

RFID Certifies Celebrity Collectibles

Systems integrator RFID Ltd. is launching an application utilizing RFID tags to verify the authenticity of Jimi Hendrix's wah-wah pedal, Jessica Biel's autographed photos and other memorabilia.

By Laurie Sullivan

Nov. 15, 2006—At a private gathering in New York City on Nov. 26, RFID tags will be affixed to Jimi Hendrix's guitar strap from the 1969 Newport Pop Festival, as well as the wah-wah foot pedal he used to enhance the sounds of his guitar. The items will go on display the following day—on what would have been Hendrix's 64th birthday—at BB King's Blues Club. Rock icons Eric Clapton and Stevie Wonder are expected to attend the celebration, says Duane "Spyder" Hughes, CEO of recording label Spydo Music, who will help manage the party.

"It's absolutely necessary to apply this technology to music and memorabilia, especially on those belongings from the Hendrix estate, because through the years there have been many fraudulent claims, and we're at a point where you don't know what's real and what's not," Hughes says. "It's helpful for this type of technology to be used with rock, hip-hop and all kinds of music memorabilia."

The Ghetto Fighters, a backup group now known as the Fantastic Aleems, recorded several songs with Hendrix prior to his untimely death in September 1970. The group's members own both the guitar strap and the wah-wah pedal, and have agreed to sell these items, along with publishing rights to the songs, to one of the major digital music sites, such as Napster, SpiralFrog or Yahoo! Music.

The bidding for the rights to publish the songs and take ownership of the strap and foot pedal, which began Monday, will last seven days. The idea is to release the songs commercially and link them to a giveaway contest, with the strap and pedal to be offered as prizes. In an effort to promote the music, consumers who purchase and download songs will be entered in the drawing. The giveaway will launch simultaneously with the debut of four unreleased songs in digital format.

The RFID-tagged items are some of the first to become part of an e-pedigree database and certification service offered by Denver-based systems integrator RFID Ltd.. The service is designed to combat piracy in the multibillion-dollar memorabilia industry, according to Nicholas Chavez, the company's president. Chavez, whose company is managing the sale of the Hendrix songs to the music sites, calls the application AuthentiChip.

A few weeks after the Hendrix event, RFID Ltd.'s application will authenticate signed movie production stills in Los Angeles from actress Jessica Biel's latest movie, *Home of The Brave*. Each photograph will have an RFID label affixed to the back to authenticate the piece.

"We intend to place 10 to 12 authenticated items, associated with the film, on eBay a week or so prior to the release of the film," Biel writes in an e-mail to *RFID Journal*. "The proceeds will benefit Serving Those Who Serve, which rehabs the houses of returning combat-wounded war veterans."

Biel says she hopes to safeguard her own "brand, and address the blatant counterfeit and knockoff problem that exists on the Web." In addition, she explains, she is intrigued with using the technology to help nonprofits raise money at live auctions.

Each tag's unique ID number will be recorded in a database that will include the item's date of purchase, appraised value, owner, manufacturer and other data. To make it difficult for hackers to duplicate the tag, RFID Ltd. will encrypt the tag's ID number recorded on the data and might also mark the tag with a unique physical identifier, such as a hologram. Chavez, however, declines to explain what sort of encryption technology his company is using.

Owners of memorabilia with an embedded tag will receive a password to access the AuthentiChip database. Once they log in, they can review items owned by others registered in the database and submit offers to make purchases, creating a secondary market for such RFID-authenticated items.

Chavez says the application works with several different types of tags. The type his firm will most likely utilize is Alien Technology's 915 MHz passive EPC Gen 2 Squiggle tag, similar to those product manufacturers apply to cases and pallets of goods shipped to U.S. Department of Defense supply depots.

To maintain items in the database, RFID Ltd. charges a one-time fee based on the volume and value of items tagged. For example, it would cost less to RFID-tag and register a signed celebrity photograph than to register an original Picasso painting. For athletic jerseys, photographs, movie props and comparable memorabilia, the fee would be less than \$50 to apply an AuthentiChip RFID tag and record information about the tagged item in the database. Pricing could change in the future, the company notes.

Chavez says he plans to partner with an organization specializing in memorabilia, and that he would like to develop kiosks utilizing RFID interrogators and computer terminals linked to the AuthentiChip database. His hope, he adds, is to place the kiosks in stores, to be used by anyone looking to authenticate items. Collectors would also be able to search for items online, in the AuthentiChip database, to check the authenticity of those items.

RELATED_ARTICLES Ideally, auction houses will possess RFID readers and access to the AuthentiChip database to authenticate items up for sale. RFID Ltd. intends for the application to replace the manual process of taking a Polaroid photo of someone signing a piece of memorabilia and printing a certificate (the only method presently used to prove the authenticity of collectibles, Chavez claims).

According to Chavez, RFID Ltd. could possibly sell RFID interrogators in the future. If his company can make the readers inexpensive, he explains—about \$100 each—then the average eBay seller or buyer would be able to use the application, as well.

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