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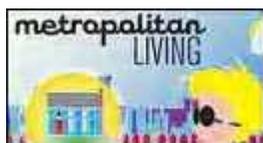
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MUSIC

ARTS FEATURE . VOL 23 #1135 . PUBLISHED 9/4/02

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This is a Recording

Local labels are redefining the way to make music

by **Rod Smith**

While the corporate-music assembly line continues to churn out a string of humanoid talent, a tiny St. Paul record label is poised to do the industry one better: It has signed a robot to the roster. The robot's skin is a kind of eggshell plastic with just a hint of gray here and there, and its overall appearance is that of a silicon-driven bagel maker. The look is sort of early 1980s, which doesn't exactly fit in with the marble look of the downtown bank that is home to Innova Recordings.

Fashion aside, the robot doesn't really have an artistic statement to make--though that never stopped Creed. Luckily, the Future of Minnesota Music (to coin a fatuous nickname for the 'bot) is responsible only for burning tracks onto compact discs--not for recording



"People want something they can hold in their hands": Innova Recordings' Chris Strouth with the merchandise

Image by **RICH FLEISCHMAN**

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- ▶ Bars and Clubs
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the music in the first place.

"It's a really simple process," says Innova's director of artists and product, Chris Strouth, as he commands the contraption to go to work through a PC keyboard. But, then, like even the most docile industry pop star, the drone occasionally seems to have a mind of its own.

The robot whirs into action and, like something out of *Terminator 2*, a mechanical claw lifts a blank CD from the robot's right-hand spindle and swings around while the burner drawer pops open welcomingly. Instead of gently lowering the disc as it's supposed to do, the arm just drops it from a foot or so above. The disc clatters around in the tray drawer for a moment, then plummets to the carpet.

Strouth swivels around in a chair that seems a size and a half too small for his six-foot-plus frame, picks up the disc, and puts it in the drawer, which proceeds to close right on cue. "We just got this thing a couple of days ago," Strouth says dryly, like a Little League dad whose kid just beamed the umpire from the pitcher's mound. "We're still in the process of making it all work."

That sentence could apply not just to a single machine, but to the nature of Innova Recordings--and the independent-label scene at large. Ten years ago you wouldn't have found a robot, or any kind of CD duplicator, in the office of an independent label. They didn't exist yet. Indies, including local legends Twin Tone and AmRep, had their CDs made at factories, just like major labels. In fact, they tended to emulate the majors pretty much whenever possible.

The indie label signed an artist to a multiple-record deal. The label gave the artist an advance (in effect, a loan), which the artist used to buy studio time and hire a producer. The artist made an album, which went on a master tape. The label sent the master tape off to a factory, where it became CDs, cassettes (which were still healthy), and maybe vinyl (a format that was already on hospice care).

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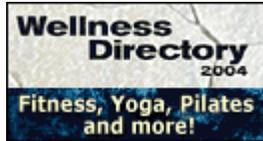
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Then the label shipped the finished product off to one or two distributors (the bigger the better), mailed out a whole bunch of promos, and took out as many magazine and zine ads as possible. And, budget permitting, the artist made a promotional video or two. Meanwhile, the artist toured like crazy---ideally, enough to generate a buzz, move some product, and get a major label interested enough to buy out the balance of the artist's contract. The system worked a lot like major and minor leagues in baseball, with the indies acting as farm teams. Just as the gaudy economies of Major League Baseball have flirted with ruin in the past decade, the corporate-music industry has begun to founder. And while baseball's minor leagues have thrived by offering a different kind of entertainment, independent music seems to be finding its own fresh business model. This dynamic is readily visible in Minnesota labels like Innova, Alluvial, Heart of a Champion, and DeStijl. Though none seems poised to break into the commercial big leagues (or make their artists the next Alex Rodriguez) this quartet can be seen groping toward a new method of distributing music: through in-house manufacturing, DVD and vinyl releases, collector packaging, and nonprofit financing. Efforts like these suggest that today's local labels have abandoned the fool's errand of trying to break into the mainstream. Instead, they're finding a way to thrive on the margins.

