The Independent Echo

Brought to you by PIAS

DAVID BOWIE

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A TRUE HERO

Dear friend of [PIAS],

In January 2015, [PIAS] launched our first ever newsletter for the global independent music community.

The Independent Echo is now received by more than 3,000 people across the world every month - from labels to managers, publishers, retailers, media, radio and beyond.

In each monthly issue, I have had the pleasure of interviewing some of the most inspiring and successful characters working in our world.

From Sire founder Seymour Stein to Mute's Daniel Miller, Mushroom's Michael Gudinski, Cooking Vinyl's Martin Goldschmidt, Epitaph's Brett Gurewitz, Fat Possum's Matthew Johnson and many more besides, these people have all achieved a huge amount in their lives.

They also have one very obvious but very important thing in common: great taste in music.

The booklet you hold in your hands compiles some of these interviews, delving into the experiences, memories and motivations of some truly extraordinary individuals.

Our aim with The Independent Echo is simply to celebrate the brilliance of these people (and their artists), while perhaps revealing something enlightening about their personalities.

Of course, every one of them is proudly independent - just like [PIAS].

I sincerely hope you enjoy it.

Kenny Gates,
[PIAS]

"THERE'S SOMETHING REALLY SATISFYING ABOUT WORKING WITH RAW TALENT, PUTTING A TEAM AROUND THEM AND WATCHING IT GROW."

A WARPED MIND
STEVE BECKETT ON RUNNING A LABEL LEGEND

Aphex Twin, Nightmares On Wax, Boards Of Canada, Flying Lotus: Warp Records has been a natural home for brilliant, banging, head-bending music ever since it was born in 1989. Steve Beckett has been there from the very beginning, when he co-founded Warp with his fellow till jockey at Sheffield's Fon record shop, the late Rob Mitchell.

Together, the duo fathered one of the most influential record companies of recent decades.

Their early records set the tone for Warp's fascination with the unorthodox side of dance music: debut release Forgemasters' Track With No Name (WAP1) in 1989 was dark to the point of unsettling, but was awash with a clear understanding of techno's floorfilling peaks.

It was followed by the groundbreaking Dextrous from Leeds DJ George Evelyn, aka Nightmares On Wax, which also carried Warp's then-trademark purple sleeve design.

Surprisingly – most of all to Beckett – Warp's weird yet soulful tastes soon began to flirt with commercial success; the label's fifth release, 1990's bass-heavy LFO, sold more than 130,000 copies in the UK and hit No.12 on the Official Singles Chart.

It was a signal that corners of mainstream club culture were starting to embrace more interesting – but no less hedonistic – music. If this was a new movement, Warp was born to be at its heart.

Since that formative era, Warp has released classic record after classic record, from acts as diverse as Aphex Twin, Grizzly Bear, Nightmares On Wax, Maximo Park, Battles, Jamie Lidell, Hudson Mohawke and Flying Lotus.

It's also been unafraid to branch out into other areas of creative expression; from its first live night, Blech in Sheffield – started in 1996 – to its BAFTA-winning film division, responsible for producing movies including Shane Meadow's widely-acclaimed duo, Dead Man's Shoes (2004) and This Is England (2006).

Last year, Warp celebrated its 25th anniversary with a series of re-releases and special gigs across Europe – culminating in a spectacular finale at September's Sacrum Profanum festival in Krakow, Poland.

The anniversary was a handy excuse for the label to look back on its achievements, but the modern day innovation of the company didn't take a rest: Aphex Twin album Syro, for instance, was teased with a huge blimp flown over London, before its tracklisting and title were revealed via a hidden online service only accessible via the 'Deep Web'. Not your usual artist – not your usual record company.

[PIAS]'s Kenny Gates caught up with Warp's Steve Beckett to ask all about the formation and history of a label that's always been proud to be different.

Do you feel it's important to celebrate an anniversary like Warp's 25th?

Good question! It's important to celebrate generally, because as you know when you're working in the music business you're always looking forward – at your next release, the next year, next, next, next…

Every now and then, especially for your staff, artists and the fans, it's important to look back and acknowledge your success. Secondly, it's a great excuse to have a good party.

The staff came to me and said: 'Do you want to do a 25-year thing?' I said: 'Not particularly, we did one five years ago [for the 20th]. But if we can work with that guy Phillipe who does the Sacrum Profanum festival in Krakow, then we'll have an excuse to have a great party!'
I'm just going to give conversational answers to these questions, is that okay?


Boards of Canada

I don't know. This is the first ever interview I've done!

[Laughs]

Why are you still doing this after 25 years?

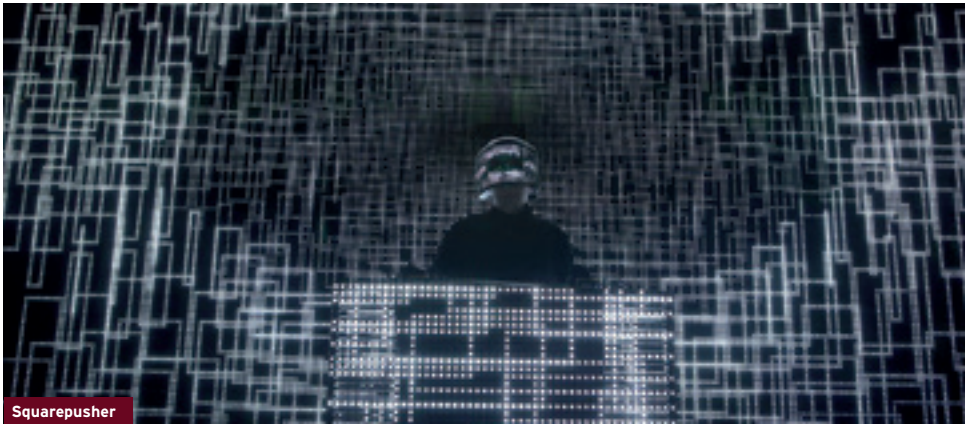
When it comes down to it, the thing that's most satisfying for me is finding, nurturing and breaking new talent. I was with an artist yesterday and she was talking about how amazing the journey has been from where she was to where she is now – she's just done a big art installation in Sydney Opera House.

There's something really satisfying to me about seeing that raw talent, usually quite young talent, then putting a team round them and seeing it grow. It's quite a slow process; even when something 'goes', people think it's happened quite quickly but the behind-the-scenes work takes a long time.

When you see these artists who you first saw in a room of six people [succeed], it's brilliant; I saw Flying Lotus the other night playing a sold-out Roundhouse show. Seeing people coming from nowhere to making a real impact on the world; that's the 'why' of what we do – bringing new, exciting music into the world.

But Warp isn't just about music. I get the impression it's always been important for you to go into other areas – videos, cover art, film. You're a music company that taps into other areas of art…

Yeah, the idea of an aesthetic has always been really important to me. That's how we've had a natural progression into things like films. We were working with great designers doing the artwork, then it developed into making sure we were tracking down great directors for the music videos.



Squarepusher

Through interactions with people like Chris Cunningham [we realised] it wasn't just a marketing tool for people's music, it was art in its own right. It was such a similar experience working with a filmmaker like Chris Cunningham as it was working with an artist like Aphex Twin. It felt like such a natural progression to go into film.

We did a short film with Chris [Cunningham], then we did one with Chris Morris [My Wrongs #8245–8249 & 117, in 2002]. From there, we realised it wasn't that much of a step to start doing feature films and TV series.

I see it as all part of the same thing: putting great, beautiful art out into the world and making things that last. Some of the things we put out 25 years ago have stood the test of time. That's what I'm looking for.

"We realised video wasn't just a marketing tool for people's music. It was art."

25 years ago, a music fan would have discovered an album from a new Warp artist in a record store, probably on vinyl. Today, they will probably hear it through their phone – perhaps even through YouTube. How does that make you feel?

There's loads of pros and loads of cons! For those old fogies amongst us who were around pre-internet, there's still something very romantic about vinyl.

Obviously me and Rob used to have a record shop in Sheffield, and there [was] something special about Monday morning when the new Sugarcubes album was out and everyone was queuing down the road waiting for us to open.

They'd buy it, rush back with a group of friends and listen to it for the first time as a shared experience. That's amazing.

Or back when the dance scene broke, on Satuday mornings before the imports came in, people were again queuing down the road before the doors opened. The first time they'd hear records was us playing them in the shop.

If you'd ever experienced that, you can't help but feel nostalgic about it. Then there's the whole quality issue; you've got artists who are spending their lifetime trying to make sonically amazing [creations].

Flying Lotus

It's like a Picasso painting; looking at that on the screen of an iPhone just wouldn't be the same experience. These producers are making amazing music through incredible speakers, finessing the bass and the sub-bass. And then people are listening to it on those crappy [Apple] white headphones or even through the speaker on their phone.

But on the pro side, people can access so much music so instantly so widely around the world now – people who would previously have been miles away and completely excluded can now get it at the touch of a button.

Everything moves so quickly and that can be great; artists have got easy access to people. But then a downside is that you get a bit of a throwaway, one-click attitude to music: 'I'll try this… then this… then this!'

[That means] that with streaming services like YouTube or Spotify, things have got to really jump out and be impactful.
My concern is that with the type of music we do – music that is subtle or takes time to fully experience – might struggle to rise to the surface.

You referred to romanticism. Do you consider yourself a hopeless romantic?

I think so, yeah. Most people I know in the music business who are still here are hopeless romantics!

Do you feel – and did you ever feel – part of an independent music scene?

We're definitely part of the independent music industry in the wider context.

But everybody I know in the music industry always thinks they're the most independent and the best!

If you didn't think you were the best you'd be signing different music.

"IT'S ABOUT THE LOVE OF MUSIC, ROCK'N'ROLL AND HAVING A GOOD TIME."

A SLICE OF HEAVEN
25 YEARS OF HEAVENLY RECORDINGS

Jeff Barrett – yes, that's him behind the vinyl sleeve – could do with a bit of shut-eye.

When [PIAS]'s Kenny Gates catches up with the Heavenly Recordings co-founder, he's fresh – or, tell the truth, not so fresh – from a 'Heavenly Weekend in Hebden Bridge'; the first chapter of 2015's 25-year celebration of his label.

The four-day anniversary event in Hebden, Yorkshire was headlined by modern Heavenly stars including Cherry Ghost, Stealing Sheep and Leeds singer/songwriter, Eaves.

These acts continue a wonderful legacy for Heavenly, which began in 1990 when Barrett was given the opportunity to launch a label by his friends at Revolver distribution.

Since its achingly indie beginnings, Heavenly's been part of two major labels – EMI and Sony – and learnt plenty from the ups and downs of both experiences.

Today, the label is fully independent once again, fully run by Barrett with backing from [PIAS].

Heavenly's roster has often touched on the sublime, ranging from acts such as Doves, The Magic Numbers, Edwyn Collins and Beth Orton to Mark Lanegan and modern-day indie superstars Temples.

Barrett and his label are also credited with 'saving the Manic Street Preachers' career' – signing the Welsh agit-rock outfit for very early singles including Motown Junk.

Here, Kenny asks Jeff about the ethos behind Heavenly, his unorthodox path to becoming a label owner and why he's still wrapped up in independent music, three decades after his career began.

Tell us more about a 'Heavenly Weekend in Hebden'.

We went to a place called Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire to enjoy the first bit of celebration around our 25th year. We took over a venue [The Trades Club] and, to a degree, the town with all of our bands.

We're London-based, but we're not London-centric. Hebden has myth and legend about it; Ted Hughes the poet was born down the road, Sylvia Plath his wife was buried up on the moor. There's also stories about the ridiculous number of lesbians and hippies up there, and even stories about a legacy of bad parenting meaning there's lots of kids on smack. It's nicknamed 'Happy Valley'; it's got a story.
I noticed the Trades Club appearing

on my bands' schedules and I went last year for the first time, and I loved it. I loved getting off the train in dusk in January and walking onto these cobbled streets and slipping on my arse. I loved the smell of the place, how it was described by a kid on my train; as the doors opened he inhaled and said: "You can tell you're in Hebden by the smell of the gange."

It was actually chimney smoke so someone's ripping him off but, either way, I felt a vibe in that small town. And the atmosphere at the venue is fantastic.

Is it important for Heavenly to celebrate its life so far?

Well we definitely like to celebrate, given the excuse, and 25 years is as good an excuse as any. When we were 18 we threw a really big party on the Southbank in London – the Royal Festival Hall, The Queen Elizabeth Hall, the whole lot.

It was a real coming together of history – it was about everybody that had been on the label. It was a fantastic turnout: The Manics

Beth Orton

recorded seven songs for us [in the early '90s], including two singles, and they came and played those songs. Beth Orton, who we had a fantastic relationship with but hadn't worked with for some years, came and played. As a label bloke, that's a really nice thing; having that lasting relationship with artists. They're the important bit – their music is what makes everything memorable and valuable.

At that time, we'd been in this joint venture with EMI for six or seven years and that was just finishing. And as a result, my partnership with my long-term friend Martin Kelly – a big part of our story – came to an end.

Why did the partnership come to an end?

Well, money: there wasn't any. There was a change of landscape in the industry and there was a change of landscape in our bank balance. We were at a point in our lives where for the first time we probably considered ourselves grown ups and that scared us.

The EMI deal funded us very well; we were earning good money and we had good budgets. It ended when the industry was really changing – we realised that we'd enjoyed the comfort zone too much. Suddenly, when that was over, we weren't really sure what we were going to do. Our primary concerns, of course, were our kids and our mortgages. It was a little bit scary.

We knew we didn't want to go back to a major company and we knew that a major company would probably never want to go with us again. Not that [PIAS] isn't a major company in its own right.

No, no - please don't call us a major!

Okay, I won't! But you know what I mean. You weren't even on the horizon then, so we ended up doing the deal

with Co-Op. There just wasn't any money.
Heavenly Recordings couldn't afford to keep [both of us], simple as that, so we separated. Martin does Heavenly Films with his brother and the guys in St. Etienne, who he's always managed. And they're doing some really great stuff.

Before Heavenly, weren't you a press officer for Factory Records?

I was a press officer in London, and I worked with Factory from early '88 to early '92. The Happy Mondays hadn't broken out yet and the Hacienda was still empty, so it was a hugely

"There wasn't any money left. We had become grown ups, and that scared us."

significant periods of Factory's history.

The Factory Records story is such a thrill. During those four years, the Hacienda went from tumbleweed to being the most important club in the world to closure. The Happy Mondays went from being a group to which a lot of people would refuse to do support gigs with, to being one of the most culturally important British acts of all time.

Did Factory give you the inspiration to begin a label?

No, I'd put some records out before then. I was Creation Records' first employee in 1985. I fell into press by accident. I didn't even know it was a job.

In 1983 I was the singles buyer at an HMV shop in Plymouth, Devon and I used to buy the independent stuff from a company called Revolver in Bristol. We were the go-to shop in the entire West Country for independent music.

And that's where you met Mike Chadwick?

I did. Mike was still the Revolver shop manager then. Revolver had this brilliant, very independent shop its was heavy on reggae and into electro when that was coming in.

After selling far more independent records than any of the shops they were dealing with, I got a call from Lloyd [Harris, Revolver distributor] saying that Mike was going into distribution, and they were looking for a shop manager. I got the job. Back then it was all in one building; distribution was in the back room of the shop.

I've obviously always loved music, but I was also always kind of interested in how independent labels operated. Anything written on a record sleeve interested me, to be honest.

I couldn't believe the job: I was managing this fantastic record shop with this incredible amount of action going on in the back room; The Smiths debut was coming out, Aztec Camera's debut was coming out. Mike and I became good friends. After a year there, I went down to Plymouth and starting putting on bands.

When I put on The Jesus & Mary Chain, Alan McGee came down to the gig. I remember being stood on the street outside the venue, and he said to me: 'Barrett. What the fuck are you doing in Plymouth?' That's when he offered me a job on his label.

And so began your time at Creation...

I loved that label. Upside Down by the Mary Chain [1984] was only just out. When I was at Revolver we'd get all these white labels through and these sales notes, and I'd laugh

because they were fucking bonkers – McGee trying to explain tour dates and release dates etc. They were just punk rock rants.
So when I went to Plymouth [after Revolver], I rung him up and said I liked his label and wanted to book some of his bands in Plymouth. He said: 'Are you taking the fucking piss mate?'

I said no, and asked why he thought I was: 'Because I put my groups on in London and no cunt comes along. You think they'll come and see them in fucking Plymouth?'

I said: 'Shall we give it a go?' And he said: 'Aye. I like your spirit, man.'

'We're not fucking paying you, get back on.' And I'd say: 'You just witnessed the best 15 minutes of your fucking life – the greatest rock and roll band in the world.' It was a fucking debacle, really. But I saw my favourite group every night of the week and drank their rider.

How did your career progress from there?

A lot of the bands, including Primal Scream, couldn't get agents. So I started doing that, putting groups on myself. And because I'd been an avid reader of the music press all my life and I knew what the writers on these music papers were into, I could target them with certain records. It worked and I got kind of good at it.

"When Tony Wilson turned up, he told us what he'd done that day, smoke a joint then left."

He sent me a load of fanzines and flexi-discs – an indie kid's wet dream.

What was your job at Creation?

Kind of a dogsbody, really. We'd take records to NME and Radio 1, take records to the cutting room – I didn't even know what a cutting room was.

The daftest thing was that Autumn [1985] Alan asked me to tour manage The Mary Chain across Europe. I didn't have a passport – I was 23 years old – and Alan didn't explain what a tour manager actually was. I guess he didn't expect me to come back without receipts either…

By the time we hit Holland, Benelux and Germany, I realised nobody had made the promoters aware that the Mary Chain played 15 minutes tops. So it was a struggle to even get paid at some of those gigs.

One day, a guy called Dave Harper who was doing press for Factory came down to me, knowing I was a huge Happy Mondays fan. He told me I was leaving and did I want to do press for Factory. I went there and met Alan Erasmus [Co-Founder] and Tina Simmons [GM], then waited three hours for Tony fucking Wilson to turn up!

When he did he told us all about what he'd been doing all day, smoked a huge joint then disappeared. It was the most unorthodox interview I've ever had – not that I've had many interviews. Suddenly I was a press guy for Factory but kept doing a bit of work for Creation.

What would be your proudest moment in your career, and what would be your lowest moment?
Honestly, the proudest is getting to 25 years with Heavenly and marking it with such great groups in Hebden. We're at 25 with a really fucking great roster of artists.

Doves

I'm also proud that after the [post EMI] bump, which is probably the most miserable period – breaking up with Martin wasn't nice – we were able to rebuild, with the support of Danny Mitchell especially. That's both the shittiest bit and the best bit.

How did Heavenly come to be in the first place?

Mike Chadwick started Heavenly, really; he called me one day and said he wanted to start an in-house label [at Revolver] and for me to do the A&R. I was high one night and Heavenly seemed appropriate.

The first low came quite soon after, when Mike decided that Heavenly had already become too big for what he'd envisaged and didn't want to fund it to the tune that I was hoping he would.

The first signings were from St. Etienne and a group from North London called Flowered Up; as a publicist I put the word out that they were London's answer to The Happy Mondays, which seemed to work. And then I signed the Manics. These things needed a video, a poster, some advertising – but that's expensive.

Where did you take Heavenly after you parted ways with Revolver?

Well I was like: 'Fuck! I was enjoying that! Now what do I do?' That was when I fell into the clutches of the majors. I'd never thought about major labels before; I wasn't keen to get 'into the industry' as such.

But this guy Rob Stringer was around, he'd signed the Manics [for Columbia] – they only had a singles deal with me so it was no problem.

London Records made me this offer, then Rob. I just wanted to be able to keep putting out records. I went with Rob and had two years [at Sony]. I didn't know what I was doing, and they didn't know what to do with me. When we came out of that, I thought we'd be independent again.

But Deconstruction, who were part of

RCA at that time, were a a really successful dance music singles label and wanted to broaden their remit into making albums, so they made us an offer and we went in there. I had my fingers in a lot of pies at the time, hanging out with acid house guys and running a club night with the Chemical Brothers.

Heavenly's roster today is more rock and indie than dance.

Well I'm 52 years old and I don't spend as much time in the clubs as I used to! There was a time when I would take test pressings or acetates from The Happy Mondays and put them straight into the hands of DJs – Andrew Weatherall, Paul Oakenfold, Danny Rampling – and get them played then and there. I did 'sort of A&R' on Screamadelica through that; I introduced Primal Scream to Andrew Weatherall.

You do have your own bar though.

Yeah, The Social in London, which punches above its weight. That was 15 years old last year. And our club night that spawned it was 20.

Man, you know what it's like, you've been around long enough and suddenly you're celebrating shit all the time.

The tagline of Heavenly is: 'Believe in magic'. After 25 years, do you still believe?

Yeah! Absolutely. I saw it happen in Hebden. That [motto] is everything to do with The Lovin' Spoonful, who had a song called, Do You Believe In Magic?

The lyrics to that song, the emotion of it, are to me the holy grail – it's about the love of music, of rock'n'roll and having a good time. That ticks all the boxes to me.

So do you see yourself as a hopeless romantic?

Completely. How can you not be?

That's my favourite question. I've been told I'm one too.

Well, we're the sort of people who love myths, legends, poetry. That's who we are.

If you weren't running a label, what would you be doing?

I'd still be working in a record store. All I ever wanted to do as a kid was work in a record shop. It took me four to five years to get that job and I loved it.

2015 looks exciting for Heavenly: your new act Eaves played at the [PIAS] conference in January and was fantastic. Now you have Temples on the second album – they have a really good chance of becoming very significant.

On a serious, professional tip – rather than just banging on about magic all the time – one of the things I'm most looking forward to this year is working with Temples on that record. They made a fantastic debut and the world seems to want the second record.

They're seriously talented guys. James, the guitarist/songwriter/producer, has a real vision. I like being around that boy.

Equally, working with Stealing Sheep is great. On their first album, I'd have never immediately guessed they'd have moved from this willingly weird folk to become this kind of technicolour groove outfit. And Joe, who is Eaves, is a brilliant talent.

What are your memories of the explosion of Doves?

There's a lot of significance around that on many levels. We were aware of Doves; Martin Kelly knew Jez, and the word was they'd made a record. We bought this EP, Cedar Room, and it was on Rob's Records; Rob being Rob Gretton who I still miss every day.

Rob was a very good bloke and I learnt a lot from him; he was a musician's friend. He was excellent with artists – especially broke ones. With Doves, Rob incredibly sadly and prematurely passed away just as Doves had finished their debut album. We waited for an appropriate period of mourning, then approached Rob's widow, Lesley, and asked if we could talk to the group. There'd been other interest in the group – some others didn't show quite the decorum we did [after Rob's death] – but when we want something we don't mess around or let anyone else get a look in, really.

"Temples are seriously talented guys. James has a real vision. I like being around him."

We loved Doves. That debut LP is a masterpiece. It didn't surprise me they did so well. It surprised some other people, for shit, stupid reasons.

Can you be more specific?

One thing was I had people idiotically saying: 'He can't sing.' It was like: 'Really?! Of course he can!'

The other thing about Doves was we'd just done our deal with EMI and they were the first thing we'd brought in. We had a deal with this label that was having success with Robbie Williams and was trying to have success with Geri Halliwell.

I mean, man, we brought one of the most exciting rock bands in the world! Suddenly I had the attention of everyone in that building who didn't get much of a thrill from working with Robbie Williams or Geri Halliwell.

What was it like working within a major label generally?

I can speak honestly and fondly about the time we had at EMI, our last period of working within a major. But the thing that people need to remember about us then was we weren't a 'boutique' label, whatever the fuck that means. We had our own office and our office was basically a nightclub. We were still fighting the indie wars with EMI, even when we were part of them.

For instance when we found The Magic Numbers, we knew we'd found this great group. Imagine if we'd done that completely independently – fuck! We sold over a million records on that first album.

They didn't get it. I remember having this argument: "At the one end you've got Pete Doherty's junkie business going on, but this is like a ray of sunshine. There's room for both!" We put together this offer…

How much money was it?

It was for about £8,000 for a mini-album. And EMI said no! I was second-guessed. I told them: 'Don't fucking second-guess me." I rarely had to end up throw my toys out the cot but I did.

Thankfully, one of the guys there did go: 'Alright, alright.' They weren't asking the right questions of the group. They thought they were that dreadful word, 'retro'.

Then [Sony boss] Rob Stringer got involved, and before you know it it's a £125,000 [deal] rather than the £8,000 – then potentially £40,000 we would have paid.

That was one moment where our instinct and attitude clashed with a major.

Stealing Sheep

What about signing the Manics so early on? What are your memories of that?

A lot of people didn't get that because they thought we were a fucking dance label! But as we know, music is music.

I thought they were the best thing around, loved them; they were bright, gobby, weren't afraid to speak their minds, lovely people and incredibly committed.

Do you feel part of an independent music business community today?

Yeah, I think so.
We're a passionate bunch – we give a shit.

We've been very lucky to meet Jason Rackham along the way. He's been incredibly supportive of our business.

I've heard that you refuse to compete with others in our world for acts.

Well it's good manners, isn't it.

Business is not often about good manners!

Well then maybe I'm more about good manners than I am business. I think if another guy or girl gets to an act first, fucking pay them some respect.

It's the same with [Rough Trade's] Geoff Travis and Jeannette Lee or [Wichita's] Dick Green and Mark Bowen; I let the manager of [a given act] know that if it goes tits up with those guys that I'm here, but I ain't gonna go in there and chuck another £10k to see what happens.

