



Begin to Liberate Your Music

Difficulty: Technical ★★☆☆ Social ★★★☆☆ **Time:** A Cozy Weekend

So What's the Problem?

If you've ever bought or listened to music online, it is probably tucked away in a Big Tech [walled-garden](#). It might be trapped by [Digital Rights Management \(DRM\)](#) that restricts how and where you can enjoy it. Alternatively, you might be locked into a streaming service: most work on a freemium model giving access to music for free, with listening ad-free being a paid feature.

As of 2026, Spotify Premium allows offline listening with DRM-protected stored files but does not enable users to build their own music collections from its platform; TIDAL offers offline access on mobile devices via subscription, with encrypted and DRM-locked content that cannot be transferred; and YouTube Music only permits downloads through Premium, which are also DRM-encumbered and restricted to use within the official platform.

Multiple artists, including Taylor Swift and Thom Yorke, have [criticized Spotify](#) for its revenue sharing model. Artists are paid less when their music plays on streaming services. These services are also part of the data surveillance economy; for example, [Spotify accumulates significant data](#) on your listening habits, locations, and preferences. When you use a platform to listen to your music, you are also at risk of losing access to the music you enjoy if there is a contractual dispute between the rights holder and the platform, or if the service is discontinued, as was the case with [Google Play Music](#).

Fortunately, you can liberate your music from *some* Big Tech Platforms and buy music from listener and artist friendly online stores that don't restrict your freedom with DRM.

Create Your Music Library

First you're going to need a place to store and listen to your music library. Some good options could be:

- On your computer - with alternative music player software
- On your phone - check out the F-Droid store on Android for good choices
- On a USB thumb drive or hard drive – easily plug it into a car or into another computer to listen
- On cloud storage – relatively safe and secure
- On a portable music player (MP3 Player) – this can be a conversation starter! You could even rejuvenate an old device with [Rockbox](#).

Wherever you store music, you'll want to consider making backup copies, and syncing across multiple devices. You'll usually see music as compressed files such as MP3, Ogg Vorbis (“lossy” – acceptable audio quality; smaller file sizes), or as FLAC (“lossless” – excellent audio quality; uncompressed, larger file sizes). File formats are often a container for an encoding, so you might see an Apple .m4a file, which is encoded using either AAC (lossy) or ALAC (lossless). For most users, lossy compressed files are perfectly fine for listening over consumer-grade headphones or speakers. Audiophiles with expensive audio systems are the main audience for lossless file formats.

You will want to organize your music to make it readable by music players. One common approach is to have a folder for each artist, and a folder for each album within that, each containing the music files for the tracks – typically with a number and track name. For example, in my music collection, I have a folder for the artist “Amon Tobin,” within which I have folders for several albums including “Chaos Theory.” Inside the album folder I have a file “09 - Hokkaido.mp3,” indicating track nine from the album is called “Hokkaido” and it is an MP3 file. Sometimes you might see album folders named for the artist and the album, such as “Amon Tobin - Chaos Theory”, depending on how your music player expects albums to be organized – most are flexible and configurable.

Escaping from Amazon Music

Amazon announced that music downloads and ad-free listening will end on July 2nd 2026. Until then, MP3 albums and songs purchased on Amazon music can be easily downloaded to your music library and are DRM-free. Music from Amazon Music’s streaming service cannot be downloaded.

Escaping from Apple Music and iTunes

Apple Music is both an app and a subscription streaming service. While music purchased from the Apple iTunes store has been DRM free since 2009, music accessed through an Apple Music streaming subscription is locked by FairPlay DRM, which restricts playback to authorized Apple devices. Music purchased through the iTunes Store can be played through the Apple Music app.

To confirm whether a file is DRM-free in Apple Music, right click on the file or click on the elipsis to the right of the file name, select Get Info, then click on the File tab: Kind should be “Purchased AAC audio file”; if you see “Protected AAC audio file” it will be locked by DRM and cannot be used elsewhere (files will have an extension of .m4p). You’ll find all of your DRM-free downloaded music in the Music folder in your MacOS home folder with an extension of .m4a; you can copy these files to to your personal music library.

Great Sources for New Music

- Buy from a DRM-free store like [Bandcamp](#), [Qobuz](#), [7 Digital](#), or a co-op like [Subvert.fm](#).
- Rip CDs – from your collection, bought used from second-hand or thrift stores, new online or from a physical store if you can

Discover New Music

Find new music from mailing lists like [KEXP New Music Tuesday](#); by exploring music metadata guides like [All Music](#) and [MusicBrainz](#); go to live shows; listen to the radio; magazines, zines, and blogs!

Most importantly: have fun listening to favorites you haven’t heard in a while, take your time, enjoy the process. If you like music, support artists by buying their music in a way that benefit them most, buy their merch, and attend their live shows if you can.

A Challenge

Have you shared songs and playlists through a streaming app? How could you talk about what you’re listening to, without sending links back to a Big Tech platform?