

MPEG audio file
6 MB
160 kbps
44.100 kHz
-4.1 dB

MPEG audio file
4.8 MB
192 kbps
44.100 kHz
-1.0 dB

MPEG audio file
4.1 MB
181 kbps
44.100 kHz
-2.7 dB

MPEG audio file
4.8 MB
320 kbps
44.100 kHz
-1.0 dB

MPEG audio file
2.8 MB
160 kbps
44.100 kHz
-0.7 dB

MPEG audio file
7.3 MB
160 kbps
44.100 kHz
-3.0 dB

MPEG audio file
16 MB
275 kbps
44.100 kHz
-1.9 dB

MPEG audio file
4.6 MB
160 kbps
44.100 kHz
-0.7 dB

MPEG audio file
24.5 MB
320 kbps
44.100 kHz
-8.9 dB

In a time and society where everything can be categorized and commercialized, digital forms of music have slipped into a liminal area. The chaos in attempts to price digital music has had a profound cultural influence on live performance, the way people listen to music and the way artists approach making music.

For musicians, the inability for recorded music to be reliably sold or bought in a digital world has shifted the monetary emphasis back to performance. Ironically, this resembles a time before recorded music existed at all, where performance was the only dissemination and presentation of music. However, this change is occurring at a time where the availability of recording software and technology is widespread. Garageband is automatically installed in mac computers and there are many varieties of basic and professional music software available through the internet. For anyone with access to a computer and an internet connection, music is no longer limited by the constraints of live performance, yielding an increase in music that is created through the process of recording and engaging with the medium of electronic software. The act of creating music through the act of experimenting or working with the medium of recording itself is not new, but the growing popularity and regularity of this music process and the amount of resulting music made this way is new.

The financial imperative to perform live (rather than sell recordings) and the growing popularity of process based electronic music are increasing at the same time, converging in a confrontation with traditional forms of live musical performance. The type of live music that an audience traditionally expects from a show works very well if the music was written by playing live in the first place. For these types of artists and bands, a recording tends towards a documentation of the live act. For artists that compose through recording, inversely the live performance is a presentation or a translation from the music's original format. Similar to the process of writing a book, once the pages are written the author is irrelevant to the book. A reading of the book is more of a presentation of a finalized object than a live, dynamic performance.

There are many different types of electronic music and many ways for it to be performed and presented; including ways that are successfully dynamic and alive. However, when this new type of music attempts to conform to old standards of performance, the audience views it as inauthentic, fake, deceitful and lazy; such as when a vocalist lip syncs over prerecorded tracks, instrumentalists play along to recordings or when an artist performs only using a laptop. The financial pressure on concerts and playing live has obstructed a type of experimentation and creativity that has inversely blossomed in new contemporary electronic music. Contemporary artists that don't create their music live should not attempt to imitate a traditional live music performance and equally, audiences should not expect a traditional live performance. New electronic music performances are the most successful when both the artist and audience embrace the qualities that are specific to its medium.

For the consumer, the ability to have access to unlimited music for free has made the presence of music ubiquitous and almost inescapable. With a foundation of the necessary software and hardware,

streaming, downloading and sharing music is easy and buying music is inexpensive. There are very few risks or consequences to owning and collecting music; digital accumulation or hoarding becomes a hobby concerned with quantity over quality. Everyone and anyone becomes a “music collector” and music becomes a default backdrop to everything and anything. Once saved for specific occasions, music has reached a state where it is present at all times and circumstances. Music, relentlessly, becomes a soundtrack for social events, entertainment, shopping, jogging, driving, taking the subway, cooking, making love, working, walking, dancing, worshipping, drinking, smoking, sleeping, drawing, waiting, television shows, partying, relaxing, tasks, cleaning, the gym (the elliptical, the stationary bike, lifting, the treadmill, the stairmaster) biking, celebrating, meditating, advertising, clubbing, dining, “surfing the web,” thinking, conversing.. Music becomes less of an activity in itself and more commonly a continuous soundtrack, whether from a computer, headphones or external speakers. Music is treated less as a valuable or coveted object and more like the cheap and insignificant couple of megabytes that it is.

