



# Spotlight

## Victory Scores With Indie Grit *After A Decade, The Label Is A Force To Be Reckoned With*

BY BRYAN REESMAN

When people hear of independent record labels in corporate culture, they often think of start-ups with plenty of venture capital. But Victory Records began with little cash and made a profit the old-fashioned way: The label earned it.

As it marks its 10th anniversary, Victory has become a highly successful and influential indie label, but it has taken a lot of blood, sweat and tears to reach that point.

"The reality is, Tony [Brummel] started this company in his apartment, and it has developed into what it is today," says Nicolas C. Ferrara, partner at entertainment law firm Serling, Rooks and Ferrara. "A part of that [success] is related to the people that work at Victory, but a majority of it has to be attributed to Tony and his vision. To be successful, you have to have great A&R and marketing skills. He knows his market."

In 1994, after five years of Tony Brummel releasing seven-inch records as a hobby, Victory blossomed into a full-time record label and released its first full-length CD.

By February 1994, Snapcase's debut album, "Lookinglasself," had sold 30,000 copies in only a few months. That same year, Brummel hired his first employee, got the company Web



TAKING BACK SUNDAY: HITTING THE CHARTS AND APPROACHING GOLD

site up and running and opened Victory's online store in time for Christmas.

During the first quarter of 1995, Victory signed international distribution agreements in Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy and Sweden. Releases by Earth Crisis, Integrity and Snapcase followed, and

the label experienced strong growth.

Victory reached a pivotal point by partnering with RED Distribution in the fall of 1996. The first release through this new association was Earth Crisis' "Gomorrhah's Season Ends," which became the label's first album to crack the *Billboard* Top Heatseekers chart.

"[Tony] had that core artist roster, like Snapcase and Earth Crisis, that brought [the label to RED] in the first place and got our attention," recalls Alan Becker, senior VP of product development at RED Distribution. "He has the ability to always keep things fresh and exciting and capture a new wave that is really bringing him into the mainstream—bands like Hatebreed, Thursday, Taking Back Sunday and Atreyu."

In 1997, a year that would see the company double its staff to 15 people, Hatebreed kicked off a slate of prominent new releases. In addition, Snapcase's "Progression Through Unlearning" became a seminal release for the label, according to Clint Billington, production manager for Victory.

"It gave the label notoriety, because it was such a musically ground-

breaking album," Billington says. "That was Snapcase's second full-length release, and it just really took off. It was probably the first time that mainstream as well as underground critics were able to embrace the same Victory release."

The label continued to make inroads outside of the United States, and by

June 1998, Koch Entertainment became Victory's exclusive Canadian distributor. Another important milestone that year was the creation of the Another Victory publishing division.

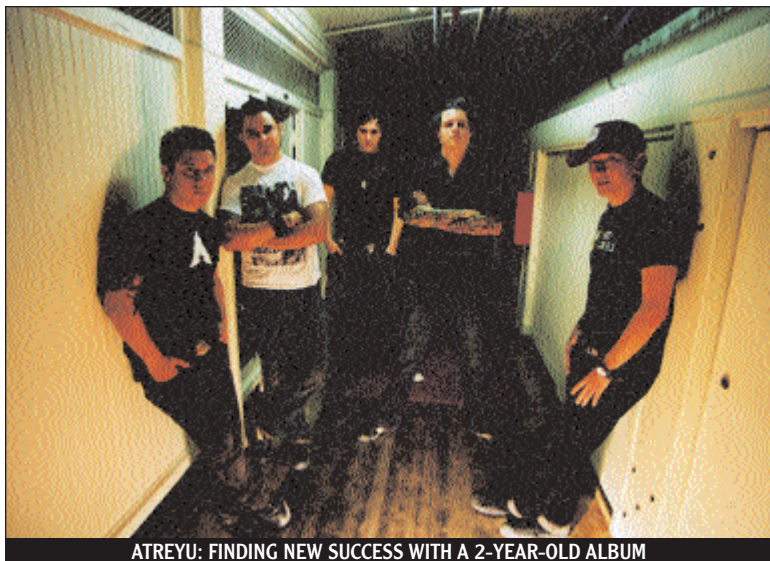
"Another Victory is a separate company that controls the copyrights for many of our artists," explains Brummel, who confesses he knew nothing about publishing but started the venture out of frustration. "The bigger publishers [associated] with some of our artists at the time weren't doing anything, but they were always the first ones to ask where their check was. So I started our company because I felt that we were [already] doing the work of the publisher."

