Look to the local labels for proof of Seattle’s diverse music

By TIZZY ASHER
SPECIAL TO THE P-I

The year is 1987. Sub Pop Records has just released its first EP, Soundgarden’s “Screaming Life.” Sub Pop founders Bruce Pavitt and Jonathan Poneman don’t know it yet, but their label will soon define Seattle’s sound.

Fast forward to 1998. Barsuk Records has just put out “Something about Airplanes,” the debut LP from Death Cab for Cutie. Though it is not Barsuk’s first release, it is the one that will put its distinctive dog logo into Seattle households. In six years, Death Cab will have two gold records and a contract with a major label.

Jump ahead nearly 10 more years to June 2007. Which local label is poised to ascend to the level of Sub Pop or Barsuk? Who will join those big names in setting a precedent for music in Seattle in the next decade?

Take a look at the local music landscape, and it’s obvious that there may not be just one contender -- there are many. Record labels are booming in Seattle, and not just Barsuk and Sub Pop (though those are still booming too). Each one is making its business work in its own unique way.

Today’s local labels reflect the sprawling diversity that has blossomed in Seattle’s music scene. If you can name a genre, chances are it has a devoted home in Seattle.

According to the Mayor’s Office of Film and Music, there are 88 labels now operating in Seattle.

Though much has changed in the music industry since 1987, the definition of an independent (or indie) record label has not. An indie exists without support from any of the four major music distributors: Universal Music Group, Sony BMG Music Entertainment, Warner Music Group and EMI. Often, an indie relies on an outside distributor such as Redeye or NAIL to get its releases into stores.

Some believe the difference between an indie and a major lies in the motivations of the owners. Big labels want money and lots of it. Indies often are headed up by those with a deep passion for music and few aspirations for the champagne and private-jet lifestyle. Owners of indies work long hours, often start out with little or no pay and can expect to use a stack of CDs as a coffee table.
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Matt Sullivan is one such owner. He founded Light in the Attic Records in 2002 because he wanted to focus on reissuing classic records forgotten by time. He says that the initial years involved heavy grunt work with little reward -- as well as having interns working on his living room couch.

"Starting any business takes so much patience and persistence, but it's especially true with a label," he says. "You don't see any reward for three or four years. But all the work that goes into it is the best part."

Light in the Attic has since released more than 20 well-received reissues. It has signed three present-day bands to its roster as well: The Black Angels, The Blakes and The Saturday Knights.

Local labels are plagued by some of the same issues that bother the majors. Illegal downloading and file sharing, for example, have troubled Light in the Attic.

"We work so hard to put together a package with our albums, so it's a bummer when we find them on the Internet," Sullivan says. "But then again, people are hearing the music and they might buy the album later or buy the next one."

Sullivan is quick to point out the benefit that digital communication has brought as well. With established networking sites such as MySpace and retail outlets such as CD Baby, small labels or independent artists need very little technical skill to reach fans in distant corners of the globe. Amazon.com has a store devoted to indie labels. ITunes also devotes programming space to independent releases.

Digital access helps indies counterbalance the effects of media consolidation. As the four major music companies become increasingly interconnected with traditional means of exposure such as radio and magazines, getting your music heard becomes increasingly difficult.

Mike Toschi of tiny indie Global Seepej Records notes that when its distributor was bought by Sony, the politically minded Global Seepej got dropped. He still hasn't found a distributor to replace it.

Toschi started his label in 1996 partially to speak out on political issues such as media consolidation. He "felt the region was lacking a label that was interested in supporting artists that were rooted in issues of justice."

Labels with distinct political philosophies can struggle to hold true to their guiding principles in such a competitive market. Toschi notes that he hasn't had to compromise his values yet.

"The hardest part for me is not having the cash flow to help artists the way I would like to," he says.

Another such label is Mass Line Recordings. Formed just last year, Mass Line has already established itself as one of the defining forces behind local hip-hop. Common Market and Blue Scholars both call it home. (The label was conceived and started by members of those two bands.)

Mass Line hopes to highlight politically conscious, socially aware hip-hop coming from Seattle and also to help foment social change starting with hip-hop listeners.

David Meinert of Mass Line notes that it isn't scared of the things that
major labels complain about.

