

14,000 songs in 28 days

(a case study)



Burr Settles

SXSW Interactive

March 16, 2010

about FAWM

February Album Writing Month

The screenshot shows the FAWM.ORG website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for SONGS, JUKEBOX, FAWMERS, FORUMS, WIKI, and MERCH / DONATIONS. A search bar is also present. The main content area features a header for "February Album Writing Month" with a quote from Jack London: "You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club." Below this, there's a section for "This Week's Songwriting Challenge: Week 4: Time" with examples of songs. A "Recent forum discussions" list includes topics like "Hiding Behind Production" and "Be a Featured FAWMSTAR!". A large number "10239" is displayed, representing the total collective songs so far in 2010. To the right, there's a "Welcome, Burr Settles!" message with statistics: 86 forum posts, 72 song comments, and 61 soundboards. Below that is a "FAWM Fund-O-Meter" showing 50% progress towards a goal of \$7133, with a note that 7.6% of fawmers have donated. Social media icons for Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace are visible, along with a "RADIO" icon. A "FAWM OVER! WE WIN!!" banner is at the bottom of the main content area. The browser's address bar shows "http://fawm.org/" and the user is identified as "R. Bharat Rao".

annual challenge:
14 songs in 28 days

“creative community”
3,000+ fawmers
28,000+ songs
to date

created by *accident*
by me (and 3 friends)

about me

- **computer science researcher**
 - PhD from UW-Madison (2008)
 - currently a postdoc @ Carnegie Mellon
 - specialize in machine learning, data mining, natural language processing, bioinformatics
- **current projects**
 - “Read the Web” – <http://rtw.ml.cmu.edu>
 - “Active Learning” – <http://active-learning.net>

(more) about me

- singer/songwriter
 - typical guy-with-guitar CD-collecting 4-track home-recording geek since my teens



since 2005:

- ~65 gigs (solo, 2 bands)
- Alaska to New York
- England, Europe, etc.

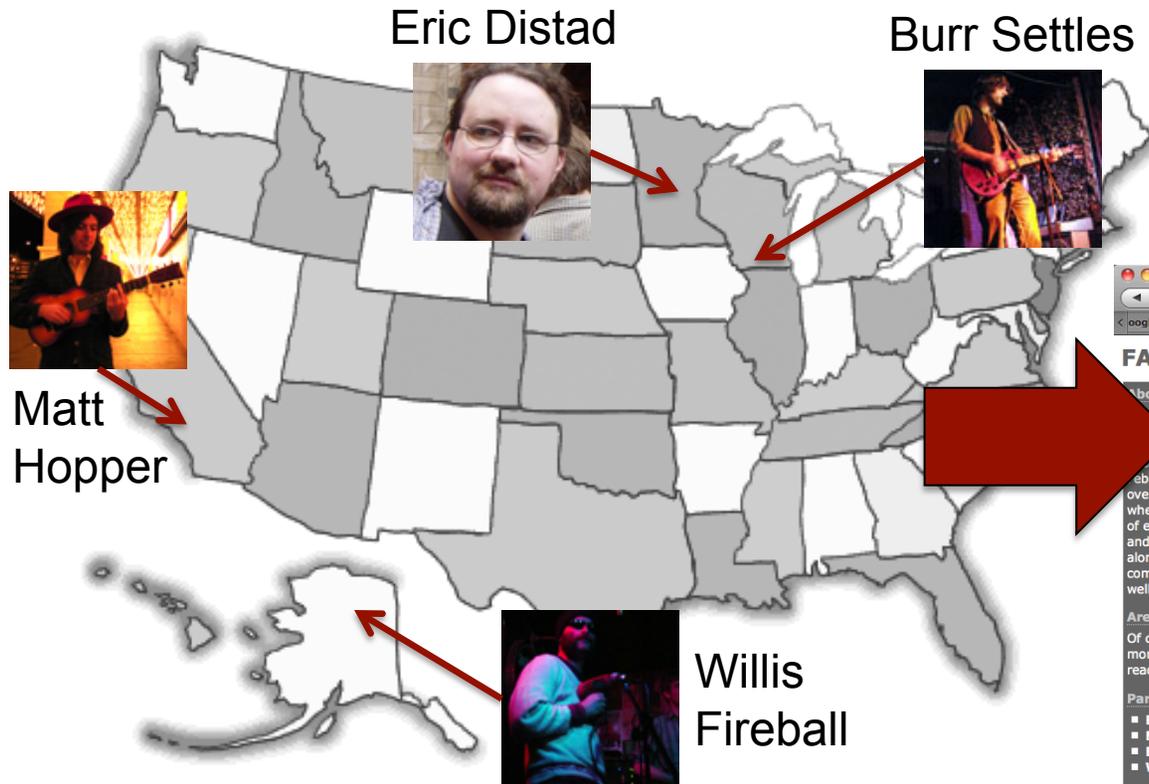
before starting FAWM:

- nothing

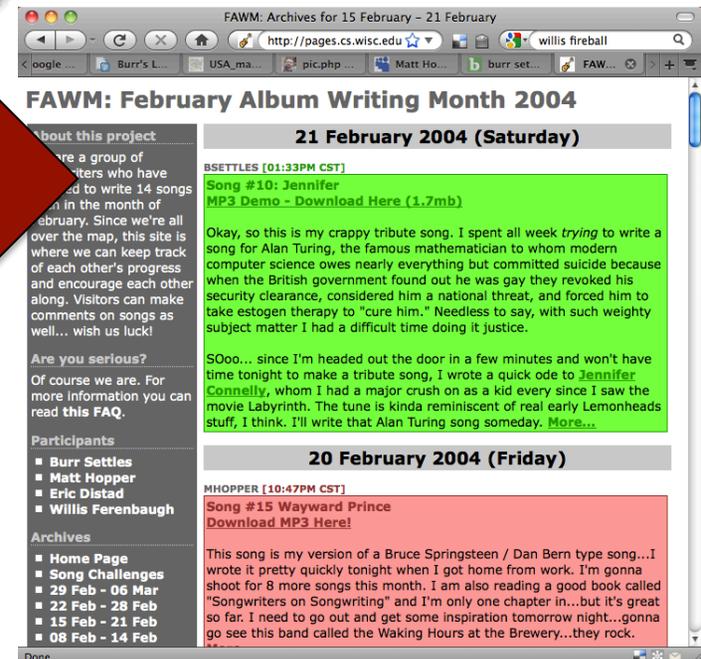
a brief history

- **Nov 2003:** wrote a fun but abysmal 50K-word novel for NaNoWriMo
- **Dec 2003:** wowed! elated! looked for a musical equivalent... found nothing 😞
- **Jan 2004:** decided to write a song every 2 days for a month with 3 friends
 - arbitrarily picked February

2004: the first FAWM



solution:
a group blog!



