

F O R T H E R E C O R D

A group of undergrads start a label
to help campus musicians find their groove.

by Alex Raines

Right: Colby Ramsay of My Boy Rascal. On working with Vinyl Records, Ramsay says, "It's amazing how far my music has come. It's just worlds better." Photo by Alex Raines.



In high school Tripp Gobble would drive an hour from Louisburg, North Carolina, to hear his favorite bands at Cat's Cradle in Carrboro. When he arrived at Carolina in 2006, Gobble immersed himself in the local music scene, where he befriended some musicians. One was Al Mask, a pianist minoring in music, and after returning from a summer spent playing and recording and performing at the Berklee College of Music, he had an idea for Gobble. Mask wanted to start an organization to help students produce their own music, because he knew firsthand just how hard it was. Gobble was in.

Gobble admits he isn't much of a musician. "I've never been incredibly skilled at any instrument, outside of the trombone in middle school," he jokes. But he had always wanted to be more than just a music fan. Gobble took Mask's idea—to help student bands financially—and thought, "What if we started a label with an entire network of support around these musicians and helped them build a professional portfolio?"

Of course, neither Gobble nor Mask knew anything about starting a record label. They turned to mentors in the music department and the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise for guidance, developing a business plan that they entered in the Carolina Challenge, UNC's venture capital competition. They didn't win that competition, but they revised their proposal and won a \$25,000 grant from the Carolina Entrepreneurial Institute's Innovations Fund in the spring of 2008. Vinyl Records was born.

Gobble and Mask set about finding a staff. They posted fliers, flooded inboxes, held informational meetings. The morning after the first meeting, a job application appeared under the door of their tiny office in Hill Hall. "It was in this nice manila envelope and it was very professional and I thought, 'Okay, this guy is serious,'" Gobble remembers. The application was from Andrew Hamlet, a first-year student from Atlanta who had experience recording with his own bands. "It was obvious that he had diverse but also pretty refined tastes in music and artistry," Gobble says. "So we put him in artistic development and repertoire, where he would be scouting new talent but also trying to help them find their sound."

Gobble and Hamlet took a democratic approach to finding new artists. They hoped that letting the campus community choose the artists would generate grassroots support that would translate into album sales. The staff narrowed down thirty applicants to ten



Tripp Gobble, cofounder of Vinyl Records: "Once we got going, we realized how hard it really is for student bands." Photo by Alex Raines.

bands, who auditioned live. From those they selected six bands to battle it out in a free concert on campus they dubbed the September Showdown. After the show, more than twenty-five hundred students voted for their favorite bands, and the top three won that coveted record deal. Step one was done, and Vinyl Records had its first artists: indie pop band Lake Inferior, folk rock act Lafcadio Shot Back, and hip-hop artist Apollo. Next step: record and promote the artists.

That turned out to be more work than anyone expected. "Off the bat we approached it as a three-hundred-sixty-degree deal for artists," Gobble says. "Then we realized how overwhelming and consuming that can be, and we started recognizing why Warner Brothers can't make money and EMI is in debt." Vinyl Records was trying to do everything: on top of recording and producing albums, it was acting as manager and agent for the bands, as well as booking shows and tours and marketing them on campus and around town.

Merge Records, one of the most successful independent labels in the United States, is just down the road from Chapel Hill in Durham, so Gobble and Hamlet paid them a visit. They were surprised to find how streamlined Merge was. A staff of about fifteen people represents dozens of artists, including major names such as Arcade Fire and M. Ward. Merge has focused on producing

and selling good albums, letting the musicians take more responsibility for advancing their own careers. It takes more work from the artists but also gives them more creative freedom. Gobble and Hamlet decided to take the same approach with Vinyl Records. They would record and produce the albums, but each band would have to make sure it was playing enough to get its name out there and generate a following of people who would want to buy the album.

The new plan worked. Vinyl Records released its first three albums in January 2009 to a sold-out crowd at Local 506, a rock club on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill.

In March, Vinyl Records released *The Study of Animal Magicity* by My Boy Rascal. It's a great example of what Vinyl Records can do for an up-and-coming musician. Singer-songwriter Colby Ramsay (the band name is an anagram of his name) came to Carolina from the mountains of British Columbia. Ramsay had worked for Vinyl Records as a graphic designer and videographer in the label's first year, but he resigned his position so that he could try to be signed as an artist. (Vinyl Records does not sign any of its own staff, though many are musicians.) He won the most votes with his performance in the February Faceoff in 2009. As soon as he was signed, Ramsay felt the effect of the heightened publicity. "It opened up a lot of performing opportunities for campus events," he says. "People knew about me." But the biggest impact came when Ramsay stepped into the recording studio.

The Study of Animal Magicity was the first album recorded in Vinyl Records' new studio space in the basement of Hill Hall. The studio allows artists to record for free whenever and for however long they like. For My Boy Rascal, it took the entire fall semester, working at least five days a week—some days until four in the morning. "We made the basement of Hill Hall our home," says Hamlet, who produced the album. "I think if we had known what we were doing, it wouldn't have taken as long. But we were really trying to feel the songs out."

That process is critical for most new artists, but it takes more time than a bigger label or studio is willing to spend on an untested band. "When you listen to what Colby came in with," Gobble says, "it was good. But Andrew and Colby worked a lot of hours on putting that record together

and bringing it to the best that it could be in terms of all the different musical elements working together. I think it became a lot bigger and bolder and made a much stronger statement."

