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Labor of Love

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Music fans are working for free to promote their favorite bands.

There were mounds of mashed potatoes, gobs of gravy, plenty of turkey, wine, milk, and of course, pumpkin pie. As if one weren't enough, there was a second pie — blueberry — brought by a thoughtful guest. Sounds of football on the TV could be heard in the background except when everyone sat down for dinner.

Family and guests — 12 all together — sat down at the table, and following a prayer, it was time to eat. It was also time for family talk and to catch up on current events.

“It was your typical Thanksgiving dinner,” Kristen Greiner, lounging comfortably on her dorm room couch, says with a half-hidden smile.

“Typical” is a bit misleading. The holiday celebration probably seemed like any other to the family members and friends at the Grubbs’ home in Omaha last November. But to Greiner and fellow non-family member Shauna Freeman, who flew in from California, the experience was something different. They were celebrating Thanksgiving with their favorite band, Omaha rockers Grasshopper Takeover, at the lead singer’s parents’ house.

“At first, it was hard to separate the fact that this wasn’t the guy, Curt Grubb, that I’ve idolized for so long,” Greiner says. “This is Curt Grubb with his family; it was a whole other situation.”

Greiner and Freeman owe it all to the fact that, for over a year, they have been devoted members of the “Ambassadors of Sound,” GTO’s volunteer street team — a growing phenomenon of grassroots music promotion used by unsigned and major label bands alike.

A street team is “a group of fans who desperately think that the band they are working for has the potential, the talent, the drive to blow up the country,” Greiner says. “And they want to help out in any possible way.” Street teams pass out fliers, CDs, and just about anything to get people interested in the bands they’re promoting. Greiner, sophomore in pre-journalism and mass communication, has also been a member of “The Champions,” the 2 Skinnee J’s street team, for about two years, and was recently recruited by the Urge.

Fellow street teamers agree with Greiner. “I
think a street team is a group of friends and fans that love the music and believe in the band, that want to spread the word to other people," says Rachel Kritenbrink, GTO street team member. "Their function is definitely to spread the word of the band and introduce the music to more people."

High school and college students — the groups most likely to populate street teams — are the agents through which smaller bands attempt to accomplish with much less capital the same goals as a mass-marketing campaign by a giant record label. "They understand what their peers like, what works, and what doesn't work," says Eddie Eyeball, guitarist for hip-hop funk rockers 2 Skinnee J's. "They know the language, they know the vibe, they know how to get the point across. I find that street teams are a great litmus test for a band."

There are usually about two members in each major city, and both New York's J's and GTO now have 150-member street teams, a far cry from the four-member team GTO initially boasted. Rather than paying for airplay, album] is released, street teamers will be armed mostly with stickers, posters, and fliers," says Rob (who prefers to keep his last name secret for security purposes), ringmaster of a street team for the 2 Skinnee J's. "Once the new album is released, they will be armed with CD singles for the current radio hit, if one exists, a list of local radio stations playing the single, a flier with the album cover or band logo on it, that type of gear."

Street team members follow a formula. They post fliers and posters when a band is coming to their town, bring promo copies of the CD to radio stations, newspapers, and local shows heading out from a show. In addition, street teamers also post information on message boards on the Internet and on fan sites of similar bands.

"The function of a street team is to create a buzz about a specific band," Rob says. "Posting fliers with a picture of the album cover for instance does this: If someone sees this flier in passing some day while browsing the local music store, they may run across the actual CD and say, 'I've seen this before' or 'This is what was on that poster.' Basically, any way you look at it, music goes are possibly reminded of the 2 Skinnee J's, which helps in any way. Whether it be verbal, by sight, by a slogan or anything else that may trigger a sense, the job has been done."

Music needs to travel from the artists who create it to the people who would potentially purchase records.

"For up-and-coming acts, it's really competitive," Eyeball says. "It's really a marketplace; regardless of how artistically creative you are, you're trying to sell your record. In this market, a band needs every advantage it can get."

