



# Exploring the Big Four production styles and the recording industry in Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

This study identifies the key characteristics of the four music production styles mentioned by Owsinski (2014). The production styles can be traced back to four main origins, being London, Chicago, Nashville and New York. The study used a historical research paradigm, to trace the music production styles that gave birth to the Zimbabwe recording industry. The study endeavoured in the first place to trace the arrival of recording studios in Africa and, in particular, Zimbabwe. This effort assisted the researchers with important insights into the predominant production style found in Zimbabwean music. The pertinent music productions encompass both the analogue and digital eras. The pioneers of these styles were unveiled through various literature, and effects found in mixing and their main purposes were also documented for this study. It was noted that Gallo Records from London played an immense role in shaping and moulding Zimbabwe's music production, placing the roots of music production in line with the key tenets of the London model. Regardless of the dominance of the London music production style, there are traces of the Chicago, Nashville and New York models. It can be concluded that the Zimbabwe music production model borrowed from various production styles, especially as the dominance of digital technology is ever-increasing globally and locally. Further studies will benefit the academia if similar studies are engaged to examine other countries in Africa and other developing nations globally to see how London, Chicago, Nashville and New York impacted the recording industries thereof.

## Introduction

With the advent of recording technology, western engineers had to learn to use the equipment in their studios to achieve the best sound accorded for production. Through trial and error, in pursuit of new sounds, engineers began to model specific techniques known to them during their time. As a result, distinct sounds could be heard; such that anyone could tell where any recording was made. For sound to be distinct, it should have clarity, uniqueness, definition, be well defined and exude characteristics that can be recognised without struggle. Our paper discusses the music production styles that shaped the global and local industry in Zimbabwe. Even though music production styles have identifiable standards, we aver that New York, Nashville, Los Angeles, and London exerted influence on music



productions globally. Exploring how the alluded production styles shaped the Zimbabwe recording industry is critical. Data for this study were drawn from literature and critical listening to music recordings in the acoustically treated listening environment.

Everest and Pohlmann (2014) view critical listening as indispensable for audio professionals. It helps to forecast and unpack elements of music production. Franze (2008) says critical listening is a skill for music producers to identify and create unique musical features. We selected songs and subjected them to critical listening to unpack features in the production styles. Owing to digitalisation, and globalisation, the once-upon-a-time fluid divisions of the four production styles have blurred. Regardless, the characteristics are traceable through critical listening skills. The recording industry in Zimbabwe has different musical styles and genres that have been exposed to some music production styles. We identify the style that shaped the Zimbabwe recording industry through the underlying prototypes of the production styles to trace the contextual background to the Big Four production styles. Owsinski (2014) says these styles came from four regions. One from London, with three originating in the USA, in New York, Los Angeles and Nashville. From the 50s to the 80s, they were separable with contributions from engineers, producers, musicians, instrumentalists, inventors, and listeners. They contributed to creating, pioneering, recreating, shaping, and popularising four styles. There is substantial literature on the production styles of Western nations, but only some researchers have documented the production styles of Zimbabwe. The paper traces the arrival of music production in Zimbabwe and highlights the role of the London style.

### **New York production style**

Excessive compression on low frequencies makes this style stand out (Owsinski, 2014). The character of the mix takes expressive sounds that pop out in a song. Franze (2008) notes that this technique has a highly compressed bass and rhythm section, with the vocals usually placed at the back of the mix. An example is the YouTube song by 50 Cent, 'Go Shorty'. However, low frequencies dominated the vocals blended with the instrumentals. Parallel compression has become an essential tool in music production beefing up drums and artfully adding silky presence to a vocal (Echevarria, 2021). The New York compression took an old technique and used it differently. It applied parallel compression on drums. This production style can work on any instrument or vocal (Izhaki, 2008). When applied to different instruments or vocals, it brings a different sound to the lows but gives a new sound character. In a typical case, the vocals can be described as silky. Although parallel compression applies anywhere, it gained credit when first applied to the bass of a mix.

Brunotts (2022) highlights how the method is more specialised than traditional compression to get New York compression. Robjohns (2013) indicates that two channels are created where one channel with a heavily compressed bass drum is recombined with the original bass. Low, level signals are raised in while high-level parts remain unchanged (Savage, 2014). Kody (2022) points out that this technique preserves transients, thereby retaining original dynamics. New York compression is popular in processing drum tracks (Robjohns, 2013). The approach was mainly tailored for the drums. Hence, New York compression sculpts the sound to give punchy, relentless backbeats, rock-solid bass lines, and vocals with power and nuance (Colletti, 2011). Upon listening to songs produced under New York style, one identifies the distinct feature, the louder than live drum and rhythm section. The New York style relied on a parallel compression; to make low frequency sounds bigger than they are while still retaining the dynamics. The sound gives a forceful and energetic sound to the listener.

