

## The Ghost Studio – George Martin's Island Dream

Written by Andy Owen



The first thing you notice is the silence.

Where the air once rang with melody - the twang of guitars, the gospel hum of harmonies, the thud of bass drums echoing into the night - now there is nothing.

Only the low rustle of leaves, the buzz of insects and the soft patter of rainwater as it gathers in the cracked tiles of a long-forgotten pool.

The ruins of **AIR Studios Montserrat** lie still.

Sun-bleached, overgrown, broken. Walls that once embraced the likes of Sting, McCartney, Knopfler, Elton John and Stevie Wonder, now sag under vines and rot.

A grand piano, once perfectly tuned to the demands of world-class musicians, is warped by water and carpeted in mould. Cables that once transmitted electric dreams, hang lifeless from ceilings that no longer exist.

There is something ghostly about it. Something sacred.

If you were able to walk carefully around the place, if you closed your eyes and listened - just for a moment - you might still hear it. The laughter. The harmonies. The unmistakable sound of an old Stratocaster, the whisper of lyrics scribbled on a napkin, the breath before a take.

The past is louder than you think.

For George Martin, AIR Montserrat was not just a studio. It was an *idea*.

An idea, that art is better when it's made in peace. That creativity thrives in sunshine, not under fluorescent lights.

That sound needs space to breathe.



And for ten golden years, it worked.

This tiny island studio became the unlikely birthplace of some of the greatest records of the 1980's. 'Ghost in the Machine', 'Brothers in Arms', 'Tug of War', 'Ebony & Ivory', 'Steel Wheels' *and so much more...*

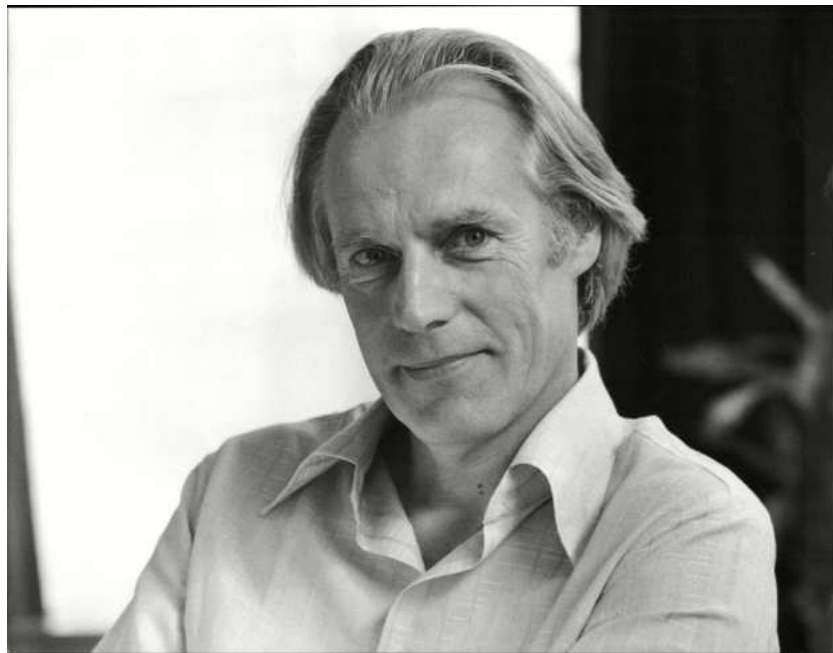
The music was *global*. But its heart was *here*.

Now that heart is broken.

But the soul, though battered and silenced, refuses to leave.

This is a story of extraordinary vision, of sonic alchemy and of beauty lost to nature's fury. It is, in many ways, a love letter to what was - and a solemn bow to the man who dared to build a musical paradise.

And what a man he was...



George Martin first entered the music business in 1950.

Within five years, he had become the head of the Parlophone label at EMI. His early work revolved mainly around comedy and classic recordings with artists including Peter Sellers, Dudley Moore and Flanders & Swann.

But in 1962, his life – and the lives of millions of others, all around the globe – changed for ever.

Including mine...

On 6<sup>th</sup> June, (*D-Day 18 years before*) four very likeable lads from Liverpool, were invited down to London by EMI to record some songs.

They had a hope of being offered a recording contract.

