



By John McGlasson

“You did what?” was a close friend's response when I told him I wasn't going to be releasing the new album for a certain world-renowned guitar God.* The plan was in the works for months. The album is done, we were ready to go. But at the last minute, I hesitated and thought about what I was doing, why I was doing it, and how unfair it was to our other artists.

First of all, the only way a label as small as mine was able to attract a guy of his stature was to offer a deal that was lopsided in the artist's favor. I didn't have a problem with that, because, like a lot of things we do in this biz, I had to ask myself; if I don't make a penny from a promo effort, was it worth the publicity and visibility in the long run? For example, we're doing commercial radio promo for *Backyard Tire Fire* right now, knowing we're not likely to get big airplay for the current album, but by the time we release next one, we'll have gotten to the people who'll play it. So while it wasn't likely that we'd ever profit from the release of this guy's album, I did think I'd be able to break even on it, and get a huge boost for the label, and all of our artists, in the process.

But then I did what a business owner has to do, crunched the numbers while looking at the current industry, and with the advance I'd have had to pay the artist, and the dollars it would've taken to promote the album worldwide, there was no way I could've put the album out without hurting every other artist on the label, most of who've stuck by me long before I had any global exposure. We've all worked and grown together, and I'm heavily invested in them. It would've cost the label everything and then some to put out the album, and we wouldn't have broken even. And it's not because of the artist or the album or the label, it's the industry.

Had the plan gone exactly right, it would've probably paid off as I thought it would. But as the industry continues to decline, I simply couldn't make the case to myself and the other artists that it was really the best thing for everyone to bank everything on one album. I can't play games with the careers of people who are close to me that way, and that's what it started to feel like, a risky gamble.

When the opportunity first came up, I was floating on a cloud. It was everything I dreamed of when I thought about what I want my label to be in the future, who I'm trying to compete with, and what I want to do with my life. He's the kind of artist that my friends said “no f%^*ng way!!!!” when I told them, and I got a lot of pats on the back. Now they say the same thing when I tell them I had to turn the guy down and why, and most of them pat me on the back for that too. It was the hardest decision I've had to make since starting the label, and now that's it's sunk in, I know I did the right thing.

Brushes with the big time give me perspective. Why did I start a label? To have a way to get all the incredible artists I knew here in Central Illinois to the world who'd been ignored by other labels purely for geographical reasons, this is "flyover country" after all. To put out my own albums, something that's yet to happen. And to be different, to do it my way, and use the mistakes I'd seen others make as my guide for my own label. The label has gone further in 3 years than we ever expected it to, mostly because we're different. We didn't stick to one genre, we did the opposite, no two artists on our label are in the same genre. I've stuck with guitar-oriented music, though I've gotten lucky and had one band really have some unexpected pop success, and it's become fun to watch all our work grow into something we can see week after week.

Keeping the perspective of who I am, where I'm from, and what I was trying to do in the first place reminded me how happy I am to be the little guy, from the cornfields, doing big things, within our scale. I tried to go large in one big shot, and it probably would've cost me the label, and hurt the careers of people close to me. Can you buy stature? I don't want to know. We'll grow into it. I now know that we can attract the greatest guitarists on the planet, and I know I'll be able to compete with my heroes who own other labels, in time. But if not, I'm happy to run the little label from the Illinois cornfields.

*I can't say who because it would just cause unnecessary problems for the artist with his current label. It makes no difference to the point of the column.

[John McGlasson](#) is a life-long guitarist, producer, and founder of [o.i.e. Records, Ltd](#) ., a musician-oriented independent record label based in central Illinois.