

To Save The Music Industry, Give The People What They Want

It's been a great week for the debate over the future of music. An NPR intern, [Emily White](#), kicked things off with a thoughtful blog post about the need to monetize music and pay artists. "But," she writes "I honestly don't think my peers and I will ever pay for albums. I do think we will pay for convenience."

Songwriter and professor [David Lowery](#) responded with a long, thoughtful post on the effects of musicians receiving no, or greatly reduced, pay for their work.

They are both right, of course. Emily's right because any business model that depends on changing the mind of her and her peers, and getting them to go back to buying albums is doomed to fail. The music industry has been disrupted and will never produce the windfall profits of the pre-Napster era. David's right, that an industry based on taking what you want for free, with or without the justification of greedy record companies "deserving" such treatment, ultimately hurts the artists most of all.

In 2003, at Walt Mossberg's first D Conference, Steve Jobs said "My personal belief, and this is just a guess, is that the labels will be lowering album prices over time to continue enticing you to buy the albums. And, a significant share of the songs sold will continue to be albums."

In 2012, we know that Jobs' prediction never came to fruition. In fact, album prices have risen since iTunes originally launched with nearly every album at \$9.99. The record companies won from Apple in early 2009 concessions which let them price music variably. Some songs would be \$.99 some \$.69 and some songs to \$1.29. Similarly albums could be priced anywhere from \$7.99 up to \$14.99. How is this relevant to the debate? Rather than adapting to the paradigm change in their industry, the record companies continue to cling desperately to their old model. In addition to raising iTunes prices, they also won the right to mark certain tracks "album only," meaning they could not be purchased individually on iTunes.

Except in rare instances, one of the most meaningful effects of Napster and its progeny has been to disaggregate the album as the unit of music commerce. The vast majority of music consumers no longer want to be forced into buying albums.

David Lowery rightfully points out, “[b]esides — is it really that inconvenient to download a song from iTunes into your iPhone? Is it that hard to type in your password? I think millions would disagree.”

So, other than the fact that some people are ethically challenged regardless of the circumstances, why do some people unethically steal music when convenient options to do the right thing abound? I would argue that, in many instances, the record companies’ desire to force people to buy (or rent) music in a way that contradicts their desires as consumers “justifies” (in the users’ minds) the continued stealing. If Consumer X goes to iTunes, Spotify and Amazon, and finds that they can’t buy that song from the movie they saw last week without buying an entire album, well, then, it must be OK to go get it from a file sharing network or YouTube. Right, [MG](#)?

It’s time for the music industry to recognize that album-only songs and \$14.99 albums are a thing of the past. If consumers want songs one-at-a-time, sell them that way and make money off the transaction! If album sales are better for the industry than individual sales, then make the consumers choose between a song for \$1.29 or the whole album for \$6.99. You’ll sell a lot more albums that way. And, sadly, recognize that you are in fact trading “[analog dollars for digital pennies](#),” despite Jeff Zucker’s fondest wishes. Your job, now, is to maximize those pennies in a way which allows the music industry to survive, and the artists to get paid.