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## *A Critical (and interdisciplinary) Survey of Popular Music Genre Theories*

**ABSTRACT:** Genres are among the most discussed topics in popular music studies. The attempt to explain issues as complex and layered as how musical genres are born, how they work and what they ontologically are cannot avoid opening a box full of theoretical problems, questions and tools that need to be understood and used in order to say something significant on genre today. Despite the long story of this theoretical debate (roots of which can be traced back to ancient Greece) and the variety of disciplines involved (e.g. literature, music and film studies, but also philosophy, sociology, cultural studies and semiotics), it is difficult to find survey papers that can give an overview of such a rich research environment. This paper attempts to fill that void by trying to systematize the main (contemporary) perspectives on musical genre, in particular non-essentialist theories coming from the overlapping fields of musicology and sociology. Most importantly, its overview stresses the necessity of an interdisciplinary study of musical genre, which – as an *exemplum* of extraordinarily layered phenomenon of the human production of culture – intertwines technical, social, discursive, commercial, historical and other elements, thus requiring an approach capable of accounting for as much of its many layers of meaning as possible.

**KEYWORDS:** genre, theory, style, popular music, discourse, interdisciplinarity, community

### A long and wide story

When studying issues related to popular music, you will hardly meet a theme that finds its roots as far from our time as the concept of ‘genre’ does (*length*). Thanks to the fact that they have something to do with many different kinds of art – like literature, as well as music and cinema – genre theories can also count on a wide array of ideas and suggestions elaborated from different perspectives (*width*). So, few things in popular music studies can be seen as having such a *long* and wide story, yet, for someone who wants to get an idea of what has been going on in this field of research in the last 30–40 years, it is not easy to find an introductory essay or book that really tries to draw a map of

the subject.<sup>1</sup> A lot has been written on the topic, but almost exclusively (and legitimately) with the aim of taking part in the theoretical debate, of course mentioning other positions and giving some (even large) context, but without actually trying to make order in such a complex field. My task here is not to explore the theoretical positions concerning musical genre in all the length and width that the theme affords, yet to give immediate access to some of the main points emerging from theories, debates and concepts that characterized the research on genre in musicology and not only that. Indeed, my second aim is to convince the reader of the absolute necessity of employing an interdisciplinary approach when studying such themes. Despite being so long and wide, in fact, the evolution of genre theories does not always take full advantage of all the diverse inputs from the different ages and disciplines involved. Although I will not be allowed to dig too deep into single theories – this is a task that I leave to the reader, who will hopefully know better where to head to learn more about the topic, after reading this paper – I hope that the limits of past, present and future theoretical perspectives that end up being self-referential (or, so to say: *not-interdisciplinary-enough*) will be evident by the end of this introductory essay, a sort of critical survey paper close to the model that is more popular in other fields.

### To be or not to be? Essentialist and non-essentialist theories

Someone should write a monograph titled *Music Genre: from Aristotle to Spotify*. I will not be that brave person (not today, at least), but I cannot stress enough how amazing it is to have such a rich field of study at hand – so rich, that mentioning our ancestors in that hypothetical book title would definitely be not inappropriate. Indeed, the roots of all research on the concept of *genos* (from the Greek *genos*, ‘lineage’) can be traced back to Aristotle’s time – although it mainly concerned literature. Concerning Aristotle, there is a distinction that has to be made immediately: that between essentialist and non-essentialist theories. The approach of the Stagirite was in fact an essentialist one, meaning that he considered genres as something *really* existing in nature, which people can do nothing but describe. There is a certain factuality in genres: they are there, in the work, where we can recognize them. The same idea has been variously declined by Theophrastus and Horace (the latter, in particular, inaugurated the prescriptive tradition: genres exist and, as we describe them, we are also telling the authors how they should use them), then filtered by the evolutionist theories in the nineteenth century (here genres were described employing biological metaphors, subjected to evolutionary models) and finally arriving to contemporary literary theories, like the one elaborated by Northrop Frye (1957),

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<sup>1</sup> The closest attempts at producing something in that direction can probably be found in Moore 2001a mainly focusing on the role of ‘style’ and its relationship with genre, mostly taking theories coming from other disciplinary fields into account) and, more recently, in the first pages of Brackett (2016).

