Metal for the masses: how indie metal labels have adapted for the digital era

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Abstract

One of the areas that has most readily adapted to the changing musical environment is within metal music culture. Dedicated fans have taken responsibility upon themselves to create smaller record labels that specialize both in bringing attention to new, rising bands, as well as to do the laborious work that is needed to make sure that historical, out-of-print metal albums continue to receive new listeners. Their dedication has resulted in tightly-woven communities between these labels, the bands, and music fans, and this has contributed to the resurgence of physical mediums including vinyl and cassettes. Strategies are discussed that help push sales of physical media, including the release of special and elaborate versions of albums, often with unique packaging, or with limited color variants of vinyl editions. This article includes interviews with individuals that run underground metal labels and that host metal music streams, and they share their experience of how metal has changed as the music industry and the consumption of music has moved into the digital era, and the pros and cons that come with that, including perceptions about streaming and streaming services. Comparisons are made between major corporate labels and indie record labels, and the proactive role of indie labels in keeping musical subcultures thriving is assessed.

Introduction

The music industry has changed drastically in the digital era. Some of the largest changes include how music is consumed, how corporate entities interact with musicians, the introduction of new formats for listening to music, and the options that labels and artists have for releasing music, and although this means that many bands no longer have the opportunity to receive large financial expenditures from corporate industry titans, it has allowed indie music and some musical subcultures to continue to evolve and blossom after adapting to the new musical consumption climate, and it has created an environment for an intimate relationship between indie record labels, bands, and music fans. For instance, it used to be almost a necessity to get funding from a record label to help fund the recording and releasing of an album, whereas nowadays, in the age of the internet and affordable do-it-yourself technology, anyone can become a recording artist at home, and release their music digitally, or even in a physical format such as on compact disc, vinyl, or cassette through many of the accessible manufacturers that are readily found mere seconds into a Google search. Self-releasing music avoids some of the pitfalls of releasing music through a corporate label, such as being bound by restrictive contracts that often aren't ideal for the musicians, but that also means that independent bands do not have

access to the skilled engineers, producers, booking agents, and managers that a record label can provide (Leyshon, 2009). We can look to Canada as an example of how widespread the movement away from releasing music through record labels has become. In Canada, 95% of all musicians are not affiliated with either major or independent record labels and instead act as entrepreneurs that create, record, and then release their music themselves (Hracs, 2012). Although this is true across many musical subgenres, with ambitious new rap artists recording in their basement and their ilk, what is focused on in this article is how the production and consumption of heavy metal music has changed, with an emphasis on the rise of smaller, do-it-yourself record labels. These smaller record labels, which are often referred to as indie or independent record labels, are small to medium record labels that operate without the funding of a major corporate label or enterprise. Indie record labels are especially prevalent for musical genres that have less financial appeal, such as heavy metal music, and all the more so for more niche subgenres of metal music.

Metal music is a unique form of music that is distinguished by distorted guitars, loud volumes, and music that frequently incorporates compositional and structural extremes, both in tempos and vocal styles. Following the rise of metal music in the 1960s, a number of dedicated subcultures emerged, each identified by a unique style of metal music, and a number of other defining characteristics, including different styles of dress, the utilization of symbols, and some differences in moral reasoning styles, personality traits, and lyrical preferences (Messick & Aranda, 2020). These metal communities are often close-knit, and sustain contact through a variety of means, including through social network activity, and through the attendance of live music events, including concerts and festivals. For some, metal even serves as an important coping mechanism for many of the stressors and mental health concerns that they face (Messick, Aranda, & Chris, 2020). In general, metal music fans have an intense commitment to their worldview (Guibert & Guibert, 2016; Weinstein, 2000; Weinstein, 1991) that promotes shared experiences of belonging, emotional attachment, and the embracing of common symbols such as the hand gesture referred to as ‘the horns’ (Snell & Hodgetts, 2007). Members of the metal music community share an identity that is derived from a unique set of myths and heritage (Spracklen, Lucas, & Deeks, 2014; Kahn-Harris, 2007) which are socialized through other members, the internet, and often family members. Even prior to the popularization of the internet, intense commitment to the metal worldview was predominant, as it was not uncommon for members to exchange cassette tapes and literature with members from other countries to promote the acquisition of knowledge and artifacts about metal music culture (Dunn, 2004; Harris, 2000).

In the 1980s, metal music was particularly popular, with regular airplay on the radio and with television shows on music channels like MTV that maintained a focus exclusively on metal and rock music, including popular programs such as *Headbanger's Ball* and *Beavis & Butthead*. Metal music is no longer the popular musical genre that used to dominate radio stations and have constant video airplay, but it has continued to thrive despite becoming a more niche style of music. This nicheness has only made metal subcultures more tightly knit, and within metal's

many cultures, a microcosm of the outer music industry has occurred, with passionate fans taking up the mantle of record industries with a more do-it-yourself approach that is fuelled more by the passion for music and a perceived need within the metal community, rather than a desire for monetary rewards. It is a more collectivist approach to the distribution of music. But that is not to say that metal music is not still popular, as in this digital era, we continue to see that metal albums, even extreme subgenres like death metal, have high stream counts on services like Spotify (Nijkamp, 2018), and occasionally a metal album will still appear in high rankings on the American Billboard Charts (Zellner, 2019). Part of the reason why metal bands don't often pop up into popular culture anymore is that in this do-it-yourself era, where anyone can teach themselves how to play an instrument through Youtube instructional videos, is that there has been an enormous growth in the number of metal bands that exist. In Finland alone, the country credited for having the highest capita of heavy metal bands of any nation with approximately 53 heavy bands per 1,000 people according to statistics drawn from Encyclopaedia Metallum in 2012. This garnered such attention that former President of the United States Barack Obama publically joked that the prevalence of heavy metal bands in Finland might have contributed to the country's economic success, stating 'I do want to point out that Finland has perhaps the most heavy metal bands in the world, per capita, and also ranks high on good governance. I don't know if there's any correlation there' (President Obama is familiar with Finland's heavy metal scene. Are you?, 2016). With so many bands now existing, the dispersion of metal fans has spread much more thinly across these bands. It used to be that bands like Metallica and Black Sabbath dominated the attention of many due to their wide accessibility through radio and advertising, but now fans can discover metal bands through the internet, effectively cutting out the previous role of corporate entities and music television.

Corporate music labels do continue to push music as a product, as is the case with the pop music that currently dominates radio and television, but these artists are often created as products with financial gain in mind, with music written by entirely different people, at least in part, than those that perform the songs. For instance, many popular songs, including hits by Katy Perry, Britney Spears, The Backstreet Boys, NSYNC, Maroon 5, Taylor Swift, Céline Dion, Kelly Clarkson, Usher, Avril Lavigne, Christina Aguilera, Ariana Grande, and Pink were co-written by Max Martin, an individual that is not considered a full-time member of any of the aforementioned musical acts, nor is he a household name like the those acts despite his invaluable contributions to their successful careers. This corporate style of creating music has been described as 'an impersonal, assembly-line-driven process that would make Henry Ford proud' (Getlen, 2015). This differs greatly from many indie bands, including those that play extreme subgenres of heavy metal like death metal, grindcore, and doom metal, which frequently write their own music, and are generally well aware that the style of music that they play won't likely be financially lucrative. In the indie metal music world, an increasing number of bands self-release their own music, instead of using a label at all, but this still leaves a gap somewhere between the corporate world and the completely independent metal artists, since the reach of an independent metal band is still much more limited than when they have the resources available to

