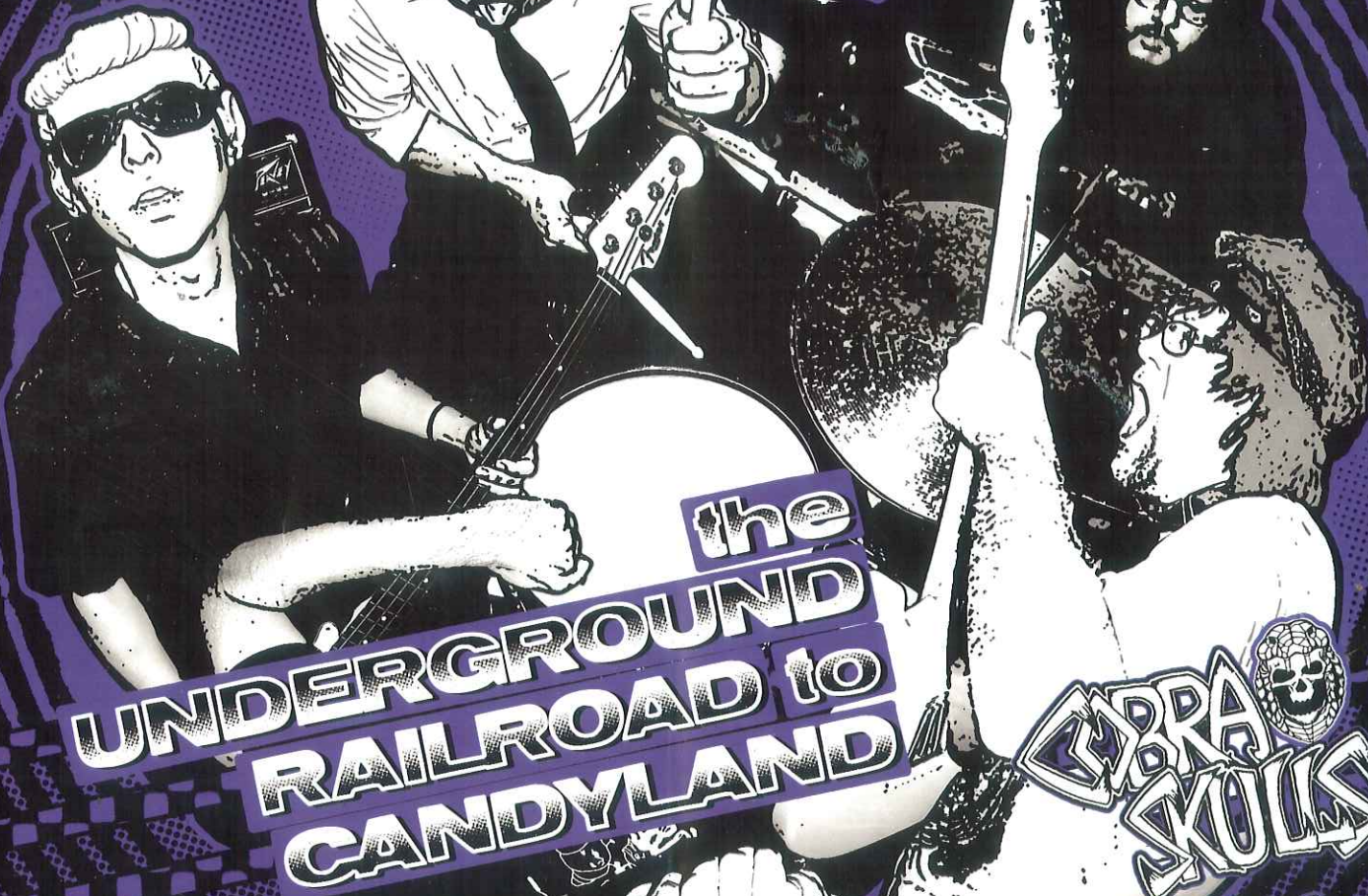


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the
**UNDERGROUND
RAILROAD to
CANDYLAND**

