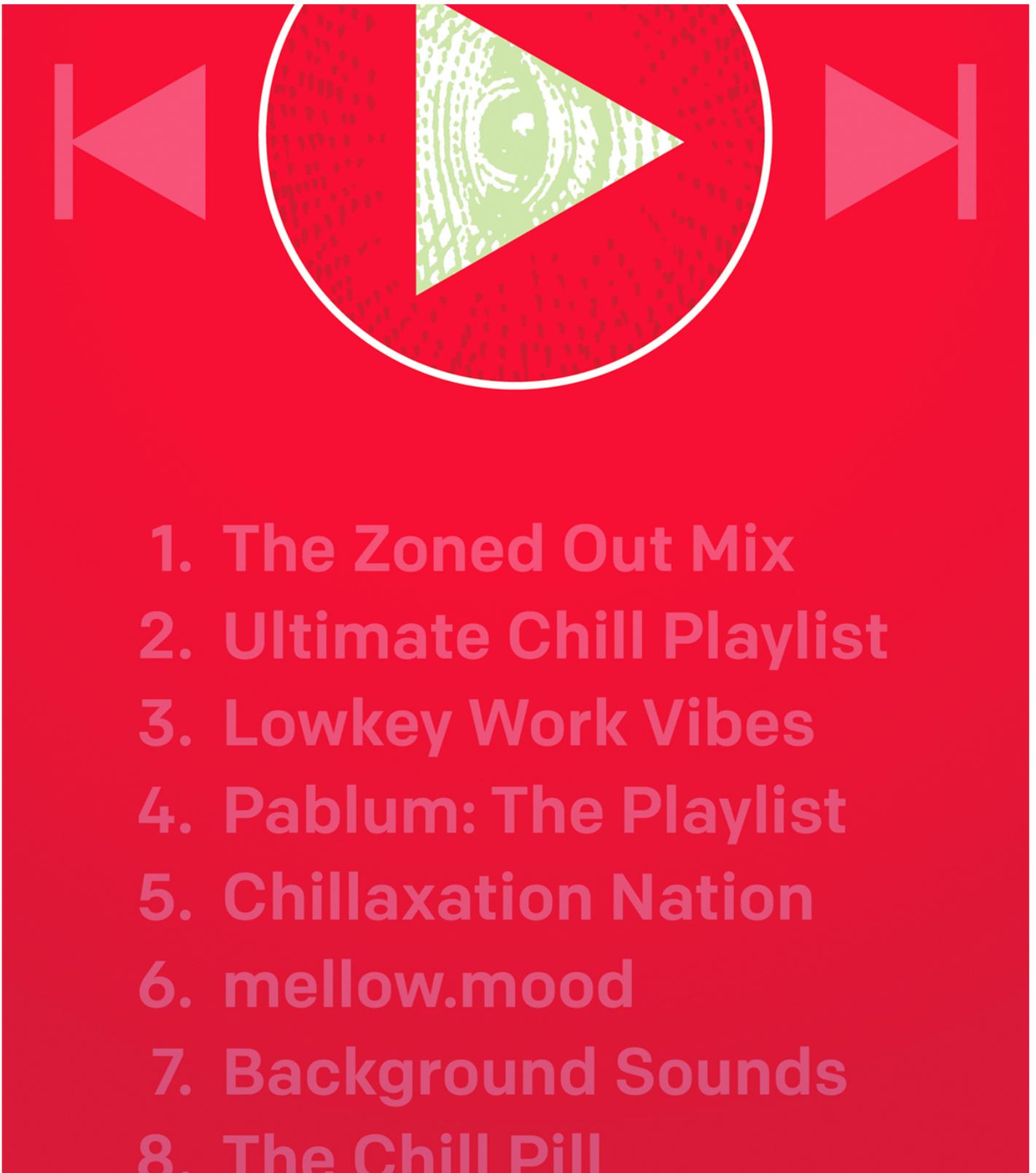


Liz Pelly
No. 37

The Problem with Muzak

Spotify's bid to remodel an industry





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*“Anything you want.
Anyone you want.
Anywhere you want.*

Anyway! Anyway!

