

INTO THE MIX

Scott Singer and Tom Schwall see success in their new studio

By Autumn Phillips, Pilot & Today Staff

When you are done making money, climbing the ladder and proving yourself to the world -- that's when your best work begins.

And so it seems for Scott Singer and Tom Schwall as they lean toward the speakers in their Steamboat Springs sound studio. The voice on the recording is singer songwriter, Carrie Elkin, and Singer and Schwall are bursting with pride as they point out the production subtleties.

"The keyboards just came in. Did you hear that?" Schwall said. "And that guitar, that's Brent Rowan." Schwall came to sound engineering late in life, but to watch his face, it seems as if everything was leading up to this. As he listens and watches the soundboard, he is glowing.

Schwall's new knowledge, and by all appearances his new passion, came by way of his friendship with Singer, a former Los Angeles sound engineer.

Singer has 25 "years of ears" in his life story as a freelance sound engineer and occasional producer. He engineered sessions for Toto, Kenny Loggins and Air Supply in the 1980s and produced a lot of underground rock.

After all those years in corporate sound studios, he's happy to be sitting in the corner surrounded by the equipment of his trade, old ski area signs and a pinball machine. And he's happy to be sharing everything he learned in two decades with Schwall.

Call it paying back into the pot. Singer learned the art of layering and manipulating sound in 1976, during his junior year of college. He was a photography major and went to take pictures of the girlfriend of a sound engineer. Toward the end of the night, everyone had fallen asleep except Singer and the engineer who would become his mentor for the next four years.

"He said, 'I need your hands,'" Singer said. "So I sat down and got to help him mix a demo. I was hooked. It's like you're painting a picture with sound."

The same feeling swept over Schwall when Singer invited him to help mix the sound on the recording of *Sleeping Giant* -- a Schwall-and-friends original music project they had asked Singer to produce at Randy Dodd's Mud Alley Studio in Milner. "For me, I'm coming from the songwriter standpoint," Schwall said. "I love knowing how to get those creative ideas down on tape. To orchestrate that process. That's what got me."

They mixed down the *Sleeping Giant* album in 30 days--10 hours a day. Using minimal equipment of Schwall's house, Singer showed Schwall all the tricks he knew.

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"It was a ton of information. It was mind-boggling, but it was fascinating," Schwall said. The Sleeping Giant album was released in Steamboat in 2001.

Singer was inching out of retirement and suggested that he would like to record Carrie Elkin, a talented singer he met through his real estate agent. Singer believed in her talent and would do the work for next to nothing, even with limited equipment in Schwall's basement.

Singer was leasing his sound equipment to his former business partner in Los Angeles and the lease was up.

"He suggested that we have the equipment shipped here," Schwall said. "I said 'yes' before I realized. Then a full-size moving van pulls up. I rapidly downsized my law office (housed in the basement). It was the forced transition that I needed."

Since then, they have recorded a driving tour of Steamboat for the Tread of Pioneers Museum, a full-length CD for guitar player Bill Martin and steadily worked away on a 10-track CD for Elkin.

They invited musicians such as Brent Rowan, Randy Kelley and Scott's brother, Mike Singer, to play on the album. Then they layered and layered and layered.

"When [Carrie] came in, she was a girl with a guitar and a voice. That's what I heard," Schwall said. "But Scott heard something bigger. Scott is good at seeing the whole picture. He hears the final product before the first tracks are laid down."