The Decline of Melody and the Rise of Noise in Popular Music

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Bill Hartenstein

Examiners:
Dr. Anita Jóri

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CONTENT

1 INTRODUCTION

> "I never think about melody or chords; it's always about the feel, the tone, the energy." Rick Rubin, quoted in *Rolling Stone* (Sheffield, 2011, para. 4).

Contemporary popular music is undergoing a major transformation. The role of melody as a structural and expressive foundation is declining, while timbral qualities, distortion, and texture increasingly define its aesthetic identity. As shown in Clark and Arthur's (2023) study *Is melody "dead?": A large-scale analysis of pop music melodies from 1960 through 2019*, recent pop songs display a modest increase in repetition and a corresponding decline in rhythmic diversity (p. 128). Techniques once associated with experimental or avant-garde production have thus entered mainstream contexts, shaping the sound of contemporary pop (Bluemink, 2021; Hegarty, 2007; Jones, 2024).

This paper examines this development through three perspectives. First, it outlines the cultural and historical foundations of popular music, considering its social and aesthetic functions. Second, it investigates how experimental sound practices, particularly the use of distortion and saturation, entered popular contexts through technological change. Third, it discusses production techniques and artistic examples to demonstrate how these transformations manifest in contemporary musical aesthetics.

Building on previous research on the musical recontextualization of nostalgic popular material on SoundCloud (Hartenstein, 2024), this paper shifts focus from sample-based production to the evolving sound characteristics of popular music itself. Artists such as SOPHIE and Arca exemplify the expressive manipulation of timbre through distortion, while Playboi Carti and 2hollis translate these sonic principles into contemporary rap and EDM. These examples are examined to demonstrate how aesthetic priorities in popular music have moved from melodic composition towards sound design.

2 POPULAR MUSIC

Pop music can be understood as a dynamic, socially embedded phenomenon rather than a fixed genre. The Berlin musicologist Peter Wicke (1997) defines popular music as "a discursive instrument of cultural negotiation within the territory delineated by commercial music production" (p. 27, author's translation). This definition situates pop as a field of negotiation among artistic, commercial, and audience dynamics.

According to Pfleiderer (2018), the concept of pop music may be approached from two complementary perspectives: sociological and aesthetic. From a sociological standpoint, music production has become increasingly professionalised, converting musical works into commodities within a capitalist market structure. Industrialisation and urbanisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created a mass audience lacking formal musical training, allowing popular music to become a primary medium of cultural consumption. From an aesthetic perspective, pop music fulfills diverse social functions: it enables the articulation of identity, the expression of resistance, the provision of entertainment, and the facilitation of emotional escapism.

The historical emergence of popular music is closely intertwined with technological and social transformations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These periods witnessed fundamental changes in the production, distribution, and reception of music. The development of mass-entertainment venues, the establishment of professional music publishing, and, later, the advent of sound recording, radio, film, and television collectively created the infrastructure that enabled large-scale production, distribution, and reception of popular music (Pfleiderer, 2018, pp. 27–28). The ability to reproduce and distribute music technologically democratized listening, positioning pop as both a cultural and commercial force.

Pierre Bourdieu (1979) identifies musical taste as one of the clearest indicators of social distinction: "Nothing more clearly affirms one's class, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music" (p. 18). In his theory of cultural production, the musical sphere constitutes a field, a social space in which artists, labels, critics, and listeners compete for different forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural. Within this field, value is not inherent to the artwork but emerges from processes of recognition and legitimation.

Musical taste, in this context, operates as a form of symbolic distinction. Preferences expressed through distinctions such as avoiding "mainstream" or favouring "underground" music signify not merely aesthetic choices but acts of social positioning. Pop music therefore becomes a site where identity is expressed, negotiated, and contested. Bourdieu further asserts that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (p. 6). Taste categorises not only music but also the listener, revealing habitus and relationship to cultural capital. Within popular music, this manifests as a tension between the "authentic" and the "commercial." Listeners navigate this duality to construct and communicate identity, balancing cultural and economic capital and thereby reinforcing symbolic social boundaries.

