net.labels

An introduction to the emerging phenomenon of net.labels

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T he traditional approach to releasing music, independent from what is called "the music industry", follows a basic formula: record, print CD, promote, distribute, promote, lose money. It is difficult to know why so many independent musicians follow this pattern, seemingly oblivious to the fact that they will almost certainly lose time and money. Thankfully there's a new type of independent music label that is emerging on the internet. These entities call themselves *net.labels* and are in the process of defining an interesting new subculture of independent music distribution.

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Sharing music

It needs to be said that sharing music online has been going on for a very long time. Perhaps the first substantial example of this was with the sharing of *Tracker* files over *Bulletin Boards*. *Trackers* are a type of sound software that use *mod* files for storing instructions. These files are then re-interpreted by other *Tracker* software for replay or for

Fig. 1: net.label noiseusse

the purpose of creating a derivative work (the *mod* files are re-editable through the *Tracker* software).

I am going to skip this very interesting and important phase of online audio and file sharing and look at the more recent history leading to the development of *net.labels*. This story starts largely at the moment the music industry decided to introduce *digital audio* to the consumer market.

Before the music industry invented a way to resell us the same music we already owned there were not many complaints about the quality and function of vinyl. In fact when the new media was introduced there was a lot of grumbling, especially by music aficionados because CD audio at that time was an unknown proposition. The physics of this new media made it sound like the technology was in-

herently inferior and more expensive. Breaking up analog audio into a series of ones and zeros just sounded like a bad idea. How could a mathematical representation of an analog wave (sound wave) possibly sound as good, or, as the CD advocates claimed, *better* than an analog representation of an analog wave? It just didn't sound right (excuse the poor pun).

However, the music industry led the charge, and good for them, as there are now few complaints about digital audio. Few complaints... apart from ones that come from those in the music industry. There is of course some irony at work here: the music industry (the people that made us buy all of the music we already owned in the new format - digital audio) are now enraged when consumers ingeniously utilize two of the inherent advantages of the new medium for their own gain: the ability to copy content quickly, and the ability to distribute content virally. Digital audio allows an ease of replication unmatched by any analog audio format that has ever existed.

File Sharing

In the "underground" of *News Groups* file sharing had been going on for some time, largely unharnessed by the surface web dwellers. This was more or less ignored by the industry because the logistics of this kind of distribution meant that only a small minority of geeks participated. Files were generally split into parts and compressed. To put them back together again all of the parts had to be found, de-compressed, and re-assembled. And if one part was missing too bad.

This subculture also didn't suffer fools, so if you hadn't been born with the innate knowledge of how to compress and de-compress *rar* files then there was no point asking, you were by definition, the wrong species to try it in the first place.

Audio file sharing couldn't get moving until easy to use consumer technology came along. This technology was of course, peer-to-peer (*P2P*) file sharing as demonstrated most prominently by *Shaun Fannings'* dorm room invention - *Napster.*

So the file sharing industry was born. Interestingly for independent music producers, this new technology, combined with *MP3*, also enabled the distribution of independent music at a fraction of the cost of traditional methods.

Fig. 2: net.label ideology

P2P labels

As a starting point for examining this emerging phenomenon take a look at a *net.label*, which uses *P2P* networks for distributing its content. Most *net.labels* do not, in fact, utilize this method as their primary distribution technology, preferring to allow users to download the music direct from their homepages, with *P2P* as a secondary strategy for distribution. For starters take SoulSeek Records (`http://www.slsknet.org/`).

S*oulSeek* has a special place in my heart, as it was one of the file sharing sites I used most before the music industry became the bogeyman and closed most successful file sharing networks down in a legislative rampage. *SoulSeek*, instead of dying, transformed itself into a new model of record label.

