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GIANT TRACKS

How 42 Musicians Made
A CD On The Net

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BY DAN BARRETT

Online Collaboration:

The Making of *Giant Tracks*

Have you ever wanted to release an independent album? Here's how one group did it via the Internet, using email and Web pages to share ideas, music, and cover art. This unique collaboration enabled completely unknown musicians, working in their homes, to interact with established musicians in the industry, including Grammy winner Kevin Gilbert and ex-Zappa guitarist Mike Keneally. If you'd like to attempt a similar project yourself, reading about our experiences should get you started.
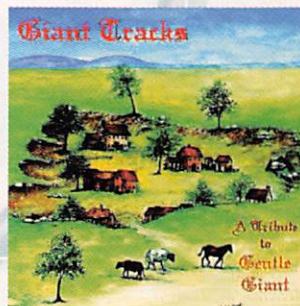
Welcome to *Giant Tracks*: a grass roots music project for the 1990s. Forty-two Internet musicians, initially strangers, together planned, recorded, released, and marketed an album on the Net without meeting in the flesh. This article explains how you can do a similar project yourself: gather musical collaborators online, set up communication channels, plan and share music, handle group finances, design and produce the final product, and market it on the Net.

Giant Tracks was my second large musical collaboration online. The first was spearheaded back in 1990 by Mike Metlay, now an assistant editor at *Recording* magazine, and involved eight electronic musicians in two countries. The resulting CD was *Bandwidth* by Team Metlay (Atomic City Records, www.pd.net/atomic-city) which, to my knowledge, was the first commercially available album produced in this fashion.

Why Online?

Making music on the Net is no substitute for collaborating in person, but this working style has some clear benefits. For one, it lets you work with musicians whom you otherwise wouldn't

Dan Barrett, a musician and software engineer, has been an active Internet participant since 1985. He is currently working with Gentle Giant to market their new CD, Under Construction, *via the Internet. Stay tuned.*

meet. *Giant Tracks* had participants from the U.S., Canada, Italy, and Brazil, and the influence of foreign cultures may be heard in the music. Working via the Net is also very cost-effective. It's much cheaper than long-distance telephone calls, way faster than postal letters, and can provide worldwide exposure for under $20 per month. Most of all, online collaboration and marketing can free you from the shackles of the music industry. Record executives and written contracts aren't needed to make an album: just a home studio, talent, and enough money to press a CD. And if you're collaborating, you needn't foot the whole bill yourself. We made a 2-CD album for $300 per participant, and it would have been $200 if we hadn't licensed other artists' music. →

Online Collaboration:

Birth of a Realization

The project began when Rob Rosen, a project manager at Sun Microsystems in California and a part-time musician, suggested to a half-dozen Net friends that it might be fun to record some music together. We were all participants in an Internet mailing list devoted to Gentle Giant ("GG"), a progressive rock band from the 1970s. Rob thought that GG's intricate, complex music would work well in more modern arrangements, so he asked, "Anybody want to record some cover tunes?"

Within 24 hours, one of the participants (Tom Dubé at the College of the Holy Cross) had created an electronic mailing list for the project. This permitted each of us to broadcast email messages to the whole group by sending them to a single address at *holycross.edu*, a computer at Holy Cross. Email became the primary way we interacted; at the height of the project, we shared 10–20 messages per day.

I strongly recommend using a single, central mailing list when collaborating. Without one, everybody must keep track of everyone else's email addresses, which is a major hassle (and error-prone). Ask your online service provider for help in creating such a list.

Gathering Participants

Our initial group had just seven members. Assuming one piece per person, we couldn't fill an album, so we started spreading the word. At first, we contacted acquaintances by email. One of the next steps was to place a project announcement on the Gentle Giant Web site, which I maintain, and this attracted more participants. Before we knew it, several dozen people were on the mailing list, eager to make music.

