

SUBTERRANEAN RECORDS

People sometimes forget about all the different people that make up a music scene, tending to concentrate on the bands and artists foremost. This article is not about a band but a record label run and started by a guy. Subterranean Records for me is one of the best examples of what a good quality, independent label is all about. Take a look at their catalog: Zev, Flipper, Nervous Gender, Minimal Man, Chrome, Leather Nun, Dead Kennedys, Code of Honor, Fried Abortions, Wilma, Monte Cazazza, Factrix... Quite an odd assortment, wouldn't you say? The thing that separates Subterranean, I think, from most of the others is the chances they take by releasing unusual, unproven artists who are different from the norm. (And I'm talking within an underground context). Let's face it. Safe is boring and different music and new ideas is where it's at, folks.

Basically, Subterranean is Steve Tupper or: Steve Tupper is Subterranean. There are others that help out from time to time, but it's basically Steve (age 36) who's in charge of matters, artistically and businesswise. Subterranean was started in 1979 (in Berkeley, now in San Francisco) with the release of the SP Underground ep featuring No Alternative, Tools, Vktms, and the debut vinyl for Flipper doing "Earthworm". The label was funded originally by Steve's well paying machinist job. He was able to live modestly while pumping the majority of his pay into the label to get more releases available. Today the label is a full-time job and keeping it going and afloat seems to be Steve's primary goal at the moment. He likes the stuff he puts out and is open to lots of different musical forms. In fact he was telling me about his current interest in the NYC street music (rap/scratch) coming out these days. "Could you imagine a Funky Four Plus One 12" on Subterranean? It'll probably never happen, but then again I wouldn't be too surprised. The following brief interview was conducted with Steve over the phone in October.

Q: Why did you start Subterranean?

A: There were a lot of people making music then and practically no way to get it on vinyl at that time.

Q: What were you doing musically before you started the label?

A: I was working with some people who were putting on some shows. I was doing that for a year and a half. We were putting on these great shows and nobody came.

Q: A lot of independent labels seem to fold quickly, but you've managed to hang in there and still put out lots of releases. What's your secret?

A: Oh boy. Mostly I think, unfortunately, that for a long time I had a good paying job. I was a machinist, making pretty good money and living real cheap so I could use the money putting out records. Most of them would eventually break even.

Q: What's your best selling record?

A: The DKs record was. It sold about 25,000 copies so far.

Q: How many copies do you usually press on a normal new release by someone new as opposed to someone like the DKs, Flipper...

A: These days usually somewhere between one and two thousand. That's just for people who are pretty much unknown.

Q: You try to keep all your vinyl inprint?

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: Do you choose the artists for the label yourself?

A: Yeah.

Q: Basing decisions on your own personal taste, or something you think will sell?

A: Basically on my own personal taste. Of course I always take into consideration if I think we can sell it.

Q: Have there been any artists on the label whose music you didn't go for or whose ideas you disagreed with strongly?

A: Not really. There are maybe a few records if left totally to me I might not have put out but not many. Maybe actually only one of two.



Q: How did you meet Z'ev and Monte Cazazza?

A: I met Z'ev when we were planning the "Live at Target" LP. I'd seen him perform, of course, many times since he was pretty much a regular at the Mab since the early days. Since I wanted 4 bands on the LP (and the first 3 had already been settled), & I'd seen Z'ev & Johanna Went play together (he was doing her backup percussions at the time), I thought their act might be a good one to use. Johanna, tho, said she couldn't make it, and suggested that I talk to Z'ev about a solo performance. He said that he'd be glad to do it, but that he was working on a new act called Uns that might be more

appropriate for a recording, considering that it was less dependent on visuals than his usual percussion act. And indeed it was. Monte Cazazza is a somewhat simpler story. Factrix, who I'd met by chance at KPFA one night, began working with Monte after awhile, and they then approached me 2 years ago about doing a live LP, which was eventually released as "California Babylon".

Q: What do you think of the music press?

A: In the Bay Area it's practically nonexistent. There's really hardly anything around here except for some very, very small fanzines... There does, however,

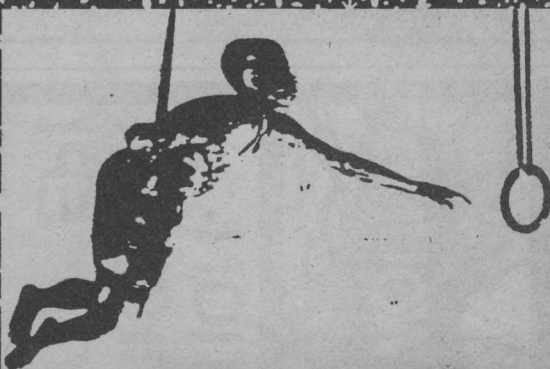
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seem to be a few good writers and fanzines around...not much in the way of a national publication.

Q: You mean like the New York Rocker?

A: Yeah, that kind of thing...it took awhile, but it just seemed to get narrower and narrower before it rolled over and died. Of course there was Slash which died as a fanzine, becoming a record company. There really isn't much coming along to replace that. Of course Search and Destroy which kind of went under and resurfaced later as Re/Search, but that's only published very infrequently. It's like a book now, but very, very good. Re/Search is probably the best publication I can think of...

Q: Do you take reviews of the records you put out seriously?

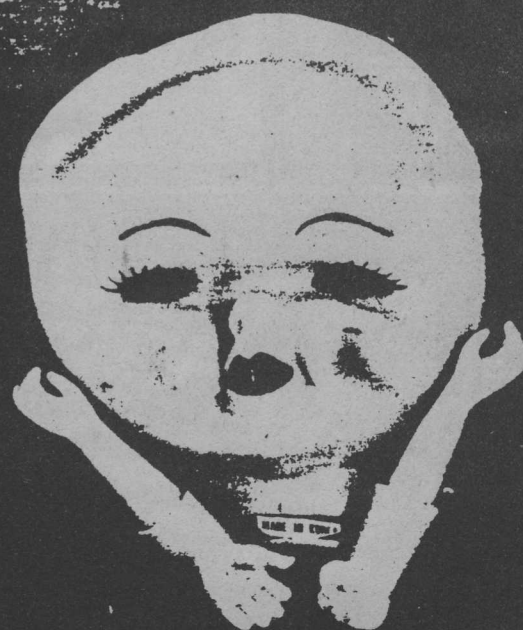
A: Yeah, I always do...

Q: Do you have any over-riding goals with your label?

A: Right now to keep going...If I can outlast the depression...I would very much like to last and survive long enough to generate some interest in alternative forms of music and help generate new cultural ideas through this music.

Q: You were telling me earlier about your interest in scratch and rap music. Will we be seeing anything along those lines on Subterranean in the future?

A: As for us doing any hip hop, I really dunno. It'd be nice, but there isn't much of a visible scene here yet. I'm hoping that one might develop, and I'd like to try to help it along, but there's also people around here with access to a lot more cash and thus to the first class studio time that that music demands. Also, black artists tend to be a lot more serious about making careers out of their music, having few options open to them other than that, and so are often hesitant to record with small labels.



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