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## **SST Defies Industry, Defines New Music**

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Ten years ago, when SST Records spun at the creative center of rock music, founder Greg Ginn was living with six other people in a one-room rehearsal studio.

SST music was whipping like a sonic cyclone through every college campus in the country. SST bands criss-crossed the nation, luring young people away from arenas and corporate rock like no other force since the dawn of punk.

But Greg Ginn had no shower and no car. He lived on a few thousand dollars a year, and relied on public transportation.

"The reality is not only different, it's extremely, shockingly different than what people imagine," Ginn said. "We basically had one place where we rehearsed and lived and worked."

SST, based in the Los Angeles suburb of Los Alamitos, is the quintessential independent record label. For 17 years it has existed squarely outside the corporate rock industry, releasing music and spoken-word performances by artists who are not much interested in making money. When an SST band grows restless for earnings or for broader success, it simply leaves the label.

Founded in 1978 in Hermosa Beach, Calif., SST Records has arguably produced more great rock bands than any other label of its era. Black Flag, fast, loud and socially aware, was probably the world's first hardcore punk band. Sonic Youth, a blend of white noise and pop, is a contender for best alternative-rock band ever.

The SST legacy also includes the melodic hard rock of Husker Du, the country-fed punk of the Meat Puppets and the short sonic bursts of the Minutemen, all among the best artists of the 1980s. Distortion-laden bands such as Dinosaur Jr., the Screaming Trees and Buffalo Tom helped lead college radio into the '90s. SST even produced the multiplatinum grunge band Soundgarden.

The label's influence on the music industry has been just as profound as its impact on music. SST was founded and run by musicians. Driven by Ginn's do-it-yourself ethic, the company has given artists total control over their albums and has never asked, persuaded or cajoled bands to change anything for the sake of either sales or prudence.

SST Records sits in a research park in Los Alamitos, in a nondescript building with no sign.

Ginn, 40, is lanky and easy-going; he speaks slowly and carefully as he sorts through a stack of demos on his desk that grows by about a dozen a day. (He listens to each one himself.) He has a boyish face and short hair, turning grey only at the edges.

Growing up in Hermosa Beach, Ginn was distracted not by music, but electronics. He learned to build amateur radio equipment at age 12. In high school, he formed a company and put out a magazine devoted to solid-state radio transmitters. He shortened the name to its essential letters: SST Electronics.

While studying economics at UCLA, Ginn started playing the guitar. He hated mainstream rock music but was entranced by the raw power of bands like the Stooges and Black Sabbath. Instead of copying the progressive rock music like Yes and Emerson, Lake and Palmer that played in his dorm, Ginn wrote songs of his own, in a musical vacuum.

"I thought of music as kind of a scam," Ginn recalled. "Pop music, I kind of thought of it as these people doing three-minute commercials. I thought I was smarter than to buy that. In some ways, I still feel that way today."

In fall 1976, the Ramones put out the first real punk-rock record by an American band. The following year, Ginn took the music a step further by forming his own band, Panic.

Panic played songs faster and louder than anything else in punk rock. Ginn's guitar work made the Sex Pistols sound slow. His lyrics, handled by different vocalists over the years, weren't sung so much as shouted.

When Ginn discovered another band called Panic, his band changed its name to Black Flag. The new moniker was part pesticide, part politics.

"Black Flag is a symbol of anarchy that has a long history," he said. "But we liked the other connotations as well. It kept it all kind of light."

Utterly ignored by the music scene and rejected by clubs, Black Flag would rent fraternal lodges and community centers for their shows. To advertise, they would paste up posters, spray-paint graffiti and hand out fliers wherever they could recruit new fans. Their audience was growing fast, and by January 1978, Ginn was ready to make a record.

At the time, a band needed at least \$500,000 to make a mainstream rock album. Between them, Ginn and his bandmates had saved about \$1,000. But Ginn had run his own electronics firm for years, and he knew how to get things done. He found a low-budget recording studio in Hermosa Beach, and hired an intern to work with Black Flag at night, on the cheap.

Through a record pressing plant he found in the telephone book in late 1978, he ordered about 1,000 copies of the extended-play Black Flag record *Nervous Breakdown*. Members of the band packed the disks in plastic sleeves culled from Ginn's electronics shop. They took the finished records to local record stores and persuaded shop owners to take them on consignment. The release, which was essentially a sideline of SST Electronics, was sold under the name SST Records.

For Black Flag's second public performance, they shared the bill with a new San Pedro, Calif., band called the Minutemen. The Minutemen played songs even faster and shorter than Black Flag tunes, and they sang or spoke their lyrics with political conviction.

"They approached me about putting out a record, because I had done it," Ginn recalled. "I really had to think about it: Did I want to do this?"

Ginn relented, and the second SST release was the Minutemen's EP, *Paranoid Time*.