### **Engineers who forged the New York**

Before parallel, the exciter compression technique was used. The Motown engineers compressed vocals making them bright. Colletti (2011) mentions that in the 1960s, engineers Mike McClean and



Lawrence Horn used “Exciting Compression”. A vocal was duplicated through a console; one instance would be treated with typical equalisation (EQ), compression and reverb, and the other squashed and brightened considerably with heavy-handed high-shelf EQ. This was blended with the second channel with the original channel enough to effect vocal excitement. This was how parallel compression borrowed from this compression to give the drum a punchy presence. Penglis (2021) says the Aural Exciter effect was discovered in the late 1950s when Curt Knoppel unwittingly wired one channel of a Heathkit DIY stereo amplifier kit incorrectly. Upon testing, audio passing through the channel was distorted and unappealing; however, running the material through the incorrect and earlier correctly wired channels simultaneously created a bright, exciting, and previously unheard-of effect. Indeed, parallel compression owes its existence to this invention and the birth of the New York style.

### **Nashville production style**

Nashville was known for acoustic instruments it had three attributes. The big vocal from the lead singer immediately grabbed the listeners’ attention, contrary to New York’s punchy bass. This vocal was placed in front of the mix with enhancement through the echo chamber. Nashville focused on appealing vocals; hence the lead vocal took precedence. London placed an effect on vocals, while Los Angeles and New York did nothing to vocals.

Owsinski (2014) mentions the second attribute that involved every other sound, as a subdued band, with few drums, strings, horns, and lush. Renee (2021) describes it as smooth strings, sophisticated background vocals, and crooning lead vocals. Fumo (2018) accounts for the paradigm shift from the honky tonk to the sounds of dialling back the twang and adding lush arrangements. Orr et al. (2015) say the Nashville sound became popular due to the distinct sound in vocals and instrumentation. Studio musicians and backup vocalists constituted a system of numbers that performed the required sound. The group of musicians played almost every album produced with consistency to the Nashville sound. They took advantage of the acoustics in the environment to enhance their sound further. Nashville thrived on capturing the natural room acoustics, and engineers relied on that. Chet Atkins acknowledged that the latter Studio A was larger and thought to be better than the former Studio B. However, the sounds were never the same again; instead, they preferred Studio B. This distinguished from other production styles, which never relied on room acoustics.

### **Contributors to the Nashville**

Several contributions were made towards the Nashville sound. As rock ‘n’ roll gained popularity, folk songs and country music lost ground. This affected the music industry, and the Nashville sound was born to keep the music business alive. Orr et al. (2015) remark that the Nashville sound was birthed in the 1950s through rock ‘n’ roll pulled fans from country music. The alluded shift forced producers to search for a sound that attracted the population with maintaining momentum and profitability. Herbsudzin (2018) reveals that Nashville sound was created to stay the same regardless of changes. The spur to produce novel sounds saw various techniques and ideas enter the studio to birth Nashville. Chet Atkin introduced a string section, allowing the new country sound to fit into pop music for radio and the country stations. That experiment of removing certain instruments and introducing others caused Nashville to stand out from other styles.

With guidance from Atkins and Bradley, a group of studio musicians learned the new style and played on almost every country album. The group of musicians created consistency in the Nashville style, making the sub-genre recognisable for its instrumentation (Mixdown Staff, 2022). Ratcliff (2002) says the musicians included pianist Floyd Cramer, Bob Moore, the bassist, guitarists Grady Martin and Ray Edenton; the Jordanaires and the Anita Kerr Singers provided the harmonies. A new sound was noted in the successive hits that followed. More than 35 000 songs were churned from 1957 to 1977,



more than 1 000 American hits, 40 million-selling singles, and over 200 Elvis Presley songs were recorded in Studio B (Renee, 2021).

