

# Eric



## Eric, tell us about Ivy Hall.

*Eric Loomis:* Ivy Hall was originally a home built in 1935, designed by well known architect Edwin Keeble. The home was built for Dr. Cleo Miller, his wife, and two children, but they only ever lived in it for about a year as he went off to Europe to serve in the war.



# Loomis

Interview by  
Paul Vnuk Jr.

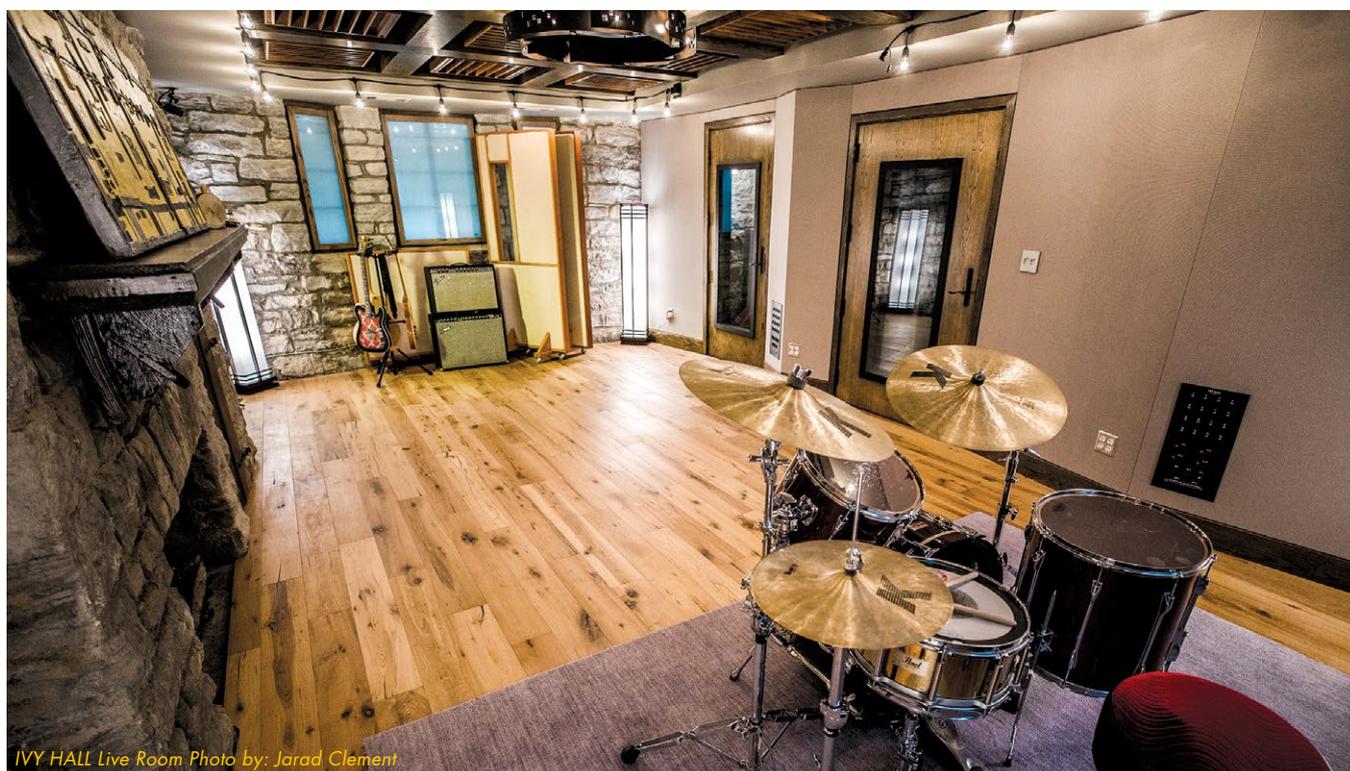
## at IVY HALL STUDIO

**I**vy Hall is a studio on the outskirts of Nashville with a unique story. Studio Manager/House Engineer **Eric Loomis** splits his time between tracking bands in this historic location, as well as touring as a live Front Of House engineer.

