



IF LIBRARIES don't adapt to their customers' changing demands, they'll find themselves without anyone to offer a music collection to

Don't blame your public library

Librarians would like to offer digital pop music—but the big labels aren't co-operating

BY BRYAN BORZYKOWSKI • Unfortunately for the thousands of Canadians who borrow music from the library, the days of flipping through a library's CD collection could be numbered. In 2007, the Toronto Public Library saw music checkouts decline by seven per cent, while the Winnipeg Public Library saw its numbers drop by five per cent. The reason? More people are finding music online.

Like retail music stores, which saw a 16 per cent fall in sales in 2007, libraries are finding that their music offerings are slowly becoming obsolete. Combatting the decline in CD usage by offering a digital alternative is expected to take months, if not years. Unlike major labels and record stores that have seen sales figures dramatically drop over the last few years, the digital revolution has just started to affect libraries, so they're a bit behind the curve. In fact, not every Canadian library has seen a decline—the Vancouver Public Library saw its music circulation numbers increase by nearly 23,000 checkouts last year. Still, the VPL isn't turning a blind eye to the inevitable. "When you're in the library as long as I have been, we bear the scars of every format shift," says Chris Middlemass, the VPL's manager of the fine arts and history division. "Digital is where the public expects it to end up."

The problem right now isn't that libraries don't want to offer their patrons alternatives to the physical CD—if anything they found out how quickly tastes change when DVDs became popular—it's that there's no easy way for them to provide digital music. Libraries aren't in the business of developing software and licensing albums from record labels, so they have to turn to another company, like Ohio-based OverDrive, to do the dirty work. Many Canadian libraries already pay

OverDrive to access its downloadable audio books and classical music catalogue, but so far, the company offers nothing in the way of mainstream pop music.

Why not? Big labels like Universal Music and Sony BMG, who have been notoriously slow to react to the changing industry, have yet to jump on board. "The majors are too busy doing other stuff," says a sarcastic Ric Arboit, president of Nettwerk music, a Vancouver-based label that hasn't kept its disdain for major label bureaucracy a secret. His company is one of the only significant industry players actively working with OverDrive to get its artists, which include the Barenaked Ladies and Sarah McLachlan, into libraries.

Tapping into new listeners is the main motivation behind Nettwerk's decision to license its songs to OverDrive. "It's another segment of the population that you would be making music available to, and how many libraries are there across North America?" Arboit asks rhetorically. "That sounds like a good thing to me."

Why the labels continue to stall is the big question (Universal and EMI executives wouldn't comment), but it's likely they're still too busy worrying about falling retail sales to put libraries on their priority list. Aram Sinnreich, a visiting professor of media at New York University, says it's not just

about resisting change—labels have never liked the idea of making their catalogues freely available. "Labels have actually fought libraries in the past on this, and fortunately they lost," he says.

The hesitation to embrace libraries stems from the age-old problem of piracy—people borrow CDs and copy them at home—but these collections also help create fresh markets as people discover new music. With OverDrive, the industry would actually be protected from overzealous copiers, as the "checked out" audio files are programmed to lock up after about two weeks on a computer or MP3 player.

Other issues, such as digital rights management, which OverDrive uses to lock its music files, is also slowing down the transition from physical to digital. DRM prevents tracks from being transferred to an iPod, and that's something the libraries want changed before they push ahead with pop music downloads.

It's anyone's guess as to when a library lover will be able to borrow the latest Nelly Furtado disc without trekking to their nearest branch. One thing's for certain, though: if libraries, like retail stores and labels, don't adapt to their customers' changing demands, they'll find themselves without anyone to offer a music collection to. "Are we paranoid?" asks Middlemass. "You bet. We sweated with every single format change. But I can't see us not shifting to digital, because that's certainly where people are going to go." **M**



ASHLEY DUPRÉ... HAS SOMETHING TO SAY

If you wanna take me out after the club / You gotta do it right, baby / Show me some love / Sex, money, drugs is what I'm all about / Step your game up so you can see for yourself / Brush up against me and whisper in my ear / Make me feel what you want to feel / Numb to the touch, deeper pulse inside / Let's hit the dance floor / Turn it up inside.—From *Move Ya Body*, the second self-released single by Eliot Spitzer's alleged high-priced hooker