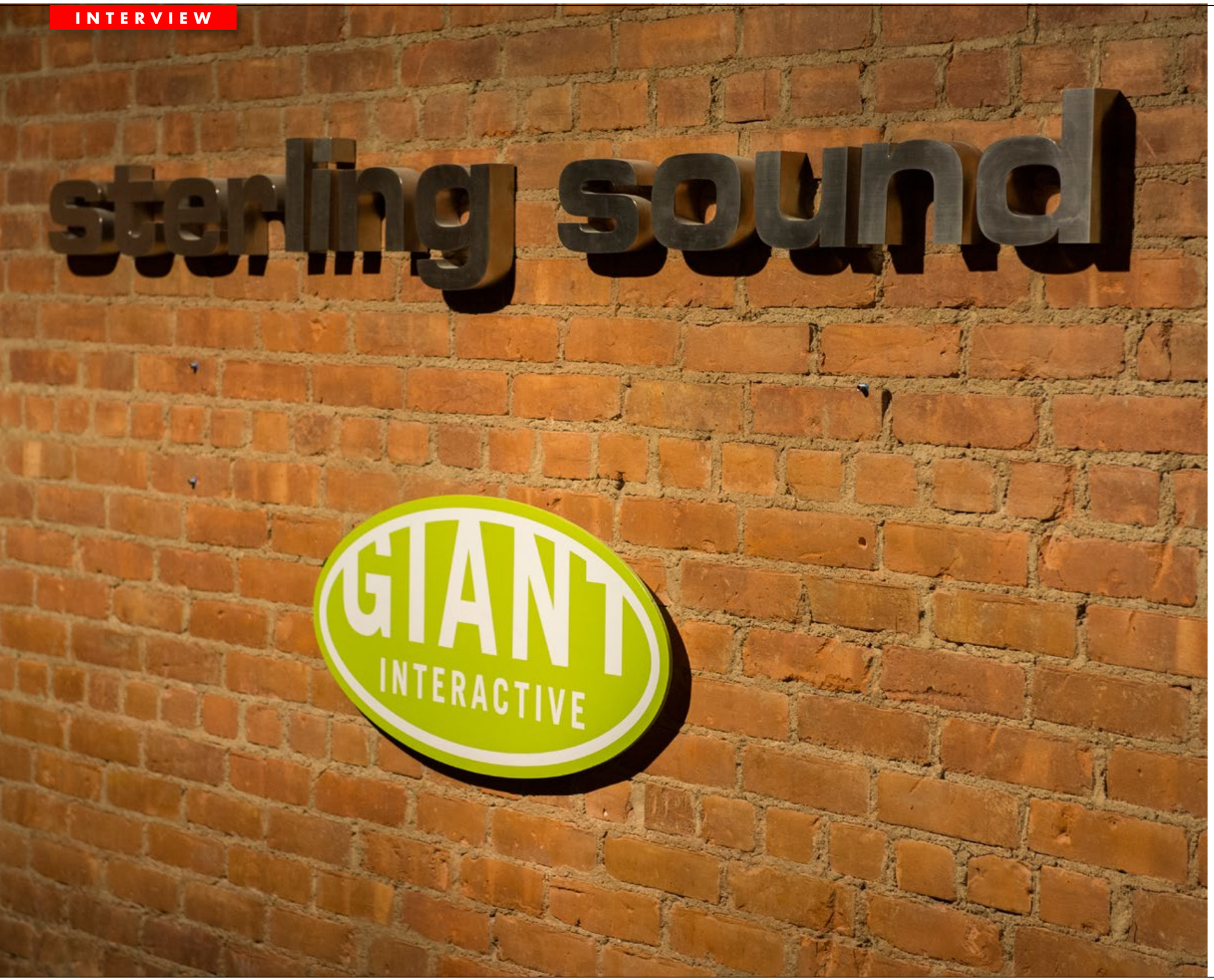


INTERVIEW

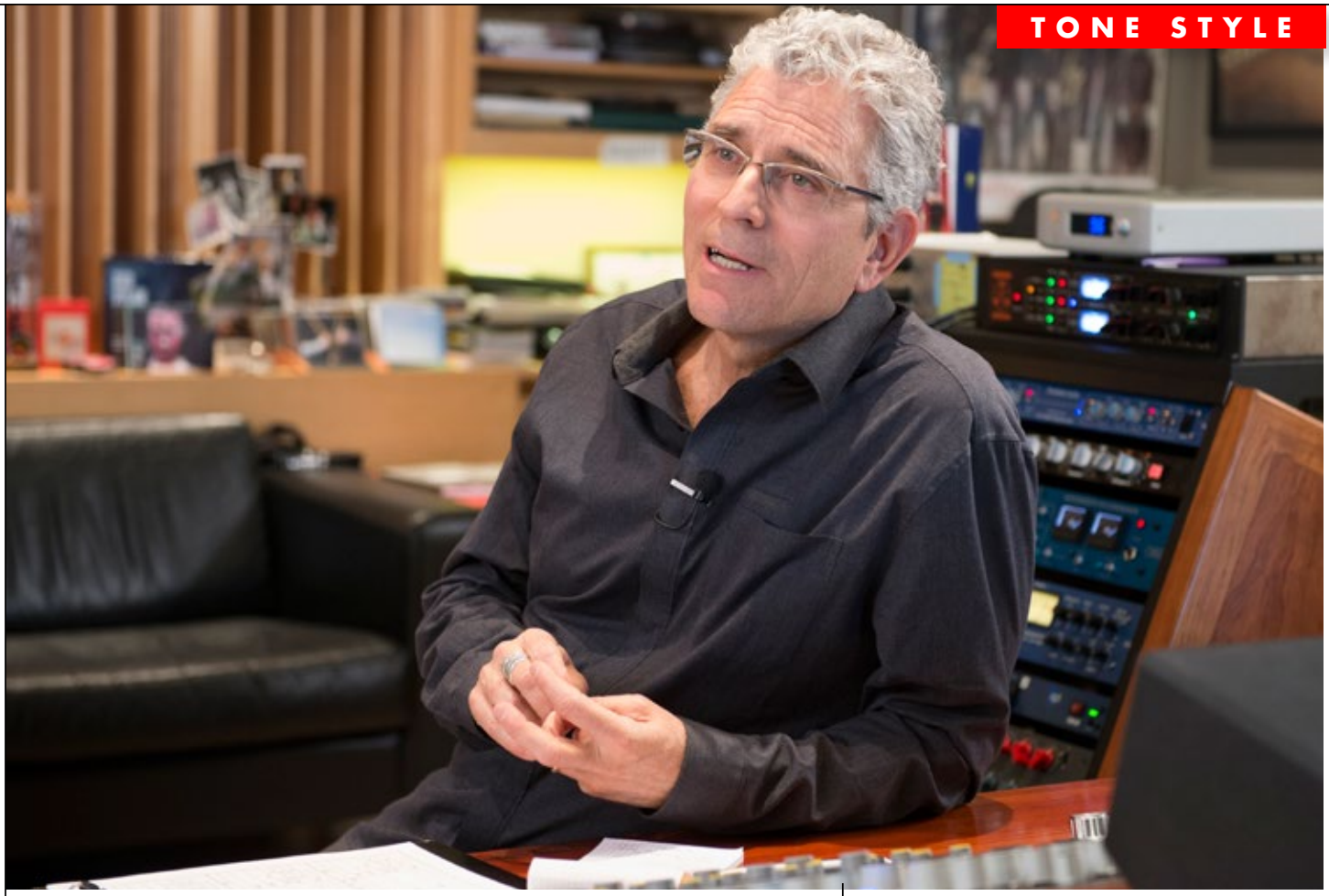
A Discussion with Greg Calbi

The difference is in the details

By Jeff Dorgay

In the world of the mastering engineer, every detail, no matter how small, makes a difference in the sound of the recording. In many ways, the mastering engineer is the gatekeeper to the final performance. Greg Calbi, who is one of the world's most sought-after mastering engineers, has been at Sterling Sound for over 30 years and he's worked on hundreds of top titles, including Bowie's *Young Americans*, Springsteen's *Born To Run* and Paul Simon's *Graceland*, just to name a few. And he's kept current, having recently worked on David Byrne's and Brian Eno's *Everything That Happens Will Happen Today*, as well as the recent St. Vincent album.

In his own words, the mastering engineer "is the bridge between the consumer's ear and what happens in the recording studio. I take the files from the recording studio and, without altering the content, I refine the finished product, whether that means making it softer, more dynamic, or more beautiful. Hopefully what jumps out of the speakers when I'm done is the best that the recorded piece can be."



