

Jim Olsen – “Signature Sounds Recording Company” 10th Anniversary Interview

Part 1 – The Music Fan Who Formed A Record Label

The interview with Jim Olsen, CEO Signature Sounds, took place on Thursday 7th November 2004. Jim was at his home in Whately, Massachusetts, and I was at home in Birmingham, England. Many thanks to Flora Reed at Signature Sounds for setting up the interview. We began by talking about Jim’s early life.....

Folk Wax : Can you recall your first musical memory.

Jim Olsen : There are a number of early memories that come to mind. I definitely remember seeing the Beatles on Ed Sullivan. We were gathered around my grandparent’s television. Some of my cousins were there, as well as my brothers and sisters all of whom are older than I am. They were making such a fuss, and the parents and grandparents were grumbling, “*What is this, these long haired guys?*” It all seemed tremendously exciting. I was six when that happened [J]. That’s my earliest memory. I feel very fortunate to be the age that I am, and to have grown up with older brothers and sisters. As I mention in the notes in the booklet that accompanies our 10th Anniversary commemorative CD, I really have vivid memories of hearing some of the great sixties music on the car radio. Listening to WABC in New York, for instance. It was such a rich time for music, from the Beach Boys to the Beatles and the Motown stuff – the pop music of the day – there was no alternative at that point, was there? [Laughs]. At least, that’s the way it felt here in America. There was the Pop Top 40 and that was about it.

FW : The early sixties, in the States, was the era of the *folk scare*. Presumably that music wasn’t significant to you, when you were young.

JO : No, not at that age certainly. My parents were not musical in the slightest. None of my love of music came from them. My dad liked Frank Sinatra, and had his records but virtually everybody did in that era. It was really through my siblings and my friends that I discovered music.

FW : Did any of your siblings, or did you, play a musical instrument.

JO : Yeah. My brother played bass and guitar, not very well. My sister’s played woodwind instruments. I took a couple of stabs at guitar, but it never really caught on. I’m actually pretty non-musical.

FW : If that’s the case, I guess you just listened to a hell of a lot of music.

JO : Yeah. There was a certain mystery about the sixties. They were such a wild time musically, politically. The graphics on the lp’s were wild. I remember staring at the cover of Cream’s “**Disraeli Gears**” and thinking “*What is this all about?*” [Laughs]. There were many flamboyant characters during that time. It was really a new world. These people were like aliens, so all of that entered into it.

FW : When we get to your late teens how did you make the quantum leap into the world of broadcasting and radio. Had you done anything musical before you entered the world of radio.

JO : No, nothing. I was just a big music fan while I was growing up. I remember being into the Allman Brothers at the time, and that led me back to the old blues musicians. The Allman Brothers and Eric Clapton and such played a lot of blues, and I was just a hound for – “*This is a song by T-Bone Walker, what does his stuff sound like?*” I’d go out and find that. That led me back to the old players. In my College years I was just a fan. I had a roommate in College, and a good friend, who worked in radio in high school. He was working at the College radio station. I went to Ithaca College, in Ithaca, New York. I was a Health Care Administration major, and thought I was going into business. In hanging around the radio station with him I grew an interest in it, and started doing radio in College. When I graduated from College I found that I wanted to pursue that interest – and so I did, and was in radio for many years before starting the label.

FW : Was WRSI the only station you worked at, before launching Signature Sounds.

JO : When I graduated from College, my first job was in a station in Rhode Island, WERI. I worked in a station in Portland, Maine for about a year, and then I wanted to get into management, more so than just

being a dj, so I went to a very small station in New Hampshire as the Programme Director, and from there I moved to WRSI in 1984.

FW : When you were a broadcast dj, what style of music did you play. Was the music principally folk and singer/songwriter oriented.