—Priests, “Pink White House” (2017)

IMAGINE YOU ARE IN AN AIRPORT, and you have forgotten to eat lunch. It’s a mistake you will pay for with a dull, expensive dinner. Hungry, meandering, you happen upon one of those iPads that line every other table, a machine that allows you to order without talking to other humans—a circumstance provided by capitalism’s boundless quest to cash in on convenience. Of course, this doesn’t make your experience any easier: within minutes, an employee scrambles over to assist you with the device, which keeps freezing when you choose the “bowls” tab. “Can I just tell you my order?” you ask, half-laughing, thoroughly hoping for a moment of commiserating solidarity over this disruptor™ fail. Instead she grabs the thing and helps you finalize your purchase. This person hates her job, but she’s lucky that, for the moment, she still has it.

This worker is teaching people to use the iPads that will one day replace her. It’s an awkward phenomenon that now pervades a growing cross-section of industries, a type of techno-solutionism that’s unbearable because it insistently capitalizes on quick fixes for problems that didn’t exist to begin with. It’s also a disadvantageous mutation of principles that marketers have historically leveraged to make us feel bad about ourselves so that we’ll buy more shit we don’t need. It is all of these things, and it is also becoming the operating motive of the music industry.

The music world continues to be exceedingly vulnerable, and there are looming questions that desperately need to be addressed. Most important: How can artists distribute and sell their work in a digital economy beholden to ruthlessly commercial and centralized interests?

Enter Spotify, a platform that is definitely not the answer. In fact, it only exacerbates such conundrums. Yet for now it has manipulated the vast majority of music industry “players” into regarding it as a saving grace. As the world’s largest streaming music company, its network of paying subscribers has risen sharply in recent years, from five million paid subscribers in 2012 to more than sixty million in 2017. Indeed, the platform has now convinced a critical mass that paying \$9.99 per month for access to thirty million songs is a solid, even virtuous idea. Every song in the world for less than your shitty airport meal. What could go wrong?

Billionaires have thrown a lot of money at Spotify. As of September 2017, the platform has been valued at \$16 billion by venture capitalists who see it as the next Netflix, and who have perhaps fooled themselves into trusting that this exploitative model will “save the music industry.” Spotify’s endgame, for now, is to go public. The company could be worth \$20 billion by next year, when it will likely be listed on the New York Stock Exchange. According to Reuters, Spotify plans to file its intention of a public offering with U.S. regulators before the end of this calendar year and to go public in the first or second quarter of 2018. Bloomberg reports that it recently hired Goldman Sachs Group Inc., Morgan Stanley, and Allen & Co. to “assess its options.”

Yet, despite its conventional market viability, there are key differences between Spotify and its rivals, Apple Music and Amazon Music, which both have the luxury of capitalizing on overpriced, fun-sized plastic and metal surveillance machines. For Apple Music, the bottom line is selling iPhones, laptops, iPads, and other hardware. Streaming music makes those products more valuable. For Amazon Music, the motive is similar; they aim to sell Alexa devices and Amazon Prime subscriptions.

But Spotify’s worth is more ephemeral. Its value—what makes it addictive for listeners, a necessity for artists, and a worthwhile investment for venture capitalists—lies in its algorithmic music discovery “products” and its ability to make the entire music industry conform to the new standards it sets. This means one thing: playlists are king, and particularly the ones curated by Spotify itself. An unprecedented amount of data (“skip rates” and “completion rates” determine whether a song survives) and “human-machine technology” are deployed to *quantify your tastes*. This is what lies behind the “magic” of Spotify.

