

# PRO AUDIO REVIEW

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## Blue Heaven Studios “Cathedral of Sound”

by Russ Long

I suspect that Salina, Kansas would find itself near the top of the list of locations unlikely to have a world-class studio. How ironic that deep in the heart of Kansas lays first-rate Blue Heaven Studios. In only four years of operation, the studio has been featured on *CBS Sunday Morning*, NPR's *All Things Considered* and CNN, as well as receiving coverage by the Associated Press. Not to mention the fact that its album credits read like a *Who's Who* of the Blues.

### The dream

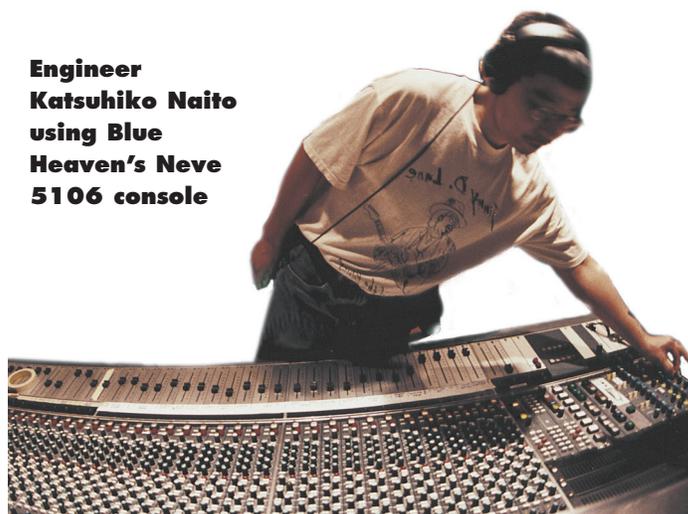
Blue Heaven is a result of Louisiana native Chad Kassem's dream to record the music and stories of America's greatest surviving Blues artists before they die, and he is doing just that. Famous and not-so-famous Blues artists travel by car or plane — and sometimes bus — to a small town in the middle of Kansas to record at Blue

Heaven Studios. They come to write their page in Blues history.

In 1986 Kassem started Acoustic Sounds, an international LP and CD mail-order business with more than 32,000 customers. Acoustic Sounds caters to the serious audiophile listener. The discovery of a demand for unsigned artists' music led to the creation of Analogue Production Originals (APO) Records in 1993.

In addition to new releases, APO reissues out-of-print blues, classical and jazz classics, primarily on 180-gram premium vinyl — the

**Engineer  
Katsuhiko Naito  
using Blue  
Heaven's Neve  
5106 console**



audiophile's preference.

In addition to Acoustic Sounds, APO and Blue Heaven, Kassem has partnered with Don MacInnis of Record Technology, Inc. (RTI) to form AcousTech Mastering. This facility is housed in RTI's production facility (a top record pressing plant) in Camarillo, Calif.

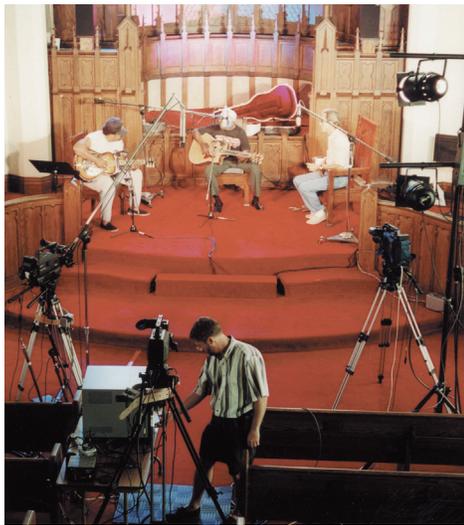
Kassem's partnership in AcousTech allows him to oversee APO's projects from start to finish, assuring its high-quality production standards can be met. The facility is equipped with the former Wilson Audio's Neumann mastering desk, accompanied by an abundance of rare tube-based gems.

In 1998 Kassem brought on Chicago native Jimmy D. Lane as the label and studio's music director. Lane organizes players, produces sessions, coordinates special events and works alongside Kassem in recruiting blues artists for APO recordings. Lane is also one of APO's prominent artists. As well as being the son of blues legend Jimmy Rogers, he has recorded with dozens of artists, including Keith Richards, Eric Clapton, Taj Mahal, Mick Jagger and Steven Stills.





