

# Which music is best? (well, according to Pitchfork)

Tyrn Carnegie

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## What's going on?

[Pitchfork magazine](#) is a music review website with its archive going back to 1999. Its been my favourite music review website for several years and most mornings I read some of their reviews for recently released music. However, over time I've noticed a couple of things about Pitchfork. First, the music review are generally focused more on indie music. Also, it seems that the less likely it is that I've heard of the artist, the more likely that they're going to receive a good review. After some time being a loyal Pitchfork reader, I had these questions:

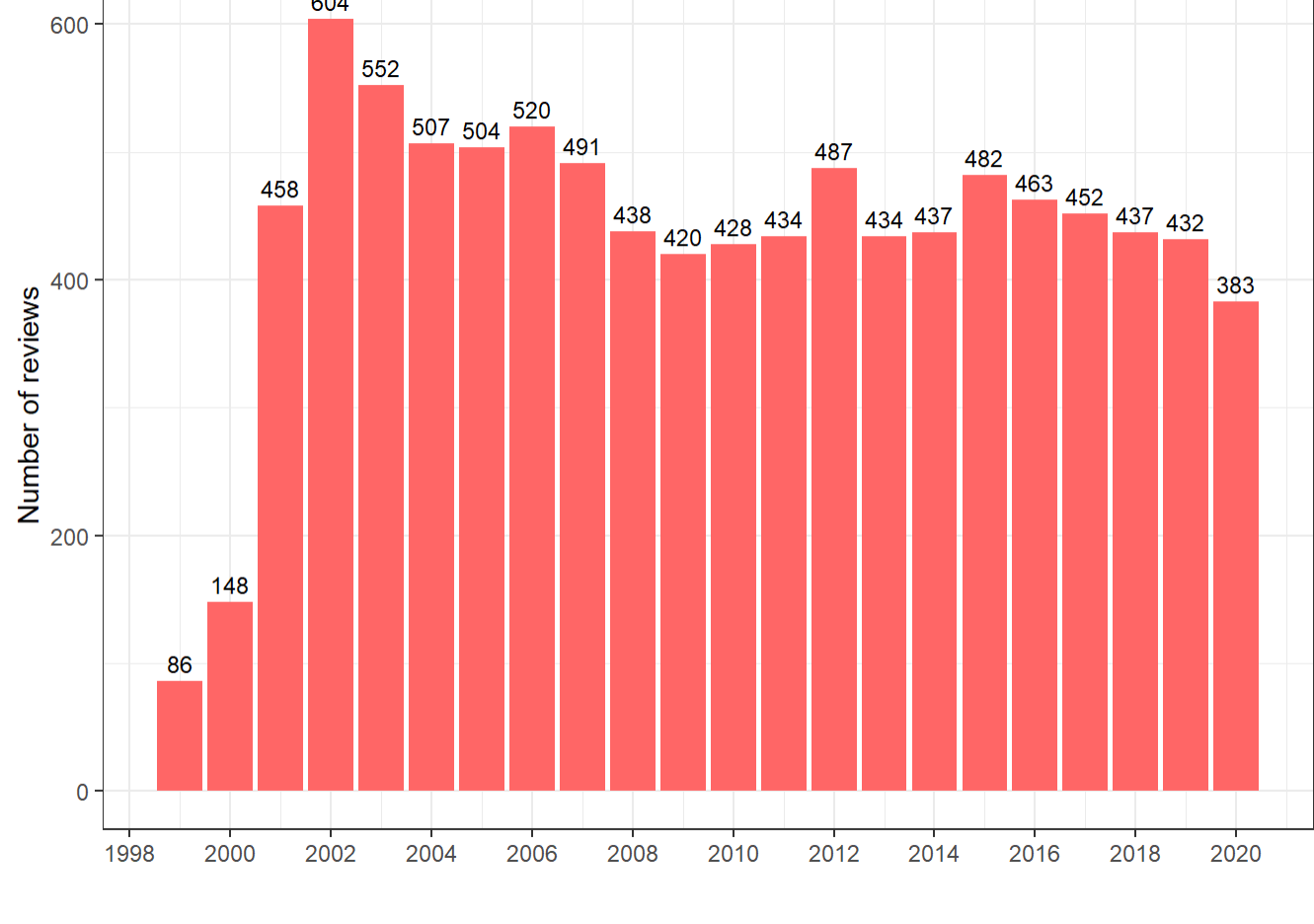
1. Does Pitchfork prefer reviewing certain types of music?
2. Which type of music was most well (and worst well) received?
3. Did music get better over time?
4. Which artists consistently produced the best music?

