

The story of Merge describes a successful music scene

Our Noise is an essential document about music as an art form, a business and a community builder. Founders Mac McCaughan and Laura Ballance have managed to avoid the pitfalls that ultimately ruined their once successful predecessor labels like SST and Sub Pop.

At the Malaprops book signing, McCaughan cited Sub Pop as an influence, which is ironic considering how dreadful Sub Pop seems in comparison today.

While Sub Pop transformed "punk" into "grunge," Merge kept it real, releasing albums that contrasted and challenged each other rather than regurgitating the same ideas and manufacturing a distinctive "sound."

Nirvana and Soundgarden championed Sub Pop's Seattle sound, and Nirvana's *Nevermind* remains the most told story in indie rock lore.

Yet Merge accomplished so much more than just bringing more underground music into the spotlight. They released hundreds of amazing, unpredictable records, and to this day they have not changed their values.

The beauty of Merge is that McCaughan and Ballance never restrict artistic control. Merge began as a band, Superchunk, that needed to put out records. All they have ever strived for since is to do the same



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thing for other bands, without splitting factions and worrying about sales.

In the early days, Merge refused to use contracts, insisting that all deals be based on a handshake.

"We weren't thinking of it as a business, we were thinking about it as this fun, cool thing. Contracts seemed like a gesture of mistrust," says Ballance in *Our Noise*. "We'd talk about the basic premise, and that was that. In hindsight, I think that was really naïve. But at first, there really wasn't much money involved, so it didn't seem to matter."

Merge's efforts produced a flowering Chapel Hill music scene that has yet to lose momentum.

With 220 miles between Asheville and Chapel Hill, the two cities have gradually integrated each other's music, although the framework of their respective music scenes is almost completely opposite.

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Chapel Hill has the benefit of a flagship label, Merge, which has allowed for an organized exchange of ideas and a certain unity among independent musicians. Asheville is currently more of a dog-eat-dog kind of scene where no particular genre stands out within the "indie" umbrella term.

If anything, Asheville's label is "the jam-band city," which is an incredibly unfair yet valid stereotype. When Phish came to the Civic Center, it seemed that dreadlocked hippie culture had taken over downtown for a whole week.

Bluegrass, folk and traditional song craft have also played large roles in defining Asheville's image as a music town, due in part to easy-listening festivals like Bele Chere and a tourist-minded economy.

Not that this is a bad thing in itself, but it restricts the odds of a young, experimental rock band from having a shot at material or artistic success without a clearly de-

defined indie movement.

There is, however, a huge amount of great indie music in Asheville. Most of these unsigned artists never escape the "bar" scene, playing to small crowds and making only gas money.

The same thing goes for most unsigned bands in America, but at least there's a realistic dream in a place like Chapel Hill, which has seen dozens of reputable labels pop up since Merge broke through in the early 1990s.

No one can say how or whether the indie scene should break through in Asheville, but it is odd that there's such a difference in how independent music is appreciated, marketed and executed in two otherwise similar N.C. towns.

Anyone interested in music would benefit from reading *Our Noise: The Story of Merge Records*, which details how Chapel Hill's indie rock scene happened and why it remains such a strong force worldwide.

Our Noise

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"We would borrow money, like a few hundred dollars from one person; and then do a release and then pay them back," McCaughan said.

The 20-year-old entrepreneurs started by collecting singles from local bands, and selling them to local record stores in Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill.

"We had a little tiny room devoted to Merge," said Amy Ruth Buchanan, Ballance's former roommate. "And it had this little red table, and like some stacks of singles. No windows. It was just this little, tiny, closet-y kind of room, and Laura would work away."

More than 20 years later, Ballance and McCaughan sit in front of the Malaprops crowd trying to define the term "indie music."

"It used to be just a definition, meaning independent. Now, it's more of a genre," McCaughan said.

Merge artists like M. Ward and Neutral Milk Hotel certainly fall under the term, but Ballance and McCaughan said a consistent quality, rather than a similar sound, determines whether Merge will sign an artist.

"What Merge artists have in common

is that they write good songs," he said. "We put out what we like, and I think that provides a general direction that people can trust."

Although the two are the business brains behind the label, they said the success of Merge has a lot to do with the fact they are also musicians.

"We try not to interfere with the artistic development. I think that's because we're in a band too," Ballance said. "A label has no role telling an artist what their art should be."

With Arcade Fire selling more than a million copies of their 2007 release, *Neon Bible*, regular performances by Merge artists on "Saturday Night Live," "The Tonight Show" and "David Letterman," and the release of Magnetic Field's groundbreaking three-volume album *69 Love Songs*, Merge Records has crystallized Chapel Hill's dialogue in the independent music conversation.

"There's something about the feeling of holding your own band's record in your hand for the first time," McCaughan said. "I still feel that way even though we're not getting boxes of 7-inch singles anymore."

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