

/website build-off unsigned band sites

It's no longer enough for an unsigned band to just have a presence on MySpace. We invited three music-obsessed designers to dream up the perfect promotion online

The brief

Mock up a homepage for an unsigned band. Many artists have a presence on MySpace, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, but there's still value in having a hub to provide information and link out to other sites. The band is unsigned, so it will have a fairly tight budget.

Designers



Name David Emery
Company Beggars Group Records
URL www.de-online.co.uk
David is the head of web development for the Beggars Group of independent record labels, where he's worked on sites for Radiohead, Jarvis Cocker, TV On The Radio, Adele and many more.



Name Jason Jones
Company Otterball
URL www.otterball.com
Jason is the web protagonist and co-owner of Nashville-based design firm Otterball. He serves as creative director on all incoming projects. Clients include EMI, Warner Bros Records and Centricity Records.



Name Josh Saunders
Company BBC World Service Trust
URL www.undisco.com
Josh Saunders has worked in London for web agencies since 1998. He was at EMI Music UK for seven years as digital development team lead and is currently at the BBC World Service Trust. He's also the bassist for Rebecca Closure.

David Emery's solution

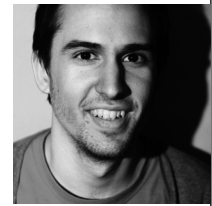
Gone are the days when, if you were an unsigned band, it was good enough just to have a simple MySpace page to promote yourself. Sure, they're still useful, but as more and more people migrate to different social networks (such as Facebook and Twitter), having a decent website that acts as a 'hub' into all your disparate online presences makes ever-increasing sense.

The key focus of the design for the fictional band The Electric is to get information across as quickly as possible. You're competing against a flood of other bands vying for attention, so there's no time for flashy intros or 'interesting' navigation concepts; it needs to be straight and to the point. Similarly, the last thing you need to worry about is piracy or trying to keep

a tight leash on your music. What you want to do is enable as many people to hear you as possible, so having some form of music player on your website is a must (and make sure the audio is decent quality as well). Allowing people to embed the tracks on their website or MySpace is another good idea: if people are into your music, you want to make sure that they've got the tools to help spread the word.

The other key element – although a little old school – is a decent mailing list. It's the best way of having a direct communication with your most enthusiastic fans, so the sign-up box gets primary placement next to the logo. To motivate people to sign up for the newsletter, it's also good to give them an incentive – in this case a free MP3. ●

Expert info



David Emery's month

What have I been doing?

I've just finished launching the new sites for Jarvis Cocker (jarviscocker.net) and Belle & Sebastian offshoot God Help the Girl (godhelpthegirl.com). I'm now moving on to new sites for Jack Peñate and The Horrors.

Sites I've visited

jasonsantamaria.com is always great due to the amount of time he takes over each post. I also admire what www.boston.com/bigpicture is doing with its use of really large photos.

What have I been watching?

I'm working my way through *The Sopranos* because it previously passed me by, and also series two of the excellent *Mad Men*.

What have I been listening to?

Last.fm says: Sonic Youth, Future of the Left, Discovery, The Horrors, The XX, The Big Pink, Micachu, Grizzly Bear, Tune-Yards, Chew Lips, Girls, Dirty Projectors and lots more.

Close up



1 The stream This aggregates all the band's activities on other sites – such as Twitter updates – as well as the latest news and blog posts, so the homepage is always full of fresh, interesting content.

4 Photos Bringing in photos from the band's Flickr group gives fans an easy and convenient way of posting content to the site, without you having to spend too much time or money on development.

2 Music player Probably the only use of Flash on the homepage would be for the music player, which would make it easy to give out YouTube-style embed code and get the band's music to as many people as possible.

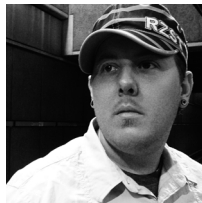
5 Tour dates It's vital to get people to your gigs, so making them prominent on the site is important. At this stage ecommerce is unnecessarily complicated, so driving people to buy things at shows is the way to go.

3 Comments If you've yet to build up a big fanbase, a dedicated forum would be overkill. But enabling people to comment on almost everything on the site works very nicely as an alternative early on.

6 Facebook It's quite easy to integrate Facebook with your site. It's well worth doing because it makes it simple for your fans to start spreading news about your music to their friends online.

Turn the page to see solutions from Jason Jones and Josh Saunders >>

Expert info



Jason Jones' month

What have I been doing?

Aside from some must-see movies that monopolised my precious Friday afternoons, we hammered out some sites for a diva from the Philippines, a cast member from *Survivor* and a trendy salon right here in Nashville. No big whoop.

Sites I've visited

Lately I've been going to www.smashingmagazine.com and designnewz.com – or rather, they have been coming to me through their Twitter feeds. Oh, technology.

What have I been watching?

I'm a pretty big TV buff, so along with finishing up the seasons of *Lost*, *24* and *Fringe*, I finally got around to watching seasons one and two of *Flight of the Conchords*. They call me the hip-hopopotamus.

What have I been listening to?

I've been enjoying Amos Lee, Jars Of Clay, The Gabe Dixon Band, The Damnells, Erin McCarley, Matthew Perryman Jones, Marc Broussard, Phillip LaRue and Sufjan Stevens.

