The Sound of the Roaring 2020s: The Wild World of Hyperpop

Document Number 2023-0814

May 13, 2023

Akari Hoshino

The Sound of the Roaring 2020s:

The Wild World of Hyperpop

The Sound of the Roaring 2020s:

The Wild World of Hyperpop

The original articles from whence this originated were published in March 2021 -- this is a reformatting to aid with readability.

This is not intended to be academic literature. I have taken care to ensure it is free of errors, but, inevitably some will slip in.

First Edition, May 2023

Second Edition, August 2023

Third Edition, October 2023

Note: This document has been found in several places over the years: *https://www.tumblr.com*, and *https://hsnet.strangled.net*

+ Akari Hoshino 2022, 2023

Contents

Where Did Hyperpop Come From? 1
The Melodic Influence 1
The Lyrical Influence 2
The Grand Fusion 2

A Study of: "cat.flp" 3

A Study of: "underscores" 5
The Generations of Hyperpop 5
A Character Study of April Harper Gray 7
Second hand embarrassment 7

Conclusion and the Future 9

Where Did Hyperpop Come From?

Over the years, I have had many people ask me where hyperpop really originated; I've given various different answers, but I often found myself grasping at straws: the usual suspects are all *nu rave* artists (like Test Icles and the various artists found on the PC Music record label) like Alexis Krauss and Derek Miller's group *Sleigh Bells*, but I argue a different origin.

Think carefully what hyperpop music truly is:

1. Overdriven synths that clip erratically
2. Earwormy, force-tuned, denpa-song-style[1] singing merged with hip-hop rhythmic music
3. Trap-esque backbeats

The Melodic Influence

In knowing this, one may think back to the 1990s and have vivid visions of various rave artists swirling around in their head: DJ Slammer, 808 State, Mike Banks, The Prodigy, and Altern 8 come to mind, but while this certainly comprises the musical influence on hyperpop... where did the lyrical influence originate? As your mind fills with the warm sounds of synth string instruments playing alongside a drum-machine beatline playing off an old Warp 69 record, glance up at the old tape cabinet and take note of an unlikely group you haven't heard in 30-plus years: **Information Society**.

Obviously, before we talk about hyperpop, we have to touch on **A. G. Cook** and **Sophie**'s very obvious influence on hyperpop; without them, this genre would hardly exist. A. G. Cook is to Little Richard as Sophie is to Fats Domino: Sophie was the one that bought the "other" defining genre of hyperpop in -- that is, of course, the rave influence. Sophie's dad famously introduced her to rave music, and, most of the hyperpop songs you hear nowadays have a somewhat pronounced rave influence in them. If you listen to her songs, you can hear a very distinct rave influence, albeit a bit "slowed down": her songs are a half-step between traditional 90s rave music and hardcore techno. Sophie brought in the experimental sound style that dominates hyperpop to this day, but, it was PC Music (the record label I mentioned before) that bought in the melodic electronic style that you also hear in the style today.

Granted, Cook's songs sound like they came out 2 days ago, even though they're from 2014; I suppose this really stands to state how ahead A.G. Cook and Sophie were, but surely there's more to this picture than just these two figures alone.

Of course, A. G. Cook would later go on to be the "hand in the machine" for Charli XCX; without his influence, Charli XCX would not sound anything like she does nowadays. A. G. Cook, being Charli XCX's creative director, replicated a lot of his musical style into Charli XCX's music, and, the influence is clear. So, we've established where Sophie's influence came from, but, where do you see A. G. Cook's style influence?

[1] A “denpa song” (Japanese lit. *radio wave*) is a J-pop song with confusing and often unintelligible lyrics, where the sole point of the song is the rhyming of the lyrics and the melody accompanying them

The Lyrical Influence

This is where I propose an unlikely source -- Information Society. Now, they don't get much attention and they're somewhat "under the rug" today, but, this group was one of the first "melodic techno" groups to break into the mainstream. InSoc, as they are often written, was initially influenced by late 70s synth-pop legends such as Duran Duran -- this influence would not last forever, though. It didn't take them long to differentiate to their own style, and, that style consisted of something that sounds like PC Music, but a tad bit older. The songs on the "Hack" album sound quite modern, and, it's all quite strange. Was this intentional? I'm not sure, really. Of course, there's tons of influences all at play here, this was just one that I could find that seemed to have the strongest *lyrical* influence on this genre.

