

# PALM AV-ICN

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# HOW I HAVE SEEN STUDIOS EVOLVE

## *Growing up in a studio environment*

by Aditya Mehta

I was about three years old when we were suddenly moved to another bedroom in our house in Andheri. My father, (late) **Nikhil Mehta**, urgently needed to build a studio in our house in a timeframe of 3 days! The year was 1977. He borrowed carpets and mattresses from his uncle's bungalow next door. Jute mats and heavy curtains were placed on the walls, and a makeshift control room was constructed in one balcony. All windows were sealed with plywood. A wall between the balcony and the living room was broken down to install a glass partition. A small mixer sourced from Lamington Road cost him Rs. 650. Sitting all night, he personally converted that mono mixer into stereo. With borrowed microphones and his spool tape recorder, he recorded a full 7 song album, with six singers and eight musicians together. It was later commercially released and distributed by **Oriental Melodies** on audio cassettes. A company called **Movac** had introduced cassette tapes in India the same year.

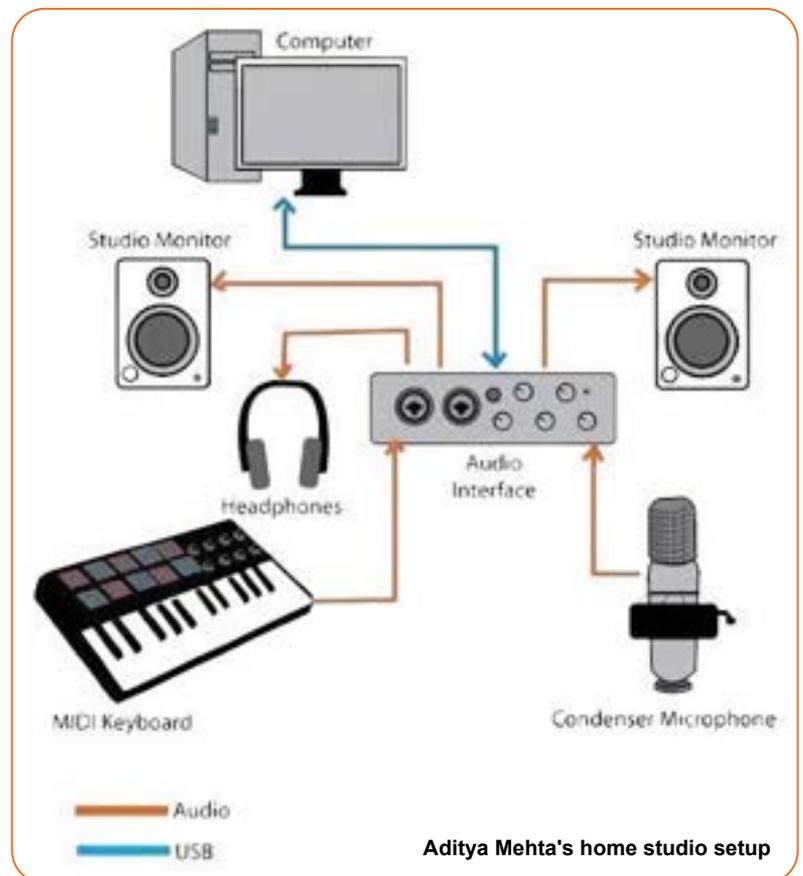
Much later I learnt that this makeshift studio was born out of necessity, as a music label had gone back on its promise. The entire household had pitched in to help my father. My aunt, Kishori, became an album producer. My mother, Sudha, handled the canteen service (and later worked on translations for some audiobooks). Within a couple of months, the control room was moved to the other balcony. Our living room became the main recording hall. And a much-better acoustically treated studio was built. The studio spanned about 1,500 sq. ft., with our home becoming the remaining half, but had a separate entrance.

At the time, Bombay had only six to eight recording studios. Import duties on audio equipment stood at a staggering 350%. **All India Radio** had its own studio for content production for its various broadcast stations, while the other commercial studios focused on film music - where the equipment was to be recorded audio directly onto film rather than on a separate tape. The level of live music recording skills in those days is unparalleled today - both for music and background score. Suburban Bombay had no studios yet; Mehboob Studio in Bandra was the last stop before heading to Tardeo for the majority of the film studios there. And now in 1977, **Sudeep Studio** was born in Andheri. It was dedicated to non-film work, including radio spots, private label albums (now called indie music), dramas, documentaries, spiritual recordings, and TV serial title songs. In hindsight, Andheri becoming the recording hub of Bombay today might be Nikhil Mehta's doing!

