

A Savage Indictment of Spotify [C1]

Secondo una recente pubblicazione, il gigante globale dello streaming ha reso la musica più noiosa e la vita degli artisti più precaria.

In November and December last year, Spotify's chief executive, Daniel Ek, sold 420,000 **shares** in the music streaming company, earning himself \$199.7m. One wild rumour that circulated on social media suggested Ek's **eagerness** to **divest** himself of **stock** in the company he founded was linked to the imminent publication of Liz Pelly's book *Mood Machine*, as if Ek feared the revelations contained within it would adversely affect the share price. That was obviously a **fanciful** notion. Ek started **cashing out** Spotify **shares** in July 2023, and has continued to do so into 2025. At the time of his last transaction, a month after Pelly's book was published in the US, Spotify's share price was at an **all-time high**. And yet, you can see how people who had a preview of *Mood Machine*'s contents might get that idea into their head. It may be the most depressing and **enraging** book about music published this year, a **thoroughly** convincing argument that Spotify's success has had a disastrous effect on pop music. Pelly also **alleges** a catalogue of alarming corporate behaviour, indicative of a company that, one former employee suggests, has "completely lost its moral centre." The question is whether it ever had one to start with. The favoured origin story around Spotify's founding involves Ek, a Swedish tech millionaire and "music nerd," electing to save the industry from the **scourge** of online piracy by providing an alternative: an all-you-can-eat buffet of music on demand for a small monthly **fee**. Pelly suggests this is basically **tripe**. Ek's speciality was in selling online advertising: his big idea was that some kind of streaming service would be a good way to do it. In its initial iteration, Spotify wasn't even specifically intended as a music provider: the concept was to stream movies, until Ek and his co-founders realised that the size of the digital files involved was prohibitive. The picture that emerges is not of a **munificent** fan but a very different and familiar archetype: the guy who's good with computers and neither understands, nor places any value on, art. Certainly, Spotify seems **to have gone out of its way to denude** musicians of earnings. Major labels were paid enormous advances to license their catalogues to the

service, with no obligation to share any of the money with the people who had actually made the music. Spotify's system of royalty payments is both **byzantine** and patently unfair. Artists aren't paid simply by the number of streams their songs achieve, but by the percentage of total streams they account for in each country: not for your work, but how well your work is doing compared with that of a **handful** of megastars. One of Pelly's interviewees calls it "forced consolidation": not everyone who makes music wants to compete with Ed Sheeran, but this is a world in which you're automatically obliged to do so. If you're willing **to forgo** a further percentage of your earnings, then there's Spotify Discovery, which adjusts the app's much-**vaunted** algorithm to promote artists who accept a reduced royalty rate. Meanwhile, in the early 2010s, the company shifted its focus from "music enthusiasts" to what it calls "**lean-back** consumers", effectively the kind of people who would once have turned the radio on in the morning and left it **burbling** in the background all day. The purpose of the playlists it designed to target them — "**chill vibes**", "**mellow** morning", "**mood-booster**" — was, and is, to provide unobtrusive background noise or, as Pelly suggests a latter-day equivalent to muzak: nothing **striking**, unusual, out-of-the-ordinary, or indeed any of the things one might reasonably want music to be. The message that quickly filtered through to artists was that the more beige your sound, the more likely it was to find a place on a Spotify playlist and earn some cash. **Hence** the rise of a homogeneous genre **dubbed** Spotifycore, which you've doubtless heard even if the term seems unfamiliar. It's a bit ambient, a bit electronic, a bit folky, a bit indie, a non-specific **wish-wash** possessed only of a vague **wistfulness**: music "for any place, for anyone," as one producer put it, that ends up being "music for no place, for no one." Spotify encouraged it, developing an optimisation tool called Spotify4Artists that urged musicians to examine the data, see what is doing well and **tailor** their music to be more like that. Given how hard it is for musicians to make a living in the 21st century, you can understand the pressure on artists to join this particular **race to the bottom**. "To be sustainable," says one indie record label executive **dolefully**, "you have to put out records that are going to get repeat listens in **coffee** shops." But there was more bad news for those that did. If you were dealing in music for no place and no one, it might as well be made by nobody. Spotify started buying

