

NEW MUSIC FRIDAY

an accidental exploration in the UX of
community-based music curation

experienced and narrated by Jacques DeBar

Last school year, I had the great privilege of working for my school (University of Washington) as Program Coordinator of the Arts + Entertainment (A+E) team.

The job largely consistent of planning and executing events to satisfy the creative needs of the student body. We began working at the beginning of the summer, giving us ample time to pull off some big events at the start of the school year. However, because my specific role was largely a day-of execution role, I did not have many set responsibilities during that summer. As a result, my team gave me a simple task: keep track of the music, entertainment, and pop culture landscapes as closely as possible in order to attain valuable insights into current entertainment trends.

Entertainment and pop culture seemed simple enough to digest through strategic media consumption, but what of music?

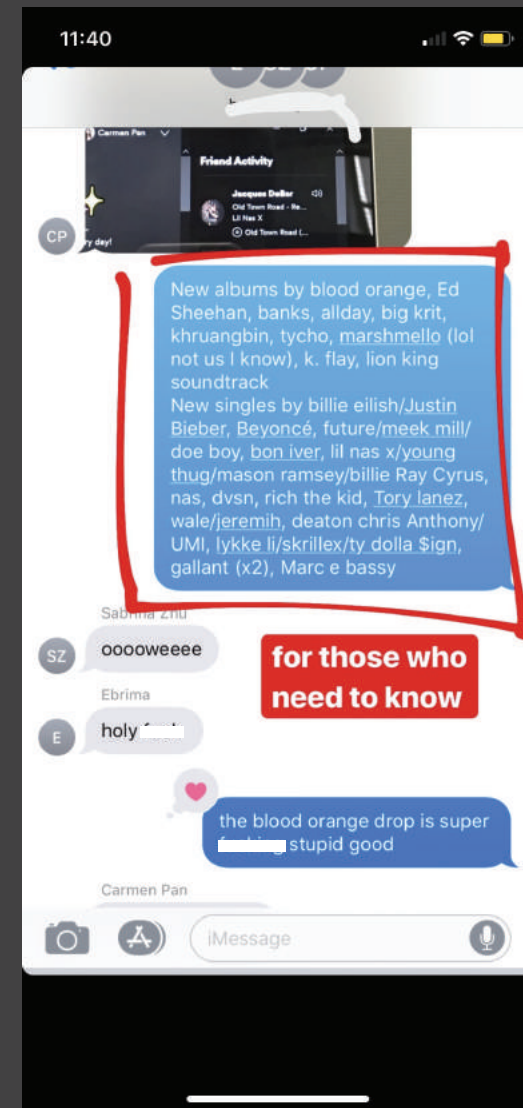
My answer: keep track of every notable piece of music that came out, every single week. Thus began my unexpectedly long and thorough journey into new music consumption and curation.



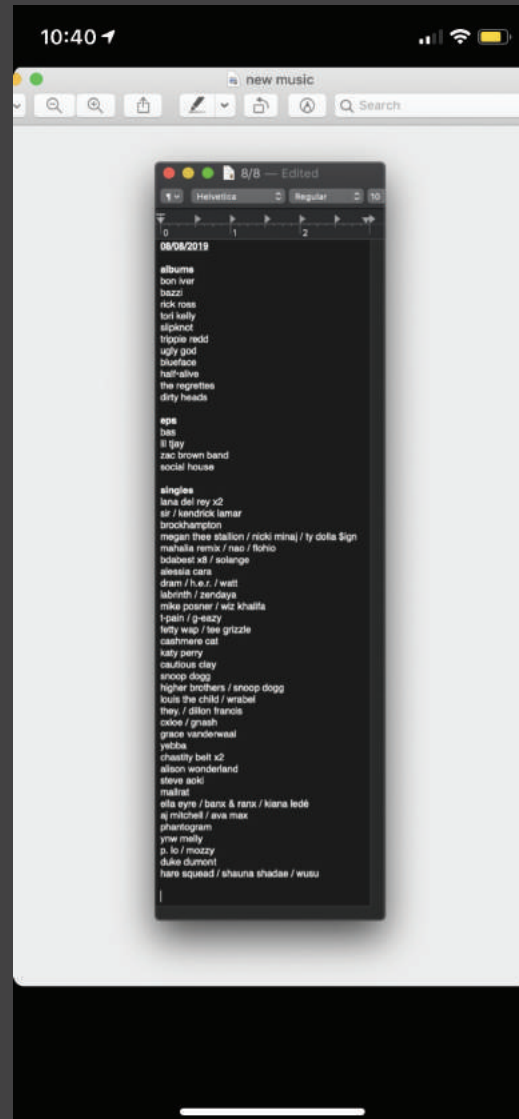
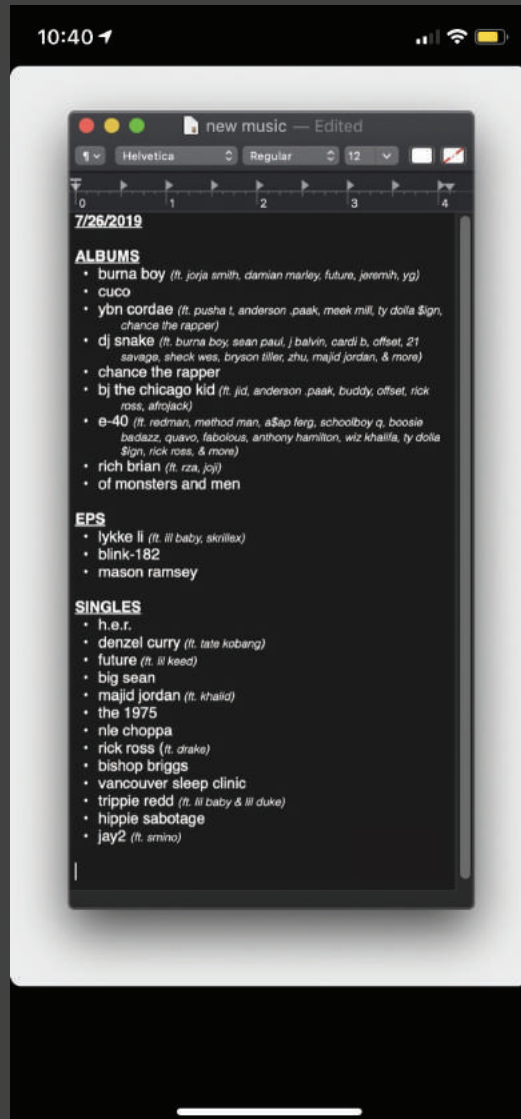
My efforts started out small, with me skimming through new releases on Friday (the main music release day) and alerting the rest of my team to the notable releases.

