

MUSIC COLUMN - THE BEAT: Ruckus pays off
VCU student a finalist in AOL's online reality show

It might have been his obvious passion for music that brought Steven Flick to producers' attention. Or maybe that, at only 18, he had already worked in the industry, a key accomplishment for this particular casting call.

Whatever it was, Virginia Commonwealth University student Flick is among nine hopefuls vying for a major prize from AOL's "The Biz."

The Web-based reality show, one of the first executed to such an extent, carries the tag line, "The battle for the best job in music." Because that job will be to run a newly founded record label under the Warner Music Group umbrella, it's tough to argue with the accuracy of that statement -- except for the timing, given the tenuousness of traditional labels.

But here's the deal with "The Biz" for those of you already lost with the concept. AOL Music and the Warner Music Group have teamed up for this contest, which started Oct. 18 with nine finalists, whittled down from 9,000 applicants. Everything takes place online at www.thebiz.com, with the team given daily tasks to prove their acuity in the music business. Clips of those tasks can be viewed at the site, along with contestant blogs and personalized info, such as their favorite videos and songs.

"Unlike a lot of reality shows . . . here, they all have a job. They're working together in real music scenarios, and every task that we have them do is a representation of a very real job in the music industry," said Andy Meyer, an executive producer of the show who has done time on the reality-TV circuit with "American Idol"

and "Blind Date."

One recent mission found the team blanketing midtown Manhattan to promote a concert by Panic! At the Disco, a Las Vegas export mining the path set by Fall Out Boy. From visits to radio stations to old-fashioned flier handouts and megaphone announcements, the contestants are forced to hustle in tandem.

"The music industry is a collaborative business. It's not just how good someone is at doing a particular job, but how they work with other people, manage them, work in a team environment," Meyer said.

Something that impressed the decision-makers about Flick, who hails from Virginia Beach but came to Richmond for college, was his active involvement in the business side of music.

Flick, who discovered the contest on the Web site absolutepunk.net, toiled as an intern at The NorVa club in Norfolk, ran his own company in the Hampton Roads area to promote and book area bands This Day's Ours, The Soundtrack and The No Talent Show, and shot a documentary about roadies on the East Coast leg of this summer's Vans Warped Tour.

And in case you didn't catch it the first time, he's 18.

Even though this is his first semester at VCU, Flick says he worked things out with most of his teachers ("except I had to drop English"), while he competes in New York. "The Biz" is expected to wrap at the end of November, when Lyor Cohen, chairman and CEO for U.S. Recorded Music at Warner, will decide who becomes the mini-mogul. (Viewers can cast votes for their favorites but really more as an interactive activity than having any influence on the outcome.)

Flick is majoring in business marketing and hopes that he'll be in

the position to delay college for the chance to run his own label. But he's also adamant about the importance of school.

"Getting a degree is a personal goal of mine. But college will always be there, whether you're 70 or 18. If I happen to win, I'm not going to turn down the job to go to college. But with technology the way it is, I can always take classes on the Internet," Flick said.

Considering all of his competitors are older -- most in their early-to-mid-20s -- it's understandable that Flick pondered the issue of his age. But, he reasoned, "age is always a factor, but we all came in as equals. Was I intimidated by [the others]? Not at all. I have enough confidence in myself"

The effervescent, fast-talking Flick sounds precociously sharp and informed, but, as demonstrated in his audition video on the site, he's still very much a boy who likes to make noise.

For the final scene, Flick and a filmmaker friend at VCU gathered 80 students to convene in front of VCU's new Brandt Hall to chant his name (Flick, not Steven) before the 9 p.m. noise curfew kicked in.

"We actually had security come out and shut our cameras off because we caused such a ruckus," Flick said with a hint of pride.

Sounds like the right attitude for the music business.