Says Meinert: "Retail stores like Tower closing is bad, but indie stores like Sonic Boom, Easy Street and Silver Platters seem stronger than ever. And iTunes and hopefully the new Amazon store should help pick up a lot of the loss. Media consolidation sucks, but I think that the recent rulings about payola might force some of the larger stations owned by Clear Channel to live up to the FCC laws and play more local music."

More local music on mainstream stations means more exposure for hometown indies. And more exposure means more sales. And while increased sales may not bring any local label owner closer to owning a private jet, they do help them continue to release records they are passionate about.

Having more inspired labels means only good things for listeners. As for which label will define the next decade, with all this going on, who needs just one?

**SOME OF OUR LABELS**

This is just a tiny sliver of the many record labels in the Seattle area. Please note that this list does not include everyone, nor does it include labels started by artists in order to release their own work only.

**MT. FUJI RECORDS**

*mtfujirecords.com*

**Founded:** 2002

**Roster:** The Cops, Lillydale, Little Brazil, Slender Means, Wintergreen

**Recommended if you like:** Going to The Sunset Tavern to catch a show. This label boasts an eclectic mix of bubblegum pop and gritty rock acts, just like the Ballard watering hole.

**NOC ON WOOD**

*noconwood.com*

**Founded:** 2001

**Roster:** E5th, Gator, Nocturnal Rage, Ruester, Street Kingz

**Recommended if you like:** Shaking your booty to top 40 hip-hop. This crew of producers and emcees focuses on providing sleek, dance floor-friendly rap and urban sounds.

**ORAC RECORDS**

*orac.vu*

**Founded:** 2001

**Roster:** Bruno Pronsato, Jon McMillion, Strategy, Caro, Mossa, [a]pendics.shuffle, Dapayk, Solenoid

**Recommended if you like:** All forms of electronic music. Orac provides a home to the region's burgeoning electronic scene, including purveyors of both experimental and dance floor-friendly sounds.

**ORIGIN**

*originarts.com*

**Founded:** 1997

**Roster:** More than 85 artists. New releases are out from Darrell Grant, Bobby Broom, Thomas Marriott, Geoff Stradling, Hal Galper/
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Jeff Johnson/ John Bishop, Kelly Sill/ Jim McNeely/ Joel Spencer

**Recommended if you like:** Jazz, jazz and more jazz. This label specializes in all forms of the genre with a heavy focus on local artists. Origin also produces events such as the Ballard Jazz Festival.

**PATTERN 25**

[pattern25.com](http://pattern25.com)

**Founded:** 2000

**Roster:** Smoosh, Head Like a Kite, Jon Auer, Robert Roth, Sanford Arms, Spyglass, Graig Markel, Sushirobo

**Recommended if you like:** Eclectic indie rock that's hip without being pretentious or inaccessible. Pattern 25's bands range from electronic artists to singer-songwriters.

**SUICIDE SQUEEZE**

[suicidesqueeze.net](http://suicidesqueeze.net)

**Founded:** 1996

**Roster:** Minus the Bear, Six Parts Seven, Chin Up Chin Up, Page France, Metal Hearts, Goon Moon, Headphones, Hella, Crystal Skulls, Zach Hill, Eugene Mirman, The Unicorns, We Ragazzi, Hint Hint, the Aislers Set, S, The Magic Magicians, Pedro the Lion, Red Stars Theory, Modest Mouse, 764-Hero, Elliott Smith

**Recommended if you like:** Joining into one person's singular vision. Founder David Dickenson signs music according to his taste, which can range from angular post rock to dreamy shoegaze. One thing that doesn't vary is the polished and sleek sound.

**UNIT CIRCLE REKKIDS**

[unitcircle.com](http://unitcircle.com)

**Founded:** 1991

**Roster:** Bethany Curve, Degenerate Art Ensemble, Amy Denio, Bill Horist, Intonarumori, Jupiter 88, M' lumbo, Pineal Ventana, SubArachnoid Space, The Garden, UnFolkUs, Vassily

**Recommended if you like:** Music that sounds as if it could have accompanied a space ship on a cross-universe journey. Unit Circle houses some of the city's most respected experimentalists.

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**Soundoff** (0 comments)
Do you have a favorite local music label?
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Incl. valet parking, two museum tix, breakfast, Zagat guide: $399/nt
www.perfectescapes.com

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www.watax.com

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