

Threats to Recording Studio Survivability and
What Studio Owners and Managers Are Doing About It

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Introduction

According to the Recording Industry Association of America statistics, the prerecorded music business lost 38% of its value between 1998 and 2008 (2009), with every link in the vertical chain feeling the effects. From artists to labels, distributors to the retail sector, all segments of the prerecorded music business have suffered from the attrition of the music business. Whereas, some “experts” lauded the end of the music business as early as 1979 (Dannen, 1991), there seem to be additional factors at work in the past decade that are making the music business an even more difficult environment in which to be financially successful.

Circumstances have not always been so difficult. Throughout most of the 1960’s and 1970’s, the music business thrived. The cost of producing a record was not as scrutinized then as is has become, and when artists, producers, and recording studios would ask for large sums of money to produce an album, labels were much quicker to oblige, with the understanding that their chances for financial success were greater then than they are today. Recording studios reaped the benefits of these practices by charging enough for their services to enjoy a healthy profit margin and, for a time, a lucrative business model.

But since the music business posted its first industry-wide loss since World War II in 1979 (Dannen, 1991), music business executives have been skeptical of the future. As world-renowned audio engineer Bob Clearmountain states:

‘I don't think you'll ever see a “golden era” like the '70s and '80s again... Let's be frank, in most cases, the costs were inflated. Labels can't and won't toss around \$300,000 for an album project anymore. If you can get \$100,000 now, you're really lucky. Most budgets are less than that.’ (Holland & Price, 2005, p. 31)

Times have changed for recording studios, and studio owners are no longer able to rely on ample production budgets to keep their businesses thriving.

With no “golden era” returning in the near future of the recording studio business, determining the threats recording studio owners face and the things owners are doing to combat these threats might help struggling studio owners stay in business and industry groups devise strategies for combating these threats. Preliminary reviews completed in this research of industry trade magazines such as *Billboard* and *Mix Magazine* indicate there may even be multiple factors at play. Record labels no longer provide the large budgets they once did, and the advent of home recording is moving some of the work traditionally done at a commercial recording studio into artists’ home studios. Adding these factors to other market factors such as illegal downloading and general economic malaise, many recording studio owners find it difficult simply keeping their facility open, not to mention growing their business.

With the aforementioned industry contraction, recording studio facilities have paid the cost. Studio owners have found it increasingly difficult to remain open and some are looking at previously unconsidered business model changes to try to turn threats into opportunities (Jackson, 2009). Studio owners are being asked to do more with less as well. Andrew Leyshon (2009) found during his interviews with studio owners in the United Kingdom that they had not significantly increased rates for renting out their studios from the mid-1980s to 2005-2006. While the inflation of wages and other costs of doing business had increased significantly over the same period of time, studio rates remained flat, resulting in an incredible deflation of fees studios charge. With no increase in the amount of money charged by studios and no increase in the amount of studio time sold by recording studios, cutbacks naturally follow, including fewer employees, fewer benefits for employees, and fewer new purchases of equipment.

Since studio owners are being asked to do more with less, something in the process has to suffer. The old adage “Fast, good, cheap: pick two” applies here, however, record labels and other audio producers are reluctant to take on a project that is expensive to produce, slow in development, or inferior in quality. Financially speaking, consider Michael Jackson’s album *Invincible*, released in 2001. Although the album has sold more than six million copies worldwide, it is considered a major failure by his record label, Sony Music, due to the fact that it cost upwards of \$50 million dollars to produce and another reported \$50 million dollars to launch and promote (Zuel, 2003).

This research will attempt to determine threats to the recording studio industry and what studio owners and managers are doing to combat these threats in order to adapt to and excel in these changing conditions. Through a thorough review of literature research questions will be determined, and these questions will then be posed to recording studio owners via an online survey. The responses will then be collected and interpreted in order to ascertain the symptoms and possible cures that may keep a recording studio business healthy.

The ultimate goal of this research is to help those recording studio owners and managers who find themselves struggling to keep their recording studio businesses open during these difficult times. If those individuals can learn and discern what difficulties exist in the marketplace as well as inside their own specific situation, then understand what other owners and managers are doing to combat those threats, it may be possible to avoid the collapse of the recording studio industry, as it is seen by many inside the industry to be presently occurring.