He goes on to discuss the difference between optimizing music files for any given medium, which lends a consistency and flow to the album, and the conceptual part of mastering: the creative decisions that draw from his years of experience. Likening his part of the record-making process to that of an art director in an ad agency, Calbi feels responsible for communicating the wishes of his clients. Modern electronic tools have changed the process, says Calbri, who points out that nowadays a great recording can come from a laptop, a full-blown recording studio, or anything in between, but his involvement remains the same regardless and just as passionate.

Recently, following his work on Capitol Records' remasters of the U.S. Beatles albums, we caught up with Calbi in New York City. Already at work on a new project for Keith Richards, Calbi always has both feet (or should I say both ears) in the game—but he was kind enough to speak with us. A full video of our interview will be up on the WireWorld website as soon as it passes final editing, so stay tuned for that announcement. Here are some of the highlights of what Calbi shared with us during our recent conversation:

TA: So, we've discussed mastering in depth. What about the difference between mastering and remastering? Do any audio forums question your creative decisions?

GC (laughs): I have to stay away from all of that.

TA: A lot of people think that remastering just means "make it louder."

GC: The current Beatles project is the perfect example of how you want to take something and enhance it—without changing it, without changing the essential character. The equipment used to digitize the Beatles catalog on the first round of CDs back in the mid '80s was not as good as it is today. *(continued)*

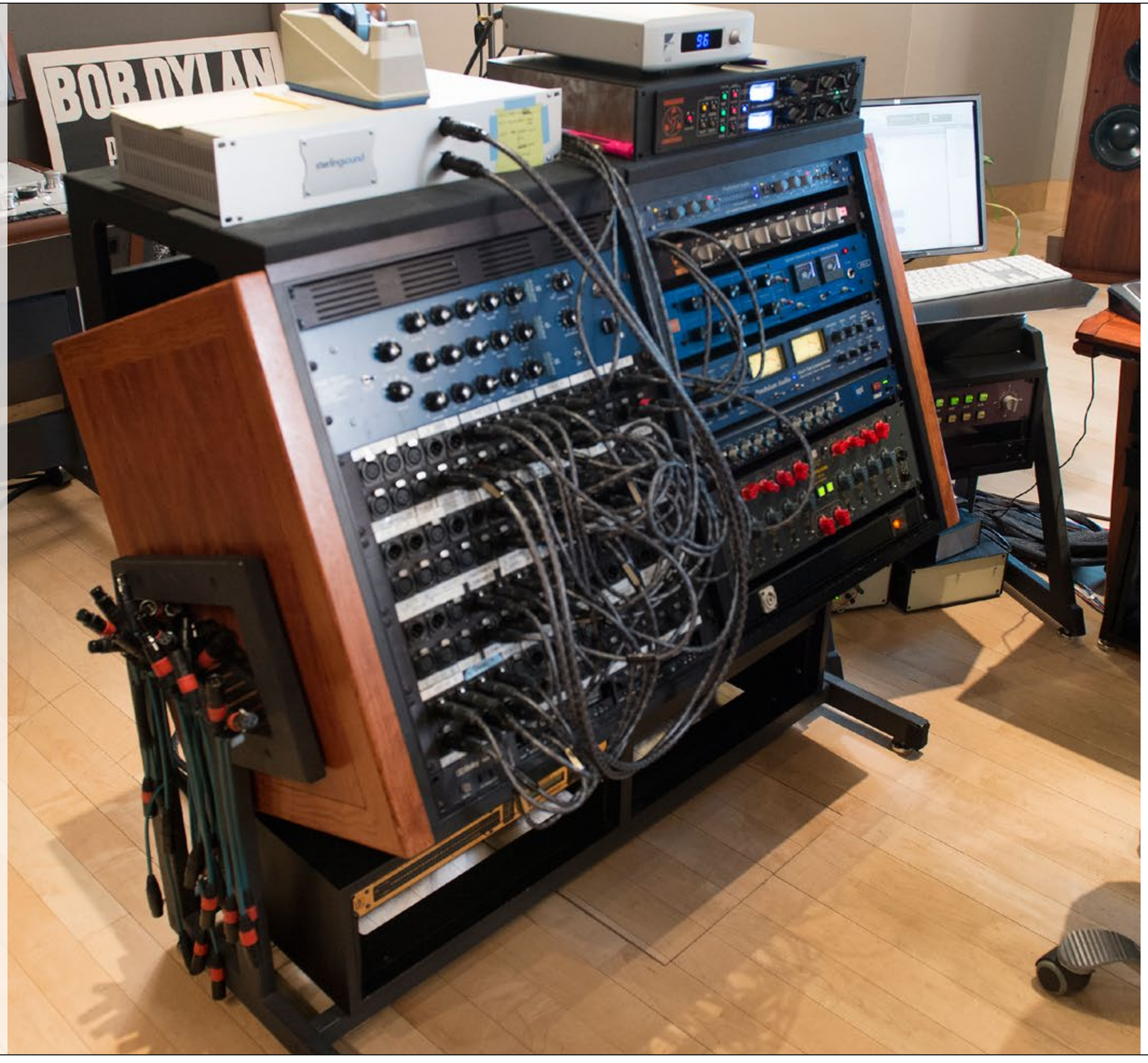
The reason that some of the newer discs are louder is because the equipment is better and capable of a wider range than the discs back then. We don't simply make things louder.

