

# science of sounds

## Technology helps artists put out more music for less money

Arts in the Next Century

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Editor's note: Today, we present the fourth in a week-long series exploring where the arts are headed in the next century.

The basement of Mike and A.J. Mogis' Lincoln home is pretty cozy.

The walls are lined with foam soundproof padding that creates a very "non-basement" feel, and the separate rooms are connected by tight hallways.

In one room, a drum set sits with microphones strategically perched around its many angles. In another room, an array of guitars waits to be played, as does the bass upstairs in the kitchen.

Finally, tucked away in the basement's west side is the control room where Mike sits at a desk, typing on a keyboard and flanked by two thin computer screens.

He clicks the computer's mouse, and a sound board the size of a Yugo lights up like the grill of the "Knight Rider" car, and a drum beat immediately fills the room.

The brothers' basement doubles as Dead Space, a recording studio formerly called Whoop Ass, where a number of local bands have recorded, including The Faint and Mike and A.J.'s group, Lullaby for the Working Class.

Despite being located in the basement, the studio has become recognized regionally as well as nationally for its impressive sound quality.

In the last 30 years, technology and popular music have teamed up to change both the way music is played and recorded. America watched this union manifest itself through the rise of genres such as techno and the demise of others such as folk.

The "new thing" has constantly been updated, as has the source proclaiming its arrival. TV turned into MTV, MTV turned into VH1, VH1 turned into a multitude of 24-hour satellite stations, and eventually, the Internet bullied its way to the front of the line.

Finally, the shockwaves from this technological boom swept across the Heartland and, in doing so, left a number of indelible marks on local music's former face.

Washed away in the erosion were primitive things such as tapes and 45s. What was left were puddles filled with CDRs, invisible MP3 files, real audio files and Sony minidiscs. Pretty neat, huh?

In a phone interview from his home in Lincoln, Bernie McGinn, owner of Lincoln's Caulfield Records, <http://www.acton.com/caulfield/> and member of the local group Luck of Aleia, took some time to discuss these technological advances and their relation to the local music scene.

"It's a pretty exciting time," McGinn said. "To see people not have to rely on a major - or even an indie - label to get their music out there is pretty exciting."

"Recording has certainly gotten remarkably better, in terms of cost and quantity. Ten years ago, anything that was recorded locally you could just tell - it sounded local. It didn't have that up-front quality."

Richard Alloway, general manager of KRNU, said the station receives more local music on compact disc than it ever did before. He also said there was a notable increase in the quality.

"Certainly the CD is a more honest medium in some respects. You're going to hear more on a CD than on a cassette, for better or for worse," Alloway said. "A lot of the local acts we play now sound as good as the national acts they're sandwiched between."

McGinn started Caulfield Records in 1988 as a means to release an album for his former band, Sideshow. Since then, he's worked with about 15 bands and is currently working on

Caulfield's 34th and 35th releases. The first is a compilation spanning Caulfield's recordings over the last five years, and the second is a full-length album from m.i.j.

The decreasing cost and increasing quality involved in recording and producing CD albums has made McGinn's job as an artist and music promoter slightly easier. But it's also created a more saturated market, in terms of competition. Still, McGinn cites the advances as being largely beneficial for everyone involved.

"Eight years ago it was like, 'Oh my God, you're going to put out a CD? You're not putting out a tape?' But it's just super affordable now," McGinn said.

"On the other hand, that's just more and more music. I mean the ratio of good to bad music tends to be heavier on the bad side, but if I had to choose which way to have it, I'd rather see people have access to put out their music."

"It's put the power back into the musicians' hands across the board, and I can't think of that big of a drawback through these advances. I mean, some of the older technology that was around left a lot to be desired, and since quality is less of an issue now, the performance can shine through."

Back at Dead Space, A.J. took a break from the recording process to talk about the increasing influx of local recordings into the market, while Mike re-recorded a drum track in the basement.

"Just from the experience we've had here at the studio, when you hear a good band, you know it," A.J. said. "I think it might be a little harder for some of the more marginal bands that aren't super great but are still pretty good. That's where the saturation is."

A.J. said the equipment used at Dead Space was mostly semi-professional gear that can put out music easily comparable to professional equipment. Since last summer, Dead Space has used computers to save music on hard discs rather than tape format, the traditional method.

