One Punk’s Guide to
STARTING YOUR OWN
DIY RECORD LABEL

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One Punk’s Guide is a series of articles where Razorcake contributors share their love for a topic that is not traditionally considered punk. Previous Guides have explored everything from pinball, to African politics, to outlaw country music.

Razorcake is a bi-monthly, Los Angeles-based fanzine that provides consistent coverage of do-it-yourself punk culture. We believe in positive, progressive, community-friendly DIY punk, and are the only bona fide 501(c)(3) non-profit music magazine in America. We do our part.

Starting Your Own DIY Record Label originally appeared in Razorcake #60, released in February/March 2011. While there have been numerous changes since then — from several labels and distros going out of business (including EMI, which was absorbed in 2013) to the rising price of pressing vinyl — the essential elements of the article remain valid today, therefore the text has been unchanged.

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STARTING YOUR OWN DIY RECORD LABEL

I was discussing the state of the music industry with a friend not too long ago. He was repeating the usual line that recent changes (such as the rise of digital downloading, iTunes, and file sharing) were destroying the record industry. He then pointed to the downsizing/collapse of veritable record labels like Touch And Go and Lookout! as evidence these changes were taking their toll on DIY punk as well. His logic was pretty suspect though as he used “music industry” standards of success on a culture that generally doesn’t play by accepted rules. While the major record labels are exclusively obsessed with maximizing profit, DIY punk is more interested in getting unique music out to as many people as possible at affordable prices. Hell, there is a long tradition of punk labels loaning bands money to start their own labels (Crass and Fat Wreck, for example). If that isn’t contrary to the fuck-your-competitor-over mentality of the corporate music industry, I don’t know what is.

So how is the DIY record industry doing these days? I reject the notion that we should judge a DIY record label’s success in terms of profit margin, market share, or even longevity. Most label owners don’t measure their success in those terms. Why should we? DIY punk is first and foremost about spreading a form of music (punk) and a message (Do It Yourself). Open up any recent issue of MRR, Razorcake, or other zine and you’ll be heartened by the amount of music being generated these days and the ridiculously high number of DIY labels putting it out. Sure, many of them are hobby labels that may only put out a handful of releases over a few years, but that is the point. People are contributing to the community, spreading the word, and inspiring others to do it themselves. The state of DIY punk is looking pretty damn good these days.

I am currently working on a book about the political implications of global DIY punk. In many ways, this has been a long-term project. I spent the late 1980s and 1990s playing in various DIY punk bands (most of which you probably never heard of). In 1993, my North Carolina-based band formed our own record label, Girth Records. We didn’t know what the hell we were doing, but it seemed like the right thing to do—we didn’t know how to approach established labels, so why not release it ourselves? The band and label rumbled along until I finished graduate school with a PhD in political science, at which time we drifted apart and the label was shelved. Since then, most of my academic work has dealt with issues of
If you’re thinking about starting your own label, THERE PROBABLY IS NO SHORTAGE OF BANDS THAT WOULD LOVE TO WORK WITH YOU.

African security and development, but after the birth of my second kid, the idea of spending long stretches of time in war zones became less attractive to me and the rest of the family. So I started writing about DIY punk culture, something I have been involved in since the early 1980s.

Part of the research I’ve been conducting includes interviews with people who run their own DIY record labels. To date, I have interviewed around a hundred DIY record labels across the globe. Most of these labels have been small labels in North America, but I’ve also interviewed labels across Europe, Latin America (mainly Mexico and Colombia), Asia (mainly China and Japan), and Australia. These interviews have been conducted face-to-face when possible, but also via phone or e-mail (and often a combination thereof). For the record, very few of the labels I approached declined to be interviewed. This is a pretty warm and open community.

During the research process, I realized I was sitting on a treasure trove of information about how to run a DIY record label, so I decided to put this essay together as a user’s guide to starting your own record label. Invigorated by the vitality of the scene and with the encouragement of several of the label owners I spoke with, I even re-activated Girth Records. While the major music industry is going through spasms and convulsions as it tries to prove its own relevance, it is clear that the underground DIY record label scene is alive and well. Entry into that underground remains incredibly easy. As the classic punk band Desperate Bicycles sang on their self-released DIY single “Handlebars” back in 1977: “It was easy, it was cheap—go and do it!”

A final word of clarification: In his 2008 sociological study Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy, Alan O’Connor makes a distinction
between commercial punk labels and DIY punk labels. Commercial punk labels are companies that regularly achieve sales of 20,000 to 100,000 copies, often through distribution in chain record stores and big-box stores like Wal-Mart. They usually work through a major record distributor to achieve this. In the U.S., there are four major “independent” distribution companies that are actually owned by major record labels: Fontana (owned by Universal Music group), ADA (owned by Warner Music Group), RED (owned by Sony BMG) and Caroline (owned by EMI). Many of the commercial punk labels—Epitaph, Vagrant, Sub Pop, Fat Wreck, Equal Vision, Victory, Trustkill, BYO, Fueled By Ramen, Secretly Canadian, Bridge Nine, Mute—distribute through these “indie” distribution companies. DIY record labels, on the other hand, have much smaller record sales and distribute either directly or through “true” independent distribution companies. For this article, I am interested exclusively in DIY punk labels: record companies usually run by an individual or small group of individuals who achieve record sales far below that of the commercial punk labels.

