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TECH Has the Internet Really Killed Creative Arts?

# Has the Internet Really Killed Creative Arts?

BY MICHAEL THOMSEN | OCT 15, 2013 | 4:42 PM | PERMALINK

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## Spotify, Pandora, and the changing landscape for artists in the Internet age.

In the early days of the 21st Century, Daniel Levitin, a record producer turned neuroscientist, helped popularize the idea that timbre—the texture or character of a sound—had become as important as melody and harmony in musical composition. His famous experiments [showed how most people could identify a song from a single note](#). The mode of a thing's production, and the medium necessary for mass distribution, left subconscious imprints on music in a way that overpowers the song itself.

This is what makes the original studio recording of a song comparatively more valuable than a recording of someone performing the same song at a karaoke bar or humming it on the sidewalk. It's also helped underscore our present sense of music as an abstract but containable thing that can be manufactured en masse, copyrighted, and controlled by corporations that claim ownership over it.

In a lament for *The Guardian*, former Talking Heads member [David Byrne points out that musicians' share of the corporate spoils of this industry have greatly diminished in recent years](#), largely because of a distribution model that sees Internet streaming services like Spotify and Pandora.

"For a band of four people that makes a 15% royalty from Spotify streams," Byrne writes, "it would take 236,549,020 streams for each person to earn a minimum wage of \$15,080 a year. For perspective, Daft Punk's song of the summer, 'Get Lucky' reached 104,760,000 Spotify streams by the end of August: the two Daft Punk guys stand to make somewhere around \$13,000 each."

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Byrne's argument is an over-familiar one, making the dilemma a false binary between makers and consumers: on the one hand a generation that recognizes monetary limits on their curiosity and cultural participation to be absurd; and on the other musicians who feel stressed to a breaking point in giving their energy to a practice that doesn't offer commensurate repayment. Yet, since a large part of what consumers respond to in music is its qualities of machined reproduction and distribution, it seems dubious that musicians can be made central to the industry again.

This is not an especially comforting or hopeful fact, but it clarifies the disposability of most art and most people behind it. As long as it has been a commercial good for mass markets, music has depended on the creation of a churning zeitgeist that makes participation feel like an imperative, something that, even if you don't care for *Remain in Light* or *Bangerz*, you're encouraged to at least become familiar with them to participate in the community of arguments, proclamations, and power struggles that surround them. Ad-driven subscription streams are the ideal endstate of the economic model that made people like David Byrne celebrities only a few generations ago.

Within Byrne's complaint is a deeper current of economic distress sprung from what's been branded as the sharing economy, a theoretical framework that allows companies to book profit from both creator and consumer while producing nothing. From Airbnb to Etsy, a new variety of networks are flourishing with the goal to reconvert excess goods or creativity back into money. The company Feastly goes as far as allowing aspiring cooks to build party menus and sell admissions to local strangers, an attempt to "democratize dining" the [company's co-founder told the Wall Street Journal](#).

In a story for the *Financial Times*, [Evgeny Morozov argues](#) that the flourishing for these micro-entrepreneurial networks has coincided with "the erosion of full-time employment, the disappearance of healthcare and insurance benefits, the assault on unions and the transformation of workers into always-on self-employed entrepreneurs who must think like brands." The plight of the profit-less musician is not a simple matter of freeloaders and it's not a uniquely different problem than that of the profit-less auto worker, whose discovered his presence in the economy is suddenly less necessary than it seemed in a few generations earlier.

It's obviously untrue to suggest the Internet has made the world a less creative place, but it has dissolved the vocational structures that supported the old modes of creativity and made it seem like being a musician was a substantively different calling than being an electrician or garbage collector. What has emerged from the wreckage of that old system is a model of even simpler exploitation, which produces fewer and fewer objects and instead installs toll booths on social bonds then makes both producer and consumer feel guilty for short changing the other.

Music doesn't need artists to make anthems known to millions of people around the world. There is something predictably mathematical about music that ensures [songs will sound not so unlike one another](#) with or without Kings of Pop and Queens of Soul. What musicians do need is money, and in this they are like all of us. The harder it is for those who've gotten used to living apart, supporting a dreamy lifestyle on the excesses of a multinational distribution empires, the more apparent that music was only one small piece of what it was we were buying through them. It was maybe even, perversely, the least important thing.

*Michael Thomsen is Complex's tech columnist. He has written for Slate, The Atlantic, The New Inquiry, n+1, Billboard, and is author of Levitate the Primate: Handjobs, Internet Dating, and Other Issues for Men. He tweets often at @mike\_thomsen.*

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