

Music Streaming Services Are Gaslighting Us

[Darren Hemmings](#)

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I feel that in recent weeks I have had something of a “road to Damascus” moment around my consumption of music. Let me start with setting out how I was feeling 2–3 weeks ago about my own music-listening habits:

1. I could never find new music to listen to. Yes, I had infinite algorithms at my disposal, but nothing meaningful ever really connected with me.

2. I realised it was harder and

harder to find any editorial that steered me toward artists and releases worth checking out.

3. I realised, on reflection, that my once voracious appetite for new music and that excitement of discovering something amazing had dissipated. In its place was a tired cycle of just hoping I might stumble into something good through blind luck. Now and then I would find something amazing, but with no real direction. They were lightning strikes, nothing more.

This is music consumption in 2019. Music journalism is in decline. Sites are closing down because ad revenue alone won’t keep the lights on, leaving fewer platforms for great articles to live on. Those that do exist are increasingly hard to find—or at least it feels that way to me.

Alongside this, we have a chronic abundance problem—one that dovetails into a much broader societal issue. Silicon Valley recognised that in a digital realm, you can have everything of everything. This is why we are all glued to our phones, because with infinite content—however facile—to Hoover up, we gorge away; a fairly literal representation of [Huxley’s “amusing ourselves to death”](#). This end result is not a positive step; we are burning ourselves out and [mental health issues are constantly on the rise](#). Quite simply, we as humans were not made for an “always on” lifestyle.

With music, the same thing has happened. By giving us everything of everything, we overload and take nothing of anything, overwhelmed in the face of it all.

Picture this. The year is nineteen-ninety-something, and you walk into your local indie record store. You have an album by an artist that you like and want to find

more music like that, as it has really blown your mind. Instead of the person behind the counter selecting a few albums to check out, they call out 20 guys from the back, who start loading your car with the entire contents of the shop; thousands of albums. Then they hook a trailer on the back and give you fifty thousand more, and they let you drive off with the lot for just £10. Why? Because you said you liked indie rock, or hip hop, or whatever top-level genre.

Now, within those thousands of albums might be a gem, or even a few. There might be another band who, to paraphrase [The Minutemen](#) (and [Michael Azzerad](#)), could be your life. But with thousands of albums to now wade through, you just give up. In the face of it all, it overwhelms you. You can't store this stuff, very little of it is familiar, and mentally you're overwhelmed.

This is how it is to be a music fan in 2019.

We are constantly being told by the likes of Spotify that they can enhance our music discovery. Algorithms and their own curated playlists should give us no end of music to enjoy. But the sheer volume, coupled with zero friction, results in the much-cited "[paradox of choice](#)". Selecting anything is horribly hard, but equally, with zero friction in accessing it, no emotional investment is made and our own consumption becomes entirely shallow. We listen for 10 seconds and move on. It has become so bad that [songs themselves are getting shorter](#), acknowledging this very fact.

Furthermore, this whole process of recommendation is weak in construct and poor in execution. Music has always existed in a broader context. There are stories to tell, scenes it fits into—whole cultural movements it is a part of. When it is just "Artist Name—Track Title" in a list however, stripped of all of that context, much of the meaning we attach is simply lost and its own value diminished.

At every step of the way, streaming services are essentially gaslighting us that this ecosystem is an amazing new development. Just like Silicon Valley in general, there is this mindset that having everything available all the time is a good thing. It isn't—and it is arguably damaging art and culture as a result.

Alongside this, payment models on streaming services seem superficially fair but in truth do not favour the small act, the people on the rise. Daniel Ek tells us that he wants to have [millions of artists making a living from streaming services](#), but—and here comes that gaslighting again—behind that benevolent statement is a reality in which any artist must hit millions of streams in order to actually generate income of any meaningful amount. And, as an industry, everyone appears to be accepting that, like it is now perfectly correct wisdom. But it isn't, and someone needs to call that out.

For me, the revelatory moment was stumbling into an article on Bandcamp about [the best beat tape releases of the month](#). I'll be honest; I'm very familiar with Bandcamp and have met the team a few times etc, but have never been a big user. However this article blew my mind, recommending a bunch of releases that absolutely bowled me over. For the first time in ages, I had that rush of discovering something amazing, followed by that equally awesome situation where you follow a breadcrumb trail of a couple of other recommendations, having your mind blown again and again along the way.

