

# Rock Band Incubus Creates Multimedia Event to Connect with Fans

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By **Dan Daley**

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From Facebook to Twitter, blogs to Kickstarter, the internet has given music artists no shortage of engagement tools to connect with their fans, but those same tools can keep fans at a virtual arm's length, with higher levels of engagement limited to the high-ticket VIP deals that garner a hurried meet-and-greet backstage. Multiplatinum rock band Incubus decided to ratchet that kind of connection up more than a few levels. For the week leading up to the release of its first new studio album in 5 years, the band and its crew turned a warehouse space in Los Angeles into a high-tech agora, where hundreds of aficionados chosen from its fan clubs converged to meet the band members, watch them rehearse and perform, participate with them on art projects using six large white canvases placed in the room and on instrument clinics, and just do an extended hang with their heroes. Using a range of streaming and internet platforms and technologies, Incubus was able to project that experience to an estimated 2 million additional fans around the world, making Incubus HQ Live a multifaceted multimedia experience.

What director Marc Scarpa describes as a "real-time documentary and participatory media event" had its roots in an otherwise quotidian encounter between Incubus lead singer Brandon Boyd and band manager Steve Rennie at Boyd's girlfriend's retail boutique in Venice, Calif. They realized that the constant circulation of people and ideas through the shop was the perfect metaphor for reconnecting the band to its audience: a stage for a web broadcast that would allow hundreds of fans to be there live and be joined by hundreds of thousands more via the internet, all interacting via live streaming media and Facebook back-and-forths. They searched the Los Angeles area for a venue, finding a 4,500-square-foot building shell on La Brea Boulevard, part of a new retail and restaurant development whose developer was, serendipitously, an Incubus fan. They rented the space for 6 weeks, spending the first 3 weeks rehearsing for the upcoming U.S. tour to support the new

album, *If Not Now, When?*, even as the front of the space was built out to engage attendees with things such as hanging six huge canvases that fans could paint or draw on and scattering couches and rugs that created a loftlike vibe.

During the week of Incubus HQ Live, which started on June 30, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. each day the space saw an ebb and flow over the course of the day of between 200 and 300 fans who had signed up for a 1-hour slot via the band's website. Each of them entered a day-long raffle to be picked to return for that night's performance. During the day, they could hang out, talk to the musicians and crew, ask questions about musical instruments and gear, and perhaps pick up a T-shirt or two. (Rennie says that while the retail metaphor was purely conceptual, they still sold about \$24,000 worth of merchandise in that 6-day period.) From 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. the band rehearsed privately, and 100 or so raffle winners were let back in after 6 p.m. for a live set that ran from



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"It was incredible — the fans were sitting all around the band, as close [as] three feet from Brandon," Rennie remembers. "It was the kind of experience you never get."

## The Three-Channel Streams

But translating that intimacy and that constant engagement would be the challenge for the web broadcast. The band partnered with Livestream to produce streaming broadcasts of the event all week long, after a small club gig in Berlin several months earlier that served as a practice run for the larger event. The band hired Scarpa, whom Rennie had worked with once before for a live webcast performance by Celine Dion. Scarpa, who seems to like technology marathons — his credits include a 72-hour live participatory online broadcast for the 2010 GRAMMY Awards and 64 hours streaming from Woodstock 99 — sought to balance interaction between the band and the fans in attendance with some structure—the guitar clinics, the performances, the ongoing artwork, and arranging the performances to chronicle the band's history, starting with its first record from 1998 and culminating in a performance of *If Not Now, When?* on the final night — and flexibility that would allow a narrative to emerge spontaneously, combined with the mandate to take all of these various conversations online in a way that also engaged the wider virtual audience.

"We wanted it to be immersive, and not just a matter of leaving cameras on randomly," Scarpa explains. "Some things were planned out ahead of time; we had a run of show. But other things — [the band] had guest artists stop by and join them, for instance — they just didn't tell us about. So we had to be ready for anything, all the time."

