Okay, Computer: Popular Music in Post-Postmodern America

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Literature Review

The cultural climate of today’s post-postmodern America makes clear that we are living in distinctly different times than those characterized simply as postmodern. Postmodernism’s claims regarding irony and consumer culture no longer resonate as dominant features of American music culture. The reader may wonder: is there a significant difference between postmodernism, and post-postmodernism? The answer is a definitive “yes,” and the first portion of this literature review will be spent laying out a postmodern vision of popular music in America and then demonstrating why it is inadequate for the exploration that follows here.

Before going any further, it is important to note that one could not possibly account for all of the characteristics and visions of postmodernism that exist. The simplification of Frederic Jameson’s argument that follows here should be understood as such: a simplification that allows for a stable point from which to launch my own argument. To be sure, a more robust definition of postmodernity might allow for a more robust conceptualization of the post-postmodern in the future.

Keeping that in mind, there are three main problems with making use of theories of postmodernism in explaining the state of popular music today. The first problem is capitalism. Jameson emphasizes the link between postmodernism and capitalism, and this link between culture and capitalism is not as strong as it once was. The second problem is that of sincerity in today’s music, which problematizes Jameson’s observation of irony
and “depthlessness” in postmodern art. The third question that music today raises with regard to postmodernism is the issue of the waning of affect.

In his work, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Jameson places a strong emphasis on the role of consumer culture in the creation of art. He writes,

“What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. Such economic necessities then find recognition in the institutional support of all kinds available for the newer art, from foundations and grants to museums and other forms of patronage.”

This statement is a strong one, and observations that will follow about the production, distribution, and consumption of popular music today will problematize Jameson’s assertion.

While the role of the consumer is still present in an examination of music culture today, the consumer’s role is increasingly fluid, and is not necessarily tied to the traditional understanding of the word. Now that the Internet allows for the sharing of digital information, the consumer is defined only by the direction in which information is flowing in relation to their hard drive. And the advent of accessibly-priced, user-friendly music production software has rendered even that distinction somewhat irrelevant. Music today is rarely “finished,” and this realization, in turn, casts doubt on the notion of the

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consumer as traditionally conceived. Rather than exchanging money for finished works of art, we are, increasingly, simultaneously producers and consumers, and we only exchange information. It is this problem that suggests the advent of some newer cultural era after postmodernism. At the very least, postmodernism fails to explain these trends.

It is for this reason that the paper that follows is structured the way that it is. While the traditional boundaries between consumer and producer are collapsing, it is still useful to create some distinction between the two in order to allow for a somewhat organized discussion of their roles. The Production chapter of this paper will address producers both in their traditional role as producers, and in their newer role as consumers. Similarly, the chapter of this paper that addresses Consumption will examine both consumption and production activities of those who do not professionally make music. The Distribution chapter of this paper will discuss the middle ground where these two parties meet. This distinction between two camps – those who produce, and those who consume—is becoming largely irrelevant, but it remains a useful way to give structure to an argument characterized almost entirely by a collapse of distinctions.

The second major problem of postmodernism that this paper will address is irony. Jameson addresses the idea of irony in his description of postmodernism as he compares the work of Vincent Van Gogh and Andy Warhol in depicting a pair of shoes. Of the differences between “Peasant Shoes” and “Diamond Dust Shoes,” Jameson writes, “The first and most evident is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense—perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms to which we will have occasion to return in a number of other
contexts.”² Jameson calls this feature the “deconstruction of expression.”³

This flatness and depthlessness is problematic because does not resonate in light of some of the music being produced today. It seems like we are experiencing the opposite—a reconstruction of expression. In my examination of this phenomenon, I call this “sincerity.” Much of the music being produced and performed today is sincere in a way that postmodern, depthless, ironic art is not. Artists today are far more likely to be criticized for their deployment of irony than their earnestness.

The third feature of postmodernism described by Jameson is the waning of affect. Jameson introduces this idea with an example:

“Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream* is of course a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation, a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety. It will here be read not merely as an embodiment of the expression of that kind of affect, but even more as a virtual deconstruction of the very aesthetic of expression itself, which seems to have dominated much of what we call high modernism, but to have vanished away—for both practical and theoretical reasons—in the world of the postmodern.”⁴

For Jameson, the expression of sincere emotion and anxiety in Munch’s painting is characteristic of modernism, and is in some ways the antithesis of postmodern expression. As we will see, post-postmodernism exhibits a return to a modern, rather than postmodern, artistic tone.

So, then, a question arises: what makes post-postmodernism different from modernism? It is tempting to see the current shifts as a regression to the artistic ideals of

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² Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 60.
³ Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 58.
⁴ Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 61.
modernism rather than as something new. Donna Haraway’s cyborg construction offers a way out of this problem by demonstrating the ways in which ever-advancing artistic tools are fundamentally changing the relationship that artists, consumers, and distribution channels have to artwork. The difference, put simply, is technology.

Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” lends the examination of post-postmodern music a concrete construct – the cyborg – that is tremendously useful in talking about the fine line between software and operator, and thus musician and machine. Cyborgs are the product of cultural shifts beyond the limits imposed by the realities of modernism and the theories of postmodernism. While Haraway’s cyborg is typically associated with postmodernism rather than post-postmodernism, this thesis will examine the effects of the cyborg, which are characteristically post-postmodern.

Haraway writes, “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”5. This definition is highly useful in an examination of digital music culture and the increasing influence of the remix. Music is increasingly the production of collaboration between man and machine rather than solely the act of an individual, or a band or orchestra of individuals. Those who make music often choose to delegate at least part of the task to a machine. These machines vary in their intelligence, but their cumulative effect is staggering. In the world of music, cyborgs certainly walk among us.

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In many respects, music is the ideal space for the cyborg. Music is strongly tethered to material culture—the MP3 players we fill with files and the headphones we wear. And yet these material objects are no longer the passive artifacts of the past: they are active and dynamic. Furthermore, more ephemeral “materials” are entering the equation—software and samples are just lines and lines of code and data that make up our music. Yet their integral role in the creation of music is hard to deny. It becomes increasingly clear with the application of the cyborg framework to music that there is a rich and complicated middle ground of equipment that transcends traditional roles.

Cyborgs are the product of larger social and cultural shifts taking place in music culture and media studies. Lawrence Lessig helps to explain these shifts in his book *Remix*, where he makes a distinction between what he characterizes as RW culture and RO culture—these abbreviations are analogous to the status assigned to digital files which are either Read/Write enabled (meaning that they can be edited and manipulated) or Read Only, meaning that the file cannot be edited—only read. According to Lessig, America has transitioned from (or is in the process of transitioning from) RO culture back to a period of RW culture. The implications of this shift are significant: RW culture is, necessarily, far more interactive than RO culture.

Lessig makes the apt observation that the physical music formats of the recent past tend to support RO culture—namely records, cassettes, and CDs. DJing with physical copies of music is a fairly simple task—the DJ only needs to manually manipulate the movement of the record on the turntable—but it is much more difficult to actually alter or remix material in these formats. Lessig writes, “The business model…of RO culture depended upon controlling the distribution of copies of culture. The nature of analog
tokens of RO culture supported this business model by making it very difficult to do much differently. RO culture as experienced during much of the 20th century was necessarily tied to physical objects like CDs, instead of being based on an exchange of data.

Not so with MP3s, or any other digital format (save those coded in such a way as to prevent this sort of manipulation, like DRM, which stands for Digital Rights Management). We are, thus, entering a period of RW culture. There is an increased interactivity with media today because of the formats in which we consume that media. We are experiencing a veritable death of natural analog constraints in music distribution. Music is more accessible than ever before, but the industry is in turmoil. As such, the remix occupies a nebulous and ever-shifting corner of the cultural landscape. Remixing is easier than ever, but the business model has never been so confused.

What’s particularly interesting in this discussion is that RW culture, according to Lessig, isn’t new. Before readers of this paper were (likely) purchasing music, sheet music was, in fact, the dominant means of music distribution. This was RW in a purer sense, perhaps, than the iteration of RW culture that we are seeing today. In order to participate in RW culture in the age of sheet music, you needed to be able to at least read music and probably play an instrument. “Remixing” per se, was not happening, but individual performers were applying their own musical skills to a particular instrument and piece of music. They were interacting with music just as much as a 21st century

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teenager with Radiohead stems\(^7\) and a bootleg copy of Pro Tools interacts with music. We are, in some ways, experiencing a return to form rather than a revolution—just with altered skill sets.

Lessig also writes that digital technologies have changed consumer expectations regarding access.\(^8\) In an age before digital music formats, access was not guaranteed. If you were going for a walk, you were going to have to forgo listening to your collection of vinyl at that moment in time. You could not listen to your gramophone in the car. You could not plug earbuds (or an equivalent) into a typewriter. Today, these limitations are virtually unknown to anyone with an iPod or any other digital music player.

Technological advancements have granted us flexibility and decentralization: we can, more or less, have our music any time we want it, anywhere we want it. This has ramifications for how we both experience and understand music.

Paul D. Miller (also known as DJ Spooky) points to the idea of a current as one of these ramifications in his book *Rhythm Science*. He writes that society (and within it, the cultural experience of music) can be described as in constant flow.

“Today we live in a society defined – in many senses, and by almost all the connotations associated with the word as well – by the word ‘current.’ Alternating or direct, descriptions of transience and modality, in this strange binary world of fiber optics, digital information technologies, and global economics, a logic of alterity is at play. The old hierarchies of linear thought, sublime … engagements with art, poetry, music, science, and history are no longer needed to do the

\(^7\) When a song is divided into multiple tracks, featuring the vocals, percussion, and various other types of instrumentation on separate tracks, those tracks are called stems. Stems are typically distributed to expedite and even encourage the remix process.

ideological work now conducted again along the lines of ‘current.’”

Miller highlights something key: digital culture is dynamic, ceaseless, and in constant conversation with itself. The ubiquity of media makes it impossible to separate moments from that which immediately preceded and succeeded it: Miller makes the critical observation that music culture today is best understood as a current in constant flow, rather than as a series of static moments to be dissected and understood out of context.

Miller also sheds light on the act of sampling. “Sampling is a new way of doing something that’s been with us for a long time: creating with found objects. The rotation gets thick. The constraints get thin. The mix breaks free of the old associations. New associations form from the old. The script gets flipped. The languages evolve and learn to speak in new forms, new thoughts.” This points to the important notion that sampling is not new and allows music culture to decontextualize and make relevant otherwise obscure and disparate elements of music culture. Hence the constant current – music culture in a digital age is, in Miller’s view, a constant recycling of bits of found culture that have been coded into new contexts, giving them new meaning.

This recontextualization touches on Jameson’s notion of pastiche, which, for him, is a lowbrow form of art that quotes endlessly, but fails to meaningfully convey a message. “Pastiche,” Jameson says, “is like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some

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healthy linguistic normality still exists.”

Jameson continues, “Pastiche is thus a blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs…”

While Jameson’s pastiche casts postmodern art in a negative light – that is, insinuates that it can say nothing new, post-postmodern music moves beyond this limitation. The stitching together of references and disparate texts can create something greater than the sum of its parts, rather than art that is necessarily derivative and somehow less valid than the art of the past.

It is especially interesting to note the equipment with which this cultural recycling is taking place. During 20th century RW culture (to stick with Lessig’s construct), recycling pieces of music culture was a little more complicated because no one had MacBooks loaded with MP3s and user-friendly media production software. Certain technological advances—particularly the advent of sophisticated consumer-grade media production software, digital music files, and the Internet—have drastically increased the role of the computer in the creation of music. Humans operate these computers and author these pieces of software, but the potential for making these processes automatic is enormous.

