

AI in Music: Creativity vs. Commodification (The Heavyweight Champion of the World)

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It seems as though every day I enter one of my music business classes I'm met with the topic that is chief of invoking dread and fatigue: AI. "This is our future," "It's only going to become more prevalent," they say. I'm reminded that the second music became a lucrative business, this was the endpoint. Critics have cried wolf for years over top 40 pop being derivative or manufactured or even *soulless*. But what happens when that scathing critique becomes literal? What happens when there truly is no soul attached to this musical work? This line of thinking causes a spiral. What's the point of art if it can just be automated? Is the purpose of life just to feed the corporate machine one chipper email at a time? Music has been touted as a "universal language" for as long as it's existed. We lose when it no longer comes from a place of genuine emotion. The men that wield the purses play dumb. They know where this is going, they just don't want to admit it.

A main catalyst for the recent discourse hellhole surrounding the use of AI in music creation is a song called "Heart On My Sleeve," a song written by anonymous TikTok user ghostwriter977 that is sung by AI generated Vocaloids of Drake and The Weeknd. The track was set to chart due to the impressively accurate sounding vocals, but was quickly taken down from DSPs by Universal Music Group (Williams). The record label empire released a statement, reading "UMG's success has been, in part, due to embracing new technology and putting it to work for our artists—as we have been doing with our own innovation around AI for some time already. With that said, however, the training of generative AI using our artists' music (which represents both a breach of our agreements and a violation of copyright law) as well as the availability of infringing content created with generative AI on DSPs, begs the question as to which side of history all stakeholders in the music ecosystem want to be on: the side of artists,

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fans and human creative expression, or on the side of deep fakes, fraud and denying artists their due compensation...” It’s relevant to note the statement beginning with a willingness to use AI only when it benefits them, their artists, and/or their subsidiaries. It comes to no shock that a quasi monopoly a la UMG would be chomping at the bit to streamline music creation. It comes across as violently hypocritical to embrace the use of AI in one sentence and then call it fraudulent and the enemy of artists in the next. While profiting off of the likeness of a successful artist is objectively scummy and in most cases not legal, the use of AI in this instance is not really the threat to creativity that it could be. The only thing generative AI had a hand in here is the vocal performance. The lyrics and musical composition were all written by Ghostwriter. There is no real threat to the value of creativity or human work here, just UMG’s profit margins.

In that same vein, many business-centric publications have been unequivocally in favor of AI becoming a mainstay technological advancement in music technology. Moral and philosophical qualms be damned as long as shareholders’ wallets are guaranteed some extra girth. Forbes author Bernard Marr cites it as “one of the most exciting aspects of the recent wave of generative AI.” Marr interviewed the founder and CEO of AI generated music service Loudly, who likened the creative potential of AI assisted music creation to that of Bob Dylan taking the risk of busting out an electric guitar at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965. How well that statement ages is something I am not equipped to predict, but nonetheless, a change in how an instrument’s tone is projected does not seem logically comparable to an attempt at streamlining the music composition process. With a similar mindset, a Bloomberg Magazine report suggested “...music executives say they want to find a way to work with new technologies. Their openness may be related to the fact that the growth in streaming has slowed and they need a new way to

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please investors” (Shaw). The implication here is that a quicker turnaround of agreeable and listenable music will both be cheaper for labels to produce and allow for more product to be released in a shorter period of time. Similar practices have already become prevalent in the fashion industry, as generative software has allowed companies like SHEIN to have turnaround of concept to final product of two to three weeks (Fish). For context, this process usually takes other brands several months.

This concept actually brings me back to Drake. In the recent years of his career, Drake has attempted to optimize his output for the streaming age, and so far (monetarily, at least) he’s been rewarded for it. As of December 5th, 2023, he is Spotify’s 3rd most streamed artist globally, trailing only Taylor Swift and The Weeknd, and that is in part due to the pure volume and frequency of his recent output. He has become the king of the throw-spaghetti-at-the-wall-and-see-what-sticks method, and it’s provided him some of the biggest hits of the past decade. Drake has released at least one album every single year since 2015, and doesn’t seem to plan on stopping any time soon. There are only 51 songs that have surpassed 2 billion Spotify streams, two of which belong to Drake. For context, an average of 120,000 new songs are added to Spotify every single day (Stassen).

Drake’s method proving true is exactly why streaming companies are so willing to go all in on AI. Streaming services, as they exist today, are not profitable due to the high cost of royalties. Spotify could, however, instantaneously generate music via AI they would not have to pay royalties for, and push it to consumers as much as possible (Canovas). That being said, it’s more than likely that this oversaturation of the market would dilute the value of recorded music immensely. We are already at a point where creating and releasing music is the most accessible

it's ever been, which in a lot of aspects, is a good thing. A lot of exceptionally talented musicians are able to have their voices heard when they may not have in the music landscape that existed 20 years ago. But the issue of oversaturation and hyper democratization of music consumption has almost eradicated the concept of musical cultural phenomena. There is too much to sift through, and due to that, there is increasingly less time for The Culture to focus on any single release.

However, when we look at music from the perspective of the individual fan, what makes a world of a difference is the emotional resonance they receive from it, and the varying parasociality that comes with it. Music derives its value from the emotional catharsis that is provided to the listener. Knowing that no literal human emotion was put into the creation of a given piece of music is, at least in my view, a bastardization of the multi-millenia history of this artform. There is a reason that I sobbed through the final 20 minutes of the Phoebe Bridgers concert I went to the week after I graduated high school. In a personal piece I wrote recapping the music that defined my teens, I recounted, "I sobbed my heart out straight through both 'Graceland Too' and 'I Know The End' next to a love with a quickly approaching expiration date. I had a lot of big bad feelings about starting a new chapter in my life, and hearing both "She knows she lived through it to get to this moment" and "I'll find a new place to be from" sung back to me in that moment was something I'll remember for a very long time" (REDACTED).

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