Charlie's Martian is music to artists
Kate Mackenzie
MAY 25, 2004

This report appears on australianIT.com.au.

WHILE the giants of the music and technology industries shape the digital music landscape, an Australian musician is setting up her own online platform for independent artists to sell their songs.

The platform, Martian Method, allows musicians to publish and sell their songs, and collect payments, either on their own website or from a central website.

Sydney composer Charlie Chan wants the platform to be easily accessible to musicians and their customers, and to have low barriers to entry, like PayPal and other web transaction services.

Chan is no stranger to the mix of music and technology, being a longtime operator of a website that has sold 65,000 CDs online.

Mailing out CDs is labour-intensive, however, and the furore over illegal file-sharing and the success of Apple’s iTunes led Ms Chan to ponder an alternative method that would reimburse artists for their work, no matter how small their audience.

Legitimate music download services for major label artists are barely six months old in Australia.

Telstra and Ninemsn have begun selling songs in recent months, both with platforms and rights management from overseas providers.

Local company Destra has created its own platform and negotiated with music labels to provide downloads for several music retailers’ websites.

All of these are the result of extended negotiations with the five big music labels, and Ms Chan says this leaves many musicians out.

"We see people who might only sell to 500 people, but those albums are valid. iTunes probably won't want to deal with all those artists," she said. "That's the thing about online publishing — you don't have to sell a lot."

Ms Chan invested some of her earnings from music sales in hiring developers to write the platform, which includes a shopfront, a central website, and an interface for musicians to upload their works and view sales information.

Although still very much in pilot phase, with about a dozen artists signed up to use it, Martian Method has already snared some interest, including an unsolicited seven-figure offer from a large technology company, after Ms Chan spoke at the Future of Music conference in Washington earlier this month.

Ms Chan said the platform took care of both the distribution to consumers and near-instantaneous payments to copyright owners.

Ms Chan, whose music has been distributed by Sony and Warner, said she was not against the big labels. "I learned a lot about selling CDs from Sony. I take my hat off to them," she said. "At the same time, I saw the digital agenda come up and disappear, again and again."

APRA chief executive Brett Cottle said his organisation, which is responsible for collecting and distributing music royalties, supported any internet-based platform that provided lawful music distribution and handled royalties and digital rights management. However, he said, most existing platforms were geared towards the commercial end of the market.
The internet had facilitated growth in the number of musicians with small but dedicated audiences around the world — not the type that big labels were interested in.

They don't all remain in obscurity. US music industry bible Billboard said independent releases accounted for 17 per cent of CD sales there, and in Australia two of the five Song of the Year nominees for last night's Australian Performing Rights Association awards were independents — John Butler Trio and The Waifs.

"One of the things needed for the market, and perhaps missing from it, is a system geared towards the bottom end — those who self-distribute or are not commercially successful," Mr Cottle said.

"Charlie's approach to both the business and the technical model could well plug a gap in the market."