

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

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).<sup>\*</sup> 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: <sup>\*</sup>(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 – though I do get the benefit of previewing music online before buying it, something that I couldn't do back in the day.



my remnant CD collection as of 2022 -- what survived The (much-regretted) CD Purge

## How streaming devalues culture

- Intro: tie in with the mindset of more

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 passive. Fitzpatrick continues: “This passivity makes us as audiences, as people, less engaged with what we’re doing.”

### Streaming changes listeners’ relationships with music

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. (I wonder if this is part of why so many people were disappointed with Spotify Wrapped this year?) 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 from our phones. Listening became more individualistic. Microgenres flourished, 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 – 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

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](#)

## Streaming de-cultures media

It 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. 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.

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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?

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.

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 loss of 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.

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)

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**.

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.”

- Connect back to Spotify revelations about stock music in playlists – will people even be upset? Why should it matter to the listener that they are listening to “stock” music? It’s still music performed by musicians 🤖 (haha I listen to an indie artist that makes “stock” music for streamers to use... but as a self-published artist I presume they’re doing much better than artists who release their rights to an agency)

## 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 we have access to an unlimited catalogue in music through streaming, I recognize it’s not better.

**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.

- Under streaming, there’s a perception that we can try anything anytime when you subscribe to a catalog

I used to be limited in how much new music I could get by my budget; a new CD could be \$20, more than three hours at my minimum wage job. 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.

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. 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 😊

- Discovery at concerts – I was surprised when I realized how many musicians I found back in the day by going to 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
- I even bought a CD from a Wired review 😊
- Used to keep track of bands' new releases, anticipate them, go to the record store specifically to get them

## Reclaiming music culture without streaming

### Look to human curators

A human with domain knowledge, understanding how rock originates from blues, can guess that if you like certain types of rock you might also enjoy certain types of roots music.

#### [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.

Algorithms cannot accommodate contextual needs. Maybe you want an old favorite playing in the background for its comfortable familiarity while you do chores, but to try something new after work. 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 fine tune its suggestions the way a person could 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.

### Broadening exposure, sampling

- Finding new music is different from books and information -- it's emotional, vibes based, not intellectual -- even moreso than books, people don't have the same emotional reaction to sounds and rhythms.



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

- 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, but learning your taste through experience.

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

A never-ending music library contains too much to explore on your own – that amount of music is overwhelming.

Further reading:

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

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

[The dilemma of constant music](#) by c. G. Dostoyanikov

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