them that a record label can provide. This is where metal fans stepped in, and they started creating their own indie record labels that could provide a valuable service for the metal community. For many, the focus was not on profits, but rather, it was for bridging a gap between music and fans that wasn't sufficiently available through other means. It was to give an opportunity for broader exposure to bands that wouldn't find that opportunity elsewhere. These labels have popped up over the last few decades, and each focused on specific types of heavy metal music that the label owners had the strongest preference for and connection to. Some would not only release albums by newer bands that the owners felt deserved broader attention, but also, they would go through the laborious task of tracking down the rights for albums that were long-out-of-print. Sometimes this meant engaging with bands who had members that had passed away, such as the case when Kostas Vaxevanos, owner of an indie metal record label called Repulsive Echo, contacted the surviving members of Ohio's death metal band Guttled, to see if he could officially reissue their 1994 album, *Bleed For Us To Live*. The album was originally released through Red Light Records, a label that had become defunct after becoming bankrupt in 1995. Metal fans like Kostas maintained a persistent love for the metal albums that they grew up with as the analog era changed into the digital era, and over those decades, many metal albums such as the aforementioned Guttled album had become nearly impossible to find without paying an exorbitant amount through auction websites. It is reflective of the dedication of people like Kostas for the music that was so fundamentally important to them in their youth, that they go through extraordinary lengths to make out-of-print releases widely available again for the newest generation of metal fans. Not only this, but these indie labels also identify rising talent within the metal community, and then as they draw attention to many of these bands, bigger record labels swoop in and sign these bands to their own labels once they've been evidenced to be profitable. Despite these frustrations and the dire hardwork that coincides with them, independent labels persist, even though they often aren't a profitable venture for those who run them.

I interviewed a number of owners of indie metal record labels to understand their role in metal music culture, why they persist in the face of the aforementioned hardships, and to understand the differences that they've experienced as the music industry has entered into the digital era. The following article has been divided into sections based on commonalities between the interviewees. These individuals are mostly tied to a specific metal community, which is characterized largely by the style of music they prefer: death metal. Death metal is a style of metal music characterized by vocalizations with unnaturally low fundamental frequencies, high levels of distortion, and little to no harmonic structure. The guttural vocal technique utilized in death metal is frequently described as 'growling.' These vocalizations are frequently associated with aggression and fear, however, these are not the emotions that fans of this music experience while listening to it (Olsen, Thompson, & Giblin, 2018). It is a high-tempo, energetic style of music that embraces taboo lyrical topics like death and murder, although not exclusively (Messick & Aranda, 2020). There are indie record labels worldwide that specialize in the promotion and releasing of music in this style, including Obliteration Records (Japan), Xtream

Music (Spain), Lord of the Sick Recordings (Russia), Transcending Obscurity Records (India), Osmose Productions (France), Vicisolum Productions (Sweden), 20 Buck Spin (United States), Maggot Stomp (United States), The Artisan Era (United States), Willowtip Records (United States), New Standard Elite (United States), Chaos Records (Mexico), and many more. The following were the individuals I was fortunate enough to interview for this article, which I've listed alphabetically alongside the record label they own, the year the label formed, and the respective countries where each label primarily operates:

- Barrett Amiss II of Seared Records (Formed in 1997, USA)
- Eric Musall of Unspeakable Axe Records, sub-label of Dark Descent Records (Formed in 2013, USA)
- Giorgio Spevo of Everlasting Spew Records (Formed in 2016, Italy)
- Jamie Bailey of Unmatched Brutality Records (Formed in 1998, USA)
- Kostas Vaxevanos of Repulsive Echo Records (Formed in 2013, Greece)
- Luciano Gaglio of I, Voidhanger Records (Formed in 2008, Italy)
- Matt Calvert of Dark Descent Records (Formed in 2009, USA)
- Raúl Sampedro of Memento Mori (Formed in 2009, Spain)
- Steve Green of Comatose Music (Formed in 2001, USA)

The interviews with these individuals revealed three consistent themes that are outlined after the formation of these indie record labels is discussed: 1) how the consumption of metal music has changed over the existence of their labels, 2) how proactivity is perceived as crucial for sustaining metal music culture, and 3) the differences that the label owners outlined between major corporate record labels and smaller, indie record labels.

The formation

A number of the people that currently run indie metal record labels didn't intentionally start out pursuing that goal. They were members of the metal community that already supplied something to the metal community, such as through playing in a metal band or by creating and distributing fan-made magazines about the latest metal artists ('fanzines'), and naturally expanded into a record label. Kostas Vaxevanos started out by creating a fanzine in 1999. Fanzines like Kostas' generally included interviews with bands and reviews of new albums, sometimes included information about upcoming metal concerts, and played a large role in spreading information about new and upcoming bands in the 1980s and 1990s. Most of these were budget, do-it-yourself publications. In the case of Kostas, he began to run a small distribution alongside the selling of his fanzine, with the intention of making albums that were difficult to acquire in Greece, where Kostas resides, more readily available to fellow residents of his country. Eventually, Kostas' ambitions snowballed into becoming one of the most prominent underground record labels in Greece, beginning with the first official Repulsive Echo release in 2013, which followed quickly with merchandise and pressings of albums in multiple formats.

Currently, Kostas hosts some exclusive pressings of new and previously out-of-print extreme metal albums worldwide. I was fortunate enough to visit him in Athens, and I saw that that all he accomplishes with his label reflects his intense passion, and one that requires much effort, time, and sacrifice from him. It is a hobby that doesn't pay his bills, as he, like many other indie record labels also maintains a day job, but it surely fulfills needs for him that are not satiated through an ordinary day job. Kostas was not the only one to expand what they were already doing into a record label. Barrett Amiss II also expanded from his fanzine, *Sevared Pages*, into *Sevared Records*. In Barrett's case, he was living with the drummer of a band called *Disinterment*, and the band did not have the resources to release their album, so Barrett stepped in, provided the necessary resources to *Disinterment*, and that became the first *Sevared Records* release, *Endless*, in 1997. After that first release, Barrett became acutely aware of music that wasn't getting released elsewhere, so he again stepped in, and began contacting bands whose music he greatly enjoyed. As he described:

‘...after [I released the *Disinterment* album], I kept getting tapes, demos, et cetera of sick bands from all over and nobody was releasing them, so I was like "I love this shit, let me try to contact them and release something." A lot of them got back to me, some didn't, maybe because I had only one or so releases et cetera, who knows, but I was very persistent, and for some bands I would see who the band members were and actually called 411 or whatever it was at the time [the telephone number for local directory assistance in Canada and the United States]. You would tell them [the operator] the person's name and they would connect you to them. The first band I did that with was *Disfigured* from Long Island, New York. I got the *Disfigured* demo in Illinois at a fest and loved it, so I ended up calling Ryan from *Disfigured* at eleven at night, and we worked out a deal and that was my 3rd [*Sevared Records*] release.’

Barrett is a good example of how a record label contacted bands before and after the digital era, since a label would have to either find the home phone of a band member or mail them in order to contact them, whereas nowadays that process can be much simpler as many individuals can be contacted through email or through a text message through Facebook or some other social networking platform. Bands used to include their home addresses in demos and releases in order to be contacted by potential labels and fans, whereas now bands can get contacted more easily through Facebook or email, so home addresses generally aren't included with releases anymore. Other indie label owners similarly branched out from other metal-related endeavors. In the case of Steve Green of *Comatose Music*, he began including releases from other bands at his band's merchandise table, and that evolved into a full, proper record label. In his words:

‘When everything started with *Comatose Music* I was also in a band, *Lust of Decay*, that was playing a lot of shows at the time. And I thought having a distro table of various death metal CDs to set up at these shows would be a great way for new fans to discover the vast and thriving underground metal scene.’

The motivation to pursue a record label differed from person to person, with some feeling that they were filling an existing void in the metal community, and others, such as Luciano Gaglio of I, Voidhanger Records, just wanted to be more involved in more aspects of the metal community:

‘I’ve been a rock/metal writer for more than 15 years, but at a certain point it wasn’t enough, I wanted to experience the privilege of being on the other side, at the side of the artists, assisting them during the creative process, offering them my viewpoint on their music and concrete advice about artworks and packaging. I didn’t take the field because I felt that the metal community needed a label like mine - and in fact my label had been ignored, at first - but today I think that underground metal would be less rich without the releases of I, Voidhanger, as I’ve always tried to give voice to the diversity in metal, to artists often snubbed by other labels or by distracted listeners.’

