

Virtual City

YOUR GUIDE TO CYBER CULTURE

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WHO'S ONLINE TONIGHT?

Cyber Stars

66 Hit Acts
You Must See...
The Motley Fools
To Cybergrrl

ESCAPE!
Travel Tips & Trends

NAKED CITY
"I Was a Girl of the Net"

SCREEN TEENS
Geeky or Groovy?

Also featuring
Sonic Net
Brett Leveridge
Planet Out
Michael Bolanos
The Hecklers

>>> STREET SMARTS: Ease on to the Internet <<<



barbecue, sit out under a crescent moon and watch the little Fools race up and down cornrows chasing fireflies") and stock picks that have consistently performed better than almost every hotshot mutual fund are only the first reasons the Gardners became America Online's biggest draw. More important may be that they have created a friendly environment that encourages smart people to share their knowledge; unlike many who preach the gospel of interactivity, the Fools walk the walk. As a result, they have such remarkable customer loyalty that a hundred of their regular contributors flew to Washington, D.C., a few months ago—at their own expense—to transform their virtual friendships into real relationships.

It would be easy to cast the Gardners as renegades from the Establishment, rebels with a cause. In fact, they're great students who have simply applied the high morals of their elite education. "Through Brown, I saw Groton as a narrow-minded world," Tom recalls. "But when I came out of the beer-induced haze, I realized that what I heard in chapel and English class made sense. The school motto—*Cui servire est regnare*, or 'to serve is to rule'—is pretty much what we're doing."

NICHOLAS BUTTERWORTH also graduated from Groton and Brown. But as a comparative literature student, he looks back at college as a breeding ground for a new kind of venture capital elite. "At Brown, you could analyze films and television shows as cultural texts," he recalls. "In the same way, you can look at the web as a deconstructionist's delight. You can have your cake and eat it too in interactive media; it's a way for white, upper-class, educated kids from boho schools to become creatively satisfied and financially successful, which isn't necessarily the case in traditional media."

Not that Butterworth, now 28, left Brown with a career plan. He played bass in a punk band called Dung Beetle, "which set out to become a legendary failure and was quite successful at it." When a friend took over a direct-mail company, he went to California to help out—and found himself servicing Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign. The following year, he became the director

of Rock the Vote, a voter registration effort to register the young.

Two nonstop weeks on America Online taught him all he needed to know about the addictive power of online chat. In August 1994 an old friend asked him to help develop a marketing plan for an alternative rock bulletin board called SonicNet. A year later, he was editorial director—and the modest operation had moved to the web and was being courted by Prodigy.

"This medium has too much supply and too little demand," he says, sounding a bit like a student in a class on deconstruction in media. "The business model makes no sense. Advertising—is that the right term for a one-by-four-inch image? If you're not pushing pornography or business information, how do you expect to charge money for your content? No, if this is it—the high-water mark—we'll all leave and do something else."

But Butterworth is going nowhere. Alternative music is a hugely popular category on the web, and he's riveted by the challenge of organizing the SonicNet staff to present sharp opinions and the latest graphics. The goal: interactive television. The workload: unending. "When I sleep, I dream about chat," he says. "I wake up and tell myself, 'I must go back to sleep and work on this business plan.' Not long ago, in order to stop thinking about work, I had to read two novels and see three movies."

Butterworth's recent reading is provocative: *Microsoft Secrets*, "which showed me that the structure we set up to run this business happens to mirror what Gates did." Gates should watch out; Nicholas Butterworth, perpetual student, is still going to school.

HIS MOTHER SANG BACKUP FOR Frankie Vallée and the Four Seasons. His father was an engineer who directed the Little Theater. He was an only child. Everything was in place for Michael Bolanos to work in show business.

At eight, when his family lived in Taiwan, he appeared—singing in Mandarin and looking like a pint-sized Michael J. Fox—in McDonald's commercials. The following year, back in Los Angeles, he was the first kid chosen for a children's version of a television quiz show. On special occasions, he went to Disneyland, where he "loved to watch how it was organized." On his first

visit to Disney Studios, "I was on my knees! I wanted to live there!" Not surprisingly, he liked to pose his dog behind a makeshift anchorman's desk, as if his pet were a logo. In his fantasy, he had a network.

In his New Jersey high school, the other kids hustled up summer jobs; Bolanos produced musical reviews for country clubs. The budgets were about \$25,000 a show—but he didn't hire the talent until he had the guarantee in hand. "Actors would walk in and ask for my dad," he recalls. "When they learned I was paying more than Equity, they got over that."

Although he was accepted by Princeton and Stanford, college was never an option for Bolanos; he was too busy representing actors and producing international shows. In 1993 he was "minding my own business" when a neighbor showed him CompuServe's magazine for members; he got the software, logged on and was mystified by the lack of content about entertainment.

