

Home Studios are Killing Music

For some, more gear equals creative suicide

by Ronan Chris Murphy

I get asked a lot by songwriters what gear they should buy, and I tell them a 4-track cassette or an old ADAT with a Mackie 1202 — and whatever they do, don't get a DAW. I am obviously a terrible businessman because I have a business (Home Recording Boot Camp) that makes money from teaching musicians how to make better recordings at home. But I have seen home studios wreck a lot of people's careers. For the most part, if you are a performing songwriter that puts a fancy studio in your home, if that does not stop your career dead in its tracks you are the exception and not the rule.

I used to see it in artists all the time and then it dawned on me, that I can trace the end of my career as a performing songwriter to exactly the time I started building my home studio back in the late '80's. Granted, I have been lucky and traded it for a cool career as a producer/engineer and I am honestly much better at that than being a performer — but it sure as hell ended things for me. I've never toured as an artist again after I put together my first studio. [I am actually going to be touring again this spring!]

I see this over and over again: If you meet two performing songwriters who were both talented and hardworking and one had a 4-track cassette deck and the other was starting to put together a DAW-based studio. Fast forward one year and ask what they have been up to in the last year.

4-Track Owner: "I wrote a whole bunch of new songs and ran into a cool artist at a jam that ended up putting one of my songs on her major label release. I did a couple tours and last spring I went into the studio for a couple weeks with a cool producer and we cut an album which has been getting some airplay around the country. It's been getting spun a lot on some stations in the southwest so I'm about to do another tour there to support it."

New DAW Owner: "I have been getting the studio together and trying to save up to buy some better A/D converters. My band has been working in the studio a bunch and we've written and recorded basics for almost 7 songs. We should have the album done some time next year. Yeah it would be cool to tour but we are waiting until we get the record done. And we will need a new drummer. The old one got bored of not gigging and split but I have almost got my acid loops to sync up with some of the old tracks....."

I am not saying that DAW guy's life is bad, but the hard reality is that the overwhelming majority of the time getting into home recording ends the careers of performing songwriters. The big reason for this is twofold:

1) All the time and financial resources go into the studio. So instead of spending money to fund a tour or pay for promotion or buy live gear or fix the van, the money gets dumped into plug-ins. Also, instead of spending time writing songs, rehearsing the band and gigging and touring, they are sitting at home trying to figure out how to get their new MOTU interface to talk to Logic Audio, or spending weeks editing tambourine tracks. The most prolific times in the last fourteen years for me were when I first put a 4-track cassette based studio together, and then about three years ago when I decided to go to Office Depot and get a micro cassette and start using that as my main writing tool.

2) Home recordists tend to isolate themselves and sit in their home studios playing with gear instead of getting out into the real world and stumbling into opportunity by playing more gigs or jamming with different people. The majority of great opportunities in this biz come from chance meetings than from someone hearing a home recorded masterpiece.

One of the things I try and talk people into in my classes is getting people to come into their studio and the fact that it can be so valuable. You make better professional relationships, people bring fresh ideas and perspective to the work, and they can bring in a lot of knowledge, too — like showing you a cool trick they learned from another engineer. It always amazes me how often bringing in a guest musician to the studio can transform a piece of music for the better.

I am sure almost everyone could show me an exception to the rule, but they are still exceptions. And for people that are just into home recording for the joy of recording and do not have ambitions as performing artists, then none of this really matters. But look at it this way: imagine you had to take a gamble on two artists to have a good career. One spent a year getting a studio together and recording; the other went into a medium-sized studio for two weeks with a cool producer and spent the other 50 weeks of the year promoting the album. Which one do you think would be a safer bet?

Obviously, many of us love recording. It's the main reason many of us spend time reading articles and posting in forums online. And tons of us are just as happy to be having fun recording than trying to advance our "artist" careers. But ending careers is a hidden cost of home recording for a lot of people. And that's a lot of great songs that will never be written."

Source: <http://www.studioreviews.com/killingmusic.htm>