

NEWS

Mixers Gone Wild *_Good News Spreads About Chris David and Leslie Shatz's Wildfire Studios_* *by Debra Kaufman photos by Gregory Schwartz*

When freelance re-recording mixer Chris David cajoled, coerced and ultimately convinced the owners of Wilshire Stages to go union back in 2001 (though not without some kicking and screaming), little did he know that one day he and colleague Leslie Shatz would own the stages they were organizing. “I



Leslie Shatz, left, and Chris David are the new owners of Wildfire Studios, formerly Wilshire Stages.

Came in one morning and my recordist didn't look great,” recalls David. “Then I discovered he'd been up all night, still on the same rate as when he started. I said, ‘That's enough,’ and called the union.” The final vote in the election was 75 percent pro-union. “I think the 25 percent who voted against it would probably vote the other way now if they could,” he says. “They're quite appreciative of the union.”

Flash forward to earlier this year, and David and fellow freelance mixer Shatz bought Wilshire Stages and transformed it into Wildfire Studios, a proudly union mixing house with production offices. The first project to pass through Wildfire was director Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There*, about the life of Bob Dylan. Mixers Ken Polk and Stanley Johnson also used the stages to mix director Jason Reitman's *Juno*, for Fox Searchlight. And *Rambo IV* is in the house for the full sound and DI treatment.

Transitioning from a lifetime of freelance sound work to owning the shop is a big leap, but for David and Shatz, it made sense. “It gives us a great deal of control over our own destiny,” says David. “It gives us a chance to create a working environment run by professionals to do the work of professionals. We can create an optimum working situation for us and our clients.”

David had been involved in the world of professional audio since the early 1970s, originally doing rock 'n' roll tours, then segueing into rock albums, commercials and, finally, films—all in London. When he moved to Los Angeles in 1988, he took a job with Solid State Logic leading the design team for the SL5000 film console. “Our first client was Lucasfilm,” he says. “Then we sold 10 consoles to Todd AO.”



Chris David, front center, and Leslie Shatz, right, with the staff at Wildfire Studio

Many consoles later, in 1990, he took a job with 20th Century Fox and began mixing films, first for Fox and then for Todd AO. Since 1997, he's been independent and has worked all over town, with probably 75 percent of his work at Wilshire Stages.

When David realized that Wilshire Stages was for sale, he began negotiating with the owners. “During the early stages of looking for co-conspirators, Leslie—whom I'd known for 10 years—was in here mixing a film called *Martian Child*,” says David. “I told him what I was doing and asked if he was interested; he said, ‘Yes.’”

Shatz started his career as a sound editor/mixer at the American Film Institute (where his first credit was the Peter Bogdanovich documentary *Directed* by John Ford). After AFI, Shatz went freelance and has worked on a long list of feature films, including *The Mummy*, Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* and all the films of noted indie director Gus Van Sant.

The two mixers kept working, while the long, complex negotiations continued. After several months, David assumed the deal was dead and, at the end of April this year, went to Cinecitta in Rome to mix Abel Ferrara's *Go Go Tales* for its Cannes Film Festival premiere. Already on an insanely tight deadline, he was shocked to get a phone call that Wilshire Stages was his—but he had only a few days to close the deal or it was off. With Shatz in Los Angeles and a lot of international conference calls, the deal was finally struck, and David and Shatz became the new owners of Wilshire Stages on May 5.

“The first goal was to turn around the operation, which had been falling apart over the last couple of years due to lack of investment and lack of attention to management,” says David about the four stages (two large dub stages, one small dub stage and one ADR stage). “It had been sort of coasting in neutral for awhile, so just like a car, eventually it starts to slow down.”

David and Shatz turned their attention to bringing all the deferred maintenance and software upgrades up to date, improving hard drive, memory space, processor speed, and installing all the latest software in their ProTools machines. By the end, they had bought or upgraded 18 ProTools HD2 or 3 systems running version 7.3, and installed a 6-terabyte RAID array server system.

They also installed an SSL C348 Digital Film Mixing Console on Stage C and upgraded the rooms’ projectors, adding two Barco DP-90 2K digital projectors for Stages A and B. The smaller C Stage was outfitted with a Panasonic AE1000 1080i HD projector. “Plus, we added countless plug-ins, interfaces, extenders and monitors,” says David.

In addition to the four stages, Wildfire Studios is made up of a collection of sound edit rooms and production offices. Currently, *Fred Claus*, a Christmas movie from Warner Bros., is renting 12 rooms for its picture department, post-production supervisor, music editors and visual effects staff. Though the film isn’t mixing at Wildfire, David points out that the availability of the offices enables the studios to offer a complete package with sound, DI and production space.

Wilshire Studios did just that with director Mel Gibson’s *Apocalypto*. “They were using at least three of the four stages at one time and had a few rooms with an Avid in them,” says David. “It enabled the whole team to move in here for that last six-week push to the finish line. They can do almost all the things they have to do in that period when post production gets really hectic—and they can do it all in one place.”

The other changes that transformed Wilshire Stages into Wildfire Studios are cosmetic, but still important. First was the name change. “While Wilshire Stages had a good reputation in certain areas, we felt there was a need for a fresh look, fresh name, fresh atmosphere,” explains David. “A lot of it hadn’t changed since the building was first opened in the mid-to-late 1980s.” The name Wildfire—which is only a two-letter change from Wilshire—came to David while hiking in the mountains.

Because filmmakers spend a lot of time at the facility during the final mix, David and Shatz made sure that the new environment was comfortable and features great coffee (the beans come from Portland, Oregon) and a range of gourmet foods. But that’s only part of it. “We call ourselves a boutique operation, and everybody in our company is geared towards personal attention to each project,” adds Shatz.

Filmmakers who have come to Wildfire Studios in the six months since it opened have been pleased. "I would highly recommend Wildfire Studios to any of our colleagues," states director Scott Hillenbrand, who with his brother/partner David, is directing *Transylmania*. "They understand what a producer and director need. Leslie and Chris are A-plus people, and that flows down to everyone who's stayed to everyone they've brought on."

Hillenbrand says he appreciates the ease in which the producer and director can integrate into Wildfire's system. "It's not like someone who manages a sound facility but doesn't understand the process," he explains. "They manage a team of people who understand the process. You don't find that in a lot of places where the suits—people who have never gotten dirty with the process—run the show. It's an absolutely gorgeous professional working environment."

David and Shatz are already thinking of the future direction of the company. Shatz says he'd like to explore television. "Now that HDTV is becoming a standard, 5.1 sound is going to be a reality on every single TV show," he says. "It's probably close to that now. And the creative possibilities for TV are going to grow. There'll be a demand for high quality sound."

"Business is good," concludes David, who is working on *Elegy* and says that Shatz is working on *Kids in America*. "We've done well and we've been lucky." Luck may be part of it, but Wildfire Studios' clients show up for the expertise, capabilities and the professional union sound team that fulfills their every need.

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