



YouTube school

There's a brand-new facility aimed at creating the superstars of the future. Will Storr steps inside for a closer look

¹ In an underground studio, in between London's King's Cross and St Pancras stations, people with cameras and face-microphones ⁵ stare out of the darkness towards a stage.

Sitting on the edge of a stool is a young man with an acoustic guitar. This is Archie Norris. Archie ¹⁰ is pale and thin and has sad eyes, a high fringe and a pink jumper. His fingers rest on the strings of his instrument as he waits for the clapperboard man to clap in the ¹⁵ next take. You might imagine that we're in a television studio and Archie is a professional singer with a record to promote. But you'd be wrong.

²⁰ All about the money

In fact, Archie Norris is a 'creator' and this is a multi-million-pound facility owned by YouTube. It opened in August last year, and ²⁵ it's here that the online platform's stars can come to produce their content, and plot world domination. They can attend workshops on everything from lighting your ³⁰ bedroom to maximising the profitability of your channel.

At over 20,000 sq ft, it's the second largest YouTube Space in the world, and the biggest outside ³⁵ LA. It contains three fully equipped

studios and sound stages, as well as 15 full-time production staff who can both work on your videos and offer training. There are ⁴⁰ 360 cameras and rigs, including HTC Vive and Jump cameras, an SSL Dante Audio Console with a 64-fader large format console, as well as a smaller 16-fader desk.

⁴⁵ I've got no idea what any of that means. I'm guessing you don't either. What it really all adds up to is this: money. The people from YouTube have refused to tell me ⁵⁰ exactly what this place cost, or even the amount it takes to keep it running six days a week. Let's just say that one keen-eyed journalist, who visited when it opened, ⁵⁵ spotted a single lens on a single camera that was worth £25,000.

Advertising business

But how much has it cost Archie Norris to rent this studio with its ⁶⁰ crew and cameras today? How much do they charge superstar creators such as Zoella and Tanya Burr? Nothing. All you need to

get two full days of access and ⁶⁵ production every month is 10,000 subscribers – a relatively modest number, I'm assured.

The more followers you have, the more time you get. Workshops ⁷⁰ and help are provided for free to those with fewer fans. Why would a profit-seeking corporation like YouTube do this? It seems incredibly generous of YouTube to be laying ⁷⁵ all this on for their creators for nothing. After all, these young people will be making money out of it, won't they?

'It's an advertising business,' ⁸⁰ explains YouTube spokesperson Thea O'Hear. 'When you get to a certain size, advertising starts to show against your videos.'

'And how much do they get ⁸⁵ from that?' I ask. 'I can't tell you the exact number,' she says. 'But they get over half the profits. If people start producing better-quality content, there's more watch time ⁹⁰ for everyone, and the ecosystem grows.'

By ecosystem, she means the billion users YouTube already has worldwide, and the 400 hours of ⁹⁵ content they post every minute. In the first three months of last year, it reached more British 18- to 34-year-olds on mobile alone than any commercial TV channel.

It's here that YouTube's stars can come to produce their content

100 Sofia Karlberg

Downstairs, we find another creator recording her cover. Sofia Karlberg has flown in from Stockholm to record her version of 'Paris' by The Chainsmokers. Two middle-aged men watch her from the shadows, stepping forward to whisper in her ear every now and then.

As soon as I get the chance, 110 I talk to them. 'So what's your relationship to Sofia?' I ask. 'We're her producers,' says the taller one. It turns out they are superstar producer-songwriters Quiz & 115 Larossi, who have worked on global hits for Conor Maynard, Alexandra Burke, and Kelly Clarkson. 'We found Sofia on YouTube when she only had, like, 1,000 followers,' says 120 Quiz or Larossi. She was 16 and had been posting videos on YouTube for three years.

Together, they worked on a masterplan. Sofia would continue 125 recording covers in her bedroom and posting them on YouTube, but Quiz & Larossi would produce the music. They'd build her career on the platform and only when 130 she reached a critical mass of subscribers would they launch her as an artist. The turning point came in August 2016, when her cover of Beyoncé's 'Crazy in Love' got 135 over 60 million views. She now has almost 1.5 million subscribers and has signed her first record deal, with Universal.

Bebe Rexha

140 I leave the Swedes and slip into the back of a workshop. I meet Bebe Rexha, a smart and talented girl from Brooklyn whose career has been driven by social media. She

145 started putting out covers of Lana Del Rey and Drake songs, getting 3,000 plays on Myspace.

Everything changed when she posted a song of her own on 150 SoundCloud ('I Can't Stop Drinking About You') that got 1.5 million plays. Soon her compositions were picked up by the likes of Selena Gomez, Eminem, and Rihanna. Her 155 debut album *All Your Fault: Pt 1* was released in February last year. 'Record labels are not the answer. If your shit ain't popping, they're not going to get it popping for 160 you. All they're doing is putting a magnifying glass over what you're already doing,' she tells me.

What Bebe is saying is extraordinary. For at least 50 years, 165 record companies have indeed been 'the answer'. It was simple: A&R (Artist and Repertoire) people would scout for talent, sign it up with an enormous cheque, spend 170 even more money on recording, styling, videos, plugging, and promotion – 'getting it popping for you', in other words. But this isn't really happening any more, 175 partly because of those 60 million listeners who were able to enjoy Sofia's Beyoncé cover for free, on YouTube or streaming services such as Spotify (where it's currently 180 clocking in at 66 million plays).

A whole different game

Once, people would have had to pay to listen to that song whenever they liked. The profits would have 185 gone to the artist but also to the record company. Not only has the level of income from recorded music collapsed, it is now going to digital companies like YouTube, who don't make risky investments in developing 190 new talent. Today, if you want to be famous, you need to create your own fame first, as Sofia is finding.

And that takes time, even for 195 Bebe Rexha. 'I have my Instagram, my Spotify, my Twitter, my YouTube, and I'm on top of it all,' she tells me. 'So not only am I writing the song, producing the song, 200 mixing the song, I have to pick the director and shoot the video. Then, when you get the video, you have to make sure you have the right screenshot on the YouTube 205 channel, make sure your Instagram makes sense with the Spotify and the Spotify makes sense with the SoundCloud. It's a *whoooooo* different game.'

I ask if she feels any bitterness that so much money that once went to the artist and label now goes to digital platforms. She smiles a professional smile. 'I don't focus on 215 that because I'm just proud to be here right now.' <<