It should also be noted that, all along, Victory handled its artists' merchandising through its own VSP division.

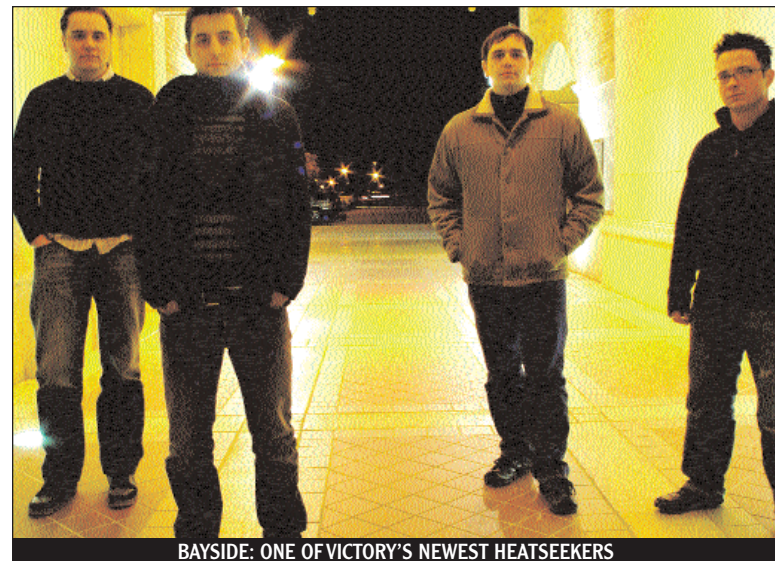
"If we put out a record, we just saw the merchandise as a natural extension of that," Brummel says. "I don't have a record company, I have a lifestyle company. If you buy the record, you want the shirt, you want the hat, you want everything."

By 1999, the label was branching out into other genres with devoted fan bases by developing acts in the punk, ska, metal and alternative subgenres. Then, in 2001, Victory sold Hatebreed to Universal.

"[Hardcore metal] is certainly a hard  
*(Continued on page 22)*



ATREYU: FINDING NEW SUCCESS WITH A 2-YEAR-OLD ALBUM



BAYSIDE: ONE OF VICTORY'S NEWEST HEATSEEKERS

# Spotlight

## Victory's Brummel Sets Long-Term Goals

BY BRYAN REESMAN

When Tony Brummel started Victory Records as a side project in 1989, he had only \$800 to play with. Once he kicked things off with some seven-inch vinyl releases of underground, hardcore punk bands, Brummel kept pumping out music. After five years, his pastime evolved into a serious venture.

By 1994, Victory had become a full-time business, one that now includes a music publishing company (Another Victory) and merchandising arm (VSP). Currently, there are 20 bands on its roster, including Taking Back Sunday and Atreyu, and the label's guitar-driven music spans the gamut—hardcore, emo, punk, ska, metal.

Brummel, an indie entrepreneur who based his company on passion and street smarts rather than a traditional business model, has done quite well for himself, reporting continuous growth every year.

Last year, Nielsen SoundScan listed Victory as the No. 2 independent rock label in the United States. Meanwhile, Taking Back Sunday's debut, "Tell All Your Friends," is approaching

400,000 units shipped, and Atreyu, which is slated to be on this summer's Ozzfest, has moved 100,000 copies of its "Suicide Notes and Butterfly Kisses."

