BAGHDAD — There’s no tribal council or immunity challenge. Viewers don’t vote off their least favorite. But reality TV has come of age in Iraq with a new show about some well-spoken twenty somethings who share their lives, fears and dreams as cameras follow them around one of the world’s most dangerous cities.

It’s part documentary, part “The Real World — Baghdad.” Capitalizing on the personalized video craze popularized by Internet sites such as YouTube and MySpace, the Web-based series, called "Hometown Baghdad," has attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers worldwide since its March debut. It’s popular everywhere, that is, except Iraq, where the program remains largely unknown because of the scarcity of high-speed Internet.

Filmed by Iraqis in the capital, at the height of last summer’s sectarian clashes, and edited by Americans in New York, the program follows the lives of three young men as they cope with challenges ranging from daily power outages to the occasional discovery of bodies outside their doors.

There’s Ausama, the shy, baby-faced undergraduate who laments the difficulties of dating amid Baghdad’s insecurity and takes cameras on a tour of his family’s ransacked, bullet-scarred home.

Saif is a slightly embittered aspiring dentist, worried about his career prospects and desperate to get out of Iraq.

Adel is the graffiti-spraying, electric-guitar-playing bad boy who pours his pain into heavy metal lyrics, his dreams of being a rock star on hiatus like his band, which fled the country.

A female participant was dropped from the show because the logistics of filming her in the Green Zone were too daunting.

It’s a captivating if narrow slice of the Iraq conflict, spliced for the MTV generation. Hip, English-speaking stars provide a largely upper-middle-class viewpoint in sync with most Western viewers. They are Muslim, but none is particularly devout. They’re not among the anti-American militants, and none will ever be forced to take risky jobs with the Iraqi police or army, unlike their less fortunate and less educated peers.

That’s by design, say the show’s creators, who sifted through 50 audition tapes before choosing the three young men as they cope with challenges ranging from daily power outages to the occasional discovery of bodies outside their doors.

"This was about trying to engage Americans with the rest of the world," said Laurie Meadoff, executive producer of Chat the Planet, a New York-based production company specializing in using the Internet to link youths from around the world.

"This is a kind of news for the YouTube generation," said Meadoff, who previously produced a videoconference aired on MTV linking students in Ohio and Baghdad. "It’s not about the politics. It’s about the stories. We really believe this show has hit a chord."

Released three times a week on a variety of Internet sites, including http://www.hometownbaghdad.com, the two-minute installments have attracted more than 2 million views from 110 countries and elicited thousands of comments on message boards.

Producers originally hoped to sell the show to American television, but networks turned
them down, calling the idea too depressing and predicting U.S. audiences were "saturated" with Iraq. Now some of those network executives have asked producers to repackage the program into a six-part TV series.

Adel, 23, an engineering student and aspiring musician, is what Hollywood agents might call the "breakout star" of the show. (His last name and other personal details were omitted for security reasons.) Good looks and unabashed sensitivity have made him a hit with many viewers.

The episode "Songs of Pain," which shows Adel using music to cope with Iraq's turmoil, received nearly 650,000 hits and 3,000 comments on YouTube. Rolling Stone magazine ran a blurb about the show with a picture of him jamming on his guitar. Female viewers call him "hot" on message boards, and some have sent personal e-mails.

In Iraq, he's just another recent college graduate. Only his family and half a dozen friends know about the show. Even Adel has difficulty watching it via his slow, unreliable Internet connection. It takes nearly an hour to watch a two-minute segment, he said.

Although he has received e-mails from viewers around the world, Adel has never been recognized on the street, and that's fine with him. In Iraq these days, no one wants to stand out.

"I hope the show gets a lot more attention," Adel said in an interview. "But not here. In Iraq you can get killed for the stupidest of reasons. There are probably people who would want to make an example of me."

Adel's parents urged him not to participate. Camera crews are often subject to arrest or worse by insurgents, militias or U.S. troops, who suspect someone taking pictures might be spying.

To reduce the risk, the show's cameramen were careful to obtain authorizations, either from the government or local security, before filming in public. They would occasionally pretend to be journalists conducting on-the-street interviews. After filming Adel giving a tour of his college campus, the cameramen interviewed other random students so Adel would not appear to be the only subject. "But when they filmed the others, they turned the camera off," Adel said.

Each of the participants, who received $100 per day of shooting, were given portable video cameras to record private diaries or scenes from their everyday lives. In one dangerous stunt, Adel hid his camera in a duffle bag to film the trash-strewn streets outside his home in one of the city's most restive neighborhoods.

"I didn't show that one to my mother," he said, laughing. "If she saw it, she would be the one to kill me."

In another episode, Adel interviewed his younger brother and cousin after they encountered a man shot and dying on the street on their way home from school. Adel anguished about what sort of effect the experience would have on their development.

Adel said he hoped the show would humanize the Iraq conflict to Westerners, whom he worries are growing numb to the continuous bloodshed.

"When a bombing happens in another city, it's a big deal," he said. "When it happens here, people in the rest of the world] are used to it. They think, 'Oh, so another 100 people died.' We are trying to show the suffering here from a different side of the story. We are trying to show that we are normal people, just like everyone else."

Adel's musical tastes run toward Iron Maiden, but his style is more Robbie Williams, with open-collared black shirts and spiky short hair. So far, he said, he hasn't answered any of the fan mail and he responded only once to a message board comment.

By contrast, Ausama has posted several comments to viewers. And Saif is angling to get on "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

The hardest part, Adel said, is reading the personal criticism on message boards. A few wrote that his guitar playing "sucks." Another viewer accused Adel of sending his "friends" to fly planes into the World Trade Center.

He's sensitive to criticism that he might use the show to kick-start his career. "I don't want to take advantage of the attention for the show or for Iraq to make myself famous," he said.

Although Iraqis largely missed the reality TV boom and few have ever seen shows such as "The Real World" or "Survivor," Adel said he had no problems adjusting to life with cameras. Like any reality show, he said, there were occasional embellishments.
In one segment, Adel sprays graffiti on concrete security walls in the middle of the city.

"You can kill me. You can hurt me. But you cannot have me," he scrawled across the cement before flinging the paint cans at the walls and walking away.

It's dramatic footage, even if locals might point out that graffiti in Iraq is fairly uncommon and defacing blast walls near one of the city's most-congested commercial districts would be virtually impossible.

Adel explained that the crew got permission from security officers, who watched the scene off-camera. When the filming stopped, the crew covered the graffiti with white paint.

"OK, it's not exactly real," he said. "But it's as real as you can get."

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