Although you can use *SoulSeek* to share music illegally, it tries to distance itself from this practice and indemnify itself as its policy now reads:

> "Soulseek(tm) does not endorse nor condone the sharing of copyrighted materials. You should only share and download files, which you are legally allowed to or have otherwise received permission to share. Soulseek(tm). was created to encourage the sharing of public domain music from unsigned, independent artists willing to share their work and communicate with a large audience in an efficient way." (SoulSeek Records rules) (`http://www.slsknet.org/`)

Fig. 3: net.label Kallisti Gold

However, *SoulSeek* doesn't do much to make concrete its position as an independent music distributer as opposed to a file sharing network where many illegal files get shared. In fact it exists in rather vulnerable territory as the operators of this system charge money to users that want "priority access" (you pay to be first in line) and this is something the *Recording Industry Association of America* (*RIAA*) will likely take a rather dim view of when *SoulSeek* finally appears in their radar. However *not appearing in their radar* seems to be the only defensive tactic of *SoulSeek* as founder *Nir Arbel* said when interviewed by slyck.com in SoulSeek Records news (http://www.slsknet.org/news.php?story=356):

> **Slyck.com:** Considering mostly techno, dance, house and electronic music is on the network, do you feel this has prevented the RIAA from taking an interest in SoulSeek?

> **Nir Arbel:** It couldn't have hurt. Considering the majority of stuff trafficked on the system is probably non-RIAA owned, and seeing as the system is pretty small to begin with, it's likely we're not even on the RIAA's radar.

This doesn't look like a smart or sustainable strategy to me. Considering the paranoia of the *RIAA,* I wouldn't bet on *SoulSeek* lasting the distance.

S*oulSeek* doesn't work for me as a *net.label*. It doesn't give the special feeling of trust you get from a label that you can expect to deliver the music you need, instead it feels like a file sharing network - a particularly good *P2P* network but far from the sort of entity we associate with the idea of an independent music label. To me a label is something I can trust, it has a character that I relate to, without this trust I won't spend the time obtaining and listening to material because it might turn out to be awful nonsense. Essentially this is the problem of positing a file sharing network as a new kind of independent music label. . . the point of the *P2P* technology is that users have the ability to share what they like. As the consumer, you are given no guarantees, you roll the dice, and you take the risks. To try and combat this many operate as pseudo self-regulating social networks, of which *SoulSeek* is a good example. In these situations there are strong rules of sharing etiquette and online behavior. However, they just don't fill the role of a *net.label* well; the content available isn't exclusively independent releases, and it's largely illegally shared copyrighted material. This doesn't mean there can't be an effective strategy for *net.labels* that utilize file sharing networks as their main distribution technology. So far however I haven't found an approach like this that satisfies my needs as a user in search of a trusted source of independent music.

P*2P* doesn't offer much control over the presentation of the content either. If an artist wishes to release an EP where the track order is important then this cannot easily be maintained with these kind of distribution networks. This also applies to the associated information and artwork (it is difficult to maintain the association using *P2P*).

net.labels

A *net.label* like ComfortStand (http://www.comfortstand.com) moves more in the direction of becoming an interesting model for a *net.label* and it fulfills a lot of the necessary requirements for what I think makes a good *net.label*. The site is a year old, well organized, and offers a lot of material in their catalog of artists. Each release is supported by "cover art" and "liner notes" (two terms they use on their site which are derived from the earlier vinyl era). You download an all-in-one compact *zip* file, or each track individually. It's also possible to listen to the content before you 'buy' (download) through *Streaming Flash* or *MP3*. Some releases even come with CD art to print and stick to your freshly burnt CD. The model is very much like a record label which has been put online

with very little or no translation into the new medium, you are expected, in some cases, to complete the process of manufacture and make the CD yourself, complete with cover and disc art.

This is, I think the limitation of this approach; it feels to me too much like it's an extrapolation of an established way of doing things and not a creative exploration of a new way of doing things with new technologies. The label does offer itself as a trusted source, which is largely down to editorial policy. Whether their choices are ones you enjoy is another matter, but I have to say that the straight-forward *Movable-type* blog-like interface deters me from downloading anything from this site.

As a tester I downloaded their latest compilation called *Comfort Cake*, which is a collection of their favorite tracks for the first anniversary celebrations. I notice when downloading the *zip* file (140MB) that the files are hosted on The Internet Archive (http://www.archive.org). *The Internet Archive* is an interesting service that archives the internet by running an automated software process (known as a *spider*) to crawl through the web and download every page that exists on the web. Copyright nightmare as it may be, its an amazing service and it allows anyone to browse previously stored versions of almost any website that has ever existed. In addition to this *The Internet Archive* offers a service to *net.labels* so the labels can host their content free of charge. There are a few other services like this including *scene.org* but none as comprehensive and as fast as *The Internet Archive's* service. For more information see the archive.org net.label service (http://www.archive.org/audio/netlabels.php).

