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Live Bands On Film: 'Web Sessions' with Austin's All-Analog Transistor Six

Austin's Transistor Six recreates the authentic, intimate feel of the BBC's Peel Sessions by capturing almost-famous bands live on still and Super 8 film and delivering performance and interview clips in online "web sessions." Here's a behind-the-music look at Transistor Six, its founders, its business model, its gear, and its analog ambitions.

By [Liz Merfeld](#)

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Page 1 of 2 [next »](#)



It's all happening for [Transistor Six](#), an Austin, Texas-based new media company that's bringing back the best of the 1970s (tangible, celluloid film, of course, in case you were thinking bellbottoms) to the music business. T6 invites artists into their studio to record a few live songs and do an interview, and they capture it all on film "for a truly warm analog experience."

Advertisers then sponsor the online premieres of the digitized sessions on Facebook and other social media platforms. All of this ties in with surprise "pop-up premieres" and invite-only shows that keep the most ardent hipsters on their toes (and cash in artists' pockets, where it belongs).

Transistor Six co-founder Cory Llewellyn explains their history, starting with his background handling marketing and new media for music industry giants like Def Jam, Sony, Polygram, and Epic Records in Los Angeles. During this time, he worked with bands on the leading edge of web video, recording web sessions sponsored by corporations like AOL and Hot Topic.

It was an emerging trend at the time, but he remembers the sessions as being "all kind of the same. Musicians were jammed into a room and folks recorded them with digital cameras. Nothing really interesting was happening." To him, the formulaic format was uninspired. Yet the seed of the web sessions idea—capturing live music as it happened and letting the experience reach would-be fans via the Internet—resonated strongly with him.

The Web Sessions

Llewellyn was reminded of the Peel Sessions, a well-loved BBC radio show where bands performed just one song for host John Peel. The potential web iteration of that concept intrigued him, and he imagined the end product would be more appealing if the production were styled in a throwback manner, with genuine analog effort steeped into the production. Llewellyn knew that the right type of video could captivate viewers. "One random day I was going through Led Zeppelin footage online," he recalls, "watching recordings done on Super 8, and I found myself watching entire sessions, not watching just for a second. They were so beautiful. There was something magical about them."

After moving to Austin, Texas, often dubbed the "live music capital of the world" (a moniker Llewellyn didn't really buy until he got down to a live band at a local bank), he realized that the scene was ripe for the type of marriage between analog and digital he envisioned. "Kind of an old school show, done on film. I've always been a fan of film and Super 8. I thought, 'Wouldn't that be great in Austin?'"

Here he befriended Daniel Northcutt, the local mover and shaker who owned stalwart hot-dog-eatery-by-day/rockin'-whisky-joint-by-night [Frank](#). One night during SXSW (Austin's renowned annual music, film, and interactive conference), Northcutt threw up a stage just outside the venue, and hosted an ad hoc Jack White show.

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Llewellyn thought he'd found a kindred spirit, and told Northcutt, "Let's try to do something together, all analog." It made good sense: Both Llewellyn and Northcutt owned Super 8 film equipment, Frank had the space and the sound person, and Llewellyn had the connections to book acts. After bringing on a third partner, David Peris, a former Sony coworker of Llewellyn, to handle back end web design along with social media, Transistor Six was born.



The Transistor Six team, left to right: Cory Llewellyn, Daniel Northcutt, David Peris

Retro-Romantic

Many new media companies live by the motto "We want to do something that's never been done before." But the T6 approach inverts that mantra, trading "cutting edge" for "retro romantic," and "slick" for "dreamy." The resulting effect is both nostalgically beautiful and evocative of a time well before all concerts could be quickly captured on mobile phones or pocket point-and-shoots. T6 records bands playing strictly in analog, filming the sessions in Super 8, and doing a photo shoot on 110 film.

Weaving old-school effects into new-school production has a certain hipster cachet these days (see: Instagram, Hipstamatic, and so on), but Transistor Six doesn't cut corners creatively, or technically. "I get a lot of people asking me, 'What kind of iPhone filter did you use? The Super 8 app?' No, I tell them, this is the real deal. I can't tell you how many bands will come through and try to look at the back of our cameras. It's completely alien to some young people."

