

Tab 1

No streaming: reclaiming music culture

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

- Focus on **music (and video) streaming** in this piece – not algorithm in the sense of social media feeds

[Michael Faber writes](#):

There's a glut of artistic product. We have the fruits of our civilization coming out of our ears. It's not even a matter of seeking them out anymore, of foraging for the good stuff. Art is in the air, plentiful as oxygen, and we are under pressure to inhale deeply.

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.**

[It's now been a year and a half](#) since I [ditched Tidal](#), over two since I [bailed on Spotify](#). I no longer subscribe to any streaming service -- I'm back to [listening with CDs](#) and mp3s, along with occasional ad hoc ad-supported streaming (mostly using YouTube for one-off plays).

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. Instead, I've jumped back into the 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 streaming encourages. **I still think it's worth it to move away from streaming, but it's reintroduced friction where I'd adapted to none.**

- Return to intentionality – even with an owned music collection this is a challenge, requires a commitment to the work

How streaming has changed my perspective on music, now that I'm back to owned media

Noticing, not judging:

it's become normal to buy one song instead of an entire album, so I don't even listen to the rest of the album, but instead just buy the one song I like

I feel more resistance to paying even \$1 or \$2 for a song when I know I could get "unlimited" music for like \$15 a month on a streaming service -- even buying an artist's entire discography for \$20 was like wow what am I doing

I feel resistance to re-buying CDs that I used to have and got rid of in the now-regretted purges

How endless content devalues culture

- Intro: tie in with the mindset of more

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.

- don't value time saving, perception that we can try anything anytime when you subscribe to a catalog

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.

-- Kyle Chayka, [Interview with Ezra Klein \(archive link\)](#) (emphasis mine)

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 – to work. (Because we are always working.)

- Is this a cultural, not an individual, phenomena? Is this universal today?
- What is the difference between putting on an album I own or a playlist that I made for myself compared with an algorithmic recommendation or an AI-generated playlist? I've done the work
- Note that I'm not judging people for listening to playlists as background music – the music is serving a different need than culture, and that is totally legit – just that the larger cultural forces are acting against music culture at scale

[Michael Faber writes:](#)

Our society's sonic saturation is quite a recent development and may prove to be an abortive detour in human evolution. Our species managed to thrive through millions of years without multinational entertainment corporations, YouTube and Spotify. In the distant past, there was simply a lot less music around... Unaccompanied silence was normal.

Capitalism has changed that landscape.

<https://dostoynikov.com/the-dilemma-of-constant-music/>

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. **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.

Likewise, Netflix is incentivized only to keep customers subscribed to the service, not to produce great works of culture. Executives [realized that they can produce and license lower quality – and lower cost – material](#) because people use their service as background.

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. As Will Tavlín [writes](#), "Even Netflix knows its users can't find titles that they like." It's recreated the problems of broadcast TV, and added more.

<https://youtu.be/YAIDbP4tdqc?si=7ZyTxIChHwx1lygo>

Streaming de-cultures media

This goes beyond apathy for culture and into contempt for it – because their services have driven the traditional models for creating music and movies to the brink of destruction.

- Not paying artists who are “too small” – scale over all

Destruction of music **culture**:

- streaming platforms --> less need to purchase albums --> artists create only the songs intended to be singles, why bother writing B-sides? --> decline in variety of music
- Not paying small artists = signal of not caring about music culture because every band has to start somewhere – there is no nurturing of the musical pipeline
- Strips people out of the curation pathway by turning to AI, relying on algorithms

[How platforms killed Pitchfork](#) by Casey Newton (Platformer)

As Carman notes, in 2020 Spotify CEO Daniel Ek announced the company would be placing more emphasis on personalized, machine-learning-driven recommendations to drive listening. All across Spotify, you'll find personalized playlists powered by AI. And increasingly, AI plays the role that Pitchfork once did.

[Why Is Music Journalism Collapsing?](#) by Ted Gioia (The Honest Broker)

Before streaming, everybody in the value chain needed new music. The record stores would go broke if people just listened to the old songs over and over.