It is the potential for computers, rather than humans, to alter the course of Miller’s cultural current that connects these ideas back to Haraway’s notion of the cyborg. There is potential for fear of the cyborg because it exhibits humanlike qualities but isn’t itself human, and yet the cyborg is all-important because it alone can mediate the current of information and, as a result, culture. Haraway writes,

“In communications sciences, the translation of the world into a problem in coding

11 Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 65.
12 Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 65.
can be illustrated by looking at cybernetic (feedback-controlled) systems theories applied to telephone technology, computer design, weapons deployment, or data base construction and maintenance. In each case, solution to the key questions rests on a theory of language and control; the key operation is determining the rates, directions, and probabilities of flow of a quantity called information.\textsuperscript{13} This flow of information is what we often experience as music today. Many of us have heard a song and loved it, only to learn that it prominently featured a sample that was not the original work of the artist to whom the song is credited. The reality of the situation is that this type of borrowing, this flow of information – whether it is mediated by man or machine – is a reality of living in a digital world.

This has economic implications. The act of sampling has given rise to a perpetual reappropriation of valuable sounds: sounds that may have, at one point been created under conditions consistent Jameson’s postmodern consumer-mindedness, but they certainly do not carry that trait with them into every new context into which they are placed. Today, samples are exchanged across genres and between those who make music for a living, and those who do not. A sample, far from being permanently stamped with the commercial intent with which it may have been made, frequently sheds old meanings and is reborn in new pieces of work.

A term that is often brought up in a discussion of digital technology and music (or writing, or art) is “new media.” The term is often defined only in the vaguest of terms, but Lev Manovich’s The Language of New Media sheds some light on this nebulous characterization. Manovich contends that new media has several characteristics: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding.

\textsuperscript{13} Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” 165.
For Manovich, numerical representation means simply that the media in question is composed of numerical code, and thus can be described mathematically and could theoretically be algorithmically manipulated. So any music that exists in a digital format (MP3, AAC, MP4, WAV, etc.) qualifies under this condition of new media. Digital conversion necessarily turns analog sound files into a series of ones and zeros. This music can thus be described mathematically and manipulated in any number of ways.

Modularity refers to an object’s composition: it is made up of smaller, disparate parts – the media object in question is not indivisible. This characteristic is evident in today’s music through the prevalence of samples. Not only are songs and albums not indivisible – they are ever-increasingly chopped up and re-purposed and decontextualized in other works. The disparate parts of a song vary in size: the pieces can be as small as a fraction of a note, or the majority of a track. Generally speaking, it is very difficult to identify the unit in which music is measured because that unit seems to be shrinking/constantly being divided into smaller units.

Modularity and numerical representation combine to make give a new media object automation. This means that humans do not need to be present in each step of the creation/destruction/manipulation/consumption of the media object in question: these things can be automated to some degree. Software, the specifics of which will be discussed later in this paper, is largely responsible for the automation of music.

Manipulation can occur through pre-programmed processes, with the help of software,

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15 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 70.
16 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 32.
and in some cases, hardware.

Variability means that new media objects can exist in multiple (and perhaps infinite, Manovich notes) versions.\(^\text{17}\) This is certainly true of music. A given track may exist in any number of forms: it is not uncommon for a single track to be remixed multiple ways, and amateur cell phone recordings of concerts have virtually ensured that every song performed in a public venue is available in dozens of grainy, concert videos on YouTube. Furthermore, digital versions of tracks derived from the same original may exist in different file formats simultaneously.

Here we see that Lessig’s RW culture come into play again: in RO culture, multiple versions of media objects are far less likely to exist, because they are not easily manipulated. However, in an age of RW culture variability is far more common because media objects can be edited and transformed. Finally, new media objects can be transcoded. This means that they can be moved from one format to another.\(^\text{18}\) Today, music is frequently transcoded: this writer owns some of the same pieces of music in multiple formats – vinyl, compact disc, MP3, WAV and FLAC, for example.

These traits relate primarily to the representation of traditional media in an encoded form. This is useful, because it clearly delineates the point at which music becomes “new media.” Not all music being created, performed, and consumed in digital, post-postmodern America can be considered new media. But if Manovich is to be believed, music certainly toes the line – particularly in digital formats. Code can be manipulated in all of the ways that Manovich says new media must be in order to be considered new media. Thus, music as Americans experience it today, often exists as an object of new

\(^\text{17}\) Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 36.

\(^\text{18}\) Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 47.
media, despite the fact that music has been around for far longer than the digital
technologies that are affecting it today.

Music as new media doesn’t ensure that a particular piece of music is post-
postmodern, although the post-postmodern artist certainly takes advantage of music’s
status as new media. The conditions for post-postmodernism as described earlier in this
literature review’s discussion of Jameson must still be met. But these conditions will
almost certainly not be met unless a piece of music exists as new media. So, while post-
postmodern music does exist as new media, not all music that meets the conditions for
new media is post-postmodern.

*Cyberculture* by Pierre Lévy is another instructive text in the understanding of
digital culture and music in postmodern America. Lévy contributes an explanation of the
globalization of music. Digital technology doesn’t just make it easier for neighbors to
share music with one another. On the contrary, Lévy writes: “Today’s popular music is
global, eclectic and changing, without any unifying system. We can immediately
recognize in it certain traits characteristic of the universal-without-totality. Historically,
this state is very recent.”¹⁹ Music is no longer held back by geographic constraints – and
with the ease of file-sharing (which sounds sinister, but is as simple as attaching an MP3
to an email), much of the music in circulation today has a global backstory and a global
audience. In many ways, Lévy’s universal-without-totality is a very post-postmodern
notion in itself: it does not place great stock in totality (as modernism did), but contends
that the universal is still possible (an idea largely rejected by the postmodern).

Lévy explains this transition as the result of two changes: “One involved the

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general transformation of the economy and society (globalization, increased travel, extension of an international urban and suburban lifestyle, cultural and social youth movements)… and the other involved the economic and technological conditions associated with recording, distribution, and listening to music.”\textsuperscript{20} This is instructive, as Lévy demonstrates that digital technology has not just changed the way in which like-minded, geographically-close Americans share music with one another. Instead, digital technology has allowed for global music to influence other global music and reach new audiences worldwide.

This chapter will conclude with a discussion of one key essay from Paul D. Miller’s anthology \textit{Sound Unbound}. The essay is by Miller himself, and entitled “In Through the Out Door: Sampling and the Creative Act.” Miller characterizes the changes in music today as largely circular, and writes that in 1938, with the growth of recorded music, music fans had similar concerns to those being voiced today. “People were being exposed to music that they barely had time to remember because the huge volume of recordings and the small amount of time to absorb them presented to the protomodernist listener a kind of sound-bite mentality—one we in the era of the Web continue to be growing all too familiar with.”\textsuperscript{21} These changes in media appear to be cyclical, and the changes that are feared to be apocalyptic are seldom more than a recurring stage in an apparently cyclical evolution of media as a whole.

Miller also defines “archive fever”\textsuperscript{22} and points to the conditions that cause DJs to

\textsuperscript{20} Lévy, \textit{Cyberculture}, 118.


\textsuperscript{22} The notion of archive fever is originally Jacques Derrida’s. For Derrida, it is a constant need and not dissimilar to a sickness.
construct a library of found bits of audio. “It’s that archive fever that makes the info
world go round, and as an artist you’re only as good as your archive.”

He explains further, “Think of DJ culture as a kind of archival impulse applied to a kind of hunter-
gatherer milieu—textual poaching….” This rings true in light of Manovich’s
characteristics of new media – this archive mentality exists because culture today (RW
culture, to use Lessig’s terminology) places such an emphasis on meaningful interaction
with a variety of disparate texts that, heedless of geography or time, come dynamically
together on a whim to form a larger, transitory cultural object that exhibits modularity.

As such, music does not occupy the familiar place in American culture that it has
for the last few decades. Just as the transition from sheet music to recorded music was a
development that some saw as a harbinger of cultural decline, the changes occurring in
and surrounding the field of music today are significant. This literature review has
demonstrated that postmodernism does not account for these shifts: it will be the purpose
of the remainder of this paper to explain what does account for them, and what the
ramifications are for the production, distribution, and consumption of music.

**The Problem with Irony**

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate the shortcomings of postmodern irony
in music today is the meteoric career of Lana Del Rey. When Del Rey fell out of favor,
she fell hard. *New York Daily News*’ Laura Booth described Del Rey as having “all the

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23 Miller, *Sound Unbound*, 16.
charisma of a corpse.” Vulture’s Nitsuh Abebe wrote, “[Del Rey’s] album should come with a drinking game.” Paul Harris of the Guardian summed up, “Suddenly, many of the fans that had boosted Del Rey turned on her in spectacular fashion. Music blogs poured vitriol on her talents. Some influential web sites...have turned insulting Del Rey into an art form.” Many have tried to pinpoint exactly what it is about Lana Del Rey that makes people so angry.

In 2011, the track “Video Games” (audio: “Video Games” by Lana Del Rey, 0:00) catapulted Del Rey to fame in independent music circles: the music web site Pitchfork, seen by many as an arbiter of cool for the musically savvy, wrote favorably about the track, and it subsequently received more exposure from other outlets. No one knew much about Lana Del Rey: the track itself was a ballad about the tribulations accompanying love in a digital age – namely, what to do when in love with someone who is consumed by an enthusiasm for playing video games. The video was made up of vintage footage of Hollywood, disparate images of Americana, and interspersed with webcam shots of Del Rey crooning.

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It was around this time that fans learned that Lana Del Rey was not the performer’s real name. Del Rey, born Elizabeth Grant\(^{28}\), spent years playing in lesser-known venues and clubs in New York City without commercial success. In hopes of rebranding herself, Grant adopted the moniker Lana Del Rey in order to reflect a shift in her musical sensibility.\(^{29}\) “[The] revelation [that Lana Del Rey was Lizzy Grant] has made Grant/Del Rey one of the most controversial figures to emerge in US music for years,” Harris writes. “Some people feel victims of an immense confidence trick.”\(^{30}\)

Then, the crude, *ad hominem* attacks started. Del Rey attracted negative attention for her appearance, particularly the size of her lips, which, many speculated, she had altered with injections. Information surfaced that she was from a wealthy family, casting doubt on the rags-to-riches narrative she had adopted. She was criticized for slipping in and out of an awkward falsetto in her songs, particularly in live performances.

Put simply, fans felt duped. “People were suspicious of the way Grant’s failed album, and all her social media websites, appeared to have been scrubbed from the internet just before Del Rey appeared,” Harris writes. “There has been much speculation as to exactly when Del Rey teamed up with her current label Interscope


\(^{29}\) “Lana Del Rey Album ‘Born to Die’ Sparks Controversy.”

\(^{30}\) Harris, “Lana Del Rey: The strange story of the star who rewrote her past.”
and how much influence their savvy marketers might have put into her original emergence.”

Shortly before the release of her album *Born to Die*, Del Rey made an appearance on the late-night satire show *Saturday Night Live*. The performance, featuring *Born to Die* tracks “Video Games” and “Blue Jeans,” was criticized as “pitchy and strangely guttural,” and the general consensus among critics seemed to be that Del Rey hadn’t been ready for late-night television. Not long thereafter, when her full-length debut as Lana Del Rey, *Born to Die*, came out, it was a commercially successful, if critically unimpressive affirmation of what Del Rey’s naysayers had predicted.

Del Rey’s music matched her persona, which is to say that it seemed highly artificial. Her song lyrics were focused around a rags-to-riches narrative that fans now knew was all for show. Her world seemed shallow (with lyrics like “Money is the reason we exist/Everybody knows that it’s a fact/Kiss kiss”) and the sincerity glimpsed in initial tracks like “Video Games” and “Born to Die” was missing on the LP as a whole.

