

# **HOW THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF MUSIC CHANGED THE INDUSTRY**

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By

Ryan Feyre

Dr. Peter Kvetko

Faculty Advisor

Department of Music and Dance

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## Abstract

The music industry has witnessed a rise in democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both in terms of how artists write and record their content, and how we as listeners consume it. The growing affordability of music technology over the past ten years has allowed artists to work in the confines of their own homes. Many musicians are now granted the opportunity to build their own fanbase without the help of a label, mainly through music chat channels. As a result, consumers acquire music from a variety of places (Limewire, Napster, and now, Spotify). Corporations have now seemingly convinced customers that Spotify is the best place for acquiring any music one could want. This was thanks to the many innovations in the early 2000s, as well as a group of people who wanted as much music as possible for free.

My objective in this thesis is to showcase the trends of the music consumption process, and how it has directly affected the streaming era. File-sharing and the development of the mp3 will be fully explored in relation to the democratization of music. I will gather information through various readings (Michael Ayers' *Cybersounds* for example) and interviews with my peers at Salem State University. They're the ones who grew up in the era of file-sharing. I will also use information from Slate's *Hit Parade* podcast about the death of the single. These studies will assist with proving file-sharing's impact on the industry.

With these various sources, I hope to find out who specifically was affected by the looming grasp of the music industry (lower class, media, etc), as well as the full breadth of the industry's impact (Kanye West and Theodore Adorno seem to think so). I specifically want to explore Napster's impact on modern streaming, and how that era affected music democratization. Lastly, I will identify how these developments have influenced the artist's creative process.

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## I. Introduction

The millennial generation doesn't know a world where music wasn't at the edge of their fingertips. With the help of Pandora, Soundcloud, Spotify, and Apple, recorded music is as accessible as it has ever been. The continuously evolving concept of music streaming dates as far back as 1993, when Internet Underground Music Archive launched as the first official outlet for online music consumption (Gil, Sutori). IUMA allowed unsigned artists to share their content to their fans for free as a way to avoid labels breathing down their backs. According to *Wired* writer Caleb Garling, musicians had the choice of either charging money for their music, or releasing it for free as an attempt to build a substantial audience for their live performances (Garling, 2014). Either way, IUMA was the main reason for a developing online rapport between artist and consumer. It quickly emerged as the unofficial blueprint for later streaming and file sharing services, most notably Napster in the late 1990s.

Since then, services like Spotify, Soundcloud and Apple Music have normalized this idea of attainable streaming. As a result, music has increasingly become more "democratized," thus ushering in a more collaborative experience between artist and consumer. The advent of music streaming is a direct result of certain significant events: the rise of an MP3 format, Napster's ascension to prominence, bootlegging/illegal downloading, technological developments, and the free-flowing nature of online music chats that dominated most of the late 1990s and early-mid 2000s.

While in this thesis I will focus on the past 25 years, sound recording and consumption have been in motion since World War II, when the magnetic tape shifted the way musicians wrote and recorded their content. Instead of producing everything in a live setting, artists had the

unique luxury of recording different tracks and combining the best ones onto the tape. This, and many other modes of music recording and consumption are what put us in the position we are in today. I'll go more in-depth in later sections.

While many celebrate the liberating potential of technology on music production and consumption, there's also the pessimistic view laid out by Theodore Adorno and his peers in "the Frankfurt School." While studying U.S. and European culture in the 1930s, the German philosopher argued that the capitalist popular culture, music and movies especially, manipulates us into living lives empty of true freedom (Warburton, 2016, *Against Popular Culture*). To Adorno, popular culture is not a form of free expression, but rather a profit-driven industry that reflects capitalism's underlying logic of exploitation and manipulation of the working class. In some aspects he's right, but things have changed since he's made that argument. I believe that there's been a shift away from the traditional label format. Consumers want that connection with the artist without having to succumb to the label. Developments such as the MP3 and file sharing sites proved that technology was starting to liberate us from control of big media conglomerates; at least in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **II. What is Considered Democratization?**

The term "democratization" must be used with some type of social awareness, especially when describing the music industry at large. In reality, the word itself involves a couple of different ideas. Normally, when people speak of democracy, they think of the word from a political standpoint. And while there have been inklings of democratic principles since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century (mainly in Greece and Poland), the modern angle is still fairly new. From a social and political perspective, a country is considered a democracy if it ensures basic civil liberties,

respects the rule of the law, and allows the people to choose their leaders through fair and competitive elections (Hauss, 2003, *Democratization*). In other words, people are “freer” amongst this type of regime. There’s also a key issue that revolves around a belief in the centrality of the individual as the basic unit of measurement. Our use of the word “freedom” emphasizes that the individual can prioritize seeing him/herself as autonomous and self-realizing.

Recently however, there seems to be a widespread distrust with democratic establishments, particularly following the 2016 United States election. The reason for this upheaval stemmed from the whole Cambridge Analytica/Facebook saga; where Britain’s infamous political consultant firm collected personal data from people’s Facebook (without their consent) for political propaganda. This worldwide event tainted many elections outside of the U.S, thus causing massive skepticism involving people’s freedom and privacy, specifically in the context of voting. Many believe this corruption led to an unfair victory for not only Donald Trump, but many other world leaders as well (notably in Nigeria and the Czech Republic). Between Cambridge’s immoral actions and Trump’s tumultuous presidency, it’s no wonder people are losing trust in democracy. Clearly, some aren’t abiding by the aforementioned principles. If democracy is supposed to mean we’re “free,” then why does it seem like we’re being monitored every second of the day? I still get ads on my social media about things I’ve talked about in the past. Is my phone and laptop really listening to me?

More specifically in this thesis, I’m looking at how freedom, control and compromise played a large role in the past 25 years of music-making and music consumption. For years, label executives have failed to promote certain artists beyond the box they’ve put them in. And when tech-savvy consumers used peer-to-peer networks as an act of rebellion in the mid-2000s, labels had to adapt. The CD was dying, iTunes was rising, and traditional executives didn’t know what

to do. Think of it this way: the labels are Cambridge Analytica, and the music listeners/artists are the people who were wrongfully manipulated. Except labels will probably never die because of the monopolization of the big three: universal, Sony and Warner in particular.

Democracy in music can also be illustrated in a more direct perspective. There's the common perception that digital technologies - the computer, DAW programs (Digital Audio Workspaces), and music chats - are associated with the shift from a single recording site to numerous other production locations (i.e. bedroom producers). The advent of such digital technologies place enormous control in the hands of the producers (Prior, 2018, p. 86). This includes the making, distributing and sharing of music with unprecedented speed. Multi-track production, composing, auto-tuning, mastering, micro-timing, and cut-and-paste editing can now be done without the help of a professional, as long as that person knows how to use a computer.

GarageBand is a perfect example of a pre-installed software for Mac computers. Released in 2004, the program is considered Apple's entry-level DAW, and sits at the forefront of the desktop (Prior, 2018, p. 87). GarageBand contains a multi-track interface with a host of pre-installed loops and digital instruments (including, piano, guitar, and drums). All of it is pre-programmed and ordered by genre. For regular consumers, GarageBand acts as the perfect place for musical ideas and loose sketches. For others, the popular DAW can also be used for professional-quality producing and songwriting. For example, Canadian producer Grimes wrote a critically-successful album using only this software. Even folk minimalist Mount Eerie uses it on the occasion for instrumental purposes. According to music author Steve Savage, "GarageBand represents nothing less than a paradigm shift in the music consumer's relationship to music production, because it fosters a sense of cultural participation" (Savage, 2013, p.155). Maybe that's just what people want. Sure, there's the freedom aspect, but there's also

collaboration; a sense of belonging if you will. People want a voice, an identity, something to call their own-whether it be an artist they've found before anyone else, or an original song they've created without the help of a professional. Both of these instances constitute some form of "cultural participation." Maybe this is what really democracy is. We'll dive into this throughout later sections. But before we get there, it's best to offer some context with regards to the three of music's biggest inventions over the past 20-plus years.

### **III. A Brief History of Music's Three Biggest Inventions For Recording and Consumption**

#### **Prior to the 1990s**

According to music author Robert Strachan, "Democratization in the digital age implicates specific elements: increased participation and access, a decentralization of media organizations and technologies, equality in levels of reward and status for participants and the emergence of innovative and diverse forms of expression" (Strachan, 2017, p. 22). These four major attributes provide a useful framework for how society has adapted to a more digitized age. The advent of the MP3 and the growing popularity of the home computer became major acumens for music technology development.

Before I get deeper into these last three decades of growth and turmoil, I first want to point out a couple of major progressions amongst the musical landscape prior to the contemporary age: the cassette tape and the Walkman. I will split this section into two sub-sections. Full disclosure, I am not going too far into detail with these inventions. There's just too much to cover. Also, I'm not including radio in this section. I will talk about it later on with regards to the death of the single and how that sparked a democratic approach to music consumption. Stay tuned.

### *The Cassette Tape*

The cassette tape made it possible for radio to air shows and music without having to insert everything in a live setting. DJs were able to use pre-recorded material for re-runs of songs people loved, or talk shows that could be played at certain moments of the day. Consumers could also record a song on the radio to have for themselves; an early version of getting music for free. My father used the radio as a way to record certain songs he thoroughly enjoyed. A lot of them are in my basement back home.

Since its ascension in the 1950s, magnetic tape made many aspects of recording much easier for musicians. Rather than make everything live, artists could now create different takes, and combine the best ones onto one track. This was typically known as the “splendid splice” (Komurki & Bendandi, 2019, p. 11). Most tapes of this time had a playback head and a recording head. When recording, the tape rubs against the recording-head, and lines up the magnetic particles in a certain pattern. In layman’s terms, one could record music, and play it back multiple times for either enjoyment or editing purposes.

