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A beginner's guide to indie

What is indie anyway? To me, indie music is more than just an aesthetic, it's a lifestyle. It's about doing it yourself, crafting your songs and laying them to tape. It's about setting shows up yourself, making posters and having fun with music.

In these days of Nada Surf and Oasis, it's not surprising where all the meaning in music has gone. It seems to be about money and massive tours and, in essence, just a sick reflection of the capitalist society we live in. Luckily, all is not this bleak though my friends. True indieism still exists; there are still people releasing records and losing money. Thank goodness for that. My purpose here is just to give you a little guide to relevant North American (with a major lean towards Canadian) indie music today. I'll try to cover as much ground as I can geographically, because there are a lot of great labels all over the nation. But don't expect this to be a comprehensive discussion-indie music has grown to enormous proportions in the last 10, heck even 5 years. There are now over 200 independent labels in Canada alone, and that's only by some smarty pants guy's count, so I'm sure the actual number is close to 300 if you count all the itsy bitsy labels (like mine). One thing to keep in mind is that very few "indie" labels nowadays are truly independent. Often you'll find that they are affiliated with a major label, sometimes in terms of a manufacturing or distribution deal like our friends Murderecords (see below) who are in bed with MCA. Anyway, let's get started...

Out here in the East, Murderecords has established itself as a quality label dealing primarily in pop rock stylings. As you may already know, the label is run by members of the Halifax band, Sloan, who recently released a sweet album called *One Chord To Another*. Murder lays claim to most of the best of the East Coast rock scene: The Superfriendz continue to grow in popularity, Thrush Hermit penned a major deal with Elektra earlier this year and will release a new full length this coming February and The Local Rabbits' live performances are quickly becoming legendary. Murder has become the type of label you can trust and each new release is worth at least a listen. Recommended listening- Superfriendz *Mock Up, Scale Down*, The Local Rabbits *You Can't Touch This* and Richard Davies *There's Never Been a Crowd Like This*.

Moving closer to home, Sackville's Sappy Records has also been turning some heads lately. Originally, it seemed that the label would only be a vehicle for Eric's Trip related projects, but this silly talk has since been put to rest. Moncton natives Orange Glass have released a few seven inch records on the label and have just put out a full length CD on Squirtgun Records. Former Moncton native turned Wooden Star and Ottawa resident, Mike Feuerstack has a great 7" out on the label under his solo moniker, Snailhouse, and there are also plans for a full-length CD. Sappy moved into CD territory this past spring with the release of label owner Julie's gorgeous Broken Girl CD. Julie will be heading down to Memphis next month to record a new album for Sub Pop at Easley Studios with Dave Shouse (of The Memphis schlunk-rock outfit The Grifters). Expect more good things to come from Sappy, including an Inbreds single. Recommended listening- Broken Girl *s/t*, Orange Glass *Circle Dance 7"* and Snailhouse *s/t 7"*.

Moving west, we hit Montreal's fabulous Derivative Records. Derivative has thrived on releasing records for bands from all over the map. Some of their better imports include Sportsuitar, a strange duo from Switzerland who revel in guitar-laden pop, and The Grifters, the aforementioned Memphis schlunkers. On the Canadian side of things, Derivative has released stuff for Spool, a London-based quartet that sound almost too much like Pavement. As well, they've gotten in the CD game with the releases of former Eric's Tripper Moon Socket's *Socket To Me* CD and the new Pest 5000 album (whose members include Derivative gurus Patti and Kevin). An admirable quality of Derivative releases is that they always have great packaging. I like that. Recommended listening - The Grifters *Stream* and Spool *Callous Makers*.

In Toronto, there are indie labels coming out of every nook and cranny all the time, but none as good as Lunamoth records. I'm not sure what their exact affiliation is with big daddy Virgin records, but I know there is one. Anyway, Lunamoth has been relatively quiet in the recent past, but is releasing the new Wooden Stars album this month. The label is also home to Canada's finest band, Change of Heart (whose new album will hit the streets in January), as well as King Cobb Steele and Ui. Hopefully, they will continue to grow and flourish and put out more delightful treats. Recommended listening - Change of Heart *Timmysuckle* and Wooden Stars *The Very Same*.

Hamilton's Sonic Unyon Records are the undisputed kings of promotion. Simply put, a band could not be luckier to sign to any other label. These guys take good care of their bands. Although the label is only a few years old, it has taken the country by storm and changed the face of Canadian indie music. It has helped make Hayden a folk icon and teen heart throb. It has blasted treble charger into the realms of major labelness. It was one of the first record labels (to my knowledge) to include a CD-ROM track on a CD along with music. It has set more trends than Calvin Klein and Kramer combined. All hail the mighty Unyon! Recommended listening - Sianspheric' *Somnium*, Hayden *Everything I Long For* and Tristan Psionic *TPA Flight 028*.



Although I could go on and on about Canadian indie music (oh yeah, I already have) I'll just mention one more label before we move south. Vancouver's Mint Records have made a marked impact on the West Coast scene. With their help, Cub has garnered a massive following throughout the continent. Huevos Rancheros has become a notable surf instrumental combo and Duotang has started to collect a following of their own. Recommended listening- Huevos Rancheros *Dig In*, Cub *Come Out, Come Out* and The Smugglers *Selling The Sizzle*.

