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Momentary Musics: How Spotify and the Attention Economy Transformed Music from Art Form to Affect

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Momentary Musics: How Spotify and the Attention Economy Transformed Music from
Art Form to Affect

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts of Bard College

by
Tobias Hess

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1.....	8
Chapter 2.....	37
Chapter 3.....	45
Chapter 4.....	53
Conclusion.....	59
Bibliography.....	66

Introduction: The Vibe that Creeps

In 2018, I switched music streaming services from Apple Music to Spotify. While I had no particular problem with Apple's service, I was allured by Spotify's offerings. They had a generous discount for college students, of which I was about to become, but my deeper inspiration for using their services was the fact that my absence from the platform always gave me the vague sense that I was missing out. From conversations with friends, I learned that they were "discovering" new artists much more frequently, and many of them were encountering the same new artists, leading to moments of group excitement around musical artists I have never even heard of. Most fascinating to me was that they were not encountering these musicians through the major online blogs, most of which I frequented at the time, but an algorithm I had no access to. The chief pull to me then was Spotify's recommendation algorithm.

Upon joining the service, I immediately noticed that I indeed was "discovering" many more artists. Spotify has a weekly, algorithmically curated playlist titled "Discover Weekly" that it shares with all of its users. Every Monday, I would listen to my new "Discover Weekly" playlist and find many songs that I enjoyed, but my excitement surrounding finding this new music felt noticeably hollow. Finding undiscovered music, or music that was outside of mainstream awareness, was one of my favorite pastimes as a young music consumer. I used to scour music blogs, Reddit forums and Soundcloud pages to find music that excited me, music that provoked me, music that felt somehow on the cutting edge of culture. Spotify's recommendations often represented some of my preferred musical traits — a vague blend of female-forward pop music with elements of experimental electronics, or hip hop on the edge of nostalgic, to put my musical biases in their most simplistic form — but they brought me none of the thrill that my former explorations had. Maybe it was that there was no challenge to finding

this music; it all simply appeared on my Spotify mobile app weekly. Or maybe there was something about the music itself; yes, it sounded like music I liked, but it was just checking boxes of sonic attributes I tend to enjoy. Or maybe it was that I had no context, no story for these artists; I had no idea of what scene they were coming from, or what inspired them, or anything about their artistic aims.

Music, in the context of algorithmic recommendation, had been extracted from any wider discourse and was simply a hyper-optimized form of recommendations. No need to read that *Pitchfork* article telling you about where this artist is from and who they're touring with. All you have to do is listen and hit like if you're so inclined, or add it to a personal playlist if you're feeling particularly enraptured. It was so seamless, so easy, so unthinking. And while it saved me the labor that goes into online research, it also diminished the excitement of finding new music.

Over the past 4 years of using Spotify, I noticed in myself, an overall lessening in my passion for music. There are many reasons this could have been the case — from being overwhelmed by my college course work, the turbulence of young adulthood, and of course a pandemic that eliminated much of the social aspect of music — but I have a strong sense that Spotify, and their hyper-optimized recommendation system was a part of this progression. My music listening habits used to revolve around albums that I would obsess over for months at a time, but once I started to use Spotify, my attention span for obsessing and dissecting my favorite albums diminished and I found myself in the rat race of trying to keep up with all the recommendations Spotify threw my way.

Upon reflecting about this trajectory, it has occurred to me that a central factor has been that Spotify's recommendations were not centered around artists and genres that its algorithm suspected I would enjoy, but rather via mood and situation, or to put bluntly, vibes; vibes such as

happy, confident, driving, late night, sad, chill, hype. These are words that ring throughout Spotify's ecosystem and while their delineations are surely useful at times — sometimes it truly is late at night and you want to put on some “chill” music — its deeply narrow conception of music as being in service of your mood and moment, warped my sense of the artform. No longer did I have a deep intuitive sense that music is a thing in and of itself, but rather I began to take on, perhaps unintentionally, Spotify's view that music is a tool in service of my life. And as the years churned on, I felt like this imbued sense, this vibe, truly took something from me. Maybe this project is an attempt to reclaim what algorithms took.

This project is not an ethnographic study of the ways in which Spotify's algorithmic recommendation system changes users' relationship to music. But it is a study and exploration that stemmed from observation of my friends — what they were listening to, how they were discussing music, what they began to find intolerable sonically. I wanted to dig deep into questions of structure. I wanted to understand how the decisions of a platform such as Spotify changed my own and others' relationship to the artform I care so much about. And then I wanted to zoom out and see how these decisions ripple across culture.

As I've embarked on this inquiry, my reading and writing has taken me into surprising directions. What I found upon beginning my studies was that the questions at core of my endeavor into Spotify inherently dovetailed with larger questions surrounding the attention economy, the power of large tech platforms such as Twitter and TikTok and the notion of an algorithmic culture more broadly. In this sense, Spotify, is all but one view into these more overarching concerns of structure, mediation and form. What became clear to me was the reality that these platforms are in dialogue with one another, and that many of them work to further entrench their preferred modes of being. The questions surrounding Spotify's recommendation

algorithm are thus important not just in and of themselves, but for the ways in which they echo across culture as it is mediated via large technology platforms.

It is with that in mind that the structure for this project has taken on its unique form. My first chapter is a more formal inquiry into the specific workings of Spotify's recommendation algorithm: the people, ideas and groups that have informed its unique modality. Using Spotify's own executives' testimonies, ad campaigns and other journalists' and scholars' endeavors into the algorithm, I make the case that Spotify's recommendation algorithm imbues the entire platform with its highly specific idealization of music and its purpose. I then use myself and music I have worked on, in addition to the data I have received from Spotify about that music, to show how these algorithmic decisions shape what becomes popular and how artists conceptualize the purpose of their own art. Then, putting these reflections in conversation with the theories offered by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as the more recent writings of philosopher Robin James, I argue that Spotify represents a clear example of James's emerging notion of "Vibes Capitalism." This conceptualization is a potential update on Adorno and Horkheimer's original conceptualization of "the Culture Industry" for a post-industrial, digitized age.

The following three chapters are case studies that seek to apply the larger ideas I invoke in my first chapter to contemporary cultural works. They are not formalized additions to my first chapter's central thesis; rather, they can be thought of as riffs, or theoretical and scholarly improvisations inspired by my initial inquiry into algorithms. This is for a number of reasons, the first of which is practical. After writing my first chapter, I found in myself a deep desire to share my ideas with a wider readership and to see how my ideas ripple across networks. It was a desire for praxis. I felt that my scholarship had given me a unique perspective and ability to handle

algorithmic platforms, and thus would allow me to be able to reach an audience that may find these ideas usefully challenging. I thus began to post my “chapters,” or essays, on my own Substack newsletter which I had started a year prior. These chapters were thus emailed to an email list of readers and shared across my social media networks.

What surprised me as I embarked on this stage of the project, that is its stage of public writing/scholarship, was the extent to which its public-facing nature made itself present in the writing. As I explore throughout this text, I paired every new chapter I posted with a TikTok video that expanded upon or synthesized the ideas of my writing. These TikToks became more successful and more seen than I could have predicted. My videos were consistently garnering between 5-50 K views each, and my writing was thus seen and engaged with by some of the very musicians I was discussing, as well as people who work at Spotify. My success on an algorithmic platform such as TikTok, became fertile ground for my wider inquiries, leading to social media and social networks becoming increasingly dominant subjects in my inquiry.

My second chapter is a specific case study of the popular genre hyperpop, the conceptualization of which was done by Spotify as it formalized the genre into a concrete idea via its own popular “hyperpop” playlist. What also beckoned me to explore the emergence of hyperpop was its connection to the attention economy writ large. The music of the genre is largely composed by young members of Gen Z, and I was eager to unpack whether the genre can serve as a critique of the attention economy and our culture’s ever-shortening attention span, or rather if it was merely a representation of this problematic state.

My next chapter is a more specific exploration of social media and its relationship to artists and major labels. Using provocative emails that were sent between the CEO of Sony Entertainment and outside consultants (and were released to the public by *Wikileaks*), I make

connections between the rise of streaming and the attention economy to make the argument that musical superstardom, as personified by past megastars like Britney Spears, is shifting, at the very least, and becoming obsolete at most. Using the example of Lil Nas X, an artist whose fame is entirely dependent on his skill at using social media platforms such as TikTok and Twitter, I argue that musical superstardom is becoming more akin to the work of social media influencers. I then explore how this status ultimately serves major record labels and streaming platforms such as Spotify in addition to social media platforms.

My third chapter combines my scholarship of streaming with my research into social media. I explore the music of the indie-singer Mitski, and how her music is deployed by her fans on the popular video-app TikTok. This example helps to demonstrate how Spotify's conception of music as serving the purpose of imbuing mood has been internalized by music consumers. I argue that this dialectic, between the dogma of streaming platforms and the incentive to perform extreme emotions on social media, only works to intensify the musical trends started by streaming platforms that encourage musicians to make music that specifically serves specific moods and vibes.

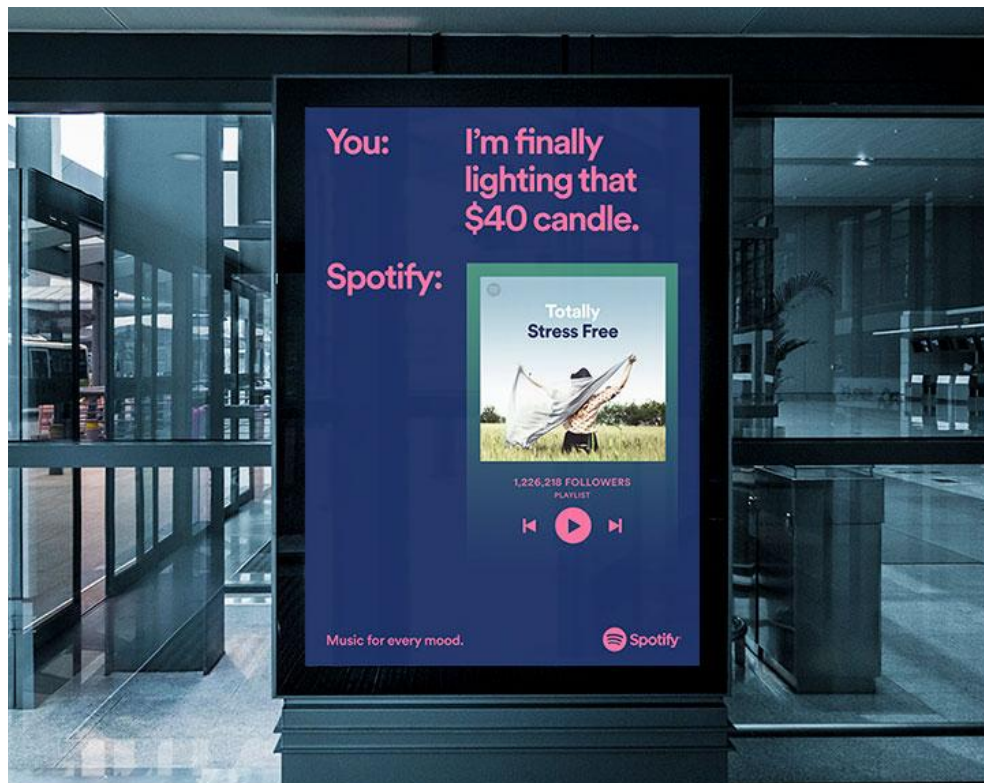
My conclusion is a personal essay exploring how my relative success on algorithmic platforms, such as Spotify and TikTok, have shifted my perspective and informed my creative subjectivity. Through an interrogation of myself, I sketch the potential effects that an awareness of algorithms and their incentives can have on the self. I end the project then, as an exploration of living scholarship, and an invitation for readers and musicians to consider how these dynamics have shifted their own subjectivity.

While this project has no prescriptions to the problems I describe, I hope that it inspires readers to become more critical in their engagement of platforms, to question algorithmic

recommendation systems, and to begin to dream of other ways of mediating culture. I hope that we can begin to imagine collectively radical alternatives to these large platforms and I hope too that we can stop deeming this rapid pace of change as inevitable. We give into these technologies with our money, but more crucially, our attention. It is not destiny that culture be mediated through coded-algorithms, that music be monetized in this strange way through streaming, or that the ideology that music serves mood/vibe/situation become widely held. We shift these progressions with our behavior and with our discourse. If this writing, and my public scholarship, can beckon some to question these dynamics at all, I believe we can crack open that door towards new imaginings, if only so slightly.

Chapter 1:
Momentary Music:
Spotify's Quest for the Perfect Music for Your Moment

Music for Moods



“*Music for Every Mood:*” it was the [campaign title of Spotify’s 2019](#) media blitz that sought to exemplify the various ways that Spotify’s plethora of editor-curated playlists can be deployed to deepen, alter, or provide ambiance for the many situations Spotify users find themselves in.²

Many posters and billboards featured in the campaign emulate the [popular meme format](#) known as “me/also me” that contrasts the divergent relationship between what we say/do with

¹ Chinaface, and Getty Images. Music For Every Mood Ad Campaign Example. Photograph. Ads of the World. May 1, 2019. https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/integrated/spotify_spotifys_latest_global_brand_campaign.

² Tim Nudd, "Spotify Riffs on Meme Culture in a New Global Brand Campaign," *Music by Clio* (blog), entry posted April 30, 2019, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://musebycl.io/music/spotify-riffs-meme-culture-new-global-brand-campaign>.

how we truly feel.³ One ad reads, “You: I’m finally lighting that \$40 candle” to which Spotify replies with a playlist titled “Totally Stress Free,” a playlist that features calm, positive indie pop like Kacey Musgraves’s “Simpler Times.” This particular example is indicative of the kind of work Spotify believes music can do. The anxiety of an expensive purchase is offset by the affective power of pleasing music. The mood of stress is responded to with music that imbues the mood of relaxation. Or maybe it’s simpler. It’s time to relax with the help of stress-free music and a luxurious candle.