**LYRA
SKULLS**

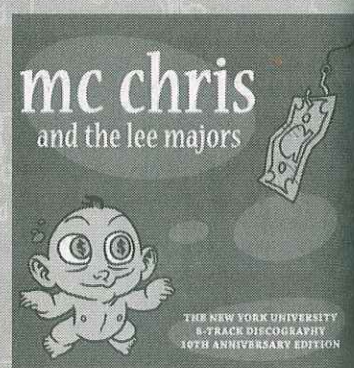
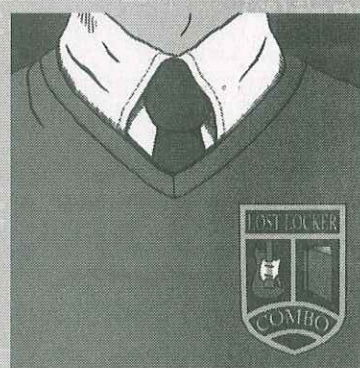
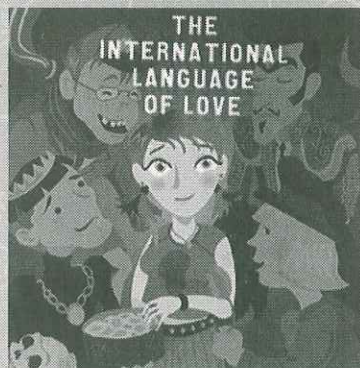
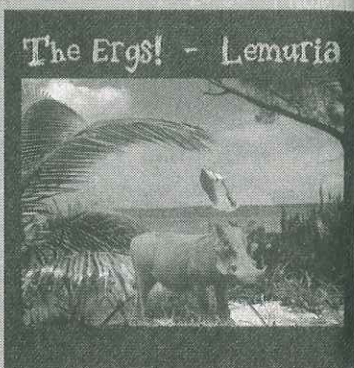
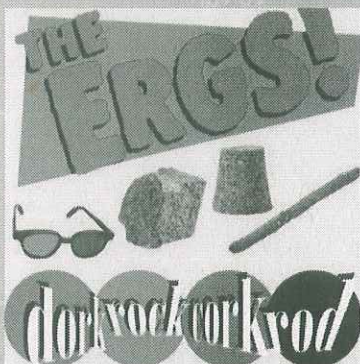
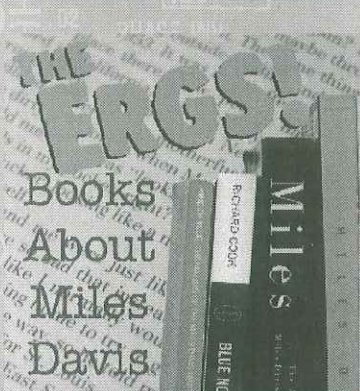
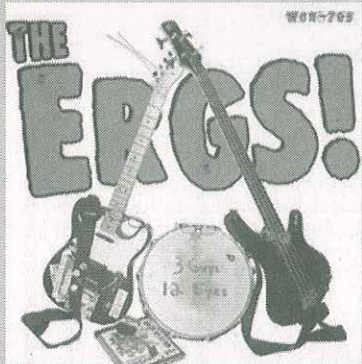
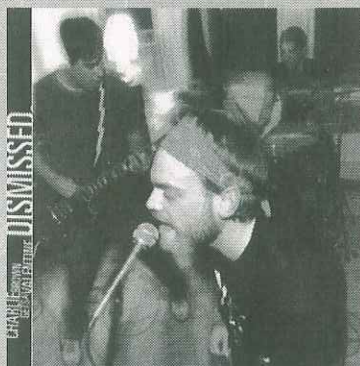
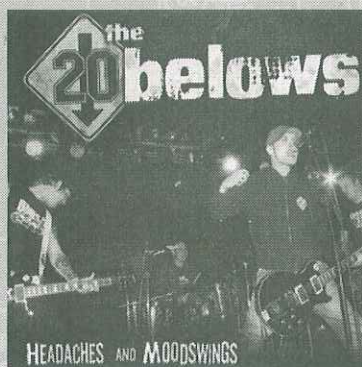
tiltwheel
Part II

Wheee Oh
Records



Chips & Salsa: Jason Willis.

