

# AT YOUR SERVICE

While a full-blown record deal and DIY releasing sit at the extremes of the industry, there is a third way for artists and their teams to get their music out. From established acts to fresh-faced newcomers, *Music Week* investigates what is on offer from the ever-evolving label services sector in a special report...

— BY PAUL STOKES —

One of the few upsides of lockdown life is the knowledge that when we are all finally allowed back to our places of work, a lot of folk won't go. Well, not all the time at any rate, as WFH-ing has shown that with the right resources and a flexible approach you can enjoy the best of both worlds.

A good balance is something artists who have embraced the label services revolution already know about, though. While some acts find the perfect home on a label, and other music-makers also relish striking out alone and doing the releasing themselves too, a label services deal can offer a good mix between enjoying artistic independence while tapping in to industry experience, expertise and cutting-edge resources.

"Label services enable established artists to release their music without the need to give away their master rights, which is so important for bands in the current

time," suggests Mark McQuillan, owner of Republic Of Music who has worked with the likes of Fatboy Slim, Fleet Foxes, The Black Keys, Elbow, Paul Weller and Sleeper across his industry career. "We can take on the role of labels and handle the day-to-days and run the campaign with promo teams, whilst the band can concentrate on what they do best: making music, touring and promoting themselves."

Ingrooves Music Group's managing director, UK, Nick Roden agrees that label services can allow artists and their teams to really personalise the approach they take while releasing their albums and singles.

"It gives you control," he notes. "Not just control and ownership of your masters, but hands-on control over your campaign. Ingrooves can add the skills, knowledge, tools and resources needed to bring your project to the widest possible audience,

but, ultimately, the rights owner is the decision-maker."

Retained rights ownership is often cited as one of the big upsides of the label services arrangement, and with MPs currently investigating how record deals are structured it is an issue artists and managers increasingly consider.

"I am a big believer that artists should own their rights, this is their pension," says Marley Dennis, MD of Hoxton Vinyl & Essential Merch, who have helped the likes of Dave, AJ Tracey and Gerry Cinnamon release records.

"I come from a family of music professionals. I grew up watching my father run an independent record label and publishing business, my brother ran a distribution business and I saw how important ownership is first hand. We have great relationships with the artists and the teams we work with, they see us as a strategic partner who is there to help them achieve

their goals, and grow their careers."

That is a key message from the label services sector. The retention of rights is obviously an attractive factor in a deal, but truly creative relationships are based on more than just the mechanics of a particular contract, and label services teams across the board are keen to stress the facilities they offer are not 'off the shelf' quick fixes, but bespoke solutions.

"Your relationship with an artist or manager needs to be rock solid, transparent and dependable regardless of whether owned rights are involved or not," suggests Ian Dutt, MD of The Orchard, UK. With a career that has included work with Oasis, Adele, Daft Punk, Skepta and Jorja Smith, he argues label services' strength is they can actually be tailored to an individual artist.

"We can support a client in pretty much any way they want to be supported," he explains. "We don't take a cookie cutter approach. Everyone has different needs and strengths. But the core fundamentals that underpin our offering stem from technology, distribution, sales, marketing – both UK and international – product management and promo."

**No drama:**  
When releasing  
Psychodrama Dave  
turned to Hoxton  
Vinyl to get his  
LP out on time



**Field work:**  
Ingrooves is expanding  
Beabadoobee's reach



"Label services  
gives you  
hands-on control  
over your  
campaign"

**NICK RODEN**  
Ingrooves



**Looking forward:** Teenage  
Fanclub enjoy autonomy  
within Republic Of Music



That adaptable approach is also evident within campaigns themselves.

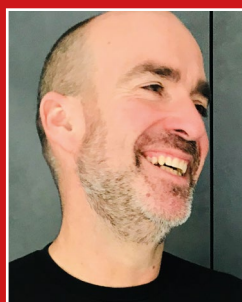
"The structure of our global team is designed so that we can, and do, adapt campaign strategies to optimise what's happening with a record on a particular platform, market or demographic," explains Ingrooves' Roden who has over 20 years of industry experience behind him.

"As we've seen in the past year with many artists, when a track breaks out on TikTok, we have to be ready to react as a team. Finding new targeted audiences in growth markets, identified by our AI-powered data insights, and leveraging the data to increase cross-platform exposure for the track and the artist."

