

Black Lodgers Ed Rose and Ryan Pope talk about the past and the prospective future of their storied Eudora studio by Richard Gintowt, May 19, 2009

There's a giant FOR SALE banner hanging on the front of Black Lodge Recording Studio in Eudora, Kansas. If anyone steps up, one of our music scene's defining institutions could begin anew. Otherwise, it'll most likely disappear.

The area's pre-eminent music studio has been on the market for six months. With no takers as yet, \$300,000 gets you the studio and all its equipment; \$200,000 gets you an empty old building in downtown Eudora.

For 20 years, the studio has churned out some of the best records in local history, by such artists as the Get Up Kids, Ultimate Fakebook, Koufax, the Casket Lottery, the Appleseed Cast, Coalesce, Vedera and many more. It has brought national acts like Motion City Soundtrack and Brandtson to town to make records in the homey confines of Eudora, where the spirit is fed by relative isolation and Jasmin Restaurant's bold pairing of Chinese and Mexican takeout.

Even today, amid all the music industry's struggles, Black Lodge maintains a steady business. This month's clients include Coalesce, Empires, the Sexy Accident and Black Tie. So why is it for sale?

First and foremost, the three owners are moving on to new adventures. Get Up Kids Ryan and Rob Pope are getting up and moving to Portland, Oregon, and engineer Ed Rose wants to make records in places other than Eudora (he recently worked a gig in Australia). The three entrepreneurs bought the studio in 2002 from Sam Platt, who owned it throughout the '90s when it was called Red House.

There's a palpable sense of exhaustion exuding from Ed and Ryan when I meet with them to discuss the pending sale. Part of that is attributable to the fact that they also own a bar (the Bourgeois Pig in downtown Lawrence), and part is due to the changing nature of the recording industry.

"When music became free, that wrecked the entire business model of how the industry had been functioning for 100 years," Ed says. "While I do think there will be fewer and fewer studios, there have to be some — otherwise, making music gets gross."

Gross is a word that Ed uses a lot these days. He uses it to describe the vogue process of making computerized records with fake drums and pitch correction (which he's a whiz at, by the way). He also uses it to describe the "death of musicianship" that he has encountered of late.

"Every kid understands how much power the computer has to correct performances, and that's led to apathy," he says. "From an engineering standpoint, I can fix anything now. But when fixing one thing turns into every drum hit or every syllable, that takes the fun right out of it."

Gross could also characterize the current budgets that record labels give bands to make records. What used to be a \$20,000 album is now more likely to be a \$10,000 album. Ed says he first started noticing the shrinking budgets in 2006 while working with Brandtson, a Cleveland band that records for the Militia Group label.

"The label came up with a new formula based on previous album sales," he says. "Back in the good old days, you signed a contract for x amount of records with the budget increasing for each one."

The trend isn't a death knell for studios like Black Lodge, but it does sound a warning bell.

"Whoever buys this studio will have to spend all their free time out here and take any gig that walks through the door," Ed says. "Every once in a while, a studio needs a shot in the arm, and at this stage in the game, I'm not sure how many of those I can deliver."

The news of the sale conjured up a decent amount of interest right out of the gate, but each potential buyer fell prey to investors who backed out or to bank loans that fell through.

"I think everyone's a bit scared to get into a new business, which is what we're told to be," Ryan says. "We had to convince ourselves that it was a good idea [to buy the Bourgeois Pig], and it turned out to be a great idea." Ideally, Ed and Ryan will still be able to execute Plan A: handing over the keys to a new owner and continuing to work at the studio.

"Pulling out all my drums and setting them up — that's still fun for me," Ed says. "While I do love that room, I'm looking forward to not being responsible for tarring the roof when there's a leak on a hot day." In the meantime, Black Lodge is still open for business, and Ed is still working on his pet project of creating a drum-sample library to sell to a company such as FXpansion.

"Drum libraries are huge right now because it's easier than learning how to record them the right way," he says. "From a technological standpoint, I think it's amazing. But it adds to the homogenized grossness that is music today."

Business is business, but let's hope Black Lodge survives.