

I walked into Tiny Telephone recording studios in San Francisco's Mission district for the first time on April 12, 2014. Two months earlier I had booked 10 days at the studio so I could record my first "official" CD.

The few unofficial CDs I had made up to that point were of the quaint DIY variety, produced in my basement, yours truly at the helm of each instrument, each decision, each knob and fader on the mixing console, each desktop-published ink-jet graphic, and each burned disc that was handed out to close friends and family. Those self-produced gems had their charms, but the time had come for something different than the home recording treatment of yesteryear. The newfangled mayhem of a legit day job, highly dependent offspring, unruly backyard hedges, etc. had bumped "home recording" to the rock bottom of my domestic priority list. I had a stable of new songs at the ready, but if I was ever to record them as something other than rough demos I needed HELP.

Thus, on January 14th, 2014, with spousal encouragement, I emailed John Vanderslice, the owner of Tiny Telephone. I told him I was a singer-songwriter with a hankering to cut an album. I told him I had just my basic songs (vocals and guitar), limited time, and that I needed help with production and in lining up session players. John was quick to respond and said Tiny Telephone was just the place. He suggested I reserve 10 days to complete approximately 10 songs. I said OK. He said he needed a deposit. Spouse said OK. I said OK. OK!

After speaking with John Vanderslice about Tiny Telephone I made no further inquiries into other studios. Tiny Telephone seemed to fit what I wanted. First of all, I needed to get out of Dodge. I wanted to complete all ten days of recording at once and envelop myself in the process without facing my everyday distractions. That would have been nearly impossible had I stayed in town. Secondly, Tiny Telephone was an analog recording studio. Two inch tape was their game. I am by no means an analog snob, but taking a little trip back in time sounded like a fine idea to me. Why not? An antiquated tape machine rather than the

ubiquitous computer monitor? Sold. Third, John Vanderslice was prompt in his responses, professional, enthusiastic, and encouraging. He gave me confidence that we could pull off what I wanted to accomplish. And he kept saying I was going to have a great time.

Some friends were skeptical. "What? You don't know them and they don't know you or your songs and you are just going to go up there, sight unseen, wing it, and hope for the best?" Um, yeah I guess.

So at 8 am on the morning of April 12th, 2014, with my two boys still asleep in their beds on a lazy Saturday, I packed my last few things in the car and thanked my wife Melanie profusely for her indispensable role in my pricey, Quixotic adventure that was sure to put off the bathroom remodel for yet another year. I took the 101 Northbound and headed for San Francisco with my trusty Martin DM and enough clean shirts to avoid the laundromat for ten days.

The recording session was to begin in earnest upon my arrival after the four hour drive from San Luis Obispo and John Vanderslice was true to his word. As soon as I walked into Tiny Telephone John introduced himself, assistant engineer Laurence Wasser, and session drummer Jason Slota. Then John told me to grab my guitar and we got to work. He set me up in an isolation booth with a vocal mic and a guitar mic while Jason sat at the drums in the main tracking room. John asked through my headphones what the name of the first song was. I said "Bless Her Insecurity". He told me to play it through one time so Jason could figure out a drum part. So I did. And Jason did. Then John said he was going to record the next take. And he did. And less than 30 minutes into my first day at Tiny Telephone, before I had time to blink or think, the bones of the first song were complete.

Over the next two days we recorded the bones of 13 more songs in efficient, methodical, workmanlike fashion, with live guitar, vocal, and drums. I loved the pace. They say John Vanderslice is arguably the fastest recording engineer in the West and I suppose that reputation stems in part from his distaste for multiple takes. During those first couple days John would sometimes ask me to redo the take if the first one was not so great. If he did I knew the second take would be the keeper, not necessarily due to its superiority but because there would be no offer of a third take. And John's rationale behind prohibiting a third take was quite simple: It would suck compared to the second. And if there was a fourth take it would suck even more, so best to limit it to two and get on with it.

The following few days we added embellishments; Rob Shelton played piano, organ and synthesizer; Jon Monahan added electric, acoustic, and bass guitar; Jason Slota played everything percussive under the sun: vibraphone, surdo, conga, piano bench, triangle, tambourine, clave, and shakers o' plenty; Laurence Wasser whispered a sultry "Petit Telephone" in his native tongue. And John Vanderslice worked his magic with an assortment of vintage analog synthesizers, knobs, compressors, and other mysterious wares. It was a pleasure to sit in the control room and listen to these guys do their thing. Watching Jason Slota play impeccable triangle for five straight minutes on The Shit We Keep was an unnerving thing to behold as I waited breathlessly for him to fall out of time. He never did. Ever. His vibraphone playing on Hell If I Know has inspired me to defend his Indiana University music degree to the death should any Hoosier business major ever challenge its worth. Rob Shelton threw down the gauntlet on The Technological Breakthrough via a 1904 Story and Clark upright piano. Jon Monahan played the perfect riff when I told him I wanted his guitar playing to sound like a failing marriage.

AND ON THE SIXTH DAY we wrapped up recording as mixing engineer James Riotto added some tasteful and serendipitous grand piano notes to Sun Valley Sally, broken wrist and all. We did not rest on day 7 because there was still a lot to do. James spent the next four days shaping and mixing all the raw recorded materials onto 1/2" tape while I either paced furiously in the control room or took short but vertical bike rides up and over Potrero Hill. Then, at 4:00 PM on day 10, 4/21/14, with the City by the Bay still reeking from its myriad 4/20 celebrations, James finished mixing the final song. And just like that it was over. I bid a bittersweet adieu to the fine folks at Tiny Telephone and set out for home with four reels of precious 1/2" tape on the passenger side.

The next day I went to the UPS store to mail the tapes to Chicago for mastering, which is the final step in the recording process. The clerk asked me what the insured value should be. I said \$10,000. The guy in line next to me looked at my package furtively, as if it might be stuffed with diamonds and worth an impromptu hold-up. I declared to the room in general that they were audio recordings and that I was the only person in the universe that valued them at \$10,000, that they were worthless to everyone else. Well the clerk told me the first \$100 of insurance was free, but it would cost an additional \$200 if I wanted to insure the tapes for \$10,000. And in an instant their value plummeted by \$9,900. I paid the shipping fee, took the free insurance, kissed my beloved tapes goodbye, and wished them a bon voyage to Chicago.

According to the tracking number they made it to Chicago Mastering Service on April 28, 2014 and a gentleman named Andrew signed for them. There they sit, waiting in the mastering queue. Once they are mastered I will finally send my songs and CD artwork to the CD factory. I will then receive 1,000 shrink wrapped CDs in exchange for yet more credit card debt. I hope to have a finished product by Independence Day 2014.

If you are reading this then it either means my CD has officially been released or you are my wife editing this for punctuation. If you are the former, the latter, or both, I hope you like my music. I really enjoyed making this album. From the twilight bike rides through San Francisco's neighborhoods to the camaraderie of daily lunch outings with John, Jason, Laurence, Isa, and James to the taqueria du jour to the beautiful aesthetic and comfort of Tiny Telephone to Megan and Mike's lovely Mission District studio that I called home for ten days to the truly unique experience of working alongside John Vanderslice, it was all an absolute thrill - a rich, unforgettable experience packed into ten fascinating days. I hope to do it again.

Derek Senn. May 13, 2014.