

# SOCIAL SCENE

How big stars and indie artists are using social networking to find new fans

BY CHRIS NEAL



MySpace



Facebook



YouTube



Twitter

About a year ago, Texas singer and songwriter Melissa Polinar began making video clips of herself performing her songs at home and uploading them to the video-sharing site YouTube. One person watched, then another and another. People began sending links of her videos to friends and posting them on blogs. Before long, some fans were even making their own videos covering her songs.

Today, Polinar's homemade clips have been viewed almost two million times on YouTube and the tracks she posted at her MySpace page have been listened to more than a half-million times. But for Polinar, the real satisfaction came when she saw how the online attention was producing real-world results in a less virtual realm: live performance. "Because of social networking sites," she says, "I go play at a gig and I find that there's actually someone who sings along to my song as I sing."



Melissa Polinar

That's the goal of all the YouTubing, MySpacing, Facebooking and Twittering musicians all over the world are doing 24 hours a day: to make one more person want to come to a performance and sing along. Acquainting oneself with the tools of social networking can be a daunting but vital way to reach that goal. "I never really had a concrete plan in trying to acquire listeners," Polinar says. "I'm just an indie artist trying to figure out where people are gathering, and social networking sites are where they are at."

Social networking can be just as valuable for established acts, expanding fans' idea of an artist in ways that are endearing and even revelatory. Country star Blake Shelton found his media profile drastically heightened after he learned to apply his wry sense of

humor to outlets like Twitter (username: @blakeshelton) and YouTube. "Business is so internet-driven these days that you've got to figure that out," he says. "You can't fight it anymore, you've just got to go with it. Fans want to see that side of an artist's personality."

So which social-networking site is best for artists at whatever rung of the showbiz ladder? Each has its own unique strengths and weaknesses, so it's best to cover all the bases. "There was a time when I felt that I should only join one and stick to it," recalls Polinar. "I came to find out that if you want to keep thriving in the social networking realm,

**'Because of social networking sites, I play a gig and there's actually someone singing along.'**

— Melissa Polinar

you need to join all of them. Some individuals stick to preferences, but as an artist you want to reach as many people as you can."



Blake Shelton



The Fear and Trembling

## MYSPACE

There's no denying that MySpace, after enjoying several years of unquestioned dominance in the social-networking field, has taken a beating lately. According to tracking by Compete.com, the site's unique visitor count has dropped 14 percent over the last year and is now well under half that of Facebook. But even as everyday users have migrated to other platforms, MySpace has cannily played up the one major advantage it has over its competitors: Its relatively one-sided interface is still a great way for musical artists to spotlight their wares.

In addition to high-quality music streams, artists can offer biographical information, news updates, photos and video to bring potential fans or interested businesspeople up to speed. Frontman Adam McIntyre of Atlanta's the Pinx says his band uses its MySpace page ([myspace.com/thepinxatlanta](http://myspace.com/thepinxatlanta)) as a virtual press kit. "In the old days, you'd have sent a recording, some glossies and a bio if you wanted to get a gig or let someone know in 60 seconds or less what you're all about," he says. "A MySpace page is good for establishing a sound, a look and a general style. That's enough for, say, a national or worldwide act to figure out if they want us to open for them."

That doesn't mean MySpace is necessarily the first step for listeners looking to discover new music—but it can be a very useful second step. If you learn about an artist who sounds interesting, an online search for that act's name will usually bring up its MySpace page. "I don't think people see MySpace as a way to find out about new music anymore," says multi-instrumentalist and singer Ryan Stimpson of New York City band The Fear and Trembling ([myspace.com/thefearandtrembling](http://myspace.com/thefearandtrembling)). "However, if you want to check out a band you heard on a blog, or on internet radio or college radio, then MySpace is a great way to get a sampling of their music free and legally. MySpace has been our main site since the





Glenn Switbar

Lauren Lucas

inception of the band. We use it as our main website, and we direct people there the most."

