Downloading squeezes the art out of the album A growing single-song culture is wiping out the multiple-track format

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USA TODAY

The album, music's dominant creative framework for the past 40 years, is dying under the wheels of an accelerating revolution.

The digital age, driven by single-song downloads, threatens to eradicate the multiple-track album, whether on compact disc, cassette or old-fashioned vinyl. It's not just the physical artifact that's joining shellac 78s, turntables and 8-track tapes in the pop graveyard: The very concept of songs integrated into a whole faces extinction.

"The entire game is changing," says singer Rob Thomas of Matchbox 20. "I can handle the fact that artists are selling fewer records and making less money, but you can't take away our albums! It's a conscious step toward disposable art. On an album, the artist creates a full work of art with songs that fit together and create a mood. If we become a single-minded nation, where careers depend on hits, you won't hear challenging music that takes risks."

The death of pop's primary aesthetic and commercial unit evokes a variety of reactions. Cyber-savvy fans feel empowered. Confusion grips older consumers. Labels are threatened and panicked by the radical transition. Musicians are enthusiastic, dismayed or conflicted.

"The disappearance of the album as an entity would be sad, but anything to do with the evolution in how people access music excites me," singer Alanis Morissette says. "I'm very album-oriented, and my highest preference is that people experience my album as a whole, but I know people can gravitate to a certain song and listen to it ad nauseum. That's their right. It's about freedom of choice."

Though he agrees that the Internet is ushering in a song-oriented pop world, prolific singer/songwriter Ryan Adams intends to continue making albums.

"I'm still stuck in that mode. I like the idea of creating your own world in 10 to 14 songs. I enjoy the broader scope. It's like taking in a whole exhibit, not just one painting. At the same time, there's no way to deny technology."
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Though albums still vastly outsell single-song downloads, a shift is looming as increasing numbers of listeners shop online and consume music piecemeal. They want handpicked tunes, not ready-made collections.

"The chances of restoring growth to the pre-recorded CD business is about as slim as an Apache Indian getting elected pope," says analyst Phil Leigh of research firm Inside Digital Media. "People now have the power to make their own albums. The revolution that's hitting the record business is not just the Internet; it's also the computer itself, especially computers equipped with CD burners. People want to get the songs on their computer, manage a centralized library and organize playlists that suit their individual tastes."

Napster hits the scene

The record industry was raking in $14.6 billion and expanding more than 6% a year when file-sharing trailblazer Napster emerged in 1999. Album sales last year fell to $12.6 billion and this year are down 5.2% from 2002. About 273 million users have downloaded the song-swapping software to access Kazaa, the intersection for 2.7 million downloads a week.

Though piracy accounts for an estimated 40% of the global decline in record sales, it's not the only culprit in the potential demise of the album. Legitimate services pose a threat, too. Rhapsody streamed 16 million songs to its paid subscribers in August. Apple's iTunes, with a catalog of 400,000-plus songs, projects sales of 100 million song files its first year. "The album," Apple CEO Steve Jobs recently declared, "is obsolete."

Paid downloads, expected to reach $80 million this year,$1.1 billion next year and $3.2 billion in 2008, account for a fraction of music sales but are expected to explode as Generation Y brings its entertainment dollars to the marketplace. While baby boomers maintained an allegiance to the album format as they graduated from vinyl to tape to CDs, the so-called echo boomers, a staggering 78 million of them, increasingly prefer the pay-per-tune route. And they favor shopping online over standing in line. In the week ending Sunday, downloaders bought 1.3 million tracks while stores sold 186,000 physical singles, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

CD buyers are 35 and older

"The album won't disappear right away, but we're seeing a transition," says Lee Black, a Boston-based digital media analyst. "The majority of the CD-buying audience is 35 and older. Once that older demographic fades away, it will be a wonderfully digital world where (people) talk about how many gigabytes they have, not how many CDs they own."
Unlike earlier transitions, including the format leap from tape to CD, this uprising is not a corporate-imposed mandate but a grass-roots phenomenon.

"The real kick is that now the store and the packaging plant and the kiosk are all in one place," Black says. "It's called the PC, and it's in the consumer's home. That's not everywhere, of course. Not that much of the country is Internet-wired, and far fewer have broadband connections. And you still have the issue of young users not having credit cards. Until those catch up and reach a mass market, the album will have a role."

The long-playing record, or LP, a 12-inch vinyl disc that held 23 minutes on each side and played at 33 rpm, was developed by Peter Carl Goldmark in 1948, 71 years after Thomas Edison invented the record and phonograph. The 7-inch 45 rpm single was introduced a year later. Digital audio compact discs reached the market in 1982 and by 1988 surpassed LP sales, and labels mostly abandoned vinyl.

The album format, featuring a dozen or so songs by a single act, didn't dominate pop music until the rock boom of the mid-'60s. The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, anointed the best album of all time in the current *Rolling Stone*, created a watershed moment that countless artists attempted to re-create.

**The CD revolution**

Joe Levy, music editor at *Rolling Stone*, theorizes that the CD has killed the album; that is, the arrival of the shiny digital disc with expanded room for sound helped push the concept of a bundled batch of songs toward extinction.

"The CD has been responsible for the death of the album in two ways," Levy says. "One is technology. Once music was sold in a digitized format, it could be easily traded on the Internet. CDs began to disappear as consumers collected music one MP3 at a time.

"The second factor is artistic. If you grew up with vinyl, you got 30 or 40 minutes on a record. Now you get 70 on a CD. The album format got swollen, unmanageable and, to some degree, unlistenable. Either you don't have that much time to listen to it or the experience isn't rewarding."

