

# Making the Most of Online Music Fandom

Nancy Baym  
onlinefandom.com  
university of kansas, usa

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The internet has transformed what it means to be a music fan. Fans can and do build communities more rapidly and successfully now than ever before, with consequences not just for their own experience of music, but for everyone involved in the creation, distribution and promotion of music in any capacity. They're making a new kind of music scene that shakes up long-standing balances of power between fans and the music makers. This change calls for a new kind of relationship, one that values social activities and rewards as well as valuing products exchanged for prices -- one consequence of new media is that we're adding layers of social exchange relationships on top of economic exchange relationships.

My goal here is to provide a big picture perspective to help you think about (1) the social activities that are most important to music fans (2) how the internet has empowered fans to pursue these activities (3) 4 principles for working with these dynamics so both fan communities and musicians and those working with them benefit.

I come at this as a lifelong music fan who's been researching and teaching about online fan community and relational dynamics since 1991.



## Music fandom is old

Music fandom is at its core a social activity -- something we do with other people -- and the relationships with other people are important parts of being a music fan. From its very origins thousands of years ago, music has been social. Its original and arguably core nature is to connect people. In connecting around music, fans today are continuing to foster the connection between music and sociability as they talk about and share music.

In many ways this is NOT about the artists, let alone the music business or the recording industry, it's about fans' relationships to each other.

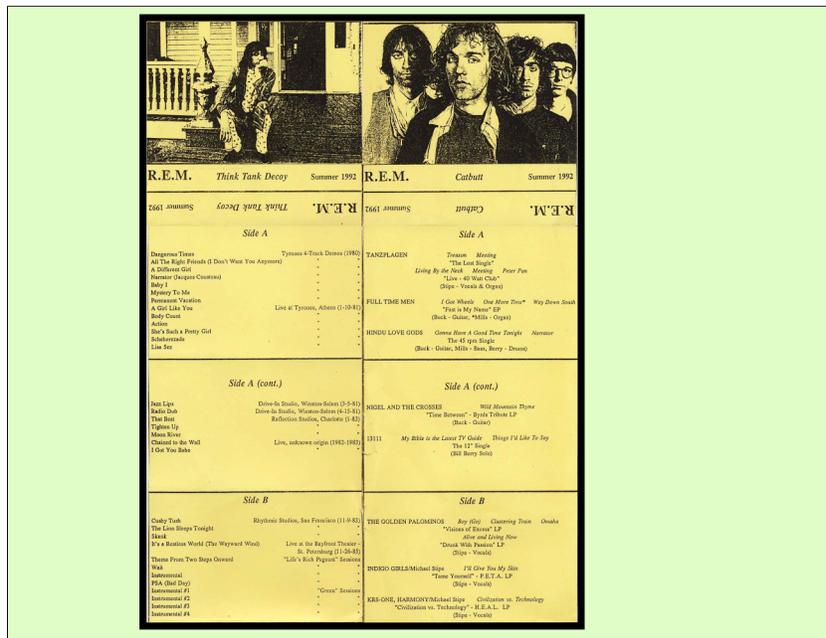
If you can support the social relationship fans have with one another, you can build stronger relationships with fans in ways that directly benefit artists as well as fans.



It's hard to say when fan communities built around music developed, though it's not hard to imagine that some wandering troubadours had bigger followings than others, and that people with strong preferences in troubadours behaved in ways we'd recognize in contemporary music fandom.

By the time it came to the Grateful Dead, the art of building a music-oriented distributed fan community had pretty much been perfected. Deadheads built a shared lifestyle around the Grateful Dead and developed models of roadtripping, tape trading and social networking that thrive today.

It's not a total coincidence that the Dead and the internet emerged in the same time period in the same geographic location.



I was a huge REM fan in the 1980s, and my my experience was typical of music fandoms of the time.

My friends and I spent hours listening & talking about them. When they toured, we'd throw our bags into a van with two seats and a mattress and take a movable party on the road to see their shows. Along the way we met fans in other towns. This broadened our knowledge base: we could compare set lists, we could trade bootleg cassette recordings or leaked demos we'd made or traded our way into. Throughout the 1980s, working my connections, I amassed around thirty live REM tapes. This was considered an exceptional collection and I was quite proud of both it and the social connections it represented. We were something akin to a community. We didn't all know each other, but we weren't many degrees of separation apart. We shared values and we knew it, that was half of what it meant to be an REM fan.

REM fostered this fandom well. They combined accessibility and enigma so that fans could both identify with them and want to know more. The energy they and their fans generated created an entire music scene, one which launched many other bands.