To get to the bottom of this, I wrote script in R that scraped from each review the:

- artist name
- album name
- genre
- album rating
- year published.

The scraping script produced a dataset of 23163 reviews from 10405 artists. The script I used to scrape the data can be found on [my github](#). The dataset includes 21 years of review data, from January 1999 to December 2020. I excluded all retrospective reviews. I also tried to exclude reviews on all box sets and reissues by cross checking the data against data collected from [Discogs](#).

The figure below shows that the number of reviews increased sharply between 1999 and 2002. From 2005 and 2020, the number of reviews each year steadied to between 383 and 520.

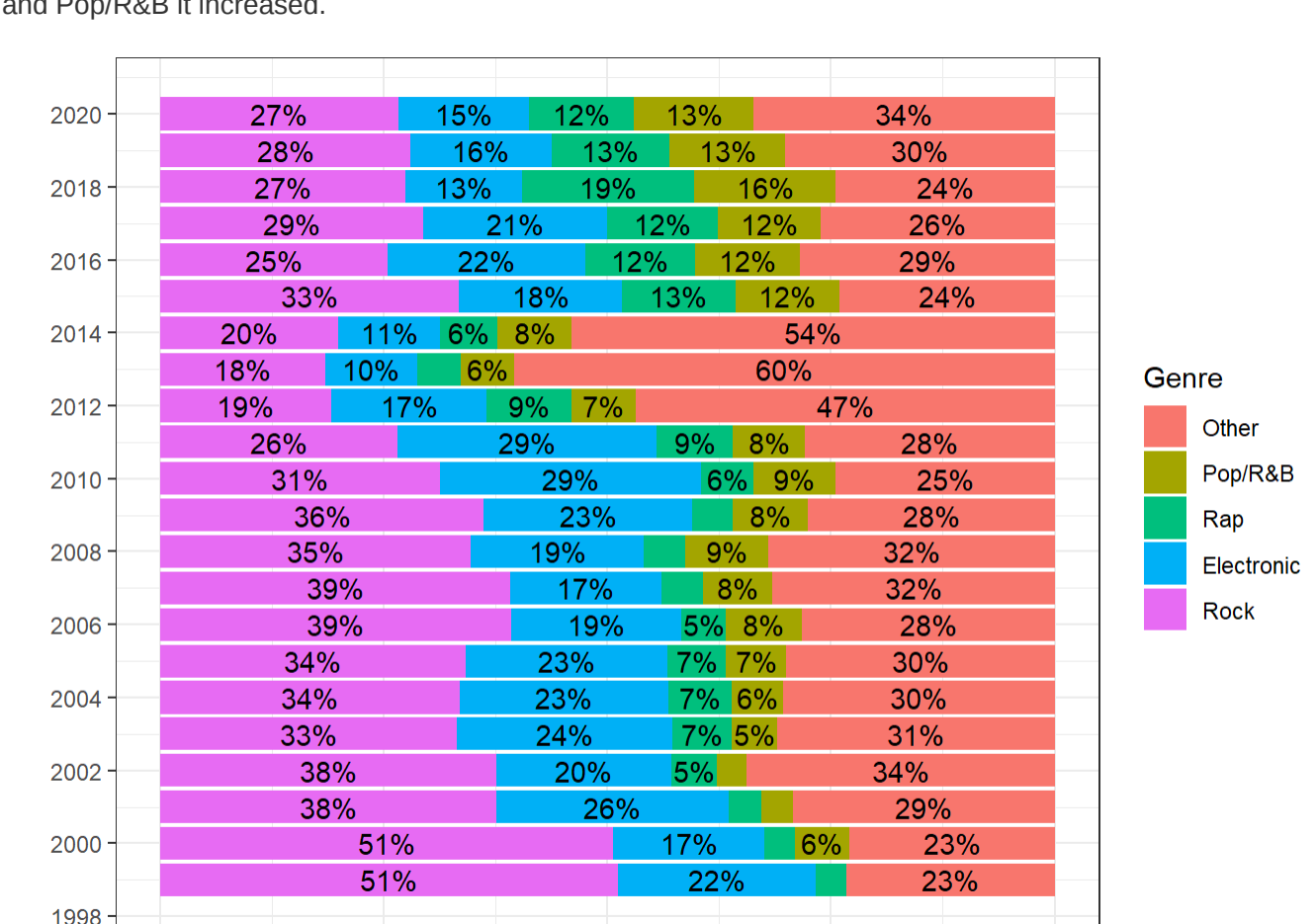


## 1. Does Pitchfork prefer reviewing certain types of music?

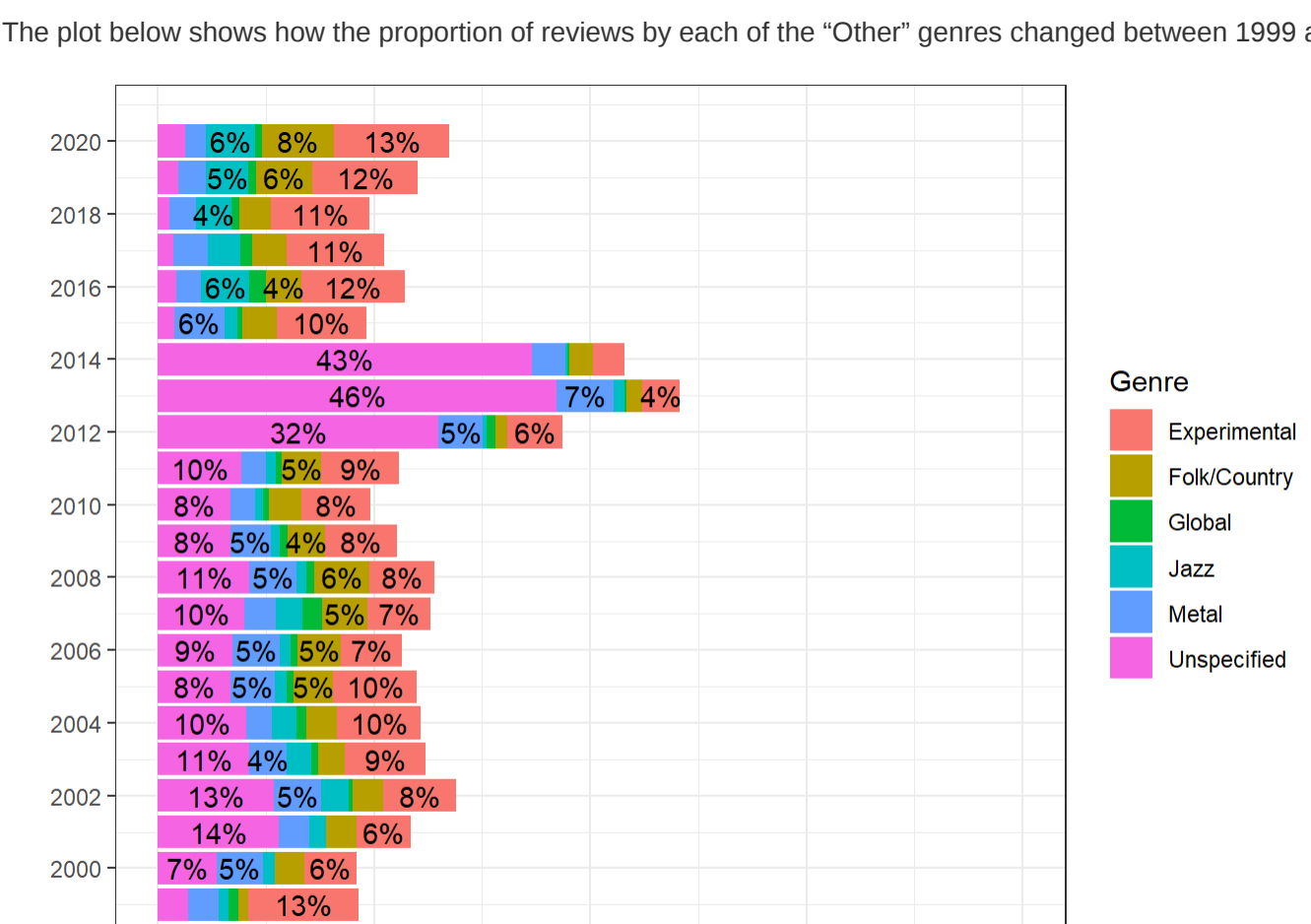
Over the 21 years, the most frequently reviewed genres were Rock, Electronic, Experimental and Rap (well, actually the 4th most common type of review was one where the genre wasn't specified). Notably playing into Pitchfork's focus on indie music, Pop/R&B ranked 6th out 10. The list below provides a breakdown of the genres reviewed with the proportion of reviews in that genre in brackets:

