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Sultan of sound

Former Chicoan Larry Crane is one of the best-known recording engineers in Portland

By [Chris Baldwin](#)

Back in the early '90s, when I was attending college in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, a lot of student-rented houses had their own names--like the Corn Rocket House (after a band that lived there), the Moonhouse (after a large balcony for star-gazing), the Pool House (duh, they had a pool). You get the picture.



Courtesy Of Jackpot

On one occasion, I went to see my friend Evelyn and her psychedelic cowboy band, Blast Off Country Style, who were playing a backyard party at the B House (don't ask) with a visiting band from California. The entire week prior, people had been noticing fliers around town because of the name of that visiting band, Vomit Launch. It was from an unheard-of town called Chico, Calif. I remember thinking the band was probably hardcore punk or something.

Vomit Launch was actually a melodic indie-rock band, recording on Teen Beat Records out of Arlington, Va.; and Evelyn (who now co-runs the recording business) was acting as host for the touring group. The small party came and went, with a crowd of about 20 people milling around the back yard of the old house. It wasn't the most successful gig, but it was fun, and I remember liking Vomit Launch and thinking they sounded like a female-led, early R.E.M.

Little did I know that seven years later I would be living in Chico and would be friends with lead singer Trish Rowland (who now plays in the Repeat Offenders with the ex-drummer of Launch). Small world, as they say.

While Trish (now Trish Howard) was the front woman for Vomit Launch, which had garnered a cultish reputation on the West Coast, other members included Lindsey Thrasher on guitar, Steve Bragg on drums and bass player Larry Crane, a self-described "control freak" who was a motivator and producer of sorts, even then.

A native of Grass Valley, Crane moved to Chico in 1981 and graduated from Chico State in '85 with a degree in filmmaking but found himself increasingly interested in music and recording in particular. For the most part, he was entirely self-taught, as I learned during a phone conversation from his current studio in Portland.

"I studied electronics in high school and built weird electronic boxes, a little mixer and synthesizers and stuff ... at Chico State [he deejayed at KCSC]. I started out making cassettes of weird electronic music using two cassette decks to bounce back and forth. ... I was into Brian Eno, atmospheric stuff."

Vomit Launch disbanded in 1993, for reasons that Trish Howard describes as "being together too long ... things just weren't working for the new album ... we didn't want to beat a dead horse." Crane decided to move from Chico to Portland, Ore., one of the reasons being he was "tired of playing music."

But he still had an itch for recording, and because he already knew several local bands (such as Calamity Jane) that had played with Vomit Launch, he was quickly immersed in the music scene. It was only a matter of time before he had another band, Flaming

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Box of Ants, and was busily recording other projects from an 8-track studio in the basement of his house known as Laundry Rules (because of its close proximity to the washing machine).

Crane quickly acquired a reputation as a friendly guy who ran an affordable recording studio, and widely known indie rockers from Stephen Malkmus (Pavement) to Mary Lou Lord and Chan Marshall (Cat Power) began stopping by and laying down tracks with him. Soon, he and wife at the time (they've since divorced) were living in a mad house.

"From the end of '94 to the end of '96 it got really busy. I thought maybe it was time to make the jump," he recalls.

The "jump" consisted of moving into a larger, better-equipped facility called Jackpot! Studios, a joint undertaking that Crane began with a local songwriter and musician named Elliott Smith. Smith has since gone on to become somewhat of a celebrity, after the track "Miss Misery," recorded with Crane and featured on the soundtrack for the movie *Good Will Hunting*, was nominated for an Oscar. Smith transcended the local scene and now records for Spielberg and Geffen's Dreamworks label, though he still occasionally stops by Jackpot! to record or visit.

"The Academy Award nomination, you could call it a detour," Crane laughs. "It lent a certain credibility to the studio and to what I was doing, but it didn't seem [at the time] like it brought in any work."



MAN BEHIND THE MUSIC Former Chicoan Larry Crane sits in his Jackpot! Recording Studios in Portland, Ore.

Crane is being modest. Since January of 1996, Jackpot! has been recording a wide diversity of local and visiting groups. Some would say he specializes in recording "indie" rock bands, though he also has done work for string music outfits like the Dickel Brothers (Chico's Land of the Wee Beasties also once recorded there). And with the name recognition that comes from working with such local stars as Smith and Sleater Kinney (whose drummer Janet Weiss is a friend and records many of her side projects at Jackpot!), Crane found himself in demand.

"Actually, it seems like people think I'm busier than I am," he says. "Some of the local bands are afraid to call because they think that they couldn't afford me or whatever. ... Monetarily, we're at the breaking point where if someone doesn't want to spend a couple grand on a record, we're too expensive--which sucks sometimes. ... I do get to work on higher-profile things [Sleater Kinney, Go-Betweens, Pinehurst Kids], but 75 percent of my year is working on other stuff. You have to take the work."