With this more advanced gear also comes an ability to clean up the recordings, as opposed to cleaning up the actual performance. At times, it's a mixed blessing.

On this particular day, the lounging members of the latest incarnation of Bright Eyes watch as Mike attempts to layer the sound of a kickdrum in with an earlier recording. They talk about the beat's tempo and its overall energy and try a number of different arrangements, each a result of a different click of the mouse. Finally, they decide to play it again.

"There's an issue of being able to manipulate things so much that it sounds premanufactured," he said. "It kind of makes me sick at heart to have a guy come in and do vocals who maybe isn't the best singer, and he wants me to go fix it with the 'Auto Tune' and make it sound like he knows what he's doing."

While more affordable recording technology has made it easier for bands to get quality recordings, cheaper CD-copying equipment has also made it easier to get quantity.

Last September, Dan Augustyn, a 23-year-old graduate student in math at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, helped start a record company called Milk Records, 1742 K St. Suite B4. The company was designed to put out CDs of local artists.

At first, the concept seems like nothing new, but what sets Milk Records apart from other local record labels is best summed up in the opening section of the label's Web site, <http://www.milkrecords.com/>.

"Milk Records is a new record label whose goal is to provide independent recording artists the opportunity to sell their albums over the Internet. No one will be turned away. We'll manufacture your CD and sell it from our Web catalog at no cost to you. All you have to do is send us your album and wait for the royalty checks to roll in!"

It's an enticing offer that Augustyn said came from a desire to do things differently from traditional record companies.

"We looked at the practices of record companies, and we've had a bunch of things that, if we were to succeed (as a band), we'd like to have changed, so we just decided to start a record company that was as artist-friendly as possible," he said.

"Our contract is designed so that the artist maintains the ownership of their music, which is different from most contracts, and normally record companies give 10 or 12 percent as retail royalties. We give 50 percent."

He said Milk would put out CDs regardless of the quality of the

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BERNIE MCGINN  
owner of Caulfield Records

recordings, and the bands could decide on the retail price of the CD, so long as Milk gets at least \$2.50 per CD to cover its costs.

"If the artist thinks that their music is good enough, that's all we worry about," Augustyn said. "We also have a list place where they can send promo albums and just pay postage."

Milk's interesting proposition brings up another area of excitement and concern for local bands - music on the Internet.

For McGinn, the advent of the Internet has allowed people all over the world to hear bands on his label through MP3 format. He hopes the songs will entice listeners to take a trip to the record store and buy the album.

"I can tell that people from Singapore, Japan, Germany and all over the states have downloaded these songs," McGinn said. "There's usually like 15 downloads a day, and I know I've bought stuff by hearing an illegally copied MP3 or two."

He said the Internet has also networked a vast amount of touring information that has made going on the road much easier.

"When I was booking the first Sideshow tours in 1991, I had like \$400 and \$500 phone bills just from booking the tour," he said. "With e-mail, you can hound people a lot easier, and it's just a much more organized network."

"I know a number of bands who are able to book their tours while they're on the road, so I think it's helped the professional musician or the struggling band."

But with the Internet's many advantages also come some drawbacks in terms of people pirating music. It's something that is becoming more prominent, and even McGinn has had to deal with entire Caulfield albums being posted on the Internet available for free to anyone who wants them.

Alloway said these developments could have far-reaching consequences.

"I think the whole structure of how we get music is going to change over the next years, and I think the music industry is scared," he said. "They've held the keys to the castle for a long time, and things are changing."

"I don't think this will stop people from getting music at a record store. The established organizations will figure out how to get involved in it. They're not going to stand by and watch this happen."

Despite the blitzkrieg of technological innovations being fired at the local music scene, there remain some constants.

While digital recording has become incredibly accurate, A.J. said, Dead Space spent more money last year on older recording equipment than on the latest gear.

"When you switch to more modern stuff, it has more of what you'd expect from an ideal set up, you know, no distortion, you don't hear the funny quirks that, from a technical standpoint, aren't good," A.J. said. "But to our ears they sound better."

"There are a lot of subtle things, but they seem to add up to make a difference."

Ultimately, regardless of the quality of a group's recordings, they will eventually have to be able to perform live. It's one aspect of the local music scene that simply won't change.

"In the music business, you still have to have a band that can tour," A.J. said. "And once they get on stage, it becomes pretty obvious that the emperor has no clothes."



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