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In a City Far, Far Away From Hollywood, the YouTube Tales of a Lesser Vader

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MADISON, Wis. — What does it take to parlay YouTube stardom into an entertainment career?

A year ago, when Matt Sloan was working in a bookstore and Aaron Yonda in a metal shop, they were shooting low-budget comedy films that they showed every week on the local cable-access channel here. When a friend suggested they parody the “Star Wars” films, the two were split over the idea of what Mr. Sloan described as “basically Darth Vader in a grocery store.”

But as he and Mr. Yonda began fleshing out the character of Darth Vader’s hapless younger brother, Chad, a shift manager in the Empire Market who can’t land a date despite his Jedi powers, Mr. Sloan said, “I knew we had something special.”

With a neighborhood grocery co-op as their backdrop, they shot the first episode of “Chad Vader: Day Shift Manager” with friends volunteering the talent and labor. They worried about the cost of the \$600 Darth Vader costume that Mr. Yonda wore, but, he said, “We really wanted to get the look right.”

Then Chad Vader hit YouTube.

The eight-part saga is one of the site’s biggest hits, having been viewed more than 19 million times since its debut in July 2006. The series has put Mr. Sloan and Mr. Yonda among the site’s top celebrities, along with performers like Jessica Lee Rose, the actress from the LonelyGirl15 series, and Terra Naomi, the singer whose breakout song on YouTube is called “Say It’s Possible.”

While Mr. Yonda and Mr. Sloan may not have much name recognition, they do have big-name professional representation, a choice of projects, and enough money to pay people for their work on season two of Chad Vader, which they say is forthcoming.

This month the camera maker Canon brought them to New York to make a “Battle of the Internet Superstars” video along with Glenn Rubenstein, one of the writers for the Lonelygirl15 series, and Gary Brotsma, who gained YouTube stardom for his vigorous lip-synching of a Romanian pop song (he is better known as the “numa numa” guy).

Whether Mr. Yonda and Mr. Sloan will gain national recognition or remain a niche act is an open question. They still have to pitch their ideas to get work. The entertainment industry, it seems, is trying to make sense of where artists fit into the broader establishment after they make it in the quirky medium of YouTube.

Even so, the success is already far beyond what either Mr. Sloan or Mr. Yonda say they imagined when they began performing together in an improvisational comedy club five years ago.

“Chad Vader definitely gets us in pretty much any door in the entertainment industry,” Mr. Yonda said. “We had the interest of a lot of people before Chad Vader, but Chad has made us more of a hot commodity.”

Because they write, produce, direct and star in their own films, they are poised to become part of a new class of Web-based performers and producers who can shuttle between conventional media, like television and films, and online outlets like YouTube.

"They're an original comedic voice coming off the Web, and everybody's interested in that," said their agent, Dan Shear of the William Morris talent agency, which has represented them for about two years.

Their manager, Kara Welker of the Generate agency in Los Angeles, said the pair's YouTube success puts them at "the forefront of the whole self-distribution platform," allowing them to choose where and how their work will appear instead of depending on film studios or television networks to distribute it.

"They're creating stuff on their own for their own fan base," she said. "It's the power of the medium. They're their own de facto studio."

Now that they have built a loyal following, their fans will follow them to whichever medium they choose, Ms. Welker said. "Funny is funny, and once you hook into that audience, they're there for good," she said.

While they hope to branch out into movies and television, Mr. Sloan and Mr. Yonda said the Internet remains central to their plans. "I don't really care what medium we work in as long as we have the creative freedom to do what we do and are able to work in an environment that supports our creativity," Mr. Sloan said.

This year they were among the first performers recruited by YouTube's new professional partnership program, paying content providers a portion of the site's ad revenue. Neither Mr. Sloan nor Mr. Yonda would say what the deal is worth, but Aaron Ferstman, a YouTube spokesman, said that most performers in the program "don't get into this to make money. They have something to share and they want to build an audience and get their material out."

That seems to describe Mr. Sloan and Mr. Yonda. Although they have quit their old jobs to make films full time, they have no offices or production facilities of their own; they do their shooting on location, their writing in coffee shops and their film editing at home. They still perform once a week in an improvisational comedy troupe, because, as Mr. Sloan said, "improvisation is the backbone of most of our work."

They say they have no plans to leave Madison and, thanks to the decentralized nature of the Web, Ms. Welker said there is no reason to relocate to continue their careers. "In this day and age, you don't have to live in Hollywood any more. It's not the 1920s," she said.

Madison — the birthplace of the satirical newspaper The Onion — "has a kind of quirkiness about it that makes things interesting," Mr. Yonda said, adding he and Mr. Sloan have received far more generous support than they might have in a bigger city.

For example, the Willy Street Co-Op, the setting for the Empire Market, where Chad works, rents for about \$10 an hour and is open for filming whenever the crew needs the space, said Brendon Smith, the co-op's spokesman.

Dave Cieslewicz, the mayor of Madison, opened his office to the Chad Vader crew and made a cameo appearance as Chad's boss. Like The Onion, which has since moved to New York, the series "represents that eclectic, funky vibe we have here," Mr. Cieslewicz said.

Mr. Sloan and Mr. Yonda said they want to continue making Chad Vader films for the foreseeable future, but as Mr. Sloan put it, "we don't want to be known as just the Chad Vader guys."

"My personal dream is to get to the point where we don't have to do pitches," Mr. Sloan said. "It's fun to talk out your ideas sometimes, but I want to reach a level of success where people will say, 'Listen, we know what you do and we like it, so just go ahead and do it and I'm sure it will be good.'"