

A Walk Through Music Forums

"We'll invent some new computers
Link up the global vil-
lage
And get AP, UPI, and
Reuters
To tell everybody,
news news"
Husker Dü - Divide
and Conquer (1985)

We are the children of the internet. We were raised on a diet of a trolls, sockpuppets, avatars and signatures. We stayed awake until 4 am discussing why Radiohead's In Rainbows was a step beyond or a living proof of their decadence. Rock critics were a matter of criticism themselves, sometimes an argument of authority, sometimes a laughing stock. In internet forums, anyone could become a respected expert and a followed creator of opinion, subverting the canon of rock music that has been vertically imposed by critics in mass media (Jones,

2008).

For this piece of work, I draw on my (subjective) memories of belonging to Spanish music-related internet communities, such as message boards, during the noughties. I scrutinise how these living entities that are forums reproduce or rebel against the discourse of the mainstream critics, how they shape tastes, how its members became what they (we) are as music fans, and how the fragility of internet servers erase the memories of a collective virtual experience.

First there was Google. I barely remember how the world was before Google. I was born in 1991, the year that punk broke¹. By the time I reached the age in which I developed a conscious awareness of the world of sounds that surrounded me punk was well buried, but I didn't know it. I date the beginning of my obsession

with pop music, as, more or less, 2004. There was not an epiphany. The majority of autobiographical narratives relating to musicians, critics or fans of pop music mention a magic moment when something clicks inside a teenage mind. Years ago the Spanish music journalist Nando Cruz had the habit of asking all his interviewees a very simple question: "Why do you make music?". Depending on the generation the majority of the musicians, tended to mention a song on the radio, a Top of the Pops broadcast or a recorded cassette tape that a friend gave them. For me, there was not a single life-changing moment. My approach to pop music was gradual and cerebral. It was through words, and not through sounds. It was reading music forums.

One of the biggest paradoxes of the -let's call

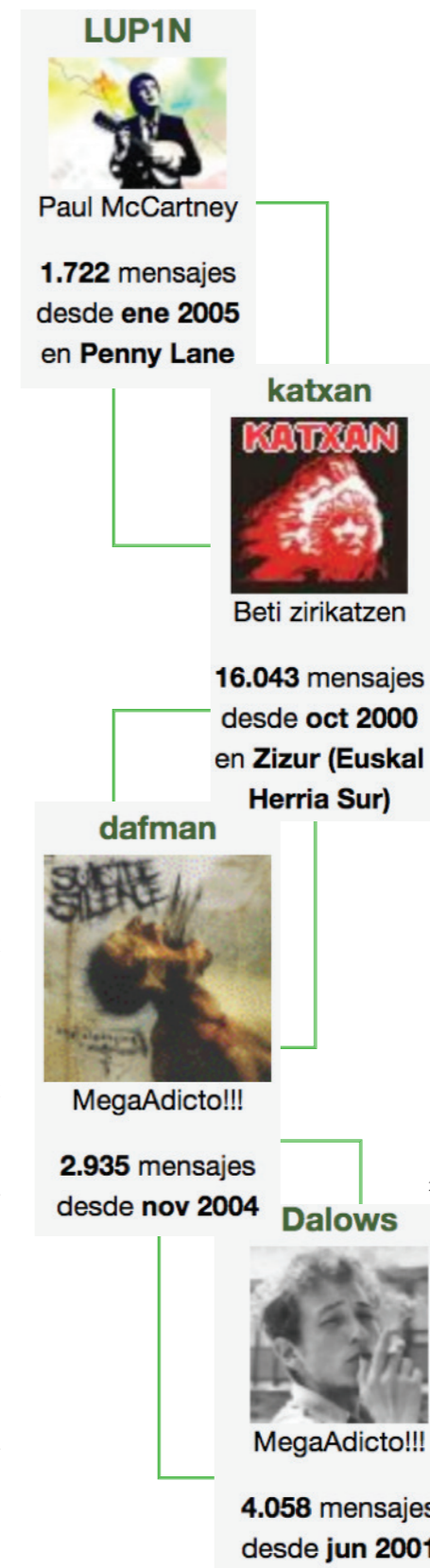
Santiago Fernández Sánchez

it- virtual era is that, by having access to an infinite archive of the history of pop music, one can virtually live in a mental 1967, 1979 or 1994, depending on your choice. You can immerse yourself in the back catalogue of Shed Seven in a way that no-one could even dream of (or fear) in 1996. Simon Reynolds (2010) famously analyzed this phenomena using the concept of retromania, and while his words addressed the subsequent revivals of diverse underground genres (from post-punk to shoegaze) in the noughties, they perfectly describe the general discourse in music forums around 2005. I registered for the first time on elotrolado.net in May 2005. I was 13 years old.

1.041 mensajes desde may 2005

After years of internet presence, I have been able to perceive changes in the ways of expression. These changes were not just due to the appearance of new platforms, the take up of social media or generational gaps. Between 2005 and now, the amount of internet users in Spain has tripled. In the mid noughties, users were still virtually internet illiterates, precisely because there were not any rules on how to express yourself. The grammar of internet discussion on music (or any other topic) was being written, while the discussions were happening. Users were identified with a nickname, an avatar (a small image appearing at the left of the screen) and a signature (which could be either an image, a short text or both). Holtz (2012) dismisses this visual information as irrelevant for the study of forums,

but in the context of the forum itself it was an essential signifier to introduce yourself. In similar ways to the ways youth subcultures used clothes as an essential signifier, forum users needed these to explain who they were and establish status within the online community.

