



The Sub Pop Story!

It was Soundgarden that brought Sub Pop label chiefs Bruce Pavitt and Jonathan Poneman together in Seattle in 1987.

Poneman, a music promoter and DJ on public radio station KCMU, was a quiet observer, thoughtful, analytical, Pavitt says. By contrast, Pavitt wore his passion for Northwest rock and punk on his sleeve. "There was always something on the tip of his tongue that he was enthusiastic about," according to Mark Arm, singer and guitarist for the Sub Pop bands Mudhoney, Green River and the Monkeywrench.

At that point, Pavitt had already been using the name Sub Pop for various projects: a fanzine and cassette series, his own radio show on KCMU, and a column in the local music paper *The Rocket*. He'd also released an album called *Sub Pop 100* that included indie groups like Sonic Youth as well as Northwest punk bands the Wipers and the U-Men. Poneman offered to finance *Screaming Life* by hard rockers Soundgarden, and he and Pavitt became partners in Sub Pop. They quit their day jobs, and on April 1, 1988 they moved into a tiny office in Seattle's Terminal Sales Building. They stacked boxes of records around the toilet.

From their earliest days together, the pair spoke publicly about "world domination." Of course it was largely a goof. Sub Pop, after all, hailed from Seattle. In the late 1980s, Microsoft had yet to conquer the world's computers, and Starbucks had not yet opened on every corner. Seattle was the rain-soaked backwater to most of the country, and to the music industry in particular.

That said, Pavitt and Poneman were serious about creating a brand for the label that would rival classics like Motown or Blue Note. Many of their early releases featured a uniform look: a black bar across the top, with the band's name in all capital letters, followed by the release name, all in a sans-serif font. Many of those early records also featured the iconic, action-packed rock photography of Charles Peterson.

Credits for the albums and singles often listed only Peterson and producer Jack Endino. Paring down the text, Pavitt says, pumped up the visceral connection to the records, added a sense of mystery, and branded Peterson and Endino as Sub Pop's house photographer and producer.

And then there was the logo. "That logo was a large reason of why I wanted to work with Bruce," Poneman says. Evolving over time through use in Pavitt's *Rocket* column and on *Sub Pop 100*, the mark was another key ingredient in creating an image for the label. Stark, simple, with a white-on-black "SUB" stacked above the black-on-white "POP," the logo lent itself to reproduction on the tiniest CD spine to the largest poster. In the early days, shirts with the logo outsold Sub Pop's records.

"We learned early on that probably the best way we could spend promotional money was to make a profit having other people wear our logo," Pavitt says.

Indeed, relentless branding was the Sub Pop approach. At the time, 7-inch vinyl singles were the hip currency in punk. Issuing them in limited runs made them instantly coveted, and encouraged word-of-mouth interest in Sub Pop. But it also bred frustration when fans found the singles immediately sold out at record shops. From this conundrum came the Sub Pop Singles Club: fans subscribed to a series of monthly, limited-release 7-inches. The label got paid up front, fans got rare vinyl by mail, and excitement moved through the underground about that label from Seattle.

While courting devoted fans, Sub Pop also courted the press, and the British music press in particular. UK outlets such as *Melody Maker* and the *New Music Express* were given to hyperbolic fawning, which suited Sub Pop's own exaggerated marketing. In March 1989, the label paid to put *Melody Maker's* Everett True on a Seattle-bound plane to come soak up the scene. His excited report back, "Seattle: Rock City" whet European appetites for all



things Northwest, including Seattle's pared-down punk and metal hybrid known as grunge rock.

Three months later, Sub Pop released *Bleach*, the first album by Nirvana. Although the album was not an immediate hit, it generated big buzz in American indie circles. Tastemaker Thurston Moore from Sonic Youth offered props to both Nirvana and Mudhoney in interviews. Bands that once drew 100 hipsters to Seattle clubs were now selling out the city's Moore Theater. Meanwhile, Sub Pop released records by heavy rockers Tad, the universally offensive Dwarves, and feminist badasses L7, among scores of others.

Unfortunately, while Sub Pop was awash in artistic success it was also awash in financial trouble. The short story: hyping bands into the stratosphere costs lots of money. The long explanation involves unwise spending on meals and travel, through-the-ceiling legal bills as Pavitt and Poneman entered discussions with major labels, and an unprofitable distribution business.

Layoffs began in the spring of 1991. Eventually the company dropped from a staff of 25 to a crew of 5. "When you were in the office, you felt the stress, the financial pressure," said Megan Jasper, who began at Sub Pop as a receptionist in 1989, and who today holds the vice president's seat. "But in the outside world everybody thought that Sub Pop had more money than the company could handle. And that was because of the way everything was being marketed at the time."

Eventually the word was out. *The Rocket* and *Seattle Weekly* ran stories predicting the label's demise. Musicians were heard at gigs shouting rumors that Tad's checks from Sub Pop bounced.

Paradoxically, Nirvana both rescued the label and set the stage for even more difficult years in the latter part of the decade. With its second album, *Nevermind*, Nirvana left Sub Pop and moved to the major record label Geffen/DGC. Within nine months of its September 1991 release, *Nevermind* had sold 4 million copies. Sub Pop received a buyout on Nirvana's contract, plus royalties on future albums, and that income helped pull the label out of the red and into the black.

Of course, *Nevermind* also made grunge a household word and put flannel shirts and Dr. Martens boots on fashion runways and in JC Pennys. By this point, major labels had been scoping out Seattle bands for a few years. When Nirvana brought alternative music into the multi-platinum mainstream, the majors looked harder, looked wider, and offered more money for bands to sign on the dotted line. Suddenly Sub Pop was competing not only with other indie labels for new talent, but with the majors as well.

