

# Episode 31: Unwrapping Spotify Wrapped

We're getting toward the end of the year, which means, most importantly, that it is Spotify Wrapped season. A few of you have sent me some screenshots of your Wrapped lists showing Pop Culture Boner sitting in your most listened podcasts for 2021 which I am so grateful for. It's nice to know that you're tuning in for my opinions, and I love when you share yours with me.

But because I am who I am, despite all the warm and fuzzy feelings I got knowing that people were listening, I immediately started thinking about the Spotify discourse that happens like clockwork every year. Around November, posts start appearing reminding everyone that they either do or don't care about what you've listened to throughout the year, someone inevitably makes a post about being monitored by big corporations, and a bunch of poor musicians try and gently reiterate that Spotify is, in fact, the devil. It's the most wonderful time of the year.

I'm Alex – this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today, I'm thinking about Spotify Wrapped.

2021 marks the 5th year of music streaming service Spotify's annual Spotify Wrapped campaign. On the off chance that you do not have Spotify, listen to all your music on CD and don't have any social media, thus preventing

you from seeing the onslaught of posts, Wrapped gives Spotify users a view of their activity on the platform over the past year including their most listened to artists and songs. All the data is presented in fun infographics, which are easily shareable on various social media services – particularly Instagram. Since Spotify makes the bulk of its money from user subscriptions, the Wrapped feature essentially serves as an annual viral marketing campaign for the company, by encouraging users to share their stats.

Despite the fact that most streaming services would have access to similar data about their user base, Spotify was the first to recognise that potential as a marketing tool and turn it into something visual and engaging which would encourage their users to talk about the service with each other in a public forum. Spotify's head of marketing attributed the campaign's success to the 'FOMO effect' – by making people's use of the service an event, new users would be encouraged to sign up for fear of missing out on something social each year. The whole thing is now considered as a best-in-class example of social advertising by heads of marketing for other mega-corps like McDonalds and Pepsi.

The fact that it is, at its core, a marketing campaign is likely part of the inspiration for the incredible discourse that happens

around Wrapped every year. Once a year, someone Tweets something like "This is your annual reminder that no one cares about your Spotify Wrapped". Then someone quote-Tweets it with "I care so deeply. Show me your Spotify Wrapped". And then if you open the replies for any of these Tweets there's inevitably hundreds of responses saying stuff like "let people enjoy things!" or citing Spotify's horrifying business model and its poor treatment of artists as a reason they cannot support the campaign.

Anyway, because it happens like clockwork, I thought we could take a little look at the Spotify itself, Wrapped and the performative nature of enjoyment encouraged by the campaign. Does making your private moments with songs and artists public change how you actually listen to music? Let's get into it shall we?

It would be remiss of me to do a podcast about Wrapped without talking about Spotify's business practices generally. Wrapped is a fun, colourful, social thing, but as with most giant corporations, everything happening behind the shiny, front-facing bit is kind of a nightmare. Which is why we're going to spend some time looking at the history of streaming. The company was launched in Sweden in 2008, by Daniel Ek and Martin Lorentzon. From there it has expanded into 184 markets, with more earmarked for 2022. It has 381 million active users, and 172 million paying subscribers. It has a catalogue of over 70 million tracks, which includes 3.2 million podcast titles (including this podcast). Despite best efforts from competitors like Apple Music, Spotify continues to hold the lion's

share of the music streaming market, and it's been the catalyst for changes to everything from the way many artists write and promote their music, to the way that Billboard counts their charts.

The incredible success of the platform is due to a confluence of factors. The first was an effort by the music industry to kill the retail single – 'retail single' of course referring to the song that you can buy individually without having to buy the whole album. Most of the people who listen to this podcast are probably in the age bracket where you remember being able to buy CDs in thin jewel cases that contained your favourite song plus one or two B-sides. I think I've still got Garbage's *When I Grow Up* and Len's *Steal My Sunshine* floating around somewhere. There's a great episode of Slate's podcast *Hit Parade* called *The Great War Against the Single* which covers this off in full detail, but to give you a very brief summary: throughout the 1980s, the music industry pushed singles as a way to milk an album for as much as they could. Seven of the nine songs on Michael Jackson's 1982 album *Thriller* were released as singles, for example. This was framed by Jackson as "wanting to make an album where every track was killer" but was also a well-placed money-spinning exercise for Sony. But as they moved into the 1990s, labels changed tactic and started promoting songs that were only available to purchase on significantly more expensive full-length albums. It's one of the reasons that a rag-tag group of anarcho-communists like Chumbawamba were able to sell 3.2million records in the USA alone, despite being the type of people to give interviews saying, "Nothing can

change the fact that we like it when cops get killed". Tubthumping, or as you may know it, the "I get knocked down, but I get up again" song, was a lead single available on the album Tubthumper, rather than as an individual release. A great strategy for making money, but also a really good way to breed consumer resentment amongst people who went from being able to pay \$8 for a single to having to shell out \$30 for an album.

