# RIFFS ft. OIASPM



Riffs is a peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal which provides a space for experimental ways of thinking and writing about popular music research. It is a space for creatives of all backgrounds, experiences and interests. Riffs has a strong DIY and experimental ethos. We aim to push the boundaries of academic research, communication, and publishing in the area of popular music writing.

The journal is run by an international editorial board of researchers and practitioners and supported by the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research. Contributions are made available through the Open Access journal website (www.riffsjournal.org) and a limited edition printed run.

In addition to publishing high calibre, critical and experimental engagements with popular music, *Riffs* runs writing and research events that consider, explore, and create experimental writing, primarily (but not exclusively) on the topic of music.

Riffs aims to work in partnership with music-focused initiatives and organisations. Our UK partners have included Ideas of Noise festival, Surge in Spring, Brum Radio, Home of Metal, IASPM UK/EIRE, and Soundsystem Outernational.

We now present our first international partnership and zine special issue with IASPM-Canada.





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## 'ALRIGHT BAB?': AN EDITORIAL

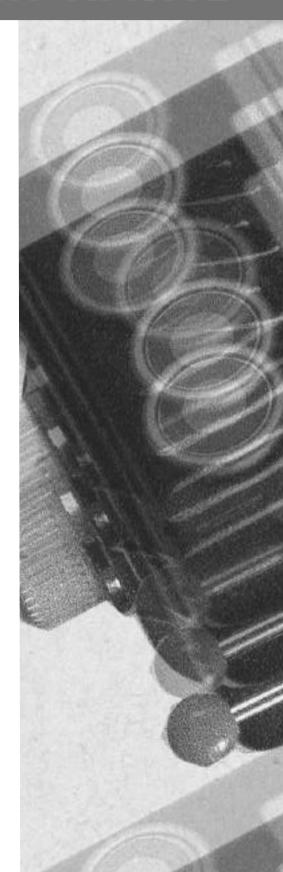
## SARAH RAINE

Urban sprawl,

From the Bullring to the ring-roads,
A confusion of architectural styles.
Georgian glamour next to sixties regrets,
Empty industrial buildings newly inhabited,
Reimagined as bars and apartments,
As live music venues and recording studios.
A city convinced of its own identity:
Of canals ("more than Venice");
Of parks ("greenest city in Europe");
Of Tolkien fame;
Of celebrated diversity;
Of music.

A city full of music.

From the hidden to the legendary, From Symphony Hall to Dancehall, Jazz to Grime. Musical revelations separated by a few streets, A few years, A mere generation or two, Or still going. Celebrated by the council as key To Brummie identity, Or clinging on, Through petitions and court dates, Battening down the hatches Against the storm of change, In defiance of noise complaints, Of outsider developers And their plans.





"I remember..."

"Back in the day..."

"On this spot..."

"I still have the flyer..."

On one night in one street
A soundsystem vibrated the pavement with Dub Reggae;
A jam session crept out of a curtained lock-in;
A queue snaked into a night of Trance;
And Northern Soul dancers took over a wooden dance floor.

All the ingredients for innovation,
For cross-genre experimentation,
For a unique city sound,
To be envied
And travelled for,
Part of band tours and nights out:
Pubs clubs warehouses halls yards cellars bars.

The music *now* is engraved upon the history of music then.

From the legacy of Dancehall in a Hip-hop track
To the continued influence of a legendary teacher,
The influences of people and sounds and places live on.
A history emblazoned in the streets

Through graffiti talents
And bright memories,
But rarely blue plaques
Or museum displays.

Tales of popular music heritage Told on dance floors and social media Evidenced through photographs And battered flyers.

Ephemeral souvenirs found and reclaimed,
Sole survivors of venues and nights
Now buried under carparks,
Changed but not forgotten.

"I remember..."

"Back in the day..."

"On this spot..."

"I still have the flyer..."

And now.

Streets temporarily silenced.

Shutters down and music off.

The heat of the summer

Thwarted by a new threat.

And whispers of a return don't silence the worries,

An absence of guidance

For the reappearance of music on these streets.

A crisis of space mourning

The loss of blaring horns

And speakers rumbling bass,

A voice piercing anticipatory silence

Of applause and excited chattering.

Not now, not yet.

How will this time of silence
(In a music city)
Be remembered?
Another nail in the coffin?
The beginning of something fresh and new?
A temporary pause in the music of the city?
The impetus for support (better late than never)?
A kick up the arse we all needed?
A devastating blow to live music?
The challenge of a lifetime?

"I remember..."

"Back in the day..."

"On this spot..."

"I still have the flyer..."

Sarah Raine (2020)





The last two years have been a strange time to study popular music, particularly for those of us who focus on live music performance and festivals. Walking around the familiar streets of our respective cities, it has been for us all a period of disconcerting silence: our sonic worlds have been utterly disturbed. Popular music scholars have had to rely on increasingly distant memories of walking into a humid venue, of feeling the bass pulse in our throats, the almost hypnotic experience of losing oneself completely in a live music performance (as audience or performer), and the press of people who are in some way sharing in these moments and in the creation of meaningful memories. Over the past two years, we have attempted to write existence a multi-sensory and meaningful experience which has been temporarily removed from our lives. Of course, ethnographic research and writing naturally draws upon memories: that of the researcher and of the researched. Yet these memories have felt increasingly frayed and fragile, and at times imbued with melancholy, nostalgia, and a sense of loss not quite quenched by our pivot to predominantly digital spaces of live music and festivals. These strange times, however, have afforded us all an opportunity within which to reflect and reassess. And these reflections may hold within them the kernels of new ways forward for researchers and music industry professionals as we face a post-pandemic world.