### The Growth of Technology and the Industry

The Asiad Games at Delhi in 1982 boosted TV sales, and neighbours would gather at the privileged TV owner's house. TV serials like *Hum Log* began in 1984. And we had just 2 hours of TV broadcast everyday. Around the same time cassette players became affordable and that propelled sale of non-film albums. Radio and TV were already covering film songs. When Mahabharata aired on TV (1988), even metros like Bombay came to a standstill. Recording sessions paused at Sudeep Studio, as musicians watched the episode at our home before resuming work next-door. The 1980s generation fondly remembers *Chayyageet* on Wednesdays, and Sunday film timings on DD even today! Audio and media equipment like radios, cassette players, TVs were highly cherished items in homes. Music consumers also treasured their music albums on cassettes (and later, even CDs).

In the next few years, 4-track recorders evolved into 8-track and then 24-track devices. Electronic drum machines too were making a mark. But were taken as a novelty item initially. My father predicted that increasing track



counts for recording would not only keep musicians busier but will eventually dilute the team spirit of music creation as a "team". He said, "While we studio owners will benefit due to more hours getting booked, the album producers and music labels will have to bear the increase in recording costs." With a handful of studios in Bombay, our own studio was pre-booked for months in advance. With the arrival of DD Metro channel, advertising jobs started increasing faster.

In the 1990s, the advent of 24-hour TV channels like Zee, Sony, etc. led to exponential demand for content producers and therefore more recording studios were born. Hard disk recorders started coming in, to be followed by computer-based recordings. Studios started getting classified as film studio, non-film studio, advertising studio, etc. based on their location. Advertising work primarily happened in Fort, Worli and then Bandra. Juhu and Andheri studios were doing more film and album work. This was mainly because the corporates and ad agencies were based in Nariman Point and Fort area. And film fraternity was living in Bandra, Juhu and Andheri. Another trivia is that only in suburban studios, footwear was to be kept outside the dubbing rooms. There were canteens attached to most of these studios which used to serve tea, snacks and tea.

### Why am I sharing these intricate details?

1. Many young readers may not know of such recording practices.
2. There were no institutes except for FTII, Pune, and much later Mumbai University & SFTII Kolkata for audio.
3. The new digital technology era that was setting in has now eradicated several subtle and feel-good factors of music creation, as mentioned above.

## The 90s Digital Era

*Roja* (1992) marked the arrival of **A.R. Rahman's** unique sound and home-recording studio possibilities. While he did use some live instruments in that album, digital production took centre stage. Samplers, synthesizers, and drum machines gradually started replaced 'real' musicians. Large studios shrank in size as technology advanced. Those who failed to adapt were getting left behind. In 2002, we introduced *SwarShala*, followed by *SwarPlug* in 2004, under *SudeepAudio.com*. This software featured 74 Indian instrument samples, developed by French musician Mariano Etchepareborda with samples of several Indian musicians. I helped with the interface design, and ensured its wide-spread distribution by going door to door to studios and homes of musicians in Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai. At the time, we all didn't fully grasp the downsides of digitization, but if we hadn't done it, someone else would have. Selling software in physical boxes presented its own challenges like customs clearances, waiting times, etc. Piracy was (and still is) the biggest hurdle of them all. There was poor internet connectivity right till 2015 and so box-packs existed even in a digital era! However, improved recording digital audio workstations (DAWs) like **Pro Tools**, **Logic**, **Acid Pro**, and **Ableton**, along with virtual instruments like **Omnisphere**, **Stylus RMX**, and **Elastik Player**, turned the computers into production powerhouses on the size of a simple desk!

## The State of Studios Today

From smaller sized rooms, recording studios now shrank into personal bedrooms. Reflection filters from companies like **SE Electronics** allow singers to record at home. Plugins from Waves and iZotope enable audio cleanup. Until 2014, Macs dominated audio recording, but Windows PCs gained traction with a stable Windows 7 OS. The number of music creators has moved beyond Mumbai and skyrocketed across India. **FL Studio**, still the top-selling DAW on **SudeepAudio.com** in 2025, reflects this shift.

