

Rolling Stone

Internet Web Stars

Published July 29, 2006

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For six years, "inspirational comedian" Judson Laipply traveled the country addressing high school crowds, church groups and corporate get-togethers, performing a bit called "The Evolution of Dance," a history of hoofing from Elvis to Eminem in under six minutes.

In April, Laipply posted "Evolution" on YouTube.com, the white-hot video-sharing site, and in less than two months the clip has been viewed more than 20 million times – making it far and away the most popular video in YouTube's six-month history and changing Laipply's life forever.

"It's been great for business," he says, adding that in addition to appearances on the Today show, E! and CNN, he's been contacted by hungry agents. Hollywood types inquiring about movie possibilities and TV execs about hosting his own show.

Producers, agents and talent scouts have wised up to the Net's potential as a virtual Star Search. Increasingly, they are scouring blogs, humor sites and video portals for talent they can turn into the next Andy Milonakis, Dane Cook or Andy Samberg, all of whom parlayed their work on the Net into fame and fortune. Here's a look at three of the biggest successes so far.

MYSPACE: THE MOVIE: David Lehre still remembers his first million – the first million people, that is, who downloaded video "MySpace" The Movie." The twenty-one-year-old college dropout had been making short films since the tenth grade, but in January he decided to go after a bigger fish. "I said to myself, 'This is the movie that's going to bust open the door,'" he recalls. "It couldn't fail."

The result was a hilarious eleven-minute parody lampooning the social-networking site's weird cult of narcissism, which Lehre posted on his personal Web page. Once it found its way on to YouTube, he was fielding interview requests and inquiries from agents. In the first three days, the clip received more than 1 million views.

"Posting the video on one bulletin was all it took," says Lehre. "Within a week, everything I'd ever wanted came true."

Since "MySpace: THE MOVIE" went live, Lehre has been offered a development deal with MTV and is in "serious talks" with Fox. "I've been offered to direct feature films, TV shows," Lehre happily reports. "I'm even auditioning for a few movies."

RED VS. BLUE: For Michael Burns and Geoff Ramsey, viral success came by chance. In 2000, they helped start Drunkgamers.com – the premise: Review video games while drunk! – hoping to score some swag.

"Turns out companies didn't want their products associated with drunk idiots," says Ramsey.

Instead, Burns started adding voice-overs to Halo, which became a hit with the game's cultlike following. So he and his friends started Red vs. Blue, lending hysterical

dialogue to other video-game characters. Within six weeks, viewership had soared from thirty-five to 500,000.

When they later received a call from Microsoft, whose subsidiary Bungie Studios developed Halo, a lecture on copyright infringement seemed imminent. Instead, the software giant hired them to make Xbox ads. Barenaked Ladies also had the guys create some exclusive videos to play at their concerts. In 2003, they formed their own company, Rooster Teeth Productions, and last year they quit their jobs to produce their videos full time. Each video – they're on their seventy-seventh – is downloaded by a million people a week. Now they're mulling film and TV offers.

"Taking your product and posting it for free sounds like the worst business model of all time," says Burns. "But that's how we were able to find an audience and eventually leapfrog that whole distribution hurdle."

SHINING: In 2005, Ryan Ryang, 25, was working as a film editor's assistant in Manhattan when he came across a contest sponsored by the Association of Independent Creative Editors. The challenge? Reimagine a classic film trailer in another genre.

Using Peter Gabriel's "Solsbury Hill" as a soundtrack, Ryang reconstructed Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* as "Shining," a family film about a man's attempts to bond with his stepson. Ryang won the contest and sent the clip to two friends; the next thing he knew it was on iFilm.com.

By the following week, Ryang had received hundreds of emails and a call from a vice president at Warner Bros., which owns the rights to the Jack Nicholson film. "He said, 'Everyone in Hollywood is e-mailing your trailer around.' He said if I ever have some creative ideas, I should let him know."

Ryang recently edited the video for Death Cab for Cutie's "Stable Song" and is being pursued by managers at CAA, ICM and Paradigm.

Of course, not everyone was so tickled by Ryang's work. He hit a firewall when the Independent Spirit Awards hired him to spoof trailers for its televised ceremony in March (he turned Universal's *The Fast and the Furious* into a homoerotic drama called "The Fast and the Curious" and David Lynch's dark, surrealist drama *Blue Velvet* into a wacky comedy). Lynch and Universal refused to release the rights, and IFC couldn't broadcast Ryang's efforts. Of course, in this day and age, it didn't matter: You can still find the rejected clips online.