## 5 social activities of fandom

tanakawho

Whether it's music fandom, television fandom, sports fandom, or any other kind of fandom -- including those people don't usually call "fandom", there are five core social activities going on in fan communities. Fans are drawn to fandom in part so they can participate in these activities, understanding them helps you to better engage your fans:

Sharing feeling

Creating social identities

Collecting intelligence

Sharing interpretations

Creating for each other

## Sharing feeling



This is a picture of Amanda Palmer fans

When music works, it makes us feel, and when we feel, it's human nature to want to share those emotions with others.

These emotions may not always be good. While it's great to be able to share excitement about an upcoming album or share the news that you scored great seats for a concert with people who will really understand what you feel, it's also important for people to be able to share their disappointment, anger, and even grief.

The important part is connecting with others who **UNDERSTAND** what you feel and who can **AMPLIFY** or **MITIGATE** it.

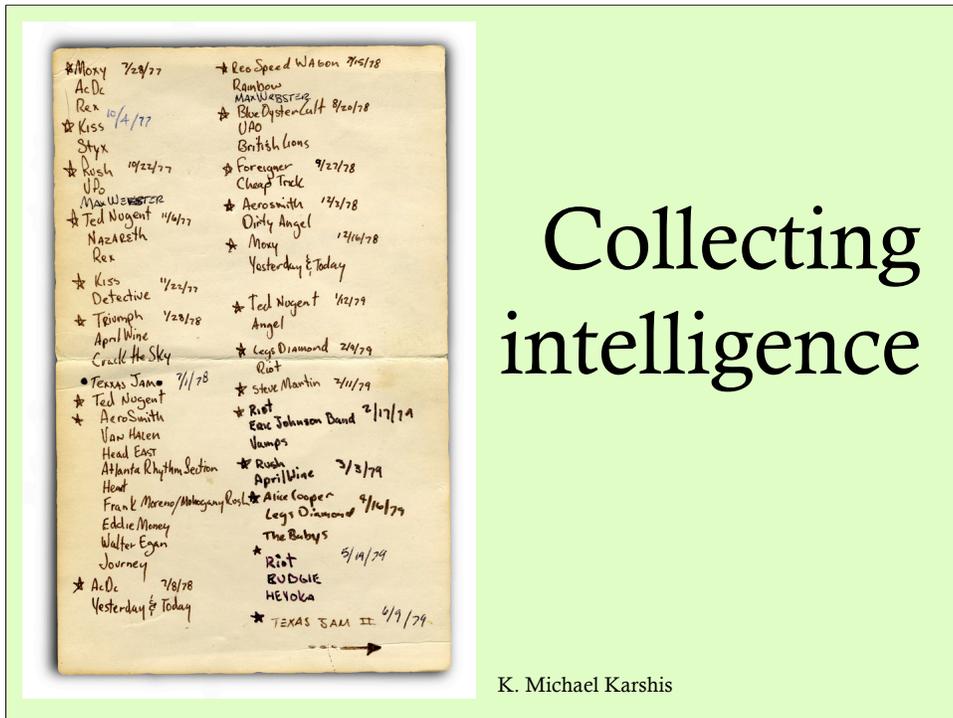
# Building social identity



These are Ben Folds fans

We also use music fandom to define who we are relative to other people -- to display which tribe we belong to. We use communicative tools -- including merchandise, posters, conversations, bumper stickers and friends links -- to connect ourselves to others who share our musical taste, and to set ourselves apart from those who don't.

Some people also seek to define ourselves within fandoms. Being a particularly devoted or accomplished fan is one way to gain status within some tribes, and if we look at the program for MIDEMNet, we can see several examples of people who have excelled at this. This is something you can actively feed.



# Collecting intelligence

K. Michael Karshis

Fans also enjoy the scholarly work of collecting details -- usually more details than those involved with creating music can bear to consider. Fans collect and pool:

Set lists

Discographies

Concert chronologies

Bootlegs

The fan label Purple Chick recently issued 83 cd set of 96 hours documenting the Beatles' complete *Let It Be* sessions. This is work professional archivists are paid to do, but fans do it for pleasure.

When it's shared, fans can build much richer connections to music and each other.

**American Pie - The analysis and interpretation of Don McLean's song lyrics**

This item is filed under [ [American Pie, Don McLean, Lyrics](#) ]

A long, long time ago...

"American Pie" reached #1 in 1972, shortly after it was released. **Buddy Holly**, unfortunately, died in 1959 while other aspects of the song hint even further back.

I can still remember how That music used to make me smile. And I knew if I had my chance, That I could make those people dance, And maybe they'd be happy for a while.

