

studio**report**

The Manor House



UNITED KINGDOM

The secret studio

Osea Island hides a fantastic secret – an SSL room accessed through a hidden door. But there's so much more to Nigel Frieda's private hideaway, says **Dave Robinson**

THE ADVENTURE starts the moment you clamber into the water taxi at Heybridge Basin. If you're recording at East Point Studios and you miss low tide, then this is the sort of journey you're going to have to get used to. Best you don't forget anything essential before the captain casts off...

East Point is on an island, you see. It's the latest addition to Miloco Studio Group's ever-expanding management roster, and it's located in the Manor House on Osea Island in the River Blackwater estuary in Essex.

Nigel Frieda, one-time owner of London's famous Matrix and Maison Rouge studios and brother of John the hairdresser,

bought the island over a decade ago from the Charrington brewery. Dig around on the internet, and you'll soon discover Osea has a colourful and somewhat controversial history as a retreat and 'celebrity sanctuary'. Wanting to distance himself from that episode, perhaps, Frieda set about re-marketing the island as a holiday resort in late 2010; and in 2011 he began a dialogue with Miloco regarding the fully-equipped SSL studio installed in Osea's waterfront Manor House.

"We know Nigel from his time at Matrix," says Miloco managing director Nick Young, who has been hosting *PSN Europe* on the island on a bright July day. "He loves music,



and he wants to start exploiting this studio, which has just been sat here doing very little for most of the past 10 years. We thought we could help him

develop Osea's reputation and bring some business here." Which, of course, fits in perfectly with what Miloco has been doing over the past few

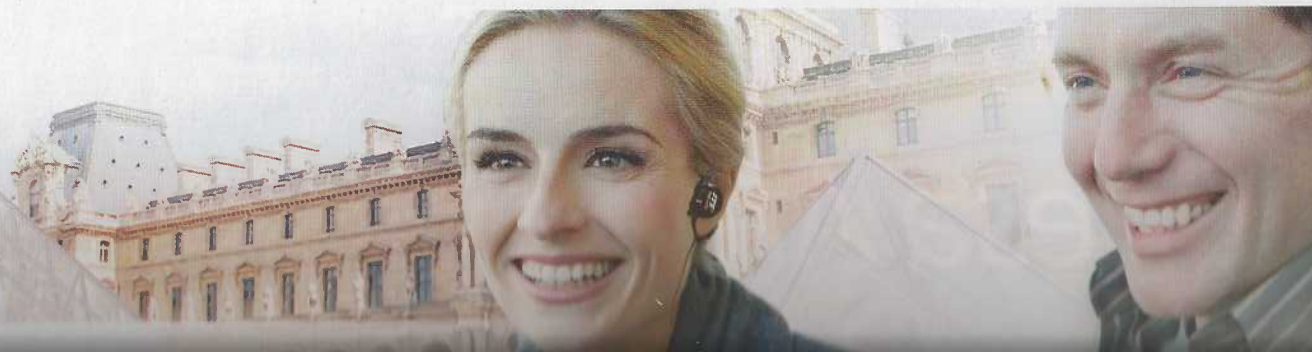
years: building up a portfolio of quirky, charismatic facilities in the UK and internationally to manage and promote.

"We came up to the island and just thought it was terrific. Not just as a studio with a control room, etc – it's about vibe and location and what you can achieve here."

"There's something magical and mystical about this place. And I'm not the sort of person who says, 'Oh man, can you feel the vibe!'" laughs studio manager Siobhan Paine.

But they are right. Osea consists of a hamlet of cottages and houses, a converted chapel, various outbuildings and barns and the aforementioned Manor House, set amid fields and

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Water taxi is the only way to reach the island during high tide



farmland and dirt tracks. Access on wheels is via a tidal causeway, which only emerges from beneath the estuarine waves for four hours at low tide – otherwise you're in that boat. The causeway was used for the TV (1989) and film (2011) dramatisations of Susan Hill's chilling *Woman In Black*. So maybe it's this combination of things – the remoteness, the associations with ghosts, the causeway, the location, who knows – that creates an otherworldly feel about Osea. But 'vibe' it certainly has.