After my coworkers responded enthusiastically, I figured it wouldn't hurt to give my Instagram community the same heads up about the new releasees.

The origin of it all: a text to my coworkers letting them know about some new drops



Some early tinkering in format



I continued this process of collecting and sharing new releases each Friday, but began experimenting in visual display formats.

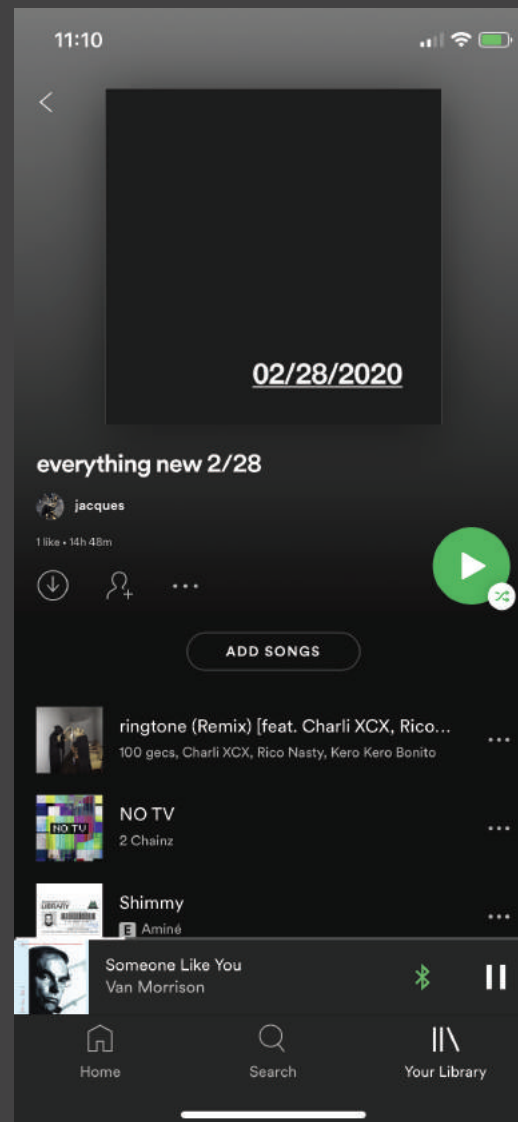
I wanted to offer the viewers of my Instagram story a sleek and digestible informational display format that still allowed for comprehensive coverage.

My standard format: separate categories for singles, albums, and EPs, with the name of the lead artist displayed and features displayed in light detail text

Soon enough, I settled on a consistent visual format.



