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Sex, Drugs and Updating Your Blog

By CLIVE THOMPSON

Jonathan Coulton sat in Gorilla Coffee in Brooklyn, his Apple PowerBook open before him, and began slogging through the day's e-mail. Coulton is 36 and shaggily handsome. In September 2005, he quit his job as a computer programmer and, with his wife's guarded blessing, became a full-time singer and songwriter. He set a quixotic goal for himself: for the next year, he would write and record a song each week, posting each one to his blog. "It was a sort of forced-march approach to creativity," he admitted to me over the sound of the cafe's cappuccino frothers. He'd always wanted to be a full-time musician, and he figured the only way to prove to himself he could do it was with a drastic challenge. "I learned that it is possible to squeeze a song out of just about anything," he said. "But it's not always an easy or pleasant process." Given the self-imposed time constraints, the "Thing a Week" songs are remarkably good. Coulton tends toward geeky, witty pop tunes: one song, "Tom Cruise Crazy," is a sympathetic ode to the fame-addled star, while "Code Monkey" is a rocking anthem about dead-end programming jobs. By the middle of last year, his project had attracted a sizable audience. More than 3,000 people, on average, were visiting his site every day, and his most popular songs were being downloaded as many as 500,000 times; he was making what he described as "a reasonable middle-class living" — between \$3,000 and \$5,000 a month — by selling CDs and digital downloads of his work on iTunes and on his own site.

Along the way, he discovered a fact that many small-scale recording artists are coming to terms with these days: his fans do not want merely to buy his music. They want to be his friend. And that means they want to interact with him all day long online. They pore over his blog entries, commenting with sympathy and support every time he recounts the difficulty of writing a song. They send e-mail messages, dozens a day, ranging from simple mash notes of the "you rock!" variety to starkly emotional letters, including one by a man who described singing one of Coulton's love songs to his 6-month-old infant during her heart surgery. Coulton responds to every letter, though as the e-mail volume has grown to as many as 100 messages a day, his replies have grown more and more terse, to the point where he's now feeling guilty about being rude.

Coulton welcomes his fans' avid attention; indeed, he relies on his fans in an almost symbiotic way. When he couldn't perform a guitar solo for "Shop Vac," a glittery pop tune he had written about suburban angst — on his blog, he cursed his "useless sausage fingers" — Coulton asked listeners to record their own attempts, then held an online vote and pasted the winning riff into his tune. Other followers have volunteered hours of their time to help further his career: a professional graphic artist in Cleveland has drawn an illustration for each of the weekly songs, free. Another fan recently reformatted Coulton's tunes so they'd be usable on karaoke machines. On his online discussion board last June, when Coulton asked

for advice on how to make more money with his music, dozens of people chimed in with tips on touring and managing the media and even opinions about what kind of songs he ought to write.

Coulton's fans are also his promotion department, an army of thousands who proselytize for his work worldwide. More than 50 fans have created music videos using his music and posted them on YouTube; at a recent gig, half of the audience members I spoke to had originally come across his music via one of these fan-made videos. When he performs, he upends the traditional logic of touring. Normally, a new Brooklyn-based artist like him would trek around the Northeast in grim circles, visiting and revisiting cities like Boston and New York and Chicago in order to slowly build an audience — playing for 3 people the first time, then 10, then (if he got lucky) 50. But Coulton realized he could simply poll his existing online audience members, find out where they lived and stage a tactical strike on any town with more than 100 fans, the point at which he'd be likely to make \$1,000 for a concert. It is a flash-mob approach to touring: he parachutes into out-of-the-way towns like Ardmore, Pa., where he recently played to a sold-out club of 140.

His fans need him; he needs them. Which is why, every day, Coulton wakes up, gets coffee, cracks open his PowerBook and hunkers down for up to six hours of nonstop and frequently exhausting communion with his virtual crowd. The day I met him, he was examining a music video that a woman who identified herself as a "blithering fan" had made for his song "Someone Is Crazy." It was a collection of scenes from anime cartoons, expertly spliced together and offered on YouTube.

