

One Track Mind:

Genre-Specific Labels in the Triangle

Small Labels Carve Own Market Slice

By JOANNA PEARSON
Staff Writer

Amid the sea of major labels with big names and big bucks, the Triangle's independent, genre-specific record labels still find ways to get their music to their audience.

These companies have found that the way to achieve success involves increasing personal attention to projects — a technique that serves to offer consumers an individualized alternative.

"Everybody thinks that when you get a major label deal, it's, 'Oh, I've made it,' but you take your career and put it in the hands of idiots," said Ron Royster, co-founder of the Chapel Hill electronic label Freakadelic.

Dan Alger, an employee at Chapel Hill's indie-folk label Awakening Records, also said the ability to devote attention to its artists was the breeding ground for the label's success.

"Major labels are not as interested in the welfare of the artist," he said. "The welfare and success of the artist are our No. 1 priority."

Durham's gay and women's rock label Mr. Lady Records provides a community service in a business world that isn't supportive of certain groups, said co-founder Kaia Wilson.

"It's hard for queer artists and women to get on a major label," Wilson said. "What we have to offer is a genuine love of music. Yeah, hopefully, you can make some money, but we also care about putting out really great music that can change people's lives."

To be on a major label, "you do have to sell your soul a little bit," Wilson said. "They want marketability and radio-friendly shit, so you can get dropped really quickly."

Attracting an audience is another challenge faced by smaller labels. Though Awakening is a locally based label, it still serves a broad audience. "We really have a national market," Alger said. "We do have a loyal following of fans here in Chapel Hill, but locally, people are less receptive to Awakening's music than in the Midwest."

Freakadelic also aims to move beyond the area. "Our audience is getting bigger, slowly," Royster said. The label, he said, relies on footwork and phone calls to get the word out.

Rather than depend on the traditional medium of radio airplay, Awakening relies on its annual compilation releases to reach the mass-

es. "Each features a bunch of independent artists," Alger said. "Fans of Awakening keep coming back for compilations, and we carry all the artists featured on the compilations."

Wilson said Mr. Lady relied heavily on touring to increase visibility of its artists. "Really seeing the person creates word-of-mouth," she said.

Companies like the Durham-based American roots music label Sugar Hill Records actually have an advantage over their major-label competitors when it comes to promotions, said promoter Steve Gardner.

"Let's say a label like RCA decides to put out a bluegrass album. They wouldn't really know how to do it because they only deal with MTV and The New York Times," Gardner said.

"To put out an album in that niche market, you have to know the niche media. You need to get to those little stations out there in Spindale, N.C., and we know about them."

This kind of niche marketing "certainly is our strong point," said Bob Haddad, founder of the Chapel Hill label Music of the World.

Since its inception in the early '80s, Music of the World has seen a lot of changes in the way the music business works. "To stay active as a record label you need to diversify with the changing times," Haddad said. "It's sometimes hard to do that when you're a record company with a niche market."

But the label is doing a good job of keeping pace. It recently merged with the Internet company emusic.com, and Haddad said they'll be "combining forces to get the music out there in different ways," including downloadable music.

While some local labels seem to have found the answer to turning a profit, others have not been as successful, facing the inherent risks of existing as a small-time independent company.

Awakening co-founder Scott Sanders supports himself via the label, Alger said. But when asked how Mr. Lady managed, Wilson said, "We don't. We're using credit cards, we have massive debt, we don't get paid, and we've been doing this for three years, working hard."

Freakadelic, Royster said, is getting by. "The good news is we haven't lost money. We haven't made money, but we haven't lost money."

The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.



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label in 1978.

At the time, said promoter Steve Gardner, "There were a lot of people ... creating this more progressive style of bluegrass. Sugar Hill started as a label to put out that type of music."

The label has since grown into a respected supplier of American roots music of all varieties, boasting eight Grammys and artists like Doc Watson and Dolly Parton.

The Triangle, said Gardner, is the perfect place for an Americana-based record label. "I think it's great because it has a great mix of this rural nature, which our music takes, but it's progressive musically."

"We could have a record company out in the middle of the sticks and get the rural nature, but we wouldn't be hooked into what's going on in the world." Plus, there's local talent — Sugar Hill recently signed Carboro's Tift Merritt and the Carlines.

Royster's Freakadelic label is also based in local talent — both of its artists hail from the area. Formed in 1998, the label features artists who create electronic music from scratch, not from samples.

"We perform live, which is very unusual in electronic music," he said. The live shows incorporate performance art and videos.

Royster runs the label with the help of co-founder Tim Harper. Harper, who has worked as a producer for bands such as The Connells and Whiskeytown, also records music as Dub Assassin. Royster and Harper



Zoubek & Bryant play during a concert sponsored by Awakening Records in Gerrard Hall. The band is traveling cross-county with other Awakening artists.

teamed up with Marcell Marias and Simone Shannon, visual and graphic performance artists who also perform music as Dusk.

The label has put out nationwide releases from both acts and has received airplay on college radio in several major cities.

But Chapel Hill hasn't proven the most receptive environment for Freakadelic, Royster said. "We get radio airplay all over the country and can't even get recognized in

our own hometown," he said. "Electronic music in this area is just not cool."