Given Innova's roster, which is heavy on modern classical, ambient, jazz, experimental, and world music, it's highly unlikely that the majors are going to be knocking on the label's door anytime soon. (Innova's biggest seller, microtonal maverick Harry Partch, did have a stint on Columbia a few decades ago---back when he was still alive.) And sound/text wiseacre Eric Belgum, weapons-grade jazzbos Fully Celebrated Orchestra, or master music-box manipulator John Morton seem unlikely to be turning up in *Entertainment Weekly* any decade soon.

On top of that, Innova rarely, if ever, runs ads.



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According to Strouth, "Ads are a great way to build a relationship with a magazine, but it's highly unlikely that someone is going to see an Innova ad and go, 'Oh, ambient tuba music by Tom Heasley! I'm gonna run out and buy that right now!'"

Ultimately, Innova stands as something of an odd duck in a pond full of strange birds. The shining emblem of that difference hangs near the office door---past the CDs in long cardboard boxes, the rock posters (including Kiss!), and all the other typical trappings of indiedom. It's a color Xerox of a check for \$1 million---a grant from the McKnight Foundation.

While a million dollars is a mere pittance to a major label (one-thirtieth the cost of Michael Jackson's last album), to an indie, it's a fortune. According to Philip Blackburn--the person responsible for landing the McKnight million and the program director for Innova's parent nonprofit, the American Composers Forum--it's also a dream come true. "That check should keep us going for a long time to come," he says, "assuming the stock market keeps McKnight's endowment more or less intact."

Just as its funding is unusual, Innova bankrolls recording projects in a unique fashion. In a manner that bears a superficial resemblance to the old-school advance, Innova lends its artists enough to finance the manufacture and distribution of a CD run--usually a thousand copies. (The robot will make even smaller runs possible.) The musician's initial sales will go toward repaying the loan. But once the loan is paid off, which involves selling only 300 or so discs, all the additional revenue goes to the artist. This represents a major departure from the old model, which allotted only a small percentage of sales revenue to the creator. And the deal works out for composer and label; last year, Innova sold close to 18,000 CDs.

Artists also benefit from Innova's hard-won marketing expertise--the label has been around since 1976--and a distribution scheme that pushes records into both retail chains and hipster mail-order outfits, and indie stores. Innova also has its

own energetic online presence. Its Web site (www.innovarecordings.com) offers five streaming music stations, divided by genre. The site also offers listeners the option of downloading tracks in the Liquid Audio format for a buck apiece.

Both Blackburn and Strouth see the online audio offerings as strictly supplemental. "People want stuff," Strouth contends. "They want something they can hold in their hands. They want to see graphics, take out the booklets, see the photos, and look at the liner notes--even if they don't read them."

Innova's commitment to *stuff* is such that they're moving into a new arena--DVDs. They'll be making their DVD debut this fall, with a "Sonic Circuits" compilation. A production of composer/activist Fred Ho's *Black Panther Suite* will follow.

DVDs are a hot item among indies, and for good reason. The cost of making a DVD is comparable to that of making a CD, and DVD players are now commonplace. According to Recording Industry Association of America figures, DVD sales actually rose in 2001, even as CDs tanked. And as the means of production have become more affordable, more and more artists--composers and musicians included--have taken up the camera and the laptop.

Strouth sees a revolution just around the corner: "In the Fifties, everybody wanted to be a poet. Then everybody wanted to be a painter for a while. And after the Beatles broke, everybody wanted to be a rock star. That lasted until around 1998, when everybody decided to become a DJ. Once people figured out that having the letters *D* and *J* in front of their names wasn't going to automatically get them laid 24/7, they started losing interest. Now, everyone wants to be a filmmaker."