In short, Lana Del Rey missed her moment. In the past, America as a whole has been much more interested in artists who have reinvented and rebranded themselves as more consumable. Lady Gaga, Madonna, and Bob Dylan have all been forgiven for precisely this sin. Del Rey’s transgression resonated as particularly

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31 Harris, “Lana Del Rey: The strange story of the star who rewrote her past.”
deceitful, and this atypical reception of a fairly typical marketing strategy speaks volumes about the cultural landscape of post-postmodern America.

Indie-folk artist and 2012 Grammy winner Justin Vernon of the band Bon Iver was questioned about the role of sincerity in his music in an interview with Pitchfork after the release of his self-titled, second studio album, particularly in regards to the album’s final track, “Beth/Rest” (audio: “Beth/Rest” by Bon Iver, 1:24). *Pitchfork*’s Mark Richardson wrote that the song had “been much remarked upon for its unabashed and unironic embrace of 80s adult contemporary pop sounds.”33 The references in the track are unfashionable, and it remains a divisive song amongst fans. Richardson noted, “It’s almost naïve of Vernon to think he could pull this off.”34

*Pitchfork*’s Grayson Currin asked of Vernon, “[A prior project Vernon worked on] often got labeled as insincere, and I imagine there’s a risk of the [80s pianist and singer] Hornsby sounds on this album’s closer ‘Beth/Rest’ being labeled in the same way. Why do people often resort to the irony explanation when they hear something that might be unfamiliar or unexpected?”35

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34 Richardson, “Bon Iver: Bon Iver.”
Vernon replied, “The simple answer is that irony is based on insecurity. It seems to me that when people are doing something ironically, it’s because they’re challenged by something or they like to hate something that’s popular.”

Currin then asked if Vernon was concerned about “Beth/Rest” being received and improperly categorized as ironic. Vernon responded, “I love that song. I cried while working on that song. I know what that means, where that comes from, and why you cry for music. It isn’t for ironic reasons.”

The examples of Lana Del Rey and Bon Iver are telling of the larger reception irony in music today. Del Rey followed up reasonably catchy, current-sounding singles with an apparently postmodern album, and incurred the wrath of fans and much of the music-blogging community. Justin Vernon wrote a clunky closer with a dated sound, but was rescued, largely by critics’ and fans’ sense that Vernon, no matter what it sounded like, meant it. Vernon’s sincerity carried the day. He went on to win a Grammy for Best New Artist, and Del Rey has returned to a career of relative obscurity.

David Foster Wallace, the author of Infinite Jest, had his doubts about irony’s ability to meaningfully convey a message. The New Yorker wrote, “The default for Wallace would have been irony—the prevailing tone of his generation. But, as Wallace saw it, irony could critique but it couldn’t nourish or redeem. He told [Professor Larry McCaffery in a 1991 interview], ‘Look, man, we’d probably most of

36 Currin, “Bon Iver: Justin Vernon on myths, mystery, meaning, and his triumphant self-titled album.”
37 Currin, “Bon Iver: Justin Vernon on myths, mystery, meaning, and his triumphant self-titled album.”
us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does
nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is?" 38

Wallace told McCaffery, “It seems like the big distinction between good art
and so-so art lies... in be[ing] willing to sort of die in order to move the reader,
somehow. Even now I’m scared about how sappy this’ll look in print, saying this.
And the effort to actually do it, not just talk about it, requires a kind of courage I
don’t seem to have yet." 39

Wallace and The New Yorker addressed the insufficiency of irony with regard
to fiction, but years later, the same frustrations are still playing out in music. As a
form of critique, irony certainly survives in music. But what is increasingly evident
is that there isn’t much to be gained through this ironic critique from the standpoint
of emotional connection with art and media. To paraphrase Wallace, we may be
living in dark and stupid times, but music that magnifies the darkness and the
stupidity may only leave the listener feeling emptier (a point with which Jameson
would have wholeheartedly agreed).

Wallace points to postmodernism’s inability to construct meaning in his
essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” where he writes “…irony,
entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It’s critical and
destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it.

38 D. T. Max, “The Unfinished: David Foster Wallace’s struggle to surpass ‘Infinite
Jest,’” The New Yorker, March 9, 2009, accessed February 21, 2012,
39 Max, “The Unfinished: David Foster Wallace’s struggle to surpass ‘Infinite Jest.’”
But irony’s singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks."^40

Whereas the postmodern artist might approach American culture and society today as problematic but point to the problems in largely derisive, obscure, and subjectively interpretable, and even nihilistic ways, the post-postmodern artist simplifies the process. The post-postmodern artist expresses sincere concern over an issue or situation, and uses art to address that concern in a direct, and sometimes unfashionably impassioned way.

Chapter 2: Production

Death of the musician

In post-postmodern America, the traditional musician as we know her is a dying species. Instruments aren't the only way to make music today, and being able to manipulate a variety of software programs and hardware devices is increasingly the measure of a performer’s value. Accordingly, there has been a general trend away from “musicians” and towards those who are identified instead as “producers.” Indeed, it is no longer unusual for producers and musicians to be one and the same (although this is certainly not always the case): as the technology to create new and different sounds using digital technology has proliferated, those technologies are increasingly available to those who would otherwise identify as musicians. And as the technology becomes increasingly powerful, it is unreasonable to withhold describing the most talented producers as anything other than gifted musicians.

Post-dubstep R&B producer James Blake exemplifies this shift. Blake is known for subtle, meticulously mixed, bass-heavy tracks (audio: “Limit to Your Love” by James Blake, 3:15), and has always been identified in the media as a producer because much of his work occurs in front of his MacBook,41 rather than solely in connection with any instrument or the use and performances of his voice. Yet, recent releases from Blake have

included acoustic tracks featuring Blake’s vocals (apparently untouched by AutoTune\textsuperscript{42}) and piano. Thus, he technically fills the role of both musician and producer. Blake and others fill these multiple roles organically: there is no sense that musicians who produce their own work are stepping outside the bounds of what is appropriate. And few people, if any, would suggest anyone other than Blake produce his albums. He has two skill sets: that of a producer, and that of a musician, and changing technology has removed the need for these two skill sets to be separate from one another.

Blake demonstrates that the line between producer and musician is nebulous, and collapsing daily. And he is hardly the only artist straddling this increasingly arbitrary distinction. Along with the emergence of a changed cultural climate in post-postmodern America, the role of the artist is changing as well: the most forward-thinking musicians working today are a hybrid of producer and musician, because the technology is there and using it allows them to create new sounds and new experiences for their listeners.

It is important to note that the boundaries between digital and analog, performer and producer, and postmodern and post-postmodern can be broached in a variety of ways. Some artists are at their most innovative in production, others in the distribution of their work. And the consumer, given the growth of new technology’s influence in music, has the chance to innovate, too, sometimes based on opportunities granted by the performers. Few artists exhibit innovation in all of these areas (most specialize in one or two), but it seems certain that many artists today are more or less troubleshooting the cyborg, be it onstage, in-studio, and elsewhere.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{42} AutoTune is an audio processing software that allows the user to alter the pitch of a component of a given piece of music. It is commonly applied to vocals.}
It is this exploration of the collapse between man and machine in the world of music that engenders the innovation characteristic of post-postmodern performers. 

*Pitchfork*’s Lindsay Zoladz epitomizes this collapse in her review of the album, *Visions*, by Grimes when she writes: “As a child I feared the day the world would be taken over by robots; these days I am seized by a much more potent fear that I am becoming one.”

Zoladz's only mistake is her characterization of this process as one fraught with fear: given the impassioned responses of legions of fans and the proliferation of new artists, it seems likely that there has never been a more exciting time to be creating or consuming music. And to be fair – maybe the musician isn't dead, but her tools look very different.

### Some notes on digital music

So-called “digital music” is, in reality, a topic permeated with hybridity. While MP3s are now the dominant means by which Americans consume their music, to characterize music today as purely digital would be a gross mischaracterization of the facts. Much of the music production hardware in use today is still analog, and of the “digital” hardware on the market today, much of it still has analog components.

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44 This subchapter is indebted to the music production expertise of Professor John Williams of Georgetown University's Department of Music.

45 An MP3 is a lossy (meaning a considerable amount of data is eliminated) audio codec that is more or less the industry standard for the digital music that is available for purchase online through stores like Apple's iTunes.
An excellent anecdotal example of this hybridity between digital and analog is the amplifier. Digital and analog amplifiers demonstrate not only the differences in sound between analog and digital equipment, but the reasons that musicians have for choosing one over the other.

Tonality, control, and distortion of sound vary between analog and digital synthesizers. This, Williams says, is where a key notion in the field of music production comes into play: emulation. Part of working with digital synthesizers is trying to find more accurate ways to emulate the desirable quirks and tonalities of analog equipment. Some of this is just aesthetic preference, and some of it requires working to eliminate or recreate what can be understood as the shortcomings of the equipment’s analog counterpart, although those shortcomings may in some cases create a more aesthetically desirable sound.

For example, with an analog amplifier, as a sound approaches the point of distortion, the distortion has a gradual onset, and the first part of that onset typically exhibits a reduction of the waveform’s peaks, thus narrowing the dynamic range of the sound. This contributes to a more comfortable listening experience on the whole, and producers have learned to use this quirk to their advantage. So, while digital equipment freed producers from the natural constraints of analog equipment like the phenomenon described above, it turns out that some of the quirks are desirable, and some people have worked to emulate them. As such, a considerable amount of energy goes into creating digital equipment that emulates the more desirable quirks of its analog predecessors.
Williams points out that even digital amplifiers are not purely digital: pretty much any time you run a line input (like a microphone) into a piece of digital equipment, that line input is analog. While digital microphones do exist, the most advanced models are prohibitively priced. Instead, many musicians use a USB microphone that can be plugged directly into a computer. These microphones convert from analog to digital within the microphone itself. Generally speaking, the closer to the microphone capsule the conversion takes place, the higher the quality of the converted sound. Even when plugging a USB microphone into a computer, analog sound is not being removed from the equation. “Purely digital” music—music that is just ones and zeroes—rarely exists.

Producers were excited about digital technology when it first became available in the 1980s, Williams says. So excited that they dove headlong into digital equipment before it had gotten very good. While digital equipment has made enormous strides since the 1980s, it is because of the early shortcomings of digital equipment that people continue to reach back for their analog equipment. Early digital sounded, to many producers, too clinical. It was precise without necessarily being pleasant. In reaction to this discovery, Williams points out that there was a big move back to the use of tube microphones and tube amplifiers. Producers felt that, in many cases, these older analog microphones and amplifiers imparted a warm sound quality that made up for the “cold reality of digital.”

As far as audio production software goes, Avid’s Pro Tools is the dominant software that lends compatibility to increasingly disparate programs and pieces of

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hardware. “Pro Tools is generally viewed as being the 800-pound gorilla,”\textsuperscript{47} Williams says. Nonetheless, other software has become popular, including (but not limited to) Ableton Live, Logic, Garage Band, Audacity, and most recently, Reaper.

Ableton Live, in particular, has gained popularity for its features that allow musicians to modify what they are working on while playback is in progress – an extraordinarily important development for some of the performers discussed later on in this paper. A lot of what takes place in Pro Tools is a repetitious sequence (modify, audition, repeat) that requires stopping and starting, and then “bouncing” (Pro Tools-speak for exporting) the finished product. But Ableton Live is geared towards musicians who are interested in changing something on-screen, and having it play at that moment. Ableton Live provides a significant amount of reach into sound files that are connected to the program, and allows for their manipulation without having to stop playback. If Pro Tools is like a word processor for music, Ableton Live is more like a video game.

Despite all of the software options available to musicians today, Williams says many musicians keep a copy of Pro Tools around for compatibility, even if it is not their primary software program. “Pro Tools is the closest thing we’ve got to a lingua franca,” Williams says.\textsuperscript{48}

The importance of these software programs is, above all, that they allow for a virtually unprecedented amount of manipulation of sound files. Songs are blank canvases in software like Pro Tools. There is not really any aspect of a track that cannot be changed with the right software or plug-in.

