1. Introduction

Interacting with media in 2025 has turned into looking at lists. Lists of music on a streaming service, lists of movies online, lists of books on Amazon, lists of games on Steam, the list goes on. This shift took place when media consumption pivoted from an experience that involved an in person element (going to a record store, going to a bookstore) into for most people, an entirely digital experience. The powers that be fell into this design rut where displaying media was boiled down to this sterile level of simplicity.

In the aughts, this was not a given. The UI and UX standards that dominate the tech industry had not yet oozed all over art and media. There was more freedom, more experimentation. My thesis project is a website that embraces this chaotic era of the early to middle life of the internet.

What if music could be presented and promoted in a more visual and interactive way. What if we could take a break from looking at lists?

The inspiration for this theis project came from conversations over the years with musicians who expressed their frustration with modern social media. They felt that these platforms had become an obligation to use, not the creative outlet they were once promised. The dominance of Spotify and their questionable business practices also played a part. In essays and her 2025 book *Mood Machine,* author Liz Pelly shed light on how Spotify exerts their will on musicians and listeners. (Pelly) Her work was a major factor in my decision to pursue this project.

2. Background

2.1 History of Music Consumption on Computers and The Internet

2.1.1 The Innernette

As the internet started to become commonplace in the late 1990s, artists began to realize the value of having direct access to fans. Many launched custom websites to promote their work. Musician David Bowie was an early pioneer of music on the internet, embracing the web to showcase his latest projects and music. In 1996, his single "Telling Lies" was the first song by a major label artist to be released solely as a digital download. He launched his own internet service provider called *BowieNet* in North America, which worked in tandem with a website. In a retrospective for *The Guardian*, Keith Stuart wrote

> The ISP provided every user with 5MB of web space, encouraging them to create and share their own websites; there were also forums and live chat sections where Bowie himself conducted live web chats. This was in effect a music-centric social network, several years before the emergence of sector leaders like Friendster and Myspace. (Stuart)

The website also looked undeniably cool.
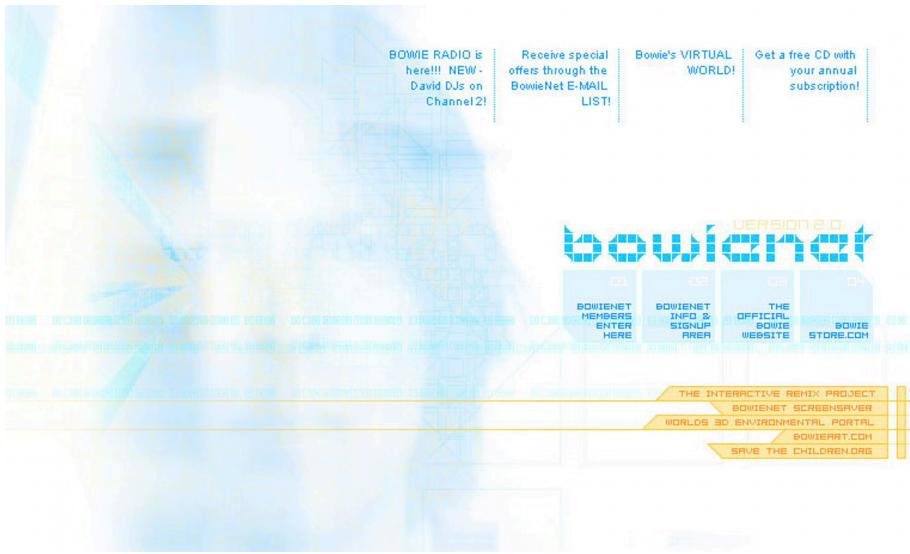
Fig. 1. *Bowienet* homepage. The Guardian.

Most early artist websites offered some sort of connection with the artist, or at the very least a design that expressed their vibe or attitude to fans. Artists had more

direct control over how they presented themselves and their work, not needing to depend on third party platforms like they do today. And importantly, it was intensely visual, and fun.

