



We are not taught how to listen to music. Corporate Wrapped will count up your minutes and favorite artists and classify your listening patterns among their gargantuan database of user statistics. But this essay is not about summaries. This is about nostalgia.

My music streaming history resembles a train disappearing into the horizon, each passing car a discarded playlist. Each one is ~30 songs long and named with some cryptic phrase that felt relevant to me when I made it. Like “ruf,” for the first year of grad school when I was spending a lot of time on my roof and also having a pretty rough time figuring out how to do research. Or “I’m trying to get to work. I have a work meeting to attend,” after the direct quote on my speeding ticket when driving from NYC to Ithaca. Once I make a playlist, I keep adding to and listening to it, those months saturated in a couple dozen songs playing on repeat. Eventually, a new cryptic phrase arises out of my life storyline to replace the old. The old playlist, obscure title and temporary life soundtrack and all, gets deleted, and the cycle repeats. A new car is added to the train.

My friends have slight variants of this practice:

- JA has one huge playlist that they never remove from and always add to the end of. Scrolling top-to-bottom, you’ll see that swaths of consecutive songs tend to resemble one another in mood or are even from the same artist or album.
- CR has dozens of playlists titled variants of “chill fam”, and I can’t tell the difference between them but he seems to know exactly which one to play every time he gets into the car.
- CD makes a new playlist three times a year and believes that the visual harmony of the auto-generated playlist cover is an omen for how the following four months will go.

My insistence on zero-sum-data-use playlist creation and deletion comes from the way that I learned to listen to music as the music distribution industry, along with the rest of the world, rapidly developed technologically.

My sister showed me how to burn CDs. We used to sometimes get the “Now That’s What I Call Music!” CDs, but I don’t even remember actually listening to them; we’d just look at the groovy print and see how many titles we recognized. But having a family computer and a stack of blank CDs meant we could make our own periodic “Top 40”s—bootlegged, personally curated and collected. Lisa would burn CDs for our holiday season family road trips. Those CDs laid the soundtrack for the long drives. Then, Dad would make an end-of-year slideshow and the songs burned onto those CDs would then be burned onto a DVD overlaying the photos. They are subsequently burned into my mind for ever and ever as the melodies of my late-elementary-to-middle-school family life.

CDs soon yielded to iPods, and I spent hours every week coming up with a list of songs that I wanted, going to YouTube, finding a song, going to youtubetomp3.com, pasting the link, and downloading `Fergie_Big_Girls_Don_t_Cry__FULL_AUDIO_HIGH_QUALITY__.mp3` to my iTunes. I’d slot these songs into my standing playlist titled “now in.” And when my devices would complain about the lack of space remaining, I would drag those songs that were no longer “now in” to the trash icon.

Then, more rapidly than I can track, downloaded music yielded to a plethora of online streaming services. They evolved drastically over the past decade, each iteration making new music easier and easier to access. Each also came with better algorithms to simulate a little personal radio DJ, just to my tastes. Every morning, the little bots serve up a platter of new titles and artists, and I pluck out a few to carry with me in my playlist of the moment.

I think if I were to sit there and watch my playlist train pass by, I would witness the emotional roller coaster of phases I experienced and escaped through music, like some puzzling timeline of my life. I think I’d be able to tell exactly when I was partying a lot, when I was primarily studying, when I met somebody new who was showing me new genres of music...

Writing this leaves me curious about how you listen to music. Do you walk a long and winding road, like JA? Do you dip in shimmering serene pools, like CR? Do you read tarot cards, like CD? Or do you do your own thing, memory and music emerging from beats and rhymes and life?

*** drawing done by my talented CD-burning sister, Lisa*