

Gone Surfin'

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by Philip Moscovitch

Last month, landmark music shop Sam the Record Man shut down its Halifax shop. Now, only the flagship Toronto store is left.

The closing highlighted – once again – the huge impact that the Internet is having on the music business. A lot of what we read about digital music focuses on piracy. But there are many great places to legally download music online – often for free. Here are a few of my favourites.

Apple's iTunes is the best-known online music retailer, accounting for the lion's share of digital music sales. Less well-known is eMusic (www.emusic.com) – and that may be why the company offers up some generous free downloads.

eMusic is a monthly subscription service, featuring songs – over a million of them – exclusively by independent artists. A US\$ 9.99/month subscription gets you 30 CD-quality tracks every 30 days. (I was going to say songs instead of tracks, but the catalogue offers up lots of comedy recordings too.)

To entice new subscribers, eMusic offers 25 free downloads. Sign up, download your 25 songs within 30 days, and you're free to cancel before spending a penny. If you are a subscriber, eMusic offers a large selection of free tracks – and sometimes complete albums for free. Click on “New on eMusic” then scroll down to “Free tracks.”

Online magazine Salon (www.salon.com) has flirted with bankruptcy a few times, but seems to be on solid ground these days. While it typically focuses on US politics, entertainment and a few lifestyle stories, Salon also has a generous archive of free songs available on its “Audiofile” page. There's a free daily download, and past downloads are archived on the site, so you can always nab them later if you missed them the first time around.

Sometimes the song of the day on Salon is an older classic (Elton Motello's *Jet Boy, Jet Girl*), but more often it's a recent indie offering. There's a wide range of styles, from blues, to eccentric soul recordings, to free jazz and pure pop.

WFMU (www.wfmw.org) is an independent, eclectic radio station out of New Jersey. You can stream the station live online, but there is also a great blog (www.blog.wfmw.org) that offers an eccentric collection of free downloads. Looking for 101 different versions of *Stairway to Heaven*? You'll find takes by Pat Boone, Dolly Parton, the Vienna Symphonic Orchestra, and many others (including one that's played backwards). The WFMU bloggers aren't always on the lookout for the latest and greatest. They regularly post interesting forgotten gems from the past.

Finally, if you're looking to sample music by a favourite artist, or an up-and-comer you've heard about, visit their website. You will often find samples available for free. For instance, Ottawa singer-songwriter Kathleen Edwards – an outspoken critic of illegal file-sharing – has 10 tracks from two of her albums available for free download at www.Kathleenedwards.com.

Notice anything in common among all these sites? It's the word "independent." The four major music labels are generally terrified of giving away free tracks with no copy-protection. That may be about to change – and it's a topic I will cover in a future column.

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