[Short Wave]

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Updating the Back Catalogue

Redefining Temporalities in the Music Industry

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Introduction

The contemporary music industry is structured around the promotion of new releases. For record labels, the goal is straightforward: to bring their latest single by its in-house artist into the charts—and to keep it there. Yet, during the 1980s, as the Compact Disc (CD) became the dominant format, consumers began repurchasing on CD the vinyl records they already owned.[1] As a result, albums that had been out for years suddenly found themselves back at the top of the charts. However, the charts were originally designed to promote new musical releases. In 1991, the industry therefore introduced a distinction between *frontline* and *back catalogue*: only recordings released within the previous 24 months (18 months since 2008) were eligible for chart inclusion,[2] while older titles were classified as back catalogue.[3]

With the rise of streaming platforms, history appears to be repeating itself. Industry professionals have observed a growing share of streaming activity devoted to back catalogue recordings: in 2024, they accounted for 73% of all global streams.[4] In France, during the same year, back catalogue titles—defined as releases over 36 months old—represented 60% of the Top 100,000 audio streams.[5] While new releases continue to dominate the charts (constituting 80% of the French Top 200 streaming),[6] it is the back catalogue that is driving overall industry growth. Several explanations circulate among industry actors: the rise of nostalgia-driven listening among younger audiences;[7] the "long tail" effect,[8] reflecting the coexistence of novelty (as flow) and back catalogue (as stock); and the influence of recommendation algorithms that surface "new-to-them" tracks, often drawn from the back catalogue.[9] Nonetheless, there is widespread agreement that since 2015, back catalogue streams have exceeded those of new releases,[10] and the trend is accelerating.

In light of this shift, one might assume that capitalising on the growing importance of the back catalogue while sustaining the promotion of new music would require a redefinition of the industry's traditional categories—a debate widely reflected in the trade press.[11] Since 2020, the French National Syndicate of Phonographic Publishing (SNEP) has included albums up to 36 months old in its Top 200;[12] the analytics company Chartmetric has even proposed extending this threshold to five years.[13] Yet fieldwork conducted among professionals at major record labels (hereafter referred to as « majors »)[14] suggests that the issue cannot be reduced to categorisation alone. For these professionals, streaming represents a paradigmatic transformation in the circulation and consumption of music. Whereas physical retailers, constrained by limited shelf space, tended to prioritise novelty, streaming platforms now offer virtually unlimited catalogues.[15] This shift has reconfigured the economic model—from one based on the purchase of physical media (logic of ownership) to one centred on digital listening (logic of repetition).[16] Within this paradigm, the visibility of work now depends heavily on playlists and algorithmic recommendation systems that encourage repeated listening. Beyond temporal

categorisations, it is the traditional marketing and promotional practices of the music industry that are being called into question and reshaped. This raises a central question: how do industry professionals seek to update the back catalogue within a streaming-driven ecosystem that remains centred on the valorisation of new releases?

This article introduces the concept of *updating* ("actualisation" in French) to describe the processes through which the past is brought and revalorized in the present.[17] It draws on empirical research—observations and thirty interviews conducted between 2020 and 2025—with back catalogue professionals working in the French subsidiaries of two majors.[18] One of which was examined in depth through a doctoral project (industrial PhD). The analysis also incorporates a corpus of sixty trade press articles and reports on the recorded music market.

1. The Heritage-Making of the Artist and His Work

The *updating* of the back catalogue is nearly as old as the music industry itself. In the first half of the twentieth century, the invention of the record accelerated the rediscovery of "old" music—primarily classical repertoire. Between 1900 and 1950, the share of "contemporary" music (for the time, that is, post–nineteenth century) in Pathé's catalogue fell from 97% to 25%, while that of music composed before 1800 rose from 3% to 37%[19]. In 1900, the most frequently recorded composers were Verdi, Sullivan, Gounod, and Wagner; by 1950, companies focused instead on those of the previous century—Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart. With the advent of the long-playing record (LP) in the 1950s–1980s, *updating* primarily took the form of compilations and reissues. The arrival of the CD, cheaper to reproduce and capable of holding twice as many tracks as a vinyl record, further reinforced this logic.[20]

A first mode of back catalogue *updating* involves editorial work on well-known artists who no longer release new material, through reissues and compilations. This practice is mainly carried out within majors. On the one hand, these firms often hold exploitation rights to older catalogues—particularly recordings made before the 1990s—under artist contracts that entail relatively low royalty rates.[21] On the other hand, the enduring fame of these artists reduces financial risk and increases the profitability of *"back catalogue projects"*, encouraging in recent decades the acquisition of catalogues by majors or investment funds.[22] For instance, Sony Music's 2024 purchase of Queen's catalogue for $1.27 billion, or Pophouse Entertainment's acquisition of KISS's for around $300 million.

Updating the Back Catalogue: A Matter of Anniversaries

As with "*frontline* artists", majors have several strategies of *updating* based upon the current visibility of *back catalogue* artists. The research identified three categories.

The first includes *forgotten artists*, whose *updating* is minimal. A professional described a case involving a 1960s artist who wanted her album to be reissued:

I calmed her down by saying we'd put part of her repertoire online. At least, legally speaking, we were no longer doing nothing—since it's written that we have the right to exploit it or not if we wish. […] The only issue is that putting something online isn't automatic; there's a lot of work involved.