And Chapel Hill's reputation for musical fertility doesn't help, he said. "We're just another record label from Chapel Hill."

"Maybe we should tell everybody we're from Saxapahaw."

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Kaia Wilson and Tammy Rae Carland, founders of Durham's Mr. Lady Records, hang out in SchoolKids Records with their puppy. The music store carries records from the all-female rock label.

Musicians Find Partnership With Genre-Specific Labels

By JOSH LOVE
Staff Writer

In this era of music-industry conglomerates spawned from corporate mergers, countless major-label recording artists have fallen by the wayside — either ignored, mishandled or outright released from contracts.

And broadly based labels often fail to provide artists in specialized genres with the attention necessary to effectively promote their music.

To stave off this small fish, big pond syndrome, artists willing to sacrifice mass-market exposure can take refuge in the niche-specific confines of independent labels, several of which can be found in the Triangle.

"Independent labels really allow you to bypass the one-hit wonder symptoms of corporate music," said Justin Rosolino, who released his debut album, *Music*, on the local indie-folk label Awakening Records.

"A label like Awakening functions more to empower and liberate than restrain an artist," Rosolino said.

Likewise, Durham's women's rock label Mr. Lady Records has provided 19-year-old solo artist Tami Hart with both a musical foundation and ideological support. "I felt like I was working with people with similar beliefs and that I could identify with them," she said.

Hart's first full-length album will be released May 2, and she attributed much of her success in the punk rock scene to the relationship she has forged with Mr. Lady. "I didn't want to be with a label where I didn't feel respected and admired," Hart said. "With (Mr. Lady) it feels just like a family."

A similar sense of kinship first endeared Jack Herrick, multi-instrumentalist for local folk and bluegrass mainstays The Red Clay Ramblers, to sign with Durham-based Sugar Hill Records, a revered pillar of

Americana and bluegrass music.

"Sugar Hill is very strong in folk and bluegrass and dedicated to the Triangle music scene," Herrick said. "We wanted to stay within that niche, and after our original label (Flying Fish) dissolved, they seemed like the natural choice." The label also offered the Red Clay Ramblers the freedom to explore the musical possibilities of both film and theatre, leading to a soundtrack collaboration with playwright Sam Shepherd.

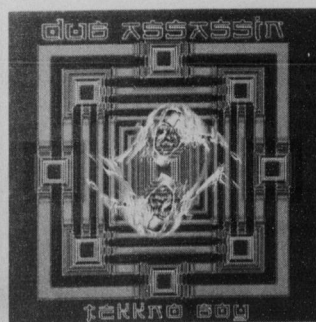
Tim Harper, who records as Dub Assassin, also wanted to expand his creative opportunities. The desire inspired him to co-found the electronic label Freakadelic and then release his music on the label.

"I was looking to create more of an experience for the listener through multimedia presentations, and recording for an independent label helped bring that into focus," Harper said.

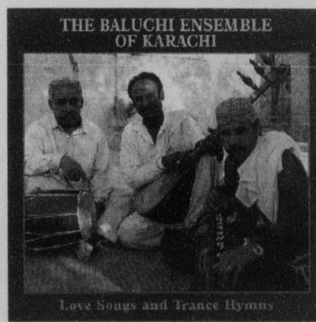
Despite the liberation and solidarity that independent labels provide, certain limitations remain inherent in the operations of small-scale record companies. "You don't receive as much publicity with an independent label, and you do have to work harder," Hart said. "But because of the people involved, it's definitely worth it." And for traditional musicians in places like Guyana and Turkey, Bob Haddad and his world music label Music of the World provide what could be their only opportunity to reach an audience.

"The equivalents of Polygram or EMI in Africa, they don't want to produce traditional music," Haddad said. "It would be like Warner Bros. producing a CD of pow-wow music and trying to sell that to the shopping malls."

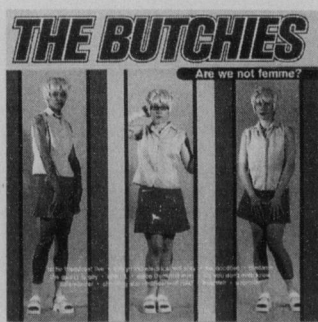
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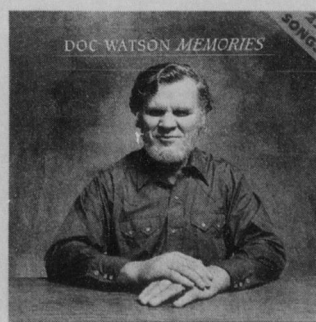
COURTESY OF FREAKADELIC RECORDS
Dub Assassin, Freakadelic Records



COURTESY OF MUSIC OF THE WORLD
The Baluchi Ensemble, Music of the World



COURTESY OF MR. LADY RECORDS
The Butchies, Mr. Lady Records



COURTESY OF SUGAR HILL RECORDS
Doc Watson, Sugar Hill Records



COURTESY OF AWAKENING RECORDS
The Awakening Compilation: Volume 1