

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

Malcolm Lynn Baker

December 2007

This survey report is the result of research conducted as a sabbatical leave project during the fall of 2007. My thanks to the University of Denver for supporting this work.

The purpose of this research is two-fold. First, I am interested in discovering if there are any emerging trends or “best practices” developing in these types of labels. An ancillary aspect is trying to discover if there are any “emerging” trends that address the volatility of the record industry in regards to distribution and intellectual property, among other issues. That is the principle focus of the study and I am happy to share my observations about those ideas in this report. Secondly, and with more self-interest, this is a bit of a “benchmarking” exercise. The goal in this is to determine if several of my ideas are unique enough to warrant the effort to begin a label at the Lamont School of Music, University of Denver.

The study began with the selection of thirty-two labels located in the United States. These labels were chosen not in an attempt to reach a comprehensive understanding, but rather to try to receive a representative sampling of labels run by colleges in the United States. Two types of criteria were used; type and location of institution. When selecting based on type, representation from private and public institutions was sought, as was representation from universities, colleges, and community/vocational colleges. When selecting based on location representation was sought from institutions residing in urban, suburban and rural locales, and a wide geographic distribution.

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

Selections were also made to reach labels whose organizations run the gamut from loosely supervised clubs to sophisticated, integrated institutions connected with graduate programs in music business and audio production.

After the selection process, questionnaires were sent to each institution. Many schools responded to the mailing and some, for a variety of reasons, did not. However, the following narrative includes information from all schools selected, if only information gleaned from their web pages (see Appendix B for a complete list of web sites referenced).

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

Below are the labels that were sent the questionnaire:

80 One Records	Harrisonburg, VA	James Madison University
Acklen Records	Nashville, TN	Belmont University
AEMMP Records	Chicago, IL	Columbia College
Beneficence Recordings	Muncie, IN	Ball State University
Black Squirrel Records	Haverford, PA	Haverford College
Brick City Records	Columbus, OH	Ohio University
CAM Records	Denver, CO	University of Colorado at Denver
Cane Records	Coral Gables, FL	University of Miami
Castle Point Records	Hoboken, NJ	Stevens Institute of Technology
CU Records	Chicago, IL	Columbia College
EASRecords	Kingston, RI	University of Rhode Island
First Step Records	Decatur, IL	Millikin University
FlatFoot Records	Orlando, FL	Valencia Community College
Gallatone Records	New York, NY	New York University
Green Street Records	Champaign-Urbana, IL	University of Illinois
GTB Records	Kent, OH	Kent State University
Heavy Rotation Records	Boston, MA	Berklee College of Music
Hoot Recordings	Boca Raton, FL	Florida Atlantic University
Husky Entertainment	Storrs, CT	University of Connecticut
M Block Records	Ann Arbor, MI	University of Michigan
M.I.S. Music Group	Northridge, CA	Cal State University, Northridge
MAD Dragon Records	Philadelphia, PA	Drexel University
Marshall St. Records	Syracuse, NY	Syracuse University
New Dynamic Records	New Albany, IN	Indiana University Southeast
Niteskool	Chickago, IL	Northwestern University
Orangehaus Records	Anderson, IN	Anderson University
Park Avenue Records	Tucson, AZ	University of Arizona
Po Records	Mahwah, NJ	Ramapo College of New Jersey
Split Rail Records	Boone, NC	Appalachian State University
Veritas Records	Cambridge, MA	Harvard University
White Pine Music	Mount Pleasant, MI	Central Michigan University
Wild Oak Records	Chico, CA	University of California at Chico

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

Upon receipt of the questionnaire the next step was to arrange phone conversations and site visits where possible. Due to financial constraints I was not able to visit as many institutions as I would have liked, but those that I was able to visit were extremely helpful.

The questionnaire, phone, and personal conversations centered on discussing five major topics that I will address individually; Organization, Talent, Product, Marketing & Publicity, and Intellectual Property. Through the course of the study it became clear that a sixth category Assessment, was an important additional consideration. And therein lies my first “best practices” trend – College Record Labels are developing tools and norms for assessment of their label, and the practices of their label, that did not exist until the last four years or so. I will expand upon this when I discuss the Assessment topic.

Some labels did not respond, some responded with only anecdotal information, and some, whether or not they responded, were concerned about disclosing proprietary information. In recognition of these concerns, and to therefore assure a degree of anonymity, I will not refer to specific institutions but rather speak in generalities about the information discovered.

