

# From record stores to Gayngs: what's left of the shattered recording industry



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Rock shows and record stores. That is what touring was all about according to Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore in "I Need That Record!," a documentary that was streamed on the Pitchfork website on the heels of Record Store Day. It profiles various record stores as they shut down and the audiophiles who depended on them for sustenance, and interviews industry veterans for perspectives reaching back to the early prominence of the recording industry. It laments the decline of independent music stores and the creative side of the industry. Yet out of all of the dejected faces seen, hope can be found when the undertones of those laments point to industry-defying artists of today.



Chris Frantz, the drummer for Talking Heads, offers frustration over record labels going public by acknowledging that if record labels acted as they did today, they would likely have been dropped after their first record. In the '80s, the climate of the music industry transformed its interest in the art form into an investment in short-term profits. Co-founder of Punk magazine Legs McNeil explains the transformation succinctly in the film, saying, "That's the moment music became mediocre, when you get accountants running the record companies."

To put it another way I think most musicians would agree with, the greed of a few corrupted the art form of many. As a result, artists went from confronting the public by challenging conventionalities and social norms to relying solely on those conventionalities and norms to create an album safe enough to be accepted by the general public.

Then in the '90s, pop music became manufactured middle-class fertilizer: reassurance that their kids would grow with morals while listening to innocent, safe crap. This explosion, coupled with illegal downloads, made million-dollar records scarce for labels to come by, and as a result the manufactured music became their exclusive avenue to revenue. This era of Disney pop combined with the rise of the mp3 meant that the creativity found through the mingling and perusing of record stores was squashed on both ends, according to "Record!"

As most mainstream collaborations became set up by record labels to foster the growth of their own artists, Gayngs—a Minneapolis-based band that recorded their first record in Wisconsin—provide a promising reminder that the artists can still prevail. In a Broken Social Scene-esque manner, Gayngs picked up fellow artists hitchhiking through the indie landscape. The album lineup ballooned to Joe Westerlund, Brad Cook and Phil Cook of Megafaun; Ivan Howard of the Rosebuds; Justin Vernon and Mike Noyce of Bon Iver; P.O.S. and Dessa of Doomtree.

And it got even more obscure from there: Jake Luck and Nick Ryan of the Leisure Birds, Channy Moon Casselle of Roma di Luna, Maggie Morrison and Grant Cutler of Lookbook, a slide-guitar specialist, a jazz-saxophonist who has worked with Andrew Bird, and a couple of extra backup singers. That's not even mentioning the collaboration between Ryan Olson and Solid Gold members Zach Coulter and Adam Hurlburt that birthed the project.

This is overwhelming, as it represents one dot on a timeline of indie music. But also, because of its expansive lineup, it also presents one of the fullest pictures of a music scene you can expect to find. It seems to present an unpredictable environment both socially and sonically, but one that thrives on an open atmosphere of artistic freedom.

For artists and labels to allow such cross-collaborations, the bottom line must be the art. When it comes to fans, the shows are still there, the artists actually interested in "art" are still there and record stores are even surviving. You just need to look a little harder than before to find what you're looking for from all three.

*Want to discuss how music's evolved over the past few decades? E-mail Justin at [jstephani@wisc.edu](mailto:jstephani@wisc.edu).*