Ten years later, Victory has 25 full-time employees in Chicago and one in London, and there are plans to



BRUMMEL: 'ADDICTED TO ADVERSITY'

have two in Toronto by the end of the summer.

In this exclusive interview, Brummel discusses the label's history, his philosophy and goals and what can be expected from Victory in 2004.

**Victory recently opened its first office outside the United States, in London. How did that come about?**

International is usually somewhere around 20%-25% of our gross sales, and we always had somebody here in the States that handled the international partners. But it got to the point where we needed to have somebody actually based in Europe, who is there for our artists and can easily jump on a plane and hit whatever territory [necessary] to help push the product. We have distributors in over 25 territories.

**You started your Web site in 1994. What inspired you to do this so early? Was it for promotion, information or to recruit fans?**

All of the above. It started as a way to cheaply get the information out there. Originally [it was] the old bulletin board system and newsgroups, pre-Web sites. That information migrated into the first Victory Web site.

We started doing e-commerce in December 1995. I was fortunate to have a lot of friends who were involved in that industry at the time. So Victory

was in a good situation, because as the technology improved, we were privy to it without having to pay for it.

**From the start, you have done low-budget videos. Before MTV and Fuse started playing more underground clips, what types of outlets did you go to with those videos?**

### Victory Records: Fact File

Headquarters: Chicago  
Key executives:  
Tony Brummel, CEO  
Ramsey Dean, VP of sales  
John Kuliak, national director of radio promotions  
Clint Billington, production manager  
Heather West, director of publicity  
Web site: victoryrecords.com

It was predominately regional video shows. We would use the videos as a vehicle for retailers, whether it was the local skateboard shop or a mom-and-pop store that had a TV, and anybody that could potentially

play a video.

One of our other databases would be club owners that would play our videos over their system in between sets, before and after the show or in the bar. We were sending our videos to anybody that would have [customers] that might potentially be into our artists. To this day, we still do that.

We have videos that might not get played on Fuse, MTV or another high-profile network, but there are lots of smaller outlets that are playing them. People are definitely seeing them. You have to be creative.

**Are MTV and Fuse more receptive to your videos these days?**

MTV and Fuse have been extremely supportive of Victory [artists].

**Which bands have been getting the most airplay?**

In the past year, it would be bands like Taking Back Sunday, but all of our bands get support on different programs.

Right now, "Headbanger's Ball" on MTV2 has four of our videos on their playlist [by] Freya, Snapcase, Atreyu  
*(Continued on page 26)*

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the most persevering"**

- Napoleon Bonaparte

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# With Partners In Place Worldwide, Victory Expands

BY BRYAN REESMAN

While Tony Brummel is credited as the driving force behind the success of Victory Records, a dedicated staff and partners around the world are helping him bring the label's music to new and old fans.

But as always, Brummel does it on his own terms.

"Some labels, especially within the hardcore [and] punk rock scene, aren't too professional; they are just fans of the music," observes Ronald Drayer, managing director and co-owner of Suburban, Victory's distributor in the Benelux region (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg).

"Tony is a music lover and very professional, and let's not forget dedicated. He's like a pit bull when it comes to his label and artists," Drayer observes. "I think working his label in a punk rock way but not considering marketing [to be] a dirty word has helped a lot."

Possessing a large group of international distributors, particularly in Europe, Victory opened its London office last year. International VP Russell Aldrich is the one-man operation

that coordinates all of the label's affairs in that region of the world.

A Toronto office may also open by late summer, which makes sense, given the number of label acts hailing from north of the border.



ZGARKA: COMMITTED TO CANADA

"Tony is one of the most accomplished label owners of the last 10 years," says Dominique Zgarka, president of Koch Entertainment, Victory's distributor in Canada. "He understands his audience and his bands and what they're both looking for. He helps them build the success they deserve.

