License to Create: The Economic Appeal of CC BY Music Licensing in the Digital Age

by
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A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College

Fall 2025

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Abstract

Copyright law in America is often misunderstood by the public and abused by bad actors. As a result, some artists are beginning to consider alternative approaches to traditional music licensing. This creative thesis project explores the process of licensing digital music releases under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license, which allows for free file sharing and is less restrictive regarding derivative works. This thesis project involves the creation and release of two albums, with one being traditionally monetized, and the other being licensed to the public under CC BY. Through a post-release process of data collection, analysis, and consideration of limitations, it was determined that the monetized album received a significant increase in interest due to the release of the CC BY album a month later. This suggests that music licensed freely to the public can potentially act as a loss leader for marketing an artist's brand.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank Dr. Denise Shackelford for guiding me through creating this thesis, for her patience, and for her willingness to take on a new role as thesis director with total commitment. With her experience, I learned so much more about the recording industry than I ever could have otherwise. I cannot overstate just how helpful Dr Shackelford was throughout all the ups and downs of this project, as well as how willing she was to work around every obstacle we encountered.

I would like to extend additional thanks to the MTSU Honors College thesis authors whose papers I studied while writing my thesis. Among these are Michael Tonos's "The Recording and Manipulation of Natural Sounds into a Musical Work", Owen Tadych's "The Production Techniques of Two House Music Subgenres Used in Theory and Practice", and Johari Hamilton's " Podcast for the Cause: Nonprofit Uses of Podcasting to Raise Awareness of Prostate Cancer Among African American Men." Thank you to the Honors College Library staff who provided me access to those materials.

I would like to thank the Dean of the MTSU Honors College, Dr John Vile, for financially supporting my academic journey through the Buchanan Fellowship program. Without this financial assistance, I would have never had the opportunity to pursue higher education at MTSU nor the opportunity to study abroad after my junior year. I would like to further thank Laura Clippard for her assistance as an advisor in helping me find new learning opportunities that I could afford while maximizing my ability to pursue my goals each semester. It is only because of her tireless work that I can say that I hope to graduate this December, following the completion of my thesis.

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CHAPTER 1

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED IN MUSIC LICENSING

There exists a debate within the Hip-Hop community over music copyright. In one camp, an artist's ownership of their music is something to be enforced with watertight copyright protections under the Copyright Act of 1976. Anyone seeking to remix, adapt, or use said music in a derivative work must contact the owners of the composition and the owners of the sound recording for approval, and in some cases, everyone involved in the creation and performance of the song may need to be contacted to prevent the assertion of non-transferrable moral rights. For the purposes of this paper, this approach to music will be referred to as "restricted use." The other side of the debate believes that protecting the use of music within the musical culture it belongs to can be more important than protecting the rights of the original creator or creators (Mitchell 465). This belief is often the driving philosophy of copyright exemptions such as open licensing, royalty-free music, fair use exemptions, and public domain. This approach to music will be referred to as "unrestricted use" in this paper, and will be the focus of my creative project.

The average Hip-Hop artist and listener will fall somewhere between these two extremities. A listener, when asked, might say they want artists to make more money when they stream that artist's music. At the same time, that listener can also make a creative mashup of two popular songs and be excited to share their idea with the internet, only to run afoul of content moderation systems on social media due to copyright laws holding the social media platform responsible for taking down infringing content. Many

artists simply want to create art because they are creative people wishing to contribute to a musical culture, and copyright law is not something that they are very familiar with (Mitchell 450-454). Unfortunately, the music industry often takes advantage of artists that do not fight to keep their rights. Artists may sign contracts that give record labels a large percentage of their royalties while major digital streaming platforms pay out mechanical royalties in pennies (Castle). By design, major record labels are not only incentivized to prioritize money over art, but they will also choose to benefit the shareholders with increased quarterly profits over the best interests of their employees, artists, and consumers. Many artists do not want to give their rights to a record label, but feel as if they have no other choice. Restricted and unrestricted use are best viewed as opposing responses to the current system of music copyright ownership: both positions look to create a music landscape that transfers power from record labels to artists and listeners. The point of contention, however, is whether creative control (to remix, adapt, etc.) is transferred from record labels to the original creator or to the public.

Proponents of restricted use in Hip-Hop believe that the artist or artists responsible for creating an original artistic work should own the product they created. One artist who most radically embodies this philosophy is Mach-Hommy, who sells his albums for as much as $5,000 and prohibits his lyrics from being transcribed anywhere on the internet. The Mach-Hommy brand is developed similarly to a designer brand, where the perceived artistic value of the album is related to its scarcity. Because Mach-Hommy believes his rap albums are of similar artistic value to the paintings in museums, he sets the price of his albums in accordance with high art and refers to them as investments (Pearce 6).

The restricted approach is also a response to the systemic exploitation of labor. Many proponents of protected ownership in Hip-Hop culture, which has always been intertwined with Black culture, draw upon the ideas of Black ownership. However, some may argue that the radical protection of ownership in this way is only the commodification of art, which is inherently classist. For example, Hip-Hop supergroup Wu-Tang Clan sold an album with only one copy in 2015 under the stipulation that it cannot be played until 100 years have passed. This scarcity combined with the brand value of the Wu-Tang name caused the album to be sold for $2 million. More specifically, the album was sold to Martin Shkreli, a man who made life-saving medicine financially inaccessible to millions of people as the CEO of a pharmaceutical company before he was convicted of securities fraud. Wu-Tang's lyrics often speak about growing up in the lowest class of society, and prohibitive pricing prevents that same class of people from accessing their music (Limbong).

Proponents of free art in the context of Hip-Hop may point out that copyright is too difficult to protect in the digital world. When it comes to the internet, the music industry primarily relies on copyright detection software, which cannot consider what is fair use without human intervention. YouTube's copyright detection system is notoriously faulty; EDM artist TheFatRat even had his original music flagged on YouTube for copyright infringement. This specific issue is often the result of fake record labels exploiting YouTube's system to issue copyright claims for sound recordings that they do not legally own in order to steal ad revenue from creators (Katzowitz). Detection systems similar to YouTube's are one of the common anti-infringement measures on the internet, which is rife with music piracy and workarounds. Copyright circumvention is easier than

ever: premium subscriptions offered by many major digital streaming platforms can be unlocked for free by downloading third-party software with minimal risk.