Special thanks are made here to individuals who were very generous with their time through phone conversations, personal conversations and/or site visits. The insight gained from extended communication with these people is crucial to the success of this study: Frank Jermance of CAM Records; Serona Elton, Kathy Gerschutz and Tom Clark of ‘Cane Records; Michael Zager and Alejandro Sánchez–Samper of Hoot Wisdom Recordings; Don Gorder of Berklee College of Music; and Michael Dorenfeld of Heavy Rotation Records.

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

Organization

The first component of examining the organization of college labels is to determine under what auspices they function. There are generally three configurations under which the labels were administered; 1) A club, funded through student fees receiving only passing supervision by a faculty or staff member, 2) A part of the music or music business program receiving close supervision by a faculty or administrator from the department and 3) A separate, incorporated entity which receives supervision from faculty or administrators from within a degree program in commercial music or music business and which is frequently associated with a publishing company that functions in a similar fashion.

Most colleges that have a music business program operate music labels as a separate, incorporated entity. Schools who do not have the extensive curriculum and student involvement associated with a music business program most often opt for the model of program administration through the music department or school. “Club” models occur more frequently at colleges that do not have highly developed music program that contain commercial music or music business programs.

Many college labels have Mission Statements that are important features in their by-laws and incorporation, regardless of their organizational structure. There are many common features among mission statements and include: providing students with a “real-life, hands-on experience,” promoting the “diversity, and artistic excellence” of the college, and providing students in the program with opportunities for the “development of personal, organizational, and trade skills.” Some mission statements specify the label is specifically for the benefits students of the college, some are less specific about which groups are to benefit from the activities of the label.

The structure of most labels is fairly common, with some innovative exceptions, and mirror the existing structures of commercial record labels. The faculty advisor is top of the structure and the place where the buck stops in regards to the label’s relationship with

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

the college. Of course, there is no real analogous component in commercial labels, but this is one of the concessions that college labels make to the institutions that allow them to exist in a non-commercial context.

Reporting to the Faculty Advisor is the Chief Executive Officer or Chief Financial Officer. These two jobs are frequently combined, but some labels have separate personnel for the two positions. Reporting to the Chief Executive Officer are usually Vice-President-level positions that administer the principle components of the label: Artist & Repertoire, Marketing, Publicity and Promotion, Production and Touring, and Business. These are sometimes combined, depending on the size and flexibility of the label.

Many labels assemble teams of students who perform the work associated with the components of the label. Tasks such as press release development and distribution, signing artists, negotiating artist agreements, “ground” teams for release events, developing graphic arts, etc. are work within the auspices of associated components.

Some labels are finding new ways to organize. The concept of a “team” approach, in which a group of students is assigned to one artist and within that team individual students perform the tasks associated with that artist has been developed. The benefit of this approach appear to be a feeling of “ownership” of the project, direct responsibility of task completion, quicker feedback from associated components, and the flexibility to reach outside to other resources as needed.

My research indicates that college record labels may be on the vanguard of developing new business practices in organizational structures. These new structures may be able to more quickly respond to the shifting demands of the current recording industry. Appendix A contains sample flow-charts of college record label organizational structures.

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

Talent

College record labels identify the talent they select in the following ways:

1. Solicited and Unsolicited Submissions
2. Auditions
3. In-House (usually departmental-specific) Talent

Most labels contain an A&R component that is responsible for developing leads, sorting and evaluating the prospective artists. However, many labels bring artists to a combined meeting of all the label personnel for the final signing decision.

The necessary association of the artist to the educational institution is one of the least uniform aspects of current practices. For some institutions it is vital that the artist is a student (or very recent attendee) of the school, for others, it is optional, and for some it is not a consideration at all. All shades of grey in regards to pre-existing association are represented by successful record labels, it is a matter of mission as to what works for the particular institution, and thus, it is one of the most interesting findings of the survey – there is no trend in regards to the relationship of the artist to the label before signing.

Very few labels take a role, outside the recording producer, of developing the musical skills or repertoire of the artists. This artistic nurturing role is generally not present in most college record labels. However, it must be noted that those labels that require artist to be enrolled at their institutions have de facto artistic development activities associated with the school.

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

Product

The actual production of the recording varies among institutions. Some labels only accept complete projects, having been recorded, mixed, and mastered apart from the label. Those labels are tasked through their mission and goals (and frequently as a result of their lack of physical resources) to only handle the post-production aspects of a record label.