In this special zine issue of *Riffs* ft. IASPM Canada, we explore some possible imagined popular music futures, bringing together, amplifying and distorting extant and (so-far) fantastical utopian and dystopian aspects of industry and scene. We offer playful, provocative, and experimental pieces inspired by our research and creative practices, written in forty-eight hours by contributors in several time zones, brought together to consider "what next?".

As an emerging mode of disseminating research, zines offer a way "to usefully deconstruct and question dominant forms of knowledge construction and dissemination...to speak to a varied audience, to offer a space for alternative or hidden voices, and to critique dominant ways of doing communicating research" (Draganova et al forthcoming, see also see Licona 2005). Equally, more intimate or informal forms of writing offer the writer a means to think through experience and research-informed insights, to speak in a more intimate way to the reader, to find a more appropriate form (Stewart 2007) for a shared feeling of loss, and to "reinforce the human nature of scholarly work" (Pernecky 664). Perhaps through different forms (2020: communicating research we express our desire to critically and reflexively consider the practices, processes and politics of scholarship, ethnographic research. and emotional entanglements with our objects of study. particularly during periods of shared crisis, instability, and uncertainty.

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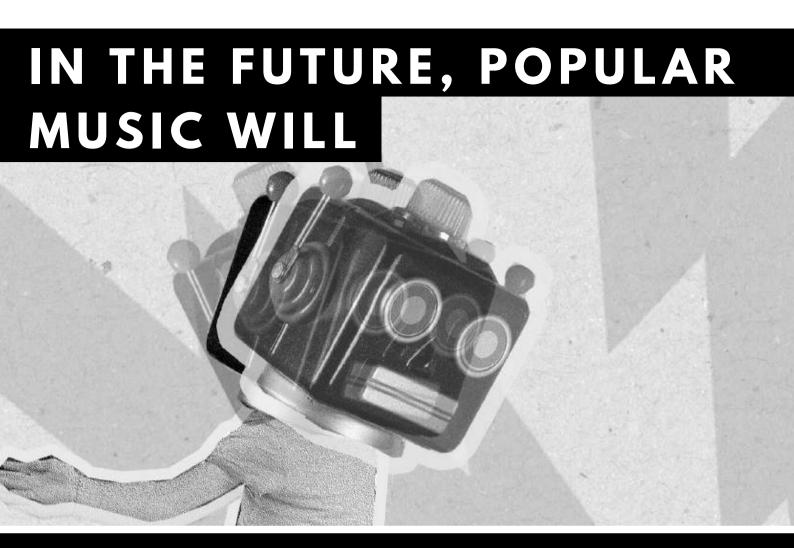
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## ROBERT DAHLBERG-SEARS

...be radical again. It will be something that represents the truly "popular" spirit, as in mass appealing, all encompassing. The "popular" has long ago lost itself amidst the "pop"-ular, and perhaps this has led to some formative energies or synchronicities. The routes/roots of capital P Pop have long held some solid ground together, but that solid ground is gently eroding now.

... encompass all that it can possibly hold. I'm talking the popular, the unpopular, the weird-popular, the subcultural (whatever that is) – all of it encased in the popular idioms of a thousand and more minds. There are forests with fewer trees than the number of ways to define popular. How does it all start out then? Where does popular go?

...be meaningful or meaningless or perhaps just mean less. In terms of meaning, the Pop idiom has always found itself wanting. The rock pop stars of the 80s giving way easily to the slippery smooth hyper polished pop of the 90s to the synth driven EDM of the 00s and into the now where pop seems to have imploded on itself, seeking a kind of "Gen Z TikTok weird" moment? But does this actually have anything to do with Pop? Does it have to do more with Popular?

...be more punk. It will be more locally produced inside particular locales, perhaps with the very idea of "local pop performers." In a way the J/K Pop booms have this weird linkage to locality, albeit a fake one, but maybe this is a future worth striving for? Maybe the bedroom is the big stage again? Is this punk? Or is it Pop?

...bend itself to the will of its producers and be fastened less to the interests of listeners. Maybe "weird sounds" are a thing after all. Maybe weird music can be a future - weird as in different from what we've got now, weird as in wired or wyrd. Maybe this new weird is just a future normal, or maybe it's an imagination of the possibilities of production.

...drive itself forward. The whims of boardrooms might mean less, or might hold less sway. This isn't to say that the radically democratic (or even anarchic) is going to suddenly replace boardrooms, but that boardrooms themselves are going to be split upon how to go forward. The reputed "death of genre" of recent times maybe is lending itself its own power, a kind of recursive building upon the popular press' movement toward itself?

...produce itself in greater and greater frequencies. This isn't to say that it isn't already a mass movement, but simply that the tools to create music even in general are going to become easier to create-share or maybe share-create. We can take something from the DIY community here, in that the reasons for creating something don't need to matter as much as the act of making it itself. Leave a record of a song, an imprint. Maybe it will be heard.

...find itself broader but shallower. The over-saturation of a listenership perhaps driven by an overconsumptive reflex. The algorithmically generated "next" will hit upon links that we mere people don't hear, but which is also driven by capital flows. These flows derive from power and power is always going to create what it wants to create next. So how do we undermine it? How do performers and listeners find themselves in this milieu?

...be unpopular again in a way not ever seen since the rise of the modern definition of popular music. This is a means to an end, a way of capturing the great long thin tail end of music markets that for so long was seen as the missing link between major companies and their greatest profit margins yet. This kind of unpopularity will bring a new modulated singer/songwriter performer to your ears everyday, but you'll never know their name or their songs. Liminality by design.

