Home on the page: a virtual place of music community

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Introduction

In 1996 a small independent record company, Oh Boy Records, set up a ‘chat page’ on its web site where fans of its major artist, John Prine, could exchange typed messages in close to real time. The page became a place where fans could ‘virtually’ meet to get information or exchange experiences and opinions relating to Prine. Through the chat page a fan community was established, in that the chat page became a meeting place that could not exist within real-world boundaries. John Prine has had some recent commercial and critical success, but Prine fans are still a minority in most geographic communities, and are, to some extent, isolated by the lifestyle of their 35-plus age group. It could be said that the one and only place where Prine fans could regularly gather was online through the chat page provided by the record company. The Oh Boy Record’s homepage became a symbolic anchor – a recognition of shared experience and a sign of community. While music communities are usually associated with ‘local’ places, ‘the notion of “communities” or localities as bounded geographic entities increasingly has been seen as problematic to the study of music in urban settings’ (Gay 1995, p. 123). Communities exist through dialogue; through an exchange of past social history and current social interaction. Developments in communication technology have contributed to a ‘deterritorialization of space within a global cultural economy’ (Fenster 1995, p. 85), to a point where ‘local’ is no longer disconnected from ‘global’ and the identity of a specific place is located both in ‘demarcated physical space’ and in ‘clusters of interaction’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p. 8). In the absence of a communal physical space, the Oh Boy home page became the site of a ‘local’ Prine community.

The ritual exchange of information online allows fans a feeling of community between themselves and between them and the performer, facilitating a belief in a commonality, although they are dispersed geographically and disparate in needs and experiences. An electronic place in which to ‘gather’ enables a direct link between fans, and even makes possible a direct connection between fans and performers. The link benefits not only the fans, but also the performer and the record company, in that it provides a connection to a central focus of the performer and the producer, the marketplace. However, an online community is subject to the interpersonal dynamics of any face-to-face community, as well as the communicative and social effects of possible anonymity.

Early in 1998 a small group began to dominate the page with ‘off-topic’ chat, and someone began making abusive and offensive comments anonymously on the page, resulting in a rapidly escalating exchange of vitriol, which included criticism of John Prine. Oh Boy responded by posting a disclaimer, briefly filtering the exchanges, and then closing the chat page.
The place of performers and consumers

The commodification of popular music following the development of recording technology inscribed a division between music producers and music consumers: ‘Read any pop history and you’ll find in the outline the same sorry tale. However the story starts, and whatever the author’s politics, the industrialization of pop music means a shift from active musical production to passive pop consumption’ (Frith 1987, p. 54). The decline of folk music communities, where music was an active, incorporative practice, and their replacement with a music product that was merely consumed, was ‘a classic case of what Marx called alienation: something human is taken from us and returned in the form of a commodity’ (Frith 1987, p. 54). The commercialisation of popular music was accompanied by a move in the ‘place’ of music from the public performance space to the private listening space: increasing the isolation of the consumer from the musician and from other consumers.

Despite the increasing gap between music production and consumption, fans retain a belief in the bonds between themselves and the performers, though these links remain largely illusory: ‘Fans have inherited the belief that listening to someone’s music means getting to know them, getting access to their souls and sensibilities. From the folk tradition they’ve adopted the argument that musicians can represent them, articulating the immediate needs and experiences of a group or cult or community’ (Frith 1986, p. 267). Fans feel that they ‘know’ the musician and that the musician speaks for them. Music contributes to the way people make sense of their lives, in that it provides symbolic categories into which fans can organise the ongoing stream of events that constitute their personal, social and cultural life. Music’s role as an agent of socialisation is partly dependent upon the maintenance of the performer’s ‘authority’ through a direct connection between the star and the fan, which enables the fan’s knowledge of the musician and the musician’s representation of the listener’s experience. When recording technology disrupted the physical line between performer and fan, symbolic links were developed to maintain a sense of commonality between performer and listener, and create a community among fans.

John Prine’s music is firmly rooted in a folk tradition and is essentially a ‘music of the people’: ‘The peculiar thing about John Prine’s songs is that they’re always accessible and always personal. . . . Ultimately they speak about you and me’ (Dawson 1976). Prine plays small venues like clubs and bars, he occasionally plays solo, and when he plays with a band he does at least one segment alone and emphasises audience contact: ‘there’s a part of the show where it is just me. I let the fans throw songs at me from the audience, and I sing them’ (Puckett 1995, p. 15). The implied connection between Prine and his fans was born in folk music, fostered by the lyrics of the songs and the musician’s style, and actively maintained by both Prine and his audience.

