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"Love It If We Made It": Experimental Pop and Societal Decay

In the early 1970s, bands like the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, and The Clash pioneered the explosive sound of punk, embracing an aesthetic of grit, straightforwardness, and harsh minimalism that would change music forever. Rejecting the elitism of classic rock and reacting to the political turmoil of their era, these punk-rockers imagined worlds of dystopia, doom, and collapse, channeling the rage of a generation into an artistic movement. Decades later, these visions of "fascist regime[s]" (Sex Pistols 0:22) may not have yet manifested fully, but disillusionment continues, spurred on by the rise of neoliberal austerity politics, rapidly increasing wealth inequality, and mass social unrest. However, in the 21st-century, the musical landscape has changed entirely.

Thanks to the emergence of digital music streaming, social music sites like Soundcloud, and the rapid expansion of social media platforms such as TikTok, music has become more diverse than ever, enabling consumers to develop tastes that are far more complex and wide-reaching. Faced with an entirely new social paradigm and blessed by countless new tools for digital music-making, a rising generation of young artists is attempting to push the limits of contemporary pop. Whether it be the artsy and other-worldly indie rock of The 1975, the maximalist pop chaos of 100 gecs, or the futuristic hip-hop of Bladee and Yung Lean, this kind of experimentation is finding its place within mainstream music as well as more niche musical enclaves enabled by the internet. The phenomenon speaks largely to its fanbase: a new demographic of disaffected youth, burdened by late-stage capitalism and bewildered by corporate and technological expansion. And while it may be easy to dismiss these new sonic adventures as degenerative or lacking artistic merit, to ignore the messages conveyed by these digital pop stars could be a grave mistake.

Like punk rock before it, it is important to understand this movement as a reaction—one that attempts to counter the polished minimalism of the late 2000s and early 2010s. *Vox* journalist Eliza Brooke traces the emergence of this trend within fashion and design to the 2008 recession, which forced major department stores like Manhattan's Saks Fifth Avenue to cut prices by seventy percent in order to clear out inventory. Consumers, now looking to spend less on clothing, adopted a conservative fashion sense that embraced the simple and the minimal, in sharp contrast to the loud and garish fashions of the early aughts. In a similar vein, new lifestyle startups embraced the minimalist design aesthetics of sans-serif fonts and smooth, geometric logos, which attempted to visually demonstrate the straightforwardness and transparency of their brands to consumers (Brooke). Recession neoliberalism urged consumers to get by on less—to adopt more sustainable individual lifestyles to bear the brunt of the economic downturn. The aesthetic of minimalism quickly spread across the internet, with the quirky, textured logos of the late 90s and 2000s being swiftly replaced by flat colors and shapes. Political campaigns embraced this too, especially within liberal America, with Hillary Clinton's layered, serif-ridden 2008 logo transforming into her iconic Sharp Sans "H" in 2016.

This trend spread to music as well. *Billboard*'s year-end number-one singles transformed from loud, unapologetically-pop party hits like Usher's "Yeah!" in 2004 and the Black-Eyed Peas' "Boom Boom Pow" in 2008, to subtler songs featuring sparse arrangements and a return to less synthetic sounds, such as Gotye's "Somebody That I Used to Know" in 2012 and Pharrell Williams' "Happy" in 2014. But by the end of the decade, creative backlash was already emerging against this clean aesthetic, which for many had become sterile. Another *Vox* article in 2020 predicted the end of this era of sparseness and minimalism in favor of what *Architectural Digest* called "vintage maximalism" (Jennings). The decade of flatness was over.

By 2020, a new movement in pop music had emerged to accompany this shift. Music critics called it "hyperpop," but there was disagreement over what that meant, and the artists who supposedly embodied this genre were often reluctant to embrace it, describing themselves in other terms such as "digicore" (Bugara). Some argue that "hyperpop" was coined by Spotify for its playlist of the same name, full of explosive, glitchy, and autotuned works of artists like 100 gecs, umru, Slayyter, and Charli XCX (Madden). However, the term was first used in 1988 by British music journalist Don Shewey, in reference to synth pop bands like the Pet Shop Boys and Frankie Goes to Hollywood, both of which he claimed had "turned pop's star-making machinery back on itself." Rather than finding a specific set of musical characteristics that define hyperpop, it seems more useful to think of the term just as Shewey frames it—as less a genre than an artistic technique. Thus, "hyperpop" can be understood to encompass any contemporary music that appropriates the mechanisms of pop, and in so doing subverts the norms of popular culture. This, after all, is not far off from the philosophy of early punk, which saw bands like the Ramones re-appropriating the style and tropes of bubblegum pop and classic rock in order to launch a movement against these styles and their hegemony (Dixon).

