

Tab 1

Accepting friction: listening without a streaming subscription

This is part two of a series on tackling wants, managing media diets, and finding enough. Read the introduction.

To regain intentionality in how I listen to music, I cancelled my streaming service: [it's now been a year and a half](#) since I [ditched Tidal](#), nearly three since I [bailed on Spotify](#). I'm back to [listening with CDs](#) and mp3s, along with occasional ad hoc ad-supported streaming (mostly using YouTube for one-off plays).*

Even with an owned music collection, the exodus from streaming music has been a challenge. If you're like me, you've spent the last decade accustomed to letting the subscription streaming service pick new music for you to try. **The [grooves of habit](#) are laid in convenience and letting others curate for me.**

Aside: *(This transition was probably easier for me than most people younger than me because I'm just old enough to have established a music collection before streaming took hold; I continued to add to my music library each year by purchasing my favorite tracks up through 2018.)

While I'm noticing a lot of nostalgia online for the good ol' days of music before streaming, leaving behind streaming hasn't let me recreate them. Music culture has changed too much to fully go back. There are also problems I'd forgotten about music libraries, my personal listening infrastructure is missing gear, and our collective music infrastructure has adapted towards the type of listening that streaming encourages. **I still think it's been worth it to stop streaming, but it's reintroduced friction where I had adapted to none.**

Switching from streaming back to my owned music library broke me out of my listening routine, one I built up over ten years of streaming. I knew the transition would be disruptive, but I was surprised by how challenging it is sometimes. It takes a lot more energy now to decide what to listen to, so I often default to listening to the same few playlists I've created since the switch. Music discovery takes more intentionality and effort than on a streaming service.

One of my personal hangups is fear of stagnation, which plays out as a desire to [always be finding new music](#). Switching away from streaming plunged me into the deep end of "accepting what you have" 😊 Not having mindless access to new music encouraged me to revisit some older favorites – to rediscover what I already had.

I do also listen to music less often. Like [dostoynikov](#), I noticed that I was listening to music constantly, inundating myself in sound. I still use music as a tool, to boost my mood or energy for cooking or exercise, or when writing to help me personify a character's voice – but I'm more intentional about it than I used to be. That shows up in my listening stats: in 2020 and 2021,

when I had a streaming subscription, I listened to about 16,000 songs, whereas in 2024, I listened to under 12,000 tracks.

Streaming changes the rules of listening

Streaming music services establish the bounds of a music library as "all music," – which makes any personal collection pale in comparison. Likewise, streaming video services pad their catalogs with junk just so there's **a feeling of abundance**. (Yet when we subscribe to a service, we don't own anything at all! Clever trick.) Never mind that's more music than we could ever listen to -- **giving up unlimited access still feels like a loss**. It's a mental trap to keep us subscribing instead of doing the hard work of discovery and collecting on our own.

With access to endless music, we get decision paralysis and continue to listen to the same things as always, or lean on algorithmic recommendations. Listeners learned to trust music curation to streaming services instead of critics; pre-made playlists in the software you already use to listen to music are a much easier way to find new music than the old rigamarole. Even better? They're "personalized" to our taste by AI.

Kyle Raymond Fitzpatrick [remembers](#) the "homework" we used to do as music fans – reading reviews, seeking out the opinions of music critics – "all in the service of *purchasing* music." Now there's a pre-made playlist for every moment; we no longer need to spend hours curating playlists for ourselves if we want a different mix for working out, for writing, for cooking dinner. Streaming saves us a lot of work... but, ironically, [people like things better when we have to work to find them](#). Being served music instead of seeking it out for ourselves makes us into *consumers* moreso than *listeners*. Fitzpatrick continues: "This passivity makes us as audiences, as people, less engaged with what we're doing."

Streaming changes listeners' relationships with music

We used to be *participants* in music culture; now all listening is facilitated through a single corporate portal where every band looks the same, the cover art placed in its designated little square. At least in the MySpace days, you could pick up a band's vibe from how they personalized their page. Now a classical album looks exactly the same as a metal one, making it harder to build any recognition for artists.