This situation highlights a tension between, on the one hand, the obligation to exploit a catalogue—or at least not to simply refuse—and, on the other, the expected profitability given the workload required by label professionals. Consumption of this category of artists—whether physical or streaming—remains very low, and the editorial work (digitisation, clearance,[23] delivery to platforms) is often considered too time-consuming relative to potential revenue. As a result, majors tend to opt for minimal solutions—putting unavailable tracks online, adding an anniversary sticker to existing physical releases—or licensing the catalogue to another label,[24] thereby defusing possible conflicts with the artist or their heirs.

The second category concerns artists deemed to be *in need of repositioning*. These performers typically enjoyed major success several decades ago but have since faded from the public eye. A *back catalogue* project manager described the case of a singer who died in 2016:

When he passed away, we were contacted by his daughter, who asked us to create several projects. We've already released a greatest hits album, one or two small low-cost compilations, and now a tribute album is coming out. […] That's going to be the first step toward rebuilding his image—by next September, for the fifth anniversary of his death, we'll release the first complete discography box."

Physical products are tailored to different audiences: a complete discography box set for longtime fans, *best of* compilations for knowledgeable listeners, and a tribute album featuring *frontline* artists for broader audiences. Producing *back catalogue* projects for artists "to reposition" is financially risky, as it is difficult to predict the purchasing behaviour of these diverse publics. This is a well-known feature of cultural industries: because cultural goods are *experienced goods*, their success is inherently unpredictable.[25] Traditional media promotion (press, radio, television) therefore remains essential to mitigate risk.[26] Even when commercial success is limited, some professionals emphasise the *cultural* or*heritage* dimension of their work. As one project manager said, reflecting on his career,

At least I'll have played my small part in making sure my kids still know these artists.

The third category encompasses famous artists—often described by professionals as *legends of French chanson*. Unlike those "to reposition", these artists already benefit from extensive *updating* and remain widely consumed, both through streaming and physical sales. For such "legends", as for other categories, label teams frequently rely on birthdays or death

anniversaries to launch new products. These dates provide opportunities to "speak up"—to initiate targeted marketing campaigns—as illustrated by a project manager referring to one iconic artist:

In 2020 it'll be the twentieth anniversary of his death. […] We design products for the anniversary because there's going to be a promotional peak in the media, and we ride that wave. […] Sure, there's a slightly morbid side to it, but we're simply responding to demand—because the media will talk about it. And exploiting repertoires, that's our job.

Such artists are a top priority for majors. They attract heavy listening and are supported by a fan base perceived by professionals as particularly willing to spend—older, more affluent, and loyal. While acknowledging the decline in physical sales, labels seek to capitalise on high-value products such as complete discography box sets targeted at these dedicated fans.

Across these three categories, the *updating* process constitutes a form of heritage-making of back catalogue artists carried out by professionals within majors. *Heritage-making* refers to "the process through which music becomes heritage—that is, both a monumental legacy of the past and a possession to be enjoyed."[27] This work relies on "mechanisms of preservation, conservation, and valorisation"[28] to ensure the transmission of musical works, while simultaneously "following partially market-oriented logics."[29] Over the decades, the products used to *update* an artist's *back catalogue* have multiplied. Among them, biopics stand out as the quintessential medium of *heritage-making*. Despite being expensive and time-consuming for audio-visual production companies, biopics are easier to promote to the public.[30] In recent years, musical biopics have proliferated internationally and in France: *Back to Black* (Amy Winehouse), *Better Man* (Robbie Williams), *A Complete Unknown* (Bob Dylan), *Maria* (Maria Callas), *Bob Marley: One Love*, or *Monsieur Aznavour*, to name only 2024 examples. Yet this surge in *updating* projects has also fuelled critical discourses denouncing the *retromania*[31] or *foreverism****[32]*** of cultural industries—in other words, the saturation of the present by the commodified past.

The Expertise of "Catalogue Teams"

Since the mid-1990s, *catalogue teams* have been created within majors to develop back catalogue projects,[33] particularly those concerning deceased artists.[34] Professionals working in these teams—especially project managers—take pride in their technical expertise and in-depth knowledge of the works they handle. They often compare themselves to archaeologists uncovering hidden treasures in forgotten master tapes, or to detectives piecing together, clue by clue, the creative context of a rediscovered track.

Their expertise is grounded in both a deep erudition surrounding a given artist or historical period and in their ability to collect and organise large volumes of audio, visual, and iconographic material. This savoir-faire is acquired over years of close work on an artist's repertoire and sustained contact with rights holders and "consultants" (close collaborators or fans with deep knowledge of the artist's oeuvre). These consultants assist project managers in assessing the artistic, commercial, and moral value of unreleased

material—ranging from mere "drawer leftovers" to exceptional unreleased recordings deemed worthy of release[35].

Because speaking about an artist's work posthumously is also, inevitably, speaking about the deceased themselves, criticisms have emerged—most often from journalists and fans—denouncing the perceived lack of authenticity or quality of posthumous releases, and questioning whether these products respect the artist's supposed intentions.[36] The controversies surrounding certain posthumous projects since the 1970s have had a structuring effect on the professional practices of majors.[37] On the one hand, observers agree that the number of posthumous releases has increased sharply since the 2000s, some even claiming the emergence of a new "posthumania"[38]. On the other hand, such projects appear increasingly regulated, as industry professionals now consider recurring criticisms of the potentially degrading effects of purely commercial logic. The expertise of back catalogue professionals also consists of anticipating these critiques—a form of reflexivity visible, for instance, in the recurring self-irony of project managers who liken their work to that of undertakers. This dynamic reveals a shared process: as back catalogue projects concerning deceased artists have become industrialised, their production has simultaneously given rise to *prudential practices**[39]*** aimed at legitimising and protecting the integrity of the work.

