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5 Ferndale studios at epicenter of Detroit's music recording industry

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Vintage King Audio technician Jeff Spatafora looks over a refurbished Neve 8078 audio mixer at its warehouse in Ferndale. Vintage King specializes in providing vintage equipment to studios across the country. / Jarrad Henderson/Detroit Free Press

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By **Brian McCollum**
Detroit Free Press Pop Music Writer

Nestled along a half-mile stretch in Ferndale, among the rugged industrial shops and gray warehouses, is the bustling epicenter of Detroit's music recording scene.

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Most of the thousands who drive every day through this area by 9 Mile and Hilton probably don't even realize it's there: a concentration of high-end studios and audio firms humming with creativity and commerce, often around the clock.

You might call it Detroit's Music Row, in the fashion of Nashville, or our own mini Burbank, after the heart of the L.A. recording scene. Some of the most prominent sounds out of Detroit have passed through these mixing boards in recent years, including stuff by Eminem, the White Stripes, Kid Rock, Bob Seger, Insane Clown Posse, D12 and Detroit's techno greats.

"It's the motor for the music industry here," says Joel Martin, operator of 54 Sound, which planted its flag in Ferndale three decades ago.

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Mark Bass is co-owner of F.B.T. studio, which has hosted work by Eminem, D12, T.I. and the Dramatics. Bass, who has started a label called Motunes Media, says he's mixing new material by Sly Stone and members of the original Family Stone. / Jarrad Henderson/Detroit Free Press



Tempermill's team of studio engineers, from left: Erik Maluchnik, Jim Kissling, Dave Feeny, Tony Hamera and Matt Basner. Feeny estimates that more than 1,000 records have been made at the studio. / Tempermill



A drum booth at Effigy studio, which opened in 2004. / inForm Studio



General manager Scott Guy stands in the 'blue room' at 54 Sound, a four-building complex with multiple studios, mixing rooms and a video production berth. The studio does steady business with gospel, rock and R&B projects. / Jarrad Henderson/Detroit Free Press

There are other important studios in metro Detroit, including Studio A (Dearborn), Rustbelt (Royal Oak), Pearl Sound (Canton) and Kid Rock's Chophouse (Clarkston). Across the state in Benton Harbor, the Keyclub Recording Company has quietly become an indie-rock hotspot, site of recordings by bands such as the Black Keys, the Kills and Franz Ferdinand.

But in a disruptive digital era that's seen a culling of high-end studios nationwide and a proliferation of do-it-yourself home operations, Ferndale's studio row stands out. Nowhere else in Michigan — perhaps even between New York and Chicago — will you find a recording-industry cluster quite like this.

Here's a look behind the doors:

Effigy Studio

Eminem's home-away-from-home is a recording palace, secluded in a former manufacturing building and cloaked in mystique.

Rapper Big Sean recounted an April trip to the facility, opened in 2004 by audio engineer Thomas Johnson and purchased three years later by Eminem.

"I pull up to the studio and it's like a factory outside. I walk up in ... and it's lavish as hell," Big Sean told MTV. "I'm like, 'This is probably the most expensive thing in Detroit.'"

Designed by the Northville architectural firm inForm Studio, Effigy was hailed as a grand, state-of-the-art facility, unique for its time.

"They built the kind of studio that people don't make anymore," says 54 Sound's Martin.

Architect Michael Guthrie recalls the ambitious drive of Johnson, who spent \$1.5 million on design and construction and perhaps millions more on gear.

"The music industry had been so big around here, but there wasn't anything like this kind of studio anymore," he says. "Here was an opportunity to do something great."

The main performance room is its own building-within-a-building,



General manager Scott Guy stands in the 'blue room' at 54 Sound, a four-building complex with multiple studios, mixing rooms and a video production berth. The studio does steady business with gospel, rock and R&B projects. / Jarrad Henderson/Detroit Free Press

encased in concrete to elude noise from nearby train tracks. At 1,400 square feet, it's the sort of large studio space that was standard in the age of orchestras, outfitted with angled walls and latticework overhead.