**Taping Honey Boy Edwards' DVD and album, 'Shake 'Em On Down.' From left to right on stage: Jimmy D. Lane, Edwards and Madison Slim.**



**The Neve 5106 console, Tannoy SGM 10 monitors and modified ATR tape machines**



**Naito working in the control room**



To provide proper electrical specs, Muncy spent more than \$60,000 to supply the building with new electrical service. Only premium breakers, panels and surge suppression equipment were installed. Kansas Power and Lighting installed a designated transformer, providing Blue Heaven with a private power source.

Blue Heaven's 94-foot by 55-foot Gothic sanctuary has 42-foot ceilings supported by beautiful walnut beams. Since some of Blue Heaven's recordings are live concerts, Muncy and Kassem decided to keep most of the original oak pews intact. An audience of 400 can be comfortably seated. While this sometimes limits the flexibility of the room, it assured that the fantastic acoustics would not be altered. The control room is built into the rear of the sanctuary to give the engineer and producer clear sightlines to the musicians without obstructing the acoustics.

The basement of Blue Heaven has a giant recreation area with a pool table, ping-pong table, dart boards, a TV, a private lounge and a 900-square-foot kitchen. Kassem often flies in a chef from Louisiana to provide unforgettable food for the studio's talent.

**Equipment**

A classic 36-input Neve 5106 desk is the backbone of Blue Heaven's control room. After purchasing the console from Fox Broadcasting, more than 1,000 hours were invested into its restoration and modification to assure the utmost sonic quality and performance. All audio wiring is premium

cabling from Canare and Belden, with gold-plated connectors throughout.

Blue Heaven has an old-school philosophy of recording. They shy away from digital (although they were more than accommodating when I brought in a stack of 20-bit ADATs for my two-week stint at the studio). Most of the records Kassem records for APO are done direct to two-track, avoiding multitrack recorders altogether. Blue Heaven doesn't have automation either. They prefer old-school mixing, with four pairs of hands on the desk at once. Yet for all that old-school, Blue Heaven is on the cutting edge with several projects with Sony SACD.

The control room is both acoustically accurate and comfortable. Two Herman Miller Aeron Chairs (the Rolls Royce of all chairs) provide comfortable seating for those long nights. The Mastering Lab modified Tannoy SGM10 monitors and Yamaha P2201 power amp fill the control room with accurate sound.

In addition to the audio equipment, the sanctuary has been wired to accommodate eight camera lines, press feed and 200 amps of stage lighting. For DVD releases, APO complements the high-quality audio with full video coverage. This makes Blue Heaven the perfect location for simultaneously creating a live video and album.

**In use**

I spent two weeks at Blue Heaven last summer and it proved to be a rewarding experience. I found the sanctuary's acoustics fabulous and the sound of the Neve

**Naito with jazz engineer David Baker**



5106 desk simply stellar.

The latest in the rack is a Manley Labs VOXBOX.

The microphone selection is basic, yet first rate. There is just enough diversity to cover most circumstances. In addition to the high-end AKG C24 and Neumann U67s, Blue Heaven has a handful of ribbons, which complement the collection nicely.

A couple more high-end tube condensers, like the Brauner VM1 KHE, Neumann U47, Soundelux U99 or one of the Lawson tube mics, would be nice. I would also like to see a few more 421s and 57s for some added flexibility. Top it off with a pair of Royer R-121s, a Royer SF-12 and a pair of Earthworks SR77s and I would be in microphone heaven. I must add that Blue Heaven's microphones are well maintained.

The 67s and the C24 sound pristine and the classic RCA 44BX, although a bit rough in appearance, sounds brilliant. Drums sound wonderful in the Blue Heaven sanctuary. The ambience is incredible. Just imagine John Bonham on steroids and you will be in the ballpark. Electric guitars also sound fantastic in the room. In addition, the studio is equipped with an immaculate Hammond B3 (with Leslie 122 cabinet) and a 9-foot Steinway Concert Grand model D piano.

The piano is one of the finest I have ever heard. In Blue Heaven's sanctuary, I

imagine its sound — accompanied by violin, viola and cello playing Mozart's Piano Quartet in G minor — will be as close as possible to what Mozart intended.

