MUSIC PIRATES rule the waves

By ALFRED SIEW

When 18-year-old Gladys wakes up in the morning, one of the first things she does is to check her computer.

After a night of non-stop downloading while she slept, the trusty machine would have done its job of giving her all the songs she loves — from alternative rock acts such as The Decemberists and Plain White T's — for free.

Downloading without guilt

"I leave my computer on all the time and it only takes a couple of hours for an entire album to be downloaded," explained the teenager.

"It's okay because I'm not downloading thousands of songs and I'm not mass-distributing them," said Gladys (not her real name), when asked if she knew it was illegal to download pirated songs.

In any case, her friends are all doing it, she added.

It is unclear how many pirated songs are downloaded by the likes of Gladys here.

But if the Internet gives teenagers everywhere the ability to download bootleg Black Eyed Peas songs, episodes of Friends and Microsoft Windows XP software in the past, the worst news is that youths have now become used to getting everything for free.

A survey on consumer attitudes to be published next month by two university dons reveals that people here are aware that it is illegal and morally wrong to download pirated music.

Yet, the study also shows that people who have downloaded content from the Net think it's okay to download illegal copies for a number of telling reasons — 35 per cent think everything is free on the Net anyway, and 31 per cent say everyone is doing it anyway.

This "pirate culture," said National University of Singapore (NUS) researcher, Dr Lim Sun Sun, is hard to fight because people are not doing the right thing despite getting the message to respect original works.

"It doesn't matter how much education there is, as long as the illegal download services are there, people will avail of them," she said.

Trouble for the music industry

Dr Lim's survey, done with fellow NUS don, Dr Alan Tan, was conducted in May last year with 1,000 respondents aged between 15 and 50 years old. It was commissioned by the IP Academy, an educational arm of the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore (Ipos).

Dr Lim's survey results are acknowledged by Ipos.

"Said its director general, Ms Liew Woon Yin: "We are willing to part with hundreds of dollars to purchase the latest cell phones or electronic gadgets, but when it comes to getting original products such as CDs or DVDs priced around $20 to $25, we are reluctant to pay the price."

"Even with legal download sites such as Play and Soundbzzz offering single tracks at affordable prices of around $2 each, people still download illegally.

This persistent belligerence is trouble for the music industry, which has already been stung into action to offer legal song downloads as an alternative to pirate channels.

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The authorities believe the long-term goal is to continue educating people, despite the persistence of illegal users. The reason is simple: More than just music downloads, a respect for intellectual property is needed to develop local businesses.

Ipos’ Ms Liew said Singapore has to catch up with developed nations such as the US, which have had a headstart in the areas of innovation and creativity.

“In Singapore, our challenge is to change the mindset of Singaporeans. We recognise that this is a long-term commitment,” she added.

**WHO’S AFRAID OF ANTI-PIRACY LAWS?**

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"Only when people are brought to court will they see that illegal downloading is the same as stealing a CD from a shop.” — Mr Sudhanshu Sarronwala (right), CEO of online music store Soundbuzz