Internet-savvy fans steal thunder of Radiohead release

By Ashlea Deahl, Globe Correspondent, 6/10/2003

When Radiohead played New York City's Beacon Theatre last week to promote its new CD, "Hail to the Thief," the band members seemed surprised that the audience knew all the words to the new songs. The album goes on sale today, yet fans sang along to "Scatterbrain" as if it were a top-10 hit already.

It's no secret that an early version of the album has been widely available via the Internet for more than two months. Anecdotal evidence suggests that listeners have been downloading it at an extraordinary rate, making it not only the latest but one of the most egregious examples of people snagging electronic copies of a record before its release date.

What critics and fans haven't been able to predict is whether any of this matters. Will fans still buy "Hail to the Thief," or is the release painfully anticlimatic?

"I'll still buy the album to reward the artist," says Cyrus Chowdhury, 23, of Boston, a longtime fan who downloaded the album a month ago from Kazaa.

Record store managers hope others feel the same way. "Of course we're worried that people have had the album for so long," says Natalie Waleik, senior music buyer at Newbury Comics. "We're also confident that the diehard fans will still want the CD."

Virgin Megastores hopes that people who have the album will spread the word. Because of "extensive media coverage and online activity," the album is "one of the most eagerly awaited new releases of the year," says Dave Alder, senior vice president of Virgin Entertainment Group.

How the album got to the Internet has not been established, but the files are copies of stolen unfinished versions of songs, according to Billboard.com.

There have been conflicting reports about whether Radiohead is upset about the downloading. Guitarist Jonny Greenwood reportedly said the album was not finished before it was posted online. "The leaked music is a stolen copy of early, unmixed edits and roughs," he is quoted as saying on several websites. "We're kind of [angry] about it." But "upset" is too...
strong a word," says David Fricke, who interviewed lead singer Thom Yorke for the current issue of Rolling Stone. "This is not the first time they've had to deal with this situation. 'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac' both got out ahead of schedule, so [Yorke] wasn't particularly surprised by it."

Jeff Matte, a 21-year-old history student at Northeastern University, says Radiohead probably doesn't mind the illegal copying because of its interest in digital music and intolerance of corporate control. "They're all about not being a slave to rules," he says.

Matte got an advance copy of the album from a friend, but he still planned to attend a midnight sale last night. The idea that the CD could vary from the downloaded tracks and the artwork on Radiohead's album covers were enough to drive him to the store.

The title "Hail to the Thief," which alludes in part to President Bush's controversial 2000 election win, ironically prophesied the album's own fate. But Fricke says its message will not be compromised.

"The record is as relevant now as when [Yorke] made it," he says. "The scare is more about record sales, but that doesn't mean the music is irrelevant."