Streaming fans don't pay much attention to new music anymore.

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](#)

function of music has changed: it's become backgrounded, in service of concentration or efficiency or whatever; Individual listening over shared listening → death of music as shared culture -- no longer share musical taste with friends; music used to serve social signals -- now if we're not in each other's spaces, sharing the same sounds, looking at people's collections, there's little signaling from music -- how much was moving from analog to digital, from CDs to mp3s -- also music has spread out so much we don't recognize artist names, we don't have shared language or meaning from artists (I have a post on this with a weird name, need to dig up)

[Renting your music means accepting that it will disappear](#) by Cory Dransfeldt

- when we rent our music instead of buy it we feel less ownership and attachment to it, invest less of ourselves in it
- put less meaning to individual preferences

Finding music used to take work, now it is “effortless”; We like culture better when we've done work to get it; must be interested in self knowledge to invest the time in developing taste

- Excess of material --> lower value on cultural works --> effortful discovery becomes less worthwhile
- too many choices --> decision paralysis --> sticking to what we already know or letting others choose for us

[W. David Marx:](#)

[Filterworld] is full of important ideas..., but one of its most important conclusions is that humans end up valuing culture more after putting time and effort into *discovery*.

<https://1234kyle5678.substack.com/p/no-you-cant-do-everything>

I was talking to someone this week about this, and they were explaining how twenty (Plus!) years ago when they (and I!) started reading Pitchfork, we turned to the site to find co-signs from music critics, to read reviews, and do-the-homework of being a music fan, all in the service of *purchasing* music.

This passivity makes us as audiences, as people, less engaged with what we're doing. Everything is a screensaver.

Streaming markets the idea of being cultured by listening yet undermines the industry – e.g. Spotify Wrapped – part of why people were so disappointed in SW this year?

- must put value, meaning in art -- music must be more than background noise to become part of our identity -- we must recognize it as expression and relate to that expression

Capitalism incentivizes average content

- capitalistic forces already pressured culture before the rise of the algorithm
 - consolidation of radio stations and studios
 - reduction in number of movies made, shift to blockbusters
 - buying placements on radio stations
 - analysis of singles --> samification of songs
- Shift from analog to digital content
 - enabled purchase of single songs --> decline of albums vs. singles

W. David Marx [explains that](#) targeting mainstream audiences discourages deviation from the current “artistic conventions.” And under modern capitalism's imperative to scale, producers are interested in creating works that appeal to the broadest possible audience, to maximize profit. Marx describes these works as “[lowest common denominator content](#)”. What is new is often bland because it's a calculated regurgitation of [what people already like](#), or a careful [neutrality designed more to be inoffensive](#) than to actively attract anyone.

All of culture is flattening and dying as corporations in charge of what art gets produced (music, TV, movies) becomes more and more risk averse and [regurgitate what they know works](#). Style comes from being opinionated, embracing limitations, and [making mistakes](#). These are all things executives are scared of; this type of project is perceived to be riskier than [inoffensive, opinionless](#) pabulum.

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 maybe even the listener’s – this is a valuable service, because they need sound as background, not music as culture.

According to "[This is What It Sounds Like](#)," one element of music many people value is **authenticity** -- basically, personality. (They had me listen to the [most appalling "music"](#) I've ever heard as an example of authenticity and I peaced.) Bob Dylan: great songwriter, singer not so much. Same with Conor Oberst of Bright Eyes, yet 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 it seems like he's just showing off his chops.

Re-valuing authenticity?

<https://subpixel.space/entries/after-authenticity/> by toby shorin

What we are witnessing is the disappearance of authenticity as a cultural need altogether.

Under authenticity, the value of a thing decreases as the number of people to whom it is meaningful increases.

Overcoming psychological barriers to change

- accept the discomfort of "wasting time" listening to an album that wasn't that good or watching a video that wasn't for you -- it's not wasting time per se

Discovery 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 a random rockabilly album (*Stranger Things* by The High Noon). I'm pretty sure that's also 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, and that's what they had, so that's what I got. Sometimes I wished for a bigger selection, but now that we have access to an unlimited catalogue in music through streaming, I recognize it's not better.