Being on Victory means something, and few labels [can say that].

"Victory's commitment to Canada is well-known," he continues. "The label signings of Grade, Silverstein, Somehow Hollow and, most recently, A Perfect Murder are prime examples of his commitment not only to great, new music but helping Canadian artists succeed on a global scale."

Ben Ralph, A&R/label manager of Australian distribution partner Stomp, says, "Victory has been a success due to the passion and knowledge of its staff. [They have] a willingness to go the extra length to support their bands and their worldwide partners. Victory is not only a label, it is a family."

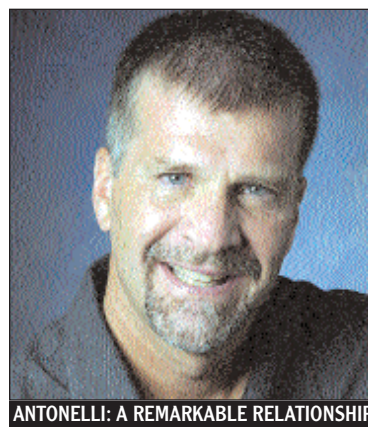
That extended global distribution family includes Plastichead in the United Kingdom, Soulfood in Germany, JVC in Japan, Border in Sweden, Venus in Italy and Mastertrax in Spain, among others.

#### FIERCELY INDEPENDENT ROOTS

"Tony's a tough guy to do business with, because he's fiercely independent and fiercely protective of what he believes [in]," says Jeff McClusky,

president of Jeff McClusky and Associates. "I have a lot of admiration for him, and I've had my beefs with him.

"We've been a major component of his promotion department," McClusky continues. "I put together



ANTONELLI: A REMARKABLE RELATIONSHIP

an entire outsource team for Thursday last year, and look where the record is sitting today; some 200,000 units [sold]. It would be difficult to say that a major record company would have done a better job."

Alan Becker, senior VP of product development at RED Distribution,

says that Victory artists have gained fairly significant airplay, most notably Thursday and Taking Back Sunday.

Becker adds that because of lack of significant mainstream radio and video play, indie labels like Victory have development and marketing plans based on touring, press and artist development.

"This is the flip [side] of the major-label model that is so radio-driven," he observes. "Tony can go out and develop a band that sells 200,000 copies and is significant [with] a fan base that buys tickets and T-shirts, as well. So the band [as a] brand is being developed." Radio then becomes the avenue for greater exposure.

In order to promote its acts' newest releases at retail, Victory has used a wide array of marketing campaigns.

RED recently collaborated with Victory on a half-hour block of videos by label artists called "Discover the New Breed of Music," which was sponsored by Sam Goody and aired in February on the Fuse music channel. Nine bands were featured, including Taking Back Sunday, Spitalfield and Atreyu.

In addition, Ramsey Dean, Victo-

*(Continued on page 24)*

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# Spotlight

## Victory Wins

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genre [in which] to sell bucket loads of records," admits Monte Lipman, president of Universal Records. "But, ultimately, I think Hatebreed might be considered one of the biggest bands within that genre. We believe Jamey [Jasta] is a big star, and we give a lot of credit to Victory because it sold the first 100,000 units, and that's always the most difficult."

On Victory, Hatebreed's "Satisfaction Is the Death of Desire" has sold 158,000 units, according to Nielsen SoundScan, while the Universal title "Perseverance" has sold 234,000 copies.

Lipman adds, "We like saying that we're one of the few labels that have

successfully negotiated a deal with Tony. He's fiercely independent."

### CUP OF COFFEE WITH MCA

Such independence was reaffirmed by a most unusual business transaction in April 2002, when Victory sold a 25% minority interest to MCA Records. Less than a year-and-a-half later, the label returned MCA's equity purchase funds and dissolved its relationship with the company. MCA was shuttered shortly thereafter.