A remarkable number of signed artists owe their record-label contracts to MySpace—Lily Allen, Sean Kingston and Arctic Monkeys all came to the attention of their respective labels through the site. Red-hot country act Lady

## 'It's about an ongoing conversation with your fans.' — Lauren Lucas

get out to a show. In addition to posting about an event (relatively ineffective, as the average Facebook user's front page changes constantly), an act can send out invitations and announcements to individual targeted users.

"I've used our event invites in a way that's hopefully not too annoying," says the Pinx's McIntyre. "Like anything else on Facebook that gets to be a bit too frequent, people tune it out or hide it. Still, others keep an eye out for your band's updates because that's why they signed up for them, and they'll be at your shows—all because you took 10 seconds to sit down and keep them informed via Facebook."

The more casual tone and easy interactivity of Facebook also offers the opportunity to bond with listeners in a way that other sites don't. (This is helped by its egalitarian look—the most popular artist's Facebook page looks about the same as the average listener's does, offering the impression of a level playing field.) "On Facebook I get a chance to directly comment back to a fan on one thread, where everyone else can see it and jump in the conversation," says Nashville-based singer-songwriter Lauren Lucas. "And the more the merrier! That's the whole point of social networking: It's viral. You want other people to know what makes you tick, and vice versa,

because that's the only way to truly connect."

Lucas points out that MySpace's comments sections—ostensibly a forum for listeners to express their thoughts about the artist—are now regularly hijacked by other acts looking for attention. She says that's not a problem on Facebook, at least so far. "Facebook gives you a chance to talk directly with your fans, because there's less of an opportunity for other bands to advertise on your page," she says. "That's what's wrong with MySpace. Your comments and friend requests get so clogged with other musicians trying to promote themselves that you can't find your true listeners."

"On Facebook and Twitter, it's much easier to truly connect to my listeners on a one-on-one basis. It's less about the music and pictures. It's more about an ongoing conversation with your fans." Still, Lucas says she considers the ultimate goal of all her social-networking activities to drive fans to her website, [laurenlucas.com](http://laurenlucas.com).



Adam Bennett

## FACEBOOK

Facebook has more than 133 million users, a number that's nearly doubled in the past year—but its capability as a tool for musicians is limited. MySpace and Twitter allow acts to share information with users, but Facebook's focus



Classic-rock band Journey found lead singer Arnel Pineda (center) on YouTube.

Jane Richey

## TWITTER

The fastest-growing social network remains Twitter, which has increased its number of unique visitors over the past year by almost 300 percent to about 24 million. While its utility is limited for independent artists, it has proven itself an unbeatable platform for major-league artists to allow fans a glimpse at their day-to-day lives—while also carefully controlling just how much information they want to divulge.

Velvet Revolver guitarist Slash (@[slashhudson](https://twitter.com/slashhudson)) kept fans updated throughout each step of the process as he recorded his new solo album, *Slash*. He admits that when Twitter first became popular he dismissed it out of hand—until he began experimenting with it. "A lightbulb went off in my head that it would be a good way to do updates as honest as possible in real time, and also to be able to talk to fans in a way that you just can't do through press releases," he says. "You can't trust magazines to put the exact, proper information out there. You can do it yourself, which I think is great."

Interactivity is naturally hobbled by the sheer volume of "tweets" received by an artist of any stature, though it's still possible to learn a lot about your audience from sifting through those responses. "It's amazing how much they know about you," Slash observes with a chuckle. "You don't really know until you get on Twitter and find out the tons of information they have. They attach to certain songs you might not think of—the not-so-obvious music you put out there, or isolated performances you've done. They're really interested in a lot of the behind-the-scenes stuff, gear-wise. They're really fascinated by the whole thing."

That behind-the-scenes openness can cut both ways if the artist isn't careful. In addition to his high-profile celebrity relationships with stars like Jennifer Aniston, John Mayer's seemingly endless stream of Twitter posts—although typically clever and funny—have, at times, served to overshadow his music. "With Twitter, I can show my real voice," he declared in a recent *Playboy* interview—and when he later publicly apologized for several controversial statements elsewhere in that same interview, he did so on Twitter.