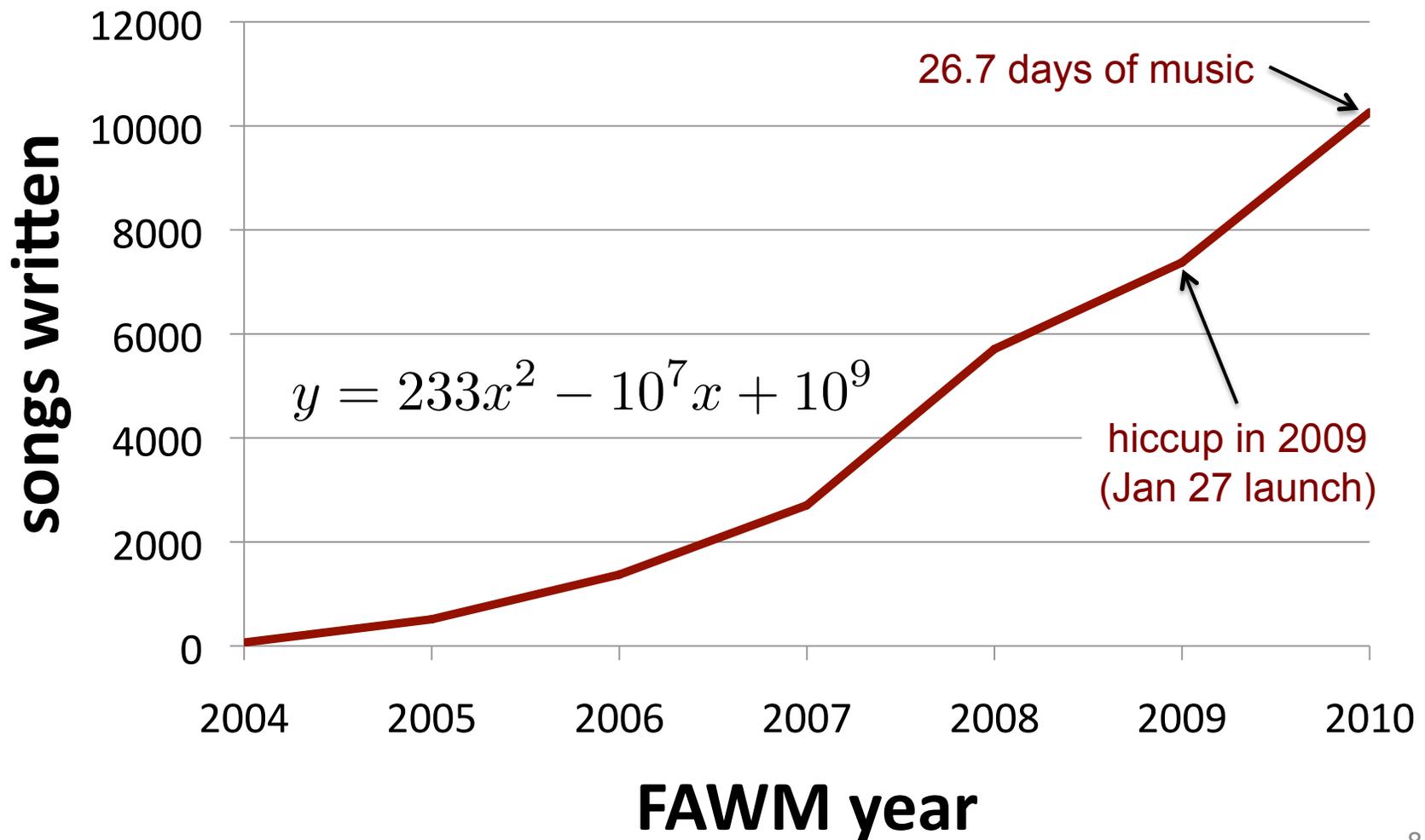
problem:
4 guys, 4 states,
3 time zones

66 songs!

2005: people found out

- received dozens of emails from other songwriters asking to participate
 - registered *fawm.org*
 - set up a multi-author WordPress site
- 72 fawmers registered, 25 “winners,” 513 new songs written

the rest is history



what this presentation is

- lessons and reflections after 7 years of running FAWM.ORG
- 4 general principles for designing and maintaining “creative community” websites
 - with examples!
 - from FAWM and elsewhere!
- ~45min of me talking
 - 15min for Q&A / discussion / bickering

what this presentation is NOT

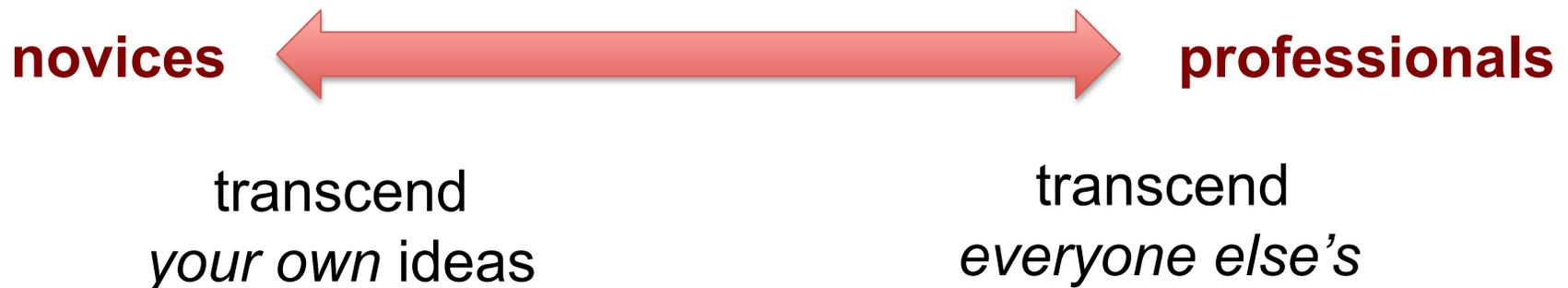
- a how-to guide
 - your mileage may vary...

cre•a•tiv•i•ty

| krē-ā'tivitē |

noun

the ability to transcend existing ideas, rules, patterns, interpretations, etc., and to generate meaningful new ones



creative community

- a place where people can be creative!
 - accommodate both ends of the spectrum
- why community is important:
 - people challenge you
 - people inspire you
 - people provide context for your own ideas

achieving creative community

- how to attract creative people?
- how to encourage people to think creatively once they're around?