who recognized elements similar to Jungian archetypes – attributable to the profound needs of human beings – within genres, as if they were a sort of modern myths.<sup>2</sup> Only in relatively recent days, scholars have seriously begun to consider the role of history and its agents – not just authors, but also communities, critics and the cultural industry – in the formation of genres. This does not mean that essentialist theories are completely gone today: there are indeed several ideas that tend to overlook the historical and discursive dimensions of genres, such as the theories based on prototypes (e.g., Lakoff, 1987) or ‘schemata’ (e.g., Levitin, 2008), which give credit to ‘explanations based ultimately on neural phenomena, on the formation of cognitive and behavioral habits hardwired in human bodies’ (Fabbri, 2012, p. 181). Generally speaking, such theories tend to describe genre models that are static and to underestimate the pragmatic and social aspects of how genres live and change. Reductionist approaches like these – as it happens in fields that are very distant from that of genres – tend to let go of too many paramount factors that seem to be characteristic of what a genre (or culture, in general) is, and happen to fail in accounting for the fluid and somewhat ‘arbitrary’ definitions of genres – an arbitrariness that theory should try to understand, or at least describe.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, their often-superficial dialogue with other disciplines and especially humanities (in the diffuse conviction that pure science is by itself sufficient to explain everything that relates human beings) is the exact opposite of what this paper tries to promote, namely an interdisciplinary approach to the matter. Let us therefore narrow the field of investigation to non-essentialist theories only, and it will be clear in a moment which kind of important aspects I was referring to.

If it is true that genre theories can be dated very far back in time, this is mainly true when it comes to literature. Genre *in music* is a less-studied field (Holt, 2007, pp. 4–6), on the one hand because classical musicology tends to consider ‘genre’ as something purely formal (in the field of art music, in fact, genre usually describes the form of the composition, e.g. symphony, Lied, concerto) (Moore, 2001b, pp. 85–86), and on the other hand because the legitimization of popular music studies – which were responsible for the rediscovery of the musicological interest in genre theories – is something we have only recently achieved, and not everywhere in the world to the same degree. Beyond the skepticism of those who emphasize the contingency, instability or even the futility of the idea of ‘genre’, it is difficult not to notice that today it is substantially impossible for us not only to study this concept, but also to consistently use it (Brackett, 2016, pp. 1–3). In this sense, I believe that the observations offered by Simon Frith in his analysis of music genres are a good starting point: he states that genres are indispens-

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<sup>2</sup> For more complete accounts of this concept from Aristotle to the last century, see: Altman, 1999, pp. 1–12; Fabbri, 1981, pp. 55–63; Bechis, 2004, pp. 3–11, Tomatis, 2015, pp. 61–128.

<sup>3</sup> The contrast between these two kinds of approach emerges quite clearly from Franco Fabbri’s (2008a) review of an important book on genre by Fabian Holt (2007). Of course, studying things from an ethnographic perspective (as it happens in Holt, 2007 or in Thornton, 1995, where the subcultural capital of specific communities is analyzed) does not prevent anyone from elaborating a theory and, once again, a hybrid model seems to be the best option.

able at least for ‘organiz[ing] music making, music listening and music selling’ (Frith, 1996, p. 88). Indeed, genres allow the music industry to map the audience using their expectations as main rationale, thus optimizing its communication strategies; but, at the same time, they also regulate the work of distributors and retailers – or, at least, this was true before the streaming came. Moreover, they also allow musicians to always have a sort of intuitive musical expertise at hand, so that they understand one another without entering too much into technical descriptions (e.g., ‘give it some funk!’ works better than a thousand words describing what the bandmates should do); they also provide critics with useful tools for making sound comparisons and for building the most diverse genealogies, which are helpful for the audience for decoding and referring to the music they listen to.

In the field of popular music, the discursive agents involved in the definition of a genre are manifold, and they must be located within a context that is much more fluid than that of – say – cinema. Indeed, it is much more difficult to isolate the popular music text from the context than it is in the case of a literary or cinematographic work, because of its ‘natural’ and constantly renewed intertwinement with the social factor, which thus probably deserves to be prioritized (Bechis, 2004, pp. 22–37). This is also understandable: subjected music is a practice that *is made*, while films or books *are there*, and exist as objects, which can be more easily – but equally improperly – decontextualized, just as it can happen for the music of the classical canon, when it is conceived primarily in the form of written text. This is perhaps one of the reasons why it is the *sociological* approach that often prevails in the accounts of popular music genre, although the theme can (and should) be analyzed from a variety of additional perspectives. After all, it is important to remember that music is the reason why all discourses and practices surrounding the theme of music genre exist. It can sometimes happen that otherwise enlightening sociological theories do little more than recalling here and there the fact that they are talking about things related to music and focus almost exclusively on the analysis of social factors, to the point of occasionally getting to conclusions that, from a musicological perspective, may almost seem paradoxical. This is one of the reasons why musicologists have often tried to give more centrality to the musicological aspects of the problem of genre, without forgetting the undisputable importance of social factors. Almost all theories I will mention can be seen as stressing either the musical or the sociological aspect, often striving to keep them both together, emphasizing different aspects of the problem and occasionally involving other disciplines as well. So, the study of genre in this field is particularly challenging because of all of these factors, and in order to say anything meaningful we should probably start from Jason Toynbee’s (2000, p. 103) statement about the fact that popular music genres are not textual essences, nor comprehensive codes, but rather, quoting film scholar Steve Neale: ‘systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject’ (1980, p. 19). This is another common ground for most non-essentialist theories, but it is only the starting point which, as it is easy to guess, opens a whole lot of paths of study ready to be tread.

