

THE MAN WITH A PLAN

When Canadian acts want an American record deal, Chris Taylor's number is usually the first one they dial

BY CHRISTOPHER SHULGAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALYSON ALIANO

How weird has the music industry become? Consider this: Early one Thursday evening in January, Toronto music lawyer Chris Taylor is sitting in an office high above midtown Manhattan in a meeting with Mary Gormley, vice president of A & R for Atlantic Records. There's little business to talk about; both Taylor and Gormley know Atlantic isn't really looking for new acts. So Gormley wanders into a monologue about her dog, Gidget. The pooch isn't present, but her artifacts are strewn round the room. There's a sleeping mat in the corner and, on the wall by the desk, a framed portrait of what looks like a Shih Tzu. Gormley tells Taylor her pet has an interesting ability: When someone supplies the proper keyword, the mop-like canine will mount the nearest object and commence hip thrusting – what Gormley refers to as “humping on command.” She's about to utter the trigger-word when her telephone rings. Glancing at her call display, Gormley holds up a finger.

“Hi Linda,” she says after donning a headset. Taylor waits patiently. A few appointments ago, Taylor was in the office of James Dowdall, Warner Brothers Records' senior vice-president of A & R (the talent scouts who find and sign musicians to record labels). Dowdall took a call from someone he called “Macy” – later, he said it was the soul singer Macy Gray, who, Dowdall explained, is working on producing a new act for Warner. When Gormley finishes her call, she says her conversation partner was Linda Perry, a producer best known for creating hits for Christina Aguilera and Pink. “So,” says Gormley. “Where was I?” Once reminded, she supplies the keyword, the abracadabra that sets off her pet's copulatory reflex. That command is, “Fuck.” For Taylor's benefit, Gormley demonstrates.

“Fuck!” she says, all spritely and bright. “Fuck, Gidget! Fuck!”

Most pop songs have something called a “break” – a kind of musical gearshift

where the tempo changes, the drumbeat switches rhythm, and the lyrics move from verse to chorus. If Chris Taylor's career is a song, he's at the break. During the last decade, Taylor has become by far the most prominent music-industry lawyer Canada has. Among his roster of 100 clients are artists that were responsible for nine releases that made Billboard's Top 200 album chart last year, including Nelly Furtado, Sum 41, Avril Lavigne, and Fefe Dobson. He also represents a significant fraction of the nation's most critically respected acts (among them: Hot Hot Heat, Buck 65, and Hawksley Workman).

“There is no one in the U.S. who matters who does not know who Chris Taylor is,” says Jonathan Simkin, a Vancouver lawyer who

WILL DEATH FROM ABOVE BE TAYLOR'S NEXT SUM 41?

represents such grunge-revival acts as Nickelback and Default, as well as the Matthew Good Band, making him Taylor's closest rival as Canada's most high-profile music lawyer. “He got to where he is because he's thought to have a good ear. Chris is considered a credible source. If Chris picks up the phone, calls Arista, and says, ‘This band is the shit,’ then [Arista] is going to listen to that band.”

Taylor is thirty-eight. For much of his career, he straddled the boundary between the financial and creative sides of the music business – the line between suit and talent. While attending Toronto's Osgoode Hall Law School, he played in various Queen Street West bands, and for much of his twenties, he was lead singer of a reggae/rock act called One. He quit at thirty, he says, because he decided the band would never be successful enough to allow him to support a family.

Law was the backup.

His casual dress – think the more hip-hop aisles of Old Navy – almost succeeds in disguising his suit-ness. There's a hoop in his left ear, and his dark, wavy hair is covered by a Detroit Tigers baseball cap pulled snug on his brow, *à la* Magnum, P.I. When he ventures into New York's February cold snap, he dons a Canada Goose down parka that is the approximate dimension of a queen-sized duvet. Envision a stoner with a head cold and you've got a good handle on the way he speaks. But none of that obscures Taylor's deal-making ability. His blue eyes betray a rare intelligence. When he listens to someone talk, he often seems one step removed from the conversation, as though some part of him is screening, airport X-ray style, for bullshit.

