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There Are No Rules

The Sound Kitchen's founder/operation manager Ira Blonder revived a historic studio.

Ira Blonder

Commercial real estate magnate/
studio manager

Career

Highlight:

Having rock band Chicago record at the Sound Kitchen.



Connecticut native Ira Blonder's background in real estate was put to the test when in 2008 he purchased the Sound Kitchen in Franklin, Tenn., one of the most sought-after recording studios in the country. "The facility's former owners were in arguments over the property. Normally, I don't make rash decisions in business," says Ira, a businessman who also had a hand in the selling of Nashville studios OMNIsound and the Quonset Hut. "I had three days to step in and decide whether to not to purchase the Sound Kitchen. It was really daunting."

The deal went through, and Ira hatched a plan to revive the historic studio, which had fallen into disrepair. "We evaluated what was needed to upgrade the facility, and then we went staff by staff to determine who brought value to the organization. We found that there was a lot of old-school thinking. The Kitchen had to become something new and fresh. We have only one rule—"There are no rules," says Ira.

Indeed, Ira has used that freedom to create a multi-use facility, which he has referred to as a "campus environment," a 19,000-square-foot property south of Nashville that is home to seven recording studios, six full-time staff, six interns and an open-arms environment. "There's a certain feel and harmony to this place. We allow people from [many] genres to work together," says Ira. That includes Keith Urban, Reba McEntire, rock band Chicago, bluegrassers The Grascals and Christian-music legend Michael W. Smith.

While the walls of other studios are lined with gold and platinum records, the Sound Kitchen's reception area features walls decorated with simple kitchen plates signed by the various artists who have recorded there—including Dolly Parton, who recently filmed a promotional video for the studio. "We let clients write their feelings about their sessions on a plate. It becomes a living



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Bluegrass band The Grascals and country singer Dierks Bentley (second from left) are among those who record at the Sound Kitchen.

history book of who's been here," says Ira. The plate concept has become so popular that only artists who have had a Top 10 hit can earn their place on the wall.

Ira's keen business sense has earned him a reputation as one of the country's top studio managers by *Music Connection* magazine. "You have to understand this business and be business-minded," Ira emphasizes. Patience and a passion for music are also imperative. "You have to understand the artist's mindset," he says. Ira manages 500 to 700 e-mails per day, along with booking time in the studio and planning a vision for the next step in the Sound Kitchen's evolution.

Ira insists that his concept isn't unique. "When you think of Motown, they changed the music business game," he allows. "The songs they created from the late '50s are still part of our culture today. When people say, 'This is a great concept for a studio,' I copied it. It's a 50-year-old idea. Thank [Motown Records founder] Berry Gordy."

—JESSICA PHILLIPS