In his white button-down and crisply pressed slacks, Kevin Weinke blends in with the happy-hour crowd at Eli's Bar and Grill in downtown Minneapolis. He could easily pass for a mortgage broker, or some kind of consultant, which is actually what he is.

A trained archaeologist who got sick of "walking around in 90-degree heat with a shovel and staying in hotels," Weinke now spends his weekdays doing things like securing various permits for energy firms. "I work for the enemy," Weinke quips. "Not Enron, but some firms that are pretty closely associated with Enron. As you might guess, business is pretty slow these days."

At night and on weekends, though, Weinke rolls his sleeves up a cuff higher and digs into Alluvial Recordings, a label stationed at the very outer rim of experimental music's asteroid belt. Most Alluvial artists--such as Daniel Menche, Augur, Seth Nehil--generate works that rely on the sort of silence and space you'd expect to encounter just west of Pluto. Even though it has only been around since 1999, Alluvial represents the fruition of a dream Weinke and roommate/business partner Scott Flaherty have nurtured since their high school head-banger days in Buffalo, New York.

Though they previously schemed to create a label for 7-inch bootlegs, so far, the label has been CD-intensive, with only one LP to date. But they're thinking about switching over. "Every time we put something out," Weinke notes, "it's on one or more file-sharing services right away. If we did extremely limited, nicely packaged, slightly overpriced vinyl, it wouldn't matter. Everything would probably sell out whether it was downloadable or not."

Despite the online leakage, the label pays for itself. (Last year Weinke and Flaherty took in \$10,000.) And it has a solid distribution setup, which extends into Europe through Staalplaat and V2, two esteemed online and mail-order dealers in the Netherlands. Europe, where listeners tend to be more open-minded than their Yank counterparts, is an important market for Alluvial. Important enough that one of their artists, John Hudak, shared a gallery space with Laurie Anderson in Lyon, France, earlier this year.

Hudak's "Don't Worry About Anything, I'll Talk to You Tomorrow," the label's biggest seller to date at 600 copies, is a prototypical Alluvial release. It's an

answering-machine message left by the artist's mother before her death, extended to CD length and manipulated in various bizarre ways.

Weinke is careful to point out that Hudak and Anderson weren't collaborators, just next-door installation-art neighbors. "Still," he muses of this avant-garde icon, "I wonder what she thought."

Treehouse Records is as much a community center as it is a retail facility. Flyers for local shows get prominent window space. Handmade "roommate wanted" and "band dude wanted" signs line the doorframe just inside the entrance. Much of the magazine rack is taken up by locally generated publications. The other racks, CD and vinyl, display a wealth of material by local artists.

It's a classic independent record store. And the guy behind the counter, Dan Cote, who with his short hair, chin beard, band T-shirt, and jeans, brings to mind a younger, thinner, slightly more Amish-looking Frank Black, is a classic indie dude, right down to the label he runs---Heart of a Champion (hometown.aol.com/heartchamp/home.html). In the three years of its existence, Heart of a Champion has built a discography laden with the work of locals like Sean Na Na, Lucky Jeremy, Lifter Puller, the Hidden Chord, Arm, and the Hawaii Show--and just as heavily laden with vinyl.

Prominently displayed in the vinyl racks at Treehouse is an LP by one non-local: *Snakebite*, the latest release by Los Angeles native Eleni Mandell. It's hard not to wonder why Mandell is still on an indie. She writes songs that are a cross between Cole Porter and Tom Waits, sings like a less frenetic PJ Harvey, and is quite easy on the eyes.

"Eleni Mandell is my absolute favorite artist right now," Cote proclaims. "And if I had the option, I'd put out both CD and LP. But she's already got a deal with Space Baby. They're bigger and they've been around longer. So I'm happy to do this."

