

SMELLS LIKE PENNINGTON SPIRIT

By Jamie Manser

If you are familiar with the musicians' practice studios at 125 E. Pennington Street, chances are you don't know the name of it.

Greyhound Soul's bassist Duane Hollis calls it "Pennington Street Studios."

In actuality, the name is Francisco Studios, owned by Francisco Gamez who started his business in 1976 in San Francisco on Francisco Street.

If you are a musician that practices there, you probably have become inured to the olfactory offenses that permeate the air.

Tucson drummer Ben DeGain has identified the three major odors as, "an acidy barf smell, a poo smell of some kind, and B.O."

"Well, of course, beer and cigarettes too."

DeGain has had plenty of time to become an expert, he has been renting and practicing there for three years.

"I moved back to Tucson at the end of '99. Some other band had been rehearsing there. Right after I heard about it, I got a place there, beginning of 2000."

A similar scenario was Greyhound Soul's. "I think (Wavelab Studio's) Craig (Schumacher) told us about it," said Hollis, who remembers GHS moving in three or four years ago.

Local multi-instrumentalist/engineer Nick Luca (of Wavelab Studio, Nick Luca Trio, Calexico and Spacefish - to name a few) said in an email that he believes Wavelab moved into the building in October of '99.

"We were the first tenants, the 'anchor' studio."

The official first tenant is not clear. The manager of the studios, Dane Burnam, said the first tenant status is "a little dispute. I have three or four guys who swear they were the first tenant."

The original occupant of the 80 music rehearsal spaces was Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph who moved into the west end of the building the same year the University of Arizona first granted degrees - in 1917. The original building, on the west end, was 120 E. Pennington.

In 1937, construction on 124 E. Pennington was completed and the telephone company moved its offices. According to a newspaper article dated August 28, 1937, "the new building, costing approximately \$60,000, adjoins the old structure at 120 E. Pennington Street, which has housed the entire telephone company for many years."

"The new edifice is two stories high, of brick construction, and will house the administrative and sales offices of the company."

Today, looking at the front of the studios, a façade belies the fact the building is comprised of three separate structures. On the roof, however, you can see the separations between the structures and the original red brick.

It is unfortunate that the typical trappings of corporate architecture - a combination of mottled black and gray faux marble, cold pale blue 2'x2' tiles and beige brick - have covered the red brick.

Burnam said they would like to take down the façade, but that it would be "very expensive."

Walking through the narrow dark hallways, with their low ceilings and walls painted blue or red, it is difficult to imagine a telephone company operating there. In the basement of the west end, there are still old handwritten bills and old equipment, along with a fire door, a water fountain that must be from the forties, and another door that looks like it belongs on a submarine.

According to a 1985 article in the Tucson Citizen, Mountain Bell was selling the building when the company moved to a new structure in 1986. The City Directory lists 124 E. Pennington as a payment center for the phone company up until the late eighties and then the building was vacant for approximately ten years, until Francisco Studios purchased it.

"Our main objective is to find an industrial building, or something that looks cool, and set it up for music studios," Burnam explained.

This is called adaptive reuse - where an old building is creatively adapted for another purpose and some of their historical features are retained.

"We essentially gut the building, rebuild all the walls - they're not normal walls, they're not sound proof, but are thicker than bedrooms. They all have air conditioning, it's minimal. No one is going to get cold there in the summer."

DeGain described the summer months in the studio as "really hot. We recorded an album in our practice room in the middle of the summer. We couldn't have the AC on because the noise would interfere with the recording. We were basically in our underwear."

"When the air conditioning is on, it doesn't work that well. It just keeps you from dying. I mean, this stuff doesn't matter because you are there to rock or whatever."

In the three to four years that the space has been used for music studios, the same complaints and compliments have existed.

It smells, the garbage situation can be a nightmare, parking is limited, the bathrooms aren't so clean nor do they usually stock toilet paper, and some of the musicians can be idiots.

"There used to be fire extinguishers, but they would get discharged," DeGain recalled.

"It's like a dormitory for musicians. It has that weird giddy energy where they can trash it because their mom or parole officer aren't around," DeGain added.

On the good side, DeGain commented, "Everyone down there seems pretty cool. It's pretty secure and you can go anytime you want and you can be as loud as you want. The security and convenience of playing whenever you want is really nice. And getting to hear how crappy most musicians actually are."

Another huge bonus to the studios is their downtown location. This feature alone makes it super convenient for gigging musicians to have proximity to Tucson's more popular live music venues.

"I'm glad the place is there, that's for sure," DeGain said. "Every band I know has practiced there or does practice there."

"Phony" Bennett and drummer Bruce Halper agreed. "It's where everyone's home base is. It's a pretty strange mix of people, musicians. You see punk rock bands, heavy metal bands, rock bands," said Halper. "You come back from a show and you'll also see Latino kids hanging out and everyone gets along."

"The only bummer," DeGain reflected, "is that there is no place around there that sells beer."

Note: Hotel Congress sells beer to go. And they deliver. 