\textsuperscript{47} John Williams, interview with author, March 15, 2012.
\textsuperscript{48} John Williams, interview with author, March 15, 2012.
Another important development in the discussion of evolving music production technology has been MIDI, or, Musical Instrument Digital Interface. MIDI is a language that allows musicians to trigger playback of either samples from live recordings, or of digitally synthesized sounds. MIDI serves as a way of storing and manipulating information. An early advantage of MIDI (when computers had far less RAM and hard drive space than they do today) was that MIDI files take up a fraction of one percent of the space it takes to store a real audio recording. This is because with MIDI, producers don’t have to store information about how the music is changing over time over the course of a song or a set or an hour. MIDI works with a modeled recording instead.

MIDI data is often manipulated with the use of a MIDI controller, or other devices like samplers and sequencers. The best controllers, according to Williams, mimic instruments and have a strong tactile component to them that lets the performer use them in ways that feel intuitive and instrument-like. MIDI devices vary between manufacturers and even models, but the purpose is almost always the same: to provide musicians and producers with ways to manipulate and trigger playback of sounds that do not originate (immediately, anyway) from an instrument.

**Post-Postmodern Production**

This chapter uses the word “producer” in the title to describe those who create music in the generic sense, rather than those who are charged with finishing a track or arranging it once it has been recorded by a musician. While there is
obvious overlap between the two groups (namely, those who record and produce their own music) this chapter will not be limited to a discussion of those who finish tracks. To the contrary, it will examine the production of music in the broader sense: how it is made, and who is making it.

Music production technology has changed tremendously in the last decade or so. The right equipment – software or hardware—becomes a logical extension of the musicians, rendering them hybrids of man and machine. While not all of this equipment is digital, much of it has started to eclipse the role of the performer as a musician in the traditional sense.

John Seabrook follows the life of a pop track from start to finish in a 2012 article for The New Yorker and demonstrates just how different things have become. It should be noted that Seabrook addresses so-called “top forty pop” exclusively, and that his findings don’t apply to many of the other artists profiled in this paper. Yet his findings bear repeating, as they still represent a significant break with the past in the creation of music.

Seabrook’s story follows songwriter (or “topliner”) Ester Dean, who has written a number of top-forty hits, many of them for Rihanna, and production company Stargate. Seabrook writes, “Most of the songs played on Top Forty radio are collaborations between producers like Stargate and ‘top line’ writers like Ester Dean. The producers compose the chord progressions, program the beats, and arrange the ‘synths,’ or computer-made instrumental sounds; the top-liners come
up with primary melodies, lyrics, and the all-important hooks, the ear-friendly musical phrases that lock you into the song.”

According to Seabrook, this fragmentation and mechanization of the recording process is typical within some genres of music. “Whereas rock is about the sound of a band playing together (even when its members aren’t actually together) and features virtuoso solos played on real instruments, today’s Top Forty is almost always machine-made: lush sonic landscapes of beats, loops, and synths in which all the sounds have square edges and shiny surfaces, the voices are Auto-Tuned for pitch, and there are no mistakes.”

Much of today’s pop music seems cold and precise in this way – and while human error is easily erased, either by correcting subpar vocals with AutoTune or using a synthesized instrument rather than a musician—it is the way that these tools are manipulated that makes music being made today so different. These tools haven’t just changed the way artists create music in-studio. It has ramifications for the shape of their careers as a whole, and for the way in which the creative act is perceived.

“The people who create the songs are often in different places,” writes Seabrook. “The artists, who spend much of the year touring, don’t have time to come into the studio; they generally record new material in between shows, in mobile

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50 Seabrook, “The Song Machine: The hitmakers behind Rihanna.”
recording studios and hotel rooms, working with demos that producers and top-line writers make for them to use as a kind of vocal stencil pattern.”

It’s difficult to imagine having to write a book straight through from start to finish, given the advent of the personal computer equipped with a word-processor, and the same need for linearity has been discarded in the creation of songs which no longer need to be sung/recorded from start to finish. Seabrook writes that after Dean sang nonsense phrases culled from magazines to the tune that the producers had put together, the real work began:

“[Producer] Stargate went to work putting Dean’s wailings into traditional song structure.... Eriksen worked ‘the box’—the computer—using Avid’s Pro Tools editing program, while Hermansen critiqued the playbacks. Small colored rectangles, representing bits of Deans’ vocal, glowed on the computer screen, and Eriksen chopped and rearranged them, his fingers flying over the keys, frequently punching the space bar to listen to a playback, then rearranging some more. The studio’s sixty-four channel professional mixing board, with its vast array of knobs and lights, which was installed with [the studio] was constructed, only five years ago, sat idle, a relic of another age.”

In much of top forty music, this is the norm: there is no need to use real instruments, un-manipulated vocals, or even more traditional analog mixing technology like a mixing board. Software has, in many cases, begun to usurp the role of hardware, and the most advanced hardware serves to create a meaningful, tactile, and intuitive way to interact with software programs like Pro Tools.

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51 Seabrook, “The Song Machine: The hitmakers behind Rihanna.”
52 Seabrook, “The Song Machine: The hitmakers behind Rihanna.”
While top forty pop largely relies on non-instrument technology to clean up tracks and create something manufactured and instantly memorable, independent artists have used the available technology in different ways. Top forty is more apt to use available technology to create art that denies the collapse between performer and tool; the post-postmodern artist uses these tools to explore this collapse. A number of bands have made use of emerging production technology to create music that sounds different rather than like a more polished version of what has come before it.

There is also an interesting dichotomy to be observed here: while technology can be used to create more commercially viable music, as described above (which is a characteristically postmodern intention), not all artists make music for those reasons. Music and, necessarily, all art, is produced with the consumer in mind, according to Jameson’s vision of postmodernism. But some artists have no interest whatsoever in creating music for commercial gain, or any gain at all.

John Holland of the band Salem once told a Swedish television station in an interview, “Even if nobody had heard it now or ever, I don’t think I would care. We would still be doing exactly what we were doing.”53 This sentiment is very post-postmodern.

**Sincerity and the making of “Not in Love”**

Semiotics as a field examines how meaning is made through signs, and is helpful in explaining the role of sincerity in post-postmodern art. In order to make sense of signs, semiotics introduces two key concepts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is what transmits meaning. The signified is the how that transmission is received.

A simple, illustrative example of this concept is the stop sign (sign, here, meaning the red hexagonal object, rather than “sign” in the semiotic sense of the word). The signifier is the physical stop sign itself. The signified is the meaning that the stop sign conveys—namely, that you should stop your car. Here, the relationship between signifier and signified is very stable and predictable.

Along with a proliferation of technological options in the production of music, there has been a tandem shift in the content. To frame the issue in terms of semiotics, we see the signifier and the signified stabilize in relation to one another. The stop sign actually means “stop.” As such, sincerity—predictability between the signifier and the signified—in post-postmodern music, trumps irony.

The processes of creating, distributing, and consuming music are changing daily in ways that can, at times, seem to threaten the apparently stable line between man and machine. The artists who toe this line from a production and distribution standpoint often produce music that appears more sincere in its content.

An anecdote that troubles postmodern irony’s dominance in a commercially successful track in post-postmodern America can be seen in the transformation of
the Crystal Castles track “Not in Love.” Crystal Castles is the electronic music project of Canadians Ethan Kath and Alice Glass. The track “Not In Love” is a cover of an original song by Platinum Blonde, and was released by the Crystal Castles shortly before their second studio album (II).

The Crystal Castles version of “Not In Love” is a track swathed in icy synths and Glass’s highly distorted, tinny-sounding vocals. It exemplifies the band’s “abrasive pop” sensibility, as well as their capacity to render a track unrecognizable through remix. At this level of expertise, remix versus original hardly matters: the two tracks are completely different. And while Crystal Castles maintains the original structure of the song, this isn’t, generally speaking, a requirement. Particularly given the prevalence of MIDI in top forty, as discussed earlier in this paper, the distinction between “song” and “remix” is especially irrelevant: many of the sounds being used to create music today issue from a computer, it largely doesn’t matter whether those sounds originally appeared in another context. Jameson would point to this recycling as troublesome: for him, it bears no connection to a more authentic language with which to describe art. Jameson’s mistake is his failure to realize that in some instances, the samples are the authentic language now, and technological advances have allowed for so much manipulation of those samples that they can be reborn, so to speak, as “original” in new contexts.

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Whereas the Platinum Blonde original (audio: “Not in Love” by Platinum Blonde, 4:23) of “Not in Love” is emotive and plaintively dramatic in the way that mid-1980s rock often is, the Crystal Castles cover acts on the opposite impulses. Crystal Castle’s take on “Not In Love” (audio: “Not in Love” by Crystal Castles, 5:39) is alien-sounding in every sense of the word: even though the lyrics are mostly intelligible, the vocal performance as a whole sounds more like the voice in an in-car navigation system than an actual human. It’s a glitchy, contrived interpretation of the track, and the emotional heft of the song is neutralized entirely.

The single version of the song, however, and the band’s second-best selling track to date (behind “Vanished,” which also samples a relatively unknown track extensively) 55, sounds very different. The single features Robert Smith of famous 80s band the Cure on vocals, which recasts the entire track as heartfelt, slightly desperate, and noticeably more sincere than the Crystal Castles original. Smith has an iconic voice that is, interestingly, very similar in timbre to that of Platinum Blonde vocalist Mark Holmes. If the Crystal Castles cover of the track was a simultaneous update and deviation in terms of genre and tone, the Robert Smith remix is a return to form. The reincarnation of this track (audio: “Not in Love (feat. Robert Smith)” by Crystal Castles, 6:44) demonstrates the ongoing negotiation of sincerity versus irony in American culture: the commercial success of the Robert Smith version strikes a chord, figuratively if not literally, that neither previous track managed to hit. It hits this chord because it combines the sincerity of the human voice with alien-sounding electronica.

“Crystal Castles took the [original Platinum Blonde] song and injected it with digital noise and obscuring distortion to bring the world of the song into our overloaded cheap computer speaker age,” writes Pitchfork’s Mark Richardson of the Crystal Castles track. “...But maybe it went just a little too far in one direction. Because hearing Smith on it here, he rescues the song and elevates it, striking a brilliant balance between new and old, between the pull of nostalgia and the reality that our entire lives are actually happening right here this very second.”

The Robert Smith track is otherwise very similar to its immediate predecessor, although it is slightly more bass-heavy, in a lower key, and the histrionic synthesizer from the last chorus of the Crystal Castles version (a guitar riff in the Platinum Blonde track) kicks in earlier. Given the similarity between the two later tracks, it becomes evident that Robert Smith’s sincere, confessional vocals made the song far more commercially successful than it otherwise would have been. And there is something about Robert Smith’s voice that resonates more than Alice Glass’s.

It may seem strange to unearth source material again and again rather than writing what would, by Jameson’s definition, be considered “new songs.” But this practice of remixing the same songs again and again is more common than ever, and there is a fairly regular discourse and exchange between bands and producers interested in this kind of exchange. It doesn’t just happen with songs, either – it happens with entire albums.

Pitchfork’s Rebecca Raber reviewed the album *Disco2* by noise-poppers HEALTH, and points to this work as a key indicator of remix’s strong foothold in the music community today. “You could say that it’s a remix album of a studio collection that was influenced by a remix album,” Raber writes. “But rather than becoming and indistinct photocopy of a photocopy, the album brings HEALTH’s strengths sharply into focus.”57 The sincerity or meaningfulness of a track or album is not limited by that work’s reliance on samples or remix.

