

# Metallica, Napster, and the Transformation of Subcultural Capital

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On June 1, 1999, Napster went live. The software, developed by Shawn Fanning and Sean Parker, popularized peer-to-peer (p2p) file sharing. Napster allowed users to search for and see the media libraries of other computers on the network and download songs that they wanted (at that moment, most internet connections were too slow to download movies or TV shows). Napster's development, release, and ensuing popularity coincided with the creation of the mp3 format, which compressed audio files and allowed thousands of songs to be stored on the small hard drives of personal computers. The mp3 format enabled built-in PC media programs, like Windows Media Player, replace radio, mixtapes, turntables and CD changers as platforms for personal and collective listening. These two software innovations, the mp3 and PC media players, allowed users to upload songs from their CD collections onto their PCs and make playlists out of their personal libraries. These developments unfolded along with PCs becoming cheaper and more common, the growing availability of high-speed internet, and the mass marketing of desktop CD burners. In combination, these technological changes gave consumers greater control over what they listened to at home, at work, and on the move. The introduction of Napster's p2p software expanded the library available to users, allowing them to tap into the catalogues of other users and download selected songs and albums for free. At its peak in 2001, there were over 80 million users internationally (Gowan), meaning that hundreds of millions of songs were available to download for free, enhancing the possibilities for on-demand listening and personalizing the listening and consuming experience.

I remember when Napster broke out. Freshly graduated from college, I was preparing to head to graduate school and in possession of my first personal computer – a clunky desktop with a 3-gigabyte hard drive (which seemed luxuriously large). Napster did little to ameliorate my desire to have CDs, but it allowed me to download songs by artists whose full albums or readily available singles I had little interest in buying or could not afford at that moment. I downloaded throwback tracks from the 80s, remixes of hip-hop bangers, and live bootlegs from my favorite bands. If I heard a song by a new artist that sounded promising, I would investigate their catalog through Napster, risk-free, by finding another user who bought the CD and loaded it onto their PC. I remember digging into Ludacris and Slipknot, bootleg Santana tracks, and songs from the Kids and Singles movie soundtracks. I expanded my library one song at a time, from artists I knew and loved, artists I only knew one or two songs by, and artists who only had a few songs that I really wanted to hear. Powered by curiosity, convenience, and (no) cost, my music library grew, as did the libraries of almost everyone I knew. Napster was our own crowdsourced free music depot, where we searched for what we wanted, popular and obscure, new and old. As more users joined, the breadth of the library expanded, opening up seemingly infinite possibilities for our ears. The means of digital distribution bypassed traditional brick-and-mortar stores and allowed for nearly instant and free acquisition. Napster changed the nature of listening, of fandom, and most of all,

it changed the music market. It altered how music is consumed and distributed; it impacted listening behavior and, as a consequence, changed the relationship between fans and artists.

In popular music, Napster's primary stock and trade, the creation of cultural and subcultural capital is a dynamic, entangled, and perpetually emerging process. As Thomas Frank (1997) and Theodor Adorno (2001) narrate and theorize, there are industries that work to create hegemonic cultural capital, seeking to publicly define the parameters of the hip, new, edgy, classic and profound, and grafting these characteristics onto different modes of consumption. Frank narrates this process in the advertising industry, which moved from selling commodities that were classic and built for a lifetime to emphasizing the seasonal and new, in line with planned obsolescence and corporate growth. Adorno looks at the large post-war culture industry, like popular music, films, and books, that peddle predictable plots and uninteresting ideas wrapped in veneers of newness and innovation. Adorno saw the culture industry as the new threat to society, flattening discourse, manufacturing consent, and silencing genuinely new ideas or coopting and watering them down for the purpose of profit rather than progress. These social mechanisms sought to create new forms of cultural capital – utilizing popular culture rather than established high culture to create social value and hierarchy based on differentiating between modes of popular consumption. As Frank shows, one of the post-war culture industry's most successful operating principles was the creation of cool cultural capital, particularly for the Baby Boomer and post-Boomer generations. The advertising industry sought to teach consumers that constantly buying, replacing, and upgrading to what was current and fashionable, consuming and displaying innovations and designs in the fashion, automotive, and lifestyle industries could give them cultural capital by rendering them cool among their peers. But beneath the hegemonic culture industry's temptations and expressions intended to pique a desire to be at the forefront of what's new and hip, there are other networks, often connected by a shared love of a specific culture, that collectively produce their own parameters for subcultural capital that reject the conventions of hegemonic cultural capital purveyed by the advertising and culture industries.