2.1.2 The Mid 1990s into 2001

As the internet became more ubiquitous and commonplace, the music industry started to undergo a transition. The digital nature of the CD allowed for music to be "ripped" and played back on a computer. The early days of ripping CDs took place on software like *EAC* on Windows, or *Toast Audio Extractor* on Mac OS. CDs would be read by the software, ripped into the MP3 format, and stored for listening later. On Windows this was often *WinAmp* (Farivar) or *Windows Media Player*, and on Mac, *Audion* and *SoundJam MP*.

The interfaces of *WinAmp* and *Audion* were designed similarly to CD players of the time. They also supported skins, allowing for fan made modifications within limits. Fan skins took on a life of their own, but they were still generally within the guard rails of the stock UI. ("Winamp Skin Museum") ("Winamp Skins Collection")

Audion on Mac had a similar design sense; a very visual and attractive way to listen to digital music. Co-developer of *Audion*, Cabel Sasser, commented on his inspiration behind building the program in a retrospective: "When we created Audion…Steven Frank and I had one goal: we wanted to listen to our music CDs on our computers while we worked, and we wanted it to be stylish." (Sasser) Style and fun was front of mind during the conceptual and design stage, and why wouldn't it be? Music is supposed to be fun! And the ways we interact with it should also be fun.

SoundJam MP was Audion's main competition on the Mac. Released in 1999, it allowed for playback of digital audio files, was skinnable, and more importantly, allowed for the creation and tagging of playlists. (Reynolds)

These programs lightly embodied a skeuomorphic design sense (Spiliotopoulos et al.) (Moran), while also being forward thinking in embracing the fact that they only existed digitally. It was this combination of familiar and new that made them unique, and was one potential future for how software was to be designed.

This powerful playlist creation and organizational functionality of *SoundJam MP* caught the eye of returning Apple CEO Steve Jobs, who wanted in on the digital music market. (Kahney) Apple hired three key developers of *SoundJam MP* and tasked them with creating what became *iTunes*. *Audion*, *SoundJam MP* and *WinAmp* presented themselves as playback software; *iTunes* was a digital jukebox. Tagging and lists were the main feature: dominating the user interface and functionality at every level.

Fig. 2. *SoundJam MP* interface. Hackett.

Fig. 3. *iTunes* 1.0 interface. Wichary.

2.1.3 The *iTunes Music Store*

By the early aughts, *iTunes* was far and away the most popular way to organize and listen to digital music on the Mac. In 2001, Apple launched the iPod, quickly becoming a cultural phenomenon and bringing the digital MP3 player into the zeitgeist as a must have item. (Forde)

The iPod, like *iTunes*, presented the user with a list based interface. Users scrolled through lists of music and selected what they wanted to play. *iTunes* and the iPod further intrenched the list display method when it came to presenting music to the listener.

In 2003, the *iTunes Music Store* launched, allowing for legal downloads of music for 99 cents a song sold a la carte, or $9.99 for an entire album. The music industry, in the middle of a crisis brought about by the ease of sharing digital files illegally, (Wayte) came to their senses and embraced downloading as the future.

2.2 Music Promotion and Social Media (2003-2014)

2.2.1 The Rise of MySpace

Digital music downloading was here to stay as a mainstream item, and unlocked a new way for musicians to promote and distribute. A major event in this new world was the launch and almost immediate popularity of MySpace.com. It quickly became a vital and required platform for musicians to be active or at least have a presence on. During its heyday from around 2005 to 2009, millions of songs were uploaded by fans and artists. (Cox) The ease of uploading music, along with rich customization options, made it an essential web platform for musicians. Musician Nicole Atkins in Michael Tedder's article "The My Generation: An Oral History of Myspace Music" stated,

> Myspace was the first time I ever posted my demos. I put them up and all of a sudden I had people from Spain writing to me about my music. I got a message from Mark Lanegan from Screaming Trees, and he was like, "I can't get 'Neptune City' out of my head." And I was like, "What the fuck?" It was crazy. (Tedder)

The Top Friends feature on *MySpace* allowed artists to quickly highlight other musicians they were a fan of or wanted to promote. (Antin and Earp) It also had a robust messaging system, allowing immediate access to potential fans and other artists. Frank Iero, guitarist for My Chemical Romance put it best "I never, ever, in my life had a conversation with another band like, "Oh, what's your social media presence like?" You'd sound like a fuckin' narc." (Tedder) The network effect was fast and immediate. If you were a musician, you needed a *MySpace* page.