Why would I do that to people I respect? We've all got to make a living – why make it harder for each other?

"I'M PROUD OF EVERY SINGLE MISTAKE I'VE MADE."

AN INFECTIOUS ATTITUDE
KORDA MARSHALL ON A&R

Korda Marshall harbours two distinct, sometimes warring, personalities.

First, there's the A&R extraordinaire with an independent heart; the owner of – as the industry adage would have it – 'great ears', who discovered Muse, Ash, Alt-J, Garbage and The Temper Trap before anyone else had a sniff.

And then there's the business-savvy mogul; the guy who became a wheeler-dealer by selling home-grown vegetables in his early teens – and who grafted his way up the greasy pole of not one but two major labels in RCA and Warner Bros. (Before getting kicked out of both.)

These two vying elements to Marshall's make-up – the creative and the commercial; the poetic and the profiteering – have been the bedrock of his latest great success, Infectious "mk. 2".

Back in 1998, Marshall sold his original Infectious Records to Rupert Murdoch's News International. It was eventually swallowed into Warner Music Group and looked gone forever.

But in 2009, fresh from a successful eight -year run at Atlantic/Warner, Marshall re-started Infectious as an independent, signing The Temper Trap – and their global mega-hit Sweet Disposition.

His career has seen him climb to two very senior positions at the majors: Head Of A&R at RCA in the early '90s and MD of Warner Bros Records in the early noughties. Both times, his rebellious side – his independent side? – won out and he was, as he gently puts it, "summarily dismissed".

"The last six years of Infectious have just been about music and artists I adore."

Having built Infectious Mk. 2 to worldwide recognition with a roster including The Temper Trap, These New Puritans, Local Natives, Superfood, Drenge, The Acid and, of course, Alt-J (pictured left), Marshall last year sold the business to BMG.

He now operates within the Bertelsmann-owned company, still running Infectious but also directing traffic at the company's artist services record business.

As such, acts he's currently working with include his much-loved Drenge and Alt-J, as well as BMG acts The Charlatans, Jack Savoretti, You Me At Six, Bryan Ferry and Leftfield.

Way before any of this, though, was the wide-eyed, romantic Korda – the one stood aged 12 in the audience

at Earls' Court being blown away by David Bowie; and the one who would go on to become a reasonably successful drummer in his own right with two bands, The Thin Men and Zerra One.

It's this guy who shines through when he talks about new Infectious signings like The DMA's – an Aussie three-piece he enthusiastically defines as "every great Mancunian band you've ever heard rolled into one".

Behind this giddy excitement, though, always lurks the canny deal-maker, ready to do battle toe-to-toe with those who would see his beloved artists stolen away – or, even worse, fail altogether.

[PIAS]'s Kenny Gates sat down with Marshall to get a picture of a very businesslike independent music hero.

Korda, how are you?

I'm very well – I'm excited about doing this interview. From one icon to another!

Do you remember the first time we met? My recollection was that it was in Cologne at Popkomm. You came storming after me – "Ash, Ash, Ash, Ash..." I realised this guy is either a passionate music lover or a crazy man!

You're not alone. A few people have wondered that – including my missus….

Why did you end up working in music?

I grew up in a world of craftsman and designers surrounded by creative people. My dad ran something called the Design Council in the '60s and we lived in a very crazy arty house in West London. I grew up in the world of [famed potters] Janet Leach and Bernard Leach and all these great designers.

I remember seeing David Bowie play Starman on Top Of The Pops – I'd have been 12. This androgynous figure amazed me; I fell in love. The Rise & Fall Of Ziggy Stardust was the first album I bought.

Any other influences from your childhood?

My elder sister had a boyfriend who was Deep Purple's tour manager at the time. He told me about Bowie playing Earls' Court, so I saw him there when I was 12 and I saw the last ever Ziggy Stardust show when I was 13 at Hammersmith.

The very next week, my parents moved us down to Cornwall, in a little village called Roche – eight miles from the nearest town. I had no friends, a cockney accent… I felt ostracised.

I subscribed to the NME, Sounds and Melody Maker and bought a drum kit. I used to grow vegetables in the garden and sell them at the local market to raise enough money to get the bus into town and buy as many records as I could.

What was your first job in music?

I left Cornwall when I was 18 and went to Canterbury Art College to study architecture. I didn't actually want to be an architect, but I knew Pink Floyd were all architects.

Drenge

When I was at Canterbury, I joined a local art school band called The Thin Men and we became a big fish in a little pond. Then we did some Radio 1 sessions and what have you. After we split up I joined another band called Zerra One, which was my first real engagement with the music business.

They were a three-piece and they needed a drummer. At that time I could play a drum solo and roll a joint at the same time – I was a terrible drummer, but that trick got me the job. Because I bought an electronic drumkit, it meant we could get all the equipment in the back of hatchback, so we could make £50 support gigs work. That also weighed in my favour.

We toured with Echo & The Bunnymen, The Cure, Peter Gabriel – we did loads. I walked out of that band in the middle of the Peter Gabriel tour in Newcastle – 'creative differences' – and decided to see if I could get in to the music business proper.

I wrote 256 letters to publishers, agents, record companies, managers. There were eight replies. One of them was a phone call from a guy called Peter Robinson [at RCA] who said he was looking for a scout. I had nine hours of interviews and eventually got offered a job for £20 a week with bus pass and luncheon vouchers in January 1983. I was No.9 in a department of eight in RCA A&R. My job was coffee maker, tape copier, dogsbody.

What came next?

I discovered The Blow Monkeys. We went to New York and got Michael Baker to re-record their songs, and we mixed a track called Digging Your Scene which was a big hit. That impressed the bosses and I got to have a proper job in A&R.

From there I ended up working with a band called Londonbeat with Dave Stewart and signed The Wedding Present, The Primitives and Pop Will Eat Itself

I then became a Senior A&R Manager looking after bands including The Silencers – who sold a lot of records in France – and Curve, who by that point had broken through.

Then in 1988 I was made Head of A&R for three years, and then in 1991, I helped to sign M-People and Take That.

"I walked out on my band in the middle of a Peter Gabriel tour. 'Creative differences'."

Take That? I think I've heard of them.

Did you know I got fired for signing Take That? I signed them with Nick Raymonde, who was the A&R manager, then it all went wrong. And then, when it all went right, Nick got the credit and all the royalties! He's a lovely man but I got summarily walked out of the building by the new regime after 10 years at RCA.

The new regime came into the company, took a look at it all and decided they didn't like what they saw and I was responsible. I got a bullet for spending too much money on Take That. I had a three year firm deal, luckily, so I walked out with two-and-a-half-years salary.

Let me guess - that money started Infectious?

Exactly. I started Infectious on April 27th 1993. After my face didn't fit with the new regime at RCA, I was arrogant enough to think I'd just walk into a new job.

I remember sitting in a hammock in

the garden and my second child, William, had just been born. It was the beginning of mobile telephones, phones on cables, so I could sit in the garden with a notepad, telephone and a boogie box with a cassette player. That's how Infectious started.

The first act I signed to Infectious was Pop Will Eat Itself, which we signed for £5k because that was all I had in the bank account. That album did about 60,000 sales so in a very short space of time I had a proper business. I later sold half of Infectious to Michael Gudinski [Mushroom Records founder].

We rolled it all together and then signed Ash at 15 years old – for £12k – Muse at 17 years old, Paul Oakenfold, Peter Andre, Garbage. We went from nowhere to being a £5m-a-year business in five years and I have a lot to thank Michael for.

You then sold Infectious completely, right?

Yes, in 1998 we sold the business to James Murdoch.

I remember it – we lost the licence!

Sorry about that! We all made a lot of money – there was a lot of it swimming around in 1998 – and James Murdoch became my boss. Then I tried to do an MBO, which didn't work, so we brokered a deal with Roger Ames for Warner to buy Mushroom.

Then when I eventually left Warner in spring '09, I started Infectious Mk.2 – totally independent with private money.

The last six years of Infectious has just been about music and artists I adore. BMG bought the business last autumn and now I'm running BMG's frontline records business.

What we're trying to do there is carve out a space between the independent labels and the major labels: it's a well-financed European corporation that looks after and treats its acts as if it was an independent.

So you were major, then independent, then independent funded by a corporation, then back into a major with eight years at Warner, then an independent again. So are you an independent or a major?!

I'm an independent! I was thrown out of Warners. There was masses of politics.

"I signed Pop Will Eat Itself to Infectious for £5,000. That was all we had in the bank."

Politics that saw Max Lousada somehow squeeze you out?!

[Laughs]. I love Max, I trained Max. He's a beautiful man. We signed The Darkness and James Blunt together. He's well trained!

And you left The Darkness's distribution with [PIAS]...

I got into so much trouble for that. But I assume you made a nice few quid.

I remember having the conversation with Ames: "We've got to leave The Darkness with [PIAS]. They've been on board since the start and now it's exploding."

What's the difference between an indie and a major, then?

Philosophically, there's a huge difference. At most major labels,

The Temper Trap

the top 5% of the company worldwide all have the understanding that the artists are working for them. At independents, the executives work for the artists. At BMG we work for the artists.

I ask this of everyone: are you a hopeless romantic?

Yeah, of course ask my missus but I'm a businessman as well. If you're going to grow apples, you've got to prune some trees. There was a day when I had to sit down and fire 17 people one afternoon at Warners. That was one of the key factors for why I didn't try and re-negotiate [my contract] at Warners. Keeping the human side is important.

Which music executives have you most respected in your career?

Well there's the old ones and the new ones. What Geoff Travis did, what Daniel Miller did and what Laurence has done at Domino – I admire them all. But more than anyone else, it's Richard Russell at XL. I've always wanted to be him when I grow up. He's a genius.

Then in the major world, I grew up with Mo Ostin, Lenny Waronker and I had the pleasure of meeting Ahmet Ertegun. I was also told off a few times and trained by Clive Davis; Clive told me that music decisions should be made by music people, not lawyers or accountants.

In the modern world I admire people like Steve Ralbovsky – he's got Alt-J in America and I take a lot of pleasure working with him.

What about Michael Gudinski?

Gudinski taught me an awful lot about hustling, about how to run a business, international deals, building a company and working with artists. He was my consigliere for ten years and a genius in his own way.

Dave Stewart taught me about working with artists too. I remember being in the studio and him saying he wanted [the sound] to be "more orange".

What are your proudest moments in music - and your lowest moments?

My proudest moments are my three beautiful children and meeting my beautiful wife Tracy.

My proudest business moment was when I first walked out of RCA with a huge cheque in 1993, and then the second

one was when I sold Infectious to Murdoch for north of a million quid in 1998.

My third proudest was selling Infectious to BMG for, er, for…

… for more than ten quid.

... for more than ten quid, thank you. Musically, which is much more exciting, my proudest moments would obviously include [The Blow Monkeys'] Digging Your Scene because that was my first proper hit record.

Independently, there was the summer when I had three hits all with 'girl' in the title: Girl From Mars by Ash, Mysterious Girl by Peter Andre and Stupid Girl by Garbage (pictured). Obviously, Muse and Alt-J, I'm very proud of both of those.

And after I left Warners, I signed a beautiful Australian act called Temper Trap whose song Sweet Disposition grew Infectious Mk.2 from nowhere to a £2m turnover in its first nine months.

I still have the licence of Sweet Disposition so I know that story well! I remember hearing: 'Korda's back.' Okay, let's see… And then your first act just explodes. How many syncs of that record have there been now?

Hundreds. It's one of the most synched records of the past decade. I did what Daniel Miller did with the Moby album [Play] – I had a lot of money involved and thought, I can't just rely on radio.

My kids dragged me to see The Temper Trap in some dodgy club. By the second song, the lead singer, Dougie, walked on with a little green beanie hat on and started singing Sweet Disposition – and the voice of an angel came out. It was a no-brainer. I started Infectious because I found the band. I was supposed to be going sailing!

Gudinski rang me and said: 'Do you want it?' I wasn't sober, but I said yes. And Infectious version two was born.

And then I came to see [PIAS] who gave us a distribution deal, and we were on our way. And, by the way, it wouldn't have been the success it has been on any other company than [PIAS].

Thank you. Are you going to avoid telling me your lowest moment because you're too much of an optimist?

[Laughs]. No, I've had a few. Spending £300,000 on a video with Malcolm McLaren – on an act I won't mention – was pretty horrendous. Sitting down and firing those 17 people at Warner Bros was obviously horrible. And getting fired at RCA first time round was pretty low; there's nothing worse than being thrown out of a building by a security guard after ten years. That's pretty heavy.

You've mentioned your kids. Two of the three are the business, correct?

Yep, one of them is still at university. Summer is a very successful agent at CAA now – she was on my knee when we sat in the studio and listened to Garbage's Stupid Girl. She was [side] of the stage with Ash at Reading when she was seven. We used to buy her albums every week. She works with Mike [Greek] and Emma [Banks] at CAA – together they look after Sam Smith, Paloma Faith and others.

William graduated in architecture and has just started at Metropolis as a junior promoter. Nothing to do with me; they both got their jobs independently.

Summer brought me The Darkness when she was about 16 – she has great ears, always has done. She also came to me and said: "That You're

Beautiful song by that James Blunt guy could really work."

I'd have A&R meetings at Warner or Mushroom on the Friday. Then on Sunday mornings I'd cook Sunday lunch at home and play all the music that had sifted to the top to my kids. They were much more brutal than the professionals.

As an A&R man, you have a strong self-belief – your record shows it, especially when you're spending your own money. But how do you manage those moments of insecurity when you look in the mirror and think: 'I've gone all in on this band.'

Well, I felt alienation I felt when I was loving David Bowie in the early '70s in West London surrounded by skinheads, and I felt alienation when I was taken off to Cornwall by my parents in my flared jeans and Afghan coat.

"Ultimately in A&R, you can't convince other people if you don't believe yourself."

I learnt through those periods that it's a very fine line between confidence and arrogance. I abhor arrogance; it's a very nasty, dark influence.

I learnt that the process of self-belief from my dad and the creative people I was around in Cornwall. As an artist, if you're making decisions about enameling, pottering, painting, designing a ring, you have to be confident in what you're making.

Ultimately in A&R, you can't convince other people to believe if you don't believe yourself. So sometimes you have to go into a false self-prophesying mode that says 'this is great, we're going to do this' – if you can believe it strong enough, you can make it happen.

In all of your career, in all of your signings, is there one artist that you're most proud of?

There's a few. I'm incredibly proud of Garbage. Shirley Manson is a genius. I first met her when she was 15, this bolshy, cocky little redhead in Edinburgh.

She was the backing singer in Goodbye Mr. Mackenzie. I flew up to see them. I didn't sign the band but she was great. Butch Vig, what a producer. Then there's Muse (pictured) – Matt Bellamy's amazing.

I remember you telling me: 'Muse are the next Queen'.

That's true. I first saw Queen at Plymouth Guildhall when I was 15. I couldn't afford the ticket so I bought 30, hired a coach and then sold the [ticket and travel package] so I could afford to go. I grew up loving Queen, those first two albums are amazing.

When I first saw Muse, he had this amazing voice, and if you shut your eyes with that falsetto voice, there's Freddie.

You recently said Infectious was your personal soundtrack to Blade Runner. Does that mean Infectious is an eighties label?

[Laughs] Very good! As an entrepreneur, I like to create self-professed parameters. If you try and do everything you'll never succeed. True story: at Mushroom, I had a very strict rule that we would not sign anybody over 21 or under 30. I didn't want to deal with stroppy 27-year-old guitarists.

I won't go too far into Atlantic and Warner, but Atlantic [signings] were based on [the ability to sell] 15 million albums worldwide – let's say

The DMA's

there were a lot of helium balloons!

The Infectious mantra, which goes back to seeing The Temper Trap, is what would happen if we walked out of the little yellow taxi with the dummy driving it in Blade Runner; what would a record label look like?

Initially, I didn't want an office with Infectious – I wanted it all done over Skype and to be totally digital, no physical stock at all. In the end, that didn't quite happen – we probably ended up more Logan's Run than Blade Runner!

If you listen to all the music on Infectious mk.2 , it all belongs on my personal imaginary Blade Runner soundtrack: the floaty atmospherics of Sweet Disposition, the futuristic melody of Alt-J, the harmonies of Local Natives, the orchestral four-piece, diva-esque style of These New Puritans.

I hear the new Leftfield album is getting you excited...

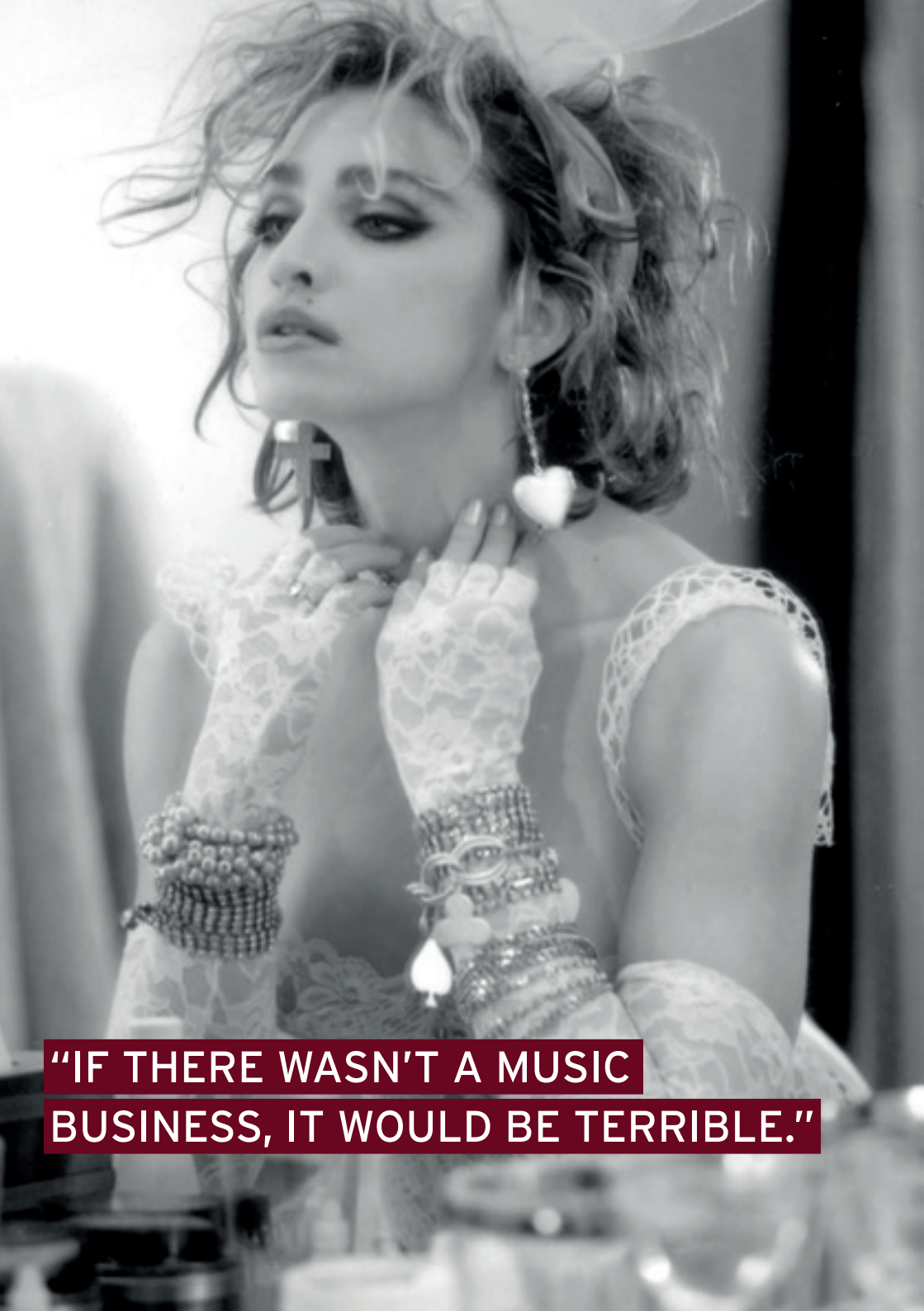
Oh yes. It's a brilliant record. At BMG I want to bring the whole thing together. There was a roster here [at BMG] when we came in, so we've put them together and we've now got an amazing collection of artists: Bryan Ferry, You Me At Six, Charlatans, Leftfield, Aqualung, Alt-J, Drenge, The Acid, Temper Trap and we're hoping to work with James and Local Natives.

We've also signed two great new acts; The DMA's from Australia, who sound like every great Mancunian band you've ever heard rolled into one, and a great young rock act called We Are The Ocean.

Do you have a special anecdote you can share with us from your career?

Oh, I'm rubbish at anecdotes. I can say I've made every mistake in the book; I've flown to Edinburgh when I should have flown to Glasgow to see bands; I've flown to Berlin to see a band and been too late; I've lost entire album master tapes for months and then found them under my desk; I took £5k in tour cash once, put it in my jacket pocket and left it on the plane.

And I'm proud of every single error, because I've never made the same mistake twice.



"IF THERE WASN'T A MUSIC BUSINESS, IT WOULD BE TERRIBLE."

A REAL LIVE SIRE

SEYMOUR STEIN ON HALF A CENTURY IN THE MUSIC BUSINESS

Seymour Stein, a bona fide music industry legend, turns 73 this month. Get him talking about music he loves, though, and he'll match the passion of any young industry whippersnapper pound for pound.

Stein is still every bit as full as admiration for great bands as he was more than half a century ago, when in 1966 he co-founded Sire Records with his friend Richard Gottier.

Stein – who these days plies his A&R trade within the walls of Warner Music Group – remains a hero to the 'next generation' of independent music executives; those now running labels and publishers around the world.

Through Sire, he played a vital role in bringing the likes of Talking Heads, The Ramones, The Cure, Ice-T and Echo & The Bunnymen to mainstream recognition.

And then there was that signing, when Stein fell head over heels for the music and theatricality of Madonna Louise Ciccone – launching the career, in 1982, of a woman who would go on to define music's pop culture time and time again.

[PIAS]'s Kenny Gates shared a coffee and a chat with Seymour at SXSW to delve deep into the career history of one of independent music's true godfathers.

I'm sure you've told this story hundreds of times, but please do cast your mind back again: you started Sire in 1966?

Yes, late 1966 as a production company. If you go back a few years further, you find the reason we were able to get Sire started: I was 14-years-old, and the first man I ever worked for was Tom Noonan, the charts editor at Billboard magazine.

He had just taken over a position at Columbia Records, running a label called Date. He helped Richard and I get a big advance – in those days it was a big advance, anyway!

Do you remember how much it was for?

Oh, of course. $50,000. It was a lot of money back then. Plus, we got free use of the Columbia studios anywhere in the world and [then] they would pay to sign up the acts. The $50,000 was just operating capital, which we desperately needed.

How did you and Richard meet?

That's important! We met in the Brill building; that was my last job [before Sire] – working for Red Bird Records for George Goldner, another one of my mentors. And in-between, after Billboard and after Red Bird, I worked for King Records.

Syd Nathan at King was my greatest mentor. [King's roster included]

James Brown (pictured), Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, Freddy King and a great country roster.

I know that without being mentored by these and other people – including Ahmet [Ertegun] and Jerry Wexler, even Nesuhi Ertegün – I wouldn't have had such a successful career. I believe in mentoring very much.

Well you are one of my mentors! I'm amazed by your longevity and your passion.

Thank you – I'm amazed at it too given the life I've lived!

How old were you when you started Sire?

I was, let's see, 22. But Sire wasn't a label to start with; it took about a year-and-a-half for that to happen. Again, I was very fortunate. We had no office.

Syd Nathan was closing down the King headquarters in New York and rented me this amazing office for $325 a month. The first thing I did was to take the biggest room in the office and rent it out to Julie and Roy Rifkind – Roy was a manager and Julie was a great record man, working for Bang Records.

Bert [Berns, Bang co-founder] did all the producing and Julie did just about everything else.

What was the first artist you signed?

It was a woman named Mattie Moultrie. She was a black woman from Georgia, and I had always loved that song – That's How Strong My Love Is. That was the first thing we did with her.

Columbia wanted us, as much as possible, to sign black acts. They stated that. My background with King meant I used to go on the road with James Brown amongst other things, all in my late teens. I never went to college.

James Brown

They also had this guy Dave Kapralik at Sony who brought in Sly & The Family Stone – when they finally 'got' it.

The majors lagged behind [the indies] and even within the majors, Columbia lagged behind Decca, Capitol and RCA in terms of getting involved in rock'n'roll, rhythm and blues… Part of the reason they did the deal with us was to play catch-up a little bit.

You say you didn't go to college. Did your parents support your business career?

They didn't understand it. My father just scratched his head. But they didn't interfere, and that was help enough.

My father was an orthodox Jew, so, you know. He didn't believe rock'n'roll was the devil's music or anything; in fact, my father loved music.

He told me about his days of checking out vaudeville shows.

And your mother wasn't scared about the music industry?

No. My mother came from a totally different background.
She's Jewish as well, but my grandparents were in the Italian food business. So I think my mother was a little more rough and ready!

I loved music ever since I was a boy. My sister is six years older than me, so I heard pop music very early.

So your sister is responsible for getting you into music?

Well, I just listened to the radio with her. She had records. It certainly helped me in life to have a big sister, yes.

Was there a defining moment from your teens when you thought: 'I'm going to be successful in this business.'

I wanted to be part of the music business since I was nine years old.

