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On keeping an indie record label running for over 21 years

Carpark Records label founder Todd Hyman reflects on the label's history and discusses the ups and downs of running your own independent business.

This global pandemic has proven particularly terrible for folks working in the music industry. How have you—and your label—managed to weather it?

Thankfully, I think we were pretty unintentionally very well prepared for something like this already. My office is in the basement of my house. So, all the inventory is here. Before I did have someone come here and work here and we had interns, so that's the main change. Everyone's working in their houses now. We don't have interns and I'm doing all the mail out stuff now, which I didn't do before. Well, I did it many years ago before I had a staff, but now I'm doing it all myself again.

How has all of this affected your business?

I think mail-order has been going up just because people aren't going to record stores and stuff. So, it's been a pretty steady stream. There have been quite a few intense waves. It's not so bad right now and I'm fairly caught up, but we have a Black Friday sale on Friday. So, I would imagine it would hopefully spike back up again later this week.

It's weird running a record label because I feel like we're one of the few of the music industry businesses that aren't totally devastated right now. I feel live music is non-existent at the moment and radio, at least commercial radio, seems to be falling apart in some ways. Record stores are really taking a hit, as are venues, and musicians are certainly suffering at the moment. I feel like we're lucky in the sense that people still want to listen to music and they can still listen to music without leaving their house. So, people can still stream and they can order their stuff from their computer. In that way, things aren't as dire for us particularly, but it's definitely a super drag that the bands can't go on tour and they're not making the money that they normally make. It's terrible. But as a label, we're hanging in there.

You just announced a covers compilation to celebrate Carpark's 21 year anniversary. When you started this, could you have imagined you'd still be doing it two decades later?

When I first started Carpark it was purely an electronic label, so that has changed a lot. I was always just super into music most of my life and then after college, I was like, "I'm not starting a record label. I'm interested in all these different types of music and people who start labels, they just tend to put out the same stuff over and over again," but I don't know, it just happened. For some reason, I was in a particular situation in New York in the late '90s and it just seemed like a good idea. It was like, "I'm

going to document this new laptop, digital electronic, whatever scene that is happening and it's going to be awesome and it's going to be the new indie rock." I thought I was spearheading this new and exciting movement.

Turns out, it wasn't really a new and exciting movement, or at least it never quite took off in the way that I hoped. I guess I couldn't have foreseen it becoming what it is now then because it was this journey—what we released morphed and evolved over the years. So, after maybe three years or so of doing the purely experimental electronic type stuff, I was feeling a little run down and feeling like I wasn't going in the direction I was hoping. That's when we started branching off into doing different things, not doing purely electronic music, and starting sub-labels, which was moving into different areas. Mixing it up, I guess.

What were some of the first records that you put out that felt like a departure from the electronic stuff?

Somewhere around 2003 or 2004, I was deliberately trying to get more acoustic instrumentation into the digital music that I was putting out, which seemed like a big deal at the time. Then around 2006, I moved down to the DC area with my wife because she got a job down here and so, there was this period after we moved here, quite a few months where I was just like, "I don't know. What am I doing?"

I just felt lost creatively in terms of the direction of the label. I was in this new place and didn't really know what to do with Carpark, but I knew a couple of people in Baltimore so I started getting in touch with them and started going to shows there. It was the beginning of the whole Wham City scene and things were really picking up there. I was coming into contact with all of this cool, amazing music and interesting people, but it didn't fit into the mold of what Carpark was. I still had this idea in my head that labels always were known for putting on a certain type of music and that's how they made a name for themselves, but then at that point, I was just like, "You know what? I don't think people really care." I felt like I was the only one who really cared about that idea, so instead, I'm just going to put out whatever music I like. I'm just going to see what happens.

I think that was the change that has lasted to this point where we are now. We still do a little bit of what we were known for at the very beginning, but I think we're, I don't want to say all over the place, but I feel like we're trying to create a diverse family of artists who somehow make sense under the Carpark umbrella, if that makes any sense.

Curating is such a weird and inexact science. It really is sometimes just a sensibility that you can't really describe, but you know when it's wrong or when it doesn't feel right. It really is just often about the feeling. It's your own personal sensibility that defines the history of the label and the roster you've built.

