

WORDS
TOM
FABER
PHOTOS
EMMAN
MONTALVAN
STYLING
CARLEE
WALLACE



THE
HYPERPOP
HITMAKER
BEHIND
BRAT
SUMMER.

ARG COOK



“You gon’ jump if A. G. made it!” Whenever the British singer-songwriter Charli XCX performs her song “360” live, the crowd, waiting for this line, launches themselves into the air as soon as they hear it. The lyric, from the opening track to Charli’s smash album *Brat*, refers to her ride-or-die collaborator, A. G. Cook, who produces much of her music and is a key creative consultant for her brand. She knows, as her fans do, how much of the glorious, unhinged fun of her music—and the success of *Brat*, which became a cultural phenomenon over the summer of 2024—is thanks to Cook’s magic touch.

Cook says he knew the music on the album was good but the fevered intensity of its reception still took him by surprise. “I don’t think anyone expected it to go so mainstream,” he says. It swept across the world, from the grungiest nightclubs to the highest echelons of global politics. Just days before this interview, the X account for

Kamala Harris’ presidential campaign adopted the shade of slime green now synonymous with the album’s cover after a deluge of memes had compared Harris’ attitude with Charli’s. “That stuff was just unreal,” Cook says, laughing. “It sort of makes sense, but it’s totally bonkers.”

Perhaps he shouldn’t be surprised. *Brat*’s success is only a fraction of his résumé. As the founder of the era-defining record label PC Music, Cook has been infiltrating the pop mainstream for over a decade. His crew of collaborators has evolved from fringe experimentalists to in-demand talent, tapped by artists including Beyoncé, Dua Lipa and Lady Gaga. Everything about Cook’s career is intense, from the sheer volume of his output to the hyper-saturated sound of his music. Yet, speaking over a video call from his home in Los Angeles, light flooding through the window behind him, he just looks like a laid-back, normal dude. The only notable things about his appearance are his signature round glasses and shaggy mop of brown hair. As a top-rated YouTube comment on one video says: “A. G.

Set Designer: Kelly Fondry. Digital Tech: Alex Woods.

Cook looks like all of the members of the Beatles at once.”

Speaking with him feels like chatting to a genial scholar of pop music. A single question sets Cook off on a long, winding response where he drifts through a series of freewheeling tangents, asking himself questions and answering them along the way. When asked exactly what made *Brat* such a success, for example, he has such a detailed and articulate answer that you almost expect him to produce a PowerPoint presentation. He talks about how long they spent getting the songs right, the careful marketing campaign, but most of all how the record resonated with fans because of its honesty. “We were trying to make this the most *Charli* Charli album yet; to be super-transparent, musically and lyrically,” Cook says. “Because pop music is personality.”

He spends a lot of time thinking about what pop music is, or isn’t, or might be. This was the overarching question that governed the approach of his pioneering label, PC Music. Cook started the project in 2013; he was 22 and had just earned a music computing degree from Goldsmiths, an arts college in London that has a reputation for progressive thinking. While studying electronic music from the 20th century, he observed a dichotomy in the literature between acoustic music, played on “real” instruments, and computer music, which was deemed mathematical, experimental and inhuman. It seemed like an outdated paradigm. “I was seeing people using GarageBand, Skype, whatever early social networks, and thinking: everyone’s got a computer, this is no longer some alien thing,” he says. “We’re all messing with this stuff. The laptop is like a new folk instrument. We all have it, it’s at our fingertips.” Cook wanted to challenge this older way of thinking. “And I was really convinced that pop music was the right battleground for that.”

Having gathered together a set of like-minded artists, PC Music began releasing a dizzying array of music under a variety of aliases. Often it was unclear who was an avatar and who was a real person, who was singing and who was lip-synching, as they played with the idea of what a pop persona could be for the internet generation. A good introduction can be found in the label’s three compilations which collect some of their best tracks. Listening to them back-to-back is an exhausting and exhilarating experience, as if you’ve fallen inside the malfunctioning mainframe of the pop machine. The songs are usually in the dance-pop mold—fast, frenetic and impossibly colorful—and often adopt sonic ingredients from genres thought to be tacky, such as the



fluorescent synth lines of Eurodance or the chipmunk vocals of happy hardcore.

