Learning Outcomes

Historical Context

- **1990s to Present**: the rise of alternative music/niche marketing, rock returns, the modern music factory, pop music borrows from dance music, digital music technology changes the business

Genres


Key Terms

- Alternative/niche, digital, standardization, novelty, the song machine, electronica

Course Themes

- Standard forms enable mass production, alternative musics move into the mainstream, technology enables both new creative possibilities and changes the business
The 1990s: The Age of Alternative

- Very difficult to determine the boundaries between the pop mainstream and the margins in the 1990s
- Diverse range of artists topped the charts, from Hip Hop to Hard Rock to Adult Contemporary to New Country
- The idea of “alternative” or “marginal” music became a marketing term for a mass audience interested in novelty, excitement, and a sense of authenticity
- **Examples:** Alternative Rock, Alternative Country (Alt-country), Alternative Rap, Alternative R&B…
- Two complimentary definitions of “alternative”:
  - Music that somehow challenges the status quo (independent, local, anti-corporation)
  - A lucrative niche market that corporations can exploit
- Major corporations accept the independent labels as their de facto Research and Development wings, and invest more money in monitoring local scenes for successful talent
Most genres start as “underground” musics made by marginalized peoples

When a critical mass of people become aware of an underground music, it quickly becomes absorbed by the mainstream

Underground musics are made “mainstream” by:

- changing the lyrical content: songs become about romantic love/heterosexual sex/dancing/whatever the current concerns of the middle class are
- imposing the dominant pop song forms onto the sounds: AABA in the 1940s, verse-chorus-bridge from the 1960s on
- reducing the noisy, challenging timbres - growling vocals become crooning, distorted guitars become clean, deep bass and synthesizer sounds become brightened

Popular music always feeds on marginal and dance musics, as this is where the necessary novelty comes from
Digital Music in the 1990s

- Digitization of sound made it easier to create, record, and consume music
- Personal computers can now do the work of a full recording studio
- **MP3s invented**: low-fi, but liberated music from the media it had previously been tied to
- Early example of obvious digital manipulation of the voice: **Cher** - “Believe” (1998) - autotune as an effect, rather than a corrective
- Perfected by **Kanye West** on *808s and Heartbreak*
- Reaction against digital music in the rock scene, where many musicians felt that these technologies were *inauthentic* and create artificial performances
- There is a continued “low-fi” ethos in the indie rock world, where older, analog technologies are fetishized
- **Example**: White Stripes - “The Hardest Button to Button”, which features “real” sounds
Electronica

- Term used since 1996 - 97 to refer to electronic dance music: currently called EDM
- Music produced primarily for nightclub DJs, focused on dance-based entertainment
- Extensive use of synthesizers, drum machines, and sequencers - no “live version”, often a single creator
- Encompasses a broad set of dance music genres that come out of disco and German experimental electronic music
- Inheritor of rock’s seriousness, experimentation, rebellious stance and elitism while questioning ideas of art
- **Future-focused**: With its focus on experimentation and new technology, electronic dance music has long been plundered by pop singers looking for a “contemporary/novel” sound
- Pop songwriters write standard form songs on Electronic music rhythms and sounds - just like in the swing and ragtime eras
Detroit Techno

“Techno music sounds like George Clinton and Kraftwerk stuck in an elevator”

-Derrick May

• Style of electronic dance music originating from the Detroit suburbs in the mid-1980s - “Synthesized soul”
• Inspired by disco, Parliament/Funkadelic, Motown and German electronic music - attempted to make funk records without a band
• Use of analog synthesizers and drum machines like the Roland TR-808 and TR-909
• Experimental, futuristic, forward-thinking, yet intended for dancing: funky dance music on cheap synthesizers
• Clubs nights took place in warehouses and abandoned buildings
• The ‘Belleville Three’:
  • **Juan Atkins** (Model 500) - “No UFOs” (1985)
  • **Derek May** (Rythim is Rhythim) - “Strings of Life” (1988)
  • **Kevin Saunderson** (Reese)
Chicago House

- Disco-influenced dance music named after the Warehouse gay club in Chicago where it was developed
- Disco made by amateurs: disco drum rhythms and baselines created on cheap electronics
- Drum machines and bass synths could keep going all night
- Prominent use of Roland 303 bass synth
- **Formative producers:**
  - **Frankie Knuckles:** “Your Love” (1983)
  - **Phuture:** “Acid Trax” (1985)
- Many subgenres: Deep House, Acid House, Progressive House
- Sound quickly appropriated by white pop singers
Techno/House in the Mainstream

