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Future sounds of London

A pioneering new London record label is aiming to put the artists back at the heart of the creative process. Lunacy? Or the future of the industry? In an exclusive interview, **Eddy Lawrence** tracks down Brown Punk's firebrand figurehead, Tricky, to find out. Photography **Rob Greig**

Despite the fact that it's one of the top five annual contributors to London's economy, the music industry comes in for a lot of stick. And so it should, because it's crap. There are few sights as sympathy-eroding as giant corporations pleading poverty while simultaneously threatening customers and blaming circumstance for their own strategic miscalculations.

For all the moaning that illegal downloads have made it impossible for labels to make money, this is a time of unprecedented fertility for independent labels, which are flourishing. The indie sector accounts for £500 million of business per year, and while that's only 20 per cent of the UK's total music revenue, it's telling that internet radio play is dominated by the nation's independent labels. Most of these are spare-room operations set up by super-fans to release music they feel the world really, really, needs to hear, which is an admirable sentiment. There is a new label, however, called Brown Punk, which has loftier ideals, aiming to establish a template for artist-run businesses that could ultimately usurp the current system of indentured artistic servitude. That might seem like a notion from the back pages of *Living Marxism*, until you learn the identities of the people behind it – Chris Blackwell, founder and managing director of by-no-means-minor label Island, In The City Urban director Emily Taylor and maverick recording artiste Tricky, who tells *Time Out* that the philosophical direction of the label was triggered by an experience he had at last year's annual In The City conference in Manchester. Having delivered a speech to an audience of aspirant musicians, Tricky stayed behind to talk to the audience.

'I was shocked,' he says. 'A lot of the kids there, seeing their ideal and talking to him was crazy. They knew I lived in LA and they were talking to me about big bands and people like 50 Cent, saying 50's a real *gangsta* or this rock band are real *rock stars*. It was just so unrealistic compared to what really is going on here, and I'm like, well, that's not real life, you know? And the music has nothing to do with the artist any more – a record company might as well be a bank.'

In person, Tricky displays a passion and earnestness that make Steve Irwin (RIP) look like Mark Lamarr. One of the dangers of print is that

your internal monologue, once vocalised, might come over as a rant, but his quotes were all delivered with the guileless enthusiasm of someone who has definitely helped an old woman with her shopping in the last fortnight. Rock stars complaining about the soullessness of the music industry is nothing new, it's practically part of the job description if you're going for the over-12s, but Tricky isn't just separated from the pack by his lack of cynicism, he has crucially committed to providing an alternative – even turning down an invitation to rejoin Massive Attack in order to concentrate on his new protégés.

Brown Punk has been forged in a crucible of white-hot corporate optimism not seen since the establishment of Factory in 1978, though we'd hope Brown Punk isn't undone by its own generosity as Tony Wilson's label was. The balance of power is weighted approximately 99 per cent in

'The music has nothing to do with the artist any more – a record company might as well be a bank'

favour of the artists, who are responsible for all creative decisions and output.

'If any of my artists wanna leave Brown Punk, they can leave tomorrow,' says Tricky. 'And I would help them get another deal. They can have whatever artwork they want, they can record what they want, say what they want, do what they feel. It's got fuck-all to do with me, I'm just there to lend my name and get them out there. If I think you're a talent, why would I sign you and then try to change you? Which is what I see a lot of record labels doing. How is an A&R guy going to tell a musician how to make an album? When I got into the industry, if you signed Polly Harvey, that made you a credible A&R guy. Now if you don't sign a hit, you lose your job. Tom Waits, if he just started now, wouldn't get a deal – on a jazz label, *maybe*. But major labels wouldn't go near him. What's mad is these major companies don't

seem to be learning from this. It shows, because so few artists are selling. So you've got Geffen selling 50 Cent and Eminem and they've got another hundred artists you've never heard of. A lot of them are very talented, but all Geffen's money is going into two artists. Me as an artist, I would never sign to Interscope. Because I don't sell records like 50 Cent and Eminem, so why are they gonna give a fuck about me? I'm gonna be shelved, and then I won't be allowed to sign to anybody else.'