Over the years, I'd occasionally received email from professionals in the music industry who were GG fans. Might it be possible, I wondered, that some of them would join our project? Email seemed the ideal way to ask, since it's pretty

Supervising producer John Hagewood receives delivery of 1,000 copies of Giant Tracks.

informal and unobtrusive. I took a deep breath and sent some polite requests. The response was surprisingly positive. Almost all were enthusiastic about the idea; and though many didn't have time to participate, a few did, like guitarist Mike Keneally and Chapman Stick wizard Steve Hahn. The biggest surprise was when Grammy winner Kevin Gilbert showed up, having heard about the project from Keneally. Kevin contributed an original piece in the style of Gentle Giant, as well as much advice and humor on the mailing list. (Tragically, Kevin passed away in the middle of the project; we dedicated *Giant Tracks* to his memory.)

The Internet makes it easy to communicate with people you barely know. Both amateur and professional collaborators can be found in newsgroups like rec.music.makers.synth, mailing lists devoted to favorite artists (see www.ubl.com), and chat groups. I can't promise that Oasis or Alanis Morissette will come beating on your door, but plenty of lesser-known professionals are online. Many artists, especially those on smaller labels, provide an email address in their CD booklets or on their official Web pages. If you have talent and drive, the Net can provide a direct channel to the pros.

Decision Making

As our group's population climbed, we were planning furiously. Did we want to make a private album for fun, or should we try to sell it? Cassette or CD? How many copies? Form our own label, or try an existing independent or major label? Should we include all the music submitted or just the best pieces? Should we hire an outside engineer? Who should have final say over a song: the creator, the group, or an outside producer? How the heck were we going to pay for all this?

If the discussion sounds chaotic, believe me, it was! But that was half the fun. The Internet gave everyone an equal voice in the creative process. When it came time to make tough decisions, we voted. One person created a list

of questions with multiple-choice responses, posted it to the mailing list, received people's votes by private email, and tallied and posted the results. This is not a traditional way for musicians to work, but the process succeeded numerous times.

In our case, we voted for a commercial tribute album containing all of the material to be submitted (which would require two CDs) and to encourage unusual and experimental rearrangements of the original songs. To retain as much artistic control as possible, we decided to release the album on a private label, HyberNation Music, created by participant John Hagewood of Nashville. We'd produce our own pieces separately and later hire an engineer to master
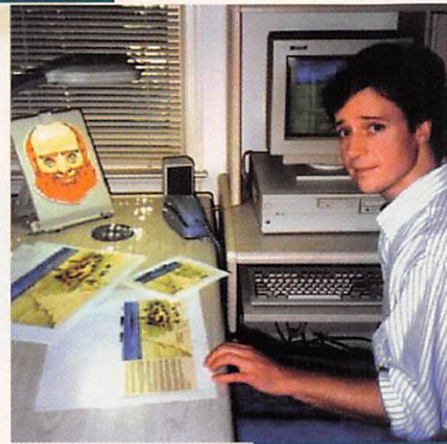

Fig. 1. Graphic artist Phil Beane did the booklet layout.

the whole album. Concerning finances, our major goal was to make music, with money being secondary. If we broke even or made a little profit, that would be fine, but mainly we wanted exposure. Each person pledged as much money as he/she was willing to contribute, and it totaled enough to master and press 1,000 two-CD sets.

Of course, decisions weren't really this straightforward. (Can you imagine 42 musicians agreeing on anything?) We argued, compromised, backtracked, called for revotes, and argued some more, but always with the sense that this project was possible.

As the project moved forward, it became apparent that some tasks needed leaders — to collect the recordings, investigate CD duplicators, work with the mastering engineer, track the finances, license the material from Gentle Giant, prepare the artwork for printing, and conduct sales and marketing. In most cases, someone volunteered, and other times we chose a task leader by vote. The most important part, however, was identifying these tasks in the first

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GIANT TRACKS

Label
HyberNation Music

Web
www.quackwatch.com/GT

Email
dbarrett@ora.com

Orders
Daniel Barrett – GT
P.O. Box 66004
Auburndale, MA 02166-0001

Price
$16.50 postpaid in USA, payable to Daniel Barrett. See the Web site for more details.

