Bytes and Backbeats
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Bytes and Backbeats: Repurposing Music in the Digital Age.

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To best celebrate music and the efforts of human expression it is necessary to embrace change. While this is not to be done uncritically, it can only be accomplished with an open mind. The meeting of digital tools and audio production is the latest in the never-ending confluence of technology, culture, and the individual. Scholarship is one means of increasing receptivity to new and different ideas and experiences, celebrating human endeavor in all of its complexity and variety. Through its integrative impulses music seeks to provide the potential for cultural understanding and acceptance, and in these ways there are some parallels between the Western tradition of study and the practice of music. At the same time, we “use machines and other technology in the same way as we use music and musical instruments, to interpret the world and give it meaning.” Thus it is no accident that the final section (Part III) of this work has focused on an adaptation of an African folklore piece on the one hand and the latest in consumer technology, such as the iPod, on the other. These modes of music participation extend the previous focus on presentation and performance to highlight the positive forces alive in contemporary music creation and reception. While I have worked to maintain a balanced point of view, I have been motivated in large part by a desire to reclaim the joys of music participation in what is sometimes a hostile environment.

Music is bound to a social context. Music is often an essential element in the creation of social meaning, for instance in terms of teenagers’ construction of personal and group identity, yet it is often judged on its ability to survive its particular moment, to “stand the test of time” and outlast
its historical setting. We must recognize that the meaning of music is de-
pendent on the context in which it is experienced: it is always culturally
and historically contingent, whether the music is a creation of the moment
or a re-creation (either live or recorded) of the past. Technological repro-
duction may give us access to music from the past in some form but it does
not give us access to the actual experience of that music at the time it was
created. There is always a dynamic relationship between the production or
reproduction of music and our experience of it. The advent of digital au-
dio technology has heightened our ability to be participants in this dy-
namic relationship and in that regard moved us closer to the older models
of musical integration.

There is currently a changing paradigm of music consumption born of
the marriage between digital audio and the Internet. Digital downloading
is reversing the model of grouping musical pieces that began with the LP
and continued through the CD. Under the new model music is no longer
necessarily experienced in preconceived groupings, delivered as sets of
pieces to be experienced in a specific order. In a sense this is a return to the
multiple discs required to reproduce a single piece of classical music from
the days of the shellac 78 rpm recordings, when classical pieces, although
sold as sets, may have been listened to out of sequence; or the “singles” cul-
ture of the 1950s, when songs were listened to radio style, one artist’s song
at a time. But the new paradigm broadens both of these long-abandoned
models. Via digital downloading and portable mp3 players people are ex-
periencing all kinds of different music, juxtaposed in new and unexpected
ways. Vast libraries may be accessed randomly or easily programmed by the
consumer, rather than prepackaged for them. Internet sites such as Pan-
dora, TagWorld, and Amazon use either personal or collaborative filtering
to recommend music based on the music that you’ve indicated you like.
This cannot be understood as the simple and random movement of tech-
nological capabilities to which culture responds. In some way we have
dreamed up these new capacities—we have arrived at a desire to integrate
divergent musical performances in even more immediate and encompass-
ning ways. We wish to experience a broader palette of musical styles in an
even more condensed fashion. This may be understood as a movement to-
ward a widening in the breadth of musical expression as well as a move-
ment to a closer kind of musical integration.

The following rhapsodic evocation of this new technology comes from
Alex Ross, and its ultimate assertion of a universal sense of music as simply
music is at the heart of my arguments here:
I have seen the future, and it is called Shuffle—the setting on the iPod that skips randomly from one track to another. I’ve transferred about a thousand songs, works, and sonic events from my CD collection to my computer and on to the MP3 player. There is something thrilling about setting the player on Shuffle and letting it decide what to play next. Sometimes its choices are a touch delirious—I had to veto an attempt to forge a link between György Kurtág and Oasis—but the little machine often goes crashing through barriers of style in ways that change how I listen. For example, it recently made a segue from the furious crescendo of “The Dance of the Earth,” ending Part I of “The Rite of Spring,” right into the hot jam of Louis Armstrong’s “West End Blues.” The first became a gigantic upbeat to the other. For a second, I felt that I was at some madly fashionable party at Carl Van Vechten’s. On the iPod, music is freed from all fatuous self-definitions and delusions of significance. There are no record jackets depicting bombastic Alpine scenes or celebrity conductors with a family resemblance to Rudolf Hess. Instead, music is music.4

So the forces of dislocation that seem so rampant in contemporary culture are not the only forces present, nor are they necessarily aggravated by technology. Together music and technology find new ways to reinforce and expand individual and cultural identity. My own experience as a recordist is bolstered by my pursuit of scholarship, and together they provide me with the enthusiasms of music making and listening. I am more acutely aware than ever of the ways that music in its digital form, from the DAW to the iPod, may inspire community and creativity just as music always has.

When, over seventy years ago, Walter Benjamin considered what was at stake in light of the new technologies of mechanical reproduction, he conceived the withering aura of the original. But perhaps he suffered from his own assessment: “The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion.”5 It would seem that the new in the technology of music is always seen as a threat, that somehow the new ways of making or hearing music are going to rob music of its mystery. Perhaps Benjamin would agree that now, after over one hundred years of development, the processes that allow for mechanical reproduction may produce art with a different but meaningful aura of its own—that, indeed, the technology of music might help us retain this sense of the mystery of music. Music, in all of its forms—its creation, its expression, its reproduction and its consumption—remains a window into another, perhaps higher world. In the words of Jorge Luis Borges: “Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces
belabored by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us some-
thing, or have said something we should not have missed, or are about to
say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is,
perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon.”