...be experiential if not progressively more of a thing "done" and experienced rather than "heard" and listened to as an experience. The idea of experiencing a live music show may well be replaced or undermined by the idea of experiencing a given moment – a youtube clip of a girl writing at her desk as hip-hop beats play out, only possible in that second never to be heard again.

...be a dreamscape kaleidoscope of sound. Algorithmically generated beats will be overlaid by tempting new sounds, drawing listeners ever deeper into a complex web of linkages designed by their preferences and listening habits. Or maybe it won't. This idea is far too complex and requires far too much of the listener. It asks too much of people's time and energy when what many folks seem to want instead is a way to just soundtrack their life – but meaningfully! Where is the meaning in a random piece of sound?

...be hyper targeted, a kind of Spotify generic pastiche where individuals can find their sound profiles only to realize they disagree. Why would they be recommended a sad song; they aren't sad? The reasoning behind a choice of music may find itself beholden instead to the emotional rationalities of the listeners, rather than to the whims of Al. Or it won't and this won't/ will be a saving grace, helping to guide memory's hand as choices are made.

...be made important by the people again, instead of algorithms or vibes or commercial interests. This is the only future I want to see. One where the individual choices are able to access the bounty and beauty and vociferous voices of the thousand news songs being crafted every minute. Who is to say that the next punk in a band in a garage might not light the fuse? Who is to say a 9th grader spitting beats into a mic won't drop something so hot it melts the earth's core?

...be. Just be. Only good vibes, no bad vibes. Popular music will exist as a series of songs collated so perfectly together that the end is the middle is the beginning again until we've wrapped ourselves back into the past of the earliest blues singers humming on a porch for their friends. Maybe our obsession with the fit of a song to a time or place will bring effervescence. Maybe it will damn us instead.

...be popular again. This isn't to say that popular music isn't popular as it currently is, merely that the idea of popularity has shrunk into itself. I listen to a type of music I would call popular in that it is widespread, but it certainly isn't well liked by a broad swath of the listening public. My mother's wrath at my loud music can attest to this for sure! But what is a punk song if not popular?

...be more popular than ever, more democratic than ever, and more unknown than ever. There will be a sense of popular, a smell to it, something which defines it for certain, but how to inscribe that thing, that box, will be an ever more daunting task for future music writers/performers/thinkers. Because writing the popular will be simply impossible to establish.

...find itself. Maybe it will find itself something new, or maybe it will lend itself a sheen of definition by weeding out subgenre and style – a true, final delineation between the mass music appeal and the niche local/subcultural/un-popular. Perhaps there can be time to fix the popular in certain points, but maybe for not great periods.

...defy all attempts to retain the meanings that previous time period's popularity has developed. As evidenced enough by the quickening forward roll of technology, so too will popularity become defined by its ability to access capital while also garnering a fan base large enough for recognition. This is meaningful action at play, significant in that it can be defined, but insignificant in that the meaning is less able.

...belong to everyone. Finally. And with finality. The idea of ownership of a hearing experience will no longer be defined by an individual instance of a song's occurrence repeated ad nauseam, but by the actuality of the effect of hearing a song in a given place or environment. Maybe this is a bad thing though? Will Starbucks now trademark their sound environment, replete with star artists to draw in listeners?

...be defined by who is able to dictate the terms of engagement with it. The punks, the DIYers, will claim that the experience of making and listening is the true site of interaction. The corporations which generate massive funny money amounts will design hyperfields of listening availability honed to individual tables or rooms or shops with accuracy. Where will these publics compete? Where will they overlap?



# SOUNDS OF TOMORROW: YOU DESIGN THE FUTURE: WE DO THE WORK





## REGAN BOWERING

## THE MUSIC OF THE FUTURE SOUNDS LIKE...



## YOU

It's much closer than you think!

You design the future.

### With Sounds of Tomorrow, your music technologies serve you.

Did you wake you wake up on the wrong side of bed this morning? The Sounds of Tomorrow's state of the art emotional regulatory system analyser sensed the slight incline of your heartbeat between 0400 and 0600am and generated curated a personalised soundtrack with BPMs that match, and predict, the rhythms of your breath as you begin to emerge from deep sleep. If that wasn't already enough, each piece of music adapts to your ideal music-body tempo at each moment, and the audio/immersive visual pleasure settings on your implanted device, chosen by you.

Not compatible with the eyePhon series. Compatible with the earPhon 11 and above.

## Sounds of Tomorrow has your back.

Our revolutionary, microscopic sensors monitor and balance your mood and energy levels and steady your bodily rhythms and guide them back to the recommended daily level of anxiety required to surpass all expectations in every area of your work=life at every single moment of your schedule. Which reminds me, today (Sunday 1st April 2035) you're performing virtually in Paris, Melbourne, New York, Tokyo, Kingston, Berlin and Istanbul, teaching three 20 min lectures on the history of post-laptop aesthetics, and your parents are zooming in for lunch and dinner as I noticed that your internal social regulatory system has been wiping their eyeMails for weeks.

#### Sounds of Tomorrow understands you.

We know exactly what you want, and need, to hear. You've been spending too much time alone lately.

Our floor sensors recorded the dip in your mood through your slight weight gain and the way you've been dragging your feet. The music you made in the shower last week with the all-in-one water studio really took a deep dive to the murky depths of your broken heart. That's why you've been hearing more of them on your pre-wake-up soundtrack. We thought that you might like to be reminded of the time you played with them at VR-SXSW-2032 and you were so in-sync despite the time difference between you. Don't worry, there's no need to wait for them any longer, Sounds of Tomorrow captured and stored the data from their internal sensors and implanted listening devices, replicated their bodily movements and the rhythm of their breath. We promise you that people, music and the world may change, but for you, they don't have to.

This article is not interchangeable with other personalised versions of this content.

