

CALENDAR

POP EYE

October 16, 2005

It's a long way from that island

By STEVE HOCHMAN

Special to The Times

BRUNO GUEZ was one of the rising stars of the music business in the last half of the 90's. Mentored by Island Records founder Chris Blackwell, he earned the reputation as a sharp talent-spotter, creative label executive and enthusiastic leader of the burgeoning global electronica and world fusion scenes via his Island-distributed Quango Records label.

But Guez spent the first half of this decade in the background, consulting on various projects, serving as music director for the Cirque Du Soleil empire, and most crucially, adapting to life as a quadriplegic after an ill-fated dive into the ocean off Brazil in early 2000.

Now Guez, 35, is learning to adapt to all the changes in the music business that have occurred over the last five years. He's relaunched Quango as an independent label, is signing new acts, and is aggressively pursuing a new approach to music branding and distribution.

"I've got back on my feet for new ventures and want to do more lifestyle-oriented productions," he says.

To that end, he's teamed with such companies as the American Rag clothing stores, Oliver Peoples eyewear firm, and Da-Nang clothing to produce and distribute custom compilation CDs.

"Working with companies for branded products became a strong focus for me in the last year," he says. "The market is oversaturated with compilations, but if you team up with a brand that has a wholesale and retail engine and create a soundtrack that speaks to their customer and the essence of the brand, then that helps strengthen brand awareness and trust."

The biggest change is that Quango is no longer under Blackwell's wing. But the executive thinks Guez can thrive on his own.

"Quango is exactly the kind of label that can develop a strong following, as it has a clear character," Blackwell says, relating it to the early days



MATHIEU BITTON

INDEPENDENT: Bruno Guez's label is on its own.

of Island, a stronghold for reggae and adventurous acts before signing such artists as U2. "There is now the Internet and its extraordinary global reach, and he has a passion for music, discovering new music and the wish to pass on his discoveries."

Guez has not given up on finding new acts, either. In the earliest stages of rehabilitation after his accident he signed Zero 7, which has become Quango's biggest act. Now he has taken a new, aggressive stance to signings, recently releasing "Quiet Letters," the debut from Danish act Bliss. Two new projects are due in early 2006: a debut from an as-yet-unnamed duo Kiran Shahani and Shana Halligan, and an American debut from Spanish act Gecko Turner. Guez hopes to find commercial and film placement for both, providing the kind of boost that Zero 7 got when a song appeared on the "Garden State" soundtrack.

He says he has been approached by several major labels proposing deals for him and/or Quango, but thus far none have been of interest.

"It's a renaissance for independent labels right now," he says. "The majors are sinking themselves deeper into a hole where they need to have hit after hit after hit right out of the box. Independents can control expenses and build careers from grass roots."