Brummel notes that although he respects some of his major-label counterparts, he does not abide by their business philosophies, especially when it comes to breaking bands.

"Independents are in a different business than the majors, who are part of public companies," he asserts. "Art is about freedom and flexibility, not quar-

terly reports and bureaucracy."

In August 2002, Victory sold Thursday to Island/Def Jam, after joining the Universal family through MCA's 25% equity purchase in the company—a complicated scenario Brummel cannot comment on. The band's Victory debut, "Full Collapse," has sold 280,000 units, while its major-label follow-up, "War All the Time," has sold 259,000 copies.

When Heather West joined Victory two years ago as director of publicity, Thursday was receiving substantial airplay on MTV2. She began coordinating press coverage with larger national publications that the label had not reached before but which were starting to respond to Victory's artists. West discovered something interesting in the process.

"We don't need those people to break a band," she says. "We've proved that



SILVERSTEIN: MIXING Hardcore, Punk and Emo

time and time again. If they climb on board, that's great, but if not, we have our own network."

During the past decade, Brummel and his dedicated employees have expanded his company, partnerships and fan base organically. As a result, their hard work and perseverance are reaping big dividends today.

"We're shipping more records than ever before," VP of sales Ramsey Dean declares. "There's a new level of respect at retail for what we do, and we have a very consistent track record. We don't really have stiffs here because of our fan base."

RED's Becker adds that Brummel's newer bands "are bringing him more attention than ever. His records are not selling 30,000-40,000 anymore, they're pretty consistently selling 50,000-100,000."

Last year, Taking Back Sunday became the label's first band to chart on *Billboard's* sister radio publication Airplay Monitor's alternative radio charts, according to John Kuliak, Victory's national director of radio promotions. The band's album, "Tell All Your Friends," is approaching gold certification.

Kuliak adds that Victory has recently started an active rock campaign with Atreyu that initially began in three markets. "In each of those markets, SoundScan [figures] went up between six and seven times what it was before the record got airplay," he says. "So that is the story we're taking to radio."

