



SUB POP

by Theo Cateforis

On April 30, 1991, Nirvana signed with Geffen Records, leaving behind the tiny Seattle indie label Sub Pop, who had released their acclaimed 1989 debut LP *Bleach*. The trio from Aberdeen, Washington, soon released *Nevermind* in the fall of 1991, an explosive blend of abrasive punk and melodic pop smarts that would knock Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* from the top of the charts and help launch the alternative rock movement. *Nevermind* would become a global phenomenon, eventually selling over 30 million copies worldwide for Geffen. As part of Sub Pop's contract buyout, however, the label stipulated that their logo be placed alongside Geffen's on every Nirvana album, a strong reminder of alternative's underground roots.

Indie labels like Sub Pop were vital to the development and growth of alternative rock. Much as 1950s independent labels like Chicago's Chess and Cincinnati's King Records provided a showcase for regional rhythm and blues artists, the indie labels of the 1980s such as Minneapolis's Twin Tone and Washington, D.C.'s Dischord records supported the scores of local punk, post-punk and offbeat musicians who were initially of little interest to the major labels. At a time when the twin meccas of Los Angeles and New York ruled the recording industry, cities like Seattle remained on the periphery. Nobody went to the Pacific Northwest to be "discovered."

It was precisely in such remote environments that alternative scenes formed. In Seattle, one of the key players in shaping the direction of that scene was Bruce Pavitt, Sub Pop's founder. Pavitt first introduced the idea of a "Subterranean Pop" world of underground alternative American music in 1979 while still a student at nearby Olympia's Evergreen State College, where it served as the name of both his college radio show and self-produced music fanzine. After moving to Seattle in 1983, Pavitt continued his radio show, *Sub Pop USA*, on local KCMU, opened a record and skateboard shop, and contributed an influential "Sub Pop" indie record review column to local music magazine *The Rocket*. When Pavitt eventually decided in 1986 to release an indie compilation LP titled *Sub Pop 100*, the Sub Pop record label was born.

Pavitt was joined in 1987 by fellow KCMU radio DJ and venue promoter Jonathan Poneman. Together they assembled a roster of Seattle groups—Deep River, Soundgarden, Mudhoney, and Nirvana—who cohered around a lo-fi, muddy, distorted guitar sound that soon became known as grunge. Sub Pop had a recognizable sonic identity, one that was willfully out of step with the polished professional pop that dominated the major labels. Seattle photographer Charles Peterson's wide-angle concert shots, a blurry mélange of long hair and flailing bodies, gave the album artwork a similarly identifiable visual signature. More than a mere record label, Sub Pop was effectively a brand.

Alternative indie labels deliberately eschewed the glitzy language of fame and success typical of the major labels, and the Sub Pop brand played up this difference through deeply ironic tones. Rather than glorifying their musicians as heroic rock stars, they instead printed up Sub Pop T-shirts simply emblazoned with the word "Loser." For one

of the label's key public events, they chose the banner of *Lame Fest* to promote a 1989 concert showcase featuring Mudhoney, TAD, and Nirvana. And eventually they adopted a self-deprecating slogan, "Going Out of Business since 1988," that captured their distaste for the corporate business model.

As much as they mocked the traditional record label enterprise, Pavitt and Poneman also had a keen appreciation for alternative music fans, many of whom, like collectors of early jazz and blues records, eagerly hunted for obscure and rare recordings. They smartly catered to that audience by starting a limited edition "Sub Pop Singles Club" series that made their catalog instantly collectible. The first single in the series, Nirvana's "Love Buzz," routinely lists for a thousand dollars on eBay.

Sub Pop also recognized that their potential fan base was unlikely to peruse the pages of *Rolling Stone* or *Spin* for new music news. So, instead, they aimed their publicity at the weekly British music press. Major newspapers like *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express* were highly regarded in the late 1980s American indie underground, for these were the only newsstand publications to place alternative artists like the Pixies, Butthole Surfers, and Sonic Youth on their covers. Sub Pop's visibility and credibility rose substantially in March 1989, when *Melody Maker* ran a cover feature on Mudhoney, followed in the next issue by a full Sub Pop label profile.

Thanks to this exposure and, of course, Nirvana's subsequent success, by the early 1990s Sub Pop had become virtually synonymous with the explosion of American alternative rock. The national media no longer viewed Seattle as some hinterland, but rather a breeding ground for new musical talent with its own unique subculture. In 1992, a reporter for the *New York Times* phoned the Sub Pop office

looking for more insight into the new grunge phenomenon. How did grunge kids dress? How did they speak? A 25-year-old sales rep, Megan Jasper, took the call and in true irreverent Sub Pop fashion concocted some absurd grunge slang words on the spot (old ripped jeans were known as "wack slacks," a loser was called a "cob nobbler," and so on). The paper accepted them as authentic and printed them under the heading of the "Lexicon of Grunge."

Labels like Sub Pop prided themselves on their freedom and "Do It Yourself" (DIY) ethos; it was what encouraged them to thumb their noses at publications like the *New York Times*. At the same time, as major labels increasingly devoted their resources to alternative artists over the course of the 1990s, the indies became more open to aligning with "the enemy." In 1993, fellow indie Matador signed a merger with Atlantic Records (itself a former indie), and two years later Sub Pop would sell 49 percent of its share to the Time Warner Music Group, a move that significantly broadened the label's infrastructure and promotional reach.

By the end of the 1990s, grunge was no longer in vogue, and the music industry had moved on from alternative rock. Indies like Sub Pop survived and thrived, however, by expanding beyond their original regional focus and cultivating the various niches that have come to define today's more fragmented indie world. In the two and a half decades since their first taste of notoriety, Sub Pop has released seminal slowcore, emo, synth pop, indie folk, garage rock, and chillwave albums, assuring their place of prominence in the vast indie landscape.

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