"She spent hours working on this," Coulton marveled. "And now her friends are watching that video, and fans of that anime cartoon are watching this video. And that's how people are finding me. It's a crucial part of the picture. And so I have to watch this video; I have to respond to her." He bashed out a hasty thank-you note and then forwarded the link to another supporter — this one in Britain — who runs "The Jonathan Coulton Project," a Web site that exists specifically to archive his fan-made music videos.

He sipped his coffee. "People always think that when you're a musician you're sitting around strumming your guitar, and that's your job," he said. "But this" — he clicked his keyboard theatrically — "this is my job."

In the past — way back in the mid-'90s, say — artists had only occasional contact with their fans. If a musician was feeling friendly, he might greet a few audience members at the bar after a show. Then the Internet swept in. Now fans think nothing of sending an e-mail message to their favorite singer — and they actually expect a personal reply. This is not merely an illusion of intimacy. Performing artists these days, particularly new or struggling musicians, are increasingly eager, even desperate, to master the new social rules of Internet fame. They know many young fans aren't hearing about bands from MTV or magazines anymore; fame can come instead through viral word-of-mouth, when a friend forwards a Web-site address, swaps an MP3, e-mails a link to a fan blog or posts a cellphone concert video on YouTube.

So musicians dive into the fray — posting confessional notes on their blogs, reading their fans' comments and carefully replying. They check their personal pages on MySpace, that virtual metropolis where

unknown bands and comedians and writers can achieve global renown in a matter of days, if not hours, carried along by rolling cascades of popularity. Band members often post a daily MySpace “bulletin” — a memo to their audience explaining what they’re doing right at that moment — and then spend hours more approving “friend requests” from teenagers who want to be put on the artist’s sprawling list of online colleagues. (Indeed, the arms race for “friends” is so intense that some artists illicitly employ software robots that generate hundreds of fake online comrades, artificially boosting their numbers.) The pop group Barenaked Ladies held a video contest, asking fans to play air guitar along to the song “Wind It Up”; the best ones were spliced together as the song’s official music video. Even artists who haven’t got a clue about the Internet are swept along: Arctic Monkeys, a British band, didn’t know what MySpace was, but when fans created a page for them in 2005 — which currently boasts over 65,000 “friends” — it propelled their first single, “I Bet You Look Good on the Dancefloor,” to No. 1 on the British charts.

This trend isn’t limited to musicians; virtually every genre of artistic endeavor is slowly becoming affected, too. Filmmakers like Kevin Smith (“Clerks”) and Rian Johnson (“Brick”) post dispatches about the movies they’re shooting and politely listen to fans’ suggestions; the comedian Dane Cook cultivated such a huge fan base through his Web site that his 2005 CD “Retaliation” became the first comedy album to reach the Billboard Top 5 since 1978. But musicians are at the vanguard of the change. Their product, the three-minute song, was the first piece of pop culture to be fully revolutionized by the Internet. And their second revenue source — touring — makes them highly motivated to connect with far-flung fans.

This confluence of forces has produced a curious inflection point: for rock musicians, being a bit of a nerd now helps you become successful. When I spoke with Damian Kulash, the lead singer for the band OK Go, he discoursed like a professor on the six-degrees-of-separation theory, talking at one point about “rhizomatic networks.” (You can Google it.) Kulash has put his networking expertise to good use: last year, OK Go displayed a canny understanding of online dynamics when it posted on YouTube a low-budget homemade video that showed the band members dancing on treadmills to their song “Here It Goes Again.” The video quickly became one of the site’s all-time biggest hits. It led to the band’s live treadmill performance at the MTV Video Music Awards, which in turn led to a Grammy Award for best video.