Eric got his start in the Theater department of his Colorado high school, shortly after the school installed a new audio system with a big analog console. He studied at the University of Denver's recording program, and by age 19 he was on the road as a live sound engineer, touring with a bluegrass band. Eventually this led him to settling in Nashville.

Just under one year in Nashville he met the owners of Ivy Hall, Rachel McCann and Josh Gray, who were in the middle of renovating the basement of Ivy Hall into a state-of-the-art recording studio. As Eric tells it, he more or less invited himself to the party and never left.

Eric took some time to walk us through Ivy Hall's renovation from historic family estate to state-of-the-art modern studio facility. He also shares some of his favorite gear recommendations, new and old, and techniques he uses both on stage and in the studio.



IVY HALL Live Room Photo by: Jarad Clement

# Eric Loomis at IVY HALL STUDIO



Photo of DPA Microphones capturing an upright bass and a grand piano by: Michael Weintrob

## How did you get involved with the studio?

A friend of mine was subcontracted to do the wiring at Ivy Hall and brought me in to help out. I overheard a conversation with Josh about the design of the studio. I am very good at inviting myself into conversations and delivering my opinion with fervor, and I challenged some of their ideas, so eventually I got to know Josh and he asked me to help finish up the place, and then stay on and help run it.

## Tell me about the studio. I know it's a home studio, but what a home!

It's a unique spot, and the house has a lot of personality. We have full patching throughout the house, not just the studio rooms. For example, we have a 1986 Baldwin grand piano upstairs in the great room, which has the original plaster on the walls. There's a nice brightness to the space, it's really alive.

The basement is what we fully converted to the studio, and we brought in well-known Nashville acoustician Michael Cronin to design it.

## What did you do to create the studio space? How do you soundproof and treat rooms in a space like this, while maintaining the integrity and vibe of the old house?

That's a great question. Upstairs where the piano is, we did not change

a thing other than adding the mic panel. The home is on the Nashville Historic Registry and also the National Historic Registry, so that means no changes can be made to the design and look of the house's exterior. For instance, if you do any gutter work, you have to use period-specific copper gutters. The windows are old and drafty, and you cannot make changes to those. The colors of the paint have to stay the same, the clay tile roof... you get the idea. Rachel has an architecture background, and she and Josh have been amazing stewards of the interior of the place as well, to keep it looking and feeling like a 1930s home.

## Where is the studio space in the house?

The studio space is in the basement. Basically half the space was unfinished, which is where the control room and the amp isolation rooms now live. On the live room half, the original mantel and fireplace are still there. That room was remodeled in the 1970s with a man-cave/smoking-lounge kind of vibe, and so we tore the whole basement apart, and then left as much of the original hand-cut limestone exposed as possible.

We were limited by the dimensions of the basement, but essentially we were able to build the studio from the ground up, while we kept as much in line with the original look of the house as possible. We repurposed original doors in the basement which, while not acoustically perfect,

came from other parts of the home. We kept the staircases going to the studio untouched. Overall we had to ride this line where you had the benefits of modern studio construction, but kept the personality that the history of the home already has.

## When I first saw pictures of the interior stone walls, I thought maybe you added those.

No, those are original.

## Some of those exposed walls are in the amp room. Most of the amp rooms I am used to are completely dead and absorptive. Tell me about that.

There is one stone wall, and one fully absorptive wall opposing that. They are the two largest surfaces in that room. Then the ceiling has a combination of diffusors and absorption. This gives some life to the amp room that I kind of like, it's not completely dead. If I close-mic with dynamic mics, it does not really matter, and I can get an isolated sound, but if I get a couple of feet off the cabinet with a condenser we get a little bit of space to the sound, which is my preferred electric guitar tone.

