

The Record Plant: Magical Seeds

Halloween Masquerade Ball

Studio Opening

Dancing BYOD

October 29

6 p.m. to 2 a.m.

RSVP 415-332-2755

In the fall of 1972, the who's who of the music business in L.A., New York, San Francisco, and beyond received this invitation on a slab of California redwood from Chris Stone and Gary Kellgren, owners of The Record Plant studios in Sausalito, California. John Lennon and Yoko Ono showed up dressed as trees, their presence a clear indication of the level of clientele The Record Plant's Northern California outpost (they also helped launch The Record Plant's L.A. and New York facilities) would attract. As the grand-opening bash raged through Sunday morning, word spread fast that this new studio across the Bay was a party getaway for the rich and famous.

With its Jacuzzi, guest houses, organic chefs, and rooms with waterbed floors—not to mention the laughing gas masks hanging from one control room ceiling and two fake walls leading to an escape route in case of a drug bust—The Record Plant reflected the excess of the times in grand, glitzy L.A. style. It also brought to San Francisco one of the industry’s first “resort” studios: one that would offer good equipment and better times. It was one of the first independently owned studios in town with the cache to bring in top-tier talent. At Sausalito’s “living room” studio, clients could take an extended vacation from label-town recording, stay in a beautiful city, and record in a high-end studio that offered as many or more perks as a four-star hotel.

Stone, armed with an MBA and the ability to “make money from water,” and Kellgren, a respected engineer who had crafted albums for Bob Dylan, the Velvet Underground, Jimi Hendrix, and the Mothers of Invention, had already established themselves in the studio world with successful New York and L.A. studios, both with the same living-room feel and elite guest lists. They hadn’t planned on opening a Northern California outpost until one of their Bay Area clients planted the seed.

KSAN’s Tom Donahue often brought former Band of Gypsys drummer and solo artist Buddy Miles down from San Francisco to record at the L.A. Record Plant. Often during their stay they would plead with the owners, “There are no *really* hip studios in San Francisco, please come up here.”

Donahue promised a live radio program if they agreed, which they did, deciding to settle in sunny Sausalito on the north side of the Golden Gate. Unintentionally, they beat Wally Heider to the area. Knowing that many of his San Francisco studio clients had moved to Marin County and had a hard time leaving their pastoral surroundings, Heider had drawn up plans for a second facility and even found a spot nearby in Mill Valley’s Tam Junction before The Record Plant came in, speedboats and all. Heider had trouble getting the proper sewer permits, so the studio never happened.

Stone and Kellgren had better luck with a plain-looking building on Bridgeway Avenue owned by real estate developers Sasaki Walker

Associates. When the company decided to relocate, they leased the space to Stone and Kellgren, who proceeded to tear it apart and turn it into their two-room, multi-accessorized Bay Area headquarters. They recruited Tom Scott from Wally Heider Studios in L.A. to help them erect the Sausalito Record Plant and later serve as its chief maintenance engineer. Tom Flye, one of their top engineers at Record Plant New York, moved west to serve as chief engineer as Studio B neared completion. The two Toms already knew each other from working on the road with The Record Plant's two remote trucks and had become friends. Once Flye heard that Scott had relocated to join the new Record Plant staff, he accepted the lead engineer job and relocated as well. They even moved to the same neighborhood in Marin County and bought houses on the same dead-end street—three doors apart—where they both still live today.

The core Record Plant lineup—Stone and Kellgren, Flye, and Scott—two teams united by friendship and a passion for music and recording, created a cozy hangout for clients who wanted to escape the L.A. scene. “Gary decided that the most important thing was for the artist to think that he was in a living room,” says Stone. “The greatest compliment that an artist could pay us was, ‘Hey man, I don’t want to leave!’”

Lots of Record Plant clients did stay...for a very, very long time. The studio originated the lockout concept, offering clients a weekly or monthly rate with all of their usual perks, including housing. “That way, the record companies would know they were going to stay on budget, with the exception of extras,” says Stone. “We were careful to abide by the company’s wishes in that regard.”

