

## Social Media & Smaller Bands: Who Needs Music Magazines Anyway?

Bob Reuter has been making music in St. Louis for 47 years. A local legend and disc jockey for a local radio station, he claims that the Dinosaurs, his 70s era band, was one of St. Louis's first punk bands. Back then, he didn't really care if people heard his music or not because it was so hard to set up road gigs.

"To go on tours, you used to have to make a billion phone calls," he said. "You'd get these magazines or someone would write down a bunch of connections for you and you just started calling them all. It just sounded like a terrific pain."

While by Reuter's estimation, he has been in 13 bands and has had two songs featured in national commercials, it has only been in the last five or six years that people have started paying any attention. For this, he thanks the Internet and Facebook and the new wave of fans that came with it.

The current band that's gotten him to this level, Bob Reuter's Alley Ghost, consists of Reuter on guitar and vocals backed by four guys in their early 20's. In 2009 Reuter was in the hospital after undergoing a quadruple-bypass when two young fans of his radio show--Mat Wilson and Chris Baricevic--dropped in for a visit. They had heard about the Dinosaurs, and wanted to bring Reuter's music to whole new set of fans via their record label, Big Muddy. Wilson and Baricevic wanted Reuter to start a new band with them and their friends as backing musicians. Excited by the idea, Reuter immediately agreed.

And while the band practiced and re-purposed some of Reuter's old songs for this new project, Big Muddy's website started posting music from many of Reuter's old

bands. Determined to get Reuter's music "out there", Big Muddy made available for stream or free download dozens of songs from his past on their website.

Alley Ghost's first show was at CBGBs, a tiny dive bar in St. Louis, on a Monday night at 11 p.m. Reuter was convinced no one would come, but his newfound Internet presence preceded him. "We get there and the place is packed with underage kids and they know the lyrics to my songs. It was songs from every part of my life going back as far as the middle 70's until today," Reuter said.

Since then Reuter has finally won "Best Songwriter in St. Louis" from the local alternative weekly after having been previously nominated 19 times and has also started touring around the Midwest for the first time in his life. The rest of his band started touring when they were 15-- Reuter started when he was 60. "I could have gone to my grave and missed this," he said.

And he owes all of it to the social media and some kids who thought his music needed new life.

By all accounts, the Internet has revolutionized the way Americans consume music. The effects of downloading, legal and otherwise, has been well documented. Major record labels have struggled to find ways to evolve, but indie labels and smaller musicians have used social media to their advantage. No longer do musicians need a manager and a public relations person. No longer do they rely on the mainstream media to get their name out.

Bands are making their own videos, streaming their own music, and thinking of new and creative ways to let their audience know who they are on many different platforms, all of it hosted by the Internet. St. Louis based Bo and the Locomotive has

created new and interesting ways to promote itself in the few years it has existed, and have seen national attention as a result. YACHT, an LA based band, has achieved underground clout in the last 10 years, and they are in control of every facet of their image. The democratization of many of the tools previously only used by professionals has allowed musicians bypass many of the hoops that previous bands have had to jump through.

Many big name musicians have come out staunchly against downloading and other unlicensed Internet content. Prince, for example, has his own team of lawyers just to scour the Internet for unlicensed YouTube videos. Meanwhile, bands like YACHT encourage fans to steal and do as they wish with their music. YACHT consists of two main members, Claire Evans and Jona Bechtolt. YACHT is a “Band, Belief System, and Business” according to their website. They believe the creative process is not complete until the audience has interacted with it, and they “subscribe to the free online dissemination of all things, including [their] own music.” So, their website features free downloads of songs, videos and a copyright notice that says “the contents of this website can and must be disseminated as freely as possible.”

The members of YACHT are native residents of the Internet. They have a website, a Twitter page for the band and individual ones for themselves, an Instagram account, a Facebook page, YouTube and Vimeo channels, a Soundcloud page to stream music, a podcast, a Tumblr blog and another blog on their site, as well as an online store and an official “fan club/secret society” with its own website. “There are a million more windows now that people can peek into, and we have to make sure there’s an engaging show happening in every single one,” Bechtolt and Evans said in an email interview. “It

can be exhausting, but fortunately we're tireless content producers with a singular sense of purpose."