Sociologists credit teenagers with the popularity of Rock and Roll, as a part of the Baby boomer generation, they found themselves in a very influential position. Their sheer number were the force behind most of our country's recent major transitions. McLean was a teenager in 1959 and he begins by simply commenting that the music had an appealing quality to him as well as the millions of other teens. McLean also had an intense desire to entertain as a musician. His dream, to play in a band at high school dances, was the dream of many young boys who wanted to make people dance to Rock and Roll.

But February made me shiver,  
**Buddy Holly** died on February 3, 1959, in a plane crash in Iowa during a snowstorm. Its rumored that the name of the plane was: American Pie.

**Lyric Interpretations.com**

Beatles Song Meanings

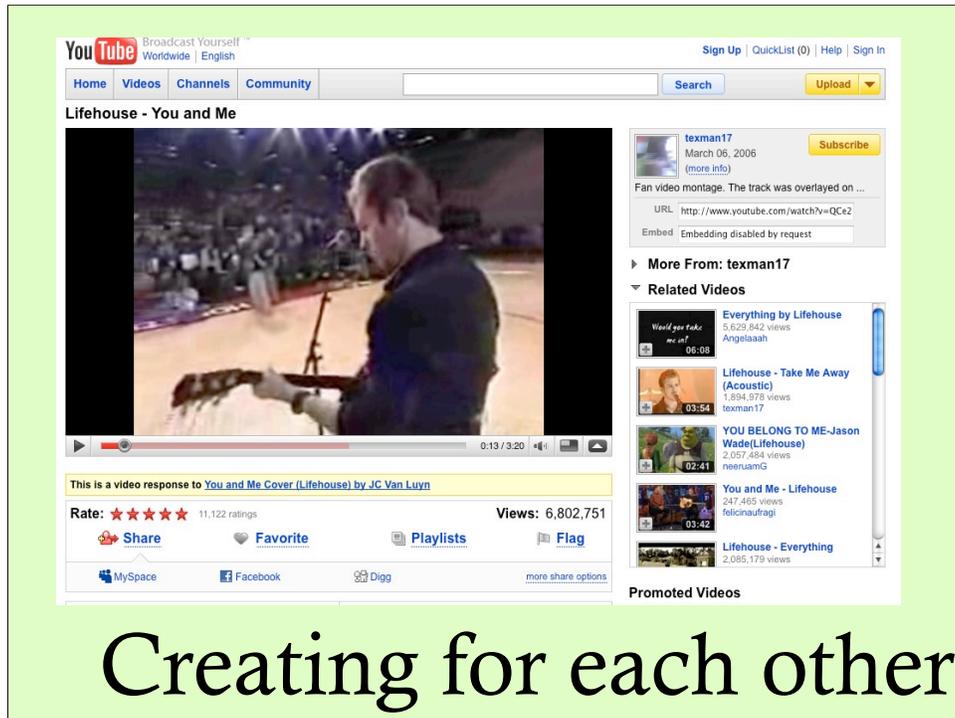


- A Day In The Life (48)
- Abbey Road (11)
- Across The Universe (17)
- All You Need Is Love (29)
- And Your Bird Can Sing (9)
- Ask Me Why (1)
- Baby You're A Rich Man (2)
- Baby's In Black (4)
- Back In The U.S.S.R. (14)
- Backbeat (9)
- Being For The Benefit Of Mr. Kite (3)
- Birthday (2)
- Blackbird (14)
- Come Together (44)
- Cry Baby Cry (4)
- Day After Tomorrow (8)
- Dear Prudence (13)
- Don't Let Me Down (3)
- Eleanor Rigby (48)
- Everybody's Got Something To Hide Except Me And My Secrets (13)
- For No One (4)
- Get Back (14)
- Get It (9)
- Glass Onion (21)
- Golden Slumbers (2)
- Good Day Sunshine (3)
- Good Morning Good Morning (9)
- Happiness Is A Warm Gun (44)
- Hello Goodbye (11)
- Help! (13)
- Help! Help! (17)

# Sharing interpretations

Fans also spend an enormous amount of energy pooling their interpretations, sometimes shaping consensus, and other times dividing into camps over issues such as which album is best or whether signing with a major label represents selling out.

Fans often interpret lyrics, as seen in the websites pictured here. They also informally (and sometimes formally), review recordings, concerts and ongoing events -- including some that artists might consider private and prefer be left alone.



## Creating for each other

Some fans are also driven to create for each other, and more fans than that appreciate being able to engage fan-created materials. A recent form of music fan creativity is the homemade music video. The one pictured here has been viewed almost 7 million times and over 11,000 people have given it an average 5 star rating.