Playlisting the Back Catalogue

Contrary to what such heritage-oriented practices might suggest, the updating of the back catalogue is not incompatible with the digital era. Since the late 2010s, the catalogue teams of major labels have adapted to the rise of streaming platforms, seeking to rejuvenate the audiences of artists with extensive historical catalogues.[40] These teams have diversified by integrating digital specialists, whose goal is to maximise the visibility and renewal of catalogue works online.

In the CD era, success was defined by sales rather than listening; in the streaming era, it is defined by repeated listening. This shift has transformed the logic of catalogue updating: it now relies increasingly on playlisting. Professionals work daily to secure placement of titles in thematic playlists or to create new ones linked to seasonal events, moods, or musical genres. These practices keep the artist's work "alive", contribute to its ongoing heritage-making, and can also target younger audiences. Yet, as one catalogue label director explains,

You have to find a balance between very careful budget management and the artist's development in the digital sphere.

Uploading previously unavailable tracks, creating thematic playlists, or releasing remixes are all marketing actions aimed at stimulating algorithmic recommendation. As one digital specialist within a major label puts it: *"Editorial playlisting influences algorithmic playlisting."* In other words, the more extensive the updating work surrounding an artist, the more likely streaming algorithms are to promote their music to listeners. The shift from a transactional model (the physical era) to one based on repeated listening (the streaming era)

has also reoriented the metrics that catalogue teams monitor. Instead of tracking sales, they now follow engagement KPIs (*key performance indicators*), such as average listening duration, discovery rate, or skip rate[41]—indicators that measure audience interest and, according to professionals, influence a track's future circulation.

Nevertheless, releasing tracks, creating playlists, or issuing remixes is not always enough to "rejuvenate" an artist's audience. In order to accomplish this, labels must understand how young listeners discover and consume back catalogue music outside of streaming platforms.

2. The Resurgence of a Song

The "*digitamorphosis*"***[42]*** of catalogue updating extends well beyond streaming platforms, as nowadays the consumption of back catalogue titles through streaming is tightly linked to their circulation on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or Snapchat. In 2024, 84% of the songs that entered the *Billboard Global 200* had previously gone viral on TikTok.[43] Among the fifty most used songs on TikTok worldwide, twenty came from the back catalogue—headed by Alphaville's *"Forever Young"* (1984).[44]

While the Covid-19 period weakened the live music sector, the global mainstream adoption of TikTok in 2020 profoundly reshaped the recorded music industry. Beginning in 2021, a new term spread through the corridors of majors: *resurgence*. Used notably by industry professionals, the metaphor of resurgence[45] designates back catalogue songs that had partly fallen into oblivion and suddenly regain popularity on social media, often in unpredictable ways.

The Logic of Virality

"Virality" can be defined as "a collective and temporally concentrated surge of attention on an object"[46], leading to "its rapid and massive interpersonal diffusion within social networks."[47] While *"Old Town Road"* (2018) by Lil Nas X became one of the first emblematic cases of virality on TikTok in 2019, *"Dreams"* (1977) by Fleetwood Mac marked a turning point in the viral rediscovery of older titles. It all began with a video of Nathan Apodaca skating down a road, cranberry juice in hand, soundtracked by the Fleetwood Mac song. More than a year after its upload, the video went viral on TikTok, propelling the track back into the streaming charts. Since then, such examples have multiplied and are widely discussed in the press.

Why do these resurgences attract so much attention from professionals? Firstly, a back catalogue song can once again become a hit and climb the charts. In 2022, driven by social media virality, Spotify reported that nearly a third of its weekly Top 200 tracks came from the back catalogue (compared with 13% in 2020).[48] Secondly, a viral song leads to an average of 70% increase in streams across the artist's overall repertoire.[49] Finally, resurgence serves as a powerful lever for an artist's international exposure, as illustrated by

"Makeba" (2015) by Jain, *"Dernière danse"* (2013) by Indila, or *"Est-ce que tu m'aimes?"* (2015) by GIMS.

Resurgence phenomena have also been observed in back catalogue music featured in films, TV series, or video games—a practice commonly referred to as *synchronisation*. Examples include Kate Bush's *"Running Up That Hill"* (1985) in *Stranger Things* and Régine's *"Je survivrai"* (1979) in *Bref 2*, both of which generated tens of thousands of TikTok videos. These cases illustrate new modes of circulation, linking synchronisation, user-generated content on social media, and renewed listening on streaming platforms.[50] According to SNEP data, this reconfiguration contributed to a 19% increase in synchronisation revenues for the French market in 2024 (compared to 2023).[51]

Resurgence not only "reactivates" an artist's historical audience and increases international exposure, but—crucially—reaches younger listeners, as roughly 70% of TikTok users worldwide are between 18 and 30 years old.[52] Marketing professionals refer to this as an "*audience transfer*" between social and streaming platforms. Majors have observed that resurgence can rejuvenate an artist's audience—a rare occurrence, since artists typically age alongside their fans. For example, in March 2025, Sony Music France reported that half of Joe Dassin's listeners were under 34.[53] This rejuvenation effect distinguishes the resurgence from viral phenomena involving *frontline* artists: it nourishes the hope that these new audiences will continue listening to the artist for years to come.