1

don't promote

(rather, let the community do their own promoting)

let the community promote itself

- they want to share their successes
 - with musical associates
 - with friends
 - with the media
- they want to be around like-minded people
 - leads to more participants who “get it”
 - fewer trolls!

still use promotional tools

- email mailing lists
- forum announcements
- twitter, myspace, facebook, etc.
- press releases, etc.

- just aim these tools **inside** the community, rather than outside
 - equip them to share the word

you can get press anyway

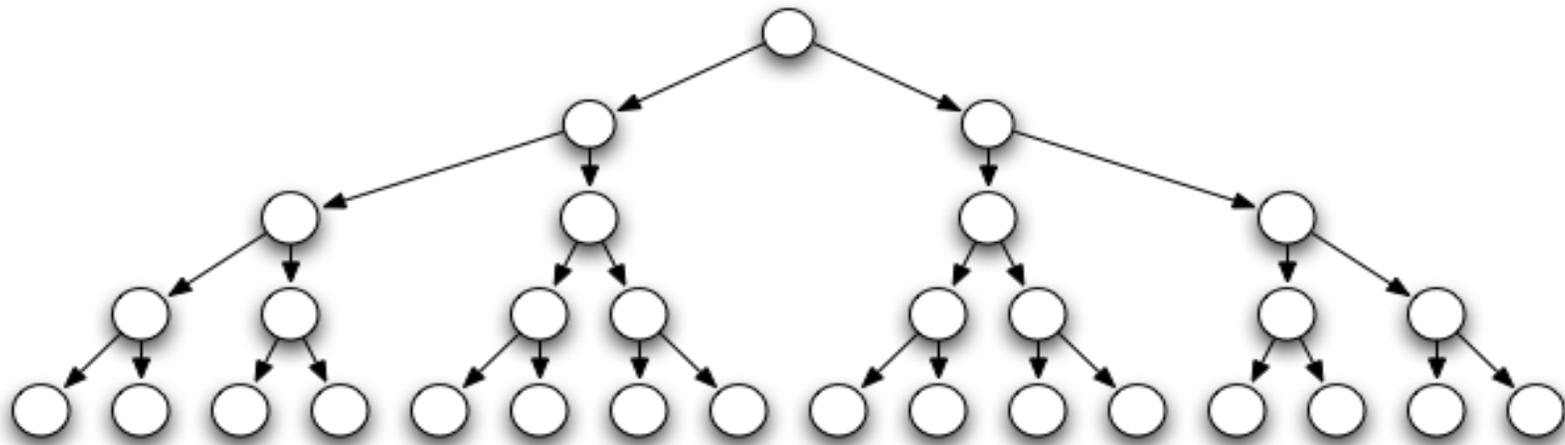


CBCradio



another perspective...

- focus your energy on encouraging people to think creatively once they're around
- if you do your job, you might have your hands full anyway!!



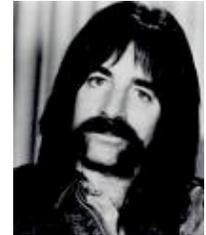
2

embrace constraints

FAWM is one big constraint

deadline!

“Nothing brings on inspiration more readily than desperation.”
- *Harry Shearer* (of Spinal Tap Fame)



“The commitment provides the nudge to be creative in a different way than time-unbounded process provides.”
- *Scott Lake* (Colorado, 4 years)



“14 songs in 28 days is impossible, until you do it one time.”
- *Billy Sea* (California, 3 years) ← 162 songs this year



weekly challenges

- this year:

- week 1 – “jobs”

- week 2 – “inanimate object”

- week 3 – “neither major nor minor”

- week 4 – “time”

concrete vs. abstract
lyrical / topical / musical / etc.

- 8% of songs (781) written this way

- fawmers have fun seeing how others interpret the challenges differently

tweets



fawm

FAWM over. We win!

7:03 AM Mar 10th via web

2/28: 10 hours, 44 minutes left. Write another song (any old song) for the heck of it!

5:16 PM Feb 28th via web

2/27: Feast! http://fawm.org/wiki/fawm_culture

12:21 PM Feb 27th via web

2/26: The word of the day is "three." It's a magic number, yes it is. Write a magical piece of music.

12:18 PM Feb 26th via web

2/25: Ooops.

12:17 PM Feb 26th via web

2/24: Write a song about traveling.

11:28 AM Feb 24th via web

2/23: Be inspired by a friend.

7:43 AM Feb 23rd via web

2/22: Pick a "non-traditional instrument" and write a piece of music for it: xylophone, water glasses, samples of slamming doors, etc.

5:55 AM Feb 22nd via web

Name FAWM.ORG

Location All over the place.

Web <http://fawm.org>

Bio 14 Songs In 28 Days. What are you waiting for... inspiration?

51 following 339 followers 23 listed

Tweets 32

Favorites

Following



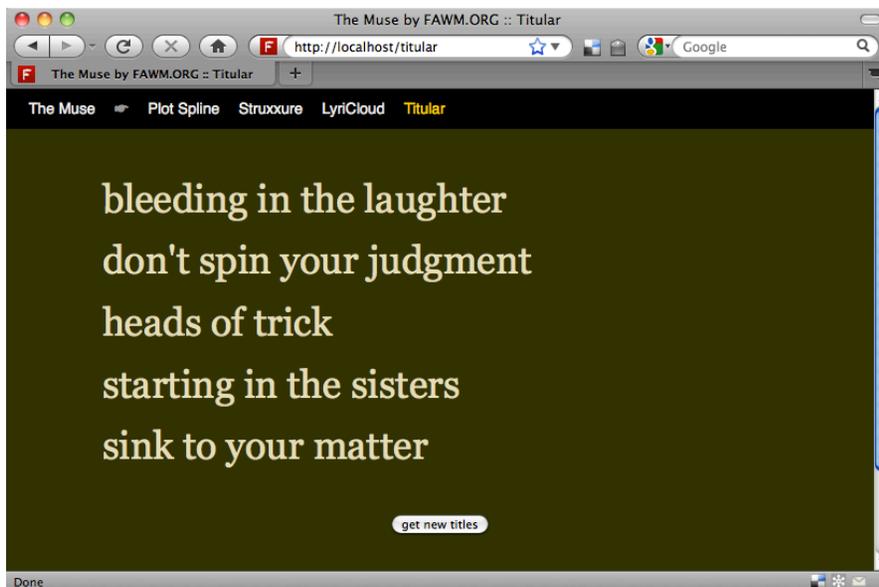
View all...