Fans also create for one another by performing covers of a bands material, making mix tapes and playlists, performing cover songs, creating remixes, artworks and writing fan fiction.





## The internet superpowered fandom

It's not surprising that the internet proves hospitable to fandom -- one of the first things those who were creating it did with it in 1972 (just 3 years after the first successful login) was to create a vibrant community of science fiction fans on the mailing list SF-Lovers.

What fans quickly discovered was that the internet empowered them in ways that transformed fandom and, as this event demonstrates, created enormous challenges and opportunities for the music industry.



## 5 reasons the internet superpowers fandom

There are five main reasons that the internet made fans so powerful. The internet:

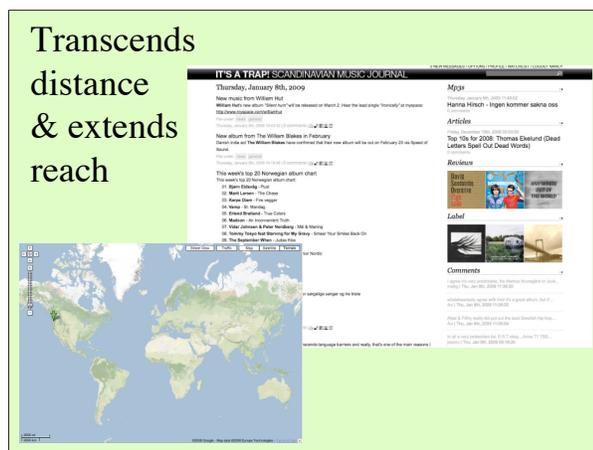
Transcends distance and increases reach

Provides group infrastructures

Supports archiving

Enables new forms of engagement

Lessens social distance



Transcends  
distance  
& extends  
reach

The internet lets fans connect with each other instantaneously across distance. This greatly diminishes fans' reliance on the music press and the PR machines behind it. It also means fans can build relationships across geographic boundaries and become centers of scenes -- or tribal leaders -- regardless of their location.

Here, for example is the fan-authored webzine about Scandinavian music "It's A Trap." run by Avi Roig and a motley crew of volunteer reviewers, including me. It's a Trap gets several thousand hits a day from all over the world, and many from Scandinavia.

Roig describes himself as " the leading news provider -- the go-to site for many, many industry people and am often one of the first places people will send news releases since I have a quick turnaround and a wide reach"

Roig operates IAT from Olympia Washington, literally half a world away from Scandinavia.

# Provides group infrastructures

The image shows two web pages side-by-side. On the left is the Prince.org website, which features a purple header with the site's name and navigation links. Below the header, there are several news articles with headlines such as 'Rolling Stone: Prince Premieres Four New Songs On L.A.'s Indie 103.1', 'After 60 years, what's next? (spoiler?)', 'New music premiered on radio', 'Jimmy Jam discusses Time reunion album', 'Wendy & Lisa's new album available now!', 'Anti-DRM blog singles out Prince', 'Wendy and Lisa to release "White Plains" online in December', 'Manuella Testolini survives Mumbai hotel bombing', and 'Tika Nelson introduces "Brand New Me" in Minneapolis'. On the right is a Yahoo! Groups page for 'Best of Music Groups'. It features a search bar, a 'Pick of the week' section for 'Faith+Fire/Fires', and several music-related groups listed under 'Music Genres and Groups' and 'Browse for more Music Groups'. The groups listed include 'Beyonce Fans', 'Justin Timberlake', 'Prince Forever & Always', 'Kelly Clarkson', 'True To Tiffany', 'March 6th Blues', 'Music and Whatnots 2', 'Music Videos & Pics', 'Boston Rocks', and 'Beautiful Instrumental'.

The internet also makes it extremely easy to have group discussions because it provides platforms for people to create groups through services like YahooGroups or Facebook and to run fan groups of all sorts on their own sites.

**Supports archiving**

**Hello! Surprise!** **Lovekevin**

[Back to Hello! Surprise!](#)

**Info about Lovekevin**  
 The Lovekevin started out in 2003 as a classic jangle pop outfit.  
 The debut 7" "Blame the English" and the live-recorded "Max Leon" EP garnered international praise among fans of The Shins, Bady Drawn Boy, Gorky's Zygotic Mynci and Teenage Fanclub.  
 The debut album "vs. the Snow" builds upon the foundations of their earlier work - immaculate songcraft, simple melodies and scandinavian melancholy - yet hones their interest in abstract lyricism and experiments of pure sound.

