

# Consciousness and Commodity: Towards A Critical Theory of Genre in American Popular Music

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## ABSTRACT

Genre, particularly in the popular music industry, can be understood as a perpetual cycle – from the origin of a new sound or ‘scene,’ recognition by critics and tastemakers, commercialization as a canonized genre, and finally its rejection and/or reinvention by a new generation of artists seeking to establish their own new forms. In America, these musical communities have been most often grounded in racial, regional, or sexual preference identities, as these ties have been the most meaningful to listeners. Over time, the reactionary resistance of these artistic communities and practices produces music that is itself codified as a new product line, confirming the relentless cycle of genre. In this paper, I utilize three case studies ranging from the fabrication of ‘hillbilly’ music in the 1920s, Disco Demolition Night and resistance to the popularity of disco in the late 1970s, and the rise and popularization of hip hop in the 1980s help show different moments on the cycle of genre creation and the resistance that emerges. Finally, this paper will point to indications that the advent of streaming music is leading to the obsolescence of the traditional production of genre. We are witnessing the rapid rise and fall of new musical non-genres, epitomized by hyperpop, a ‘genre’ that lacks any core common attributes. If genre is a tool to construct the self and, at times, enable communities of resistance, a world without lasting musical genres presents implications and challenges for the future of identity and social change.

## Introduction

The belief that music enables social change is both intuitive and strange. Music plays a crucial role in political events, demonstrations and marches. Enjoying music together builds a common sense of community, from small choruses to stadium-sized singalongs. And yet the actual connection to societal transformation is hard to identify or explain. Why exactly would music, or any art, mobilize people to take action? Certain styles of music have a recognized relationship to politics; protest and folk music, for example. But if there is a causal relationship between this music and political activity, it is a discontinuous phenomenon. Social change occurs in fits and starts. Why does music of any kind catalyze progress (or even political reaction) only at certain times? Is this simply the result of a political movement elevating music as a form of expression, but if so, why *this* form of music versus *that*? A common answer to this question can be located in the concept of genre. Certain musical genres are understood to express certain sentiments associated with a particular group more effectively. But why do politically-energizing genres only have potency at specific historical moments while at other times the same songs and sounds have none of the same resonance? Meanwhile, genres without any apparent political content or heritage can be at times a foundation for community cohesion and resistance. A more comprehensive answer would locate musical genre as a social and economic phenomenon in a process of constant cultural transformation.

Genre, particularly in the popular music industry, can be understood as a perpetual cycle – from the origin of a new sound or ‘scene,’ recognition by critics and tastemakers, commercialization as a canonized genre, and finally its rejection and/or reinvention by a new generation of artists seeking to establish their own new forms. A new musical form emerges from a unique community with its own specific conditions, creating

new styles without the primary goal of commercial success. In America, these musical communities have been most often grounded in racial, regional, or sexual preference identities, as these ties have been the most meaningful to listeners. Successful new genres reflect the concerns of a particular identity community, but also help to extend it. New listeners recognize the genre's themes as part of their own experience, the suffering shared by members of an out-group, for example, and, through listening, become more sensitized to the underlying identity. As the new form gains a stable audience, critics and then the music industry begin to notice. It begins to sign artists with the clearest 'crossover' appeal, marketing them as items within a new and exciting product line. Though frequently depicted as victims, these artists can be ambitious and skillful agents of commercialization. They appreciate the benefits of larger audiences and better compensation. But in achieving its commercial success, their genre loses its ties to that original community and the unique conditions within which it operated. Sounds and words are disconnected from their source. The genre's potential as a means of raising the consciousness of a particular group for the purpose of social resistance is diminished. As the process continues, commercialization eventually produces its own dissatisfaction. Empowered by their status as inheritors of a musical tradition, artists and fans detect the genre's lack of authenticity and originality. They work to escape its constraints, reconnect with 'real,' even if smaller, audiences, and foster new (or restored) forms outside of its canonized boundaries. Over time, the reactionary resistance of these artistic communities and practices produces music that is itself codified as a new product line, confirming the relentless cycle of genre. Three case studies ranging from the fabrication of 'hillbilly' music in the 1920s, Disco Demolition Night and resistance to the popularity of disco in the late 1970s, and the rise and popularization of hip hop in the 1980s help show different moments on the cycle of genre creation and the resistance that emerges. Finally, this paper will point to indications that the advent of streaming music is leading to the obsolescence of the traditional production of genre. Due to the personalized and 'trending' distribution powered by individualized algorithms and artificial intelligence, we are witnessing the rapid rise and fall of new musical non-genres, epitomized by hyperpop, a 'genre' that lacks any core common attributes. If genre is a tool to construct the self and, at times, enable communities of resistance, a world without lasting musical genres presents implications and challenges for the future of identity and social change.