I went up to Billboard when I was 13 to do research on the charts. Tom Noonan was very gracious and gave me access. I'd go there every day after school – my parents didn't like that, but then they met Tom.

Was there a moment where your parents saw that you were successful?

They both lived to see Madonna be No.1 on the charts. They were very proud of me.

You're twenty years older than I am – I see you at shows, underground gigs, terrible toilet venues. These are places no sane person would want to go!

Well if I survived the toilet at CBGB's, which didn't even have a door, I think I can survive any toilet out there.

What gets you up in the morning?

I love to work. I think it keeps me young – at least in spirit and in mind. I mean, what else would I do?

It offers me so much. 15 years ago, when music really started to taper off [through piracy] I was low.

I felt everybody, if they want to, should have the experience of being in the business.

And I knew that if there wasn't a music business, it would be terrible.

How did you stay positive about the business during that period?

I started focusing on India and China, which I still do. 20-25 years from now, I probably won't be around, but over 80% of the world's population will be in Asia and Africa. It's hard to believe.

I remember when Hong Kong was totally a pirate market. Nothing is impossible. There are 1.3bn people in China. And in India, there's 1.2bn, but it will eventually be bigger than China because there's no restriction on the number of children they can have.

In each of these countries you have 400m or more middle class people – with millions more joining the ranks every year. [The music business] really better get started in these markets.

"I felt everybody, if they want to, should have the experience of being in the music business."

You've been internationally-minded for a very long time, though.

Great hits can come from anywhere. I put out Australian music in America before anyone – a record, I'm Stranded by The Saints. I felt bad; I heard this record in EMI and they said, 'Oh, you can have this. American record labels will never put this record out.'

Well, why should they? They rejected The Beatles twice – not once, twice! That's why those early [Beatles] records came out on a rhythm and blues label, Vee Jay.

And when Vee Jay couldn't pay royalties, the rights came back to Capitol. And then Capitol rejected them again!

That's why Swan Records put out Please Please Me [in the US].

When you signed Madonna, did you think she'd still be making music 30 years later?

I didn't think about it. What people usually ask me is, Do you think she'd ever be this big? Of course not! I knew she was special.

And you met her through Mark Kamins?

Yes, I'd always befriended Mark. He was a DJ who played all sorts of weird music but somehow made it work – he was playing Faro music, mixing it with African music and making it all work.

I gave him $18,000 and I told him: 'This should be enough for you, over a period of a year or longer – don't rush it – to make six demos.' Madonna was the third demo he brought me. I listened to it and I loved it.

"Atlantic was the greatest of all the indie labels. They actually paid their artists!"

I told The Saints' manager that I'd never signed a band until I'd seen them live, and that I'd always wanted to go to Australia. Eight months later, I went out there and signed [The Saints] and another band, Radio Birdman.

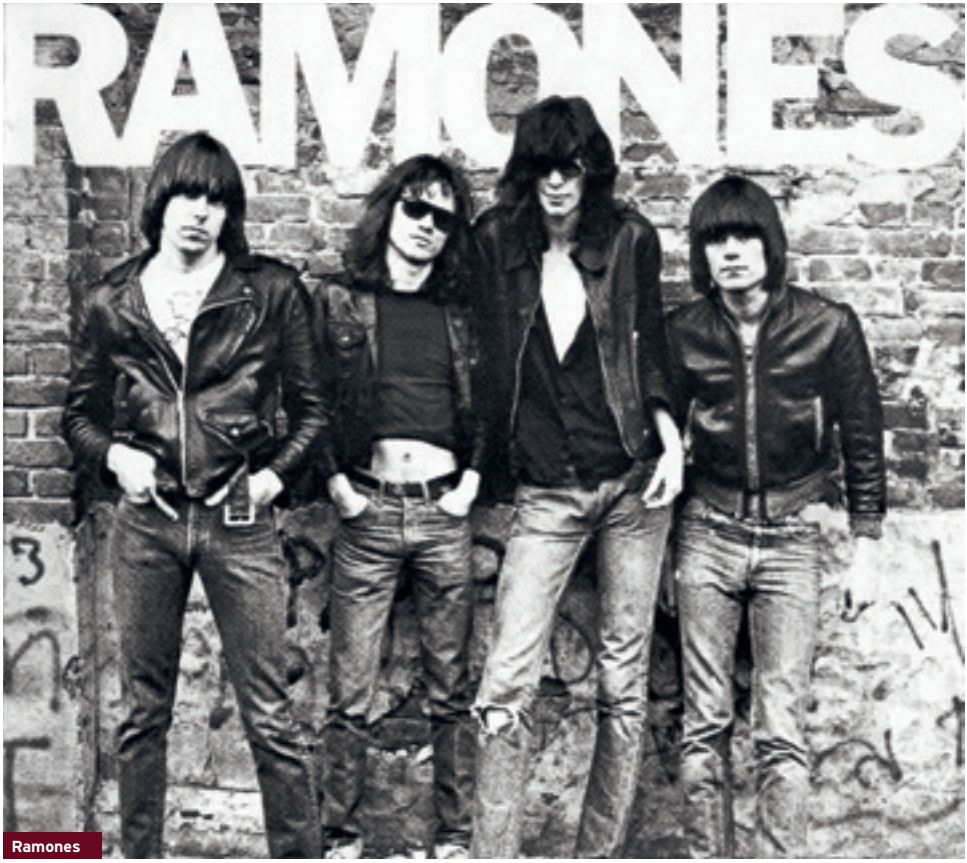
Both of those bands have been inducted into the Australian music Hall Of Fame, and I'm very proud of that.

You, of course, know of the success I had in Belgium with Ca Plane Pour Moi [by Plastic Bertrand] and with Telex. In fact my first million-seller was Focus, Hocus Pocus from Holland.

Everyone knows this story: I heard it in the hospital, and I got so excited, I made her come to see me. No, that's not true – even then you couldn't make Madonna do anything unless she wanted to!
She came to the hospital and we agreed on a deal right then and there. I asked her to go to her lawyers so we could draw up the papers.

All these bands you signed: Talking Heads, The Pretenders, The Ramones... Discovering The Ramones must have been an incredible moment.

Yes, but a regrettable moment in a way. They're all dead now – the last of them died last year. In addition, they never sold [what they deserved to].



Ramones

But they influenced so much of the music business. I met with someone from The Grammys recently, and they're going to do a big spotlight on The Ramones next year.
It breaks my heart they weren't bigger.But whenever the public learn who I am, the first thing they ask about is The Ramones. So they have 'made it', I suppose, it's just horrible they're not alive.

To me and many others, you are a friend of the indies, but you work for Warner. You are the most independent major label executive!

Yes. Well, first of all, Warner is a bit different than the other majors. It never started out to be a major label. Warner started out the way the other record labels did – in the motion pictures business.

Columbia Pictures had a label – all of them did. But luckily, they bought Reprise Records, and with it they got a business man who was very smart in Mo Ostin.
Then they bought Atlantic, which was the greatest of all the indie labels. They actually paid their artists – that's how great they were!

I'm not saying the others didn't, but Atlantic was the most honest. They started Bang: it stands for Bert, Ahmet, Nesuhi and Jerry. And they bought Elektra Records; with that they got not only a great music man, but a great technical guy who knew about making records – Jac Holzman.

Jac still works for Warner to this day. When I got inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame, I was

embarrassed that I was inducted before him. Such a great music man, you'd love him. Like me, like you, Jac's an independent.

It sounds like I'd like him. You still consider yourself an independent executive?

Of course! It's in my blood! I don't think like a major label. I've never gone after a big artist.
Lou Reed came to me because his lawyer recommended me after he left RCA. I've never done any big deals.

I'm embarrassed to tell you what the deal was with Madonna. She's probably a billionaire now!

I'm very happy for her, and very proud of her.

You said you were embarrassed by the deal: you have to tell me!

$15,000 for three singles and then an option to pick up an album.

That was not the usual kind of deal, but I felt that she would be the queen of the 12" – and she was.
And when I heard the fourth single, Borderline, I knew there'd be no stopping her.

I always believed she'd be very big, but not like she became. I couldn't even think that big!

When you sign an artist, is it the song or the performance that makes a difference?

In almost every case, it's the song.

Recorded music is about 150 years old. But there's been a music business for hundreds of years.

Warner/Chappell is 215 years old, and Schott Music in Germany is even older than that.

There's no such thing as 'classical music' at birth. Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and people like that were rock stars!

Because they survived, they became 'classical'. I'm sure Elvis will be considered 'classical' at some point, same with Madonna.

What's your greatest miss? Which one band do you most regret not signing?

Oh, there are a number of them. But I've signed so many, successful and unsuccessful, that I'd rather not dwell on it.

We talked about mentoring before. Is it right you've taken Tim and Toby at Transgressive under your wing?

I have. Not as much these days – I still think of them as little babies, but they're old enough to take other people under their own wings now and I hope that they do.

They're great guys. I wish them all the best.

Korda Marshall told me about them at first, and he's fantastic. He's an all-round music guy, one of the best in the UK. You must know Korda?

I interviewed him last month! We are business supporters of both Transgressive and Infectious. What drew you to helping Tim and Toby in their early years?

I saw a little bit of myself there. I liked them, and they were genuine – they are genuine. They care about their artists.

Would you consider yourself a hopeless romantic?

Well I am hopeless, so at least half of it is true [laughs].

I just love what I do. I don't have to work, but I don't know what else I'd do if I didn't.

If an when the time comes that I'm really not able to do this, and I'm

"There are good times and there are bad times. There are opportunities during both."

still trying, I hope someone's good enough to sit me down and say: You know, enough is enough.

But I don't feel that time has come and I'd like to keep going.

Well if at any time Warner is mad enough not to want you anymore, there'll be a job for you at [PIAS]! They're lucky to have you - you inspire trust and make people want to work with Warner.

Thank you. As I said, Warner is very different from the other majors.

There are only three majors now, but even when there was seven or eight of them, Warner was always different.

Is it true you had a complex about being a musician then found out it was better not to be one?

Yes, it's true. I was at the Windsor Pop & Jazz Festival in 1966 or 1967. Jethro Tull were playing and they were unsigned.
Mike Vernon was a producer then. I said to him: 'Look, this band are great.' And he said to me: 'Oh Seymour. I could never work with a flautist.'

I didn't know what a flautist was - we called them flute players! I thought he meant he was a deviant or something.

So I turned to Gus Sturgeon, who was sitting to the other side of me. He was an engineer who became Elton John's producer, and I told him: 'You could be involved in [Jethro Tull] - you could be their engineer.'

He said to me: 'Seymour, obviously you don't play a musical instrument… If you did, you'd have heard all the mistakes they made.'

What's been the highest point and lowest point of your career?

All I can say is, I love the business so much – and I love being part of it so much. It's been mostly high with a few lows.

I'll tell you what I'd like to leave behind a little bit; to make it a truly connected world of music, that's why I've spent so much time in Asia.

Would you still recommend someone sets up a label in today's music business market?

There are good times and there are bad times. There are opportunities during both. Music is not going away.

The music business is older than the film business and certainly older than radio or television.

I don't know of any form of entertainment, other than live theatre, that's older than music.

A kid on the street knows more about the technology than I do, so I guess I'm no good in that regard.

But the one thing that's the constant is that it all begins with a song. Great music, for the most part, will always prevail – sooner or later.

You mentioned before we sat down that you have a book coming?

Well, I have to write it first! It's true that I've got the deal in place. I've probably given half of it away in this interview!


"I ALWAYS ROOT FOR
THE UNDERDOG."

A FITTING EPITAPH

BRETT GUREWITZ ON PUNK ROCK, INDEPENDENCE AND MAKING IT BIG

Eleven million album sales.

Once upon a time – not that long ago – the independent music community could only dream of such a number.

These days of course, we live in a post-Adele world, where ludicrous commercial achievements seem that bit more possible for indies everywhere.

But back in 1993, an eight-figure album sales haul seemed literally impossible to anyone outside of the major labels.

That was before The Offspring's Smash came along, on Brett Gurewitz's feisty, irreverent Epitaph Records.

This was a watermark moment for the ambition of independent labels.

Gurewitz admits that major record companies started making persistent attempts to acquire Epitaph once Smash started blowing up. Yet, for good reason, he resisted.

Inspired by the DIY success of NWA, Gurewitz kept both the record's label and its European distribution (which [PIAS]/Vital took care of) completely independent.

"Part of that is loyalty, but part of it is that I'm a punk rocker, man," he explains. "I always root for the underdog."

Gurewitz has stood by this philosophy ever since setting up Epitaph while at school to issue records by his own band, Bad Religion – founding fathers of the West Coast punk scene of the 1980s.

For the man on the street, Gurewitz is better known for his musical work than his legendary label, largely thanks to renowned Bad Religion albums including Suffer, Recipe For Hate and 1994's Stranger Than Fiction – their one and only major label release, on Atlantic.

In addition to Bad Religion and The Offspring, Epitaph has made waves with influential records from bands such as NOFX, Pennywise and Rancid, while, more recently, it's signed the likes of Bring Me The Horizon, The Menzingers, Parkway Drive and even Weezer (for 2010's Hurley album).

Meanwhile, from punk beginnings, sister label ANTI- has become a home for legends and gonna-bes from all genres, including Merle Haggard, Marianne Faithfull, Kate Bush, Nick Cave and Tom Waits.

This success hasn't always been a smooth ride for Gurewitz: he suffered from various stints of serious drug addiction throughout his career, before successfully 'getting clean' in rehab in the late '90s.

[PIAS]'s Kenny Gates sat down with Gurewitz to get the measure of Epitaph today, to delve into its punk rock beginnings – and to discover

how Smash changed everything both for Epitaph and the aspirations of the wider independent community…

Do you remember the first time we met?

Now you're putting me on the spot. Was it Midem?

I don't actually know myself...

Phew! I don't remember either, but that's not saying much. The Eighties were very good to me, Kenny.

We'll come back to that. So... Gurewitz. Is that a Polish name?

It comes from a town in the Czech Republic called Hořovice. I'm third generation Los Angeles. My great grandfather had a candy store in LA. And on my mother's side, my grandfather was from the Ukraine.

How was school for you?

I didn't flourish in school. I was a wild child.

A rebel?

I turned into a rebel, maybe. But as a young kid I had behavioral problems, and that turned into taking a lot of drugs. And then punk rock and all sorts of things. I didn't even finish high school. I wasn't equipped for the format of school.

Elton john

When did you first encounter music?

Music has been my great passion for my entire life. My first memory of music is my grandmother, Frida – who to this day is my favourite person I've ever known.

She used to hum and sing to me when I was a little child.

The first record I remember was The Beatles, Yellow Submarine, but the first record I bought was Credence Clearwater, Cosmo's Factory. I was too young to buy records but I asked a kid on my street about it.

In the '70s I fell in love with Elton John on AM radio. My mother took me to see him at the Los Angeles Forum in 1975. I was 13.

It was the height of the glam era, the Yellow Brick Road tour. He had strings from the LA Philharmonic, the Tower of Power as his horn section. It blew my mind.

It was a religious experience, I shit you not.

I'm not a religious person at all. I don't like superstition; I love philosophy and discovery. I mean, I was in a band called Bad Religion – religion's obviously not my cup of tea. But if I were to make a metaphor, what's taken religion's place in my life has been music.

People need something to fill their soul. I think religion does that for some people. And scientists have shown the centres of the brain that light up for religion are the same that do when you hear music. The feeling is processed in the same part of the brain in similar ways. That makes a lot of sense to me.

"Back then I was listening to Genesis, Yes, Emerson, Lake and Palmer..."

Bad Religion was formed at school, right?

Yeah. El Camino High School. There were probably only four punk rockers in my high school. Me and my friend Tom were punk rockers. We didn't know any others.

Then Tom found these other two guys who were a year younger, Jay and Greg.

He introduced us: 'You guys are punk too. We should form a band.' That's literally how it happened.

So you had a band, you needed a label and that's why you decided to start Epitaph?

It was a logo and a PO Box. Both Greg and Jay came from families with single working mothers. They didn't have a lot of money, everything was very hand-to-mouth.

I'm not saying my family was wealthy, we were middle-class – my dad is an entrepreneur; he has his own business. He was very encouraging and lent me the money to press the records.

So your parents supported you? They didn't want you to be a doctor or a lawyer?

It wasn't like that. To them, this was like a lemonade stand: 'Oh, isn't that cute!' They didn't see it as a business, but it was something positive.

And the name Epitaph comes from a King Crimson song? A punk rock label using a prog rock band's lyrics for its name?

Well, Crimson's pretty punk – in a way.

I know it's confusing to a lot of people, but in '76 and '77, I hadn't heard of MC5 and Iggy & The Stooges. I was listening to avant-garde weirdo music – the prog stuff.

All the cool kids in school were listening to Led Zeppelin or Peter Frampton.

[I] was listening to Genesis, Yes, Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Kraftwerk. I was into prog, but I was into glam too – especially Alice Cooper and David Bowie.

Greg [Graffin, Bad Religion co-founder] also really likes prog , and we put so little thought into it: 'We need a name to put on our first 7-inch.'

Epitaph was a cool word, from that Crimson line: 'Confusion will be my epitaph.' It's kind of a resonating message when you're a teenager.

What was the first band you signed to Epitaph as a label - not just your own band?

The first thing I ever did was The Vandals and their record Peace Thru Vandalism, which became a classic album.

I put it out and I even sang backing vocals on Anarchy Burger. At that time I was in high school and literally didn't know how to do anything and I didn't pay the band any royalties.

To make amends for that later, I just gave the record [rights] back to them. So I don't have Peace Thru Vandalism on Epitaph anymore.

Joey from The Vandals actually used that record to launch Kung Fu Records, so it's all fine.

You have many professional lives: you're

Bad Religion

a record label executive, a guitar player in Bad Religion, owner of a merch company (King's Road Merch), a publishing company (Mothership Music) and even an indie comic book publisher (Black Mask Studios). However... you're also a producer. How did you learn production?

I've always loved production and been fascinated with technology. I started recording at home with a 4-track cassette player in the '80s. When I got in a band I was naturally drawn to recording. I had a job and went to night school to learn how to record, then started using my band as a guinea pig.

At that time I was working as a salesman at a record distributor called Sounds Good Imports in Santa Monica. They specialised in buying British imports and bringing them into the US two weeks early, before selling them to the record stores.

I had a roommate at the time, who is no longer with us, who came into some inheritance. He was in this class with me and had a little bit of money and said: 'Let's start a recording studio!'

So that's what we did: West Beach Recorders. I was 19 or 20. I went to my boss and said, Me and my friend have a recording studio and I know how to put out records – I'd put out Bad Religion and The Vandals at that point.

I said I'd still work [at Sounds Good Imports] as a salesman, but why not give me a P&D deal; give me a little bit of money and I'll find bands and record them, then we'll put them out. That was the real beginning of Epitaph.

Has your experience as an artist informed the way you treat other artists?

At that time, I was really part of a scene: punk rockers in Los Angeles. We all knew each other. If you saw a punk rocker on the street and you didn't know him, you got to know him. It was a very close-knit scene.

I knew most of the other bands and a few punk labels – SST, Slash, Posh Boy and Frontier. All the bands always said the labels were ripping them off – always.

I was already not the most popular kid – I got in a band to be more popular! – and I didn't want to lose all of my friends.

Plus I'd had the experience with The Vandals where I didn't take care of the accounting, and I knew that wasn't cool. I didn't ever want to be on the wrong side of artists and musicians. That's my tribe – I am one.

So I decided if I was going to do this, I'd do it in a way where I didn't lose friends over it. I wanted to be fair and respectful to my tribe, my people, and that's what I did from that moment on. It became my mission statement.

I don't know if it's true or if I'm just being prideful, but I feel like we were one of the first indie labels where our innovation was really being artist-friendly and being fair and transparent. Not just saying it, but paying.

What kind of deals were you doing? Royalty deals?

Yes, royalty deals, but I was paying mechanicals from day one [as well]. I figured out that a mechanical plus a royalty together is roughly one third of my revenue.

So if $9 came in, $3 was owed to the artist. I wasn't sophisticated – this was before the PC revolution.

I opened two bank accounts: if $1,000 came in, $700 was for me to run the business and pay my salary, and $300 was so I could always pay royalties.

I did that until I had five employees and could afford a bookkeeper. But I knew that way I wasn't dipping into the artist royalties, so I wasn't going to lose any friends over it.

Tell me about when Bad Religion signed to Atlantic for Stranger Than Fiction. Was that a trauma for you?

Yeah, it was. I don't know if it should have been, but it was.

To put it in perspective, I mentioned that I had a lot of experience with drugs in high school and so forth. In 1987, I got clean and sober – right before [Bad Religion] put out Suffer.

I was 25 years old. I wrote it with Greg, and produced, mixed and recorded it myself. It did very well. Then every band I signed started doing well too.

Over the next seven years, Bad Religion put out seven records – and I was growing my business, my label and my recording studio at the same time. And we were touring!

Our touring schedule had to be part-time because Greg was going for his Masters and his PHD. We could only tour in summer because of his academic ambitions, which helped my business ambitions. It also had the result of us prioritising the recording.

"I was not the most popular kid when I was young - I got in a band to be more popular!"

That's something I talk to young bands about today: there's a lot of good bands out there, and you can't just put your focus on touring. You've got to put your focus on writing.

You have to work on your writing, and you have to be prolific. A young band can't tour on one record forever.

So, you've released Suffer on Epitaph, and over the next seven years, Bad Religion keeps on growing and growing...

By 1994, we were quite big – selling hundreds of thousands of records around the world, when Atlantic noticed us – Mike Gitter from Atlantic.

I was married with two kids, going through some stuff in that area. Seven years with seven records and

seven tours in a band can create a lot of relationship issues as well.

Atlantic came and said: we'd like to sign you to a major label deal. And while that was happening, The Offspring started blowing up [on Epitaph]. Their record literally went gold while we were talking to Atlantic – putting Epitaph on the map.

It was a moment in time when indies could blow up – NWA's Straight Outta Compton was going platinum, on an independent label.

It made me realise that major labels don't have a secret sauce, a magic spell, to make something a hit. It can happen for anybody. Right as my band has its big chance to sign with a major.

This created a lot of inner conflict for me: I wanted my band to sign to Atlantic, because I wanted to see what could happen for us. In the back of my mind, I always have self-doubt. Even though I've been successful, I'm an insecure person.

Epitaph had become a big company, but I didn't know if that was a fluke and it was never going to happen again.

We voted in the band, and I voted to go to Atlantic. But in my secret heart, I wanted [the rest of Bad Religion] to say: "Don't be silly! We're staying with Epitaph!" But they didn't. They're not mind-readers.

And they were probably thinking: if Brett's saying let's go to Atlantic...

Of course. Part of me wanted to try a major label. It was very flattering.

Nirvana had just gone platinum. We had a chance to have Andy Wallace produce us, who'd just done Nirvana, Rage Against The Machine.

It was very controversial for a punk band to sign to a major at that time. Bad Religion got a lot of criticism for being sell-outs for signing to Atlantic.

And you quit the band after that?

Yes. I wrote the record and recorded [Stranger Than Fiction], but I quit after.

It wasn't because of any one thing, but put yourself in the perspective of that time.

Here I am, it's 1995, and I'm in a band I started in 1981. We've just put out our big major label record with some of the best writing maybe I've done, and I'm now 32 years old.

I have my business, which is putting out other punk bands. And [largely thanks to The Offspring's Smash] it did $50m that year.

It seemed like an opportune time to make a change in my life: from being in a rock band to working for other rock bands.

At the same time, I was struggling with the sudden success and the sudden money. I don't feel like a rich person. I'm a middle class person with too much money! I wasn't prepared.

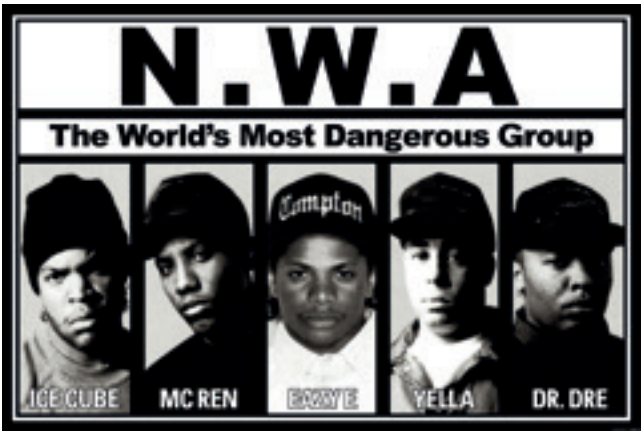
I was living in a very modest apartment when it all happened.

So tell us the story of Smash.

It's really a story of Epitaph's success in the '90s.

In the late '80s we put out this Bad Religion record, Suffer. And Bad Religion started this trajectory where each record got a little bit bigger. Our sound was quite popular.

At the same time, Operation Ivy put out an album which really was a wake-up call in California for the [punk]



scene. I made Suffer in my studio, West Beach Recorders.

Fat Mike from NOFX loved the record and came to Westbeach Recorders to record. He wanted that sound.

I was making a living as a recording engineer at that time, more than anything else. Other bands started coming to me saying: 'We want that sound from Suffer.'

And to the really good ones I'd say: 'Do you want to put a record out?' I signed NOFX, then Pennywise, then Rancid, and then I signed Offspring.

There were a couple of bands in-between, but for the most part those were my first five signings.

Epitaph got a real reputation: there were fans of the label. It's different today, but at that time I could put out a new record, and everyone who were fans of the previous [Epitaph] record would try it.