By 1958, a tape cartridge could hold up to 30 minutes of sound, which eventually increased to 45 minutes by the time the first official cassette hit the stores in 1966. Compact cassette technology made waves throughout much of the 1960s and 1970s-rooting itself into the broader idea of democratization. Noise reduction systems (which blocked out hissing sounds) and 4-track tape decks with built in mixing boards allowed artists to record, produce, and release their own music without the help of the big label (Komurki & Bendandi, 2019, p. 16). Bruce Springsteen for example attempted to make the “purest” album possible with the help of a TASCAM 4-track tape deck. Synths and drum machines made it possible to create professional-

quality recordings with lo-fi intimacy. Other musicians such as Gary Numan and Daniel Johnston took advantage of this improving technology because of its inexpensiveness and portability. As a result a bunch of “cassette labels” rose from the 1980s. This included Al Margolis’ Sound of Pig label and Stevie Moore’s Cassette Club. According to Margolis, these labels were more about spreading music for the love of it rather than for money. People loved the cassette because it was cheap, easy and intimate. People could interact and share their own love for music one-on-one. Ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel describes the cassette’s impact in India (and the greater world) as such-“Cassettes have served to decentralize and democratize both production and consumption, thereby counterbalancing the previous tendency toward oligopolisation of international commercial recording industries (Manuel, 1991, “The Cassette Industry and Popular Music in North India).” Morris and Margolis successfully represent cultural participation in its purest form. Music, not money, became the forefront of these labels.



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### *The Walkman:*

The introduction of Sony’s Walkman TPS-L2 in 1979 revolutionized the way we listen to music now as a community at large (Gartenberg, 2019, *40 Years Ago, The Sony Walkman Changed How We Listen to Music*). Sure, prior to this invention, portable radios and boomboxes

were everywhere acting as accessible ways for the common person to listen to what they wanted to listen too. The addition of the Walkman however created a whole new dynamic for music listening: privacy. People now obtained the opportunity to listen to their music away from home without having to subject outsiders to their specific tastes: “The Walkman was quiet, withdrawn, introvert, enveloping users in a self-enclosed universe. For the first time in human history, enjoying music became an insular, solitary event (Komurki & Bendandi, 2019, p. 21).” Whether it be at the gym on a morning jog, the Walkman created a nuanced experience where consumers could block out the outside world. People listened to records all the time at home, but now mobility was a viable option for consumers. People could block out the outside world while a part of the outside world.

The Walkman’s original design has a classic design to it, and still carries some form of relevancy in modern pop culture (Star Lord loves his Walkman in *Guardians of the Galaxy*). It’s composition consisted of a 14-ounce, blue-and-silver model with chunky buttons, two earphone jacks, and a leather case. Nowadays, the original design goes for thousands of dollars, showing exactly how impactful the invention was.

The Walkman garnered a great deal of intrigue outside of the every-day person. Before streaming and file-sharing was ever in the minds of scientists and entrepreneurs, theorists such as Shuhei Hosokawa found that The Walkman transformed our relationship to urban space. When people listened to music with a Walkman, they entered their own poetic and dramatic world. In other words, “We listen to what we don’t see, and we see what we don’t listen too (Komurki & Bendandi, 2019, p.21).” Much of the older generation thought the youth lost touch with reality (sound familiar millennials?). One French sociologist even asked users on the streets about this. He found that the youth was unfazed by this new technology. Instead, they saw it “not as an

existential disruptor but simply an expansion of their possibilities of freedom (Komurki & Bendandi, 2019, p. 28).” Music democracy from the consumer perspective was well on its way.



#### **IV. The MP3's Evolution, And How it Relates to the Democratization of Music**

Music consumption in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen many forms. There was the early days of Napster and Limewire; two pirating sites that sent rich label executives into a frenzy for a period of time. Then, Apple developed a format where people could buy single songs for the ridiculous price (at least in my opinion) of \$1.29. This concept eventually morphed into what we see today; Spotify, Apple Music, Pandora, YouTube, Soundcloud, music chats, and Band Camp. Despite the constant changing of the guard, each one of these outlets are connected through one glaring similarity-they all carry compressed formats inspired by the MP3; one of the most essential inventions of modern technology.

Technology author Jonathan Sterne details an era when phone companies such as AT&T ran tests to examine and calculate the concept of band-width. Our modern rendition of the MP3 format officially established mainstream popularity in 1997. CD burners began to drop

in price, and Mp3-filled CDs were beginning to make waves amongst the streets of major cities. This configuration quickly morphed into a proprietary standard for some of the biggest companies in the world. The MP3 developed into a technical niche for places like Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Motorola, CNN and Mattel (Sterne, 2012, p. 27). Some of the biggest businesses in the world were making hundreds of millions of dollars just by acquiring the rights to MP3 format. Travel agencies, toy companies, and news stations converted themselves to the MP3 format, and became official licensees of the new product.

According to Sterne however, the inklings of this monumental invention came about long before its ascension to popularity in the late 1990s. The study of psychoacoustics (or the study of hearing in general). Back in the early 1900s, AT&T established themselves as one of the first companies to test human subjects in the realm of hearing. The goal was to ascertain an understanding between human and machine. In Sterne's words, "human factors ergonomics" is the study and optimization of productivity and comfort of people as they interact with machines (Sterne, 2012, p. 93). By 1950, AT&T had already constructed an electrical model of the inner ear. The goal was to construct a communication system that would delete all of the unnecessary frequencies in audible range that users of the phones couldn't hear. The lesser band-width allowed for people to only hear what they needed to hear, thus increasing the capacity for phone calls in more regions across the world.

The experimentation that occurred during the early to mid-1900s would directly affect a lot of developments in the latter part of the 1900s. This idea of freedom or democratization was challenged during AT&T's ascension into the psychoacoustic realm. In the period between the First and Second World Wars, Bell Telephone Laboratories completed hearing tests on 1.5 million subjects with audiometers (an instrument for gauging hearing).

Physiologists such as Hermann Helmholtz and Harvey Fletcher began testing live human subjects and dead human subjects. This idea of cultural participation and individuality was stripped away during this time period. According to Kurt Danzinger, psychologists took to presenting their data as the attributes of collective rather than individual subjects (Sterne, 2012, p. 57). In other words, experimenters grouped individuals in anonymous fashion, then proceeded to write about their findings as if they are one collective organism.

The ethical implications of testing live and dead subjects were ignored for psychoacoustic reasons. Scientists and psychologists found that the ear works in similar fashion to the telephone. Our nervous system is kind of like an electrical telephone line to the brain. Physiologists would've loved to officially test this theory out by implementing an actual technological system into the human ear. That most likely would've sent people into a frenzy. So instead, two physiologists would try this theory out on dead animals; specifically cats.

### *The Cat Experiment*

Princeton psychologists Ernest Glen Wever and Charles Bray removed part of a cat's skull and most of its brain in order to attach an electrode to the animal's right auditory nerve, and a second electrode to another area on the cat's body (Sterne, 2012, p. 61). Let that sit in for a second. Two scientists utilized their intellectual abilities for the sole purpose of testing the audio capacity for cats. I suppose ethics were a hard thing to come by in 1929. These electrodes were then hooked up to a vacuum tube amplifier located in a soundproof room. The psychologists would make different sounds into the cat's ear to see what responses they would receive. They noticed that the auditory nerve functioned similar to a telephone service,

where simple command such as counting were easily received. Brain and machine were now intertwined; each complimenting the other with ease. There was almost a natural understanding between the two entities. In a metaphorical kind of way, this experiment would foreshadow the common dependency each of us has with technology. Nowadays, many of us are glued to the algorithmic tendencies of Spotify. The service recommends us music based on our tastes, and we usually comply. The rise of Napster was such an important piece of music history because people were putting in the effort to find newer underground acts. Listeners still do that now (thanks to blogs, Soundcloud, etc.), but Spotify and Apple-as part of the label machine-provide us curated playlists that tend to limit our imagination. The machine wants to make money, not allow us insight into newer sounds and aesthetics.

These findings would later be overturned, but not without AT&T using them as a basis for their own findings. By utilizing perceptual technics (the field of research that's used to monetize signals), the company wanted to find different ways to incorporate users' hearing into their own infrastructure (Sterne, 2012, p. 62). The machine began to take the place of the human. In a way, we were all becoming slaves to the industry. Dead cats were unfortunately the occupants to "modernity's iron cage." Writers like Jody Berland noticed that psychologists were not working with their subjects, but rather stripping them of their humanity. This became one of the premier instances where big-name infrastructures were defying the ethical laws of mental and aural freedom.

Cybernetics became an integral role in the development of technology in relation to human interaction. Things became more complicated in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as the brain went from an organ to a scientific receptive system (at least in the eyes of the psychologists). They argue that there needs to be some level of control involved, particularly during

communication between the copper electrode and the animal's brain (or in this case, the cat's). It's an argument that forgoes the individual's opinion on the matter, thus making this relationship restrictive, and ultimately antagonistic. As Sterne so eloquently puts it, "A telephone wired directly into the brain, a mouthpiece with a tube sewed directly into the head. What a perfectly coercive propaganda model! Here is a head, physically connected to a communication system, from which it cannot disengage itself and which it cannot turn off" (Sterne, 2012, p. 73).

Efficiency and democracy with regards to technology is not a 21<sup>st</sup> century concept. These concepts were central roles to mid-1900s values, particularly in the case of AT&T. The very idea of an MP3 format emerged from a relationship among interested parties during this time period (Sterne, 2012, p. 89). In a way, I can play devil's advocate and state that the phone companies, the engineers, and the working psychologists helped shape the way one looks at aural communication. But it's those same values mentioned above; power, freedom, and democracy, that have had a greater impact in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century heading into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Napster, the file-sharing giant that shook the music world to its core in the late 1990s, obviously created a brand that was ultimately considered antiestablishment. Ironically, their logo for the website was titled "The Kittyhead," and showcased a cat wired to a sound-system lost in its own world. Napster creator Shawn Fanning chose this design for the simple fact that it looked cool. Little did he know (or he might've known but just didn't acknowledge), this logo would become an unofficial manifestation for rebellion; an underdog statement if you will. In a nutshell, it represents individuality and cultural participation, two terms that continue to dominate the forefront of music democratization. As Sterne puts it,

“Here is a picture of a cat connected to a sound system that is supposed to be a mark for agency and rebellion. And yet it bears an uncanny resemblance to Wever’s and Bray’s cat head, unconscious, decerebrated, wired, and sewn to a system it cannot comprehend or choose to leave (Sterne, 2012, p. 90).”

