Discogs.com

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Abstract
Discogs is a large comprehensive community-contributed music discography Web site. It has become a pre-eminent Web resource for identifying physical manifestations of music releases thanks to its very large free database of highly detailed metadata. Users can use the metadata to create and share information about their collections as well as to buy and sell precise versions of music releases via its separately contained third-party marketplace. Metadata is primarily built around the release/album rather than around individual songs, which has a tendency to obscure more complex relationships between items and contributes to an occasionally confusing browsing environment. However, the site’s newly improved search engine allows for free-text and phrase searching, and does a good job of effectively getting searchers “in the ballpark” of what they seek. Overall, Discogs is useful for anyone looking to precisely identify, locate, buy, sell, or appraise the value of physically recorded media.

Pricing Options
N/A

Product Description
Discogs is a free Web site offering a large, publicly accessible database of crowd-contributed discographic metadata representing more than 5.3 million unique music releases spanning recorded history in a wide range of formats, genres, and styles. Registered users can edit and contribute information to the database and use the metadata to manage and share representations of their personal collections. As the database is completely crowd-contributed, detailed submission guidelines, guided forms, and a review system are provided to ensure quality control. Discogs’ metadata is also available to third-party applications via API functionality.

Utilizing the metadata from the database, Discogs offers a separate third-party marketplace where users can accurately identify, buy and sell very specific versions of new and used physical media. Discogs charges sellers an eight percent commission on each sale, presumably allowing it to operate as an otherwise free service without subjecting registered users to advertising.

The third major component of Discogs is its user community. Discogs offers thousands of community group discussion pages, mostly on music-related topics, and a range of help forums where users and staff interact regarding the workings of the site.

TABLE 1 Available Music Formats, Database Versus Marketplace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Marketplace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Items</td>
<td>5,380,025</td>
<td>18,742,160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDs</td>
<td>1,587,412</td>
<td>4,026,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPs</td>
<td>2,804,637</td>
<td>14,366,239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>987,976</td>
<td>349,501</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HISTORY AND SCOPE
Discogs is privately owned by Zink Media and was founded in 2000 by its CEO, Kevin Lewandowski, a music fan and software developer. It was designed as a place where users could share discographic information about electronic music. Five years later, Discogs launched its marketplace. Over time, the number of genres and styles of music represented in the database and marketplace expanded. Today, releases can be found in 15 broad Discogs-specific genres and in more than 400 additional style categories encompassing all of recorded music from Edison scrolls to CDs (Table 1).

Discogs is notable for its extensive coverage of vinyl records—more than 3.2 million of the 5.2 million releases in the database as of this writing. (The Web site’s logo uses an image of a vinyl record as the “o” in “Discogs.”) This coverage is likely because the vinyl format is the longest-running physical format in the history of recorded music and because of its recent resurgence in popularity. Both the database and marketplace are international, with releases and sellers originating from countries around the world.

AUDIENCE
Collectors, buyers and sellers of physical music releases compose the core audience for Discogs. The site’s database, marketplace, and community are valued by users looking to identify information about specific physical releases and to help appraise them for rarity and value. For librarians, Discogs can serve as a useful resource for cataloging, collection development and assisting researchers with questions pertaining to music and the recorded domain. For catalogers, Discogs’ large dataset contains an extensive amount of cross-referenced information about artists, contributors, record labels, and publishers, as well as release dates and formats. For collection managers, Discogs’ marketplace offers current and historical sales information for specific physical releases, which is useful for those making acquisition, weeding, and shelving decisions, enabling them to quickly assess the value of specific items.

While the database contains information about unofficial releases, it does not generally include information about home recordings, sheet music, bootlegs, and similar items.
Once a user has signed in, the Discogs home page becomes a dashboard providing access to the site’s many features. Here, users can find links enabling them to create and manage representations of their collections, identify wanted items, and create custom lists of releases. Users’ lists are linked to individual release pages mentioned in the list (if they are public). Also on the dashboard are links for adding items to the database as well for buying and selling items in the marketplace.

LOOKING UP AN ITEM IN THE DATABASE

A user with a physical manifestation of a music release visits the Discogs Web site and enters some identifying information about the item in the search bar, such as the artist’s name (e.g., Pink Floyd). As the user types, a small drop-down window appears, offering a list of results as it attempts to autocomplete the query. When the user completes the search entry and presses Return, the results are displayed on the main database interface (Explore) page.

Every item in Discogs falls into one of four main category tabs: Release, Master Release, Artist, or Label. On the left menu, these categories can be filtered by genre, style, format, country, and decade. The filter options change depending on the category of the item being viewed. Filter options are not generally searchable alone nor are they inversely filterable by category.