## **“Liquidation of Two-Dimensional Culture”: Critical Theories of Genre**

When asking why societies tolerate oppression, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School came to the conclusion that the co-optation of culture by capitalism was a major cause. In a view held widely by his Frankfurt peers, Herbert Marcuse argued that, in a market economy, art was transformed into a commercial product, which finally eliminated even its limited potential as inspiration for revolutionary consciousness. Before the rise of a full capitalistic system, art remained at least distinct, offering an implicit if quietistic alternative to the horrors of human society and history. Marcuse wrote in 1964's *One-Dimensional Man*: “The two antagonistic spheres of society have always coexisted; the higher culture has always been accommodating, while the reality was rarely disturbed by its ideals and its truth.”<sup>1</sup> This coexistence is destroyed not through an attack on the merits of the artistic sphere, but rather by monopoly capitalism's hungry embrace, its rapacious desire for new experiences to glamorize and new products to sell. “This liquidation of two-dimensional culture takes place not through the denial and rejection of the ‘cultural values,’ but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale.”<sup>2</sup> To Marcuse, art within capitalism becomes like every other product, another commodity that can be mass-produced on factory lines and marketed through advertisements. A new popular musical genre, therefore, is nothing more than a new product line. It is created for efficiency using the same materials, often essentially the same item in new packaging. Even seemingly radical art is easily incorporated. Rebellion can be packaged and sold. In 1972's *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse described the specific process of commercial co-optation with perhaps the most famous example in American popular music, that of blues transforming into rock and roll: “Life music has

indeed an authentic basis: black music as the cry and song of the slaves and the ghettos... the aesthetic form is the "gesture" of pain, sorrow, indictment."<sup>3</sup> Marcuse specifically highlights the way that 'life music' depicts the struggles of Black communities, which through its sounds, lyrics and culture communicates their position as enduring victims of political and economic violence. To make this music is implicitly a revolutionary act because it calls attention to dissatisfaction with the ruling order. In contrast, Marcuse describes what happens once the blues genre was commercialized: "With the takeover by the whites, a significant change occurs: white 'rock' is what its black paradigm is not, namely, performance... What had been part of the permanence of life, now becomes a concert, a festival, a disc in the making... And as this music loses its radical impact, it tends to massification: the listeners and co-performers in the audience are masses streaming to a spectacle, a performance."<sup>4</sup> Now stripped of its revolutionary context and purpose, blues became the rock and roll product, a 'show' for white audiences that required no understanding of or support for the Black struggle.

Angela Davis, probably Marcuse's most famous student, formulated a more optimistic theory. Davis believed that genres had a function as imagined worlds for various identity groups to build community. It is implicitly political because it provides a 'safe space' for these people to represent themselves without the racism and sexism of the outside world. Davis thought blues fulfilled this function for the Black community: "As it came to displace sacred music in the everyday lives of black people, it both reflected and helped to construct a new black consciousness."<sup>5</sup> Since communal consciousness is the essential precondition for revolution, or at least political action, music of the kind Davis describes is fundamental for such action to take place. Even if it is not explicitly political, music that unites a marginalized community is therefore a challenge to the ruling order. This revolutionary effort is stymied by industry co-option that turns the genre into a product rather than a conscious-raising effort.

Additional support for this optimistic view of community resistance comes from a different critical tradition focused on post-colonialism. In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott describes how colonizing regimes, and governments in general, employ classification as a method of making 'legible' the societies they hope to control. This often artificial application of categories, Scott argues, is a hallmark of 'high modernist' ideologies seeking to increase and sharpen state power.<sup>6</sup> For example, it is necessary for a government to classify its citizens in order to effectively tax them or recruit them for military service. When the state's top-down sortings ignore indigenous conditions and expertise, its actions can result in catastrophe. In their paper "The Moral Economy of High-Tech Modernism," Henry Farrell and Marion Fourcade show how the same processes are at work within industrial capitalism, where businesses define and categorize products for the market.<sup>7</sup> By creating and enforcing standards, corporations can exchange goods and services for money, with confidence in the price and type of the item purchased or sold. Given the intangible nature of its products, the culture industry has played a central role in the standardization of creative work. These state-like practices made it possible for popular music businesses to operate at industrial scale. Each step in the chain understood what to expect from suppliers and what to deliver to consumers. Crucial to top-down standardization is genre. Every aspect of the process is made more manageable and thus more lucrative when, from artist to consumer, the expectations of genre are understood and enforced. Farrell and Foucade point out, however, that the power of categorization acts both ways. Alluding to Scott's earlier study, *Weapons of the Weak*, they emphasize that "those on the receiving end of categorical violence are not passive and powerless."<sup>8</sup> Just as a music label gains power by organizing its producers and customers into genres and making them 'legible,' artists and fans can use those same labels as convening spaces around which to mobilize and resist. As Angela Davis saw in Black female blues, musical practitioners need not be "submissive dupes of the categories that objectify them.... [T]hey may contest the definition of that category, its boundaries, or their assignment to it."<sup>9</sup> Even when genre is imposed top-down, artists and audiences can tap its power for their own purposes.