## Preliminary distinctions: genre vs style / genre vs mainstream

One of the first problems that scholars of musical genres have to face is a terminological one: the distinction between ‘genre’ and ‘style’. Although sometimes the two terms are used essentially as synonyms (Shuker, 1994, p. 119), more frequently their distinction has required some theorization. Allan Moore is perhaps the scholar who has insisted the most on the importance of this distinction, perhaps because he seems to go against the tide in stating – in line with traditional musicology – that *genre* has *exclusively* to do with musical form (e.g., a fugue, a narrative song, an uptempo dance number or a ballad), which is then performed in a certain style (e.g., the style of Bach or rock), further specified in the single artists’ *idiolects* (Moore, 2001b, pp. 94–95).<sup>4</sup> So, every genre that we usually call so (e.g., rock, funk, jazz) has stylistic and genre features, each of them highlighting different aspects of it. It is more or less like describing the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of a song, respectively (Moore, 2001c, p. 3). Although Moore stresses the point that the two terms should be used in a non-hierarchical way (i.e. style should not be subsumed within genre) and that they are complementary ways of describing a song, in a way that is perhaps the most musicologically precise we can think of, a possible problem is that this approach is apparently quite distant from the way genres are conceived (and used) outside the academy (Fabbri, 2008b, p. 73; Wall, 2003, pp. 145–146). For this reason, on the other side, Franco Fabbri’s approach (1982) may distance itself from the traditional terminology, but it remains consistent with the widespread use of the concept of ‘genre’ and does not seem to create any problem when it subordinates style to genre (as we shall see, style is a specification concerning a precise aspect of genre).<sup>5</sup> In Fabbri’s idea, indeed, musical style (certain formal conventions, recurrent musical solutions and sounds, and so on) is but one of the many aspects to be taken into consideration when defining a genre, as a discursive entity concerning many aspects of music consumption and making. So, from this perspective, ‘hard rock’ is a genre that implies a certain musical style – a certain way of playing – as well as other features that do not relate with music directly – and this is why other disciplines (starting from sociology) need to get in the game (a necessity that is mentioned in Borthwick & Moy, 2004, pp. 1–4, as well).

Another important distinction we can find in genre theories is that between mainstream (often identified with pop music) and other genres. Or rather: *the*

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<sup>4</sup> In the *Introduction* of Moore 2001c, a summarized version of Moore’s position can be found.

<sup>5</sup> The debate with Moore was inevitable (see virtually any bibliographical entry by both authors), and apparently not free from misunderstandings: this is quite explicit in Fabbri’s words (2008b, p. 73), who is not satisfied with Moore’s considerations on his theory, while an extended exposition of Moore’s position (2001b, 2009) reveals a theory that looks potentially much more complex and articulated than it is in Fabbri’s paraphrases – for instance, it does not seem completely true that for Moore ‘hard rock’ is exclusively a style and not a genre, although this actually seems implied in Moore’s sentences cited by Fabbri. The result is a theoretical Pandora’s box that now we would better close again.

