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Pandemic Projects: Home recording in the time of Covid and the ongoing impact on small independent recording studios

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Abstract

Musicians – amateur and professional- sought a creative outlet in the social vacuum of the pandemic and with live performance in the deep freeze the home studio offered a safe haven for musical expression and experimentation. As a result, there have been a plethora of pandemic recordings, many of which will never see the light of day. But for some commentators this highlights a further decline in the fortunes of small independent places of commercial music production. De Dios Cuartus (2021, IASPM Journal 11.1) documents the accelerated post-covid delocalisation of music production from studio to transnational networks and emphasises the designification of the recording studio within a geographical music “scene” However, absent from existing scholarship is a focus on the potential post-covid benefits for small independent commercial studios, particularly in terms of increased interest from home studio musicians seeking validation for their efforts, and the provision of additional professional expertise to elevate these efforts. The author was one of these musicians who made a home recorded album but had the added benefit of being the co-proprietor of La Chunky, a well-regarded Glasgow recording studio that just survived the pandemic. In this presentation the author will deploy an ethnographic analysis of the album’s creation and its migration to the professional studio environment to address the viability and value of physical music recording spaces in the post-covid milieu. This analysis will be closely contextualised with case studies of nascent recorded outputs that had their origin in the times of the pandemic but came to fruition in medium format studios after most restrictions had been eased. Home recording technology has always been a threat to the viability of small independent commercial studios but could this recent surge in home recording expose the inherent limitations of non-professional recording

environments and provide a lifeline to the independent commercial studios that survived the last few turbulent years?

Introduction

This paper is the first step in a larger research project that will chronicle commercial studios in Scotland beginning in 1935. However, in this paper the focus is on a small sample of Scottish studios and musicians – how they coped with lockdown and how they rebuilt their practice as restrictions were eased.

This paper deploys qualitative research methodology based on personal interviews. The focus on Scottish-based interviewees allows for a more robust circumscribed analysis which may have become too unwieldy for valid research conclusions had other sources been included.

The interviewees have all consented for their names to be used in this paper presentation

Craig Houston is a former employee of the musical instrument chain “Guitar Guitar” who, despite the name, also sell recording equipment in-shop and online.

Carla Easton is a singer songwriter and is also a strong advocate for female, trans and non-binary artists in the music industry. She has also co-directed the acclaimed film “Since Yesterday: The Untold Story of Scotland’s Girl Bands” (2024).

Tommy Duffin runs 16 Ohm Studios based in the East End of Glasgow.

Sam Smith is a director of Green Door Studios, Glasgow.

Peter Fletcher runs Black Bay Studios – a residential recording studio on the Island of Lewis.

Luigi Pasquini runs Dystopia Studio in Glasgow.

MJ McCarthy is a singer-songwriter and acclaimed theatre composer.

Paul Savage is an engineer/producer and co-owner of Chem-19 studios in Blantyre, Scotland.

In April 2020 I set up a basic recording space in my flat and initially planned to make an EP that finally expanded into a full-length album entitled “The Beyond and the Better Way”. The first single “A Grand Day” will be released digitally on the 20th September. However, I am not releasing this record in the hope of becoming a pop star. Sam Smith of Green Door Studios encapsulated my position and the position of many others by describing recording studios as

“the advanced arm of vanity publishing” further observing that recording and making music “it's really good for, you know, well being and [people] having a project that they know isn't necessarily a commercial entity is still something that's bringing them a great amount of enjoyment”.

The Studio Landscape Before Covid

Home Studios and democratization

Since the advent of recording technology there have been home recording enthusiasts. In the US there were magazines such as dB, Audio Engineering, Magnetic Film and Tape Recording aimed at the hobbyist recording engineer and in the UK magazines such as “Practical Electronics” which often focused on audio-based projects for their readership.

From the 1970's onwards other magazines emerged for the home recordist such as “Sound on Sound” that is still operating to this day. However, these magazines also venerated large-format studios.

The reasons could be summed up into three simple words – equipment, space and people. Since the advent of the “modern” recording studio the cost and complexity of high-end recording equipment has required significant financing. Rooms with ideal acoustics needed to be constructed, there needed to be a team of maintenance staff along with recording engineers equipped with the skills to manipulate the equipment for optimum results. These skills included mic placement, gain staging, along with the almost undefinable attribute of “good ears”. (Massey, H. 2015)

Home studios could never compete and home recordists never aspired to compete. However, from the turn of the millenium there was a paradigm shift based on the DAW. . *“The large-format studio has been in financial decline since the first Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) began to compete in terms of quality with the analogue 2” tape machine early in the twenty-first century.”* (Goold and Graham 2019)

Large format studios aka “pot-plant” studios (Ward & Watson, 2017) still have a place in the music industry but now much of what they previously offered is available in project and home studios – decent microphones, pre-amps, monitors and acoustic treatment have become readily available and affordable. A professional project studio could probably be set up for around £10k investment whereas in the past a large format studio would have required investment in the region of £500k up to millions. In the halcyon days of the recording industry large-format studios could charge thousands a day and record company funded bands would book in for weeks or even months.

