

# SOUNDCLOUD: A CREATIVE MUSIC SPACE FOR EVERYONE?

Marina Arias and Pablo Espiga

In recent years there has been talk about “the SoundCloud kids” and the sonic and aesthetic innovation in their DIY work. In this article, we will discuss two main phenomena that we have observed through qualitative fieldwork on the platform: the nature of SoundCloud as a fruitful creative space for the development of more experimental forms and the advantages and disadvantages of the social dynamics it offers. Qualitative methods were applied through three different perspectives: as musicians, as listeners and as popular music researchers. We will discuss some points about the applications and the type of user SoundCloud has, and how it evolved in recent years. We will apply this to the Spanish independent music scene, exemplifying it in DJs, producers, podcasters. We will also observe how internet (micro)genres proliferate on the platform, like SoundCloud rap or wave. Indeed, these music categories co-exist with communities encouraged on SoundCloud social dimension via comments, like, reposts, follow, and other social dynamics. Nevertheless, this “culture of connectivity” (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2019) usually conceals problems that can put at risk the participatory understanding of the platform, as we will examine in this work.

## SoundCloud: Space for amateurs or experimental music?

SoundCloud’s social dimension and collaborative potential benefit the collective component, artist-audience interaction, and the bloom of virtual music scenes and new music genres. Several stages in the history of the platform can be distinguished. The one that mainly characterises the SoundCloud ethos is that of the pre-regulation context (2009-2014), marked by genres such as SoundCloud or mumble rap, as stated on multiple YouTube videos that idealize this period [1]. In contrast, since the mid 2010s, some changes have taken place in social media, especially the online media monetisation and new copyright policies, marking a period of change and the consequent decline and almost disappearance of SoundCloud. Nevertheless, this platform is still different from any other social network or music listening service due to how it is experienced by the communities that are generated around it. To demonstrate why SoundCloud offers a different landscape for musicians and musicologists, we have conducted this research through interviews with musicians who are users of the platform and virtual fieldwork. This qualitative study of SoundCloud has



been developed through three types of user roles: **musician**, **listener**, and **musicologist**.

As millennial/postmillennial **musicians**, we have developed the necessity of not only creating but also sharing our work. We both have used SoundCloud to broadcast our personal music projects. We agree with other users that we can upload content immediately and for free without worrying so much about the control over the content and its quality. You do not have to feel completely sure that you have a finished project; publishing in this context represents more of a snapshot of what you are creating. Indeed, as with YouTube, SoundCloud is commonly used in music schools as a pedagogical tool for students to delimit a project, as we explored when we uploaded our tracks and DJ sessions for class assignments in our user roles as music production students.

As **listeners**, we noted that SoundCloud still has some particularities that make discovering music different from other platforms: bidirectionality between artist and user and platform functions such as reposting or the now extinct user groups. For example, we consume DJ sessions and podcasts through SoundCloud that cannot be found elsewhere due to copyright issues. However, the sheer amount of content and lack of clear hierarchies makes it difficult for the listener to access what really interests them. Therefore, we usually access the SoundCloud profile of artists we have previously discovered on social networks or even in person, like wave producer Hermei or lo-fi artist Defrvtos, who we both met in Madrid.

As **musicologists** interested in popular music, apart from offering access to many underground artists, SoundCloud provides us with a large amount of extra-musical material, from library samples to podcasts. SoundCloud fieldwork has helped us to observe how music-related activities occur on the Internet. We have tracked hashtag, repost, comment, like and (more broadly) post dynamics that led us to analyse how virtual (and physic) relations are built, how users interact with other agents – audiences, curators, other artists, or labels – and which kind of strategies they employ in their music scene participation.

SoundCloud is a platform oriented to any kind of sound material with a social media component that differentiates it from other streaming services such as Spotify or Apple Music. From its inception, it achieved success among amateur musicians due to the absence of aggregators, offering users almost total control over their work. Moreover, it started as a free service that interested some major artists, so users began to upload content of a more spontaneous nature, without economic expectations and with the sole intention of disseminating it. The platform was particularly relevant in a context prior to the regularisation of copyright on the internet [2], so it was common for a musician to use it to disseminate versions of other artists' songs without paying royalties. As with YouTube, SoundCloud collaborated with the music software industry to encourage amateur musicians to share their work, including direct export functions to the platform. This fits perfectly in a context characterised by the rise of prosumers in the millennial and Z generations. Arguably, SoundCloud, like MySpace in its day, has functioned as a portfolio for amateur musicians or for experimental works that musicians choose not to include in their streaming catalogue, not to mention other content such as live performances, remixes, rehearsal recordings, etc.