"In terms of 2020, for our labels' and artists' campaigns, our mantra always was that lockdown doesn't mean shutdown," he adds. "If an artist can't tour or promote their release in-market, let's find ways to do the same but virtually. And at other times, we found real-world workarounds. For example, lockdown didn't stop Boy Pablo promoting his album in multiple cities around the world, thanks to lifesize cardboard cutouts that our local teams took for impromptu photoshoots in their respective cities."

**T**he adaptability of a tailored label services arrangement also applies when nice things happen, for example, sold-out shows (remember those?).

"When a record takes off like Dave's Psychodrama, we were able to get records pressed and delivered directly to the venue for his sold-out dates at Brixton Academy within four weeks," explains Hoxton Vinyl's Dennis. "When he was nominated for the Mercury Prize, we were able to react quickly and have the record back into production and in stock in no time to capitalise on sales. The same happened for Gerry Cinnamon's album Erratic Cinematic. The vinyl sold out the first weekend it was released following sold-out shows. We were able to get it back



*"We can take  
on the label  
role, so  
bands can  
make music"*

**MARK  
McQUILLAN**  
Republic Of Music



*"We are a  
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artists achieve  
their goals"*

**MARLEY  
DENNIS**  
Hoxton Vinyl

in stock in short order to capitalise on the success of the record."

With the mix of adaptability, rights arrangements and industry experience, label services deals have proved increasingly popular with established acts for whom A&R guidance is no longer a priority. Having worked with them on their 2016 album Here, McQuillan's Republic Of Music has become something of a support network for golden indie-pop purveyors Teenage Fanclub.

"Here was their first Top 10 album since 1987, and we are currently working on their tenth album Endless Arcade, out on April 30. We have put in place all the promotion teams around the world and are co-ordinating the whole campaign, distributing physically and digitally worldwide – with the exception of the US where Merge licensed the album – as well as running the band's D2C platform, setting up vinyl exclusives with the likes of Dinked Edition, Rough Trade and Recordstore.co.uk and handling all the manufacturing," he says of the vast scope a label services deal can cover.

"Basically we are doing all of the day-to-day and practicals of releasing an album, as well as financing, removing the need for a label, so the band can concentrate on making music knowing they are in very capable hands."

However, McQuillan is also keen to stress that while label services have a great reputation helping artists with an existing fanbase, they can also further the careers of new acts who do not feel a label is quite the right fit.

"For artists just starting out we can give them valuable advice on the best ways to get their music into the market," he adds.

The Orchard's Dutt agrees, suggesting the culture of label services can actually encourage some fledgling acts.

"I wouldn't want to presume that what we do is particularly any different to a label, but I do think there is one key difference – and that's pressure, or,

## FINANCIAL SERVICES

### Accountancy firm CC Young on going it alone

**W**ith artists and management teams able to cherry pick the help they need for releases via label services, it is important not to forget there are some tasks labels have traditionally done in the past that still *have* to be done.



"Label service agreements turn the traditional license deal on its head, the artist becomes their own label and can therefore retain a greater share of the income provided they can finance and administer their releases with the help of a label services partner," explains Adrienne Willen, senior rights manager at accountants CC Young & Co's rights management department. "With increased royalty rates comes increased responsibility."

Tasks could include managing producer and third-party accounting, retail licences and more.

"All of this may seem daunting but with the support of an excellent accountant it is entirely manageable," suggests Willen, so much so that she and her colleagues will do it for you.

"It's a common misconception that the accountancy role only extends to number crunching," she adds. "Beyond the compliance work we also provide repertoire management services, royalty audit and analysis. Record labels often have in-house accountants and large finance departments, an artist acting as their own label doesn't have this – which is where we come in."

"As accountants we have the ability to advise from a financial perspective on which direction the artist should consider for their recording deals, and can bring our experience of working for indie labels to the artist as a label model. The role of the accountant is flexible and stretches all the way through the music sector."

*A deeper look at CC Young, and the role of a music industry accountant, starts on page 69*



**In bloom:** Enny is flourishing with The Orchard



more importantly, the lack of it," he suggests.

"Usually in a services example, the artist is the only person they really have to answer to. There are teams of people to guide, advise and activate, but the pace and success for a new artist comes down to the manager and the artist. They are not beholden to anyone else, any other agenda or any other time frame. It's useful to see new artists learn from mistakes they might make. I believe it turns them into better artists. Music isn't an exact science and you need the breathing space to make mistakes. A misplaced pass doesn't make you a shit footballer. We've been pretty much there from the beginning with Dodie, Orla Gartland, Backroad Gee and NSG, to name a few. Currently watching Enny blossom is a joy."

