

MySongCast.com

Internet Music community - Review by Gibson Nolte

How does a music community site strive firstly to emerge, grow, and then to flourish in a landscape overshadowed by uber fatties like LastFM, Facebook's iLike app, and MySpace (plus Pandora, provided you live in the US)? LastFM, which its developers sold to CBS in May for chump change somewhere in the order of \$300 million, began life with a great business plan and some very clever software, but its passionate staff had to clock up countless hours of unpaid labor (while its administrators stared down pants soiling bills) before a viral groundswell came from nowhere and catapulted the site into pop culture stardom.

The beauty of the Internet is that pretty much anyone with some know-how and a good (or not-so-good) idea can go live around the globe in a matter of hours. But to really get serious you need to have a solid idea, more than a little know-how (or access to someone with it), an attractive marketing angle, plenty of development time, reasonably deep start-up pockets and a passion for what you're doing. Plus, the X-factor: Luck.

MySongCast.com is one of the newest of these smaller players to throw its hat into the online music ring. Based out of Milson's Point the small crew of muso-cum-startup jockeys, headed by Janine Gregson, has toiled for the last year to develop, test and launch (albeit in beta form) this cool little site. *'This idea for an indie music website came about over a year ago,'* says Gregson. *'It is partly as I am a musician myself and wanted somewhere to put my own music for my friends and fans to listen to, and partly came about as I was having trouble finding the music I wanted to hear on other bigger community sites like MySpace. I guess I wanted to see if I could develop an indie music site that was just about the music and was a community where artists and fans would feel looked after and could interact easily with each other.'*

Having focused the idea, Gregson then set out to build not only the site, but also a development and delivery team as passionate as she was. *'Actually I had no idea how to do this,'* she confesses. *'I approached a friend, Dean Taggart, who is a graphic artist and web designer. He had been a professional musician and won a Triple J Unearthed competition in the past. He was very excited at the idea, and basically dropped everything to work on it.'*

But what began as a 6-week project (according to Taggart's initial estimate) ultimately turned into a yearlong process. *'I hadn't realised how much would be needed to do this,'* Says Gregson. *'We both didn't really.'* Over the next few months a small but dedicated engineering, marketing and legal team was assembled, all backed by Gregson and her partner, thanks to the sale of an investment portfolio. From a business point of view, investing 100% personal funds may seem like an unwise move, but Gregson believes it has contributed to

the drive and direction of the site: *'We are not backed by any kind of corporation,' she says, 'and I think this has helped keep our feet on the ground as we build the site. We really are the indie musos building an indie music website.'*

The project finally came to fruition in a tangible way when, after having undergone closed beta testing for a couple weeks, MySongCast.com went live to the public in mid-October, picking up over 200 members in its first week. And, although the site is hosted and created in Australia, membership is open to the international music community as well.

'I did consider whether I should just keep it as an Australian site,' Gregson explains, 'but realised that it is hard to stop it from being global if that's what people want. I expected that we would have mainly Aussie groups on here to start with and then maybe it would go more global, but have been quite amazed that within a week of going to live testing, we have so many global members. I am really excited to see this, and I feel the next generation of musicians just don't see borders.'

When it comes to reviewing a site like MySongCast it's difficult not to compare it to the larger or more established players. This may seem a little unfair, but the brutal reality is that, while smaller startup sites often have a certain underground feel, if they aren't offering something special, something other community sites lack, why would you bother spending time hanging out there?

Fortunately, Gregson's commitment to creating a site where artists and fans can interact easily and directly has produced what is the crux of MySongCast's appeal, and, one can only assume, an important marketing angle to boot. Individual users can register for membership as either a **Fan** or as an **Artist**, with both levels being issued a personal page where they can share a little about themselves for other members to view. Artist members have the opportunity to post band bios, pics and gig info, as well as their music (and accompanying vids, too), which can be played using the site's inbuilt media player. But don't worry; all copyright remains the property of the Artist.

All members can listen to tracks posted by the Artists, attach themselves to the bands they like (via a 'Become a Fan' button) and post comments and messages for Artists and Fans alike. Soon-to-be-added functions such as a live Forum and a facility for downloading tracks will enhance this fledgling site immeasurably. Gregson is adamant that the Forum is a top development priority.

A third level of membership, and one that I find particularly interesting, is **Venue**. Premises hosting live music can register for site membership, thereby enabling management to interact directly with Artists and Fans. The membership in this category is significantly smaller than in the others, but has enormous marketing and distribution potential for Artists (not-to-mention a punter building runoff for the Venues themselves).

Another feature I like is the monthly competition, whereby Artists can submit a track and, based on the response of the membership, be up for a cash prize. Of

course, in a small membership pool the outcome of a popularity competition can be easily skewed (by, say, a particular band getting all their friends and family to join the site and vote for their track), but as the MySongCast membership base grows this will become less of an issue.

The design and feel of MySongCast are both great, but navigation around the site took a bit of getting used to. Thankfully the extensive **About** and **FAQ** sections are amongst the most comprehensive I've encountered, so it wasn't long before I was on track. The browse and site-wide search functions seem to work pretty well, though I would like to see added search capabilities based on geographic location. It's great being able to listen to music without borders, but I'd like to be able to find out which Artists, Venues and Fans are based near me. There are little flags that denote the location of members, but these are limited to country (as opposed to city) and are unsearchable.

The site is still officially in the beta testing stage, so some kinks are to be expected, but I encountered some nuts and bolts problems that I found particularly irritating. Perhaps the largest of these gripes was with the inbuilt media player, in which it seems impossible to skip to sections within a track that's playing (attempting this just restarts the track). This glitch reared its head in both Firefox and IE, suggesting that it's not a browser-based problem. The Upcoming Features section of the site promises that a sexy, custom built, intuitive media player is in the pipeline, but I would've assumed, seems as the entire focus of the site is on music, that this would have been the most important pre-launch aspect to get right.

Media player issues aside, I was pretty impressed by the style, execution and potential of MySongCast.com. Janine Gregson and her team clearly have the necessary passion, know-how and resources to build and deliver a viable indie music hub – and the active, growing user base seems to agree. With some technical kinks ironed out, a good marketing thrust and a little luck, MySongCast could very well become a significant player.

Related info:

- Snippets of a BBC interview with Martin Stiksel, co-founder of LastFM, including his 5 key points for would be Internet startup entrepreneurs, can be found at <http://foundread.com/2007/09/12/5-ways-to-leverage-lastfms-successful-learning-curve/>

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