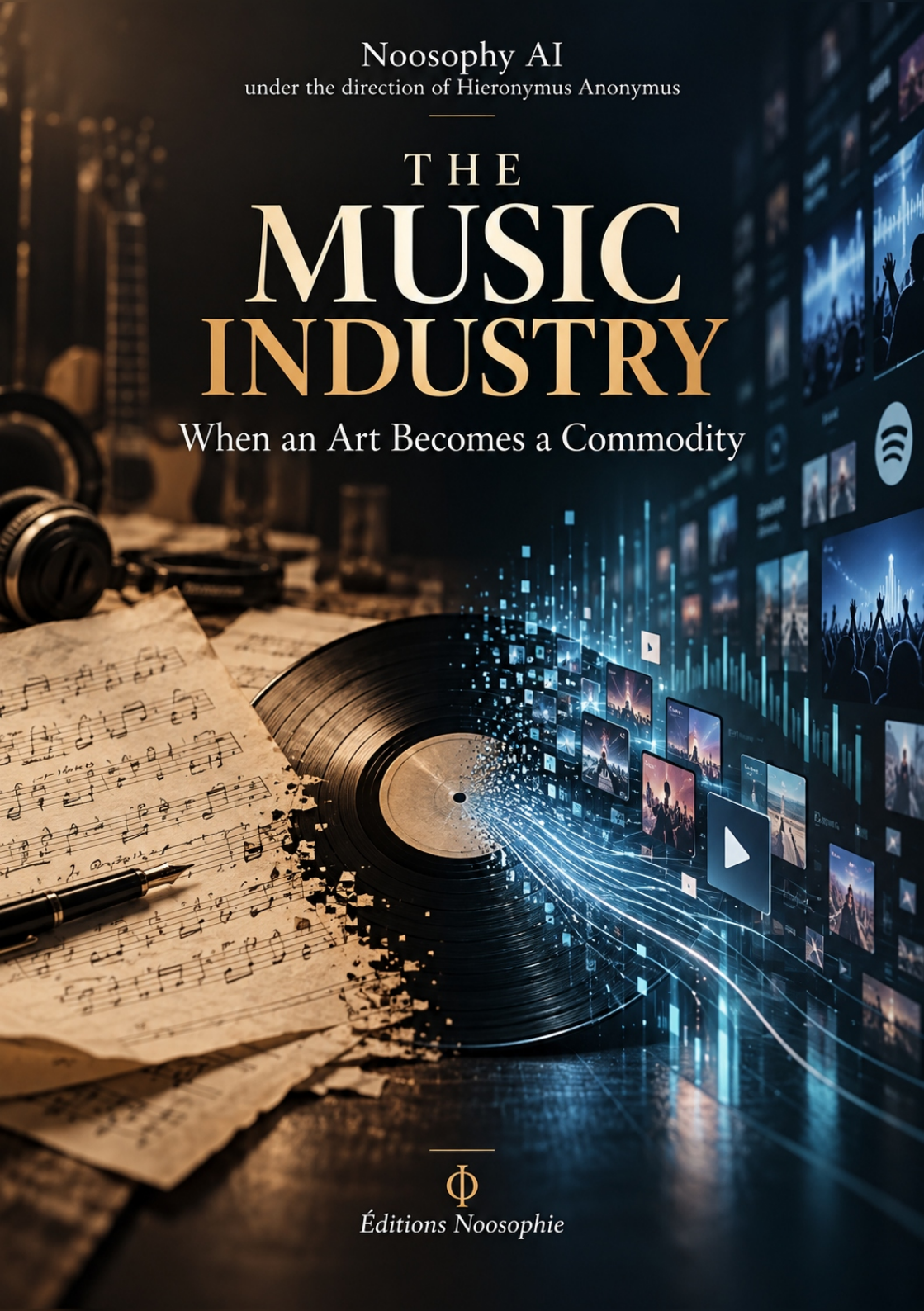


Noosophy AI
under the direction of Hieronymus Anonymus

THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

When an Art Becomes a Commodity



Éditions Noosophie

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This book was developed through a collaboration between Hieronymus Anonymus and Noosophy AI. Hieronymus Anonymus initiated the project, defined its subject and aims, arbitrated its direction, reviewed and corrected the work, and retains authority over final validation and publication. Noosophy AI contributed to documentary research, structure, drafting, comparison of arguments, coherence audits, source verification, and editing.

The text is therefore neither a raw model output nor a human manuscript that was merely copyedited by AI. It is the result of an iterative process of generation, criticism, verification, correction, and human validation.

For this U.S. edition, the finalized French book remains the intellectual source. The American version was rebuilt chapter by chapter rather than translated sentence by sentence. U.S.-specific claims about the music business, streaming, copyright, royalties, platforms, labels, market structure, listening practices, institutions, and law were independently researched wherever the change in context materially affected the claim. Each chapter was then audited for conceptual fidelity, autonomous American English, absence of translation shadow, source-to-target traceability, non-regression, and factual accuracy.

Artificial intelligence is not treated here as a source of authority. Its proposals can be wrong and remain revisable. Decisions about the book's aims, values, validation, and publication remain human.

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CHAPTER 1 — WHEN MUSIC BECAME AN INDUSTRY

Before Records, Music Was Already a Business

The music business did not begin with the phonograph. Long before anyone could capture a sound, music already moved money, labor, status, and rights. Instruments were built and sold. Concert halls booked performers. Impresarios organized tours. Teachers made a living from lessons. Copyists and publishers circulated sheet music. In the United States, the Library of Congress holds more than 15,000 pieces of sheet music registered for copyright from 1820 through 1860 and more than 47,000 from 1870 through 1885. Music publishing was already a substantial business before recorded sound existed.[1][2]

But that economy rested on a limitation that is easy to forget now. A score could travel without the performance traveling with it. It carried a work that someone else could play again; it did not carry one particular rendition. To hear music, a voice, a body, or an instrument still had to bring it back into existence. A melody could be remembered, taught, or copied. A concert disappeared with the moment in which it happened.

Recording changed that constraint. It did not create the music economy. It created a new economic object. One particular performance — a voice, a timbre, a phrasing choice, a tempo, a take — could begin to be preserved, transported, repeated, and sold.

The first step was more modest than the revolution it eventually produced. In 1857, Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville developed the phonautograph. The machine traced sound vibrations onto a blackened surface, but people at the time had

no way to play those traces back.[3] It could preserve a visual record of sound without yet producing a repeatable listening experience. That matters because technologies do not arrive with their future business model already attached.

Twenty years later, the threshold changed. In 1877, Thomas Edison developed a device capable of both recording and reproducing sound. Historians qualify the exact chronology of the first functioning machines, but the basic break is clear: a single apparatus could inscribe a vibration and then reproduce it.[4] For the first time, a particular performance could become repeatable without requiring another performance.

That sounds ordinary now. We instinctively think of a song as something we can hear again. For most of human history, that was not true. You could ask someone to play the tune again. You could not summon the exact same performance.

When a Performance Becomes a Product

The story could have stopped in a laboratory or an office. Early phonograph promoters imagined many professional uses for the device: dictation, business correspondence, spoken archives. The North American Phonograph Company, formed in 1888, tried to build a network that leased machines to businesses.[5] The idea made sense. The machines, however, were expensive, fragile, and awkward, and the expected office market was not enough.

Actual use pulled the technology in another direction. Some local companies discovered that they could make more money by charging people to hear songs, stories, and jokes than by renting the machine as office equipment. Coin-operated phonographs appeared. The invention changed function

because customers found a use more compelling than the one its promoters had emphasized.[5]

By the early 1890s, a rudimentary recording industry already existed: prerecorded cylinders, automatic machines, and early home listening.[6] Reproduction was still difficult. An early cylinder was not the equivalent of a digital file that could be duplicated instantly. A recording could be heard repeatedly, but it was not yet easy to reproduce at industrial scale.

The competition between cylinders and discs helped change that. Commercial Berliner disc catalogs appeared in 1894 in what the Library of Congress describes as an early format war, and more affordable spring-motor phonographs helped bring recorded sound into homes by the middle of that decade.[7] The disc also gained a decisive industrial advantage: a recorded performance could become a master from which molds were made, allowing hundreds of copies to be pressed.[8]

That difference was enormous. The artist no longer had to repeat the performance for each listener. A performance could be fixed once and then multiplied. Recording ceased to be only a technical curiosity. It became a manufactured product.

A new value chain followed. Someone had to choose the artists, organize the session, manufacture the medium, manage the catalog, distribute the copies, sell playback machines, promote new releases, and persuade retailers and buyers. Music gained an unprecedented ability to travel. It also entered an expensive infrastructure that only a limited number of companies could control from end to end.

One of the central paradoxes of this book appears here for the first time. A technology can free an artist from one constraint while creating a new dependency. Recording freed a performance from physical presence. At the same time,

reaching an audience increasingly depended on studios, manufacturers, catalogs, distributors, retailers, and promotional networks.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the question was no longer whether recorded sound could exist. It was which format, and which commercial ecosystem, would dominate. Cylinders peaked around 1905 and then gradually lost ground. Columbia stopped selling them in 1912. Edison, long committed to the cylinder, eventually produced a disc player in response to the growing popularity of discs.[9] The struggle was not just about sound quality. It was about compatibility, price, available repertoire, distribution, and the commercial power of an ecosystem.

As companies grew, functions specialized and control became more concentrated. Small firms built around inventors gradually gave way to organizations capable of investing nationally and internationally. During the 1920s and 1930s, companies connected to electricity, radio, and film became more deeply involved in recorded sound.[10] The ability to decide what would be recorded, manufactured, distributed, and promoted became part of the business model itself.

When the Record Business Began Marketing by Race

Industrializing recorded music did more than turn performance into a product. It also classified audiences and artists.

Black performers were strikingly underrepresented in the early catalogs of the American phonograph industry relative to their importance in the country's musical life. The Library of Congress notes that it was not until 1920, after the extraordinary commercial success of Mamie Smith, that record companies

fully recognized a large market for recordings by African American performers.[26]

The industry then developed the category known as “race records,” marketed primarily to Black consumers. That opening had real consequences. Thousands of blues, jazz, gospel, and other African American recordings were finally made, distributed, and preserved. The market created careers, documented major musical traditions, and gave phonographic visibility to performers whom the earlier industry had largely neglected.[26]

But the opening took place inside a segregated system. Historian William Howland Kenney shows that from 1920 through 1945 a small number of large companies came to control the race-record market, while some Black artists objected to being confined to the categories the industry considered marketable — blues in particular — despite the broader range of music they actually performed.[27]

The classification was commercial and cultural at the same time. It made some music visible while helping decide the label under which that music could be visible.

The economic imbalance ran deeper. In his study of blues and copyright, Robert Springer argues that many African American musicians did not receive compensation or recognition commensurate with their creative contributions. He attributes much of that exploitation to ordinary practices in the record business, intensified by the legal and social vulnerability of Black artists. Imitations, covers, and ownership arrangements often moved economic value toward other performers or rightsholders.[28]

Two opposite caricatures should be avoided. The recording industry did not simply “steal” all Black music. It also financed,

recorded, distributed, and preserved an enormous body of work that might otherwise have reached far fewer people. But creating new commercial opportunities did not erase segregated catalogs, unfavorable contracts, or mechanisms of appropriation that accompanied that expansion.

This is an early example of a pattern that will recur throughout the book: a system can broaden access while distributing the power and value created by that access very unevenly.

Radio Separates Availability from Attention

Then another technology appeared to threaten the economics of the object. Radio let people hear music without buying each record. During the 1920s, that competition put real pressure on parts of the phonograph business. The history of Edison's record division shows worsening performance beginning in 1924 as radio expanded, before the company tried to enter that market itself.[11]

Radio did not simply replace records. It also became one of their most powerful showcases. Record companies and broadcasters developed reciprocal promotional relationships. Catalogs, press materials, scripts, advertising campaigns, and programming all appear together in the archives of the period. [12] Buying a record gave the listener ownership and control over replay; radio delivered exposure.

That distinction is fundamental. The person who finances or owns the recording is not necessarily the person who controls attention. A label may make and distribute a record; a radio programmer helps decide which records enter everyday life. Producing something and making it technically available is already not enough. The work still has to be encountered.

That problem survives every technological revolution that follows. Distribution and attention are not the same thing. A song can exist, be available, and even be extraordinary without ever entering the listening life of a large audience.

The Medium Does More Than Carry Music

While the commercial system changed, the sound itself changed with it. In 1925, Columbia and Victor adopted electrical recording, greatly expanding the frequency range that could be captured and quickly making older acoustic methods obsolete. [13] Recording technology was becoming a more visible part of musical experience.

No medium is completely neutral. What it can record, reproduce, hold, and transport shapes practice. In June 1948, Columbia introduced the 33 1/3 rpm long-playing microgroove record. A twelve-inch LP could hold roughly twenty-three minutes of music per side.[14] RCA Victor responded the following year with the 45 rpm single.[15] The market now had material formats particularly well suited to different units: the short, immediately marketable song and the longer program that would help stabilize the modern album.

The diameter of a disc did not invent the album out of nothing. Multi-disc sets already existed, and artistic coherence does not come from a playback format. But the LP made it far easier to consume a long program as one physical object. It gave the album an unusually effective material foundation.

That qualification matters later. When physical media stop imposing the same constraints, the album remains a powerful cultural form, but it is no longer necessary in order to sell a song. Some of what we casually think of as “musical form” is also shaped by the conditions under which music circulates.

Magnetic tape opened another break at the end of the 1940s. Ampex introduced high-quality tape machines and tape that transformed recording and broadcasting. Editing became much easier, and multitrack techniques developed.[16] Recording gradually ceased to mean only capturing an event that had happened in front of a microphone.

It could be built.

A voice could be recorded at one time and an instrument at another. Takes could be compared, cut, combined, and layered. The space heard on a finished record might correspond to no physical room that ever existed. The studio became an instrument of creation in its own right.

That change has lasting consequences for how we judge musicians and recordings. For some recorded music, asking whether a group “really plays it like that” eventually becomes the wrong question. The finished work may never have existed in exactly that form in a room at one moment. Performance remains essential, but it becomes one element among many in production.

The cassette pushed a different logic: home copying. Introduced by Philips in 1963, the compact cassette became both a commercial music format and a blank medium that listeners could record themselves.[17] You could copy a friend’s record, tape a radio broadcast, or make a compilation. Reproduction was no longer exclusively industrial.

When Sony popularized the Walkman around 1980, the cassette also changed where listening happened.[17] Music became more mobile, more individual, and more tightly connected to movement through everyday life. The smartphone did not invent private portable listening. It extended it until access could become nearly continuous.

The compact disc brought digital audio into mass home consumption in the early 1980s. Sony and Philips launched the format commercially at the beginning of the decade, and the CD gradually displaced vinyl as the dominant recorded-music format.[18] Yet despite its digital encoding, the business remained largely an object business.

You bought a disc. You owned it, loaned it, shelved it. Most of the payment happened at purchase. The hundredth listen did not trigger a hundredth transaction. That model became vulnerable once digital content could escape the physical carrier that had contained it.

When Music Becomes a File

The decisive change in digital music was not simply that sound became numbers. A CD already stored digital audio. The deeper break came when music became a file that could circulate independently of the commercial object in which it had been sold.

A file can be copied without manufacturing another disc. It can be transmitted, stored, duplicated, and moved at very low marginal cost. For listeners, that property can feel like extraordinary freedom. For an industry built around the sale of physical units, it destroys part of the scarcity on which the model depended.

Napster, launched in June 1999, made the change visible at enormous scale. Private copying existed long before Napster, and Napster was not the first way to share digital files over the internet. What changed was the combination of scale, searchability, and the amount of music users could find through a network.[19]

Recorded-music revenue fell sharply during the 2000s, but “Napster killed the music industry” is too simple to explain the period. Economists have debated how much of the decline can be attributed to file sharing itself. Joel Waldfogel emphasizes both the erosion of effective copyright protection and the collapse of physical revenue, while also warning that falling revenue does not automatically prove an equivalent decline in the quantity or cultural importance of new music.[20]

That distinction is essential for everything that follows. The financial health of an industry model, the number of works produced, artists’ income, and the aesthetic quality of music are four different questions. They can interact without moving together.

File sharing also exposed a demand the industry eventually had to meet. Listeners wanted fast access to individual songs. They wanted search, portability, and control over their libraries without being tied to a physical carrier.

Apple answered part of that demand with the iTunes Music Store, launched in the United States in April 2003 with more than 200,000 songs, many priced at 99 cents, and no subscription requirement.[21] Music was still owned, but the object was gone. The customer bought a file.

That change weakened the album’s commercial necessity even further. A listener could buy one song without buying the others. The album remained an artistic and commercial choice, but it was no longer an unavoidable consequence of the physical object.

Legal downloading also demonstrated that several features that had made piracy attractive — search, immediacy, portability, and song-level choice — could be rebuilt inside a

paid offer. Yet the basic transaction still looked familiar: one payment for one unit that the customer possessed.

Streaming: From Ownership to Access

The next break was deeper. Streaming stopped centering the sale of an object or even a file. It centered access.

Spotify launched in October 2008 in several European countries and later described its mission as creating a legal service convenient enough to compete with piracy.[22] The promise sounds simple, but economically it changes the unit around which recorded music is organized.

With a record, the listener buys an object. With a download, the listener buys a file. With streaming, the listener primarily pays — directly through a subscription or indirectly through advertising — for access to a catalog under the service's terms.

That changes how consumption is measured. In the object model, most revenue is concentrated at the moment of purchase. In streaming, plays are counted and fed into systems that distribute money among services, rightsholders, labels, distributors, publishers, songwriters, performers, and other participants. The economic relationship moves from possession toward use.

For the listener, the effect is dramatic. Once a subscription is paid — or while using an ad-supported service — trying one more song feels close to free at the point of use. The listener no longer has to decide which small number of records deserve limited shelf space or a limited purchasing budget. Vast catalogs can be reached in seconds.

That abundance answered part of what file sharing had revealed. When a track can be found legally almost instantly, illegally downloading it, organizing the file, and preserving a

private copy becomes less attractive for many people. But the gain creates a different dependence. When millions of tracks are available at once, listeners need interfaces, charts, search tools, playlists, editorial choices, social cues, and recommendation systems to make the catalog navigable.

The recorded-music business did not disappear. IFPI's historical series shows global recorded-music revenue falling from \$22.3 billion in 1999 to a low of \$13.1 billion in 2014, then returning to growth.[24] IFPI described 2015 as the first significant industry growth since 1998, with streaming among the main drivers.[23]

By 2025, IFPI estimated global recorded-music revenue at \$31.7 billion, up 6.4 percent for an eleventh consecutive year of growth. Streaming accounted for 69.6 percent of global recorded-music revenue, including 52.4 percent from paid subscription streaming, and IFPI counted 837 million users of paid streaming subscription accounts.[24]

The American market tells the same broad story without being identical to the global one. RIAA reported \$11.535 billion in U.S. wholesale recorded-music revenue for 2025, up 3.1 percent from 2024. Streaming generated \$9.475 billion — a little more than four-fifths of the total — while premium paid subscriptions alone generated \$5.881 billion.[25]

Those numbers correct one common story: the internet did not simply destroy the music industry. It destroyed or weakened some of its business models and helped establish another.

The opposite conclusion would be just as careless. Industry growth does not prove that artists in general are doing well. Aggregate revenue does not tell us how many musicians can make a living, how money is divided, how much diversity

listeners actually hear, or who controls discovery. A growing market can still generate new asymmetries.

The New Scarcity

Look at this history as one movement and a pattern emerges.

The phonograph makes a performance repeatable. The disc makes repetition industrial. Radio distributes listening without requiring ownership. The LP stabilizes a new unit of consumption. Tape turns recording into construction. The cassette normalizes home copying and portable listening. The CD digitizes the content while keeping the object. The file separates content from the carrier. The download sells the file. Streaming largely replaces ownership with access.

At every stage, one older constraint recedes.

For a long time, the fundamental scarcity is presence: a musician cannot perform everywhere at once. Then scarcity becomes partly a problem of manufacturing and distribution: not everyone can press records and place them in stores. In the file era, the struggle shifts toward control of copying. In the streaming era, almost all recorded music can, in principle, be available at the same time.

That is where a different limit becomes decisive, one that technology cannot expand in the same way: human attention.

A catalog can contain tens or hundreds of millions of tracks; a day still has twenty-four hours. A platform can make a song technically available around the world without more than a handful of people ever encountering it. Global distribution therefore does not abolish selection. It changes how selection works.

The central paradox of the contemporary music business begins here. It has never been easier to make a track available

to the public, and never have so many tracks competed for the same few minutes of attention.

The next chapter begins with that new scarcity.

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[15] Library of Congress, National Recording Preservation Plan, "Timeline": Columbia LP in 1948; RCA Victor 45 the following year.

[16] Library of Congress, National Recording Preservation Plan, "Timeline": multitrack recording and high-quality magnetic tape; Ampex, 1948.

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CHAPTER 2 — FROM SCARCE RECORDS TO SCARCE ATTENTION

When Almost Everything Can Be Available

The previous chapter ended with a paradox that defines the modern music business: distribution has never been easier, but being heard is still anything but automatic.