The first Pink Floyd result leads to an artist profile page for the group, displaying the names of the group members, aliases of the group’s name (e.g., The Screaming Abdabs), and variants of the group’s name (e.g., Пинк Флоид). A hyperlinked discographic list displaying each of the group’s releases (e.g., albums and singles) and artwork follows, with more filter options presented to the left. Here, the user can select the album in hand—for example, *Dark Side of the Moon*—which leads to a Master Release category page dedicated to that album (Figure 2).

The Master Release page for *Dark Side of the Moon* displays the album’s artwork as well as the genres and styles associ-
is derived from adding the number of items in each of the four categories, even though the Release category is a subset of the Master Release category.

A closer look at the individual results on the Explore page reveals that they are not presented as singular links to singular result pages (Figure 5). Instead, two separate hyperlinks appear right next to each other within the same result, leading to two entirely different pages: a release page and an artist page. A click on the wrong link can easily lead one astray.

Release pages also include release-specific credits, such as composer, producer, and engineer. In Discogs, contributing personnel with such nonprimary roles are categorized as artists in their own right.

On the Release page, one can see that artists are connected to other artists within Discogs, which is designed to allow for discovery, however the database’s display sometimes makes this difficult (Figure 4).

For instance, consider the prolific mastering engineer, Bob Ludwig. A search for him in Discogs returns a dedicated artist page listing more than 3,400 releases associated with him but without any information about the primary artists. The user must individually select each release to see the primary artist.

This issue stems from the fact that the Discogs database is, at its most basic level, devoted to releases. Other access points, such as artist and label, are all ultimately subject to the release category, which is the basis upon which all other relationships are built. This structure results in some navigational issues and confusing numbers.

NAVIGATING THE DATABASE

The Explore page indicates that there are 10.2 million items in the Discogs database. This number is inflated, as it

FIGURE 3 Master Release Page

FIGURE 4 Release Page
Musical genres and styles in Discogs are not exclusive. This makes sense, considering that it’s possible for a piece of music to span more than one genre or style. However, it isn’t immediately clear how an individual release might have two different formats. In some cases, when one clicks on a release in one format, the formats filter shows other formats of what appears to be a single-format item. This is presumably due to some releases being offered in package form (e.g., a box set) containing multiple formats. Thus, the numbers presented for such parameters are best viewed as being rough upper bound estimates.

CONTRIBUTING TO THE DATABASE

If a user cannot find an item after searching for it in the database, the user may decide to create a new release and contribute it to the database by using the Add Release form on the Submissions tab on the site’s dashboard (Figure 6).

The Add Release form allows users to input a rich array of metadata and to upload images of the release. General and highly specific guidelines for making contributions to the database are provided. Contributors are encouraged to have a physical copy of the release being cataloged in hand and to cite trustworthy sources when adding information. Users are also encouraged to associate the release with the correct artist, as multiple artists sometimes share the same name.

Discogs allows for such authority ambiguities via its Artist Name Variation field, which allows users to bring together differing versions of artist names so that they all link to the same artist profile page.

Discogs does not have unique cataloging guidelines for classical music releases, and as a result, composers as well as performers all appear in the Artist field, which results in long lists of individually hyperlinked names associated with release titles for this genre.

Users can associate releases with any of 15 standardized genres as a starting point and then choose from among more than 400 styles. The Discogs documentation indicates that the number of styles offered is limited to keep the user interface manageable. Users can request the addition of new styles via the user forums.

Users who contribute or edit releases in the database are awarded rank points to their profile—three for a full submission, one for an edit or a photo submission, and one for a release review. It is possible to browse users based on number of points, but beyond...
that, the purpose of the points is unclear.

QUALITY CONTROL
As the crowd-contributed database is subject to questionable cataloging, Discogs provides a peer-review mechanism; the quality of each submission is rated by more senior users. Discogs selects users for this role via an undisclosed algorithm based on contribution activity. Selected users can rate user submissions on a scale ranging from “correct and complete,” to “entirely incorrect.” Submissions needing revisions include a red mark on their release pages and in search results.

Submissions voted as “entirely incorrect” are reverted to a draft version and removed from the search results. Contributors with many negative votes are placed on a probationary status called the Contributor Improvement Program.

Given the preponderance of search results displaying the Needs Vote indicator, there appears to be a backlog of releases in need of votes. There is even a dedicated forum page hosted by Discogs staff where users can request that voters consider their submissions.5

APPRAISING ITEMS IN THE MARKETPLACE
For users looking to buy, sell or assess the value of a particular physical release, the Discogs Marketplace offers a large dataset of historical price information. One can see the average, median, highest, and lowest prices the item has sold for. It is also possible to assess the value of an entire collection of different releases (Figure 7).

The marketplace is accessible via Discogs’ persistent navigation pane. Selecting it activates a drop-down menu providing genre, style, and format choices, as well as links for sellers. Selecting All Items leads to the main marketplace interface, which includes many of the same filter options seen on the Explore interface along with marketplace-specific parameters (e.g., Seller, Media Condition, Price).

