

# Bridging the Digital Divide

Universal Music NZ's Scott Maclachlan talks to **Michael Thorp** about how 16 year old singer-songwriter, Lorde, got noticed online and how other artists can do the same.

**For** any musician, or any other kind of artist, it can be a daunting task trying to get your music and videos noticed online above the millions of other artists and 13 billion Youtube videos.

So, I put it to Universal Music NZ's A&R manager, Scott Maclachlan, "**What can musicians do to get themselves noticed online?**"

Scott: While the internet is this incredible stage or platform that artists didn't have ten years ago, nothing's changed in the fundamentals of creating great and innovative music, and challenging people.

If I can use Lorde as an example, it was started from a website – her website, where she literally put her wares on the table and said, "These are the five songs I've done in the last six months, what do you think?" And then people liked what they heard, grabbed them, and started sharing them.

I don't think there is a formula. I think it's basically, get it out there, and then you can email your friends, you can flag it with people and hope and encourage people to come and look at it. At that point you live and die, because if it's crap, nobody shares it and it's kind of over. If it's good, then it starts to get a life of its own.

## **How did Lorde promote herself?**

She created her own URL. She had a Facebook link, a Twitter link, and a Tumblr - she's really into Tumblr, it's a big part of what she does. She created a Facebook page under Lorde and of course invited all her friends and stuff.

And that, I think, is an absolute key. Because I can't go to a 16 or 18 year old kid and say, "This is really cool, you should listen to it." But she could and she was doing it laterally, saying, "What do you think? I've done this record."

It was the equivalent of going to the playground with a CD or cassette that you made in the past and passing it around your friends. And that's exactly what she did. And it spread laterally like wildfire in exactly the target market - and this wasn't planned - that you would've hoped for.

## **What do you mean, "It spread like wildfire"?**

The best way I can explain it is four days after she put it up, I get a call from Jason Flom in America – one of the biggest,

most successful A&R guys in the world (CEO of Lava Records). Actually, sorry, he went back to her Facebook and said, "Who are you? You have to phone me." She passed it on to me. And I said, "Hi,

check this out," then he went to him and he came to us.

## **For new artists trying to get noticed online, what steps would you recommend?**

The absolute starting point is making the best music you can. I know that sounds really crass, but if you have music that is not good, every single step is going to be a hurdle and going to be tough. But if you've got a song that people like, doors open very, very quickly. So, I would say, save yourselves an enormous amount of heart-ache and time, energy and money spent on videos, remixes, production and studio time by just getting in your bedroom and write the best song you possibly can. Get that right, everything else falls in place.

## **So, you have a great song, what's the next step? Setting up a website, social media pages?**

Yea, website, then there's obviously the traditional path of taking it to a record company and say, "Look, I've got this great song." But, integral to that, obviously, is the online presence and building a fanbase. Twenty years ago, you would go out and gig and then build your fan base and take that fan base effectively with you when you signed with a record company. And when you put a record out, they went and bought it. You're doing exactly the same today, but online.

And the great thing now is that, when you played in the Dog and Duck in Putney in the UK, you could only reach 60 people, now you can put it on the internet and you can reach a global market. And the great thing, then, and that's what's kind of happening with Lorde at the moment, it is starting to ignite in countries all over the world.

## **Igniting through specific actions on your part or her websites?**

Predominantly through her websites, but obviously behind the scenes she has a global record deal and each record company in each territory is working to a strategy that at the moment is a very softly, softly approach with online tastemakers, specialist radio shows, and just building those foundations.

## **If an artist knows who their likely audience is, what's the best way of reaching**



**NZ singer-songwriter, Lorde**

Jason." He said, "You probably don't know who I am..." I said, "I know who you are." And he goes, "What's your connection?" And I tell him the story, and he's like, "I'll get on a plane and come down. This is the best thing I've heard in the last 10 years," bla, bla, bla.

For me, that was, something that had been put on a computer in a bedroom in Devonport had connected with a guy in New York.

## **How did he hear about it?**

He has scouts all over the country. An old colleague of his came across it on a blog somewhere and went, "Wait, we need to

### out to them?

I think it's recognizing where that audience congregates – it's the water cooler moment, that's your target. You know that there are blogs populated with people who are into skate-punk, so you go to them, or even clothes, or art, or whatever, and you approach those people and say to them, as much as you would to an editor at a magazine, "Are you interested in this?" "Can you review this?" And try and populate those areas where those people congregate.