Sounds of Tomorrow
You design the future: we do the work

## IN THE FUTURE...

## HUSSEIN BOON

#### **Public Access - File Trading**

The banner flashed across his screen. Get 20% off the pro version! He was interested but still on the fence. He'd been playing with the trial version and the results were pretty staggering. Five new songs already completed in the last hour. Though most of the hour was spent typing in parameters, and rearranging lyrics, the software only took seconds to come up with a song. He was about to start his second hour and was busy trying to identify the right parameters for his Nicki Minaj x Jacques Brel song, when the banner interrupted his flow. If he didn't know better he thought they knew he was ready to commit, at least almost. He could upgrade to the pro version and this would allow him to accomplish the task he was currently interested in but was it worth paying that much money? He'd already looked online for a cracked version of the software but reports suggested that the AI engine's datasets were distributed across a number of crypto sites making it difficult to hack. Knowing he was probably going to buy it, he had secured a loan in advance against his DNA sequence and tissue samples for the next five years. He'd be giving up some freedom in return for access to the data sets to realise his musical dreams. But at least he'd still have his organs and limbs. The last thing that held him back was that the early adopters had started to flood the market in their rush to be influencers and get in front of the next wave of creators. And whilst he was interested in the 'what ifs', he also felt sorry for most of the artists. For the ones who were really popular, the net was saturated with songs either in imitation or in the style of. The bottom soon fell out of the streaming market. There were so many songs that no one really had the time to listen to them. Many artists no longer needed to go to the studio, preferring to use the software instead.

#### Better Than Minimum Wage - Working for the Man

Each year, on the First Friday in February (FFF), the music the whole world will be listening to for the rest of the year is released. It's televised in a global extravaganza. There's a competition to see who gets to 'push' the button that starts the task. Once the button is pressed, the AI churns out nearly twenty two million songs in a matter of seconds. These songs will form the sole available listening experience for everything. Adverts, films, spin cycle classes, dog and cat videos. First in the queue are TV, Film and production companies. Following this a number of cultural commentators listen to a random selection of what's available. Usually they moan that there's nothing exciting. One year they noted that the only radical piece was a remix of John Cage's 4'33" married to Terry Riley's In C for eight hundred musicians. The piece was a little over seventeen hours of silence and spectacle, hailed as a master work. Once the critics were out of the way, the song competition would follow aiming to find the best song of the year. Each country nominated its own attributes and keywords submitted to the Al listening panel which managed to analyse the complete dataset in a matter of minutes. The results were tallied and the winning song revealed to an eager world and made available for free on all streaming platforms.

Of course, what lay behind this venture was the human workforce required to make the machine work. You see, so much money had been invested in AI that it was now too big to fail. Yet its results were far from stellar. The labs soon realised that the flaw in their plan was copying what already existed which did not guarantee that the musical outputs would be exciting enough for audiences. To get around this the leading Al labs signed new, undiscovered human artists. They promised them a better deal than record labels ever would. The artists would have stable and secure jobs, a regular income commensurate with corporate working, plus benefits, and all they needed to do was to turn up every day and 'feed' the machine. They wrote and recorded new songs either on their own or in collaborative teams and presented the fruits of their labour to the machine. The problem for the songwriters was that they could never tell anyone what they did for a job. They would never be nominated for song of the year, best new artist or best producer. Some still played gigs and, occasionally, they'd play a song they'd written, ingested by the machine. After their shows they would be told that it was a great cover but not as good as the machine. But the money was great and was better than the old Spotify remuneration rate. For many of them it was the most stable their lives had been, though anonymity was not what they bargained for.

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#### We On The Outside

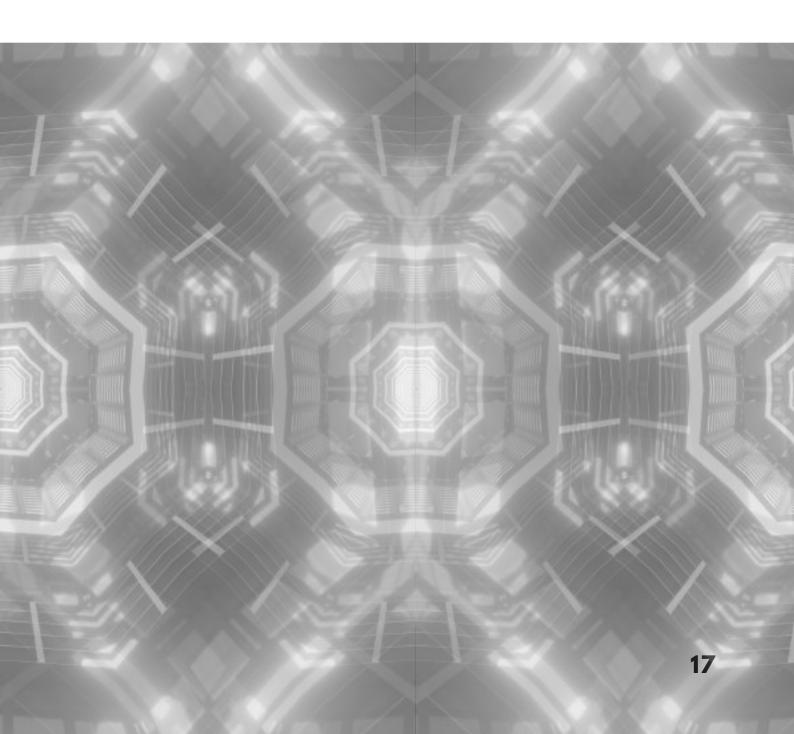
I look after the machine. Every year the machine selects three music pieces for special auction. To do this the machine creates an XR/AR/SAI immersive interface for the winning bidder. Once experienced the piece is destroyed, never to be heard again. Over the years of my service I had the privilege to witness a number of moving experiences. All of us on the outside, could only marvel at the experience once the listener was embedded in the machine, the ultimate in super rich spectaculars.