The dynamics of pop's self-reflexivity are exemplified by the American band MGMT. As Andrew VanWyngarden explained:

> "When we wrote Time to Pretend, we were totally taking the piss out of the rock-star thing. And all of a sudden that song was, like, a single, and we had to play it every day for … two … years. (…) I'm not saying that Kids and Time to Pretend are stupid songs, but I think there's at least partial irony and sarcasm." VanWyngarden, as cited in The Guardian (Petridis, 2010, para. 5)

"Time to Pretend" and "Kids" achieved substantial commercial reach. Kids alone generated approximately 881,000 downloads in the U.S., and Time to Pretend peaked at No. 35 on the U.K. Official Singles Chart. MGMT's satirical critique of fame and consumer culture was thus paradoxically absorbed by the very system it sought to question. This example encapsulates a central paradox of popular music: its capacity to subvert and simultaneously reproduce dominant cultural narratives.

Traditional pop composition is defined by harmonic clarity, repetitive phrasing, and structural simplicity. De Clercq (2024) identifies its coherence in modular song forms such as the verse-chorus pattern, supported by stable harmonic rhythm and clear cadential motion. These features promote immediacy for listeners while maintaining formal consistency across styles. Pop harmony typically employs cyclical progressions, most often tonic, subdominant, and dominant relations rather than extensive modulation, thereby establishing a stable

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tonal centre that anchors melody and rhythm. In *Similarity of Structures in Popular Music*, Corsini (2024) corroborates this continuity through quantitative analysis, employing melodic-similarity matrices to compare harmonic and formal patterns across artists and decades. His findings demonstrate that repetition and phrase symmetry remain defining constants of popular-song structure.

Repetition constitutes one of the defining structural features of popular music. Margulis (2014) observes that "musical repetitiveness is so common as to be almost invisible" (p. 3). This prevalence reflects how repetition functions both as a compositional principle and as a listening condition shaped by cultural habit. Julien and Levaux (2018) note that "1960s minimal music resembles nothing so much as contemporaneous Pop, the art most open to serial repetition and mechanical reproduction" (pp. 13–14). Fink (2005) extends this observation sociologically, describing modernity as a culture of repetition in which industrial production and mass media structure daily life through recurring cycles (p. 43). Pop Art (e.g., Warhol's serial prints) and minimal music (e.g., Reich's phase compositions) exemplify how artistic production internalised these patterns.

3 The Decline of Traditional Melody in Popular Music

As Paul Hegarty (2007) observes, noise is not simply an acoustic phenomenon but a judgment; it is sound already qualified as excessive, unwanted, or disturbing (p. 4). What is perceived as "noise" therefore depends less on its sonic properties than on cultural perception and context. Changes in how popular music integrates noise reflect shifting definitions of what is considered music.

In the early twentieth century, composers began to expand the range of acceptable sound. Respighi's *Pines of Rome* (1924) famously incorporated a phonograph recording of a nightingale, integrating mechanical sound into orchestral composition. A decade earlier, Luigi Russolo's manifesto *L'arte dei rumori* (The Art of Noises, 1913) called for a new music based on the sounds of the industrial age, arguing that traditional melody could no longer represent modern experience. As he wrote, "this limited circle of pure sounds must be broken, and the infinite variety of 'noise-sound' conquered" (Russolo, 1913).

Subsequent decades saw these ideas further developed. Arnold Schoenberg's atonal works and Arseny Avraamov's *Symphony of Sirens* (1922), performed with factory whistles, ship horns, and artillery, abandoned conventional tonality and

melody altogether. In the 1940s and 1950s, Pierre Schaeffer and Daphne Oram developed *musique concrète*, composing with recorded sound and tape manipulation rather than notation, thereby redefining composition as the organisation of sound.