While there is no auction function, the marketplace is similar to eBay in that registered users can buy and sell items and accumulate feedback scores that are displayed on their user profiles. Transactions are initiated when a buyer commits to making a purchase and agrees to the seller’s shipping terms. The buyer and seller are connected through the Discogs messaging system.

The pages for individual items for sale are similar to database Release pages, except that users can add marketplace items to their shopping carts. Users can see the price and condition of an item, along with the seller’s feedback score and shipping terms. Users can also find more copies for sale. Discogs supports Goldmine’s internationally recognized media grading standard for describing the physical condition of media for sale and offers detailed examples.6

Those interested in selling items are given a column of choices allowing them to list items for sale, manage their orders, view inventory, manage payments to Discogs, and view their “store”—a page playing their items for sale and seller information. As noted, sellers must pay an eight percent commission to Discogs. Discogs invoices sellers once per month.

To estimate the total market value of a collection, users choose the Collection option on the drop-down menu at the top right side of the page and then select the View Statistics icon.

In contrast to the database search results, Discogs Marketplace search results present each item as a single link that combines the artist and release title.

THE DISCOGS COMMUNITY
Discogs users have access to thousands of community discussion groups, primarily consisting of threads related to music and recording topics. The site also provides forums where users and Discogs staff can discuss topics regarding the site’s functionality. Discogs staff members post updates here regarding the database, the marketplace and other development initiatives, such as the site’s API.

Another community component of the site is the ability to mark other users as friends. This is not the type of friendship one might find on Facebook, where there is an invitation and a mutual connection. On Discogs, adding someone as a “friend” simply adds that person’s recent activity to one’s dashboard and involves no interaction between the parties. In fact, it’s possible for users to be friends with someone on Discogs without knowing it.

Discogs has a blog where staffers (28 as of this writing) post relevant news, announcements, and links to music mixes. Here, an electronic music editorial voice is evident in the form of monthly mix posts. Recent announcements include the launch of Vinyl Hub, a new Discogs site that is attempting to map every record store in the world, and detailed technical information about the site’s recent search engine upgrade.

SEARCH ENGINE
In October 2014, Discogs upgraded its search engine platform to the open source ElasticSearch, replacing the previous Solr search platform. This change vastly improved the relevance of search results. Before the upgrade, search results for well-known artists such as The...
Beatles would return obscure releases that perhaps contained the word “Beatles” but were otherwise unrelated to the band. ElasticSearch allows Discogs to assign more weight to popular items, providing more relevant search results.\(^7\)

The new search engine supports full-text phrase searching as well as the Boolean operators AND and NOT. Multiple terms in the search box are treated as if linked by AND. Adding a minus symbol prior to a term excludes it from the search. The system does not appear to allow for OR searches. The search engine is strict and does not pluralize search terms. A search for “Dancing in the Street” returns a completely different set of results than does “Dancing in the Streets.”

As the user searches, visual building blocks appear on the side of the screen in both the database and marketplace, representing the filters being applied to the results. The ability to search within results is not supported on the main database page but is possible on artist pages.

Discogs also allows users to enhance the search mechanism associated with their accounts by adding Grouped Search to their settings. This is done via the Labs option within the Settings category on the utility menu at the top of the screen. This option displays search results grouped by category and is useful for distinguishing between artists with the same name. Discogs’ convention for handling such ambiguity is to add a number after the artist’s name in the order in which the item was added to the database, for example, *Felt* and *Felt (2)*.

An advanced search option allows for precise field searching. This option does not appear on the home page but is available from the drop-down menu and results page once the user has already performed a search. A “Help on searching” link is available near the advanced search link along the left side of the page, but some of the information it presents is incorrect. For example, the help advises, “To get to the Advanced Search, just click the search icon when there is nothing entered in the search box.” In fact, clicking there returns the user to the Explore page.

Discogs’ new, improved search capabilities have not yet extended into the user groups pages. Individual groups can be searched once selected, but it is not currently possible to search the full text of all user groups. Full-text searching does work across all of the forums.

HELP

The Discogs help page is accessed via a menu at the bottom of the screen. This page offers a visual menu of icons for categories, including a list of the most popular choices.