A number of the label owners that I interviewed said that they started their label because they perceived a need for it within the metal music community. In other words, they perceived there as being a vacancy that needed attention, and they took personal responsibility for rectifying it. For example, Jamie Bailey, brother of Unmatched Brutality Records founder Mike Bailey, described one such example of a perceived need when he stated that:

‘Mike and I both felt that there was a lack of representation in the United States specifically for the brutal death metal acts [an especially intense style of death metal music characterized by a fast-drumming technique called the “blastbeat”]. There were certainly labels that were supporting it but we felt there was room for more. We were really interested in releasing material from bands we actually enjoyed, as opposed to what we thought may be more universally accepted.’

In their instance, Mike and Jamie felt that there were challenging, less commercial forms of their preferred style of music that were not being sufficiently represented by existing record labels, so they started their own label to give the bands that they enjoyed a chance to reach a broader audience. Eric Musall of Unspeakable Axe Records also noted that he felt there was a need for his label:

‘There are always way more bands than there are labels that can possibly support them. Even if you discount the many, many bands that probably shouldn’t be on a label, or distributed on any mass scale, there aren’t enough labels. I saw a band I really liked struggling to get any label support, even though their first [self-funded and released] album was so good. That was the tipping point for me. In a sense, it was a very selfish act: I wanted that album to get a proper release that I could personally own. Weird reason to start a business and spend \$1500 on a CD pressing, but it was enough for me.’

How the consumption of music has changed with the digital era

In the early days of metal, albums were released on vinyl, 8-track tapes, cassettes, and later compact discs. With the introduction of the internet and the expansion of technology to include digital storage devices such as music players, cell phones, and computers, the consumption of music has been gradually changing towards consuming music through the downloading of digital music files, such as MP3's (Leyshon, 2009), instead of through the purchasing of physical versions of albums that can be played through a more limited number of specialized devices. Almost as quickly as the internet and digital music gained prominence, music began being ripped, or copied, from physical devices such as compact discs and exchanged over the internet, and after that, digital files would be shared directly, without being purchased from a label or band. New terminology gained prominence, such as when a digital album would be readily available to download illegally online, then that album would be referred to as 'leaked'. This replication and distribution of music illegally over the internet had massive consequences for the music industry, and has dramatically changed the cultural climate for music consumption. File-sharing programs like Napster, Limewire, Bearshare, Soulseek, and many others were used as ways for music to be exchanged between different people without monetary exchange, effectively preventing record industries and musicians alike from profiting off the consumption of the music that they owned and created. Some artists tried to push against this, such as the well-documented case of Metallica (Rimmer, 2001), but the phenomena was simply too widespread to regulate. Even as Napster shut down in July of 2001, other file-sharing services including Soulseek have maintained prominence to this day. In order to push back against the consumption of digital music that wasn't profiting record labels or bands, the music industry began to adapt, and began selling albums digitally, and often for prices that were competitive with physical albums. From here, similarly, music through terrestrial radio has become less prominent for consumers as internet and satellite radio stations became available (Korver, 2019). With faster internet speeds, it was no longer the case that a music fan had to wait an entire day for their dial-up internet to download a single song. Albums could be streamed, or played immediately without delay in real-time, through various streaming services such as Youtube, Spotify, and Bandcamp. Often albums would be streamed on a website like Youtube without the artist's consent, and this ability to listen to music for free, whether legally or illegally, further hurt the music industry and the individual artists that created music, as they weren't initially making money off of these streams. There have been significant movements to allow artists to make some income off of music streams, but as has been documented in the case of Spotify (Teague, 2012), the payout to artists is still incredibly meager and the general treatment towards artists by streaming services is poor. For record labels, it can often be an impossible task to try and have every illegal stream of an album removed from Youtube, particularly for smaller labels that don't have the time or money to do so (since hireable services exist that track down and remove links on the label's behalf), so many labels have stopped attempting to remove 'illegal' streams altogether. Labels have adapted in different ways, often hosting entire streams of albums for free on their label's own Youtube or Bandcamp pages, but some record labels (e.g., Memento

Mori and Repulsive Echo) still maintain a more traditional view, where they feel that labels/artists should be paid in order for fans to listen to a full album, so they may only make one or two songs from a new album available for streaming for free. This section elaborates on two areas about how music has changed according to the label owners that were interviewed: 1) the resurgence of physical media, and 2) how indie metal labels have adapted for and compete with digital media.

The resurgence of physical media

Although there is great variability in how indie labels have adapted to the digital era, there is somewhat of an anomaly within metal music culture: even as digital files become ever-increasingly prominent, physical media like cassettes and vinyl have made a huge return. In 2019, albums released on vinyl generated more revenue than compact discs for the first time since 1986 (Leight, 2019), and this is largely due to the widespread demand for vinyl by fans of metal music, as for many, this is their preferred way to consume music. This isn't always intuitive, as digital files can be downloaded in a file form known as Free Lossless Audio Codec (more frequently referred to as FLAC), which is a higher quality music file than what is available on vinyl or compact discs. Although, for metal fans, audio quality is not the only important factor in purchasing music, since cassette tapes have seen a resurgence too, and cassettes are notorious for having audio quality that is worse than compact discs or vinyl. The resurgence of physical media is a more niche one, but a trending one that is fueled largely by nostalgia, either for reliving a listener's youth, or for paying homage to the 'golden age' of metal. For example, in the pre-digital era of metal music, metal fans and bands worldwide would exchange cassette tapes through postal mail in order to introduce new music to one another (Dunn, 2004; Hecker, 2012; Reyes, 2013). Many attempt to relive this era of metal by continuing to collect metal albums on cassette tapes. As Raúl explained:

‘Cassettes aside, every other music genre features music on any format after the vinyl trend a few years ago. In metal and punk there's the demos on tape tradition, and it's probably linked to nostalgia as well. Tape trading and all that stuff, you know. I guess it's either old enough people that never quit purchasing tapes, or young people that didn't live through the analog era and just try to recreate it.’

Kostas explained why so many forms of physical media persist in metal music:

‘For the same reason you go to the bakers shop and it has 100 different types of bread. Variety is something that helps on sales. There are people with CD players only. Others with turntables only. Some others find cassettes cheap and their nostalgia mode is on. So there must be room for everyone.’

Giorgio similarly believed that the reason so many forms of media persist is because each metal fan has a preference for the media format that they most embraced in their youth. It was an ongoing worry that digital media would completely replace physical media, but everyone I

interviewed felt that physical media will persist, regardless of the popularity of digital media. For example, Matt was optimistic about the future of physical media, based on his own experiences with Dark Descent:

‘For sure...streaming is a huge thing now. Everyone is streaming so you have to pay attention to that. I’m not a streamer of music but a lot of people are and they want to hear on their favorite platform. When we started, you were ecstatic to move a 500 vinyl pressing especially at our size. Now vinyl is outselling the CD in a lot of cases. Ten years ago most were convinced the physical format would diminish... it was just a matter of time. You’d see the articles about the demise of the compact disc or some other nonsense. It’s great to see this hasn’t come to pass as we’re selling more [physical albums] than we ever have.’

Adapting for and competing with digital media

Metal record labels tend to focus on physical pressings of music, due to the rich history of the genre with vinyl, cassettes, compact discs, and even 8-track tapes, but many of these record labels still needed to address the growing demand for digital music as consumer preferences changed, with many metal fans exclusively listening to metal music in digital format. Kostas believed that physical media formats will persist, but he still noticed trends based on age groups that suggest otherwise:

‘Digital music is something we can’t hide from. We can’t prevent people from listening to music this way. We must be open to everything. I am not a fan of digital and I think physical formats will survive. What I am afraid of though is that I don’t see many new fans especially in extreme music. Most of our buyers are between 25-50, so I really don’t know what that means. When I was teenager I was visiting [record] stores every week and multiple times. That is my only fear. You can’t replace the real thing. The same for newspapers.’