For most of the twentieth century, releasing music meant crossing expensive physical barriers. Artists needed studio access, manufacturing, inventory, distribution, shelf space, and some way to persuade radio, press, retailers, or promoters to pay attention. Those barriers have not vanished, but digital distribution has lowered several of them dramatically. A musician can record at home, hire a digital distributor, and place a release on major platforms without owning a factory, carrying boxes of records, or negotiating for space in a store.

That can make access to the public look solved. It is not. Much of the bottleneck simply moved.

Luminate tracked 184 million audio ISRCs in its 2023 year-end report. Of those, 45.6 million received no streams at all during the year, while roughly 436,000 crossed one million streams.[1] By 2025, Luminate was referring to 253 million audio ISRCs registered across digital services.[2] The two figures should not be treated as a clean time series without checking changes in coverage and methodology. They are still useful as an order of magnitude: the accessible catalog is enormous.

The more important distinction is between availability and listening. A track can exist on a service without meaningfully entering anyone's life. Digital distribution can put an

extraordinary amount of music on the shelf. It cannot make anyone stop in front of that shelf.

The old scarcity was easy to see. Records had to be manufactured. Stores had finite space. Inventory cost money. The new scarcity is harder to notice because a work can be technically everywhere and practically nowhere at the same time.

Abundance Does Not Flatten the Peaks

It is tempting to assume that nearly unlimited choice should spread listening more evenly. If every listener can find exactly the music that fits them, why should a relatively small number of songs and artists still capture so much attention?

Because abundance and concentration can coexist.

A huge long tail of lightly streamed tracks does not prevent a steep concentration at the top. That fact alone does not prove unfairness, and it does not prove that an algorithm is manipulating listeners. Concentration can emerge from reputation, marketing, social imitation, perceived quality, habit, familiarity, recommendation systems, press exposure, fan networks, touring, cultural moments, or simply different levels of demand.

The important point is narrower: removing distribution barriers does not remove selection. It multiplies the places where selection happens and often makes those places less visible.

In a record store, selection is physical. A shelf has a fixed length. On a streaming platform, the catalog may feel limitless, but the screen is not. Something still has to appear first. Search results need an order. Home pages need modules. Playlists need tracks. Charts need rules. Recommendation systems need

objectives. The scarcity is no longer just warehouse space or retail space. It is exposure.

New Releases Compete With the Entire Past

Digital abundance has another consequence: new music is not competing only with other new music.

Older recordings never have to leave the virtual shelf to make room for this week's releases. In U.S. consumption data reported from Luminate for 2025, only 43 percent of U.S. on-demand audio streams came from music released within the previous five years.[3] That is not the same definition of "catalog" used by every industry report, and it should not be turned into a universal threshold. But the larger point is hard to miss: music that would once have been thought of as back catalog accounts for an enormous share of present-day listening.

A physical retailer once had to decide what older titles deserved limited shelf space. A digital catalog can keep an old recording available at negligible visible cost to the listener. A thirty-year-old song can resurface through a television series, a movie, a game, a short-form video, a meme, a tour, or a playlist and suddenly compete with a release that came out yesterday.

That changes what "discovery" means. A listener can discover a song today that was recorded before that listener was born. Catalog music stops being only heritage. It becomes active supply.

For a new artist, the competitive set is therefore much larger than the current release calendar. The new song competes with much of recorded-music history inside the same interfaces.

How Does a Song Enter the Listening Field?

The attention economy becomes easier to understand when we separate stages that are often collapsed into a single word such as “reach.”

A track can be available without being visible. It can be visible without being noticed. It can be noticed without being played to the end. It can be played once without being played again. It can be replayed without leading the listener to follow the artist, save an album, buy a ticket, purchase merchandise, or join a fan community. And even a large audience does not guarantee a sustainable career.

The chain looks something like this:

availability → visibility → discovery → listening → repeat
listening → engagement → possible conversion → career

Each transition is a different filter.

There are also many entry points. Some listeners search for an artist or song directly. Some play their own libraries and playlists. Some encounter music in editorial or algorithmic programming. Others arrive from outside the streaming service: radio, friends, YouTube, social media, short-form video, games, film, television, journalism, creators, live shows, or a song heard in public.

Spotify’s own platform data makes one part of that distinction unusually visible. In its Fan Study, Spotify defines a new artist discovery as the first time a listener streams an artist for at least thirty seconds. For the October 2023 period it analyzed, the company says more than half of new artist discoveries on Spotify occurred in “programmed” playlists, with more than a quarter coming from Spotify Mixes, Radio, and Autoplay.[4] That is company data about one platform, not a

measure of the entire U.S. market, and it does not tell us how the listener first became interested in the song. But it demonstrates why programmed exposure matters even when the full catalog is already available.

U.S. survey research also shows how many paths feed discovery before a stream is counted. Edison Research's 2024 Music Discovery Report found that 48 percent of Americans age twelve and older used Spotify to learn about music. Among Americans ages twelve to thirty-four who said keeping up with music was important, 63 percent used Instagram and 58 percent used TikTok as discovery sources. Among Americans twelve and older for whom keeping up with music mattered, friends and family were used by 82 percent, YouTube by 70 percent, and AM/FM radio by 50 percent.[5]

Those figures measure reported sources of discovery, not causal shares of streaming. They also describe different demographic bases within the survey. Their value is precisely that they make the ecosystem harder to reduce to a single gatekeeper. A search on Spotify may begin with a clip seen on Instagram. A song saved from a playlist may become a concert ticket months later. A radio exposure may send a listener to YouTube, which then leads to a streaming service. Attention moves across systems.

Being Shown Changes What Gets Heard

Visibility is not merely a reward that arrives after popularity. Visibility can help create popularity.

A 2022 study examined what happened when tracks crossed into the top 100 of a major South Korean streaming service. Using a regression-discontinuity design around the chart threshold, the researchers estimated that entering the top 100

increased new listeners by roughly 11 to 13 percent and total streams by about 2 to 3 percent.[6] Their analysis was more consistent with a salience effect — the ranked song becomes easier to notice — than with a simple story in which listeners assume that anything popular must be better.

The study does not prove that every chart, in every country, on every service produces the same effect. It is one platform in one market. What it does establish is a mechanism: holding the catalog constant, presentation can affect discovery.

In an environment saturated with choice, visibility becomes economically valuable. A position on a screen, a slot in a playlist, an appearance on a chart, or repeated exposure across social feeds can matter even though the track is already technically available to everyone.

That is the shift from the old distribution problem to the new attention problem. The work may already be inside the digital store. The harder question is whether it ever enters the listener's field of view.

Algorithms Have Power, but “The Algorithm” Explains Too Much

Contemporary discussions of visibility often collapse into one word: the algorithm.

The phrase is convenient and usually imprecise. A streaming service does not rely on one master algorithm that decides everything each listener hears. Different systems may rank search results, sequence autoplay, build personalized playlists, recommend the next track, populate a home screen, or identify content for a particular context. Those systems can optimize for different goals and operate alongside editorial decisions, commercial tools, social signals, and the listener's own choices.

Popularity bias is nevertheless a real research question. In a 2020 reproducibility study using 3,000 users from the Last.fm LFM-1b dataset, Dominik Kowald, Markus Schedl, and Elisabeth Lex divided users by how mainstream their listening was. Several recommendation algorithms in the study over-recommended popular artists, while users with the least mainstream tastes received less accurate recommendations under the study’s metrics.[7]

The result matters, but so does its scope. This was an offline evaluation using Last.fm data and specific recommendation models. It is not evidence that Spotify, YouTube, Apple Music, Amazon Music, or any other commercial service behaves identically.

A 2022 preprint by Douglas Turnbull and colleagues makes the picture less comfortable in the opposite direction as well. The researchers found popularity bias in several recommendation models they tested — and the most accurate model in their experiment was also the most biased — but reported no equivalent evidence of popularity bias in a simulated experiment querying commercial recommendations from Spotify, Amazon Music, and YouTube.[8]

That does not prove those commercial systems are unbiased. The study did not have access to their internal models, and the commercial-platform portion was simulated. It does block the easiest conclusion: that “the algorithm” necessarily favors the biggest artists in one uniform way.

Listening concentration can be real without having one cause. Familiarity can reinforce itself. Recommendation systems can sometimes amplify what is already popular. Listeners can also actively seek artists they know. Marketing, radio, press,

social media, touring, and fan behavior can all shift attention before a recommendation system ever enters the picture.

The useful question is not which single system is guilty. It is how multiple systems of selection interact.

Discovery Is Not Just Accurate Prediction

Recommendation systems also face a design problem that is partly philosophical: what counts as a good recommendation?

One common approach is to reward a system for predicting what a listener is likely to play or like. But a system optimized too narrowly for familiarity can become very good at serving more of what the listener already knows, or more of what resembles it.

Actual discovery requires some risk. A recommendation must be close enough to the listener's interests to be plausible and different enough to be new.

A RecSys 2024 user study by Robin Ungruh and colleagues tested two approaches intended to reduce popularity bias in music recommendation. The sample was small — forty participants — but the result is useful as a proof of possibility. Neither method reduced satisfaction. The item-centered method, which favored less popular tracks, reduced familiarity and increased the sense of discovery; that discovery could in turn improve satisfaction.[9]

This is not a universal recipe. It does show that recommendation design contains choices. A platform is not technologically forced to optimize only for the highest probability that someone clicks something familiar.

A recommender can balance accuracy, diversity, novelty, serendipity, immediate satisfaction, and long-term loyalty in

different ways. Change the weights, and the same catalog can produce a very different listening environment.

The Listener Still Has Only Twenty-Four Hours

The entire attention economy rests on a constraint so obvious that it is easy to overlook: supply can grow far faster than human listening time.

Tracks, playlists, releases, and promotional content can multiply almost without visible limit. The number of hours in a listener's day cannot.

As the catalog expands, the competition therefore moves away from mere existence in the catalog and toward a share of finite time.

That is one reason attention is measured so aggressively: streams, completion rates, saves, playlist adds, repeat plays, follows, clicks, shares. These metrics are not the music itself. They are partial traces of listener behavior. They matter because platforms, labels, managers, advertisers, and artists use them to infer what holds attention and what might deserve more exposure.

The danger is to confuse what is easy to measure with what has the greatest artistic value. A work may reveal itself slowly over repeated listens. It may make sense primarily as part of an album rather than as an isolated track. It may build a durable relationship with a small audience. Another piece of content may generate a burst of rapid interaction without producing any lasting attachment.

The distinctions matter. Visibility is not proof of quality. One play is not proof of loyalty. A large audience is not yet a career. Measuring attention makes some behavior legible; it does not tell us, by itself, what that behavior means.

Gatekeeping Did Not Disappear. It Spread Out.

One of the most attractive early stories about the internet was that middlemen would disappear. Anyone could publish directly, and the public would choose.

Part of that promise came true. Artists can release music without a pressing plant, without a network of stores, and sometimes without a traditional label. But the functions performed by intermediaries did not disappear. They moved and multiplied.

Radio, labels, press, and promoters still matter. Alongside them are editorial playlists, personalized recommendations, search rankings, charts, short-form video, social platforms, creators, fan communities, recommendation feeds, and the listener's own network.

The current system is more open in some ways and more opaque in others. An unknown song can circulate internationally without the physical infrastructure once required to distribute a record. That same song also enters a field where almost unlimited supply competes for a finite number of listening moments.

So the choice is not between an old world in which a handful of gatekeepers controlled everything and a new world in which one algorithm replaced them. Selection is now distributed across many actors and systems.

That redistribution has a direct consequence for musicians. If uploading has become easier while attention remains scarce, more of the work shifts toward attracting, holding, and converting that attention.

Making music is still the center of the job. But for many artists, the surrounding job now also includes images, video,

stories, posts, audience data, announcements, fan interaction, and a continuing public presence designed to remain visible in a crowded environment.

That is where the next chapter begins: when the artist becomes the media.

Notes

[1] Luminate, 2023 Year-End Music Report: 184 million audio ISRCs tracked; 45.6 million received no streams; roughly 436,000 reached one million streams or more. <https://luminatedata.com/reports/yearend-music-industry-report-2023/>

[2] Grant Gregory, Luminate, “Why Country Music’s Top Stars Loom Larger Than in Other Genres,” March 17, 2026: 253 million audio ISRCs registered across DSPs in 2025. <https://luminatedata.com/blog/why-country-musics-top-stars-loom-larger-than-in-other-genres/>

[3] Associated Press, reporting Luminate’s 2025 U.S. consumption data: only 43% of U.S. on-demand audio streams came from music released within the previous five years. The threshold differs from other industry definitions of “catalog” and is used here only to show the continuing weight of older repertoire. <https://apnews.com/article/a5e06a001705cd7e5d3854d8fab901b8>

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CHAPTER 3 — WHEN THE ARTIST BECOMES THE MEDIA

From Promotion Campaigns to Permanent Presence

For much of the record business's history, promotion could at least be imagined as a distinct phase. First you made the record. Then came the launch: press outreach, posters, interviews, radio appearances, music videos, touring. The line was never perfectly clean, but it was recognizable. The music sat at the center; promotion gathered around it.

Digital platforms blurred that boundary. When attention is continuously redistributed through feeds, recommendations, short-form video, stories, notifications, and personalized content, promotion stops being only a campaign. It becomes a presence.

For a contemporary artist, releasing a song can therefore mean much more than releasing audio. There may be an announcement, a story behind the track, a teaser, behind-the-scenes footage, comments to answer, vertical video to edit, profile assets to maintain, playlist pitches to submit, rehearsals to film, shows to document, data to review, and another wave of posts to prepare after release day.

The artist does not simply become their own publicist. The artist can begin to function like a small media operation.

That shift brings a genuine gain. Musicians can communicate with listeners without waiting for radio, television, a newspaper, or a magazine to give them access. But the same autonomy also moves part of the promotional workload toward the person making the music.

The Real Benefit: A Direct Channel to Fans

It would be a mistake to describe social platforms only as a new burden. They provide something earlier generations of musicians had much less access to: a direct channel.

An artist can announce a show, share a work in progress, answer a fan, test an idea, explain a process, build a small community, or sell a ticket without first persuading a major media outlet to pay attention. That possibility matters especially for independent artists, niche scenes, and musicians whose audiences are geographically scattered.

U.S. listening research makes the scale of those pathways visible. Edison Research's 2024 Music Discovery Report shows that discovery now moves through overlapping channels rather than one replacement for the old system: streaming services, social platforms, YouTube, radio, and personal networks all remain relevant, with their importance varying by age and by how closely people follow music.[1]

A direct relationship can also become economically meaningful. An anonymous listener can become someone who follows the artist, comes back, shares a release, buys merchandise, joins a mailing list, or shows up at a concert. For many independent careers, that relationship is not merely a marketing bonus. It becomes part of the infrastructure that makes the work sustainable.

But the word direct can be misleading. Artists reach listeners through platforms that rank content, measure interaction, define formats, and change the conditions of visibility. Replacing an older intermediary does not mean eliminating intermediation.

Musicians Enter the Content Economy

The deeper change may be that musicians are no longer competing only with other musicians.

In a social feed, a song can sit next to a comedy clip, a tutorial, an advertisement, a recipe, a film excerpt, a political argument, a sports highlight, or an influencer's post. Music enters a general content economy in which every piece of media is competing for a few seconds of attention against material that may have nothing musical about it.

That changes the work itself. Jason Ng and Steven Gamble's research on independent hip-hop producers examines how self-promotion, social media, and platform gatekeeping have become part of career building in the digital music economy. The producers they study describe promotional work as a significant demand on time and energy rather than as a frictionless extension of music production.[2]

The resulting paradox is familiar by now. Digital tools can help artists bypass some older gatekeepers, but that autonomy can also transfer functions that were once spread across several jobs: publicity, video production, marketing, audience relations, data analysis, and sometimes something close to customer service.

This does not mean every artist does everything alone. Established musicians may have managers, labels, agencies, publicists, and social teams. Yet even when a team exists, the cultural expectation often reaches the artist personally. The team may be able to edit the video, buy the ad, or schedule the post, but the raw material is frequently expected to include the artist's face, voice, story, personality, rehearsal, opinion, or private-seeming moment.

The Authenticity Paradox

Platforms reward forms of proximity. The artist is encouraged to look accessible, spontaneous, and personal. Behind-the-scenes footage can feel more authentic than an advertisement. Speaking into a phone can look more direct than issuing a press release.

But once spontaneity is expected, spontaneity becomes work.

Artists have to decide what to show, how often to show it, in what form, and with what degree of intimacy. The public identity has to be coherent enough to be recognizable while still appearing alive enough not to look manufactured. Authenticity becomes, at least in part, something that must be managed.

A 2025 *Frontiers in Psychology* study based on interviews with twelve musicians in the United Kingdom captures this tension directly. Participants described real benefits from social media — connection, self-expression, networking, career building, inspiration — alongside harmful comparison, uncertainty about algorithms, pressure to keep sharing, and the risk that online activity displaced music, relationships, and other valued parts of offline life.[3]

The study also describes the boundary problem. Musicians are encouraged to build closeness with listeners while deciding how much of themselves remains private. The result is not necessarily dishonesty. It is a new form of labor: deciding which parts of a real life become public material and how to keep the public version from consuming the private one.

That matters because an artistic career depends partly on symbolic identity. When promotion requires that identity to become a continuous stream of content, the artist is no longer

circulating only songs, albums, and performances. The artist is also circulating an updated public version of the self.

Visibility Is Not a Career

The implicit promise of viral platforms is easy to understand: if enough people see the content, the artist will find an audience.

Sometimes that happens. Short-form video can move a song across countries in days. A 2025 report commissioned by TikTok and produced with Luminate said that 84 percent of songs entering the Billboard Global 200 in 2024 had gone viral on TikTok first. The same report said U.S. TikTok users were 74 percent more likely than the average short-form-video user to discover and share new music through social and short-form platforms.[4]

Those figures are useful, but their source matters. TikTok commissioned the report, and some of the underlying engagement data came from TikTok. The results show a strong association between the platform, music discovery, and chart activity; they do not independently prove that TikTok caused the success of every song in the dataset.

More importantly, an explosion of visibility does not necessarily turn into a career.

Alexandria Arrieta's 2025 study, based on twenty-seven interviews with music artists and creators working with short-form video, describes exactly that problem. Viral sounds, memes, covers, and rapid exposure could produce attention without delivering the professional or economic milestones creators wanted. Many participants therefore described shifting away from pure optimization for virality and toward content that could support fandom and longer-term career sustainability.[5]

That distinction is fundamental: virality, recognition, fandom, and livelihood are not synonyms.

A clip can receive millions of views while very few viewers remember the artist's name. A song can become attached to a meme whose fame exceeds that of its creator. Someone can watch fifteen seconds, enjoy it, and never hear the full track. Meanwhile, a much smaller community may be willing to buy tickets, purchase merchandise, support a membership, or follow an artist from release to release.

Visibility is a stage in the process. It is not the end of the process.

When the Platform Becomes a Marketing Tool

This transformation is not limited to TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube. Streaming platforms have increasingly absorbed functions that once sat outside the listening service.

Spotify now describes the artist profile as a place for music, concerts, merchandise, videos, and other ways of deepening fan engagement. The company says millions of people visit artist profiles every day and that 90 percent interact with those pages in some way. Those are Spotify's own metrics, not an independent study, but they reveal how the company imagines the profile: not as a static discography page, but as a space for relationship, promotion, and conversion.[6]

Spotify has also expanded video and promotional tools inside the service. In 2025, the company reported that listeners who discovered a track with a music video were, on average, 34 percent more likely to stream it again the following week, while tracks with music videos were 24 percent more likely to be saved or shared. Again, these are internal platform metrics, not randomized independent evidence. Their significance is

institutional: the listening service increasingly hosts activities that once belonged to an external marketing campaign.[7]

Discovery Mode goes further. Eligible artists and rightsholders can identify tracks they want prioritized as an additional signal in certain personalized recommendation contexts. Spotify does not guarantee placement. Instead of charging an upfront campaign budget, the service currently applies a 30 percent commission to recording royalties generated by streams of selected songs in Discovery Mode contexts; streams outside those contexts remain outside that commission.[8]

The boundary between distribution and promotion therefore becomes unusually thin. The same system can host the music, recommend it, measure response, provide campaign tools, and participate financially in a promotional mechanism tied to recommendation.

A musician is no longer using a streaming platform only to deliver an audio file. The surrounding work can include managing a profile, reading analytics, choosing campaign tools, coordinating releases, supplying video, and deciding what kinds of exposure are worth pursuing.

Metrics Enter the Studio

Once nearly every action produces data, artistic and promotional decisions can be observed almost in real time.

Views, completion rates, saves, follows, shares, playlist adds, locations, audience demographics, performance of individual clips: artists and their teams now have access to information that would have been difficult or impossible to obtain during the physical-record era.

That information can be extraordinarily useful. It can reveal where a song is beginning to spread, which city may support a show, which older track is finding a new audience, or which campaign appears to generate more engagement.

But data creates another temptation: what is measurable can quietly become what matters.

Some music needs time. Some albums build their audiences slowly. Some songs become important years after release. Some artistic choices are deliberately difficult, long, quiet, or resistant to the formats that generate immediate responses.

The contemporary artist therefore works under a new kind of gaze: numerical reaction arrives almost immediately. Feedback can inform creation. It can also invade it.

The useful distinction is not between artistic purity and data. Refusing all information about an audience would be as artificial as composing only to optimize a metric. The problem begins when indicators stop serving as instruments and become objectives that silently redefine the work.

