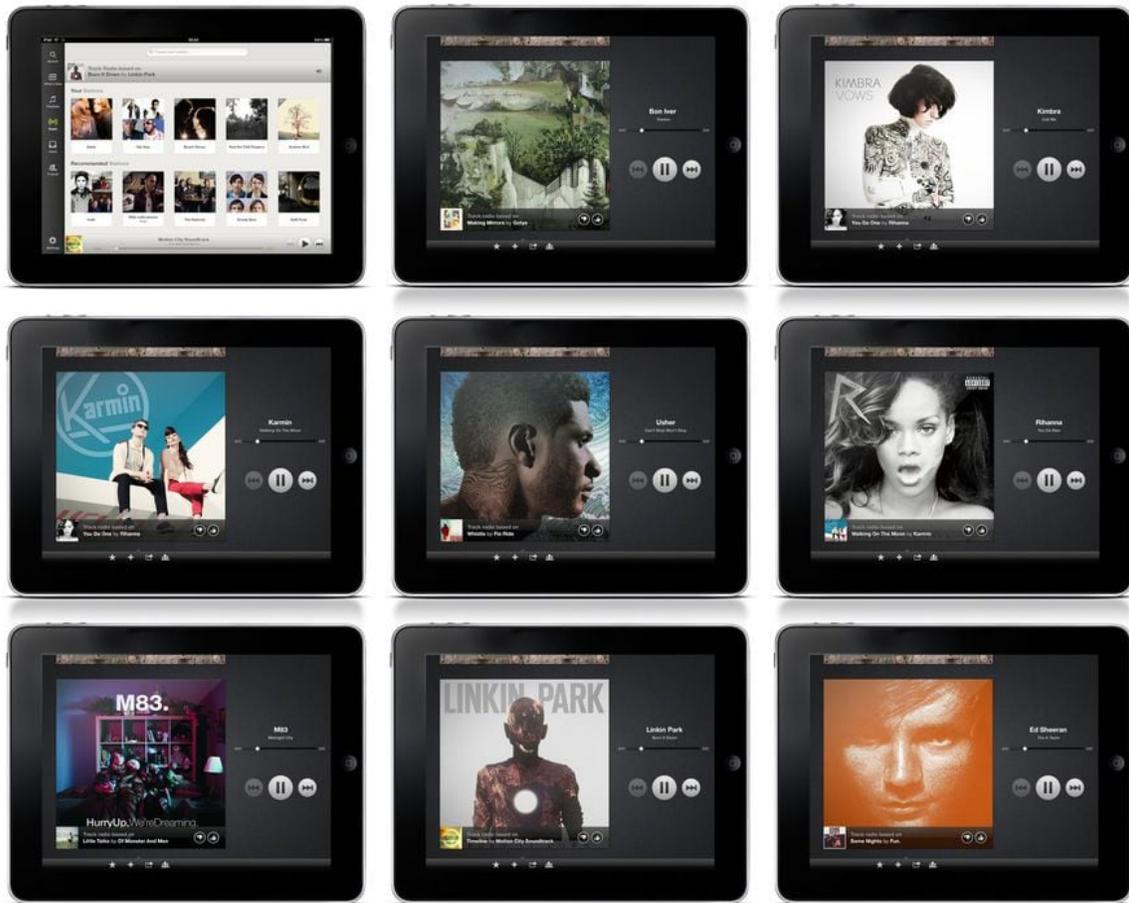


OPINION

Spotify gave me back my father

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I lurched over to my laptop to add the song to my Spotify playlist before it disappeared into the inaccessible past. “Samba de Orfeu,” Paul Desmond on alto sax, 1965. It’s been a while. AP

By Karen Stabiner March 15, 2024

My father stopped by my house recently, even though he died in 1987, and I have Spotify to thank for the reunion.

I'd just subscribed to the music streaming service, and at my daughter's suggestion I allowed Spotify to suggest songs it thinks I might like. That's a problematic sentence for me — I don't like technology telling me what to do, and I don't think it can think — but I don't want to congeal as I age, so I decided to give it a try. I could always opt out.

The first four notes of the first song Spotify picked for me wafted into the room — and all of a sudden my dad was as good as there, sitting at the dining room table with a second cup of coffee, complaining that I no longer let him smoke in my house, tapping a finger to the beat. I lurched over to my laptop to add the song to my playlist before it disappeared into the inaccessible past. [“Samba de Orfeu,” Paul Desmond](#) on alto sax, 1965. It's been a while.

