

Below is an article that resulted in a \$1,500 scholarship. It was published in The Daily News Journal, but because of space issues, the majority of it had to be cut. This version is the original complete one.

Job-seeking blues:

Looking for employment in ‘a tight industry’

Declining revenues, downsizing in recording business leave some MTSU students jobless after graduation, while others still squeezing their way in

By his sophomore year of high school, Zach Sensabaugh had his life planned out: He wanted to work as an audio engineer and spend decades worth of late nights behind a console of buttons that some might contest looks more like the first computer rather than something that produces music.

He applied to one college – Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tenn. – because of its nationally known recording industry program. Sensabaugh didn't let the school's distance from his Virginia home or the extra expenses that come with being an out-of-state student deter him from his dreams.

Since he wanted to become an audio engineer, Sensabaugh chose the program's production/technology concentration instead of its other two options, music business and commercial songwriting.

Now, almost a year and a half after his December 2008 graduation from the university and what he estimates to be more than 500 job applications later, he's back at home, substitute teaching about five times a month.

"Since I graduated, I've been applying to every single opening [in the recording industry] I can find," said Sensabaugh, 23. "I was actually offered a job, but then the studio went bankrupt."

Sensabaugh is one of many recording industry graduates who have discovered that in spite of earning a degree from what is frequently promoted by MTSU as one of its premier programs, landing a job can sometimes prove to be a near impossible task. The reasons, experts say, can keep even the most determined, intelligent and talented graduates from finding employment.

The slumping economy, coupled with drops in CD sales, have flustered the crafters of the industry's business models and created tight budgets for management companies, publishing firms and recording studios alike. And thanks to recording programs that can be operated on home computers, such as Pro Tools and Garage Band, virtually anyone with a few extra dollars can become somewhat of an audio engineer.

"Our industry has contracted to be sure," said Dan Pfeifer, a 19-year veteran faculty member of MTSU's Department of Recording Industry, known at the school as the RIM (recording industry major) department. "It's fundamentally a tough industry. Our economy is bad, our industry is in a decline – so there are a lot of things conspiring against students to be successful."

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics could be perceived as proving Pfeifer's point, though it's hard to tell because the BLS groups the recording and movie industries together.

The BLS's "motion pictures and sound recording industries" category employed about 333,000 people as of February, down from 355,000 a year ago and 380,000 in

2008. The past two years have been the hardest on those industries since the turn of the century, the data shows, because from 2000 to 2008, the total number of employees fluctuated at much smaller increments.

"This is the worst year I've ever had," said Gene Breeden, 74, owner of Gene Breeden Recording Studio in Nashville. "I've talked to my friends who own studios and they've said the same things."

Representatives from the Recording Industry Association of America were unavailable for comment, but Mitch Bainwol, chairman and CEO of the RIAA, told *The Tennessean* in March: "We are halfway through a rough age...It's a tricky time, and we're probably at our low point."

Bainwol estimated that revenues for the recording industry now total around \$8 billion as compared to \$15 billion a decade ago.

Mike Anderson, a 2005 MTSU graduate who chose the RIM department's music business concentration, said he feels his inability to find music-related work is a consequence of these declining revenues. Since graduation, his "plans have changed," he added.

"I'm not doing anything music related at all," said Anderson, 28. "I started off stocking music and movies at Walmart – that was about as close to the music industry as I got. There were no jobs."

Anderson is now enrolled in Ohio State University's city and regional planning master's program.

Like Anderson, 22-year-old Gina Antonini is taking a completely different path than her original music-based one. She graduated with a RIM degree in commercial

songwriting in May 2009, and after nearly a year of hunting, she finally landed a job. Even though her work doesn't correlate with her degree, she said she's thankful nonetheless.

"I got a job this month, but it's not at all in recording; it's in real estate," she said. "At this point, any job is good."

To be sure future recording graduates like Anderson and Antonini know what they're getting into, Nancy Stubblefield, career coordinator for MTSU's College of Mass Communication, sends out an e-mail every year to all RIM freshmen saying: "I will be honest with you, the recording industry is a tight industry and many of the jobs are not posted through traditional methods."

The average salary for those who have found jobs in this "tight industry" and reported their numbers back to MTSU is listed on the university's Web site at \$28,482, the ninth lowest on the list of 47 programs. Stubblefield said the actual number is probably higher, though, because very few students who are hired send in their information.

Amid the disheartened, hard-earned success emerges

John Furr found a niche that has helped him stay employed in the ever-shrinking recording industry. After completing his post-graduation internship with The Tracking Room in Nashville, he was hired by the studio as an equipment repairperson.

