

Taking Pills to Fill the Chasm  
by Tristan Eden  
March 2012

It was early 2010 and I was alone. I was halfway into my freshman year of college at a small liberal arts school in Ohio and it was brutally cold. It had been cold for a long time. It was dark, too. I can't remember exactly how it started, but I will never forget how I spent the next month. From right around the beginning of January until the beginning of March, I downloaded over 2,000 songs for free from the Internet. Perhaps this is not unusual, though the kinds of songs, the kinds of websites, and the ferocity with which I discovered them and downloaded from them were all fairly insane. I know I liked it at the time, but thinking back on that month now I feel overwhelmed and a little nauseous. It was a strange time in my life.

I had always been what you would call "into music." Ever since sometime in middle school I've had a passion for it. I loved finding bands, telling people about bands, listening to certain albums over and over for weeks. I started where everyone starts: the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Beach Boys, plus whatever current pop music was big at the time, e.g. Maroon 5, Good Charlotte's "Girls and Boys," 50 Cent, Justin Timberlake's first solo album. But sometime between middle school and high school my taste and passion expanded crazily. In high school I listened to what everyone in high school listened to—Death Cab for Cutie, Coldplay, that one Imogen Heap song, Justin Timberlake's second solo album—but also to things no one listened to. Bands like Yo La Tengo, the Magnetic Fields, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, New Order, the Beta Band, Art Brut, the Hold Steady, and the Velvet Underground came into my life and helped solidify my now (if I do say so myself) impeccable taste and superior knowledge.

I listened to and discovered music literally all the time. One day in statistics class, instead of working, my best friend Alex and I found ourselves looking at Genesis's Wikipedia page—and then Peter Gabriel's and then Phil Collins'. Somehow of course this all lead us to Yes's page and then inevitably to Rush's. All this so-called prog rock sounded too good to us. We wrote down the names of the best-sounding or highest-rated or best-looking albums and, after school that day, drove to the nearest record store and bought used copies of *all of them* (they were not scarce) for really cheap. Of course, we quickly learned that no matter how cheap a CD was, it was not necessarily worth it—no one needs *Nursery Cryme* by Genesis on CD. No one. But, never mind! It was all part of the feverish discovery, the unquenchable thirst for new unheard sounds—and the accompanying historical and pop cultural information was also fascinating.

The famous prog rock afternoon was just one in a series of innumerable musical phases Alex and I embarked on throughout high school. Some were extremely beneficial to our musical lives (R.E.M. phase, post-punk phase, or hardcore phase, which was totally fueled by Michael Azzerad's highly readable tome *Our Band Could Be Your Life* and took up most of the summer before college, for example) while some were less obviously important, yet looking back now seem cool and well-meaning if not totally crucial (prog phase to an extent, country phase maybe).

All of these phases—these brief but devouringly intense bouts of music consumption—were all important in their own way. Each phase added something new to our vast and always-getting-vaster musical landscapes. But, perhaps most interestingly, these phases *cost us money*. We bought all of this music—hundreds and hundreds of dollars worth. We wanted—for reasons we could not quite articulate though that seemed perfectly legitimate and even noble to us—physical copies of every album we owned. After a big day at the record store, the CDs we bought

were obviously (and lovingly) ripped into our computers, into our well-curated iTunes libraries. Occasionally we did listen to the CDs in CD players, but mostly it was a possession thing, an old school devotion to the medium, to the artist, to the label, to the product. We didn't feel like we fully owned a record until we, well, fully owned it, via buying a physical CD copy. We were able to buy so many CDs because we exclusively bought them used. Seattle had great record stores with humungous used selections. If a CD was over six months old, chances are we could find a used copy. Sometimes, though, for reasons of rarity or cost, we would be forced to download an album. But we wouldn't feel complete about it; we would still keep our eyes peeled for it and would most likely buy the hard copy if we ever actually saw it in a store.

However we harbored no disdain for the mp3 format. Not at all! In fact, it was our main mode of listening and we took immense pleasure in iTunes maintenance. I would spend hours after ripping CDs (an already highly tedious process) changing the genres from the boring ones iTunes automatically used to more specific and more accurate ones. Guided By Voices was not Alternative & Punk, idiots, it was actually Lo-fi. Sonic Youth was not Alternative & Punk, either, it was NYC Art Noise. Black Sabbath was obviously not Rock, it was Heavy Metal. Bob Dylan was not Folk, it was Vision Music. In my iTunes, Band of Horses was Seattle Breakfast Rock. Because that's exactly what it is. My genres were all my own! My iTunes was for me! Man, it was sweet, and sort of weird.

