

Vaporwave

A E S T H E T I C



Vaporwave is a microgenre of electronic music and an Internet meme that emerged in the early 2010s. The style is defined by its appropriation of 1980s and 1990s mood music styles such as smooth jazz, elevator music, R&B, and lounge music, typically sampling or manipulating tracks via chopped and screwed techniques and other effects. Its surrounding subculture is sometimes associated with an ambiguous or satirical take on consumer capitalism and popular culture, and tends to be characterized by a nostalgic or surrealist engagement with the popular entertainment, technology and advertising of previous decades. It also incorporates early Internet imagery, late 1990s web design, glitch art, anime, 3D-rendered objects, and cyberpunk tropes in its cover artwork and music videos.

Originating as an ironic variant of chillwave, vaporwave was loosely derived from the experimental tendencies of the mid-2000s hypnagogic pop scene. The style was pioneered by producers such as James Ferraro, Daniel Lopatin, and Ramona Xavier under various pseudonyms. A circle of online producers were particularly inspired by Xavier's Floral Shoppe (2011), which established a blueprint for the genre. The movement subsequently built an audience on sites Last.fm, Reddit, and 4chan while a flood of new acts, many operating under online pseudonyms, turned to Bandcamp for distribution. Following the wider exposure of vaporwave in 2012, a wealth of subgenres and offshoots emerged, such as mallsoft, and hardvapour.



Vaporwave found wider appeal over the middle of 2012, building an audience on sites like Last.fm, Reddit, and 4chan. After a flood of new acts turned to Bandcamp for distribution, various online music publications such as Tiny Mix Tapes, Dummy and Sputnikmusic began covering the movement. In September 2012, Blank Banshee released his debut album, Blank Banshee 0, which reflected a trend of vaporwave producers who were more influenced by trap music and less concerned with conveying political undertones. Bandwagon called it a "progressive record" that, along with Floral Shoppe, "signaled the end of the first wave of sample-heavy music, and ... reconfigured what it means to make vaporwave music."

Subgenres with names like "vaportrap," "vaporgoth," and "vapornoise" have soared to subcultural popularity, only to rapidly twist into new forms that are further removed from the style's original features. This rapid proliferation of subgenres has itself become part of the "vaporwave" punchline, gesturing at the absurdity of the genre itself even as it sees artists using it as a springboard for innovation.

–Rob Arcand, Vice

Following the initial wave, new terms were invented, some of which indicate the non-seriousness of the genre. These include future funk, which expands upon the disco/house elements of the genre and mallsoft, which magnifies the lounge influences. Future funk takes a more energetic approach than vaporwave. It incorporates elements of French house, albeit produced in the same sample based manner as vaporwave. Future funk also tends to incorporate elements of 1980s Japanese city pop. Dylan Kilby of Sunbleach Media stated that "[t]he origins of mallsoft lie in the earliest explorations of vaporwave, where the concept of malls as large, soulless spaces of consumerism were evoked in some practitioner's utilization of vaporwave as a means for exploring the social ramifications of capitalism and globalization", and said that such an approach "has largely petered out in the last few years in favor of pure sonic exploration/expression".

In 2015, Rolling Stone published a list that included vaporwave act 2814 as one of "10 artists you need to know", citing their album Birth of a New Day (新しい日の誕生 Atarashi Ni-Tsu no Tanjō).That same year, the album I'll Try Living Like This by Death's Dynamic Shroud.wmv was featured at number fifteen on the Fact list "The 50 Best Albums of 2015", and on the same day MTV International introduced a rebrand heavily inspired by vaporwave and seapunk, Tumblr launched a GIF viewer named Tumblr TV, with an explicitly MTV-styled visual spin. Hip-hop artist Drake's single "Hotline Bling", released on July 31, also became popular with vaporwave producers, inspiring both humorous and serious remixes of the tune.

Hardvapour emerged in late 2015 as a reimagination of the genre with darker themes, faster tempos, and heavier sounds. It is influenced by speedcore and gabber, and is viewed as oppositional to the vaporwave aesthetic. According to Vice's Rob Arcand, the genre lies somewhere between vaporwave and distroid, writing that hardvapour uses similar music software tools "not out of any special fixation with them, but simply because they're now the cheapest and most accessible tools around."