RSS feed of fawm's tweets

this year, we experimented with tweeting daily songwriting exercises

inspirational tools

<http://muse.fawm.org>



107+ songs written this way

muse examples

I Am Your Adult (Titular)

“So, this is a song about the little voice inside you that stops you from doing fun things because you’re not a child any more and you can’t really get away with doing them.”

Expandable Friend
(UK, 1 year)



For the Bethlehem of Manhattan (all four)

“It was like doing a puzzle, and the result is actually quite surprisingly coherent AND good.”

Yakobo
(UK, 1 year)



constraints are liberating

- don't *restrict* creativity – they bring context and framework to play within

“For you what is a ‘constraint’ is for us a new toy to play with, and the novelty of a new toy is huge for keeping ongoing interest... Don't forget that you're offering up a sandbox.”
- *Elaine DiMasi* (New York, 3 years)



“Those constraints aren't so much a limiting factor as they are a spark to build off of – and the creativity within those constraints is virtually limitless.”
- *Deborah Isaac* (Toronto, 4 years)



they'll constraint themselves

YouTube

fawm 3.5 hours

Search

Browse

Upload

How To Win FAWM In Less Than Four Hours

gojacool

7 videos

Subscribe



feasting:

writing as many songs as possible in one sitting

record:

14 songs, 3½ hours by Tim Wille, (Denmark, 4 years)

concept albums

- concept albums
 - years (ellen cherry, 2005)
 - chemical elements (2005)
 - fictional TV soundtracks (roger roll, 2008)
- this year, half of *my* FAWM songs were a “Sinfeast” EP (7 deadly sins)

US presidents project

FAWM 2006:

3 Sacramento fawmers noticed $14 \times 3 = 42$,
the number of presidents in US history

- Jeff Pitcher (Above the Orange Trees)
- Christian Keifer
- Matthew Gerken (Nice Monster)



triple-album project released during the 2008
election season to critical acclaim
- showcased at SXSW in both 2008, 2009

Of Great and Mortal Men
Standard Recording, 2008

they'll constrain each other!



2010 “Loteria challenge”

Loteria deck: Mexican bingo-game with Tarot-like cards

Bret Rooks (California, 6 years) volunteered to “deal out” random cards for farmers to write songs about

59 songs written this way

songsfirmishes

- Sundays at 1:00pm EST: a title is given, everyone has 1 hour to write the song
 - 106 songs written this way



SONG FIGHT!
presented by spud and jb

POST ON BOARDS!
PODCASTS!
MUSIC ARCHIVE
SIDEFIGHT ARCHIVE
HXARQ! ARCHIVE
ART ARCHIVE
SUBMIT ART!
SONGFIGHT LIVE!
SONGFIGHT STUFF!
FAQ

DOUBLE TAKE
DOUBLE TAKE

Double Take
stream all

- Doug Funnie
- The Weakest Suit
- Ross Durand
- Sockpuppet
- WTFBBS
- State Shirt and Glenn Case
- Flxxvm Florvm
- Chopped Liver Meat God
- BLT and the Hoblit
- Banditt
- Rycchat

next week's fights
Robot Ninja Zombie Bear
Due: Wednesday, 03/17/10 9:59am pdt
mp3 with artist name sent to fightmaster@songfight.org (tips)

last week's fights
Please Stop
Architects of Desire, Christopher Cogott, and Jake DeLorey can't seem to stop people from voting for them.

five years ago this week
Turn the Power On
winner: R. Mosquito
Man Speaking German
winner: Gregorian Pants
Snow Fort
winner: Forty Second Songs
Tank Top
winner: Future Boy

song news
From Andrew Reist



Hi, Therman has a new EP - it's called E(MO)P, and is available [here](#) - 5 songs of crazy angst for your listening pleasure.

organized by Cow Exchange
(Wisconsin, 5 years)

similar to NaNoWriMo “word wars,” e.g., write as many words as possible in 10min, 15min, etc.

inspired by songfight.org

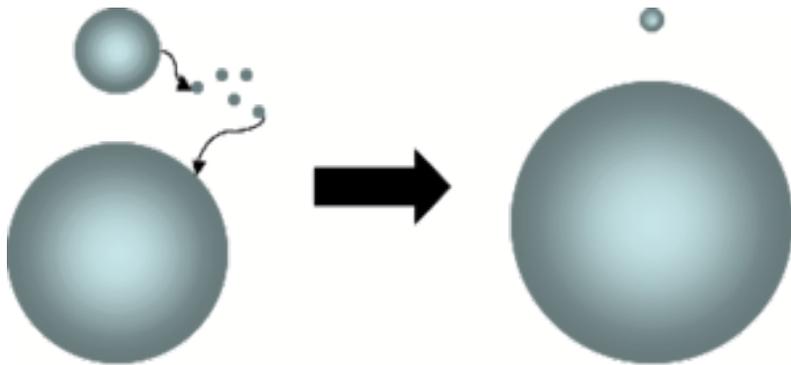
enabling community constraints

- entire section of the forum devoted to user-generated challenges
 - 4 chords, repeat the first verse, cover/parody, dr. seuss, “emo crap,” etc.
- free-tagging of songs
 - makes it easier to find others’ responses to the challenge

3

keep it ripe

Ostwald ripening



chemical phenomenon in
liquids and solids:

“rich molecules get richer”
(over time)

example: re-crystallization of water in ice cream (gives old ice cream that crunchy texture)

**the same happens in social phenomena
(particularly online)**

(social) Ostwald ripening

spectrum of ripening in online social phenomena

ripe



rotten

constructive feedback
positive discussion
games
challenges
constraints
encouragement
publicity

anonymous heckling
negative discussion
trolling
flamebaiting
attention whoring

2 ways to keep it ripe

- design the interface to mirror your ideals
- monitor what gains traction
 - freeze the rotten stuff
 - reinforce the ripe

ripe interfaces

limit the
“gameable”
features
(explicitly)

i can taste it on my lips
savor the sweetest part of it

Rate This Song (For Your Records):

⊖ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Feedback:

 **Add a comment:**

Be honest but respectful with feedback!

