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GENRE IS DISAPPEARING. WHAT COMES NEXT?

As record stores close and streaming algorithms dominate, the identities that music fandom supplies are in flux.

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It's hard to imagine the Grammys without their categories, yet they feel increasingly irrelevant to our consumption of music. Photo illustration by Kyle Berger for The New Yorker

When the newest batch of Grammy nominations were announced, in late November, Justin Bieber expressed displeasure with the way his music had been identified by the Recording Academy. His fifth studio album, "Changes," was up for

Best Pop Vocal Album, a major category. “I am very meticulous and intentional about my music,” Bieber wrote on Instagram. “With that being said, I set out to make an R&B album. ‘Changes’ was and is an R&B album. It is not being acknowledged as an R&B album, which is very strange to me.” There are eighty-three categories at this year’s Grammy ceremony. Although some awards—Comedy Album, Spoken Word Album, Liner Notes—feel relatively unambiguous, most are inherently vague. Whether an album belongs in one category or another (Rock or Alternative? Folk or Americana or American Roots?) is debated, often hotly, by nomination committees assembled by the Academy. Those determinations are confidential and, of course, fallible.

This isn’t the first time an artist has bucked against the specifics of a nomination. Last year, Tyler, the Creator won Best Rap Album for “IGOR,” a complex, often radical concept record about a devastating love triangle. “I’m very grateful that what I made could just be acknowledged in a world like this,” he said backstage. “But, also, 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.” He continued, “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?” (Though “urban” is not included in the guidelines for the Best Rap Album category, the Grammys have nonetheless struggled with the term, which some once considered to be an acceptable euphemism for nonwhite; this year, the Academy changed the category of Best Urban Contemporary Album to Best Progressive R. & B. Album, and, in a stab at transparency, made its rules and qualifications available publicly for the first time.)

It’s difficult to imagine a Grammy ceremony that doesn’t rely on genre as its organizing principle—I suppose that would entail the bestowing of just one award, Best Music—yet genre feels increasingly irrelevant to the way we think about, create, and consume art. Few contemporary stars pride themselves on a pure or traditional approach to form, and most pull purposefully from assorted histories and practices. Is it even possible, in 2021, to locate, let alone enforce, an impermeable membrane between R. & B. and hip-hop, hip-hop and pop? Genre was once a practical tool for organizing record shops and programming radio stations, but it seems unlikely to remain one in an era in which all music feels like a hybrid, and listeners are no longer encouraged (or incentivized) to choose a single area of interest.

I graduated from high school at the end of the nineteen-nineties, and I’ve often wondered whether I was part of the final cohort to think of unwavering genre fealty as an expression of integrity: you picked a style and vigorously defended its superiority. As a teen-ager, I lived in near-constant fear of being called a poser—an incoherent tenderfoot who simply drifted toward whatever was popular. Now the idea of identity as a fixed and narrow concept, and of taste as inherently cloistered, feels bizarre, punitive, and regressive. Taste is still a way of broadcasting a social identity and indulging in a kind of instinctive tribalism, but the boundaries are no longer quite so circumscribed.

Popular music has always been the result of various traditions intermingling. Yet, until relatively recently, the ways in which we write about and sell music haven’t left a lot of room for that idea. Years before I was scrawling “NIRVANA” on the sides of my Chuck Taylors with a black Sharpie, there were hints of the kind of cross-genre pollination that was coming. In 1980, Deborah Harry, of the New Wave band Blondie, rapped some of the verses on “Rapture,” an elastic, disco-influenced pop song. In 1984, the Beastie Boys illegally used an AC/DC sample and bragged about it (“Use real rock beats / Show off big toys”). Two years later, the rap group Run-D.M.C. and the rock band Aerosmith collaborated on a version of Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way,” which became the first rap song to chart on the *Billboard* Top Ten. The song’s opening guitar riff—meaty, beautifully dumb—had been popular with hip-hop d.j.s in New York for years (Grandmaster Flash had used it as early as 1978), but for most listeners the partnership was startling. Even Run found the song’s success odd, telling Geoff Edgers, the author of “Walk This Way: Run-DMC, Aerosmith,

and the Song That Changed American Music Forever," "We did not perform 'Walk This Way' in 1986 while it was exploding." He added, "It was a separate thing in my mind." The track inspired a slew of imitations, including one by the Fat Boys, a hip-hop trio from Brooklyn, who teamed up with the Beach Boys to record a version of the surf-rock classic "Wipeout," which charted at No. 12 in 1987.