It's not the type of work the May 2009 RIM graduate originally expected, but, he said, he loves it – "I love it a lot. If there was a bed, I'd probably sleep here."

For Furr, 25, his internship was invaluable in finding employment. The relationships he developed through it and the fact that he was “open to anything” as far as a job was concerned also helped, he said.

“For people looking to do things in the industry, one of the best pieces of advice is not to get too much tunnel vision,” said Furr, who graduated with a RIM degree in production/technology.

There wouldn’t be any financial reason for his employer to let him go now, he said, because he saves the studio more money through repairs than it pays him.

“Plus [having all the equipment in order] makes the studio look better,” Furr said.

Like Furr, Brad Sanders completed an internship; also like Furr, he is doing work that doesn't deal directly with his production/technology degree.

He does radio promotions for Chauffer Records in Nashville. It's a part-time gig, so Sanders, 23, has to do auctioning work on the side to pay the bills.

His job at Chauffer requires him to call radio stations across the country in hopes of getting airtime for the artists on his label.

"It's difficult to accomplish," the May 2008 graduate said. "You have to get used to being told no 95 percent of the time – well actually it's more than that."

Sanders said he hopes his hard work – or as he calls it "banging my head against the wall" – will pay off as his label grows.

The things that Furr and Sanders are doing – completing internships, being open to all types of jobs and working hard – are essential in finding and keeping employment after graduation, Pfeifer said. Among the cases of unemployed graduates he has seen, the RIM professor emphasized that there are still plenty of success stories.

One of the professor's former students, Josh Newell, has been doing quite well, Pfeifer said, adding that Newell is currently producing an album with the rock band Lincoln Park. This success came after what many in the recording field call "paying your dues."

"He's the guy who went out there, lived in the 2-bedroom apartment with three other people, and ran for pizza and coffee to get to the next level," Pfeifer said. "[He] worked it, worked it, worked it to pursue his passion, and now he's working on a Lincoln Park record."

Newell, 31, earned a post-graduation internship in Los Angeles with some help from Pfeifer, who is also the audio internship coordinator for MTSU's RIM program.

After completing his internship, Newell was hired on by a different music company as a "runner," which is "basically a glorified paid intern position," Newell said. He held that position for four-and-a-half years.

"You're the first one that opens up in the morning and does the vacuuming, [and] you're the last one to leave at night after cleaning everything up," Newell said. But, he emphasized, it's all worth it.

After about 80 job applications preceding his time as a runner and witnessing many LA-based studios close down, Newell was hired by NRG Studios in Los Angeles, which is where he is currently working with Lincoln Park.

"By the time I graduated [in 2001], the industry was already in a decline," he said. "It's just nice to make a living in this industry considering how much it has shrunk."

'A heck of a deal'

Pfeifer said that though there are no statistics on the percentage of RIM graduates finding music-related work, one thing he does know is that compared to schools with similar recording programs, MTSU is "a heck of a deal" as far as tuition and fees are concerned.

For the 2009-2010 school year, which includes both fall and spring semesters, full-time, in-state MTSU students had to pay a little more than \$6,000 for both tuition and fees, according to the university's Web site. For out-of-state students, many of which come to school specifically for the RIM program, that total tripled to about \$18,000. Rates for the 2010-2011 school year will not be released until July.

The increase in price for those traveling to Tennessee from different states to attend MTSU, a public institution, is still more cost efficient than three comparable schools that Pfeifer identified: Belmont University in Nashville, Berklee College of Music in Boston and the University of Miami – all private colleges.

According to the universities' Web sites, UM is the most expensive, costing just under \$38,000 in tuition and fees for the 2010-2011 school year.

Behind UM is Berklee, which is set to cost about \$32,500 for the next school year.

For students planning on attending Belmont during the 2010-2011 school year, tuition and fees will total about \$23,000.

Sometimes, though, it's worth it to pay more if you can, said Reynaldo Sanchez, chair of UM's Department of Music Media and Industry.

"If you're going to come to our school and you're going to pay us money, you're going to get something out of it," he said.

One of his department's selling points is the size of its student population as compared to public institutions like MTSU, Sanchez said.

UM's audio engineering concentration has about 60 students who stay with the program until graduation, he said, adding that number is around 100 for the school's music business concentration. MTSU's Web site states that once combined, the three concentrations within its recording industry program have an average enrollment of between 1,200 and 1,700 students, making the average per concentration between 400 and 560 students.

