

Digital music pioneer looks for new frontiers

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As the buzz surrounding Google Inc.'s efforts to jump into the digital music market rose to a roar late August, one name kept surfacing about the person who might lead it -- Ian Rogers.

There were good reasons. Rogers had once headed up Yahoo Inc.'s \$140-million music business after selling his [music software](#) company, Mediacode. The 38-year-old, with his long blond hair and tattooed fingers, has been at the forefront of digital music and came out ahead when others perished from the brutal economics of the Internet.

[Google](#) will have to look elsewhere. Rogers believes he'll have more influence as chief executive of Topspin, a small start-up in Santa Monica that helps bands market and sell their music online.

Another reason: Google's plan did not appear radical enough to Rogers.

"It sounds like they're just going knocking on doors looking to license content for streaming and download," Rogers wrote on his blog the day after his name surfaced on Billboard's website as a potential candidate for Google's venture. "Yawn."

An avid skateboarder who practiced back flips by strapping a snowboard to his backyard trampoline, Rogers says he's more interested in finding ways that technology can create new [business models](#) for the musicians than defending the status quo of the music industry. And he sees Topspin -- despite a name that evokes 45 rpm vinyl -- offering musicians the digital tools to sell music directly to fans and bypass labels.

"What he's creating is the missing link between artists and their fans," said Jeff Price, chief executive of Tunecore, an online music distribution company. "There are other companies out there doing what Topspin does, but most of them are not getting as much traction. He has a track record of having a vision and executing on it unwaveringly."

The music freak in Rogers emerged at age 5, when he began collecting albums of heavy metal bands such as Kiss and AC/DC. Growing up in the small town of Goshen, Ind., Rogers often asked his mother to drive him an hour west to South Bend so he could buy a copy of *Maximumrocknroll*, a punk music fanzine.

Rogers' precociousness extended to his becoming a father at age 17.

When his daughter, Zoe, was born, he was still a senior in high school. In his family that was not considered unusual; Rogers' mother was 16 when she had her first child. What he did next was. Rogers went off to college -- the first person in his family to do so -- and he took his daughter with him. Rogers and Zoe's mother, Susanna Golden, timed their classes so one parent would always be with her. When schedules conflicted, Rogers plopped Zoe on his bicycle and took her along.

"He built his life around Zoe," recalled David Fensky, a professor at Indiana University when Rogers attended school there, and now dean of Drexel University's College of Information Science and Technology. Fensky hired Rogers in 1992 to develop software that would allow the university to stream songs on demand from its vast record collection to 100 computer stations in its music library.

Between going to classes, parenting Zoe and working on Fensky's project, Rogers built an unauthorized fan website in 1993 honoring his favorite band at the time, the Beastie Boys. A few months later, he got a call from the band's manager, John Silva.

Instead of telling him to shut down the site, as Rogers feared, Silva asked him to make websites for his other clients, including Bonnie Raitt, the Breeders and Redd Kross. A year later, the Beastie Boys invited Rogers to go on tour with them and he eventually became president of new media for the band's record label, Grand Royal.

"We micromanage everything to a fault," said Michael "Mike D" Diamond, a founding member of the Beastie Boys. "Ian was the rare person we felt we could trust. But what really struck us was Zoe. She was just as big of a music fan as Ian was."

Now a 20-year-old junior biology major at MIT, Zoe Rogers didn't see her upbringing as unusual. The concert tours, the business meetings and the late-night recording sessions blended with the more prosaic memories of childhood.

"That was just kind of how it was," Zoe said, who was home-schooled for fifth, sixth and seventh grades. "It was all normal to me."

All normal, except that by age 10 she had memorized the pitches her father would give to venture capitalists to back his business as she quietly sat in the room.

It was during one such meeting in 2002 when David Pakman, a venture capitalist, recalled her sitting off to the side working on a school project as her father and his partner, Rob Lord, pitched an idea for a company called Mediacode.

"He had this incredible mix," Pakman said. "He's the father of this very mature little girl. But he's got the surfer hair, the skate punk clothes and the brains of a nerd."

Pakman invested in Rogers' company and its vision of letting people

access the music collection stored on their home computers via any other computer with an Internet connection. It was a radical idea at the time and it caught the ear of Yahoo's then-chief executive, Terry Semel, who bought Mediacode from Rogers in 2003 for an undisclosed sum.

Rogers went to work for Semel, eventually becoming general manager of Yahoo's [music business](#). He launched a service in 2005 that let people download as many songs as they wanted for \$5 a month. But it failed to tempt enough customers, largely because its songs could not be played on Apple Inc.'s iPods, which did not support Yahoo's piracy prevention software. The service ceased in 2008.

Rogers left Yahoo that year to become CEO of Topspin.

For record labels, Topspin straddles a delicate balance between disruptive and constructive.

Artists can use Topspin's tools to bypass record labels. Bands can build their own online fan base and sell music, merchandise and even concert tickets directly to consumers. In return, Topspin gets a cut of the sales. As musicians become more established, they can hire managers and, eventually, labels to take over those tasks. Whoever ends up with the job still would use the tools provided by Topspin.

"What's interesting about Topspin is that they have users from every level in the ecosystem," said Ryan McIntyre, a managing director with the Foundry Group, a venture firm that invested in Topspin. "However the industry shakes out, everyone will have a use for them."

Topspin's clients include Arcade Fire, Beck, Eminem, David Byrne, Brian Eno and more than 2,000 other artists, many of whom don't have label contracts.

But the company is not yet profitable. Rogers regards that fact with the same optimism he had as a teenage father heading off to college.

"There are fewer than 50,000 artists whose main gig is their music," Rogers said. "My belief is that number will grow. If we work hard as a company to make it possible for artists to make a living we can grow that number to 100,000. Music is a \$60-billion business. If half of that is generated by that middle class of 100,000 artists, that's a sizable market."

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