Whoa Oh Records



It's four-fifteen in the morning, and I'm walking around downtown Manhattan with Jon Vafiadis, mastermind behind Whoa Oh Records. Its turned into an unexpectedly long night, and we're finally making our way towards the subway back to Queens when he stops and informs me, "We're going into this place to get some falafel." I start to protest, trying to argue that it's late, I'm tired, and not

even hungry, but it's too late, and I'm already inside. In just a brief moment, Jon's not only placed and paid for our orders, but also recruited the other three people inside to all join in saying "Of course you want a falafel!"

I bring this up because it's a reminder that Jon is a man who knows what he wants and gets it. And that's what he does when it comes to his label. He has taken it a

step beyond just putting out records he likes by making it a point to do everything he can to help out the bands he works with. Now—I'll be honest—Jon's not only a bandmate, but a part-time employer, as well as good friend, so while it's possible some of this may seem biased, I like to think that I've had a firsthand look at those kind of efforts that are often overlooked.

Interview by Joe Evans III
Photos provided by Jon Vafiadis

Joe: So, in a nice accomplishment, the label recently broke even and is now completely out of debt, correct?

Jon: Getting back to the point where the label doesn't owe anything to any one—outside of a little bit to me, personally—has been a major coup. Around 2003, I decided that I wasn't going to put any more money out of my pocket into the label in an effort to make it self-sustaining and to motivate myself to work harder. My logic was if there was a large amount of debt, that would be terrifying, and I would do everything in my power to pay off American Express. I'd say that the majority of the releases have come since I put this plan to action, so with that, it's been a huge burden off my shoulders. I'd assume it's like when someone pays off their mortgage. I don't know what it means for the future of the label outside of not having to pay astronomical interest fees. In theory, there would be more releases as a result. It also probably means more sales and discounts, but since I'm only minorly

clairvoyant I don't know what the future holds.
Joe: Explain the predatory practices of credit card companies and what you did, specifically, to get out from under their thumb.

