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## Belmont to operate Ocean Way As A Teaching & Commercial Music studio

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As sunlight illuminated the stained-glass windows of Ocean Way Studios yesterday morning, Ryan Pryor saw his horizons expanding. Pryor, a commercial music major at Belmont University and a staff engineer in the university's on-campus recording studios, was there for the announcement that Belmont had acquired Ocean Way, a Music Row facility that's just a short walk from the school. Music-business students like Pryor, a senior from Richmond, Va., will be able to learn the craft of sound recording in one of the best places to do it, according to Belmont and Ocean Way officials. The university intends to keep it open as a commercial venture. "It ups the level of our experience exponentially," Pryor said. "The dynamic between a real-world studio and the student studios at school is entirely different. It'll be an invaluable learning experience to help finish off our education." Charley Hubbs, a senior music business major from Barbourville, Ky., said Belmont's new studio also will give students additional networking opportunities and, in some cases, a better incentive to do well in their classes. The new studio could boost recruitment at the university, which is nationally known for a music business program that has produced graduates including Trisha Yearwood, Steven Curtis Chapman, Lee Ann Womack and Brad Paisley. But Belmont faces dissension within the local studio industry, which the university helps feed with trained college graduates. "I hate to find out my alma mater is my competition," said Andrew Kautz, president of Emerald Entertainment and a 1991 graduate of the school of music business. Warren Peterson, owner of Javelina Recording Studio, said jobs could dry up for students. He attended the school in the 1970s until he landed a job in the industry through Belmont. "I've probably hired more Belmont students than anybody in town," Peterson said. "I'm not too eager to continue to help them. They shouldn't compete with us if they want to get students placed." Belmont President Robert Fisher announced the acquisition in Studio A at Ocean Way, a Gothic Revival church built in 1850. Fisher and others involved in the deal declined to say what the university paid owners Gary Belz and Allen Sides for the property on 17th Avenue South. The deal, orchestrated by Ira Blonder, a Nashville business and real estate adviser, came together after about six months of negotiations and evolved into a complicated partnership. Sides said he'll continue to be involved over the next three years. Belmont didn't pay what Belz and Sides believed the studio was worth, which is estimated at more than \$6 million. The difference is considered a donation to Belmont from Belz and Sides. "It offered a way for Ocean Way to become more involved with the community," Blonder said. Fisher said in an interview that Belz and Sides donated a "very substantial" portion of Ocean Way's value. "They did make a gift — a big gift," he said. Fisher and other officials stressed that Ocean Way, a recording venue for Sheryl Crow, Brooks & Dunn, Matchbox 20 and other well-known artists, will remain a viable studio. Belmont will keep the entire staff, and musicians will continue to take advantage of the building's top-notch acoustics, high ceilings, unique sound board and large control room. Belmont, a Baptist school that sits just off Music Row on Wedgwood Avenue, started its music business program in 1971. The program has become perhaps the university's greatest claim to fame, drawing students from far and wide to study and learn in the shadow of Nashville's top studios,



LARRY MCCORMACK / STAFF

**Belmont University President Dr. Robert Fisher announces that the school will take over the Ocean Way Studio on Music Row.**

producers and engineers. Wesley Bulla, an associate professor of music business who coordinates Belmont's recording-studio curriculum, said about a third of the 600 music business majors focus on studio work. Bulla said the program probably will give seniors a "capstone" experience at Ocean Way, a chance to round out their studies in a way that will help them "get a jump on their competitors." The studio probably will be available commercially 40-50% of the time, said Pamela Browne, associate dean of Belmont's Curb School of Music Business. It will be used for academic work the rest of the time, but those activities won't "impair" the commercial enterprise, Browne said. Sides said the studio is "solidly booked for the next two months." Belmont has five studios on campus, Bulla said, but the largest of those is only as big as the smallest of the three studios at Ocean Way. While the campus studios are of professional quality, "they're not open to the public and they aren't run in the same manner," he said. With the acquisition, the university enters a business slumping because of slow country music sales. Emerald Entertainment, Music Row's largest studio firm, recently filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy so it could reorganize under protection from creditors. Sides said he and Belz hadn't planned to sell Ocean Way, noting they were perfectly content to hold a business they say has turned a profit since opening four years ago