Madonna - “Vogue” (1990): 1st #1 Techno-influenced record
Dubstep

- Emerged as a dance club phenomenon in South London in the mid-2000s
- Focus on deep, sub bass sounds, engineered for club sound systems
- Desire to make the sound physical
- Uses samples of real percussion, but relatively sparse drums
- Informed by Jamaican dub reggae
- Prominent labels: Skull Disco, Hyperdub
- **Example**: Skream - “Midnight Request Line” (2005)
Dubstep In The Mainstream

Rihanna - “Jump” (2012): dubstep-influenced pop record
The Mainstream

Boy Bands:

• Term used to describe male popular music groups of the late 1990s and early 21st century

• Refers to groups of three or more young male vocalists in the teen-pop genre who typically perform complex dance choreography

• Assembled by producers and entertainment promoters, material written by professional songwriters

• Modelled on the doo-wop vocal groups of the 1950s and the Jackson 5 in the 1970s

• Hugely popular with a young, female audience, dominated the charts in the 1990s

• Example groups: New Kids on the Block, Bel Biv Devoe, N’Sync, One Direction

  • Example: Boys II Men “Motown Philly” (1991)

  • Example: Backstreet Boys - “Backstreet’s Back” (1997)
The Mainstream

Girl Groups:

• Tradition of female groups of three or more singers continues from the 1960s

• Modelled on the Brill Building and Motown Girl Groups of the 1960s: The Ronettes and The Supremes

• Added element of elaborate dance choreography, sexualized image

• Some groups assembled by producers and song writers, others are more self-contained

• Standard pop song forms with a R&B and Hip Hop elements, and occasionally lyrics addressing issues of gender equality: “Girl Power”

• Example groups: En Vogue, Destiny’s Child, All Saints, Wilson Phillips

• **Example:** TLC “No Scrubs” (1999)

• **Example:** Spice Girls - “Wannabe” (1997)
The Margins: Grunge

• A subgenre of 1990s rock that was a reaction against the successful glam rock/hair metal bands of the time.

• Grunge retained the distorted guitar sounds and intensity of heavy metal but avoided its guitar solos and other signifiers of virtuosity.

• Grunge musicians and their fans avoided heavy metal’s spectacularity of dress and appearance, preferring unfashionable clothes and unstyled hair.

• Many grunge lyrics reflected and spoke to generational malaise: rising unemployment and other factors made it clear that this would be the first generation of Americans who would not, for the most part, be better off than their parents.

• The music supported the attempts of musicians and fans to fashion viable identities and find meaning and community within a social environment they saw as saturated by advertising, politically corrupt, in decline and unworthy of trust.

• **Key bands:** Nirvana, Soundgarden, Hole, L7, Alice in Chains, Pearl Jam
Nirvana

- Commercial breakthrough for alternative rock came in 1991 with the release of Nirvana’s album *Nevermind*
- Blend of hardcore punk, heavy metal, and pop moved alternative rock into the mainstream
- Success ended the chart domination of Hair Metal bands
- Second album *Nevermind* sold 10 million copies, went to #1 on the pop charts
- Success was difficult for songwriter Kurt Cobain, overdosed on heroin, then died of a self-inflicted gun shot would
- **Big hit:** “Smells Like Teen Spirit” (1991) - established loud-quiet-loud song formula
- First “alternative” rock single of the 1990s to enter the top 10
Grunge rock, with its connection to punk culture, opened spaces for female musicians who have traditionally been limited to positions as fans - rather than creators - of hard rock and metal

- Many women-led rock bands in the early 1990s, including L7, The Breeders, Hole, Lush, and Jale

**The Breeders:**
“Cannonball” (1993)
A feminist movement in the early 1990s tied to the third wave of feminism

Focused on female empowerment and reclaiming the experiences and feelings of girlhood

Centred around Portland Oregon and Olympia Washington

Short-run homemade ‘zines critical to spreading the RG message
  - Encouraged community participation and activism
  - Reinforced the DIY approach of the movement
  - Prompted young women to start bands
  - Punk-style music focus on energy, aggression, and claiming space for women and sexual minorities
  - Asserted that sexuality in rock is constructed and contested

Key bands: Bikini Kill, Sleater Kinney, Bratmobile
Bikini Kill - “Rebel Girl”

That girl thinks she's the queen of the neighbourhood
She's got the hottest trike in town
That girl she holds her head up so high
I think I want to be her best friend, yeah

Chorus: Rebel girl rebel girl
Rebel girl you are the queen of my world
Rebel girl rebel girl
I think I want to take you home
I want to try on your clothes

When she talks, I hear the revolution
In her hips, there's revolutions
When she walks, the revolution's coming
In her kiss, I taste the revolution!