TA: How much time do you take to wrap your head around a remastering project?

GC: I often spend a few hours going back and listening to various versions of original vinyl, and the tape when it's available, but it really comes down to the budget. With the Dylan box, I had the luxury of the time to listen to multiple versions. But on some of these recordings, we just don't have the original tapes. You spend a lot of time trying to discover what the possibilities are. Sometimes you are more disappointed than you think.

TA: So here's the million-dollar question: For the U.S. Beatles project, did you use the high-resolution tracks that were used in 2009 for the last set of Beatles remasters, or did you make some subtle changes?

GC: They aren't that far off. The Beatles board had approved the 2009 remasters with the English sequence. They said if we could enhance the files without really changing them, we had their permission to go on. This was where the WireWorld cable in my mastering console came in handy: It saved me by passing a pure signal through cleanly with no coloration, allowing me to make subtle changes, shaving a bit here and a bit there. But it was important. The bass was not particularly big on the early albums, so a bit of bass had to be added, a little bit of patina—making it the same but better.



INTERVIEW

TA: So, what about earlier LP pressings of the Beatles, and for that matter other recordings?

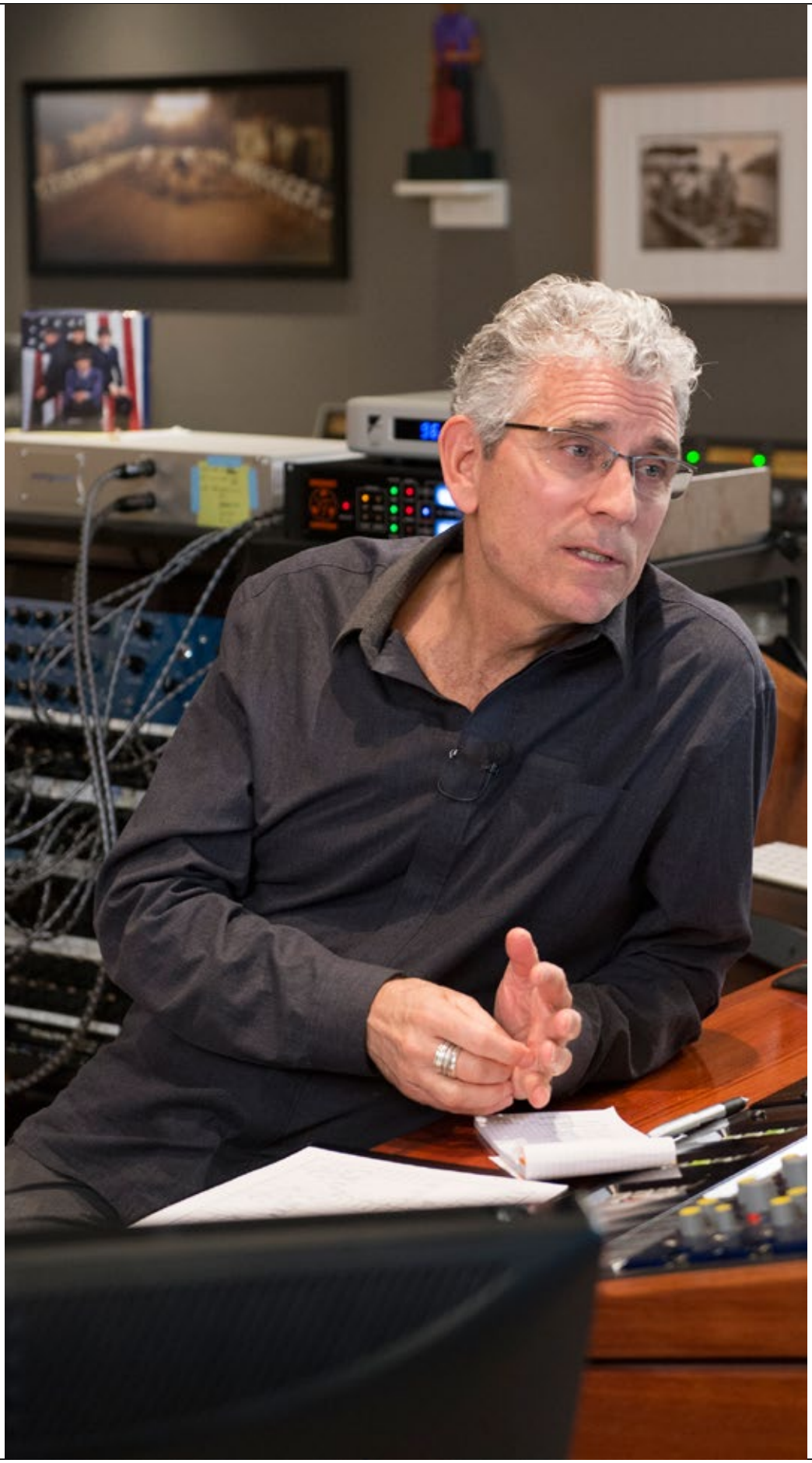
GC: I often tell people that if they have a clean early original stamper copy of these records from the '70s and '80s that it's never going to sound better, because the tape was fresh. After a while, the tapes do lose a bit of life and energy. We try to overcome that in the mastering process, but it can't always be saved.

TA: And what about mastering for vinyl? How does that change the picture?

GC: Vinyl poses a tremendous challenge these days, because it requires an additional budget step, adding thousands of dollars to the budget. We're living in an era of diminished music sales, where mastering for vinyl correctly will actually double the cost of finishing the record, and not everyone can afford that.

TA: How far does your involvement go in the actual end result of the record? Do you ever go in and change the order of the tracks, etc., etc.?

GC: No, no, I never do that on my own, but there are times when I do make suggestions. For some of the newer bands I've worked with, it's their first time in the mastering studio, so they can look to me for opinions on what I think the single might be or if I hear any glaring errors—that kind of thing. There are so many new people that it's a deluge of creativity. *(continued)*



TA: That's a good and bad thing, yes?

GC: It's good for creativity but often bad for sonics. But when people come here and see what we can do with our chain of electronics and expertise, they pretty quickly realize they are in the right spot.

TA: A lot of it is about trust then?

GC: The psychological part of this process is so deep that what you say and what you don't say sets the tone early on in the relationship.

[I mention the handwritten note that Calbi received from John Lennon, when working on *Walls and Bridges*, in which Lennon tells Calbi that he trusts him.]

TA: Wouldn't you say that's the ultimate compliment you can get from an artist?