So, I'm what you would call "into music." In college, though, my constant consumption was tempered due to my needing to attend to more pressing matters, like adjusting to a new home, a new state, and new people. I needed to do well in my classes, I needed to make friends, I needed to get my bearings. For the first half of my freshman year, my music buying and music listening was sort of forgotten. I bought the occasional CD on Amazon, I still read music news and reviews regularly, but on the whole I realized my musical life was going to be very different in college. Besides most of my time being devoted to working and trying to socialize, mostly I couldn't sustain my musical habits because there were no record stores anywhere near my school and Alex was across the country, feeling the same music-getting withdrawal I was. School was fine, it was fun, but music was probably better. Alex and I talked often, though, understandably, our conversations were more about our new lives and our new friends and less about our new bands and our new albums. But we were both clearly missing the music. I vividly remember, sometime in fall, Alex telling me, "I just want to listen to music in my one-lamp-turned-on-the-wall-illuminated room." I could not agree more.

After the first semester, when everything—friends, workload, etc.—was much more solidified, music quickly flooded back into my life. Like I said, I forget exactly how this downloading binge started, but once it did, there was no going back. It was like it knew I needed it, knew I missed it. As best as I can remember, I stumbled upon the first download blog after Alex and I were discussing Fucked Up's new album *Couple Tracks*, which came out on January 26, 2010. The album, which is actually a compilation of rare Fucked Up material spanning from 2002 to 2009, contains a number of obscure covers. As outlined in the album's liner notes (Alex had the liner notes because he had bought the CD the day it came out at a record store near Los Angeles), a couple of those obscure covers were songs by British twee pop "legends" the Shop Assistants, Another Sunny Day and Dolly Mixture. British twee pop! The Shop Assistants! Another Sunny Day! Dolly Mixture! Those sound amazing. Alex texted me this liner note discovery and after mere minutes on the Internet I was somewhere I had never been before: a "whole album blog."

Some explanation is necessary here. Whole album blogs are nothing like torrents or LimeWire or whatever Russian site your co-worker swears by. No, they are simple blogs (usually Blogspots) run (“curated” might be a more appropriate term) by individuals with very specific musical tastes. Also known by their much catchier name, sharity blogs—“sharity” being a three-way pun on “share,” “charity,” and “rarity”—they offer page after page of well-presented (full scans of artwork et al.) and usually obscure albums for free and easy download, via a link to a file-hosting site like Mediafire, Megaupload, or Rapidshare. And because the overwhelming majority of the albums uploaded are rare and very out of print, legality becomes something of a non-issue. Many of the blogs contained a disclaimer stating something along the lines of, *The albums posted here are posted out of love for the music. They are either out of print or too expensive to realistically purchase. We want everyone to be able to hear all of this great music. If you are an artist and think it is inappropriate that we have posted your music here, please contact us and we will promptly remove it.* Sometimes links were removed for copyright reasons, or something, but seemingly very rarely.

Now back to me, sitting at my laptop, in the library of my school, staring in wonder at the first sharity blog I’d ever seen. It was called Take the Pills! and it was beautiful. It’s not like I’d never downloaded music for free online before, but this set up was new to me, and very appealing. Immediately I understood that this blog, this [takethepills.blogspot.com](http://takethepills.blogspot.com), was the creation of a person, probably someone very like me. It belonged to a music nut who wanted nothing but to share his favorites with people with similar tastes. It was kind of like going through a knowledgeable friend’s record collection, or talking to one of the aloof but also desperate-for-interaction record store employees Alex and I were always irrationally scared of. It was kind of personal.

At once I clicked the download link for Dolly Mixture’s *Demonstration Tapes* album. The twee-as-fuck album cover looked so appealing right above the download link. Between the album cover and the highlighted download link there was a brief description of the album itself, written with the kind of enthusiasm only a music nerd would use/appreciate. I watched my Downloads window and saw the blue bar moving steadily. The album—“DM-DT.rar”—was downloaded to my Desktop in maybe a minute, but, as I clicked on it, I became confused: what was this format? .rar? What was that? Whatever it was, it wouldn’t open and would certainly not import into iTunes. A quick Google search (“rar converter”) got me a free download of what would become, in the subsequent days and weeks, my most adored application ever: UnRarX-1. Sweet, sweet UnRarX-1. After installing UnRarX-1, I opened it and saw a small white square on my screen. I dragged DM-DT.rar into the white and couldn’t help but smile: lines of unreadable html code and the like flowed down the small white box. I had no idea what the code meant, though under each mess of letters and numbers and slashes, were the words *TRACK ONE: OK, TRACK TWO: OK, TRACK THREE: OK*, and so on, for the entire album.

