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In the Dawg House

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in the DAWG house
It's an unassuming building. Only a couple of miles from Highway 30, down your run-of-the-mill gravel road. Surrounded by harvested cornfields. Part of an old farmstead, tucked in between four silver grain silos and the white, battered 1923 farmhouse. A tiny gray building, its paint job fading, trimmed in brown. It looks like a shed, honestly. A small brown sign nailed on the outside wall is the only thing that stands out. "The Dawg House."

It might not look like much, but this small building is home to one of the area's up-and-coming recording studios. Dawg House Recording, powered by two music "lifers" on a mission, is rapidly becoming the studio of choice for many local bands. And there's nothing the two men behind Dawg House, Monte Whetstone and Dennis Haislip, would rather do than help local musicians make it big.

The mundane outside appearance of the studio is instantly forgotten once you step inside. There's the small lounge, complete with a fridge blanketed in band stickers and empty except for a handful of beers. There's the mixing room, where all the recording equipment is located. A thousand different switches, dials, and buttons whose functions only Dennis knows. And of course, there's the performance room. The space where a band's sound first truly takes shape and where musicians' dreams of putting out records are finally realized.

It has already been a long road for Monte and Dawg House Recording. Middle-aged, with a wispy brown beard and dark eyes that jump when he's emphasizing a point. Monte remembers when the studio was just a storage shed, "a place to put my shit." It then served as a practice space for Monte and his band. Over time, the transformation from shed to studio slowly took place as Monte started acquiring more and more recording equipment.

But the studio was quickly forgotten in August of 1999 when Monte's wife, Barbara, died in a car accident. Music just didn't seem important anymore. Barely 40 and now a widower, Monte had other things on his mind. The studio stood empty for the next four years. What had been Monte's sanctuary was again just a shed.

That all changed when Monte met Dennis at an open mic night in December of 2002. "It was December 5, my wife's birthday," Monte said. "I had been on a bender all week, but I had heard about Dennis, so I went to see him play. I think Lupi [Barbara's nickname] wanted us to meet."

Monte and Dennis played together for the first time that night. They soon discovered a they shared a burning passion for music and quickly became friends. It was Dennis who urged Monte to open the studio again. "I was just like, 'You're not doing anything with this?'" Dennis said. "I felt at home as soon as I walked in."

The two men quickly set out to return the studio to working order - purchasing equipment, installing isolation booths, and spreading the word about Dawg House. But they weren't doing it with an eye on the bottom line. "I don't care about making money," Dennis said. "I care about making music." The studio quickly established a reputation among local bands as being an excellent and affordable place to record.

"The Dream Factory." That's what Monte calls his studio sometimes. This small building out in the middle of the nowhere is filling a void in the local music culture. Ames bands didn't have a local studio that could handle their recordings, and Dawg House is affordable enough to allow even the poorer bands and musicians a chance to hear themselves on a record.

A number of local bands have recorded at the studio, including Unhinged, Twistin' Trees, and Pyrocracker. Chad Jacobsen, keyboardist and percussionist for Twistin' Trees, and his band mates were surprised by both the rates and the atmosphere. "You can't beat the quality you get for the price you pay," Jacobsen said. "And the environment is great."

Both Monte and Dennis realize the impact their studio has already had on both local bands and the local music scene itself. "There's an enormous amount of local talent," Dennis said. "But you need a good demo to go anywhere. I can't make you sound like Led Zeppelin, but it will sound way better than if you record it in your buddy's basement." Based on the response they've been getting from their customers, Monte and Dennis think the studio is on the right track. More importantly, it gives them an outlet for their musical passion. For Monte, nothing matches the impact the studio has on musicians. "When we play back the recording, most guys just get this wide-eyed look of amazement on their faces. And it's like 'Yeah, that's why I do it.'"