"Thomas wanted to create a space with lots of reverberations to have a really live, acoustic feel," says Guthrie.

An adjacent vocal room, isolation booth and control room are all linked via windows.

Audio inputs were installed throughout the facility — even the bathroom — for flexible recording. A party room in the back looks upon a courtyard.

Effigy may have been a bit *too* opulent: The studio struggled for business before it was swooped up in 2007 by Eminem, after his stints at nearby 54 Sound and F.B.T. Studios. He's since recorded several albums there (including last year's "The Marshall Mathers LP 2") and related projects such as Slaughterhouse, Bad Meets Evil and 50 Cent.

Studio technician Norman Druce, who worked at Effigy in its early years, says the rapper rebuilt the control room, adding several earthshaking 18-inch, 1,000-watt subwoofers.

Eminem engineer Mike Strange talked about Effigy in a 2010 interview.

"Our main focus in getting the new studio was in creating a recording facility that was similar to other rooms Em had worked in and in which he is comfortable," he told Sound On Sound magazine. "We've developed a certain workflow over the years that means that we can move through the material very quickly, and in which the recording process has become almost invisible."

54 Sound

The legend already loomed large.

"Look, man, if everything goes well, you could be flowin' down at 54 Sound next week," a promoter tells the aspiring rapper played by Eminem in the 2002 film "8 Mile."

The first player on the 9 Mile studio scene was this facility, opened in 1985 when engineer Joel Martin, then teamed with musician George Clinton, was aiming to cut recording costs. The locale was strategic: Freeways were close, property was cheap, and "even in the '80s, they were calling this funky Ferndale," Martin says.

The studio's early days were dominated by funk and gospel — including the Clark Sisters and James Cleveland — and clients came to include artists such as Prince, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Patti Smith, Nicki Minaj and Juan Atkins.

But the figure who will forever be most linked with 54 Sound is one

Marshall Mathers: Having recorded much of his debut album with Dr. Dre in L.A., the rapper was eager to settle back home, and by 2000 was bunkered full time at the Ferndale site, working with a team that included producers the Bass Brothers, musician Luis Resto and engineer King.

"Dr. Dre would come here with his entourage and mixers, and camp out for weeks," says Martin. As Eminem became one of the world's best-known celebrities, a security fence was installed in the back, and guards were permanently stationed around the building.

A second studio was soon built in 54 Sound at Eminem's behest, with blueprints from the L.A. facility where he'd first worked with Dre. A dank storage room nearby became the rapper's preferred writing spot, as hits like "Lose Yourself" came to life.

The 54 Sound complex has grown to occupy four buildings, with multiple studios, mixing rooms and a video production berth. The Eminem craziness there has died down — the rapper bought his own studio in 2007 — but 54 does steady business with gospel, rock and R&B projects.

In a digital world, 54's emphasis is old-school. Martin stocked the place with vintage equipment through the years: an echo plate from United Sound, the organ from Aretha Franklin's New Bethel church, a Stephens 24-track tape machine, a Mellotron from the 1960s.

"We can get that groovy, greasy sound," says engineer King. "These kinds of studios are becoming very prized, because there are so few of them left."

Vintage King Audio

Next door to 54 Sound is headquarters for one of metro Detroit's coolest modern success stories. Vintage King, which specializes in classic audio gear and tech service, touts itself as the biggest operation of its kind in the world.

Clients include some of the biggest figures in the industry — Beyoncé, Coldplay, Adele, Jay Z, Alicia Keys, Pete Townshend, Kanye West — who turn to Vintage King for hard-to-find equipment, from studio monitors to microphones. The firm has outfitted entire studios for artists such as Will.I.Am and Macklemore & Ryan Lewis.

Vintage King, which has opened retail stores in Nashville and L.A., also supplies gear to all its Ferndale studio brethren.

