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Record Breaking

Small-time is big-time for a crafty local label Sort Of Records.

by [Aaron Jentzen](#)

Amid fliers for new releases and underground rock shows in the window of Paul's CDs sits a small box of faded 8-tracks, a nostalgic ode to obsolete media and those who cherish it. Inside the Bloomfield music store, that nostalgia is everywhere. There's a prominently displayed copy of *Shadow Music of Thailand* -- new limited vinyl reissue, \$21 -- and the latest from indie band Elf Power, also available in glossy new vinyl. Not to mention the racks and racks of CDs, the decades-old format whose death many have been predicting since the rise of mp3s. Even the idea of a small brick-and-mortar record store like Paul's is a dinosaur in today's rapidly changing music industry.

Yet there are signs of progress in Paul's as well. In the display counter in front of Jason Baldinger are the store's flashiest and most eccentric fetish objects. Baldinger points out an album made to look like a large hardcover book. And behind him is a display of recent releases, the vast majority in newer digipaks -- a plastic tray glued into a slick cardboard cover, often made of recycled materials -- instead of the old all-plastic jewelcases.

Along with the newer format comes an interest in more experimental designs: Oddly shaped CD covers and boxes -- "whatever it takes to distinguish your packaging," says Baldinger -- are increasingly popular with indie labels and majors alike.

Baldinger has seen the trend not only at Paul's, but at Carnegie Mellon's radio station WRCT, where he's hosted a free-form radio show for the past 10 years. His own collection, in fact, numbers some 6,000 albums.

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Heather Mull

Progressive acoustic: Pairdown onstage at Woodlab

"In the age of the download, packaging almost seems superfluous," Baldinger says. But for many of those who work and shop at Paul's, "You buy things as much for the package as the information contained therein."

On a Tuesday, customers browsed new releases just hitting the shelves, bantering in that distinctive record-store way with Baldinger about obscure musicians, the composer Erik Satie, and the small, Pittsburgh-based label Sort Of Records.

Paul's carries much of the label's catalog on a consignment basis: short-run CDR releases by local musicians Daryl Fleming, Pairdown and David Bernabo, and others from outside Pittsburgh. Each release is distinguished by its

elegant, handmade packaging.

"Dave Bernabo sells pretty well," Baldinger observes. Even so, he thinks that Sort Of's philosophy of short runs -- printing as few as 100 copies at a time -- "makes a lot of sense. Pressing on that level, you can take risks."

Indeed, for most record labels, the decision to put out a double-CD set of sprawling, stoned-out improv like Paper Thin Stages' *Flying Hears* would probably be less aptly described as risk than as suicide. Unless you're someone like Sort Of Records founder Raymond Morin, who has figured out how to distribute music on a tiny scale ... and at a hip intersection of craft, technology and subcultural cool.

Sort Of Records is based in an airy room on the second floor of Raymond Morin and partner Minette Vaccariello's tastefully appointed Garfield home. In the next room is a small recording studio, with instruments and a vintage tape machine; upstairs is a sewing room.

With the tools of his trade surrounding him, Morin's space feels more like a workshop than a business office. There's a row of color printers, for running off CD jackets and liner notes; a CDR duplicator that spits out seven copies at a time; work tables and cartons of silicone glue dots. And everywhere you look, small stacks of colorful CDs from the Sort Of Records catalog.

"I kinda started accumulating it piece by piece," Morin says of his tiny empire. He started with just one color printer, but "then I had to get two or three of each to keep up with what I wanted to do. And then the duplicator was a huge deal, because then it became hundreds [of copies] an hour, instead of one at a time."

The packaging, however, is still assembled by hand through a laborious step-by-step process that Morin has refined over time -- and that he is reluctant to entirely divulge. Still, it involves laying out (and often designing) the artwork, then printing it on a long rectangle of cardstock. The cardboard is trimmed to size, scored with grooves, folded and pressed flat using a dry-mount press. Morin glues in a plastic CD tray using dots of silicone adhesive (other glues, he's learned, can cause the cardstock to buckle in humid conditions). The whole thing is slipped into a plastic baggie with a sticky flap, more or less approximating shrink wrap. That's one copy.

