On the fourth floor of the Ronald Tutor Campus Center at USC, the future of the music industry isn’t just a question of commerce or culture—it’s a homework assignment. This is the home of the Iovine and Young Academy, and it’s here that students like Matt Stern, a member of the academy’s maiden class, are charged with working on such intractable problems. You can see why his professors would think he might be up to the task. Stern has led a $10,000 campaign to build schools in Africa and plays music under the name DJSterntables. His classmates are similarly impressive. Montana Reed runs one business that creates outdoor furniture from found materials and another that provides home repair and maintenance. Arjun Mehta cofounded Stoodle.org (acquired by the CK-12 Foundation) and PlaySpan (acquired by Visa). Caitlin Tran has done consulting work for Best Buddies, an international nonprofit, and this summer she interned at Autodesk. While they all take different classes across the USC campus, the core of the program revolves around group projects. Every two weeks
they’re presented with a new challenge, break up into small teams, and design a presentation. Over the course of the year, they came up with ideas for new wearable medical devices, a comprehensive plan to incorporate skateboarding across the USC campus, and methods of digitizing precious cultural artifacts.

But for their first assignment they were tasked with imagining how music would be experienced 10 years in the future. The group’s presentations included such notions as wireless earbuds that allowed for collaborative listening, synchronized album-release parties, and a platform that would let artists A/B-test their albums. Some students also suggested a marketplace where musicians could interact directly with fans—a feature not unlike Apple Music’s new Connect platform. “We were joking during [Jimmy Iovine’s] keynote, ‘When is he going to thank the Iovine and Young Academy?’” Stern says. “You could see a lot of parallels in there.”

Iovine was inspired to create the academy after concluding that most college graduates emerge from school with their interests and expertise unhelpfully narrowed. “We tried to hire people for Beats, and they were either engineers or music people,” Iovine says. “I’m like, this is all wrong. Of course the guys that run Beats understand both. Trent Reznor understands both. Will.i.am understands both. Those are the kind of people I was looking for, and there just aren’t enough of them.”

Iovine began scouting for a school that would support a new kind of program and quickly settled on USC, especially when he got connected with Erica Muhl, whom Iovine calls “a fucking miracle.” Muhl, a classical-music composer and conductor who runs USC’s Roski School of Art and Design, helped create an ambitious new curriculum, pulling together faculty and advisers from the engineering, business, and arts schools, establishing a four-year trajectory that includes seminars with celebrity guests like film producer Eric Eisner, financier Paul Wachter, and Snapchat’s Evan Spiegel (as well as WIRED editor in chief Scott Dadich). By the end, many students will have set up their own businesses or nonprofits.

Although the music industry’s travails may have inspired the academy, the overarching goal is broader—to teach students marketable tech skills while encouraging them to explore their creativity. A quick perusal of the Garage, a circular classroom-cum-makerspace that serves as the academy’s student headquarters, suggests that it’s working. Students proudly point out their class projects, like a cardboard prototype of a mobile printer. They lead me past video-screen-dotted workstations, where they hone their editing skills, and show off the 3-D printers, laser cutters, and hacksaws that populate the various work spaces and labs. The whole thing has the air of an extremely well-funded Montessori school, which Muhl says is no accident. When her son was in fourth grade, he attended a school that promoted interdisciplinary thinking by arranging classrooms around a central pod, so that students could look at subjects from different perspectives—an arrangement you can also find at the new Apple headquarters or at the Pixar offices in Emeryville, California.

“The thing that struck me was the energy of the place,” Spiegel told me in an email, adding that on the day of his visit the students were racing hand-built watercraft. “Jimmy and Dre have created a place that celebrates both thinking and doing, married with tons of excitement and creativity.”

Iovine says he’s just doing what he’s always done, following his sense of where the culture is headed. “One of the things he told me very early was ‘There’s a new kid out there,’ Muhl says—a generation that grew up with technology as a cultural product, that doesn’t draw rigid lines between art and engineering. He certainly seems to have tapped into something: This year more than 300 students applied for 22 spots, and Muhl says students have turned down offers from Ivy League schools to attend the academy. Muhl says the program’s success depends not just on providing a great education but on picking the right students in the first place. In that way, it’s kind of like a record label. “Jimmy collects creative minds,” Will.i.am says. “Why would he have a school with coders, designers, and developers? I think that’s his version of always smelling what’s coming next. Because it won’t just be someone writing a song.”

It’s all very buzzy—the school named after a rap icon, the celebrity speakers, the promotional materials declaring “the degree is in disruption!” Iovine, who became well versed in the art of ego management after dealing with rock stars for four decades, sometimes worries that all the glamour will go to his students’ heads. But he can’t always help himself. Last August he treated the class to a barbecue at his (very nice) house, complete with appearances from Dre and Will.i.am. “If I could unring that bell, I would,” he says now. “I don’t want to intoxicate these kids.”

Then again, it’s hard not to be intoxicated by Iovine. As we wrap up our first day of interviews, Iovine tells me that he usually has contempt for also-rans who knock off his innovations—the Interscope wannabes scrambling after gangsta rappers, the Beats pretenders that grab any athlete endorsements they can find. But when it comes to the USC program, he hopes that other schools will copy him. After all, the Iovine and Young Academy won’t generate an entire industry’s worth of creative executives all by itself. “That’s why this article is more important than anything I’m doing at Apple,” he says.