Throwing Away Money

People don’t like spending money when they don’t have to. This mind-boggling human inclination can be attributed to greed, thrift, or perhaps just common sense. The bottom line is: money is an extremely finite resource for most, and they will cling to it unless it is absolutely necessary to do otherwise. For this reason, people enjoy having an “excess” of money (and the affordances it offers them), and will gladly take it from their fellow human beings if there exists an opportunity to do so. It also follows that people will seize opportunities to save money, to *not* spend hard-earned cash when an alternative exists. In this sense, a teenager torrenting Radiohead’s discography in his parent’s basement can be likened to the headmost honcho of the recording industry: both want to retain or increase their current store of money, not deplete it. This conflict of interests has explicitly manifested itself in the battle between corporate-sanctioned methods of acquiring music (which generate money for the corporate party), and peer-to-peer file sharing channels that allow users to effectively acquire music for free. Ctrl+C, Ctrl+V has made a death threat to the cash-for-music transaction that has dominated history, though this may not be as heinous as it seems, especially when this previously dominant form of transaction is brought under a closer lens.

The recording industry made a serious mistake when it underestimated the internet, and the incredible channels of transmission that its rhizomatic structure would eventually allow. Though not the first, the ambitious concept of Napster became the model for future Bittorrent structures, who were then able to circumvent some of Napster’s pitfalls, specifically that of anonymity. Today, a consumer looking to fill up an iPod has (essentially) two routes. He or she can “buy” a song off of iTunes for $1.29, at which point it has effectively been “rented” for the rest of his or her lifetime (apparently death’s icy claws add insult to injury by taking musical rights to the grave, in addition to the human soul.) Digital Rights Management technology will likely accompany this file, preventing it from being copied, while a gargantuan license agreement will restrict the consumer from modifying the song in any way, legally dismissing the opportunity to re-interpret or remix the song. The second option is to use a program that allows users to collectively upload and download music, anonymously, at superior speeds to a typical purchase. Such a program takes ten seconds to download, and another five to begin acquiring an entire discography, which can then be abused, revered, or enjoyed however the user sees fit. One could assemble an argument that humans feel entitled to music because of the emotional capacity that it possesses, that it makes us *feel* certain things. Alternatively, on a far more rational plane, it can be seen as a simple choice between spending money and being locked into a contractual jungle of red tape, or pocketing that cash *and* experiencing unlimited freedom with the music files. The ceaseless march of technological advancement has undermined the old methods of acquisition; previous generations did not possess the capacity to carry thousands of songs in their pockets, and thus, had no expectation of being able to do so. To youth especially, sharing and/or not-paying-for-music is all they have ever known, and it seems, all they will ever know.

The recording industry has effectively missed the boat; people have little reason to *stop* acquiring music for free, especially given the current alternatives to doing so. The power relationship between consumers and suppliers of music has become muddled, as the consumers themselves are now capable of transmitting and even creating their own musics with little to no need for the “man” who could have ultimately been paid for a more constricted opportunity. In this sense, contemporary society is comprised primarily of musical sluttiness, sharing and spreading itself robustly with little need for intimacy. At this point in time, it seems rational to acquire music for free when the option to do so exists, especially when it simultaneously entertains the human spirit of resistance.