His MySpace odyssey

David Lehre’s Internet-launched ‘MySpace: The Movie’ launches his career as well.

By Susan Carpenter, Times Staff Writer

Life’s been moving fast for David Lehre. In the four weeks since the amateur filmmaker first screened "MySpace: The Movie" at his 21st birthday party, the short film spoofing the MySpace phenomenon has been viewed more than 6 million times through various sites online.

It's also prompted a development deal offer from MTVU, broadcast deals with two other television networks, feelers from Hollywood management muckety-mucks, numerous sequels and parodies — and a complimentary e-mail from MySpace co-founder Tom Anderson.

"I've never had stuff go as fast as it is now," said Lehre, a self-taught filmmaker who still lives at home with his parents in the town of Washington, Mich., where much of the "MySpace" film was shot.

Lehre first had the idea for the 11-minute short about two months ago, when he was looking to increase exposure for the films he cranks out almost weekly. Now — who knows — he could be in the early wave of unknowns trying to find a new way to break into Hollywood by winning public approval from the ground up and, as a result, gaining attention from top-tier gatekeepers.

It isn't just major media that's cruising the Web for content and talent. As the offerings expand for teens and twentyseomthingst through emerging platforms — online, on air, via broadband and with video on demand — new media outlets are looking for content. And they're finding it among their own Generation Y viewers who are so technologically literate they're almost like a new species — a new creative species, so familiar with computers and cameras that making videos and uploading them to the Web is about as complicated as walking and chewing gum.

Lehre's movie parodies the habits of the popular social networking site's users.
Told in five scenes, it begins with a shirtless teen narcissistically snapping pictures of himself in the bathroom when his mom barges in. It then segues into a series of moments all linked by MySpace: a blind date with a girl who's got the “angles” — pictures that show her from every angle but straight on; a user who suffers the consequences when he doesn't pass along a bulletin; a showdown between a boy whose girlfriend insists on using his password to see the incriminating photos on his page; and a raging party that ends up with one partygoer — an actor playing MySpace’s Anderson — bent over a toilet bowl as friends capture it all on camera, presumably for posting. (Registration is required to watch the movie at myspace.com, but it's available in the video section of youtube.com, under the "most viewed," then "all time" categories.)

Loosely scripted by Lehre and his best friend, Jeremy Kerr, the skits were improvised by the two of them and their friends. It took Lehre two months to film, edit and score the film.

Lehre has been making films with the same cast and crew since 10th grade, when he and his friends were denied parts in the high school theater production of "Little Women."

"I thought, 'Let's make a movie.' They're like, 'Do you know how to make a movie?' I was like, 'I don't know. I'll figure it out,' " Lehre said. "I was sick of other people deciding if I could entertain or not. I thought, if they won't give me a chance, then I'll make my own movie."

Using the money he'd made working at an Italian restaurant, he bought a mini digital video camera and corralled his friends together to make their first movie. The martial arts comedy, "Fighting Dragon," was a hit at school, so the group kept going.

Lehre said he and his friends now have 50 films to their credit and are so well known in their town that the local movie theater premieres their latest projects. Local businesses also support their productions, which are now billed under the banner of Vendetta Studios. Most recently, he said, he was loaned — for free — helicopters, motorcycles, a Lamborghini, a BMW, guns and sky divers for the action film he just finished, "Agent Millionstone." Lehre is completely self taught. He learned filmmaking by imitating the videography he saw and liked on TV and figuring out how to achieve the effects he wanted by researching it online. He now uses a high-caliber, digital video Canon that shoots on par with film, and the resulting look is impressively professional.

The trajectory of "MySpace: The Movie" goes something like this:

On Jan. 28, Lehre posted the movie to his personal website, DavidLehre.com.

On Jan. 31, the video was "leaked" to youtube.com by a user named "eggtea," who had downloaded it from Lehre's site and uploaded it to the popular video sharing site.

Each day, about 20,000 videos are uploaded to YouTube and more than 15 million are watched. At 3.3 million viewings, "MySpace: The Movie" currently ranks as the site's most viewed video.

"I just thought it was a really cool idea, and then that he had all his friends and they put together the movie outside the system and put it up on the Internet was amazing to me," said Scott Vener, a Beverly Hills manager who happened to catch "MySpace: The Movie" the day it was uploaded to YouTube.com.

Within 30 minutes of watching the film, Vener had tracked down Lehre's phone number to talk about the possibility of managing him. Vener is a manager with Schiffco, an agency that represents Eminem, Justin Timberlake, Gwen Stefani and other big names for TV and film projects.

By Feb. 4, Lehre's web site was getting so much traffic it crashed.

On Feb. 6, Lehre got an e-mail from MySpace's Anderson, saying, "how come you haven't uploaded your film to myspace?" Anderson said he'd been tipped to the film by a MySpace user, suggesting the movie be shut down for copyright violations.

"I thought it was funny and didn't care," said Anderson. "Users have made commercials about MySpace. There's a bunch of songs. They're making T-shirts and all kinds of other things about it, so it's just kind of the next step."

MySpace, which launched about 2 1/2 years ago, has more than 58 million users. Despite its current sign-up rate of 200,000 new members a day, the site's been lambasted of late — by schools and religious groups for lewd and threatening posts, and by users for getting too corporate since its purchase by News Corp. last summer. In addition, within the last year, several charges of sexual assault have been brought against men accused of using the site to find underage girls. None of those controversies figure into the movie, which skewers the gargantuan cultural...
"MySpace: The Movie" has gotten so much play online that it's spawned its own imitators, spoofs and sequels, e.g., "MySpace: The Movie Trailer," "The Real MySpace Movie" and "MySpace: The Movie #2."

None is giving the original much competition. Since mid-February, Lehre's film has been in rotation on Current TV — a recently launched "national network created by, for and with an 18- to 34-year-old audience" that reaches 20 million U.S. homes.

Three days ago, Lehre was offered a development deal with MTVU, MTV's on-air, online and on-campus network. MTVU's "content more and more is the content students are creating, so the channels become not just a channel for college students but a channel by college students," said MTVU's head of programming, Ross Martin.

The deal, which hasn't yet been inked, includes Lehre producing content and appearing as on-air talent for MTVU and MTVU's broadband service, Uber. "The whole point here is to incubate and develop [Lehre's] talent even further as we showcase it," Martin said.

The MTVU deal wasn't entirely based on "MySpace: The Movie." The film was one of many segments Lehre sent Martin on a DVD demo that included a pilot for a variety show, a music video featuring the fake boy band Heat Street and spoofs of the TV shows "Iron Chef" ("Happy Chef!") and "Survivor" ("Disease Island").

"I want to be able to have the freedom in the entertainment industry to produce anything I want at any given time and to have a lot of fun doing it," Lehre said, describing his ultimate goal.

From the looks of the last month, it seems he's well on his way.