Other designs have been even more labor-intensive, with more elaborate materials and shapes cut into the packages. Take Bernabo's *Word Roses*: Each of the limited-edition album's 200 copies sports a different image printed on the disc face.



Heather Mull

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Morin's business couldn't have even existed a few years ago, before color printers and CD duplicators became common consumer electronics, available at a relatively low cost compared to the price of a lathe for pressing vinyl albums. "The industry and I kind of moved toward each other," Morin says. But even with such advancements, there's a limit to the niche he's carved out.

For one thing, despite the technology, he still assembles the CD packages by hand. "They make robots that do the whole thing, but there are a lot of upfront costs on that, and the ink doesn't go as far," he says.

And Morin's business model exists only at a small scale.

"It doesn't make any sense once you get to a certain point of investment," he says. "But if you only need 100 CDs -- that's what I wanted to perfect: being able to do between 100 and 500 in a few nights, and have amazing quality, and have all kinds of control over shapes and sizes and quantities."

Morin and Vaccariello moved to Pittsburgh in 2005 from Boston, where Morin was involved in the music scene and began Sort Of Records.

"I originally envisioned the label being a progressive acoustic label -- more elaborate acoustic stuff, fingerstyle guitarists," he says. For the first release, he approached his friend KG Fields. "He turned in this EP that was perfect -- a perfect first record." Since then, Sort Of has released 22 records and, in the process, broken a bit with its founding aesthetic [See [sidebar](#), "Track Meet"].

"I ended up wanting to be more loyal to the people than to the aesthetic," Morin says. For example, he originally signed Boston-based musician Nate McDermott as a solo act, who has issued albums on the Sort Of label under the name Meanings. But McDermott also plays in experimental rock band Paper Thin Stages, and while the band's approach seemed totally at odds with the label's output at that point, Morin thought, "If I believe in his voice that much, I should have anything that has his voice on it."

Nowadays, the label is "just whatever feels good," Morin says. As Sort Of has expanded as a brand, it's also hosted shows including the Woodlab concert series at ModernFormations. The label also has a pair of anniversary shows coming up, on Sat., May 10, at ModernFormations and Brillobox.

A typical Sort Of release sells a few hundred copies, split about evenly between store sales, digital downloads and copies the bands sell at shows. Morin is working on a deal with distributor Carrot Top, which would help place CDs in stores other than the Boston and Pittsburgh shops he currently stocks. A band on the label will typically agree to buy one box of 50 CDs from Morin at wholesale, which helps defray the upfront costs of a run.

Sort Of has even launched a niche sub-label of its own: Abstract on Black, a series of releases curated by David Bernabo, focusing on improvisational, electronic and other experimental approaches. The smaller label currently boasts Bernabo's more avant-garde work, as well as new releases from Chicago improv act The Friction Brothers and Pittsburgh New Music ensemble Alia Musica.

"Bernabo and I have a lot in common, in terms of the music we came of age on -- that Chicago post-rock scene, people like [Chicago avant-garde musician] Jim O'Rourke," says Morin. "Dave went much deeper into the avant-garde side of that, where I went much deeper into the pop and acoustic side."

In any case, Morin hopes Sort Of is developing a strong identity that nonetheless allows for variation and exploration -- qualities he's long admired in adventurous indie labels like Touch and Go, Merge Records and Drag City. "You could have the most raucous rock, and the most beautiful acoustic, but you still knew that if it was coming out on that label, it was gonna be good," he says.

What distinguishes Sort Of releases even from those relatively small labels has to do as much with what's on the *outside* of the album as what's on the inside.

Morin says Sort Of prides itself on "having a standard musically as well as physically. ... Hopefully, the fact that it's handmade, and it's all done with so much personal care, it's so limited -- we hope that will endear it [to purchasers]. Not so much to treat the object as precious -- it is still just a CD -- but to give you more feeling for it, to make you feel you're a little bit of a part of it."

While Morin has lofty artistic ambitions for his label, he seems uninterested in making it big. He doesn't even seem eager to quit his day job at a Squirrel Hill framing shop. Fortunately for Sort Of, in today's tumultuous record industry, small may be beautiful.



