

## **MP3: The Catholic Format**

In recent years a question that bands have increasingly been posed in interviews is whether or not they have an opinion on the mp3 phenomenon. By mp3 phenomenon, of course, oblique reference is made to the fact that, whether they like it or not, much their music is available on the internet for free, thanks to mySpace, file-swapping networks, and torrent websites. Some say they welcome the fact that this enables their music to reach a wider audience. Others, including some in the latter group, point out that instruments, equipment, studio time, graphic artists, manufacturing, stock shipping and warehousing, wages, and, most importantly for them, their royalties, all need to be paid for, and that, while it is all well and good for some that the internet has democratised their music, even if they approach their art as artists and not as capitalists, their ability to operate and the financial viability of the scene that makes it possible is undermined when anonymous swarms of parasites devour it without giving anything in return.

In my job, I have found mp3 a useful format, and, when questioned in the past, I have never condemned it, seeing it as the modern equivalent of the audio cassette, which did not 'kill music', as some limited doomsayers were predicting decades ago. The format enables me to make informed choices when it comes to distributing releases by bands I am unfamiliar with, which are many. (There is at least one new Black Metal band somewhere in the world every twelve hours.) It also enables me to carry and have the option to listen to any of hundreds of albums in a tiny player weighing dozens of grammes; this is very useful when travelling, and indispensable when the music has been extracted from a CD that was very limited, is now very rare, and would, if lost or damaged, be difficult or almost impossible to replace. However, over time, I have noticed that the format has had, as normal and expected with any new technology, adverse effects. I have found that the mp3 phenomenon has given rise to an insidious culture of something-for-nothing, where ironically-detached interlopers without any real commitment to the scene feel free to rip off with impunity (at least for now) hundreds of honest, hard-working, talented artists whose sustained creative effort provide them with such abundant pleasure. I have found also that, when the ripping-off becomes normalised in the minds of these parasites, by virtue of its being done constantly in the context of huge numbers of people doing the same, music for them eventually becomes worthless. Since its acquisition required no personal sacrifice; and since it is possible this way to amass such colossal quantities of music files that in the end there is no time to listen to them all, music is finally treated with contempt. You get what you pay for, right?

I had an employee once, whose wages, as with everything else, were paid with the income resulting from the sales of our CDs. When asked if he had plans to purchase this or that album – albums we did not stock, for he was not quite into Black Metal – however, he reacted with outrage at the very idea of paying for his music. 'I am not paying for music!' he would wail, slamming his desk with his palms, indignant, his face creased with horror, his offended blue eyes probably more at home in the face of a fundamentalist cleric. When challenged on his views, his standard reply was 'Yea, but there will always be people who buy it!' True, dedicated fans will take pride in owning the original item, with artwork, lyrics, photos, logos, and all the trimmings, and not just the naked audio, but I could not for the life of me make him understand that it was not simply a matter of his illegal activity being a drop in the ocean, but a matter of principle: he was able to pay his rent, buy himself clothes, purchase two new computers, take his girlfriend on dates, take out a gym membership, pay for his haircuts, etc., thanks to the economics of an industry made possible by the talent of artists, who were true believers of their craft, and whose music he felt entitled to enjoy, and yet he had no problem with ripping them, and the industry that paid his

wages, off. What was particularly galling about this case is that this former employee, otherwise an agreeable, honest, and trustworthy fellow, owned a gigantic hard drive, which he had stuffed with tens of thousands of mp3 files, most of which he had never listened to. Why? Because he did not have time to go through them all. He was so spoilt for choice he did not know where to begin, and therefore stuck comfortably to what he already knew. Like him, there are many out there.

I can imagine this argument not garnering much sympathy among listeners of mainstream Pop. Their supply of brainless, self-aggrandising, self-indulgent, here-today-gone-tomorrow Pop stars is relentlessly pumped out by corporate multinational record labels, which flood the planet and blitz our consciousness with worthless output year after year. Mainstream Pop music is so non-descript, so transient, so superficial, and so many of its listeners keep up with it not out of reasoned choice but either supinely or spinelessly out of pressure to conform, that it is easy to see why they, insensible to, affrighted, or ignorant of true art, would be unwilling to pay for mainstream brainless fodder. One can almost hear them saying ‘Aw, fuck'em. They're all loaded anyway!’ Moreover, Pop music is churned out in such vast numbers, that the sheer superabundance of product debases the currency of the message, to the point where pride of ownership becomes an oxymoron; how could one feel proud of owning an album that millions of trend-followers also own; which, like thousands of others, regurgitates the same vapid clichés, heard a thousand times before; and which is so easily and readily available anywhere, including petrol stations and supermarkets, that it becomes no less pedestrian than the Mars bars, Polo mints, and gossip magazines it sits next to.

One expects healthier attitudes from members of marginal, grass-roots, anti-commercial music scenes, where hundreds of quark-sized, fan-run labels barely manage a few releases a year, and where they and most of their artists see little, no, or at least no commensurate, return for their years of heart-felt creative labour. Here participation in the music subculture implies more than passive consumption of a product. It implies cultural resistance, a statement of non-conformity against the mainstream's herd mentality, made by a radical, critical, and almost secret minority that take pride in their own ostracism. Sure, we engage in commercial activity and operate within a capitalist model, but capitalism is simply a tool, and a tool that can be used in different ways, not all of them inconsistent with even the extreme anti-modern values of Radical Traditionalists. (Mass quantities, low quality, one-size-fits-all is not the only way to practice, or the only tendency of, capitalism, even though sloth, lack of creativity, and lack of a sense of purpose in life causes many to favour the former paradigm).

In some ways, mp3s are the ultimate expression of that paradigm in the music industry: it has proliferated to the point where the sheer weight of quantity can negate its use value, symbolic value, and sign value, all in one go (so abundant, you cannot find the time to listen to them all; so generic, it has no special meaning; so free, it confers status to no one); it is of low quality, and comes without texts, textures, or artwork; and it is the ultimate catholic format, in theory playable by any device or programme, on any platform - in reality not even that, since the sale of mp3s is about the sale of mp3 players, and, because this is where the money is (a cool mp3 player confers status, a hard drive stuffed with mp3s does not), copyright management systems are used to lock competing devices out.

In this context, I was not surprised when Martin, the sound engineer we use up in London, said to me last November that he had cut more lacquers for vinyls in 2006 than he had in all the years since he began: contrary to the ‘predictions’ of businessmen with vested economic interests in the sale of mp3 devices, physical formats have not died, and vinyls – the clunkiest and most care-intensive of physical formats – have made a forceful come back in the past two years. It proves the point that there is more to a record than the bare audio; and more to a collection than just accumulated quantity. Mp3s are indispensable for researching bands and making one's collection portable; but it does not replace a great collection – an mp3 file can never be rare, obscure, or come with outstanding artwork, ‘forbidden’ symbols, or textured packaging.

Some of you will remember a series of articles I ran in *Supernal Music's* mail order catalogue between 2005 and 2006, which I wrote after visiting selected customers in England whom I knew to be obsessive record collectors. In each visit we surely listened to some music, and we all discovered great bands we had never heard of. But the most interesting part was to see what the records looked like, what it felt like to hold some of them in one's hands (because they were so rare or so valuable or so old a version), what it was to see so many of them in one place, how the collector went

about collecting, how he or she stored the records, what his or her environment was like, and so on. My visits, and my articles, would have been less interesting, and certainly the collectors in question would have appeared less formidable, had they only had a list of free files to show me on a computer screen.

© 2007, Alex Kurtagić