

Tales from Oxnard's Teatro: Shooting pool with Bob Dylan, buying weed for Willie Nelson

ter has given life to music by Neil Young, Iggy Pop and others. Willie Nelson loved med an album after it.

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Today, the official Pacific Coast Highway route skirts the east edge of Oxnard on Rice Avenue until it hits Highway 101. But in the 1990s, PCH ran through downtown on Oxnard Boulevard.

If it hadn't, a few landmark rock, country and folk albums wouldn't sound the way they did, and Oxnard would have missed out on a connection to music history. Bob Dylan wouldn't have shot pool with the locals, and Willie Nelson wouldn't have sent an emissary to Ventura to buy an ounce of high-grade marijuana.

Sometime in 1995, Mark Howard, a recording engineer who worked frequently with the producer Daniel Lanois, was on a road trip from a meeting in Los Angeles to his home in San Francisco. On his way through downtown Oxnard, he passed an old movie theater with "Teatro" on the marquee and a "for lease" sign in the window.

That, he thought, would make a good recording studio.

Howard and Lanois liked to record in places that weren't built for recording music. Lanois recorded U2's "The Joshua Tree" in an 18th century Irish mansion, and in 1989 he and Howard recorded Dylan's "Oh Mercy" in an old Victorian house in New Orleans.

"I'm a very much guerilla recordist, where it's 'record me now,' whenever the artist is making music, and recording studios don't lend themselves to that very well," Howard said in a

recent interview. “You’re in glass booth, separated from the artists, you’re on the clock. ... I don’t know how that became the standard.”

Howard had a good feeling about the Teatro because old movie theaters always sound great — “the size of the room, the high ceiling, really matters for the way I record,” he said. He checked with Lanois, called the building’s owner and was soon renting the place for \$1,500 a month.

Howard and Lanois only worked at the Teatro for about five years, but they recorded two albums there that are still regarded as late-career high marks by legendary artists: Dylan’s Grammy-winning “Time Out of Mind” and Nelson’s “Teatro,” released 25 years ago this month with a photo of the theater as its cover art.

Both albums have a legacy. Island Records reissued “Teatro” on vinyl last month to mark its 25th anniversary. In January, Columbia released a 60-song set called “Fragments — The Time Out of Mind Sessions,” the 17th in the label’s “Bootleg Series” of Dylan rarities, remasters and live recordings.

Other artists to spend time and make music at the Teatro in the 1990s included Emmylou Harris, Marianne Faithful, Iggy Pop and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Neil Young recorded an album there in 2015, years after Howard and Lanois left, with a backing band that included two of Nelson’s sons.

The Teatro is now owned by Paul Sangster, a businessman based in Chatsworth. His company, Future Lighting, does projection, video and visual effects for television, advertising and concerts and other live events — for example, the visuals at a Hollywood Bowl concert.

Sangster has been fixing up the inside of the theater, and he recently put the building up for lease. He said he’s hoping it can become a recording studio again, or a concert venue, or anything that can be a catalyst for the revitalization of downtown Oxnard.

“My dream would be to have a central hub for music, technology and the arts,” Sangster said.

From theater to studio

The Teatro opened in 1929 as the Boulevard Theatre. It was the first “talkie” movie theater in Ventura County, with ads that boasted “Our Screen Talks and Sings Like Live People,” Jeff Maulhardt, the author of a series of books on Oxnard’s history, said in an email interview.

The population of Oxnard and the movie theater business both changed a great deal in the next few decades. By the late 1950s, it switched to Spanish-language movies, Maulhardt said, and eventually the name changed to “Teatro.”

At some point, it showed some fairly racy Spanish-language films, judging by the posters Howard found in back in the 1990s, but Maulhardt said he doesn't think it was ever an adult theater.

The theater had been closed for years by the time Howard found it in 1995. It was, he said, “a dump,” with a moldy popcorn machine still in the lobby and a homeless man sleeping in the ticket booth.

Howard relocated the ticket booth resident to a broken down Cadillac El Dorado in the parking lot and had heavy gates put up outside the entrance. Then he moved his recording equipment in and turned the place into one of his guerilla studios. The seats were torn out, the old Mexican movie posters went back on the walls and a pool table went into one of the rooms off the lobby. The lighting was warm and low and the floors were covered with Persian rugs.

Shooting pool with Bob Dylan

The first thing Howard and Lanois recorded at the Teatro was music for the 1996 Billy Bob Thornton movie “Sling Blade.” Then in 1997, Dylan reached out about recording another album with Lanois. He had already written some songs, and he started driving to Oxnard from his home in Malibu to record them at the Teatro.

“Dylan came up by himself every day in a pickup truck,” Howard said. “He would walk around the neighborhood, go to Gordon’s Western Wear or the pool hall. I told him, don’t go to the pool hall ... and what does he do? He goes straight to the pool hall. He had a cowboy hat on, and nobody recognized him.”

That was a big part of the Teatro’s charm. Even Willie Nelson, possessor of one of American music's most famous faces, was never recognized at the taqueria across the street.

“The location was great for people who are superstars,” Howard said. “There’s nobody there to bother them. It’s the first time in their lives they don’t need security to walk down the street. It’s total freedom for them.”

On his drives to Oxnard, Dylan would pick up a radio station that played old blues songs, and he told Howard and Lanois that was the sound he wanted for his album.

“Time Out of Mind” was recorded with 10 or 15 musicians in the room together, Howard said, and it sounds like a rough, raw live performance.

"Dylan would change the key every take, and people are making a lot of mistakes, and it sounds very junky, very live, a lot of s--- bleeding into his vocal mic," Howard said. He prefers the more polished sound of "Oh Mercy."

