

Recording Gold Rush

Making records in Acadiana is alive, well and growing

BY SUZANNE FERRARA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DENNY CULBERT

ACADIANA'S MUSICAL RECORDING WORLD has always been an island unto itself, and it's no wonder — this is a magical place that turns out Grammy winners and is the home of a music culture unlike any other in the world.

"Music is a way of life here; it's every single weekend in Acadiana and you can't escape it," says Chris Stafford, owner of Staffland Studio in Lafayette's historic Freetown. "It is as important as food and everything we have here culturally, it is so ingrained in who we are."

Joshua "Bubba" Murrell, owner of Treehouse Recording in New Iberia, has a similar take on it.

"Our musicians have heart, and they give 150 percent," says Murrell. "The bar is certainly set higher here as far as musical standards go, and there are so many talented people; the whole cultural attitude translates to the music."

While that spirit has remained steadfast for more than a century, Acadiana's recording industry is being rocked by an explosion of DIY studios. This has transformed the art of sound recording, making it simple, accessible and affordable for just about everyone.

"Instead of having four people create a song, it's just me," says songwriter and producer Alex Voorhies of Lafayette, who makes house calls with his portable recording equipment. Like most musicians, Voorhies got into the recording side of the business because he couldn't afford to hire a studio engineer to archive his own music. Murrell says technology has now made the whole process almost effortless. "All you need is a microphone to plug into your computer and you go from there, incorporating sounds available through software."

While most making recordings use live instruments and then incorporate digital sounds, Voorhies is the quintessential example of a DIYer who uses technology to its fullest capability.

"It's unbelievable what you can do and I'm 100 percent digital; I can transpose it, pitch it, and that doesn't include all the reverberations and modulating it with more crazy plug-ins."

Voorhies, who is currently working on a record for rapper Lil Wayne, says he likes to use all virtual instruments when he tracks a tune.

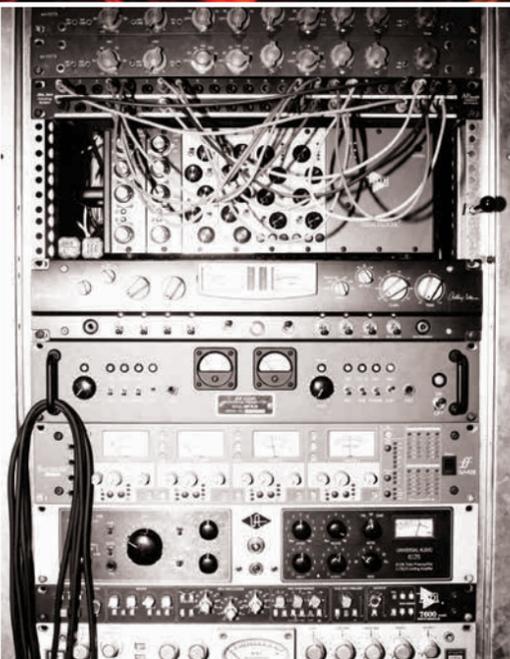
In a contrast of style, Murrell's DIY method is to record musicians live wherever they are performing then add in the editing and mixing, a two-part process.



LEFT 29-year-old Christ Stafford recording at his Staffland Studio in Lafayette's historic "Freetown" **TOP** Songwriter Dwight Roy with producer and drummer Zack Rhey recording hand claps **MIDDLE** Stafford, a musician himself, discussing recording with fellow musicians. **BOTTOM** Stafford recording from the control room.



TOP Leap-Studios' handmade CD chandelier
MIDDLE Paul Broussard working with producer Jonathan Romein (sitting). **BOTTOM** Leap-Studios rack unit for amplifying microphone signals. **RIGHT:** Leap-Studios' Paul Broussard focused on fine tuning sound for a Brother Jac recording.



"I want to get the best recording, and I find they play better in a live environment like the clubs — that's when they kick ass — but in the studio they stiffen up because the clock is ticking."