In many ways. For most of Carpark's life, I've been the sole decider of what we put out, but in the last few years, I feel like there's been a lot more input from my staff and they've been able to help out. Ultimately I still need to be into something and it still needs to have my seal of approval, so to speak, for it to come out on Carpark.

I know lots of people who have started their own labels and they all quickly realized it was way more work than they anticipated. Or they really liked one aspect of it but didn't realize there was all this other stuff that came with it too that they were going to have to learn how to deal with, usually involving all the business stuff. When you started Carpark, did you have a pretty good sense of how to run a label, or is that something you just have to learn as you go along?

I guess it was a little bit of both. I mean, I did college radio all four years when I was in college and I was music director for a couple of years there, so that was my first taste or introduction to the actual music industry. I was talking to people like college radio music promoters, labels, and independent companies. After I graduated I went to New York and worked at some labels, interned, and worked at record stores. So I had a college radio background and then I had a little bit of a label background and then had a little bit of retail experience. So, I knew what distributors I needed to target to send my stuff to.

In the beginning, I was doing everything myself. I knew a couple of people who had labels and they had press lists that they were nice enough to share with me. So, I had people to send stuff to, and living in New York you would easily meet lots of journalists and people who worked at record labels by just going out. So, I feel like I had a pretty good background, but obviously, there's tons of other stuff that you don't even think about and there's tons of stuff now that didn't even exist then. So yeah, you obviously learn stuff as you go.

You've been doing this for a long time now and obviously, the business of running a record label has changed pretty radically in 20 years, but at this point what do you find the most fulfilling—and most creative—aspects of running a record label?

Well, I still like the magic of when you hear something and it connects with you and you're like, "Okay, this is something that I think we should release." It is always exciting when that happens. It doesn't happen to me very often, which I guess is why it's exciting. I still appreciate the joy of finding a new band that you really like and then just that whole process of helping them build their career and their audience. The goal is getting them to the point where they're fairly popular and making a living with their music. It's just a really satisfying feeling to know that you helped a band become what it is. So, that's I think that is still the most exciting part.

What is the most difficult?

Doing all the accounting stuff is still pretty mind-numbing a lot of the time, keeping track of royalties and things like that. We have software now that we've used for a few years, which is definitely helpful, but it's still a bit of a slog to do that every accounting period. We try really hard to work with good people, but occasionally you can run into some difficult people who make your life unpleasant, which isn't very fun. I'd say that the whole financial aspect of running a label is probably the least exciting aspect of what we do here.

Two questions. What advice would you have for someone who is considering starting a label? And these days, do musicians still actually need a record label when they have the means to do so much of this stuff on their own?

I know artists are hurting and need money, but I guess I'm a little wary of artists just finding a company to upload their music and just doing it that way just because typically, unless you're super experienced, you're probably not going to have a plan in place and you're just going to upload it and then...I don't know.

Maybe you'll post something on social media about it and then the people who follow you will listen to it, but I feel like it's not going to help you grow and get to where you want to be, so to speak. When we put out something, we've got a strategy and a plan, a marketing plan, publicity, and all kinds of stuff that I feel like an artist trying to do it themselves, wouldn't even know what to do in that regard. If they have someone who knows about that stuff and is working with them, then that's obviously a different situation. If it's just a small thing if you're just looking for a little cash, I guess it could be cool to just do it yourself, but if it's an album that you've been working on for years, I would say probably unless you have a lot of experience working at a label, you are probably would be better off finding someone who knows how to sell and market music to work with.

As a small label, what is the most important thing to try and always do right?

I can only speak for us, but we try and always be as artist-friendly as possible. I feel like we're doing what we should be doing. We've got an intimate group of people we work with and a small staff and we're not too big, but we can still do big things. We can still put out both small releases and bigger indie releases. So, I feel pretty good about where we're at.

So many people I know that have worked in the music business for a long time either burn out or become deeply cynical about it. How have you managed to avoid that and maintain enthusiasm for this work for so long? Is it really just about still being excited about music?

I guess it's a combination of things. I am obviously still very into music. I listen to music a lot and I also feel like I've got a great team of people who work at Carpark that are also super excited about music. Being surrounded by the right people has helped me from burning out. Ten years ago I didn't have anyone working for me. It was all on me. I was just working all the time and I definitely would have burnt out years ago if I had kept doing that. I'm always thankful that there are people here who can take a little bit of a load off of me and have experience doing certain things that even I might not be aware of or good at. Things change so quickly these days and one person can't be the master of everything. That's the main thing. I've been able to pull back and not do everything myself over the last decade and that's helped me maintain my perspective.