The Hidden Cost: Time

The easiest resource to forget in this new economy is the artist's time.

A thirty-second video can require an idea, setup, several takes, editing, captions, a post, and then replies. Repeat that every week, every day, or across several platforms, and the workload becomes substantial.

The musicians interviewed by Musgrave and colleagues repeatedly connected social-media work to time pressure. Some described a professional obligation to remain visible and explained that content production competed directly with time for music, relationships, rest, and other parts of life.[3]

Ng and Gamble identify a related tension among independent hip-hop producers. Being able to promote oneself can support a career, but it also adds labor that is not necessarily paid directly and requires producers to learn the conventions of multiple platforms.[2]

This creates an inequality that is less visible than the cost of studio time. Artists may all have access to a publish button, but they do not have the same amount of time, the same editing skills, the same comfort on camera, the same equipment, the same knowledge of platforms, or the same team behind them.

Democratized publishing is not the same thing as equal promotional capacity.

Not Every Artist Wants to Be a Content Creator

“Artist” covers very different kinds of people and practices. Some musicians enjoy filming their work, explaining technique, joking with listeners, documenting a tour, or turning social media into another creative form. For them, content can genuinely extend the art.

Others primarily want to write, play, record, produce, or perform. Asking them to master the conventions of influencer culture can create a conflict between the work they chose and the work the market now rewards.

That difference in disposition matters. A promotional environment that places a high value on frequent content will tend to reward some personalities, genres, narratives, and visual forms more easily than others.

This does not mean introverted, private, or visually understated artists cannot succeed. It means the promotion system increasingly values a competence that is separate from musical competence.

The ability to tell a story about the work, build a public image, communicate regularly, and understand platforms can become a professional advantage just as knowing how to navigate radio, press, retail, or label networks once was.

From Audience to Fandom

One of the more revealing shifts in recent industry language is the move from raw reach toward fans, superfans, retention, and durable relationships.

That shift is not altruistic. A loyal fan is generally more valuable to an artist and to the businesses around the artist than one passing viral impression. The fan comes back, listens again, saves, buys a ticket, follows, shares, explores the catalog, and may purchase something directly.

But the shift also matches what creators in Arrieta's study describe: visibility becomes professionally meaningful when it can be translated into an ongoing relationship rather than remaining a temporary spike.[5]

The question changes from "How many people saw this?" to something harder: "How many know who I am, come back to the music, and will follow me beyond this one moment?"

For a career, that difference may matter more than virality itself.

Autonomy Has a Price

The digital transition gave artists real power. It became easier to publish, communicate, build a community, and sometimes build a career without passing through every older intermediary.

But autonomy should not be confused with the disappearance of work.

Tasks once performed by labels, media outlets, publicists, and marketing teams are now accessible directly to artists. That also means some of those tasks can be transferred to them.

A contemporary musician can therefore be, at the same time, songwriter, performer, producer, editor of a public image, videographer, community manager, data analyst, and campaign manager.

That multiplication of roles can be liberating. It can also be exhausting. The same tool that helps an artist bypass a gatekeeper can create a new dependence on continuous visibility.

The central change is not that promotion disappeared. It moved closer to the artist until, for many musicians, it became part of everyday work.

And that accumulation of roles leads directly to the next question. If the artist is doing more of the work, where does the money generated by music actually go?

Notes

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[3] George Musgrave, Daniel Carney, Emma Silver, and Marc S. Tibber, “‘Working in the content factory’: musicians’ social media use and mental health as seen through the lens of a transdiagnostic cognitive behavioural conceptualisation,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 16 (2025). Qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with twelve UK musicians pursuing careers in popular/non-classical music. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1542407.

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CHAPTER 4 — WHERE DOES THE MONEY GO?

One Song, Several Economies

When a listener presses play, it is easy to imagine a simple transaction: the platform receives money, keeps a share, and sends the rest to the artist.

The real system is much more fragmented.

A recorded song can contain several different economic assets at once. There is the sound recording — the master — which may be owned or controlled by an artist, a label, or another rightsholder. There is the underlying musical work: the music and lyrics, with its songwriters, composers, publishers, and administrators. There are performers. There may also be a distributor, manager, producer, booking agent, touring company, merch partner, or collection organization.

The same three minutes of audio can therefore generate several streams of money that follow different routes and pay different people.

Understanding music economics begins by giving up the idea that there is one thing called “the song’s revenue.”

A Stream Does Not Pay “the Artist”

Spotify’s own royalty guide makes a useful distinction. The company says it pays recording and publishing rightsholders, not a single generic category called “the artist.” Those rightsholders then account to performers, songwriters, publishers, and other participants under the agreements that apply to them.[1]

That distinction explains much of the confusion around streaming.

When a service collects subscription fees and advertising revenue, it does not simply attach a universal cash value to every play and transfer that amount to the person whose face appears on the screen. Different rights are licensed in different ways. Money may reach a record label or distributor on the recording side and publishers, performance-rights organizations, or mechanical-royalty systems on the composition side.

Spotify says roughly two-thirds of its music revenue is allocated to recording and publishing royalties. In the company's current description, about four-fifths of that royalty allocation goes to recording rights and about one-fifth to publishing rights. It also says that its payouts are based on streamshare rather than a fixed price per stream.[1]

Those are Spotify's descriptions of its own system, not universal statutory percentages that every service must use.

And even when we know how much a service paid to a rightsholder, we still do not know how much a particular musician took home.

The First Asset: The Sound Recording

U.S. copyright law treats the sound recording and the underlying musical composition as separate works.[2]

That sounds like a technical distinction until money starts moving.

On an on-demand service, the sound-recording side is generally licensed through the companies that control the master: labels, distributors, independent artists, or other licensors. If an artist owns the master and distributes it independently, the recording income can flow toward that artist after distributor fees, collaborator shares, and other costs. If a

label controls the master, the label or another licensor may receive the recording-side payment and then account to the artist under the recording agreement.

Two artists with the same number of streams can therefore end up with very different incomes.

One may own the recording and pay a distribution fee. Another may have assigned or licensed the master to a label. One may have several collaborators receiving points. Another may be working under a partnership deal. One may have recouped an advance. Another may still have an unrecouped balance.

The public number — ten million streams, one hundred million streams — does not reveal the private contract.

Financing Changes Control

The traditional label bargain is not difficult to understand in principle. Recording, promotion, staff, marketing, videos, tour support, and advances require capital. A label can supply some of that capital and absorb risk that the project will fail.

The harder question is what the artist gives up in return.

Recording agreements can involve advances against future royalties, recoupment of specified costs, exclusive recording commitments, and label ownership or control of sound recordings. The terms vary widely, and modern deals include everything from traditional label contracts to licensing, distribution, services, and partnership arrangements. There is no single contract that represents “the record deal.”[3]

An advance is especially easy to misunderstand. It can feel like income because the artist receives money before the record earns it back. But in many recording agreements, the advance is recoupable from the artist’s future royalty account. The artist

does not necessarily write a check back to the label if the project fails; instead, the contract can require the artist's royalty share to cover the recoupable balance before additional royalties are paid out.

That creates a distinction between a recording making money for the business that owns or exploits it and the artist's personal royalty account being recouped.

Ownership matters just as much as percentage. If a company owns a master, it controls an asset that may continue earning for decades. If an artist retains the master and licenses it for a limited term, the short-term economics may be less generous in some respects but the long-term control can be very different.

Neither structure is automatically good or bad. Financing has value. Services have value. Distribution has value. The economic question is whether the rights, term, recoupment, control, and compensation are proportionate to what each side contributes and to the bargaining power each side actually has.

The U.S. Copyright Office has repeatedly pointed to another layer of opacity in digital licensing: large advances and other forms of consideration can be negotiated between services and major rightsholders, while the extent to which those amounts are shared with individual creators depends on the relevant contracts and accounting practices.[4]

Money in the music business is therefore not only divided by copyright law. It is divided by contracts layered on top of copyright law.

When the Master Becomes a Career Asset

This is why disputes over masters are not merely symbolic battles about artistic pride.

TLC famously sold millions of records in the 1990s while entering bankruptcy and challenging a contractual structure in which a production company, royalty rates, and recoupable costs sharply affected what the group received. Prince made control of his recordings and release schedule part of a public conflict with Warner Bros., eventually regaining ownership of important parts of his catalog years later.[5][6]

These cases are memorable because the gap between public success and private economics was so visible. They do not prove that every label contract is exploitative. They prove something narrower and more useful: sales, streams, fame, and ownership are different variables.

A career can look enormous from the outside while the underlying rights are structured in ways the public never sees.

Concentration and Negotiating Power

Individual contracts do not exist in a vacuum. Market structure affects what can be negotiated.

The recorded-music business is still organized around three major music groups — Universal, Sony, and Warner — alongside a large and diverse independent sector. The definition of “independent” becomes complicated because an independently owned label may still use a major-owned distribution service.

Recent U.S. Luminate data illustrates how differently concentration can look depending on where we measure it. In the first half of 2024, independent distributors handled large shares of tracks in lower and middle streaming tiers, but 43 of the 46 tracks that crossed one billion U.S. on-demand audio streams were distributed through Universal, Sony, or Warner. [7]

That is not a single market-share number, and it should not be treated as one. It does show that access has broadened without making the top of the market structurally flat.

Large music groups can offer capital, global teams, marketing infrastructure, distribution, catalog expertise, and relationships that smaller companies may not match. Those capabilities are real economic services. At the same time, ownership or distribution of commercially essential catalogs gives large rightsholders bargaining power in negotiations with platforms.

The useful distinction is not “major label bad, independent good.” It is between different combinations of capital, service, ownership, risk, and control.

The Second Asset: The Song

The composition is legally separate from the recording.

If ten artists record the same song, there can be ten different sound recordings built on one underlying musical work. A singer may perform a song without having written it. A songwriter may earn from a recording without appearing on it.

That is why the publishing side cannot simply be folded into the master side.

In the United States, streaming a musical work can generate more than one type of publishing royalty. The two most important for on-demand streaming are mechanical royalties and public-performance royalties.

Those two flows do not travel through one all-purpose U.S. collection system.

Why U.S. Publishing Royalties Split Into Different Pipes

The Music Modernization Act changed the way digital mechanical licensing works in the United States.

For covered digital uses — including interactive streams, permanent downloads, and limited downloads — section 115 provides a blanket statutory mechanical license that digital music providers can obtain. The Mechanical Licensing Collective, or MLC, administers that blanket license. Services operating under it send usage data and royalties to the MLC; the MLC matches recordings to musical works and rightsholders and distributes matched mechanical royalties.[8]

As of June 2026, the U.S. Copyright Office had completed its periodic review and redesignated the existing MLC and Digital Licensee Coordinator to continue their statutory roles.[9]

But the MLC does not replace performance-rights organizations.

Public-performance rights in musical compositions are licensed through a different system. Organizations such as ASCAP, BMI, SESAC, and Global Music Rights license performance rights on behalf of songwriters, publishers, and other composition rightsholders, alongside direct licensing where applicable.[10]

An on-demand stream can therefore implicate a mechanical right in the composition and a public-performance right in the composition, in addition to the separate rights in the sound recording.

This is why saying “the songwriter gets the publishing royalty” is still too simple. The amount reaching an individual writer depends on ownership splits, publisher or administrator agreements, registrations, matching of usage data, and the particular rights involved.

The legal architecture is complicated because the song is not one economic pipe.

Sampling Makes the Two-Copyright System Visible

Sampling exposes the separation between composition and recording more clearly than almost anything else.

If a producer directly copies audio from an existing record, the use can implicate the copyright in the sound recording and the copyright in the underlying musical work. The U.S. Copyright Office emphasizes that these are distinct rights and that there is no universal rule saying a sample becomes free merely because it lasts less than a certain number of seconds. [11]

An interpolation is different. Instead of copying the original recording, the musician re-records material from the underlying composition. That avoids using the old master itself, but it does not necessarily avoid the composition right.[11]

This distinction matters economically. Clearing a sample may require negotiating with the owner of the sound recording and the owner or administrator of the composition. Those parties may be different companies. They may ask for different forms of compensation. They may say yes, no, or not at that price.

Sampling therefore makes a general truth visible: whoever owns the rights can decide whether a new use is licensed and on what terms.

U.S. courts have also refused to produce one perfectly simple rule for every sample. *Grand Upright Music v. Warner Bros. Records* in 1991 helped establish a much stricter industry climate around uncleared commercial sampling. *Bridgeport Music v. Dimension Films* later adopted an especially strict rule for sound-recording sampling in the Sixth Circuit. In 2016, the Ninth Circuit rejected that approach in *VMG Salsoul v. Ciccone*

and held that the de minimis doctrine could apply to a claimed 0.23-second sound-recording sample.[12][13][14]

The practical lesson is not “under X seconds is legal.” There is no such universal safe number. The right involved, the jurisdiction, the amount and importance taken, licensing, and possible defenses all matter.

Copyright protects creative property. But the person controlling that property is not always the person who originally created it.

That is why master and publishing ownership matter far beyond royalty percentages. Ownership determines who can authorize, refuse, negotiate, and price reuse.

The Third Layer: Performers

The word artist hides another set of differences.

A featured singer, a session musician, a songwriter, a producer, and the owner of the master can all contribute to the same recording without having the same legal rights or payment routes.

The United States makes this especially visible because sound-recording public-performance rights depend heavily on the transmission.

For eligible noninteractive digital services — services that function more like radio than on-demand selection — the statutory license administered by SoundExchange can apply. SoundExchange says the statutory digital-performance royalties it collects are divided 50 percent to the sound-recording copyright owner, 45 percent directly to featured artists, and 5 percent to funds for nonfeatured performers.[15]

That direct featured-artist payment is important because it is not the ordinary path for an on-demand Spotify stream.

Interactive services generally need direct authority for the sound-recording performance rather than relying on the SoundExchange statutory license. On those services, recording-side money usually reaches the artist through the master rightsholder, label, distributor, or other licensor under the relevant agreement.[16]

Terrestrial AM/FM radio adds another American peculiarity. U.S. copyright law gives musical compositions a public-performance right, but the public-performance right in sound recordings is limited to digital audio transmissions. AM/FM broadcasters therefore license composition performance rights, while the United States still lacks a general federal sound-recording performance royalty for ordinary terrestrial broadcasts.[2]

The same recording can therefore produce different payment paths depending on how it is heard.

That is why “performer royalties” cannot be treated as one universal category.

Why “Price Per Stream” Is the Wrong Question

Tables comparing “what Spotify pays per stream” with “what Apple Music pays per stream” circulate constantly.

They can produce a rough historical average by dividing some total amount of money by some number of streams. What they do not produce is a retail price attached to each play.

Spotify explicitly says it does not pay a fixed per-stream rate. Its recording royalties are based on streamshare within the relevant market and period, and the value of the pool changes with subscription revenue, advertising revenue, country, plan

mix, and other factors. The rightsholder then pays the artist according to the artist’s agreement.[1]

The publishing side introduces another set of formulas and institutions. Under the current Phonorecords IV rules for 2023 through 2027, the headline statutory mechanical rate for most digital phonorecords, including interactive streams, rises from 15.1 percent to 15.35 percent of revenue across the period — but the regulations also use alternative calculations and minimums, including Total Content Cost and per-subscriber elements.[17]

That does not mean “songwriters get 15.35 percent of Spotify.” It means the covered mechanical royalty is governed by a rate structure whose calculation is more complicated than a fixed number attached to one play.

Even if we knew exactly what the service paid for one category of rights, we would still not know what one musician received after ownership splits, contracts, commissions, recoupment, and collaborators.

A stream is a real unit of use. It is not a unit price.

A Growing Market Does Not Mean Every Artist Earns More

Streaming helped rebuild a growing recorded-music business.

RIAA’s 2025 report confirms that streaming now supplies the large majority of U.S. wholesale recorded-music revenue.[18]

Spotify, for its part, says it paid more than \$11 billion to the global music industry in 2025. The company also reports that more than 13,800 artists generated at least \$100,000 in Spotify royalties that year.[19]

Those numbers demonstrate that streaming can generate substantial economic value.

They do not tell us what those artists personally took home.

Spotify's figures measure royalties generated for rightsholders associated with an artist's catalog. The money may still be divided among labels, distributors, publishers, songwriters, collaborators, band members, or other contractual participants. And the figures do not tell us how many artists pursued professional careers while remaining far below those thresholds.

Two opposite claims are therefore equally misleading.

"Artists make nothing from streaming" ignores a large and growing royalty economy.

"Streaming works because thousands of artists generate six figures" ignores the denominator, ownership structure, costs, and contractual splits.

Aggregate market health and individual career health are related. They are not the same measurement.

A Career Has More Than One Revenue Stream

Even for full-time musicians, streaming is often only one part of the business.

Income can come from live performance, physical sales, downloads, streaming, songwriting, publishing, synchronization, merchandise, direct-to-fan sales, memberships, crowdfunding, production, beat licensing, session work, commissions, teaching, brand partnerships, and other activities.

The mixture varies radically.

A songwriter may earn primarily from compositions recorded by other performers. A touring band may rely heavily on tickets and merchandise. A producer may sell beats, collect producer royalties, and co-write. A self-releasing artist may keep

a larger percentage of recording income while personally financing recording and promotion. A heavily streamed performer may have a contract that leaves a much smaller share of the master income.

There is no single business model called “the musician.”

Live Is Not Automatically the Answer

When streaming pay is criticized, one response appears repeatedly: artists should make their money on the road.

Live performance can absolutely be central to a career. But touring is not a machine that converts audience into profit without costs.

Transportation, lodging, crew, rehearsal, equipment, production, insurance, agents, promoters, venue costs, commissions, taxes, and time all sit between gross ticket sales and personal income.

The venues and promoters on the other side of the deal face their own economics. The National Independent Venue Association’s 2025 State of Live study, based on the independent U.S. live sector and conducted with TEconomy Partners, reported that 64 percent of independent stages were not profitable in 2024. The study also reported that 31 percent of their expenses went directly to artist and booking fees.[20]

NIVA is an industry association, and the study should be read with that institutional position in mind. But it is strong evidence against the simplistic idea that live performance is automatically high-margin money waiting to replace streaming income.

A sold-out room can be a profitable business, a break-even investment in audience development, or a financial loss.

Gross is not net.

The Contract Can Matter as Much as the Hit

Public success is measured with visible numbers: streams, views, chart positions, sold-out dates, certifications.

Private economics are determined by less visible numbers.

Who owns the master? Who owns the composition? Who receives the payment first? What percentage is owed to collaborators? Is an advance unrecouped? Which costs are recoupable? Is the artist signed through a production company? How long does a license last? Does a deal include touring or merchandise? Who controls synchronization? Who pays for marketing?

Two careers with the same public metrics can therefore produce completely different private results.

One artist owns masters and compositions. Another owns neither. One artist is solo. Another divides income among four band members. One paid for the record personally. Another received an advance. One pays a distributor a service fee. Another works under a traditional royalty agreement.

The public sees the hit.

The contract decides what part of the hit belongs to whom.

Allocation Rules Are Designed, Not Natural

Royalty systems can feel like laws of nature because they are complicated and largely invisible.

They are not.

Some rules come from contracts. Some come from copyright statutes. Some are set through regulatory or judicial processes. Some are designed by platforms.

The section 115 mechanical rate is one example. Copyright Royalty Judges set rates and terms for the compulsory license, and the current Phonorecords IV period applies from 2023 through 2027.[17]

The SoundExchange split is another. The 50/45/5 allocation for eligible statutory digital sound-recording performance royalties is a policy choice embedded in law, not a physical property of a stream.[15]

These systems can be changed.

Changing them does not create money from nowhere. Different rules can shift value between services, labels, publishers, songwriters, performers, and other rightsholders. That is why rate-setting and allocation fights matter so much: they determine how a common pool of economic value is divided.

Fraud and Artificial Abundance

Any system that distributes money partly according to measured listening creates an incentive to manufacture listening.

Bots, fake accounts, artificial playlists, identity manipulation, and mass-produced content can be used to make streams appear to come from real demand.

In March 2026, Michael Smith pleaded guilty in federal court to conspiracy to commit wire fraud in a scheme that used hundreds of thousands of AI-generated songs and automated bot accounts to create billions of fraudulent streams. Federal prosecutors said the scheme obtained more than \$8 million in royalties, and Smith agreed to forfeit \$8,091,843.64.[21]

This case matters for more than its novelty.

Streaming royalties are allocated from finite pools. Fraudulent activity does not merely generate a fake popularity number. It can divert money that would otherwise be distributed on the basis of legitimate listening.

Artificial abundance therefore creates an accounting problem as well as a cultural one.

If the cost of producing and uploading tracks approaches zero, platforms and rightsholders need reliable ways to distinguish legitimate creation and listening from systems designed primarily to extract money from the royalty mechanism.

We will return to AI later. For now, the economic point is enough: once attention becomes money, fake attention becomes financially valuable.

What “Making a Living From Music” Actually Means

The phrase sounds simple. It describes very different realities.

One musician may live entirely from recordings and compositions. Another combines touring, teaching, sessions, and royalties. Another earns little from a solo project but a stable income producing other artists. Another generates impressive gross revenue while facing high touring costs and multiple contractual splits.

So several numbers have to remain separate:

royalties generated;

gross project revenue;

business expenses;

profit;

personal royalty income;

salary or draw;
taxes;
and disposable income.