Literature Review

The recording studio business has always had its share of threats, some of which are built in the very essence of the studio itself. Recording studios, by design, rely heavily on technology.

Typically, most studios choose to combine older “vintage gear” technology with the newer digital technology and computer-based production methods. “Studios are expected to keep up with the latest shifts in technology to stay competitive. Yet, across the board, studio rates have remained stagnant or even dropped because of intense competition from home studios and other commercial facilities” (Jackson, 2003, p. 37). Even though recording technology continues to evolve, and some of the technology has even dropped in price, the type of equipment needed by professional recording studios, including large-format consoles, high-quality microphones, and sought-after processing gear, remains expensive. Additionally, the need for upkeep with software and hardware upgrades by studios to remain competitive and state-of-the-art makes for a continual cost as well. These additional upkeep costs were not part of the recording studio business until digital technology started entering the recording studio in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

One option record labels, musicians, and producers are going to is less expensive home recording studio technology. With decreases in recording budgets, many feel that the money may be better spent on home studio recording gear. Bobby and Joanne Nathan operated Unique Recording Studios in New York City for twenty-six years before closing their doors, and the primary reason for their business’s demise was the movement to home recording studios. “The professional studio business that remains today is what cannot be done at home: live recording and mixing” (Walsh, 2004, p. 58). Musicians are finding ways to record their music without the full use of a full-service professional recording studio facility. The negative impact of home recording studios hits even harder on studios in secondary markets outside New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville according to Austin, Texas-based Hit Shack Studios owner Jay Hudson (Walsh, 2003a), due to the fact that secondary markets do not receive as much business from the

traditional primary studio clients, record labels and music publishers, and rely more on independent artists and songwriters as their clientele base.

Recording budgets have steadily declined, starting in the late 1990's, leading to a series of decisions that have left large-format recording facilities with less work (Walsh, 2000b, 2003b). Artists are not only using analog tape (a format typically reserved for professional recording facilities) less and less due to the increased cost of analog tape over digital multitracking methods (Walsh, 2003a), but many are also completing as much of the production they can themselves at home studios before spending money at commercial facilities (Walsh, 2002). The end result is that recording studios are "doing the same amount of work, or more, to get sessions up and running, for less money" according to Tino Passante, studio manager at Avatar Studios in New York City (Walsh, 2003b, p. 60).

Additional threats to the industry's structure include the overbuilding of studio spaces. There was a point in time prior to the digital recording revolution where recording studios were considered sacred spaces, not to be entered into lightly due to the extreme technical nature of the process and technical expertise it took to operate the equipment properly. However, as lower-end recording equipment got easier to use and cheaper to purchase, and as the music industry grew in size and profitability, many people saw recording studios as their chance to create a successful business venture. However, the recording studio industry increased to such a size that studios became devalued. In 2001, Grant Fowler, studio manager at Love Shack Recording in Nashville, said "Nashville is way overbuilt for the amount of work that's coming from the labels now with all the closings, consolidations, and so many people running scared. Obviously, the reason we're overbuilt is due to the wave we were riding five years ago" (Walsh, 2001, p. 89). A short-term

wave of popularity resulted in long-term problems after the amount of buyers of studio services decreased, leaving many more studios competing for less work than the market could bear.

The declining cost of lower-end digital recording equipment has also created an industry where there are a relatively small number of buyers but a large number of sellers, called an oligopsony. Similar to the United States radio industry, where Clear Channel and Viacom own a major portion of radio stations in the United States, forcing the large number of record labels and advertisers to deal with these two companies, there are relatively few traditional large buyers of recording facility services (record labels and music publishers, for example) compared to the number of sellers available in the marketplace. As Leyshon states, “as is typical of oligopsonies, the concentrated power of buyers has encouraged intensive competition among suppliers which has brought about a significant deflation of studio fees” (2009, p. 13). When the sellers of a service far outnumber the buyers in a marketplace, the buyers are able to create leverage by pitting sellers against each other.

