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Merge Records defies everything you've heard about the music business. Started by two twenty-year-old musicians, Merge is a lesson in how to make and market great music on a human scale. The fact that the company is prospering in a failing industry is something of a miracle. Yet two of their bands made the Billboard Top 10 list; more than 1 million copies of Arcade Fire's *Neon Bible* have been sold; Spoon has appeared on *Saturday Night Live* and *The Tonight Show*; and the Magnetic Fields' *69 Love Songs* is a contemporary classic.

In celebration of their twentieth anniversary, founders Mac and Laura offer first-person accounts—with the help of their colleagues and Merge artists—of their work, their lives, and the culture of making music. *Our Noise* also tells the behind-the-scenes stories of Arcade Fire, Spoon, the Magnetic Fields, Superchunk, Lambchop, Neutral Milk Hotel, and Butterglory. Hundreds of personal photos of the bands, along with album cover art, concert posters, and other memorabilia are included.

Our Noise: The Story of Merge Records, the Indie Label That Got Big and Stayed Small Details

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From Reader Review *Our Noise: The Story of Merge Records, the Indie Label That Got Big and Stayed Small* for online ebook

Duke Haney says

Does this book really rate five stars? Probably not, but I did wolf it down, being the indie-music freak, stuck in the nineties, that I am. I've been revisiting Superchunk, Buttermilk, Polvo, Seaweed, etc., since I finished *Our Noise*, and I'm once again crushing on Laura, while feeling all "Gosh, what a swell guy" about Mac. One thing that especially caught my interest in the book was Merge's take on the defection of ...And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead to Interscope in 2000 or so. I knew ToD, and I have to say I thought they were making a mistake, but when the CEO of a huge label is flying his personal jet to Texas to see your ass after reading about you in -- what magazine was it? *Vanity Fair*? -- and baiting you with memories of Lennon in the studio and that kind of shit, well, I guess it's hard to resist.

Byron says

This was co-written by the founders of Merge Records, so who knows how true any of it is, but it seems very true. It's surprisingly candid about the business of running an independent record label, and it's one of the most interesting things I've ever read in that particular regard. It loses points because the story of Superchunk, the main band on Merge and the topic of at least like half of this book, is the least interesting story of a rock band possible (they're literally accountants who rock out in their spare time), and because there's a lot of great albums on Merge that go almost completely unmentioned. You learn more about Buttermilk than his own parents know about him, and literally nothing at all about Destroyer's Rubies. Priorities fail.

Ginna says

Skipped around a bit in this one. Probably would not have stumbled upon it except for my Rockstar bookclub, but glad to know more about one of my downtown neighbors. Pretty cool that some friends helped put this book together. Because I missed out on a lot of these bands' glory days by being out of the Triangle or just on the periphery of any kind of music scene (I DJ'd @WXDU for a year & saw some of the MERGE albums come through the playlist), I wasn't invested in most of the band stories. However, it was fun to see how the label came together & struggled, & I loved reading about the Magnetic Fields & Arcade Fire & Lambchop.

Ben Sweezy says

This book is full of stories about Superchunk becoming Merge Records, and then great chapters on Neutral Milk Hotel, Magnetic Fields, Spoon, and Arcade Fire.

I love it because the whole premise of the book is relating all of those artists and the musical movements that they grew out of back to Chapel Hill. The story of Arcade Fire driving down to meet Merge Records and the founder taking them out to dinner somewhere in Chapel Hill. Neutral Milk Hotel's album duplication order

form putting the artist's phone number down as "currently disconnected." Copies of indie 'zines chronicaalling and labelling Chapel Hill as the "IT spot in punk/rock/indie/hardcore/anything". Photos of label HQs in such quintessentially Chapel Hill and Carrboro looking houses. Playing at the old Cradle, Cave etc. Comparison of 1980s Chapel Hill vs Raleigh hardcore scenes and their relationship with bands in DC.