Metaphors aside, Napster would be one of the driving forces for MP3 consumption, offering a more collaborative version of music listening, sharing and distributing. Aside from legal issues, the file-sharing site would eventually morph into a leading catalyst for user compatibility and liberal music listening methods.

### *The Modern MP3 and changes in music consumption*

Much of those early AT&T experiments in the 1950s directly impacted how human beings interact with telephones and other sources of sound, particularly within the musical realm. As I’ve mentioned before, the music industry has witnessed constant ebbs and flows when it comes to technological advancements, people’s listening habits, and label decisions alike. Today, the world’s largest musical store sells digital files. Since the mortgage crisis in 2008, artists have attempted to create new modes for reaching their listeners without the reliance on physical sales of compact discs or LPs.

The “death of the single” was a monumental moment for the music industry in the 1990s. Listeners were becoming frustrated with the labels’ manipulative principles when it came to selling music in the CD format. Ever since the 1960s, the music industry emphasized the concept of the album over the single. On the excellent music podcast “Hit Parade,” Chris Monalphy dissects the stark revolution of what a “single” really is. He exclaims that before YouTube and

Spotify, singles were typically referred to as retail singles, or songs one could buy separately at a local store without having to buy the entire album.

Typically, these retail singles were sold as a cart, or cassette-like configuration (and even sometimes as an LP). And while this initially seems like an ancient concept, there are still outlets today where one could purchase a single song as a cassette tape without having to waste money on an entire CD that they may not want in the first place. In fact, as part of my yearly adventure to West Farms Mall in Hartford, CT, I had the luxury of detecting these important artifacts at the Urban Outfitters of all places. Unsurprisingly, these cassette tapes were hidden in obscurity near the storage area. If you were to lightly peruse the place without giving a detailed walk, then one would probably miss the mythical rectangle. As a diehard millennial, inspecting this piece of plastic was like perceiving something from a whole other universe. I had no knowledge involving the retail single prior to completing my research. Little did I know it was one of the premier formulas for listening to music for almost 25 years.

Prior to the rising popularity of the retail single, labels were selling their music normally through the album format. In the late 50s and early 60s, the vinyl 45” was the main platform for music selling. Very rarely were labels experimenting with the single-song vinyl. The Beatles’ “Nowhere Man” was one of the few international songs that were sold separately from their *Rubber Soul* LP.

By the 1970s, labels started to release 12-inch dance mixes as “bonus” tracks from certain artists’ LPs. Club DJs, record collectors, and huge fans of an act who wanted as much from that artist as possible, were some of the main music aficionados buying these newly-organized mixes. By the end of this time period however, vinyl records were starting to lose popularity as listeners began gravitating towards the Walkman; the CD later on; and the internet

shortly thereafter. The compact disc became exponentially more profitable during this unprecedented shift in music listening habits; thus leading to the de-incentivizing of the classic vinyl record. As a result, local record stores refused to sell vinyl records in their stores because, they found the practice to be aimless, and ultimately absurd (*The Great War Against the Single Edition*). Artists didn't even bother to release their music through this channel. As discussed before, music fans established solace within the free-flowing nature of a Walkman or compact disc, thus allowing their own aural experience to emerge.

Once the 1990s rolled around, music listening entered another period of change and progression (or regression depending how one looks at it). The definition of a single was modified to fit the major labels' money-hungry vision. Retail singles lost a lot of traction amongst the mainstream crowd; only fizzling with a purpose when club DJs wanted the perfect dance mix to radiate throughout the dancefloor. According to Monalphy, if an artist wanted to release a single on a 12'' vinyl, it would tantamount to not releasing a single at all (*The Great War Against the Single Edition*).

This concept was a far cry from the early 1960s, when singles were outselling albums by a stunning ration of 2:1. In that era, longer albums only pertained to mature adults who carried hi-fi systems (at least in the labels' eyes). Affordability was a major factor during this period, and would continue to dominate music consumption well into the 1990s. Teenagers found the retail singles in the 1960s to be much more accessible for them. Nonetheless, the 1960s were a time for album-length storytelling, where a cohesive piece transformed the musical landscape much more than any other standalone single could do. Projects such as *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club* established an era of great change. Labels started to notice that album were charting and selling mounds better than those 45'' vinyl singles. This trend continued for much of the

1970s as well, though best-selling records such as The Eagles' *Hotel California* did not always mean Billboard-topping pop hits. Success was more often based on top 40 airplay rather than the charts, and artists would gain more respect if they reached the former.

Take Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" as one of the more famous non-single examples. The band refused to release it as "45", therefore the track was never eligible for the Hot 100 charts. Songs has to be issued as retail singles to ever be considered on these illustrious charts. So imagine that, one of the greatest tunes in modern music history never even charted. And people had to either wait for it on the radio, or buy their entire *IV* album. Jethrow Tull, Pink Floyd, Yes were other bands that wore their concept albums as a badge of honor. For them, not reaching the charts didn't matter all that much. They were still reaching airwaves during a time period where radio was at its pinnacle. This wasn't the case all of the time however. Most of the artists I've mentioned did have at least one song that featured in the Hot 100, most notably Pink Floyd's "Money." This became the exception more than the rule though. If a song was catchy enough, it still had a chance on the Billboard no matter what.

By the late 1970s, labels found trouble balancing the LP and the retail single. Albums were much more profitable, but retail singles catapulted artists to instant superstardom. Labels found that the only way to reach this level of equilibrium was to stuff the album with as many hit songs as possible. Prior to 1977, there were no full-length LPs that generated more than three Billboard charting hits. Fleetwood Mac's *Dreams* and the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack would change that undying trend. The former featured four Billboard hits, were all released as retail singles (*The Great War Against the Single Edition*). This formula would prove to be successful for much of the 1980s, as Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and Def Leppard's *Hysteria* dominated the airwaves upon initial release. For a brief point in history, labels were fine with

consumers purchasing the 45” retail single; just as long as the physical copies from one individual album. Jackson’s *Thriller* would go down as the best-selling album of all-time, charting a whopping seven songs in the top 10. The album contained only nine songs.

Between 1984 and 1990, at least a dozen albums charted five top 10 singles (*The Great War Against the Single Edition*). Music executives accomplished the “Thriller” model, milking as many hits as possible out of their artists. Bruce Springsteen, Janet Jackson, Paula Abdul, and Rhythm Nation would each carry multiple tracks into the Billboard charts. Pop music was blossoming, and consumers received the full effect.

The 1990s signaled a monumental moment within music, both in terms of how artists released their output, and how we as consumers listened to it. The formula for milking as many hits as possible onto one album started to become more and more difficult. Not everyone can be the next Michael Jackson. Consistently asking artists to produce as many hit singles as possible is virtually improbable, particularly when most musicians are strapped with a label contract. Music executives meanwhile continued to feel the full effect of the retail single’s problems, especially on the profit side of things. So naturally, the labels completely flipped their game plan upside down on its head. Their next method to madness involved releasing albums with as little hits as possible, thus swindling the consumers into buying the entire project; even if there’s only one or two worthwhile songs.

The most egregious example of this debacle came in the form of MC Hammer’s early 1990s album run. His massive song “U Can’t Touch This” reached the Top 10 on the Billboard charts, but couldn’t ascend passed the top five because it wasn’t sold as a retail single. And in order for consumers to buy the track, they would have to buy his entire album, *Please Hammer Don’t Hurt ‘Em*. Only three songs from that 1990 album would make the Top 40. And since

people had to buy the entire album just so they can listen to the infectious “U Can’t Touch This,” Hammer’s debut project stayed at #1 on the Billboard album chart for a whopping 21 weeks. This was the longest-charting number one album since Prince’s *Purple Rain*, which coincidentally was released in the 1980s during the climax of great albums with a lot of hits. By April 1991, *Please Hammer Don’t Hurt ‘Em* was certified diamond (*The Great War Against the Single Edition*). That was the fastest an album soared to ten times platinum. To put it in another perspective, he sold more than Janet Jackson, Whitney Houston, and Madonna that year; three objectively more talented artists. It’s the third best-selling rap album of all-time too, an equally impressive feat considering rap’s recent rise to the forefront of music.

Vanilla Ice’s debut album achieved the same bizarre status, with 16 straight weeks as a number one on the Billboard charts thanks to his infectious hit single “Ice Ice Baby.” Rap was still a relatively novice genre, so most labels advertised a much more commercialized pop/rap aesthetic as an attempt to appeal to the masses. The meteoric rise of grunge music eventually signaled the official “battle against the single,” and became the perfect channel for labels to attempt this new experiment. In 1991, Epic Records released Pearl Jam’s *Ten*, an album that would chart much better than Nirvana’s *Never Mind*, despite the fact that Nirvana promoted their project with a retail single and Pearl Jam hadn’t. Many other grunge bands would follow suit, and not release a promotional single at all (artists like Soundgarden and Smashing Pumpkins).

By the mid-90s, artists and consumers were getting frustrated with this money-hungry formula. Pearl Jam front man Eddie Vetter (and other bands) demanded that labels release their radio hits as traditional singles, especially since most of their U.S. fans were paying loads of money for imported singles. Most grunge acts would eventually get their wish, but by the mid-90s, label executives were already moving on to pop acts. The Rembrandts reluctantly recorded

their hit “I’ll Be There For You” as a pop single, even though they wanted to maintain an alternative image for their diehard fans. They forced Warner Music to release the song as an album cut, thus boosting the sales of not only their LP, but the “Friends” (the TV show) soundtrack as well; since it happened to be the official theme song. Even Wu-Tang Clan reached multi-platinum status with their debut album *Enter the Wu-Tang: 36 Chambers* because of their legendary hit “C.R.E.A.M.” That was especially unusual during a time where shiny suits and bad boy looks subsumed the grimy underground New York scene.

The industry was turned upside down on its head, all because of a formula that only really benefitted the label people (even though many artists were reaching unprecedented heights). Despite the fact that “I’ll Be There For You” was the number one played song for eight weeks in 1995, it never charted at number one on the Billboard charts because it was never released as a retail single (*The Great War Against the Single Edition*). In that specific time period Billboard still carried a rule that only allowed retail singles to chart. Finally, by 1998, Billboard successfully transitioned from a “singles” chart, to a “songs” chart, thus acknowledging album cuts as important aspects of an artist’s success.

