

Business

Two recording studios in city take different paths to success

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June 4, 2009 8:04 PM

In a nondescript house three blocks west of South Broadway Street and the heart of Fells Point, the members of We are the Ocean, a popular teen hardcore rock band from London, are in the final week of recording their debut album at Salad Days.

Lead guitarist Liam Cromby has a guitar and pick in hand, as bandmate Alfie Scully looks on.

Sitting across from Cromby and Scully in a rolling office chair is the owner of the recording studio, Brian McTernan, wearing an untucked, blue, buttoned-down shirt, jeans and black Sketchers.



"That last note you hit was sharp," McTernan tells Cromby.

"Just get the very end and then we've got it."

The other bandmates are lounging around upstairs watching a baseball game on television, but downstairs in the control room of the studio, McTernan has been recording take after take all day with Cromby until they get the color and mood of each guitar strum right.

Cromby gives it another take, picking each note with a purpose.

McTernan leans back in his chair, cocks his head back, closes his eyes and puts his feet up on a nearby table, as he carefully listens to each note.

When McTernan stops the metronome click, Cromby looks up.

"Much better," McTernan says, leaning forward. "Let's do it one more time."

Approximately four miles north of Salad Days in Charles Village, Matthew Leffler Schulman is seated in his Mobtown Studios control room recording East Baltimore native Edward Joseph Neenan of the local rock band E. Joseph and the Phantom Heart.

Neenan has been recording vocal tracks for several hours, sipping a can of National Bohemian beer in between takes.

"I'm just worried about the fundamentals," Schulman says from behind a wall that separates the control room from the tracking room.

"That's why you are sitting in that chair," Neenan says.

McTernan, 33, and Schulman, 32, met each other in 2008 at a music conference in Baltimore where both served as panelists.

The two connected immediately, learning that they each had studios in town as well as infant daughters.

But they soon realized that their recording studios' missions couldn't have been more different.

McTernan records approximately eight to 10 bands a year from all around the world with singles that are featured on the radio and popular mainstream games like "Guitar Hero." The bands live in his studio for the duration of the recording process — a rarity today, according to record label executives.

In comparison, Schulman's focus is on serving the Baltimore arts scene. He records primarily Baltimore musicians and showcases their talents through free concerts held monthly in their intimate tracking room. Local musicians say Mobtown is different from other studios in the area in that its focus is on improving the Baltimore music scene — offering a local budget, with a high-quality sound.

Despite different business models, and an ever-changing musical landscape, McTernan and Schulman's studios complement each other, bringing something unique to Charm City's music scene.

Musicians worldwide come to Fells Point

Wayne Pighini, the director of marketing for Los Angeles-based Vagrant Records, an independent rock label, says that every band he has sent to record with McTernan has made its best record with him.

"With Brian, he's always more involved with the bands personally," Pighini said. "He helps arrange the songs. He helps with the song structures. He's a real producer."

McTernan's musical career started well before the opening of Salad Days in Fells Point. A Bethesda native, McTernan dropped out of high school when he was 17 and toured all over the world as the lead singer of a hardcore rock band called Battery.

After Battery, McTernan toured with a group called Miltown. But soon after landing a record deal with Warner Bros., the band broke up.

McTernan moved to Boston to open up his first recording studio and to be closer to his future wife, Minu Aghevli, who was attending Harvard University.

After five years of recording bands in the basement of a house he shared with his six roommates, he and Aghevli moved back to Beltsville. They bought a house not only big enough to live in but to house an entire band with a recording studio.

"I didn't have a lot of fancy gear back then," recalls McTernan. "The only thing I really could do to get the records to sound really good was to help the bands play a little better."

McTernan recorded up-and-coming rock bands that showed promise before they were signed to record labels. After bands were signed, they told the record labels about McTernan, and through word of mouth, McTernan started getting calls from major independent rock labels like Vagrant, Epitaph, Victory and Equal Vision records.

In 2005, McTernan was becoming a well-known name in the industry and he was ready to move out of his house in Beltsville.

"We started to get older and the bands got younger," said McTernan. "One day, Minu said to me, 'I can't deal with living where bands are living.'"

McTernan's New York-based manager suggested that he open up a studio in New York or in Los Angeles because that's where many of the top studios were located.

But McTernan said he was worried about the cost of owning a studio in a large city, and that's when he started looking at possible spaces in Baltimore.

Later that year, McTernan found what he called "the perfect place" for his studio — a 3,500-square-foot building with 25-foot ceilings nestled on the outskirts of Fells Point.

"Baltimore is not some super hot spot for the music industry, but it is super conveniently located for people," he said. "My overhead is so much less than anybody that's in New York or in L.A. — the labels don't mind sending bands here because it's so much more affordable."

McTernan turned the empty house with no running water into a state-of-the-art recording studio with spacious living quarters.

In addition to elaborate control, tracking and drum rooms along with a lounge area and a pool table on the first level, the second level has a den-like area with a television, a kitchen area and bedrooms for the artists.

McTernan, who has lived in Mount Washington since 2007, said that hosting bands in the studio for the duration of the recording process — generally four to six weeks — is a bonus because it allows them to be creative around the clock.

"I like having the bands live here. Nobody's ever late," he said. "In my mind, I don't necessarily think of this as a recording studio. I think of it as a house. I think people are living in this house making music with me."

Other than several Washington, D.C., bands, McTernan doesn't record any area artists — and he likes it that way.

McTernan wants musicians to focus solely on the music when they record with him, rather than leaving the studio each night to socialize with family and friends.

Pighini said that McTernan's setup is hard to find among other studios in the country.

"It's pretty rare to find these days — to have that access 24/7," he said.