Good times. These are part of the legacy and legends of Chapel Hill of which I was never a part directly but have been swimming around the edges from the very first time I opened up Spectator or Independent Weekly in middle school. I like that.

And yes, I read all that I did between Pentagon City metro and my house before gifting this to Rachel for Christmas. Sorry Rachel, I wanted to make sure it was sufficiently awesome :)

Edwin Arnaudin says

I'd been eyeing this one from afar for a few years and was motivated to check it out after the latest in a series of rewarding interviews with Merge artists – this one with co-founder Mac McCaughan in advance of his recent show at Asheville's The Mothlight.

There are no doubt other ways to tell the story of the NC label's rise and longevity, but Cook convinced me that an oral history is the most entertaining approach. From Laura Ballance's run-in with Courtney Love in 1992 to Stephin Merritt's qualms with the Merge logo, the anecdotes keep coming and the writing never lags. Plus it's fun to read about places I know well from my graduate school days, such as an early label office above the Armadillo Grill in downtown Carrboro and the tiny Chapel Hill bar/venue The Cave, where – and I'm still having trouble picturing this – Arcade Fire played an early show. Also, the number of important sets that were played at Cat's Cradle continues to astound me. I've enjoyed every act I've seen there, but its history almost completely eluded me as an attendee...and that's how this book makes you feel: like you were in the midst of major happenings but that they were done by down-to-earth, real Topeka...err Chapel Hill/Durham people. Such is the Merge way.

Kevin says

If you're a fan of Merge Records like I am, you probably like almost everything they do. They're so consistently great and this oral history of their first twenty years is outstanding. Funny and revealing recollections from Mac and Laura share the pages with recollections from other musicians and record industry folks. My favorite parts were the chapters on little-known genius's Butterglory, the rise of Neutral Milk Hotel, the accidental "country" of Lambchop, the ups and down of Spoon, and the stuff about Superchunk trying to finally get on radio with "Hyper Enough." Plus there's a ton of cool photos, show posters, and personal correspondence. A highly entertaining read about an inspiring record label that has stayed true to the musicians (M. Ward, Ladybug Transistor, Arcade Fire, Spoon, Lambchop. Magnetic Fields, Richard Buckner, Camera Obscura, and of course, the almighty Superchunk)they love.

Jenny says

I loved every minute of this book! Great story about how a band operates, and how they created a label out

of necessity. I love that they states true to themselves and never changed their business model to match traditions record labels. I live in Durham and know some of the people mentioned in the book, which made it even more fun to read.

If I had to nitpick, I would say that the story could've been fleshed out better and told from a third-party, non-biased, more biographical point of view. But I still thoroughly enjoyed it.

Bryan Bedell says

The photo of Laura when she was a goth is worth twice the cover price. Each Stephin Merritt quote is worth more than that. Be sure to set aside some cash to order Butterglory's back catalog after you read this. Minus a star because I feel like they didn't really let Wurster get going. :)

Robert Vaughan says

A very interesting read about Merge Records, one of the only successful indie record labels to survive the past two decades. Told in a roundtable narrative fashion. Highly entertaining.

Niklas Pivic says

A really, really good book on a do-it-yourself record company that didn't know how to do stuff, found it out themselves and are still alive and kicking, despite all kinds of problems, including being in a quite major band - Superchunk - themselves and at the same time giving artists on their label a perspective big piece of the cake.

People ask the question a lot: Why did you decide to put out your own records? But it's not like there was anyone else asking to put them out. —Mac McCaughan

And they learned and learned:

Steve Albini: They were pretty lighthearted. There wasn't a lot of farting around. Coming from an independent background, Mac understood the economics of making a record independently. You have to try to save as much money as possible. And it's much more efficient and it costs less money to have your shit together and be well rehearsed. Less money than it does to sort of hope that things come together in the studio.