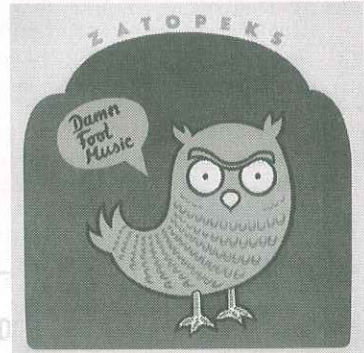
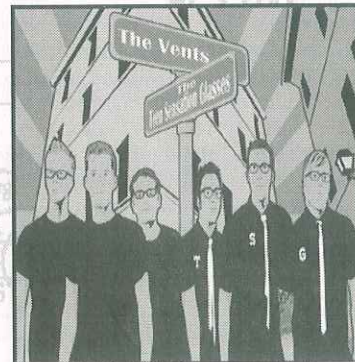
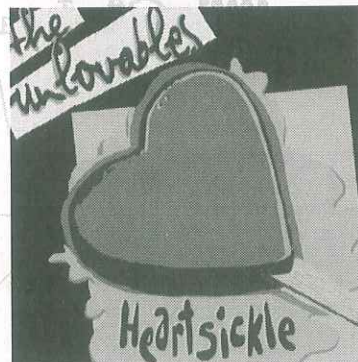
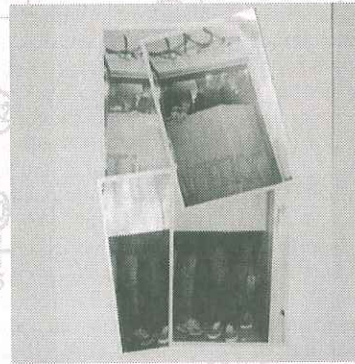
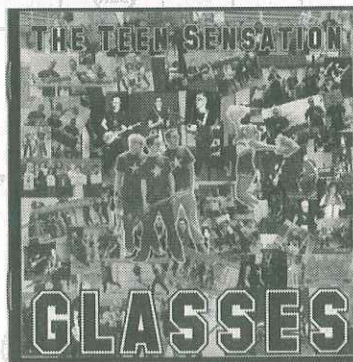
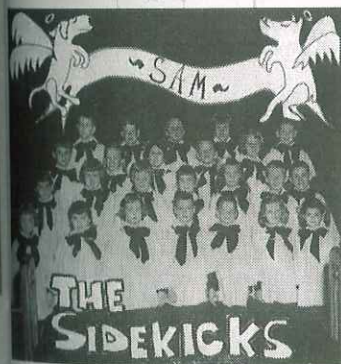
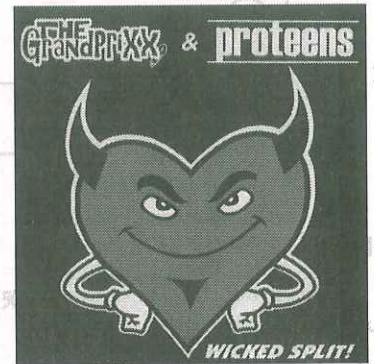
Jon: I basically floated the label on American Express for years. At points, the interest charges were coming to almost three hundred dollars a month, which is painful when you are selling CDs at ten dollars and wholesaling them at six or seven dollars, and you have to pay bands out of those sales. If you think about it, two to three hundred dollars a month in interest over the course of a year is a release or two, if not three. I worked down the debt by keeping costs as low as possible on every release, and I looked at the strengths of the label and planned accordingly. Since I had over twenty releases, I was able to do some bundles or wholesale the older releases for a lot less to keep the cash flowing, and by flowing I mean directly to Amex. The digital stuff like iTunes always helps, too, because it's basically free money. There's no real cost, no shipping, no nothing.

Joe: You've expressed that your family is important to you. Do you feel like that's

something that translates over to the label as well?

Jon: Family and friends are of the utmost importance. I was lucky growing up, in that I had and still have a large support structure, which I'm eternally grateful for. By extension, I've always tried to make the label similar in the sense that it's about helping bands get the recognition that I feel they deserve. I try to put the bands' needs above the label's needs because they are the ones creating the music. I don't know if I'm expressing this as clearly as it is in my head, so here's the best example I can think of. The Ergs! were about to record their second album and I said I didn't want to do it because they deserved and had offers from bigger and better labels who could help them more than I could. What also ends up happening is the bands you go to see all time and that you work with become your friends and, eventually, like family, so is it worth it to screw over your family for maybe a couple of bucks? I subscribe to the philosophy that money comes and goes, but friends stick around forever.

Joe: How about the importance of Astoria, Queens?



Is it worth it to screw over your family for maybe a couple of bucks? I subscribe to the philosophy that money comes and goes, but friends stick around forever.

Jon: I grew up and spent all my time in my formative years mainly around Astoria. Its had a huge influence on me from its multiculturalism, to its closeness to Manhattan, to its variety. I feel like you should take pride in your neighborhood because it does help shape you. Matt Army (of Dick Army) has a good quote, "Don't trust anyone who doesn't root for the sports team from the area they grew up in."

Joe: What first got you into music?

Jon: Music wasn't a big part of growing up. My mom would put on the oldies station on Saturdays, which were cleaning days. That's where I heard and loved The Beach Boys and The Beatles. My uncle, who is more of a big brother to me, was big into dance, house, and hip hop, so I would listen to TKA, Clivilles and Cole, Black Sheep, and stuff like that before I really got into rock and then punk. The first band to proverbially pop my cherry was Pearl Jam. I was twelve. It was Halloween and I borrowed *Vs* and *Ten* from one of my uncle's friends. I have a fond memory of getting home, borrowing my uncle's CD player, and putting on *Ten* as I was getting ready to fall asleep. It was an eye-opening experience, because it was the first band that I heard that had a little more weight to their lyrics outside of the dance and even radio pop songs that I was surrounded by at the time. It made me realize that songs could have more power than just getting a hook stuck in your head.