The networks of consumers and creators that create subcultural capital reject the terms of hierarchical consumption provided to them by creating and communicating their own distinct parameters, aesthetics, and hierarchies. Brake theorizes that any subculture and its internal and external displays "indicate[s] which symbolic group one belongs to, it demarcates that group from the mainstream, and it makes an appeal to an identity outside of a class ascribed one" (1985, 13). Subcultures and the activities that lie at their intersections possess their own internal hierarchies and standards. Some of these practices are externally aimed in that they differentiate between the subculture and what is broadly, and often loosely, defined as mainstream. Others are internal and differentiate between silverbacks and neophytes, posers and stakeholders, authentic and sell-out (Thornton 1995; Jensen 2006). These standards differentiate between cultural products and displays, signaling which fit the subculture and its expressions and which are viewed oppositionally. Knowledge, familiarity, and competence in these accepted forms, often accompanied by possession, creation, and display of particular commodities, create subcultural capital. One of the more common criteria for the accrual of subcultural capital in music is the notion of being "indie," a term derived from being signed to an independent record label (or no label) rather than a major label, which is affiliated with a large distribution and marketing network (see Thompson 2001 for an excellent gloss of this as it pertains to punk). This indie status was a sign of independence – artistic, financial, and creative – and a mark of authenticity for fans. Being independent signaled, truthfully or not, that the art sold to fans was a genuine piece of the artists themselves, insight into their worlds, experiences, and emotions. Being indie was about being artistically honest and not under the control of the culture industry and its commodity machine of simulacra and artifice that sought profit over truth. Consuming indie music created subcultural capital for fans, allowing them to differentiate between their taste and the tastes of those who consumed mass culture music delivered to them by the recording, advertising, publishing, and broadcast industries.

In indie fandom, the relationship of the artist to the mode of production is key to fans' perception of their art and the artists as individuals. The further an artist is perceived to be from mainstream, glossy production – expensive producers and engineers, studios filled with signal processors and computers to

make every sound perfect, and marketers looking for hits and booking photoshoots to fill the pages of pop culture magazines – the more truth and soul is attributed to their music. This “mainstream” mode of production – a combination of practices, institutions, and structures – that is meant to make music for the widest possible audience and, therefore, the most profit, stands in contrast to indie modes of production, which are simpler, less expensive and glamorous, and possibly even DIY (Anderson). This indie ideal cultivates parasocial relationships between fans and artists, where fans feel as though they know the artists and share a collective culture and way of being. When fans sculpt their identity around an indie band and their music, it is thought of as co-creating (sub)culture, not a commodity fetish. Indie fandom can result in dedication and devotion that pushes artists to fame and notoriety, even while being outside mainstream distribution and broadcast networks. To some extent, being hard to find, less well known, or a best-kept secret adds to the allure of an artist and to the loyalty of fans who are in the know or are early adopters. In turn, these fans accrue subcultural capital through their knowledge and familiarity with indie artists and their catalogs.

This position as an indie favorite was the case with Metallica. Formed in 1981 by friends Lars Ulrich and James Hetfield, the band was one of the progenitors of the thrash metal genre, a mix of heavy metal and hardcore punk. Early on, the band ground out a living touring, developing an audience attracted by their high-energy shows and novel sound. They released their first song on a compilation by indie label Metal Blade Records and their first two records on the independent label Megaforce Records. These albums catapulted them into the exalted ranks of metal, helping to make thrash – with its raw lyrics and aggressive musical textures – a genre that stood opposed to radio-friendly hair metal and pop music in general. Where hair metal was a product of major labels, thrash was indie, and artists like Metallica, Slayer, and Anthrax were held up as symbols of resistance to industry appropriation and control. Even when Metallica signed to major label Elektra Records, had albums that debuted at the top of Billboard’s top 100, radio hits and videos on MTV, and played with the San Francisco Symphony, they managed to retain much of their subcultural capital. They were the indie band that broke into the mainstream, and many of their fans, while dismayed by some of these compromises, believed in the indie spirit of the band and the artistic authenticity of their music, until Napster.<sup>1</sup>

