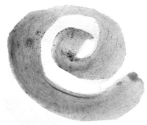
19 things I’d tell people contemplating starting a record label (after running one for 19 years)



Brassland co-founder Alec Hanley Bemis explains what he's learned during almost two decades of running a label.

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As told to Alec Hanley Bemis, 3239 words.

1.

My first advice to anyone telling me they want a life in music is to say “It’s hard, don’t do it.” If they take that advice, they don’t want it enough. If they persist, they might have a shot.

2.

Be against perfectionism: I am all for perfect recordings. Discovering and releasing them is why we do this—because a song can be perfect in a way the world will never be, because riches will rain down on you if you find a recording that is both unimprovable and moves people’s hearts. What I mean by being ‘against perfectionism’ is that it is rare that either the artist responsible for making a perfect recording or the label releasing it are aware they’ve happened upon something perfect until the audience gets their ears on it. (Ok, in my career I’ve witnessed one exception.)

3.

Neither drugs nor money will help in the long run.

4.

Consume more than you produce: It is your responsibility as someone helping to set the world’s aesthetic agenda to not release crap into this world; not release things just because you can; and not release things just because they will make you money. So don’t *just* publish. Instead, sometimes just listen: dedicate yourself to learning as much about music that already exists as you do contributing new music to our cultural ecosystem. This advice applies to anyone publishing or shepherding the works of others: a small poetry press, gallery owners, film producers, etc.

5.

Be early or be late: the middle is a drag: I find artists tend to be the most interesting at the start and mature phase[1] of their careers—before they know who they are, and then when they're trying to redefine or reboot their creativity. Generally speaking, it's those middle years of attempted hit making, pandering or attempting to conform to new and emerging trends that are the most tedious. And there are business reasons to focus on early or late career musicians as well: large swaths of this business are devoted to harvesting the efforts of already successful artists for fun and profit. (Mostly profit.) There is a reason the term "vulture"[2] is applied to music industry professionals with disturbing frequency.

6.

Musicians are people: Respect them and observe the golden rule: treat them as you'd like to be treated.

7.

Crossing over is not the goal, but success is not the enemy: The first half of this maxim is self-evident within the kind of eclectic, DIY and alternative musical communities I inhabit. Strangely, it is the second half that is less intuitive so let me restate it: when opportunities come, please take them. I've worked with too many artists who have turned down what could have been their moment of widest exposure: opening for a more successful artist — accepting an offer to put their music in a commercial for mobile phones — letting a mainstream publication or TV program feature their work. Sometimes I think shitty culture dominates because quality culture makers abdicate opportunities, while opportunist culture makers happily take every chance they get to dominate our social media feeds, our streaming TV services, our lame television award shows, et. cetera.

8.

Take the long view: I often say if an artist isn't selling more records, making more money or making better art five years after I have put out their records, that we've collectively failed at something. Be skeptical of overnight successes. (p.s. I still like those songs by Lil Nas X and Tones And I[3]

9.

Art is a political act: By definition[4], art is a form of speech — so art is never apolitical. Even instrumental music or an abstract picture represents communities and histories — and contributes to the world we live in, the cultural oxygen we breathe, the mood in the air. Trying to make explicitly political art sometimes makes for an awkward mix — and I'm not advocating for musicians to write odes to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, or for painters to make respectful portraits of Barack Obama or parodic ones of Donald Trump. But I do think your first duty as a publisher is to keep in mind your contribution to the discourse; to prioritize the conversation around art over the demands of commerce; to make a statement about your perspective on the world with everything you release.

10.

Software not hardware: The music industry is built on talented people not on elegantly engineered pipes for administration and distribution. Streaming music is *the future* right now but it almost surely will not be forever; just as physical product gave way to digital downloads which gave way to the Internet ether, another

form of consumption may, one day, be ascendant. Only the artists are forever, and I'd advise anyone building a business on recorded music to focus your energies on them. That said let me now address some of the basic infrastructure that will surely be part of running your affairs…

11.

Contracts are good: I'm not saying you have to hire a lawyer. I'm not saying you need to sign a dense, 30 page document written in unintuitive legalese. However, it's a good idea for you and the artists you're planning to work with to have an agreement, in writing, that defines the terms of your business relationship. This can be as simple as an email dialogue between artist and label in which each side explicitly agree upon a few simple aspects of that relationship: the term, territory, how money will be split up if a profit is made and if the agreement will apply only to an existing recording or to future ones. Contracts protect artists from labels, but they also protect labels from artists or, more accurately, lawyers, managers, and other labels/distributors competing in the marketplace.

12.

Banking and accounting is part of your business: Sorry it's true! At its essence that is essentially what a label does: you spend money to take risks on unproven talent; if you make money it needs to be correctly counted and classed as it comes from a distributor or DSP, then correctly paid out to artists if profit is achieved. Conversely, I don't think anyone gets into running a record label because their primary interest is in banking and accounting. So please, at least be aware of this tension before starting a label; you'll spend a lot of time supervising this kind of numbers work.