Not only are copyright protections difficult to enforce, but they can also discourage various uses of music that benefit the public. For many music therapists, working with copyrighted music is a financial risk that clinics are not willing to take, despite the potential opportunities for patient health (Reid 294-295). Proponents of the unrestrictive approach to music copyright may also claim that the freedom of adaptation creates a meritocratic system. Mixtapes often featured artists adding their own lyrics over instrumentals from other artists' popular songs, regardless of whether the artist who created the original or artist who created the derivative work was more popular at the time. Websites like DatPiff were relevant within Hip-Hop culture for distributing free mixtapes from artists like DJ Drama and Future before they found major commercial success. Free mixtapes helped those artists get traction in the music world before they ever released a debut studio album (Josephs).

The initial inspiration to relinquish creative control for the sake of artistic conversation came from an artist outside of the Hip-Hop genre. They explained how they no longer wanted to retain any ownership of their music because they believed that art should belong to a community. Whoever this artist was, I was not following them at the time and I have no hope of rediscovering their exact arguments again. While their work planted the seed for this project, the concept truly took root as I grew increasingly frustrated with how copyright law has been used against, and has become weaponized within, Hip-Hop culture.

There has been a clear historical shift where legal pressures have systematically constrained creative practices that are core to the culture of Hip-Hop. For instance, in 2005, the police raid on DJ Drama's studio in Atlanta was a major turning point that effectively ended the 'golden era' of the mixtape. Not only did this send a message that the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) would weaponize SWAT and civil forfeiture against artists, but it also communicated to the Hip-Hop community that mixtapes would no longer be treated as promotional tools, but rather as criminal bootlegging operations instead (Madden and Carmichael). Subsequently, the common practice of rapping over another producer's beat, a way to show artistic identity and collaborative ability, was greatly diminished by lawsuits, such as the lawsuit against Mac Miller for his use of a Lord Finesse instrumental, which itself contained a sample that Lord Finesse never cleared (Rhys). Even the foundational art of sampling, which is integral to Hip-Hop's cultural identity, can often pose a significant legal risk. Ever since Diddy sampled Sting's "Every Breath You Take" without permission in 1997, he has reportedly been paying Sting between $2,000 and $5,000 every day (Vega).

I mention that initial non-Hip-Hop artist because this issue of creative control is not exclusive to one genre. However, it feels particularly resonant in Hip-Hop because of its historical reliance on sampling and repurposing beats, a tradition that stretches back to the first breakbeats spun at New York block parties in the 1970s (Browne). Furthermore, as the genre where I have the most production experience, a Hip-Hop focus provided a natural framework for my project. This research is also relevant to the changing economics of music; many artists across genres are discovering that their financial sustainability comes less from counting meager streaming royalties and more from

revenue generated through public performance and strategic marketing. This is largely because income from touring and merchandise will usually go directly to the artist, unlike streaming revenue which is a small percentage paid out only after a record label has recouped its initial investments. Among the top 35 touring artists in gross income in 2002, only four artists made more money from recording and publishing than touring. Interestingly, the only two Hip-Hop acts in the top 35 highest-grossing artists were Jay-Z and Eminem, and they were both among those four artists earning more from recording and publishing (Connolly and Krueger 71).

CHAPTER 2

PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

Methodology

The purpose of this creative project was to document the process of releasing music under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license and to examine the economic viability of 'free music' in practice. The hypothesis at the core of this project was that artists who offer their music to the public at no cost will still benefit from the music because it will function as a loss leader capable of promoting the artist's brand and their other music. I wanted this project to answer the following questions:

- What unique challenges and benefits come with choosing to release music under CC BY instead of monetized music?
- Can an artist's choice to release free music increase public awareness of the artist's brand?
- Can an artist's choice to release free music increase the streams of their monetized music?
- Is the fear of copyright infringement harmful to the public?

In order to study these questions, I set out to create two different albums. One album would be released shortly before the other, and this first one would be traditionally monetized. This album acted as a control group against the second album, which was licensed under CC BY. My intention was to simulate a hypothetical artist with no existing following and focused on releasing music digitally without profiting from any public performance or physical CD sales.

The CC BY license in particular was used because it is the most permissive option available under Creative Commons. From the beginning, I knew that I wanted a license that would allow for both commercial use, which could include small businesses, podcasts, and video games, as well as allow for derivative works, such as remixes, freestyles, and music education. One of the more exciting parts about licensing music for unrestricted use is how it grants creative freedom for derivative works. The only requirements for any CC BY licensee is to make the appropriate attributions as provided by the licensor, as per Section 3a. For this project, I required all uses of my CC BY album to include a visible, written notice that the original work was used under the CC BY license, that the work was created by me, and the notice must include a URL to the original work.

I also wanted to release the monetized album before the CC BY album because it would give me insight into how existing products under the artist brand would be affected by the CC BY release. Alternatively, if the CC BY album was released before the monetized album, I could instead simulate an online artist transitioning from free releases to monetized releases. That being said, I wanted to treat the CC BY album with just as much respect as the monetized album to reflect the ideology of unrestricted use. If the monetized album was the product of 100 hours of work while the CC BY album took 10 hours to create, then my results could be much less consistent. Any attention given to the monetized album could be discredited as attention being given to a better, more polished album. In addition, I thought that releasing the monetized album after or at the same time as the CC BY album could overshadow the CC BY release, which was the unique element of this project that I was focusing on in this report.

This project would consist of two album covers, eight or more songs (so that there would be a minimum of four songs in each album), and a webpage to host downloads for the CC BY album. I had originally hoped for about fourteen total songs split evenly between the two albums, but production time and song quality was a major concern of mine. If there were eleven great songs and three below-average songs, my data could be extremely skewed. One way I would ensure that all of the music I released would have a similar level of quality would be starting production on each song around the same time with identical recording equipment. I would have liked to measure the free album's impact on merchandise sales and physical sales as well, but creating those products is a cost that I could not cover without financial assistance. As an alternative, I also wanted to use the website to offer my services in creating custom music for businesses and individuals as a work for hire. This strategy could attract clients that are incapable of or are discouraged from using material through a non-exclusive license.

I wanted my songs to include vocals as a point of personal preference, but I made sure that recording and mastering vocals would be the last step in the production process because it was optional. This project needed to prioritize instrumentals over lyrical content; I expected businesses would care more about the mood of the music, which I believe is primarily established by the instrumental. My data analysis examined the musical traits of the instrumentals used. I wanted to categorize the songs included in the free album by mood and style, while also recording more exact data, such as key and tempo. From here, I was able to identify characteristics that are shared among songs that get more use than others. The purpose of this data collection was not to be a definitive proof of causation for other artists to mimic. Instead, this data should serve as a snapshot

of what may have worked for this project at this moment. Determining what songs get used the most may be entirely dependent on the method of distribution I ended up choosing, and factors completely out of my control may have influenced how many listeners each song was getting.

