



## TECH 'N' ROLL

### THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE GROOVE.

BY CHRIS COLLINGWOOD

**T**HE radical digital reimagining of nearly every aspect of modern life has been underway for a few decades now, proceeding at such a clip that we hardly stop to acknowledge the massive disruptions to our daily habits and tastes.

While MP3s changed the music industry for consumers, sweeping digital innovations were also changing the way music was made. And if technology and music have become irreversibly intertwined, it's because we tend to instinctively associate recorded music with the era it came from.

The 80s had giant goofy snare drums, the 90s machine-driven club music. The sound of the current moment is usually tied to the state of the current technology.

As often as people complain about the overuse of CGI in movies, it's also true that most successful digital rendering goes unnoticed. For every fake-looking space monster, there is a glorious, near-impossible sunset on an empty beach.

Similarly, some recording technology first appears as a gimmick—think Cher and T-Pain and Auto-Tune—but later becomes omnipresent. In fact, just about every record made now is Auto-Tuned, and

though there was no exact moment when it started, these days you might only notice when it's missing. But other more insidious, creeping digital advances may be having a more profound effect, because they're far less obvious.

Specifically, I wonder if the very idea of playing with great feel will survive the digital era, since there is really no form of popular music that doesn't have every idiosyncrasy ironed out before it reaches your ears. While recording engineers correct a vocalist's pitch, they also line up every drum hit to an imaginary grid, sync every bass note to the drums, and make sure every instrument is the same (loud) volume. What would be the point of hiring a legendary session musician now? You could literally go to a studio and play each drum once, and one note on every instrument, and the engineer could do the rest, for half the money. And who gets credited for the performance?

While it's been clear for a while now that you can be a successful musician without knowing how to play anything but your laptop, the distinction between performance and program has only very recently become more or less irrelevant. There used to be great rhythm sections

(musician-speak for bass and drums) known for playing in the "pocket" (musician-speak for that magical groove that depends on an unspoken understanding between two or more players). One of those rhythm sections—the legendary Muscle Shoals combo from Alabama—played on scores of R&B records and were sought out by everyone from Aretha Franklin to Paul Simon.

Surely there are similar groups working today. It's not that great players will cease to exist—it's just that pretty soon it won't matter at all. The market will dictate that.

Auto-Tuning every performance ensures that the shittiest bass player sounds exactly like the greatest bass player. It's hard to imagine another rhythm section achieving the stature of the Muscle Shoals band, and people raised on digitally aligned music will never know what they've missed.

It'll be up to cranky old coots like me to remind them. ☹️

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