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AN NFL ROOKIE

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AMERICAN AIRLINES - AMERICAN EAGLE

# AMERICAN WAY

FEBRUARY 15, 2008

TRENDS FOR THE MODERN TRAVELER



**DREW CAREY**  
A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE  
WAY TO STARDOM



# When the Music's Over ...

It's time to really get down to business. Especially for this breed of artists-cum-entrepreneurs. By Joseph Guinto

**BACK IN 1991**, the hair band Skid Row condemned corporate cubicle culture and boring work of all kinds in the anthem "Slave to the Grind." The song went, in part, "I'm just another gear in the assembly line — oh no! The noose gets tighter around my throat. But I ain't at the end of my rope, 'cause I won't be the one left behind. Can't be king of the world if you're slave to the grind." Obviously, it rocked. Hard. And the message seems to have been well received. *Slave to the Grind*, the album, debuted at number one on the Billboard charts.

But things change over 16 years. Hair, for one. Today, the band's Jersey-born cofounder Dave "Snake" Sabo, a friend of that other well-coiffed hair-band survivor Jon Bon Jovi, is a bit less tousled. And though he insists he's still no slave to the grind, Sabo does admit that

he's not rocking quite as hard as before. "I can't afford hangovers anymore," he says. "I have too much responsibility."

When a guy called Snake tells you he's too focused on the bottom line to swig Jack Daniel's in the wee hours, you know the music industry has changed. Today, Sabo still plays the occasional gig with Skid Row, but he spends most of his time managing two acts for McGhee Entertainment in Los Angeles: the Southern rockers Down (which includes two members of Pantera) and singer-songwriter Bonnie McKee, whose sound is that of an edgier Jewel. Sabo's one of a growing number of musicians who are using their own career experiences to bolster other musicians — in genres ranging from hard rock to hip-hop. At a time when CD sales are sinking and major labels are pouring more money into fewer acts, these independent musicians turned entrepreneurs are filling an important void and helping performers get out of their garages and on radio stations and stages around the country.

Still, even when backed by performers with number one hits to their credits, these musician-led small enterprises can lack the finances and marketing muscle of the majors. But they may make up for it with something almost as important: sympathy. "I know what it feels like to be in a van for 50 days in a row and to be broke and hanging out with four smelly guys and sleeping in bad hotels," says John Kirtland, owner of Kirtland Records, a Dallas-based label whose acts include Bush and the Toadies. "I get it. I know what these acts are going through out there."

Kirtland also knows what it's like to live every band's dream — you know, the one about scoring a number one hit. He was the drummer for Deep Blue Something, a group from Denton, Texas, that landed a number one hit in 1995 with the still-infectious "Breakfast at Tiffany's." But there was a downside to topping the charts, one that helped spur Kirtland to start his own label. "Going through the '90s and riding that ride that was Deep Blue Something and 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' and having this big machine called Interscope Records have you as a priority — well, that was great," Kirtland says. "But after that, the record company

wants to make another record, and you're recording song after song that they're not releasing. And you figure out that you're not a priority anymore. There were more than a couple of years of that kind of frustration — and of watching my career dissipate."

Frustration and dissipating careers are exactly what Kirtland Records hopes to avoid in its work with the acts it promotes. "We have kept to the formula that we work with acts that we like as artists and as human beings," Kirtland says. "So we stick with them."

That's the same formula applied by Quannum Projects' chief executive. Really. He's Chief Xcel née Xavier Mosley, the hip-hop artist who is half of the group Blackalicious and who also runs Quannum on behalf of its owners, among whom are himself and four other multiple-name artists: DJ Shadow (Josh Davis), Gift of Gab (Tim Parker), Lyrics Born (Tom Shimura), and Lateef (Lateef Daumont). The seven people started the now 16-year-old label to give themselves greater control over their careers. Today, the label has signed more than a half dozen additional artists, all of whom were drawn to Quannum in part because of that whole sympathy thing, the Chief says. "In this day and age, music is being dealt with more and more as an accessory and not as a necessity," he explains. "But for us, it's a necessity. So the difference between us and a major corporation is that we don't view an artist's record that they've put so much heart and soul into as something that's going to come and go in a two- or three-week span, and then we're off to the next thing."

**HEART AND SOUL** are all well and good, but beating the competition is what pays the bills. And with industry contracting, the competition is increasingly tough for independent, artist-owned labels like Quannum Projects, Kirtland Records, and a handful of others — notable among them, Merge Records, founded by former members of Superchunk and based in Durham, North Carolina, and famed Washington, D.C., punk rock label Dischord Records, founded by Fugazi's Ian MacKaye.

