Crowd Control

The great pop-culture marketing machine discovers just what fans will do for love.

By Chris Lee, Times Staff Writer
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CALL it the "Hips Don't Lie" effect.

Last year, Epic Records held a contest offering fans a chance to help create a video for Colombian pop diva Shakira's yodel-tastic single of the same name featuring Wyclef Jean. Label executives' expectations were low — they were spending only $5,000 to create and promote a quickie clip, after all.

But the impact of that effort sent shock waves through the music industry.

The contest yielded some 500 submissions of fans lip-syncing and booty-shaking in extremis that were spliced together by a professional editor to create a single video. Posted at Yahoo.com's music portal in March 2006, it quickly became the site's most popular clip. When it did drop out of the No. 1 slot several weeks later, it was second only to Shakira's own video for the same song. The pair of "Hips" were eventually streamed more than 50 million times, making "Hips Don't Lie" easily the Nielsen BDS most-streamed video of the year, just about tripling the number generated by second-place finisher Beyoncé's "Check on It." Shakira's song went on to become a No. 1 hit in 20 countries, selling 1.7 million copies. And as an unintended result, "Hips Don't Lie (Fans-Only Version)" seems to have sparked a brave new era of fan-artist interconnectivity.

Now, a slew of similar contests is allowing pop enthusiasts to create content for videos, dictate tour itineraries, name artists' albums and even perform on stage with the likes of Justin Timberlake, as one contest winner did live during this year's Grammy Awards broadcast.
According to Craig Marks, editor in chief of Blender magazine, the viewer-decided outcome of "American Idol" turned the key to an era of plugged-in fan empowerment. Meanwhile, fans have grown desensitized to record labels' traditional promotional efforts while embracing the "choose your own adventure"-style entertainment of YouTube.

"Everyone feels it's their discovery. It's their domain," Marks said. "It's not coming from the culture czars on high — it's from the people."

At this MySpace-obsessed moment in culture, the contest gambit provides a cost-effective, buzz-generating alternative to big-budget music videos or costly print-ad runs. Moreover, the contests virally generate publicity and result in virtual "communities" by getting music aficionados to communicate with one another in ways that yesteryear's fan clubs could never dream of.

It's an equation that the labels can't help but love — fans pump in labor, attention and enthusiasm, and artists reap sales. And at least at this point in the cycle, when we've yet to see any significant contest backlash, scandal or cynicism, many fans seem energized by the proliferating attempts to pull them into the marketing loop. For Epic's senior vice president of marketing Lee Stimmel, who was one of the minds behind "Hips Don't Lie (Fans-Only Version)," enabling Shakira's music to galvanize a worshipful fan populace meant more than the song's pop-chart ranking or radio airplay.

"It's very hard in the media matrix world that we live in to see how a song actually resonates with a fan base and makes that fan base grow," Stimmel said. "We showed that it can virally and organically grow. That's something you can't necessarily buy with traditional media. That one-to-one relationship with customers became the most powerful part of the promotion."

Viral marketing's spread

The untrammeled proliferation of music-related fan contests has produced some inspired efforts at viral marketing — and many others are simply bald-faced marketing ploys. Both are strewn through every quadrant of the pop landscape.

In November, shoegazing alt-rock band the Decemberists mounted a "Re-animate the Decemberists" contest, asking fans to create a video using pre-recorded green-screen footage for the song "O Valencia!" Multi-ethnic genre fusion group Ozomatli held a "Make Your Own Ozomatli Video Contest" in March for the group's ode to Los Angeles, "City of Angels." And Brooklyn bar band extraordinaire the Hold Steady dangled a $1,000 cash prize in March to "create and upload an original music video" for any song from the group's album "Boys and Girls in America" — a certifiable bargain weighed against the low six-figure going rate for videos directed by professionals. Tween heartthrob Mandy Moore and X-rated hip-hop braggarts the Ying Yang Twins, among other performers, have partnered with the event promotion website Eventful.com's Eventful Demand function to solicit fan input in the service of organizing "user-generated" concert tours. That is to say, fan votes will result in Moore hitting the road to perform at a high-school graduation later this year. And the Twins will add five performances on college campuses to their 2007 performance schedule based on Eventful.com fan vote data.

"The artist is giving the fans the ability to influence where they tour," said Eventful.com's chief executive, Jordan Glazier. "What that does is form a stronger engagement. Giving them that power to influence has never happened before."

