

Introduction

The San Francisco Bay Area’s spirit of adventure, of charging ahead to untended ground no matter what the rest of the world thinks, goes as far back as the 1848 Gold Rush and the Comstock Lode and silver mines of 1859, when people arrived in droves in search of a better life. Those sorts of roots are hard to shake. A century and a half later, people still pack up their belongings and traverse across the U.S. to the City by the Bay in hopes of finding prosperity or maybe just the freedom to be themselves without persecution. Naturally, a city founded largely by independent thinkers and free spirits would evolve into one of the most progressive and aggressive regions in terms of social and technological development and a natural nesting place for creative individuals of all professions, arts and entertainment included.

Considering the area’s high concentration of creative individuals, it’s no surprise that the Bay Area’s earliest radio station, reportedly the first to broadcast human voices, was the result of an experiment—by Stanford graduate Charles Herrold, founder of Herrold College of Engineering and Wireless in San Jose, who began regular broadcasts in 1910.

As the radio industry evolved, San Francisco remained a market leader and trendsetter. In the 1920s, stations such as KPO, purchased by NBC in 1933, and KTAB, later to become KSFO, dominated the market. KPO committed to an “all live” format and set up remote stations throughout the city to broadcast concerts from halls such as The Warfield, as well as from their own impressive studios. In the early 1930s, people huddled around their radios to listen to soap operas, quiz shows, dramas, comedies, anything to take their minds off of the Great Depression. Around 1934, stations began recording these performances on lacquer discs, which allowed them to record an orchestral or big band performance, for example, and play it at a later date. Hence, the city’s first real recording studios. Most of the recording in San Francisco took place live in the radio studios—grand, acoustically treated spaces with room to fit musicians and an audience—or live in the clubs, until some small studios began cropping up in the mid ’50s.

Beginning in the mid ’50s, too, San Francisco was home to a very different kind of cultural Renaissance that brewed underneath the mainstream culture. With North Beach as a nerve center, a young group of writers and poets—dubbed “beatniks” by *San Francisco Chronicle* journalist Herb Caen—including New York transplants Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Jack Kerouac and locals such as Phil Whalen, Phil Lamantia, Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, and Michael McClure, provided an alternative view of American society to free-thinkers who refused to buy into the conservative paradigm of Eisenhower America. Ginsberg’s “Howl” alone, performed live for the first

time at the Six Gallery in San Francisco in 1955, would be credited for sparking a resurgence both in American poetry and liberal thought.

When the Beats weren't hanging out in North Beach cafés such as Vesuvio, Caffè Trieste, Caffè Tosca, and Enrico's Sidewalk Café, they often ventured into one of the city's jazz clubs (the preferred genre among the hip literati), where the music stayed smokin' hot into the next morning. In the late '50s, as well, a significant folk scene sprang up in Berkeley, the Peninsula area south of San Francisco, and in the city itself.

The jazz and blues that permeated San Francisco at this time began its surge around World War II. This took place primarily in the Fillmore district, where many African-American industrial workers, artists and musicians settled after President Roosevelt signed an order to relocate the Japanese, some of whom lived in the Fillmore, to internment camps. Over the next several years many nightclubs opened in the area. Trumpeter Chet Baker, stationed in San Francisco during the Korean War, would sometimes sneak out of the barracks at Fort Mason to sit in on a jam session at Jimbo's Bop City (located in what is now the heart of Japantown), famous for its post-midnight jam sessions.

By 1955, the Fillmore bustled with activity nearly comparable to the Harlem Renaissance. Jazz giants such as Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Ray Charles, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, and Gerry Mulligan all passed through town to play in the homey, dimly lit watering holes of the Fillmore district. A young John Handy played Bop City with the great John Coltrane. Venues such as Jack's, Café Society, the Blue Mirror, and Club Alabam attracted bands led by Wes Peoples and Saunders King, among others. Other popular venues around town included El Matador, Jazz Workshop, Facks (its building on Bush Street would later house Coast Records), and the Blackhawk, which stood as one of the premier jazz venues from 1949 to 1963 and was the site of many classic live recordings.

The few resourceful technical innovators who had the foresight to record some of the jazz club happenings of the '50s and '60s usually had to lug around heavy equipment stuffed into station wagons or even strapped to the hoods of cars. Wally Heider, Orrin Keepnews (a *New Yorker* at the time), Sol and Max Weiss, and George Horn, all of whom make appearances in this book, could be found in San Francisco nightclubs capturing the music of the era.