"What 'Walk This Way' did was break down musical genres so they didn't really exist," Edgers told me. In 1991, Perry Farrell, of the alt-rock band Jane's Addiction, launched Lollapalooza, a multi-act summer tour. The first lineup included Rollins Band, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Living Colour, Butthole Surfers, and Ice-T and Body Count—bands that didn't necessarily share a musical through line but did coexist on the periphery of the industry. Though the festival was branded as "alternative," its theme was inclusivity. "Punk rock couldn't last, only because their attitude was 'Fuck everything,' " Farrell later told *Spin*. "Mine is 'Include everything.' "

What we mean by "pop" or "jazz" or "country" changes regularly; genre is not a static, immovable idea but a reflection of an audience's assumptions and wants at a certain point in time. The scholar Carolyn R. Miller defines genre as being marked by some "typified rhetorical action"—a repeating feature that handily satisfies our expectations or desires. That rhetorical action might be musical (a proper twelve-bar blues, for example, is played on a guitar and built around a 1-4-5 chord progression), but it's just as likely to be rooted in aesthetics (country singers wear cowboy hats and boots) or attitude (punk bands consist of miscreant anarchists). "Genre is always a blending of both formal structure and cultural context," Ehren Pflugfelder, a professor of writing at Oregon State University, told me recently. "This may be the most frustrating thing about genre for those who want it to be stable over time. What makes something country music is often just as much about what the audience for that genre expects it to be as it is the chord progression, instruments, time signature, or lyrical content."

As an audience's assumptions about a genre change, so does the genre itself. Although some styles, such as bluegrass, cling to their signifiers, assigning huge amounts of value to the old way of doing things, others, such as pop, demand a kind of endless, purposeful reinvention—regurgitating too-recent sounds and tropes would simply be humiliating. (Mercifully, it's been a couple of years since I've heard on the radio an air horn, a staple of Jamaican dancehall culture that, beginning in the late two-thousands, was briefly but enthusiastically adopted by such hip-hop artists as Drake, Kanye West, Eminem, Lil Wayne, Missy Elliott, and even Beyoncé.)

Often, nonmusical components—our aesthetic expectations—are tangled up in discriminatory ideologies. In the earliest days of the recording industry, genre was frequently determined by race, and more than a century later the repercussions of that choice—who gets to make what kind of song—are still profoundly felt. When phonographs were introduced to the mass market, around 1900, they were housed in elaborate wooden cabinets and sold in furniture stores. The records they were designed to play—fashioned from a fragile shellac compound and spun at seventy-eight revolutions per minute—were considered an added-value perk, a way to make the cabinet itself more appealing to buyers. It took a while for people to stop thinking about music as a lived, temporary, and communal experience, and to reimagine it as fixed, replicable, and private. Once the first record labels became more established, executives who had previously worried about the sale of cabinets had to decide how to market music as a physical product.

Few of the early strategies made sense. Before the vaudeville star Mamie Smith recorded "Crazy Blues," a runaway hit in 1920, blues songs had been recorded only by white performers, even though Black musicians had developed and perfected the genre

decades earlier. Okeh Records took a gamble on Smith. It had been erroneously presumed that Black people would not (or could not) buy records. “That Southern vernacular lowdown sound? Those straight-out-the-juke-joint blue notes and bends? Early white labels saw no reason to record them unless they could be repackaged with white artists for the phonograph-owning bourgeoise of the Progressive Era,” Daphne A. Brooks wrote in the *Times* last year, on the centennial of the release of “Crazy Blues.” Smith changed that trajectory by virtue of her popularity with Black listeners. The title “Crazy Blues” refers to the irrationality of love, and the nauseous realization that you have perhaps committed yourself to a person who can’t or won’t love you back. Smith’s performance was undeniable. “Crazy Blues” sold some seventy-five thousand copies and earned close to a million dollars.

