

REVIEW – Independent Label – Hidden Shoal Recordings, Perth WA
<http://music.hiddenshoal.com/>

Hidden Shoal Recordings are a new independent label based in Perth. With an interesting approach to both presenting and selling music online their selection covers a broad spectrum of contemporary sounds and styles (including instrumental ambient, indie rock, emotive pop and beat laden electronica). They currently represent around 14 artists with 24 works on offer as digital download packages in their website (HSR) store. I went there the other day (always in search of good music downloads), created an account and previewed my way through a selection of new releases. A special pre-release of a debut album “Moongoat” by an outfit called Moongoat took me into a surprisingly complex and atmospheric cluster of sound not unlike tracks found on Brian Eno’s classic 1988 release Music for Films. What a find! There’s plenty on offer here and the prices are more than reasonable ranging from \$1.80 AUD to \$15.00 AUD with most releases selling for \$8.50 AUD. What better way to shop for Christmas!

With a collective approach to running a label they seem to be taking off in more ways than one and I caught up with co-founder Cam Merton via email to find out more

Q) As an independent musician what originally inspired you to set up your own label?

A) I think the biggest inspiration came from hearing so much amazing unreleased music around me and I was floored that this material wasn’t getting heard outside of a select group of ears. This was music that had been given to me by friends and colleagues that I wore out on my cd player because I dug it so much. Each of the partners in the label were also involved in projects that were awaiting release. It just hit me one day that it was criminal not to get this music out to the world. It was funny actually because I had this strange feeling of responsibility and couldn’t help thinking of the “publish or die” idea. It’s that step between thinking something should happen and actually realising that not only can you yourself make it happen but that it is irresponsible of you not to at least try.

We talked to the initial group of artists and bands we started the label with and everyone was really excited and worked with us to make it happen. Then there is this romantic notion of a music label that we really like. There’s so much to be said for the collective energy and force of a record label, particularly with the right mix of artists. Each artist feeds into the collective aura of the label and vice versa. The whole thing starts to become somewhat of a collective publishing experiment. We all look back to the days where you’d await the next release from labels such as 4AD, Subpop or Creation. We’d love to recreate that with HSR and have an audience that anticipated the labels next release and not just the release of a specific band. At the end of the day all the music on the label is music I listen to and would do even if I wasn’t involved in the label.

Q) How many people are involved in the day to day (week to week) running of the label?

A) We have three major partners in the label, myself, Stuart Medley and Malcolm Riddoch. We manage the label as a team and each take on specific production and administrative tasks. We also have the lovely Amie Harrison who works with us part time in the area of publicity and the wonderful visual artist Sam Landels who has just come on board as the labels photographer and video artist. Then of course we have the labels artists who all work closely with us and pitch in as a collective to make things happen.

Q) How did you go about financing the label?

A) The label is all self financed with the three partners investing the required money, time and expertise to get it up and running and to keep it running. We see the first year as a building period and during that time we're putting all money earned by the label back in to further grow it as a self-sustaining entity.

Q) Is there an artistic/graphic side to the label that you would like to talk about?

A) Stu, looks after the "look" and visual presence of the label from creating/finalizing all cover art down to the look of the website etc. He approaches it as a curator in a sense as well as a designer. We're into the idea of connecting the visual and aural senses through design but conscious of not dictating to the listeners the kinds of pictures they 'should' be getting from the music. It's an interpretive thing but hopefully an open and suggestive one. We're both big fans of Creation records but were always more impressed by the total package you would get from 4AD or Factory records. Their covers were vastly superior and way more coherent. Stu is a huge fan of Vaughan Oliver and his work with various photographers on the 4AD covers. Stu's had a good year with the record sleeves too because he met his design hero George Hardie who put together a lot of the Hipgnosis stuff for Pink Floyd, 10cc and Led Zep.

We also have the wonderful Perth based visual artist, Sam Landels, coming on board in the role of photographer and video artist. What we're hoping for there is for the kind of chemistry that happened between Reid Miles and Frank Wolfe during the Blue Note golden years. But maybe without the punch-ups! We all come from a visual arts/contemporary arts background so we inevitably draw from that experience and like to approach the label and its operation and activities in an open and creative way. We are also really excited about working with Sam to develop a series of music videos for release next year.

Q) What made you decide to sell digital media in the form of a download package as opposed to hard copy Cds?

A) It was a two-fold decision really. The financial aspect played a role and not because we are tight arses or started this thing off with 28 cents, but more because we had a real vision as to what this label could be and to realise that vision we needed to bypass a bunch of hurdles. Digital distribution allows us to get the music out to a global market, create active/responsive release schedules and allows us to develop a strong full roster of artists (we would not be able to handle the amount of artists we currently have on board if we distributed physically). To add to this, I have no romanticism attached to the cd as an object. I can sum it up by using two horribly worn clichés – "at the end of the day", "it's about the music". Digital music stores have now been widely accepted by music fans and will soon be the primary vehicle for the sale of music. All album packages sold through the label's store (The HSR Store) come complete with front and back printable cover art in PDF format and high quality mp3s so it's all ready for anyone who wishes to make a cd from the digital package. Basically the digital distribution approach means we've been able to drop so much of the baggage, bullshit and barriers (the three B's) to becoming a fully fledged indie label and do what we wanted to do from the outset without being limited by finances and issues with distributors.

Q) Can you talk a bit about the future and where you see the label going?

A) In terms of our larger vision, we want this to be a label where people look forward to the next release knowing it's going to be interesting regardless of what genre it may or may not sit within. To that end we will continue to steadily grow and curate our wonderful catalogue. We are conscious however to keep the collective to a level where it still feels like family and where we can give each artist and their respective release the

love that they need. Some labels seem to take on as many artists as they can get their hands on to fatten up their catalogue and it all starts to get disconnected and impersonal. Like I mentioned before we want this to be a collective where we can all work and communicate as a team to help everyone push their music forward.

In terms of practical directions we are just starting to push the licensing aspect of the catalogue through Hidden Shoal Publishing. So much of our catalogue is cinematic and visual and I am not just talking about the ambient and instrumental stuff here either. I think there's lots of opportunities to get our artists work into interesting film and TV projects and we are all set up to do that. I'm excited about getting this aspect of the business up and running and looking forward to setting this up as another viable publishing option for our artists' music. We are also just starting work on a cover album project, which will see release mid next year. The album will consist of HSR artists covering a selection of artists from the early days of the 4AD label. We liked the concept of a label covering a label. We're really looking forward to that one.

Written by Simone Score