Whether the act paid by the week or the month, they usually received red carpet treatment. “The San Francisco market was very limited,” says Stone. “The majority of our business came from outside the Bay Area. In particular, we once flew George Harrison over from London, picked him up at the airport in a limo, brought him to Sausalito, where he worked for three or four weeks and nobody ever even knew he was in the states!” The studio limo, owned by Stone, had the license plate “DEDUCT.” The license plate on Kellgren’s purple Rolls Royce read “GREED.”

The two guesthouses, next door to each other and within minutes of the studio, each had multiple bedrooms, providing ample accommodations for large entourages. “We had a retired American Airlines stewardess as the house mother,” adds Stone. “We were able to offer each group virtually anything they wanted...organic cooks, whatever they wanted we would provide.” Flye and Scott conveniently lived down the street. “So if the hot tub conked out at 1 a.m., there’d be a knock at my door,” laughs Flye.

When they wanted to record a vocal at 2 a.m., they called Michelle Zarin, who joined the Record Plant Sausalito in early 1973 as an assistant to studio manager Ginger Mews. In short order, Mews moved on, and Zarin got promoted and became the missing link in the studio team. She developed close relationships with record labels and clients alike, running a smooth-sailing ship despite its zany passengers.

Their marketing plan and strong customer service certainly boosted business, but their success didn’t solely stem from organic chefs, a basketball court, or limo service. It came from the triumvirate of Stone’s business sense, Kellgren’s engineering talents and creativity, and studio designer Tom Hidley’s trendsetting plans, as well as a skilled and dedicated staff who understood that The Record Plant was a 24/7 job, and that was okay. The fact that Record Plant L.A. fed them a lot of business didn’t hurt, either.

The Sausalito Record Plant modeled much of its interior, including the sculpted redwood hallways, after Frank Werber’s popular local jazz club/restaurant, The Trident. Combined with stained glass and skylights, the studio had a warm, country feel—until you got past the lobby. The conference room originally had a waterbed floor—one of Kellgren’s crazy ideas—but it caused so much water damage that they ripped it out, only to replace it with five thick layers of carpet and no chairs. Outside the conference room was the Jacuzzi, a perk made famous in L.A. “Gary wanted to build a swimming pool and I wouldn’t let him,” says Stone. “So we installed the Jacuzzi. When we built Sausalito he said, ‘Okay Stone. There’s no room for a pool so I’m not even going to ask, but we are going to have a Jacuzzi.’ It was a popular place to be.”

Studios A and B, located to the left and right of the reception desk, mirrored each other in acoustics and equipment, but had very

different décor. Studio A came with a sunburst pattern on one wall of the studio and white fabric that resembled tents on the ceiling, which were hung to help eliminate reflection. Studio B had swirls of colors and a mural on the walls and different colored cloths hung in layers on the ceilings. Equally colorful gobos could be rolled into either room. “Studio A was more...sedate if you can use that word with The Record Plant,” says Stone.

API consoles resided in both control rooms, as well as ample EQs, limiters and compressors, and Yamaha grand pianos. Tape machines included a 3M 16-track and Ampex 2-, 4-, 16-, and 24-track machines. The mic closet came stocked with Neumann, AKG, Shure, Sennheiser, Sony, RCA, and ElectroVoice models. Large monitors from JBL and Hidley’s newly formed Westlake Audio flanked both control rooms. Clients in either A or B could also dial into the studio’s own FM transmitter, which allowed engineers to broadcast from the control room so that artists could listen to rough mixes from one of their favorite reference points: their cars. Studios A and B incorporated Hidley’s acoustical concept of the “dead” room, which incorporated heavy amounts of trapping as a way for rock bands to get a large room sound in less space.

The Record Plant’s Studio A, circa 1972.



Photo courtesy of Chris Stone

“Traditional recording studios were large rooms; in a city, that’s very expensive real estate,” explains Flye. “So studio owners learned from Tom Hidley that you could have small piece of real estate and make it sound big with reverb chambers, which everybody used anyhow, to help with leakage problems. A small room sounds bad, like

a Holiday Inn room, just terrible. And [Hidley's concept] works; you can make it sound tight or cavernous, as long as you have control."

"At that point in time, the rock and roll bands were so loud; they could always add brightness, but brightness wasn't always what they were after," adds Stone. "So we deadened the room knowing that we could brighten them up with wood gobos or with LA2As and other outboard, but to deaden it, you have to have that in the walls."