The potency of genre can be found in theories that go one level deeper to detail how individuals use music as a tool for the momentous task of constructing and maintaining the self. Theodor Adorno, a colleague of Marcuse in the Frankfurt School, argued that modern capitalism, and especially its forms of work, engender

a consciousness ridden with anxiety and loneliness (anomie). In his essay, “On Popular Music,” he argues that music consumers are forced to use music as a form of psychological response. “Listeners are distracted from the demands of reality by entertainment which does not demand attention.”<sup>10</sup> By using music in this way, the subject channels her indistinct anomie, raw affect that cannot be interpreted, into recognizable emotional categories associated with the genres.<sup>11</sup> Adorno provides two broad archetypes: the ‘jitterbug,’ a dance-crazed fan who deludes himself that his aggressive and physical behavior is an expression of individuality,<sup>12</sup> and the “poor shop girl,” who listens to “sentimental” music for wish fulfillment while never questioning her own lowly position.<sup>13</sup> The need of listeners to make sense of themselves through standardized emotional frames provides another way for the industry to market music to potential customers. Capitalism both creates the void and provides products with which the anomic subject can fill it.<sup>14</sup> Per Tia DeNora in *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*, music in this state is “reduced to the status of a commodity, a commodity that subverts critical faculties and substitutes for knowledge a kind of compensatory affirmation.”<sup>15</sup> It loses its ability to create consciousness and replaces it with the cheap enjoyment of a prefabricated product. Those same feelings of alienation force the consumer to look to emerging genres as a “way of attempting to find stability, in an anomic social universe increasingly disrupted and fragmented.”<sup>16</sup> In her own sociological research, DeNora extends and refines Adorno’s theories. Sixty years after “On Popular Music,” when music had become far more convenient to obtain and consume, she used interviews with pop fans to document how listeners use different genres “as a means for creating, enhancing, sustaining and changing subjective, cognitive, bodily and self-conceptual states.”<sup>17</sup> As much as Adorno saw the ways genre shaped the self, DeNora reveals how the modern listener uses different genres to ‘soundtrack’ moments in their life. Some of her respondents describe how they listen to sad music when they are sad, both to categorically identify the feeling and to work through it. Others mention how they used particular genres or artists to mark stages of their lives.<sup>18</sup> Both she and Adorno point to genre as a crucial element enabling a kind of personal soundtrack, a musical narrative that gives life meaning and the self-definition within the destructive context of stresses of capitalism. Their insights help explain the cycle of genre as described through the arguments of Marcuse and Davis. Because of its deep function in the service of self-identity, a genre obtains the capacity for social impact when a group of listeners collectively accept it as a way of describing their unique situation and condition. Classification and commercialization expands the number of people exposed to the genre and simultaneously undermines its uniqueness, as the institutions of the music industry remove or de-emphasize features that might exclude potential listeners. When this occurs, a new group of artists and listeners, hungry for the authenticity that once gave the genre its social and psychological potency, inevitably seek to reclaim or replace it with newer styles and sounds, grounded in what they believe to be their true condition. Once these new sounds gain context and currency, the industry identifies them and the cycle continues. For all of its unique capacities, musical genre thus echoes all other attempts at social categorization. As Farrell and Fourcade put it: “Human society, then, is forever being deconstructed and restructured by the continuous interactions between classifying institutions and the people and groups they sort.”<sup>19</sup>

The following genre case studies – on hillbilly music, disco, and hip hop – provide examples of this tension between industry and culture, between commodification and community consciousness. They will show why this tension results in ongoing de- and restructurings, and how those transformations affect the identity of their respective audiences and their capacities to shape themselves and their world. [Here is a [link to an Apple Music playlist](#) with selected songs representing each case study.]

## “The Hearts of Mountaineers”: The Commercial Co-option of Hillbilly Music

The genre of ‘hillbilly’ music emerged from the folk traditions of the working people of Appalachia, which by the turn of the 20th century was still an economically underdeveloped region, with limited connections to railroad lines and telegraph networks and where most residents survived on subsistence agriculture. Over the 1900s and 1910s, the nation’s voracious appetite for coal drove the rapid exploitation of the region’s resources and workers. Interviews with miners describe isolated camps whose residents were bound to the coal company by scrip used as payment and no way of leaving, effectively a system of legalized debt-bondage.<sup>20</sup> There was little regard for the safety of the miners; mine explosions were common, killing dozens at once. These conditions led to labor actions and violence between unions and strikebreakers dispatched to force the miners to get back to work, leading to the particularly violent Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921.<sup>21</sup> The strikes solidified a sense of class solidarity, who were racially divided between white, Black, and immigrant, but united in opposition to the owners.<sup>22</sup> Their music both reflected and inspired this sentiment, as in the song “Which Side Are You On,” which declared that there were ‘no neutrals’ in the war with the ‘thugs.’ But the region’s music had long been multiethnic and multiracial, with diverse influences from the original Scots-Irish settlers with their fiddle music, to Black freedmen who brought the banjo to the region,<sup>23</sup> to more recent European immigrants, who introduced the characteristic yodeling vocal style.<sup>24</sup> Its lyrics reflected the hard life of the region, with a mournful focus on betrayal, both romantic and socio-economic, and recurring mentions of death.<sup>25</sup>