To backpedal a little bit though, it’s important to note that The Rembrandts did eventually release “I’ll be There For You” as a B-side retail single, which finally gave them the charted affirmation they so rightly deserve. However if one were to look up the song on the internet, they’d realize that the track only reached number 17 on the Billboard thanks to the hackneyed rule; and constant radio play.

This phenomenon affected all popular genres in the 1990s. Prior to the ascension of streaming services, songs and albums only gained popularity through consistent airplay and word-of-mouth. As a result, a lot of artists such as The Fugees (Laurynn Hill, Wyclef Jean, and

Pras) found notoriety months after they released their critically-acclaimed album *The Score*. By the time it had reached number one on the album charts for 13 weeks, their hit cover “Killing Me Softly” reached its apex as one of the greatest hip hop songs of that time period. Other delayed achievements were sprinkled throughout the mid-late 1990s. One of the major examples was No Doubt’s *Tragic Kingdom* album, which was sextuple platinum by the end of 1997, but ten times platinum by the end of 1999. A circumstance such as this was only possible if no retail single was released. Interscope records decided to push their final two “singles” to radio, both “Spiderwebs” and “Don’t Speak.” By December, No Doubt was selling a half million copies of *Tragic Kingdom* thanks to continuous airtime. This was the unofficial apex of record label’s album-oriented formula without the assistance of retail singles sold in stores. A crazy part about all of this is “Don’t Speak” spent sixteen weeks as the most heard song on the radio, which at the time, was the largest non-Billboard charting single in music history. To put that in perspective, only two artists have ever spent number one on the Billboard charts for sixteen straight weeks. “Don’t Speak” was essentially an “invisible smash” (*The Great War Against the Single*).

The phase that led to consumer resentment was the very late 1990s, when labels began hoodwinking consumers into thinking one song is worth \$20. Their success with bigger artists garnered an over-confident attitude within their manipulative methods. So, many of them decided to attempt this practice with artists who weren’t as well known or critically-acclaimed as many of the ones mentioned above. Naturally, consumers weren’t pleased with this mechanism of making money. Basically, labels’ promotional ideas became lazier and lazier as the decade went on. In the late 1990s, most executives wouldn’t even bother to advertise more than one track off of an artist’s project. Slowly but surely, they stopped milking hits, instead hoping their

buyers would cave since there were very little other option with regards to music consumption at the time.

Within this hackneyed period of music making, one could argue that many bands carried a “one hit” mentality because they felt that no matter what, they were still going to sell millions of records, even if the rest of their record completely sucked. Chumbawumba was probably the most egregious example of the “one-off” mentality. Originally from the mid-1980s, the British group never secured a major hit, or a critically acclaimed album until 1997. And it was all because of one song titled “Tubthumping.” This hit was issued as a CD single in the fall of 1997, but Republic Records only allowed 70,000 of these to reach the public. Due to the small number of singles available, those 70,000 sold out quite easily, thus leaving it up to the band’s actual album to account for the rest of the sales. The song never cracked the Billboard Top Five, but did stay as the number one played song on the radio for nine weeks late that year. And despite the fact that their album sold a stellar 3.2 million copies in all, Chumbawumba never saw the charts, or commercial acclaim ever again.

Many other one-off acts reached the forefront of the music industry for a short period of time in the latter part of the 1990s, but never found monumental success again. This arguably became a toxic form of music consumption. Labels preferred catchy singles more than quality music, therefore musicians like MC Hammer failed to retain this obvious short term infamy. Not every song was bad during this period however. In fact, Shawn Colvin won record of the Year for “Sunny Came Home,” a song that followed the same one-hit formula as the ones mentioned above. Then again, much of these “one-hit wonders” could’ve been propagated from the audiences’ fickle response to music. Labels definitely wanted as many hits as possible, and an artist such as Colvin surely carried more hits prior to “Sunny Came Home.”

After a few years of labels taking advantage of consumers who had no other option but to purchase a full album with only one or two good songs, Billboard finally decided to make a major rule change. According to Monalphy, the company decided to allow radio-only singles onto the charts. It was reported by local record store managers, that many teens would come in with five or ten dollar bills for retail singles, only to find that there was very little in store. Labels had already been releasing singles at a minimal pace, and Billboard did not want it to get any worse. “Retail chain managers fretted openly that the industry was discouraging a generation of young music consumers from developing the music buying habit” (*The Great War Against the Single*). There was a point where trust was completely lost between music buyers and the Billboard chart. In theory, Billboard is supposed to act as a stark indicator what’s popular across the landscape. If there’s loopholes surrounding decision-making, then that idea of “cultural participation” s completely lost. As an overarching theme, democracy is supposed to represent honesty, clarity, and adaptability (among other things). If consumers are swindled into purchasing a \$20 album for the sole purpose of listening to one song, then that’s not beneficial.

Once the rule change was officially made, songs such as the Goo Goo Dolls’ “Iris” could finally be featured on the Hot 100 list as a single. However, since the track was entered kind of late (due to the change), it only ended up reaching number nine. Had it been allowed on the charts two months earlier, it most likely would’ve stamped itself as one of the biggest tracks from the 1990s. Regardless, it still stands as one of the greatest from that decade; just unofficially.

From the perspective of the labels (and even the artists to some degree), this decade-long experiment proved to be a major success, especially from a monetary standpoint. Even if the operation was less consumer-based, executives were correct in their assumptions. Selling albums

without the assistance of a retail single undoubtedly made them more money. And yet, the demise of this era wasn't propagated from the industry at all. In light of worldwide technological development, consumers and savvy college students attempted to re-establish music as a democratic entity. Shawn Fanning's Napster turned into the perfect channel for file-sharing music consumption for people of all ages, and all talent levels. The Northeastern dropout utilized the MP3 band-aid to his advantage, and created something that would intentionally impact the music industry for 25-plus years. It was not the first file-sharing platform, but it was the most user-friendly at the time (*The Great War Against the Single Edition*). Monalphy puts it perfectly: "The rise of Napster and file-sharing in 1999 doesn't simply read as people wanting free stuff, or deciding they prefer portable digital music. Rather to me as a singles fan, it reads as a true rebellion" (*The Great War Against the Single*). It's duly noted that while albums are indeed fantastic artistic achievements (especially if they contain some type of meaningful concept), the real heart of pop music overall lies within the beauty of a single. These individual beings are the official backbone of larger bodies of work. Without the single, there would be no album; there would be no inspiration, and there would be no consumption. Music labels were well aware of this concept, despite the fact that they consistently became the leading causes for selling music in bundles without the assistance of a retail signal.

By 2001, music sales had decreased due to Napster's freewheeling dominance. The major file-sharing source was initially predicated to those who understood the nuances of a computer. Because of its accessibility however, Napster did reach a much wider audience than even the labels anticipated. Case in point: my dad (who was 40 at the time of Napster's breakthrough) admitted months ago that he was a daily user on the site; illegally downloading some of his favorite songs onto empty CD discs. Occurrences such as these made listening to

music more consumer-based. After failed attempts to counterattack this exciting revolution, the music industry finally decided to pivot in an entirely new direction involving the meteoric rise of MP3 driven software.

Labels began to attach to this underground movement by acquiring major deals with genius entrepreneur Steve Jobs. The Apple mongrel inadvertently took what made Napster appealing and morphed it into another big-time money exercise. The former guru was heavily invested in 21<sup>st</sup> century technology because he was bored with the dull aspects of capitalism. He wanted to be a part of something truly revolutionary. He saw the music business as an exciting avenue for consumers. It wasn't necessarily the music that drew him in, but rather the idea of innovation. In 2003, Jobs started to sell individual songs for \$.99 on his newly-constructed iTunes platform. This was the beginning of the end for classic money-hungry maneuvers. The singles market was revived, and many old-time bands conformed to this newly-minted evolution.

#### *The meteoric ascension of MP3 format*

There's no doubt that the end of this singles war was a direct result of a collective rebellious attitude from young consumers who desperately wanted to re-establish that personal freedom with music. Much like the aforementioned cassette boom during the 1980s, people wanted to experience cultural participation. When you're in possession of something that means a lot on a personal level, you tend to consummate a sense of pride that many record labels would never fathom due to money's supernatural power filled with moral emptiness. When someone has a piece of art they can call their own without the materialistic tendencies of capitalism breathing down their backs, then those same people have an uncanny ability to spread the naturalistic (and non-materialistic) exuberance to those who care.

Before I delve into the individualistic nature of the mp3's rise to prominence, I first want to recognize the specific impact mixtapes and blogs had on early rappers and their local fanbase; which also indirectly ties into the importance of online music chats from the late 90s and early 2000s (which I'll get into in a few pages). Mixtape culture has miraculously stayed intact for almost thirty years now, dating all the way back to hip hop's first real taste of mainstream popularity. *HotNewHipHop* author Michael Kawaida illustrates a time period when rappers and frequent listeners would literally visit the "plug's" house to acquire a disk featuring a group of songs that proudly represented the best of hip hop from that current landscape (Kawaida, *Mixtapes: A Brief History of Hip Hop's Ever-Evolving Tool*, 2020). Kawaida goes on to emphasize the collective euphoria that came with listening to some of his favorite songs with his good friends; who also carried similar music tastes.

Mix-tape culture in general played an alluring role in music's transition from label-controlled album releases to singles-oriented decentralization. Finding a classic mix-tape in the early 2000s was stimulating in the best way possible. According to Kawaida, hip hop heads remember where they were when Lil Wayne's *Dedication* series rotated around the streets; or when Jay-Z's *Carter Collection* gained much-deserved notoriety. Compared to today's modes of music consumption, the early-2000s were a time where the internet was still finding its footing as a leading channel for showcasing an abundance of music. A lot of artists took their time when it came to their craft, thus increasing excitement for their projects even more. When someone bought a highly-touted mix-tape out of a trunk or in someone's backyard, the moment felt cathartic; especially if the mix-tape came from an artist who hadn't released in a while. Nowadays, many musicians release music at a faster rate than ever before, mainly due to Soundcloud's user-friendly aesthetic and Spotify's algorithmic tendencies.

