

UNSUNG HEROES

Uncle Stevie talks to the people running Fredericton's only independent record label

Setting up an independent record label anywhere in the world can be distinctly dodgy. Skull breaking hard work, morale crushing disappointments and financial institutions treating you like a dose of something nasty, it's definitely not a job for the lily-livered. It's a task that requires 115% commitment and genuine willingness; an interest to promote young fresh talent onto the blasters and decks of a nation's youth that is more apt to be shampooing the hamster to the strains of Binty Grosston and Bum Jovi. But, that said - in Fredericton, New Brunswick?! What sort of craze-spawned nutters, hell-bent on self-destruction, would even consider taking on such a doomed project? After all, isn't this the town that tried to run me down because I wear striped pants? (Steady on! - Ed.) The town that is home to 40,000 baseball caps. Who are they these latter-day Johnny Risk-Takers?

Not frenzied nutters at all actually. Surprisingly enough it was to be a young charming and articulate husband and wife team that have set up the Canadian Independent label "Dressed To Kill" (DTK).

Peter Rowan and Dawn Aeron Wilson (for it is they) have been hard at work on the business for nearly a year now. During that time they have released two albums by local artists with a distinctly alternative feel and the sound track to a locally produced film (see opposite page). But that's not all. They have also been single-handedly responsible for coaxing in a number of bands from all over Canada as well as setting up venues for the local heroes of the music scene. Quite commendable activity in the face of an otherwise insipid and bland entertainment scene characterized by bulging satin cod-pieces belching out inane nonsense that shouldn't have been let out of the elevator.

So is it a business set up in the interests of local acts?

PETER: No. Not specifically anyway; first and foremost we regard ourselves as a CANADIAN independent record label. Although it's true that our first releases are from this

locale we are more broadly concerned with doing whatever we can to help any Canadian artists to further their potential. Right now I find the Canadian music scene an extremely exciting one and regard it as one of the most productive and innovative areas too. Ten years ago I was spending all my pocket money on British Imports. Today I'm happy just to listen to stuff put out in my own country.

For instance our next recording project will be with a band from Toronto called 'One Free Fall' which some of your readers will remember from last year.

But you have to admit Freddy is a bit off the beaten track for an independent record label...

PETER: Yeah, we really have to work hard in terms of promotion and getting people to actually realize that we exist. Of course given the restricted nature of our budget we're not able to take our bands out on a massive country-wide tour...

DAWN:We realized this a long time ago but we do have the video medium at our disposal. Using videos we can get at an audience in their living rooms without having to rely on live performances - even if we were able to do that.

The videos are out then?

PETER: Yeah. We have a video out for both the Vogons and Decade of Dreams. So far the interest has been good and we feel that if anything we're able to produce video material that is as good as, even much better than, any other band based on an independent label. We also have interest in terms of a novelty value: that is the fact that we are actually from the Maritimes. We're not usually seen as a place that is visually and musically creative in upper 'Canada'.

What about the danger that you are being patronized in an almost condescending way? - a kind of 'Ho-Ho let's see what they're doing in the sticks'-type of attitude?

DAWN: Well it works both ways. At this stage we're willing to use anything anything that is available to us. Even so there hasn't been any really patronizing attitude aimed at us that we're aware of. Certainly the people at Much

Music have treated us well without any of the sort of thing you mentioned. We do realize we're a bit of a novelty though.

PETER: That's right, we're willing to use anything at this stage just to get our foot in the door. We certainly couldn't expect to run a label out of here for ever and ever...

...So the ideal situation would be if you moved to somewhere like Montreal or Toronto and still have your fingers in the soil back here.

PETER: Exactly. We love living here and of course there's our job to think of, but we just cannot get exposure for our bands in a town of this size and separation from the major centres.

So how about the local talent then?

PETER: Well, you may remember the battle of the bands contest that CMSR organized five months ago. (Article to follow soon? - Ed.) Yeah, that's right.

PETER: We did receive over 46 entries, but by and large I was disappointed with the overall quality. In fact there was only about three or four that seemed to have any direction at all.

DAWN: We were actually quite upset to see a lot of people stay out of the whole affair because they didn't think that they would have a chance, considering who won the last one. (Holly Rio: a cabaret pianist; I think - Ed.) What's more, some of the bands that did play drastically altered their styles in some kind of Faustian way to increase their prospects for winning.