While most engineers either liked or adjusted to the idea, it didn't win everyone over. "It was horrendous; the room was so dead it just sucked up all the sound!" says engineer Betty Cantor-Jackson. Her engineering partner Bob Matthews proposes, "The idea was that they could have two rock bands playing at full tilt 130 dB and still have isolation." The Grateful Dead's *Wake of the Flood* album was recorded at The Plant in 1973, with Dan Healy working as principal engineer on the project. It's rumored that the band took full advantage of the gas masks.

When clients weren't working, which at The Record Plant was sort of a relative term anyway, a speedboat docked at Gate 5 could take them to Tiburon or Fisherman's Wharf or for a quick joyride around the Bay. Want company? There are probably some teenage groupies hanging out in the lounge. Or you could hire a pro. At a time when The Record Plant's market—the top ten percent of rock and roll—had unlimited budgets, those "miscellaneous expenses" could mean just about anything. The rock and roll elite could spend months in the studio writing, recording, and, well, partying, on their own time table, and the labels often didn't question the bill. "It was that era where you found your favorite eight bars and stayed on it for maybe 36 hours," former Pablo Cruise frontman Cory Lerios said in a 1998 interview with *Pulse* magazine. The band recorded "the better part of four albums" at The Record Plant. "It was a great time, no question."

"You had to have a major-label budget to afford places like The Record Plant, with all of the perks—the Jacuzzi, the décor, the psychedelic atmosphere—and everybody was high as a kite," says artist/songwriter Bob Welch, who played guitar in Fleetwood Mac from 1971 to 1974 before going onto other ventures. "A lot of great

records got made. Most of them could have cost half of what they did, but a lot of that budget went for...other stuff.”

Yes, The Record Plant was a great place to party, but its owners aimed to create a worry-free environment where the artist “had no choice but to make the best music possible,” says Stone. “There was no way out. You’ve got a good acoustical environment, we’ll set the monitors the way you want them, you’ve got housing, food...now go make your music. And they think, ‘Oh shit. I have to perform.’” And they did, sometimes for a couple of days straight, aided by their chemical of choice, but regardless, the studio regularly churned out Gold and Platinum sellers, the evidence of which can be seen now by the RIAA-certified plaques that line the walls.

Kicking back in The Record Plant’s pre-production room, 1972.



Photo courtesy of Chris Stone

The same guy that broke in Wally Heider Recording, producer/engineer Al Schmitt, christened The Record Plant in 1972 with a band called Finnigan and Wood. Donahue lived up to his word, and in 1972 the inaugural “Live from The Record Plant” show aired on KSAN, Jive 95, on Sunday nights at 11 p.m., with Jerry Garcia, Fleetwood Mac, Bob Marley and the Wailers, and Bonnie Raitt as some of its early featured performers.

Flye alone kept Studio B booked solid. The first project he engineered at the studio, *Adventures of Panama Red* from the New Riders of the Purple Sage, went Gold. Subsequent left-coast Record Plant visitors such as Stephen Stills, America, Commander Cody,

Joe Walsh, Three Dog Night, Yes, Marvin Gaye, and Tower of Power continued the hit streak in The Record Plant's first few years.

Sly Stone, who would later become a permanent resident, made his first appearance at the studio while he still had the Family Stone behind him. Considered the group's and Sly's final masterpiece, *Fresh* was recorded mostly in Sausalito by Tom Flye. With their previous album, *There's a Riot Goin' On* (recorded at CBS' New York studios by Don Puluse), the band had all but moved away from recording live and instead recorded one instrument at a time. Once known for their groundbreaking integration of black and whites in one ensemble, the group had devolved to separation in the studio. They recorded this way partly because of Sly's unpredictable behavior: his cocaine addiction had gotten the better of him, and he often showed up hours late for gigs or missed them altogether. Furthermore, by this point, Sly Stone wrote, arranged, and produced most of the material and played the majority of the instruments anyway. He became an innovator in the overdub style of recording, tracking one instrument at a time, usually beginning with a rhythm track. "Usually he started out with a Maestro Rhythm King. We called it the 'Funk Box,'" says Flye. "That was the original drum machine. It could only do real simple stuff, but it gave him a foundation to work on, and then he'd build his record. But sometimes he'd put the drums on last. Sometimes he'd put down an organ track first, and that would tell you the chord changes. Then he'd go into whatever idea he had next. So there was no set way of working." Flye also credits Sly Stone as one of the first to use a drum loop. "We were working on 'Babies Making Babies,' and every time we'd get to one section, he'd go, 'Now that's funky. Those four bars, boy I wish it all sounded like that.' So I made 24- to 24- copies of it and cut 'em all together and that became the track."

