



Occupy Billboard! Entertainment of the People, by the People, and for the People

The web has straightened the curves in the road from obscurity to notoriety for writers, poets, painters, musicians, and other artists. But it still takes innovation, ingenuity, persistence, and yes, resources to rise above the noise.

“I don’t know what you mean by democratization,” I could almost hear my friend’s impatient tone over the Facebook chat. “I just find the music I like online. I don’t really follow the music charts. But what’s that got to do with Occupy Wall Street?”

I smiled, because, of course it has *everything* to do with Occupy Wall Street. “Finding music that I like online” has become so common that she, and millions of others, don’t even think about the “olden days.” Then, by way of reminder, the selection of music available to the masses was decided on in the boardrooms of the music giants - not in dens, bedrooms, and coffee shops worldwide. Just like Occupy Wall Street has set its sights on taking back the economy for the 99%, the reins of the music industry were ripped out of the hands of the elite over a decade ago. Call it ‘Occupy Billboard’, if you will. And it worked.

But how truly democratic is the online entertainment arena, and – more importantly – how democratic *should* it be?

Democracy is far from a new, or perfect, concept. 500 years before Jesus, the city-state of Athens was one of world’s first democracies. Athens was a pure democracy, wherein all citizens (OK, all *male* citizens) would vote in mammoth assemblies, deciding on national issues. However, so many thousands of citizens would show up for these assemblies, that accurately counting votes became a practical impossibility.

So, if the Athenian masses *themselves* could impede the functioning of democracy – could this be the end result of the web’s democratization of art? In other words, can too many online cooks really spoil the soup?

Stopping the Brown Wave

“Absolutely,” claims Peter Åstedt, band manager for the up-and-coming Swedish pop group You Say France & I Whistle, and an online music industry veteran. “There is such a thing as *too* democratic. When Napster hit the scene in 2000, all of a sudden any band could distribute music freely. We called it the ‘brown wave’ – a tsunami of bad music that couldn’t get published anywhere else, just pouring out of the Internet.”

This all changed, Peter claims, with the advent of social media - when fans started to have their say. The music was still flowing downstream, but now dams were being



erected to catch the flotsam – stopping the brown wave. “Today, if your music isn’t good, it takes about five minutes for the whole world to know it.”

So, does this mean that the playing field is completely leveled, and Joe’s No-Budget Garage Band has the same chance to succeed as Madonna? Not exactly, explained Peter. Because there’s still enough good music out there to make getting noticed a challenge, and making money even more difficult.

But it can be done, and You Say France & I Whistle (YSFIW – the name comes from the title of a song by Van Morrison) is a amazing example of a band that’s doing it right. Their first album isn’t even due to be released until 2012 – but the band has already graced several big-name advertisements, been adopted by number of well-known consumer brands, been featured in numerous TV shows, lauded by key online music bloggers, and has booked a major European tour. By any standards, YSFIW’s star is clearly rising.

Talk to the Fans

The secret? “Well, there *is* the fact that our music is outstanding,” Peter laughed. “But we would definitely not be where we are today without the relationships we’ve cultivated online with thousands of fans.” And when he says ‘cultivate’ he means via traditional tools like blogs, videos, and social media – and also more innovative tools like YSFIW’s recently-launched mobile app, which they developed using the free [Conduit Mobile](#) platform.

“The future is in keeping fans engaged,” Peter claims. “People today are always looking for the next big thing, and online attention spans are short. Acquiring fans is the relatively easy part – keeping them involved and interested is the challenge.”

By way of example, take a look at how rapper 50 Cent and rockers Radiohead started their own social networks using the [Ning](#) platform. These guys are not just talking *to* their fans, they’re talking *with* them. This, says Peter, is exactly the way to do it.

No Such Thing as a Free Lunch

And does all this take resources? “Yes,” he admits, “we have a staff of 13 dedicated to online marketing.” However, it *can* be done on a shoestring. Bands that are just starting out need to use the resources they have and the tools available creatively. There are still free avenues to notoriety, the trick is find the “right path for you. Today – you need to be both a top-notch musician and an innovative marketer,” he said.

By way of example, YSFIW’s recently-launched mobile app allows them to reach thousands of fans instantly – “and not just to their computers, but directly to their pockets,” Peter noted. So, when ticket sales were a bit low just prior to a recent concert, the band reached out with a pre-show pitch directly to a micro-segment of fans in the show’s geographic region. The results – the concert was a sell-out.



This, according to Peter, is the essence of the democratization of art that the web has brought us. “Whereas in the old model, the record companies held all the cards – today I have the same tools available to me as Lady Gaga. It’s just how I choose or am able to use them that makes the difference.”

Other bands are doing the same. From Justin Bieber’s success using [Microsoft Tag](#) to tie offline and online promotions together, to niche bands like [Carolina Chocolate Drops](#), who’ve leveraged the massive amounts of information and resources available on sites like [ReverbNation](#). There are bands using tools like [TuneCore](#) and [TubeMogul](#) for music and video distribution, and keeping in close touch with fans via [BandTXTAlerts](#).

The bottom line is that more bands are reaching out with low-budget, do-it-yourself tools. And the smart ones – the persistent and innovative groups that deliver both excellent music and a vibrant community experience – they’re succeeding.

So, if by democratization of art we mean making more and better art available to a growing, increasingly-participative, and discerning constituency who’re not afraid to make their voices heard, and who expect a high level of interaction – then it would appear that, some 2500 years after Athens, we’ve achieved pure democracy. If only the Athenians had had Facebook, we could have saved a lot of time.