

Interview with Sho Iwase

Music industry expert in Gerson Lehrman Group
By Michael Luisi, Temple University Japan Campus

Q: As a talent scout - what do you look for when considering an artist from an online/virtual source?

A: There are several factors that scouts would focus on.

The main aspect would be marketability. The artist in question must have at least one striking factor that will help propel his/her name upon his debut. Examples are things like being very young (or the opposite, being very old), already having some sort of following (i.e.: MySpace, twitter, facebook, YouTube, NikoNikoDouga, etc), having another talent (i.e.: Model, illustrator, professional athlete, etc).

Age is definitely be important since I would hesitate to sign anyone that has a steady full-time job that's not in the music industry. Part-timers or students are the best, as it will offer give the label more time to develop their music, as well as giving the scouts a higher to chance to convince the artist.

Scouts must also be aware of the fact that artists found through a virtual source may already have some sort of management/record label deal in place. Many majors prefer to have their artists debut in the independent music sector first - once the artist creates some sort of buzz (which is considerably easier as independents have less restrictions than majors, and because it's much easier to rank in the Independent music charts than the major charts) they're rung back to the majors. To the ordinary eye, it'll seem like the artist "earned" their major debut, while in reality it was already planned out from the beginning.

Q: If you were able to find a musician worth considering in Second-Life, how would the music industry convert an artist from the virtual world into the real world? What steps would be taken after the initial recruitment?

A: The first step would be to create some sort of buzz in the virtual world. In Japan, the easiest route is to become popular in nikonikodouga. Artists like Rapbit and KURIKINTON FOX are prime examples - both artists were unknowns that received massive popularity online through YouTube and Nikonikodouga exposures, and eventually managed to earn themselves a record label contract. Rapbit's popularity started off when he uploaded a song of him rapping to an Anime theme song. KURIKINTON FOX became popular videos which show him performing video game soundtracks with an electric guitar. Rapbit is now signed to EMI Music Japan, and KURIKINTON FOX is signed to an Independent record label.

I'd be very cautious in presenting the artist, since fans tend to shy away when virtual idols/artists actually break out to the real scene. Virtual music fans like the musician because he/she is unknown and "close" because they can be found on the same platform (like Secondlife). Once the artist becomes popular, they no longer feel needed and tend to move on.

The scout will also have to consider the time that it takes to train the artist. The musician would have to go through intense training so that he/she can be presentable in live-gigs (music on the virtual world can always be

edited/mastered/reuploaded, whereas live music can never be undone).

Q: What are the costs involved in scouting in an online source such as second-life and how difficult would the transition be from second-life to an actual contract?

A: (Secondlife rapidly fell out of popularity in Japan so I'm going to use other examples here)

Costs of scouting online mainly occur from the labor power needed to search numerous online sites/services. You'll definitely need to have a few people surfing through music-related sites and services on a constant basis.

The transition would be difficult, since some online services ban users from exchanging contact information (i.e.: e-mail addresses will be censored in messages). Since spam mails are very common on any site/service, the most difficult part would be to convince the artist that this is an actual offer by an actual scout.

The artist would also have to realize that he/she no longer has full control of his/her virtual presence. The character he/she has in SecondLife (or any similar services) would have to be discussed in the contract, as the label would most likely want to have control over pre-existing media routes that already have a presence. The same goes for MySpace pages, facebook music pages, etc.

Q: And lastly - if you could offer advice to online musicians trying to get their music out there or get a potential contract - what would you tell them?

A: My best advice would be to create one buzz that can attract attention. The most important thing in the internet era is to be noticed. It could be anything - uploading cover song videos, uploading musical responses, creating a popular blog, writing short stories, uploading your drawings, etc. The beginning doesn't have to be music - music can always be uploaded later.

Thank you.