The rise of the American recording industry led to the commercialization of Appalachian folk music and its reification as hillbilly music, one of the foundational genres of American popular music. By the early 1920s, manufacturing scale had reduced the cost of phonographs and vinyl, enabling the emerging record labels to market their product to groups other than upper-class white urbanites inclined towards ‘serious’ classical music.<sup>26</sup> Recording professionals discovered that Appalachian music’s combination of accessible sounds and lyrics with a regional and nostalgic exoticity would appeal to middle-class Northern audiences. With no concern for authenticity, the first successful effort to adapt Appalachian styles, Vernon Dalhart’s “Wreck of the Old 97” (1924), did not feature regional musicians. Derisively known as ‘citybilly’ music, records of this kind were written by professional songwriters, with opera and vaudeville-trained vocalists and professional session musicians, providing a sedate orchestration not unlike the ‘popular’ records of the day.<sup>27</sup> Citybilly songs “tickle[d] the mainstream audience’s appetite for novelty without confronting them with... unassimilable alterity.”<sup>28</sup> The recordings, which mostly discussed small-town tragedies, were understood as the output of a musical assembly line. Echoing later analyses by critical theorists who situated the American culture industry in the context of ‘Fordism,’ citybilly songwriter and guitarist Carson J. Robinson described his songs as “flivvers from a factory!”<sup>29</sup> Despite its manufactured origins, the music resonated with rural Appalachians. *Talking Machine Magazine*, a phonograph-era trade journal, noted that citybilly records were “distinctly popular in the so-called ‘sticks.’”<sup>30</sup> Dalhart told *Billboard* how his music “stirs the hearts of mountaineers” who “never tire of hearing the song.”<sup>31</sup>

As audiences became more sophisticated, enterprising producers began searching for genuine Appalachian folk musicians to market to a national audience. The first of them, talent scout Ralph Peer, traveled to Georgia in 1923, where he recorded and had a minor success with Fiddlin’ John Carson.<sup>32</sup> Over the next several years, Peer traveled Southern Appalachia to discover local favorites, culminating in the legendary 1927 Bristol Sessions, in which he recorded Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, among others.<sup>33</sup> The Sessions were the key shift in the production of hillbilly music, where its stars shifted from masquerading Northerners to genuine Appalachian natives steeped in the region’s traditions. The resulting product was a synthesis of regional artists with the styles and practices of Northern labels. For example, traditional yodeler Rodgers, who became the first genuine hillbilly star, adopted the clear vocal technique of the citybilly records and recorded with session musicians like Louis Armstrong.<sup>34</sup> By the end of the 1920s, Appalachian musicians had been integrated into the process of manufacturing and marketing hillbilly music.

Enabling the marketing of hillbilly music was its ahistorical depiction as a primordial tradition of American whites who traced their origins to the British Isles. To white Americans facing rapid demographic



change, there was potent appeal in a folk music that was the authentic product of people without outside influence, specifically that of Black musicians.<sup>35</sup> Much of this invention was performed by academic folklorists in the 1930s, who aimed to catalog American musical forms for preservation. It reinforced the message from the record labels, who already alluded to the purity of their products, as a means of transcending time and a “remedy” to the anxieties of modernity.<sup>36</sup> When John Lomax, a folklorist funded by the New Deal’s Federal Writers’ Project, interviewed Blind Willie McTell, a Black bluesman from Georgia, he insisted on hearing songs about “the mistreatment of [sic] the whites,” implicitly seeking to separate the socio-economic roots of the music from its multiracial character.<sup>37</sup> This ‘whitening’ of Appalachian folk can be seen in biographies of Rodgers, including his wife’s *My Husband, Jimmie Rodgers* (1935), in which he is described as having an “Irish heart” or “soul,” suggesting he descended from a grand tradition of Celtic folk and deprecating his connections to Black musicians.<sup>38</sup>

Appalachian music once flowed across the boundaries between the white and Black communities of the region. As represented by its biggest star, it had become firmly racialized. Rodgers’ death in 1932 and the changing tastes and conditions of the audience began to shift interest away from Appalachia. In the depths of the Depression, the poverty of Appalachia looked less tragically exotic and more drearily commonplace. The center of the recording industry shifted west to Texas and California. Gene Autry, a combination of country music and Western film star, became its most famous product. Appalachian music had gone from a multiracial folk tradition consonant with the class struggles and socio-economic conditions of its region to a manufactured and nationally mass-marketed commodity aimed at white consumers. As those consumers were lured to (even) more artificial alternatives, hillbilly would abandon its roots and reinvent itself as Country *and* Western.

## “Da Ya Think I’m Sexy:” Homophobia and Disco Demolition Night

Disco music, which emerged from the collective needs and constraints of gay men in New York City, was commodified by the recording industry in a way that impaired its power to reflect and inspire gay community consciousness while simultaneously generating a homophobic and racist backlash. In 1979, a DJ named Steve Dahl organized a mass demolition of disco records at Chicago’s Comiskey Park during a doubleheader between the Chicago White Sox and Detroit Tigers. The ensuing riot revealed the broad and violent hostility to a genre that had completely dominated American popular music since 1975. While its name refers to the wartime ‘discotheques’ of Paris, disco as a deejayed musical mode first emerged at gay parties in homes, bars and bathhouses in the late 1960s.<sup>39</sup> A 1926 New York City cabaret law, selectively enforced to hamper gay and non-white nightlife, made live bands impractical and playing records the safest legal alternative. With their preference for funk, soul and Latin sounds, disco deejays at clubs like Paradise Garage and the Loft nurtured a distinct musical style with a core set of features, including a ‘four-on-the-floor’ dance rhythm pioneered by Philadelphia International Records, and ambitious orchestral arrangements, including heavy use of strings.<sup>40</sup> The ecstatic dance music was the backdrop to a revolutionary setting and moment of gay liberation. Nightlife had always been an indispensable mechanism for gay<sup>41</sup> people to meet and mate. After the 1969 Stonewall Inn riots, the gay liberation movement claimed it as a right. Openly celebrating their community and sexuality was seen as essential to helping more gay people come out, as well as to being recognized as normal and equal members of society.<sup>42</sup> The personal became political and for some, financial. Entrepreneurs began to open clubs for gay people to dance together without fear of homophobic reprisal.<sup>43</sup> Clubs also appealing to straight disco fans soon followed.