That distinction is not accounting for its own sake. It changes how we evaluate a career.

A million streams can be an important achievement. It still does not tell us whether the musician can pay rent.

What the Industry Is Paying For

Asking where the money goes eventually leads to a deeper question: what is the music industry actually paying for?

It pays for creative rights, performances, capital, recording, production, distribution, publishing administration, promotion, audience access, risk, data infrastructure, touring, and the commercial exploitation of intellectual property.

Those contributions are not equally visible.

The listener mostly sees the artist name and the song title. Behind that screen is a contractual and legal architecture that decides who can license the recording, who can license the song, who collects which right, who is paid directly, who must wait for a rightsholder to account, and who owns the asset after the campaign is over.

Understanding that architecture helps us avoid two opposite caricatures.

Intermediaries are not automatically parasites. Financing, distribution, administration, promotion, and rights management can create real value.

But market growth does not prove that every division of value is fair or efficient. Rights can be concentrated. Contracts can be opaque. Bargaining power can be unequal. And rules

that look technical can determine who is paid first and who is paid last.

The money follows the structure.

And structure can influence art. When an industry rewards particular patterns of listening, release strategies, formats, and forms of engagement, creators can respond to those incentives.

That leads to a more difficult question.

Did the music change — or did the way we listen change first?

Notes

[1] Spotify for Artists, “Royalties Guide.” Spotify states that it pays recording and publishing rightsholders, that royalties are based on streamshare rather than a fixed per-stream rate, and that roughly two-thirds of its music revenue is allocated to recording and publishing royalties.

<https://artists.spotify.com/royalties-guide>

[2] U.S. Copyright Office, “Musical Compositions and Sound Recordings” and Circular 56A. Musical works and sound recordings are separate copyright-protected works with different rights. The public-performance right in sound recordings is limited to digital audio transmissions.

<https://www.copyright.gov/register/pa-sr.html> ;

<https://www.copyright.gov/circs/circ56a.pdf>

[3] Richard Pawelczyk, “Recording Contracts Decoded: What Musicians Should Know Before Signing,” American Bar Association, 2025. Secondary legal overview used for contractual structure, not as a claim that one set of terms is universal.

<https://www.americanbar.org/groups/gpsolo/resources/magazine/2025-nov-dec/recording-contracts-decoded-what-musicians-should-know-signing/>

[4] U.S. Copyright Office, Copyright and the Music Marketplace, 2015/2016 corrected edition. The report discusses advances, direct licensing, transparency, breakage, and the extent to which creator payments depend on agreements with labels and publishers.

<https://www.copyright.gov/policy/musiclicensingstudy/>

[5] Los Angeles Times, “Group Tops Charts but Claims Bankruptcy,” May 28, 1996, and subsequent reporting on TLC’s contract dispute. Historical case used

to illustrate the difference between public sales success and private contractual economics. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-05-28-mn-9230-story.html>

[6] Los Angeles Times, reporting on Prince’s Warner Bros. dispute and later control of his masters. Historical case used as an example of master/control conflict, not as a model of all label relationships.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/posts/la-et-ms-prince-imaginative-legacy-music-business-20160422-story.html>

[7] Music Business Worldwide reporting Luminate’s H1 2024 U.S. distribution data: 43 of 46 tracks with more than one billion U.S. on-demand audio streams were distributed through Universal, Sony, or Warner; independent distribution held larger shares in lower streaming tiers. Trade reporting of Luminate data, not a complete current market-share measure.

<https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/indies-are-nibbling-into-the-majors-global-market-share-after-believe-saga-how-might-warner-music-group-respond/>

[8] U.S. Copyright Office, “Music Licensing Modernization — Section 115 / Musical Works Modernization Act.” The MMA created a blanket section 115 licensing system for digital music providers making digital phonorecord deliveries, including interactive streams, and established the MLC to administer it. <https://www.copyright.gov/music-modernization/115/>

[9] U.S. Copyright Office, NewsNet Issue 1087, June 3, 2026. The Copyright Office continued the designations of the existing Mechanical Licensing Collective and Digital Licensee Coordinator after its periodic review.

<https://www.copyright.gov/newsnet/2026/1087.html>

[10] U.S. Copyright Office, “How Songwriters, Composers, and Performers Get Paid.” The Office explains that PROs license musical-work public-performance rights, identifies ASCAP, BMI, SESAC, and GMR as commonly used U.S. PROs, and distinguishes that function from the MLC’s digital mechanical-royalty role. <https://www.copyright.gov/music-modernization/educational-materials/musicians-income.pdf>

[11] U.S. Copyright Office, “Sampling, Interpolations, Beat Stores and More: An Introduction for Musicians Using Preexisting Music,” and “What Musicians Should Know about Copyright.” The Office distinguishes sampling of actual recorded audio from interpolation and warns that there is no hard-and-fast minimum amount that is automatically free to use.

<https://www.copyright.gov/music-modernization/educational-materials/>

Sampling-Interpolations-Beat-Stores-and-More-An-Introduction-for-Musicians-Using-Preexisting.pdf ; <https://copyright.gov/engage/musicians/>

[12] Grand Upright Music Ltd. v. Warner Bros. Records, Inc., 780 F. Supp. 182 (S.D.N.Y. 1991).

<https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/780/182/1445286/>

[13] Bridgeport Music, Inc. v. Dimension Films, 410 F.3d 792 (6th Cir. 2005).

<https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F3/401/647/551588/>

[14] VMG Salsoul, LLC v. Ciccone, 824 F.3d 871 (9th Cir. 2016).

<https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/ca9/13-57104/13-57104-2016-06-02.html>

[15] SoundExchange, “Digital Performance Royalties.” SoundExchange states that eligible statutory digital-performance royalties are allocated 50% to the sound-recording rightsholder, 45% directly to featured artists, and 5% to a fund for nonfeatured performers. <https://www.soundexchange.com/digital-performance-royalties/>

[16] SoundExchange, “Licensing 101.” The section 114 statutory license applies to qualifying noninteractive digital services; interactive/on-demand services require direct licensing of the sound-recording right.

<https://www.soundexchange.com/service-provider/licensing-101/>

[17] Copyright Royalty Board, Phonorecords IV rates and terms for 2023–2027. The headline rate for most digital phonorecords, including interactive streams, rises from 15.1% to 15.35% of revenue across the term, with alternative calculations and minimums also applying.

<https://www.crb.gov/announcements/>

[18] Recording Industry Association of America, RIAA Year-End Recorded Music Revenue Report '25. U.S. wholesale recorded-music revenue: \$11.535 billion; streaming revenue: \$9.475 billion.

<https://www.riaa.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/RIAA-Year-End-Revenue-2025.pdf>

[19] Spotify, Loud & Clear 2026 / March 11, 2026 summary. Spotify says it paid more than \$11 billion to the music industry in 2025 and that more than 13,800 artists generated at least \$100,000 in Spotify royalties. These are company figures for royalties generated, not audited personal net income for individual artists. <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2026-03-11/loud-and-clear-music-economics-highlights/>

[20] National Independent Venue Association, State of Live, released June 23, 2025, covering 2024. NIVA reports that 64% of independent stages were not

profitable and that 31% of expenses went directly to artists and booking fees. Industry-association research conducted with TEconomy Partners.
<https://www.nivassoc.org/stateoflive>

[21] U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, "North Carolina Man Pleads Guilty To Music Streaming Fraud Aided By Artificial Intelligence," March 19, 2026. Michael Smith pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud; prosecutors said the bot/AI scheme generated more than \$8 million in royalties, and Smith agreed to \$8,091,843.64 in forfeiture. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/north-carolina-man-pleads-guilty-music-streaming-fraud-aided-artificial-intelligence-0>

CHAPTER 5 — DID MUSIC CHANGE, OR DID THE WAY WE LISTEN CHANGE?

The Wrong Question: “Was Music Better Before?”

Whenever one generation compares the music of its youth with what comes after, the conversation can turn into a trial. Songs are supposedly simpler. Musicians are less skilled. Production is more artificial. Choruses repeat themselves too much. Listeners have shorter attention spans.

Those claims bundle together several different questions.

Music really does change. Production technology, distribution formats, business models, dominant genres, and compositional practices all evolve. But listeners change too. Age, memory, listening context, the amount of music available, and the way songs are discovered all shape judgment.

So two opposite mistakes have to be avoided. One is to dismiss every impression of change as nostalgia. The other is to measure a change — shorter songs, more repetitive lyrics, or lower melodic complexity under a particular metric — and then leap from “different” to “worse.”

This chapter will not try to answer an impossible question such as which decade made the best music. It will separate what can be measured from what remains a matter of taste, and ask how music and listening habits have changed together.

We Do Not Listen With Neutral Ears

The first bias is biographical.

Music heard during adolescence and early adulthood often leaves a disproportionate mark on later preferences. A study in *Marketing Letters* that revisited earlier work on musical

nostalgia found an average preference peak for music released when listeners were around seventeen years old.[1] The authors discuss important limits to generalization, but the result is enough to make one point clear: when we compare new music with the music of our youth, we are not comparing two neutral objects from outside our own history.

An older song may be attached to first experiences, friendships, parties, places, and a period when identity was still taking shape. A new song has to compete with that emotional archive without having had decades to acquire the same memories.

That does not mean every preference for older music is an illusion. Someone may genuinely prefer the harmony, writing, performance style, or sound of another era. Nostalgia simply makes it dangerous to turn a personal preference into a historical diagnosis.

There Is No Single Measure of Musical “Quality”

Calling one song “better” can mean many different things.

We might be talking about harmonic richness, melodic originality, rhythmic complexity, performance quality, sonic invention, the effectiveness of a hook, the coherence of an album, lyrical depth, emotional power, surprise, technical mastery, or simply pleasure.

Those criteria do not always move together.

A very simple song can be devastating. An extremely complex piece can be dull. Repetition can be empty or hypnotic. Three chords can support something forgettable or something extraordinary. A technically imperfect recording can carry an aesthetic force that a pristine production does not.

“Complexity” is therefore a particularly dangerous word. Complexity can be measured along specific dimensions. It is not a grade for artistic worth. If a study finds that one dimension of popular music has become simpler, that establishes a change in form — not an automatic decline in quality.

Are Songs Trying to Capture Attention Faster?

Some formal changes are measurable.

Hubert Léveillé Gauvin analyzed 303 singles that reached the U.S. Top 10 between 1986 and 2015, looking at features including song length, tempo, time before the first vocal entrance, and time before the song title was first mentioned.[2] The historical analysis found several shifts consistent with the logic of an attention economy: some features moved in the direction of getting to recognizable content faster.

What makes the study useful is that it also resists an easy causal story. In a second analysis, Gauvin compared sixty popular songs from 2015 with sixty less-popular songs by the same artists. Those comparisons did not support the idea that the same features systematically caused greater popularity.[2]

In other words, successful songs changed over time in ways compatible with an environment where a listener can skip instantly. But that does not prove that a shorter intro or an earlier title mention mechanically produces a hit.

A historical trend can be real without having one cause. Streaming, radio, genre evolution, production practice, audience taste, and imitation among artists can all contribute to the same movement.

Have Songs Become Shorter?

Song length provides another case in which popular intuition contains some truth without explaining the whole phenomenon.

A 2024 Washington Post analysis of Billboard Hot 100 songs found that average song length fell from more than four minutes around 1990 to roughly three minutes in the recent period, with substantial variation across decades and genres.[3] This is journalistic analysis rather than a causal academic study, but the chart history clearly shows a return toward shorter formats.

A recent academic study focused specifically on hip-hop found a similar change within its own corpus. Across the playlists it compared from 2002 and 2022, average track length fell from 4:19 to 3:03.[4] The object is narrower, which means the number should not be projected onto all music.

Why might songs get shorter? There are several plausible explanations.

Streaming counts plays and can create an economic incentive for songs that can be replayed more often in a fixed amount of time. Listeners also have an immediate skip button. Short-form video has familiarized part of the audience with extremely compressed forms. But music formats have never been independent of distribution technology. The capacity of physical media, radio programming, and the commercial single all shaped song length before streaming existed.

Streaming did not invent the idea that a medium can influence duration. It changed the constraints and made some behaviors more measurable.

Popular Melody Has Become Simpler Under Some Measures

The question becomes more delicate when we move into musical material itself.

In 2024, Madeline Hamilton and Marcus Pearce published an analysis of melodies drawn from U.S. charts between 1950 and

2023. They identified major change points around 1975 and 2000, with a smaller one around 1996. The broad pattern was a decline in melodic complexity alongside an increase in note density, especially after 2000.[5]

That matters. At least in this corpus of U.S. chart music, using the measures chosen by the researchers, popular melody changed in a statistically measurable way.

But the limits of the result matter just as much.

The study does not measure the total complexity of arrangements, rhythm, texture, sound design, production, lyrics, or performance. It does not cover all music being made. And it does not show that a less-complex melodic line is less expressive. A simple melody can sit on top of an intricate rhythmic or sonic architecture that a melodic-complexity metric will barely see.

The finding should therefore be kept as evidence of a real change in one dimension of mainstream popular melody, not as a verdict that music as a whole has become poorer.

When Complexity Moves Somewhere Else

A comparison can become biased before the first note is counted. If we compare a Bach fugue with a techno track using only chord count, modulation, and melodic length, the result is largely determined by the ruler we chose. Electronic dance music is being measured with dimensions that a major part of the European art-music tradition developed and theorized especially deeply.

The tonal system usually called Western common-practice tonality, dominant through much of European art music from roughly the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, is often described as a language strongly organized around pitch:

harmonic function, voice leading, counterpoint, cadence, modulation, and formal development.[10] That does not mean this music is rhythmically unsophisticated. Western notation itself contains a long history of complex rhythmic organization. The point is narrower: its theoretical apparatus has given extraordinary attention to pitch, harmony, and contrapuntal relation.

Other musical traditions place conspicuous forms of sophistication elsewhere.

Scholarship on African and African-diasporic music describes practices organized around rhythmic cycles, timelines, layering, syncopation, call-and-response, and close relations among music, movement, and participation. Samuel Floyd, Melanie Zeck, and Guthrie Ramsey trace transformations of African musical practice across the diaspora and describe rhythmic networks connecting Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas. [11] The Smithsonian likewise emphasizes that African American music cannot be separated from the transatlantic slave trade and the forced movement of African peoples, and that practices including call-and-response have African antecedents.[12]

Precision matters here. These are not biological properties of Black people, and there is no natural opposition between a supposedly “rhythmic Black music” and a supposedly “harmonic white music.” Racial categories do not compose music. People, traditions, institutions, technologies, and histories do.

Slavery, forced migration, colonial societies, and Atlantic circulation brought different musical practices into contact under conditions that were often violently unequal. Descendants of displaced populations preserved, transformed,

and hybridized ways of singing, playing, dancing, and organizing time. Those practices encountered European instruments, harmonic systems, commercial institutions, and Caribbean and Latin American traditions. The result was neither African music frozen intact nor European music simply “enriched,” but new cultures created through contact, struggle, adaptation, and invention.

Ragtime provides one documented example. The Library of Congress connects ragtime syncopation to African American and Afro-Caribbean practice, itself partly rooted in African rhythmic traditions.[13] In New Orleans, Smithsonian Folkways describes the polyrhythms, syncopations, and pulses heard at Congo Square as part of the rhythmic ground from which ragtime, brass-band music, jazz, rhythm and blues, and funk would develop.[14]

That history helps explain why the word groove feels so natural in discussions of many African American popular traditions. But groove should not be turned into an timeless racial essence either. Contemporary research generally uses the term for the pleasurable experience of music that makes people want to synchronize bodily movement with a pulse. Researchers identify possible ingredients including a stable beat, subdivision, syncopation, counter-rhythm, repetition, and microtiming.[15] Groove belongs to no race or people. Some traditions have nevertheless placed these temporal relationships near the center of practice and have profoundly shaped the popular musics that grew from them.

A large part of American popular music, and later global popular music, emerged from precisely these crossings. Blues, ragtime, jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, soul, funk, disco, and hip-hop are not a sequence of “Black musics”

replacing “white musics.” They are histories of circulation, appropriation, unequal power, and hybridization in which African American innovation has often been far greater than the economic and institutional power granted to its creators.

Electronic music adds another layer.

There is no single line running from classical music to techno. One branch of electronic history comes from European avant-garde practice: in 1948, Pierre Schaeffer began working with recorded sounds as compositional material and helped establish *musique concrète*.^[16] Another major line into electronic dance music runs through Black, Latino, and queer popular scenes. Scholarship on Chicago house places its emergence in queer Black and Latino dance spaces, while Detroit techno developed around Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson, drawing on funk, soul, local radio, and European electronic music.^[17]

Those lineages eventually meet inside many of the same machines: turntables, tape, drum machines, synthesizers, samplers, sequencers, and computers.

This is where the idea of complexity has to move.

A track may use two chords and a very short melody while building depth through interlocking rhythmic layers, syncopation, event placement, gradual changes in timbre, the relationship between kick and bass, spatialization, or almost imperceptible changes to a loop. Conversely, a harmonically sophisticated piece may use relatively regular rhythm.

Neither observation establishes a hierarchy of worth.

Experimental work on groove reinforces that caution. Syncopation has a measurable relationship with the desire to move, often peaking at intermediate levels of complexity: too

little surprise can feel flat, while too much irregularity can make the pulse difficult to grasp.[15] A pattern that looks simple on paper can therefore contain carefully shaped temporal tension.

But the opposite mistake has to be rejected as well.

Saying that “complexity moved” cannot become an excuse to call every minimal production sophisticated. A track can genuinely be simple harmonically, melodically, rhythmically, and timbrally at the same time. A generic loop, stock chord progression, and uniform quantization do not become deep merely because they were produced digitally.

The stronger conclusion is more demanding. When a study measures declining melodic complexity, it measures something real. It does not necessarily measure the total complexity of the work. A fuller description of musical richness would need several dimensions at once: melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, texture, form, performance, production, and the relation between sound and the body.

Modern popular music has not simply made every dimension simpler. It has also moved musical work into dimensions that older or narrower analytical tools may capture poorly.

Lyrics Have Changed Too

A 2024 Scientific Reports study analyzed 353,320 English-language songs across five genres and five decades. The researchers examined vocabulary, structure, repetition, readability, rhyme, and emotion.[6]

Across the corpus, lyrics tended to become simpler and more repetitive, though the size and direction of changes varied by genre. The authors found declines in several measures of lexical richness, a broad increase in repetition, and emotional shifts

toward lyrics that were more personal and, in several measures, more negative.[6]

Again, “simple” should remain descriptive.

Repetition can serve memory, rhythm, dance, hypnosis, ritual, or collective participation. High lexical diversity does not automatically make a better song lyric. But it would be equally artificial to deny the measured trend: in this corpus, some dimensions of lyrical complexity really did decrease.

The useful conclusion is not that lyrics became worse. It is that the linguistic form of popular song shifted, probably through a combination of changing genres, cultural practice, production, and listening habits.

The Sense of Homogenization Is Not Invented Out of Nothing

Earlier research also identified some long-term standardizing tendencies.

In 2012, Joan Serrà and colleagues analyzed more than 464,000 recordings from 1955 to 2010 using the Million Song Dataset. They found striking stability in many musical structures alongside three significant trends: a restriction in pitch transitions, homogenization of timbral palettes, and increasing loudness.[7]

The study is often reduced to a headline that “all music sounds the same now.” That is not what the authors found. Many features remained remarkably stable over more than half a century, while those specific dimensions moved in measurable directions.[7]

The more interesting result is that a musical culture can preserve much of its grammar while changing particular dimensions of variation, texture, and intensity.

We will return to loudness in the next chapter because it depends directly on mixing, mastering, and playback technology.

“Popular Music” Also Changes Because the Genre Mix Changes

Another statistical trap appears when we measure the average characteristics of all popular music and then attribute the change to what individual songwriters or producers are doing.

If the relative weight of genres changes, the overall average changes even if each genre keeps much of its own internal grammar.

Luminate’s U.S. streaming data makes that visible. R&B/Hip-Hop remained the largest core genre in U.S. on-demand audio streaming in 2024, with a 25.3 percent share, but its share had been declining as genres including Latin and Country gained ground.[8] The following year brought further movement, and Luminate continued to report different growth patterns by genre.

The exact percentages are less important here than the structural point. A market in which R&B/Hip-Hop, rock, pop, country, Latin, dance/electronic, and other genres change relative weight will also change its average melodic, rhythmic, lyrical, and production characteristics.

Hip-hop can organize melody, repetition, rhythm, verse length, voice, and verbal density differently from a pop ballad, metal track, country song, or electronic dance record. A shift in “popular music” can therefore be partly an internal change within songs and partly a change in which genres occupy the center of the market.

The Album Did Not Disappear, but Listening Is Organized Differently

Streaming also changes the unit of consumption.

With a physical record, choosing an album often means encountering a set of tracks already grouped and sequenced together. On a platform, each track can be separated, placed in a playlist, recommended independently, discovered in a video, or played without the listener ever opening the album page.

That does not kill the album. Many artists still treat it as a central form. Many listeners still hear records front to back. Vinyl retains cultural value precisely in part because it foregrounds the object and sequence. But the platform no longer forces every listener to encounter songs in the order chosen by the artist.

The individual track therefore gains another degree of independence from its original context. That is freedom for the listener. It can also create pressure for every track to work on its own.