BRIEF COMPARISON TO SIMILAR PRODUCTS

Discogs is one of five major silos of music metadata. Three of these are proprietary (AllMusic Group, Gracenote, and EchoNest), licensing access to data as a service to other companies, such as Apple, Rhapsody, and Spotify. Discogs is one of only two open sources for music metadata. The other is MusicBrainz.\(^8\)

Like Discogs, MusicBrainz is an entirely community-contributed metadata repository, with detailed guidelines for contributing and a peer-review mechanism for submissions. As of this writing, MusicBrainz contains 1,373,888 releases\(^9\) compared to 5,380,025 on Discogs.\(^10\)

MusicBrainz is an entirely open-source project, founded in 2000 in response to the commercial takeover of CDDB (CD database), which was a large, free, crowd-contributed music metadata project. CDDB was taken over by the company that eventually became Gracenote.\(^11\)

Like CDDB, MusicBrainz is designed to identify metadata for digital files, such as those taken from CDs, which for many years were sold without any attached metadata.\(^12\) The most notable and popular feature of MusicBrainz is its Picard tagger application, which allows users to automatically scan their digital music collections and identify tracks that are missing metadata. Picard queries the MusicBrainz database and automatically adds the metadata to the tracks.\(^13\)
TABLE 2  Discogs and Competitors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discogs</th>
<th>Items for Sale</th>
<th>Special Order Option</th>
<th>Alexa Global Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18,725,107</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>1,792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD&amp;LP</td>
<td>“15 Million Vinyl Records and CDs”</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>68,753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemm.com</td>
<td>“15,000,000 Vinyl Records 7,000,000 CDs 4,000,000 Books plus everything else under the sun from over 40,000 Sellers.”</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>148,977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MusicStack</td>
<td>“…millions of out of print vinyl records”</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>65,191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. “Explore on Discogs.”
3. “CD and LP.”
4. “Gemm.”
5. “MusicStack.”

Unlike Discogs, MusicBrainz’ data is structured to treat individual tracks as unique entities (including precise track times), which enables the Picard tagger to work. This structure also enables the creation of highly complex connections between items in the database. For example, in MusicBrainz, a correctly formed search for “Wild Thing” will bring up links to all artists in the database associated with that song: the Wild Ones, the Troggs, Jimi Hendrix, The Standells, X, Tone-L o, Nirvana, and so on. The same search in Discogs would instead return a list of results at the release/album level, which the user would then need to examine further.

It has been argued that MusicBrainz’ best practices, including separate guidelines for cataloging classical music releases, and granularly structured data make it a strong contender for being the basis of a future universally recognized music metadata schema that could be used to identify artist contributions and payment considerations in a digital environment. This structural rigidity makes searching difficult, though. Free-text and phrase searching across fields is not possible in MusicBrainz; instead, users are forced to choose from a set of unintuitive fields.

MusicBrainz is also less useful than Discogs for identifying unique physical objects and the unique information access points associated with them (e.g., artwork variations, pressing numbers, LP runoff matrix etchings).

While both Discogs and MusicBrainz offer publicly available metadata, Discogs is a private company that could conceivably go out of business or worse go the way of CDBD, restricting access to or charging for the use of its data. This does not seem especially likely, considering that Discogs clearly states that its data will always be free. While the Discogs terms of service page indicates that the user license could change at any time and that the information provided there is for personal use only, there is also a link to the terms of service for the Discogs API data. This data is released under a Creative Commons CC0 No Rights Reserved license which allows for free an unrestricted use. Anyone can save it and make it available again in the future should Discogs start charging a fee.

Discogs is different from MusicBrainz in that, aside from being a source of metadata, it is also a functioning marketplace. In this respect, Discogs is a unique resource. There are many music marketplaces on the Web, both general purpose ones, such as eBay and Amazon, as well as large, dedicated sites such as Gemm.com and CD&LP, but the metadata offered in conjunction with items for sale there is neither uniform nor reusable.

In terms of scope, both Gemm and CD&LP claim to have a large number of releases for sale, although both sites allow users to list items that they do not in fact have in their possession. Transactions on both of these sites are brokered differently than at Discogs, with buyers paying the Web site and the Web site paying the sellers. MusicStack is a smaller music marketplace worth mentioning that operates similarly to Discogs, but without the support of a metadata database. Discogs appears to be the top player in the music marketplace market as evidenced by its Alexa score in comparison to other specialized marketplaces (Table 2).

Aside from its value as a useful information source and marketplace, Discogs is interesting in that it is a unique example of a functioning intersection between “commons-based peer production” and commercial enterprise. Both the community- contributed database and the marketplace serve mutually beneficial roles in making unique physical objects digitally identifiable and thus sellable. Librarians looking for detailed metadata and market value information for such media should certainly consider using Discogs in conjunction with other single-purpose Web resources.

**Contract Provisions**

Discogs’ API makes the data freely available without restriction under Creative Commons license CC0.

**Authentication**

While anyone may browse the data, users must register to use the site’s many features.

**Endnotes**


About the Author
Joseph Hartnett is an information services librarian and assistant professor in the Newman Library at Bernard M. Baruch College, City University of New York, where he also earned an M.S.Ed. Previously, he earned an M.L.S. with a concentration in information science from the University at Buffalo, State University of New York.