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## The rise of Battle of the Bands



London band Bo Pepper

SOPHIE HEAWOOD

While skimming through an email from GNER, offering discount train tickets to Yorkshire this Christmas, I noticed a mention of how successful their recent Battle of the Bands competition had been.

It's a curious fact that, while the music industry is suffering a downturn, live music itself has never been more popular, with Battle of the Bands contests an increasingly popular way for brands to cash in on bands. No matter how unmusical their line of trade (trains, jeans, fizzy drinks), any random company can now boost their kudos by offering unsigned wannabe rock and pop stars the chance to play live against each other to win, well, what exactly?

Bo Pepper, a London band currently tipped for big things, explain that the prizes vary, but that it isn't the winning but the taking part that counts. Indeed, if there were a competition simply for how many unsigned band competitions a band can enter, Bo Pepper would surely win. 'Dolly', their frontwoman, reels off their gains: "In the Capital Radio one we came second, which was good exposure. Coming second in the Diesel one was the right kind of market, because the indie judges from the Fierce Panda label and XFM radio wouldn't normally have touched us with a bargepole - but it made us cooler. We didn't win the The Road to V contest, to play at the V Festival, but it got us on Channel 4, which a lot of signed bands can't even achieve, so that was worth it. Then we won Q magazine's best unsigned band award and got to play at the Cavern in Liverpool. The Coca-Cola i-Tunes gig was a European competition and we were the British winners, so they flew us out to play a gig for MTV Italy and paid for everything. And tomorrow I'm flying to LA to play live on an indie radio station, because of a competition."

Phew - it's clear that if you already have some industry savvy, you can use these events to bypass the record labels - something Dolly knows all about, as she has had record deals under her real name, which she would rather not give. In fact, she recorded two whole solo albums, neither of which quite saw the light of day. "I've been down the route where you spend two hours in a marketing meeting discussing your hairstyle, and whole days re-shooting pop videos because a label executive thinks the first one gave off the wrong image - all that and the public never even get to hear your music. I actually think it's quite uncool to be a competition-winning band: I'm well aware how naff it must all sound - but it means real people actually hear your songs, which is what it's all about for me. We've got all this radio play without having to go through the label route of 'you're in or you're out.' Seeing as we've got no money, it's free PR - a sprat to catch a mackerel."

Yet what of those small town kids who are new at this game - can it still work for them? Apparently so - for one group of teenagers, it led to playing their first ever gig at Glastonbury Festival. Revolt, as they are now called, weren't even a band at all until they were picked from 400 individual applicants to come to the festival, where they had three days to get to know each

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other and write a protest song to play in front of four thousand people. (The competition, run by the Youth Music charity, specified that they make their song political.)

Politics has paid off for the band: Revolt have decided to stick together, after the head honcho of Glastonbury's leftfield stage, Geoff Martin, liked what he saw and signed them to his own record label and released their single Call It What You Want (We Call It War). Thuluxton Janenthirarajah, known as TJ, their 18-year-old drummer, says, "I had no idea anything like this would come of it. When the tutor on my National Diploma in Popular Music in Bournemouth told us about the competition we were all like, ah it's just something for little kids, and I was so behind on my coursework already that I left it until the very last minute to apply. But I'd been in a band before so I emailed in an mp3 of a drum track and a guitar track that I'd already recorded. Amazingly, it worked. I have been telling everybody what it was like playing at Glastonbury!"