Spotify and Chill

To understand the danger Spotify poses to the music industry—and to music itself—you first have to dig beneath the “user experience” and examine its algorithmic schemes. Spotify’s front page “Browse” screen presents a classic illusion of choice, a stream of genre and mood playlists, charts, new releases, and now podcasts and video. It all appears limitless, a function of the platform’s infinite supply, but in reality it is tightly controlled by Spotify’s staff and dictated by the interests of major labels, brands, and other cash-rich businesses who have gamed the system. On Monday, you’ll find “Discover Weekly,” an algorithmically created playlist of recommendations based on your listening habits. On Friday, there’s “New Music

Friday,” a highly coveted and well trafficked playlist of mostly Top-40 content, thoroughly inaccessible to anyone but major labels. The rest of the front page arrangement depends on the date and time, but you’ll likely see one of its most prized brands—like the popular and also major label-saturated “RapCaviar”—or else music that somehow opportunistically rides the news cycle: Which celebrity musician died today? Otherwise, you’ll find songs tied to moods or activities, like “Good Vibes” or “Wild + Free.” And you will most certainly see something along the lines of “Chilled Folk,” “Chill Hits,” “Evening Chill,” “Chilled R&B,” “Indie Chillout,” or “Chill Tracks.”

Spotify loves “chill” playlists: they’re the purest distillation of its ambition to turn all music into emotional wallpaper. They’re also tied to what its algorithm manipulates best: mood and affect. Note how the generically designed, nearly stock photo images attached to these playlists rely on the selfsame clickbait-y tactics of content farms, which are famous for attacking a reader’s basest human moods and instincts. Only here the goal is to fit music snugly into an emotional regulation capsule optimized for maximum clicks: “chill.out.brain,” “Ambient Chill,” “Chill Covers.” “Piano in the Background” is one of the most aptly titled; “in the background” could be added to the majority of Spotify playlists.

As an industry insider once explained to me, digital strategists have identified “lean back listening” as an ever more popular Spotify-induced phenomenon. It turns out that playlists have spawned a new type of music listener, one who thinks less about the artist or album they are seeking out, and instead connects with emotions, moods and activities, where they just pick a playlist and let it roll: “Chillin’ On a Dirt Road,” “License to Chill,” “Cinematic Chill Out.” They’re all there.

These algorithmically designed playlists, in other words, have seized on an audience of distracted, perhaps overworked, or anxious listeners whose stress-filled clicks now generate anesthetized, algorithmically designed playlists. One independent label owner I spoke with has watched his records’ physical and digital sales decline week by week. He’s trying to play ball with the platform by pitching playlists, to varying effect. “The more vanilla the release, the better it works for Spotify. If it’s challenging music? Nah,” he says, telling me about all of the experimental, noise, and comparatively aggressive music on his label that goes unheard on the platform. “It leaves artists behind. If Spotify is just feeding easy music to everybody, where does the art form go? Is anybody going to be able to push boundaries and break through to a wide audience anymore?”

We should call this what it is: the automation of selling out.

Indeed, Spotify's obsession with mood and activity-based playlists has contributed to all music becoming more like Muzak, a brand that created, programmed, and licensed songs for retail stores throughout the twentieth century. In the 1930s, the company prioritized workplace soundtracks that were meant to heighten productivity, using research to evaluate what listeners responded to most. In many ways, this is not unlike the playlist category called "Focus" that we see now on Spotify. In March 2011, Muzak was purchased by Mood Media, a company that provides in-store music, signs, scents, and video content. The similarity between the objectives of companies like Muzak and Mood Media, and the proliferation of mood-based playlists on Spotify, is more than just a linguistic coincidence; Spotify playlists work to attract brands and advertisers of all types to the platform.

The Automation of Selling Out

Advertising and branding products are used all over Spotify: videos, audio, commercial breaks, clickable image pop-ups, overlays, the sponsoring of (extremely popular) Spotify-owned playlists, the sponsoring of live session videos, home page takeovers, and standalone advertisements. Some are banner advertisements, others are advertorial, and still others blur the line. And this is part of a grander confusion: the very idea of what it means to be an "independent artist" in 2017 has been eroded as more and more artists find themselves beholden to corporate platforms of all types.

