

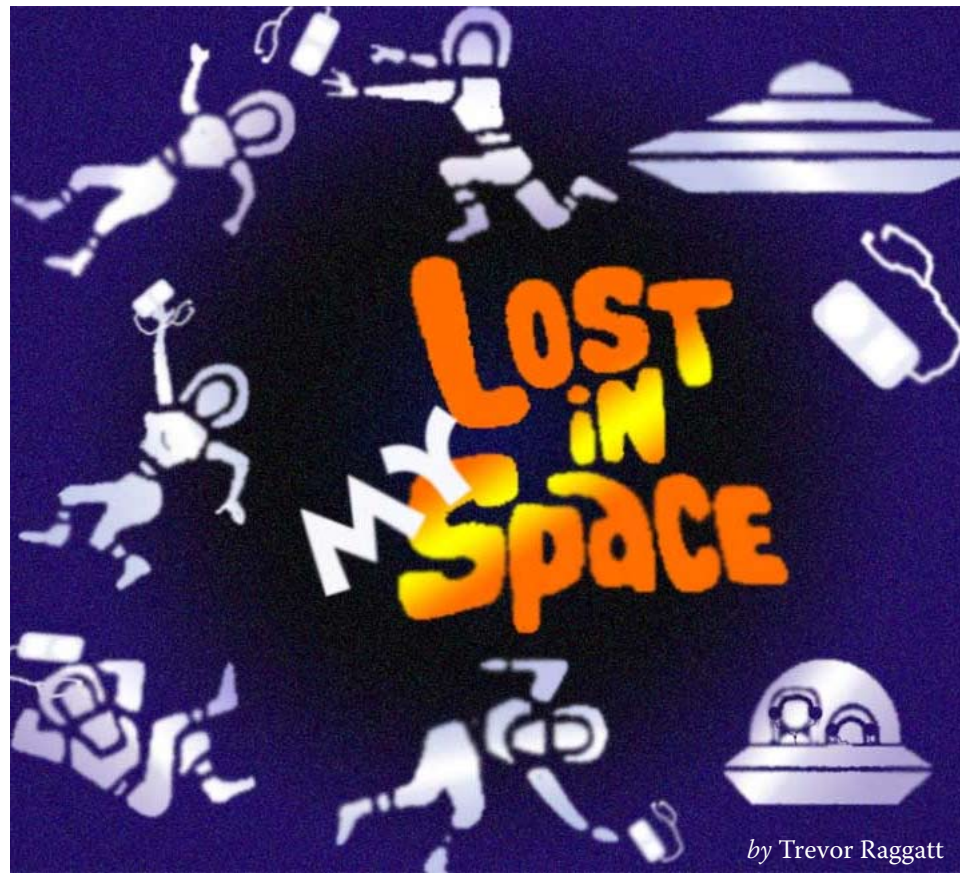
Once upon a time there was a magical place full of the promise of good things. A utopian land where all men (and women) were equal, from common workaday Joe's or Joanne's to aging heroes from long, long ago. It was a wonderful paradise called mp3.com.

These days mp3.com is little more than yet another online CD/download store with no indication of its groundbreaking past. The idea was quite simple; have a website where anyone – yes anyone – could post their latest compositions, EPs or even full albums in mp3 format. If you browsed past an album that you happened to like, then mp3.com, for a small fee, would even burn it onto CD, print up the album cover and mail it to you.

The site was certainly egalitarian and open to all. Bedroom musicians had the same access as established artists who used it for those private “experimental” projects in which no label would take an interest. Byrds founder Roger McGuinn used it as a base for his Folk Den project, compiling and distributing his own recordings of traditional American folk songs. David Bowie also delved into his vaults of rare, unreleased tracks and posted them on the site. Of course, for every McGuinn or Bowie using mp3.com there were a thousand others posting material of, at best, questionable quality. After all, even this Eden sprouted the odd apple tree while snakes slithered in the long grass.