Regarding professional musician usage of SoundCloud, the Spanish example is characterised by independent artists who participated in a very weakened peripheral industry after the 2000s music industry crisis and the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. SoundCloud was particularly relevant in Spain in the independent rock and urban music scenes as many recording studios and labels disappeared (see Novoa 2013). Thus, self-production and the use of this platform became almost necessary for musicians in the sharing of their work. At the same time, there was a confrontation between musicians and the SGAE (Sociedad General de Autores y Editores, the Spanish music copyright organisation), which made the use of these platforms into a

kind of vindication act [3]. For example, the band Los Punsetes published some of their first albums under Creative Commons licenses claiming their support of open access cultural movements. There are multiple testimonies of Spanish musicians at that time who offered free access to their work through platforms or their own websites, protesting against the abuses of record labels or the SGAE. Therefore, live performances were still their income stream.

SoundCloud also offered DJs several alternatives to present their work through playlists and mixes, becoming the main DJ platform in Spain. DJ César Muela commented that, although there are other alternatives, SoundCloud is still essential in our country to show his work:

“What makes the difference in favour is visibility. And also, validity. I don't sell my music, but it allows me to have visibility and to be hired to perform as a DJ in clubs.” (...) In his opinion, it is very noticeable in the North American market because there they use Mixcloud “but many switched to SoundCloud,” he says. “Another advantage is the navigability, and it is very fast and instantaneous” (Muela in Herranz, 2020).

SoundCloud is also a platform to get original sound material for DJ mixes, since more “experimental” forms can be found, which resonates with the ideas of “alien creativity” exposed by Phillips (2021) on SoundCloud rap. Similarly, Hermei, from The Withered, explained his sonic conception of SoundCloud:

If you tell me “SoundCloud sound”, for me it's crappy sound, homemade, not professional. It's also a more experimental sound, people who play with distortions and moves that you don't find elsewhere. (Hermei, interview with authors in 2021)

SoundCloud is also a space where new internet microgenres are born. With a very limited life hope, they comprise a wide variety of styles, with highly vague borders and an endless restructuring in new tags. From lo-fi hip hop to vaporwave to witch house, there are many internet microgenres that can be found on the platform, but also on YouTube or even Spotify. What makes SoundCloud different is the hashtag. The platform contributes to the creation of new tags because users can upload their music with whatever hashtag they choose or create from scratch. Users upload their material either with well-known music genres or styles, such as “EDM” or “techno” or with more evocative tags like “anime”, “rompecadera” (hipbreaker) or their own username. However, nowadays the hashtag search does not work well enough on the search option, so it is not a reliable tool for research, mainly because it does not redirect to the tag you are looking for. Instead, the results are a blurry mess of songs that can be tagged with another hashtag or with none. Therefore, while this tool is useful to identify genres, styles or aesthetics, it is not effective when looking for similar content on the platform.

Another SoundCloud functionality is its social dimension. As stated earlier, SoundCloud combines the options of a music streaming service and a social media platform, allowing users to connect with other creators or with their audience. This feature has helped to create communities around microgenres, which are fuelled through following, like, repost, comments and other dynamics. Users can support each other by reposting material they like and can comment on the waveform of the track to share opinions or feelings that emerge from their listening. However, these social dynamics hide a negative impact: spam and bots spread through the platform, generating a feeling of disenchantment among the users. These “culture of connectivity” problematics were addressed by Hesmondhalgh et al. (2019), who consider the development of hierarchies and competitiveness inextricably linked to the platform. Nevertheless, we can observe some community dynamics underpinning the jungle of content and users entangled on the

platform. This is the case for DJ Club, a Madrid DJ collective whose objective is to spread mixes from women and LGBTQ+ DJs, uploading a new guest mix each Tuesday on their SoundCloud profile. Thus, DJ Club activities exemplify how social dynamics help to fuel marginalised communities' creativity by creating safe spaces.