John Prine

Chicago postman, John Prine, started playing his songs on talent or open-mike nights at a local folk club, where he met Steve Goodman. Goodman had a gig opening for Kris Kristofferson and played one of John’s songs, then took Kristoffer-
son along to hear John play. Prine and Goodman were invited to New York to cut a demo for a record deal, and they went to see Kristofferson at the Bitter End music venue, where Prine did three songs at Kristofferson’s invitation. Jerry Wexler of Atlantic Records was in the audience and on the next day he offered Prine a recording contract. Prine released three albums with Atlantic, *John Prine* (1971); *Diamonds in the Rough* (1972) and *Sweet Revenge* (1973), which received positive reviews if not major sales. By 1975, Prine’s relationship with Atlantic was beginning to sour. Jerry Wexler was no longer actively involved, and Prine felt that he ‘couldn’t really communicate with Ahmet Ertegun [his Artist and Repertoire representative at Atlantic] all that well. He was hanging out with the Stones and Led Zeppelin and I just felt lost over there’ (*Oh Boy* 1998). Prine did not use Arif Mardin as producer on his fourth album, which brought his relationship with Atlantic to climax point, and he paid Atlantic to release him from his contract. The album, *Common Sense*, was not well received. If Prine was exploring the balance between country/folk and rock, the critics saw it as ‘playing away from his strengths’ and ‘losing faith with his audience’ (*Great Days* liner notes 1993). Atlantic released a ‘best of’ album, *Prime Prine*, in 1976. Pat Dawson’s liner notes for the album say, ‘There was never any thought of calling this collection ‘John Prine’s Greatest Hits’. Prine is a cult figure in the purest sense; and that’s really too bad.’

John Prine signed with Elektra/Asylum for a three record deal. *Bruised Orange*, released in 1978 after a three year hiatus, was both a critical and a minor commercial success, and in retrospect was labelled a ‘landmark’ in folk music. Prine went on to release *Pink Cadillac* in 1979 and *Storm Windows* in 1980. He had completed his obligation to Asylum and was in no hurry to enter into another similar commitment. As he says, ‘After I finished my recording obligations to Asylum Records in 1980, I just totally put on the brakes. I wanted to separate everything ‘cause I was really tired of mainly the business end of it. I was wondering where the fun was with the music, this thing that I took on as a hobby years earlier that I used to get so much out of long before I ever sang a song for anybody else except myself. I wanted to get back to doing that and then I wanted to redefine everything that I was doing for a living. If it meant that the only way I could enjoy taking the guitar down off the wall and sitting around playing, was to not be a recording artist, then I was wanting to do that.’ (*Oh Boy* 1998)


Oh Boy Records has since signed R.B. Morris (a poet and playwright turned rock singer), Heather Eatman, Donnie Fritts, and The Bis-quits (who took their name from having ‘quit the business’ of music).
John Prine Chat Page

The study of the John Prine Chat Page involved: a web survey form, the web address of which was publicised on the chat page and linked from the major John Prine fan page; a semi-structured email interview; and a qualitative analysis of exchanges on the chat page over a twelve-month period. Participants were self selected for the survey, which took the form of multiple choice questions plus an ‘any comment’ open question. Respondents clicked on the desired responses then clicked a submit button to return the survey. Internet provider addresses were automatically attached to identify any multiple responses. Participants who were willing to be interviewed were asked to give their email address. The interview consisted of a series of open-ended questions, plus an option to give additional information or opinions. Forty-seven people responded to the survey, twenty-one agreed to be interviewed, and seventeen responded to the interview questions.

Of the people who responded to the survey of the John Prine Chat Room users, 30 per cent were long-term users, having been part of the chat for more than twelve months, while 40 per cent had been involved for less than three months. Some 27 per cent chatted daily and 39 per cent visited the page at least once a week, with 34 per cent visiting less than once a week. A total of 39 per cent of the group described themselves as having an ‘average’ level of participation in the chat, both listening and contributing, while 16 per cent described themselves as ‘talking lots’ and 45 per cent as ‘mainly listening in’. Most of them (45 per cent), came across the chat page in a web-search for John Prine, or were told about the page by someone else (23 per cent).