**LET’S START A LABEL!**

The people who run DIY punk labels are people just like you. There is no certain type. They include young kids in high school, recent college graduates, regular folks working regular jobs, and a few who have made their label successful enough to avoid having to work for someone else. There is no specific age group that dominates the field. The people I’ve interviewed have been folks in their teens, twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties. They come from a wide range of educational backgrounds. Some are high school drop-outs, some graduated from college, and a few have post-graduate degrees. They also come from all socioeconomic classes, with most coming from working or middle class backgrounds. In North America, most of the people running DIY punk labels are white, but not exclusively. The most common characteristic is that most are male. Still, there are a number of women running their own record labels, too. For example, Renae Bryant runs On The Rag Records which, for my money, has one of the best slogans ever: “Put Some Pussy in Your Punk.” The overwhelming majority of people I’ve spoken to have another primary form of employment, meaning the record label is something of a hobby (or a second job).

Everyone I have spoken with started their label for the love of the music, not the allure of money. Many began their label to release their
own band’s music. Mike Park of Asian Man Records speaks for a number of label owners when he said, “I was in a band and we just put out our own records. I wasn’t looking to start a label, it just kind of happened” (7/24/2010). Yumikes, who runs the Japanese label MCR, recalled “I played in a punk band called Fuck Geez and I wanted to release our record, but we cannot find any label who can release our band record, so I decided to do it on my own label” (9/19/2010). Likewise, Andy Instigate of the Swedish label Instigate Records claimed he “couldn’t think of anyone willing to release my crappy bands (and I still don’t) so the only option was to do it myself” (7/25/2010).

Others wanted to become a more active participant in their scene, releasing music made by their friends. Alex, of Grave Mistake said his “main motivation was to put out records for bands from my area (at the time MD/DC) that I was either friends with or just thought were good bands that should have something on record” (8/14/2010). Ken Cheppaikode of Dirtnap was a self-described “record label geek” heavily into music even before getting into punk.

“To me, the behind-the-scenes type shit was almost as interesting as the music itself,” Cheppaikode says. “I had wanted to start a record label for at least a decade before I did it” (10/31/2010).

For someone like Michal of Poland’s Nickt Nic Nie Wie (NNNW) label, founded in the 1980s under Communism, there weren’t many options other than DIY: “There were really few chances for bands in 1980s to release
their own record. Apart from the censorship, it required ‘connections’ of sorts. So, some small cassette labels erupted—not necessarily punk, but working in this DIY and—of course—illegal way. As there was a band connected to our crew—Ulica—and we were in touch with a lot of people by that time, we decided to try ‘doing it ourselves’” (1/4/2010). Regardless of their global location, most of the labels I’ve spoken with started by releasing music that either they or a close friend made. If you’re thinking about starting your own label, there probably is no shortage of bands that would love to work with you.

When you start working with a band (yours or a friend’s), the first thing you need are the master recordings. A few labels put money up front to cover the expense of hiring studio time and an engineer. Many labels simply assume the band will be able to generate a master recording of their music on their own.

“The bands are usually responsible for their recording, mixing, and mastering,” says On The Rag’s Bryant. “I take responsibility for the cost of producing the physical product, advertising, and promotion” (10/31/2010).

Mike Riley of Firestarter Records pointed out “I’m not in a position to cover studio time, so the band covers recording costs” (8/12/2010). This is true for most of the labels interviewed.

When Robert Voogt of the Dutch straight-edge label Commitment Records started the label in the 1990s, he paid the studio costs. “These days, with the decline in sales, this is not possible anymore. Bands have
to pay the studio costs,” he said. (8/21/2010). With the advent of ProTools and other music software, producing a decent recording has become affordable for most bands. If you’ve got money to spend on getting a quality recording, that’s great. If not, don’t worry about it. Chances are bands will be able to provide you with a decent master recording on their own.

**FORMATS: CD VS. VINYL VS. CASSETTE VS. DIGITAL DOWNLOAD**

One question you should be pondering is format for your release. Currently, there are basically four options: vinyl, CD, cassette, and digital download. When CDs were introduced, they supposedly signaled the demise of vinyl. Not everybody got that message, particularly in the DIY punk community. The overwhelming majority of DIY punk labels continue to release on vinyl. For some, this is simply the recognition that vinyl currently sells better than CDs. But for many there is a personal attachment and preference for the vinyl format. Nick Lovro of Cowabunga Records speaks for many when he effused about vinyl: “Vinyl is just great. They come in so many cool colors, the way it spins on a turntable, the sound of the needle as it hits the record, and the fact the records come in a nice cover (usually) with the cover art looking like a masterpiece or something worth owning” (8/24/2010). Jerry of Phratry Records agreed saying “There’s something about the larger, vinyl format, and the fact that real humans cut the lacquers on a lathe that gives LPs and 7”s a more primitive feel. Not to mention the enjoyment of interacting with the large artwork and whatever poster-sized inserts might come with a release (i.e. The Clash’s *Sandinista* or the absurdly beautiful packaging of the newest Big Business release, *Mind the Drift*). Even though it’s super expensive, and I consistently loose money on the label, I will continue to put out as much music as possible on vinyl in an effort to make something ‘true’” (8/22/2010). Todd Taylor of Razorcake Records pointed out that vinyl, “doesn’t suck and it never has. Nothing about it sucks. It’s fragile, so you take better care of it, and that pays dividends. It’s also the one format in use where the end-user can’t replicate the format. (No one’s making one-off vinyl record copies of their records.) Vinyl is also an investment of time and energy. Plus, no MP3 is going to go for $100” (8/3/2010).