Then his client, Ben Vereen, was hit by a car in Malibu. Back in New Jersey, Vereen's family had trouble getting information about his condition. Bolanos went on CompuServe and pulled the wire service stories. "My mind was blown: I knew more than Ben's family." He wrote a letter to CompuServe's executive vice president and moved on to a show he was producing in Russia. When CompuServe asked him to become an entertainment consultant, he still wasn't rabid for the online world. "I had no intention of working for H & R Block," he says. "But I started calling studios to book talent. No one had any clue what I was talking about. Just finding the name of the appropriate person to talk to was hours of fun."

Eventually, he got movies and television and critics all in one place—"an idea that seems simple now." At the 1994 Academy Awards he was the sole online journalist filing on-the-spot reports. The big breakthrough: offering EDrive users (those who purchased, for \$14.95, his download software for films) an early look at clips of *The Lion King*. Two hundred and fifty thousand people said "yes" almost at once, crashing the host computer at CompuServe for 48 hours. After that, the people at the entertainment-challenged CompuServe—and in Hollywood—gave Bolanos pretty much whatever he wanted.

Bolanos has always worked out of his home, and EDrive has been no exception. The 4,000-square-foot loft on a nonde-



"We hit the convergence of technology, media and entertainment. EDrive happened because we were there."

—Michael Bolanos, EDRIVE

script block in Manhattan's East Side hides three bedrooms behind an office that includes a cyberversion of a television newsroom. "I often get up at two in the morning," he says. "That's a good time to contact Europe and Japan." And read mail. And prepare to host events. "I'm very proactive. Everyone here will tell you I'm a real pain in the ass."

Which is not to say: a star. "Last year, people invested millions in sites that *lost* money—and because we were profitable from day one and our growth was astronomical, all these people wanted to buy us," he says. In the end, to keep growing he accepted a few million dollars—"more than three, but less than ten"—from Compu-Serve for a minority stake. "But we still have the champagne bottle we opened when we hit 10,000 members. We think of ourselves as little guys having a good time."

COLEMAN, ALABAMA, LIKES TO THINK of itself as "the city of churches" because there are a hundred houses of worship to service its 15,000 residents. Films play for weeks in its movie theater. And in this dry county, the nearest bar is 30 miles away.

In seventh grade, a Coleman boy named Mike Ragsdale was admitted to the advanced class. He was a teacher's pet, on student council, the whole deal. But he was bored. One night he rolled toilet paper across a teacher's lawn and smeared Vaseline over her car windows. He was caught and punished. "After that, I was the same person, but people's perceptions of me changed," he recalls. "And then I realized: I can roll a teacher's yard and the worst thing that happens is that I have to do her grass for a few weeks."

Soon after that, he met Sean Michael. "We were the ones smart enough to know it wasn't worthwhile busting your ass in junior high," he says. "We huddled together for warmth."

College was a different huddle. Ragsdale and Scott Davis, a friend of Sean's, would each buy 15 packs of beer and some steaks at 10:00 a.m. and drink their way through the day. Eventually, one of them suggested, "Fifteen's not enough, let's go to 30." Once Davis actually hit the target. Ragsdale, sensing perdition ahead, decided to shift his reclusive drinking into bar-hopping, "socializing with just enough in me so a girl would laugh."

Graduate school was no more satisfying. Online was. They'd log on from their separate locations and do what they loved best—play wise guys. Was Jagger appearing in some deadass forum? They'd ask if he slept with David Bowie. At a certain point they realized that what routinely passes for wit in chat rows was content—that the background could become foreground. Thus was born Hecklers Online, which now flourishes on America Online from a base in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Nothing's changed, according to Sean Michael: "We were doing some marketing materials, clowning around for the camera, and when we looked at the pictures, they seemed right out of a yearbook. Same personalities, just moved forward in time."

With one key difference: alone of our cyber stars, the Hecklers (augmented by Darren Nelson) feel like celebrities. "We pump ourselves up by comparing ourselves to the Rolling Stones," Ragsdale says. "These are like the bar days; eventually, we'll play stadiums. So I relish this time."

"If we're so confident," Michael adds, "it's because, bottom line, Hecklers is us. It's not an act."

"We're sure glad we live in a digital age," a sober but unbowed Scott Davis concludes. Then he poses the ultimate question for those who have, in finding cyber celebrity, found creative satisfaction as well. "If we'd lived a hundred years ago, who knows what we would have done?"

Jesse Kornbluth (jessekay@aol.com) is a contributing editor of *Virtual City* and *Architectural Digest* and contributes to *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*. He hopes to launch an online site soon, and, like the subjects of this story, become a cyber star.



