

PODCAST NEWS:

Detroit Podcasters Network brings a personal touch to homemade broadcasts

March 9, 2006

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It was a conversation ranging from the spinach-and-cheese ravioli at Trader Joe's to the war on terror. Only instead of keeping the chat private, Autumm and Raine decided to make a podcast of it.

"We just sat in front of my laptop to record it," says Autumm Caines, 31, of Melvindale, whose iBook G4 has a built-in microphone.

Since that first attempt, the friends have done several episodes of their "Elemental Symphony" podcast.

"There's no script, nothing fancy and cute about it," says Raine, a 27-year-old law student from Detroit who, like some DJs, prefers to use only her first name. "It's the same conversation we'd be having if we turned Autumm's laptop off."

Their podcast is one of many linked to the Web site for the Detroit Podcasters Network, a grassroots group formed last year to celebrate the cool new world of citizen broadcasting.

The network's members gather at a restaurant or bar each month to share tips and promote their shows. The last few meetings have attracted an average of 25 people.

Autumm and Raine haven't been to a meeting yet, but they'd be welcome. The network wants to connect with all the fledging podcasters in the area.

And all the potential listeners, too.

"There's a new way to make a connection and reach people, and that's what's exciting," says Mike Pfeiffer, 37, of West Bloomfield, who's active in the network and has an alternative music show called "Most People are DJs." "Anybody can do it."

Boiled down to simple terms, a podcast is an audio file you can listen to at your convenience by downloading it to a computer or to an iPod or MP3 player.

Big media outlets like National Public Radio and ABC News offer podcasts. But the most intriguing versions are the homemade ones. Much like blogs, these podcasts are much more personal, raw and quirky than the music and talk provided by mainstream radio.

In 2005, “podcast” (a hybrid of “iPod” and “broadcast”) was declared word of the year by the New Oxford American Dictionary. It’s still a relatively new concept to most people (so is video podcasting, but that’s another story).

The research on podcasting is just emerging, but it shows that podcasting’s popularity is rapidly growing. More than 6 million American adults have downloaded podcasts from the Web to listen to on their iPods or MP3 players, according to a survey done last year by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

And the number of podcasts is exploding. FeedBurner, a market leader in managing online content feeds, is currently managing roughly 41,000 podcasts (including audio and video), a number that’s tripled in the past six months.

Regional clubs are springing up to give podcasters a way to connect with each other, says Kristopher Smith, co-editor-in-chief of ID3 Podcast Magazine, which is set to publish its debut issue in May and is being billed as the first print magazine for podcasters.

“What’s really interesting about podcasting is these are motivated people who are really self-starters,” says Smith.

The members of the Detroit Podcasters Network certainly fit that mold. They say they’re drawn to podcasting for a variety of reasons — to express themselves, to have fun, to reach customers for their businesses, and to spread news and awareness of certain issues.

Re Ausetkmt 50, of Detroit listened to many podcasts and quickly sized up their potential before trying it herself.

“I thought to myself, oh no, this is not a fad. This is a response to people being tired of crappy records and radio stations that don’t care about the listeners,” she says.

Now Ausetkmt, who’s also known as Mama Asid (for “anti-slackness intellectual development”), produces several podcasts, including a spoken word calendar, “Pod 313,” and shows about music and political discussion. She’s passionate about them, and about her hopes for podcasting as a global force.

“Podcasting is the best use of talk time on the planet, so let it be for social justice and betterment,” she says.

Jasper Borgman, 31, started his “Plan Nine Rock Show” podcast as a way to promote his Warren-based Plan Nine Print screen-printing and graphic design business. Over the past few months, he’s seen traffic at his Web site increase from less than 100 visits a day to more than 500.

He’s also attracted some good attention. The March issue of Spin magazine mentioned Plan Nine Rock Show, which plays a lot of Detroit bands like the Dirtbombs and the Von Bondies.

“This whole speaking thing is not really my forte at all,” says Borgman, a former lead singer and guitarist for a band called the Unfriendlys. He used to edit his shows to take out the mistakes, but now he leaves in his verbal flubs to add to the candid feeling.

Matt Hanchon, 34, of Westland describes his “Digital Detroit Radio” podcast as “primarily a music-based show with some silly stories in there to hopefully make people smile.” He likes to record from locations like parking lots or coffee shops. In one episode, you can hear outdoor sounds as he describes the weird thing that happened to him at a Starbucks (it was out of cream, even though it was located inside a grocery store).

Back in April, Hanchon met Les Zalewski, 36, of Livonia, whose “Zaldor’s World” podcast offers an eclectic mix of music and interviews. They recall how they both went to a podcasting meeting in Novi organized through Meetup.com. They soon realized they were the only people who’d shown up. So they became involved in forming the Detroit Podcasters Network.

Since then, Hanchon and Zalewski have become friends with Pfeiffer and Chris Marshall, 35, of Berkley, whose “Collected Comics Library” podcast, a talk format devoted to reprint editions, high-end comic books and trade paperbacks, has been downloaded in Iceland and Argentina, among other places.

The men say they have a lot in common. They’re about the same age, they each have children and they’re interested in building an even bigger network of local podcasters.

“This is about people saying we can do things just as well as a corporation or a large conglomerate,” says Pfeiffer, who had 1,000 listeners for a recent show. When they say anyone can be a podcaster, they mean it. Even Zalewski’s 8-year-old son, Trent, is doing podcasts.

“He just talks about stuff, what happened in school, a video game or a movie. He talked about Chicken Little one time,” says Zalewski. “He loves it because he saw me doing it, so then he was ... ‘I want to do a podcast, Daddy.’ “