frēstyl: simplifying the process of promoting and discovering local live music

Arianna Bassoli
FreStyl Inc.
77 Wallbridge Hill
Tolland, CT
karmanet@frestyl.com

Johanna Brewer
FreStyl Inc.
77 Wallbridge Hill
Tolland, CT
deadroxy@frestyl.com

ABSTRACT
In this paper, we present a new service for web and iPhone for promoting and discovering live music, frēstyl. We will show how frēstyl addresses and attempts to solve the problem that emerging musicians, local promoters and small/medium venues face when publicizing their events, both on a local and global level, and the problem that music fans face when trying to gather a complete but not overwhelming understanding of local and global live music events.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
H.5.5 Sound and Music Computing

General Terms
Design, Experimentation, Human Factors, Verification.

Keywords
Web service, mobile service, music technology, social network, geolocalization, commercial application, user-generate content

1. INTRODUCTION
The music business is currently undergoing a wide range of noticeable changes, mainly due to the growth of digital music distribution and the diminishing power of the previously few yet influential record labels. Many web services are contributing to these changes and attempting to support the development of new dynamics around the promotion and consumption of music.

One of the aspects that will be constant in the music business is, we assert, the fact that music will always be live in one form or another. Its very nature necessitates that it be played, over time; even if no audience is present, the music is still "live". Moreover, though, online, digital, music distribution has actually supported the growth of the number of musicians that can become visible enough to book shows and attract an audience. Finally, market analysis demonstrates that more people now then ever before attend concerts and that the top 100 musicians are actually generating less and less revenue through concerts while the

market continues to grow [1]. In short, the live music market is growing, and that growth comes from the long-tail, i.e., emerging artists, local promoters and the venues that host their concerts.

However, it is difficult for these musicians, promoters and venues to publicize their shows properly, and for music fans to find information about the upcoming music events for a particular neighborhood or even city. This information is fragmented both offline (as posters and flyers distributed around town) and online (through a variety of individual web pages, local listings and logs) or, often times, not even available at all. Indeed, the bulk of information about live shows that is online comes from major ticket sellers and consequently focuses on the large-scale, high-price concerts that require the advance purchase of tickets.

In order to make it easier for musicians, promoters and venues to publicize their shows online, and for music fans to discover them, we have built a new service called frēstyl, available for web and iPhone. The following section will further explore the problems being addressed by our service.

2. THE HARDSHIPS OF PROMOTING AND FINDING LIVE MUSIC
We have stated that live music consumption is actually growing as a major source of revenue for the music business, and yet, it remains difficult for the stakeholders who create these events to effectively spread the word about their concerts.

2.1 The Problem of Promoting Live Music
While the top-selling musicians, promoters and venues have the support of powerful PR agencies and their shows are listed on the major online ticket sellers such as Live Nation, those outside of the mainstream still struggle with promotion. They rely on posters and flyers, and pay to be featured in local listings, but this information is mostly confined within smaller circles. These long-tail event stakeholders have started to acknowledge the power of online self-promotion and often use Facebook to spread the word about their events, in addition to maintaining their own websites, but this approach only circulates information within their often rather small and self-confined networks. In order to visit a musician's website users need to know of their existence first, a non-trivial hurdle to face, and the information a venue owner shares within Facebook is distributed only to his network of friends and fans. Finally, these long-tail event stakeholders often have to take care of the promotion of their shows themselves and have little time to update a growing number of social networks.

2.2 The Problem of Discovering Live Music

From the perspective of music fans, it is hard to gather information, in an easy and straightforward way, about live shows outside of the mainstream. This information is distributed physically as people have to gather it through posters and flyers spread around the city, while online it is mainly conveyed on venues' or musicians' personal, often out-of-date, websites or in local listings and blogs. Social networks can facilitate this process but the largest ones, such as Facebook, do not provide end users with enough filters to make the data meaningful. For instance, there is no easy way within Facebook to see all of the upcoming live music events in a given city. The high number of event-creation notifications, private messages and status updates sent out by musicians, promoters and venues makes it hard for the user to receive useful and manageable information about live shows, and often ends up being viewed as spam.

