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The Effect of Electronic Music Production and Consumption on Genre

Content

INTRODUCTION

Music has evolved alongside our own evolution throughout time. It has been equipped by humanity across cultures and time. From the Australian Aboriginal practice of Songlines, which recounted important information about their land and culture throughout generations [1], to the modern day, where music genres such as hip-hop are intrinsically linked to propelling minority voices and shining light on political issues [2].

This essay will analyse this constant transformation of music, however, instead applied to a more recent scope, with the technological advancements of the 70s/80s and its profound effects on the evolution of the music industry from that point onward. Specifically, how the industry and music streaming platforms have led to fundamental changes in the reason why we make music, now oftentimes aiming for monetary gain. However, it is also worth acknowledging the advantages these technological developments provided during that time and even now, with accessible music production technology available to a vastly larger population.

These innovations have fundamentally transformed not only how the music industry operates in terms of production techniques and even how music is consumed. The shift towards electronic music production, the increased accessibility of digital tools for home producers, and the rise of streaming platforms have blurred the lines between genres, creating a hybridised musical landscape. Over time, with access to the global internet, traditional definitions of genre have been challenged. The concept of genre has reached a point of convergence or saturation, and in some cases, it has been completely reshaped.

This essay will discuss these influences on genre and the notable outcomes of this change on music and its consumption. I will be focusing on some key Irish artists and composers that demonstrate these changes.

I.   TRADITIONAL ROLE OF GENRE IN MUSIC PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

It can be difficult to define the concept of genre today, as the uses of 'style' and 'genre' are used much more liberally outside of academia. This was not always the case, as initially powerful cultural institutions in society, such as the church in the 17th and 18th centuries, dominated the musical culture of classical music. Regarding classical music, there are clear distinctions between the styles as an overarching category of the music. While genre instead is differentiated by "vocal" and "instrumental". While genre and style in classical music are still complex, the academic and privileged establishment of this music leads to a smaller and more homogeneous group of classifiers [3].

In comparison, the vocabularies and classifications regarding popular music of today are primarily regulated by the music industry in a dialectical relation with local communities. Today, genres have taken on a lineage type of evolution, with the ability to trace their origin to localised neighbourhoods in some cases [4]. This leads to music that can represent larger and more diverse cultural spheres in comparison to the small representation provided by classical music of the past. With access to the internet, people have gained the ability to resonate and appreciate different cultures internationally. This has led to extremely unique influences and incorporations of sound into the music of today.

However, this has also led to significant changes in popular music production, which is now created in a fast, opaque flow of international exchanges and is less stable and isolated than some other musical cultures [3]. A major reason for this is market capitalism. This has led to a change in incentives and has completely changed the landscape of music production. This industry can recognise and reward certain sounds and, in turn, influence both the creativity of musicians and their audiences [5].

II. THE RISE OF BEDROOM PRODUCERS AND ACCESSIBLE PRODUCTION TECHNOLOGY

In some cases, artists who sign with record labels can go on to have their sound be overly polished to appeal to a wider audience. One notable case is the many amazing artists signed to Motown Records, who went on to feel shoehorned into a specific brand as they entered what resembled a factory line of success, much like the labels' namesakes of Motor Town Detroit. For example, Berry Gordy's extreme resistance to Marvin Gayes' release of "What's Going On" represents this mindset of curation, to ultimately appease the white audience they had now procured [6]. While this overbearing control of the output of Marvin Gayes' discography paid off in some cases, this piece of music centred social critiques of the time, representing Gayes' true beliefs, and has gone on to be considered "one of the most important musical works of the 20th century". While Gaye had to fight to release this song, this same struggle fortunately does not obstruct many artists of today.

 This is one of the many advantages that have come with the advent and mainstream accessibility of DAWs (Digital Audio Workstations). This, accompanied by social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, has provided a unique and proficient way to truly find your audience as an artist. With these skills developed, artists can now effectively communicate with traditionally trained producers using DAWs and equipment, allowing their vision to fully come to fruition in the final production.

An apt example of this creative freedom can be seen with Irish 19-year-old artist Liam McKay or signcrushesmotorist who, with over 14 aliases, has amassed over 100 million streams, all while staying completely independent – no manager, no label, no PR. As previously mentioned, this type of inspiration and reach of an artist in rural Donegal would have been considered almost impossible without this unlimited access to global sounds and resources.