Uncertain Control

From 2021 onwards, resurgence became a central concern for majors. Historically, these companies have successfully reorganised their structures and practices to maintain control over the dissemination of their music. Dedicated teams have since been established to monitor and amplify viral phenomena, and new roles—particularly influenced marketing specialists—have emerged. Yet integrating resurgence into label marketing strategies has proven more difficult than expected.

Two dimensions of virality are particularly problematic for marketing professionals when they attempt to manage such phenomena. The first is *ephemerality*[54]. Trends on TikTok are extremely short-lived, with an average lifespan of about three weeks. Professionals therefore operate under constant time pressure if they wish to capitalise on viral momentum. One strategy has been to "create" trends proactively on TikTok. However, such attempts often collide with the second aspect—*organicity*.[55] As one back catalogue marketing director from a majors explains:

I don't think we control anything. We're constantly trying to make videos go viral, but it rarely happens. We spend a lot of money and energy on this, but it often leads nowhere—and above all, it doesn't depend on us.

These viral dynamics depend primarily on users' appropriation of music on TikTok. This new paradigm of musical circulation has introduced the expression *"organic trend"* into the everyday vocabulary of label marketing departments, in contrast to trends actively

promoted through paid campaigns.[56] This reflects the classic uncertainty of cultural industries—predicting success remains impossible—but in a new ecosystem driven by algorithmic and participatory logics.

Recent examples of resurgence show that viral trends often form not around the artist or their persona, but rather around the song itself: its lyrics, the drop[57] used in videos, or the imaginaries conveyed by its sound textures. Organicity thus materialises in users' creative reinterpretation of songs. Whether arising from user behaviour or algorithmic dynamics, this unpredictability raises a challenge to majors: resurgences cannot be forecasted. Moreover, attempts to artificially create virality can prove costly relative to the results achieved—an issue often blamed by marketing professionals on limited viral marketing budgets.

Capturing the Trend: Detecting, Amplifying, Anticipating

Since generating resurgence is so uncertain, viral marketing teams have shifted their focus toward *reactivity*—detecting existing viral phenomena early and amplifying their reach. "*Amplification"* consists of rapidly maximising a song's virality to increase its social visibility and, subsequently, its streaming consumption.

However, to amplify a trend, one must first detect it before it fades. During fieldwork within a majors, I observed a growing number of professionals dedicated either to viral marketing or to *data analysis*. The latter rely on internal dashboards compiling consumption data to monitor, in real time, how the label's catalogue circulates across social platforms. Over the years, these tools have become increasingly sophisticated and essential to marketing decision-making.[58]

Once a resurgence is detected, professionals deploy marketing strategies to amplify it—mobilising various actors across the industry: TikTok representatives, content creators, and sometimes the artists themselves. Consider the following ethnographic excerpt from a meeting within a major label's back catalogue division:

The label's digital manager mentions that there are currently 15,000 TikTok creations using a back catalogue track from one of their artists. The marketing director says, "We need to go all in. Let's see if it keeps growing and whether we bring in influencers." The digital manager wonders about timing, since a new single by the same artist is about to drop. The label director replies, "We take everything! Let's amplify the resurging track. Our goal is to push the catalogue across all artists—it's compatible with a new release." Another manager interjects: "He won't create any content himself; it's going to be a nightmare—he hates that." The meeting ends with the director concluding, "We have to try; nothing should be off limits."

Artist participation in trends involving their own songs is described as a key amplification lever. Yet, as this example shows, it is far from straightforward. Some artists do not know how to engage with the platform, fail to see its value, or reject TikTok as time-consuming or incompatible with their image. When artists do participate, the success of the video often depends on their ability to align with the trend's specific content. In 2020, for instance,

Mick Fleetwood (Fleetwood Mac's co-founder and drummer) reenacted the viral *"Dreams"* scene—cranberry juice in hand[59]. Participating in a trend thus means embracing the very principle of organicity: accepting that a song's meaning may escape both its creator and its label.

Over time, professionals have also observed that certain resurgences follow a *seasonal logic*. This cyclicality emerges when songs become "earmarked"[60] by users' appropriations—such as *"we fell in love in october"* (2018) by Girl in Red, [RF1] now associated with expressions of love each October. In France, Joe Dassin provides a clear example of a seasonal resurgence: *"Et si tu n'existais pas"* (1975) resurfaces around Valentine's Day, while *"Dans les yeux d'Émilie"* (1978) reappears during *local saint's days festivals* or rugby competitions[61]. What were once songs from a specific era, cherished by an artist's original fans, are now reinterpreted and reappropriated by a new generation. Their meaning has shifted, contributing to their transmission, increased catalogue consumption, and the artist's heritage-making.

Seasonality also enables professionals to *anticipate* organic trends. By integrating this principle into their planning, labels can schedule back catalogue activations throughout the year, no longer relying solely on anniversaries. In other words, with the incorporation of seasonality into resurgence strategies, catalogue updating now unfolds through an ever-expanding calendar of events.

3. Permanent Presence

As social media platforms and streaming services continue to redefine the ways in which music circulates and is consumed, the boundary between the *frontline* and *back catalogue* appears increasingly blurred. Some industry professionals claim that this distinction no longer makes sense for younger listeners, who discover older tracks as though they were new. Worse still, according to these professionals, during *resurgent* phenomena, young audiences often mistake the old for the new.[62] Why, then, do temporal categories continue to structure professional practices within majors?