*genres*. In fact, if genres are linked to an intersection between certain musical and socio-discursive aspects, connected with specific subcultures and communities, the mainstream typically aims at becoming a sort of ‘universal music’ which the widest possible audience (i.e. nobody in particular) should be able to enjoy – thus also losing all stylistic coherence (Toynbee, 2000, p. 122). We can therefore consider the mainstream as something closer to a way of production than to a genre, just like we usually do with Tin Pan Alley music (and even more vaguely than that), or with Muzak and other similar labels (e.g., black music, Top 100...) that do not have an actual discursively established canon nor relationship between musical texts and practices, integrated in a certain tradition with a social basis, as genres usually have (Holt, 2007, pp. 16–19; Lena, 2012, pp. 20–22).<sup>6</sup>

Roy Shuker is among those scholars who do not seem to consider the categories of pop and mainstream as fully overlapping. When he defines pop in opposition to rock (Shuker, 1994, pp. 122–124), he mentions its less ambitious nature, which brings it closer to a form of mainstream entertainment. But mainstream is not fully described by pop, since songs belonging to other genres may, at least for some time, find themselves at the top of the charts. That’s why Jennifer Lena suggests the ‘pure pop’ label for that kind of music that aims at the widest audience possible, which takes part in the mainstream along with ‘genre’ tracks that become particularly popular for a given period of time (Lena, 2012, p. 21). This can also happen through a hybridization phenomenon studied by David Brackett among others: the crossover. It takes place when music from more or less niche genres manages to reach the mainstream level (Brackett, 2002, pp. 69–80; Toynbee, 2000, pp. 119–122). Fabian Holt describes similar situations as well: he argues that genres are encoded, in the first place, within communities that he calls ‘center collectivities’, which are responsible for the discursive definition of genres, but this phase is followed by an ongoing renegotiation that often takes place within a dialectical process involving the mainstream and the industry’s requests. The latter process allows genres to take advantage of new technologies and fashions, both factors that give motion to the ‘modernization’ process. Industry also standardizes genres and, in doing so, sometimes compromises them, or uses problematic labels as long as they work (e.g., world music) (Holt, 2007, pp. 20–32). If using an exclusively musicological perspective and taking the sole style into account, one might not find significant differences between ‘genre music’ and mainstream music, so this fact once again emphasizes the importance of an interdisciplinary approach.

### Hints from another dimension: Rick Altman’s theory

One of the most useful non-essentialist theories comes from the field of film studies and is Rick Altman’s. His care for the various discursive agents who play the ‘game of genres’ is evident from the very beginning of his argumen-

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<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there are scholars who warn us about the risks of deciding by ourselves what may and may not be considered as an actual genre, see Tomatis (2015, pp. 82–83).



tation, as he mentions a couple of theories from the field of literature that come close to his conception of genres (Altman, 1999, pp. 7–11): those elaborated by Todorov and by Hirsch. In fact, Todorov (1970) fights back the aforementioned theory by Frye, and thus distinguishes between theoretical genres (which are basically abstractions, derived from theory of literature) and historical genres (the real and ever-changing incarnations of genres, derived from observation). Hirsch (1967) instead emphasizes the relationship between readers and genres, stating that the reader constructs the meaning of the text basing the process on his/her own expectations, which are in turn linked to the genre classification he/she has in mind. The main critique Altman moves to such positions is that they do still underestimate the weight of critics in genre formation.

In *Film/Genre* Altman elaborates a new ‘semantic/syntactic/pragmatic theory’ (Altman, 1999, pp. 207–215), which stresses the inclusion of the cinematographic genre in a network of relationships between spectators, critics, production companies, authors; all subjects characterized by different interests and needs, which lead to different readings of the syntactic/semantic layer of the film, and therefore to different (and often conflicting) classifications – that is: to different ‘uses’ (for this reason the approach is also ‘pragmatic’) of the genres themselves. Hence the precariousness of film genres. While it is important to understand how the industry gives shape to genres by serializing films that are superficially similar (Altman, 1999, p. 36), and how the critics ratify the industry’s work by categorizing each film into a single canonized genre (Altman, 1999, p. 127) – a thing that the industry avoids doing, in order to address an audience as wide as possible (Altman 1999, pp. 54–62) – one must also take into account the fact that *frontal* communication (from the industry to the audience) does not convey a definitive message, but something that is bound to be renegotiated through *lateral* communication (from user to user, see Altman, 1999, pp. 169–173). This means that the classification is not imposed by any entity on anyone or absorbed uncritically by the audience (as Adorno would probably argue), yet it is renegotiated by peer discourse at the ‘lower levels’ of the hierarchy. In order to understand his position, Altman invites us (quoting Wittgenstein) to carry out the ‘look and see’ experiment (Altman, 1999, pp. 96–97): suppose we enter different kinds of stores and notice that the same items are grouped in different ways according to the aspects that the different retailers decide to highlight as shared by the items. We could find sausages near other kinds of meat, but one may prefer to put them near some kind of soft bread for hot dogs. The same happens with genre categorization, since genres are discursive instances created by concrete interlocutors located in particular situations and owning very specific purposes – although all of this is often hidden behind the naturalization (and thus often essentialization) of genres (Altman, 1999, p. 99).

