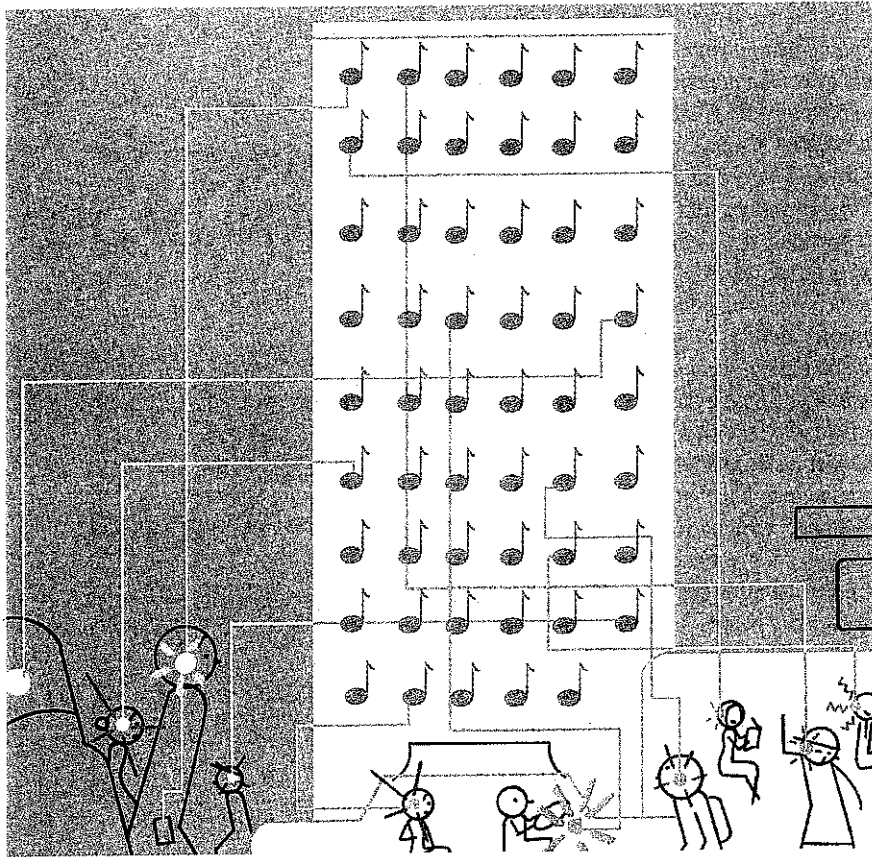


## YOU, THE D.J.

*Online music moves to the cloud.*

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

*Listeners can now access their music wherever the Internet is available.*

No one knows what the future of the music business will look like, but the near future of *listening* to music looks a lot like 1960. People will listen, for free, to music that comes out of a stationary box that sits indoors. They'll listen to music that comes from an object that fits in the hand, and they'll listen to music in the car. That box was once a radio or a stereo; now it's a computer. The handheld device that was once a plastic AM radio is now likely to be a smart phone. The car is still a car, though its stereo now plays satellite radio and MP3s. But behind the similarities is a series of subtle shifts in software and portability that may relocate the experience of listening—even if nobody has come close to replacing the concept of the radio d.j., whose job lingers as a template for much software.

"Of the twenty hours a week that an average American spends listening to music, only three of it is stuff you own. The rest is radio," Tim Westergren told me. Westergren is the founder of Pandora, one of several firms that have brought the radio model to the Internet. Pandora offers free, streaming music, not so different from the radio stations that many people grew up with, except that the d.j. is you, more or less. The company does not sell music—like normal radio, Internet radio is considered a promotional tool for recordings, even though the fees that it pays to labels are currently higher than those paid by terrestrial stations.

If you go to Pandora, on the Web or on a phone, you begin by picking a song or an artist, which then establishes a

"station." Pandora's proprietary algorithm, in which a panel of musicians assesses about four hundred variables, like "bravado level in vocals" and "piano style," for each song, leads you from what you chose to a song that seems to fit with it, musically. You also have the option to teach the algorithm, by giving a song a thumbs up or a thumbs down. The company has captured a very large chunk of the Internet-radio audience—the service now has fifty million users, who listen an average of more than eleven hours a month.