The proliferation of these DIY studios in Acadiana is evident, and has far outnumbered traditional studios 10 to one. While a handful of local studios are still going strong, the DIY shops are more attractive to those who are looking for a cheaper way record their music. Today, there are hundreds of DIYers in Acadiana, and most of them are coming out of the bands themselves.

"Every band is a DIY studio because somewhere in the band is a computer geek under the age of 40, and he is going to be pushing the record button on some type of recorder," says Murrell.

There are different levels of DIYers, from the singer/songwriter who records from his or her bedroom to the mid-level DIYers, who have built studios inside their homes or garages. That's where Paul Broussard, with Leap-Studios comes in to play. Broussard's studio, which was damaged during the August 2016 floods, is back up and running and attached to his Lafayette home.

"I spent about \$150,000 for my studio, and I use state of the art equipment with high quality microphones and monitoring," says Broussard.

The legendary La Louisianne Records and Studio has been in operation since 1948, but has taken a hit because of DIYs and downloading capabilities.

"Truthfully, there's no more room with the way the industry has gone now over last 10 years with digital streaming is cutting a lot of us out," says La Louisianne owner David Rachou. "There are still many out there touring and making money; it's just the merchandising that has dropped tremendously."

Rachou's father, the late Carol Rachou, founded La Louisianne and recorded Acadiana legends such as Nathan Abshire,





Aldus Rogere and Rufus Thibodeaux, and Rachou says his father would not believe the recording capabilities of today.

“When my dad started out it was live recording; that is all he had,” says Rachou. “You couldn’t go in and overdub on computers”

Rachou says his downtown Lafayette studio, which is chock-full of high-end vintage and digital equipment, is primarily involved in smaller recording projects.

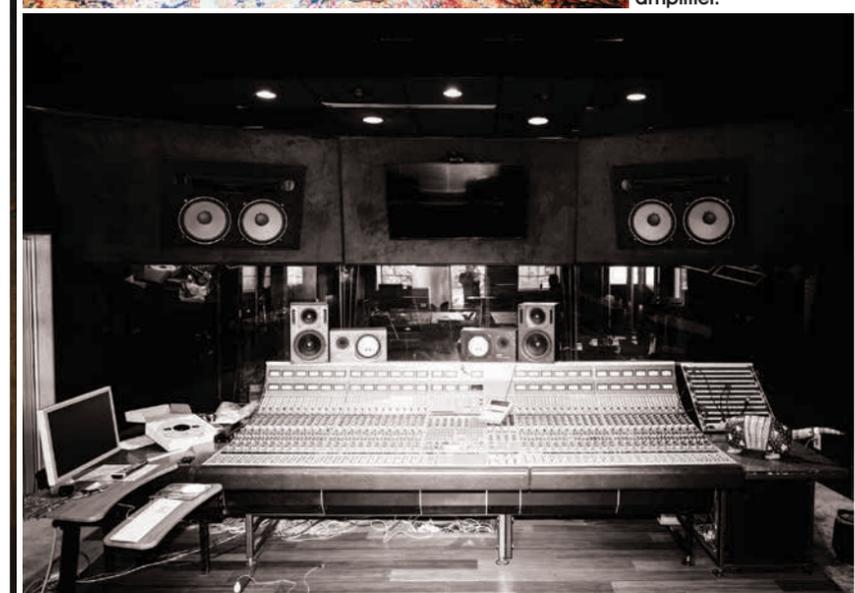
“There are no more larger projects with a label budget, says Rachou. “The recording process and the bands recording an album is becoming more of a promotion than a stream of income.”

While Rachou is churning out recording masters that his clients can upload, down on the banks of the Bayou Vermilion in Maurice is the iconic Docksider Studio, where owner Cezanne “Wish” Nails says the calendar is full of recording appointments. Docksider, a revered studio that has won several Grammys, sits on 23 scenic acres and seems untouchable, despite the integration of technology.