Chorus
That girl thinks she's the queen of the neighborhood
I got news for you, she is!
They say she's a dyke but I know
She is my best friend yeah
The Angry Women of Rock

- Alanis Morissette’s *Jagged Little Pill* became a surprise hit in 1995, with the very angry single “You Oughta Know”
- Started a trend for women who sang openly about sex, weren’t shy about addressing their issues with men, and used profanity
- Morissette and others cultivated a friendly relationship with the media
- On major labels from the start, music very “produced” and radio-friendly despite the “challenging” lyrics.
- Women were conventionally attractive and “properly” feminine
- Inherited the legacy of Riot Grrrl by setting shocking lyrics to familiar pop music
- Example of a radical subculture (women) being pulled into the mainstream and commodified

**Example artists:** Alanis Morissette, Fiona Apple, Meredith Brooks
Alanis Morissette - “You Oughta Know”
Pop Punk

- Pop punk combines the short songs, fast riffs and distorted guitars of 1970s punk with pop-influenced melodies and lyrical themes
- A reaction against both the dark themes and general no-fun-ness of grunge and the artificiality of hair metal
- Songs and videos often feature humour and a general playfulness
- A fixture on the charts from 1994 until the mid-2000s
- Achieved wide-spread popularity starting with Green Day’s album *Dookie* (1994), which produced three hit singles

**Key bands:** Green Day, Blink 182, Sum 41

- **Example:** Green Day - “Basket Case” (1994)
- **Example:** Blink 182 - “What’s My Age Again” (1999)
Alternative Hip Hop

• A style of Hip Hop that emerged in the early 1990s as an alternative to both the lightness of pop rap and the darkness of gangster rap

• Less noisy and confrontational than groups like Public Enemy and NWA, but with thoughtful, political, Afro-centric lyrics

• Featured wide-ranging samples from jazz and popular music combined in often psychedelic ways: called “sampledelic”

• Accessible sounds, but challenging ideas in the lyrics

• **Example**: A Tribe Called Quest - “Buggin’ Out” (1991)

• **Example**: De La Soul - “Eye Know” (1989)
Alternative R&B

- A style of R&B that emerged in the 1990s that fuses soul-style singing with elements of Hip Hop, Funk, and EDM
- Artists often both sing and rap
- Recordings feature a combination of “live” instruments and samples
- Expands the traditional R&B lyrical themes of love and romance to include social issues, often directly addressing the violence, materialism, and sexism of gangster rap
  - **Example:** Lauren Hill’s *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998), Album of the Year at the 1999 Grammy Awards - “Doo Wop”
  - **Example:** D’Angelo - “Feel Like Makin’ Love” (2000)
“New” Country

• New marketing strategies and sales-tracking technology in the early 1990s made country one of the most popular genres of American music, with huge record sales

• Many artists achieved chart success by combining traditional country sounds with production and performance styles drawn from stadium rock

• Vocalists maintained the country “twang” and the steel guitar and fiddle of Honky Tonk, but added big pop production styles drawn from rock and pop music

• Lyrical subjects focused on rural heritage and the “outsider” pride of rural people in an increasingly urbanized world

• Key artists: Garth Brooks, Shania Twain, Luke Bryan and Taylor Swift
Garth Brooks

- Singer and songwriter known for integrating elements of rock music into country
- The most commercially successful country artist of the 1990s, selling over 60 million records
- Wore a cowboy hat with a microphone attached to perform in a way similar to rock musicians
- Added rock growl to vocal twang
- Big, glossy production style on his records
- **Example:** “I Got Friends in Low Places” (1990)
Shania Twain

- From Timmins, Ontario
- Best selling female country artist of all time
- Brought a big, pop sound to country music that echoed stadium rock of the 1980s - set the template for other country artists to follow
- Provocative videos that scandalized the country establishment
- Videos and performances were both sex-positive and empowering
- **Example:** “Any Man of Mine” (1995)
Bro Country

- By 2012 the most popular genre in America, based on sales
- Lyrical themes of drinking, partying, trucks and girls
- Emphasis on rock elements: distorted guitars, big stadium shows, bad boy image
- Criticized by other country musicians and commentators for its depiction of women
- Production techniques drawn from pop and hip hop
Taylor Swift

- Young singer/songwriter who identified as a country artist
- Obvious country markers are absent in later music, but are clear on first records
- Appealed to a younger generation of fans, drawing them to country music


- Disappointed many fans by “going pop”
- How did she mark her shift from country to pop?

