

# Drumming up business

POP MUSIC: Local musician John Kirtland finds his tempo after founding record label

12:00 AM CST on Thursday, January 5, 2006  
By MARIO TARRADELL / The Dallas Morning News

John Kirtland watches the bustle of downtown Dallas from his office 41 floors above Elm Street as a Cars LP plays on a turntable nearby. A vinyl album in today's all-tech world? "Hey, this is a record label," he says casually. An independent record label, at that. In 2003, after years of playing drums for the now-defunct local band Deep Blue Something, Mr. Kirtland founded his own, self-titled label. His creative inspiration then and now is fellow indie imprints Wind-Up, Roadrunner and Epitaph, progressive-minded rock labels that strategically launched million-selling national bands Creed, Evanescence, Nickelback and Offspring.



John Kirtland quit beating the drums for the band Deep Blue Something and began making noise about the artists who record for Kirtland Records, the independent label he established.

"Just kind of looking at what's happening with the industry," he says, "I really wanted to – within a few years, and I knew it would take maybe as long as three or four years to get there – put together a team of people and operate like a Wind-Up or a Roadrunner or an Epitaph, record companies with 15-person staffs who are able to release a record locally, regionally or compete at a national level."

The personnel's in place: six employees in Dallas, three in Los Angeles and three radio-promotions veterans scattered across the country. Mr. Kirtland, 35, also has a solid stable of burgeoning artists, namely arena rockers the Burden Brothers; pop-rock ensemble Pat McGee Band; newcomers Brill, whose sound combines Radiohead's distorted emotionalism with U2's soaring structure; and young emo-rock band the Hourly Radio. He has even secured national distribution through industry powerhouse RED. Since its inception, 18 CDs and three DVDs have been released by Kirtland Records.

But what about the future? Clearly, the recording industry continues to lag in a mammoth commercial slump. Last year's CD sales, usually a record label's primary source of income, were down 9.1 percent from 2004, according to Nielsen SoundScan. And music buyers increasingly want individual songs these days, not full albums. In 2005, Americans downloaded 333 million tunes from online merchants,

more than double 2004's total of 134 million.

Conventional wisdom suggests that operating an independent label in this climate, particularly one still cementing its reputation, hardly makes sense.

Mr. Kirtland is keenly aware of the obstacles, and he's not worried. Since he has been in a band, he understands the artists' standpoint. That explains the forward-thinking business partnerships he has with most of the bands.

He's also savvy enough to recognize the value of owning a once-lucrative catalog. Mr. Kirtland acquired the rights to the first four CDs by multimillion-selling grunge rockers Bush. Plus, the no-suit-and-tie label owner thinks big and spends small. "What we are trying to do is change with the times, be smarter and faster and quicker," says Mr. Kirtland. "The big elephants that are the major labels are having a hard time adjusting to the new landscape. People, especially young people, can get music easily and sometimes free."

So he doesn't bank on just selling the actual compact disc. He has drafted multi-layered contracts with many of his artists. With Brill, for example, Kirtland shares merchandising responsibilities. The company is involved in the manufacturing of T-shirts, hats and other items the band sells on the road and through its Web site. With the Pat McGee Band, the two parties share merchandising and management duties. With the Burden Brothers, there's also a management relationship.

Such multitiered contracts resemble Korn's fresh deal with Virgin Records, which partners with the mega-selling metal rockers on touring, music publishing, merchandising and sponsorship, according to a recent Billboard.com story.

"We got the best of what we wanted, and they got the best of what they wanted," says Vaden Todd Lewis, lead singer of the Burden Brothers, a band comprising two former Toadies members.

## 'SWEET DEAL'

The Burden Brothers' Kirtland debut, 2003's *Buried in Your Black Heart*, is closing in on the 100,000 sales mark, according to the label. "We have national distribution and a radio team they hired. These days, a major will hire those people anyway and then take 90 percent of your gross. We have a sweet deal. It's a gamble, like anything, but we feel really good about it. We feel like they are honest and forthright."

Not to mention smart. After the demise of Deep Blue Something, which toured the country supporting its 1995 pop hit "Breakfast at Tiffany's" and its accompanying, gold-selling album *Home*, Mr. Kirtland spent time playing with the big boys in the major-label rat race.

He worked with Trauma Records, the one-time fledgling label that launched Bush and No Doubt through a joint venture with industry goliath Interscope. When Rob Kahane, president of Trauma, ran into financial straits, Mr. Kirtland lent him money under the stipulation that if Mr. Kahane defaulted, Mr. Kirtland would acquire the rights to the Bush catalog and royalties on sales of No Doubt's *Tragic Kingdom* and The Singles 1992-2003 CDs.

"He defaulted, and I exercised my rights to get the catalog and ended up with pay dirt."

