As I was browsing through my enormous list of albums one day a few years ago, a fundamental question struck me: where had all this music come from, anyway? I didn't know the answer, and as I researched it, I realized that no one else did either. There had been heavy coverage of the mp3 phenomenon, of course, and of Apple and Napster and the Pirate Bay, but there had been little talk of the inventors, and almost none at all of those who actually pirated the files.

I became obsessed, and as I researched more, I began to find the most wonderful things. I found the manifesto from the original mp3 piracy clique, a document so old I needed an MS-DOS emulator just to view it. I found the cracked shareware demo for the original mp3 encoder, which even its inventors had considered lost. I found a secret database that tracked thirty years of leaks—software, music, movies— from every major piracy crew, dating back to 1982. I found secret web- sites in Micronesia and the Congo, registered to shell corporations in Panama, the true proprietors being anyone's guess. Buried in thou- sands of pages of court documents, I found wiretap transcripts and FBI surveillance logs and testimony from collaborators in which the details of insidious global conspiracies had been laid bare. My assumption had been that music piracy was a crowdsourced phenomenon. That is, I believed the mp3s I'd downloaded had been sourced from scattered uploaders around the globe and that this diffuse network of rippers was not organized in any meaningful way. This assumption was wrong. While some of the files were indeed untraceable artifacts from random denizens of the Internet, the vast majority of pirated mp3s came from just a few organized releasing groups. By using forensic data analysis, it was often possible to trace those mp3s back to their place of primary origination. Combining the technical approach with classic investigative reporting, I found I could narrow this down even further. Many times it was possible not just to track the pirated file back to a general origin, but actually to a specific time and a specific person.

That was the real secret, of course: the Internet was made of people. Piracy was a social phenomenon, and once you knew where to look, you could begin to make out individuals in the crowd. Engineers, executives, employees, investigators, convicts, even burnouts—they all played a role.

I started in Germany, where a team of ignored inventors, in a blithe attempt to make a few thousand bucks from a struggling business venture, had accidently crippled a global industry. In so doing, they became extremely wealthy. In interviews, these men dissembled, and attempted to distance themselves from the chaos they had unleashed. Occasionally, they were even disingenuous, but it was impossible to begrudge them their success. After cloistering them- selves for years in a listening lab, they had emerged with a technology that would conquer the world.

Then to New York, where I found a powerful music executive in his early 70s who had twice cornered the global market on rap. Nor was that his only achievement; as I researched more, I realized that this man *was* popular music. From Stevie Nicks to Taylor Swift, there had been almost no major act from the last four decades that he had not somehow touched. Facing an unprecedented onslaught of piracy, his business had suffered, but he had fought valiantly to protect the industry and the artists that he loved. To my eyes, it seemed unquestionable that he had outperformed all of his competitors; for his trouble, he'd become one of the most vilified executives in recent memory.

From the high-rises of midtown Manhattan I turned my attention to Scotland Yard and FBI headquarters, where dogged teams of investigators had been assigned the thankless task of tracking this digital samizdat back to its source, a process that often took years. Following their trail to a flat in northern England, I found a high-fidelity obsessive who had overseen a digital library that would have impressed even Borges. From there to Silicon Valley, where another entrepreneur had also designed a mind-bending technology, but one that he had utterly failed to monetize. Then to Iowa, then to Los Angeles, back to New York again, London, Sarasota, Oslo, Baltimore, Tokyo, and then, for a long time, a string of dead ends.

Until finally I found myself in the strangest place of all, a small town in western North Carolina that seemed as far from the global confluence of technology and music as could be. This was Shelby, a landscape of clapboard Baptist churches and faceless corporate franchises, where one man, acting in almost total isolation, had over a period of eight years cemented his reputation as the most fearsome digital pirate of all. Many of the files I had pirated—perhaps even a majority of them—had originated with him. He was the Patient Zero of Internet music piracy, but almost no one knew his name.

Over the course of more than three years I endeavored to gain his trust. Sitting in the living room of his sister's ranch house, we often talked for hours. The things he told me were astonishing—at times they seemed almost beyond belief. But the details all checked out, and once, at the end of an interview, I was moved to ask:

"Dell, why haven't you told anybody any of this before?"

"Man, no one ever asked."