Large recording studios sit empty, as products like Vienna Symphonic Libraries replace live violin and orchestral sections. As sound engineer **Shantanu Hudlikar** advises, "Know the original instrument sound before using samples."

Pro Tools, once priced Rs. 2 lakh with mandatory hardware costing another Rs. 4-6 lakh, is now available at Rs. 21,000-55,000 yearly subscription, running on affordable audio interfaces from any brand. Software is instantly downloadable from SudeepAudio.com, eliminating box-packs and customs issues adding to the instant gratification need we all are getting used to. Studio-sized mixing consoles are replaced by software mixers. Only live drums and Indian instruments still require commercial studios. Many singers now have their own recording spaces, saving time and money, and helping them offer package deals to producers. As sound engineer **Mujeeb Dadarkar** notes, "Studios are now run by accountants. Creativity has taken a back seat."

COVID-19 accelerated remote work. Many OTT shows were dubbed in the actors' homes by themselves using their phone's headsets and mailed to the studios during the lockdown! That gave the confidence that even post-production jobs can be done in small home setups! This also helps cutting commercial rent and commute time for the sound engineers and musicians. Large spaces are being primarily booked only for final screenings. Freelancers offering package deals have also affected the income levels in the industry. Unfortunately, film actors remain India's highest-paid entertainment professionals, while music and audio departments receive minimal compensation, despite being expected to deliver Hollywood-level sound. As Sound Engineer

**Baylon Fonseca** says, "Even vegetable vendors on the same street don't undercut each other. Why can't we sound engineers unite on the minimum fees front?"

## The Changing Landscape

Music consumption is now purely app-driven, heard on mobile phones with bluetooth earbuds primarily. No one buys albums anymore. Music is now being treated as a 'free' commodity, thanks to app-subscriptions inbuilt by mobile networks in their monthly plans. YouTube is the second most used search engine after Google, where music is being consumed - again, for free. Yes, Vinyl records are making a come back in the USA. However, each record costing in the range of Rs. 3000-5000 makes it quite unaffordable in India. On the audio education front, there are free tutorials being offered by several young sound engineers on social media. A lot is changing, and too fast.

### A comparison of past and present scenario:

4. New technology has enabled home setups for both music creation and post-production, including modern acoustics.
5. Advertising jobs spike only during live events like IPL.
6. Studios are over-supplied not just in Bombay, but across India.
7. Certain genres, like Indian classical and ghazals, are fading.
8. Computer-based production dominates; the magic of live recording sessions has diminished.
9. Collaboration between musicians and sound engineers is rare; though **PALM Expo** and **IRAA Awards** foster networking.
10. Listeners skip tracks within seconds if they're not engaged.
11. Entertainment overload has reduced attention spans; even three-minute songs now feel too long to listen to!

## The Future of Studios

In such a tech-driven scenario, will existing studios survive? Yes - but only the strongest. Many that sprang up hastily post-Covid to ride the content creation wave are already shutting down. It is not that there is no work happening in the industry and that everything is going downhill. But some new, unexpected challenges have indeed come up. For instance, with a sudden and big rise in rental costs in Mumbai for commercial spaces, and an increasing number of freelance engineers working from home, only the most resilient studios will endure. It is also pertinent that Film, OTT, and TV producers start valuing the work that sound engineers bring to the 'desk' - both in music and post-production. They definitely add creativity to the final output, and are not to be treated as just mere technicians. As AI continues to disrupt the industry (e.g. mastering can be now done within Apple Logic DAW), the key lies in embracing this new computing method as a tool, much like other technological advancements that have shaped modern audio production.

A recording studio will always thrive when it again becomes a meeting space for creative minds (re-read the first 2-3 paras of this article). Today, most studios have the best of gear. But it is the "vibe" of a studio - its soul - that helps creativity flow, just like what I've experienced in my own childhood at our studio. Love, laughter, food, and THEN the music recording begins.

Let us all come together and help build a healthier future of music creation; where expertise of real musicians and experienced audio engineers is truly valued along with healthy + timely payments. And that our sound recording industry stands united to help nurture each other and grow together.

Fingers crossed.



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