One of the most recognizable groups associated with the term "hyperpop" in the present day is the American duo 100 gecs, made up of artists Dylan Brady and Laura Les, who have made a name for themselves thanks to a unique (and polarizing) sound that combines elements of hip-hop, pop-punk, ska, EDM, and electro-pop. The duo first rose to prominence with their sophomore album, *1,000 gecs*, which Jon Caramanica of the *New York Times* dubbed the best album of 2019. With a chaotic blend of musical elements and lyrical content that *Pitchfork*'s Larry Fitzmaurice called "pure and uncut absurdity," the album embraces a rare kind of musical whimsy. Songs like the popular "Money Machine" include nonsensical and braggadocious lyrics such as "With the big boys coming with the big stuff / I feel so clean like a money machine, oh yeah / Big boys coming with the big trucks / Feel so clean like a money machine, oh yeah" (00:20), underscored by distorted trap beats, metallic synth accents, and an artificial-sounding digital guitar riff. Les's pitched-up, hard-tuned vocals deliver infectious, repetitive melodies that add to the outrageousness of the track in their almost-inhuman flashiness. *100 gecs'* pop-friendly tracks often evolve into sections of pure distortion and discord, like the ending of the song "800db Cloud," which gets progressively louder and more abrasive until it transforms into a death metal-influenced breakdown, with Les growling the lyrics "I hit the big boof then it's all gone / I hit the big boof then it's gone / I hit the big boof and the weed, yeah" (01:45). These arbitrary transitions and obscure musical references contribute to a greater feeling of discord and illogic, one that feels aligned with the Dadaist movement set out by Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara in the early twentieth century, which aimed to create "a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies" (Tzara). The resurfacing of remnants from anti-logical modernist art movements is further reinforced when 100 gecs applies the surrealist "exquisite-corpse" approach to produce their music, sending tracks back and forth between the pair, each independently making small tweaks toward the greater project (Ewens).

It is easy to dismiss this kind of absurdity as silly and nothing more—which is in a sense true—but there is an inherent political statement within the meaninglessness of absurd art. Discussing the history of the Dada movement, National Gallery of Art curator Leah Dickerman observes that "World War I produced a collapse of confidence in the rhetoric—if not the principles—of the culture of rationality that had prevailed in Europe since the Enlightenment," resulting in the development of such artistic phenomena. The leader of the Surrealists, André Breton, called the movement "a violent reaction against the impoverishment and sterility of thought processes that resulted from centuries of rationalism" (Breton). But in the same way that artists from Ball to Breton rejected the so-called "rationality" of early twentieth-century liberalism, which ultimately produced the catastrophe of World War I, so does twenty-first century absurdism respond to the neoliberalism of the last few decades, a period that has seen the catastrophes of the

September 11 attacks, the 2008 recession, and the coronavirus pandemic. Les and Brady's work is a vast collage of unusually paired sounds that echo the nature of twenty-first-century reality—a digitized world in which seemingly infinite entertainment and pleasure can be juxtaposed with equally ubiquitous images of tragedy and crisis. While the disconnectedness of this kind of music can be jarring to some (such as critic David Smyth, who declared it "like music's worst genres crammed into a bazooka and fired at your face"), ultimately this zany style of production is perhaps better understood as a direct reflection of a horrifyingly absurd reality.

Stylistically, the development of 100 gecs' unique sound is inseparable from the influence of many modern hip-hop artists, particularly those in the so-called "Soundcloud Rapper" camp (a vague label which largely describes artists whose experimental hip-hop sound emerged via the internet). Despite the obvious similarities in style—whiney autotuned emo vocals, distorted 808s, and the combination of trap beats with alt-rock guitar riffs—Les specifically cites Atlanta rapper Playboi Carti, who got his start on SoundCloud in 2011, as an influence (Les and Brady). Jon Caramanica of the *New York Times* describes this genre—including artists like Lil Peep, XXXTentacion, and Trippie Redd—as having "an almost punklike purity, emphasizing abandon over structure, rawness over dexterity." But the truth is, that the sound of internet hip-hop is hard to pin down and full of variation. One such evolution is the atmospheric "cloud rap" of artists like Bladee and Yung Lean (born Benjamin Reichwald and Jonatan Aron Leandoer Håstad), both signed to the Swedish YEAR0001 record label (and who are also both sometimes labeled as "hyperpop"). Although these artists' sounds have changed substantially over the course of their young careers (both are only in their twenties as of 2023), a number of their stylistic and thematic inclinations consistently point to a similar interest in social collapse.