With so much corporate cash floating around, artists demanded bigger advances, larger budgets, more support, even from independents. Pavitt recalls one band's story as typical of the times: "I was told by our head A&R person that they would be happy with a \$5,000 advance. Two months later, we were giving them a check for \$150,000."

In January 1995, Sub Pop completed a deal with Warner Bros. In return for an infusion of cash, Warners received 49 percent of Sub Pop. While the money helped Sub Pop compete on the post-Nirvana landscape, it also led to changes that were foreign to the label's culture. Poneman points to a number of mistakes that followed the Warners deal. Sub Pop opened satellite offices in Toronto and Boston, spent too much money on band advances, restricted its A&R policy for finding new artists, and established contracts with all employees. Later in the year, Pavitt left day-to-day operations at the label he founded to raise his family in the northern islands of Puget Sound.

There were, of course, high points during these middle years. Sub Pop issued early albums by The Go (whose Jack White was also starting up a band called the White Stripes) and Zumpano (led by Carl Newman, who would later lead the New Pornographers). Meanwhile, Sub Pop played the role of rock historian, notably issuing a



compilation by influential Australian punks Radio Birdman and underscoring Americana's debt to the Boss with *Badlands: A Tribute to Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska* (SP525).

It would be overstating the case to call Sub Pop's poor business choices in the late 1990s a mixed blessing. Nonetheless, righting the ship from those years did set the label up to thrive in the new century as the music industry struggled in the face of a shift to digital distribution.

"You can't buy your way out of certain problems," Poneman says. "You need to go back to your mission." And that mission had always been world domination—or, to put it in more realistic terms, uncovering artists and bringing them to the world.

The third wave in Sub Pop's history broke with the June 2001 release of The Shins' retro-sounding *Oh, Inverted World* (SP550). The album registered immediately with hip cognoscenti, but The Shins shot onto the mainstream radar when two of their songs were used on the *Garden State* (2004) soundtrack.

Hit indie-pop albums by The Postal Service and Hot Hot Heat followed, along with a string of modern folk discs by Iron & Wine and rootsy rock from Band of Horses. Sub Pop even moved into (intentional) comedy with a Grammy-nominated set from David Cross and a Grammy-winning release from Flight of the Conchords, among others.

It's not as if the label has abandoned its underground roots. Mudhoney, after all, continue to put out discs on Sub Pop. (And truth be told, grunge wasn't Sub Pop's sole focus even in the early years.) Still, there is a sense of being able to breathe more freely now that bright cultural spotlight has moved on from the Emerald City and alternative rock.

"New clubs open, new people move to town," Jasper says. "You find your place in it and start caring about other things. At some point you feel like that outsized attention is behind you."

Oddly enough, the label that itself claimed to have its sights set on world domination has found its new footing in responsibility. Outrageous advances for bands and videos have been scrapped. Sub Pop works to make its bands as self-sufficient as possible. Tours are designed to make money, rather than be artificially buoyed by the label. Realistic recording budgets are set so bands have a chance to earn royalties even on modest sales. Meanwhile, Sub Pop has taken advantage of the opportunity for cheap promotion made possible with the proliferation of ways to hear new music online—too commonly perceived only as the 21st century scourge of record labels.

In 2007, Sub Pop launched a small imprint called Hardly Art with an eye toward exploring territory outside the traditional music industry business model. Instead of bands earning royalties, they split profits with the label. Bands own their master recordings and license them for release to Hardly Art. And all deals are one-offs rather than standard multi-album contracts.

As Sub Pop moves into its third decade, Poneman describes the label's history as "Innocence, innocence lost, innocence regained." Sure, it's a joke (how naïve is any label that, at the depths of its financial woes, printed up shirts reading "What part of 'We don't have any money' don't you understand?"). But there is a grain of truth in there.

Sub Pop at 20 approaches its goals the same way a pair of enterprising kids would have thought about Soundgarden and Nirvana two decades ago.

"We react solely from a place of, 'This is fucking great,'" Poneman says. "The world may react differently, but we start from the premise of, 'This rules.'"



In the late '80s and early '90s, Bruce Pavitt and Jonathan Poneman distilled the brains, hard work, imagination and entrepreneurial spirit of the '80s American underground into a cultural phenomenon called Sub Pop. Thanks to brilliant hype and great bands, Sub Pop became a regional powerhouse, a reminder that New York and LA hardly held a monopoly on creative genius, putting Seattle on the map as effectively as other corporations thousands of times their size. But the most amazing thing is that 20 years and a few miraculous comebacks later, Sub Pop is releasing its best records ever—and that's really saying something.

—**Michael Azerrad, author of *Our Band Could Be Your Life***

As a Northwest local, a young entrepreneur, and a music fan, I think Sub Pop is a paragon of the indie label rising up to champion artists that otherwise wouldn't have been given a chance while remaining well-rounded and dedicated to good taste and eye-catching graphic design. Also, Bruce Pavitt is my dad.

—**Iris Pavitt, age 14 (SP217)**

Hard to believe its been 20+ years since Kim (Thayil), myself and some friends set up an assembly line in Bruce's apartment, packing and hand addressing that beautiful LP box—*Sub Pop 200*. Nothing but possibility lay before us and look what happened. Bruce and Jonathan's vision helped define a cultural movement.

—**Susan Silver, manager for Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, The U-Men.**