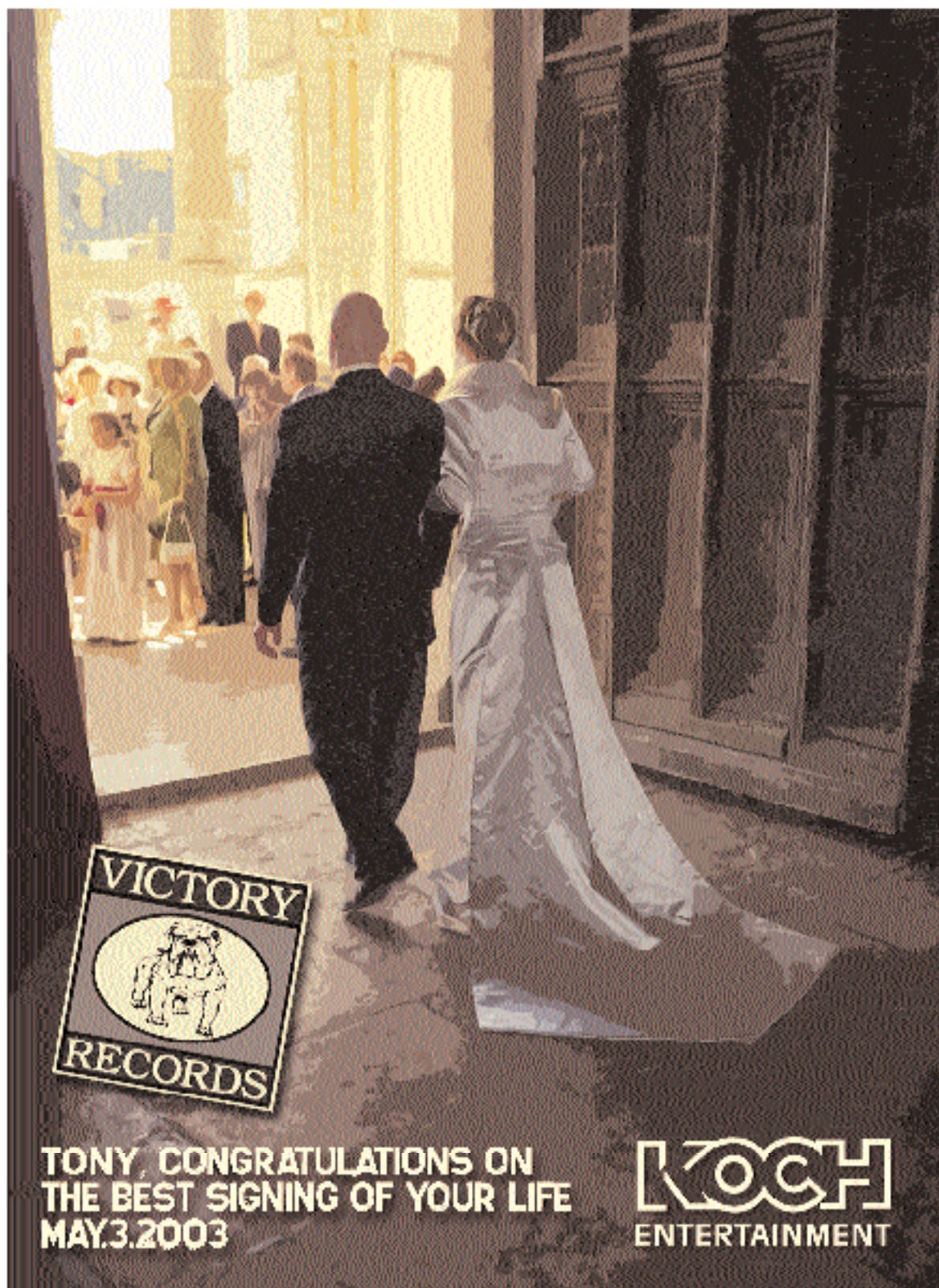
### PASSION IS KEY

How the label keeps growing is a simple equation. "Victory has a staff that is talented at finding bands early on," says Jillian Newman, senior manager at Amp Management, whose roster includes Taking Back Sunday. "That's the hard part: taking the risk on a band with no sales history. You have to go with your passion at that point."

"Victory has a good system set up for bands that are just starting out," she continues. "Tony is a smart businessman who sets his mind on something and pursues it with a lot of passion. The bulldog logo is pretty representative of his management style. He constantly attempts to challenge the system."

And that system is taking notice. Victory recently scored another first in late February, when four of its bands

(Continued on page 24)



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## In Praise Of Victory

"First and foremost, Tony has a strong business sense and has surrounded himself with a team of dedicated and hardworking employees. About four years ago, I had the pleasure of spending a day at the Victory warehouse, and while there I sat in on meetings and saw the inner workings firsthand. Victory has managed to stay loyal to itself and to the underground scene; even though they are a 'big label,' many kids still consider them underground."

—**Jeff Terranova,**  
Smorgasbord Records owner

"They work their asses off for their bands, sending them on tour and helping wherever they can. These guys are real music lovers."

—**Jochen Richert,**  
Soulfood Music owner

"Tony has never ceased to amaze Koch Entertainment with Victory's releases. Its bands are continuing to tour Canada, and retail has opened up its shelves to Victory [acts], treating them with the respect the label

deserves. Koch is in the middle of a huge marketing and promotional retail and TV/media campaign for Victory as we speak."

—**Dominique Zgarka,**  
Koch Entertainment president in Canada



"They're a very passionate, very focused and very driven company. Tony is a very good record executive. He's difficult [to do business with], but I chalk that up to passion. He believes in what he does. He believes what he does is right, and [if] anybody questions that, there might be some friction."