Better Segmentation for a Better Updating

With the specialisation of professionals in *heritage-making* or in the amplification of *resurgences*, the rise of *back catalogue* consumption in streaming, and the growing debate on the causes of this renewed interest, label members have refined their categories for thinking about updating. By studying consumption volumes, not at the level of an artist or a single track, but according to the year of release, professionals (especially those within majors, who can compare data across a large number of contracted artists) have observed that the increase in *back catalogue* consumption is concentrated on relatively recent music: in 2023, almost three out of four streams came from tracks released less than ten years earlier.[63] This *"shallow catalogue"* (music released within the past ten years) represents

the most dynamic market segment of the industry,[64] as opposed to the "*traditional catalogue*" (ten years or older). Moreover, beyond the *resurgence* of older tracks, professionals within majors have found that *virality* tends to concentrate heavily on tracks released less than five years ago.[65]

Depending on the major, the categories used to analyse *back catalogue* consumption vary. Some refer to the "*early back catalogue*"—music released more than three but less than six years ago—while others prefer the term "*young catalogue*", which includes music released more than three but less than fifteen years ago, as opposed to the "*deep catalogue*" (more than fifteen years). However, beyond their temporal criteria, these observations have shifted debates about which *back catalogue* segments should be prioritised in *updating* work. Whereas time and budgets dedicated to *back catalogue* projects initially focused on the *heritage making* of renowned artists (*deep catalogue*) or on transforming new releases into hits (*frontline* labels), professionals within majors have, over the past few years, increasingly turned their attention to the recent *back catalogue* (*early, young,* or*shallow*).[66]

Mobilising the Back Catalogue to Be "Always on"

Moreover, fieldwork conducted in the French subsidiary of a major reveals how deeply the updating of an artist's recent *back catalogue* and the promotion of their new releases are now integrated within the same commercial logic—especially for established *frontline* artists. As the director of a *back catalogue* label in a major put it,

Pushing the [back] catalogue is compatible with a new release.

This change does not merely reflect a desire to maximise returns across different segments of an artist's catalogue. It is part of a broader transformation in the music marketing model. With the rise of digital platforms (both streaming and social media) and the growing number of tools for direct artist–fan communication (newsletters, Discord, etc.), a new *marketing regime* has taken hold in the industry: the *engagement marketing regime*. According to professionals within the major, "*engagement*" refers both to the process through which audiences become emotionally attached to an artist—facilitated by multiple marketing devices—and to the quantifiable reactions of consumers to each of these stimuli. In this regime, success is no longer about reaching the widest possible audience but about generating frequent and sustained interactions from a loyal and highly engaged fanbase. [67] For instance, Spotify notes that, on average, 2% of an artist's monthly listeners account for 18% of total streams and purchase more than half of the artist's merchandise. [68] Hence the growing popularity within majors of another term: "*superfans*".[69] In 2023, investment bank Goldman Sachs estimated that *superfans* could generate $4.2 billion in annual revenue[70]—a figure that circulated widely across the sector.[RF2]

What, then, is the link between *superfans* and the updating of the *back catalogue*? Within the *engagement marketing regime*, retaining even more devoted fans is paramount. This involves not only maintaining frequent communication and rewarding their loyalty but also continually nurturing their attachment to the artist. Professionals therefore speak of an

"always on" logic—constantly providing new music and new products: exclusive content, limited editions, early access, personalised bundles, and so on. An artist's *back catalogue* (particularly the recent one) can thus be valorised between two promotional cycles—between a new release, a tour, or a new merchandising collection.[71] As a result, especially for artists deemed "priority" by their labels, the year is structured by uninterrupted calendars of new content: the release of singles, promotion of a new album, celebration of a debut album's anniversary, amplification of a seasonal viral track, and more. Much like the setlist of a concert, in the *engagement marketing regime*, the old and the new are increasingly intertwined.

However, this logic of *permanent presence* is particularly time-consuming and requires close coordination between departments. The anticipation of numerous projects—catalogued in ever-denser retro-planning charts—and the production of an expanding range of derivative products often generate internal conflicts. These conflicts, which become visible during periods of heightened activity, no longer concern only present issues (such as playlisting a track or promoting it on social media) but also future ones—such as producing a new clothing collection or pressing a reissued album. In other words, as the logic of *permanent presence* grows within the daily practices of professionals, so too do *temporal conflicts*[72] between teams within the same major. Moreover, this approach demands the production of original, high-quality projects in the eyes of fans, under the constant risk of criticism for recycling old material for purely commercial purposes. Thus, being *always on* requires significant resources—so much so that, even within majors, only a limited number of artists are truly concerned.

Conclusion

At the end of this cycle, can we say that the distinction between the *frontline* and *back catalogue* is bound to disappear? Within the marketing regime of engagement—based on the growing monetisation of superfans—this boundary is increasingly blurred and may appear arbitrary to listeners. Yet it continues to structure certain professional practices, particularly in the allocation of budgets between the production of an artist's future releases (which often require substantial upfront investment) and the updating of older material.[73] Likewise, data analysts still rely on these temporal categories to detect consumption trends and guide marketing strategies.