**Website**  
<http://www.lovekevins.com>

**MP3 and other media**  
[Lovekevin - Blame the english](#)  
[Lovekevin - Happy happy](#)  
[Lovekevin - Max Leon](#)  
[Lovekevin - Private life of a cat](#)  
[Lovekevin - Soviet.se](#)  
[Lovekevin - Stop being perfect](#)  
[Lovekevin - Tamedachi freestyle](#)  
[Lovekevin - The big room](#)

If you have more information about this artist, please email me. [hello!surprise@colorize.net](mailto:hello!surprise@colorize.net)  
 Hello! Surprise! is only tested in [Mozilla Firefox](#).  
[HHS:ca](#)

W3C XHTML 1.0

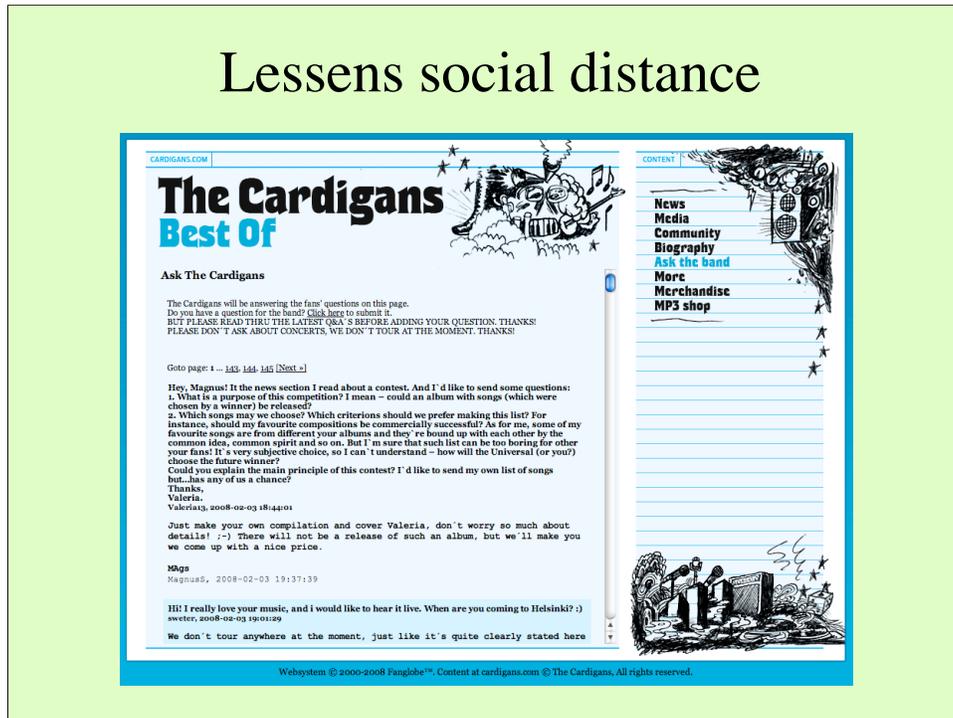
The internet is also well suited to serving as a museum for the curatorial impulses of fans. One of my favorite fan archives is this one, by Johannes Schill in Sweden who's collected a list of over 500 Swedish pop bands, more than 40 labels, and for each has created a page with information and a link to their website and any free downloads or other media that the artist has made available.

# Enables new forms of engagement

The image displays two digital interfaces. On the left is the 'HYPE MACHINE' website, which features a search bar, navigation links (about, radio, chat, popular, now playing, blog list, contact), and a main content area with sections for 'Listen to music blogs', 'Explore blogs', 'What's going on here?', and 'What's new with us?'. The 'Listen to music blogs' section lists various music-related posts with timestamps and titles. The 'Explore blogs' section lists popular and recently updated blogs. The 'What's going on here?' section provides information about the Hype Machine's mission and offers RSS feeds. The 'What's new with us?' section includes updates about email newsletters and RSS feeds. On the right is a mobile interface for 'Last.fm Radio', featuring a play button and a list of 'MY TOP 10 BANDS LAST WEEK:' including Club 8, Crowded House, Andrew Bird, The Fine Arts Showcase, Familjen, Granddaddy, and Klaxons.

The internet provides all kinds of new ways for fans to engage music and each other. People who could never imagine doing anything like it before can now broadcast their own playlists, write mp3 blogs and oeuvre blogs, create remixes and videos, and otherwise engage in participatory culture (read *Convergence Culture* by Henry Jenkins if you haven't).

## Lessens social distance



Finally, the internet can eliminate the layers of filters that separated fans from performers in years past. People who might never get backstage can now expect at least some bit of seemingly interpersonal interaction with the artists they adore.

