

# Working for the **Boss**

Toby Scott, Bruce Springsteen's sound man,  
calls Whitefish his home

BY BRIAN SCHOTT

If you happen to be walking down Central Avenue in Whitefish, Montana, you might not pay any attention to the unimposing man in a tee shirt and jeans talking with shopkeepers or walking into City Hall for a local planning board meeting. Tonight he might be arguing about the need for affordable housing or dissecting the staff report on a new subdivision. Tomorrow he might be calling his wife from Finland as he prepares to record another of Bruce Springsteen's concerts.

Scott has spent more than 20 years covering 16 albums with Springsteen, and has earned a spot as one of the leading recording engineers in the music business. And for the better part of half of those years, he has made his home in Whitefish, commuting across the world at the call of his "Boss".

Just down the street from the Buffalo Café in a historic brick building, Scott meets with clients at a large wooden board room table with notes penned on a dry erase board behind him. In the recording space down the hall, large cardboard boxes lie scattered across the room with various mixing equipment and a new, unpacked Power Mac G4. An old Gibson guitar with numbers marked on the frets, a Yamaha synthesizer and various scattered tools complete the scene. Scott is in the process of setting up his own local studio - a process he hopes will keep him more here than there.

Like many young rock and roll lovers, Scott started out seeing Elvis on the Ed Sullivan show as a teenager, tried playing guitar, experimented with drums, and was "the hippie of the school" in Santa Barbara, Calif.

Dave Reese photo

Toby Scott at his dock on Whitefish Lake,  
winter 2004



## neighbors

His friends started a band and told him that while he wasn't allowed to be in it - would he manage them?

After various stints with bands and landing a few recording deals that didn't pan out, Scott started college and flunked out as a business major, then switched to music, studying orchestration, arranging, writing, and theory. He got a two-track recorder, then moved to a four-track system and thought he had the potential to make something happen.

Scott recorded a number of demos and toured Europe soliciting them to record companies in England. They were all turned down. After rethinking his career, Scott moved back to California and took a brief class in engineering, then followed it up with a second class. Feeling ready to put his honed skills to work, he moved to Los Angeles, got a job at a studio and began engineering sessions as an assistant. Within three years he was the chief engineer and manager.

"There's a certain sort of a personality to it. Engineering is very subjective," says Scott. "You have to love music, know mixes, balances, the sound of things - you need an instinctual ability to listen to music. There are very few people that have been professionally employed for 30 years in the same role in the music industry."

Scott rejected offers to move onto bigger studios or different jobs and stuck with what he knew and what he liked. It was 1978 when Scott first hooked up with a young Springsteen who was in California to finish recording the album *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. Previously, Springsteen had made it big with his "Born to Run" album and was on

the cover of Time and Newsweek in the same week - a feat that has happened only three times in 50 years.

Springsteen liked what he heard and a work relationship developed where Scott went on to mix *The River* and recorded *Born in the USA*, *Tunnel of Love*, *Human Touch*, *Lucky Town*, and recorded and mixed *Ghost of Tom Joad* and all others to this date. *Born in the USA* hit No. 2 on the Billboard chart for six months and resulted in seven Top 10 singles - tying the record for the most that have ever been pulled from one record.

Springsteen moved back to L.A. for recording sessions on the West Coast and Scott followed, renting a house. He became friends with actor Tom O'Brien, who stayed with Scott when he was working on various acting jobs in L.A. O'Brien, who lived in Whitefish, convinced Scott to come visit. On Labor Day weekend in 1990, Scott took his friend up on the offer.

"I spent the entire weekend in Whitefish and had so much fun and met so many interesting, genuine people who became good friends," said Scott. "When I got back to Los Angeles and I was sitting around, I really started to think to myself, 'boy - it's nice out there.'"

With Springsteen continuing his work in California, Scott knew there was a chance he would need to move there too. "I didn't want to live in L.A., so I asked Tom what it would cost to live out there in Montana." After looking at a few real estate listings, he quickly realized that compared to L.A. prices, "It was cheap."

It didn't take long for Scott to return to Whitefish and find himself a nice home on a few acres of property. In January 1991 he moved in.

"Springsteen's only comment was that as long as I was available when he needed me, it was fine," said Scott. "In our recording situation

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we'll work for two or three weeks on a project and then take a week off - or maybe two weeks off - or three. And then we go back to work."

But that was long enough to meet Michelle Amberson, a golf shop accountant at Whitefish Lake Golf Club, where Scott was a member. Over the span of four years, short chats turned into a drink and dinner, a jog in the Whitefish Lake Run, dates and bike rides.