Heather Mull
Polka Inferno: Raymond Morin and Minette Vaccariello, who sometimes perform Bee Gees songs, as "The Bee Gentles"

Even at the top rungs of the industry -- perhaps especially there -- the music business is rapidly changing. Flagship artists like Nine Inch Nails, Radiohead and The Eagles are prospering through nontraditional sales and marketing online, while the major labels seem to be spiraling into oblivion. A more flexible, agile business like Morin's may have a better chance of surviving -- at least on his own modest terms -- than a major label with huge capital investments and overhead costs.

"In the old system, it was great to be the biggest, because you're dictating the terms," says Brian Hrcacs, a third-year Ph.D. student at the University of Toronto who is researching technological and spatial trends in the music industry, and the intersections between independent music and indie fashion. He's also played drums in Toronto-based bands for 15 years. "But in the new system, the consumers really dictate the terms."

And what indie-music consumers seem to want, Hrcacs says, are physical goods that carry symbolic social value, instead of simply functional or use value. When iTunes and other technologies mean everyone everywhere can listen to the same things, having stuff that nobody has is better than having stuff that everybody can get. "You're not going to be the coolest person on the street if everyone else on the street has the same T-shirt or the same jeans or the same sunglasses or the same music, right?" Hrcacs asks.

Hrcacs also sees Sort Of's limited, handmade releases as a reasonable response to a larger marketplace trend, a "backlash to the mass-marketing, mass-consumption pop music." He calls it the exclusivity model: "Not only is smaller in a sense better than bigger, but the idea that it's authentic or different or one-of-a-kind or an insider-type thing, that really appeals to these groups of people we're talking about -- whether you want to call them hipsters, or sophisticated consumers."

Hrcacs speculates that the exclusivity model is a trend that is likely to continue. "I don't think anyone's really figured out exactly what's going on, or looked at it too carefully," he adds.

If anything, though, the exclusivity model is becoming less exclusive. As technology like Morin's printers and duplicators become available to small producers, the approach will be more common. Hrcacs calls it a shift in the freedom/risk or opportunity/risk equation.

"The larger technology and restructuring in the industry has given musicians and artists the opportunity or the freedom to do different things," he says. "So on one side it's, 'Wow, it's a brave new world, we can do these things, it doesn't cost a lot, it doesn't take a lot of technical expertise to do these things.'"

On the other hand, with lower barriers to entry, almost anyone can get their foot in the door and start a CDR record label. So the transition to attaining even modest success is the real challenge. As the field becomes more crowded, Hrcacs says, "It's that much more difficult to make a name for yourself."

That doesn't seem to be a problem for Sort Of Records. In fact, the label just signed an artist with the potential to greatly increase the label's presence in terms of prestige and sheer volume: John Berndt, an experimental musician who runs Baltimore's Red Room club and is a founder of the High Zero festival and collective there. "We just signed him last Saturday morning over breakfast, it was lovely," says Morin, with excitement in his voice.

Berndt could help Sort Of break into the scene of a different city, and he also has connections to independent distributors Forced Exposure and Revolver, which could help Sort Of get its releases into stores all over. "We're hoping

to get in the door with his record, and then go through with the rest of the avant stuff," Morin says.

But it's hard to shake the suspicion that securing wider distribution could wreak havoc on Morin's small, personalized operation.

For the most part, Morin's approach to music has dovetailed with another successful cultural phenomenon: crafting.

At around the same time Morin was launching Sort Of Records in Boston, in fact, he and Vaccariello began making one-of-a-kind shoulder bags, under the brand name Ray-Min. "I picked up some fabric and pulled out my sewing machine, and we spent an afternoon sewing," says Vaccariello. "I showed Raymond how to sew, and he picked it up really fast."

No wonder, since the handmade, small-production model was similar to the one Morin was using for his music venture. And in fact, the two are part of a much larger trend. A nationwide movement of "indiepreneurs," as the *New York Times'* Rob Walker describes them, has grown steadily since the late 1990s, focusing on infusing "uncool-sounding domestic skills like knitting and sewing with a postpunk attitude that revolved partly around mall-rejecting self-sufficiency."

One mall-rejecter is Jessica Manack, a longtime local crafter who has helped organize Pittsburgh's Handmade Arcade craft fair since it began in 2004. Manack is also involved in the Craft Congress, the nation's largest conference for this community, which debuted in Pittsburgh, in 2007. Her buttons, collages and silkscreen prints -- made under the name Miss Chief Productions -- have shown alongside Morin and Vaccariello's wares at the Handmade Arcade and other events.