13.

Develop a strong second sense for spotting assholes; don't work with them. The lead singer who is terrible to their bandmates, the publicist who is sketchy to their employees or interns, the magazine publisher who has no knowledge of music/art/aesthetics yet seems a bit too proud of their tastes: stay away; make no exceptions.

14.

The most terrifying 9 words in the English language are: "I am a businessperson and I'm here to help": This is an addendum to my last point. You should run your business honestly and efficiently; you should hire good bookkeepers, tax advisors, and accounts; you should work with distributors who have a reputation for paying their bills; and associate only with artist managers and promotion companies that are straightforward about finances. However, you should not be so deluded as to think music is a good business. And you should be suspicious of anyone who says that they are drawn to working in the arts because they like the business side of it. If they're saying that, they are dumb because there are simply better ways to make money, and creativity is inherently indifferent to money. Or, as an acquaintance Greg Saunier, the incredible drummer from Deerhoof, recently posted on a social network: "The definition of music is not profit. People talk about music like it was invented by Adam Smith in the 1770s."[5] Weirdly, the vice versa is more true: money itself is as much a product of our imaginations as a great pop song or a painter's mid-career touring retrospective. I'd recommend Lawrence Weschler's book about the money artist J.S.G. Boggs on this topic.[6] An even more influential book on my thinking about this in recent years has been Yuval Noah Harari's Sapiens, which opens with an extended riff about how our most influential tools — gods, nations, money — are no more 'real' than a movie or a painting; rather they are collective delusions around which many people have chosen to organize their lives.[7] So put money in its place. It sometimes rewards the magic of great creative thinking; but it's not a system of belief around which to orient your life. Business should be subservient to making and sharing great art.

15.

Genre does not exist and thankfully the wider public is starting to realize it: The fluidity of genre has been an established belief among our greatest musicians for a long long time: Steve Reich idolized John Coltrane and trained in African percussion. In the early days of UK punk, some of the most popular music was dub, ska and reggae. Africa Bambaataa's biggest hit—"Planet Rock"—sampled Kraftwerk's "Trans-Europe Express." What genre do Bob Dylan and Nina Simone fit into besides "greatness"? I won't even broach the multiethnic, multiracial, international stew that created the uniquely American "genres" of country and rock. But music that simultaneously lives in two or more musical worlds is nothing new. What's exciting about pop and indie music in 2020 is that I'm not sure the public has ever been so disinterested in pigeonholing their own listening habits. These days, when an "indie" rocker collaborates with a mega-popstar be it Solange and Dave Longstreth of Dirty Projectors, or Jack Antanoff with Lorde, Lana Del Ray and Taylor Swift, their respective audiences love it. The pop stars aren't told they are being too obscure; the indie artists aren't accused of selling out. Finally I was excited that in the wake of America's recent protest wave, Republic Records—one of the biggest labels in the world—said they would ban the word "urban" as a genre term and in job titles. More ridiculously the Grammys updated the name of their "Urban Contemporary" category to "Progressive R&B" which, like everything tied to artistic awards, is kind of stupid. But, you know what?: I'm into all of it. More progress, please.

16.

Define success your own way: Monetary success will not necessarily make your label better or you happier. What happened to Blue Note Records after Norah Jones? Or Nonesuch after the Black Keys? Creation after Oasis? XL after Adele? In all those cases, I'd argue that the labels became worse — more risk averse, less creative or, at least, less weird and inspired. In some cases temporarily; in other cases permanently. This is a formula that can be applied to artists' creativity as well. The National are the rarest thing: a forever band whose music is culturally relevant and destined for the history books. But there was something particularly intriguing about them when they were struggling. Back in the early days, some of The National's gigs felt like watching a ragged but incredible show by The Fall, others like watching U2 in their prime. That wide aesthetic bandwidth is a thrill that is unique to artists who have not become 'professionals' yet and are still figuring it out in public. To be clear: I wouldn't wish my worst enemy an entire career (or life) mimicking that of The Fall's Mark E. Smith. I'm happy The National have graduated to arenas and headlining festivals, and they fill those rooms with light and sound in a way developing artists only dream about. But the unpredictability of those early years was something very special, too. It's nice to see them continuing to chase that state of flux: I have savored attending all of the 37dO3d events which Brassland's co-founders Aaron and Bryce Dessner have mounted over the past half-decade. At those gatherings, the same magic of discovery from those early The National gigs recurs: the sense of artists making something brand new, messy and human live on stage. My point is this: pay just as close attention to the journey as to the destination. The difficult journey to success holds many secrets to making great art—and it takes a lot of intention to recreate those conditions once you've found fame and/or fortune. Some artists never find their way back.

17.