Either way, the music is in service of your mood and moment. And according to the logic of the ad, music here has a clear function: it alters or supplements mood. But those that care deeply about music are likely to respond to the ad, and the premise that undergirds so many of Spotify’s popular editorial playlists that are designed to induce specific moods and serve specific moments with a simple question: *Well, what is music for exactly?* Music can help us recall feelings we associate with our favorite songs. Music can evoke certain emotions in relation to the mood or sense the song inspires. Music can do a million strange things to the subjective mind, and in that sense, can music be *for* anything?

Spotify’s deeper hidden premise, that music can be *for* something has imbued the whole structure of the listening platform with a distinctly utilitarian relationship to music. This is particularly clear when looking at Spotify’s important editor-curated playlists that served as the focal selling point of Spotify’s “music for every mood” ad campaign and are centered in the Spotify user-experience. The editor-curated playlists, which are organized by members of the Spotify editorial team using a mix of Spotify’s algorithmic tools and their own judgment, have immense reach and are listened to by millions of people a day, who in listening to the playlists

³ Brian Galindo, "23 'Me, Also Me' Memes That We're All Guilty of Doing," BuzzFeed, last modified January 21, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/briangalindo/23-me-also-me-memes-that-were-all-guilty-of-doing>.

are exposed to Spotify's incredibly specific musical delineations. According to these playlists, some music is for [driving](#). Some music is for when you're feeling [sad](#). Some music is for when you're [throwing a party](#). And some music is for when you're wanting to [express queer pride](#). These casually assigned distinctions are deeply fraught, and their popularity on the platform beckons a critical analysis. How are these playlists constructed? What algorithmic technology informs them? What are they telling us about how Spotify views music?

As I've waded into these questions, I have found myself mired in the complexities of the technology that informs the editor-curated playlist. I found that while these popular mood/vibe/situationally oriented playlists bring to light important questions about how Spotify views music and its purpose, the playlists are merely one of the more visible instances of the ways that Spotify's algorithm shapes the platform. The Spotify algorithm informs playlists, both editor-curated and algorithmic,⁴ but it also informs the subtle ways that the Spotify user experience functions. The algorithm, in many ways, *is* Spotify. And because Spotify is central to the contemporary music industry,⁵ the algorithm shapes the entire industry.

As the prioritized musical qualities of Spotify's algorithmic recommendation system entrench themselves, a new musical dialectic has emerged between the artist and the algorithm with profound implications for the contemporary musical creator's subjectivity. In essence, to do well on Spotify, an artist must produce music that performs well on Spotify's algorithm and is recommended to users via algorithmic and editor-curated playlists. But algorithms are not neutral; the quality of a piece of content must be measured in some way by an algorithm to

⁴ Algorithmic playlists are constructed based on musical analysis and user data, with no input by human curators.

⁵ According to a 2021 article by Tim Ingham for Music Business Worldwide: "In FY2021, according to Warner's filing, payments from Spotify accounted for 18% of WMG's total annual revenues (\$5.301bn). That's perhaps a lesser proportion than many might expect, but it's worth remembering that, because this relates to WMG's total revenues, it covers recorded music and music publishing revenues, but also 'ancillary' revenues like merch, ticketing, e-commerce etc."

determine its value to users (for example, Facebook controversially uses engagement as a measure of quality). And Spotify's algorithm has its own highly specific forms of measurement that in turn shape its recommendation system, resulting in the favoring of highly specific musical qualities. In this sense, musical creators are encouraged to intuit what these qualities are and produce music that exemplifies them in order to reach a mass audience, creating a shared economic-aesthetic logic.

As the necessity of adhering to the implied aesthetic priorities of the algorithm have become clearer, musical creators have internalized the logics of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's conception of the "culture industry"⁶ creating the dispersal of an economic-aesthetic logic that was once imposed "top-down." In an economic-aesthetic logic, "the culture industry" has become the "mass culture industry"⁷ arising from the production of the masses (from the bedroom producer, indie singer, even to the mid to major label artists) who intuit what cultural product to make, not from the economic calculus of a boardroom, but from an intuitive sense of what does and does not perform well on Spotify's broader recommendation system. This intuition can be thought of as what philosopher Robin James terms "[Vibes Capitalism](#)," a contemporary form of capitalism that is governed by orientations or "vibes" that

⁶ In "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," a chapter from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer problematized the notion of popular culture — that is culture, produced by a few large corporations for the ever-enlarging masses. What worried them most was the possibility that such a culture primarily served to pacify the masses and entrench the preferred aesthetics of capitalist industry whose vested interest was to maintain an uncritical status quo.

⁷ In "Culture Industry Reconsidered," Adorno reflected 28 years later after his and Horkheimer's decision to replace the term "mass culture" (which was the terms used in their earlier drafts of "Culture Industry") with "the culture industry," stating, "We replaced that expression with 'culture industry' in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves." Today, to note that production arises "from the masses" would strike a reader not as an endorsement of the current cultural status quo, but rather as a realistic estimate of cultural production in a post-industrial age. While "the masses" here (i.e. bedroom producers, youtube content creators, TikTokers) are still prone to co-optation from established conglomerates of "the culture industry," they are some of today's most vital cultural producers. Thus production does indeed, to some extent, rise from the masses. Crucially though, these creators are producing culture in response to an intuitive understanding of what does well in a culture governed by algorithms.

determines hegemonic, and thus profitable, behavior in late-stage neoliberalism.⁸ Musical recommendation algorithms communicate a clear vibe that musical creators internalize and then become resonant with, shaping their artistic production.

To understand the contours of this prioritized vibe, I will explain how Spotify views music, connects users to music that its algorithm predicts users will enjoy, and how the technology that undergirds this process functions. Finally, I will reflect upon how Spotify's technology is impacting both music consumers and musicians alike as well as the algorithm's wider implications for the cultural economy.

Music for Moments

The idea that Spotify seeks to help users find music specifically “for moments” has been stated explicitly by members of Spotify's team such as Shiva Rajaraman, who served as Vice President of Product during crucial years in Spotify's development. In an [insightful piece for WIRED](#), Rajaman offers the key thrust to much of Spotify's product development: “Instead of orienting around this idea of having music which you put in a library, we orient more around your life.”⁹

According to Rajaraman, the whole notion of music for “moments,” began with an assessment of users' workout playlists. These playlists were played and altered (meaning songs were added, taken away and re-ordered) with a notable intensity, piquing the interest of Spotify's product team who thought to take this “to its logical conclusion.” The WIRED article reads:

Spotify is beginning to read your context—your location, the time of day, and more—to make deeply educated guesses about what you might want to listen to. You always run at 7 am, before work; Spotify's going to start showing you running playlists at 7 am. In the

⁸ Robin James, “What is a vibe?,” *its her factory*, January 29, 2021, [Page #], accessed April 9, 2022, <https://itsherfactory.substack.com/p/what-is-a-vibe?s=r>.

⁹ David Pierce, “Inside Spotify's Hunt for the Perfect Playlist,” *Wired*, July 20, 2015], accessed April 9, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/2015/07/spotify-perfect-playlist/>

morning, Rajaraman says they've found most people like uplifting music, so they're starting to show users playlists like "Have a Great Day!" End of the day, you're heading home, maybe you want "Evening Chill" to mellow you out a bit. It's 2 am and you're still listening to Spotify? You're probably drunk, so here comes Avicii.¹⁰

Spotify can do this via its intrusive privacy policy, which was updated in 2015 to collect data from third-party apps such as Facebook, receive location data from a phone's GPS system, and have access to local media files such as address books, mp3 libraries and photos.¹¹ One would think that this information is largely irrelevant to one's music taste — all a curation system would presumably need to recommend a user new music is data from their musical library, [or answers to a brief survey](#) — but Spotify is not in the business of recommending via one's discrete and describable music taste: Spotify is seeking to recommend music that fits a user's shifting moods, contexts and habits. This data is not discernable without third-party sources.

The centrality of the idea that “music is for moments” has even led to the CEO of Spotify, Daniel Ek, to say “We’re not in the music space—we’re in the moment space.”¹² Music, to Spotify, is only valuable in the sense that it serves a purpose in time. The musical work is not meaningful in and of itself, but in context. Another approach to music, say one that centers a distinct artistic voice or historical context, is erased in the sleek design of the user experience. On Spotify, every song has been ahistorically recontextualized into a mood-inducing tool to serve a particular moment.

Spotify achieves this recontextualization of music via its centering of mood-based and situationally oriented playlists. The centrality of situational and mood-based playlists in Spotify's interface forces users to listen to music on Spotify's terms. As culture critic Liz Pelly has written

¹⁰ Pierce, "Inside Spotify's."

¹¹ Eric Drott, "Music as a Technology of Surveillance," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 12, no. 3 (2018): 233-234, <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196318000196>.

¹² John Seabrook, "Revenue Streams," *New Yorker*, November 17, 2014, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/24/revenue-streams>.

about for *The Baffler*, Spotify centers “the playlist” at every step of the user experience. The nudge towards playlists is most notable on Spotify’s mobile app— users often wake up to “start your day” playlists upon opening the app in the morning — but the nudge towards playlists is ubiquitous to the experience of using Spotify across devices. Be it when opening Spotify’s desktop user interface to the immediate flash of genre and mood icons that a user can click on for a variety of applicable playlists, or looking up a musician via one’s own choice,¹³ the user is at each step nudged towards a playlist that Spotify created.¹⁴ The implicit logic of Spotify is that even when users are seeking a specific artist, they would benefit from a curated playlist of music *like* that artist. For Spotify, there is a benefit towards being in the curatorial driver’s seat. De-centering the artist and centering Spotify’s delineation of what music is for what mood and time, or how it defines genre/era/vibe, works to naturalize Spotify’s functionalist view of music.

An implicit criteria arises from choosing music to induce moods and serve moments. The music selected for mood, vibe and situational playlist must work well in the background. These playlists are not crafted taste-based curations, but functional tools, and thus their aim is not to introduce users to new, exciting music, but serve a specific, vibe-inducing purpose. As Jorge Espinel, former head of Global Business Development at Spotify says:

“We love to be a background experience. You’re competing for consumer attention. Everyone is fighting for the foreground. We have the ability to fight for the background. And really no one is there. You’re doing your email, you’re doing your social network, etc.”¹⁵

Recognizing that tech platforms from Instagram, to Netflix, to TikTok are all in the business of fighting for user’s undivided visual attention, Spotify has realized that their niche lies within the

¹³ For example, typing in “Cocteau Twins” into Spotify allows me to click on the band itself or a series of 5 playlists that include mixes such as “1980s Revival” and “Dreampop Classics.”

¹⁴ Liz Pelly, “The Problem with Muzak,” *The Baffler*, December 2017, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-problem-with-muzak-pelly>.

¹⁵ Liz Pelly, “Big Mood Machine,” *The Baffler*, June 10, 2019, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://thebaffler.com/downstream/big-mood-machine-pelly>.

intrinsic nature of audio. Unlike visual stimulation, audio works as a secondary activity that can occur simultaneously to other tasks. In this sense, listening to music on Spotify, becomes naturalized as “ubiquitous listening” that “modulates our attentional capacities, . . . tunes our affective relationships to categories of identity, [and] conditions our participation in fields of subjectivity.”¹⁶

This musical function is contingent on the centrality of mobile streaming, which allows users to listen to a personalized curation of music any time, anywhere, from their mobile device. Thus the scope of moods and moments that music is deployed to induce and provide ambiance to has been greatly expanded and made eminently customizable. With users listening to music in so many different shifting contexts, the background function of music takes on even more importance in Spotify’s curatorial algorithm; music recommendations must fit private, social, mobile, static and professional contexts.

The problem is not that there is an inherent wrong to music serving a background function, but rather that musicians are forced into a context where background music is prioritized in Spotify’s recommendation algorithm. If music must work well in the background to land on a popular editor-curated playlist, and these playlists are the central mode of listening on Spotify, then musicians are rewarded for adhering to Spotify’s myopic and utilitarian stance towards music and its purpose. In this sense, Spotify sets the terms for a debate around music and its purpose that musicians have no role in framing. Individual musicians may make work for a variety of purposes with a variety of artistic aims in a variety of musical forms, but the centrality of editor-curated, and their specific function being to provide ambiance, forces musicians to grapple with a strangely specific dilemma set by Spotify. They must grapple with

¹⁶ Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (n.p.: University of California Press, 2013), 18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt2855s2.5>.

the question of if their music can serve a background, “mood/vibe” inducing function. The answer to that question may very well determine the extent to which their music reaches a mass audience.

Music for You

Pairing an awareness of time and place with data derived from a user’s unique taste profile allows Spotify to not only give users playlists that provide perfect music for the moment they find themselves in, but perfect music for them specifically, in accordance with their taste. Spotify, using an internal tool named Nestify, can deeply analyze a user’s musical taste, helping them tailor their recommendations to fit a user’s musical preferences. In a 2014 piece for FiveThirtyEight on Spotify’s data analysis work conducted shortly after their [purchase of musical data analytics company EchoNest](#), Ajay Kalia, the chief developer of the Nestify tool (which was developed by EchoNest), explained how Spotify tracks users’ taste clusters. These clusters are “little islands of artists that fit together” and make up the listening diet of Spotify users.

