



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?

Nicolas Fernandes-Skog of [Hypnotic Dirge Records \(Bandcamp\)](#) ("NFS"): I certainly don't have any sort of formal background in business or anything. In fact, anyone that knows me well knows that I am pretty fundamentally anti-business. In the late 2000s, I had a dark ambient project called **Ancient Tundra** and although I released my debut album on an outside label, I thought it might be interesting to self-release the second album. Shortly after that, and in the midst of conversation with other musician friends on myspace, I realized that many of them were independent and I thought it might be an interesting endeavour to start up a small label and release their albums as well. The time period between 2008-2010 or so was the initial stage of Hypnotic Dirge, where I was mostly releasing albums from friends on limited-run CD-R and trying to learn along the way. Looking back to that time now, there were a lot of missteps and a huge lack of aptitude but I suppose that should be expected.

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?

NFS: When I first launched Hypnotic Dirge, my ambitions were very small. I certainly didn't have any grand plans and thought I'd maybe release music for 1 or 2 years before putting my focus back into writing and releasing my own music, perhaps using my label as a vehicle for my own projects in cooperation with other labels. As the years passed, I became more and more comfortable in my role and really felt no reason to stop.

C: What's the day-to-day of running a label like yours?

NFS: On the days where I'm not working elsewhere (I typically work part-time or do odd jobs here and there to supplement my income, quitting jobs often during busy periods for HDR), I usually start the day by checking emails and messages, then get to work on creating graphics, uploading content, coordinating plans with bands, or promotion. I like to take a break in the middle of the afternoon, play some piano or guitar and/or go for a walk while listening to podcasts and audio books and typically use the evenings to pack orders and make nearly daily trips to the post office.

C: Do you interact at all with other labels?

NFS: Yes, I still trade with other labels or buy their releases for distribution in our shop when I can, although it's getting harder and harder to find the time to dedicate to the distro. With my workload being what it is, it's tough to find time to just chat about releases, discuss strategy, or simply ask how they are doing, but I know many label owners (as well as band members obviously, and writers / journalists) who are amazingly dedicated people who are driven by a love of music and a strong will.

C: What do you look for in bands that you sign to Hypnotic Dirge and how do you go about finding them? Do you ever have to persuade bands to sign to you?

NFS: There are so many bands with potential and I'm sure Kunal and Robert can both attest to the fact that it is simply impossible to listen to all the demos they receive, let alone find space in their release schedule for everything that they appreciate. I'm typically planning releases roughly 6-9 months in advance, often leaving a spot here or there for new discoveries, but when a band messages me and wants to release something right away, it is often not possible due to release schedule limitations. I've released material from bands that have contacted me and have also found bands and reached out to them, usually just by digging through Bandcamp, YouTube, or from recommendations from friends. Sometimes, both the band and the label expresses interest but there isn't any space in the release schedule, so we remain in touch and consider working together on a future release.

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

NFS: Most days I love what I do. It would be a hell of a lot easier to just quit and find a stable full-time job with a guaranteed income. There are certainly a lot of sacrifices made but I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't enjoy it and find value in what I'm involved with. The amount of jobs I have quit simply due to needing more time to work on upcoming releases (not to mention the immense time taken on packing and shipping orders) is quite staggering, and I've also put off educating myself to become qualified for higher-paying and easier work. I'm essentially limited to "non-skilled" labour work when I do find day jobs at this point but luckily people are very supportive of the label so I'm able to get by reasonably comfortably if I'm careful. My material desires are quite low so as long as I have a computer with internet connection, some instruments to play, and good food to eat, I'm reasonably satisfied and don't feel restricted.

I do get *far* more fulfilment and joy being involved in the music industry than every single day job I've ever had, so I see no reason to quit anytime soon.

C: You mention coordinating plans with bands - I'd be really interested to hear a little bit more about the sort of relationship you have with bands signed to Hypnotic Dirge - how regularly are you in touch with them and to work on what?

NFS: I try to remain in contact with bands as much as possible but trying to balance several conversations can be difficult, so there are obviously times when we are not in as much contact. Typically, there is more regular contact leading up to a release and shortly afterwards, but there are still things to discuss between releases such as non-release specific merch, music video releases, royalties, etc. so in most cases, the contact is fairly constant.

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?

NFS: I try to stay out of the way as much as possible, but I will make my opinions heard if I notice things that can be improved upon. Depending on the band and release, I will also be involved with the preparations for shirts and digipack artwork. I'm not an artist so I don't create the original art but I often help design the digipack and discuss layouts with bands. I'm also involved in promotional graphic design for social media and video thumbnails and such so there is definitely a bit of collaborative effort on that. When it comes to the music itself, I'm pretty hands off.

