Can an MP3 Glutton Savor a Tune?

By ROGIER VAN BAKEL

WHEN Marcel Proust bit into a little madeleine, it famously triggered a book's worth of delicate memories. But when it comes to being jolted back in time, foodstuffs aren't nearly as effective as music.

Almost everyone knows hundreds of recordings that are time machines. With a few guitar notes, or just a couple of syllables sung by a familiar voice, they transport you into your past, perhaps placing you in the middle of teenage angst and your first love. Baby boomers like me may suddenly find themselves on a long-ago road trip with a Talking Heads mix tape blaring from the speakers, or reliving a sweltering backyard evening with friends and tubs of cold beer and David Bowie incanting his inscrutably cool lyrics. By virtue of repetition over weeks or months, music can become a soundtrack for a particular time in your life.

But all that may be changing now that music fans can indulge boundless appetites, and shoveling ever more music onto CD shelves and computer hard drives has become almost a quest unto itself.

With the advent of online music services both legally sanctioned and illicit, expanding your collection no longer requires deep pockets. At www.emusic.com, for example, I typically find a few hundred good-to-great tracks each month (the service charges as little as $120 a year for virtually unlimited downloads). I'm an EMusic aficionado because the site has introduced me to artists I might otherwise have missed, like the atmospheric Scottish rockers Mogwai and the wonderfully delirious Ethiopian sax player Getachew Mekurya.

But with so much worthwhile music pouring into my computer and from there into my iPod, none of it seems quite as long-lasting or momentous as the old tunes. I'll come across sets of MP3's I have no recollection of having downloaded just weeks earlier. Such forgetfulness would surely turn into full-blown musical amnesia if I used free illicit services like Grokster, KaZaA or Morpheus, where the repertory is many times bigger than that of any fee-based MP3 site and where my musical greed would go dangerously unchecked.

My iPod, by the way, is the most capacious player on the market. It's my fourth iPod, because I ran out of space on three previous versions with smaller hard drives. And I haven't exactly stopped buying CD's, either. Just months ago I had new shelves built in my living room to accommodate my ever-growing collection of the shiny disks. (If anything, my MP3 habit fuels my CD habit; I buy official CD's of my favorite downloaded music because the sound quality of the disks is markedly better. It's also nice to have printed lyrics, liner notes and artwork.)

But sometimes doubts arise. It's not that I beat myself up over the materialist aspect of it, over the money I spend. (My excuse is that in comparison with fine art, for instance, recorded music is a pretty good bargain.) Rather, I'm thinking about what the music means to me - to us, to music fans. Are we diminishing its emotional capital by spreading our affection for new cuts so thin?

When I was a student and money was tight, virtually every album I bought came to stand for something. The music became the marker of that period for the rest of my earthly existence. I remember who I was, where I was and what my life was like when the first two Joe Jackson albums were released. That music is forever tied to the post-adolescent turmoil of those years, and to my cramped room with its preposterously huge speakers (a belated apology to my former housemates). It brings back memories of the friends I had at the time, of plays and concerts I went to, of meals and vacations and embraces and discussions. Records by Wire, John Martyn and Tom Waits had the same effect. I wrapped myself in every note, lyric fragment and album cover.
At the time, my entire music collection, after seven or eight years of buying records, consisted of maybe 150 to 200 albums. That's 2,000 songs, give or take - all of which would probably now fit on the lowliest iPod. I own a hundred times that much music these days. Question is, was I somehow getting more out of my tunes when all my albums fit into a duffel bag?

The suffering recording industry aside, there is something to be said for consuming small portions of music instead of engaging in the gluttony that has become the norm for many music fans. So here's my back-to-basics admonition to myself: Buy two or three CD's, or download just a short playlist of songs, and listen to them repeatedly. Play them so often that they become a bookmark of the present. Years from now, the music will remind you who you were, where you were, whom you were with. It will call up myriad locations, colors, smells, moods.

In other words, music's mnemonic power, like Aretha Franklin in her signature song, deserves a little more R-E-S-P-E-C-T than it gets from us inveterate acquirers.