Say It!

 **AXL** 5 days ago [edit](#) | [delete](#)

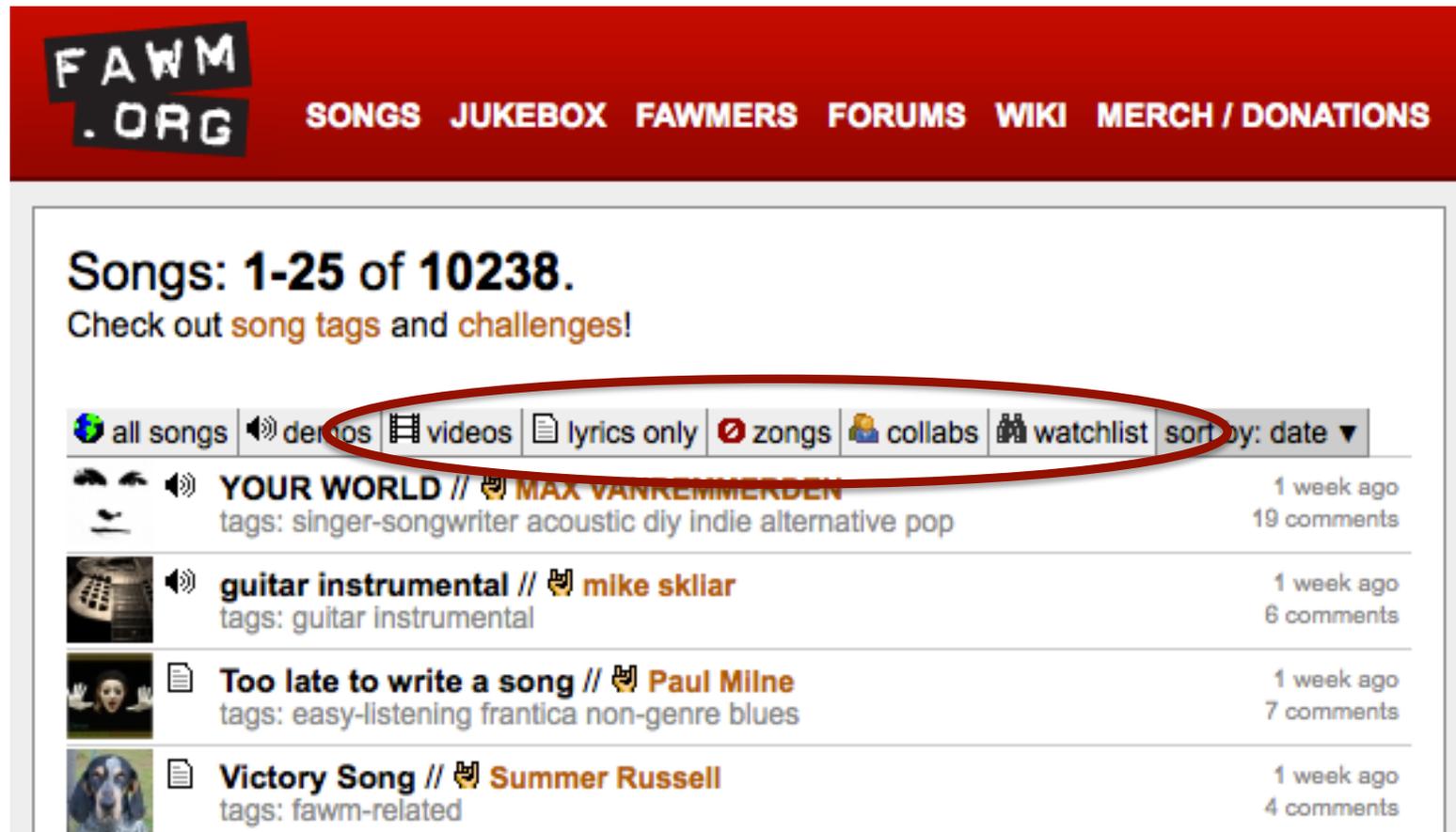
Love the chromatic chord progression and the 'stumbling' at the end of the verse. With a band this could sound really cool. And of course, the chorus needs lots of oooohhs and aaaahs in the background. That will make it irresistibly tasty 😊

simple
guidelines
(in-line)

“de-rotting” discussions

- be public about reigning in abuse
 - do NOT take sides or shame anyone
 - it’s OK to say “not appropriate for the community” and freeze (lock down) the discussion
- the community learns to self-police
 - only 12 forum threads have been frozen in the history of FAWM (0.4%)
 - never re-opened in a new thread
 - important to freeze (not delete)
 - only 2 users left due to dispute (0.05%)

reinforcing the ripe 1: features



FAWM
.ORG

SONGS JUKEBOX FAWMERS FORUMS WIKI MERCH / DONATIONS

Songs: 1-25 of 10238.
Check out [song tags](#) and [challenges](#)!

all songs demos videos lyrics only zongs collabs watchlist sort by: date ▼

	YOUR WORLD // 🎸 MAX VANREMMERDEN tags: singer-songwriter acoustic diy indie alternative pop	1 week ago 19 comments
	guitar instrumental // 🎸 mike skliar tags: guitar instrumental	1 week ago 6 comments
	Too late to write a song // 🎸 Paul Milne tags: easy-listening frantica non-genre blues	1 week ago 7 comments
	Victory Song // 🎸 Summer Russell tags: fawm-related	1 week ago 4 comments

reinforce the ripe 2: showcase it

2007 “Anagrams” Forum

I came up with: **I'm Mr. Awful Organ Tune (by birth!)**, which describes me perfectly. Or how about this description on how to "win" FAWM: **Warm flute/guitar hymn: ribbon!** Or the feel of the place during February: **Humorous, barmy, bantering wit.** Or how's this for an album title: **I am the flabby, nurturing worm.**



Wow, those could all be lines in the same song. A very disturbing song.



