

BLACKBERRY JAM

Eugene's newest music recording studio is a swank, secluded affair

By Lewis Taylor
The Register-Guard

Eugene's newest recording studio doesn't feel like a recording studio at all — more like a European chateau that fell from the sky and landed atop a scenic hill in rural southwest Eugene.

Welcome to Blackberry Hill Studios, a custom-crafted 2,300-square-foot yurt-style building with original artwork, a three-bedroom apartment and a million-dollar view.

Oh, and don't forget the studio, a state-of-the-art outfit with high-powered Macintosh computers and a spendy 60-channel control console. There are six isolation rooms, dozens of loaner instruments to choose from and a boatload of vintage and modern microphones and other recording equipment.

"It's like a dream," says Michael Roderick, a local musician who tested the studio with his band Mood Area 52 shortly after it opened last fall. "The studio, from a musician's standpoint, is phenomenal."

Almost everything about Blackberry Hill — from the meandering dirt access road to the 200-pound copper doors — suggests seclusion, and that's the point. Loosely based on Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios near Bath, England, the building is part studio, part artist's retreat.

"It's more like a studio you could really work in and feel comfortable in," says owner Justin King, 24, who recorded his own solo guitar album at Gabriel's studio in October 2001.

King won't say how much he spent developing Blackberry Hill. Money probably was no obstacle. King is a scion of the family that owns the enormous, chateau-style King Estate Winery in Lorane. The King family made its fortune in aircraft electronics, segued into vineyards and wine-making in Lane County in the early 1990s, and now, in a minor way, into music.

"One of my goals is to attract musicians from out of town," King said. "It's really nice to go to a place and record and not



The studio features state-of-the-art recording equipment, as well as a three-bedroom apartment and available catering services for artists who want seclusion.

have to stay in a hotel."

King hasn't yet managed to attract the kind of big spenders he is hoping to draw to his studio — musicians who can afford to travel and pay, not just for expensive studio time but for an experience. King even has access to a private jet and a 32-foot sailboat for those willing to pay.

Rates at Blackberry Hill start at \$85 an hour, comparable to what the top studios in Eugene charge, but prices can go much higher depending on the services offered. There's private catering available, rental of the three-bedroom apartment, plus two other properties. King even offers the use of the 6,000-square-foot wine cellar at King Estates for those in search of a more sonorous recording environment.

King says he financed his studio with his own money and his family's money, but won't say how much the project cost other than "a lot of time and a lot of money."

How well a new recording studio will do here is an open question. Eugene boasts half a dozen sizeable music recording stu-

dios, plus myriad other home studios, project studios and mixed-use studios.

At a time when sales of recorded music are down and Internet downloading and CD burning are up, opening a swanky new studio seems risky. But King sees it as a long-term investment.

"If I was really trying to start a studio that just cranked out tons of money every day, I probably would have done it in Los Angeles and done something one-fourth the size," King says. "The point of it for me was to make a studio where you have every option and you have no limitations."

If anyone can make such a studio fly, it's King, says Don Ross, a veteran engineer who owns the studio Don Ross Productions in Eugene.

Please turn to **BLACKBERRY**, Page F4

BLACKBERRY HILL STUDIOS

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Continued from Page F1

"Justin's studio has definitely got the best view in town," jokes Ross. "My facility, while more modest in its dimensions, is efficiently laid out and well-equipped for the variety of work I do."

King, a solo musician, learned much of what he knows about recording techniques through working with Ross and other engineers in town. There's an irony to his opening a studio that could take a bite out of the businesses of his former mentors, but Ross doesn't see it that way.

"Experience is probably the biggest difference," says Ross, who has been in the business for 25 years. "A lot of it comes down to the comfort zone of the client with the facility and the

engineer. (There are) lots of good choices for Eugene."

With so many studios in Eugene, professional engineers such as Ross have gone beyond seeking clients who simply want to record music.

"I am fortunate in having a diverse clientele," says Ross, who also records advertising narration and audio for video productions. "And many of the producers and directors that I work with are outside of the local area."

King is keeping his studio doors open to other engineers, in the hopes of fostering a collaborative relationship, and some have already taken him up on his offer.

Thaddeus Moore, owner of Sprout City Studios in Eugene has used Blackberry Hill to master a couple of his audio

projects.

Jim Rusby, former head mastering engineer at the now-vacant Sony disc manufacturing plant in Springfield, has been serving as the in-house mastering guru at Blackberry Hill.

"I think it's a heck of a great start," Rusby says. "I'm sure that with time and experience and different people using it, there will be things that change, technically speaking. Justin's gone a long way toward trying to do things right."

Construction began last April, and the building, which was designed by Oregon Yurtworks and constructed by contractor Jake Walsh, was finished last fall.

More than a half-dozen artists and artisans contributed ideas to the project. King plans

to add a nighttime garden that blooms under moonlight, and he hopes to trim back the brambles that give the studio its name.

Even as King seeks to attract a high-end clientele to his studio, he says he doesn't want it to be seen as out of touch to the average local musician. Already he's hosted several area bands, including the indie rock outfit World After April, and the punk-rock band Chevron. Both groups recorded five-song demos at the studio free of charge.

"There's nothing about the place in its appearance or in the place itself that's elitist," King says.

"I'm really excited to get local folks in there and I'm hoping that we can make the place take off on a national level, too."