



This interview was conducted by email over the course of March and April 2020.

Carcharodon (C): Thanks so much for agreeing to take part in this project of mine. Can I start by asking what's your background and what led you to set up a record label in the first place?

Kunal Choksi of [Transcending Obscurity Records](#) ([Bandcamp](#)) (“KC”): Thanks so much for this interview and taking an interest in our little label! I used to run a webzine since 2005 with the aim of helping promote bands around the world. I created my own website using Dreamweaver on my own because I couldn't afford to hire pro web developers back in the day. It consumed me and I learned so much about all kinds of music - I would say that it helped me greatly when it came to signing bands. I was particularly into one of the lesser known bands from Australia called **The Dead**. I personally reviewed their entire discography and even conducted an interview with them but when they said that they're looking for a label and asked for my help but nothing could materialize, I thought perhaps I should give it a shot - it couldn't hurt the band at that stage. It was a huge challenge because I was working with international bands from a country like India which wasn't really known for its metal scene or bands. But I stuck with it for better or worse and here I am!

C: Did you have a mission statement or particular objective in mind at the start whereby, if you achieved x, you'd consider the whole thing a success?

KC: The original idea was to help bands grow. I still go by that standard. Perhaps it stems from my decade-and-a-half long experience as a writer trying to promote bands. Things were simpler and in a way easier back in the day. But then you realize that you can't work with every band on your wishlist and that there is a hierarchy of sorts, and you have to make do with what you can get, which meant starting in the underground and working with such bands. But thankfully with the heart in the right place, I was able to help them grow and they weren't so underground anymore after I was done with the release. That gave me satisfaction. Most bands were grateful and saw that I was pushing them hard. Then I worked on other areas of the label such as improving the quality, getting distribution in stores, ensuring speedier delivery and so on. We're still getting there but ultimately though, if I'm able to make a band bigger, so to speak, I would consider that a victory.

C: What's the day-to-day of running the label for you?

KC: It's unfortunately way too hectic these days - 14 hours a day on an average. I mean right from the time I wake up to take a dump in the morning till I switch off the lights at night, I'm on my phone and always typing out something or the other pertaining to my work. It's definitely not the kind of 'label boss' life that you would imagine, I suppose! But then I have to because I have a small staff too and we all do this full time. If I slack off, then everything gets affected and I really don't want to stagnate. It's imperative for me to be able to transcend obscurity in the first place and do things on a somewhat significant scale. I'm also supposed to be drumming and playing guitar to start my own band some day, but there's no time left for that. Luckily I have pets as stress busters - eight cats and a dog, so I don't get too bitter with them around haha.

C: Do you interact at all with other labels?

KC: It's minimal. It's not like I can share contacts of vendors being from India. I'm pretty much isolated here but of course I have a healthy respect for all of them. I used to also run a PR company and have worked with quite a few labels while doing that so I'm friends with quite a few, especially Raul of [Memento Mori](#) who gave me my first break around the time I lost the last surviving member of my family - my beloved sibling, my sister.

C: What do you look for in bands that you sign to the label and how do you go about finding them?

KC: The music. That's what seals the deal for me. I can't remember the last time I signed a band just because of their aesthetics, for instance, even though that helps. You get my point? I mean we're working with bands from Argentina and Paraguay and I'm not looking at the logistics - it's all about the music. Perhaps I'm being naive and I should look to sign more touring bands but it's difficult for me to get convinced if I don't believe in the music. Sometimes it's a bit of a challenge for me to work with obscure but sonically powerful bands and get them the acclaim that they deserve. It's probably why I have so many bands signed to my label, and of course the fact that I listen to all kinds of extreme metal music and don't focus just on a sub-genre or two.

To this day, I approach bands directly and check out songs of new bands all the time. That is of course in addition to checking out all the submissions that I get on almost a daily basis. It's work but I've got to be fair. Most new bands have misconceptions but I'm really not that difficult to get in touch with if you're trying to link me up to your band's music. I unflinchingly check each and every one of them but of course don't have the heart to write to them saying "no" and just carry on hoping that they'll understand. I don't want to be this asshole judge at shows commenting on stuff and giving them reasons for it not clicking with me. Thankfully most bands that I'm working with are very nice to me and often suggest bands too, which helps! **Rogga Johansson** and **Jonny Pettersson** in particular have been quite helpful!