This is not forever: It is a dark truism little discussed outside of private conversations among music industry professionals that many "successful" artists have a career lifespan of about five years. The heyday of a successful label should be longer than that by several measures but it's probably not forever and, I'd argue, should not even aspire to be forever. Labels are in the art business and art is always about making a statement and not always about growth. Personally, I try really hard to work exclusively with 'lifers' — but that doesn't mean I'm seeking out a Bob Dylan who is going to tour almost 100 days a year into his 70s. (Sidenote: Bob, if you're reading this and looking for a new label, you can call me!) What 'lifers' means is that I'm seeking out people who want a life in or near music, even if they're not always the star attraction.

18.

Traditionally music is a young person's game; aspire to change this: You probably know the legend of the 27 Club: the myth that iconic artists are sometimes fated to die at age 27.[8] Well that shit is only getting worse: Lil Peep, 2017, age 21 — XXXTentacion, 2018, 20 — Juice WRLD, 2019, age 21. All dead. Putting aside any debate about their talent, this recent phenomenon begs us to ask some big questions: Is there any other industry in which 16-27 year olds are not only the greatest consumers, but also valorized as the greatest producers? And here's the thing: if you give much thought to artists who made their greatest works while in that age cohort, then fell off and did not die, it paints an even uglier picture. Does anyone really aspire to be like Morrissey or the Strokes in 2020? I mean, ick. Their precocious early work is undeniably impressive. But their careers pale in comparison to that of artists who were just getting started at age 27: JonI Mitchell was 28 when she made Blue and Kendrick Lamar about the same age when he made To Pimp A Butterfly and Ian MacKaye about the same when Fugazi got humming. Everyone in the music community should celebrate experience. Focusing on young artists exclusively is a sign of weakness and possibly tantamount to participating in some kind of weird suicide cult. Sorry Gen Z: maybe you should wait a few years.

19.

Many of your 'indie' peers will be backed by enigmatic sources of wealth: Off the top of my head, I can cite three well-regarded "indie" record labels that are owned or funded by millionaires or, in at least one case, a multi-billionaire. It is likely that some of these labels will never turn a profit, and they are direct competitors to Brassland—hiring the same publicists, marketing people, consultants, and working through the same distribution networks we work with. Jay-Z famously jumpstarted his first label Roc-A-Fella through dealing drugs. In the 90s' alt-rock days, there was a very beloved label which cemented their position as leaders of the "indie rock" revolution by signing joint venture deals with two different major labels over a four year span. No dis! All the labels I am speaking of have released incredible music, helped new artists and, in some cases, acted essentially as philanthropists for independent musicians. Hustlers gotta hustle and I'm not a hater so I don't hate. In fact, in the first years of Brassland, we benefitted mightily from The National funding their early records with relatively lucrative day jobs in advertising and web design; and during our first decade in business, I found other gigs which brought in enough money that I did not need to draw a salary from the label. I don't have anything negative or spicy to say about all this. It's just a fact of life so get used to it—and plot your "indie" venture accordingly.

I believe…
that Marcel Duchamp should be on everyone's playlist
that JonI Mitchell should be on everyone's playlist
*that *The Great Gatsby* should be on everyone's playlist*
that Steve Reich's "Music for 18 Musicians" and John Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme' and Erik Satie's "Gymnopedies" should be on everyone's playlist
that The Wire television show should be on every American's playlist
that Lawrence Weschler's Seeing Is Forgetting The Name Of The Thing One Sees should be on every artist's playlist
that The Band's self-titled record (the brown one) is a form of alchemy
that Fugazi is the best band I'll witness in my lifetime, and the most untainted
*that back when I co-founded Brassland, I was listening to D'Angelo's *Voodoo* way more than Radiohead's *OK Computer**
that when the final Confederate statue has been torn down there should be monuments to Nina Simone, Bob Dylan, Dolly Parton and John Coltrane erected in their place, because as the 20th century grows more distant the music is one thing worth remembering in all of its inexpressible humanity
that Rosalía and Kendrick Lamar are the two artists currently on top whom I feel most confident might 'keep things interesting' in the 21st century
and that, despite my very real grumpiness about the way things are, the future can always be better than the past

1. I almost used the phrase “end of their careers”—but that seemed a bit grim. What I mean is the point at which an artist has committed to doing their own thing rather than what the music industry and other commercial forces are pushing them towards.
2. We should probably call them ‘gleaners’ not ‘vultures’ but where’s the fun in that?
3. I know, I know—both are clearly one hit wonders. I am not even a poptimist whatever that is. But I like and cannot deny music that SLAPS even if I don’t usually work with those kind of cultural flashpoint artists.
4. Well, by definition of how the U.S. Constitution has thus far been interpreted.
5. http://twitter.com/deerhoof/status/1151561374180376576
6. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/454807.Boggs
7. Harari’s writing is the kind of shtick that practically screams “Welcome to my TED Talk”; but I feel very warmly about it, because what inspires his thinking seems not to be the lecture circuit but his meditation practice. (2 hours a day by some accounts.)
8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/27_Club — Jimi Hendrix, Mim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, Amy Winehouse, Jean-Michel Basquiat
9. The ‘fake’ indie funded or owned by much larger entities is an evergreen music industry business structure.

Name

Alec Hanley Bemis

Vocation

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