The Future of Social Media and Independent Artists

Let’s face it…social media virtually surrounds us in today’s culture and trend show it will only continue to do so. The smart thing to do, which many businesses in a wide array of industries are doing, is to embrace this cultural shift with open arms. There are countless opportunities for existing businesses and emerging businesses to take advantage of by using various forms of social media to gain an upper-hand on their competition. Now that news is great for big corporations and brands… but what about the “little guys?” Fortunately, there are also many ways that individuals can publicize themselves via social media and develop their own “personal brand”. Social media has provided the opportunity for diversity of competition across many types of industry, including the music/entertainment industry. When it comes to social media/networking sites, independent artists can have just as much of an influence over the web as stadium headliners.

Twitter is a site that has tremendous potential for an independent artist, or anyone for that matter, looking to extend their influence and develop their personal brand. “Twitter” is a social-networking site that has revolutionized the way we formulate our thoughts by making us express them in 160 characters or less. Businesses are beginning to find it necessary to represent themselves on Twitter and maintain steady interactions with their clientele. The same concept is true for musicians and performers. Sure, the “A-List” musicians tend to have a much higher “follower” count… but this doesn’t mean that independent musicians can’t get noticed and can’t be influential (Music Business 1).
According to Lincoln Parish of “Cage the Elephant”, a contemporary indie band, “It’s not about growing your fan base, it’s about getting in touch with them and creating new communications to keep them interested and coming back” (Spark Minute 1). The band, “Cage the Elephant”, has achieved substantial success and claims that interaction with fans and the public via social networking sites has played a huge part in their rise to fame. Many independent artists are able to establish, what seems like, personal connections with their fans via Twitter and other social networking sites. Parish gives aspiring independent musicians advice and that is, “Be yourself to as many people as possible”. He believes that many of his fans are not only fans of his music, but are also attracted to his web personality (Spark Minute 1). Since these fans feel they have that personal connection with the artist, they are more likely to stick around. According to Parish, your fans might not stay loyal if they feel as if your press team is doing all of your publicity and “tweeting” (Spark Minute 1).

Jack Conte, another famous “web musician”, gives the advice, “If you want to have a more active social media presence, then YOU have to have a more active social media presence”. What Conte means by this is that an artist can’t just expect to have followers building on their page without the actual artist being present and actively involved in the online community (Spark Minute 1). Conte said that when he simply dedicated more time to spend on these social networking websites, such as Twitter and YouTube, he would gain more fans and connections just by interacting with others. He too decided to become fully emerged within this social media culture, which certainly paid off for him. Conte also stressed that at first it may be difficult to adapt to social media. Conte’s suggestion is to stick with it, because if social media is used effectively, it can be a great tool (Spark Minute 1).
Not all independent musicians have to work by themselves on Twitter to become social media celebrities. For example, “The Civil Wars”, which are an independent soul/singer-songwriter duo, has seen great success through Twitter. However, “The Civil Wars”, who are currently #1 on the singer/songwriter chart on iTunes, didn’t achieve this success on their own. By some stroke of luck, Taylor Swift was surfing the web and happened to stumble upon “The Civil Wars” “YouTube” channel (I’ll get to YouTube in a minute…). Taylor was apparently impressed enough by them to take to Twitter to tell all of her followers about them. While this may seem like a simple and minor gesture, Taylor Swift currently has close to ten million “followers”. This means that close to ten million people were being told about this band, “The Civil Wars”, and that Taylor Swift was the one telling them! Immediately after this “tweet” was sent, the band saw a tremendous increase in album sales and iTunes revenue, and has since gained a consistent fan-base. “The Civil Wars” are now well on their way to becoming quite the established musicians and they owe a good amount of that success to their friend Taylor Swift and Twitter.

YouTube is also a tremendous tool for many aspiring musicians who are looking to get their names out there. The common misconception with YouTube is that it is simply a website where people can “dump” their videos. The majority of the public doesn’t seem to realize that YouTube is a flourishing social networking site filled with different sub-communities… all looking to get their names out there and meet new people. It is also important to note that “YouTubers” don’t necessarily need to make their videos a large-scale production. Some of the most popular videos on YouTube have been as simple as a kid with a guitar recording a cover with a webcam… you may know him as Justin Bieber (DIY Musician 2). That is also an important point to touch on… covers. There are many musicians who tend to shift away from covering other artists’ music and focus on being “original” and writing their own. While every artist is entitled to their own opinion, covering
songs on YouTube can be a great strategy to attract some new attention (DIY Musician 2). Here is how it works... An independent artist records a cover of them playing a certain song, uploads it to YouTube, and then labels the video with certain “tags” or “categories”. Examples of these tags can be: music, guitar, piano, singing, cover, (artist name), or (song title). This system of “tagging” allows more traffic to be pulled to that user’s video. This scenario has played out millions of time on YouTube (YouTube Help). For example Jack Conte, or Pomplamoose on YouTube, uses this method frequently to attract attention. If someone looks up the song “Single Ladies” by Beyoncé, Pomplamoose’s cover of the song will appear further down the page in the suggested videos. There have many been several artists who have become celebrities nearly over night by covering other artists’ songs (DIY Musician 2).