Walt Hickey, the journalist behind that article, allowed Kalia to analyze his Spotify data and define his clusters. Hickey listened to a distinct set of indie rock, pop hits and Vitamin String Quartet. These seemingly unrelated clusters make up Hickey’s unique taste profile. Kalia noted that 40% of Hickey’s listening was pop music, but no artist or song was replayed with particular intensity, signaling that this is music Hickey plays and enjoys but is not tied to his self-defined musical identity. On the other hand, certain indie rock songs and albums were played over and over again, signaling that this was Hickey’s “favorite” music. And finally, Vitamin String Quartet, a string quartet that performs string covers of pop songs and music from film and TV, had over 1,000 plays in Hickey’s listening history with no song having a particularly notable

amount of plays, which Kalia inferred meant that this was an artist Hickey put on in the background for a certain mood. With these taste clusters, Spotify can refine its recommendations, recommending Hickey string-based “focus playlists” during his work hours, playlists that feature artists like his favorite indie rock artists for taste-based recommendations, and pop-playlists for when Spotify’s data tracking intuits he is in the car or may simply want to put something on in the background.¹⁷

These individualized recommendations are not only informed by Hickey’s individual user data, but a complex assemblage of machine listening, natural language analysis and global user behavior. Using “machine listening,” The Echo Nest tool can analyze songs at a rapid clip and typify a “song into thousands of unique segments, including timbre, beat, frequency, amplitude, vocal syllables, notes and other computer-measurable characteristics.” In addition, the Echo Nest tools scour the internet for writing about music, including articles, social media posts and forums to gain further insight into how music is delineated. For example if certain adjectives arise in the discussion of certain artists frequently, this data is combined with musical analysis for a more finely tuned recommendation. A purely musical analysis may not be able to delineate the differences in subtle subgenres for example, whereas online discourse makes a point of doing so. Layering this data processing with an analysis of user behavior allows the Echo Nest tools to be quite sophisticated. What songs are skipped, favorited, added to playlists and shared on the aggregate is tracked. And the individual user who always skips/shares/likes songs with a certain musical quality is marked as doing so, informing their future recommendations. Tracking user data thus serves an individual role for users, as it's used to customize their experience, and as a

¹⁷Walt Hickey, "Spotify Knows Me Better Than I Know Myself," *FiveThirtyEight*, September 18, 2014, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/spotify-knows-me-better-than-i-know-myself/>.

component in the aggregate data assemblage of what songs users respond positively to en masse.¹⁸

All of this data derived from The Echo Nest's data processing system is funneled into a tool named "The Truffle Pig." This tool allows Spotify's editorial team to search through Spotify's vast musical catalog and pick songs for playlists via hyper-specific musical qualities. "The Truffle Pig" can allow a member of the Spotify team to base a playlist on an artist, adjective, genre and even mood. Jim Lucchese, CEO of Echo Nest says, "Say you want high acoustic-ness with up-tempo tracks that are aggressive up to a certain value. It'll generate a bunch of candidates, you can listen to them there, and then drop them in and add them to your playlist."¹⁹ Once these playlists are assembled, [Spotify's playlist curators study](#) how listeners are engaging — what songs are skipped, favorited, added to additional playlists, etc. — and edit them based on this data.²⁰

Thus the simple moment of a Spotify user waking up to the "[Chill Hits](#)" playlist on their Spotify app home screen is informed by numerous layers of data processing. That moment is informed by an analysis of raw musical data, of online discourse, and of how users interact with songs on the aggregate and on specific playlists. Finally, it is informed by how that specific user listens to music, which leads to them receiving the recommendation in the first place.

Each of these data points bring with them their own set of musical biases that work to reinscribe socially-conditioned notions of musical quality. The analysis of musical discourse found online is meant to add nuance to the imprecise nature of pure musical analysis, helping the

¹⁸ Jeremy Wade Morris, "Curation by code: Infomediaries and the data mining of taste," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, nos. 4-5 (June 16, 2015): 453-545, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415577387>.

¹⁹ David Pierce, "Inside Spotify's Hunt for the Perfect Playlist," *Wired*, July 20, 2015, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/2015/07/spotify-perfect-playlist/>.

²⁰ Liz Pelly. "Discover Weakly." *The Baffler*, June 4, 2018. Accessed April 13, 2022. <https://thebaffler.com/latest/discover-weakly-pelly>.

algorithm determine the differences in genres, scenes or associated moods that may not be audible but are nonetheless relevant for a musical recommendation system. And yet, the distillation of online discourse brings with it the biases of the online masses. For example, the discrepancy between the number of female vocalists to male vocalists on a “sad” editor-curated playlist works to reify the association between femininity and melancholy.²¹ While these disparities may be an accurate reflection of real world musical association as derived from online discourse, the reflection of that prevailing bias on a popular playlist essentially co-signs this bias and further feeds into it, giving users further experience to affirm their biased association of music by female vocalists and sadness.

Most problematic though may be the centrality that user behavior has in shaping recommendations. If user-behavior such as skipping songs is a central factor in determining musical quality, then certain musical attributes will emerge in the aggregate as determinative of what does and does not make good music. Music that is longer will be more likely to be skipped at some point. Songs that are more dissonant as well. Loud, unpleasant music. Challenging music. These are adjectives that are tied to conceptions of gender, race, sexuality and class. What is associated with “weirdness,” dissonance, difficulty, and disruption cannot be disentangled from the historical forces that shape popular musical attitudes along the lines of identity and subculture. Thus the centrality of user behaviour in determining what is and not worth recommending works to display long-standing musical biases against challenging sounds

²¹ This subject requires further, more formal inquiry. Anecdotally, based upon my own experience, certain genres and moods are noticeably gendered/raced. Often, music is recommended to me on Spotify’s mobile app via banner groupings that show a slideshow of playlists and albums under a title. I often see the title “Sad Girl Indie” to recommend various indie female singers. Generally, sad playlists feature, on average, more female vocalists. Similarly, “confidence” playlists such as “[Confidence Boost](#)” feature only women and predominantly Black American artists as of the time of this text’s writing on April 13th, 2022. Even from a quick glimpse, it is clearly visible that Spotify has an editorial perspective that is not reticent to offer particular narratives around mood and its connection to gender and race.

and the work of Black, queer, poor, politically radical and marginalized artists under the banner of objective audience analysis. The onus of recommending diverse music practices moves away from the curator and towards the algorithm, which is simply observing user behavior and making its determinations from that. Similar to the Echo Nest's use of online discourse, using the variable of user behavior such as skips, works to reinscribe widely held biases as objective, mass-sampled quality checks.

Music for Spotify

Spotify moved out of the “music space” and into the “moment space” out of economic necessity. In 2013, Spotify realized that their key “asset” (musical plentitude) was actually, as Eric Drott notes, “a problem to be solved.”²² A [2013 report done by Media Insights & Decisions in Action](#) of Spotify found that 70% of users were inactive: a percentage that was deeply unsustainable.²³

That report found that the primary cause of this inactivity was “infoglut:” an information overload that renders consumers ambivalent. The alluring pitch of Spotify (for 9.99 USD a month you can access over 30 million songs) became a hindrance once the consumer actually began using the platform. The work of musical curation, exploration, and choice is simply too strenuous for the contemporary subject who is facing near constant information overload, be it on facebook or their iMessage, let alone their music streaming apparatus. So in face of extinction via their own asset, Spotify had to balance the dual necessity of maintaining their key feature/sales pitch, while mitigating the overwhelming effects of said feature.

²² Eric Drott, "Why the Next Song Matters: Streaming, Recommendation, Scarcity." (Twentieth-Century Music 15, no. 3, October 2018) 347. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572218000245>.

²³ Mark Mulligan, *Making Freemium Add Up: An Assessment of Content Monetization*, ed. MIDiA, May 2013, <https://musicindustryblog.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/midia-consulting-making-freemium-add-up.pdf>.

Further, as the streaming space became more competitive and the catalog size between Spotify and its competitors such as Apple Music and Tidal became relatively similar, streaming services were forced to find ways to differentiate themselves “as an experiential brand . . . engag[ing] in a process of brand differentiation that functions to convince potential customers that a particular service corresponds to how they consume music in everyday life.”²⁴ Spotify sought competitive advantage in curating a seamless musical experience that automatically pairs users with playlists that fit their mood and context. The crux of their economic edge was largely in their ability to connect users with “music for moments” and not merely music for its own artistic value.

There are larger questions of economic value at play here as well. Spotify users are, as is the case with most tech platforms, both the customer and the product. For no money with ads, or for a small monthly fee, Spotify users receive access to a vast database of streamable music. While the mere penny percentiles per stream that rights holders receive for the streaming of their music seems, and is, like a vast undervaluation of music, “licensing deals signed with labels and publishers for the rights to their catalogs obliges Spotify to pay out upwards of eighty three percent of its earnings to rights holders.”²⁵ It thus became an economic imperative for Spotify to maximize existing revenue streams such as the ads on their free version, and accrue assets to ensure a high valuation for future investment and/or acquisition. The data collected from users that informs their “music for moments” orientation works on many levels for Spotify. On the surface, it helps Spotify make the user experience seamless, connecting users to music their algorithm intuits they will appreciate based on their expected mood, situation and taste profile.

²⁴ Jeremy Wade Morris and Devon Powers, "Control, curation and musical experience in streaming music services," *Creative Industries Journal* 8, no. 2 (2015): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2015.1090222>

²⁵ Drott, "Music as a Technology," 236.

But this data is also a “commodity” that is sold to advertisers and data-aggregators, a “factor of production” that allows Spotify to categorize and bundle audience groups to enhance the value of their ad sales, and finally as an asset of the company who gets to hold onto a deep and insightful set of user data that not only has insight into users’ listening patterns and habits, but rich psychographic information that can be extrapolated from those listening patterns.²⁶

Music for the Seeker

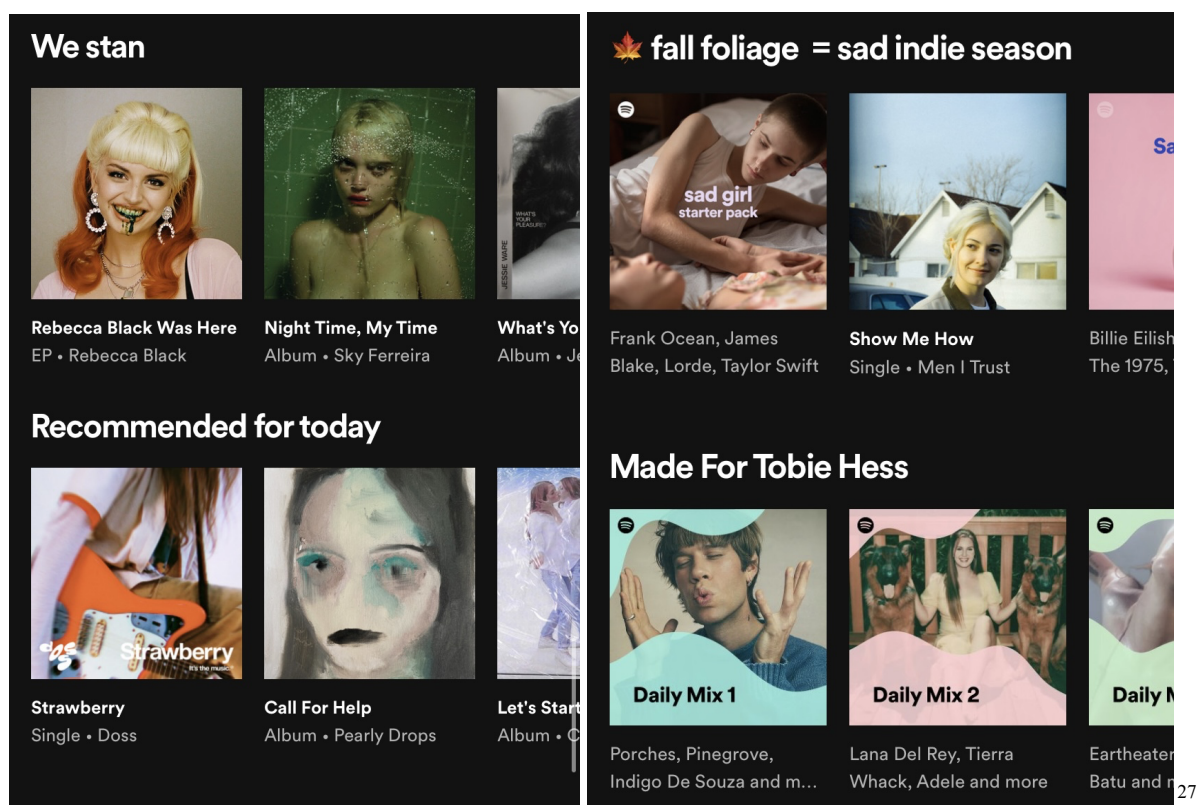
I am yet to use a ubiquitous word in the Spotify lingua franca: “Discovery.” “Discovery” ties the utilitaristic, mood-serving function of Spotify’s user experience with more arcane, romantic notions of musical discovery such as talking to a record shop owner or reading about a new music scene in a magazine. Even as “Discovery” on Spotify seeks to curate a set of new music for a user to listen to, it does so in the context of recommending new music “for today,” for given moments, or as “similar to” the artists/moods/vibes/genres that a user already enjoys. In this sense, “Discovery,” which invokes images of enthusiastic, novel encounters, is facilitated by Spotify so that it’s in service of specific moods and contexts.

The same algorithm that undergirds editorial playlists is used to fuel “discovery” features on Spotify. Notably “Discover Weekly” serves as a main focal point of “discovery” on the platform. “Discover Weekly” is algorithmically assembled based on a user’s taste profile and delivered to them every monday. The intention of the playlist is to expose users to music that they have never heard and are likely to enjoy, a techno-optimized solution to asking a friend “what should I be listening to?” Like editorial playlists, what songs perform well in the aggregate is factored into the algorithmic curation of “Discover Weekly” playlists. A song that is frequently

²⁶ Drott, "Music as a Technology," 237.

skipped will not be further recommended for example. In this sense, “Discover Weekly” is less like a friend curating a mixtape or playlist, and more like a focus-grouped offering.

“Discovery” is not relegated to this one popular feature, elements of “discovery” can be seen any time a user opens the app to find a series of albums or playlists under specialized titular banners. This style of recommendation is also taking part through the vast data work of the Echo Nest and its analysis of the millions of Spotify, as well as its tracking of individual users which helps the Spotify algorithm decide what should appear on whose home page when.



As can be seen in the example of my home screen above, I open the app to a bombardment of different recommendations. “We Stan” comprises music from weird-of-center, female pop vocalists, a musical type that makes up a considerable amount of my musical diet. As

²⁷Spotify. *Spotify Mobile App*. Spotify Mobile App. Accessed December 1, 2021. *Screenshot of Tobias Hess's Main Page Account on Day of Access*.

