

High Definition Streaming

This is intended to be a short piece so I will skip over a lot of the detailed history and concentrate on getting to the point of the article.

It appears to me that how music is delivered is changing so quickly that you have to pay close attention to the latest developments or get left behind. Years ago, we went from vinyl to cassette and then to CD. It was all about the physical media, something you could hold in your hand and possess/own. Then computer audio came about and people started ripping physical media to computers and playing it back. In the beginning there was a lot of stealing of music and music industry started to crack down.

The music industry was at a crossroads. Physical media was slowly dying and the stealing had to be stopped or curtailed to allow them to make money and ultimately to supply us with new artists. Then came Apple music where you could buy music tracks electronically/legally but unfortunately, we were given the lowest possible quality that was perceived to work for the average consumer. Since it was portable you got cheap headphones and it sounded good enough for the masses. Other companies such as Amazon, Spotify, Napster, Bandcamp, CDBaby, and SoundCloud jumped into the music download business and we say physical media sales starting to tank.

Then came streaming services where you pay a monthly fee to access music but you don't own anything tangible. Companies like Pandora, Spotify, Amazon, iHeart radio and others developed subscription-based music delivery services. All of these streaming services were based around compressed MP3 schemes that delivered between 256Kb and 320Kb.

This went on for many years and we watched physical CD sales shrink and even music downloads starting to slow way down. Ironically, the once dead vinyl LP started to make a comeback. Millennials started to appreciate what vinyl did and they enjoyed the experience of holding an LP jacket and the experience of having notes and information at their fingertips. It is hard to put your finger on what has created the vinyl revival but it is real and has been growing for multiple years.

The next logical evolution of this cycle was that the subscription based streaming services had to figure out a way to get us back to at least CD quality and make the experience on par with the quality that we lost when MP3 flooded the market. Companies like Tidal (3 million subscribers), Deezer (7 million subscribers) and Quboz (< 1 million subscribers) offered a subscription service that was sold as High Definition (whatever that means). We now had small players (at least compared to Apple, Spotify, Padora, etc.) with catalogs of 16/44 and up. Tidal did MQA and could provide 24/192 while Qobuz could play flac files up to 24/192. We were on our way although both services had a somewhat eclectic mix of music. They had many of the big rock artists but only a limited number of their total catalog. These other services were offering more in the way of classical, jazz, blues and world music.

What the landscape needed was one of the big players to embrace high definition or high bit rate streaming at a competitive price or even a potentially lower price point. The world was watching Apple, Spotify and others but there was little movement. The rumors had been flying but the key players seemed to be waiting each other out. Then low and behold here comes Amazon Music with CD quality and high resolution up to 24/192 using the flac format. Note that Amazon has approximately 50 million songs with 95% CD quality and about 5% considered high definition). So, what about price you ask? Tidal and Qobuz run \$19.95 a month but Amazon Music cost 12.95 (for Prime members). They claim 50 million HD songs (they include 16/44 CD quality as part of their HD service) in their HD library.

With the advent of Roon, a software component for your digital audio system, you can integrate your recorded music collection with streaming services like Tidal and Qubuz. If a major player like Amazon Music also interfaces with Roon then you have a tremendous opportunity to integrate all of your music into a cohesive whole. For example, you pull up an artist like Pink Floyd and you would get your personal collection, then you could see what Tidal has to offer, then Qubuz and potentially even Amazon Music. Roon allows a peerless music curation function that can provide the closest thing to touching or feeling your music in an electronic world. Information about the music/recording/musicians, when and where it was recorded, liner style notes, artist biography, etc. Other software players such as JRiver can do something similar but it takes a lot of manual input to get to a similar level.

I think alternatives to Roon will likely come along and we will have a tremendous opportunity to bridge the gap between the old model of physical ownership of your music and essentially renting music that you never really own. The future looks pretty exciting to me! I wonder what will happen going forward? I can play all of the music on any device and explore new artists and music genres that I would never have done before. I can get liner notes for each release as well as explore the artists biography. I can ask to see other artists that are similar to my favorites and potentially find new favorite artists. The possibilities are limitless and the future looks bright to me. I am cautiously optimistic.

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