

Chemikal Underground: “Post-Independent” Rock and Pop in Scotland?

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Introduction

In the second week of April 2005, Glasgow-based independent band The Delgados announced their decision to split up after eleven years and five critically acclaimed albums, including one Mercury Music Prize nominee. The four members of the band continue to run the Chemikal Underground record label and the company’s recording studio, Chem 19. Co-lead vocalist and guitarist Emma Pollock signed a solo deal with Beggars Banquet with whom she released one album, *Watch The Fireworks*. She released a second solo album, *The Law of Large Numbers*, on Chemikal Underground in 2010, and contributed to two musicians collective albums the same year by The Burns Unit and Fruit Tree Foundation. Co-lead vocalist and guitarist Alun Woodward released a solo album in 2009 under the name Lord Cut-Glass. Other members of the band toured in 2005 as Arab Strap guitarist Malcolm Middleton’s backing band, supporting the Chemikal Underground album release *Into The Woods*. In 2010, the label reached its fifteenth year and has a rich back catalogue, including material from Mogwai, Arab Strap and Los Angeles-based Radar Brothers. The business practices and ideological approach of Chemikal Underground continue to confound conventional popular music studies notions of relationships between the “independent” and the “mainstream.” Of course, there are other UK labels that occupy similar spaces, but Chemikal Underground is probably one of the best examples of what I wish to argue here is “post-independence.”¹

¹ The essence of “post-independence” is the combination of a focused ideological and creative independence, combined with a clear understanding and use of contemporary mainstream music industry business practices. In this, it might be argued that long surviving “independent” labels born out of punk in the late 1970s have set some precedent. Two of the most successful of these are Daniel Miller’s Mute Records and Martin Mills’ Beggars Banquet. It is no coincidence that these labels are still, in 2010, headed up by their founders and that both men are driven and charismatic. One of the significant contrasts is that Chemikal Un-

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In some ways, this paper has been evolving since February 1995 when The Delgados released their first seven-inch vinyl single, a double A-side, *Monica Webster / Brand New Car*. As both participant in, and observer of the Glasgow music scene before, during and after that moment, I became increasingly convinced that the activities of The Delgados, both as a band and as co-owner/managers of the Chemikal Underground record label, would be significant in several ways. Firstly, I would be in a unique position as an academic to chart the development of the working practices of a small independent record label from start-up. I have worked professionally with The Delgados and Chemikal Underground on many occasions and despite the potential methodological issues thrown up by that work, one consequence has been that I have had unmediated access to all four label founders and have remained close to the scene in general. The nature of my involvement has varied, but has included DJ-ing for Chemikal Underground events, and earlier in the band's career, promoting local gigs for The Delgados and other Chemikal Underground artists.

Secondly, whilst The Delgados were certainly not the first band in Glasgow to set up a label to release their own records, it quickly became apparent that they were taking very seriously their position within the West of Scotland music scene, beyond simple self-promotion. This was most obvious after the entirely unexpected success of the third Chemikal Underground release, *The Secret Vampire Soundtrack* EP by Bis, which went to 25 in the UK national singles sales charts in 1996. At that time, Bis were a three-piece Glasgow electro-guitar-pop band, with an average age of eighteen and a strong local following. Their brief mainstream UK national success was a surprise to both band and label. Bis finally disbanded in 2003, reunited briefly under the name Data Panik in mid-2005, then again as Bis in 2008 and 2010.

Partly as a consequence of the exposure to mainstream media that followed the successful Bis release, The Delgados' approach to dealing with the music industry was gradually shifting, and the evolution of Chemikal Underground from vehicle-for-the-band-and-their-friends to serious contender in the global indie-network was rapid. In order both to stay in business and to stay true to their

derground is jointly run by four individuals with a remarkable unity of vision, combined with a clear-headed division of labour.

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original vision for the label, they adopted an ideological strategy that embraced the contradictions of the music industry almost as it dismissed those same contradictions. By doing this, Chemikal Underground seems to have avoided the kinds of problems documented by Stephen Lee (1995) in his work on the Wax Trax label. Lee suggests that the problems for ideologically-driven record label personnel in reconciling their principles with the realities of the music industry can be significant. Those problems for labels like Wax Trax have led to inter-personal conflict and in some cases loss of control of the label to larger companies. This essay looks at the reasons why this has not happened to Chemikal Underground, and will suggest that it is reasonable to describe Chemikal Underground (and other labels in similar situations) as “post-independent.”