Power to the people

HARD-rocking Angeleno metal outfit Buckcherry teamed up with the entertainment website ArtistDirect.com for "an open call to fans" to create a video for the group's single "Everything." Sybaritic Brit-pop metal band Placebo began asking fans to submit single-camera shots of them singing the group's new single "Running Up That Hill" as part of a contest promising to "make YOU the star of Placebo's new video." And power-pop tabloid staples Good Charlotte entreated fans last month to customize the video for the group's new single "The River" by uploading personal photos to http://www.beintheriver.com .

This critical mass of contest-generated fan videos has got music video-dom's most in-demand director, Marc Webb, for one, thinking about his career. "A music video is a symptom of the marketplace," he said. "If it becomes about kids making videos and that becomes a viable way to get a song out there, so be it. I'll have to find another job."

Epic's Stimmel confirmed that fan contests may actualize many video aces' worst fear. "The days of spending multiple hundreds of thousands of dollars to make a normal video are quickly going to be over," he said.
Taken another way, this democratic approach means performers' fan-dictated output can only be as good as their most talented supporters. But in the view of Tom Hayes, who writes the popular Silicon Valley new-media marketing blog http://www.tombomb.com , benefits outweigh the risks.

"There are so few downsides for a smart band aside from locking yourself into something that makes you look silly," he said. "The act of just engaging with fans and making the offer has a powerful effect on a community."

Some efforts stray beyond the basic "work with my new song" model. Vanilla Ice, for instance, raps about taxes in the TurboTax-sponsored "Tax Rap Contest" that an announcement touts as providing "fun-loving taxpayers nationwide a shot at their own Grammy-worthy performance and $25,000 in winnings."

And on the heels of a well-trafficked fan-generated "haiku contest" in February, Grammy-nominated psychedelic hip-hop duo Gnarls Barkley sent out word on http://www.gnarlsbarkley.com last month that they were relying on fans to come up with a motto — a "comforting credo we might mutter under our collective breath during intervals of crisis."

Incubus, the chart-topping nu-metal group, turned to a contest to forge a new connection with listeners — and ensure that its new release, "Dig," would get airplay where it really counts.

"The music channels that used to be really supportive of rock and played videos don't play them anymore," said Incubus guitarist Mike Einziger. "The place kids are going to watch videos is MySpace and YouTube. So we just thought, 'Why not give it to the fans?'

In February, the five finalists of the "I Dig Incubus" contest came to L.A.'s Wiltern from throughout the U.S. and as far away as Portugal to meet the band in a backstage dressing room, part of the grand prize for creating "Dig" videos.

A clip of the group performing the song against a green-screen background had gone online at http://www.idigincubus.com three months earlier, along with downloadable editing software and an enticing offer. The winning entry, chosen by Incubus, would become the song's "official" video, airing on MTV and VH1 (unlike "Hips Don't Lie," for which Epic quickly hedged its bets last year by commissioning the glossy Shakira-starring clip from video veteran Sophie Mueller). A hundred hopefuls from 18 countries submitted entries, returning to the site again and again to view and post comments about the competition; so did thousands of their friends. "That they trust us to create their own interpretation makes me feel like the band cares about fan input," said "I Dig Incubus" finalist Ramon Boutviseth, from Charlotte, N.C. "That's huge."

"It brings the music to a more personal level," added Austin, Texas, native Matt Ryan, another finalist. "They inspire us. And now we can inspire them."

Einziger appreciated seeing "a big sense of community between all the people making the videos and discussing them with each other."

"A lot of them were better than the ones we spent thousands of dollars on," added Incubus vocalist Brandon Boyd.

Finalist Derry Schwatner from Cohasset, Mass., was unbothered by the idea that "I Dig Incubus" might have had an ulterior motive. "It may be a marketing tool, but that's smart," she said. "I respect a good marketing tool."

Too trendy to last?

DESPITE its current ubiquity, some music industry observers see the contest phenomenon as simply a Hail Mary for fan attention at a time when album sales have plummeted for seven straight years.

Blender editor in chief Marks feels it's too soon to say that fan-based contributions will replace professional efforts to shape popular culture. "It seems like a totally grass-roots approach, but it's not necessarily effective," Marks said. "What happens to the multitude of [fan contest efforts]? And where does it get played? There's still no way to measure the effectiveness of this stuff and monetize it."

If one of the 926 entries in the Gnarls Barkley haiku contest is any indication, getting fans to participate and winning their hearts and minds are two very different things.

"How lame are haikus? ..." a poster calling himself "Robert 2" wrote. "3 lines and don't even rhyme ... retarded contest...."
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