

an AUDIO PILGRIMAGE

»»»»»»»» Our editors journey to see how the world's finest music recordings are made—and to pick their favorites for a fantastic new CD.

LET'S PUT THIS EVENT in perspective: A day at Chesky Records, in the company of co-founder David Chesky, is to an audio enthusiast what a walk through the Ferrari factory with Enzo Ferrari himself would be to an auto aficionado. Of course, given that David Chesky is very much alive, and Enzo Ferrari passed away in 1988, the Ferrari tour might be a bit more special. But only a bit.

Many audio buffs—including all the ones on *Home Entertainment's* editorial staff—consider Chesky Records the source of the



world's finest stereo recordings. David Chesky and his brother Norman started the company in 1986 as a response to what they considered the generally poor quality of typical music recordings. The approach Chesky Records developed employs exotic microphones and preamplifiers, yet eschews conventional mixing boards and audio processing devices. The result is a sound that combines astonishing spaciousness with full-bodied tonality and visceral rawness. It's an aesthetic that works as well with a distortion-loving jazz/rock guitarist

By Brent Butterworth

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What's on the 10 Best Chesky CD

THE 10 BEST

1. "52nd Street," David Chesky
2. "Love and Happiness," The Coryells
3. "Oh Well," Sara K
4. "Dinah," Bucky Pizzarelli
5. "Spooky," Christy Baron
6. "Maria Mulata," Marta Gómez
7. "Three Little Birds," Monty Alexander
8. "Fever," Valerie Joyce
9. "No Flight Tonight," Larry Coryell, Badí Assad, and John Abercrombie
10. "Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," The Persuasions

SPECIAL TEST TRACKS

11. Trumpet: Chesky recording
12. Trumpet: Typical recording
13. Channel ID/phase test
14. Balance test
15. Pink noise
16. Subwoofer crossover test

The CD is available through chesky.com.

Steve Guttenberg, who has worked as a producer on various Chesky projects, and who owns what may be the world's most extensive collection of Chesky recordings—including yet-to-be-released tracks and a few never-to-be-released oddities. Steve's handpicked high-end two-channel system—currently a CD player, pre-amp, and power amp from Ayre Acoustics, and Dynaudio Special 25 speakers—provides the perfect microscope with which to examine the recordings and pick our favorites.

And then we move on to the best part: finding out from David Chesky himself exactly how his company works its magic.

HOW THEY DO IT One might expect Chesky Records to be a technical wonderland, each room overflowing with gear and interconnected by multicolored wire bundles strung across the ceiling. But in fact, only one room contains a substantial amount of audio gear; it's a small studio/listening room in which raw digital audio recordings are edited into the final tracks that appear on CDs, SACDs, and DVDs. Chesky doesn't need an elaborate studio because the company doesn't record in a studio. Its "studio" is nothing more than a small, portable rack of exotic recording gear, which hides in a storage closet awaiting the next recording session.

To understand the Chesky method, one must first review how typical music recordings are made. First, a band is brought in. The members often perform their parts separately, starting with drums and adding bass, guitar, and keyboards to create the basic track, then adding more guitars, or saxophone, or didgeridoo, or whatever else suits the producer's fancy. Then the singer records one, or three, or 13 vocal tracks. The walls of the studio are covered in foam so the sound cannot echo. The resulting recordings are then mixed together and artificial reverb and other audio processing is added to

as it does with a softly voiced Brazilian singer.

Inspired by Dennis Burger's July/August 2005 Show-Offs column devoted entirely to Chesky's works, the company offered us an irresistible proposal: to create a special CD of our all-time-favorite Chesky recordings. Of course, we could have chosen the cuts for this CD through a casual e-mail exchange among our editors, but we decided that such an opportunity deserved a more serious effort. So Dennis and I travel to the New York City home of contributing editor



David Chesky stands before a temporary "vocal booth" (left) constructed at St. Peter's Church to isolate a vocalist from the other performers acoustically. The SoundField microphone (right) contains multiple mic capsules, so it can record in stereo or in surround sound.

replace the ambience lost by recording in an acoustically dead space. It's all about controlling the sound, not about capturing a performance. "The typical commercial recording process is like inputting data, then adding it all together later," David comments.

In contrast, Chesky records in environments chosen for their natural reverberance, such as St. Peter's Church and the Makor jazz club, both in Manhattan. Every performance is live—all the musicians and singers play together, and there are no overdubs. No audio processing, such as reverb or compression or equalization, is added. And most of the performances are captured using a single, very special microphone, built by British manufacturer SoundField, which combines several mic capsules in a single body so it can record in stereo or surround sound.

The gear that Chesky uses for its recordings is remarkably minimal. Chesky's engineers use custom-made tube microphone preamps; like many audiophiles, they regard tube circuitry as more natural-sounding than tran-

sistor-based circuits. The analog signals from the preamps travel to a Prism Sound AD-2 analog-to-digital converter, and the resulting digital audio signals are then stored on a Genex GX8500 optical disc recorder. For instrumental groups, no mixer is used. "We 'mix' by altering the distance of each player from the microphone," David explains.

Adding a vocalist complicates the process, but only a bit. The band is captured exactly as it would be for one of Chesky's instrumental recordings. But in order to get a more direct, intimate vocal sound, the engineers isolate the singer in a separate, temporarily constructed booth. The singer and the band perform simultaneously; the engineers use a custom-made, vacuum-tube-based mixer to combine the sound from the singer's microphone with the sound of the instruments coming through the SoundField mic. Instead of adding electronic reverb to the singer's voice, the engineers pipe the sound from the vocal mic to speakers positioned in the back of the church, so the vocal

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recording has the same natural ambience as the instrumental recordings.

THE RESULT The difference between Chesky recordings and ordinary commercial recordings is glaringly obvious—and the better the audio system, the more dramatic the distinction. In fact, *Home*

Entertainment's editors and writers often use Chesky recordings in our evaluations of audio equipment. You can do the same, if you pick up *10 Best: Home Entertainment Editors Pick the Best of Chesky Records*. The *10 Best CD* includes liner notes that describe the way the tracks should sound and also has a few test tones crafted by the



The altar at St. Peter's (top) serves as a performance stage for Chesky's recording sessions, while one of Steve Guttenberg's Dynaudio speakers (above) supports a few of our favorite Chesky discs.



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Home Entertainment editors to help you get the best performance from your stereo system. You can order the CD either through Chesky Records' website at chesky.com or our website at hemagazine.com.

Although it's impossible to describe adequately the difference Chesky's recording process makes, cellist Dave Eggar, who happened to be visiting Chesky during our tour, sums it up nicely: "A lot of classical records are bathed in reverb, which blurs everything together. But in a Chesky recording, you hear the athleticism of the performance. It's more difficult for the performers, but the result is much more dramatic." 

Chesky Records, 212.586.7799,
chesky.com