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Oct 25, 2017 · 9 min read



2017: Post Numero Diecisiete

How Streaming Is Changing Music

DJ Khaled, Calvin Harris, Drake, and others are pioneering an evolving art form and incentive structure.

Last year marked streaming's full arrival in the world of music consumption. Beyoncé's *Lemonade* was streamed a record 115 million times in its first week, only for Drake to up the ante a week later when his album, *Views*, was streamed 245 million times. The [Harvard Business Review](#) reports US album sales have plummeted from a peak of 785 million in 2000 to just 241 million in 2015—predominately from people listening to individual songs via Spotify or Apple Music, making physical album sales and downloads relics of a Billboard's past.

It's a trend that's only begun: More and more recordings may abandon the linear consumption of an album, with back-to-back tracks conveying a clear narrative in exchange for a cohesive vibe that has just enough of a difference between songs to make the listener feel like they're not listening to the same thing over and over again.

However, each streaming user now has the opportunity to self-curate their own favorite tracks, or to get a pre-packaged assortment of songs in another playlist provided by an anonymous curator or a well-known DJ or artist.

These types of records make for a passive, auditory indifferent listen—one that creates an atmospheric feeling that’s enjoyable, but disposable. This has been a boon for streaming services, but it leaves much to be desired for music junkies seeking a thematically or sonically rich album that they can forge a deep connection with.

This isn’t an entirely new phenomenon, of course. For decades, catchy singles have been mass-produced for a commercial audience, and jockeys would spin these 7-inch vinyls on their FM-equivalent playlist until the grooves wore flat, or its three-month shelf life ran its course, only for a different tune, with the same, but slightly rearranged, four chords to take its place.

But, what we’re witnessing today is jukebox jams on steroids.



It’s a mentality that can lead to some indispensable singles, but the albums that host them will often amount to a throwaway vibe that’ll be replaced every Friday when new releases come in.

Drake’s much-vaunted “playlist,” *More Life*—essentially an album given a zeitgeisty rebrand—appeared to be more of a marketing campaign looking to capitalize on the growing trend of listers looking to consume an ambiance rather than engage with lyrics and compositions.

By choosing to dub this project a “playlist,” he has fully acknowledged the importance of curated lists of songs to the current musical landscape. With a 22-song tracklist, it scans like a well-tuned assortment any regular music fan could assemble with some hard work. And that’s the point: 6God is providing listeners with more songs to add to their playlists.

June delivered the back-to-back releases of star-studded albums from pop music's biggest producer-artists, DJ Khaled and Calvin Harris. Even more so than Drake, Khaled's *Grateful* and Harris's *Funk Wav Bounces Vol. 1* represent the contemporary apex of streaming and playlist culture.

DJ Khaled's latest clocks in at 23 tracks and nearly 90 minutes, filled with enough shouts of *ANOTHA ONE* and *WE THE BEST* to make listening to its entirety a chore of Gitmo proportions—perhaps by design. *Grateful* doubles as an ill-conceived extension of Spotify's Rap Caviar playlist, essentially an overflowing cauldron of ho-hum hip-hop balanced out by occasional deviations into whitewashed dancehall and throwback street rap.

The record is congested with known quantities like Future, Migos, Drake, Beyoncé, and Jay-Z, while sprinkling in younger talents like Chance the Rapper and 21 Savage. They don't have the time to say anything particularly insightful—they just occupy space, shoulder-to-shoulder in a recording booth perhaps, only to prove DJ Khaled still has his finger on hip-hop's pulse, even as he increasingly becomes a treadmill meme.

It's a record aimed at a rap listener who wants to have a passing familiarity with the relevant names in the culture.