Labels turned a blind eye to the phenomenon of mix-tapes mainly because they didn't think they would impact the industry in the long run. Boy, did they underestimate the power of DIY artists. There were many DIY scenes in previous pop music (particularly the pop punk scene), but it is the impact of technology that explains why the industry wasn't toppled by these previous movements. According to the RIAA, mix-tapes were generating an astonishing \$150 million in sales over the course of the early-2000s (Kawaida, *Mixtapes: A Brief History of Hip Hop's Ever-Evolving Tool*, 2020). Not only were unknown artists such as 50 cent and Jeezy racking up the profits from these street-inspired tapes, but a lot of their early output eventually jumpstarted their illustrious careers. Labels heard about these hip hop artists through the circulation of the highly-coveted mix-tapes. Word of mouth and constant "cultural participation" was the backbone of music in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Artists would use their early work as demo tapes to help market their brand of artistry to whoever found interest. Most importantly, mixtapes gave musicians the opportunity to work freely without the input of big-name label executives. This idea still holds true today, even with countless streaming services saturating our market more than ever before.

The early progression of mixtape culture culminated in a 2007 FBI raid of DJ Cannon and DJ Drama's stash of 80,000 illegal CDs from their studio. This monumental happening officially put a dent in the bootlegging business, as both DJs were arrested for federal racketeering and bootlegging charges.

By 2010, blogs were attracting new music, and more and more people used those channels as a way to find novice artists. Music sites such as *Fake Shore Drive* and *Passion of Weiss* introduced regional musicians as an attempt to spread their music beyond local communities. From the mid-2000s until now, a majority of these low-profit blogs would be the

first journalists to discover artists-in a way acting as scouts for the ravenous consumers who wanted something new.

I saw a recent comment involving this concept of collaborative experience through music blogging. *Passion of Weiss* writer Lucas Foster dutifully exclaimed the mindset of many writers who get paid very little to discover artists who eventually get signed by major labels based off of what small-time blogs emphasized in their writing. It's an interesting point that intelligently sums up the chauvinistic approach taken by many label executives. Artists are signed based on what many common people say about them, not because labels do tremendous scouting. Foster proclaims multiple times throughout his social media that he does what he does for the love of music. This had to be the case for many bootleggers as well.

Music in a way represents a snapshot in time. People remember when they first found out about an artist that they hold dear to them. Memories flood, and nostalgia eventually sparks. Blogs and mixtapes would be the key operators for conjuring these natural feelings.

Democratization as a whole usually encompasses people's genuine beliefs about a specific topic such as gun violence or health care. Nothing is fabricated, and nothing should be. The same can be said for music, particularly in the short but effective time period of mixtape culture and blog practice. There's no way artists could be found without the aura of cultural participation surrounding music consumption and music making.

The Mp3 format worked in similar fashion. Much like in the case of mixtapes, the algorithmic layout honed in on the idea of obsession and invention. Stephen Witt's novel *How Music Got Free, A Story of Obsession and Invention* potently describes the joint occurrences of Karlheinz Brandenburg's intellectual force behind the mp3 technology, and Lydell Glover's stout sneakiness that landed him a bunch of unreleased albums. The latter worked at Polygram, a

disc manufacturing plant in North Carolina. It was there where he became one of the most prolific MP3 pioneers on the planet, weaving his way through FBI investigations, hindered relationships, and individual quests that eventually lead to countless amounts of pre-released music reaching Bit Torrent sites before record stores and labels could even lay a finger on them (Witt, 2016, p. 27).

An underground software scene was bubbling during the period when Brandenburg was entering his format into competitions, and doing everything in his power to brand his invention as the next big thing. Amidst this uphill battle was a little something called “The Warez Scene,” an online community that simultaneously functioned as a bootlegging gold mine and a Call of Duty chat group (thanks to countless reports of obscenities being thrown from all over the place) (Witt, 2016, p. 72). This loose subculture divided itself into different crews. You had people pirating every type of software-music, games, magazines, pictures, pornography and fonts. According to Witt, the first industrial-scale mp3 pirate was a Scene player by the screen name “NetFraCk.”

Prior to the mp3 craze, people were using wav files as means to transfer music across the web. The files would be way too big however, so size restraints needed to be implemented. Accessibility became the largest reason for easy music consumption, even if most of what people did was considered criminal. My 59-year-old dad-who still has trouble using a touch phone-told me about his tenure with Napster before the music industry ceremoniously shut it down. He would grab blank CDs from people he knew at work, and used those as the platform for the mp3 cuts he enjoyed the most. This concept grew as a worldwide phenomenon and lead many to completely disregard the diminishing impact of the compact disc.

While it's too difficult to pinpoint exactly why certain tech wizards relished in the consumption of pre-released music in an mp3 format, many can speculate pride, a rebellious attitude, and economic gain as key factors. The music industry ignorantly started to neglect the panoramic breadth of the internet, particularly its power in connecting the outside world. Doug Morris, a Seagram A&R stalwart (a company that used to operate as a liquor organization oddly enough), studied a deal prospectus during a hectic period in the 1990s when rap music was getting banned (thanks to 2 Live Crew's stark vulgarities), CDs were starting to lose their value, and music was becoming globalized thanks to the personal computer (Witt, 2012, p.84). And yet, despite the obvious red flags, Morris ignored the predictions the same way President Trump ignored the CDC's warning of a possible pandemic back in the fall. He believed that consumers would still buy discs, as long as he was continuing to crank out hits with the artists he worked with.

A real turning point in all of this occurred when Universal folded the CD manufacturing plants that were once unanimously owned by Polygram (a factory that Glover himself worked at). Overhead costs were expected to fall \$300 million, which sounds nice, except the change never benefited the consumers. There was a collective ignorance permeating throughout Universal and Sony. The former thought that people's tastes would change, and quite honestly, many of the big hitters were frightening by rap's growing popularity. Birdman's Cash Money was gaining credibility as a musical force, and an economic recession was becoming a large possibility in the beginning of the millennium. Executives at Seagram and Universal disregarded the internet's power, and felt they could still retain control of the industry without it. Boy were they wrong.

This story of file-sharing and appreciation for the mp3 format devolved into a head-spinning story; one in which the U.S. government would eventually get involved in. Glover and fellow music fanatic Kali (someone Glover closely worked with during the apex of online music chat groups) would stay anonymous and create a group with other music lovers who simply wanted to obtain tracks before they would ever be released to the mainstream public-aka the people who still saw the personal computer as a novel device. “His [Glover’s] leaks had made their way through top sites across the globe, and from there private trackers like Oink, and from there to public sources like the Pirate Bay and LimeWire and Kazaa,” according to Witt. “He was the primary source of contact for hundreds of millions of duplicated mp3 files-perhaps even billions-and, given Universal’s predominant position during this period, there was scarcely a person under the age of 30 who couldn’t trace music on their iPod back to him. He was the scourge of the industry, the hero to the underground, and the king of the Scene. He was the greatest music pirate of all time (Witt, 2012, p. 252).”

At the turn of the century, music consumption began surfacing as a good vs. evil type structure. There were the cynics who had already been skeptical of new age technology due to their “apocalyptic” connotations, and now big-name labels carried similar worries. One could make the argument that the illegal distribution of countless music was catastrophic to our economic landscape. Hundreds of employees were laid off from CD distribution sites such as King’s Mountain, and Grover was barred from interacting with any of his colleagues ever again. Many of these informants were eventually acquitted of all charges, as many jurors found the total punishments to be a tad severe. One of the more unique occurrences from this entire situation was the fact that many of these pirating participants had actually lost money from their participation in file sharing. Tech wizards like Grover would spend much of their paychecks on

blank CDs, even though countless movies and music were already circulating the web. Most just wanted to hang with their friends.

The invention of the mp3 would strongly impact future streaming services such as Spotify-the ultimate channel for modern day music consumption and collaboration. Rather than utilizing the innovative format, Spotify's blueprint involved Ogg, which was an open-source alternative to the mp3. The mechanics were similar if not exactly the same; but Karlheinz Brandenburg (the inventor of the mp3), didn't push any legal action because most of his patents were already over 20 years old, thus beginning to expire. The technology was technically free to use and share now, while labels and artists began searching for other ways to make money from music.

CDs were clearly dying (if not already dead) by the mid-2000s, and the internet started to dictate where the industry was officially going. Viral videos, festivals, and streaming services continued to grow in importance (Witt, 2012, p. 260). 2011 and 2012 became landmark years. People were now using their money on live and digital music more than compact discs. Revenues from ad-based streaming passed \$1 billion for the first time ever. The industry had effectively morphed itself into a different breed of entertainment. As of 2019, that number has ballooned to \$8.8 billion. A forgotten tidbit in all of this sudden change is the fact that streaming services wouldn't be the most successful blueprint for money-hungry label owners-at least in the very beginning. Yes Spotify and Pandora were undoubtedly innovative and highly accessible to the public, but the industry was ill-prepared to make a full transition from album-centered consumerism to internet-based technology. Ironically, Witt states that "streaming didn't solve everything. It may not have solved anything (Witt, 2011, p. 261)." You see, streaming services were dishing out endless amounts of money to license content that would help attract early users.

This type of business making benefitted no one. Artists began only obtaining a small portion of those stream checks-maybe like hundreds of dollars when the service itself was actually raking in millions.

Warner Music for example only pays their musicians 25 percent of the royalties, as of 2019 (Ingham, 2019, *Streaming Platforms are Keeping More Money From Artists Than Ever*). Streaming services more recently have made large money deals with independent and mainstream labels in an attempt to hand over some of that yearly revenue to the creators. By 2017, Spotify had inked a deal to lower the share of pro-rated net revenue they received from their platform, thus paving the way for margin relief so they can stay afloat. The shallow deal greatly impacted artist and labels pockets. Only 54.6% of an artist's streaming money would be allocated to the actual artists and labels themselves. Now you may think to yourself, "who cares, these artists are making bank anyway." Sure, but what about those independent entities who already don't make dime anyway from their music? As of 2018, Spotify accounted for more than half of music revenue (\$5.4 billion to be exact). The service is basically taking what the file sharing sites accomplished and turning it into their own monopolized empire without the soul and freedom of the actual cultural participation. Artists now have to go through two different obstacles before they even smell a piece of the pie nowadays.