The ways of updating the *back catalogue* have evolved considerably with the rise of streaming and social platforms. Updating no longer consists solely of producing reissues for an artist's historical fans but now involves the continuous *playlisting* of their work around thematic or calendar-based events. Moreover, professionals no longer simply upload older tracks: they increasingly incorporate users' creative reinterpretations of music on social platforms to amplify its circulation. Finally, within the marketing regime of engagement, cultivating fan loyalty requires not only promoting new releases but also continuously updating the artist's *back catalogue*. These transformations have two major consequences.

First, whereas labels once sought immediate profitability at the time of an album's release, they now aim to extend its commercial lifespan. Second, the logic of updating has broadened: it no longer concerns only renowned *back catalogue* artists but increasingly also *frontline* ones—famous or not—as illustrated by the growing acquisition of catalogues from this category of artists.

Temporal issues are omnipresent in the updating of the *back catalogue*: through categories, dates, calendars, production timelines, and processes of temporalisation (durations, rhythms, tempos, and projections)[74], as well as through formalised procedures such as heritage making. These notions help describe the activity of label professionals whose work of updating has intensified over the past three decades. This intensification has led to the emergence of specialised teams—more and more interdependent with labels—and to a proliferation of *back catalogue* projects. However, this dynamic can also generate new internal frictions within the majors when regulation fails among teams that do not always share the same professional norms. Similarly, the intensification of updating increasingly requires artists themselves to take part in the promotion of their older music alongside their new releases. Despite public criticisms from some artists regarding the pressure exerted by their labels to produce TikTok videos,[75] few studies have examined their own relationship to this intensification. Rather than lamenting the disappearance of novelty or denouncing an omnipresent past,[76] it seems more fruitful to interrogate the reconfiguration of updating work—work that, much like the *back catalogue* itself, often remains in the shadows.

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[1] Jean Lalande, "L'exploitation sur médium CD du back catalogue dans la musique rock anglophone," paper presented to Philip Tagg, Université de Montréal, December 2003.

[2] Will Page, "Does the Music Industry's Definition of 'Catalogue' Need an Upgrade?," *Music Business Worldwide*, December 5, 2017, https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/music-industrys-definition-catalogue-need-upgrade.

[3] In professional terminology, the back catalogue is often referred to as the catalogue. However, the latter also denotes the entire published work of an artist, including new releases. To avoid confusion, I will use the term back catalogue here.

[4] Luminate, "2024 Year-End Report," 2025.

[5] Syndicat national de l'édition phonographique (SNEP), "Bilan du marché de la musique enregistrée en 2024 : une année charnière pour l'industrie musicale," March 11, 2025, https://snepmusique.com/actualites-du-snep/prod-musicale-francaise-en-2024.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Claudia De Wolff, "Journey to the Past – How Nostalgia Keeps Fans Engaged," *Music Ally*, March 18, 2024, https://musically.com/2024/03/18/journey-to-the-past-how-

nostalgia-keeps-fans-engaged.

[8] Chris Anderson, "The Long Tail," *Wired*, October 2004, 170–177.

[9] Chartmetric, "Chartmetric Music Industry Trends | H1 2022," 2022, https://chartmetric.com/fr/music-industry-trends/6mo-report-2022-h1.

[10] Nielsen, "2015 U.S. Music Year-End Report," January 2016. This report focuses on the U.S. market, but similar trends exist in the French market.

[11] Will Page, "Does the music industry's definition of 'catalogue' need an upgrade?," cited.

[12] Syndicat national de l'édition phonographique (SNEP), "*À propos des Tops*," https://snepmusique.com/top-radios/a-propos-des-tops.

[13] Chartmetric, "Music Industry Trends | H1 2022," cited. The report notes that the consumption momentum of a track seems to lengthen in the audio streaming regime.

[14] The three major labels (Universal, Sony, and Warner) hold approximately 70% of the recorded music market (physical and digital). Music & Copyright, "New market share results reveal the recorded-music and music publishing winners and losers in 2023," April 23, 2024, https://musicandcopyright.wordpress.com/2024/04/23/new-market-share-results-reveal-the-recorded-music-and-music-publishing-winners-and-losers-in-2023.

[15] Murray Stassen, "There are now over 200M tracks on audio streaming services. Nearly 100M of them aren't played more than 10 times each year," Music Business Worldwide, January 15, 2025, https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/there-are-now-more-than-200m-tracks-on-audio-streaming-services-nearly-100m-of-them-attracted-no-more-than-10-plays-each.

[16] Sigbjørn Hjelmbrekke, "From ownership to access. The economics of music subscription services," PhD diss., Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2021, https://repub.eur.nl/pub/137027/thesishjelmbrekke.pdf.

[17] By speaking of *updating* rather than update, I stress the processual and temporal character of the work carried out by professionals. This concept draws on the work of Yannick Barthe, *Les retombées du passé. Le paradoxe de la victime* (Paris: Seuil, 2017), understood as the mobilisation in the present of past or future facts, as well as on Liliana Doganova, *Discounting the Future: The Ascendancy of a Political Technology* (New York: Zone Books, 2024), which addresses the determination of the current value of future revenues.

[18] The actors in the studied major labels work in the label dedicated to the back catalogue (project managers, marketing managers, label directors, etc.) or in departments supporting the labels (data analysts, influencer marketing managers, legal staff, etc.).

[19] Sophie Maisonneuve, “L’industrie phonographique et la patrimonialisation de la musique dans la première moitié du XXe siècle,” *Le Temps des Médias*, no. 22 (2014): 79, https://doi.org/10.3917/tdm.022.0077. In the early twentieth century, “in a context of competition between phonographic companies, the past (and in particular unreleased material) is used as a resource of novelty to distinguish one’s production and to establish rarity.”

