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Current Issue: September 2004

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Leveling the Playing Field

Rise of the Mini Record Studio

By Jenn Lackey

It's clear the digital age has turned the record industry upside down. With the advent of computer recording programs, greater accessibility to low priced recording gear, and the ability to swap music via file sharing there has been a lot of speculation about whether the record industry will soon go bankrupt.

The February 2003 issue of Wired magazine pondered the collapse of the entire industry. According to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) the year 2003 was not a good year for the \$40 billion global industry as major record companies lost, and continue to lose heaps of money with plummeting CD and singles sales. Overall the industry experienced a 6.7% drop in net revenue for CDs, with a staggering 84% drop in the net revenue sales of singles.

It's easy to blame record industry woes on technology, but it's technology that has given rise to the mini recording studio. It used to be that a musician would have to land a major record deal to produce a full-length album for thousands of dollars. Today with the right software-recording program, a few microphones, and a well-insulated basement, musicians can easily record themselves without paying big bucks.

The cost of making a record today is merely a fraction of the price tag it would have cost twenty years ago. Back then a quarter inch tape machine used to record music would have cost at least \$15,000 and weighed a ton. Also the process of transforming music to vinyl was quite expensive and difficult. Today pressing a CD costs a buck and software recording programs, many of which include hardware, such as Pro-tools,

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Logic, Digital Performer Reason, Radar and Cake Walk start at little as \$1,000.

There has been an explosion of independently produced music in basement studios across the country. Without question technology is democratizing music production. More music is being produced than ever, but the playing field has never been more competitive. for better or worse.

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Even though technology has enabled more independent musicians to produce records, Portland , OR based Jackpot! Studio owner and engineer, Larry Crane, would argue that producing a quality sounding record is hardly a cakewalk. "I don't think it's ever been easy to make a record," says Crane, "I think making a good record whether you're recording to a four track or a live tape, isn't all that easy."

Jackpot! Studios, is a successful mid-level recording studio known for recording artists Elliott Smith, Quasi, Sleater-Kinney, Richard Buckner and Stephan Malkmus. Crane has been recording music for more than twenty years and he never intended to be a full time recording engineer. At first Crane was a musician simply recording music for his various bands: Elephant Factory, Vomit Launch, Sunbirds, Foggy Notion and Flaming Box of Ants. But eventually Crane found himself with enough technical skills to produce and engineer albums for friends and he built Laundry Rules Recording studio in his home basement. Now Crane is a widely known and respected engineer among the independent music community. He's also the founder and editor of Tape Op, a nationally distributed magazine about creative recording.

Crane emphasizes that technology is great, but it takes a lot more skill than one might think. "It's not so much whether you record to a tape or a computer; it's the skill of the operator and how you use the equipment," explains Crane. It's things like choosing the right microphone and placing it just right to get the right type of sound for a particular style of music. There are so many choices to make that have a larger impact on how you're making the recording versus what you choose to record the music to."

While Crane doesn't think that small studios have greatly affected the big recording labels success rate, he points out that technology has enabled a greater amount of middle ground recording options for independent musicians and Indie labels, which has been a huge plus for the independent music making community. Larger studios have been hit hard with the advent of low cost recording options and many large studios have either gone out of business or morphed into recording schools. Meanwhile smaller and mid tier studios such as Jackpot! have been able to maintain a healthy existence.

Despite the fact that large recording studios are going broke, pro audio manufacturing companies such as M-Audio and Universal Audio are thriving. These companies are catering more to the home studio and independent musician than to larger studios because that is where market growth has been. Take M-Audio marketing, M-Audio manufactures and designs keyboards, speakers, microphones and MIDI interfaces, among other things, and they also distribute recording software such as Propellerhead, Ableton and Arakos. According to M-Audios marketing director, Adam Castillo, in a recent Mix magazine article, these products helped boost M-Audio's sales 72% in 2002.

Other companies traditionally known for hardware electronics have diversified

their product lines to cater to the home studio and boost sales. For example Universal Audio sells hand-built analog mic preamps and compressors to high-end recording users. They have developed product lines with analog hardware and software plug-in systems for numerous computer-based audio systems, according to Universal president Matt Ward. Sales have been way up and the company is looking to double the amount of space it now occupies.

Even though more musicians are choosing to record at home because they can, there is still plenty of room and a need for the high-end middleman such as Jackpot! The general trend is that a lot of musicians will self record an album and then bring it to Jackpot! to refine and polish the final product. Studios like Jackpot! with engineers like Crane have the expertise and a wider variety of equipment to produce a higher quality sound. With Jackpot! independent musicians can save themselves a lot of heartache and time. "There's a lot people out there who have come to me after spending a lot of time, money and energy recording themselves and they're frustrated," says crane. "When you spend 10 years making records, you learn special tricks and you learn all the things that make everything go smoother and more quickly."

With the right expertise and the right talent a quality record will indeed be made, but getting that record noticed is another story. Some say the down side to technology is that it has created a glut of independent music, making it harder for talent to get noticed by fans and labels. There is a whole ocean of independently produced music and it seems everyone and their brother is in a band making a record.

"There is a lot of music out there without any viable promotion or distribution," says Crane. "I think people have become exhausted as to what and go see. In the 80s if you were on tour there would be five or six cool bands that you would meet over and over again touring the same cities. Nowadays it seems everybody works a day job and is in band."

Talbott Guthrie, a local Portland drummer and owner of Lucknow Studios located in his basement, has been recording music for ten years and echoes Crane's feeling. "I remember back in the day I felt like I knew a little bit about a lot of music out there. And now there are all of these bands I've never even heard." Formerly known as T-Bag productions, Guthrie has produced and recorded records for Portland based Five Fingers of Funk and Porterhouse.

"It's hard to keep track of who is who, and that is a result of anybody being able to make a record. On the local level, it's always interesting to see who is going to fade away and who is going to continue making records," says Guthrie.

Also, the glut in music seems to contribute to the fact that quality music is harder to find. For professional full time musicians this can be disheartening. "With technology these days you don't necessarily have to be a good musician," says 32 year-old professional piano, keyboard player Joey Porter. Porter is founder of Portland 's Porterhouse and has toured with the Steve Miller Band, Rubberneck (Portland , OR) and The Motets (Boulder , CO), "You can sing a little pitchy and they can fix that with software, and you can move stuff around by the wavelength. A really average musician or singer can make a really good album with the right engineer," Porter points out, "Brittany Spears doesn't have to worry about reaching the right pitch. So the fact that she's one of the most popular 'supposed' artists out there can be very disheartening to a musician who has worked extremely hard, and logged a lot of hours to perfect their music."

But despite the glut, technology is bringing greater success to mid sized independent record labels, particularly because a lot of artists are distrustful of the major labels (read: <http://www.negative.land.com/albini.html>). Hopefully independent record labels like Seattle based Sub Pop records or Chicago based Matador, will be able to hang onto artists as they grow into mainstream success instead of being swept up by bigger labels, such as Nirvana was back in the 90s. Crane is optimistic about the future. "There are a lot of people who have been able to be very conscientious and keep it independent," says Crane citing the success of Fugazi who has chosen to stay with their self created label, Dischord, instead of signing with a major record company. "That is fantastic! And that's what I see for the future," says Crane spiritedly.

The great music industry shake up is still in effect. If major record labels are to fall, perhaps there will be greater room for a democratized musical middle class with thriving musicians, independent labels and hometown studios such as Jackpot! At least technology has enabled independent music studios and record labels to use the same tools in the same game. While the game may not be any easier, at least the playing field seems a little fairer.