JO : I wanted to work in progressive radio in order to follow my personal music tastes, which certainly included folk, but also included a lot of other music. When I moved to WMDK in New Hampshire in 1983, there was a club down the street in Peterborough called The Folkway. It was a terrific club in the seventies and eighties, and really nurtured a lot of the performers of the time. The club was only two blocks from the radio station, so performers would come on before their shows and do interviews. I did many interviews and through those interviews had my first encounter with Greg Brown, John Gorka, Suzanne Vega and Nanci Griffith – folks like that. That really opened my eyes and I attended a lot of shows there. That was really when I first became aware of the folk scene and really dove into it full steam.

FW : So the next step in the progression from radio to record label, is that you meet a man who works for Calvin Klein. Did you know him personally.

JO : No. I moved to WRSI in 1984 and was hired as the Music Director first off, and then became the Programme and Music Director, basically from 1985 through 1996. Along about 1990, I got a call from this guy, one day, out of the blue. He would drive up and down Interstate 91, which is the Interstate right near where the radio station is, and he would hear my show. He managed a series of Calvin Klein stores. He called up *"I love what you do with the music, this is the music I want in my stores. Can I pay you, essentially, to make mix tapes for me that I can play in my stores."* That's what he did, and I did a series of those for him. Later, kicking myself, realising that I could have had a very lucrative business probably, using them as a base and taking that forward. After a while he started finding other ways to do it. It was a little cumbersome, because it was the days before CD burning, so you had to duplicate cassettes, and it really didn't work that well. Through that gentleman I met my partner Mark Thayer, and he helped me with duplicating the cassettes. It was a sideline in his studio business. As we got to know each other, Mark and I discussed projects and went on to record a series of **"Homegrown"** albums, for which we had a third partner, another of the dj's at the station who had a local music show called **"Homegrown."** We developed the idea to release fund raising CD's. We recorded them at Mark's Signature Sounds Studio. Through that I got to know a lot of the musicians that we ended up working with, as we moved forward.

FW : I managed to gather snippets of information regarding track listings of the **"Homegrown"** CD's from the web. They seem to focus on acoustic performers.

JO : Yeah, the Western Massachusetts., Pioneer Valley area was so rich in songwriters and acoustic music during that period of, the early to mid-nineties. It was a very exciting time here. Dar Williams and Martin Sexton were getting started. The Nields were here, and all of the people we ended up working with. The main club here is, The Iron Horse, and a lot of the national acts would come through. It seemed like a real focal point of that scene at the time.

FW : How precisely did you meet Mark [Thayer]. Had someone at the radio station recommended him.

JO : I actually looked him up in the phone book.

FW : So it was totally random.

JO : Totally random. I needed somebody to duplicate the cassettes.

FW : It's a strange world isn't it.

JO : [Laughs].

FW : The pair of you were no doubt tossing ideas around, including launching a record label, so at what stage does Leah Kunkel become involved. I know her as a performer who cut two solo albums for CBS in 1979/80 then formed The Coyote Sisters who recorded for RCA Victor around 1984. These days, she's your legal representative.

JO : After doing two “**Homegrown**” albums, we decided that it would be fun to start this label. At first I thought of it, as a sideline business or a hobby. I had known Leah, as a character around town, and knew she was an attorney – and had had this music career and was wanting to do music business. She was a logical choice to call up, and at first she tried to talk us out of it [Laughs].

FW : That certainly appears to be the case going by the quote in the 10th Anniversary CD liner booklet [*]. It's not as if she didn't know what she was talking about, having gone through *the mill* herself.

JO : Exactly. She has been a great resource that way. It's unusual to have your attorney have that direct experience. I recall a couple of times in formulating our contracts we'd pull out one of her old contracts with Sony or whatever, and take a look at the language - and just laugh at it. Her contract would be ninety-five pages long and ours was eight pages long.

FW : I'd like to talk a little about the “**Homegrown**” albums. Was “**Homegrown Holidays**” a Xmas album.

JO : Yes, that was a Xmas album.

FW : Presumably “**Homegrown Harvest**” was a thanksgiving celebration album.

JO : The “**Harvest**” disc featured songs about this region.

