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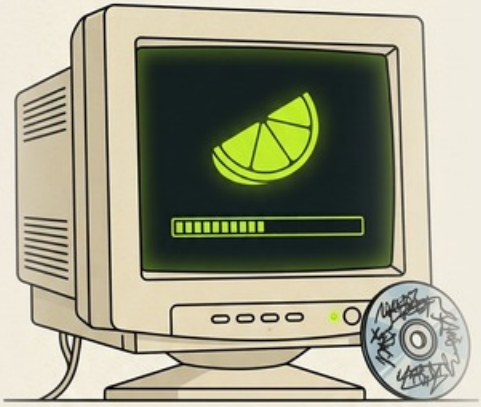
The Last Wild Era of Music

How LimeWire was built, fought, and switched off



COURAGE GARIKAI

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The Last Wild Era of Music
How the biggest music app of the 2000s was built, fought, and switched off

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Chapter 1 · One in five computers

LimeWire was once on almost one in five computers on the planet. In America, more than half of all the music people got from file sharing came through that little green lime — more than every other app combined.

It was truly viral. We did not advertise at all.

But in 2005, LimeWire's founder had a meeting with six executives from the biggest record labels in the world, who were offering to buy his app. They wanted him to sell and turn his users into paying customers. He turned them down. And why wouldn't he? At the time, LimeWire was growing every month. It was making millions, and the record labels looked like they were losing the war.

So how did LimeWire go from fifty million users a month to a $75 trillion lawsuit, and a name that now belongs to a memecoin?

With its crawling green download bars, its fake songs, and its family-computer viruses, LimeWire was the last wild era of music on the internet, before Spotify and iTunes made everything neat and tidy. But the reason LimeWire died is not what you might think. It wasn't the viruses, and the lawsuit was only the last step.

This is the story of what actually happened to LimeWire — how the biggest music app of the 2000s was built, and then switched off.

Chapter 2 · The hedge fund guy who built it

Mark Gorton never looked like a pirate. Engineering degrees from Yale and Stanford, an MBA from Harvard. In 1998 he started Tower Research Capital, a New York firm where computers trade stocks faster than any human could. Music wasn't really his thing. Networks were.

In March 2000, two programmers at Nullsoft, the company behind Winamp, put a new kind of network online: Gnutella. Their owner, AOL, pulled it down the next day. Too late. The code had already escaped.

Gnutella had no center, no main server, no headquarters — nothing to unplug. Every computer simply talked to every other computer. That is the beauty of peer-to-peer systems. We were not running a server.

That May, Gorton's company released a program for that network. By the end of the year it had a name: LimeWire. Gorton later described how he saw it. In his words, it was just generic file-transfer technology — an easy-to-install web server that "cannot possibly be illegal."

At first, nobody cared. Everybody was on Napster.

Then, in 2001, Napster lost in court and went dark. Napster had a central server, so a judge could switch it off with one order. LimeWire didn't have one. Millions of Napster users went looking for a new home, and they found a little green lime.

You couldn't shut down something that had no center. At least, that was the theory.

Sample provided free for review. The complete work is available at https://library.coldcode-si-labs.workers.dev/