Even in independent genres of heavily electronic music like drag, sincerity makes an unlikely appearance. Pitchfork’s Joe Colly writes, “‘Drag’ tracks are always beat-driven but molasses-paced—the bass is prominent, but drowsy and languid. Vocals are there, but no one’s singing up front. (Typically, vocals are manipulated in some way and buried in the mix.) It’s not necessarily tech-y music—there’s a human quality to these songs but it’s ghostly and distorted as if the tracks themselves are haunted.”58

Drag and its close, ridiculously-named cousin, witch house, are increasingly prominent forms of this development and its adherents are perhaps the most characteristically post-postmodern artists making music today. These genres are currently dominated by a few key players: Christopher Dexter Greenspan, the producer who releases music under the name oOoOO (simply pronounced “oh”), producer Alec Koone (a college student who performs as Balam Acab), and the collective Salem. There are elements of pastiche to this music that coincide with

Jameson’s definition of postmodernism, but drag and witch house are certainly greater than the sum of their parts. Tracks may feature disembodied vocals, slowed-down beats, and the sounds of cars crashing and wind whipping through trees during a storm—all things that have certainly been done before many times over—but there is always something else at work.

Pitchfork’s Joe Colly wrote of Balam Acab’s See Birds EP, “Sturdy as these songs are, what’s really impressive about Koone’s music is how he’s able to play with contrast and draw out emotion…. For digital music, it can be especially evocative.”\(^59\) Contrast, which seems key to this kind of music, is typically achieved through the use of software and digital music files. The “O Holy Night” chorus in Salem’s title track from the 2010 album King Night (audio: “King Night” by Salem, 7:59) coexisting with a sinister synthesizer melody epitomizes the contrasts that make drag and witch house feel more emotionally immediate than more traditional house music.

The other major feature of drag and witch house that evokes sincerity rather than irony is the comparatively small number of beats per minute. This characteristic was inherited from screwed and chopped\(^60\), and imparts sincerity by slowing down, and thus subverting, traditional pop sounds into tracks that range from mournful to spooky. This intentional subversion of postmodern, commercial pop sounds is post-postmodern in its own way. The oft-cited example of this


\(^{60}\) Music, usually rap, that has been slowed down, and has had some of its beats removed and/or manipulated with the use of music production software. This technique is popular, and there are many YouTube tutorials demonstrating how to achieve this effect.
technique is the Salem remix of the Britney Spears track “Till the World Ends.” The original Spears track (audio: “Till the World Ends” by Britney Spears, 9:02) is an upbeat dance track with incongruously dark lyrics about an impending apocalypse. The signifier and signifier don’t compute, here—it looks like a stop sign, but it means “go.” The Salem remix (audio: “Till the World Ends” by Salem, 10:30), on the other hand, restores predictability between signifier and signified. The slowed-down, pitched-down remix (with the addition of a few well-placed screams) sounds as ominous as the content of the lyrics. Spears’ ironic performance is subverted, and with Salem’s edits, the track becomes a sincere one.

These developments speak to the notion of Haraway’s cyborg operating within the sphere of music. There are machines—software, hardware, instruments—that do work that contributes to, rather than detracts from, the “humanity” of a given piece of music. If (to borrow Colly’s terminology) tech-y music and human-feeling music were mutually exclusive, “human” electronic music would be a contradiction. It is, instead, a very real phenomenon.

Necessarily, those involved in the production process have learned to be savvy consumers not only of the equipment described earlier, but also of samples—essentially the smallest unit of digital music. Since so much of music today is synthesized or sampled, those involved in the production side of music cannot expect to remove themselves from its consumption.
Samples essentially function as raw material, and software and hardware function as tools that allow for the manipulation and recasting of those samples. The wide availability of samples again complicates a vision of the music described here as postmodern: for Jameson, music is made with the consumer in mind from the start. It is pure commodity, stripped of aesthetic applications. But so much music today is created outside of traditional channels of consumption that to continue to characterize it as postmodern is to overlook a significant cultural shift at work.

**Digital ghosts**

What becomes increasingly apparent in remix and sampling culture is that samples do not emerge *ex nihilo*. Remixes, then, are not new creations so much as they are layered, chopped-and-screwed, distorted versions of existing texts. Depending on the remix, the original texts may or may not be actually discernible within the remix.

A common criticism of digitally distributed music is that it does not sound as good as its analog counterpart: CDs and especially MP3s have the tendency to sound tinny, whereas their vinyl counterparts retain a tonal warmth characteristic of analog recordings. When analog sound waves are converted into ones and zeros, compression occurs, and fidelity decreases. But some – among them Elliot Carter Rome Prize fellow, Guggenheim fellow, Fulbright scholar and composer Paul Rudy – say that digital does something analog has never been able to.

First, a few words on digital versus analog sound: as discussed earlier in this paper, very rarely are the two mutually exclusive. With that said, it is important to
understand the process of analog-to-digital conversion. According to Williams, the main
difference between a digital signal and an analog one is that an analog signal varies
continuously, and a digital signal does not. A digital signal is, instead, a series of
representations separated by time. These representations are obtained by taking a sample
of the analog signal. This method of conversion, according to Williams, can create a
“reasonable facsimile” of the original, but the digital signal is, of course, fundamentally
changed from its analog counterpart.\textsuperscript{61}

For Rudy, digital sound creates a faithful replica of the moment during which a
sound was recorded – and captures not just sound waves and “kinetic stuff”\textsuperscript{62} but energy
as well. Rudy tells the story of how a woman in the audience at one of his performances
was once made ill by a sound he replayed. It was the sound he had recorded of a baby pig
squealing as it was attacked by a dog. Rudy describes the sound as anguished and chaotic
– he says the pig was suffering, and Rudy himself was incredibly angry as he watched it
happen. Rudy feels strongly that the energy of the moment, beyond just the kinetic reality
of the sounds, made it into the digital recording of the event. He has not used the
recording since, and now is prompted to ask himself, “What is my energetic state when I
record sound?”\textsuperscript{63}

“I don’t think that can happen quite as well in the analog world,” Rudy said.
“Because there’s still a magnetism that is being directly applied to a magnetic tape or
grooves on an LP. I’ve always worked in digital. Whatever energy is present when I’m

\textsuperscript{61} Williams, interview with the author, March 15, 2012.
\textsuperscript{62} Paul Rudy, interview with the author, January 18, 2012.
\textsuperscript{63} Rudy, interview with the author, January 18, 2012.
composing the sounds goes into the music, and it is imparted through a more subtle energy.”

Rudy isn’t the only one who sees an almost spiritual side to digital music and the collection of sounds. In his book *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener*, David Toop writes about the ways in which veritable ghosts find their way into music today. He writes,

“As if to resuscitate eccentric notions such as Charles Babbage’s Victorian-era theory that the air is a vast library, inscribed with the sonic impression of every sound ever uttered, or Guglielmo Marconi’s conviction that sounds enjoy eternal if ever-diminishing life in the earth’s atmosphere, a growing number of academic studies address the problem of sonic history through detective work, a verbal reconstruction by auscultation of the lost sound embedded within a wide variety of sources.”

What Toop does not say explicitly, is that to some degree, the internet (which Babbage and Marconi could not have possibly known they were describing) does archive sounds in the form of samples in precisely the way that scholars of yesteryear imagined. “The images suggested by Babbage and Marconi are of sound floating upwards or through the air, either writing itself into the outer reaches of the human environment or thinning into unimaginably insubstantial states of materiality: thin, thinner, thinnest yet never quite nothing.”

The internet is simply a more tangible incarnation of this approach to sound.

In this way, form seems to counteract irony. Even if a piece of music is at one point performed or distributed ironically, it is likely that the same music will be

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64 Rudy, interview with the author, January 18, 2012.
65 David Toop, *Sinister Resonance* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 34.
66 Toop, *Sinister Resonance*, 34.
repurposed in a way that will strip the work of its original irony. Jonathan Lethem writes in *Sound Unbound* about what he terms the “strange beauty of…second use”⁶⁷ and posits, “Readers are like nomads, poaching their way across fields they do not own—artists are no more able to control the imaginations of their audiences than the culture industry is able to control the second use of its artifacts.”⁶⁸

This is more than pastiche: samples can be removed from their original context and, because of the listener’s subjective interpretation of the sample, still hold the potential to mean something in another work. Jameson does not acknowledge this potential for the creation of meaning through sampling, and as such, postmodernism does not explain the creation of meaning through remix. To the contrary, the use of samples in this manner in characteristically post-postmodern.

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Chapter 3: Distribution

The previous chapter has offered an explanation of how the production technology in use today problematizes the notion of the last decade’s music as postmodern. This chapter will illustrate the tremendous shifts that have occurred recently in the distribution of music, and will then demonstrate the ways in which these shifts are not characteristic of postmodernism. Because Jameson characterizes postmodern art as fundamentally driven by mass production and consumerism, this description cannot accurately be used to describe the state of music distribution today.

Distributing Live Work

Anyone who has been to a popular music concert recently has probably noticed that there is something different going on. The live performance is no longer the sole domain of the traditionally gifted vocalist or musician. Instead, live performances have become far more plugged-in affairs. Many of the artists performing today are constantly evolving hybrids of digital technology and more traditional analog musical skills. This is not to say that artists can not survive with more traditional skill sets: there will likely always be a market for talented musicians who perform with minimal digital technology both in-studio and onstage. But these more traditional artists are not necessarily the future.
Claire Boucher, the Canadian artist who performs under the name Grimes, exemplifies the hybrid artist. Boucher is both traditionally and digitally talented. She sings: her trademark is a breathy falsetto that reaches high notes most vocalists never dream of. But she is equally talented in the manipulation of less traditional equipment when playing.

In a 2012 performance for KEXP, Boucher was filmed from above while performing on the radio station’s floor, showing viewers exactly what it takes to put a Grimes track together in a live setting. What is immediately striking is that Boucher is not playing any traditional instruments, and she later tells her interviewer that she has no formal music training and has simply purchased the gear her musician friends have.69

Instead of playing a piano or guitar, Boucher triggers a series of playbacks, juggles multiple microphones (sometimes with effects), and occasionally picks out a few notes on a synthesizer. What is so notable is that even though she is manipulating a series of pre-recorded clips and sounds, Boucher is far from a lazy performer – it seems to take all of her attention to work all of her gear while remembering to sing. It isn’t a live performance in the traditional sense of the word, but by delegating tasks to her equipment, Boucher is able to create a lusher and more densely textured sound than a single performer would otherwise be able to generate on his or her own (audio: “Vanessa” by Grimes, studio version, 13:31; “Vanessa” by Grimes, live version, 15:34).

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Grammy nominee Deadmau5 (pronounced, “dead mouse”) is the project of Joel Zimmerman. Zimmerman performs electronic dance music from within a giant mouse head, and bears many similarities to Boucher as a performer (audio: “Raise Your Weapon” by Deadmau5, 17:16).

“Joel Zimmerman doesn’t like being called a DJ,” reads his biography on the Deadmau5 web site:

“[Zimmerman] ... rolls his eyes at the description which he sees as a hopelessly outdated way of describing what he does. His sets are closer to live performances as he assembles tracks on the fly using cutting edge computer technology including software that he’s helped to write himself. ‘There are no CDs involved,’ he explains. ‘It’s a technological orgy up there and I try to keep it more my music than anyone else’s. If people come out to see deadmau5 I want them to hear deadmau5 music.”

Both Boucher and Zimmerman share something: while their music is largely synthesized and digitally manipulated, it demands just as much skill as being a concert pianist or violinist would be. And it is not just the skill set required of a DJ: it is something different entirely.

Troubleshooting the cyborg

What works in the studio does not always work onstage. This is particularly true in genres, like the two that will be described immediately below, that are heavily reliant on studio effects and/or highly-automated software programs like Ableton Live

(cyborgs). It is one thing to employ cyborgs in production: musicians can stop playback, add the desired effect, audition the clip, and then continue production. In a live setting, performers do not have this luxury, and sometimes it shows.