1. (53.76%)
2. Rock (14.49%)
3. Electronic (9.18%)
4. Unspecified (5.61%)
5. Experimental (4.05%)
6. Pop/R&B (3.87%)
7. Rap (3.7%)
8. Metal (1.95%)
9. Folk/Country (1.9%)
10. Jazz (1.09%)

When looking at how the proportion of genres reviewed changed over time, Pitchfork's coverage of Rock declined over the 21 years while for Rap and Pop/R&B it increased.



The plot below shows how the proportion of reviews by each of the "Other" genres changed between 1999 and 2020.



## 2. Which genre of music was the best (and worst) received?

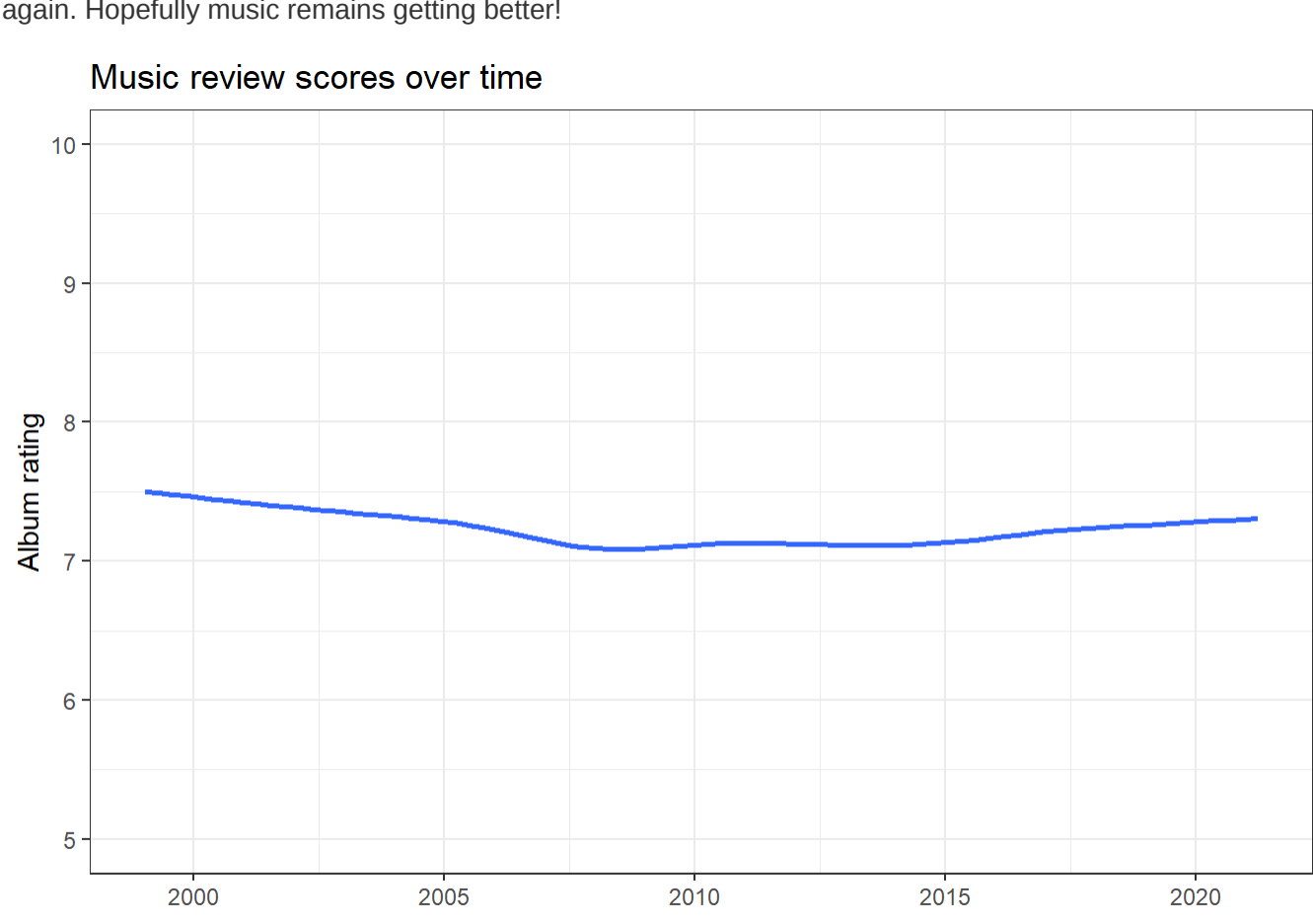
Between 1999 and 2020, the average review score was 6.99. Interestingly, when we rank genres by their average review score, the least commonly reviewed genres had the best reviews on average:

- Jazz (7.43)
- Global (7.35)
- Experimental (7.34)
- Folk/Country (7.13)
- (7.01)
- Metal (6.97)
- Electronic (6.97)
- Rap (6.92)
- Rock (6.88)