When we put out Offspring, their first record, Ignition, sold 30,000 to 50,000 copies, within the scene. Most of my bands would sell 10,000 [on their first album], then 30,000 [on their second], then 100,000 [on their third].

Offspring sold 10,000, then 50,000… then they sold 10 million.

You might say, how? What was the difference?

The difference is you getting struck by lightning, or the house across the street getting struck by lightning.

Did you record Smash as the engineer?

No, I recorded the demos. They hired Tom Wilson, who had also done Bad Religion records. He did Ignition for Offspring as well. He's no longer with us but he was a brilliant producer.

How did you deal with that sudden success?

Well Smash didn't sell 10m in its first year – it sold 3m to 5m. And then all of the major record labels came calling, of course. They offered very nice deals.

The thing that gave me the courage to not do a major deal with NWA, straight Outta Compton. That was an indie through RED, and so was I.

All the majors said you can't be an indie and reach this level of sales. Well what about 'F*ck Tha Police'? How's 'Come Out And Play' any different?

For better or worse I didn't sell a

portion of my company. The biggest deal I turned down was $50m.

To buy Epitaph?

To buy half of Epitaph.

You were overwhelmed, presumably. Is that why you got back into drugs?

Yes, I was overwhelmed. I did not handle it well. I thought okay, well now my picture's in Billboard and Hits Magazine all the time, I have money… it's true my relationships are all in turmoil, but now I have this safety net [so] I can use drugs on the weekend and enjoy myself. I'm not a kid anymore.

So I started using drugs and alcohol on the weekends, but it didn't work. I had a very rough time for about three-and-a-half years. It's fairly well-documented. But then I got clean again.

I don't mind saying I'm a drug addict and I have problems with mind-altering substances. But in my life I've been clean seven years, and then 17 years. So I'm a drug addict who's been clean for 24 years!
I mention it because really all I have is today – I could decide to blow it today, although I don't plan on it.

For people out there in the same shoes, there is hope. You can do it.

Were you annoyed when The Offspring left the label?

Yes, I was. It was a three-record contract. They delivered two records and we were in talks about the third one.

I was very surprised to find out that they had signed to Sony for it. And I think Sony was very surprised to find out that they owed the third one to me!

What I regret is all the negativity that I shared publicly. I could have kept my mouth closed.

I'm not a negative person. Me and The Offspring had some bad things to say about it each other publicly at that time.

So is a hit album a curse or a blessing for a label?

It's of course a blessing but a lot of times it can destroy you.

NOFX

There's that big void after a hit: 'What do I do now?'

That's right. You have to have a little bit of foresight. I had seen it happen at Delicious Vinyl.

I'm an LA boy: there are indie labels here that have hits, going back to the '50s. I'm a student and I try to learn from not only the people around me but historical examples.

I realised when we had that big hit that I had to plan for the future. I didn't buy a yacht. You know what I bought? You're sitting in it – a building.

I tried to be smart. It was a building in a terrible neighborhood, which is now the best neighborhood in LA. I got lucky again.

No. You have good instincts.

You can prepare the ground for luck. That's all.

What's the meaning of punk rock to you? A musical genre? A way of life?

It's a musical genre. I'll expand on that.

Rock'n'roll is the best thing ever invented. It's the fucking best thing. Other than food and sex, it's a very close third. You just need the other two to live, so you can enjoy rock and roll.

Punk rock is a kind of rock and roll. It started roughly with Iggy or The Ramones or The Pistols – I'm not getting into that fight.

It has a sound, a fashion and an attitude. Punk rock as a genre has ramified and branched into almost every significant kind of rock music we have today.
It's almost as influential as the blues was to a previous generation – although, of course, even punk rock is based in the blues. Blues is the grandaddy.

But punk rock turned into indie, and garage, and techno, and straight edge – all kinds of shit.

Too much is made out of: what is punk rock? I know original, creative, courageous thinkers who aren't punk rock. A lot of people in punk rock are too reactionary – they think everything else sucks. 'I can't like dance music, that's not punk.'

Punk rock was a movement that was very influential and relevant to what it meant at that time.

Are there still punk rock kids today?

There are some. That's the thing about musical genres – they never go away. They just go into hibernation. There's still psychobilly kids, ska kids, goth kids…

If a scene comes about someone likes, they'll keep it going. The thing is, this is dangerous to say…

I am friends with people who are still punk through-and-through. Lars from Rancid is a punk rocker, he's never going to change – same for Fat Mike from NOFX.

They're original punk rockers. It's part of their DNA.

But there's young kids today who, when they do it too exactly, it seems a bit like role play. But I'm not standing in judgment of anybody: if kids do it and they like it, then that's for them.

What was the high point of your career up to now?

Working with Tom Waits on Mule Variations. I think he's one of the most significant artists in the history of music.

That's the moment I decided not to just be a 'punk rock label' – or a punk rock kid. It's when I said to myself: 'This is wonderful but I think I have a chance to be more.'

Tom is such a profoundly great artist. That was a peak moment for me.

How did you get to meet Tom?

Donald Passman [author or 'All You Need To Know About The Music Business'] called me up out of the blue and said: 'Hey, would you be interested in working with Tom Waits?'

I said: 'Donald, if you're serious, then I'm going to send you a blank piece of paper, and that's the contract. Just fill it in.'

Good karma.

Exactly. You stick to your values. When you give something up, sometimes you get something much better later.

Who are your mentors in the business?

In the early days, I don't think he's kept a focus on his business, but I really looked at Greg Ginn at SST was doing. He was a guitar player in a band like me, putting out his band's records and signing other bands. They had Sonic Youth and Black Flag. That was very influential – not his business practices, but the fact he could just do it.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention Suzy Shaw, who was my girlfriend for many years. She ran Bomp Records. Some would say it was the first punk label in the US. IT came from the fanzine Who Put The Bomp…

Suzy ran the record label and really taught me a lot about the business. They had groups like Devo, The Dead Boys and they put out some Iggy stuff.

I've learned a lot from my predecessors. Lionel Conway, the founder of Island Music and one of the great pre-eminent music publishers who signed Tom Waits, Cat Stevens and U2 has been a mentor of mine over the years.

We all have the loneliness of being at the top as business owners. Do you realise that you've achieved something extraordinary and meaningful? Do you allow yourself that pride?

No. I have discovered for myself that ego is not my amigo. And I've worked very hard to cultivate spiritual but non-religious values: humility, compassion, equanimity.

This may surprise you: I have a mediation practice I've been doing for 35 years. It's not lunchtime yet and I've meditated twice. I don't fuck around with that stuff.

Thinking about my achievements is a dangerous place to me.

So why do you still do this?

Because music is my great love.

I love my family and friends and my relationships. But music fills me up. It gives my life meaning. It's not just the sound vibrating in my eardrums.

I like to write a song. I like to help an artist write a song. I like to help a young artist focus their energy and achieve what they want to achieve. That's my high. There's nothing better.

Do you think you're romantic?

My wife says I'm not sentimental. But I think I am!

Matthew Johnson, when I interviewed him earlier this year, said: Brett bailed me out. I was in deep shit. I needed $150,000 and he gave it to me. Why did you do it? Was it good business or just helping a friend?

Tom Waits

Both. I wouldn't have done it if I thought it was $150,000 down the drain.

But it was a risk.

Risk is fun. You know that. You can't be an entrepreneur and not enjoy risk. I enjoy gambling too.

I think this is the most wonderful livelihood you can have – taking a chance on bright people who are creative.

We're putting more music into the world, not more greenhouse gases. It's just music. How fucking great is that.

Independence: what does it mean to you?

Independence means not having a boss or stockholders, and that's what I love.

It's nice. It gives me a lot of freedom and peace of mind.

There was a time it felt like more of a community. Our industry's in so much transition right now. On one level, the difference between majors and indies is diminishing. The advances majors can pay are lower, the advances indies can pay are higher.

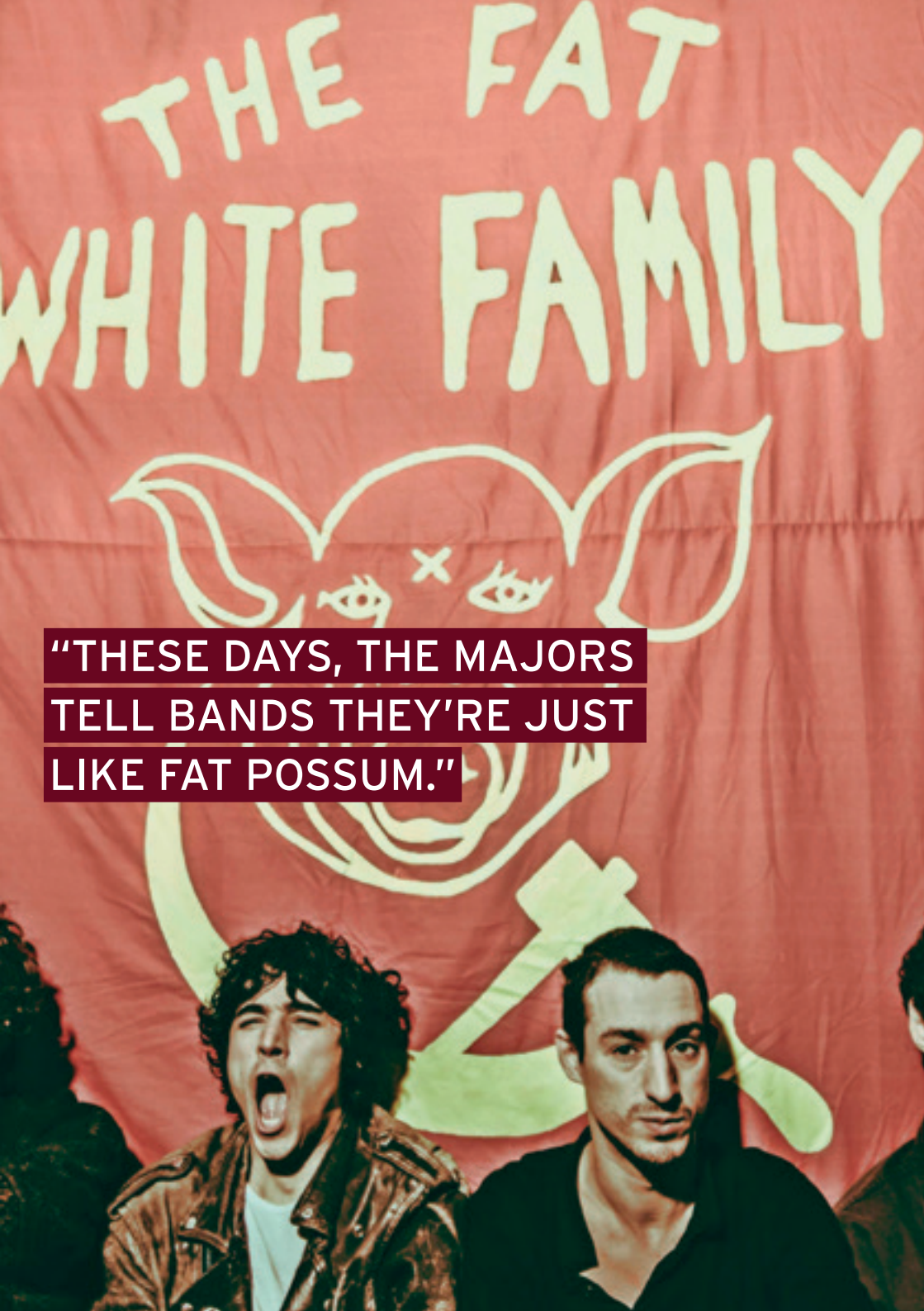
The playing field is even: every person has every record ever made in their pocket, you can just check it out.

I still hope that independents, generally speaking, treat artists fairer and with more respect than majors.

I agree. I think independents are important, otherwise it's giant corporations stockholders and monopoly.

There might be a CEO at these huge corporations that does care about artists, but he will get fired if he doesn't serve his stockholders.

I won't get fired unless I don't serve my artists.



"THESE DAYS, THE MAJORS TELL BANDS THEY'RE JUST LIKE FAT POSSUM."

FAT POSSUM
"THEY NEVER THOUGHT THIS LABEL WOULD WORK"

There aren't many hotter labels on the planet right now than Fat Possum.

Just don't let that fool you into thinking that the Mississippi company has done things the easy way.

With the likes of The Districts, The Fat White Family, Temples and Seratones on the US label's books in 2015, you might envision a slickly proficient A&R machine – one well-versed in corporately out-positioning its rivals.

Sit down with Fat Possum co-founder Matthew Johnson for any period, though, and he'll teach you the error of your ways.

The way Johnson tells it, Fat Possum's history has been a patchwork of missteps and last-minute glory ever since it set up shop 24 years ago.

It's been a journey kept on the road by some fortunate happenstance, brilliant A&R decisions and serious leaps of faith.

You'll pick this up by glancing through Fat Possum's back catalogue, which includes Modest Mouse, RL Burnside, The Walkmen and Johnson's most famous signing, The Black Keys.

Amongst other Fat Possum assets, you'll also find the classic recordings of soul legend Al Green – the product of a canny Hi Records acquisition from EMI – as well as the label's very own vinyl plant, Memphis Record Pressing.

In typical Fat Possum style, this mini-factory nearly cost them everything – but it might just end up paying major dividends.

Below, [PIAS]'s Kenny Gates chews the fat with Johnson, and discovers how a record company once plunged into the financial blues kept the faith, leaned on its friends… and revived itself.

I came across Fat Possum for the first time in the early 1990s when you were going through Epitaph and we began distributing RL Burnside…

First we were with Capricorn Records. That was a disaster!

It ended really badly, on Music Row in Nashville.

We were in bankruptcy after that, and that's when Brett [Gurewitz, Epitaph boss] got us.

He bailed you out?

Oh, totally. Things were happening pretty fast at Epitaph at the time, The Offspring had just exploded.

The only question Brett asked me before the deal was: "Who would win in a fight: The Incredible Hulk or The Terminator?"


Black Keys

I said The Terminator… and that I needed $175,000 just to keep the fucking lights on.

He gave it to me later that day.

How did you get started as Fat Possum?

We started putting out RL Burnside and Junior Kimbrough records in 1992.

And you began life purely as a blues label?

That's what we began as, certainly, but pretty quickly we started getting into other stuff.

We were always a little bit different; even our touring was different.

You probably remember A Ass Pocket Of Whiskey [from RL Burnside, pictured], which came out on Matador – that was our first record.

We were in bankruptcy, so we licensed it to them.

RL was hanging out with Iggy Pop, Jon Spencer, all those guys. But we couldn't put stuff out under our own name. We had tonnes of 'cease & desist' letters and shit!

We didn't do anything right.

Why did you start a record label in the first place?

I didn't think it was going to work. If I did, I'd have come up with a better name.

It felt like a joke: let's just do this, and then move on to the next thing.

But now Fat Possum's been going for over 20 years.

It's so hard right now for an indie label. I don't think it's ever been harder.

Why is it so hard now?

It used to be that it was like a curse to be on an indie label; that if you had indie distribution, the band would go free. That used to be written in.

I guess the flipside back then was that there was so much more money.

Guys at majors used to go to our bands and say: 'We love Fat Possum but they can't give you the push that we can.'

Now they try to steal them by saying: 'We're just like Fat Possum. We're indie like them.'

It's crazy how it's all flipped around.

Like how?

Look at Sony Red in the US. I think with all their independent labels combined they have a bigger [distribution] market share than any of the fucking major guys uptown.

Mumford & Sons, Jason Aldean and all that [independent] stuff – platinum artists that have been taken from zero, really, and developed without huge campaigns.

It's kind of wild. It used to be that you couldn't do that on an indie.

Brett was the first person to have a

[US] No.1 record in something like 25 years [on an indie].

Since then, I get the impression that the management community are far more open to dealing with an independent than with a major.

Yeah. The gap between the worst record label and the best record label, and the worst distribution and the best distribution, has gotten so narrow now.

So what do you tell a band like The Districts; why should they sign to you and not a major?

Well, you have to sign them real quick [laughs]! It's really hard to win that battle with the majors.

Every band says they don't care, but when the money starts stacking up, they really do.

That [loyalty] shit can go out the window real fast.

If you go to a major, at least wind them up for a bunch [of money]. Or build on an indie and then go.

When The Black Keys left [for Nonesuch], for instance, as much as it killed me, we had like two or three [staff].

Now we have like 14 people so I feel we could go head-to-head with [Warner]. We couldn't back then.

"The only question Brett asked me before our Epitaph deal: 'Who would win in a fight: The Incredible Hulk or The Terminator?"

[The majors] still have a lock on radio, whatever anyone says, even if it's slowly eroding.

I didn't know what Nonesuch was. It wasn't really a powerhouse at Warner, and still isn't, really.

Now, Red can help you - and obviously you have a great partner in Europe...

Yeah! One thing that's fucking awesome is that when we took the Al Green stuff from EMI [the Hi Records catalogue], that was huge.

We're selling more Al Green records a month than they were!

They were doing like 400-500 and now we're back up to 1,600-1,700. So things have changed.

We get our report card from Soundscan over here every week: boom, this is how good you are.

Why did you consciously want to sign blues artists in the beginning?

They were the best quality thing I could find and they were local. I wanted to do it differently.

These old [label owners] were making these blues guys go back to acoustic music and pretend like they were in the 1950s.

I wanted it to be more of a freak scene; I wanted them in the punk clubs, for it to move real fast and get out of hand. And to start as many rivalries as we possibly could!

What about signing The Black Keys - that must have been a very important moment.

I talked to Jack White a little bit and Judah [Bauer] from the Blues Explosion, who'd also done a two-piece.

There was a time when that wasn't

viable; it was like, 'Get a fucking bass player.'

The Districts now is a good example of how we treat acts. I hope they're happy.

We try to give them whatever they want and stay out of their way.

Hopefully that belief will be repaid...

We're comfortable where they are right now.

"Of course bands don't trust labels! We've got nine bands on our desk – they've got one!"

But there comes a spot where the indie labels are typically weaker – probably around half a million [sales], things can start to break up.

That's when the majors, for the most part, really grind it out.

Probably the only people that have made it to that level are you guys and Red, maybe ADA.

But what's important is that bands can still do great with 200,000 worldwide sales on an independent.

Fuck, yeah – we can do great with 80,000!

Did you ever think of selling the label?

Every day… oh, I don't know. Maybe that's not true.

Some days it's uphill, you know?

We've been lucky to have the trust of some people I really admire. And getting the Al Green stuff, getting the Modest Mouse back catalogue, having The Black Keys early stuff; that's been a dream come true.

We work really hard at this, I hope our bands see the value in us.

It's not unheard of for bands to be ungrateful about a label's investment when things go right in their career. Do you feel frustrated by that?

No, I usually take their side!

It's like, of course they don't trust labels! We have nine bands on our desk, and they've got one – that's it.

Indies have done such a shitty job so many times in the past and fucked things up.

One of my artists once told me: Kenny, you've got 20 bands, I've only got one career.

Exactly. We [as an industry] take that shit for granted. It's a problem.

Every bus that comes around the corner has a band on it.

So chances are, eventually, we'll step into some luck.

What makes you decide to sign a band? Is it the tune, the attitude, the fact they'll sell?

In the past I've signed stuff just because I'm super-lazy. I've stopped that now!

We've really focused over the last few years. We don't sign so much anymore. We got smart.

If you treat the music business like a lottery, then your chances of winning it are… like a lottery.

I was going after stuff like, 'Fuck it, I don't need to own a label.'

I was flat broke when I signed The Districts, totally out of money. I went all in.

Modest Mouse

I decided: 'If this band doesn't work, I probably shouldn't be doing this for a living.'

It was the same with Seratones. It was like: 'Don't let them leave the room until they sign.'

Fat White Family were so self-destructive, I had to have them.

I'm like a parent who loves the ugliest child the most!

You're one of the hottest labels in the world as we sit here, but it's happening as Spotify and streaming takes over. How do you feel about it?

I've got my fingers crossed. I mean, hopefully it's going to work. It scares me.

Insanely enough, I drove with The Districts for ten hours recently, just to see if I could still handle it. I used to live in fucking vans!

I noticed there weren't any CDs in their vehicle, at all. And I was like: 'That's finally going.'

I don't even know who buys CDs anymore.

It frightens me that half our money comes from people I don't understand. Do you buy CDs?

I buy vinyl. You just launched a vinyl plant!

It's a big undertaking. If we'd have done our research, I don't know if we'd have done it.

Sometimes as a business, it's like we're saying: 'Our aim is to sit down.' But then we have to chop up a tree, sand it into boards, nail them together and make a chair.
We did the vinyl plant, because the [market] just wasn't consistent: every time we turned around, the rates were going up, we couldn't get enough manufactured…

At Christmas, the shitty Government withheld like 3,500 Modest Mouse records that were back-ordered.

It's like the Raiders Of The Lost Ark out there. Bullshit.

So let's get this straight: you outright bought a pressing plant?

Ha, no! We bought a scrapped pressing plant, that was all wrecked.

We loaded it wrapped in plastic because pieces of it were falling apart. It was ragged out. And then we got this old guy to put it all back together.

Today, we have nine working presses. We went back to the bank three times. And the bank was like: 'Have you guys worked any of this out on paper?'[Laughs].

It's the same bullshit you get with bands! 'We're 90% done with the record, but the last 10% is going to cost twice what you've already spent.'

The infrastructure you need is crazy;

a huge boiler, steam pipes… these things don't come with a manual.

So it's working now?

Oh yeah, it had to! Fat Possum put up all the money. There was no other option. I think I spent Christmas Eve fixing it up.

Hopefully it's going to work; hopefully this vinyl thing is going to grow for at least another three to five years.

Everyone we work with is going to want their records made, right?

It was so frustrating before to have something that was actually selling, which we couldn't supply.

Why did you split with Brett and Epitaph?

They kind of fell on tough times. They felt they were putting in more than they were getting out of [Fat Possum], and perhaps we felt we didn't need their help anymore.

Brett was about as good a business partner as we could have had. It ran its course.

Do you remember the first time you saw The Black Keys live?

Yep, they played a shitty bar in Oxford, Mississippi.

I think we signed them in 2003 or 2004 – you have to remember it took ten years for them to make it. They didn't explode until 2011.

Well that's testament to you sticking with things in the long-term.

I think so. Building for years puts a foundation under a band that they can't get from one big radio hit or a car commercial.

It happened with Modest Mouse, it happened with the Keys: things that heat up slowly also cool down slowly.

Some people have said that Moby's huge Play album was inspired by RL Burnside. How did you feel about it?

Everybody grabs something from somebody. I don't feel it's stolen at all.

I suppose he beat us at our own game.

Have you got a vision for the next ten years on the label?

Oh no.

What about the next ten days?

That, if you give me a minute, I can probably come up with [laughs].

We need to make sure we're with the right partners and going in the right direction.

If we do that, we'll be fine.

I take comfort in the fact that, besides pesticides, entertainment is still America's biggest export.

And weapons, of course.

We're not allowed to deal in weapons. If you want to make money, it's all about pesticides.

Would you consider yourself a hopeless romantic?

No. I'm a happy-go-lucky nihilist. I've seen it not work out so many times – but, you know, it could be worse.

"YOU CAN DO SO MUCH HARM IN THIS INDUSTRY AS A MAJOR LABEL WITHOUT EVEN INTENDING TO."

INDIE SPIRIT OF THINGS
ALISON WENHAM ON PROTECTING HER FLOCK

Independent labels know a lot about Alison Wenham.

We know she's a forthright orator whose fierce intellect can skewer the biggest and baddest enemies of the indie music sector.

We know she's a passionate, pragmatic strategist who fights to unify and galvanise the disparate comrades of AIM (and WIN, the Worldwide Independent Network, of which she is also CEO).

And, yes, we know that, to many of her flock, she is a matriarchal guardian – someone who we can turn to when we need clarion advice… or just need our heads banging together.

We know lots of 'whats' about Alison – but we rarely ask much about 'why'.

Why just over 15 years ago she decided to create AIM and pull together a collective (and, it's fair to say, initially sceptical) voice for the independent community.

Why she continues to battle for fair treatment towards a sector that isn't always exactly gushing with its appreciation.

And why she's never short of energy to needle those market-hungry major labels – especially when they're bullying the less corporate side of the business.

[PIAS]'s Kenny Gates decided to try and find out.

During Kenny's chat with Alison below, she protested that she's "actually quite a simple soul" – and there is certainly one straightforward version of her career that fits this bill.

She started working in retail, eventually moving into the classical music sector with UK indie Conifer before turning to the dark side and working for BMG, then a major label, for the best part of the 1990s.

Alison clearly had a flair for independent business: under her direction, Conifer grew to be the UK's largest independent record and distribution company in any specialist field.

But it's the experience between the cracks in this timeline – her recollections of a tragic lack of diversity at the top of the UK music biz, her first-hand experience of corporate malpractice, her early struggles to get AIM off the ground – that perhaps tells us more about what drives a true figurehead of our industry…

A big question to start, Alison. How have you ended up doing what you do?

I've never had a career plan. I don't know if women do, generally. There doesn't tend to be a big picture or grand vision for us.

My career is pretty boring. I've worked in a lot of different jobs, nearly always on the indie side.

At Conifer, I did a deal with Zomba [in 1992] to run all of their music library stuff. Then about three to four years later I got offered a job at BMG. And I said: 'Nah, why would I want to come and work for you?'

