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In a Battle of the Bands, Musicians Are Judges

By WILSON ROTHMAN

If you are a musician, you know that it is hard to get constructive commentary from friends and family. Even if you think your song or performance is awful, you might still hear, "That's so great," over and over.

The encouragement is nice - it's preferable to having some brutally honest Englishman make a fool of you on highly rated national television - but every so often a thoughtful, unbiased critique would be nice.

Like many working stiffs, I'm also a musician, and my band, named Augean Stables after the Herculean task, recorded a full-length CD of original music last year. Along the way we received positive reinforcement and kind words from everyone around us. Still, once we had the finished product in hand, we longed for some sort of third-party validation, or at least a cold splash of reality.

With that desire in mind, my partner, Dave Riedel, began posting our songs on garageband.com. Once an Internet darling bent on shaking the foundations of the crusty old music industry, Garageband is home to over 325,000 musicians and new-music hunters who review original songs in an ongoing round-robin tournament.

Garageband's beating heart is a "preference engine" that combines the reviewer's emotional reaction à la hotornot.com (Does the song put a smile or a frown on your face?) with the more intellectual judgments of, say, slashdot.org (With your knowledge or experience, how would you improve this song or recording?).

Because of its design and the atmosphere of friendly competition, Garageband manages to persuade thousands of musicians to assess one another's music.

Competing sites from the dot-com era have suspended operations or switched their focus and now promote major-label releases, so Garageband is the last happy haven for unsigned or amateur musicians in search of feedback and a chance to discover what others are doing with their studio time. Dave and I, as passionate about our tunes as we are opinionated about others, were instantly drawn in.

As soon as we began reviewing other people's original music, strangers worldwide - most with musical backgrounds and production experience - began reviewing ours.

Our first song, a band favorite called "Citronella," received the validation we were hoping for: after more than 30 reviews, about three-quarters of the listeners said that they liked the song. "It has a serious Blues Traveler groove, with hints of Simon and Garfunkel," one reviewer wrote. "Special points for acoustic guitars and lyrics. Good use of backing vocals on the chorus, too." Another complimented us on our "kickin' organ" and a third praised the "nice pop feel."

Not every song is for every person, though. Somebody labeled it "generic and off-key" and another
confessed, "I don't like this stuff because I'm a jerk."

At the same time, "Citronella" was charging up the charts. Coming from way up in the neighborhood of No. 15,000, down through the quadruple and triple digits, it hit a momentary high of No. 66 in the Pop/Rock category. Suddenly, we knew how rock stars felt as they watched their own tracks inch up the Billboard 200.

Our glory was short-lived, however. "Citronella" was soon retired to the back catalog, where its all-time Pop/Rock ranking is No. 2,617 out of about 18,700 - respectable, but nothing to brag about.

Having a song in the active contest gives you a gambler's thrill: up and down it goes, and where it stops, only the preference engine knows. The algorithm that determines rank is fairly sound, devised with logic similar to that of the college football or basketball ranking systems. Each reviewer listens to a pair of songs and chooses one over the other. The process itself is blind, in that a reviewer can pick a genre, from Alternative to Rock, but doesn't learn the name of the song or artist until the review session is over. In the qualifying round, a song is paired 20 times with random challengers; each time, a new reviewer chooses one song and rates both on a scale from 1 to 5.

In the past, if there wasn't enough data to order the top songs from 1 to 200, the system put those songs out for extra reviews. Starting this month, each category's top 20 percent will automatically go into a formal second round after 20 reviews. There, new rankings will be combined with first-round data for a more accurate chart.

The system isn't perfect: if a song wins every pairing but has only been randomly matched with songs at the bottom of the barrel, it will rate lower than a song that has gone undefeated against stiffer competition. The system is tamper-resistant, though, and it is becoming a better way to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Still, how good are the judges in picking winners? Or, as my bandmate puts it, "Does anyone on the site have a clue as to what a radio hit could be?"

The people on Garageband are not the average music-buying public, nor are they "American Idol"-class music-industry insiders. They are people like Dave and me who make their own music and have strong opinions about how it should be done.