While long term regular users were a minority of those responding to the survey, these data are consistent with other studies of electronic forums, which reveal ‘transient memberships; users’ preferences to be broadcasting recipients; and weak involvement in contributing messages’ (Rojo 1995). However, it is recognised that a small core of long-term, regular users and a balanced flow of new, or irregular participants guarantees both a consistent identity and an ongoing vitality for a forum: ‘The extent to which social relationships develop online seems to be influenced in part by the presence of a relatively few heavy users’ (Baym 1995, p. 158) and ‘it seems to be the case that most newsgroups have a small coterie of habitues . . . and in the patterns of their posts and replies one can find the traces of what we have come to call virtual community’ (McLaughlin et al. 1995, p. 93). A total of 60 per cent of the group who responded to the survey now considered as ‘friends’ people that they had met in the chat room, and of these twenty-eight people, nineteen keep in touch via phone, email or face-to-face meetings. The primary modes of use of the John Prine Chat Page were: socialising (70 per cent of those answering the survey reported using the page for general or social chat); exchanging music related ideas and experiences (41 per cent of respondents); and getting or providing music-related information (34 per cent indicated that they used the chat room as a source of information).

The Chat Page was used as a means of connection for John Prine fans, a minority group in most real-world communities. The chat page gave fans a sense of place, and with it an identity.

I really enjoy it, where I live most people have not even heard of Prine. (Survey)
I have been a Prine fan for 26 years. The Prine chat room lets me share my music tastes with others who agree with me. (Survey)
It is good to know there are so many people who appreciate John as much as I have for so long. (Chat Room 4 January 1998)

Connection does not necessarily lead to the development of community, and gathering in an online place is not automatically followed by the formation of social bonds. What electronic communication places do is provide an efficient form of social contact and allow us ‘to customise our social contacts from fragmented communities’ (Jones 1995, p. 16). They are socially produced places in which communities can develop, in that they are ‘passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that unite people who were physically separated’ (Stone 1991, p. 85). It is the ritual sharing of information that binds contacts into communities. Information sharing on the John Prine chat room was ritualised into a number of repeated exchanges. One category of exchange concerned contact with Prine: stories of how people first heard of his music, when and where they had seen him in concert, and of personal meetings or sightings. A second category was exchanges of Prine media ‘sightings’ where the man or his music appeared in film, television, newspapers or magazines. Another major category of exchanges was Prine trivia, where chatters asked often rhetorical questions, usually about song lyrics, but occasionally about Prine history or connections. A fourth conversation, repeated to the point of ritualisation, involved speculation about John’s appearance in the Chat Room.

Prine stories emphasised the link between the fans and the performer and established that link as the commonality between chatters. Everyone is able to tell the story of when they ‘discovered’ Prine’s music, others have stories of meeting him, or of particular connections with him, and many can exchange common tour or concert experiences.

I started listening in ’74, when my sister introduced me to his music. (Chat Room 31 March 1997)

In 1973 one of my husband’s friends moved into a house where someone left a JP 8 track behind. They had never heard of JP so they listened and the rest is history. (Chat Room 1 April 1998)

JP fan from Clarksville, Tn since 1972 when John’s first album was on WKDF, the rock station in Nashville. (Chat Room 2 March 1998)

John and Fiona got married on April 6, 1966 . . . My friends’ friends went to the wedding and had photos. (Chat Room 20 May 1997)

Got to talk to John Saturday night, after the Bee Cave performance (Austin). (Chat Room 31 March 1997)

The exchange of ‘connections’ with John Prine also included a ritualised reporting of his media appearances. These are fairly infrequent and rarely publicised so there is significant gratification in first catching them, and second being the first to report them to the chat group.

get the movie The Fire Down Below and watch it until the credits are over. Cuz as they show the credits they play the whole entire song Paradise. Then you see John’s name. (Chat Room 23 March 1998)

Meg Ryan sang a few lines from Angel from Montgomery in the movie – can’t think of the name of it – the war movie with Denzel Washington?? (Chat Room 24 March 1998)

Austin City Limits has show 2102, which was presented last January, with John and the other half with Merle. (Chat Room 26 October 1996)

Did you see the group JP was in for the movie ‘Falling From Grace’. It had Larry McMurtry, the son of Lonesome Dove’s author, and they played ‘Let’s Talk Dirty in Hawaiian’, and it played some on CMT. (Chat Room 22 October 1996)
There's this PBS show where Prine did a song with Billy Lee Riley called 'My Gal is Red Hot' it was 1980 or so. (Chat Room 14 April 1997)

Knowledge of Prine's career and especially of his music was a marker of belonging, and the chat so regularly involved rhetorical or multiple answer questions that they became a ritual part of the exchange.