As MySpace would have it, we're no longer "fans," we're "friends."



Of course, the flip side to fans' empowerment is what seems a lot like disempowerment to those who've been able to control music production, distribution and coverage. It's natural to respond to this with fear. The threats are real. Those in industry may want to stop fans from:

Criticizing them, spreading their music, using their name, bootlegging their shows, discussing their private lives, writing fantasies about them, spreading misinformation

But getting control back is not an option. That genie is not going back in the bottle. The power struggle and the tensions it raises will continue for the foreseeable future.

The relationship between fans and artists is less and less like a business relationship in which artists and industry set the terms and audiences either buy or don't, and more and more like a social relationship in which bands and fans have to negotiate terms together.

They are independent, they have their own goals, and they will do things you don't like. They can also help you.



The sense of fear that many in the music industry have is magnified by overwhelming scope of the internet. How can a band be represented everywhere it should be? How can you monitor activity in all those places at once?

But the overwhelming scope of the internet is also the key that makes it possible for fans and bands to have symbiotic online relationships.

The band needs to be everywhere but doesn't have the resources to create and maintain a presence everywhere.

Fans want to communicate about bands with each other in all the many places they hang out online.

If you give them the tools to nurture the social elements of their fandom, they will spread your presence in places you never go.

“If it doesn’t spread, it’s dead”



From 4 sites to 500+

Track streamed every 2 seconds in first 24 hours

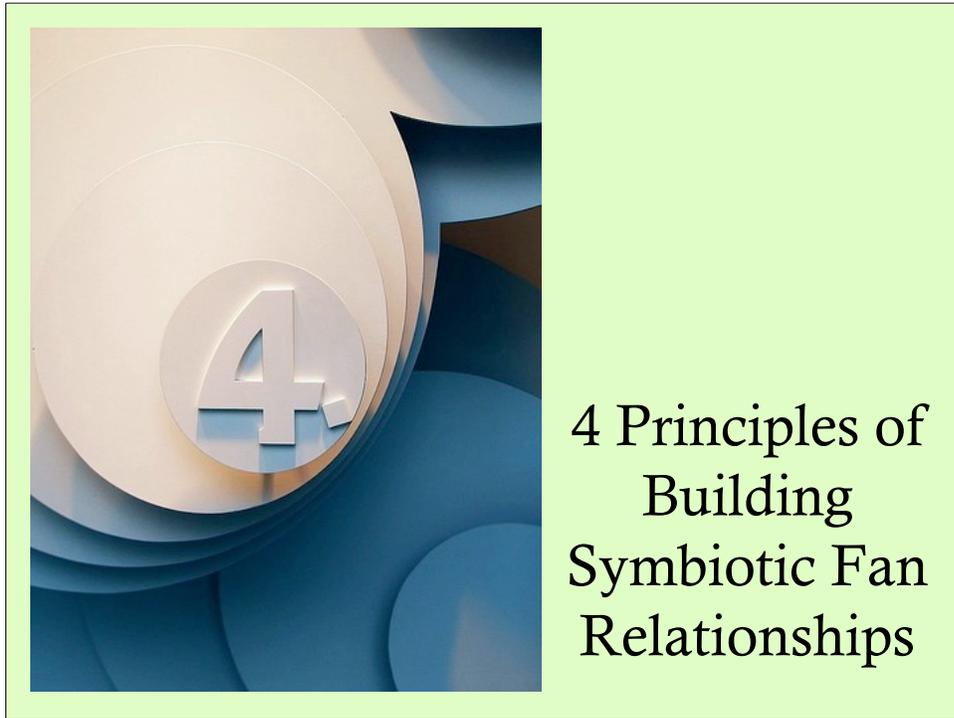
We all face a problem of attention -- bands need to get noticed through the massive amount of music that is now available, music fans need guidance on what to listen to in such a crowded marketplace.

In this context, fans are increasingly important filters for one another and for artists, bringing new music and music news to others’ attention.

This widget from ReverbNation demonstrates how the social needs of fans and the promotional needs of bands can compliment one another perfectly:

Why would someone embed this?