Gradually, winning bidders started a new trend which was selling broad rights and tickets to their experience. Whilst the amount of money they charged did not recoup the winning bid amount, the revenue did offset it somewhat. There were souvenirs and support acts; light shows and sponsors. Imitation machine experiences and side betting predictors. All to watch someone become immersed in an AI musical experience that, apparently, transcended everything we knew about listening. Or at least this is what we were told. None of us, other than the winning bidder, had experience of what the music was like. It sat tantalisingly on the 'other side', out of reach. Some commentators said there was nothing in the experience and that it was ordinary music, amplified to an extraordinary level. I was not so sure of this. There were some years where the listener sat crying, collapsed in a heap on the floor, attended to by onsite medical staff. We on the outside could only marvel at the experience. Even when they had recovered sufficiently to be interviewed, they couldn't find words to describe it. Many suspected that the device built by the machine also contained psychotropics, micro-dosing listeners. I noticed that, gradually, the machine had become more perverse in its music experience making capacities. The musical experiences became shorter, at least to us on the outside. The listeners all reported a loss of time, convinced that their experience lasted for hours.

#### **Tinkering At The Edges**

The machine was the perfect, capitalist venture, servicing all segments of the market. All genres, all tastes. The bottom had fallen out of the market for musicians except for those styles where the machine had difficulties. The machine lacked sufficient authenticity and capability, some described it as belief, to make music for religious purposes. It couldn't make Christian music but it also couldn't make music that worshipped

the devil. It seemed that not enough datasets were available to construct a proper model based either on faith or the negation of it. They tried one particular dataset which infected all aspects of production. Children's music took a nasty turn when exposed to negative faith datasets. When they mixed this dataset with a faith based dataset, the machine stopped producing music. Analysts suggested that the machine was conducting an internal battle between good and evil. They could see from the various activity monitors that something was happening but no sound would emerge. They almost lost the whole venture. From this point onwards it became company policy to run these sorts of experiments in an isolated, off-site facility to limit potential contamination to the wider system. The machine was too important to allow it to be compromised and destabilised by existential crises.



## PARTY TAPES



## MORGAN BIMM

[You are at a party and you are struggling against the urge to go on a weird tangent about Spotify and the melancholy you feel every time you stop to think about paying ten dollars a month to rent music.]

It makes finding new bands so much easier!

For sure.

And Wrapped is so fun! I look forward every year to finding out who my top artists were.

Me too.

The best part is the playlists though. Who has time to make their own any more?

It never bothers you that streaming services have cannibalized the implicitly personal act of making playlists and knowing someone and reduced it to something controlled by algorithms and total strangers?

What?!

The streaming service interpellates us as ourselves and nothing else.

Uh... huh.

Drott, Eric. 2018. "Why the Next Song Matters: Streaming, Recommendation, Scarcity." *Twentieth-Century Music* 15(3): 336.

[You are at a party and someone has just put on a playlist of Top 40 songs you recognize from the long drives back and forth to university, on those weird backroads where the radio only worked sometimes and you were too grateful to have a soundtrack to question much else.]

This is a good one.

Everyone kind of hated her for it, though.

Why?

They thought it was shallow and vapid. But it did allow her to make a really great follow-up album.

And that did well, too?

Sort of. People got really pretentious about preferring it to her Top 40 hits, and this early stuff basically became a meme.

Harsh.

Totally. A lot of really great dance parties though.

[You are at a party and you are making the conscious decision not to mention the hours you lost struggling with a too-slow desktop just to load ten new songs onto your first generation iPod shuffle circa 2005.]

There was no cord?

No cord.

Just a USB?

Just a USB.

And how many songs did you say it could hold?

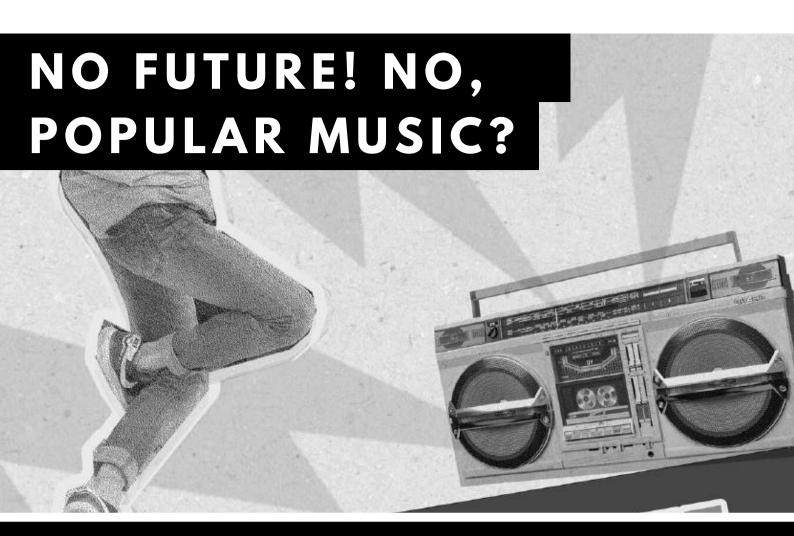
240. But sometimes file size was weird because of Limewire.

What's that?

We don't have time.

How did you know what song was playing with no screen?

You cultivated a rabid, encyclopedic knowledge of its ever-shifting contents because you were obsessed with being cool enough and worthy enough and knowledgeable enough about this thing called music to matter.



