

On Your Toes

Warm Beaches, the Dog Days of Winter, and starting your own EDM label in Cleveland amidst peer-to-peer pirates

SOME IDEAS ARE BORN OUT OF FIRE. Others are born out of slush, blizzards, and freezing winter winds. (No, this is not another rehashing of the *Urban Dialect* legend). Enter Toes in the Sand Recordings, the latest record label to come out of Cleveland. *Urban Dialect* readers may be familiar with the same bodies that stand on these toes. We featured their promotions arm, HeadRush Music, back in May 2003. Nearly a year later, and after a successful summer at Abbasso, the duo of Amy Dana and David Christopher have finally decided to go ahead with their label.

What can seem like mission impossible to some is now a reality for Dana and Christopher: launching a predominantly progressive house label from Cleveland, Ohio. And in the dog days of February, no less. Paradoxically, Toes in the Sand was conceived on the warm, sun-soaked beaches of Miami. It's that feeling of release, of an elemental connectedness to one's source — "We all came from the ocean," reminds Dana — that fundamentally inspired the label's name.

"A year ago we never thought we'd have the ability to start a record label," says Christopher. "We just said 'Let's do it,' and we did it and I think it's gonna blow up." The

well-mannered, articulate couple are exceedingly knowledgeable about and committed to dance music culture as way of life grounded in history. At times they can be very outspoken about it. But hey, as promoters, producers and label heads, *it's their business*.

It's also safe to say that the two do not suffer from delusions of grandeur in regards to their latest venture. "John Digweed's first label, Black, failed," relates Dana. "He never thought Bedrock [his current and highly successful label] would make it to 50 releases."

Any mention of failure won't happen on their end. Between the label, party promotion, production work, meticulous maintenance of their websites, and working professional day jobs to boot, their dedication is dauntless and unrelenting. "We put the pressure on ourselves," says Christopher. "We didn't have to start this record label, but we did, and it's just kind of happening." "Running HeadRush has taught us that if you want something to happen, sometimes the best way to get it done is to do it yourself," relates Dana. "It would be easy to sit back and complain that no good music is coming out, that the scene is dying, that we don't feel the DJs on the popular circuit right now are good. Why complain when you can do something about it, and make it better?"

To this effect, it's worth recapitulating the goal of their particular brand of music. Says Christopher,

"Our goal is to release tracks with a sense of musicality that has been missing from a lot of progressive house lately. So many producers these days are using the same software and sound sources, and following what has become the established formula, that the music is becoming redundant. We want to feature artists with a strong focus on composition, originality and emotional quality. Dance music should be more than functional; it should enrich the mind and soul as well as move the body."

Toes in the Sand's primo release, "Bound for Ascension" by Michael Lanning featuring Charity Havens, is due out on 12-inch this month, with a remix by Thomas Penton. The track may well be the perfect embodiment of the Toes philosophy, with its driving subterranean beats and evocative, soothing female vocals.

In the world of electronic dance music, the life of a newly released single is highly dependent upon whose ears it falls. The pair plans to send promotional copies to the world's top progressive DJs and to distribute worldwide via retail outlets and online shops (including the few vinyl outlets Cleveland has to offer).

Already, the new single has been charted No. 5 by UK veteran Nick Warren and is also a finalist for inclusion on Sandra Collins' new mix CD, *Perfecto Presents: Sandra Collins* (Thrive), for whom Christopher (as Deviant) recently opened at Modä. Both instances — DJ charts and licensing for compilations — are crucial to the success of any new track in this particular genre.

It is Dana's impression that "many people in the U.S. are educated about dance music by going to their local Borders, FYE or Barnes & Noble and picking up the latest mix compilation by the latest superstar DJ." She feels this is "unfortunate, because there's a lot of really good music out there that may not get heard because it wasn't licensed for a mix CD."

As with their promotions arm, the label relies "heavily" on the virtual community that the Internet provides for the dissemination of their music. But it's the capability for piracy of this same file-sharing community that they are extremely adamant to dissuade. Says Christopher in this regard, "We are *very* strict."

"Yeah, you've got to be really careful," he explains. "There's nothing you can really do once the track's released, but you just got to do everything you can beforehand. The artists we recently signed had never signed a track before and so they were still in the 'hungry artist' mode and just kind of giving music to everyone, just hoping that someone would take it. And I had to tell them, 'You guys gotta stop doing that, you gotta stop having your stuff online because it makes it really unattractive to sign.'"

"The worst thing an artist can do is underestimate the worth of his/her work," adds Dana. "A lot of people think that it's a huge thing to get discovered or get a track out on a label, so in eagerness to get it out there, they sort of get desperate about it."

"That's the reality we live in; if someone can get the record for free instead of paying 10 bucks for it, then they're probably going to download it, you know," says Christopher.

"Don't fuck us or we're gonna come after you," laughs Dana. But it remains a serious matter. "I agree that labels need to probably accommodate the demand for digital

Techno for two:
Toes labelmates
Amy Dana and David Christopher