But “Time Out of Mind” was a hit, Dylan’s first million-selling album since the 1970s. It would win Album of the Year at the 1998 Grammy Awards and is widely credited with launching a late-career renaissance that continues to this day.

The album was almost never released. After recording for a while at the Teatro, Dylan decided there were too many distractions working that close to home, and the whole gang relocated to Criteria Studios in Miami. Howard said the sound in that studio was never quite right, and worse, Lanois and Dylan started fighting, and weren’t on speaking terms by the end.

"We'd be sitting at a console listening to a track, Dan would lean over to me and say, ‘That sounds great,’ and Bob would say, ‘Is there somebody talking?’” Howard said.

After Miami, Howard gave Dylan a cassette tape of the rough mixes. Months went by, and it seemed like the project might be abandoned, when Howard got a call from Dylan.

Dylan said he’d been playing the tape at a friend’s house in Santa Monica when there was a knock at the door. It was the downstairs neighbor, who said, “what are you guys listening to? I’ve got to get this record.”

That review was enough to prompt Dylan to come back to Oxnard and finish mixing the album, Howard said.

For Dylan fans, “Time Out of Mind” is his “death record.” The first line of the first song is “I’m walking, through streets that are dead,” and there are songs called “Not Dark Yet” and “Tryin’ To Get to Heaven.”

The mortality vibe is also tied to a health scare Dylan went through after the album was recorded and before it was released. While touring in Europe in May 1997, he was hospitalized with chest pains. It turned out to be a treatable but potentially fatal heart condition triggered by a bacterial infection. Dylan, then 56, was quoted as saying, "I really thought I'd be seeing Elvis soon."

Buying weed for Willie

"Time Out of Mind" was the biggest seller and award-winner recorded at the Teatro, but it was Nelson's "Teatro" that put the studio on the map. Howard had taken a photo of the front of the building, and he wrote "Willie Nelson" on the marquee and gave it to Nelson's manager to use as an album cover.

"They loved that so much, they called the record 'Teatro,'" Howard said.

Nelson parked his tour bus in the Teatro parking lot and slept there, while his wife and children stayed at a hotel on the beach. He brought his sister, Bobbie, to play piano and his harmonica player Mickey Raphael and the rest of the band was hired for the session. In two days, they recorded 21 songs, 14 of which ended up on the album.

"I work fast, and so does Willie," Howard said. "Willie would work up a song and I'd go, 'That was great. Did you just write that?' He'd say, 'No, I wrote that in the '50s.' He had all these old songs no one remembered."

As soon as the bus arrived, Nelson's manager came to Howard and said, "Willie's out of weed. Can you get some weed for him?"

Howard was living in Ventura at the time, and he knew a guy. When he found the guy and told him the purchase was for Willie Nelson, the dealer said, "Oh no, this is dirt weed. You can't give it to Willie Nelson, but the guy upstairs has really good stuff," Howard said. "It's grown in bat s---, and it's really high THC."

So Howard went upstairs and paid \$800 for an ounce of the bat-guano stuff. He brought it to Nelson's bus at around 10 the next morning.

"I said, Willie, I've got this weed, but it's really strong, maybe don't smoke it during the session, smoke something else and smoke this at night," Howard said. "He said, 'F--- that, roll one up.'"

Nelson's guitar tech staggered into the studio a little later and had some trouble locating a cable that was right in front of him, Howard said. Nelson was completely unfazed. He sat down and recorded about a dozen songs.

"Teatro," the album, has a Latin sound, which Howard attributes to where it was recorded. The recording crew spent a lot of time across the street at Cielito Lindo Cafe, where they were "blown away by their jukebox," Howard said.

Lanois and Howard are both from Canada, and they had no background in Latin music. They tried bringing a local mariachi band in off the street to record with Dylan, but Howard said they were "too raw" to put on the album.

For the "Teatro" record, they used two drummers, which gave it a rhythmic sound unlike anything else in Nelson's catalog.

"Teatro" is almost a duet album, with Emmylou Harris singing on 10 of the 14 songs.

"I thought it was an amazing thing, because she didn't know the songs," Howard said. "She's kind of singing off the cuff. We had no video prompter or lyrics, so she shadowed him, singing slightly behind him. It was beautiful, the way she did it."

Changes

After "Teatro," the secret of the Teatro was out. The Red Hot Chili Peppers recorded there with Howard in preparation for their 1999 album "Californication," but none of the Teatro recordings ended up on the album. The band decided to go with Rick Rubin to produce the album, and re-recorded the songs in a different studio.

By 2000, the partnership between Lanois and Howard had run its course, and they moved on to separate recording studios.

Howard said he'd love to see the Teatro as a studio again, or as a concert venue, but it can be difficult to draw people from out of town to downtown Oxnard.

Downtown Oxnard has changed since the 1990s, but one constant has been repeated efforts by civic and business leaders to revitalize it, to attract more people for jobs in the daytime and restaurants, music and culture at night.

"I really love historic downtowns," said Sangster, the Teatro's owner. "There's a lot of history here, and I think it could be something great for Oxnard."

Sangster said he's looking into funding some improvements to the building through the Mills Act, which offers property tax breaks to owners of historically significant buildings. He already added air conditioning in 2015, when Neil Young came to record "The Monsanto Years." The neon sign in front was damaged in recent storms and could be replaced, and Sangster also wants to add solar panels and electric vehicle chargers.

"Things are changing in that area," said Abel Magaña, the executive director of the Downtown Oxnard Improvement Association. "We'd all like to see that building active as a venue for the public."

Nelson turned 90 earlier this year, and he's told interviewers he's quit smoking and switched to edibles and other cannabis delivery methods. If he ever comes back to the Teatro, there's one change he might notice about downtown Oxnard: There's now a legal cannabis dispensary about a mile away.

Some of the songs recorded at the Teatro

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