The Sunday Read: ‘Why Did This Guy Put a Song About Me on Spotify?’

0:00

[Music]

0:14

hi I'm Brett Martin I'm a contributor to the New York Times magazine and I live in New

0:19

Orleans I genuinely don't remember what made me search for my name on Spotify one day last summer it's possible I was

0:27

looking for a podcast I'd been on or maybe it was the kind of search that we all do once in a while just to

0:33

procrastinate or just out of vanity in any event I must never have done this

0:38

particular search before because the first thing I saw was a song titled Brett Martin you a nice man yes and it

0:46

had been up there for 11 years now there are many Brett Martins in this world several much more famous

0:53

than I am there's a major league baseball player an Australian squash Legend some historical figures but

1:00

obviously I press play and at first the words are generic

1:07

enough you're a radio guy you're a right to man you're a reporter

1:15

dude granted these are somewhat uncannily like my life but I'm just thinking this is hysterical this is my

1:21

new theme song Oh Brett Mar you're a wonderful person you're a nice man I

1:29

really like you there's a line about you tell good stories and I think this is

1:35

fabulous this is even more like me but then a couple of really specific details stopped me in my tracks Brett Martin you

1:43

cry on airplanes you watch Sweet Home Alabama and you start to cry a lot

1:49

Martin you cry on airplanes you watch Sweet Home Alabama and you start to cry

1:56

a lot now I worked on a story 20 years ago for This American Life about crying on

2:02

airplanes and specifically about crying during the movie Sweet Home Alabama so at this point my girlfriend

2:09

and our daughters come into the room and I point at the screen and I say wait a minute this actually may be a song about

2:16

me written by some guy I don't even know and I'm stunned and I am also very very

2:23

amused needless to say this song becomes a huge hit in my house we probably play

2:28

it 2017 times play it for every guest that comes to the house and and every time we laugh

2:34

uously and it's not until maybe my 30th listen that I actually register How It

2:41

Ends this guy sings Brett Martin I really like you will you be my friend

2:47

will you call me on the phone Brett Martin here's my phone number and he

2:53

sings his actual phone number Martin my phone number

3:00

[Music] I have to admit it takes me a few days to call first of all who calls anybody

3:06

anymore and who was this guy but my daughters keep asking if I've called and

3:12

eventually my curiosity gets the better of me so I finally pick up the phone and

3:17

I never could have expected what I'd find on the other end what happens next is this week's

3:23

Sunday read a piece I wrote for the magazine that's about what it's like to work at the intersection of Art and

3:28

commerce what it takes to make oneself visible in The NeverEnding River of content on platforms like Spotify that

3:35

rule our culture and how you make a life in a commercial art form all of which

3:40

are questions that nearly everybody I know who works in any medium finds themselves

3:45

asking so here's my article read by Eric Jason Martin our audio producer today is

3:52

Adrien Hurst and the original music you'll hear was written and performed by Aaron Esposito

4:03

I don't want to make this all about me but have you heard the song Brett Martin

4:08

comma you a nice man comma yes I guess probably not on spottify Brett Martin

4:17

you a nice man yes has not yet accumulated enough streams to even register a tally despite an excessive

4:24

number of plays in at least one household that I can personally confirm even I the tit nice man didn't hear the

4:31

1 minute 14-second song until last summer a full 11 years after it was uploaded by an artist credited as

4:38

Paparazzi and the fogs I like to think this is because of a heroic lack of

4:44

vanity though it may just be evidence of very poor search

4:49

skills when I did stumble on Brett Martin you a nice man yes I naturally

4:55

assumed it was about a different more famous Brett Martin perhaps Brett Mar the left-handed reliever who until

5:01

recently played for the Texas Rangers or Brett Martin the legendary Australian squash player or even Clara Brett Martin

5:09

the Canadian who in 1897 became the British Empire's first female lawyer

5:15

only when the singer began referencing details of stories that I made for public radio's This American Life almost

5:21

20 years ago did I realize it actually was about me the song ended I really

5:27

like you will you be my friend will you call me on the phone then it gave a phone number with a New Hampshire area

5:34

code so I called it's possible that I dialed with

5:40

outsize expectations the author of this song whoever he was had been waiting 11

5:45

long years as his message in a bottle bobbed on the digital Seas now at long

5:50

last here I was I spent serious time thinking about how to open the conversation settling on what I imagined