Online Collaboration:

Disc Two (51 minutes)

Track	Title (Click for liner notes)	Artist (Click to email)	Listen (Click to play)	
1	*Just The Same*	Glass Haus	550K	125K
2	*I'm Turning Around*	Arlo West	900K	200K
3	*Betcha Thought We Couldn't Do It*	Alan Wiseman	400K	100K
4	*Wreck*	Pangaea	900K	225K
5	*River*	Rob Rosen	750K	175K
6	*Thank You*	Glen Burg	600K	150K
7	*Give It Back*	Eclipse	400K	100K
8	*Two Weeks in Spain*	Bug Choir	350K	75K
9	*Number One*	Dan Barrett	400K	100K
10	*In Memory of Gentle Giant, Part 2*	Gustavo Matamoros	725K	175K

Fig. 2. Audio excerpts on the Web in 8-bit and 16-bit resolution.

place so we wouldn't be surprised, months down the road, by someone crying: "Hey, didn't anybody *do* that already?"

Music Making

Some of us recorded pieces by ourselves or as part of a local band, while others collaborated with distant partners. For example, while living in Massachusetts I worked by email with a New Hampshire band, led by Tom Benson, to cover Gentle Giant's "Just the Same" from *Free Hand*. First, Tom and I agreed by email on a musical arrangement based on the studio and live versions of the original song. Then I created the keyboard parts with a sequencer while Tom did the drum machine work. I emailed a MIDI file to Tom, but since MIDI does not include audio, I also mailed a cassette so he could hear my patches and approximate them on his keyboard rig. Tom synced the synth and drum parts and mailed me a cassette of the results to approve.

Finally he invited the rest of the band to record the bass, guitar, sax, violin, and vocals on multitrack tape in his studio.

In a similar manner, everybody finished their pieces over the course of a year, most of us working in home MIDI studios. We had initially set a submission deadline of a few months, but this proved *much* too optimistic for people with day jobs and families. As each piece was completed, the performer sent a DAT or cassette copy to John Hagewood. To share the music, John sampled a few seconds of each piece to create an audio "collage," which he placed on his Web site as a .WAV file. This was quite the teaser and our first glimpse of each other's work. Meanwhile, John laboriously copied all the pieces to a single cassette and mailed duplicates to everybody at his expense. →

MECHANICAL LICENSES

Before you cover the music of another artist, such as Gentle Giant, a *mechanical license* is required. Licenses are usually easy to get: Just pay the standard licensing fee, which is 6.95 cents for up to five minutes or 1.1 cents per minute for longer songs, per copy made. Mechanical licenses are granted by a song's publisher, not the composer or record label. ASCAP (www.ascap.com), BMI (www.bmi.com), and the Harry Fox Agency (www.nmpa.org/hfa.html) provide search engines for looking up publishers. When applying for a license, you'll need the song's title, composer(s), and the exact length of your cover version. On each copy made, you must include the printed writer/publisher credits specified by the publisher.

When contacting ASCAP or BMI for help in finding a publisher, ask for the Index Department. When calling the publisher (often the record company) to request a mechanical license, ask for the Copyright department. The publisher will provide instructions about how and where to send payment.

Mechanical licenses for *Giant Tracks* were complex because nobody was sure who the publishers were. One song, in fact, had never been published in the U.S., and it took several months for Chrysalis Songs to verify that they owned the rights. Don't leave licensing to the last minute! In addition, several of our pieces were medleys of Gentle Giant material. Instead of paying a separate licensing fee for each excerpt, I negotiated to have each medley treated as a single song. (Apparently this is a common arrangement.)

Online Collaboration:

The result was astonishing. After more than a year of effort, we were finally holding in our hands the fruits of our labor — over 100 minutes of music! We'd really done it: A bunch of strangers had become a band. The mailing list heated up with wild praises and honest criticisms of each others' work. Some of the critiques led people to modify, remaster, or even completely re-record their submissions. Eventually, people were satisfied with their pieces, and the time arrived to turn them into a product.

Production

We decided on a professional mastering house instead of trying to do the job in one of our personal studios. The music was mastered directly to PMCD discs (a medium that can be used directly by a duplicator to press CDs) plus a pair of CD-Rs so we could check the job ourselves. The hired engineer (Mack Evans of Magnetic Technology, Nashville) did an admirable job getting a consistent sound from 21 diverse, complex pieces from 21 different studios. Be sure to allow extra time if you use outside mastering in your own projects.

Meanwhile, several participants had proposed ideas for the cover art. We decided to vote for the best. Prototype pictures were created, digitized, and placed on the Web for all to view. Each participant then emailed his/her vote to the vote taker. (We could have made a fancy Web page with checkboxes and a "Send Vote" button, but went with old fashioned email instead.) Without the Net, this process would have taken weeks instead of days.