We also like things we own better – but now we rent our music. As soon as we stop paying, [it will disappear](#). Without any feeling of ownership over what we listen to, it becomes less meaningful. **Music collections used to serve a social function, letting others understand how our tastes overlapped**, the way bookshelves do – but curating a music library is no longer a meaningful social signal. Even when we get together, if everyone's just putting on *some playlist*, it doesn't represent *them* the way it used to. This shift began with the transition from physical media to digital, but has been entrenched by streaming.

On-demand music changed the function it played in our lives. With endless, easy access to all-the-time music, we listened to it on our own more. We didn't have to listen to whatever was on the radio or whatever CDs we owned – we could stream anything we wanted from our phones. **Listening became more individualistic.** Microgenres flourished – hyper-categorization played to Spotify's benefit – so even if we saw what our friends were listening to, we wouldn't know what it was. [Most music doesn't have a shared meaning anymore.](#)

When we can listen to music any time, its function changes. Instead of something that deserves our attention, or a source of connection with others, it becomes background music* – a lubricant for work. (Because we are always working.) When I put on a playlist I made for myself, it may seem mindless, but the playlist only exists because I have put in the work. An algorithmically generated playlist – especially one designed not to disrupt whatever else we are doing – asks nothing of us as listeners.

Aside: *(I don't think it's bad for people to listen to playlists as background music – the music is serving a different function than culture, and that is totally legit – just recognizing that cultural forces are acting against music culture at scale.)

Liz Pelly describes how [Spotify users treat the endless availability of music](#) (emphasis mine):

According to a source close to the company, Spotify's own internal research showed that many users were not coming to the platform to listen to specific artists or albums; they just needed something to serve as a soundtrack for their days, like a study playlist or maybe a dinner soundtrack. In the lean-back listening environment that streaming had helped champion, **listeners often weren't even aware of what song or artist they were hearing.**

This treatment of music as nothing but background sounds—as interchangeable tracks of generic, vibe-tagged playlist fodder—is at the heart of how music has been devalued in the streaming era.

Spotify has been commissioning “stock” tracks to include on popular playlists that have a lower royalty payout. Pelly [interviews a musician](#) who's recorded tracks as a side gig:

The most common feedback [from producers]: play simpler. “That's definitely the thing: nothing that could be even remotely challenging or offensive, really,” the musician told me. “The goal, for sure, is to be as milquetoast as possible.”

From Spotify's perspective – and even the listener's – this is a valuable service, because **they need sound as background, not music as culture.**

Aside: (I wonder if this is part of why so many people were disappointed with their Spotify Wrapped this year?)

Streaming de-cultures media

Spotify is not a music company, though they have reshaped the music industry – and even music culture. (Their pivot to podcast underlines this.) Streaming platforms drove listening to playlists instead of albums. Rather than receiving payouts for purchases of albums, artists received money per play. This incentivized artists to only create songs that would fill the niche of a single and get a lot of plays. Why bother writing B-sides if no one listens to them – especially if you won't get paid for what people don't listen to?

It goes beyond apathy for culture and into contempt for it – because streaming subscription services have driven the traditional models for creating music and movies to the brink of destruction. Instead of buying music, people turned to renting it. Royalties artists received shrank – and even then, Spotify stopped paying artists it considered too small. **Streaming is a mechanism of scale, not of culture.**

We pay less attention to what we're listening to, now that it's merely entertainment, no longer connected to our cultural status. There's less pressure to stay up with new music. Ted Gioia [points out](#) that "Streaming fans don't pay much attention to new music anymore." Without a need for new music to be released, there is no incentive for streaming services to support small artists.

what if streaming wasn't just the end of "peak indie" but the end of "peak recorded music" more broadly? what if the 1970s-2010s was a unique, finite boom period for the entire medium? what if it's over now? just a thought <https://t.co/htj9w26KsT>

— jaime brooks 🐼 (@elite_gz) [December 12, 2023](#)

Pelly points out that this degradation of music culture is a feature, not a flaw:

It is in the financial interest of streaming services to discourage a critical audio culture among users, to continue eroding connections between artists and listeners, so as to more easily slip discounted stock music through the cracks, improving their profit margins in the process.

Streaming companies have realized that they don't provide a cultural service; they provide a service to buffer the boredom of modern life. We just need *something* to ease the tedium of chores or work, and we're not picky about what that something is.

