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Six File Sharing Epiphanies

by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

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Epiphany No 1: While I could discuss any number of musical epiphanies I've personally experienced over the past half a century, all of them would pale in comparison to the epiphany of seeing Napster for the first time. Although prior to Napster I had been a member of several file sharing communities, the sheer scope, variety and seeming endlessness of Napster was mind-boggling: you never knew what you were going to find and how much of it was going to be there. It was as if every record store, fleamarket and charity shop in the world had been connected by a searchable database and had flung their doors open, begging you to walk away with as much as you could carry for free. But it was even better, because the supply never exhausted; the coolest record you've ever dug up could now be shared with all your friends. Of course, this has been exacerbated many times over with the advent of torrents and MP3 blogs.

Epiphany No 2: One of the first things that struck me about Napster was how damn impure (read: eclectic) people's tastes were. While browsing another user's files, I was stunned to find John Cage MP3s alphabetically snuggled up next to, say, Mariah Carey files in the same directory. Everyone has guilty pleasures; however, never before had they been so exposed – and celebrated – so publicly. While such impure impulses have always existed in the avant garde, they've pretty much remained hidden. For instance, on UbuWeb we host a compilation of the ultra-modernist conductor and musicologist Nicholas Slonimsky's early recordings of Varèse, Ives and Ruggles. But we also host a recording of Slonimsky croaking out bawdy tunes about constipated children – “Opens up the BOW-ELS” – on an out-of-tune piano. He sounds absolutely smashed. The Slonimsky recording is part of The 365 Days Project, which is a collection of crazy stuff: celebrity, children, demonstration, indigenous, Industrial, outsider, song-poem, spoken, ventriloquism, etc; snuggled in with the crazy Mormons, twangy garage bands and singing stewardesses is one of the fathers of the avant garde, Nicholas Slonimsky.

Epiphany No 3: File sharing is non-contextual. The cohesive vision of an album has been ditched in favour of the single or the playlist. Many people getting music online have no idea where something came from, nor do they care. For instance, we find that many people downloading MP3s from UbuWeb have no interest in the historical context; instead, the site is seen as a vast resource of 'cool' and 'weird' sounds to remix or throw into dance mixes. It has been reported that samples

from Bruce Nauman's mantric chant, *Get Out Of My Mind, Get Out Of This Room* [MP3 link], from his *Raw Materials* compilation on Ubu, has recently been mixed with beats and is somewhat the rage with unwitting partygoers on dancefloors in São Paulo.

Epiphany No 4: As a result, just like you, I stopped buying music. I used to be a record junkie. For years, I spent most of my free time hunting down discs in dusty corners of the world. I'll never forget my honeymoon in Amsterdam in 1989. I had to purchase an extra suitcase so that I could bring home dozens of Dutch reissues of Stax and Atco soul LPs that were completely unavailable in New York. While I travel extensively these days, I haven't set foot in a record store in well over a decade. Why bother, when the best record store sits on my laptop in my hotel room? A few nights ago at home, after putting the kids to bed, I was parked in front of the computer sipping bourbon. My wife asked me what I was doing. I told her I was going record shopping. As I glanced at my screen, ten ultra-rare discs I would have killed for way back when were streaming down to my living room for free.

Epiphany No 5: I don't know about you, but I've lost my object fetish. But then again, I was never the type of collector who bought records for their cool covers: the music had to be great. Still, I have 10,000 vinyls gathering dust in my hallway and as many CDs in racks on my wall. I don't use them. To me, if music can't be shared, I'm not interested in it. However, once I digitize these objects and they enter into the file sharing ecosystem, they become alive for me again. As many dead LPs and CDs as I have, I've got many times that number of discs sitting on a dozen hard drives, flying up and down my network.

Epiphany No 6: It's all about quantity. Just like you, I'm drowning in my riches. I've got more music on my drives than I'll ever be able to listen to in the next ten lifetimes. As a matter of fact, records that I've been craving for years (such as the complete recordings of Jean Cocteau, which we just posted on Ubu) are languishing unlistened-to. I'll never get to them either, because I'm more interested in the hunt than I am in the prey. The minute I get something, I just crave more. And so something has really changed – and I think this is the real epiphany: the ways in which culture is distributed have become profoundly more intriguing than the cultural artifact itself. What we've experienced is an inversion of consumption, one in which we've come to prefer the acts of acquisition over that which we are acquiring, the bottles over the wine.

[I published this piece in the April 2011 issue of *The Wire*, but see it as a companion piece to my previous Harriet post, *Archiving Is The New Folk Art.*]

2011-04-22

Posted in Group Blog, Music on Friday, April 22nd, 2011 by Kenneth Goldsmith.

Original URL:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/six-file-sharing-epiphanies/>