However, this is not to say artists now have unlimited access to creative tools; as Liam says in this referenced interview, "limits force creativity" regarding the free trial of Ableton with only 8

tracks available [7]. As interviewer Dylan Murphy points out, this personal exploration of tools actually "informs the music" of the artist, changing the trajectory of the artists' music had they gone down a traditional path of music production education. This can be seen in the attitudes of many bedroom producers, who solely produce music to develop their craft rather than chase fame [8].

Often, independent artists find their start on music platforms such as SoundCloud and Bandcamp. These audio distribution platforms allow for free and easy uploading of music, like the social media platforms, providing a means by which musicians can find their audience independent of recording and publishing companies. These audio platforms have distinct differences from mainstream music streaming platforms. They can be differentiated as "producer-oriented" platforms, as opposed to the "consumer-oriented" mainstream platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music [9].

III.   THE INFLUENCE OF MUSIC STREAMING PLATFORMS ON GENRE PERCEPTION AND CONSUMPTION

There are valid criticisms of these "consumer-oriented" platforms, namely the use of algorithmic recommendation systems for audiences. This has been extremely advantageous to many artists; however, it can also lead to millions of artists being left in a digital shadow. According to Luminate's 2023 Year-End Music Report, 45.6 million tracks had 0 streams in 2023, and 158.6 million tracks received 1,000 plays or less on streaming services last year (statistics represent plays across a range of streaming services, not Spotify) [10].

This is not to say all hope is lost, according to the same Luminate report, with over 7 trillion songs streamed in 2023, which is 33.7% higher than in 2022. This represents an incredible time for music consumption, offering excellent opportunities for both big and small artists across various streaming platforms to gain exposure and earn money from their music [11].

Alternatively, the recommendations system of Bandcamp seems to be entirely editorial rather than algorithmic. This platform instead aims to encourage music producers to upload content rather than focus on the actual consumption of the music to a widespread audience. The digital niche and close-knit community that platforms like Bandcamp can offer, appeal to musicians who have a somewhat independent ethos, those who want to be embedded into the new age of digital music distribution, however, without the incessant over-consumption often pushed by the "platformised" alternatives.

This apparent independent and democratic platform ethos can sometimes be deceitful, for example, in the case of Soundcloud. As discussed in this journal article [9], underpinning the platform's interactivity is the problematic social media "culture of connectivity", where artists feel continuous pressure, both from peers and the platform itself, to solely prioritise increased output and hence increase the platform's user consumption and engagement. This ties into the concept of consumerism and what it means today. There is a colloquial phrase often used regarding "free" content under capitalist structures, "if something is free, you are the product." [12]. The business model behind platforms like SoundCloud depends on the "free" or unpaid labour of the users through the monitoring of users' behaviour and gathering data about music consumption. There are exploitative problems concerning this type of consumption, further explained here [13].

Capital incentives can fundamentally alter genres, for example, in the case of hip-hop. Since the genre's inception in the late 1970s and early 1980s, hip-hop was an authentic and unique Afrocentric genre that quickly evolved to be politically charged, with themes of poverty, racial violence, and depression in African-American communities. It was a musical expression of the socio-economic conditions that these communities were dealing with due to neoliberal capitalism and an even longer history of racial oppression. However, over time, as hip-hop gained traction on the airwaves, it began to become commercialised and co-opted by capitalism. As early as the 90s, more and more rappers started getting signed to major record labels, where they became subject to the incentives of the mass market. These record labels, who ultimately owned the music rights, pushed their artists to make music that was more accessible to as many people as

possible. This diluted the once visceral subject matters of the genre, along with the intricate lyricism, instead veering towards flaunting overly materialistic lifestyles.

While there were, of course, exceptions to the trend of mainstream hip-hop, there was a crucial time of change for the genre with the rise of the internet. As previously mentioned, with platforms like YouTube and Myspace, many talented hip-hop artists who probably would have otherwise stayed underground were able to find followings on the internet and didn't need major labels to be heard. This independence allowed for the artists to control their creative output and message. By the mid to late 2010s, many alternative artists who had started off on the fringe corners of the internet had gradually become the face of hip-hop in the streaming era. One notable example of this is the alternative hip-hop music collective Odd Future, formed in 2007 by Tyler the Creator. This controversial group ultimately propelled the careers of artists such as Earl Sweatshirt and Frank Ocean.