Producing the cover art was truly an international endeavor. Glen Burg, a student in Quebec, invented the concept (a giant footprint containing a village), which Patricia Deschamps of Brazil painted with watercolors. The painting was digitally scanned in Brazil and emailed to Phil Beane
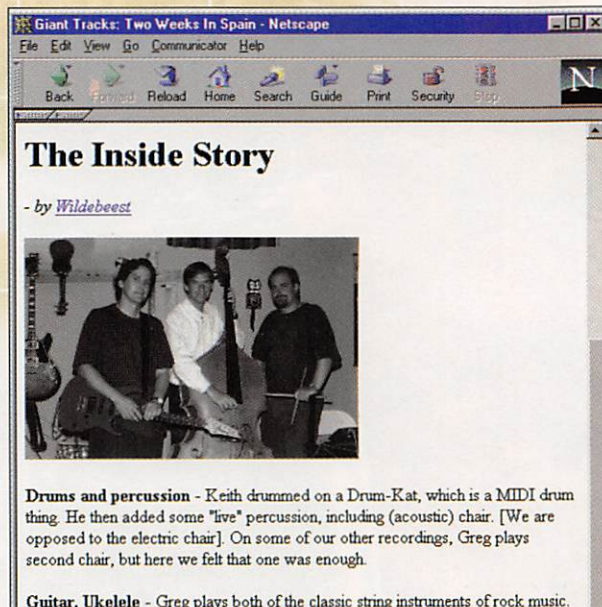

The Inside Story
- by Wildebeest

Drums and percussion - Keith drummed on a Drum-Kat, which is a MIDI drum thing. He then added some "live" percussion, including (acoustic) chair. [We are opposed to the electric chair]. On some of our other recordings, Greg plays second chair, but here we felt that one was enough.

Guitar, Ukelele - Greg plays both of the classic string instruments of rock music.

Fig. 3. Extended liner notes for each piece were written by the artists and placed on the Web.

and Roger Eller in South Carolina, where they used Aldus Freehand and Adobe Photoshop on a PowerMac 8100 to edit the picture and add titles (see Figure 1, page 48). They then used a high-end Barco graphics workstation to add crop marks and color bars necessary for reproduction. (This could have been done on the Mac, but the Barco was made for such tasks.) Other artwork, track lists, and liner notes were also created and processed. The finished product was output to film and sent to a printing service in Nashville, where it became a six-page booklet, a tray card, and two CD labels.

Finances and Trust

In the midst of recording, mastering, and painting, it was suddenly time to spend money as a group. Since we were spread out on three continents and had never met face to face, this was a real concern. How should payments be handled? Who could be trusted to collect and hold the funds? Well, over the year we'd "known" each other, a true community had formed. Trust just happened automatically. When John Hagewood asked each of us to send $65 to him for mastering, we just did it. Some folks procrastinated, and one of the members was away on tour, but

COSTS AND REVENUES

ITEM	COST	ADDITIONAL INFO
CD mastering	$1,350	–
Duplication & printing	$2,650	1,000 two-CD sets, six-page color booklets.
Mechanical licenses	$1,625	Omit for original music.
UPC symbol	$300	–
Shipping	$150	In addition to postage paid by buyers.
P.O. Box	$25	For six months.
Total costs	$6,100	–
Revenues	$11,000	880 sold, 120 giveaways.

Note: A one-CD album with all original material (no licensing fees) would cost $2,000 less.

Online Collaboration:

eventually all the money all showed up, and not a single check bounced. Very cool.

Things worked similarly for the mechanical licensing fees (see sidebar, page 50); everyone sent their share to me, and I paid PolyGram and Chrysalis. For CD duplication, each of us sent $130 to John again. Well, sort of. A few members ran into financial trouble and could not afford to pay their share. In any large group, this is bound to happen sometime. The group's reaction was great: Participants started making private financial arrangements with one another. Some folks lent money to others, and every penny got paid back. Another artist "bought out" one group by paying their licensing fees in exchange for a percentage of their revenues. Overall, we came through for one another, just like a community should.

