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For the love of music

I've always hated the idea that the quality of music depends on the equipment used or the skills of the artist, and on top of that, the idea that music can be measured with any sense of objective quality at all. I, as a musician, even find myself falling victim to the exact idea which I hate, feeling like if I could just have this tool, or have this skill, then my music would be good. My music which I look back on most favorably is that which I made quickly, with limited skills, tools, or standards. Music which, by many definitions, is not good. Bad music does not exist. As with any art, the quality of some piece of music is entirely subjective; any music can be good, and any artist can make good music, regardless of skill, equipment, or limitations.

Now, don't get me wrong, there is music that I think is awful. There is music that I will point to and say "Wow! This is *horrible*." But my opinion is subjective; I have tastes and ideas separate from everyone else, and to say that some piece of music is objectively bad—and to shame others for liking it—simply because *I* don't like it feels like a rather narrowminded way of approaching art.

First, what even is "bad" music? We might say that music is bad if it is unoriginal, has technically unskilled musicians, is not clearly recorded, has cliché lyrics, etcetera, but in reality, none of that makes it objectively bad. When it comes to describing art, "good" and "bad" are terms that have little meaning, despite being frequently used. For something to be bad, it must be bad *for* something. As the purpose of music is to be enjoyed, if we were say that some music is bad, that would mean that it is bad for enjoying. But once again, enjoyment exists as an individual relationship between a person and a thing, not as a universal attribute of that thing.

Second, an important consideration when it comes to the idea of what might make art "good" or "bad" is the culture that surrounds it. In many ways, culture acts as a bridge between art itself and those who create and experience it. The expectations, conventions, and themes of most art are heavily influenced, if not entirely defined, by the culture surrounding it. Additionally, culture largely dictates what we consider "bad art," for example: in the 1920s, when jazz was in its infancy, it was considered by some not to be simply bad, but downright harmful. Henry Ford, of Ford Motor Company fame, had articles published in his newspaper, The Dearborn Independent, claiming jazz was "musical slush," "Monkey talk, jungle squeals, grunts and squeaks and gasps suggestive of cave love," and a plot made up by Jewish people to infect American popular music ([source](#)).

Harry Aslinger, the commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics between 1930 and 1962, saw jazz as a genre linked to smoking cannabis, and a threat to public health. Aslinger persecuted singer Billie Holiday starting in 1939, until her arrest in 1947. After her release in 1948, Holiday was banned from singing in any jazz clubs in the United States, with the reasoning that "listening to her might harm the morals of the public." ([source](#)) This hatred and fear towards a genre now beloved, and regarded as extremely culturally important, was a clear effect of a culture of the time, a culture with strong roots in bigotry and traditionalism. If some music, or piece of art in general, is widely perceived as "good" or "bad," consider what effect culture has on that public perception.

Third, the amount that one's equipment matters is entirely overemphasized when it comes to making a great song. Many incredibly influential, successful, and beloved artists have created their music with minimal equipment and incredible dedication. One example of this—and a personal inspiration of mine—is Tom Jenkinson, better known as Squarepusher, and famous for his complex electronic compositions and virtuosic bass playing. [Jenkinson sequenced all of his work until 2001 on a Roland DR-660](#), a fiddly non-event of a drum machine in a line-up of machines meant for guitarists to jam along to until they find a real drummer to play with. For comparison, Richard D. James (aka Aphex Twin), an artist frequently discussed in conversations of electronic music from the 1990s and lauded for his similarly fast and complex compositions, sequenced much of his music with vastly superior computer sequencers. [A quote from Jenkinson](#) which I love, and wholeheartedly agree with is: "My advice to anyone who's reading this would be: 'Don't worry about what I've got. Don't worry about what anyone else has got. Take whatever's in your studio and make music. The most important thing is that you keep that free flow of ideas. Keep pushing your imagination. If you can only afford two bits of gear... fine! Push them as far as they'll go.' "

Three other artists who made music with great limitations are Django Reinhardt, Mdou Moctar, and J Dilla. Reinhardt, a jazz guitarist, was 17 when he suffered severe burns across much of his body, losing the ability to use two of his fingers on his left hand. Despite this, Reinhardt dedicated himself to relearning guitar, and lived as a jazz guitarist until his death in 1953 at age 43. Nearly 70 years later, Django Reinhardt is considered one of the best and most influential guitarists ever to live ([source](#)).

Not all limitations are physical, though. Mdou Moctar is a skilled guitarist from a small, religious, village in central Niger, where secular music was heavily looked down upon. As a child, he built his first instrument out of wood and bicycle cables. It was some years later he bought a real guitar, teaching himself in secret, as his family did not approve of him becoming an artist. Moctar found his fame nationally through the sharing of MP3 files between cellphones, and worldwide once his song "Tahoultine" was released on the compilation album "Music from Saharan Cellphones, Vol. 1" ([source 1](#), [2](#)).

Some artists, like J Dilla, made great music despite both physical and technical limitations. James Dewitt Yancey, better known as J Dilla, recorded his final album, "Donuts," in a hospital during the final months before his death. Suffering from a rare blood disease, Dilla was laid up in bed, unable to walk and barely able to talk, with nothing more than a small turntable, limited sampler, and computer for saving his work. Dilla would work on his music until his hands were too swelled and painful to continue, then asking his mother to massage his fingertips so he could finish his album. Donuts was released on Dilla's 32nd birthday, February 7th, 2006, 3 days before he died. Donuts, the 31 track album, is considered to be his masterpiece, and one of the greatest hip hop albums ever produced ([source](#)).

Fourth, many artists make great (beloved, influential, interesting, etc.) music despite having much technical skill at all. Very few find any sort of commercial success, but often end up inspiring some of the musical artists who do find massive success. Daniel Johnston, Captain Beefheart, The Shaggs, Wesley Willis, and Jandek all fit into the category of "outsider music," music which usually comes from a place of musical naivete and wild creativity. Many outsider musicians suffer from mental illness (Daniel Johnston and Wesley Willis are examples of this), while others seem to lack the musical skill to create music which is considered traditionally good (The Shaggs, Jandek). Despite their relatively low commercial success, many mainstream artists have found inspirations in their work. Nirvana's Kurt Cobain cited The Shaggs and Daniel Johnston as being some of his bigger influences. Captain Beefheart and his magic band were an inspiration for the Talking Heads, Jeff Buckley, PJ Harvey, Red Hot Chili Peppers' John Frusciante, and more. Outsider music is often unlike anything else, from Jandek's haunting *Ready for the House*, an album of off-key singing over a single out of tune guitar chord, to Daniel Johnston's lo-fi, child-like *Hi, How Are You?*, to the 28 songs of Captain Beefheart's brash, surreal, avant-garde blues-rock on *Trout Mask Replica*. These albums could easily be labelled "bad" upon first listen, but have found their spot in the hearts and minds of many eclectic listeners.

Finally, if you love music, and you really try to make music, you can't make a bad song, no matter the limitations. It might be boring, it might be poorly mixed, it might have cliché lyrics, it might be out of tune, abrasive, annoying, and hated, but it *cannot* be bad. There is something uniquely human about "flawed" art which makes it so unique and beloved. Make music, not for success, money, glory, fame, or prestige, but for the love of music itself.