Take for example, Bladee's 2018 song "Mallwhore Freeestyle," a stream-of- consciousness track in which the artist reflects on his relationship to consumerism and the material. "I'm a mallwhore and my Pradas look like Tom Ford," Bladee brags, "Black gloves on, yeah, I'm lookin' hardcore" (0:12). The rapper name drops multiple brands, from "Neimans" and "Saks" to "Louis" and "Dior," but pulls back from his material flexing at times, contemplatively stating, "Sometimes I don't understand what it's all for / But I understand when they see me then they all sore" (0:27). Here, he seems conflicted, not knowing why he insists on buying these designer brands and yet also intuitively recognizing that having this sort of material prowess over others is gratifying in some way. Meanwhile, Bladee weighs these materials against other, more existential ideas: "Death knockin' on my door, that's the front door / Dip out of the back door, hop into the black Porsche" (0:33). This is a brief moment of sobriety for Bladee amidst the intoxication of consumerism, where he realizes that death is imminent and real—but it is quickly dismissed by Bladee, who believes that he can cheat death through a "back door" and that his material claims—like the Porsche—can save him from his own mortality. The song, produced by frequent collaborators Lusi and Rip, contains atmospheric, soft, and icy synth pads and echoing, reverberant vocals that harken back to the early 2010's genre of *vaporwave*. This last genre was also popularized largely thanks to the internet, featuring artists like Macintosh Plus who manipulated samples of 1970s and 80s pop and muzak, often in satirical reference to consumer culture and the art that it produces (McLeod).

Many of Bladee and his collaborators' songs point to a common theme of consumeristic or material emptiness. Philosopher Mark Fisher identifies a similar feeling in his theory of "depressive hedonia," which he outlines in his book, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Fisher says:

> Depression is endemic. It is the condition most dealt with by the [British] National Health Service, and is afflicting people at increasingly younger ages . . . Many of the teenage students I encountered seemed to be in a state of what I would call depressive hedonia. Depression is usually characterized as a state of anhedonia, but the condition I'm referring to is constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it is by an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure. There is a sense that 'something is missing'—but no

> appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed beyond the pleasure principle. (29)

This concept embodies the themes of empty consumption, isolation, and obsessive pleasure-seeking that artists like Bladee—as well as 100 gecs and other hyperpop peers—repeatedly discuss in their music. Yung Lean exemplifies this in his song “Miami Ultras,” saying:

Watchin’ Star Wars, smokin’ pot
I take what I got, I live ’til it stops
Ch-ch-chop, chop, chop up my lungs, stay rot
I take what I got, you hate that you not
Like me, hate me, I don’t give a motherfuck
What I am, what I’m not, Polo down to my socks (0:47)

While it is common in hip-hop to *glorify* substance use, what is different about artists like Lean is their willingness to deal with drugs in an honest way—which often ends tragically. Here Lean paints a picture of a life defined by vice, encapsulated in the nihilistic declaration, “I live ’til it stops,” with references to media consumption, drug use, and designer brands broken up by the rapper’s uncaring and empty internal monologue. The verse exhibits the exact “inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure” that Fisher details: an existential emptiness despite plentiful access to material pleasures.

The song’s origin story only further emphasizes these themes. “Miami Ultras” was written and produced in Miami, at a challenging time for Lean, who was heavily addicted to codeine, Xanax, cocaine, and marijuana and would frequently dissociate and hallucinate as a result. Because of this, the lyrics on the resulting album, *Warlord*, are often confusing or nonsensical. Lean was eventually hospitalized in Miami but became paranoid about being separated from his hard drive full of music and insisted that his manager Barron Machat bring it to the hospital. Unfortunately, on the way there, Machat veered off the road in a fatal car crash—making the situation all the more devastating for Lean and everyone else involved (Cooper).

Back home in Sweden, under the care of his father, Yung Lean attempts to grapple with his substance abuse and mental health issues in his song “Agony,” a slow and discordant piano ballad, singing:

> When I’m afraid, I lose my mind
> It’s fine, it happens all the time
>
> Isolation caved in
> I adore you
> The sound of your skin (0:40)

Lean describes being trapped inside, alone with only pieces of furniture to keep him company, hallucinating haunting images all around. While extreme, it is no surprise that these kinds of images resonate with young listeners. A 2020 report determined that nearly 8 in 10 members of Generation Z and nearly 7 in 10 Millennials experience loneliness as defined by the UCLA loneliness scale (Cigna), and there is significant evidence that these issues have only been further intensified for children and adolescents by the years of isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Loades et al.). Artists like Yung Lean, Bladee, 100 gecs—who are all quite young themselves, and presumably have even younger fanbases given that the majority of users on sites like SoundCloud and TikTok are under the age of thirty-four (SimilarWeb)—reflect the culture of new generations, born into a world of digital communication, instant gratification, and growing alienation.