We Listen More, but Not Always in the Same Way

Listening habits have changed too.

IFPI's global Engaging With Music 2023 survey estimated that respondents in its main markets spent an average of 20.7 hours per week listening to music, an increase from the previous year. Respondents used more than seven different methods on average to listen to or otherwise engage with music, including audio streaming, video, radio, purchased music, live music, and other formats.[9]

These are music-industry survey data, but they make an important point: the streaming era is not simply an era in which people listen to less music.

Music is woven into more parts of the day and more kinds of activity. It accompanies commuting, work, exercise, games, videos, meals, social feeds, and downtime.

That ubiquity creates several kinds of listening.

A person can listen closely to an album on headphones, let a playlist run in the background, recognize a song in a few seconds of video, skip after ten seconds, replay one track a hundred times, or use music as the sonic environment for another task.

So “audience attention” is not one thing. Background listening and analytical listening are both listening, but they ask different things of a work.

Music Changes Because Listening Changes — and Listening Changes Because Music Changes

Looking for one cause would be a mistake.

Platforms make skipping instantaneous. That can reward faster openings. Songs built to establish a vocal or hook quickly can in turn train listeners to expect those elements sooner. Producers observe behavior and adapt some choices. Listeners then encounter more music built that way.

Similar loops can form around duration, release strategy, chorus placement, collaborations, or production style.

This is not a platform mechanically imposing a form on passive artists. It is a feedback loop among technology, economics, creation, and habit.

Radio already produced loops of this kind. Singles had practical durations. Programmers preferred certain formats. Artists and labels learned those constraints. Listeners became familiar with the resulting forms. Streaming accelerates the

feedback and measures more of it, but it did not invent the principle.

So Has Music Become Poorer?

The most rigorous answer is that several dimensions of mainstream popular music have simplified or homogenized in measurable ways, while other dimensions have shifted, grown denser, or simply fall outside the measures used by those studies.

We can say that melodies in the chart corpus studied by Hamilton and Pearce became statistically less complex under their measures. We can say that lyrics in very large English-language corpora became more repetitive and simpler under several metrics. We can say that song duration and the speed with which many hits establish recognizable material have changed. We can say that some timbral characteristics became more homogeneous and that recorded loudness increased over the period studied by Serrà and colleagues.

We cannot turn those findings into a scientific sentence that says, “modern music is worse.”

Artistic quality is not reducible to those dimensions. Genres, audiences, and corpora differ. Rhythm, groove, timbre, production, texture, performance, and cultural function can contain forms of organization not captured by a melodic or lexical metric. And the listener making the judgment brings a personal history into the comparison.

The deeper transformation is more interesting than a decline narrative.

Contemporary popular music is created in an environment where music is instantly accessible, instantly skippable, continuously measured, mixed with other forms of content, and

heard in an unprecedented range of contexts. It would be surprising if musical form stayed exactly the same.

And the transformation is not only in composition.

It is in the sound itself.

Why do modern records sometimes seem louder, denser, cleaner, more compressed, or more artificial? What actually comes from mixing and mastering — and what belongs to mythology about modern production?

That is the question of the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 6 — WHY RECORDS DON'T SOUND THE SAME ANYMORE

A Record Is More Than the Sound of the Musicians

Compare a recording from the 1960s, an album from the 1990s, and a current production and you are obviously hearing different musicians. You are also hearing different microphones, rooms, consoles, tape machines, converters, software, mixing decisions, and playback systems.

A recording is never a neutral window onto a performance.

The interpretation begins with microphone choice and placement. Add compression, change the equalization, choose a reverb, edit two takes together, or correct a pitch and the result changes again. A record is therefore both a trace of performance and a technical construction.

None of that began with the computer. Magnetic tape could already be cut, spliced, assembled, and manipulated. Analog studios used EQ, compression, saturation, echo chambers, tape effects, and a long list of other processing tools. What digital production changed most dramatically was access, precision, repeatability, and the scale on which transformation became possible.

The Studio Moved Into the Computer

For much of recording history, making a professional record required access to scarce and expensive infrastructure. Consoles, multitrack tape machines, outboard gear, large rooms, maintenance, and specialized staff represented substantial capital.

Digital audio workstations — DAWs — moved a large part of that infrastructure into software.

Andrew Leyshon described the rise of cheaper digital recording systems and easier programming protocols as a profound change in the recording-studio sector. Capabilities that had once been available mainly through professional facilities became accessible to independent musicians and producers.[1]

That shift genuinely broadened access to production. A bedroom, a laptop, an audio interface, a few microphones, and software can now be enough to produce a technically releasable recording.

But “democratization” needs a qualifier. Researchers have pointed out that owning the software does not mean having the same skill, time, acoustics, professional network, monitoring environment, or equipment as a major studio.[2] Access to tools flattened much more than access to every possible result.

The home studio did not simply replace the professional studio. It created a continuum, from a bedroom demo to an international release assembled across multiple homes, laptops, project rooms, and high-end facilities.

Mixing: Organizing What Has Already Been Recorded

“Mixing” is often used casually to mean everything that makes a track sound professional. In practice, it describes a more specific stage.

Once the tracks exist, a mix organizes their relationships.

Levels have to be balanced. Elements can be placed across the stereo field. Frequencies can be shaped so instruments do not mask one another. Dynamics can be controlled. Reverbs and delays create or simulate spaces. Automation changes parameters over time. Vocals, drums, bass, and other elements can be processed so that they coexist inside one sonic image.

Mixing can be almost invisible or become a major part of the composition.

A naturally recorded drum kit can remain largely intact. The same kit can be edited, reinforced with samples, heavily compressed, filtered, saturated, and placed inside an artificial acoustic space. Both are mixing. They simply serve different aesthetics.

That matters when comparing eras. A record that sounds “raw” is not necessarily less worked on. Rawness can be the result of a different kind of work.

Mastering: Finishing the Record, Not Repairing It

Mastering usually comes after mixing.

It works on the finished result — often a stereo mix — to manage overall tonal balance, consistency across tracks, perceived level, peaks, technical delivery requirements, and translation across formats and playback systems.

It is a finishing and quality-control stage, not a magic repair tool.

Mastering can improve how a record translates from one system to another, make small tonal adjustments, manage peak level, or preserve a coherent relationship among songs on an album. It cannot easily rescue a vocal buried under a guitar once both have been collapsed into the same stereo mix, and it cannot invent a performance that was never recorded.

The common idea that “mastering makes it powerful” or “mastering makes it professional” therefore puts too much responsibility on the last stage. The final sound comes from the entire chain: arrangement, performance, recording, editing, mixing, and only then mastering.

Editing Is No Longer an Exceptional Intervention

Digital production radically lowered the cost of editing.

On tape, changing a performance could require a physical cut. In a DAW, a syllable can be moved, a snare aligned, a chorus copied, a breath chosen, or ten vocal takes combined with extremely fine precision and without an obvious audible seam.

That does not mean modern recordings are necessarily fake.

It means the cost threshold for editing collapsed.

What once might have been reserved for major repairs can become continuous detail work. A vocal can be assembled word by word. A drum performance can be aligned to a grid. A note that lands slightly late can be moved without asking the player to perform the passage again.

The existence of that possibility can change expectations. An irregularity that would once have been accepted may now be corrected simply because correction is easy.

But possibility is not obligation. Some producers use digital tools precisely to preserve long, imperfect takes. Others use them to construct performances that could never exist in exactly the same form on a stage.

Cut, Loop, Quantize: When the Studio Writes Time

Digital editing does more than repair performances. It can rebuild musical time itself.

The idea predates the personal computer. In 1948, Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète* treated recorded sound as compositional material. A train, an object, or a musical fragment could be fixed, repeated, transposed, juxtaposed, and removed from its original context.[8] The break was conceptual as well as

technical: recorded sound was no longer only an event to preserve. It could become material to cut apart and rearrange.

Hip-hop moved that idea in another direction. In the Bronx in the 1970s, early DJs used two turntables to extend the instrumental breaks that generated the strongest response on the dance floor. The Library of Congress describes Kool Herc's use of two turntables to keep the break going as one of the foundational gestures of hip-hop.[9] A commercial record, supposedly a finished product, became an instrument and a reservoir of reusable time.

The sampler detached that operation from the turntable. A sound could be isolated, triggered, repeated, shifted, sped up, slowed down, or layered. Sequencers placed those events on grids. DAWs made the operations nearly unlimited.

What might crudely be called "chopping music" therefore includes several very different acts.

A performance can be cut to remove mistakes. It can also be cut to create a structure that no musician ever performed continuously.

A bar can be repeated because the producer has nothing else to say. Or a loop can become the center of a composition whose interest lies in tiny changes: one percussion hit disappears, an accent moves, a filter opens, a texture arrives, the low end changes, the stereo space shifts.

A player can be quantized because the timing is weak. Or a rhythm can be programmed with a degree of precision that no human ensemble would reproduce in exactly the same way twice.

Quantization deserves special attention. In its simplest form, it moves musical events closer to a timing grid. Used without

judgment, it can erase expressive timing, standardize attacks, and make every event feel as though it falls in the same place. But the claim that living groove necessarily requires notes to be “late” or “early” is too simple.

Experimental research on groove shows that pulse, event density, and especially syncopation can strongly affect the desire to move.[10] The role of microtiming — deviations of a few milliseconds around the grid — is less straightforward. Several experiments do not find that increasing those deviations automatically increases groove. Under some conditions, fully quantized versions and versions retaining original expert microtiming receive similar groove ratings, while exaggerated deviations can make the groove worse.[11]

That does not mean human timing is irrelevant. It means groove is not simply another word for imprecision.

A producer can quantize one layer and offset another. A sequencer can add swing, vary velocity, shift selected events, combine conflicting subdivisions, or preserve the timing of a sampled break. The grid does not require rigidity. It provides a reference against which exactness, displacement, and instability can all be designed.

Loops also change how form can work.

A great deal of Western tonal analysis follows a journey: departure, tension, modulation, development, resolution. Many electronic and groove-based musics can organize experience differently. The main cycle remains stable while its interior evolves. The question is not always “which chord are we moving toward?” It can be “what is changing inside this cycle?”

That can sound impoverished if harmony and melody are the only things being tracked. But attention may instead move

toward texture, spectrum, rhythmic placement, dynamics, spatial movement, and the interaction among layers.

Digital tools can also make standardization easier. Libraries place the same loops, samples, presets, drum sounds, and sometimes harmonic templates in front of millions of users. A DAW makes exact duplication of four or eight bars effortless. Automatic correction can erase differences that might once have become part of a player's identity.

So it would be as naïve to celebrate digital editing as pure liberation as it would be to condemn it as the destruction of music.

The same action — cut, copy, paste — can remove information or create it.

The same sequencer can produce a completely predictable beat or an architecture no single body could perform.

The same repetition can be industrial filler or become the space in which listeners begin to notice increasingly fine differences.

The move from continuous performance to editable music is therefore less a disappearance of musicianship than a relocation of some of it. Work that once had to happen during the take can now be composed afterward, directly inside recorded time.

Auto-Tune: Invisible Correction and Audible Instrument

No tool symbolizes the argument about authenticity more effectively than pitch correction.

Auto-Tune entered commercial use in the late 1990s as a tool for correcting intonation. It can be subtle: a note that lands

slightly flat can be moved toward the intended pitch without the listener necessarily hearing an obvious effect.

It can also be pushed until the processing becomes part of the voice. Cher's "Believe" made the audible effect famous, and later R&B, hip-hop, pop, and especially trap turned extreme pitch correction into a recognizable timbre.

Catherine Provenzano emphasizes these two histories: pitch correction as hidden labor that smooths a performance, and pitch correction as an audible aesthetic sign.[3] Ben Duinker's more recent work goes further, arguing that in trap, extremely fast Auto-Tune can function as an instrument-like technology that shapes composition, timbre, and expression rather than merely repairing pitch.[4]

Saying that Auto-Tune "lets anyone sing" therefore collapses several different questions.

Software can alter intonation. It does not automatically create timbre, phrasing, rhythm, emotional delivery, presence, or identity. But it can move the boundary between performance and production, and it can make usable a take that might once have been rejected and recorded again.

The authenticity question is therefore less about whether technology exists than about what we believe a recording is supposed to preserve: an uncorrected performance, a refined performance, or a constructed sound work.

Compression Is More Than One Thing

"Compression" causes another common confusion because the word describes at least two very different processes.

Dynamic-range compression reduces the difference between louder and quieter moments or events. It can control a vocal,

bring a bass forward, add density to drums, or raise perceived level.

Data compression — MP3, AAC, and related codecs — reduces the amount of data needed to store or transmit audio.

Both can affect what we hear, but their mechanisms and purposes are different.

A record can be heavily compressed dynamically and still be delivered losslessly. A highly dynamic record can be encoded in a lossy format.

The Loudness War: Why Records Tried to Sound Louder

For decades, engineers and producers knew that, in a quick comparison, a slightly louder record could seem more impressive.

That competitive pressure contributed to what became known as the loudness war.

Joan Serrà and colleagues' large-scale analysis of recordings from 1955 through 2010 found a clear rise in average recorded loudness over time.[5] Their analysis does not show that every form of dynamic variation vanished, but it does document the long-term push toward louder masters.

To make a track feel louder without exceeding the digital ceiling, engineers can use compression and limiting to bring average level closer to peak level.

Pushed too far, that can flatten contrasts, soften transients, create distortion, or make long listening tiring. Used more moderately, it can simply create the density and impact the production is meant to have.

The problem is not compression itself. It is what the compression is asked to do.

Streaming Changed the Loudness Competition

Loudness normalization changed the incentive to make every master louder than the one before it.

The Audio Engineering Society recommends normalization practices for internet streaming and on-demand playback to reduce disruptive level jumps and improve consistency across content.[6]

The principle is simple. A service measures perceived loudness and adjusts playback gain.

Spotify's current artist guidance says it targets approximately -14 LUFS in its Normal setting. The service measures loudness at ingestion but applies the gain at playback rather than rewriting the submitted master. Louder masters can simply be turned down. Spotify also preserves relative track-to-track level when normalizing an album as an album, while tracks heard outside that album context can be adjusted individually.[7]

There is an important scope caveat. Spotify currently says its web player and some third-party devices do not use loudness normalization, so the playback behavior depends in part on where the listener hears the track.[7]

That changes the aesthetic calculation.

When two CDs were compared without normalization, making one master louder could create an immediate advantage. If a service turns that master down before playback, much of the competitive advantage disappears.

That does not mean the loudness war mechanically ended. Engineers may still want density, distortion, punch, saturation, or a particular texture independent of final playback level. But normalization weakens the incentive to sacrifice dynamic range solely to win a volume comparison.

Album or Isolated Track: Context Still Matters

Normalization can also be applied in different contexts.

The AES distinguishes track-based and album-oriented normalization strategies. An album can preserve intentional level differences between a quiet track and a loud track by applying a shared gain relationship. In a mixed playlist, tracks from unrelated productions can instead be brought closer to a common target.[6]

Spotify's current implementation follows that basic distinction: album playback can preserve the album's internal level relationships, while shuffled or cross-album listening can lead to track-level adjustment.[7]

The same master can therefore be heard inside an album where relative contrast is preserved or inside a playlist where its loudness is brought closer to music made under entirely different production conditions.

The distribution system still shapes perception even when the source file itself is unchanged.

Digital Does Not Necessarily Mean “Cold”

A familiar opposition describes analog as warm and alive and digital as cold and sterile.

The distinction grows from real technical experiences, but it easily turns into mythology.

Tape, transformers, certain preamps, consoles, and analog circuits can add saturation, harmonic distortion, noise, frequency coloration, nonlinear behavior, and practical limitations. Those characteristics can be aesthetically desirable.

Digital recording generally offers greater precision, repeatability, lower noise, and much easier editing. Software can also model or imitate many analog nonlinearities.

What listeners call “analog sound” is therefore often a bundle of particular behaviors, not a universal superiority of one medium over another.

A bad analog recording is still bad. A good digital recording can feel extremely alive. The more useful question is how the properties of each system are being used.

Playback Systems Shape What Producers Make

A record is never heard in a vacuum.

Large hi-fi speakers, car systems, Bluetooth speakers, earbuds, headphones, laptops, televisions, and phone speakers do not reproduce sound in the same way.

A mix intended for the real world has to survive those environments.

That can shape production decisions: controlling extreme low end, keeping vocals intelligible on small speakers, checking mono compatibility, managing peaks, or building a balance that still works at low playback volume.

This is not new. AM radio, jukeboxes, transistor radios, and car stereos shaped earlier production decisions. Smartphones and earbuds did not invent the idea of mixing for the playback environment. They added new dominant environments to the chain.

More Possibility Does Not Automatically Mean More Creativity

Digital production offers a staggering range of tools: virtual instruments, sample libraries, presets, synthesis, timing

correction, pitch correction, analog modeling, orchestral libraries, and thousands of plugins.

That abundance can be liberating.

One person can program a virtual orchestra, record a hundred tracks, create textures impossible in a traditional studio, and experiment without paying by the hour for a commercial room.

The same abundance can also encourage standardization when many producers reach for the same presets, sample packs, plugin chains, arrangement templates, or mix references.

The problem echoes the previous chapter. Easier access to tools does not determine what people will do with them.

Technology opens a space of possibility. Genre conventions, budgets, platforms, skills, communities, and taste determine which parts of that space are actually explored.

“Modern Sound” Is a Cluster of Choices, Not One Technology

When someone says a current record sounds “modern,” they may be hearing several things at once: more stable level, deeper low end, a closer vocal, more exact timing, pitch correction, tighter transients, controlled stereo width, digital effects, saturation, denser arrangements, or some combination of those traits.

None of them is mandatory.

A band can still be recorded nearly live with two microphones and minimal processing. A song can also be constructed for weeks from hundreds of tracks and thousands of edits.

The decisive difference from the early decades of recording is not that one machine called the computer took over. It is that

the range of available transformations became much larger, cheaper, faster, and easier to recall exactly.

Contemporary sound emerges from a system of possibilities, norms, and expectations.

Production Can Correct — but It Can Also Invent

It would be reductive to tell this whole history as the story of technology hiding weak musicianship.

The same tools that can correct a wrong note can create a timbre that did not exist before. The same grid that can stiffen a performance can support a groove no single player could execute. The same editor that can polish a take can become a compositional instrument.

Production is not merely the policing of imperfection.

For a large part of popular music, it has become an art practice in its own right.

The useful question is therefore not “is technology cheating?” It is “how much of this work do we understand as performance, how much as writing, and how much as sound construction?”

Different genres and artists can answer that question in radically different ways.

Why Records Don’t Sound the Same Anymore

Contemporary recordings sound different because the entire chain changed.

Recording tools became less scarce. Editing became nearly unlimited. Mix settings can be automated and recalled exactly. Pitch correction can disappear into the vocal or become the point of the vocal. Masters became louder during the loudness war, and streaming platforms introduced normalization.

Listeners move between headphones, cars, phones, smart speakers, albums, and playlists.

None of that is a pure victory or a pure decline.

The changes made possible new aesthetics and independent productions that would once have been financially impossible. They can also make overcorrection, standardization, and perfectionism easier.

The result still depends on human choices at every stage.

But a technically remarkable recording still has to reach a listener.

That leaves the next question: who actually decides what we hear?

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CHAPTER 7 — WHO DECIDES WHAT WE HEAR?

Selection Never Went Away

When a catalog contains tens or hundreds of millions of tracks, something has to decide what appears first.

Sometimes the decision is explicit. A radio programmer puts a song into rotation. A critic recommends an album. An editor places a track in a playlist. Sometimes the decision is automated: a system orders search results, chooses what follows the song you selected, or rearranges a home screen around your listening history. And sometimes the listener makes the choice directly by searching, building a playlist, following a link, or taking a recommendation from a friend.

Streaming did not abolish gatekeeping. It redistributed it.

The older music business depended more visibly on a handful of bottlenecks: labels, radio stations, retailers, press, television, promoters. The current system adds platforms that can organize an immense catalog continuously and personalize part of that organization for individual users.

So the useful question is not “Who controls music?” as though one institution sat at the center of the system. It is: which mechanisms make some music easier to encounter than other music, for which listeners, at what moment, and under what rules?

Radio Still Matters

Streaming can make terrestrial radio look like yesterday’s gatekeeper. In the United States, it is not.

Edison Research’s Share of Ear has documented a long decline in radio’s share of the total audio day as on-demand listening expanded, but AM/FM still occupied 36 percent of daily

audio time among Americans age thirteen and older in its 2024 ten-year comparison.[1] In Edison's 2024 Music Discovery Report, half of Americans age twelve and older who said keeping up with music mattered to them reported using AM/FM radio as a source for discovering music.[2] Nielsen and Edison data for 2026 likewise show radio retaining a large share of U.S. ad-supported audio listening.[3]

Those measures are not identical. One measures time, another reported discovery use, another the ad-supported audio environment. Together they make a narrower point: radio remains a large channel of exposure even after streaming became central to recorded-music consumption.

Radio also selects intensely because airtime is finite. A station cannot place every current release into meaningful rotation. Format, audience research, local strategy, network programming, label promotion, familiarity, advertiser considerations, and the judgment of programmers all help determine what receives repeated exposure.

That form of gatekeeping differs from personalized streaming. Radio often exposes many listeners in the same market to the same records at roughly the same time. A high-rotation song can therefore become part of a shared environment in a way that a highly individualized recommendation may not.

