

Inspiral Carpets tunes into new technology with Zen Internet

At the height of the 'Madchester' music scene of the early 90s, the Inspiral Carpets were the cornerstone of the quintessential Manchester trio of bands that included Stone Roses and Happy Mondays. From a background of 'psychedelic punk pop' in the mid-80s, Inspiral Carpets eventually went on to headline at the Reading Festival, have four top 10 albums, appeared frequently on Top of the Pops, and saw the rise of its now infamous "Cool as F***" t-shirts. They became one of the biggest bands in the country.

And then in 1995, as the music industry was realising the potential of using new technologies to reach wider markets, especially the Internet, Inspiral Carpets split. As a result the band never reached the point of having a Web presence and never made much use of technology. The fan club had been run in the 'old fashioned' way, dealing with fans in person. Martyn Walsh, bass player and Web site administrator, says: "We traditionally had a very close relationship with our fan base which was very important to us. It was very traditional, hands-on, and approachable. We did our merchandising on our own, stuffing envelopes by hand – in fact, anyone who owns a "Cool as F***" t-shirt from those days, probably has one that was stuffed into an envelope by Noel Gallagher, who was one of our roadies at the time and helped out in the office."

When the band reformed in 2003 with a new publishing deal and a greatest hits tour, it was apparent that in the new 'multimedia' environment, they needed a Web site. A Web presence had become the norm, and in order to be seen as a credible band, Inspiral Carpets needed to go online. Says Martyn: "We wanted to fight against the preconception that we were just a 'come-back' band. We're not on a nostalgia trip, we want to appeal to new fans, and just as importantly to improve visibility with potential publishers and advertisers." This desire partly to change perception of the band, and partly to influence an industry that had moved on in its absence, led Inspiral Carpets to work with Zen Internet to host a new Web site.

Launch of inspiralcarpets.com

Zen have provided domain name hosting for inspiralcarpets.com, and ActiveSpace (a Shared Windows hosting package) for the Web site. Zen Internet's ActiveSpace is aimed at Web developers and programmers who want to create a sophisticated database-driven Web site, using all the features of Microsoft ASP and Microsoft® FrontPage®. Zen registered the Web site name, and provided 50MB of Web space, unlimited free technical support, and password protected Web site hit statistics. They also provided 2GB of monthly bandwidth.

There were many reasons for Inspiral Carpets to choose to work with Zen, not least of which was Zen's unpatronising and straightforward approach to the project. Martyn found that initially the band was overwhelmed by the realisation of how important the website would be in terms of business. "We were taken by surprise by the increasing importance that the growing fanbase and record labels placed on the Web site," explains Martyn. "We had to take this into account when we started on the project. Zen's practical attitude helped us to approach this in the most productive way." The site launched smoothly, with Martyn able to approach Zen with any problems at any time, he never had to chase them up on the phone, and Zen staff were always sympathetic and helpful. The fact that Zen is based in Rochdale was also important to the decision to work with them. Martyn was keen to use a local company, to allow them to support local business and put something back into the community.

Inspiral Carpets now has a fan database, and a successful Web site that includes video clips, audio clips, a link to a merchandising site (which has been designed to look as though it is part of the band's site), online interviews with

radio stations using real-time chats, and links to concerts such as Glastonbury. Plans for the future include increasing the amount of Web space, in order to accommodate a recording of a gig at Brixton Academy made earlier this year, which will incorporate DVD and audio clips.

Site raises profile

It's been a steep learning curve for Martyn and the band, as they've realised the importance that record labels and radio stations place on databases. But Martyn found that the band's main demographic – fans in their late 20's and early 30's – were still not comfortable about leaving contact details online, unlike their much younger pop counterparts. So to keep the database fresh, the band offer regular mailing competitions with prizes only given out to people on the database, and exclusive news. Having an up-to-date and growing database means that Martyn is now able to easily access user figures and statistics, for example to provide to radio stations looking to place their logo with a link on the Inspiral Carpets site. The radio can then base its decision on a breakdown of users and fan base.

The site has allowed Inspiral Carpets to highlight their existing hits to potential customers such as publishers and advertisers, and if they decide to move forward with new material in the future they now have a Web site as a perfect vehicle for promoting it. The band has a very loyal fan base and keeping them informed has been and always will be high on the list of priorities. As Martyn says: "It's difficult to quantify the worth of a Web site, but we've learned, in working with Zen, that having a site that's built properly and linked properly can raise our profile enormously. And the boost to our reputation and image has been priceless."