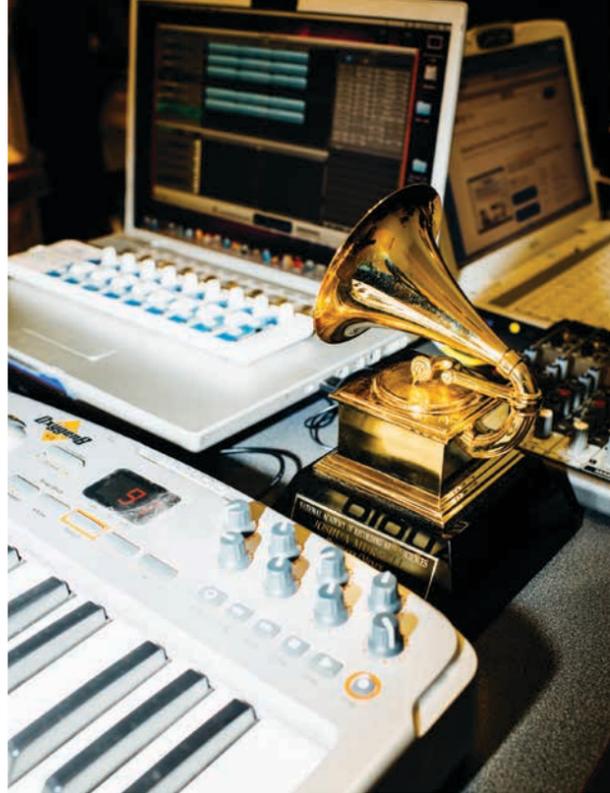
“Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits, Leon Russell and actress Scarlett Johansson have recorded here, and we have three Grammys for B.B. King,” says Nails. Docksider was also hit by the August 2016 flood. But, says Nails, “Thank God the Neve (console) was saved. People were thanking me for opening back up saying we really need you and what Docksider does for us.”

After all, the Docksider compound radiates a magical vibe where musicians can be comfortable, concentrate and clear their minds while recording their art.

While you would think the infiltration and growth of DIYers would bring about guarded competition between rival recording producers and engineers, it’s



LEFT Steve and Suzanne (Wish) Nails, the pillars of Docksider, in front of the old barn out of which they built a dream. **TOP** The Neve console, the heart and soul of Docksider. **MIDDLE TOP** Bassist Charlie Wootton’s gear sitting in Docksider’s Live Room. **MIDDLE BOTTOM** Docksider’s control room also designed by Steven Durr. **BOTTOM** The Ampeg, vintage amplifier.



TOP Joshua "Bubba" Murrell's Grammy shines amid his recording equipment. **MIDDLE** 62-year-old Murrell passionately talks music and recording from his New Iberia office. **BOTTOM** Murrell fine-tuning recording. **RIGHT** Murrell holds his "blessing", a Grammy he won for producing/mixing the Best Zydeco/Cajun Music album.



actually quite the opposite. Just as musicians have the innate desire to share their music through performing, producers and engineers are eager to help each other capture and document tunes for their fellow musicians.

"It's not like New York or Los Angeles," says Stafford, who is also a musician in the band Feufollet. "We are all friends and we want to see each other succeed in Acadiana."

This feeling is echoed by Muller, who says, "It's karma, and I've been given a lot. I got a Grammy for producing and engineering, and I consider myself very blessed and the best thing for me to do is to turn it around and help the fellow next to me."

Musicians who've been on the scene for decades acknowledge that this gold rush of DIY recordings has created opportunities they were never afforded when they arrived on the music scene. They are now able to document their music with little or no budget, and at a pace that doesn't involve any time constraints. Whether in the comforts of a home or on location, many DIYers say the digital age of duplication allows musicians to play with heart and not so mechanically, something sound engineers can actually feel during a recording. Whatever the methodology, these recordings can be instantly shared with the world on YouTube or any other social media site.