Another addition was the Phoenix band the Meat Puppets. They had opened a Black Flag show in Arizona, and Ginn had liked their music.

Ginn also signed Husker Du, a Minneapolis band he stumbled across during a visit to Chicago.

The Huskers had carefully orchestrated the meeting.

"We offered to play that night for free because these SST bands were playing down the street, and we thought if we did a late-night show it would be a good way to plug our band," recalled Husker Du co-founder Grant Hart. "We started showing off specifically for them. Not so much me, but Bob Mould, who was really the Black Flag fan."

"For the encore, Bob comes out with this big can that ends up being blue paint, and (spills it) all over the stage. And the crowd was really getting into it at that point, and sloshing around. It was the kind of gig that impressed Black Flag and impressed Greg Ginn."

By this time, the SST stable, hand-picked by Ginn, overflowed with potential. Three bands, Husker Du, the Meat Puppets and the Minutemen - all trios - competed for prominence on a label with talent to burn.

"We were really competitive, in a healthy way," recalled Watt, bass player and co-songwriter for the Minutemen. "We really liked the idea of the Meat Puppets and the Huskers and the Minutemen all being trios and all having totally different sounds."

But after this burst of creativity, SST's artistic core began to split apart. Guitarist D. Boon of the Minutemen died in an automobile accident in 1985. Husker Du left SST Records for a major label, Warner Bros., a year later. Also in 1986, Black Flag broke up. The band was veering toward heavy metal, and Ginn felt it was an artistic dead end.

In the late '80s, new bands, drawn to SST by its growing reputation, inspired a generation of college bands and young listeners. Dinosaur Jr., led by J. Mascis and his collection of distortion pedals, ruled in 1987. Sonic Youth captured the spotlight in 1988 with a brilliant double album, *Daydream Nation*, building pop songs with partially tuned guitars. Bands such as Screaming Trees, Buffalo Tom and the Volcano Suns kept attention on SST at the beginning of the '90s.

Over the years, SST was slowly growing as a company. When Black Flag broke up and abandoned their one-room apartment, Ginn rented a proper office with a warehouse in North Long Beach for his record company. By 1990 the staff had grown to 30, and SST moved to its present location in Los Alamitos.

It is hard to fathom how small the SST operation is: The label shipped fewer than 2,000 copies of the first Dinosaur Jr. album. By contrast, two recent albums by Sugar, fronted by ex-Husker guitarist Bob Mould, have sold about 300,000 copies each for the Rykodisc label.

Ginn has mixed emotions about the inevitable departure of the bands he has nurtured to success. Nearly every important SST band has eventually left the label for a contract in the corporate rock marketplace. The bands usually cite SST's limited ability to distribute records around the United States and overseas.

Ginn disputes this. He thinks most independent-label bands seek fame, comfort, and, yes, money.

"By the mid-'80s, R.E.M. started selling, like, a million records," Ginn said. "And I saw a lot of bands that I was working with changing their values and changing their music, and trying to get a piece of those sales.

"You won't find an alternative band to speak honestly of their motivations," he said.

But, in an odd way, Ginn and the legendary SST bands are probably better off apart. Like any good talent scout, Ginn is always looking ahead. A band that has already made its mark is of little use to him. He's more interested in the scrappy trio that hasn't played a single gig but has somehow scraped together enough money to mail a crude demo to SST.

"If we were talking 10 years ago, in 1985, you would probably be asking me about Husker Du and Black Flag, and I would probably be talking about other bands that would become popular a couple years later," Ginn said. "I'm not interested in getting more bands like Black Flag, or Husker Du, or anything else. I'm more excited about breaking in with something people don't expect."

"In that sense, I don't think our perspective has changed since we started out."

SST MUST HAVES...

1. *Damaged*, Black Flag: Perhaps the finest expression of political, social and personal turmoil by America's first hardcore punk band.
2. *You're Living All Over Me*, Dinosaur Jr: A collection of '60s-influenced garage-band tunes piled high with distortion.
3. *Bug*, Dinosaur Jr: Contains "Freak Scene," a defining moment of college radio.
4. *Zen Arcade*, Husker Du: A double album that tells the story of a runaway youth with breakneck speed and relentless energy.
5. *New Day Rising*, Husker Du: Hard, fast rock with stunning melodicism and songwriting.
6. *Meat Puppets II*, Meat Puppets: This record shoots off in many directions - punk, folk, country, psychedelic - and show all the possibilities of alternative rock.
7. *Up On The Sun*, Meat Puppets: An articulate, disciplined album of airy rock.
8. *Double Nickels On The Dime*, Minutemen: A double album of utterly inventive songs, loosely based on car travel.
9. *Sister*, Sonic Youth: Beneath the noise, this record brims with fascinating chord structures and grows with each listen.
10. *Daydream Nation*, Sonic Youth: A pop record from a noise band, in the best sense of both words.