This is not a trend that affects A-list stars. The most famous corporate acts — Justin Timberlake, Fergie, Beyoncé — are still creatures of mass marketing, carpet-bombed into popularity by expensive ad campaigns and radio airplay. They do not need the online world to find listeners, and indeed, their audiences are too vast for any artist to even pretend intimacy with. No, this is a trend that is catalyzing the B-list, the new, under-the-radar acts that have always built their success fan by fan. Across the country, the CD business is in a spectacular free fall; sales are down 20 percent this year alone. People are increasingly getting their music online (whether or not they’re paying for it), and it seems likely that the artists who forge direct access to their fans have the best chance of figuring out what the new economics of the music business will be.

The universe of musicians making their way online includes many bands that function in a traditional way — signing up with a label — while using the Internet primarily as a means of promotion, the way OK Go

has done. Two-thirds of OK Go's album sales are still in the physical world: actual CDs sold through traditional CD stores. But the B-list increasingly includes a newer and more curious life-form: performers like Coulton, who construct their entire business model online. Without the Internet, their musical careers might not exist at all. Coulton has forgone a record-label contract; instead, he uses a growing array of online tools to sell music directly to fans. He contracts with a virtual fulfillment house called CD Baby, which warehouses his CDs, processes the credit-card payment for each sale and ships it out, while pocketing only \$4 of the album's price, a much smaller cut than a traditional label would take. CD Baby also places his music on the major digital-music stores like iTunes, Rhapsody and Napster. Most lucratively, Coulton sells MP3s from his own personal Web sites, where there's no middleman at all.

In total, 41 percent of Coulton's income is from digital-music sales, three-quarters of which are sold directly off his own Web site. Another 29 percent of his income is from CD sales; 18 percent is from ticket sales for his live shows. The final 11 percent comes from T-shirts, often bought online.

Indeed, running a Web store has allowed Coulton and other artists to experiment with intriguing innovations in flexible pricing. Remarkably, Coulton offers most of his music free on his site; when fans buy his songs, it is because they want to give him money. The Canadian folk-pop singer Jane Siberry has an even more clever system: she has a "pay what you can" policy with her downloadable songs, so fans can download them free — but her site also shows the average price her customers have paid for each track. This subtly creates a community standard, a generalized awareness of how much people think each track is really worth. The result? The average price is as much as \$1.30 a track, more than her fans would pay at iTunes.

Yet this phenomenon isn't merely about money and business models. In many ways, the Internet's biggest impact on artists is emotional. When you have thousands of fans interacting with you electronically, it can feel as if you're on stage 24 hours a day.

"I vacillate so much on this," Tad Kubler told me one evening in March. "I'm like, I want to keep some privacy, some sense of mystery. But I also want to have this intimacy with our fans. And I'm not sure you can have both." Kubler is the guitarist for the Brooklyn-based rock band the Hold Steady, and I met up with him at a Japanese bar in Pittsburgh, where the band was performing on its latest national tour. An exuberant but thoughtful blond-surfer type, Kubler drank a Sapporo beer and explained how radically the Internet had changed his life on the road. His previous band existed before the Web became ubiquitous, and each town it visited was a mystery: Would 20 people come out? Would two? When the Hold Steady formed four years ago, Kubler immediately signed up for a MySpace page, later adding a discussion board, and curious fans were drawn in like iron filings to a magnet. Now the band's board teems with fans asking technical questions about Kubler's guitars, swapping bootlegged MP3 recordings of live gigs with each other, organizing carpool drives to see the band. Some send e-mail messages to Kubler from cities where the band will be performing in a couple of weeks, offering to design, print and distribute concert posters free. As the band's appointed geek, Kubler handles the majority of its online audience relations; fans at gigs chant his online screen-name, "Koob."

“It’s like night and day, man,” Kubler said, comparing his current situation with his pre-Internet musical career. “It’s awesome now.”

Kubler regards fan interaction as an obligation that is cultural, almost ethical. He remembers what it was like to be a young fan himself, enraptured by the members of Led Zeppelin. “That’s all I wanted when I was a fan, right?” he said. “To have some small contact with these guys you really dug. I think I’m still that way. I’ll be, like, devastated if I never meet Jimmy Page before I die.” Indeed, for a guitarist whose arms are bedecked in tattoos and who maintains an aggressive schedule of drinking, Kubler seems genuinely touched by the shy queries he gets from teenagers.