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 etc.?

NFS: This is something that is hard to quantify, but there are certainly times when I notice an uptick of sales of a particular record after a positive review on AMG or a similar website. Premieres and year-end lists also tend to help in this regard.

C: With the digital world we now live in - everyone has their entire music libraries on their phones - I find it super interesting the effort labels put into special edition CDs, vinyl etc - what trends are you seeing in sales ? I'd be super interested to hear any thoughts you may have on the drivers for this.

NFS: When I first started releasing music, I typically stuck to releasing albums on CD and leaving it at that. For the past 3-4 years or so, I've been releasing more merch and bundle options which include patches, stickers, magnets, signed cards, and that has certainly helped with sales. As everyone has music accessible to them at all times from the internet, I think people have generally become more interested in merch as a way to support bands and labels.

Besides this, I have placed a greater emphasis on digital formats and have encouraged people to download our albums which are all available for no minimum price and completely donation-based. On the one hand, this gets the music out to people much quicker and since they are only digital files which cost \$0 in terms of production costs, I have no issue offering them for free and accepting donations from people who choose to donate. I think people understand that small labels operate on very tight margins so there are many people who are willing to help support us by donating a few bucks. This enables me to fund future releases and produce physical merch for those who prefer something more tangible. Ultimately, I just want to help spread the music and like to offer as many options as possible. Another bonus to this model is that I don't have to spend time packing and shipping orders when people order digital.

C: I know Hypnotic Dirge has a couple of different subscription options on offer - what's the take-up like on these?

NFS: Nothing insane, but everything helps. I think the key to running a label in this day and age is pursuing multiple revenue streams. Hypnotic Dirge would never survive from CD sales alone or digital sales alone. By combining CD and merch sales, digital sales, subscriptions (which I view as basically a Patreon-type model), and streaming royalties, I am able to run Hypnotic Dirge fairly effectively and it provides enough funding to release the amount I strive for on a yearly basis. I don't think I would like to release too much more material per year at this time because I doubt I could give each release the proper attention if I did that, and I also have other interests that I like to fill my time with.

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

NFS: Probably a greater and greater emphasis on digital formats, but I tried to embrace it as early as possible. I switched to a "name-your-price" model in 2014, and although it was a bit worrying at the time because I was concerned that if it didn't work out, I might have to start putting a minimum price on downloads again, but luckily the community has been very supportive and generous. I think listeners recognize that we are dependent on community support to fund future releases, so they are very willing to donate money when they are able. I prefer this model because the support is entirely voluntary and no one is forced to pay for music if they are struggling financially. Eliminating unnecessary restrictions on art accessibility is something very important to me.

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

NFS: I actually suspect that things will remain relatively stable for the foreseeable future. The accessibility of streaming and digital music has already reached a point where there are no longer any real barriers to access so I think that the people who are still buying physical merch are doing so for a tangible product, and to support bands and labels. No one **needs** to buy physical merch to access music anymore but I haven't noticed a drop in physical sales, and if anything there is more interest in vinyl and special editions than in the past.

*C: With all the social media and so on nowadays, 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.]*

NFS: Absolutely. I don't think any band really **requires** a label anymore. It does help to have the support because then bands can concentrate more on writing, recording, and touring without having to spend as much time on promotion, graphics, and packing/shipping orders but anything that a label does

is something that can also be done by bands. A lot of the PR work we do can also be done by PR agencies, but to be honest, I've always preferred to do that hands on to have a relationship with writers and journalists instead of passing that off to someone else.

C: Lastly – and I'm sorry but I have to ask – what sort of impact do you expect from COVID-19? I saw, for example, that Amazon stopped accepting vinyl shipments, shows are getting cancelled and so on.

NFS: Well, I think we're all going to be negatively affected in some respects, but obviously this is out of our control and we just have to roll with it. The important thing is being socially-responsible and staying at home. There are many things we can be doing during this time, not only in relation to a record label, but in general. Releases and shows are going to be delayed but there's no sense in worrying about something that is out of our control.

There can be a silver lining to the pandemic. Despite the need for physical distancing, we can use the time to become closer socially, embrace a slower pace of life, watch movies and documentaries, read books, create art, and live a healthier lifestyle. We have - as a society - placed far too high of an emphasis on consumption and the cult of validation-seeking. I think this can provide us all with a "reset", some time to critically think about our personal habits, as well as a market-based system that completely falls apart the moment that people's labour is taken out of the equation.