"Having a good song on Garageband is not going to matter unless other factors are in place," said Eric Godtland, who manages Third Eye Blind, the KGB and others. "Labels want to know how old you are, how marketable your look is and then what the music is like."

Referring to Avril Lavigne, the skater-girl pop sensation, he said: "Her songs wouldn't have done much sitting on Garageband, but people saw her live and it became a mania. Garageband only offers a tiny little slice of what the public needs to embrace an artist."

Since the site was founded, only a handful of bands taking part have been signed by major labels, and most of them were hard-working, professional entertainers to begin with. Validation from Garageband is cool because it suggests that in a blind test, your peers approve of your sound, yet Garageband charts are mostly for recreational use only. Why, then, was the company pulled from the trash heap and resuscitated by former employees shortly after it closed? Why are its membership figures higher than they were when the promise of a record contract loomed overhead?
Perhaps it's because the site was secretly one of the biggest success stories of the dot-com age, if you measure success in terms of member loyalty.

Garageband was created under the misconception that there was a scientific way to discover the best band in the world. According to the original blueprint, that band would be handed $250,000 and would become the Garageband label's first artist. At the same time, the site drew reviewers by promising a free CD for every 20 review pairs completed. In February 2002, after burning through a lot of cash without making a dent in the real world of radio stations and album sales, Garageband closed down for several months.

"People were crying out, 'I want my Garageband back!' " said Ali Partovi, who became the chief executive after the site's resurrection. "There was a very vocal group of people who were very sad and wanted it to come back. We wondered whether it was 100 super-excited musicians, or if tens of thousands would be right there when we re-started."

Patrick Koppula, the chief operating officer, said that the site was running on a shoestring, but that after an imminent cash infusion it would be able to sustain itself on revenues from advertising and perhaps fees for additional services.

Leading the movement to bring back Garageband was Jukeboxxx88, the ad hoc hostess of the site's message boards - a composer and pianist from Santa Rosa, Calif., known offline as Jaymi Hill-Briney. A member since 2000, she helped shape the site into an uncommonly pleasant place to visit and share ideas on the Web.

"When I joined in 2000, there was a real back-stab-a-thon on the message boards, with a lot of 'my music is better than your music' talk," Ms. Hill-Briney said. "One day I decided to throw a gorgeous virtual party."

For her first "playlist party," she invited everyone to gather virtually at a resort in Calistoga, in the Napa Valley. "I posted pictures, described the place, described the food and the kegs of beer, and said bring your Garageband playlists. It got a whopping 138 replies. People stuck in cubicles all day said, 'Oh, keep this going. ' "

Since that first party, Ms. Hill-Briney has been the host of many more, and has presided over happy and sad moments, from marriage and birth announcements to the loss of one active member to cancer last fall. She has also helped her share of little lost bands.

"Garageband is an open mike for the whole world," she said. "And I've never been to an open-mike show where people weren't encouraging."

Still, like any other open-mike show, there's a difference between clapping and paying, or even coming back for more. After four months, we have only sold one CD on Garageband, though we never thought of it as a real retail opportunity. What's more embarrassing is that although we've received over 100 rave reviews, the reviewers have rarely chosen our songs for their own Garageband playlists. That means that even though listeners claim to have experienced musical euphoria listening to Augean Stables, they have no plans to repeat the experience, even free of charge.

To be fair, my own Garageband playlist contains nine terrific songs, and with the exception of a
novelty tune titled "Gotta Be a Trucker," none have ever been played a second time.

There may be a larger purpose for this gathering community or its developing review process, one that has yet to be envisioned. Mr. Partovi and Mr. Koppula are mainly focused on perfecting the system, but they are still on the lookout for what they call a home run.

Perhaps bands will be able to use Garageband, for a fee, to promote tours and CD's by region or interest group. The company will also try to market top-performing songs to TV producers, advertising executives and record labels in exchange for a share of potential earnings. The future might bring a pay download service as well.

As for Dave and me, we will return for the thrill of competing, the ego boost of praise, and the satisfaction of judging others.