1. To share feelings of excitement
2. Because they identify with it and it allows them to create social identity, including perhaps gaining status in the fan community for posting it first
3. To contribute to collective intelligence



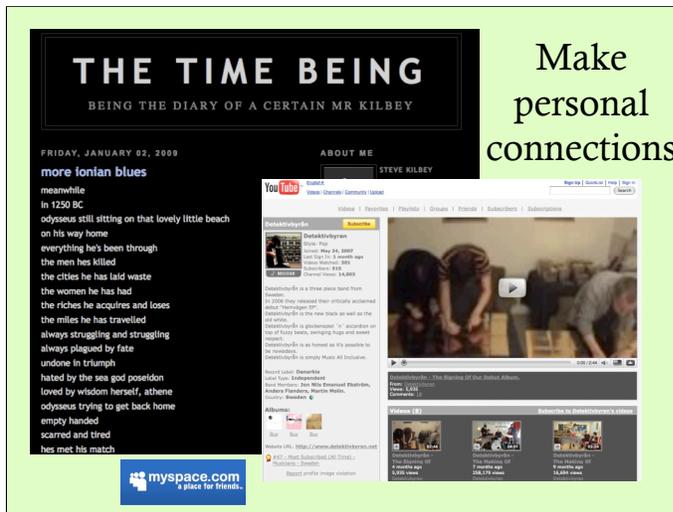
In closing, I want to offer four principles that allow bands to connect with fans in ways that directly nurture the internal strengths of fan communities and that will rebound in positive ways for bands. They are all based on demonstrating respect for the fans and for their independence.

Build personal connections

Use a variety of social media

Provide fans with social resources

Encourage fans' creativity

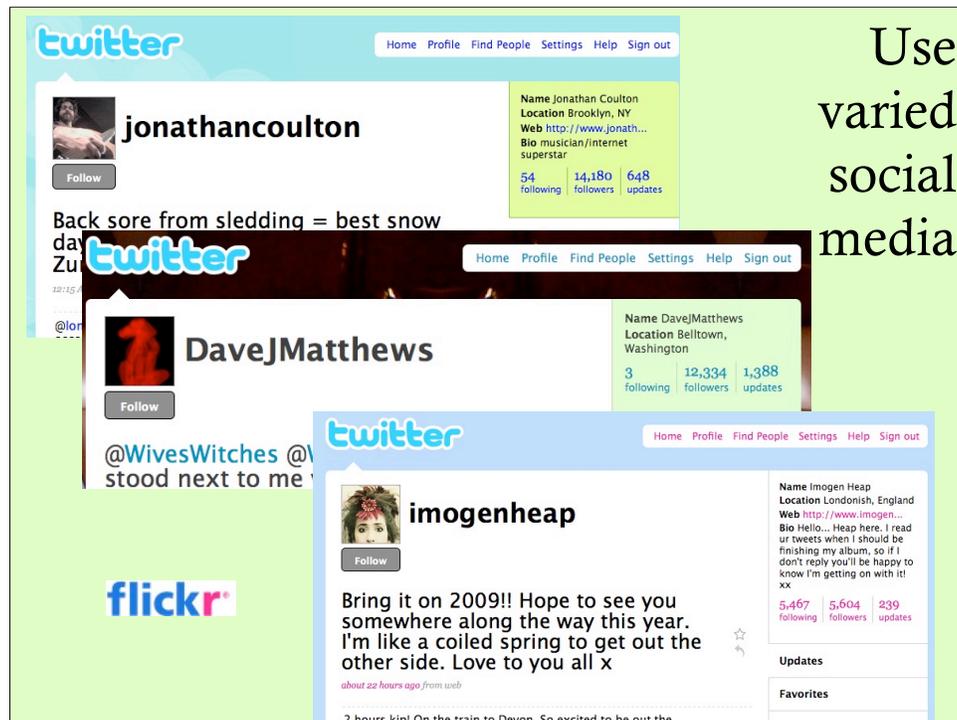


Make  
personal  
connections

The reduction of social distance means that fans have a greater expectation of making personal connections with artists. That brings with it its own set of problems, but also brings with it a lot of power to generate goodwill on your behalf. Goodwill is increasingly important as the incentive to pay for anything bands do is increasingly motivated by voluntary ethical and moral feelings of relational obligation rather than economic and legal contracts and constraints. Having personal connections with audience members is also a powerful reward for many artists, one that is usually overlooked when we focus only on monetizing the relationship.