PETER: Even the bands from outside of town (it was open to the whole maritime nation - Ed.) were badly represented because they thought only a Fredericton band could win, but obviously we know they're out there...

DAWN: Yeah, otherwise we wouldn't have started in the first place.

OK, so let's take a hypothetical situation here - if I wanted to get my shoddy but aspiring young dirt band out of the garage and into the faces of the punters, how could you help me?

DAWN: All you would have to do is show us that you have some decent material - a tape of three of four songs - you'd

need to show us you were committed obviously, and if we were impressed we'd talk seriously about backing you.

So I've got me instruments and me songs together, what now?

PETER: Being ridiculously simplistic, we would get you into the studios, cut a record, deal with the distribution, graphics, whatever avenues of promotion were open to us...

So at this early stage money wouldn't be a problem for me?

DAWN: No. We would get you to sign a contract that entitles us to the return of our investment and take it from there.

I hope you realize you are going to be inundated with tapes now!

PETER: We wish! We have let it be known quite loudly that we want to hear from as many people as we can, and if there is anybody out there with just such an idea, please don't hesitate - send it in! Obviously we have our own standards of selection but we are always very willing to listen to anything that we receive and provide as much help as we can to anybody that's interested.

What about the live acts? You've enticed about nine bands to come to this outpost of fresh expression since your instigation - how would you say it has gone overall?

DAWN: Realistically speaking, not very well at all. There is just a basic unwillingness to support this kind of live entertainment. Even when we've advertised on local commercial radio there has been a ridiculously low turn-out.

PETER: Yeah - losing over two thousand dollars just on the live shows can hurt. It stopped being fun when there was not only a bad attitude on behalf of the potential audience but also from the authorities. Hand posters and flyers are probably our most substantial form of advertising and as soon as people see them they immediately assume we are putting up some kind of hardcore thrash band.

What about on-campus entertainment?

DAWN: For us it's almost out of the question. The Social Club, for example, appears to be presently quite unwilling to host a venue that sounds remotely alternative.

PETER: Another thing is the problem with liquor regulations. We're often faced with the prospect of having forty or fifty kids that can't get into the concerts because they are underage and can't get anyone to sign them in. We take away liquor sales and we lost the older audience even when there are places like Rumours (ie. near Monsignor Boyd - Ed.) nearby which they could visit

between sets.

DAWN: As for the Social Club, we've even said that we would supply the several thousand dollars to pay the band and they could take care of bar sales.

PETER: Even when they wouldn't listen. We've even had some problems with the campus police. Most of the time the guys have been selected because they are open minded but we have had some troubles with heavy handedness from some of the bouncers simply because they don't understand or don't like the way the kids are behaving. As a result, some of the bands got quite pissed off and didn't want to come back.

DAWN: Make no mistake though, we still want to get more bands in.

PETER: Oh yeah, we realized a long time ago that the only way we were going to see bands that we like was to bring them in ourselves. There's no doubt that we do enjoy it, we do enjoy meeting the bands and vice versa. They have a good time. Funnily enough they seem quite surprised about the fact that we do actually pay them and feed them! (Laughs)

So what can we expect?

DAWN: Oh a good selection, I think. At the moment we're making of the Grapes of Wrath, 5470, One Free Fall and Sons of the Desert.

PETER: We're actually lucky to see Tim Judah acting as student union entertainment manager this year. He seems really progressive in his thoughts about providing a refreshing blend of entertainment. So despite all out moaning, the prospect of real on-campus entertainment may still exist.

So in the end we should wholeheartedly applaud the efforts of Peter and Dawn in their attempts to bring some fresh air to a scenario that is disappointingly characterized by stagnancy and the contemplation of wall-paper patterns. I can only hope that they will persist in the face of all the difficulties and dissension from those of us that would rather twiddle our thumbs to regurgitated top 40 gibberish in a safe haven of safe pop.

There's some old guy standing on the corner of King and Regent having a conversation with a paving slab and I give him a couple of cigarettes to try and get him to let go of my jacket. It's Sunday night. It's coming down like rodents off a flat rock but I turn up my collar and disappear into the drizzle whistling a potpourri of Decade of Dreams songs. The next couple of months might not be that bad after all.