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A Hendrix Castle Where Musicians Still Kiss the Sky

By BEN SISARIO
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Just down the street from the hot dogs of Gray's Papaya, on a row of down-market Greenwich Village shops selling used CDs and a certain kind of glass pipe, 52 West Eighth Street is easy to miss. But a small sign marks hallowed musical ground: Electric Lady Studios.

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Michael Nagle for The New York Times

The cover of Jimi Hendrix's "Axis: Bold as Love" hangs on a wall at Electric Lady Studios.

Founded by [Jimi Hendrix](#) in 1970, it was an oddity for its time. Instead of following the usual studio model — a big, impersonal box tended by buttoned-down staff engineers — it was a psychedelic lair, with curved walls, groovy multicolored lights and sci-fi erotica murals to aid the creative flow. Hendrix died less than a month after its opening party on Aug. 26, 1970, but he left libraries of tape from his sessions there, and the list of greats who have worked at the studio includes the [Rolling Stones](#), [Stevie Wonder](#) and [Led Zeppelin](#).

Something else about Electric Lady has turned out to be unusual: It has lasted. As a group of engineers and producers noted in a 40th-anniversary celebration on Tuesday, most other big-name studios in New York — the Hit Factory, the Record Plant, Sony Music Studios — have shut down in recent years, victims of the recording industry woes or simply of real estate pressure, but Electric Lady has defied the odds by staying alive, and staying top-tier.

Eddie Kramer, Hendrix's favored engineer and a force in the studio's creation, has a simple explanation for its longevity.

"In a word: vibe," he said, sitting in a small lounge by the control booth for one of Electric Lady's three recording rooms. "We wanted to create an environment where Jimi could feel really happy, and feel that he could create

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Electric Lady at 40



The engineer Eddie Kramer, who helped Jimi Hendrix create the studio, discusses its history and enduring appeal.

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Jimi Hendrix, seated, with the engineer Eddie Kramer, behind him, and the studio manager Jim Marron in the control room of the unfinished Electric Lady Studios on June 17, 1970.

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Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Participants in an Audio Engineering Society panel discussion on Tuesday to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Electric Lady, gathered afterward in a mirrored hallway of the studios. From left: Janie Hendrix, Robert Margouleff, John Storyk, Lee Foster and Eddie Kramer.

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An original mural by Lance Jost at the

anything.”

“It was this womblike, beautiful place,” he added, “where he could feel totally relaxed and create the music he wanted.”

The South African-born Mr. Kramer, whose slicked-back hair, trim goatee and punctilious manner give no indication of his résumé — working with Led Zeppelin, Kiss, the Rolling Stones and plenty more rock giants — was celebrating Electric Lady on Tuesday at a panel discussion organized by the Audio Engineering Society. Like Electric Lady itself, the meeting was an example of megafame hiding in plain sight, with men who have recorded some of the most famous and celebrated albums of the last 40 years yet are unknown to the public.

Seated with Mr. Kramer in Studio A, Electric Lady’s subterranean main room — which still has its original rounded walls and spiral ceiling — were Tony Platt, who mixed AC/DC’s “Back in Black” there in 1980; John Storyk, the architect and acoustician who designed the studio; and Robert Margouleff and Malcolm Cecil, the synthesizer wizards whom Stevie Wonder recruited in the early 1970s. Among the 80 or so audio professionals there, these famous-to-a-few figures overshadowed two panelists with much broader name recognition: Lenny Kaye, guitarist of the Patti Smith Group, and Janie Hendrix, Jimi’s stepsister.

With sentimentality and a precision appropriate for lifelong engineers, they told studio war stories (Jimi’s amp was there, against the wall; Stevie’s drums went right there); made the audience ooh and aaah with slideshow photos of old mixing consoles; and tried to pinpoint what it was about the place that gives it that all-important vibe. The spirit of the studio’s founder was cited more than once, along with the mix of high-tech equipment and mellow atmosphere.

“All the studios you see today come from being a friendly place to make art,” Mr. Margouleff said, holding back tears. “That was really what came out of this studio.”

For many artists Electric Lady has become a home away from home. The door to the upstairs bathroom has a small hole in it, just big enough to run a cable in there for when Keith Richards wants to cut his guitar parts in the most private kind of privacy. For Jimmy Page the personal imprimaturs of Hendrix and Mr. Kramer made all the difference when Led Zeppelin mixed parts of “Houses of the Holy” there in 1972.

“Eddie Kramer was a damn fine engineer,” Mr. Page said in a telephone interview this week. “If he was going to be

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studios, still at 52 West Eighth Street, top.

working on a studio that had Hendrix's name, he was going to make sure it was a good place with good acoustics so that musicians wanted to play in that room."

Yet in the world of recording studios, where time is money and inspiration needs to flow for take after take, even intangibles like vibe have a specific function, and the design approach of Electric Lady has become commonplace today.

Mr. Storyk explained that in addition to the mood lighting, Hendrix called for visionary changes in studio design, like control rooms large enough for artists and engineers to work together closely. Those plans, along with complications like the high water table under the building, made for a protracted and expensive construction.

The studio's original filing with the [Buildings Department](#) estimated its cost \$125,000, but it ended up costing about \$1 million, said Mr. Storyk, who got the Electric Lady job at 22 and has gone on to design numerous studios and performance spaces around the world.

"For the first time an artist was building a studio," Mr. Storyk said. "This was happening in a few pockets all over the world, but none more famous than here with Jimi."

Electric Lady's artist-friendly innovations — along with the Hendrix mystique — have helped it survive in an era when large, all-purpose recording studios are giving way to smaller rooms with narrower focus. Echoing the Electric Lady model, many new studios, like [Jay-Z's Roc the Mic](#) on West 27th Street in Manhattan (designed by Mr. Storyk) are tailored to the needs of a particular client.

Yet Electric Lady also had its lean years. As with most studios, it suffered as advances in technology allowed anyone to make cheap and reasonably high-quality recordings at home. By the early 2000s it had lost its sheen and nearly closed, but after a renovation and a change in management it is thriving again.

Lee Foster, the 32-year-old studio manager, said that when he took over five years ago, he began going through his record collection and inviting Electric Lady alumni to come back. Before long its rates were back up, and the three rooms were always booked. Recent sessions have included [Eric Clapton](#), Coldplay, [Rihanna](#), [the Strokes](#) and [Sheryl Crow](#).

To make room for the Audio Engineering Society's meeting, Mr. Foster said, the studio ended sessions early. But on Wednesday it was back to work, with Studio B booked by [Kanye West](#).

Mr. Kramer is in Studio A this week. He's mixing a new Jimi Hendrix album, he said, and he looked excited.

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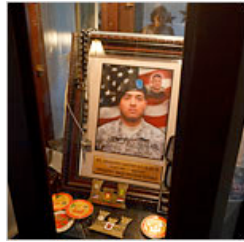


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