Porter's creation of an echo chamber aspired to capture room reverberation. Porter's Pyramids were triangular fibreglass baffles suspended on the ceiling. Porter used ideal physical positions of guitarists and vocalists on microphones to suit their purpose (Renee, 2021). Winer (2018) emphasises the equipment positions to entail redesigning studios and shaping the sound based on room acoustics. Emphasis was placed on the tonal balance of instruments to appeal to the listeners. Mixdown Staff (2022) informed on the smooth sound from RCA, replicated by Columbia and Decca Records, which resulted in hits for Patsy Cline, Tammy Wynette, and Loretta Lynne. Porters Pyramids and the sweet spot became a sought-after sound, with attempts by studios to imitate it. Sam Phillips pioneered the slapback effect for Scotty Moore's guitar, known as Elvis Presley's signature sound. It is unclear who innovated the slapback, but Sam Phillips pioneered its use on rock 'n' roll records of the 50s for Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cas (Wolfert, 2015). Blitz (2016) mentions that the Ampex 350 tape machines helped create the famous Sun sound by bouncing the signal from a console to the rack-mounted version with a split-second delay between the two. Other engineers tried to emulate this effect, but none could reproduce it as Sam Phillips did.

Snoddy built a guitar pedal that generated fuzzy distortion and earned the name Maestro Fuzz-Tone. Dauphin (2018) informs that Glenn Snoddy, upon engineering Marty Robbins' song, "Don't Worry", Grady Martin's guitar made a distorted, fuzzy sound. They realised a blown transformer in the amplifier caused it, leaving that sound in that recording. Soon many yearned to have it in recordings. Oermann (2018) enunciates that Snoddy's pedal triggered a demand among engineers. Demands for Snoddy's pedal highlight the rarity effect in the industry. Consequently, the pedal as an effect began to cut across genres in production styles. The low, reverberant sound from Martin's bass on "Don't Worry" reached the country's top 10, like a rumbling car muffler (Friskics-Warren, 2018). For the song to reach the top 10, the listeners popularised it.

### **The Los Angeles production**

While the London engineers focused on creating a never heard before sound, Los Angeles emulated natural sounds from the environment instead. Such sounds included the crashing waves, the sounds on the beach, and cries from the wild. The Los Angeles style achieved this with minimum effects layering as possible to keep its naturalness. Providing characteristics that defined the style, Franze (2008) reports that the mixes tended to have an upfront vocal, less processing and an overall natural sound. Reverb-drenched electric guitars were primary to the Los Angeles production style (de Keijzer, 2017). This sound is attributed to Dale. Rueb and Pareles (2019) say Dale became known for defining the sound of surf guitar as a musical expression of the rudimentary surge of the ocean, waves, its volatile cross currents, and tidal undertow. For this uniqueness, he collaborated with Leo Fender and at the turn of the '60s, the Fender Stratocaster guitar was developed (Snapes, 2019).

Bart (1965) reports that surf music was the stepping stone to building the California sound, drawing national attention as surfing music gained momentum. This trend saw the Beach Boys come to the limelight. The California style was also associated with the Fantastic Baggys, famous for wearing saggy trunks in the surfing cult. The point is that a different technique spawned through an existing one with each paradigm shift. They received worldwide praise due to their extraordinary production techniques, with the sounds found in the Pet Sounds record album (Leaf, 1978). Waring (2022) describes the change brought to the pop scene as seismic, the sonics as unusual, the textures as novel, and innovations as structural. The fame they went on to have, shows it was indeed a sound that was not ordinary, further confirming how a production style gets to be unique. Unlike the usual sounds



that one is accustomed to in pop tracks, McCormick (2017) observes bicycle bells, water bottles, buzzing organs, guiros, sleigh bells, timpani, harpsichords, Electro-Theremins, vibraphones, Coca-Cola cans, and orange juice jugs. Owsinski (2014) remarks that the entrance of such unusual objects evidence how ideas began to diffuse, particularly when the engineers moved from one studio to another.

Phil Spector is recognised for creating the Wall of Sound. Kemp (2021) defines this as a music production technique for pop and rock recordings that captures live musicians embracing chaos and oversaturation. His sound had an identifiable aural brand in such a manner that, from 1960 to 1965, he had 24 records in the Top 40 (Grimes, 2021). Kemp (2021) sheds light on how Spector used the studio as an instrument drawing attention to the sound created through multiple instruments playing simultaneously, with each sound harmonising and reinforcing the others. He further articulates that this approach allowed sounds to bounce around the room and blend into a dense sonic mess rich with complex overtones. Schaal (2021) also discusses this approach, focusing on how Spector simultaneously constructed a well-defined big sound. He says Spector invented ways to apply different echo forms to each track as it went into the mix; hence a distinct sound was made. Spector's sound was profound that Grimes (2021) expresses how it influenced other producers and rock groups, from the Beach Boys to Bruce Springsteen. Spector is one of those that defined the Los Angeles production since the world-famous Beach Boys were inspired by his techniques.

