

Sugar Hill Studio

Narrator: Texas music can be defined by its many different ethnic genres.

N: From conjunto to country, Cajun to choir, the many different types of music found throughout Texas reflect the culture and heritage of its diverse population.

N: Houston in particular is an area in which many different types of music thrive.

N: A testament to the enduring importance of Houston's divergent musical heritage is Sugar Hill Studios.

N: Located in Houston's Third Ward, Sugar Hill is a cutting edge studio with a fascinating history.

N: With roots dating as far back as 1941, this studio became the epicenter of a rapidly developing Houston music scene.

N: Over the decades, thousands of recordings were made here, including Gold Records and national chart toppers in a myriad of different genres.

N: From R&B superstar Beyonce Knowles to the pioneer R&B artist Barbara Lynn, from country legend George Jones to platinum recording artist Clay Walker, from zydeco to blues, psychedelic rock to Tejano, Sugar Hill's doors have been open to the entire spectrum of Houston's diverse population.

N: In 1941, Bill Quinn began a business producing radio commercials and personal birthday greetings, Quinn Recording Services.

N: By 1946, he branched out to form Gold Star Records, which became one of the first successful independent record labels to be based in the south.

N: In 1947, Quinn released "Jole Blon" by Harry Choates.

(Music playing)

N: This classic Cajun waltz sold thousands of units and was a popular radio and jukebox hit, climbing the charts and putting Gold Star Records on the map. .

N: Quinn also began recording a young blues act he thought had potential, Sam Lightnin' Hopkins, whose first single "Short Haired Woman" shot to the top of the charts.

(Music playing)

N: Hopkins would on to record over 100 songs for Gold Star, helping to cement his status as one of the most influential blues musicians in history.

(Music playing)

N: Quinn's success continued, but by the early 1950s he chose to focus on the recording side of the business instead of the label.

N: He converted the bottom floor of his house into a fully equipped studio, naming it Gold Star Recording Studio.

Andy Bradley: The studio that we're in right now, this was actually, where we're standing, is actually the front yard of Bill Quinn's house and the double glass is basically now one of the walls of his house that faced the street, and the door that we're going to walk through over there is basically where his front door was when you walked into his house slash recording studio.

AB: This room became a recording studio in 1950 and this was the bottom of Bill Quinn's house.

AB: When you shoot the purple beams above our head, that's basically what the second floor of the house sat on, so this bottom part of the house was basically the recording studio and the kitchen.

AB: The kitchen is that area over there where the guitar amp is now sitting in, and this booth over here, which is our current drum booth, was basically his dining room which he converted into his recording booth, so that's where he recorded from and everyone played out here.

N: In the mid 50s, a young man named George Jones stepped into the studio to record the song that launched his career, "Why Baby Why."

(Music playing)

AB: And the last major hit cut here before he moved into his new studio in the back part of the property was "Chantilly Lace" by the Big Bopper.

(Music playing)

N: This hit by the legendary disk jockey from nearby Beaumont stayed on the charts for over six months.

N: A pop-rock classic, this recording, made in Gold Star Studio A, has sold hundreds of thousands of units and, since its release, has achieved over three million airplays.

(Music playing)

AB: In 1959, Bill Quinn built a giant studio, which is in the back part of our building, which is no longer in use as a studio, it's basically been cut up into offices and mastering studios, he built that room because television was just booming.

AB: He thought he could build a big enough room where they could shoot video as well as do audio recording.

AB: The room was very useful for people to bring in high school bands to record because he could fit a full hundred piece orchestra or band in that room, that's how big it was.

N: In addition to large orchestras, Gold Star continued to record hits that raised the gambit of Houston's different styles.

(Music playing)

N: By 1963, Bill Quinn was ready to retire.

N: He leaves Gold Star to J.L. Patterson, who began to bring in various independent engineers and producers, such as Chris Strachwitz, who brought zydeco pioneer Clifton Chenier to Gold Star in 1964.

(Music playing)

N: Another one of those independent producers was Huey P. Meaux, known then as the "Crazy Cajun."

N: Although the criminal charges for which Meaux was in prison in the 1990s are very serious, his musical contribution remains significant.

(Music playing)

N: With a string of regional hits under his belt including Barbara Lynn's "You'll Lose a Good Thing," he began to record frequently at Gold Star Studios.

AB: And he recorded quite a number of artists here from '62 through to about June of 1965.

AB: Two of the major artists he was involved with that recorded here were The Sir Douglas Quintet, which he was the official producer of the first album and the whole concept of that and was something that he dreamed up together with Doug Sahm, and Roy Head and his famous song "Treat Her Right," which went to number one in the rhythm and blues charts in 1965 and went to number two in the pop charts, only to be held out of the number one spot by The Beatles.

N: Looking for a way to combat the British invasion, Meaux produced a young band featuring the now legendary Doug Sahm.

N: The Sir Douglas Quintet recorded "She's About A Mover" at Gold Star, which began a lasting career for Sahm and the rest of the Quintet.

(Music playing)

N: Roy Head's "Treat Her Right" became an instant classic, with cover versions recorded by George Thorogood, Barbara Mandrell, and Billy Crash Craddock.

(Music playing)

AB: In 1968, the studio was bought by International Artists, which was the real Texas psychedelic label of the era.