MySpace co-founder Chris DeWolfe described how the platform became a mainstay for artists, only two years after launching in 2006

> With MySpace, when they went out on tour, they could actually tour nationally. The band might have 20,000 friends on their list and send out a bulletin saying, 'I'm going to be in Austin on Tuesday night. Come see our show.' It has allowed bands to make money on music without having a deal. (Forbes)

With the massive reach of MySpace, location based engagement became viable and effective.

Along with these key infrastructure features, *MySpace* was a very visual platform. It was a wild west of animated gifs, bad fonts, and clashing colors - anything a seasoned designer would have a heart attack over. It allowed for a level of customization that simply no longer exists on modern major platforms. If you

wanted your page to be a mess, you had a certain level of freedom to do so. A night and day difference between what is possible today with popular platforms.

2.2.2 The Implications of MySpace's Success

While *MySpace* was a fun and experimental space, it also set some poor precedence. Much like major social media platforms of today, MySpace ended up being acquired by a controversial behemoth. In 2005 NewsCorp purchased them for a then massive $580 million. (Saba) NewsCorp's main goal with this purchase was one of commerce, using data acquired from users to sell advertisements. (Lush)

MySpace, unfortunately, set many of the trends that degrade the experience of modern social media: tracking users, massive corporate oversight, and inundation with ads. Its importance and influence should not be diminished, but this little rebellious startup that could was anything but. The concessions artists made had wide reaching impacts for the future of promotion and distribution of music on the internet. This level of control that one had with a personal website started slipping rapidly. The trade off was wider distribution and access to one of the biggest online communities of the time. (Dignan) It marked the first time many artists became dependent on a third party tool to promote their work.

2.2.3 Viral Marketing and Experimental Promotion

In the late aughts, this level of experimentation that started in the mid 1990s was reaching a fever pitch. Digital downloads were becoming the new hot item. Use of the internet as a promotional and distribution platform for new music was taking on new forms.

Artists attempted novel ways of promotion and distribution. In 2007 Radiohead launched a "pay what you want" model for their record *In Rainbows*. In a 2009

retrospective *NPR* contributor Eric Garland stated "In Rainbows was an important milestone on the path to fans having more avenues to obtain music and feeling more connected with the artist." (Garland) It was an instant success that got people in the industry thinking about new ways to leverage the internet. (Garland) Nine Inch Nails followed a similar path for their 2008 albums *The Slip* and *Ghosts I-IV*, where they gave away a download for free under a Creative Commons license. They also sold limited edition physical copies on their website direct to consumers. (Steuer) Another standout was drummer Josh Freese selling his semi-novelty solo record with tiered rewards, depending on how much the listener was willing to pay. Ranging from $5 - $70,000, they included things such as having a phone call with Josh or driving off with his old station wagon. (Lewis) Radiohead and Nine Inch Nails are massively successful bands, with large followings (RIAA). Paired with their innovative use of the internet to market and distribute their records, these gimmicks were extremely effective. Freese, who is orders of magnitude less popular, leveraged his minor celebrity status to create a viral hit.