And what is it about his studio that makes musicians feel at home?

"I try to keep it casual, like you're just going to a different rehearsal space. It's more of a musician-friendly vibe. People always say they feel comfortable here, whereas some studios you enter, it's just uptight. ... You don't know where you're going to set your beer. It feels like a dentist office in the worst cases."

Crane also believes that people began coming to him because they heard the records he helped produce and liked the sound, which was not "over-produced or glossy."

"Definitely I work on an individual basis. You want to bring out the best in the artist ... and it's subjective, too, because I think what makes any engineer or producer what they are is their taste in music. I really love music. I have a huge CD and vinyl collection at home. When I hear something I try to emphasize what I like, and hopefully that's a good thing," he says, laughing.

"I might be a freak in the engineering world," he continues. "The records I like are mainly because of the songs ... something like *Meddle* by Pink Floyd."

In addition to recording every day in the mid '90s, Crane also found time to begin his own zine publication, *Tape Op* magazine, as an outlet for discussing recording methods and tips with readers.

"I just wanted to read about stuff that I wasn't getting to read about in other magazines. I wanted to ask them how they were doing it. ... It was out of curiosity and because I like writing."

The magazine was an instant success, devoured by groups like Sonic Youth and other noteworthy artists, and soon Crane had a deal with Substance Media Works (out of Sac), and his circulation went from 2,000 to 25,000 overnight. Issues now arrive every two months, and a new book, *Tape Op: The Book About Creative Music Recording* (containing everything from the first 10 issues), is available from Feral House Press.

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Many believe the magazine is successful with bands and recording purists alike because, unlike other recording industry magazines, it doesn't hype or push new "gear" or technological advancements. It is simply a labor of love to be shared by those interested in recording.

"A lot of people jump on new gear and think, 'This is the answer to my problem,'" Crane explains. "For example, certain sounds that we're used to hearing, like putting an SM57 in front of a Fender Twin, give you that loud, electric-guitar sound. The same way, printing drums to analog tape is a sound we're used to on all the classic records. If you take that element away--say, recording drums onto a computer directly--you've got to find ways to simulate that sound or do something new. On a Beck record you can do it all on ProTools [computer recording software] because it's new music--it's a hybrid and it's not going to hurt. But if you try to simulate a classic rock sound not using analog tape, you're going to be in trouble."

That doesn't necessarily mean Crane thinks "old is good" when it comes to recording equipment, especially since the old stuff "usually takes more work." Nowadays, his main deck is a 1987 Otari MX-80 24-track, which he picked up after learning a valuable lesson using an old clunker from 1973, "a monster to maintain," he says.

"Recording is easy in a way, but to get albums that hold up and last forever isn't easy. Every time there have been breakthroughs in recording, it's usually been a bad thing. If you look at the '80s and gated drum sounds [drum machines] ... whereas Peter Gabriel might use them in an interesting way, the Thompson Twins make them sound horrible and dated within five years. You've got to be careful as far as advances in recording technology, because a lot of times you're doing the music more harm than good."



He points to the heavy-handed approach of producers in the '80s. "Engineers were trying to force this kind of order on rock 'n' roll, which doesn't demand order. If you start cleaning everything up, you get dull, sterile records. ... You want to find things that have sounds with emotional resonance."

For now, Crane is intent to continue recording for a living as well as performing every once in a while with his girlfriend in a Velvet Underground cover band called Foggy Notion. In the future, he hopes to do more engineering outside of Portland.

"People don't read the credits; that's the first thing you realize when you become an engineer. Bands drop in here and knock out a song--that's one of my favorite parts. Meeting new people ... maybe will lead to work in other cities. Probably the biggest goal [for producers] is picking and choosing."

"It's amazing to be getting paid to work on good records I'm grateful every day when I wake up. ... Sometimes you work with people who are so phenomenal you're scrambling to set the mikes up."

As far as advice goes for people in Chico who might be intrigued or inspired by his personal success story, Crane has a few words of wisdom.

"I've only been recording for six years and am pretty amazed by how far I've gotten. People always ask me how to get to this position, and all I can say is to keep doing it. The first year I was open I was recording every day, and I learned so much. I'm constantly learning new stuff. ... In school, you might not think that you're learning something useful--I was a filmmaker, but now some of it does come into play. I learned tape splicing at KCSC. ... A million other things tie together."

"Never think that you're wasting your time if you're doing something creative or interesting. Just keep doing it. Starting out in a band, I never thought I could be an engineer. Now I'm happy doing that, even though I'm massively in debt." He laughs.

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