

The Fall of Rome

Rome wasn't built in a day, but it sure seems to be tumbling that fast. **DAN DALEY** won't say he told you so, but he does look for reasons amid the ruins.



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IN FEBRUARY, an essay, in the form of a press release, made the rounds of the Internet. In it, Kirk Imamura, the president of Avatar Studios, a sizable facility in New York City, took issue with a sentiment expressed in yet another press release, this one far more terse, which announced the impending closure of The Hit Factory (NY).

Hit Factory's press release, which declared that the end was nigh for the 30-year facility, had a coda that stated: 'The Hit Factory's [closure] further signals a burgeoning shift in the music industry away from large-scale recording facilities to the newer highly innovative digital technologies.'

Faster than a speeding bullet, Imamura's response was broadcast. It stated, 'Calling the studio business dead is very misleading and greatly exaggerated.... [We] reject the general indictment of large, multiroom facilities and the implication that albums are no longer being recorded at professional studios. Nothing could be further from the truth.'

The truth? To paraphrase Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*: 'The truth? You can't handle the truth!' I'm not directing that comment towards Imamura, who is a great guy who has held his shoulder to the wheel of the studio business for a long time, as have the MDs and owners of a couple of dozen other major facilities. But it is an indictment of an industry that has managed to avoid reality for over a decade, and still, as Imamura's paean indicates, prefers to concern itself with the arrangement of deck chairs aboard HMS Titanic instead of becoming cognisant of wet feet.

The recent demise of some very high-profile major facilities — Hit Factory (NY), as well as Cello and Enterprise in Los Angeles — makes it appear as though some economic tsunami has suddenly ripped through studioland. The truth is, the malady that did them in was a chronic one dating back to the moment digital technology began to enter its Moore's Law phase, in which each successive iteration was faster/

cheaper/smaller/better. By the mid 1980s, even before digital recording platforms had become ubiquitous, what one reasonably talented person equipped with a Tascam PortaStudio and a digital delay and reverb could accomplish was remarkable, compared with what it took to make a record 10 years earlier. The handwriting was already on the wall by then — coarse as it may have been with four tracks on a cassette. Everything that came after it, from the ADAT to Pro Tools, was simply a riff — a faster/cheaper/smaller/better one — on this.

Yet look at the industry's response. In 1989, the emergence of the project studio prompted a collection of LA-area studio owners to form the Hollywood Association of Recording Professionals — basically Posse Comitatus with a soldering iron — whose mission was to drop a dime to the local codes administrator on every home studio they could uncover. Needless to say, HARP had little success trying to hold back the sea of personal recording with a meagre couple of rhetorical sandbags.

Throughout the 1990s there were countless indicators in almost every global industry sector that the accessibility of digital technology was going to radically change decades' worth of familiarity, from printing to manufacturing to publishing to graphics to photography. And a few jobs were going to be lost during the transition. Yet the music industry was going to magically avoid the same fate. Of course.

You didn't have to look that far afield for omens. By the late 1990s bankruptcy protection had become a common cure for economic ailments among studios. Nashville, the last bastion of recording that necessitated large studios, had over a dozen closures or receiverships in less than five years, most notably Emerald Studios, once the city's largest facilities.

What there were in the way of new facilities were often capitalised by personal fortunes. I once wrote a column for this magazine cautioning readers not to

judge the notion of the 'rich kid's studio' too harshly; many of the overly affluent often brought more money than brains or talent to the recording table, but they also served to continue to seed the replenishment of the landscape at a time when capital of other sorts was drying up. But did you notice that by the late 1990s and early 21st Century there were a hell of a lot of well-heeled types planting studios where they likely didn't belong, like palm trees above the Arctic Circle? They had an interesting effect on studio rates.

One could also have looked at Europe, specifically the UK and especially London, to see how changes in technology and tastes were decimating studios. Who needed acoustics for dance music? Some London studios seemed to figure it out early and tried to modify the business model to adapt to the fact that the world was becoming smaller and more modular. Studios like Roundhouse sought to turn their cavernous spaces into joint ventures with the very engineers and producers who were being lured into their own creative caves by affordable and powerful technology. Versions of that approach made their way to the States; most recently Chung King Studios, once well-oiled from the largess of rap's heyday in the early 90s, is one of several studios that have recently reinvented themselves with a landlord-tenant relationship with former clients who now rent studios as though they were storefronts, outfitted with their own gear or the studio's, as the latter continue to make monthly payments on what five years earlier seemed like a sure thing.

The record industry — or what's left of it — has been the studio industry's whipping boy of late, blamed for focusing more on corporate consolidations

and profits than on the music, cutting budgets in the process and constricting the cashflow of the large studios where their artists once used to spend months writing their albums, let alone recording them. Both the labels and the studios had become used to that kind of excess — when you experience a sudden reversal of fortune, the kids might be hungry but it's hard to let go of the Mercedes.

The reality is, studios and labels failed to assess the long-term damage that digital would do to them. It's to the labels' credit that they brought in hard-nosed accountants like Andrew Lach at Sony to stem their losses. (What's it matter if he has a tin ear in the age of MP3?) Of course it sucked that labels were slashing budgets, not signing new artists and tossing what little money was left towards safe pop pap. But what was remarkable was how studios would howl about it without quite realising that they were in the same boat, and that the labels had found a life preserver, odious as it may be. The studios, quite apparently, haven't.

Nothing lasts forever. Period. There is no law of man or jungle that mandates how music must be recorded. It's interesting that that wonderful book *Palaces of Sound* came out in time to be as much a requiem as a celebration. I didn't write that one, and wish I had. But I did write a lot of cautionary tales about rapidly changing business models, and I was often excoriated by some for doing so. People don't like to hear bad news, and magazine advertisers like it even less. Back to *Titanic* again, a lot of passengers couldn't bring themselves to believe the ship was actually sinking until their feet were wet, and even then...

But I also know why that is, and it has nothing to do with the collective intelligence of the studio

business, because there are a lot of otherwise very smart people in this business. Making music, like a crime of the heart, is an act of passion, and people will walk for love where someone with eyes open would not venture. Contrasted with the pragmatists in video, and the clinical tweekers of multimedia, audio people are the Romantics of the media arts. They love sound for its own sake, as well as the tools with which it's made. Their initial anger at digital technology was about what it did to the sound, not to its economics.

But implicit in this all along has been a rejection of reality in favour of an idealised vision. Can you imagine the television industry supporting a 'back-to-black & white' movement at the dawn of colour television, or a backlash against high-definition versus NTSC/PAL? But isn't that just what the 'back-to-mono' and analogue revivals were? (The fall of Quantegy took a lot of minds off the fall of Baghdad for a few minutes.) The sentiment pervades the industry: advertisements proclaiming how one manufacturer or another has managed to coerce a digital device to approximate the sound of an analogue one. Right. And Aston-Martin will soon announce that the new DB9 will have the performance characteristics of a 1954 Buick. Love is both blind and blinding.

This is not the swan song of the battleship studio, only its Reformation. In purely Darwinian terms, some will have to die so others can live. For the orchestras and symphonies, for the film scores, for the affluent or ambitious rock bands, there will always be a need for large, acoustically valid spaces filled with well-maintained, state-of-the-art equipment, and for the people who make them sing. Just not as much need as in the past. And so it goes. ■