

2013: Giving life back to music (promotion and distribution)

By Steven Caldwell Brown

Fragments of time: An overview

On May 20th, 2013, French dance duo Daft Punk released their highly anticipated fourth album *Random Access Memories* – their first studio album in 8 years. The record was not only a critical and commercial success, but the fastest-selling album of 2013; prematurely predicted by [NME](#) to be the fastest-selling album since British rock band Oasis' third record *Be Here Now* in 1997. It also achieved the [greatest first-week streams](#) on popular music-streaming service Spotify and was the [most pre-ordered dance album](#) ever on Amazon. The success of the album is largely attributable to an original distribution and promotion strategy. In the words of SPIN's [Shelburne](#), shortly after the release of the album: "Right now, scads of project managers are sitting down with fame-hungry musicians trying to dream up similar campaigns designed to hijack the Internet's ever more distracted mindshare".

Doin' it right: Aims and objectives

Now that the dust has settled, this short article explores the success of *Random Access Memories* and asks the question: *is this the future of music promotion and distribution?* In doing so, reference is made both to other artists and relevant resources before considering a seldom understood phenomenon which may guide future release strategies.

One more time: generating hype (with music sampling)

Music is an experience good. That is, it must be experienced before it can be enjoyed. This is why pre-release streams are now commonplace, removing the speculative risk of recorded music purchasing. A week prior to the official release of the record, Daft Punk streamed the entire album for free on i-Tunes with a link to pre-order the album via the Apple service (which remains the market leader for digital music). The decision to choose i-Tunes to stream the record is in itself noteworthy for being relatively novel, though in the weeks following, a diverse range of other artists including Queens of the Stone Age and Black Sabbath would similarly release their new records in this way. It is likely to become even more common throughout 2013 with [60% of all sales](#) of *Random Access Memories* in the first week coming from i-Tunes. In other words, it worked.

The hype surrounding the album started long before the album stream, with details of the release systematically filtered (such as the song titles, how long the tracks lasted, artwork, etc.) months ahead of the eventual release, accompanied by a series of video teases. A single, 'Get Lucky', was

released a month ahead of the album. Daft Punk's first number 1 single, it would remain top of the charts in the United Kingdom for several weeks going on to be one of the biggest-selling singles of 2013 so far. Daft Punk also released a video series titled 'The Collaborators' on their official website, featuring interviews with guest musicians on the album. Rarely collaborating with others (and certainly not with such high-profile artists), Daft Punk's promotion benefitted from the guest musicians on their record, drawing attention to their music from fans of the collaborators (would lead single 'Get Lucky' have been as popular without hip-hop star Pharrell Williams on lead vocals?).

Streamed almost 25.5m times in four weeks, the lead single 'Get Lucky' set another Spotify record. Widely discussed in the media, [Stuart Dredge](#) explores the performance of the song in its first month in some depth, estimating revenues of \$127,000. This figure he explains does not include actual sales, citing data from The Official Charts company at 606,000 legal downloads or appearances in other media such as YouTube with 34 million views (the video itself only contains a static image). Whilst the figures are staggering, the exact details of the revenue recouped remain unknown. Likewise, how popular the song was via illegal circles can only be extrapolated from its popularity across legal channels.

Around the world: having everyone talking about you

The album also received widespread press coverage, appearing on the cover of Rolling Stone magazine (uncommon for a dance act), in newspapers such as the New Yorker well as trade magazines like MixMag. In a career retrospective piece which included interviews, The Guardian's [Dorian Lynskey](#) explains how: "Their fourth release, Random Access Memories, is the most hysterically anticipated record in years: every tidbit disseminated online over the past two months has been scrutinised like a fragment of the true cross". [NME](#) were one of several sources to report on Daft Punk's choice of a rural town in Australia to launch the album, with 4,000 tickets sold in an area with only 1,653 residents. With local butchers serving 'Daft Punk sausages' and local bakery offering 'Punk Pies and Techno Treats', NME reports that: "Fans also donned cardboard Daft Punk masks in honour of the band". The band was also featured in a cover story by Pitchfork, which included an exclusive interview by [Ryan Dombal](#). Not since Radiohead's 7th album *In Rainbows* had an album been given so much press coverage, and that mostly stemmed from attention over how it was released (discussed later).