## V. How recent music consumption relates to capitalism

Cultural participation in music relates to late capitalism in a number of different ways. Just think, while the labels were fighting a two-front war with streaming services and pirates, artists were starting to try different methods of making consistent income with their music. Radiohead's Thom Yorke took his album *Tomorrow's Modern Boxes* and placed it on BitTorrent instead of Spotify. Taylor Swift sold millions of copies of *1989* mainly through compact discs and big box stores. Leaks were inevitable so as long as the CD was around. Labels never made an attempt to destroy the CD, as a third of sales were still being circulated through that channel in 2013.

One must understand that none of these transformations would've happened without the help of engineering companies and IT startups. "The technological developments that have changed musical production and consumption were as much a product of capitalism as the music industries themselves," said David Hesmondhalgh and Leslie Meier (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2017). These IT companies developed a new plan of consumption, pushing for networked mobile personalization rather than mobile privatization. They've pushed for stronger individualism, directly impacting how people interact and network with each other on the internet. The simple inventions of a personal computer and mobile phone could now be utilized for interconnectivity. In an interview with one of my colleagues at Salem State University (we'll use the name Jane Doe to protect their identity), we talked about the importance of the cell phone, and how it's been made easier to stream music and recommend certain artists to friends and family. My colleague mentioned how the iPod impacted file sharing and downloading tremendously. Her thoughts contained a special rebellious attitude. "I feel like the ownership of music mattered a lot more back then. Back in the day, I wanted it to be mine forever," she said during the discussion.

My colleague does note however that the hassle of downloading high-quality songs back in the early aughts made ownership a little more difficult than simply listening through an affordable streaming service, especially if you're a college student who has the coveted \$5-a-month deal that happily includes Hulu in its package. It's modern capitalism at its finest, where small incentive deals capture audience's attention. There were 20-plus other college students I interviewed about the topic of file-sharing and its impact on modern streaming technology, and a majority (about 95 %) agreed that they would still carry a monthly subscription even without the scholastic discount. To be quite frank, I personally can't blame them. As my above colleague said, it's just easier nowadays to find every piece of music through a simple search. And even if a song or artist isn't on Spotify, they're most likely featured somewhere on Band Camp or Soundcloud-two places that allow free streaming with minimal ads.

Another subtle narrative to emerge from these capitalistic tendencies is the annoyance of advertisements. The millennial crop is infamously heralded as the generation that easily becomes distracted or impatient. About five years ago when Spotify was starting to reach its full breadth of popularity, incessant amounts of advertisements were starting to plague the listening experience. One 15 second commercial quickly turned into two, and 30 second ads eventually morphed into a full minute of waiting until the next song played. Even I caved and finally bought a subscription. The decision benefitted me tremendously since I'm one of the few people who enjoys listening to music in an album format.

For the most part though, Spotify and Apple Music succeed in capturing a time period where singles began to rule the world, and people's playlists. Much of this movement sparked from those manipulative 1990s days; but a lot of it had to do with IT departments developing technologies that emphasized interconnectivity and human involvement at a more intimate level.

A common trope that normally gets unsaid amongst the musical landscape is file-sharing sites from the early 2000s (such as Napster) were still considered to be dotcom sites that were buoyed by strict capitalism. Even as Napster reached a level of obscurity by 2003, the RIAA still found it difficult to bludgeon file-sharing sites with lawsuits because they were legally bounded to a certain system that emphasized “a circulation of digital files (was) wrapped up with the circulation of capital (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2017).” The reality was many for these sites were great for telco companies, and helped to increase consumer demand with regards to more music. The advent of the mp3 and Napster occurred firmly outside of the traditional industry’s control, and yet, they were ushering in a new era of music consumption; one that would push every listener online.

It’s funny because as modern capitalism goes, someone is always outsmart someone else for the betterment of their brand and others. Steve Jobs was one of those entrepreneurs who saw the idea of file sharing channels as a grand opportunity to progress Apple past the Macintosh ways. The iPod became the new Walkman, and iTunes morphed into a monetized version of Napster and other free-flowing music sharing sites that left an indelible mark on the industry as a whole. The small piece of plastic was a cultural phenomenon, and only furthered people’s pursuit of individual music attainment. Unlike the Walkman, which forced listeners to live in their own aural world, the iPod found its niche as a collaborative entity. For all the criticism millennials get for being on their phone too much, the iPod allowed friends and family to share playlists, and easily recommend music from the mp3 format. It was easier to bring these portable players to live, and it was aesthetically pleasing. There was a youthful hipness to its existence. Professional DJs especially benefited from the invention, taking these pieces of plastic with them as simple ways to feature their playlists during their sets.

“The spread of digital music, largely fostered by the availability through file-sharing networks of music files in mp3 format, has brought about a deep restructuring of the patterns of music distribution and consumption, both in quantitative and qualitative terms (Ayers, 2006, p. 186).” Napster and the iPod were arguably two of the biggest physical inventions in modern music history. Their functionalities expanded beyond the communities of computer geeks, and fully forced itself into the zeitgeist of pop culture. So how does this all relate to capitalism? Well, Apple may have facilitated “legal” cultural participation amongst its users, but it still failed to mitigate the spread of unlawful file sharing. Apple capitalized big time on the iPhones and their iTunes system. They were also able to take advantage of the laidback music storage laws in the early 2000s. Apple was legally selling songs for \$.99 and albums for around \$12, but the company also allowed users to download songs on the iPod from other file sharing networks such as Limewire or Napster. Many of the users I interviewed stated that they used their iPod for this process.

Apple found higher profits from selling the hardware device and lower profits from their iTunes system. According to Michael Ayers, iTunes acted more as an effective promotional tool for Apple (Ayers, 2006, p. 188). I suppose in a way, Apple hoodwinked the music industry into thinking that they were going to be the saviors of traditional music distribution-the idea of putting the music back into the hands of the RIAA. In reality, Apple was simply trying to expand their capitalistic vision. Regardless, the iPod quickly became one of the most important channels for music consumption, and greatly impacted the next twenty years of music digitalization. Their products were perfect hosts for the growing mp3 database. Music and capitalism would be forever intertwined thanks to a couple of major decisions by specific companies and the consumers that came with them.

From the consumer perspective, the growing amount of subcultural capital contributed to the spreading of free-to-use music that wouldn't have been available without the development of the technology discussed above. Part of being intertwined within a consumerist society is the concept of wanting more. Whether or not this is a positive aspect of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is totally up for perspective-technology has forged us into undying materialism, to the point where being on a our phone for less than two hours in a day is considered an anomaly. With this growing push for materialism comes the craving for more. We always want the updated versions of computers, phones, laptops; music too. Think about it, how often do you see fans of an artist beg for a new album or single. The availability for everything has created a fast-paced environment ripe for impatience. People's appetite for new music is bigger than it's ever been, and file sharing sites were a key contributor in developing that subculture.

Some hackers simply wanted the fame and street credit after cracking pre-released software. Others like Grover were simply mesmerized by the entire process surrounding it. Producers finally gained the ability to create music without highly-touted skill thanks to easily-accessible DAWs and professional sounds that were already fully mixed and mastered. Artists don't even need a proper knowledge of their specific features, like wavelength or frequency. Rock producer Nick Raskulinecz had this to say about the progressive DAWs-"Part of making it in the record business back in the old days was that you could do something and nobody else could do that. Pro Tools has enabled people, any average ordinary person to achieve those results now...it's kind of enabled people who have no business being in the music industry to become stars (Strachan, 2017, p. 27)." There are parts of this statement that I agree with wholeheartedly, but Raskulinecz' final argument leaves much to be desired in my opinion. Sure, the enculturation

of DAWs has made it easier for any Jo Schmo to curate an album, but saying that it has taken away from the quality of the art itself is quite frankly ridiculous.

In the mid-2000s, remix and mashup culture helped to blur the lines between producer and consumer, as more people continued to engage in prior musical texts that were beneficial to their own bodies of work. This specific group of producers/consumers have been seen by many to be a part of fundamental practices that blatantly destabilize the underlying logic of ownership courtesy of big media conglomerates. According to Strachan, the culture's insistence on distributing their music beyond the big label companies encompassed the idea that digital technology's capacity allows democracy to dismantle capitalism (Strachan, 2017, p.33). Despite the progressive tendencies, big labels were still able to nab artists for unlawful use if seen fit. Nonetheless, artists such as Girl Talk, Madeon, Richard X, and Mark Vidler continued to push their content to the forefront of YouTube and Soundcloud-two services that would change the way consumers listen to digital music.

While we're on the subject of Soundcloud and other developing technologies of that stature, it's important to note media's exploitation of these user-friendly channels. When Soundcloud formed in 2008, the service became a great place for artists to gather a cult audience even without making any type of profit on their music. Since there's not much of a monetary motivation on the platform, many artists must rely on sponsorships from music journalists, blogs, and other well-established artists who may find pleasure in listening to your music. It's been an effective form of curating artists for years, with people like The Weeknd and Brockhampton acquiring popularity through these ever-important blogs that are some of the last representations of excellent music journalism (a lot of big conglomerates are trying to ruin those too, but that's for a whole other discussion in the future).

Soundcloud started to see tighter restrictions on their platform around 2014 after a Premier's Partners plan was established so smaller artists could monetize their art through the likes of established artists and big label conglomerates. Users began tracking their added revenue through advertising and increasing plays from underground consumers (listeners who weren't really interested in mainstream content). The beginning of this program only included people who were exclusively invited. If an artist were to achieve this status, then they could partner with the biggest wigs in the industry, including Warner's, Universal, and a number of different EDM independents. In 2018, the site expanded their premier arrangement to even more creators, though according to the service, it would still only be an invite-only system. The deal includes leading tools that would help in reaching a wider audience, new marketing and promotional opportunities to help creators build off of the platform (Soundcloud, 2018).

