

Herrin native culminates career with new process to restore audio tape

by Gary Gibula

Kelly Pribble is a man on a mission. His altruistic goal is to save all the archived audio tape in the world before it deteriorates and is lost forever.

"It's a race against time," the Herrin native said this week.

Pribble has made some amazing accomplishments since being a high school kid working at the local drug store and doing air shifts at hometown radio station WHPI-AM (right).



Today, at age 56, he works as Principal Studio Engineer and Preservation Specialist at Iron Mountain Entertainment Services, a worldwide digital media archiving company with an impressive list of Fortune 500 clients.

"Right now, I'm as proud about this as anything I've ever done in my career because I'm helping preserve history," Pribble said. "That's very important to me, and it's also important for future generations."

Most visibly, he is responsible for a new technical process that recently saved 60 reels of vintage audio recordings entrusted to IMES by Nobel-winning singer songwriter Bob Dylan.

Pribble also received accolades last year from pop singer Mariah Carey for recovering music from cassette and old format reel-to-reel tapes that were then released on her recent new album, *The Rarities*.

He recounted: "I got a text message last summer on my cell phone, and it was voicemail audio from Mariah herself thanking me for my work. Pretty cool."

Pribble discovered and identified that audio recording tape manufactured from the 1970s to the 1990s contained a synthetic chemical that has been leeching out and causing the tape edges to stick together.

"We call it Adhesion Syndrome, and it can happen even when tapes are properly stored in climate-controlled environments," he said.

The challenge has been to identify the condition, unbind the tape and transfer the content, usually to a digital storage medium, before it's too late.

Another problem requiring a little more tact is convincing artists and record companies who might be reluctant to admit their archived master tapes are deteriorating.

"There are a lot of non-disclosure agreements," Pribble said. "That's why we're trying to educate people and tell them if it can happen to Bob Dylan, it surely can happen to others. The fact he and his people are gracious enough to let me talk about it is a big deal, because no one has allowed us to say anything about

this for the last 10 years."

Pribble said the Covid pandemic, ironically, has aided spreading the word about Adhesion Syndrome.

"Instead of a weekend industry meeting in New York, we're having Zoom conferences, due to the pandemic, that more effectively send the information all around the world," he said. "We want people to have this knowledge. We want to tell them that they need to look at their master tapes fairly soon."

Pribble's interest in audio first began as a result of his grandfather owning an elaborate home stereo system.

"His name was Pete Gentry, and he was both the police and fire chief of Herrin for years," Pribble said. "I helped him set up sound systems for all the Little League parks in the area. The family ate Sunday dinner at his house and I'd then go downstairs and play record albums on his stereo."

Pribble later received his first career referral from an unlikely source --Tom Petty's bus driver.

"It was probably 1983, I snuck into the SIU Arena to see a Tom Petty concert but was quickly escorted out," he said. "Same show, I got in a second time and was caught and shown the backstage door. But then it happened a third time and the Tom Petty bus driver, who had seen all this happening, called me over."

Pribble chatted with the man and explained that his life goal was to learn how to make records. The bus driver then told Pribble all about the audio program at Belmont College in Nashville.

After saving enough money for his first semester, Pribble moved to Nashville. For the next few years, he interned at the largest recording studio in town in the morning, attended school in the afternoon and worked at UPS in the evening.

Along the way, Pribble opened his own recording studio.



"When I was 23, along with a few other key guys, I opened Quad Studios, which actually was the former Quadraphonic Sound," he said. "It had been a very famous studio in the 1970s and was where Neil Young made the *Harvest* album. It had been out of business and vacant since 1979, and in 1988 bunch of independent engineers and a financial backer bought it."

The very first year, Pribble assisted recording the Charlie Daniels Band's 'Simple Man,' the first of many gold and platinum albums made at Quad.

Pribble later worked in New York City for a different Quad Studios that bought out the Nashville location. He then

moved to London and recorded at Kensaltown Studios.

After returning to the U.S., Pribble began working for IMES, a story that will be continued next week in the Music Historicity column published in the Southern Illinoian every Thursday.

"My whole family is there in the Herrin area," Pribble said. "My uncle, who lives in DeSoto, was a founding member of Jackson Junction, which used to play all the time at Fred's Dance Barn."

Pribble said he loves returning to visit his hometown, although the pandemic has delayed his being able to do so.

"When I come to Herrin, I can unwind, slow down for a minute and just enjoy being around my family," he said. "I wanted to do this (interview) for everyone in Southern Illinois. It's my home and I just love all the people there."

Preserving audio history one tape at a time (Kelly Pribble, Part 2)

by Gary Gibula

In case you missed it, we published a story last weekend about Herrin native Kelly Pribble, who recently made important discoveries about audio tape deterioration that are being shared throughout the recording industry.

As Principal Studio Engineer and Preservation Specialist at Iron Mountain Entertainment Services, he's traveled a long road to becoming one of the world's foremost tape restoration specialists.

It was Tom Petty's bus driver, behind the SIU Arena, who first suggested Pribble consider Belmont College in Nashville to learn about audio. The teenager moved to Tennessee, started school and landed an internship at the largest recording studio in Music City.

"My first teacher was Scott Hendricks, who today is a very famous Country record producer," Pribble said. "At the time, he also happened to be the main engineer at Bullet Studios."

