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5 Predictions for the Future of Music

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By Carl Franzen on October 29, 2009 3:50pm

In the iTunes era, there's no question that digital music reigns supreme. In the coming years, who knows? Even the most astute industry experts can't predict what medium or business model will dominate, but that hasn't stopped bloggers from combing through a recent spate of audio-related announcements to discern the next big trends. Five predictions for what lies ahead:

- **'The End of the MP3'** Web sites that allow users to play (or stream) music files for free have been around for years, but one called Lala has been making noticeably larger waves. Lala has developed an application that will allow users to stream their entire music libraries on mobile phones (beginning first with an iPhone app). The company's co-founder says it will replace MP3s as the preferred format for digital music. Ironically, this puts Lala into direct competition with Apple's own iTunes music store. As Wired's [Eliot Van Buskirk](#) notes: "LaLa claims it already earns an average of \$67 per user. That's 300 percent more than what the iTunes music store brings in, according to a 2008 Forrester study. If that figure is accurate, Lala is already proving that drastically lower pricing for music could spell higher profits for the record industry and more tunes for the people at the same time."
- **Refined Music Search** Search companies are listening users' complaints that finding music online is a chore. On Wednesday, Google debuted a much-hyped new search function that allows users to play and purchase audio files directly from a search results page, thanks to partnerships with several burgeoning music services (Lala and Myspace's iLike, to name a few). The move comes a year after Yahoo partnered with Rhapsody to create a similar playable musical search function. Still, as PC World's [Ian Paul](#) finds, music search is far from perfect: "When I searched using song lyrics, Google often came up short...Yahoo's search results were less robust than Google's in my tests. I could only find music samples when I searched for artist names, not song or album titles. But if you're looking for a simple way to sample a particular song, either service will work just fine." The L.A. Times' [Jon Healey](#) is similarly unimpressed with Google, and doubted the contention of some bloggers that the service would help grow legal music downloads: "It can help expose millions of people to legitimate Internet music outlets, which will help those companies compete with free (and, in many cases, unauthorized) sources of music online. Whether consumers will actually spend more on music than they've been doing, however, is a whole 'nother question." Meanwhile, [Microsoft](#) has begun its own talks with MySpace to host a comparable service.

- Audio Algorithms** The creation and production of music is also undergoing a revolution. At Discovery News, [Robert Lamb](#) inspects uPlaya, a Web site launched earlier this summer that uses an algorithm to determine the "hit potential" of any audio file a user uploads. By mathematically comparing a song's features to past hits across multiple genres, the company claims to be able to predict its viability, allowing artists to adjust their new music to appeal to the widest possible audience. As Lamb explains: "Think of the technology as the artificial intelligence counterpart of Simon Cowell, except with more stats and less sarcasm." He also says that it has achieved an 80% success rate. Meanwhile, over at EurekAlert, [Luke Barrington](#) reports on a new project at UC San Diego that also relies on an algorithm to generate automated music playlists. Test users preferred the UC playlist to Apple's Genius recommendation system. Barrington suggests the technology will help bring new artists to the forefront: "Genius currently ignores relatively unknown songs because it lacks adequate wisdom from iTunes customers about how these songs connect to other songs. Systems like the auto-tagging music algorithms developed at UC San Diego could be useful in filling in the 'blind spots' in Genius and other collaborative filtering systems that rely on the wisdom of the masses to generate playlists." And yes, the [Malcom Gladwell](#) devotees are correct in thinking that the popular journalist caught wind of this trend years ago.
- 'The Music Gene'** Over at the Huffington Post, self-proclaimed "provocateur" [Gail Zappa](#) offers her eccentric take on the state of the music industry and an outlandish prophecy of the future. Recalling an incident in which her husband, musician Frank Zappa, was blacklisted in San Francisco, she argues that modern music corporations have enough power to tell an artist "you'll never work on this planet again," and actually enforce it. She bemoans the increasing availability of recording technology and the sorry state of copyright enforcement as a result of Internet file-sharing. Finally, she predicts that "Scientists (?) [sic] will prove that there is a 'music' gene," which will bring about a cure for deafness and vindicate the notion that listening to music "is exactly like sex."
- Radio Revival?** Over at the Guardian, [Nicholas Lezard](#) celebrates new figures suggesting that nearly 90 percent of people in the UK listen to radio at least once a week: "For those of us bewildered and appalled by the march of modernity - in other words, those of us over 40 - this return to bygone days is so welcome it almost induces tears. We may be being badgered to buy HDTVs, iPhones, nanowotsits and any amount of technocrap, but against all this babble we can erect a solid wall of good sense and bullshit-free information..." The only trouble is that the British station leading the charge is BBC Radio 4, which specializes in just about everything but music. However, the number of listeners for classic music station [Radio 3](#) is also up 12.6 percent to 2.19 million listeners, suggesting that for at least a certain genre of music, radio still holds sway.