Jason Jones' solution

Indie artists call us all the time needing a great website to help rocket them into stardom, but they only have a pocket full of lint, a guitar, and a can of macaroni cheese to their names.

Ten Out Of Tenn's creator Kristen Dabbs came up with the brilliant idea of pooling resources. TOT is a group of 10 signed and unsigned artists from Nashville who travel together, write together and subsequently sell out venues. They came together with the understanding that collectively they could garner more momentum than could be accomplished by the efforts of a single singer/songwriter. We were asked to create a website for them, and were struck by the genius of this relationship and how it could apply to the droves of emerging artists. Where 10

brand new websites would require a small fortune in labour, one great site can service the entire movement (www.10outoftenn.com). We designed it to be informationally driven, but with a custom, organic feel. Our goal was to provide the visitor with instant access to these artists. While exploring the site's content, hopefully visitors would become fans of not one, but many.

For the artist who already has their own unique website and web marketing tools, this site enhances their efforts. To the self-starter who might not have the same resources, it's robust enough to provide a home for their marketing efforts, while associating themselves with the more popular artists. Either way, by combining resources, artists are able to get a world-class site without any one incurring overwhelming expense. ●

Close up



- 1 Twitter feed** We put something on the homepage that would change each time a fan visited the site. With 10 artists updating the feed, this stream is a constant place of interest that encourages visitors to follow.
- 2 Artist pictures** Not only can you click on your favourite artist's face to navigate to their individual page, you can also find other artists who you might enjoy. This feature serves as an equal opportunity marketing tool.
- 3 Music by artist** Typically a site's MP3 player will play various tracks from an artist's record. With 10 artists, our player features the artist's name only, encouraging visitors to sample a variety of music of different styles.
- 4 Large format Flash** Defying those who bemoan the limitations of Flash, we used a large format Flash environment, utilising scrolled content, unique URLs for each page and the browser's Back button.
- 5 Active news** We placed the news section on the front page. The most recent article renders here, with a drop-down inviting you to read previous entries. It was important to us that the landing page remains relevant.
- 6 iPhone site** This website has a complementing iPhone site, which is populated with the same information, only in a mobile-friendly format. Every site that comes out of our firm has one of these.

Josh Saunders' solution

The group **Rebecca Closure** (www.myspace.com/rebeccaclosure) has been going for about five years, and the accompanying aesthetics have tended to be fun and energetic – a little Terry Gilliam in nature. This site has been envisioned as an Adobe AIR desktop app download, meaning it can be entirely Flash in framework, but without being in a browser. This is due to the fact that full Flash sites tend to be a no-no in 2009, not least due to poor SEO.

Most band site navigation follows a tired roll call of news, gigs, photos and so on. Here we've broken from this tradition, using a Twitter feed for news/gigs info. This site also accepts the importance of peer distribution in 'breaking' an artist. Subsequently, the main site content (the audioplayer, the 'Buy

links, the animation, the main navigation linking back to the main site) is exportable as a widget.

One screenshot can't do this concept justice, but the idea is that by navigating the 'slices' of the cow, a different visual concept (pertaining to song concepts) appears in the main site content. The consistency on all widgets is: artist name, cow navigation. The user can choose to export one, or each concept (generated by clicking the cow nav) as a widget from the site. This approach has been adopted because a band's site now needs to understand its place in the ecosystem (MP3 blogs, MySpace and so on) and not be a fixed hub. A site's main purpose in breaking an artist is the 'peer marketing' of the music, not the site as sole destination. ●

Expert info



Josh Saunders' month

What have I been doing?

This month I've been doing IA and UI – site maps and wireframes – for a project that the BBC World Service Trust is doing in Bangladesh.

Sites I've visited

www.artsricksha.com is about rickshaw art in Bangladesh – it's a good digest of the illustrations of these vehicles. I've also got into Hussein Chalayan's 'high art vs high tech' approach – see www.husseinchalayan.com.

What have I been watching?

Any videos via B3ta are normally worth a view. Various degrees of mentalism usually abound there.

What have I been listening to?

Apart from Rebecca Closure, I listen to Shellac, The Evens, Pharoah Sanders, Albert Ayler, and the Analogue Africa (label) compilations of Nigerian 70s funk.

Close up



1 Twitter feed The Twitter feed is embedded in the top left, and is the first thing a user sees. Microblogging is perfect for busy artists, and the Twitter API is second-to-none for 'mashupability'.

4 Site content as widget The user can export the main content as a widget. In the user journey, users can see what the end product will be like (a small Flash SWF) before they go to the 'embed' functionality.

2 Other site links The Last.fm and MySpace links are prominent, and can be opened as new windows. The Last.fm API is a very good one – plays of Rebecca's music could be mashed-in as real-time streams.

5 Photos The photo section of the site is envisioned as using the Flickr API, with a Flash client-side class/UI that adds some snazzy 'rotational' menu physics to each image, for browsing purposes.

3 Consistent navigation The cow navigation remains in place as the user clicks and the screen overwrites its main content (background, audioplayer ghetto-blast, buy links) with this content to suit each song.

6 Videos As with the photos, the video section uses the Flash front-end to display the feed of content items using the rotational physics attributes, but in this particular case the API is YouTube's.

Have your say ...
Got a suggestion for a new site build-off? Let us know at netmag@futurenet.com

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