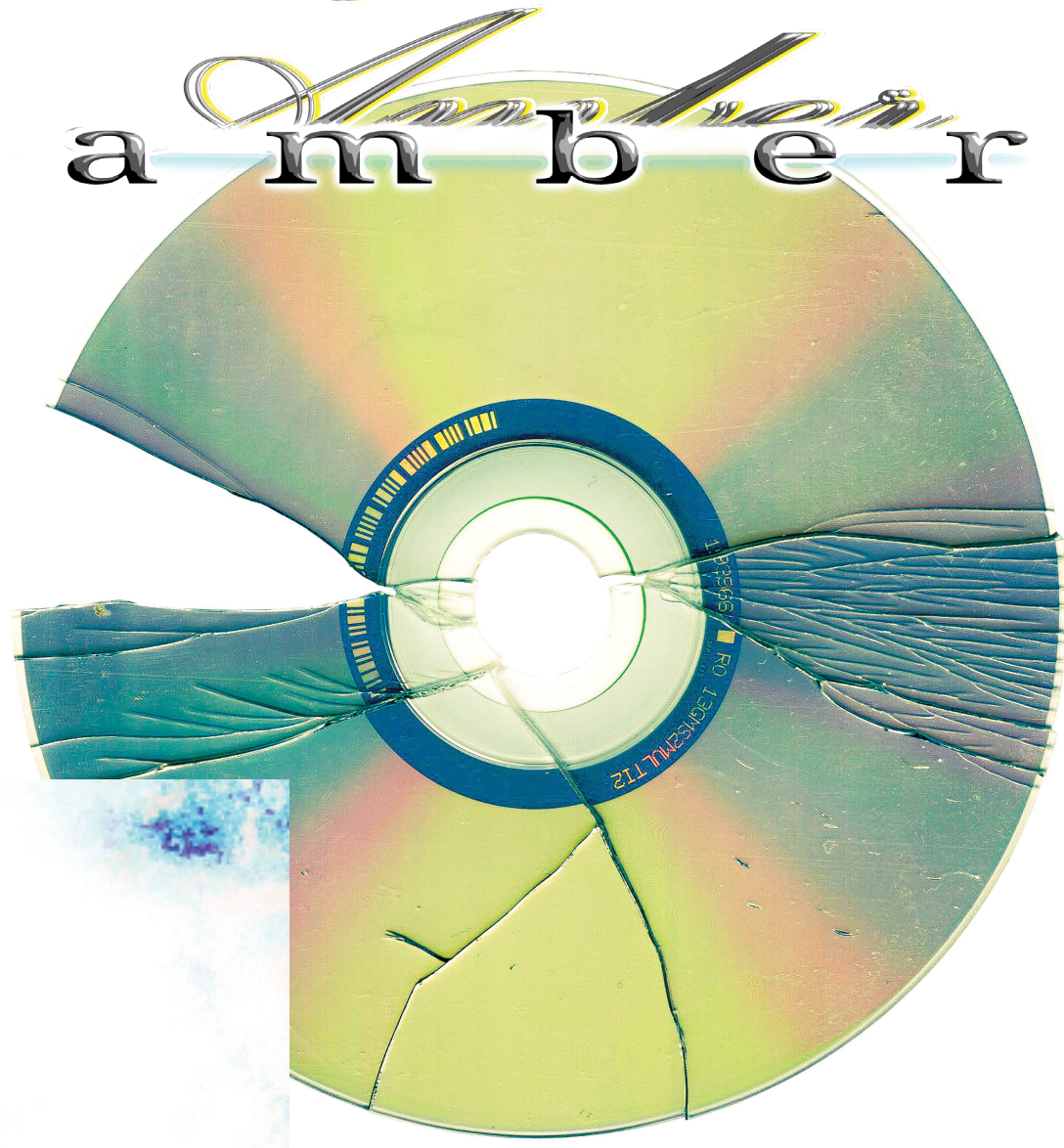


digital

ambler



Written by: Mason Rowley, Graphics: Tyga Martin & Jackson Bechtold

Somewhere buried between my chestplate and my spine is the ever-aching heart of a person who is tormented by my next discovery and where it'll arrive from. My nerves are frayed from twenty-one years of mental traipsing down roads untraveled. Databases haunt me, especially databases as Babelonian as musicbrainz.org.