The organizational format they chose was unique. Using the title of the new LP as a divisional rubric, three channels were created and served to help parse what would become an enormous amount of content. Channel 1, dubbed "If Not," was the "documentary experience," says Scarpa — a single Teradek wireless camera and microphone rig would roam the space all day long, interacting with attendees and band and crew members. "The camera became a character in the broadcast, talking to the kids, watching what was going on," says Scarpa. Other documentary channel cameras were a Sony PMW-F3 Cinealta digital camera, two Sony XDCAM PDWF 800 cameras used to capture rehearsals and live performances, a Sony HXR-MC1 HD "lipstick" camera focusing on the drum kit, and several GoPro wearable cameras. The live content was interspersed with archival footage of performances and personal moments that had been assembled from an array of sources on formats ranging from Beta SP to VHS to 3/4" tape, as well as surveillance cameras set up around the room, all directed in a line cut by Scarpa. It was also the channel dedicated to the streaming of each evening's live performance, from which MTV also took a daylong feed.

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Channel 2, the "Now" channel, used an Apple iPod touch as the interface, strung like a high-tech back-stage laminate around the neck of a different crew member each day, including Scarpa and mascot Duke The Dog, and streamed a different first-person POV on a Wi-Fi signal to the Livestream platform.

Channel 3, titled "When," was the ambient stream, using video from the surveillance cameras and audio from open microphones set up around the room to provide viewers with the big picture. "You could hear the conversations as they took place around the room," Scarpa says. "It put you in the room with everyone."

All three channels were streamed live and discrete on two dedicated channels, [www.incubushqlive.com](http://www.incubushqlive.com) and [www.livestream.com/incubus](http://www.livestream.com/incubus), as well as on [www.facebook.com/Incubus](http://www.facebook.com/Incubus) and other social media channels.

Scarpa says that the webcast had a crew of 11. They included the typical roles that have migrated from Hollywood to the web, such as himself as director/producer, an assistant producer, a TD, and a DP. But live event streaming calls for some new titles as well. They included a social media producer and a digital media manager, who organized the slew of still and video files constantly coming in from a variety of sources.

"The social media producer was managing the conversation on Facebook and Twitter, the conversation in both directions," says Scarpa. "For instance, Brandon might have been painting on a canvas with a fan who was there with him when 'Dan1234' from New York was telling them [via Facebook] about a particular painting he had done, and Brandon can immediately address 'Dan' directly via the documentary camera. It was all about having a real conversation but it was taking place across all media and multiple platforms."

## Sounds Good

Understandably for a music-oriented streaming event, there was considerable emphasis on sound. Darren La Groe, the band's live monitor mixer, pulled triple duty for the event, mixing front-of-house, monitor, and webcast audio through a 96-channel Avid Profile console to the house PA, a QSC WideLine series line array, which was useful for its wide dispersion characteristic in the confined space, with Clair BT218 subwoofers, and to Sennheiser 2000 in-ear monitors for the band. Those in the hall would experience what most Incubus audiences did at live shows — La Groe stayed with the same microphones he used for live shows, such as an Audio-Technica AT4050 on guitar amps — but he adjusted things for the webcast.

"On the webcast's output buss [from the console] I used some mastering compression plug-ins and a brick-wall limiter," he says. "I treated the web mix like I was mixing a live album. I tried to keep the stereo image pretty true to their album sound or placement on stage. Drums and keys and guitar were panned accordingly and Brandon's vocal was right up the middle. Since I had to mix in the same room as the performance I would run outside in the middle of songs with my in-ear monitors to listen to the web-cast. I'd use my iPad with a VNC network to my console and make adjustments to the streaming mix."

La Groe also recorded the events, using the same MacBook Pro with an RME MADiface express card interface that he uses on tour. "I used the REAPER [Rapid Environment for Audio Production, Engineering, and Recording] software and recorded all 64 channels to a single FireWire 800[GB] drive," he says.

In fact, all of the video and audio for Incubus HQ Live was recorded and made almost instantly available as video-on-demand to the band's YouTube channel. This included a 15-second film of the fans' experience using an Incubus-inspired Viddy pack on their iPhones.