3. RELATED WORK

The online promotion and discovery of live music has been to date typically a secondary aspect of services that focus on digital music discovery, or it has been tightly coupled with online ticket sales. Web services like MySpace, Last.FM, Reverbnation and, to some degree, even Facebook, gave artists a platform to share their digital music with fans, and over time began to offer the option to add additional information such as photos and concert listings. However, we believe, that because the promotion of live events was not meant to be the primary purpose of these services, the concert listing for any given artist is often left incomplete and are only sporadically updated. On the other hand, the dominant ticketing services like LiveNation, focus solely on increasing their revenues from ticket sales. Rather than requiring artists and venues to maintain their event listings, ticketing services centralize the data collection through an editorial process. Consequently, the events listed by such services tend to be higher-grossing, larger-scale concerts, as the companies focus on maximizing their per-concert revenue. This has the long term effect of promoting the most popular concerts to the top, which in turn, drives their popularity even higher, never allowing for less well-known musicians to break in.

Recently, several targeted online platforms have been launched to allow music fans to follow the tours of their favorite musicians. Among these services the most popular is now Songkick [2], followed by smaller, similar platforms like BandsInTown [3] and GigLocator [4]. These services primarily rely on information already present online, and aggregate data from many of the major ticket sellers. These new services, then, contribute to the echo-chamber effect which begins with the ticket sellers they partner with. Mainstream musicians are favored, while emerging artists and their events often do not even appear. As services like Songkick seek to achieve global coverage, local depth and richness falls to the wayside.

Finally, local online listings, such as 06live [4] in Rome or LiveMusicLombardia [5] in Milan, offer information about smaller shows, but this information still remains fragmented as different places and cities have different local listings that are challenging to find for people who are visitors to these cities and simply want to discover the local music scene.

We can describe the current status of live music information available online in terms of an iceberg whose tip is constituted of mainstream artists and large venues, well-represented by online services like LiveNation and Songkick, and the bottom of which,

is comprised of emerging musicians, local promoters and small- and medium-sized venues that are represented online through a very fragmented (e.g. local listings) or network-limited (e.g. Facebook) set of services.

The goal of frēstyl is to unite in a single platform all of the information about live music that constitutes this iceberg, by representing the rich and complex local music scenes and making them accessible globally.

4. FRĒSTYL: OPENNESS AND GEOLOCALISATION

We have built frēstyl acknowledging and addressing all the previously described hardships involved with the process of promoting and discovering live music, and the limitations of currently available services. For musicians, promoters and venues we have provided a way to distribute the information about their shows in a fast and efficient way.

4.1 Tools for Artists and Venues

For registered users, adding an event is a very simple task on frēstyl. The *create event* dialog requires only three types of information in order to create an event: the date, the venue in which it takes place and at least one artist participating (*when*, *where* and *who*, see Figure 1). Thanks to an auto-complete mechanism, the user can select the venue and the artist if they are already present in the database, and can add them if they are not, by simply entering their name and, in the case of a venue, also their address. All the information that constitutes an event in frēstyl is not textual, but, rather, comprised of entities (i.e., records) present in or added to the system (namely, venues and artists). This simple process speeds up the data-entry time required in an attempt to address the fact that the long-tail event stakeholder have limited time to dedicate to the promotion of their events.
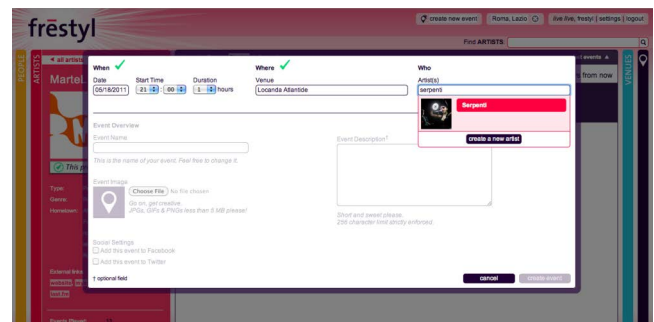

Figure 1. Creating an event on frēstyl.

Also, frēstyl allows its users to save time the often spend updating their information across multiple social networks. Instead of keeping the information users add to the database inside of a walled-garden, frēstyl attempts to make it easier for this information to spread across the internet as much as possible. At present, users can connect their frēstyl accounts to other social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, and when they add events to the frēstyl, they have the option to automatically push those events to Facebook and Twitter. We are constantly working to increase the number of social connections offered, are improving our beta-version API, and finally, developing widgets to allow users to integrate their event information on other sites across the web.