In short, the success of the record was facilitated by sampling and press coverage – the same template which has existed for decades. The only difference in the digital era is the volume of sampling and press coverage. Rather than a few songs via radio airplay, the full album was streamed

online (legally). Beyond conventional press coverage from predictable sources, seemingly every web resource was commenting on the release. Widespread social media use (particularly so on microblogging service Twitter) also helped direct likeminded people to such resources quickly and easily. Daft Punk's collaboration with streaming service Deezer is more suggestive of the active role the band played in facilitating the reach of the internet to stimulate widespread interest in their new record. The partnership involved the creation of an application where users created playlists of Daft Punk songs as part of a competition to win the new album on vinyl. Going live just over a week ahead of Deezer's creation of a new app studio to rival Spotify, Rhian Jones from Music Week reports that [Deezer is now approaching market leader Spotify in terms of paying subscribers](#).

Beyond: promoting an album after it has been released

The promotion didn't stop after the album was released, with the band attending the 2013 Monaco Grand Prix complete with robot helmets to support the Lotus Formula 1 team who were racing in a car adorned with Daft Punk imagery. Perhaps more bizarrely, musician Joe Jeremiah posted a YouTube video where he performed an 8-bit mash-up (reconstructing the album using dated sounds popular in 80's/90's games consoles) of the entire album on the keyboard. Widely reported in the media, [Erin Coulehan](#) from Rolling Stone reports that: "The arrangement includes danceable and tech-y effects on top of Daft Punk's disco sounds, kind of like if you were cruising through L.A. on a Friday night while inside an old-school Nintendo game". [Other remixes](#) have appeared in recent weeks.

Elsewhere, other recent examples of internet-based promotion come from the debut albums of Atoms for Peace and How to Destroy Angels; both side-projects fronted by artists from established and commercially successful groups (Radiohead and Nine Inch Nails, respectively). With streams made available on the same day, the websites hosting the new albums featured a more engaging and interactive userface than conventional album streams. More recently, Icelandic post-rockers Sigur Ros posted a stream of their new record *Kveikur* on their official website, integrated with social media (allowing comments to be posted on their website). An alternative and more cost-effective way of creating excitement over a new release is typified by Canadian post-rock giants Godspeed You! Black Emperor, who in late 2012 released their first album in 12 years, *Allelujah! Don't Bend! Ascend!* at a concert a few weeks ahead of an official release. The promotion for the record was entirely word of mouth.

These artists, as well as Daft Punk, made their music available online to sample in different ways prior to release. This is an important component of music distribution nowadays, where fans are

better positioned to make informed purchases. Daft Punk also created a hype which cannot be understated as contributing directly to their success. Unremarkable in many regards, [Smith](#) from Hypebot explains how the band brought: “A special flair to their promotions”. Many examples are presented above, with the preceding figures outlining the commercial success of *Random Access Memories* speaking for themselves.

Briefly continuing discussion over the importance of sampling, [Kyle Bylin](#) (in his free e-book ‘Divergent Streams’) explains that “More than a decade into the digital revolution, no subscription music service has broken through to mass appeal” (p. 31). The functionality of such services appears to benefit this desire to sample, rather than replace music ownership per se. With advancements in smartphone technology however, this may change. If one can listen to any piece of music they wish on demand in an equivalent way to portable music players, then what is the difference with owning music?

The importance of music sampling is well known and forthcoming (at the time of writing) music subscription Daisy proposes a new era of music sampling which is more lucrative for content creators than conventional music subscription services (which routinely come under fire for the relatively poor profits artists generate). With a [\\$60m investment from owner of Warner Music Group Len Blavatnik](#), one of Daisy’s principal aims is to integrate music-listening with purchases of merchandise and concert tickets. The credentials of Daisy’s Chief Creative Officer’ Trent Reznor (Nine Inch Nails) in terms of successfully distributing music are well established (as discussed in a [recent article](#) of mine).

Something about us: Getting carried away

All too often in the last five or ten years when a record is notably successful, questions are asked about a new secret formula to sidestep piracy. The press speculate over a new future of the recording industry. Everyone gets overly excited. However, the fact is that the recording industry is in good shape – there’s no need to get carried away. There’s not a big climactic change just around the corner.