There were many ways I considered tracking the number of people using the CC BY music. I could have asked users who were about to download my music to complete a short, optional survey that asked for their name and the intended use of the music. This survey would have allowed me to add an interactive reminder to fulfill the attribution requirement. Alternatively, I could have decided to track the number of downloads. I would have needed to know who was downloading the music so that I would have a better idea of how many unique users are downloading it.

One strategy I abandoned early in conception was keeping my favorite songs on the monetized album. The purpose of this action was to make the monetized album higher quality than the CC BY album, incentivising listeners to buy 'the good album' if they enjoyed the CC BY album. This was a tactic I had seen music producers employ to make their favorite instrumentals have a greater financial value to match their quality as perceived by their creator. I struck this idea down because imposing my preferences was likely to create more distinctions between the two albums. This would mean that any data I found that favored one album more than the other could be reflecting musical traits that are unrelated to the music licensing topics that I was exploring. For example, it could be possible that my favorite songs also happened to be the four slowest songs in my project. If the CC BY album was significantly more popular than the monetized album I put the slow songs on, was the popularity of the CC BY album a result of listeners wanting a fast

tempo or was it because the album was released under the CC BY license? I wanted to avoid as much ambiguity as I can to focus primarily on the effect that licensing had on key metrics of success.

Expectations

I expected that the monetized album would be released and receive only a small amount of attention, which would be evidenced in my results with low streaming numbers. When the CC BY album was released, we should see an increase in streams for the monetized album that would otherwise be unusual for an album to have in the second month after its release. I estimated that the number of streams reported for the monetized album's first month will be equal to or less than 20% greater than the number of streams reported in its second month after the release of the CC BY album. It was unlikely that the monetized album would report more streaming in the month after the release of the CC BY album compared to the amount of streams it reported during the month of its own release, but that scenario was also a possibility if factors such as a larger catalog and repeat listeners could outweigh the initial burst in popularity that occurs when a musical work is released for the first time.

Getting Results

Even though my project was designed to encourage the public to use my CC BY music for public performance, remixing, and derivative works, it could be difficult to determine how many uses of my work there were. The attribution requirement, the characterizing element of the CC BY license, does not give licensees the obligation to

notify me of how they plan on using the music at all. Instead, I only had the option of asking users why they were downloading my music. Fortunately, I would have more concrete data regarding streaming and sales. This would allow me to measure the marketing effect of the CC BY album in much more detail than monitoring creative uses of that album. Put simply, the potentiality for derivative works made from my CC BY album is valuable enough without specific measurements.

CHAPTER 3

COMPOSITION AND COPYRIGHT IN THE PRODUCTION PROCESS

Typically, my music production experience had been in the Hip-Hop genre, so I decided to keep the music in this project Hip-Hop. Usually when I make music, I will use samples in my instrumentals. After all, Hip-Hop originated from taking drum breaks—short snippets of existing songs where the drums are the only instrument playing—and looping that audio (Browne). However, this often means that I use audio in my music that does not entirely belong to me. For this project, I wanted to make sure that there were no doubts that could generate a freezing effect among potential licensees of my CC BY music.

There are websites like Looperman.com, where users can freely share their audio samples with producers under a license that grants producers the "non-exclusive, royalty free right to copy, reproduce, edit, adapt, modify, remix, use, incorporate and otherwise exploit the specified Loops in new and original recordings," which would also not conflict with my project's CC BY licensing (Looperman Ltd). Even still, I still avoided using these sample libraries to ensure that I could confidently say that all of the audio recordings used in my CC BY album was owned by me. I could explain to my audience that the license I had freely obtained from a Looperman user can legally be transformed into a derivative work and further licensed freely to others, but simply working with virtual instruments in my Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) made for a more simple explanation. I later discovered that this simpler explanation is false, however. The DAW that I used to produce both albums with was Apple's Logic Pro X. Logic Pro X has

virtual instruments that can operate as synthesizers to create sounds, or they can operate as samplers to modify audio samples that are downloaded as part of Logic Pro X by default. Most of the instrumentals I created in this project used a mixture of both of these kinds of virtual instruments, with all of the drums being based on default, or 'stock,' Logic Pro X samples, and typically synthesizers providing more of the melodic and harmonic elements. Upon reading Apple's Logic Pro X license agreement after the production phase of this project, I realized that their license was hardly different from Looperman.com's, as it stated that "all Sample Content included in the Apple Software may be used on a royalty-free basis to create your own original soundtracks for your film, video, and audio projects" (Apple Inc). Ultimately, the decision to not use freely licensed samples became more of a creative restriction than a legal one.

There is an incentive to keep the best stuff for yourself when it comes to free music. Loops that don't go to looperman may go to sample packs for producers to purchase. Producers who can make beats and rap will sometimes choose to hold onto beats that they want to rap over.

I wanted to cover a wide range of emotions and atmospheres so that I would be less likely to miss out on potential uses of my music due to a particular mood or sound not being covered. I also wanted to track the key signatures and the rhythmic speed of my instrumentals, the latter of which I would track by measuring the number of beats per minute in each song. Sometimes these factors were determined from the outset when I began working on the instrumental, but my creative process when producing the other songs in this project sometimes started with a different idea. For those songs, the key signature and number of beats per minute were 'discovered' during the production

process and tweaked to fit the foundational elements of the song. The time signature of 4/4 was used in all of the songs released in this project, which is not atypical of Hip-Hop music in general. My song arrangements were fairly simple and short. This was not a problem to me, since most of the uses for my music that I could think of would not be using the full length of the song.

Different users may also prefer songs that have more focus on low-pitch sounds compared to focus on high-pitch sounds. There are metering devices that can look at each song's volume, length, and pitch to give an average pitch, but I think a subjective description of a song's 'mood' is more effective for understanding what emotions a particular song is able to evoke. For instance, if instrumentals associated with negative feelings such as moodiness or anxiety are finding a lot more use than the upbeat and cheery songs, it is worth noting that there may be a yet-unexplainable correlation for the benefit of future artists and researchers.