My dad loved that song, and I heard it a lot back in the day, but I could not have found it on my own. I didn't remember the title, so there was nothing to search for. I didn't remember the opening riff, so I couldn't hum the notes into an app that might recognize them. The artificial intelligence behind Spotify has no such limitations: It simply sorts information into piles, red socks with red socks, blue socks with blue. Most of my list is red socks, music from my life, but a single song, the aptly titled [“Song for My Father,”](#) is a blue sock from my dad's list of favorites. Spotify saw an opportunity, I guess, and found another blue sock for me.

My belief system leans toward what I can confirm with multiple credible sources, so I know my dad wasn't really there — but in over 30 years of wishing he hadn't checked out early, I have never felt anything like what I will call the Spotify rush. It was a visceral thrill. I stood very still, waiting to hear what was up next.

I was not disappointed. [“O Pato,” the Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd version, 1962.](#) [“Take Five,”](#) the Dave Brubeck Quartet, 1959.

Proust and his teacakes had nothing on me and Spotify. Suddenly I was 9, my family headed to Polk Brothers, a big electronics and appliance store in Chicago, to buy our first stereo, a suitcase design whose midsection folded down to become a turntable and whose speakers unclasped to sit 6 feet apart.

We got an album called “[Provocative Percussion](#)” and stood in front of the stereo, in awe, as the beat moved from one speaker to the other.

Memories like that flooded my living room. I was suffused with joy, and that is a completely objective assessment.

All of which left me at an uncomfortable crossroads — grateful to and appreciative of artificial intelligence, the shiny new toy that otherwise scares me because it threatens writers, actors, employees in general, restaurant workers, advice columnists, even poets and [presidents](#). I didn’t have to break a sweat to generate that list, and I know you can think of other vulnerable populations you want to add.

It is easier to think of AI as a menace than to dabble in possibility, because even experts and policy makers are worried about what it might do. The nonprofit Center for AI Safety issued a terse statement last year, signed by 350 experts in the field, public figures, and policy makers, that read, “[Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI](#) should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks, such as pandemics and nuclear war.”

Is it just me, or does that sound unnervingly like [J. Robert Oppenheimer](#) trying to warn the country about the dangers of the bomb?

You’d think we would’ve learned caution by now, but our track record with fake stuff is not good. We continue to fall head over heels in love only to wake up decades later full of remorse, whether the artificial object of our affections is PFAS chemicals, the sweetener aspartame, Styrofoam, or ultra-processed food. I try not to think about how much of me is made up of residue from Velveeta, the analog cheese product essential to my mom’s legendary spaghetti casserole.

And yet we have given “artificial” a job promotion, to modify “intelligence.” I figured the only sane response was to run fast in the opposite direction, where I was sure of myself — at least until the music started.

Guarded optimism is trickier, but AI expert Gary Marcus seems to have embraced it; [he anticipates](#) “all kinds of alarming scenarios” from AI, even as he believes that “its potential capabilities are revolutionary.” We just need to understand, he says, that right now AI is behaving like a typical adolescent, “a teenager, who suddenly, for the first time, has some power, but doesn’t really have a complete prefrontal cortex to stop doing things that shouldn’t be done.”

Raised properly, it could become an adult with important contributions to make, but right now it's kind of a hellion.

In fact, I'd say AI is more of a toddler than a teen. AI likes to sort, a classic developmental milestone for the 2- to 3-year-old. It hallucinates and makes things up, and anyone who's ever heard a toddler blame the sleeping cat for the paint spill on the new carpet will see the similarity. And it makes messes, not unlike the kid who pulls all the books onto the floor and leaves them there.

AI and I have started to fight over who's in charge. Dissatisfied with its initial bravura run, Spotify has since fractured my existing lists into sub-list after bewildering sub-list, adding new tunes with random glee. I now have a Happy list and a Chill list, but I don't know if that means I should listen when I already feel happy or chill or if it is engaging in musical therapy, which feels pretty presumptuous.

In any case, Spotify is very busy and slightly obsessed, like a little kid who spends months eating only white food or scrambled eggs.

What AI needs, if we're going to have a meaningful long-term relationship, is a parent, the kind that sets boundaries and enforces them. It's time to stop being thrilled, overwhelmed, and in thrall to every little thing it does. It's time for some tough love, whether on a grand regulatory scale or on a more intimate level.

So I'm going to invoke the AI equivalent of a time-out and turn off Spotify's suggestions long enough to clean up and reorganize the lists. But I'm not giving up on our relationship entirely, any more than the parent of a real toddler would decide to stop trying. Spotify pried open a locked door for me, I can't deny it. Once the musical sock drawer gets straightened out, I think I'll add another of my dad's favorites, Frank Sinatra's rendition of "[Time After Time](#)," to my playlist.

And then I'll turn the feature back on, to see where we go.

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