

Online music comes of age - and now fans are getting in on the act

As downloads soar, social networking sites are increasingly giving artists their first break

Owen Gibson, media correspondent

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One is a gloriously gobby purveyor of hook-laden, bittersweet pop and the other a publicity-shy miserabilist who has combined huge critical acclaim with commercial success. But both Lily Allen and Radiohead's Thom Yorke were last night rewarded for connecting with their fans via the web at an awards ceremony designed to celebrate the "coming of age" of online music.

Success at the BT Digital Music Awards, now in their fifth year, has become progressively more important to artists and their labels as the internet and mobile phones have come to the fore as a means of breaking new acts.

Allen, who picked up the best pop artist prize, had more than 40,000 "friends" on the social networking site MySpace before she even launched her first single. Yorke, who with Radiohead helped to pioneer the use of the web to interact directly with fans rather than via broadcast media or the press, won prizes for best use of mobile and best artist campaign for his solo album *The Eraser*.

Turbocharged

The popularity of social networking sites such as Rupert Murdoch's MySpace, which last night won the award for best innovation, has turbocharged the rate at which artists get their first break and has democratised the A&R process. For every Allen, there are dozens of others using the internet to build up a following or get a record deal.

Last night's ceremony at the Roundhouse in north London honoured a range of official sites, fan sites, digital retailers, blogs and online innovations. Mike Skinner, aka The Streets, won best blog for amusing retellings of his ribald on-tour antics. Other winners, decided by a mixture of public votes and industry judges, included bombastic rockers Muse, who won for their official and unofficial websites, and the Mobo winner Lemar. Peter Gabriel, a pioneer in digital sales, was given a special award.

The awards also reflected the way the web is levelling the playing field. The prize for best podcast - radio-style shows that can be downloaded to a portable device or played on a computer - went not to Radio 1 or another media giant but to London Elektriccity, a jungle and drum and bass show. And Bleep, an online record store launched by the electronica label Warp, beat online retailers such as Apple iTunes and Amazon to the best music store prize.

Whereas radio airplay, video rotation on MTV and press coverage were once prerequisites for breaking a band, the internet has allowed some to independently create live followings and forge closer bonds with fans.

Jack Horner, creative director at the music strategy agency Frukt and the chairman of the judges, said: "The big thing this year was the coming of age of fans on the web through all the different social networking sites. The fans can now talk to each other, there are so many new music services and ways to buy music legally."

Shannon Ferguson, the European managing director of Yahoo! Music, said: "Users are becoming increasingly involved in generating

content, through blogging, making recommendations to friends, building playlists, posting photos from concerts, and even creating their own videos."

Digital downloads now outsell physical singles, with weekly sales topping 1m, against 14,000 two years ago. It is expected that around 50m downloads will be sold this year. The popularity of songs in the so-called "long tail" - which sell only a handful each but collectively add up to more than big global acts - has been encouraged by websites that find songs they think you might like based on your favourite artists.

Last.fm - a UK site that tracks your musical tastes, finds similar users and builds you a personalised radio station- last night won best music community.

Sandi Thom, who came to prominence by webcasting gigs from her basement, said before playing at last night's event that the democratic nature of the web was its biggest attraction. "It's giving you the chance to communicate directly with the audience rather than going through middlemen. With the internet, Madonna and my mate next door can both have a MySpace account and they're completely equal."

Democratic web

A flurry of press interest in Thom was followed by another when, after her debut single for a big label reached No 1, it emerged that she had also employed a manager and PR company to work on her behalf and promote the exercise through blanket emails and online promotion. "The reason there was controversy was because it was something that was new," she said. "It had done great things for me and for my career but I also got the backlash against it."

Yet the big beasts of the music, media and marketing industries refuse to be left on the sidelines. Music is seen by mobile networks, media companies and advertisers as the way to the hearts of the 16-25 demographic that is becoming harder to reach through traditional means. Hence they are pouring millions into creating their

own festivals, one-off events and television programmes that will provide exclusive content.