This reached a breaking point when in 2014, Apple and Irish rock band U2 teamed up to give away a copy of their latest album *Songs Of Innocence* to anyone with an iTunes account. Unlike *In Rainbows.* this was not an opt in situation, the album just appeared in the user's library—with no way to remove it. In *Wired,* shortly after the controversial release, reporter Vijith Assar wrote that Apple "has, demonstrably, no competence in the sort of social and cultural thought that should have gone into a well-orchestrated version of this same gimmick." (Assar) This was not a *Bowienet* style innovation, but rather a marketing stunt that felt like anything but genuine. (Whitney)

2.3 Promoting Music

2.3.1 The In-Person Experience

In the period before between online streaming and even digital downloads being the dominant vehicle for music consumption, music was purchased as a physical product; a consumer needed to visit a brick and mortar store to buy them. For many, the big chain record stores of the day were the first point of contact for consumers. Depending on what the store was highlighting that week, or was being advised by the record labels to push, there were in-store displays, demo stations, posters, and live event promotional material. Independent record stores, catering to specific music tastes, took things a step further. These stores allowed for a more personal interaction between the music fan and the collection on sale. The other customers in the store, the sensation of physically flipping through music, shopping, and browsing were key parts of the music experience. (Polite and Meskin)

2.3.2 Posters and Art for Music Promotion

Concert flyers, especially in the world of alternative music such as electronic, dance and hip hop, were other unique touchpoints that were vitally important to fans. These were works of art, telling a very visual story about the attitude and expectations for the event. (Pichler) They do still exist but much like the way recorded music is presented in 2025, have taken a backseat to a more sterile online listing.
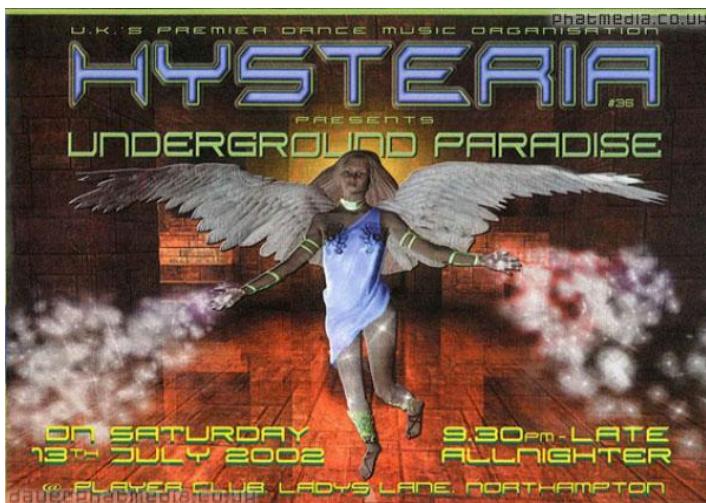
Fig. 4. *Hysteria 2002 Underground Paradise* flyer. Phatmedia.

In an interview with Esta Maffrett for The *Museum of Youth Culture*, artist Chelsea Louise Berlin commented on the artistic value of the flyer, "I love photographs…however for me a flyer does more. It gives me more information, the flyer alone will remind me of exactly who I was with and what we did…If you just saw [the flyer] you would know exactly what that club was about." (Maffrett) It has this element of artistry and culture, while also serving a practical purpose. (Pichler) Dave, the founder of Phatmedia, a rave poster archive based out of the UK, described their appeal as "our way into this underground culture. It had the look and feel of something only we could know and understand." A key element of this was their hyper-local nature, and a community aspect. Raves were a form of rebellion, a youthful scene growing out of the expense of and distaste for mainstream nightclubs.The DIY aesthetic of these events was reflected in the art used to promote them.

2.4 Wrap-Up and Project Inspiration

Customizable platforms like MySpace are gone, replaced by services like TikTok and Instagram, forcing users into a one-size-fits-all framework to post content. Instead of continuing down a path where customization and personal taste was encouraged, the industry fell into the design language of iTunes: lists of media that follow the design standards of the technology industry. The artistry and superfluousness of the interface slipped away. (Horton)

Instead of a listener's first point of contact being a meticulously designed work in the form of a custom website or flyer, it is usually a list of songs. And it is a list of songs that for all intents and purposes looks the same as every other list of songs on the listeners streaming platform or storefront of choice.

Artist promotion takes place primarily on social media platforms where ease of use has usurped creativity. Instead of musicians looking forward to interacting

with fans and other artists via a customized page or website, digital promotion starts to become another tedious thing that has to be done.

