

MTV and the making of a cybermall



MARC LaFOUNTAIN
Technobabble

O.J. Simpson, the Menendez brothers and Tonya Harding. In the real world we have numerous court cases populated with a colorful cast of characters to keep us entertained. On the Internet, we have MTV Networks vs. Adam Curry.

The legal battle between MTV and its former video-jockey seems destined to be one of those events to go down in Net lore. The case isn't important because of the money at stake, but because it has made users think about what constitutes proper and improper use of the Internet.

It all started one day as Adam Curry was driving to work to tape the MTV Top 20 Video Countdown. He had been operating an Internet site at MTV that allowed users to send to the station e-mail, get on-line music news and a variety of other things. It was one of the most popular sites on the Net, even winning awards. But while Curry was driving along, he decided he wanted more. He wanted to get into the commercial Net business full time.

I would like to say that Curry did the mature thing and went privately to his bosses at MTV to tell them about his plans to resign. Actually, he decided to be a bit more melodramatic. He taped the countdown that day, and with no prior warning, announced his resignation just before revealing the number one video. Needless to say, the MTV execs were stunned, and the editing room got busy editing out Curry's announcement.

So, Curry left MTV and made plans to start his company, On Ramp, Inc. On Ramp's purpose is to help businesses get services and information on the Internet. Curry planned to take the Internet address he had been using for the MTV site (mtv.com) as On Ramp's address. Predictably, MTV wasn't too happy that Curry had decided to "free his mind" with its Net address.

The company hit Curry with a lawsuit demanding he return control of the address to it. Even though mtv.com was registered to Curry, the network said that "MTV" was its registered trademark and that Curry couldn't use it on the Net. It also claimed Curry had placed information that was the property of MTV on the Net site without permission.

Curry felt that his work on the site and the fact that he had registered it made mtv.com his. He also said the network had asked him to put its material on the site. So, in the spirit of the '90s, Curry counter sued MTV for \$5 million in damages and grief he said the network had caused him, his family and On Ramp.

Until the lawsuits are resolved, Curry will maintain control of mtv.com. However, he can't offer any services there. Instead he and On Ramp have opened up shop elsewhere, and visitors to mtv.com are referred to the new site. If you want to visit On Ramp, you can go gopher or ftp to metaverse.com. The best way to visit is to use world wide web at http://metaverse.com.

The new site is still one of the more popular on the

Net and has attracted big business. You may have heard the AT&T "youwill.com" commercials on the radio. You can try to win a ride on a new virtual reality simulator if you access the youwill.com site, brought to you by On Ramp, Inc. On Ramp also managed to get in on the Woodstock '94 craze. The Internet is turning out to be a very profitable place for Curry and Co.

There are some Net users who aren't happy with Curry's profit-motive. In fact, they hate him to the point of creating an entire Net site just to mock him. If you have world wide web access, check out http://www.galcit.caltech.edu/~ta/mtv/main.html. The site is called "empty.tv.com" and is a hilarious take off on Curry and On Ramp.

Instead of featuring Adam Curry as the owner of On Ramp, "empty.tv.com" has the fictional "Madam Furry" as the owner of "Off Ramp, Inc." Through Madam Furry, Curry is portrayed as greedy and self-obsessed. He is also the butt of endless jokes about the size and style of his hair. (If you've ever seen Curry, you'll know what I mean here.) "Empty.tv.com" has the same user sections and articles as Curry's On Ramp site, only with a satirical slant. It is the first attempt I have seen at a Net parody, and I think it's very well done.

There is actually a very serious message behind "empty's" madness. The creators of the site believe that Curry and On Ramp are going too far in their efforts to commercialize the Net. I happen to agree with them.

On Ramp has released promotional materials showing how it will lure in customers for its Net clients. This includes such things as getting the companies' information on Usenet newsgroups, in e-mail and on other web, gopher and ftp sites. This is all in addition to ads in television, radio and print. This planned advertising blitz on the Net angered many, and Curry has toned things down a bit.

Still, all of this raises the question of whether we really want the Internet to turn into a global shopping mall. I have always liked the Net because most things on it have a more noble purpose than monetary gain. There have been commercial services on the Net for some time, but they have never been as ambitious or intrusive as Curry seems to want them to be.

I hope users and system administrators will remember that what has made the Internet great are the free communications, education and entertainment services it provides. I am not against commercial services being on the Net, but I don't want business to dominate it. I don't want hundreds of virtual billboards and virtual neon signs ruining the landscape along the Information Superhighway.

I wanted to discuss this with Adam Curry. I sent him an e-mail, and he responded within hours saying I could send him a list of my questions. That was three weeks ago, and after repeated e-mails, I haven't heard a thing from Curry. Maybe he's too busy fixing his hair.