They had one of the greatest legacies in the world but they couldn't compete with Universal or EMI on classical. I was about 40 at that time.

Then over the week I started to think about it: 'Just because you've been on the indie side all your life doesn't mean that you wouldn't enjoy it – you might!'

I worked out a way to give it a fighting chance of being very successful, and that was to bring Conifer into BMG [in 1995].

Our market share was double theirs. They had about 2.9% and we had about 6%. Putting it all together meant you had a very significant company.

And so you became an employee of a 'major'.

I worked at BMG for about five years. I learned a lot.

I had a sofa in my office and first-class travel; I was told I couldn't keep my car because it looked too old. I had to get a new one, to match the aspirational value of the role.

After about four years of it I just ended up thinking: 'This world is so not me.'

We all know it's easy to fall into the trap as an indie: at a major I'd have unlimited resource and I could achieve more...

You'll understand this very well: at Conifer, we'd started production because we thought that as a distributor, eventually the success we'd have would be our downfall.

We'd help make our label partners – like Blue Note and Nonesuch – successful in the UK, and then their owners [EMI, Warner] took them back.

That didn't feel very satisfying. So we built up a balance between our owned music and our third-party stuff that felt comfortable.

So why BMG?

I thought they would bring the international opportunities. I also thought those opportunities would be much more coherent and easy to access than they were at Conifer – we had some pretty big artists by this point and our overseas business was very exposed.

We were going through different distributors. It was a patchwork; labour intensive, low margin and it was risky. So I thought about that, and, yes, I thought about money.

The appeal from BMG's perspective was that they thought they would get hold of independent thinking, entrepreneurship.
They brought in Martin Heath, me, Keith Blackhurst and Pete Hadfield. And they also had Christian Tattersfield running NorthWestSide with Nick Raphael.

We were bought in to energise the corporate culture; we wanted to access that corporate culture to sell more records.

And I'm not sure it worked for anyone by the end.

What makes you want to represent independents? Why are they worth defending any more than a major company?

That's a good question! I don't know if they are any more worth defending.

All industry needs its defense lines, it's just that ours has a fault in it.

Maybe that will heal one day, maybe it won't.

It's a fault that's most sharply seen in the Anglo-American axis of the industry.

Certainly in the 1980s, it didn't exist, then in the 1990s the majors started to eat each other up; to grow and grow and grow.

Before then, the big indies were about half the size of the smallest majors. Everybody had a chance to have a hit record.

I'm a great believer in competition; I believe it's good for businesses and artists.

So is the idea that indies have powerful market share now wrong? If in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s an indie had a bigger influence over the majors?

In 1989, the independents had 40% of the market. The market increased in value because of the CD.

But what happened from that point was a rapid transfer of market share: Virgin, Chrysalis, A&M, Island… these big independents became part of the corporate world.

There is a now fracture in our industry. I think the independents face a real threat; you can do so such harm in this industry as a major label without even knowing it – without ever intending to.

That's because the majors aren't in an ecosystem. They are natural predators.

Exactly. There's no corporate social responsibility in that world for the health of the rest of the companies in your industry.

Music is not something you do because you think you're going to make a lot of money out of it. I don't know a single person who entered the music industry thinking that way.

You do it because you have to; because it's in your blood. We've lost a lot of the big indies from the late nineties [to majors].

In the early noughties I thought: 'Sh*t. This isn't good. This is a slow walk to nowhere.'

But then something great started to happen at AIM: companies that started up from 2000-2005 are now really succeeding; take Sunday Best, Stolen Recordings, Hassle Records, Full Time Hobby – those sort of small, well-run business that are doing alright, thank you very much.

"There's no corporate social responsibility in the world of the major record labels."

After Conifer, you were MD at BMG Entertainment International. That must have made you feel like a bit of a rare breed: a woman at the top echelons of a major.

It's been lonely.

When I was an independent, it never crossed my mind that there was any imbalance anywhere in the industry. You get up and do your job the best you can.

When I took over [at Conifer] we were eight people and when I [joined BMG] we were 40 people – a real mix of ages, genders, backgrounds. All on merit.

Then I was asked by the BPI to join their classical committee. It was a bit moribund; they wanted some new energy and fresh ideas.

And then I went onto the BPI Council. Wow. It was a complete boys' club, from top to bottom.

I was the first elected woman on that council, ever. It was 1990. Then I got let into the PPL board… same thing.

Did you feel treated differently because you were a woman?

I think I unsettled people. Put guys and girls together in business you get a certain kind of jive going. You're trying to run the best company, with the best people, the best brains.

Then you walk in [to the BPI or PPL in the 1990s] and it's a tribe with a hierarchy that's almost pre-determined – whether by market share or length of service or by reputation.
What happens in those structures is that you don't really foster innovation. You don't really step outside of that comfort zone. And those that do so end up feeling a bit exposed.

Did I feel threatened? Never. But did I feel awkward? Of course.

I could tell they were unsettled when I arrived. There was a tentativeness, a nervousness. It was foreign to them.

This industry had allowed men to own all of the seats at the top table. It never crossed their minds that their might be lots of women who deserved a place.
But in some ways, the blokes have been quite proud of me. Everyone's sort of aware now that it's not a good look to be a boys' club in an industry like this.

Now you have an even tougher job on your hands: independent companies are by nature individualistic. You represent AIM: a body that tries to encourage collective thinking amongst people who are determined to forge their own path!

I didn't say it was easy! Our members are as different from each other as they are from a major.

Some are reticent to join AIM because they think that somehow they'll be surrendering their identity or their personality.

"This industry had allowed men to own all of the seats at the top table."

You have to be very careful to make sure whatever you decide upon is a very strongly-held shared view amongst members.

For example, when the whole file-sharing thing blew up, we did a deal with Napster because we could see a big business forming and we wanted first-mover advantage from the independents.

Napster got killed by the majors, everyone knows that story – what a silly thing to do. Then file-sharing just exploded.

Napster had essentially taught the

world how to do this, then Kazaa learnt from Napster how not to get caught – to not have a centralised server with all your information on it. We never put out a unified AIM view at that time because we knew our members had differing views.

They might have very different beliefs and personalities, but there is a difference between people who work in the indie sector and those who work in the major sector.

The culture in which you're in defines how you operate. And in majors, eventually, they grind you down. They grind you to dust, sometimes.

I remember phoning a few people the day I started AIM: Sam O'Brien, Guy Holmes, Martin Goldschmidt, Martin Mills, Alan McGee. Some I knew, some I didn't. And I was asking all of them for money!

There was a real directness about it. I just felt: 'I'm home again.' Because if people didn't like it, at least they said so!

At a major getting a straight answer was quite often one of the most difficult things you could attempt.

You were fiercely opposed to Universal's takeover of EMI. Looking at the market impact since, is it as bad as you feared?

No, I've actually been quite surprised.

I can't read it: you buy the third biggest recorded music company in the world and you lose market share. Bizarre.

It's early days, though. That catalogue, think about it; it is a formidable steam ship. The market in streaming is still quite young. When the whole world is able to receive and connect with music digitally, the outcome might be very different.

Do you think independents over-reacted to UMG buying EMI?

I think we should stand against consolidation on the very principle that it is not good for creativity; it's not good for musicians, artists or business.

I'm in favour of keeping things disrupted.

Have you looked at the leaked 2011 Sony and Spotify contract?

I haven't finished reading it yet, but I dare say it's pretty complicated.

The streaming licence itself is quite simple, and then you've got all these other things that are moving away from the centre – [advertising] credits and such.

It didn't look too terrible to me, really.

As indies, we're always paranoid it's worse for us than for them!

What puzzles me is that these companies say they pay advances, breakage etc. [to performers] but then the artists say they're not getting paid properly.

You have to wonder…

What was your first job in music?

It was at the very imaginatively-titled The Record Shop, in Hitchin, Hertfordshire.

This was in the days when the bus used to come in from the villages and people would flood into the shop – Tuesday and Fridays, market day.

We had listening booths where you could pay 10p to hear the latest single.

My dad was an engineer so we were always moving; I never stayed

anywhere more than 18 months, which is why I think I'm the way I am!

If you go to as many schools as I did and be the new girl every time you become a little bit of a nomad. You learn to rely on yourself.

Am I right in saying you're a musician?

I always wanted to play the piano, and we never had one when I was younger – we didn't have enough money.

I got in with a group of people who were doing A-Level music and there was a piano in their room, so I started playing that.

Then the boy next door to me was a violin player who ended up in the Royal Opera House. And it just changed my life. Just like that.

I was planning to go to Oxford or Cambridge to do English – I was good at it. But I stopped it all and started to play music. And I still do. I can play bit of Debussy.

I ask this of everyone: Are you a romantic?

Yes, I think so. I'm an idealist, certainly.

What about a hopeless romantic?

God no. Definitely not.

Finish this line. Without the independent music community...

The record industry would be bland, dull, sorry and boring.

"THERE'S A LOT ON MY MIND.
I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR BULLSHIT."

THE GUD LIFE

MICHAEL GUDINSKI ON 40 YEARS OF ROCK'N'ROLL

When most fledgling labels put out their first ever release, it's a case of dipping their toe in the choppy waters of the music business.

A short EP, perhaps a limited 7" – even just a single track online. All very sensible ways to get started.

Michael Gudinski's never been very good at dipping his toe. He's a jump-in-and-see-how-the-water-is type of chap.

It's a big reason why the Australian has become such a music biz legend over the past five decades.

Gudinski's first release on his Mushroom Records in 1973 was about as lavish as you could get: a triple live album of Australia's Sunbury Rock Festival.

Mushroom, still housed in Gudinski's home city of Melbourne to this day (as The Mushroom Group), bounded from strength to strength from there.

It furnished a reputation for signing interesting rock with a mainstream appeal, conquering Australian year-end charts with the likes of Skyhooks and Split Enz – a vehicle for the brothers who would become Crowded House, Neil and Tim Finn.

Yet what really put Mushroom on the map worldwide was a single, iconic name: Kylie.

Mushroom's diversion into pure pop music surprised some critics, but Gudinski saw something special in Australia's homegrown songstress – and he couldn't have been more correct.

Before the end of Mushroom's first decade, an ambitious 20-something Gudinski had launched ancillary businesses with a foot in live – an extremely sharp move in hindsight.

Following the success of the Premier Artists Agency in Melbourne, The Harbour Agency was started in 1978. The formation of Gudinski's Frontier touring company followed in 1979.

Both remain part of Gudinski's modern Mushroom Music Group, and muscular competitors to the likes of Live Nation and WME in the exec's backyard.

Frontier is now the third biggest promoter in the world in annual ticket sale terms behind AEG and Live Nation.

On November 28 this year, it will host three giant gigs in Oz simultaneously: Sam Smith in Perth, Taylor Swift in Sydney and Ed Sheeran in Brisbane.

("I think that's made a real statement to the world," Gudinski tells us. "Worldwide, Live Nation

are really trying to take over. If they get much more powerful I don't think it will be good for the overall business. It's cheque book rock'n'roll – they buy a lot of artists.")

Within Mushroom 2015, these businesses join a merchandising operation (Love Police ATM), a services hub for international labels (Liberator), second-to-none promotions and marketing companies plus a wealth of exciting labels and publishing outfits (I Oh You, Liberation, Ivy League, Illusive and many more).

This holistic approach to the business has served Gudinski well, even after he shocked the indie label community by selling 49% of the original Mushroom Records to Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd in 1993 – before flogging the rest to Murdoch six years later.

Korda(In between, Mushroom set up a UK company. Gudinski eventually hired Korda Marshall to run it, and scored huge successes from the likes of Garbage, Peter Andre and Ash.)

Having sold his beloved Mushroom Records, it didn't take Gudinski long to return with all guns blazing. In 1999, he launched Liberation Music; to this day, the central record company within Mushroom.

Signings including The Temper Trap, Vance Joy (pictured) and Violent Soho put Liberation on the map, and success has continued in typical style ever since.

As for modern day Michael?

As you can read below in his recent chinwag with [PIAS]'s Kenny Gates, he's preparing himself for a "crazy year" – with his Frontier touring company now establishing itself as one of the world's most significant live promotion powerhouses.

Vance Joy

To me you're the guy who invented the '360' model. Your first record was a triple live album - that said everything.

Thank you. It's nice to hear that, but it's important to say that we never man-handled artists.

We didn't take on rights we couldn't manage properly like some people have since – we had companies to take care of each part.

We would never put acts in a position if they weren't comfortable that they had to be with the agency or the merchandising company.

It was a long time ago. Fortunately for me I was in the business very young – when a concert ticket cost much less than an album.

You are the son of Russian immigrants. Do you speak Russian?

No. I've always felt very lucky to be Australian.

I was an after-thought; my father was 45 when I was born.
I was the only Gudinski born in Australia at that point.

I can't imagine that if I was born in Russia I'd be doing anything like I'm doing now.

Did your parents help you?

Not really. They were old school Eastern Europeans – the rest of my family was very well-educated.

I was the black sheep of the family; I didn't enjoy school very much and I was already running dances when I was 15 in the school holidays. I had the music bug.

About three of four months before my last day of school I was already making a fair bit of money and after being offered a job in the music business, I left.

"No matter how hip and cool you might be, if you can't pay your bills you're shit."

A few of my friends thought I was absolutely insane; they still talk about how bad they feel because they tried so hard to talk me out of it.

My father came back from travelling and just threw me straight out of the house.

That sounds horrific, but it wasn't; it toughened me up.

They wanted you to be a doctor, lawyer..?

My sister was over-educated. Her husband has been knighted – he's the top arthritis professor in the world.

My father thought the music business was like Monopoly.
It was happening in America but in Australia it was still a backyard, shonky business with a fly-by-night operators.

That's why we started with a triple live album with outrageous packaging. We wanted to have major impact.

When you were successful, did your parents realised you'd made it?

My mother saw it. My father still wasn't convinced; I had a company that went into liquidation when I was young.

To him it was confirmation that I was a bum.

Most entrepreneurs in the music business get into financial trouble at some stage – particularly independents.

It sounds strange but for it to happen to me when I was very young, in those early days, was helpful; it's a lot different if it happens later in your career.

It taught me that no matter how hip or cool we were, if we couldn't pay our bills we were shit.

That's still the case now!

I took everything on board from those early days.

When I was 16 I went on the road for the first time with a pop band called The Valentines; they had two lead singers and one of those singers was Bon Scott.

He was just a great guy. He inspired me. I kept in touch with him until his tragic death.

Unfortunately AC/DC were never with Mushroom – it would have made life very different.

Your first two bosses in any business are very important to you. Learning from that was pretty important.

You can't learn the music business in college – certainly not in those days.

I used to put up posters, hand out leaflets, work in a cloakroom. You've got to get in there and be with an organisation that will help you to learn.

[PIAS] has developed some of the best staff to come out of Europe, and it's the same with us in Australia.

Thank you - I would agree with that. Today you are described as 'The Godfather Of Australian Rock'n'Roll': the title of a new book all about your life. How does that make you feel? Are you proud?

'Godfather' makes me feel a bit old but let's face it, as long as I'm relevant – and [The Mushroom Group] feels more relevant than ever – it's all a compliment.

The book you mention is unauthorised; people who are waiting to hear the great stories of Gudinski on the road – the legends – will be sorely disappointed to hear I've had my lawyers go through it with a fine-tooth comb.

I believe what goes on the road stays on the road.

Some of the people who've fallen out with me over the years probably talk the most in the book, but I've got pretty thick skin.

You're a survivor.

Yes I suppose I am. I'm very proud and I've been very lucky.

I know I've been a big fish in a small sea – that might have been different had I moved to America but I wanted to bring my family up around where I grew up.

I've got an Order of Australia; it was quite humbling to think that could happen considering the business I'm in; the Government made me the first entertainment person to win the Melbournian Of The Year Award, which was also quite special.

I try to keep myself in the position of still getting excited about breaking artists. You've got to stay pretty real.

I've gone through a couple of periods where I've lost the plot a little bit. That's when you need good people around you.

You must have seen it all. How have things changed on the road?

It's funny, that's where a lot of people in the music business don't realise how competitive it's become.

When an artist gets the chance to have the [media] sunshine on them, they've got to take advantage of it.

The days of TVs being thrown through hotel windows, sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, are really long past.

You can still have a bit of fun but you've got breakfast TV to do in the morning.

What were the tough times for you and Mushroom?

It was a very hard time when we set up Mushroom in England.

We made a lot of mistakes and spent a lot of money – this was when we were in business with Rupert Murdoch and News Ltd.

I was about to shut the English office down then we had three No.1 albums in three months; Garbage, Peter Andre and Ash.

I often wonder what a fucking disaster it would have been had I shut that office down when I had the chance.

Which brings us on to Korda Marshall...

Korda and I have an amazing relationship. We've worked together a number of times.

We're different characters, but we both have a very strong passion for music. We've rarely had a disagreement.

I hope things go really well for him at BMG. But if not, I'll be waiting, and ready to go again.

One of the new Infectious acts is also ours [The DMA's] and I'll be there from day one.

What was the first record you ever bought?

My first two singles were Elvis Presley and Roy Orbison. I was about 12 or 13.

My parents wouldn't let me see The Beatles; they thought I was too young. That just drove me more towards music.

The first concert I went to was a lunchtime [gig] in Berk Street in Melbourne by a band called The Loved Ones.

I bought their publishing many, many years later.

There was a song of theirs called The Loved One, which INXS recorded and it was a hit everywhere.

I approved the royalty rate for the guys, and it was a very good investment!

What about Kylie - she wasn't a typical Mushroom artist at the time...

There's a lot of bullshit in that book you mention about Kylie; who did what and how.

The label was very rock and alternative, so Kylie was not the kind of act you'd expect – they said, 'It's the death of Mushroom!' I laugh about it now.

The one thing about Mushroom is that we've always been very diverse. To be honest, I thought she might be a one or two-hit wonder.

I had a great big beard and crazy hair then. I was very concerned to get the right people in the office to meet her parents!

[Kylie's family] were very tight and they remain very tight to this day.

For the first few years she was never really a live artist, and now she's become one of the greatest touring artists in the world.

She put us on the map internationally. I could talk for hours about that girl. She's so committed, dedicated and she's such a great person.
I'm famous for being a bit brash and arrogant – sometimes I don't mean to be. There's just a lot on my mind and I don't have time for bullshit.

So I'm extra proud to say that Kylie Minogue and I have never had an argument, ever. I saw her the other week and she is just a gem. It's great to see her happy. I've been through a very big health scare with

her and she's been through one with me.

'The death of Mushroom'? It makes me laugh. It was the complete opposite. Sometimes you have to be very careful not to listen to the wrong people.

What's the secret to Mushroom's success?

I've had a good knack at picking great people. I give them a lot of rope, and a few of them have hung themselves.

But that way you find out pretty quickly how good they are.

We've got iconic names with us at the company. But it's not just about Ian James (pictured), Warren Costello and now Nick Dunshea, who's really brought in a very strong team.

I thought if I was over I had a great life.
Like it or not, in the '80s and '90s, partying was part of the business – especially going to America.

I'm glad the industry has grown up since then. I was lucky that I was my own boss, because realistically if I hadn't been the boss I'd have been fired ten times over.

The partying worked in our favour. When people come to Australia they're usually a long way from home, so if you look after them they don't forget it.

I've always had a policy that if I was going to go and see an act, I'd try not to see them in LA, New York or London – I'd turn up in Buffalo, Carolina, somewhere where

"I've gone through a couple of periods of losing the plot a bit. You need good people around."

It's about a new attitude, one that ensures the Mushroom companies work closely together. After all, we've got enough companies trying to compete with us out there!

It's well known that David Geffen started out in the mailroom of William Morris.

I get a lot of credit and my son says I micro-manage, but the people are the thing that makes Mushroom happen.

40 years of rock'n'roll. 40 years of partying. 40 years of artists. How do you survive that?

The partying has obviously slowed down an immense amount. I had a very big health scare and the doctors were fortunately very wrong. It was a shake-up for everyone.

I had a good attitude about it,

all of a sudden you're important and remembered.

As you know, reputation is paramount in this business. I'm very proud to say we've never been to court with an artist. Mind you, we did settle on the steps twice!

But it's still an incredible accomplishment when you think about all the legal shit that goes on in this business.

Who are your mentors - people who really inspired you?

The late and great Alan Healy, who ran Festival Records, was like my second father.

When Mushroom went through hard times he'd come and stay with me. He was a very straight guy – you could say the

opposite to me – but he really helped me so much.

Festival was owned by Rupert Murdoch, who must have walked in there three times in 30 years. He was already on a mission with newspapers, Fox etc.

Another one was Tom Ross who head of music at CAA in America who helped me a hell of a lot.

And then Elliott Roberts, one of the great managers in America. And also Paul Schindler of the legendary music law firm Grubman, Indursky and Schindler, was a great supporter.

I was one of the first six clients of theirs. I tended to gravitate towards people who found me interesting.

That thing about looking after people when they come to Australia was definitely true with Jerry Moss. When he first came to Australia with Herb Alpert and The Tijuana Brass, they'd had a hit single with The Lonely Bull.

After we took care of him, when I went over to America, I got picked up from the airport in a Rolls Royce and I went to [Jerry's] house with all the Gauguins on the wall and the rest of it.

I couldn't believe it. It was like a fantasy land. He signed a couple of my acts, I don't know if that was a favour or not.

And then Chris Wright and Terry Ellis from Chrysalis were pretty supportive.

I got on very well with Terry at first, then Chris and I became friends for life. There were other independents from that time who were a great help too.

What about Seymour? He could be your brother from America!

You know, you're right. We get on well.

We did a little bit together in the early days. You've got to be a leader not a follower and Seymour Stein is certainly a leader.

Before he became a bigshot, Tommy Mottola was also pretty helpful to me in the early days.

Tell me about the Mushroom Records sale. You sold to News Ltd?

Yeah. I didn't push Rupert Murdoch for it. Initially I went to see him about an idea I'd had to buy some radio stations [together], which to this day could have been the greatest thing I'd ever set up. However, it wasn't to be.

They were called the Triple-M network, which to me stood for More Mushroom Music.

But there were very strong broadcasting laws in Australia about cross-ownership [that prevented Mushroom buying them].

I went straight to Rupert Murdoch

and he was just a genius. He saw the whole big picture. He'd never been in the radio business. In order to do it, he'd have had to park the shares with someone else.

But all his honchos were so pissed off with me that I'd gone direct to Rupert Murdoch that they fucked it up. That deal would have made AUS $125m easy.

During those discussions, he said to me: 'If you're ever going to sell, please let me have the opportunity.'

A Japanese company, I think Fuji Pacific, were very keen and eventually they made me an offer to buy 25%.

I went to Rupert, showed him the offer and he said: 'I'll match it, but I want 50%.'

I said I'd do it on one condition – that I had the casting vote [retaining 51%]. That was the smartest thing I ever did.

Rupert Murdoch

Do you regret selling?

I have mixed feelings. I knew what I was doing, and the money set me up in my life. But I thought much more would come out of it from [Murdoch's] Fox connection and News Ltd. That's where it was a letdown.

The power they could have put behind it was huge. But even their own companies in those days were hardly in sync either.

We still had all the other [Mushroom] companies, remember – we only sold the label.

A lot of people thought I was a genius because I could see the record industry was going to fall apart. I think that's giving me a bit too much credit.

What was really disappointing was when I sold the other half to them [in the late '90s], it took a long time to get the deal done.

You go to bed wondering if the deal's on or off. That went on for 18 months and it could have been done in three.

Rupert's son James was involved; I have little respect for the way he does business. I've got nothing against Lachlan or Rupert – if Rupert walked in here now he'd shake my hand.

A lot of people don't realise that [News Ltd.] actually approached me and that I'd had this fantastic radio idea.

The power we would have had if we pulled it off! And I like power…

They dismissed me [as a employee after Mushroom was sold]. I was naïve enough to think I was going to stay around and help.

It was incredibly frustrating.

I'd have loved to have stayed on and ensured that Mushroom became the saviour of Festival. However, James Murdoch didn't see it that way.

So because of that, the minute my non-compete was up I came back with a vengeance [with Liberation Music]… and pissed away a lot of money.

In true Gudinski form, we've survived again and done very well.

Are you a punk or a hippy?

A hippy.

Why do you still do this?

I love it. What else am I going to do? Now my son's there, my wife knows I'm going to make sure the Mushroom legacy continues.

I'd like to slow down a bit but I'll never retire.
I suppose, as would be expected, I've gone through periods where I've zoned out a bit. I'm too old to use the excuse, 'I've been on tour – don't hassle me.'

What about, 'Gone fishin'?!

Haha. Not me mate. I hate fishing. Golf's more my scene!

You can see just sitting here talking I get excited by what I do.

Whether you're a plumber, electrician or a pilot, if you've got a job you enjoy, you'll be better at it and you'll be happier in life.

That's the simple philosophy.

You don't need a masters degree to work that out, but you and I know so many people who don't like their jobs and that reflects into their life, I reckon.

Are you a romantic?

Yes.

Are you a hopeless romantic?

No. One of the greatest things in my whole life has been my wife.
She has been my absolute balance.

She ensured I never came close to being a 'rock'n'roll casualty'.

We are so looking forward to the future together.

I was a hippy – I never planned to live to 50, let alone have kids.

My wife came out of radio industry so she knew [the music business].

She's just been such a strength for so long.

If I hadn't had that balance throughout all that time, I'd have fallen off the edge. I'm certain of it.

I can't give my wife enough credit.

