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This One's on Them

By JOHN JURGENSEN

Most music fans convey their loyalty to a band through the T-shirts they wear and the Facebook pages they whip up. One group of motivated Nine Inch Nail fans produced a concert video that they shot, edited and distributed themselves. And now they want to offer their growing expertise in guerrilla production to other bands.

Working under the moniker This One Is On Us, the NIN fans organized online and converged on a 2008 concert in Las Vegas by the veteran hard rock group. Using their own personal video cameras, they captured the show from about 30 different perspectives, in the process evading a few overzealous security guards. Then, calling on the expertise of the group's roughly 50 volunteers, they spent months collaborating to edit the video, produce accompanying liner notes and artwork, and put the results out to the band's followers via thousands of DVDs and downloads.



Watch a clip from a fan shot video of Nine Inch Nails performing live. Produced by thisoneisonus.org.

This was no black-market bootleg. This One Is On Us [TOIOU] is a not-for-profit venture. Indeed, the group says it's just following the lead of Nine Inch Nails itself. The band's founder and front man, Trent Reznor, has been one of the biggest proponents of change in the music industry, advocating a shift away from the system in which record labels dictate how music is released. Mr. Reznor has experimented with various strategies, including releasing music under a Creative Commons license. In 2008 (after splitting from a major label himself) Mr. Reznor released a new 10-track album for free online with the statement, "This one's on me."

To build on that sentiment, the fan group put its video project into motion. Around the same time, Nine Inch Nails tried a video experiment of its own: In early 2009, about two-hour's worth of professionally shot, high-definition concert footage was leaked online. Linking to it, Mr. Reznor wrote, "I'll bet some enterprising fans could assemble something pretty cool."

Using this raw footage, which included highlights from three shows on the 2008 "Lights In The Sky" tour, TOIOU compiled a stand-alone concert DVD, which it released last week as "The Gift." With an asking price of \$10 each to cover the cost of producing and shipping the discs, the first run of 1,000 DVDs has sold out, says Clive Holloway, a founding member of TOIOU. (The group has shipped about 5,000 copies of a more lavish three-disc set that it released last summer, which includes the fan-shot Las Vegas show.)

Mr. Holloway, a 40-year-old computer programmer living in Wallingford, Conn., acknowledges that he and his collaborators are picking their way through a "legal gray area." While their project has the tacit approval of Nine Inch Nails, some of the music featured on their DVDs is officially controlled by other rights holders, including Universal Music, which originally released much of the NIN catalogue. TOIOU is hoping such rights holders either won't notice the video project or--because the fans aren't trying to turn a profit--will look the other way, especially now that fan-made content has been embraced as a powerful promotional tool.

"On one side, there's our little hippie heaven where we want to give away the music for free, and on the other side is this policy of draconian lockdown that many of the labels have. Somewhere there should be a middle ground where both sides can be happy," Mr. Holloway says, adding, "It's a real fine line we're walking with [the DVDs] and we don't want to upset anyone. It's definitely been a little nerve-wracking."

Jim Guerinot, who manages Nine Inch Nails, wasn't aware of the TOIOU videos—there are too many fan-generated NIN projects to keep track of, he says. In general, however, he says such efforts mesh with Mr. Reznor's broader philosophy. "If a fan shoots a concert video and they want to put it online or up on YouTube, he'd say 'That's awesome.' Now, if someone wants to sell that same video for \$29.99, he's got a big problem with that. That's not playing by the rules." Indeed, the professionally shot footage that NIN leaked online was meant as "a starter kit" for such fan projects, Mr. Guerinot says.

Through donations and the nominal fees charged for its DVDs, TOIOU has been able to cover its expenses, which Mr. Holloway says amounted to about \$40,000. With members spread out from New Zealand to Quebec, the team hit its share of snags. For instance, the video they gathered themselves in Las Vegas was shot on an array of different camera models and digital formats, by audience members with wildly varying camera skills.

Having come through the learning curve intact, TOIOU is weighing how to offer its services to other fan communities. The team has its first freelance gig of sorts this weekend with the Dresden Dolls, a punk cabaret act that has toured previously with NIN. The band leapt at the TOIOU's team offer to shoot a reunion concert at New York City's Irving Plaza theater on Halloween, says Sean Francis, the Dresden Dolls' director of new media. He says the band owes much of its cult popularity to a longstanding policy allowing fans to swap audio and video concert recordings; TOIOU is "just taking the extra step to comb through and combine the footage of 25 different people and do something cool with it."

With the band's cooperation, the DIY camera team expects to get access to the camera mounts inside Irving Plaza that are usually reserved for professional crews, says Dave Yuhnke, the 35-year-old software engineer who is leading the shoot. He's taking an overnight bus from his home in Buffalo to meet his fellow cameramen (most for the first time in person) at a diner before the concert. He says it's possible that other artists and even record labels could use the TOIOU blueprint to help deepen their relationships with fans: "The concept is open to interpretation."

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