When dealing with vinyl, you have several choices, in terms of size and rpm, as well as color. A full-length 12” release fits around eighteen minutes per side at 33 1/3 rpm, twelve minutes per side at 45 rpm. With 10” releases, you get twelve minutes per side at 33 1/3 rpm, nine minutes
per side at 45 rpm. And with 7” records, you can fit six minutes per side at 33 1/3 and four-and-a-half minutes at 45 rpm. Of course, you can squeeze a bit more music on any side, but the quality starts to deteriorate fairly rapidly. Some labels have a strong preference for the 7” release. Florian Helmchen of Germany’s HeartFirst Records pointed out that “HeartFirst started out as a 7” only label. I will not release anything that is bigger than a 7”” (7/29/2010). But, Robert Voogt of Commitment Records argued “I think hardcore works best in small amounts. I prefer the 7” format, so I only release 7” EPs. I don’t like the current trend to put only a few minutes of music on a 7” when it can easily fit ten to twelve minutes of music. That’s a waste of vinyl and of people’s money. Ten to twenty minutes of music works best for a hardcore band, I think” (8/21/2010).

The problem with releasing on vinyl is that it can be expensive. It is especially expensive for labels outside of the U.S. Many foreign labels release on other formats based on economic necessity. In much of the developing world, such as in Latin America and much of Asia, vinyl is simply beyond the reach of both the label and the listeners. As Shaun of Australia’s Tenzenmen Records pointed out: “Vinyl is still a little too expensive for us here in Australia, despite us having two pressing plants in the country” (7/24/2010). Yumike of Japan’s MCR sees a tension between the U.S. and European punk markets and the rest of the world: “I usually use CD for release, but vinyl will be more important for a punk label. But, it’s a bit hard to sell in Japan. But Europe and North American punks are not interested about CD format so much. It’s a problem; to be or not to be” (9/19/2010).

The expense of releasing on vinyl comes from the set-ups, plating, and the lacquers. There are a couple of pressing plants for vinyl, and the costs are roughly the same. Let’s say you want to press three hundred
copies of a 7” record on basic black vinyl. You could choose between, say, United Record Pressing and Rainbo Records, but your costs are going to be roughly the same. The lacquers will cost between $150-250. Some DIY punk labels use a third-party to set up their lacquers, like David Eck at Lucky Lacquers. His prices are competitive and he gives a level of attention you might not get from the big pressing companies. This is actually an important step that you probably don’t want to screw up. “The technology for making vinyl-friendly records has been lost to a large degree, resulting in need for ‘vinyl-premastering,’ or the re-mastering of CDs or digital files, in order to be vinyl-friendly,” Eck said. “Reference lacquers help confirm a vinyl-friendly master, before spending hundreds on the plating and test presses” (9/13/2010).

Regardless of who does your lacquer, you will also have to pay for plating, which are the metal stampers created from the lacquers. For our theoretical 7”, this will usually run between $150-200. Pressing companies will also charge a set-up fee, especially for small runs like this one, which will usually be around $30-$75. The test pressing will be around $50. If you wanted the pressing company to do your jackets or multi-colored labels, the price increases. If you want them to just do a basic label (black ink on a white label), it’ll usually run between $50-$100. Once you do all of that, the actual pressing of the three hundred records is relatively cheap, usually around forty-eight cents per 7” (more if you want colored vinyl). When all is said and done, you’ve got three hundred 7” records for around $650-700. You can photocopy your cover at a local print shop, buy some cheap plastic 7” sleeves, and invite a few friends over for a folding and packaging party. Then you are good to go with three hundred 7”s that cost you around $2.50 each. Of course, the more copies you order, the cheaper each individual item will be. For example, if you order one thousand copies, the cost gets down to around one dollar per copy.

If you want to go the CD route, the costs are much cheaper. Depending on who you use—and there is no shortage of CD pressing plants out there—the final product will cost you anywhere between one and three dollars per copy. Usually, you just send the CD pressing company your master CD (or even upload it to their website), send them your artwork (or upload it using the templates they supply), and you are all set. An online company like Kunaki can turn your release around in a matter of days for around a dollar a CD (with no minimum order), for everything including shrink wrap. It is quick and cheap. The problem is that CDs aren’t selling very well.

Brian Lombardozzi of Amor Y Lucha Records said he “will no longer press CDs as they don’t sell, and it is not a format I am fond of” (8/12/2010).
Sam Richardson of Feel It Records echoed that sentiment when he said “I will never release a CD because, in my opinion, the compact disc is a dead medium. Just look at record stores these days. CDs are sparse and vinyl is returning to the shelves” (7/31/2010). The overwhelming majority of record labels express the belief that the CD is a dead format. There are exceptions, however.

As I noted earlier, record labels outside of North America and Europe still deal with CDs. Shaun at Tenzenmen said, “with the Asian bands I’m looking more towards small-run CDs with nice packaging” (7/24/2010), largely because the CD is still an active medium in Asia. But even here in the U.S., the CD is still a functional format. As Chuck Livid of Livid Records said, “CDs are a dying medium, but they still serve a solid purpose: touring. A CD doesn’t care if it’s 120 degrees in your tour van. The same can’t be said about vinyl” (7/22/2010).