One of the most prevalent threats found in the literature comes from the fact that because of the devaluing and underperformance of studio facilities, the property owners of those spaces may find a more valuable use for that space. Real estate owners in New York City and San Francisco have been renovating warehouses and other recording studio-friendly spaces and turning them into lofts that can be rented or sold for much more money than could be expected from a recording facility (Benzuly, 2009; Walsh, 2000a). The recording studio industry has historically been an industry made up of individuals filled with a love of the art and craft of recording over a love of money or a great deal of business acumen.

Illegal downloading and digital music sharing has also had a significant impact on recording studios. Whereas the major record labels traditionally led the fight against the illegal

downloading of music, the effect of illegal downloading trickles down to the recording facility level when record labels cut corners and budgets wherever they can, including finding cheaper ways in which to produce music. “In the studio business, the maxim that one is better off investing in real estate gains resonance with every illegal download and each new round of major-label layoffs” (Walsh, 2003b, p. 60).

The impact of these factors has been two-fold: Many recording studio facilities have failed, and many of the studios that remain open have had to rethink how they go about their business and reorganize to keep up with the changing marketplace. Some studio owners resort to charging less for their services, despite an increased cost of doing business. Janet Leese, studio manager for Starstruck Studio in Nashville, states that “a lot of big studios have gone by the wayside. The labels are continuing to crunch down on budgets, and our rooms are pretty high-end so we need to get a certain rate out of them” (Schultz, 2008, p. 130). Similar notions have been shared by Nashville producer Tony Brown (Cooper, 2008) and Austin, Texas-based Wire Recording Studios owner Stuart Sullivan (Walsh, 2003a). Christopher Walsh also suggests that “given the music industry's woes, studio rates in every market are facing downward pressure” (Walsh, 2003a, p. 74) and that many studio owners are not only forced to lower their rates but are privately selling their studios in response to market forces (Walsh, 2001).

Some studio owners are finding continued success by starting to offer additional services to their clients, such as location recording, sound-for-picture work, and musical services such as music composition and arranging. Martin Böhm, founding principal at MG-Sound Studios, states that “it’s necessary to offer all these services to survive” current market conditions (Walsh, 2003c, p. 46). Additional studio owners are finding success in working with home studio owners instead of trying to work against them by offering home studio set-up services and on-location

consulting (Walsh, 2002).

Alternatively, some studio owners are finding continued success by maintaining strong relationships with a loyal client base, instead of changing or adding services. Freddy Fletcher, owner of Arlyn Recording Studio in Austin, Texas, states that “we've had some fairly longstanding clients, and I feel like for the most part, if people from this area are going to do records with a budget, we get a lot of that” (Walsh, 2003a, p. 74). This sentiment is echoed by the owners of other recording studios such as Cedar Creek Recording, whose client base includes Lloyd Maines, producer of the Grammy Award winning album *Home* by the Dixie Chicks, AIR Studios (started by George Martin, producer of the Beatles) and Roundhouse Studios in London, England.

Whereas, all these above practices may seem somewhat singular in their approach, they may also be indicative of a larger solution to the strengths studio owners and managers can build upon. The problems and threats stated here come up time and again in the literature, so there seems to be at least some commonality in the problems that studio owners face. However, the literature also points to the idea that the solution or solutions a specific studio owner or manager may find to their problems may very well be built upon the specific set of circumstances in which they find themselves, depending on their location, size and magnitude of the facility, clientele base, and specific strengths and weaknesses of those who manage these businesses.

The approach to solving this problem entails the use of a survey. This survey will ask basic business demographic data questions such as business age, total revenue, and facility size in order to create a basic frame of reference. The survey will also ask open-ended questions about the greatest threats to the survivability of the respondent's studio as well as what the respondent is doing to overcome those threats. This research expects to find that studio owners

and managers that say they are experiencing threats to the survivability of their business will report:

- an increased cost of doing business;
- that the increased use of home studio technology has resulted in less commercial work;
- that there is less money being used by record labels for producing the recordings they need;
- an overbuilding of commercial studio space, resulting in more sellers of the service than the market is able to hold; and
- that illegal downloading is negatively impacting their business.

Additionally, it is expected that studio owners will report that they are combating threats to the survivability of their business by:

- charging less money for their services;
- offering more services to their clients; and
- building stronger relationships with the clients they already have.