5:57

was something simple but iconic on the order of Dr Livingston I presume after

6:03

one ring a male voice answered I said this is Brett Martin I'm sorry it's

6:10

taken me so long to call the man had no idea who I was you

6:16

have to understand he said apologetically I've written over 24,000

6:21

songs I wrote 50 songs yesterday and thus was I ushered into

6:27

the strange Universe of Matt Farley Farley is 45 and lives with his

6:33

wife two sons and a cockapoo named pippy in Danvers Massachusetts on the

6:39

NorthShore for the past 20 years he has been releasing album after album of songs with the object of producing

6:46

result to match nearly anything anybody could think to search for these include

6:52

hundreds of songs named checking celebrities from the very famous to the much less so he doesn't give out his

6:58

phone number in all of them but he does spread it around enough that he gets several calls or texts a week

7:05

perhaps sensing my deflation he assured me that very few came from the actual

7:10

subject of a song he told me the director Dennis Dugan of Dennis Dugan I

7:16

like your movies very a lot part of an 83 song album about movie directors

7:21

called once but he didn't realize who it was until too late and the conversation was

7:28

awkward freed from the blinding incandescence of my own name I could

7:33

suddenly see the extent of what I had stumbled into it was like the scene in a thriller when the detective first gazes

7:40

on the wall of a serial Killer's Lair Paparazzi and the is only one of

7:45

about 80 pseudonyms Farley uses to release his music as the hungry food

7:51

band he sings songs about Foods as the guy who sings songs about cities and

7:56

towns he sings The Atlas he has 600 songs inviting different named girls to

8:02

the prom and 500 that are marriage proposals he has an album of very

8:08

specific apologies albums devoted to sports teams in every city that is a sports team hundreds of songs about

8:15

animals and jobs and weather and furniture and one band that is simply

8:20

called the guy who sings your name over and over he also has many many songs about

8:27

going to the bathroom if you have a child under 10 with access to the internet it is very likely you know some

8:34

part of this body of work what he refers to collectively as his poop songs are

8:39

mostly released under two names the toilet bowl cleaners and the odd man who sings about poop puke and pee the odd

8:48

man is more Shameless he explained the toilet bowl cleaners are making statements with their albums though the

8:55

distinction between the forers butt cheeks butt cheeks butt cheeks and the latters I need a lot of toilet paper to

9:01

clean the poop in my butt maybe subtler than he imagines largely though not entirely on

9:08

the strength of such songs Farley has managed to achieve that most elusive of goals a decent living creating music in

9:17

2008 his search engine optimization project took in $3,000 4 years later it

9:23

had grown to $224,000 the introduction of Alexa and her voice activated

9:30

opened up the there toor underserved non- typing Market in particular the kind fond of shouting things like poop

9:37

in my fingernails at the computer pooping my fingernails by the toilet bowl cleaners currently has over 4.4

9:43

million streams on spottify alone to date that band and the odd man who sings

9:50

about poop puke and pee have collectively brought in approximately

9:55

$469,000 from various platforms they are are by far Farley's biggest earners but

10:01

not the only ones Paparazzi and the fogs has earned $41,000 the best birthday song band ever

10:10

$38,000 the guy who sings your name over and over $80,000 dozens of others have taken in

10:16

two three or four digits the New Orleans Sports band The Chicago Sports band the

10:22

singing film critic the great weather song person the Paranormal song Warrior

10:27

the murn media holiday singers who performed 70 versions of We Wish You a Merry Christmas substituting

10:33

contemporary foods for figgy pudding it adds up Farley quit his day job in

10:40

2017 people like to criticize the whole streaming thing but there's really a lot of Pros to it he said indeed in 2023 his

10:49

music earned him just shy of $200,000 about one half penny at a

10:55

time Farley's earnings help fund his multiple other creative Endeavors he

11:00

records what he calls his no jokes music this includes a Twan band he's been in

11:05

since college called Moose Haven which once recorded an album a day for a year

11:11

he hosts two podcasts one about his work and the other recapping Celtics games

11:17

and he makes movies micro budgeted determinedly amateur but nevertheless

11:23

recognizably cinematic features starring himself and his family and friends they

11:28

feature a spect acular array of New England accents in most Farley plays

11:33

some version of himself a mild-mannered eccentric hero projecting varying degrees of Menace Farley and his college

11:42

friend Charlie rockburg are in the midst of a project in which they have resolved to release two full movies per year the

11:48

model Farley said was inspired by Hallmark movies if this movie stinks good news we're making another in 6

11:56

months their most popular work remains don't let the riverbeast get you 2012 a

12:02

charmingly Shaggy tale of a crypted threatening a small New England Town it features Farley's father as a big game

12:09

hunter named Ido hootkins like many of Farley's Endeavors his films have attracted a small but