Derek Sivers, founder of CDBaby, recently put his finger on the issue – there were no filters, no way of practically separating the musical wheat from the talentless chaff. “I think filters are needed right now in the music scene because distribution has become so easy. mp3.com was an even more extreme example of that – anybody could just fart into a mic and upload it. It was free. It's just an mp3, you don't even have to burn a CD... all of a sudden there were just hundreds of thousands of mp3s up there – how could you possibly go through that?” Rather more diplomatically, an MTV employee was quoted at an online content delivery conference as saying, “If nothing else, mp3.com showed us there are an almost unlimited number of marginally talented people out there.”

Ten years ago the technology available to marketplace sites like mp3.com was insufficient to provide meaningful



filtering for users. Users chose from a range of simple genres to classify their pages and the automated user assistance was rudimentary. Sivers again, “...to their credit [*they*] really did try to set up a system where the cream would rise to the top – they did it in terms of popularity of downloads and such... [*they were*] popularity contests as far as the people who already had the biggest fanbase, or if you worked at a big company, you e-mail everybody in the company and say, please go download my song so I can rise to the top of the charts.”

Of course it couldn't last and at the turn of the millennium the launch of a basic file-sharing facility on the site led to damaging court action by the recording industry establishment against mp3.com. The dot-com bust that followed soon after sealed its fate.

Fast forward five years to an online world which has changed immeasurably. Technical advances and the indomitable spread of broadband has revolutionised how we use the internet and view music. Now we have innumerable online music stores, burgeoning legal download sites, the Napster debacle seems to be over bar the shouting, digital stations are multiplying at an hourly rate and claiming to know

what music we like better than we do. Even those shiny, rainbow-hued optical discs are touted as being as obsolete as a wax cylinder or a Betamax tape. Most of this could have been predicted by those futurologists with their hover cars and Bacofol jumpsuits. However, no one could have reasonably foreseen the explosive success of a site that has grown from a few hundred users to over 70 million in only three years – and its effect on grassroots musicians and music fans. Without a doubt, MySpace will go down in the internet annals as a true phenomenon.

Will you be my friend?

For the uninitiated, MySpace is what's officially known as a ‘social networking site’. Its operation (on the surface) is simple – upon registering as a MySpace member one receives what is, effectively, a web page that serves as your MySpace home – initially with a standard but user-friendly format, customisable through simple HTML programming (‘standard’ and off the shelf elements/editors are already becoming readily available). Its two beauties and the keys to its success are its breadth of features and the fact that, for the user, it operates on an incredibly organic basis,

exploiting the powerful six degrees of separation principle. Users network by finding pages of users who share common interests and inviting those people to become their 'friend'. A list of each user's 'friends' is displayed on their page allowing you to browse your new friend's other chums to see if they are someone you want to get to know too – after all any friend of yours must be a friend of mine. In effect, the MySpace experience is the online realisation of real-life social interaction.

Whilst this, on its own would be unlikely to keep up interest for long, MySpace's interactive features allows a sense of community to blossom. From each page there is the facility to e-mail and instant message friends, display photos, coordinate diaries, post bulletins, leave comments on other friends' pages, join special interest groups and online forums and blog your wisdom to the world; all in all, there's enough to keep most users occupied, and enough to make meaningful connections possible. It now even incorporates features similar to those on sites such as Friends Reunited and Friendster.

As with so many innovations, all this was the result of a few individuals' inspiration – in this case Tom Anderson (everyone's first ever friend on joining MySpace) and Chris DeWolfe. Whilst working for an online storage group Anderson came up with the idea of a cyber-networking site, pitched it to DeWolfe who arranged investment from Intermix and the rest was, very soon, history!

Whilst large numbers of MySpace users may be hormone-fuelled teens looking to score, a more discerning clientele has quickly amassed. Music has been a strong focus of MySpace since its genesis and has increasingly become a powerful marketing tool for both major and independent recording and performing artists. DeWolfe was strongly connected to people in the LA creative community and polled bands, artists, musicians and other creatives for feedback on what they would want out of a promotional and networking site. Those features were quickly incorporated into MySpace. Since 2004, musicians have been able to create their own music profiles that allow them to promote their concerts and other events and post up to four mp3 files that can be set



from top right: Kat Parsons, Victoria Vox, Brianna Lane and MySpace screenshot

to automatically stream whenever the profile is viewed. Musicians even have the option to let their friends and fans download, rate and comment on their latest tracks.

