

# The day the music died: New research into the UK recording studio sector

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A severe crisis in the music industry is seriously depleting the UK's recording studio sector, according to new research from The University of Nottingham.

Once synonymous with the creative talents of artists like The Beatles, Pink Floyd, Oasis and Coldplay; the UK recording studio sector is today becoming better known for closures and redundancies. A number of iconic London recording studios, including Olympic Studios, Townhouse Studios, Whitfield Street Studios (formerly Sony and, before that, CBS Studios) and Eden have closed in recent years.

The implications are grim and wide-reaching; affecting emerging talent, employees and record companies alike.

Professor Andrew Leyshon's research has uncovered the extent of the damage to the sector, brought on by the explosion of [digital music](#) formats and the democratisation of musical technology.

Professor Leyshon, a Professor Economic Geography, examined the effects of digital advances on the studio sector and found the industry to be in a more serious condition than anyone thought.

He looked at the unintended, but significant role software has played in destabilising the economic viability of the sector.

It is a problem which, until now, has been largely ignored.

"We all know that the music industry has been radically transformed by software," Professor Leyshon says.

"We understand the impact that software formats such as MP3 and problems like internet 'piracy' have had on intellectual property rights and distribution. We also understand the knock-on effects for record companies. But the impact on the recording studio sector has passed by with very little comment. "

In his paper *The Software Slump?* published in the journal *Environment and Planning A*, Professor Leyshon argues that there has been a progressive disintegration of the sector, which began slowly in the 1970s, and has now accelerated dramatically in recent years.

He argues the root of the decay lay with the increase in independent studios and equipment suppliers. But now, with the increase in readily available software the situation, for some, has become untenable.

In his research, Professor Leyshon visited studios around the country and found that the days of the record company owned and run studios are well and truly over.

"The obvious exception of course is Abbey Road," Professor Leyshon adds. "EMI have retained ownership of the studios, but whether this will be kept on as a recording studio set-up, a tourist attraction or indeed a combination of the two remains to be seen, and its future is far from certain.

Professor Leyshon points to a 'vertical disintegration' of the business, a destruction of the sector's core functions. And whilst the industry has over the years adjusted to the problem, it has never really come to terms with it, which has driven this process of disintegration even further.

It is not just the retail and distribution side of the business, but worryingly, the production side that is affected.

"The sector at the moment is characterised by falling recording budgets, declining demand for studio space/time, worsening employment conditions, the destruction of barriers to entry, runaway production costs and studio closures."

The problem is not only affecting the production of music but has also changed the way new talent is found. Record companies have withdrawn from the business of discovering and developing new talent (A&R) and instead have left this to the management companies, who some argue are in the business of taking new talent and turning them into marketable artists, who can then be found a recording contract.

The management companies are also increasingly taking on the responsibility and cost of delivering albums. The falling cost of recording technology has meant that artists have increasingly been able to record high quality music outside recording studios, which has further conspired to drive down the demand for studio time and the fees that they are able to charge.

The vertical disintegration of production is further embedding the musical economy's ties to London, leading recording budgets to remain in the capital city with established companies, effectively excluding established studios in other parts of the country.

In his paper, Professor Leyshon points to a report undertaken by the National Music Council which estimates there are around 300 'economically significant' recording studios in the UK. Of these 200 were based in London alone.

As for possible solutions Professor Leyshon says it is a problematic issue

to solve. He suggests studios could seek to turn the problem to their advantage by using their assets and expertise to become management, production and publishing companies.

But he points out that this approach is expensive and that only a few recordings ever cover the cost of production, and so is not reliable.

It has also been suggested that studios could use their buildings as examples of Britain's musical heritage, but in his visits to the studios he found reaction to this was unfavourable.

"Whichever strategies the studios choose for survival in a business environment which has turned on them," he adds; "the fact remains that recording studios in the Anglo-American world will continue to close.

"We do know this will have serious repercussions for the economic geography of music. What remains to be seen however is how this will play out, and what will be left of the sector for the future."

Source: University of Nottingham ([news](#) : [web](#))

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