12:16

intense following I could fill a 5,000 seat Arena if I could only get everybody

12:21

in one place he says his is the kind of obsessive project that seems to inspire

12:27

the same from others a few years ago Leo Galil a Chicago music writer set out to

12:33

listen to Farley's entire Corpus from start to finish chronicling the journey in a Zen titled freaky for Farley four

12:42

pages into issue one he had already taken on the Grim tone of an Arctic Explorer I've become a little tired of

12:49

the album 25 songs in he wrote which makes me concerned about my ability to

12:54

get through the rest of this listening Quest issue two begins I

13:00

failed the umbrella name that Farley uses for all his outputs is murn he made

13:06

the word up or rather he seized on what he felt was its strange power after misspelling the word intern in what he

13:13

had planned to be a 10,000 page novel to Farley creativity has always been a

13:19

volume business that in fact is the gist of the murn method a 136 page Manifesto

13:26

on creativity that he self-published in 20 21 his theory is that every idea no

13:33

matter its apparent value must be honored and completed an idea thwarted

13:38

is an insult to the Muse and is punished accordingly if you reject your own ideas

13:44

then the part of the brain that comes up with ideas is going to stop he said you just do it and do it and do it and you

13:52

sort it out later or as the case may be you don't but rather send it all out

13:57

into the abyss hoping that someday somebody somewhere will hear

14:03

it I was aware of course that on some level I'd been had the one tiny fish

14:10

vain enough to be snared in Farley's troll it left me a bit paranoid Charlie

14:15

roxburg suddenly seemed like such a perfect Boston pseudonym that I spent a day investigating whether he was a real

14:22

person he's real lives in Connecticut and makes corporate videos for his day

14:27

job I lost another day chasing after a letterboxed commenter who goes by the

14:33

handle dcs577 and was so baffled by the popularity of Farley's movies that he

14:39

published his own short eBook The not murn method it urges readers to give up

14:45

on their artistic dreams and even mimics Farley's Buckshot SEO by appearing in

14:51

multiple slightly different versions surely he had to be a farly Alter Ego

14:56

nope a 36-year-old movie buff in Missouri mostly I was trying to figure

15:02

out whether I thought Farley was a bad guy did his scheme represent the

15:07

inevitable cynical end product of a culture in the grips of algorithmic platforms or might it be a delightful

15:14

sight effect was his work spam or a kind of Outsider Art was he just the poop

15:21

song guy or was he closer to Steve Keane the brooklyn-based Gen X hipster

15:26

approved painter of over 300,000 works who has been the subject of books and Museum

15:32

retrospectives as it happens Farley has a song about Steve Kean it's on a

15:37

Paparazzi album titled I am not wasting my life which suggested he was asking

15:43

some of the same questions when I went to Danvers to meet Farley in December it became quickly

15:51

apparent that he is the most transparent person in the world he's got a thick head of hair high cheekbones and a

15:57

friendly Kyle Chandler like face that n another letterboxed reviewer correctly identified as youth

16:04

ptery when he picked me up at my hotel he was wearing a fleece lined Brown hoodie that judging by social media is

16:11

the only outer layer he wears throughout the New England winter including on the 15 to 20 M walks he takes twice a week

16:20

he struck me as the kind of guy who wears shorts the moment it gets above 48° compulsively early he confessed that

16:28

he arrived at the Lobby an hour before we were scheduled to meet you might

16:33

mistake M's aesthetic for Stoner humor but Farley says he has never had a sip

16:38

of alcohol much less done drugs by his own description he eats

16:43

like a picky 12-year-old when I made him take me to a restaurant in Salem called

16:49

Dub's Seafood famed for its belly clams he ordered chicken nuggets and buried

16:54

them beneath a blizzard of salt and ground pepper removing the top of the pepper shaker to pour it on more

17:01

directly in the car we listen to The Rolling Stones The Replacements Tom

17:06

waights it's a mammoth accomplishment of self-control for me not to be playing my own music right now he said though his

17:14

efforts at restraint were puzzling given that I was in all likelihood the one person on Earth at that moment whose job

17:21

was to listen to it all of Farley's life he has wanted to make things and have people see hear

17:29

them after going to school at Providence College he moved to Manchester New

17:34

Hampshire specifically because he knew nobody there who might distract him if you know people they want you to go to

17:41

cookouts he says I designed my entire life to not have to go to cookouts even

17:47

now he cannot abide downtime to him the wasted time of a party or watching a

17:53

football game is measured in songs or scripts he could have written at no point did Farley consider a more

18:00

conventional route such as film school or a low-level job in the entertainment industry instead he took a job at a