I won't cover every one of the aesthetic choices I made in this project in great detail because they won't always have a measurable impact on the questions at the core of this project. Admittedly, I could have gone for a more corporate, impersonal aesthetic to fit into traditional business-to-business (B2B) marketing, but I would have alienated the more casual streaming audience to do so. As for naming, I typically went with something that matched the mood of each song, and the albums were both named after experiences tied to income inequality and classism. The monetized album was titled *Salt Prices*, and the album licensed under CC BY was titled *Means Tested*.

Salt Prices

"Quarter" was the first song on the first album. I considered this song my most polished, well-rounded instrumental. "Quarter" had the most creative drums, it had transitions between different sections of the song, and it wasn't lacking any elements of a solid, modern Hip-Hop beat. There were lots of very slight transformations to the groove as it progressed, which kept the instrumental feeling fresh for longer. This instrumental's energetic hi-hats and use of bell sounds came from the trap music subgenre, and its mood was generally upbeat. "Quarter" plays at 79.57 beats per minute, which can also be expressed as 159.14 beats per minute depending on the interval of beat used. The reason for this unusually specific number of beats per minute is because the song was originally made with 146 beats per minute, but later in the production process I decided I liked the sound better with a 9% speed increase, which also slightly increased the pitch of the instrumental. Before this change, the synthesizer chords belonged to the key of F# major. Further variations were planned, but I thought that "Quarter" felt complete without them.

Out of all the songs I made for this project, genre identity was most obvious in "Point See." I wanted a recognizably 90s West Coast Hip-Hop beat with its bouncy bass and high-pitched whistle synthesizer. Before starting the mixing process, I also researched how many beats per minute is typical of the West Coast subgenre. This number is particularly important in order to match the steps of West Coast dances, in the same way that dances from the Hip-Hop subgenres of jerk and New York drill would be more difficult to perform at slow tempos. From my research, I found a range of beats per minute going from the high 80's up to the low 100's. I eventually settled on 91 beats per

minute, which was not far from many of the other songs I made for this project. “Point See” was made in the key of G major.

“Spider Spout” was a song I expected to do well in streaming, even if it had less energy than some of the more commercial-sounding beats on the album. “Spider Spout” was less distinctly hip-hop than some of the more trap-inspired beats, partially because of how I needed the drums to be less prominent in order to let the fuzzy, nostalgic synthesizers take center stage. The instrumental was composed in the key of E minor, and its overall tempo was 88 beats per minute, although its 11-second intro section was set at 82 beats per minute. This was the only song in my thesis project that had an intro section with a different tempo.

“Peaks” had a very upbeat, triumphant mood, and the way its verse and chorus sections flowed into each other made me hopeful that a longer section of the song could have a variety of uses. Admittedly, it sounded a little busy with all of the different digital instruments and how evenly the sound was spread across the middle frequencies. This meant that in its release state, “Peaks” would already sound complete, which can make the song a little more difficult for an artist to record vocals over. “Peaks” had a tempo of 100 beats per minute, and it was composed in the key of D# minor. To me, “Peaks” had the most heroic mood of all the songs in my thesis project, especially because of the sound engineering. There was an electric guitar virtual instrument which was going through Logic Pro X plug-ins that emulated the distortion of guitar amplifiers. While those plug-ins are typically meant for guitar audio, I also routed a piano and some brass instruments into guitar amplifiers as well to heighten the grandiose quality of the song.

Means Tested

"Lurkin" started while I was experimenting with the organ sounds available in Logic Pro X. I played a D minor chord on the Vintage B3 plug-in, split the chord into three short notes, and looped it to create a constant background arpeggio, similar to Kid Cudi's Solo Dolo (Nightmare). Most loops in Hip-Hop production are 4- or 8-bar loops, which is a measure of time used to keep them in sync with other elements of the song. The arpeggio in "Lurkin" felt uncomfortable because it looped every 3 bars, while the drums usually looped every 8 bars with only a few slight variations. This hypnotic sound, when paired with crushing bass synthesizers, made this song sound much darker than many of the other songs released. I have a habit of focusing too much on the high- and medium-pitch sounds in my music, but I took extra care to ensure that "Lurkin" would appeal to users who were looking for a rich low end sound that could rattle their speakers. "Lurkin" became my favorite song out of both albums, and I expected it would rank first or second in streams. If I had the time to market these two albums, I would have advertised this song first. The exact number of beats per minute in "Lurkin" is 84.925 as the song was originally composed at 395 beats per minute before being slowed and pitched down by 14%. Prior to the application of the slowing effect, the composition was in the key of G minor.

"Klaxons" keeps up the high-intensity sound of *Means Tested* with another short, anxious loop over heavy 808 bass patterns. This song had more defined sections for hooks, but it also had a lot of repetition. This was chronologically the last song I completed, and it probably would be the one I would make the most changes to if I had

more time to submit *Means Tested* to my distributor. “Klaxons” was made with a tempo of 97 beats per minute in the key of Bb major.

“Juvie” was somewhat inspired by the work Pharell Williams produced for Cash Money Records artists in the early 2000s. In other words, I knew I wanted to include more unconventional drum sounds that could keep up the song’s energy throughout. Overall, I am happy with how I was able to incorporate a diversity of drum sounds without making them feel as complex as a song like “Peaks.” In keeping with the early 2000s era, I also used some unusual bell synthesizers and set the song’s tempo at 95 beats per minute. “Juvie” was composed in the key of E major, however the prechorus and chorus sections feature repeating F chords, which do not belong in E major. This modal borrowing is meant to produce a tense, cinematic feeling that releases when the song returns to a verse section afterwards.

For “SweetNSour,” I wanted something that would have a high tempo and a bright mood. That way, the song could attract businesses who need short pieces of music to match their positive, bubbly branding. I was very happy that I was able to make a very unique bridge on the last days of the project, which saved this song from being a simple chorus-hook-chorus pattern. The lead synthesizer melody, combined with punchy bass 808s, gave “SweetNSour” a retro video game-like feel in the key of E major. The final product had a tempo of 88.5 beats per minute, which could also be expressed as 177.

In total, *Salt Prices* had a more upbeat, positive sound. I tried to visually signal that *Means Tested* would have a darker sound than *Salt Prices* by using colder colors like blue and black on the *Means Tested* cover art, in contrast to the yellow-stained *Salt Prices* cover. When it comes to which album ended up being more energetic, *Means Tested* only

had two high-energy songs compared to *Salt Prices*'s three. *Means Tested* explored more unique moods with both the mellowness of "Spider Spout" and the anxiety of "Klaxons," although *Salt Prices* did also include a distinctly different subgenre of Hip-Hop with "Point See."

