

Using video clips, Israeli DJ creates a million-hit wonder

May 31 2009, By Dion Nissenbaum

Ophir Kutiel didn't set out to become YouTube's Elvis Presley. The 27-year-old Israeli DJ was just looking for a good beat.

However, what started out as an online search for a funky video set Kutiel off on a musical exploration that's changed the way people look at [YouTube](#), challenged copyright laws and transformed the little-known Tel Aviv musician into a budding Internet celebrity.

"This is what your Elvis looks like, gang," tech blogger Merlin Mann gushed after he saw Kutiel's YouTube creations.

Kutiel is unlikely to become the king of a musical revolution like Elvis. Like the king of rock 'n' roll, though, Kutiel has created an innovative musical fusion using other people's work.

The idea came to him one afternoon while Kutiel was searching YouTube in his Tel Aviv studio apartment.

Kutiel, who goes by the DJ name Kutiman, was looking for an instructional video so he could learn some new musical riffs. He quickly came across one by Bernard "Pretty" Purdy, a colorful, 69-year-old musician who bills himself as "the world's most recorded drummer."

Kutiel downloaded the clip so he could play guitar along with the rhythm-and-blues drummer.

Then he hit on the idea that's transformed his career: He decided to download YouTube clips of other musicians and mix them together into a new tune.

The idea quickly became an obsession. For two months, Kutiel downloaded dozens of videos of amateur musicians, the more obscure the better.

"I guess I could relate to that," Kutiel said during an interview at his Tel Aviv apartment. "I felt that they were the same as me, sitting in my room, playing guitar with this song I really want everybody to see. So I did my best to find, not great musicians, not famous people, just people playing and doing their thing."

Kutiel found videos of a 25-year-old World Bank administrative assistant singing a capella into her computer and a 27-year-old Los Angeles mother performing while bouncing her young son on her knee.

Kutiel took samples of people playing Tibetan gongs and wind chimes. He used a church organist, a street corner rapper and a young Christian cheerleading squad in the Philippines. He grabbed samples of people playing harps and harpsichords, trombones and tubas, harmonicas and bongos.

Using a trial version of \$500 Sony music-editing software, Kutiel created seven YouTube musical mash-ups. He posted them on his own site, called ThruYOU, and sent links in March to a few dozen friends.

Although Kutiel told his friends not to share the link, at least one of them did. Almost overnight, ThruYOU became an Internet sensation. Within days, so many people were trying to check out Kutiel's videos that the site crashed, and ThruYOU got more than 1 million hits in its first week online.

Kutiel's project inspired admiring copycats and fueled a debate about copyright laws that, according to Stanford University law professor Lawrence Lessig, make it legally impossible for this Israeli DJ to create video mash-ups of other people's work.

"I see it as a perfect example of just why the existing regime must change," said Lessig, who's arguing for a radical change in American copyright laws. "The creativity is fantastic. And he does no harm to anyone. Indeed, I believe he should be able to create like this and make money from it -- how else can we support the arts?"

So far, Kutiel said, every one of the musicians featured in the videos that he's heard from has been flattered or flattering.

One of the first to contact Kutiel was the 25-year-old World Bank administrative assistant, Leslie Harris of Washington.

"I think Kutiman is a genius!" Harris said. "I think the concept is brilliant, and it also gave me some exposure."

Kutiel grabbed a grainy, close-up, 80-second YouTube video of Harris performing an original, improvised a capella tune "Take Me for a Fool," in her apartment. Then he mixed in samples of a bass guitarist, a young violinist, harp, synthesizer, a guy playing giant wind chimes and a flute.

The result was a soulful, three-and-a-half-minute musical mash-up.

"It is simply a masterpiece," Harris said.

Kutiel makes no money on the videos, and he compared his work to people who create "best of funny cats" videos to post on YouTube.

"I just mixed some videos and put them back on the same place where I

took them from, so I don't see any reason why it should be illegal," he said.

Beyond that, it may be difficult to curb this kind of artistic expression, said Lessig, who founded Stanford's Center for Internet and Society.

"There is no way we can kill this form of creativity; we can only criminalize it," Lessig said during a recent presentation in Berlin on modern challenges to copyright laws. "We can only drive their creativity underground. We can't make them passive. We can only make them, quote, pirates. And the question we need to ask is: Is that any good?"

ON THE WEB

ThruYOU: thru-you.com/

Stanford's Center for Internet and Society: cyberlaw.stanford.edu/

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