### **The London Style and attributes**

Owsinski (2014) describes the London style as a very layered musical event that is compressed to a lesser extent than the New York. Franze (2008) highlights that many techno and electronic music from London is laden with layered instruments and effects. The term laden describes the magnitude of unusual effects leading to the nature of the London sound. Franze (2008) distinguishes between the rock genre mentioning that the rock music from London possessed many effects of crunchy and aggressive guitars. The London rock was separate from the rest due to the character it had with multi-layered effects. The wide use of the perspective technique drove the London sound, making the mix stand out because many parts appear at different times in the song (Franze, 2008 & Owsinski, 2014). Owsinski (2014) explicates that while some parts were for effects, others emerged to change the dynamics of the same song. Eventually, every part was given its environment in the mix, thus created the perspective approach with the London style.

### **Contributors to London Production**

Joe Meek a genius in dealing with sound was inspired by science fiction. He was always after out-of-the-world sound, and the techniques he used were not normal. Savage (2019) describes Meek's obsession with science fiction and the occult, in his 1960 album, "I hear another World". He projected pop in outer space with sounds never heard before, all created by the labyrinth of wires in his home studio. He shook the music world by producing three number-one hit records from his little studio. Musicians played in the bathroom, on the staircase and in the living room with Meek twisting, cutting, slowing down, speeding up and subverting the tracks as they played. The sounds he got from that studio were incredible. The equipment he used to record Telstar, modern equipment of that time could not do it (Couvee, 2017). This initial instance influenced the London engineers to create an out-of-the-world sound.

George Martin recognised Geoff Emerick as a ground-breaking engineer in capturing John Lennon sounding like the Dalai Lama on a mountaintop for Revolver's 'Tomorrow Never Knows' (Blistein & Kreps, 2018). Bongiovanni (2018) illuminates how Emerick dismantled the studio's Hammond organ and used its rotating amp as a mic. Maxwell (2018) states that Lennon's vocals gave an iconic tremolo



because of Leslie amplifiers. Amendola (2006) informs that Emerick's love for unique sound led him to get the drum kit's sound as it was heard in the studio onto the record. Maxwell (2018) views the heavily compressed drum sound as the template for most British pop music for the rest of the decade. From The Jimi Hendrix Experience to Led Zeppelin, the close-miked kick drum technique is still in use.

Because before that point Emerick felt the drum sound was weak and too distant from the snare (Amendola, 2006). Bockrath (2014) underscores that Emerick has double-compressed and even triple-compressed signals to create unique sounds. He took risks and excessively did things. Bockrath (2014) states that a neurological condition made Emerick hear sounds like painters see palettes of different paints. If Lennon required a guitar that did not sound like a guitar, keys that did not sound like keys and effects that engineers failed to get, it was easy for Emerick (Bongiovanni, 2018). He developed novel microphone techniques, automatic double-tracking, and tape loops to build new sonic soundscapes. Bongiovanni (2018) mentions the song 'I'm Only Sleeping' and how the rare effects are heard, especially the reverse tape effects on the guitar solo. Through experiments and daring to be different, Emerick contributed to London sound making it a cut above others.

### **Music production in Zimbabwe**

Gallo initially represented Decca and Brunswick record companies in Britain. Gallo directly and indirectly impacted the recording industry in Southern Africa (Lwanda & Kanjo, 2013). Gallo mainly aimed to import and distribute music for American label Brunswick Records (Darangwa, 2022). Later, Gallo started making recordings as the continent's first record label (Lwanda & Kanjo, 2013; Darangwa, 2022). Zimbabwe, then Rhodesia, first interacted with Gallo Records around 1960. Zindi (2015) informs that in the late 1960s, Gallo sent South African West Nkosi to record some Zimbabwean musicians. At this time, South African music artistes had established an unquestionable grasp on Zimbabwean music lovers; Mahotella Queens, Nzimande, Shabalala and others toured Zimbabwe (Ndlovu, 2022). Gallo never directly sent a representative from London, but Zimbabwe was connected to South Africa. As Zimbabwe interacted with South Africa, it emulated their production style and sound. South Africa, having West Nkosi for Gallo, discovered the Green Arrows band and, in 1977, became their producer (Zindi, 2011). This marked the infancy stage of the London production style.