The bulk of the music I was bugging out over was not on Spotify—something I don't think was a coincidence. So I paid up and bought some of the releases. That's when an old, familiar truth circled back on me: paying for music made me listen to it more. As I'd had to part with my hard-earned to get it, I was playing it over and over.

In 2019, artists need meaningful patronage, not a speech about how they could get more streams. That patronage might come from merch or other means, but it should come from music too. As someone who makes his living from the music industry, it also occurred to me that frankly, I owe these people. Without them, I wouldn't have this job that I love.

For that reason, I made a decision: every month I am going to ringfence £100 and spend it supporting artists I love. Not to get things; just to support them via channels that are meaningful. I will be blunt here: streaming Tall Black Guy's incredible music on Spotify won't help keep his lights on unless you do it millions of times. But [buying his music on Bandcamp, or subscribing to his club to get all his music plus exclusives](#)? That will, because out of that £20 (for the membership), around £17 will go straight to him.

“Ah,” I hear you cry, “but discovering Tall Black Guy's music on Spotify might mean you then buy a t-shirt, or see him live, so you are patronising him in other ways”. There's truth in this, but I think at its core is the main issue above—i.e. that these streaming platforms do a lousy job of editorial and telling that story. So I did not discover this artist on Spotify, nor was I ever likely to. Equally, in buying Tall Black Guy's music on Bandcamp, he can now stay in touch with me directly as a fan. On Spotify, Apple Music and the rest, that simply isn't the case; I am just another consumer the artist cannot reach.

Silicon Valley has led us to believe this “everything of everything” model is a good one. We now rent access to things rather than own them. But without ownership, perceived value is diminished. If you could just switch your car out any time you had an accident or bumped it while parking, you'd be far less bothered. However you cannot do that; crashing your car costs you a lot, and so you make damn sure you drive carefully.

The same applies around music: context is being stripped out in favour of cold, context-free interfaces. By not paying for this music, we care little for it. In the process, this is all devolving to a state where music that provokes no response whatsoever appears to do better than music that gets hated. Why? Because algorithms mistake ambivalence for fandom.

Will this situation change? No, I suspect not. I fear it reveals an awkward truth, however, that streaming services are just an evolution of radio, and not a replacement for CDs or whatever format of choice that dictated a more proactive listening experience. But radio is not inherently valued; it is “just there” and the reason we do not pay to listen to it is because advertisers pay to invade our attention with their messaging. If we had to pay, I suspect it would have died as a model years ago, as it inherently appeals to the casual listener.

That may well be the future for streaming media too. Statistically, it is already levelling out; [in 2018 the growth in the number of paid-streaming users was 44.9%. In 2017 it was 57.1%](#). The reason Spotify is branching into podcasts etc might well

be because it knows that there are few new means to acquire paying users now. Furthermore [the Average Revenue Per User has been in decline too](#). The more this model grows, the more inefficient it becomes as a means to generate revenue for artists.

In the face of this, music becomes a victim. New artists will struggle because the volumes of consumption they need to earn a liveable wage are significantly higher than ever. Ironically however, most could achieve this if they just enact a model where fans must pay for the music. [Southern Lord](#) is one example of a label who continues to avoid streaming platforms—and the fact they are now 21 years old might in fact be telling as to this approach working. The focus should not be on millions of more casual streamers, a good chunk of whom are hearing you as one of a hundred songs on a playlist; it should be something closer to [the theory of 1,000 true fans](#) instead.

Thomas Hesse recently [wrote an article opining that 20% of streamers drive the majority of the profits](#), and should be focused on far more. If that is the case, I would argue that this is where something like Bandcamp can do a much better job of connecting superfans with artists. With things like its [subscription options](#) and [crowdfunded vinyl pressing](#), a profitable, meaningful direct relationship between artist and fan is maintained.

In the meantime though, if like me you work in music, consider the approach I have taken. Focus on spending a bit more money on artist channels that actually benefit them in a meaningful way. We need an equivalent to the Fair Trade mark in coffee; means to understand that when you spend money on an artist, they are the main beneficiary and not the platform. Without it, the grass roots—the fertile space from which brilliant, globally-known artists emerge—will dry up into cultural vapidness and outright mediocrity.