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Taking that first step

Teacher-folksinger sells self-made album, hoping it leads to the big time

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CHESAPEAKE — Tom Farley made his professional debut at Norfolk's midtown Holiday Inn in 1973 when he was 21. In those days he was a long-haired hippie with an acoustic guitar playing folk music at an all-black bar.

In the ensuing nine years, the Chesapeake school teacher failed to find fame but gained a local following moonlighting as a musician and folk and country singer while teaching history at Indian River Junior High School.

Now, though, he may have achieved a musical breakthrough, thanks to his fellow teachers.

After he performed some of his own songs in Virginia Beach last August, he was approached by a group of Chesapeake teachers who agreed to finance an album if he produced it.

Farley was quick to take advantage of the opportunity, saying, "I knew that if I could get [the songs] into a professional studio . . . that they would sound good and be a marketable product."

The album, titled "Songsmyth," is scheduled for released next month. Recording started in November and was finished by Easter Sunday.

Farley asked for and was granted complete artistic control. He wrote all the lyrics, composed all the music and performed most of the songs. He is the album's producer, publicist and distributor.

He is one among a growing number of local independent record producers who are testing the local market before branching out into the national and international markets.

Jim Mikles, manager for Live Oak Sound recording studio in Norfolk, suspects that the number of local independents producing for local markets is increasing.

"Basically, before we started in business four years ago, there were none," he said.

Farley was born in Portsmouth, raised in Norfolk and Virginia Beach, and educated at Virginia Tech.

At college, he met Steve Gallagher, a young man who like himself was very musically inclined. Soon the two men and Steve's younger brother, Todd, began "getting into original music."

Farley started composing his own songs and upon graduation began accumulating instruments — an electric guitar, an acoustic guitar, a flute, a violin, a clarinet, an organ synthesizer and more strings.

Gallagher, on the other hand, began accumulating recording gear and pretty soon the two were spending their Sundays in Farley's basement, mixing sound tracks on their four-channel tape deck, playing with the microphones with their head gear on, the tape deck rolling and "learning an awful lot about engineering" in the process.

In the meantime, Farley was performing in Tidewater night spots, at first as a soloist, then as a member of a local country-rock band and finally as a soloist again.

He met his wife Tanya at his very first gig. She was the daytime bar manager for the club he was playing. He had just given up a relatively secure job teaching English and history at Indian River High School.

"It was a nice place," he said. "I liked the people. I liked the community. But then I thought, 'Here I am, 21 years old. If I don't try it now, I'll get locked into job security.' So I said what the heck. I'll try it. I'll blow it."

His first band, now defunct, had about four people and 20 different names, Farley mused. "There was so much potential in this band, but we just didn't have the money or the equipment or the chance to display ourselves," he said. "Plus we just weren't mature."

Perhaps the band is best remembered under the name 'Simarron,' a local group with a reputation for vocals. In its heyday, the band played the Crystal, Country Cousin, Jewish Mother and Cogan's.

Farley decided to go solo again a few years ago and in so doing found that he had lost very little of his following. He played the Coach House, Friar Tucks, Fantastic Fenwicks and the Happy Clam.

And while playing the local circuit, he said he found that his "songs were going over like gangbusters."

A person recording his own album can expect to spend about \$1,500 for recording time alone, Mikles says.

A demonstration recording can be cut for about \$1,000. Costs can mount to the hundreds of thousands of dollars if you're shooting for the very best in everything, he says, adding that the average rock 'n' roll band recording for a major record dealer will spend about \$50,000.

A good budget for an independent, however, would fall in the \$5,000 range, he says. An independent's chances of success depends on the size of his local following "basically, because he depends on selling all his albums locally," he says.

Should he sell 10,000 records, the independent would be doing a lot better financially than breaking even, Mikles says.

"If you're not an established band," he adds, then success "depends on how hard you push [promote] the record."

The recording studios don't involve themselves with distribution, he warns.

Mikles estimates that about 1,000 records would have to be sold to break even.

Farley is primed for the task of selling his albums, all 10,000 of them. He eventually wants to produce movie sound tracks and has cut his own album, in part, to establish a recording past.

"Most of the songs are ready and proven by public performance," he says. "If the album goes, I get all the glory. If the album goes down the toilet, I get all the grief."

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