A folder was automatically created on my Desktop: “Dolly Mixture.” I clicked on it; inside were mp3s of every song on the album (27 tracks total). I highlighted them all and dragged the blue mass into my open, waiting, eager iTunes library. There was a pause and then they began appearing—as iTunes songs—in my Recently Added playlist. I clicked on a song—“He’s So Frisky,” one of the songs Fucked Up covered on *Couple Tracks*—and it started playing into my headphones. I smiled like a crazy person. It sounded incredible; I felt incredible. I felt something like how a heroin addict probably feels after shooting up for the first time. I liked it, but immediately I knew I would need more. I texted Alex the name of the site—TAKE THE PILLS!—and brief instructions re: downloading UnRarX-1. Minutes later, he texted me back

saying “Dream Come True,” the other Dolly Mixture song Fucked Up covered, sounded great. We were back in business. We were addicted and we didn’t even know it.

That night I didn’t do any homework but I stayed in the library. I was exploring Take the Pills!, which was revealing more and more amazing-looking must-download content by the minute. I was clicking through pages and making notes of what looked good, what I should come back and get. I didn’t download anything else besides Dolly Mixture that first night. I was, whether I was conscious of it or not, already at least a little bit aware of the slippery slope I was about to fall down. I was already overwhelmed.

Take the Pills! was decidedly twee-leaning: all of the uploads were 1980s, 90s, or early 00s twee and indie pop bands, mostly British. I knew a little bit about this music and I’d always found the fey, British, cardigans-and-Converse, totally catchy, post-punk vibe of it all extremely appealing. This was the music that brought the term “indie” into usage. This was punk music with a softer and more romantic spirit. Bands like Dolly Mixture, Another Sunny Day, the Clean, the Field Mice, the Go-Betweens, Heavenly, the Softies, the Close Lobsters, Marine Girls, and Talulah Gosh all created—and, obviously, evoked—the do-it-yourself ethos in pop music. DIY! Grab a friend or a girlfriend, grab a guitar and of course a lovely cheap little drum machine and write some love songs. A total product of the late 70s and early 80s, this music became known, in its own rarified circles, as pure, perfect pop.

Since this music was created in—and for—such rarified circles, it quickly disappeared. People would start little labels and press vinyl records in adorably limited editions, probably mostly with their friends in mind as the only buyers. So, basically, it’s all out of print now (or going for ridiculous sums on eBay). That’s where these sharity blogs come in. And of course, as I would quickly discover, there’s dozens of them for every imaginable sort of genre, era, or taste. They are certainly not limited to twee and indie pop, though at the moment, in the library, this first night, that’s mostly what I was looking for. And once I had a vague idea of what I was looking for, I didn’t have to look too hard.

The next couple of days I discovered sharity blog after sharity blog devoted exclusively to twee and indie pop. And oh my god, it was all so alluring. The thing about this particular strand of 80s indie and twee pop that I had stumbled into—“jangle pop” as many of the blogs would call it—is that it all sounds good. There’s a lot that’s amazing and there’s a lot that’s pretty mediocre. To be successful, you need a filter, some sort of moderation device...but when it’s all free and *right there in front of you* but you also *might not see it again*, well, why not just get it now, UnRarX-1 it, drag it into iTunes, and ask questions later? In my normal CD-buying, cash-spending music-getting mode, I was forced to make more decisions. I had to *really want* an album. Even if it was only \$3 it was still my \$3 and it would also take up a little more space in my room. In order to make the right decisions, I would do more research, I would be more careful. In sharity blog land, though, money and physical storage space were not issues at all. This, obviously, was dangerous territory.

Looking back, I’m astonished at the speed with which I came to understand these blogs and their unique culture, and also take full advantage of them. I know the exact dates I downloaded all of this music because I can look back at my iTunes’ Date Added column. Doing so now gives me chills. Within a week I had downloaded over 500 songs—mostly jangle pop, the majority of which *I had never heard of*—from myriad sharity blogs. I was crazy about it. I created a Bookmarks folder specifically to keep track of these blogs. By the end of the week there were maybe 30 different blogs bookmarked there. I checked them often, in case their proprietors added some new gem I *needed*. I was downloading on average about 100 songs a

day; I was listening to *maybe* 25. Clearly this was not really sustainable, but there was also absolutely no reason to stop. I would wake up in the morning and get on my laptop and look at sharity blogs. I would have ten tabs open at once, ten different blogs up. This early in the game, I was still essentially limiting (limiting!) myself to jangle pop and twee blogs. These had cutesy names like Victorian Squid, I Wish I Was a Flexidisc, Best Kept Secrets, Jangle Pop Boutique, and Crispy Nuggets. I had pretty much cleaned out Take the Pills! and had to move on.