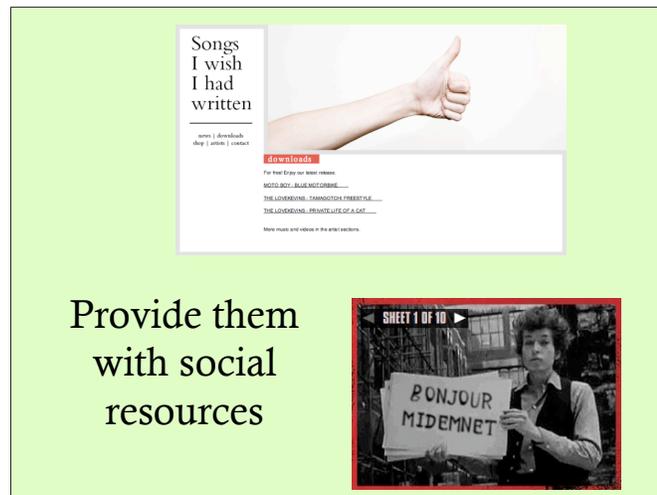
Connection happens at two levels: holistically with all your listeners paying attention to you online, and with the specific individuals doing the most to spread your presence.

Connecting isn't easy: Social skills and music making skills are very different & there is not one right way to do this. It's important to have a match between the identity put forward in the music and promotional materials, and that put forward by the individuals online.



Have a well-defined online presence that is distributed across different sites, but that is well-integrated and consistent. Make sure that your own homepage is the core, that all of your other sites point people back to it, and that it points outward to all the other places you're building an active presence.

Warning: only communicate with your fans in as many ways as you can manage to maintain regularly over the long haul. Don't be overly ambitious. Dead blogs and empty twitter accounts are worse than none at all.



If you want fans to talk about you, you need to give them something of social value.

Some of this is social for you too: information, news, behind the scenes peeks

Others you view as economic: the songs, the videos.

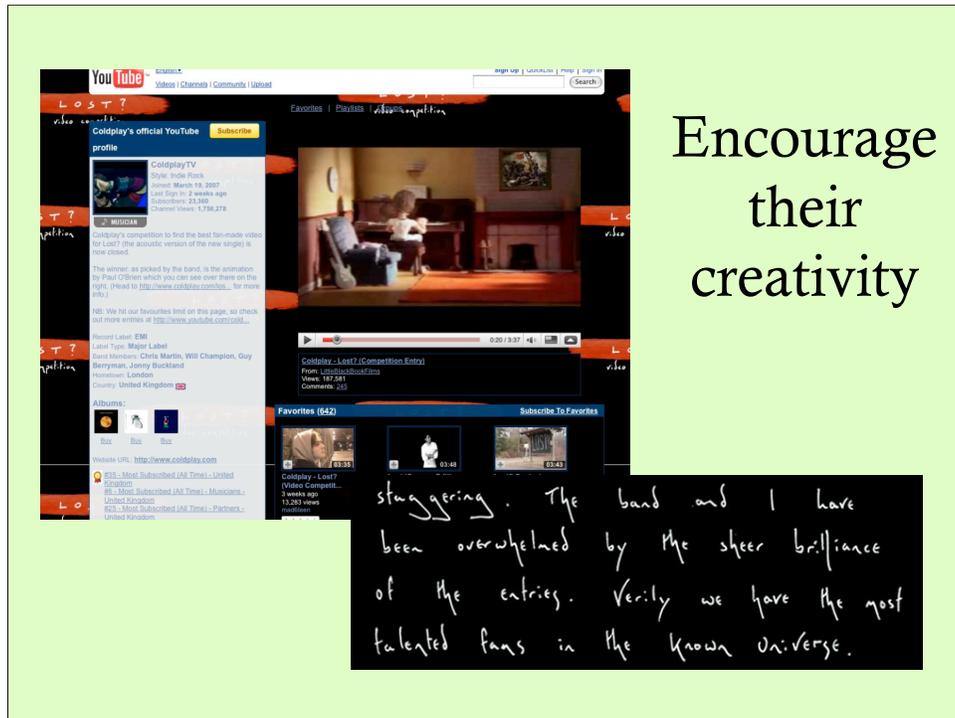
But from the fans' point of view, both of these are forms of social capital that they can use to connect with each other.

The music provides them the emotions they want to share. You can give them resources that stimulate the other activities they want to do:

give them things to build identity with (songs for playlists, widgets, email addresses, urls)

to pool into collective intelligence (back stories, histories, detailed information)

to offer up for collective interpretation (music, video, art)



My final suggestion is that you find ways to encourage fans' creativity. If they are into something, they will use it to create. Increasingly, this kind of remix culture is the main way young people are able to engage creative practice at all. They are going to remix, make videos, figure out lyrics, build archives, and play with the music no matter what you do. This is part of how they build their social identities for each other.

When you encourage their creativity, and provide them with tools, incentives and rewards for it, as Coldplay did with their recent video competition, you enhance their connections to the music, to each other, and to you.

Questions? Comments?  
Tales to tell?

# Merci!

nancy@onlinefandom.com  
www.onlinefandom.com

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