Physical pressings of music must compete directly with digital versions, including illegal digital versions that the label and bands cannot profit from, so labels do what they can to encourage the purchasing of a physical album instead of downloading the album illegally. This is already difficult, since so few record and music stores are still open, and those that are open, likely don’t cater to the type of music provided by indie metal record labels, so these record labels are dependent on sales almost entirely through their individual respective websites, or other websites that carry their releases, in addition to any sales that the bands make directly with fans. Labels often add additional incentives so that physical releases have some advantages over digital files. At the very least, a physical pressing will likely have high quality printed artwork, often a booklet that includes lyrics and a photo of the band, but an increasing strategy by record labels is to include limited variants of albums. This can include limited color schemes of vinyls, a limited boxed-set version of an album that includes bonus items like patches or a poster, or by advertising that the albums are hand-numbered or limited in quantity. It is sometimes the case

that physical albums will include bonus tracks (additional songs) while digital versions will not. All of these strategies allow physical media to continue to compete with digital media, but not all record labels apply these strategies, as some, including Raúl, see this marketing strategy as a cheap ploy that disrespects devoted metal fans. He explained:

‘I’ve never been interested in stuff like that. Not even as a mere fan. I believe it’s nothing but a commercial bait. Something labels do in order to artificially create a “must have” item, provide the buyer/owner with a sense of uniqueness, and therefore boost sales to the max. Financial psychology in full effect. I find limited presses to be ludicrous. Why would you want to limit the amount of copies you press, if there’s a demand for more? Answer above. I mean, I pretty much understand you make an initial press. But once that initial press is gone, do a repress if there’s a demand for it, instead of going the easy way to guarantee big sales figures. Besides that, there’s the typical online speculator that makes big money from selling these “unique items” in the second hand market. Screw those people [Predatory, opportunist people that buy limited pressings of albums to sell them online for exorbitant prices]. If I see one of our sold out releases show up on one of those platforms at an overinflated price, I’ll make sure to make a repress as soon as my release schedule and my budget allow. My goal as an underground label owner is to spread the music of the bands on our roster as widely as I can, and as affordably accessible to the fans as possible. Period.’

Kostas elaborated on these marketing strategies by saying that these strategies predate the digital era, although they’ve gained prominence because of the new era. He also criticized labels that put up full album streams as part of their marketing strategy. In his words:

‘Colored versions [of vinyl records] used to exist before the downloading era. The plain truth is that indeed all these are marketing tricks so labels can survive the war with the digital era. My point of view is that the labels are responsible for all this. In the 90s they were promoting CDs and burying vinyl and tapes. Now that they saw people downloading like crazy they had to come up with something worthy. So 180gram vinyl, posters, this-and-that, plus the limitation you mentioned are all parts of bringing back the glory plan and still selling high. Remember a CD is the cheapest format to do so why in the 90s did they double the price of a vinyl? They convinced fans it sounds better, clearer, and can be stored easier. Also labels should not have entire albums in media like Soundcloud, Youtube, et cetera. One or two songs are enough.’

Giorgio communicated that a balance must be struck when applying these marketing strategies, as although metal fans are collectors, they should also be respected:

‘I generally mirror our private approach about physical media as buyers into what we do with the label, so you’ll hardly find boxed sets [from Everlasting Spew Records] because I just think they are a ridiculous waste of space and 99% of the times the stuff included is useless. I mean, action figures? Fridge magnets? Please no! Colored vinyl variants are a different thing: they basically are the same product [as a regular vinyl]. No space wasted, a sort of prize for the hardcore fans of certain bands, for those willing to pre-order the release faster than others. From the business side of the thing of course, having limited releases that could sell fast and give a sense of "urgency" to the fans also helps us collect money prior the release itself [through presales; preorders] so you will partially recover part of the investment in a really short time. But that’s all we want to do in that direction, we don’t want to scam people with 1000 different colored variants “obliging” some of them to collect them all, as we are buyers too. I would perceive that as a really bad move from a label.’

Comatose Music is one of the few labels that I interviewed that have a unique perspective because they have been around for nearly twenty years, so Steve Green has first-hand experience about how the music industry has changed and how a label like Comatose Music must adapt:

‘Things certainly changed during the time that Comatose Music has been around. I’d say the biggest change is physical media versus digital media. And with the rise of digital media came the age of illegal downloads. All I can really do to appeal to the fans in hopes that they’ll purchase the physical media is provide a high quality product with exceptional artwork and packaging. Thankfully I believe there will always be the true die-hard fans who demand the hard copy. But I’ve also realized making albums available digitally is important and Comatose Music has been working with a digital distributor since 2012 to make that happen. Social media is also something that’s really gained popularity over the years with the start of Myspace and Facebook, so an online presence is crucial these days to help push and promote as hard as possible.’

Sevared Records has been around even longer, having been founded in 1997. Founder Barrett similarly described the changing environment of music consumption, and warned of its consequences:

‘It’s changed in everyway possible! Mainly [because music has moved towards] digital shit. Once people could just go to a site and listen to the music for free, they stopped supporting not only the labels, but bands mostly! It really did kind of kill everything, and still is [killing everything]. I don’t understand how somebody can just download an album and say, "I have that in my collection." In my mind, and I think most people who actually love the music - you want to hold the completed album in your hands! People nowadays don’t understand what it

actually takes to get an album out. First the band makes the music, then record it, get it mixed and mastered. Then, send it to the label, all the while getting the artwork made, then getting the layout made, then when the whole package is ready to go. You send to the pressing plant to get them mass produced. A month later you get the full package back from the press and it's ready to send to fans. Now, we [any independent artist] made a song. Get it on our Bandcamp [the Bandcamp of the independent artist] for one dollar, and if there's enough interest maybe you will be blessed with a physical copy. No bands or labels can stay active like that!'

As Barrett illustrated, it doesn't seem feasible for a band or label to operate in a capacity that is economically sustainable by only releasing digital music, due to the time and costs that are associated with the recording and production of music, so this is one reason why these indie metal record labels persist in selling physical media. Despite many label owners having reservations about the changing cultural climate and how music is consumed, these label owners have also adapted so that they could persist and still encompass the broadening needs of metal music fans. Steve also pointed out that the way music gets advertised has largely changed. Not only has music consumption changed, but also the methods of first learning about music. It used to be that one heard about music through a variety of means, whether through the radio, music videos played on cable television, through fanzines, and/or through tape-trading. More recently, it was important for bands and labels alike to have a presence on social media through websites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Luciano communicated this importance by emphasizing that the promotion of music has changed from magazine/fanzine adverts towards streaming services:

'I remember that I was initially against the digital sales and distribution, while today they are an important part of my label's business, if not in terms of sales, because of the insignificant percentages, at least in terms of visibility and promotion. Basically, if your records are not streaming on Spotify, YouTube, or Bandcamp - you don't exist. From this viewpoint, the ads on magazines have become marginal. Today the best promotion goes through social medias and through platforms and forums dedicated to metal. In a certain way, it's the good, old word of mouth but with a new dress, and the virtual absence of costs permit labels and bands to reach a vast potential audience without special efforts. The other side of the coin is that now we're [metal fans] constantly bombarded with more releases than we can really handle. We don't have enough time to listen to them thoroughly and with the necessary attention, and this situation obviously penalizes the artists that don't propose conventional metal sounds and try to do things differently [because fans don't have time to digest new musical approaches].'

Giorgio maintained a much more optimistic outlook about digital streams of music, stating:

‘We just perceive it as pure promotion. We also push people to upload our albums and tracks on Youtube, adding our tracks on their Spotify playlists and so on... Whoever wants to buy an album will buy it even if available on streaming everywhere.’