FW : I believe the “**Holidays**” album came out in late 1993. So when did the “**Harvest**” album appear.

JO : Almost exactly a year later. They both came out just before the holidays.

FW : Through the internet, I've managed to discover that artists like Brooks Williams and Salamander Crossing appeared on “**Holidays**” -

JO : And Louise Taylor, a group called The Blood Oranges, the Ray Mason Band. Who else was on that - John Sheldon who we ended up working with later on, a group called Clean Living that was big here in the seventies – they got back together and did a song for it.

FW : On the “**Harvest**” disc, I found that there was a Pete Nelson track, and also one by Jim Henry.

JO : The “**Holidays**” is the CD that's really hard to find. That's completely out of print. I can't even recall where we made the masters, so I don't even know where we can get more copies.

FW : What was your method of selling those compilation CD's. Was it through the radio station.

JO : It was definitely tied to the radio station. That was our main marketing tool locally. We really had no designs on going further than local with it. We considered it to be a real local project and really didn't try to sell it beyond this region. I don't think we felt there would be a real demand for it elsewhere. Salamander Crossing made their very first recording for “**Homegrown Holidays.**” Out of all of them, Brooks, as an artist, was the one that was furthest along in his career. Most of the people, at that time, had only played locally.

FW : Numbers have always fascinated me. Why did the first Signature Sounds release “**Homegrown Holidays**” have the index number SIG 1225.

JO : That's the date of Christmas [Laughs].

FW : Well there you go, I knew there something at play there. That's neat.

JO : So much of what we did early on was really haphazard. Even down to the name of the label, that was haphazard.

FW : What were your thoughts at the stage you decided to form a label. Did you have feelings of trepidation. Obviously you were still holding down a day job.

JO : Absolutely still working at the radio station. You know, we felt like we had got our feet wet with the compilations, and that there was great talent out there. John [Sheldon] had this really interesting family history, and was a good writer – maybe a little more rock oriented. His friend, James Taylor, wanted to help out so that was an interesting wrinkle [Laughs]. I guess we felt like there was a real leg up there. So we dove in with it.

FW : In terms of a learning curve, presumably in those early days, you did things that you wouldn't do now.

JO : Oh yeah. I can't really say I had a mentor in the music label business that I could even call for advice. A lot of it was trial and error, and mistakes were made for sure – some, very costly ones.

Note.

[#] – The Beatles made their US debut on the Ed Sullivan Show on Sunday 9th February 1964. They also appeared on the show the following weekend, and a filmed performance aired on the 23rd February show.

[*] – The Signature Sounds 10th Anniversary CD liner notes, provides the insight *“When Olsen and Thayer had their first meeting with their attorney Leah Kunkel, she tried to talk them out of starting a label. “The music business is full of sharks and bastards, and you guys are too nice,” she said.”*

to be continued

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Jim Olsen – “Signature Sounds Recording Company” 10th Anniversary Interview

Part 2 – The First, Ten Great Years of Signature Sounds Recordings...and Beyond

In last week's episode, Jim Olsen CEO at Signature Sounds talked about his radio career and how he eventually decided to form the Signature Sounds label. Many thanks to Flora Reed at Signature Sound for setting up the interview. This week we continue talking about the early days of the label.....

Folk Wax : Going by the liner notes in the 10th Anniversary CD booklet, I gather that Dar Williams was involved with the label during its early days.

Jim Olsen : I had done some work for Dar's manager, a guy by the name of Charlie Hunter. Charlie was also managing Bill Morrissey and, at one point, I did some radio promotion for Bill. We also promoted Dar's music. As we were getting the label off the ground, Dar's career had started to take off. They both bought in as investors.

FW : Back in 1994 did you set out with a defined musical ethos for the label.

JO : At first it was going to be solely Pioneer Valley musicians. We really didn't have the resources nor did I feel like I had the knowledge or expertise to try to go out and sign a big name artist. I was very taken with the group Salamander Crossing, right from the minute I heard them, and wanted to work with them. I really wanted to work with Louise Taylor who was around at that time, so I felt like I didn't need to look beyond the Pioneer Valley.