## ROBERT DAHLBERG-SEARS

In considering a future for and with capital P/M Popular Music I was originally narrowly drawn to a more negative reflection. The phrase popular music is often linked in my mind with just "Pop" music and its various connections to an explicitly extractive relationship with listeners (not that that is only confined to the "pop" sphere). The sort of rabid consumption for the sake of growth, and growth for the sake of growth, that simply has, to call up the old punk slogan, "no future" – this time said without a rotten smile or sneer. Perhaps under the influence of the past two years, or due to the recent news of bandcamp's (undisclosed sum) multi-million-dollar acquisition, it took a few moment's reflection to remember that popular music encompasses these consumptive behaviors but can also be outside of them if given the chance. So long as there are people, there is no future without popular music, right? So let's prognosticate some broad terms.

#### Popular Music Will Go On (And On [And On])

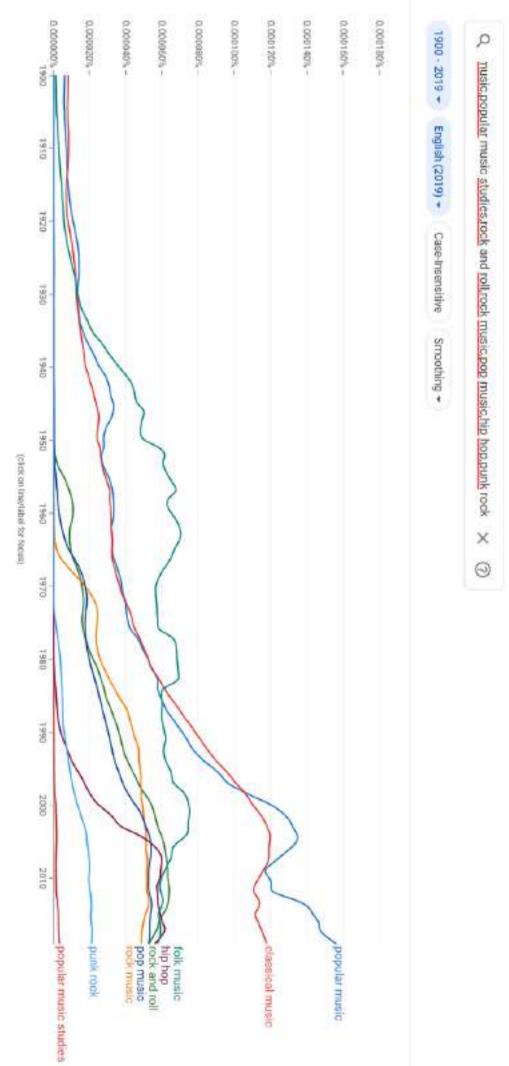
Despite the ubiquity of the term, popular music rarely seems to imply a given thing. As an effective descriptor of content, the phrase certainly leaves one wanting; when did you last hear someone exclaim at a gettogether, "ah yes, I like popular music!" Unless you party with beings from out of this world, chances are this isn't common. It's usually more specific, a performer, a style, a recent release. Popular music is a conglomeration of specifics under a big umbrella, a Levi-Straussian floating signifier if there ever was one. As it is, all that is new under the sun becomes popular in our current interconnected world – who needs an umbrella for that? This raises the concern though: if we don't need the umbrella, then...

#### Popular Music Won't Go On

Over the last few years there has been a fair amount of hand-wringing over new music that seems "beyond genre" (and thus a little bit harder for capitalist extraction to put into a nice box and sell). While this points to growth and continuity on the one hand, it also brings up a point of trouble. If popular music grows so much that it begins to leave the bounds of the identifiable, is popular music actually continuing? Where is the divergence between progress and a possible "un-popular" music?

#### No Future! (We're All Dreaming)

A quick Google Ngram search reveals a startling truth - popular music is very popular to write about! Or at least, the trend demonstrates growing popularity as a topic over the past 100 years compared to other trends within popular music. Rock and roll, pop music, even hip-hop(!) seem to have turned downward in the last few years. Maybe different concerns of a genre-less future in commercial music outlets are actually pointing toward a growing interest in developing the idiom of the popular further. We're all actively engaged in producing/reifying popular music in some way, so perhaps attempts at predicting what is to come are flights of fancy. I think There is no one future because we're all dreaming



## THE JOB BOARD



## **DEANNE KEARNEY**

FUTURE FANDOMS ft. The New Labour of Digital Platforms on Superfans

THE JOB BOARD

HIRING: SUPERFANS of musicians, artists or bands

Date Posted: Mar 21, 2022

Application Deadline: Ongoing

Start Date: Immediately

Salary: \$-550,000.00 to start

Location: Online Job Type: Part-time Career Level: Any

#### **JOB DESCRIPTION:**

These are no longer the days when a superfan can get by in the physical world. Now, superfans buy NFTs of their favourite musician's merchandise or songs, buy virtual land next to their favourite artists in the metaverse, or even get plastic surgery to look more like their idols. Now you can buy donuts, wings, hamburgers, or chicken nuggets, all based on your favourite artists' preference. Is it not available in your region? Then you can purchase the used packaging from others online for a hefty fee.

The future of popular music fandom is a capitalist's utopia. Much has been written on microcelebrity cultures and the extra labour that digital platforms are creating for artists. Artists must consistently produce content for multiple online platforms to remain favourable to the algorithms and to stay relevant to their fan base. Yet, this constant flow of content creates even more labour on the superfans of these artists. More and more spaces are created for fans to one-up each other, showcasing their love and dedication to their favourite musicians through online means.