Streaming services and through posts on social networking websites are often the most direct way for bands and record labels to tell music fans about upcoming releases and tours, and it is through these websites that consumers of music can largely find out that a new song or album that is streaming, and find out when and how to purchase it. In addition to the connection made by fans following record labels and bands on these social media websites, many music fans also discover new music through following/subscribing to certain Youtube channels. Some channels can have thousands or even millions of followers, which is a simple way for people to find music similar to what they already enjoy, as these channels generally appeal to a specific subgenre/style of music. Although many of these channels upload files without consent from bands and labels, the owners of these channels can still build deep and meaningful connections with bands and fans. Much like the owners of indie metal record labels, the individuals that run these popular Youtube channels also play a proactive role in bringing metal music to metal fans.

Proactivity keeps music culture alive (leaders not followers)

Running a music label, particularly one that focuses on fringe subgenres of heavy metal, is usually not a financially lucrative venture. Despite the burdens and sacrifices that need to occur to keep these labels subsisting, small labels persist worldwide. To understand this counterintuitive phenomena, I asked owners of labels why they started their business, and if they felt that their label fulfills a need within metal music culture. Some indicated to me that it was largely because metal needs many proactive leaders to continue to exist, because it isn't enough to diffuse responsibility across others to keep metal alive. Metal has a deep history, particularly in fringe scenes like thrash, death metal, doom metal, and black metal, in fans taking active roles in the distribution of new metal artists worldwide through music trading, the creation and distribution of fanzines, and through starting local distribution services and record labels. These are actions that help sustain the metal music community as an ongoing, growing, and evolving community. For instance, Raúl stated that, ‘Generally speaking, it's proactivity that keeps the underground going, and I'm not the kind of guy that likes to depend on other people's ventures, and simply consume what he's been offered.’ Many indie metal label owners felt that there was a need for their services, particularly for identifying the most promising new metal bands, but this comes at a cost, since bands that are established successful by indie record labels will then get offered deals by larger record labels. As Eric Musall explained:

‘[The role that indie metal labels play is] a necessary one. Metal is a genre like punk where the underground is, in my opinion, more vital to its health than the aboveground. And the big labels treat small ones like mine as the farm leagues—calling up the bands that make it to do releases for them, for more money. We are

doing the hard part—finding obscure bands with promise; sifting through emails and demos for hidden gems; taking gambles, a few grand at a time—while they snatch up the best players and then release their second or third album, when it's no longer a gamble to do so. If I sound a little bitter, you have read me correctly. Anyway, I think far more bands benefit from small labels than from big ones. But the big ones need to be there too. Bands at a certain level—career bands especially—need tour support and such, and I don't have the cash on hand to provide it, even if I wanted to.'

Raúl Sampedro had a similar experience, as he, too, explained that indie record labels are necessary for identifying up-and-coming bands, but that larger labels would frequently pull bands away from him:

'When I have a bad day, I feel like we're just providers of goods for the bigger fishes in the tank. Like we take a vibrant, up and coming band, and work our ass off to push them, and then they come up and capitalize on our work and effort. Fortunately enough, I don't usually have such bad days. Nah, I believe we're crucial to the growth of bands. If the band's as good as to draw the attention of those bigger fishes, then so be it. That's how it works, like it or not. And I'd also like to think that we help the regular metal fan realize there's pretty interesting stuff to be found if you scratch under the surface.'

As Kostas explained, 'Well... the best bands are hidden in the underground if you ask me.' Kostas felt it was particularly beneficial for indie metal labels to discover new talent, and to do so before larger labels found them, as he felt that indie labels like Repulsive Echo allow bands to pursue their own vision, whereas larger corporate labels can dilute bands by influencing the direction of their music and songwriting. Barrett reinforced this further:

'Without smaller labels, the bigger labels wouldn't exist. Smaller labels keep the underground going, they do all the leg work, go to all the shows, for the most part, and hear the new sickness brewing all over. Bigger labels don't do that, they wait for the smaller labels to put a band in the spotlight, and then when they finally hear how sick a band is, they try to snatch them up.'

Part of the proactive role of indie labels is making products that larger labels wouldn't take the gamble on, such as putting out albums in higher-cost, lower-demand formats. Kostas Vaxevanos mentioned that many of the extreme metal releases he adored were not released on vinyl, a preferred format for many metal fans. He said that this was because major labels were not interested in a less-lucrative media form like vinyl when compact discs and digital were dominant, so Kostas took it upon himself to work with bands to release their albums in formats that other labels weren't interested in, including on vinyl and cassette. For some larger releases, Kostas has maintained the rights to release albums in cassette or vinyl format while a different

label would release the same album on CD. Besides the necessity of proactivity in the ways already mentioned, smaller labels are also fundamentally important for bringing attention to musical scenes in areas of the world that don't have a lot of reach abroad, and are less marketable to major labels. For instance, metal from the United States, Canada, Scandinavia, and Europe get a lot of circulation worldwide and thus have far reach and more familiarity for the average metal fan, however, there are many other areas of the world, including across Asia, Central and South America, Africa, and Australia that have vibrant and flourishing metal scenes too. Many indie label owners have a passion for discovering and making people aware of bands from scenes that aren't as well known in a Western context, which also gives those bands an opportunity to be heard by more people and grow in popularity. For example, Barrett explained the diversity of the roster on Seared Records and why that has been important to him ever since the founding of his label in 1997:

‘More than half the bands on Seared Records are from other countries. So, at least back then [the early days of extreme metal where the major labels dominated], not a lot of US labels were releasing death metal bands from other countries, especially from Asia. I was obsessed with Asian - especially Indonesian - death metal, being a collector, and to get stuff [physical pressings of releases] from Indonesia was really, really hard. Most were released on tape at that time which to me was even better - so rare, so brutal, so amazing - so I reached out to bands with actual letters in the mail, et cetera, and released some of the first Asian stuff in America. I wasn't the first, but I did a lot of really underground stuff that I think no label would really touch at that time.’

There is another downside to this proactive decision for metal fans to turn into label owners: the market can then become oversaturated with releases, and quality control can be lost. As Luciano explains,

‘...once again, there's another side of the coin: too many are the labels that exist only to flood the market with mediocre releases and without any kind of vision or purpose behind [them]. The fact that the manufacturing costs of CDs and vinyls are at an all-time low is not a good excuse for their bad taste and littleness of ideas. I have no sympathy for those kind of “Sunday” labels.’

Other than the role in discovering new artists, putting out releases in other formats, and drawing attention to acts from multiple countries worldwide, this proactivity takes three other forms that are covered in the subsequent sections: 1) the role of introducing past, historical musical works to a new generation of metal fans, 2) the role of streaming in informing metal music fans about metal music, and 3) the role of these record labels in maintaining connectivity with the global metal community, including through sales to other countries and maintaining relationships with labels and distributions in those countries.

Reintroducing the past

This proactivity is not only about making new bands gain prominence, but also to help old bands maintain it. Many of these smaller label owners don't focus only on releasing music from new bands, as they also focus on making sure that the albums that they grew up loving and adoring continue to be widely available. As a metal album goes out of print (i.e., is no longer in production), either from a record label no longer finding it to be financially lucrative to continue to press it, or because the record label that had the rights to it went bankrupt or permanently closed down, then it becomes very difficult to obtain those albums through any means other than valuable trades for other obscure albums, or via spending an exorbitant amount for an album, sometimes even for hundreds or thousands of dollars, on an auction website like Ebay or Discogs. When a label owner decides that they want to pursue rereleasing an older album, it can be a very complicated process, and often one that is more difficult than releasing something that is new. As Kostas explains:

'The process begins by finding who the owner of the rights is. The band? An active label? A closed label? Then we get in touch with everyone involved so we can gather what we need: music, lyrics, artwork - this is the most painful sometimes [finding the original artwork and getting a new scan of it] - and useful material like old memorabilia. We start compiling our ideas and when we feel it's a quality, beautiful representation of the album, we go for pressing. A reissue is important when the original is very rare and expensive to find or/and when a certain format is not available, like vinyl, which, for me, has the best sound quality. The decision [to repress an old album] comes from the heart.'

