

A&M hires Tom Schnabel and his eclectic ear as head of its revived Horizon records.

Los Angeles Business Journal • Nov 19, 1990 • A and M Records Inc.

A&M hires Tom Schnabel and his eclectic ear as head of its revived Horizon records

Local public-radio legend Tom Schnabel is beating the odds.

The ex-music director of KCRW-FM stepped into a plum executive post at A&M Records this month. The fringe-music aficionado brings no commercial track record and a notorious penchant for debuting obscure artists and Third World bands before they've gained more than 10 American fans.

Schnabel will produce albums for A&M's Horizon Records division in the same vein he nurtured on his acclaimed "Morning Becomes Eclectic" radio show on KCRW since 1979. It's called "contemporary international music" and is not known for hit singles that sell well in Cleveland shopping malls.

A&M, on the other hand, is the commercially successful record label of such artists as Janet Jackson and Sting. It even took on a new layer of corporate management last year, selling out to London-based Polygram International for a reported \$500 million.

But A&M has faith in Schnabel's ear.

"For 11 years, Tom Schnabel has brought the best music the world has to offer to his audience, and they responded," said A&M Vice Chairman Herb Alpert, who hired Schnabel away from KCRW.

During Schnabel's tenure at that listener-supported radio station, its audience grew to about 350,000 a week and budget to \$2.5 million a year. That's big-time for public radio, which tends to run on shoestring allowances and aim away from mass-market tastes.

Schnabel, a surfer whose sedate but intellectual commentary was never commercially slick, has been promised he can remain a daring music scout. Perhaps he'll bring to A&M the next Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

"My job is basically to find the talent and to get these records out," said Schnabel, who leaves a \$36,000-a-year post to report to A&M's Alpert for a salary neither would quote.

"I think Herb, you know, respected a lot, you know, what I was doing at the radio station and basically took a chance in hiring me," said the low-key Pacific Palisades native who still moonlights as a lifeguard.

That surprised Warner Bros. Records executive Larry Butler: "I always thought he was very comfortable, very happy there" at KCRW. "I never knew he wanted to get into 'the biz,'" said Butler, who supplied performance artist Laurie Anderson and other Warner talent to Schnabel's show for years.

"Tom's talent is his knowledge," added Butler. "When (songwriter) David Byrne brought his Rei Momo tour here, Tom already knew all the dozen or so Brazilian orchestra members and who they had played with before. I don't send him bios. He knows more about my artists than I do."

Schnabel, 43, took the latitude at the "Morning Becomes Eclectic" show to broadcast, well, almost anything. Bouncing between Algerian rai and African juju, with perhaps Duke Ellington thrown in between, he helped launch Brazil's Milton Nascimento and France's Gypsy Kings into America's mainstream.

"I don't understand why pop radio has become so homogenized," Schnabel once told Style magazine. "It's all based on studies. . . ."

His live interviews with artists poised to play at local clubs like Catalina's Bar & Grill in Hollywood and At My Place in Santa Monica ignited a small "world music" community in the Los Angeles area.

"These clubs felt more daring when they knew they could develop an audience for lesser-known acts," said KCRW Publicity Director Sarah Spitz. Losing Schnabel "is a rupture for a tiny organization," lamented Spitz, one of 12 KCRW paid employees, backed by about 100 volunteers.

Schnabel denied he had an ivory tower situation at KCRW. "I had to watch it there. If I had wanted to be the hippest on earth -- arcane and very much on the inside -- and didn't care about singing for my supper, I probably wouldn't have lasted 10 years there."

At A&M, Schnabel resurrects the defunct Horizon Records division and becomes its vice president. He estimates he'll be putting out about eight albums a year. The first is scheduled for release in late spring 1991. A&M would not make public Horizon's budget.

If A&M's move is a financial gamble, it's backed by the Hollywood record company's talent wiz, Herb Alpert. The one-time trumpeter-bandleader of the Tijuana Brass band, who formed A&M with promoter Jerry Moss in the mid-1960s, sold it last year to Polygram for a reputed \$500 million.

"I greatly admire and respect (Schnabel's) taste in music," said Alpert.

"Herb is a very ethereal, 'feely' sort of guy and so is Tom; I think they operate by instinct," said A&M publicity VP Diana Baron.

Horizon Records was originally founded in the 1970s as a jazz label, headed by producer Tommy La Puma. Before it expired in 1979 during the record-industry doldrums, its roster had picked up "an eclectic mix of jazz, blues and left-wing pop music," said the company. Horizon artists included Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry and Yellow Magic Orchestra.

The new Horizon will not do left-wing pop, Schnabel said.

PHOTO : Schnabel: A daring music scout