U.S. album sales are cascading. In 2006, 588.2 million albums were sold, a big drop from the 618.9 million in 2005. And though

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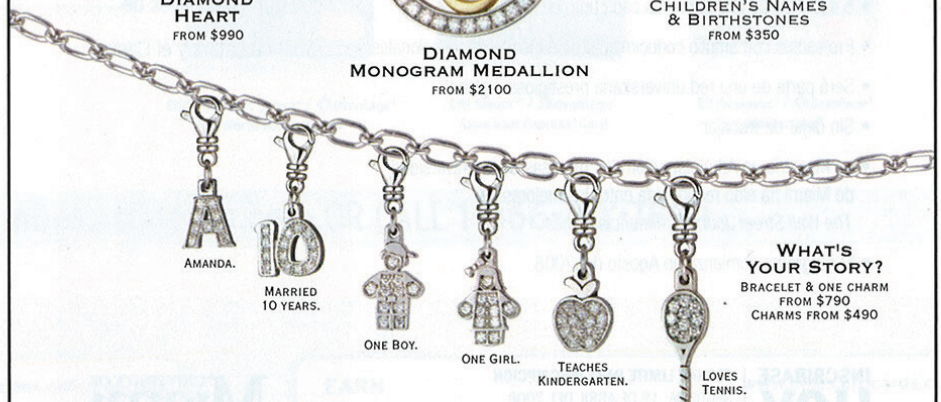
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complete 2007 numbers were not available at press time, sales were down even more this past year, all year long. Digital download numbers, meanwhile, are up, but not enough to make up the difference for the fall in CD sales. That's likely why some artists are trying new strategies to get their music out to the public. The most dramatic example is Radiohead, which a few months

ago offered its newest album, *In Rainbows*, online in a pay-what-you-like format.

For artist-owned independent labels, pay-what-you-like hardly seems to be an option. Like any small business, they need all the income they can get.

Kirtland Records has one key edge in that area: It's buoyed by ownership of the brisk-selling Bush catalog, which came into

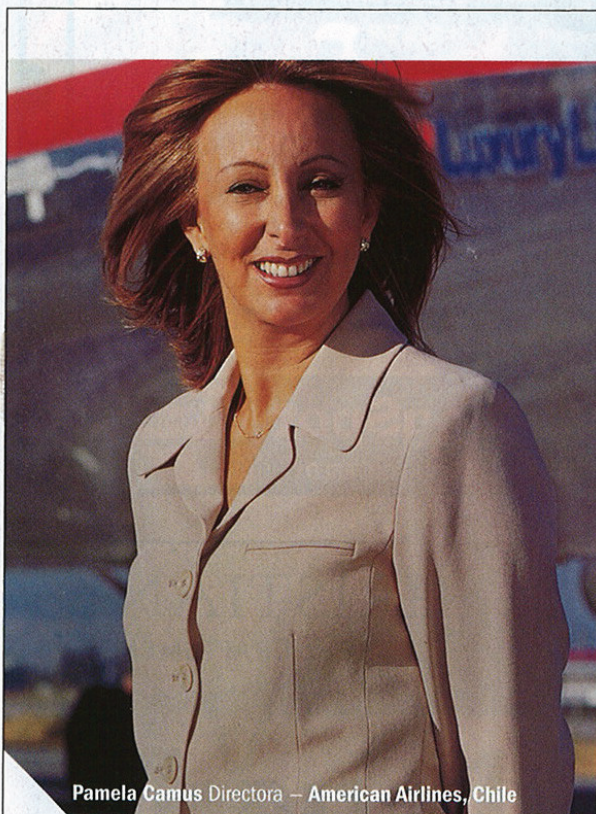
John Kirtland's possession after the prior owner, Trauma Records, went under. That steady income is essential to keeping the label competitive. "I know what a record needs to sound like to compete on the radio," Kirtland says. "I think I know what a hit sounds like. But unfortunately, what I've discovered is that you need a lot more than that. It takes a lot of money to break a band, and it is very difficult for any small label to compete on a national level with the majors, especially when the majors are working with fewer and fewer acts. Those acts have to hit for them, so they spend a lot of money promoting them. It's really hard for an independent label to get an act noticed up against that."

Of course, that promotional muscle is why so many acts still push hard for major-label representation. But to Grammy Award winner Judy Collins, that way of thinking is just being a slave to the grind. "There is a myth and mythology of being with a major record label," says the 68-year-old artist, who has recorded everything from folk to rock to show tunes and who even produced a 1972 Academy Award-nominated documentary. She founded her own label, Wildflower Records, in 2000, in part to escape the bureaucratic labyrinth at some major labels. "The record labels have gotten too focused on things other than the growth of the artists," says Collins, whose label distributes her own music as well as that of a plethora of singer-songwriter acts like Jimmy Norman and Amy Speace.

To be fair to the big labels, though, their business models are built on big returns, and they're answerable to shareholders and employees for their performance. Of course, smaller labels and management groups have to make money too. But when the up-front investment is lower, the returns don't have to be as big. And how do you keep the up-front costs in check? You get people with a passion to work hard for music they believe in. People like Snake Sabo.

"I'm still a kid who is a fan of the music," Sabo says. And with Down, the Southern rock act, "the music is incredible. I think it's critical that the world hear this record that they've made. For me, this is not just a business. This is personal." **AW**

Frequent *American Way* contributor **JOSEPH GUINTO** once had an office across the hall from a small record label whose business, he believes, consisted entirely of playing *Doom*.



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