C: Do you ever have to persuade bands to sign to you?

KC: Oh, all the time. Most bands are sceptical probably because of where I'm from. It's inconceivable for them to work with a label from India. I've had to work doubly hard to prove myself in that regard, and also to convince them of my abilities. It's a lot easier now than it was a few years back but of course there are bands that will prefer to work with local labels which I feel is very unfair. It's about time they get broadminded and look at the larger picture. I've literally had bands tell me that they wouldn't work with me because I'm from India and that they'd rather work with a smaller but local label which defies logic because sometimes they get a significantly better deal with more formats, merch, better promotion and even distribution all over not to mention a budget too. I wouldn't say my label is among the bigger ones out there but it sucks to lose a good band that you feel would be a good fit for the label.

C: And what do you get out of running the label? I assume it's not all for the fame and wealth?

KC: Satisfaction, sustenance, headache - not necessarily in that order. I don't think anyone's out to become a millionaire working with death metal music, you know? But no one wants to lose money too. That's a part of this label business that few realize - we actually lose money too. There have been times when I've been overzealous and offered more formats and merch when it was not needed. There have been times when I've been too generous with the budget or artwork costs or videos for that matter. Ideally I want to do the very best but practically it doesn't always make sense and you learn that the hard way. I have bills to pay too and a part of you wishes you were doing something else so that you don't have stress over this stuff but then again if you want to be the best or at least really good at anything, you have to be committed and can't do things in a half-assed manner.

But would I willingly want to work this hard for just money in some other line? Probably not. Because it's not about the money - there's something more. This is our passion and we thrive off it. There's a part of you that wants the world to also listen to the music you've discovered, or for a band to do better simply because they're excelling at it. It's basic fan mentality where you can't wait to brag about a band to your friends, only now the circle of influence has become significantly larger and bands kind of count on you to do that. It's difficult but there's no looking back now. A special note of thanks goes out to all

the people who've bothered to take an interest in our bands and of course to the bands themselves for giving us a chance to work with their music, which makes it all possible in the first place!

C: Just taking a step back for a moment, you say that the key thing when signing bands is the music - which makes total sense - what sort of relationship do you have with bands once they're signed to you?

KC: We become friends. I don't socialize much nowadays probably because of how busy I've become so all the interaction is with the bands and we end up cracking a few jokes and exchanging .gifs and what not. Ideally, I'd want it to be like a family and would like things to be smooth and mutually beneficial, with monetary aspects being secondary to good working rapport. So far I've been pretty successful at that, with just a couple of instances where things haven't worked out with a band and that's after working with over a hundred or probably a lot more bands if you consider the sub-labels. That's a percentage I can definitely live with. I mean I understand my label isn't the biggest out there and admittedly I do take risks but that's because I want to grow and not wait five years till I do something that I want to do like the big labels.

I still send out my own press releases and personally look into matters concerning the artwork, layout and box sets, even merch, all of which can be pretty demanding. Most labels have PR companies to do that but I would prefer to do it myself, having had some experience with that personally. In just a couple or so years, we're having box sets for all formats, making all kinds of merch including having an in-house printing setup, establishing stores in two different continents, and working with bands from all over without having any kind of homeground advantage. If bands can't see the hard work that I'm putting in and are just concerned about the timing of their release then it's too bad.

C: Do you get involved at all when 'your' bands are making new records or choosing artwork? Would you ever offer advice on that sort of thing?

