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Digital Distribution Provides Boost To Heatseeking Artist  
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Ten years ago, a department store employee with time on his hands wouldn't have had much hope of quitting his day job to become a rock star. But by getting his music online, John Vesely was able to marshal enough buzz to do just that -- and show up on Billboard's Heatseekers chart with his first release, "Awake."

Vesely, 25, records acoustic emo under the name Secondhand Serenade. His father, a Czech jazz musician who played gigs from Cuba to Siberia, encouraged his son to play saxophone and piano. Instead, Vesely gravitated to the San Francisco bay area punk and ska scene, playing bass in several bands before forming an acoustic duo. He picked up the guitar after meeting his wife, who wanted him "to serenade her."

Vesely and his bandmate would send out a MySpace bulletin and play "organized street performances" in downtown Palo Alto, Calif. Meanwhile, when business was slow at his retail jobs, he would write music. "I wrote a lot of my songs at Neiman Marcus, and some of them at Bloomingdale's," Vesely tells Billboard.com. "I did a lot of writing on receipt paper."

Those receipts turned into real money when Vesely recorded his demo and started playing local shows, promoting them on his MySpace page and selling his CDs through mail order with a PayPal account. His digital push came after signing up with distributor TuneCore, which made his songs available on iTunes and other music portals.

The strength of his online sales and plays caught the attention of longtime label exec Daniel Glass, who signed Vesely to his new Glassnote Records, which is distributed through the Warner Independent Label Group.

In total, Secondhand Serenade has sold about 73,000 digital tracks and more than 10,000 copies of his album "Awake," according to Nielsen SoundScan. After the album was released on Glassnote/ILG on Feb. 6 with two additional songs, it debuted on Billboard's Heatseekers chart at No. 16.

Vesely was recently featured on MTV's "You Hear It First," and the online love keeps coming, with spots on AOL Music's "Breakers" and next month on Yahoo! Music's "Who's Next?".

Via MySpace, "I'm constantly reaching out to new people that are hearing my music for the first time every day," Vesely says.

In between club dates all over the West Coast, he's scheduled to play at next month's South By Southwest music festival and at New Jersey's Bamboozle festival in May.

Secondhand Serenade's nascent fan base has more to look forward to this year, when the artist releases a new album with a full band and production by Butch Walker and Danny Lohner, who have worked with the likes of Avril Lavigne and Nine Inch Nails, respectively.

"Whether a label picks you up or not, you can support [yourself] through music," says Vesely. "Digital distribution is as easy as paying a fee and sending it in. [But] if you have a good product... chances are you'll get further."