During the 1960s and 1970s, minimalist composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass emphasised repetition and gradual process over melodic development. Works like Reich's Piano Phase (1967) and Glass's *Music in Twelve Parts* (1974) used temporal displacement and modular patterning to create musical structure without traditional harmonic progression (Reich, 1968/2002).

Technological changes in the same period made timbre central to popular music. Electric amplification and recording enabled new forms of sonic expression. Distortion, feedback, and overdrive became stylistic markers in blues and rock. The reaction to Bob Dylan's electric performance at the Newport Folk Festival (1965) demonstrated how a shift in timbre could provoke cultural resistance (Waksman, 1999).

From the 1970s onward, punk, industrial, and noise genres further blurred boundaries between musical tone and sound. Artists such as Merzbow, Throbbing Gristle, and the New York no-wave scene employed distortion and static as compositional material (Hegarty, 2007). As Novak (2013) describes, the Japanese noise scene of the 1980s and 1990s treated the physical intensity of sound itself as performance, focusing on texture and volume rather than pitch.

3.1 Production Techniques: Distortion, Clipping, Saturation

In traditional music production, distortion and compression were regarded as technical imperfections; in contemporary practice they function as intentional expressive tools that shape timbre and dynamic contour rather than pitch or harmony. The expressive use of distortion emerged in mid-twentieth-century popular music. Link Wray's *Rumble* (1958) and Jimi Hendrix's *Machine Gun* (1970) illustrate how overdriven amplifiers converted a technical constraint into musical expression. As previously noted, Dylan's electrified performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival extended this shift from studio experimentation to public controversy, marking distortion as both a sonic and cultural sign of authenticity. Waksman (1999) identifies this moment as pivotal in redefining the electric guitar's identity.

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By the 1990s, the pursuit of greater sonic intensity had migrated to the mastering stage—the final phase in which a finished mix is balanced, equalized, and maximized for commercial release. The so-called loudness war privileged overall amplitude at the expense of dynamic contrast. Producer Rick Rubin, known for shaping the sound of artists ranging from the Beastie Boys to Johnny Cash, became emblematic of this aesthetic in his work on Metallica's *Death Magnetic* (2008). Waveform analyses revealed extensive digital clipping, resulting in a persistently compressed, high-density sound (Katz, 2015). As Katz (2015) observes, this period marked a shift in production values in which "volume became the new drama" (p. 142).

This emphasis on maximum loudness relied on three interrelated processes: clipping, compression, and saturation. Clipping occurs when an audio signal exceeds the system's headroom, flattening the waveform and generating harmonic distortion (Yamaha Pro Audio, 2023). Compression reduces dynamic range, maintaining a relatively constant level of perceived intensity, while saturation, derived from analog tape and tube circuitry, introduces additional harmonics and warmth (Korneff Audio, 2022). Together, these techniques transformed loudness from a byproduct of technical limitation into a deliberate expressive parameter within contemporary production.

In the early 2010s, production techniques developed in electronic dance music began to permeate mainstream pop. Skrillex's collaboration with Diplo and Justin Bieber on "Where Are Ü Now" (2015) exemplifies this convergence: the track applies heavy compression, transient shaping, and limiter chaining to Bieber's vocal samples, producing a percussive, distorted timbre. Such integration of experimental sound design into a global pop hit demonstrates the incorporation of EDM and dubstep's aggressive textural aesthetics into mainstream pop production. The early-2000s minimal production style of The Neptunes illustrates a different trajectory toward timbral focus. "Drop It Like It's Hot" (2004) relies on sparse rhythmic elements, tongue clicks, percussive hisses, and spray-can-like bursts of white noise in place of harmonic accompaniment. As Chad Hugo explained, the duo's approach emphasized "leaving space, letting silence and texture carry rhythm" (Chad Hugo, quoted in The Neptunes, Pitchfork, June 14 2022, para. 12).

