As music labels struggle, bands thrive in games

By Lisa Baertlein
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LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - It is a dark time for record labels and mainstream radio, but the people who pick music for video games say there has never been a better time to be an aspiring rock star.

"There are more opportunities than ever before. I would much rather be a young band right now than 10 years ago," said Steve Schnur, referring to a time when record companies and radio station owners held the keys to what got heard.

The worldwide executive of music at Electronic Arts Inc., which is the biggest video game publisher, put a once unknown Southern California band called Avenged Sevenfold in multiple games including EA's "Need for Speed: Most Wanted" racing game and its perennially popular "Madden" football game, which is considered prime real estate.

The band, also known as A7X, has since gotten a Warner Bros Records contract and its songs are now familiar to millions of gamers.

Scottish indie rock band Franz Ferdinand crossed the pond, winning U.S. fans after its music was in games like "Madden NFL 2005," soccer game "FIFA 2005" and racing title "Burnout 3: Takedown," said Schnur, who also led the music selection in "NBA Live 2003" -- the only video game soundtrack to go platinum.

"We're a new medium that delivers music in a new and interesting way," said Alex Hackford, artist and repertoire manager for Sony Computer Entertainment America.

Hackford has worked with bands in all stages of development, including Stab the Matador, a young band from upstate New York.

He put them in baseball game "MLB 06: The Show." From there, he said, the band got a booking agent and a national tour.
"You have almost a completely level playing field," said Hackford.

These days, artists market themselves on the Internet from their bedrooms or depend on a Madison Avenue marketing firm to get the word out.

"If you're entrepreneurial, you can do it yourself," Hackford said. "It's easy to give over control of your career to a multinational corporation and blame somebody when it doesn't go right. Really driven people aren't going to cede control," he said.

Music-based games such as Konami's various karaoke titles, Activision Inc.'s "Guitar Hero" and Sony's "SingStar" are also an outlet for established groups from the Rolling Stones and Queen to Lynyrd Skynyrd and Deep Purple.

Crooner Frank Sinatra, country star Johnny Cash and the Doors were headliners in Activision's "Tony Hawk Underground 2."

"It really underscores the fact that there is no longer a magic bullet that sells a record," said Celia Hirschman, founder of Downtown Marketing, a music marketing consulting company in San Francisco.

Video games are a perfect way for consumers to discover new music and for bands, especially those of the post-modern punk, hip hop, funk and heavy metal variety, to reach their typically rabid fan base, she said.

"The music fit with the lifestyle of what they were selling in the game. It was a no-brainer," Hirschman said.

Nick Beard, bassist for Circa Survive, said having the band's music appear in a video game would be like fulfilling a childhood dream.

"I've been playing video games since I was 5. It would just be sweet," Beard said.
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