But they had already been rejected by other companies.



When asked, many years later, what his feelings were towards them, George said:

*"Simple amazement, because I had never seen anything like them before. Immediately after the session, I could not stop talking about them to my family and friends. This was most unusual, as we were working at Abbey Road with the greatest recording artists in the world on a daily basis - and rarely mentioned them, unless asked. I was, to a degree, infatuated by them."*

Soon after the session, music history was made.

The Beatles were signed to EMI and George went on to produce every Beatles record. He didn't just capture their sound - he elevated it. He was the Fifth Beatle in the truest sense. He was their enabler, interpreter and creative compass.

He also produced a host of other artists in the 1960's and 1970's, including; Cilla Black, Gerry and the Pacemakers, Matt Monro, Elton John, Billy J Kramer and The Dakotas, Jeff Beck, John Williams, Cheap Trick and Ultravox.

When the boys broke up in 1970, George Martin decided to turn his back on Abbey Road studios - which they and he, had turned into a shrine - to open a new facility in London.

He assembled a supergroup of record producers for some of the UK's top acts - Ron Richards, John Burgess, Peter Sullivan and himself - to form Associated Independent Recordings, or AIR.

They proposed a new arrangement, where AIR would fund the production of new releases, relieving record labels of the cost and in return, take a royalty on sales.

The new freelance producer set-up was a hit. From offices in Park Street, Mayfair, they continued to record the day's top artists at Abbey Road, Decca and other studios. Within two or three years, they were making enough money to take on staff - young engineers like Chris Thomas, whose baptism of fire was The Beatles' White Album.

They were able to bank enough of AIR's profits to build their own production facility. Their selected location was virtually just down the road.

It was on the fourth floor of the Peter Robinson department store at Oxford Circus.





It was an old banqueting hall that George Martin decided could accommodate two spacious studios. The new facility would be a studio 'built by producers for producers'.

AIR Studios eventually opened in October 1970 in typical music industry style.

It was a star-studded, two-day party, fuelled by 450 bottles of Bollinger champagne.

The first session at the new studio, was for the Average White Band's third album.

Classic albums recorded or engineered at AIR in its first decade, include 'Meddle' by Pink Floyd, Queen's 'Sheer Heart Attack', Roxy Music's 'For Your Pleasure' (and their three following albums), Paul McCartney's soundtrack to 'Live and Let Die', the Sex Pistols' 'Never Mind the Bollocks', 'Wuthering Heights' by Kate Bush, and The Pretenders' eponymous debut album.

T Rex, Genesis, Supertramp, ELO and a host of other big names all worked on new releases at Oxford Circus.



The studio eventually closed in 1991, when its 22-year lease ran out. It had lost a bit of its attraction with certain people anyway, as major artists were not happy with it, as they always had a struggle to come and go without being recognised by the shoppers on Oxford Street.

George had been thinking about a 'dream recording studio' ever since the early 1970s.

During the time in Oxford Street, AIR London was sold to the Chrysalis Group and the infusion of cash from the sale, gave him ideas.

*"I was at a point where AIR London had been going for a while and had been so busy and so successful that I couldn't get into it. And more and more of my work was being done abroad."*

At the beginning, George wanted to build a studio on a boat cruising the Mediterranean or Caribbean.

*"I thought I would like to have a world mobile studio," he says, "which would be a superb ship and could go anywhere."*

He actually came close to purchasing two ships – one, a 160-footer that could accommodate up to 16 people - and a smaller boat that would just be large enough for a studio. But economic conditions in England at the time, as well as the difficulties a ship underway at sea might present while artists were recording, forced Martin to abandon the idea.

He also investigated opportunities for a land studio in Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean.

But, while on a family vacation in 1977, George fell in love with the island of Montserrat, a whisper of a place - 40 square miles of green velvet, cooled by trade winds and warmed by a gentle community spirit.



George was instantly smitten.

Just like he did with John, Paul, George and Ringo, he listened to his inner voice – and made a spur-of-the-moment decision

*"I went there for a few days and fell in love with the place," he said. "I loved it so much, that I bought a place, simple as that. It was the first place I'd come to, which seemed to be together as a people. The people were warm and friendly, which is not typical in the Caribbean, because of the pasts of white people."*

Nestled in the Eastern Caribbean, Montserrat lies 250 miles southeast of Puerto Rico and about 900 miles south of Miami.

