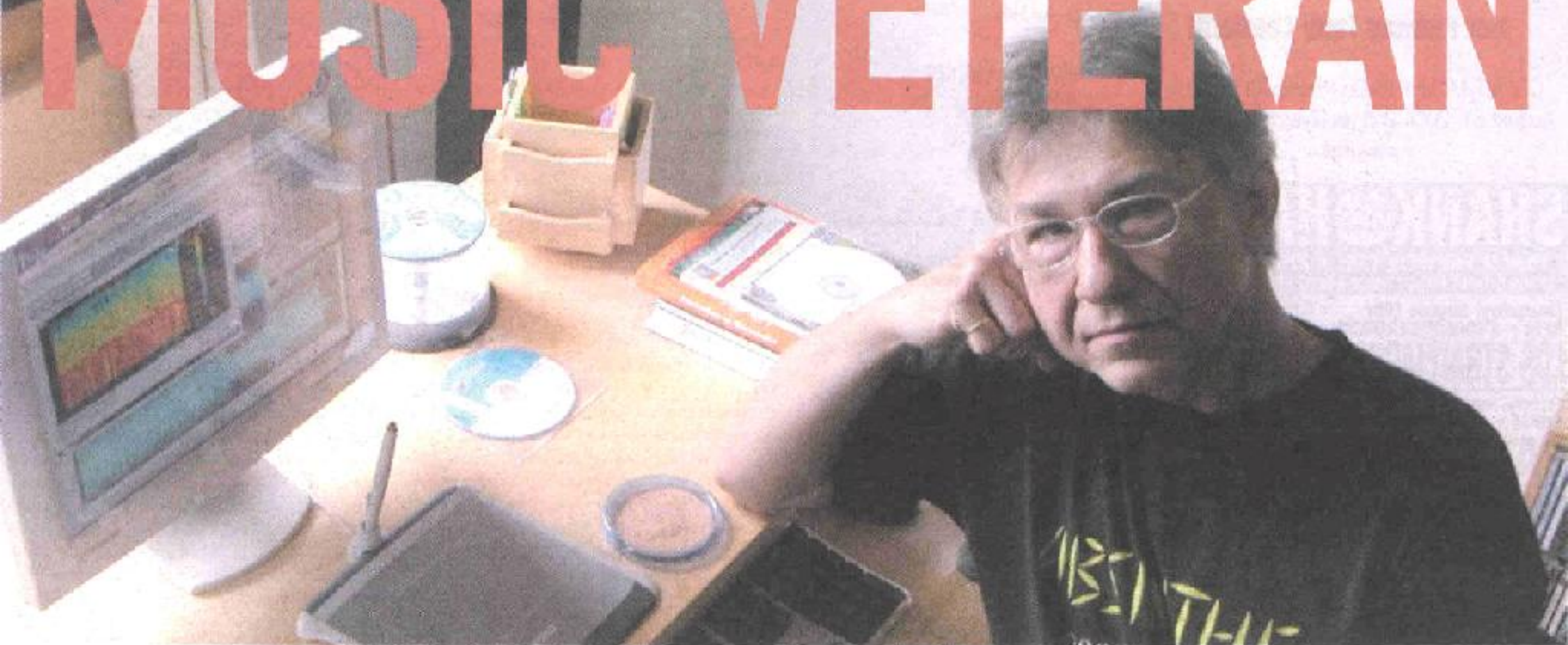


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When Todd Rundgren's longtime keyboardist Roger Powell decided to record his first solo CD in decades, he didn't call any of the many big-name producers in his circle. Instead, he tapped Milwaukee's Gary Tanin.

Powell thought of Tanin because of Xpensive Dogs, the Milwaukee musician-engineer's long-distance collaboration with Japan's Toshiyuki Hiraoka. The technocratic Powell was impressed by the Dogs' 1994 debut disc, recorded entirely by downloading and uploading music files--a noteworthy, cutting-edge concept 10 years ago. "Toshi and I never even spoke on the phone," Tanin says of the all-Internet project.

