

MUSIC

San Francisco's Om Records Celebrates 25 Years

A new compilation record features highlights from the label's quarter century.

by [Jaime Sloane](#) • 05/28/2020 8:40 am - Updated 05/28/2020 3:18 pm



Reptile Room's track 'Sunlite' is part of the forthcoming compilation album celebrating Om Records' 25th anniversary. (Photo: Cindy Harter Sims)

Though downtempo innovator Mark Farina began spinning records in his native Chicago, it wasn't until he moved to San Francisco in 1993 that he developed his trademark Mushroom Jazz sound — a psychedelic fusion of his hometown's house and urban textures blended with the dubby beats, breaks, and instrumentals then popular in the city by the bay.

He founded a weekly Mushroom Jazz night at SoMa nightclub Oasis where he spun his web of R&B-fueled harmonics to a growing following of indie-leaning music fans craving elements of electronica. Before long, Farina's hypnotic soundscapes caught the ear of Om Records founder Chris Smith, who used the cross-section of music percolating throughout the San Francisco scene as inspiration to start the label in 1995.

Exploring a broad swath of sounds including electronic, hip-hop, acid jazz and punk rock, Om Records quickly made a name for itself at the vanguard of independent music, championing artists from a variety of genres. Since its humble beginnings in an unassuming office on Haight Street, the label's headquarters have careened across the city — from the Dogpatch to Bryant Street — delivering 700 chameleonic releases along the way. Twenty five years later, one of America's first and longest running dance music imprints celebrates its historic catalogue this summer with a compilation album titled *Om Records – 25 Years*.



Mushroom Jazz innovator Mark Farina, right, joined forces with Homero Espinosa, left, to mark the 25th anniversary of Om Records. (Photo: Dirk Wyse)

The label manager first met the Om Records team in 1996 at the Tampa stop of Farina's Mushroom Jazz tour, which launched nationwide when the club hosting the weekly San Francisco night closed its doors. At the time, Hissam was the hip-hop program director for his college radio station, and he recalls being left slack-jawed by the show's live remixing and trailblazing CD Rom projections. Farina had just unveiled the first installment in his critically-acclaimed *Mushroom Jazz* album series, an extension of the club night which debuted as one of the first-ever continuous DJ mixes. Along with Om Records' other early releases, which offered digitally enhanced media components alongside the music, *Mushroom Jazz* came with a bonus CD Rom that featured remixes and in-depth interviews.

"With our events and showcases, we're always conscious about throwing in some sort of curveball, whether it's a live band, or hip-hop group playing between DJs all night, or throw a drum & bass artist between a bunch of house music, just something that flips the script," Hissam explains. "I think our audience was ready for that stuff. And that's what's cool about Om; we're not one particular thing, and hopefully the 25th anniversary keeps that going."

Underground Tech

While most Americans were just creating their first email addresses in the mid '90s, Om Records was already pioneering the digital space with its various multimedia accompaniments, and became one of the first independent labels to release music on iTunes.

"It felt like a blessing, like Steve Jobs was putting the sword on our shoulders and saying 'I hereby grant you access to iTunes,' and that changed the game," Hissam laughs. "We had always thought about what technology and music could do together, and what a record label focused on underground music could do."

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album of the globetrotting superstar known as Kaskade.

Om Records – 25 Years kicks off with “When I’m With You,” a new collaboration from Kaskade, alongside songstress Colette — setting the tone for the 25 following tracks which include both unreleased material and archival anthems. The retrospective serves up records from the likes of Marquess Wyatt, Colossus, Groove Armada, and Rithma — and ranges widely, from growling bass and funky disco, to classic soul grooves and junglist breaks.

DIY sampling duo People Under The Stairs were the label’s first hop-hop signees, and contributed three dubplates for the compilation: the fan-favorite 2000 hit “Acid Raindrops;” a 2003 collaboration alongside J Boogie’s Dubtronic Science, titled “Movin’ To My Beat;” and a demo called “Turbbuilders,” which didn’t make it onto the pair’s 2019 album *Sincerely, The P*.

“Technically, they retired with *Sincerely The P*, so it was a long shot to get a new song out of [them],” Hissam beams as he explains how “Turbbuilders” might be the only new music coming out from the defunct project. “They’re one of the greatest hip-hop duos of all time, and it wouldn’t be the 25th anniversary without them.”

Pushing Boundaries

Om Records unveiled the album’s first single “The Story” earlier this month, a new collaboration between label originator Mark Farina and his musical partner Homero Espinosa. Next up is a spellbinding meditation called “Sunlite” from Atlanta-based trio Reptile Room, composed of siblings Sean and Sami Michelsen alongside their childhood friend Bill Zimmerman. Hissam first discovered Reptile Room the old-fashioned way — through their demo submission. Though sending in unsolicited tunes rarely leads to an Om signing, Hissam and the rest of the team heard something special and released Reptile Room’s debut LP, *Jade*, last year.

“Sunlite” is an atmospheric dreamscape of electro-pop synths anchored by singer Sami Michelsen’s euphoric croons. The track’s words of encouragement are scribbled across posterboard in the accompanying sepia-toned, lo-fi lyric video, which the three-piece filmed themselves on Atlanta’s deserted streets before the city went into full COVID-19 lockdown.

“Sunlite is very much a focused, intentional message that things are going to shape up, and not to worry,” Sami Michelsen says. “The timing of it all is interesting, because we didn’t start out writing it knowing that the world would be affected the way it’s been, and it feels like it has come full circle. You’re writing for your future self, but you don’t know it at the time”



The song’s message of hope mirrors Om Records’ progressive path forward, through a pandemic that’s left the music industry rattled. The compilation’s summer debut will be the harbinger of a brimming 2020 release schedule, packed with studio albums from veteran acts such as Body Language, Rocket Empire, King Kooba, and even Om founder Chris Smith’s groove-oriented project Shiny Objects, all of whom contributed tracks for *Om Records – 25 Years*. The compilation features 26 tracks — 25 to commemorate the label’s history, and “one to grow on,” Hissam explains.

“I hope that we can continue to support art for art’s sake, and continue to stay true to what we’ve always been doing, and push the boundaries of where music can go,” Hissam says. “Up ’till now, it’s always just about goosebumps, and if we feel that, then that’s where we go.”




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