The Grand Fusion

This article wouldn't be complete without talking about Laura Les and Dylan Brady -- their hit band 100 Gecs is almost a household name, and has bought hyperpop into the mind of millions of music listeners worldwide. Laura's musical style from when she produced music on her own retains the melodic style, with a mixture of the aforementioned/discussed rave and techno style. Ultimately, it would be Laura Les that bought that "fused" style out into the big-hit world; sadly, the "great Laura Les archival crisis" is upon us, and, some of her early music has become (nearly) lost media; this makes tracing her development in particular rather difficult, but we will examine some smaller hyperpop creators later and examine their musical journey.

Of course, I think the best way to study the history of hyperpop is to understand that, being a rather underground music genre, studying the production of various small-scale artists is best; much in the same way we discussed Vocaloid producers earlier and how they shaped modern popular music, let us examine two small players in the hyperpop space.

Where Did the Word Come From?

Often times, I hear debates about where the word “hyperpop” even came from! The simplest explanation is that the word was retroactively applied to the works of 100 Gecs by Lizzy Szabo and Glenn McDonald (or so it seems to be the case as of 2023).

A Study of: "cat.flp"

There are very few musical artists that I find that I want to keep listening to all the time, and, this is one of them. I first discovered cat.flp (pronounced cat dot f l p) at a party, where one of my friends was playing this song that just reeked of perfect 90s drum-and-bass. The next song that came on was the most hyperpop-sounding thing ever, but, not Laura Les or Sophie sounding hyperpop, no, it was more akin to AG Cook and the whole world of hyperpop musicians born of that style. The album playing was Camp 909 Volume 1 (of course, the whole 909 Worldwide project permeates the space, now and forever), and the song I heard was Break The Rules. I asked him what the song was, and, he said "cat dot flip's break the rules." This would ultimately brickwall my progress in finding this elusive artist of those two songs, since I was searching the net for "cat dot flip," and not "cat.flp."

I asked him to replay it, and I went in my bedroom and pulled out an old cassette recorder. I used a tee adapter grab the output from his phone going to the big speaker setup we have in my apartment, and, I got a recording of it on tape. I probably wore that tape out playing those two songs, simply because I thought it was *that* good!

Now, I don't exactly have a reputation for being able to track down obscure people (well, at least, not in the easiest ways). Since I was coming up blank on Google, and, this was ages ago, I threw that name down on a page in a notebook and shelved it. Flipping through it many months later, I thought back to that artist, and the tape on the shelf. Maybe I had given up too early... after all, if they had managed to make two bangers, who's to say they haven't made more? Well, on a whim, I texted a picture of the page to one of my friends. I was really hoping he'd have some information on Cool Blu or some other archaic drum-and-bass musician I threw on that list, but, no, much to my utter astoundment, something I shall not ever surpass in luck to this day, he said "oh, cat.flp, yeah, she's one of my friends."

Finally, armed with the knowledge of where to find the rest of her music, I was, needless to say, blown away at her music style. It was almost a fusion of techno, trace, DnB, and hyperpop, lest we also forget her ambient music. A couple of days later, I would discover the other song that my friend played: -- a cover of an .Alow song. Now, I will say, I have heard the original (it's called "Your Favorite Forecast"), but, her cover of it is amazing. There's some vocal processing in effect, and the effective audio bandwidth comes to around 3 KHz (sounds kinda like a single-sideband radio signal if you're a ham radio operator or a commercial radio-op).

Now, I would not know this till later, but, that aforementioned friend was himself a pretty big fan, and, he actually managed to catch recordings of Lynn performing various live sets. Immortalized on cassette tape and VHS videotape, I would eventually upload what I had to YouTube (he caught her on Goop Week 7, as well as a videotape portion of the end of her performing on the original Camp Boneyard, over on the Underscord community). Now, there are not many other artists that pull off this genre very well; we will discuss the other one in a bit.

Now, something that has become somewhat "infamous" in my circle was my perpetration of an unofficial "hyperpop fan club" at the university here. My music friend and I were the ones that started it, and, armed with the crazy speaker system we've got in my apartment, we'd blast all manner of "internet music" from whatever storage medium we had it on -- reel to reel tapes, 8-track cartridges, CDs, LP records, or videotapes if we had any. At least someone somewhere had a live set of whoever-in-question performing at whereever-in-question; I personally amassed recordings of Lynn's livesets on tape and would later play them at various parties I got to DJ for in 2022.