Clearly, using the prefix “post-” carries many risks in media and cultural studies, but in this case I mean that Chemikal Underground’s ideological approach to its creative and business activity draws freely and unselfconsciously from orthodox oppositional notions of mainstream and independence. These are combined and redefined in a way that on one hand maintains their commitment to creative independence and on the other allows the label to adopt business practices that will help the band achieve their ambitions of national and international distribution of high quality independent music.

A Few Words on Methodology

The quotes used in this paper come from a September 2000 interview with three of the four owner-managers of Chemikal Underground (Emma Pollock, Paul Savage and Stewart Henderson) at their label offices in the East End of Glasgow. The interview was conducted with all three subjects in the room at the same time, and using a minidisc recorder. Some historical context comes directly from my own anecdotal observation. Other material comes from informal meetings with individual then-members of The Delgados, with other participants in the Glasgow music scene, and from band and label websites. Since the original interview, I have been in regular informal contact with the all of the original participants and I have incorporated minor modifications to my original argument. This article is then very much rooted in an analysis of a particular moment in the history of Chemikal Underground but one that illustrates how early in the life of the label (only five years) an effec-

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tive set of production practices had been developed, underpinned by an innovative ideological approach to notions of independence.

Although I have used the expression “Glasgow music scene,” I have no wish to become involved in an extended discussion of definitions or theory of scenes. Firstly, it would be a distraction from the central argument of this paper, that independent record labels are now working in a new and less ideologically constrictive way. Secondly, because my experience in conferences and seminars over a number of years has been that any attempt to make definitive statements about the nature of scenes is ultimately doomed to failure, or at the very least, doomed to endless dissent and citation of counter-examples of evidence, either empirical or anecdotal. In this essay, what I mean by “Glasgow music scene” is the assemblage of musicians and DJs actively making music in Glasgow, and some of the other key elements, such as performance venues and promoters, as enabling entities for the scene. Other authors have extended definitions of “scene” to include local media (mainstream and alternative) and music fans, but here I really want to focus on the scene as site of primary cultural production.

History and Context: Glasgow, Scotland (1993–2000)

It would be foolish to imagine that I could offer anything here resembling a substantial social history of 1990s Glasgow independent music, but what I hope to do is establish the context out of which Chemikal Underground grew.² In common with scenes in other major urban centres, the Glasgow music scene has experienced ebbs and flows in both local productivity and levels of media coverage. The late 1980s saw Glasgow-based music as being represented at national UK level by the mainstream pop/rock of Deacon Blue, Wet Wet Wet and Texas. This dominated outside perception of Glasgow music, but there has always been (and Glasgow is in no way unique in this) an under-current of more peripheral, alternative music activity. In many ways, this underground scene was stimulated by what it perceived as an intensely conservative, even cynically commercial form of mainstream music-making. Long-standing key participants in this alternative scene include The Pastels and Teenage Fanclub, although it is perhaps more correct to say that

² Readers interested in pre-1994 Scottish rock and pop should attempt to get hold of Brian Hogg’s excellent book (1993), currently out of print.

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both of these bands are from the Glasgow satellite town of Bellshill. Coincidentally, three of the four Delgados are from Hamilton, a neighbouring Lanarkshire town.

With print and broadcast media attention on West of Scotland popular music focused on mainstream artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the alternative scene started to become more active. A key moment was the 1993 opening of The Thirteenth Note café-bar on Glassford Street in central Glasgow. There had been a precursor to this venue, run by the same team, but it was The Thirteenth Note that would become an important focus for local scene productivity, with regular, cheap (often free) gigs, an open-minded booking policy, and a “pub” ambience that was accompanied by vegan food and a selection of European beers. In this sense, The Thirteenth Note was part of a lineage of urban venues associated with the development of particular scenes in rock history. Well-known examples are The Roxy in London, England around 1976 (first wave UK punk), CBGBs in New York, in the mid- to late 1970s (first wave US punk and New Wave), and The Hacienda in Manchester, England, during the late 1980s and early 1990s (rock/dance cross-over and the “baggy/Madchester” scene).