The plan shifted. From then on, blues records were sold to Black buyers. The idea that these marketing distinctions were somehow valid and inflexible began to take hold. Black artists should be sold to Black consumers (these were often called “race records”), and white artists to white consumers. Eventually, that spirit of separation seeped into the music: certain genres would be made by and for white people, and other genres would be made by and for Black people. “The racially segregationist distribution strategy of the recording industry implicitly instructed white ears to feel revolted by the blues and, moreover, to assume that this sense of revulsion was instinctive,” the scholar Angela Davis wrote in her book “Blues Legacies and Black Feminism,” from 1998. Race remained such an important factor in determining musical genre that new language often had to be used whenever a popular artist subverted racial expectations. Though the term “rock and roll” was not created for Elvis Presley, it was eagerly applied to his work, which was famously rooted in Black gospel, R. & B., and blues.

The legacy of these choices became evident in late 2018, when Lil Nas X, then an unknown eighteen-year-old who had been brought up in an Atlanta housing project, and who possessed an uncanny aptitude for synthesizing online culture, released “Old Town Road,” a song that adroitly blurred genre lines. “Old Town Road” is based on an instrumental track that features a sample of “34 Ghosts IV,” a spectral, loping song by the industrial band Nine Inch Nails, and contains some rapping, some singing, and many gleeful allusions to horses, boots, Wranglers, cowboy hats, and bull riding. In photographs, Lil Nas X, who is Black, often wore chaps, fringe, and a sizable Stetson. The track gained purchase first on TikTok, and then on the *Billboard* country chart, where it débuted at No. 19 before the magazine removed it, claiming that it had been miscategorized. *Billboard* explained that it determines genre by “looking at an artist’s chart history, listening to the song, looking at streaming services and examining how and where the label is promoting and marketing the song.”

It seems strange, perhaps, to prioritize a label’s prerogative (or lack thereof) over the artist’s own; when Lil Nas X released the song online, months before he signed with Columbia Records, he tagged it as country in the track’s digital metadata, which is typically

what streaming services use to place new music on the appropriate playlist. He also publicly described the song as "country-trap"—a label that, he pointed out, also applies to Bebe Rexha and Florida Georgia Line's "Meant to Be," which débuted at the top of *Billboard's* Hot Country chart, and was allowed to stay there. (Rexha and both members of Florida Georgia Line are white.)

Despite its problems, genre is still a useful enough shorthand that it can feel essential to marketing a new artist, especially on a large scale. Aaron Bay-Schuck, the C.E.O. and co-chairman of Warner Records, told me that ideas about genre are still critical to determining how an artist will be presented to the public by a major label. "We are always asking ourselves, 'Who is the audience for this music?' " Bay-Schuck said. " 'What fans will be the first early adopters of this artist? What is our entry point?' And those questions dictate our radio, press, and marketing strategies." He admitted that it can sometimes be difficult to reconcile the aesthetic and the musical. "When determining what the genre is, strictly in musical terms, it's all about the musical and lyrical signifiers, the performance, the sonics of the production. But from a marketing lens it's all about the contextual signifiers. The danger can come when these things do not align."

Nabil Ayers, the U.S. general manager of 4AD, an independent label based in the United Kingdom, said that 4AD has always been defined more by its psychology than by its sound, though fans of the label often conflate the two. "We put out music by drastically different artists, and always have," Ayers said. "Even before I was at the label, people loved to talk about the old days of 4AD, when it had such a recognizable aesthetic. And I'm always, like, 'But Pixies and Cocteau Twins sound nothing alike!' " 4AD does have to think about genre when the label is asked to provide metadata for a new release. "It's pretty archaic," Ayers said of the process. "Is it electronic? Is it rock? Is it alternative? You have to choose one of these big buckets to put things in. But we don't think about it much beyond that tick of a box." He doesn't see genre as relevant to the way younger listeners experience music. "I don't think they *actively* don't think about it," he said. "I think they *actually* don't think about it." He added, "It's so easy to find anything you want without having to label it."

Since streaming services have mostly supplanted record shops as the simplest way to find or acquire music, the issue of how to organize a musical library has been revisited. Spotify operates from a playlist model, frequently sorting music by vibe—an idea that's perhaps even more ineffable than genre, but which also seems considerably more in tune with how and why people listen to music.