An easy-to-remember, readable URL would serve as a redirect to my weekly “everything new” playlist. Here, all of the music on the visual display would be at a user’s fingertips



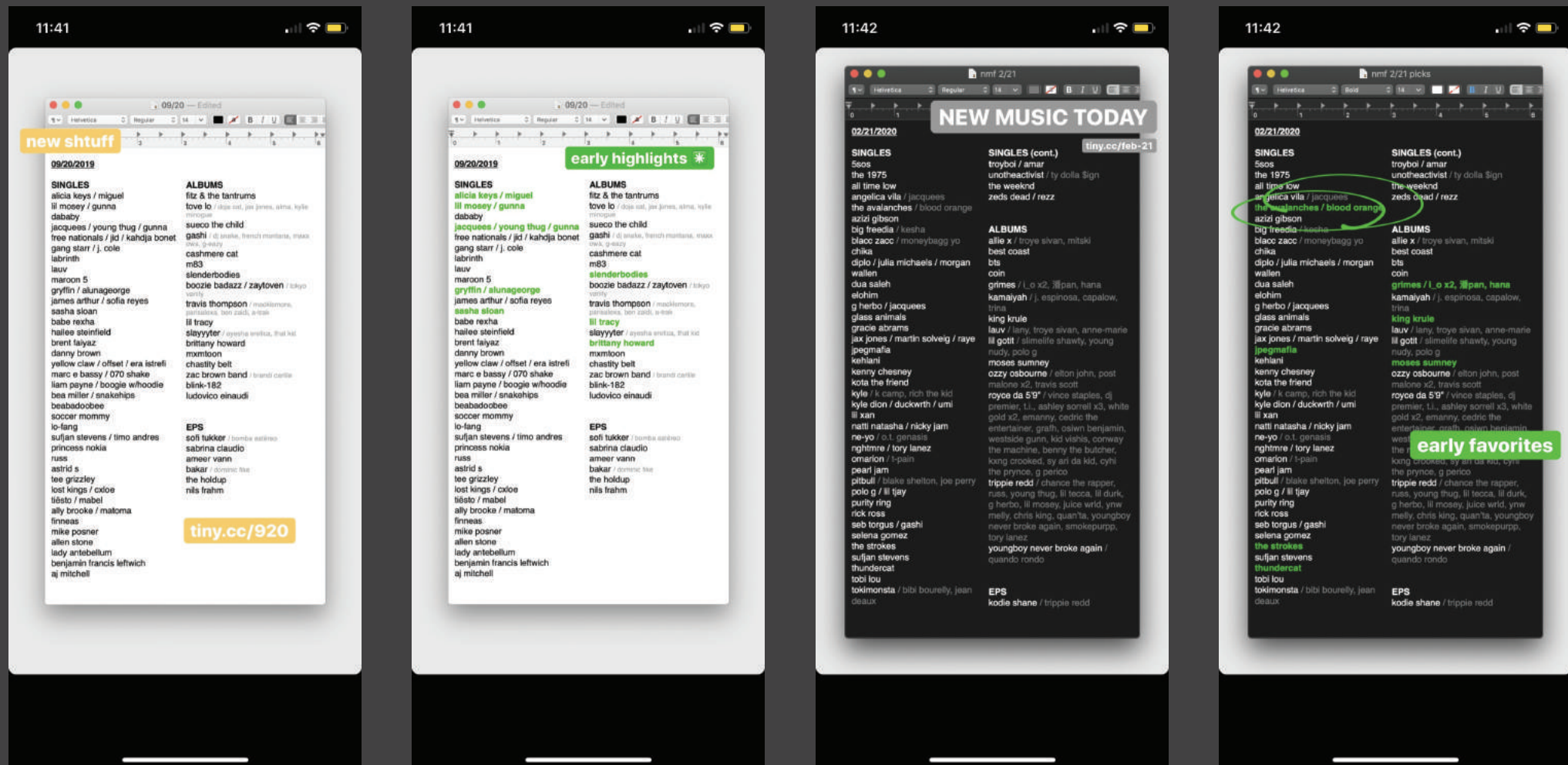
I soon implemented an easy way for people to access all of the new music.

My solution was to compile all of the new releases into a single Spotify playlist so that people could easily find everything in one place and sift through if they so chose.

These playlists were organized first by category, then alphabetically by artist.

This continued for some time.

Occasionally, I would indicate standout tracks or projects by highlighting them in green.