Going to the record store was even more fun with a friend. We'd split up to do our own browsing, but wave each other over when we found something good. You can't really browse an online shop with a friend.

Streaming gives us unlimited selection, but no time limit, no serendipity, no company. I can listen to new music any time, any day, I don't have to go to the record store.

Streaming doesn't make me choose: I'm not limited to what I can afford to buy. But that's an illusion, because we still have to pay for new music, simply in time rather than money.

- Discovery at concerts
- Trading mix CDs with friends – no one else I know still has a CD player lol
- Compilation CDs – I guess the equivalent of a playlist

Benefits of human curation

[Personalisation and Curation](#) by Elliot Smith

While curation seems similar to recommendation on the surface, it has two properties that make it interesting. First, curation tends to signal itself quite well. If you're looking at the list of the ten best local Mexican restaurants you've opted into that category. Second, by opting into a category you give the curator permission to present a wider spectrum of recommendations. If the top five teen fantasy books were all just Harry Potter it would be a pretty boring list. Curation gives us the opportunity to explore different aspects of something we enjoy. A good curator will choose items that highlight different key features of a genre.

- a human with domain knowledge can guess that if you like certain types of rock you might also enjoy certain types of blues or other roots music, understanding how rock originates from blues;

Algorithms don't understand context. Sometimes you want an old favorite playing in the background for its comfortable familiarity while you do chores or work, but sometimes you want to try a new show over dinner. It doesn't understand what experience you're looking for. It doesn't understand why you liked something -- it can't tell the difference between someone who loves anything with Vin Diesel and a sci-fi fan -- and can't adjust the way a person could fine tune suggestions based on your feedback.

[Choosing Consideration. Not Consumption](#) by John Warner (The Biblioracle)

But true criticism is the opposite of algorithmic averaging moulded into a consensus. It is the product of a unique intelligence reacting to the object of scrutiny as only that unique intelligence can. The criticism generated by this process becomes its own thing, independent of the original object of scrutiny. When done well, it is awesome, necessary even.

- [Curated music discovery](#)

Broadening exposure, sampling

- finding new music different from books, information -- it's emotional, vibes based, not intellectual -- even moreso than books people don't have the same emotional reaction to sounds, rhythms -- can't really ask a librarian for music recommendations (or can you? 🤔)

have to increase the surface area of what you experience

What does it take to be good at sampling?

--> being willing to read / hear bad stuff

--> be willing to quit media

--> recognize when to quit and when to stick it through

What helps with sampling

finding value in things you dislike

physical media -- physical stores and events

Amoeba records, take a gamble on random used CDs that look interesting

Minimum(!) (and max) budgets

[lateral reading](#) / [listening](#)

selecting the pool of cultural material you will try -- deciding what to spend your time on

- human "tastemakers" -- bloggers, critics, reviewers talking about and sharing cultural works that they think are worth your attention
- word of mouth, friends, mix tapes

How my listening has changed without streaming



my remnant CD collection as of 2022 -- what survived The Purge

- have been broken out of my routine, built up over ten years of streaming -- disruptive for sure -- been listening to a lot less music as I try to build new habits because I can't just put on my new tracks playlist or my synthwave playlist
- I knew it would be disruptive so I'm not upset about it, but I was surprised by how challenging it is sometimes -- it takes a lot more energy now than in the past to decide what to listen to -- I wound up not listening to music as I worked in May and realized it was making it harder to work / focus without background music -- it is a motivator and makes tasks much more pleasant
- but in a way I have playlist amnesty instead of being burdened with playlists I made when I was 18 -- I can have a fresh start
- <https://tracydurnell.com/2024/04/13/the-draw-of-the-herd/>
- music discovery takes more intentionality (and effort) -- but it's easier to listen to music before buying it than it was back in the day
- deciding what to listen to is harder
- reinforces listening to my existing collection, to older music

<https://gizmodo.com/im-tired-of-pretending-physical-media-isnt-still-better-than-streaming-digital-2000543458>

Further reading:

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

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