Expectations

At this stage, I expected that the instrumentals with more of an upbeat sound would be more successful in use cases. Although I am not a marketer, it seems more likely that a business owner would want their brand associated with positive moods. For example, brands often gravitate towards the color yellow when designing their logo because of psychological associations that customers make subconsciously (Ridgway and Myers 50-57). I also expected songs with a tempo around 89-90 beats per minute to get the most usage among businesses, whereas the general streaming audience will not have a clear tempo bias. I felt that certain songs were more repetitive and simplistic, and wouldn't get as much attention as others. In terms of quality, I did not expect "Klaxons," "Juvie," or even "Peaks" to be as popular as other songs.

Limitations

As I moved into the distribution phase, I had to acknowledge a few key limitations on the production phase that shaped the end result of my thesis project. The most significant constraint was the timeline that I had established for myself. To ensure I had enough time afterward to collect and analyze listener data, I set two firm production deadlines, one for each album. This time pressure directly influenced the project's scope,

ultimately limiting the total number of finished songs to just eight. These songs were split into two separate albums with four songs on each, which I considered to be the minimum number of songs needed to maintain a sense of cohesion and provide listeners with a distinct collection of moods. Another limitation imposed by my deadlines involved my creative vision for the music. As I mentioned in previous sections, my original plan was to incorporate vocals into several of the songs. However, my progress on writing and recording those vocal parts was slower than anticipated, and the work wasn't complete by the time my self-imposed deadline arrived. Consequently, all the songs I ended up releasing were instrumental versions. It's worth noting that I did meet the deadline with a handful of partially completed vocal tracks saved on my hard drive, representing an artistic direction that, while initially intended, remained unrealized for this particular release. I did consider reviving these works-in-progress for marketing later on, but those concepts never fully materialized.

CHAPTER 4

NAVIGATING CC BY DISTRIBUTION

Finding The Right Distributor

The first step of distribution was choosing what distribution service I wanted to use. I was immediately repelled by distributors who offered impermanent releases sustained by subscription fees. If I were to distribute my albums through those distributors, I would have to regularly pay fees or else the distributor would take the albums off of the streaming services they distributed them to in the first place. These fees would also be subject to price changes, and because of this practice I considered even switching my project to focus on music on physical mediums, such as CD's or vinyl. Admittedly, it was mostly my personal animosity towards subscription services and impermanent releases that made me avoid some of the more affordable distribution options I had available. For a creative thesis project utilizing approximately two months of data collection, it was not necessary for me to look for a distributor that would only be cheaper after three or more years of subscription fees. That being said, I am also trying to accurately represent an artist's journey through this creative process, which means that I will not always find value in the same options that would appeal to a researcher.

After a thorough analysis of the major distribution services, I settled on using CDBaby to distribute both of my albums. CDBaby offered a flat $9.99 fee per release, which could either be an album or single. Later in the distribution phase of this project, they would increase their rate for albums by $5. CDBaby would distribute to over thirty different streaming platforms, ranging from Spotify to Peloton, without any risk of

removal in the future. For artists with a larger audience, CDBaby might not fit them as well as it fit me for this project. I was unlikely to receive revenue from any streaming services, meaning that CDBaby's 9% commission on revenue would not apply to me. For artists supported by a large audience, this percentage may be a greater cost than paying a subscription or legacy fee elsewhere.

The process of uploading my album to CDBaby was not difficult. CDBaby first asks uploaders if they have certain codes used for tracking metadata or if they need CDBaby to generate those codes for them. Then, the uploader needs to mark which services or territories that they don't want to distribute to. Choosing to opt out of certain counties felt unnecessary for this project. Lastly, I had the option to opt into CDBaby's Social Video Monetization on TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook, which I chose to do for the monetized album. I submitted my albums for inspection and set their release dates, with CDBaby recommending not to set release dates within three weeks of submission to allow time for inspection.

Looking through the streaming sites that CDBaby would distribute to, I did not see Bandcamp or SoundCloud. From my experience, I knew that these two sites were popular on the internet among people who like to discover 'underground' artists. I manually created profiles on both sites and uploaded my albums for free, setting them to release on the official release dates that I had put into CDBaby. These sites allowed for much more regarding monetization and allowed me to include album descriptions, which I utilized on *Means Tested* to explain that it was being licensed under CC BY, and I gave steps for how to properly fulfill CC BY's attribution requirement for anyone who would want to take advantage of *Means Tested*'s CC BY license. SoundCloud even had a

built-in option for uploaders to choose whether or not they wanted to license their music through Creative Commons, with further options allowing artists to choose which Creative Commons license best fits into their business strategy. What makes these options especially noteworthy is how they are written in simple language so that even someone with a shaky grasp on copyright law can still understand what rights they have and determine which of those rights that they want to extend to the public. This detail made me curious about how many artists on SoundCloud were using this feature and how much more data could be gained from future studies of their experiences.

Creative Solutions

When it came time to submit the first four songs, I manually sorted the instrumentals to either album with considerations to song diversity. I chose the order of the songs intentionally, excepting a pair of songs that were sent to opposite albums following a coin flip. Since I had more time to release the CC BY album, I avoided submitting those songs early to continue polishing them. However, this backfired because of a release delay and because CDBaby raised their release prices before *Means Tested* was submitted. I learned the hard way from this experience to submit music to distributors as early as possible to avoid missing my release date.

During the initial planning phase, my objective was to establish a dedicated website to host the two completed albums. This website was also intended to provide a clear and accessible explanation of the proper attribution requirements for the musical work licensed under the CC BY framework, provide links between different streaming services and social media accounts, provide free file downloads for the CC BY album,

and market my services as a music producer by providing a means for businesses and individuals to contact me. Upon further consideration, I determined that a custom website was not a necessary expense. For many independent artists operating with limited resources, hosting a website month after month is not always financially realistic. This financial challenge was instead resolved by leveraging two of the services that I was already planning on using to collectively fulfill all of my core requirements at no cost.

Linktree was employed as a centralized digital hub to connect various online platforms. Its functionality included a direct method for potential clients to initiate contact via email or Instagram regarding commissions, a service arrangement that would align with the legal concept of a "work-made-for-hire." In layman's terms, this is different from the music I created, owned, and licensed to the public because I would be creating music and transferring ownership of that music to my client, who would then have the rights to decide how it can be used. In the entertainment industry, these kinds of exchanges are typically defined in a contract well before any music is produced. Often, businesses will prefer to use music they own in movie and video game soundtracks, as they can do more to exploit the association of that music to a franchise later on. While a synchronization deal could be offered to an artist to include the artist's music in an advertisement or political rally, a transfer of ownership makes more sense for long-term engagement.