I scroll through this banner, I am recommended different albums, most of which I already listen to, but mixed in are playlists I am yet to frequent like “Pop Rising” and a compilation of music by the british girl group Little Mix titled “This is Little Mix.” “fall foliage = sad indie season” shows that the algorithm has both an understanding of the time of year I am writing this in, early winter/fall, and that I listen to a considerable amount of downtempo singer/songwriter music. Like “We Stan,” scrolling through “fall foliage = sad indie season” shows me a mix of albums I listen to, some I have not yet heard and editor-curated playlists like “Sad Indie.” Mixing in my favorite music with new songs is a covert form of helping me, the user, discover: I find new music but under an affective vibe the algorithm presumes I enjoy and this new music comes either in the form of whole albums or via Spotify’s tightly managed editor-curated playlists.

“Recommended for today,” a curation of albums I am unfamiliar with, is largely composed of indie artists with smaller followings. As I explore these offerings, I am pleased to find that I largely like this music. “Pearly Drops,” a dreamy synth-pop duo from Helsinki makes music on the verge of strange; it is musically shifty, ethereal, calming, cool and low-key. They have 40,000 monthly listeners, with their most popular song having 711,508 plays, a notable, if not charting, number. I have discovered them. And yet, have I? I was shown them, given their music because of some optimized sense of what “today” calls for. It’s a Thursday. I’m in Berlin. It is sunny, yet cold. Does Spotify know all of this? Based on their privacy policy they must, and how does that musically and algorithmically translate to this moment of musical discovery? And what does this discovery lead to? I have added a song or two by them to my own playlists, but this process has been so seamless, so optimized, that I feel no particular feelings towards this duo from Helsinki. Thinking back to my early days of music discovery in middle/highschool in Los Angeles, when I scoured blogs, obsessively traded recommendations with friends, and then

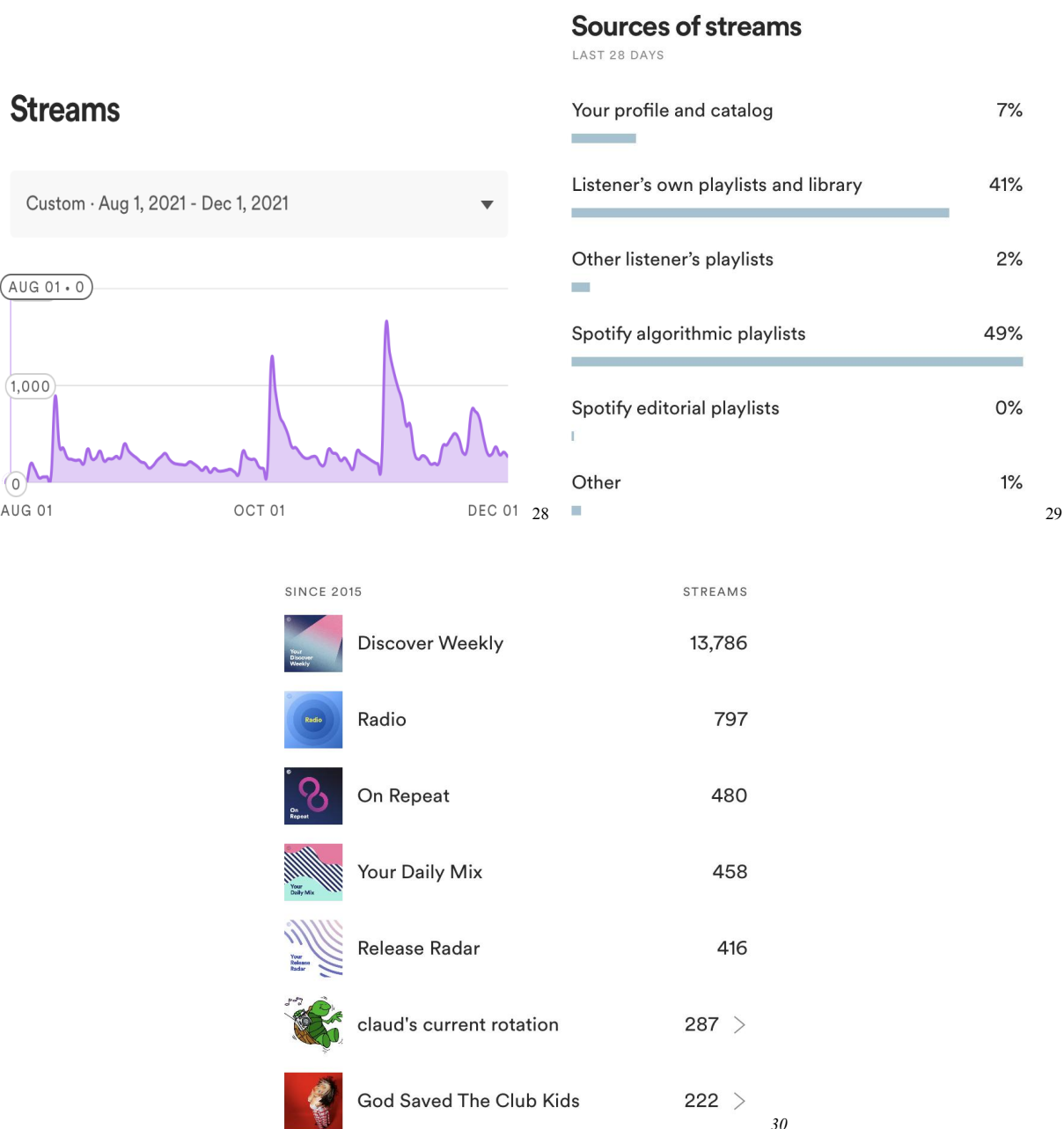
latched onto certain newly discovered artists and inhaled them as part of my identity. Under the guise of “for today,” this discovery is woven into our former discussion of mood/vibe/situational playlists. I have discovered something new, but it is “for today,” for now, an algorithmically-calculated vibe to serve my current moment.

Music for the Artist

For the indie artist and musical upstart, the landscape presented by Spotify’s discovery system provides both opportunities and dilemmas. Its algorithmic nature means that exposure to a large audience does not need to move through traditional channels such as major labels, publications or even online music blogs. The algorithm can analyze any piece of music, recommend it to new listeners via Discover Weekly or a home screen sliding reel of albums, singles or playlists, analyze how users listen (if they favorite it, skip, share) and then take this data to inform who else it exposes the music to. Out-of-algorithm promotion helps the song perform better in the algorithm, but performing well on Spotify helps the song get recommended to even more people. And while the possibility of gaining access to a larger audience without a label or spending significant money on marketing is a real opportunity for artists, dependence on Spotify’s recommendation algorithm forces artists to tailor their music to the algorithm. New artists essentially need to do well on the algorithm; there are about [60,000 new songs](#) released on Spotify every day, most of which are from artists with no following, label or professional backing. In such a bloated space, being “picked up” by the algorithm determines whether one can gain traction or simply whither with the rest.

I have seen this dynamic through music I have worked on, of which I have access to its Spotify listener data. Below is data from a release I worked on that I have access to through a feature named “Spotify For Artists.” The song, “[Bed Head](#)” is the debut single of God Save the

Club Kids, a musical duo that comprises myself and Grey, an artist based in Los Angeles. As of December 4th, the song has 39,304 streams on Spotify.



²⁸ Spotify For Artists, "Streams for 'Bed Head' by 'God Save the Club Kids' August 1- December 1 2021," chart, Spotify for Artists, December 1, 2021. *Screenshot taken through Tobias Hess's "Spotify For Artist" portal.*

²⁹ Spotify, "Stream Breakdown for 'Bed Head' by God Save the Club Kids for October 2021," chart, Spotify for Artists, December 1, 2021.

³⁰ Spotify, "Most Popular Playlists for 'Bed Head' by 'God Save the Club Kids' Since 2015," map, Spotify For Artists, December 1, 2021.






















As can be seen from the above figures, 49% of streams for the song have occurred on Spotify's algorithmic playlists. You can even see this in the graph representing listens over time. The huge vertical shifts in streams that happened in early October and then November were all Mondays when the song was put on users' Discover Weekly playlists. The steep incline represents the speed and scale at which Spotify's algorithmic playlists can expose listeners to any given song. Other algorithmic playlists make up a notable share of listens, such as Radio, which means the song was included in radios that the algorithm forms when a user wants to listen to a playlist based off of a certain artist or song, and "Your Daily Mix," a daily playlist that the Spotify algorithm forms for users that includes their favorite music mixed in with new music.

The Spotify algorithm favored the song for a number of reasons. A primary factor is promotional work that Grey and I executed on our own. Grey has a [popular TikTok page](#) that she shares with her partner Grayson. Grey and Grayson frequently post content about their queer relationship, issues pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community and racial justice. In this sense, Grey already has a platform and loose fanbase of TikTok users who appreciate her perspective and content. In a [viral TikTok](#) posted on August 11th, a few days after the song's release, Grey used the song as background audio and made a small montage of how her life has changed as she has pursued a music career and faced a number of obstacles.³¹ That video now has 71,000 views. The first steep vertical incline that can be seen in the above graph is streams that happened as the video was becoming viral in the TikTok algorithm (a deeply interesting algorithm that will be discussed in later chapters). This increase in user-generated data in relation to the song provided enough evidence of the song's quality to make it relevant in Spotify's recommendation

³¹ Grey and Grayson (@officiallyverygay). 2021. "I forget how much has happened in such a short amount of time... @tobiasfornow #music #indiemusic #nyc #gay#lesbean #clubkid #joblife" TikTok, August 11, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@officiallyverygay/video/6995314756198468870?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.

algorithm. Other work we did, like having friends promote the song by adding it to their own playlists (notably one by popular indie singer Claud, whose playlist “claud’s current rotation” is widely followed by their fans) and our own social media promotion, also helped the song.

In addition, the song itself is tonal, rhythmically un-complicated and poppy. It is not particularly experimental or distracting or dynamically surprising and thus works well in a background function. It also expresses a combination of melancholy and hopeful feelings that works well to imbue a wistful mood. This is evidenced in the idiosyncratic titles of the playlists our listeners have added the song to.

PLAYLISTS			PLAYLISTS		
	love the way I feel when I wanna die	38 >		fine again	8 >
	it gets dark at 3 PM	28 >		Raising Hell	7 >
	Mid Fall	26 >		november'21	7 >
	11.19.2021	24 >		college study III	7 >
	cock	22 >		Window Down	7 >
	November '21	20 >		world turns	7 >
	Rain	19 >		beautiful world, there you are	7 >
	flowing into winter	18 >		my old ways are creeping in	7 >
	rotation	18 >		uuden musiikin lista	7 >
	Scorpio 2021	17 >		planes, trains, and automobiles	7 >
				extra-fluffy kale seed quilt	7 >

³² Spotify For Artists, "User-Playlists That Include 'Bed Head' by 'God Save the Club Kids,'" table, Spotify For Artists, December 1, 2021. Screenshot taken from Tobias Hess's "Spotify For Artists" portal.

These playlists which are created by individual Spotify users for personal use and to share with friends, family, romantic partners and peers give us unique insight to the centrality mood/vibe/situational-orientations on Spotify. Even though these playlists are formed by individuals and not algorithms, they largely reflect Spotify's logic of what music is for: to serve moments, moods and vibes.

Two playlists that have generated the most streams for the song are titled respectively "love the way I feel when I wanna die" and "it gets dark at 3 PM". The former denotes a sense of melodramatic self-awareness, a typical Gen Z online form of irony that utilizes hyperbole, despair and doom to define a hopeless, yet humorous subjectivity. The latter is time-bound, referring to the early darkness that occurs after daylight savings on November 7th. Both of these playlists denote a somber, melancholic, dramatic quality. Other playlist titles such as "beautiful word, there you are," "world turns," and "fine again," similarly invoke a feeling of wistful self reflection. "extra-fluffy kale seed quilt" offers a strangely specific image from which emanates a vibe, a coziness, an intimacy. The description for this playlist, which users can add to any playlist, is "we're all just growing and glowing," which speaks to a sense of self-reflection, improvement and solitude. Other playlists featuring the song are more time and use specific. "November '21," "Mid Fall," "flowing into winter," and "Scorpio 21" explicitly connect the playlist title with the time of their compilation (November, fall into winter, Scorpio season) and/or with the mood of these colder months. The likely purpose of these time-delineated playlists is as an archive of users' favorite songs for that given time period. The playlist "college study III" signifies that the song is part of a studying playlist that is played in the background while the user studies for college assignments.

Ethnography of users of streaming services and their playlisting habits has found that users that frequently create, maintain and edit playlists are motivated by a variety of factors including a sensitivity to context (mood, situation, purpose) and shift playlists to fit specific and musically affective ends. It was also found that users form playlists as archives or collections, noting that playlists created for these purposes were expressing more clearly-defined musical identities and senses of subjectivity. These playlists though were also characterized by a dialectic between personal notions of taste, affect, feeling and moods, both shifting and long lasting.³³ Both the vague, mood-based playlists such as “love the way I feel when I wanna die” and the more purpose oriented playlists like “college study III” are indicative of the ways that playlists are “‘affective genres’ or fusions of musical substance, sociotechnical assemblages, and sociomaterial practices that respond to the exigencies of affect.”³⁴ They represent categories of music that are not strictly bound to social-discursive practices around the categorization of music via traditional genre distinctions, but are the expressions of highly-individualized conceptions of music and its relationship to mood and place. They are improvised genres that are curated and then deployed to imbue or express affects signified in the playlist’s title. And while these “affective genres” may not be as straightforward as an editor-curated Spotify playlist such as “sad indie,” they nevertheless serve a similar mood-inducing function through a much more personalized method.