Some labels have begun offering releases on cassette. For punk audiences in the developing world, like in Mexico or Colombia, the cassette has always been a cheap and accessible medium. In the U.S., the return of the cassette appears to be driven by nostalgia and the personal preferences of a few labels. Will at Penguin Suit Records releases on

“If lazer discs were a viable format to release albums, we would release those too... I WANT EVERYBODY TO BE ABLE TO EMBRACE OUR BANDS. Punks, metal heads, comic book nerds, old ladies at bingo halls. EVERYBODY.”

Dan Emery, Anti-Corp Records
vinyl and cassette and argued that “tapes are more durable than CDs, cheaper to make, and the packaging is more fun to play with” (7/21/2010). Sam North of Traffic Street Records also releases on cassette and said, “I’m still a fan of cassettes, but I think they’re best reserved for short-run, somewhat quirky kinds of projects. The live Rational Anthem radio set, for example, has been our only cassette release thus far and I think that’s the kind of thing that’s well-suited to that format” (8/8/2010). If you are interested in releasing something on cassette, the costs are quite low. A company like Rainbo will duplicate the cassette, print the artwork, package it into a classic Norelco case, and shrink wrap it for between one and two dollars per copy, depending on the number ordered. The problem with the cassette format is that you may have a very limited market. Some DIY record labels absolutely loathe the cassette format. For example, Raymond Bailey of Collision Course Records said, “Cassettes I’ve always hated with a passion. There’s no reason for them to exist, in my opinion” (7/21/2010). Mike Park of Asian Man added, “I know there’s this big cassette resurgence, but I don’t want any part of it” (7/24/2010).

Digital downloads have become the primary way music is listened to these days. The music industry reports that seventy percent of all music consumed in 2009 in the U.S., U.K., France, and Germany came from digital downloads, even though sales from those transactions only account for thirty-five percent of the industry’s revenues. The rise of digital downloads has caused a variety of responses in the DIY punk
community. Some labels simply refuse to deal with digital downloads at all. As Mike Josephson of Longshot and Meaty Beaty Records states, “I personally hate digital formats, so I am resisting the route of MP3 sales” (9/12/2010). Other labels have had no problem shifting to that medium. Bryon Lippincott of Kiss Of Death believes “Digital works well because it is 2010 and it makes sense that lots of people have portable ways to play digital music. I listen to digital more than anything else” (9/26/2010). A few labels have begun to release music exclusively as digital downloads, such as Digital Warfare Records. But most DIY punk labels I interviewed strike balances between the existing formats, offering releases on a variety of formats. A common practice is to put out a vinyl release with a digit download code. This can be done through the vinyl pressing plant (for example, United offers 1,000 downloads for $225) or a third-party hosting site (the prices vary widely, as does the quality). The major digital distributor, iTunes, does not typically deal with small DIY labels. But there are options, if you are interested in going that route. An intermediary, like TuneCore, can get your releases available through iTunes, eMusic, and Amazon on Demand for a fee. One of the new bands on Girth Records wanted their single “Fuck You, Cancer” available on iTunes, so I used TuneCore. They charge an annual fee of $9.99 per single or $49.99 for a full album, as well as a slice of the iTunes profit. The band/label will reportedly receive around seventy cents for each iTunes sale, though I will admit to feeling more than a little uneasy about working with such
a corporate behemoth as Apple. Regardless, record labels have plenty of options available to them regarding the format of their releases. One of my favorite quotes about releasing on multiple formats came from Dan Emery of Anti-Corp Records: “If lazer discs were a viable format to release albums, we would release those too. I think it’s kind of elitist to overlook certain formats because they aren’t ‘cool enough.’ I want everybody to be able to embrace our bands. Punks, metal heads, comic book nerds, old ladies at bingo halls. Everybody” (7/22/2010).

A note on artwork: regardless of the format, most of the pressing plants will print your cover artwork for a price. This can be useful in that the product you receive from the press will be the final, shrink-wrapped product. But a number of punk labels maintain a DIY ethos when it comes to their packaging. It is easy to just photocopy your artwork yourself and slip it into the vinyl jacket, CD case, or around the cassette. The Scottish label Problem? Releases their CDs with a basic photocopied sheet that is folded in a complicated origami style. I dig that, and it keeps printing and mailing costs down, considering they ship their releases all over the world. I also respect the creativity in the DIY packaging. Rumbletowne Records, for example, released the RVIVR album with covers made from used record sleeves, folded inside out and silk-screened. Simple and very effective. Bonus points for recycling and re-using.

**DISTRIBUTION**

Okay, so you’ve got your box of three hundred 7”s. The question now is how do you get them out into the world? Corporate record labels have vast distribution networks, ensuring their releases get into record stores around the globe, particularly in the big box stores that currently make up one of the primary purchasing points for music. For the past few years, Wal-Mart, Best Buy, and Target have been the number two, three, and four top music retailers in the U.S. iTunes was number one. The ability to access these markets is a major distinction between commercial punk labels and DIY punk labels.