in what it calls PFC, or “perfect fit content” — **blandly nondescript stock** tracks from companies that specialise in background music, made by session musicians paid a **flatfee to crank out** dozens of tracks at a time — and packing its playlists with them. PFC, usually hidden behind fake artist names and made-up biographies, proliferated through official Spotify playlists. The company has dissociated itself from direct involvement in PFC, stating “we do not and never have created ‘fake’ artists and put them on Spotify playlists.” It remains a secretive world and Pelly gets almost nowhere investigating it, although she does **track down** some of the musicians involved: grateful for the cheque and frank about the “**brain numbing ... joyless**” experience of **battery-farming** music “as **milquetoast** as possible.” It’s a **relentlessly** miserable story that one suspects will get more miserable still. The rise of AI presumably means that even the faceless session musicians will soon be **out of a gig**. Pelly reports that Spotify has experimented with an idea called Soundscape, an endless AI-generated personalised ambient stream (though the product has been put on “indefinite **hiatus**.”) Its dream seems to be a world of entirely passive consumers who don’t choose what they listen to, but simply press play and let Spotify choose for them. She ends by attempting to suggest alternative futures — in which consumers switch to small, cooperative streaming services **run** by musicians, or go out of their way to buy direct from artists, replicating the indie economy of small labels and **DIY gigs** that once supported **left-field** musicians — but her **worthy** ideas **feel** like sticking **plasters** on a **gaping wound**. Streaming now accounts for 85 per cent of the music market in the UK: Spotify is the market leader, with the **sharpest** practices, but, as Pelly notes, its competitors aren’t much better. One suspects that for most consumers, Spotify’s convenience — and it is convenient — **trumps** whatever damage its rise has inflicted on music and musicians **thus far**, which means it’s only going to get bigger and more powerful. What that means for music and musicians going forward remains to be seen, but Mood Machine doesn’t leave you filled with optimism for the future.” Published in The Guardian on 5 March 2025. Reprinted with permission.

Glossary

- **cashing out** = incassare
- **all-time high** = massimo storico
- **dubbed** = chiamato
- **burbling** = chiacchierare
- **Hence** = quindi, perciò
- **joyless** = privo di gioia
- **plasters** = cerotti
- **divest** = cedere
- **to have gone out of its way** = fare il possibile, fare uno sforzo
- **stock** = inventario
- **dolefully** = tristemente
- **enraging** = indignante
- **handful** = manciata
- **nondescript** = anonimo, poco distintivo
- **blandly** = senza sentimento
- **eagerness** = impazienza
- **alleges** = affermare
- **scourge** = flagello
- **tripe** = sciocchezze
- **byzantine** = complicato
- **mellow** = morbida, rilassante
- **brain numbing** = che intorpidisce il cervello
- **battery-farming** = allevamento intensivo
- **thoroughly** = completamente
- **munificent** = generoso
- **to denude** = spogliare
- **race to the bottom** = corsa al ribasso
- **tailor** = adattare
- **left-field** = non convenzionale
- **shares** = azioni
- **hiatus** = pausa
- **gaping wound** = ferita aperta
- **sharpest** = più acuto

- **chill vibes** = vibrazioni rilassanti
- **mood-booster** = stimolatore dell'umore
- **striking** = sorprendente
- **flat fee** = tariffa fissa
- **trumps** = battere
- **fee** = tariffa
- **wish-wash** = insipido
- **out of a gig** = senza lavoro
- **fanciful** = fantasiosa
- **to forgo** = rinunciare
- **vaunted** = vantarsi
- **relentlessly** = implacabilmente
- **lean-back** = appoggiarsi indietro
- **to crank out** = produrre in serie
- **milquetoast** = mite
- **run** = gestire
- **DIY gigs** = concerti fai da te (do it yourself)
- **worthy** = meritevole
- **thus far** = finora
- **wistfulness** = malinconia
- **track down** = rintracciare