It didn't take the major record labels long to cotton on to the potential power of MySpace as a promotional tool. International megastars such as REM, the Rolling Stones, U2, Madonna, Kelly Clarkson, Coldplay and Mariah Carey all have their own pages, often with tens of thousands of friends. Other established but less mainstream artists like Aimee Mann, Ani DiFranco and PJ Harvey have also joined in the fun. Emerging talent like KT Tunstall are using it too – Tunstall's MySpace presence formed a solid word-of-mouth basis for February's US launch of *Eye To The Telescope*.

Sisters doin' it for themselves

No matter how much the majors look to promote their product through MySpace, it's in the realm of the independent artist that the site has begun to have the greatest impact. The rise of the Arctic Monkeys, a veritable internet phenomenon, has been attributed to their MySpace presence and has already become the stuff of legend. Indeed, they now reside in the top ten most popular bands on MySpace in terms of friends and page views (nearly 50,000 friends and three quarters of a million page views!) out of well over 350,000 music pages. However, even at a more modest level, the site gives independent artists a shop window in which to display their wares, interact with fans, publicise their gigs and recordings and increase their profile. Whether completely new artists using MySpace as an alternative to a 'proper' website or

more established artists working the circuit, the response was uniformly positive and remarkably similar.

LA-based independent artist Kat Parsons jumps in at this point, "It's been a really wonderful way to introduce people to my music and it makes it really easy to record something, convert it to an mp3 and get new music out there right away. It's also a really neat way to get to know my fans and to tell them more about me."

Brianna Lane who plies her trade around the American midwest and further afield agrees: "The internet is a godsend for independent artists. Without the big bucks of a major label backing us it's challenging to get your name out there. As a promotional tool it's essential... word of mouth (or word of e-mail!) travels fast and there are hundreds of networking sites and fan outreach opportunities. It's great seeing folks at my shows that I know from MySpace... they'll come up to me afterwards and say 'Hey, I'm your MySpace friend...' and often I'll think 'No way! Man, it's working.' I'm always stunned and grateful when I find out I've made an impression on someone through the internet and they've gone beyond that and made their presence known at a live show."

Another artist making good use of MySpace technology is Wisconsin's ukulele-totin' pop princess, Victoria Vox, who seems to spend most of the year heading up or down both the US highway system and the information superhighway, spreading the news. "I get on MySpace daily... well, I try to! Its proved to be as addictive as caffeine. I feel it's sort of replaced the website for

emerging artists and DIY-ers. It is, in fact, a one page website...and a free one at that! I can't mention that word 'free' enough. There are so many outlets for musicians to promote at no cost but the coolest thing about MySpace is that it's primarily a 'fan site'. The interaction between fans and musicians is great – and fans love it."

For the hard working muso trying to make it on a budget there are other benefits of MySpace too. Vox again, "It's also a great way to meet other bands and swap gigs and audiences. Overall, I think it's been positive all round." Lane is similarly enthusiastic but adds a word of scepticism, "For gig attendance... it's definitely helped out there... connecting with some really awesome and helpful folks that want to get people out to see my shows. They are so amazing and such huge supporters of independent music. Getting gigs? I think it's helped too. A lot of venues have MySpace sites so it makes it easy to be in touch with one another – helping to build a stronger community. But MySpace still seems to be a little too new to be fully trusted. My guess is that bookers like listening to CDBaby or SonicBids...just a theory!"

Is all rosy otherwise? Users do have a raft of complaints about the site – there are sufficiently regular technical problems that the error message "An unexpected error has occurred" is commonly known as an "expected error" message. There are complaints of all too regular service outages, and typically the maintenance downtime is scheduled for the deepest parts of the night – in LA – meaning daytime disruption for us in the UK!