The song’s relative success in being added to user-curated playlists is a valuable component of the data assemblage that Spotify factors into its recommendation algorithm. As of December 2021, the song has been added to 660 playlists. With every new addition of the song

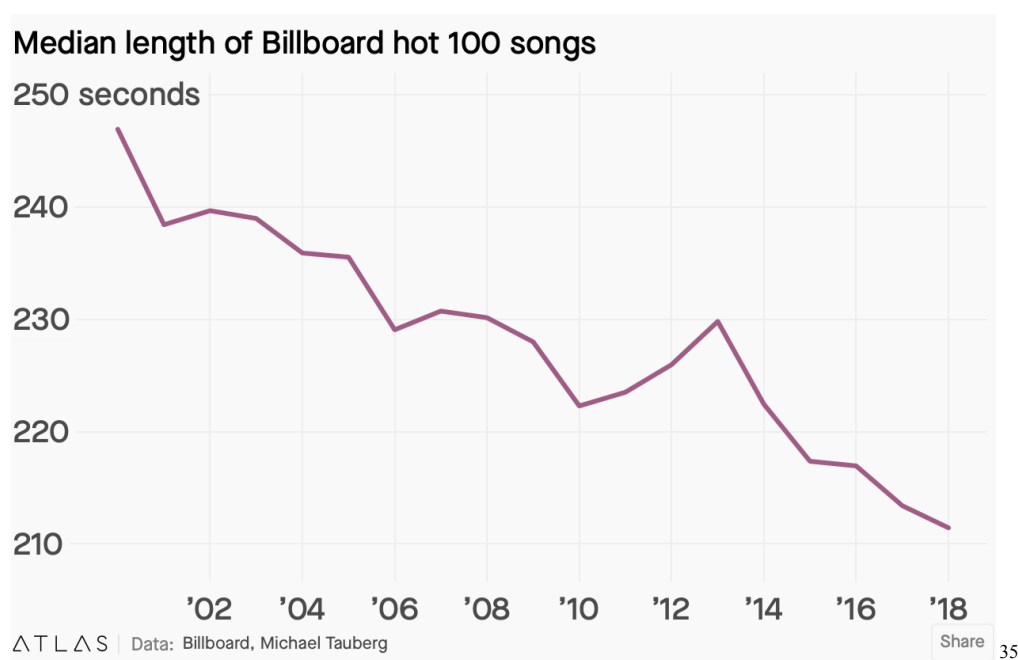
³³ Anja Nylund Hagen, "The Playlist Experience: Personal Playlists in Music Streaming Services," *Popular Music and Society* 38, no. 5 (2015): 638, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1021174>.

³⁴ Ignacio Siles et al., "Genres as Social Affect: Cultivating Moods and Emotions through Playlists on Spotify," *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 2 (May 25, 2019): <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119847514>.

to a personal playlist, the algorithm is given data signifying that the song is worth recommending. It has been added to these playlists because people like the song, but also because the song works well on a playlist, a medium with an implicit background, mood-inducing function. Thus the song's modest success cannot be disentangled from the favored qualities of the playlist format.

Vibes Capitalism

The potential of the algorithm to increase the reach of a song means that artists, including those with established careers, are incentivized to make music that aligns with the favored musical qualities of the platform. For example, today's top hits are shorter on average.



This is largely because shorter songs means more streams, which in Spotify's economic model of providing micro-sums of penny-percentiles per stream means more revenue for artists. Shorter song lengths also means that these songs are less likely to be skipped which boosts the song in

³⁵ Dan Kopf, "Median length of Billboard hot 100 songs," chart, The Atlas, 2018, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://theatlas.com/charts/rJ8BhiUom>.

the algorithm. Other shifts in the composition of pop music have taken place. For example, in the streaming era, choruses often come before the verse in [today's most popular](#) songs in an effort to capture attention and inspire “likes” quickly.

Another shift in pop music is the creation of mood/vibe mixes of already popular songs. At the time of this writing, the most popular song on Spotify is “[abcdefu](#)” by GAYLE, powered by [viral videos](#) on TikTok and its wild success on Spotify playlists such as “pop rising” and “Hot Hits USA.”

The song is angry, intimate, straightforward, with a soaring chorus that features GAYLE singing, “a b c d e F U and your mom, and your sister . . .”³⁶ This hit song has a remix with another artist, but crucially GAYLE also made two additional versions, one “[angrier](#)” and one that is “[chill](#).” The “angrier” version of the song is nearly identical to the original but has additional layers of distorted guitar and is a bit faster. The “chill” version is in a slower tempo, is sung with a gentler affect and features different guitar harmonies doused in chorus and reverb. This move by GAYLE is revealing about the incentives of the platform. She is a musical upstart, completely new to the pop music scene with her first single coming out in 2020. She and her team (she is now signed to Atlantic) decided that creating mood-oriented versions of a song that was already released would be a lucrative play. This tweak, of further mood-ifying a song, is tied to the streaming era and the incentives of the platform. An “angrier” or “chill” version helps the song serve specific ends for different listeners who do not just want to listen to the song, but deploy it to fit their shifting moods. This work to mood-ify also works well with Spotify’s desire to be in the background; a chill, or angry version of a song can be put on with the explicit

³⁶ “abcdefu,” performed by GAYLE, lyrics by David Pittenger and Sara Davis, on *abcdefu*, produced by Peter Nappi, Atlantic/Arthouse Records, 2021, compact disc, accessed May 2, 2022.

intention of affectively shifting the task at hand or environment one finds themselves in. There is not even a need to guess what mood the song will inspire because its title states so explicitly.

These are just a few examples of the ways in which the streaming era and the incentives set by Spotify (for songs to be explicitly-mood inducing, and work well as background music) are not just changing the ways we listen to music, but music itself. The overall context for this change is occurring under what Robin James defines as “Vibes Capitalism,” a form of late stage neoliberal capitalism that substitutes “Vibes” for probabilistic frequencies, a measurement that undergirded policy and business decisions in early neoliberalism. “Probabilistic frequencies” are derived from the past, such as bell curves that define normative behavior out of mass data samples like data derived from past incidents of death or debt. That form of probabilistic frequency thinks of life in terms of rates, proven data sets that indicate something determinative about the future. “Vibes Capitalism” conceived of people as vectors, pointing towards future outcomes as predicted by their past behavior and in comparison to other people similar to them.³⁷ This can be conceived of quite simply: a person who watches *Horror Movie A* on Netflix will be recommended *Horror Movie B* in the future because users who watched *Horror Movie A* also watched *Horror Movie B*. In other words: the algorithm determines that this user has *Horror Movie B* vibes. In this one simple example, there is resonance across people and cultural objects. The recommendation algorithm speculates that one person would want to see a film because they shared similarities to other users; they were conceived as being orientationally aligned with those users. And the two movies, orientationally aligned with one another.

³⁷ Robin James, “No Genre, Just Vibes,” lecture presented at University of Hartford, Hartford, CT, November 17, 2021, It’s Her Factory, last modified November 17, 2021, accessed April 16, 2022, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-dI9xd2i-HVVVs2wNuIRShTIFyh4xM_kSVuJQDPm76jc/edit?usp=sharing.

To offer a different example, one can see this in the way that a user buying one product on Amazon will be recommended a similar product after. That one product “vibes” with the other. But beyond the limits of Amazon, a person’s purchasing data from Amazon points towards other things (music, movies, services) that vibe with those purchases. The products and the data surrounding them indicate a variety of interests and habits pertaining to lifestyle, culture and affect that can be determined from other user’s behavior to inform algorithmic recommendations across platforms. In this sense, “vibes” are a broad framework for thinking of the resonance between things across mediums and according to specific qualities. [The dark, moody synth song vibes with imagery depicting moody, urban sunsets](#). The fresh pressed juice vibes with the yoga pants brand. The fitness app vibes with the fitness-oriented playlist.

While disparate objects/products/pieces of culture can vibe with other things according to any given quality that denotes orientational-alignment, there are certain vibes that are themselves oriented towards the incentives of mass platforms. Twitter seems to incentivize hyperbolic behavior, crass and ironic affects, and absurd humor, as posts with those attributes tend to perform better than posts with different ones. On Twitter, the bombastic personality, the shocking video, the irreverent meme, all vibe. TikTok incentivizes the posting of videos that users watch to completion, comment on and share, thus incentivizing shocking, surprising, relatable content in the aggregate.³⁸ And as discussed here, songs that are clearly and effectively mood-inducing are in alignment with the incentives of Spotify. Artists then, in order to succeed on the platform, must be in alignment, must vibe, with the favored qualities of Spotify, hence GAYLE’s moodified mixes.

³⁸ TikTok’s “For You Page,” which is the chief mode of consumption on the platform, shows users videos it expects them to enjoy. It uses the listed metrics stated here as its barometer for quality. Thus if a user, even one with no following, makes a video, and it is shown to a sample audience who largely finish it, like and comment on it, then the video will be shown to a larger group, and so on.

The dialectic between the musical creator and the algorithm imbues within the musical create an algorithmically-aware subjectivity, or as stated before, an economic-aesthetic logic. While there has always been an awareness of “the market,” especially since the advent of recorded music and its subsequent commodification, a time of algorithmic recommendations supplies a constant flow of data that sends near-constant signals about what does and does not perform well on the algorithmic platform. SpotifyForArtists, the service that artists use to retrieve data about their release and from which I took screenshots of for this writing, relays daily updates about new streams, from where they derive (playlists, artist profiles, algorithmic recommendations) and audience demographics. The possibility of a song performing well via algorithmic recommendations and access to the data that depicts this success/failure creates an opportunity for artists on Spotify to have an understanding of just how “good” their music is; if it was a good song, it doesn’t matter that an artist had no label backing, the algorithm could spread it to new listeners. “Bed Head” is apparently “good;” it has been recommended to thousands of Spotify users. And yet it is “good” in the sense that it vibes with the orientations of the platform. It imbues mood. It works well in the background. It is . . . vibey.

This subjectivity affects artists both big and small, though adherence to the prioritized vibe of Spotify is most important for the musical upstart. The ability for algorithms to depict artistic success and failure via how much they recommend a given song is the democratization of “the culture industry,” Adorno and Horkheimer’s famous theorization of a top-down, industrial approach to culture that produces aesthetic sameness, distracts the masses and shifts cultural consumers’ subjectivities towards the counter-revolutionary³⁹. The concept of “the culture

³⁹ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94-137.

industry” is a helpful lense in which to consider Spotify. Spotify is not “the culture industry” in that it does not, in general, produce cultural products, but rather it provides a venue for cultural products to be experienced, discovered and shared. And its algorithm signals what should be produced to the musical creators who use its platform. Musical creators do not need “the culture industry” in the form of board rooms and studio executives to dictate what they make to reach mass notoriety; they can intuit what would perform well on the platform and orient their vibe towards that. In this sense, algorithmic platforms have merged what Adorno defined as “mass culture,”⁴⁰ that is culture that arises from the talents and desires of the ordinary masses, with “the culture industry.” The new fascistically-oriented culture industry capitalists who used to dictate the cultural diet of the throngs from their corner offices, are now the programmers and platform executives who orient algorithms towards favoring certain qualities and wait for the creative populace to catch the signal and produce. They imbue the economic-aesthetic logic and they create the conditions in which compliance becomes near-mandatory for success.

The following essays will provide few answers as to how we challenge the hegemony of Spotify’s vibe. But in exploring it through the following examples, I hope we can better understand it, in hopes of disentangling ourselves from the vibe one day soon. The artists explored in the following essays all contended with the vibe in their own novel ways; some by making themselves resonant with it, others by disrupting it, creating “bad vibes,” and some by trying to change it. In an account of how these artists related to the vibe, I hope we can find new ways for ourselves to relate to it, both as listeners and musicians. I hope we can learn to hear the vibe. And I hope we can learn to silence it as the vibe nags at the back of our consciousness.

⁴⁰ Theodor W Adorno and Anson G. Rabinbach. "Culture Industry Reconsidered." (New German Critique, no. 6, 1975), 12. <https://doi.org/10.2307/487650>.

Chapter 2:

Hyperpop Would Like Your Attention

Adapted from a [Substack article](#) of the same name posted on March 11th, 2022

There's a moment in "[hand crushed by a mallet](#)" by 100 GECS where the song becomes unintelligible. It begins with sweeping synth chord arpeggios as Laura Les croaks in chipmunk-tuned gasps, "I was trying to find a way to kill time/ I didn't even get to tell you goodbye." The music then builds with white noise sweeps and quarter note snare hits until everything finally drops out. Or everything drops in. The 808s that appear are so loud and distorted, their upper register so gratingly pronounced, that they fill the sonics of an entire instrumentation. Les's voice is muffled under their weight. "Oh my god, what the fuck/take my hand, crush it,"⁴¹ she sings. Her voice struggles to cut through, but you can hear it enough that you can sense the remnants of her drowning vocals.

Maybe *this* is the "hyper" in hyperpop. An extremity that renders maximalism minimalist. So much, so loud, so fast, that the whole thing turns in on itself; sounds apply pressure unto sound until the whole thing hardens like a diamond and the music becomes one solid thing. So tough you can bludgeon with it.

But maybe there's another form of "hyper" out there. The beginning of "[Gunk](#)" by Underscores seems as if it's starting at the very peak of an entirely different song. Sounding like a direct copy of an early 2010s Skrillex Dubstep anthem, we hear a voice proclaim "we don't give a fuck" as synth hits blare with that classic Dubstep siren-style intensity. It's a glorious 9 seconds until the music abruptly ends, the sound of a record scratching, reversing and slowing down and then Underscores's tag, "it's the new wave of the future," sounds out. The song

⁴¹ Dyaln Brady and Laura Les, "hand crushed by a mallet," performed by 100 geecs, on *1000 geecs*, Dog Show Records, 2019, audiotape, accessed April 22, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/7CUkeiG7QtB7tPU9f8SANS?si=caa692af36a646d1>.

becomes simple, intimate, moving. With quiet, tender arpeggiated synth chords accompanied by acoustic guitar, Underscores begins to sing. “Drive the car off the main road/I took way too much . . . And I don't wanna get sick/I've got a bullet to bite before I drive myself crazy.” The song moves in the way a good-old fashioned song does. The chord harmonies change as they sing “did I swallow my tongue?/Did I puncture my lung?” When the typical chords reappear we hear new layers of noise and static, the instrumentation becomes more layered and distorted, we hear the last lines “Been seven years since I cried/ It'd take a lot for you to break me,” and then a moment of pause and finally, the climax: a one second moment of complete, speakers-blown-out 808s and noise static.⁴² And then it's over.

