Live Music and Performances in a Virtual World

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INTRODUCTION

The introduction of the Internet and its rapid expansion in the 90s, coupled with technological advances in software and hardware, allowed the digitisation of virtually the entire value-chain of the music industry (Berry, 2006). The industry saw its traditional value exploiting methods, in particular CD sales, become less effective and in many cases obsolete. At the same time, new stronger and more direct relationships started forming between the artists and their audience, radically changing how many of the industry's functions, such as its supply chain management, were undertaken. In this article, we discuss how information and communication technologies affect one aspect of the music experience, that of live and virtual performances. This choice allows us also to illustrate a change of attitude toward technology from all stakeholders, especially music labels.

The article first presents a number of examples of "live" performances with "real" performers that were reproduced and repackaged using various multimedia technologies and then distributed through a number of online and digital channels. Following this, the article discusses the emerging phenomenon of virtual performances on *Second Life* and considers their potential implications.

LIVE PERFORMANCE AND PROMOTION

Historically, issues like the name and artwork to be used in music productions were kept confidential, not only because they changed frequently up to the date of release, but also because of the very high risk of leaks of content prerelease, which might encourage piracy. The openness of the Internet, and in particular its capacity to facilitate direct relationships between the artists and their audiences, radically changed this attitude. This is demonstrated by the artists' increasing tendency to reach out and collaborate directly with their fans not only on prerecorded products, but also increasingly in live performances, as shown by the example of Sandi Thom. Thom is a female singer-songwriter who was rapidly signed to SonyBMG's RCA label after she received a reported 180,000 viewers of a live Web cast of a musical performance that she broadcast from her basement flat in Tooting, and her first single entered the charts at 15 on download sales alone. Although there is a dispute about whether the number of viewers is precise, the case illustrates clearly how Internet technologies can act as cheap, effective promotional tools for artists' live performances.

The burgeoning online video environment can be both cause and effect of this phenomenon, in particular sites such as *YouTube.com*, which allow users to upload their own videos simply and quickly for anyone in the world to see and share through Web sites, blogs, and e-mail. At the time of writing, it is reported that YouTube delivers more than 80 million video views every day, with more than 65,000 new videos uploaded daily (Logitech, 2006). Live-performance video on such Web sites has been gathering momentum as domestic broadband Internet access increases, boosted by events such as the international Live 8 concerts for Africa in the summer of 2005, when Internet service provider America Online had over 90 million views of its free Web casts (Leeds, 2006).

The reach and instant distribution produced by the Internet, together with the rapidly falling cost of producing video content, means that fans and live performers

have more access to each other than ever. Artists also started to reach out to their fan base to help them create videos of their live shows. The Beastie Boys were first, in 2005, when they handed out 50 handheld video cameras to fans at their Madison Square Gardens concert, taking the footage afterwards and editing it into a full length video of the concert complete with music direct from the show's soundboard (Aversion, 2005). Coldplay did something similar by first requiring fans to enter a competition on their Web site. Only the winners were given the chance to help them shoot a video for the concert DVD of their album, "X&Y." In a logical progression of the concept, another illustration of this phenomenon is Billy Campion, lead singer of "The Bogmen," a highly regarded New York band which broke up in September 1999. However, Campion retained a very loyal following of fans, who were encouraged to bring their own mobile camera phones and video cameras to one of his live performances in Brooklyn in June 2006. Within two months of becoming available, the YouTube footage produced of his performance of "Hi on Wade" had viewing figures of over 130,000. Yet another example is that of Marillion, one of the earliest bands to make use of digital technologies to get closer involvement and interaction with their fans, who also made use of their fan's input to live performances. In an e-mail sent to fan club members in July 2006, the band said:

We're going to release a single from the new album in early 2007. Now while we can't give you specific details (where we are releasing it, what's it called (sic), etc.) for a while, we are going to need a video and—in the spirit of keeping it in the family—we have a little favour to ask of you... We'd like YOU to shoot the video. We'd like to make an abstract video, a creative experiment which involves as many of our fans as possible (Marillion, 2006).

Although the reconfigured-by-technology music value chain allowed a direct link between artist and consumer, it never included the consumer's participation in the act of creating music. However, through mechanisms such as this, artists were able not only to reduce the cost of producing promotional materials, but also include their fans integrally in the production of promotional and support materials, bringing the two sides closer together in a mutually beneficial relationship. Concert promoters were also keen to participate

in the trend for cheaper and more direct-to-user digital distribution. Although online content distribution had been tried in the late 1990s, the experiment run by House of Blues Entertainment foundered because of the lack of broadband enabled computers and the high cost—$4.99 per show—which audiences unused to buying online content were unwilling to pay. By 2006, however, broadband connectivity and consumers' increasing technological sophistication encouraged Live Nation, the world's largest concert promotion company, to wire 120 of its outlets to record concerts for Internet and other digital outlets. Chief Executive Michael Rapino, intending to bundle sales of Web casts together with merchandise and ticket sales, said: "There's an opportunity to say: 'Didn't make it to the show? That's O.K.,'…(t)hat's something we haven't been able to say for the last 20 years" (quoted in Leeds, 2006).

Universal Records also participated in the trend, allowing rehearsals of their artists' concerts to be broadcast through Center Staging's Web site (www. rehearsals.com). Only 2 months later, SonyBMG hired a company to sell advertising on their proprietary online music players, which showed music videos and live performances of SonyBMG artists. Not every artist, though, can be promoted in this way, as artists' contracts with a record label usually include exclusive rights to any of their recordings, which generally include live performances. When this is the case, concert venues intending to distribute such content therefore have to negotiate with the label for each artist. For this reason, it seems that Web casts are more likely to be supportive of unsigned or underground talent.

VIRTUAL PERFORMANCE AND PROMOTION

A relatively recent phenomenon is the increasing use of virtual worlds, such as *Second Life* (www.secondlife. com), through which artists, labels, and consumers could interact in an entirely new environment. According to their Web site, within 3 years they managed to attract more than a quarter of a million users, and by June 2007 had over 10 million registered users who use avatars to represent themselves. Second Life was similar to a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) except for the fact that land was owned by the residents, and they were also free to create whatever they wanted to on it. As well as real life

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