Discursivity meets pragmatism in Altman’s theory, which can be partially re-used in areas other than cinema (Altman, 1999, p. 215), but in that case we need to reflect upon how much of it we can really borrow when discussing about music. One aspect that might need some revision in the musical context is the role of society: as Toynbee argues, in fact, cinema is largely produced by huge institutions that are located quite far from the community – films are in a sense dropped on

the audience's heads – while music often emerges from within the communities themselves, where listeners are also musicians and vice versa (Toynbee, 2000, p. 110).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Holt also points out that both cinematographic and literary fields have only few things in common with the field of music, which production is much more fluid and thus the limits of genres are constantly questioned down to the level of individual creativity – and this is further complicated by the fact that music, unlike the other two 'art worlds' mentioned, is not a referential means of expression (Holt, 2007, pp. 4–5). So, genre classifications within cinema and literature are based on more objective classifications as they are linked to deeply established and very basic (and thematic) categories, and not so much on norms accepted by a community (Bechis, 2004, p. 34). But crossing perspectives coming from fields that look far one from the other can always provide us with insightful suggestions. Indeed, I argue that at least the most general statements of Altman's theory remain valid within the field of music and highlight an important aspect of genre: its pragmatic side.

### Musicological perspectives: Franco Fabbri's theory and its developments

One of the most frequently mentioned genre theories was made in the 1980s by the Italian musicologist Franco Fabbri (1981, 1982, 2008b, 2012). He defines 'genre' as a set (in a mathematical sense, so that it can easily include intersections and sub-sets) of real or possible musical events whose course is governed by socially accepted norms (Fabbri, 1982, p. 52), then he describes all of those norms as follows (Fabbri 1982, pp. 54–59; Fabbri, 2008b, pp. 76–85):

- technical/formal norms: related to style, they are conventions concerning formal elements of music (including the 'ways of playing') and lyrics;<sup>8</sup>
- semiotic norms: inherent to the meaning of music, spacing from how it should be interpreted to what kind of spatial positioning one expects from the participants in the musical event;
- behavioral norms: concern what is expected from the artist's behavior, also with respect to his/her relationship with the audience and mediators;
- social and ideological norms: inherent to the social base of the genre and its ideological connotations;
- economical and juridical norms: linked to the material conditions that underlie a genre, its means of production and legislation.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, literally independent film production is also a thing, but much less frequent than its musical equivalent, at least because of the very pragmatic fact that it is usually much more expensive.

<sup>8</sup> In Fornäs (1995) style seems to be similarly subsumed within genre, as he argues that 'genre is a set of rules for generating musical works' and that 'a style is a particular formation of formal relations in one single work, in the total work of an artist, or in a group of works across many genres' (pp. 111, 124). However, Moore argues that here we can witness the glimpse of a more equal treatment of the two concepts (2001a, p. 440).



According to Fabbri, a new genre is formed when the norms of a pre-existing genre begin to wear out: the audience already knows what to expect and diverts its interest towards those instances of music that break those conventions, creating the 'core' for the development of a new genre (Fabbri, 2008b, pp. 86–88). In Fabbri's perspective, indeed, violating the norms means making avant-garde music, which can then in turn be codified, thus becoming a genre with precise norms, most likely destined to become outdated in turn, sooner or later (Fabbri, 1981, p. 54).

Fabbri's theory has often been criticized for the supposedly rigidity of its system of norms, which would not fully account for the fluidity of genres. Simon Frith, for instance, points out that genres are constantly evolving and both excessive adherence to the rules and too much transgression are usually punished by the audience (Frith, 1996, pp. 93–94). Keith Negus' position is also similar, as he emphasizes the presence of a 'continuous dynamism' in genre, from the musicians' point of view, and contrasts Fabbri's perspective with that of Angel Quintero Rivera (1998), a Salsa scholar who replaces the concept of 'genre' with that of 'practice': genres are thus fluid 'manners of making music' involving certain quite general traits and ideals, which can be declined very differently in a range of particular stylistic contexts (Negus, 1999).<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Lena also gets back to this point when discussing the birth of new kinds of music from established genres in their decadent phase – a new avant-garde that leads to a new genre that is only loosely connected with its original incarnation, perhaps just ideologically. Lena mentions the example of post-punk, a genre born from the ashes of punk as an alternative to its more purist and revivalist (and derivative) offshoots, and which virtually shares with it only that 'manner of doing things' that is the Do It Yourself ideology (Lena, 2012, pp. 52–55).