“If some kid is going to take 10 minutes out of his day to figure out what he wants to say in an e-mail, and then write it and send it, for me to not take the 5 minutes to say, dude, thanks so much — for me to ignore that?” He shrugged. “I can’t.”

Yet Kubler sometimes has second thoughts about the intimacy. Part of the allure of rock, when he was a kid, was the shadowy glamour that surrounded his favorite stars. He’d parse their lyrics to try to figure out what they were like in person. Now he wonders: Are today’s online artists ruining their own aura by blogging? Can you still idolize someone when you know what they had for breakfast this morning? “It takes a little bit of the mystery out of rock ’n’ roll,” he said.

So Kubler has cultivated a skill that is unique to the age of Internet fandom, and perhaps increasingly necessary to it, as well: a nuanced ability to seem authentic and confessional without spilling over into a Britney Spears level of information overload. He doesn’t post about his home life, doesn’t mention anything about his daughter or girlfriend — and he certainly doesn’t describe any of the ill-fated come-ons he deflects from addled female fans who don’t realize he’s in a long-term relationship. (Another useful rule he imparts to me: Post in the morning, when you’re no longer drunk.)

There’s something particularly weird, the band members have also found, about living with fans who can now trade information — and misinformation — about them. All celebrities are accustomed to dealing with reporters; but fans represent a new, wild-card form of journalism. Franz Nicolay, the Hold Steady’s nattily-dressed keyboardist, told me that he now becomes slightly paranoid while drinking with fans after a show, because he’s never sure if what he says will wind up on someone’s blog. After a recent gig in Britain, Nicolay idly mentioned to a fan that he had heard that [Bruce Springsteen](#) liked the Hold Steady. Whoops: the next day, that factoid was published on a fan blog, “and it had, like, 25 comments!” Nicolay said. So now he carefully polices what he says in casual conversation, which he thinks is a weird thing for a rock star to do. “You can’t be the drunken guy who just got offstage anymore,” he said with a sigh. “You start acting like a pro athlete, saying all these banal things after you get off the field.” For Nicolay, the intimacy of the Internet has made postshow interactions less intimate and more guarded.

The Hold Steady’s online audience has grown so huge that Kubler, like Jonathan Coulton, is struggling to bear the load. It is the central paradox of online networking: if you’re really good at it, your audience quickly grows so big that you can no longer network with them. The Internet makes fame more quickly

achievable — and more quickly unmanageable. In the early days of the Hold Steady, Kubler fielded only a few e-mail messages a day, and a couple of “friend” requests on MySpace. But by this spring, he was receiving more than 100 communications from fans each day, and he was losing as much as two or three hours a day dealing with them. “People will say to me, ‘Hey, dude, how come you haven’t posted a bulletin lately?’ ” Kubler told me. “And I’m like, ‘I haven’t done one because every time I do we get 300 messages and I spend a day going through them!’ ”

To cope with the flood, the Hold Steady has programmed a software robot to automatically approve the 100-plus “friend” requests it receives on MySpace every day. Other artists I spoke to were testing out similar tricks, including automatic e-mail macros that generate instant “thank you very much” replies to fan messages. Virtually everyone bemoaned the relentless and often boring slog of keyboarding. It is, of course, precisely the sort of administrative toil that people join rock bands to avoid.

Even the most upbeat artist eventually crashes and burns. Indeed, fan interactions seem to surf along a sine curve, as an artist’s energy for managing the emotional demands waxes and wanes. As I roamed through online discussion boards and blogs, the tone was nearly always pleasant, even exuberant — fans politely chatting with their favorite artists or gushing praise. But inevitably, out of the blue, the artist would be overburdened, or a fan would feel slighted, and some minor grievance would flare up. At the end of March, a few weeks after I talked with Kubler in Pittsburgh, I logged on to the Hold Steady’s discussion board to discover that he had posted an angry notice about fans who sent him nasty e-mail messages complaining that the band wasn’t visiting their cities. “I honestly cannot believe some of the e-mails, hate mail and otherwise total [expletive] I’ve been hearing,” he wrote. “We’re coming to rock. Please be ready.”