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Heather Mull

Vaccariello stitches up a Ray-Min creation

"I think the craft scene arose from the older punk, DIY kind of mindset," says Manack, who also sees links between the independent music scene and crafting. In both spheres, she says, "You don't have to go to a store and buy something that's already made. You don't have to accept what's being offered to you. You can create an alternative to

that that may not exist."

For his part, Morin is comfortable with the idea of that his label is an extension of the local craft scene. (He often sells albums alongside the Ray–Min bags at crafting fairs.) "It's all the same people -- the people that make stuff, the people that play music, the people who DJ, the people who make paintings -- they're all at Handmade Arcade, just like they're all on the gallery crawl," Morin says.

But much has changed since punk's DIY ethos emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For starters, "the craft movement has benefited greatly from the Internet," says Manack. Web sites like Etsy.com allow crafters to sell their goods and share information and resources in a way that simply didn't exist 20 or 30 years ago.

Crafting, Walker suggests in his *New York Times* article, also appeals to a slightly older crowd: Participants are more likely to be in their mid–30s than in their 20s, and that demographic fact helps shape the perspective they bring to their work. Many crafters, Walker writes, have "reached adulthood at a time when the Man is slashing benefits, renegeing on pensions, laying people off and, if hiring, is looking for customer–service reps and baristas." Crafting "is not a utopian alt–youth framework; it's a very real–world alt–grown–up framework."

As a result, crafting sometimes takes a more businesslike approach than is usually brought to bear on a hobby or pastime. "It's following the typical business principles," says Manack, "but it's something that they started doing for fun." While she says that some crafters do successfully turn their handiwork into a full–time occupation, she and many others prefer not to "put the burden of supporting myself on creative work, so it can be purely creative, artistic, spiritually fulfilling."

Still, it's possible for crafters to be professional about their work without making it their profession. "'Hobby' is just a dirty word, for some reason -- with this stuff, you work so hard at it!," says Morin. "But there's a definite ceiling of what you want to accomplish."

Vaccariello says she loves her current job as a product designer at Bright Innovation, and neither of them plans on making the label or the bags their main source of income. But somehow, those enterprises are more than just recreational activities. "Because it's not a full–time job, and it's not paying our bills, we can enjoy it," says Vaccariello. "If we had to sell 500 bags a month, it would be a much different story."

But there are challenges that accompany bringing a crafting ethos to a record label, as well as to embracing an aesthetic built on exclusive, handmade goods.

For one, there are the demands of pursuing such labor–intensive activity in the time left over from the regular job. In addition to his regular 40–hour work week, Morin estimates he spends about 20 hours a week on Sort Of, not to mention time spent helping Vaccariello with the bag business. That doesn't include time he spends making CDs for local indie bands who aren't on his label, including Boca Chica, Lohio, Discuss and Triggers.

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Heather Mull

A couple of assistants help Vaccariello sew bags, but Morin says that when he's sought help with manufacturing CDs, his assistants weren't as attentive to detail as he wanted. To keep up with demand, he's even begun outsourcing some printing work, albeit to a "totally punk-rock" print shop in Cleveland. Even so, Morin often doesn't have time for much else.

"That's probably our biggest problem," Vaccariello says. "I don't complain that Raymond works too much, because this is what he's passionate about, but it's hard for us to break away and just go off for a weekend. Unless it has something to do with music or the bags."

"It's hard not to work," says Morin. "If you have two days off in a row, it's like, 'Oh, there's so much I could get done for Sort Of, for handbags.'"

In fact, there's a risk that Sort Of could become *too* successful. The danger became more pressing once Morin managed to reverse-engineer the slick digipak designs many larger labels now use. "Nobody's ever tried this," he says. But the results look ... well, professional.

"I walk a weird line, because my stuff doesn't look like it's handmade a lot of times," Morin acknowledges. "It used to." He realized how the label was changing when Bernabo released *Graphic Scores*, the first Abstract on Black disc, which brought together stunning design and glossy materials for a production run small enough to make sense for a recording intended to accompany an art show.