The *Comfort Cake* release was predictably cheesy and goes to prove that you can judge a *net.label* by its homepage.

Refining the Idea

Another approach is undertaken by 20kbps (http://20kbps.sofapause.ch/), which is a *net.label* run out of Switzerland. This site is deliberately low-fi, an approach I personally enjoy. I respond to this better than to a site like *ComfortStand* which is nice but a bit too sterile. The aim of the label is to introduce music that explores the aesthetic of low-fi audio, it could be likened to well known labels like New Zealands *Corpus Hermeticum* in that sense. Past the front page is a listing of news about releases and a di-

Fig. 4: net.label 20kbps

rect link to the *MP3* files. The music is also stored at the fabulous net.label hosting facility at *The Internet Archive*. The attitude is inherent in the site - if you like one release then you share the same ethic and hence you are part of the *20kbps* clan. The texts take a very direct tone about the releases and you get the feeling that you'll either love or hate what they do.

The cool thing is that the releases r*eally* are 20kbps and hence are very low-fi, defying the boring and relentless push towards "perfect" digital sound. I like the artifacts created by high compression and these guys do some cool things exploring that territory. It's an aesthetic, a way of doing things, and an attitude. The extra bonus is that because of the high compression used the files are really small and download extremely fast - a four track release (and most net.labels still use terminology like "EP") weighs in at about 4MB! I found their approach so complete that I was persuaded to listen to material beyond the boundaries of what I'd normally enjoy. The point is that I might not always enjoy what they do but I trust them to always do something interesting.

I like this label a lot but it might not be for everybody.

Looking at something a little more hi-fi check out the Lithuanian label Sutemos (http://www.sutemos.net). This is very slickly designed and comes complete with its own web magazine with reviews, interviews and articles about the *Sutemos* artists and releases as well as interviews with other musicians like *Monolake* and *Chris Cunningham*.

This site embraces the new medium a lot better than the very traditional approach of *ComfortStand*, presenting a blog-

Fig. 5: net.label sutemos

Fig. 6: net.label falsch

like interface, throwing away the default styles but with a great design. The result is a site that looks good and (if you have used *blogs*) is intuitive to navigate. Also, instead of cover-art and liner notes we have "virtual galleries" (although I don't like the use of the word "virtual" in any situation) which are photos and images associated with the release. They are not meant to be cover-art but are just there to be looked at and admired either online or after you have opened the *zip* file for the release.

You can also subscribe to their email newsletter if you get hooked. The releases are typical "LP" length format which hopefully more *net.labels* will fight to root out from the norm, there is after all no need to be limited by concepts set as a standard for outdated formats. A 'release' no longer needs to be considered anything more than a snapshot or version of a "track" at a particular moment in time, instead of as something than has been etched forever by laser or lathe and can't be changed, deleted, updated, or rolled back.

The interesting motivation of *Sutemos* is that it seems to see itself as a half-way step toward being a "real" record label. The release notes (released in Microsoft Word format, but that's another battle) for *3tronik* state:

> "Although it is improper in society to boast I will let myself say that *Sutemos* net label is getting rid of its virtual features gradually and is releasing stuff that would almost fit the CD/LP format. The album of French producer *Florin Fabien (aka 3tronik)* called *Mirror* will take another fast step to prove that to you. I think that after listening

to the newest work of *3tronik* you will agree that it is more than just an mp3 release and we are sincerely hoping that after *Mirror* he won't need to appear on *Sutemos* (or on any other net label) again. This is what we wish him."

The label is providing a stepping stone opportunity for the artist, allowing him to be noticed and released on a bonafide, hard format record label. This has some form of altruism attached to it, but also fundamentally it is a statement about the cultural economics of *net.labels*. Each of these enterprises is discovering its own area and its own economy, some appear to exist on an economy of reputation, others like *Sutemos* see themselves as providing artists with a promotional medium from which they can refine their skills, develop a following and step into another economy perhaps where actual cash changes hands.

That's not to say it's impossible to establish a *net.label* that sells music. It is certainly possible but the phenomenon has not yet embraced this strategy to any great degree, perhaps because selling music online also sets a logistical and financial threshold to building an audience. Most *net.labels* seem to be more interested in how many downloads they get rather than how much money they make. Additionally it could be said that *net.labels* are throwing away the overburdening infrastructures required to make money, establishing and managing these structures after-all are the very things that have lost many independent labels money in the past.