Two examples exemplify problematic cyborgs: the witch-house collective Salem’s performance of King Night track “Redlights” (audio: “Redlights,” studio, by Salem, 18:04) at music festival SXSW’s Levi FADER Fort showcase in 2010, and popular dubstep DJ Skrillex’s tendency to crowd-surf extensively at his own concerts. Both of these examples showcase how man and machine somehow fail to work together successfully in the creation of live music: both Salem and Skrillex encounter issues in recreating their recorded work onstage. These struggles are closely linked to the use of computers in production and performance. Salem and Skrillex each operate within subgenres of electronic music (witch house and dubstep, respectively) that are perhaps more reliant on cyborgs than any other type of music. It is not that they are doing things wrong: it is that there is, in many cases, no other way to do it – the question of live performance becomes a one of choosing a performance that is unfaithful to the original, or a more faithful performance that is almost completely automated.

Witch house is a subset of electronic dance music often characterized by the word “drag” – Joe Colly of *Pitchfork* explains, “The term ‘drag’ is partly a reference to screwed and chopped hip-hop, the syrupy style cooked up by DJ Screw and others in 1990s Houston, and was first used by the band Salem to describe their music. Salem took screwed and chopped’s pacing – its heavy, hypnotic pull – and combined it with spooky synths and vocals to create an eerie, cavernous sound.” Dubstep, as performed by

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71 Colly, “Ghosts in the Machine.”
Skrillex, is a permutation of electronic dance music (or “EDM”) influenced by the bass-heavy music of South London. According to *Pitchfork*’s Nitsuh Abebe, Sonny Moore, who is Skrillex, “makes big, inelegant electronic tracks, bashing hyperactively from electro-house to giant dubstep bass drops that sound like a modem with indigestion, then wrap[s] the whole thing up in the four-minute span of a hard-rock single.” Salem and Skrillex both make music conventionally classified as electronic: Macbooks and drum machines dominate, and production reigns over performance. It is at this edge, however, where the breakdown occurs rather predictably.

Salem failed to deliver the product that fans had come to expect from their recorded work in a live setting during their “much-blogged-about-disaster-of a FADER Fort appearance” (audio: “Redlights,” live, by Salem, 18:59) at 2010’s SXSW music festival in Austin, Texas. Salem’s strength is their meticulously produced witch house featuring distorted, looped vocals and electro-drums cutting through thick sonic haze. Salem’s reputation does not include being a strong live act, and they have admitted that they do not approach it traditionally. Heather Marlatt told *Dummy* magazine, “We don’t think it’s that interesting to go somewhere and watch three people playing instruments. We wanna [sic] make it more environmental.”

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performance was muddy and unappealingly lo-fi\textsuperscript{76} in comparison to the densely-textured recorded work that the band has released to critical acclaim.

Writes FADER’s Matthew Schnipper of the performance’s problems:

“Salem needs heavy bass, crushing synth and vocals buried – this is not a secret or a cover-up, it’s how they do things. We know this. We like this. One of the necessities of throwing a mini-festival like the Fort, though, is that bands don’t really soundcheck. They get baseline set-ups and the sound is tweaked by our excellent crew for like one minute before the bands play. So Salem didn’t sound ‘bad’ so much as they didn’t sound like Salem.”

The implication here is that ‘sounding like Salem’ requires something other than the showing up and playing their songs straight through, live. Schnipper continued,

“The sound was crisp and when Jack rapped, you could hear it clearly, which is not a good thing. There was no slowing down the speed, no frying the smooth edges, no haze from which to emerge. Salem’s ingenuity comes in the invention of its own creation myth. Played clean, there is no mystery. Even if they feel no partiality to a hidden agenda, their music deserves a shrouding daylight does not deliver.”\textsuperscript{77}

Indeed, Salem is far greater than the sum of its live human performers, as became apparent to the crowd that day. Despite SXSW’s traditionally pretty open-minded audience, the band was subsequently booed off of the stage. The performance prompted

\textsuperscript{76} “Lo-fi” describes music that is low in fidelity. Lo-fi recordings are of a particularly poor sound quality – sometimes this is done intentionally for aesthetic reasons.

Hipster Runoff music blogger Carles to ask readers, “Should some bands only exist on
the internet so that they don’t ruin their brand?”

Enormously popular dubstep producer Skrillex has the opposite problem. A
cursory search on YouTube will yield multiple videos of Skrillex crowdsurfing at his
own concerts – particularly when approaching the inevitable bass drop in his tracks,
which should presumably be the most labor-intensive aspect of each song. Spectators
might wonder: how is it that he is crowdsurfing? Shouldn’t he be doing something
onstage? There is a stigma within the DJ community that refers to those who “just press
play.” Skrillex has certainly been accused of this more than once, and his shows are not
unlike big listening parties where everyone, including the DJ/producer, is just having a
good time. He sounds almost identical live as he does on a recording—presumably,
because he’s playing that recording at his concerts.

Skrillex (audio: “Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites” by Skrillex, 20:20) has said of

“My performances are different because you’re captivated more by everything
around you rather than just staring at something…. It’s always a different
experience. That’s the purpose. For me, as much as it feels like there’s ego
involved with anyone who’s up there on a stage, DJing is the least egotistical
thing. Like: ‘What do you want to listen to?’ It’s not something you can capture
on the Grammys.”

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78Carles, “Live Performance Analysis: Is Salem the worst modern buzzband?” Hipster

While Salem shoulders a reputation as a poor live act, Skrillex’s live shows sound almost exactly like his releases. Salem jeopardizes their brand every time they play live because they try, but are unable to, fully recreate their recorded work. Skrillex’s shows are on-message, and they certainly are consistent with his brand as and artist. But one of the reasons fans go to see concerts is to experience something beyond the recorded work – and because so much of Skrillex’s show is automated, that added dimension is lacking.

It is an interesting problem: we see in the examples of Salem and Skrillex that performance – once the only way that music was experienced—may be beside the point or even obsolete in some genres that have heartily welcomed the cyborg into their studios. Performers like Salem and Skrillex are not optimized for live performance the way that 20th century bands had to be. Salem struggles to reproduce their work in a live setting, and Skrillex does not bother. Their skills have shifted: the use of technology in their work is cutting-edge and at times, brilliant – but that brilliance often happens in-studio, not onstage. As the prior discussion of audio software and hardware has demonstrated, a lot of software (other than Ableton Live) is not built for live manipulation, leaving performers with two options: automated playback, or a performance that does not sound like the original.

As the opportunities for lazy performances have multiplied, some artists have taken additional steps to ensure that the audience, not just the performer, benefits from the inclusion of smarter technology in performances. Perhaps the most extreme example of this is James Murphy of the now-defunct band LCD Soundsystem, which The New Yorker’s Sasha Frere-Jones describes as featuring “stiff
but danceable beats, irreverent nostalgia, and a fidgety romanticism.”80 Every sound on an LCD Soundsystem album is meticulously placed: the songs (audio: “Someone Great” by LCD Soundsystem, 21:22) are technically precise and include analog sounds along with electronic instrumentation. Importantly, this isn’t just the case in their recorded work: Murphy has firm rules for live performances:

“LCD live was set up to be an argument about what’s wrong with bands, and why bands should be better,” Murphy told The New Yorker about LCD Soundsystem. “Nobody onstage can hear anything the audience doesn’t hear. No click tracks, no guides, nothing can be heard onstage that isn’t going to the front of the house. If it’s a synthesizer, you have to make that sound happen onstage with a synth. If it’s an organic sound, it absolutely cannot be put on a sampler... I want someone to come out of the audience and onto the stage and hear the same shit.”81

Distributing Recorded Work

The process of distributing music has changed enormously in the last decade. As the 20th century drew to a close, compact discs were the dominant format in which Americans consumed music. But over the last ten years, the MP3 has overtaken the compact disc, and with it, physical music formats as a whole. This shift began, largely, in 1999 and 2000 when tech-savvy consumers registered their displeasure with 20th century

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distribution techniques with the explosive presences of Napster, a peer-to-peer service built exclusively for audio files (if not audiophiles).

“It took more than a decade,” writes All Things D’s Peter Kafka in early 2012, “But the music industry’s sales numbers are finally starting to make sense to the kind of people who are reading this story right now: For the first time ever, the labels’ digital sales have surpassed CDs and vinyl.”82 But not by a landslide: Kafka reports that digital sales accounted for 50.3% of all music purchases in the U.S. in 2011, according to Nielsen SoundScan.83

“Still,” Kafka writes, “the big picture finally resembles the one we’ve been hearing about since Napster showed up in 1999, or at least since Apple started selling music via iTunes in 2003: one day, files would beat discs.”84 While digital files have taken years to overtake physical forms of music distribution, they are now the dominant means by which Americans consume recorded work.

This transition, however, was not a smooth one. “There is nothing inherent or natural about paying for music,” writes Pitchfork’s Eric Harvey, “and the circulation of MP3s through unsanctioned networks reaffirms music as a social process driven by passion, not market logic or copyrights.”85 As such, despite the ever-present threat of a lawsuit, music piracy survives today.

84 Kafka, “The Music Business Welcomes the Future, a Decade Behind Schedule.”
British rock band Radiohead more or less upended the traditional system of distribution in 2007 with the release of their seventh studio album *In Rainbows* (audio: Weird Fishes/Arpeggi” by Radiohead, 22:21). The album was available online, but instead of setting a price for the album, the band allowed customers to engage in a “pay-what-you-wish” model – namely, listeners could download the album for free, or they could pay Radiohead what they thought the album was worth via a “digital tip jar.”\(^86\) This was in effect for three months, and the album still hit number one on the charts, both in the United States and the United Kingdom following its physical release.\(^87\)

*NME* reported, “According to reports most fans chose to pay nothing to download the album. However, it still generated more money before it was physically released (on December 31) than the total money generated by the sales of the band’s previous album, 2003’s *Hail to the Thief.*”\(^88\) Despite this, NPR’s Eric Garland points out that the album was pirated at ten times the rate of new releases from other highly visible artists. *Forbes* reported that of those who did choose to pay for the album, 17% paid $4 or less, 6% between $4.01 and $8, 12% between $8.01 and $12, and just 4% paid more than $12. “Put another way,” writes *Forbes’* Louis Hau, “those who paid more than $8 accounted for about 79% of the revenue generated from the site.”\(^89\)

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\(^88\) “Radiohead reveal how successful ‘In Rainbows’ download really was.”

This largely shocked Americans, who remain divided over the legacy of the *In Rainbows* experiment. Jim Larrison of Adify told *Forbes*, “This is a true win for the music industry as it shows there is still perceived value in the digital form of entertainment.” But Fred Wilson of Union Square Ventures disagreed, and told *Forbes*, “This shows pretty conclusively that the majority of music consumers feel that digital recorded music should be free and is not worth paying for.” Radiohead did not repeat the experiment with their 2011 studio album, *The King of Limbs*.

The distribution of music is no longer explicitly tied to an exchange of money, and Radiohead’s *In Rainbows* experiment demonstrated this division amongst fans: while there are those who will pay for music even when they are not required to, more fans will download an album for free if given the chance, either through sanctioned means or otherwise (like those who pirated the potentially free *In Rainbows* from other sites). This shift largely began with the file-sharing web site Napster in 1999, and the mentality that music shouldn’t necessarily cost anything has survived ever since.

This shifting attitude towards music’s intrinsic worth is a troubling one for the music industry, and is certainly not consistent with Jameson’s vision of mass production for sale to consumers. If Jameson is to be believed, music must be mass-produced with the end goal of commercial sale in mind. However, as distribution techniques have changed, it is no longer certain that someone listening to a given album or track has necessarily paid for it. This upends Jameson’s theory, and instead points to a post-postmodern age where music is not necessarily a commodity to be bought or sold.

