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Local label revolution

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It doesn't take an expert to know that the Triangle has built a reputation for ambitious and successful record labels.

Merge Records, the foremost example of the area's success, formed in Chapel Hill in the '90s and has gone on to release records by Arcade Fire and Spoon that have broken into the top 10 of the Billboard 200.

But it's easy to forget that Merge was once a small imprint formed around an up-and-coming Chapel Hill indie rock band Superchunk, who went on to national stardom and took the label along for the ride.

"I don't think we really foresaw anything beyond getting some music out there for people to hear, which is kind of what we're still doing," Mac McCaughan, co-founder of Merge said in an e-mail.

But, even for all of its success, it is important to remember that Merge Records is not the only label in town.

Channeling a new generation of eager and talented musicians, a slew of dedicated and highly motivated labels have popped up around the area in recent years.

"For local labels to be successful like this, there have to be great bands," said Kyle Miller who cofounded Durham's Churchkey Records last year. "And there are a ton. And there has always been a ton."

Miller formed the label last fall with friend Steve Jones to put out the debut EP by Durham metal act Tooth. The label produced a second release with the full-length debut from Southern-punk band The Dry Heathens in May.

The success of these releases has made Churchkey a hot ticket for bands looking to get their music out.

"We have had to say 'no' to people," he said. "We've said 'no' to records that I really like, which makes me feel kind of awful. We're overwhelmed."

One thing that isn't in short supply right now is success stories. The Bowerbirds released their debut

Hymns For A Dark House on Durham's Burly Time Records to critical acclaim before being picked up by national label Dead Oceans.

And Durham experimental folk act Megafaun's self-release, *Bury the Square*, was picked up by an English imprint after the band was featured as a "Band to Watch" on the popular music blog Stereogum.

All this success has led some in the music community, including the heads of some labels, to predict that the area is poised to return to the prestige it enjoyed in the '90s.

"I think it's about to hit sort of a renaissance," said Will Hackney of Chapel Hill's Trecky Records. "We've been in this music scene for six or eight years. I think this is becoming on one of the most exciting times that we've seen."

Hackney formed Trecky with friends Emma Nadeau and Martin Anderson while the three were in middle school in 2002. The label is currently experiencing its biggest year yet with back-to-back high-profile releases from The Physics of Meaning and Lost In The Trees.

The release party for the latter packed Cat's Cradle on a Saturday night.

"The community is recognizing that there's a lot of good work coming out of here, and we just want to have a part of that," Anderson said.

Community is a point of emphasis for Chapel Hill's Holidays For Quince Records.

"That's a conscious effort on our part to bring together the parts of the Triangle," said Heather McEntire, lead-singer of Bellafea who cofounded the label with fellow Chapel Hill musician Jenks Miller. "There's a Durham thing, a Chapel Hill thing and a Raleigh thing."

"We feel it's really detrimental to the Triangle in general."

Though the label has only released albums by Chapel Hill bands so far, McEntire echoed the sentiments of Trecky and Churchkey that working together by mixing bands from different labels on bills was important

to the community.

"It's about collaboration. I think that makes all the difference," Anderson said. "What makes this town special is that people are willing to work together."

But at the point when local labels have pushed their bands to the brink of making it big, more issues rear their heads.

Miller emphasized the significant investment it takes to give a band national exposure.

"It's tough as a local label to decide if you want to do that," he said. "There's a lot of people who don't. They really want to be a local label."

One label that has turned being a jumping-off point into an institution is Chapel Hill's Pox World Empire.

Zeno Gill, who brought Pox to town when he moved from Ithaca, N.Y., in 2001, said that his vision for the label is to be able to step in to help bands that have few prospects for releasing their material.

"If we come across a band that is inaccessible, meaning they don't have access to any bigger options or bigger labels then we'll approach them and offer working with us as an alternative to having to release something themselves," he said.

In doing so Pox has released records by popular Chapel Hill artists such as Nathan Oliver and Schooner who might have never gotten their music out any other way.

But Miller was excited to speculate on what it would mean to this area if a label stepped up and made the kind of investment it would take to sky rocket a band to the big time.

"I think if that happens has a lot to do with money and a lot to do with luck," he said. "What if one of these labels does decide that they're going to borrow 20 grand and make it happen?"

"Maybe that's what it's going to take."

Contact the Divisions Editor
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Local imprint infantry brings the music to the people



DTH FILE/JORDAN LAWRENCE

Trecky Records cofounder Will Hackney plays with Lost In The Trees at Cat's Cradle last month.



DTH FILE PHOTO

Heather McEntire, who co-owns Holidays For Quince Records, plays at Local 506 last February.



DTH FILE/JORDAN LAWRENCE

Daren Sink of Churchkey Records punk rockers The Dry Heathens plays at Jack Sprat last February.

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