Bo Bulawski, the lead singer and songwriter of Bo and the Locomotive released its first full length album, *On My Way*, in 2011 and gained attention for it by playing shows all around St. Louis in unconventional locations. They first put out a call for locations on Twitter and set most of them up a day or two beforehand. On the day of the moveable concert, fans started tweeting at the band to get them to come to their location. "We would just show up with acoustic guitar and a drum and a little bass amp that we'd have to plug in somewhere," Bulawski said. "I had an 102 degree fever and it was 110 degrees outside. We started at eight in the morning and played on the roof of the parking garage in the [University City] Loop, and on the rooftop patio on a office building in downtown Clayton, in a Metro Link station, in some guy's apartment..." As people tweeted the band, members set up different times and locations and kept going all day. The local alternative weekly, the Riverfront Times (RFT), heard about it and sent a writer to document. Bulawski says they got great exposure from this adventure, and they are constantly trying to think of ways to outdo themselves.

Bulawski says video seems to be what people connect with the most, and it is easier then ever for bands to make their own videos. The cost of the tools has gone down allowing many people to create things that they would not have been able to previously. "Most people consume culture now via a two-dimensional visual plane," YACHT said. "This is profoundly democratizing, because it's increasingly difficult to tell the difference between a 'professionally' produced media object and something made by individuals. After all, we're using the same tools now."

Bo and the Locomotive have made two music videos, both extremely low budget. One of the videos, for “Give Me Something”, was made by a couple of their friends for free just because they liked the band. “A lot of times when we play a show in a different city, someone that checks us out before the show will be like ‘man, that food fight video was crazy’ or ‘love that video of you guys shotgunning beers’.”

People used to just read traditional journalistic publications, like the newspaper when they wanted to know what bands were coming through. Now, finding out about music is far more personalized, allowing people to find just the music news he or she cares about. Recommendations are gathered from trusted Internet sources. This could be Facebook, blogs, event sites, email updates or just friends’ opinions. In fact, many music fans trust friends’ opinions more than established music sites and social media makes these opinions readily available.

Most bands now announce their upcoming shows on Facebook immediately, so fans know about the show often before the venue announces it. Reuter said talking about shows and posting frequently on Facebook works the same as physically posting fliers does because it promotes name recognition. “I try to get the word out whenever we’re going on tour, I always post it,” he said. “We go to Chattanooga, I’ll post that we’re going to Chattanooga. And so it looks like every week, people go ‘man, that Alley Ghost, they’re playing everywhere.’ And I’m not telling them that there’s 15 people there to see us. But it looks like, that’s a hard working band. This past fall Bo and the Locomotive played a show with a band called Netherfriends. To get people excited about it, they released a free split track between the two bands. Bulawski recorded a Netherfriends song

and Netherfriends recorded a Bo and the Locomotive song and the RFT made it available for free download.

The mainstream media can still be very helpful in gaining fans, but that it can only take you so far. Bulawski saw a spike in Bo and the Locomotive's internet popularity when they were featured as No. 1 on Paste Magazine's "10 Missouri Bands You Should Listen to Now" list. He says that the article directly contributed to them playing their first large-scale music festival a few months later, and many of the fans they met there had heard of them because of the article. "Stuff that you don't generate yourself is often good because it's not like you telling people to look at you, it's someone else telling people to look at you," Bulawski said. "It helps to have a legitimized source say something like that."

Touring bands use Facebook to get into contact with fans in other cities who may want to go to their shows. Reuter says that bands on the coasts want to make it big and they feel like their proximity to major media centers makes that more possible. "But if you're from St. Louis or anyplace like that, there's very little chance of you making it as a marketable thing so a lot of groups just decide to be who they are," Reuter said. "And you can get that out on the Internet." Bands that aren't conventionally marketable can find communities online that are interested in their type of music and get people to hear it. "It's just real important for people who are real music lovers and really smart people to connect with each other, because there's only going to be so many in every city," Reuter said. "But it'll be enough to get a band through. Get the word out online and the 50 cool people from that city will be there."

If a band makes a record and doesn't promote it, will it make a sound? Fan interaction, for bands like YACHT, is indispensable. "It's just the only way we know how to do it," the members said. "Because we're tapped into our fan base and their language, we have a sense of the zeitgeist: we hear what people want, what they expect from bands."

While the effect of newspapers and magazines isn't gone completely, it is no longer the end-all be-all of being a musician. Bands are learning how to use social media to present new and interesting content, which pushes them forward as artists and creative people, and allows them to make their image into what they want it to be.