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Another key platform was Anvato, which provided its Media Content Platform for Incubus HQ Live that enabled near real-time VOD syndication of the streaming event. This feature allowed for on-the-fly capture and edit features for rapid delivery of clips to broadcast and cable news outlets and provided live transcoding of the event as well.

"Anvato let us do the real-time broadcast of our line cut and syndicate all of that media to the press outlets," says Scarpa, who noted that while reporters might have had to go back and edit that content before they posted it, the raw footage was already out there for all to see. "Their real-time clipping combined with real-time transfer technology let us do that syndication to YouTube in [a quarter] of the time it usually took doing it the old way, where we had to use one device to capture content, another to edit it and yet another device to upload it. It was a direct connection that let us syndicate the files directly to YouTube. It saved us on manpower and time. Editing in real time and their optimized transfer was the secret sauce for the success."

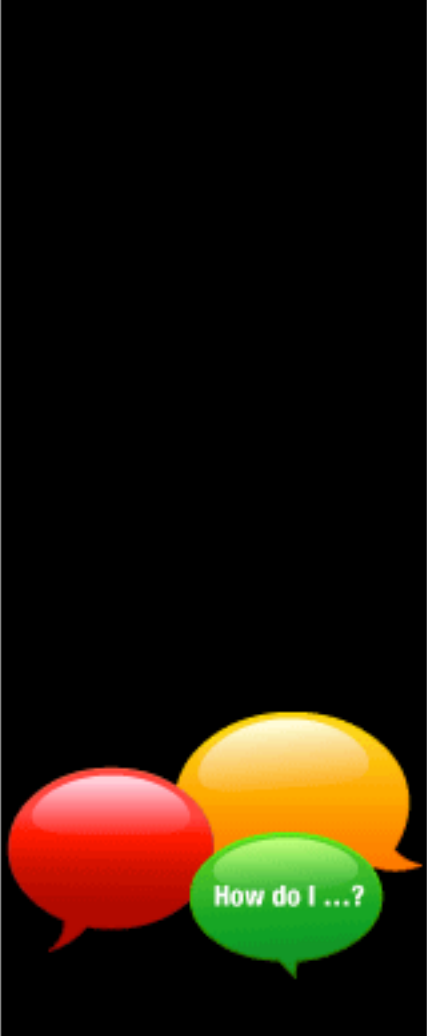
None of this would have been possible on a reasonable budget without wireless connectivity. Scarpa says the crew had tried to get AT&T to run a business line into the event space but were rebuffed when the broadband provider said they couldn't find the address, despite the fact that an AT&T switching center is within a couple of blocks of the space. Instead, Los Angeles-based Fireline Broadband provided a 10-mbps dedicated two-way digital microwave link for a Wi-Fi signal.

So much wireless signal in a close space — in addition to Wi-Fi, the band was using wireless microphones, the communications links were wireless, and all of the video was running wirelessly as well — could have been a disaster without the good frequency management that staff began well before the event started. "We had given ourselves time to check and adjust frequencies and resolve [any] frequency conflicts well before the show began," says Scarpa. "Keeping a log of all the wireless frequencies is important."

Incubus' next streaming adventure won't be quite as complex or lengthy — the band members streamed the opening show of their U.S. tour at Red Rocks in Denver on Aug. 17 via a single broadband channel, a walk in the park compared to the weeklong multi-stream event in July. But Steve Rennie says Incubus has a streaming strategy going forward, part of a music industry that's still trying to figure out how digital can help it as much as it has hurt it.

"[Streaming] takes it to the next level," says Rennie. "We're going to take the participatory Incubus HQ Live concept on the road with us," where they'll be deploying LiveU's portable video-over-cellular backpack solution that uses multiple cellular links simultaneously to provide a seamless broadband channel optimized for up to 1080p HD video transmission from the field. "We'll have that at an Incubus HQ Live tent set up at the venue at concession points for fans to gather at and interact with each other and the band. It's the future, and it's great."

*This article first appeared in the October/November 2011 issue of Streaming Media under the title "Incubus Notches Up the Streaming Connection."*



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