It's strange how quickly you're able to adapt to something new, to understand its nuances and rules. I felt this in the extreme as I was exploring these sharity blogs. Without even thinking about it I became aware of all of the ins and outs of the blogs. I came to learn that if an album was uploaded in two parts (i.e., two separate download links), it was too much of a hassle and I should look elsewhere. I learned .zip format was much easier than .rar because it didn't have to be converted (though the .rar conversion process had become oddly very soothing for me). I learned Mediafire links were by far the easiest, then Megaupload, and finally Rapidshare.

Dreaded Rapidshare, was, annoyingly, the most popular upload site among the bloggers. I don't know why this was, but it was frustrating. If you didn't have a Rapidshare account (and there was no way I was going to get a Rapidshare account), it limited your downloads to one every 20 minutes. It didn't even matter if I was using links from multiple different blogs: if they were all Rapidshare links I could only download one at a time. This, obviously, really slowed me down.

But, like any addict, I found ways to get what I wanted. And the solution was so obvious! I realized that the download limit was governed by IP address; Rapidshare only limited my computer's browser's unique IP address. My computer could only download one Rapidshare link at a time, but I could use other computers, other IP addresses. And I had full use of a library packed with computers. Quickly (startlingly quickly) I devised my plan: I would wait until after most people had left the library, late, around 1 a.m. Then I would log in to as many empty computers as I needed (needed!) and start different downloads on all of them. It was genius; it was insane.

I did this several nights in a row towards the end of that first crazed week. At one point, I think I had eight different computers across multiple floors of the library downloading music all at once. I would casually (but probably not as casually as I thought) walk over to one of the computers and check its download's progress. I was like one of those circus plate spinners, trying to keep all my plates in the air at once, running back and forth between the spinning poles, giving each one a quick twirl before checking on another. The download times were fast, but after they were done I would have to wait 20 minutes. Or, I could go to another computer, a fresh one.

As the albums downloaded to the various Desktops strewn across the library, I would be there to collect them, via a thumb drive. After putting a whole night's worth of files onto the thumb drive, I would return to my own laptop, unrar or unzip everything, and finally drag it all into my iTunes library. It was a science; no, it was an art. I felt like the smartest person ever. I felt like I was simultaneously screwing the system and using it completely to my advantage. Rapidshare download limits? *Pfffft*, please. I had fully harnessed the full power of the sharity blog.

Alex and I tried to keep each other in the loop as to what we were downloading, what was good, what new bands, and—perhaps more importantly—new blogs we'd found. But both of us (especially me, probably) were downloading at such a tireless pace that this sort of play-by-play communication quickly proved useless. It was not feasible to tell each other every one of

the 16 albums we'd downloaded the night before. And, increasingly, we were not *listening* to them. If something we found was truly incredible (Lloyd Cole & the Comotions' 1984 debut *Rattlesnakes*, for example, which remains one of the best albums of all time), we would let the other know. But mostly it was just all too much to keep track of.

By the end of the second week I had downloaded nearly 1,000 songs. And soon, judging by my iTunes Date Added dates, I was branching out from the whole twee and jangle pop thing. I don't really know how it happened, but sometime around the middle of February I found myself in much weirder, much more obscure sharity blog territory. These new blogs were less about a specific genre or era (jangle pop, the 1980s) and were more about *good, obscure taste*. They were chock full of so much cool-seeming esoterica that it became impossible to tell if it was actually any good or not. It probably was, though, because the presumably super hip guy who runs the blog cared enough to upload it, right?

Talk about a slippery slope! This now was music I had really no real background experience with. Yes, I knew many of the "big names" of this sort of record geek avant-garde (Faust, Swans, Pere Ubu, Captain Beefheart, Steve Reich, Sunn O))), Throbbing Gristle, Jim O'Rourke, etc.) and was certainly curious about it, but beyond that, I was lost. No matter, though, because these new truly obscure, truly highbrow sharity blogs would help me, would guide me. I was through with jangle pop and twee. How tidy and lame that all now seemed! Experimental drone, minimal synth, jazz, post-punk, and harsh noise were all in my very near future.

Besides offering completely different kinds of music, this new batch of sharity blogs looked and felt completely different as well. They were much darker, much weirder. The webpages themselves were almost all entirely black. The text was often red or orange or maybe white or grey. The blurbs about the albums were much snarkier, much more reference-heavy yet also irreverent. It was all very cool. And the cute names of the twee blogs were gone; these sites had much more sinister titles like No Conclusion, 7 Inch Punk, Habit of Sex, Systems of Romance, Mutant Sounds, and then the ridiculously appropriately-named Chasm Filler.