But because technology makes such a working method possible, it doesn't follow that it becomes the most desirable way to record. Tanin--a thoughtfully intense man whose frenetic gesticulations make the intangible tactile--gladly met with Powell face-to-face last month when the keyboardist flew to Milwaukee to inspect Tanin's studio. Housed in the attic of a comfortable South Side home, Tanin's studio fills three small rooms with a state-of-the-art Digital Audio Workstation, DAT and ADAT machines for recording and mixing, plus a raft of vintage gear--Fender amps, an echoplex, analogue synthesizers.

The range of equipment, spanning the 1970s through the 2000s, exemplifies Tanin's Janus-faced view of past and future. A talented pianist and songwriter since the '60s, Tanin in the '70s became one of the first Milwaukee musicians to embrace an instrument still considered futuristic, the synthesizer. Computer programming was his day job at a time before Microsoft and Macintosh when the field was still considered arcane. Xpensive Dogs probably wasn't the first online-only CD, but was certainly among the earliest. Nowadays, however, Tanin worries that an over-reliance on the Internet is leading to a loss of viable community among musicians and audiences as well as lowered ambitions.

Adolescent Courage

Perhaps posting files and marketing self-recorded CDs on the Web is altogether too easy? Tanin recalls his garage-band days in the '60s: summoning his adolescent courage, he approached a local studio in a successful bid to record his band. The resulting single never grazed the Top 40, but did establish the foundation for his lifelong career in music.

"When I got into the business through the small door that was available, you really had to be motivated to get an opportunity," Tanin says, pointing out that mentoring is best achieved in person. "You had to make a presentation for yourself and seek out people in the business who had more experience than you did. The difficulties were an incentive to grow as an artist and to get to a higher level in the business."

There can be a disconnect when artists spend too much time communicating with online fans and not enough building an audience the old-fashioned way--from the bandstand. "People crave communal connection," Tanin continues. "Someone to give them a story that allows them to feel sympathy, outrage--anything emotional!"

The horizon of the World Wide Web is vast but the scope for unknown musicians is often limited. It's still difficult to imagine a local act transforming itself into a star band with worldwide reach without the marketing push of a record label. And here, the big labels have dropped the ball since the early '90s, discarding any commitment to artistic development, dumping artists as soon as their debut disc fails to sell according to the unrealistic expectations of an industry fixated, more than ever, on profit.

Ambitious Agenda

Not everyone is content with the situation. During the past year Tanin became staff engineer-producer-mixer for a new Milwaukee-based label, RockIt Records. RockIt's owner, Minneapolis native T. Oman, has pursued an ambitious recording agenda, releasing at least seven discs by bands--all of them from the Midwest and most from Milwaukee--as various as the alt-country Twang Dragons to the progressive metal of Leviathan's Choir to a second album by Xpensive Dogs. Although the jury is out on RockIt's accomplishments, the concepts behind the label are sound.

"What can a record company do that a band can't?" Tanin asks rhetorically. "Very few bands have their business acumen together--even if they have a handle on contracts, publishing and copyrights, do they think about press releases, or the single sheets with barcodes that music retailers are looking for? You can make a record and sit on hundreds of copies 'til Doomsday if no one is working it on your behalf. Online indie promotional sites will gladly take your money but if their efforts don't generate sales, then what?"

Does the future lie between the rapacious, out-of-touch corporate music behemoths and the limited reach of DIY musicians? Tanin thinks that boutique labels focused on particular genres--or in RockIt's case a geographic region--will afford bands the career nurturing once provided by Blue Note, Chess, Atlantic, Stiff and a host of small-to-medium size outfits whose operators were usually as concerned with the music as the bottom line. The advantage for musicians in finding a good label is much the same as finding a good producer. It's gotten easy to make a CD in your bedroom but, Tanin concludes, "It's important to have someone outside of what you're doing to look at what you're doing. You can't buy some software, push a few buttons and expect to have the same experience and wisdom as someone whose been making records for 30 years.

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