

The Democracy of Myspace

- An Essay on Independent Music and the Free Publicity of Myspace, 2006 -

If Andy Warhol were alive today, perhaps he would hail Myspace as the 21st century pop cultural equivalent of Coca Cola. In his 1975 memoir *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol from A to Z* he praises Coke for its democratic nature.

"What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest.

You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the president drinks Coca-Cola, Liz Taylor drinks Coca-Cola, and just think, you can drink Coca-Cola, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking.

All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the president knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it."

Comparable to coke, all current major political candidates (I'm not even going to delve into the presidency) have Myspace pages, Fiona Apple and Jewel have Myspace, and arguably, no amount of money can get you a better Myspace page than the one the bum on the corner has, considering he or she has some creativity and computer literacy.

Even if a pop star or politician has their webpage maintained by a staff or representative, they are still restricted to the same visual format and communication features that every other Myspace page has. Eight years ago, it might have been fair to say that only persons with the financial means to acquire a computer and monthly internet service have true internet access; however in today's world, even a slightly ambitious internet seeker can easily find web access at a public library or internet café.

As a public network that literally requires only an e-mail address and some basic information to join (i.e. name, sex), Myspace provides free and equal access to the kind of media exposure that would otherwise only be available to the financially privileged, socially connected, and desired.

In Myspace each user's page also links to the pages of all of their friends through user-icons; and to add another user to one's group of friends, a Myspacer simply needs to send them a friend request and be accepted. Thus, with each member's page acting as a referral to the pages of their Myspace friends and a simple friend-adding process, large networks of friends can quickly be formed. In addition, Myspace "search" enables users to find other users who have listed specific interests or characteristics on their Myspaces, thereby further expanding their established friend network.

Not surprisingly, Myspace gained its original popularity through musicians and bands that took advantage of the site's free publicity and network. Through Myspace, musicians could communicate with their fans by posting performance bulletins, images and music related blogs; and because friends often have similar taste in music, a web-based social network like Myspace is an especially effective way to promote music.

In 2004, Myspace added Myspace Music, which significantly increased site traffic by allowing bands to upload their songs and eventually music videos onto Myspace. Furthermore, because a majority of Myspace users fall between the ages of 16 and 25, the demographic most associated with the consumption of popular music, Myspace also bridged the gap between independent musicians and a willing generation of post-MTV listeners.

In addition to providing free publicity, promotion and a platform to showcase their music, Myspace also facilitates the iconization of independent musicians and greatly increases their chances for celebrity; and by iconization, I mean the process of becoming an icon or a symbol. As a digital interface, Myspace allows for inter-user relationships that exist solely in mediated form, that is, only in the world of Myspace where communication is indirect, limited, and constructed.

All photographs, personal information, comments and messages are selected and edited before they are posted. Thus, like a real-world celebrity or public figure, every Myspace user has the opportunity to shape their public identity, as well as choose the values and characteristics they want to project and thereby represent. In the vein of a misleading glamour shot, this projected image can also be as flattering as the creator desires regardless of its proximity to real/non-Myspace life.

Furthermore, recorded music is a media in itself, and musicians are often thought to embody the qualities and ideals expressed in their songs. In a way that is somewhat fitting to the voyeuristic nature of the medium, the music industry is also fueled by media image. Thus, independent musicians benefit doubly from the free music publicity and kind of image control Myspace provides, and the site substantially increases their celebrity potential.

Because Myspace is a venue for direct communication between fan and performer, it also supports more personal performer-fan relationships, for better or for worse. Indie musicians are more reliant on their individual fans than mainstream pop artists; logically speaking, when you have less fans each fan becomes more important. Thus, indie musicians generally have a greater obligation to their fans than mainstream recording artists.

In some cases, the extra web-connection of Myspace places indie musicians in a position where they are expected to respond to fan comments and messages over Myspace and follow up accordingly at live shows. This can be potentially awkward and daunting for the performer, as voiced by one musician that I interviewed: "Fans feel like they know you because of the music and because of the web, but you don't know them at all. So, it's like you have a complete stranger approaching you at shows."

Although mainstream celebrities and pop stars have Myspace pages and benefit from the extra publicity, indie musicians are considerably more dependent on the web and also more likely to have a personal relationship to their Myspace page. Lacking extraneous resources, most indie musicians maintain their Myspace pages directly; and by updating their own pages, they are also more likely to post personal content.

For example, many musicians will post blogs of non-music related opinions, where they will comment on everything from politics to pet feline-toilet-training. Real life friends and family often have a presence on the pages of indie musicians as well, further solidifying the intimate feel of their pages. Until recently, Abby Kweller, Ben Kweller's sister, a twenty-year-old college student whose photo and profile does not differ much from those of her brother's fans, was one of Ben Kweller's top friends.

Furthermore, in a digital world where technological innovation allows for accessible and budget-friendly professional-grade production, but simultaneously thrives on mass-production and impersonal forms of communication, the individualistic and anti-corporate-ness of everything "indie" has not only become increasingly possible, but also more and more attractive. This gravitation toward "indie-ness" is evident in all things from the popularity of vintage boutiques that specialize in unique garments to the use of baby-naming consultants to find uncommon, standout names for children.

The social outcast finds solidarity and acceptance in indie culture, and the intellectual and mainstream celebrity seeks indie fashion to stand out. Ironically, celebrities often create trends by adapting indie habits, such as unforgiving dresses and large sunglasses, magically transforming the unusual or undesired into the ordinary and trendy through mere charisma. Likewise, indie subcultures develop the same kind of elitism and snobbery of the mainstream circles they originally sought refuge from, such as the high school oddball come cooler-than-thou hipster.

The recent success of Myspace music and YouTube, Myspace's video surrogate, is another indication of the increasing interest in indie culture and a general merging of indie and mainstream production. Artists such as the Arctic Monkeys, Lilly Allen, and My Chemical Romance have emerged from the webpages of Myspace and indie fan sites to prosperous careers in pop. A general "Do It Yourself" aesthetic has also found its way into the traditionally slick world of advertising and multi-media. A prime example of this is the bi-continental Emmy Award-winning television series, "The Office," which brilliantly uses a low budget documentary aesthetic to its comedic advantage.

Even though the popularity of Myspace seems to have substantially decreased in the last year, indie production and DIY style have had an increasing presence on the web and mainstream media, and digital networks and search engines in general are nowhere near extinction. Similar to the way the 20th century saw the rise of America with the turn of the industrial revolution and the country's democratic territorial expansion of California, so too do we stand at the brink of a digital age overlooking a vast expanse of uncharted digital space. Going back to Andy Warhol's vision and outward embrace of American ideals, his work and life credos are no less than prophetic. For individual's living in a digital world, even 15 minutes of fame seems a bit low. Weeks, months and possibly years seems much more like it.

- Iris Jaffe