Of course, we didn't start spending money until we had a plan for earning it back. We held a vote on what to do with the revenues: Split them evenly? Donate some to Gentle Giant? To charity? And how many free copies should we each get? In the end, we voted to split the money evenly, including an equal portion donated to Kevin Gilbert's estate in his memory, and to give five free CDs to each participant. A limited number of additional CDs could be purchased by members at a discount, and thereafter at full price. (As sales became profitable, we relaxed these restrictions and let all members buy as many discounted copies as they liked.)

An overview of our finances is in the sidebar on page 52. When handling financial issues in a large, distributed group, make your calculations *excruciatingly* clear. Make sure everyone understands where every penny is going, especially if you're working without a contract, as we were. Maybe a contract would have been a smart idea, but believe it or not, the idea *never came up* in two years of discussion. For 42 people with a shared vision, simple trust was enough.

Marketing and Sales
Through voting, we decided how *Giant Tracks* would be marketed and sold. Since I had more experience with Internet marketing, I volunteered to do most of it, using the techniques covered in my August '96 *Net Smarts* column. For advertising and sales, I designed a Web site with sampled excerpts of every track (see Figure 2, page 50), created using the Win95 Sound Recorder utility to sample directly from our CD-Rs. This type of Web site lets potential customers try before they buy. Each artist also submitted extended liner notes for their piece, which I turned into Web pages (see Figure 3, page 52). Other pages included ordering information, prices, and shipping costs. My father graciously offered free space on his Internet site, so the Web pages cost us nothing to maintain. (In a big group of Net users, someone will surely have Web space available. Otherwise expect to pay $20 per month for a site.)

When the site was complete, we announced its existence in the GG mailing list, several other lists devoted to progressive rock, and a half dozen Usenet newsgroups. We also sent polite ads by email to a dozen progressive rock CD vendors. We did not use "spamming" to broadcast

millions of junk messages to uninterested people — just short and informative messages in *relevant* forums. I also asked maintainers of related Web sites to link to ours.

For receiving orders, I rented a post office box. As each order arrived, I kept careful records with Microsoft Excel (always keeping two backup copies of the spreadsheet) and did all the packing and shipping. I recommend self-sealing mailers to avoid the need for tape and staples; in bulk, they cost less than 20 cents apiece. Larger orders were shipped in used boxes found at home or work. To make things easier, I printed mailing labels with Microsoft Access, bought a postal scale and a self-inking "First Class" stamp, and purchased postage stamps in quantity. (If licking stamps gets cumbersome, consider renting a postal meter.) For foreign orders, I recommend picking up a stack of customs forms from the post office and filling them out in advance. It saves tons of time.

In order to sell merchandise legally, I had to get a business license ($10) from my home state of Massachusetts so I could collect sales tax. The application procedure is different in every state, so check with your local department of revenue. I decided to accept checks and money orders only, since setting up a credit card system on the Web would cost money, and my online service provider didn't support it anyway. (And after shipping over 1,200 CDs, not a single check has bounced. Progressive rockers are an honest bunch!)

In order to make our CDs acceptable to stores, John Hagewood purchased a UPC symbol by applying to the Universal Code Council (phone 937-435-3870). The procedure costs $300 and takes 2–3 weeks, or you can pay extra for a rush job. A few participants put *Giant Tracks* into local CD shops on consignment, risking their own money. The discs sold.

Inevitably, some CDs were defective. Our policy was to provide 100% satisfaction: If a CD wouldn't play, or if a customer claimed that an order never arrived, we shipped a new copy, no questions asked.

Wrap Up
Overall, the *Giant Tracks* project was successful and brought us tremendous satisfaction. Besides the album release, the high point came when several members of Gentle Giant heard the album and sent compliments. We were blown away. The Internet made it possible to pay tribute to our favorite artists and actually have an impact.

We didn't make much money — about $250 profit per participant — but big bucks were never our intent. Music was the main goal. Larger profits are possible if you're recording original music (no license fees) and/or charge more for the product (we intentionally kept the price low). Also, a solo artist is likely to make a lot more money than a group, but won't have the benefits of collaborating online.

In the 1990s, online musical collaboration has become practical, effective, and a lot of fun. If you want to reach a large audience with your music but don't want to deal with the recording industry, it's a great way to work. Why not give it a try?