

HOT POD / SPOTIFY / ENTERTAINMENT

Last.fm turns 20 and now has a following on Discord / Plus, Neil Young says he's 'never going back' to Spotify, and Spotify pushes ahead with audiobooks.

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last.fm

This is Hot Pod, The Verge's newsletter about podcasting and the audio industry. [Sign up here for more.](#)

Thanksgiving is almost here, and I've already eaten half a bag of King's Hawaiian rolls. I'm looking forward to signing off, seeing family, and eating a lot more bread later this week. But for now: podcasts. Or music, actually — most of this week's news is about streaming music and what we listen to. And mostly, this week's newsletter is about a service I have very fond memories of, even if I haven't used it in many, many years.

Today, we've got a check-in on Last.fm and its burgeoning presence on Discord, an update on Neil Young on Spotify, a new audio editing tool from Anchor, and an expansion of Spotify's audiobook efforts.

A quick heads-up for Insiders: we're taking Thursday and Friday off this week for the holidays. Ariel will be back with you on Tuesday. See you then, and have a great holiday!

Last.fm turns 20 – and people are still scrobbling

Over the weekend, the service that popularized the practice of tracking your digital listening habits turned 20 years old. Last.fm's users are still scrobbling — that is, tracking their music playback — hundreds of thousands of times a day, according to a running counter on the service's website.

Last.fm felt just a little bit revolutionary when it was first introduced in the early 2000s. The site's plug-ins — which were originally created for a different service called

Audioscrobber — tapped into your music player, took note of everything you listened to, and then displayed all kinds of statistics about your listening habits. Plus, it could recommend tracks and artists to you based on what other people with similar listening habits were interested in. “If this catches on, a system like this would be a really effective way to discover new artists and find people with similar tastes,” the blogger Andy Baio wrote in February 2003 after first trying it out.

This was very much a precursor to the algorithmic recommendation systems that are built into every music streaming service today. Spotify, Apple Music, Tidal — whatever it is you’re listening to, they’re all tracking your habits and using that to recommend new tracks to you. But on those services, your data is kept hidden behind the scenes. Using Last.fm was like having access to your year-end Spotify Wrapped but available every single day and always updating.

“People like to talk about music.”

(In case you’re wondering: yes, people are scrobbling *You’re Wrong About*, *Pod Save America*, and *Joe Rogan*, too, and Last.fm offers up fitting recommendations against each. Podcasts just aren’t very popular compared to music.)

Streaming services’ automated recommendations have largely obviated the need for a platform like Last.fm (I certainly haven’t scrobbled anything in more than a decade). But I poked around, and it turns out there are still corners of the internet building vibrant communities around its features. One of the big uses is on Discord, where third-party developers have built a service called .fmbot that integrates scrobbling data into the popular chat room app.

“People like to talk about music,” said Thom, the owner and maintainer of .fmbot, who only gave his first name in an interview with *Hot Pod*. “This is a tool to easily see other people’s music taste.”

Thom, a backend developer based in the Netherlands, says the bot has more than 400,000 total users, with 40,000 people engaging with the service each day. It’s particularly popular in Discords based around specific musical artists or genres — where people “want to compare their statistics to each other” — and among servers for small friend groups, so they can “dive deeper into what everyone is listening to,” he says.

The bot pulls in fun stats that people can brag about: the date of when they first listened to a given song, just how many days' worth of music they consumed each year, or a list of their top albums. Thom says he joined Last.fm "after it was already, I guess you would say, dying." But he loves the data it offers and sees a future on Discord as long as the service is still around. "Discord is betting bigger on bots ... so I think that could help the bot grow even further," he says.

I was a little surprised to see that Last.fm was still around when I first started writing this story, let alone that it had new communities flourishing around its data. (The company didn't respond to a request for an interview.) But I suppose in a world where most services close off and hide your data, there'll always be people looking for a way to track it and analyze it themselves. And in exchange, they get the joy of arguing about music stats every day — and not just once a year when Wrapped comes out.

Neil Young is “never going back” to Spotify

Neil Young sat down with Howard Stern last week to talk about climate change, Woodstock, and, of course, yanking his music from Spotify in protest of the company's support for Joe Rogan and his spread of covid misinformation.

Stern tries to get some juicy details out of Young around the impact of pulling his catalog ("What is the calculation? How much money did you turn down? How many millions of dollars?"), which Young quickly dodges ("I don't know. I knew I was going to do fine."). But he did get one big declaration about Young's future as it relates to Spotify: don't expect to see him back there any time soon — or ever.

"I'm never going back there — or anywhere else like it," Young said. "I don't have to, I don't want to."

“Why would I want to keep it on Spotify when it sounds like a pixelated movie?”

Losing Young obviously isn't a game-changer for Spotify, but it does show the power that major artists have. Young and other top musicians have the leverage and success to pick and choose platforms, and in a world where enough big names choose one service over another, they could start dictating winners and losers. For now, though, we're far away from that

reality. And the rapid decline of streaming exclusives shows that most parties would rather have wide availability over one preferred platform.

During the interview, Young also made sure to get in his favorite shot at Spotify — and, really, most digital music: that it sounds like garbage due to the compression. “We don’t need it. I’ve got it all these other places. And it sounds better at the other places,” Young said. “Why would I want to keep it on Spotify when it sounds like a pixelated movie?”

It’s a good line. I don’t personally share Young’s audio quality gripes, but I sure wouldn’t mind knowing more about when that HiFi tier is going to show up.

Anchor adds one-tap noise reduction

There’s a smart new addition to [Anchor this week](#) that’s meant to help clean up audio by making voices pop and noise fade away. After you finish a recording, there’s now an “Enhance” button in the bottom right corner of the screen that instantly adjusts the audio with just a tap.

I tested the feature out, and I didn’t find it particularly impressive. It makes your voice a bit louder (and more robotic) and can remove a bit of droning background noise. But mostly... I came away impressed with just how adequate my phone’s microphone was on its own at isolating my voice, even as I blasted two YouTube clips of New York City street sounds and a lo-fi music channel less than a foot away from the mic.

Still, I think what Anchor is doing here is important. If Spotify really sees a future in these homegrown and roughly constructed podcasts, it’s going to need to do everything it can to ensure they’re good to listen to. Anchor’s Enhance button could use some work, but it’s a smart step toward that goal.

Spotify expands its audiobook store

Audiobooks are [now available](#) on Spotify in the UK, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand, after first launching in the US in September. Continued global expansion will be key to making audiobooks the third pillar of Spotify’s business as it expands beyond music and podcasts. Of course, so will improving the user experience so that people can actually buy books inside the app — but it’s not clear [that Spotify will get the chance](#).

That's all for today. See you next week. /

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