Beyond practices such as DJing, SoundCloud communities can also emerge simultaneously with new music genres. Wave music, an internet microgenre, has been characterized as a collective movement where artists seem to have an "egoless attitude" (see Jenkins 2017). SoundCloud has been claimed by wave scene as the starting point of this sound, being "solidified" as a new tag by Wavemob collective and DJ Plastician [4]. In Spain, wave music has been produced by The Withered collective which, as Hermei explains, was created as a result of a personal and creative nexus:

We met through the internet, through social media, I only met one of them in person (...) We chose SoundCloud because it had the perfect balance between the musician's community, discovering new music and social media. You could make yourself known, it allowed you to download and to put links to other sites. (Hermei, interview with authors in 2021)

However, around 2017 SoundCloud entered a phase of decline due to the departure of users, abusive copyright control, errors in company policy, and the consolidation of Spotify as the main streaming service. In this new context, free platforms such as SoundCloud are now mainly used to distribute secondary works and remixes or are used by amateur rather than professional musicians. However, SoundCloud is still alive, with a large number of users claiming its benefits. Hermei refers to these tensions between advantages and disadvantages:

Nowadays, SoundCloud is half dead; the people who use it now are because they've been using it all their lives. Now they use Spotify, Bandcamp even. YouTube is not for discovering small artists; that's what SoundCloud is for. On YouTube, you have to make a really good video with the quality, the microphone, etc. On SoundCloud you can upload something of lesser quality. On Spotify I upload more finished stuff, SoundCloud is more experimental. Anyways, I don't upload just any shit – Soundcloud is for more or less listenable stuff and Spotify for what is finished. (Hermei, interview with authors in 2021)

Indeed, faith in the platform's resurgence is shared by many musicians, such as DJ Bruno Garcia, who acknowledges that, although "green is the new orange" – in reference to Spotify's reign – he still uses the platform through a nostalgic mood (Garcia in Herranz, 2020). Similar nostalgic attitudes are also perceived in many YouTube videos where users stand up for SoundCloud in an increasingly restricted internet paradigm. The resilience of SoundCloud users demonstrates that, despite the dynamics of big industry control, the internet still offers space for a limited exploration of the utopian idea of collectivity, plurality, and open culture.

## Conclusion

In this work we have highlighted that qualitative research methods can be efficient to explore our contemporary cultural contexts. Thus, when studying SoundCloud, two perspectives have been set against each other. At first, we started from pessimistic visions present in the media, which predicted its disappearance, and our own nostalgic perception of the platform. On the other hand, by applying qualitative research methods we became aware of a more complex reality where the platform is built through the specific and constantly changing practices of the users. In fact, in a context where algorithms have been imposed, personal visions about the use we give to this

platform and, more broadly, the way in which we consume and distribute music become increasingly necessary. This becomes even more compelling when dealing with underground and peripheral music scenes that depend on their tight relationship with the internet, a medium that facilitated the free distribution of music, but also generated filters that distort its reception.

**Marina Arias** is a PhD student and a Musicology Department member with a predoctoral contract financed by the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. In her dissertation thesis, she explores the history of reggaeton in Spain.

**Pablo Espiga** is a PhD student at Universidad Complutense of Madrid and a research assistant at the Sound Laboratory of the Musicology Department - Sonolab UCM, where he works on music production and digitalisation of media files.

## Endnotes

1. Soundcloud Era - The Era that changed music forever...  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCfUy4GjXB0&ab\\_channel=TriggerMusic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCfUy4GjXB0&ab_channel=TriggerMusic) [accessed November 2021].
2. Soundcloud was sued for copyright infringement by the three major music companies. Universal unilaterally took control to reclaim and remove user contents.
3. ¡Copiad malditos! <https://www.rtve.es/play/videos/el-documental/copiad-copiad-malditos-codecmaster-web-169/1075737/> [accessed November 2021].
4. DJ Plastician states that “in 2015 a style of music [wave] came to light that was seemingly spawned out of Soundcloud” <https://soundcloud.com/plastician/plastician-wave-pool-mmxv> [accessed November 2021].

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