This is really what inspired this thesis project, giving musicians some control back to be more expressive and creative when promoting and distributing their work. To create something that does not feel like a slog to use, but a natural extension of an artist's creativity.

3. Process

3.1 - Ideation

3.1.1 The Visual Design

In developing this project, two throughlines presented themselves in the background research. One was this lack of fun that has been bugging me vis a vis technology and media platforms. The sameness of web/UI design (Goree), and the emphasis on clean uniformity. This works for some tools and software, but not for all. A skeuomorphic style design language has mostly fallen out of favor (Chatfield), ditching the development of a synergistic relationship between digital and real life. Launching a website to promote music in the chaotic style of the early internet and *MySpace*, as an exploration in bucking this trend, was born out of this.

Research began with looking at the *Web Design Museum*, going back to the late 90s and early 2000s. ("Web Design Museum") By the late 1990s many musicians started to realize the potential of the internet, and launched their own websites.

Fig. 5. Modjo in 2001. Web Design Museum.

I found the uniqueness of each design so striking compared to websites today. These pages looked more like works of art, instead of just sources of information. In the early 2000s, many had interactive animated elements as well, using tools like Macromedia Flash and Shockwave. With different textures, colors, layouts, these sites offered more than looking at a static poster or print advertisement.

I made the decision to create a very visual social media styled website, for the singular purpose of promoting music, musicians, and concerts. Musicians will be able to upload and customize media that can be used to highlight new music, a concert, or just themselves.

3.1.2 The Problem With "One Size Fits All"

Part of the downside of the ease of use of platforms that are more one size fits all, is the incongruency between posted content and the container that it needs to fit into. On Spotify, pages used to display albums, singles, or EPs all look basically the same.
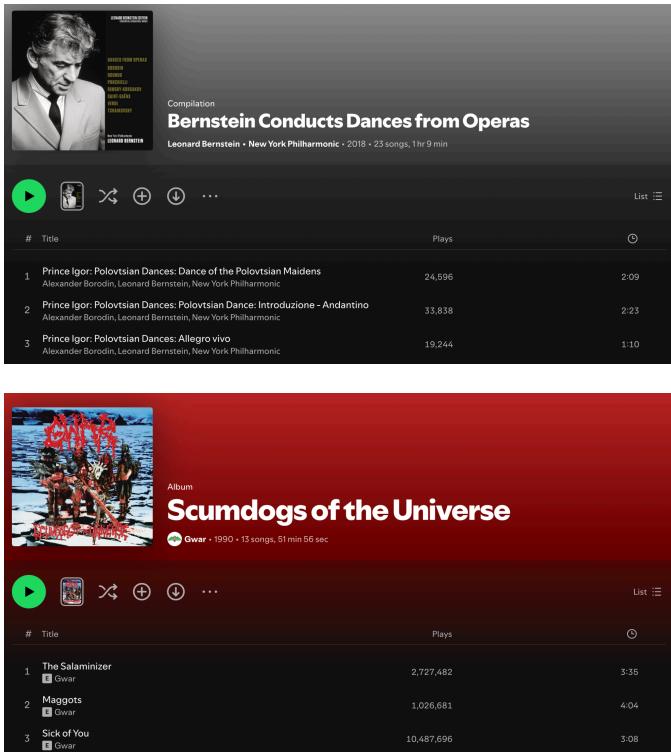
Fig. 6. *Bernstein Conducts Dances from Operas* and *Scumdogs of the Universe* Spotify listings. Bernstein. GWAR.

An album cover, artist name, and album title as the header, and a list of the songs below. Aside from the background color, these two very different albums look indistinguishable on the platform.

Instagram forces uploads to be displayed in a 3x3 grid in a non-standard aspect ratio (Babcock) between 9x16 and 1x1. Users cannot change any of the fonts, colors, or thumbnail sizes; they are at the mercy of the platform's design. Even music centric social media sites such as Soundcloud and Bandcamp have very limited avenues for customization. Soundcloud, while very useful for uploading and sharing music, is list format social media at its core. Imagine if an artist had absolutely no control over the colors, fonts, size, or layout of their album art. Social media's dearth of options is the digital equivalent.