Soundcloud in general has been an excellent avenue for getting your work out to the public, however the site has been heavily restricted by the conservatism exuded by Universal. The major label completed a licensing deal with Soundcloud in 2016 for all of their content. The entire situation felt narrow-minded in concept for Soundcloud, especially considering their very impact was being mitigated by capitalism. Universal was now monitoring every little nuance of the underground movement, ridding every song that didn't have a cleared sample. I personally perceived this as problematic. Most artists that use the platform for their creations don't have their name attached to a label (unless it's one they've built themselves), and they're not making any sorts of money off of streams (unless they're a part of that premier program). Therefore in my opinion, they shouldn't be penalized for utilizing samples from a movie or other musical components. Not to mention, the entire ordeal takes away from the beauty of the listening and creating experience.

*The Creative Experience*

While we're on the subject of creative autonomy, it should be worth noting the undying impact Digital Audio Workspaces (DAWS) had on the amateur musician movement-as well as modern music as a whole. Dave Pensado-the host of the famous web TV series *Pensado's Place*-described the increasing access to studio equipment, and how that in itself meant artists could progress as self-taught entities. "Everything is tied to the digital space. At one point, you had to be a millionaire to access studio time. Now you can access the same equipment for a few thousand dollars. Songwriters are recording their own demos, adding plug-ins and designs (Strachan, 2017, p. 30)." The ancient ways of mixing are becoming obsolete. Artists don't need to understand the specific nuances of a note. This isn't necessarily a bad thing either. One of my colleagues from Salem State (I'll refer to him as John to keep his identity concealed) explained his process as a DIY musician in an interview from a year ago. He tells me that he learned guitar and Garageband while watching YouTube videos and emulating what these people were doing themselves.

John noted how much easier it was to go through this route rather than paying for lessons, or forcing family members to take time out of their lives to teach him. "I always tried to learn guitar as a kid, but no one wanted to help me," said John. "Luckily, there's this great thing that we have in this modern age called YouTube, and honestly if I didn't have YouTube, I don't think I'd be where I am playing guitar." Even while utilizing pre-programmed EDM loops on Garageband, John was able to learn some form of musical cohesion without required professional training. He's now working on an alternative album with a high school friend-set to hit streaming sometime in the summer of 2020. John believes that file-sharing was an integral

concept for newer artists, especially since they had a better chance of finding an audience that they can relate. This is also the time period where you find your most genuine fanbase-the type of people that will stick with your music through thick and thin. This initial fanbase will be the basis for the future. Their passion for a specific artist will help spread the word and increase the stature and popularity of the musician.

John tells me that one of his favorite guitarists-John Mayer-owes part of his career to Napster and Limewire because that is where he first developed any significant artist. My colleague noted that he personally found Mayer through his many escapades with Napster in the early-2000s. This was his favorite time growing up as a music fan because songs were more affordable than they've ever been before.

To say that Napster's existence promoted illegal music consumption is a fair assessment; but to blame the possible death of the music industry on the entire service is borderline ignorant. According to *Guardian* writer Eamonn Forde, the demise of the industry in the early 2000s wasn't necessarily just the cause of laziness from the big name executives. There was also a clear generational disconnect that was funneled by the public's frightened state of mind involving technological advancements entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century. People thought the world was ending, robots were taking over, and people would be nonexistent. Society was skeptical of computers and therefore didn't completely understand their impact (Forde, "Oversharing: How Napster Nearly Killed the Music Industry," 2019). Venture capitalist Eileen Richardson actually presented the idea of \$.99 songs in response to the CD era from the 1990s, but quietly decided to step away and disregard the idea since labels would most likely not want to get involved with a company that promotes anti-album sentiments.

Napster became the talk of the town by 2000, and the RIAA tried everything in their power to bring down what was essentially ruining their old-fashioned methodologies. Artists such as Courtney Love and Moby heavily enjoyed Napster's presence, with Love going as far as to say the labels were the real pirates. Others like Metallica and Dr. Dre wanted the service shut down as the RIAA sent hundreds of documents explaining their unlawful use of file-sharing and corrupt business practices. Napster intended to present a business model to companies like Sony, BMI and Universal, but that scenario quickly wilted away because many labels weren't willing to renegotiate contracts with their artists solely based on this digital revolution (Forde, "Oversharing: How Napster Nearly Killed the Music Industry," 2019). In other words, Universal and co. didn't want Napster to dictate their every move. As with many rich executives, it was entirely an ego thing. Why else did they demand the internet to be cancelled? Because it was taking away from their precious profit. Meanwhile, independent labels found no need to offer a counterattack against Napster because they found the process to be user-friendly.

The Guardian article illustrates Napster in a somewhat negative light, claiming that it almost ruined the entire industry. Yes, the industry didn't fully recover financially until 2014, but that was due to heavy inaction on the labels part. In reality, Napster and LimeWire directly inspired Swedish technologist Daniel Ek in his Spotify invention. Shawn Fanning was even invited on the team to help with the algorithm. Napster had technically won the industry battle, allowing millions of users to share their favorite bands in a highly liberating experience. From the outside, it looked like music consumption was finally in the hands of musicians and consumers.

The upheaval grew large enough where other entertainers outside of music started to insert their own perspective on the subject. The greatest example of this was *South Park's*

“Christian Rock Hard” episode (which you can happily watch on Hulu). The show’s creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone injected their own satirical thoughts on the subject, using their keen sense of modern pop culture to address the topic of file sharing and illegal music distribution. The episode takes shots at Brittany Spears and Metallica; artists who regularly exuded hatred towards this new era of internet music consumption. The whole joke revolved around the idea that established musicians who are already making millions off of their art shouldn’t be so bitter about the new age of music making and listening. Parker and Stone utilize sarcastic humor to portray the FBI raiding the houses of regular file sharing users. The musicians lose their mansions because of the “dire” situation. The point of episode is to show the over reactionary mindset of many at the time. People in all sectors of the music universe treated this era as a war between the old-fashioned label executives and the working class tech experts who simply wanted the new Kanye West album before anybody else.

All 20-plus people I interviewed snickered at the idea of being scared to download illegal music onto an iPod or disc. There was no reason to be since they weren’t the ones facilitating the music across Napster or LimeWire. Most of them decided that iTunes wasn’t completely worth it, even if their blueprint employed the single format. There were other obstacles with Apple, such as acquiring iTunes gift cards so one could buy music. Each song was still a \$1.29, so purchases definitely added up once you got into the 100-song range. Many of my participants noted that downloading music from Napster was much easier of a process and more riveting. Unlike the iPhones most of us have now, the iPod Touches contained a myriad of space for music to be held on. We didn’t need to store phone calls or high-profile applications. The Touch was the new Walkman basically, allowing people to navigate anywhere they wanted with one simple piece of plastic.

## **VI. The importance of online music chats and DAWs**

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, hip hop became one of the most progressive genres for a number of different reasons. Since its inception in the 1970s, hip hop began experimenting with different forms of creative expression, as well as ways in which artists should release their music to the public. By the 90s, much of the genre saw the internet as a great avenue for igniting their brand in a world where mainstream acceptance was only marginally achieved (thanks to rappers like Tupac, Biggie Smalls and Jay-Z). Online music communities were an avenue for rappers (and other artists for that matter) and their fans to connect with each other through similar interest.

Michael Ayers introduces two of the most famous online music channels- Okayplayer.com (U.S. based) and Africanhiphop.com (made for African content). The common thread for these sites is both (and many other online chats) are bound together by people with similar racial and ethnic backgrounds. A lot of these virtual communities were started based on certain marginalization within the mainstream light. Ayers introduces this idea of a virtual diaspora (diaspora itself refers to the dispersal of an ethnic population from an original homeland into foreign lands, often in a forced manner or under traumatic circumstances) where communities are constructed according to marginalization as a result of their cultural, ethnic, and musical orientations within a specific genre. “The virtual diaspora is also to be understood as a metaphor for a terrain in which, due to experimental and historical dynamics, social agents position themselves oppositionally as well as opportunistically to the status quo or the dominant ideology. In doing so, the virtual diaspora establishes its own sociopolitical space or field (Ayers, 2006, p. 84).” These communities are places where marginalized cultures can regain that autonomy, particularly within the hip hop community in Africa and the U.S.

Okayplayer.com has become one of the most important sites to visit for up-to-date music news and artist curation. Audiences are captured on the channel, and an online space is created for mutual collaboration between artists and their diehard fans. As Ayers puts it, “Okayplayer is more a dynamic space, where the site and its creators actively engage their “e-family” to not only sell music to them but also have direct communication with fans (Ayers, 2006, p. 94).” Artists are able to establish a community with their fans and ask for marketing feedback in order to improve their brand for the future. Musicians simultaneously develop a loyal fanbase and find an edge in the hunt for worldwide success. By allowing fans to offer input, the artist is promoting cultural participation. Friendships are started and music is more connected than it’s ever been. Generally (even today), many artists build their image this way. They start out as DIY (do-it-yourself) entities, acquire a loyal audience, and then use their social media following as a method to get noticed by big-name executives. I’m not going to sit here and say that labels are totally pointless, but without the assistance of blog culture and virtual music chats, it’d be difficult to properly attain a worthwhile artists without appropriate research. Like imagine a 65 year-old rock-loving executive trying to find the hottest rapper on the planet. For someone who doesn’t know the genre well, this theoretical businessman would need outside sources to help him. That’s where places like OkayPlayer come in. A lot of these artists start out independently too, building a clique that can lead to prominent exposure. Executives like Doug Morris (from Witt’s book) must consistently adjust to the times. Otherwise they look ignorant and in denial.

For nu-soul and hip hop artists like Jill Scott and The Roots, Okayplayer was the origin of their fame. The Roots especially were some of the first pioneers within the music chat scene, mainly because they felt that they weren’t receiving the right exposure across the world. In 2000, the band invited Jill Scott (originally from Philadelphia) to star as a feature on their new album

*Come Alive*. Later that year, Scott released her debut album *Who Is Jill Scott* to widespread acclaim. Even without the marketing budget of a marquee artist from a bigger artist, Scott's debut shot up the charts thanks to an organic DIY movement propagated from Okayplayer. Scott's small record company (which was Hidden Beach Records) credits the domain as the major reason for her ascension to superstardom. "We've developed an army of interns who's (sic) been a part of spreading the word about Jill. Before the album was released, we started distributing "Who is Jill Scott?" promotional items such as T-shirts and stickers.