Just 27 miles to the north-east sits Antigua, its nearest neighbour - but in many ways, Montserrat felt like a world apart.

Accessible only by small plane or private boat, the island owes its name to Christopher Columbus, who believed its jagged hills resembled the mountainous region of Montserrat in northern Spain.

And indeed, the island has a dramatic presence. Formed by ancient volcanic activity - the same forces that gave rise to its shimmering black sand beaches - this 40-square-mile emerald jewel, is carpeted in dense, tropical vegetation and kissed year-round by warm trade winds.

The temperature, idyllic and reliable, never drops below 74°F.

Back then, Montserrat was home to a modest but proud population of around 12,000, comprised mostly of native Montserratians.

As a British Crown Colony, the island was overseen by an English-appointed governor. Its relative isolation meant that tourism remained minimal, something the locals quietly appreciated. There was an authenticity to life here - no glossy resorts, no cruise ship crowds - just the easy rhythm of real island living.

For George Martin, it was perfect.

He had found the setting he'd been searching for. A place of peace, privacy and inspiration. He bought a large house - the now-famous Olveston House - and made a decision that would forever alter the musical map of the world.

This was where he would build his dream: a 'world studio', far from the demands of London, but with all the capabilities of the finest facilities on Earth.

To bring the vision to life, Martin called upon trusted collaborators - including legendary engineer Geoff Emerick - the man who had captured many of The Beatles' most iconic sounds. They all knew the standards required..

After all, AIR London had flourished in part because of its meticulous attention to acoustics and technology. Martin wanted nothing less for Montserrat.

And so, on a 30-acre ridge, 500 feet above sea level, overlooking the Caribbean Sea, construction began.

Two years later, in July 1979, AIR Studios Montserrat opened its doors.

It was not just a studio - it was a creative compound. The central recording space was flanked by a nearby villa complex where artists and their crews could stay throughout their sessions.

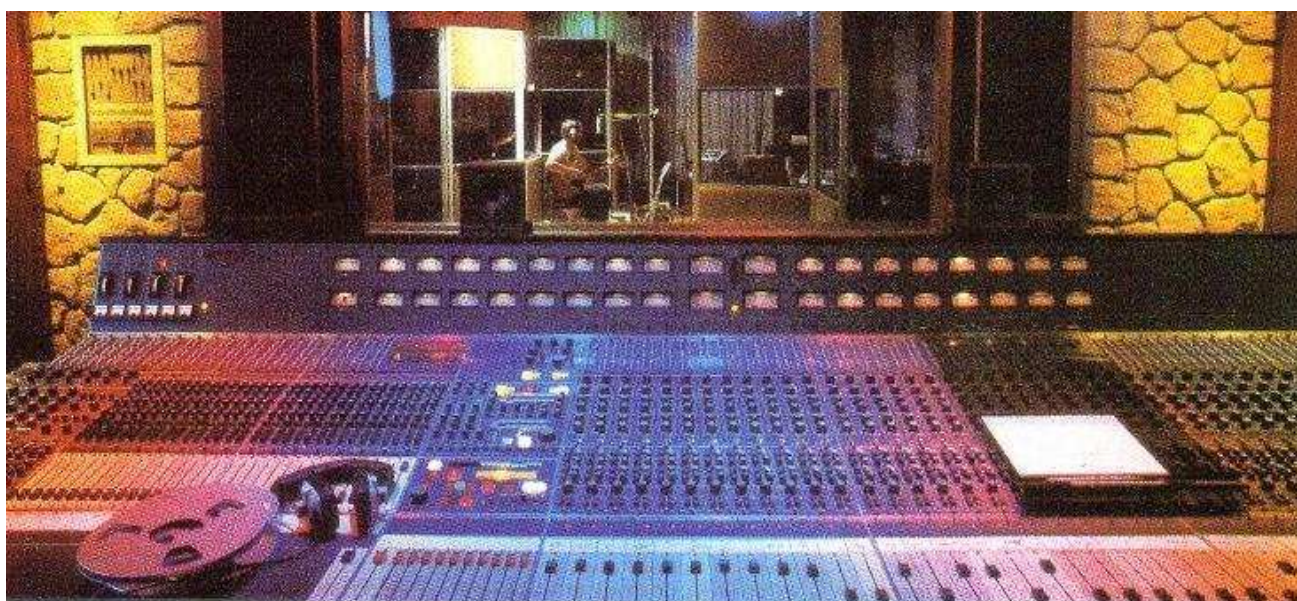


It offered everything.