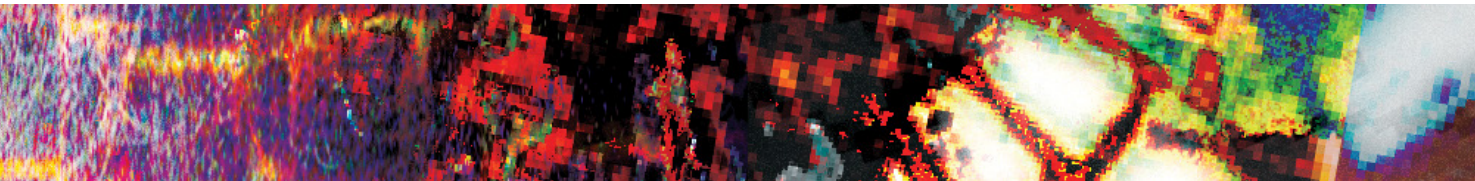
They don't make sites like these anymore. It's a cute slab of HTML started by fellow neurotics with ambitions set squarely at Roko's Basilisk¹. Within it, numbers that creep into just-outside-comprehension: 2,620,058 artists, 4,784,277 releases, 35,397,320 recordings, 50,454,374 individual tracks. This is all at time of writing, of course — slightly past midnight on the third of June, post-espresso, pre-shower, mid-episode of "House" — but it's not like those numbers are suddenly going to dip anytime soon. They operate like other popular info-heavy, audio-light websites for tracking like last.fm or RateYourMusic, relying on a web of contributors the world over to connect their Spotify, or log their CD distribution numbers, or tag albums with "quirky" descriptors. Not all at the same time, but you get the idea. These formats are excellent for tracking data surrounding music, things like release years and fidelities and collaborators. I, personally, get my sick kicks from actually listening to the stuff, and that's where the vice tightens.

In 2008, a fire breaks out on the Universal Studios lot. The five-alarm flame consumes King Kong Encounter², a digital copy of Seth Rogan's insert blank adjective here piece "Knocked Up," and a couple episodes of "I Love Lucy." The light dies, firefighters receive back-pats, and nothing of value is lost. The only exception, as detailed by Jody Rosen for the New York Times a full decade later, is the total and utter destruction of some or all of the master tapes for:

- Early rock pioneers like Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, B.B. King and Fats Domino.
- Celebrated songwriters like Joan Baez, Loretta Lynn, Burt Bacharach, Joni Mitchell, Captain Beefheart, Jimmy Buffett, Sheryl Crow, and Beck.
- Countercultural icons like Iggy Pop, R.E.M, Hole, Primus, Oingo Boingo, and Soundgarden.
- Jazz greats like Mingus to Coleman, arena rockers like Aerosmith and Elton John, essential rappers like Rakim, Tupac, and Eminem.

Which is, by the way, not even close to an extensive list, and doesn't include the folks not important enough to be remembered: the countless small folk, rock, gospel, rap, punk, funk, and metal groups who were grazed by the limelight.

1. Officially coined as of 06/03/2025 as "Rocko's Jukebox," in tribute to "Jonesy's Jukebox."
2. A ride so beloved, borderline nobody has heard about it.



The years of collective expertise that went into their music — the musician’s skills, of course, but the recording technicians, producers, unnamed session players, and further down the line, the people who created the microphones, mixing cabinets, guitar pedals, amplifiers, who pressed it to wax or acetate or tape, who stored it in canisters accompanied with written liner notes and album art and details about the process and put those canisters onto shelves in Building 6197 on the Universal lot — all gone at 130 degrees Fahrenheit.