As I mentioned at the outset, “commercial punk labels” are companies that usually sell between 20,000 to 100,000 copies, often getting into chain records stores and big-box stores like Wal-Mart by working with large “independent” distributors that are actually owned by major record labels. This creates a rather interesting grey area in conversations about punk record labels. A punk label like Epitaph may pride itself on being independently owned and operated. Yet, they have a distribution deal with
Alternative Distribution Alliance (ADA), which is owned primarily by the Warner Music Group (Warner currently owns ninety-five percent of ADA, with SubPop owning the remaining five percent). Given the distribution of a record is the primary purpose of a record label, it can be hard to regard Epitaph (or other labels in similar situations) as truly “independent.”

Often the connections are complicated and hard to see at first. For example, Dischord Records and Crass Records currently use Chicago Independent as their primary distributor. Chicago Independent in turn distributes through Fontana, which is owned by Universal. In their defense, most of these record labels maintain that the corporate-owned distribution companies have no say in the day-to-day activities of the label; the relationship is just a fact of business and has no impact on who or what bands they release. While reflecting on the complicated nature of ownership in the distribution field, Derek Hogue of G7 Welcoming Committee Records said, “We’ve always been hyper-aware of this, and struggled for many years with trying to find distributors who could do a good job without involving the major label-owned distributors. By now, almost every smaller distro is either owned by a major, or turns around and sells to one that is. It’s pretty much impossible to avoid” (10/14/2010).

DIY punk labels generally do not operate on the same scale as commercial punk labels and, therefore, do not have direct access to these large distribution companies. Instead, they have several options available to them. At one level, there are several “true” independent distribution companies to use. These include Ebullition, Redeye, Independent Label Collective, Revelation (aka RevHQ), No Idea, and, once upon a time, Mordam. Lumberjack Mordam’s spectacular collapse was a complicated saga covered in great detail in issues #53 and 54 of *Razorcake*. Dan Phillips, who worked for Lumberjack until the very end (technically, he is still working for them to clean up the accounts), perhaps captured it best when he said the basic reason for their failure was “people making stupid decisions and being shitty” (7/30/2010). Needless to say, the way in which Lumberjack Mordam imploded, burned a lot of DIY punk labels. Hopefully important lessons were learned (lesson #1: don’t be a dick; lesson #2: beware the corporate music industry; lesson #3: repeat lessons #1 and 2 endlessly).

Lumberjack Mordam’s messy collapse altered the independent field in numerous ways. In some cases, many labels got burned and suffered financial losses they have not been able to recover from.

“A lot of labels got hurt with all these big distro companies going out of business,” said Chuck Dietrich of Basement Records. “Everyone was
owed money, but you’ve got to move forward and keep on picking up the pieces and putting them down somewhere else” (7/27/2010).

At the same time, several distribution companies stepped in to fill the vacuum left by Lumberjack Mordam, usually with strengthened anti-corporate, independent commitment. Two employees of Lumberjack Mordam, Jason White and Dan Phillips, began the Richmond, VA-based Independent Label Collective in 2009. The ILC, along with Ebullition, Redeye, Revelation, and No Idea represent important distribution networks for small DIY record labels. Distribution companies basically serve as a middle-man between individual record labels and retailers. They do the important legwork of getting a label’s releases out into the world. Sometimes they will just order a handful of copies of a new release. Other times they may order almost half of the pressing if they think it is a likely seller. In most cases, these “truly independent” distros are small affairs. California’s Ebullition is basically a one-person operation run by Kent McClard. Florida’s No Idea has a slightly larger staff, but it is still an intimate affair. In both cases, the distribution company developed from a DIY punk label.

“I had been doing a zine and a record label and if I wanted to get those things out to the world then I had to do the distribution myself,” McClard said. “After a few years, it was apparent that the distribution was larger than the label” (9/29/2010).
Most DIY punk labels are small affairs and their distribution tends to be very direct. They sell their releases at shows, and perhaps at a few local indie record stores. Ryan Cappelletti of the label Punks Before Profits is a good example: “I just trade records with people and then I just bring some boxes to shows. That’s my favorite part about punk: some kid with some boxes of records at a show. I got most of my records that way” (7/23/2010). For many labels, the most direct way they deal with their audience is through a website. Getting a website is fairly easy and inexpensive. You can go through a broker like GoDaddy to purchase a URL domain name (such as www.GirthRecords.com) for around twelve dollars a year. They will also host your domain for less than ten dollars a year. There are plenty of free software programs out there to help you design your own website. In conducting my research, I noticed a few DIY labels were actually using blog platforms, like WordPress or Blogger, to host their websites for free. I decided to do that with Girth Records as an experiment, and it seems to be working fine. I can post PayPal “Buy Now” buttons on the site at no cost (though PayPal does extract a fee for every transaction it handles). I used the option of upgrading my available space to 5GB (for around twenty dollars a year) so that I can post MP3 audio files. This allows visitors to the site to hear samples of the releases they are considering buying. Very few record labels opt out of having their own websites, and even then they usually maintain a MySpace page.
One of the most important ways that DIY punk labels distribute their releases is by trading with other small DIY labels. Swapping releases is a time-honored tradition in the DIY community and it allows labels to increase their own offerings and to get their releases out to more people. Dan Emery of Anti-Corp said, “We get everything in the distro off of trades with other labels, mainly because it makes distribution work for both parties, but the financial aspect of being able to barter is also pretty cool” (7/22/2010). Sam North of Traffic Street said the most important element of their distro is trading: “I trade copies of all of my releases to all of the other DIY pop punk labels: Dead Broke, Dirt Cult, No Breaks, It’s Alive, Muy Autentico, Kiss Of Death, and plenty of others. Through trading, I get my titles stocked in all of those labels’ distros and webstores and also get a ton of records to sell in my own distro and webstore, which is really important in attracting people to your website and getting them to pick up your own releases. No one wants to have to pay shipping and handling on an order with a single 7”, so it’s important to have a huge selection of other records that they can tack on to their order” (8/8/2010).

