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Musicians achieve success without financial backing

Secure Digital Music Initiative was established to create voluntary music security specification.

By Brenda Lange, Correspondent

It used to be that you would hear a song you liked on the radio or a friend would loan you a record, an eight-track tape, an audio cassette or a CD and you'd run right out to the nearest music shop and buy your own copy.

Since vinyl discs were replaced by electronic tape recordings and laser discs have been replaced by tunes sent through cyberspace, new technology consistently replaces the old.

Alternative sounds and technologies become mainstream, opening the door for a new alternative.

And so it goes.

A technological revolution recently has shaken the established music industry to its core.

No longer is it necessary for a musician to have the backing -- financial and otherwise -- of a major recording studio in order to achieve success.

Now, the artist can reach a vast audience -- worldwide, in fact -- on a one-to-one basis, as it were.

Marketing himself through the growing web of Internet sites devoted to music, a musician can gain an audience faster and cheaper for his fans than in the traditional studio-run marketplace.

"The balance of power has shifted back to the artist," claims Rick Denzien of Ambler, a musician and producer who began marketing himself over the Internet with his first release in 1991.

"Record companies have driven the business forever, picking and choosing the people they think will be money makers, then they act as a filter, with little money ever coming down to the artist.

"Now that the artist can market his work and sell directly to the public, the industry is once again artist-driven."

Of course, the financial overhead of traditional music marketing is immense, from the studio production costs, to shipping, storage and advertising.

Selling music on the Web cuts out all but the production costs, allowing Denzien to sell his latest CD, "Exit 21" for as little as \$5 at a site called *www.Sightsound.com*.

"This is the trend for the future," he says. "It's how it's moving."

There is a proliferation of sites devoted to offering software that, once downloaded, enables consumers to then download individual songs or entire CDs, or even create their own compilation CDs from various artists. CDs still can be ordered for delivery from those sites for about the same price as you'd pay in a traditional record store.

MP3s -- simply a compressed music file format -- also can be downloaded directly into small electronic players, allowing for listening without any physical disc or tape. OR they can be used to create a physical CD through a device known as a CD burner that connects directly to the computer.

Consumers trading MP3s freely on sites that also sold legitimate, licensed CDs created the controversy.

With the right equipment, those bootlegged CDs have nearly the same quality a licensed CDs.

That created a threat to the established music business as consumers began to say: "Why should I pay for something I can get for free?"

And then, the music and technology businesses woke up.

A little more than a year ago, the Secure Digital Music Initiative was formed by more than 100 leaders of the worldwide recording industry to create a voluntary digital music security specification.

Big-name technology companies, including AOL, AT&T, IBM, Microsoft, Sony and Toshiba, supported the initiative.

"Creating a voluntary, open security specification benefits everyone," Hilary Rosen, president and chief executive officer of the Recording Industry Association of America, said at the time.

"(The initiative) is about the technology community developing an open security system that promotes compatible products in a competitive

marketplace. It's not about the recording industry imposing a standard on technology companies."

As of November of last year, the SDMI had ratified copyright protection technology for portable devices and had approved licensing terms for a SDMI-compliant trademark.

Increased standard-setting and the possibility of legislation is seen as a mixed blessing by Denzien, an independent artist, a David in competition with several Goliaths.

"It may turn out to be a tool that will lock out independent artists once again," he says. "Those involved (with SDMI) are all major players trying to create standards that will involve costs and create segmentation of the concept of the free flow of music from the artist to the public.

"It seems like it may be their attempt to gain control once again. It may be a good thing -- to protect my intellectual property -- but I think the average artist who's out there ... this is so far beyond where they're at and where the consumer is at right now.

"It seems like the big record companies got caught with their pants down and are playing catch-up."