It's a lot like the English label, Factory, in some ways:

Laura: We weren't thinking of it as a business, we were thinking about it as this fun, cool thing.

Contracts seemed like a gesture of mistrust. We were putting out records by people we knew and were friends with, and that could trust us and that we could trust. We'd talk about the basic premise, and that was that. In hindsight, I think that was really naïve. But at first, there really wasn't that much money involved, so it didn't really seem to matter.

Brian McPherson: (Attorney for Merge and Superchunk) I always thought it was a bad idea. I wrote a book called *Get It In Writing*. But that's obviously their way.

Then, the money came in.

Matt Suggs: I got talked to by a lot of completely cheesy-ass industry people, which always freaked me out. I wanted to say, "Have you listened to the record? This is not going to get played on the radio." In 1996, Butterglory was offered a \$50,000 publishing-contract advance – wherein a publishing company buys a songwriter's catalog copyrights, in hopes that the songs blow up one day. Matt Suggs They were offering a ridiculous amount of money. It started out at 30 grand, and then it was 40 grand. And we kept saying no. It was ridiculous, because I'm like a twenty-three-year-old working a deep-fryer, making \$6 an hour, and I'm saying, "No, thirty grand is too low." So when it got to \$50,000, I said to Debby, "Look man, we should take this fucking money, because there's no way we're ever going to sell enough records for them to recoup even half that. So let's just take their fucking money." The publishing company sent a \$10,000 check as first payment, and Debby and Matt went to Santa Monica to sign the papers.

Not much debauchery, though:

Despite the newfound popularity, there was little debauchery on the road with Superchunk.

Jon Wurster: I wasn't sure what it was going to be like on my first tour, so I brought a box of twelve condoms along. Having no idea what was going to happen. But I might want to have twelve of them, you know? I didn't use any of them. Never opened it. Still have them.

About the classic Steve Albini article:

In 1993, Steve Albini wrote an article for Chicago journal *The Baffler* called "The Problem With Music." It was an astringent and clear-eyed case study of the process by which a band is signed to a major, beginning with the seemingly hip A&R rep who first makes contact: "After meeting 'their' A&R guy, the band will say to themselves and everyone else, 'He's not like a record company guy at all! He's like one of us.' And they will be right. That's one of the reasons he was hired." It ends with a detailed accounting of how, after lawyers, managers, producers, promotional budgets, and all the other fees necessitated by the major-label system are taken into account, a band can sign a \$1-million contract, sell 250,000 copies of their first record, and end up \$14,000 in debt to the record company. Its final line is, "Some of your friends are probably already this fucked."

On the advent of The Magnetic Fields:

In late 1991, Mac picked up a new 7-inch that had just come into Schoolkids. It was a release from Harriet Records, a Boston label founded by Harvard University history professor Timothy Alborn two years earlier. The A-side was called “100,000 Fireflies,” and it was a haunting, spare, and strange amalgam: An artificial tick-tock drum-machine beat beneath what sounded like a toy piano playing sugary melodies and a gorgeous, classic woman’s voice singing desperately sad lyrics with a delivery reminiscent of Petula Clark. It reminded Mac of a lo-fi, Motown-inflected Yaz, featured one of the most memorable opening lines ever laid to tape – “I have a mandolin / I play it all night long / It makes me want to kill myself” – and sounded like pop music from the distant future as it might have been imagined in 1965. The band was called the Magnetic Fields. Mac had never heard of them, but he loved “100,000 Fireflies” and played it so frequently in the van on the road that Wurster suggested that they cover it. Mac had been thinking the same thing, and they came up with a version that swapped out the original’s delicate reserve for furious guitars and Mac’s urgent, strained vocal delivery. It quickly became a crowd favorite at shows; Superchunk recorded its version during the On the Mouth sessions in Hollywood and eventually released it as a B-side on a single. Word eventually got back to the Magnetic Fields, then located in Boston, that some punk-rock band was playing their song. On October 22, 1992, Stephin Merritt, who wrote “100,000 Fireflies,” and his bandmate Claudia Gonson went to a Superchunk show at nearby Brandeis University.