Mr. Kirtland promptly sold his royalty rights to the No Doubt discs but kept the Bush CDs and snagged a distribution agreement with RED. Bush's commercial heyday is over; the band hit its stride with 1994's 6 million-selling *Sixteen Stone* and its follow-up, 1996's *Razorblade Suitcase*, which sold 3 million copies. But for a small label such as Kirtland, having those records in its bag of goodies provides clout.

"We got the attention of the distributor," he said. "I'm trying to use that cash flow and that leverage with the distributor to find great music, good people and true artists and make a difference."

Yet Mr. Kirtland has done more with the Bush connection than simply reissue those first four albums. In November, Kirtland released *Zen X Four*, a CD/DVD package containing live concert recordings and all of the band's hit videos. The label shipped 80,000 copies to stores all over the United States; 5,500 sold the first week of release without any marketing fanfare.

## BUSH REUNION

According to Mr. Kirtland, Bush is not defunct. In fact, as soon as Bush lead singer Gavin Rossdale wraps up work with his side-project band, *Institute*, the four members will reunite to record two new songs to be included in a greatest-hits disc Kirtland should release sometime this year.

Still, Bush represents the past, and staying current in today's ever-changing musical landscape is paramount. Music by Kirtland Records artists can be legally downloaded from iTunes and many other online merchants.

Video, of course, is important in such an image-conscious business. But there's no need to spend hundreds of thousands on clips. Bril's moody conceptual video for "Far Away" cost a mere \$27,000. The Burden Brothers' "Shadow" clip came in at \$30,000. The video for Dallas quartet the Hourly Radio's "Fear of Standing Upright" rang up for just \$1,000.

"We can spend money smarter and wiser," says Tami Thomsen, Kirtland's head of marketing and publicity. "You don't have to spend a million dollars to record a record or a million dollars to make a video."

Kirtland Records' most powerful weapon could very well be its owner. Mr. Kirtland's experience as a member of Deep Blue Something gives him insight about the label's potentially lucrative assets – its artists.

And he's self-aware enough to realize that being a former musician doesn't give him the expertise to run a label. So he hired Los Angeles-based Dave Darus as the imprint's president. Mr. Darus, who handles the day-to-day management, was head of promotion for Interscope in the early '90s and in 1995 took that same position with Island Records.

"Dave has a lot of experience that we're benefiting from," says Ms. Thomsen, "John has experiences and things that Dave doesn't have. John has been the guy in a van on the

road playing for 50 bucks. He's also been the guy with a million-selling record that's toured Asia, that's toured Europe. And so the combination of those two, and those two working on really equal levels, is what makes us unique."

## DALLAS HUB

Having Dallas as headquarters isn't exactly the norm, either. Sure, Kirtland Records has a Los Angeles office, but that's more out of necessity because Mr. Darus lives there. Dallas is undoubtedly Kirtland Records' hub. A few steps from Mr. Kirtland's office is a small recording studio equipped with a high-tech essential, Pro Tools software. The Pat McGee Band's upcoming live CD/DVD package was edited and mixed there. Tracks for *Rambler High* and *Hourly Radio* were recorded there as well.

For Mr. Kirtland, setting up shop in Dallas was a no-brainer. Although he grew up in Austin, he attended the University of North Texas and immediately became immersed in the local music scene. He met his Deep Blue Something bandmates in Denton. Together they released four CDs, 1993's *11th Song*, 1995's *Home*, 1996's *Byzantium* (only released overseas) and 2001's *Deep Blue Something*.

"I've been here for a decade, family here," he says. "There's a great music scene here, a great art scene here, culture, sports teams. It's not like we're devoid of entertainment and art and things to do and places to see."

Ms. Thomsen promptly joins in, mentioning independent labels such as Saddle Creek, based in Omaha, Neb., and Victory Records, which operates from Chicago. She even tosses in American Gramophone, also in Omaha and home to one-man new-age instrumental pop guru Chip Davis and his Mannheim Steamroller empire.

"There are countless examples of it," she says. "... I don't feel like we're stuck in the 18th century 'cause we're in Dallas."

Kirtland's in the 21st century, for sure, although occasionally the label tips its hat to the 20th century. Among the releases for 2006 – which include Bril's *Airless Alarm* disc in February, the Pat McGee Band live CD/DVD combo in March and a new Burden Brothers CD tentatively scheduled for late spring – is a 7-inch vinyl single from the Hourly Radio. It's all part of the label's philosophy of carefully putting out and promoting music that's handpicked, not mass-produced.

"Unlike the major labels who are going to bank everything on one act, we're going to be very smart on how we do that," says Mr. Kirtland. "I'm not content where we are, but I'm very positive about the machine that is Kirtland Records, meaning the promotion and the marketing and the sales and the president... and how this team is growing and evolving. We're getting better as a company."

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