May I suggest that the disturbing song is written in the disturbing genre "Strange Disco" as **Wow, those could all be lines in the same song. A very disturbing song** anagrams to **Beethoven's howlingly melodious new bass guitar 'n' Strangle Disco.** 10 points to anyone who writes a song that makes the above line make sense



strangle disco

1 day later: 4 “Strangle Disco” songs

2 days later: official genre category,
- we promoted it in the weekly email blast

1 week later: unofficial criteria emerged

- disco / hip-hop / dance beats
- anagrams (or palindromes)
- tongue-in-cheek sinister lyrics
- beethoven / bass guitar references

month’s end: 52 songs



T-shirts
“megamix”

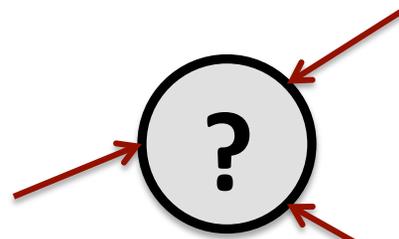
explore the core

song elements independently written by different people
it's up to the fawmer to do the rest!
(genre, tempo, melody, etc.)

lyrics

sun burns / sleep sleeps
things run / eyes see
feet race / heart drums
seek wish / find none

but in black month where silver shimmers far
i am burrowed deeply down
hidden under hills of frost
beneath a river running fire
back for one more
return to the core



verse - chords

Gm B♭ C Em
D Bm F B♭

chorus - chords

Cm G Dm A
B♭ F Gm D G

28 songs written this way (2010)

neologisms

afawmmodations (n.) allowances friends and families must make to a participating fawmer so he/she can continue to write and record songs.

FAWK (n. or v.): balls-out rock by a fawmer

fawmburger (n.) any meal (or handful of food) hastily prepared and eaten while fawming.

fawmling (n.) newcomer to the FAWM challenge.

fawmpilation (n.) annual compilation CD of 14 FAWM songs.

infawmnia (n.) inability to sleep due to songwriting anxiety and/or addiction to FAWM.ORG.

keeping it ripe

- as with **all social communities**, certain phenomena will start to gain traction
- find ways to point out & encourage the *ripe* stuff (what builds community)
 - respectfully lock down the **rotten** stuff
- the community learns to follow your lead

4

communication
over aggregation

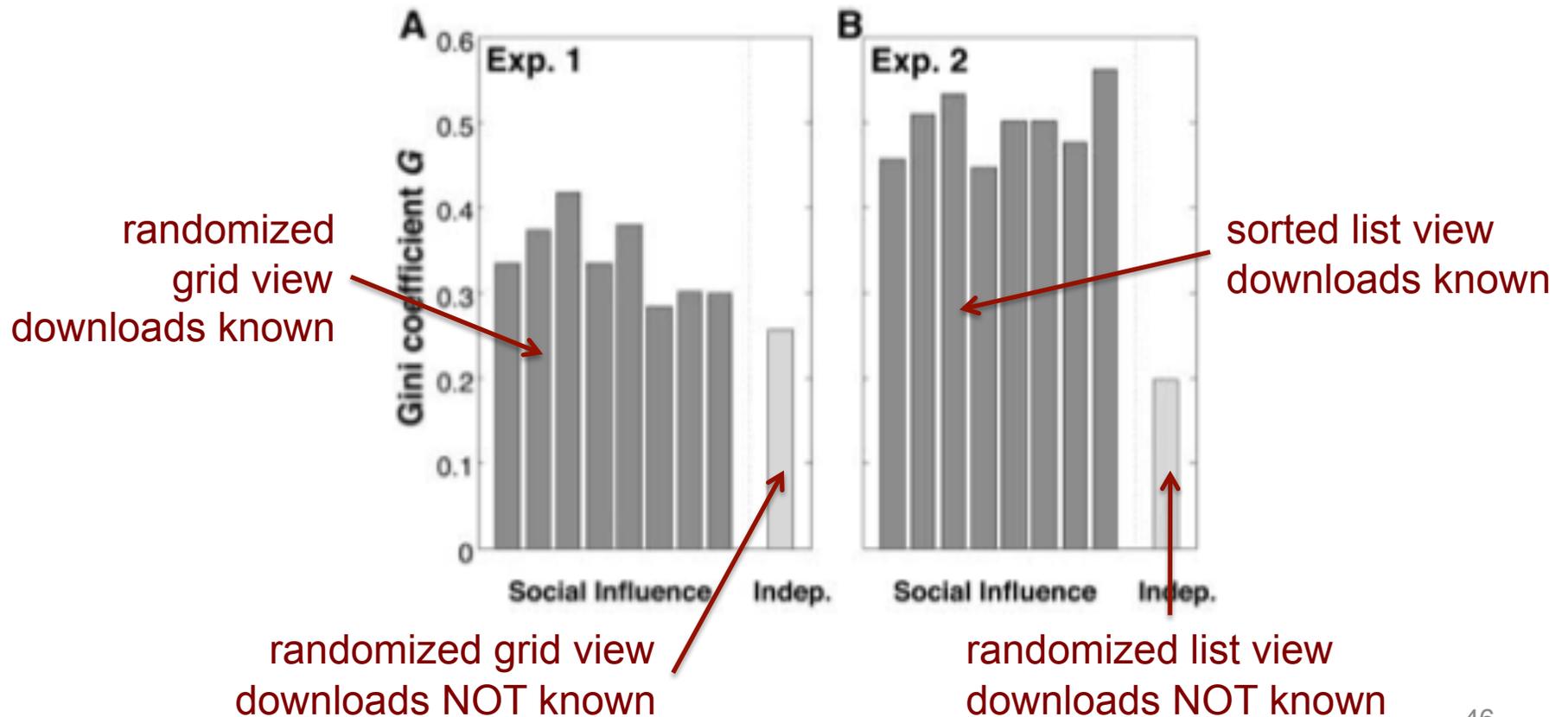
web 2.0 = aggregate!