Stephin Merritt: I was horrified. It’s probably best if I don’t go into the details of why I was horrified. But we thought of punk rock as reactionary. We thought of punk rock as... Stalin.

Not that Mac himself is very Stalinesque.

Stephin Merritt: No. More like Emma Goldman, maybe.

On "69 Love Songs":

The next Magnetic Fields record, 69 Love Songs, would deliver Merritt from the indie-rock ghetto. There’s a story that Gonson tells to help explain how 69 Love Songs came into being: In 1994, Merge asked the Magnetic Fields to play at their fifth anniversary celebration at the Cat’s Cradle. On the drive down from Boston, they stayed overnight in Washington, D.C. In the middle of the night, with the band members sprawled out across someone’s living room, Merritt sat up in the dark and shouted, “Indie Rocks!” The rest of the band wearily humored him as he explained: In the late seventies, pet rocks were a fad. So why not Indie Rocks? Or Soft Rocks? Or Punk Rocks? He went back to sleep.

The next day, when they got to Chapel Hill, Gonson collected rocks from the parking lot behind the Cat’s Cradle, went to an art supply store, and painted up about twenty Merge Indie Rocks. She sold them for \$1 apiece that night at the show. Claudia Gonson So that’s exactly Stephin Merritt in a nutshell. He has these ideas, and he never thinks about executing them. For every idea he executes, he has three thousand that he doesn’t. 69 Love Songs was the rare one that he did execute. It’s the kind of record that has an origin myth: In January 1998, Merritt was drinking alone at a piano bar on the Upper East Side, writing songs. He was listening to Stephen Sondheim, and thinking not about love but about the American composer Charles Ives and his book 114 Songs, and – “Indie Rocks!” – decided that he would write a musical revue

called 100 Love Songs.

It would feature various performers singing a vast and comprehensive survey of every kind of song there is to be written about love, from country to punk to krautrock to Irish folk ballad, all to be penned by him. The idea was quintessential Merritt: A taxonomic and clinical take on the most intimate and emotional of subjects. It quickly dawned on him that such a musical would be a challenge to finance, so he downgraded the idea to an album of 100 love songs. When that proved excessively long, he trimmed it down to 69: A suggestive number that had the virtue of being visually appealing on an album cover.

Arcade Fire signed with Merge, based on them being nice people. They left their previous label for Merge and wrote this to Merge:

Hey Mac. We just talked to Alien 8 and told them we were going with you guys. It went pretty well. They knew all along what the situation was, so it wasn't too much of a shock. You can make an announcement. (I am sitting in the studio and we are mixing neighborhood RIGHT NOW!) :) —Régine

On how major labels basically wasted money:

Glenn Boothe: When I worked at Sony, I used to have an \$18,000 expense account. And I was expected to spend it. And a lot of times that meant me and my friends went out and ate sushi. Because it's got to be spent. I used to date this girl who worked for a label, and one day she told me, "Yeah, I needed a Snapple. So I had a friend messenger me one from her office." So instead of going downstairs and buying a Snapple, she spent \$20 or whatever to have it messengered.

All in all: a very inspirational, tough and loving story about a little record label that spawned a lot of brilliant artists and releases, and still continues to run to this day, having now been up for 25 years. That's really something.

Hillary says

Why did it take me eight years to read this book?

"Our Noise" is the intertwined story of (my favorite f'ing band of all time) Superchunk and the independent record label two of the band members co-founded, Merge Records. In hindsight, how could their stories not be so intertwined, it makes perfect sense. And in telling this oral history in an endearing, lovingly pastiche sort of way, selecting certain Merge bands to chronicle as reflections of Merge's ascent, Cook along with Ballance and MacCaughan put together a book that made me feel like I was sitting in their office in Durham, North Carolina and being invited in and allowed to hang out and listen to them chat as various artists rolled in and out of the room (and keeping to myself how shocked I would have been that they let me in to hang

out). They took me on a trip back in time, back when I first discovered the band after "Foolish" had come out, over the albums and tours I'd caught them in different cities and clubs, and into mine (and their) adulthoods.

