

## Indie music riding the digital surge

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**Having learned a thing or two about the guitar and songwriting, Geoff Byrd is practicing another instrument that could prove even more important to his musical career: the Internet.**

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### What's new:

Independent musicians are augmenting traditional promotional methods such as touring, word of mouth, fan clubs and posters with Web sites, e-mail lists and blogs. Listener recommendations, online preview clips and samples, shared playlists and other grassroots Web tools are also changing the music landscape.

### Bottom line:

The trend could one day reduce the percentage of music sales currently controlled by a handful of heavily promoted acts and boost recognition for a greater number of less-popular artists.



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Byrd's music has consistently ranked among the top listings on [GarageBand.com](#), a Web site that allows independent musicians to review one another's songs. For the next few weeks, the Portland, Ore.-based singer-songwriter's tunes are going into Internet radio's version of heavy rotation, due to a deal announced Wednesday between GarageBand and the [Live365](#) network of stations.

The new Net radio promotion is just one in a series of offers [Byrd](#) says is finally adding up to a powerful set of tools for independent musicians online. Largely through Internet promotions over the last year, he's sold thousands of CDs, won opening slots in several large concerts and drawn calls from major label scouts.

"Everybody is the product of what works for them personally and practically," Byrd said about his online experiences. "But every connection helps. The way I look at it, any exposure is beneficial to artists."

Independent musicians have long turned to the Internet in their struggle for recognition outside traditional industry channels such as radio and MTV. Now, in the wake of the dot-com bust, many are discovering that savvy online marketing may never catapult them to stardom--but it can give their careers an important lift.

For all its promise, the Net has not yet created any overnight sensations. That power, for now, appears firmly locked to television, where popular contest shows such as "American Idol" have put unknowns at the top of the pops with ease. By contrast, the Internet is proving its worth to independent musicians primarily as a complement to traditional marketing efforts known to generations of road-weary rockers. Touring, word of mouth, fan clubs and

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posters are now being augmented with [Web sites](#), [e-mail lists](#) and [blogs](#).

Still, signs of the Internet's growing influence are beginning to be felt in a variety of ways, musicians say. Listener recommendations, online preview clips and samples, shared playlists and other grassroots tools are bringing more knowledge and choice to consumers than ever before. That trend could one day reduce the percentage of music sales currently controlled by a handful of heavily promoted acts and boost recognition for a greater number of less-popular artists.

Many say it's about time. Independent musicians and labels counted for about 25 percent of the \$32 billion global music market in 2003, according to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry.

Early digital music boosters predicted that the Net could help increase that market share. Independent labels and artists have traditionally struggled with distribution, and the Net--in theory--allows any artist to reach a global fan base, they reasoned.

In practice, the Internet hasn't proven to be a magic bullet.

A handful of established artists have attempted to move outside the major label system by going online, trading on their offline popularity to draw Web audiences. Most prominently, Prince maintained his own Web store throughout much of his self-imposed exile from major label distribution. Although he's now back with Sony Music, his latest album is still available for download on his site.

Indie rock band Wilco temporarily distributed its 2002 album, "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot" on its own Web site after being dropped by its record label, only to be picked up by a related label a few months later.

Some underground artists have found fleeting success. DJ Danger Mouse's recent "Grey Album," a [mash-up](#) mixing Jay-Z's "Black Album" with The Beatles' "White Album," was distributed widely through blogs and Web sites after record label EMI Group blocked its commercial release, for example.

But the most popular artists in today's download services, and on the biggest Internet radio stations, are still Britney Spears, Outkast and other superstars from the offline world.

"The Internet is certainly a way of showcasing music in a larger venue," said Jupiter Research analyst Michael Gartenberg. "The question is getting it heard and getting people to pay for it."

### **To iTunes and beyond**

Independent labels and artists are beginning to play an increasingly visible role in download services such as Apple Computer's iTunes Music Store, where bragging rights to the largest collections of tracks--including obscure independent songs--are a critical selling point.

In large part, this growing indie presence is due to the services of a set of aggregators that serve as middlemen between the labels and the big online services such as iTunes and Napster. These companies, such as the [Digital Rights Agency](#) and the [Independent Online Distribution Alliance](#), help small labels place their albums inside the music services, even helping them negotiate royalty rates that might otherwise be impossible.

"It's still a struggle in most cases to get rates that are competitive with the majors," said Tuhin Roy, the founder of the Digital Rights Agency. "It's only through the collective bargaining power of organizations like ours that we're getting close."

[CD Baby](#), an online CD distributor for labelless artists, also helps its musicians place songs in iTunes and other services. [Loudeye](#), a company that digitizes music for the major labels, offers a similar service to independents that helps them win a spot in download catalogues.

The digital download market is much broader than iTunes and its direct rivals, however. A handful of independent labels are beginning to create their own stores. Warp Records, a prominent electronic music label, recently launched its [Bleep.com](#), offering downloads of ordinary MP3s from several independent labels, without copy protection, for about \$1.35 a song.

Niche sites offering sales only of [punk rock](#), jazz or Christian music have sprung up. A company called [Weed](#) lets people trade and buy independent musicians' songs using a private peer-to-peer network.

### Finding a sympathetic ear

Despite all the new distribution capability, independent musicians still face their oldest problem, however: How to get noticed in a market where potential listeners now have as many as 700,000 songs at their iTunes-browsing fingertips.

GarageBand, a boom-era company that was recently rescued and refinanced by current Chief Executive Officer Ali Partovi, has one answer to that question. Independent artists like Byrd can post their songs online, but they must first review other artists' music. The top-rated songs are prominently displayed on the site, and have, at least in Byrd's case, drawn contacts from top industry managers and label employees.

CNET News.com publisher CNET Networks offers its own site where independent musicians can host and promote their music, [Music.download.com](#).

Internet radio stations can provide some similar exposure. Live365, which lets independent DJs run their own Webcasts, has its top songs show up on charts in industry magazines Radio & Records and CMJ, both of which are closely watched by big labels and broadcast radio stations.

In the end, artists say the new tools for independent musicians are coming into their own. But at least today, they remain complements to the traditional modes of incessant touring and offline self-promotion.

Byrd said that he's had his songs reviewed by radio promotion consultants, and they picked the same potential singles that GarageBand.com reviewers liked. He's now taking those songs to broadcast radio stations.

For his own plans, the feedback from Internet radio and his CD Baby sales has been invaluable, the songwriter said.

"I'm selling a ton of CDs in Connecticut and Pennsylvania," Byrd said. "It helps me figure out where I want to tour."

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