FW : Was the sub-focus of the label acoustic singer/songwriter.

JO : No, it wasn't going to be that way originally. It quickly became apparent to me that we couldn't be this eclectic, all over the place label, and get anywhere with it, that we would be better off focusing. Like I said, I saw that Dar and Martin were starting to really have this success. It seemed with the folk scene, a) I liked the music, b) It was a grassroots do-able thing for us. The pop world was daunting, to dive into that. You have to remember at the time, it was a different landscape than now. Pop music was controlled by the major labels, almost exclusively. There weren't the large indies that exist now. There wasn't anywhere near the indie network that exists now. It was pretty much, the majors up here and the indies way down here scrambling.

FW : Was it intentional to grow slowly. Initially you only released two or three albums each year.

JO : Yes. That was definitely intentional. I didn't really want to, and didn't really have the resources to do much more than that. I was still juggling my radio career. I remember I would take Monday's off to work on the record label [Laughs]. You know it was *catch as catch can* otherwise. At the time, Mark was running the studio and I was really a one-man operation with the label.

FW : Is there a year where you felt you had actually turned a significant corner in terms of the growth of the label [\$].

JO : In each of the early years we went from a few, to a handful of releases. You can see that 1996 was the year that I quit the radio station to concentrate on the label full time, and there are more releases. In 1998 my twins were born, so I was too busy with them [Laughs] – so less was released. And then slowly but surely we started picking it up again in 1999 and 2000. I look at 2000 and it looks like a lot, but really the Salamander Crossing album was a reissue. Erin's "**Queen Of Quiet**" disc was a promotional item.

FW : At what stage did you decide to broaden your scope and look outside the Pioneer Valley – and outside Massachusetts for that matter - for artists to sign to the label.

JO : It was really in '97 and '98, somewhere in there. I started feeling like I should look elsewhere for other artists. There really wasn't anyone here at that time that was interesting me that much. Of course, once your label is somewhat established people started coming to you. And that's what began to happen. People started coming to us and we expanded that way.

FW : Presumably you were also involved in industry gatherings like Folk Alliance.

JO : Absolutely. That's a big part of it. I look at the whole thing, and I think the turning point was when we made the deal with Richard Shindell, to work with him. At the time he was very hot, having come off the Cry Cry Cry thing. I think that bumped us up in the eyes of the industry. It was our first chance to sell a significant amount of records. Around that same time we found Dave Carter and Tracy Grammer. Eric McKeown very shortly thereafter. I felt in 2000 it really fell into place.

FW : Is "**Somewhere Near Paterson**" currently the biggest selling album in the label's history.

JO : It's neck and neck. Richard's album and Josh Ritter's "**Hello Starling**" both have sold about 30,000 copies. Erin McKeown's "**Distillation**" is right behind that at about 25 or 26,000. It's a little deceiving, because Richard pretty much only sells in North America, while Josh has sold a lot around the world. The 30,000 that we've sold have been in the U.S.A. I don't know what he's done in Europe and elsewhere, but it's probably significantly more than that.

FW : One of the words you used earlier in this conversation is *distribution*. In the record business, good distribution can be the difference between success and failure.

JO : Part of it [Laughs].

FW : I'll concede that having good music on your recordings counts. In the early days though, were Signature Sounds releases only available in local record stores.

JO : Yeah. We got our first distribution in 1995. At the time there were still small regional distributors around the country. In the United States now, that has pretty much stopped. There are some smaller national ones, but no one does it on a regional basis. We actually worked with four or five small regional distributors in the early years. It was difficult to make any real headway with that. Oddly enough our strongest distributor was on the west coast where there was the least amount of interest in our music [Laughs]. It didn't work out on a lot of levels, but it did teach me a little bit about how the distribution industry works. When we started talking to Koch in 1996, I felt like I, at least, had a sense of how things worked. At the time our relationship with Dar Williams, who is one of Koch's biggest selling artists, through the Razor & Tie label, really helped pave the way for our relationship with Koch. That was an early turning point, when we got our distribution deal with them.