Payola: When Exposure Becomes the Hidden Consideration

Radio's power over attention has a particularly revealing commercial history in the United States: payola.

Under federal sponsorship-identification rules, the problem is not simply that promotion involves money. Advertising that is identified as advertising is different. Payola is the undisclosed

payment or other valuable consideration used to secure airplay while the resulting programming is presented as ordinary editorial content.[4]

The rule is not a relic of the 1950s. In 2010, a Univision subsidiary pleaded guilty in a federal case involving illegal cash payments to radio programmers and managers in exchange for increased airplay for recordings associated with the company's music business. The Justice Department described false invoices and contracts used to conceal the source and purpose of the money.[5]

The form of the consideration can also change. In February 2025, the FCC issued an enforcement advisory stating that stations and their personnel cannot compel or accept undisclosed free or reduced-fee artist performances in exchange for more favorable airplay. The advisory explicitly treats services and other valuable consideration, not just cash, as potentially relevant to payola rules.[4]

Later that month, the FCC chairman sent iHeartMedia a letter about its iHeartCountry Festival, asking how artists were compensated and whether participation might be tied to airplay. The letter was a request for information and a warning about compliance. It was not a finding that iHeartMedia had violated the law.[6] As of this edition, that letter should therefore be read as a regulatory inquiry, not as an adjudicated violation.

This distinction matters. Payola does not mean that every heavily played song bought its position. It shows why transparency matters whenever a gatekeeper can convert scarce exposure into economic consideration. If a listener believes a song was selected editorially when airplay was

actually part of an undisclosed exchange, the system is hiding one of the reasons the song became visible.

Playlists Took Over Part of the Shelf — and Part of the Program

On streaming services, selection often arrives in playlist form.

A playlist can organize a genre, mood, activity, moment of the day, cultural scene, release cycle, or individual taste. It can be built by a listener, an editorial team, an algorithm, or some combination of the three. The same word therefore describes very different mechanisms.

What playlists share is logistical power. Media scholar Maria Eriksson describes the editorial playlist as a kind of “container technology”: a package that assembles and moves music through the streaming economy.[7] The idea is useful because it shifts attention away from the romantic image of the playlist as merely a mixtape. A major playlist is also infrastructure for distributing attention.

Placement can matter at several levels. Getting into a high-traffic playlist may expose a song to listeners who would never have searched for it. Appearing near the top can matter because many listeners do not reach the bottom. Staying in the list can matter because repeated exposure creates more opportunities for saves, replays, follows, and other signals.

That does not mean a playlist placement mechanically creates a hit. It means the playlist changes the set of opportunities a song receives to be heard.

Human or Algorithm? Usually Both

Public discussion often divides curation into two eras: humans used to choose music; algorithms choose it now.

Streaming platforms are more hybrid than that.

Tiziano Bonini and Alessandro Gandini's ethnographic work on music curation describes "algo-torial" gatekeeping: editorial judgment and algorithmic systems are intertwined rather than cleanly separated.[8] The balance varies by surface and platform, but data and human selection can feed one another.

Spotify's own descriptions point in the same direction. Its editorial teams monitor musical and cultural trends, while personalization systems use signals such as listening, skips, saves, playlist adds, and engagement. Spotify also says editorial knowledge can help inform machine-driven discovery rather than operating as an entirely separate layer.[9]

A track might be picked by an editor, generate strong listener response, and then receive more algorithmic exposure. An algorithmic surface might reveal unusual momentum that an editorial team notices later. Popularity itself can become an input to recommendation. The process is a loop.

Recognizing that loop prevents a common mistake: attributing every outcome to a mysterious machine. Recommendation systems are technical, but they are built inside products with editorial policies, business goals, interface designs, safety rules, data definitions, and human decisions about what should be measured.

The Interface Is Already a Curator

Gatekeeping begins before any song is actively recommended.

It begins in the architecture of the interface.

What occupies the top of the home screen? How many search results appear before a user has to scroll? Which genres exist as browse categories? Which playlists receive large visual

modules? When does autoplay begin? What does a search box suggest before the listener has finished typing? Which controls make it easy to ask for novelty, familiarity, a mood, or a specific artist?

These design choices are easy to treat as neutral because they look like the background of the service. They are not neutral in their effects. They create easier and harder paths through the catalog.

Robert Prey uses the term “curatorial power” to describe the capacity of a platform to advance interests and shape outcomes by organizing and programming content across the markets in which it operates.[10] The point is not that every interface decision is manipulative. It is that a nearly infinite catalog cannot be presented without structure, and structure always changes which encounters are likely.

Charts Are Rules, Not Mirrors

Charts look like simple answers to a simple question: what are the most popular songs this week?

The answer depends on the measurement rules.

The Billboard Hot 100 currently combines U.S. streaming activity tracked by Luminate, radio-airplay audience impressions measured by Luminate, and sales data compiled by Luminate.[11] That makes the chart a composite measure of several forms of consumption and exposure rather than a direct count of one behavior.

There is nothing inherently illegitimate about that. Different forms of music consumption have to be combined somehow if one chart is meant to summarize them. But the resulting ranking is not a natural object that exists before the methodology. It is produced by decisions about what counts,

what sources are eligible, how different inputs are combined, how fraud is treated, and how the underlying data are collected.

Charts then feed back into the system they measure. A charting song may receive press coverage, playlist placement, radio attention, social proof, or greater visibility inside stores and services. Measurement can become promotion.

This is another reason the industry is full of loops rather than one-way causes.

Recommendation Can Contain Commercial Signals

Recommendation is not purely a question of predicting taste. It also exists inside businesses.

Spotify's Discovery Mode makes that visible. As described earlier, eligible artists and teams can select songs as an additional signal in certain personalized recommendation contexts; Spotify does not guarantee placement and takes a commission from recording royalties generated by streams in those contexts.[12]

That arrangement does not mean that every recommendation is purchased. It means that a recommendation system can incorporate a commercial signal alongside listener behavior, editorial judgment, popularity, contextual relevance, and other inputs.

That matters because the boundary between recommendation and promotion can become porous. The platform may simultaneously be distributor, recommender, advertising environment, data provider, and promotional tool.

The right question is therefore not "Are recommendations commercial?" or "Are recommendations organic?" as if the two categories never overlap. It is which signals enter which

surfaces, how they are disclosed, and what incentives they create.

Do Platforms Systematically Favor the Biggest Players?

The suspicion is understandable. The evidence is more complicated.

Research using the Last.fm LFM-1b dataset has found popularity bias in several recommendation algorithms, with users whose tastes were least mainstream receiving less accurate recommendations under the tested models.[13] But another study that tested recommendation models and then simulated users on Spotify, Amazon Music, and YouTube did not find comparable evidence of popularity bias in the commercial recommendations it observed under that protocol.[14]

Editorial playlists complicate the story further. Luis Aguiar, Joel Waldfogel, and Sarah Waldfogel studied Spotify's New Music Friday rankings in twenty-six countries during 2017. In that specific setting, their outcome-based analysis found that independent-label music received rankings more favorable than its later streaming performance would predict, with a smaller comparable effect for music by women.[15]

That does not prove that platforms are unbiased. It proves that "the platform favors majors" is too broad to function as an empirical conclusion.

Bias depends on the surface, period, country, dataset, objective, and definition being tested. A search-ranking system can behave differently from an editorial playlist. A recommendation model can favor popularity under one metric while an editorial team counterbalances it. A platform can advantage incumbents in one part of the system and create opportunities for independents in another.

The responsible conclusion is narrower: platform gatekeeping is powerful enough that its biases matter, but the direction and size of those biases have to be demonstrated rather than assumed.

Social Media Moves the Decision Upstream

A listener may encounter a song long before opening a music-streaming app.

Edison Research's 2024 U.S. Music Discovery Report makes that upstream diversity visible: listeners who care about keeping up with music report discovering it through friends and family, YouTube, radio, streaming services, Instagram, TikTok, and other channels, with strong age differences across platforms.[2]

These survey responses do not measure causal shares of streams. They show that discovery begins across multiple environments.

A song may first appear as fifteen seconds under a dance, a game clip, a joke, a beauty tutorial, a sports edit, or a personal story. The listener may then search for the full track elsewhere. A creator who does not think of themselves as a music critic can therefore become part of the discovery system simply by choosing a sound.

Industry-backed data can show the scale of that relationship while requiring caution. TikTok and Luminate reported that 84 percent of songs that entered the Billboard Global 200 in 2024 had gone viral on TikTok beforehand.[16] Because TikTok commissioned and promoted the study, the result is best read as evidence of a strong association in that dataset, not independent proof that TikTok caused those chart entries.

Contemporary gatekeeping therefore extends far beyond people whose job title involves music. A fan community, meme format, streamer, video creator, or recommendation feed can redirect attention at enormous scale.

Listeners Are Part of the System Too

Gatekeeping language can make audiences sound passive. They are not.

Listeners search. They follow artists. They make playlists. They skip. They save. They send songs to friends. They mute artists they do not want. They abandon recommendations. They build communities around genres and scenes. Those actions shape what platforms learn.

By April 2026, Spotify said its users had created more than 9.67 billion playlists since launch.[17] That number is company data and says nothing by itself about the quality or independence of user curation. It does show the scale of ordinary listener organization happening alongside professional and algorithmic curation.

Platforms are also making that participation more explicit. Spotify expanded Prompted Playlist to U.S. Premium users in early 2026, allowing listeners to steer playlist generation with natural-language instructions and then refine the result.[18] The feature is still a platform-mediated algorithmic system, not pure listener sovereignty, but it illustrates the direction of travel: the boundary between user choice and automated recommendation can itself become interactive.

The listener is therefore neither fully sovereign nor simply manipulated. Choice happens inside an environment that structures possibilities, while those choices generate data that can reshape the environment.

Power Lives in Feedback Loops

The most consequential form of gatekeeping may not be one decision at all. It may be a sequence of small decisions that reinforce one another.

An editor adds a track to a playlist. Exposure creates streams. Some listeners save the song. Those signals make the track more promising for other recommendation surfaces. It enters a chart. The chart creates press coverage and social proof. Creators use the song in videos. Search volume rises. More listeners encounter it, producing more data.

The opposite can also happen. A track that misses its first few opportunities may remain almost invisible even though it is technically available everywhere.

These loops create cumulative advantage.

That does not mean success is fabricated from nothing. The track normally has to generate enough listener response for the loop to continue. But exposure and response can reinforce one another, which makes it difficult to separate “what the public wants” from “what the public had a realistic chance to encounter.”

The public chooses from what becomes visible. Those choices help determine what becomes more visible next.

When Gatekeeping Becomes Coercion

There is a more serious form of access control than a playlist decision or a radio rotation: using professional power to demand sexual access, tolerate sexualized conditions, or punish refusal.

U.S. employment law recognizes the basic mechanism. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidance describes quid pro quo sexual harassment as situations in which submission to

or rejection of unwelcome sexual conduct is used as the basis for employment decisions, and it treats tangible job consequences tied to sexual demands as unlawful where Title VII applies.[19]

The music business creates complications that a standard employer chart does not capture. Careers are frequently built through freelance relationships, informal sessions, short contracts, independent production companies, touring networks, and gatekeepers who may control an opportunity without being the worker's formal employer. Federal employment protections therefore do not map neatly onto every music-industry relationship.

That legal complexity does not erase the professional mechanism. U.S. research on women working in popular music has documented sexualization and safety as career issues. In interviews conducted for the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's 2019 study of female songwriters and producers, 39 percent of the seventy-five women interviewed identified stereotyping and sexualization as barriers, while respondents also described the recording studio as a site of objectification and personal-safety concern.[20]

Those data do not establish that sexual favors are routinely required to advance in U.S. music. They do show that access to professional spaces can coexist with gendered and sexualized power.

International evidence makes the coercive form even more explicit. A 2024 U.K. parliamentary inquiry into misogyny in music cited survey findings in which some respondents reported pressure to engage in unwanted sexual conduct, career advantages offered in exchange for sexual cooperation, or professional harm after refusal.[21] Those percentages describe

the surveyed U.K. population, not the United States, and they should not be transplanted into U.S. prevalence. Their value here is to document a mechanism that is entirely consistent with the quid pro quo structure recognized in U.S. employment law.

This belongs in a chapter about gatekeeping because professional access is never only abstract. Behind a session, contract, tour, introduction, or promotion can be a person with the ability to open or close an opportunity. A system of selection has to be judged not only by whether it discovers talent, but also by whether people can refuse abuse without losing access to their careers.

So Who Decides?

No one decides alone.

Radio programmers still select. Labels still promote. Journalists and creators still recommend. Platform editors choose. Recommendation systems rank and personalize. Charts transform behavior into public hierarchies. Social networks propel fragments. Fans organize communities. Artists campaign for their own work. Listeners search, skip, save, share, and build playlists.

But those actors do not have equal leverage.

A friend sharing a song and a platform putting a song in front of tens of millions of users are both acts of recommendation, but they are not the same kind of power. A national radio network can create collective exposure that a small playlist cannot. A streaming service can observe behavior at a scale that no twentieth-century programmer could. A chart can turn dispersed consumption into a public status signal. A label can spend heavily to create the conditions under which all of those systems notice a release.

Contemporary gatekeeping is distributed, not flat.

Understanding it requires abandoning two myths at once: the myth of a past in which a few gatekeepers controlled absolutely everything, and the myth of a present in which listeners choose freely from a neutral infinite catalog.

What exists instead is a permanent, hybrid, evolving system of selection.

For artists, that has a concrete consequence. Being good, being available, and even being discovered once are not enough to build a durable career. Attention has to persist, deepen, and eventually support an economic relationship.

That is the problem of the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 8 — CAN YOU STILL BUILD A MUSIC CAREER?

Being Heard Is Not the Same as Making a Living

The modern music business produces impressive numbers: millions of streams, views, followers, subscribers, and monthly listeners.

Those numbers measure attention. They do not automatically measure economic stability.

An artist can be widely heard and make very little. Another can reach a much smaller audience but sell tickets, merchandise, records, memberships, lessons, commissions, or direct releases to a community engaged enough to support the work.

Building a career therefore requires something more than visibility. Attention has to become a durable relationship. That relationship has to support several revenue streams. Those revenues then have to leave enough margin — and enough time — for the work to continue.

For Many Musicians, the Career Is a Portfolio

The image of the full-time musician living from one clean source of income fits poorly with the way many music careers actually work.

U.S. labor statistics make that instability visible. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that musicians and singers held about 170,400 jobs in 2025, with 48 percent classified as self-employed. The agency also notes that part-time and intermittent work is common, that schedules are irregular, and that long gaps between paid music jobs can lead musicians to take full-time work in other occupations while continuing music part time.[1]

The BLS reports a median hourly wage of \$47.80 for musicians and singers in May 2025, but it does not publish a comparable annual wage because this work is so often non-year-round and non-full-time.[1] That limitation is not a statistical annoyance. It tells us something about the structure of the occupation.

Concerts, teaching, sessions, production for other artists, composition, licensing, royalties, commissions, technical work, direct sales, and jobs outside music can coexist in the same career.

That diversity of income can feel like a failure of the idealized career. It can also be a form of resilience. One income stream controlled by one company or one platform may be more fragile than several smaller streams that do not fail at the same time.

Audience Depth Matters as Much as Audience Size

An audience is not uniform.

Among the people who hear an artist once, some will forget the name. Others will return every week. A smaller group may buy tickets, records, shirts, memberships, or other products and actively follow the artist's work.

Spotify calls its most engaged audience segment “super listeners.” In the company's 2025 data, super listeners represented about 2 percent of an artist's monthly listeners on average but drove more than 18 percent of monthly streams and roughly half of ticket sales made through Spotify.[2]

Those numbers are platform data based on Spotify's own definitions. They are not a census of the whole music market. Their value is narrower: they show how different two listeners

can be economically even when both appear in the same monthly-listener count.

Luminate’s U.S. Music 360 research points in the same direction. In its 2023 year-end report, Luminate classified 18 percent of U.S. music listeners as “super fans,” meaning they engaged with artists and their content in at least five different ways. Those listeners reported spending 68 percent more on music each month than the average U.S. music listener, 126 percent more on artist merchandise, and 76 percent more on physical music.[3]

For a career, a smaller number of committed supporters can therefore matter more than a much larger number of casual contacts.

Live Music Can Build a Career — and Destroy a Margin

Live performance remains one of the most important parts of a music career. It can generate fees, ticket revenue, merchandise sales, and the kind of relationship with an audience that is difficult to reproduce through a feed.

But the economics of live music can be brutal even when demand is real.

The National Independent Venue Association’s 2025 State of Live study estimated that the independent U.S. live sector generated \$153.1 billion in total economic output in 2024 and supported more than 900,000 jobs.[4]

Those large aggregate numbers can coexist with fragile margins at individual venues and on individual tours, as the earlier discussion of live economics showed.

Touring has costs that do not show up in audience metrics: transportation, lodging, crew, rehearsal, gear rental, insurance, visas for international work, agents, production, commissions,

and time away from other paid work. A sold-out show can still be a bad business decision if the costs required to reach it are too high.

Live music can be central to a career without being automatically profitable.

When Promotion, Venues, and Ticketing Concentrate

Touring costs are not the only structural risk. The organization of the live business can also affect an artist's bargaining power.

The U.S. Live Nation–Ticketmaster case matters because one corporate group participates in several parts of the chain: concert promotion, venue relationships, ticketing, sponsorship, and other live services.

In May 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice and a coalition of states sued Live Nation and Ticketmaster, alleging anticompetitive conduct across live entertainment. The complaint included allegations involving retaliation, tying of services, venue access, and the use of market power across promotion and ticketing. Those were government allegations, not final judicial findings on every contested fact.[5]

The case later moved toward settlement. The DOJ's case docket records a Notice of Settlement dated March 9, 2026 and a Proposed Final Judgment filed June 12, 2026.[6] A proposed judgment is not the same thing as a final adjudication of every original allegation. Its significance for this book is structural: competition policy reached directly into the relationships among ticketing, venues, promotion, and retaliation because those relationships can affect who gets access to live infrastructure and on what terms.

For an artist, the issue is concrete. A live career depends on venues, promoters, ticket sellers, audience data, marketing, and routing. When several of those functions are controlled or coordinated by the same organization, efficiencies may increase — but switching partners can become harder.

Building a career therefore means understanding not only whether enough people want to see the show, but also who controls the room, the ticket, the promotion, and the customer relationship around it.

Direct Sales Change the Value of a Fan

Streaming is an economy of enormous numbers of small uses. Direct sales operate differently: a fan chooses to pay a specific price for a work or object.

Bandcamp says that, on average, 82 percent of the money from a purchase goes to the artist or label after Bandcamp's share and payment-processing fees.[7] Artists can set their own prices, sell digital music and physical products, and communicate with supporters through the platform and email. [8]

Bandcamp is still an intermediary. It has its own rules, fees, and business risks. But the model makes visible why a few thousand committed buyers can matter differently from a much larger passive audience.

A record purchase, a ticket, or a membership is not just another unit of attention. It is evidence that the listener crossed a threshold from access to support.

Owning the Relationship Is a Form of Independence

There is an important difference between having followers and being able to reach the people who follow you.

An audience that exists only inside a social platform depends on that platform's ranking rules, account systems, recommendation choices, and business strategy. Organic reach can fall. A service can change. An account can lose visibility. A platform can disappear.

A mailing list, customer history, membership community, direct ticketing relationship, or fan database is more portable.

Bandcamp explicitly markets direct communication and access to sales history as part of its artist model.[8] The broader principle does not depend on Bandcamp itself. The goal is not to abandon platforms. It is to avoid letting every relationship with the people who already chose to support the project remain permanently rented from someone else.

Merch Is Not a Side Note

Merchandise is often treated as an accessory to the “real” music business. For some artists it is both a meaningful revenue stream and a way to turn a digital relationship into something durable and visible.

Spotify's own commerce data show that this is not restricted to global stars. From 2022 through 2024, the number of artists with fewer than one million monthly listeners selling merchandise through the Spotify–Shopify integration grew more than threefold, while total merch sales volume for that group grew more than sixfold.[2]

Again, this is platform-specific data, and sales volume is not the same thing as profit. Inventory, manufacturing, shipping, returns, and design all cost money. But the evidence is enough to reject the idea that merchandise belongs only to superstar economics.

A Niche Can Be a Coherent Business

Digital platforms encourage everyone to think in enormous numbers. Not every viable career needs a mass audience.

A jazz musician, experimental producer, metal band, regional roots artist, composer, or scene-specific performer may reach a relatively small audience scattered across many cities or countries. The internet can make those small publics findable and connectable.

The economic logic changes. The goal is not to matter a little to everyone. It is to matter enough to a group large enough to support the project.

That model may rely less on viral reach and more on trust. Specialized venues, independent labels, college or community radio, niche publications, fan communities, mailing lists, clubs, subscriptions, direct sales, and repeat touring can become more useful than broad but shallow exposure.

Small is not automatically weak. It becomes fragile when the cost structure and ambitions require mass-market scale that the audience does not provide.

The Hidden Cost Is Time

Earlier chapters showed how many roles now accumulate around the artist: writing, recording, producing, posting, filming, analyzing, pitching, touring, selling.

A sustainable career has to be measured in time as well as money.

A project can show revenue and still fail as a livelihood if it requires eighty-hour weeks, constant travel, loss-making tours, and permanent content production. The hours spent maintaining the business compete directly with the hours available to make music.