From an artist perspective, the creativity angle is key. Doing promotion and fan outreach should be fun and rewarding, not a tedious grind. From a fan perspective, knowing that the artist developed and uploaded a custom work enhances their connection to the artist. It is many times more genuine than an instagram post or tweet.

3.1.3 Local Features

A platform like this would be geared for smaller or midsized artists vs a larger act that already enjoys ample promotion and a large audience. *MySpace* excelled at this. It allowed smaller acts to network and interact with fans and other musicians with ease. Building off this idea would be a differentiation point from traditional social media.

The internet has led to localization in music (and art in general) being deemphasized. While there exist ways to look up local events and concerts – such as *bandsintown*, *Resident Advisor*, and local to New York City outfits like *gunk* – things get especially difficult for the midsized acts to stand out and promote themselves. A local focus for this project can be beneficial for musicians. It would also be a potential way to stand out and gain the network effect that *MySpace* and other "essential" platforms enjoyed in their heyday. Logging in and instantly seeing the uploaded content for your immediate area is powerful and practical.

3.2 Building

3.2.1 Design Overview

Planning the build out involved first landing on a design paradigm to work around. Being inspired by the band websites of yore, a visual aesthetic in line with that era was important. Show posters were also a source of inspiration,

mostly around how diverse and eye-catching they are. Does design trump ease of use in a lot of cases? Yes, but there is a good balance that makes them effective marketing materials.

Texture was also a focus, to evoke thoughts of bulletin boards, advertisement-laden scaffolding in New York, and street poles littered with flyers and ads. For my prototype I used stock images, but eventually went out and took photos of anything relevant to use for the project.

This design choice comes from my continuing displeasure with "flat" design, which has dominated digital design for the past decade. Designer John Brownlee wrote on the launch of iOS 7 in 2014 "While flat design has made iOS 7 look remarkably consistent, it has also removed a lot of personality from the operating system." (Brownlee) Lots of discussion around interface design revolves around making software easy to understand. James T Gibson's Theory of Affordances is relevant here "The affordance of an object is what the infant begins by noticing. The meaning is observed before the substance and surface, the color and form, are seen as such." I would argue that the flat design paradigm is inherently not affordance friendly. While it may look "cleaner" and more modern, it loses not only personality but humanity. Choosing this design strategy is not solely coming from a place of nostalgia but as a comment on the current state of digital design.

3.2.2 Viewing, Uploading, and Interaction

The first thing the users sees when they enter the website is uploaded content specific to their location. This takes the form of live event posters, album covers, or any other visual content the artist has chosen to upload. Users will immediately be able to interact with it as if they were moving paper around a bulletin board. Clicking on a poster will play a song or piece of audio that the artist has chosen to upload. The user can zoom in and out, and interact with

clickable elements if the artist has added any. Users can then save any artist uploads that they enjoy to their personal page.
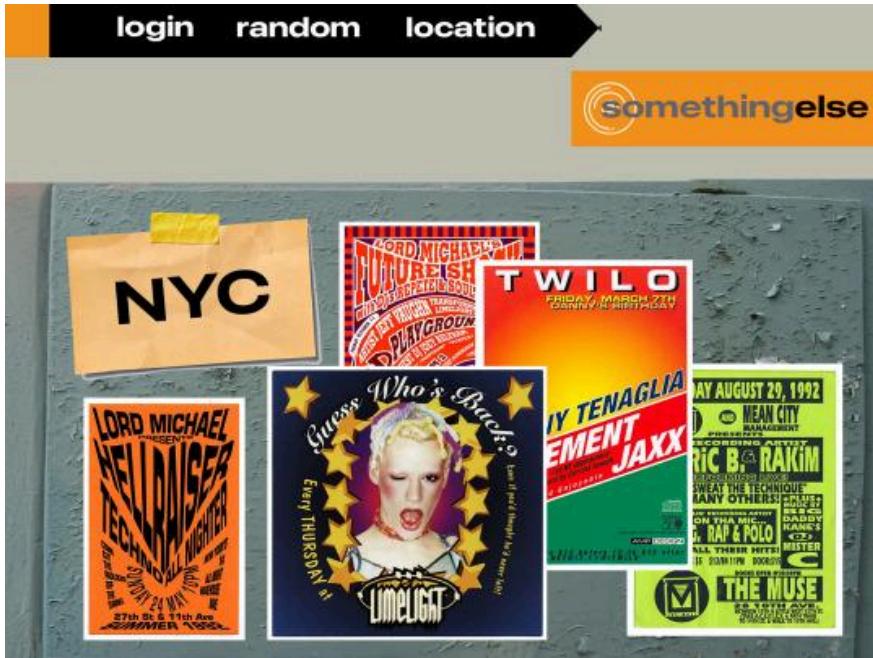
Fig. 7. Prototype of the location page on somethingelse with various promotional flyers from 1992-2000.