Finally, falsch (http://fals.ch) is interesting because it takes a completely different tactic from other *net.labels*.

Born from the Austrian *mego* and *farmers manual* borg, this site is fantastic due to its in-your-face design and tricky navigation. This site will almost certainly cause cerebral hemorrhaging for technophobes, offering no shelter for the lost or overwhelmed.

Licensing

The question now arises… isn't downloading music illegal? Well this is the problem underlying the current war on file sharing, there is little done to discriminate between legal and illegal file sharing.

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There's a lot of content online that is free and available for download legally. If you want to check out some of the repositories for this kind of content then have a look again at *The Internet Archive* or Legal Torrents (`http://www.legaltorrents.com/`) or the activist video sharing network v2v (`http://v2v.cc/`) and there are many others. *Bittorrent*, by the way, is an extremely interesting technology that aggregates available bandwidth from hosts that have the file you want so your download proceeds faster than if it was downloading from just one host. This technology is used for some *net.labels* including the Croatian label egoboobits (`http://www.egoboobits.net`). American academic *Laurence Lessig*, inspired by the recent moves on open source software licensing, has made a number of template licenses for distributing content. These are bundled together in a site (movement) called Creative Commons (`http://www.creativecommons.org`).

These licenses give you the permission to set the parameters of the distribution and re-use of your audio content.

However the scope of these licenses is much broader in philosophy, and central to what they are doing is the idea of stimulating creative development through derivative works. *Laurence Lessig* wants to encourage artists to consider licensing material so that it can not only be distributed but also so that it contributes to a pool of creative works that can be drawn on as raw materials by other artists. His

Fig. 7: net.label Kikapu

claim is that culture has always developed this way and that by unnecessarily restraining this process through strict content licenses we live in a poorer cultural environment. That is a point that you need to decide for yourself, but you may find *Laurence Lessig's* book *Free Culture* an interesting read on these issues. *Free Culture* is available for free from http://www.free-culture.cc/ (`http://www.free-culture.cc/`)

Conclusion

net.labels are refining technological processes and defining a cultural economy and identity for independent music distribution. Evading the financial burdens that envelop CD production and distribution, these pioneers are cutting an interesting new path which is well worth the download time if you are a fan of independently produced music.

net.label links

12 rec (`http://www.12rec.net`)

2063 music (`http://www.2063music.de`)

20kbps (`http://20kbps.sofapause.ch`)

8 Bit Peoples (`http://www.8bitpeoples.com`)

Acedia Music (`http://www.acediamusic.org`)

Binary Zero (`http://www.binaryzero.com`)

Broque (`http://www.broque.de`)

Cyclene (`http://www.cyclene.com`)

falsch (`http://fals.ch`)

Fukkgod (`http://www.fukkgod.org`)

Ideology (`http://www.ideology.de`)

Kahvi Collective (`http://kahvi.org`)

Kallisti Gold (`http://www.kallistigold.com`)

Kikapu (`http://www.kikapu.com`)

Linguablanca (`http://linguablanca.sevcom.com`)

Maetrix Solution (`http://www.maetrixsolution.com`)

Monotonic (`http://www.monotonik.com`)

Noiseusse (`http://noiseusse.org`)

privatelektro (`http://www.privatelektro.de`)

pumplanerecords (`http://www.pumplanerec.com`)

realaudio.ch (`http://www.realaudio.ch`)

rand (`http://r4nd.org`)

Repan Records (`http://www.repanrecords.se`)

Sofa Sound (`http://www.sofasound.de`)

Sweet Smelling Surfaces (`http://www.sumodehouse.com/sss`)

stadt gruen (`http://www.stadtgruenlabel.net`)

statsifield (`http://stasisfield.com`)

stromklang (`http://www.stromklang.de`)

Subsource (`http://www.subsource.de`)

Surfaces (`http://surfaces.tinkle.lt`)

sutemos (`http://www.sutemos.net`)

yrnuid (`http://www.yrnuid.net`)

Copyright information

About the author

Adam is a digital artist (r a d i o q u a l i a (`http://www.radioqualia.net/`)) who works with software, online audio and video, sound art, new technologies and more traditional forms of broadcast. See also r a d i o q u a l i a's latest project Radio Astronomy (`http://www.radio-astronomy.net`)