Finally, the homepage of frēstyl is a large map centered around the users current position (as determined through geolocalization),

which shows all of the events that have been uploaded by users for any given day. This allows both big and small events to have an equal opportunity to be viewed and discovered by music fans, who do not need to be registered to the service in order to access frēstyl. In part, this design decision serves to address the limitations that social networks like Facebook impose implicitly by only presenting events to users who are in the artist or venue's network. Simultaneously, while the map serves to streamline event discovery on a local scale, any user can change the location on which the map is centered, effectively allowing all events to have a global audience.

4.2 Tools for Music Fans

From the perspective of music fans, frēstyl addresses the problem of finding complete and useful information about local shows. We have built a platform that works at a global level, but provides the information that can be more relevant to users locally. Instead of building a system where users have to manually select the location where they want to find live music, frēstyl automatically geolocates the user, after they have agreed to share their location, shows them their position and all the live music events taking place around where they are, on the same day. The geolocalization works both online, through the Google Maps API and the new HTML5 Geolocation API, and on iPhones, using Apple's location tools (based on GPS and WiFi triangulation).

Because frēstyl aims at providing information not only about large-scale shows but also, and especially, about the small ones, the service immediately presents the user with concerts happening *today*, as they often do not require the advance purchase of tickets. The driving use case for frēstyl is to answer the question: *where can I go to see a good live music show tonight?*

The time and place specificities of how events are displayed on frēstyl represents a first level of filtering for obtaining a manageable amount of relevant information about live music. Still, in big cities such as Rome, where frēstyl has now its biggest penetration, the overall amount of daily shows can be up to fifty. In order to provide users with targeted information we are developing a system for social live music recommendations, based on users' implicit and explicit preferences, behavior and social connections.

While most music recommendation systems rely on sonic similarity, frēstyl intends to provide social recommendations instead, as most of the live music shows that are publicized through frēstyl include artists that are still unknown to the majority of people or have not yet recorded their music. Events will be then suggested to users based on a series of variables that include the venues where the users often go, the shows their friends attend and the artists that are socially connected to the ones they already like (e.g., supporters of known artists).

At the moment, the hottest events, artists, venues and music fans can already be spotted easily by users (see Figure 2). Depending on how popular an event becomes based on people attending and recommending, the event itself and the artists, venue and event creator involved also go up the ranking and become *Hot Today*, *Hot This Week* or *Hot This Month*. This is only the starting point of a recommendation system that will be progressively more targeted to each user and more deeply geolocalized.

In order to further simplify the process of promoting and discovering live music frēstyl has adopted an approach of local engagement and global accessibility. We will discuss this approach in the next section.
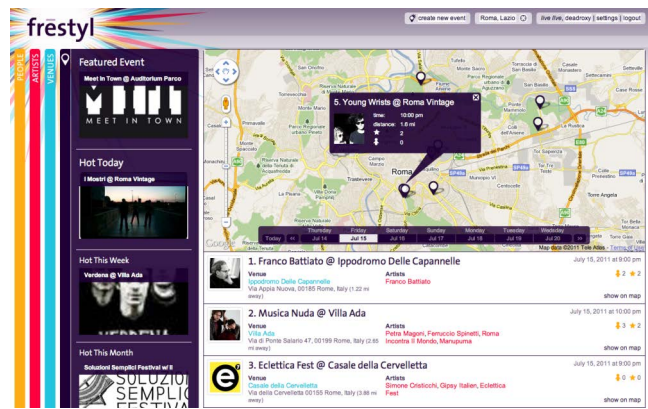

Figure 2. frēstyl's homepage with all events happening today around the user.

5. A PLATFORM TO SUPPORT LOCAL ENGAGEMENT AND GLOBAL VISIBILITY

We have previously discussed how frēstyl supports and simplifies the process of promoting and discovering live music, through providing tools for emerging musicians, local promoters and small venues to publicize and share their events, presenting music fans with information about music events that are temporally and spatially specific (e.g., tonight, nearby) and creating a socially-driven recommendation system to improve the discovery of events. Another way in which frēstyl facilitates this two-way process of promoting and discovering music shows is by allowing the emergence of local music scenes within a globally accessible platform, and supporting the communication between music fans, musicians, promoters and venues.

The small and medium players in the live music market mostly work on a local level. Emerging bands try to get their first gigs at small neighborhood venues and promoters work for years in a single city to gain the trust of fans and followers. The platform that frēstyl offers to users, and the direct marketing efforts that our team is carrying out, are aimed at increasing the visibility of these local music scenes. At the same time, all events and locations on frēstyl can be accessed from anywhere, so that each local music scene is visible and available to anyone in the world. In addition, frēstyl relies on the mobility of its users, especially artists and music fans, to create a truly physical link between these local music scenes and provide continuity to the content.

