

Text for IASPM “Demystifying the Sound Studio”

La Chunky Studios was established in 2002 – initially as a writing space for founding partners Ronan Breslin (the author) and Colin McGeoch. Both McGeoch and Breslin were developing a reputation for composing radio jingles and the acquisition of the writing room was intended to focus their efforts on breaking into the more lucrative TV music market.

SLIDES 1 TO 5.

There are two obvious routes into establishing a recording studio. One is where the studio expands iteratively to meet the needs of users and potential clients. The other is where the studio space is designed from the ground up and the studio build and equipment installation is a singular process that responds to a potential market (Gibson, 2005).

La Chunky studio followed the former model. Gorbals Sound in Glasgow is an example of the latter. SLIDE 6

In this latter case, significant external investment to create a bespoke space complete with a centrepiece built-to-order Neve recording console. Gorbals Sound could be considered a “pot-plant” studio which is an informal term for large studios with a reception area (Ward & Watson, 2017). One has to argue whether this **capital-intensive studio** was a wise investment given that many of the artists in their target market already had well-equipped home studios at their disposal. Ward & Watson also note that “the availability and usability of high quality digital software for home-recording, and the means for distributing and promoting this music online, such as social media, means it is now possible to circumvent traditional music production processes and facilities.” This may well sound the death knell for large facilities outside of London and may have already led to Gorbals Sound closing two of its three studio spaces.

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In an interview with Emma Pollock of Chem 19 Studios (and The Delgados) she drily noted that a recording studio “from a business perspective, the Dragon’s Den type perspective, studios are a disaster so why would anyone do that. There’s got to be that genuine love [of what you do]” (Pollock, 2015).

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Eliot Bates in the Bloomsbury Handbook of Music Production (2020 pg 131) adds further weight to this position.

“Studios are expensive and space intensive facilities, but constitute one of the least-profitable parts of the music sector, and this appears consistent regardless of the national market.”

The high-end studio was still a viable proposition over 25 years ago. The author worked as a freelance engineer at Park Lane Studios in Glasgow in the late 90's. The main recording format was 24-track 2" tape on an Otari MTR-90 Mark 2 reel-to-reel though midi and DAW workstations were beginning to make their presence felt. The standard day rate at Park Lane in 1998 was £550 + VAT of which the engineer was paid less than £100 a day. A tidy profit for the studio though the cost of professional recording equipment at the time was quite astronomical (£80k for the tape deck alone) so it is not particularly surprising that these rates were standard. Digidesign's (now Avid) Pro Tools DAW started to become prevalent in the late 1990's but was still not a cheaper option given the cost of extra DSP hardware and fast SCSI (footnote required) hard drives. The author recalls participating in a session at Glasgow's legendary Cava Studio 1 with Belle & Sebastian. The engineer/producer Tony Doogan had run out of analogue tape tracks so an extra eight tracks were added via Pro Tools synced to timecode. The cost of the Pro Tools rig was almost equivalent to the tape machine [Correspondence with Tony Doogan, July 2022].

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Returning to La Chunky. The studio expanded slowly from 2002 onwards. Acquisition of equipment (in particular microphones) was based on quality and cachet. Our approach to equipment purchase was validated by Emma Pollock of Chem 19 Studios in an interview for a previous paper on Glasgow Recording Studios [Breslin, 2015] when she emphasised the importance of investing in high quality equipment. Unfortunately, in the last decade the main issue we have encountered is that recording musicians seek high quality spaces, instruments and equipment but do not have the financial resources to pay premium rates [Ward & Watson, 2017] so they rely on home set-ups or temporary spaces. A studio is only booked for finalising projects. This is a

challenge for all recording studios going forward and has knock-on effect on what can legitimately be charged daily for a recording studio. Our current rate for bands/musicians is £250 per day of which £125 is paid to the engineer. Our margins are tight so we refer back to Emma Pollock's comment on the commercial viability of recording studios – "a disaster".

However, recording is a passion. That's why we do it. Let's have a look at the space. TOUR!