Other labels have in-house facilities and personnel that are integrated into the product development from the very beginning. These labels most frequently produce recordings that include (but are not limited to) artists and ensembles that are associated with the school prior to signing with the label. Faculty artists, artists-in-residence, school ensembles, etc. are those artists whose recordings are released by some labels.

Some labels are able to accept artist from a wide variety of sources. This is another aspect in which there is no trend or developing practice.

Once the recorded product is complete there are a number of ways it is packaged for sale, and most labels are using the complete variety of packaging and delivery methods. Current packaging methods are: Compact Disc, Downloads, DVD, and rarely vinyl. The trend is to move towards including downloads where they are not currently used. However, there doesn't appear to be a trend to move away from CDs due to several favorable factors; they can be sold at live events, and they contain additional, non-musical information (lyrics, pictures, bios, etc.) to which audiences have grown accustomed. However, there is some talk of moving to enhanced download files that contain these and additional (musician interviews, "the making of," etc.) non-musical, value-added elements.

Another trend associated with CDs and the move to downloads is that some labels are experimenting more with EPs (AKA "Extended Plays," CDs containing three or four songs) instead of full-length albums. The benefits of the EP are that products can be

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

produced more rapidly and respond more quickly to changing market trends (though that is rarely considered at college record labels at this point), and they provide a more focused representation to radio program directors who continue to be important decision-makers in the record industry. EPs also serve as more focused introductions to individual listeners who are then referred to a download or other web site for additional information and purchases.

Some larger labels regularly produce ancillary merchandise, but not as a profit center. Rather ancillary merchandise is produced for publicity purposes of either the label in general, or specific artist or event-related items (key holders, caps, etc.).

Artwork developed for use with the recorded product or the ancillary merchandise shows no trends with labels acquiring the artwork from a variety of sources including; institutional art programs, individual students, extra-institutional commercial sources, licensing, and recording-artist-produced works.

Physical recorded products are being distributed through a variety of channels; CD Baby, iTunes, Rhapsody, Rounder, Amazon, Orchard and other emerging on-line resources, local stores, local stores of major chains (local Borders and Barnes & Nobel in particular), and at artist events.

Most labels produce rollout events or “CD release parties” to announce and make available their products. The development, organization, and production of these important events are frequently the preveue of a department of the label and provide valuable training and experience for students wishing to enter this aspect of the commercial recording industry.

Marketing and Publicity

Only a few labels reported that they have performed market research, and none reported they have market research associated with specific artists. However, several have stated they have at least informal market research projects and some are planning to develop more detailed market research components. This appears to be an emerging trend that mirrors long-existing practices in the commercial industry.

Publicity is obtained through both “old” and “new” media. In regards to radio, many labels place a high importance on gaining play on college radio stations, this is especially true for labels that produce Pop, and Metal, and Alternative artists. College Radio is also a consistent supporter of jazz and many labels seek play for their jazz artists on college radio stations. There is a loose network of local, community supporter radio stations that are also approached by labels. Community radio stations reflect broader musical tastes and therefore are targets for airplay for most artistic genres, specifically classical, experimental, and ethnic musics. The emerging trend in this category of publicity is labels reaching out to Internet radio, which allows a broader musical and geographic reach for labels.

A general trend in communications is the development of social networking sites such as myspace and facebook. These services have become potent cultural forces and college record labels are taking advantage of their widespread appeal to the demographic most interested in college record label products. These frequently serve as portals to label and artist web sites that contain much more information, and frequently contain online stores. Please see Appendix B for a list of label web site addresses.

Of course, developing relationships with local print media remains an important element to most college record label publicity plans. Press releases issued to college magazines, local entertainment magazines, and local and regional papers, as well as online magazines are standards publicity routines adopted by most labels.

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

The most visceral publicity and marketing event is the commonly implemented CD Release Party or other type of product rollout event. These are popular events that are very useful in announcing and building “buzz” around new releases. Some labels hold these events on campus, but many times they are held at an off-campus venue, providing more “street cred” to the event. Products are sold and/or given away (to VIPs) at these events and also allow the building of mailing and email lists that are important communication tools for further publicity events.

Some labels are even able to assist artists with local bookings and tours. The larger labels have even arranged for showcases at major music events such as South By Southwest (SXSW) and CMJ Music Marathon (CMJ). This is done infrequently and I don’t anticipate this practice to emerge as a trend.

