



## Reopening the Vault



In 2018, McCutcheon left his position as the U.S. industrial products and Pittsburgh office leader at PwC, one of the Big Four accounting and consulting firms, to turn his family hobby, The Vault Recording Studio, into a commercial venture.

As founder and president of The Vault, McCutcheon found the ideal track for his second act.

“I learned early on that I had an artistic, creative side to me,” he says. “In the world of art, it’s called creativity. But in the world of business, it goes by a different name. It’s called innovation. It’s your ability to see the abstract and bring it to life.”

The Vault is a place where people tap into their innovative sides. “A recording studio is a magical place to be,” McCutcheon says. “There’s a feeling you get seeing a project come to life. It’s rewarding. Musicians know it. They don’t often have time to spend in a studio, so when they do, they make the most of it.”



Watch this [VESTED Voices video](#) featuring Bob McCutcheon to learn how a corporate leader turned recording studio owner.

## A Long Time Coming

Many of McCutcheon’s life experiences laid the groundwork for where he is today.



As a child, he pretended to be Glenn Campbell while strumming a toy guitar. In high school, he got a real guitar and played classic rock music in a band. He worked his way through college recording other artists' music in his first recording facility, Alternative Studios, which he built in his mom's garage.

Although he didn't have formal training, he learned by trial and error. "A lot of it was experimentation," he says. "The beauty of the recording arts is, technically, it's art, not science, but there is a lot of science behind the physics of sound. It's experimentation. If it sounds good, it is good."

In 1991, he graduated from Robert Morris University, near Pittsburgh, with a double-major bachelor's degree in business and finance. He chose those subjects because he wanted to run his own recording studio.

But instead, he landed a job with PwC and worked his way up the corporate ladder, enjoying every rung. "I realized I had an interest and a talent for business, accounting, and consulting. It was something I enjoyed. It happened to be an opportunity that was presented to me, and I took it."

A couple of years after graduation, he met and married his wife, Dana. After their two children—Ryan and Brett—came along, McCutcheon's daily time with music started to wane. He couldn't juggle it all. "My hobby became almost nonexistent," he says.

He figured his musical aspirations had been a phase of his life that was going to fade. "I kept a lot of my gear, but my guitars were in the closet collecting dust."

McCutcheon says his career fulfilled him, so he was comfortable letting music fall to the back burner. "The firm offered me the ability to change jobs every couple of years. I was never doing the same thing twice. I was always able to innovate and find new and interesting things to do."

But when his boys started to show an interest in music, his passion was rekindled.

Bob and Dana's younger son, Brett, began taking piano lessons at age four. Later, Brett took up the saxophone and drums, started writing and recording music, and created his own YouTube channel.



Ryan found a passion for drums. He was drum captain in his high school marching band and played in a rock band in college.

As a way to spend time with them, McCutcheon built a small studio in their home, and the family played and recorded music together.

In 2016, on a flight home from Europe, he was flipping through the in-flight movie choices and stumbled on a documentary about the history of Sound City Studios in California. “It brought everything back,” he says. “I got off the plane, and thought, I’m in a position where I can do this now. Why am I not doing it?”

This was his aha moment. Finally, the time was right to do what he had always wanted.

Because of his role at PwC, McCutcheon knew how to conduct in-depth studies of different companies. “To serve my clients, I had to understand their industries,” he says. “My approach to starting the studio was no different. I studied the industry to learn about it.”

Once he felt he’d done enough research, McCutcheon wrote a plan, purchased an old bank building on Neville Island near Pittsburgh, and hired a firm that specialized in designing high-end recording facilities.

“At the time, it was still a personal studio project,” he says. “I was going to do my own recording on the weekends and evenings, but I knew I wanted to build it to commercial studio standards.”

The McCutcheon family funded the studio themselves. It was a passion project for all of them. In 2016, construction was complete, and The Vault was born, taking its name from the old bank vault in the basement of the building.

But he was still working in his corporate roles. “I was as busy as I had ever been with the firm. But we enjoyed the studio on the weekends with bands that I knew and with the kids. We were having fun doing recordings.”

Then, tragedy struck.

## **Loss and Clarity**

In September 2017, Ryan, 19, was killed in an automobile accident while returning to his college campus after a long day assisting high school drum students at a local band festival.

“The best we can tell is that he fell asleep at the wheel,” McCutcheon says. “Everything was turned upside down in a heartbeat. Everything just froze.”

McCutcheon took several months away from the firm. “I started to question what I wanted to do and what was important in life. It probably took me a year or so to assess where my heart was,” he says.

The loss changed him. “I just don’t look at things the same way I did prior to that. It was a defining moment. The things I value are very different now. You realize it’s about relationships. It’s about

community. It's about family.”