Secondly, my requirement for a reliable file distribution system was met by Bandcamp, which specializes in music streaming and downloading, completely negating the need for a custom hosting solution. In fact, I was able to get much more data from Bandcamp than other file sharing sites like GitHub regarding who was downloading,

which songs were being downloaded, and when they were being downloaded. Bandcamp did have restrictions on how many times someone could listen to the CC BY album before forcing them to download it to continue listening, but I determined that this restriction was not impactful enough to avoid using Bandcamp.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Data Collection

Following the release of the monetized album, the data collection process began immediately. I went to each of the streaming platforms where my music was available to monitor and record key metrics of success. After a month of collecting data on the monetized album, I had my control data and was ready for the release of the CC BY album. I then collected data from both albums for a month from the release of my CC BY album from September into October.

The easiest measure of success for a digital music release in 2025 is the number of streams those releases got. For my albums, the most successful platform for both releases was Bandcamp. To give an idea of how much more success I found on Bandcamp, I found that I had 85% more streams on Bandcamp compared to YouTube Music, which already had the second-highest stream count. The third most popular streaming platform was SoundCloud, and many of the other streaming sites that ranked below SoundCloud did not show significant streaming numbers. I was unable to see the exact numbers on every platform because CDBaby automatically distributed the projects to over thirty different streaming services, but since enough of those sites had no streams whatsoever, I settled on an estimate of no more than 10 streams coming from the platforms that I could not check. Thus, as of October 2025, my estimated total combined number of streams was 120 streams.

Bandcamp also provided another metric of success: sales. Bandcamp users can pay artists for their music to get access to high-quality file downloads. As part of the upload process, artists set the minimum amount of money that their album can be downloaded for. The artist is also prompted to set each song's price in case users wish to buy individual songs. I set my monetized album, *Salt Prices*, at a price of $1.25, with song downloads being $0.50 each (which was the minimum price that Bandcamp would allow me to set). These prices were low enough that every user that purchased the album chose to pay more than the asking price. One month after the release of my monetised album, my gross album sales were at $5.

During the upload of *Means Tested*, my CC BY album, I set the album download as free and removed the ability for users to pay for that album at all. Removing the ability for users to donate here is not necessary for any future researchers seeking to replicate my methods, but it did keep my data collection process easier by routing people looking to donate to my monetized album instead. If I could prove that this was occurring, I would be able to say that my hypothesis that free music is a loss leader capable of promoting an artist's other music was proven correct. Following the release of my CC BY album, the gross album sales for my monetized album increased over the next month by $12 to a total of $17 in gross album sales.

After Bandcamp and PayPal, their payment processor at the time, took their percentages, my net album sales were left at $13.26. One of these album sales was from a Bandcamp user who reported that they purchased the monetized album in order to make "Point See" their ringtone. I had made this project so that people would use the music I made, but I did not expect them to use the monetized album for anything beyond regular

listening. This $13.26 can also be measured against the cost of distribution. The cost of production could hypothetically be measured if I knew how many hours of labor went into eight songs, but I decided to focus on the more tangible distribution cost of $25. It was originally budgeted to be $20, but the price increased between the monetized and CC BY album submission. It should be noted that I was also selling my music for much cheaper than other artists on Bandcamp, and that my work-for-hire services making custom music for businesses or individuals were not used during the data collection period. If I was making more music tailored to a client on an exclusive basis, I would have been able to charge much more money compared to the cost of non-exclusive album downloads.

The data I collected on streaming most notably reflected an increase in my audience's interest in my monetized album following the release of my CC BY album, with an estimated 60% of the monetized album's streams coming from the month after the CC BY album was released. 64.2% of the total recorded streams for this creative project were streams of my CC BY album, with the monetized album receiving the other 35.8% of the recorded streams. This could show an unexpected listener interest in the CC BY album, but it becomes less of an impactful data point upon closer analysis. Since "Spider Spout" gained more streams than the other three songs on the CC BY album combined, it could be considered an outlier in this specific measurement. Removing or reducing this outlier's influence on the data shows much less variance in the number of streams per album or in the number of streams per song. This statistic could also be attributed to recency bias, meaning that listeners gravitated towards the most recent release because they assumed the more recent album would be the better album.