Grateful
DJ Khaled

1 (Intro) I'm so Grateful 4:58

2 Shining 4:43

3 To the Max 3:13

4 Wild Thoughts 3:24

5 I'm the One 4:48

6 On Everything 3:53

7 It's Secured 3:39

8 Interlude (Hallelujah) 0:52

9 Nobody 4:31

10 I Love You so Much 4:50

11 Don't Quit 3:49

12 I Can't Even Lie 4:01

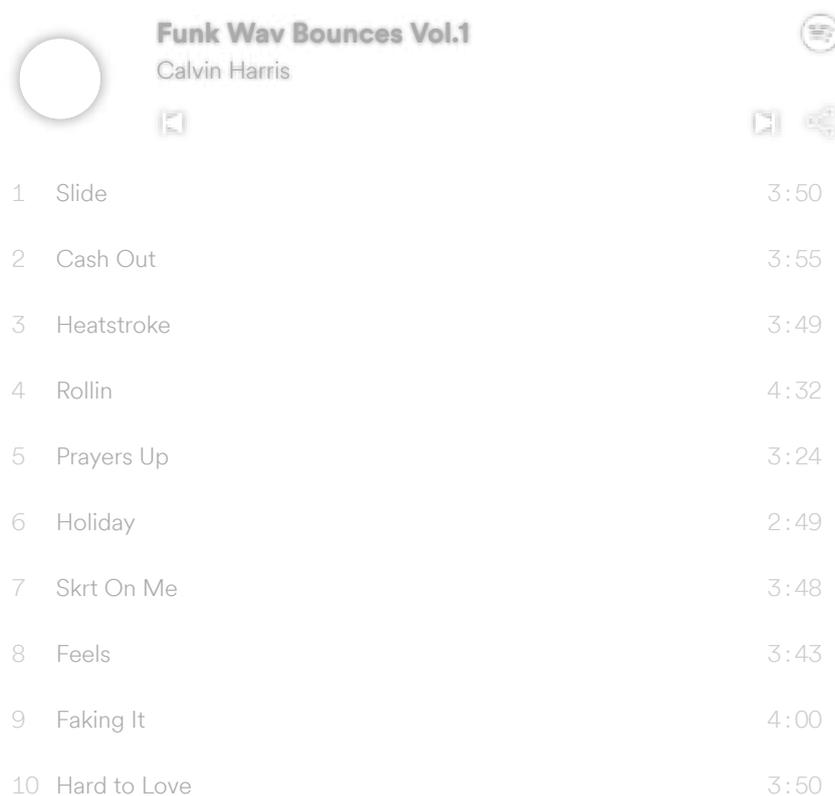
13 Down for Life 5:00

14 Major Bag Alert 4:57

That same carousel feeling is all over *Fun Wav Bounces Vol. 1*, a generic-yet-hip titled, pink-tinted collection of 10 different stabs at the song of the summer, which provide a readymade soundtrack for the beach, or your morning commute spent fantasizing about that Day Glow feeling. With punchy bass lines and glimmery synths, it's a zealous commitment to an '80s pop pastiche that's fully morphed into the tropical house music that currently dominates today's mainstream music.

With saccharine and glossy production and little variance from track to track, it's a project that feels like one gentle wave flowing over you over 40 minutes, with a tonal monotony that leaves nothing more than a few specks of sand and a hazy, post-sugar-high daze.

The album carries an celebrity ensemble—a roll of credits that include Lil' Yachty, DRAM, Frank Ocean, Khalid, John Legend, Niki Minaj, and Katy Perry—only for each to offer a sample-sized presence before they exit stage left.



Track Number	Track Name	Duration
1	Slide	3:50
2	Cash Out	3:55
3	Heatstroke	3:49
4	Rollin	4:32
5	Prayers Up	3:24
6	Holiday	2:49
7	Skrt On Me	3:48
8	Feels	3:43
9	Faking It	4:00
10	Hard to Love	3:50

Each record's stacked guest list leaves the impression that Khaled and Harris are checking off boxes to make sure there's something for everyone, resulting in records that feel more like a casual stroll along the Hollywood Walk of Fame rather than something born out of artistic collaboration.

However, from a purely financial standpoint, these types of records are quite savvy. Streaming is starting to drive profit for the industry, so artists who can consistently crank out tunes are well-positioned to benefit from a streaming-based listening model and incentive structure that prizes turning individual songs into pieces of content on the digital assembly line.

Many people turn to playlists because they trust or like the creator. Drake's aggrieved and solipsistic emotional drippings provide a moody atmosphere. Khaled's absurd and Snapchat-documented lifestyle gives him a bombastic relatability. Harris, with no vocal presence, plays the role of anonymous Spotify curator.

How Streaming Is Changing Music (Again)

Beyoncé made history with her album *Lemonade*, which was streamed a record 115 million times i...

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The ascent of the CD during the '80s cemented the power of major labels: they could sell music in a cheaply manufactured format for far more than it costs to make. Then the digital revolution transferred that leverage to Apple, helping them open the door for artists to ditch the label system entirely. MP3 players and the iPod made CD purchases unnecessary, but 99 cent song downloads made sure those devices were filled with readily-available music.

Now, per [the Recording Industry Association of America](#), streaming accounted for 51.4 percent of US music revenue in 2016—an increase from 34 percent in 2015 and 9 percent in 2011. Streaming services are starting to shift the control away from major labels. But playlist-centric listening only means that Spotify or Apple Music or Tidal could step into this power vacuum, with artists becoming more dependent on their algorithms and playlists to disseminate their music.

At the extremely cynical end, songwriting is now starting to contort to fit the aesthetic and audience of certain playlists; trying to second-guess what will go viral.

Spotify has become a playlisting priority for music labels and artists, and with a 140 million active users, with 60 million paying subscribers—compared to Apple Music's 27 million—it has a vested interest in making in-house playlists, the *lingua franca* of streaming.

Spotify doesn't own the catalog, so it has to exercise some degree of power. They could be looking to pull apart the album as a format altogether: A record no longer has to remain a fixed entity, as evolving playlists emerge to fill the void.