Spotify also presents a new and complicated extension of hyper-commercial webspace, and it's a development that could prove to be particularly harmful for musicians: the corporate-branded playlists. This "feature" could be explained as the platform's interpretation of corporate personhood, where paid-for brand accounts can create their own profiles and make playlists in the manner of the platform's regular users. This has led to a proliferation of playlists made by brands. For example: the "Coffeehouse Pop" made by the official Starbucks page, or the "Running Tempo Mix" created by Nike Women. So long as corporations have at least twenty songs on their playlists and don't include an artist more than once, they're good. In the past, such an arrangement would require a given artist to sign a licensing or advertising deal, and it often appeared transactional, hence the

traditional notion of “selling out.” Today on Spotify, artists often have no idea they’ve been added to these playlists. I only managed to discover this phenomenon upon plugging a friend’s band name into a tool called “Spot On Track,” which uses Spotify’s public API to present the different playlists where specific artists and their tracks appear. My friend’s band was completely unaware of its inclusion on the Nike and Starbucks playlists, and the band receives no additional compensation beyond the usual streaming royalties sent to labels and rights-holders.

We should call this what it is: the automation of selling out. Only it subtracts the part where artists get paid. On their “Brand Playlist Guidelines” page linked within the company’s Terms and Conditions, Spotify offers telling advice to brands:

If you have a reason to believe a specific artist may have a problem with your brand, it’s probably smart to stay away from that artist . . . Keep your playlists editorial in nature; don’t try to make it a commercial for your product. Just like other Spotify users do, show the world what kind of music your brand likes to listen to while partying, driving, or enjoying a cup of coffee.

It is absurd to suggest that a playlist created by Bacardi, Gatorade, BMW, or Victoria’s Secret could exist for any purpose other than the sale of its liquor, sports drinks, cars, or fancy lingerie. And this encouragement of a false sense of objectivity found on its Terms of Service is seen nowhere on its “Spotify for Brands” website, where it has published a series of articles luring corporations to the platform: “In the biggest game of the year, many of the ads feature music front and center, whether it’s a big hit like Eminem’s ‘Lose Yourself’ [Chrysler’s memorable 2011 spot] or an indie jam like Hundred Waters’ ‘Show Me Love’ [Coca-Cola’s 2015 spot],” the article explains, directly equating branded playlists to an expression of commercialism. “Using music effectively can also mean curating the perfect playlist that reflects the sound of your brand.”

Brand playlists are advertisements, even if Spotify strives to imbue them with so-called editorial integrity. Such uncompensated advertorial playlists are harmful in that they offer artists no option to opt-out, but also because they undercut what can sometimes be a valuable source of revenue for artists. If brands can align themselves with artists without having to pay specifically for individual tracks or artist appearances, what do we think they’ll do? Can we at least give people the option to sell out if they want?

“For artists who do have those opportunities and are comfortable with it, sponsorships, as well as commercial syncs, can contribute an important revenue stream, a component of how they’re able to scrape together a living,” says Kevin Erickson of the Future of Music Coalition, when reached by phone in September. “If brands are able to use branded playlists to score extra cool points from the association with musicians, but without the expense of actually paying musicians anything extra for lending their aura of cool, without even having to obtain permission for the association—well, maybe we’ll start to see that revenue stream dry up too.”

No Platform

The avant-punk four-piece Deerhoof’s 2016 single “Plastic Thrills” is featured on “Nike Running Tempo Mix,” which boasts over five hundred thousand followers. The playlist is featured prominently on the “Workout” sub-page within Spotify’s Browse feature, along with a few other Nike playlists, which is considerably rare—not many playlists found through Browse are currently curated by brands other than Spotify itself or the major labels.

In conversation with Deerhoof drummer Greg Saunier about the Nike playlist, he recalls a time in 2007 when a group of artists filed a class action lawsuit against Camel cigarettes and *Rolling Stone* for publishing an advertorial on the history of indie rock, one that used more than one hundred artist names without permission. The band was happy to be included and inspired to see their peers push back against corporate exploitation. “The difference now is that, if you don’t bow down to Spotify, you might as well tell whoever runs the guillotine that’s above your neck to just let her rip,” Saunier says, as the band sits in their van, on tour, en route from Grand Rapids to Detroit. “These streaming services are literally the only option for a music career nowadays.”

