



## REBELS WITH A CAUSE: FAME AND FORTUNE

Just ask "Ultragrrrl." Sarah Lewitinn is an assistant editor at Spin magazine, but her alter ego is a blogger, a DJ, and now a budding A&R impresario. Her latest project is Stolen Transmission, a singles label launched through her blog ([ultragrrrl.blogspot.com/](http://ultragrrrl.blogspot.com/)) to promote the unsigned bands she can't plug in the pages of Spin. "I see my blog as a great source of publicity, not to mention that a lot of A&R people read it," she says. "The question was: 'How can I get these bands attention?'"

Stolen Transmission launched in October with a roster of unknowns like Louis XIV, The Oohlas, and the 5 O'Clock Heroes. Each "three-song" costs \$4, and Lewitinn sold half her inventory her first weekend. "Right now, artists are really lucky there's the Internet," she says. "They're able to put their art out and then piggyback off the network of blogs. They don't have to worry about signing to a major label just to be seen; as long as they stay on their own terms, people come to them."

A new lifecycle of cool is emerging: the promotion of what's good over the studied rejection of what's bad; the use of networks, whether personal or digital, to link like minds in a fractured landscape; and a new pride in the entrepreneurial edge that allows artists to avoid the mainstream altogether, if that's what they want. Steven Johnson saw this phenomenon happening already in media in his book *Emergence*: "The grid shatters into a million free-floating agents... All chaos, no order. And then, slowly, clusters begin to form... Some grow into larger entities... and last for many years. [Others] are more idiosyncratic, and fleeting... generated by the same underlying processes: pattern-matching, negative feedback, ordered randomness, distributed intelligence."

"The Tipping Point also assumed cool spreads through a network of unconscious hipsters. But in the emerging nexus of cool around Ultragrrrl's blog, she's eminently aware of what she's selling."

Indeed, hipster entrepreneurialism has been the downfall of the coolhunter—another invention of Gladwell's 1997 article (for *The New Yorker*). In the wake of his story, shoe companies, automakers, and just about every other packaged goods manufacturer scrambled to hire one of their own or turned to the coolhunter consultancies springing up at the tail end of the '90s boom: Lambesis, Look Look, Plan B, Youth Intelligence, Iconoculture, Sputnik, etc. Coolhunters even popped up as the heroes of novels like William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* and Alex Shakar's *The Savage Girl*.

Not surprisingly, they failed to find a Rosetta Stone of cool. However, a younger generation of cool hunters, like designer Josh Rubin, are as creative as the alpha-consumers they watch from blinds in Paris, Tokyo, and the Lower East Side. Rubin blogs daily at [JoshRubin.com](http://JoshRubin.com) and holds down a day job as vice president of product development at mobile messaging software maker Upoc Networks. In his blog, Rubin turns his discoveries into inspiration for interface design. "Coolhunting today is truly about understanding the target, designing specifically for them, then showing them how great it is," he says. "It's about creative leadership, not trend reaction."

"That's because it's easier than ever for a DJ or artist to open wide in her hometown. Web sites such as Flavorpill and Daily Candy spread the word to hundreds of thousands, cutting out the middlemen and (how ironic) ushering in a new era of digital tribesmanship through social network sites such as LinkedIn, Orkut, and—Hebdige must be rolling in his grave—Tribe.com."

"There's too much good culture out there, and not enough channels," says Flavorpill co-founder Mark Mangan. "So while some places might get plagued by the attention, other cool is getting exposed. That's good for everyone."



Sophie Donelson, Jeralyn Gerba

