

NATIONAL EDITION

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## No airplay? No record deal? No problem

By **Gina Piccalo**  
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HOLLYWOOD — "More Bounce in California," a Canadian songwriter's ironic comment on American consumerism, didn't get Soul Kid #1 any radio play. But it did become a sports anthem at the NBA All-Stars' slam-dunk contest, ESPN's X Games broadcast, the Los Angeles Dodgers' batting practice and the San Diego Chargers' cheerleader shows. It landed on two movie soundtracks ("Legally Blonde 2" and "Win a Date With Tad Hamilton!") and in the Fox TV show "The O.C." When Kazaa users started trading it online, songwriter Marc Godfrey knew he'd arrived.

And this was after he'd lost his record deal.

As the music industry reels from an epic identity crisis, musicians are circumventing the system and finding new ways to reach fans. Artists who've been shut out of the major labels are thriving at indie labels. Technology has decreased the cost of recording and reproduction, enabling struggling bands to produce and release their own albums. Bands without budgets can use Web sites to cultivate global fan bases.

### **Image branding takes off**

And while mainstream radio playlists have narrowed, new-media venues have exploded. Independent artists are turning up on satellite radio, video games, online music stores and Web logs. They're also exploiting a new marketing trend — image branding with music — by getting songs on retail store CD compilations and

in-store playlists, at sporting events and festivals, and in TV shows, commercials and films.

"It's the bands that actually get out and do things without consulting the record labels that get somewhere," Godfrey says. "It's actually good for them to rough it a bit. ... It's not all that bad. There's still lots of money to be made through licensing, playing, merchandise, being creative."

Six months after Soul Kid #1 landed a deal with DreamWorks Records, he was dropped from the label with an offer of about \$100,000 for rights to his album. Godfrey, against the advice of attorneys, declined the money and left with his music. By May, he will have earned double that offer in licensing fees.

"The level of quality coming from independent sources right now is staggering for many reasons," says Steve Schnur, an industry veteran and now worldwide executive of music for video-game publisher Electronic Arts. "The record industry has been looking at business differently lately, much more cautiously. Bands have to prove themselves before they get to a major label. Once they get there ... many times they don't have the ability to mature and develop. And it's the old adage, they get thrown against the wall to see if they stick."

While one marketing model falls away, however, a dozen more take its place.

For music that doesn't easily fit into a radio programming category, the next best thing is getting played in Starbucks cafes, or being featured on a free compilation distributed to every W Hotel guest or every Claritin user or every Jaguar test-driver. And in the last 10 years, a handful of companies have emerged as the progressive answer to Muzak: Hear Music, PlayNetworks, DMX Music and Rock River Communications all specialize in packaging music to match a mood.

"The good news for independent musicians is that other forms of distribution have emerged that aren't as dependent on the central control corporations," says Don MacKinnon, founder of Hear

Music, a Starbucks-owned company that produces CD compilations that are sold and played in stores.

### **'Street marketing' to hipsters**

Specialized companies such as Fader magazine's Cornerstone Marketing, Vice magazine's addVice Marketing, Filter magazine's Filter Marketing and M80 have become key in developing fan bases for indie bands and new artists on major labels. Some focus on radio or pitch songs to music supervisors in TV and film. Others use "street marketing" to reach fans in their element — at boutiques, hair salons, concerts and parties. They pitch music to club promoters and DJs, fashion show coordinators and people behind "lifestyle events" such as the Sundance Film Festival. And thanks to the Internet, they can cast a wide net. E-mail is not only convenient and inexpensive, it's considered a hip form of word-of-mouth marketing.

AddVice, whose clients include nearly 30 indie bands, taps into the vast e-mail databases of cutting-edge clubs, clothing lines and arts organizations. The scenesters that came to see a French Kicks gig at the Mercury Lounge on Manhattan's Lower East Side, for example, were invited via the hip-hop clothing line Triple 5 Soul and the online music store InSound.com. For a Rapture performance at the Bowery Ballroom, also on the Lower East Side, Gen Art, a national arts organization that characterizes its members as young "hip city dwellers," shared its e-mail list for a ticket giveaway. "And — boom! — all of a sudden you've got all these thousands and thousands of affluent, culturally driven people aware of the Rapture," says addVice founder and president Nadine Gelineau.

Web logs and online record stores have become especially powerful lobbies for independent bands because their indie status lends them more credibility with discerning fans. CD Baby.com, an online record store based in Portland, Ore., has doubled its sales of music by unsigned acts every year since it started in 1998, says founder and programmer Derek Sivers. It sells and distributes to dozens of other music Web sites, including [www.garageband.com](http://www.garageband.com), [www.iuma.com](http://www.iuma.com), [www.starpolish.com](http://www.starpolish.com) and [www.galaris.com](http://www.galaris.com).

## **Video gets in on the game**

Of all the new-media venues, the most dynamic is the video game, which has the potential to reach as many listeners as commercial radio, if not more, according to major label executives, music supervisors and of course, game publishers. As a result, artists routinely release music in games before they go to radio. The Crystal Method has taken this path. Two months before Geffen Records shipped Blink-182's "Feeling This" to stations, it released the song on Madden NFL 2004, a game that has sold 6.5 million copies in seven months.

The more popular the game, the more exposure the artist gets. So, naturally, the less money the company offers for the song. In some cases, the payout is as little as \$400.

Still, "the exposure is priceless," says Dominic Griffin, whose company, Soundtrack Sites, is hired by record labels and music publishers to shop songs. "It's like getting a billboard on a busy street, and you've just got to hope that the kids don't turn the volume down on the video game."

## **The truly independent**

Although most artists dream of making it big, a staunchly independent contingent deliberately avoids mainstream commercial success. Among the icons of this movement are Ani DiFranco, who has self-released more than 20 albums, the straight-edge punk band Fugazi, and Phish, whose shows consistently sell out despite the lack of radio support. These bands, like their progeny, build their fan bases with constant touring.

"Artists tend to be a lot more savvy these days about the business, and realistic," says KCRW's music director, Nic Harcourt. "You find many artists who don't particularly want to be a huge star but want to get their music heard."

Even the term "unsigned" offends these musicians. " 'Unsigned' is looked at as an old, out-of-date-type term," says CD Baby's Sivers.

"They don't want to be signed. ... A lot of musicians are finding they're happier selling 10,000 CDs, making \$100,000, than selling a million CDs and being broke and also not being in control of their own music."

One of the latest indie success stories is that of L.A. singer-songwriter Gary Jules, who with friend and composer Michael Andrews covered the 1982 Tears for Fears hit "Mad World" and propelled his career from relative obscurity to the mainstream.

Jules had already been around the block with a major label. He was signed in 1996 to A&M, recorded an album, remixed it at the label's request, released a new version that was shelved when the label merged with Interscope and Geffen Records, and then was dropped in 2000. About that time, Andrews asked him to sing over his score for the independent film "Donnie Darko." The film, which starred Jake Gyllenhaal, screened at the Sundance Film Festival and was released in late 2001.

Jules self-released his second album, which featured "Mad World," performed it around L.A. and sold about 10,000 copies without a label or marketing. Meanwhile, "Darko's" cult following embraced the film's climactic song. Fans began trading it online. Then, in late 2003, KCRW, the noncommercial station in Santa Monica, put "Mad World" into rotation. "Darko" became an overseas hit, and suddenly "Mad World" was on radio charts from Israel to Ireland.

In January, a British label released Jules' album in the United States, and all the major American labels that originally had passed on it came calling. Ultimately, he signed with Brushfire Records, the label started by another indie success story, surfer-turned-singer-songwriter Jack Johnson.