As Kostas explained, it can be a difficult process to rerelease an older album, but for many of these indie metal record labels, reissues are a cornerstone of their release schedule. In order to reissue an album on their own label, a label owner has to first track down whoever owns the rights to the album. Sometimes the original owner will be a record label that no longer exists, or it will be a major label that refuses to sell the rights but also has no interest in repressing the album. Some rights-holders only have rights for specific territories, so if a label only has rights to an album's pressing and distribution in the United States, then this might be an opportunity for someone like Raúl or Kostas to obtain the rights to press and distribute the album in Europe. An additional obstacle in the process is finding out who has the rights to the album cover, since some famous metal cover artists, such as Dan Seagrave, sometimes maintain the rights to each of their paintings, and only temporarily provide rights to record labels and bands. In instances where record labels cannot find the original artwork, or cannot obtain the necessary permissions to use the artwork, then they might have to commission a new cover to be used for the reissue of the album instead. This also has problems other than the financial cost of commissioning a new piece, as metal fans can be sticklers about change, particularly since an album's artwork often becomes synonymous with that album, so whenever an album that many might regard to have been a classic is reissued with new artwork, it can be met with hostility, despite the effort that

has gone into these reissues by label owners. Even though the process of reissuing an album is so time-consuming, sometimes costly, and vigorous, it still persists, and the reason, as Kostas illustrated, is that it is something fundamentally important to the label owner, largely because the album they're pursuing was a very important album to that label owner personally. Steve Green explained his passion for albums that he sought to reissue in detail, noting that many of these albums heavily influenced his own playing as a musician, and were what he feels were fundamental albums for metal's evolution and longevity:

‘Comatose Music has re-issued a handful of albums over the years that were previously out of print. The first re-issue way back in 2004 was Lividity’s *Fetish for the Sick*. This album was so important to me and extremely influential on my guitar style in [my band] Lust of Decay. Lividity was also one of the first underground bands I discovered in the late 90’s when I was really getting into brutal death metal, so that reissue was very special for me in many ways and hopefully for others as well. And all the re-issues that were released on Comatose Music I felt were vital for new fans to own since much of the younger crowd may have missed them when originally released.’

Due to the difficult and taxing process of reissuing an album, some record label owners can become disillusioned with the idea of it. Eric Musall explained these difficulties to me:

‘This is something I’ve barely done [reissue an album that someone else had the rights to]. Really just twice, and one of them was the band I just mentioned, Besieged, who self-released their debut album. I rereleased it, but that was really the album’s first broad release at all, and it was only a few years after the original small pressing. The other was a reissue of Eternal Dirge’s early-90s album, *Morbus Ascendit* [originally released in 1992]. That was an album I liked, and in the early days of the label, I contacted the band about reissuing it. It turned into a lengthy process after that, because the rights were not owned by the band but by their original label. I had to obtain permission, then I had to get all the materials from the band, which took ages because they were not active anymore [They split up in 1996]. Much as I love that album and appreciate getting to put it back in print, the whole experience taught me that reissuing albums was not what I really wanted to do. At this point, I have one more reissue in the works, also dating back to the first year or two the label existed; and after that I may never do it again.’

It isn’t all bad in regards to reissuing albums though, as Matt Calvert explained to me, these albums are often a safer, more predictable source of income than a new release from a new band, so reissues can help fund other releases. In general, he was much more optimistic about reissues and their benefits whereas others emphasized their difficulties. In Matt’s words:

‘These reissues have been very well received and often times sell briskly which help us with other projects. It's great to introduce a new band to the world but it's also great to see people rediscover old gems that may have gone overlooked by many. Reissues/compilations are usually a much easier beast to deal with than a new album release. First off, there's no recording involved. Often times artwork is covered or we know where to look for it. Patience is often the key on some of these as a lot of the artists aren't full-timers and don't set it as a high priority as you may. In the end, I think it's good to have a nice mixture of both new and old. As time passes, we have been releasing less and less of these older gems but we have a few upcoming like Decomposed and Maimed.’

Proactivity and Streaming Services

It is clear that small record labels discover talented bands, help fund and promote their albums, and have a clear role in keeping metal from becoming stagnant. What is less clear is the role of streaming services, especially ones that provide streaming content without permission from bands or labels, in bringing attention to rising artists and whether or not they help or hurt the music industry. For example, Youtube is a popular service for streaming videos, and millions of people per year stream music, including full albums, through Youtube's website and phone applications. Some of these album streams are official streams from a record label or band, and they can accumulate a small monetary amount for a large number of streams. Some people have managed to make careers out of streaming on Youtube through channels that focus on things like video game and movie reviews. However, there are other channels that are hosted by music fans, as absolutely anyone can create a Youtube account and start uploading content in minutes, and many of these fans upload music, including full albums, that they do not own the rights to, or have not acquired permission to upload from the rights holders. Some channels that are not run by a label have become so popular that record labels ask them to stream albums on their channel to get more exposure, as is often the case with the popular Youtube channel Slam Worldwide, which at the time of this article had over 200,000 subscribers and hosted well over 2,000 videos that are primarily streams of slam music, which is a subgenre of death metal focused on slower, groovy musical passages known as *breakdowns*. This channel gets exclusive streaming rights to a number of releases from many different labels just because it can often bring more exposure to those releases than albums might find on the channels of each respective label, with some videos surpassing 700,000 streams. The case of Slam Worldwide is an unusual instance though, as most channels that upload hundreds of death metal albums do so without permission from bands or labels. It is likely the case that the uploaders of these fan-run channels believe that they are providing a service, as they spread information about music, particularly music that might not be well-known. Conflict occurs due to the lack of permission obtained to upload music that other parties (the band and record label) are actively pursuing compensation for. Record labels sometimes only release one or two songs as a free stream as an incentive to buy a record to hear the rest of the songs. Youtube users often upload entire albums, which sometimes causes conflict between bands/record labels and the Youtube users, since the notion of having an album

available to listen to for free might discourage people from buying it. Before going deeper into illegal streams, I asked record label owners about their thoughts on legal streams, which they can directly profit from. I asked Jamie Bailey of Unmatched Brutality Records, which first began in 1998 prior to the introduction of streaming services, and who has a rich perspective as not only a label owner but also as a musician in the bands Brodequin and Liturgy, if he felt that music streaming helps or hurts music sales:

‘As a whole I feel it hurts sales. In the beginning, I and a lot of others I know thought it would lead to more merchandise sales. I haven’t really seen any influence of that. There is the argument that by selling a digital copy you really haven’t provided anything and therefore it’s basically pure profit. To a point that’s true, but the numbers are so cut up by every service involved in that transaction taking their piece, it isn’t really much to take into consideration... digital music changed everything for better or worse and its impact cannot be overstated. On the one hand it’s great for the fans to be able to download an artist’s album on or before release day. The ability to spread the music globally in a matter of seconds is a very powerful tool. On the other hand, it’s very detrimental to bands and labels in regards to the income received. There is very little money going around unless you have millions of streams, which in underground metal isn’t going to happen. Looking at 2018 numbers, Spotify paid \$0.006 per stream for the artists we are talking about. The vast majority of labels and bands are not making a living off of their work of course but, “compensation” at that rate is unacceptable. Spotify itself at this time is finally profitable after 13 years which shows a serious problem with digital music in general, especially considering they are warning of millions of dollars in losses in the near future. Unfortunately, I feel many see music now as a service rather than an art form.’

That statement primarily regarded legal streams, but I also pressed Jamie about streams of albums he has released that Youtube users have uploaded without permission from him or the bands on his label:

‘It’s a constant point of frustration for the label and the bands. As far as YouTube is concerned, it’s fairly easy to get these taken down but that’s assuming you are aware of them. There are so many, there’s really no way of keeping up with it all in the long run. There are services that will do that for you, but of course that incurs another fee in an already low cash generation area. I can understand in some ways when a fan wants to share some of their favorite music and posts it. But at the same time, when their channel is monetized, even though we are talking about very little money, it’s just not right to do to the bands/label. At that point it certainly is not supporting the band they are intending to.’