18:08

group home for teenagers knocking out a 40-hour week in 3 days so that he could

18:13

work on music and movies the other four he would leave MOS Haven CDs in public

18:19

places across Manchester hoping somebody would pick them up he slipped them into the stacks at local record stores like a

18:26

reverse shoplifter he would drive people to the airport just so he could force his music on them on the

18:33

way Farley's Persona is simultaneously grandiose I really do think I'm the

18:39

greatest songwriter of the 21st century he told me and knowingly

18:45

self-effacing one night I went with him to a tiny independent theater in Lexington for a screening of the murn

18:51

film magic spot a time travel comedy on the drive down I asked what the endgame

18:58

for the movie was obviously they have a very different business model from his music what if somebody gave him say a

19:05

million dollar to make his next movie he thought for a second 300,000 for me and

19:12

Charlie spread the rest around to the people who have helped us all these years make a $10,000 movie and get sued

19:19

he said that would be about twice the budget of a typical murn joint magic spot wasn't on the Marquee

19:27

when we pulled up but there was a flyer taped to the door we couldn't afford color copies but we did our best the

19:34

theater owner said as he let us in there were 11 people in the audience including

19:41

Farley's father and brother-in-law both of whom were in the movie there was also a film student named Taylor who had

19:48

driven up from the cape for the second of three murn screenings he'd see within a month and two guys down from

19:54

Manchester one of whom was turning the other on to the Farley Cannon a few minutes into the movie The Sound

20:01

went out and we sat for about 10 minutes while Farley frantically tried to fix it

20:06

he was on the verge of jury rigging a solution involving holding a microphone to his laptop when the sound system

20:13

miraculously healed itself a huge success I'm on Cloud9 he said as we

20:20

headed back toward Danvers after the show he refused to accept his share of the ticket sales instead pressing extra

20:27

money into the owner's hands is thanks for somebody so driven to find an

20:32

audience and so immune to embarrassment the Advent of the digital age was a

20:38

miracle Farley began uploading the MOs Haven catalog to iTunes when it came out

20:43

and then to Spotify as described in the closely autobiographical murn film local

20:49

Legends MOS Haven was intended to meld the sounds of Bob Dylan Van Morrison and

20:55

Pink Floyd into a musical concoction that was going to blow the minds of millions of fans all the way around the

21:02

world as it turned out Farley noticed that the only song that seemed to blow minds or at least get downloaded was a

21:09

comic throwaway called shut up your monkey get down get funky shut up your

21:16

monkey some people would have quit right there he says I saw an

21:22

opportunity a lot of energy has been spent trying to pick the lock of the recommendation algorithms that can make

21:29

or break a song on Spotify and other streaming services any number of online

21:34

courses Distributors and publishing companies promis to navigate the Labyrinth of inputs playlist inclusion

21:41

natural language processing average length of listens influencer attention

21:46

metrics like acoustic speechin and danceability that will push a song unto

21:52

millions of users recommended playlists critics meanwhile bemon the rise of

21:57

bands like of Van Fleet an algorithmic fever dream according to Pitchfork who

22:03

seemed to be engineered to be the next song after whatever it was you actually chose to listen

22:10

to when I asked Farley how much of this he factors into his work the answer was

22:16

almost zero he gets the sense that longer titles seem to work better than short

22:22

ones and that around a minute and a half is a good minimum length but for the

22:27

most part his is a blunt force attack on the softer Target of search results at

22:33

its most intentionally parasitic this includes such tracks as a review of

22:38

Exile on Main Street designed to be discovered by The Rolling Stones curious

22:44

a 2013 album credited to the passionate and objective Joker fan takes advantage

22:49

of the fact that song titles cannot be copyrighted thus this girl is on fire

22:55

quick grab a fire extinguisher almost Instant Karma and searching for sugarm

23:01

man which unlike the more famous sugarm man by Rodriguez is about a baker whose

23:08

sugar delivery is running late Farley says he has since sworn off these kinds

23:13

of Tricks these days he sets himself a relatively light goal of 1 50 song album

23:20

a month recorded in a spare bedroom in his house 50 tracks is the limit that CD

23:25

Baby which Farley uses to distribute a manage his music allows a regulation

23:31

that may or may not have something to do with Farley who used to put as many as 100 on an album once he reaches his

23:38

quota he begins the tedious work of checking the levels of each song entering titles and metadata genre

23:46

writer length Etc creating an album title and cover art nearly always a

23:51

selfie and uploading the package one song at a time Farley showed me a worn green

23:58

spiral notebook in which he meticulously tracks his output and earnings from

24:04

Spotify he earns roughly a third of a cent per stream Amazon and Apple pay

24:09

slightly more on average between a third and 3/4 of a cent Tik Tok on the other

24:15

hand pays musicians by the number of videos featuring their songs and is thus immune to Farley's strategy when Chris