—**Monte Lipman,**  
Universal Records president

"You've got to hand it to Tony for building such a great and growing label out of nothing and with no one's help. He also dissed MCA when he saw how shallow the major label game has gotten."

—**Michael Koch,**  
Koch Entertainment CEO

Compiled by Bryan Reesman.

## Victory Wins

Continued from page 22

appeared on Nielsen SoundScan's Top New Artist chart (from which *Billboard* culls Top Heatseekers).

Brummel proudly notes, "While the rest of the chart was on a backslide from [the previous] week's surge in sales, we managed to not only hold our ground but make huge advances."

Taking Back Sunday was No. 26 (after almost two years on the chart), Atreyu hit No. 37, Bayside was No. 109 and Silverstein debuted at No. 111 on the Heatseekers chart. Impressively enough, Atreyu's "Suicide Notes and Butterfly Kisses" had been out for 90 weeks, and Silverstein's "When Broken Was Easily Fixed" was 40 weeks old.

"Overall, our sales rose 17% while the chart dropped 16%," Brummel notes. Additionally, he says that Taking Back Sunday's "Tell All Your Friends" is Victory's longest-running album on Nielsen SoundScan's Top New Artist chart and *Billboard*'s Top Heatseekers and Top Independent Albums charts.

From hardcore and metal to emo and screamo, Victory Records continues to discover and promote bands with tenacious followings and potential for widespread exposure. The fact that Atreyu will be on the second stage at this summer's Ozzfest offers proof of that.

"Tony is a very astute judge of talent, and he has a tremendous work ethic," says Jason Flom, president of Lava Records. "He has built a little culture out there in Chicago of people who share his vision. When you have good records and good people, good things happen."

## Partners

Continued from page 20

ry VP of sales, even convinced the Best Buy chain to add an emo/punk endcap in each of its stores.

RED Distribution president Ken Antonelli says that Victory titles are showing increases.

"Tony stays with his acts," Antonelli says. "He's got some amazing insight into the bands that he finds, and he knows what to do with them. It's been a remarkable relationship between us."

"He's an incredibly talented A&R guy who grew up learning this business on his own. He's done a remarkable job of branding his company," he continues. "Victory has an incredible

identity that stands for something. It's given us an enormous amount of credibility in the independent community, and over the years we've really established his presence."

"Credibility" is a key term used when discussing the label. "Victory has a solid reputation as a label that can break bands," says Tim Smith, manager of Atreyu. "They have a great sales track record and have the capability to get a great band out there and in people's faces."

"Being on an indie label is good, because the turnaround time is usually pretty fast," he says. "There's minimal red tape, and we can usually act on things quickly. Tony's been very successful at what he does. Victory is without question one of the largest indies out there."

**Congratulations to Tony, Clint, and Everyone at VICTORY RECORDS! Ten successful years is a great achievement and milestone.**

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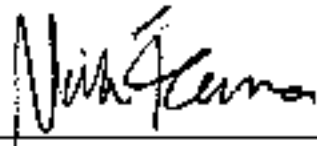
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## Brummel

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and Silverstein. Recently, Catch 22 was on Fuse's "Oven Fresh," and Taking Back Sunday was on MTV. Also, Fuse was playing the Spitalfield video, and for weeks Atreyu was in rotation on MTV2's "Uranium."

We've done very well with our support and relationships with both of those networks. At the same time they know what our music is worth to their programming, and obviously their viewers are telling them that they need to be playing this stuff. That's what it boils down to—the people that will potentially buy the music are supportive [and] saying that it needs to be played.

**You are the sole shareholder of the label. Would you ever want to go public? And if so, how would that change the nature of your business?**

That's why we're able to do what we do. We're a privately held record company—no board meetings, no quarterly reports; we do everything from the gut. I know that's why we're successful, and that's part of the reason why the majors are having problems.

It's art, but these public companies have to make their shareholders happy and hit their quarterly numbers. It's not about art, it's just about product and pushing out as much as you can for billing, and a lot of times at the sacrifice of an important artist's career.

