



Metalhit.com Profile

By Justin M. Norton / Photography By Elizabeth Riddick

Metal fans are attached to vinyl perhaps more than any other music enthusiasts. Many listeners simply refuse to listen to digital music. Discussions about the move to digital will light up any chat room or message board and often divide the metal community into clearly demarcated factions. Old school purists argue that metal is best served on a vinyl platter; retro-thrashers will argue for cassette tapes – once the staple of metal music trading. Others say there is no room in their life or apartments for physical albums and have moved all of their music to laptops.

Virginia-based digital label Metalhit.com (www.metalhit.com) is hoping to become a one-stop virtual shop for metal fans. Owner Mike Riddick, 32, ran the Fossil Dungeon label until business became so tough that he moved to a digital only-format. The fledgling Metalhit label aims to serve bands who might otherwise be unable to release a proper album. They are

also helping metal labels like Relapse and metal publications set up digital music stores. Riddick, the brother of underground artist and Fetid Zombie mainman Mark Riddick, recently discussed why Metalhit is needed in the underground music scene; why he moved away from vinyl as some labels have embraced it and why the metal community was being underserved

by other downloading options. Metalhit now has more than 8,000 songs in their digital catalog. Riddick's goal? To become the iTunes of the metal community.

Do you have a staff? Engineers? What exactly do you need to run a digital-only label?

I run Metalhit by myself. I also run other businesses, so this is something I do in my spare time. It's less time-consuming than a traditional metal label because it's easier to distribute it digitally. I work from an HP Pavilion laptop, nothing spectacular.

A lot of small labels seem to be going the other way and focusing on vinyl and special edition CDs – why did you decide to focus solely on digital releases?

The primary reason was the financial aspect. It became too cumbersome to continue publishing CDs and vinyl. I have a passion for the business side of music and I wanted to be involved, but in a more productive and efficient manner. It also gave me a marketing edge to promote something other than a traditional record label. There are digital labels out there but none in the metal market from my understanding.

Did you think the metal community was being shortchanged with the quality of digital releases, particularly underground bands?

Our downloads are superior to what you can get at iTunes and other digital vendors. It's the

highest quality MP3 you can buy on the Internet. We're planning to offer uncompressed files, which will be completely pristine. It's just like getting a CD.

What would you say to metalheads who still like to listen to albums on vinyl and CD only when necessary?

I'm still all for CDs and vinyl. I love vinyl. What will be interesting to see is when CDs become obsolete and digital becomes the norm. Vinyl will survive because there is an affection for the sound and artwork. It's the best way to capture the atmosphere and you can't get that with tape and CD. Bands will continue to desire vinyl even when CDs are gone. But digital is going to take over. I buy in all three formats – they are all viable mediums right now but I think CDs will be phased out during the next decade.

For artists that release music in a digital-only format how do you ensure that the albums contain high-quality artwork and liner notes – something metalheads are accustomed to?

There's really no way to have artwork and liner notes. I think people do look for lyrics and the production credits. That stuff can be posted on MySpace or a website and it's accessible. It's certainly reasonable to want to include it.

Does the digital format allow people to sample and get to know a larger range of artists?

It's a great way to open a novice into metal and expose them to more than what in the past was just controlled by the major labels. Now anything is accessible and that opens up a broad range of artists for access. Before, people were limited to their local offerings. Now with the power of the web you can find anything with a little research. It's a great medium and has transformed the underground.

Are you worried that digital music deprives fans of part of the experience of an album or do you feel like digital music is the standard now and some people won't accept that?

It does deprive you of part of the experience because you don't have a tangible item in your hands. I'm a graphic designer. At my other label I put a lot of time and attention into high quality packaging. That's missing with digital music. The counter to that is convenience. Most consumerism is driven by convenience. People don't need to take a CD into their car anymore. You can plug and play with your iPod or listen to it on your desktop. That's what drives the market.

One of the things about the digital revolution and living in a connected world is that anyone can release their music via social networking or a website. With a huge glut of metal bands how do you make



sure what you put together for proper digital release is worthy of reaching an audience?

That's where the marketing power of a label comes in. And that's what separates a label – a vast amount of media contacts. That's the only leverage a label is going to have anymore. Because the distribution will be simple and not involve getting CDs into the store. The only reason a band would need to sign is the marketing power of the label and their media networks.

Do the bands you work with still try to release music in other formats, sometimes through other labels? And do you do help smaller labels properly release their music in a digital format?

I've licensed a lot of bands that have CDs and

put them on the digital market. I think having a band in the digital realm and the physical realm is a powerful thing. We are also thinking about licensing the artists we work with to other labels to get CDs properly distributed.

Have you kept your music collection or is all of your music in a digital-only format?

My brother and I retain a pretty large collection of underground and mainstream metal. I like all formats.

With the recession will more people be looking to download music rather than purchase physical albums?

I think so. Our business has continued to grow in the midst of a recession. It's becoming more appealing because people can cherry pick rather than buy a full CD. 