Over the course of the 1970s, disco grew steadily in its popular appeal and commercial success. By 1976, the US had 10,000 discos with another 5,000 scheduled to launch the next year.<sup>44</sup> Six of the ten top songs of that year were disco, including the top song, Wings’ “Silly Love Songs.” Two years later, the genre reached its high-water mark with the release of the soundtrack to the film *Saturday Night Fever*, which at its release was the best-selling album of all time. Epitomized by John Travolta’s performance, the culture industry pro-

moted, and many fans adopted, disco as a lifestyle, complete with distinct fashions, hairstyling and dance lessons to purchase. In place of the gay deejays who originated disco, the industry's most successful hitmakers were, like Travolta, straight white performers: the Bee Gees and K.C and the Sunshine Band. As the commodification process accelerated, even rock and R&B artists incorporated disco flavors and fashions. Disco-focused record labels like Midlands International and stores like Strawberries flourished.<sup>45</sup> New York-area radio station WKTU had been languishing with its rock format until it switched to an all-disco model in 1978. Within a year, it was the most popular station in the entire country.<sup>46</sup>

Despite this rapid mainstreaming, the origin of disco as a product of the gay community was widely known and a source of growing prejudice.<sup>47</sup> For fans of a traditional performer-audience paradigm, disco's focus on the dance floor rather than the artist undermined heroic notions of masculine stardom.<sup>48</sup> Its performers were derided as anonymous and generic, a criticism fueled by the sheer volume of seemingly similar-sounding records.<sup>49</sup> The notoriety of exclusive clubs like Studio 54, managed by the gay Steve Rubell, tied disco to an elitist cosmopolitanism that was allegedly out of touch with working-class Americans, a demographic facing sudden deindustrialization.<sup>50</sup> The seemingly 'effeminate' dance moves and poses, along with sexualized songs like "Da Ya Think I'm Sexy" by Rod Stewart was to men like Dahl was evidence that disco had perverted masculinity itself.<sup>51</sup> The music industry had worked to disconnect disco from gay culture, but for a broadly homophobic nation, a stigma remained. This spawned the Disco Sucks movement, which exploded in popularity after Disco Demolition Night. That day, July 12, 1979, Dahl arrived at Comiskey Park in Chicago to light a dumpster filled with records on fire, at which point rowdy crowds stormed the field, and were only dispersed after the arrival of riot police.<sup>52</sup> In an article examining the causes of Disco Demolition Night, Dave Marsh of *Rolling Stone* examined the people who brought it about: "White males, eighteen to thirty-four, are the most likely to see disco as the product of homosexuals... therefore they're most likely to respond to appeals to wipe out such threats to their security."<sup>53</sup> To many working-class white men, disco had driven their favorite music off the airwaves. After Disco Demolition Night, the reverse happened. Over the summer of 1979, program directors began to remove disco tracks from their rotations.<sup>54</sup> On the Hot 100, the retro-rock single "My Sharona" by the Knack rose to number one in late August and stayed there until early October. Many disco clubs closed. Disco dancing and fashions became a national punchline.<sup>55</sup>

In parallel with its rejection by the straight white mainstream was disco's growing estrangement from its original gay and non-white counterculture community. Drained of all but the most cliché associations with sexual liberation and nonconformity, cutting-edge artists and fans looked for new dance music forms. By 1980, Frankie Knuckles, the deejay at the Warehouse, a discotheque in Chicago, had pivoted towards a new style that combined disco rarities with European imports, which was dubbed 'house' music.<sup>56</sup> Knuckles described house as "disco's revenge," particularly apt in the same city that had hosted Disco Demolition.<sup>57</sup> Much like early disco had done, house enabled a space for gay expression, also signified by the presence of macho imagery on album covers.<sup>58</sup> House, and its Detroit counterpart, techno, did not become commercially successful in the United States in its original incarnation, but by the mid-1980s was adopted by European fans and evolved into new musical forms, including acid house and Eurodance.<sup>59</sup> Coming full circle, these restructured post-disco genres provided the context for voguing, a trans-centric dance style and subculture which was promptly appropriated by Madonna.

Growing from the constraints facing the gay community in the 1960s, disco's unique deejay-driven style was commoditized by the music industry. It was reified as a genre so completely that millions of Americans were able to confidently identify as disco dancers or, conversely, members of the 'Disco Sucks' movement. This was until disco, exhausted by its own commercial success, would need to be reinvented under new names by the next generation of deejays and dancers.

## **"King of Rock:" How Rap Became Mainstream**

Hip hop, now the most popular genre in the world,<sup>60</sup> emerged as the musical expression of urban Black consciousness, providing both a setting for positive social engagement and a medium to voice frustrations. As the genre acquired critical recognition and then commercial momentum, it seemed inevitable that hip hop would follow the familiar process of industry commodification. The genre's second generation recognized this dynamic. They elected to 'commodify' themselves, actively participating in the exploitation of their own art form rather than be controlled or replaced by the culture industry. This theme of maintaining sovereignty, even at the price of sublimating the music's political heritage, has remained central to hip hop culture.

