

BY PAUL MCDERMOTT

Pandamonium! How NOT To Run A Record Label

BY SIMON WILLIAMS - *NINE EIGHT BOOKS*

In 1994 NME journalists **Simon Williams, John Harris** and **Paul Moody** set up *Fierce Panda Records* and released the “Shagging in the Streets” double 7” single launching *New Wave Of New Wave* hopefuls S*M*A*S*H and Those Animal Men onto an unsuspecting public. The NWONW may be a distant memory but Williams stayed the course and Fierce Panda has to date released over 500 singles and over 130 albums. Along the way the label released debut singles by some guys called Coldplay and Keane, and a host of other artists that also jumped from the indie to bigger labels. *Pandamonium!* is his story of how “not to run a record company.” It’s also the brutally honest account of his attempt, on New Year’s Eve 2019, to take his own life.

We’re taken on a roller-coaster indie adventure, from his years spent writing for the NME and broadcasting on Xfm to his time at the indie coalface in the Camden Falcon, the Dublin Castle, the Bull & Gate and countless other toilet venues across London. Bands are approached, 7” singles are released in batches of 500 and 1,000, launch gigs are organised and more new bands are approached. Between chapters we’re brought hurtling back to reality as Williams spends much of 2020 recuperating in hospital and seeks help with his depression and mental health problems. This is an extraordinary book.

Williams is keen to dismiss the legend that Fierce Panda was the great architect of indie talent. “Now one thing that sticks in my craw as much as it must do anyone else who knows their A-ha from their Elbow,” he writes. “Is

Fierce Panda’s tag as ‘the label with the golden ears’, as ‘discovers’ of ‘hitherto unheard-of talent’.” Williams admits that the truth was in fact far simpler: “Truth is: people were just very nice to us.”

Imagine if Coldplay or Keane had stayed with the indie label - Fierce Panda would surely be a household name? But as Williams points out, “Aside from the rarities like Depeche Mode and New Order, who stuck with Mute and Factory, it’s hard to think of a single significant band, from Buzzcocks’ ‘Spiral Scratch’ through Coldplay’s ‘Brothers & Sisters’, who didn’t move from an indie label to a major.” Fierce Panda put out hundreds of singles over the years and many of those artists were snapped up and some became stadium selling acts. Fierce Panda didn’t benefit from those bigger deals so along the way Williams does deals to fund the label through Mushroom Records and Island Records. Ultimately he goes it alone and in spite of the changing industry survives with his indie credentials intact.

In November 2021 Radio X, the British alternative commercial radio station, named Fierce Panda as the 18th “most significant indie label on the planet”. The list included such luminaries as Creation, Factory, Mute, XL, Rough Trade, Sub Pop, Domino, 4AD and Warp. Williams is rightly very proud that his small operation makes the list alongside such illustrious company but in typical self-deprecating manner he wagers that, “Fierce Panda is barely the fourth best indie label alone in the universe with the initials FP.” The other three being Fat Possum, Fantastic Plastic and Fortuna Pop.



My #FiercePanda Top 5:



1. Decade: Ten Years Of Fierce Panda (NONG 34)

Released in 2004, just a few years before streaming would change the landscape forever, this 20-track comp is an unbelievable snapshot. Featuring: Ash, Supergrass, The Bluetones, Placebo, Kenickie, Coldplay, Seafood, Bright Eyes, The Polyphonic Spree, Keane, Idlewild, Death Cab For Cutie and more. ALL got a start on Fierce Panda.



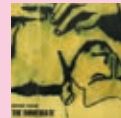
2. Mogwai/Magoo (NING 47)

“Two sonic scratches of the big bad rock arse”. Two Chemikal Underground bands record two blistering Black Sabbath covers for a Fierce Panda split single. It reached No.60 in UK Singles Chart in 1998.



3. Simple Kid - ‘I Am Rock’ (NING 114)

After the demise of The Young Offenders, Ciaran McFeely went back to basics. He bought a microphone, a laptop and a tape machine and recorded ‘I Am Rock’ the first of two great 7” singles on Fierce Panda (the other being the brilliant ‘Truck On’). He plays Whelan’s on the 7th April.



4. The Immediate - ‘Never Seen’ (NING 161)

Before Conor O’Brien was a Villager his band, The Immediate, released their debut single on Fierce Panda. Williams describes ‘Never Seen’ as “shimmeringly epic”. Leaving Fierce Panda behind the band released their album *Towers and Clouds* on Fantastic Plastic Records.



5. Art Brut - Bang Bang Rock & Roll (NONG 38)

The debut album from Eddie Argos and co. is quite simply a bone fide classic. My favourite album released on Fierce Panda and one of my favourite albums of the 00s. Featuring the singles: ‘Emily Kane’, ‘Modern Art’, ‘Good Weekend’ and ‘Formed A Band’. ‘Emily Kane’ became Fierce Panda’s highest-charting single reaching No. 41.