

Fontana North

By Vish Khanna, Exclaim Magazine Feb 2009

<http://exclaim.ca/musicschool/labellife.aspx?csid1=129>

Date of Birth: 2006

Number of Distributed Labels/Titles to Date: Approximately 80 labels, 5,000 titles

Biggest Sellers: Radiohead, Tegan & Sara, Neverending White Lights, Silversun Pickups, Kiss

Current Releases: Eagles of Death Metal, Brett Dennen, Howie Beck, Femi Kuti, Jim White, Ben Kweller, Plushgun

Online: www.fontananorth.com

Crowned "Independent Music Distributor of the Year" at Canadian Music Week in 2008, Fontana North has grown from an offshoot pressing and distribution bridge between indie and major label interests, to a pivotal player in the music biz. Emerging from the U.S.-based Fontana Distribution (the independent arm of entertainment conglomerate Universal Music & Video) in 2006, Fontana North is affiliated with MapleCore Ltd. and Universal Music Canada.

MapleCore is the overarching home of label Maple Music Recordings, the prominent online retailer maplemusic.com, and in 2004 it launched its own distribution arm, MapleNationwide. "It began simply, essentially giving smaller indie acts and labels access to major label distribution via Universal," Matt Smallwood explains. Smallwood, who joined MapleNationwide in early 2005, is now the General Manager of Fontana North. "There was a need for a service that fell somewhere between maplemusic.com and our label. We couldn't sign everything to the label, but a web store wasn't necessarily enough for some acts. So the distribution arm was off to a good start; there was an early demand for a new service."

Toward the end of his first year at MapleNationwide, Smallwood and his bosses noted Fontana's prominence in the U.S. and, due to what he describes as their own "explosive growth," MapleNationwide aligned their distribution business with that of Universal's in the States.

Fontana North was launched in the spring of 2006. From the outset, the snowier, hoser Fontana was about diversity, working with artists and labels from every genre under the sun, but also providing multi-faceted services, making them a comprehensive promotional one-stop. "Offering publicity, radio, and full marketing has afforded [our clients] many more opportunities than a regular distributor would," Smallwood says. "That really defines us as a company; it's how we pitch and position ourselves internationally too."

Thanks to their papa bear connection in the States, Fontana North handles Canadian accounts for some of the world's biggest artists, from Kiss and Paul McCartney to indie heroes like My Morning Jacket. "Certainly the relationship with ATO Records is a big one," Smallwood says of MMJ's label home. "They're the reason we were able to release and work Radiohead's *In Rainbows* last year. That was a highlight for our entire staff; we had the Fontana North sales team selling the records, complemented with Maple Music Recordings staff building the overall plan and execution of the album release." Despite Fontana North's success, Smallwood acknowledges that music distro is extremely competitive with labels and artists swapping distributors to cut the slightest cost in this rough economic climate. And while some retailers have seemingly given up competing with free digital files by stocking less and less music, distributors still butt heads over this diminished space. "While there are exciting areas of growth online, we're finding that retail space is now at a premium," Smallwood explains. "The major retailers

are stocking more games, movies, merchandise, and accessories. We still value partnerships with all types of retailers — large, small, physical, and digital — and we work closely with all of them to satisfy their individual needs."

In as much as he can laud the strengths of Fontana North, Smallwood acknowledges that, even as music industry engines stall and sputter, self-motivated artists have rarely had it seem so simple. "We're seeing bands, on their own, building their profiles to a real level where we can come in and really sell some albums and songs. Bands have more direct access to the media than ever before. Through blogs, magazines — even radio and video are more used to supporting independent artists. We're also lucky in Canada, as bands can tap into funding, so they can hire radio and video pluggers, tour extensively and create world-class video and albums."

For his part, Smallwood believes that Fontana North has a stable place in the record game. "I believe we'll be doing this for a long time. I think we'll continue to see a shift in formats but we're the specialists in our marketplace; a UK label doesn't know or understand the overall landscape in Canada. Beyond making songs available on iTunes, you need driving factors for the buyer to make a purchase. Our intimate knowledge of the marketplace helps bands succeed in Canada."