As you might expect, the bands that have been drawn to this arrangement are the ones who want to push the boundaries of their craft, ranging from the honey-sweet goth-pop of The Gospel Featuring Kira to the minimal bluescore of The Dirty to the anti-capitalist hip hop of First Blood. If you want to know more, the label's first single, 'Burnin'' by Laid Blak, hits the shops this week, to be followed by a new single every fortnight for the next six weeks. The label also holds a bi-weekly residency at the Rex Cinema on Rupert Street (Laid Blak headline the next one on August 15). Check out Brown Punk's MySpace page for a taster – you may not like everything you hear, but your curiosity will be seriously piqued. Tricky freely admits to having some artists on his 25-strong roster that he doesn't even particularly like, theorising that just because he isn't into a style of music doesn't necessarily make it bad – the label's most important consideration is the artists' commitment to and love of music.

'While recording their first album, First Blood were washing windows for money to eat,' says Tricky. 'They're grafters. They said to Emily, my partner, "Can we wash your windows for a fiver so we can get some food?" That makes me wanna weep. It makes me get so much more behind you than you coming in and telling me how many diamonds you've got or how hardcore you are.'

Crucially, there is a business plan to back up these fine words. At the heart of Brown Punk's operation is a simple financial equation: speculate less to accumulate more. Tricky is making a determined effort to harness the power of word of mouth over marketing muscle, meaning more money remains with the artist.

'I see a lot of bands getting signed and thinking that they've made it. Their first single doesn't ►



Tricky's business (left to right) Kyrill (*The Dirty*), Tricky (*rebelMD*), Kira (*The Gospel*), Flex, Joe Peng, DJ Bunjy and James (*Laid Blak*)

happen, then they get dropped,' he says. 'I want the artists to know they don't have to sell records. We're doing everything low-cost, an album is costing maybe £20,000. To make that back is not a lot of sales in the long term, so we don't need any of these artists to have hit records, there's no pressure on them. And the funny thing is how many artists do not want to sign to corporate record companies now. Half the artists on my label weren't looking for deals. They were gonna do this with or without me. They were already touring, already making records. That's why you want to do an album for 20 grand rather than 200 grand. An artist doesn't realise they have to pay that back. It's your fucking money, and you're running around boasting, oh yeah, we spent 2 million on the video. To spend 2 million – pounds or dollars – on a music video, you've gotta be out of your fucking head. You gotta be really fucking clinically insane. Because it lasts two minutes, it's on for a couple of months and then no one ever sees it again. When your budget ain't that big, you try a little bit harder, and it brings out genius.'

Pop music has long held itself up as the last bastion of cultural nonconformism, an artistic Wild West in which anyone can make it provided they have an idea that no one has heard before. Sadly, this isn't the case, and never really has been. Since the days of Elvis Presley, music has been packaged and preened by major companies.

But many of the most influential bands of the past 50 years owe their success to an indie label and their troubles to a major. Whether it's the Pistols leaving EMI for Virgin, Nirvana on Sub Pop or Geffen bungling the Stone Roses. And none of these made a name for themselves by designing their music by committee or looking up 'demographics' in the dictionary. Tricky relates a story about a meeting with a major label rep which

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disintegrated when the exec asked Tricky how many records he had sold, and Tricky realised that he couldn't answer the question.

'I sat there and thought about it and realised that with Chris, we'd never talked about album sales or anything like that,' he grins. 'People like me and Polly Harvey, we didn't sell loads of records on our first album, we grew. U2 didn't sell any fucking records when they started out... I remember Chris said to me the other day, "Bob

Marley wasn't always hot", and it's hard to think of Bob Marley ever not being hot, but there was a time when people weren't buying his records.'

Ultimately, Tricky would like to see the Brown Punk model utilised by other small labels, or individual bands. In fact, several of Brown Punk's artists have started spin-off labels, which Tricky would like to see develop into a web of distribution and mutual support that side-steps the traditional outlets and, hopefully, business practices.

'I've been in this business a long time, so I'm around record company people,' he grimaces. 'With a woman artist, the first thing a record company exec will ask is "How old is she? What does she look like?" Why does that matter? Billie Holiday didn't look like fucking Brigitte Bardot and she's one of the greatest singers we've ever had. Janis Joplin was not a pretty woman, and she's one of the greatest singers we've ever had. If you're a woman, if you're 26, you're over. And I just became sick of listening to all that. Unless someone gets involved and tries to change it, it won't change. I was on a plane once, complaining about what was on MTV, and someone said to me, well get on MTV then. So when I made my first record I started getting on MTV. But I don't think you can change it just as an artist any more – labels need to change. So we decided to do something about it.'

For more info visit www.brownpunk.tv or www.myspace.com/brownpunkthelabel.