AB: The International Artists Corporation had signed the 13th Floor Elevators, the Bubble Puppy, the Red Crayola, Endle St. Cloud, and a number of other artists.

N: The psychedelic rock movement had taken Houston by storm, and no group exemplified the sound more than Roky Erickson and his 13th Floor Elevators, who made their most influential recording at Gold Star.

(Music playing)

N: Huey Meaux bought the studio in 1972, changing the name to Sugar Hill.

AB: Huey Meaux thought the name Sugar Hill was nicely generic and didn't connote any form of music being recorded, so he decided to call this place Sugar Hill.

AB: It fits perfectly into the whole concept of what's going on and luckily, when he sold the business to Modern Music Ventures in 1986, he sold them the name, and when Dan, I, and Rodney bought the business from Modern Music Ventures in 1996, they sold us the name, so it keeps going and we see no reason for a change.

N: Throughout the 1970s and early 80s, countless musicians recorded at Sugar Hill; to name a few Marcia Ball's group Frieda and the Firedogs, Little Feat, Freddy Fender, Ray Benson & Asleep at the Wheel, Kinky Friedman, Ricky Nelson, Todd Rundgren, Lucinda Williams, and Ted Nugent.

N: In 1984, Andy Bradley joined the staff of Sugar Hill Recording Studios.

AB: Well, I talked to Huey Meaux and he said, "Sure, if you want bring your client base over here I have work for you as well from my record recording projects," and "let's make a deal."

AB: So we made a deal, I moved over here in roughly October of 1984.

(Music playing)

N: During the 1980s, Sugar Hill became an important studio for the burgeoning Tejano music scene, producing several gold records for artists including Emilio Navaira, La Fiebre, Excelencia, Johnny Rodriguez, and Alberto Gallegos.

AB: I also recorded and mixed an album for Little Joe y la Familia called “Renunciación,” and that album was highly successful, and Billboard still did not recognize Mexican-American music yet as a genre in that time period in 1984, but the song “Cuatro Caminos” was a huge radio hit and the album was incredibly popular and sold truckloads, so that was my first real, delving into the Tejano music scene in a big way.

N: Owned by Andy Bradley, Rodney Meyers, and Dan Workman, Sugar Hill has continued to expand its musical horizons, reflecting the ever-changing population of Houston and Southeast Texas.

Dan Workman: Houston has always both benefitted and suffered from the fact that we’re so eclectic there’s never been one spotlight on one type of music.

DW: Briefly there has been in Houston gangster rap or Houston rock and roll, ZZ Top, or Houston R&B with Destiny’s Child, but underneath that layer we’ve had so many spotlights on so many different things.

DW: People don’t realize that some of the world’s best salsa bands are here in Houston, Texas.

DW: Some of the world’s best jazz, small ensemble jazz, here in Houston, Texas.

DW: Some of the most amazing singer, songwriters in Texas come through Houston and call Houston their home now.

DW: We’ve had Lyle Lovett in the studio, Clay Walker, Smash Mouth, Destiny’s Child, Beyonce; I mean if their recording star that’s somewhere located in Texas they’ve been in Sugar Hill.

DW: A big, big majority of our clients are people who are working at a medium tier of the business or just getting started, and so it keeps us on our toes because we have to record everything you can possibly imagine, everything from accordion polka bands to punk rock kids, from rap to Cantonese, Chinese gospel music, it’s the whole gamut.

N: Sugar Hill has the modern digital equipment required by many of today’s contemporary artists but also has the advantage of some very singular characteristics.

DW: This history here is palpable, and that part of it is tangible.

DW: There’s lots of old microphones here, there’s lots of old plate reverbs, old electronics, ancient microphone stands, odd chairs from the 1950s, there’s just a huge visual reminder as well as technical, some of the gear we work with is really, really old and has been here for a long time.

N: One of the most unique characteristics is built into the studio itself.

DW: At Sugar Hill we have, literally, the effects built into the building the way that they used to in the old days.

DW: The echo chambers are what served to make special effects back in the day before there was digital effects or even some of the older analogue electronic effects.

DW: They literally built it into the hardware of the building, into the form of the building, spaces that were plastered, unfinished and they would pipe the music in there through a speaker and then pick it back up and (clapping) you know, you would get the echo sound.

N: Reverb has been and continues to be an essential effect used in most recordings.

DW: Through the years there have been different ways to do this electronically, I mean big huge plates that came from Germany, which we have two of upstairs, and then smaller electronic boxes that were discrete electronics and then finally a piece of software that you run on the computer.

DW: This is where it all came from; this is the mother of reverb.

DW: Music from the control room is pumped into the speakers here in the reverb chamber.

DW: The microphones pick up that music as it's amplified and changed by the reverb chamber and then that's sent back to the control room and added back into the song or the piece of music.

DW: And we can actually pick out the way this sounds on records if we're listening to a record and wonder if it was recorded here, if we can hear enough of the echo on it we can tell that it was this room.

DW: So it imparts a signature that is a part of the studio that's unique and is a big part of the Sugar Hill sound.

AB: I can tell you all the people that if they want to go and listen to "She's About A Mover" by the Sir Douglas Quintet you'll find that the lead singer does some and the shaker he's playing are covered in that reverb.

(Music playing)

N: From its earliest incarnation to contemporary hits, Sugar Hill Studios continues to be a vibrant and important place for all genres of music.

DW: We've never rejected the history we just keep embracing the future.

