



How Listening to Music Has Changed

by Bryan Smith, LTCL Tech Coach

The weekly LTCL Tech Q&A Zoom class comes to our rescue again with today's topic. Listening to music has certainly changed over time and technology (again) fueled these changes. So, this week's column will discuss the various mediums that we have seen, which ones are still around and viable, and then the latest ways to listen to arguably the largest libraries of music people have ever been able to access.

For many of us, the oldest medium was probably the vinyl record. Played by placing a specialized needle attached to an amplifier, it provided amazing fidelity. Then technology came along to pack more music in a smaller space. What emerged was magnetic tape... reel-to-reel, 8-track, or in the highly portable cassette, and in addition to listening, we could now also record whatever we wanted on such tapes (and re-record over and over on the same tape). This advance to magnetic tape however reduced the quality of the music for pure audiophiles, but for the majority of us, this enabled us to play "our" music in vehicles versus relying solely on the radio station. The other drawback to tapes is that they are fragile to heat and the mechanics of unrolling and rolling the tape perfectly over and over.

Next came Compact Disks (CDs). These seemingly indestructible plastic gems introduced the concept of recording music in digital form versus analog which means that more fidelity returned, although most argue that vinyl still has better fidelity. And again, many more songs could fit on a CD than the standard cassette tape. No worries about the tape getting unwound, and it takes a lot more heat in a hot car to warp a CD than a cassette.

Since music was now available in a digital format, it could be saved on portable music players, aka MP3 players like the iPod, or computer storage devices. USB "thumb" drives could be used to copy songs, and then plugged into a computer with speakers. Some vehicles even started offering a USB port and player. It was during this time that music services like Napster and iTunes started popularizing the ability for you to get/purchase a single song in digital form. And with Bluetooth speakers and enabled in vehicles, your smartphone is your music source. It is speculated that several years from now, new vehicles will no longer include AM and FM radios!

And that brings us to today where you can "stream" music from various music services. Some services, like Amazon Music and Apple Music (previously known as iTunes) allow you to purchase songs/albums and stream them. Others, like Google's YouTube Music, Pandora, Spotify, and iHeart Radio, don't allow you to purchase individual works, but instead grant access to their large catalog of music that you can stream. Think of these services as allowing you to rent access to their libraries of music (Apple and Amazon Music, which is included with Amazon Prime membership, also offer this service.)

So why purchase songs/albums on-line versus streaming? In my opinion, this is not an easy question to answer anymore. It used to be that the streaming services required Internet or cellular access, but this is not always true anymore – services like Spotify allow you to download specific songs to play when you are “disconnected.” So, I guess it comes down to wanting to “own” or just “rent” your music. If you only want to listen to 100 specific songs, then purchasing these will be cheaper over the long run versus paying maybe \$10/month renting entire libraries from these services. And if you want to explore new music, I can think of no better way than to trial a streaming service by picking a few songs and then letting the service introduce you to songs and music that they think you might enjoy based on other’s ratings.

Most of the streaming services have a free version as well as a paid service. For example, the free subscription on Spotify allows you to choose artists and create playlists (aka your tailored mix tape ☺), but for higher quality audio, no commercials, and ability to download and listen to music when not connected to the Internet, you need to upgrade to their paid subscription.

Happy listening!

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