Joe: How about the New York City pop punk scene specifically?

Jon: We didn't really know there was a New York City pop punk scene when we were teenagers. We had submitted our then-band to be listed in *Book Your Own Fucking Life*, which is a collection of different bands, labels, radio shows, and more broken down by state. When it came out, we looked through the New York section and found another pop punk band from Astoria, which was surprising since we thought we knew all the bands from Astoria and they were all hardcore bands. I still remember their listing, "Book us, fucko! We'll play your basement and help your mom clean up afterwards." Egghead. We decided to write them and ended up meeting Mike Faloon (also of *Go Metric* zine) for pizza. That was my first introduction to a New York scene that wasn't hardcore. For those who don't know, New York City was not really a pop punk town in the mid-'90s. Anyway, around the same time

we started getting into Mutant Pop Records and Tim (Chandler) was doing 7"s for Dirt Bike Annie and the Kung Fu Monkeys, both from here. Around the same time, some way, somehow, I befriended George Tabb and there was a double 7" release party show for Dirt Bike Annie's *Chocoberries* and the Kung Fu Monkey's *Summer School*, with Furious George, The Hissysfits, and The In-Crowd. That was a real watershed show for me because it opened up my eyes that there was something great going on in New York and wasn't all hardcore bands and waiting for bands to come through on tour.

Joe: Would you say you have a trend of typically working with younger bands?

Jon: I prefer working with newer bands. In particular, I love doing a band's first release. I like the band's excitement and anticipation about seeing themselves in print for the first time. There's something a little more special in that. That's not to say that I don't like working with established bands; it just means a little more to be someone's first.... Yes, that was a virgin joke.

Joe: You spend a lot of time doing label work, even though it isn't your source of income. Does that get overwhelming?

Jon: I've found that the label stuff is pretty manageable within the scheme of "normal" work on a day-to-day basis. It gets hectic when new releases come and you have to do all the promo work, like sending out copies for review, creating ads, spamming the internet, plus mailing copies to a bunch of different distros and the individual orders that come in. Those occasions are, unfortunately, few and far between by day-to-day and other labels' standards. So I've never really had any problem dealing with both, but maybe I'm just awesome at time management.

Joe: What's your "real" job?

Jon: After being a brutal victim of nepotism, I parlayed a temporary summer job organizing files and stacking things into a full-time environmental consulting gig. It's pretty jobby by most standards, but I was called on by New York City bureaucracy to be a first responder for Ground Zero after September 11th. We got a police escort downtown through three checkpoints down Broadway, one of the busiest streets in New York, which was so devoid of people that it felt post-apocalyptic. I ended up about fifty feet from the pile, and I wrote some of the reports on the air quality. That was exciting amidst a whirlwind of emotions,

but outside of that, it's really reports, samples, and time sheets.

Joe: Did you go to college to study business?

Jon: I did go to business school as an undergrad, and maybe one day I can take the plunge and go for my MBA. I learned a lot about entrepreneurialism, general marketing ideas, and pitfalls that other companies have faced through case studies and presentations. I ended up taking classes in how people think, see, and are affected by products. One big thing I remember is that a satisfied customer tells two to three people and an unsatisfied one tells six to eight. So I've always tried to keep people happy. That—mixed with my own immediate gratification wants—is why the overwhelming majority of orders go out the next day.

Joe: How would you compare the "sound" of the label to your own personal listening habits?

Jon: I like to say that the label is a pop punk label, but I don't know if that's true, I've always thought of it more along the lines of a bunch of stuff I like for different reasons. I don't think the label has a sound, but maybe that's because when I think of labels having "sounds," all the bands are going to sound exactly the same, and I don't think that's the case with Whoa Oh. I mean, The Unlovable and Charlie Brown Gets A Valentine don't sound the same. The Ergs! and the Zatopeks don't sound the same. Tin Armor and The Sidekicks don't sound the same. Lemuria and Full Of Fancy do kinda sound the same.