Although once posed as a disrupter in the space, digital platforms and universes are becoming less about the accessibility of artists to their fans around the world, but are instead focused on creating new ways to take advantage of the digital economy. As a result, the role of the superfan needs to be updated to fit its new tasks. This means past buying the album, the merchandise and following artists on tour, but to enmesh all the unique responsibilities of the digital realm.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES:**

- Go to not only their in-person concerts but their virtual concerts as well [1].
- Buy NFT merchandise, skins or digital content of the artists on top of regular merchandise [2].
- Subscribe to their personal Patreon, OnlyFans or Newsletter accounts [3].
  - Important note: Please pay for the top-tier groups available on these sites, not just the basic fee.
- Follow their personal lives, who they are dating, and their family's lives on social media.
- Be ready to defend the artist online at any time. Make sure to identify with the social media army that has been created, using the appropriate emojis and hashtags [4].
- Post on their Reddit pages, any online forums or fan blogs or social media accounts.
- Better yet: Be a moderator on these pages.
- Leave Spotify open playing their music to become a top 0.1% fan of the year. This is to be posted on your social media platforms [5].

- Buy their wings, donuts, coffee, hot sauces or specialized food products and meals.
- For career progression, buy the packaging of the food product if you are unable to get it in your region [6].
- Buy property next to them in the Metaverse [7].
- Get plastic surgery to look just like them [8].

#### **REQUIREMENTS:**

**Education:** A post-secondary degree with a focus on your artist, musician or band and a minimum of five years of experience in the field.

#### **Skills and Abilities:**

- Prior fan experience and knowledge of standard/past fan procedures (Buy their album, go to their concerts, buy a t-shirt...).
- Ability to quickly adapt to new social media platforms.
- Impeccable memory and attention to detail with anything to do with the artist.

#### **HOW TO APPLY:**

Qualified candidates should continue to show their love of their favourite artists online as much as possible. We encourage applications from candidates who identify as BIPOC and/or 2SLGBTQIAP+, although you will be lost in the algorithms of oppression [9].

#### **Notes**

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## POPULAR MUSIC FUTURES



## MARY FOGARTY

In the future, popular music

...will be exactly like how it was in the past. Exactly and precisely the same. Popular music never had an adequate context except when it was hardly thought of. That's paradoxically when context mattered the most.

...will be a category of the past. It will make sense to describe a particular time and place when "pop" music mattered in society in ways that were thought about as important and generation-defining. It won't make any sense whatsoever to the people of the present, so great efforts will be made by the last living experts of the study to explain why it mattered so much to them.

...will have a grip on older people more than the young. Popular music, by being the music of old people, will become quite a confused category, mostly used in nursing homes to help people remember the spin classes of their youth.

...will be this unusual and archaic category that people apologize for when they mention it. One of those categories they will apologize for ever having used or believed in. And to the people they apologize to, it won't even matter. It'll be some weird, guilty apology that makes no sense because no one is bothered whatsoever with the category; they just don't think about it at all really.

...will not be seen as the creative endeavor it was once claimed to be though.

...will be a very uncomfortable category that reminds us of past lovers and their obsessions that made us feel small. Well, that's a very Taylor Swift-esque approach to the subject matter, but also one that speaks to the elitism of a category consumed by its own inadequacies, and so overcompensating. This will happen when it's finally accepted canonically in the academy.

...will be marketed so heavily that you won't be able to drink a coffee without hearing the coffee song, read a book without hearing the "read a book" song, and there will be so many songs for sex, but each person will only hear the same song over and over in their head no matter what they are up to. It's like ads from the past that get in your head, but much, much worse.

...will be a reflection not of taste but of circumstances beyond one's control. Created by algorithms.

...won't produce pleasure. It won't be associated with leisure, a category of experience that is only studied at school. Popular music will not even be considered backgrounded, assuming some sort of foreground was possible. It won't be ubiquitous anymore. Popular music will be an irritant.



...will be mostly used to track people's listening practices to sell them things. If this sounds like the past, it is, only the tracking methods will become normalized, and the effects will be left understudied. The whistleblower warned us but no one remembers her name.

...will produce a new anxiety promoted by careerists uninterested in truth, beauty or music. People will publish paperback books no one reads, chastising people for buying books. People will make music with lyrics that explain what's wrong with listening to music and how doing so is destroying our world.

...will get shorter and shorter, and the copyright laws on what has been done tighter and tighter, so that no one will want to make music for money anymore because the consequences and court cases will be too much to bear. No one will make popular music anymore except the elite rich who can afford the lawyers required. They will make terrible music.

...will be unfathomable, and the joy for aliens in studying the form will mostly arise from listening to the Beatles. The Beatles' music will be played everywhere for alien children, and the children will grow up rather well adjusted, minus the females of the species, of course. But they will cut their hair in bobs to try to fit in and rebel later on by growing their hair long.