Many music lawyers restrict themselves to negotiating their client's contracts. But Taylor built his practice by working for free with some of his acts, then toting the performer's demo CD down to New York or Los Angeles. He'd play the CD for A & R scouts such as Gormley and Dowdall until someone signed the act. Such sessions helped to get Nelly Furtado her contract with Dreamworks; Taylor was also instrumental in arranging deals for Sum 41 and Three Days Grace. After only seven years in practice, he gets dozens of demos a week because he's become known as one of the nation's prime conduits for an American record deal. The reverse is also true: In the U.S., he's considered a lightning rod for what's going on in Canada.

But over the last several years, as retail music sales have shrunk annually, presumably as a result of piracy, and the industry continues its slow consolidation, the label behemoths have stopped signing new acts; and those musicians that do get signed have vastly smaller advances. “Over the last year and a half, shopping bands has been a nightmare,” says Taylor. “In 2002, it seemed like every band I shopped got a deal with a major label. But in 2003, things got a lot tougher.



Chris Taylor, at left, with Death From Above's Jesse Keeler (centre) and Sebastien Grainger, secured an American record deal for the band after a four-night New York City showcase.

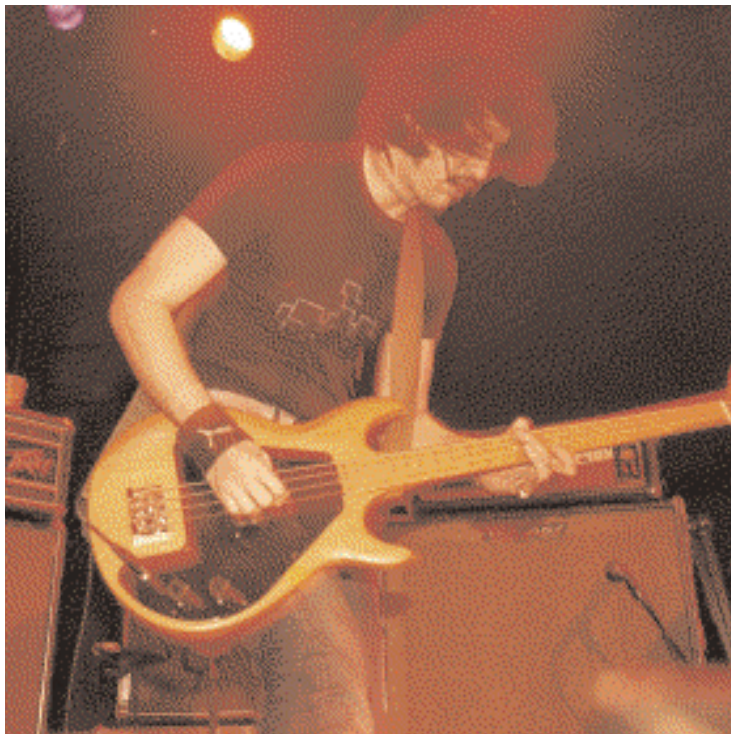
And the labels got a lot more evil." He sums up the state of the industry: "The music business is in the shitter."

So Taylor is diversifying: In mid-2003, he founded his own label, Last Gang Records, which currently has three acts: Metric, the hot L.A.-based outfit; Slan, led by Sook-Yin Lee, the only CBC staffer ever accused of being an outlaw; and Death From Above, a duo that

Taylor has just begun to manage with another lawyer in his firm, Stacey Mitsopoulos. There is some irony here: Taylor, a man known for the extent he champions artists against labels, is forming his own label. The move isn't unprecedented; both of Detroit's major musical exports, the White Stripes and Eminem, have managers who were once their lawyers.