Joe: With an expansion of the label's sound, do you ever conscientiously think, "Don't pull a Lookout! Records. Don't turn completely away from pop punk"?

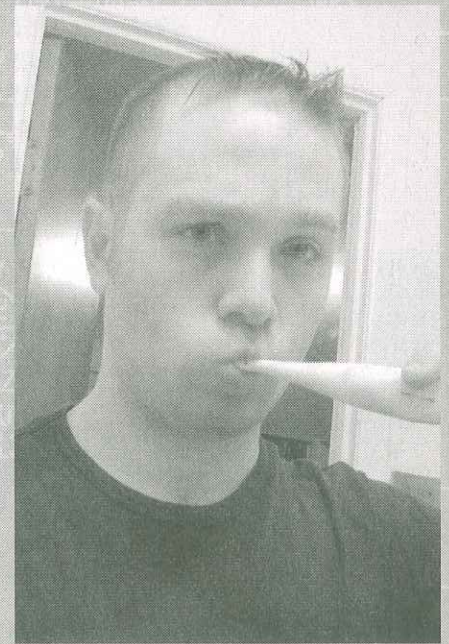
Jon: Wow, that's something that I had never thought of and now that it's mentioned, I do feel like I pulled a little bit of a Lookout! I haven't given up on pop punk, but the latest few releases have been different and slightly more indie. It's something that I'm going to be more aware of going forward if the label continues. This question, plus my changing tastes, has just completely changed my opinion of Lookout! Let me qualify that. It has completely changed my opinion of Lookout! in their release choices, not their in paying bands and how they operated.

Joe: Was the label name meant as foreshadowing of the focus on pop punk?

Jon: The label name was a lucky decision that I made when I was eighteen. I didn't think far enough ahead to realize that it would be as fitting or important to me, as it



above left: Dirtbike Annie. above: The Unlovables
below left: The Ergs (photo by Todd Taylor).
below: Jon Vafiadis of Whoa Oh Records.



A satisfied customer tells two to three people and an unsatisfied one tells six to eight.

would be. I had it down to two names before the first release, the Triple Bypass CD: Whoa Oh and TBP Records. At that point, I didn't know how seriously I was going to take the label and if it would be a label that did things besides records by the band I was in at the time. That's why TBP was in contention. I ended up just liking Whoa Oh better as a name, even though I knew it would be misspelled all the time. Honestly, it was one of the best and luckiest decisions I've made.

Joe: What was the first not-your-band record and what made you decide to take that leap?

Jon: The first not-my-band was the Pettyfords from Hawaii, I had known Jeremy from the Mutant Pop message board. He sent me an email asking if I wanted a 7", to which I replied, "Yes," and he replied with, "Send me three dollars." I figured I'd make his day and sent the money. The 7" was pretty good: straight-forward pop punk up until the last song which, for some reason, hit me. It was more than just a standard, three-chord pop punk song. It had that certain something that makes a band stand out. What that indescribable thing was, I can't say. It's just there for some bands. From there we continued to talk. What pushed it over the edge was a mix of Timbo—who was taking about ten copies of my stuff—publicly asking an additional fifty Pettyfords 7"s. It sparked my decision to take the label more seriously and start releasing other bands' music.

Joe: How did you get involved with the charity group New York Cares?

Jon: I've been involved with New York Cares for about four years now through NYU. Last year, the school decided that they weren't going to do any more alumni groups to help with the charity work that New York Cares does. I got the idea to put together a group under the Whoa Oh banner to help with various events that they run throughout the year. I feel that a label's job is to give to bands and to the scene, so the natural next step would be to help the community around it. More recently, the label held a coat drive for the homeless, and then a group got together to help sort the coats that New York Cares collected. In a few hours, we were able to sort over 2,100 coats, which were given out to different shelters, churches, and other locations where they would be given directly to the homeless.

Joe: What would you say your ultimate goals are?