This is one reason teams continue to matter.

A manager, booking agent, publicist, label, distributor, business manager, accountant, or technician can reduce the artist's visible independence while increasing the artist's practical freedom by giving time back.

An intermediary creates value when the function it performs is worth more than its cost and when the artist understands what rights, control, and dependency come with the arrangement.

Independence Does Not Mean Doing Everything Yourself

The mythology of independence often imagines a heroic artist doing every task alone and keeping every dollar.

That confuses ownership with isolation.

An artist can own the masters and hire distribution. An artist can run a label and outsource publicity. Booking, accounting, merchandise fulfillment, tour management, or content production can all be delegated while strategic control remains with the artist.

Useful independence often means choosing dependencies rather than eliminating all of them.

The practical questions are: What does this partner do? What does it cost? What rights does it control? How long does the arrangement last? Can the artist leave or replace it?

A Career Is an Architecture of Risks

Every revenue stream carries a different kind of risk.

Streaming depends on platform rules and rights contracts. Touring depends on travel costs, ticketing, venues, and demand in specific cities. Merchandise can tie up cash in inventory. Synchronization income is irregular. Teaching converts time

into income but reduces the hours available to create. Direct-to-fan models demand administration and audience maintenance. Work outside music may stabilize rent while slowing artistic production.

Diversification does not guarantee safety. It does reduce the chance that one rule change destroys the entire model.

A robust career often combines recurring audience attention, direct relationships, properly administered rights, controlled costs, several income streams, and partners who can be replaced if the relationship stops working.

Growth Is Not Always the Right Goal

Digital culture constantly rewards growth: more listeners, more followers, more territories, more releases, more shows.

But maximum size is not always the same thing as sustainability.

Twenty profitable dates can be better than fifty loss-making ones. Ten thousand supporters who return and buy can be more valuable than a million listeners who disappear after one viral clip. Releasing less music can sometimes leave enough time and money to support each release properly.

The right scale depends on genre, geography, costs, team, family life, health, touring appetite, and artistic goals.

There is no universal audience threshold at which a career becomes “real.”

A Career Is the Ability to Continue

Virality is an event. A career is the ability to do it again.

Finance the next record. Keep the band together. Return to a city and still have an audience there. Survive a year when the numbers fall. Turn a listener into someone who remembers the

name. Keep access to the catalog. Preserve enough time and energy to make the next work.

That continuity depends on infrastructure that is less visible than success metrics: rights, contracts, contacts, reputation, community, skills, cash management, archives, collaborators, and habits.

It also means accepting that a music career may change shape.

A musician may move from touring to production, from band work to sessions, from recording to teaching, from scoring to live performance, and back again. Professional continuity does not require performing the same task forever.

Can You Still Make a Living in Music?

Yes — but that sentence is too simple to be useful.

Some people make extraordinary incomes from music. Many make modest incomes. Many combine music with other work. Some projects attract large audiences and still fail economically. Others survive for decades outside mass culture.

The better question is not “How many streams does it take to live?”

It is: What system of rights, costs, revenue streams, relationships, and time allows this particular project to continue?

Streaming can be part of that system. So can live work, direct sales, merchandise, licensing, teaching, production, commissions, memberships, and other forms of work.

A music career remains possible, but it increasingly looks less like one ladder and more like an architecture.

And another technological shift may put even more pressure on that architecture. What happens when producing plausible music itself becomes cheap enough to scale almost without limit?

That is the problem raised by generative AI.

Notes

[1] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, “Musicians and Singers,” updated August 2026. The BLS reports about 170,400 jobs in 2025, 48% self-employment, common part-time/intermittent work, and a median hourly wage of \$47.80; annual wage is not published because this occupation is frequently non-year-round or non-full-time.

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/entertainment-and-sports/musicians-and-singers.htm>

[2] Spotify for Artists, “The 2025 Spotify for Artists Recap” and Fan Study — Merch and Live. Company data: super listeners average about 2% of monthly listeners while driving 18%+ of monthly streams and roughly half of ticket sales made through Spotify; 2022–2024 merch figures cover artists below one million monthly listeners using the Spotify–Shopify integration.

<https://artists.spotify.com/blog/the-2025-spotify-for-artists-recap> ;

<https://artists.spotify.com/fan-study/merch-and-live>

[3] Luminate, 2023 Year-End Music Report / U.S. Music 360. Luminate classifies 18% of U.S. music listeners as super fans in this analysis and reports substantially higher spending on music, merchandise, and physical formats.

https://luminatedata.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Luminate_Year-End_Report_2023.pdf

[4] National Independent Venue Association, The State of Live, released June 23, 2025. NIVA/TEconomy research reports \$153.1B in total economic output, more than 900,000 jobs supported, and 64% of independent stages not profitable in 2024. This is sector-sponsored research about independent live organizations, not a direct artist-profitability survey. <https://www.nivassoc.org/stateoflive>

[5] U.S. Department of Justice, “Justice Department Sues Live Nation–Ticketmaster for Monopolizing Markets Across the Live Concert Industry,” May 23, 2024, and complaint materials. Allegations are described as allegations, not adjudicated facts.

[6] U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. and Plaintiff States v. Live Nation Entertainment, Inc. and Ticketmaster L.L.C., case docket: Notice of Settlement,

March 9, 2026; Proposed Final Judgment, June 12, 2026.

<https://www.justice.gov/atr/case/us-and-plaintiff-states-v-live-nation-entertainment-inc-and-ticketmaster-llc>

[7] Bandcamp, “About Bandcamp.” Bandcamp states that an average of 82% of purchase revenue goes to the artist or label after its revenue share and payment-processor fees. <https://bandcamp.com/about>

[8] Bandcamp for Artists. Bandcamp describes artist-controlled pricing, direct fan messaging, email communication, and access to sales history. <https://bandcamp.com/artists>

CHAPTER 9 — WHEN MUSIC BECOMES ALMOST INFINITE

A New Break: Production at Machine Scale

Streaming made distribution feel nearly limitless. Generative AI adds another break: it can sharply reduce the time and cost required to produce new musical content.

The word infinite should not be taken literally. Computing, storage, distribution, moderation, and listening all have costs. But the quantity of plausible tracks that one person or one company can generate in a short period can now exceed human listening capacity by an extraordinary margin.

That changes the problem we have been following throughout this book.

When records were difficult to manufacture, scarcity lived in production and distribution. When digital distribution lowered those barriers, scarcity shifted toward attention. When production itself can be automated at scale, pressure on attention increases again.

The important question is therefore not simply whether a machine can produce a convincing song. It is what happens to the music ecosystem when generating one hundred thousand tracks becomes easier than listening carefully to one hundred.

Assistance, Generation, and Substitution Are Different Things

“AI music” is too broad a category to do useful work by itself.

A musician can use machine-learning tools to clean up a recording, separate stems, transcribe audio, suggest harmonies, generate textures, organize samples, or explore an

arrangement. In those cases, the technology may function more like an advanced production tool.

At the other end of the spectrum, a service can generate lyrics, melody, voice, arrangement, instrumentation, and a finished mix from a short instruction.

Between those extremes lies a continuum.

The distinction matters because creativity, attribution, copyright, labor displacement, and listener expectations do not work the same way at every point on that continuum.

U.S. copyright policy already reflects this difference. In January 2025, the U.S. Copyright Office concluded that using AI as an assistive tool does not automatically prevent copyright protection. Protection can exist where a human author determines sufficient expressive elements, including through creative arrangement or modification of AI-generated material. But the Office also concluded that the mere provision of prompts, by itself, generally does not make the machine-determined expressive elements copyrightable.[1]

The D.C. Circuit reinforced the human-authorship baseline in March 2025 in *Thaler v. Perlmutter*, upholding the Copyright Office's refusal to register a work whose sole claimed author was an AI system.[2]

That does not mean every work involving AI is uncopyrightable. It means the legal question turns on what expressive authorship can actually be attributed to a human.

The Volume Explosion Is No Longer Hypothetical

The most visible change is quantitative.

Deezer provides one of the clearest public datasets because it has been measuring and labeling what it classifies as fully AI-

generated music. In July 2026, the company reported that it was receiving roughly 90,000 fully AI-generated tracks per day on average, with such tracks exceeding 50 percent of new daily uploads at peak in June.[3]

That figure describes Deezer, not the entire U.S. or global music market. It also depends on Deezer’s detection system and its definition of “fully AI-generated.” It should not be turned into a claim that half of all music released everywhere is AI-generated.

But it proves something important enough on its own: synthetic supply can scale far faster than human demand for listening.

Uploads Are Not the Same as Listening

The explosion in supply should not be confused with equivalent listener adoption.

In the same 2026 disclosure, Deezer said fully AI-generated music accounted for only about 1 to 3 percent of streams on its service even while it represented an enormous share of incoming uploads.[3]

That gap matters.

Generative systems create an abundance problem before they necessarily create a preference problem. Millions of synthetic tracks can exist without listeners actively choosing them in large numbers.

But lightly streamed tracks still impose costs on the ecosystem: ingestion, storage, indexing, metadata, fraud detection, moderation, search, recommendation quality, rights administration, and catalog maintenance.

The economic problem is therefore larger than the question “Do people like AI music?” It also concerns what happens when catalog growth becomes detached from human creative time.

Abundance Can Become an Economy of Fraud

Automation can produce more than songs. It can produce attempts to extract money automatically.

Deezer reported that up to 85 percent of streams on the fully AI-generated tracks it detected in 2025 were fraudulent, compared with about 8 percent of streams across its catalog under the company’s measurements.[3] Deezer says it demonetizes fraudulent streams and excludes detected fully AI-generated tracks from algorithmic recommendations and editorial playlists.

Those figures are company data, not an independent audit of the whole industry. They still illustrate a clear incentive problem.

If generating a catalog becomes extremely cheap, a bad actor can combine mass generation with fake accounts, bot listening, metadata manipulation, or other forms of stream fraud in an attempt to capture part of a royalty pool.

That does not mean AI-assisted music is fraudulent. It means industrial-scale generation reduces the cost of producing the raw material on which fraud can operate.

Spotify has described a related problem from another angle. In September 2025, the company said it had removed more than 75 million “spammy” tracks in the previous twelve months and announced additional filtering aimed at mass uploads, duplicate content, metadata abuse, artificially short tracks, and other tactics made easier by generative systems.[4]

The Voice Problem Is Not Just a Copyright Problem

Generative AI can create new songs, but it can also imitate identifiable people.

Voice is especially sensitive because it functions at once as an instrument, a personal identifier, a commercial asset, and a part of an artist's public identity.

A convincing clone can make someone appear to have performed a recording they never made.

That problem does not fit neatly inside traditional copyright. A synthetic vocal performance may imitate an artist's identity without copying any particular protected song.

Spotify's current policy treats unauthorized vocal impersonation as a separate issue: the platform states that vocal impersonation is allowed only when the impersonated artist has authorized the use.[4] That is a private platform rule, not federal law.

U.S. law is more fragmented.

In 2024, the U.S. Copyright Office concluded that existing protections leave significant gaps and recommended a new federal law against unauthorized digital replicas of an individual's voice or visual likeness.[5] As of September 2026, Congress has not enacted a comprehensive federal digital-replica statute. The NO FAKES Act of 2026 has been introduced in both chambers, and the Senate version was reported out of committee in June, but it remains pending legislation rather than operative federal law.[6]

State law can provide additional protection. Tennessee's ELVIS Act, signed in March 2024 and effective July 1, 2024, expanded the state's personal-rights framework to protect an

individual's voice, including simulated voice, against certain unauthorized uses.[7]

The practical result is that “Can I legally clone this voice?” does not have one nationwide answer that can be reduced to copyright ownership. Copyright, state publicity or personal-rights law, contract, platform policy, and future federal legislation can all matter.

Style Is Harder Than Identity

Imitating a recognizable voice and imitating a musical style are not the same legal problem.

Copyright protects particular expression, not a general aesthetic such as “sad 1980s synth pop,” “Memphis soul feel,” or “minimalist trap drums.” But generative systems are trained on large bodies of existing material, and their outputs may sometimes reproduce or closely resemble protected expression.

That is where the training debate begins.

In May 2025, the U.S. Copyright Office released a pre-publication version of Part 3 of its AI report on generative-AI training. As of September 2026, the Office still describes that report as pre-publication and says a final version will follow without substantive changes expected to the analysis or conclusions.[8]

The Office did not announce a simple rule that all training is fair use or that all training requires a license. It analyzed fair use as a fact-specific doctrine, including the purpose of the use, the nature of the works, the amount used, and market effects. It also emphasized that developing licensing markets can matter to the market-harm analysis.[9]

That uncertainty is important. “Training on copyrighted music is legal” and “training on copyrighted music is illegal” are both too broad as statements of current U.S. law.

The legal answer can depend on the facts of the system, the source material, how the copies were obtained and used, what the model can reproduce, and how the use affects actual or reasonably developing licensing markets.

Licensing Is Already One Possible Path

The dispute over training does not lead only to litigation.

On October 29, 2025, Universal Music Group and Udio announced that they had settled copyright litigation and entered licensing agreements for a new authorized AI music creation platform. The companies described licenses covering recorded music and publishing rights and a new commercial product built around licensed use.[10]

One settlement does not resolve the legal status of AI training in general. It does show that a market can develop in which at least some rightsholders choose licensing rather than unrestricted use or permanent litigation.

That path creates its own questions. Who is allowed to license which rights? How are artists and songwriters paid? Can a performer license a voice separately from a composition or master? Can smaller rightsholders negotiate on comparable terms? What happens to works whose owners cannot be found?

The AI debate therefore repeats a familiar music-industry pattern: a technological possibility eventually becomes a question of rights architecture.

Can Listeners Tell the Difference?

Transparency becomes more important precisely because listeners may not reliably identify synthetic production by ear.

In a 2025 Ipsos survey commissioned by Deezer across 9,000 respondents in eight countries, 97 percent of participants failed to correctly distinguish fully AI-generated tracks from human-made music in the blind test used by the study. Eighty percent said fully AI-generated music should be clearly labeled.[3]

Those numbers should be kept in scope. The test used a limited set of tracks, the study was commissioned by a company with a commercial stake in AI detection, and it was international rather than U.S.-only.

It does not prove that all AI music is indistinguishable from human music.

It does support a narrower conclusion: disclosure cannot be replaced by the assumption that listeners will always know what they are hearing.

Labeling Is Not the Same as Banning

The simplest response to a transparency problem is disclosure.

Deezer began labeling releases that contain fully AI-generated music and excludes detected fully synthetic tracks from its algorithmic and editorial recommendations.[3] Spotify initially took a different approach centered on credits. In 2025 it announced support for an industry-standard disclosure framework developed through DDEX, intended to describe where AI was used — vocals, instrumentation, lyrics, post-production — rather than force every release into a binary “AI” or “not AI” category.[4]

That approach expanded in 2026. Spotify added in-app AI-use credits when artists, labels, or distributors submit them. In August, it also announced an “AI Persona” badge for profiles whose public identity is AI-generated rather than a real person and said those personas would, by default, be excluded from editorial and algorithmic recommendations unless a listener had chosen to follow or save them. That is a platform rule about identity and recommendation, not a blanket ban on AI-assisted music. Spotify also notes an important limitation of AI-use credits: the absence of a credit does not prove that AI was not used, because the system depends on disclosure and distributor support.[4]

That distinction is useful. Transparency systems can document process without declaring the work illegitimate.

The IFPI moved in a similar direction for charts in July 2026. Its global principles for official-chart eligibility allow appropriate use of AI while drawing boundaries around substantially human creation, authorized and lawful AI services, fraud, and disclosure.[11]

The difficult part is enforcement. A principle such as “substantially human” is easier to state than to measure.

Detection Becomes Infrastructure

If platforms, charts, distributors, and rights organizations want to label or treat synthetic content differently, they need evidence about provenance.

Deezer says its system can detect music generated by several major models and that, beginning in 2026, it made the technology available for licensing to other companies and rights organizations.[3]

That creates a technical race. Generators improve. Detection systems adapt. Hybrid works mix human recordings with synthetic elements. Models may leave fewer recognizable signatures over time.

For that reason, provenance may ultimately matter as much as detection: standardized credits, trusted metadata, content credentials, signatures, or contractual attestations about how a recording was made.

The music industry has spent a century building systems to answer “Who owns this?” It may now need systems that can also answer “How was this made?”

Economic Forecasts Are Scenarios, Not Measurements

Creator organizations are already trying to estimate the economic consequences of this transition.

A study commissioned by CISAC and conducted by PMP Strategy projects that, under its assumptions and an unchanged policy environment, generative AI could put 24 percent of music creators’ revenues at risk by 2028.[12]

That is not an observed 24 percent income loss. It is a forecast produced for an organization representing creators and built from assumptions about adoption, substitution, licensing, and market growth.

Its value is not that it predicts the future with certainty. It identifies where the perceived economic risk lies: production music, libraries, standardized commissions, some advertising and audiovisual uses, and competition for streaming revenue and attention.

The actual outcome will depend on licensing, law, platform rules, consumer behavior, and how musicians use the tools themselves.

Artists Are Already Using AI

It would be misleading to describe generative AI as something happening only to musicians from the outside.

A 2024 study commissioned by SACEM and GEMA, based in part on responses from more than 15,000 creators and publishers, found that 35 percent of surveyed creators had already used AI in their work, rising to 51 percent among creators under thirty-five.[13]

That is a European rights-society population, not a U.S. prevalence estimate. It remains useful for one limited reason: it demonstrates that the creator population cannot be divided neatly into “human artists” and “AI users.” Many creators are both.

Musicians have always automated parts of production: sequencing, quantization, pitch correction, sampling, synthesis, preset design, editing, mastering assistance.

Generative AI pushes automation further because it can produce material that resembles composition, arrangement, performance, or production choices rather than merely executing them.

The practical question becomes one of creative control. At what point is the tool expanding an artist’s ability, and at what point is it replacing labor or authorship that previously belonged to a person?

Scarcity May Move Toward Provenance

When almost anything can be generated, another resource becomes scarce: trust.

Who actually made this recording? Did the named singer perform it? Was the voice licensed? Are the credits accurate? Are the streams organic? Is the catalog an artist’s body of work,

a content studio, or an automated network designed to capture royalties?

In a saturated environment, provenance itself can become valuable.

Listeners have never required music to be autobiographical or technologically pure. Studio recording has always involved mediation. But part of the artistic relationship depends on believing that a person or group stands behind the choices, takes responsibility for the work, and can be meaningfully connected to it.

AI does not automatically destroy that relationship.

It makes the conditions of that relationship more important to disclose.

AI Does Not Create More Attention

The underlying contradiction is now clear.

Generative systems can reduce the marginal cost of producing a song. They cannot add hours to a listener's day.

If supply grows much faster than listening time, value shifts even further toward selection, trust, reputation, curation, identity, and durable relationships.

A million new tracks do not create a million new moments of attention.

The more abundant the catalog becomes, the more filtering matters. Platforms, editors, critics, communities, search systems, recommendation engines, identity systems, and provenance tools all become more important — not less.

AI can therefore create abundance and simultaneously become one of the technologies used to manage that abundance.

When Music Becomes Almost Infinite

Generative AI does not make human music obsolete.

It changes the environment in which human music circulates.

Production costs fall. Catalog volume expands. Fraud becomes easier to automate. Voices can be imitated. Training rights remain contested. Licensing markets begin to form. State and federal legal frameworks develop at different speeds. Platforms create spam filters, disclosure systems, and identity rules. Artists themselves incorporate AI into their work.

None of this tells us what percentage of future music will be synthetic.

But the direction of scarcity is already visible.

What remains hard to generate in unlimited quantities is not sound. It is meaningful attention, trusted identity, reputation, shared history, human presence, and a relationship strong enough for a work to matter to someone.

That brings us to the final question of the book.

What comes after abundance?