## Where do you typically do vocals at Ivy Hall?

I have a vocal booth that I will use when we are cutting a band live with the singer at the same time, but otherwise I like to cut vocals in the middle of the live room. I don't like a totally dry vocal take. Whether it's drums or a vocal, you can put a mic up almost anywhere in our live room and get a usable sound.

## What kind of gear does the studio have?

Josh has been collecting microphones for years, so we have all the classic stuff, but we also added modern things like DPA, which I'm really familiar with from my years of touring and live recording—they're some of my favorites.

I am such a fan that we have sponsored events in the studio with DPA, to educate people about why the mics are so good at



what they do. At one event we recorded a jazz trio and had all 32 inputs of our Burl converters filled up with just DPA mics.

## What is it that you like about DPA so much?

I know the price tag scares some people off—and don't get me wrong, I love all the vintage stuff too—but for me, DPA is all about the clean yet musical capture.

The best explanation I can give is using a them on a drum kit. DPA mics don't have off-axis coloration, so if you put a d:vote 4099 on a snare drum and on toms, your bleed is not 'bad', it's just bleed. The way your snare sounds from the direct mic is the same tone you get from the bleed of the snare in the rack tom mic. Essentially it's the same color from every angle. So instead of using a plug-in to get rid of bleed and put a bandage on the process, if you use DPA, in my opinion you shouldn't have a bleed problem.

## I like that with DPA you get the color from the kit or the source, not the microphones.

Exactly. Using DPA mics on a drum kit, you can mute and solo different microphones and the color does not change.

## In this same issue, we are reviewing the new DPA d:fine 6066 and it's similar. The sound you get from the person speaking sounds just like they do when they are standing next to you.

I occasionally do corporate audio, and I know exactly what you mean.

## What mics do you like to use on guitar cabs in the amp room?

Obviously the Shure SM57/Royer R-121 is a classic combo. I also do an Andrew Scheps trick that's an SM57 and a Sennheiser MD 421 to give a very midrange-forward heavy rock sound. Then I also like using an old Electro-Voice EV 635a omni that does not get the proximity effect.

## What condenser mics top you like to use to take advantage of the live sound of the space?

We have a pair of C12 capsule AKG 414's or Upton 251's that I like to use for that.

## What are your preferred mics when tracking vocals?

From all my years of live sound and recording, I like to use the DPA d:facto handheld condenser microphone. It uses their 4018VL capsule, and I have put that up against every other large-diaphragm condenser I have and it holds its own.

## I reviewed that mic and really liked it.

It's insanely good. The thing is that there are all these nuances and subtiles between various large-diaphragm condenser mics... people will talk about them for days on end and they all sound different, but this one mic is a great starting point and covers a lot of ground, both live and in the studio.

That's the thing about starting with good clean mics. They teach you to be a better engineer.

## How so?

Take drums, for instance. If you start with good clean drum mics, guess what you're going to learn? Not that those mics are the right or wrong mics for your drum kit. You're going to learn that your drum kit sounds like crap—or maybe that it sounds really good. You're going to learn how to tune a snare and what type of heads to put on it, and whether the room you are recording drums in sounds good or not. You're going to learn about recording instead of getting caught up in having the right chain. It's easy to get caught up in "but I need this or that pre-amp to record drums"—no you don't.

That's another thing I like about super-clean gear like DPA mics. They are brutally honest, and it pushes my workflow to be more concerned with the sound of my source before it hits the microphone, and that makes me a better engineer.

## Going back to drums, let's say you have DPA 4099s on the snare and toms; what do you marry that with for overheads or kick drum?

I often use a pair of DPA 2011 twin-diaphragm cardioid mics in XY for overheads. I prefer them in front of the kit a bit more than over the kit, as I think it sounds bit more natural.

For kick drum, it depends. My favorite is a Heil PR40 because it's quite linear and gives you the sound of the drum vs. some overly tailored kick mics that make every drum sound the same. That's for kick in; for the outer kick, I am a really big fan of the Bock iFet 47, which is their FET 47 offering, sometimes that's the only one I need.

