

THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED - THE DIGITAL DISASTER

"Digitalization kills music stone dead. It is music with the heart and soul ripped out of it. It is genetically-modified music, throwaway music for the throwaway age"

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Recently it was reported that sales of recorded music were at an all time low, and few seem to be able to predict entirely why this might be the case. It is true that many now download it free from the Internet with apparent ease, which may partly explain the reason. It is also true that many youngsters (who are traditionally the mainstay of the record-buying public) now have many other distractions in their lives such as mobile phones and computer games that 20 years ago would not have interfered with their listening to music.

Many youngsters are simply no longer obsessed and excited with music as they were a generation ago, and indeed many are into the artists of yesteryear such as Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, The Doors and Pink Floyd etc. Why is there also a proliferation of tribute bands covering Bryan Adams and Meat Loaf to Yes and Abba.

Perhaps one reason for these things could be the ubiquitous digitalization of recorded music. Compact discs seemed to be the pinnacle of recorded music when they hit the scene over 20 years ago. They seem to sound better on first hearing, and the sound is clean, sterile and has no 'clicks' or 'pops'. CDs were more user-friendly than their awkward vinyl counterparts- smaller, taking up less space, playable in the car, ability to plan track order, repeat, program, and of course the music lasted about an hour (more than 20 minutes when you had to change it as with vinyl). CDs seemed to be the answer to the record industry's prayers. Furthermore, it was alleged that they would not degrade and that they were indestructible.

However, the music was digitalized and apart from a few technical boffins, those who were not technically minded never had a clue as to what this meant. It was actually sold as a great advancement in recorded music. So, what is it? Well, the

sounds of the music are reconstructed out of digital numbers spat out of a digital converter, rather like the microdots of a digital photograph, seemingly a good reproduction of the music. Yet music is not digitalized when heard live from a symphony orchestra, rock band or jazz musician, and was never meant to be. Before digitalization, when music was recorded in analogue fashion, recorded music sounded vibrant, expansive and exciting. Not everyone agrees with this sentiment so maybe it's only those who have a discerning musical ear or those who remember being really stimulated by recorded music before the digital age who see the point. Those below the age of, say 25 would not have grown up with recorded music in this format.

So, maybe it is to do with subtle brain functioning that some can tell there's a difference between CD and vinyl, or to be more precise, between analogue and digital. Or is it due to auditory acuity? Some individuals refute that anyone can tell the difference between the two, yet other people seem to know instinctively which they prefer. I wouldn't say I could tell every time but after several plays I know which recording I am tired of and which I want to hear a hundred times. I have albums of Steely Dan, Chick Corea, Prefab Sprout, Springsteen and Joni Mitchell which I never grow tired of, yet CDs by these same very artists seem dull and tiresome after 4 or 5 plays.

Neil Young describes digitalized music as "sensory deprivation with no titillation like torture". He has been recording music for over 30 years so is in a good position to judge. Elton John also recognizes the superiority of "analogue" music over the digitalized versions, "having greater emotion". Young states that the age of the CD (digital) will, in the future come to be known as the "dark age" of music.

If digitalization is responsible in part, for the fact that youngsters (and other age groups) feel generally less excited or euphoric about music than youngsters did a generation ago, then it could indirectly be the reason that so few artists and bands are making a profound impact that the rock dinosaurs did, and taking over the mantle of the music giants of yesteryear such as Led Zeppelin, the Who, the Rolling Stones, Genesis and countless others. And is this the reason for the proliferation of tribute bands over the past ten years? Who had ever heard of a tribute band in the 1980s? .

What has brought about the upsurge of rap music in the past 10 to 15 years? Could this be due to the fact that the aggression and spirit of the lyrics are more important and make up for the bland digitalized reproduction? Was digitalization partly the raison d'etre for rap? No disrespect to rap artists, but are the quickly rapped words creating the excitement to compensate for the one-dimensional state of digital recordings? What would be better than to hear Tupac, Ice T. or Eminem recorded on analogue? I've no doubt it would sound truly magical.

Simon Cowell said on the Jonathon Ross programme on 6th June 2003 that "there's too much blandness in music nowadays", whilst Jonathon bemoaned that there were too many cover versions. He failed to comment that a great many cover versions seem to derive from the pre-digital era. But why should this be? It cannot be due to a lack of songwriting talent, or that we are in a state of pathological nostalgia. There certainly isn't a lack of talented producers and technological wizardry has never been greater.

I am now as tired of buying CDs as I am of listening to them, and refute that it's because I'm older or don't have the time to devote to listening to music. For one old git like me, digitalization kills music stone dead. It is music with the heart and soul ripped out of it and counter-instinctive. It is genetically-modified music. It is throwaway music for the throwaway age.

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