Sound

Listen and Learn

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KODI, alias Nathalie Bruys (Amsterdam), during the Clubtransmediale 2004 in Berlin. KODI uses digital and analogous material, creates installations, music, film and radio and works as a DJ. – Photo: marco.microbi

On 11 July this year, the court in Utrecht ruled that Dutch Internet providers do not have to hand over their customer data to Stichting Brein. Brein (Dutch acronym for 'Protection Rights Entertainment Industry Netherlands' and coincidentally the Dutch word for 'brain') monitors copyright compliance in the music industry, among other things, and has declared war on 'peer-to-peer services' (P2P) like the popular KaZaA and LimeWire programs, which enable Internet users to share music without paying royalties. Although the judgement represents a provisional victory for Internet users offering copied music, 'file sharing' is facing an uncertain future. Elsewhere, in the United States for example, the makers of P2P software programs are now being prosecuted too.

The increased pressure on music sharers is also causing ripples in the world of 'audio bloggers'. Just recently, the highly popular mp3 blog aggregator Totally Fuzzy called a time out. Aggregators generally don't do much more than publish lists of mp3s discovered on the web and provide links to the song, mix or even whole CD in question. They are much-needed guides in a diffuse universe of mp3 blogs. An audio or mp3 blogger posts one or more tracks every day, usually accompanied by a review, commentary or an interview with the musicians concerned. These weblogs engage not only in scouting, promotion and discourse formation, but also in the 'leaking' of tracks that have not yet been released and which are meanwhile tested by aficionados and DJs. mp3 blogs are also used differently from, say, a P2P program. In the latter you 'search' deliberately for music you want to hear; with an audio blog you 'find' music you can listen to and about which you can express your

opinion. Most bloggers are CD and record collectors, music fanatics and DJs keen to share with visitors their enthusiasm for a new or forgotten composition, an instrumental (*riddim*), or self-made remix (*refix* or *mash-up*). You're not very likely to stumble across 50 Cent's latest hit on an audio blog, but you will find the hiphop-refix *Riders On the Storm* in which the late Jim Morrison and rapper Snoop Dogg engage in a vocal battle. And in many cases an audio blog will tell you where you can buy the track.

Unlike the classic mp3 blogs, many aggregates are gradually becoming 'polluted' by references to obscure outposts of websites where entire CDs have been placed ready to be downloaded. Students in particular use the web space allotted them by universities and colleges to store their favourite music. As a result, aggregates find themselves promoting the 'search structure' so typical of P2P programs. Totally Fuzzy, too, discovered that more and more links to CDs were being circulated and declared a brief suspension of activities – to the annoyance of its thousands of mp3-addicted visitors. 'I'm fed up with all those CDs', complained host Herr K., returning a week later with the announcement that from now on he would only be publishing links to interesting songs, 'mix tapes' and audio blogs. On the one hand he did not want to surrender his blog to the copyright police, on the other hand he wanted to remain true to his genuine love of music. In short, more quality rather than more quantity.

Elsewhere on the net, the first consumer survey has been conducted into the phenomenon of the audio blog (www.surveymonkey.com). The purpose was clearly formulated: have copyright guardians set their sights on mp3 blogs, too? Over a hundred audio bloggers took part in the survey, sixty of them from the United States. Striking findings included the high ratio of male bloggers (94%) ; the relatively mature age of audio bloggers (some 80% are between 25 and 45 years old) ; the explosive growth of mp3 blogs (82% are less than eighteen months old) ; and the high percentage of mp3s devoted to 'independent' or 'alternative music' (31%). There were also some interesting results concerning discourse development. Only 3% of bloggers do not attach a comment to a posted track and 55% add comments that have nothing to do with the mp3 in question – popular topics are pop culture (42%), personal anecdotes (33%) and politics (21%). It is also clear that audio bloggers do not encourage the posting of entire CDs: over 82% steadfastly refuse to post links to complete albums or concert recordings.

Finally, the question of copyright was raised. Some 40% say they operate 'legally', meaning that they seek permission from record labels, musicians, producers or DJs. The remaining 60% readily admit to operating the audio blogs in an illegal fashion. To the question of whether bloggers are ever pressed to remove tracks by musicians or record labels, 88% replied in the negative. In the recent past, only three mp3 bloggers have been faced with legal steps against their websites or threats from providers.

Another, more qualitative, survey was recently conducted by Siddhartha Mitter, a correspondent for *The Boston Globe* (31 July 2005). Mitter, who credits blogs with helping to broaden and deepen musical taste, came across a growing interest in music from Sri Lanka, Congo and Norway, to name but a few countries. He also discovered that the music industry is flourishing under a regime of audio blogs. In his article 'Listen. And Learn' he concluded that mp3 bloggers are seen as 'a new tastemaking elite, conveners of hipness and buzz... Promoters send popular bloggers free product in the hope of scoring a posting. Some bloggers have been asked to scout new talent for labels.' What's more, the audio blog is beating the music-writing media on all fronts and its opinion-forming role can no longer be ignored. Paul de Jong, musician and member of the Dutch-American duo The Books, confirms this trend. 'The popularity of The Books is first and foremost down to the Internet and mp3 blogs. They promote our music and concerts, publish interviews and tour itineraries with the result that a small band like ours is able to prosper and our record label can make a decent-sized CD pressing.'

It would become Stichting Brein if, as well as acting as the fierce 'copyright watchdog of the entertainment industry' (*Elsevier*), it were also to become a positive force in the development of musical taste. Providing web space where consumers are encouraged to discuss their music with one another would improve Brein's image and also make a positive contribution to the general development of taste. Until that time, everyone who believes in musical progress is condemned to illegality.

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Tags

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