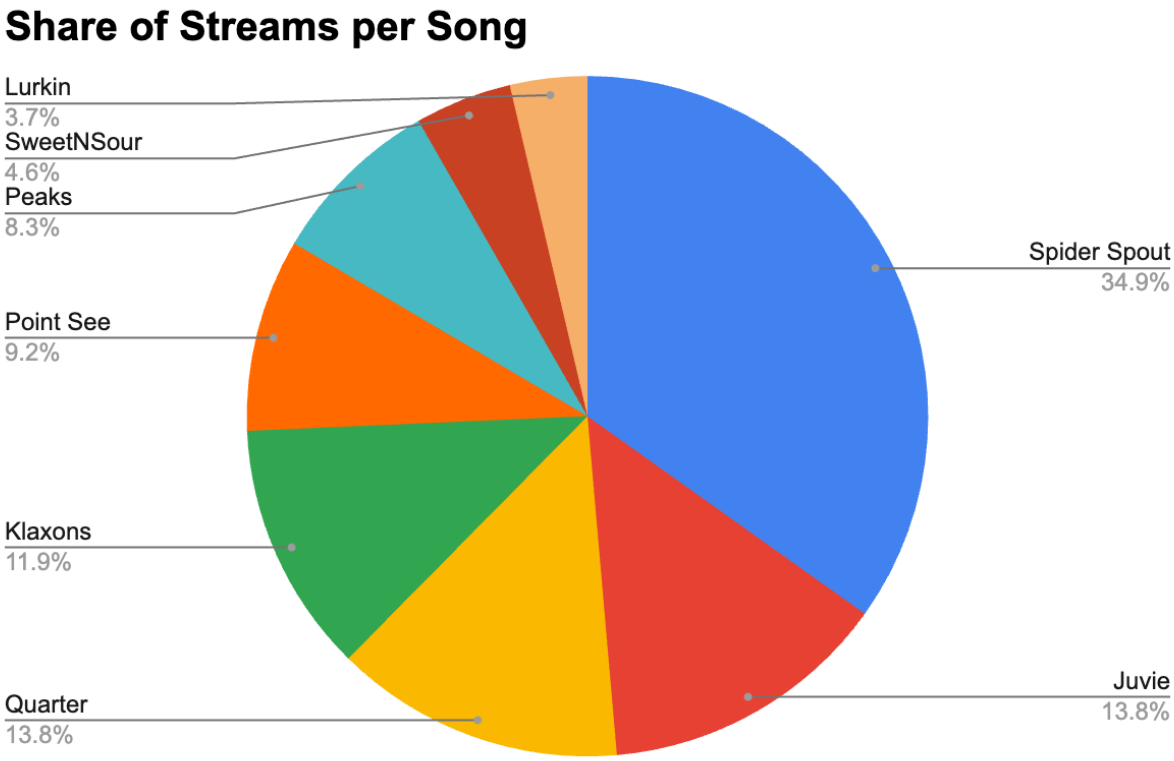

Table 1: Share of Streams per Song

Fortunately, song quality did not produce any extreme data skewing. While most platforms did favor one or two songs more than the others, those favorites were not consistent among other platforms, which had their own favorites. For instance, “Spider Spout” had the most streams overall because it was the most popular instrumental on Bandcamp, whereas “Klaxons” and “Point See” were only the fourth- and fifth-most popular songs respectively despite being the two most popular songs on YouTube Music. Additionally, the opinions that I carried through the production phase regarding which songs were ‘the best’ out of these two albums were not validated by the data I received.

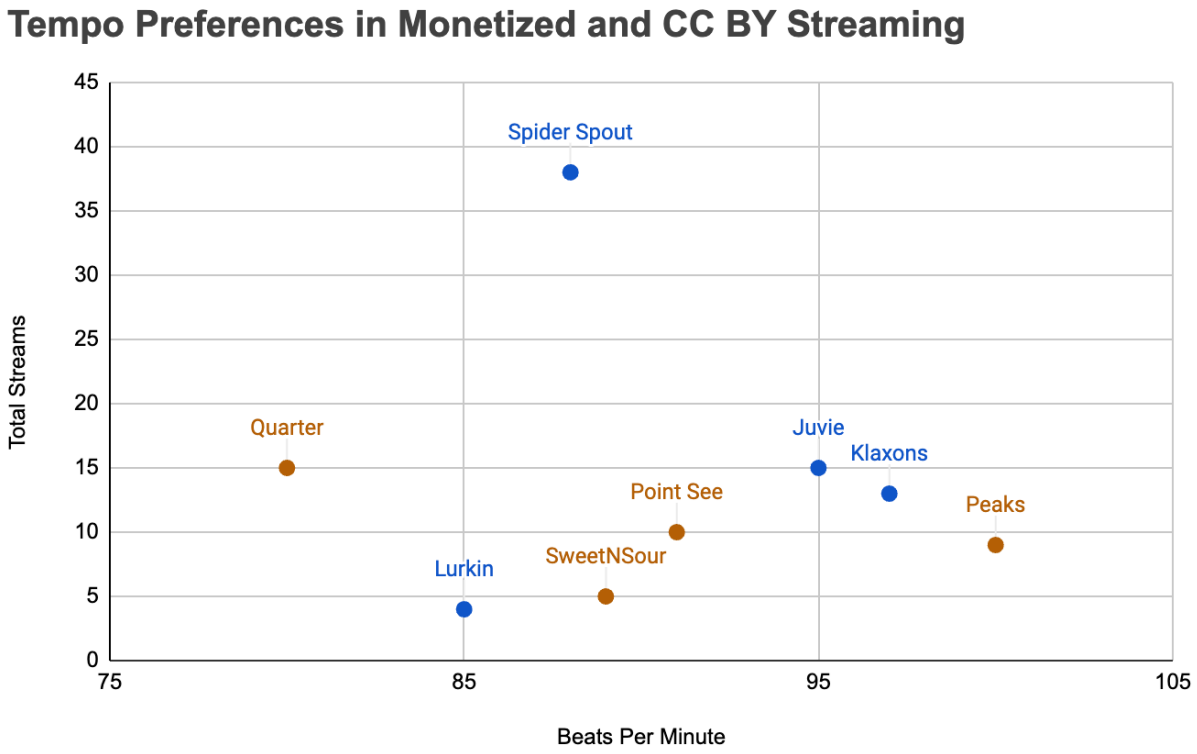

Table 2: Tempo Preferences in Monetized and CC BY Streaming

When measuring the popularity of the different tempos present in these two albums, there was no significant correlation between streaming popularity and the number of beats per minute in each song. The top four most-streamed songs were an average of only 1.25 beats per minute slower than the four least-streamed songs. To the human ear, a change of less than 3 beats per minute is not audibly significant. I investigated this topic further to see if a trend would emerge when considering whether a song was monetized or licensed under CC BY. My expectation was that studying the CC BY album could reveal what tempos were more popular among businesses that were looking for music to use.

When compiling my data on key signatures, I also considered the notes being used. This is useful because all major keys have a natural minor key with the same notes. If I listed a song as belonging to the key of G major, I could also claim the song was in E minor because they share the same notes. Doing this, I discovered that I had coincidentally made four pairs of songs that could be written as belonging to the same key. Ultimately this data point was not significant. I could claim that E minor/G major was the most popular key signature while claiming Bb major was the least popular but the data is nowhere near concrete enough to make that claim.

Some of the data I collected was interesting, but seemed coincidental. For example, Bandcamp streams appeared to show favoritism towards the monetized release, whereas SoundCloud users greatly preferred the CCBY release. On YouTube Music, interest seemed to be split evenly between the two albums. I tried looking into "Lurkin" more because it was the least-streamed song despite being one of my favorites, but there were no correlations I could form between that song and other songs in the project that performed similarly. I tried to make sure each song would be equally loud, but I feared I had gone too far with the low-end loudness in "Lurkin." In reality, that song sounded the quietest when I listened to my releases on Spotify. It is possible this was caused by Spotify's automatic audio normalization, or I could have unintentionally made the song too quiet because I was too focused on not releasing a song that was too loud.