The point of Taylor's trip to New York is to

get an American label interested in licensing for U.S. release the next album by the Toronto-based band Death From Above, a gifted two-person outfit with a distinctive bass-heavy sound one might think of as hardcore pop: aggressive like Black Flag, catchy like Kelis. Taylor is betting they'll impress New York audiences, and he's assembled a series of four shows aimed at exposing the band to



With Keeler thundering on bass and Grainger behind the drums, Death From Above blasts out a set at New York's Bowery Ballroom.

as many label scouts as possible. How Death From Above's shows fare over the next couple of nights will, to a large extent, indicate whether Taylor's career change is going to fly.

Hours after the Gormley appointment, Taylor finds himself in a dive on the Lower East Side called Sin-é to watch the second gig in the four-night Death From Above showcase. With a half-hour left before they're due to start, Death From Above's drummer, Sebastien Grainger, twenty-five, scans the bar, which houses no more than ten people, most of whom work with the band. "It's going to be awfully loud in here if this is our audience," he says.

He turns out to be right: It is loud in there, but not because the venue is empty. The duo, with Grainger on the kit and twenty-seven-year-old Jesse Keeler on the bass, has enjoyed some nice buzz, garnering advance mention in *The New Yorker's* Night Life section (Death From Above's "high-energy sound has all the subtlety of a ball-peen hammer to the teeth") and a write-up in the *Village Voice* ("...big throbbing meaty rock numbers with booming low end and no small amount of grit and swagger"). A quarter-hour before showtime, the space begins to fill up with the fur-trimmed hoods that denote a wintertime hipster crowd. When Keeler and Grainger clamber onto the waist-high stage, the room count stands at forty. Taylor does a survey to

note the scouts in the room. (He claims Elektra, RCA, and Warner Music are there.) Onstage, Grainger leans into his microphone. "We're Death From Above, and we're from Toronto." The set begins.

Grainger and Keeler don't so much play their instruments as play your chest. Aside from some synth work and the occasionally vocodered lyric, the songs are composed exclusively with the tools of percussion: the four-strings of Keeler's bass, and the long-

TAYLOR'S GOING TO TOUR DFA LIKE VIKINGS FOR A YEAR

suffering skins of Grainger's drum kit. "We're serious about our volume," Grainger tells the audience. It's an unnecessary observation. Having witnessed several tracks played at head-bursting decibel, the crowd can tell.

"I'd been a fan of Death From Above for months," says Suroosh Alvi, one of the founders of New York's Vice family of companies, who saw Keeler and Grainger play for the first time at Sin-é. "I thought it was interesting that finally there was a band with balls coming out of Toronto, which hasn't happened in at least a decade. But seeing them live,

for me, took them to a whole new level."

Next afternoon, Friday, turns out to be the most important part of the showcase: the getting-to-know-you sessions designed to begin what everyone expects to be the long process of procuring Death From Above's next album an American-label deal. Joined by co-manager Stacey Mitsopoulos and booking agent Glen Vogelsang, Taylor and the band drive first to the Universal Music headquarters in Manhattan to chat with Strummer Recordings, an indie offshoot that's home to The Rapture. Then they pile back into Keeler's jalopy and cross the East River, intending to have an afternoon beer with another label, Vice Recordings, the music arm of the magazine publisher.

The visit is to be casual, just a drop-in session set up out of convenience, since that night's show, at Northsix, is a few blocks away. "This is more like it," thinks Keeler as they walk in. Strummer Recordings had been a warren of windowless chambers; the atmosphere included a mania for security — Keeler thought it strange he required a key card to visit the washroom. In contrast, Vice is an open space in an old factory. Taylor flops on a couch in what passes for the meeting area, little more than a couple of shabby chesterfields and some easy chairs. Taylor can afford to relax. Since this is just a get-acquainted session, his role here isn't central. Soon after

the band's arrival, everyone settles in, drinking beers and talking music.

