Internet music engines fuel discovery

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We've all been there: You're in the record store and want to try something new, but the only thing looping through your head is the Top 40 radio station. Step away from the Jessica Simpson album. Internet music engines are here to help.

The concept is simple but brilliant: The listener gets to the site, types in a song or band he likes, and the engines construct an Internet radio station that will play music similar to the listener's selection.

TagWorld, an online community with the option to make Web pages, post pictures and chat, launched such a service Thursday -- the Music Discovery Engine.

"With this new service, TagWorld revolutionizes the music listening

experience and gives artists a much broader audience than traditional media and Internet radio stations," the company said in a statement.

The Music Discovery Engine has some unique features. The listener can customize his or her preferences so he'll get only or mostly mainstream bands, or indie bands, or bands that are still unsigned.

This is where the company is placing its emphasis: "We have over 3,000 (unsigned and indie) bands already signed up," said Ryan Rifkin, TagWorld director of product development.

When a band "signs up" for TagWorld, the band gives its permission for the site to play the song on demand.

If the song shows up in a user's Music Discovery Engine, the listener can link directly to the band's TagWorld-hosted Web site, learn more about the group, become a fan and even get in touch with the band members, Rifkin told United Press International in a telephone interview.

"It's a big thing for an unsigned band," Rifkin said. "They can get airplay directly behind a major band."

The listener can also limit his selections to bands that will be playing shows near his house in the near future.

Also, music becomes a social experience. The community's ratings of songs, especially those of the listener's buddies on the Tagworld site, can affect the song selections.

"A person can say, 'I want to be influenced by songs my friends rated highly,'" Rifkin said.

"The focus on local artists or on tracks your friends rated high is a nifty

option," said Stefan Berteau, a computer research engineer and music enthusiast in Washington enlisted by United Press International to test out the site.

"Overall, I like the idea of integrating it into a social networking site a lot -- and that might be enough to make me actually play around more with this TagWorld thing," Berteau said.

The Music Discovery Engine started out with some kinks. UPI tested it out with a request for Latin rocker princess Shakira. The engine's perplexing reply was gangsta rap.

Berteau received a similarly random selection: "I started with Tom Waits. The next track was Beyoncé, taking it in a direction I don't want to go. But I don't really want to prevent it from ever playing any Beyoncé songs, which I think selecting 'no play' on the artist would do," Berteau told United Press International.

Returning to songs also seemed to affect what the engine chooses next. UPI went back to "God Only Knows" by the Beach Boys several times, and eventually the Music Discovery Engine seemed to give up. It no longer lined up new songs, and requests for new artists were rejected.

"It's a bit buggy. There are places I can click that just open blank windows, or where nothing happens that I can see," Berteau added.

According to Rifkin, these are normal kinks for a just-launched device. His team was also receiving unrelated songs at the beginning. "There was a small problem on the back end that we fixed," he said.

Besides the initial bugs, Berteau had some criticism of the site: "The interface is poorly explained, and I can't find a way to rate anything other than the individual artist, album, or track I'm currently listening

to," Berteau continued.

"Like Pandora (another Internet music engine), they seem to have neglected classical and opera almost entirely. They have Latin music, but no Chuck Brown.

"They also don't know who Run DMC is," Berteau pointed out, referring to one of the seminal bands of hip hop's beginnings.

In all, "they seem very focused on mainstream rock and hip hop, but it's possible that I'm just good at picking artists they don't have," Berteau concluded.

Rifkin said the songs in the Music Discovery Engine are categorized by genre, and bands joining TagWorld have the option to list their genre.

Pandora.com, on the other hand, is designed to give the listener new music with similar qualities to the bands and songs he or she already likes.

The site is part of the Music Genome Project, an effort to map out the qualities that make a song what it is. Pandora calls it "the most comprehensive analysis of music ever undertaken."

Unlike at TagWorld, which relies on users to rate the songs, Pandora's music selections are determined by musicologists who have identified which building blocks of music are present in a given song.

For instance, a request for songs similar to the Beach Boys returned "Bad Reputation" by the dB's. If the listener wants to know why this song was suggested, he or she can click on the explanation button.

"Based on what you've told us so far, we're playing this track because it

features electric rock instrumentation, subtle vocal harmony, major key tonality, extensive vamping and mild syncopation," Pandora helpfully replied.

From testing by UPI and Berteau, Pandora seems to have a more extensive library of major bands. Pandora also allows a listener to keep up to 100 separate stations with different influences and musical qualities.

Pandora offers a free service, supported by ad banners on the site, and a subscription service that is ad-free.

TagWorld's music engine is currently only available to people who have signed up for TagWorld's free membership, but eventually the company plans to make the music engine a stand-alone feature, Rifkin said. Currently, the site has no advertising, but Rifkin said that as the site is refined and completed, they will start to add targeted advertising.

Whichever site the listener chooses, he can rest assured that on his next trip to the record store, he'll have discovered so many new bands that Jessica Simpson won't even cross his mind -- and that's a technological wonder.

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