Now, the most significant of the American indie labels, starting with Sub Pop Records. It's hard to really consider them an 'indie' label anymore, since Warner owns 49% of them, but their methods haven't changed. They're just bigger. Sub Pop is really no stranger to any music fan: they brought Nirvana to the world to be worshipped by 12-year olds all over the globe; they provided an early home for Soundgarden; they were essentially to blame for the whole 'Seattle' thing (as well as the coining of the 'grunge' term). Nowadays, Sub Pop is more diverse than one would like to believe. They continually shock me with their eclectic nature. From blatant country bands (Scud Mountain Boys) to experimental electronic music (Earth), Sub Pop's got it all. They continue to release loads of 7"s as well, a format that they were partly responsible for bringing back into style. Although I wouldn't call them an all-round quality label (they have released some pretty horrible records), Sub Pop is always one to watch. Recommended listening - Scud Mountain Boys *Massachusetts*, Nirvana *Bleach*, Sebadoh *Bakesale* and Six Finger Satellite *Severe Exposure*.

The other major player in the American indie scene is Matador Records. This label has only put out around 230 releases, but has built a massive fan base throughout the world. In the recent past, it has become the label that bands jump to when they want to remain indie, yet also want to have better distribution. One example is Guided By Voices, who left Scat Records in '94 for Matador after the release of their Box Set. Lead singer Bob Pollard claims that this move was made because they felt that their music wasn't reaching the audience it could be and, as the success of their two Matador albums *Aliens Lanes* and *Under The Bushes*, *Under The Stars* has shown, he was right. Matador has also made Liz Phair and Pavement household names for the Lollapalooza generation. Recommended listening - Guided By Voices *Alien Lanes*, Pavement *Slanted And Enchanted*, Jon Spencer Blues Explosion *Orange* and Liz Phair *Exile From Guyville*.

There are plenty of other noteworthy American indies, but time is money kids and we can only recommend a few places to start. Other ones that you should definitely check out are Drag City in Chicago (Palace, Smog, Silver Jews) and Merge in Chapel Hill (Superchunk, Lambchop). Good luck on your indie journey, my children, and may music make you happy.

- Jon Bartlett

Address List (write 'em for a catalogue/info on their bands):

Murderecords P.O. Box 2372, Halifax Central, Halifax, NS, B3J 3E4
Sappy P.O. Box 25097, Moncton, NB, E1C 9M9
Derivative P.O. Box 42031, Montreal, Que., H2W 2T3
Sonic Unyon P.O. Box 57347, Jackson Station, Hamilton, ON, L8P 4X2
Mint #699-810 W. Broadway, Vancouver, BC, V5Z 4C9
Sub Pop Canada 2255 B Queen St. E., Suite 3268, Toronto, ON, M4E 1G3
Matador 676 Broadway, 4th floor, New York, NY, 10012
Merge P.O. Box 1235, Chapel Hill, NC, 27514
Drag City #210-119 N. Peoria St., Chicago, IL, 60647

And on the local scene

The Fredericton music scene's been around longer than I have. Now, when I say the local scene, I mean, for the most part, Do It Yourself (DIY) gigs and the bands that play them... (usually not "bar bands", there is a difference, but I don't want to rant about that right now...and I'm not saying anything bad about all bar bands). The scene is usually deemed to be the "punk scene". What's that mean? I don't know. To figure out what that means, you've got to know what punk means... and that's a whole other article.

Fredericton's music scene has seen a lot of ups and downs, as does any other scene. It seems that lately it's been getting a bit healthier (i.e. more new bands), and that's good. Earlier this year though, it was going down hill quite a lot. So why does a scene get bigger or smaller? I think that the scene was going down hill because the kids were getting spoiled. The local all ages promoters were bringing in a lot of big named Epitaph bands (always a favorite at the shows), and usually letting a local band or two to open (which is good)...The problem is that everyone got used to seeing these better known bands, and wouldn't show up to a concert just with local bands (a definite scene killer). I think the turn around happened this summer. Usually the summer time has a lot of great shows, but this summer had no shows at all. I think that this is what gave the scene the boost it needed. People started to miss going to shows, and they missed the music. As a result of all this, people started getting their own bands together, and start going to shows, just for the sake of going to a show. Also, now it seems that rather than relying on the same people to put on shows, people are finally doing something for themselves and putting them on. DIY.

Being in a band myself, my opinions and experiences tend to differ from people who go just to watch the bands. For one, I have a lot of respect for people who put on the shows, because I know how much work it is to do. I remember when I was going to gigs just as an on-looker and I remember more or less never giving it any thought to how a show might come to be. I guess I just thought they were just these things that happened every so often. When you think like that, it's obviously easy to take it for granted. That's why people who go to gigs, whether in bands or not, need to get involved in the scene more. If the scene is to thrive and grow, more people need to start setting up shows, making 'zines, getting the word out that there's a scene to get into and gigs to go see. It's all got to be about pooling resources and knowledge to get things done. Some of you may not even know that these gigs even take place, because often they're not really advertised very well. Usually your only notice are posters around downtown about a week in advance. Word of mouth is usually the best way to spread the word of a gig and that's why the more people that go, the better.

So I guess I've avoided the topic of bands here quite nicely - you'll have to take my word for it that there are several. Some even have tapes, and/or records...were do you get them? Usually at one of the two downtown record stores (Backstreet, or Purple Haze) or right from the band. Don't think that local bands are any good? How do you know that without hearing them? At least give them a listen. If you don't like them after that...that's fine with me.

- Andrew DeMerchant