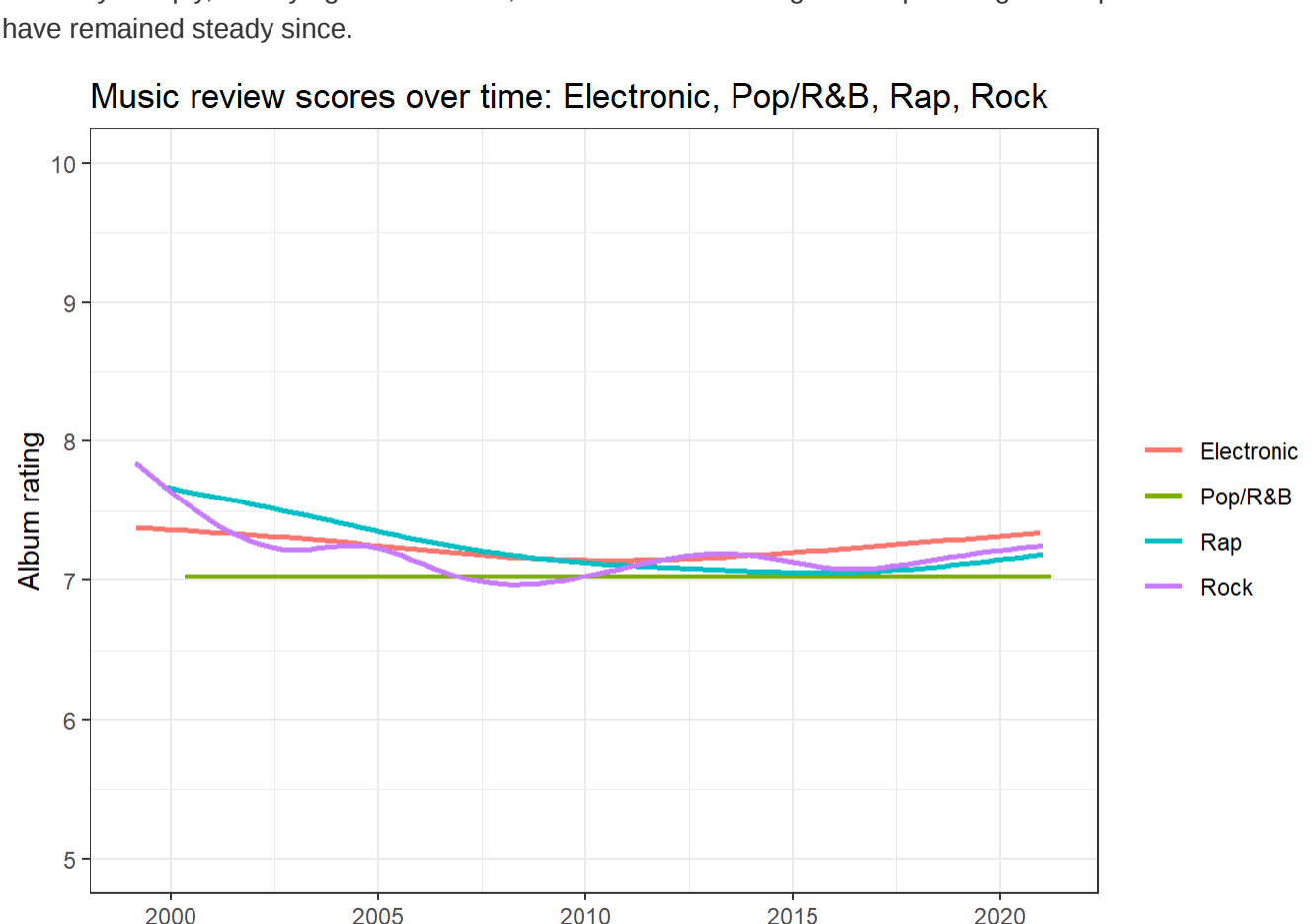
This is likely because when it comes to less popular genres such as Jazz, Global and Experimental, there is a higher likelihood that reviews will ignore lesser known artists, and the more well-known artist are likelier to consistently produce the better music.