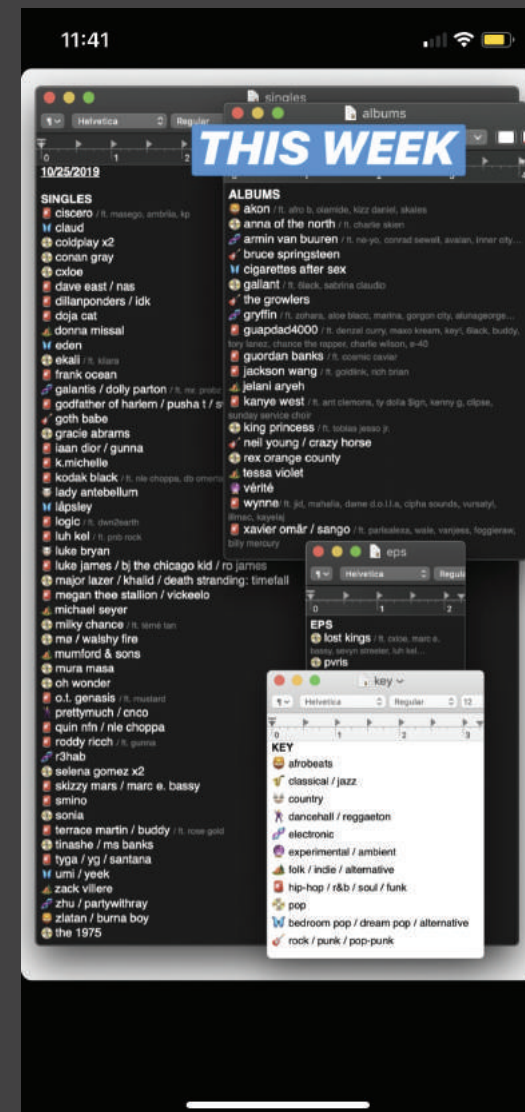
Some weeks, I would even add my own subjective ratings to every single release using intuitively-colored emojis.



I began to experiment more and more with elements of curation and subjective judgment

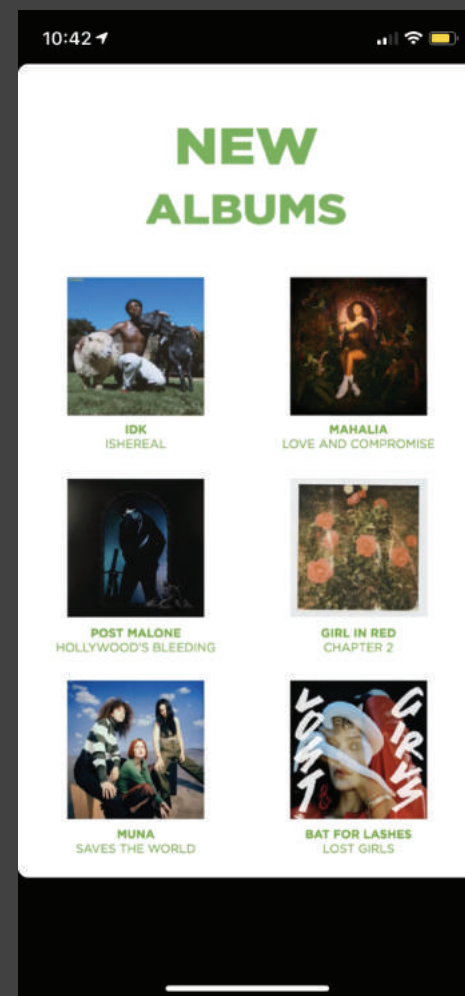
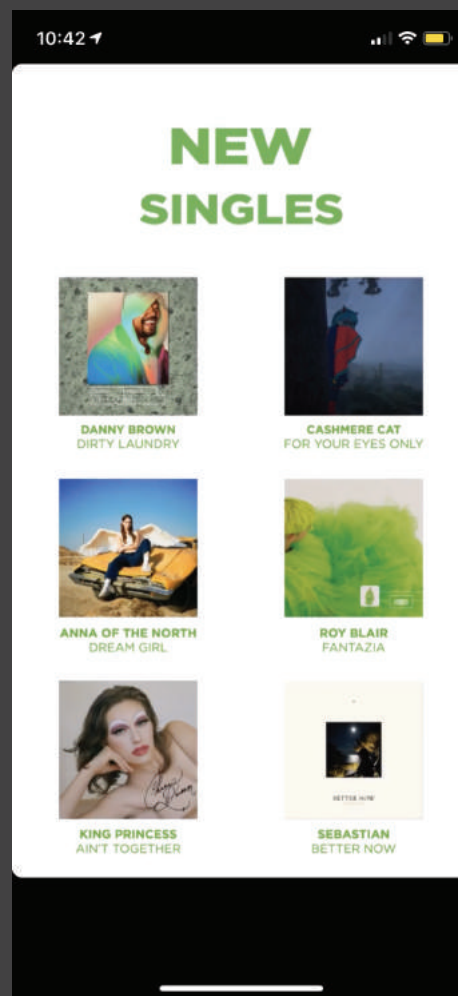
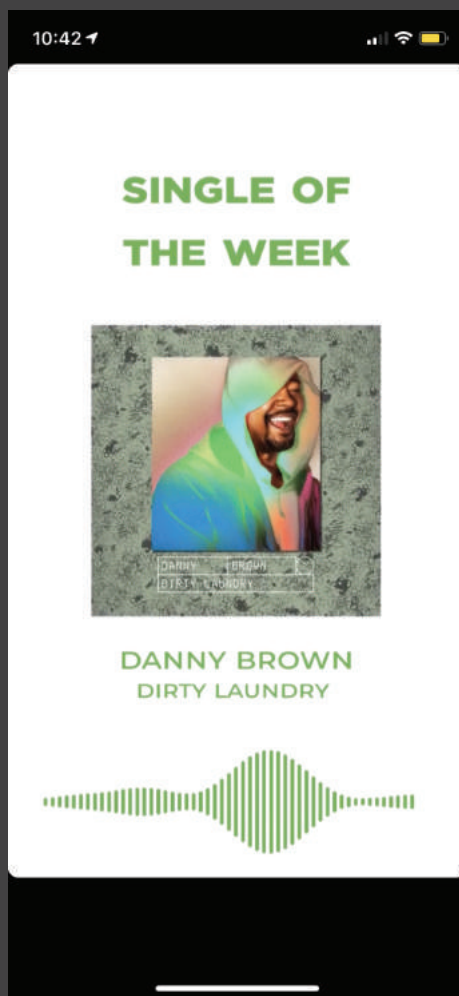
The more I got into it, the better I got at tracking down new releases. As a result, my Instagram story displays became more and more unwieldy, forcing a significant cognitive load on the user.