Okay, Prine makes a lot of references to alcohol and alcoholic beverages in his songs. Name the drink and the song it came from, and indirect references don't count i.e. ‘melted icecubes in a paper cup. (Chat Room 19 May 1997)

John likes to work holidays into his lyrics. What holidays can you find, and the songs they are in. (Chat Room 29 October 1996)

How many other folks appear on JP’s albums . . . ? (Chat Room 11 May 1996)

TRIVIA!!! What song and what album was it on, that a song was misidentified . . . It had an accordion in it? (Chat Room 9 February 1997)

Name three JP songs for, or about, his dad?? (Chat Room 10 November 1997)

The Prine Chat Room constituted a community, where community is understood in the sociological sense as meaning a group of people who share social interaction and some common ties between themselves and other members of the group, and who share a defined place or area for at least some of the time. The defined place of the Oh Boy Chat Page allowed people who shared an appreciation for the music of John Prine to engage in social interaction. They formed a virtual community. The constituting core of the community was its invisible member, John Prine, and the chat regularly returned to a discussion of whether John Prine himself visited the chat room.

I was hoping that this [chat room] would be a great success so we could get John on himself. (Chat Room 22 October 1996)

John told me that he just might get on the ‘net with us one of these nights . . . he’s been kicking it around. (Chat Room 31 March 1997)

We need a ‘handle’ for JP when he gets here . . .

I think when JP gets here he’ll not want us to know his handle. (Chat Room 1 April 1997)

Has John ever looked in on this chat? Would anyone know? If your people had set up a page, wouldn’t you, every so often, take a peek in? We’d all love to talk with John. (Chat Room 4 June 1998)

The success of the John Prine Chat Room lay in the fact that it enabled a virtual community, defined by the place of the web page; connected by implied links to John Prine; and bound by the ritual sharing of information. Its demise can be explained in terms of the particular characteristics of this group and the characteristics of computer-mediated communication generally. One issue to affect the viability of the group was John Prine’s cancellation of the remaining part of his European tour in 1997 and the announcement that there would be no new tour dates for 1998. John Prine was undergoing treatment for cancer, it has since been revealed. Furthermore, Lost Dogs and Mixed Blessings, released in 1995, was Prine’s last ‘new’ album. The only release since then was the second live collection, Live on Tour (April 1997). By February 1998, there was no new information to exchange. By this time the ‘regulars’ had a well established social relationship, but had almost exhausted their exchanges of Prine contacts, media sightings and trivia questions. One evening’s chat monitored from 9 p.m. to 12 p.m. on 17 February 1998 contained no mention of either John Prine or his music. The absence of Prine as a topic of conversation was noticeable.
I have tried to communicate with this list, but every time I get in, there is nothing being said that makes any sense. Nothing relates to John Prine. Does anyone ever talk about John Prine's music? Or anything vaguely related? (Chat Room 4 February 1998)

I wish that the conversations would be more Prine or similar artist related, lately conversations have gone off on strange tangents. (Survey)

That which bound the group, the ritual exchange of information, had declined to a point where it almost ceased to exist.

Another factor, which inherent in any medium of communication, is that people have a variety of purposes for using a forum. These purposes may not always be sympathetic and can, in fact, be antagonistic. Some people used the Chat Page as a way of getting information, and some as a place to meet with people they had a great deal in common with other than geographic location. Others used it as a way of validating and sharing their music-related opinions and experiences. Still others found social contact to be the most important element, in that the page was a way of meeting and talking to other people and the topic of conversation was not a primary consideration. As the connection with John Prine declined, the links that bound these disparate users dissolved, and the gaps between their interests and motivations widened.