By far, my favorite set she did was when she performed at Camp Boneyard The First;[2] about 10 minutes in, it's the most speedcore-ravecore thing ever and it sounds like something straight off of the college radio station in the 90s (this comes up later -- keep reading). My second favorite set (although it hovers around first) was her performance (with her band, Webpage 505) on 505fest, back in 2021. It is, to this day, the perfect averaging of all of the internet music culture I can think of -- she produced something absolutely amazing there.

So, then, how is cat.flp encompassing the sound of today?[3] Well, without a doubt, she has worked with several big names in the online hyperpop world to get some absolutely killer songs out. The closest approximations I can think of would probably be Underscores (although her style has shifted a bit over time, nothing wrong with that, though), Diana Starshine (for the speech-compressor vocal style that I associate with Lynn), Nusagi (for several reasons, she has some amazing songs too), Tracey Brakes, and, without a doubt, Strxwberrymilk (although he mainly does DnB rhythmic stuff). cat.flp feels like a fusion of all of these, taking a mixture of all of the above, not to mention the countless jungle and rave influences she has noted.

Yet and still, the songs that do contain strong lyrical content all contained “canned lyrics,” cat.flp is an example of a hyperpop artist that does *not* make primarily lyrical music (contrast this with 100 Gecs, Underscores, and the likes).

I have fond memories from last year listening to cat.flp and the other hyperpop producers we will discuss soon; I spent many hours stuck in traffic back in my home city, sitting in an old 1966 Mustang, blasting an 8-track tape featuring *leastfavorite!*'s hit song *LAST NAME* that I made on a whim; a wooden box in the passenger-side floor had tapes featuring none other than Nusagi, Underscores, various Kasane Teto and Hatsune Miku songs, and who knows what else I was listening to in 2021...

[2] Okay, this is a bit anachronistic. It wasn't called “Camp Boneyard The First” then, but I for some reason chose to call it that when I wrote this in early 2023.

[3] 2023

A Study of: "underscores"

Much in the same way as many young musicians of today are shaping modern music culture, there are very few artists that manage to pull off genre fusion to a high degree. In the first installment of this article series, we examined cat.flp, a Canadian hyperpop artist that manages to pull off a strong genre fusion of hyperpop, glitchcore, jungle, and breakcore. Now, let us examine San Francisco's hyperpop leader: underscores. Not much information is available on the web about underscores,[4] so, let me provide a brief recap. underscores has been producing music since she was 6, launching her first album in 2016. *Skin Purifying Treatment* is an album that features a combination of genres, ranging from A.G. Cook-esque electronic music to some jazz elements. Unfortunately, this album did not hit it big -- her breakthrough album was *fishmonger*, and, it contains some of the first real "hits."

Second hand embarrassment took the hyperpop world by storm. Needless to say, her "modern rebirth" of the old A.G. Cook style has resulted in something that I would not quite describe as "hyperpop for the masses," but more of "hyperpop for the true fans." We will discuss this more in detail soon.

With that being said, I would like to start with a brief look at her videography style; the reason I bring this up at all is because hyperpop music videos tend to feature a very distinct visual style, and, her music video of *Cops and Robbers* epitomizes the "hyperpop style" in such a way that it is not topped even by hyperpop giants like 100 Gecs. As the video starts, a flashy intro of exploding fireworks (reminiscent of the aforementioned band's music video of Hollywood Baby) and a man running from something. The camera angle then flips to show someone working as a bank teller "for like eleven years." The high-pitched tuned vocals, the noisy synth, and the visual style coalesce to form a hyperpop masterpiece, the likes of which only the best of the best produce. As the song goes on and the video rolls, something that one might even describe as a literary narrative unfolds.

Of course, the song is about a crooked bank employee that embezzles money. While this article is not an analysis piece of this song, I do believe that it is the most "average" underscores song, fusing all of her motifs and style into one singular work.

The Generations of Hyperpop

In a way, I consider underscores to be one of these “second-generation hyperpop” artists; as we discussed earlier with the early history (of figures like AG Cook and Sophie) of hyperpop and its eventual popularization, a distinct change in the genre came when younger producers began to make hyperpop songs of their own. I define these “generations” as follows:

- **First generation,** wherein most hyperpop music was British and influenced by British and Detroit hard-style music; notable producers include:
  - Sophie
  - Hannah Diamond
  - Hayden Dunham

[4] This was certainly the case in 2023 when I originally wrote this, and this article you're reading now was basically the only chunk of information out there on her!