Music's diminishing cultural value

We still think of music as culturally meaningful, and streaming services play on our desire to feel cultured – but music must be more than background noise to become part of our identity. **We must value music for it to have meaning – and it's hard to value something that we didn't choose, that means nothing to anyone else besides us, and that we lay no claim to.** When music is endless and costless, its individual value is degraded.

Part of the deal Spotify originally offered listeners was a way to listen to music that made us feel good about ourselves: we got access to endless culture, and musicians got paid for it. I wonder, will people be upset if they learn they are listening to stock music? Will this revelation harm Spotify's reputation? Does it matter that it's "muzak" if people are listening to it not as cultural media but as a way to make work more pleasant?

According to "[This is What It Sounds Like](#)," one element of music many people value is **authenticity** -- basically, personality. Bob Dylan: great songwriter, singer less so. Same with Conor Oberst of Bright Eyes, though I would say [LIFTED](#) is a straight up good album in spite of its youthful indulgences (skip the first track) -- most people probably wouldn't agree with me though 😊. [This recording of Coleman Hawkins](#) is powerful because of its human imperfections and effort. In contrast, I've heard people say they can't stand Joe Satriani because he's "just showing off his chops but has no soul."

[Toby Shorin identifies that](#) in a culture that values authenticity, "the value of a thing decreases as the number of people to whom it is meaningful increases." This is antithetical to capitalism's growth and scale imperative. Over the past decade, our cultural understanding of authenticity has changed, to the point that "What we are witnessing is the disappearance of authenticity as a cultural need altogether."

Music culture before streaming

Since I cancelled my music streaming service, I've been thinking back to how I used to find music in the days before streaming:

As a kid, we'd go poke around the music section of Borders and listen to all the samples they had set up with headphones. I begged my parents to get me a random rockabilly album (*Stranger Things* by The High Noon). I'm pretty sure that's where I picked up *Johnny Hodges meets Wild Bill Davis in Atlantic City*, [a fantastic set](#). I played alto sax and wanted to hear more Johnny Hodges; that's what they had, so that's what I got. Sometimes I wished they had a bigger selection, but now that I can have access to a basically unlimited catalogue in music through streaming, I recognize it's not necessarily better for finding new music.

Streaming gives us unlimited selection, with no constraints, no serendipity, no company.

I can listen to new music any time, any day, I don't have to go to the record store. With a streaming subscription, there's a perception that we can try anything anytime when we subscribe to a catalog -- but the reality is that there's so much material, it's easier to let the algorithm pick for us. And the algorithm has no incentive to recommend anything out of the ordinary for us.

I used to be limited in how much new music I could try by my budget; a new CD could be \$20, which took me more than three hours to earn at my minimum wage job. Streaming doesn't make listeners choose: I'm not limited to what I can afford to buy.

When I had to trade my hard-earned cash money for music, and I'd chosen a particular CD, I was a lot more willing to give it multiple listens than I am with music that I didn't pay for. I remember buying the Gomez album *Split the Difference* in college after loving *Bring It On* and *In Our Gun*, and was horrified that I'd wasted my money on it... until the third or fourth listen, when I decided I dug it after all.

In an interview with [Ezra Klein](#) ([archive link](#)), Kyle Chayka says (emphasis mine):

I think these ecosystems and platforms prevent us from experiencing difficult content in a healthy way. We don't have to fight through something. We don't have to be patient...

It's almost like boredom doesn't exist, like difficulty doesn't exist, scarcity doesn't exist. And a feeling I've been having a lot lately is that **scarcity is often what creates meaning**. When you're surrounded by infinite possibilities, when you know around the next corner is another video that might be funnier, you're never going to sit with the thing that's in front of you. You're never going to be forced to have the patience or the fortitude or the willpower to fight through something and figure out if you truly like it or not.

By cleaving us to our past preferences, algorithmic recommendations can allow our tastes to stagnate. Chayka argues, "We're herded and shepherded toward experiences that we're going to find comfortable enough."

I was also more willing to listen to music I initially disliked if a friend put it on; the first time I heard The Unicorns, I was appalled – now their successor Islands is my favorite band. Modest Mouse and Bright Eyes took years to grow on me – fortuitously, I actually liked them by the time I met my husband who's a fan of both bands 😊

I'd even take a gamble buying music I hadn't heard. I bought *The Bird and The Bee* based on a review in Wired 🎧 Once, our server at for dinner was the lead singer of a band, so I picked up [their new EP](#).