But what of the medium scale studios perhaps run by just one musician/engineer/producer - “The closure of many larger facilities has led to more opportunities for the autonomous producer/owner/operator” (Watson: 2013, p. 331 cited in Goold & Graham 2019). Perhaps these studios are agile enough to survive and thrive in the post-Covid milieu. Lower overheads, the ability to pivot quickly to new opportunities such as audiobook and podcast recordings and of course the capacity to offer home recordists a competitively priced venue for finalising their efforts with the validation of a recording professional.

Matthew Homer (2009) also questions “what is lost when the musician dispenses with the professional studio” and proceeds to coin the phrase “sonic literacy” which is neat way of encapsulating the gulf between studio engineers who have spent many years learning their craft and new-entry home studio practitioners.

However, Homer (2009) also highlights the creative freedom that home studios afford their owners and goes on to state that “there are now many artists who use the professional studio in conjunction with their home recording tools to create high-quality records.” Homer (2009) also referred to the benefits of home recording culture for professional studios citing an interview with Ross McCracken of Yellow Fish Music Group who stated that “he is now receiving many clients who will begin recording using their own equipment at home and then use the studio and its resources to improve it”.

Themes & Methodology

There were a number of different themes that emerged as part of the interviews. Initially these themes were mapped using a rather cumbersome spreadsheet. These themes were then concatenated into three categories that will form the basis for our discussion.

Music Making / Recording Process for COVID albums

During the lockdown restrictions music-makers “desire to sustain their creative practices often went beyond the basic desire to make a living or continue a hobby ... [music-makers] also sought a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives” (Cai et.al. 2021).

MJ McCarthy stated that “*The thing I realized in that first six or eight weeks of the pandemic was in order to feel fulfilled in my work, I need to be making something.*”

McCarthy further added “*It's not sufficient to be making something on my own. I need to be making something with other people. I need to be making it collaboratively*”

Music-making can be a solitary process but is most rewarding when done collaboratively. During the lockdown period this meant a massive increase in the use of online meeting tools such as Zoom which could loosely be described as remote music collaboration software RMCS (De Dios Cuartus, 2021).

Songwriter and artist Carla Easton is a natural collaborator and even before Covid had released a number of well-received collaborative projects. During lockdown, Easton continued to record rough demos on a hand held recorder but also became involved in the Poster Paints recording project with Simon Liddell of Frightened Rabbit. On Poster Paints – Easton: *“Well, I don't know if we'd even have made an album, to be honest. You know, it was that kind of way of like, Simon sent me a song. Can you do some vocals on it just before the pandemic? Yeah. But then during the pandemic, I wrote the top line and the lyrics and sent it to him, and then it was like, Oh, we realized we could do that. Let's do it more.”*

Easton and Liddell released the Poster Paints album in October 2022 all of which (including drums) was recorded in contributors' home studios with individual parts shared online. As part of the process Easton created her own home set-up which she uses to this day in preparation for going into studio and demo recording *“... and it was actually the poster paints album that forced me to get a very basic home recording to do, and, you know, you're talking logic, a Focusrite interface and mic.”*

However, as previously noted it wasn't just professionals who sought refuge in music-making as a *“way to cope with pandemic stressors”* (Chi et.al 2021), Craig Houston: *“.. one of those things that I think covid, looking back in it now, was a time for a lot of people for reflection So if you had been playing guitar for, let's say, 10 years, you had some ideas, then you're gonna buy an interface. And that's really what surprised me, was the amount that was going out ...things went absolutely apeshit. And the majority of the items that we had going out were interfaces ... hate to hazard a guess ... probably 200% increase on the sales that we do normally. Yeah? Because you would sell some every day.”*

The stasis of Covid led to a new generation of home recording enthusiasts with spare time and more pertinently spare cash which resulted in a huge upsurge in the purchase of home recording equipment. For some new home recordists their enthusiasm has expanded into a desire to elevate their efforts beyond what they could achieve at home and led them to seek the expertise of professionals in medium sized studios – firstly as finishers and also as validators. Let's explore this further.

Why does the home studio migrate to the professional studio

Studio pros, Peter Fletcher, Sam Smith, Paul Savage and Tommy Duffin all survived the initial months of lockdown by undertaking remote mixing projects.

However, there is only so much work and income that can be extracted from mixing after work calendars have emptied industry wide and eventually these studio professionals also had to rely on support from government and in Duffin's case this also involved taking on a job as a postman to make ends meet.

The immediate aftermath of the lockdown presented some interesting conundrums for recording studios – how to operate within the rules of restrictions while also rebuilding the business. In the case of my studio La Chunky we focused on voice only recordings such as audio-books.

As restrictions eased further an interesting phenomenon became apparent ..

“Once restriction started to come down, I definitely started to get involved in things that had already been started at home, mostly vocals, yeah” (Tommy Duffin, 16 Ohm Studios).

