Cultural Production in and Beyond the Recording Studio

Allan Watson
Recording studios are the most insulated, intimate and privileged sites of music production and creativity. Yet in a world of intensified globalisation, they are also sites which are highly connected into wider networks of music production that are increasingly spanning the globe. This book is the first comprehensive account of the new spatialities of cultural production in the recording studio sector of the musical economy, spatialities that illuminate the complexities of global cultural production.

This unique text adopts a social-geographical perspective to capture the multiple spatial scales of music production: from opening the “black-box” of the insulated space of the recording studio; through the wider contexts in which music production is situated; to the far-flung global production networks of which recording studios are part. Drawing on original research, recent writing on cultural production across a variety of academic disciplines, secondary sources such as popular music biographies, and including a wide range of case studies, this lively and accessible text covers a range of issues including the role of technology in musical creativity; creative collaboration and emotional labour; networking and reputation; and contemporary economic challenges to studios.

As a contribution to contemporary debates on creativity, cultural production and creative labour, Cultural Production in and Beyond the Recording Studio will appeal to academic students and researchers working across the social sciences, including human geography, cultural studies, media and communication studies, sociology, as well as those studying music production courses.

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Cultural Production in and Beyond the Recording Studio

Allan Watson
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In the popular imagination the recording studio is, somewhat unfortu-
nately, regarded as a mysterious place—a fiercely guarded environment
full of expensive, complex technology, arcane processes and riddled
with jargon.

(Warner 2003, 35)

Even now, after a century of sound recording, the process of making
records remains at least a partial mystery to the majority of those who
listen to them.

(Zak 2001, 26)

Recording studios are spaces that run deep in the popular musical imagina-
tion. Particular recording studios have become “iconic” through their link
with particular music scenes and particular recording artists, even to the
extent they have become a site of pilgrimage; one only has to think of the
connection between the Beatles and Abbey Road, or between Sun Studios
and Elvis Presley, for example. Yet, despite their central place in the devel-
opment of rock ’n’ roll folklore, there is very little understanding of what
actually takes place in these spaces as music is created and recorded, outside
of those involved in the production of music. Partly, this is due to the fact
that recording studios are associated with complex technologies, although
as home recording is becoming increasingly common, many of these tech-
nologies are becoming much more widely understood and used. But it is also
in large part due to the fact that very few people have ever seen the inside
of a recording studio, let alone witnessed a recording in progress. It is, as
a space, figuratively (and sometimes literally) a “black box.” Yet, there is
an interest and intrigue about the way in which music is recorded. Why?
Well, amongst other reasons, the music that comes from within these stu-
dios excites, moves and touches people. Our connection with music is both
personal and intimate. Often, music is recorded in such a way as to allow
fans to feel a direct connection to an artist through an intimate moment
of musical performance, as if they were in the space with the artist. In this
way, the way music is produced directly relates to notions of originality, authenticity and genre.

The aim of this text is to open up the “black box” and to reveal and examine the technological and creative processes that take place when music is created and recorded. It is certainly not the first academic text that attempts to do this; there are a number of comprehensive accounts of recording studio technologies and their relation to changing concepts and practices of recording. Here I point readers to Virgil Moorefield’s *The Producer as Composer* (2010); Albin Zak’s *The Poetics of Rock* (2001); and Paul Théberge’s *Any Sound You Can Imagine* (1997) in particular. This book draws significantly on these and other texts. But it also looks to go beyond them, by employing a geographical and relational framework for analysing music production. Key to such an approach is considering the many and various relations involved in the production of music, and the various spatial scales at which they occur. The book is concerned with the various interrelationships that occur between people, technology and space, not only within the insulated space of the studio, but also beyond the walls of the studio, from the urban centres in which recording studios are (typically) located, to the global urban and digital networks of music production. The idea of viewing studios as relational spaces of creativity in this way is one that was inspired by Chris Gibson’s (2005) paper on that very theme, and is therefore one for which I cannot take credit. However, the size of this volume provides an opportunity to fully extend this line of thinking and, I hope, to provide a discussion which goes some way to doing justice to the technological, emotional and spatial complexity of music production in the digital age.

The process of research that has informed this book was both long and challenging, and hugely rewarding. It would not have been possible without the love and support of my wife, Kate, and my three boys, Harry, Jack and Charlie. I thank them all for their patience and support through the great many hours of writing. There are many others who I must also thank for playing their own valuable parts in the production of this book. First and foremost, my thanks go to Steve Williams, who was involved from the very conception of this text, helping me to form the proposal and subsequently commenting on the chapters as they took shape. The book is both stronger and more coherent for his input. I also want to thank Phil Hubbard and Michael Hoyler, who have supported this research from its origins in a PhD scholarship in the Department of Geography at Loughborough University. My thanks also go to Fiona Tweed for her support. I owe much to Jenna Ward, whose valuable help in shaping ideas around emotional labour in a recording studio setting has much improved this work; and to Christoph Mager for his involvement in shaping ideas around networks of musical production in the city. Some aspects of this work have been published in journals and have benefited greatly from insightful comments from reviewers. At Routledge,
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Introduction

Largely acting as an independent service within the contemporary recorded music industry, recording studios form the direct link between the record companies and artists and the creation of a final recorded musical product. As such, they form a key component in the networks of creativity and reproduction (see Leyshon 2001) of what is now a highly globalised music industry, and an economically important one. In 2012, global recorded music sales totaled US$16.5 billion (http://www.ifpi.org/facts-and-stats.php; accessed 21/02/14). Whilst only estimates exist for the economic value of the recording studio sector, it is the case that, compared to record companies and publishing companies, the value and level of profitability of the recording studio sector in itself is relatively low (Leyshon 2009). However, the sector does act as a “crucial part of the overall value chain of the musical economy, producing commodities upon which large parts of the industry depend” (ibid. 2009, 1315). However, it is not the case that the importance of recording studios lies only in the production of music as an economic commodity. Recording studios also play a central role in the creating the “sound” of particular music scenes, and act as a focal point for networks of musicians and musical creativity. As such, recording studios and the skilled engineers and producers who work within them have played a central role in shaping the production of music as both an economic and cultural commodity, and as such, in shaping both local cultural production and global popular culture.

Despite the evident importance of recording studios to musical production, there is relatively little academic literature focusing on recording studios and the recording studio sector more widely. This is particularly the case in geography, with just two notable exceptions: Andrew Leyshon’s (2009) work on the decline of the recording studio sector, and the work of Chris Gibson (2005) on recording studios as relational spaces of creativity. Outside geography, a limited body of work on recording studios has emerged from the fields of musicology, sociology, cultural studies and science studies. One might pick out in particular the work of Paul Théberge (1989, 1997, 2004, 2012); Antoine Hennion (1989); Susan Schmidt Horning (2004, 2012); Albin Zak (2001); Virgil Moorefield (2010); and