

'Schoolhouse' rock: Program takes students from idea to iPod

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Scott Kennedy, Western News Don Wright Faculty of Music professors Jay Hodgson and Robert Toft will be teaching students how to write, record and produce music, and then how to market and distribute that music on Western's own record label- Schoolhouse Records.

For those who want to rock, Western is the place to be.

Starting next year, the Don Wright Faculty of Music will offer a "trailblazing" academic program that will not only teach students how to write, record and produce music, but also how to market and distribute that music on Western's own record label. Schoolhouse Records, operated entirely by students, will be one of only a handful of university-based labels in the world, and the only one of its kind in Canada.

"We've always wanted to be trailblazers here," says Music professor Robert Toft. "That's why we started the Music Business program and the Pop Music program. Now this label is going to blaze the trail."

The label will be part of a revised program currently working its way through the approval process. The program, which falls under the BA in Popular Music Studies, will integrate aspects of both the Pop Music and Music Business programs, and culminate in a capstone project.

That's where the label comes in. The end result will be released on the Schoolhouse Records label.

Students in the Popular Music program will be the creative force behind the songs and the Music Business students will handle the marketing. "It's going to be very organic," Toft says. "It's a very student-driven project."

The label will not be limited to any one style or genre; instead, it will be a collective of whatever the students are interested in putting out that year.

"We can have a hip hop-style thing, straight ahead glossy pop. We might have blues," Toft says. "Who knows what we'll get."

The aim of the new program is to give student the experience of being involved in the entire process of creating and selling music. "From the idea to the iPod," Toft says. "We want them to follow all the stages through."

Students will graduate from the program with the specialized skills, and the hands-on experience, to launch their careers in the music industry, either as recording artists, label executives or perhaps both. "This is the new paradigm. We're training them to be self-sufficient," Toft says.

Toft's partner in the project, Music professor Jay Hodgson, who will teach music production and engineering in the new program, explains the model prepares students for an industry transformed by technology.

“It encapsulates everything you need to know to function professionally,” Hodgson says. “It really is the future. It’s what musicians are doing now. The ability to function as a label, personally, allows you the freedom that you wouldn’t have before.”

Previously, large corporate labels exerted their power through their control of the channels of distribution, Hodgson says. Today, through outlets such as YouTube and iTunes, independent musicians have access to a global market.

“The label we will be running will be very modern in terms of the model itself,” he continues.

An important issue, addressed early in the program, is money. With students selling records, the question of royalties must be dealt with in the first year of their program.

“It’s going to be a label, so we have to have legal agreements in place for everything,” Toft says. “It will be part of the learning process. We’re going to set this up professionally through lawyers.”

Although the motive behind the label is not profit, there has to be a fair and equitable distribution of income. “We’re not going to be in the business of trying to rip students off,” Toft says. “But since we’ve enabled them and taught them how to do this, it’s probably only fair that Western or the program gets its share.”

Schoolhouse Records anticipates releasing its first tracks toward the end of the 2014 winter term.

But air guitar virtuosos and lip-synching prodigies with dreams of rock stardom, take note: Students do not get into the program without auditioning. Toft and Hodgson expect a maximum of 15 students will be accepted each year.

“The basic fundamental thing is musicianship,” Toft says. “We test that right at the beginning.”

There is only so much magic studio wizards can use to supplement the creative process. You need the musical skills to write good songs, Hodgson says.

“You start with the musician, and then you add the gear,” Toft adds. “Our goal here is to train people to be the best musician in the room.”