

# AI Music and the Economics of Attention

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Are you a musician worried about AI-generated music taking over? You don't have to be—at least not in the way the debate is usually framed. AI is unlikely to replace you as an artist. But it may change something else: the conditions under which music is created, distributed, and valued. To understand why, we need to look more closely at what is actually changing.

Many musicians are concerned that AI-generated music is flooding streaming platforms. But what does that really mean? Apart from the well-known fact that these platforms already pay artists extremely poorly, is there truly a loss at stake—and if so, where does it occur?

## Addition vs. Substitution

At first glance, the situation can be broken down into two simple scenarios.

In the first, listeners consume AI-generated music *in addition to* their existing habits. A listener who previously streamed ten tracks a day now streams fifteen, five of which are AI-generated. In this case, there is no direct displacement. However, even here, the picture is more complex than it appears: streaming revenues are distributed within a shared pool, so an increase in total content—even without direct substitution—can still dilute individual earnings.

In the second scenario, listeners consume AI-generated music *instead of* human-made music. Here, AI does replace human output. This is the scenario most artists fear—and rightly so.

## Why They Choose What They Choose

But this raises a more fundamental question: why would listeners prefer AI-generated music in the first place?

One obvious answer is that it apparently meets their needs and expectations better. However, this explanation is incomplete. Preferences are not formed in a vacuum. They are shaped by recommendation algorithms, platform incentives, and the broader economics of attention.

Streaming platforms have strong incentives to promote music that is cheap, scalable, and fully controllable. AI-generated music fits these criteria perfectly. It is not only a technological development—it is also a platform-economic one.

## The Real Competition: Efficiency, Not Quality

This shifts the problem. The real question is no longer whether AI can “replace” human musicians in terms of quality, but whether it can outcompete them in terms of efficiency, availability, and algorithmic compatibility.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that most current AI-generated music occupies

a very specific space: functional, low-complexity, highly repeatable content. The kind of music that already dominated large parts of streaming platforms long before AI—background playlists, mood-based tracks, and other forms of what might be called *functional music*.

In this domain, AI does not introduce a fundamentally new dynamic. It accelerates and scales an existing one. One form of standardized, low-risk music is replaced by another—only now it is cheaper and faster to produce.

### **Is this really a loss for artists?**

**Only if this was the space they intended to compete in.** But this is precisely the point: competing with AI in the production of highly standardized music is not only difficult—it is strategically questionable.

At the same time, this does not mean that AI has no impact on musical culture. On the contrary, its effects may be profound—but not necessarily where they are most visible.

### **Consequences**

One likely consequence is an increase in the overall volume of mediocre content. However, mediocrity itself is nothing new. What changes is its scale and accessibility. AI lowers the barriers to entry dramatically, enabling more people than ever to produce music.

This is, in many ways, a positive development: it allows individuals to express creative ideas who would otherwise be excluded by the financial, technical, and organizational demands of traditional music production.

Musicians can use AI as a tool to streamline their production processes, reduce costs, and even find inspiration.

But there is a trade-off. High-quality music has historically been tied to long-term processes of skill development, refinement, and artistic identity formation. AI alters this process. It does not eliminate creativity, but it redistributes it—away from execution and toward selection, prompting, and curation.

This raises an open question: will this lead to a decline in quality, or simply to a transformation of what we consider musical skill?

### **The Shift to an Economy of Attention**

What seems more certain is a structural shift: as the supply of music increases dramatically, the scarce resource is no longer production—but attention.

In an economy of attention, visibility becomes more important than creation. The key challenge for musicians is not only to produce music, but to capture and sustain listener attention in an environment saturated with content—much of it generated at near-zero cost.

### **The Future Role of Human Musicians**

This suggests that the future role of human musicians may shift away from competing with AI on efficiency, and toward areas where AI is fundamentally weaker: live performance, personal connection, artistic identity, and cultural context.

Rather than disappearing, human-made music may become more niche—but also more distinct. It may develop in smaller, more engaged communities, where authenticity, experience, and meaning matter more than pure availability.

## **Selection and Quality in the Niches**

At the same time, a kind of filtering process may take place within these niches. In contrast to an AI-dominated mainstream optimized for scale and efficiency, niche environments could favor a different kind of selection pressure—one based on commitment, depth, and artistic necessity. Those who remain active in these spaces are more likely to be individuals who are not merely producing music, but who feel compelled to do so—artists for whom making music is not optional, but essential.

If such conditions hold, this could lead to a counterintuitive outcome: while the mainstream becomes increasingly saturated with interchangeable content, certain niches of human-made music may actually reach higher levels of artistic quality and intensity. Not because technology enforces it, but because the social and economic conditions filter for those who are willing—and able—to sustain a deeper engagement with their craft.

## **AI won't replace artists**

So no—AI is unlikely to replace musicians as artists.

But it may fundamentally reshape the conditions under which they can make a living.

What is changing is not the need for human expression, but the economic framework that has traditionally supported it. The relationship between artistic work and income begins to shift.

At this point, the discussion extends beyond music. It becomes a broader societal question: what role do we want art to play, and how do we value it?

## **Beyond Music: A Structural Shift in Society**

If AI continues to increase productivity across multiple domains, the traditional link between labor and income may become increasingly unstable—not only for musicians, but for many professions. In this context, proposals such as a universal basic income are not merely ideological—they are structural responses to a changing economic reality.

Music, in this sense, may simply be an early indicator of a broader transformation.

## **Rethinking Success**

What about fame, fortune, and glory?

Fame, recognition, and cultural relevance may remain. But financial success may no longer be tied to artistic production in the way it once was.

That is the real shift—not artistic replacement, but economic transformation.