Deerhoof is in a unique position: the band formed in 1994, and it has released more than a dozen albums since. Their career began well over a decade before streaming became the norm. Deerhoof’s members have generally proceeded on their own terms over the years, steadily putting out records and touring with support from indie labels like Joyful Noise, Polyvinyl, and Kill Rock Stars. But as collaborators in a DIY-minded group who tours with young and underground acts, they’ve seen their friends struggle in this new environment, and they’ve experienced first-hand how streaming services generally make it harder for musicians to navigate their world with a sense of agency.

“It is compulsory in our system, with the absolute commodification of everything, that [artists] become their own brand,” Saunier says. “The musician is more and more similar to the Instagram Star in that sense. Or a gambler. Someone who just creates something from their imagination, from their time and energy and hard work, and money . . . and then just, posts it, basically, and hopes for the best.”

I want to believe that it’s not too late to beat the billionaires and the bots.

“And so, if some absolutely infamous Sweatshop-Owning Shoe Company decides to include you in their playlist to make them look hip, are you going to complain? No. What a joke . . . And if Nike is the one putting the song on their playlist, then well, your lips are now touching their Nike shoes. Because that’s your ticket to something other than absolute oblivion.”

But who’s to blame? Saunier recognizes the tough spot so many artists and labels are in, where they’re unable to outwardly criticize their corporate overlords without risking total irrelevance. “The people I would blame the most are the greedy chauvinists in charge of companies like Spotify and [those] who own Google,” he goes on:

These are the companies that have presented themselves as hip, huge, harmless . . . In fact, they are ruthless and as hungry for profit . . . They’re shark-like. Just eat up everything, take all of the world’s creations. Digitize them and offer them back to humanity either for free or for an incredibly low price. And don’t pay, or massively underpay the creators, and just kick back and put your feet up, and know that if Greg from Deerhoof doesn’t like it, well that’s fine, because there are a million other people lined up behind Greg who are perfectly happy to volunteer their music to exactly such a scheme in hopes of doing something besides being a barista their whole life.

Label Fate

The consequences of such an unfair system are only now revealing themselves. Much of the business and music presses credit Spotify with contributing to the first increases in recorded music revenue in years, which data proves is factually true. But more gross revenue in the music industry does not in any way translate to an industry that is healthier or more sustainable for the majority of artists. Unsurprisingly, as the platform has grown, it has emerged as yet another variation

on there's-an-app-for-that thinking, a rationale that aims to benefit a wealthy cadre of pop stars, major labels, and tech workers—all while exploiting the labor of most everyone else. Spotify's "pro-rata" payment model, for example, means artists are paid a percentage of the total pool of royalties relative to how their stream count stacks up in the *entire pool of streams*, meaning the tiniest of payouts for most independent musicians.

Spotify's relationships with major and independent labels are vastly different. Still, in the wake of the platform's expansion, all labels are reimagining their workflows. The major labels employ dedicated Spotify liaisons, who interface with Spotify's own dedicated major label liaisons and have weekly chats with the company about upcoming priorities. (They generally scratch each other's backs in a way that recalls the longstanding quid pro quo between major labels and commercial radio.) Meanwhile, independent labels delegate new streaming strategies to their digital marketing employees, who play the platform's games and study data pulled from their APIs, fingers crossed, shouting into the void, hoping to get noticed for a precious playlist spot for one track off their latest release—their only hope on a platform that doesn't care if they exist.

No matter how you look at it, it's clear that Spotify is trying to replace labels. That's a sentiment echoed by folks across the industry, major and indie alike, but it's a reality felt most harshly by independent labels. The algorithmic nature of the platform makes it difficult to navigate, says one independent label employee. In the past, if a music shop ordered copies of a record, independent labels could do simple things—like send thank-you notes. "Since Spotify is so algorithmically based, there isn't a lot of back and forth conversation between you and anyone there," she explains. "It changes the nature of how you sell and pitch music to retailers, and the places where you're making money. You'll say, 'Oh, I noticed this one song got on this big playlist, is there someone in indie genre editorial who is a big fan who I could say thanks to?' And they're like, 'No, it did well on this playlist, so we added it to this playlist, and it did well on this playlist, and this playlist . . .'" Thanks, algorithm! "How they place things seems to really take away a lot of the personal aspects of how music transacts," she adds.