In April of 2000, Metallica was the first band to bring a lawsuit against the burgeoning file-sharing platform (their suit was preceded by the RIAA, and followed by Dr. Dre). The band claimed the legal action was sparked when they heard their unreleased (and unmixed) song “I Disappear” from the *Mission Impossible Two* soundtrack on the radio. In investigating how radio stations got access to the song, they found that copies of it were available on Napster. In numerous statements made to the press, and to the US Senate Judiciary Committee, Ulrich invoked independence and control as the band’s rationale for the suit. He insisted that Metallica was using their platform and resources on behalf of smaller artists who depended on album sales and airplay (Thigpen and Eliscu) and likened control of distribution to the artistic control that defined Metallica’s approach to songwriting and recording (Harris). Ulrich claimed that “with each project, we go through a grueling creative process to achieve music that we feel is representative of Metallica at that very moment in our lives. It is therefore sickening to know that our art is being traded like a commodity rather than the art that it is” (Conniff). He also asserted that protecting the band’s authentic art was their rationale for hand-delivering the names of over 300,000 users who downloaded a Metallica song off Napster to the company’s California headquarters, claiming that each Metallica song available for download on Napster was worth \$100,000. When confronted with the hypocrisy that as a young man, Ulrich copied songs from Hetfield’s record collection onto tapes for his own private listening and that Metallica was aided by and participated in the tape trade, where fans sent around copies of underground tapes, demos and hard-to-find releases to fellow fans, Ulrich retorted that “sharing is such a warm, cuddly, friendly word...this is not sharing, it’s duplicating” (NME).

Metallica’s suit was hailed by the RIAA and others in the industry, but not all artists were receptive. Later that year, Limp Bizkit embarked on a free summer tour sponsored by Napster. When pressed about it, lead singer Fred Durst replied that he “couldn’t care less about the older generation’s need to keep doing business as usual” (Eliscu). The Offspring’s lead singer, Dexter Holland, remarked that the lawsuit was contrary to the “spirit of rock & roll.” Public Enemy’s Chuck D offered \$5,000 for the best pro-Napster

lyrics to his remix of “Power to the People,” and the Deftones posted a new single on Napster rather than go through traditional promotion and distribution channels, using the platform as an advertisement for their album “White Pony” (Eliscu). This wrangling was temporarily solved by two events – a 2001 court injunction that shut Napster down and an undisclosed settlement between Napster, Metallica, and Dr. Dre that Ulrich claimed was resolved “in a way that works for fans, recording artists and songwriters alike” (AP). Metallica won their suit, and Napster folded, but Metallica lost their indie credibility. The means of distribution, as much as the mode of production, became part of the calculus for the allocation of indie subcultural capital.

Napster may have spawned the business model that pervades young listeners’ habits, which are largely disconnected from albums and emphasize singles and user choice (Apple launched iTunes in early 2001, utilizing a pay-per-single model rather than selling complete albums and easily enabling user-made playlists). Napster was also a changing of the guard with the listening public’s relationship to distribution. Distribution, rather than just conventional markers like genre, sound, or label status, became a signifier of dedication to fans and artistic integrity that resists the homogenization and commodification of the music industry. If an artist freely shares their music, they develop a new kind of credibility, regardless of their genre, label status, or previous successes. In the wake of Napster, sharing became a new mode of gaining subcultural capital, particularly the kind that attracts a following without radio play or presence in mainstream media. Artists from Radiohead and Wilco to Prince, Nine Inch Nails, Gorillaz, Kittie, Run the Jewels, Chance the Rapper, and Childish Gambino have all released albums for free, either for a limited time or permanently. These artists run the gamut from hit makers to indie darlings, and all saw value in distributing music to their fans for free, which met with positive responses (see Hopper for an on-the-ground look at the effect that free music distribution has had on Chance the Rapper’s Chicago fans).

Metallica was one of the rare bands that were able to navigate mainstream success while maintaining their indie credibility – keeping their old fans even as newer, pop-oriented listeners joined their ranks. In spite of changes in their sound and image, the discourse around Metallica was one of deference to masters and thrash OGs. The lawsuit against Napster put a dent in Metallica’s reputation, even as the band tried to use discourses of independence, authenticity, and creative control to legitimate their position. This may have failed because the perception of indie – subcultural capital that links fans to artists through an idea of unmediated truth and pure artistry – was expanding. After Napster, distributing music to fans for free, signaling resistance to commodification and industry control, has become an indicator of an artist’s dedication to fans. An artist’s relationship to the means of distribution, not just the mode of production, became part of fans’ formulas for what determined if an artist was independent, authentic, and cared about their fans.

<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Metallica lost all credibility. YouTuber Finn McKenty offers a spirited defense of the band and their honesty in one of his commentaries. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-oeTJqRDEY>

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