Some of these label owners, despite the frustrations they experience at the occurrence of a release streaming illegally, also understand that the intentions of fans that upload albums are usually good, and represent enthusiasm rather than any intention to financially hurt a band or label. Luciano explained:

‘I usually perceive that as a lack of respect. It would take only a couple of minutes to get in touch with the label or the bands and ask, but in this digital world we live in, where everything is handy, people think that they can freely take and do whatever they want. However, I like to think that in most occasions it's a case of excessive enthusiasm, therefore I am always tolerant and let it go.’

To understand the perspective of someone that streams music without permission from the rights holders, I sought someone who uploads music to Youtube through an increasingly popular channel, but the person I selected is a unique circumstance as his channel specializes in albums that are no longer available for monetary gain by the bands or labels, and similarly, his channel is not monetized, so he also does not make a profit off of his channel. I interviewed Ken Escobedo, who runs a Youtube channel, Ken's Death Metal Crypt, that focuses on decades-old (80s and 90s) obscure, death metal releases that are mostly no longer available in any physical format, so there isn't a band or label that is potentially losing money from the album being streamed. This is not the case for many Youtube channels that specialize in uploading brand-new releases in their entirety, which surely are readily available for purchase from the respective band and label. Although these streams likely draw attention to an album, it is not yet clear if that attention generates an increase in sales for lesser-known bands, or if these free album streams are utilized in place of purchasing the albums. I sought Ken for enlightenment, as he maintains both a streaming Youtube channel and he's in a band himself, the death metal band Unnatural, so he is likely to be able to see the perspective of both a streamer and a band. Due to the type of content that Ken hosted on his channel, he did not feel any cognitive dissonance about having other people's music streaming without seeking permission to do so. He explained:

‘Almost everything I upload is long out of print, so I don't feel I'm taking anything away from the band or a label. I've actually had bands thank me for uploading their older demo or EP for fans to hear. I've never had an issue with a band or label because I uploaded something to the channel.’

Ken also echoed the thoughts of many of the record label interviewees that reintroduce the past to a new generation of fans, as he communicated to me that his channel also served a proactive role in keeping metal alive, particularly for metal that was important to him in his youth and for educating people about bands that had a historical role in the formation of modern death metal:

‘I think channels like Ken's Death Metal Crypt keep the role as the “Old Guard”. By posting these lost and forgotten gems, I'm giving the younger generation a

chance to hear the bands that pioneered the scene today. I think it's important to remember these bands and musicians and pay homage to their early releases.'

Many of the record label owners, much like Ken, can likely have the label of 'Old Guard' applied to them, as they're from an earlier generation of metal fans than those that now predominate. Many of these labels owners are parents or grandparents, and so they feel a personal responsibility in passing on the metal music that they grew up with to the next generation. Ken was clear to draw a distinction between his channel and channels that upload new releases:

'I completely understand bands and labels being frustrated if a channel is posting new releases that can be streamed before or during the release date. Something like that would not happen with my channel.'

The international reach of the underground

One of the most fascinating aspects of these underground labels is that they don't cater only to their locale. Part of the importance of being proactive in metal is being globally connected to the metal community, including with other record labels. Every label owner I interviewed runs an online distribution that ships their own releases globally, and in many cases, they carry releases from many other labels and distributors too. For instance, Kostas's label in Greece has sent packages as far as Thailand, Vietnam, and Costa Rica alongside more expected areas like the United States and Europe. Matt explained that the importance of international reach isn't limited only to customers, but through interactions with labels in other countries too, as these labels can host your releases in their own distribution centers, making the releases more readily available to people in those countries:

'Early on it was tough to move releases if you didn't trade [releases with other labels]. You almost traded out of necessity. It's better to sell three CDs than one CD, so we'd take on trades from other labels. This allows a great underground connection making your titles available in foreign markets but it also brings in more exposure to your store. This remains a viable option for most smaller labels.'

Majors versus minors

Since this article focuses on minor, indie record labels, it is important to be able to draw some distinctions between major and minor labels. Some have been mentioned in the process of discussing the role of indie record labels, but others emerge when explicitly asking label owners about these differences. As one example, Barrett included some accusations towards how major labels can disrupt and control the creative process of bands:

'I've never had a band re-record their album because I didn't like it, I've never had them change the artwork, I've never had any band on my label ever change

anything! [I'll give] Some layout advice, but other than that, nothing I can think of.'

With indie labels, bands generally maintain creative control over their musical process. Other consistencies emerged from the interviews. The next two subsequent sections will focus on two other perceived differences between major and minor record labels: 1) minors are motivated by passion and a perceived need rather than profits, and 2) minors establish a familial relationship with bands, fans, and the broader metal community that is a fundamental aspect of how their businesses are conducted. Before going into both in detail, I'll give Kostas as an example that succinctly explains both how the goals being pursued are different and how personability is important:

'I think the perspectives are totally different. An underground label makes art from the heart. Any income is welcomed of course and money is sweet, but I think the quality of the music comes first. A big label would look for bands that can make music that is easily consumed by listeners. Also, running an independent label with a few people in your roster helps make the connection between fan and label more human. We are not unknown. People email me and they know my first name, and that's important.'

Raúl said similar:

'A major, mainstream label is totally profit-oriented, whereas we, underground labels, even those that are professionally managed like ours is, do it first and foremost because we want to push the bands and their releases. It basically comes down to business (them) vs passion (us). We, underground labels, might deploy some marketing strategy every now and then, just like they do, but we do not consider our releases mere items to make as much profit as possible from. I always try my best to implement some sort of a family relationship between me and the bands I work with/for. I don't want them to feel like I'm some kind of boss that's there only to give orders and instructions, but a fan that's helping them out to get their music out there by coordinating the whole process. Sometimes I succeed and we even become friends, and sometimes I fail and communication is simply correct and professional. Whatever the case may be, I want them to feel treated with respect and dedication. As for fans/customers, it's pretty much the same. For instance, I chose to not have an automated ordering process at our online store, so I can provide everyone with a personalized attention. Again, I don't want people to feel like they're part of a simple transaction between two parties. I want them to feel like they're dealing with a fellow fan who's there to help them get the music they love, which is precisely what I ultimately am.'

Passion not profit

A major label will have a multitude of high paying jobs, whereas, the label owner of a small label like the ones discussed in this article may only have a single employee (the owner) or a small team of employees. Major labels are constructed and maintained with profits in mind, but the goals of minor labels are more personal and less influenced by monetary concerns, particularly since this style of music (extreme metal) is a niche genre that isn't lush with profits to begin with. An important facet to acknowledge when discussing indie metal record labels is the extent to which they are profitable, since these are businesses, after all. Very few of these small label owners can live entirely off of their label, so there are other motivations for continuing to run their labels. As Eric Musall explained:

'It's not profitable. Most years I just about break even. I do it because I love music and I love physical format releases—CDs and records. I want bands to get to make them. I want to be able to buy them myself, as a collector and enthusiast. Essentially it's a hobby, which I try to exhibit just enough business acumen about so as not to go broke doing it.'

Eric further elaborated on the difficulties of following his passion:

'It's expensive and it's high variance. Some releases do less well than I hope. Some really just end up being money sinks—something I love but seemingly no one else wants to buy. That's a bummer, and as I am not rich and the label's pockets are not that deep, it can feel a little like gambling. Like you've been doing okay at the blackjack table, you bet half your chips on one deal, and then immediately bust. It can be scary, and I always feel like I'm three bad months away from giving it up. But so far I've never had more than two bad months in a row. The hardest part is just that—the market—the niche I service—is small. Loyal, but small. There are only so many people into underground extreme metal - only so many of those few that buy physical releases. Only so many again that are even going to consider throwing ten bucks at me [the cost of a CD]—because all the others haven't heard of the label or the band, or what have you. It's like playing quarterback but you only have one wide receiver and he's triple-covered and only open half the time. You just have to keep throwing and keep hoping.'

