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From Viral Video to Billboard 100

By **JENNA WORTHAM**

Viral videos tend to have a short lifespan online. The best ones might attract a few million views on [YouTube](#) and get a mention on a late-night talk show before fading into oblivion.

But in one of the stranger twists in recent pop-music history, a musical remake of a local news clip transcended YouTube fame and reached the Billboard Hot 100 chart in August.

It was a rare case of a product of Web culture jumping the species barrier and becoming a pop hit.

The song's source material could not have been more unlikely: A local [TV news report](#) from Huntsville, Ala., about an intruder who climbed into a woman's bed and tried to assault her.

But with some clever editing and the use of software that can turn speech into singing, the [Gregory Brothers](#), a quartet of musicians living in Brooklyn, transformed an animated and angry rant by the victim's brother into something genuinely catchy.

The resulting track, "Bed Intruder Song," has sold more than 91,000 copies on iTunes, and last week it was at No. 39 on the iTunes singles chart. Its [video](#) has been viewed more than 16 million times on YouTube.

And to top it off, the song was No. 89 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart for the week of Aug. 20, ranked among singles by Katy Perry and Usher. The chart takes into account sales and radio play as well as online streaming.

"It's not easy to get on that chart," said Silvio Pietroluongo, director of charts at Billboard. "There are plenty of decent radio songs that don't reach the sales chart."

Russ Crupnick, an analyst at NPD, said the song's success pointed to a shift in how music is shared and discovered. Around 70 million Americans buy a CD each year, he said, which is on par with the number of people who are now listening to and finding new music on

YouTube.

“The bar is getting lower for creative artists to break into the mainstream,” Mr. Crupnick said. “In a sense, it’s not surprising that this viral pop music is succeeding as a pop-culture phenomenon.”

The Gregory Brothers’ choice of subject matter has elicited a range of responses, with some critics asking whether they were perpetuating stereotypes or making light of a serious crime.

In both the original news clip and the video remix, the victim’s brother, Antoine Dodson, looks into the camera and angrily tells his sister’s would-be attacker: “You don’t have to come and confess — we’re looking for you.”

But the group says they were drawn by Mr. Dodson’s energy. “The song is memorable and compelling for the same reasons a conventional song is,” said Evan Gregory. “He’s conveying emotion and a strong personality, and that’s what we latch onto in a pop performance.”

In fact, the song is credited to “Antoine Dodson & The Gregory Brothers,” and the group is splitting the profits from the song with him.

For his part, Mr. Dodson said he welcomed the unexpected attention and was hoping he could also ride the wave of [Web fame](#).

“We all have the song as our ring tone,” he said, adding that it had brought “some brightness” to an otherwise dark incident.

“We’d intended to get attention to what happened to my sister — but not this much attention,” Mr. Dodson said with a laugh.

This was not the first viral success for the Gregory Brothers, which consists of three brothers — Michael, Andrew and Evan — and Evan’s wife, Sarah. They are originally from Virginia but they all migrated to New York in the last few years to pursue careers in music.

While they were fooling around with video of the [presidential debates](#) in 2008, they started experimenting with [Auto-Tune](#), software that is meant to help fix off-key vocals but can also turn a person’s speech into a song, or create the warbling-robot vocals that have become a [pop-radio cliché](#).

“Mostly we started doing the videos because it amused us,” said Michael Gregory, who at 25

is the youngest of the group.

The Gregorys first caught the Web's attention by splicing choice bits from news broadcasts and turning them into a satirical compilation for a video series called "[Auto-Tune the News](#)."

The series developed a following among news watchers and has a prominent fan in [Rachel Maddow](#), who has often featured the videos during her show on MSNBC.

"We built credibility by turning it into a series," said Evan Gregory. "People would know that we weren't a one-hit thing."

"We got really addicted to the challenge of making speakers sing," Sarah Gregory added.

Lately the Gregorys have been trying to take clips that are already viral online and make them more so. In July they released "[Double Rainbow Song](#)," remixing a [home video](#) of a double rainbow over Yosemite National Park that featured ecstatic commentary by the videographer, Paul Vasquez. They also split the proceeds from sales of that song with what they refer to as its "unintentional singer."

The group's recent work has attracted offers from music and media companies that are impressed with their online success and mastery of viral culture.

"I find them to be enormously talented comedically and musically, but bigger than that — I fell in love with them," said Kent Alterman, head of original programming and production at Comedy Central, which has asked the group to develop a pilot for a possible show.

"They are so appealing both as performers and as people," he said. "I think that's part of what makes their work so instantly a part of the zeitgeist."

For now the group says its bread and butter comes from iTunes sales and commercial work they have secured as a result of their Web hits. The members of the group are also involved in various folk music projects and solo acts — none of which feature Auto-Tune. But the success of "Bed Intruder" has eclipsed any of their previous work.

"Music professionals are now turning to us saying, 'How did you edge out our clients?'" said Evan Gregory. "We've had offers for publishing deals, songwriting opportunities, even asking if we want to put artists into our videos."

Some of the group's online traction stems from the way they turn their songs into viral video

franchises by posting the chords and lyrics and encouraging others to create their **own versions** of the songs, said Kenyatta Cheese, one of the creators of a Web video series called **"Know Your Meme"** that documents online phenomena.

"They made it more participatory, which increases the value of their original work," Mr. Cheese said. "They embraced the remix culture and understood they have to contribute back in order to make it spread even further."