- great for websites primarily intended for content **consumption**
 - holy grail: popularity
- not so great for content **creation**
 - quality & artistic growth is important

the problem with ratings

[Salganik et al., *Science* 2006]

an artificial iTunes-like music market study:



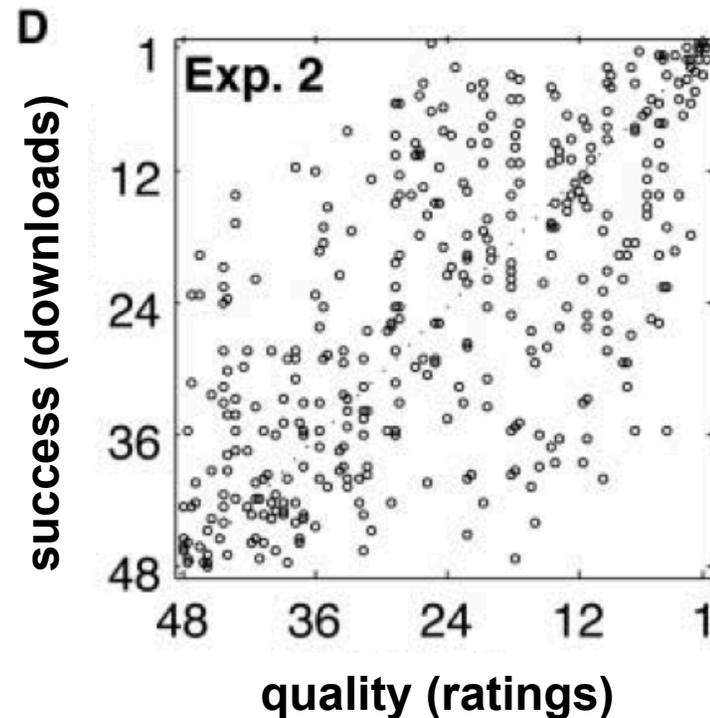
success \neq quality

[Salganik et al., *Science* 2006]

“Our results support the hypothesis that social influence... contributes both to inequality and unpredictability”

information cascade

violates Surowiecki's requirement that crowd members make *independent* decisions to be intelligent

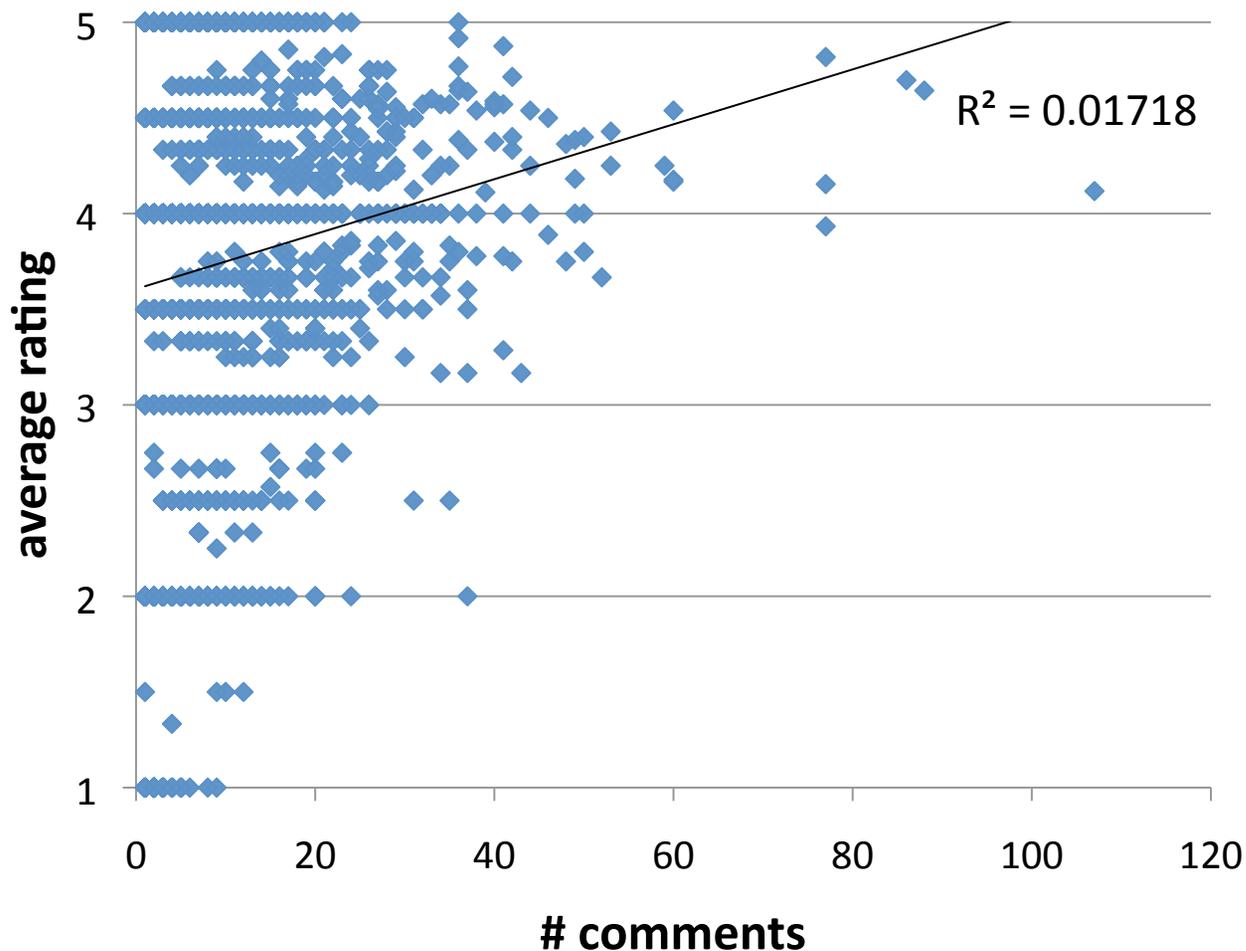


private ratings

- bookmarking tool
- more reliable ratings
- useful for recommender systems
- encourages comments (real feedback)

#1	🔊 *For the Bethlehem of Manhattan // 🇸🇩 Yakobo	★★★★★★
#2	🔊 Frankly, I Don't Mind // 🇸🇩 The Cow Exchange + 🇸🇩 Phil Norman	★★★★★★
#3	🔊 Press House Installation // deliciouspastries	★★★★★★
#4	🔊 I am your adult // 🇸🇩 expendablefriend	★★★★★★
#5	🔊 Killer Frog Overload! // Captain Vulpine! + 🇸🇩 Billy Sea	★★★★★★
#6	🔊 Let's Vomit Exclusively! // 🇸🇩 The Cow Exchange + 🇸🇩 Debs	★★★★★★
#7	🔊 loose lips and battleships // 🇸🇩 PlushBaby	★★★★★★
#8	🔊 Hey Now // Andrew Grimm	★★★★★★

FAWM still isn't immune



users can optionally sort by comment count; they tend to glom on to popular songs this way

comments have very little to do with quality (ratings)

fighting aggregation

zong (n.) zero-comment song. Not to be confused with the term introduced by Dr. Seuss in “Oh The Thinks You Can Think”.

zong-busting, zonging (v.) to comment only on zongs.