All of these responses are expected due to the fact that they are also highly prevalent in the surrounding literature. An increased cost of doing business is the result of an industry that is equipment-based by nature, along with a need to keep up with current technology. The rise in modern home recording equipment means that there is less need for songwriters and artists to spend money at a traditional commercial recording studio facility. Record labels are cutting costs since the prerecorded music business has lost so much of its value and consumers are not purchasing music as they once did, at least partially due to the illegal downloading of music. The

overcrowded commercial studio market means that buyers of studio services can easily define the terms of the agreement and set studios in opposition to each other for the buyer's business.

Charging less for their services may be seen as a way to not only compete with home recording studios but as a way to compete with other commercial facilities as well, enticing songwriters and artists to use a commercial facility to complete the work they cannot do in their home studio and record labels to choose a cheaper studio with which to do business. Offering more services to their clients may have the benefit of attracting those who are looking for a professional studio that can serve most or all of the client's needs, making the production process easier and quicker. Building stronger relationships with the clients facility owners and managers already have would ensure client loyalty, even when faced with resource-saving options.

The design of this research is built to obtain data from as many studio owners and managers as possible. With no singular focus on a particular type of studio facility (size, revenue, age) other than location, and assuming an appropriate level of response, the data should provide a panoptic view of what studio owners and managers are facing and reasonable conclusions may be made.

Methods

Participants

The participants for this research included recording studio owners and managers in the greater Nashville, Tennessee Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) as determined by a search using the ReferenceUSA database, an online subscription-based database of fourteen million U.S. businesses. The participants were culled from the database by limiting the search to businesses in the Nashville, Tennessee MSA (which includes surrounding cities of

Murfreesboro, Brentwood, Franklin, and Dickson, among others) that are listed under the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code for Sound Recording Studios (512240).

Materials

The primary instrument for this research was a survey administered and hosted via online survey company QuestionPro. The survey was built as a web page where participants would navigate to, complete, and submit, with all data being collected on QuestionPro's server and continuous access available to the principal investigator. Additional instruments included one initial letter of inquiry sent out to those surveyed asking them to participate, as well as one follow-up letter sent to those surveyed thanking them for their participation and requesting that they complete the survey if they had not already done so. Likewise, initial and follow-up e-mails were sent to those studio owners for whom a current e-mail address could be obtained.

Procedure

The initial culling of addresses from ReferenceUSA resulted in a list of 288 total businesses. From that total, 87 listings were removed from the list after verification via phone that they in fact did not have recording facilities as part of their business (mostly record labels such as Benson Label Group and Sugar Hill Records) and from repetitious listings of business names or addresses. The remaining 201 business listings were then researched in order to obtain e-mail addresses for the owners. Of those, 111 businesses were found to have electronic contact information available.

After electronic contact information had been obtained for all studios possible, the initial postal letter was sent out to all business owners on June 9th, 2009, with the initial e-mail sent on June 11th. Of the initial 201 postal letters sent, 39 were returned as undeliverable and one letter was returned stating that the facility had been sold to a private party and was no longer a

commercial facility. New addresses were found for those returned and initial letters were re-sent to those businesses, with 10 of those re-sent letters being returned.

Follow-up letters were sent on June 19th, 2009, to all original participants (excluding the one facility that had turned private) thanking them for participating and asking them to participate if they had not already done so, with similar follow-up e-mails sent June 22nd. Fourteen of those follow-up letters were returned as undeliverable, making for a total of 186 possible recording studios contacted for participation in the study.

Three weeks after the follow-up letters were sent, the data were all collected from QuestionPro's database for processing. After basic demographic data had been compiled, answers given for the two primary research questions were coded. The first research question asked the participant, "What do you see as the biggest external threat(s) to the survival of this facility?" The answers were open-ended and the participants were able to list as many answers as they chose in the space provided. The second research question asked the participant "What is the management of this facility doing to combat this (these) threat(s)?" Again, the answers were open-ended with participants being able to list as many answers as they chose in the space provided. The answers were coded by the researcher by taking all answers for each question given by each participant and grouping them together into similar responses.

