

YouTube music label means all artists are with the bandwidth

December 17 2009, By Stephanie Lulay

Craig Benzine had weathered almost 10 years with his band, Chicago-based indie rockers Driftless Pony Club -- self-releasing two albums along the way -- with no luck.

Then something clicked. [YouTube](#). After playing around on the site, Benzine and his bandmates started experimenting with posting their own videos. Benzine said the band's YouTube presence has helped Driftless Pony Club gain a growing national fan base and more recognition and [financial success](#) than they had ever seen before.

Benzine credits the success to signing with a new breed of music label: the DIY digital label. DFTBA Records, which stands for "Don't Forget to Be Awesome," is the first of its kind, according to Michele Flannery, music manager at YouTube, and signs only artists who already have made it big on YouTube. Partnering with musicians with an existing online fan base allows DFTBA to distribute its music faster and cheaper.

Driftless Pony Club released its first money-making EP, "Expert" in August. The band members are fresh off of a West Coast tour and are planning another tour soon. "We've paid for the cost of it already, which is something we've never done before," the Ukrainian Village resident said of the EP.

DFTBA records is the virtual brainchild of Alan Lastufka, 26, of Manhattan, Ill., and Hank Green, 29, of Missoula, Mont., fellow YouTube musicians who decided to combine their online super powers

-- they have more than 5 million combined channel views -- to start the music label in November 2008.

By January, the pair, who have never met in person, started producing their own music. Their first release was Green's CD, "So Jokes." They next signed U.K. band Chameleon Circuit, a band that bases its music off of the popular U.K. show "Doctor Who;" eleven other acts followed.

"We really just wanted to provide a way to get the music out there," Lastufka said. "It seems that bands always feel that they're not getting what they want out of the labels -- so much money is given to them up front that they can never give it back. We didn't want to mess with any of that."

So far, all of the artists on DFTBA's label are musicians that Lastufka and Green sought out. Artists who already have enough music for an album can have CDs ready to ship and music on iTunes within five weeks of being signed, Lastufka said. If an artist or band needs help producing the music or setting up a tour, the label helps with that too, Lastufka said.

The DFTBA formula seems to be working. Lastufka said they've already hit \$185,000 in sales, nearly doubling their original sales goal for the year. The CDs sell for \$6 to \$12 each. The label has been succeeding chart-wise too. Green's CD hit No. 22 on the Billboard Hits of the Web, and Chameleon Circuit made the Top 100 Rock Albums chart on iTunes. Lastufka said he plans to quit his day job teaching mentally and physically challenged adults to manage the label full-time at some point. Flannery said she sees more artists using the site to launch their music careers, "and DFTBA is an example of people who have kind of taken that to the next level."

With an online community that is watching hundreds of millions of

videos everyday, YouTube has become a go-to launch pad for indie musicians.

"We have so many rising star stories, people who make little homemade videos and end up getting signed," Flannery said.

Consider the case of eclectic 23-year-old Zee Avi, who uploaded a video singing "No Christmas for Me," got signed to Brushfire Records and played Bonnaroo this year. Priscilla Renea, 20, from Vero Beach, Fla., is another example -- she uploaded a video of herself singing the dictionary, and now she's signed to EMI's Capitol Records with a CD dropping Dec. 1.

Some aspiring artists say YouTube also is a vehicle to share their work without being judged by mainstream music standards. Narciso Lobo, an unsigned artist from Albany Park said he decided to post his music on YouTube after seeing David Choi, who was featured on the front page of the site with his "YouTube (A Love Song)." Lobo noticed that like Choi and himself, many of the top artists on YouTube were Asian.

"In mainstream music Asian artists kind of get lost," Lobo, 38, said. "I don't have to get signed to get my music out there and I don't have to win anyone over."

In addition to embracing the music democracy that YouTube creates, DFTBA also pays their artists differently than major labels: DFTBA musicians get 60 percent of the sale price of the CD. At some major labels, artists only see pennies on the dollar, according to Lastufka.

Because they focus on YouTube-based acts, DFTBA has the freedom to work with artists whom they've never met or ones a major label wouldn't consider. "A lot of (our artists) are very niche-y," Lastufka said. DFTBA's acts range from comedy parodies to Modest Mouse-esque

rock. But not everything is easier the YouTube way, Lastufka said.

"Rotation is the biggest thing that we're trying to overcome," he said. "People will hear Coldplay 12 times a day for the next few weeks. When you upload a video to YouTube, you have 48 hours before it's dead." because most viewed, top rated and other YouTube charts only track videos uploaded within the last 48 hours.

To keep music in the YouTube rotation, DFTBA relies on the audience. The label will pick a song off each new album and ask other YouTube bands to cover it, driving traffic back to the original band. They've also launched program called Music in Your Videos, which lets any YouTuber use music from a list of approved DFTBA albums (as long as they've bought the music), which encourages users to get creative without worrying about copyright infringement.

"We're looking for people who can make great videos as well as great music and interact with their community well," Green said.

As the label continues to grow, Green said that he and Lastufka want to keep attracting new audiences to their YouTube-based music.

"Thirteen-year-old girls are a lot of people, but I hope the community continues to grow," he said about the audience on YouTube, which he believes skews young and female. "I hope that people see the amazing entertainment and power of YouTube."

BEHOLD THE POWER OF ONLINE VIDEO

While new artists are using YouTube to promote and release their music, traditional record labels also are harnessing the power that online video can create.

At Chicago-based Victory Records, Eric Richter in new media said the label embraces the power of video -- VicTorV is a free podcast that the label posts on its Web site, YouTube and iTunes.

"There is such a large audience out there that it will automatically get 1,000 views. People want it now," he said.

The label also gets messages from bands on YouTube all the time and browses the site every once in a while looking for talent, Richter said.

Even after signing an artist, Michele Flannery, music manager at YouTube, said that a label will continue to use YouTube as a promotional tool. "A lot of these singer/songwriters have built up a fan base with their subscribers. There are people that have over 100,000 subscribers that get alerted whenever they upload a video," she said.

Musicians that were uber famous before the rise of YouTube have taken note of the power of online video _ Nine Inch Nails officially released its song "Ghost" as an instrumental in 2008, encouraging YouTube users to use it as soundtrack music in their homemade videos.

"I think that when people do it, they are amazed when they see people are able to create something new from their [music](#)," Flannery said.

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