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Vinyl Records, Spotify, and the Evolution of the Listening Experience

Platforms through which people enjoy music are constantly updating, improving, and evolving, altering the experience of listening to a song. A platform is a technological medium through which tasks can be performed for a person who operates it. According to Marc Andreessen, “if you can program it, then it’s a platform. If you can’t, then it’s not” (Benson-Allott). Platforms divide human beings from their technologies and separate the desire for a task to be completed from the eventual completion of that task. Due to the evolution of music platforms — from record players, cassette tapes, and CDs to the various music streaming platforms of today — the user experience and accessibility of these music platforms has greatly improved over time. For example, listening to Frank Sinatra’s “New York, New York” on a record player in your home with your family would be an entirely different experience altogether than listening to it on Spotify with headphones in while walking down the street. Nevertheless, instead of just removing the old platforms to make way for the new, technologies today have opened doors to new music streaming while also creating modernized versions of record players from the past. Although the record player and Spotify streaming both remain enjoyable methods of listening to “New York, New York,” they each create a different atmosphere, even though both have been updated and improved to keep up with our fast-paced technological world.

In the 1900s, the invention of record players caused people to rethink the way that they listen to music — instead of having to leave the house to hear a live performance, people could remain in the comfort of their own homes and enjoy the luxury of choosing the songs that they

want to hear. In 1977, Frank Sinatra released “Theme from New York, New York,” which could be enjoyed on various record players in homes and restaurants throughout the country. However, although the record player paved the way for a new music listening experience, it was not portable, involved taking perfect care of all of the equipment that the platform necessitates, and required the purchase of the records themselves. Therefore, despite its convenience in terms of listening to a person’s own music anywhere in his or her own home (within reach of an outlet power source), it was not portable enough to be taken outside and was an expensive investment, considering the added cost of the records and any other accessories that may be required to utilize or repair it. Around the time of its invention, the record player was a revolutionary way of listening to music because of the freedom of luxury that it introduced.

In contrast, Spotify streaming provides music to much wider audiences than record players did in the early 1900s. Through Spotify, any person who owns a smartphone, a tablet, a computer, or any other portable technological device has the ability to listen to music on the go, anywhere. Despite only being launched in 2008, Spotify allows users to listen to songs from all genres and decades, including Frank Sinatra’s “Theme from New York, New York” from 1977. Although connectivity could be an issue at times, Spotify also has an option to download playlists so that songs can be played offline. Furthermore, instead of purchasing individual albums or songs (as required by a record player), Spotify allows its users to pay a monthly fee for access to over thirty million songs, providing constant opportunities to discover new music. Although record players were (and still are) a useful platform for listening to music, nothing compares to the freedom of walking down the streets of New York City with headphones in to the tune of “New York, New York.”

Moreover, the one category in which these two platforms are most drastically different is the user experience that each engenders. When listening to a song on a record player, one must plug it in, turn it on, choose a record, place it on the turntable, and place the needle on the record to start the music. Unfortunately, it may be difficult to determine exactly where to place the needle depending on which song you want to hear. Records can also easily be scratched, but some record player fanatics would argue that the quality of the music which comes from record players is superior to all other platforms, despite its possible downsides. Either way, the rich history and inclusive community listening experience provided by record players sets them apart from Spotify and other streaming services of today. Nevertheless, record players are still popular a century after their creation, as older generations continue to pass down the legacy of their early music listening experiences while newer generations revamp this old tradition in a modern and artistic way.

On the other hand, Spotify creates a much more individualized approach in its listening experience, as each user has his or her own specific playlists (made by Spotify as well as its users themselves) and they can choose to share this music or wear headphones when listening. Due to the accessibility and portability that headphones provide, users can listen to Spotify whenever they want to, without having to include anyone else in this listening experience and without needing an outlet as a power source. Instead of bringing people together in one community-like way, Spotify places more of an emphasis on the individual and his or her unique musical preferences. Although Spotify does provide users with the ability to see what the people they follow are listening to, it is mostly a collection of a user's own playlists and music library, supplemented by the songs that Spotify recommends based on what a user enjoys.

Due to the portability of the Spotify application, which can be downloaded on various technological devices today, people can enjoy their music daily as they use public transit, walk to work or class, and move from place to place. This allows for the opportunity to play soundtracks behind daily tasks, as if creating a soundtrack to a movie, with that movie being one's own life. Although record players provide a unique listening experience which seems to bring people together, they cannot be moved from place to place in the same way that phones, laptops, and tablets can. As technologies continue to acquire more updates to further their capabilities, phones have become able to play Spotify through wireless headphones, speakers, cars, etc., each creating new opportunities to enjoy music in an entirely different way than before.

However, it is also important to note the changes in record players from those invented in the late 1800s and early 1900s to those invented recently. Early versions of record players were bigger and bulkier than those of today, mostly made of wood, and often featured a large horn-shaped device attached from which the music was projected. Today, new versions of record players have been invented which are somewhat portable, could be listened to via headphones, and are smaller and/or more compact. Although these new alterations may shift the traditional listening experience which record players used to provide in the past, they also draw connections between the experience of listening to music in the early 1900s and listening to music today.

Although record players have been improving to keep up with the latest technologies of our world today, they still cannot compare to the freedom of listening to Spotify on the go. Both platforms provide users with fantastic methods of enjoying their favorite songs and artists. However, even if record players provide a higher quality of sound, Spotify allows users to create libraries of music, organize their own playlists, and discover songs in ways that record players

will never be able to do. Although Frank Sinatra's "Theme from New York, New York" was released in 1977 and could only be listened to through live performance or record player at the time, a person can listen to various live, recorded, and cover versions of it on Spotify today while only paying the price of a single CD per month. Listening to Spotify on a smartphone or computer gives people the opportunity to play their favorite songs while completing everyday tasks and going about their daily lives. While record players may bring people together, Spotify allows people to create a soundtrack to their lives, which is a concept that other platforms have yet to surpass.

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