Then comes something Taylor didn't expect. Alvi calls over several staff and does a round of introductions: This is Adam Shore, he's the label manager of Vice Recordings – that sort of thing. Then he and Shore begin a lecture in Vice 101, providing Taylor and the rest with an in-depth overview of the company, down to which distribution channels they use for retail.

"It dawned on all of us that they were making a pitch, which totally took us off guard," Keeler says later. About an hour into the meeting, according to Taylor, Alvi makes things explicit by asking, "What would you guys be looking for in a deal?"

By this time, Death From Above is due at their sound check. Once Grainger and Keeler have left for Northsix, Taylor sketches out what he's seeking. He knows that one factor motivating Vice to move quickly on Death From Above is that the label is still smarting from failing to sign the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, who went on to sign with Interscope after Vice's interest sparked a bidding war.

So Taylor begins his spiel with something he knows will pique Alvi's interest. "It's not so much about the size of the advance, here," Taylor says. "Plenty of major labels like this band, but we want to start slow, to be with a label that will help us promote this band in the right way." He says he prefers to sell the rights to an indie label – an Epitaph, a Sub Pop – for the U.S. only, Taylor explains, and he hopes to do a one-album deal, perhaps with options for one or two more. Alvi and Shore, according to Taylor, indicate that's the sort of deal they favour as well.

As they head toward Northsix, Taylor voices a desire to get drunk. Things do get a little crazy: Before the gig, Grainger pukes up a bellyful of fluorescent violet coleslaw, and the night ends when he aims an ice ball at a van used by one of the other bands that played on the bill. What ensues is tense: The van halts, its side door slides open, and two heads peer from the back. Grainger stares back, and for a moment everyone thinks, *fight*. Then the door rumbles shut, and the van accelerates down the street. Its occupants shout at Grainger, accurately, "Crazy Canadian!"

The next night – the showcase's last – Chris Taylor stands in the centre of a basketball court's worth of varnished brown wood, in the middle of the Bowery Ballroom, a Manhattan concert venue, where Death From Above are slated to open for a sold-out concert by The

Stills, from Montreal. The Stills are running through their sound check, their lead singer smoking and ashing onstage. Chris Taylor is having a good moment. "Something like this had never happened to me before," Taylor says, meaning that a record deal was pitched before a showcase was even finished. Death From Above's New York showcase is the most successful he's engineered, and it serves to confirm that his move toward management is the right one.

Hours later, Messrs. Grainger and Keeler blast their set from the Bowery stage, and although they seem a little intimidated by the sea of bobbing heads, they give their usual: They kill. That night there is talk about an offer of tour dates with Andrew W.K. (rejected). There is talk of studio canoodling with backpack rapper Buck 65 (also rejected). Taylor ends up inking the licensing deal with Vice by the beginning of spring – a faster-than-usual turnaround, he says. The band finishes its album, tentatively titled *You're A Woman, I'm A Machine*, at the end of April, and schedule it for an August release on Taylor's Last Gang Records in Canada and Vice Recordings in the United States. Taylor also drafts a rigorous concert schedule that will see the duo travelling this summer across North America and Europe. "They're going to tour like Vikings for the rest of the year," he says.

As the evening winds up, The Stills' lead singer is introducing one of the concert's final songs when he pauses. "A year ago," he says, "We played this place as the first of three bands with no one to see us." He looks from the left to the right of the room, studying the sold-out space, and concludes, "This is nice." Taylor and Death From Above's two young musicians hope they'll follow a similar path.

"I was trying to figure out this morning why I've enjoyed this trip so much," says Taylor, slumped in the Bowery's basement on a couch very similar to the one in Mary Gormley's office. He pauses a minute, as though he's not quite finished that figuring. But when he speaks again, his voice has the inflection of certainty. "What it is, is that, as the lawyer, you're off to the side, you're not privy to everything. It's more like, we'll call you when we need you. Now, as the manager, I'm the centre of everything."

He sits up.

"I'm the one with the plan."

Judging from the success of the New York trip, that's a good thing. ■

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