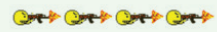


2004 had been the year of the release of "Gasolina", an extremely successful reggaeton single by Daddy Yankee. Gallucci (2008) defines the essence of the genre as highly sexual lyrics over repetitive, aggressive beats. Reggaeton has proved resistant to the constant backlash of specialized music media. The harsh media reception of the genre has even been analyzed as a racist expression by Lenore (2014).

I heard reggaeton for the first time, as did many people in my generation, from the giant speakers of the bumper cars in a small town fair: reggaeton has been, since its inception in Spain, a music for celebrations and festivals. Music forums emulated the canonical values of rock (Jones, 2008): complexity was celebrated over simplicity, technique was regarded as the objective measure of quality in music³. Metal and rock were celebrated, rap was judged as poetry, the "disco sucks" discourse of Steve Dahl was still alive. The arrival of reggaeton was consensually judged as a disaster, an evident proof of the terrible decadence of music since the golden age of rock music, the purest, the "most authentic" (using Frith's (1996) terms). "Reggaetonto" (reggaedumb) was coined as the term to define the new genre, and it was depicted with graphic emoticons that expressed the shared feelings for a phenomenon that did not fit the rockist canon. We learnt how to hate reggaeton without listening to it. It was not "real music". It had "no instruments".

"I heard reggaeton for the first time... from the giant speakers of the bumper cars in a small town fair"

Lo que yo no entiendo es porque este hilo esta en el foro de música.



"THIS IS NOT MUSIC"

"REGGAETON IS.... DEAD !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"FUCK REGGAETON !!!" 4

Lists are an obsession of rock culture. Anyone who has been a regular reader of any music zine has been exposed to a wide variety of lists. Von Appen and Doehring (2006), in their analysis of the “best albums ever” lists from major music magazines found out a huge amount of coincidences, regardless of the geographical or temporal origin of each list. In my forum we decided to create our own list. We fought, we insulted each other, some people were even banned. This was the result:

1.The Beatles

Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band

2.Pink Floyd

Wish You Were Here

3. Led Zeppelin

IV

4.Pink Floyd

Dark Side of the Moon

5.Queen

A Night at the Opera

6.Dire Straits

Brothers in Arms

7.The Beatles

Abbey Road

8.Nirvana

Nevermind

9.Guns N' Roses

Appetite For Destruction

10.Iron Maiden

The Number of the Beast

Democracy had fallen in a repetition of the most obvious stereotypes of rock lists. We mimicked the rock critics we used to criticize. The (poor) dialectic struggle in which we were immersed used to end up using critics as an authority argument. Music forums (which were overwhelmingly masculine) were a mixture of a community and a competition, of saccharine and testosterone. There was an element of competition in the discussions and critics were our guides in that macho world. We used critics as an objective proof of how our masculine tastes were superior to those genres that were dismissed as “for girls”. Eurodance, “flamenquito” or reggaeton were not part of the critic canon, so they were instantly regarded as second-tier styles of music.

By the year 2010 my forum had declined. On one hand social media had changed, and platforms such as Facebook or Twitter had become central to virtual interaction. On the other hand, discussions in forums had become boringly circular, and the majority of the users had sophisticated their taste in peculiar ways, by overcoming references that seemed too “basic” or, in internet slang, “normie”. Exclusivity and rarity of artists were being used as an argument of authority, as a way to climb in the forum hierarchy. The Beatles, Pink Floyd or Led Zeppelin had become too obvious.

We can say that Rolling Stones were just another British R&B band, you can say it if you are aware of the Birds, Downliner Sect, The Pretty Things, Remo Four, The Yardbirds, Small Faces, Chris Farlowe, Georgie Fame, etc.⁵

We needed to overcome the critics, we had to invent our own canon, express a perfect individuality which showed how far we were from our previous arguments of authority. We had to show that we had become diggers, unique individuals. Japanese psychedelia, harsh noise, tropicalia.

Obviously Phil Ochs is much better than Dylan⁶

We had become the online, and unpaid, parody of a rock critic.

Again.

And that is how we learnt to love music.

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[1] This is a reference to the VHS box set directed by Dave Markey, 1991: *The Year Punk Broke*.

[2] (online) https://www.elotrolado.net/hilo_canciones-de-reggaeton-favoritas_898356 [seen 5th May 2018] Creative Commons Licence.

[3] Examples of such artists are Joe Satriani or Steve Vai. These musicians, in addition to many others, were praised by musicians and fans alike because "objectively" they had a better technique than no-one else, as they could play more musical notes than other guitar players in the same amount of time.

[4] (online) https://www.elotrolado.net/hilo_a-nadie-le-gusta-el-reggaeton_554600 [seen 5th May 2018] Creative Commons Licence.

[5] (online) https://www.elotrolado.net/hilo_grupos-sobrevalorados_1228180_s150 [seen 5th May 2018]

[6] (online) https://www.elotrolado.net/hilo_vuestra-cancion-favorita-de-bob-dylan-de-los-60_1798732 [seen 5th May 2018]