KC: Of course I do! Well, there are bands that are too adamant and earlier I couldn't get them to budge, and neither did I have the budget to get new artworks for them, but nowadays things are better in that regard. I wouldn't say that I'm an expert but having done PR for over a couple of hundred releases and also having learnt a bit of digital painting myself, I guess I can see a good artwork from a bad one. It's not my opinion over the band's but what's ultimately better for the release. It's worked reasonably well of late even though bands get miffed at the extra time that it might take to get a new one made from scratch. The decision to go for a Dan Seagrave artwork for **Paganizer** was mine, and thanks to **Rogga Johansson**, we got a good one for his eponymous album too, from Mariusz Lewandowski no less, which goes superbly with the epic music on the album. We collectively chipped in to get the stunning artwork for **Lurk** from Adam Burke, and where bolder decisions go, bands like **Chaos Motion** and even **Arkheith** trusted me to go for the kind of shocking, avant-garde paintings for their releases which we all agree now worked in the favour of the release. Mark Riddick in particular, whose band **Fetid Zombie** is on our label, has been extraordinarily kind to hook us up with artworks right from the beginning. We can't wait to reveal some of the newer artworks that have been created for releases of bands such as **Imperialist**, **Depravity**, **Heads for the Dead**, **To Descend**, **Rogga Johansson**, **Thornafire** and more!

C: Given what we at AMG do, I have to ask: how much attention do you pay to reviews? How much of an effect do reviews - good and bad - have on sales and so on?

KC: I completely respect what you guys are doing because, as I said earlier, I too ran a webzine and that too for nearly a decade and a half. I've seen so many webzines come and go, readerships getting created and also erased overnight. I can't help but pay attention to reviews because part of me notices how well it's written - it's become an old habit of sorts. I was kind of an editor when I was running the webzine and my work entailed that I proofread and double checked everything. I wish I had the time to do more of that but the label has consumed me completely!

Where its impact goes, unlike the naysayers out there who are like "who reads reviews when you can listen to it yourself!", I feel it's extremely important simply because there's not enough time to listen to

all the music that gets released nowadays. You need some kind of guidance or reference when it comes to even checking out new music and that's where I feel reviews or any kind of promotion of this type helps. It doesn't hurt if the said source carries credibility, which can't be created easily, and that I would say Angry Metal Guy has in spades. We were fortunate enough to have two of our releases featured as the record of the month on your site, that of **Eternal Storm** and **Gaerea**, and it definitely impacted sales big time. We wouldn't have made vinyl for **Eternal Storm** without that happening. So there's your direct, tangible effect of positive reviews on sales.

C: What trends are you seeing in sales? Everything I read, vinyl is making a huge comeback (and even cassettes!) - does this chime with your experience? What are the drivers for this?

KC: I'm not completely convinced. People think whatever you press will get sold out overnight but that's not true, at least not in my experience. I've got most stock of leftover vinyl and even though it moves well, it doesn't move as well as you'd think. Same goes with cassettes - it's decent but nothing that will make you recover the recording or pressing costs immediately. It's more of a perceived notion than anything, and I personally feel that it's highly dependent on the kind of release it is for and the following that the band might have, also factors like if a band is touring or not. It's very easy for a band to demand vinyl but it's ridiculously expensive and I don't think most bands have the kind of loyal following to even justify that move.

On our part, we promote the shit out of our bands in the hope that they get bigger and that would somehow warrant more formats and merch. But, in my experience, I've offered way too much to even bands releasing their debuts and I've lost a lot of my personal savings trying to please them all. Perhaps bands too should work hard themselves and not just sit on their asses and demand all kinds of formats and merch from their labels, even though ideally we're doing our best to give all of them the best possible treatment. We went against our better judgement by offering mandatory box sets and merch for any kind of release, big or small, and it's something of a to-do thing for us as a label, but with formats like vinyl which we can't even make here in our country or subcontinent, it becomes an incredibly expensive affair taking into account extra shipping costs and customs where we come from.

*C: I've also seen some crazy merchandising ideas going round - like the recent **NOCTU** record, which came with the scent of funeral flowers, I think?*

KC: I like to keep progressing no matter what. I hate the idea of repeating myself over and over and feel the need to do something different as far as possible. Sometimes it causes delays and that's regrettable but we don't have the time to sit and do research and development while keeping releases on standby. It has to be done when things are lined up, risks have to be taken, and I learn each time from it all. It's all the more difficult for us as we don't have standards in place here for metal products. When we work with local vendors here, we give them templates which we've created for our own products. I use some of my mechanical engineering background to get the right sizes for the box sets and the items that go inside, for instance. Even our digipaks, as you've mentioned, come with crazy effects especially of late.