[20] Jean Lalande, “L’exploitation sur médium CD du back catalogue dans la musique rock anglophone,” cited.

[21] Nicolas Baudoin, “Back catalogue, la mine d’or de l’industrie musicale,” Billboard France, March 28, 2025, https://fr.billboard.com/back-catalogue-la-mine-dor-de-lindustrie-musicale.

[22] Kaitlyn Davies, Henderson Cole and David Turner, “Deux décennies d’achats de catalogues musicaux,” CNMlab, October 6, 2022, https://cnmlab.fr/onde-courte/deux-decennies-dachats-de-catalogues-musicaux; Alexandre Quiquerez and Tristan Schindler, “L’investissement dans des catalogues musicaux français et étrangers,” CNMlab, September 4, 2023, https://cnmlab.fr/onde-courte/linvestissement-dans-des-catalogues-musicaux-francais-et-etrangers.

[23] “Clearing a track” consists of requesting exploitation authorization from all rights holders of the music.

[24] In the license contract, the producer of a recording cedes, for a determined period, the reproduction and marketing rights of the music to a licensee, in exchange for a royalty.

[25] Philippe Bouquillion and Yolande Combès, eds., *Les industries de la culture et de la communication en mutation* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007).

[26] Beuscart Jean-Samuel and Mellet Kévin, *Promouvoir les œuvres culturelles. Usages et efficacité de la publicité dans les filières culturelles* (Ministère de la Culture – DEPS, 2012).

[27] Sophie Maisonneuve, “L’industrie phonographique et la patrimonialisation de la musique dans la première moitié du XXe siècle,” cited, 77.

[28] Guy Di Méo, “Processus de patrimonialisation et construction des territoires,” in S. Bouffange and P. Moisdon-Pouvreau (eds.), Regards sur le patrimoine industriel de Poitou-Charentes et d’ailleurs, conference proceedings (Poitiers, Sept. 12–14, 2007), La Crèche, Geste, 2008, 87-109.

[29] Karim Hammou and Marie Sonnette-Manougian., “Chapitre VI. 40 ans de musiques hip-hop en France : (il)légitimation, institutionnalisation et patrimonialisation”, in K. Hammou and M. Sonnette-Manouguian (eds.), 40 ans de musiques hip-hop en France, Ministère de la Culture – DEPS, 2022, 173-211.

[30] Maxime Tellier, “De Piaf à Freddie Mercury: le business des biopics,” France Culture, October 30, 2018, https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/de-piaf-a-freddie-mercury-le-business-des-biopics-5949984.

[31] Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011).

[32] Odile de Plas, “Le foreverisme, ou quand la culture pop se momifie pour faire plus de profits,” interview with Grafton Tanner, *Télérama* (website), July 15, 2025, https://urlr.me/34bqxd.

[33] Jon Matsumoto, “Cataloging the Future,” *Grammy Magazine*, May 29, 2002.

[34] The number and specialization of labels vary by major and evolve with internal restructurings. Each major typically has a label or department dedicated to the updating of older or deceased artists. In independent labels, dedicated positions often do not exist.

[35] Noé Latreille de Fozières, “Les limites de la marchandisation des morts : les professionnels des majors musicales face aux porte-paroles des défunts,” *Socio-anthropologie* 50 (2025): 60.

[36] Ibid., 62.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Olivier Nuc, “Le retour des morts chantants,” *Le Figaro*, September 23, 2013, https://www.lefigaro.fr/musique/2013/09/23/03006-20130923ARTFIG00270-le-retour-des-morts-chantants.php.

[39] Florent Champy, *La sociologie des professions* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2012 [2009]), 80. These prudent practices occur in situations of uncertainty due to the high singularity of cases handled. They characterize adjustments and trial-and-error work “in relation to a formalizable and purely technical practice” (80).

[40] Nicolas Baudoin, “Back catalogue, la mine d’or de l’industrie musicale,” cited.

[41] Percentage of users who stop listening to a track before it ends.

[42] Fabien Granjon and Clément Combes, “La numérimorphose des pratiques de consommation musicale. Le cas de jeunes amateurs,” Réseaux 145–146 (2007): 291–334.

[43] Luminate and TikTok, “2024 Music Impact Report,” February 13, 2025, https://newsroom.tiktok.com/tiktok-and-luminate-release-latest-music-impact-report.

[44] Dan Milmo, “Older Music Has Been Getting a Second Life on TikTok, Data Shows,” The Guardian, December 25, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/dec/25/older-music-has-been-getting-a-second-life-on-tiktok-data-shows.

[45] The term “resurgence” traditionally refers to underground waters reemerging at the surface.

[46] Ugo Roux, “Viralité et partage dans les espaces socionumériques. effet du genre sur la diffusion d’une vidéo publicitaire en ligne,” *Interfaces numériques* 9, no. 2 (2020): 153, https://doi.org/10.25965/interfaces-numeriques.4341.

[47] Ugo Roux, “Viralité: la métaphore virale et ses limites,” *Terminal* 129 (2021), https://doi.org/10.4000/terminal.7299.

[48] Spotify for Artists, “Catalogue,” September 2022, https://fanstudy.byspotify.com/fr-FR/edition/catalog. The calculation is based on tracks at least 18 months old.

[49] *Ibid*. This percentage is calculated over a 60-day period, 30 days before and 30 days after the track went viral, between Feb. 1 and May 1, 2022.