Owned by Guido Caccienti and pal Johnny Noga, the Blackhawk hosted some of the biggest names of the 1950s at its 200 Hyde Street location. Already a Saturday night regular, Miles Davis debuted his "working band," featuring his powerful *Kind of Blue* band—pianist Wynton Kelly, bassist Paul Chambers, and drummer Jimmy Cobb, along with Hank Mobley on tenor sax—at the venue in 1961. Thelonious Monk, Shelley Manne, Cal Tjader, and Dave Brubeck also recorded albums at the club.

Vince Guaraldi's first official booking came from the Blackhawk, as a fill-in for the legendary Art Tatum. Engineer Reice Hamil recorded many Blackhawk albums, including Monk's *At the Blackhawk*, recorded on April 29, 1960, for Riverside Records, co-owned by Keepnews and based in New York. Hamil owned a portable Ampex 600 machine packed in a sturdy Samsonite case, which he used to tie onto the back of his tiny Porsche.

Noga later sold his interest in the club to the Weiss brothers, who owned a small pressing plant called Circle Records, the launching pad for their soon-to-be label, Fantasy Records. These, along with clubs such as the Trident in Sausalito, Hungry i in North Beach, and later, venues such as the Fillmore Auditorium and Winterland Arena, would become sites for numerous live recordings.

When the city's first commercial studios appeared on the scene, the same acts that recorded their live albums in San Francisco finally had the option of making a studio album in their native city, too. The abundance of local talent that made the city's radio broadcasts come alive and filled coffeehouses, nightclubs, and concert halls would bring these early recording rooms to life.

From its early roots as a haven for various ethnic music forms, jazz, blues, and R&B, the city evolved to become a center for folk, pop, country, reggae, avant-garde, electronic, new age, rap, hip-hop, and of course rock in all its various forms. The list of nationally known bands to come out of the area is astounding. The '60s gave us Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, Santana, Janis Joplin, Sly and the Family Stone, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and Steve Miller. In the '70s, local acts such as Boz Scaggs, the Doobie Brothers, Journey, Tower of Power, Eddie Money, Sammy Hagar, the Pointer Sisters, Herbie Hancock, Sylvester, Dead Kennedys, and The Tubes entered the scene. The '80s gave us everyone from Huey Lewis, Tommy Tutone, MC Hammer, and Robert Cray to Faith No More, Primus, Digital Underground, Joe Satriani, Chris Isaak, and Metallica. The '90s saw many more local acts hit it big, including Smashmouth, Third Eye Blind, 4 Non Blondes, Train, En Vogue, Counting Crows, NOFX, and Green Day. In recent years we can add The Donnas, Dan the Automator, and DJ Shadow, among others. That only scratches the surface of the talent residing in this area.

About These Halls

Studios specializing in audio for film, TV and radio commercials, video games, and music exist throughout the entire Bay Area, from as far south as Monterey all the way up to Marin and Sonoma counties to the north and to Sacramento in the east. To cover them all in one book would probably require an encyclopedia-sized tome. With that in mind, I had to set some boundaries. First, I decided to focus mainly on *music* recording studios, allowing the musical history made within those walls to naturally come forth through the words of the many artists, producers, and engineers who contributed to this book. After all, these soundproofed buildings and their fancy equipment

don't amount to much more than scrap metal and wood without them, so they're as much, if not more, a part of the Bay Area's recording history than the studios themselves.

With some notable exceptions, I narrowed my geographical range to the city of San Francisco, venturing outside of the metropolitan area only when historically necessary. For example, to write this book without including legendary facilities such as The Plant in Sausalito or Fantasy Studios in Berkeley wouldn't be much of a book. I also decided not to cover home studios and artists' private studios here, although hundreds are scattered all over the Bay Area, many of them on par with the commercial studios.

I do, however, intend to take you through a range of historic spaces and little-known places, giving you an inside look at where bands of all levels, budgets, and genres would record, as well as a behind-the-scenes look at how some of the music's most famous records got made and the often odd dramas that occurred in the process. Think of this as a guided tour when you're on vacation: You get to see most of the high points, and if you look closely, you'll catch a few things on the perimeter that only the locals know about.

Enjoy the ride!

Heather Johnson

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