## Great mic!

Great vocal mic, great on kick. Honestly if there was a large-diaphragm workhorse



IVY HALL Vocal Booth Photo by: Jarad Clement



IVY HALL Control Room Photo by: Jarad Clement

# Eric Loomis at IVY HALL STUDIO

mic that I would recommend to someone who could only afford one large-diaphragm in their studio, it would be that Bock.

**Coming from your bluegrass background, obviously you do a lot of acoustic instruments. I'll assume it's all done with the 4099s and their various instrument clips?**

The mounts and clips they offer are insane. You can do piano, you can do mandolin, acoustic guitar, you can do cello, violin...

**Wouldn't that be fiddle?**

Yes [*laughs*]. I also like them on upright bass. Usually on upright bass I will do a large-diaphragm condenser like the Upton 251—a museum-quality 251 clone—or an RCA 44 ribbon, but I also always put a 4099 clipped onto the bass, below the bridge, as my safety. Especially if the bass player moves around a lot; the 4099 moves with the bass.

**When working with a traditional bluegrass group, do you just stick with the 4099 mics on everything?**

For mono, yes, but when I can, I prefer to mic things in phase-coherent stereo. I am really not a fan of spaced-pair stereo recording; Blumlein and XY are my two main stereo techniques. Again I love the DPA 201 1s in XY, and I like the stereo R88 Blumlein mic from AEA, or I'll put other mics in Blumlein.

When the channel count is low, you can mic everything in stereo and the image does not get too cluttered, but I will still take a mono source as well. That way, if the mix gets too dense, you can pan and place instruments in the spaces between.

Another trick I use, if I am mixing someone else's tracks and all I get are mono sources, is the Brainworx Stereo Maker plug-in. It does this crazy phase trick, and if you keep the settings within reason, it can sound very wide but still in phase.

All of my favorite acoustic and bluegrass engineers and producers out there have a seriously strong grasp of stereo recording,



IVY HALL Amp Room Photo by: Jarad Clement

and how to make you feel like you're sitting right there in front of the instruments.

**Let's talk about preamps and other gear that you like to use.**

For preamps, being from Colorado, I'm a diehard Grace Design guy. This fall I am touring with a group, Judah and The Lion, and all of the instrument mics and direct inputs are going through a Grace Design FELIX or the smaller ALiX. FELIX is a 2-channel blending acoustic instrument and mic preamp with EQ that is fantastic. And they have effects loops built in so they can use effects pedals in their setup with very low noise.

**What about in the studio?**

Ivy Hall has a 24-channel vintage Neve VR and a ton of outboard gear. I still find myself going for the classics like API or CAPI preamps, and lately I am a big fan of the 4-channel Manley FORCE preamp, especially on drums. I also like Vintech preamps a lot.

**Seeing as you like to work with such clean mics and preamps, do you track clean or will you add EQ and compression on the way in?**

Acoustic music I pretty much leave alone. I think that the dynamic content of the acoustic instruments is extremely

important to maintain, and you can change it later if you need.

That said, the two things I absolutely do add processing to on the way in are drums and vocals. In that world I am a big fan of Distressors and 1176s on drums for compression, and for EQ I like the API 550b and 560. I use a Crane Song STC-8 for my drum bus compression. I am a big fan of anything Dave Hill makes—again, clean and modern.

**What about vocals?**

For vocals I am a big fan of the Tube-Tech CL 1B tube compressor, but I also will do the combination of two compressors in series, one fast and one slow. I will add a Distressor or 1176 to accomplish that.

**What about mixing acoustic stuff?**

I will usually just EQ in the box afterwards with just a highpass filter. I prefer to get mic placement correct, and then use a really nice phase-linear EQ when I need to. I am a fan of the Brainworx bx\_Digital V3, and for subtle compression I like the Waves C6 dynamic multiband compressor. Basically, in the acoustic world, I will use it to clean up between 300Hz and 1kHz really surgically.

**Thanks for the info! There is a ton of great stuff here.**

It's been my pleasure. If you get down here, I'd love to show you the place! ➔