Kanye West toyed with the concept of a living, evolving audio project when, in the months after he initially dropped *Life of Pablo*, he released new updates and versions of the record. Last year, David Gray released a “dynamic” greatest hits on Spotify where tracks were switched around depending on their popularity.

While streaming services may be shaping the way music reaches us, ultimately the listener still has choice—and that power is built into the

service’s architecture. Spotify watches which tracks get skipped, and those that are continuously passed on will be unceremoniously binned.

The onus therefore remains mostly on artists and labels to whip up momentum.

To keep the vinyls spinning, we’re also witnessing a new type of multi-formatting with singles. In the 80s and 90s, labels would pump out as many iterations of a song as the chart rules allowed, urging fans to buy them all to help propel a song up the charts. But today, rather than the recordings receiving a touchup, the actual compositions themselves are getting a full makeover.

“Despacito” was the biggest song of 2017, both in terms of how many plays it has racked up—4.6 billion and counting—and the near-dozen versions that have been released. There’s the original with Daddy Yankee; the globe-conquering follow-up featuring Justin Bieber; respective Portuguese, salsa, pop, and “urban” renditions; and not to mention multiple remixes.

As well as evincing the apparently insatiable appetite for a reggaeton song about having sex on a Puerto Rican beach, it may be a harbinger of future singles molded with the intention of glomming on to as many vaguely-named playlists as possible.

The result is playlist carpet-bombing: Artists are now vying to get the cumulative streams they need to have a serious chart presence. Or, as Coldplay drip-fed different tracks off its *Kaleidoscope EP* over several months, artists could plan to strategize different impact points of their releases in order to keep themselves present on ever-refreshing playlists.

Consequently, musical acts may gravitate toward the streaming model to stay afloat in today’s industry. This could perhaps be the beginning of a new template for this maturing era of digital distribution; an artist driven-format of churning out the level of content that being a relevant musician in the streaming landscape demands.

“I’m the One” Is the Banger of the Millennium

DJ Khaled dropped another one.

festivalpeak.com



It's not hard to picture how *More Life's* playlist model, or DJ Khaled jam-packing celebrity collaborations into musical sardines, could evolve in the future—seeing an album come together in real time via frequent updates or artists including songs by their peers in their projects without having to worry about label conflicts.

But a dilemma remains: How much power can Spotify, Apple, and their rivals hold on to as they negotiate and renegotiate their access deals with labels?

The recent struggles of SoundCloud, widely considered streaming's most democratic and artist-friendly service, paint a picture of a prominent faction of music listeners that continues to gravitate toward the surface-level trend hopping of playlist culture.

The rise of playlists could be the tipping point for streaming platforms to exert their influence over labels, or it could be the final straw for these companies to decide to withdraw access to their music.

Optimistically, playlists will enable labels, streaming services, and artists to an easier route to collaboration and a way to share money and power.

This can also be a powerful tool to deliver new music and bands to fans eager to find the next big artist to binge out on.

Playlists can be a powerful tool for labels to use, potentially forming partnerships with streaming services to promote recently signed or up-and-coming artists to introduce them to new audiences based on their listening history. Or, Spotify can leverage its built-in social networking to use active listeners as influencers to share and promote bands and recommend different types of music.

And an ever-evolving playlists can allow fans to determine which songs are the best of different genres, as an Alternative Rock or '90s Hip Hop playlist will be completely democratized, allowing frequent listeners of respective categories of music to have a say in what content gets shared to different streaming users looking to expand their taste.

But, for now, the music industry will be faced with strategizing which artists will thrive, and deciding what kind of content should they produce.

Harvard Business Review's Michael Luca and Craig McFadden note two possible paths forward for the album: Artists like Frank Ocean and

Beyoncé have had success with visual albums, allowing their audiences to “watch” their body of work, while the Chainsmokers ditched the full-length record and released 10 separate singles and remixes, which have 2.6 million downloads and 600 million Spotify streams.

Hip-Hop Be Damned. K-Dot is the Best Artist Alive.

DAMN. Places Kendrick Lamar on Top of the Pop Culture Heap

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And there will always be artists like Kendrick Lamar, who buck the trend by crafting thematically rich and sonically dense albums that have both a cohesive vision and an ability to connect with the streaming set—his latest release, *DAMN.*, secured the #1 through #9 spots on the Billboard On-Demand Streaming Songs chart on the week of May 6.

But the continued success of Drake or Khaled or Harris points toward a musical future where that sort of artistic approach could be a financial and branding gamble, as musicians may feel prodded to make songs that conform to the parameters of streaming services and their playlist curators.

But, for now, its time for *ANOTHA ONE*.

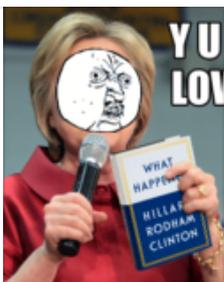
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