Trading between labels is especially common for labels in different countries. Michal of the Polish NNNW label said, “We see a DIY network as our natural ecosystem, so we try to use these channels mainly. Sadly, having been ripped off some times in the past, we had to think about other ways too. Mailorder, auctions, trades—that’s the reality of labels like ours. We’ve had problems with the biggest chain store in Poland, but we sued them and won the case. Up the punx!” (1/4/2010). Jordan Atkins of Residue Records noted the importance of trading with overseas labels when he observed, “It can take awhile to see the results of trades, but it is the best way to get records overseas and to places that are hard to get people to pay a more expensive wholesale” (7/29/2010).

A number of DIY labels also distribute through on-line stores. Amazon.com is the obvious behemoth in the market, but few DIY labels deal with it, usually because of principle, and the hefty fee they extract from each transaction. Instead, many labels use a handful of independent “one-stop” stores like Interpunk, PunknJunk, and RevHQ. These “one-stops” tend to accept copies of releases on consignment (the number varies on expectations of sales, but they’ll usually take a few of an unknown release) and offer them in their online stores for a fairly minimal mark-up. Some labels prefer not to work on consignment because it is often hard to ensure that you’ll get paid what you are owed. But a number of labels expressed positive experiences working with these independent online distros, such as Raymond Bailey of Collision Courses.
“Those guys can really help us little guys by making stuff available on their sites,” Bailey said (7/21/2010).

These online stores have basically replaced the old pre-internet mail order system. Other labels still prefer a more direct route, such as Bobb Easterbrook at Eradicator Records who said, “I get in touch with a lot of stores and distros directly instead of going through a big one-stop distro. It’s nice to know who’s selling your records” (7/27/2010).

SIGNING A BAND

Okay, you’ve recorded your band’s single, released it as a 7” on your own label, traded it with other DIY labels, and got it into the hands of a larger distro company and various “one-stops.” Now you are thinking about releasing another band on your label. This raises a couple of questions: Who are you going to release? Are you going to formalize your arrangement with them using a contract? What are the terms of the contract (or general agreement) going to be? Is there a certain identity you want your label to have?

Given that today most bands have the ability to self-release their own material, it seems that the primary purpose of a record label is to cover the production, advertising, and distribution costs that might be beyond the means of the band. Still, there remains another vital role of the record label: community building. The respected DIY punk labels tend to be those that, regardless of size, treat their bands and other labels well by fostering a sense of community. Renae Bryant of On The Rag Records also plays with the band All Or Nothing HC and she pointed out, from a band’s perspective, “the only reason to be on a record label is to be a part of a community of other bands you admire and agree with their ideas. Being on a record label, in the punk world, is like being a part of another family. We co-released one of the All Or Nothing HC releases through Rodent Popsicle. It was all a handshake deal. We love Toxic Narcotic and were stoked to be a part of the family of bands Bill puts out. Being a part of this family helped us as we booked our own local shows and U.S. tours. More importantly, we made many friends through the label and shows” (10/31/2010).

The majority of record labels I’ve spoken with deal almost exclusively with bands they know personally. Sam Richardson of Feel It Records said that is a criterion many record labels also want.

“I only release records by bands that I personally know at least one member of,” Richardson said (7/31/2010).
Lumberjack Mordam imploded, burned a lot of DIY punk labels. Hopefully important lessons were learned

The logic behind this position is further clarified by Justin Pearson of Three.One.G. Records: “Obviously we have to like the band or artist first off. But we also factor in things like our personal relationship with the musicians. That is important for a few reasons. One, typically we lose money on releases, so if we are going to put time, energy, and money into something, we want to know exactly who we are putting effort into” (8/8/2010). But for some labels, a personal connection is not always enough. Super Secret Records’ Richard Lynn added, “I have to love their music. In the past I put out a couple of CDs for friends and I regretted it because I didn’t love the music; it was more of a favor. Now, I have to love the music” (7/23/2010).

Some labels create an identity for themselves based on the specific scene they reflect. A label like Dischord, for example, states that its goal is to help document the Washington, DC scene, so almost all of its releases are from DC-based bands. Likewise, Knw-yr-own Records only releases music by artists based in and around Anacortes, WA. Some labels are more interested in releasing music from unknown or obscure bands in foreign countries. For example, Brian Lombardozzi started Amor Y Lucha after spending time in Chile and Argentina. His goal was to introduce listeners in the U.S. to bands in other, non-English speaking scenes.

“It was a humble attempt to combat some of the ethnocentrism that most in the U.S. have a hard time shaking off,” Lombardozzi said (8/12/2010).