The Thirteenth Note in late 1993 and 1994 was a supportive environment in which bands playing new and original music could play without the costs of promoting their own shows. It also, crucially, provided many social networking opportunities. Of the dozens of bands that played on The Thirteenth Note’s cramped stage in that period, one of the first to be recognised by the national UK music media was Urusei Yatsura. The band’s early self-financed Sonic Youth-esque releases on their own Modern Independent Records (in early 1995) were accompanied by a John Peel BBC Radio 1 Session, and coverage in the UK national specialist music press. As has happened elsewhere, media identification of a “scene” caused problems locally when some bands started to resent being classified alongside contemporaries with whom they had little in common musically, even if they were drinking companions. Indeed, musical diversity was one of the strengths of that scene. Urusei Yatsura’s first releases did something else—it helped other local bands realise that they could themselves release records on their own labels. Urusei Yatsura signed to London-based indie label, Ché Records, beginning an often uncomfortable relationship that ended when Ché went under in 1999. The band split in 2001, after releases on Beg-

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gars Banquet and their own Oni Records. Urusei Yatsura have often made it clear that they believed that many of their problems were a direct result of what they have described as the incompetence of various companies and personnel in the independent music sector. It is perhaps worth noting that it was during this period at The Thirteenth Note that vocalist and guitarist Alex Kapranos, now of Franz Ferdinand, was performing in a band called The Blisters and promoting new band nights, such as The 99p Club and The Kazoo Club. Indeed, the first documentation of Thirteenth Note bands was a 1994 live compilation LP called *The Kazoo Collection*, on Alex's label, Glass Records (or "Glassy," as it appears on the album sleeve artwork).

The original Thirteenth Note closed in 1997, and relocated to King Street in Glasgow, a low-rent area peppered with art galleries and studios. In 2001, the company went into liquidation in controversial circumstances, and the original Thirteenth Note team reopened across the street as Mono, joined later over the next nine years by sister venues Stereo, The 78 and The Flying Duck. The King Street Thirteenth Note still exists as a venue, but under different ownership.

The Delgados and Chemikal Underground

It would be a mistake to try to consider The Delgados (the band) and Chemikal Underground (the record label, often shortened to Chemikal) as separate entities for the first ten years of the label's existence. Throughout the period 1995–2005, the band themselves often had problems separating these roles, and this duality had both good and bad consequences, some of which I will consider later in this section. What I want to do here is to address some key moments in the history of the label and the band, and use appropriate quotes from the interview to illustrate my points.

The Delgados were a four-piece guitar-led, independent pop/rock band whose line-up was Emma Pollock (guitar and vocals), Paul Savage (drums and production), Alun Woodward (guitar and vocals) and Stuart Henderson (bass). They have released five full-length Delgados albums: *Domestiques* (1996), *Peloton* (1998), *The Great Eastern* (2000), *Hate* (2002) and *Universal Audio* (2004).

By 2010, the number of releases on Chemikal Underground was over 140 and includes material from Arab Strap, Aereogramme, Radar Brothers, Zoey Van Goey, and The Phantom Band. Be-

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tween 2000 and 2003, Chemikal launched fukd id as an imprint for one-off releases by mostly non-Chemikal artists, including the first UK release by New York band, Interpol.

Back in 1994, the first few Thirteenth Note gigs by The Delgados rapidly led to a decision within the band to take making music more seriously and to set up a record label that would do two things. Firstly, it would allow the band to put out their own material without any creative or financial interference from outside the band. Secondly, they could put out records by other bands that were starting to emerge from the Thirteenth Note scene. From the very beginnings of Chemikal Underground, there was an indication that the label was combining two approaches to the business of releasing independent records. The first approach was the indie cottage industry Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach. The first significant UK manifestation of this was in the 1977 release of Manchester punk band, Buzzcocks' first seven-inch vinyl EP, *Spiral Scratch*. Emma, for example, described how she worked out how to prepare the camera-ready copy for the picture bag of the first Chemikal seven-inch release by pulling apart another band's single cover and making a template.