At the same time this was happening, the internet was starting to really come into its own, and by the end of the 90s, file sharing services like Napster were allowing average people to easily pirate music from their peers. Which, to be clear, is the same thing people have always done to share music. As soon as cassette players allowed people to record onto blank tapes, they started making copies of the things they bought or taping songs from the radio to share amongst themselves. The difference with Napster was that people were able to do it en masse, not just in their immediate circle. At its peak, Napster had around 80 million users. But then, famously, Metallica found out one of their singles had been leaked onto the platform and was receiving airplay on US radio stations prior to its official release. This resulted in a multi-million-dollar lawsuit which effectively destroyed Napster, although the company still exists in some form or another.

The success of Napster did effectively solidify the digital distribution of music as something record companies wanted to get a handle on, and for much of the early 00s they weren't able to. Piracy was simple and effective, particularly

for cash-poor teens who might not have been able to fork out for the music they were being marketed. I'm not making a judgment call on piracy, nor am I admitting to anything. But I will say that there were studies which suggested that people who were sharing files and downloading music through services like Napster were actually more likely to then go and spend money on that music, as the service was essentially filling the void that the calculated assassination of the retail single had left.

Anyway, point is – enter Spotify. Where internal innovation strategies at labels were unable come up with effective solutions for digital distribution and sales, Spotify was there with an offering. Let them host the music on the platform and they would split the revenue with the labels. It was an immediate boon for the recording industry. Spotify was able to position itself as something positive for artists. They weren't just getting paid for individual record sales. They were going to be paid regularly when people listened to their songs. In the wake of the Napster lawsuits, there had been some highly effective PR about how piracy was killing off honest musicians just trying to make a living, and subscription services were on hand to alleviate any consumer guilt about the convenience of digital listening. The artists were being paid. All was right with the world.

Except that's not really how it works. While Spotify has been a lifeline for record labels, the same can't be said for the artists signed to those labels. While the money might be coming in monthly, it doesn't trickle down to the musicians making the songs that keep the platform

functioning. Ben Sisario for the New York Times has a really succinct description. He says: "There's a complicated and opaque formula that determines how the \$10 monthly subscription for Spotify or Apple Music makes its way to artists. After those services take their cut, about \$7 goes into a pot of money that gets split a bunch of ways — for the record labels, songwriters, music publishers, artists and others. The more people listen to music, the less each song is worth because it cuts the pie into smaller and smaller slices. I've seen financial statements from some fairly popular independent musicians that suggest they're making a pretty good living from streaming. But often, unless musicians have blockbuster numbers, they aren't making a great deal."

In the face of increased public scrutiny, Spotify released Loud and Clear, which is allegedly designed to give the platform more transparency. The site says: "Artists deserve clarity about the economics of music streaming. This site aims to increase transparency by sharing new data on the global streaming economy and breaking down the royalty system, the players, and the process." The website is pulled together in Spotify's typical "friendly interactive" visual style, but it essentially is designed to drill home two things:

1. They don't pay per stream, so that 'fraction of a cent' number artists often post in relation to how much they get paid for their Spotify streams isn't accurate.
2. Spotify doesn't pay artists directly, it pays 'rights holders', meaning that the money an artist makes depends on their contracts with the rights holder (like a record label). Which is great because record labels famously aren't predatory

or exploitative at all. The whole site is all very 'it's not our fault, we're the good guys', while also telling on itself a little bit about how much money is actually paid out.

On top of that, Spotify hit the news again recently because founder Daniel Ek invested \$113 million in Helsing AI, a military defence firm pushing technology designed to integrate machine learning into modern warfare to "create real time pictures of battlefields" and "serve our democracies". Because that's the sort of modern hellscape we live in – it's always a single heartbeat between "this piece of fun and easy to use technology is making my life easier" and "this piece of fun and easy to use technology is also being used to further fund pointless wars and speed up the eventual heat death of the planet". The really troubling thing about this is particular investment is that a lot of the algorithms Spotify uses to build profiles on its users behaviour could be seen as transferrable to a company like Helsing AI.

Now, I don't know if there's a properly solid alternative to a streaming service like Spotify, but other smaller services like Bandcamp, which tends to be favoured by musicians, take a comparatively small commission on music sold while also facilitating the sale of merchandise and giving artists more control over how their music is streamed. Bandcamp has also run an initiative throughout the pandemic called Bandcamp Fridays which waives their commission in support of artists. So, on an average day around 82% of funds made on the platform reaches the musician or label, and on Bandcamp Fridays it's about 93%. But it's certainly

a less convenient service than Spotify, and we're very much at the "give me convenience or give me death" stage of capitalism.