As time went on, I experimented with genre indicators and spreading information out over multiple screens.



My Arts + Entertainment team were excited about my new music work, so we began to produce weekly motion graphics highlighting some of the top finds each week. This format was definitely inviting, compact, and apologetic about cognitive load, but I felt that the 7-single 6-album structure was not perfectly suited for the material at hand. Do we ignore the 8th and 9th “best” singles each week, even if they are 100% worth encouraging people to check out? What happens if we don’t feel that there are even 3 excellent albums on a given week, let alone 6? The tradeoff between ease of consumption and content integrity became clear, and I did not feel satisfied with a system that compromised some music.

Our weekly “New Music Friday” motion graphic included a brief introductory animation, a few seconds showcasing a standout single of the week, and twin displays for our favorite singles and albums of the week. An audio clip from the single of the week was overlaid throughout the 15-second clip.



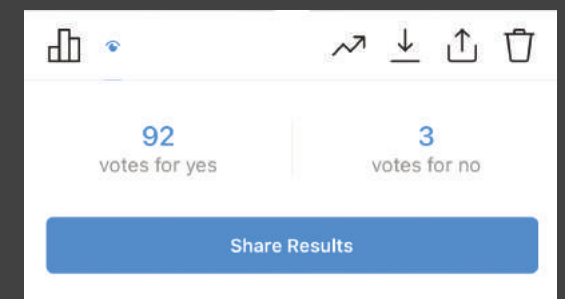
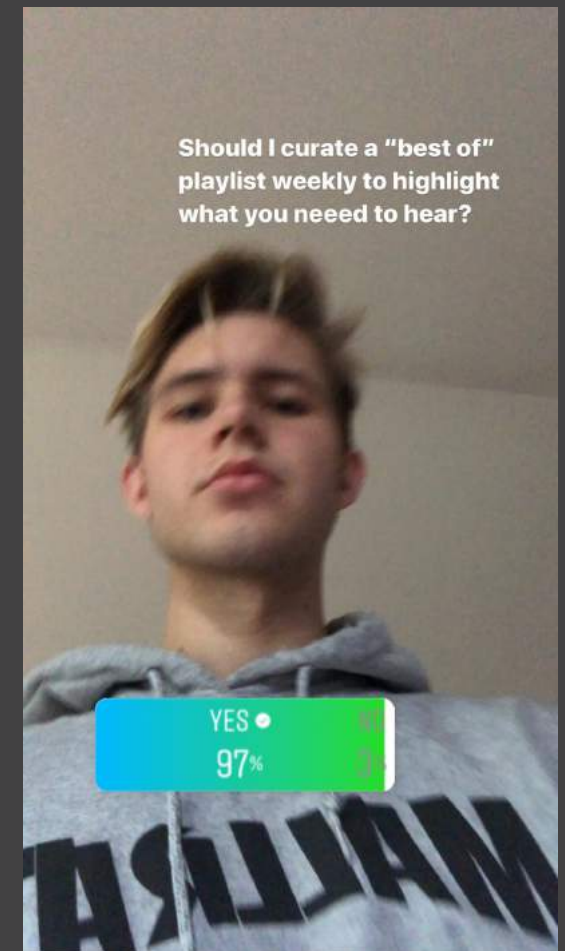
The rest of the A+E Team were tapped out enough already with the workload of our current new music Friday system, so I decided to move onwards in this exploration on my own.