By this time, drummer Greg Errico had left the group and bassist Larry Graham had moved on to form Graham Central Station. Not so coincidentally, Flye recorded most of Graham's albums as well, mostly at The Record Plant, and some of them simultaneously with Sly Stone. "It was right after the group had broken up, so it was a little weird," says Flye. They even recorded in the same room, with Graham usually coming in when Sly Stone was out of town.

Larry Graham

Dig that funky bass line? Thank Larry Graham, the originator of the percussive slap/pop electric bass style that defined 1970s progressive funk. In fact, you can partially credit Graham for the term progressive funk, as Sly Stone, his bandmate from 1968 until 1972, coined the phrase to describe the music of Sly and the Family Stone.

Born in Beaumont, Texas, but raised in Oakland, California, Graham started taking piano lessons at age 8; by his early teens, he knew guitar, bass, harmonica, and drums and had a three-and-a-half octave vocal range. He joined his mother's lounge act, Dell Graham Trio, at 15 and worked the San Francisco club circuit. He first met Sly Stone, then known as Sylvester Stewart, on one of those nights.

After backing R&B and blues artists such as John Lee Hooker, Jackie Wilson, and Jimmy Reed and the Drifters, Graham joined Sly and the Family Stone in 1968. His deep baritone and thick grooves defined their sound and brought Bay Area funk into the mainstream spotlight. He stayed with the ensemble through their heyday, contributing to now-classic albums such as *Stand!* and *There's a Riot Goin' On*, as well as such singles as "Dance to the Music" and "Everybody Is a Star," among others.

He resigned to giving Sly the spotlight throughout those heady years, but his talent as a musician and songwriter deserved one of its own. Not completely by his own doing, Graham exited the group in 1972. He joined a group called Hot Chocolate (not the U.K. band who had the 1975 hit "You Sexy Thing"), renamed them Graham Central Station, and with an equally red-hot ensemble, released several funk albums through the 1970s before disbanding at decade's end. As a solo artist, he reached another peak in the early 1980s with *One in a Million You*. The title track became a Top Ten hit. The following albums, *Just Be My Lady* and *Sooner or Later*, had success as well, though his next two albums, *Victory* and *Fired Up*, essentially fizzled.

He worked steadily as a songwriter and sideman for several years, led the nine-piece Psychedelic Soul in the early 1990s, then re-formed Graham Central Station in 1993, this time with Cynthia Robinson and Jerry Martini of Sly and the Family Stone. They received a substantial boost from Prince, a longtime fan and supporter, when he asked Graham and crew to serve as the opening act on his Jam of the Year tour in 1997.

As the 1970s progressed, Sly Stone became one of The Record Plant's best clients. He loved recording, so he naturally spent ample time at the studio. His name alone brought more business to the studio. When he asked for his own room in the mid-1970s, Chris Stone and Kellgren obliged, which led to the design of The Pit, a one-of-a-kind studio that incorporated one of Kellgren's crazy ideas with Sly Stone's specs. Like the other two rooms, The Pit had an API console and 3M 16-track, but they resided in a sunken-in area about 10 feet deep. The musicians stayed at ground level on a ledge that went around all sides of the control room below. The entire place—the floors, ceiling, walls, and stairway—was covered in plush carpet for absolute deadness, and psychedelic murals and embroidery added to the very 1970s vibe. “The actual recording area was a full story above in this padded, carpeted room where there was absolutely no echo. There were no reflective surfaces at all, and the engineers were blocked from the live sound because they were a floor below and they had this cowling that came up over, like a windshield on a convertible that was also carpeted, so the engineers could monitor at pretty high volume and still not get any leakage.”