Where was the “hyper” here? Was it in that off kilter beginning and climactic end? Was the rest of the song, with its earnest simplicity, not “hyper” but for the proximity to those maximalist bookends? Or maybe the composition itself, with its surprising structure that necessitates a specific kind of captured attention, makes the song “hyper” not despite its quiet middle, but because of its very contrast.

What unites the music that falls under the banner hyperpop is difficult to track. It ranges from the intimate and emo-inflected heartthrob mutterings of [Glaive](#), to the 2010s-dubstep-inspired musical jokes of [100 Gecs](#), to the legions of artists inspired by the late producer/artist SOPHIE whose music sought maximalist engagement through tender, challenging pop music. At the very least what unites this music is a sense of the “hyper,” an affinity for sonic business with loud overblown synths and 808s, fast tempos, often but not always shorter songs, and the prioritization of musical engagement.

⁴² Devon Karpf, “gunk,” produced by Devon Karpf, performed by underscores, recorded 2021, on *boneyard aka fearmonger*, by underscores, underscores, audiotape, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1bYhVmOJ972hDOdjhLBeHr?si=b047ec80b610449e>.

[In a 2015 interview with Rolling Stones](#), SOPHIE used the word “engagement” to describe her artistic project. She says, “The challenge I’m interested in being part of is who can use current technology, current images and people, to make the brightest, most intense, engaging thing.”⁴³ It seems that if nothing else, hyperpop is seeking the full attention of its listeners. Thought of in this way, the range of hyperpop’s sounds makes sense under one banner. Though the term for the genre comes from dubious origins as we will soon explore, the music thought of as hyperpop is united in its intent to provoke and keep its listeners engaged. It is not music for the background. It is music that wants your attention.

In a [2021 NY Times](#) piece by tech critic Charlie Warzel, Warzel describes “the attention economy” as “a catch-all for the internet and the broader landscape of information and entertainment. Advertising is part of the attention economy. So are journalism and politics and the streaming business and all the social media platforms.” But on a more fundamental level, the attention economy describes a literal dynamic that predates the internet. Warzel writes: “Every single action we take . . . is a transaction. We are taking what precious little attention we have and diverting it toward something.”⁴⁴ Engagement on the internet is a double-win for content creators and platforms alike; when you are engaging with one piece of content or on one platform, it means you are generally disengaged from everything else. And when revenue is tied to attention, as platforms/websites need your attention focused on them to offer that same attentional space up for advertisers, it is your very attentional capacity that becomes the realm of capitalistic battle.

⁴³ Simon Vozick-Levinson, "PC Music Are for Real: A. G. Cook and Sophie Talk Twisted Pop," *Rolling Stone*, May 26, 2015, accessed April 22, 2022, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/pc-music-are-for-real-a-g-cook-and-sophie-talk-twisted-pop-58119/>.

⁴⁴ Charlie Warzel, "I Talked to the Cassandra of the Internet Age," *New York Times* (New York City, NY), February 14, 2021, accessed April 22, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/opinion/michael-goldhaber-internet.html>.

Anyone who spends significant time on the internet can attest to the feeling of malaise that this dynamic produces. The fractured state of consciousness. Twitter makes itself addictive with its endless refreshability. TikTok offers candy-coated entertainment on its infinitely long and infinitely curated “for you page.” News sites flash you with click bait headlines. Everyone, all at once, vying for you.

This is what makes Spotify so lucrative. Musically, they have disengaged from the engagement war. As discussed, Daniel Ek, the CEO of Spotify has even said in reference to his company that “we’re not in the music space—we’re in the moment space,”⁴⁵ expressing that above all else, Spotify seeks to curate the perfect music for whatever situation you find yourself in, not necessarily the best music in general. So in their bid to recommend their users “music for moments,” they are conceding the quest for users’ undivided attention and offering instead an accoutrement to other more attentive activities. Doom scrolling on twitter. Washing the dishes. Driving. They have your background music. They own the unsexy attentional background. hyperpop then, is the antithesis of Spotify’s musical agenda. If Spotify’s aim is to provide “music for moments,” then hyperpop fails at this by providing music that is too hectic to serve anything beyond itself; like the social media feeds that Spotify wants to provide the soundtrack for, hyperpop is pining for your undivided attention.

But while the genre shirks the gravity of the platform it’s hosted on, it orbits similarly to the rest of the online attention economy. More than any genre, it is music of and by the attention economy, made by young people who were weaned on algorithmic recommendations and whose aesthetics developed in a complex web of internet irony. In the same way that TikTok [upped the ante in keeping users engaged via algorithmically curated videos that are curated to maximize](#)

⁴⁵Seabrook, "Revenue Streams."

[engagement](#),⁴⁶ hyperpop has upped the sonic ante by depicting a psychic sense of digital overload through sound.⁴⁷

That's the double-bind of the genre, its promise and its peril. The promise of hyperpop lies in the genre's ability to depict and thus help us better understand our state of attentionally fragmented consciousness. Its popularity has also allowed for the emergence of a popular music that is in many ways opposed to the placid aesthetic preferences of Spotify's recommendation algorithm, a project that is worthwhile for anyone interested in expanding popular music taste towards anything in the realm of the challenging and strange. But its potential countercultural impulse also rings a bit hollow when thinking of it more broadly as part of culture. Its fast tempos and chaotic business may be part of a move towards a more challenging pop music, or it can simply be an impulsive shift towards an all consuming aesthetic of the internet. It could be not a complex grappling, but a musical prescription for an attention-depleted culture, a salve to our fragmented selves, music for squirmy young people raised on the web who cannot focus on anything unless they are being blasted with sensation.

Hyperpop may be most remembered though in the long run not for the music that falls under its amorphous banner, but as a historiographical marker: it is one of the first genre's to be coined by Spotify itself. The term had floated around the internet for some time (since SOPHIE blasted onto the scene in 2014), but it was Spotify itself that marked the term as the official genre

⁴⁶ Eugene Wei, "TikTok and the Sorting Hat," *Remains of the Day* (blog), entry posted August 4, 2021, <https://www.eugenewei.com/blog/2020/8/3/tiktok-and-the-sorting-hat>.

⁴⁷ The writer and tech executive Eugene Wei has written a series of insightful explorations of TikTok for his long running blog, "Remains of the Day." Wei highlights TikTok's ability to quickly and seamlessly sort consumers into interest groups, which allows their algorithm to consistently recommend relevant content for all users, as a key factor in the app's success. He also notes that TikTok judges content by reviewing how engaging content on the app is, using metrics like watch time and how many comments and shares each video gets as a barometer for quality. This quality-check ensures a level of constant entertainment and curation when using the app.

title with their creation of the popular “hyperpop” playlist, which has become the unofficial platform for tracking what’s happening in the genre.

In an article for the [New York Times](#) detailing the genre’s rise, Ben Dandridge-Lemco confirmed this when he found that the editorial team at Spotify were the ones to codify the term

“... after seeing [hyperpop] come up in metadata collected by Glenn McDonald, Spotify’s ‘data alchemist,’ whose job is finding emerging sounds on the platform and classifying them into ‘microgenres.’ Over email, McDonald said he first saw the term applied to PC Music’s releases in 2014 but it wasn’t until 2018 that hyperpop qualified as a microgenre: “‘For our categorization purposes it was mostly a matter of waiting to see if enough artists would coalesce around a similar ebullient electro-maximalism.’”⁴⁸

Spotify’s metatextual tools, powered by their [music-data-analytics company the EchoNest](#), felt the oncoming of an emergent genre and then defined it before subcultures could. To be clear, there is a dialectic here between musical creators, fan communities and Spotify itself. hyperpop as a music largely emerged online on discord servers that fostered emergent communities of young “bedroom producers” and artists. And the music does have a physical presence, as can be seen at shows like [HEAVEN in Los Angeles](#) and in PC MUSIC’s (SOPHIE and AG Cook’s label) near-decade-long run of releasing music and organizing performances. But the style’s proliferation from distinct scenes in the UK and the west coast to diffuse bedrooms throughout the world, and its popularization through online platforms, made the thread connecting these diverse musical practices hard to track. And thus its crystallization as a genre was more-easily executed by Spotify who could mark it as a thing in one easy key stroke.

Spotify’s ability to reframe a diffuse group of artists and scenes into one coherent banner is a display of the imbalanced power dynamic between artists and Spotify. And their doing so is made starker by the impersonal nature of their framing; there is no article announcing the idea of

⁴⁸Ben Dandridge-Lemco, "How Hyperpop, a Small Spotify Playlist, Grew Into a Big Deal," *New York Times* (New York City, NY), November 10, 2020, accessed April 22, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/arts/music/hyperpop-spotify.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

the genre with a comment section to haggle over its efficacy. Simply one day, Spotify deemed it so, made evident by the addition of a playlist on their impersonal platform.

Despite any misgivings that artists who are associated with the genre may have about the formulation and curation of hyperpop by Spotify, many are dependent on Spotify and the hyperpop playlist for a platform. This was made evident when the producer A.G. Cook did a “takeover” of the playlist and replaced many of the up and coming artists that it featured with older music, such as Kate Bush and J Dilla, that he believed had inspired the genre. The stark change in the playlist, and the resultant change in who was receiving streams from the platform prompted many young hyperpop artists to complain. The up and coming hyperpop artist quinn explained the feeling in that same New York Times article. “People were asking why we were making such a big deal about it, but they didn’t realize there were people who were literally living off that Spotify check.”⁴⁹

And in that dependence that quinn alludes to, we see it all. Spotify has such power as a platform and a curator that they not only host the genre’s music, but define it; their curatorial decisions trickle down to the young creators that supply them with their product, resulting in either real revenue or barely anything at all for the young musicians. Spotify has the type of power that beckons one to question if critique is even necessary. For as I sit here and ponder over the sonics and society that the music interacts with, there is the hard economic reality of how the music distributes itself across networks.

In the same way that Spotify has rendered much music journalism and radio curation partially purposeless, as critics and tastemakers no longer make or break artists (algorithms and nameless Spotify curators do that now), they have rendered some of our sincere engagement with

⁴⁹ Dandridge-Lemco, “How Hyperpop.”

music too a bit purposeless. Our championing of artists, our grappling with their import, pales in comparison to the data-giant's power. With one quick playlisting decision careers are made and stalled. And a whole genre and whole subculture — subculture, that thing that molds itself not at the pace of corporate powerpoints, but at the strange, slow pace of underground culture — is defined in forgetful instants.

And yet, this is music people are listening to. And it blends itself into their restless days. And that's something, even if the power of our discourse is void in the face of algorithms and corporate backed decision. At least we can take the sounds that people consume seriously. Because there is something there in hyperpop. And its challenge, critique and energy reverberates despite that energy reaching us through faceless technology. Because at the end of the day, the kids are making good shit. Like [The Frost Children](#). That's some weird, good stuff.

Chapter 3:

No More Superstars

Adapted from a [Substack article](#) of the same name posted on March 18th, 2022

[Lil Nas X's single, Montero \(Call Me By Your name\)](#), was never really about the music.

It was all just the pretext for one of the most complex, masterful acts of online trolling the internet has ever witnessed. Everything about the song and its campaign was made to provoke a reaction: the song's music video features a thousand-mile pole slide from heaven into the fiery depths of hell where Lil Nas X proceeds to give Satan a lap dance.⁵⁰ For promotion, Lil Nas X sold six hundred and sixty six pairs of "satan shoes" that allegedly contain drops of human blood, and on and on.⁵¹

Predictably, everyone from the Governor of South Dakota to culturally conservative "intellectuals" weighed in to express their dismay. And Lil Nas X made mincemeat of their tired, 80's-style pearl clutching by responding to them on twitter with precise and satisfying jabs.

[In a smart piece for The New York Times](#), pop music critic Jon Carmanica tracked the contours of Lil Nas X's hypermind trolling, writing,

"what 'Montero' has caused — or rather, what [Lil Nas X has engineered](#) — is a good old-fashioned moral panic. The true art here isn't the music . . . or the video: it's the effortlessness, the ease, the joy of his reactions to the reactions. It's the sense that he is playing chess to everyone else's lame checkers moves — he is simply faster, funnier and on firmer, more principled ground than his adversaries, who are at best, comically flimsy."⁵²

Lil Nas X is a prodigy at navigating the various realms of the internet. As he responded to the controversy inspired by his single, he shifted his style according to each social media

⁵⁰"Lil Nas X - MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name) (Official Video)," video, Youtube, posted by Lil Nas X, March 25, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6swmTBVI83k>

⁵¹ Oscar Holland and Jacqui Palumbo, "Lil Nas X's unofficial 'Satan' Nikes containing human blood sell out in under a minute," CNN, last modified March 29, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/lil-nas-x-mschf-satan-nike-shoes/index.html>.

⁵²Jon Carmanica, "Lil Nas X, Clapback Champ," *New York Times* (New York City, NY), March 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/arts/music/lil-nas-x-twitter-sneakers-outrage.html>.

platform he used to maximize engagement. Each required their own distinct affect and style. On Twitter, his trolling took on quippy and coy forms, responding to homophobic and hyperbolic comments on his song and video with terse and sardonic retorts.