I continued my weekly displays independently. More and more, I was receiving requests to curate a “best of” playlist for each week of new releases. This hadn’t been the initial intention of my efforts, but if someone in our community was going to undertake the tastemaking burden of each new slate of releases, it might as well be me, the only person I knew already sorting through hours and hours of new music.

After asking publicly about the potential playlist and receiving substantial support, I committed to undertaking the idea.

Reluctant to jump into a thorough curation effort if only a couple friends were interested in weekly highlight playlists, I turned to my instagram followers to gauge interest.

Poll results were decisively positive.



However, I still had to figure out how to preserve this idea of “content integrity” I held so dearly.

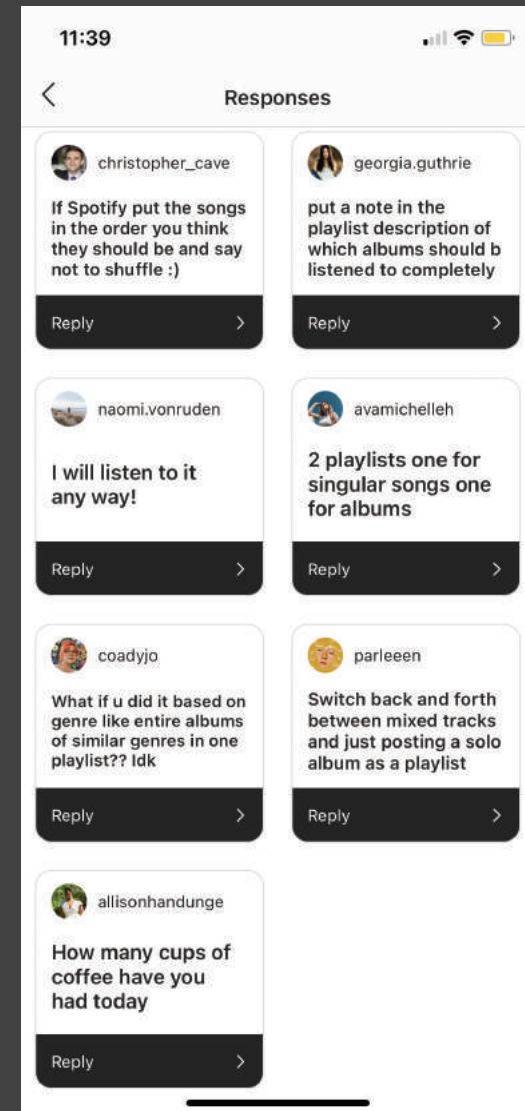
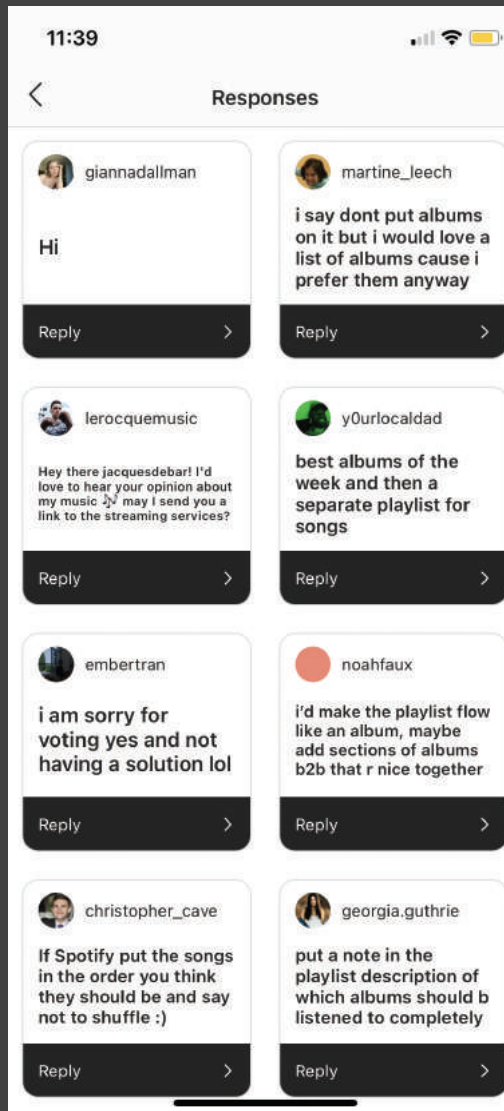
My main issue revolved around albums.

Albums couldn't be stripped down to a few standout tracks if I wanted to give them their just due as complete works of art. How could I include worthy albums in a playlist without them drowning out the standout singles?

Full album inclusion would also jeopardize the shufflability of a playlist, and I didn't feel comfortable trying to consistently order a playlist of this nature. But was creating a second playlist too much for a consumer to keep track of?

Also, was a playlist even the right mechanism for sharing albums? If not, what sort of reusable structure could I dream up to display noteworthy albums week after week?