It dragged pretty sadly without you this week . . . but at least there weren’t any ‘brothers in solidarity’ or ‘medical’ discussions . . . what a bunch. I think some of them sit in front of their screens pretty much all day and hope someone, anyone, says ‘Hello in There’ . . . may have to turn in my decoder ring and my membership badge. (Private email 1 April 1998)

At times lately this has appeared to be a page for the lonely and lost, rather than John Prine fans. (Survey)

I’d enjoy the chat room more if some people didn’t monopolise it for their political soapbox and for their anger and perversions. (Survey)

A related characteristic was the increasing emphasis on a division between ‘the regulars’ (or the ‘regs’) and the newcomers. The composition of the Chat group had remained fairly consistent for the first year that it was in existence. Once the page was picked up by search engines, the number of new and one-time visitors increased significantly. Long-term participants can operate as moderators and ‘contribute to an increase in the sense of community of a list by reintroducing social dynamics in a medium that does not facilitate it’ (Rojo 1995), but the efforts of moderators to keep discussions to particular topics, to disseminate netiquette conventions, or to promote reciprocal interactivity are not always appreciated by all participants.

I am tired of hearing from people who think every post should relate to John Prine – not possible. (Survey)

To those who harp about being a ‘Reg’, some of us use different names in the same chat room. (Survey)

Ain’t it strange that the regulars from the daytime and the regulars from the night chats seldom mingle? I’ve noticed that. Just like shift workers passing in the night. Kind of like . . . this is mine . . . that is yours . . . I’m angry and you guys are Prine freaks . . . and they never meet. The shift workers analogy is appropriate. (Chat Room 7 April 1998)

Another characteristic of electronic communication was a factor in bringing about the closure of the chat page; namely that people are more insulting when using anonymous computer-mediated communication (Myers 1987). When ordinary social cues are filtered out, ‘the computer creates anonymity, which leads to a decrease in social inhibition and an increase in ‘flaming’ [the use of personal com-
ments of a negative, insulting or invective nature’ (Baym 1995, p. 141). Apart from the absence of social inhibitors, two other characteristics of computer-mediated communication account for the relative frequency of ‘flaming’ in Internet conversations: ‘first the technology makes it easy to reply . . . and second, feedback can be slow, so that it may take some time for ambiguities or misunderstandings to be resolved’ (McLaughlin et al. 1995, p. 97). The chat forum provided by Oh Boy Records was web-based chat, where messages were retained on screen until the volume of messages meant that the earliest disappeared from the screen. This meant that the comparatively few daytime messages were on screen when the night-time chatters logged on, although those who had written the lines were usually no longer at their computers. One primarily daytime chatter spoke often of his illnesses and his drug and alcohol related problems. He was in Vietnam and drew a causal link between his tour of duty and his current difficulties. While many people tired of the off topic chats, and some avoided the chat page when he was on, most responded to him sympathetically. Then in February 1998 another, apparently new, chatter identified himself as also a veteran of the Vietnam conflict. Later, Vet1’s uncle and cousin joined the chat as his health deteriorated further. Vet1 has since died as a result of this illness. The forum came to be dominated by discussions of failing health and the consequences of active service.

I had monitored the exchanges on the Chat Room live since July 1997 and via the archives since its beginning in October 1996. The first negative exchange that I witnessed began with a complaint about John Prine on 4 February 1998:

My meeting [John Prine] turned me off greatly. I had previously E-mailed his office on numerous occasions and I was under the impression from his webmaster that he loved receiving E-mail. However, when I mentioned [my nickname] (a name given to me in Vietnam) he looked like he didn’t know what I was talking about and he looked at me like he couldn’t give a flying fuck – so much for the downhome image. (Chat Room ‘Vet2’ 11:16)

Sorry you are of such self importance that you think after a performance you would think JP should remember 1 fan out of the thousands – man you got a problem. Sorry you didn’t just enjoy the music. (‘Regular’ 12:34)

I am listening to JP as I type this out as not to offend these crybabies who talk JP 24 hours a day. (‘Vet1’ 13:27)

Hey ‘Regular’ why don’t you wake up before you start flapping your jaws! If you read my message carefully, you would have read ‘We experienced a great show’ – so don’t tell me I didn’t enjoy the music. Yes I have a problem – assholes like you that pre-judge me half-cocked! (‘Vet2’ 13:31)

Gee Whiz ‘Vet2’ . . . maybe you should take a min and hug that inner chil. (‘Regular Too’ 14:00)

Chill out ‘Vet2’ JP meets hundreds of thous. of fans. (‘New Name’ 14:03)