So what of the studio? Entry to the control room is gained through a secret door, disguised as a bookcase, in the snooker room. An SSL 4064 E analogue console awaits inside the east-facing suite, with ADAM S3A and Yamaha NS10M monitors, a Pro Tools HD3 system, and several racks of classic outboard. "We're buying some Boxer monitors to add some more oomph," notes Young.

To the rear there's a drum booth, and behind that, a second small live room; tie-lines connect these, and the snooker room should you need the added space, to the console.

The icing on the cake is the residential touch: up to 20 people can stay in the beautifully furnished, stylishly decorated residential facility with all the privacy they desire. This 'bling' effect has already attracted several big-name pop acts, including Tinie Tempah and Jessie J, to East Point. The island and facilities were also used extensively in the ITV's *Superstar* talent show earlier in 2012.

But the Manor House is not the only option for creatives. Miloco has received enquiries from someone who wants to set up all their own gear on the island, "so we've been quoting for one of the barns". Young talks of instigating songwriting retreats there, and suggests it's ideal for laptop-based production teams who want to work without the distractions of the city. (Osea is less than 60 miles from London.)

In fact, to that end, a shed building next to a row of cottages ('The Laurels') in one corner of the hamlet has been converted into a compact writing studio, replete with Pro Tools and an Audient ASP desk, leading into a small live space kitted out with Roland



Miloco's Nick Young and Siobhan Paine outside the Laurels writing room

V-Drums and – yes! – a Korg MiniPops drum machine. Several bands have already hired The Laurels and its studio for fortnight-long stints of tune-bashing. "We do a very good hire package for that," says Young. "We can tailor a price for pretty much whatever you need, in fact."

"We always have a list of the tide charts, and prices for the water taxis, in the info packs," adds Paine.

Does Young really think there is a long-term future for this kind of residential operation – where there needs to be a commitment of time and budget of the sort you don't often see in today's recording industry – for Osea, and for Miloco's position as bookings manager?

"If we can offer our clients different vibes, different locations, different price ranges, we get more clients. At Miloco we look carefully at each studio we take on – that's always been the strategy. We're not going for every studio in every location, because some just don't fit with our clients." Then it's about trust, he says. Forming a partnership with studio owners such as Frieda is not taken lightly. "We've got to feel they can deliver and look after our clients."

As *PSNEurope* awaits the taxi bus to deliver us all over the causeway and back to the mainland, Young says: "People who want to come here really have to experience it."

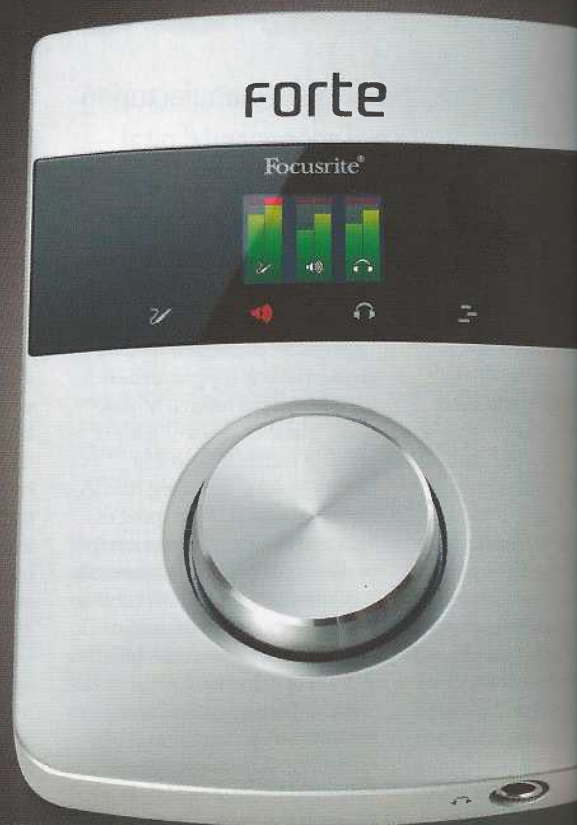
"Come and visit for the day, it's such an eye-opener," chirps Paine.

A word of warning though: there are no shops on the island, so bring everything you require in your luggage.

"One act had the most expensive cigarette run in history," relates Young. "A round trip of 80 quid to get a packet of fags..." ■

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