Results

After all of the data were compiled, it was found that there were a total of 29 different surveys completed from the surmised 186 total possible respondents, which results in a 90% confidence level with a 14% margin of error. Out of the 29 total respondents, eighteen respondents reported that their studio was primarily used for tracking (62%), and five respondents (17%) said that their studio was primarily a mastering facility.

Almost half of the respondents (48%) reported that they are a one-room facility, and almost three-quarters of the respondents (72%) said their facility fell into the one- or two-room category. The average number of years that all the facilities in the study had been in operation was 15.1 years, with 31% of respondents stating that their facility had been in operation for six years or less, and only two respondents (7%) stating their facility had been open 35 years or more.

A full quarter of respondents stated that their facility earned \$50,000 or less gross revenue, and close to half of the respondents surveyed (46%) reported that their facility earned \$100,000 or less gross revenue in the previous tax year, with and over two-thirds of total respondents stating that their facility grossed \$150,000 or less. Only 21% of respondents reported gross revenues of \$250,000 or more in the previous tax year.

Threats to Survivability

In regards to the threats that recording studio owners and managers see to the survivability of their studio, a total of 44 total valid responses were encoded that fell into thirteen separate categories. Out of those responses, the concept of home recording studios were mentioned 15 times, making up 34% of the total responses. This was, by far, the most coded response with almost every participant mentioning the rise of home recording studios.

The second-most common response coded dealt with the threat of general economic malaise in the music business and the world economy, with seven responses or 16%. Tied for third most-common response was the idea of illegal downloading and the idea that budgets to make records have decreased significantly, each with 11% of total responses. Almost as many responses coded (9%) mentioned that musician quality has recently declined and listeners have less discriminating taste than they previously did. All other responses were singular in nature.

Combative Techniques to Overcome Threats

A total of 34 valid responses were coded in response to the question “What is the management of this facility doing to combat this (these) threat(s)?” These responses fell into 16 different categories. The three most prevalent responses were that studio managers were lowering the rates they charged clients (14%), managers were increasing their marketing efforts (14%), and that managers were going to begin offering services and options that home studios do not (11%). Additional techniques that received multiple responses included the addition of “package deals” to clients, that would cover the production of a project as well as additional services (9%), an increase in the types of work done at the facility (to become a “one-stop-shop” facility), seeking clients previously not considered, an increase in networking to grow business, and the idea of doing nothing to combat these trends.

Discussion

This survey found that recording studio owners and managers certainly think that there are threats that are keeping their businesses from growing and surviving the Nashville recording studio industry, some of which were hypothesized and some were not. Most prominent is the idea that home recording studios are a large threat to the survivability of professional recording studios. This sentiment is echoed throughout the literature and was expected, as stated in the hypothesis. What is less clear is if the sentiment follows what is discussed in the media, or if the media reports simply report on what is happening in the industry.

The threat of home recording studios being coded more than twice any other response is an important point and may indicate an adversarial relationship between the owners and managers of professional recording studios, whom depend on clients to stay in business, and the

clients themselves, many of whom probably own and use home studio equipment for audio production purposes, as noted in the literature.

The fact that general economic malaise was coded as the second greatest threat to the survivability of professional recording studios is also supported by the literature review, supports the hypothesis, and may also play a part in several other threats coded, including smaller production budgets put forth by record labels and the decline in sales of recorded music. The recording studio industry seems to be just as susceptible to economic downturns like any other, and may be put at a further disadvantage due to the service-oriented nature of the recording studio industry, rather than being a product-based industry. A limitation of this study exists in this area and more research needs to be completed regarding service-based versus product-based industries and the survivability of those industries in times of economic depression.

The fifth most-coded response, regarding lesser quality musicians and a less discriminating taste on part of the listener, is a response not supported by the literature review and was not part of the hypothesis. There may be several reasons for this. One possibility may be that musician quality and less listener discrimination is a more recent phenomenon, one that has not had the chance to percolate in the mass media realm. Another possibility exists that these concepts are localized in the Nashville area only or exist only in the realm of the most prevalent genre of music produced in the area, country music. 27 of the 29 respondents reported producing country music projects in their studio in the previous year, which yielded more responses than any other category offered.