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90 Hau, “Mixed Rainbow for Radiohead.”
91 Hau, “Mixed Rainbow for Radiohead.”
The distribution of music is a more complicated proposition with each passing year, and while digital files have gained ground, there has been a resurgence in the popularity of physical, analog formats. Mixmag reported in early 2012 that vinyl sales were up 39% in 2011,92 which supports the trends Williams observed in the popularity of tube microphones and amplifiers in recent years. The shortcomings of digital music are becoming apparent, and so some music fans have returned to their older, analog equipment. Mixmag’s Sean Griffiths writes, “In the last few years, more mainstream acts have begun to release on vinyl again meaning the formats [sic] resurgence has moved from a nostalgia fuelled hipster phenomenon to something with mass market appeal.”93

Vinyl is, in some ways, the antithesis of MP3 culture. Whereas listening to a digital music file often requires little work beyond pressing “play,” there is a very deliberate material aspect to vinyl. Records must be removed from a paper sleeve, often dusted, and then placed over the spindle of a turntable. The listener needs to locate the desired track, and then manually move the tone arm (to which the needle is connected) over that track. The record needs to be flipped over to get to the other half of the release – and sometimes, one release will take up multiple records, which need to be swapped in and out. Vinyl is expensive – new records can cost as much as $30. Vinyl takes up a lot of space, and it needs to be cared for: heat warps records, and careless needle-dropping and handling scratches them.

Vinyl is a clunky, temperamental format, and its adherents are mostly audiophiles and particularly dedicated fans who appreciate the investment in a physical object as

93 Griffiths, “Vinyl Sales Up 39 Percent.”
opposed to an ephemeral file. Some musicians have capitalized on this affinity for physical objects in an age where most music is just a series of ones and zeros by releasing vinyl records with an expanded set of packaging, making it a premium product in an age when clicking “Buy” on iTunes is an almost frictionless act.

The quirks and inconveniences of analog formats, much like the imperfections generated by analog recording equipment, are sometimes desirable characteristics. Composer and producer Brian Eno wrote in *WIRED*, “Since so much of our experience is mediated in some way or another, we have deep sensitivities to the signatures of different media….In the end, the characteristic forms of a tool’s or medium’s distortion, of its weakness and limitations, become sources of emotional meaning and intimacy.”

Radiohead, with the release of their eighth studio album, *The King of Limbs*, sold a vinyl counterpart billed as the “world’s first newspaper album.” Several months after the February release of the digital music files (Radiohead allowed customers to pay more for a higher-quality WAV file, should they be concerned about losses to compression), Radiohead released the “newspaper album” which came with a CD, two clear 10” vinyl records, a custom Radiohead-themed newspaper, and 625 small pieces of artwork. The clear message of this packaging is its commentary on physical media – and in a lot of ways, it makes perfect sense to package one out-of-date medium with another.

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The band’s bassist Colin Greenwood wrote in an essay for *Index on Censorship* that when the band was figuring out how to release *The King of Limbs*, “It seems to have become harder to own music in the traditional way, on a physical object like a CD, and instead music appears the poor cousin of software, streamed or locked into a portable device like a phone or iPod.” Greenwood continued, “Traditional marketplaces and media are feeling stale—supermarkets account for 70 per cent of CDs sold in the UK, the charts are dominated by TV talent-show acts—and we are trying to find ways to put out our music that feel as good as the music itself. The ability to have a say in its release, through the new technologies, is the most empowering thing of all.”

This is increasingly a problem that artists face as they work to release a record. The many ways to release an album have made some performers and labels think hard about the best way to release their work: it’s not just a matter of releasing an album anymore. Should the release come out on CD? Should fans be offered a higher-quality WAV file for a premium? Will the album have a corresponding smartphone or iPad app? Will it come out on vinyl, and how will it be packaged? The manner in which an album is released today is sometimes as important as what the album sounds like, and it can generate an equal amount of hype.

Obviously, physical formats aren’t as easily stolen/pirated as digital files. So the decision to choose vinyl, to choose legal downloads, cassette tapes, CDs, or pirated bittorrent files, with all of the implications regarding sound quality, legality, and cost

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97 Greenwood, “Set Yourself Free.”
becomes a reflection of the consumer rather than just the recorded work being distributed. Except in select, very deliberate cases (mostly iTunes holdouts, like AC/DC and Garth Brooks)98, most recorded work is available in a variety of formats. The consumer doesn’t just choose how they want their music delivered to them: they can make decisions about how much to pay for it, which is a far cry from 20th-century RW culture where you bought the dominant recorded format at a fairly consistent, predictable price, and that was that.

Media is available in a plethora of different formats and each format says something different about what the consumer hopes to get out of the experience of consumption. As such, it is very difficult to make music with “the consumer” in mind, because consumers have such different experiences with music. These experiences—ranging from a grainy YouTube video to deliberately dropping the needle on a vinyl record—are so disparate that it is nearly impossible to market to those who will gravitate towards each of them. Especially today, when so much music is pirated and exchanged outside of the traditional channels of distribution, the means of distribution has made predicting and prescribing the particulars of consumption a very difficult proposition.

Price aside, digital distribution has cheapened music in more ways than one. At a dollar (give or take thirty cents) apiece, songs are all “worth” the same, and many of us have been conditioned by Apple to think of storage space and accessibility, rather than the music itself, as the commodity. The iPod Classic currently for sale on the Apple web

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site is described with the headline “One word: Capacity.” A 160GB iPod classic will hold 40,000 songs (of negligible sound quality, anyway) which sounds like a great deal until you think about how much it would cost to buy 160GB of music. At a dollar a song, using Apple’s numbers, it would cost $40,000 to fill that iPod with songs from iTunes.

The other way some have come to think about digital music is in terms of accessibility. The problems with sound quality in MP3s have been laid out earlier in this paper, and there is no need to rehash them here. But sound quality and resolution aren’t the only variables affected when a track is converted to an MP3. An MP3 is, by virtue of the fact that it is such a compressed file, much more quickly downloaded and synced to an iPod. Thus, MP3s are a negotiation between quality and quantity: having good MP3s (or better still, lossless files) with a higher resolution means your iPod will not hold as many of them. On the other hand, spending $40,000 on 40,000 songs that will likely sound compressed is the alternative. The smaller files download more quickly, but they lack fidelity.

A recent development in digital music distribution demonstrates that major distributors (in this case, iTunes) are aware of the sonic shortcomings of their MP3s. In early 2012, Apple introduced Mastered for iTunes, a designation given to albums that have been mastered differently to cut down on losses in the conversion to the MP3 format.

Professor John Williams says that typically, tracks will get recorded at 96 kilohertz with 24-bit resolution, or maybe even twice that. Usually, tracks then get knocked down to the native rate of the CD, which is a 44.1-kilohertz sampling rate with

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16-bit resolution. From here, a track is then run through further data compression algorithms to create the MP3, AAC, or MP4. Williams says if you are lucky, that ends up being about 256 kilobits per second, but if you are not lucky, it could be as low as 96. Once you have gone down that far, Williams says you have thrown away about 99 percent of the data from the original recording.100

What exacerbates the situation is that the compression often takes place in multiple stages, as described above. So with Mastered for iTunes, Apple has put out a tool that takes the high sampling rate, high resolution files, and encodes directly to AAC. This cuts down on losses to compression a little. Apple’s claim is that tracks will sound better if they are taken down to AAC in one step, rather than through multiple formats, like the CD. Apple has put out an encoder for free that allows recording studios to make that transformation, and is encouraging studios and producers who are supplying original files to supply them in higher quality formats rather than in the CD quality.101

What Apple has not done is release an encoder where the user can hear in real time what the music will sound like after it comes out of the data compressor. This, according to Williams, is what a lot of mastering engineers really want. Mastering engineers would like to have a button that they can switch on and off, that allows them to hear what a song sounds like before and after compression. As it stands, there is a tool that lets engineers line up unencoded and encoded files to compare them after the fact to do an A-B comparison. But a real-time version of the tool would let mastering engineers adapt the mixing process to optimize the track before the encoding has already taken place, leading to a better-sounding MP3. Williams says that this is an instance in which

100 Williams, interview with the author, March 15, 2012.
101 Williams, interview with the author, March 15, 2012.
the production process is catching up with the marketing. Since MP3 is now king, Williams feels that data compression processing should not be an afterthought. It should be a primary part of the production process.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{102} Williams, interview with the author, March 15, 2012.
Chapter 4: Consumption

In earlier chapters I have focused on the production and distribution of music in order to elucidate the ways in which postmodernism is insufficient to describe the current cultural shifts taking place, and to posit the emergence of a newer post-postmodern era. In this chapter, I will build on those arguments and demonstrate the ways in which these shifts affect the consumer, as that consumer both consumes music in the traditional sense, and “finishes” music in ways previously reserved for producers.

For Jameson, selling a mass-produced good to the consumer is the goal of creating art. Yet, today, there are increasingly opportunities for the consumer to continue to “produce” music once they have the relevant audio file, rather than to passively consume it. This problematizes Jameson’s theory by casting doubt on the end goal of creating music. Music is not always treated as a finished product by consumers, and producers know this—a particularly salient example of this shift is rapper Dr. Dre’s line of headphones, which will be addressed in this chapter.

Post-Postmodern Consumption

While it is easier now to acquire and listen to a favorite song than it has ever been in human history, consumption of music in post-postmodern America is an increasingly complicated issue. The technology through which Americans consume
music is proliferating almost as rapidly as the music itself, and this great proliferation creates possibilities for a broad variety of consumption experiences.

As addressed in the Distribution chapter of this paper, there are opportunities for consumers to experience music in a variety of formats today — more opportunities than have existed previously. This has ramifications for consumers, who must choose from among these various formats, but also has ramifications for the form the music itself takes. Some have even started to question the value of the album as a unit of consumption.

Ever since the advent of the LP, the album has been music’s standard aesthetic form (with some competition from singles and EPs). “The LP and 45 rpm formats took the phonograph, which had been in existence for over half a century, to the masses, right as the American middle-class was going suburban and privatizing their lives,” Pitchfork’s Eric Harvey writes. “We could then use musical objects like we’d been using literature and art for centuries prior: as collectibles, and signifiers of personal taste.”¹⁰³ And ever since, the album has been the classic form of music distribution.

But the proliferation of music vendors like iTunes and Amazon’s MP3 store have increasingly allowed consumers to buy single tracks as opposed to albums—a luxury that was virtually unheard of in the heyday of 20th century physical formats. This, in turn, has created fragmentation: consumers are more likely than ever before to simply buy the songs that immediately catch their attention rather than the album as a whole. For some artists, this is a distressing development.

¹⁰³ Harvey, “The Social History of the MP3.”
Indie-folk-turned-electronica artist Brooklynite Sufjan Stevens told *Signal to Noise* magazine’s Vish Khanna, “I feel that the album no longer has a stronghold or has any real bearing anymore…. And I’m wondering, what’s the value of my work once these forms are obsolete and everyone’s just downloading music?" As consumption has shifted towards smaller and smaller pieces of music, the album as traditionally conceived has lost its dominance – a sentiment also echoed by Radiohead bassist Colin Greenwood earlier in this paper.

Steven explained that the death of the album as the unit of consumption of music has led him to question his work as an artist, and even the worth of a song. “...I think it has to do with a creative crisis .... I’m wondering what am I doing? What is a song even? I’m questioning, what’s the point of a song? Is a song antiquated? Does it have any power any more? The format itself—a narrative song with accompaniment—is really beyond me now.”