Most of these label owners can't live off of their labels alone, so they also have day jobs. Giorgio works for a leasing company, Kostas works in pest control, Eric works in software support and administration, and Jamie was simultaneously working as a graphic designer while pursuing a Master's degree in geoscience, just to give a few diverse examples. Giorgio explained to me how difficult it was to juggle two occupations:

‘It is extremely difficult to jump from one to the other especially because, apart from the amount of hours the label requires, you completely have to switch from a thing to another completely different one several times per day.’

The funding for these record labels can largely come from these secondary occupations, as was illustrated when Eric Musall temporarily had to put activities at Unspeakable Axe Records on hold when he found himself between jobs. Once he found another position, his record label resumed business. It is important to these record label owners to maintain the standards that fans expect, which sometimes means taking a hiatus, whether for monetary reasons like Eric’s, or for more personal reasons like Jamie’s. Jamie had to put Unmatched Brutality Records on hold for years while he and his brother grieved over the loss of their parents. He explained this decision to me:

‘The stress associated with their deaths and the responsibilities of taking care of our parents’ estate, combined with our own daily responsibilities, was too much to deal with. The only thing we felt we could do was step away from the label/band altogether. With all we were dealing with it wouldn’t have been fair to the fans or bands to continue and be unable to deliver the standards we had set in the years prior. It was several years before we reached a point where we felt we could dedicate the time and emotion required to get back involved.’

But even as Jamie was apart from his label, and apart from the realm of metal music, something in him still yearned to return to it:

‘I missed the entire realm of music, writing, performing, traveling and being plugged into the scene by releasing other bands’ work. I’ve spent many years doing it and it was a real loss for me when I wasn’t part of it. So on a personal level there was a lot of loss involved, whether we were on hiatus or the reasons for being on hiatus.’

These record labels have become crucial parts of the identities of the people who run them, and they are very rewarding for the label owners. It isn’t merely an occupation or a paycheck, but rather, something that fulfills or even completes them. Jamie described the successes of his label and his label’s bands not unlike how a father would describe being proud of his child’s accomplishments:

‘Realizing that we were able to get not only the music we created around the globe, but also the music others created is a powerful thought. The fact that there are those that enjoy the label’s bands that may have never heard them without us releasing them is what makes me the most proud. A close second is seeing our bands or bands that at one point were on the label performing around the world.’

Kostas always loves when he first gets to see an album that he's worked hard to release come together in all its facets: the artwork, the booklet, the case:

'The most rewarding moment is the time of creation. That's a great part to see it take form. The other one is getting a response from a fan that found the release great and enjoys listening to it.'

Raúl explained the greatest rewards and proudest accomplishments from running Memento Mori:

'To do your bit for the perpetuation of something that you madly fell in love with decades ago is definitely the best thing about running the label. That's priceless. Also, of course, the satisfaction of everyone involved in the process: bands, fellow fans and, customers. I'm often asked "how are sales going", and my answer is always the same: "that comes second to the fact that most people that purchased the CD, be them a lot or not, actually dug it". That's what matters the most to me. It may sound like a cliché or a politically correct answer, but it happens to be the truth. We're still here, alive and kicking 10 years after, and against all odds. That's what I'm proud of, along with the relationship I have with bands and fans/customers: that we're still fighting the good fight to keep this little world of ours alive.'

The familial relationship between indie labels, bands, and fans

The last major difference between majors and minors is the interactivity between label owners, bands, and fans. Major corporate labels generally have many employees, and these employees are likely not on a first-name basis with the consumers of their music. Whereas smaller labels are often niche, so they cater to a smaller, more intimate, and more dedicated group of bands and fans, and the general consensus from these label owners is that this intimacy manifests itself through a relationship that is often described as familial. For example, Barrett explained his relationship with bands and fans as having parallels with the bond between brothers:

'Well, I think for the most part we are all bro's, [but there are] always exceptions. But I've become very good friends with tons of the bands on Sevard and friends with tons and tons of fans of Sevard releases. We're all a big, brutal metal family!'

Jamie shared steps that he takes to strengthen the bond between the role of himself as the label owner and with customers, as he personally writes a 'thank you' note that he includes with each order to make sure that each fan feels appreciated and knows that they're dealing with a real person, and he also communicated the importance of being familial not only with bands and fans, but with other smaller labels too, as it is important for metal culture to be cooperative to progress and succeed:

‘I like to think that we have a very positive relationship with all our bands and fans. I personally package and thank each customer [by saying so on the packing slip] that places an order with us. It’s important for the bands and fans to know that we appreciate them. Without either of them we are done. I’m also very friendly with many of the underground labels and have known many of the owners for years. Working with other labels is vital in order for all the parties to get each other’s releases spread out as much as possible. It’s not uncommon at all for me to pack up stickers and advertisements for other labels/bands in orders I pack up and I know many do the same with my materials. The same goes with [metal music] festivals. Promoters send me advertisements and I include them in outgoing packages in an effort to draw people to their event. We’re all part of the same circle and all rely on each other in one way or another in order for things to continue.’

Matt added to this, as he said that he would not only support the bands through the label, but also would attend their shows as a fan and as a friend, and he would let them stay at his house when they played a music venue near him on tour, and he’d take extra steps to make those bonds stronger:

‘I’ve been working with a lot of the bands on our roster for years now. Over the years I’ve gotten to know a lot of the guys well. I make trips to fests where I can see a lot of them playing and get to know them more. There’s a camaraderie that you build with years of email contact, phone calls, texts and physical meetings. You host them when they are passing through on tour or just vacationing. I enjoy the partnerships I have with the bands and they make it possible to exist.’

He also elaborated on the bond with fans, and how that bond is amplified by how he conducts business at his label:

‘We’ve been transparent with our followers over the years. We’ve also been accessible. I think this plays a big role in how people connect to the label and the bands. They feel like they are part of it. They are in on it at the beginning. It’s great to see guys ordering from us that ordered from us ten years ago. That makes me feel great. I am thankful and fortunate that people have remained interested.’

Concluding remarks

Indie metal record labels have a number of distinct qualities that have been outlined through these interviews. They’ve had to adapt for how the consumption of music has changed, including the resurgence of physical media formats, as well as adapting for digital media. Many of these small labels now stream their releases through Youtube, Bandcamp, Spotify, and other streaming services, and they’ve adapted their marketing strategies for physical media in order to compete

with streaming services and digital media. The stake that these record label owners have in their labels is a personal one, as these owners felt that they were largely playing a crucial, proactive role in keeping metal music and its community flourishing. These indie labels are often the first stepping stone in a band's career, as small labels identify rising talent, which then gets picked up by major labels to expand the band's exposure and profitability. The proactivity of indie record labels takes a few other forms, as they serve a role in reintroducing metal's history to a new generation of metal fans through reissues and rereleases, and they actively build an international web of connections between bands, fans, and other record labels that allows for the open exchange of music across nations worldwide. Although this proactivity takes an obvious form in the existence of the labels and their album releases, knowledge about metal is also spread through social networking sites and streaming services, some of which are run by labels and bands, and others are run by fans. Although it is not clear if fans that run streaming channels without permission from bands or record labels help or hurt album sales, it is at least evidenced that those that run streaming channels *perceive* themselves as contributing to the metal music community by making lesser-known music more widely available for fans to discover. Lastly, the label owners drew their perceived distinctions between major labels and themselves, which admittedly, major labels can provide a band with more money and resources, however, smaller labels can give bands more intimate attention, because their motivation is heartfelt and passionate, rather than focused on profit margins. In addition, each indie label owner described their relationship as familial with bands and fans, with each of those parties often knowing the record label owners on a first-name basis. Indie record label owners explained that they would let bands stay in their own homes when needed, they would attend concerts by bands on their labels, or would personally write thank-you notes to customers that they would place in every order. All of these facets provide evidence that indie metal record labels play a crucial role in keeping metal music culture as a global, connected community, and one that continues to thrive due to their risks and sacrifices, as they are the ones that bring attention to new bands, bring light back to their music's rich history, and provide resources for bands that cannot find them elsewhere.

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