Intellectual Property

There are two tracks that most college record labels take in dealing with the potentially thorny questions surround intellectual property issues.

Some colleges only license one-time-use agreements with artists. These contracts are “complete buy-outs,” enabling the label to use the master recording on a particular record in exchange for the production, promotion, marketing, and other services the label provides the artist. The advantage to this type of arrangement is that it removes the label from needing to engage in the separate, but important, tasks associated with running a publishing company. This allows the label to focus their attention on record label issues and provide their students with a focused experience in those areas. The disadvantages are that students do not experience those publishing aspects – and there might be future legal concerns for the label if one of the licensed songs “breaks” and is used by a commercial label. This scenario may be playing out at one of the labels and it will be instructive to see the results of negotiations between the college label, artist, and the commercial label.

Other colleges choose to engage more completely in the world of the recording industry and run publishing companies in collaboration with the record labels. These labels are able to negotiate all levels of licenses, royalties, use agreements, etc., with the artists. This experience is valuable for students whose principle interest is not in the writing, performing, recording, and producing aspects of the music industry, but in the less aural business components of the industry.

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

Assessment

There has been a recent dramatic increase in the number of record labels run by colleges and universities in the past ten years. This is a dramatic and trying time in the record industry and it is interesting that many college labels have begun during this period.

While frequently and appropriately adapted to the Music Industry, this is Hunter S. Thompson's original quote:

The TV business is uglier than most things. It is normally perceived as some kind of cruel and shallow money trench through the heart of the journalism industry, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free and good men die like dogs, for no good reason.

Hunter S. Thompson,
San Francisco Examiner, Nov. 4, 1985

Many of the labels are administered by “refugees” from the commercial record industry. This is by not means meant in a pejorative way, and there are many advantages to experienced industry professionals bringing their experience to the education community – namely networks of contacts and the plethora of professional experiences unique to the record industry. However, there are concomitant risks – specifically the lack of pedagogical experience in the areas of motivation, organization, and assessment.

The development of motivational, organizational and evaluative elements is one of the most pervasive and important emerging trends in college record labels. After years of developing record labels, most have moved past the nascent and naïve phase of being part of an educational institution and into their adolescence. Many labels have now realized that students need the focus, motivation and assessments of a framework. The combination of the “carrot” of being involved in the exciting, “hip,” and creative world of a record label and the academic “stick” is resulting in a more positive experience for all

A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

those involved – artists, officers, volunteers, and not least, the faculty advisor! The academic element takes many forms from non-credit classes that need to be successfully completed to graduate, to multi-credited coursework at the undergraduate and graduate level. Regardless of the particular shape and articulation of the academic component, many labels, and most of the largest labels have integrated an academic component within the last four years.

Summary

In conclusion, I have identified six emerging trends that college-run record labels are:

- Developing tools and norms for assessment of label.
- Including downloads purchases and distribution where they are not currently used.
- Experimenting with EPs instead of full-length albums.
- Beginning to develop detailed market research components.
- Reaching out to Internet radio as publicity and marketing tools.
- Rapidly adopting social networking sites such as myspace and facebook as publicity and marketing tools.

Future Research

This research was conducted during a very brief ten-week sabbatical leave from the Lamont School of Music, University of Denver. The restricted time frame and funding of was a major factor in the limited scope of the project. I feel there is ample ground to cover and important organizations such as the Music and Entertainment Industry Educators Association (www.meiea.org) and their associated student group (MEISA) could adopt this as an on-going and expanded project.