Abstract

Sound studios are generally hidden from view but quite ubiquitous (Watson & Watts, 2017) – driven by people's passion for sound and music previously referred to by Emma Pollock. They do not make serious money and are often significant loss-makers. This is why, twelve years ago Abbey Road Studios was threatened with closure and possible demolition to make way for property developments. Owners EMI had indicated that the complex was for sale. A campaign spearheaded by Paul McCartney and a subsequent intervention from English National Heritage succeeded in halting the sale but many other legendary studios have not had such luck.

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https://www.masslive.com/entertainment/2010/02/abbey_road_studios_made_famous.html

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-music-abbeyroad-idUSTRE61K1FQ20100221>

Glasgow's own facsimile of Abbey Road, Cava studios is one of these. The owner Brian Young had to bow to commercial pressures (a £100,000 roof repair bill) and sell much of the former church space meaning that the legendary studio 1 had to shut leaving studio 2 as the last vestige of the Cava brand. <https://cairnestateagency.com/bentick-street-kelvingrove-glasgow-g3>

SLIDE 12

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/scotland-rock-around-the-block-tkhr6z38p2p>

The demise of Cava meant that Glasgow did not have a large studio space until the advent of Gorbals Sound. However, one has to wonder whether a large studio space is financially viable in an urban environment. Large studios can still thrive in rural environments where there is space and low rent and high-end clients can avail of additional services such as personal chefs and fun countryside pursuits – a prime example being Grouse Lodge Studios in Ireland.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2010/aug/15/michael-jackson-ireland-secret-retreat>

<https://grouselodge.com/about/>

However, in Scotland, large rural studios such as Castlesound near Edinburgh rely heavily on the traditional music market. This may partially explain why Glasgow and Scotland have never truly hosted a legendary studio space for rock and pop music production.

In 2015, music polymath Howard Massey published “The Great British Recording Studios” (Hal Leonard). For myself, as a recording studio nerd, this text was fascinating and illuminating but I also noted that the extensive list of “Great British Recording Studios” featured no Scottish Recording Studios. Infact, the vast majority of the studios featured were based in London or within 50 miles of London. This is quite eye-opening and somewhat depressing.

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La Chunky Recording studio is a small independent facility. These facilities now dominate the market and there are too many of us competing for work from musicians who lack the financial clout to book extended lock-outs₁ or pay day rates that realistically reflect the value of the equipment and experience of the engineers. (Gibson, 2005), (Watson & Watts, 2017). Following massive advances in digital recording technology, the home recording space has become the main progenitor of new music and the mythology of the recording studio has been revealed as mere hyperbole (Gibson, 2005) (Watson & Watts, 2017).

Thus, the economic landscape for small independent music recording studios is somewhat grim. We have to diversify, and our model follows that of the larger

enterprises – film and TV sound. La Chunky recently completed an ADR (automatic dialogue replacement) project for an LA based TV post-production facility. We were able to charge £220ph for a two-hour session. This equates to almost two days recording time with a band. The question remains, will musicians soon find that there are no useful spaces for them to record in because independent facilities seek a better return on their effort and investment?

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However, this rather negative overview ignores the value of independent recording studios as social spaces that catalyse creativity and provide a safe space for musical experimentation. One can refer back to Marx's *Capital* and highlight the shift of recording studio labour from a craft mode to an industrial/entrepreneurial nexus where technology usurps individual creativity in the relentless pursuit of profit. BUT, as stated previously, independent recording studios are a poor investment. Instead, they are “peculiar kinds of factories, being involved as they are with ‘emotional labour’ and with creating products that often have a pronounced role in constituting or representing ‘culture’” [Bates]. Nobody who wants to make money would even think of opening a recording studio but those of us who value art, creativity and the sheer elation of music-making would think differently. Emotional and cultural capital is the driver.

According to Eliot Bates in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Music Production* “studios may constitute hubs of local music scenes” so that “the purpose of studios goes beyond economic considerations...” Functioning as “charged nodes within broader production networks ..”.

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Bates's observations have been formulated via the recording studio culture of Istanbul, but they have universal resonance. Focussing on Glasgow, Green Door Studios <https://www.greendoorstudio.org.uk/> has been in existence for 15 years. They have ensured their longevity via an integral association with the artists they record. Green Door regularly curate gigs at key Glasgow venues featuring artists they have recorded. This connects the studio to “other workspaces” that provide hospitality and identity most notably The Hug and Pint and The Old Hairdressers Venues in Glasgow.