It needs to go back to how it was in the 1930s and 1940s, when the people that started the first record companies in America were all independents. They weren't Harvard and Yale graduates; these were guys that liked music. They were guys that hung out in clubs. It seems like that's what we're swinging back to, at least in my world.

We don't care about first-week sales. It's nice to have a good showing so people know the record is real, but my barometer is, "Where is the record in six months? Where is it in 12 months?"

Some of our records don't even pick up heat and traction until a year after they're released. It is our job to stick with it, believe in the artist and keep plugging away so that we can develop careers for these people that are depending on us.

If we were a public company or part of a major, we would never be able to do half of what we do. There would be somebody telling us to stop.

**What is the longest it has taken to break one of your acts?**

A lot of times it takes six months before anything real even gets started. We've got several records where that's the case right now. Like Atreyu, whose record will be 2 years old in June, and we're seeing the biggest sales weeks now.

Their debut album will be seeing its biggest sales ever, and we're going to drop their new album at the end of June. How cool is that? There is not one major label in the world that can say that they've had a situation like that. Not one.

Taking Back Sunday's record will be out two years [in April], and we're seeing the biggest sales on that record, too.

You hear stories from people who work at majors or visit majors—whether it's a lawyer or a manager or an artist—about how depressing it is, how quiet it is and how there are empty desks and cubicles. It's crazy over here, man. There is major electricity in the air. I'm kicking my employees out of the office at nine o'clock at night, [saying], "Go home!"

**What can we expect from Victory during the next year?**

We have a very busy release schedule for 2004—probably about 25 [albums]. This summer alone is going to be huge for us, with new albums from Atreyu, Taking Back Sunday and Stray Light Run. Those are going to be

three huge records right there.

Aside from that there are other records that are currently selling and active by Silverstein, Bayside, Between the Buried and Me, Spitalfield and the other great records we're going to be releasing. We definitely have our work cut out for us.

If we release Taking Back Sunday's record the right week, it could potentially be a No. 1 album. It will [at least] be top five. The current album will be gold within the next [few] weeks. Their fans are beyond passionate.

A lot of what we do boils down to viral and direct marketing, street teams, the Internet, trend spotting, data mining, customer feedback and

being a fiscally responsible business. We are mystique engineers. A lot of what we do is extremely clandestine and nontraditional.

We are addicted to adversity and thus use many nontraditional methods to market and promote our artists. What we do is very intriguing and attractive to the artists that come here and the people that buy their albums. Everyone involved knows that this is something very special.

**What advice would you offer to a young kid who wants to start his or her own label?**

Be sickly passionate about what you do.

# Congratulations to Victory Records on your 10th Anniversary!

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## Life Experience Shapes Label

Victory Records founder Tony Brummel credits the years he spent in the Caribbean during his youth for shaping his perspective of life and business.

**Where and when did you live in the Caribbean?**

We lived in Nassau, Bahamas, from late 1977 to late 1981—basically 2nd to 7th grade. I was accelerated from 4th to 6th.

**How did that experience influence you and the work you do now?**

It sculpted me, it created my mold. Socially, it made me immune to many of the imperfections of American society. People there operated from "can do" to "can't"—sun up to sun down—with very little. No one beat around the bush. Honesty and loyalty were total. There was an unerring sense of community.

Seeing Bob Marley at the Queen Elizabeth Sports Center in December 1979 on the Survival tour was one of my most profound memories. That performance—on and mostly off the stage—was the most composed act of defiance I will ever see. It was revolutionary and liberating.

I knew from that day that I would be involved with something important, something that touched people. Being involved with music is a wonderful and enriching gift when you truly realize its power and cultural significance. To this day, I credit my favorite artist—Peter Tosh—for turning me into a 12-year-old island rocker.

**This has always been  
a very noisy kid since  
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