Among those early collaborators were Danny L Harle, who now produces for Caroline Polachek and Dua Lipa, and the mononymic producer Sophie, who Cook once said he admired for having “almost no regard for the walls between pop and experimental art.” He describes this period as a time of intense creative inspiration. “We were spending all of our time making, thinking, talking about pop music, trying to crack the code in some way,” he says.

The signature of PC Music, Cook explains, was never so much a specific group of sounds, but rather “an attitude of having music which is in dialogue with itself, in dialogue with both the mainstream and underground.” The label eschewed conventional album cycles to pioneer a hyper-online release strategy, telling its story in fragments of DJ mixes, YouTube videos and janky, one-off websites. Their imagery embraced the glossy aesthetics of consumer and celebrity culture at its most vapid. One release, Cook and Sophie’s “Hey QT,” was themed around the idea of product placement for a fictional energy drink. It is a giddy firework of a club-pop anthem, at once wry and deeply felt, and one of the label’s best.

Many, however, found their shtick off-putting. “All our friends thought what we were making was terrible,” recalls Cook. “We were putting on empty club nights. Our friends thought what we were doing was—” he pauses, searching for the word, “trash, basically.” He attributes this early resistance to the way PC Music was presented as a collective, which was playful and feminine at a time when London’s electronic music scene skewed dark, masculine and self-serious.

(above)
(opposite)
(previous)

Cook wears a shirt by ACNE STUDIOS, trousers by ERL and shoes by PHILIPPE MODEL.
He wears a shirt by EDWIN, trousers by ECKHAUS LATTA and shoes by PHILIPPE MODEL.
He wears a sweater by MARTINE ROSE.



(opposite) Cook wears a shirt by J.LINDBERBERG, trousers by KILIAN KERNER and shoes by COMMON PROJECTS.
(below) He wears a sweater by MARTINE ROSE.

A particular sticking point for music critics was whether the project was sincere and not, as some felt, a bunch of art school hipsters trolling the industry with their flagrant disregard for good musical taste and penchant for online pranks. The press was also nonplussed, with one headline asking whether they were “the future of pop or contemptuous parody.”

“I don’t really care about things like authenticity in a strict sense when it comes to pop music,” Cook argues, but you don’t have to look too deeply to realize that his playfulness doesn’t preclude a genuine love of the music. On Halloween in 2014, PC Music did a live stream on YouTube which included the liberal use of silly camera effects and ropey 3D graphics. During his set, Cook appears dressed all in black with ghoulish makeup, impossibly tall and thin. As he performs, he dances; his movements loose and wild, at once gangly and graceful. You can see how profoundly he is feeling the music. “It was so clear to us that it was genuine,” he says.

The initial blowback didn’t stop PC Music. In fact, Cook says, it galvanized him. They soon entered into a partnership with Columbia Records and established a family of regular collaborators including Charli XCX, Caroline Polachek, Carly Rae Jepsen and Sophie. “The most pivotal part of my musical development was finding these other people who are completely ride-or-die,” says Cook.

PC Music’s prescience was proven when the rest of the music world began trying to catch up to their way of thinking. Scroll through TikTok today and you’ll hear super-fast, hyper-melodic music that sounds like PC Music did a decade ago. The warren of websites and Easter eggs they created for Reddit sleuths to decode is now a legitimate



(1) In 1976, game designer Warren Robinett hid what is thought to be the first Easter egg (so named for the hunt to find them) in a secret “room” of the video game “Adventure”—a screen that flashed “Created by Warren Robinett.” It was an act of defiance against the game’s publisher, Warner Communications, which Robinett knew was not going to credit him as the game’s author.

marketing technique employed by artists like Taylor Swift.¹ Their commentary on consumer culture and the collision of personality and brand no longer seems provocative in an age of influencers, where the term “sell-out” has ceased to mean anything. And they have inspired a younger generation of artists who now make music under the genre banner of “hyperpop,” a term about which Cook, like any good trailblazer, professes to feel ambivalent.

After PC Music’s fringe ideas became part of the mainstream, the project started to lose its raison d’être. If it no longer sparked controversy, reasoned Cook, then what was it for? In 2023 he announced PC Music would close, choosing to end with a

“Our friends thought what we were doing was trash, basically.”

deliberate punctuation mark rather than peering out or being sold off to a major label.

In the meantime, Cook has been stepping out from the shadows to become a pop star in his own right. For a long time, he had only a handful of singles under his own name. This changed dramatically in 2020, when he released *7G*, a seven-disc album containing 49 songs, which he followed just over a month later with another album, *Apple*. The latter is a tighter showcase of his production skills, while the former is more conceptual, with each of its discs centering a different instrument in his arsenal.