Over the last two years La Chunky Studios has been actively promoting live shows in our underused back room. These shows have attracted an audience of young, innovative experimental musicians who are coalescing into a community that will hopefully function as the “charged nodes” proposed by Eliot Bates.

There is much more I can discuss regarding the conceptual and functional space of La Chunky, but I think it is important we move on to discuss The Tenementals Project and its relationship with the studio.

To fully describe the process of recording The Tenementals record we need to explore the increasingly amorphous dichotomy between music producer and sound engineer but firstly I will explain the historical evolution of recording studios and the subsequent hierarchies of labour that emerged.

Recording studios have been in existence since Thomas Edison produced his first phonograph in the late 19th century. [Schmidt-Horning, 2011]. From the 1920's onwards studios were designed with large ensembles in mind – Abbey Road studios being a case in point. Renowned orchestral composer Edward Elgar hosted and conducted the opening with a performance by The London Symphony Orchestra playing ... Elgar.

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In The USA large studios were also bankrolled by record companies but entrepreneurial grifters on the make recognised that the recording business could be very profitable and independent studios and labels began to open their doors throughout the USA (ibid.) with a predatory business model of find “the right artist, record them, pay them peanuts and then rip them off and retire. The singing into a tin can scene in “The Coen Brothers’ “Oh Brother Where Art Thou” isn’t that far removed from the reality experienced by early blues and country artists.” (Breslin, 2015).

At the same time in the UK musicians, businessmen and recording technicians were opening independent facilities mainly in London but also in other population centres such as Swansea (Snelson) and Bristol (The British Recording Service) (ED. Cook et. al., 2011, pg 144) and Glasgow (Girmac) (Breslin, 2015).

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Regarding the latter I have a personal connection with Glasgow's Girmac via my late maternal grandfather Andrew McElhinney who was one of the proprietors. Girmac opened in 1935 and ceased trading in 1938. I only discovered this connection seven years ago, but it resulted in a very personal research project that was presented at the **Ninth Biennial International Conference on Music Since 1900**. University of Glasgow, 7th to 9th September 2015. A copy can be found on GSA RADAR research outputs.

Like all businesses, recording studios both independent and corporate had hierarchies of labour. The concept of emotional labour was generally only applicable to the artist and producer. This account from a young engineer is quite illuminating

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Nonetheless, the evolution of La Chunky as an independent recording studio is not reflected by this statement, nor could it be considered as a hierarchical blueprint for other recording studios in Glasgow – past or present.

Cava studios previously employed staff engineers as does Gorbals Sound currently. However, most contemporary independent studios operate on a freelance model – La Chunky included (Ward & Watson, 2015). This model therefore results in the blurring of roles between the producer and engineer – in fact it negates the distinction entirely in many cases.

For example, the recording of The Tenementals album has been a work in progress for a number of years now and has encompassed the worldwide Covid lockdown period.

One of the most interesting aspects of the entire process is predicated on the key question – who is the producer? Is it the songwriters, the project instigator, the recording engineer or is it the band?

I will now play section of songs which I produced, followed by others I engineered.

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Public recognition of well-known music producers tends to be based on notoriety, self-publicity and association with high-profile artists. (Ward & Watson, 2015). Mark Ronson, Pharrell Williams and Timbaland are prime contemporary examples. These are the exception. This album's producer is a much more amorphous creature.

Jari Muikku (Muikku, 1990) states that “the essence of the producer’s role is to be the catalyst for the other participants in the studio”. Muikku further postulates that the producer often doubles as songwriter, arranger, engineer and performer. This definition could be partially applicable to my own role in the realisation of this record, but Muikku then asserts that the producer has “physical control” of what happens in the studio and leads by example. This is certainly not how I would describe my input other than that I operate the software and set up the microphones.

I would argue that my role is as studio engineer and ultimately the role of the producer has been fulfilled by band members (including myself) with conceptual direction facilitated by David Archibald.

To sum up, the production of this album has been an integrated process that properly defines the meaning of the phrase “pop group”. The studio is a social and creative space where the concept of “emotional labour” is applicable to all members of the band. This can only be described as a positive outcome and serve as template for studio operations of the future. A co-operative, non-hierarchical approach to studio labour may yet prove to be the saviour of the small independent recording studio.

References

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