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Genrecore: The Smooth Hell at the End of Music

I came of age during our slow glide out of cultural biodegradation. Filesharing dredged up an entire seafloor's worth of cultural objects in a quick gallop of years. I could finally find TAD's *Inhaler* or Melvins' *Gluey Porch Treatments*, records that I couldn't find in hardcopy anywhere, but which I read about in rock histories and encyclopedias. Simultaneously, "poptimism" overthrew "rockism," a shift in critical music values that valorized anew musicians and genres (80's pop, boy bands, etc.) previously scorned as "phony" or "inauthentic." Nothing need perish, be forgotten, un- or underappreciated. The era of cultural total recall opened a rift through which things could reappear, but never disappear. My first cultural memory of these two tendencies weaving together comes from an episode of *Gilmore Girls,* in which Rory attempts to write about how file-sharing was changing music. This leads her to a dork's room where he's obsessively downloading rare yacht rock live albums. "Have you heard the new Interpol record?" he asks her. "It sounds like Joy Division mugging Tom Waits in an alley."

Hardware caught up to the glut: iPods. Since you could fit your whole music library onto your iPod, more or less, everyone became a music collector, curator, organizer, scavenger. Two culturally definitive love scenes from the era center around both the "cool collector" p[illegible]chnology abetted and the portability it afforded: the waiting room scene between Natalie Portman and

Zach Braff in *Garden State* when she "changes his life" by letting him listen to "New Slang" by The Shins (2004); Pam and Jim in *The Office* listening to "Smile" by Travis on Jim's iPod in the second season (2005). A new private, social experience became available: a soundtrack for your own life, for any moment (with greater variety than previous portable hardware offered). Early personal blogging platforms catered to this: livejournal and its ilk offered bloggers a window to enter the "soundtrack" for the posts. And, of course, if there's a soundtrack to your life, you're the star of your own show — an emergent cultural teleology with its own repercussions that I won't get into here.

We were lucky — an endless buffet of options, the music industry in shambles, no gods, no managers, a new, insurgent media class of tastemakers moved in to stake out the new turf — and we knew it. Steve Albini, who infamously lifted the veil on how major labels screwed small bands over during the alternative boom during the 1990s, in a 1993 *Baffler* essay titled, "The Problem With Music," declared, "the internet solved the music problem" in 2014 talk of the same title. "Imagine a great hall of fetishes where whatever you felt like fucking or being fucked by however often your tastes might change, no matter what hardware or harnesses were required, you could open the gates and have at it on a comfy mattress at any time of day," he invited. "That's what the internet has become for music fans." And it was better for musicians too: more access to fans without the suits back at corporate telling you how to part your hair and then making off with all your money. Thanks, Spotify!

There's an understandable credulity here: Albini imagined the marketing terrain of the 1990s survives. It does not. The internet, especially since the dawn of social media, has brought its own problems. Narrative, personality, and atmosphere make for the trinity of marketing today — a relatable/likeable (and non-aspirational) story of the brand, the brand's "personality" and "public" behavior on social media, and the aura that the two former elements, when combined with the product itself, make for. Take, for example, Starbucks, which now needs more than just Howard Schultz's mythology to keep its marketing department effective. It must be like someone you know, a friend, an acquaintance. And what do your friends do? They listen to music. So now Starbucks needs its own playlist. But who's going to provide that? Spotify. And this means some bands are going to experience increased visibility because Starbucks has made them part of its branded playlist for people who read the phrase "Starbucks branded playlist" and say, "Hey, that's for me." So much the better for the brand — er, the band.

But back in Albini's day, Starbucks would have had to get permission, some sort of licensing deal would have been struck with the band or whoever owned the rights to the song. Spotify doesn't need that. So, if you're a musician, Lockheed

Martin's "Highflying Hijinx" playlist can feature your music and you wouldn't even know it. Spotify simply puts you on the playlist and collects the paycheck from Academi or whichever corporate entity solicited Spotify for access to its millions and millions of users. Liz Pelly calls this "the automation of selling out." If the iPod gave made its owners cool, "crate digging" music collectors, then Spotify gave the same gift to brands. After all, the glut can't stay the glut forever. Or rather it *can*, but it needs some editorializing. And that's part of what Spotify offers companies and consumers alike: *we have the playlists you crave.* And it's not just for brands. Spotify works around the option paralysis built into its library of Babel by algorithmically sorting and compiling music recommendations for you. But in order for these playlists to remain lucrative, they can't push you too hard. Thus the game has its own incentives: if you want to make money, don't make anything challenging. Make it "chill," unobtrusive. Pelly writes:

'Spotify loves "chill" playlists: they're the purest distillation of its ambition to turn all music into emotional wallpaper. They're also tied to what its algorithm manipulates best: mood and affect. Note how the generically designed, nearly stock photo images attached to these playlists rely on the selfsame clickbait-tactics of content farms, which are famous for attacking a reader's basest human moods and instincts. Only here the goal is to fit music snugly into an emotional regulation capsule optimized for maximum clicks.'

This incentivizes the creation of more music that sounds like other music. Or music that fits neatly into specific genres, can be easily hoovered up and sorted into various playlists. The effect is something I call "genrecore," a phenomenon I've noticed in punk for a while, that now appears ubiquitous as a result of various platforms algorithmic needs. Genrecore can be summed up in the following formulation: better and worse iterations of familiar musical themes. Mathier mathcore to twitch to, trappier trap beats to flex to, etc. More of what you like with more of more of what you like thrown in there with it.