Since its earliest days, hip hop has retained its association with poor 'ghettos,' where it emerged and from which most of its stars have originated.<sup>61</sup> The specific conditions of each city where new regional styles were created inform the lyrical subjects.<sup>62</sup> The Bronx of the 1970s, where the first rap artists emerged, was plagued by failing city government, gang violence, drug abuse and deteriorating infrastructure.<sup>63</sup> Those blocks that were most deeply affected were hip hop's geographic core. A detailed study of the locations of fires in the Bronx shows a near-perfect overlap to those specific places, generally abandoned buildings, where the music was first performed.<sup>64</sup> These crisis conditions were similarly reflected in the lyrics of many early hip hop songs. 1982's "The Message," from Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, detailed urban decay in the Bronx, mentioning "broken glass everywhere" and "junkies in the alley with a baseball bat." One of the group's members, Melle Mel, describes a life of futility, with "no money to move out" and "no choice."<sup>65</sup> Other recordings, by artists like Boogie Down Productions and Public Enemy, excoriated the racist society that sanctioned the violent and degrading environment in which they lived. Chuck D, Public Enemy's leader and MC, recognized the centrality of hip hop to African American politics, claiming that "rap is black America's CNN."<sup>66</sup> Even when songs were not explicitly ideological, the lyrical focus on distinctively urban Black lifeways and hardships embedded in a vernacular and musical style purposely foreign to outsiders' ears, made the genre itself a form of resistance, much as the existence of disco as a safe space for gay communities was a challenge to the homophobia of the mainstream.

The breakthrough of Run-DMC in 1983 represented a key turning point in the commodification of hip hop as an industry product. Managed by Russell Simmons, the trio selected a young white producer named Rick Rubin, who believed the group could cross over to suburban audiences by bringing together guitar riffs and rap.<sup>67</sup> They quickly found success; Run-DMC became the first rap group to go gold with their self-titled debut album (1984), platinum with *King of Rock* (1985), and finally top-10 on the album and singles chart with the Aerosmith-featuring "Walk This Way" (1986).<sup>68</sup> While Run-DMC's first single, "It's Like That," echoed the political indignation of songs like "The Message," their subsequent efforts shifted to themes of status, sex, fashion, and partying. In its iconic music video, "Walk This Way" hinted at Black-white conflict, but ultimately shows the band willing to partner with industry retreads. The song established Run-DMC entirely outside the revolutionary discourse of first generation hip hop. Remarkably, this did not come at a cost for Run-DMC's authenticity, as they retained popularity with Black audiences amidst their newfound chart conquest.<sup>69</sup> In 1984, Rubin and Simmons also founded their own rap label, Def Jam Recordings, which would prove central in the mainstreaming of hip hop.

Shortly after its launch, Def Jam released their greatest crossover success, the Beastie Boys' *Licensed to Ill* (1986). The first diamond-selling rap album, *Licensed to Ill*'s singles were initially successful with Black audiences. But as pioneering white rappers, they were mainly purchased by white fans, many of whom were hearing hip hop for the first time and delighted in the band's carefully-crafted bratty 'white boy' image.<sup>70</sup> Not only did the Beastie Boys circumvent political expression like Run-DMC, they actually parodied hip hop's culture and revolutionary consciousness. Their MC names were satirical. Their biggest hit, "Fight for Your Right," teased a resistance to injustice but revealed itself as a puerile party song targeted at drunk, wealthy, white college students. Traditional hip hop fans were dismayed, but the larger trend was clear. Roots drummer and hip hop historian Questlove recalled that moment in the history of the genre: "I remember those Source magazines in which Cypress Hill [a Latino/white rap group from the late 1980s] is getting ridiculed because it



was like, where did all these white kids, and where did all these nonblack kids show up... Is this the Beastie Boys' fault?"<sup>71</sup>

With Rubin and Simmons showing how to market hip hop as a mainstream commodity, the rap community was leveraged for the culture industry, from Young M.C. hawking Pepsi to magazine *The Source* advertising sneakers.<sup>72</sup> Unlike other genres, where product endorsements were limited to artists who no longer had chart success, top-selling hip hop acts aggressively pursued these opportunities. This, too, was pioneered by the acts on Def Jam, with Run DMC's 1986 hit "My Adidas" leveraging their "edgy street style" to sell sneakers.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, there was a rise in hardcore rap lyrics around 1988.<sup>74</sup> A widely-embraced 'hustler' persona enabled rappers to reconcile their establishment role in the music business with their credibility as voices of urban decay.<sup>75</sup> As alleged representatives of a semi-criminal caste, their pursuit of money and status was in keeping with character. Those 'gangsta' rappers, as Ice-T, NWA, and others were known, sold white America a "manufactured spectacle" of urban environments as violent wastelands in order to promote themselves as savvy anti-heros rather than embody their communities' plight.<sup>76</sup> When rappers like Vanilla Ice lied about their heritage to claim 'ghetto' credibility and rise in the hip hop community, it represented the transformation of rap authenticity from a token of acceptance in a marginalized community to another strategy to sell records.<sup>77</sup> Questlove recalled the moment he realized that rap artists had fully embraced self-exploitation and were "going to make selling out the new norm."<sup>78</sup> The mainstreaming of hip hop had made it more popular, but the consciousness that animated its earliest recordings was amputated to reach white non-urban audiences.