The nature of the particular software imposes its own dynamic on the communicative process. If two or more chatters are logged on at the same time, the exchange happens in more or less real time. However, a chatter can respond to a message left hours earlier and the response will perhaps never be seen by the addressee. Chatters must complete ‘name’ and ‘email address’ fields before their message will be accepted, but there is no check that an actual email address has been entered, and, in fact, the program will recognise a tap on the space bar as completing the required field. Once an attack on those who were seen to have hijacked the Chat Room had been legitimated by example, the anonymity provided by the program allowed the exchange of invectives to escalate rapidly. It is highly probable that the various ‘no name’ messages were left by more than one person. For example, the following insults seem substantially different semantically and linguistically.
How much does your mother charge these days? I bet your are a registered child molester I heard thru the grapevine you wear women's clothes. ('No Name' 13 April 1998)

Let me guess: You have a Liberal Arts degree and are now working a low-wage job in the service sector. Close? This would explain your ennui and the enormous amount of time you seem to have on your hands. ('No Name' 30 March 1998)

The very characteristic that facilitated the exchange made it impossible for a researcher to categorically establish the parameter of the exchange. Abusive and derogatory messages directed primarily at Vet1 and Vet2 were left during periods when no one else was logged on, by a person or persons who did not give a name or email address, or gave an unrecognised name and a false email address. Obscene and/or offensive replies were posted by Vet1 and Vet2, or people purporting to be them, and by posters with unknown names who were suspected to be either Vet1 or Vet2. The postings identified as belonging to Vet1 and Vet2 became increasingly critical of John Prine:

‘Hello Mr. Prine. I am one of the losers here on the chatline. I am one of the losers who buy tickets to your shows. I am one of the losers who have over the years bought your albums and cds . . . I am one of the losers shot in the conflict overseas. I am one of the losers who is on disability at the expense of your tax dollars . . . on the James Taylor chatline the webmaster monitors their chat page closely and boots off people like no name . . . You are a over the hill washed up can’t get air play mf . . . you are no better than they are. (Chat Room ‘Vet1’ 18 March 1998)

Oh Boy Records closed the Chat Page. It was re-opened with a disclaimer that the page was unmonitored and did not reflect the view or opinions of Oh Boy or John Prine. However, when the negative exchanges continued, the page was briefly replaced by a filtered message board and was then discontinued altogether.

**Conclusion**

One of the benefits for John Prine and Oh Boy Records of including a chat forum on their web site was essentially commercial. Having a chat component on the company’s site increases visits to the site, boosts customer good will, allows customers to create ‘content’ in line with their current interests, and increases the ‘information’ available on the site. As a business application, chat is ‘a method of building communities and a way to cultivate loyalty. Over 66 per cent of sites that add capabilities experience an increase in traffic’ (Hickman 1998). The Chat Page enabled the formation of a community around Oh Boy Records and included fans, performers, and record company. Through the Chat Page Oh Boy established a ‘local’ presence, in that their Chat Page was a specific place available as a meeting place for a particular audience and a site for the emergence of a sense of identity that was grounded in a concept of community.

The benefit for the fans was the tangible link to each other and to John Prine. While connections between fans and musicians are usually more a belief than a reality, the Chat Page strengthened this belief in a tangible way by providing a delineated place for social contact. In connecting dispersed fans and providing them with a link to John’s record company, the Chat Page enabled the possibility of a direct connection with Prine. The location of the Chat Page on Oh Boy’s web site encouraged the notion that Prine was part of the community, and the anonymity of the forum enabled this belief. Since the Oh Boy chat forum was discontinued, a number of other message and chat forums have been established by those who...
participated in it, but the absence of the direct connection to John Prine is apparent. The links between fans remain, and the sharing of information continues to an extent, but the aura of a concrete link to John Prine is more difficult to sustain in the absence of a meeting place that is Prine's own.

The combination of a small company owned by the performer and a forum where fans could communicate with each other and with the company (and possibly the performer) went a long way towards dispelling the alienation that followed the industrialisation of pop music; highlighting the consumption of music as an active, incorporative practice; and solidifying the often illusory bonds between performer and consumers. The record company’s Home Page became ‘home’ for the chatters, a virtual place that facilitated the belief in a local music community that included both fans and performer. The demise of the Chat Page underlined the essential problem that with anonymous communication ‘anonymity dissolves community’ (Rheingold 1997, p. 1). However, its eighteen month success showed how the Internet can provide a place in which new music communities can be formed.

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