The company was informally founded 21 years ago by brothers Mike and Andrew Nehra, who ran Detroit's White Room Studio and enjoyed a run of national attention with the band Robert Bradley's Blackwater Surprise.

"We did it because it was our own passion — we knew the classics were done with this gear," says Mike Nehra. "We figured if it's great, it will always be great. It's not a trend or a fad."

Maybe not a fad, but definitely a resurgence: Classic gear is now a

booming boutique industry, as producers add the warmth of analog devices to their digital rigs, and basement recording hobbyists catch the collecting bug. More than 22,000 fans follow the firm's Facebook page.

Nearby is the company's tech center and warehouse — 11,000 square feet of gear-geek paradise. A technician tinkers with vintage Neumann and RCA microphones; specialists devote a month of man-hours to restoration of a handsome Neve console; staffers clean and polish the compressors, tape machines and other units headed for sale on Vintage King's website.

"There wasn't an epicenter here yet," says Nehra of Vintage King's move to Ferndale in 2000, as the company outgrew its cramped site in downtown Detroit.

About 20% of the company's business is actual vintage gear, items snatched up from around the world. The rest is new product, built by firms such as Retro Instruments in the mold of the classic stuff.

Last year was the company's best yet, with just under \$35 million in revenue, according to Nehra. Vintage King employs about 75 people nationwide, including a Ferndale staff of about 45, many of them musicians after dark.

F.B.T. Studios

Flush from their success as producers for Eminem at 54 Sound, brothers Mark and Jeff Bass decided in 2004 to invest \$2.2 million in their own custom studio up the street.

Years earlier, Mark Bass had been the first to record the teenage Eminem — Bass still calls him "the kid" — launching a two-decade ride that he says "was like two corkscrews at Cedar Point."

F.B.T. is in a nondescript building that once housed an ad agency and dental lab. "Now it's a circus," says Bass.

Just like at 54 Sound, the main room was designed with Eminem in mind, fashioned after the L.A. studio he'd come to love. (You can catch glimpses of the just-finished F.B.T. in Eminem's "Like Toy Soldiers" video.)

"We made it like a race car: We had the design, and just kept going," says Bass. "We drove the builder crazy."

At the center of it all is a massive SSL 8088 mixing board, capable of taking 176 separate feeds of sound. Bass says it's the biggest console in Detroit.

F.B.T. has hosted work by artists such as Eminem, D12, T.I. and the Dramatics, and now serves mostly as a personal musical playground for Mark Bass and his assorted projects, including an upcoming album of Motown cover songs by George Clinton.

Bass, who has started a label called Motunes Media, says he's also been mixing new material by the mercurial funk-pop giant Sly Stone

with members of the original Family Stone band, along with new D12 tracks, including three with Eminem.

Tempermill

Dave Feeny was recording local bands in his parents' basement when he opted to go big in 1989: He bought a onetime chiropractor's office on Hilton, stuck an ad in the back of the Metro Times, maxed out his credit cards and launched what would become one of the most prolific studios in metro Detroit.

The list of Tempermill clients through the years is sprawling, from big Detroit names like Kid Rock and Jack White to national figures such as Loretta Lynn, John Hiatt and Gov't Mule. And it's been a go-to spot for rising musicians making a go at pro recording.

"Everyone in town at some point has walked in the door," says Feeny.

That means the energy at Tempermill is invariably upbeat: "The guys who are coming in are so enthusiastic about being here, it rubs off on you. It's infectious."

Feeny figures more than 1,000 records have been cut at Tempermill through the years.

"I don't think anyone has made more records in Detroit than we have since Motown," he says.

With two studios, a spacious control room and five engineers, Feeny has kept alive the dream he had a quarter-century ago, when "my business plan was just to make really good records, and make a living doing it."

Also on the agenda for Feeny, whose studio alumni include Jim Diamond (Ghetto Recorders) and Geoff Michael (Big Sky Recording): a new artist collective called Gangplank, which will issue releases this year by Detroit bands including the Hard Lessons and Blanche.

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