## 3. Did music get better over time?

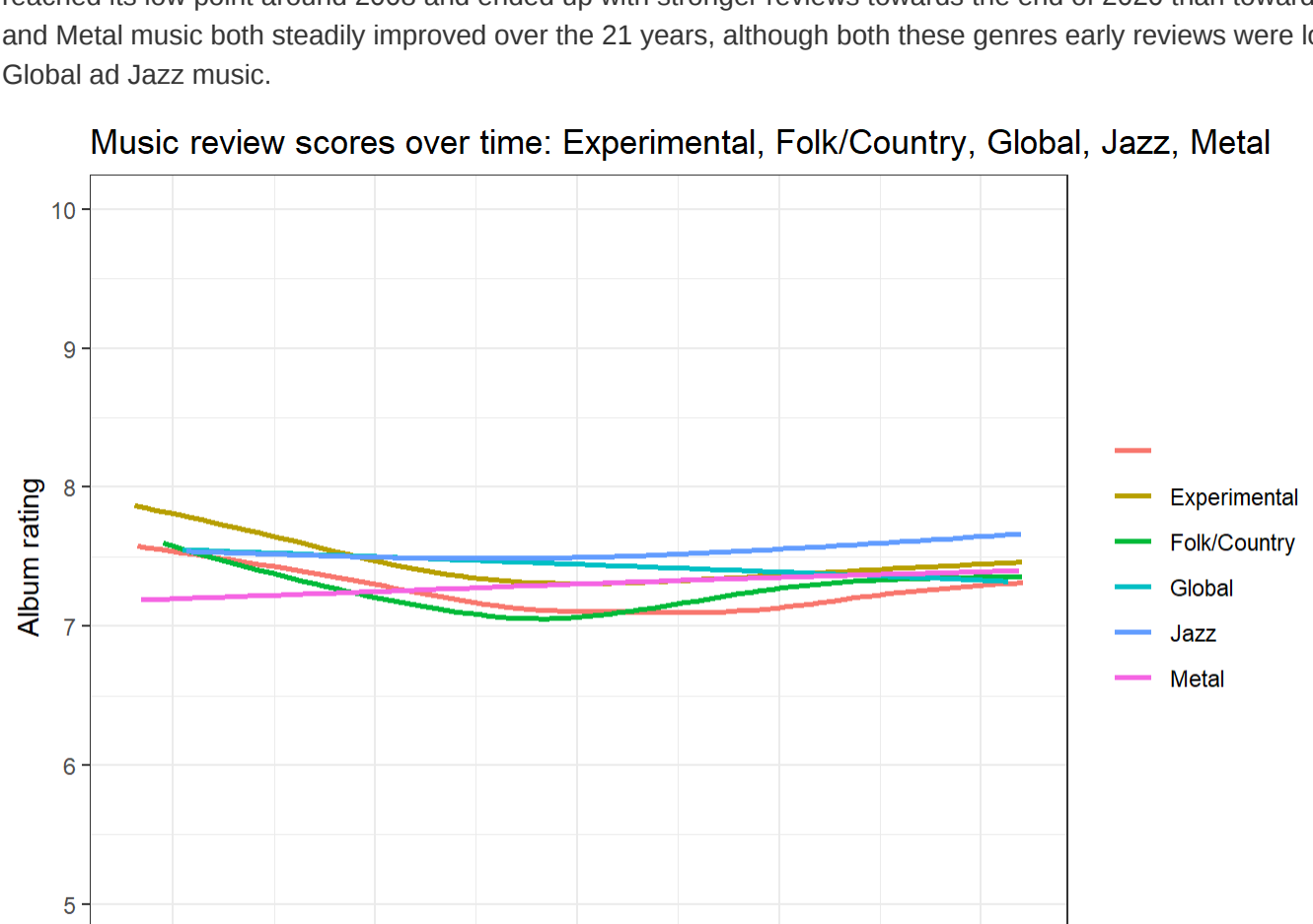
To answer this question, below is a line of best fit that best expresses the relationship between album review scores and release date. The line of best fit was estimated using a Generalised Additive Model (GAM). The plot suggests that overall, music reviews have actually gotten worse between 1999 and 2020. Scores declined from 1999 until 2008, where scores remained steady until around 2014 where they started to improve again. Hopefully music remains getting better!



While overall music review scores declined over time, was this the case for all genres? Do we see some genres actually improve? The graph below shows that over the 21 years Electronic, Rock and Rap had scores that declined whereas Pop/R&B saw a modest improvement. Electronic music reached its low point between 2010 and 2013, and then rebounded to scores almost as high as those it had in 1999. Rock's scores declined relatively sharply, steadying 2007 to 2015, from where scores began to improve again. Rap's scores consistently declined until about 2010 and have remained steady since.



