



Udhav Sharma



The spectacular view from Salt Haus'

# A studio worth its Salt

A new recording studio has opened up on India's south east coast, with acoustic design by Sound Wizard. **Caroline Moss** visits

## WATCHING THE WAVES ROLL IN, ONE COULD BE FORGIVEN

for thinking that the view from Salt Haus Studios was that of California's Pacific Coast. The studio is, in fact, some 40km south of Chennai, at the home of composer, producer and engineer Udhav Sharma. Raised in Chennai, Mr Sharma began playing in bands in his youth before deciding to become a sound engineer, moving to the USA to study at Full Sail in Florida. Having gained a BSc, Mr Sharma worked for three years in Los Angeles as a junior producer signed to J2 entertainment, a production team whose clients included Shakira, Cassie, FIFA World Cup 2014 and Jesse Mendez. In 2014 he came full circle by moving back to Chennai, where his family had a house on the coast.

'They bought this place the year I moved to the USA, using it as a second home to come and chill out near the beach,' he says. 'When I moved back I wanted to build a studio where I lived, to be productive 24/7, so we ended up building it here.'

The building project required some internal reconstruction, and the first floor of the family home underwent a transformation as walls were knocked down and new partitions built. Working closely with Mr Sharma, who now lives on the ground floor of the property, was acoustic consultancy Sound Wizard, based in nearby Pondicherry.

'Sound Wizard had built a studio for a friend of mine, and I found out they were based just two hours down the road,' says Mr Sharma. 'Their input and experience was invaluable. This is quite an old property, and when we acquired it we didn't have any plans showing us how it had been constructed.'

'We had to chip away at the plaster to find out where the supporting walls were before we started removing anything,' adds Sound Wizard's CEO, Kumbha Young Grenier. 'The main structural challenge was a column that would have been right in the middle of the control room, so we had to replace it with a big metal beam in the ceiling.'

Mr Young Grenier also had to be mindful that the ground floor was still to be used as the family home. 'We've built the studio as a floating structure, and the studio monitors are also floating, mounted inside boxes, so the energy doesn't travel down to the rooms below,' he says. 'We also wanted to try and



The studio offers Neumann, AKG, Sennheiser, Shure and Rupert Neve microphones

maximise the light and space as much as possible.'

The initial plan was that Salt Haus would be a residential recording studio, where bands would come and stay for extended periods to work on their projects. 'We wanted to have two rooms and a live room, and rent out the second studio room for a month or two at a time,' says Mr Sharma. 'But when I moved in and started using the studio, I found I was working in it for 15 or 16 hours a day, so it was difficult for me to commit to someone else coming in. It's turned out to be just

me working here, so I'm getting more people involved, such as engineers and managers, to concentrate on the music and also to help with the admin involved.'

The control room, where Mr Sharma spends most of his time, is geared towards production, with a pair of ATC SCM200ASL Pros as main monitors and Barefoot Sound Micromain27 Gen2 nearfields. 'I love the ATCs; I was working with some of their smaller models in Los Angeles,' he says. 'I bought a lot of my equipment from Vintage King when I was in the US; I was able to drop in and try out a lot of gear. This is where I heard these speakers, and I literally fell in love with them.'

'As for the Barefoot nearfield monitors, I like them because they sound very real for such a small package. You can switch between the sounds of different speakers, so you can get the NS10 sound and the B&W sound. I've carried out multiple tests, and it's very impressive. Instead of having three sets of speakers, I just need one.'

The studio's SSL Matrix2 console was also purchased from Vintage King. 'I really like the SSL desk for the convenience it gives me,' says Mr Sharma. 'I use it a lot for summing, when I'm recording myself playing guitars and drums and synths. It makes it easy because I can have two busses going into it, or everything going in individually. Everything is routed so I don't have to patch anything up; it goes into the SSL and then straight into my Apogee Symphony I/O and Duet audio interfaces. The SSL has got a couple of really cool controls. For example, I can put all my hardware plugins on any channel, and tweak it from the desk. I'm also using it as a monitor



A pair of ATC SCM200ASL Pros serve as main monitors with Barefoot Sound Micromain27 Gen2 for nearfields



control room

management system, which makes life a little easier, especially when you're monitoring more than eight channels of audio.'

Salt Haus also has an impressive collection of mic preamps, including a four-channel SSL Alpha VHD-Pre, a Universal Audio 4-710D and 6176 channel strip, Neve 1073 LBs, API512 compressors and Shadow Hills Gamas. There are also Neve, API, Manley and Prism EQ units and a good selection of compressors including Shadow Hills, Rupert Neve, SSL and a Lisson Grove AR-1, which is based on a vintage Altec

compressor used extensively in the 1960s. 'I've tailored the whole room to the sound I want to get,' explains Mr Sharma. 'I knew exactly what I wanted because at Full Sail you're exposed to such a wide range of gear that you get to know everything.'

Other equipment includes two Rupert Neve 550 Series tape saturators and a master two-bus Neve processor which Mr Sharma uses for a lot of mixing and mastering. There is also a good selection of synthesisers including Korgs, a Minimoog Voyager and Access Virus TI Darkstar and Virus B, plus Neumann, AKG, Sennheiser, Shure and Rupert Neve microphones.

Mr Sharma is now hitting his stride as the studio beds in. 'After the studio was built it took me three or four months to figure out the layout, make sure everything was connected and sounding good, and start getting everything ready for some serious work,' he says. 'Then I met a couple of musical directors who liked my sound, and I've been working on the action sequences for some films. They'll send me, say, 15 minutes of that day's edit, with cues, and I write the music from that stage. Initially the musical directors would come here, but it's quite far out of Chennai, so I've set up a solution which



The control room is geared towards production



Salt Haus' recording room


allows us to use video and audio feeds to work remotely.'

Mr Sharma is also managing to find time to work on his own solo projects, recording and producing some artists he's currently working with. 'I've got used to the Western way of recording music, which is very different to how it works here in India,' he says. 'With one of the bands, we recorded 300 drum tracks in four hours, and they were blown away with how we did that. We put five or six mics on each guy to get a good sound; they had never been miked like that and they loved the sound. There was no EQing or compression, it was just ready to go in the mix. So we're really trying to incorporate new styles and try out different things in this studio. I love the way the room sounds, and it's really fun to write, mix and master in here.'

Mr Sharma is also finding the location very inspiring. 'I start my day pretty early, around 7.30am, and the work I do in this studio definitely has to do with this space,' he says.

And with views like that from the control room window, it's no wonder Salt Haus Studios is getting the creative juices flowing.

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