Nobody ever imitated The Pit, probably for good reason, but it sure supported the hot-tub-loving Kellgren's idea of super-decadence. “So you're laying on this carpeted floor, guitars on your lap, pillow under your head,” recalls Welch, “I remember watching [Rolling Stones bassist] Bill Wyman doing his vocals laying down with a bottle of brandy and a mic jack stuck in the wall. It was the concept of the times. I think people like to work more efficiently now.”

When Sly Stone recorded in The Pit, he recorded *in* The Pit. He liked to record in the control room, and he recorded keyboards (he always had a Hammond B3 in the control room), vocals, and anything else he could get away with down below.

Flye once recorded the Tower of Power horns in the control room, standing in the doorway. “I'd line the room with plywood, so they wouldn't overblow,” says Flye. At one point Sly wanted to move the drums in the small control room, but that's where Flye drew the line. Drums stay out!

Oddly enough, real sessions did happen in The Pit. Welch and numerous others came in to play on Bill Wyman's solo album, *Stone Alone*, which materialized in The Pit in 1975. "It was totally out of control," recalls Welch, who added guitar parts. Other guests included Dr. John, Van Morrison, Joe Walsh, the Tower of Power horns, former bandmate Ron Wood, and Tom Johnston of the Doobie Brothers, among others. "Bill Wyman was very straight. He didn't touch any drugs, but everybody [else] was stoned out of their brains. We didn't know what time of the day or night it was, it was completely ridiculous. I remember Stephen Stills taking an hour and a half to tune a guitar, sitting under the piano...it was wonderful! I'd never want to repeat the experience, but it was very unique."

Welch's hard rock group Paris, which included former Jethro Tull bassist Glenn Cornick and former Nazzy drummer Thom Mooney, recorded their debut album there with producer/engineer Jimmy Robinson, around the same time. Welch recalls the setup in the unusual room: "The musicians were on a ledge looking down. We baffled off the drums and set them up somewhat further away so he couldn't actually see down into the control room. The rest of the musicians were on top and if you wanted to, you could peek over the ledge and throw spitballs at the engineer. Most people preferred to go off in a far corner. The isolation was really pretty good, and of course you monitored yourself with headphones like you usually do. The lack of the glass wall didn't seem to matter."

In between the occasional outside client, Sly Stone often spent weeks at a time in The Pit. So Kellgren built Stone his own apartment, complete with small office, lounge, bathroom, and bedroom. The loft bed, accessed by climbing through a huge pair of bright red upholstered lips—designed as a parody of Sly Stone's big, wide grin—had mic input jacks on the headboard, so you could theoretically do your vocal part from bed.

While Sly Stone hibernated in The Pit, the rest of the facility hummed with activity. During one season of 1977, for example, Al Kooper came in to produce Massachusetts' Chris Morris Band with staff engineer Bob Edwards; Allen Blazek produced and engineered a live album for Elvin Bishop; Tom Anderson mixed a Supertramp album for A&M.

Fleetwood Mac, accompanied by producer/engineer Richard Dashut, came in to record *Rumours*. The album, released in 1977, became one of the best-selling of all time, arguably their greatest achievement, but they knit it together during one of the most traumatic periods of their lives.

John and Christine McVie faced divorce, and the relationship between Lindsey Buckingham and Stevie Nicks' was unraveling. Mick Fleetwood's marriage was on the verge of collapse as well. Personally, the group was falling apart, but professionally, they were at the height of their career. "Rhiannon," the second single from the band's self-titled 1975 album, sprinted up the charts as the *Rumours* sessions got underway. They were on a roll and didn't want to screw it up.

But the strained male-female relationships created a tense studio environment, even at the party studio by the Bay. "It took two months for everyone to adjust to one another," Dashut said in the band's biography, *The Fleetwood Mac Story: Rumours and Lies* by Bob Brunning. "Defenses were wearing thin and they were quick to open up their feelings. Instead of going to friends to talk it out, their feelings were vented through their music. The album was about the only thing they had left."

To take the edge off, they did what any pressured musician would do: They partied. A typical day would start around 7 p.m. with a big feast, then party until 1 or 2 in the morning, and somewhere down the line, they would start recording. Van Morrison, Rufus and Chaka Khan, Jackson Browne, and Warren Zevon often hung out, some of them working down the hall. Sometimes the band would listen back to what they thought was last night's masterpiece, only to find that it sound terrible, so they'd start all over again. "It was the craziest period of our lives," Mick Fleetwood told Brunning. "We went four or five weeks without sleep, doing a lot of drugs. I'm talking about cocaine in such quantities that, at one point, I thought I was really going insane."