Ingrooves' Roden adds that it is not just new acts, but sometimes newer labels who can also benefit from the skills and years of industry know-how that his teams have acquired.

"We work closely with Dirty Hit on their projects, providing them with advice, expertise and insights, all of which helped them build an engaging campaign for Beabadoobee's debut album," he suggests of how label services teams can even help serve labels.

"Tapping in to our global teams, we were able to leverage playlist cover support in growth markets for her like Germany, Philippines and Australia, while also mirroring marketing support with retailers through other territories, which ensured the album was pushed to another level globally. Dirty Hit's own direction and passion on this campaign allowed us to plug in wherever needed to help

execute their plans – while also providing audience insights for marketing for specific territories, and optimising artist playlists. Together we were able to lock in some top line marketing opportunities across all services."

It is this zeal for collaboration – with their clients and beyond – that really underscores the label service sector's strength, though there is one area where label services teams are indistinguishable from their record label colleagues: their passion for the artists they are working with.

"At Republic Of Music I am extremely proud of my team, they all have a huge passion for music and I think that is the absolute key for our success," explains McQuillan of his employees.

"We are growing year-on-year but we retain the feel of a small, focused company. I like to think it's more than a job for my team as they love music and that really comes across when working with artists and labels. I get a huge buzz in receiving the next great artist or album. I think the fact that labels and artists know they can have a real close relationship with the various departments – from label manager to physical sales to sync to digital – and there is always someone to talk to about their releases makes us stand out. Put it this way, I currently enjoy distribution work far more than following my beloved but beleaguered Ipswich Town FC!"

**T**he reaction from the artists with experience of label services seems to suggest they know a winning team when they see one. "Since partnering with Hoxton Vinyl for vinyl pressing of our 2020 album *Breathing Exercises*, as well as order fulfilment, we now consider them an integral part of our operations team," hip-hop duo Frankie Stew and Harvey Gunn told *Music Week* of their label services experience.

"Being an independent, it's so important to us to be able to achieve business ops partnerships that can give you the firepower to compete with major label teams."

The Orchard's Dutt also believes it is artist experience that is the best demonstration of what a label services deal can achieve. "Label services deals are getting longer not just

because the relationship between audience and artist is changing, but because artists are enjoying the label services process and experience," he argues. "They are our biggest advocates; we rarely advertise our services because artist and manager recommendations are more meaningful."

It is that expanding network – from working with artists across a spectrum of genres – that is naturally giving the label services a depth that acts and their teams are tapping into.

"Having knowledge and expertise working across a range of artists, genres and markets is essential in today's global music ecosystem," concludes Roden at Ingrooves.

"Our team is constantly seeking new opportunities, based on an incredible knowledge of what's worked across genres and territories. Fans are not restricting their listening to one genre or platform, so it's essential for artists and labels to have a broader understanding of what's working across the wider market."

They really are at your service.



*"Artists are enjoying the label services experience, they are our biggest advocates"*

**IAN DUTT**  
The Orchard

## TECH SUPPORT

### New Reprtoire can unlock the industry

**A** tech-loving beatmaker in the '80s before founding The Orchard's first French branch, Rendez-Vous Digital and Reprtoire's co-founder & CEO

Dominique Rottet has a background to inspire any artist considering life without a label.

Plus, he has the software to help them, too.

"Reprtoire is a 'Software as a service' solution specifically designed for record labels and music publishers," he explains. "We built a software suite to help music professionals manage their music catalogues, playlists, releases and royalty accounting in the same workspace, accessible to all members of their teams."

Comparing smaller labels and artists to start-ups who are often forced to confront business issues they had no prior knowledge of, Rottet suggests that the increasing digitisation of many industry tasks (his firm have just released a new Royalties Manager platform he predicts will "save a huge amount of time for record label managers") is making it easier for artists to move beyond traditional structures.

"At Reprtoire, every day we welcome small emerging structures without much experience that have the energy of start-ups but often come up against a lack of knowledge of the industry, contracts, rights, accounting, etc," he observes. "Like most entrepreneurs, they are confronted with steep learning curves and ultimately do not spend enough time developing their business activities. In the end, a service like Reprtoire allows them to collaborate better and to also better understand all aspects of rights and royalty flows."

So whether making or releasing music, Rottet believes good tech is a service worth having. "One thing seems quite clear to us," he notes. "Many actors in this industry would greatly benefit from digitising their business processes and tools."