The foundation had been set, Zimbabwe catapulted in this infancy stage when Gallo noticed the lack of recording facilities and furnished the studio with equipment. Zindi (2015) states that the studio was furnished with equipment to record demo tapes with mixing completed in South Africa. This shows South African influence in Zimbabwe music as they infused it in mixing. The equipment used was from London and led Zimbabwe. The equipment defined the difference in the sounds of London from those of America. Izhaki (2008) reiterates that no two compressors sound alike and we hold that the equipment left the signature of the London style.

Dube (1996) says Teal Record Company a subsidiary of EMI Records was established in Salisbury, now Harare (Zindi, 2015). Chimbudzi et al. (2021) highlight that Gallo and Teal were from other countries and we hold that Zimbabwe's recording industry is an adoption of these companies. The technology they operated brought innovative designs into Zimbabwe and exhibited the Gallo and Teal style. The influx of musicians that time left the record labels failing to cope individually. The two companies, headed by John Grant and Tony Rivett, merged into one entity. After 1980's political independence, Gallo evolved to Zimbabwe Music Corporation, and Teal became Gramma Records (Zindi, 2015). The above detail show how the London style came to Zimbabwe through globalisation and diffusion (Owsinski, 2014). This traces the etymology of the production approach back to its cradle. From the 1960s through 1980 to the enactment of the Local Content Act in 2001,



radio stations buzzed with South African-produced music. The trend was removed to give way to homegrown music productions. Zimbabwe radio stations are state-run, and all programmes comply with the above-referred act. This promoted the proliferation of music productions of local music for radio broadcasting. Some years after 2001, some pro-studios began losing grip due to their restricted approach to sign artists and the diffidence to embrace emerging music production technologies. The interaction between South Africa and Zimbabwe in music, coupled with the foundation of Gallo Records, and the music artists' music production and performance styles, reflected the London style. Radio broadcasting and the recording studios' calls to emulate marketable music made many artists to play music that resembled the London rock and South African mbaqanga (Zindi, 2015).

Besides emulating the Beatles, Bee Gees, Jimmy Hendrix, and Paul McCartney, Zexie Manatsa, Oliver Mtukudzi, The Eye Q Band, The Harare Mambo Band, The Talking Drum, The RUNN Family and The Midnight Magic were some Zimbabwean outfits that emulated the London style. Muranda and Maguraushe (2014) inform that emulators strive to play music like well-established musicians. Music production emulators endeavour to imitate established recording entities' production styles. All these moulded the production styles in music globally, regionally, and locally.

The River, a Zimbabwean 1987 song by Mike Lannas, has 24 instruments. At 3 minutes 55 seconds of the mix 14 instruments are played simultaneously, and a dense sound is heard, demonstrating a highly layered musical invention of the London style. Layered instruments create a London feature at 5 minutes 3 seconds; 5 minutes 6 seconds; 5 minutes 13 seconds; 5 minutes 19 seconds; 5 minutes 18 seconds, and 5 minutes 21 seconds. Tombofara, a 1998 local song, depicts the London sound. Fifteen instruments play in the first part of the song. At 1 minute 15 seconds, 12 instruments play simultaneously, and the vocals dominate as a Nashville feature, although London dominates. The dense layering of instruments appears from 3 minutes 15 seconds to 3 minutes 40 seconds, with electric piano vintage, sticks, hi-hat, saxophone, click, vocal 1, cymbal, bass, backing vocals, kick, snare, vocal 2, 80's lead, rhythm guitar, soft strings, and warm pads with a unique ambience. The mix exhibits the London style in the sound and overall ambience.

### Conclusion

In pursuit of the quest for the uniqueness of the Big Four music production styles, as mentioned earlier in this study, the above detail has unpacked each style with the pioneers from various eras, particularly speaking to the key attributes inherent in each. With the information gathered, we could trace the evolution of production styles, particularly the London. With this, one cannot dismiss that Zimbabwe's recording industry owes its inception to Gallo from London, hence adopting that trend first. Teal's influence, however, cannot be winked at. Nonetheless, literature has brought to light that the London style is the foundation, the core, and the substance and has had the greatest influence of all, and its traits still linger on after different changes. Hence, our exploration contextualised our research questions and objectives, making it possible, according to Owsinski (2014), to trace the production style back to its parent, one of the Big Four, London. The evolution continues to take effect with the advent of digital technology, whose dynamics keep music producers on the edge of their seats as many changes are imminent.

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