GC: It's the best there is, but it comes with great responsibility. You always have to realize what's at stake for the artist and respect that.
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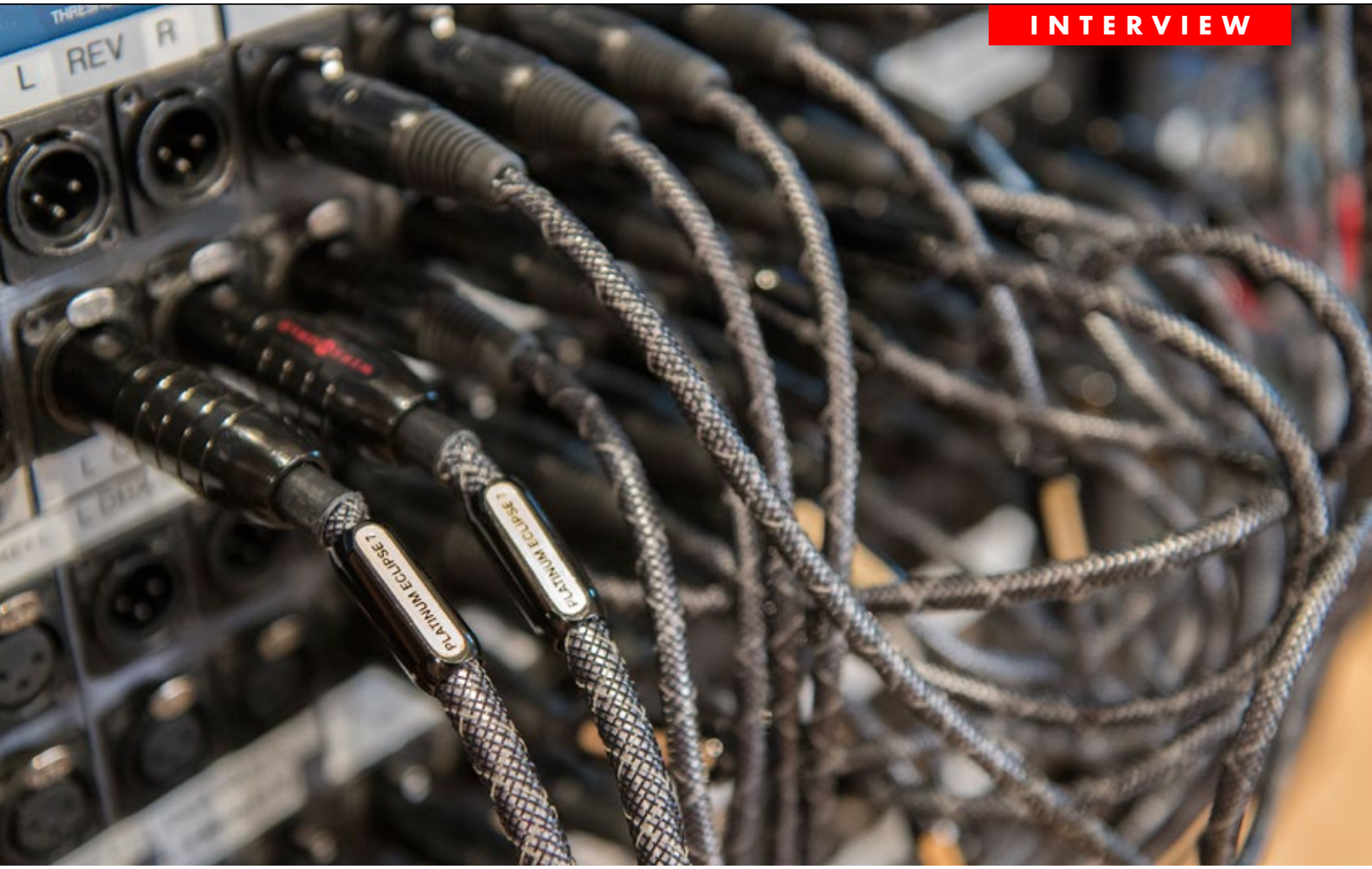

TA: Let's talk about cables for a minute. I noticed that you have a full suite of WireWorld cables in your bay here. I take it you're convinced that good cables do have a positive effect on the final sound?

GC: I've been using WireWorld cables for at least 10 years now. They replaced the Mogami cables we were using. I kept comparing things, but I was so impressed with the clarity and fullness of the WireWorld cables that they became my go-to. I'm totally blown away by the current products.

TA: So the technology does serve the music in the end?

GC: I learned years ago after following what Doug Sax was doing at the Mastering Lab that the signal path was critical. Now I can use the patch bay creatively and it makes all the difference in the world.

TA: Are you much of a high-end audio guy at home?

GC: No, I've got a very basic system at home. That said, I love music and I listen to music constantly, but mentally I can't go there at home. I can't listen to music this critically when I go home, so I just listen to music for pleasure. It's a different part of your brain that goes into this job.

TA: Do you have any musical guilty pleasures?

GC: I like Abba and AC/DC. There isn't any kind of music I really don't like, but I do draw the line at Barry Manilow. No offense, I've heard he's a wonderful guy! ●

sterling-sound.com/engineers/greg-calbi

See Interview Video