For artist uploads, I landed on a system that involves artists first uploading a "base image" like a poster or an album cover. Then this can be further customized by uploading clip art, animated GIFs or other supplemental visual material that can be overlaid on the base image. The only other editing that will take place on the site is allowing for creation of click zones. An artist can, for example, make a line of text on their poster be a link to an external webpage. Artists will only have one base image and one song live at a time, taking the pressure off to constantly post unless they have something interesting or timely to share.

The name somethingelse was chosen to reflect the irreverence of the concept: an alternative social media adjacent website.

3.3 Infrastructure and Development Overview

For development I am mostly using p5.js along with some stock Javascript. P5.js allows for quick prototyping of very visual work and was flexible enough for this project. Data storage and uploading of images and audio quickly became a problem for anything aside from a simple 2 user demo so node.js was used to create a database to handle all of this. This allowed for higher quality music and image uploads, faster loading, and multi user support.

I also wanted to avoid vibe coding this project as much as possible, and doing it in p5.js allowed for that. I used Anthropic's Claude Code Sonnet 4.5 LLM to fill in my gaps of knowledge, especially when it came to creating the node.js server and other backend infrastructure.

3.4 Iteration and Feedback

For version one of somethingelse, the main website features were implemented: Uploading and editing of artist pages, a location based homepage, a user saved posters page, and a very basic music player.

The feedback received for version one mostly revolved around doubling down on some of the more physical meets digital aspects of the project. A common theme was the passing of time. A system to archive event posters, removing them from the main viewer but still existing as a digitized memory. Giving an artist the ability to designate a set time to show a poster if promoting an event or album was also mentioned.

Another call out was the disappearance of physical ticket stubs. This used to be an essential physical momento, which no longer exists with digital ticketing. Integrating a system into the website where artists could provide a digital facsimile stub after an event is very much in line with my current design choices.

Decaying and tattered posters were also mentioned. Much like a flyer pasted to a lamp post or tacked on a bulletin board, there could be a level of damage that occurs the longer it stays on a user's page. Introducing a decay mechanic could be a way to double down on the physical meets digital idea I am exploring.

4. Conclusion and Future

Independent musician Tate Gregor discussed his frustration with being a musician on social media, namely this obligation to focus on everything but the music. To him the music and artistry side comes easy, but the content used to promote it and stay current on platforms is not. On social media, the music often takes a back seat. In his eyes, social media platforms seem designed around constant content consumption. Stopping, looking around and interacting with individual items is deemphasized. "Social networking I enjoy, social media I do not." (Gregor) A social website not designed around a scroll list, where musicians can upload when something is worth uploading, was an attractive prospect. A community based around artists, music and sharing has a draw that the grind of using Instagram or TikTok does not.

The main challenge to launching a potential platform is gaining enough users to become viable. In this sense, being focused on one category may be helpful, not a hindrance. So many sites and social media networks try to be for everyone, and in the process end up not being great for any one purpose. Focusing on musicians and music fans by building a smaller community platform is a path forward that will not require attracting millions of users shortly after launch.

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