

1110

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Mimi Johnson is the founder of LOVELY MUSIC, LTD. (463 West St., New York, N.Y. 10014), an ever-growing independent label dedicated to making New Music by living composers available to the public. She is also involved with Performing Artservices, a nonprofit management agency devoted to the same thing. Mimi is a good example of someone who started their own record company, and succeeded...

OP: What got you interested in starting a label, and what did it take to make it happen?

MJ: Money, mostly... I was really interested in it from the point of view of seeing how a record company would work. It was a challenge, an interesting challenge to me, and since most of the composers that I was friendly with and whose work I admired a lot had been talking about putting out their own records... obviously Columbia wasn't doing it... I said, "Well, I think I'll just do it. I'm going to end up doing the work anyway. So let's make a company that has one name, and I'll gather together under that umbrella the people that I like, whose music I like," and I just did it. Now, what it took to get it started... First of all, I had the support of the organization I'd worked with for many years, Performing Artservices, which is a nonprofit management service for avant-garde performing artists, and has been in existence since 1961. They have a real office and a staff... people to help me, and I have a salary there, so that's how I earn my living. I was lucky enough to have had a little bit of money in the bank. I had a few thousand dollars, and I sat down with that and some estimates of how much it would cost to press records, and determined that they would cost so much for the first thousand copies, say, and I then made agreements with those composers who were going to participate about them kicking in part of the money toward their own recording. So basically, with the little bit of capital I had, and the capital that each composer was able to bring to the company, we managed to press them and to get them out into the world.

OP: How many of each record do you press at the first pressing?

MJ: 1000, because we have to use that right away. What we found is that the number of pressings isn't so important... the important part is that the place where I'm having the jackets done, Modern Album, simply won't deal with the printing of less than 5000. So you bear a lot of the cost of the printing right away and that makes the first records that you manufacture very expensive.

OP: So you press 1000 records and have 4000 extra jackets sitting around? That's absurd.

MJ: Exactly. Well, there are two ways that they manufacture the record jackets. I've done it both ways. One way is to print paper slicks and to have those glued onto ready-made cardboard envelopes. The other way is to print right on a board stock. The first time, I used the paper slicks and they just glued up as many as I needed. Now that's not a storage problem. However, I was unhappy with the quality of the cardboard that they glued onto and found they weren't going to give me any cardboard that was better quality. The board stock that they print on is nicer. It's smoother, looks better, so I decided to use that for the second series we did, so we had the actual cardboard object. Now, that IS a storage problem! Four thousand empty jackets have to be put someplace, and they won't store them for you. So, my basement is now packed. They do go out... I'll fill 1000 right away, and I've repressed all of the second set by now, so then I send out 5000 at a time.

OP: You've already sold out the entire first pressing of that second series? That's great.

MJ: Almost. I don't let them sell out completely. When I get down to about 100 copies of a record, I re-press.

OP: How about the first series?

MJ: On most of them, I'm approaching 2000 records. I've gone over 2000 on a couple of them in two years. Part of those are promos of course, but that's expected.

OP: What was your initial investment, per album?

MJ: It cost about \$3000, as an initial investment. I think you can do it cheaper, but I'm not interested in doing it cheaper... So, in other words, if you've got 1000 records, each one, not counting the jacket, has cost you \$3. That's expensive, but when I go back and re-press, it's almost nothing because we've already paid for the printing of the jackets. The individual record, where I'm having them printed now, at Windsor, is costing up to 61¢ per record. When I started out three years ago, it was about 53¢ per record. That was with shrink-wrap and everything. The costs have risen astronomically. So, let's figure this out quickly here... If it's 61¢ per record and there are 1000, that's \$610. Now, before that, I've paid maybe \$1500 on the printing, and we can't forget the master lacquer and plates, which are a one-time expense but still money spent. I'm now having the lacquers cut at Master Disc, in New York, and it's about \$90 per side, and the plating is also \$90 per side. So you've spent about \$360 right there (two sides each time). And we can't forget the labels that we get printed up somewhere else.

OP: Did you find that by putting out the records in groups of five or six at a time, it helped to make your money back faster?

MJ: I think it does, and it's from a point of view of advertising. We don't have a lot of extra money, so if we can advertise in one ad the release of five records, that's quite a savings. You also can do a mailing maybe once a year, announcing five new records. I don't have either the money or the physical resources to keep mailing out new-release announcements all the time. So that's where it saves. We are such a small company... I'm not getting any breaks at any of the factories. They don't care... they're very nice, but we don't do enough business to get any breaks. But I can't see that there is ever much of a break on the pressings, except to big companies who press lots and lots of records. Maybe if you press 5000 all at once, that price of 61¢ will go down.

OP: I thought second pressings were usually cheaper...

MJ: No, they still charge me the same 61¢. The only reason it's any cheaper is because I've already got all of those jackets printed up. It's 61¢ whether I press 100 or 1000 on my second pressing.

OP: How about distribution? I know you go through NMDS and Rounder. Anyone else?

MJ: The major ones are NMDS, Rounder in Boston, and Rick Ballard Imports in Berkeley. I'm very happy with all of them. I have a distributor in Chicago who told me the other day that he was very surprised at how well the records were doing. They're called Kinnara. They're a smallish distributor.

OP: What's the financial arrangement between Lovely Music and its distributors? Do they get a percentage or commission...?

MJ: They pay me for every record they sell.

OP: For how much do they sell each record?

MJ: They sell at various prices... They're either selling to sub-distributors, or to record stores, or to individuals.

OP: How are you doing with European distribution?

MJ: Amazingly well, considering I'm not over there plugging it. Journalists have come through New York, and I think they've sort of spread the word. I've seen three Italian articles about Lovely Music in the last couple of months. There's one distributor in Milan that's ordered twice, and NMDS said they've been getting orders from Japan. Somebody else told me they had an order from Japan too... Sometimes a distributor or an exporter will call me up... because some of his clients in Europe have requested these records.

OP: You seem to be succeeding in this with a minimum of advertising. I don't think I can recall seeing an ad in a magazine, yet it seems to be working well for you...

MJ: That's because the music is so wonderful! It's basically because of that... People are screaming to get a hold of this music. What I'd like to be able to do, is to have a little more money to put some ads in the right places. We did one in OP about two years ago (chuckles)...

OP: What I respect about Lovely Music, is that you were someone with an idea who said, "Let's do this, and make it work," and you did...

MJ: Well, I figured out how to make it work, and I have to give credit where credit is due, in that I've seen other people make it work. I saw Chatham Square Records, that Phil (Glass) started. I was in close contact with the Mother Mallard records, David Borden and Judy Borscher. I saw them make their records and sell them. And I'd worked with NMDS all this time. I also think you can't stress too much the fact that somebody's got to be willing to sit at home and do the business, and that's what I like to do. I happen to actually like doing administrative work. So, though I would really encourage composers to make collectives and get these things together, the problem that they're always going to run into is... Who does the business and keeps things organized? It's hard for artists to do that sometimes, because they think, "Well, I'm taking this away from my creative time." I understand that it's hard. Also, the other thing I enjoy about selling records is that the other half of what I do is worrying about people... whether they get their grants, and whether they've got enough money to live, and whether they're unemployed or not, and everything else... so in comparison, to sell a record is sublimely simple. It doesn't talk back. It's just an object... Well, maybe more than just an object...

-S. Peters