FW : These days, you have distribution in Canada through Festival.

JO : We were with Koch in Canada at first, and then we switched to Festival in 2000. Now we've begun licensing our albums in Canada to a label called True North. That's a pretty recent innovation.

FW : Looking back over the last ten years, what are your most significant memories.

JO : Positive. Negative.

FW : Both.

JO : The negative is easier than the positive.

FW : Isn't that always the case.

JO : The day Dave Carter died, I'll never forget. That was just, you know, so difficult. As for positive memories, there are many, which is one of the reasons why I do this - there is a lot of joy involved. In the beginning it became a tradition that we would have a Holiday Show at the Iron Horse each year, with pretty much all of our artists. Those are very memorable for me, and really fun. It's something that we've stopped doing. We have two 10th anniversary shows coming up, a similar concept. I also think of breakthrough shows by artists - seeing Dave and Tracy, on the main stage for the first time, at Falcon Ridge - watching the audience impact of that, was pretty spectacular. Then there's various recording sessions, and being one of the first to hear people lay things down. Louis Taylor's recording sessions are always memorable because she does everything live including her vocals. When you were there you were locked in and hearing it all as it went down.

FW : Out of all the albums you've released in the last ten years, do you have a few favourites.

JO : How about ten. You know there are favourite albums, and then there are albums that are really special to me. "**Tanglewood Tree**" by Dave and Tracy is very special to me. I find albums that I was more involved with creatively, the most interesting. We do a combination of planning and working with our artists on their recordings, and then we also pick up albums they did themselves and license them. Some of our best albums, certainly, have been licensed, but they lack the excitement of being part of the planning stage and the early demos. Amongst my favourites "**Tanglewood Tree**" would definitely be there. "**Distillation**" by Erin McKeown. "**Bottleneck Dreams**" by Salamander Crossing. "**Bittertown**" by Lori McKenna. Both of Josh Ritter's albums certainly. Mark Erelli's first album, and his latest album I really enjoy. But, I can't pick just one.

FW : Over the years you've released, a series of sampler albums. Have they been a good marketing tool.

JO : I've never taken them too seriously. For one thing, the market is so flooded that we've never tried to commercially release them. We basically give the sampler discs away to our mail order customers, as a way for them to discover our music. For me, I really enjoy doing those samplers because it let's me play dj [Laughs]. It's nice to have them around when discussing something with someone who is not familiar with the label. I can send them a couple and they can make some sense of what we're about.

FW : To date, you've created a very strong catalogue of songwriter recordings. That's a niche market. In terms of the next ten years, where do you see the label going.

JO : [Laughs]. You know, I think you'll see more of the same. I think you may actually see less releases per year, than more. I think that's the way the industry is going. There is so much out there and I think we need to step back a little bit and be a little bit more focused. It's also to the point where, particularly with some of our earlier artists, they are approaching middle age and not necessarily wanting the career that they wanted ten years ago. They don't want to tour as much. At the beginning, everybody was going "*Let's see how far we can take this.*" Now that they've seen the parameters of their career, they're stepping back, and wanting to do things more realistically. Really, as an artist, once your career has had that peak, you almost don't need a record label, you know how to reach your fans. I see this with some of our earlier artists. They might do some self-releases and less touring. I think you're going to see a little more turn over in our roster over the next few years.

FW : I've run out of questions. Thanks for your time, and many happy returns.

JO : Thank you.

Note.

[\$] – Following a couple of transatlantic e-mails, prior to my interview with Jim, Flora Reed and I produced a full Signature Sounds Discography. Certain comments Jim makes in this answer refer, specifically, to that Discography, a copy of which is posted at this Folkwax link [\[xxx link xxx\]](#).

Arthur Wood.

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