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[OFF THE CUFF] Regional Rock

It was the **Beatles**. Like so many American musicians of his generation, seeing the British band on Ed Sullivan sparked a lifelong pursuit of music for **T.J. Oman**. The Minneapolis-bred guitarist played in bands, but also discovered a love for the recording process, which folded into a day job in engineering that took him coast to coast. Living now in Milwaukee, Oman founded **RockIt Records** two years ago. It seeks nothing less than to re-create the thriving recording scene that existed in the Midwest in the '60s, albeit with contemporary music. Releases range from the power trio **Forest Fire** to the gothic metal of **Leviathan's Choir** and the alt-country-rock of the **Twang Dragons**

Why did you come to Milwaukee?

I came as part of a business move. A prime mover in getting me immersed in the local scene was my work with (keyboardist) Rick Forkes.

Tell me about Rick Forkes.

He was one of the first individuals I met in Milwaukee. He worked at a music store and we struck up a relationship as I'd come in to buy stuff. He was having trouble finishing his recording project. I got involved as executive producer to help him finish it.

Describe your role as executive producer.

It's a jack-of-all-trades job. It's project manager. Business manager. Artistic manager. It's mother, father, aunt and uncle. It's being a gopher when need be. It involves getting everything back on track, schedule-wise, budget wise, and product wise.

How did you come to start a record label?

It actually started in the late-'70s in Minneapolis as RockIt Recordings. It was cheaper for me and my musician friends to buy our own studio gear than to pay for studio time. Later, we started doing recordings for other people. RockIt Records was the next logical extension of that. It was futile to shop regional music to major labels. Indie labels cater more to the artists. For me, it's a sound marriage of the artistic things I've been involved in and the business sense I acquired from working internationally.

How many CDs has RockIt released?

Thirty to forty since early 2004.

What's your criteria for working with bands?

RockIt is unique in that it's not genre specific. We're modeled after the regional labels of the '60s. The thread that draws all of our artists together is regionality. Also, we don't do things we don't understand—we're focused on rock, jazz, blues, heavy metal. We look for performing artists.

What have you accomplished for your performers?

We've gained airplay for some of them in Europe and at community-oriented radio stations in the Midwest. We've gotten them good ink in the press. We've placed CDs with a number of regional retailers, but the most effective way for new artists to sell CDs is from the 'corner of the stage'. That's also why we're trying to stay involved with working musicians.

What are your goals?

It's a labor of love. We love music. We like the communities we live in and we're trying to enhance the cultural aspects of those communities by promoting and supporting local art.

—David Lührssen