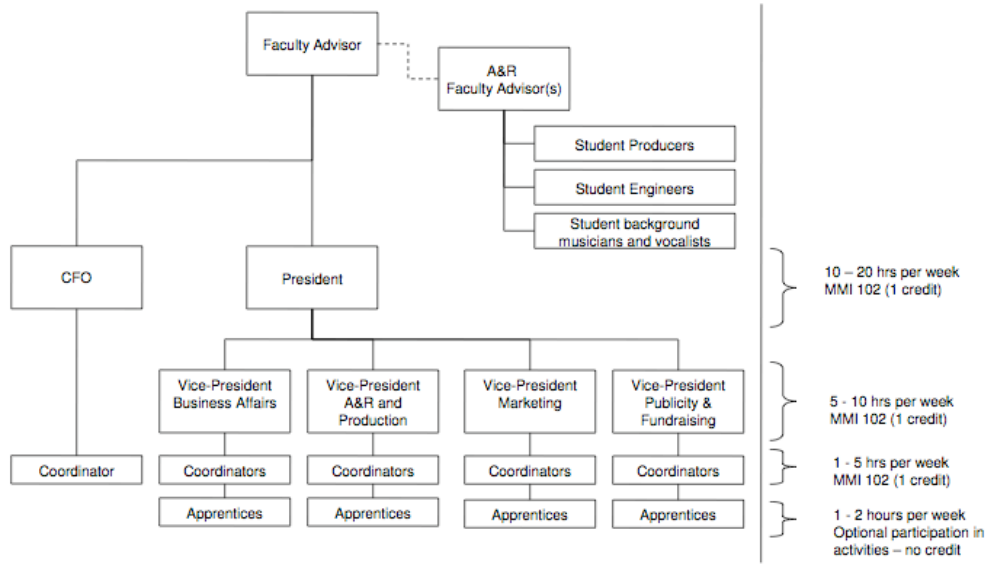
A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

APPENDIX A

Sample Organization Charts



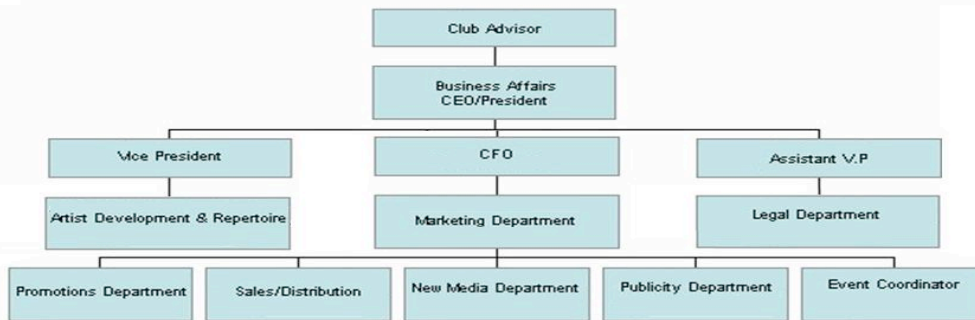
Organization Structure



Last Updated Fall 2007



Flow Chart



A Brief Survey of College-Run Record Labels

APPENDIX B

Record Label Web Site Addresses

CAM Records	http://www.camrecords.org/
80 One Records	http://upb.jmu.edu/80One/fullnews.asp
Acklen Records	http://www.belmont.edu/mb/profile.cfm?idno=181
AEMMP Records	http://www.colum.edu/academics/aemm/students/AEMMP_Records.php
Beneficence Recordings	http://www.bsu.edu/research/benerecordings/
Black Squirrel Records	http://www.blacksquirrelrecords.com/
Brick City Records	http://www.brickcityrecords.com/
C3U Records	http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/broadstairs/courses/music.asp
Cane Records	http://www.canerecords.com/
Castle Point Records	http://stevensmultimedia.com/
CU Records	http://www.curecords.com
EASRecords	http://www.uri.edu/student_life/easrecords/
First Step Records	https://www.millikin.edu/firststep/index_fsr.htm
FlatFoot Records	http://www.flatfootrecords.com/index.html
Gallatone Records	http://www.gallatone.com/
Green Street Records	http://www.greenstrecords.com/
GTB Records	http://www.gtbpromotions.com/
Heavy Rotation Records	http://www.myspace.com/heavyrotationrecords
Hoot Recordings	http://wise.fau.edu/hoot/home.html
Husky Entertainment	http://www.huskyent.uconn.edu/index2.php
M Block Records	http://www.blockmrecords.org/
M.I.S. Music Group	http://www.csun.edu/~musicid/mism.htm
MAD Dragon Records	www.maddragonrecords.com
Marshall St. Records	http://vpa.syr.edu/sur/msr/index.html
New Dynamic Records	http://www.newdynamicrecords.com/
Niteskool	http://groups.northwestern.edu/niteskool/
Orangehaus Records	http://orangehausrecords.com/
Park Avenue Records	http://www.parkavenuerecords.org/index.html
Po Records	http://porecords.net/index.html
Split Rail Records	http://www.splitrailrecords.com/
Veritas Records	http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/veritas/
White Pine Music	http://www.whitepinemusic.com/
Wild Oak Records	http://www.wildoakrecords.com/index2.asp