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## Mongillo: Big Bend Records seeks to support Texas artists

BY PETER MONGILLO - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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*The second record from Austin's Ghosts Along the Brazos, "When it Rains It Pours," was the first to be released on new Big Bend Records. The band members are James Gwyn, from left, Katie Holmes, Kris Wade, Greg Harkins and Connor Forsyth.*

Stewart Ramser, Jon Niess and Julian Lowin did something earlier this year that to some people might not seem like the best decision in the music business — at a moment when more and more acts are releasing their music independently, they started a record label.

The label, Big Bend Records, is part of a larger partnership between Texas Music magazine, where Ramser is the publisher, Niess' Austin Signal recording studios and Lowin, a media consultant. Niess said that combining the recording process, a media outlet and a publicity arm will allow the label to provide extra support to its artists (each element of the partnership will continue to work with and cover acts not involved with the label).

"I had the studio, and occasionally people would say, 'Why don't you start a label,' which seems like kind of a boneheaded thing to do given what the industry is like right now," Niess, a producer, said. "So I resisted that even though it sounded interesting."

Niess took the long way to becoming a studio owner and producer. A former musician, he detoured into the world of computers for several years (“I sold everything and dropped out,” he said). He taught himself to record music on the side, editing recordings during long hours spent on business trips. A few years ago he sold his business to IBM and built a studio on the property of his Hill Country home.

Lowin, a neighbor, introduced him to Ramser; the three hatched the idea for the partnership and label in March. The first release was the second album from Austin country/swing/folk group Ghosts Along the Brazos, “When it Rains It Pours.” Niess was introduced to the group by band member Connor Forsyth, whose career he had followed since his days in the Belleville Outfit. When Ghosts Along the Brazos was planning new recordings, the band went to Niess. “I fell in love with the sound of the record,” Niess said. “It came out just the way we had hoped, and I said, ‘I’d love to have you on the label,’ and they were into it.”

In September, the label will release the debut album from Austin rock band the Reynolds Number as well as a new album from singer-songwriter Breting Engel. Niess said that aside from supporting younger, Texas-based artists, Big Bend isn’t tied to a particular genre.

“Stewart’s philosophy for the magazine was to kind of promote and embrace diversity across genres,” said Niess, who has never worked on a label before. “We’re going to try to do the same thing on the label. The first thing is, do we really like the music? And the second is, can they play what they record?”

At the moment, Niess is still getting the hang of some of the bureaucratic and publicity elements involved with the new project but said there has been enthusiasm from the music community. “We have to be careful not to overextend ourselves,” he said.

Up next for Big Bend is a five-city “Texas Music Live” tour to support the Reynolds Number, with Alpha Rev and Quiet Company joining on some of the dates. That mini-tour stops Oct. 25 at the Belmont.