In their most recent [annual report](#), The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry reports healthy digital growth. There are over 80 legal digital channels in the UK, with new ones planned – including Daisy. A renewed interest in vinyl is notable in the UK (largely thanks to Record Store Day), with CD’s still proving popular with consumers. Things are going well: it just looks different. It is for this reason (and many others) that Daft Punk’s recent success does not represent

the future of music promotion and distribution. To elaborate on one other reason, it is also not financially possible: for not everyone can afford to do it.

It's not practical for every musician to not only create new music but an elaborate system to ensure widespread interest in the music by effectively hijacking the internet for a month. More importantly, even if they could, they wouldn't necessarily want to. An emerging trend in academic literature demonstrates that an artists' stage-in-the-game essentially determines the best means to successfully release their music.

Human after all: How to successfully distribute your music

When Radiohead released their 7th album *In Rainbows* for free in 2007, it got everyone talking. Not the first band to do this, Radiohead's official website registered over 3 million visits during the 2 months following the records initial release. As reported in the [Journal of Marketing](#), The prices paid ranged from the 45p handling fee to £99.99. Approximately one third chose to pay nothing and the remaining two thirds paid an average of £4. This counterbalanced to a net revenue which is infinitely greater than under any other normal business agreement – (and still is).

Attracting widespread attention, [researchers in France and Tunisia](#) dedicate a whole article to analysing the potential for Radiohead's pay-what-you-want-model as an alternative to piracy (ultimately concluding 'yes', under certain conditions). Importantly, Radiohead were able to take this risk having generated a loyal fan base on the back of mainstream commercial success in the 1990's.

[Speaking out his own forward-thinking distribution methods](#), Nine Inch Nails mastermind Trent Reznor explains that: "The steps we've taken.. I think, have gotten closer to something that approaches a business model. It doesn't work for bands that nobody knows yet". This is critical. Notably, Radiohead's next record *The King of Limbs* was distributed in a mode identical to that of Nine Inch Nails and with the involvement of a record label. The recent return of Nine Inch Nails also involves the backing of a record label (as with his aforementioned band How to Destroy Angels). Why all this juggling around? It's simple – no one way of doing thing works anymore. Enterprising acts like Radiohead and Nine Inch Nails know that.

Research published in the journal [Electronic Commerce Research and Applications](#) makes the case that different business models are optimal at different stages of an artists' career. More recently, and drawing from data gathered on over 700 musicians, [French researchers](#) found piracy to have a negative impact on artists with a recording contract who do not perform live regularly. Piracy otherwise had a positive effect. [Related research](#) also highlights that piracy affects artists differently,

with file-sharing increasing live performance revenue for smaller artists to a greater degree than well-known artists.

Other research (see for example [a study](#) from as recently as March this year) explore this effect with Matthew David in his accessible 2010 book '[Peer to peer and the music industry](#)', referencing 6 case studies to persuasively argue this stage-in-the-game phenomenon. There's no one set way of doing things nowadays and artists must be willing to adapt to ensure a just return on their investments (however arranged) from the creation of recorded music. As Talking Heads' David Byrne explains in his excellent 2012 book '[How Music Works](#)', music is ephemeral. In other words, it adapts. So too must musicians.

Digital love: Concluding remarks

This article has explored the success of Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* and argued that it does not represent the future of the music promotion and distribution. It has also been argued, with reference to academic literature, that musicians would be best not to jump on the iTunes-pre-order-with-album-stream bandwagon in the wake of Daft Punk's success, but rather adapt to the stage-in-the-game model. What works today, might not work tomorrow. To once more reference David Byrne, music is about context.

Raising the profile of the recent research trend into this emerging occurrence (to the benefit of musicians), this article has highlighted the importance of music sampling – for all artists. For this reason, subscription services are likely to continue in the coming years. The real question is whether they can become more than simply a means to sample music. To this end, the forthcoming Daisy should shed light on this. To return to the lessons learned from both Daft Punk and Radiohead (or more specifically, *Random Access Memories* and *In Rainbows*), artists can't lose sight of the most important thing – making great music.

As Daft Punk have shown, with a pre-existing fan base and some sleight of hand, you can create a successful promotion and distribution strategy. Importantly, the internet is at the heart of bringing these two factors together.

It probably doesn't hurt to look super-cool dressed up as robots as well.

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Steven is a [Doctoral Research Student](#), researching music piracy. He maintains a [blog](#) on the subject. He has 5 copies of Radiohead's *Kid A* and technically paid £40 for *In Rainbows*, purchasing the made-to-order 'discbox'.