Filthy lucre?

All that being said, keeping a sprawling organism like MySpace running can't be an easy prospect as it continues to grow in scope and popularity. From a few thousand users at the end of 2003, it now boasts around 70 million members, of whom over 32 million are regularly active with daily traffic rates rivalling web monoliths Google and Yahoo. This type of market penetration doesn't go unnoticed. Inevitably, hungry eyes were closely watching the site's meteoric rise and in July 2005 ripples of concern went through the online community when the parent company of MySpace was bought by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp

for \$580 million (£330 million). However, the conspiracy theory concerns of control and corporate strangulation have yet to come to pass. Subscribing to the 'if it ain't broke' school of thought, MySpace carries on much as ever, with occasional tweaks and upgrades.

Murdoch, or his minions at least, do have plans for expansion and maybe even world domination. There are already around a million MySpace users based in the UK and in January, News Corp announced its intention to introduce a UK-based MySpace domain. Interestingly, but not entirely surprisingly, the initial focus for the site would be the UK's music scene. Plans were already afoot to cooperate with the producers of the British TV chart music show, *CD: UK* (recently exported Stateside as *CD: USA* – catchy name, would never have thought of that!) incorporating unsigned MySpace bands into the format. Fox Interactive Media president Ross Levinson said, "We hope to go back to the UK to tap into how successful that show is. Hopefully they'll want to market through MySpace and we'll tap into the local events scene, parties, clubs, artists, film makers, television producers, so I think it's going to grow pretty rapidly."

Brave words and a great opportunity for the cream of the UK's unsigned and independent artists, but it remains to be seen whether the 'independent' artists who end up being featured qualify for that title only technically. MySpace's 'independent' artists do feature, after all, the likes of Nickelback, Jem, Evanescence and LL Cool J. Maybe it will be corporate strangulation and conspiracy theory after all.

Try some, buy some

But why all the fuss over MySpace? What about the alternatives for searching out great new music. The industry is making a lot of noise about so-called 'recommendation engine' technologies such as Pandora, Moodlogic, Musicbrainz, Mercora or Grouper that learn about their users' musical tastes and suggest other artists and tracks that might appeal. All this works well in theory. Indeed, Yahoo's LaunchCast online music station has worked well on this principle for some time – allowing users to rate their favourite music and suggesting occasional new or unrated

selections. All very good but it does have weaknesses in that it takes no account of the mercurial nature of musical taste, the contradictions within any music collection or the nature of fandom itself. Personally, I have always loved Aimee Mann but have never got on with Ani DiFranco or Polly Harvey's music. I adore Sarah McLachlan but don't connect emotionally with Tori Amos. Recommendation engines say that I should. However, it does amuse me that my eclectic tastes might lead to a few Deep Purple and Thin Lizzy fans being exposed to the occasional random Chic, ELO or June Tabor track.

It seems that, somehow, MySpace and its networking technology connects with us on an organic and human level. It allows us to happen across wonderful new 'finds', peruse the virtual musical tastes of other music fans and to interact with them in a real way. Aside from the potential for commercial manipulation of the site, there is also a danger of the close accessibility eroding the traditional mythology of the artist. However, the site gives singers, songwriters and bands the chance to reach out to new fans who would never have come across their music otherwise.

Perhaps the last words should go to one of those artists, Kat Parsons: "The world is full of connections – six degrees of separation – and MySpace is great at connecting people even further, both socially and musically. It's neat that I can reach someone with whom I share common musical tastes. I think you can have true connection with someone through a song. MySpace allows for that. It allows two strangers to find one another – artist and fan – and to connect through a song. And if a stranger likes a tune they can easily learn more and let other people know about it. Other forms of getting your music out there are not as effective – a flyer or poster doesn't play a song! Maybe the main disadvantage is that there is so much out there and so little time!" ■

Got a MySpace profile? Come and befriend us! We're the new Arctic Monkeys...



www.myspace.com/wearsthetrousers