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Feature

URBAN DEVELOPMENT



Holly Riggs

By [Justin Strout](#)

It may require a confluence of events more unlikely than the creation of a human being, but the birth of an indie label that actually makes an impact is always special, and always a surprise. From Sub Pop's validation of a generation of slackers in the late '80s to Death Row's über-gangsta of the '90s and Saddle Creek's sensitive indie stylings in this decade, independent labels have proved reliable, if short-lived, national pulse indicators. In every case, it begins with a nobody from a nowhere who turns a simple thought into a movement and inextricably connects the sound to the city. Portland is the new Seattle, Austin is the new Portland, and Minneapolis is the new Austin. It can be a frustrating cycle, but one that can change a hundred lives in the scratch of a turntable.

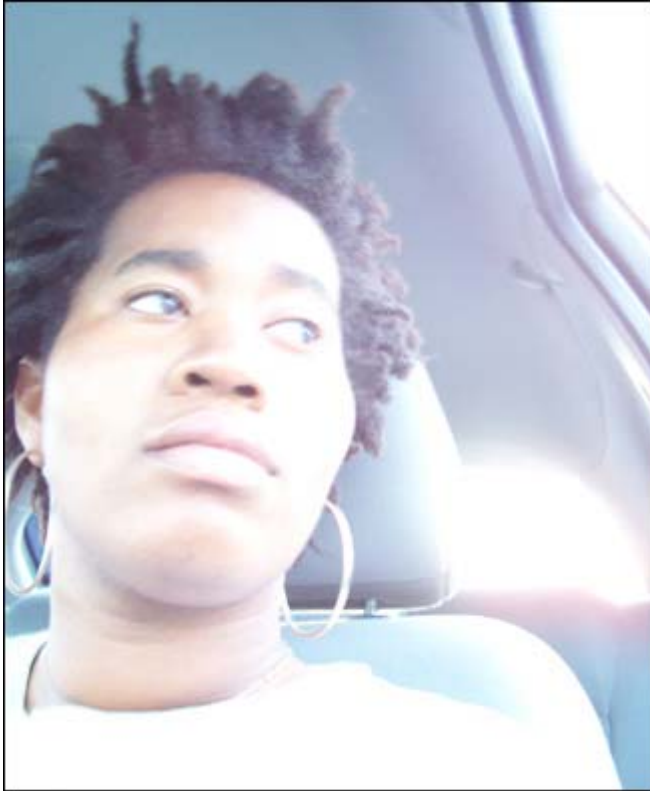
Certainly, there's no shortage of contestants for the crown these days – head to your nearest copymat at midnight to witness the cover-art collage – but precious few of these Russell Simmons worshipers ever complete a project that's worthy of anything beyond their bedroom, and virtually none can say they have amassed the greatest collection of genre artists in their city's history. Virtually.

Kelly Shockley wasn't having a simple thought a few years back so much as an all-encompassing disgust. "I'd say the majority of the mass is just pure nonsense," says the 28-year old founder of hip-hop label Nonsense Records. "That's the way that I feel about the music industry, period. I think Orlando's a young town, and there's gotta be pioneers. So I thought, 'Hey, why not [start a label]?"

Central Florida has never gathered enough momentum in the hip-hop world to stake a legitimate claim other than the occasional blip; The Mega City DJ's and Warheadz could turn a crowd in their days, but the audience never grew to the satisfaction of the beer-sellers. A few years ago, however, a group of friends known as Solillaquists of Sound started to turn the tide, followed closely by critical darlings Andromeda. Suddenly, major independent artists from around the country were stopping in Orlando for more than a bathroom break while anticipating Miami. Shockley was on the ground floor and shaking a lot of hands.

"Becoming part of Nonsense started when Kelly brought me into the studio to do some music sessions. They liked what I could do," says SPS, formerly one-half of Andromeda, now one-half of X:144 & SPS. "This was destined to happen."

Within a very short time, Nonsense was a cozy home to the majority of buzz-heavy, young and hungry artists in Orlando, and in some cases, far beyond Florida.



Mama A.Free.Ka

The grass-roots release of the Nonsense compilation *Community Service Vol. 2* showcases what could be considered a monopoly of independent swagger. After Sol.illaquists supported Sage Francis on tour, they signed with indie-label behemoth Epitaph, a move that helped Shockley in facilitating the likes of X:144 & SPS getting rave reviews in national magazines like *Urb* and *XLR8R*. It also brought other talents to the label such as Brzowski, an intensely articulate Maine native, and blip-hop soundscape artist DJ Sept from Germany.

"They're my friends, and they see it as an investment," confides Shockley.

Underground hip-hop is as real as it gets, and there are times when the noble rejection of financial gain in exchange for creative freedom drifts into uncomfortable territory. Nobody wants to be a corporate puppet, but there is another extreme to the spectrum, and it's a conviction that can lead a group of artists into prominence, or sometimes, a land mine. "I want Nonsense to be a new precedent for record labels. There are no contracts. There are no lawyers. If you're here, you should be doing it for a love of music." Kelly's artists, for their part, are utterly confident.

"Basically it's like working with yourself ... a reliable self," claims X:144, who together with SPS is Nonsense's brightest star.

"Nonsense is not just a record label, it is a family," says Holly Riggs. With her rat-a-tat, bruised-songbird style, Riggs' "The Ideal Woman" is a soulful street-poet shocker on the otherwise beat-oriented compilation. "We love each other, and that is rock-solid," Riggs maintains. "Why would there be a need for a contract?"

With a lineup of nearly 20 artists, *Community Service Vol. 2* is an excellent harbinger of a movement waiting to happen in Central Florida. In addition to Riggs, Brzowski, X:144 & SPS and DJ Sept, various permutations of the Sol.illaquists family show up, along with other bright lights like Hakim Tafari and Mama A.Free.Ka. The only remaining question is if Orlando is ready to step up as the new Minneapolis ... or the new *anything* for that matter.

"The artists are responsible, the bars are responsible, and the community is responsible because they complain but they don't do anything about it," bemoans Shockley of the current state of the city's scene. Yet she also insists that a change is coming.

"I say Orlando's gonna be a completely different place in five years. The artists, music, culture ... people are actually starting to claim Orlando as a home."

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Hakim Tafari