Chasm Filler was perfect. Chasm Filler was good taste. Chasm Filler was where I spent most of my time. Alex and I focused in on Chasm Filler and explored its endless, bottomless yet well-curated album selection. Chasm Filler, for a long time, became the only sharity blog we used. Chasm Filler's contents dominated our conversations. "Did you get that Nurse With Wound album like three posts down on Chasm Filler? Siiiiiiick." "Get *Tilt* by Scott Walker, it's on Chasm Filler. Really cool." "Chasm Filler has all the Sir Richard Bishop albums."

We got a lot of this music. Much less, though, than from the jangle pop blogs. I think there was something intimidating yet also silly about much of the avant-garde available for download at these blogs. I might not ever listen to the hundreds of jangle pop songs I had recently acquired, but I also might. Here, though, I knew somewhere in the back of my mind there was no way I was ever going to listen to all this drone or jazz or noise or experimental industrial avant-garde power electronics. As much as I thought I wanted to, it wasn't really what I wanted to hear at that point in my life. Luckily, somehow I knew that and so I stopped before I had every John Zorn album or every Can bootleg or every Michael Gira project.

I stopped when Alex and I discovered Magma. Magma was a French avant-garde prog rock jazz fusion band formed in 1969 and sported a just-manageable-enough-to-download-them-all three albums on Chasm Filler. Stumbling upon Magma, it seemed too ridiculous to *not* download, and so, well, we downloaded it. The curators of Chasm Filler, apparently, were really

into Magma, too, which made our decision even easier. The Chasm Filler description of Magma's 1973 album *Mekanik Destruktiw Kommandöh* declares,

They invented their own language. They created an impossibly complex opera across six or seven albums that entailed the destruction of Earth [and] its impending salvation by a race of benevolent, highly advanced extra terrestrials. They married the emotion and power of *Love Supreme* with the grandiosity of Stravinsky and Orff and the technique of Mahavishnu. They all dressed equally and wore a huge fucking necklace with their logo. They had a whole genre named after one of their songs. They were demented. They were Magma.

Clearly, things were getting a little marginal. I didn't need to know Magma even existed much less possess three of their albums. But, no: now I did own three of their albums and I did know a great deal of their history. Clicking on *Mekanik Destruktiw Kommandöh*'s 10-minute opener "Hortz Fur Dëhn Stekëhn West" in iTunes I knew for sure I was done with the sharity blog scene. It was over. I had reached a critical mass. I was never, ever going to listen to *Mekanik Destruktiw Kommandöh*. I knew that. I deleted it from my iTunes right then and there. I texted Alex saying so. He was on the same page. He had reached a critical mass. We were done.

I'm sure the people behind Chasm Filler were aware of how apropos their blog's name was when they chose it, but I don't know if they fully grasped exactly how perfect a description it is. *Chasm* implies a never-ending void, a place so vast and so empty it can never ever be filled. *Chasm Filler*, then, is almost a taunt, and its message applies to each and every one of the countless sharity blogs. You will never be able to know as much about music as us, they whisper, you will never be able to be whole. This was a scary thought, but I knew it was not true. Four weeks ago I had never heard of sharity blogs. Now, I had over 2,000 new songs in my iTunes library, and I felt full. I felt overwhelmed. I was happy about a lot of the music—the majority of the stuff I'd had a chance to listen to was really, really good—but I was done with the blogs. It had been a fun and a somewhat mad month. But over the next few days and weeks, I deleted about half of the music I downloaded, without ever listening to it at all. Maybe the chasm will never be filled, but I am fine.

I still buy music constantly, I still am discovering music on the Internet all the time. Alex and I, now fully settled into college, are more or less back to our old high school ways. On breaks when we find ourselves both back home, we go to the record stores. We buy a lot less music—we have learned the virtues of moderation—but we do *buy* it. It's refreshing and much more real, somehow. It's still maybe difficult to articulate why we feel the need to spend money on it, to own the physical product, but we do. It's nice. I'm still very much what you would call "into music."

Today, most of the sharity blogs I used have been shut down. The government closed Megaupload, and Mediafire and Rapidshare and struggling for air. It's a different era. The Internet is a very different place than it was just a few years ago. Looking at the handful of remaining sharity blogs (Chasm Filler is still up) feels a lot like looking at an ex's Facebook profile. Deep personal knowledge coupled with a sort of contempt or condescension, yet also still a significant lingering attraction. But you know you in your heart you really can't—and shouldn't—go back. Even if you did, you remind yourself, it wouldn't be the same. Still, you do sort of miss those halcyon days.