Tyler, the Creator won his first Grammy award in 2020 in the best rap album category for his album "Igor"; however, in his acceptance speech, he aptly criticised the Recording Academy for failing to recognise Black artists in mainstream pop categories when their music spans more than one genre [14]. For an album like "Igor", which is arguably pop music, he said at the time, "…It sucks that whenever we, and I mean guys that look like me, do anything that's genre-bending, they always put it in a 'rap' or 'urban' category,". "I don't like that 'urban' word. To me, it's just a politically correct way to say the N-word. Why can't we just be in pop?". Although he was extremely thankful in the speech, this speaks to the continued racial biases within the industry, especially within the controversial world of music awards.

In another acceptance speech by Tyler at the 2021 BET Hip Hop Awards, he speaks on the power of hip-hop, beginning with paraphrasing Playboi Carti's song "RIP" and the line, "Bought a crib for my mama off that mumblin' shit." He went on to explain that his genre has been able to "change our families' lives, our friends' lives, our lives.". "mumblin' shit" refers to the genre known as Mumble rap or SoundCloud rap, which is a micro-genre of hip-hop that spawned from Soundcloud in the mid to late 2010s. This consists of unclear vocal delivery, giving rise to the name, accompanied by autotune and 808 drums (Roland TR-808). The distorted bass and lack of polish harbours back to the initial creation of hip-hop and has similarly been met with backlash,

often used as a derogatory term even by other rappers. This microgenre went on to impact the wider consensus and opinion of rap music, once again being used as a way for black music and art to be demeaned. Drawing back on what Tyler referred to in his 2020 acceptance speech, oftentimes, these mumble rappers, such as Future, for example, rely on pop melodies and vocal effects. The term can be argued as unnecessarily reductive and does not refer to one specific type of rapping [15]. Instead, this is often used to scapegoat artists in the context of subgenres. This once again demonstrates the dialectic influences of streaming platforms like SoundCloud; these artists gained mainstream access while being confined to their genre and are simultaneously put down by some music critics.

IV.   THE DECLINE OF THE ALBUM FORMAT AND ITS EFFECT ON GENRE AND PERFORMERS

Not only can audio distribution platforms influence the evolution of genres and the creation of subgenres, but they can also be linked to the perceived decline of the album format.

As streaming platforms like Apple Music and Spotify started to dominate music consumption, artists were faced with very new incentives as they had to rely on these platforms to be heard. On these digital streaming platforms, artists are paid based on how many streams they get, with the first 30 seconds of a song counting as a stream. This, by nature, incentivises quantity over quality, and it led to artists, in some cases, abandoning the art of making albums entirely. Instead, producing albums that appear to be incohesive thematically and that are effectively a long collection of singles, in order to maximise the number of streams they get. As well as this, because the first 30 seconds of a song are counted as a stream, artists are also incentivised to start songs immediately with repetitive hooks to catch attention as soon as possible rather than building up to them.

Release concepts ebb and flow over time, as this kind of decline has been seen throughout the mainstream release of music. Mixtapes were once fundamental to hip-hop artists, consisting of a compilation of live recordings of their work over original beats and even remixes. This allowed

artists to avoid the need for extensive monetary studio recording sessions while displaying their skills. However, with the use of sampling in many of these mixtapes, the practice began to die out with the rise of audio streaming platforms, whose algorithms can automatically remove a track and copyright strike it if it's found to have snippets of another song. Chance the Rapper references this almost lost art in his 2016 song "Mixtape". Artists like this provide hope for dying formats and seek to keep this practice alive even through all of the forces acting against them.

There are artists who manage to stay committed to the album format while also engaging in this focus on quantity with a double-album release strategy. As Warner Records GM Jennifer Ivory told *Music Week*, "It will only work with artists if they've got the quality of music," speaking on the band Foals and their ability "to deliver two albums of the same calibre." [16]. Streaming now allows for two thematically linked projects to be released relatively close in time.

