Outsourcing Music Videos to the Fans

By Mike Musgrove
Sunday, March 30, 2008; F01

So, have you edited the new R.E.M. video yet?

To whet fan appetite for its first studio album in four years, the band has invited would-be directors to mix their own videos for its new single, "Supernatural Superserious," recently released to promote the album due out this week. Choose from 11 video tracks that show the band performing in a restaurant or driving around New York. Splice them together to your heart's content and, if you like, upload the results to the band's YouTube channel where other fans can comment on your skills.

For the casual video editor, it's easy enough to create something half-decent from the provided video footage. By the time you're done, the song's catchy riff will be permanently wedged in your brain right up there alongside "Orange Crush," "Man on the Moon" or any of the band's other old hits. No doubt that's pretty much the point of http://supernaturalsuperserious.com.

The music video has sometimes seemed like a dying medium; one or two small record labels even discourage their artists from making the things nowadays, arguing that they're expensive and don't tend to sell a lot of music.

But as online video sites have taken off and editing tools have become easy for even novices to use, some bands are starting to see the music video as a fresh way to build a stronger bond between artist and listener. R.E.M.'s make-your-own-video project for "Supernatural Superserious" feels like something of a lark, with the band getting some use out of leftover footage that didn't make it into the song's "official" video. Some other bands, meanwhile, are going even further and outsourcing the entire video-making process to their biggest supporters.

In a couple of unrelated projects launched earlier this month, big-name bands Radiohead and Nine Inch Nails announced that they were handing over the conception and filming of a song's video to whichever fan has the best idea.

Participants in Radiohead's contest are invited to submit concept videos or storyboards to illustrate their ideas. Ten semifinalists will receive $1,000 each for a one-minute concept video; one final winner will eventually get $10,000 to turn his or her vision into an actual, honest-to-goodness video. The winner would also make a cut of any money the band makes from the video down the road.

Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails recently invited fans to submit their homemade videos for any song from the band's new album to its YouTube channel. Released online this month, the new album is called "Ghosts I-IV" and already appears to have been a financial success for the band.

This isn't exactly supposed to be a contest, Reznor said on his Web site. "It's meant to be an experiment in collaboration and a chance for us to interact beyond the typical one-way artist-to-fan relationship."

Reznor said he figured there might be some sort of online film festival at the end of the road, but he also
indicated he's not quite sure where the experiment is headed.

Funny thing is, I'd say it generally seems to be the bands that are behind on some of the coolest video technology. The early results seem to show that user-created material can be pretty good, too.

The Decemberists launched a similar promotion in 2006 for the song "O, Valencia" about a pair of star-crossed lovers. The band's professionally commissioned video for the song, a Wes Anderson-flavored tale of a young couple on the lam, was highly entertaining. But it's also tough to forget the contest's winning user-made entry, which made the song a backdrop for a twisted story about a woman with slightly unnatural feelings for her television.

For R.E.M., the make-your-own-video site is only part of an online buzz-creating plan that kicked off last year. When the band was in Dublin finalizing the new tunes last year, it rented a theater and invited fans to have a listen. Attendees were invited to snap pictures and blog away at an official site for the project, called remdublin.com. The band's manager, Bertis Downs, calls the site a "Wikipedia of our stay in Dublin."

And though R.E.M.'s 14th album, "Accelerate," goes on sale Tuesday, fans were able to listen to it for a few days last week on a social networking site called iLike.com, which hosted an online "listening party" that let users hear a stream of all the tracks on the new album. The experiment repeats a similar one the band tried four years ago with its previous studio album, "Around the Sun," which the band made available for listening on MySpace in the weeks leading up to the official release.

To my ears, R.E.M. sounds great on the new album, though I have to admit it's been a couple of decades since I listened closely to the 27-year-old band. (I was born in the band's home town and followed its early career with what felt like a proprietary interest.)

In an effort to keep music critics from leaking the new album to the Web, Warner Bros. put some special security on early review copies of the new disc. A copy sent my way from the publisher has my name printed on it, along with a notice that any Web-borne uploads ripped from my personal copy of the disc can be traced to me. The special disc doesn't play in my car or on my computer; I've only gotten it to play on an old Sony Walkman CD player that hadn't gotten any use in the past few years.

Despite all the high-tech efforts to keep the album under wraps, it has already been leaked to the Web and was available through file-trading BitTorrent sites since even before last week's online listening party.

It wasn't me.

"You kind of expect it at this point," sighed Downs. "It doesn't matter what you want. The reality is, things leak these days."

Downs pointed out another new first for R.E.M. with this album's release: Last week, the band made an appearance at the Apple store in London to promote "Accelerate."

"It was either that or a Wal-Mart," he said. "Just kidding."

Post a Comment

View all comments that have been posted about this article.
Outsourcing Music Videos to the Fans

© 2008 The Washington Post Company