

Revolutions in Music Listening, from Radio to the Digital Age

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Dale McGowan, Ph.D.

As popular music exploded in the 20th and 21st centuries, personal music listening has undergone one revolution after another, helping to define generations and reshape daily life.

For decades, radio was the primary means by which music entered the home. Despite its limitations—a low fidelity sound and programming in someone else's hands—there was no serious challenger until the LP (long-playing) vinyl record entered homes in the late 1940s and the compact cassette tape in the 1960s. Both allowed listeners more control over the content and timing of their listening.

Then came the CD (compact disc) in 1982. It was more durable, compact, and inexpensive, held more content, and used more easily-edited digital data. The industry retooled from bottom to top, from recording equipment to manufacturing to invention, production, and sale of CD players.¹ CD players in the home, car, and even in backpacks and on belts made music more portable than ever.

As the music business continued to grow into a cultural juggernaut, the search was on for even greater convenience and control. In the early years of the 21st century, music downloads entered the landscape.² The advantages were irresistible. There was no need to record music on a physical disc and get it to the listener. Consumers went online to select and instantly purchase music, even individual tracks, to put on even smaller, highly portable players like the Apple iPod.³ Music became even easy to carry with you as a soundtrack while walking, driving, or working out.

But the era of the download was even shorter than that of CDs as streaming services like Spotify and Pandora challenged the very notion of owning music.⁴ Instead of buying a personal library of music, the consumer can now select among millions of songs and listen immediately online. In the process, music has become more completely integrated into the daily lives of listeners than ever before.

¹ “The History of the CD.” Philip Research, <https://www.philips.com/a-w/research/technologies/cd/beginning.html>. Accessed January 11, 2019.

² Knopper, Steve (2018). “The End of Owning Music: How CDs and Downloads Died.” *Rolling Stone* online, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-end-of-owning-music-how-cds-and-downloads-died-628660/>. Accessed January 14, 2019.

³ Lunden, Ingrid (2013). “Download Me Maybe: U.S. Music Market Up By 3.1%, Fuelled By 1.3B Digital Track Sales In 2012, Says Nielsen.” *Techcrunch* online, <https://techcrunch.com/2013/01/04/download-me-maybe-u-s-music-market-up-by-3-1-fuelled-by-1-3b-digital-track-sales/>. Accessed January 12, 2019.

⁴ Knopper *op. cit.*

Perhaps the most unlikely development has been the resurgence of vinyl LPs.⁵ Why this more expensive, less convenient format made a comeback is debated, with some suggesting the analog sound is “warmer” than digital music. Others cite a nostalgia for older, “authentic” things that have been displaced in the interest of convenience.⁶

LPs are unlikely to ever edge out the convenience and economy of streaming—it’s merely the fastest-growing piece of the rapidly shrinking pie of physical formats for music. But who knows? If we’ve learned anything since 1982, it’s that most predictions in this industry end up wrong.

⁵ Caulfield, Keith (2018). “U.S. Vinyl Album Sales Hit Nielsen Music-Era Record High in 2017,” *Billboard.com*, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/8085951/us-vinyl-album-sales-nielsen-music-record-high-2017>. Accessed January 14, 2019.

⁶ Barron, Lee (2015). “Back on Record: the Reason’s Behind Vinyl’s Unlikely Comeback.” *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/back-on-record-the-reasons-behind-vinyls-unlikely-comeback-39964>. Accessed January 14, 2019.