The cost of doing business as a recording facility, a primary threat found in the literature review, was not supported by the data. No answers were coded that mentioned the fact that the

cost of operating and maintaining a recording studio were becoming too great for the owners and managers to overcome. There are, however, related concepts supported by the data, including home recording and its less-expensive nature, the global economic downturn affecting the studio businesses, and the smaller budgets that record labels are setting aside for recording projects.

In respect to what studio owners and managers are doing to overcome the threats they see in the marketplace, there are some very troubling signs. First of all, there were sixteen different categories the answers fell into, where there were only thirteen categories for the threats that owners and managers see. This may suggest that owners and managers are unsure about how to go about combating these threats, and may be trying a variety of tactics instead of focusing on fewer well-researched methods. Related to this is the fact that only 34 total responses were coded for this question, whereas there were a total of 44 responses coded in response what owners and managers saw as threats to their business. This suggests that studio owners and managers see more problems than they have solutions for.

Another troubling result of the survey is that one of the answers that tied for the most coded was that studio owners and managers are lowering the rates they charge to combat the threats they see in the marketplace. This is a sentiment echoed in the literature and supports the hypothesis, where multiple studio managers stated that they feel like they must charge less money to do the same job they did only several years ago. Overall, the cost of doing business has not gotten cheaper, but those who do the business feel like they must take less money. Additionally, there was only one respondent in the entire survey that said they were actively cutting their cost of doing business. A point of research that is not covered here but would add to this discussion is a study of how much it really costs to do business as a professional recording

facility and how much a studio owner must charge in order to have a successful and profitable business.

Perhaps the most troubling result of the survey is that multiple studio managers said they were doing absolutely nothing to combat these perceived threats. Previous research has identified this phenomenon as *status quo bias*, and while this tendency for decision makers to stick to the state of current affairs is well-documented (Samuelson, 1988), it has also been shown to not always be the best course of action, especially in the face of a changing environment (Hammond, 1998).

Despite these alarming results, there are some positive points that came to the surface with respect to what studio owners and managers are doing to combat these perceived threats. An unexpected and unhypothesized result is the fact that studio owners and managers say they are actively looking to market their business seems to be a positive sign. Traditionally, recording studio marketing has relied on referrals and word-of-mouth-style promotion techniques, but the future may hold marketing campaigns for studio facilities that mimic other, more time-honored advertising and promotion techniques.

It also appears that many studio owners and managers maybe trying to set themselves apart in the marketplace. They may feel like they have to separate themselves from home recording scenarios by offering services home studios cannot. Some also feel like they need to offer recording packages that incorporate multiple services such as composing, production, mastering, packaging creation, and duplication services into a single unit that can be sold to clients. Similarly, the fact that 9% of total responses suggest that studio owners and managers are considering increasing the types of work being done in their studio suggests that they recognize

that there may be more types of work available to them if they choose to widen their focus. These results are mirrored in the literature and were expected. Multiple responses that mentioned seeking other types of clients not previously sought after also indicates a widening of focus on the part of the recording studio industry, a survival technique that deserves more inquiry.

Regardless of the differentiation that seems to be occurring in the marketplace, the fact that multiple respondents mentioned networking as a tool for overcoming survivability threats is encouraging. Networking is a studio industry time-tested technique for success, and there is no expectation that this skill will become any less important as studio owners and managers continue to combat the threats they find in the marketplace.

The issue of studio survivability is an important one. There is no real expectation that the professional recording studio industry will ever completely die out, but studio owners and managers are finding it more difficult to keep their studios' doors open. Perhaps it is because the studio industry has fallen from some bullet-proof perch and has simply joined the rest of the world in the normal hardships of business viability. Whatever the case, the changes that are taking place in this new generation that recording studios find themselves in present real challenges to the "business as usual" mindset. These challenges must be exposed, understood, and dealt with in a manner that benefits the industry on the whole and not just select individuals within the industry.

The hope is that this research will not only spur a discussion about solutions to current problems but also act as a springboard for a discussion about the future of the recording studio industry. Current ailments need to be addressed before the future health of the industry can be assured, but with no long-term care plan, the industry will find itself in the same predicament

time and time again. There is a hope that answers to current issues can lead to more long-term solutions and that the future of the recording studio industry can be made brighter.

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