David Brackett, however, defends Fabbri's position pointing out that the norms featured in his theory are to be understood as descriptive more than prescriptive – inductive rather than deductive (Brackett, 2016, p. 7). Another supporter of the theory is Gianni Sibilla, who revisits it in light of the semiotics of communication (Sibilla, 2003, pp. 31–43). He defines 'genre' as 'a particular choice and combination of codes that contribute to define a text' (Sibilla, 2003, p. 33), and then indicates four levels of its articulation, which partly overlap with Fabbri's norms: the linguistic-semiotic level, the historical-productive level, the psychological level and the sociological-industrial level. We could say that these levels are primarily related, respectively, to the author, the critics, the audience and the industry. In particular, the historical-productive level underlines the importance of critics in the creation of a tradition in which the text is inserted, which, together with the systematization work carried out by industry, creates the set of expectations and preconceptions that guide the audience's music consumption – that is the psychological level. These facts speak for the validity of some of Altman's claims in the field of music. However, Fabbri himself has re-

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<sup>9</sup> The theme of transformation and of genre fluidity in general also emerges from the case studies analyzed in Holt (2007).

cently (2012) revisited his own theory, focusing on the diachronic processes that transform genres, thus bringing under the spotlight aspects that were mostly implicit in its original formulation. In particular, he writes no more of ‘rules’ (or equivalents), yet employs the softer term ‘convention’ (not strictly prescriptive, but rather fluid), stressing the idea that genre conventions are not stipulated by communities in an explicit way (Lewis, 2002), yet implicitly ratified in the crucial act of naming a genre (Fabbri, 2012, pp. 184–190), carried out by a community which can be both physical and imagined (Anderson, 2000) – or, one could add, ‘virtual’, as it is frequent today.

### Sociological perspectives: Simon Frith’s model and its heritage

In *Performing Rites*, Simon Frith describes genre as an organizing principle for making, listening to and selling music, as he seeks to identify the relationship between genres and the creation of value in popular music employing a sociological toolkit (1996, pp. 94–95). Keith Negus locates his study in the same sociologically oriented ground and focuses more specifically on the relationship between genre and industry, claiming that ‘industry produces culture and culture produces industry’ (1999, p. 14). Regarding the first part of the statement, Negus refers to the way practices, forms and ‘contents’ of music are influenced by commercial criteria, in line with the ‘production of culture’ perspective (Peterson & Berger, 1975), without conceding too much ground to structuralist and instrumentalist optics: indeed, for Negus the industry – while aiming at maximizing profits through certain strategies – does not play the role of manipulator, but rather of *mediator* between the musicians and the audience, relating (through the institutionalization of genres) both those fundamental agents within a field of cultural production *à la* Bourdieu (Negus, 1999, pp. 14–19).<sup>10</sup> The second part of the statement alludes to the fact that, in the scheme I just outlined, the cultural context does not have a neutral effect on the way the industry works; on the contrary, culture is not coming from above as an invention made by the industry in a specific and unchangeable way, yet is born in a context of cultural formations and practices the industry must be aware of (Negus, 1999, pp. 19–21). The industry does not define the meaning of music, the production of culture does not work mechanically, and culture is not a product created through a dehumanizing production routine (and in this sense Negus also distances himself from the Frankfurt School, see 1999, pp. 21–23). Simply put, the industry tries to give a convenient form to what, at least to some extent, remains essentially linked to communities and their subcultures. The dialectic between the two moments

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<sup>10</sup> A field of production is (Bourdieu, 1994) a sort of social environment in which cultural production takes place in a certain way thanks to the various forces operating within the field itself, following certain rules that are often not comprehensible from the outside. They offer to the involved social actors positions (which are determined by their cultural and sometimes economic capital) from which they can act in different ways implying variable costs, possibilities and profits.

implied in the initial statement is set in motion when the dynamic genres that arise within society are translated (not from zero, yet from what they already are) into conventions and expectations by the industry. In this way, genres become static enough to serve as reference points for artists who want to approach the industry itself, which can then impact on creativity, by ‘imposing’ (or, rather, ‘proposing’) certain standards and models. This creates a genre culture that in turn, as it evolves, shapes the market and the industry, which then continues to select sellable material from the musical playground (Negus, 1999, pp. 181–182). Ultimately, Negus confirms Frith’s idea that the industry – through genre – has the function of connecting music (‘how it sounds’) to the market (‘who is buying it?’) (Frith, 1996, p. 76).

