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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 1855 words.

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On taking your work seriously without getting overwhelmed

Record label founder and leader Sam Valenti IV (Ghostly International) discusses consistency, finding your audience, and valuing your work.
Does your art history background impact how you approach the label?

It's sort of like a classic liberal arts degree that you don't have a real plan for. What I like about art history, even self-taught and my own personal education beyond college, is that it grounds you. There's an anti-history thing happening right now, where I feel like it's like let's throw out the old guard. A lot of it's with good reason, I get why. The idea of institution, higher education, the idea of cis white male artists being this pedigree. I like that things are being upended. I like seeing how culture moves back and forth.

It's more about human nature and that a lot of these things that we think are new are not actually new. We think we're at the precipice of the most dynamic time because there's more information, more science, more money. People have been dealing with these fears for thousands of years, about government, about taste, and about how to present yourself. There's so much available now to learn, especially free. It's great to have a study, whatever that is, that grounds you. It's a nerve wracking time if you have no basis in history.

People have been stressed about art and money and expression for a long, long time. I think that's comforting in a weird way. TV was the devil, and maybe still is, but everyone was like, "Oh, the TV viewing public, everyone's going to be so stupid." Then that was the internet and then now. You have to remember that we're part of a bigger continuum. It helps you from getting overwhelmed.

You described the Detroit scene that Ghostly was born out of as 'serious.' What stands out?

I never exactly thought of it in that frame. I would maybe have used the word sincere at the time. Even friends of mine and I had a fake manifesto about sincerity, and we were in college. It seems extremely precious now, but the idea was more like, to use your word, "Let's take it seriously and apply our shared efforts." Especially now we're all kind of afraid to be parodies of ourselves and we're afraid to be overzealous. It's a weird flip-flop, but there's an intention that a lot of artists have that I admire.

It doesn't mean being self-serious. Taking your work seriously is important, even if it's early. Valuing it even though people around you may not. You have to lean into what you do for someone else to lean into it. That's a hard line to hit. Wanting to be taken seriously by Detroit, which was and is a very intentional place, people will judge if you don't come correct which I like about it, but also be okay being yourself. It's that dance between awareness and self-awareness, intention and sincerity.

It's interesting how the size of a city can impact this.

That's why you incubate your own scene too. There's a macro scene of the city that comes before you, the history of the city, especially in New York and LA. Then there's the people you communicate with daily that you are doing gigs with. We used to have club nights in Ann Arbor and Detroit. Every week it was a little bit of exercise. I probably didn't think of it that way, but you'd bring the new MP3 that you just exported, play it, road test it. Obviously if it sucks, you're not failing, but you're iterating.

I like the idea of keeping yourself inside of a group of people that you trust that also want it as bad as you do. Then taking that to the stage. You get your butt kicked a lot. A lot of my memories with the label is overreaching too hard on certain projects or being over our heads on certain things where we thought we

were ready for something we weren't. It forces you to reeducate and not be afraid. It is a cliché, but failure really is part of the deal.

Were there non-American labels you saw as templates?

For sure. Historically there's the DNA labels of indie music culture, Rough Trade, Factory Records and 4AD, the seventies, eighties British thing. In Detroit there were a lot of local labels, still are, that are self-owned, self-financed and self-distributed. It made it seem accessible, back to the DIY aspect of it. Both were templates. One was more majestic or mystical to me. That you could have a band as weird as Joy Division and they could in some form change the world, but then locally have records that were made in a basement, travel the world and change the world too, like a Jeff Mills or an Underground Resistance. They're lessons in presentation. How do you tell a story? Especially without video, without internet, how do you get a message across? I love the theatrics and the presentation of independent labels as a template. How do you tell a story without tons of capital or access to major marketing? Great record labels have been doing that for decades.

When did you first notice America embracing electronic music? What change did it bring?