### Like busking, going anywhere there's a good potential audience.

Yea. And I'm a massive fan of collaborating, remixing... with other artists that might be more established.

## it's recognizing where that audience congregates - it's the water cooler moment, that's your target.

### Cross pollination.

Right. It's the Trojan Horse thing. The American Hip-Hop artists have been doing it for years. You have an established hip-hop artist with a new rapper coming in and guesting on a big established artist's single. You immediately Trojan Horse into a bigger audience and people go, "Oh, who's that guy?" And then you start to elevate yourself.

### What about using online advertising to promote your music or music video?

I certainly wouldn't. I honestly don't believe you need to spend money to have success at the early stages. It's not about that. I mean, I always see on Facebook, it says, "Promote your post for \$50." It's like, you know, toxic to me. I don't want to spend \$50 to force someone to listen. I hate paid advertising when I'm online. So, I think you have to be very, very careful with that.

### What do you think is the best way to keep fans interested? Is it by regular engagement, or using music apps, whereby they can contact fans directly with their latest songs, news, etc.?

I don't need a notification from Lorde that she's got a new single coming out. If I'm a fan, I think you need to invest time into your artist. Effectively, it's the old fan club idea. You join a fan club and you go to the gigs, you go to meet up with other fans and you just find out what's going on.

I think the viral, underground, undiscovered nature of conversations between people is what's absolutely key and vital in getting an artist to move virally.

I think if there was a game plan with Lorde, it was to hold back, not to give. Everyone wants instant grats these days. They demand it and they want it now. And I think the only way you engage people is to go, "No, we're not going to give it to you instantly." Because, then, people

just move on too quickly. I see it time and time again, that after releasing that great first album, they come back with the second album and everyone's moved on. They're like, "Oh, no, we're bored, we're not interested in this." So, you get these massive sales, then the second album dies right off.

### Why does it die off?

It's because people feel like they've done that artist. And the loyalty – to keep fans loyal is very, very difficult these days. And I think that's because there's a nature of just giving everything and over compensating by giving that over access to artists. I think you have to keep mystery. It's the artists we don't know anything about that we have to dig around and discover.

Those are the ones that we engage with.

**So, it's not because the second album isn't any good, but because there's so much new stuff coming out all the time?**  
Yea, there's a saturation point.

### And if you're not fresh in their minds you become a bit passé?

I don't think you have to be fresh in their minds. I think you have to be considered with how you develop your relationship with your fans. And that might not be constantly engaging them. It might be the opposite. It might be drip feeding them ideas and information that keeps them interested.

### Ringo Starr's website promotes "Save the Rhino." So, each artist needs to develop their own unique voice and engage with their fans.

I don't think they have to create it. It's just got to be their personality. It's how they divulge that to their audience.

### It can't be strategized?

No, I actually do think it's a strategy. The problem is, I think at the moment there's this kind of knee jerk reaction. By rote we all go, "Oh, I've got a sniff of some interest, let's tell that fan everything we know about ourselves. Let's give them extra content. Let's give them behind the scenes." And it's like the fan gets it in the first month and goes, "Oh, I've done that artist. I've been back stage. I've met them. I know them. So, I'm moving onto the next one."

### There's no longer any mystery.

Yea. And for me rock stars - the artists I was into, they were these guys who flew around on planes, lived in 5 star hotels, had groupies and did loads of drugs. I don't know if any of that was true, but that was the myth in my head. There was this fantasy about it. And I think if you di-

vulge everything, there is no fantasy.

### It's like any relationship.

Absolutely. You have to keep things interesting, otherwise people walk away.

The problem with the internet, it's a double-edged sword. There's so much to look at, to hold people's interest, you've got to be smart about it. I don't think the key or answer is to give everything of yourself. I know Lorde puts up what she enjoys and if people come to that and like her music and like her Tumbler and like what she's Tweeting about, then that's great. I think it's about being true to yourself as an artist, rather than chasing the dream.

### Meaningful engagement.

It has to be real, absolutely. And I don't think this has ever changed, but I think the youth have incredible bullshit detectors. The new generation have become so acute to being sold to in a very smart way because the baby boomers, that generation of the Saatchis and marketing very smartly, they're very suspicious of that. And they're very attuned to syncing out when they're being sold something or being coerced. So, to avoid all that problem, just be completely honest, true and engaging. Remember, you've got to keep people interested. Honestly, Michael, if I had...

### There's no magic formula.

Exactly. I mean the Lorde thing is a really, really special event. A lot of it is luck that she's come about at this time and people are engaging. But still, you have to put yourself out there.

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