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The New Model Is an Old Model

Jam bands like Umphrey's McGee are a step ahead of the music business.

By Miles Raymer

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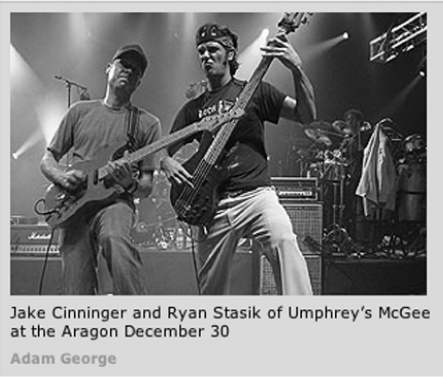
Two days before New Year's Eve the Aragon was swarming with

security guards, merch-table workers, and various flavors of roadie and support personnel—all part of the infrastructure for a three-day year-end concert blowout from Umphrey's McGee. They've come a long way from their beginnings on the inglorious South Bend music scene of 1997. "We started just for fun and free beer," says founding guitarist Brendan Bayliss. "We were getting paid in beer and we thought it was awesome."

The band that works its way up from dive bars to ballrooms was a well-worn rock 'n' roll narrative when the Beatles were still at the Cavern Club, but Umphrey's McGee—like many of their fellow travelers in the jam-band scene—have made the trip largely without the assistance of the usual star-making machinery. No big labels, no commercial radio play, no MTV support—no singles, even. As the standard music-industry formula for success becomes increasingly irrelevant, this approach is starting to look prescient: since the heyday of the Grateful Dead jam bands have been building audiences through grassroots organizing, plenty of live shows, open taping policies, and music sharing among their fans, and the rise of the Internet has made that model even easier to follow.

Of course, jam bands don't necessarily choose to operate outside the industry. Major labels won't touch them unless they're as huge as Phish—it's hard to make money selling records by a group that's all about live shows and tape trading. The music doesn't get a lot of respect either. Jam bands often seem to confuse some of rock's great aesthetic atrocities for virtues—the standard approach is apparently to combine the worst parts of acid rock and prog with a dash of white jazz—and I'll come out and say that, aside from some live recordings of the Dead and a bootleg of the show Phish did with Jay-Z in Brooklyn, I don't keep that kind of stuff in my house.

That doesn't mean I can't appreciate jam bands' insane dedication to live performance, though. Umphrey's McGee are shit-tight, and on their ninth and latest formal release, the double-CD set *Live at the Murat* (SCI Fidelity), it's hard to tell where the written material ends and the improvised parts begin. They've got amazingly open ears and seem willing to try out pretty much any sound they like—this love for all sorts of music not only elevates a brief digression into Pharell's hook from Mystikal's "Shake Ya Ass" above cheap-joke status but also makes the long instrumental stretches sound less like aimless meandering and more like taking an interesting side-street route with a city-wise driver. The members of the band have devised dozens of nonverbal signals to guide their improvisations—they use hand gestures to announce key changes, for instance, or lean backward to say "return to the original progression"—and their songs never come out the same way twice. Even



Jake Cinninger and Ryan Stasik of Umphrey's McGee at the Aragon December 30

Adam George

the stuff they write out seems geared toward expanding their musical vocabulary, giving them more blocks to play with during the jams. "The thing that you can't replace," says keyboardist Joel Cummins, "is the real live experience, having real music happen and knowing that it's happening in the moment, that it's not some prefabricated idea of what's going to happen on the stage."

This focus on live shows works to the advantage of bands like Umphrey's McGee—though many people understand the "music industry" as the business of selling records, only the very biggest acts can sell enough to support themselves. Most make their money, assuming they make any at all, by playing concerts. Umphrey's McGee's last few studio albums have sold in the modest range of 30,000 copies. "I've never seen a penny from any royalties," Bayliss says. "In my world that doesn't exist." Because they don't depend on moving units, they don't consider the people trading their music to be pirates. If anything, those fans are unpaid promoters. "If anybody's getting hurt by file sharing, they can afford to get hurt. Britney Spears, if her album leaks she's still driving around in a fat-ass car. For us, we don't make money selling albums. We make money selling tickets. So getting the music out—if people listen to it, maybe they'll buy a ticket."

Not surprisingly, the band's dealings with labels have mostly been about keeping the labels out of their way. Bayliss calls their arrangement with SCI Fidelity "the most independent deal we could find. We get to say yes or no to anything." The label was started by members of the String Cheese Incident, but Bayliss says, "I don't think of it as a jam-band thing. I think of it as a machine in place to get our stuff out—and we actually know them on a first-name basis and I can call up the president of the company and tell him 'Fuck Michigan,' because they beat Notre Dame and shit like that."

Like most jam merchants since the Dead, Umphrey's McGee have been early adopters of audio technology—a necessity when you don't have the established industry pulling for you. Tape trading in the jam-band scene was one of the earliest examples of free music distribution working for artists, and Umphrey's has moved it onto the Internet and turned it into a source of income. Their Web site umlive.net offers a large variety of formats and more music, period, than many indie labels with download stores. You can buy MP3s, lossless FLAC files, and CDs of live Umphrey's McGee recordings, sometimes the same day as the show. And they've been burning discs at their concerts since 2001; they now typically sell 120 to 180 CD-Rs a night at \$15-\$20 a pop. "We started doing it just to get gas money," Bayliss says. "Like if you go all the way to Colorado and have a \$500 guarantee, you spend more than half that money getting out there. Starting to sell them was just out of necessity, but now it's turned to actually . . . it's pretty cool. I didn't have that option when I was a kid."

That "pretty cool" is key to the Umphrey's McGee philosophy. They've made a lot of savvy career moves to get to where they can make a living playing music, but they've always been decisions that would make the experience cooler for the audience. Jam bands are way ahead of most mainstream pop acts when it comes to respecting their fans and giving them what they want—in part because they aren't shackled to major labels, which are still pretty uptight about digital distribution and seem to know how to deal with people only as consumers. Umphrey's McGee may not be big enough to play the suburban mega venues, but they can fill the Aragon for three straight nights—and many of those fans have tickets to every show, not just one, so those numbers represent a lot of loyalty. The band knows it, too. "Say there's a song we don't want to play but we know a lot of people will like," says Bayliss. "We gotta do it. In the end we get paid back because they're happy. The thing is, we started off in bars with five people, and those five people are still here."