Making clever remarks, posting provocative pictures or other extramusical behavior on social-networking sites can get attention, but be prepared for the downside. "It used to be the songs that allowed the listener to see who you are," Lauren Lucas says. "Now you can put mediocre songs out there and still become famous from

all the exposure because people still feel connected, regardless of what the music sounds like. But in my opinion, that makes for short careers. I think you need the perfect marriage of great music and marketing."

## YOUTUBE

The video-sharing website YouTube's most high-profile musical success stories are of singers being plucked from obscurity to join long-established acts: Classic-rock band Journey recruited Filipino vocalist Arnel Pineda to fill its lead-singer slot in 2007 after guitarist Neal Schon saw YouTube clips of his previous band performing, and Yes likewise discovered tribute-band singer Benoit David on YouTube in 2008 and invited him to fill in for ill frontman Jon Anderson on tour.

But those are one-in-a-million shots. More importantly, YouTube is a way to present a straightforward example of an artist practicing

## OTHER OPTIONS

### GRAMMY365 [grammy365.com](http://grammy365.com)

In late February the Recording Academy launched its first-ever members-only site, designed to encourage interaction among music industry professionals. The Academy aggressively used social-networking platforms to promote its annual Grammy Awards for the first time this year.

### REVERB NATION [reverbnation.com](http://reverbnation.com)

Reverb Nation serves as a platform to allow interaction among artists, managers, record labels and venues.

### AMIE STREET [amiestreet.com](http://amiestreet.com)

Allows artists to upload tracks for sale, with prices dependent on demand; users are encouraged to connect with one another through the "friend" feature.

### SHARE THE MUSIC [sharethemusic.com](http://sharethemusic.com)

Allows users to listen to music on one another's hard drives one person at a time. Its "Community" section encourages users in the music business to communicate with one another.



electronics tacked on. .... I fear that for many new or revived record listeners, the thin fidelity of these retro-plastic wonders will cause them to tire of vinyl quickly, making LPs more of a novelty than anything else."

Vinyl still makes up only a tiny portion of music sales, and even its rapid growth continues to be vastly outpaced by the growth in digital sales. Most consumers simply don't care enough about issues of sound quality or packaging to pass up the unparalleled convenience digital music offers. There certainly seems to be no danger of vinyl ever again matching the sales of its peak year—1977, when 344 million long-playing records were sold. "Vinyl's going to always be a niche," says Biery. "It's never going to be anything more than a niche. But I do believe it's going to continue to grow."

**4. ARTISTS' CHOICE**

Artists have been some of vinyl's most ardent fans. In the 1990s and early 2000s, when the music industry had long since turned its back on the format, some acts were using their clout to ensure that their albums saw release on vinyl. Pearl Jam has always insisted on it, and has sent members of its fan club an exclusive seven-inch single every year since 1991. Lead singer Eddie Vedder has said the difference between MP3 and vinyl is "like the difference between making love to a real woman and a plastic one." He's far from alone. "We have a turntable on our tour bus and we go scouring for little indie record stores in every town," says Patterson Hood of Drive-By Truckers. "I still blow my whole per-diem on records."

The White Stripes' Jack White is perhaps the format's most visibly committed



Jeff Krevitz  
Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder on stage at Lollapalooza 2007

**THE ART OF VINYL**

One of the once seemingly lost pleasures of vinyl was the 12-inch-by-12-inch canvas an LP record sleeve offers for visual artists, photographers and graphic designers. The resurgence of the format has been accompanied by an increase in the creativity and grandiosity of modern album covers. Here are a few of our favorites from the past few years.



Feist *The Reminder* (2007)



Jay-Z *The Black Album* (2003)



Yeah Yeah Yeahs *It's Blitz!* (2009)



Neko Case *Middle Cyclone* (2009)



Thom Yorke *The Eraser* (2006)



The Mars Volta *Frances the Mute* (2005)