Looking at the remaining genres, Experimental and Global music saw declines in their scores over time. Global music saw a consistent decline over the 21 years, whereas Experimental reached its low point around 2010 and improved somewhat thereafter. Jazz music also saw a decline but reached its low point around 2008 and ended up with stronger reviews towards the end of 2020 than towards the beginning of 1999. Folk/Country and Metal music both steadily improved over the 21 years, although both these genres early reviews were lower than those of Experimental, Global and Jazz music.



## 4. Which artists consistently produced the best music?

To answer this question I ranked each artist by their average album score and only included artists that had released at least three albums. The table below lists the 20 artists with the highest average album scores. The Velvet Underground tops the list (despite not producing any 'new' music in decades), while the relatively unknown Girls and Max Tundra come in at second and third respectively. Notably, several of the artists first produced the music receiving high ratings long ago. These include The Velvet Underground, John Coltrane, The Beach Boys, Miles Davis and Galaxie 500.

Rank	Artist	Top three albums	Genre	# reviews	Average rating
1	The Velvet Underground	Bootleg Series, Vol. 1: The Quine Tapes (2001)   Gold (2005)   The Complete Matrix Tapes (2015)	Rock	3	9.067
2	Girls	Father, Son, Holy Ghost (2011)   Album (2009)   Broken Dreams Club EP (2010)	Rock	3	9.033
3	Max Tundra	Mastered by Guy at the Exchange (2002)   Some Best Friend You Turned Out to Be (2000)   Parallax Error Beholds You (2008)	Electronic   Folk/Country	3	9.000
4	John Coltrane	The Olatunji Concert: The Last Live Recording (2001)   A Love Supreme: The Complete Masters (2015)   Both Directions at Once: The Lost Album (2018)	Jazz	6	8.967
5	Kendrick Lamar	good kid, m.A.A.d city (2012)   To Pimp a Butterfly (2015)   DAMN. (2017)	Rap	5	8.920
6	GAS	BOX (2016)   Nah Und Fern (2008)   Pop (2000)	Electronic	5	8.860
7	Scott Walker	5 Easy Pieces (2003)   The Drift (2006)   Bish Bosch (2012)	Rock	3	8.833
8	Deafheaven	New Bermuda (2015)   Sunbather (2013)   Ordinary Corrupt Human Love (2018)	Metal	3	8.800
9	The Beach Boys	The Smile Sessions (2011)   The Warmth of the Sun (2007)   Love You (2000)	Rock	3	8.800
10	Fuck Buttons	Tarot Sport (2009)   Slow Focus (2013)   Street Horrising (2008)	Electronic	3	8.767
11	Pavement	Quarantine the Past (2010)   Wowee Zowee: Sordid Sentinels Edition (2006)   The Secret History, Vol. 1 (2015)	Rock	3	8.767
12	Joanna Newsom	Ys (2006)   Have One on Me (2010)   Joanna Newsom & the Ys Street Band EP (2007)	Folk/Country	5	8.760
13	Miles Davis	The Complete Birth of the Cool (2019)   The Complete In a Silent Way Sessions (2001)   The Cellar Door Sessions 1970 (2005)	Jazz	9	8.756
14	FKA twigs	MAGDALENE (2019)   LP1 (2014)   M3LL155X (2015)	Electronic   Pop/R&B	4	8.700
15	Tame Impala	Currents (2015)   Lonerism (2012)   Innerspeaker (2010)	Rock	4	8.700
16	The Avalanches	Since I Left You (2001)   Wildflower (2016)   We Will Always Love You (2018)	Electronic	3	8.700
17	Galaxie 500	On Fire (2010)   Today (2010)   Peel Sessions (2005)	Experimental   Rock	5	8.680
18	Sleater-Kinney	Start Together (2014)   One Beat (2002)   The Woods (2005)	Rock	7	8.643
19	Morton Feldman	String Quartet II (2001)   Patterns in a Chromatic Field (2004)   The Viola in My Life (2008)	Experimental	3	8.633
20	Caetano Veloso	Antologia 69-03 (2003)   A Foreign Sound (2004)   Noites do Norte (2000)	Global	3	8.600

## Conclusion