

## Plotting the Future of the Most Storied Studio in Jazz

The New Jersey recording space built in 1959 by Rudy Van Gelder is filled with history. Can it regain its glory without getting stuck in the past?



By Ben Sisario

July 19, 2022

ENGLEWOOD CLIFFS, N.J. — Hidden along a commercial strip north of the George Washington Bridge, surrounded by car dealerships and characterless corporate offices, is hallowed ground for jazz.

There, tucked in a one-acre wooded lot, sits a squat concrete-block structure built in 1959 by Rudy Van Gelder, the polymathic former optometrist who became the genre's most influential recording engineer. On thousands of albums made at his studio there by the likes of John Coltrane, Horace Silver, Dexter Gordon and Bill Evans, Van Gelder developed ways to capture sound with renowned clarity and depth, earning the respect of musicians and the envy of other engineers.

"History was made there," Herbie Hancock, who recorded at Van Gelder's studio numerous times, said in an interview. "History that defined what jazz was then and what jazz is now. The roots of it are from those records that were made at Rudy's studio."

Yet after Van Gelder died in 2016, at age 91, the future of his studio — known to jazz fans everywhere from LP credits, but seen by few besides the musicians who recorded there — was left in doubt. Van Gelder willed the property to his longtime assistant, Maureen Sickler, but gave her no instructions about what to do with it. Sickler remembers only that her mentor had been devastated by the demolition of his parents' house in nearby Hackensack, where he began his recording career, capturing Miles Davis and others in the family living room.



Van Gelder at his recording console in the late 1980s. The building housing his studio was designed by David Henken, an apprentice to Frank Lloyd Wright. James Estrin/The New York Times

After about five years of work to restore Van Gelder's equipment and obtain historic-property status for the building, Sickler and her small team — including her trumpeter husband, Don, and Perry Margoueff, another audio engineer and studio owner — are now midway through a plan to make Van Gelder's haven a full-service recording studio once again, and create a nonprofit organization that would assume ownership of the space and ensure its longevity.

How that transition will work — and even whether the contemporary music industry will have use for a 63-year-old studio built for acoustic jazz — is an open question. In recent months, the Sicklers, with Margoueff's help, have been busy booking sessions, tidying up the overgrown grounds and even getting the studio answering machine working again. But Sickler, 76, said she is determined to see it through.

"I feel very strongly that musicians should have the opportunity to record in that incredible acoustic space, and to feel the history and the inspiration that lives there," she said. "Musicians who come into the space are awed about who has recorded there. They need the opportunity to make their own history in that unique room."

**INSIDE VAN GELDER'S** studio, the sense of history can be almost overwhelming.

The building was designed by David Henken, an apprentice of Frank Lloyd Wright, and its wide, square main room has a cathedral-like ceiling of cedar planks, supported by four Douglas fir arches that meet at a 30-foot apex. Most recording studios are windowless caves; Van Gelder's has calming views of trees in the backyard. One recent sunny afternoon, a Hammond C-3 organ that was played by Ray Charles and Jimmy Smith sat uncovered on one side of the live room. Inside an isolation booth was a 1950s Steinway grand, in what looked like perfect condition save for some marks gouged on its lid — by Thelonious Monk.



The Van Gelder console today. In recent months, Maureen Sickler, who is overseeing the studio, and a small team have been busy booking sessions. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Unusual among major studios, Van Gelder's was purpose-built and not adapted from another space, like Abbey Road in London or Columbia Records' former studio on East 30th Street in Manhattan, which had once been a church, the jazz historian Ashley Kahn said. It was also owned and operated by one man, and doubled as Van Gelder's home, with a modest but spacious apartment just up a set of stairs from the studio floor.

Many jazz fans would immediately recognize the studio interior from photos on albums released by labels like Blue Note and Impulse!, two of Van Gelder's biggest clients. The cover of "A Love Supreme" pictures Coltrane in front of a railing just outside the studio door. The master saxophonist's recording, captured on Dec. 9, 1964, is perhaps the most famous one made there.

A visionary engineer who always sought out the most advanced microphones and other equipment, Van Gelder was also a persnickety character who forbade most musicians from touching anything. Hancock remembers the time, after years of recording there, when Van Gelder, speaking from behind glass in the control room, finally gave him permission to plug in his headphones.

**Sign up for the Louder Newsletter** Stay on top of the latest in pop and jazz with reviews, interviews, podcasts and more from The New York Times music critics. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

"I looked around at the other musicians; they were staring at me," Hancock recalled. "Did Rudy say I could actually plug it in?' 'Yeah, we heard that, too.' So I did. I was like, 'Wow, I finally rose to the top!'"

Van Gelder was secretive about how he achieved his sound; over the years that secrecy has become the audio equivalent of urban legend, with stories circulating that mingle fact and fiction. Did he really substitute "dummy" microphones when photographers came to shoot sessions? Probably not. Did he wear white gloves when handling equipment? Maybe, though the truth is unclear. "White gloves was an exaggeration," Sickler said. "Reality is different." She did not elaborate.



From left: Maureen Sickler, her husband, Don, and the audio engineer Perry Margouleff. All three are working to restore Van Gelder's haven as a full-service recording studio and create a nonprofit organization that would ensure its longevity. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Before Van Gelder brought on Sickler as his assistant in 1986, he had long run the studio entirely by himself, even setting up the musicians' chairs. Sickler's apprenticeship began modestly — "I got to set up chairs," she said — but he soon showed her the ropes of all of the studio equipment. If anyone knows Van Gelder's recording secrets, it is her.