Again, I got the end users (my instagram followers) involved through a Q&A widget on my instagram story.



No one seemed to know what to do.

The more I thought about it, the more dissatisfied I felt with the tools at my disposal within Instagram and Spotify. As is the case with all major streaming platforms today, Spotify user actions revolve around playlists, and playlists just weren't the tool I needed to express the information at hand in an intuitive and consumable way.

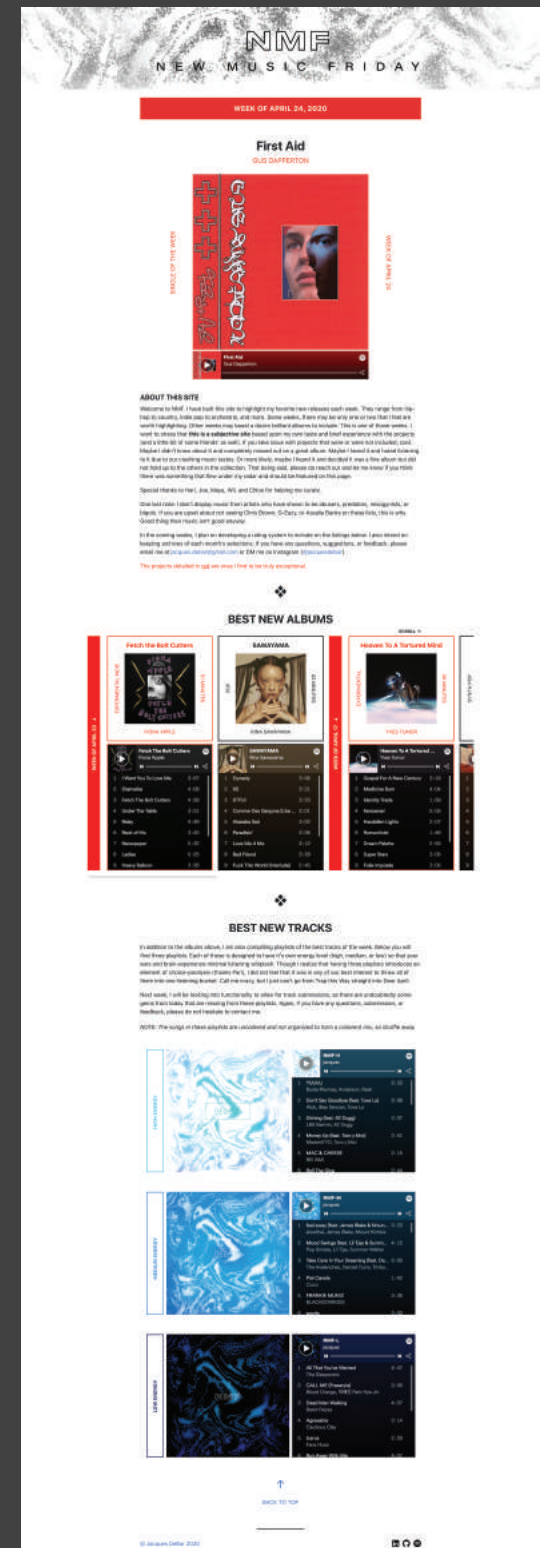
In ruling out the playlist-dominated tools of Spotify as the centerpiece of my music curation efforts, new gears started turning in my head. What if there was a medium I already knew how to craft and operate that was more flexible than Spotify?

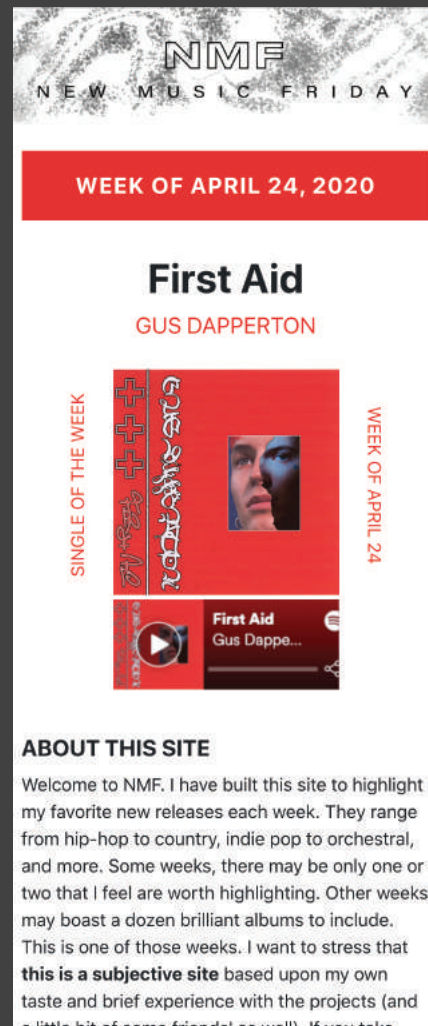
The answer? Designing and coding a webpage specifically built for the task at hand.