One such example is the pop music duo, “Karmin”, which consists of Amy Heidemann and Nick Noonan, who are engaged. The couple is based in Boston and both attended Berklee College of Music in order to pursue music careers. The pair held only a minor fan-base until they uploaded a cover of the song, “Look at me now”, by Chris Brown. The cover offered a unique musical interpretation of the song that showcased Amy’s rapping ability. Soon after the song was uploaded, the cover gained the attention of several people, some including: Ellen Degeneres, Lindsay Lohan, The Roots, Ashton Kutcher, Demi Moore, and several other notable names. The duo was soon jetting around the country doing a countless amount of interviews because it seemed everybody wanted to hear more from “Karmin”. The group has recently released their single, “Crash Your Party”. The song describes the couple’s journey to “crash the party” of the modern music industry via their YouTube following. “Karmin” maintains that they plan to remain loyal to their YouTube audience, since they accredit their success to the support given to them by their original YouTube fans (YouTube).
An independent artist that has decided to take a more “original” approach to gaining popularity via YouTube is Kina Grannis. Kina Grannis also posts several covers of other artists’ songs on her YouTube page, but this isn’t what earned her the majority of her publicity. Kina thought it would be fun to introduce a new type of music video she called “Jelly Bean Animation”. This process called for making 2,300 images “painted” entirely with jelly beans. These images were then stitched together, frame by frame, to create a full motion-picture music video. The video required 1,357 hours of production, 30 people on the production team, 288,000 jelly beans, creativity, and some intense dedication. Once the final product was released to YouTube, the music video went “viral” almost immediately. Kina was even asked by Ellen Degeneres to appear on her show and to perform. It is unlikely that any “major-label” artist was thinking of shooting a “jelly bean video” any time soon (YouTube).

These are only some of the many social networking tools that independent artists can use to get more attention. Some other examples might include MySpace, Soundcloud, and even Facebook. According to an article on Sparkminute.com, the Facebook “conversion rate” is higher than that of Twitter’s. This basically means that if a user becomes a fan of an artist’s page on Facebook as opposed to Twitter, they are more likely to download the artist’s music, buy merchandise from the artist, or attend the artist’s concerts. This idea of social networking for independent artists touches on two of Dr. Bicket’s seven keys, Product/Platform and Cultural/Historical Context. As stated previously, social media surrounds us in today’s culture and it will only continue to do so. Therefore, it is only logical for these artists to “get with the times” and become active on these social networking platforms to promote their product. But, what is their product? Their product is their personal brand, or themselves. Unlike many businesses, independent artists are mainly looking to market their personalities, performance, and sound, as
opposed to new Mint-flavored toothpaste. This means that these artists need to be more actively engaged with their audiences, and these social networking sites allow them to do so.

With any argument there is bound to be the “Devil’s advocate” who doesn’t support the theory. However, when it comes to the future of social media and independent artists, one of the biggest critics isn’t “the older generation” like many may expect. It is actually John Mayer (Ingram 2). According to an article put out by Mathew Ingram, John Mayer recently visited Berklee Performance Center to perform and talk with aspiring musicians. One of the biggest pieces of advice Mayer passed on to these students was to not let promotional and publicity schemes, including those over social networks, get in the way of the music (Ingram 2). John Mayer said, “I remember playing the guitar through the amplifier facing out the window of my house onto the street in the summer time – that was social media in 1992.” (Ingram 2) Not everyone agreed with Mayer’s stance on using social media, including David Usher, a Canadian singer-songwriter. Usher said, I actually don’t think it is great advice to tell young artists not to bother with social media. It’s like saying don’t use the telephone” (Ingram 3). He believed that no matter how “well-constructed” or “brilliant” an artist’s songs were, if they were playing them to an empty room… the song sucked. Usher does admit that artists should not let social media marketing take over their careers, and that artists should strive for a healthy balance between creation and promotion (Ingram 3). In the end, these choices are all up to the artist trying to make it. Some artists may choose to focus on publicity and put their creation efforts on the back-burner, or vice-versa, but nobody is entitled to tell them any different.
Works Cited


