

“Vroom Vroom,” The Legacy of SOPHIE, and Pop Liberation

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On January 30th, 2021, Sophie Xeon (known professionally as just SOPHIE) passed away after falling off a three-story building while attempting to take a picture of the full moon. She was only 34. Her legacy continues to live on in the music subcultures she inhabited, and is consistently lauded as a pioneer for trans musicians. SOPHIE's production work on Charli XCX's 2016 EP *Vroom Vroom* was her most mainstream project to date, and the craftsmanship on the EP's title track have been consistently influential in pop and electronic music to this day.

The Hyperpop and PC Music genres have grown exponentially since their humble beginnings in the mid 2010s, which in tandem has fostered an uplifting community for a litany of trans and queer artists. Charli XCX, while not being a queer artist herself, has consistently used the platform she was granted from her various radio hits in 2014 to uplift some of the most innovative queer artists and producers of our time. Charli's relationship with SOPHIE specifically was very special to her. In an interview with Zane Lowe accompanying the release of her fifth album *CRASH*, she described SOPHIE as a "champion of people she believed in," and that during the process of making *CRASH*, she would ponder what SOPHIE would think or tell her to do, to which she said the answer was to "Do your thing, go for it, push yourself." She goes on to emotionally convey how SOPHIE changed not only her life, but all the artists that she championed with both her talents and infectious humanity (Lowe).

Structurally, "Vroom Vroom" is not a particularly challenging song. The structure contains an intro, a verse, pre chorus, chorus, a repeat of the intro, a second verse, a repeat of the pre chorus and chorus, and then an outro that is melodically similar to the pre choruses. The verses and choruses of the song are rapped while the pre choruses and outro are sung. However, the true driving force of "Vroom Vroom" is its bassline. The unconventional and futuristic

sounding MIDI patch used for the bass in the intro and the second verse acts as an engine revving up. It's fast, unpredictable, and the only melodic aspect of the song for its first 40 seconds, single handedly establishing the verses' key of A minor. The key suddenly switches to B major during the pre chorus, as Charli begins to sing a simple and catchy pop hook "All my life I've been waiting for a good time..." In addition to this, the MIDI patch for the bassline also changes to a relatively gentler, 808-esque tone. B major and A minor are completely unrelated keys, which adds to the ethos of intentional commercial unviability, as well as switching immediately from a verse of just drum machine and rapping to twinkling synths and Charli's gentle falsetto. The sung sections of this song also have a half-time feel in comparison to the rapped sections, despite the song being the same tempo throughout.

The lyrics of "Vroom Vroom" are sassy, narcissistic, and braggadocious in the most charming way possible. It was, and still is quite taboo for female artists to be boastful in their music, as it continues to be considered by many as "unladylike." The chorus of this song reads, "Bitches know they can't catch me // Cute, sexy, and my ride's sporty // Those slugs, no they can't catch me // Beep beep, so let's ride." In an episode of her podcast "Best Song Ever" for BBC Radio, Charli discusses that she "...loves writing about cars as a symbol of status, luxury, and danger" (Wright). Metaphors involving cars remain ever-present in her music to this day, as both her most recent album *CRASH* and her track on the Barbie movie "Speed Drive" contain several car-centric metaphors. The combination of the arrogance of the lyrics and consistent references to reckless driving (something more commonly performed by men) creates a space for female liberation in Charli's music and "Vroom Vroom" specifically. It's often expected of women to display themes of vulnerability and heartbreak in their music, and Charli instead uses

her platform to turn that on its head, and spearhead a musical community where women can be prideful and audacious.

The production of “Vroom Vroom” is notably minimalistic, especially in comparison to the bombast that mainstream pop consumers were used to in the early-mid 2010s. In her profile with SOPHIE for Vulture, music writer Sasha Geffen describes SOPHIE’s production as “...visceral, tactile — you feel it like you feel your knees vibrating after you’ve launched a video-game avatar into a massive jump. It’s made from software, but it ripples through your body all the same” (2017). The only live instrument performed in the entirety of “Vroom Vroom” is Charli’s voice. The sparse, but effective synths and drum machine that enter and exit throughout the track primarily complement what Charli is doing vocally and lyrically. Many of the noises present throughout the song are only able to be defined by their description, as just “synth” or “bass” would be a lacking and/or incomplete representation of the production SOPHIE adds to the track.

Throughout “Vroom Vroom,” Charli’s vocals are doubled or quadrupled, including in the rapped verses, which is uncommon in most rap music. Any time Charli is on the mic, she is the focal point of the song. When her voice isn’t present, it’s made up for with that driving, futuristic sounding bassline. Because of how minimal the production is, every stem and choice is very intentional and audible. Any changes made in repeated sections are meticulous and purposeful. For example, the second verse includes more layered synths, which in turn also are performed much more frantically than they were in previous sections of the song, inciting further musical interest and a progression in the micro-narrative being told throughout.

The sung portions of “Vroom Vroom” starkly juxtapose the rapped portions, as SOPHIE produces them as two separate sonic landscapes. The rapped verses are industrial, brash, unforgiving, and whiplash inducing, but before you can even process it, Charli’s upper register is delivering sugary-sweet, earwormy pop hook accompanied by MIDI glockenspiel, snaps drowned in reverb, and a much gentler bassline. This dichotomy presents Charli displaying the multiple facets of her femininity. The brazen and bold part of her that wants to feel sexy, daring, and audacious can and will coexist with her more sensitive side that desires fulfillment. True feminine liberation must accept every aspect of oneself, and that is portrayed musically, lyrically, and sonically in “Vroom Vroom.”