The Pandora experience isn't much like being guided by a d.j. on a radio station—at least, not yet. (That delicious unpredictability is now approximated by the thousands of mixtapes and podcasts that are released by individuals on the Web, free of charge, every day.) I started my station with Public Image Ltd's "Poptones," a 1979 song that is loaded with bass, dissonant guitar, and the sinus bray of John Lydon, once known as Johnny Rotten. The band's sound is deeply indebted to reggae—the original bassist was named Jah Wobble—but I couldn't make a reggae song appear on my Poptones station. I did get lots of bands I like: the Minutemen, the Birthday Party, and Fugazi, who all make aggressive music that, like Public Image's, is heavy on articulate rhythm and acidic guitar.

After skipping six songs, I received this message on my iPhone app: "Sorry, our music licenses force us to limit the number of songs you may skip." Pandora is acting like a radio station, not like a replacement for a potential sale—you can't keep skipping until it plays what you want.

On a recent car trip I took through Florida, Pandora was perfect: I plugged in my phone, hit a couple of buttons, and was rewarded with ninety minutes of instrumental hip-hop.

The most popular alternative to the broadcast model is "on demand," which usually charges a subscription fee in return for the ability to choose exactly which song you'd like to hear. In Europe, the most prominent such service is Spotify, a Swedish company that has grown rapidly in the past year. In America, where Spotify has yet to debut, one of the biggest on-demand players is MOG, a new service that offers a wide

array of listening options, the least expensive of which costs five dollars a month. MOG offers the option of streaming 320-kilobyte-per-second files, the highest available digital quality, though customers have been reluctant to pay extra for greater audio fidelity.

With MOG, you can play entire albums, create playlists, or let the service perform the same kind of algorithmic radio function that Pandora provides. (While listening to a song, you pull a slider all the way to the right; the software suggests related artists and tracks.) You can also share playlists with other users. I looked up the German rock band Can, and saw, on the right side of my Web browser, a small box called "Popular Playlists Featuring Can." I clicked on one playlist called "Irritation Mix," created by a user named Scottfree, whose avatar picture looks like Iron Man. The Can track included was the spacey instrumental "Spray," from the 1973 album "Future Days." The rest of the playlist leaned on seventies rock—the Faces, Mott the Hoople, Iggy & the Stooges—but used recent tracks to keep things pleasantly unpredictable: Lady Sovereign's bubbly dance track "Blah Blah" and a track called "Johnny Depp," by the sixties revivalists Chocolat, from Montreal.

I didn't care for a few of the songs, but the experience was much more like grappling with a d.j. than like watching a piece of software operate. I learned about two bands I didn't know, was reminded of beloved tracks I had forgotten, and didn't listen to anything I already had in mind. Scottfree's playlist didn't last as long as a good d.j.'s shift; the burden is on the user to find other appealing users and more lists, and to build the experience. In some ways, it's an improvement on the radio model: the number of potentially appealing d.j.s here dwarfs what you might have once found on radio.


The broadcast and on-demand models are governed by different rules, but they share one important feature: neither depends on downloading files or finding storage space on a personal computer. Lurking behind these models are two enormous companies that will likely change the landscape of online audio in a matter of months: Google and Apple.

Google will soon offer a streaming music service for its Android phone that, like all of these services, uses the increasingly vital concept of the cloud—your music is all on a server, which you can access from any computer or smart phone, with little trouble and no wires. Apple, whose iTunes store is the biggest music retailer in America, bought the online streaming service Lala last year and then promptly shut it down. This suggests that there may soon be an iTunes.com, a Web-based streaming system that will leave behind the model of buying discrete tracks. In music's new model, fees are charged not necessarily so that you can physically possess a file but so that you can have that song whenever you want it.

An album "collection" is no longer relevant for many listeners. Limited only by the number of songs offered by any service—MOG offers nearly eight million—they can create as many playlists as they like, and access them from almost any device. Whoever comes up with the most powerful and elegant version of the streaming model will have a very big portal. If iTunes becomes a dominant radio force, it could control an overwhelming portion of the music business. Google owns YouTube, which already serves as a sort of ad-hoc radio station for many young people. If Google's streaming service works well with its Android applications and creates a music-bundling system, it, too, could take over a large share of the market.

While using these services, I kept thinking about an early-eighties drum machine called the Roland TR-808, which has seduced generations of musicians with its heavy kick-drum sound and the oddly human swing of its clock. Whoever programmed this box had more impact on dance music than the hundreds of better-known musicians who used the device. Similarly, the anonymous programmers who write the algorithms that control the series of songs in these streaming services may end up having a huge effect on the way that people think of musical narrative—what follows what, and who sounds best with whom. Sometimes we will be the d.j.s, and sometimes the machines will be, and we may be surprised by which we prefer. ♦

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