

PRO AUDIO REVIEW

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The High End

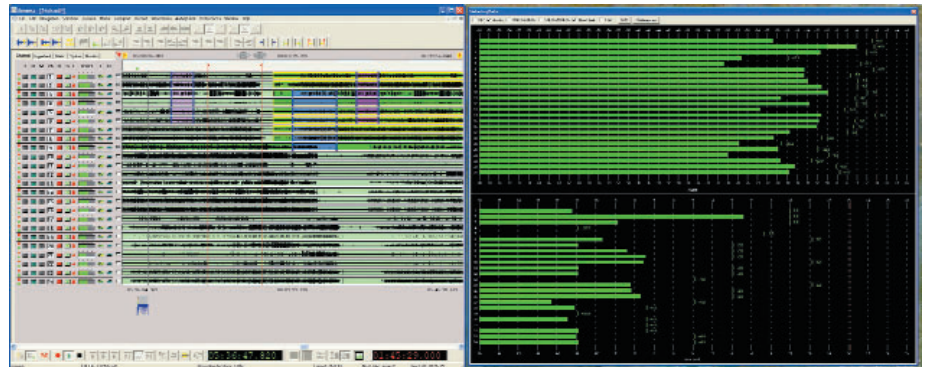
BY TOM JUNG

Great news from Boulder, Col.: a new company called Super Audio Center (SAC) has been formed to sell and support the Sonoma DSD multichannel recording system headed up by one of the world's foremost digital gurus Gus Skinas. Sonoma, originally developed by Sony with a group of engineers located in San Francisco is now available for sale in 8, 16 and 24-channel configurations. "Under Gus's guidance, this new SACD facility will enable us to better address the needs of those artists, producers and music labels who want to issue their music on this high resolution multi-channel format," said David Kawakami, Director of the Super Audio CD Project for Sony Corp. of America.

I've resisted gushing too much about Sonoma on these pages only because it has not been available for sale until recently. I have however reviewed both the Meitner (EMM Labs) A/D and D/A eight-channel converters used with Sonoma (*PAR* 8/99, 12/01) in *Par* and have personally recorded and edited several album projects on the basic eight-channel system. The Meitner converters pretty much define the sound of Sonoma, and from now on will be sold exclusively through SAC.

The Sonoma technology has been instrumental in the launch of the SACD format and the production of the vast majority of Super Audio Compact Discs on the market today. Operating completely in the SACD's native DSD (Direct Stream Digital) domain, Sonoma functions as a professional multi-track recorder while providing powerful DSD editing capabilities. In addition to sell-

New Sonoma DSD Recorder/Editor



ing Sonoma, Super Audio Center provides production services including editing, mixing, mastering authoring, format conversions and can even help with Hybrid SACD replication. Also available is a rental service for DSD that not only features Sonoma systems but DSD recording/editing tools from Genex, TASCAM, Merging Technologies Pyramix, SADiE and Meitner, they will even provide support to plug it all together and run it for you if you like.

Gus Skinas has worked around studios in the pro audio gear trenches most of his adult life supporting engineers like myself under the most difficult circumstances imaginable. Over the years Gus has saved my butt so many times I can't begin to count. Having been involved in several new technology roll outs I can safely say that support is the keyword here, without it you have to be crazy to go out on a limb to try something really new and unproven. On the other hand with good support it can be invigorating and

Sonoma in the Studio

"High end analog studios can now realize their true sonic potential. We have just finished a trial run project at Ardent studios in Memphis. The Sonoma's job was to record John Hiatt's new album. I have to admit that I was a bit worried going into the session, but the yet unreleased Sonoma-24 far exceeded my expectations. Functionally it handled everything that was thrown at it, including significant editing between takes and overdubs. The session was tracked and mixed by John Hampton on a Neve V series console with a lot of vintage tube signal processing. Sonically it is stunning! To me, it was the ideal scenario: A state-of-the-art analog studio with the DSD Sonoma as the core recorder/editor and mix-down device."

Gus Skinas, President,
Super Audio Center.

exciting to break new ground. I feel honored to be small part of Sonoma's development.

The basic eight-channel Sonoma hardware consists of a full size PCI card with four ST fiber optic connectors, eight-channel in/out and word clock in/out. These optical interfaces are used to connect to the eight-channel A/D and D/A Meitner converters making it possible to locate a noisy computer in another room away from the critical listening without any compromises in quality. Included with the system are four 100-foot glass fiber optic cables, which can be extended to 1,000 feet or more without any problems since this is the real stuff, not to be confused with plastic Toslink. Sonoma can be supplied with or without a PC and does not require a lot of computer horsepower to run since the Sonoma card bears most of the workload.

The 2.0 software that runs on either Windows NT or XP platform is rock solid and a piece-of-cake to install. A real stand-out in this new software is perhaps the most comprehensive metering I have ever seen, designed by ... you guessed it, Gus Skinas. To cover all the great editing capabilities and features of the Sonoma software a separate review would be required which I understand will be forthcoming in *PAR* by Richard King who has used a full blown Sonoma 24 on a recent project.

Unfortunately most SACDs on the market today are NOT made with original DSD masters, which I feel misleads the consumer and undermines the potential of the SACD format. When a project is recorded with DSD from start to finish it sounds like the best of analog without any of the common digital artifacts.

Sonoma is sold in blocks of eight-channels which includes the PCI card, software,

cables and Meitner A/D and D/A converters for \$19K. Upgrading to 16 or 24 channels is done without any penalties - just add blocks of eight.

If you are going for a high-rez release format I am convinced that at this point in time you cannot record at a higher resolution than Sonoma. Even with the today's standard CD release format the sonic advantages of DSD can be realized.

Tom Jung is Pro Audio Review's technical consultant.

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SONOMA