The legacy of SOPHIE and the continuing legacy of Charli XCX are significantly intertwined. When music journalists and fans alike discuss PC Music and Hyperpop as the genres enter their second decade, it’s nearly a given that both of these women will be named. The ethos of PC Music, founded by producer A.G. Cook in 2013, surrounds disregard to commercialism and commercial viability. However, this is not to be confused with a complete dismissal of consumerism. In her profile with *Vulture*, SOPHIE explains, “If you can do two things with it [music], give it meaning for yourself according to the perspectives you want to share and also have it function on the mass market, and therefore expose your message to more people in a less elitist context, then that is an ideal place to be. An experimental idea doesn’t have to be separated from a mainstream context. The really exciting thing is where those two things are together. That’s where you can get real change” (Geffen). Experimentation and authenticity should not always have to be inaccessible, and that’s the cause that SOPHIE championed with her music and production throughout her tragically short life. She says in the

same interview, “I don’t want it to be this elitist, academic thing, with only people from a certain sect listening to it. That’s not my intention. I want it to interact and have a life in the real world, as I see it, and communicate within that context” (Geffen). Through SOPHIE’s logic, the idea of interacting with consumerism as it exists in our society today is, while sometimes depressing and discouraging, is more authentic than gatekeeping your music for the sake of some fabricated moral high ground.

The most memorable aspects of SOPHIE’s experimentation came from the unique way in which she viewed music through a lens of materials and sculpture. In her production, she attempts to replicate the sonic frequencies of physical textures. “‘Lemonade,’ for example, was inspired by the fizzy pops of soda, while ‘Hard’ sounds like clanging metal and squeaky latex” (Lhooq). The hyperreal and futuristic aspects of SOPHIE’s work would go on to inspire a whole generation of hyperpop artists, the most successful of which also being trans. 2019 and 2020 saw the meteoric rise of genre-defining hyperpop duo 100 Gecs, which comprises producers Dylan Brady and Laura Les. Much of the hyperpop genre is reminiscent of the “Nightcore” style of remixing, which is no coincidence to the prevalence of trans women in the genre. Les cites Nightcore as an inspiration for her music, as the pitch shifted vocals prevented feelings of gender dysphoria that came with listening back to her natural voice (Hyun Kim).

As SOPHIE’s legacy penetrated outside the internet circles that had been praising her for years, her name started to appear much more in the media, as her death started to spark revisionist history. In 2021, just 9 months after SOPHIE’s passing, Pitchfork writer Cat Zhang rescored Laura Snapes’ controversially negative review of the *Vroom Vroom* EP (4.5 to 7.8). She corrects the then 5-year oversight by claiming, “ At the time, many critics seemed to be paranoid

about PC Music's motives. Nervous that they'd be bamboozled, they obsessed over whether a pop experiment was either satire or sincere" (Zhang).

After winning alongside Sam Smith for "Best Pop Duo/Group Performance" at the 2023 Grammy Awards, pop singer Kim Petras honored SOPHIE in her speech, saying "I just want to thank all the incredible transgender legends before me who kicked these doors open for me so I could be here tonight – Sophie, especially. My friend who passed away two years ago told me this would happen and always believed in me. Thank you so much for your inspiration, Sophie. I adore you, and your inspiration will forever be in my music." Less than two weeks later, Caroline Polachek released her second solo album, "Desire, I Want To Turn Into You," which featured "I Believe," a song partially about the artist's grief over the loss of SOPHIE. Fans have speculated the line "Look over the edge, but not too far" is an allusion to SOPHIE dying by falling off the edge of a building.

The introduction of SOPHIE into Charli XCX's orbit of collaborators sparked a turning point in her career. The days of bubblegum, run-of-the-mill pop optimism were behind her, and she felt an ache for something new. "It wasn't until 2016's Vroom Vroom EP with SOPHIE, where Charli decided to forgo pop convention and embrace the sounds of London's electronic underground. As she tells it, *Vroom Vroom* was when things all finally started to click and she began to surround herself with a community of artists who were just as enthusiastic about rave sounds and pop music as she was" (Moen). In recent years, especially since the release of her pandemic record *how i'm feeling now*, XCX has been referred to as one of modern pop music's dominating innovators. She has taken the lucky position granted to her by her early career radio hits, and has used it to create music where she is unabashedly herself, and the themes that music

happens to coincide eerily well with where we are societally. After noticing this, music journalist Shaad D'Souza wrote "... there's something jarring about classing the current wave of Charli-adjacent pop as futurist, in large part because it sounds so much like the crushing, industrial present. It absorbs the clamor of our current moment — the clatter of factories, the constant buzz of gentrification-inducing construction, the crush of landfill — and warps it" (D'Souza). Given this, Charli's music is a vehicle to grapple with the present moment one vocal processing filter at a time. She embraces modernity and its absurdity – happily playing along with the game.

Charli has consistently used the platform she has to uplift her collaborators, as she does not see herself at the center of this progressive pop movement, but instead as one piece of an increasingly complex puzzle. She says in her profile with Paper magazine, "I feel so happy that I can call all of those artists my peers and that we are all doing something together. It feels like a very fun moment in pop culture and music that I'm just so happy to be at the center of." Consistently collaborating with some of the most innovative producers of our time like SOPHIE, A.G. Cook and Danny Harle are what allows something to be created that is greater than the sum of their parts. Since streaming has become the dominant medium of music consumption, artists are at the most advantageous position to experiment than ever before. There is a reason Chari feels empowered to scream "Welcome to the fucking future of pop music, bitch!" as she introduces her performances of "Vroom Vroom." There is a reason SOPHIE's name continues to be honored by innovators and historians of pop music. Complete pop liberation is in reach.

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