"That was the first time when I realized, 'It's not a handmade thing at that point, when it looks like this,'" says Morin. And since then, the label's high production quality seems to have superseded the appeal of the handcrafted aspect. The craftier approach of his CD production "hasn't come up much in the last year. It's more like 'Oh, this looks great.'"

Signing Berndt may up the ante even further. But for now, Morin is keeping modest. "I think we've built a little discography for a couple of people, like Paper Thin Stages and David Bernabo, and all that," he says. Not surprisingly, he says, "I'd always hoped that somebody from the label would go on to some bigger label, and retroactively cast

excitement on the back catalog." But the main thing, he adds, is that "I'd like to be considered a great label by people in bands in Pittsburgh -- that would be nice."

Sort Of Records Anniversary Shows:

KG Fields, Meanings, Pairdown, The Instances. 6–9:30 p.m. Sat., May 10. ModernFormations, 4919 Penn Ave., Garfield. All ages. 412-362-0274 or www.modernformations.com

David Bernabo & Assembly, Daryl LeRoi Fleming, Paper Thin Stages. 10 p.m.–2 a.m. Sat., May 10. Brillobox, 4101 Penn Ave., Bloomfield. 412-621-4900

Woodlab Showcase:

Chicago Luzern Exchange, Bernabo/Beyer/Bucholtz/Masterman, Rick Gribenas, Ben Harris. 8 p.m. Wed., May 14. ModernFormations, 4919 Penn Ave., Garfield. All ages. 412-362-0274 or www.modernformations.com

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Track Meet

A brief introduction to the Sort Of catalogue

by [Aaron Jentzen](#)

Over the label's 22 releases to date, Sort Of Records covers a fairly wide swath of music -- from the jangly guitar-pop of The Shrinking Islands to the acoustic fingerpicking of KG Fields and the saxophone skronk of avant-rock sextet The Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Many of the releases by acts with Pittsburgh affiliations have been reviewed by *City Paper* (archived online at www.pghcitypaper.com), including The Shrinking Islands, David Bernabo, Alia Musica, Daryl LeRoi Fleming and Pairedown, the acoustic duo of Raymond Morin and David Leicht.

But the label's out-of-towners haven't received much attention here. Of these, Boston-based musician Nate McDermott's output neatly straddles two opposite poles, which together mark the boundaries of Sort Of's musical territory.

Released this April, Meanings' *Alas, Not Us* features McDermott performing nearly all instruments: spare electric and acoustic guitar backed by percussion, bass and touches of electronic drone, over which he layers harmonized vocals reminiscent of American Music Club's Mark Eitzel. The plaintive "Fresh Meat & Fruit" blends jazzy chord changes and wistful, Beat-influenced lyrics like "Apples, they make me arrhythmic / The taste of almonds makes me sick / To you I'm not so allergic / But I still would like more." The song "Mattress Coil" adopts a gauzy electric-guitar dissonance that compares favorably to Sonic Youth's more contemplative moments, even as McDermott's voice takes on a Thurston Moore-like cadence on the verses.

McDermott's other project, Paper Thin Stages, includes John Perotti and Edward Hadley, and its 2007 double CD *Flying Hearse* is a very different story. The largely improvised album opens with "It Might Come From Normal Dialogue," consisting mainly of electric guitar with delay effects and other sounds built around a repeating figure; subsequent tracks (up to 18 minutes long) feature more percussion, treated vocals, electronic blurps and beeps along with bass, guitar and keys.

Perhaps the best description of this disc is the cover image of three boys trying to ride off somewhere on horseless saddles, which is what this release sounds like at times. Its appeal is certainly limited, but Sort Of's short runs allow the number of copies to match the music's audience.

Later this summer, keep your eyes peeled for new Sort Of releases from Mikros Kosmos, Bernabo, and Pairedown, and Abstract on Black releases from Jack Wright and John Berndt.

The Shrinking Islands' [*In the Black Carpet*](#)

David Bernabo's [*Assembly*](#), [*McQueen Bear EP*](#) and [*Word Roses*](#)

Daryl LeRoi Fleming's [*The Blockhouse & Bloodhound Sessions*](#)

Alia Musica's [*Premiere Season*](#)

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Heather Mull

Studio rats (l-r): David Bernabo, Raymond Morin and David Leicht

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Our name is Neon Trees. We're musicians, we're famous and we're Mormons (mostly).

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