The technical sophistication of AIR London, but with the serenity of an island paradise.

The studio complex itself was built to inspire.

At its heart stood the recording suite, fitted with state-of-the-art gear.



Adjacent to it, the villa featured an open-air dining area, a well-equipped kitchen and a spacious, breezy lounge.



In a connected wing, accommodations were provided for the studio manager, the chief maintenance engineer and the resident tape operator - ensuring round-the-clock support for any session.

To unwind, there was a games room stocked with a pool table, ping pong table and darts - and just outside, a 50-foot swimming pool, perfect for cooling off between takes or at the end of a long night's work.

Inside the lounge - available to all clients - artists could relax to a high-end hi-fi stereo system, catch up on movies via a television and video cassette library, or simply enjoy the breeze as it drifted through from the hillside above the sea.

Every single thing had been considered. And every detail had purpose.

This was AIR Montserrat. A place built by a man who understood that great music is not just recorded - it's lived, it's felt - and it's nurtured in the right environment.

The first band to record there were the Climax Blues Band, who were recording their album 'Real to Reel'. In all, 74 other albums were recorded there, including some of the memorable records of the 1980's.

The list of artists who spent time at George's studio paradise, reads like a veritable who's who of rock royalty: Elton John, Paul McCartney, Stevie Wonder, Rush, Black Sabbath, Duran Duran, Little River Band, and Luther Vandross to name just a few.

Two of the Police's biggest selling albums 'Ghost in the Machine' and 'Synchronicity' were recorded there.



'Brothers In Arms', Dire Straits' biggest record was also recorded there and local island legend has it, that Mark Knopfler and Sting wrote 'Money for Nothing' at a local watering hole down the lane from the studio.

Riding on the success of 'Baker Street', Gerry Rafferty was also an early visitor, recording some of his fourth album, 1980's 'Snakes and Ladders' on the island.

Earth, Wind & Fire recorded some of their 1980 album 'Faces' at AIR Montserrat, while Sheena Easton recorded her best-selling album 'Take My Time' in 1981, featuring her most famous track, '9 to 5'.

As big a hit as that was, probably the biggest charting song recorded at AIR would soon follow. George Martin teamed up with Paul McCartney for his third solo album, 'Tug of War', which was recorded on the island at the end of 1980 and start of 1981.

George and Paul ended the first session after John was murdered in New York in December, but they got back together the following February.

The somewhat happier result was 'Ebony & Ivory' which Paul and Stevie Wonder recorded on the island in just a couple of days.

The song, of course, would be a huge hit around the world and is arguably the biggest track to have been recorded at AIR.



The studio was never a playground, as some suspected. George was clear with his views on this.

*"It's not an indulgence - it's peace of mind. Artists work faster here, not slower. They know what they can do and they're efficient."*

It was a rare blend: technical excellence, tropical ease - and the quiet magic of knowing the man who helped invent modern pop, was in the next room, making sure it sounded just right.

AIR Montserrat was, for a decade, the heartbeat of something truly special - a place where the creative spirit could roam free.

Whilst being loved by most of the artists who recorded there, AIR Montserrat wasn't always flavour of the month with the record companies, as George commented at the time:

*"A lot of the big record companies don't like studios like this, because they feel it's an enticement to spend more money. That's not true. The concept makes for peace of mind. I've found that groups work faster here than in a city studio. It seems like a paradox. When most people think of an island paradise studio they think that the artist will spend most of his time on the beach and very little time in the studio. But the reverse is true. Clients will spend the morning on the beach or water skiing, for example, but will be in the studio around two and work right through until midnight with one hour off for dinner. People know what they can do here and are efficient."*

*In fact, most of the groups who have used the facility to date have underrun and not overrun their booking time. Jimmy Buffet, for example, finished a week ahead of schedule. Some record companies feel studio owners want to keep their groups in for as long as possible to make money but that's not the case. Studio owners like efficiency as well."*

Overall, the artists loved the studio and the stunning setting. Sting found it "very calming" But Lou Reed, didn't agree. *"I couldn't stand it. I need the city. I need the traffic. I need the noise."*

You can't win 'em all...