5.1 Rome: a First Trial

In practical terms, we have chosen Rome as the first local music community to test frēstyl. With around 350 venues, dozens of promoters and hundreds of local bands, the music scene in Rome is often underrated and unexplored, but offers great potential as it is still under-represented through worldwide events-oriented platforms such as Songkick. Launched in late October 2010, frēstyl has 250 users in Rome sharing information about upcoming live music events and more than 800 users sharing world-wide. Ten percent of venues in Rome and ninety percent of live music promoters have actively adopted frestyl. The service is growing monthly by approximately 40% with currently about 3,000 monthly visitors and 15,000 monthly pageviews. Additioanlly, the iPhone application has been downloaded more than one-thousand times (see Figure 3). With respect to content generated by the users, over three-hundred (or eighty-five percent)

of venues in Rome have been added to our database. More than sixty venues have been added in New York City, which is equivalent to the number of venues LiveNation covers, and users have added more than 1,100 venues world-wide. Over 4,000 artists who have played in Rome are represented in the database, and within nine months after launch over 8,200 artists have been added world-wide. More than 5,300 live music events have been created, and frēstyl features more events per day in Rome than Songkick and Last.FM, while having as many daily concerts as local editorial event listing 06 Live. What we can see from these metrics is that there is potential for a localized approach to live music promotion and discovery to work as part of a larger global service.

So far the feedback from artists, venues and music fans has been very positive. Users appreciate the simplicity of the interface and find it useful to find interesting local events. *Compliments for the simplicity of an idea that has an incredibly high potential, specifically to help people find new, emerging bands*, says a blogger who is also a frestyl user. *I find it very useful that you can also create directly the events on Facebook*, says the web editor of a venue in Rome that uses frēstyl to update their monthly music program. *I'm always adding events because I don't want Cleev [another user] to become hotter than me*, says a music fan indicating the fact that adding popular events and gaining visibility can become a competitive activity.

Users are also constantly asking for new features, such as the possibility to connect to other users and to upload their own media to their profile, specifically in the case of musicians. We are trying step-by-step to incorporate their feedback, as we move towards our own long-term vision of what frēstyl should become. In the last part of the paper, we will briefly describe the functionalities that frēstyl will implement in the future months to complement and enhance the current ones.

6. FUTURE PLANS
Among the features that will be implemented within frēstyl in the following months are: improvement of social connections, upgrade of the mobile applications and socially-based recommendations.

Figure 3. frēstyl's iPhone application: events on the map.

6.1 Social Awareness
The main incentive for registered users on frēstyl is at the moment the opportunity to add and share music events. However, we are currently adding social functionalities so that users will be able to follow other music fans, artists and venues and receive updates about their activity. This will constitute a further filter to convey useful information to users, and also the basis for recommendations.

6.2 Media Integrations
As previously mentioned users, especially musicians, have been asking to integrate media content on their profiles (e.g., songs and videos). As frēstyl values openness and connections to other online services we will soon provide the possibility to add widgets from SoundCloud and Bandcamp for digital music and YouTube and Vimeo for videos.

6.3 Mobile Experience
frēstyl has been designed with the mobile experience at its core. The goal of frēstyl is for music fans to head to a live music show serendipitously, in the spur of the moment, and both the web and the iPhone applications have been built to support this behaviour. The iPhone application of frēstyl will be improved by adding features like event check-ins and mobile event creation.

6.4 UGC: Reviews
In order to facilitate the choice of music events for users we will provide the possibility to add reviews of the shows after they take place. These reviews will then be voted on by other users, so that the ones that have been considered to be most useful will become more visible to everyone (similarly as services like Yelp, Amazon and IMDB currently do).

6.5 Social Recommendations
As the functionalities within frēstyl increase and so does its user-base, we will gain useful tools and data for creating a solid socially-based recommendation system, which will allow users to receive increasingly more targeted and useful information about live music.

7. CONCLUSIONS
In this paper we have presented our web and iPhone platform for promoting and discovering live music, frēstyl. We have demonstrated how frēstyl attempts through its vision, technology and design to solve the problem for emerging musicians, local promoters and small venues to make their events more visible online and for music fans to gain useful information about the rich local music scene. frēstyl is still a work-in-progress, but our current results in Rome show that there is potential for growth and improvement upon the other existing responses to the problem of live music event discovery.

8. AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

9. REFERENCES
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[4] GigLocator: http://www.giglocator.com

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