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3.2 ARCA, SOPHIE, PLAYBOI CARTI, 2HOLLIS,

Artists such as Arca and SOPHIE have established sound design as a primary creative method, while Playboi Carti and 2hollis apply comparable approaches within rap, rage, and EDM-influenced production

Arca

Arca's "Mequetrefe" (2020) exemplifies post-melodic organisation through rhythmic fragmentation and dense timbral layering. Jones (2024) identifies its unstable metric structure as characteristic of texture-based composition. Bluemink (2021) describes Arca's aesthetic as "anti-hauntological," signalling a shift away from nostalgic tonality toward innovation via timbre. Haidari (2017) interprets Arca's use of voice and distortion as a mode of self-representation in which sound design conveys identity. Pristauz (2021) links this approach to an aesthetic of fluidity and glitch that parallels Butler's (1990) concept of performative identity. Within this framework, Arca's work exemplifies what Rothblatt (2011) terms a transhumanist relationship between technology and embodiment, whereby electronic sound functions as an extension of the body.

SOPHIE

In "Faceshopping" (2018), digital processing functions as the organising principle of the composition. Jones (2024) notes that SOPHIE's mixes achieve expressivity through density and distortion rather than pitch. Bluemink (2021) situates SOPHIE and Arca within the same post-melodic paradigm that treats production itself as musical form.

Playboi Carti and 2hollis

Comparable strategies appear in contemporary rap and rage-oriented production. *Whole Lotta Red* (2020) employs overdriven synthesizers, distorted vocals, and loop-based patterns that prioritise amplitude and texture over melody. Rage music, a subgenre of trap emerging in the early 2020s, is defined by compressed mixes, distorted leads, and percussive saturation rather than harmonic variation (Jay, 2025, para. 1). Jay (2025) further describes it as "a hyper-energetic microgenre of trap that cranks everything to the extreme" (para. 1), while Pierre (2025) situates Playboi Carti's sound between trap, EDM, and vocal distortion. 2hollis's recent work fuses the rhythmic aggression of rage music with the textural intensity of

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electronic club production; his tracks have been characterised as possessing "bold club energy" and "trance-like beats" (Styles, 2025), demonstrating how timbre and amplitude increasingly function as the primary structuring forces of musical affect. Across these cases, production determines compositional structure rather than merely supporting it. Jones (2024) concludes that in contemporary pop, "sound design has replaced melodic invention as the dominant expressive system" (p. 83).

4 Conclusion

"Modern pop melodies show a small but consistent increase in repetition, and a corresponding decrease in rhythmic diversity" (Clark & Arthur, 2023, p. 135).

Clark and Arthur (2023) quantify the structural transformation of contemporary pop; however, their analysis deliberately omits timbral and textural parameters, which constitute the primary channels through which present-day production conveys expressivity. Consequently, the apparent "death" of melody is an aesthetic perception rather than a structural one: melodic frameworks remain, but they are experienced via repetition, compression, and heightened spectral density.

Mark Fisher (2014), in *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, illustrates this dynamic through his discussion of Burial. Fisher argues that the audible artifacts, hiss, and surface noise of Burial's early recordings carry emotional resonance, evoking "a sense of loss and longing that sets his melancholy apart from the emotional austerity of dubstep" (p. 92). The textural imperfections, cracks and distortions, function not as defects but as the very medium of affect. Contemporary distortion-heavy pop operates analogously, employing grain and saturation to convey emotion and immediacy.

Following Hegarty (2007), noise is not merely an acoustic event but a cultural decision: "an excess, a perception of too much" (p. 4). What a society labels as noise reveals its thresholds of order and control. Derrida (1976) links hearing to self-presence and identity; noise disrupts this stability, acting as the counterpoint to musical order. Noise is therefore cultural, and its aesthetic force resides in the perception of excess that now feels real. In my view, the presence of noise in popular music reflects a cultural longing for authenticity within an increasingly digital existence.

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