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Digital underground

Burbank's new Feudal Records seeks to capitalize on the online music revolution

By **André Coleman**



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FATHERS' FOLLIES

In the summer of 1991, Robert Shahnazarian reached an amazing crossroads in his life. Then 19 years old, the keyboard player had cut a demo with his band, The House, and spent a semester abroad in London through a program at Pepperdine University.

His efforts pursuing music paid off when he finally got a phone meeting with entertainment executive Miles Copeland, brother of former Police drummer Stewart Copeland.

"It was a very short, blunt conversation," says Shahnazarian. "He asked me, 'What do you want to do?'"

For several seconds Shahnazarian tried to think of an answer to the question and before he could speak Copeland responded. "When you figure out what you want to do give me a call," said Copeland as he hung up the phone.

Seventeen years later, the 36-year-old producer has started Feudal Records out of his home in Burbank. Modeled after Sun Records, the legendary label that launched the careers of Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley, Feudal has a simple, but effective credo: Sign exceptionally unique artists, produce great records, and release them to the public.

"Sam Phillips (the founder of Sun Records) found compelling artists," says Shahnazarian, "and quickly turned the music around and put it out. With all the resources we have now, with home studios we are back to the '50s again: We can cut it (the demo) on Saturday and have it out on Monday."

And with the current revolution in distribution, where music is streamed on MySpace pages and other social networks, millions could be listening at any time.

While most recording experts are complaining about the impact of digital downloads on the industry, Robert Shahnazarian is going in the opposite direction.

Instead of maintaining the high overhead costs of a production and recording studio, Shahnazarian is embracing the online revolution.

"I am a producer and I can make music. I just keep my overhead low," says Shahnazarian. With modern editing equipment such as

Local dads dress in drag for the annual PTA fundraiser

Pro Tools, everything can be modular. Studios can be rented out weekly if the production requires it. “I don't have to have 20,000 CDs in my garage. iTunes is the number one music store in the country. If I align myself with the right bands we have a shot.”

Shahnazarian says he's learned that very few artists buy their music in the traditional way anymore. “They all get it online. Whether it's streaming or downloading; the genie is out of the bottle. If you have something compelling to follow it, you can compete with the majors.”

Last year Shahnazarian signed Orka Veer. The electronic artist developed a cult following after his 2005 album Sam's Solution was downloaded 100,000 times.

Since that time, the album has been remastered and released online. After being out nearly a year it's ranked 72,000 on Amazon, which is not bad, considering Amazon's rankings go as high as four million.

“I had always been hesitant about signing with a label. I wanted to stay independent,” says Orka Veer (whose real name is Michael McCarthy). “But once I got to know Robert, we really established some trust and I could see he was going to hold my best interest highly. It was an opportunity I could not pass up.”

“I used to give my music away completely free on the Internet. I have used it as a major tool,” adds Veer. “We can see online artists emerging. New technology has a way of setting the pace. It's just a matter of time. Once the older generation is gone and the iTunes generation is older it will be interesting to see how music is distributed. I am open to go with the flow.”

Shahnazarian grew up in Palm Springs. He and his wife Margrit have two boys: Christian, 9, and Dvean, 8. He began his career in 1993 as an intern at Capitol Records while also playing with his band in college, which no one was going to see. His grades were taking a nosedive and he heard Capitol was looking for interns so he decided to give it a shot. They loved his resumé, but there was just one problem. You had to be a junior to enter the intern program and Shahnazarian was only a sophomore.

“I wouldn't take no for an answer,” says Shahnazarian. “I pleaded and they gave me a shot in the International Marketing Department. I still had hopes of being an artist.”

After graduating from Pepperdine University with a degree in international relations, he landed his first job in the legal

department at Sony Music, where he learned about artist agreements and contracts. On the weekends he worked on the KCRW-FM program Café LA. In 1997 he designed an in-house production studio in the A&R (Artists and Repertoire) department at Columbia Records, occasionally performing on keyboards in pre-/post-production work with artists and editing their demos. Six years later, he moved into space formerly occupied by Sony Studios in Santa Monica and began working with all the artists on SonyBMG's labels. He also began producing "exclusive" sessions for the Live from the Connect Living-Room series, created by Ty Braswell and Neil Schield.

Since his career began he has produced more than 350 sessions for Sony Connect — some with big name artists like Incubus, John Legend, Kelly Clarkson, Plain White T's, The Killers, Snow Patrol, Keane and Sara Bareilles.

It's all of that experience that makes his label more than just another start-up, and Shahnazarian has produced some great cuts.

It's easy to get lost in the music of Feudal Records. "Mother's Pride" by Therese Neaime, a soft haunting cut about a boy becoming a soldier, is one of those songs you can lose yourself in as you sit in a dark room. Neaime's voice trembles in all the right places. Like "Mother's Pride," the electro-pop sound of "Doctor" by The Library or the tragic computer tones of Orka Veer may not be the stuff you can find on today's radio, which is packed with the same 40 songs by the same 40 artists on stations owned by the

same five corporations.

Most of the songs on the Feudal site are demos waiting to be mastered, but the talent shines through.

"Robert is a small label, we have been getting a lot of great attention from him," says Court Alexander, lead singer of The Library. "It's like a mom-and-pop business and we feel like we are part of the family. We have recorded most of our first album in his house."

"It's great working with Robert. He has a lot of expertise in producing," adds Alexander. "He lets us have a lot of input. He believes in our artistry and respects what we have. He doesn't get in the way of our vision. In this business, certain producers have an idea of what they want you to sound like and how they want

you to come across. We want something we can listen to years down the line and say, 'Wow that was a great record.'"

Shahnazarian usually travels between Hollywood's Westlake Studios, where Michael Jackson recorded his legendary Thriller album, North Hollywood's Bill Schnee Studio and his home studio in Burbank to record the music.

Shahnazarian sees producing as a collaborative effort between himself and the artist in an environment with no egos or distractions.

Somebody get Copeland on the phone, Shahnazarian finally has it figured out. ●

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