Okayplayer.com embraced Jill early on (Ayers, 2006, p.94)." Music executives such as Tim Reid (part of MCA) credits Okayplayer message boards as a crucial factor in developing record sales. It became an early-2000s staple for promotion. Many independent labels monitored these fan-to-artist interactions in hopes to secure a better understanding of what works from the marketing side of things and what doesn't.

Outside of promotion and audience-building, online music chats and blogs also worked as educative community that harbored people from similar places of the planet. This is where the idea of "virtual diaspora" comes into play. Africnahiphop.com's original mission was giving people an opportunity to learn more about the hip hop community in Africa. It was a reminder that rap lived outside the U.S. The organization reached outside of the web and funded programs that would help give local artists recording time and a proper education about the African culture with regards to hip hop. As creator Thomas Gesthuizen puts it, "I never trusted that the mainstream music industry would ever pick up on hip hop from Africa, so the site has always been a site on its own where people could exchange and learn about the music without having to worry about foreign label policies. And throughout the years the site became a gathering point for information and contacts on African rap, and now the major labels are finding their way there

and take what they can (Ayers, 2006, p. 96).” The role of Africanhiphop.com stretched outside the walls of the continent.

European radio stations such as Britain’s BBC3 Radio launched digital music radio programs where they would highlight some of the best music outside of their country. Part of this program included a channel titled “Africa on Your Street,” where BBC3 would play music from Africanhiphop.com as a way to get western listeners acclimated to music outside of their own homes. The independent recording industry was also starting to blossom in Africa, particularly in places such as Tanzania. Since many artists didn’t have proper studio equipment, a lot of these indie labels would assist with resources. Since technology was expanding, artists in Africa could hook up soundcards to a computer and record their own music before publishing it onto the internet (this is where Africanhiphop.com came into play). Altogether, this collaborative experience became a major contributor to cultural collaboration around the entire world. To sum it all up, Ayers puts it perfectly-“Despite the obstacles presented by an increasingly stifled music industry that more than ever privileges profits over artistry, what we find is that efforts such as Okayplayer.com and Africanhiphop.com develop a greater autonomy over their cultural output; that is, the internet seems to give them an edge and a greater sense of agency over the production, marketing, and distribution of their music (Ayers, 2006, p. 97).”



Part of the file sharing and amateur musician boom in the early 2000s involved peer-to-peer networks. Early artists could use these places as a basis for building a musical community and allowing music in general to be an incorporative experience. P2p networks are seen as a form of decentralized, distributed networking, allowing users to have appropriate software installed to duplicate files directly across a network (Ayers, 2006, p. 57). The networks gave isolated musicians a chance to stay connected and learn from each other. People could answer technological questions, thus making for a collaborative experience.

Sampling became a huge deal with bedroom producers, particularly in the genres of hip hop and electronic. When amateur musicians first start off, they tend to use pre-programmed loops as the basis for their art, much in the same way guitarists cover their favorite songs when they first start out. Over time, these musicians would program their own loops and use samples from other songs to add some dimensionality. Samples are a means rather than an end, and can represent an appreciation of a past culture when used tastefully. “The sample and its circulation play a fundamental role in the bedroom producer ‘scene,’ arguably more so even than the released material that binds a chatroom as an aesthetically aligned subcultural site (Ayers, 2006, p. 74).” According to Ayers, sampling is an integral part of any bedroom producer’s career. It

can act as a great starting point, or if your skillful enough with it (like Kanye West), it can be your total brand. Sampling was an exciting new way to manipulate sound, and it was all because of the internet's innovative resources.

## VII. Theodore Adorno

While this paper mainly focused on shining a positive light on technological innovation within the music industry, it was 1930s composer and writer Theodor Adorno who exploited the cynical qualities of our entertainment system. Adorno wrote many books, with one of them being *Introduction to Sociology of Music*, where he exposed the emptiness of music consumption during that time period. In the book, he praises composer Arnold Schoenberg as one of the most progressive musicians in the 1930s. He felt that Schoenberg defied what was popular at the time, relying instead on a different style of orchestra, chamber ensemble and keyboard.

Meanwhile, Adorno moved to the U.S, during the Nazi era-and explicitly stated his disgust with popular music in the twentieth century, saying it was standardized and repetitive; with a stark insistence in conformity (Mason, 2020, *Theodor Adorno's Theory of Music and its Social Implications*). In his eyes, popular music became a mere exponent of society rather than a catalyst for change. He felt like artistic value was lost; that American totalitarianism within the music industry found every possible way to take interesting tidbits of art out of the picture in place of money-grabbing uniformity. Adorno saw these aspects of America as undemocratic and phony. There was a lack of authenticity in his eyes, especially with music connoisseurs (early critics in a way), who only attended concerts because they had to, not because they enjoyed listening. He believed that music was simply complemented the death of expressive speech and a

move to non-communication. Adorno says this- “regressive listening is tied to production by the machinery of distribution, and particularly, by advertising (Mason, 2020, *Theodor Adorno’s Theory of Music and its Social Implications*).” Adorno regarded jazz as background music; art that couldn’t be digested for intellectual purposes. There was no spontaneity in his eyes, it was all background. He felt that the radio facilitated these issues, opting to not play anything with an ounce of innovation. In a nutshell, people were scammed into thinking that modern jazz was a means for intellectual participation.

Sentiments such as these are seen in today’s culture as well. For one, I briefly touched on Spotify’s algorithmic setup where curated playlists force people into narrow listening spaces with very little room for imagination. In 2013, Kanye West morphed into a modern Adorno and based his sixth album *Yeezus* off of the concept of being controlled by big-name business, whether it be in music or fashion. His response was an acid house album filled with rebellious tonalities and a song called “New Slaves,” which shined a light on big corporations and their tendency to control every aspect of an artist. Kanye specifically went through a phase of “free thinking,” stating himself to be some kind of religious entity (on “I Am a God”), and completely shocked people’s perception on his image. His sudden change in tone brought intriguing ideas that corresponded with Adorno’s own cynical thoughts on western realities. One could argue that illegal file sharing wore out the independent tastemakers of the early-2000s by attrition, to the point where many artists were stuck in purgatory as niche acts that never could be any more than a passing entity. Word-of-mouth and cultural appreciation is the only way to keep these artists’ legacies alive.

Even if I don’t completely agree with Adorno, it’s important to note his impact of modern music thinking. He begged questions that we still ask today. Are we forever attached to the big

corporation? Are we really free thinkers? Can we really make music without having adhere to someone above us? The debate will always be relevant.

### VIII. Conclusion

It's amazing to think how far we've come as a society with regards to music making and music consumption. I remember personally downloading files with my father in the early aughts when Napster was at its peak of popularity and relevance. It was a liberating moment for both of us, but especially for him-someone who grew up in eras where the album was the most important aspect of music consumption. I also remember some point in time buying songs for \$1.29 from iTunes when I first acquired the iPod touch. The mid-2000s found me firmly attached to this new form of music storage. The Touch was the coolest thing on the planet in my eyes. It didn't matter how was getting my music, just as long as I had it. I suppose Adorno would probably shake his head at me if he were alive, but you really couldn't blame someone so young. I was mesmerized by this shiny piece of plastic, and wanted to use it as much as possible. iTunes was the best way of finding all of the new music.

I never participated in the Walkman culture but I did collect CDs for a while because I loved the posters inside of them. The first album I ever bought physically was Kanye's *Graduation*, and there was this great poster of him with the shutter shades on looking fresh. CDs weren't something I necessarily needed, but they definitely acted as great memorabilia. A snapshot in time when I would peruse around record stores just for the fun of it.

It's funny because I recently just started reading this book called *Meet Me in the Bathroom*, a detailed account of the rebirth of rock n roll in New York from 2001-2011. The story's format involves excerpts from local artists of that time (including The Strokes, Interpol and Jonathan Fire Eater among others) describing the different methods of spreading their music to the public. Blogs, Napster, and a burgeoning club culture were catalysts for this exciting rebirth of garage rock. The dotcom boom made more people rich, thus ushering in a whole new era of independent labels and bands who had plentiful resources. It's an interesting book because it highlights an example of local bands gaining universal popularity through their own methods of music making and distribution. Cultural participation was at an all-time high as bands supported each other in endless hopes of a fruitful future. And it worked! Bands like The Strokes, Interpol, and The Yeah Yeah Yeahs stretched their fanbase beyond the city, and became international superstars. This is a perfect example of positive comradeship with likeminded individuals. It's truly inspiring and everything music should be about.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century in general has seen many changes to technology. I first started with a free Spotify account in the early-2010s, before transitioning into a full on subscription with Apple Music after countless advertisements started to fester in my playlists. Since my freshman year of college, I've been glued to the wonders of streaming, most notably Soundcloud; a fantastic place to find the up-and-coming artists. There's also Bandcamp, a mecca for independent musicians who sell their music from their own homes without the help of big-name distributors. These are the artists I love exploring. I almost feel like a college scout searching for the next great basketball star. The possibilities are endless with streaming. And to think, it all started with a group of people who felt a little rebellious.

When I interviewed my colleagues about this subject, all of them said they were satisfied with how music is being distributed nowadays. There appears to be a happy medium between artists, labels and consumers, even if a lot of artists are still severely underpaid by the executives. YouTube is still one of the leading places for music consumption because of music videos and various underground acts. There's honestly no need to pirate anymore. Soundcloud and Band Camp are basically free streaming platforms and great to use if an artist you're looking for isn't on Spotify. We're living in one of the best times for music, and even if labels still have a presence, their foothold on us isn't as firm as it once was. Everyone has their own methods of listening to music, and it's because of the endless avenues. Musical innovation isn't dead, you just have to know where to look. We were a part of something magical 20 years ago, and now we're finally starting to see the long term effects. In my opinion, music should always be a collaborative experience because it brings us together as a world. Positivity and social collaboration can help in a myriad of ways, even if it's just for a little. I can't wait to see the next big musical innovation, whatever that may be.

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