In his 1972 book *Take Today*, Marshall McLuhan predicts the shift alluded at the beginning of this chapter: namely, that consumers would increasingly take on a production role as electric technology proliferated. It was in 1980 that Alvin Toffler

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105 Khanna, “Sufjan Stevens Interview: An Excerpt.”

first used the term “prosumer” to describe this convergence of roles.\textsuperscript{107} Indeed, specific pieces of technology available today point to the truth in these decades-old predictions.

The immense popularity of the Beats by Dr. Dre headphones line is telling. "Pitchfork”s Mark Richardson aptly notes,

“Beats by Dr. Dre are popular because they don’t reproduce music as much as they transform it. They are the right headphones for the current era because their design ‘customizes’ the sound for the listener who wants bass. Music is never finished; we can chop and screw, add bass, slow it down 100x, mash it up with something else. And people will buy headphones that finish music in the way they like.”\textsuperscript{108}

There has also been an increase in smartphone (particularly, iPhone) applications that turn the phone into a controller of sorts. For example, the Rhythm Pad app, available for free from Apple’s iTunes store, provides a simulated drum pad. The app allows the user to pick their drum kit from a variety of genre-optimized kits, and to either solo the drums, or to play along with a song from their iTunes library – in effect, finishing the track in real time, and adding an almost game-like aspect of interactivity to the experience of listening to a song.

There is growing appeal for consumers today in music products that are somehow customizable. In this way, the Dr. Dre headphones and Rhythm Pad app are only the tip of the iceberg. Increasingly, consumers are regarding tracks as unfinished pieces of culture to be further manipulated in a variety of ways. As The Awl’s Mike Barthel points out, the act of creating the most rudimentary remixes doesn’t even require extra

\textsuperscript{107} Consoli and Musso, “Marketing 2.0.”
equipment. “The whole spectrum of tools now standard on any home computer enables [the creation of remixes]: a CD-ROM drive for ripping music, music recording software for editing music, and a high-speed internet connection for finding a cappella or instrumental versions of tracks, as well as for distributing your completed work.”\textsuperscript{109}

Barthel makes a key point about software. A major feature of post-postmodernism as it applies to popular music is the fairly wide availability of user-friendly software for the manipulation of tracks and samples. It is this software, more than any other single piece of equipment, that has contributed to the growth of the consumer who produces. Those who would be avid music fans can now take their enthusiasm a step further and produce their own remixes. A software program like Pro Tools essentially turns a track into raw materials—with tools like beat detective, songs can be broken down into such small parts and rearranged that the result may be totally unrecognizable. And not all of this software is prohibitively priced: notably, Audacity can be downloaded from the Internet for free.

Some artists, like the British rock band Radiohead, have made the act of “prosuming” even more organic to the process of consuming music. Following the 2007 release of \textit{In Rainbows}, the band began releasing the stems to their songs, encouraging fans to remix them. \textit{WIRED}’s Angela Watercutter explains, “Aspiring remixers download five separate ‘stems’ of the song from iTunes (yes, fans have to fork over $1 for each

What the fans do with those stems, and what software and hardware they use to do so, is up to them. Remixes were then uploaded by fans to the website Radioheadremix.com, where fans could vote on their favorite remixes.

Radiohead has since continued this practice of encouraging fans to remix their work. Following the release of 2011’s *The King of Limbs*, the band began to release other artists’ remixes of those tracks. In late 2010, these works were collected as *TKOL RMX 1234566*, which features 19 reworked tracks from *The King of Limbs*. For Radiohead, the remix (which is often outsourced to the consumer through the release of stems) is a valid, and even critical, part of the creative process.

There are even more nontraditional ways for consumers to take the role of the producer. DC band Bluebrain has two albums, *The National Mall* and *Listen to the Light* that function as iPhone applications that can be downloaded for free. Each of the albums is tied to a physical location: the National Mall in Washington, D.C. and Central Park in New York City, respectively. The listener activates the app on-site, and streams original music that responds to the listener’s geographic location within the park. This marriage of music with the GPS capabilities of an iPhone is a striking example of where music could go in the coming years. Holladay describes the applications as essentially the audio portion of a video game imposed over a physical landscape rather than an imaginary one.¹¹¹

With these albums-as-app, Bluebrain places the listener in a production role in an

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¹¹¹ Ryan Holladay, interview with the author, recording, January 27, 2012, Rosslyn Artishpere, Rosslyn, VA.
unprecedented way. The app itself is not truly an album until the listener engages with it. Take, for example, *Listen to the Light*. The consumer cannot sit down on a bench in Central Park and listen to the album—unless the listener moves around the park, the same music will loop endlessly. No two experiences with *Listen to the Light* will be identical, because no two listeners will walk at exactly the same pace on the exact same route through the park. And here, the consumer taking on a production role is not a choice: there is no album without the consumer. *Listen to the Light* does not exist outside of the experiences listeners have walking through Central Park—Bluebrain removes the middle step. Production on the part of the consumer is not a choice: it is inextricably linked to the act of listening.

Bluebrain’s work has a central nuance that makes it particularly innovative. While most advances in music technology have served to make music more accessible, Holladay says that he was interested in exploring the same technology could be used to impose limits.\(^\text{112}\) As such, *The National Mall* and *Listen to the Light* are only available on-site. There is no way to experience either of the two albums without being either at the National Mall, or in Central Park. Holladay says he has been questioned about this in the past, but he doesn’t see it as a contradiction. Just because digital technology has traditionally been used to create and expand access doesn’t mean that it is the only way it can be used.\(^\text{113}\)

Emerging smartphone technology has the power to do so much more, too. Holladay said that while he was working on *Listen to the Light*, he toyed with the idea of making the album sensitive not only to changes in location, but to the time of year. The music

\(^{112}\) Holladay, interview with the author, January 27, 2012.

\(^{113}\) Holladay, interview with the author, January 27, 2012.
would have become sparse in the winter, and lush in the summer in order to reflect the
day the park looked and felt to visitors. Ultimately, this would have created a tremendous
amount of work and a much larger app for users to download, and Holladay decided
against it.

Holladay also expresses interest in creating music that takes advantage of the
gyroscope in smartphones. That way, when a user walked by a fixed point or object, they
would hear the sound in the ear closer to the point or object. If they walked by in the
opposite direction, they would hear it in the other ear. The sound would be sensitive to
the tilt and orientation of the phone, lending an almost tactile dimension to the experience
of music.

While these applications rely on a skill set not traditionally associated with the
consumption of music, they essentially fall into the same category as some of the other
equipment described earlier in this paper. The iPhone becomes a controller – and while
the interface is consumer-oriented and more user-friendly, these modes of distribution
increasingly place consumers in a production role. Americans now have to tools to do
more than listen to their music, and as production becomes more user-friendly and
consumption grows more technologically advanced, one has to wonder if these shifts will
one day meet in the middle.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

By now, this paper has demonstrated the ways in which postmodernism as defined by Frederic Jameson fails to adequately explain the shifts occurring in the production, distribution, and consumption of popular music in America today. The available technology, particularly that of the last decade, has allowed for a more fluid relationship between man and machine—and this fluidity (which manifests itself as Haraway’s cyborg) has ramifications for how and why music is made, how it is obtained, and how consumers interact with it.

Far from signaling the end of legitimate, meaningful music culture (as postmodernism would seem to suggest), the last ten years have constituted a veritable golden age for musicians and listeners alike. The availability of high-performing consumer-friendly media production software has revolutionized the ease with which music can be assembled, and has virtually eliminated friction in the stitching together of disparate samples and texts. Jameson’s writings suggest that the resulting sample-heavy works of art should carry no real meaning, but that has not been the case.

This potential for creating meaning rather than destroying it is a central feature of the post-postmodern. Numerous technological advances (as described earlier) have enabled artists to recapture modernism’s tone of sincerity rather than postmodernism’s irony in their work, although the tools and methods used to generate sincerity have changed tremendously. Musicians have found ways to impart meaning to texts that may not have carried meaning to begin with.
a work from its context does not simply, per Jameson, create irony. Sampling and remixing can breathe meaning into ironic works as well as change the meaning of sincere works without degrading that work into pastiche.

Beyond the question of irony and sincerity, music of the last decade has been created under different economic conditions from those suggested by Jameson. Postmodernism claims that art is a mass-produced good made to be sold to consumers for a profit, but the Internet has rendered this characterization outdated. Given the prevalence of file-sharing and music piracy today, much of the music in circulation has not been purchased. As the peer-to-peer file-sharing network Napster demonstrated at the turn of the century, given the opportunity, many consumers will obtain music for free in unsanctioned ways rather than pay for it. The 2007 release of Radiohead’s In Rainbows using a pay-what-you-wish model distilled consumers into two main camps: those who will willingly pay for music, and those who will not. The shock waves that this experiment sent through the music community made one thing very clear: not all Americans view music as a commodity to be purchased for money. This revelation problematizes Jameson’s characterization of music as, at its core, a consumer good.

More problematic still, the consumer is no longer easily identified. The proliferation of user-friendly media production software and hardware has contributed to a collapse of the distinction between those who identify as consumers and those who identify as producers. While this distinction has been used to give structure to the argument in this paper, it is increasingly irrelevant in describing how Americans interact with music culture.
Perhaps the most extreme example of this collapse between the roles of producer and consumer is Bluebrain’s albums that function as iPhone apps. The apps can be downloaded for free, so no money changes hands in distributing the music. And beyond merely encouraging the consumer to interact with the music in a production role, *Listen to the Light* and *The National Mall* demand it. Without some measure of production activity from the consumer (in this case, physically moving through a specified geographic space), there is no album. Postmodernism fails to explain this much-changed relationship between artist and listener, which often exists wholly outside the bounds of any sort of commercial distribution structure.

While postmodernism has certainly not vanished from music culture, these observations together constitute a reasonable argument that we, as Americans, are beginning to experience (and create, because the relationship between cultural shifts and those who experience them is not passive) something distinct from postmodernism. While this paper has maintained a fairly narrow focus on artists who create music on the margins of what would be considered mainstream American popular music, it will hopefully open the door to a number of conversations that critically evaluate the changing relationship between man, machine, and music.

This paper has necessarily imposed some limits in its discussion of popular music, and as such, there is much work left to be done. It is fairly evident that postmodernism has fallen by the wayside within several subgenres of music (as described in the chapters preceding this one), but it remains to be seen what greater impact these shifts will have on mainstream popular music as a whole. Furthermore,
there are genres with longstanding, atypical relationships to postmodern concepts like irony (has country music ever been ironic?) and commercial distribution (was jazz, with its emphasis on live improvisation, ever meant to be recorded and sold?) that may, as a result, exhibit characteristics of post-postmodernism in different ways. This deserves further exploration.

The ideas put forth in these pages certainly merit additional time and study: American culture today is saturated with music in an unprecedented way. Music plays everywhere, and is virtually inseparable from the larger cultural fabric of American life. Any serious attempt to understand ideas at work in American culture must necessarily take music into account. It is my hope that this paper has done just that, and furthermore, that the ideas presented here will provide a jumping-off point for other scholars to question and critically evaluate what post-postmodernism might mean.

Again, it should be noted that this paper has simplified postmodernism and the writings of Frederic Jameson for the purpose of having a stable point from which to launch an argument. A more nuanced and complicated view of postmodernism in may yield a more robust conceptualization of the post-postmodern for scholars continuing in this line of study.

Ultimately, post-postmodernism as described in this paper should be understood as a characterization tentatively applied to the behaviors of a group of artists, distributors, and consumers of music. Post-postmodernism, as written about here, should be treated as a theory with which to trouble postmodernism’s assumptions about the conditions of American life today, rather than a broad
explanation of a definitive cultural change. Music culture is in constant and unending conversation with itself, and the assertions made in this paper are made with the understanding that the conversation could change at any point. It is this potential for sudden shift, however, that makes the study of contemporary popular music culture so fascinating and so worthy of further scholarly attention.
Bibliography