  **Example**: “Shake it Off” (2015)
The Internet and MP3

The Big Business Collapse

- **MP3** - file compression algorithm that allows for the reduction of an audio file to a fraction of its actual size
- MP3 technology hated by record companies because it was developed by software engineers completely outside of the music industry, unlike LPs, cassettes, and CDs
- Digital technology **freed music from the media** on which it used to be carried, the sale of which could be controlled by corporations
- **Napster** (1999): Peer-to-Peer file sharing allowed users to share music. Shut down in 2001, but technology can not be stopped
- Napster followed by Kazaa, Limewire, Pirate Bay, etc.
- Many lawsuits ensued as people shared their music freely
- Digital technology wiped out nearly overnight the main revenue stream of big pop artists
- Entertainment corporations have been struggling to get back to the huge profits they made before 2000
- **iTunes** founded as an industry response to digital piracy: the plan was to replace sales of physical media with digital media. It hasn’t worked.
- Artists continue to measure their success against Michael Jackson and Madonna, but without the revenue streams of earlier artists
New Business Models

• **The digital era** means that artists now have **more control** over how they produce and distribute their music, but **less opportunity** to profit from their music

• Artists now aim to **license** their music for TV, movies, and commercials to make money from their recordings

• Concert tickets prices have gone up significantly

• **Artist options**: Pay What You Can/Want, give music away, free download codes with the purchase of a vinyl record…

• No dominant new business model has yet emerged to replace the lost revenue from sales of recordings

• **Streaming** the current best/most used thing, but revenues are very small for most artists

• In 2017 Billboard starting measuring Spotify and YouTube streams to gauge hits - record sales hardly account for chart position

• Streaming-based charts now calculate how many times we listen, not just when we purchased an album/song
New Business Models

2007: English art-rock band Radiohead release their album *In Rainbows* as a pay-what-you-want digital download from their website, bypassing their record company.

2014: Irish rock band U2 strike a deal with Apple and their album *Songs of Innocence* was forcibly downloaded into every iTunes users’ library.

2015: American rock band Wilco release their album *Star Wars* as a free digital download, banking on touring revenue to make their money back.
Responses to Streaming

• When Ed Sheeran’s album ÷ was released in 2017, thanks to streaming every song on the album was in the top 20 in the UK. ÷ was streamed 6.3 billion times in 2018

• Drake’s 2018 album Scorpio may be as long as it is because artists make more money the more streams they get. Scorpio was streamed 170 million times on its day of release

• Beyoncé’s 2016 album Lemonade did not have a hard copy version until long after it’s release - the only way to hear it was on Tidal, or buy a digital version

• Beyoncé’s strategy to make money in the streaming era: release a video album to drum up fan interest, put together a huge show to make money on concert tours

• Unclear if artists will be able to sustain their profit margins in the future, or how much of their income will come from music, once record companies don’t control the flow of music
The Modern Song Machine

- **Max Martin**: Swedish songwriter and producer working in the US - real name is Karl Martin Sandberg
- Modern successor to Tin Pan Alley, the Brill Building, and Motown Records
- A “ghostwriter”: keeps his name and face out of the spotlight, crafts hits for the big stars
- Supports the audience’s assumption that their favourite artists write their own songs
- Has written 22 #1 hits, behind only Paul McCartney and John Lennon (The Beatles)
- Insists artists sings his songs exactly as he records them on his demos
- Researched and perfected the modern pop song formula: the first hook has to come within 7 seconds of the start of a song
- Freely mixes genres in a way American producers do not
- You want a hit, go to Max Martin
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Artist(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>&quot;...Baby One More Time&quot;</td>
<td>Britney Spears</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>&quot;It's Gonna Be Me&quot;</td>
<td>NSYNC</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>&quot;I Kissed a Girl&quot;</td>
<td>Katy Perry</td>
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<td>&quot;So What&quot;</td>
<td>P!nk</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>&quot;My Life Would Suck Without You&quot;</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>&quot;3&quot;</td>
<td>Britney Spears</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>&quot;California Gurls&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Raise Your Glass&quot;</td>
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<td>Katy Perry featuring Kanye West</td>
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<td>&quot;Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.)&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Part of Me&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Roar&quot;</td>
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<td>2014</td>
<td>&quot;Dark Horse&quot;</td>
<td>Katy Perry featuring Juicy J</td>
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<td>&quot;Shake It Off&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Blank Space&quot;</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>&quot;Bad Blood&quot;</td>
<td>Taylor Swift featuring Kendrick Lamar</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>&quot;Can't Feel My Face&quot;</td>
<td>The Weeknd</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>&quot;Can't Stop the Feeling!&quot;</td>
<td>Justin Timberlake</td>
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The Max Martin Near-Miss List

