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The Voices of DUME

By Jason Wagner
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George Stetten is clearly excited about music. An assistant research professor of biomedical engineering by day, Stetten has been working nights and weekends on a project to bring original popular music by current and former students and faculty artists into the light of day. In order to structure his efforts, Stetten founded the Duke University Music Exchange.

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As a participant in the Faculty Associates program, which pairs University faculty members with residential quads, Stetten noticed that many Duke undergraduates interested in music were having experiences similar to his own as an undergraduate at Harvard. A self-described child of the '60s, he said there were no real channels for the expression of musical talent at either school.

Using a small grant from the Faculty Associates Program and the School of Engineering, Stetten set out to create such a channel by producing an album of local talent. "There are an awful lot of people who [make music] and spend lots of time and energy," he observed.

Few are better qualified to make that assessment. As part of his project, Stetten has spent countless hours and personal funds on the project and has ushered it through two years of ups and downs to reach its current state.

The songs on the compact disc, titled "Voices of DUME," range from soulful piano tunes and hip-hop to folk tunes and guitar rock. Yet, "the heart of it is rock and roll," Stetten said.

Recent innovations in digital technology, by which Stetten and others can mix a song using a common desktop Macintosh computer, have opened up a whole new world to aspiring musicians, Stetten said. "In the last five years there's been another revolution and that's digital music," he explained. Although many of the songs on the CD were recorded in Stetten's Chapel Hill home, he said the new technology also allowed many of the tracks on the tape to be created in the artists' own dorm rooms or homes. "If you're an engineering-minded person and you have \$3,000 you can make a beautiful recording studio," he said. "About half of [the tracks] were already pre-produced by students."

As sole producer of the album, Stetten was in charge of all the copyright negotiations and royalty regulations. While none of the artists will get paid for having their song on the CD-all profits will go directly into making the next one-they will receive all royalties if a radio station picks up on their music.

Instead of monetary rewards, for Stetten at least, the satisfaction came in the journey of creating the album and in the discovery of new artists. Bringing together artists from the music department and individuals with a general interest in music and recording, Stetten assembled a varied set of voices for the album. "There's only one song by each composer," he said. "I got to pick what I thought were really the gems." He added that at least one of the artists on the album is now pursuing a career in music, as a direct result of the project. "I'm waiting for the angry letters from parents," Stetten joked.

"I had never actually recorded on CD before and I thought it was a great opportunity to put out Duke's music," said Trinity junior Eric Clark, one of the musicians appearing on the album. "Basically I was excited to sing on a CD with other Duke artists."

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He added that the chance to get on the radio was not the greatest incentive to get involved in the project. "Getting the music out to people at Duke is more exciting. I think if we get Duke support and people in the Duke community get excited, it has a chance to expand." He added that compared to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "It seems original music is more celebrated over there."

The CD has other backers outside of those directly involved in its production. Mary Armstrong, assistant director of the Faculty Associates Program said, "We're very excited at the Faculty Associates Program because we see this as... one of the possible ways faculty and students can interact." She noted that this project, in particular, is interdisciplinary, fun and productive. "The challenge of the Faculty Associates Program is that tricky space between the classroom and the world outside."

As for the future of his project, Stetten envisions a digital recording studio in the Bryan Center where students can record for reduced prices or even for free. "It could be a really neat scene," he said.