

The Digital Pop Machine

Anyone born during the sixties remembers the decade digital music swallowed pop. The transition from weary rock to synth pop was as fast as the technology that fed it would allow. In 1980, Devo, Blondie and Joy Division topped the charts with their digital pop synth sound and video clips that boasted special effects made possible only by digital video technology. Drum kits were reduced to a single lone stand with a thin boy in a striped shirt playing in time to a pre-recorded overproduced sound of a Roland drum machine. The theatrical piano replaced by a sorry single digital keyboard. Even the guitar was reduced to a mere accompaniment to the digital pre-recorded sequences of a machine that could reproduce the sounds of a thousand instruments. In 1981, Roland released their first synthesiser supporting the MIDI format. MIDI (Musical Instrumental Digital Interface) is an industry standard protocol that allows musical equipment and computers to communicate with each other. In the early eighties, MIDI, developed sequences which allowed one to record, edit and play back. Soon after interfaces were released for the Apple Macintosh, Commodore 64, PC-Dos and the Atari ST. In 1991 the MIDI was tweaked to allow all types of media control devices to communicate with each other. A number of music file formats based on the MIDI-byte stream are used today to store music in the very compact form used for ringtones and video games. Today the music industry has come full circle with the decline of record and CD sales and the marked growth of digital music sales in the form of mobile phone ringtones. Full circle in that Joy Divisions 'Love will tear us Apart' has made a digital comeback, and can be heard from many a teenagers mobile phone, betraying the anonymity of the caller, and full circle in that once again, music has been reduced to its lowest common denominator. Simple notes on a simple scale encoded and decoded in the simplest possible way. Yet, there's nothing simple about the digital music business. In July 2008 New Motion Inc (now Atrinsic) a leader in the internet advertising, mobile technology and entertainment industry announced that for a mere \$6 million plus, it had acquired the asset of Ringtone.com, a valuable internet domain that receives over 1,000 sign ups per day for the downloading of mobile content. Burton Katz, the Company's CEO, commented saying 'Ringtones are the historic growth driver behind worldwide mobile content sales. Over the past year and a half, there have been fundamental shifts in the subscription based business model supporting these services creating unique opportunities in a business continuing to see strong consumer demand.' At the same time, Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI), an organization that collects royalties for song writers and publishers, is forecasting that overall ringtone sales in the US will fall 7 percent in 2008 to approximately \$510 million. That drop indicating an 8 percent drop in 2007 to \$550 million. BMI claimed that the market hit its peak in the US in 2006 with sales of \$600 million. CEO of Advertising web Service Steven Bermeister remembers recording music on his Roland Jupiter-8 keyboard. His family established one of the first retail computer shops in Sydney where the now retro Atari ST, with MIDI interface was sold. Even then his love of technology merged comfortably with his love of music. These days he's on the other side of the music business selling digital music and all its applications online through peer to peer networking. Realizing that the ringtone business in the US was about two years behind Europe in terms of off-deck mobile content plays, in 2003 he established The Ringtone Channel. He wanted to get in early to be well positioned to 'ride the wave of success that was seen in Europe and Australia when the US market caught up.' Bermeister says 'The heat is coming out of the Ringtone market which means that the flood of players who came into the market late and have been losing money are getting out.' He believes that will stabilize the business and bring down the cost of acquiring customers. The players that remain (those who got in early) will divide the market between them. Madonna's Hung Up was almost certainly written to be downloaded onto a mobile phone and Britney knows it's her Prerogative to join the ringtone game too. The pop industry has fully ingested the digital music platform and is now spitting it out in ever devolving incremental bursts of half digested compositions, catchy enough to dance to and just short enough to forget.

About the Author

Rebecca Eskin specialises in writing on a broad range of topics to increase the quality of copy and content on the web.

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