Nontraditional, endearing music nonfiction.

My only disappointment is a selfish one: that the book happened to end at a point when the band had put itself on indefinite hiatus. I would like to read the as yet unwritten part about why they decided to regroup beyond the occasional show to make two fine, rocking full-length albums nine years later.

Sarah says

If you're a fan of the bands Superchunk, Neutral Milk Hotel, The Magnetic Fields, and The Arcade Fire (or any band that has ever been on Merge Records) this is the book for you. This book goes over the history of Merge Records and some of the bands that have been involved with them and is a really great read! There were quite a few bands mentioned that I hadn't heard before so I'd listen to their music while reading to get a sense of what their sound is. As this book comes up on its 10 year anniversary I'd love for an re-release of what's been happening with Merge Records in the past 10 years or even a CD of songs from all the bands mentioned released with the book. Overall a really great, fun read that I'll be adding to my collection.

Andrew says

I'm so glad that this leaked out onto shelves about a week early (in true indie fashion - snort!)! The book is a love letter to the label that once brought us Butterglory, the 3D's, Angels of Epsistemology, Versus, SUPERCHUNK, the Magnetic Fields and now brings us....uhh....the Arcade Fire and celebrity vehicle "She and Him?" Yes, organized indie rock is truly deader than dead, but those of us that lived through its early-to-mid nineties heyday can get all weepy with this handsomely designed memory book and oral history. It's full of color pictures of original show fliers, tons of pictures (Laura Ballance as a teen goth! Mac Machaughan with dreadlocks! Stephin Merritt in camo undies in someone's kitchen!), concept art, contracts, personal letters and memos on label letterhead, etc. But the real meat here is the actual text. I'm not normally a big fan of "oral history" books because they usually end up being a big, unreadable mess, but the book is really divided into specific chapter/stories about particular bands and eras, and each one of those chapters has a pretty concise group of people chiming in with their .02. It works, when these things usually don't. My other favorite element is that in spite of being a celebration, it's not really a label hagiography - there are plenty of acknowledged mistakes, missteps, some pretty hateful back-and-forth dialogue between former label mates...nothing is whitewashed, and even Chunk - the original "Chunk" drummer of (Super)chunk - was at least given the opportunity to tell his side of the story (alas, he declined). My personal favorite is the last page or two of the Magnetic Fields chapter, as Stephin lobs volley after volley of insults against Mac and Laura and the label in general ("The merge logo is butt-ugly. It's a potato stamp. I made a better one and they didn't want to use it." "Mac and Laura are completely insincere in their embrace of the whole "indie rock" thing and it's just a marketing concept to them. I'm not joking.") and they retort with politeness and "well, we have the greatest album that Stephin has made and will ever make, based on his output since leaving the label." Hot!

Rosie says

Having worked at a record label, I could relate to a lot of parts of this book. I know a lot more about the behind the scenes of a small label than your average person so it was almost nerdy how into the business-like stuff the story got. Overall, the book does a good job of telling the story of Superchunk alongside the story of some of the label's bigger bands. Well written and a good read for any respectable music nerd.

Anna says

This was fascinating, and I'm not even coming from a background of having listened to much Superchunk. I can only name a handful of their songs, but this definitely made me more curious about them (ditto on some of the other Merge bands).

I usually struggle to make progress on nonfiction works, but I didn't want to put this one down. My only complaint (aside from wishing it was longer) is with the horrific foreword from Ryan Adams - it is a example of why I am leery of reading nonfiction about music. Too often, writers seem to think they have to be pretentious and abstruse, to the point of making things unreadable.