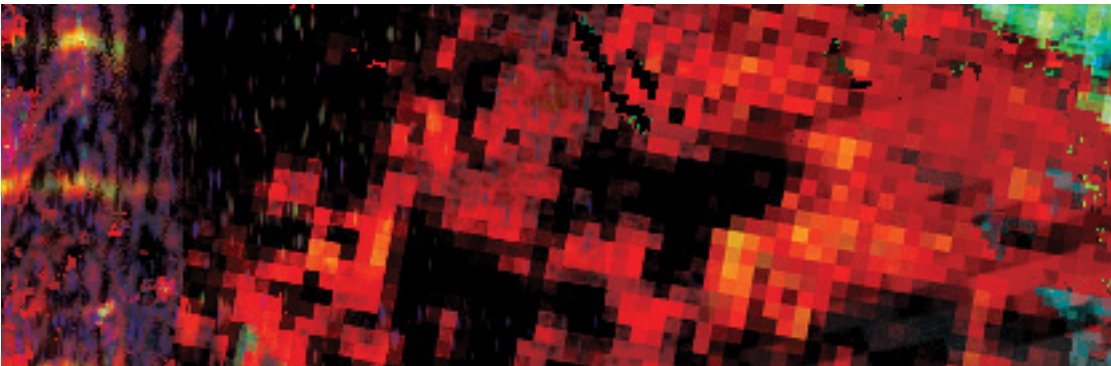
It’s unquestionably one of the greatest tragedies of the modern music era, up there with The Day The Music Died³ or Grand Upright v. Warner Bros.⁴ It’s also, in some part, a symptom of an exploding music industry which treated its own history with flippant abandon, and which continues to do so even as the sheer volume of music being produced has skyrocketed, music created and distributed on

places like Spotify, or Napster, or Soulseek, or imeem, or Datpiff, or Limewire, or Audiogalaxy. Of those named places, three are (or, more accurately for Limewire and Napster due to corporate buyouts, were) peer-to-peer nightmare factories, where your flcl_soundtrack_full_rip.wav could be a dead-end or a candy-coated .exe ready to totally pwn your firewall. They’re the lucky ones who were spared having their entire catalogues wiped with the application. Digital sand in a digital ocean.

Blame it on the proliferation of musical equipment or the deluge of uploadable sites with which you can Hail Mary your thrash metal/free jazz/hardcore hip-hop fusion project into the infinite void, but we’ve opened the bag of wind and it can’t be closed.

3. February 3, 1959; a plane crash takes the lives of Buddy Holly, the godfather of Rock and Roll, Richie Valens, America’s first Hispanic rockstar, and The Big Bopper, a perfectly serviceable singer of the era.

4. The court case that declared that unlicensed sampling was stealing, essentially killing the golden age of sampling where it stood. Adjusted for the case, Beastie Boys’ “Paul’s Boutique” is the most expensive album ever made.



In the past, the diligent crate-digger could uncover more-or-less all the music being released because one had to be able to go into the studio, record, pay for mixing and mastering, find a record label, and have it distributed directly to store shelves. Death’s “...For All The World To See” languished in obscurity, stuck between Duran Duran and Devo for decades before some whippersnapper chose to raid Grandpa’s attic. Nick Drake’s “Pink Moon” was all but lost to time due to a variety of factors⁵ before it was covered by Sebadoh and featured in a Volkswagen commercial, a feat of longevity only imaginable for independent artists when a record could simply sit on a shelf till sold.

But here we are now, in a world where data corruption or the whims of capital can rain vengeance upon your friend’s garbage band that plays weeknights at The Camel. We don’t need to reach into hypotheticals for proof of this danger; we’ve seen it play out several times already. The website lostmyspace.com is a monument to this. In 2018, Myspace quietly, secretly, and “accidentally”⁶

deleted over 50 million tracks uploaded from 2003 to 2015. This makes the Universal backlot fire look like nothing. The sheer scale of music lost in the server migration is almost unfathomable. That website I mentioned earlier, RateYourMusic, which touts itself as the largest database of music on the internet? They’ve only got a database of 25 million.

Trying to prevent these sorts of historical losses in the internet age is like fistfighting the ocean: there’s no set win condition, there’s infinite ways to lose, and what would you even gain? Is there anyone besides me who values the slushy deluge of nightcore remixes of Breaking Benjamin songs or errant freestyles by guys named KillaTheCheekDestroyer44232 over bling beats? Probably not. But does something need to be valuable to be valued? Is art — regardless of quality, regardless of reach — not worth preserving, if even just because someone decided to make it?

5. A combination of no concerts, no promotion, critical destruction, barely any audience for previous release Bryter Layter, and Nick Drake’s pot-smoking/suicide. List not necessarily in order.

6. If you had, say, 15 houses worth of books, and maybe one house’s worth was actually real-world valuable to other human beings that aren’t me, and you could conveniently move and get all of them out of your possession while shrugging and going “oopsie,” would you?