Spotify's ambition to superannuate labels is evident. In its quest for total power and control, Spotify has prioritized its own content, and it has made it notably more difficult to find albums rather than playlists. Search an artist's name, and you'll more quickly find a Spotify-branded compilation of that musician's work than an album. If it isn't clear by now, Spotify wants playlists to be the most influential feature of the platform, an "innovation" the platform claims is driven by consumer

habits but is obviously motivated by the company's own branding interests, as well as their swelling need to provide evidence that will prove its worth as a platform to investors. But if this doesn't convince you, take heed: Spotify is even starting to creep into the game of pressing vinyl, partnering with the popular subscription service Vinyl Me Please to press their "Spotify Singles" onto 7-inches. "Spotify and vinyl, now living together in harmony," reads the Vinyl Me Please website. If Amazon is the "everything store," just think of Spotify as the "everything music service."

Best New Muzak

Once upon a time, record labels would invest in artist's careers. Now Spotify invests in its own original content. Earlier this year the company poured significant resources into promoting "I'm with the Banned," a playlist and video series prominently featured as a response to the Trump administration's travel ban (tagline: "When people can't travel, music will"). Like other social-justice-oriented playlists—"Feminist Friday," the "Pride" playlists series, and "No Moment For Silence," created in support of DACA—these editorial additions are Spotify's way of cynically deploying woke optics and commodified "activism." Unsurprisingly, "I'm With the Banned" was promoted with a media campaign, subway advertisements, and sponsored content on *Pitchfork*.

This is not the first editorial partnership between Spotify and *Pitchfork*. Earlier this year, *Pitchfork* won the Webby Award for "Best Branded Editorial Experience," a prize it received for its series "Inside Discovery"—a collaboration with Spotify meant to boost awareness of the "Discover Weekly" feature. The series shows *Pitchfork* editors (and favored musicians) gushing about their love of streaming—the immediacy! The deep back catalogs! One editor says it helps him keep track of his listening habits, while another rejoices at not having to dig through crates at record shops anymore. Yet another likens Spotify to walking around a music festival, discovering something new at every turn.

What does it mean for "the most trusted voice in music" to celebrate an algorithm as preferable to its own crate digging? What does it mean when the tastemaking humans endorse data-driven machines? What does it mean when the algorithms become cool? 8.4 Best New Algorithm!

The music press's embrace of Spotify becomes more startling as the platform's totalizing ambitions materialize. Virtually every music publication now relies on Spotify media players to embed songs within online articles, and websites like *Pitchfork* and *Rolling Stone* regularly celebrate their playlists with listicles: "Ten Albums To Stream Now." "The Five Playlists You Need to Hear This Summer." A subscription to the *New York Times* can now come with a Spotify membership; a splash page cross-branding the two platforms hilariously pairs *Times* sections and Spotify artists: Opinion with "Guided by Voices," Style with "Perfume Genius," Arts with "Devo," and so on. One wonders if these artists are even aware they're being used to sell the paper of record.

Music writing serves a number of purposes: storytelling, criticism, discovery. Spotify has already established itself as a competitive force of "discovery," and it soon plans to produce more of its own (surely branded) "storytelling" and original content. With this in mind, and when I worry over the publications, labels, and artists who have (reluctantly or otherwise) embraced Spotify, I can't help but think of that airport restaurant server who teaches you how to use the iPad, thereby contributing to her own obsolescence. Why is the music press generating value for a platform that in every way plans to eliminate it? And what will become of music criticism in a world without records? Will publications review discovery feeds and write profiles of playlists? What good will criticism be when all of music has coalesced into algorithmically preordained Muzak?

I want to believe that it's not too late to beat the billionaires and the bots. But earlier this year Spotify signed a lease for fourteen floors at Four World Trade Center. The company's gone on a hiring spree, with plans to add a thousand employees. The new lease costs \$2.77 million in monthly rent. And it lasts until 2034.

Liz Pelly is a writer in New York and collective member at the art space Silent Barn.



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