Developing a new process for music discovery

Jim Willis pinged me last year and shared [his approach to finding new music outside of streaming algorithms](#) -- a challenge I've been [working my way through](#) too. It turns out there are still basically endless ways to find new music. **Some of them don't even really take more work than a streaming service, except that I have to decide to do it.**

I'm trying to embody my older spirit of listening with the benefit of free streaming platforms (YouTube and Bandcamp) that allow me to sample new music.

At first I started assembling [a list of songs and playlists](#) I encountered to listen to later, but I never remember to go back and listen to it, so I've stopped adding to it. Now, I'll only open music while I'm reading if I have time to listen to it then.

I've tried out a couple music newsletters but haven't found anything that's matched my taste yet. I've had better luck with [last.fm](#) suggestions, but those are probably pretty decent because it has 15+ years of my listening data 😊 With somewhat mixed success, I've sampled from Bandcamp's personalized feed for me -- I buy more singles than albums, so I get updates about a ton of different artists. Simply exploring the [synthwave genre page](#) can keep me in new music all day.

Unfortunately, none of my in-person friends share my musical tastes, so I need to lean on internet people. Sometimes I'll pop into last.fm and poke around my "musical neighbors," other users whose listening complements mine. There also seem to be a fair number of people who share songs on their websites -- I regularly see posts in my feed reader with individual listens and media roundups.

Indie web music curation

A few indie web folks who share music they like online:

- Greg Moore puts out a [seasonal list of vibin' albums](#)
- [Rian van der Merwe](#) has a side project [Listen to More](#)
- Chris Glass includes a song with [every photo post](#)
- Anh has a fun "[listening room](#)"
- Pablo shares his [vinyl collection](#) ([recommend Pablo a song!](#))
- Cory Dransfeldt has a [music page](#) that [scrobbles from Plex](#)
- James A. Reeves [releases mixes](#) each month
- Jay Springett includes music in each [weeknotes post](#)

My pay-it-forward contributions are my [playlists](#), [favorite albums](#), and including anything new I listened to (whether I liked it or not) in my weeknotes 😊

Accepting more noise for wider signals

[Resisting the algorithm](#) is hard and often requires sifting through more noise to find the signal, but it is doable with intention. It takes both knowing what you are looking for and being open to finding something totally not what you were expecting.

I listened to Spotify's recommended for you playlist every week for years, and I'd consider it a good week when I liked a third of the songs it suggested. In retrospect, a 30% success rate isn't actually very impressive, given that algorithms promise to know our taste?

I haven't recreated a "seamless" discovery experience like I used to have on Spotify and Tidal, where I'd start the week with a customized playlist of songs for me to try. But I'm trying a

much larger variety of music -- things I never would have encountered before. Even if it's not something I'll seek out again, I've been enjoying hearing a broader range of music than I used to. **It's fun to sometimes have really no idea what I'm going to get.**

It takes practice to recognize when to quit listening to a new song and when to stick with something. I've found a few bangers, listened to a lot of things that I liked fine but didn't feel the need to save, and closed out of plenty of songs within the first five seconds. I was ok with a 30% hit rate from Spotify, but I can do that well myself.

I'm also listening to more complete albums, when over the past decade I've been more of a single listener. I don't think albums are inherently better than singles, but I appreciate that I'm listening to more of an artist's back catalog than I used to.

I also feel **more aware of how much music I'm listening to**; an album is much shorter than most playlists, so I need to make a new selection every 30-45 minutes. Yes, it takes more mental energy to choose, which has the side effect of encouraging me to give new music a little longer try than I might otherwise 😊 Friction, in this case, creates opportunity.

Sometimes, adding a little friction is for the good.

Further reading:

[I'm tired of pretending physical media isn't still better than streaming digital](#) by Sabrina Graves (Gizmodo)

[We have a content quality problem, not a content quantity problem](#) by Cory Dransfeldt

[De-Algorithming Myself](#) by timmymac

See also:

[Listening to music without a streaming subscription](#)

[The value of friction](#)

[Why are you speeding?](#)

[The sounds we like](#)

[Breaking Out of What the Algorithm Feeds You](#)

[Monoculture: the compression and collapse of cultural challenge](#)