  - A.G. Cook
  - Polly Louisa Salmon
  - Eighty
  - Charli XCX (Charlotte Aitchison)

  The first generation of hyperpop was predominately the aforementioned brash style, with A.G. Cook (and other London-based musicians) being the primary driving forces behind the development of the genre; such examples can be found on the aforementioned *PC Music* label.

- **Second generation,** wherein the genre gained popularity (circa 2020) and fell into the hands of younger producers and was popularized via TikTok and YouTube; such examples include
  - underscores (April Harper Gray)
  - 100 Gecs (Laura Les, Dylan Brady)
  - Chairlift (Caroline Polachek)
  - Slayyyter (Catherine Garner)
  - Charli XCX[5]
- **Third generation,** when hyperpop gained mainstream popularity; this was the time that many hyperpop producers started to sign with big record labels and a fusion with other genres took hold as a mainstay in the genre.

  A prime example of this mass-market popularization is when PC Music stopped publishing new songs, and the more popular producers took the reigns. From then on, there were two camps of hyperpop:

  1. Underground “indie” productions, mainly found on Soundcloud and in the background of various TikTok videos
  2. Popularized mainstream productions, which have gotten airplay even on pop-format radio stations

  At the time of this article's composition, hyperpop is just entering its third generation (and, as such, very little has occurred thus far). Check back later for more!

Underscores marked one of the first major genre fusions in the hyperpop space. April Harper Gray, at some point in history, had a YouTube channel named **2ndgenbias**, but just like the devoted fans of vtubers and other such figures, something put on the internet cannot be easily removed; Grey emptied her channel at some point, but fans archived her works.

On that channel, she made a series of videos talking about the structure and composition of K-pop songs: the generations of various K-pop styles, the craft of choreography in K-pop music videos, and “anti-drops” (you can research this one yourself if you are so inclined).

Drawing on her solid understanding of K-pop, most of her songs mimic that song structure commonly seen in that genre but retain the hyperpop flair we have discussed thus far. Of course, another way to study music is to study the influences that make up the person who produced it!

[5] Despite being on the first-generation list, she held popularity and her style drifted to match the change in the landscape of the 2020s.

A Character Study of April Harper Gray

A common trope amongst hyperpop is that most hyperpop producers are trans women. While this is probably statistically true (especially amongst most of the second-generation producers found on Soundcloud), this notion is also occasionally used to dismiss hyperpop music as “music by trans women, for trans women;” I wish to challenge that notion as it is not entirely true (or even necessarily applicable).

April Harper Gray is a trans woman with an interesting past. Her dad was a recording engineer for The Rocket Record Company and published some music of his own; her mother was always there for her as a child. She went to the Cathedral School for Boys private school (remember, trans woman), which is a school ran by the Episcopal Diocese of California (of which she said the denomination to which they belong was the “chillest”).

Many hyperpop songs discuss the concept of “gender dysphoria,” wherein a trans person expresses severe mental discomfort with their current self and wishes to change for the better in the future (or is currently undergoing such changes in the present). Since most hyperpop producers are LGBTQ people, these themes are also present: a lot of these songs (especially Underscores) gained popularity on TikTok, but these shortform videos were circulated almost exclusively amongst LGBTQ circles on the website. As such, it never really bridged over into the conventional TikTok sphere (which I suppose could be called “straight people TikTok”), so it remains obscure even to today.

Underscores is unique amongst hyperpop music made by trans women as it does not overtly discuss themes of gender dysphoria like other trans artists do (like Astrid Gurski or cat.flp).

Second hand embarrassment

Underscores's early music influences are representative of what one might would call “internet music” (not to break out that term again, but it is pertinent here) -- this can best be summated by analyzing a song from 2 years ago: *Second hand embarrassment.*

The song starts out slow like a normal pop song, but by the middle, it explodes into keyed-vocal hyperpop synth singing. At the end, it divulges into full-blown hard-drums hyperpop reminiscent of rave music and hardstyle producers we discussed at the start of this article -- it summates the “hyperpop experience” perfectly as it stands today. Whereas hyperpop originally comprised “all the volume, all the way,” hyperpop now includes a range of dynamics and musical content.

Conclusion and the Future

In conclusion, I predict that hyperpop will continue to morph over time, and will likely diffuse with J-pop (this seems to be an ongoing trend as of 2023, wherein a number of Vocaloid songs in particular seem to have a hyperpop-esque flair to them).

I hope this article was at least passingly enjoyable, stay tuned for a successor where I talk about Vocaloid music!

Part Number
2023-08

File Number
HYPERPOP

Printed in U.S.A.