"NONE OF THIS IS MOTIVATED BY MONEY."

HAPPY ACCIDENTS

ROB DA BANK AND SARAH BOLSHI ON WHAT MAKES SUNDAY BEST ONE OF THE UK'S MOST UNIQUE INDEPENDENTS

"You'll never get a job looking like that."

Rob Da Bank grins as he recounts his father's deeply unimpressed reaction to first seeing one of the modern music biz's most famous barnets.

In a way, the old man was absolutely right.

Rob hasn't got a job. He's got about 50.

He's a celebrated DJ, broadcaster, label owner, producer and festival promoter who does a spot of music supervision and film score composition on the side.

Rob might have got an ear-bashing for his sartorial choices as a teen, but today the Sunday Best pioneer is thankful that his dad was responsible for his musical grounding.

"I played the trombone in my father's brass band for 12 years, which was great," he tells The Independent Echo.

"I was literally playing in brass band concerts during the days, then going to Pixies gig in the evenings. "I love the fact my dad made me, my brother and my sister do it. It sounds stupid now but it gave me my musical education."

It's been 20 years since Da Bank's Sunday Best was launched as a club night at The Tea Rooms in Clapham, South London.

Starting out as a member of the bar staff who dabbled on the decks, Rob's path to music biz prominence was set when a now-AWOL friend, Ben, cemented his DJ name.

"I really wish it was a cooler story," says the man lesser-known as Robert Gorham.

"Rob The Bank. That's literally how it all started – as a slightly terrible pun."

Da Bank went on to become a respected DJ on BBC Radio 1, schooled under John Peel, before jumping ship for 6Music last year.

As a festival promoter, he has built Bestival up to create the only real independent rival to Glastonbury in the UK market. (Rob credits his wife, Josie, with being the "creative visionary" behind Bestival's uniquely playful look and feel.)

There's also Camp Bestival in Dorset each July, plus a new two-day live event, Common People, in Southampton – recently headlined by Fatboy Slim and Grace Jones.

But more than anything, The Independent Echo is here to talk about Sunday Best Recordings – the record label Rob set up all the way back in 1997.

And to do that, we need to bring in Sarah Bolshi.

Rob almost entirely credits Sarah with bringing his label business to a point of financial security.

And in terms of A&R, the duo are clearly a killer combination: over the course of 18 years, they have signed acclaimed artists such as Valerie June, Kitty, Daisy & Lewis, Lucky Elephant and Dan Le Sac vs. Scroobius Pip, forging Sunday Best's reputation as a diverse music house with exceptional taste.

Then there's those records by none other than David Lynch. We'll come on to those in good time.

[PIAS]'s Kenny Gates sat down with Rob and Sarah to get a feel for a multi-functional business with a love for extraordinary creative talent…

Sunday Best is many things to many people, but how did it become a label?

Rob: I was running my little club night called Sunday Best, coming across artists that didn't have a label and thought it would be good to put out a little compilation.

Someone suggested I should talk to Sarah, who was running Bolshi Records [under Jazz Summers] at the time. Basically, Sarah knew what she was doing and I didn't!

She helped me put out the compilation and we started Sunday Best Recordings there and then in 1997.

Sarah has pretty much run the label from day one. I literally just do some A&R and the pretty bits on top

David Lynch

– although recently Sarah was the one who spotted Valerie June.

Sarah: I started out at Phonogram, went to Warner, and then to Big Life – working with Jazz Summers who's been a massive influence on me. I started Bolshi Records as a breakbeat label. We put out 12-inches.

Then Big Life [the label] sadly went into administration in 1999 and Rob and I started working together. With Ben [Turner, the third partner in Sunday Best] in the mix as well, we became a really strong force.

Over the past 13 years in particular, working with [PIAS], we've really built up a catalogue at Sunday Best – we've put out nearly 200 singles and 70 albums.

Are your festival and record labels run independent of one another?

Rob: Kind of. I started the club, which turned into Sunday Best Recordings and then into Bestival.

It's all tied in – there's a Sunday Best shop at Bestival, nearly all of our [recorded] artists play at Bestival or Camp Bestival.

Now we've got the new Bestival show in Toronto and Common People too.

Why did you start Sunday Best in the first place?

Rob: In 1995 in the club scene in England and Europe, there was a lot of trance and techno – very heavy parties – and then typically there was the ambient chillout room. I wanted to morph the two things.

You'd go to a club and it was a very dark, banging space with loud music, but there was nothing funky, nothing leftfield. That's where Sunday Best came from. It's very freestyle, anything goes.

That's my philosophy on the radio, it doesn't matter if it's heavy metal or classical, and it's the same for Bestival and for the label.

When you look at 4AD or Bella Union, you know, 'Oh that's a 4AD or Bella Union record.' But I'm proud of how diverse Sunday Best has been, and I hope 'Sunday Best people' who've bought lots of our records over the years can see there's a thread between them.

"I said to Sarah about ten years ago: 'It's time to wind this up.' And she said: 'No no no!'"

Why is it important to you to run a festival as an independent?

Rob: Sunday Best is 100% independent, and it's the same for Bestival. We don't answer to anyone, which is kind of nice. I think that's really crucial.

We decide what the artwork is for the records; we decide if we should book The Cure, Amy Winehouse, Stevie Wonder, Elton John. We know what works.

It's nice to have no ties. The downside of that is that it's a struggle. The festival and the label have been through very hard financial times and I'm happy to say that with the label particularly, under Sarah's guidance, I'm very optimistic that we'll carry on our upwards trajectory over the next five years.

I started the label as a complete hobby and if it had folded after five releases I'd have been fairly happy.

I remember saying to Sarah about ten years ago, maybe it's time to wind this up. And she said: 'No, no, no, no, no!'

Sarah: It's tough when you're an independent. We fund ourselves. You invest with passion in your releases. Every release is the same for us; it's a priority.

We put as much love and investment – emotional and monetary – into everything we do. But with a strong catalogue now, we're in a good space.

It's not a hobby anymore, it's a proper going concern.

Rob: Some of Sarah's time is certainly spent looking at the books. People who think those of us running festivals are making millions are wrong. It's a really heavy financial risk.

I can't believe we've sold 150,000 worldwide of the first Kitty, Daisy and Lewis album, it blows me away.

It's a bit like Bestival, we started at 4,000 people – now we're at 55,000 people.

In the festival world, do you perceive the Live Nations and AEGs as the 'majors'?

Rob: It's an exact mirror image. The AEGs and Live Nations are buying up more and more of the independents, just like the major record companies did.

But we're all glass half-full people; I love the competitiveness of the festival market.

There's maybe 700 or 800 festivals now in the UK, and every year it's a fight.

With Bestival, if we don't sell 50,000 tickets, we'll go bankrupt within two months. With Sunday Best it's not like that – if the new Kitty, Daisy and Lewis album only sells 20,000, we'll keep ticking over. The festival market is definitely more stressful.

Are you frustrated by the BBC's coverage of Glastonbury – it doesn't seem to really cover other festivals?

Rob: I've got two hats on here because I was a Radio 1 DJ for 12 years, and I still am with 6Music; I think their coverage of festivals is great.

But on the other hand, yes, I started the Association of Independent Festivals about six years ago and that now has 55,000 members; those guys are crying out for the BBC to come and film their festival, even just five minutes.

I think the coverage of Glastonbury is incredible, but I feel the BBC needs to widen its scope. Reading & Leeds – do we really need to see that every year?

You recently brought the Bestival brand into Canada in Toronto. What's the grand plan?

Rob: I don't have grand plans – I have happy accidents! Sunday Best Recordings, meeting Sarah, that was a happy accident.

We've spent 12 years turning down offers to do festivals in other parts of the world – China, South America, France – and then finally SFX presented us a site in Canada and stepped in as our partners.

"Going to meet David Lynch in Paris and him saying he was up for doing a record - that was a high point."

They're obviously a huge conglomerate who run a lot of festivals. In a way that's not my ethos, but they have the best sites and they have bought up a lot of it. In North America, they're the guys to work with.

Toronto was a great success – it could have fallen flat on its face but they loved it. They want to do some more shows with us. But we don't sit in a board room saying: 'Let's go into this country or that country.' It's more organic.

You don't do Powerpoint presentations about your next five years?

Rob: Ha! No! I'd love to be that organised. But it's more a bit of email, bit of phone and hanging out as friends.

Kitty, Daisy & Lewis

With the label about eight years ago, I kind of owned it so just said: 'Hey, let's split this.'

So we split it three ways [between Rob, Sarah and Ben]. Same with the publishing.

What was the first ever live show you attended?

Sarah: Mine was New Order in Hemel Hempstead when I was 14. My boyfriend took me. I still love New Order so I'm quite happy with that one!

Rob: I don't know if it was the first one, but the Pixies at Portsmouth Guildhall when I was 15 – I went in my school uniform.

I remember turning up outside backstage and Black Francis and Kim Deal got out of the tour van – I was shouting, "Kim, Kim!" She turned round and gave me a little wave.

That was a big deal for 15-year-old me. I was listening to Pixies, Mudhoney, Sonic Youth…

When you see the people going mad, crying with joy at Bestival, is that important to you?

Rob: Yes. It's not about booking huge headliners or a money thing.
I had quite a conservative, sheltered upbringing. I played in my dad's brass band. Brass bands and sailing, that was my youth – there was no rock and roll.

When I was about 15 I started throwing beach parties. That was my thing.

I'd make little flyers, take down some cassettes that I'd made, steal some of the booze from my parent's cabinet. Maybe it was my way of being popular; I wasn't a comedian or great at playing guitar or anything. I was the party guy.

What's been the most exciting moment of the label, and the lowest moment?

Rob: For me, going to meet David Lynch in Paris and him saying he was up for doing a record with us was a real high point.
Sarah: A high point's hard for me to say. It always genuinely feels like a privilege to be doing what I'm doing. There's always low points when you're worrying about money.

Rob: We've had mad things like Kitty, Daisy & Lewis supporting Coldplay in the States. Musically, Coldplay aren't really our thing, but that was pretty amazing. Valerie June on Jools Holland is another one.

Right then, how do you come to sign David Lynch?

Rob: We heard Jason Bentley play a record and we thought it was Underworld – Ben sent it to me.

Then somehow we found out it was David Lynch. So we got in touch with his people, who set up a meeting at Café De Flore in Paris.

We got on the Eurostar at 11am on a Tuesday, got out a taxi the other side and could see David Lynch smoking an American Spirit cigarette with his quiff and his white shirt. Just… fucking David Lynch, just sat there, waiting to meet us.

It was surreal and nerve-wracking, but he was lovely and we got on.

We went to his home in Hollywood, had lunch and talked about music. He's a complete legend and I genuinely love his records.

Do you see yourselves as being romantics?

Sarah: I am, definitely. Romance comes with passion.

Rob: That's a good question. I think Sarah is! You can see it in the music she loves. Perhaps I'm more of a dreamer, or an unfulfilled artist.

All of my friends and my wife are video artists or graphic artists or installation artists or painters. I supposed I'm also a bit of an unfulfilled musician; if I could turn back the clock 20 years I so wish I'd have continued playing the guitar or the piano.

I went to see Fleetwood Mac recently and Lindsey Buckingham had me in tears – I'd never seen anyone play guitar so well. It's the same to watch Prince or Stevie Wonder play the piano.

Rob, do you miss Radio 1?

Rob: I miss the old days of Radio 1. I don't want to sound like an old curmudgeon. My peak time at Radio 1 was when John Peel was upstairs; we were in the studio playing vinyl, mixing live. It was very exciting.

Don't get me wrong, I love the new Radio 1 studios, it's all gone digital – you just press a button and it all happens. But I like getting involved, a bit of DIY. Radio 1 is the best radio station in the world, no doubt. It's the place to be if you're 18 to 24. But I'm 42!

What about the BBC job cuts - has that hit it hard?

Rob: I think it's lost a bit of its soul, but that's me as a 42 year old who was there for 12 years speaking. They're going in the direction the BBC Trust is telling them to; they want to lose the festival dads.

Who are your heroes in the music business? Who inspired you?

Rob: Personally, John Peel and Michael Eavis. John Peel I listened to from when I was 14 or 15. He turned me on to The Prodigy, Public Enemy, The Pixies, The Fall and so much other stuff. I was lucky enough to work with him at Radio 1.

Then I had that weird thing where he died and I sat in and did his shows. It was incredibly surreal but an amazing learning experience. With Michael Eavis, I went to Glastonbury when I was 18 with Josie – then my girlfriend, now my wife.

We've been to Glastonbury 22 times every year together. It's like our pilgrimage. It's the best festival in the world and Michael, Emily and their family are very inspirational.

Sarah: Work-wise, I was given so much opportunity by Jazz [Summers]. He

just said: 'Start your own label,' so I called it Bolshi Records.

I learnt so much – A&R, legal, promo, tour managing… and that was all when I was 25. As a woman back in the day, there wasn't really anyone else doing that. That experience couldn't be more valuable to me now.

[Jazz Summers sadly died after this interview was conducted, aged 71. Sarah has since called him "a real music man.. a tough guy but truly inspirational".]

What was the view of your parents when you told them you were getting into the music industry?

Sarah: Nothing. I got chucked out when I was 17! My dad didn't like any music that was cool. I didn't have an older brother or sister, so I made my own way.

Rob: My dad was in to Beethoven, and a tiny bit of The Beatles and Mamas and the Papas – there were 30 records in the house and 28 of them were classical.

Which was great in a way. My dad's a doctor, and my sister and brother are much more scientific people than me.

I don't know why I went off in this direction, but my dad was telling me when I was 18 that I wouldn't get a job unless I cut my hair – so I was very pleased when Radio 1 signed me up and I could go fuck you, I'm on the radio!
I went off on a rebellious streak for some reason and it's taken me this far.

Are your parents proud of you now?

Rob: Yes, very. They call me 'Rob Da Bank' as a family joke; my mum gets all the newspaper clippings with my name in them.

Sarah: I lost my dad when I was 15, just after I got suspended from school. So he wasn't very proud of me then… I wish he had seen what I've achieved.

When you're naughty and you've got that reputation at school, you think you're not going to do anything with your life.

My headteacher used to say exactly that to me. It's not something your parents want to hear.

My mum died about five years ago, and I think she was quite happy that it all turned out okay for the black sheep.

Rob: Well I'd be very proud of Sarah if I was her father. She's totally made Sunday Best Recordings happen. Without her it would have released five or ten records.

If you talk to Richard Russell or Martin Mills, they'll tell you that there so many tempting opportunities where you could have given up.

You just need that persistence, focus and energy before you get that breakthrough, and it takes years.

Sarah's got it, thank God.

“THE MAJORS WERE SO ARROGANT AND CONDESCENDING WHEN WE STARTED MUTE. I THOUGHT: ‘FUCK YOU.’”

DANIEL MILLER
ON HOW HE WAS DETERMINED TO MAKE MUTE A SUCCESS

What do you see when you look at Daniel Miller?

Some of you will recognise a pioneering artist and producer, one whose release of T.V.O.D and Warm Leatherette as The Normal in 1978 forever influenced the appreciation of sophisticated electronic music.

Others might see a record label hero; an exec who's consistently brought eclectic and thrilling artists to the fore since founding Mute almost 40 years ago – from Depeche Mode to Moby, Erasure, Goldfrapp, Wire, Yazoo, Swans and Cold Specks.

You might also have reasonable cause to paint Daniel as a techno DJ, a canny entrepreneur and a skilled photographer.

Above all of this, though, what [PIAS] founder Kenny Gates sees in Daniel boils down to one important word.

Loyalty.

A huge fan of the Mute label for years, Kenny eventually convinced Daniel to partner with [PIAS]. The two companies are still working together, in more territories around the world than ever before.

But that doesn't tell the full story.

In 2002, Daniel Miller made the controversial move to sell Mute Records to EMI.

As part of the deal, EMI requested that Daniel move all of Mute's distribution and licensing relationships over to its mothership.

He refused, keeping a vital chunk of business within the independent music network for years to come – and risking the disdain of the men holding the cheques that were about to rescue his enterprise.

Kenny has never forgotten it.

Neither, we suspect, have Mute's numerous other independent partners around the world.

Loyalty.

As Kenny discovers in The Independent Echo's extensive interview below, Daniel Miller can't help it; it's an innate value, for better or worse, he's had since he was a boy.

And thank goodness for that.

Loyal. Likable. Legend.

Daniel, where did you go to school?

I went to King Alfred's School in North London from 4-18 years old.

At the time it was regarded as a progressive school. This was 1955-1969.

There were a number of unusual things about it for the time: there were no school uniforms, it was mixed, it wasn't purely academic – they tried to play to your strengths – and it had an arts background, a lot of people in the creative industries went there.

It taught you to be a bit more self-sufficient than a normal school, which just puts you on the path of the curriculum.

How would you describe yourself as a boy?

I definitely had a sense of wanting to do things differently. I was lazy. I was really bad at school in an academic sense. I was overweight but I was pretty funny.

We did quite a lot of comedy at school – I'd love to write comedy for a living if I was any good at it. There were a lot of things I really enjoyed but was really bad at like sports, science and playing music.

I was my own person; I am an only child. My parents were refugees from Europe, from Hitler.

They were both based in Vienna, both actors, but they actually met in London. So I had a pretty liberal upbringing, and the school emphasised that. My boundaries were quite broad.

I was besotted with music from an early age. And then when I was about 12, The Beatles and the whole British boom came out; all of a sudden everyone was in a band in school. I was transfixed by it. I was in a band, the worst band, but it was a lot of fun.

All bad musicians gravitated towards each other. Paul Kossoff was in my class at school – an amazing guitarist who went on to play in Free. He tried to teach me to play guitar; even he failed. Another great musician in my class was Nick Potter, who went on to play in Van Der Graaf Generator (pictured).

Did you write comedy?

Me and three other friends wrote it and performed it around school – it was impersonations of teachers. Taking the piss, basically.

We were really big fans of a show on the radio called I'm Sorry, I'll Read That Again. It featured people like John Cleese, Graeme Garden and Graham Chapman. One day we said: 'Why don't we send our scripts to John Cleese?'

He wasn't mega-famous at that time, – We looked him up in the telephone directory and called him. He said: 'Of course, send me them.' So we did, and he said: 'These are really good, come and have a meeting.'

We were 16 or 17 at the time. We went to see him; he was really friendly and gave us some tips and was very supportive. Then there was this new programme, which nobody had heard of at the time, called Monty Python's Flying Circus.

They pre-recorded the first five episodes. He invited us to one of the recordings – it was the episode with the famous 'nudge nudge' sketch. None of it had been broadcast. We went backstage and met all the guys. It was amazing, really.

After school, my passion was music and my second passion was film. I went to art school in Guildford and did a three-year course in film and TV. It was terrible most of the time. I started there in September 1969. I went for my interview that spring and met all the staff.

During that summer there was a big student uprising in the college. The staff on the course supported the students, and all got fired. So by the time we turned up, it was a completely different staff and

Depeche Mode

curriculum to the one we signed up to. So we went on strike.

Somehow I became a bit of a spokesman – I learnt quite a lot about politics at that time. The college had a little sound studio with three ¼-inch tape recorders in it, and we used to do experiments with tape loops and things like that.

We'd also have guest lecturers; one was Ron Geesin a poet and sound artist who'd just worked with Pink Floyd, and he'd just bought a synthesiser – an EMS SYNTHI A, basically the same thing Brian Eno used in Roxy Music but in a suitcase. That was my first hands-on experience with a synthesiser and it blew my mind. That was around 1970.

Let's jump to the late seventies: why did you start a label?

Punk was happening, and the whole DIY, release your own records thing was in bloom. Punk rock was great in some senses: it cleared away a lot of shit, but musically I found it quite conservative.

A lot of people quickly moved on to other things. So it was a combination of timing in terms of punk the DIY movement and relatively cheap synthesisers on the market. I felt it was my time – I was driven to make some electronic music.

I bought a second-hand synthesiser – a Korg 700S. I was working as an assistant film editor at ATV at the time. I came up with a couple of tunes, literally in my bedroom. People think of bedroom recordings as a modern, laptop invention. It wasn't.

There were loads of people recording in their bedroom in the mid-Seventies. I read about how to put out a single; it was an article by a group called The Desperate Bicycles who pressed their own single and distributed it by bicycle. I knew I'd have to make 500 copies, but I didn't think I'd sell any.

So this all happened in 1977?

Yes and early '78. I got the test pressings and thought I'd see if any shops were interested. The pressing

Moby

plant was in East London, so the first shop I came to was Small Wonder Records – a famous independent shop and label at the time.

I played the single to Pete from Small and he said: 'Yeah, not too bad. I'll take ten." Then I went to the Rough Trade shop and talked to Judith who was working in the shop. When I asked her if she'd be interested in the record, she said, I'll go and see Geoff [Travis], who was working in the back.

He and Richard Scott, his business partner, listened to it in the shop, in front of all these super-cool people. I was standing there so embarrassed. I was thinking: 'They don't like it.'

When it finished they said: 'We love it, we'd like to do a distribution deal for you. How many are you going to press?'

I said 500 and they said, no, you've got to do at least 2,000. They lent me the money to press the extra records. Jane Suck at Sounds Magazine got hold of a test pressing, reviewed it and made it 'Single Of The Century'. I couldn't fucking believe it. It then got other good reviews and John Peel played it.

Did you pay yourself royalties?

I ripped myself off! I was not Kobalt: I was not very transparent. The 2,000 sold out very quickly.

I bought one...

Well I'll drink to that. I think maybe it did 10 – 15,000 in the first few months.

College and alternative radio started playing it in America; I didn't even know what alternative radio was – I didn't even know what distribution was!

It was very weird for me as I had no expectations.

It was one of the first post-punk electronic singles; it came at the same time as others like Human League, Cabaret Voltaire, the first Throbbing Gristle single…

I thought I'd bought this cool underground record. It turns out you were selling loads!

[Laughs] I wasn't selling that many.

If you got in the Top 75 in those days, overnight you'd sell 100,000 records. Woolworths would buy it automatically, along with all the jukeboxes. That didn't happen.

So selling 15,000 was a successful underground record.

Were you still living with your parents?

My father had passed away, but I was staying at my mother's place at the time.

How did she feel about it – didn't she want you to be a doctor or a lawyer?

No, she was totally encouraging. She wanted me to do what I want to do – whatever I had a passion for. She did that with her own life.

By 1960s London standards, my parents were relatively bohemian. They weren't hippies though!

My father was an actor and had his own German-speaking theatre for refugees during the war. He was an indie! I got a bit of both of them.

"I was working in a cutting room, and I kept seeing this word 'mute' everywhere."

So what came next?

I was helping out at Rough Trade doing a bit of promotion work.

I was in a position where I had to make a decision: I was getting demo tapes, which I didn't really like that much and I didn't want to start a label.

Then I was introduced to Fad Gadget [Frank Tovey] by a guy called Edwin Pouncey – the NME punk cartoonist who went under the name of Savage Pencil.

It was the first thing I'd heard that I'd really liked. Then I met Frank, who was Fad Gadget, and we got on really well.

We shared a similar vision and I said: 'Let's make a single.' That really was the beginning of Mute Records as a label, as opposed to just my own thing.

Why call it Mute?

I had a list of 100 names and it was on there.

The idea of Mute came from film. When you shoot film, you normally shoot it with sound. When you shoot it without sound, it's called 'mute'.

Because I was working in a cutting room, an editing room, I saw this word Mute everywhere. I liked it.

How did you meet Depeche Mode?

Fad Gadget's single came out in 1979 and we started working with a couple of other artists – D.A.F, significantly, which was the first album release on Mute.

Fad Gadget made our second album, and he was promoting it doing gigs around London. He was booked to play The Bridge House in Canning Town.

The guy who booked it, Terry Murphy, was a real East End guy, who liked to support East End musicians; he knew Frank's father, who was a big East End figure working in Smithfield's market.

Terry booked Depeche Mode to support because they were from Basildon, Essex, which was an East End overspill town. I saw them during the soundcheck and they looked really dodgy, in homemade New Romantic clothes. They also looked really young.

They had three little synths supported on beer crates, and the lead singer had a light that he shone

upwards to make himself look gothic. But when they came on stage that night, I watched the first song and just thought: 'What?! That's fucking incredible! What the hell's that? I'm sure it will go downhill from here.'

But it didn't – it just got better and better.

Most of the songs they played in their 30-minute set ended up on the first album. I couldn't believe what I'd heard; great songs, unbelievably well-arranged. I went backstage and said: 'Hi, I'm Daniel from Mute. I really enjoyed it.'

They were being all cool, but said: 'We're playing here again next week supporting someone else.' So I told them I'd come down. I took a couple of people with me including NON – Boyd Rice – who was a big pop fan, and my first employee, Hildi Svengard.

They both said: 'Daniel, you've got to do this.' I went back and said to the band: 'Do you fancy doing a single?' They said yes, and it was Dreaming Of Me.

You were early to sign them...

I remember, typical of the British press, that there was an article [on the next wave of supposed New Romantics]. Depeche did a gig at The Hope & Anchor in Islington: Roger Ames came down, so did Chris Briggs – all these major label A&Rs were there, all trying to sign the band.

At the end of the gig, I went back stage and all these people were already in the dressing room saying: 'Mute's a nice little label, but they'll never get you any success. There's only two people working for it.'

The band just said: 'Yeah, but we're going to stick with them for the moment, see how it goes.'

