iPod Culture

The iPod, praised for its ability to transform mundane experiences into cinematic ones through musical aesthetics, is a lucky piece of technology. People have been putting earbuds in, ignoring one another, and feeling like protagonists since the days of the portable cassette player and Walkman. However, the iPod experienced overwhelming success where these technologies did not due to two aspects: the “size’ (storage capacity) of the device, and its shuffle functionality. While not technically new, shuffle moved into the limelight primarily because of an iPod’s immense capacity for mp3s. The potential for contrast, continuity, and surprise becomes infinitely greater when the device has a thousand songs to choose from instead of twelve. Instead of having to delicately select a few songs to take on-the-go, one can, “mix, mash, rip, burn, plunder, and discover... much more easily than before” (Levy 4), all because gigabytes are the standard measure, not kilobytes. Music is accessible in its traditional forms, but only to the extent that the physical medium allows; vinyls harken back to the days when music couldn’t accompany the traveler, while CD’s and cassettes offered this capability, but became cumbersome in larger numbers. In this sense the iPod owes its success not to any ingenious innovation, but to the inevitable increase in storage capacity that underlies all technological progression, allowing users a far more vast and mysterious library from which to extract the “soundscapes” that they will use to enhance their daily lives.

As the digitization of music allowed for an entirely new level of convenience, it was only a matter of time before someone realized the immense potential that this would create for a new kind of listening experience (not to mention the thousands of dollars in profits that would stem from said experience.) Steve Jobs was this man, and realized that the masses would not simply go along with it - change calls for a reformulation of subjectivity, which entails work, adaption, and other such inconvenient things. However, this barrier can be overcome by making a piece of technology intuitive, gorgeous, and above all “user-friendly”. This is where the iPod excels, offering an extremely simple, accessible, and aesthetically pleasing experience. Specific playlists can be tailored to any given task or emotion, while the “shuffle” option introduces a “glorious chaos” to the process of consumption (though this chaos ultimately exists within the confines of the user’s tastes.) As Bull puts it, “Subjects construct what they imagine to be their own individualized schedules of daily life - their own soundtrack of media messages, their own soundscape.” (Bull 84). Whether getting pumped-up to Eye of the Tiger while exercising, letting thoughts drift to Pink Floyd on a long nocturnal drive, or fueling a paper-writing session with Yo-Yo Ma, it cannot be denied that music possesses the potential to create new layers of an experience by tapping into memories and emotions. The medium is the iPod, and the message is one of possibilities, comfort, and control.

While the iPod represents the essential changes in hardware that result in this increase of possibilities, Girl Talk’s music is representative of the scatterbrained pandamonium that the “shuffle” mindset has instilled within society. Unlike The Grey Album or A Night at the Hip Hopera, whose samples seem deliberately selected to underscore specific messages, Feed the Animals conveys its own message *through* the sheer volume of works that it taps into. The album incorporates an absurd amount of samples from a wide variety of genres, an organized mess of rap, rock, soul, pop, and many others, seemingly having something for everyone. The album, mixed in the style of a traditional DJ set, emulates the “shuffling” that the iPod introduced - cuts between songs are far more frequent, teasing listeners with the “best” or most recognizable bits, though never staying in the same mood for long. (I was incredibly excited when I heard the intro to Radiohead’s Bodysnatchers, only to have him pull it as soon as the intro was over.) The album, which collides an incredible variety of material, could be likened to the way in which, “Vast swathes of humanity separate themselves from the bonds of reality via the White Earbud Express” (Levy 2). Headphone culture encourages consumers to mash up their daily lives with the music of their choice, regulating or stabilizing at their discretion, and Girl Talk embraces this concept within his mixes. Whether with the iPod or with Girl Talk, users don’t have to pick and choose: they can have it all.