Genrecore simultaneously cancels and confirms two avant-garde tendencies: on the one hand, it cancels the "traumatic interventionism" of avant-gardism, meant to expose or legislate a Truth; on the other hand, it confirms the production of what Boris Groys calls "weak universal" forms. The avant-garde's project, as Groys sees it, meant to discover the visual forms *beneath* every other visual form. Think Malevich's *Black Square*, which reduces "the image to a pure relationship between image and frame, between contemplated object and field of contemplation, between one and zero. In fact, we cannot escape the black square — whatever image we see is simultaneously the black square." What the avant-gardists did for abstract shapes, the streaming services have done for musical genres. The weak universal of "chill" or "beast mode" or "moody autumn." Genrecore even pulls from Duchamp's "ready-made" strategy by using already

existing music for its ends. Spotify aims to reduce musical expression into categorized, redundant playlists it can package for corporations looking to expand their cultural cache and for listeners who don't want to sort through an endless trove of music to figure out what they want to listen to. This strategy increases their profitability and helps subscribers overcome the overwhelm we've come to expect from our vertiginous exposure to millions of choices.

But whereas Groys sees the paradoxes and difficulties in who can be considered an artist versus who can be considered a spectator, music in the age of streaming services exemplifies a broader cultural aesthetic, one Byung-Chul Han describes as "smoothness." Smoothness is Brazilian waxes, touchscreens, the facades of all those blocky apartment complexes realtors vomit up as sign and signifier of gentrification. "What is smooth does not *injure*," Han writes. "Nor does it offer any resistance. It is looking for *Like*. The smooth deletes its *Against*. Any form of negativity is removed." Works of art represent "obstacles to communication," and must, therefore, be stripped of their difficulty. Implicit in smoothness is repetition, sameness, or what Han calls "the inferno of the same."

Anyone who's worked in retail where Spotify or Pandora supply the music has experienced this hell: a long, eight-hour blur of undifferentiated songs made flat (or smooth) by their placement beside each other. Diversity without Difference. Welcome to the cereal aisle of music consumption.

To make things worse, Spotify understands exactly what it's doing and as it strives to replace record labels, it now has it's own record label, which so far pushes moody Billy Eilish knock-offs — a genre Pelly calls "streambait." They're there for brevity, clickability, repeatability, money. As we gaze into the algorithm it gazes back into us. While the human hand removes itself from the music experience, it reasserts itself downstream, altered cast in the likeness of its own digital creation. And so there's a shift from individual artists or bands of musicians to genre itself. Frankly, it doesn't totally matter *who* makes the music, just whether or not the music can be assimilated into Spotify's playlist buffet. Eileen Myles pointed out that the transition from modernism to post-modernism can be summed up in a change of question: from "could a child do this?" to "whose child did this?" Neither seems to matter anymore — so where are we now?

But so what? Haven't labels always catered to the lowest common denominator? Isn't that what pop music is all about? Sameness sells and genres are largely a marketing tool anyway. Old story, new characters.

There's truth to all that, but the consequences of genrecore loom large. First, there's an increasing disposability in music, and thus fandom; second, music

ceases to be social and becomes something solipsistic; third, we now live in a world where there's novelty without newness.

A few years ago, Patton Oswalt wrote a prescient feature for *GQ* on a phenomenon he called the "weak otaku." Otaku, of course, translates from the Japanese to something like geek or fanboy. Oswalt points out that the gate kept cultural output from his youth was now broadly accessible, that people didn't have to "work" to find something anymore, and so fidelity to and depth of appreciation for cultural works writ large has thinned or weakened. By the close of the piece, Oswalt welcomes a kind of cultural acceleration of references that congeal in something like *Ready Player One*. But anyone who has suffered the book or experienced the film recognize there's no hope to be had here: it's a gyre of references that reward the audience for catching them. They signal nothing beyond that. You're given a dopamine hit for being a good consumer.

It is that cynical.

The weak otaku phenomenon belongs to music now too. The torrent of musical output drowns listeners, no doubt. The "Spotify solution" or the "YouTube recommends" solution, or what have you, streamlines the process for you. But without some kind of work, without some demand on the listener to seek for something, to aspire towards some kind of new, authentic engagement with music, the default position is kinda liking that thing you heard on your For Fans of Sufjan Stevens playlist that you thumbs-upped but can't quite remember — anyway, you thought it had a good melody.

If fandom has atrophied, certainly artists are hurting. And if music is more disposable, then it's harder to stick around and make a living at it.

As mentioned above, the playlists are tailored to your liking. Whether Spotify, Pandora, or YouTube, the idea behind the algorithms is to show you what you like for you — though YouTube's algorithm seems to convince you might also want to talk reactionary politics for a spin regardless of your other interests. The problem here is that listening to music becomes solipsistic and self-referential, yet another quality of the smooth hells Han describes. I'm never surprised by, nor upset by anything recommended to me, as I've said. I "like" what's on offer. I don't love it — love being an authentic, life-altering experience to have with any art. Instead, it's like I bear witness to a bizarre sonic expression of a self-portrait, but reflected in a Jeff Koons photo. Or, perhaps more apt, a portrait of me painted by the Google DeepDream AI that makes everything it generates like a psychedelic dog collage, because, well, dog photos are the most common thing stored on the entered. Portrait of the listener made out of dogs.

What do we make of a world of novelty without newness? How has capitalism failed so handily at delivering the one thing it's supposed to give us? The response to this, in almost every avenue of American cultural, has been nostalgia. Remember that thing? Remember that other thing? Oh, man, but what about *this* thing? Remember that? More and more, it seems that making everything broadly available to everyone at all times made all of us look backward.

What else could we possibly have to say now that everything, even the dead, incessantly speak all at once? And for how long can we possibly listen? Forever?