In the early 1990s, there were attempts by 'conscious' rappers to return hip hop to its role as a platform for Black resistance and renewal. But Arrested Development's *3 Years, 5 Months and 2 Days in the Life Of...* (1992), which sold four million copies, spawned the top ten pop hit "Tennessee," and earned a Best New Artist Grammy, turned out to be the last major success for this agenda. Rap's chart-topping titan of 1993 was former NWA member and producer Dr. Dre, whose debut *The Chronic* (1992) sold nearly six million copies and three top-ten hits including the #2-peaking "Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang," was driven by Dre's "realization... that a friendlier kind of gangsta rap could make a lot of money—that gangsterism rendered in the abstract, as a particular style, could appeal more broadly than gangsterism as sets of body counts and incarceration rates."<sup>79</sup> Dre's formula was replicated by a generation of rapper-moguls, who fused the gangsta character with a CEO's ambition. Puff Daddy, founder of the hugely successful Bad Boy Records, marketed himself as a suave entrepreneur with white financial friends and role models, calling himself rap's Jay Gatsby.<sup>80</sup> To boost his protege the Notorious B.I.G, he featured him in music videos that appropriated luxury status items, like champagne, Rolex watches, yachts and private jets, as staples of hip hop iconography. The 'gangsta' character transitioned seamlessly to 'CEO/Owner.' On Kanye West's "Diamonds from Sierra Leone" (2005), Jay-Z rapped that "I sold kilos of coke... I'm guessin' I can sell CDs," and declared himself not just a "businessman, but a *business*, man." Kanye would come to invest most of his time in his Yeezy fashion empire rather than music, because it made him more money.

In the early years of hip hop, rappers were castigated for 'selling out' and 'going pop.' By the late 2010s, hip hop had reversed this logic. It was now a virtue for Black artists to cross over, provided you did it on your own terms. Pop represented success and validation. When Tyler the Creator won the Grammy for Best Rap Album, he complained that "[I]t sucks that whenever we, and I mean guys that look like me, do anything that's genre-bending or anything, they always put it in a rap or urban category... It's just a politically correct way to say the n-word, to me. So... why can't we just be in pop?"<sup>81</sup> It is difficult to say whether hip hop's complete transition from consciousness to self-commodification was negative for Black resistance or artistic sensemaking, but Black artists now stand as financial leaders of a global multi-billion dollar product line. Rather than resist the culture industry, rappers took it over.

## **“Ride ‘Til I Can’t No More:” How Streaming Has Changed the Genre Process**

The music business has been completely reshaped by the rise of digital music, first for sale on apps like iTunes and now streamed through services like Spotify and Apple Music. Much as the development of physical music formats led the industry to use genres to market their product, these digital service providers (DSPs) have led to claims that genre is a relic of the past.<sup>82</sup> While genre has not yet disappeared, the economics of the streaming industry create incentives for artists to blur its lines and produce cross-genre hybrids. In the record store era, an album would be primarily situated in one aisle or another; ‘punk’ or ‘metal,’ for example. Radio stations could play songs from an adjacent genre, but that meant sacrificing time for their own core artists. With digital files, there are no constraints of physical form or airtime. A single appears simultaneously in every relevant index or search result. On the Billboard Hot 100, songs that bring together artists from disparate genres are more likely to reach the Top 10 than single-genre songs.<sup>83</sup> The longest-reigning #1 hit, “Old Town Road” by Lil Nas X featuring Billy Ray Cyrus, united hip hop and country. To maximize their attention and streams, artists benefit by creating music, and marketing themselves as a brand that will appeal to the broadest possible demographic.<sup>84</sup>

Audiences are similarly adjusting their preferences, and their identities. Where listeners of the 1970s and ‘80s saw themselves as exclusive members of warring genre ‘tribes’ – disco versus rock, for example – today’s listeners are more likely to describe themselves as devotees of no single genre. A 2018 survey by Vice Media learned that “78% of young people said they couldn’t be defined by the genre they listened to.”<sup>85</sup> This process is amplified by technologically-enabled recommendations, created by the streaming services to navigate nearly-infinite libraries and, increasingly, these platforms’ strongest value proposition and core asset. Playlists curated by the services as well as other fans cut across traditional genres (“Music for Studying Math”) or re-structure them for new purposes (“Hillbilly Workout.”) Algorithms deliver a personalized stream of music based not on genre but on a massive number of constantly-updated micro-targeted data points, including what other people with similar unusual taste combinations recently enjoyed.<sup>86</sup> Listeners, especially those power-users for whom discovery and curation is a source of social status, can and still do select their own songs. As preference data accumulates and recommendations become ever more accurate, the rationale for most people to do so has become less compelling.

