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ENTERTAINMENT

The sweetest music you've never heard

Reissue labels like Numero Group keep music alive

By Todd Leopold
CNN

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(CNN) -- Ken Shipley wants to sell a few records. Not necessarily millions, not necessarily enough to earn a large plaque of gold-painted plastic on the wall.

A few thousand would be nice. A few thousand to a hard-core group of people who really care about music.

"I don't think you can go into the record business [today] and think you're going to sell a million records," says Shipley, co-founder of the re-issue label the Numero Group, from his home base in Chicago, Illinois.

"The basis of our philosophy is to have loyal people [who seek out the brand]. That's more valuable than selling a million copies of one record."

So Shipley, a former A&R manager for funky-artsy (David Bowie, Frank Zappa, Bootsy Collins) label Rykodisc, is digging.

There are hundreds of records out there -- old singles and albums -- that have never gotten the proper attention, he believes. He's trying to give them an outlet.

He and his business partner, Tom Lunt, started Numero with that intent. So far, the company has released three CDs: "Eccentric Soul: The Capsoul Label," a compilation of soul music from a Columbus, Ohio, record company; "Camino Del Sol" by Antena, a reissue of a 1982 LP by an obscure French group; and "Eccentric Soul: The Bandit Label," a compilation of songs -- some of which were remastered from battered 45s and cassettes about to go to the city dump -- from a South Side Chicago label run out of what the liner notes call "a musical commune."

"We stumble into this stuff all the time," he says. "We're saving bits of Americana and



Numero No. 1: "The Capsoul Label"

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A list of hit songs on small labels, with Billboard chart position:

- "Bongo Rock," Preston Epps (Original Sound, 1959): 14
- "Daddy's Home," Shep & the Limelites (Hull, 1961): 2
- "Runaway," Del Shannon (Big Top, 1961): 1
- "Louie Louie," Kingsmen (Wand, 1963): 2

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'The majors can't be bothered'

Numero isn't the only one. Other small reissue labels, noting the majors' lack of interest in semi-obscure artists, have marched into the breach.

"The majors can't be bothered with that [kind of material]," Gordon Anderson, senior vice-president and general manager of Collectors' Choice Music, told The Hollywood Reporter.

CCM has reissued records by Terry Melcher, Sonny Bono and Andrew Gold. "That means there's a lot of catalog out there to be leveraged."

Indeed, though the majors have long dominated pop music, there used to be plenty of room for small independents and offbeat releases.

In the '50s and '60s, when pop music was a singles medium dominated by Top Forty radio stations, local disc jockeys would occasionally take chances with regional artists signed to small labels.

(The early years of rock were dotted with such labels -- names like Gone, Hull, Wand, Dunwich, Snap and Double Shot.)

Sometimes those disc jockeys could create a national hit. In 1966, a DJ in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, discovered a copy of Tommy James and the Shondells' "Hanky Panky" -- which the band had recorded three years earlier for a tiny Michigan label -- in a used-record bin and started playing it.

The ensuing frenzy prompted James to form a new Shondells, since his original band had broken up. Meanwhile, the rights to the recording were purchased by the much larger Roulette Records, and eventually the once-forgotten song hit No. 1.

But even regional acts could survive with the support of a few radio stations and a loyal concert audience, though they never had the luck (or distribution) to make the national breakthrough.

Shibley observes that one of Capsoul's artists, Johnson, Hawkins, Tatum & Durr, is one of those could-have-beens.

"They had a legitimate regional hit," he says of their 1970 song "You Can't Blame Me."

"It went to No. 1 in Columbus, Cleveland, Baltimore. ... It's so special that it even existed. They had a hit nobody ever heard of."

Shibley believes that if the group had been on Motown (one of the rare independent labels that became a colossus), the song would have been a nationwide smash.

'We've taken great care'

Putting out such music has its own challenges. Sometimes the recordings' owners are resistant to having it reissued.





Shibley personally met with Capsoul's initially reluctant founder, Bill Moss, and struck a deal after impressing Moss with his plans.

Gary Stewart, chief music officer for iTunes and former Rhino Records A&R head -- the driving force behind such sets as the punk/New Wave "DIY" collection and the '70s compilation "Have a Nice Day" -- says that licensing can run the gamut from


- "(Just Like) Romeo & Juliet," Reflections (Golden World, 1964): 6
- "Psychotic Reaction," Count Five (Double Shot, 1966): 5
- "Gloria," Shadows of Knight (Dunwich, 1966): 10
- "Hanky Panky," Tommy James and the Shondells (Snap, 1963; later Roulette, 1966): 1


Source: "The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits," Joel Whitburn

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"very easy to very difficult or impossible."

"Usually the person is excited somebody cares," he says, though sometimes "you encounter somebody who's bitter about the record industry and wants to make up for it [with you]."

However, "if you demonstrate a passion for music and do a little bit of deal-making, anybody who wants to can do it," Stewart says.

Then there's the recording quality. In the case of Bandit, some of the songs were available only on cassette tapes or beat-up singles, neither the best audio medium to start from.

"We've taken great care [in improving the sound quality]," Shipley says. "What if this the last chance?"

With the Bandit songs, Shipley entrusted his mastering guru, Jeff Lipton at Peerless Mastering, to do the best he could.

"This isn't going to sound amazing," he admits, "but it's going to sound good."



Shipley obviously cares a great deal, and sees Rhino as a model. "That level of quality is what I see [for Numero]," he says. To that end, the CDs are beautifully packaged and filled with informed liner notes.



So if Numero sells a few thousand copies of "The Capsoul Label" or "Camino Del Sol," that's fine with him. He just wants to do it right.

"The windfall will be on a karmic level," he says. "We're helping to change the lives [of the forgotten musicians]. It humbles you in a lot of ways."


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