

Rooksmere Studios

JONATHAN MILLER meets newcomer Mark Hutchinson at his stylish studio in rural England.

With large commercial music studios having a tough time, the cottage industry could be having a renaissance.

28-year-old professional performing musician Mark Hutchinson confesses to being a dreamer; but since opening rural Rooksmere Studios' (soundproofed) doors — attached to a tastefully extended three-bedroom abode in the quiet Northamptonshire village of Overstone — to the paying public back in January 2003 without involving any burdening bank loans, some might say he has fallen on his feet in an age of economic uncertainty. It might even be a dream come true. Certainly commercial studio start-ups are a little thin on the ground in the UK right now, yet lady luck was far from shining down on Hutchinson when it came to funding his recording venture. Rooksmere Studios came from harrowing circumstances. "My wife had a horrendous crash for which she got compensation," Hutchinson begins. "Fortunately, she had faith in me, and now I've just got to make it all pay!"

Having stocked a studio with a five-figure-sum's worth of recording equipment, making it pay is no easy task — then again, nor is building a recording studio from scratch with no experience. For Hutchinson, the road to Rooksmere Studios was long and winding.

Much of Hutchinson's previous computer-based recording exploits were confined to the corner of a bedroom. He smiles at the (not too) distant memory: "The set-up was just on an Ikea desk with these little extensions on the side." But despite moving into the more spacious house he now shares with his supportive wife, the idea of also having an 'in-house'

recording studio did not immediately hit home. "I suppose anybody who's got a computer running software and plays music aspires to one day having a recording studio, but it didn't actually cross my mind," muses its co-owner. "We had the house, which was two-thirds of the size of what it is now, completely re-done from the ground upwards. At first, we were just going to build a garage, but then we thought, 'Well, if we're going to put a garage on the side, for what it's worth, we might as well also build on top.'"

Only then did Hutchinson start sowing the seeds for Rooksmere Studios, to be sited within the spacious garage. "It turns out that we had the means to be able to build a studio," he continues. "It was one of those things; you start off small, and realise you need more space, so I went for it."

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He admirably designed its three-room layout — comprising a 4.5m x 3.5m control room, a 6.5m x 3.5m live room, and 3m x 3m square isolation booth — including its soundproofing structure (neoprene between the walls and floor): "Unfortunately, I had an architect who told me the old 'sound is like heat' scenario, and we ended up with so much concrete underneath that wasn't necessary; it wasn't until we had the concrete down that we realised we had to create some kind of floating floor."

That achieved, renowned acoustic consultants White Mark were called in after Hutchinson had checked out another local studio and heard the benefits of cleverly positioned acoustic panelling: "Although my rooms were originally built rectangular-shaped, the actual results



Mark Hutchinson and his Audient ASP8024.

were better than I expected, but I realised that this was never going to work without some acoustic treatment."

Enter Alan Cundell, Technical Systems Manager at White Mark. "I couldn't believe my luck," grins Hutchinson. "The guy lives five miles away! He came and

Hutchinson's plan to buy a Mackie D8B digital console in favour of Audient's all-analogue ASP8024: "Wonderful to use — fantastic onboard compressors; great EQ," notes its happy controller.

Hutchinson also opted for Miller & Kriesler monitoring and an iZ RADAR 24 hard-disk-based recorder on Robson's advice: "Garry gave me recommendations for most things here. Now I prefer to record to RADAR — particularly when I've got a producer in here. It's just seamless; there's no messing around with a mouse. Every client has been very happy with the result."

Hutchinson's pitch for his £350-a-day facility? "We're well served here. The Aviator hotel is at the Aerodrome and the next village has got a nice B&B. Nowadays, producers are all using Pro Tools, then sticking the singer on top, so I envisage more up-and-coming artists coming here — people who want to record in a slightly cheaper environment that's only 90 minutes from London. With Pro Tools and RADAR, both industry standard digital recording mediums, people can bring in a DVD-RAM or CD of their stuff. Hopefully, they're going to be around for a long time." No doubt Hutchinson wishes likewise for his recording dream. □

had a look, and said, 'You've done this the way we would have done it; there's no need to start it all again.'"

White Mark's Managing Director, David Bell, then visited Rooksmere and drew up some designs based on Hutchinson's dimensions, offering to take on the entire acoustic refurbishment process or simply supply plans for a reduced rate. The ever-candid Hutchinson plumped for the latter option. "They said £9000 to do the whole thing," he states. "Obviously, it would have looked aesthetically better if they'd done it, but it was £1500 for the plans, and it probably cost us £2500 for the materials — my dad did all the stud work and cut the panels to size, then I cut the actual screens and put it all together."

But there was no cutting corners when equipping Rooksmere Studios to suit its mid-priced positioning. Hutchinson primarily turned to Garry Robson at London-based audio specialist Stirling Syco: "Garry said that if you're going to build a studio, you want something that Joe Bloggs hasn't got." So out went



Radar at Rooksmere.

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