DAVE'S WORLD

DAVE SIEGEL [>>>Star Makers, below] High Five

Act: The Post-Modern Design Museum of the web, curated by primo design dictator and connoisseur
Audience: Style snobs, Graphis readers, the MoMA crowd, techno-Picassos
Applause: At last, a patron of fine design on the web, an arbiter of taste, a modern-day DaVinci; don't miss "The Casbah," his own web page (<http://www.highfive.com>)

JOSHUA QUITTNER [>>>box, p.40] The Netly News



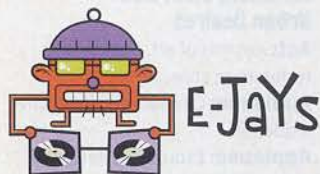
BOB ALLISON Spider's Pick of the Day

Act: Relentless ringmaster of the unruly web
Audience: Web-a-holics and site-junkies
Applause: Gives new meaning to net-surfing (<http://gagme.wwa.com/~boba/pick>)

DAVE SIEGEL [<<<box, above] High Five

GLENN DAVIS Project Cool

Act: The Michael Ovitz of web-dom
Audience: The maddening crowd, the starving masses
Applause: Winning follow-up to the legendary "Cool Site of the Day"; cool is key (<http://www.projectcool.com>)



NICHOLAS BUTTERWORTH SonicNet [<<<p.34]

Act: The cyber answer to Wolfman Jack, spinning tracks and online chats
Audience: Flannel-shirt-clad alternative rockers
Applause: Rad RealAudio sound, killer screens, caffeine-spiked news and record reviews (*Prodigy, Jump: SonicNet*) (<http://www.sonicnet.com>)

MICHAEL DORF Knitting Factory

Act: The Ron Delsener of the web
Audience: Groovy neo-beatniks
Applause: Cool nightly "cybercasts"; now you can stay at home and not miss a beat (<http://www.knittingfactory.com>)

MICHAEL GOLDBERG Addicted to Noise

Act: Virtual *Rolling Stone*, featuring Alice In Chains, REM, Sonic Youth and Smashing Pumpkins
Audience: College kids, rockers
Applause: Mad-scientist graphics, knows what's what in music (<http://www.addict.com>)

JEFF PATTERSON and ROBERT LORD Internet Underground Music Archive

Act: The Mudd Club of the online music world
Audience: Late-night carousers
Applause: Striking retro look, break-out indie label (<http://www.iuma.com>)

PAUL RYBURN DiscoWeb

Act: Studio 54 on the net; lo-fi disco info; links to Bee Gees, ABBA, Blondie
Audience: Boomers still struck with "Saturday Night Fever," neo disco kids
Applause: Been there, done that, but mindless can be fun; check out the hustle guide (<http://www.mscu.memphis.edu/~ryburn/discoweb.html>)

NICK TURNER Rocktropolis

Act: Virtual theme park of rock and roll; guardian angel—Darryl Hannah
Audience: Teenage rock-and-roll lovers of any age
Applause: Stay tuned for the new, easier-to-use version (<http://www.rocktropolis.com>)



ALIZA SHERMAN [<<<p.31] Cybergrrl Webstation

Act: The Wonder Woman of the net
Audience: Women and girls and the men and boys who love them
Applause: You have to hand it to Aliza, she *will* make the web a friendlier place for women; check out her FeMiNa and Webgrlls sites too (<http://www.cybergrrl.com>)

CARLA SINCLAIR Net Chick Clubhouse

Act: Injecting the net with estrogen
Audience: Web soul sisters
Applause: No matter what your size, the Magic 8 Bra answers your most pressing questions (<http://www.cyborganic.com/People/carla>)

ELLEN PACK, LAURIE KRETCHMAR, MARLEEN MCDANIEL Women's Wire

Act: I am woman, hear me roar
Audience: Ms. readers
Applause: Too big—and dangerous—to ignore (<http://www.women.com>)



KEVA, IVY, DEANNA, LAUREN, ANNIE Foxy

Act: The Sassy-est site in cyberspace
Audience: Kinderwhores, net vixens
Applause: These girls kick ass (<http://www.tumyeto.com/tydo/foxy>)

THE BIG GUN PROJECT Crash Site

Act: In-your-face music, sex, food, sports and politics
Audience: Monster truckers, disaster groupies, aliens
Applause: "Where chaos, horsepower and madness unite" (<http://www.crashsite.com/crash/>)

TOD SWANK Tum Yeto Digiverse

Act: Skateboard cool, teen antics and irreverent attitude
Audience: The Sega generation
Applause: Join the teenage fan club—get cool stuff by snail mail (<http://www.tumyeto.com>)

RICHARD WANG Blair

Act: An ultra-hip excursion into pop culture past and present
Audience: The Prozac Nation
Applause: Free Kitten, Lacoste shirts and Pippi Longstocking—what more could you ask for? (<http://www.cyborganic.com/Hothouse/Perennials/Blair>)



MICHAEL BOLANOS [<<<p.34] EDrive

Act: The Ed Sullivan of cyber-wood
Audience: People who like a "reely beeg" show
Applause: We like him, we "reely" like him (*CompuServe, Go: EDDrive*)

ADAM CURRY Cybersleaze

Act: MTV VJ turned nerd
Audience: 20-something gossips

OLD MEDIA	NEW MEDIA
Rod Serling's Night Gallery	Dan's Gallery of the Grotesque
One Life to Live	The Spot
New York Magazine	papermag.com
American Bandstand	Rocktropolis
Ann Rice	Mythopeia
Granta	Salon