



Multimedia artist Charlie Schmidt imitating his famous "Keyboard Cat" video that went from an online to commercial sensation.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHARLIE SCHMIDT

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YouTube's 2014 list of most-watched clips featured not one single cat video — in fact, it was topped by a dog dressed as a spider. Have we reached peak-cat? As Grumpy Cat would say: NO. It's simply spreading offline.

A book of erudite essays on the phenomenon of cat videos, "Cat is Art Spelled Wrong," will be published later this year, after a Kickstarter campaign, "Catstarter," exceeded its \$25,000 goal by \$9,000. Before that, the first-ever Cat-Con — "like Comic-Con but for cat people" — will be held in Los Angeles, starring celebrities of the online feline world, alongside merchandise stalls and all things cat pop culture. All of this follows hot on the paws of the resoundingly successful, internationally touring Internet Cat Video Festival, which caters to like-minded people who joyfully sacrifice hours of their lives to watching web clips of cats falling off things, climbing into things and chasing things.

Even if by some freak of negligent web browsing you have never encountered cat-vid superstars Lil Bub, Princess Monster Truck or Keyboard Cat, it can't be possible that you've missed Grumpy Cat. The kitty meme-queen's feline pout has garnered her owner, Tabatha Bundesen, almost \$100 million, since the former waitress posted photos of the tiny Tardar Sauce (Grumpy's real name) to Reddit in 2012. Barely three years later, there is an insatiable appetite for merchandise, a film, books in 57 languages, a Grumppuccino iced-coffee

# CAT CRAZE

*Keyboard Cat, Grumpy Cat and their fellow felines have been sensations online. Now, these apparently irresistible cat videos are moving offline, with festivals around the globe celebrating this new realm of art.*

range and a marketing deal with Friskies cat food. She has 7 million Facebook "likes." And she's just the tip of the furry iceberg.

At its root is Keyboard Cat. This grainy old Betacam footage of ginger tabby Fatso in a blue shirt plunking out a tinny tune on a keyboard was uploaded to the web around 2006 and lurked there for a couple of years before going viral in 2009. Fatso is now long gone, but Keyboard Cat is bigger than death; the film's creator, artist Charlie Schmidt, reincarnated him in the form of Bento, another ginger tom who likes to tickle the ivories. He was featured in one of the eye-watering-priced commercials during the Super Bowl last month. Thirty seconds of airtime costs about \$4.5 million, Schmidt says. "We were on for about two seconds."

Keyboard Cat was recently featured in a Russian ad for Snickers, on Cartoon Network in South America, and in a Delta Air Lines passenger safety information film. But Schmidt, who trained as an artist and remains a painter and video-maker, insists there's no grand plan or cynical intent to cash in; it's all part of the random nature of the cosmos, mirrored in the equally unpredictable, untamable nature of the Internet.

"I was making weird videos long before the cat. I was a painter, and still am. But most people are just interested in the cat," he says. In 1984, he was making home videos with "a lot of impact and not much polish," doing little illustrations and films