They put their trust in me and I wanted to return that trust by doing the best that we could do. I was determined to make it a success… I was convinced we could do it on our own. The majors were so arrogant and condescending, I thought: 'Fuck you.'

The band were offered quite big advances [which they turned down to stay with Mute]. We didn't have a contract, no lawyers, no managers: we sold a fuck of a lot of records and they made a good amount of money without any of them.

Do you remember the first time it crossed your mind that what you were doing was meaningful - that it was changing culture and people's lives?

You have to remember that in the early '70s electronic music was still elitist – people couldn't engage with making the music because everything cost a fortune.

I was a huge electronic music fan though, and in my head electronic music was the ultimate punk music especially as much cheaper synths came on the market – you didn't even need to learn three chords.

So right from the beginning I wanted to communicate that electronic music could be homemade, anti-elitist – that was the message I was sending out when I released that first single and I'd like to think that I went some way to achieving that.

What's the biggest-selling Mute album of all time?

It must be Violator. That sold around 10m or 11m.

[Moby's] Play worldwide was the same, but we didn't have the rights for north America.

Have you ever dropped an artist? If so, why?

Of course, yes. Loads! The idea we

Cold Specks

didn't drop artists was a myth that was around Mute in the '80s or '90s.

If I feel that I'm more excited by an artist than they are about themselves, that's a reason to drop an artist.

There was a phase where we dropped a lot of artists, and it was because

"There's such a clear difference between us and the majors, especially now..."

they'd run out of steam; it wasn't to do with money – it was creative reasons.

They tended to be relieved, actually – they felt obligated to make records but weren't enjoying or making very good music.

I've heard you say there are no priority artists at Mute. Can you explain?

Yes. With every record, whether you think it's going to sell a thousand or a million, you should do the very best possible job to ensure that it attains those targets.

Of course an artist that's going to sell a lot of records takes up a lot of time.

But I hate the word 'priority'. Why would you release a record and not work it to its full potential? That doesn't make any sense to me.

What makes Mute different from other labels?

I think Mute has to be different from other labels.

Let's put the majors to one side because there's such a clear difference between us and them: especially now, the majors are very focused on pop. That's not a criticism, that's a fact. Everything's very track-driven these days.

I love pop, but not in the conventional sense. Majors are very numbers-driven, sometimes only numbers-driven. I'm not criticising the people who work there, but the natural corporate structure is all about numbers.

Mute is about working with really great artists, particular artists. I think we have our own character because of the artists we choose to work with and the way we work with them.

I'm a fan of Warp, Domino and many

others, and they're all different. Independent labels like that still have their own character – they're not homogenised.

Who can honestly tell the difference between Universal, Sony and Warner?

Not many other labels have our breadth of roster. Our understanding of artists as a team is very good. We're not fashion-driven. And we're really, really nice people. I think we're even nicer than [PIAS].

You might be right. You still seem to really enjoy what you do. You recently turned to me in a moment of passion about Mute and said: 'I love it!' It seemed sincere.

I have a personal rule: so long as I like more than 50% of what I'm doing, I'm really, really happy.

The reality is there's a lot of shit you have to deal with on a daily basis.

But if I think things are moving forward with the company and our artists, I feel very lucky.

You're a leader, a boss of a label. Have you felt the loneliness we all feel in that position? How do you deal with it?

Sometimes, yes. Of course. There were moments in the history of Mute, especially when we sold to EMI. I remember the day I signed about 500 fucking contracts…

You feel very responsible: you can blame everyone else or criticise everyone else, but in the end, you're responsible, and you have to deal with it on a personal level.

A good example is Vince Clark. He was in Depeche Mode and had huge success very quickly. Then he was in Yazoo and had instant success. Then he did Erasure [first record], and it was a flop.

From the age of 18 to 24 or something, he couldn't put a foot wrong. And for whatever reason, Erasure started really badly.

We questioned it together, even getting to the point of saying, 'Maybe you should go to another label.' I felt an incredible weight of responsibility – firstly because it was a great record, but also because Vince had been incredible loyal to me.

I hate it when a record doesn't do as well as it should do.

So why did you sell to EMI?

Even though we still had Depeche and Erasure, we had some years in the mid-to-late Nineties which were very poor, very light.

Depeche were making records less frequently, Erasure's sales had started to go down. It was the Britpop era, which I had no interest in at all. Britpop represented everything I hated – the antithesis to why I started Mute; it was very retrograde, non-progressive yet all-pervasive, especially in the mainstream media.

Inevitably, we had a few financial issues. We'd always worked with individual distributors around the world – [PIAS] in Benelux, Virgin in France etc. – and I still think that's the best way of doing things. It allows you to pick the best people in each country.

But I needed some cash. I thought maybe if I did a worldwide distribution deal I could get more money. Mute was not very highly regarded in those days – a lot of people felt it was over. I had staff, artists, and I was being offered not-very-good deals.

And then, like the cavalry coming over the hill, we had [Moby's] Play.

Erasure

A lot of people believed in Play – including you, Kenny – before it was a hit. I totally believed, obviously. Yet we had released three singles and nothing was really going on.

Then we released a fourth single, having asked what I should have asked myself on day one: 'What's my favourite track?' Not 'what is the obvious single?' It was Why Does My Heart Feel So Bad.

It exploded. All of a sudden, I was regarded as a 'genius' again. I was 'past it' for a long time before that, of course, but that's the music business for you.

Emmanuel De Buretel, who I'd known since the beginning of Mute and who was running EMI Continental Europe, had always wanted to buy Mute. I thought: 'Okay, we just sold 8m records, we're in a really strong position. Do I really want to go through all of that shit again?'

So I gave Emmanuel a list of what I wanted; it was less about money, although that was on there, and more about creative control. He said yes to all of them. Plus he was starting an alternative distribution system and wanted to make it global with Mute as the lead label.

Just before we were about to sign the deal, Emmanuel's boss Ken Berry – who'd I'd known for years – was fired. Literally as I was about to put pen to paper, Emmanuel got a new boss, Alain Levy, who came from a very different world.

He signed off on the Mute deal though, no problem, but things had changed.

We were still based on Harrow Road in that crazy building. And it was all fine. But Ken Berry had been a bit of a mentor to Emmanuel. After he went, there was tension between Emmanuel and Levy. Eventually, it got too much and they parted company – Emmanuel left EMI.

Levy was still treating me very properly at that point. He let me decide who I reported to.

I definitely didn't want to be reporting into the UK, so I said I'd stay with Continental Europe – where JF [Jean Francois Cecillon] took over from Emmanuel.

New Order

Let's say we came from two different worlds: he's an Arsenal fan, I'm a Chelsea fan… Then EMI had their own problems, and we got caught up in it.

Do you regret it?

No. I can't possibly regret it. It was the right thing to do at the time, it gave Mute stability and for quite a few years we had real autonomy.

It was an interesting experience, but in the end it became impossible. Creatively, EMI never questioned what I signed – they kept their word. The problem was international – which was always very important to me.

I felt that you couldn't just break artists in the UK, you have to do it over a number of territories for them to have longevity.

That became impossible at EMI. They wouldn't release anything internationally unless it had become a hit in the UK. It wasn't that they wouldn't let me sign anything, it was that I didn't want to sign anything. The kind of artists I wanted to sign wouldn't survive in that system. So I decided to leave and start again.

Are you aware that what you've achieved with Mute is extraordinary?

Thank you, but I don't think of it that way. I live in the moment. I don't think about the past too much: that only really happens when I'm at a gig and someone comes up to me and says, 'I grew up with your music.'

Obviously, that means a lot to me. I'm proud of it.

Are there values at Mute as a company?

In a very broad sense. They are so built into our DNA we don't even think of them. It's not like [affects American accent]: 'The core values of our operation are creatively, transparency, sustainability and diversity." I've never had to think like that, thank God.

Have you ever felt betrayed professionally?

Once or twice. Betrayal gives me inspiration, though.

'Betrayed' is a really big word, so I'll say 'let down' – this is the first time I felt really let down: When D.A.F came to Mute, they slept on my floor, I took care of them, basically we were all broke.

Their album was the first on Mute so it had a very special meaning to me and I did everything I could for them. And then they left to go to Virgin.
Of course I was really pissed off. I remember it really clearly: I always

got on best with Robert Gorl, the drummer. I was sitting in my car with him at the time they decided to leave and he played me some tracks from the forthcoming album – the one that wasn't going to be on Mute.

I thought, 'Fuck, that's so great.' And I played him some Depeche stuff – we had just started working with them – and he went, 'Fuck, that's so great.'

It was a weird moment but it was inspiring too. I realised I didn't ever want it to happen again.

Are there any people in the business who stand out as real mentors or inspirations to you?

Seymour Stein, who I got to know really early on. He licensed TVOD, and was the first American music person I met. His energy and spirit were amazing, and obviously I loved the bands he signed.

I still feel close to him today. We hang out and get on. There's been different people along the way – Rod Buckle from Sonet at the beginning, certainly.

Without Rough Trade's enthusiasm and confidence at the beginning, things could have been very different. But once Mute got going and Rough Trade had huge success, we were all caught up in our own chaotic work and didn't really have such a close relationship with Geoff.

I never thought of the other independents – Factory, 4AD, Rough Trade, Cherry Red – as competitors. I felt we were collaborators working together to build something special. That's still the case, really.

What are your ambitions for the next decade?

Stay alive and keep doing what I'm doing now. Keep being innovative and work with great artists, whether they sell a thousand records or a million records.

Here's the question I ask everyone: Are you a romantic?

In what sense? I'm reasonably good at buying flowers for my girlfriend if that's what you mean! I wouldn't describe myself as a romantic – a dreamer, maybe. It depends on your perspective.

Before you did the EMI deal, you did deals with your individual licensees - including [PIAS] and others around the world. It cost you serious money but it looked after us. Are you aware that demonstrated supernatural loyalty?

No it didn't, not really. We're working in a very human business.

Music is emotional. I can't separate the human from the business side.

If I like people we work with who do a good job for me and my artists, I can't, you know…

Well I'm afraid that's what I call a romantic, Daniel…

Okay. So long as you don't call me a new romantic, we'll be just fine.

Do you remember when [PIAS] first approached you to be your licensee? What did you think of us?

Well I don't remember a specific time; I just remember a constant barrage of requests. I thought you were arms dealers, with a cover of the music industry. No, I'm joking. I remember a period of time when you hassled me a lot but we were already licensed elsewhere…

That bloody loyalty again!

Yes, you had to break it – but I'm very happy you did.

"I WAS IN SHOCK FOR ABOUT A WEEK AFTER WE SIGNED THE PRODIGY. I COULDN'T PROCESS IT."

PURE GOLD

MARTIN GOLDSCHMIDT ON COOKING VINYL'S UNPLANNED SUCCESS

Martin Goldschmidt was busying fighting Margaret Thatcher when he accidentally fell into the music business.

The Cooking Vinyl boss was organising anti-nuclear concerts around the UK in the early '80s when one particularly ferocious anarcho-punk act, The Poison Girls, asked him to manage them.

"I looked every bit like a political activist," he tells The Independent Echo.

"They bought me my first suit because they thought I needed to look more like a manager – this from an anarchist punk band!"

Today, Goldschmidt stands as one of the figureheads of the global independent label community, having built up Cooking Vinyl to legendary status over the past 29 years.

The British indie is having a rather enjoyable 2015, too, banking a No.1 album both in the UK (The Prodigy, The Day Is My Enemy) and Australia (Parkway Drive's IRE – CV's first ever chart-topper in Oz).

Below, [PIAS]'s Kenny Gates asked Martin about the genesis of CV, the growth of the company and his thoughts on key industry issues…

Where did your career as a label boss all start?

Cooking Vinyl started in 1986, but I started my own label Forward Sounds International in 1980. I kind of fell into it! The first thing Forward Sounds put out was a benefit album for the anti-nuclear movement.

In 1982 I was unofficially/unpaid managing a band – Akimbo – and no-one would put their music out so I put it out myself. That was my first "commercial" release. Rough Trade was the distribution company.

In 1984 I did a benefit album for the miners, and in 1985 releases by Rory McLeod, Poison Girls, and Omega Tribe.

Was there a turning point where you said: 'Okay, I'm going to make this my business and my life.'

I was a political activist. I never really thought of having a career – I never thought in those terms, my agenda was revolution.

I didn't understand the concept of profit when we started Cooking Vinyl. I was used to doing tours and making sure I could pay my bills. I never tried to make any money!

Pete and I borrowed £8000 to start the label. He took a small wage and I got a day job as a booking agent. I didn't take any money from Cooking Vinyl for the first five years.

Then we got really lucky with the Michelle Shocked record. All of a

sudden we had all this money coming in – that was a shock.

That was The Texas Campfire Tapes?

Yeah. We decided to set up the label, and before we started working, Pete went away on holiday to Texas, to this folk festival.

He bumped into Michelle, who couldn't get a gig – she was just hanging out. The two of them were sitting on a log by the campfire and he made a recording of her.

The quality was pretty bad, it was on a Walkman, and the batteries had run down so her voice sounded much higher than it really was. He came back and played it.

We thought: 'This is pretty different. Shall we put it out?'

He played it to [radio DJ] Andy Kershaw, who quite liked it, and so we thought let's release it.

Marilyn Manson

We got in touch with Michelle and she said we could. I remember writing down the titles of the songs while speaking to her on the phone; she was living in New York, in a squat. We got to track 7 and she said: 'Who Cares?' But we didn't realise she was being flippant, so that's what it was called on the sleeve. It is called Ghost Town.

We bought her over to tour. She lived in my council flat for 6 months or so. I was booking her gigs as an agent and after a bit, she asked me to be her manager.

I didn't want to be, as it felt far too much to be her manager, label and booking agent.

It was too early for a 360 deal!

It was too much. But she said she'd give up if I didn't do it, so I took it on.

The Campfire Tapes went mental, really successful. Then after that we got a record deal with Polygram and did the most amazing artist friendly deal with them: she didn't want to take an advance.

They were in shock; they'd never had an artist say that to them. She asked for her rights back instead, so they did a license deal for no advance. In the end, they gave her $50,000 to make the album.

We did the album, put it out, she really wanted to go with Anchorage as the single – it went on the radio all round the world and she became incredibly successful.

The album sold three quarters of a million copies, which for a folk artist is pretty amazing.

Did you think: 'Now we're a proper label'?

No, we just kept working with artists we loved. We did The Mekons, who

were good friends of mine, and then The Cowboy Junkies' Trinity Session – which went stupid, sold loads and broke the band.
Again, we didn't understand deals; we had a three-year contract on that Cowboy Junkies album, which was pretty stupid. They were bad deals for us, really good for the artists!

We also thought it was easy: we've done these records, they've been massive, we've got the golden touch.

But by 1989 we'd put out quite a few that hadn't sold very well; they were records I'm proud of, but we'd spent

"I didn't understand the concept of profit when we started up Cooking Vinyl."

all the money and we got into big financial trouble.
That coincided with Rough Trade going bust.

How much did they owe you?

Not that much – a little under £100,000.

That's a lot of money for 1989.

It was, but the biggest problem was that we had quite a good catalogue that was selling, but we lost all our catalogues sales in shops.

Suddenly, we had no income each month. That really hit us hard.

So Pete and I decided to give up. We were technically bankrupt.

Eventually, I thought about it and changed my mind. I bought Pete out and over five years, paid off all the debts – everyone got every penny. It was really, really hard. And from there, we started to rebuild.

Is it true that you went to the same school as Daniel Miller?

That's true. We didn't know each other at school; there were a lot of artistic people there.

Did your parents encourage you to do what you do today?

No. My dad died when I was 17 and my mum went to live in Australia when I was 10. So when I was 17, I'd lost my dad and didn't really know my mum.

I went over to Australia to meet her, and lived with her for a year, travelling round the country.

I came back to the UK and got very into political activism.

I'd also messed up at school, so I went back to Sixth Form and got my A-Levels, then went off to University.

I take it you weren't a right-wing activist!

No! When I got to college in Wales, it was quite sleepy, but by the time I left it was known as the most extreme [socialist] college in the UK.

If I went down to the admin building, they'd call the police because they were worried what I'd do. They were scared!

We launched two waves of national occupation across colleges in the UK against education cuts and fees. It was a fantastic time with the anti-Nazi league; we arranged 25 coaches to come up to London for the Rock against Racism concerts.

We got really involved in the miner's strike. And then I got really into the anti-nuclear movement.

I'm starting to understand a little bit better your bond with Billy Bragg...

I was managing an anarchist punk band called Poison Girls. He'd just started out. He rang up about doing some gigs with us. We didn't do them in the end, but that was the first time I spoke to him.

I became a big fan. By the time we started the label, he'd become a star.

We did a concert quite early on with the label and he played at it – he was quite an inspiration for us. My inspirations were artists, not people in the business.

As we sit here, which moments over the course of Cooking Vinyl's near-30 years really stand out?

Well Michelle Shocked was a real moment – it was amazing being involved in taking her to being a big international star.

Maybe the biggest was signing The Prodigy a few years ago. I am still in awe of them.

"The major labels saw piracy as a problem. Steve Jobs, Daniel Ek and Google saw an opportunity."

For about a week afterwards, I was in shock. I couldn't process it. It was such a big event. It was really hard. It took two years to persuade them to sign.

They kept winding me up! The only way I could handle it was to keep thinking: 'We're not going to get the deal.' It meant everything to us.

How many Prodigy albums did you sell with Invaders Must Die [2009] in the end?

1.3 million. It was incredible. We didn't expect it, they didn't expect it.

It caught a moment in time. We worked really hard – we have a fantastic team and they killed themselves for that band.

It was so exciting. We all loved it.

It wasn't about all the sales or the income; it was so exciting to be involved and turn the world back onto this band.

I'm jealous. I'm not sure we've ever signed an act direct to [PIAS] who've quite sold a million. It's a mythical milestone!

It's getting harder and harder to do – becoming more of a myth!

After going bust and re-emerging, did you have the loneliness and insecurity of a business owner - someone having to pay for all these people?

It was very lonely. I imagine you've always been really lucky at [PIAS] because you've had Michel [Lambot, co-founder]; someone to encourage you, to shout at when you're really down, to discourage you when you want to do something stupid. To have someone to talk to must be great.

I didn't have that for many, many years until I teamed up with Mike [Chadwick, pictured] about 12 years ago and we started Essential.

Mike was my distributor at Revolver and Vital for about 14 years – we stayed in touch and had a long relationship as friends.

That's made a massive difference

Billy Bragg

to my ability in business. To have someone to stop you doing stupid shit and giving you an extra push when you need to, a real partner, is brilliant.

For a long time you've typically struck services-style deals with your artists. Why?

Because Pete Jenner told me to! We wanted to sign Billy Bragg. It was another huge milestone. We had tiny records and Billy was really successful. He'd just left Go-Discs.

Pete said: 'Do you want to do his back catalogue?' Then he said: 'Let's do the deal like this.' So I did.

That was our first ever artist services deal. 23 years later, Billy's still with us and our relationship with him is better than ever.

We don't only do services deals; we did a 50/50 profit share with Marilyn Manson and a royalty-based deal with The Prodigy.

Sometimes a services deal aligns your goal with the artists a bit better. I've wanted to do an hourly rate deal, but no-one's ever taken me up on that!

Now that's a business model! Call me when you want to start. What makes you most angry about the way the major labels behave?

What makes me angry isn't what they're doing now, it's what they did in the past.

There were a small number of companies – and still are – who control how the industry's run. The independents are on the cutting edge.

Before Napster, the majors always controlled the formats that the public listened to. They made an active decision to kill vinyl and promote CDs. Then suddenly, Napster happened and they were in a state of shock.

The consumer moved on from CDs. And all they could do was complain about

Reverend and the Makers

piracy. It was worse than short-sighted; the major label bosses had their heads in the sand.

They couldn't admit the public had moved on. They saw the popularity of piracy as a problem. Steve Jobs, Daniel Ek and Google saw it as an opportunity.

You have to ask: who had the vision, who made the money, and what industry got fucked up in the process?

What was your experience of Napster?

I remember a friend telling me about it and I was outraged all our music was being pirated.
So I went on Napster and started trying to take down Cooking Vinyl's stuff. I got a big shock. A disaster: it wasn't there.

Being pirated is bad – but when no-one gives a shit it's much worse!

The majors with ADA, Caroline and RED are now offering services deals. Can that model, which is at the heart of both [PIAS] and Cooking Vinyl, work for those companies?

I think they've got a different motivation than us. They're far more concerned with market share than profit.

There used to be a massive independent sector with Island, Chrysalis etc. and they bought all

those companies. And now they've seen the independent market share grow again – they want a piece of it.

That's what they're doing, trying to buy market share. The only ones who have been really successful so far to my mind is Caroline; they've hired some brilliant people across Europe.

ADA have been successful in the UK, but I think they struggle outside the UK. And Sony RED in America are amazing; in time they'll get Europe right but they've got a long way to go.

What about Kobalt: villains or heroes?

[Laughs]. I've got so many different views about Kobalt. A couple of years ago I was really frightened about them coming into the market as competitors.

Again, they hired some great people and it looked like a really serious threat. But I'm not sure their label services thing has worked, certainly not like their publishing thing has worked.

That could change quickly, you can't count them out, but there's very little on their release schedule this year. I know they've done some big deals that have lost a fortune.

Their business model is about technology, which has worked brilliantly in publishing, but label services is about product management; there isn't a technological solution for that.

Have you ever had the chance to sell Cooking Vinyl?

In the last year, we've been approached by virtually all of our competitors – they weren't long conversations.

But my attitude has always been that I love doing this.

If someone makes me a really stupid offer, we'll listen to it. Every business is for sale at a certain price. But we're very much not for sale.

Does that make sense?

I think so. The question I always ask: are you a hopeless romantic?

I don't know. I love to work with people I like.

I love to help artists. I love working – and partying – with the team we have.

Stornoway


"I'M A STRANGE MIX OF INSECURITY
AND ARROGANCE - BUT I'M DRIVEN."

PETER THOMPSON
INDEPENDENTS HAVE PATIENCE, BELIEF AND INTEGRITY

From Mute's Daniel Miller to Sire's Seymour Stein, Heavenly's Jeff Barrett to Epitaph's Brett Gurewitz and many more besides, this book has allowed [PIAS] to share the wit and wisdom of some of the most inspiring individuals working in our industry.

But you know what? [PIAS] employs a few legends of its own – and none have seen the independent music community grow up in quite the same way as Peter Thompson.

These days, Peter (pictured) heads up [PIAS]'s own label, Play It Again Sam, developing brilliant artists including Agnes Obel, Editors, Enter Shikari, Melanie Di Biasio and Ghostpoet.

But his history covers bastions of UK independent music distribution over the past three decades, from Red Rhino to Revolver, APT, The Cartel, Vital and – of course – [PIAS] itself.

Kenny Gates has been Peter's boss for much of this time, and the pair have shared some hugely significant moments – from the madness that was Oasis's independent rise to the fire that scorched through the [PIAS] warehouse in 2011, taking mountains of independent label stock with it.

Below, Kenny interviews Peter about his life, his career, the difference between the majors and indies, some amazing artists – and what it's like to hang out with the KLF…

Do you remember the first time we met?

No! I don't think so! But then again I probably don't remember the last time we met either. It must have been in York?

It was. I think I remember seeing you at a table in the Red Rhino warehouse-slash-office and you were doing telesales.

We did everything. That was the indie way.

Red Rhino was part of The Cartel. Can you explain what The Cartel was?

It was a group of like-minded operators, mainly from independent record stores that effectively worked with the artists from each area and sold to each other, creating a wholesale or distribution chain. You'd find a band locally, make some records for them and sell it to everybody else in The Cartel.

There were stores like Rough Trade in London, Red Rhino in York, Revolver in Bristol, Backs in Norwich, Probe in Liverpool, they all became wholesalers and sold to each other.

It feels so dated now we have worldwide Spotify. It's an amazing evolution really.

Yeah. And we sold things at full price!

How did you get into the music industry?

The same as most people without any great musical skills: I started at a record shop. I was working at British Rail. It was mid-to-late seventies, punk rock was starting and you'd go to your local shop to hang out. I remember being told I had to learn to drive because there was a job coming up. I got the job [at Red Rhino] but failed my test – although I passed it eventually. I remember on Monday morning I had to go up to Newcastle, Sunderland, Stockton, Middlesborough and Redcar. If you're English, you'll know that's not the best way to start the week! I was in a big red van, selling to record shops.

It's an interesting thing to be interviewing you now. Because I don't ever remember interviewing you for the Play It Again Sam job!

I remember a slight interview once in Brussels. I don't know what happened. We probably drank and ate nice food, got to know each other a bit, and at the end of the day I had a more responsible job than I did that morning.

After Red Rhino you went on to APT, and then it merged with Revolver. How did that merger happen?

I have no idea, because at that time my first child was being born. I was commuting between York and Bristol every week. Then my mum died. I remember thinking at the time: 'One more thing. One more thing, and I'm done for.' Luckily, it eased off. It was an interesting mix, a bunch of northerners with a bunch of Bristolians.

The KLF

Didn't the whole company migrate form York to Bristol?

A big chunk of it did. You just follow your heart, you follow what's right. I look back on the people that stayed in York and think: 'What did their lives come to?'

I think most people were happy to move out of York and move to a slightly bigger city. Bristol was a pretty cool place to be. The first six weeks [of Revolver APT] were a bit hairy, though… We'd never merged a company before. These days at [PIAS] we can merge companies for fun!