53

But on TikTok he shifted his affect while maintaining a consistent sense of humor. Translating his responses to video and decentering the backlash to his work, he turned his profile into [a wider meme](#) by pairing his song with discordant videos. For example, he [reposted an animation of Carl](#), a character from the popular early 2000s children's show Jimmy Neutron, singing his lude song while sliding down the pole to hell.⁵⁴ These subtle yet important distinctions in how Lil Nas X executed his social media blitz across platforms reveals the delicately drawn details that distinguish respective platforms. Twitter, which functions off text-based engagement, rewards direct conflict that generate other textual responses. TikTok, which is more siloed and less of a communal conversation than Twitter, rewards short, fast, funny and surprising videos that generate response via comments, the re-use of the audio featured on a TikTok in videos made by other users, and through direct sharing with friends.

⁵³Montero Lamar Hill (@LilNasX), "Shoot a child in your mouth while I'm ridin" -Montero 1:08," Twitter, March 28, 2021, 4:18 PM, <https://twitter.com/lilnasx/status/1376267468050587648?lang=en>.

⁵⁴ This is the best thing I've ever animated @lilnasx audio by Billy Cobb," video, TikTok, posted by @xickel, April 28, 2021, <https://www.tiktok.com/@xickel/video/6956246354888789253>.

The art of orchestrating controversy and profiting from it has a rich history in the American context, from Andy Warhol's art-persona to the Kardashian's public melodrama. But there is something distinct about Lil Nas X's controversy-art in that his public maneuvers were mediated exclusively through social media. Just as TV changed the pace and tenor of public narrative formulation, social media represents a move towards a decentralized and thus shifty form of disseminating narratives through networks. What's striking about the dynamic of a media blitz done via social media is that the focal points of power are algorithmic not editorial. With social media, editors in a room are not shaping how the public receives narrative, instead, algorithms are nudging those involved in an emergent public narrative to behave in certain ways. On Twitter, the algorithm disseminates content exponentially through networks based on how much of a reaction it provokes. And thus, the algorithm lets Lil Nas X know through implicit signals that on its platform, it favors the curt and provocative.

The necessity for artists to vibe accordingly with the platforms they use displays the dialectic relationship of control that exists between artists and social media platforms. Lil Nas X is a master at spreading his work and ideas through social media channels, but looked at from an askance view, social media platforms are equally adept at shaping the contours of Lil Nas X's strategy. They own the rails, and while Lil Nas X, his label and team have built themselves an exceptionally efficient train, they still must drive along a track.

The influence that algorithms have in shaping the behavior of popular, public figures beckons the question: what does popularity mean in an algorithmically driven culture? And how does the power that public figures have to be both discordant and in line with the prioritized modes of behavior on platforms define their influence? A key metric of determining popularity in this framework, could be the extent to which a figure can stray from the algorithmically

preferred mode of being. And inversely, a complete reliance on those modes of algorithmically-informed behaviors may determine a contingent popularity that largely exists because of a few major platforms.

Popularity, or superstardom, is at the very core of the American musical imaginary. Thus, recent changes to the nature of fame strike at the core of the music industry's foundational myths. Fictitious stories like *A Star is Born*, or real and then narrativized ones like those surrounding Alanis Morissette's Jagged Little Pill, and N.W.A.'s meteoric rise all contribute to the foundational story of a scrappy talent being scooped by a major who, empowered by greed and gusto, pour millions of dollars into the process of making a given person "a star." But in recent years, you may have noticed a subtle diminishment of this dynamic. I'm 21 and I remember clearly the world telling me certain groups and artists are "a thing:" One Direction on *The Today Show*, the internet being flooded with the musical and visual mania of Tyler, the Creator and Odd Future, Lady Gaga and her escalating public escapades. Now of course, new huge pop stars exist today. But how many? And how did they reach us? Billie Eilish comes to mind. So does Olivia Rodrigo. Roddy Rich. Lil Nas X. Doja Cat. And while millions have been poured into these acts to support their ascendant stardom, you would not be wrong to feel, on some culturally instinctual level, that there is something less enshrined about these stars' profile compared to say, Britney at the height of the cultural mania surrounding her.

And this is all because of a very fundamental economic reality: the major labels, in conjunction with streaming platforms like Spotify, have realized that they don't make their money on new music anymore. It's a fact so simple and so daunting that it's almost hard to grasp. In the popular imagination, the music industry is the new music industry; the A&R finding the new undiscovered talent is simply what the industry does. And it still does. But the economics of

streaming have shifted the fundamentals of the industry to such a degree that newness, hotness, stardom are all qualities that have taken on far less importance in recent years.

That's because today, music is almost completely a digital commodity. And it's accessible ad infinitum once you've paid your measly fee to Spotify or Apple Music. That means that labels are no longer fighting for limited shelf space in a record store, but rather are fighting for your attention in the form of getting you to stream their artists. And they don't care if you're listening to music that's one year old or 10 years old; if it's theirs, they are making money when you stream. Their financial center is not a single purchase, but a continuous and amorphous stream. And thus novelty fades away as a central factor in their business plans.

This is all bolstered by the fact that "catalog," defined as music just 2 years or older, accounts for 75% of music streams.⁵⁵ In a 2014 email [acquired by Wikileaks](#) sent from consultant Dave Goldberg to Sony Entertainment CEO Michael Lynton, Goldberg lays out the new fundamentals of the music industry in striking candor. Allow me the space to include much of it because its clarity is striking, helpful and scary. He says:

"Music is becoming a purely digital product. Catalog provides 50% of the revenue and 200% of the profits of recorded music. Streaming revenues tend to be more heavily weighted to catalog. Pandora and Spotify are probably 65% catalog under this definition. Licensing and synch revenue (i.e. licensing songs to be used in advertisements, film, or television) are mostly catalog as well. Thus, if the new release business is oriented towards building new deep catalog, it changes the entire process from trying to pick big hits to safely getting some good music out that has longevity."

And then the kicker,

"With catalog providing the base profits, new releases need to be cut back dramatically to the point where the new business either breaks even or loses a small amount of money. The record company needs to act like a music publisher for new releases- putting up very

⁵⁵ Jaime Brooks, "Streaming Services," *The New Inquiry*, March 6, 2022, accessed April 22, 2022, <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/introducing-streaming-services/>.

little money but not trying to hold artists for long contract periods or to keep as much of the revenue.”⁵⁶

It is now the primary interest of labels to build catalogs, not to build the next big thing, though a huge star once in a while doesn’t hurt. They’re not compelling you to buy a product, but stream and stream and stream. So just as Spotify and streaming platforms incentivize listening to music that’s good for the background, so too are labels whose incentives in many ways align with streaming platforms. And that huge new thing everyone is obsessed with is not background music per se. Yes there’s the idea of the perennially ambient pop song playing in the mall, but on average: stanning requires attention. And the music industry and streaming platforms are not invested in capturing your attention on music, but having that music streamed mindlessly in the background. So their marketing and A&R budgets have shifted, per Goldberg’s idea, accordingly.

Which brings us back to Lil Nas X and social media. With the diminishment of the industry-enshrined pop star, it becomes necessary for artists to be their own marketing machines. And the rate at which new huge pop stars are also incredibly “good” at social media proves that relationship true. The fact that Doja Cat is [good at posting](#) and also happens to be the biggest star in the world right now may seem like an inevitable correlation, but it’s actually quite recent that this skill became a near-requirement for contemporary musical stardom.

I worry that a lack of willingness on the part of labels to market artists makes this reliance mandatory and thus the behavior of artists becomes almost completely governed by the gravity of platforms. When Goldstein said that labels need to “act like a music publisher for new releases- putting up very little money,” that translates to investing in what’s already hot. And

⁵⁶ David Diamond, e-mail message to Michael Lynton, September 3, 2014
<https://wikileaks.org/sony/emails/emailid/116909>.

what's already hot is surely whatever is doing well on social media. Thus what dictates investment by labels is not music or creativity per se, but a narrow set of skills pertaining to platforms with very specific favored qualities. Now this is obviously not a particularly new dynamic; labels always have invested in what's hot and they generally exist to extract the maximum amount of value that they can from artists. But what is new is the specificity in which this one specific skill, social media marketing, has become the most centrally favored quality for labels.

All this means a further entrenchment of the incentives set by algorithmic technology. It is the creation of a feedback loop between technology companies and labels where the labels use the metrics determined by the tech companies to make their investment, without ever questioning the underlying technology that shapes those metrics. With every small decision like this, those qualities that platforms prefer like being provocative on Twitter or ironic on TikTok or aesthetically desirable on Instagram, entrench themselves in our culture.

So if this is what's required to be famous in music today, what then is the status of fame? One could argue that fame today, across disciplines but specifically in music, is merely an after-effect of an algorithmic culture which is entirely determined by a few humongous tech firms. Now maybe that's okay and the old way, where fame was made real almost by dictum by entertainment conglomerates, was no better. But the decentralized way that fame can now emerge means that algorithmic culture and the incentives it sets works as almost a filter across our entire culture. Silently, unknowingly, shaping behavior like an invisible hand. And for the many, many artists out there who may want to lessen the grasp of that translucent claw, they may only have one path: which is through it. They must post and post and gain such a following that they no longer need to contort themselves to the desires of the algorithm. Finally

they will become so known and watched that they can change the conversation online despite them not optimizing every online action for platforms. And they must simultaneously produce music that becomes profitable catalog, with sustaining and sustainable revenue.

I think Lil Nas X will get to that point, and maybe he already has. And I think the joy and ease in which he uses social media is something to marvel at. But I think we should all be attuned to the stealthy, silent ways in which rises like Lil Nas X's and all those that come to fame via social media are empowered and completely shaped by the incentives set by algorithms. They set the stage, whether we like it or not. And I think we need to say that aloud so we can at least grapple with what that means.

Chapter 4:

Sad Girl Indie

Adapted from a [Substack article](#) of the same name posted on April 15th, 2022

This March, I had the privilege to attend a Mitski concert in Montreal while on spring break. To contextualize, I am not, as they say, a “Mitski stan”. But I do like Mitski and particularly loved her breakthrough album “Puberty 2” when it came out. I have always admired her melodic experimentation, how she shiftily and stubbornly avoids straightforward tonality, and her lyrics always balance poetic impressionism with an evocative narrative tether. She’s one of today’s best. But frankly, sometimes listening to her is too much for my little aching heart. The feelings her music evokes for me are so visceral and hard to name that I tend to avoid actively listening to her music as a part of my regular listening practice. So to end up in this room, with thousands of her most adoring fans who waited all day to get inside the venue and claim their territory near the stage, who jumped through hoops to get those fast-selling tickets, was strange to say the least.

Once Mitski got on stage, it was one long karaoke session. The crowd was incredibly young, probably averaging at 21 or younger, presented femme and queer, and they knew every word, every breath of her music. On stage, Mitski moved in a similar way to how she [does in her videos](#), dancing in long, trembling motions, using her arms and hands to paint the air and grace her face with the onset of a melodic climax. She was quiet in between songs. She barely, if ever, bantered. But that’s not the kind of artist she is. She is not her audience’s friend, but their conscience. The gaping wound with which they are able to feel their own pulsing hearts. I didn’t see so much dancing as I did wavering. Not so much exaltations as quiet exorcisms.

It is now a bit of a cliché online that [Mitski’s fans cry to her music](#). Mitski’s popularity has risen in the past two years as her music has become increasingly used on TikTok, usually by

young fans who use her songs as a background accoutrement to whatever extreme moment of sadness they are depicting. In a recent [profile of Mitski for the New York Times Magazine](#), Lindsay Zoladz digs into the variables that have made her the “high priestess of modern-day sadness” to many, but particularly her Gen Z fans. Zoldaz describes MitskiTok as a place where fans “exaggeratedly aestheticize feelings for which they may not have other outlets.”⁵⁷ While there’s an undoubtedly deep emotional connection that Mitski’s fans have with her, the extremity of their displayed emotional relationships with her cannot be disentangled from the technologies that mediate them.

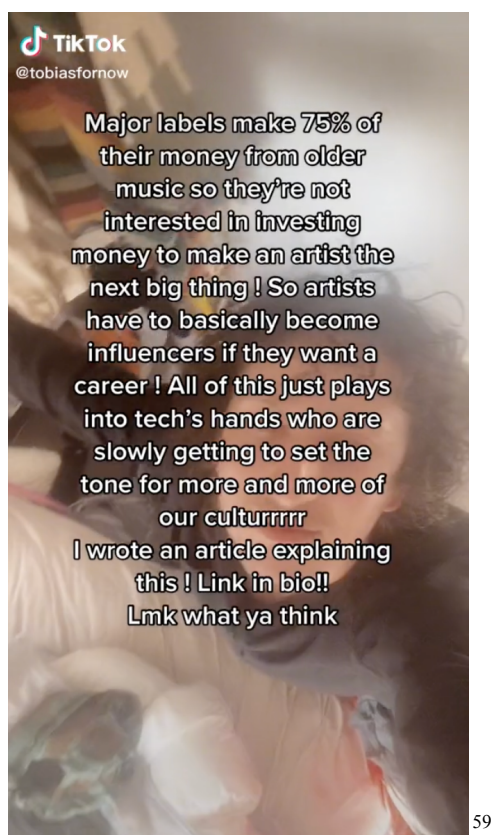
Mitski, who is generally ambivalent to her public perception, even commented on her role as a TikTok phenomenon. Speaking broadly but surely referring to her own impression of TikToks that use her music, she says, “I am always surprised that there seems to be a complete freedom of disclosure about people’s very private things. There seems to be this utter nihilism with Gen Z. They’re exposing these vulnerable things, but there is no sense of ‘exposing this will hurt me,’ because ‘nothing can hurt me.’”⁵⁸

As a Gen Zer and a, um, [TikToker](#), Mitski’s millennial take strikes me as deeply true. I know firsthand that TikTok encourages the performance of extremes. Indulge me for a moment: my Substack has grown its readership through TikTok in the last many months. The strategy has been very simple and effective. Everytime I post an article, I also [post a TikTok alongside it](#) with the most reductive, inciting version of my article possible written in text-form atop my face in the background. Behind the video is music that vibes with the general music/topic I’m discussing. The short length of the video and the long length of the text forces the viewer to loop

⁵⁷ Lindsay Zoladz, "Mitski Is More than TikTok," *New York Times Magazine*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/03/11/magazine/mitski.html>.

