



Meet the Moguls

Think you know music? Four Chicago men dare you to prove it

| By John Coyle Steinbrunner | Photo by John Sturdy |

Listen up, local bands: Alex White, 22-year-old Chicago music magnate, wants to help you hit it big. Simply a music fan? He's giving *you* a record label. Welcome to The Next Big Sound, a new website for discovering and promoting the hottest unsigned music groups.

White—an '08 Northwestern University grad now living in Lincoln Park—spent a summer working at Universal Records in New York, where, observing the business of slashed scouting budgets and pre-packaged hit songs, he realized there needed to be a better way for unsigned acts to be discovered. Then, "I was scraped off the street for an MTV focus group," he recalls. "Everyone loved the experience of giving feedback about the music... I had the idea of giving individuals their own record label." Two years later, White teamed up with fellow students David Hoffman, Samir Rayani and Jason Sosnovsky to revisit that thought.

The result, The Next Big Sound, is beautiful in its simplicity and breathtaking in its potential. Unsigned bands post up to four songs to a sleek online jukebox. Music listeners—"moguls"—sign bands to their personal "labels." The more moguls back a band, the higher that band's rating as a popular act; the more successful (and early) a mogul's picks, the higher his or her score as a music tastemaker. Bands want to be recognized as good and listeners want the recognition of discovering the good bands.

The kicker: Though a mogul can drop and add bands as frequently as he wants, he can only have ten signed at a time, making every selection significant—and guaranteeing that a band with a heap of signings is truly worth the attention. The founders hope that as the site develops, bands may connect with labels or simply get enough fans to go it alone. And

From left: The Next Big Sound founders Samir Rayani, Alex White, Jason Sosnovsky and David Hoffman outside Hoffman's apartment in Evanston.

since other users direct you to the best bands (and you sometimes get the satisfaction of being the first to sign a group that takes off), it's more efficient, interactive and exciting than MySpace or iTunes.

"I've become addicted to viewing how many new signings we receive each day," admits lead vocalist Michael SanFilippo of Barrington pop-rock band Bright Like Japan, which has been signed by 147 moguls and counting. "The site really helps artists see who's listening and where they're listening."

"Your musical taste is intimately tied to who you are," adds White, who works full time on TNBS as the other founders complete their degrees at Northwestern. "When you sign an unproven band, you're vulnerable. And as people fall in behind you, your taste is validated. You can see that you've spotted somebody for other people... and that's cool."

White has pop leanings but once hosted an underground hip-hop show; Hoffman follows hipster-rock and is an avid concert-goer; Rayani listens to electronica. And Sosnovsky? "I played the tuba in middle school. I was that guy." Likewise, the site hosts bands ranging from sugar pop to R&B to rap—and users, split evenly between men and women and averaging 24 years old, are buzzing about all of them.

"By the end of the summer we wanted to have a thousand signings take place," says White with a grin. "We surpassed that in the first week." Having started with 25 bands, the site now hosts 300 and is growing daily.

"This has really given us an opportunity to connect with a lot of bands, get their feedback and find out what we can do to connect them with music-minded individuals," says Hoffman, adding, "We want to make it fun." thenextbigsound.com ■