In December 2018, he retired, determined to spend more time with Dana and with Brett, who was still in high school. To cope with their loss, the McCutcheons found ways to give back to the community, often via music, with Ryan in mind.

The family established the Ryan McCutcheon Rhythm19 Fund with The Pittsburgh Foundation to support children's love of music in a variety of ways. “We are keeping Ryan's memory alive,” Dana says. “We mention Ryan's name every day.”

## **Pumping Up the Volume**

Trying to get back on track after the loss of their son was difficult. “We had just started The Vault label,” McCutcheon says. “It was hard to reenergize.”

He began expanding the studio beyond a small family affair to a world-class recording facility. Although Brett and Dana are still intricately involved in The Vault, McCutcheon also hired a roster of world-class producers and engineers.

One big step was the addition of Grammy Award-winning Jimmy Hoyson—who had previously worked with Michael Jackson, Eric Clapton, B.B. King, and other famous artists—as the studio's chief engineer.

Hoyson told McCutcheon, “If you want to play big, you should find a Neve recording console.” And McCutcheon agreed. “Anybody who knows anything about vintage gear would love to get their hands on a Neve,” he says. “It offers such a warm, punchy vintage sound.”

They figured it would take 12 to 18 months to find one, but they hit the jackpot when, just a few weeks later, they discovered a restored Neve 8058. Later, they learned it once belonged to George Harrison of the Beatles.

McCutcheon's goal for The Vault is to provide opportunities and services for those who are trying to make a living in the world of music. In the past five years, he estimates that hundreds of artists, many from Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia, have worked in the studio, including Chris Jamison, who finished third on NBC's *The Voice*.

“When we first opened the studio, most days, I was the only one in the building,” McCutcheon says. “Now there are people walking in the halls every day.”

The Vault is drawing impressive professionals in sound engineering to build a powerful roster of producers. About half a dozen independent engineers and producers work out of the facility, as does McCutcheon, who also produces and engineers music.



## REMEMBERING RYAN

Bob, Dana, and Brett McCutcheon created The Ryan McCutcheon Rhythm19 Fund with The Pittsburgh Foundation in memory of their son and brother who died in a car accident at age 19.

The purpose of the fund is to support children's passion for music by hosting field trips to The Vault Recording Studio, as well as hosting a summer music camp where students learn how to write, record, produce, release, and market a song.

"The Rhythm19 Fund is an integral part of what we are doing," McCutcheon says.

"It's giving us all purpose and bringing us together as a family. It's giving back," Dana adds.

Brett, now 21, and his friend, June Bracken, wrote five songs about the stages of grief. He composed the music; she wrote the lyrics.

The songs will be released in an extended-play format as *The Ocean*, with proceeds going to the fund. "The whole thing is an allegory for the grieving process and how the ocean moves and acts like the stages of grief," Brett says.

In his father's words, "It's an emotional roller coaster of a musical piece. It demonstrates how he has felt as a young teenager going through the grief process. And he's found just a beautiful way to express that through music and then turned the project into something that can raise awareness for others. We're really proud and excited about it."

For more information, go to [pittsburghfoundation.org/ryan-mccutcheon-rhythm19-fund](http://pittsburghfoundation.org/ryan-mccutcheon-rhythm19-fund)

Does he think The Vault has a chance to discover a breakout artist with a hit record? "That's not why we do what we do," McCutcheon says, "but it would be nice to have."

"In the back of your mind, you hope it's something that's going to happen," he says. "I'm surrounded by people who have had that happen multiple times. It just hasn't happened from this building yet."



But having these people here increases our odds.”

McCutcheon says he learned early in his career that successful people surround themselves with good teams, so that’s what he has done at The Vault.

Financially, the studio is self-sustaining, he says. “But I’m not getting rich doing this, and I’m not using this to support my family, which it was never intended to do. Even when it is making money, I’m putting that money back into the business. I’m funding my passion.”

## **Continuing to Grow**

The McCutcheons recently renovated a second property, an old gas station across the street, to use as a multipurpose facility for charitable events, plus camps and other activities for students who want to learn about the music industry.

McCutcheon says he hasn’t had any doubts about his decision to open The Vault. “One of the things that I’ve learned throughout my career, and to be honest, solidified in my mind after the passing of my son, is that your passions define the core of who you are.”

“I feel fortunate that I had a clear understanding of what my passion was,” he says. “Then, I had a life event that made me slam on the brakes and question what I was going to pursue. I decided I was going to pursue what I was passionate about.”

“I wouldn’t say that my journey went according to plan,” he says. “But it’s ironic that things have completely turned around, and here I am after my retirement, still doing what I originally wanted to do.”