This contrasts with The Delgados' early attitude to the process of getting records into retail outlets.

We wanted to make sure [the first single] would get all over the country. [We thought] "if we don't get a distribution deal, we should just pack it in" (Paul).

There was a clear understanding of the mechanism of the music industry *before* the first single was actually released. The band knew that "driving around Scotland with a box of singles in the car" wasn't a realistic option for an ambitious label. The original Chemikal Underground plan had been to release only seven-inch vinyl singles or EPs—a strong signifier of indie authenticity—but by the time the third release came around, CD had become an acceptable Chemikal Underground release format. This was an early acknowledgement that in order to reach the biggest possible audience, ideological constrictions would have to be reconsidered and re-evaluated.

Early releases from several bands on Chemikal Underground were often referred to in print media reviews as "lo-fi" (low fidelity), a description that irritated The Delgados.

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We made records like that because that was all we had . . . all the tools we had at the time (Paul).

I've never heard the expression "lo-fi" used without any form of derogatory undertones. "Lo-fi" seems to be synonymous with . . . wilful degrading of sound [quality] to sound more raw (Stuart).

The band's early rejection of "lo-fi" as a signifier of authenticity gives some indication of their progressive attitude to the business of making music. For me, this suggests that Chemikal Underground has, from very early on in its existence, attempted to transcend the traditional constrictions and conventions of "indie" music.

Chemikal Underground's third release on vinyl (and the first on CD), *The Secret Vampire Soundtrack* EP by Bis, was a significant moment—the record sold around 30,000 copies, made it into the UK mainstream singles sales chart, and marked a watershed for the label. The most immediate consequence of the Bis record was an influx of cash that was invested back into the label, financing The Delgados' first album, and allowing Chemikal to sign other artists. The sales of *Secret Vampire* also foreshadowed a recurring problem for The Delgados—how could they balance their own creative activity as a band with the demands of time made on them by running a successful independent label? Alongside the continuing frustration of being seen as "lo-fi" artists, Paul, Emma, Stuart and Alun found it increasingly difficult to avoid the conclusion that journalists were often more interested in the label, or the other bands on the label than in The Delgados.

In common with a number of other labels, Chemikal Underground has been driven by the success of key records—the *Secret Vampire* EP being the first of these.³ The success of that record also brought the label its first experience of having a high media profile, with the associated need to set up and negotiate interviews for print media and television. The former Delgados admit that the learning curve was steep, but also that it made them reconsider some of their notions of what "independence" might be.

³ On a number of occasions, including in a BBC broadcast interview with the author of this paper, Scottish entrepreneur Alan McGee has identified key signings and releases as pivotal points in what was then (mid-1980s to mid-1990s) his record label, Creation. The most obvious of these were the first single by The Jesus and Mary Chain, the massive success of Primal Scream's *Screamadelica* album, and the signing of Oasis.

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Despite a majority of Chemikal Underground's releases to date being independent pop and rock, the label's approach to achieving success and financial reward seems more like that of UK independent dance labels, where success and money are actively pursued without accompanying accusations of "selling out." Chemikal Underground has been happy to adopt (and adapt) some of the marketing and sales strategies of major labels, if that means they can sell more records.

What right do I have to sit here and have a go at Sony? They sell shitloads more records than we do and they know how to do it. So [therefore] we might employ some of the same tactics, but with better bands (Paul).

I think there's a middle ground between employing [those] tactics, not all of them clean, and sticking to a hard and fast independent ethic. I get tired of the argument, because you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. If you stick to your independent roots, you're unambitious. If you do it the other way, you're a capitalist pig. We're trying to run a record company that releases records that succeed. I don't feel the need to apologise for this. We're in this business to sell records so that people can buy that music and it can touch their lives in whatever way it happens to do (Stuart).

Stuart unambiguously articulates the inherent contradictions of "indie" ideology, but also indicates that Chemikal Underground sees itself as beyond that conflict and is implicitly creating a new approach.