Positive self-awareness is knowing that you can't always do everything yourself and also knowing when you've reached your limit.

Yeah. When I think back to those early years I'm just like, "Wow." I was at my computer all day, every day. I can't believe I did that for so many years, but we had to because there wasn't a ton of money rolling in yet. Not that there's a ton of money rolling in now, but I couldn't afford to hire anybody back then.

How do you gauge whether something's good or whether or not something has been successful? Has that metric changed for you over the years?

I feel like there are two kinds of success. There's commercial and critical success. So, if you're written up by a lot of people and people love you or journalists love you and are writing all these nice things about you, that sometimes translates into commercial success, but not always. We do have a few artists that, for people who spend a lot of time on the internet looking at, reading about music and stuff would think, "Oh yeah, those guys are huge!" The reality is that most of these people do not make a lot of money, unfortunately. That's true for most musicians even during the best of times. We also have bands that do make money and are able to live off of their music, but that is much rarer than most people might think.

Running a label also means that sometimes you have to be the bad guy. You have to deliver bad news sometimes, push back on bad ideas, or tell people things they might not want to hear. How do you deal with that part of the role?

Yeah. I try to avoid those situations as much as I can. We don't make empty promises to anybody when we start off and we always try to be reasonable and level headed and try and explain everything very clearly to people. But yeah, as you know, we work with a lot of different artists and everyone's different and

we've had some people think if they sign to a label that it means they're definitely going to be able to make a living on music as a result, and that's not always true. Sometimes people get real bummed out about that and then other times people are more understanding and they get it and they understand why. There've been a few cases where people come back to us and you can tell they're a little upset that things aren't going the way they had hoped. You just have to be honest with them and tell them that we're doing everything we can and we're doing those very same things for *all* of our artists. I want them to understand that it's not a personal thing obviously or anything like that. The business is always unpredictable.

It's a big responsibility for someone to entrust you with their art. It's a complicated thing for everyone involved.

Yeah. There is definitely a lot of psychology involved with running a label. When we first started and people didn't know about us, it was really hard to convince people to work with you because it's like, "Well, why should I give this record that I worked really hard on to this little label that I have never heard of and some guy I just recently met?" I feel like one of the biggest hurdles for a record label is to get over that hump to become a respected, established label that people know puts out quality music. You know if you're going to work with them, they're going to do a really good job and work really hard.

I feel like it took many years for us, almost a decade at least, to get to that point where when we started to work with an artist we wanted and wouldn't necessarily have to worry about them leaving to go to a bigger label. I feel like we've gotten to the point now where, for the most part, we can really keep our artists happy. We can do what they want and meet their expectations and everyone feels good. I feel like it's a time issue. If you stick around long enough, unless you're just doing a really crappy job, you'll get to that point eventually.

I assume that under normal circumstances you'd be doing a bunch of special shows to celebrate the label's 21st anniversary, but since that's not really an option...

Yeah. Definitely. We're still trying to plan something. Before the pandemic, we were like, "Oh yeah, let's plan a big show in New York City and DC," and now we're like, "Oh, should we do a live stream?" I don't know. Otherwise, we just keep working. We have a lot of good records coming out next year, including some we haven't announced yet, and hopefully at some point in the second half of next year that maybe some shows will start happening again. We'll have to see, but we're still cranking away, still trying to just put out records. That's what we do.

Todd Hyman Recommends:

You've put out a lot of records over the years, are there any that you think of as being lost classics? Records that might have been overlooked and are worth a second listen?

Well, I love all of our records, but when I first started, Marumari's *Supermogadon* was one of our early releases. I felt like that was a really great record that had a lot of poppy elements. I feel like maybe it could have made it a little further out or if we'd maybe made a couple of tweaks it could have been more of a pop record or something. I don't know. I was always a fan of those records back in the day and I still love them. I was also a big fan of EAR PWR. The records' never quite took off the way that I'd hoped and that was a drag, but they were really catchy electronic pop songs and I always really enjoyed them. They were fun to see live, too. I don't really know what happened, why it didn't work out, but we did a couple of records with them and I am proud of those. People should go back and revisit them.

Name

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Fact

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