

## LastFM / Pandora

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The Internets comprise a truly strange and wonderful place. Tens of millions of people interacting directly and indirectly in a kind of crossover conceptual/real space, forming communities and creating and exchanging ideas, information, imaginings and digital constructions. But with this burgeoning utopia comes the promise of profit for those with dollar signs in their eyes or printed atop their company mandates – a vast reservoir of consumers ready to be tapped by progressive marketing. Often enthusiastic purists will start out with an idea and a passion and build an impressive online utility or community only to later receive an offer they can't refuse from a massive corporation and the dream is either shut down or sold for cold, hard cash. And of course it is. Despite the Internets existing in a global, somewhat borderless state their users are still subject to the market forces of their respective communities – most of these existing in developed, capitalist nations.

Right about now you may well be asking yourself what I'm doing calling out from atop this little soapbox? Good question. You see, after the last issue of Loop hit the stands I started researching this piece with the intention of writing a head-to-head review of LastFM ([www.last.fm](http://www.last.fm)) and Pandora ([www.pandora.com](http://www.pandora.com)), two of the most interesting community-based online music sites operating at the time. Both were extremely popular independent, broadly accessible sites with large, loyal fan bases and both, it seemed, were potentially set to revolutionise not only the way we think about and listen to music, but also the music industry itself. Pandora utilises output from the Music Genome Project (MGP). A creation of Tim Westergren (musician, academic and spokesman for the Internet radio advocacy group [www.savenetradio.org](http://www.savenetradio.org)) MGP aims, as the name suggests, to manually map the qualities (or 'genes') of individual songs or tracks in an organic mathematical sense (a great piece on the MGP's philosophy and methods can be read at [www.eastbayexpress.com/2006-01-11/news/pandora-s-box](http://www.eastbayexpress.com/2006-01-11/news/pandora-s-box)). Pandora users can enter the names of certain tracks that they like and the program will not only suggest music that they may also like (based on 'gene' compatibility) but will begin playing the tracks as well – kind of like a little personal voyage of aural discovery. It's an amazing idea, it has an organic, intuitive and interactive feel (you can approve or disapprove of the suggestions and this feedback is used to help other users), the interface is fairly simple and if you can manage to ignore the embedded visual advertising you can use the site for free...unless you live outside of the U.S.

You see, since early May, because of complicated licensing constraints placed on the US-based company, it is currently limited to 'broadcasting' only within the US. IP addresses based outside of the US have been blocked, effectively barring Pandora use to the rest of the world. A notice posted on the Pandora home page suggests that international access may be rolled out at some point in the future (and you can leave your email address to keep up with news as it comes to hand) but this timeline appears to be uncertain at best.

Incidentally, as of July 15<sup>th</sup> royalties payable by US-based Internet radio broadcasters are due to sky-rocket (retroactively payable back to January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006) and will effectively silence many of the smaller independent online players. The fight against this legislation is being spearheaded by [www.savenetradio.com](http://www.savenetradio.com). The July 15<sup>th</sup> legislation implementation is a worry not only for Pandora but, ironically, may also become something of a problem for LastFM as well, despite it being a UK-based company. Why? Because following in the footsteps of MySpace (Microsoft), PhotoBucket (Fox) and StumbleUpon (Ebay) the site has been sold to a US-based media giant in the form of CBS. And while increased royalty fees will be less of a problem for the might of CBS (should they even affect LastFM with its now quasi UK identity) it remains to be seen how the transition will affect the 'spirit' of a site that flourished as an independent. It will certainly give LastFM users access to a greater library of broadcastable material but many users fear that the function and freedom of LastFM will be terminally compromised. Only time will tell but the site's administrators are at pains to reassure users that the change will be of benefit to the LastFM community (check out <http://blog.last.fm> for the official communique).

LastFM can currently be described more or less as the MySpace user's version of Pandora (so much so that there's even a LastFM plug-in available for MySpace). Where Pandora relies on the technical breakdown, analysing and cataloguing of tracks by a team of experts (hardcore music nerds to be exact) and then specifically filters this data for the end user LastFM keeps track of the listening habits of its individual users and then uses this data to create 'neighbourhoods' for the user, connecting them with other users who share similar music tastes. Once in a neighbourhood users have the option of listening to a kind of 'neighbourhood radio', which taps another user's music choices and plays them on the computer. To this end LastFM users have to link their online account with their computer-based music player through downloadable software that then tracks and logs each and every song they listen to (this info can be viewed by any member of LastFM). While slightly more invasive than the Pandora model it introduces a social aspect lacking in the former with users able to interact with one another by forming groups, chatting and sharing music.

Another key difference is that the LastFM model relies more on 'hive' decisions rather than on a complex, micromanaged, and music-centric model. Whereas music suggestions selected by Pandora are quite specific and based on 'genes' such as a certain vocal quality of the lead singer, the rolling nature of the bass and similar use of a particular instrument the LastFM model puts users in touch with other users who share similar tastes in genre, bands or musical style. It is this social interaction that offers up the new musical exposure in the LastFM model.

So what's the final word? With the current situation being such that Pandora is off limits to non-Americans and that Last FM awaits the impact of an ownership change it's clear that the big loser in a head-to-head review of the sites is, ironically, the Australian music fan. This reviewer would like to think that cool, community-friendly legal heads will prevail and that not only will Pandora be released from licensing bondage but also that the CBS version of LastFM will

continue to service users with the same passion and commitment that made it an independent favourite. Fingers are crossed but I for one have already started looking around for alternatives to both sites.