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Music Releases Online, on DVDs Could Mark CDs' Slow Death

By *Yuki Noguchi*
Washington Post Staff Writer
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When Ohio-based rock band the Sun releases its first full-length album next month, it will be available on DVD, online and on vinyl record. But not on the medium that's still the biggest seller in the music industry today: the compact disc.

"It's a tip of the hat to the past and the tip of the hat to the future," said Perry Watts-Russell, a senior vice president at Warner Bros. Records Inc., which signed the band.

The label expects the Sun to be the first of many artists to embrace a no-CD, video-only strategy. And that is part of a

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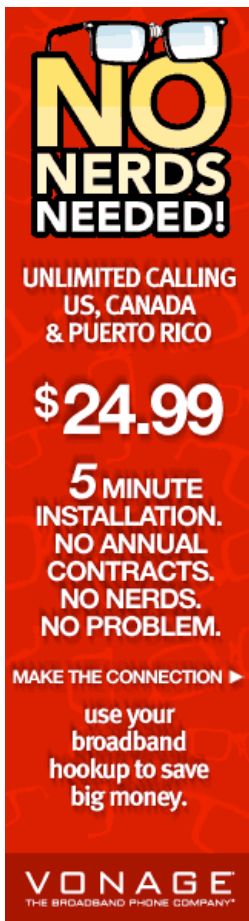
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strategy. The shift is part of a larger move away from the traditional album concept that some experts say is steering the CD the way of the hand-cranked gramophone.

The full-length CD format, which debuted in 1981, last year sold 766.9 million copies, down from a high of 942.5 million in 2000, according to statistics from the Recording Industry Association of America. At the same time, online sales -- championed by the popular Apple Computer Inc. iTunes Web site -- is picking up part of the slack: 139.4 million tracks were sold online in 2004.

The digitization of music has created a shift in how tunes are shared and consumed. Because it's faster to copy and transmit digital music, more people are copying and sharing tracks -- prompting copyright concerns from the entertainment industry. On the other hand, the cheapness of Internet distribution allows many no-names to release music that otherwise might never be seen or heard outside a garage.

The Sun's 14-song album, "Blame It on the Youth," will be released Sept. 27 and will come with one disc option -- a DVD of music videos that can be manipulated through a computer to download the songs onto an MP3 player or burn them onto a CD. Actually, there is a second disc, but it's made of vinyl -- a nod to a burgeoning subculture that is reviving the old long-play format.

Having a new generation of listeners who may be building libraries of songs by piggy-backing off their friends' collections doesn't bother Sam Brown, drummer and songwriter for the Sun, which had a \$50,000 budget to produce the videos for the album. "As more people find out about our band, more people will turn out when we play," he said. And for smaller acts like his, live performance is where the money is.

Members of the Sun, which is a garage pop band with a slightly retro aura and a sound one critic called "slick and gritty," knew that its demographic reflected its own persona: younger, digital and alternative.

"I haven't bought a new CD in a very long time," Brown said. Instead, he searches for vinyl versions, or rips songs to his iPod, or gets music from friends, he said.

The five-member band produced its own videos, and the record label was sold on the digital-video-only option, he said. "It is sort of a leap of faith to the future," Brown said, but "it feels good to be in the company of forward-thinking people."

Watts-Russell of Warner Bros. acknowledges that all-video and all-Internet distribution changes the definition of the word "album" -- a sequenced body of songs with heavy emphasis on the all-important cover art.

"I think the gestalt of having an album has been changing on its own, with or without this change," he said. "A few years from now, this is going to be exceedingly common," Watts-Russell said. "You can avoid the CD. It's on its way out. It's in no way out

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