George had great plans for the studio. *"The next five years,"* he said, *"will be devoted to AIR Montserrat. And I will continue to do what I think I can do best. I also want to do more film music."*

The final album to be recorded there, was one of the biggest.

The Stones completed 'Steel Wheels' at AIR. It was said that the sessions on the island were so positive that they helped bring the band back together, after an extended break from one another.



But the island idyll was about to be shattered.

In September 1989, Hurricane Hugo struck Montserrat with catastrophic force.

*"It wiped us out and wiped most of the island out," Martin said. "There were only 12,000 people living on the island and 11,000 of those lost their homes. It was devastating."*



Martin managed to get to the island six weeks after the hurricane hit, but discovered much of the roof missing from the studio.

Upon opening one of the studio's pianos and seeing that mould that had quickly engulfed the instrument, the writing was on the wall.

*"I realised we were done,"* Martin said, when recounting the visit, years later.

*"If the piano was that badly damaged, the damage to the electronics was insurmountable. And mould was already setting in on the gear."*

He realised that was the end of the studio, especially as the music business was starting to tighten its belts.

He said: *"The moguls running the business, no longer wanted their artists miles away, outside of their control. That happened to coincide with the immense devastation caused by the hurricane and sadly the studios had to close."*

Martin removed all salvageable gear from the studio and during the next five years he paid a caretaker to keep his eye on the place and do his best to maintain the grounds.

He understood the importance of his studio and he wanted to maintain it as much as possible, if only for posterity.





But nature hadn't finished with the island.

In 1995, the Soufriere Hills volcano erupted. The long dormant volcano was immortalised in Jimmy Buffet's 1979 song 'Volcano', but the volcano's violent eruption changed the island forever and ended any possibility of AIR returning to its former glory.

It erupted again in 1997, covering the island in volcanic dust.

While much of the island has since recovered, the studio still lies abandoned and is too dangerous to visit.

The ruins of George's Montserrat dream recording studio, now lie sad and forgotten within the shadow of a volatile active volcano that's been wreaking havoc on the island since the 1990's.

Dried mud and ash cake the buildings, and murky rainwater fills the outdoor swimming pool.

Wasp nests plug various nooks and hang from the ceiling as tangles of vegetation climb the walls.

Forgotten bits of the recording equipment that used to produce so many albums, rot inside.











The decaying ruins of the studio stand near the fringe of the exclusion zone.

As these sad images show, it bears little - if any at all - resemblance to its original grandeur. What remains now, is haunting.

But, if there are places in this world where genius lingers long after the lights go out - one such place is AIR Studios.

AIR Montserrat was not just a studio. It was a belief - a belief that environment shapes inspiration, that beauty fosters brilliance.

It thrived for just a decade.

Then nature rose, first with wind, then with molten earth - and the dream came to an end.

But what a dream it was. The dream of a *great* man.

George Martin was one of the music industry's most versatile and imaginative talents. He produced a record-breaking THIRTY number one singles in the UK, and was recognised by the industry, with five Grammys and two Ivor Novello Awards.

He deservedly received his knighthood in 1996, in recognition of his unrivalled services to the music industry and popular culture.

He left us on 8th March 2016, at the age of 90.



He now meets John and George three times a week for their regular scotch and cokes. I'm sure they talk about those exciting, fun times, when they changed the musical landscape - and the world.

It had been a glorious life. And we all owe him so much.

When I was putting together my humble little studio at home many years ago, I wrote to him in London, asking for a signed photo. I am lucky enough to have met many great people in the music world and I had many of their messages and images on my studio wall.

I wanted George up there. He responded quickly and put the photo in an envelope, which he hand-addressed then put a stamp on it and walked to the post box at the end of his road and sent it to me.

I was so taken by what he did. I have the picture and envelope framed.

That's the type of man George was.

With regards to AIR Montserrat, I'll leave the last words to George:.

***"You bring something out of nothing - and it always goes back to nothing again."***

*Ain't that the truth...*



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