The time, money, thought and process that goes into the production of music becomes irrelevant in the medium of the mp3. Whether thousands of dollars of musical equipment or just one laptop running garageband, whether it was created over three years or in an afternoon, its final format is equalized in a digital file. Among digital audio files, there is an entire hierarchy of uncompressed, lossless and lossy audio formats. Individually, each file can be quantified and identified by varying characteristics, including size in megabytes, bit rate in kilobits per second, sample rate in kilohertz, volume in decibels, time in minutes and seconds and a waveform. The most efficient way to distinguish between them, especially for pricing purposes, is by format, size in megabytes and length in minutes or seconds.

In the itunes store you can download an mp3 for .99\$ and an album can range, but starts at \$9.99. Amoeba recently digitized their rare record collection and is pricing music based on individual track format – an mp3 is 78¢, an mp4 is 80¢ and a wav is \$1.50. Amazon prices range with the format, popularity and seller. Additionally, there are independent sites and owners that charge whatever they want, averaging around seven dollars an album.

If pricing is an expression of the physical object, the labor involved and its cultural value, it's not absurd to price digital music files based on their technical characteristics. The pricing of digital music based on technical qualities seems absurd and arbitrary because its price seems like the median between two otherwise reasonable prices. On one side of the spectrum, a closer inspection of the composition, work, time, cost and maybe even brilliance that produced some music makes 99¢ seem offensive to the artist. On the other side of the spectrum, paying any amount at all for a digital file seems offensive to the consumer, as it can easily be streamed or downloaded for free.

No matter how cheap digital music can be priced it will always feel unjustified to a certain generation, as if free mp3s are an entitlement. In an effort to cut down on the amount of trash in cities, there have been attempts to install “pay as you throw” systems where each bag of trash is charged a small fee. The intention

is to bring more awareness in how much waste is produced and encourage efforts towards developing different habits to decrease waste volume. However, people have responded with outrage and hostility; there have even been cases of uncontrollable fires as burning trash in the forest became a common practice to avoid a meager price. For a specific generation, whether they grew up with the internet or adapted to it, pricing mp3s feels as offensive as putting an explicit price tag on a given necessity, like volumes of water or trash.

Mp3s, as isolated objects, are essentially free. Buying mp3s seems more like a choice or acting on a will to “do the right thing” than an accepted way of engaging in listening to music. As an alternative, mp3s are available to stream, download and share, easily, for free. However, like trash or water, mp3s are not isolated objects. The “free” mp3 only exists in an infrastructure of software and hardware. Headphones, speakers, portable mp3 players, music player software, computers and the internet are not free.

If these technologies can be understood as an entity and a living organism, mp3s are conceived, developed, reproduced, multiplied, transmitted, received, shared and deleted within them. Mp3s are a type of organism reliant on its surrounding technology as a body, vehicle, transmitter, conceiver, messenger and creator. In the past, the power relationship between the music’s physical medium and its technology was switched: record players, tape players and cd players had no other function than playing records, tapes and cds. Without records, tapes or cds, their respective players are left purposeless and obsolete. Digital forms of music, on the other hand, are integrated in the same technology that mediates communications, business, photos, videos, writing, drawing and everything else that a computer and the internet are capable of. Unlike records, tapes and cds, if mp3s were to be made obsolete, their surrounding technology would largely go unchanged and unscathed, save for mp3 players and mp3 library software. The entire existence of digital music is dependent on a larger and more powerful infrastructure of technology.

Mp3s are simultaneously the weakest and most powerful format for music – individually, they are criticized for their low quality, compression and cheapness, but there isn’t really such thing as an individual mp3. A single mp3 represents its potential to be millions of mp3s. A single mp3 is a single pixel in a larger entity, with the capacity to extend and spread with varying densities around the world. A single mp3 is a single dust molecule in a dust storm.

It’s generally regarded that mp3s have ruined music as we know it – compressed its quality, destroyed the “music industry,” the concept of the album and the material and physical joys of records, tapes and cds. But all of these forms of music are relatively new in the history of music and its cultural role in humankind – the mp3 has not “destroyed music” but has, and continues to, challenge music as a packaged consumer object. This opportunity, the financial and technical accessibility to create, collect and share mp3s, has expanded and changed the capacities of the artist, consumer and the body of the music itself.

Although a computer and internet connection enables anyone and everyone with the resources to be a music collector and/or musician, there is a difference between using and being used by technology. There is a difference, but not a clear boundary, between art that is the product of its medium and art that is the product of an artist manipulating a medium. I struggle to be an artist in a medium that I recognize as much larger and more powerful than myself, the mp3s I create and the people who might listen to them.