McTernan charges a flat rate for each recording — and depending on the band that is in the studio — that can range from as high as \$350,000 to as low as \$10,000. The fee covers the production of the recording and housing.

Newer bands that are working on their first records generally don't pay as much, while bands that have had commercial success have higher budgets from their labels.

Take the California-based rock band, Thrice, as an example. When McTernan recorded "The Illusion of Safety" with them in 2002, the budget for the entire CD was \$6,000.

After the band experienced a surge in popularity, the next record, "Artist in the Ambulance," had a budget of \$350,000.

More than 424,000 copies of the CD were sold, according to statistics released by Nielsen SoundScan.

"I have to do a balance of making sure I'm making enough money and also making sure that I'm working with fresh, new bands that will continue to grow my business," he said.

In addition to the production fees, McTernan also gets paid 3 percent of the suggested retail price of a CD — about 30 cents for every record that sells. Some records that have had commercial success can still sell as many as 100 to 1,000 records a week. But McTernan says it is the creative process of making each record that drives him.

"If I gauge success for me on what people buy, I'd be a very miserable person," he said. "Some of my favorite records haven't sold ... I try and think about the music and not so much of how well it's going to do."

And that's one of the reasons why recording label executives continue to send artists to McTernan — he cares about the music first and foremost.

"I feel like there's a million places that we can go, but I think that the service that he offers is unlike any other producer we have ever worked with," said Dan Sandshaw, the president of Equal Vision Records.

Unlike some producers who mainly press buttons, McTernan has a very hands-on approach, working with each artist individually on technique and dynamics.

It's no wonder, according to Pighini, that bands on the Vagrant label want to keep on coming back to McTernan's studio.

"We feel that every band that has gone in with him has made their best record with him," he said.

A home for artists from the Baltimore area

Matthew Leffler Schulman and his wife, Emily, officially opened Mobtown Studios in July 2008 on 26th and Charles streets.

Their studio was originally located in their Takoma Park home, but when they decided to move to Butchers Hill in Baltimore, the desire to have their recording space separate from where they live became paramount.

The Mobtown space, which was at one point a methadone clinic, is several blocks north of the Station North Arts District.

At 1,000 square feet, the Schulmans dropped the ceiling, raised the floor, stretched the walls out and built panels on the wall, allowing for a customization of sound for each recording.

The space has a living-room feel and has been insulated to prevent sound from reaching a bustling Charles Street.

The majority of the artists who have recorded at Mobtown — 50 altogether — are from the Baltimore area.

In order to support the recording studio, Matt Schulman does mastering work with artists from around the world and Emily Schulman does independent Web design work.

The standard hourly rate for mixing and recording is \$60 an hour. A full day — which constitutes 10 hours — costs \$450. But with tightening budgets in a struggling economy, the Schulmans do negotiate with artists if that price isn't in their range.

"We don't want to be in a position where we necessarily have to turn down a band of putting out some music that we really love and an artist we like to work with because they can't afford our budget right now," said Emily Schulman. "Maybe the next record they'll come back to us — so we'll work with people."

It's this flexibility and love for the music that has caught the attention of Baltimore musicians, including Michael Nestor, the founder of The Beechfields, a Baltimore-based record label that puts out albums by Baltimore bands that aren't focused on making a lot of money, but are interested in making connections with other people through their music.

"That's what I think sets them apart from everybody else — their connectedness with the local musician," said Nestor, who collaborates with Matt Schulman in a band called The Seldon Plan.

It was Emily Schulman's idea to create micro-shows, which gave their studio a chance to connect with Baltimore artists not only through the recording process but also through intimate acoustic concerts in their tracking space.

With a maximum capacity of about 30 people, area bands like Eureka Birds, Kadman and Red Sammy have performed free shows for the Baltimore community in the living room-like atmosphere.

Each show is dimly lit and typically packed with people who sit closely to one another on the floor in a relaxing environment. Each show is available for free streaming on the Mobtown Studio Web site.

Adam Trice, the lead singer of Baltimore-based Red Sammy, performed at a micro-show in support of his newest record, "Dog Hang Low." Even though his record wasn't recorded at Mobtown, the Schulmans welcomed his band into their studio.

"I think they are really good for the local scene. They will give music the attention it deserves on the local level," said Trice, whose Bob Dylan-esque raspy vocals intertwined with dark lyrics created an electric atmosphere during his micro-session.

Although the studio has been open for business less than a year, Beechfields' Nestor said he can't wait to see it grow.

"I can't wait to see it develop over the next four or five years," he said.

In Baltimore, plenty of room to work hand-in-hand

According to the 2008 year-end shipment statistics from the Recording Industry Association of America, CD sales have dropped steadily since 2000.

Music recording equipment has also become more affordable and accessible, which has led to more bands self-producing their records.

So what does this mean for the future of studios like Salad Days and Mobtown?

McTernan said that ever since file-sharing services like Napster started to surface at the turn of the century, the CD has been devalued. He said he does not expect recording labels to continue to exist in the traditional form, but rather, bands will pay for their time in the studio.

"My specialty is the songs, the color of a record and the arrangements," he said. "That's not going to be replaced by technology. I feel pretty secure in my little stratosphere."

As for Mobtown, the Schulmans are excited about how accessible music has become on the Internet. Although Schulman readily agrees that more musicians are self-producing, he echoes McTernan's sentiment — nothing can replace a professional studio's sound.

Nestor says that in a city like Baltimore, studios like Salad Days and Mobtown can really complement each other.

"Once you understand that sort of concept, it really makes sense that you would have a Mobtown and Salad Days," he said. "Recording studios can be very competitive with one another. Those two studios don't compete at all; they really work hand-in-hand."