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'John Henry,' Gilby Clarke almost giants



SOUNDADVICE
BEN PILLOW Staff Writer
PAWNSHOP GUITARS Gilby Clarke
★★★½ (out of four stars)

While the rest of Guns 'n Roses cautiously awaits frontman Axl Rose's pending court case over alleged spousal abuse, Guns 'n Roses rhythm guitarist Gilby Clarke, quietly put out his own solo album, Pawnshop Guitars, a record he says "restores my sanity," in the Sept. 22 issue of the Rolling Stone.

"Yeah, G n' R could end any minute. There's been a lot of tension, and we've been having a lot of problems lately," Clarke says in the magazine.

In the wake of all the uncertainty concerning the band's, and consequently his own, future, Clarke has created an 11-song, 44-minute blues rock record, thick with an underlying desperate feeling and lots of references to alcohol.

With Clarke's often raspy vocals and 16 different musicians credited on the album (including Frank Black and every other member of G n' R), the record moves in a variety of directions, most of them good.

"Cure Me...or Kill Me..." starts the album out with an appropriate G n' R sound, just as one might expect with Slash on lead guitars. The slower, melodic "Black" follows, in which the solace-seeking Clarke proclaims, "No one understand my hell/I'm a stranger to myself."

Slash returns on "Tijuana Jail," a song bracketed with what sounds like a Spanish radio broadcast, and whose hero of the story stabs a Mexican officer in the throat while trying to get back to Texas. "Skin and Bones" provides a shift from the electric guitars alongside haunting lyrics (I had a little sister who could drink up a storm/if

the liquor didn't kill her she'd be 21). The melody stressed "Johanna's Chopper" follows, as does Clarke's tendency to write about being inebriated ("I can't remember last night"). "Let's Get Lost" maintains the slow pace, but with a somewhat lighter mood with Dizzy Reed playing a calliope.

The title track returns to a harder sound, before Rose and Clarke team up to cover the Rolling Stones classic, "Dead Flowers." Clarke's raw voice mixed with Rose's high pitched squeal and piano play make this one of the best songs on the album.

"Jail Guitar Doors," the only song Clarke didn't write besides "Dead Flowers," features Black on rhythm guitars and backing vocals. With it, Clarke allows some rare humor as he tells the story of three men's plights on their way to jail.

"Hunting Dogs" has the best lyrics on the record ("Never had so much to lose/midday coffee blues/Hunting dogs don't kill their own"), and has a good mix of acoustic and electric guitars. "Shut Up" follows with another harmonious melody, to borrow an STP label, and gives the album a strong ending.



SOUNDADVICE
STEPHANIE SONNENFELD Staff Writer
JOHN HENRY They Might Be Giants
★★★½ (out of four stars)

Unfortunately, after 100 choice recordings and more than 1,000 international concerts, They Might Be Giants is probably just now capturing your attention.

Their fifth release, "John Henry" (yeah, the man who could beat the machine), is taking the innovative band from small-time fame to big-time notoriety via the Top 40.

If you know and love They Might Be Giants, then you'll notice "John Henry" shows some of the major transformations the group has gone through in the past years. The band has traded its familiar drum sounds for the sounds of a Benny Goodman big band type sound—rather, big band with rock undertones.

Along with known Giants, Tony Maimone, John Flansburgh, John Linnell and Brian Doherty, former Ordinaries' leader Kurt Hoffman (plays sax and clarinets and two trumpeters, Frank London and Steven Bernstein, have joined the Giants on this CD.

Like the Giants themselves, the sounds and tones of "John Henry" are really hard to categorize. "John Henry" focuses from ballads to rock to chanting, which definitely shows off They Might Be Giants' musical talents. If you want to experience the band's new take on the big band sound, check out "Snail Shell", which is the first single on the CD.

If you are looking for horns, "Dirt-bike" and "Spy" have an awesome display of horn playing, while "No One Knows My Plan" has strong Latin beats. If you're in the mood for a ballad, "Dirt Bike," despite its name, is exactly what you should listen to. Don't forget to listen to "Sleeping in the Flowers" for straight-line pop pulses.

Unlike big name bands who claim to be over publicized by the media and their groupies, They Might Be Giants has managed to stay away from the trappings of music gluttony. They have a strong following of fans and keep in touch with them. They Might Be Giants have set up a phone number, (718) 387-6962, where fans can call and hear a different They Might Be Giants song everyday. Flansburgh also helps organize a They Might Be Giants CD fan club and is setting up a program where fans can sample band's songs on Internet.

"John Henry," which was recorded at Bearsville studios, where the Band and Bob Dylan also recorded albums. Since then and since the summer release of the CD, They Might Be Giants have toured around the country playing at radio festivals. Until you get your chance to see them live, take a chance and go out and buy "John Henry." You might be in for a pretty good surprise.

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