

STYLE

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Down the Wabbit hole

Thanks to its founder's marketing acumen and attention to customers' shifting tastes, White Wabbit Records has come a long way from its roots in a converted men's restroom to become one of the country's top indie music labels

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER

It is now lore among Taiwan's music lovers — White Wabbit, one of the country's most respected indie music labels, started in a men's restroom.

Over the past eight years, White Wabbit has become a mainstay for music lovers who prefer bands like Aphasia (阿飛西雅) and English post-rockers Kyte over Jolin Tsai (蔡依林) and the Black Eyed Peas, thanks to the business savvy of founder Yeh Wan-ching (葉宛青), better known as KK. In addition to its label, White Wabbit also operates two record stores, one in The Wall (這牆) on Roosevelt Road (羅斯福路), and the other in the Shida area on Pucheng Street (浦城街). Both stores sell a combination of music from foreign and Taiwanese bands, some of which are signed to White Wabbit Records.

KK opened the first White Wabbit store in the loo of the now-defunct live music club Zeitgeist while she was still a student at National Chengchi University.

"Why did we open in a restroom? At that time, we only had a restroom," she says, laughing.

KK was already splitting her time between studying for a degree in politics and playing bass in Nipples, her former band (she is now a member of Aphasia), when she got the idea for a music store after shopping for CDs at Crystal Records (水晶唱片TK) in Vibe (another now-defunct club).

"I thought it was great that I could listen to live music and then go shopping for CDs," says KK. "My friend Freddy [Lim (林昶佐), the lead singer of Chthonic] told me he was going to open Zeitgeist and I asked him if I could have a space there."

The restroom was only 2 or 3 pings (1 ping = 3.3m²), but KK managed to shove 1,000 CDs in there. In between her schoolwork and performing, the store was open just two days a week.

But she had big goals for White Wabbit. KK launched the label with a small roster that included Nipples, Bad Daughter (壞女兒, her other band at the time) and The Peppermints (薄荷葉), as well as a series of compilation albums called Lobo

(羅蔔, or carrot). After two years, Lim opened The Wall and KK was finally able to move her store out of the restroom into a slightly larger space (5 pings).

Over the past few years, the label's catalogue has multiplied like the company's namesake. Last summer, White Wabbit opened its flagship store near Shida. The label's roster now includes 10 Taiwanese bands and more than 100 foreign groups.

"Everything happened one after another. We had to balance two things at once," she says. "We actually had to close the store for a while to focus on signing indie bands here in Taipei, but we also continued to get distribution rights for albums from abroad."

Before White Wabbit opened, indie music lovers depended on Eslite's music stores and Tower Records on Zhongxiao East Road (忠孝東路) to find new bands. The latter has since shut down, a victim of the increase in online music sales. But White Wabbit's managers say the same fate will not befall their stores, even though they don't have the backing of a large corporation.

Mika Wu (吳逸駿), KK's business partner and a fellow member of Aphasia, is quick to point out that most of White Wabbit's customers also download music. The label has worked extensively on its online marketing strategy, which includes a blog, profiles on Facebook, Twitter and Plurk, and a Web site where listeners can leave reviews (see opposite for URLs), read band biographies and listen to sample tracks.

The vast selection of CDs in each store (the Shida location has almost 10,000 albums, while the branch in The Wall has 6,000) is an obvious draw. White Wabbit stores also differentiate themselves by serving as gathering spots for Taipei's indie music scene, says Wu.

"If we create a place to talk about music and connect with other fans, then we'll be able to survive as a business, even though our customers will continue to download a lot of their music," says Wu.

Building a sense of community has always been part of White Wabbit's marketing strategy, down to its twee name and logo

(a floppy-eared bunny).

"When I started, everyone thought indie music was a serious thing that only smart people understood and that people who didn't listen to it were stupid," says KK. "I didn't want people to be intimidated by us because they thought we were a bunch of music snobs, so I deliberately chose a cutesy name."

In the eight years since White Wabbit opened, its customers have moved from buying folk and electronica albums to preferring post-rock, which is now its best-selling genre. Ambient music and pop records also move quickly. KK and Wu keep a close eye on what sells well in the stores to decide which bands to sign or import. Sometimes this means carrying fewer of their own favorites.

KK sighs in mock exasperation when asked which of her favorite groups don't sell well in the stores ("So many!"). They include Japan's OOIOO, the US' RF & Lili de la Mora, Denmark's Green Pitch, Iceland's Leaves and Finland's Oi Miten Suuria Voimia. Wu's mixtape would comprise tracks from Canada's Do Make Say Think, Japan's Merzbrow, Sweden's ef and American minimalist composer Terry Riley. Though they've found fewer fans among White Wabbit's customers, most of these groups are nonetheless represented in the stores.

In addition to new discoveries, White Wabbit's browsers also have the chance to come face-to-face with a musician from one of the label's top-selling bands, Windmill (風籟坊). Bassist DaiZi (戴子) works five days a week at the Shida store and acts as a music therapist of sorts.

"If a customer wants CD recommendations, I'll ask them what their mood has been like recently and what they've been listening to. Or I'll just think of something off the top of my head," says DaiZi, who has collaborated with White Wabbit since she was a member of Bad Daughter.

"I never thought about finding another label," she says. "I think what makes White Wabbit unique is that there is a sense of freedom here. Our logo is a rabbit, after all. We don't dictate what people should listen to and the label doesn't try to tell musicians who to be."

White Wabbit seeks to avoid being seen as a haven for music snobs. Hand-drawn signs and lighthearted explanations of different genres in its stores add to the welcoming ambiance.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

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White Wabbit founded KK and her business partner (and Aphasia bandmate) Mika Wu.



FOLLOW THE CARROT ONLINE

White Wabbit is currently in negotiations with several groups (including Broken Social Scene, Deerhunter and Explosions in the Sky) for performances in Taipei. Keep up to date by visiting their Web sites

WHITE WABBIT'S MAIN WEBSITE:
www.wwr.com.tw

BLOG: blog.roodo.com/wwwrecords

FACEBOOK:
www.facebook.com/wwwrecords

TWITTER: twitter.com/wwwrecords

PLURK: www.plurk.com/wwwmusic

STORE NOTES:

WHAT: White Wabbit Records (小白兔唱片)

WHERE: Shida flagship store: 1-1, Ln 21, Pucheng St, Taipei City (台北市浦城街21巷1-1號). The Wall store: B1, 200, Roosevelt Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市羅斯福路四段200號B1)

HOURS: Both stores are open daily from 3pm to 11pm

TELEPHONE:
Shida store: (02) 2369-7915
The Wall store: (02) 8935-1454