People here think I've gone crazy and sometimes I wonder if it's necessary but we don't merely want to conform but set new standards for Transcending Obscurity as a brand. Where merch goes, it was a massive hurdle simply because we're from India and our sizes are different. People ask us which merch brand we use and my answer to them is that we have our own Transcending Obscurity brand merch which we've created after doing a fair bit of research and also a lot of trial and error. We've changed dozens of vendors over the years because we're insistent on high quality and again delays have happened in the process. I wish it was as easy as contacting a company, giving them your order, and having things delivered to you.

Our current modus operandi involves me actually acquiring special extra thick cotton cloth, having it stitched by an experienced tailor as per our international size chart that we've created patterns for, and then assembling it all after the various printing processes that happens at our end (holds true especially for zipped hoodies and long sleeves), and ultimately ironing it and packaging it after travelling all over the place. It's almost like we have to do everything ourselves, but if that's what it takes to uphold a high

standard of quality, so be it. We even assemble box sets and some digipaks ourselves simply because we have better control over their quality that way. We learn and improve with each and every experience, as tedious as it gets, but we're far better off now than say a year back. Looking back, despite the numerous hurdles, we don't regret it and all of this has enabled us to push ahead, even ahead of our international peers in some regards, perhaps.

C: You've been running Transcending Obscurity for a long time now – what changes have you seen over the years since you set it up?

KC: Transcending Obscurity technically was established in 2004 as a forum, then in 2005 as an online magazine and later in the decade as a record label too but until that point it was called Diabolical Conquest and we had a name change to what it is now. It all started out as a hobby and one thing led to another. In 2013, I started a sub-label for bands from my country and region and I put out close to 50 releases under that banner before deciding to focus only on the main label as that was getting bigger. Around that time I also started a PR company so that I could work with more bands and not just the ones I had signed so that I could promote them and also for a bit of sustenance, even though I did some campaigns for free. In 2018 however I decided to shut down everything - the webzine, sub-labels, PR company just so that Transcending Obscurity Records could be the sole focus as things were getting demanding by then and I didn't want any conflict of interest either. I could say that it was from that year that things started to get serious.

So, as you can see, I've been working with metal music in one way or the other for a very long time and have seen a lot. It was a dream for me to do this full time - I actually used to get dreams of the same and I woke up wishing how that could be true. I had no idea that it was a possibility back in the day when I had a family business that I had to run while doing the webzine at night after working hours. With the sudden demise of my parents, and ultimately my sister, I just did metal full time, putting out a few releases while doing the PR company bit. She had asked me what I liked doing and I said metal, even though I had no idea how to go about it. I remember checking with local bands, trying to convince them if I could help promote their existing releases internationally and they gave me a chance and I promoted their release for something like 60 bucks which certainly wasn't enough but it was a start. I also organized shows locally when I had the sub-label going and even had a 'Transcending Obscurity fest' in my city! I believe, as luck would have it, I achieved significant success in all my endeavours and it's a shame that time limits you to give priorities to only a few of them. To start from scratch, spend years building it, and eventually letting it go hurts but it's not always possible to continue. Sometimes it's better to burn out than fade away.

Where the main label goes, we kept on working with more and more bands from all over. It was extremely difficult earlier on to get people to take our work seriously just because I was from India. But I persisted and worked my ass off without expecting much in return. Now we're working with over a hundred bands and I guess there's a bit of recognition where the name Transcending Obscurity goes. We're far from perfect but things are definitely much bigger than before when I was operating out of my bedroom using just a PC and packing stuff on my bed. Now we have a congested little office in my house and have a few people helping out. We've graduated from doing basic jewel case releases to 8-panel and even 12-panel digipaks with effects such as embossing, foiling, UV lamination and more.