It's not quite as cyclical anymore. I think about the EDM thing a lot, how it was tricky. At the time people were like, "Well, electronic music is blowing up." Maybe it's because I'm not the best A&R person, but it's okay to know that you don't have to be part of every wave, to use another surfing metaphor. It doesn't mean it's bad, it's just like, "Well, that's a wave someone else is taking and hopefully it will lift us too." Some good things came out of that era. We didn't have a direct line to it, but I do think it led to rising tides raising all boats. Sometimes we forget that not every audience is our audience, and that's okay. We're not failing because we're not reaching every single person who might like electronic music.

What are some of the larger music tech shifts you've weathered?

It's harder as you get older because your risk tolerance changes. Music is still driven by young people, so you want to adhere to that. As an Ann Arbor person, I accept that I'm not going to like everything and nor should I. You bring other people in who have a better sense of it. My attitude has always been, in all of these micro movements, there's usually something that's being presented that will benefit our philosophy and the type of artists that we work with.

We came in at the same time as piracy and Napster, Limewire, a big part of how music got to people in a CD era. That benefited a lot of artists, it also created a sense of the idea of taste sharing. That's why I do my newsletter. The fun of that and the fun of MySpace was, I could look into your crate, so to speak, and see what you're into. That's a human instinct that isn't going to go away. Streaming obviously has detractors, but you're like, "Okay, how do I reach as many people as possible?" Social media is a double-edged sword, but these are all tools.

You try to have a critical eye of what's not working. I believe in misusing platforms. Don't just try to do what the most successful person does, do it the way that's a little wonky and people will still understand what you're doing. Our job as creative people is to make the most of the tools that are available and that includes misusing them.

What's your work-life balance like?

I admire people who have a good demarcation of personal and professional. Integrating fun or habit into your practice. I'm getting better, but it's hard because it still is a "nine to five" world you have to deal with. You have to make sure people are available, try to make the most of each other's time. Writing the newsletter is my best effort at something consistent, more for the sense of shipping something that has no business objective. It's just pleasure, connection and community. You have to schedule everything from my experience. I'm still learning how to do that.

You've maintained the newsletter for a few years now, right?

Just about three. It's almost like having a pen pal. The fact that it's routine and formalized makes it easy to explain what it is. Whenever people are like, "I want to start a newsletter" I'm like, "What's the thing you consistently want to do?" Some people can rip a blog post once a week and it's hot and fresh, but I don't want to be afraid I'm not going to have an idea or I have to come up with a bad one just to ship. It's a form of giving flowers and showing appreciation.

What are some of the most important conversations you have with up and coming artists?

We all think we speak the same language and 'success' is a weird word because it implies validation financially or people wise. Maybe satisfaction is a better word. It's like satisfaction is such a big part of creative work, whether you're releasing it, shepherding it or editing it. Some people just like to be part of the process and help. We're helping someone see themselves. Great managers do this. Asking what actually is success? Each record, project, book, is like building a statue. I think about mountaineering, you don't just go up. It's not a linear thing. It's important to ask, what do you want out of this? That doesn't mean the whole artistic move that you're making. It means this project, what is this? Is it "I want to go on tour"? Okay, let's put everything towards that energy. I want to stream a lot, I want to license music. People are afraid of setting goals, myself included, because you're afraid of not getting

them, but if you don't, you'll end up being like, was that worth my time? That's the pain of not identifying what the goal is as a group or as an individual.

I'm into the idea of artistic practice. How do you get inspiration? How do you ship, how do you communicate, how do you share? Developing what you see as a practice that's sustainable. I am very much in favor of when artists can or want to have day jobs. I think it's a great thing. Put yourself in a position to be able to continue to make work as your best bet to succeed. Creativity is this daring-ness. It's a lot more about consistency and attentiveness than doing something wild. It's iteration versus inspiration. It's a little bit of both.

Sam Valenti IV recommends:

Gin Gins Ginger Candy

Gorilla Heavy Duty Packaging Tape

Plackers Grind No More Dental Guard

Patagonia Boxer Briefs - 6"

Name

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Vocation

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Fact

Tim Saccenti and Dina Chang

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