One disadvantage of attending UM, Sanchez said, is location – most of the music produced in the Miami area, including hip-hop and techno, is produced in “smaller settings,” meaning that songs are sometimes made and marketed by as few as one person, he described.

This is why MTSU's proximity to Nashville, which is about 35 miles northwest of Murfreesboro, is such a great thing for the university's students, Sanchez said.

“The nature of music in Nashville, it's a little bit different,” he said. “Since it's insulated by country music, there are more recording studios and more recording in the traditional sense.”

But, Pfeifer said, Nashville is nonetheless being forced to evolve, albeit slower than other markets. For those companies that don't, he added, they won't be able to survive in the industry.

The future of the program and industry

Since enrolling in MTSU's RIM program, Tim Kreitz has formed a better picture of what life could be like post-graduation. He said he knows the job market is slim, and many of those who do manage to enter it aren't doing things that specifically pertain to their degrees. But, the 21-year-old junior conveyed, he's "not really scared."

"I'm really excited to graduate and start my career," said Kreitz, a production/technology RIM major. "I expect and am willing to pay my dues as I work to achieve the dream job. If that means making coffee, I'm going to learn to make great coffee."

Some of his professors have been "positive" as far as the job market is concerned, he said, while others have been "pretty straightforward."

"The positive guys are like, 'Yeah go out there and record,' but the real ones are like, 'Yeah, you know you're going to have to run cable and make coffee before you'll be working with [recording consoles]'," Kreitz said.

To keep future graduates like Kreitz viable in the job hunt, Pfeifer said he and the program's 25 other professors are constantly restructuring their department's curriculum so it is cohesive with the recording industry outside of academia.

"The equation has changed quite a bit," he said. "The idea is to address that change by defining the equation a little bit differently."

Pfeifer said that while RIM students are still being taught traditional techniques that involve recording studios, they are now learning how to also use home-studio programs like Pro Tools.

“We, like the industry, have to evolve to serve the students and get them as best prepared as we can,” he said. “We still teach a lot of traditional stuff, but only as the business model allows.”

Whether individual songs are being made by a large studio or a single computer, they are selling at increasing numbers via the Internet, evidenced by sales from Apple’s iTunes.

Peer-to-peer programs, like Napster and Kazaa, that provided free music exchange in the early 2000s made it nearly impossible to make a profit from Internet downloading. But thanks to legislative lobbying and legal action from various recording artists and organizations over the last decade, pay-per-song programs like iTunes – which saw its 10 billionth song downloaded earlier this year – and other digital forms of music transmission have been able to emerge as potential lifesavers to the recording industry.

“The curve is going back up not on just physical units, but on the basis of all these digital buckets – ad-supported subscription, mobile, digital downloads, you name it,” the RIAA’s Bainwol told *The Tennessean*. “The only question is over how long of a period of time will we see the curve go back up.”

Recorded music, Pfeifer said, has sometimes proven to be nowhere near as profitable, though, as another field the RIM program has began teaching classes in – live sound.

“It’s interesting how you used to go buy the inexpensive concert ticket to go to the concert, and then hopefully you would go buy the record,” he said. “Now when you buy the concert ticket, you get the free download of the entire album. So we’ve flipped this entire equation.”

To help each other keep up with all the changes in MTSU's 35-year-old RIM program and the industry as a whole, a group of recording students started the first recording industry fraternity – named Omega Delta Psi – in 2006.

“The beautiful part about [our organization] is it gives us, as the next generation in the industry, a chance to get rid of the old model and start fresh,” said Dana Lalevee, the organization's secretary and a 21-year-old RIM senior. “We're kind of a breeding group for new ideas.”

ODP alumni and RIM professors alike attempt to help secure internships and jobs for the 60-plus members of the organization, Lalevee said.

“We have a really good reputation with the faculty, and they come to us first with opportunities,” she said. “There's potential – you just have to get out there and try.”

Brad Sanders said he knew there was potential before he graduated, but he also knew realizing that potential wasn't going to be an easy hill to climb.

As he continues to work at Chauffer Records, playing it day-by-day, he explained he can only do the task he was hired to do while the industry shapes itself around him. Hopefully, Sanders said, that shape will be in a form that works to not only his advantage, but also the advantage of all the others who are earning – or hoping to earn – their livelihoods through recording.

“I was not under any misconception that it was going to be easy getting a foothold in this industry – my professors certainly did not lead me to believe that,” he said. “I do feel like I've made progress, though, and I'm continually working towards that.”