We've struggled to work with formats that weren't possible to make from India such as vinyl and cassettes but figured out a way and even ended up making box set versions for both. We did flags and all kinds of merch, and of late even ended up having our own size chart and branding and nowadays we're even doing prints on the sleeves which is a pain in the ass. We also secured better distribution for North America and Europe and even established two exclusive stores for both continents even though we're lagging behind a bit. We're doing a lot of things for a label of our size and we just have to work hard for some time until of course we can afford to hire more help. But so far so good I guess. It does feel good to work with better known bands nowadays instead of completely obscure demo-level bands that we had to choose from earlier because our label was new. We still have a long way to go though and hope we can pull things off without doing anything too drastic.

C: What new challenges are opportunities are you expecting over the next few years?

KC: We want to start helping bands get shows in the foreseeable future. I'm personally going to write to as many promoters and fests as possible, and brace myself for dozens of rejections. And we would also like to have a simultaneous release of an album on all formats, as opposed to making vinyl of an album later on, gauging the sales. We're not that big of a label to risk making all formats for all bands, even the debut ones without a following. I was too idealistic earlier on and paid the price. I also came to understand with much trauma that despite your friendliness and good intentions, bands would treat it as a business and look at the bigger labels out there. It's not possible for me to compete with them from India but it doesn't mean that I can't try and build up a bit of an empire and offer them similar deals - after all they too started somewhere. We're striving to offer better deals to bands and cover more costs where possible and it's one of our goals to do it all for them in the coming years.

*C: And now, with all the social media and digital options, do bands need labels less than before? You could look at a band like **Wilderun** who have made big waves without signing to anyone. [Correct at the time the question was asked.]*

KC: I don't think so. With the advent of better technology, the recording and mixing/mastering process has become much easier with bands not needing huge advances from labels. But on the flipside, a ton more bands are producing albums and rapidly. It's extremely difficult for a band to do it all and break through on its own. **Wilderun** is an anomaly and their kind of success is possible only with solid critic backing, in this case of your site itself. I'm not taking anything away from the brilliant band but I'm just saying that very few bands can hope for that kind of splash internationally.

I get an email almost every day from bands wanting to be signed for their album to be put out on a physical or specialized format but how many of them actually get noticed globally? I sometimes notice them online, their albums on Bandcamp or even at the sites that have picked them, and the fact remains that only a small number of them manage to get the kind of attention that they want. It is for this reason that labels will remain in relevance as long as they're able to justify doing activities in a better way than what the bands can pull off on their own. It certainly helps that a label has amassed a sizable customer base after putting out numerous releases whereas bands only have to contend with the customers they have made on their own, and it's far more difficult for a new band to do so without touring extensively. Promotion-wise, an easy reference point would be for instance the subscribers they have on their YouTube channel. On an average, nine out of 10 times, the label would have a much higher subscriber base and so it's much likelier to have videos uploaded on their channel to get more views. It's also a fact that an independent band may not have the budget to put out their album on all formats or work out shipping to far off countries without proper distribution channels being in place. As someone once said to me, working with a known label is getting a smaller piece but of a much, much larger pie.

C: Lastly, and I'm sorry to ask: coronavirus. Obviously, it's affecting everything in our lives but just sticking to the music side of things - we've seen bands having to cancel shows, I read that Amazon and some other retailers aren't accepting vinyl / CD shipments anymore ... how has Transcending Obscurity been affected by all this and where do you see it going?

KC: Man, it's just surreal. I feel like pinching myself because this is something that's completely unprecedented and we're all so ill-prepared to tackle this. Sales have been hit hard. But at such times, it's probably better to focus on the positive than negative, and we've offered our entire catalogue of over a hundred releases for free download (sub-label included). At least there won't be a dearth of getting good new music, as I said in my post about it. It'll last all through April and moreover, looking at the circumstances, we've offered a deal this month on the physical too where people will get a free CD with every order placed, big or small! Essentially, if you buy one CD, you'll get a CD free. I hope that helps ease things for the music lovers out there. We're still in lockdown and I'm sitting in my tiny office and typing out this interview! I'm incredibly thankful to all the customers for their support in such times and also their patience and understanding. We haven't been able to ship stuff out for a few days and here's hoping that we're allowed to resume very soon!