CHAPTER 6

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Limitations

This project needed better marketing to flourish. For instance, social media networks like TikTok and Instagram encourage users to add music to their videos. If I had demonstrated some of the use cases for music licensed under CC BY on those platforms, I might have gotten more engagement. There are actually some existing trends that already attempt to do this. 'Open verse' is a trend where creators upload their songs without vocals in a verse section for users to add their own verse. The idea is that the creator is giving other artists an opportunity to advertise themselves while the original instrumental remains unaltered. In some cases, these collaborations have been released as remixes, especially when the artist is independent and thus has more control over the music they release. For instance, Hip-Hop artist Russ promoted his song “Remember” on TikTok with an open verse challenge, and when he heard Hailey Knox singing over his song a few days later, he worked with her to release her version as “Remember (Remix)” and promoted her music in doing so (Cook). I wrote lyrics and recorded vocals for a few of the songs in this project, but I was unable to get to the point of posting them on social media for an open verse challenge.

Music producers on social media also encourage users to remix audio recordings by challenging them to “sample this.” In this challenge, the original creator would showcase a few seconds of interesting audio that they think could be used by a producer in a musical composition. Typically, the creator is benefitting from the exchange through

attribution in derivative works and showing off how well they can play their instrument, although sometimes the sampled audio is just an interesting noise the creator encountered and wanted to share without attribution. This would be somewhat less relevant to my project, but I could show off a particular sound I engineered for my music and encouraged other producers to use that same sound in a different way in their music. For example, in "Lurkin" I took a virtual instrument that emulated the Hammond B3 organ and made it unrecognizable by engineering it into a constant ambient sound. On social media, I could show what tools I used to alter the organ sound and encourage users to try new sampling strategies rather than trying to use a specific sample.

Another missed opportunity that could have increased the amount of businesses I reached was uploading my music to more business-oriented websites. Websites like BeatStars allow for music producers to sell exclusive and non-exclusive licenses to artists who are looking for high-quality instrumentals (Chappell). This would have been a perfect fit for my monetized album, and my CC BY album could have been uploaded to a variety of royalty-free music libraries. Among these platforms, there are some services that are partnered with or are a part of social media sites like YouTube, Twitch, and TikTok. The only drawback to sharing my CC BY music with these libraries would be the risk of my music being used without attribution, as their terms do not always allow for an artist to impose an attribution requirement.

The final major limitation this project faced was name recognition. As any small artist can attest, it is difficult to get a lot of excitement for a new album without an established audience beforehand. On one hand, one of the primary reasons I used to justify licensing my music under CC BY was marketing, so starting from a blank slate

shows any increase in listeners well without any previous releases affecting my data. Conversely, starting a marketing campaign from scratch was unlikely to yield a large amount of data. Any conclusions I draw must be weighed against the relatively small sample size of my data.

Future Research

Further study on the subject of free music licensing should delve into other genres. I chose to focus on Hip-Hop because I am familiar with it and because the genre is uniquely suited to sharing musical ideas. However, there are many other genres of music that are equally conversational, such as folk, honky tonk, funk, jazz, and hyperpop. These genres may also appeal to different kinds of businesses, and the musical culture surrounding these genres may have varying effects on their results.

Although I was unable to study selling physical products as part of my project, I believe that future studies should seek to incorporate merchandising into the monetization component of their research. Despite the 21st-century development of streaming music over the internet, there are still many listeners who want physical copies of the music they love. Beyond simply selling CD's and vinyl records, studies could include other branded merchandise to be advertised through their free music releases. For an artist with an existing audience, it might be possible to sell tickets to a live performance with this loss leader strategy. If this is found to be reliably successful at a large scale, this tactic could revolutionize the relationships that artists can have with their fans and the way that the industry approaches copyright. Alternatively, future projects could focus entirely on physical music sales without including a digital release at all. This could entirely change

the dynamics at play by giving out marketing material in the form of music where it may end up in someone's home or car where they will see it on a regular basis.

Conclusion

At this point, I wanted to look back to the planning phase, where I listed the questions I wanted answered by this project.

Firstly, what unique challenges and benefits came with choosing to release free music instead of monetized music? Admittedly, this project was a blend of both free and monetized music, which means that any conclusion made would be cross-contaminated in the eyes of an artist exclusively releasing their music to the public via the CC BY license. That being said, there were differences between how my albums were received in the post-release phase.

Can an artist's choice to release free music increase public awareness of the artist's brand and increase the streams of their monetized music? My answer, according to the data I collected, is a hesitant yes. There was an increase in streams of the monetized music after the CC BY music, and most of those streams involved someone going to my account directly and seeing my bio, Linktree, and profile picture. There simply needs to be more research on this subject before I can confidently say that releasing free music will cause people to pay attention to an artist they would have ignored otherwise.

Lastly, I wanted to determine if the fear of copyright infringement is harmful to the public. I don't think this project can answer this question definitively. If there were more uses of my music, I could have more data to compare against existing literature

exploring this particular topic. The use case I do have of a listener using the song "Point See" as their ringtone is a small sample size and can be construed as proof of and proof against the fear of copyright infringement being harmful to the public. On one hand, the fact that they chose to use a song that they paid for could be a sign that the fear of copyright infringement increased the amount of sales I had. On the other hand, they could have also misunderstood how copyrights and the CC BY license work.

This ringtone is actually a form of copyright infringement. While choosing a song that you enjoy to be a ringtone on your personal device seems like a private, protected use of the song, it is not. The RIAA filed a legal argument in 2006 that ringtones were not for "private use" because they involve the transmission of a copyrighted sound recording in public in order to "publicly identify and express themselves to… the public at large" (United States, Copyright Office 31). Buying my album on Bandcamp does not actually make this use of my copyrighted work legal, and this user may have paid me for a right that I did not grant them. Of course, an infringing ringtone is a fairly minor form of infringement and the odds of a lawsuit targeting someone for using an infringing ringtone are very low.

If anything, I think this ringtone demonstrates how the legal framework of copyright is unclear to the public. Had this been a more consequential infringement, that user could have unknowingly made themselves vulnerable to a lawsuit from the same artist that they enjoyed listening to. I suspect that most people have committed some form of copyright infringement in their lifetime, which could become a widespread problem if a major record company were to try collecting damages. So while I can't say for certain that the fear of copyright infringement is harmful to the public, I can say that it is likely

for an artist's copyrights to be unintentionally infringed upon by their listeners, which legally puts an artist and their fanbase at odds. This problem cannot exist when an artist releases their music under the CC BY license.

The single most important result of my project was seeing my monetized album out-stream its release month after the CC BY album was released. This increase in streams validates my original hypothesis that the monetized album would benefit from the marketing value of the CC BY album. This project should not be taken as a guarantee that CC BY licensing will make you $17, but should instead serve as a starting point for future research and experiments in the field of music licensing.

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