Jon: At this point, I've probably done more than I've ever expected with the label. Twenty-five releases, it's out of debt, and everything that I'd like to be in print is still in print. With something that you are doing mainly for fun, I think it's best not to have big, long-term goals, but to be more focused on the more immediate and achievable goals. I guess my ultimate goal would be to have everything go out of print mainly so I could have more closet space in my apartment.

Joe: You've described yourself as having a preference of, "Quality over cheap." How

Business co-exists with punk if you alter the general principles to be about art or people rather than just a bottom line and making as much money as possible for yourself.

would you describe the quality put into your releases?

Jon: I've felt that it's best to wait a little longer and get something done the right way than giving into your impatience and just do it immediately to get it over with. I learned that from recording. If it bothers you now, in six months it's going to be unlistenable. That's why I've tried to get every release to sound and look as good as possible, but, at the same time, it's what the band wants. Those releases are representative of the label. If they look like shit, it makes you wonder how the business is being run.

Joe: Do you feel like punk rock and "traditional" business can co-exist?

Jon: Business is everywhere and it exists everywhere. It doesn't have to be the in traditional profit/loss projections, spreadsheets, and stockholders sense but more along the lines of things that generate revenue and how that revenue is used. First, reject the idea that the goal of business is to maximize profit. Instead, it's to help people with the revenue that is generated. Think about it as making enough to put out another release, or enough to help a band to fund another tour. If the business idea is to put out as many releases as possible, taking the profit out of the label doesn't help reach that goal. So, really, business co-exists with punk and just about everything else if you alter the general principles to be about art or people rather than just a bottom line and making as much money as possible for yourself. Too many small labels, in particular, feel like they've failed because they never turned a profit, when, in actuality, they have done the world a service by helping spread art to as many people as they could. That level of helping people is what punk rock has always been to me.

Joe: How did you almost end up joining the Wynonna Ryders?

Jon: The word *almost* needs to be in the sarcasm font. Back in late 2002, I got an email from Skip from the Wynonna Ryders that he had moved to New York and he was looking for a bass player, a drummer, and a guitarist for a new project. The funny thing is that I had never spoken to him before that. I asked Chris Grivet and Chadd Derkins—both of whom I was in the Shy Guys with and we had

just broken up—if they'd be interested. In the mean time, I told Skip that I'd be down and I'm waiting to hear back from a drummer and a guitarist. He wrote me back saying, "Great! Here's what I'm thinking. One of you will be in an English school boy's outfit, the other in a suit, and I forget the third costume." I wrote him telling him that the three of us were in but we'd like to pass on the costumes, and I never heard from him again. The slight irony is now I play in the Lost Locker Combo where I wear a school uniform to every show and practice.

Joe: What's the best, most unexpected "happy accident" that the label has gone through—something completely unexpected, but really helped out?

Jon: I had sent the master and the art files for *3 Guys, 12 Eyes* to the pressing plant with a note saying if the record fits on a 45, let's go with that, but if it has to be a 33 1/3, then so be it, but here are art files for both. Well, the plant ignored the note completely and ran with 33 1/3 art file because it was the first file numerically. The record ended up fitting on a 45. So the label said 33 1/3, but it was really a 45. I called the plant and they apologized profusely and assured me that they would send out another five hundred records with the proper 45 label and that I should destroy the five hundred records with the 33 1/3 label. I didn't. Instead I got five hundred free Ergs 7"s.

Joe: What about the worst mistake you made when doing the label?

Jon: I'd say either that I didn't push it hard enough or grow it at the same pace as some of the bands grew, or pressing too many copies of things. Neither are huge regrets, but I think they'd all arrive at me having more space in my apartment.

Joe: What's the best advice you can give to someone thinking about starting up a DIY record company tomorrow?

Jon: I strongly recommend that you are committed and to remember that it's the band's name on the front cover. You are on the back cover for a reason. By that, I mean the band always comes first, and you have to respect that. It's easy to put things off because they aren't any fun, but they are still necessary and you are working for the band.

