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Alan McGee on the 359 revolution

Legendary Creation boss talks new label

Terry Staunton September 06, 2013, 08:30 UTC

"The relevancy of record labels is questionable in 2013. Gone are the days when you had to jump through hoops and try to impress a bunch of strangers to get your music heard. The internet has created a whole new ball game."

So says Alan McGee, the charismatic music industry figure who started the iconic Creation label and brought the likes of the Jesus & Mary Chain, Primal Scream, My Bloody Valentine and Oasis to the masses. He subsequently set up Poptones in 2000, most notable for the success of The Hives, but shut the operation down seven years later and took a break from the business.

This year, McGee returns to music as the head of 359 Music ("one degree from total revolution," as he puts it) with an ambitious plan to launch the careers of a dozen new acts every 12 months. However, instead of trawling pubs and clubs in the manner of traditional A&R practices, McGee is sourcing his roster by inviting hopefuls to pitch their wares to him via the internet. The label's first six releases are out in October.

McGee will run the operation from his home in rural Wales, with more nuts-and-bolts back-up from his partners in the venture, London-based Cherry Red Records. Here he speaks to MusicRadar about his plans...

What have you been doing since the demise of Poptones?

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"I moved out of London to Wales to bring up my daughter and didn't really have much to do with the music industry at all. I'd been chasing music since I was about 16, started off in indie bands before moving over to the business side, and I was loving it. But by the time I got to my late 40s, I felt really jaded with it. I'd got bored of doing the same things over and over again."

What prompted your return to the business?

"I was lured out of retirement by a Japanese promoter who ran the Tokyo Rocks festival. He made me the curator for one year, so I put on Neil Young and Blur – although Neil was ultimately replaced on the bill by My Bloody Valentine. But it helped me to remember how good I'd been in the past at pulling things together and how much I enjoyed it.

"I got my confidence back, and the same promoter offered me a chance to run a record company he was setting up, with worldwide distribution by Warner Brothers. But the whole thing seemed very long-winded and was taking ages to start. I got tired of waiting for him.

"Then I got a letter from Cherry Red saying they still had a cheque for £126 in publishing royalties from about 30 years ago when I was in a band called Laughing Apple with Andrew Innes, who went on to join Primal Scream. I found out that Iain McNay, who was there when I was on the label, was still part of the set-up, and we got talking about doing something new.

"It all happened really quickly: Within three weeks we'd made a public announcement and invited people to send us MP3 demos – within a month we'd received two-and-a-half thousand."

Were you were surprised by that number?

"It was a lot to get through, of course, and we've had to put a block on people sending any more. We'll open it up again for another month next year, but for the time being we're working on what we think is the best of the stuff already in."

It sounds like a monumental task to go through them all; presumably they were of variable quality?

"You can go through hundreds of demos and not find one thing that interests you, but we settled on 15 that we really want to take further, and we'll be doing so this year and next. There were at least another hundred that were worth a second listen.

There's some unbelievable quality out there, and a lot of them might never have got heard if they'd adhered to the traditional business model of knocking on doors and trying to get record companies down to a gig."

Would you say 359 has a different ethos to the typical label set-up?

"We'll see how it goes – I think it's still a work in progress. For me, it's really just a launch pad for new talent and ignored talent, people who've been burned in the past by their dealings with labels. You can be 14 and send me a demo tape, or you can be in your 40s and send me a demo tape. We won't be hamstrung by trends; I'll listen to what you do, and I'll judge it purely on its musical merits."

How does launching your 359 signings differ to what you had to do with Creation bands like, say, Heavy Stereo or One Lady Owner? How do you get the message across?

"The major difference between trying to market a new act in the days of Creation and what we can do now is social media. It's all about online presence – that's the hub of what's happening. NME sells about 20,000 copies of the magazine each week, but that's a fraction compared to the number of people who visit their website. Online lasts forever."

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You say you'll welcome demos from people of all ages, and the first batch of releases includes North South Divide, an album by a 15-year-old Yorkshire-based singer-songwriter called John Lennon McCullagh. What's his story?

"The first time I saw him play live was when was still 14, on a wet Tuesday in Rotherham. He came on stage and did a bunch of Bob Dylan covers: She Belongs To Me, It's All Over Now Baby Blue, Masters Of War – and he nailed every single one of them. His own writing is really interesting; he's developing really quickly, and he's building a healthy following, again via the internet, but he's also putting in the hours playing gigs up and down the country. I'm not on Twitter or Facebook myself, but John uses it really well, and Cherry Red are backing him up in those areas."

What about the other new signings?

"Mineral are a really interesting indie electronic band, and Chris Grant is someone I've known for a few years. He would send me demos when I wasn't doing anything in the music business. His album is incredible, one of the best records I've ever had anything to do with, and he made the whole thing himself on his laptop. That's an illustration of what can be done without recourse to big budgets or labels."

Having your name attached to 359 gives the operation a certain cachet, of course.

"I suppose so, yes, and it'll presumably help us get publicity. If people want to check us out because they recognise my name and they know I've put out some good records in the past, then all the better for the acts we've signed."

Ultimately, what are your hopes or expectations for the label? Are you looking for the next Oasis?

"Those days are gone, aren't they? With the exception of the odd thing like Adele, nobody can hope to sell massive amounts of records. Kevin Shields of My Bloody Valentine told me not so long ago that he hardly ever buys albums, but if he hears something he likes he'll click on the YouTube link 30 or 40 times, and I think there's millions of people with the same attitude."

"Two or three thousand sales on a new artists is fairly respectable; the paradigms have changed so much. That's a realistic and healthy target, and every now and then you might hit one out of the park that really makes an impact."

For more information on the label's first batch of releases and details of how and when to send demos, visit the [official 359 website](#).

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