There were frictions, but it's really nice to see a two or three people still around from that time; one of them still works for me now, Sean, who was a big ally at the time. He was really supportive; I've always loved him for that.

You moved to London in 1998...

Due to the success of the company, I was spending three days a week in London and a lot of time on the motorway, with – at the time – a second young child coming into the picture. I always remember my son once asked my wife: 'Mummy, will daddy ever live with us?' I think that was the point she said: 'Let's move to London.'

Was that before the merger with Rough Trade, with RTM?

No, it was probably just after. That was another merger, another set of politics.

Explain what happened.

Like everything that seems to happen with [PIAS], there's always something bigger around the corner. It's ambition. Like merging APT with Revolver, it needed an injection of something else. It was a logical move to merge with a like-minded company. RTM was the ashes of Rough Trade and was owned by a bunch of labels. We'd had a relationship with RTM from the beginning when we became their physical distribution for KLF (pictured) – which gave us a relationship with one of the greatest bands of all time.

"Britpop turned the whole music industry on its head."

It was a difficult merger. I never felt RTM particularly wanted it. I think the owners of RTM wanted it, but I don't think the RTM team – who at the time were relatively successful – felt totally comfortable with it.

This is ridiculous: we had two sales teams, 24 reps, which is unbelievable. There were about 200 record stores [in the UK]. That was just the music industry at the time.

Was it at all difficult for you as a northerner in London?

If I'm really honest I wish I'd moved to London ten years earlier. It's where you learn, where you're surrounded by peers. I never felt patronised or looked down on for being a northener. A lot of the people working for [PIAS], Vital and RTM weren't from London – London's a migratory point where people move to. The main issue was my own education. It would have accelerated considerably had I been in that environment earlier.

Then you became part of Vital, the biggest distribution company in the UK.

Britpop really seemed to put Vital on the map. The whole industry got turned on its head. Independent artists you might expect to sell 5,000 copies were suddenly selling 300,000 copies. It changed everything and we were at the centre of it.

We liked that music, we had the connections. That's when it all exploded. Then from sharing the responsibility of running Vital, in around 1999, I ended up running the whole thing.

Do you think it's a talent to discover the Britpop labels you picked up?

Now I run a label, I realise it wasn't really a talent. I didn't find it hard to predict what was going to happen next – you could see trends, and running a distribution company, you could spread the net really wide. You remember the successes, but there are a lot of failures along the way.

In a record company, when you have far fewer eggs in your basket, that's much more of a talent, to pick the right acts.

You're talking yourself down. If it was that easy, why didn't everyone else do it? Why isn't Pinnacle, RDS or Spartan still alive? You helped me, a stupid Belgian, put a flag in the UK as [PIAS]. We are still here, thanks to you...

No, it's thanks to us. I'm not putting myself down – I'm spreading the praise. The whole thing is teamwork.
In them days, I was very driven and found the right labels to work with. But I was surrounded by a bunch of very supportive people – yourself being one of the most.

As a company that's been the balance. Someone like me, not being trained in running a business, and I can't remember the amount of money we must

have been turning over during the Oasis years. Don't let me manage that!

Red Rhino went bust because it wasn't financially well-managed. Between us [at [PIAS]/Vital] we managed to have fun and be creative, but run a business properly.

Was it easier back then than it is now?

Fuck yeah. Of course it was. You had three formats. A bunch of retailers. It's funny, at the time you thought: 'God, what a pain in the arse.' Whether to prioritise HMV or Our Price!

But you felt everyone was pushing in the same direction; the agendas were run by music people; the shops, the labels, the distribution companies – even our competitors – were run by music people. We all had a straightforward goal, and it was a relatively straightforward business.

Nowadays you're in the world of tech companies. That's a concern to me. People who don't necessarily have the same passion for music as we do are setting the agendas for future consumption. It's not all bad as I'm a big advocate of streaming but I do have concerns for the type of music these companies tend to champion. It's too safe and too predictable. I suppose I'm an old romantic at heart and prefer to work with people that care in the same way I do.

Let's get back to music. You've experienced a lot of explosions in music.

I had an explosion in a warehouse to deal with once…

We'll come back to that! When I look back on all of the bands that your companies have worked with it's impressive. The first one I can think of is Sisters Of Mercy…

Goth central! That was one of the beauties of being up north – we cornered the goth market. Sisters Of Mercy, Skeletal Family, March Violets, Red Lorry Yellow Lorry – there was a very definite Leeds thread to this.

Sisters were leaders of the pack and were an amazing band. It was fun, was goth. It kind of didn't take itself too seriously. Even though it looked like it took itself very seriously!

Do you remember how many 12-inches you sold of Alice or Temple of Love?

If I had those little boxes of cards in front of me I'd have a better idea. I presume no-one will ever really know how many of them records we sold. Every time we got 1,000 in it would go up the next day, so you

"We cornered the goth market."

must be talking 100,000 – 200,000. Do you have any idea?

No but I remember the moment I met you, I looked at the card and you were just above 100,000 on Alice. That number was incredibly high for me!

That was the thing about those days. There wasn't a plan. If people loved music, they bought it and….

… it hit a moment?

Yeah. The only thing I remember from those days was John Peel, NME, Sounds and Melody Maker. No-one ever got played on daytime radio. You didn't even have an early evening specialist slot. It was incredible how just John Peel and the music press could help you sell 100,000-plus records.

There was also The Wedding Present, Red Guitars, The Strokes…

I did pick up on The Strokes, but

Rough Trade had already signed them. I picked up on Arctic Monkeys. We were quite early listening to Arctic Monkeys – maybe even amongst the first. I remember a funny story I got told about Arctic Monkeys by the label A&R team, who went to a gig.

The place was packed, the band were on stage having a great time. Then at the end of the show, the band get everyone on stage dancing, and I think there was everyone except for three people – including you and Saul Galpern stood at the back!

Maybe if I'd had gone on stage we would have signed them! What about Oasis. That's part of your blood.

Northern working-class culture music. It was easy for me [to understand it]. I was never into grunge. Everyone likes Nirvana, fair enough, but the offshoots of grunge didn't speak to me in any way. It wasn't melodic enough in any respects. Britpop was a reaction to grunge and suddenly we ended up with Blur and Oasis.

As a northern lad it was easy to adopt the Oasis flag. We ended up working together thanks to Creation and a company called 3MV. That's about as an amazing time that you're probably going to have: working with an unknown band who end up releasing one of the biggest-selling records of all time and becoming one of the biggest bands of all time.

You realise that Vital/[PIAS] were active in selling the two fastest-selling albums in UK history: Adele's 25 and Oasis's Be Here Now?

That's amazing. It's probably more amazing for the warehouses that had to ship all of those records out. In Oasis's case, we were the warehouse. In Adele's case it's slightly different.

One of the funniest stories we ever had as a warehouse was during the famous Blur vs. Oasis chart battle, when two days into the shipping week, we realised the barcode was wrong [on Roll With It]. We were shipping a ridiculous number, 300,000 or something, and then on Tuesday we realise the barcode doesn't read – when the records have to be in shops on Friday to go on sale on the Monday.

Other than the fire, this is one of our greatest achievements. In 48 hours, between ourselves and Creation, we managed to turn around a repressing of the sleeve and resleeve it – by employing pretty much every unemployed person in the west of England over two nights. We got the record out in time, and no-one knew we had to do it. And still Oasis lost!

Were these the glory days for the indie scene?

I would say early 2000s. Britpop was a movement and the independents were at the centre of it. But the majors leapt on its really quickly, infiltrated it, brought out a load of crap, and ultimately Britpop died a swift and sudden death.

But what happened in 2004/2005 – Arctic Monkeys, White Stripes, Badly Drawn Boy and others were all coming through. And I think lessons had been learnt; independent labels were far more developed and knew how to handle an act like Arctic Monkeys.

As a distributor, we'd experienced volume by then – but this time we could do it without the panics, without the hyperbole. We have to be honest: during the Oasis years, Creation was run by Sony [the major had a 49% stake in Alan McGee's business at that point].

No matter how many times you go on

record as saying Creation and Oasis were independent, they weren't.

But in the early 2000s, the growth of these labels like XL, Domino and a number of others were proper independents. And it didn't peak and fall. It was real. That was the arrival of a group of mature independents.

And you were taking risks: putting up advance money to labels and artists. Didn't we put up the money for the Franz Ferdinand album?

I think we were in discussions with Domino at the time. And we agreed to give them the money they were asking for. Without that money, they might not have signed Franz Ferdinand, but I don't know the minutiae of it – I certainly got that impression from Laurence [Bell] at the time.

Independents have never had money. And I suppose distributors at the time did have some money – even if it was cash flow rather than cash reserves. We were all helping each other out. It was part of the package. We had to take the risks to give the labels the opportunity to build a business.

It didn't always work, as we well know. But I think it worked enough often enough to make it all worthwhile. That's what taking risks is all about.

So how does it feel to be interviewed by your boss?

It's actually more natural than I thought it would be! I see you more as a friend than a boss anyway. It's not as if you've been in an ivory tower over the past 30 years – we've spent a lot of time together. We've grown up together in that time, really.

How was it for you to join and then work for a company that was Belgian, not English? Were there any cultural clashes?

Agnes Obel

What was interesting was when we took on Martin Mills and Daniel Miller on the Vital board, as well as Kenny Gates and Michel Lambot. It was great: suddenly we had these icons and an interesting Belgian/UK balance. We haven't had culture clashes, we've had our own personal debates – or arguments!

That's what happens in business when you've been working together for 30 years. I suppose we've joked about the Belgian thing. But I'm English, you know. Belgium's meant to be a joke!

I agree – I'm English as well! Except when David Platt scored in the last minute of the 1990 World Cup second round. I was so pissed off. You've been owned by Belgians, but also Germans – when we sold to Edel 15 years later. Can you tell me now what you thought when that happened?

I'm easily sold, and you did a good job of selling the concept to me. To many intents and purposes it made sense. We were ambitious, and for that we needed investment. The line we had at the time was that there

would be a good degree of control kept by the original [PIAS] owners. It felt like another chapter.

Everything in life is another chapter. I may have worked for the same company for the last 30 years, but it's never felt like the same company. Whether it's moving town, changing roles, having slightly different structures, it's been an exciting journey.

So let's talk about a radical change in your job: when you went from being the head of the biggest independent distribution company in the country to become the head of a label - of Play It Again Sam.

That definitely is the most radical change, but again, possibly one I did a bit too late. We started to evolve down that road a little bit when [PIAS] started doing marketing and promo in addition to sales and distribution.

We were the first label services division, regardless of what anyone says these days, Integral – as we were called at that time – was the first. We were incredibly successful straight away, possibly too successful. Our first three albums did 400,000, 300,000 and 100,000.

Jose Gonzales, Pigeon Detectives and...

The Gossip. So that was quite an interesting change of direction. We'd talked about it for a long time. We knew there were a lot of great A&R people out there with no infrastructure. With Peacefrog and Jose Gonzalez, that was exactly the case.
Then you think: let's do a new act. And you realise how hard it is. It's a completely different chemistry, and it's a longer-term way of working.

Service deals are short-term.
You've got a fanbase, you've got an immediate audience, you invest in the audience and you make the most of the record. And it has to make money because the margins are tight.

With a record company, investing in the artist involves a lot more vision, strategy and long-term investment, especially now. I started to see that towards the end of [my time] with Integral; that the only way to do [a new artist] properly was as a record company. Which is was really interesting because the whole idea of Integral was: 'You don't need a record company! We can do it for you!'

I remembered why record companies exist. Running a record company is exhausting, but it's the best part of life: big highs, low lows.

What made you accept the challenge to go back to a record company?

I followed my gut. I was beautifully naïve. During the Integral years I wanted to be deeper into campaigns and deeper into the artist's psyche. I'm blessed at [PIAS] with a good support structure.

Play It Again Sam is like no other independent label. Most labels have had a figurehead from day one who's been there from day one. Whereas the figurehead for Play It Again Sam is you, but [PIAS] is a bigger machine.

So the label has had a constant stream of different people running it – it's almost like a major label in that respect!

Has it been harder than you thought?

The hard thing is always the emotion. We do these things because we love the artist. And when you love the artists it's difficult to be hard on the artists. And whether you like it or not, you have to be tough sometimes. That can be like being tough on your friends.

Balancing the business and the

emotional connection you have with the artists, I still find difficult. I expect every single person who runs an independent record label feels the same way. We have to run a business, but we all want to be friends with our artists. It's tricky and emotionally draining.

What's been the biggest thing you've learnt running a label?

The one thing I never did in distribution was get involved with the touring of artists. And in all of my time in music, I'd never really done A&R; I'd never looked at music in the way an A&R person would do. Having that responsibility for the core creative process, and the artist wanting your opinion. Not just, 'Do you like it? Yeah? Let's have a beer,' but proper constructive opinions. That's been the major leap.

Being that close to the artist, actually wanting to know what you think. And occasionally you don't, or you feel differently to the artist. That's been a very interesting journey. It's one I'll probably never master.

So you believe that artists need A&R people?

Some do, some don't. Artists actually like having a good A&R person. They're lonely. Managers have now taken up a lot of that role, and artists have become more self-sufficient as a result. It's like anything though, if you're too close to something you need a second opinion.

Having one or two people to bounce ideas off is important to everybody. If you can accept criticism and input as an artist, you'll make a better record.

There are good managers and not-so-good managers. Does that influence your decision to sign an act or not?

Not as much as it should. I don't think it's any coincidence that the most successful bands probably have our best managers. It's tough being a manager now because there's a lot to do: you are A&R'ing, you are driving some of the marketing, you're driving a lot of the campaign. You've got to be really good and diplomatic. We work closely with our managers.

Prior to the time I ran a label, I think there was a lot more conflict between what a manager demanded from a label and what a label expected. Good managers learn that they have to work with the label as a team. And when that happens and it works it's a very pleasurable experience. When the manager's not good enough, it makes our job harder and you do struggle. A good manager makes a good campaign work. A good manager working with a good label makes a campaign special.

"You have to run a business, but you want to be friends with your artists. It's tricky."

Out of 12 acts nominated for the Mercury Prize – the most prestigious award in the UK for artists – two of them were Play It Again Sam acts. You must be proud about that.

Of course I am! But we think all our acts should be Mercury nominated. Those two in particular felt really good.

Ghostpoet, because we've worked with him from an early stage, actually had quite a difficult second album situation. And the way we came through a tough period together to create a campaign and a record


Ghostpoet

that's now Mercury-nominated is a fantastic feeling. It could have gone badly wrong after the last album but everybody dug in, everybody believed and I think the karma has come good.

As for Roisin [Murphy], I remember having the conversation with you first time I heard it: 'There's no singles, but it's a great album.' I'm so pleased that comment has come to fruition. It's a brilliant record. We need great records and great artists. That's one of the beauties of working in this business. She's a star and a personality. But she's also phenomenally talented.

How did you sign Ghostpoet?

I can't put that one on tape! It's an amazing story that we actually managed to sign him. During our [PIAS] Christmas party we had a tequila drinking competition at 4pm. I was challenging staff: you drink one, I'll drink two. I like tequila!

At the same time, that night I had to go to a Ghostpoet show at the 100 Club. I'd never seen him live before.

To say I was out of order is probably an understatement. Without going into too much detail, I can't believe they felt we were the right label for them after that.

There was a lot of drink involved! But that's the personality thing. It's great Obaro saw the funny side, and the fun he could have if he signed to us. And he'd seen me sober prior to that!

30 years of evolving in the independent music ecosystem. Do you think for an artist being on an independent label is more or less relevant than it was decades ago?

If you're a genuine artist who's not obsessed with having hit moments, I now don't think the majors have the patience to develop you. They develop hits and I have to admit I think they're very good at developing hits – probably better than the indies.

If a major has a hit, they maybe then develop an artist off the back of it – indies generally sign artists for the long term regardless of their 'hit rate'.

What about Adele?

I think you have to take Adele out of every equation to be honest. She could have been on an indie or a major and I think it would have happened.

What I see now is two businesses: hits and artist development. The nature of creating hits seems to revolve around metrics and market research, and making something happen quickly. With the independents, we have patience, belief, integrity. We understand that what's more important to us is a strong body of work, rather than one or two hits. Unfortunately, one or two hits seems to be what sells a lot of records nowadays.

"An artist should be at their creative peak on their fourth or fifth album."

The market's getting difficult on that


Róisín Murphy

score. Hits sell records. We need to get to a third album, when you're respected as an artist and have a career. The majors aren't interested in that anymore. And I hope the independents stay interested in that. Whether through albums or just the longevity of how we work with an artist.

I've always found the UK quite a quirky marketplace; a lot of bands have their most successful record with their first album and then go backwards. I think we need to address that. Artists get better. Okay, you might have some moments of inspiration on a debut record and we all know second albums are difficult for everybody. But then as you get to your third or fourth or fifth album, that's when you should be at your creative peak. And a lot of artists aren't being allowed to get to that stage.

So is it fair that labels now expect to take some of an artist's live revenue?

It's not fair, it's critical. It's part of your broader strategy now. You don't do a TV show to sell albums, you do it to help develop your artist's positioning; to help create a brand. It means people engage with the artist, become aware of them and maybe stream some of their music.

They may then go out and buy a ticket to a show. Chances are they'll do both of them things before buying an album. So we're in all in this together. It's crucial that we as labels understand the needs of an artist live, and that artists and managers understand that we want to help develop you as a brand in a world where, potentially, your music may be free.

We're heading towards a world where quite possibly the value of music could be free or at least part of a streaming subscription package. And, as much as I love them, there's every possibility the album may become redundant as well.

I do wonder how much the new generation need an album so we have to get better in the way we present our artists. Maybe if we had a world where the album was optional we could start looking more deeply and creatively at how our artists are presented to the world.

Labels, managers, artists and even publishers and agents need to constantly be reevaluating how they should work together in the future in the united goal of creating careers.

The journey through an artist's career is changing and whilst it's still important to develop a body of work it may be that the album doesn't necessarily have to be at the epicentre any more.

What does Play It Again Sam mean to you?

It should mean a collection of great artists under one banner. That's my dream. I never know if Play It Again Sam will be cool or trendy – a reference point in itself. I don't think the world works like that anymore. The label identities are few and far between now.

What I want to create is a home where artists feel comfortable and confident that their careers are being looked after, and have a love for their label. That would mean a lot more to me – that artists wanted to be on Play It Again Sam and enjoyed being on Play It Again Sam – rather than being cool or trendy.

Do you view yourself as a romantic?

Yes, of course. The background we've come from is incredibly romantic. You look at our mentors; they all followed their heart. Whether it was Daniel Miller or Bill Drummond or Alan Horn or Tony Wilson, they were all romantics. They weren't building businesses or careers. They were releasing music they loved into the world.

"An artist should be reaching their creative peak on their fourth or fifth album."

Who inspired you? Which characters have had a crucial impact on your working life; who do you respect the most?

I respect them all. Anyone who runs an independent record label and makes a success of it has to have something incredibly special about them. The odds are stacked against you. You're under-capitalised, you're not always appealing to the latest trends. You're trying to create something different.

Look at the names that always crop up, for good reason: Geoff Travis (pictured) is clearly the forefather of everything, from starting Rough Trade distribution to starting one of the greatest labels ever. Rough Trade is incredibly special, and it's never had a sound. In the early days you'd see Stiff Little Fingers, The Raincoats, Cabaret Voltaire – indie to electronic to punk. And it's been carried through to today.

Geoff is a quiet operator, but he's created a legacy we'd all aspire to. From setting up distribution and a special label to fucking up and going with majors and coming back stronger than ever. Everything he's done has been about the bands and the music. If I named one person, it would probably be Geoff Travis.

But I respect lots of other people, like Alan Horn, who's completely barking. Postcard made no sense. It was short-lived, but it was beautiful. It was about the art. Bill Drummond too. We miss these people. It's hard to run a record label and have that degree of personality; that youthful naivety and passion you had when you were 25 years old.

You said you think you're good at running Play It Again Sam. Why?

You tell me off when I say I'm not very good at things! We had a plan where we'd want to be three years down the line, the kind of artists we'd like to work with an the kind of environment we'd like to create. I wanted happy artists, happy staff, an environment people enjoyed and a gang mentality amongst both our artists and label team. I think we've achieved that, people who fight for the cause.

When do you get frustrated?

When little things go wrong. It's always the case, isn't it? Big things you deal with. But it's the stupid little things you can avoid that drive you mad. It goes back to the fire [at the warehouse]. I never had the remotest thought that was a problem we couldn't overcome. When it's such a big thing, you all pull together.

It's no-one's fault, shit's happened, and you have to deal with it. The independent sector really pulled

together – even our competitors were saying, 'What can we do to help?'

I was in America when the fire hit – at the Grand Canyon. I'd said: I'll check emails but if you really, really need me, text me. I was on the north of the Grand Canyon, woke up one morning, turned my phone on with half a bar, and about 40 texts landed. I read the first one, it was Richard Sefton. 'Call me, urgent.' I never had a signal in that spot before or after, but I did then. That could be karma.

Were there moments in your career where you felt particularly insecure?

I'm permanently insecure! I'm a strange mix of insecurity and arrogance. But I'm driven. I feel incredibly lucky to be where I am today, and be involved in everything I have been over the past 30 years. I couldn't ever imagine doing anything else, and I probably couldn't do anything else.

Regardless of how insecure you feel, you still really enjoy going to work and always feel there's something to achieve every day you go into the office. We've all got insecurities, especially in the independent sector because none of us were trained!

What have been the highs and lows of your career?

If I'm really honest, I don't believe the high I'll always remember has happened yet. I've only been running a label for four years. And that's when you feel the real pride. Distribution is very important, but you're not at the core of making the decisions.

When the [career high] happens, I'll have been at the centre of it – of an incredibly successful global campaign. I haven't achieved that yet, but I will.

The broader high of my career is: fuck, I'm still here! The council estate kid from York who gave up his safe British Rail job to work in a record shop is still here and still enjoying it 30 years later – and still as ambitious as ever.

Then there's the logistical things, like Oasis and Blur, and the fire. Which was an incredible experience, really.

What are you looking forward to in 2016?

We've got an incredible year next year – an interesting balance between some new exciting talent, with bands like Spookyland, Fews and Elliot Moss. Acts like Lucius, Agnes Obel and Melanie Di Biasio who are pure talent [are coming back]. And we know now with Agnes that she's beautifully poised to take over the world.

I see no reason why the next Agnes Obel album can't be the global campaign I've been looking for. Artists like Lucius and Melanie coming into their second albums are so well set up and respected – it's going to happen for them both.

What emotions does music bring into your life? Enter Shikari, for instance – what does it do to you?

It makes you feel young!

If there's one problem with working in the music industry, it's that you always have to keep a balanced head. When you're young and don't have an agenda, it can instill moments of real excitement. Whereas now the responsibility is quite high. I've heard the new Lucius album and it's an incredible record, but my mind immediately starts thinking, 'What do I do with it?'

When you see a band translate a record live, and it all comes together, that's when the tears well up. It's an incredible feeling when

you're watching one of your bands – any band really – and you can't control your emotions.

Once upon a time I might have been down at the front moshing, now I'm more likely to be at the back crying!

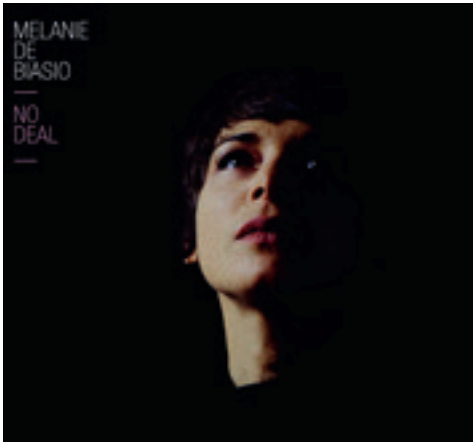
Has your wife had an influence on your professional life?

She has been, no offense to the person asking me the question, the biggest influence.

She's amazing. She's amazing to have put up with me for 30 years. She's amazing that she engages with what we do, encourages me, gets on with the artists. She's dealt with us moving three times, she's dealt with bringing our children up when I was never at home.

She's been an integral part of everything I've ever done, and still is. Now the kids are older, Jane's out every night with me. We have a lot of stress in this industry, and what I've never ever had to deal with is any pressure from my wife.

She's my best friend and I couldn't have done it without her. It's as simple as that.



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Do you have a particular anecdote from your career you'd like to share with us?

This is a two-part anecdote. Firstly I was taken to Scotland by the KLF. We met at Liverpool airport, got flown to an island by bus, boat, whatever. Bill and Jimmy were there dressed up in some uniform, looking like passport officers and they stamped my passport. I never thought anything of it.
I had a great weekend, experienced the White Room and the burning of a wicker man. I took ecstasy for the first time, we stood on stage at a Pee Wee Herman show with ice creams in our hand. And then we went home.

About two months later, I had to go to America. When I'm queuing at the check-in desk, they see a KLF stamp in the back of the passport. They went: 'What's this?' And I said: 'It's just a stamp from some band I was with a few weeks ago.' I think it stands for Kopyright Liberation Front.'

It set a few alarm bells off. I was taken to a room and grilled quite heavily about it.

I was let go, but if it happened today it might be a slightly different story!

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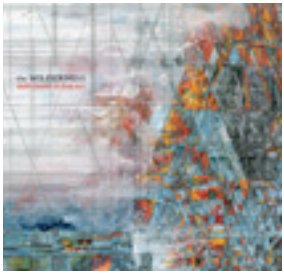

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