"I think I was closer to Rudy than I ever was to my own father," Sickler said.

After decades of running sessions almost daily, Van Gelder began to slow down in the mid-2000s, as his health deteriorated. Even then, his studio was little known outside music circles. "It was hiding in plain sight all these years," said Jennifer Rothschild, a local historic preservation consultant.

One Sunday afternoon in August 2016, Rothschild and other members of the Bergen County Historical Society met Van Gelder at his studio, after one jazz-loving member placed a cold call. They encouraged the engineer to apply for state and national status that would designate the property a historic building, but he wasn't persuaded, Rothschild said, and the historians decided to return with a sharper pitch. Four days later, Van Gelder died in the apartment upstairs.

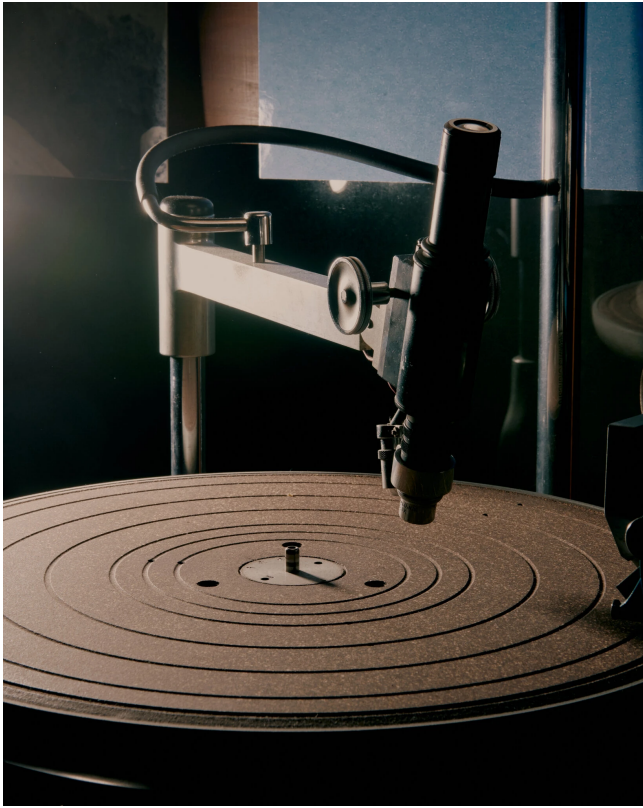
By then, the studio was cluttered with medical equipment, and the custom Neve recording console that had been installed in 1972 was in rough shape — only six of its 24 channels were functioning properly. In 2018, Sickler met Margouleff, who was well versed in Van Gelderiana but had never set foot inside the studio. "Rudy wouldn't let other engineers in the door," said Don Sickler, who works with his wife in booking and running the space.

During the pandemic, Margouleff, a Neve specialist, renovated the console piece by piece in his workshop. His dream, like that of the Sicklers, is for the facility to return to its former glory.

"The idea is to make sure that this studio lives in perpetuity," Margouleff said, "as a facility for people to continue to record music together in an ensemble fashion and in an acoustic environment."

Recently, the studio has had at least one recording session a week, Sickler said. In April, a few weeks after winning the Grammy Award for album of the year, Jon Batiste, the jazz pianist and bandleader, booked a one-day session at the Van Gelder studio, after learning that the place he had seen cited on countless records that had shaped him as a musician was finally available.

"To visit and record there was a pilgrimage," Batiste said in an interview. "There's some sort of spiritual, metaphysical reality there that makes it feel like you're stepping into a ritualistic space."



Instruments and equipment at Van Gelder's studio. Vincent Tullio for The New York Times

**THAT FEELING OF** awe will certainly be the greatest calling card for the revitalized studio. But it may also be an obstacle, said Kahn, who, with Rothschild, helped write the studio's applications for the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places. (It was added to both listings this spring.)

"The challenge for the Van Gelder studio now is how to deal with its history and also go forward as a commercial enterprise," Kahn said. "You don't want people to come in there only saying, 'I want the studio where Coltrane recorded.' You want it to be a studio that can meet present-day standards, and not marginalize it as just a historic shrine."

The building's presence on the state and national registers does not protect it from being altered or even demolished by a future owner, Rothschild said. To gain that protection, Sickler has applied for a preservation easement, which would be attached to the property's deed and involve periodic inspections. It also costs \$10,000, and

Sickler said that the studio's recent recording work has raised only enough money to cover the property tax, which is nearly \$40,000 a year.

One decision facing Sickler and any future operators is whether to stick to jazz, or open the studio to other kinds of music. Jazz, of course, was Van Gelder's great passion, and what the facility was designed for. But even at its peak, the space was also used for blues, folk music, polka and spoken word; the first recording session there, in July 1959, was with the West Point Cadet Glee Club.

Don Sickler, who has been devoted to classic jazz repertory for decades, said he favored sticking with acoustic jazz, and gruffly dismissed the idea of recording Broadway cast albums or rock 'n' roll. (For Weezer's latest album, "OK Human," released in early 2021, a string section was recorded at the Van Gelder studio.)

Batiste also urged the Sicklers to hold fast to jazz. "Sticking to their guns of it being acoustic music, making it something that is an outlier in the culture, is what will actually be the right thing to do," he said.

Sickler is more open-minded about what the future of the Van Gelder studio might bring.

"Of course, musicians familiar with the studio's history, and with the work of Rudy Van Gelder, should have access," she said. "But the live room loves all sounds."