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July/August 2025
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Current Issue	Past Issues
---------------	-------------

- | | |
|---|--|
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« previous Page 2 of 2



Daytrotter Meets Gizmodo

Northcutt and Llewellyn's obsession with retro gadgetry combined with their passion for stellar music results in a web session they consider kind of a hybrid of Daytrotter and Gizmodo, as they try to highlight the gear used during each of the sessions on their website. "A fan might say, 'Wow, those are really cool double exposures that you did with the Hold Steady!' We'll link to the Lomography website where you can buy them." (Lomography reintroduced 110 film back into the market and inspired a resurgence in film photography, and there is a

Lomography Gallery Store just around the corner from Frank.)

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Audio runs through an analog Midas Venice console. "Depending on the band, we're trying to tailor the session to the right kind of equipment, whether microphone or board," he says. For example, the band Real Estate has an echoey acoustic sound, so they used a Blue Woodpecker mic, the kind you would picture Frank Sinatra crooning into, with a beautiful, warm analog feel.

Transistor Six also takes a refreshingly nostalgic approach to rights and credits. "We give bands rights to everything to do whatever they want with it. It's hard enough to make money as a band," Llewellyn reasons. "And it's kind of a compliment to us if they want to use the film or audio as their official pieces. We kind of look at ourselves as a 1970s visual magazine and they keep what comes out of it. All we ask is that we get to premiere it." They credit everyone, including their production interns from the UT-Austin Radio, Television, and Film department. All the editing, it should be noted, is done by high-profile Austin-based production outfit [Supply Co.](#)

The Authentic Film Feel

Using film as a medium for web video does pose challenges—chiefly, cost. They shoot on all Kodak film, which runs about \$15 for a 3-minute roll of film, nevermind the \$15-\$20 processing cost. To save money in transferring the film to digital, which can cost \$75 per roll, they purchased their own telecine machine.

Llewellyn says the question he gets asked the most is, why do you bother doing this on film? "If you can't understand," he feels, "then you're just not romantic. There's a nostalgic art to shooting something when you don't know what you're going to get." But everyone understands when they see the finished product. Girl in a Coma, for example, even decided to use the Transistor Six film still photos over their own publicity

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As for a business model, Llewellyn quips, "I used to make this joke that I used to be in the music business, but now I'm just into music." Llewellyn laughs, explaining that they do monetize the content using sponsors (like Makers Mark and Dos Equis) who premiere content exclusively, making new sessions available only to their Facebook fans or site visitors for a certain period of time.

Years of industry experience have taught Llewellyn that old models for making money in the music business are quickly becoming obsolete or irrelevant. "People don't really buy music anymore, not to generalize, but not enough so bands can make a living. The idea of a 'rock star' has kind of gone away. Everyone's sort of a working musician today. The question has become, how can I keep my creativity and myself going without having going to go back to my day job? So we monetize, and then we also give the content to the band. We don't ask anything from the sales of the audio."



Stay Positive

Transistor Six has quickly evolved into a hypeworthy vehicle for free secret shows and high-profile popup premieres in their modest (250-300 capacity) venue. That's no small feat in a city as music-savvy as Austin. But the roster of artists that have done sessions so far is impressive (Craig Finn of the Hold Steady, One Eskimo, We are Augustines, and more) and as word spreads about this ambitious project, an (analog) buzz will surely build.

As for future plans, Llewellyn dreams of opening a London outpost, hinting "We have a venue lined up." For now, they have about 30 films in the can to churn out. And eventually, he envisions pop-up Transistor Six events in other markets. "We have a lot of friends with venues, in Los Angeles and New York. We're going to do a mini-tour film thing of it." In the meantime, Llewellyn, Northcutt, and Peris will continue to helm the analog revolution from behind the cameras and the computer, one band at a time.

« previous Page 2 of 2

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