FAWM
.ORG SONGS JUKEBOX FAWMERS FORUMS WIKI MERCH / DONATIONS

Zongs (public songs with zero comments): 1-25 of 936.
Check out [song tags](#) and [challenges!](#)

all songs demos videos lyrics only zongs collabs watchlist sort by: title

	"Another Rainy Day" / With Richard Blum (rittmo) // musicsongwriter tags: music and poetry sad mood-music	3 weeks ago zong
	"Snow Angel" / With Richard Blum (rittmo) // musicsongwriter tags: music and poetry snow angel piano and voice	2 weeks ago zong
	(Happy For You) Somehow // asirasremedy tags:	3 weeks ago zong
	(The You and Me) We Used to Be // ballyhoot tags: pop rock	4 weeks ago zong
	(You Left Me) Blue Again // caseydfloyd tags: slow blues	4 weeks ago zong

2007, 2009: no zongs

2010 so far: only 936 (9%)

tangent: steel bridge songfest

festival organized by Pat MacDonald (Timbuk3); raises funds to save the old steel drawbridge in Sturgeon Bay, WI

week-long songwriting workshop beforehand in 2007: my first experience in genuine **collaborative songwriting**



Kim Manning @ SXSW
3/17 Headhunters (4pm)
3/18 Blu Cafe (8pm)

2008 was “leap FAWM”



goal: write 14 songs plus one collaboration

2008: 252 collaborations (4%)

2009: 545 collaborations (7%)

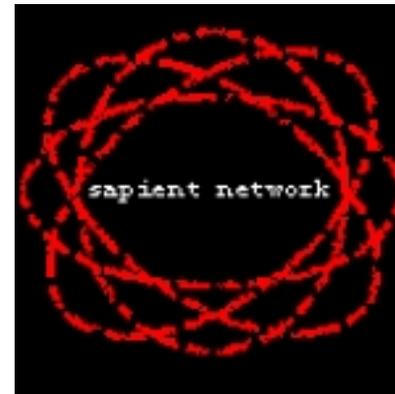
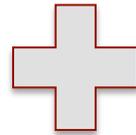
2010: 859 collaborations (8%)

genre-crossing



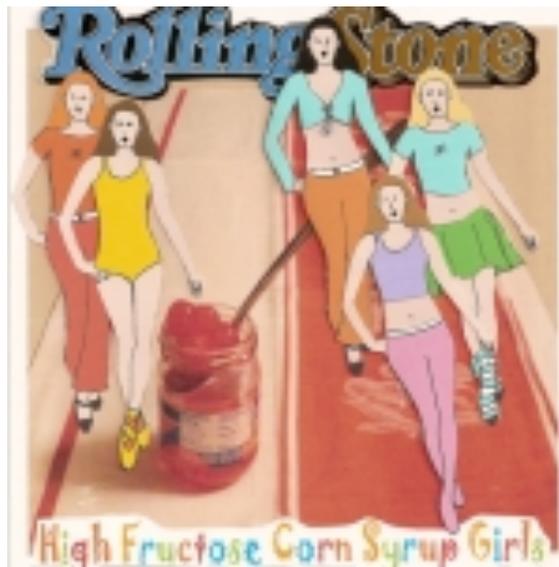
Becca Palm
(Seattle, 4 years)
jazz pianist/vocalist

“...sometimes I wish I had one of those screamer voices... I could do a raspy acid rage-filled rocker song. Maybe one of you rockers will take me under your AX and help me bring out the inner artistic angst??”

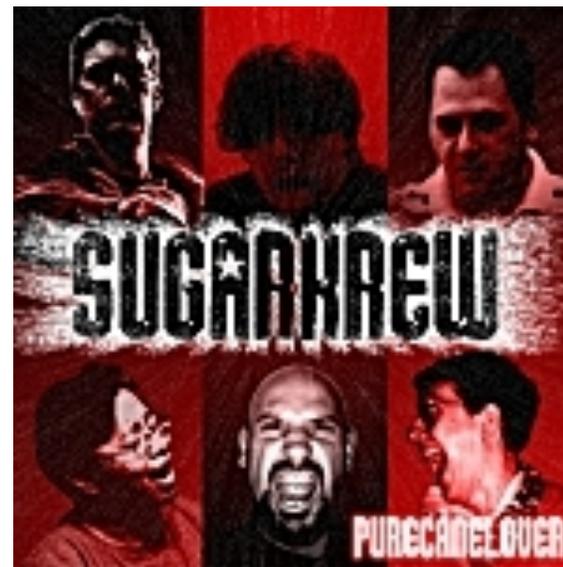


Sapient Network
(Netherlands, 3 years)

“super-group” phenomenon



5 fawmettes
3 countries



6 fawmsters
2 countries

(appendix)

under-engineering is okay

summing up

1. don't promote
2. embrace constraints
3. keep it ripe
4. communication over aggregation

from fawmers...



“FAWM is good for the fans! The music is raw and genuine, and the very moment a new creation is written, the whole world can hear it.”

- *Nathan Schleicher* (Michigan, 1 year)



“you cant fully understand FAWM until you go through it...it can be life/ career changing...”

- *XEW* (Maryland, 1 year)



“FAWM makes people go out and learn how to play guitar!”

- *heavy hedonist* (New York, 2 years)



“Before FAWM I spent most of my time thinking about writing a song, but with FAWM you have no time to think, you just write... Also, The quality of the songs I am writing has improves 100 times since FAWM and completely changed the way I write songs.”

- *Kenny Hyslop* (Ireland, 2 years)

(more) from fawmers...



“I would like everyone to know that this community supports people from all walks of life...I am a middle-aged mother who has never written a song in her life - yet with the support and collaboration of FAWMers from around the world, I wrote a dozen or so that I am SO proud of...”
- *ellen liss* (Georgia, 1 year)



“One aspect I find certainly noteworthy (well, of course I do!) is the international aspect of FAWM... To me, FAWM is the internet at its best.”
- *Karan* (Germany, 2 years)



“Increasingly, FAWM is also a launching pad for people to meet face-to-face and play music together. FAWM manages to increase international cooperation and local musical participation at the same time.”
- *Scott O. Clamp* (Minnesota, 4 years)

<http://fawm.org/forums/thread/1100/>

FAWM
.ORG

February Album Writing Month

donations welcome

see me or visit <http://donate.fawm.org>

slides to be posted via [@fawm](https://twitter.com/fawm)

