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Raising The Roof On The UK Sound Industry

Carole Humphrey is one of the leading women in the UK sound industry, with over 30 years' experience. Having worked at a number audio production facilities, she is the co-owner of the Grand Central Recording Studios (GCRS) in Soho, London.

"I was going home from work and saw an ad in the Evening Standard for an admin assistant to work in a sound studio," Carole says, as she reveals how she got her start in the industry in 1978. "I thought it was more me and the salary was the same as I was earning. I got the job and my life changed." The job was working in Studio G, in Wardour Street, where the Cadbury's Sensa Mints had been invented. "I learned a lot in my first job – like how to mic up a drum kit and the intricacies of music copyright law." In 1981 Carole became one of the founders of The Tape Gallery. "We were incredibly successful throughout the '80s and were technological pioneers. We built a studio where you could work to picture with video machines. No-one else was doing this – everything was still being dubbed on film. Our first 'to picture studio' had an 8-track tape machine, a centre track timecode 'C' machine and a v-matic machine, all of which were controlled by a system,

developed by Audio Kinetics, called Q-lock. This was all revolutionary. "We invested in the New England Digital Synclavier when no-one else was buying anything like that at all. This gave us RAM for the first time, as well as the ability to manipulate sounds in a way that had never been done before. "NED brought out the Direct to Disk system which provided loads of tracks and the speed at which we are able to work increased which allowed us to spend more time in sessions producing creative and innovative sounds for commercials. Our clients were being challenged to write scripts for the technology they used it." Whilst the studio experienced great success, Carole parted ways with the business in 1990. "I did a lot of production work – voice casting and music searches, music production and radio production. I chose and cleared tracks from Rod Stewart, Roy Orbison, Sting and Duran Duran for various different car spots. I



worked with Barrington Pheasant on a version of Ride of the Valkyries and Ry Cooder on a juan commercial. I came up with the idea of using Let's face it music and dance for a series of Allied Dunbar spots. My friend Simon Franglen and I persuaded Capital Records in LA to release Nat King Cole's master recording for us to edit and remix. Not long after the campaign went on air, Torvill and Dean used this song in the 1994 Winter Olympics. Perfect timing for us!"

After a lot of thought, Carole decided to build a new facility – opening Grand Central Recording Studios, in 1994, with her business partner Ivor Taylor, ex-founder of Turnkey and MD of Fosco UK. Sound engineer Raja Sehgal came on board and became a company director a few years later. After 10 years in Marshall Street, GCRS relocated to Great Marlborough Street building a bigger facility but still in the heart of Soho – arguably the creative hub of the UK, which Carole is very passionate about preserving.

When it opened in 2004, GCRS was the first all digital audio facility in the UK. GCRS now has seven studios and is currently in the final stages of building two more rooms on the top floor. Each studio is designed to the highest acoustic and technical standards. All are Protocols HD, four are equipped with AMS Neve DFC Gemini mixing consoles and are also certified Dolby 5.1. The remaining studios are currently being upgraded to 56 control surfaces. The two new studios known as The Loft, will have DFCs and a game changing new monitoring installation from Diggy. Studio 5 and Studio 8, meanwhile, are

certified for both Dolby 5.1 and 7.1. Studio 5 has D-Cinema projection and Dolby 3D projection. Later in the year, Dolby Atmos will also be installed in Studio 5.

GCRS has a full time staff of twenty-eight including nine sound designers – seven of whom have been with the business over ten years, whilst the eighth has recently celebrated his ninth year at GCRS. The day prior to our interview, Carole revealed that Oscar-winner Eddie Redmayne had been recording at the studios, while the team is regularly tasked with bringing audio excellence to such critically acclaimed ads as Nike: Write the Future, Jaguar: Rendezvous, Heineken: The Odyssey, Axe Apollo, Ford Mustang: The Road Awaits (launching the car to the European market) and BMW: Wolf, which was the first UK commercial to be mixed in Dolby Atmos.

She adds: "In my career, there have been so many technological changes. When I first started at Studio G, we had an eight-track tape machine. In this facility, you can have as many virtual tracks as you like. It is a completely different world."

In addition to commercial audio work, GCRS has also recently worked to take the message of sound excellence to a wider audience, and to encourage those in the commercial industry to think about the subject in a different way. "We've produced two films to demonstrate how you can completely transform a story with audio," she says. "The films were made with Steam Media and award-winning creative Paul Burke. What we see on screen remains the same but each film is given

three different audio treatments – dramatically changing tone and content. We showed them at Soho Create Festival 2015, to give the audience an idea on how much sound can contribute."

Carole also spends a lot of time investing in the future – by bringing young people up through the ranks at Grand Central, as part of an on-the-job training programme. They learn the ropes with training and mentoring from the team. Earlier this year, one of her former employees – sound editor Ben Wilkins – won an Oscar and a BAFTA for his work on Whiplash. During both award ceremonies, he mentioned Carole's name in his acceptance speech and voiced his gratitude towards her, something that she describes as, "just astonishing."

While many have Carole to thank for her support and approach to business, she concludes that she is grateful for her first introduction to the industry. "As an avid radio listener since I was little, I used to listen to the spoken word, and then to music – pirate radio, Radio 1 and Capital. I bought lots of albums and I went to loads of gigs. I read Sounds, Melody Maker and NME every week. I assiduously read the liner notes on album sleeves.

Steady Dan was one of the first bands to explore using the studio as an instrument in its own right. In 1978, I had to choose between working for the Lane Society or working in a recording studio. I chose the studio. "I blame Donald Fagen for getting me into this business," she jokes. "It's all down to Steady Dan."

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Carole Humphrey

