Sounding them out

- "The O.C." looks to indie bands to give its storylines an emotional punch. The exposure has made careers.

By Susan Carpenter, Times Staff Writer

Citizens Here and Abroad, a 3-year-old alt-rock group from San Francisco, spent Thursday night mesmerized by the latest episode of "The O.C." They're not just ordinary fans. The band, whose "Appearances" was one of the featured songs, is hoping it'll be able to catch the wave of success that airplay on the hit Fox show had brought to so many groups before them.

"It's kind of known among a lot of indie bands that being on there could mean great exposure," said Adrienne Robillard, 30, one of Citizens' singers. It's worth noting that the band is so far under the radar that she was calling from the supply closet of the trade magazine where she still works. "That's why we sent a CD earlier this year," added Robillard, who shipped off a copy of Citizens' debut record to an address she found online.

In the 2 1/2 seasons "The O.C." has been on the air, it's developed into a sort of musical alchemist, transforming relatively unknown bands into critics' darlings and sparking online chatter and sales.

Call it "The O.C." effect. Jem. Imogen Heap. Death Cab for Cutie. Dios Malos. The list of independent artists whose profiles have been boosted by the show's careful meshing of music and emotionally charged moments is constantly growing.

And then there is the "O.C." ripple effect: Thus far Warner Bros. Records has released five soundtrack albums — "The O.C.: Mix 1" in March 2004 was the first. The fifth in the series, "Mix 5," hit record stores Tuesday.

As for Citizens, singer Chris Groves, 32, says that since "Appearances" surfaced last week, "there aren't any stalkers following me around. Not yet. But at least looking at our website, the number of people visiting has gone up a lot." Whether that will translate into album sales, Groves said, is too early to tell.

When it comes to major indie-rock tastemakers, Alexandra Patsavas doesn't exactly look the part. Her mane of wavy dark hair isn't spiked blond or streaked fuchsia. Her jeans aren't low-rise and ripped. She doesn't exude "cool" as much as confidence. But as "The O.C.'s" music supervisor, Patsavas has been instrumental in defining the show's sound.

Ringing her small office are half a dozen bookshelves jammed full of CDs. Behind her desk are older albums — Richard Ashcroft; Jeff Buckley; Blind Boys of Alabama.

Across the room, new stuff from Tom Vek, Kasabian and LCD Soundsystem. In the bin at her feet — hundreds of CDs she receives each week from record labels, band managers and artists.

"We try to go through almost everything," said Patsavas, whom music fans, record labels, artists and band managers alike respect for her keen ear and her open mind — to say nothing of her willingness to slog through the slush pile of unknowns.

What's she listening for?
"An amazing emotional moment," she said. "When I'm listening to music, I definitely save things, like, 'That would be a great breakup song.' That's how I hear music."

In the case of Citizens Here and Abroad, Patsavas needed to find the right music to bridge two moments: When Ryan is considering leaving town, and when his girlfriend Marissa discusses her new friend Johnny's part in that decision.

Patsavas chose "Appearances" for "the wistful dreamy quality of the vocals ... coupled with the sparse instrumentation and California lyric." And Louis XIV's "God Killed the Queen" set the tone for last season's controversial kissing scene between two female characters.

For Groves, at least, watching how it played in the show was a bit surreal. "When you write a song, you have certain ideas, a certain emotion or certain thoughts that go into a song," he said. "It's interesting to see someone take that song and use it to move along different sentiments or emotions in this other format."

Scrolling through her iTunes, Patsavas runs her cursor over some of the tracks she's considering for upcoming episodes: underground bands such as Her Space Holiday, Great Northern, Durango Park, Jason Collett, Clue to Kalo. Some of those songs will make their way on to the weekly compilation CDs Patsavas sends to the show's executive producers, Josh Schwartz and McG.

From there, the music selection becomes a highly collaborative process.

"Sometimes we have a scene where we can't find a song, and [Patsavas] will come back with five pitches. You never know where it's going to come from," said Schwartz, "which makes it really exciting. Everybody pitches in."

"I always say to [Patsavas], 'I've got to get the next, new, great epic anthem song of all time.'"

A prime-time soap opera embraced by teens and twentysomethings — a demographic that dovetails with the music industry's hungriest consumers — "The O.C." debuted in 2003. It takes place in Newport Beach and chronicles a group of hip, well-heeled teens as they negotiate the turbulent waters of friendship, romance, family, and school. In its 8 p.m. Thursday slot, still one of the most competitive on prime time, the show is averaging 6.5 million viewers, a drop of 7% compared to last year, according to Nielsen Media Research. Likewise, sales of "Music From the O.C." mix CDs have been declining. The four volumes have sold a total of just under 600,000 copies, according to Nielsen SoundScan, the most, not surprisingly, for the first edition (270,000), the least for the third (40,000), a compilation of alt-rock holiday music.

And while the show's viewership has slipped 3% this year in its key adults 18 to 49 audience, given the increased competition "The O.C." is still doing a good job hanging on to its young audience.

Schwartz said he always listens to music when he writes, and while writing the show's pilot, he was listening to the Joseph Arthur track "Honey and the Moon."

"All of a sudden, I just got a sense of the emotional end of the story and got the end of the show from that," said Schwartz, 29. "It was able to work backward and have music laced through that told the story."

"In the beginning, the bands we used — the Doves, South, Jeff Buckley — weren't hugely popular artists," said Schwartz, who scored most of the music for the first six episodes from his iPod. "We weren't trying necessarily to start a new trend. It was just the music I really responded to and all the people who worked on the show responded to, and all of a sudden we realized it was connecting with people."

When Schwartz realized he'd run out of music, he hired Patsavas: "She took what I was trying to do and elevated it, and all of a sudden we realized it was connecting with people."
place their music on TV.

While licensed music is now so commonplace that many shows offer soundtracks, few have had the impact of "The O.C.," according to Marisa Porter, co-founder of Zync Music, a music-placement firm in Santa Monica.

"The O.C. is totally unique in its power for music marketing because there just hasn't been as consistent a level of success with any other show generating the kind of excitement that they tend to do," Porter said. "It just has become a resource more than anything for the kids out there who are looking for some other avenue, some other way of finding out about cool new acts. I don't think any other show has established itself as that kind of oracle."

*Times staff writer Scott Collins contributed to this report.*