One example of an artist changing fundamentally is that of Jorden Adetunji, the Northern Irish singer and rapper who has been nominated for Best Melodic Rap Performance alongside Beyoncé and the Weeknd for his viral TikTok song KEHLANI. Looking at his discography, one can see the transition from the use of his Irish accent, which in turn sort of boxed him into the Irish rap genre, to this more UK-based melodic rap. As the Irish rap genre is somewhat new and unfounded globally, this switch is understandable in order to reach a wider audience, which did, in fact, work.

On the other hand, the artist RÓIS is a composer, vocalist, multi-instrumentalist, and electronic artist from Fermanagh who integrates Irish culture fundamentally into her works. She manages to bring life back to a forgotten Ireland by blending elements of folk, sean-nós, electronics, and jazz harmony. RÓIS' genre-bending sound transports listeners to a different realm, especially regarding her live performances. These live performances are almost choreographed to a tee, with RÓIS (accompanied by a live drummer) integrating at least four instruments along with the use of two Roland SPK4o4 MKII drum machines to reproduce her highly manufactured album live. She manages to transition between heavy concepts of emigration and national identity to light-hearted dance songs. These emotionally evocative pieces are complemented by visuals of old tape recordings of Ireland on-loop. Each performance is exceptionally unique, from her sampling

use of The Angelus to internet memes of the 2000s. These types of performances propagate the album format, allowing artists to replicate their vision live rather than just "playing the hits".

V.   SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN GENRE FLUIDITY, HYBRID GENRES AND LISTENER PERCEPTIONS

As discussed, social media-orientated streaming platforms such as SoundCloud have provided a space for niche hybrids and subgenres to be created and received. This can speak to the sense of individuality that people now seek out when listening to music. The concept of gatekeeping artists has flourished in the context of music on social media platforms such as TikTok. There are, of course, two sides to this, in that fans want their favourite artists to be truly appreciated rather than being effectively exploited by algorithmic engagement. However, there also seems to be an incentive to "gatekeep" these artists to instil the feeling of exclusivity and personal importance within the fan. Now, with seemingly unlimited access to your favourite artists on social media, parasocial relationships have created a sense of entitlement within some fan bases. As previously mentioned, this creates additional pressure on the artist to release music on the basis of quantity rather than quality.

For this reason and many others, some musicians have sought to protect their privacy when creating their art. Anonymity and the use of multiple aliases are becoming more and more prevalent, not only to avoid these parasocial relationships and pressures but also to emphasise the art above all. This has always been an intriguing concept; however, with the rise of social media and cases of home address doxing, for example, this might become critical for some artists going forward.

VI.   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evolution of music, driven by technological advancements and changing modes of consumption, has reshaped the fundamental concept of genre. From its roots in distinct cultural and institutional frameworks, genre has become increasingly fluid, reflecting a convergence of global influences, individual experimentation, and platform-driven consumption. This transition has been both liberating and challenging for artists and listeners alike.

On the one hand, the rise of accessible digital production tools, streaming platforms, and social media has democratised music creation and distribution. Bedroom producers and independent artists can now reach global audiences without the constraints of traditional industry structures. As seen with artists like Liam McKay and RÓIS, this era offers unprecedented opportunities for creative freedom and cultural representation, fostering genre hybridity and innovation.

On the other hand, the commodification of music through algorithm-driven platforms and the decline of cohesive album formats have raised concerns about the dilution of artistic intent. Streaming metrics and market incentives increasingly shape production and consumption trends, often prioritising quantity over quality and favouring mass appeal over niche artistry. These forces not only blur genre boundaries but also create disparities in visibility and recognition for artists.

Despite these challenges, the adaptability of music as a cultural medium continues to shine. Social media has amplified listener engagement, while platforms like Bandcamp offer alternatives to mainstream consumerism. The persistence of genre-bending artists, the revival of formats like mixtapes, and the integration of cultural heritage into modern sounds highlight the resilience and transformative power of music.

In essence, the shifting nature of genre reflects a broader cultural evolution: one where technology, creativity, and community intersect. As music continues to evolve in this digital age, it will remain a vital and contested space for expression, identity, and connection, challenging us to reconsider how we define and consume art in an increasingly interconnected world.

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