[50] Ben Beaumont-Thomas, “‘The Whole World’s Gone Mad!’ Kate Bush on Running Up That Hill’s Success,” *The Guardian*, June 22, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/jun/22/the-whole-worlds-gone-mad-kate-bush-on-running-up-that-hills-success.

[51] SNEP, “Bilan du marché de la musique enregistrée en 2024 : une année charnière pour l’industrie musicale,” cited.

[52] We Are Social, “Digital 2024 Global Overview Report,” January 31, 2024, https://wearesocial.com/fr/blog/2024/01/digital-2024.

[53] Nicolas Baudoin, “Back catalogue, la mine d’or de l’industrie musicale,” cited.

[54] Noé Latreille de Fozières, “La réflexivité algorythmique. Le marketing dans une major musicale à l’épreuve de la viralité sur TikTok,” *Socio* 20 (2025): 65–82, https://doi.org/10.4000/1431d.

[55] *Ibid*.

[56] *Ibid*.

[57] A moment in a track where a change of rhythm or sudden variation in the bass line occurs.

[58] Noé Latreille de Fozières, “La réflexivité algorythmique,” cited.

[59] Nawal Bonnefoy, “Fleetwood Mac: leur tube ‘Dreams’ devient viral sur TikTok, le leader du groupe se prête au jeu,” *BFMTV*, October 5, 2020, https://urlr.me/ethHKb.

[60] Viviana A. Zelizer, *The social meaning of money. Pin money, paychecks, poor relief and other currencies.* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

[61] Nicolas Baudoin, "Back catalogue, la mine d'or de l'industrie musicale," cited. It should be noted that the *earmarking* of certain tracks predates TikTok. Mariah Carey's *"All I Want for Christmas Is You"* (1994), recurrently associated with the Christmas season, is one of the most emblematic examples. However, our focus here is on cases where the process originates from users' spontaneous appropriation rather than from a deliberate positioning strategy by a record label.

[62] Murray Stassen, "Is old music really exploding on tiktok, or has our definition of 'catalog' become outdated?," *Music Business Worldwide*, August 1, 2022, https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/is-old-music-really-exploding-on-tiktok.

[63] Murray Stassen, "'Nearly 3 out of every 4 on-demand audio streams is coming from music that's 10 years old or younger,'" *Music Business Worldwide*, January 31, 2023, https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/nearly-3-out-of-every-4-on-demand-audio-streams-is-coming-from-music-thats-10-years-old-or-younger.

[64] *Ibid.*

[65] Chartmetric, "Chartmetric Music Industry Trends | H1 2022," cited. Chartmetric classified all tracks in its database that received more than 10,000 TikTok posts according to their release dates.

[66] Murray Stassen, "'Nearly 3 out of every 4 on-demand audio streams is coming from music that's 10 years old or younger,'" cited.

[67] This logic is also emphasized in the "Artist-Centric" compensation model implemented by Deezer in 2023. Deezer, "Universal Music Group and Deezer Launch the First Artist-Centric Streaming Model," Deezer Newsroom, September 6, 2023, https://newsroom-deezer.com/fr/2023/09/universal-music-group-et-deezer-lancent-le-premier-modele-de-streaming-musical-centre-sur-lartiste-artist-centric.

[68] Spotify for Artists, "Super listeners," July 2023, https://fanstudy.byspotify.com/edition/super-listeners. It should be noted that this marketing regime, in which a small segment of the audience generates a significant share of a sector's revenue, is by no means unique to the music industry. It can also be observed in other fields, such as sports, the film industry, or the video game industry—for instance, in the phenomenon known as "whaling," where high-spending players are called "whales".

[69] According to Luminate, superfans are those who interact with an artist and their content in at least five different ways: streaming, social media engagement, purchasing physical media, buying merchandise, and attending concerts. Jaime Marconette, "Why Are Super Fans So Valuable?," *Luminate*, August 8, 2023, https://luminatedata.com/blog/why-are-super-fans-so-valuable.

[70] Goldman Sachs, "Music Streaming Services Are on the Cusp of Major Structural Change," July 31, 2023, https://www.goldmansachs.com/insights/articles/music-

streaming-services-are-on-the-cusp-of-major-structural-change.

[71] Murray Stassen, "'Nearly 3 out of every 4 on-demand audio streams is coming from music that's 10 years old or younger,'" cited.

[72] François-Xavier Devetter and Frédéric de Coninck, "Une transformation des temps de travail," *Temporalités* 16 (2012), https://doi.org/10.4000/temporalites.2304.

[73] Jason Joven, "Oldies but Goodies: Streaming Makes Catalogue Records New Again," *Chartmetric*, November 19, 2018, https://hmc.chartmetric.com/oldies-but-goodies-streaming-makes-catalogue-records-new-again.

[74] Edouard Gardella, "L'urgence sociale comme chronopolitique. temporalités et justice sociale de l'assistance aux personnes sans-abri en france depuis les années 1980," PhD diss., École normale supérieure de Cachan, 2014, https://shs.hal.science/tel-04885131v1.

[75] Sonia Rao, "Record Labels Want Viral TikToks. Artists Are Pushing Back," *The Washington Post*, May 25, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2022/05/25/record-labels-want-viral-tiktoks-artists-are-pushing-back.

[76] Odile de Plas, "Le foreverisme, ou quand la culture pop se momifie pour faire plus de profits," cited.