If Negus focuses on the role of industry, Jennifer Lena is more interested in genre archetypes and communities, trying to craft tools that can be useful for historiographic purposes – namely for the task of building ‘thick histories’ of genres not focusing on the action of single key-artists, but rather on discourses and actions of social groups and communities shaping genres (Lena, 2012, pp. 2–5). Lena analyzes the development of a large number of (American) genres and their communities, thus drawing general coordinates on recurring dynamics of genres conceived as art worlds in the fashion of Howard Becker, i.e. cultural production, distribution and consumption networks, which include technologies, regulatory systems, distribution systems, appreciation and critical organizations, gatekeepers and an audience (Lena, 2012, pp. 6–7).<sup>11</sup> From this point of view the *oeuvre* is marked by the context in which it is conceived and produced to such an extent that its creation can be attributed to a community rather than to a single individual.

The central section of Lena’s research work, however, concerns the results of the aforementioned comparison, from which emerge twelve common dimensions that contribute to the definition of all the analyzed genres, four genre-forms that are essentially the main recurring sets of combinations between the common dimensions, and two trajectories describing the most recurring paths followed by genres when transitioning from one genre-form to the following one. The common dimensions concern the organization of genres, also at a spatial level (i.e. organizational form, organizational scale, organizational locus), their economic and mediatic aspects (i.e. source of income and media coverage) and issues related to ideology and style (i.e. ideals, performance, technology, attitude towards neighboring genres, codes of appearance, language codes and source of the genre name, see Lena, 2012, pp. 10–20). The four genre-forms employ different combinations of these dimensions (Lena, 2012, pp. 27–74). The first form is the *avant-garde*, which usually arises from dissatisfaction with the previous music scene, but without precise objectives or codified rituals. Its proposal is often experimental, and the attention from the media is almost zero; only rarely, therefore, it is able to avoid withering and to get to the second genre-form, which Lena calls *scene-based*. In this case, objectives and codes are defined in a precise way, also because genres try to differentiate themselves from neighboring

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<sup>11</sup> For a first-hand definition, see Becker (1982, pp. 34–35).

scenes. Only in relatively rare cases, such a genre manages to gain (inter)national mediatic attention and thus becomes *industry-based*, a genre-form organized on the model of the industrial corporation, around which various companies and institutions gravitate, with income from records, licensing, merchandising, endorsement and monetization of anything. Finally, when the mainstream genre starts to wither, it moves on to its final form, the *traditionalist* one, which normally moves towards a preservation of the ‘pure’ music of the scene-based phase, free from compromises with the industry. Everything goes back to the dimension of clubs, and musicians who perform there (often for a few pennies) sometimes participate in festivals and conferences, getting attention through faithful magazines (and fanzines) or the internet, but beyond that there is little going on.

The sequence of genre-forms, in the same order I used to briefly explain them, also describes the main trajectory identified by Lena, which she calls ‘AgSIT’ (Avant-garde-Scene-Industry-Traditional). With ‘trajectories’ Lena designates ‘a cumulative, rather than repetitive, sequence of linked events, suggesting a certain directionality to change’ (2012, p. 65), useful to conceive a thick history made of passages between forms and with a focus on genre communities. The other recurring trajectory is ‘IST’, which identifies genres that are born within the industry (Lena cites the examples of cool jazz and nu metal, see 2012, p. 78) by already established artists, to then become scene-based and finally traditionalist. While Lena’s results have sometimes been criticized for the apparent reintegration of an essentialist perspective – or at least the drift from an integrally discursive perspective (Tomatis, 2015, pp. 82–84) – I cannot avoid asking myself if such an apparently objective classification of genres is not putting the musical phenomenon too far from our eyes (or ears). If it might be true that replacing vague categories (genres) proposed by industry and largely related to unstable stylistic traits with labels produced by the results of scientific research (the four genre-forms) can give a more solid and objective basis to the way we describe reality (Lena, 2012, p. 170), can we really replace a sentence like ‘I like free jazz’ with one similar to ‘I like noise’ (two genres which may be categorized in the same genre-form, but which are sonically very different one from the other) without irreparably compromising the richness of our discourse about music? This is where one single discipline (sociology) might become a bit too self-referential – or, to put it differently: not open to interdisciplinarity enough.