JAKOB DYLAN | DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS | SHARON JONES | PETER FRAMPTON



**WILLIE NELSON**

A wandering spirit finds his way home

**SLASH**

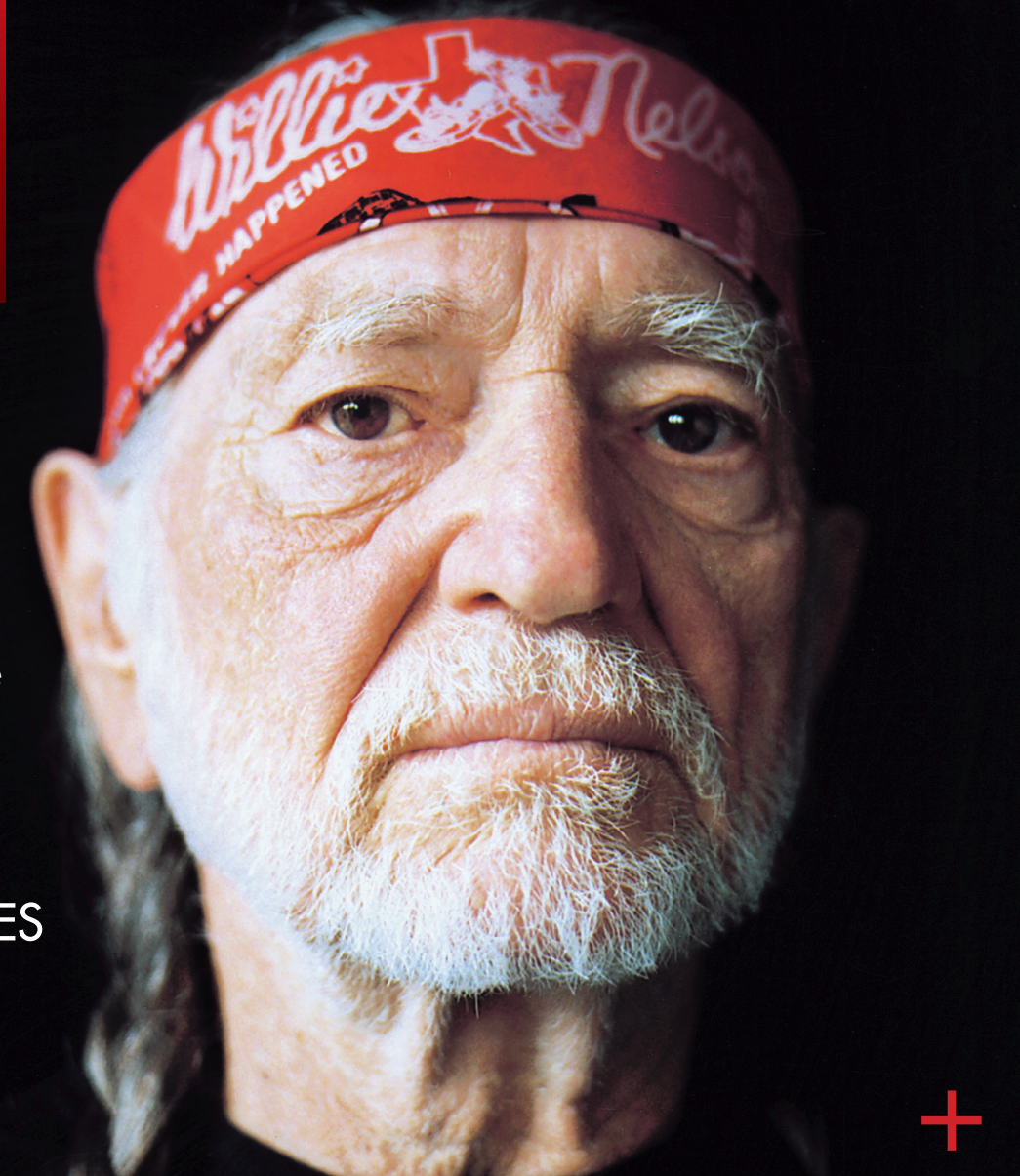
Going it alone

**WARREN HAYNES**

Gov't Mule's new kick

**KAKI KING**

Guitar heroine



BROADWAY ROCKS

SOCIAL NETWORKING

GET GREAT VOCALS

MARCH/APRIL 2010  
VOLUME 01, ISSUE 02  
PERIODICAL \$6.99 U.S. / \$7.99 CANADIAN