Max Martin songs that just missed #1
“Everybody (Backstreet’s Back) - Backstreet Boys
“Show Me Love” - Robyn
“Tearin’ Up My Heart” - N’SYNC
“You Drive Me Crazy” - Britney Spears
“I Want It That Way” - Backstreet Boys
“It’s My Life” - Bon Jovi
“Oops I Did It Again” - Britney Spears
“Since You Been Gone” - Kelly Clarkson
“U + Ur Hand” - Pink
“Hot N Cold” - Katy Perry
“DJ Got Us Fallin’ In Love” - Usher
“Kesha” - Blow
“Dynamite” - Taio Cruz
“Till The World Ends” - Britney Spears
“Wide Awake” - Katy Perry
“I Knew You Were Trouble” - Taylor Swift
“Break Free” - Ariana Grande
“Style” - Taylor Swift
The Modern Song Machine
Hip Hop Methodology

- The story of pop music since the mid-1980s has been the influence of **hip hop production styles** on popular music.
- Pop music continually borrows the sound of hip hop and rap music, usually replacing the “rapping” with singing.
- Hip Hop music production innovations:
  i. using drum loops derived from samples and/or drum machines
  ii. building songs from pre-existing songs
  iii. privileging electronic, “artificial” sounds over traditional instruments
  iv. building songs on rhythms and bass lines rather than chord progressions
  v. elevating the importance of the bass
  vi. Treating the voice as a sound to manipulate
- Example of the sonic borrowing: Kanye West’s “Mercy” (2012) and Ariana Grande’s “God Is A Woman” (2018)
DJ’s Versus Producers

- Grey area in contemporary popular music: what’s the difference?
- Unlike the disco and early hip hop eras, DJs now often create their own music to play, rather than playing other records
- Many contemporary DJs do make mixes out of existing songs, much like disco DJs
- The main distinctions:
  i. DJs - though they may sell their productions - make the bulk of their living playing clubs and parties. In this way they are close to traditional touring musicians.
  ii. Most of the music that DJs make is for their own use at their own events, and are complete works
  iii. Producers make music in their studios, and release them as recordings for sale and radio play
  iv. Producers often collaborate with singers or other artists, allowing their beats to be made into pop songs
  v. Producers might not play live, make their money making records to sell

Example: Dead Mau5 is primarily a DJ, and Avicii was a producer
Kanye West

- **Kanye West**: American rapper, singer, and record producer
- Started out as a producer influenced by Wu Tang Clan, worked with Jay Z
- Transition to rapping hindered by his lack of “street cred” as suburban, middle class person
- 2004 debut *The College Dropout* which addressed the urban/suburban divide by foregrounding his middle-class status to create a new space in the rap sphere for “middle class” rap
  - **Example**: “We Don’t Care”
- Pioneers the use of auto-tune to create a kind of sing-rapping on *808s and Heartbreak* (2008), creates the template for D’rake and the pop-hip hop to follow
  - **Example**: “Love Lockdown”
Drake

- **Aubrey Drake Graham**: Toronto-born popular artist and basketball enthusiast
- Filled the space opened by Kanye West for a suburban, middle class, “sensitive” artist in the rap game
- Generally dismissed for his rap skills, favours a mumbling, half-rapping, half-singing, heavily auto-tuned style pioneered by Kanye West on *808s And Heartbreaks*
- Stylistic chameleon: works closely with producer Noah “40” Shebib, who is constantly looking for the latest sounds and has a keen ear for a pop hook
- The most successful artist in the new streaming-based music economy, has learned how to create content that works in that medium: “mixtape/playlist” albums, **very long** albums, features with other artists
- **Influential track**: “Take Care” - built on Kanye West’s sound to create a new mainstream hip hop/R&B/pop hybrid
The New Pop Stardom

- Social media and hip hop production styles/aesthetics have changed our understanding of what a pop star is.
- The Michael Jackson/Madonna template - a singer/dancer/conventionally attractive artist - that has been dominant since the early 1980s has begun to collapse.
- Younger artists are more musically diverse (freely mixing styles), engaged in multiple cultural fields (fashion, TV/movies), and directly connected to their fan base through social media.
- Artists can now create their own music and images without corporate or professional support (record labels, Max Martin-style producers).
- The stream eco-system is less dependent on albums, and more accurately measures grass-roots listening habits, allowing for “surprise” hits from little-known artists.
- Artists aren’t necessarily banking on “music” as a profession/career, but focusing on larger cultural relevance and visibility.
The Biggest Hit of All Time
Homework

Final Test