### An interdisciplinary auspice

I will now close the overview by briefly mentioning some studies that have tried to tie together approaches (and theoretical references) that go beyond musicology and sociology, as a proof of the potential a balanced interdisciplinary approach can have.<sup>12</sup> In one of the most recent monographs on the topic of genre,

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<sup>12</sup> This aspect is also stressed with particular strength in Brackett (2016), but also in Brackett (2002, pp. 79–80); we can also find it in Borthwick & Moy (2004, pp. 1–4); Bechis (2004, pp. 12, 29); Wall (2003, p. 147) where the complementarity of Fabbri’s and Frith’s theories is suggested.

David Brackett expresses his suspicion for the presentist and historicist<sup>13</sup> interpretations of musical genres' development, hence promoting a genealogical approach following the theories of Michel Foucault: it is necessary to ask how and why a certain reading of the history of a genre emerges and is institutionalized, by questioning the discourses that 'write' history, with special focus on accidents and forgotten elements, and on the reasons why *that* reading – and no other – stabilizes in an 'official' narration (Brackett, 2016, pp. 4–6).<sup>14</sup> What is particularly interesting in Brackett's approach is his tendency to re-read well-established notions of genre theory under the light of peculiar philosophical sources (but also linguistics play a role in his argumentations). In his pages we can read of hybridizations between Fabbri's theory and concepts drawn from theories by Ferdinand de Saussure and Manuel DeLanda (Brackett, 2016, pp. 7–10), but most importantly of explanations of the discursive nature of genres based on ideas borrowed from Jacques Derrida (1982) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) (Brackett, 2016, pp. 12–15). This allows him to dig deeper into more abstract yet paramount questions like the authorless nature of genres or the difficulty in finding the archetypal texts of a genre. In Brackett's perspective, texts shape genres, and not vice versa, even if then genre influences the texts in turn, providing conventions that the authors tend to follow. In short, genres are the product of collective creativity, and by 'citing' genre conventions in new texts, the latter interact with other texts created and with the audience's expectations, which are updated from time to time. This cross-pollination, given by circulating and shared ideas and associated with the interconnection between production and audience, leads us once again to Becker's art worlds.

One should never forget, however, to deal with very concrete phenomena after embarking on such complex theoretical digressions. Daniel Silver, Monica Lee and Clayton Childress are surely very aware of this, as they have proposed a study (2016) that starts from some sociologic assumptions on music genres and tries to verify their validity through statistical analysis of data collected from MySpace and concerning the way in which bands employ genre-labels in their descriptions. While admitting that the continuous proliferation of musical genres is becoming less and less significant at a social level, and that many of the functions of genres are now responsibility of the site's (or streaming platform's) algorithms, Silver et al. reject the idea of an upcoming age of musical 'omnivorism', and identify sixteen macro-communities subsumed under three agglomerations of genres – rock, hip-hop/rap and niche – of which not all seem to tolerate combinations that go beyond their comfort zone (in particular hip-hop seems to be a rather close-minded reality). Again, such attempts of reducing the frightening vastity of the research object may reveal some criticalities, but the more fields of knowledge we manage to involve in our research work, the more easily we can try to move through this conceptual jungle.

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<sup>13</sup> Presentism tries to interpret the genre from a present perspective (thus re-interpreting and modernizing past conceptions of the genre), while historicism collocates the genre in the supposed context corresponding to the time being analyzed. See Brackett (2016, p. 5) for more information.

<sup>14</sup> To read more about the method, see Foucault (1969).

This is especially true now that genre is being redefined by streaming services and thus the contributions of even more disciplines can become of paramount importance in the discovery of such a fascinating theme. Digitalization points to a whole new declination of the topic, that calls for a reconceptualization of many ideas we met in the previous pages. Holt's center collectivities, for instance, are now mainly virtual, while the processes described by Negus more than twenty years ago must be recontextualized in the present (and mostly digital) system of music distribution, creation and consumption. Moreover, the possible dissolution of the idea of 'genre' into a post-genre era dominated by mood-oriented and situational playlists, in which clashes of communities against one another will be nothing more than a bittersweet memory, might come true as Gen-Zers,<sup>15</sup> used as they are to the new ways of consumption and music labeling, are arguably using the concept of 'genre' in a very different fashion than older generations did (and perhaps still do). Despite the urgency for the scholarly world to rediscover genre from this new perspective<sup>16</sup> (adding disciplines like media studies and computer science to the interdisciplinary recipe), I am afraid this will be a task that, for now, I must leave unfulfilled.

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<sup>15</sup> The term refers to Gen Z, i.e. the generation of people born from the late 1990s until 2010.

<sup>16</sup> First signs of interest for the matter can be spotted in the existence of contributions such as Krogh, 2020, or Born & Brackett, forthcoming.



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