Notes

[1] U.S. Copyright Office, Copyright and Artificial Intelligence, Part 2: Copyrightability, January 29, 2025. The Office concludes that AI assistance does not bar copyright, but human authorship must determine sufficient expressive elements; prompts alone generally do not make machine-determined expression copyrightable. <https://www.copyright.gov/newsnet/2025/1060.html>

[2] Thaler v. Perlmutter, U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit, decided March 18, 2025. The court affirmed the human-authorship requirement in the case of a work whose claimed sole author was an AI system. <https://www.copyright.gov/ai/docs/court-of-appeals-decision-affirming-refusal-of-registration.pdf>

[3] Deezer Newsroom, “AI music has surpassed 50% of new music uploads for the first time,” July 21, 2026. Deezer reports roughly 90,000 fully AI-generated tracks per day, over 50% of uploads at peak, 1–3% of streams, and up to 85% fraudulent streams on fully AI-generated tracks in 2025; it also summarizes its Ipsos survey and detection/licensing policies. Platform-specific data. <https://newsroom-deezer.com/2026/07/ai-music-exceeds-50-percent-daily-uploads-deezer/>

[4] Spotify, “Spotify Strengthens AI Protections for Artists, Songwriters, and Producers,” September 25, 2025, and “Introducing a New Label for AI-Generated Artist Identities on Spotify,” August 11, 2026. Platform policy: unauthorized vocal impersonation, spam filtering, DDEX-based AI disclosures, AI Persona labeling, and default exclusion of AI Personas from editorial and algorithmic recommendations unless the listener has chosen to follow or save them. <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2025-09-25/spotify-strengthens-ai-protections/> ; <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2026-08-11/ai-persona-badges-transparency/>

[5] U.S. Copyright Office, Copyright and Artificial Intelligence, Part 1: Digital Replicas, July 2024. The Office recommends a federal law protecting individuals from knowing distribution of unauthorized digital replicas because existing legal protections contain gaps. <https://copyright.gov/newsnet/2024/1048.html>

[6] U.S. Copyright Office, Legislative Developments, 119th Congress; NO FAKES Act of 2026, S.4591 / H.R.8915. As of September 25, 2026, the proposal has not been enacted; the Senate version was reported out of committee and placed on the legislative calendar. <https://www.copyright.gov/legislation/>

[7] State of Tennessee, Ensuring Likeness, Voice, and Image Security Act of 2024 (ELVIS Act), signed March 21, 2024, effective July 1, 2024. The law adds voice, including simulated voice, to Tennessee’s protected personal rights. <https://www.tn.gov/governor/news/2024/3/21/photos--gov--lee-signs-elvis-act-into-law.html.html>

[8] U.S. Copyright Office, Artificial Intelligence Study. The Office lists Part 3: Generative AI Training as a May 9, 2025 pre-publication report and states that a final version will be published without substantive changes expected in the analysis or conclusions. Status verified September 2026. <https://www.copyright.gov/policy/artificial-intelligence/>

[9] U.S. Copyright Office, Copyright and Artificial Intelligence, Part 3: Generative AI Training, pre-publication version, May 2025. The report analyzes fair use and licensing on a fact-specific basis and notes that functioning or developing licensing markets can affect the fourth fair-use factor.

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[10] Universal Music Group and Udio, October 29, 2025. The companies announced settlement of copyright litigation and licensing agreements for a new authorized AI music creation platform covering recorded-music and publishing rights. <https://www.universalmusic.com/universal-music-group-and-udio-announce-udios-first-strategic-agreements-for-new-licensed-ai-music-creation-platform/>

[11] IFPI, “Global Principles for the Eligibility of Recordings Developed Using AI in Official Music Charts Worldwide,” July 30, 2026. The framework distinguishes human-led creative use of AI from purely synthetic, unauthorized, or fraudulently manipulated recordings. <https://www.ifpi.org/ifpi-rolls-out-global-principles-for-the-eligibility-of-recordings-developed-using-ai-in-official-music-charts-worldwide/>

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[13] SACEM/GEMA/Goldmedia AI study, 2024. More than 15,000 creators and publishers surveyed; 35% of creators reported already using AI in their work, rising to 51% among those under 35. Population is European rights-society members and is not used as a U.S. prevalence estimate.

CHAPTER 10 — AFTER ABUNDANCE

We Almost Solved the Wrong Problem

For more than a century, the music business kept solving problems of scarcity.

A performance had to be captured. A physical object had to be manufactured, shipped, stocked, promoted, and sold. Radio time was limited. Studio time was expensive. Distribution networks were difficult to build.

Each technological shift removed part of that friction.

The phonograph freed a performance from physical presence. Records made reproduction industrial. Radio separated listening from ownership. Tape turned the studio into an instrument of construction. Digital files separated music from the object that carried it. Streaming made access nearly abundant. Generative AI is beginning to reduce the scarcity of production itself.

That is an extraordinary achievement. More recorded music than any previous generation could have imagined is now available, almost anywhere, almost instantly.

But solving those older constraints reveals a deeper one.

We can multiply supply. We cannot multiply human time, attention, memory, and meaning at the same rate.

Scarcity Did Not Disappear. It Moved.

The history traced through this book can be read as a series of shifts.

First, scarcity was performance: one musician could not play everywhere at once.

Then scarcity was reproduction and distribution: records had to be manufactured, moved, stocked, and sold.

With digital files, control over copying became a central conflict.

With streaming, ownership stopped being the main unit of consumption and access became abundant.

At that point, scarcity moved toward attention.

With generative AI, even new musical content can become extremely abundant. That makes another scarcity more visible: provenance, trust, reputation, and the ability to decide what deserves attention.

This is not a universal law of history. Old constraints do not vanish completely. A major tour is still expensive. Recording an orchestra in a great room is still difficult. Skilled human labor is still limited. Musicians still have only so many hours in a day.

But the pattern is clear enough to matter: when technology removes one bottleneck, competition reorganizes around another limited resource.

The Music Business Is Also an Attention Business

The word music can hide what many contemporary companies actually organize.

Streaming services do not merely store songs. They organize listening time.

Social platforms do not merely host clips. They place music inside attention streams where a song competes with comedy, news, sports, food, games, advertising, and every other form of media.

Playlists, charts, home screens, search systems, and recommendation engines do not merely create order inside a

catalog. They help determine which works have a realistic chance of being encountered.

That is why selection becomes more valuable as distribution becomes easier.

When shelves are physically small, distribution performs a great deal of selection automatically. When the catalog is enormous, platforms have to reconstruct shelves through interfaces.

The playlist, search result, home page, chart, social feed, critic, curator, and recommendation system become those new shelves.

Abundance Does Not Eliminate Intermediaries

One of the great promises of the digital era was disintermediation.

Artists would publish directly. Audiences would choose freely. Traditional gatekeepers would lose their power.

Part of that promise came true. It is genuinely easier to record, release, communicate, and sell without passing through every institution that once stood between an artist and an audience.

But intermediation did not disappear.

It changed form.

The physical distributor coexists with the digital distributor. The radio programmer coexists with the playlist editor. The record store coexists with search. The music magazine coexists with the creator, influencer, newsletter, and recommendation feed. The traditional label coexists with independent artists who buy distribution, publicity, data, advertising, and specialist services themselves.

The important question is therefore not whether an intermediary exists.

It is what function the intermediary performs, what it costs, what rights it controls, and how difficult it is to replace.

Digital independence is often misunderstood as an obligation to do everything yourself: recording, mixing, distribution, marketing, video, fan communication, touring, rights administration, accounting, data analysis, and merchandise.

That is not necessarily independence. It can be overload.

An intermediary can damage a project when it captures too many rights, locks an artist into a bad relationship, or charges more than the value it creates.

It can also be extremely valuable when it turns a difficult function into a reliable service and gives creative time back to the artist.

Mature independence is not the absence of dependence. It is the ability to understand and choose dependencies.

Stream Counts Measure Less Than They Appear To

Streaming gave the industry a highly visible number: the stream.

The number is useful. It shows that a track is circulating. It can help identify trends, calculate parts of royalty systems, and compare consumption inside a defined methodology.

But one stream can describe very different behaviors.

A deliberate play by a fan, a passive playlist exposure, an obsessive replay, background listening, an algorithmic continuation, and a fraudulent play can all produce a unit that looks similar in a dashboard.

The count is real. Its meaning depends on context.

A career therefore cannot be measured only by total plays. It also depends on whether plays turn into memory, repeat listening, ticket buyers, customers, community, and enough revenue to continue.

As music becomes more abundant, one accidental exposure becomes relatively less valuable.

What becomes scarce is voluntary return.

Spotify's own segmentation, discussed earlier, illustrates the difference: a small group of highly engaged listeners accounts for a disproportionate share of repeat listening and ticket purchasing on the platform.[1]

That segmentation should not be mistaken for a universal theory of fandom. It does support a broader point: durable relationships matter differently from undifferentiated reach.

Platforms for Reach, Direct Channels for Depth

Paradoxically, direct relationships can become more important as digital distribution becomes more universal.

Concerts, physical records, email, memberships, fan communities, direct sales, and face-to-face encounters can look like remnants of an older economy. But they possess something scarce in the platform economy: a more identifiable and sometimes more portable relationship.

Bandcamp, for example, gives artists access to direct fan communication, pricing control, and sales history, while saying that an average of 82 percent of purchase money goes to the artist or label after its share and payment-processing fees.[2] That is one platform's model, not a general law of direct-to-fan economics. It shows what changes when a platform is designed around a transaction and customer relationship rather than only around streams.

The likely future is therefore not purely platform-based or purely direct.

It is hybrid: platforms for reach; direct channels for depth.

Quality Will Still Resist a Single Metric

Earlier chapters showed that measurable aspects of popular music have changed: song duration, melodic complexity, lyric repetition, timbre, loudness, production techniques, and the structure of introductions.

None of those variables is equivalent to quality.

Simple music is not necessarily shallow. Complex music is not necessarily profound. Technical perfection is not the same as expression. Imperfection is not automatically authentic.

This becomes more important in a world saturated with metrics.

What is easiest to measure can quietly become what the system optimizes.

But artistic value often lives partly in what measurement does not capture well: context, surprise, memory, risk, identity, interpretation, shared history, emotional meaning, and the slow development of attachment.

Markets can measure what attracts attention.

They cannot decide, by themselves, what deserves to matter.

AI Makes the Difference Between Volume and Value Harder to Ignore

Generative AI pushes this problem toward an extreme.

When tens of thousands of additional tracks can be generated every day, volume stops being evidence of creative vitality.

Deezer reported in July 2026 that fully AI-generated tracks exceeded half of new uploads at peak while still representing only about 1 to 3 percent of streams on its platform.[3]

That divergence may tell us something about the next stage of the market.

The number of available works can explode without the number of works that become meaningful to listeners growing at the same pace.

The ecosystem therefore has to distinguish more explicitly among content abundance, listener interest, fraud, human authorship, authorized synthetic performance, and artistic value.

Metadata may have to carry more of that burden.

For most of the recording era, metadata mainly answered questions such as: What is this track? Who performed it? Who wrote it? Which label released it? Who owns the relevant rights?

It may increasingly need to answer additional questions. Was the voice synthetic? Was it authorized? Did AI generate the lyrics, performance, instrumentation, or only assist post-production? Is the release eligible for a chart? Is the provenance of the work documented?

The IFPI's 2026 chart principles are an early institutional example. They allow appropriate AI use while drawing boundaries around human-led creation, authorized services, fraud, legal compliance, and disclosure.[4]

Those rules will change. The direction is already visible: provenance can become part of value.

Market Rules Are Choices, Not Laws of Nature

Throughout this book, we encountered systems that can easily look inevitable because they are already embedded in infrastructure.

They are not inevitable.

How streaming revenue is allocated, how charts convert different types of consumption, how playlists are built, how fraud is excluded, how loudness is normalized, and how AI-assisted recordings become eligible for charts are institutional choices.

Payment rules provide a particularly clear example.

SoundCloud replaced its old pooled model for eligible directly monetized artists with fan-powered royalties in 2021. Under that model, an eligible artist's SoundCloud royalties are tied more directly to the subscription and advertising revenue associated with the fans who actually listen to that artist.[5] That model is not automatically superior in every market or for every artist. It demonstrates that pro-rata pooling is not a technical law of streaming.

U.S. mechanical royalties make the same point from a different direction. The statutory rates applied to covered digital uses under the MLC blanket license are determined through Copyright Royalty Board proceedings. The current Phonorecords IV period covers 2023 through 2027.[6] The formulas are complicated, but the institutional fact is simple: the rules are set, contested, revised, and applied through a legal process. They do not emerge naturally from the existence of streaming technology.

Internationally, Deezer and SACEM's artist-centric experiment provides yet another model for certain French

songwriter-right distributions. It should not be treated as a U.S. equivalent. It is useful precisely because it shows that other jurisdictions and companies can make different choices about what to reward.[7]

Technology creates possibilities. Institutions decide which possibilities become rules.

Concentration and Diversity Can Coexist

Abundance creates a lasting paradox.

Never has so much different music been technically accessible.

Attention can still remain highly concentrated.

Those two facts are compatible.

An enormous catalog can support tiny scenes while a small fraction of tracks still captures a large share of listening.

Digital distribution therefore allows both global blockbusters and careers that never need to become mainstream.

A geographically scattered audience that would have been difficult to serve through physical distribution can now form a viable niche. A few listeners in hundreds of cities can become a meaningful public when the cost of reaching them is low enough.

The bottleneck is no longer simply getting the work into the market. It is helping the people who might care actually find it.

That makes good intermediation especially important for niches: specialized media, college and community radio, trusted curators, independent venues, scene-specific festivals, fan communities, labels, newsletters, playlists, and recommendation systems that do not require a work to be globally popular before it can be discoverable.

Old and New Rarely Replace One Another Completely

The record was supposed to kill live performance. Radio was supposed to kill records. Cassettes were supposed to kill the record business. Downloading was supposed to kill the CD. Streaming was supposed to kill the album.

Some formats really did shrink. Some business models disappeared.

But music history is often additive rather than purely substitutive.

Vinyl still exists. Radio still exists. Concerts remain central. Albums still exist. Downloads declined without ownership disappearing completely.

AI will probably follow the same pattern.

It will remove some tasks, create new markets, commoditize some production, and change creative practice. That does not mean it will remove every reason humans want to make music, perform together, or listen to other humans.

Technology changes the conditions under which value is created. It does not decide cultural value by itself.

Synthetic abundance may even strengthen the value of situated human experience.

A concert, improvisation, rehearsal room, scene, community, imperfect performance, or verifiable personal history has a property that cannot be reproduced merely by generating a plausible audio file: it happened between particular people in a particular context.

That does not mean audiences will demand that all music be human-made.

It means human provenance may become an explicit attribute rather than an assumption.

Listeners Choose Gatekeepers Too

In a limited catalog, the listener depends heavily on whoever controls distribution.

In an enormous catalog, listeners depend more heavily on systems of filtering.

Following artists, building playlists, subscribing to critics, listening to college or community radio, joining fan communities, choosing albums, ignoring autoplay, or trusting a particular curator are all ways of organizing attention.

No listener can explore everything.

Autonomy therefore does not mean discovering everything alone.

It also means choosing whom — and which systems — to trust for discovery.

After Abundance, What Deserves to Count?

The history of the music industry can be told as a history of technologies.

This book points toward another reading.

Each major shift changes the relationship among four things: creation, distribution, selection, and value.

When creation was difficult, the act of producing a record itself created a form of scarcity. When distribution was scarce, getting a record into stores or onto radio mattered enormously. When the catalog becomes almost limitless, production and availability alone are no longer enough.

The work still has to be chosen.

Then replayed.

Then remembered.

Then valued enough for a relationship to form.

This is where economics and aesthetics meet.

An industry can optimize discovery, measure engagement, allocate royalties, and manufacture visibility. It cannot guarantee that a work becomes important to someone.

Music After Abundance

Music does not disappear because it becomes abundant.

Its central problem changes.

For a long time, value and scarcity were easy to confuse because making and distributing a recorded work imposed obvious costs and limits.

Now production and distribution are becoming less capable of filtering what exists.

The filtering function moves toward attention, trust, reputation, provenance, and meaning.

That can make the environment noisier, more competitive, and more unstable.

It can also allow more people to create, more niches to survive, and more works to find an audience without first obtaining permission from one central institution.

Both can be true at once.

Abundance is neither complete liberation nor catastrophe by itself.

It is a transformation of constraints.

And after abundance, the rarest resource may be the one that gave music its value long before there was a music industry at

all: the attention of another person who is moved enough to listen again.

Notes

[1] Spotify for Artists, “The 2025 Spotify for Artists Recap” / Fan Study. Company data: super listeners average about 2% of an artist’s monthly listeners but generate more than 18% of monthly streams and roughly half of ticket sales made through Spotify. <https://artists.spotify.com/blog/the-2025-spotify-for-artists-recap>

[2] Bandcamp for Artists / About Bandcamp. Bandcamp describes direct fan messaging, pricing control, sales history, and an average artist/label share of 82% of purchase money after its revenue share and payment-processing fees. <https://bandcamp.com/artists> ; <https://bandcamp.com/about>

[3] Deezer Newsroom, July 21, 2026. Platform-specific data: roughly 90,000 fully AI-generated tracks per day, over 50% of uploads at peak, but only about 1–3% of streams. <https://newsroom-deezer.com/2026/07/ai-music-exceeds-50-percent-daily-uploads-deezer/>

[4] IFPI, “Global Principles for the Eligibility of Recordings Developed Using AI in Official Music Charts Worldwide,” July 30, 2026. <https://www.ifpi.org/ifpi-rolls-out-global-principles-for-the-eligibility-of-recordings-developed-using-ai-in-official-music-charts-worldwide/>

[5] SoundCloud Help Center, “Fan-powered Royalties.” SoundCloud states that since April 1, 2021 eligible directly monetized artists are paid under a fan-powered model in which revenue is tied to their fans’ listening, subscriptions, and advertising activity rather than a single service-wide pooled share. This is SoundCloud’s model and does not apply to royalties generated on external DSPs. <https://help.soundcloud.com/hc/en-us/articles/1260801306810-Fan-powered-Royalties-FAQs>

[6] The Mechanical Licensing Collective, royalty-rate FAQs. U.S. statutory mechanical rates and terms for covered digital uses are set by the Copyright Royalty Board in rate proceedings; Phonorecords IV applies to 2023–2027. <https://www.themlc.com/faqs/categories/royalty-payments>

[7] SACEM / Deezer, 2025 artist-centric model for certain French songwriter-right distributions. Retained as an explicitly international comparison, not as a U.S. equivalent.

WHAT IS THE NOOSOPHICAL MOVEMENT?

The Noosophical movement is a project of research, transmission, and transformation. It seeks to understand reality more accurately, connect bodies of knowledge that are often studied separately, make important knowledge accessible, and turn understanding into works, practices, tools, or institutions that can be confronted with their effects and revised.

It is not limited to philosophy. It can work on education, health, agriculture, economics, politics, human relationships, culture, institutions, science, spirituality, artificial intelligence, and other domains. Depending on the subject, it may produce a book, a method, an experiment, a critique, a practical tool, or an institutional proposal.

One of the movement's central ideas is that accumulating knowledge is not enough. We also need to learn how to connect fields without collapsing them into one another. Understanding agriculture, for example, requires us to look at soils, plants, energy, economics, labor, food habits, and environmental effects together. But connecting those dimensions does not mean reducing them to one explanation. Each field keeps its own methods and standards of evidence.

The movement also aims to transmit. Important knowledge should not depend entirely on a lucky encounter, the social environment a person happened to be born into, or a discovery made too late. Part of Noosophical work is therefore to identify, verify, condense, and make genuinely accessible the knowledge that can help people understand the world more clearly, care for themselves, exercise their rights, and gain greater autonomy.

The movement takes its name from Noosophy. In its philosophical use, Noosophy refers to a truth or structure of reality that exists independently of how human beings understand it. The world does not become true because we have managed to explain it. It exists and operates independently of our theories, beliefs, and institutions. We can understand some parts of it correctly, be mistaken about others, or still perceive only a small part of what is there.

For that reason, the Noosophical movement does not treat its own texts as infallible. An idea must remain open to comparison with available knowledge, objection, testing where testing is possible, and correction when it does not hold up well against reality.

Noosophy is therefore not only something to think about. The Noosophical movement seeks to make what is understood useful, transmissible, and capable of producing real-world transformation — while remaining open to correction from the effects that follow.

HOW THIS BOOK WAS MADE

The production of this book proceeded through successive stages rather than through automatic generation of a complete manuscript. The subject, goals, and overall direction were first defined by a human. Noosophy AI then contributed to exploring the subject, researching and comparing sources, developing possible structures, and bringing forward arguments, objections, and areas of uncertainty.

The French manuscript was developed progressively, chapter by chapter. Proposals were reviewed, discussed, corrected, or rejected when they did not fit the project, relied on insufficiently supported claims, or simplified the subject too aggressively. Distinct phases of documentary research, drafting, criticism, coherence checking, and assembly were used when needed.

The U.S. adaptation followed the same discipline with an additional constraint: contextual change had to be explicit. A French or European fact was not replaced by an American fact merely because the topics looked similar. When the legal system, market, institution, population, or listening practice changed the meaning of a claim, the relevant U.S. evidence was researched and the argument was rebuilt around it. International evidence was retained when its function was genuinely international or mechanistic.

Artificial intelligence is therefore not treated as an authority in this process. It acts as an active tool for research, formulation, comparison, tension-testing, and local correction. Its proposals can be mistaken and remain revisable.

This edition results from that iterative process and was released after final human validation. The method is intended to use the capabilities of artificial intelligence without transferring

to it the decisions that concern the aims of the book, value judgments, irreversible editorial choices, or the decision to publish.

ABOUT HIERONYMUS ANONYMUS

Hieronymus Anonymus is the human initiator of the Integrative Noosophy project. His work focuses on connecting fields of knowledge and practice that are usually kept separate, and on experimenting with new forms of collaboration between human beings and artificial intelligence. He participates in the design, discussion, revision, and human validation of work published by Éditions Noosophie.

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Recorded music has passed through successive regimes of scarcity: the scarce performance, the scarce record, the scarce shelf space, the scarce broadcast slot. Streaming changed the problem. Access became abundant; attention did not.

This book traces that shift and what it changed. It examines how music is financed and paid for, how artists became part of their own media system, why recordings sound different, how platforms and gatekeepers influence discovery, what a sustainable career now demands, and what generative AI adds to a market already overflowing with music.

The central question is not whether commerce simply corrupts art. It is what happens when an art becomes a commodity—when creation, distribution, visibility, rights, and survival are organized through industrial systems. In an age of near-infinite supply, the scarce resource may no longer be music itself, but attention, trust, and the desire to listen again.

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