Fleetwood tried to keep everyone happy and even took the clocks off the wall so that no one would worry about how much time had passed. They entered the studio with no demos; the album

happened in the studio. After a long drought, McVie wrote continuously one day; resulting in four and a half songs on the album. She also requested piano tuning every hour, as opposed to the standard daily piano tuning. Meanwhile Dashut, who had worked with Buckingham and Nicks since before joining Fleetwood Mac, and Caillat, whom Dashut had brought up from Wally Heider Studios in L.A., worked to get near-perfect sounds for every instrument. They spent ten hours on a kick drum sound in Studio B, then moved to A, built a special platform for the drums, and *finally* got what they wanted. For “Don’t Stop,” assistant Cris Morris sat between Fleetwood and McVie in the studio, because his drums and her piano were angled in such a way that they couldn’t see each other. Morris acted as conductor so they could stay in time.

Morris cites recording “Gold Dust Woman” as one of the sessions’ great moments, according to the Brunning book. “Stevie was very passionate about getting that vocal right. It seemed like it was directed straight at Lindsey and she was letting it all out. She worked right through the night on it, and finally did it after loads of takes. The wailing, the animal sounds, and the breaking glass were all added later.” She did the first take standing up, the studio fully lit. Several takes later Dashut dimmed the lights. She then sat down on the floor, wrapped in a cardigan to keep warm, and nailed the vocal on the eighth take.

An estimated 3,000 hours—six months of tracking, five months editing and mixing—ended up on the 24-track masters. In order to preserve some of the clarity, they transferred the overdubs to a safety master “We had no sync pulse to lock the two machines together, so we had to manually sync the two machines, ten tracks by ear, using headphones in twelve-hour sessions.”

The fact that Caillat recorded most of the parts separately made the process even trickier. “Virtually every track is either an overdub or lifted from a separate take of that particular song,” said Dashut. “What you hear is the best pieces assembled, a true aural collage. Lindsey and I did most of the production. That’s not to take anything away from Ken or the others in the band—they were all very involved. But Lindsey and myself really produced that record and he should’ve gotten the individual credit for it, instead of the whole band.”

One other significant album that came out of The Record Plant during this era was Steve Miller's *Book of Dreams*. Though by the mid-'70s Miller was doing most of his work in the Pacific Northwest, he recruited the Bay Area's Jim Gaines to be his principal engineer after Gaines had helped him complete the multi-Platinum *Fly Like An Eagle*. For *Book of Dreams*, Miller and Gaines cut most of the tracks in Seattle, but finished up at The Record Plant.

Unlike *Fly Like An Eagle*, which developed through a lot of experimentation with sounds and re-working previously recorded tracks, Gaines says they recorded *Book of Dreams* in a more "professional" manner. Later in the process they had to work around Miller's busy touring schedule.

But wait a minute. This is The Record Plant! Party central! "The only thing was," Gaines says "even though we were there to work it still felt like a party situation." They had Rick James, who actually lived in the waterbed room for a time, working next door. "He'd come out in the mornings with just a towel around him and just accidentally let it drop in front of all the women. Crazy stuff like that."

About two months after *Book of Dreams* hit the record stores, on July 20, 1977, Gary Kellgren drowned in a Hollywood swimming pool. His death devastated the industry so deeply, *Rolling Stone* ran a black box obituary on Kellgren, coverage rarely given to an engineer. As his partner and one of his best friends for more than a decade, the news hit Chris Stone hard. They had met years before when Stone's wife Gloria had just had their son, and Kellgren's wife was seven months pregnant with their daughter and scared to death of childbirth. Mutual friends put the couples together, and the husbands suddenly had a few hours to themselves while the wives talked about having babies. When they met, Stone had never been inside a studio, but the straight guy and the artistic guy found they had a magical partnership. With Kellgren gone, Stone lost his verve for the Sausalito studio. "Without Gary's creative genius it just didn't make sense anymore," he said. He hung on for a few more years, but knew it was time to move on.