Many independent labels fail, but one of the reasons that Chemikal Underground is an on-going success in 2010 is the democratic and collective structure of the day-to-day running of the label. There is a clear and equitable division of labour amongst the four core personnel, and a consensus approach to decision-making. Another reason has been the dualism of being (and later having been) in a band and running a label. All four owner-managers of Chemikal were, and are actively involved in both activities, and all of them confirm that there are two clear benefits to this: firstly, they all know exactly what it's like to be in a band, and can normally see issues from the perspective of another band.

Being The Delgados is . . . important. When we sit down and talk to a band, they know we are talking from an artist point of view, as well as from a record company point of view. They know we're telling the truth (Emma).

There are still problems with the amount of time that the label absorbs, time that the band sometimes felt could have been better spent on The Delgados:

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It's absolutely appalling the amount of time I don't spend writing songs. It [writing songs] shouldn't be like exam revision (Emma).

At the time of these interviews (September 2000), those tensions were particularly clear. The time taken to deal with the increased media and public interest in The Delgados' Mercury Music Prize nominated album, *The Great Eastern* (1999), meant that the band was spending considerably less time doing what bands do: writing, playing live and recording. Emma's comments reflect a song-writing regime that had become so regimented and limited as to be no longer enjoyable.

Secondly, and more positively, the involvement of all members of the band had tended to ensure things get done at the label.

The fact that there're four is very important. You want to make sure you're not the one that's letting the side down—with four you'll always have the drive forward (Emma).

I know people who run labels on their own and often they're not selling [many] records. After about a year [of that], the brain numbing paperwork and administration gets on top of you, and people give up (Stuart).

This form of collectivism isn't rooted in political ideology. In the case of Chemikal Underground, some of the same outward appearances of collective organisation are in fact driven by a much more pragmatic approach to solving problems and ensuring the continuing survival of the label.

One problem the band clearly identified in late 2000 was a perception that to be "independent" was neither fashionable nor good for business.

I feel we're in a time where it's not in vogue to be independent (Stuart).

I think the music industry is more aggressive than it's ever been. It's much harder [for us] to sell records now [than earlier in the label's history]. Chain retailers are getting more reluctant to deal with independent labels (Emma).

In my original 2001 conclusion to this section, I noted the rapidly developing profile of US independent artists like The White Stripes, and speculated that this might result in a resurgence of British independent music. Arguably, this has happened, with a 2004 Mercury Music Prize win for Franz Ferdinand, and a 2005 Mercury Prize shortlist dominated by "independent" bands including Bloc Party, Kaiser Chiefs, Maximo Park, The Magic Numbers and The Go! Team. Unfortunately for The Delgados, the change in the pop

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cultural climate did not result in sufficient album sales to justify their continued existence as a band. However, the financial situation for Chemikal Underground remains stable, and the label remains committed to new, independent music. Many of those in the 2004-5 wave of independent artists and labels used mainstream industry strategies in marketing and branding their artists—Franz Ferdinand’s UK label, Domino is a good example. Nevertheless, I would continue to argue that the Chemikal Underground model is sufficiently different to justify describing the label as one of the first that could be legitimately described as “post-independent.”

Summary and Conclusion

Chemikal Underground have developed a way of thinking about what they do that allows them to understand themselves as both independent and also to be comfortable with the notion of selling larger numbers of records, using more mainstream music industry strategies to help achieve those sales.

The band/label duality that has supported both entities for the first ten years (1995-2005) of Chemikal Underground has had both positive and negative effects, but with advantages outweighing the problems. Positively, as a label *and* a band, Stewart, Emma, Alun and Paul have been able to communicate with other bands in terms that musicians understand, and have achieved levels of mutual respect that might not otherwise have been possible. Sales of Delgados records have helped to support the label and made it possible to sign more artists. However, during those first ten years, that same band/label duality generated tensions in making decisions about how to allocate resources to band and label.

The label is run using a non-politically ideological form of collectivism, where all four former Delgados are actively involved in running the label. I argue here that this democratically shared responsibility has played a significant part in ensuring the survival and continued success of the label.

Chemikal Underground has drawn from several ideologically distinct models of commerce and creativity in order to generate a workable and convincing notion of independence. I suggest therefore that Chemikal Underground records can only truly be understood as a post-independent label.

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