

MUSIC

Why Frank Ocean and Other Big Names Prefer the Sudden Digital Drop

By JOE COSCARELLI AUG. 5, 2016

As the music world eagerly awaits the inscrutable R&B singer Frank Ocean's sophomore album, "Boys Don't Cry" — which could arrive digitally at any moment via Apple Music — it's worth considering how we got to this point of nail-chewing uncertainty about big records' release dates.

These days, instead of a tactical, monthslong promotional rollout of a physical album or CD, which requires strict deadlines, pressing plants and the cooperation of retail partners to meet a firm on-sale date, some musicians have cut out many of the middlemen, making the process far more direct — and potentially mercurial.

Artists today have an array of options for digital distribution. Smaller acts can upload their music to a service like Bandcamp, where they can set a flexible price tag for direct downloads as soon as a song or album is finished. (Promotion then occurs after the fact, usually on social media.) More established artists might strike a lucrative, exclusive limited-time deal with a streaming service like Apple or Tidal, also shrinking the gap between a work's completion and its distribution. (Plastic discs and color-printed booklets take time that uploading audio files to a server does not.)

In 2016 alone, the irregular semi-improvisational album release has been continually reinvented by Beyoncé (who combined the forces of HBO and Tidal); Rihanna (whose “Anti” was both delayed and came out online earlier than expected); and Kanye West (who did things on no one’s timetable but his own). And then there is Adele, the queen of the old guard and a useful counterpoint.

Some things to consider:

What are the advantages of a digital-first (or digital-only) release?

First and foremost, there is artist control. While no one can be certain what has transpired between Mr. Ocean, his label, Def Jam and Apple Music since a video stream started earlier this week showing Mr. Ocean woodworking next to the streaming service’s logo, the singer is a notorious and self-described perfectionist. (See also: Mr. West, Beyoncé, Radiohead.) After years of teases and blown deadlines, some last-minute musical tinkering is not out of the question given that “Boys Don’t Cry” will reportedly exist as an Apple digital exclusive for two weeks. Without there being a CD package to create, deadlines become more flexible.

Mr. Ocean wouldn’t be the first to hold things up by making last-minute changes: In February, Kanye West debuted his new album, “The Life of Pablo,” during a high-concept listening session at Madison Square Garden. That was on a Thursday, with many expecting that the album would be commercially available the following day, given that Friday is the industry standard for new releases. Instead, Mr. West continued to work on “Pablo” through the start of the weekend — even referring to the Madison Square Garden event on an updated track — and eventually released the album via Tidal in the early morning hours on Sunday. (Even then, he wasn’t done fiddling.)

This shifting schedule would never have been possible with the old system, in which an artist traditionally turned in a completed album to a record label or distributor weeks or months before release and left it to the company to get it into stores. For digital releases, the process can happen in less than a week (or even quicker, in cases like Mr. West’s).

The more traditional method — while allowing for big-budget marketing campaigns, including media appearances and pre-orders — also came with additional risks.

Can digital-only releases help prevent leaks?

As the author Stephen Witt described in his book “How Music Got Free: The End of an Industry, the Turn of the Century, and the Patient Zero of Piracy,” most of the high-profile, early online leaks at the peak of the mid-2000s online piracy boom could be traced back to a single CD manufacturing plant.

For instance, dueling 2007 releases from Mr. West and 50 Cent were due in stores on Sept. 11, meaning the albums had to be pressed in mid-August, to assure delivery. That was also enough time for a plant employee to steal the album and upload it online, to the joy of superfans and bootleggers.

“We’d run them in the plant in the week, and they’d have them in the flea markets on the weekend,” said Bennie Lydell Glover, a North Carolina plant worker who claimed responsibility for leaked albums from Jay Z, Mariah Carey, Ludacris and thousands more. “It was a real leaky plant.” (Mistakes like the early uploading of Rihanna’s “Anti” have been made by digital retailers, though they occur far less frequently.)

Today the relative ease of a digital-first release also allows artists and their teams to be more reactive. When albums by Björk and Madonna were leaked online last year, the musicians were able to quickly upload official versions to digital retailers, thus minimizing their losses to piracy.

Are record labels even necessary anymore?

For some artists with a fervent grass-roots base and a mastery of social media, the answer is no. In May, Chance the Rapper, an independent artist by the old measures, released “Coloring Book” directly to Apple Music without much warning, save some cryptic hints and anticipation-building posts on Twitter. Like Mr. West’s “The Life of Pablo,” no physical versions exist even now; the album lives solely online.

The counting of album sales has been adjusted to fit this new reality: 1,500 song streams from a release — even if they are all of the same song — count as an album equivalent unit on the Billboard chart, as does the sale of 10 track downloads.

Beyoncé gets the best of both worlds. After setting the industry standard for surprise online releases with her self-titled album in 2013, she returned this year with “Lemonade,” which was available exclusively on Tidal following the premiere of a video special on HBO in April.

By holding the project close to the vest, she avoided a leak and kept the scandalous content of the record a secret. Weeks later, her label, Columbia, released a physical version to stores. (Drake’s “Views,” the most popular album of the summer thanks to streaming, had a similar commercial trajectory, beginning on Apple Music.)

But what about Adele?

With “25,” by far the best-selling album of 2015, Adele did it the old-fashioned way.

While streaming has resulted in greater autonomy for some artists, the digital-consumption habits of the day have also led to the loss of billions of dollars for the music industry. So for a super-seller like Adele — whose target demographic still favors physical releases (while streamers, who tend to be younger, favor hip-hop and R&B) — a proper CD makes the most sense.

The buildup for “25” was textbook, and is still the dominant mode for most major-label artists. In late September came the much-anticipated announcement of a late-November release, with a lead single (and pre-order option) following a month later. Because of her mastery of the traditional marketplace, when the album came out — on time — it was withheld from digital streaming services for months, contributing to a record-breaking first week and strong sales for an extended period.

On the other hand, for Frank Ocean — whose fans may be frustrated with the wait but remain on high alert — unpredictability remains its own form of viral marketing.

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