Finally, as the relationship grew closer and sparks began to fly, Scott took Amberson on a few journeys, including their first out-of-town date to attend the 1996 Academy Awards. Amberson spent the entire time in the Green Room back stage talking with the likes of Steven Segal, Goldie Hawn, and Mel Gibson, who won best director and best picture for *Braveheart* that year.

Two weeks later Scott took Amberson to Europe for a two-week trip, half of which was work, the other half play. When they came home, he asked her to marry him.

Their wedding was an event that will go down in Whitefish history. For years Scott had been telling Springsteen to come out for a visit. Now, the wedding was the perfect chance. Not one to sit around when he arrived in town, Springsteen asked what there was to do and he hit the town. Springsteen attended a rehearsal dinner at the Hellroaring Saloon on Big Mountain and continued on to the Great Northern Bar & Grill. The local house band, *The Fanatics*, was playing their normal Friday gig. "Bruce sat around on his hands for a while and then danced for a while



Mark Morida, left, of the Great Northern Bar's house band "The Fanatics," jams with Bruce Springsteen on Springsteen's stop in Whitefish.

and then finally asked, 'Can I play?'" Springsteen jumped on stage and played three songs including "Mustang Sally" and "Shake, Rattle and Roll." As word spread outside the bar as to what was happening, fans packed the room and lined the sidewalk.

Springsteen also delighted guests at the reception at Grouse Mountain Lodge the following evening.



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Luxury



When not traveling for work, Scott continues to build his studio in Whitefish and raise his five-year old son, Wyatt. He estimates he is in town about 50 percent of the time and the couple employs a policy of never being apart for more than two weeks. Both Michelle and Wyatt will fly out to meet him on the road, or Scott has been known to fly in on a Saturday and head back on a Sunday or Monday, just to be able to spend 48 hours with his family. Whitefish is home time. Play time. Vacation time.

"When you live in the city, in order to recreate you need to go somewhere," says Scott. "You either have to jog around Central Park or go to the gym or play some basketball. If you want to hike, boat, canoe, or do anything outdoors you have to take a train or drive a car - spend a couple hours to get someplace where you can have a bicycle ride or take a walk or jog through the woods. For me, Whitefish is great because it offers me the best of it all."

With his unique schedule, he also has enough time off that he's able to get involved in local politics. "As an outsider from New York, New Jersey, and Los Angeles, I had seen how ugly places can get without good planning and development," says Scott. "I'd also seen how good they can be growing up in Santa Barbara, which is one of the most beautiful cities in the United States. They have rigorous architectural reviews and all their regulations are quite thorough."

That notion led Scott to seek a position on the local Whitefish City-County Planning Board, where he has served for four years. His commitment is genuine - and must be - who could sit and wade through the reams of required paperwork and face a scrutinizing public in meetings that sometime stretch five or more hours into the early morning of next day?

"I want Whitefish to grow carefully. It's good to be involved. I like walking down the street or driving around town and seeing people I know," says Scott. "I can probably name ninety percent of the business owners on Main Street. I like the small town feel of Whitefish and the proximity to Glacier National Park and the outdoor experiences. If I want to go for a hike in the woods - I just walk out my back door. My kid and I can hop on our ATV and go cruising, or head out on the lake or go up on the mountain for some skiing. We need to protect what we have here."

After years of travel and commuting from coast-to-coast, Scott says the time in the air doesn't get to him. "My dislike of flying is that next year my son is going to be in school and he won't be able to travel with me. Being away from him for extended periods of time isn't going to be pleasant. So I would like to establish more of an ability to do some of my work locally."

Scott's "Cabin 6" studio name derives from an old camp on Whitefish Lake where his house now sits. He plans to use his facility to work with local talent and to attend to certain jobs he does for Springsteen, a prolific song writer who sometimes records 30 songs for an album. (Years later Springsteen often wants Scott to dig up one of the tracks that wound up on the editing-room floor.)

As for advice to local talent that is considering its options in the music industry, Scott has this to say: "If you gravitate to your real desire and if you can make a living at it, then by all means pursue it. If you want to make a parttime job at it, play as a hobby. Don't get into music to become a star. That's the wrong reason. It's like getting into the stock market to become rich. You've got about as much chance of it. If you do it for the fun of it and you enjoy it, then that's going to be your payoff."

— Brian Scobb is a freelance writer from Whitefish