Of course, certain elements of the hyperpop aesthetic have been adopted by more mainstream acts like the English pop-rock band The 1975. Formed in 2002 in Cheshire by frontman Matty Healy, The 1975 has balanced extreme commercial success with constant willingness to experiment. Their sound, which has varied considerably over the years, embraces the many faces of pop throughout the last several decades, incorporating elements of rock, disco, synthpop, and electronica. On the 2018 album *A Brief Inquiry into Online Relationships*, Healy and company dive face-first into digital maximalism, making use of synthetic beats and deliberately hard-tuned vocals. On tracks like "I Like America & America Likes Me"—which Healy says is "an homage to SoundCloud rap"—the band abandons any and all traditional pop-rock instrumentation in favor of hard-hitting trap beats, heavy 808 basslines, chopped vocal samples, and an overall digitized sound that appears to mimic some of the glitchy experimentation one would expect from some of the pioneers of hyperpop mentioned earlier. Healy's vocals—which are incredibly raw and emotional despite being heavily pitch-corrected—speak of the horrifying realities of American youth, torn between senseless gun violence, social unrest, and the overwhelm of consumerism:

> Is that designer?
> Is that on fire?
> Am I a liar?
> Oh, will this help me lay down?
> My skin is fire
> It's so desired
> No gun required
> Oh, will this help me lay down? (The 1975 0:49)

Healy paints a picture of modern American youth, burdened with concerns that previous generations never had to grapple with—everything from social image ("Is that designer?"), to drug use and mental health ("Oh, will this help me lay down?"). It is thus fitting that the song is also in reference to the musical culture applauded by the same demographic that Healy sings about. Once again, the aesthetics of popular music are twisted in a slightly satirical fashion in order to convey a political message.

The 1975 also practices hyperpop in other ways, as on the track “Love It If We Made It” from the same 2018 album. The disco-heavy song is intentionally “machine-like, in an industrial sense,” Healy says (qtd. in Sodomsky)—which is in fact a criticism that the 1975 and their pop contemporaries frequently receive from the “rockist” camp of music journalists who see contemporary pop music as repetitive, formulaic, and mechanical. However, by emphasizing the mechanical aspects of pop, the band actually crafts a careful message, singing of the utter bleakness of the modern world in the bright key of E major. Healy sings:

> And we can find out the information access all the applications
> That are hardening positions based on miscommunication
> Oh, fuck your feelings, truth is only hearsay
> We're just left to decay, modernity has failed us
> And I'd love it if we made it (The 1975 0:45)

The song is deeply ominous and dystopian—even nihilistic at times—all while appropriating a rather cheery sound. The juxtaposition is reminiscent of the New York Dolls’ “Personality Crisis” (1973), which explores the speaker’s descent into madness through the vehicle of a lively glam rock track bursting with guitar riffs and piano slides. These kinds of unusual pairings represent a dissonance between perception and reality, between grand narratives and a more complicated truth—something that Marx might define as the contradictions of capitalism manifesting. And yet the greater contradiction may be a cultural one: the idea that, as for the punks, the glamor of popular rock music did not speak to the bleakness of their lives; for young people today (particularly those included in marginalized communities), pop music for the last few decades has failed to speak to their realities in a meaningful way. Bands like The 1975 embody the sound of a dystopia—or at very least a perceived one.

In his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, sociologist Dick Hebdige says that the British punks of the 1970s were “*dramatizing* what had come to be called ‘Britain’s decline’ by constructing a language which was, in contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of the Rock Establishment, unmistakably relevant and down to earth" (Hebdige 87). Since that era, popular music has developed significantly, but if we recognize that musical movements like punk rock almost always emerge in *reaction to* the music of previous years, it is hard not to see these new experimentations in pop music as a reaction to the recession-era pop that has dominated airwaves for so long. Since the turn of the century, the musical community has acquired countless new tools and ideas that have furthered musical possibilities for pop artists. Digital audio workstations like ProTools and Ableton Live, pitch-correction software like AutoTune, music distribution platforms such as SoundCloud, and VST (Virtual Studio Technology) instruments that simulate synthesizers and other instruments have paved the way for a rapidly evolving and diversifying musical landscape full of countless microgenres and literally millions of different artists participating in this ecosystem. And now, new artists make use of these tools, turning them in on themselves in order to satirize pop music and thus the hegemonic culture that it emerges from. The minimalism of early 2010's chart-toppers, reflecting a narrative of simplicity and individualism, is subverted in favor of maximalism: expressing the utter complexity of late-stage capitalist reality. The sober seriousness of the former is traded in for an embrace of absurdity and illogic that encapsulates the despairing noise of modernity. And all the while, themes of decay, dystopia, and alienation from modern life grow more and more deeply rooted in pop music's motives and themes. If it is understood that new trends in music emerge from youth culture, any cultural analyst of today should be deeply concerned about the root causes of these new developments. While internet culture and the unique tastes of the younger generation may be easy to dismiss as fleeting or irrelevant, it is imperative that these trends be taken careful note of. The youth have a message in their music—a message that is meant to be heard.

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