

IS THE PARTY OVER FOR RECORDED MUSIC?

by Ross A'hern*

[This article appeared on Joanne Kee's website on October 28, 2015, at this link <http://jazz.org.au/party-recorded-music/>]

Is the party over for recorded music? Well, I guess that's up to us. Can you imagine a world without music? No concerts, no gigs, no music to drive to, no movie themes, no love songs, not even any musical ring-tones? And therefore no musicians, of course. Such an existence is almost inconceivable because music is such an integral part of our daily lives.



Ross A'hern: can you imagine a world without music?...

**Ross A'hern is a live and recording engineer with over 30 years experience. Starting with live sound for rock bands in the late 70's, Ross moved quickly to jazz as live engineer for well-known jazz-fusion band Crossfire. From the early 80s until its close, Ross was resident sound engineer for the original Basement jazz club in Sydney, during which time he also worked as a recording engineer for CBS Records' studio. Through the 90's Ross managed the studio, renamed Sony Music Studios, and developed it into a profitable, state of the art, four-room facility which as well as servicing the marketing needs of the parent record company, also provided a viable and high-quality recording option for local bands. After leaving Sony Music at the end of 2005, Ross spent three years at the Sydney Opera House, and another two working for ABC Classic FM as a recording and live broadcast engineer. Ross now works as a freelance live and recording engineer, with a particular interest in ultra-high resolution and surround recording. He can be contacted at soundonsafari@yahoo.com.au.*

Yet while there are ample opportunities to enjoy live musical performances, the major source of music for most people, I would suggest, is through recordings in one form or another. Just as music is a vital part of how we bring meaning to human existence, so too is the ability to document and replay musical works and performances. Recording is not just an efficient and convenient way of capturing and sharing music, but also plays an integral part in documenting our musical culture and identity.

For jazz lovers, the value of being able to listen to Miles, Bird and Ellington, or Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday is obvious, but so too is the ability to go on enjoying the music of our own greats. Sadly, the only way we can now enjoy the playing of Bernie McGann or Allan Browne, for example, is through the recordings they left behind. It is this ability to preserve the musical brilliance, creativity and personality of such artists that makes recording so valuable and indispensable.



Sadly, the only way we can now enjoy the playing of Bernie McGann (left) or Allan Browne (below) is through the recordings they left behind...



You can't describe music; you have to hear it, and the better the recording, the more likely it is to convey the emotional impact of the original performance. For those of us who have spent our working lives learning and refining the skill of recording music faithfully, this is the ultimate goal – to present music through recordings that not only conveys detail and nuance but which also moves the listener emotionally. No medium will ever be more important than the content, but the ongoing quest to connect the listener with as much of the magic that musicians are creating is what drives us.

We are presently weathering a difficult period of oversupply, dubious quality and devaluation. The general acceptance of cheap or free mp3s as a convenient way of accessing music has not only reduced the chance of any involved in creating or recording music to sustain themselves, but has also reduced quality to a point where many have tuned out, and music is increasingly just a background for other activities. This isn't a good situation for anyone: creators or consumers.

On the topic of quality, whether we are talking about recording resolution or the expansion of stereo to surround, there are those that argue that the generally accepted standards are sufficient. However, I have never met any artist who aspires to be 'sufficient'!



How lucky are we now that Vincent Van Gogh (above) kept painting, despite the fact that no one liked his paintings at the time and thought he was crackers...

There are some of us that still see value in pushing the boundaries, even if what we are trying to do is not immediately understood or appreciated: why else are we engaged in this? How lucky are we now that Vincent Van Gogh kept painting, despite

the fact that no one liked his paintings at the time and thought he was crackers... OK, well maybe he was, but his paintings are now universally recognised as beautifully unique and priceless: it just took a generation or so for people to realise it. Likewise, there are many artists who created work we now accept as wonderful and amazing, who wouldn't have done anything if they had accepted the pre-requisite to 'meet the market'. To accept the situation is to give up. We have to find a way to transcend and redefine it.



Ross A'hern (left) in the recording studio with trumpeter Lee McIver (right) and unidentified person in the background... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

To this end, there are a group of us who have set up an enterprise we call Mir Creation (www.mircreation.com), which is dedicated to pursuing quality recording at high resolution and in surround. There is not enough space here to elaborate on either of these aspirations, but you can read more at www.mircreation.com/tech-talk.

Of greater importance, however, is the collaborative approach we are trying to take – replacing a simple service-provider model with one where all parties invest in the creation of quality recordings – and how we then distribute these recordings through our website as downloads, and share the proceeds directly. Remember there is strength in numbers and cooperation. Again, there is no space here to elaborate, but you can get a better overview at www.mircreation.com/about-mir-creation/how-mir-works.

You never know, maybe we might hear from one or two of you who are up for a creative adventure.