Money also factors into the album's demise. Labels hastened the process by abandoning the affordable single in the early '90s in hopes of forcing fans to buy the entire album. The strategy backfired.

"The album format is dead because record companies ignored the most important aspect in driving sales: the single," music consultant Tom Vickers says. "When the kid couldn't buy the song in the record store, he grabbed it out of cyberspace. Kids were sick of paying top dollar for the one or two songs they wanted off an album. The
industry looks at the Internet as this dastardly monster, but the reality is kids just took advantage of it to get what they want: singles, not albums."

Ray Manzarek, who was weaned on 45s but joined the album revolution as keyboardist for The Doors, has mixed feelings about today's reversion. "Three minutes of good music is better than 30 minutes of drivel," he says. "We were at an advantage in the '60s, because we had to deliver only a total of 40 minutes on two sides of an LP. It's asking too much of an artist and composer to put 75 minutes on a CD. In a way, young artists are enslaved by that length."

Yet good albums can provide an enriching experience, which teens are missing nowadays.

"Each generation gets the music it deserves, and three good minutes is about all anyone really wants," he says. "As the creators, we prefer that you listen to the entire album. And we think you'd get the most satisfaction in your mind and soul from the entire album. But perhaps listening to an entire album is too much to ask of the TV generation in the mad pace of the 21st century."

Classic-rock icon Bob Seger is saddened and mystified by the album's overthrow.

"It's a different world now, and I've got to come to terms with it," Seger says. "I'm just thrilled when someone like Bruce Springsteen puts out something like The Rising. That's what I strive for. We're of an era that still believes the whole package is important. But I don't know if it makes sense anymore. I'm 58, and this is all new to me."

Not every veteran artist is resisting the new regime.

"I really treasured albums, but what's going to take their place is more interesting," says the Rolling Stones' Keith Richards. "I started off with shellac 78s. The format doesn't matter so much as long as you're getting music that sounds the way the musicians intended. If someone can deliver that, I don't care if it's on a frozen pea."

Leigh says the shrink-wrapped prepackaged CD seems old-fashioned to the young.

"As computers grow in popularity and become centralized repositories of music, it's going to be all about customizing," he says. Listening habits will "become track-oriented and playlist-oriented. The ability to rip the music empowers all that. And the chance of reversing that once people enter the new paradigm is as slim as them voluntarily giving up their color TVs for black and white."

Like others who have discovered the joys of a personal jukebox, David Bowie, in the album game since 1969, not only accepts the single-song shift, he embraces it.
"I still have a large vinyl collection, but playing them on the turntable and switching sides has come to feel almost ritualistic," he says. "I compile selections from a multitude of sources, burning CDs or filling an iPod, and play on random. It is rare that I play an album through from beginning to end except a couple of times when I first buy it. I choose my favorites from it very quickly, and these get to be part of my (compilation)."

Adam Schlesinger of the rising band Fountains of Wayne sees the pros and cons of single mania in its hit Stacy's Mom, a popular download at both sanctioned and illegal Web sites. "Creatively speaking, we're big fans of the album as a medium," he says. "From an economic standpoint, albums may not be viable anymore, but we'll keep making them. It's a little frustrating that people just cherry-pick songs, but we hope that if they like a song by us, they'll be curious and want to hear what else we've got."

No one's sure what collateral damage an album die-off will bring, but Lindsey Buckingham doubts the trend will derail Fleetwood Mac or similar acts built on album sales.

"It would be hard to imagine putting out only a single once in a while, because you do sometimes want to make a house, not just a room," he says. "It's hard to be objective about what the shift really means. I grew up listening to my brother's 45s, but my reference points are Beatles albums made during a time in the '60s when albums became concepts and works of art. It was an extraordinary time for creativity and expanding of ideas. This is not that time, not only in the sense that it doesn't seem to interface sociologically, but you don't have a lot of groups out there who are The Beatles.

"I'm fascinated by the evolution, and I don't feel threatened by it," Buckingham says. "You have to be a little philosophical about what may or may not happen. I'd be surprised if the album completely goes away. And look at the flip side. Maybe people will focus more on quality if they're not under pressure to concentrate on the breadth of their work."

Dave Matthews sees the album's demise as just another pothole in the music industry's road to ruin.

"The real issue is that the technologies of how to access information have exploded, so everything the industry took for granted has been shattered, and now the industry has to get up and figure out how to deal with it," he says. "The industry as it stands is going to be antiquated out of existence. And there's no question we'll work our way through it and become accustomed to something new."

Or something that predates the recording industry: performing live. The album's doom may be a boon not for singles but for the concert circuit.
"I don't feel threatened financially by the collapse of the industry," Matthews says. "The vast majority of my living is made from touring. Nobody's going to be able to download that."

A 'one-hit wonder' culture?

Michelle Shocked considers the album's downfall another step toward a cultural wasteland. When she finished 1991's *Arkansas Traveler*, an ambitious song cycle inspired by the blackface minstrel tradition, her label demanded she add a radio-friendly single. She dutifully delivered *Come a Long Way*.

"You can adapt to mundane things like marketing, but when the tail is wagging the dog and you generate singles for their own sake, you can pretty much kiss the concept album goodbye. That's the direction labels are going in, because that's where profit lies."

Shocked refuses to dissect her 1988 breakthrough, *Short Sharp Shocked*, for track-by-track online sales. "I control the destiny of that album," she says. "I own the rights so no label could chop it up and sell it on the Internet. If I did that, they'd only buy (hit single) *Anchorage*, which is only a part of that whole image. I refuse to be treated as a one-hit wonder.

"Trust me: We're heading into a novelty song culture."