

Merge Records owners enlighten Malaprops

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Today's independent music scene would not be the same without the sacrifice of hundreds of rabbits.

After a failed attempt at a 2 a.m. Grand Canyon excursion on their way back from visiting Sub Pop Records founders in Seattle and realizing their van simply could not avoid hundreds of rabbits in the road, Laura Ballance and Mac McCaughan founded Merge Records, the independent label responsible for Arcade Fire, Spoon and the Magnetic Fields, among other foundational artists.

The decision to start their own record label was more of a necessity rather than a creative side project. McCaughan played guitar and sang lead vocals and Ballance played bass for the Chapel Hill band Superchunk.

"People ask the question a lot, 'Why did you decide to put out your own records?' But it's not like there was anyone else asking to put them out," said McCaughan in *Our Noise: The Story of Merge Records*, published last month, coinciding with the label's 20th anniversary.

At a small gathering of music nerds at Malaprops bookstore last Friday, McCaughan and Ballance played acoustic versions of Superchunk, Spoon and Magnetic Fields songs and read passages from *Our Noise*, which they co-wrote with John Cook, a reporter for Chicago-Tribune, Gawker Media and Radar magazine.

The book includes behind-the-scenes photos and profiles of Merge artists, handwritten artifacts like set lists and postcards and an introduction by Jacksonville native and notorious Americana music troublemaker Ryan Adams.

"I had a friend in the publishing business who wasn't even that into music. He said, 'This is an interesting story, let's do a book.' And I thought about it and answered, 'It's not that interesting of a story, so let's not do a book,'" McCaughan said.

After compiling thousand of images and artifacts and with the help of Cook, McCaughan and Ballance realized their story was worth telling.

McCaughan and Ballance met in Chapel Hill in the summer of 1987. Ballance had just finished her freshman year at UNC and McCaughan had just moved there, taking time off from his



Ian Hayes - Staff Photographer

Mac McCaughan and Laura Ballance, founders of the Chapel Hill-based Merge Records, perform a Superchunk song at Asheville's Malaprops bookstore book-signing. Ballance, below, reads an excerpt from the new Merge book, titled *Our Noise: The Story of Merge Records*.

studies at Columbia University. They both worked at Pepper's Pizza on Franklin Street, where McCaughan talked a hesitant Ballance into playing music.

"I felt like I was pushed into it. Music was important to me, but I had never wanted to actually play music or be on a stage," Ballance wrote in *Our Noise*. "I was mystified by Mac and his friends' knowledge of all these obscure punk-rock bands."

McCaughan was ultimately successful in his persuasion, and the two went on to play side-by-side in Superchunk, eventually embarking on international tours and traveling with Sonic Youth, Pavement and Built to Spill on the touring 1995 Lollapalooza.

But what set the band apart from their alternative music colleagues was their refusal to answer to superior label executives.

McCaughan, a grungy guitar player, and Ballance, a goth girl from Durham, were the label executives.

"The label was totally Mac's idea. To call it Merge was my idea," Ballance said to the Malaprops crowd, reminis-



ing about the rabbit-killing road trip.

"We were driving through Colorado, and I started reading road signs while I was thinking about a name for it. I actually thought it was a pretty dumb name for a long time. But it's certainly better than 'Pronghorn antelope,' which is another thing I saw while driving on that

trip," she said.

The young Merge founders were driving back to North Carolina, inspired by their friends at the year-old Sub Pop records in Seattle, who would later sign Nirvana and Soundgarden.