Here is a (zoomed-out) screenshot of the website on a desktop computer.

The three main sections of the site are designed to showcase an exceptional single from the given week, list the week's best albums in a horizontally-scrollable collection of custom-designed album cards, and provide three playlists of new songs worth listening to, each playlist at a different energy level.

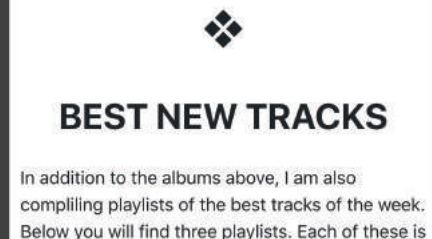
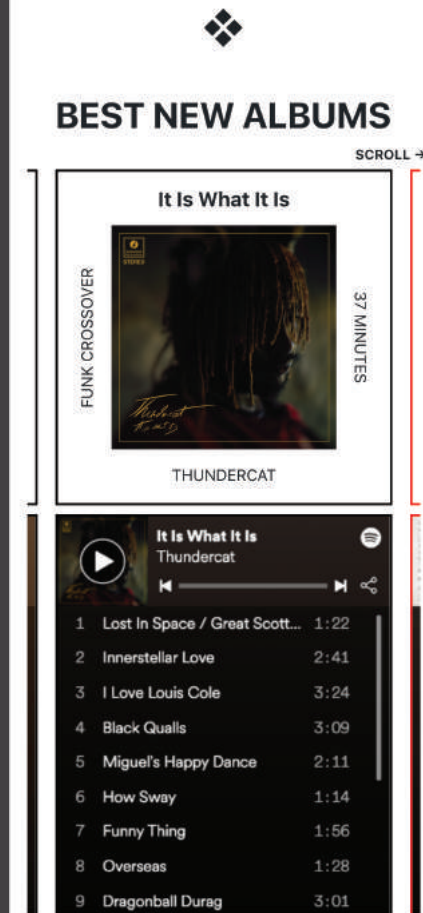
Every listing on the page includes an embedded Spotify player for a seamless transition to the popular streaming platform.





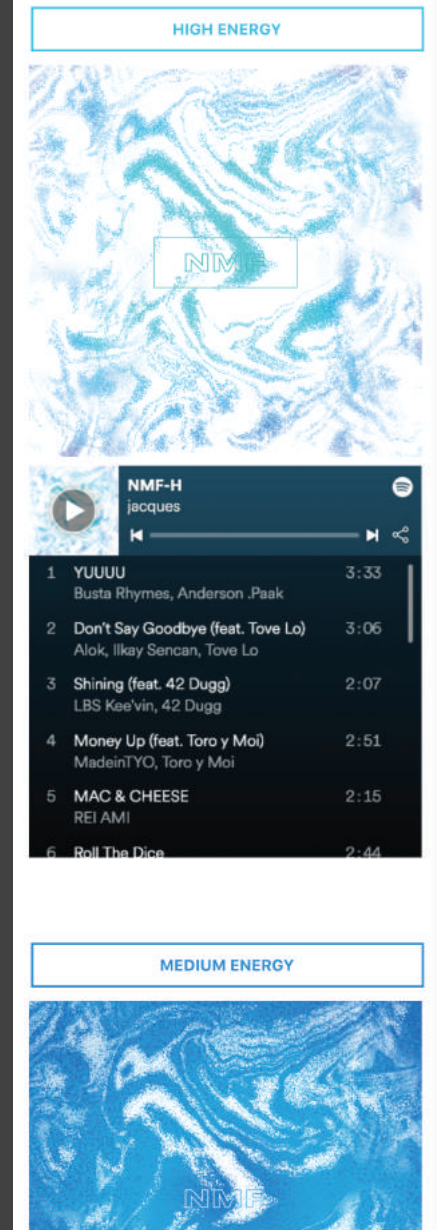
Instagram (@jacquesdebar).

The projects detailed in **red** are ones I find to be truly exceptional.



missing from these playlists. Again, if you have any questions, submissions, or feedback, please do not hesitate to contact me.

NOTE: The songs in these playlists are unordered and not organized to form a coherent mix, so shuffle away.



The New Music Friday site was designed to be highly mobile-friendly as well. This is especially important considering that the vast majority of users visit by navigating from the Instagram app on their mobile devices.

The format of this presentation is not well-suited for displaying New Music Friday.
I would encourage you to visit the New Music Friday webpage at:

jacquesdebar.com/nmf

I appreciate you taking the time to read through this very long account of my music-related UX explorations.

Thank you,
Jacques