While the iPod may have been a keystone in the development of a portable music subjectivity, technologies do not spring fully formed, and they always inform the generation of technology that is to follow. Like a song, a piece of technology may be seen as a “finished work” in its time, but will ultimately be deconstructed and re-assembled in the future to suit different tasks, the “taste” of the present. The iPhone has “remixed” the concept of the iPod, mashing it up with a telephone, a GPS, a Game Boy, and many other devices. Today, the “ability” to fit a (mere) thousand songs into one’s pocket would be scoffed at. A listener is still capable of getting lost in his/her music, but human impatience (which is what initially made shuffle so appealing) will lend to them checking their texts, emails, snapchats, instagrams, and facebooks instead of shoving the damn thing into their pocket, causing the music to become more of a “background” instead of a “soundtrack”. In this sense, the iPod was and may remain the “purest” portable musical experience. The very technological phenomenon that allowed it to succeed, by having exponentially more space, has caused it to become a mere facet of a greater whole, and lose some of it’s importance in the process by simply being one of many options.

The iPod owes its success to the cassette, walkman, and mp3 players that have come before it - it simply did it “better” by existing at a point in time when storage capacity would facilitate the multi-faceted experience that users desire, whether in the form of neat ordered lists, or the glorious chaos of shuffle.

The music of Girl Talk appeals directly to the scatterbrained disorder that manifests itself in the human way of thinking - rapidly changing, putting things that don’t belong together, yet being incredibly recognizable. Often, this is merely putting rap vocals on another song - yet it is new. Girl Talk is convenient. It has something for everybody. Feed the Animals is an amalgamation of an iPod library, not two distinct albums. Instead of drawing distinct, deep, deliberate, (not necessarily) meaningful contrasts and focusing in on TWO works, Girl Talk’s work is expressive of the technological capabilities of the time, made to be all over the place. It’s a mix on shuffle.

iPods defeat isolation. You never have to face a walk, a car ride, a train ride, or a boring class alone - your music is (conveniently) there to back you up.

“iPod culture offers a fantastical personalized escapism, a “soundscape” that transforms a mundane experience into a cinematic one. Even radio, which offers nearly every type and kind of music, doesn’t compare to an iPod, which more “safely” and accurately addresses a greater number of personal tastes.

It’s like having an iPod on shuffle while going about daily biz - mashing up our personal experiences with the emotional/physical sensations created through musical aesthetics (over which we have immense control). Users create contrast or continuity at our discretion. Regulation, stabilization, or physical incentivization.

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“Vast swathes of humanity separate themselves from the bonds of reality via the White Earbud Express” -Levy 2

plays as if Girl Talk left his iPod on shuffle while going about his daily business,mashing up his personal experiences with the emotional/physical sensations created through musical aesthetics (over which we have immense control).

Man’s inherent conservativity / resistance to change - this can be quelled by making a piece of technology accessible, intuitive, “friendly”... the iPod did this, as it taps into our minds, offering us everything from TOTAL RANDOM CHAOS to neat, structured, orderly playlists, made for specific moods, tasks, or situations (angry, exercise, car ride). This allows a divine level of control when it comes to enhancing mundane daily life - headphone culture allows us to politely ignore others as we deploy music to fit the moment. Whether it is the energizing beats of Major Lazer pushing you to work out, the meloncholoy guitar sweeps of Wye Oak making a breakup more bearable, or just fucking loving Led Zeppelin - it cannot be denied that music possesses the potential to create new layers of enjoyment, tapping into our memories and emotions, inciting nostalgia.

-The iPod does create an entirely new subjectivity, primarily due to SPACE and therefore, shuffle. It’s what a walkman/tape casette dreamed of being. Interestingly enough, as the “iPod” functionality has now been absorbed into a more omnipotent device known as a “phone”, this subjectivity experiences a slight change. A listener is still capable of getting lost in his/her music but the impatience and (add-ness) of contemporary society/just humans, which (ironically is what made shuffle so appealing) will lend them to checking their texts, emails, snapchats, instagrams, and facebooks instead of shoving the damn thing into their pocket, causing the music to become “background” instead of a “soundtrack” - it is not the focus. In this sense, the iPod was and may remain the “purest” portable musical experience - the very technological phenomenon that allowed it to succeed by having exponentially too-much space has caused it to become a mere facet of a greater whole, and lose some of it’s importance in the process, by simply being one of many options.