Another evening I visited the message board for the New York post-punk band Nada Surf, where a fan posted a diatribe attacking the bass player for refusing to sign an autograph at a recent show, prompting an extended fan discussion of whether the bass player was a jerk or not. A friend of mine pointed me to the remarkable plight of Poppy Z. Brite, a novelist who in 2005 accused fans on a discussion board of being small-minded about children — at which point her fans banned her from the board.

When Jonathan Coulton first began writing his weekly songs, he carefully tracked how many people listened to each one on his Web site. His listenership rose steadily, from around 1,000 a week at first to 50,000 by the end of his yearlong song-a-week experiment. But there were exceptions to this gradual rise: five songs that became breakout “hits,” receiving almost 10 times as many listeners as the songs that preceded and followed them. The first hit was an improbable cover song: Coulton’s deadpan version of the 1992 Sir Mix-a-Lot rap song “Baby Got Back,” performed like a hippie folk ballad. Another was “Code Monkey,” his pop song about a disaffected cubicle worker.

Obviously, Coulton was thrilled when his numbers popped, not least because the surge of traffic produced thousands more dollars in sales. But the successes also tortured him: he would rack his brains trying to figure out why people loved those particular songs so much. What had he done right? Could he repeat the same trick?

“Every time I had a hit, it would sort of ruin me for a few weeks,” he told me. “I would feel myself being a little bit repressed in my creativity, and ideas would not come to me as easily. Or else I would censor myself a little bit more.” His fans, he realized, were most smitten by his geekier songs, the ones that referenced science fiction, mathematics or video games. Whenever he branches out and records more traditional pop fare, he worries it will alienate his audience.

For many of these ultraconnected artists, it seems the nature of creativity itself is changing. It is no longer a solitary act: their audiences are peering over their shoulders as they work, offering pointed comments and suggestions. When OK Go released its treadmill-dancing video on YouTube, it quickly amassed 15 million views, a number so big that it is, as Kulash, the singer, told me, slightly surreal. “Fifteen million people is more than you can see,” he said. “It’s like this big mass of ants, and you’re sitting at home in your underpants to see how many times you’ve been downloaded, and you can sort of feel the ebb and flow of mass attention.” Fans pestered him to know what the band’s next video would be; some even suggested the band try dancing on escalators. Kulash was conflicted. He didn’t want to be known just for making goofy videos; he also wanted people to pay attention to OK Go’s music. In the end, the band decided not to do another dance video, because, as Kulash concluded, “How do you follow up 15 million hits?” All the artists I spoke to made a point of saying they would never simply pander to their fans’ desires. But many of them also said that staying artistically “pure” now requires the mental discipline of a ninja.

These days, Coulton is wondering whether an Internet-built fan base inevitably hits a plateau. Many potential Coulton fans are fanatical users of MySpace and YouTube, of course; but many more aren’t, and the only way for him to reach them is via traditional advertising, which he can’t afford, or courting media attention, a wearying and decidedly old-school task. Coulton’s single biggest spike in traffic to his Web site took place last December, when he appeared on NPR’s “Weekend Edition Sunday,” a fact that, he notes, proves how powerful old-fashioned media still are. (And “Weekend Edition” is orders of magnitude smaller than major entertainment shows like MTV’s “Total Request Live,” which can make a new artist in an afternoon.) Perhaps there’s no way to use the Internet to vault from the B-list to the A-list and the only bands that sell millions of copies will always do it via a well-financed major-label promotion campaign. “Maybe this is what my career will be,” Coulton said: slowly building new fans online, playing live occasionally, making a solid living but never a crazy-rich one. He’s considered signing on with a label or a cable network to try to chase a higher circle of fame, but that would mean giving up control. And, he says, “I think I’m addicted to running my own show now.”