Simpsonwave was a YouTube phenomenon made popular by the user Lucien Hughes.It mainly consists of videos with scenes from the American animated television series The Simpsons set to various vaporwave songs. Clips are often put together out of context and edited with VHS-esque distortion effects and surreal visuals, giving them a "hallucinatory and transportive" feel.

Fashwave (a portmanteau of "fascist" and "synthwave"), is a largely instrumental subgenre of vaporwave and synthwave that originated on YouTube circa 2015. With political track titles and occasional soundbites, the genre combines Nazi symbolism with the visuals associated with vaporwave and synthwave. In 2017, Vice's Penn Bullock and Eli Penn reported on the phenomenon of self-identified fascists and alt-right members appropriating vaporwave music and aesthetics, describing fashwave as "the first fascist music that is easy enough on the ears to have mainstream appeal". One offshoot, Trumpwave, focuses on Donald Trump. Vice writes that Trumpwave exploits vaporwave's perceived ambivalence towards the corporate culture it engages with, allowing it to recast Trump as "the modern-day inheritor of the mythologized 80s, a decade that is taken to stand for racial purity and unleashed capitalism". The Guardian's Michael Hann notes that the movement is not unprecedented; similar offshoots occurred in punk rock in the 1980s and black metal in the 1990s. Like those genres, Hann believes there is little chance fashwave will ever "impinge on the mainstream".



Vaporwave was one of several microgenres spawned in the early 2010s that were the brief focus of media attention. Pitchfork contributor Jonny Coleman defines vaporwave as residing in "the uncanny genre valley" that lies "between a real genre that sounds fake and a fake genre that could be real." Also from Pitchfork, Patrick St. Michel calls vaporwave a "niche corner of Internet music populated by Westerners goofing around with Japanese music, samples, and language". Michelle Luoog of Vice wrote that "according to commentators in various music forums, it's 'chillwave for Marxists,' 'post-elevator music,' 'corporate smooth jazz Windows 95 pop". She explained that "parodying commercial taste isn't exactly the goal. Vaporwave doesn't just recreate corporate lounge music – it plumps it up into something sexier and more synthetic."

Music writer Adam Harper of Dummy Mag describes vaporwave as having an ambiguous or accelerationist relationship to consumer capitalism, writing that "these musicians can be read as sarcastic anti-capitalists revealing the lies and flippations of modern techno-culture and its representations, or as its willing facilitators, shivering with delight upon each new wave of delicious sound." He noted that the name itself was both a nod to vaporware, a name for products that are introduced but never released, and the idea of libidinal energy being subjected to relentless sublimation under capitalism. Music educator Graffton Tanner wrote, "vaporwave is one artistic style that seeks to rearrange our relationship with electronic media by forcing us to recognize the unfamiliarity of ubiquitous technology ... vaporwave is the music of 'non-times' and 'non-places' because it is technologically of what consumer culture has done to time and space".

Speaking on the adoption of a vaporwave- and seapunk-inspired rebrand by MTV International, Jordan Pearson of Motherboard, Vice's technology website, noted how "the cynical impulse that animated vaporwave and its associated Tumblr-based aesthetics is co-opted and erased on both sides-where its source material originates and where it lives". Critic Simon Reynolds characterized Daniel Lopatin's Chuck Person project as "relat[ing] to cultural memory and the buried utopianism within capitalist commodities, especially those related to consumer technology in the computing and audio/video entertainment area". Xavier described her 2012 album "Contemporary Sapporo" (札幌コンテンポラリー) as "a brief glimpse into the new possibilities of international communication" and "a parody of American hypercontextualization of e-Asia circa 1995".

The Brooklyn Rail's Scott Beauchamp proposes a parallel between punk's "No Future" stance and its active "raw energy of dissatisfaction" deriving from the historical lineage of Dada dystopia, and vaporwave's preoccupation with "political failure and social anomie". Vaporwave's stance is more focused on loss, the notion of lassitude, and passive acquiescence. Beauchamp writes that "vaporwave was the first musical genre to live its entire life from birth to death completely online". Cultural theorist Dominic Pettman, professor of Culture and Media at the New School for Social Research, notes that the internet causes users to have micro-experiences of "hypermodulation". Beauchamp suggests that expressions of hypermodulation inspired both the development and downfall of vaporwave.