“I think a lot of people wrote a lot of new material during covid .. So I think at the end of the end of the covid period, there was definitely a bump of work that people got funding to produce - there seemed to be a lot going on” (Peter Fletcher, Black Bay Studios).

“I think definitely there have been quite a few projects where it's been people have put time aside to do something they've maybe not ever really given themselves the time to do that before” (Sam Smith, Green Door).

So why do home recordists eventually decide to bring their homework to a professional studio? This question is at the heart of this paper and perhaps one of the most compelling reasons is validation!

By validation we refer to the cultural capital that a professional sound recordist brings to a project that originated in a home studio. This is not to denigrate the efforts of home recordists but thankfully for medium level studios it still seems that the “approval” and perhaps even intervention of an experienced sound engineer is still valued.

Craig Houston was tasked with providing tech support to the multitude of new and existing home recordists and he noticed that as restrictions eased some of his clients started to talk about going to studios to finish their recordings

“you know, they recorded demos during lockdown, yes, and then they decided they needed to go into a studio to record it properly, because they felt they couldn't do it properly at home”

Tommy Duffin's take was that *“the validation, it's almost like a reassurance as well that, okay, I've taken this to a professional level by hook or by crook”*

Sam Smith opined that *if you've got experience, not that you know everything, , when you see people have not really used an EQ before, they end up sort of making these crazy sort of*

decisions Okay, that's very exciting, but that's not what we're you're probably looking for - you've gone off, fallen off the map here"

So, validation is a thing here – perhaps most apparent from this quote from musician MJ McCarthy *"I found it tremendously validating when Paul [Savage] okayed the mixes that I had done in the box at home."*

Paul Savage (Chem-19 studio) also recognised his role as validator *"I think what happened was covid brought a wave of people going, I need to do something with my time. I need to be more creative. And the thing that people always come to is mixing or mastering. I've got a lot more work just people tracking in their house or in rehearsal rooms, a lot more than they used to pre covid."*

This idea of validation can be encapsulated within a theoretical construct that considers the desires and intentions of the recording artiste – it applies to professionals and more pertinently non-professionals who have engaged with home recording at a deep level and aspire to distribution of their work to a wider audience.

Since most artists want the advantages of distribution, they work with an eye to what the system characteristic of their (art) world can handle. What kinds of work will it distribute? What will it ignore? ... To say that artists work with an eye to these matters does not mean they are completely bound by them. (Becker 2008:94-95)

If we apply this to our COVID album makers then, like makers in any field, they have some eye or ear towards the standards, technical or aesthetic, which they perceive as structuring an ideal for the type of work they are making. This does not mean all COVID album makers are aspiring towards releasing through the distribution avenues currently available for albums, rather "release ready" is one factor that structures a finish line¹. Some will perceive this finish line as clear and stable, for some it will be more fuzzy and prone to moving. Participant interviews suggest that going to Medium / Large scale studio is key to achieving their perception of release ready, whether that is a sonic quality perceptible to them and/or the validation of an expert (engineer/producer who is perceived as a professional in the field of recorded music) having a hand in their project.

The future of mid-level studios

As discussed previously, large format recording studios are becoming increasingly irrelevant to music making.

The big SSL desk and multiple outboard options are now an anachronism.

Sam Smith: *"It's not really needed unless you're doing like you know, classical recording for EMI, for film scores or something. I mean, I'm, yeah, I don't even know how many big studios are left"*

For many large format studios – their future is somewhat bleak. As for medium level studios such as La Chunky, Dystopia, 16 Ohm and even the more well-specified Chem-19 the future is hopefully more positive. The huge increase in home recording during and since Covid has inspired a generation of musicians young and old to become more curious about the recording process resulting in an increased interest in a music making process they perceive as valid through being located in a professional recording space. This study has indicated that medium level recording studios may benefit from this.

I finish this presentation with some quotes from interviewees that hopefully back this up.

"Yeah, absolutely yes. I still think they have a future ... the future of the studio, is very positive though the model is different from the model of 20 years ago." Luigi Pasquini

"I think the small studios for the local bands, that's always going to be there. The smaller ones, I think, will continue to thrive, and the bigger ones ?" Craig Houston

"I've got maybe five or six clients in that category, and that's that's been great. And so, you know, those folk again, they're new to it. ... they make some CDs or whatever it is, and it's been really, it's been really interesting and rewarding and, like, musically. I do feel positive. Yeah, I think it's things that things are going good at the moment. It's, I mean, we're never, you know, more than, more than two or three months away from disaster.. So it's a bit precarious and that's an uncomfortable way to live in some ways, but that's how it's been for 20 years. So it's as good as it's ever been right now. I should be positive. Of course, just be positive." Peter Fletcher

"Yeah, I think I'm positive. I think I'm positive for my own situation and that I survived covid, got through it.. I was thinking about this today, and thinking about how studios are set up, and my studio is very much, it's just like my home studio, which I've just made a bit bigger and invited people in." Tommy Duffin.

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