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Tom Bergeron in his office at Western Oregon University. The music professor and saxophone player founded Teal Creek Music in 1996.

Homegrown Harmonies

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By Craig Coleman
The Itemizer-Observer

MONMOUTH — Tom Bergeron began playing piano at age 10 in his native New Hampshire. He picked up the saxophone not long after, to ensure his then dream of playing in a high school band.

He's performed with countless orchestras and symphonies and backed up Ella Fitzgerald, The Temptations and Natalie Cole. He's taught music for many years, 16 at Western Oregon University, and is a noted authority on multiphonics — the ability to produce two notes at once on a saxophone.

You could make an argument that record mogul should be on his resume, too.

"No, no, I don't see that at all," the Monmouth resident said of the title, laughing. "I see myself just as a facilitator."

The do-it-yourself nature of independent music was just entering the desktop computer phase in earnest when Bergeron put out his first album in 1996.

He created a label, Teal Creek Music, as a nod to the Polk County locale he called home then.

Fast forward 16 years. That little endeavor has grown into a "musical collective" that has published 24 records ranging from jazz and Brazilian music to classical and progressive rock.

It also coordinates distribution for almost 30 artists and bands, several of whom teach at WOU or live in the Willamette Valley.

Others aren't so local. Three members of Labyrinth call Poland and France home.

Keller Coker, a fellow WOU professor, composer and frequent collaborator with Bergeron, said the label provides credibility and exposure for musicians, as well as a network of peers to work within.

"For an artist, it makes all the sense in the world," Coker said.

"There are a few labels like this throughout the country, but most are terribly short-lived," he continued. "Tom has beaten the odds."

First off, Teal Creek has no studio or headquarters — it's just Bergeron, a website, and energy from a "virtual community" of artists.

Musicians on the label are people Bergeron knows in the region's music scene or those he hears and admires, including his students.

Dylan Meyers graduated from WOU in 2011. After hearing Meyers' acoustic guitar work on a master's degree project, Bergeron added him to Teal Creek's list.

Meyers released a self-titled album earlier this year.

Teal Creek artists self-publish and act as their own producers; they arrange and pay for their own recording, mixing and mastering.

Artists release albums through Teal Creek and have an opportunity to make money through sales that go directly to them; the label doesn't take a percentage of the profits.

"I've thought about that before, but that's not the reason I do this," Bergeron said. "We're all independent artists and nobody is making a lot of money on record sales ... I don't see the need for it."

It's become more common for musicians to pursue albums because of the advent of music editing software and rel-

atively inexpensive home setups, Coker said.

He recorded the bulk of the material for his album, "Foovy," at a studio in Minneapolis and did overdubs in his own studio in Salem.

"It can be done for a few bucks, especially if you have friends who are willing to play (compositions) for you for free," said Coker, who ran a small classical music label in Los Angeles for three years before coming to WOU.

"If you're going to pay musicians and buy studio time, it's tough to do that for less than \$3,000," he added.

Bergeron has worked out deals for physical and digital distribution of Teal Creek albums through outlets such as CD Baby and North Pacific Music, which in turn makes music available on Amazon.com.

Bergeron said working together helps artists save money — if there are three or four albums being worked on at once, Teal Creek can bid on record pressings as a group to cut costs.

Another perk is creative advice between musicians and advice on logistical issues, such as licensing and copyrights.

"For those people who are coming out with their own records, this is the place to ask questions and not make some very expensive mistakes," Coker said.

Meyers said his album on Teal Creek — a collection of finger-style guitar tunes — was his first.

"I've recorded stuff when I was younger, but there was always hesitation on my part with an album," the 29-year-old from Siletz said. "I wanted something that was perfect and could feel really good about."

The label is an organic way for its artists to get exposure, Meyers said.

"If I tell somebody to check out my Teal Creek album, they'll go to the website and see other musicians and bands, it helps everyone," he said.

Bergeron and Coker belong to the Grammy Foundation and submit tracks every July for award nominations. Music from Meyers and Cassio Vianna, a WOU piano accompanist and Teal Creek artist, will likely be entered this year, Bergeron said.

"In the future, I just want to produce more records and bring more people on board," Bergeron said. "If I were to dream? I don't know, maybe somebody on the label can win a Grammy."

He laughed and quickly added in jest, "Then we'll all be rich."



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Teal Creek artist and collaborator Keller Coker in his home studio in Salem. Also a WOU professor, Coker has performed with Bergeron in several groups.