Ramsay agrees. "You can't really even compare—it's amazing how far my music has come." That's mostly thanks to Hamlet, who helped push Ramsay's music beyond its one-guy-and-his-guitar character. Hamlet played electric guitar on the album and brought in drummers, bass players, and other musicians. Ramsay did lead vocals, guitar, and keyboards; filled out his arrangements with his friends in Tar Heel Voices on backup vocals; and even brought in a string quartet for three of the tracks. All of these resources are well beyond the means of the typical student band, and the difference in the end product is huge. "People don't understand the work that goes into an album," Hamlet says. "A song is a three-minute experience for them." But it can take months or even years to record.

When recording was finished, the process wasn't over. Hamlet and Ramsay sent off the album to be mastered and manufactured. This is the other major financial hurdle for emerging artists, and accounts for most of the ongoing expenses at Vinyl Records. Despite the label's name, most albums from Vinyl Records are released as CDs and are

also available on iTunes. Lake Inferior was the one exception when it decided to release its second album as a ten-inch vinyl record (though it does come with digital downloads for those without a record player).

"These days, music is almost becoming public domain," Hamlet says. Labels will have to change their business models to survive. It's easier than ever for artists to self-produce: bands can record on their laptops and post the songs on the internet for anyone to hear, and fans can decide for themselves which artists to support. But with a lower threshold for producing music, artists can have a hard time being heard above the noise.

That's where Vinyl Records comes in. It raises the profile of the artists, helps them develop their sound, and produces a professional, refined album that stands out in a crowded field. "I see the current major label model as something that can't work," Gobble says. "But the small label will always exist, and so will the idea of branding, legitimizing, and helping define an artist."

Gobble graduated in May, after passing the presidency of Vinyl Records to Hamlet in January to give him time to settle into the role. "Andrew's been one of the most dedicated people in the organization since he came in," Gobble says, "so it made sense

Vinyl Records put on a party at the Student Union Cabaret for the release of My Boy Rascal's *The Study of Animal Magicity* in February 2010. My Boy Rascal's Colby Ramsay told the *Daily Tar Heel* why the group chose the Student Union rather than a bar or rock club: "It can be a more focused event at the Cabaret where people can sit there and really listen to the music and feel something." Photo by Tang Yi.





Left: The album cover for Lake Inferior's *Pegasusaur*. Center, top to bottom: Covers for albums by Lafcadio Shot Back, My Boy Rascal, and Apollo. Right: My Boy Rascal performs at the release of its album *The Study of Animal Magicality*. Photo by Tang Yi.

that he would take the reins of the organization. People trusted him.” In turn, Hamlet will hand over the reins in January 2011 to Reed Turchi, the current vice president. They’ve already signed two new artists for the fall: hip-hop artist Sikz Pointz and indie-folk-jazz band Group Mentality.

Gobble is somewhat amazed by the success Vinyl Records has achieved so far. It’s sold over a thousand records, and its last showcase drew yet another capacity crowd and nearly two thousand votes. “People actually know the name of the label behind the artist,” Gobble says, “which in the broader world rarely happens.” Lake Inferior is playing up and down the East Coast, and Lafcadio Shot Back has also enjoyed post-graduation success. Ramsay of My Boy Rascal is hoping to build off of *The Study of Animal Magicality* to launch a career in music, possibly combined with producing video and multimedia projects.

Many of the staff also want their experience with Vinyl Records to lead to a career playing or producing music. Hamlet interned with Merge Records last year and this summer worked with the

National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, which puts on the Grammy Awards. Gobble has founded a record label in Raleigh called Denmark Records. He’s not sure how long he will stay with this new label—but he thinks Vinyl Records has the potential for longevity. “It creates a sense of community that is probably more direct than any label outside of a university setting could do. It becomes a gateway, a music incubator helping the artists grow as musicians. But it’s also helping those who are involved in the business side or the production side to build their portfolio with experience in the music industry.”

Alex Raines is an MD/PhD student studying neurobiology. Vinyl Records is funded by a grant from the Carolina Entrepreneurial Initiative, which is managed by the Frank Hawkins Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise, and by ongoing support from Student Government. Clarence “Tripp” Gobble graduated in May 2010 with a degree in environmental studies. Andrew Hamlet is a senior psychology major and a music minor. Colby Ramsay graduated in May 2010 with a degree in journalism and mass communication.

The Life Cycle of Vinyl Records

Or, 12 Simple Steps for Running Your Own Label

- 1: Get funding
- 2: Hire a staff
- 3: Invite artist applications
- 4: Put on concert; let students choose new artists
- 5: Book performances around campus and town
- 6: Help artists define musical sound and style
- 7: Record and mix album
- 8: Create album art
- 9: Send album to be mastered and manufactured
- 10: Put on album-release concert
- 11: Sell and promote album
- 12: Go back to step 3

Because people access music in so many different ways, the success of Vinyl Records depends on getting music into as many outlets as possible:

- music available on iTunes, Amazon, etc.
- videos of concerts on YouTube
- streaming music on website
- VR Presents, a monthly series producing free demos of local nonstudent bands
- podcast on iTunesU
- “Vinyl Press” blog