This alone has spearheaded a massive change in the industry, and has spread the music of Acadiana to millions of mainstream listeners. At the same time, this capability has contributed to the evolution and melding of Acadiana's musical genre for outside ears.

"All local folks are modifying music styles to popular music but not changing fundamentals, and we are getting the music closer to what they are used to," says Muller.

Artists from around the globe have made their way to Acadiana to capture some of the distinctive sounds they first heard on Spotify or Pandora; in fact, the digital mixing sessions of today are done via the internet without anyone having to cross the ocean by sharing digital audio files. The DIY world is radically and rapidly changing, and this year local manufacturers are creating mixers that have internal recording capability.

"Now you can have four to eight channels for two-hundred dollars with the computer interface and mixing board all in one little cute box," says Murrell.





While the technology improves, there's another movement creeping back in Acadiana: analog recording, where engineers use authentic methods and refurbished equipment to track records. Saul Pickett reigns in Acadiana with his Lafayette analog studio Magnetic Arts and Analog Recording, which he began six months ago to help fellow musicians like himself who can't afford to pay a recording studio.

"I have nothing but respect for the traditional music scene here, but there has been a fledging independent music scene which gets little exposure, and I want to help those people capture their music and store it for an indefinite time," says Pickett.

The painstaking task of working with the analog equipment is far from easy.

"To literally get the most out of a piece of gear, you have to go and cut out parts, replace parts and almost redesign and modify it," and that's exactly what Pickett, who is also an audio engineer, does with all of his vintage gear.

This growing interest among millennial musicians rediscovering vinyl, who are awestruck by the old-style recording process, is a phenomenon Rachou hopes will gain popularity. Rachou has the same capabilities with his vintage equipment at La Louisianne.

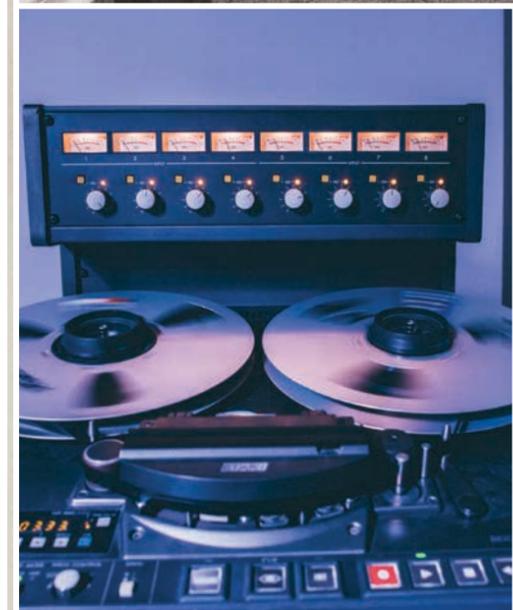
"Vinyl is making a little bit of surge and coming back; it has a different feel, a different sound," says Rachou. "Who knows? It may go back to recording live in a studio."

So, what's around the corner for the art and business of recording? Nails believes there are numerous possibilities.

"I think it's a vast amount of anything that can happen because the music industry has been turned upside down several times," says Nails. "It's not fully developed, and who knows where it's going. But we are happy to take the ride."

The overall tone about making and recording music in Acadiana seems to be one of hopeful excitement.

"People are always going to want their recordings, and it's going to become easier and easier," says Broussard. "Every time the next generation comes in, they grab the torch and the music moves them and they'll want to record that art. I know that I want to be there to help myself and others express themselves artistically. We are the vessel to make it possible."



LEFT 21-year-old Saul Pickett conducts analog recordings and uses refurbished equipment to track records. **TOP** Pickett and his assistant, Ethan Brasseaux, inside Pickett's Magnetic Arts and Analog Recording studio in Lafayette. **MIDDLE** Pickett and Brasseaux, inside the studio which opened seven months ago. **BOTTOM** Some of Pickett's reel-to-reel analog gear used in his recordings.