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INSIDE TECHNOLOGY

Software picks music that suits users' tastes

BY JON VAN

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Software that predicts the music you will like is behind the dreams of a Champaign-based start-up company that hopes to boost tunes from independent bands.

The company, One Llama, has launched a Web site (www.onellama.com) that strives to make playlists of songs based on a user's tastes. Once a user enters tunes he finds pleasing, the computer searches for others that it expects will also find favor.

It's a simple concept backed by complex software that grew out of two decades of acoustical research by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign computer geeks who are also musicians.

"We use two systems," said Amit Sudharshan, who plays the piano and violin and who recently received a computer engineering degree. "The first system is cultural analysis: How often are songs played on the radio with each other and placed on playlists with each other? We look at pop culture as reflected on the Web.

"The second part is based on the acoustical quality of the songs. The computer hears two songs and judges their acoustical similarity."

This should help consumers find music they will like, Sudharshan said, and it should help independent musicians find a larger audience.

The site is up and running, featuring a wide array of audio and video music. It will launch its full scope of services in the spring, enabling independent musicians to upload their tunes into the mix. One Llama hopes to become a portal used by independent musicians to promote themselves, sharing in revenue they derive.

Software quality is the key to success, and the fledgling firm run by Sudharshan and five colleagues has sold a commercial version of its software to EMI Music, enabling people to search the EMI catalog.

One Llama plans to make money from advertising on its Web site and from sales referrals, Sudharshan said. The company has attracted backing from the Illinois Innovation Accelerator Fund, a capital fund backed by some of the state's foremost business leaders.

David Weinstein, the fund's managing director, has helped provide business insights and connections to One Llama, said Sudharshan. The Illinois Innovation Accelerator Fund this month achieved its goal of raising \$10 million to invest as seed money in early phase start-ups.

"This is Illinois investors believing in Illinois companies and their potential," said Weinstein. "We raised money from people who normally aren't looking at early-stage deals."

Such money can be found for companies located on the coasts but is much scarcer in the Midwest, Weinstein said.

One investor, John Calamos, founder of Naperville-based Calamos Asset Management, said many proposals from small start-ups come across his desk, but his firm doesn't invest in that category. He passes these along to Weinstein.

"There are a lot of companies out there," Calamos said. "This is an opportunity to support some business to grow here in Illinois."

jvan@tribune.com