The new genre-like constructions that have emerged in the algorithmic era struggle to find a lasting connection with listeners. One example is hyperpop, which music journalist Eli Enis has described as “a genre tag for distinctly genre-less music... less rooted in musical genetics than it is a shared ethos of transcending genre altogether... intangible, nebulous, you-know-it-when-you-hear-it sensibilities.”<sup>87</sup> When hyperpop duo 100 geecs were asked to select their favorite hyperpop songs, they selected artists like Iggy Azalea, Vince Staples, and Kate Bush who seemingly had no connection to each other.<sup>88</sup> Consciously play-acting the traditions of genre, hyperpop even came packaged with nebulous ideological underpinnings but it is unclear how they relate to the music.<sup>89</sup> Hyperpop reveals a desire for a musically enabled community without the constraints of musical commonality or genuine shared consciousness. It also suggests why it had no enduring appeal.

If, as Adorno and DeNora suggest, music is a tool for constructing, maintaining and performing the self, a musical world less centered on genre might afford greater opportunities for individuation. The sounds a listener selects as their ‘personal soundtrack’ — to aid in heightening an experience, recalling a memory or past feeling, or establishing taste credentials to others — can be free of any loyalty to a genre.<sup>90</sup> But when generated in collaboration with a technology platform, a new entity emerges: the ‘algorithmic self.’ This digital twin is simultaneously an expression of the user’s tastes and the platform’s business model, and these aspects need not operate in conflict.<sup>91</sup> Having also captured and exploited the listener’s data as a commodity, the interests of the individual and the culture industry may converge.

A possible next step in this progression could be the use of generative AI to create new personalized music tailored to the tastes, moods and circumstances of each individual. The streaming service would avoid paying royalties and every user would have the ideal soundtrack to their lives. This configuration recalls Gilles Deleuze's description of the 'control society' he saw emerging in the computer age. In contrast to the industrial 'disciplinary society' which preceded it, individuals accept the subtle controls of personalized experiences, like a "self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other."<sup>92</sup> By orienting society around the motivation and satisfaction of unique individuals, humans are intentionally removed from larger collectives in which they once found identity and meaning. Farrell and Fourcade suggest that the loss of supra-individual categories has weakened communities' capacity to collectively resist. "The political and social mechanisms through which people previously responded, actively and knowingly, to their categorization - by affirming, disagreeing with, or subverting it - have been replaced by closed loops in which algorithm assign people unwittingly to categories, assess their responses to cues, and continually update and reclassify them."<sup>93</sup> In the extreme, listeners would no longer have the raw material to assemble the imagined communities that Davis celebrated in *Blues Legacies*. The genre of one created by streaming effectively means a genre of none, lacking the identity associations that create the old forms of genre.

## Conclusion

Collective identity, whether racial, regional, or based on sexual orientation, is an essential ingredient in communal mobilization, which, when effective, contributes to social change. The culture industry, and especially American popular music, has played a decisive role to both foster and undermine genre as a mechanism of American communal consciousness. Marcuse's pessimistic theory of corporate massification of genre and Davis' more optimistic argument that those forms could still have revolutionary potential are shown in the three case studies. We can observe both of these processes at work operating in tandem in a cyclical fashion. Operating as a vanguard for the music industry, influential folklorists falsely defined hillbilly music as exclusively white, thus leading to the canonization of a genre that was adopted by white Americans looking for collective expression. This commercialization of an indigenous genre is exemplified by the industry's marketing of "city-billies," nonrural musicians costumed as genuine "mountaineers." Disco emerged as a way for gay men to find collective liberation on the dancefloor, which the culture industry repackaged as an alluring cosmopolitan lifestyle. Despite the industry's efforts to market straight performers, the massive commercial success of disco, in turn, spawned resistance from homophobic rock fans expressing their anger about wider social trends. Hip hop grew out of the unique social conditions of urban Black America and provided an entertaining way to connect and comment on the issues that affected them. The genre's different – and, to many outsiders, offensive – lyrical and sonic characteristics initially delineated a hard border between white and Black listeners. Once an opening to cross over to mainstream audiences was located, hip hop artists seized ownership of the process, even at the cost of stripping the music of its founding communal function.

The advent of streaming music has eroded the boundaries of American popular music genre. Instead of a particular aisle in the record store or dial on the radio, listeners now consume playlists that combine all major genres. In response, artists blur genres and pursue cross-genre collaborations to reach the greatest number of streaming fans. The algorithmic nature of these systems creates new patterns of association between artists, fostering new identifiers like hyperpop, a non-genre with few common musical characteristics or correlation to real-world communities. It is unclear whether this manifestation is a temporary reaction or a permanent feature of the control society. Without older genres to resist and reject, new forms will have less space to invent.

For the past hundred years, American pop music has provided a shared language and space for communal expression, helping animate communities seeking recognition and social change. In its pursuit of profits, the industry has both sponsored the growth of those genres and rewarded its practitioners. It has also continually

undermined their distinctive nature and authentic origins. The transformation of the culture industry into a technologically driven experience suggests an acceleration of this trend. It is likely that musical genre in the 21st century will be less connected to collective consciousness and social action. The advent of streaming has made music more useful and omnipresent than ever in soundtracking peoples' lives, but it cannot provide the same power to reflect and inspire movements. Climate change, an overriding concern of young people, has no parallel musical expression. There is no song like hip hop's "The Message" to capture their anxieties about global warming and galvanize radical change. One might view this political defanging as a triumph of the culture industry and its corporate allies at the expense of artists and audiences. This ignores the evidence that artists and listeners have themselves been full partners in the erosion of genre. Both the music industry and the communities whose cultures it commodified may learn to regret its demise.

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