Some labels are only interested in releasing certain musical subgenres of punk, such as ska, grindcore, or pop punk. Other labels deal exclusively
with bands that share the same political commitment. For example, J-Lemonade runs the Polish label Emancypunx and she said that in order for her to work with a band, “it has to have women or queers involved. It has to be a non-commercial, DIY, feminist band. Preferably raw, angry hardcore/punk” (9/18/2010). Robert Voogt of Commitment Records said, “Commitment Records was started to promote the positive straight edge, so I want all bands that I release on the label to stand behind that idea too. I have to like the music. The bands must have a good message to share and they have to be a straight edge band. I also try to check out what kind of people are in the band. I don’t want to release records by bands made up of rightwing people or of intolerant and violent people” (8/21/2010). Other labels are more pluralistic about who they are willing to work with. The New Orleans-based label Community Records, for example, is seriously dedicated to both the New Orleans scene and ska-punk, but has signed bands from outside the region and the genre. But more often than not, there are often personal connections between labels and their bands. Some labels are happy to accept demos and release something by a band they don’t know personally, but those seem to be rare exceptions.

In most of my interviews, nothing seemed to inspire as strong a response than the issue of using contracts. I would say that the overwhelming majority of DIY punk labels eschew the use of contracts. Mike Park of Asian Man stated that “A contract only creates problems. If you’re not happy with me, I’d rather you be able to just pull your stuff from my label without any contractual obligation” (7/24/2010).
Chris at Dirt Cult said, “I don’t use contracts. It’s generally a verbal agreement and a handshake. I don’t generally generate enough money to worry about such things” (7/21/2010). When asked about contracts, Dan Emery of Anti-Corp responded “Absolutely not. Never will. If somebody wants to take their release elsewhere when the pressing runs out, or release something on another label, it is fully endorsed” (7/22/2010). Todd Congelliere of Recess Records said, “If something happens where a band doesn’t feel right about keeping a record with me, then I don’t wanna do it” (10/14/2010). Kent McClard of Ebullition added that “Contracts only have value if you intend to hire attorneys and sue people in court. I have never taken anyone to court, and I have never been taken to court. I have no intention of taking bands to court” (9/29/2010). Derek Hogue of G7 Welcoming Committee Records pointed out, “Generally, it seems unnecessary to us. Even if a band screws us over, how are we ever going to enforce a contract? We wouldn’t even know how” (10/14/2010).

Some people believe there is no place for contracts in punk, including J-Lemonade of Emancypunx.

“It’s not a business” (9/18/2010). Ryan Cappelletti of Punks Before Profits added, “I just think a handshake and a smile is fine. I don’t care about being ripped off. I just hope they don’t do it. I mean, punk to me has always been the anti-business movement. Money and contracts destroy everything.” (7/23/2010). In that same vein, Will at Penguin Suit Records said, “If I can’t have a handshake deal and make it stick, they’re not actually my friend and I’d rather not release it” (7/21/2010).

It should be noted that some labels use contracts, and for good reasons. Heather HellKitten at RealPunkRadio, said the label uses contracts because she believes the bands prefer them: “I do it for the band’s sake. It lets them know what the deal is” (7/28/2010). Justin Pearson of Three.One.G. Records holds the same view: “Yes. So everyone is on the same page when we jump into working together. Also to make sure the artists know we typically pay a higher royalty rate than the industry standard. And lastly, if a band gets offers from larger labels, they can’t just take their album from us… that seems to happen to smaller labels” (8/8/2010). Basement Records also uses contracts, as Chuck Dietrich explained, “I didn’t when I first started. There was still a sense of trust and companionship amongst bands, but nowadays people sue for cutting in line at McDonalds. So I do it, but I’m proud to say I have never had to use or execute a single contract for anything, which probably amounts to over 1,000 contracts I’ve done” (7/27/2010).
Most DIY punk labels lose money regularly. There is a simple reason for that: THEIR BUSINESS MODEL IS NOT ONE DEFINED BY PROFIT-MAXIMIZATION. IN THE SIMPLEST TERMS, THEY ARE INTENTIONALLY BAD CAPITALISTS. But that is often the point.

Despite many labels aversion to signed contracts, it is clear that many of them do take the time to spell out specific expectations that the band and the label agree to. As Bird at Warbird Entertainment stated, “We don’t call them contracts. Agreements? Yes, we use them. Why? So the label and the band are all on the same page and knows what each party is getting out of the deal” (7/24/2010). Said Chuck at Livid Records, “When I started the label, we did contracts. Nowadays, I prefer doing a simple three-line e-mail to all the members of the band” (7/22/2010).

Todd Taylor, at Razorcake Records, offered the following observation: “I understand many punks’ aversion to business. I wholeheartedly recommend you never sign a contract that’s drafted by a large corporation because they have lawyers to void that shit and put you over a barrel. But, if you all want to be on the same page with people on your level—let’s be honest, many of us drink, forget, have other things on our minds—two or three pages of simple language can ease a lot of future anxiety” (8/3/2010). This is a similar position held by Jerry at Phratry Records: “I started typing out the agreements that we’d previously discussed in person, or over the phone, and I’d give copies to each band member. These written
agreements are meant to serve as a reference tool that we can revisit down the line, if need be, after the verbal agreement is put into motion. If anyone ever has a question about splitting royalties, etc. it’s there—on paper. I never ask for anyone’s signature, but it’s a backup in case anyone forgets any of the aspects of our verbal agreement” (8/22/2010).