On the music Cook releases under his own name, he explicitly connects the dots between the realms of pure pop and experimental music—two worlds that have historically regarded each other with suspicion. There are two distinct sonic styles at work: songs that demonstrate his electronic wizardry, where a barrage of drums and chopped-up vocal samples can suddenly dissolve into the softest twinkling synths, and others more akin to bedroom pop with gentle acoustic guitar, where Cook brings his hesitant but tuneful singing voice to the fore.

Starting in 2016, Cook found himself spending more time in Los Angeles (what Cook calls “this bizarre pop music city”) to work with Charli and Sophie, two other British transplants. “My flatmates took the piss out of me because I’d be spending very little time in London and still paying rent,” he recalls. But the city held promise for him: Where London felt bogged down by history and cultural gatekeepers, LA was the opposite. “It’s almost aggressively about the present here,” he says. “It’s: Oh, what’s going on today? Who’s in town this week?”

“And I love how open-ended it is; there really aren’t any musical boundaries. Some synth weirdo might work on a massive Justin Bieber track.” For some artists, Cook became one such synth weirdo. He was tapped to help produce the song “All Up in Your Mind” on Beyoncé’s album *Renaissance*, though he describes the process as rather remote—he didn’t attend any studio sessions and was simply given permission to tinker with some files. He didn’t even know his contribution would be used in the final cut until a week before the album was released—then he was nominated for a Grammy for his work. When he produces for artists with whom he is more deeply involved, he seeks to respond to their particular creative visions. “When I’m working with Charli,” he explains, “I’m not just playing beats and being like: ‘Okay, let’s make a hit.’ I’m trying to craft things that would inspire her or open a dialogue. I’m trying to really document that person and that moment in time.”

Groomer: Nicole Maguire with TMG Agency, using Oribe and Tom Ford.



During the pandemic, Cook locked down with his girlfriend of seven years, the musician Alaska Reid, in her hometown in rural Montana. He spent the year working on music in a small basement room and going out on hikes. “For someone like me, growing up in London, you’re just not used to seeing that volume of landscape,” he says, “it’s just these huge mountains, the big sky.” In that setting, he found himself particularly aware of his own Britishness. “I was the only person there with my sort of accent,” he says, “which had this surreal, alien quality.” This was the spark for his third album, *Britpop*, which took inspiration from Cook’s sense of how Americans imagine Britain—a land of history, myth and fantasy. It was rolled out in May 2024 with a cover that references the Union Jack, lyrics evoking ancient pagan traditions and a name that jokingly refers to an era of British musical history in the 1990s. Yet, as is often the case with Cook, there’s a deeper layer of irony behind the title: the fact that in 2024, we have never been further from a consensual understanding of either what pop music is or, in a post-Brexit world, what it means to be British.

When asked questions that veer toward emotional territory or biography, Cook becomes somewhat guarded. He steers away from those topics so politely and deftly that you might not even notice it happening. It’s telling that his previously published interviews contain vanishingly little about his personal life. It might just be media savvy, or an understandable reluctance to express emotions in the public sphere, but even when he calls something “very moving,” he says it in the even tone of a librarian.

There is one moment, however, where a different side starts to emerge: when conversation turns to Sophie, Cook’s frequent collaborator, who died in a sudden, tragic accident in 2021. “The journey we had together was so specific and it had such a big impact on me,” he says quietly. One song on *Britpop*, “Without,” is dedicated to her. Cook also wrote a long text online that offers a beautifully detailed, thoughtful tribute to her artistry and personality. He mentions that references to Sophie pepper his work on *Brat*, on *Britpop*—everywhere. And while Sophie gained most acclaim during her lifetime for her striking ability to sculpt sound into dazzling new forms, he is keen to emphasize her poetic, lyrical imagination and authenticity; her understanding that we don’t need to choose between the binaries of experimental and pop, human and machine, intellect and emotion, real and fake. “Things can be both,” he says, at the very end of the interview.

(opposite) Cook wears a shirt by EDWIN and trousers by ECKHAUS LATTA.



(opposite) Cook wears a sweater by STOCKHOLM SURFBOARD CLUB, trousers by THEO and shoes by PHILIPPE MODEL.

