

By Si Robins



*Even when taking a break with River Jones (opposite) outside his studio, members of the label can't help but create new music.*



## Folk Family

In the me-first world of music production, the Phoenix-based River Jones label has a refreshing tune: “Keep it in the family.”

In a quiet downtown Phoenix apartment complex, muffled music can be heard coming from one of the upstairs units. Inside, River Jones is working, his blonde hair disheveled as he quietly clicks away on his computer. He’s making records—recording the crop of young talent he’s signed since starting River Jones Music a few years back.

Jones is no glitzy producer—he works shoeless in a T-shirt and shorts almost every day, something he only half-jokingly claims was his number-one job requirement. He doesn’t have a business card and, until recently, didn’t have a game plan, either. His recording studio is, in fact, the second bedroom of the apartment he and his fiancée share. Despite years of experience in the music industry, his label sprouted up by happy accident.

“I decided I was going to be a musician when I was 4,” Jones says. And, he’s done it all—from working in record stores, to interning at Elektra Records and Grand Royal, to working at Maverick Records, to touring the world for two years as a drummer.

But it wasn’t until Jones moved from Los Angeles back to his hometown of Phoenix that everything fell into place.

“I thought, why don’t we live in downtown Phoenix for a year, just to see what’s up,” Jones says. Calculating his next move, he met promising singer-songwriter Courtney Marie Andrews—a high school student at the time—at a show he was playing here.

“I was looking nationally for someone to produce,” Jones remembers. “I’d just returned from L.A., and couldn’t find anybody. I kept hearing Courtney’s name, and

kept saying I’d check her out. I was playing drums in this riot girl band, and someone introduced us. She took me into a room and played me a song, and I dropped everything I was doing to record her.”

Andrews’ haunting voice and strong musicianship make her songs, or “stories,” as she calls them, wise beyond her years. Playing in Phoenix since she was 15, she has a quiet maturity, though she hides beneath her long black bangs in conventional teenage style. She’s currently readying a third album, just six months after the release of her last.

It was Andrews who suggested that Jones find other musicians to record. He laughed it off, but in listening to Andrews’ friends and their friends, soon realized she was onto something. It’s come a long way fast, since Jones recorded Andrews’ debut, *Urban Myths*, in his mom’s living room in 2007.

The label features an ever-growing cast, from ukulele-toting Michelle Blades, 19, to Brent Cowles (a k a You, Me, and Apollo), 20, who moved from Colorado to work with Jones. Charles Barth (a k a Saddles), Asher Deaver and a host of other friends of the label, such as Tucson-based, French-born Marianne Dissard, round out the family.

Andrews’ second record, *Painter’s Hands and a Seventh Son*, has been the engine so far, with indie-store distribution around the country and hits on Last.fm and MySpace.

The label has grown 300 percent a year since its inception. The musicians—ranging from 18 to 22 years old—are a tight-knit group, playing shows together and appearing on each other’s records. This family vibe has drawn comparisons to Saddle Creek Records, the Nebraska label started by a few





A pastor's son from a small Colorado town, Brent Cowles of *You, Me, and Apollo* came to Phoenix to be part of the River Jones collective.

friends in the 90's that sprouted Bright Eyes and other acclaimed indie acts.

But running a one-man outfit in a town with an underappreciated music scene takes its toll.

"I can't believe I made it through that first year," Jones recalls. "I went out and bought a bunch of cheap shorts and told everyone I was going on vacation." That "vacation" meant recording two artists a week, as opposed to upward of six. Jones has recorded seven albums in the past year, and aims for even more in 2010, but feels spread thin.

"I'm trying not to rush through making these records," Jones says. "But there's so much talent and so much need; we need all the help we can get. It would be great if there were multiple producers around, but it doesn't work that way." He'd even welcome more Phoenix-based labels, if simply to foster the talent that's cropped up here.

Meanwhile, Jones is still "vacationing," recording the first proper albums for Blades and 20-year-old Ryan Osterman, a.k.a. Owl & Penny.

Owl & Penny is based in Tempe, but Osterman has moved all over the East Valley and even to Ohio for a stint.

"I met some great musicians in Ohio," Osterman says, nonchalantly plucking his guitar in Jones' living room. "But I was really looking forward to coming back here, because it's like being part of a family."

Blades, a recent transplant from Miami, is the niece of Panamanian salsa star Rubén Blades, and her music evokes much of his stage aura. But making a proper record is very different from doing one of her stripped-down, semi-ad-libbed live shows.

"Usually we kill, like, three songs in a day," Blades says, sitting cross-



legged on the floor, strumming ukulele with Wayfarers on, "but we're trying to take our time here." She immediately segues into an impromptu performance for no one in particular, content just to be singing.

Jones, 32, is the group's father figure, and he wants each artist to grow the right way. In particular, he and Andrews, who at 19 has already put out two albums and toured the West Coast three times, share an interesting dynamic. They're best friends despite an age gap, and joke around like lifelong pals. "I'm older," says Jones. "Everyone else is younger, and they want to hang out, but I have to keep that separation of work and play."

Luckily, Andrews keeps great ideas coming. It was she who thought the label should start its biannual Folk Fest, which has now earned nationwide attention. The goal is to create a cohesive, nationally respected music scene.

"People have been traveling to our folk fests from other states," says Jones, who can't help but smile. "Austin needs to watch out, because we're coming up. On MySpace, people will tell us, 'I wish I was in Arizona.' Growing up here, I never thought I'd see that." ❧

## ESSENTIAL River Jones Music Records

### ■ Courtney Marie Andrews—*Painter's Hands and a Seventh Son*

At once brooding and striking, Andrews' second record is an epic leap in songwriting. The tunes are particularly strong live, where Andrews plucks her guitar while sitting onstage, leading up to powerful choruses.

### ■ You, Me, and Apollo—*How to Swim, How to Rot*

Quiet guitar meets lush chamber pop in this five-song EP, recorded by Brent Cowles in Colorado following a painful divorce. The subject matter is intense, but it's Cowles' strong composition and Dylan-esque vocals that stand out. Upon first listen, Jones signed Cowles and agreed to release these songs.

### ■ Michelle Blades—*Oh, Nostalgia!*

Though Blades' first EP, *Where the Water Boils*, was mostly ukulele and provocative vocals, her first full-length record takes it up a notch. A fuller sound, including layers of guitar, strings and percussion, coupled with Blades' signature voice, make this one of the Valley's strongest recent releases.

### ■ Owl & Penny—*Fever Dreams*

Ryan Osterman pairs his tobacco-husky howl with strings by members of the Phoenix troubadours Poem for this five-song set. The results are lavish, confident songs much bigger than Osterman's intentions when he wrote them over the past year.

### ■ Saddles—*Shame on You, Chatterer!*

Though 22-year-old Charles Barth is the label's elder statesman, and the most traditional singer-songwriter, it doesn't mean *Shame on You, Chatterer!* isn't one of the label's most consistent releases to date. A pared-down approach gives the record a classic likability, and Barth has some serious pipes.

### ■ Marianne Dissard—*L'Entredeux*

Though not officially on the label, Dissard has done much to help it succeed (including putting up members in her Tucson home). A French export to Arizona, Dissard's breathy vocals are backed by an extensive band with supreme musicianship.