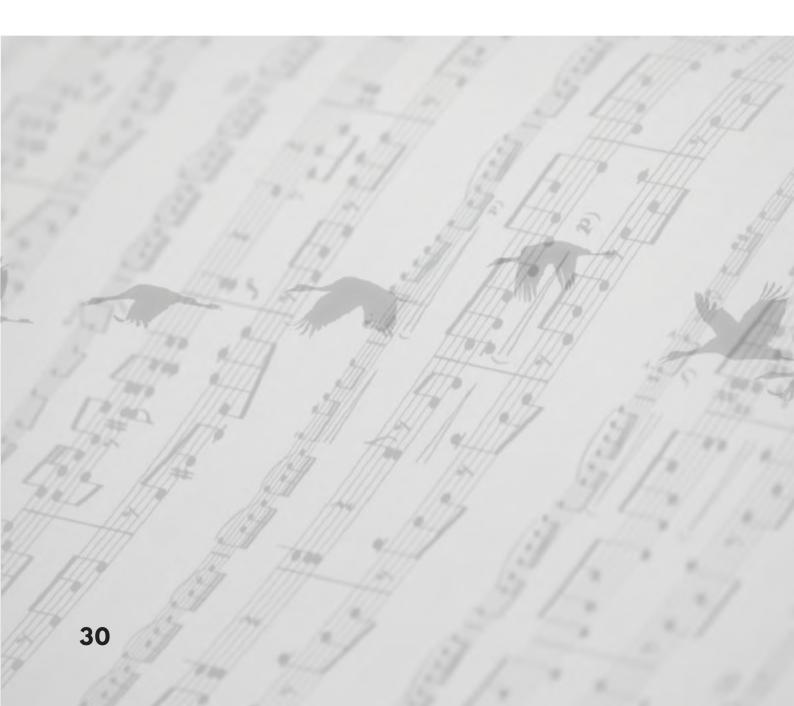
...will be not only one but a few of the categories of trash at the dump that take up loads of space. The methods through which it is organized for the dump will actually become the defining way in which music categories are thought about in the future. As materials, of different sorts, to be pushed to different corners of the lot.

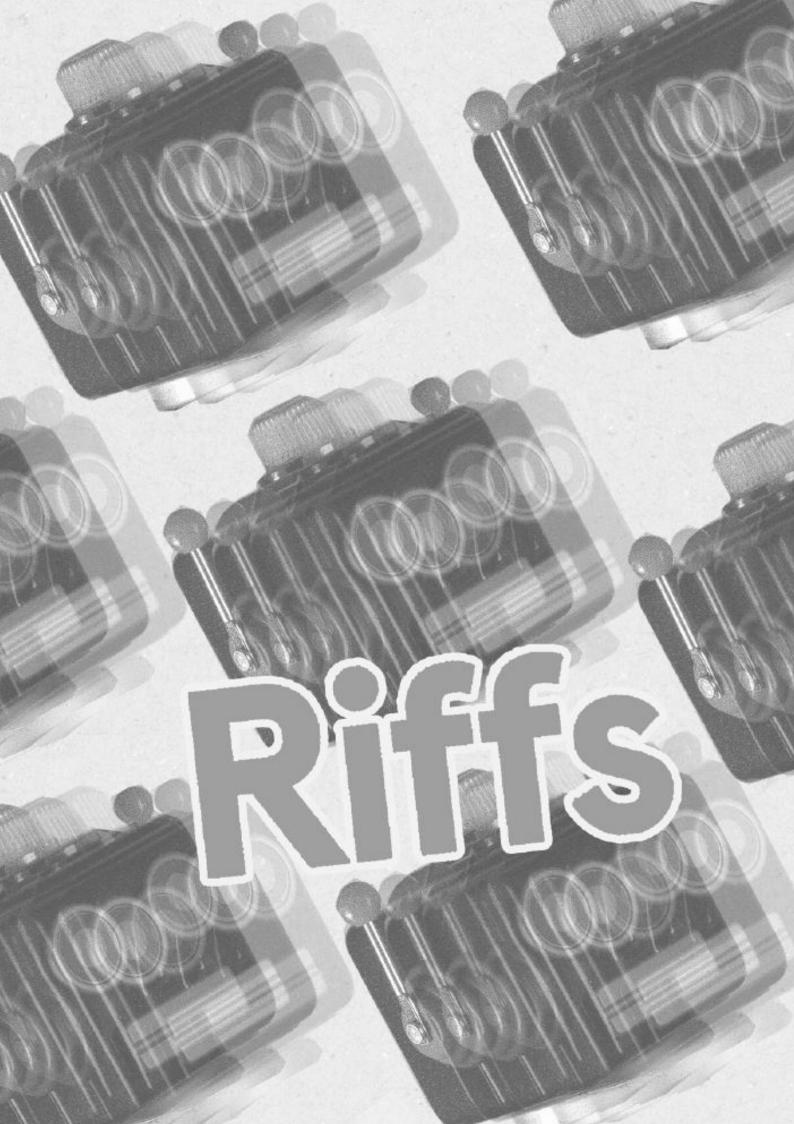
In the future, the last remnants of popular music will take place underground. People will gather in secret to listen to music, and it will be forbidden to make live music without paying corporations a lot of money. No one will be able to study it for fear of jail time. In other words, it will be illegal just like in Afghanistan. Now everywhere. Just as Kafka predicted.

In the future, popular music, a category with relevance from post-WWII to the end of WWIII, will be a subject of fascination and serious rigour for the aliens. In this framework, a lot of work will have to be done to explain the process through which popular music was thought of, by the humans to whom it mattered, as something impressive to do.

In the future, dancing to popular music will be forbidden due to copyright laws on movements that citizens celebrated when they emerged, imagining they would somehow support or protect artists. (The people were uneducated). And yet, the moving body will be the only aspect of musical appreciation that will endure because no one notices when one grinds their teeth to the beat.

In the future, popular music will be done solely by birds.





This special zine issue of *Riffs* explores popular music futures through the research, experiences, and interests of our contributors. As we stand at the edge of a post-pandemic world, reflecting upon the significant impact that the past two years has had on popular music, we look towards the future and imagine what it might look, sound, and feel like.

This zine is the product of a one-day virtual workshop on March 7th 2022 as part of the IASPM-Canada Virtual Speaker Series. This represents the first partnership between *Riffs* and IASPM-Canada, the first virtual zine-in-a-day workshop, and the first international collaboration for the journal. This issue was edited by Deanne Kearney, Sarah Raine, and Iain Taylor, and includes contributions from popular music researchers and practitioners based in Canada.

