LIFE IN THE POP LANE

My torrid love affair with Napster

By Renee Graham, Globe Staff, 3/13/2001

It first came to me a few weeks ago while I was downloading "Jingle Jangle," a brilliant slice of cheesy pop by the 1960s cartoon-inspired group the Archies, not to be confused with Josie and the Pussycats.

What the VCR meant to porn, Napster has meant to music.

Remember when VCRs first became all the rage in the 1980s? People weren’t just using them to tape "Dallas" or to watch their favorite Humphrey Bogart films or the latest blockbusters. They were also renting lots and lots of porn. VCRs instantly meant nice suburban folks who wouldn’t be caught dead trolling around some sleazy Combat Zone theater could watch "Wanda Whips Wall Street" or "Debbie Does Dallas" in the comfort and safety of their Milton split-level. No one ever had to know.

So it has been with Napster, which allowed me to love any kind of music shamelessly. Oh, I have the cool stuff like tracks by Slick Rick, Frank Sinatra, and Chaka Khan. But there’s also been a bunch of show tunes like "Sit Down You’re Rockin’ the Boat," from "Guys and Dolls." I’ve downloaded 'N Sync’s delightfully manufactured "It’s Gonna Be Me," and Chicago’s gooey "Hard to Say I’m Sorry." I’ve downloaded so many versions of AC/DC’s "Back in Black" and "You Shook Me All Night Long" I might as well start wearing Angus Young’s schoolboy outfit. (Not necessarily an embarrassment, unless you’re a 38-year-old black woman.)

Freed from radio formats and record-company notions of what we want to hear (not to mention restrictive ideas about what is cool), I’ve indulged every musical excess and guilty pleasure from the dirtiest dancehall to the sweetest pop confection. A casual scroll through the lists of fellow Napster users has revealed the same - metalheads listen to the Carpenters. Teen pop fans listen to the Grateful Dead. Traditional jazz aficionados listen to Guns N’ Roses.

For the past year, Napster has given me the best stack of singles I’ll ever have: Weezer’s "Undone (The Sweater Song)" and Meryn Cadell’s "The Sweater." Tracks by 1950s icon Buddy Holly ("Well Alright") and 1960s popsters the Hollies ("Long, Cool Woman"); Willie Nelson’s country ("Heartaches of a Fool") and Lord Nelson’s calypso ("Dove and Pigeon"); and everything from MC Hammer ("Pump It Up") to the Nails ("88 Lines About 44 Women.")
Of course, all this will likely change tomorrow, the deadline for the beleaguered music file-swapping service to remove about 135,000 copyrighted songs listed by the Recording Industry Association of America. Earlier this month, a court injunction ordered Napster to ban the transfer of specified songs within three days of notification by the copyright holders.

"Napster will take every step within the limits of our system to exclude their copyrighted material from being shared," reads a statement on Napster’s home page. "We will continue to work for a resolution that preserves the Napster community and the file sharing experience."

Most of us in the Napster community - 60 million strong - knew this day would come, that the RIAA would inevitably derail perhaps the greatest thing to happen to recorded sound since Thomas Edison invented the phonograph. And that’s because Napster has always been about the pure love of music.

I’ve never been fazed by accusations, either from RIAA president Hilary Rosen, or Napster uber-foe Lars Ulrich of Metallica, that downloading a song from Napster amounts to theft; the same could certainly be said about charging $17.99 for a new CD. To me, Napster has never just been about getting something for nothing, although I certainly haven’t complained. It’s been about having access to as much music as possible, the absurd and obscure as well as the hits, and sharing it with the curious and like-minded.

People who spend hours on Napster are the same folks who’d rather be late for work than miss their favorite radio song, and who’ll drop $130 for a Charlie Parker boxed set just to hear four different takes of ’’Now’s the Time.’’ I don’t think it’s a coincidence that several artists last year, including Eminem, Limp Bizkit, and Britney Spears, sold more than 1 million CDs during their debut weeks. Napster has been a tremendous boon because it has allowed fans to sample music before buying it - the Dave Matthews Band put its latest single ’’I Did It’’ on Napster weeks before their album ’’Everyday’’ was released, and the CD still sold more than 700,000 copies in its first week.

There’s no proof that Napster has hurt the music industry. In fact, I’ve discovered such artists as Jeff Buckley and Elliott Smith, two singers I never would have sought out otherwise. From my first Napster download - ’’Shake Shake Senora’’ by Lord Flea and his Calypsonians - it has been an absolute love affair. I’ve rediscovered long-out-of-print chestnuts from my childhood, and almost come to tears as they have spilled out of my tinny computer speakers.

I’ve downloaded several hundred songs and will probably try to download several hundred more before all is said and done. I will dearly miss Napster as it has existed for the past year, will miss how it has expanded my musical tastes and knowledge. Already, some users are fleeing to other services such as Gnutella and FreeNet, because while Napster may be severely regulated, the desire of fans to trade music
files can never be abridged.

The beat will go on - even if the Sonny and Cher song of the same name is no longer available on Napster tomorrow.

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