Will the Internet change the type of person who becomes a musician or writer? It’s possible to see these online trends as Darwinian pressures that will inevitably produce a new breed — call it an Artist 2.0 — and mark the end of the artist as a sensitive, bohemian soul who shuns the spotlight. In “The Catcher in the Rye,” J. D. Salinger wrote about how reading a good book makes you want to call up the author and chat with him, which neatly predicted the modern online urge; but Salinger, a committed recluse, wouldn’t last a minute in this confessional new world. Neither would, say, Margo Timmins of the Cowboy Junkies, a singer who was initially so intimidated by a crowd that she would sit facing the back of the stage. What

happens to art when people like that are chased away?

It is also possible, though, that this is simply a natural transition point and that the next generation of musicians and artists — even the avowedly “sensitive” ones — will find the constant presence of their fans unremarkable. The psychological landscape has arguably already tilted that way for anyone under 20. There are plenty of teenagers today who regard themselves as “private” individuals, yet who post openly about their everyday activities on Facebook or LiveJournal, complete with camera-phone pictures. For that generation, the line between public and private is so blurry as to become almost nonexistent. Any teenager with a MySpace page is already fluent in managing a constant stream of dozens of semianonymous people clamoring to befriend them; if those numbers rise to hundreds or even thousands, maybe, for them, it won’t be a big deal. It’s also true that many recluses in real life flower on the Internet, which can famously be a place of self-expression and self-reinvention.

While researching this article, I occasionally scanned the list of top-rated bands on MySpace — the ones with the most “friends.” One of the biggest was a duo called the Scene Aesthetic, whose MySpace presence had sat atop several charts (folk, pop, rock) for a few months. I called Andrew de Torres, a 21-year-old Seattle resident and a co-founder of the group, to find out his story. De Torres, who played in a few emo bands as a teenager, had the idea for the Scene Aesthetic in January 2005, when he wrote a song that required two dueling male voices. He called his friend Eric Bowley, and they recorded the song — an aching ballad called “Beauty in the Breakdown” — in a single afternoon in Bowley’s basement. They posted it to MySpace, figuring it might get a couple of listens. But the song clearly struck a chord with the teen-heavy MySpace audience, and within days it had racked up thousands of plays. Requests to be the duo’s “friend” came surging in, along with messages demanding more songs. De Torres and Bowley quickly banged out three more; when those went online, their growing fan base urged them to produce a full album and to go on tour.

“It just sort of accidentally turned into this huge thing,” de Torres told me when I called him up. “We thought this was a little side project. We thought we wouldn’t do much with it. We just threw it up online.” Now their album is due out this summer, and they have roughly 22,000 people a day listening to their songs on MySpace, plus more than 180,000 “friends.” A cross-country tour that ended last December netted them “a pretty good amount of money,” de Torres added.

This sort of career arc was never previously possible. If you were a singer with only one good song, there was no way to release it independently on a global scale — and thus no way of knowing if there was a market for your talent. But the online fan world has different gravitational physics: on the basis of a single tune, the Scene Aesthetic kick-started an entire musical career.

Which is perhaps the end result of the new online fan world: it allows a fresh route to creative success, assuming the artist has the correct emotional tools. De Torres, a decade or more younger than Coulton and the Hold Steady, is a natural Artist 2.0: he happily spends two hours a day or more parsing notes from teenagers who tell him “your work totally got me through some rough times.” He knows that to lure in listeners, he needs to post some of his work on MySpace, but since he wants people to eventually buy

his album, he doesn't want to give away all his goods. He has thus developed an ear for what he calls "the perfect MySpace song" — a tune that is immediately catchy, yet not necessarily the strongest from his forthcoming album. For him, being a musician is rather like being a business manager, memoirist and group therapist rolled into one, with a politician's thick hide to boot.

Clive Thompson, a contributing writer, writes frequently about technology for the magazine.

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