

AURAL ROBERT

Robert Baird

I Fought The Law

From time to time, friends of mine decide to open an independent record label. Try as I might to dissuade them with visions of disgruntled spouses, financial ruin, and the savory, slop-based cuisine served in mental institutions, they usually plow ahead and do it anyway.

I fully understand the allure. While indies come with their own set of problems, usually beginning with a lack of cash, they're often more nimble and open to possibility in terms of both creativity and sheer process. It's no exaggeration to say that now, more than ever, indies are where new musical flavors are born, new visions hatch, and music wash in awe can be found.

Over the years, I've observed that indie label owners come in two basic types. There's the unbelievably misguided breed who are in it for the untold wealth and fame that rarely materializes. If they fail, it's only their avarice and pride that get ruffled. The other species, infinitely more admirable yet dangerously exposed to spiritual harm, are in it for the music. Into that category fits an increasingly dear friend of mine, Abe Bradshaw, and his label, 00:02:59 Records.

"Big labels, they don't look at people who can sell 5,000 to 50,000," Abe says while sitting on a bench in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. "They're looking for people who sell 50,000 to 200,000. I was friends and fans of a dozen different unbelievably talented people, but there really wasn't a home for them. It's personal. I do it for the art, and to bring music to people. I'm not trying for [gold] records on my wall. I'm trying to help every artist as much as I can. Help them get to the next level."

Although this kind of innocent zealotry begs for the move made classic by Cher in *Moonstruck*—a hard slap across the face, followed by "Snap out of it!"—my friend does possess some defenses to protect his soul from what the music business can do. For starters, this Annapolis grad—who left the Navy because of a chronic hip condition that in 2005 necessitated a double replacement—got into the business the hard way: cold calls, and doors literally slammed in his face.

"It was probably the worst time of my life. It's very humbling to not be wanted.



Tim Baker,
Matt Mays, Abe Bradshaw



I used to look at the skyline of New York, because I wanted to live there so badly, and those weren't buildings—they were 8000 middle fingers sticking up at me."

Abe finally broke in at RCA Victor, where he worked in marketing. In 2000, he moved over to the distribution arm of RCA's parent company, BMG, where he worked for three years, then finally landed at Sanctuary Records in 2003. Led by Merck Mercuriadis, Sanctuary had a strictly defined business model that limited advances and expenses and, for a time, worked. Abe, who'd officially been on Sanctuary's sales side, had also been listening to demos, morphing into an A&R voice, and had been promised his own custom imprint. The first record on his fledgling label was to be a new set by Willie Nile, the semi-legendary New York rock singer-songwriter.

But by then Sanctuary, according to Bradshaw, had junked its earlier strategy and begun signing high-profile artists (Robert Plant) and paying huge advances, which led straight to their eventual demise. Abe quit, formed 00:02:59 Records, and released the Nile album. The label's unusual name, pro-

nounced "2 Minutes 59," comes from a line in the Clash song "Hitsville UK": "The band went in and knocked them dead in 2 minutes 59."

"It was extremely difficult to pick a stupid name. Everything sounds like something. I was thinking Rambunctious Records, but that sounds like a punk label. I was thinking Chrome

Heart Records, but that sounds like an alt-country label. I just didn't want anyone to say, 'Oh, he's obviously going to do blank.' If you see a couple numbers, you're like, 'Huh, I have no idea . . .'"

So far, Bradshaw's one man label has released six records, all available at www.2minutes59.com. After the relatively easy sell of a known commodity like Nile, whose marvelous *The Streets of New York* gave the label instant credibility, he and 00:02:59 have ventured into deeper waters as they try to break new talent. Matt Mays and El Torpedo, a hugely talented folk-rock band from Nova Scotia, and strong-voiced Arkansas singer-songwriter Christopher Denny, have both proven tougher nuts to crack. The label has also reissued the last two albums by New York alt-country/rock band Tandy, a new disc by well-known singer-songwriter Matthew Ryan, and a surprisingly consistent 36-track tribute to the Clash's *Sandinista!* While none of these has sold in big numbers, none has been a stiff, and this modicum of success has convinced Abe to keep fighting the good fight. So far he and a few friends (now departed) have bankrolled everything, but he's now looking for investors.

Like the directors of most indie labels that survive, Abe has also applied an economy of scale to his emotional and financial goals for 00:02:59. "The definition of success has gotten skewed to insane proportions. Albums sold a certain amount in 1999. Or 1986. But that doesn't happen anymore. People [in the record business] just need to accept that. Yeah, they might lose one of their beach houses, or they might never get a beach house now—but what's important is that you still get the music out there." ■