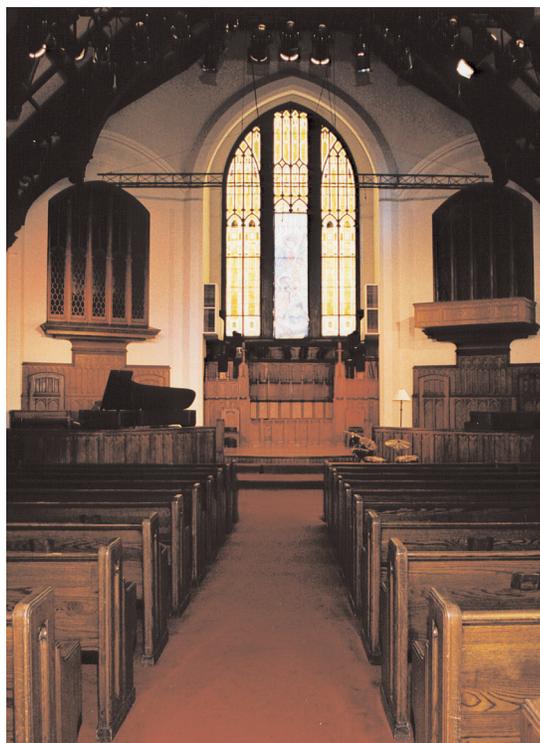
With the giant kitchen, recreation room and artist lounge, there is always a place for the musicians to hang when they are not recording. This keeps the studio noise floor at a minimum and eliminates distractions in the control room.

I only had one real complaint with the studio: I would like to see movable or removable pews instead of the permanent type. In its current state, there are only two or three options for drum placement. This would also allow musicians to be spread throughout the room instead of primarily at one end.

Kassem has assured me that the temporary removal of the pews would not be too difficult and that the staff has done this on numerous occasions when the need for their removal arose.

### Summary

Blue Heaven's acoustics are not the only thing that set it apart from other studios. It is also extremely affordable. If Blue Heaven was in Nashville, New York or L.A., I would expect to pay \$1,200 to \$2,000 a day for a similar

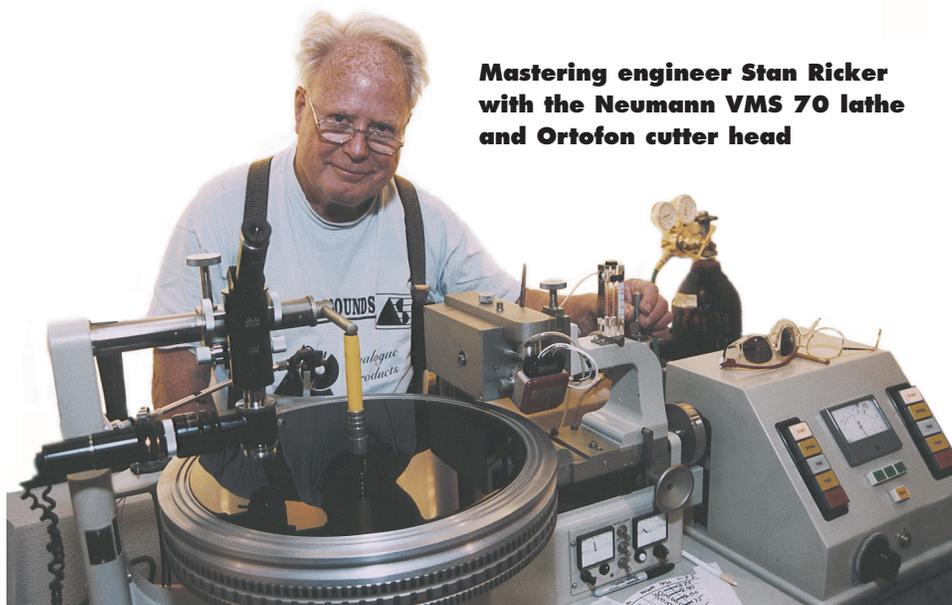


Interior of Blue Heaven showing pews

setup but for those willing to make the trek to Salina, it can be had for \$500 per day (10-hour block) or \$75 per hour. The deals don't get any better than this. Not to mention, Blue Heaven's staff is professional, friendly and ready to help.

If you don't have the opportunity to travel to Salina and make use of Blue Heaven Studios, you owe it to yourself to purchase one of the APO albums recorded there. The sound alone will win you over. In the words of top engineer David Baker, "Blue Heaven is a small cathedral blessed with celestial acoustics."

*Russ Long, a Nashville-based producer/engineer, owns The White House and The Carport recording studios. He is a regular contributor to Pro Audio Review.*



Mastering engineer Stan Ricker with the Neumann VMS 70 lathe and Ortofon cutter head

