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Don't you wish there was a radio station that could read your mind and play the music you like?

Well, Pandora.com is your wish come true. This innovative Web radio streams music according to your very own preferences. Simply type in your favorite song or artist and, based on your entry, Pandora streams music it thinks you'll enjoy. Sounds like magic—but the system is more like science. Pandora's group of 50 musicians analyzes an average of 12,000 songs per month with the simple goal of helping you discover music. The process is a little complex, so Pandora's founder, Tim Westergren, was nice enough to break it down for us and share how his experiences led him to invent this very cool tool.

Tim Westergren

Chief Strategy Officer & Founder, Pandora Media, Inc.

Where did the idea for Pandora come from?

As an independent musician I was very aware of how hard it is for artists to find an audience—it's a "feast or famine" business. I wanted to make a difference in that. And as a film composer my job was essentially to figure out the directors' musical preferences, so I became accustomed to analyzing what people liked. It was that combination of experiences that got me to develop the idea for the Music Genome Project.

What is the Music Genome?

It's like musical DNA. We've identified a list of almost 400 musical attributes that collectively describe a piece of music. Every song is measured along each one of those attributes. We consider every little detail of melody, harmony, rhythm, instrumentation, the sound of the voice, and so on. That's the connective tissue that powers Pandora.

Can you give an example of these attributes?

Let's take the voice. We analyze the voice in terms of over 30 attributes. We measure things like the range, the use of vibrato, and the different timbre qualities—that is, whether it's gritty or silky, rich or thin. This way, we can assess which vocal qualities a user likes and suggest other songs with those same qualities.

How long did it take to create the Genome?

I created the very first Genome in almost four months more than seven years ago, but that one had about 600 attributes. Having all those attributes made it too time-

consuming to analyze songs, so it then took another six to eight months to whittle down and refine the Genome. Now it takes us 15 to 40 minutes to analyze each song.

What are your present responsibilities?

I'm kind of the voice and face of the company now, so I spend a lot of time talking with the press and listeners, giving presentations, building the grassroots support for Pandora. I also spend a lot of time on company strategy and our direction and vision.


What do you like most about your job?

I really enjoy talking to listeners and musicians. For almost everybody, music is a very powerful and personal thing—and I get to talk about it with lots of people. I get a lot of satisfaction when someone writes in about a new band they've discovered through Pandora or about a new feature they think we should have.

Which of your skills have you applied to this project?

I was in a few bands, and a band is a lot like a start-up company. Things I learned, like managing and marketing a band, directly apply to my running this business.

What advice can you share from your experiences?

Don't be afraid to experiment. You learn a ton by doing things, whether they succeed or not; the process is just as valuable as the outcome. When you're young, there are a lot of people who will help and support you as you try new things—so don't be afraid. 

—VERONICA DOMINGUEZ-GARCIA



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