⁵⁸ Zoladz, "Mitski Is More".

the video, which boosts it in the algorithm and the inciting rhetoric prompts people to respond in the comments which also boosts the video. I'm explaining this because as a reader of this article you can hopefully tell that I am at least thoughtful, and yet I have also realized that presenting a sort of clownish caricature of my perspective serves me in a very real way. Writers and musicians I have admired for years have read this blog because of my actions on TikTok. The algorithm, and the world, is begging me to make a fool of myself.



With this in mind, those TikToks [featuring fans having cry-spirals to Mitski's](#) music are informed by an intuitive understanding that extremity does well on TikTok and they will likely be rewarded for their excessive performance. They are also taking part in a trend. Crying, freaking out, throwing up and shaking to Mitski is a meme, so if they participate in the

⁵⁹ Major Labels Make 75% of Their Money from Older Music. . .," video, TikTok, posted by @tobiasfornow, March 18, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@tobiasfornow/video/7076561429310033198?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.

meme-spectacle they are more likely to show up on other people's For You Page who tend to like that sort of thing. All of this works to simplify and instrumentalize Mitski's complex music into being understood as basically "sad." And that's a disservice to the nuance of her art. Take it from the artist herself. Speaking to Zoldaz, she relents: "The specific kind of pain that is asked of me is the sort of screaming, most expressive, outgoing, adolescent pain. There's all sorts of other pain. There's a grown-up, fatigued pain as well." Mitski correctly intuites that the sad service she is fulfilling is not sadness writ large, but a caricatured one: sadness through an algorithmic prism. Sadness turned to 11.

All of this makes me think of Spotify's 2019 campaign, "[music for every mood](#)," which sought to exemplify the various ways that Spotify's plethora of editor-curated playlists can be deployed to deepen, alter, or provide ambiance for the many situations Spotify users find themselves in. The premise of the ad campaign was telling for how Spotify thinks of music: music is for the background of whatever situation its users find themselves in. The "for" in the slogan implicitly instrumentalizes music and turns it into a service of a moment, a feeling. I love "totally stress free" music!

And maybe that's an intuitive understanding of music for many, but I think most music fans have the nuance and taste to also understand that a lot of music, and a lot of our favorite music, does not have as simple a relationship to mood as this ad campaign implies. Yes, we have our "cry songs," but we also have those songs we return to again and again because we love them, we find them perplexing, we don't know how they make us feel, and that enriches our life. When I listen to Mitski, the music does not sound just sad to me. It sounds powerful, painful, deep. Maybe to others, Mitski is simply their go to cry-jam, but to shove her whole discography into that small bucket feels really shortsighted to me, and apparently to Mitski as well.

It seems that this rush to instrumentalize certain artists into quick cry-fixes is particularly relevant for women-songwriters/singers who, yes, are incredibly vulnerable and open in their music, but by no means make music that is so simple that it can be cleanly and easily relegated as “sad.” Artists like Phoebe Bridgers, Japanese Breakfast, Snail Mail, Lucy Dacus seem to all evoke this sort of parasocial instrumentalization where fans on social media characterize their music as emotional outlets they turn to for sobs. And like, great, get your cry on! But does anyone else think it’s strange that it falls suspiciously on the shoulders of women-songwriters to become this endless void of pain in which the world can feel through? Maybe these artists, who devote years to crafting their music and output, deserve a little bit of a more nuanced reception than “it’s cry time??

There’s a dialectic emerging here. Yes, it’s between artists and their fans. And yes, fans will inevitably misunderstand the artists they adore in crucial ways. But between artists and fans, there is also technology. There’s the streaming platforms like Spotify who recommend music via mood through their popular mood-based playlists, selling a very narrow idea of music. Through constant signals, Spotify naturalizes the idea of a supposedly easy connection between mood and music.

And there’s TikTok, which encourages over the top emotional performance to maximize engagement. To do well on “MitskiTok,” fans are encouraged to perform sadness in the most extreme way possible. Putting this together with the idea of mood-music that streaming platforms are selling, you get extreme mood-music. Music in service of a moment, but that moment is commodified for attentional platforms like TikTok and thus these emotions are performed so excessively that mood becomes not just affect but indulgent collapse. Then you

sprinkle on a societal disposition towards simplifying women-artists into femme-fatals, into broken heroine geniuses, into manic pixie dream girls, and you get . . . well, this!

I'm glad that some of these technologies have come together to help artists like Mitski and Phoebe and others that are making genuinely interesting, moving music, but I wish that the nuanced edges of their art didn't get so swept away in the emotional-algorithmic shuffle. What I hope is that over time, we can let the music sink in, move through us, before we box it in so simplistically.

Conclusion: On Becoming Algorithmic

This project has become one of surprising praxis. Through both applied research and a decent bit of luck, the ideas discussed here have, in the last many months, begun to apply to my professional life in profound ways. In this conclusion, I hope to discuss how these changes have affected me and brought deeper insight into the ideas explored in this writing. I hope as well, to perform a sort of ethnography of the self, to explore the subtle ways that success on algorithmic platforms such as Spotify and TikTok have imbued within me the “algorithmically aware subjectivity” that I referred to in my first chapter. On a fundamental level, I wish to explore the notion of becoming algorithmic, of letting the logic of algorithmic networks permeate one’s consciousness and creativity, and to wonder aloud about the potential costs and benefits of both resisting and giving into an algorithmic status.

In my chapter, “Momentary Music: Spotify’s Quest for the Perfect Music for Your Moment,” I discuss a song I produced as part of a music project I am a part of named “God Save the Club Kids.” At the time of that chapter’s writing (December 2021), the song had 39,304 streams on Spotify. At the time of this conclusion’s writing, in late April, the song has 198,294 streams on Spotify alone. The chief driver of these streams has been “Discover Weekly.” According to my “Spotify For Artist” portal, 73% of streams for the song come from algorithmic playlists, primarily “Discover Weekly,” but also personalized mixes, radios and other algorithmically curated playlists. From these streams, Grey, my musical partner, and I, have, for the first time, seen sums of money that have moved from the laughable (the single dollars and cents amounts that hundred-thousands of streams produce) to the mildly exciting. We have released two songs thus far, and from streaming revenue alone, including Apple Music, Spotify,

Amazon Music, Tidal among others, we have generated 737.32 USD. That is an amount that can only be produced via the hundreds of thousands of streams; when finally doing the math, the price-per-stream that we receive ended up being close to 0.0038 cents.

While this is far from an equitable amount when reflecting upon the labor and care that goes into the creation of the music, the dual awareness of this paltry sum-per-stream and the receiving of it, has given me a strange pleasure. It's a pleasure that almost naturalizes the economic absurdity of the streaming economy, because even though I know that this is a largely unsustainable economic model rife with structural inequities, there is a pleasure I feel when receiving this semi-notable sum of money despite these glaring absurdities. The pleasure resides in both the knowing that this system is ridiculous and in the gaming of that very same system well enough that I also benefit, even as I know that a better model would benefit me tremendously. If the Spotify model were paying a penny per stream for example, as [Apple Music does](#) and the [Union of Musicians and Allied Workers](#) (a new union of aligned independent musicians music industry professionals) calls for, then the sum we would have received from Spotify alone for both our releases would be \$2,247.61. But even as I know intellectually about this discrepancy, I feel accomplished, excited, by the sheer volume of streams, the widening masses of people, and yes, the money.

There's a rush, a joy, in moving through networks. I open my "Spotify For Artists" mobile app every day to check streaming data from the previous day. But upon opening it, I am flashed, in big, bold letters, how many people are listening to our music right now. On certain Mondays, when our songs have been put on many thousands of people's Discover Weekly playlists, that number, which is usually 4-7, jumps to 20-30. It gives one a sense of meritocratic achievement even while knowing that this number stems, almost entirely, from an algorithm.

And yet, these are real humans we do not know, and they are all listening to our music, right now.

The prospect of having one's work be so widely and so quickly disseminated, as I've experienced it, is thrilling, scary, gratifying, and strange. It always gives me a mixed sense of joy as I am excited by the prospect of so many people encountering my work, but feel inherently strange about them doing so via the workings of an impersonal algorithm.

It's a sense similar to that I've experienced on TikTok, where I have often gone viral for videos that express my opinions in what are hopefully humorous ways. When it happens, it feels like a rush of energy, but not an organic energy that emerges from material change, but a steady, algorithmic wave that increases at the rate of diffuse engagement. TikTok, as discussed here, tests videos on sample populations, and if the video does well (meaning it is commented on, watched to completion, liked and shared) then it expands the sample population. The rate of expanding this sample groups can be dizzying. I have had videos that went from 0-100 views in an hour, and then to 5,000 within 10 minutes. Every time I refresh during one of these events, I can see tens of new comments. I can click on who is liking and engaging with my video and sometimes, I see that a celebrity has engaged. To see this is obviously exciting, but the dispersal of my video feels completely removed from my original work. The algorithm broke it down, understood it, and then brought it to ever-expanding masses who it deemed would find the video relevant. The only connection that the scope of my video's success has to my original creative work is in my ability, an ability that was both intuitively developed and analytically rendered, to make videos that I know will move through networks in this way. It is not that my idea was so original or compelling, or my execution so fabulously novel, but rather, that I understood the preferred modes of communication and aesthetics for TikTok.

This experience, and the intuition I developed through it, has served this very project. The three previous chapters were all posted on my personal Substack newsletter. Those posts have been read by many hundreds of people outside of my actual community because I have developed a very precise, methodical mode of promoting my writing on TikTok. This was described in my previous chapter “Sad Girl Indie,” but to repeat it briefly: with every new article, or thesis chapter, I post a 7 second video where I write in text, a caricatured form of my argument. I also include music that adds dramatic/humorous effect and include many relevant hashtags in the captions. The short video and long text forces people to loop the video, so the algorithm reads the video’s quality as very high because people are watching it, supposedly, repeatedly.

These videos, almost without fail, reach at least 5,000 views, with many reaching between 30,000-50,000. They are, almost exclusively, responsible for my new, growing readership. They are responsible for many important, exciting people finding my writing; people such as an indie pop star I have been a fan of years who reached out to me personally to share that my writing has resonated with her; people such as executives at Spotify and various music tech companies; people such as a budding music manager of a popular new singer. I don’t name these to gloat in my accomplishments, though it surely is exciting for me as someone who seeks to start a career in culture and tech journalism, but to marvel at the opportunity that rests constantly at our fingertips. Anyone, truly anyone, could deploy this simple, hack-like strategy and be seen by truly influential people. The prospect of doing so should be exciting for anyone whose potential career could be benefitted by an expanded audience, that is to say, most creatives. And yet, the power of this tool, its accessibility, should, I believe, give us pause. So

unthinkingly can we act in the preferred ways of a tech platform whose sole purpose is to extract profit from our ever fractured attention.

This is not to say that there is something catastrophic about many people deploying strategies such as I have. I believe that I have both used this cynical online strategy and maintained a high standard for my journalistic pursuits. But what I do think beckons our questioning is the ways in which these modes of conduct can so easily be naturalized into a broad conception of meritocracy. In a world where views or the size of audience can seem almost interchangeable with quality, there is the danger in the potential for the preferred aesthetics of platforms such as Spotify and TikTok to become internalized by an entire population as the framework for considering quality and success. And this, I suppose, is my argument most bluntly. When unnoticed, we can let tech companies define the standards by which we intake and survey art and culture.

This, I know, is not a new dynamic. It is similar to that of popular radio, with its unique preferences for certain sonic attributes. It is similar to the whims of wealthy patronages determining what music is en vogue and thus economically profitable. But what I argue in this text is that a key difference emerges when these standards emerge from algorithms and when the cultural products are being produced by not a small group of professionals and artists, but a diffuse set of ordinary people who, through access to technology, produce art that circulates through networks. What emerges through this process of creative work reaching people via algorithmic networks is not the curated preference of a gatekeeper, such as with radio or patronages, but an emergent, vague understanding of quality. It is this sense's diffuse nature that presents a deep challenge to the subjectivity of creatives. Its ability to naturalize itself within creator and consumers' subjectivity alike is what makes the project of unpacking algorithmic

incentives so vital. Because with algorithms, there is no single gatekeeper or perspective to contend with, simply a broad preference that has the alluring quality of being accessible to all who understand it. Lil Nas X, and I, can both use this technology to our advantage. And while that is surely exciting, we are both, unwittingly or not, contorting ourselves to the preferred behaviors of platforms.

This is all to say, I and I believe all who wish to create and share ideas in the world, at least those who aspire to some level of scale, should not take the path of the stoic. These tools are powerful and I believe firmly in using them to make one's way. But I also believe in a thorough and consistent naming of these dynamics, and a refusal to naturalize the preferences of platforms, to always have one's eye towards an exit door.

I hope to use the analysis developed here, of algorithms and their preferences, and to exploit them to my advantage as I have done for the past year. I also hope to eventually develop such an independence, with a dedicated readership and fanbase for my writing and music, that I will have support regardless of my success on algorithmic platforms. I know that the moment I become wholly dependent on the preferred behavior of platforms is the moment that I lose myself to an imbued algorithmic subjectivity.

This project and the practice that emerged from it, I hope, can be a model for others in how one can apply analysis and creativity to benefit one's own creative pursuit with a balanced sense of entrepreneurial drive and dedicated ethic. I hope that other creatives, in other fields outside of music, can see echoes of how these dynamics are affecting them. And I hope they can apply this critique to both ground themselves in the strange contours of algorithmic culture, to dissuade themselves from ever believing that quality should be uncritically determined by the ways algorithms spread content through networks, and to help them use these tools to their

benefit. I think understanding these dynamics is powerful and important and the analysis of them should be used by all who wish to create and survive in dizzying post-industrial post-modernism. I just hope all that take that path hold on tightly, because it can spin you so fast you quickly lose your sense of whether you're flying or flailing.

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