

Household Flourishes

A label founder reflects on his company's silver anniversary

By Josef Woodard

Now 25 years old, the independent label Household Ink Records qualifies as an accident that morphed into a tradition that refuses to die. Spawned as the “home” of the band Headless Household, the willfully diverse label traces its roots back to a natural alliance of oddball musicians, restlessly needing a collective expressive outlet in the beach-side tourist haven of Santa Barbara, Calif., in the fall of 1983.

The lineup included Dick Dunlap on keyboards, Tom Lackner on drums and percussion, Chris Symer on bass, and myself on guitar. Armed with an apparently endless fount of original compositions and concepts with dubious commercial potential, we decided a band branding was in order. As Headless Household—headless vis à vis both a democratic, leaderless ideal and an early avoidance of musical “heads” (an idea soon violated)—we culled various interests in free improvisation, sundry jazz inklings, ECM-ish lyricism, progressive-rock notions, hints of folk traditions and other inklings ill-suited to the pantheon of available, definable and salable musics of the day.

A few years into the adventure, we had a growing oeuvre that hadn't been documented and no likely prospects for a record deal. Around the same time, in my day-job mode as a music journalist, I was working on a story about New Music Distribution Service, launched by pianist Carla Bley and others as a clearinghouse for independent and artist-run record labels, especially from “new music” and alternative musical enclaves. In a hot, crammed New York City office, Yale Evelev, then head of the operation, told me, “Everyone should have a label.” Voilà, a motto and motivation. Thanks, Yale.

In 1987, we released our eponymous debut. Our new label was dubbed Household Ink, a twist on Household Inc. Naturally, one outlet for this debut vinyl LP was New Music Distribution Service, whose catalogue blurb opined, “It's hard to categorize these guys, though their music's playful, quirky, sometimes downright silly, sometimes quite soothing.”

After years of languishing and recovering, Headless Household put out the sophomore



Headless Household, from left: Dick Dunlap, Tom Lackner and Josef Woodard



Julie Christensen



Nate Birkey

album *Inside/Outside USA* (on compact disc) in 1993. This was our tipping point of “labeldom” as we branched out, inviting others into the fold. Soon, the label's roster included the alt-rock band flapping, Flapping; the art-folk group Dudley; and the fusion band Lean-To.

Fast-forward to now, and Household Ink Records has 36 titles and no sign of slowing down, settling into the era when digital downloads supply more income than physical product does. Logistically, the label's business model hovers around the idea of an artists' co-op: The musicians cover most of the costs of production, while the label provides infrastructure and a “corporate” home base.

Eight of the current roster's albums are by Headless Household. Among the other Household artists are trumpeter/vocalist Nate Birkey, singer Julie Christensen and bassist David Piltch—all connected to the expandable, guest-heavy Household band.

Along the path, Household Ink titles intersected with established figures from the jazz and pop worlds. Christensen's dedicated “jazz” project, *Something Familiar*, included longtime pia-

nist Karen Hammack and drummers Jeff Ballard and Kenny Wollesen. Alto saxophonist David Binney has been a fly-in soloist on several CDs.

Piltch, who spent years in singer k.d. lang's band, recorded with Headless Household and released his genre-crossing album *Minister Of The Interior* with a list of guests that included lang and guitarist Bill Frisell.

In the label's jazz niche, Birkey has been a vital force, with six albums out and a gospel disc in the works. “I believe I have been dubbed the token ‘straightahead jazz’ artist for the label, which is fine by me,” he said. “They have always been supportive of whatever I come up with, from my *Ballads* album, to my all-original album *The Mennonite*, to my Christmas album.”

Twenty-five years after the origins of Household Ink, independent and artist-run labels are far more common, and the very nature of a record label is in flux. But whatever the technological trappings and economic challenges of our modern times, an independent record label remains grounded in the raw necessity of musicians heeding the urge to make music manifest, by whatever means necessary.

DB