So, that's the backdrop – but what about Spotify Wrapped? Obviously, it's a great piece of marketing that covers a multitude of sins, but what are the other implications? People have always liked to share music with each other and they've always found innovative ways to do it. Mixtapes were such a common thing people have based whole rom coms around them. Every music documentary ever made has a scene where someone talks about stealing records from their cool older sibling. If you're looking for a fun rabbit hole to go down, you should check out the history of Russian 'bones' bootlegs – which were bootleg vinyl records made out of X-rays and were used to distribute banned music. The point is, music is social. We share it with each other because doing so is a little act of care. We heard something and we think someone we love might like it. It's intimate.

But, following the advent of social media, the ways we're social with each other have become more performative, and music in particular holds a great deal of cultural capital in that sense. What better way to show off what a cool and unique individual you are than by showing people the music you listen to most consistently? Why share your mixtape with one person, when you can use it to confirm your status as a tastemaker to thousands of people? That's obviously a really cynical way of looking at it, and I swear that's not even really my default position on this. I actually really like seeing what

people have listened to over the year – it's a good way to get recommendations, and it's sweet to see people who are passionate fans of a particular artist get excited about being shown exactly how much time they spent listening and reaffirming their enjoyment. But I did see a post this year, made half in jest, saying "Well, it's the middle of the year – time to start working on my Spotify listens so my Wrapped looks cool." Which made me really sad. How depressing to have to put on a show in your private time, instead of just enjoying the thing that you want to listen to.

Vox interviewed Professor David Marshall from Deakin University to talk through this phenomenon of performance – he calls it "dual strategic personas", where the algorithm transforms our persona and our performance of ourselves. I'll give you a quick quote from the article. It says: "Consumers increasingly understand that how they use an app influences the type of content they see, creating a digital double consciousness, where "we realize we're a digital construction," but we also realize that "a digital construction is connected to who we are – who we think we are"... In essence, our online selves are still an extension of ourselves; it's not not a version of personhood. At the same time, it's a version that is inherently manufactured and performative. And as is the nature of performance, those on stage are called to act incessantly."

Essentially, the pieces of data harvested not just by Spotify but by every other app housed on your phone, are presenting you with a portrait of yourself, but one that is both editable to some extent and also marketable to others. If you've been

cultivating a cool persona on Instagram with an all neutral coloured feed and vintage shirts of 80s goth rock bands, then it's probably deeply desirable to continue to cultivate that persona through a neatly packaged and shareable version of your music tastes. The three hours a day you spend listening to the Vengaboys be damned. So, I do get it. My favourite genre (in my life and according to my Spotify Wrapped) is punk, but does Spotify also know that I spent several days listening only to Tiesto's The Business? Yes. Did Spotify see fit to put that in my Wrapped for the year? Also yes. Do I see that and feel a little tinge of 'wait! That's not who I am'? Absolutely. But rejecting the impulse I had to listen to Tiesto is just stunting my own enjoyment in favour of a mediocre social media performance as a Person Who Is Into Punk Music. And what's the point of that?

So, is Wrapped just another example of the brain damage we manage to inflict on ourselves via our tiny pocket super computers every day? Look, I do think there is something nice about the way human beings approach wanting to share music as a group. The platforms change, but I think the core impulse is still largely our inner child going "Look at this thing I like, maybe you would also like it and we could talk about it". Which is sweet. People remain people. But I do think Spotify, like most big tech companies, probably isn't actually being as transparent about what they're doing with your data as the shininess of Wrapped would suggest. At the very least, they're using it for marketing purposes, which is kind of shitty. But with their aggressive acquisition of other, ostensibly music-based tech and their

founder's investment in more nefarious uses for algorithmic learning, I think it's probably worthwhile keeping a little eye on what you give away, even if it feels insignificant.

Well, that is my Spotify Wrapped opinion. It's also a wrap on this year's pod. We will have our usual Christmas bonus episode coming out in a couple of weeks, but for now – we're having a little break. Thanks to Wesley for being the best tech gremlin a gal could ask for. And thanks to you guys for tuning in over the past twelve months – it's been such a treat to appear on your most-listened lists and talk to with you about pop culture. During the break we'll still be posting on Instagram and Twitter – you can follow us everywhere @popcultureboner. You can also subscribe wherever you like your podcasts. Give us a follow on Spotify, or a little rate and review on Apple – that way you won't miss the bonus or our inevitable return. Ok, that's it from me. If you have thoughts about the incredibly bad graphic design choices made by Spotify this year, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!



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