Such dual-label, dual-format releases are not uncommon these days, and occasionally even cross indie/major lines. Take Sonic Youth's latest, *Murray Street*. The CD is on Geffen; the vinyl is on SY drummer Steve Shelly's Smells Like Records label. Indie or major, though, the bigger label always gets the CD release.

Heart of a Champion relies heavily on two distributors--San Francisco's Revolver, a true pillar of the industry, and the newer Choke in Chicago. Because many of his artists tour regularly, Cote also sells a lot of records by proxy on the road. He attributes the success of his biggest-selling 7-inch to date, a Sean Na Na/Lucky Jeremy split that has moved 600 copies, to the fact that Sean Na Na tours nine months a year.

Despite its vinyl-intensive nature, the label is not a total stranger to the digital world. In fact, one Heart of a Champion release, the visually enhanced CD by the Hawaii Show (a.k.a. performance artist Steve Barone), is closing in on DVD territory with its numerous videos. And, as Cote sees it, the label could pursue such projects further. "Steve and I have thrown the idea of DVD around. We haven't come to any kind of agreement yet, but it's definitely something I'd consider."

Cote, who has yet to show a profit, is less optimistic about the future of his favorite format, the 7-inch single. "I'm not in this for the money, but the 7-inch is becoming a sinkhole. Distributors don't want to carry them. Because of the setup costs, it costs just about as much to make a 7-inch single as it does to make a full-length CD. And, obviously, you can't charge nearly as much. You need to press a thousand to stand any chance of breaking even, and your chances of selling that many are slim to none. I'm afraid the 7-inch is on its way to becoming a novelty format."

Clint Simonson looks like a spy, even in a T-shirt and jeans. Something about his high-cheekboned, heavy-lidded visage just screams (or rather,

whispers) intrigue. In reality, Simonson, who runs the LP-only DeStijl label, acts more like a cross between a detective, a musicologist, and a skip tracer than anything even vaguely resembling a spook. Much of the time, he tracks down the artists he wants to release, no matter how obscure they are or how long it takes to find them. Sooner or later, a DeStijl release comes out, in an edition of 250 to 1,000. And, almost without fail, the release sells out shortly thereafter. (Last year, DeStijl sold 2,500 records or thereabouts.)

Somewhere along the line, vinyl--much like rock--missed its funeral. (It's as if the cassette leapt in front of vinyl and said: "No, Lord! Take me instead!") The format bottomed out in 1993, then slowly started rising, thanks to unlikely champions such as Pearl Jam, who insisted on releasing vinyl alongside CDs.

The DJ culture revolution of the mid-Nineties gave the format a major kick in the keister. By 1999, turntables were outselling guitars. According to the Recording Industry Association of America (the majors' lobbying and PR tentacle), vinyl sales in 2001 were up from 2000--if only .1 percent--from .5 percent of total market share to .6 percent. (By comparison, DVDs rose from .8 percent to 1.1 percent.) But that doesn't even factor in indies, who deal in the bulk of vinyl releases. Or collectibles. Even a cursory glance at eBay or Gemm.com reveals that collectible vinyl is doing very well indeed.

Given the loyalty of his customer base and the obscurity of his roster, which includes non-household names like Black Vial, Double Leopards, and local guitar visionary Michael Yonkers, Simonson pretty much deals in instant collectibles. He has no Web presence, save for blurbs on the Forced Exposure site, and the e-mail updates Fusetron--a tiny but formidable label/mail-order service run by former Minneapolisian Chris Freeman.

Simonson does use other distributors, though. And while he has no interest in releasing CDs himself, he's not averse to letting others do it for him. Right

now, he's negotiating with Sub Pop, who want to license *Microminature Love*, DeStijl's long-lost Michael Yonkers record from 1969, for CD release.

Typically enough for someone who does what he does out of love, he's passing on the profit. "Normally the label and the artist would split the licensing fee," he says. "But Yonkers is a friend, and he's living at the poverty level. So I'm gonna give him all the money."

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