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The Executive Suite

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The New Entrepreneurs

Web puts undiscovered musicians, listeners in tune

Hot Career Topics

Artists used to need a record label to be heard. Now, all they need is a powerful PC and a broadband connection.

Let's Talk Business

By Kevin Maney, USA TODAY

Advice from the Top

Artists used to need a record label to be heard. Now, all they need is a powerful PC and a broadband connection.

Technology and Change

For any musician with at least a pinch of talent and a desire to perform, the Internet has become a godsend.

Case Studies

Exploration

A new generation of websites -- many of them started by people who came out of the music industry -- are opening the business to thousands of artists and hobbyists who in the past had few ways to broadcast and sell their music.

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"Technology has changed things all the way through the chain," says Kelli Richards, a digital music pioneer who co-wrote *The Art of Digital Music*. "You can, in a garage, create (recorded) music that 10 years ago would've cost \$100,000, and you can instantly reach a global audience."

Driving the changes are the increased power of PCs and broadband Internet. Independent musicians can now use a PC as a multitrack recording studio. Songs can be inexpensively created, stored, burned to CDs and uploaded onto the Web.

Those websites can be much more than just a place to post songs in hopes someone might find them. Jenna Drey was an undiscovered dance-music artist who uploaded some of her songs onto GarageBand.com. The songs rose to the top of the website's listings, and Drey wound up with a record deal and a song that reached No. 11 on Billboard's dance chart.

Even for a band that's more of a weekend hobby, the Web creates ways to get occasional bookings and sell CDs.

Some types of independent music websites:

*Discovery and development. There have long been a couple of problems with independent musicians posting their output on the Web.

First, how would anyone sort through all that music to find quality songs they might like? And, second, how would an ordinary musician fight through the noise to get noticed?

One solution: GarageBand.com. Any unsigned musician can post music on the site. Listeners are asked to rate songs. Ratings and traffic on the site drive songs toward the top of GarageBand's charts, which are much like Billboard charts. Listeners looking for popular music can go to GarageBand and check out songs at the top of the charts in categories they enjoy.

Other sites act as online-only record labels. Magnatune, for instance, looks for talented but unsigned artists and is building a stable of acts, much like a record label. But Magnatune sells

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downloads and doesn't sign its artists to exclusive contracts.

*Distribution and sales. Not long ago, there were few ways for unsigned artists to make any money on their work. But now, so what if you can't muscle onto record store shelves? Anyone can sell CDs through CD Baby, which has grown into the Amazon.com of independent music.

Another company, Pump Audio, has figured out how to sell independent music to the creators of TV shows, commercials and movies for use as background music. Pump splits the revenue with the musicians.

*Live events. Websites are starting to automate what a professional manager might do. Sonicbids, for instance, posts listings of venues seeking live acts and gives bands a way to reply by clicking and sending an electronic press kit.

"There used to be only one way to get the job done: Go through a major label," author Richards says. "Now, the artist has a choice."

Sonicbids

URL: www.sonicbids.com

Purpose: Match independent musicians with live venues.

How it works: Bands sign up for about \$50 a year and create an electronic press kit (EPK), which can include song downloads and even video. People looking for live acts -- bookers, promoters, festival organizers -- post notices on the site. Musicians can send their EPKs to respond to the notices.

Back story: Panos Panay was born in Cypress, earned a degree in music management from the Berklee College of Music in 1994 and worked as a rock and jazz music agent for seven years.

"The bills just for FedEx-ing press kits were so costly," Panay says. "I could only imagine what it was like for a young artist trying to break out. I started thinking I could do something about it."

By 2000, he'd been watching the web take off and thought that could be the answer -- essentially, creating an automated online music agent. Panay started working on the company in the middle of the dot-com crash, in late 2000.

The site launched in 2002. More than 25,000 acts have signed up with Sonicbids. Listings range from Annie's in Cincinnati to a songwriter event in Sydney.

GarageBand.com

URL: www.garageband.com

Purpose: For musicians, it's a place to post music and information, have their songs reviewed and try to build a following. For listeners, it functions as a Web radio station.

How it works: Bands pay fees, which vary depending on membership levels and other criteria, to post songs for the site's latest "contest." The songs are reviewed by listeners and other musicians and have a chance of climbing GarageBand's automated charts. The site is not a place to sell downloads -- it's mostly a listen-only radio station model -- though artists can sell their CDs through the site.

Back story: Ali Partovi was one of the generation of super-young dot-com millionaires. He'd co-founded LinkExchange at the age of 23 and in 1998 sold it to Microsoft for \$265 million in stock.

Partovi is also a musician, so he left Microsoft to try to make it with a rock band. "It didn't go very well," he says.

Along the way, he'd tried out GarageBand.com, which was co-founded in 1999 by Talking Heads

guitarist Jerry Harrison. After the dot-com bust, GarageBand.com struggled.

"When I heard it might be going out of business, I thought it was an investment opportunity," Partovi says. He picked up the company cheap. Then he dug into revamping it -- making GarageBand not just a place to post music, but creating a system that pushes popular music to the top of the site's play lists. That, in a sense, turns GarageBand into a self-generating radio station, where the listeners dictate the hits.

"I see a real possibility for democratizing the music industry from the ground up," Partovi says.

PumpAudio

URL: www.pumpaudio.com

Purpose: To sell independent music to makers of TV shows, commercials and movies.

How it works: Artists send a CD and a licensing agreement to Pump Audio. If accepted, the music is included in the Pump Box -- a hard drive that a video producer can plug into a computer or digital editing booth.

The producer chooses songs -- or, more commonly, small snippets of music -- to use on the show, and pays Pump Audio accordingly. That might range from \$10 for a few seconds to \$20,000 for a song that runs for an entire commercial. Pump Audio splits the revenue 50-50 with the artists.

Back story: "It all comes out of my experience as a failed musician," says Pump's founder, Steve Ellis. More than a decade ago, he had a recording contract but never broke through and was dropped by the label. He wanted to help other musicians like him make money.

His epiphany came after meeting an MTV producer who told him the network needs 25 to 65 bits of music for a half-hour show. To get that music, MTV had to either pay a lot of money for limited rights to music owned by a record company or pay people to cook up music just for that show.

At the same time, technology has made it possible for independent artists to inexpensively crank out high-quality music. They put that music on CDs and post it to the Web. The artists, who own the rights, can sign off on the use of a song clip without having to go through lawyers.

"I thought, 'What if you put together the independent music that's already there with the TV producers who need it?'" Ellis says. He'd act as an aggregator and broker and make it easy for a TV network to get all kinds of music from one source.

That required a technology solution. The Web wouldn't work -- it would take far too long to search for music and download CD-quality clips. Instead, Ellis delivers a Pump Box -- basically a hard drive, software for searching for genres and moods of music, and thousands of songs and instrumental tidbits.

While creating a TV show, a producer can connect the Pump Box to a PC and browse through music that fits a certain scene. Once the show is completed, a music cue sheet details what music was used and who should be paid.

These days, Ellis is doing much better than when he was a musician. Pump Audio "was profitable from the beginning," he says.

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