This is why a band wouldn't just dash on over to the nearest radio station, hand a demo CD to a DJ, and wait to hear their latest single in heavy rotation. There are thousands of other bands attempting to accomplish the same thing. Musicians need promotion, or no one will hear them.

And one of the most popular alternate methods of selling a band is the volunteer street team, although they're not necessary for every act. "I don't think 'N Sync needs a street team," Eyeball says. "In the case of corporate-driven bands, record companies generally provide the needed support. But smaller bands lack that monetary muscle and must look elsewhere."

"[The street team] really helps, especially at the level where the J's are at, because we don't have a monstrous, huge marketing budget behind us that Papa Roach has," Eyeball says. "I think street teams are the most valuable resource for any band, especially any independent band," says Grubb, GTO singer/songwriter/guitarist. And some bands do explode with the help of their street team. "It's extremely integral in our growth," says Chester Bennington, vocal-
promoting.”

As free labor—can’t really find any major occasional ends up on eBay, bands don’t job, not every fan of 2 Skinne J’s or who become street team members.

“I’ve street team is doing, or not doing, and you on the street about bands is always a good results.”

Still, the bands know and appreciate the work their teams do. “The street team kids bust their asses to get out there to tell people and their friends about the band and pass out tapes at shows and stuff,” Bennington says. And bands such as GTO, 2 Skinne J’s, and Los Angeles’ Linkin Park put a lot of trust in their dedicated fans. “You don’t want to send them 100 posters and find out they wallpapered their room with them,” Eyeball says. “You want to make sure they go out and put up the posters to help promote whatever we’re promoting.”

Even though a random promo CD or poster occasionally ends up on eBay, bands don’t tend to worry about wasting their money. “I’ve never met a fan who was out to scam us,” Eyeball says. “They just didn’t know what they were getting themselves into or they didn’t plan properly.”

Bands and even labels — who see the teams as free labor — can’t really find any major problems with street teams. “The only negative is that you can’t really control what the street team is doing, or not doing, and you can’t really gauge the results,” says Peter Raspler, management for 311. “Positive word on the street about bands is always a good thing.”

Even though street teaming isn’t a full-time job, not every fan of 2 Skinne J’s or GTO is fighting for the chance to sign up. The fans who are dedicated to the band — the fans who love every song and every lyric and all the band members — are typically the ones who become street team members. “I do it because I love the music and they love the music — also because I love GTO,” says Kritenbrink.

Greiner echoes her statements. “I do want them to reach the famous, multi-platinum status,” she says. “I especially want it for them because over this time I’ve gotten to know them personally so well that I want nothing but the best for these guys because I know how hard they work, personally, and how much they want that.”

It is most likely this passion that leads to the intimate relationships many volunteer street team members have with the bands they promote and love, a result treasured by both the musicians and street teamers. “For us, you get personal benefits,” Grubb says. “You get to meet people like Kristen and Shauna, people from all over the country that stay in touch with you and push your shit over the net. You come to know these people and you find out that they’re not unlike the other GTO fans. It’s cool to see a common thread running through people via the music.”

Some bands, such as the 2 Skinne J’s, and labels employ professional street teams along with those who are volunteers. While volunteer street teams are founded on love, professional street teams are centered on money. Professional street team members might not even know the band they are promoting. They are usually hired for a certain purpose, usually to promote a band in a certain area at a certain time.

Corporate street teams began about seven or eight years ago, and have blossomed since. Steve Rifkin, an entrepreneur from Long Island, is at times credited as the founder of this type of street team. He started with hip-hop, doing many of the same things that GTO’s street teams do.

This sort of corporate street teaming doesn’t sit well with Greiner and other volunteer street teamers. She names streetbomb.com as an example. “They’ll send you a camera, they’ll send you a bunch of stuff, you put up the stuff, hand out the stuff, take pictures of it, give them proof that you did it, and they’ll pay you,” she says. “That’s defeating the whole purpose of what I, at least, consider street teams to be for.”

Volunteer street teamers get other benefits instead of money, something they see as infinitely more attractive. “Our humble form of

“I do it because I love the music and they love the music—also because I love GTO.”

—Rachel Kritenbrink, junior in animal ecology.

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