What are the general details of these arrangements? There is slight variation among labels, but there is a general trend. The work of the bands is always privileged and protected, in the sense that they retain control over the masters and rights to the music. Dirtnap Record’s Ken Cheppaikode speaks for most when he said, “the band generally retains ownership of the masters/publishing, etc., and give us an exclusive lease on them for however long we agree on” (10/31/2010). Labels tend to give the bands a percentage of the pressings, usually between fifteen to twenty percent, but occasionally as high as fifty percent. The band can do whatever they want with those copies, but they usually sell them while on tour. If the band wants more, the label will provide them at wholesale or cheaper. If there is a second pressing, the band gets another percentage of the copies or the cash equivalent. I was a little surprised at how almost every label operated along such similar terms. It seems everyone has come upon a system that works, so why screw with it?
I don’t want to paint an overly-romantic or utopian view of running a DIY label. It definitely has its challenges and downsides. When asked what they found to be the biggest challenges of running the label, the answers varied, but a few common themes emerged.

One frequently noted challenge was deciding on whom to work with. Richard Lynn of Super Secret Records noted, “Sometimes I have to disappoint people when they ask me to put out their record and I just don’t love the music. You find out quickly if they are really your friend or just trying to get you to put out their record” (7/23/2010). When asked about the challenges of running Big Action Records, Zabby said, “Figuring out who I want to release the most is the biggest challenge I face. That and not getting too worked up when things don’t go well or something bad happens... such as bands deciding not to show up to recording sessions I’ve paid for or defective vinyl coming back from the pressing plant. With no one else around to really help out, I also would have to say staying up on emails and sending out mail orders can be trying too” (8/02/2010).

In fact, perhaps the biggest challenge mentioned by most was simply having the time to dedicate to the label. Often the people running labels have a thousand things going on at once. As Dirt Cult’s Chris observed,
“I lead a pretty busy life between working full time, playing in several bands, running an all-ages show space, etc., so sometimes it’s difficult to prioritize the label” (7/21/2010).

Part of the time required to running a label is dedicated to marketing and self-promotion, things that I am personally bad at and find distasteful. This attitude was shared by Derek Hogue of the G7 Welcoming Committee, when he observed that the biggest challenge is, “not getting discouraged with the general state of the music industry, and all the bullshit you need to engage in, in order to promote releases. We’re not sales people. We don’t like taking part in the hype machine. It tires us and we’re bad at it” (10/14/2010).

Finally, many people mentioned that it could be difficult to sustain their interest in the label when things got slow and boring. As Will at Penguin Suit Records noted, his two biggest challenges are, “keeping up with orders when they come in a flurry, keeping interested when there’s nothing getting sold” (7/21/2010).

One concern I expected to hear more in interviews was the challenge to sustain the label financially, but I was surprised at how rarely that issue came up. But let me be clear about something, most labels are not making money. A few of the people running DIY labels are able to make ends meet, either through the label itself (like Mike Park at Asian Man) or through the related distribution company (like Kent McClard of Ebullition). Most have another job that helps pay the bills, from being a mental health therapist (Chris at Dirt Cult and Bobb at Eradicator) or a vegan chef (Ryan at Punks Before Profits), to working construction (Will at Penguin Suit and Raymond at Collision Course) or driving 18-wheelers (Bird at Warbird).

Very few labels, such as Asian Man, Basement, Big Action, Collision Course, Dirtnap, and Livid Records, said they were actually making a profit. A few were just breaking even, such as Eradicator, G7 Welcoming Committee, Razorcake Records, and Warbird Entertainment. Most DIY punk labels lose money regularly. There is a simple reason for that: their business model is not one defined by profit-maximization. In the simplest terms, they are intentionally bad capitalists. But that is often the point. In some ways, the DIY record industry can be seen as an alternative model to the greed-focused capitalist world of the corporate music industry. DIY punk labels tend to invest in bands they like, not the ones that they think are going to make them rich. They tend to price their releases so that people can afford them, rather than worrying about increasing the profit margin. As Chris Clavin’s Plan-It X Records proclaimed: “If it ain’t cheap, it ain’t punk.”
Most DIY record labels are labors of love. Bryon Lippincott of Kiss Of Death Records speaks for most folks when he said, “the label is actually like a hobby business. I do it because I love it and love the bands” (9/26/2010). Richard Lynn of Super Secret Records added, “I realized early on this wasn’t going to be a big money maker. I do it because I love the bands and their music, and I want there to be a record of their music for people now and in the future to be able to listen to” (7/23/2010).

For many, the goal is just to make the label self-sustaining. As On The Rag’s Renae Bryant observed, “I consider the label a labor of love. It would be great to make a profit, but all I want to do it break even and put out more releases” (10/31/2010). Others take an even more stoic view, like Andy of Sweden’s Instigate Records: “I’ve lost so much money because of this shit label. But I don’t give a shit” (7/25/2010).

The point is, you probably won’t get rich running your own DIY punk label. But if you’ve gotten this far in the article, you’re probably not in it for the money in the first place. Hell, if you’re reading Razorcake, chances are that you are already part of the converted. So why haven’t you started your own DIY label yet? As the Desperate Bicycles sang back in 1977: “It was easy, it was cheap—go and do it!”