Hendricks was part of the group who in 1988 purchased the building of then-defunct Quadrafonic Studios.

"We remodeled it and brought in all new recording equipment," Pribble explained. "I immediately went from an intern to being the main guy at the new Quad Studios. I designed the studio, did the build-out, was the manager, the head engineer, I was everything."

He lured artists to the historic studio at first by not charging them if they weren't satisfied with their recordings.

"That policy burned me a couple times, but it soon turned out that I didn't need to worry about it," Pribble said. "I got so busy that very first year, my investors borrowed \$656,000 and bought the house right next door for more studio space."

At age 25, Pribble found himself operating the largest single-location studio complex in Nashville.

"It became the 'must go' place for people to record, and artists were flying here from Europe," he said. "I had Lynyrd Skynyrd recording in one room and Whitney Houston in another. For the next decade, my four studio rooms were constantly recording music about five days a week."

Considering the competition from multi-million dollar East and West Coast studios, what made Quad Studios such a sought-after recording facility?



"Our success was completely all about vibe," Pribble said. "I looked for furnishings and things that made the environment look cool. Conventional wisdom was for a studio to have no windows, so I put in windows. I might have had a vintage mixing console, but the vibe was very comfortable, and that's what inspires musicians to do their best work."

He also installed a central kitchen casual meeting area for musicians, something most studios lacked.

"There are many other factors for a successful studio, of course," Pribble admitted. "A great song is the foundation, and having the right producer and engineer also are part of it. There are studios that can feel sterile or office-like, so a comfortable setting and vibe can help put an artist and musician into a mode that doesn't distract from the creative task."

In 1998, the studio consolidated with Quad Studios of New York. Pribble then shuttled between Nashville and the Big Apple, now working with Mariah Carey and hip hop artists including Notorious B.I.G., Tupac Shakur and Wu-Tang Clan.

Two years later, Swedish record producer Martin Terefe convinced Pribble to leave Quad Studios, move to London and work for him at his newly-founded Kensaltown Studios. With no more than a handshake agreement, Pribble and Terefe talked their landlord into erecting for them a new three-story building.

"We told the investors that we'd put as many studios as we could into that new building if they built it," Pribble said. "We ended up outfitting eight studios in there, and they're still running today."

For the next 10 years, Pribble recorded at Kensaltown with artists such as Coldplay, A-ha, Jason Mraz, Train and Adele.

"I also recorded Jason Mraz and Colbie Caillat's song 'Lucky,' which won a Grammy in 2010," he said. "I was the personal engineer for Cat Stevens, or Yusef Islam, and we recorded an

all-star tsunami relief album."

Pribble said he continued some of the practices that contributed to his past success.

"We had a master kitchen in the building with a table that could seat 16 people, and we'd have a group lunch there every Friday," he said. "Kensaltown had become the new Quad."

But in 2010, Pribble decided it again was time for a change.

"After a decade at Kensaltown, I needed to go back to the States," he said. "I missed football, baseball, basketball, drive-thrus and stuff like that. So I moved back and spent some time at home in Herrin."

A job tip from a friend led Pribble to soon contact Iron Mountain Entertainment Services.

"I went out there the next Monday and I've been with them ever since," he said. "Rae DiLeo originally hired me and we still work together today."

Pribble said IMES quickly recognized his experience and abilities, and later that year asked him to undertake a massive project at an archiving warehouse in Rio de Janeiro. The challenge was to diagnose and try to save thousands of wet master tapes that were recorded by artists and record labels throughout South America.

He assembled a team of local professionals to help tackle the job of remediating mold from the tape surface and transferring the content to digital storage. Along the way, Pribble discovered a never before seen condition.

"We found that a certain tape, Ampex 456, was subject to the edges sticking together," Pribble said. "And it also was happening with this same tape at other archiving vaults in Brazil and with comparison tape I bought on eBay."

Pribble said he reached out to every known expert around the world but no one had ever seen the condition or was able to offer any advice.

"So I started experimenting with all kinds of ideas," Pribble said. "I finally came up with a process to dissolve what was causing the binding between the layers of tape. I currently have an application for a patent on this process of treating what I call adhesion syndrome."

Pribble and his team saved over 2,000 tapes. Just as importantly, he discovered the deterioration condition and found that it is happening to certain audio tape manufactured in the 1970s through 2000.

"It took almost five years to complete the entire project," he said. "This was a big deal because there were several well-known Brazilian artist master tapes in the collection. That satisfaction at the end of the project is where my love for archiving and remediation really started."

Since then, artists like Bob Dylan and Mariah Carey have made no secret of contacting IMES and Pribble for help in recovering content from aging audio tape. Pribble also has participated in numerous industry conferences, in person and over the internet, urging artists and record labels to transfer their master tapes before they become unplayable.

Pribble said he never ran into that bus driver with whom he chatted at Tom Petty's performance at the SIU Arena back in the 1980s.

"But his advice kind of came back to me, full circle, in a way," he said. "A year or so ago I was asked to recover audio from some old data storage tapes that had been recorded in one of the first digital recording formats, called Radar, which I have."

Pribble said the tapes contained the original multitrack recordings of an unreleased song that Tom Petty recorded several years prior.

"The cool thing was, I was able to recover that audio," he said. "I can't express in words how great and emotional that felt. So to that bus driver, wherever you are, all I can say is thank you, thank you, thank you!"

