



Southern Oregon's Iconic Sullivan Recording Studio Returns From the Dead Full-Service Studio Reopens After Five Years With New Management and Digital Focus By Josh Gross

In the late 1960s, Rick Bolz and his psychedelic rock band Neighborhood Children had some minor hits, and played gigs opening for The Who, as well as other major acts of the day.

He's currently revisiting one of those songs, "Feeling Zero", as a country ballad. And to do it, he's recording at the studio built by Frank Sullivan, a pedal steel player he always took joy in collaborating with and confusing in the 1990s.

"Whenever we would record, I was out here in the psychedelic realm and he was country," Bolz says. "I would offer suggestions for how something should sound, and he would look at me like, what's wrong with you, Rick?"

But despite a storied career that includes recording sessions for Willy Nelson and Vince Gill, as well as playing the banjo as Liver Lips McGrowl in Disney's touring Country Bears Jamboree, Frank Sullivan isn't running this session. He passed away in 2016.

Bolz's recording session is a result of the rarest of stories from the Covid economy: a beloved local business's resurrection.

After years touring internationally as a session musician and audio engineer for hire, Trevor Watson was living in Seattle working as a sound engineer at Microsoft Production Studios when the pandemic hit. Like so many, he returned home to weather the shutdown with family.

While in Ashland, where he grew up and played with many bands in the 1990s, he decided to help out with his brother's landscaping business to pass the time while plotting his next move in the music industry. But the property at one jobsite looked familiar.

"I was like, I think I recorded a demo here once," he said.

Watson was right. The property housed Sullivan Recording, a compact, but fully-stocked, full-service recording studio nestled away in the hills above Phoenix, Oregon. The studio had once been a go-to location for Southern Oregon bands to cut records, and had handled most of the audio duties for the internationally renowned Oregon Shakespeare Festival. His father had even recorded there.

But since founder Frank Sullivan's passing in 2016, it had sat like an Egyptian tomb; fully-stocked, but dormant, little more than a museum to its creator.

Seeing opportunity, Watson approached Laurie Hunter, Frank's widow, and asked her about the studio. She agreed to let him take over the space and equipment, including its fleet of vintage synthesizers and recording gear.

"I had been not knowing what to do with the equipment that was left there," Hunter says. "When Trevor showed up it was kind of like an answer to an unspoken prayer. He knew what to do, what to keep, and what to sell, and he was so excited about keeping some of the old equipment like an archive, or a museum, to technology."

It also meant that Sullivan's life's work would continue.

"A big part of him is still in that building," Hunter says.

After months of remodeling and cleaning, Watson reopened the studio for clients in July 2020. One of the first projects he brought on was Rickashane, fronted by Bolz. Their current project had been started at a different studio, but was ported over specifically so the band could return to Sullivan Recording to work with Watson.

"It made my heart feel good," Rick said, of returning to work in the studio after years away.

But beyond returning to the site of many good memories, Watson ensured the experience itself delivered as well.

"Trevor has made it so much more comfortable," he says. "When Frank was here, he had really good equipment, but it was a bit more like a good ol' boys' studio."

In addition to shifting focus towards digital recording from aging tape machines, Watson renovated and decorated the studio, giving it a cozier vibe, filling it with vintage posters, records, and photos, making it as much a clubhouse and shrine to Southern Oregon music of days past as it is a place to make more of it.

"I want this to be a space for self-expression," Watson says. "Especially now that everyone is feeling so isolated from the Covid experience."

A major element of that is Watson's desire to create a space and opportunity for youth to make music like he had when he was in high school, a resource that he sees shrinking access to.

The full-service studio is generally booked out with recording, mixing, and mastering, but Watson is explicit that he loves nothing more than the urgency of a call to drop everything for an emergency session.

And while the studio is also taking on work for corporate and industrial projects, Watson's passion will always be in helping bands record original music.

"I love the magic of making something new that doesn't exist," he says. "It's exciting. Recording is an essential component of that. There's a million techniques to use. How they come together can make all the difference. And it's a great feeling when you're recording something and everybody feels it all at once. Like. Yeah. That's it."

Sullivan Recording is located at 3052 Payne Road in Medford, Oregon. For more information, availability or rates, contact trevor@sullivanrecording.com or visit Sullivanrecording.com.

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Tagline: Sullivan Recordings new makeover and digital upgrade