24:23

and Kylie Jenner recorded a video of themselves dancing to Farley's song about Chris millions of people saw it

24:30

but Farley earned less than 1 cent among other topics Farley told me

24:35

he planned to tackle in future albums were colleges household items tools

24:41

musical instruments I had planned to ask what categories haven't worked but what

24:46

had become clear by then is that the idea of any one song or even album

24:51

hitting the jackpot isn't the point even after spotify's recent announcement that

24:57

it would no longer pay Royal alties on songs receiving fewer than a thousand streams Farley's business model rests on

25:03

the sheer bulk of his output and so does his artistic model

25:09

whatever the dubious value of any individual song in The Farley Universe it's as part of the enormous body of the

25:15

whole the magnum opus that it gains power this is especially true when you

25:21

consider that an artificial intelligence could conceivably produce 24,000 songs

25:27

farly entire Ura in about a day a fact that gives his defiantly human even

25:34

artisanal labor a kind of lonely copian dignity whatever else Farley's work is

25:41

it is not AI even when it barely seems to be

25:46

[Music]

25:55

I a year or two ago hary discovered with some chrin that he was no longer the

26:01

number one result for the search poop song there was another poop song guy his

26:08

name is Teddy Casey and amazingly he is also from a Boston suburb Newton that's

26:14

where the similarities with Farley stop Casey has precisely two songs available

26:19

for streaming a sweet kids song about animals called monkey and the poop song

26:25

which has over 4 million streams across very I platforms Casey is 55 until recently he

26:33

was working as a bartender and hosting Open Mic nights near where he lives in Mid Coast

26:38

Maine when I reached him he was back home after a week in New Hampshire training to become a US Postal Service

26:45

letter carrier he wrote his poop song around 2009 but he didn't get around to

26:51

posting it until 2020 it didn't do anything for months he said and then all of a sudden one month

26:58

it made $20 I was like Wow cool buy a case of beer these days the song brings

27:05

in about $1,200 per month enough to pay his rent Casey told me with what sounded

27:11

like a Labowski and shrug I have other songs that I want to put up he said but

27:17

I kind of don't want to sell out I asked if he knew about the toilet bowl cleaners and he said he'd heard a

27:24

few of their songs I'm not making this up he said there's this other guy I don't know if

27:30

you've heard of him the odd man who sings about poop puke and pee his idea

27:35

was to customize every poop song so there's a Steven poop song a bob poop

27:40

song A Mary poop song He's got hundreds I told him that both bands were

27:46

in fact the same person well okay he said as if realizing

27:52

the full extent of what he was up against I like mine better but I'm biased

27:58

he said finally you can tell he knows how to write songs but I think he's just been going for

28:04

volume in fact I knew about the suite of songs that combine Farley's two most

28:10

successful genres names and poop because he was working on a new set of them when

28:15

I visited him he estimated that he had already completed about 3,000 but there

28:20

were always new names this can be kind of painful he warned switching on his keyboard and

28:28

firing up his laptop he dawned headphones consulted a list of names and

28:33

got to work in the Silence of the room I could just hear the soft click of the

28:38

keyboard and his vocals Jam poop Jam poop poop

28:45

poop in Local Heroes which is something like Farley's All That Jazz there is a

28:51

fantasy sequence in which Farley imagines the two sides of his personality arguing one the ser

28:58

heartfelt artist the other a greasy record executive demanding ever more poop

29:04

songs of course the scene can only be a fantasy and can only have Farley playing

29:10

both characters because the greasy record executive belongs to a lost world

29:15

one in which drastically fewer people had a chance to produce art and the work was often corrupted by corporate

29:22

Gatekeepers but in which there was also a clearly marked road to an audience and a living

29:29

Farley represents both the best and worst of the incentives and opportunities that have taken this

29:34

world's Place certainly there are few creators working today in any medium who

29:40

would not recognize the anxiety he embodies that their work now lives or dies by the vories of opaque algorithms

29:47

serving a bottomless menu of options to an increasingly distracted public and

29:53

that if they don't bow to the demands of these new realities their work and by extension they will simply

30:01

disappear which is to say that while the experience of watching Farley work was not unpainfully as promised neither was

30:09

it totally unfamiliar after a minute and a half of the Jamila poop song Farley paused He

30:16

adjusted a few dials consulted his notebook thought for a few seconds and

30:22

plowed on to the next song different Tempo different vocals similar theme

30:28

Tonka Tonka he sang poop poop poop poop poop

30:36

[Music]