Spotify's playlists are determined in one of three ways. Personalized playlists (the music that gets recommended to you by the app) are compiled by an algorithm that uses a listener's previous activity, and the activity of others who have exhibited similar habits. Listener playlists are compiled by individuals who want to broadcast their taste. Editorial playlists are curated by Spotify employees. Some prominent editorial playlists, such as "Rap Caviar," have a genre requisite, but many more are fundamentally experiential ("Songs to Sing in the Car," "Mood Booster"), and rely explicitly on a presumed listener response. Judging by their success, it doesn't seem that difficult to figure out how a song will make a person feel. "Obviously, we have access to a tremendous amount of data that tells us what our users listen to, and what they want to listen to," Kevin Weatherly, Spotify's head of North American programming, told me. "But it's still music, it's still art. It's our human curators who ultimately determine what playlists newer songs fall into."

A popular editorial playlist such as "Chill Hits" ("Kick back to the best new and recent chill tunes," the description reads) might contain gentle, down-tempo tracks by Taylor Swift, Justin Bieber, Maroon 5, Lewis Capaldi, Harry Styles, the Chainsmokers, and others. One snowy afternoon, I listened to "Chill Hits" for about an hour. It reminded me of standing for too long in the vitamin

section of a drugstore. There were plenty of songs I hadn't heard before ("Ordinary People," a sentimental ballad by the Australian singer-songwriter Blake Rose; "Slow Motion," a dreamy lament by Charlotte Lawrence, a model turned singer from Los Angeles), but the cumulative effect was a kind of narcotized stupor. Because the mood of these tracks was so consistent and unbroken ("I have been disappointed by love—*again!*") and the production so gleaming, after a while every song sounded like the same song, and none of the songs sounded good.

Other playlists are richer and more inscrutable. "Pollen" is described as "genre-less." When I listened, the first song—sometimes referred to as the playlist's "cover," because it provides the graphic at the top of the page—was "Guard Down," by Claud, a twenty-one-year-old nonbinary singer from the Chicago suburbs, whose soft, searching music is most often described as indie pop. The second track was "Gang Signs," by the thirty-eight-year-old rapper Freddie Gibbs. Gibbs is a dynamic and provocative artist; his music is not always very amiable. (One verse of "Gang Signs" contains three separate instances of the phrase "suck a dick.") Tempo aside, it was hard to locate a musical or even an aesthetic commonality here, but it was not especially difficult to imagine the *kind* of listener who might appreciate both songs: young, cool, curious, perhaps roaming an obscure corner of the city with a pair of expensive headphones and a pocketful of half-nibbled weed gummies.

Weatherly is hesitant to suggest that he or anyone else at Spotify makes definitive decisions about how music should be organized or presented, pointing out that the service's A.I. is merely reactive. "We're not arbiters of taste," he said. "We're not A. & R. We're here to try to connect our audience with different types of music, regardless of genre." He continued, "If you look at playlists like 'Pollen' or 'Warm,' they really aren't about specific genres. It's more about having all of these songs woven together to satisfy a particular user. It's really the user who defines what makes sense in a particular playlist."

He sees this new model as potentially generative. "When you have the entire world's music library at your fingertips, the potential for exploration and discovery of different styles and different types of music is greater than ever," he said. "Prior to Spotify, you were spoon-fed what music you listened to by traditional gatekeepers. All of that has been shattered."

No one is pouring one out for consolidated radio or gasbag critics, but some nontraditional gatekeepers (obsessive, savant-like record-store clerks; zine publishers) played a sizable role in the development of my own musical ideas—still tethered, as they were, to genre. (I remain grateful for the ways in which those sources helped me locate like-minded friends to see all-ages shows and trade overwrought mixtapes with.) Genre is a reductive, old-fashioned, and inherently problematic idea, and we should all be eager to see it rendered moot, but I remain curious about the contours of a post-genre world—what that might open up for the future, and what might be sacrificed. Pflugfelder, the writing professor, pointed out that anyone who believes too strongly in genre as inflexible or absolute is, by nature, already somewhat behind the times. "The most identifiable and significant features of a genre are always identified after they've actually occurred," he said. "They're almost never named in the process of changing, but just after, so the expectations audiences have for certain genres of music are, by definition, referring to the past." He added, "Anyone enthusiastic for the strict adherence to something called genre is engaging in something fundamentally conservative." It's interesting to consider genre as inherently backward-looking—particularly in a moment, such as this one, in which we are all hungrier than ever for the future. ♦

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