California Institute of the Arts

Taking Wave Offline

A History and Analysis of Wave Music

by

Oliver P. H. Jung

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Dedicated to Øfdream

R.I.P.

Thank you for your groundbreaking and therapeutic music

Introduction

A google search of "Wave Music" reveals 41 pages of results. One third of which are for a consumer speaker system, another third relating to a variety of publishing companies, and the last third is spread between articles about "New Wave" from the 1980's and YouTube videos of "relaxing beach atmospheres". But among the noise, there are exactly six articles that have to deal with real "Wave" music and its artists, this is what we're interested in.

In the coming pages, you'll learn about influential artists, a breakdown of the production process, a high-tech internet-based history of the scene, an overview of the visual language, and what the scene might grow into as well as what it has to offer for the years to come.

History

Wave was undoubtedly born on the internet, and DIY artist sites such as Soundcloud, Bandcamp, and social media platforms became the stages for Wave's presentation. However, with such an electronic birth comes preconceived notions about character, longevity, and legitimacy.

Undenounced to the public, the roots for an electronic music explosion had being planted since the 60's. Bands like The Beatles introduced the synthesizer as an additional instrument in their compositions in the 60's. In the 70's, Disco added more noticeable synthetic post processing to acoustic instruments while simultaneously bringing the synthesizer to the forefront of compositions. The birth of Hip-Hop in the 80's quickly demanded, and required, the use of a sampler, and electronic instruments became the intertwining fabric that held the instrumental side of the genre together. The 90's and 00's saw a continuous growth and string of top 40 tracks that had more and more of their compositional elements effected and/or generated by electronics.

In the early 2010's, the United States had an unparalleled explosion of electronic music production entering the mainstream. The traditional Band collaborative formula was exchanged for a solo artist with a laptop. While this gave excellent freedom and mobility, this also gave electronic music and the producers behind it, a temporary image problem. Electronic Dance Music producers weren't seen as "real musicians" because they played their laptop instead of a guitar. Public view of producers finally shifted only when Skrillex won back to back Grammys in 2011

for *Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites* and 2012 for *Bangarang* for best Dance / Electronic Album. Afterwards, the public accepted, as well as demanded producer driven music on a mass scale.

However, with all the social progress and acceptance of electronic music in the mainstream, not all the negative associations with electronic music producers have disappeared. Venue still remains an explanation for legitimacy, and the absence of a physical location often reduces the conversation from "a new exciting genre" to "just an internet thing". In a UKF interview, groundbreaking Wave producer *Kareful* commented about the lack of Wave's roots in a physical city.

> *"...most genres will take root in a physical place like Croydon for dubstep or going right back Chicago for house music, Detroit for techno. Now we're taking a sound from the internet that's had contributions from producers all over the world and we're trying to place it in a location. It's a unique situation."*

With the lack of physical matter in a physical location, there's a perceived correlation to temporariness and lack of historical roots that is hard to overcome. It's important to ask ourselves why we feel differently about a genre that is based on the internet than one based in a city or country. The validity of a genre isn't correlated to whether the music is being played through headphones or a massive PA, its strength and longevity will be decided by the mission statement of the genre and fan engagement.

Even though Wave lacks a specific physical birthplace, and its earliest roots can only be traced back to 2013, there are dedicated producers across the world. The United Kingdom has historically been a hub for bleeding edge electronic music, and Wave is no different. There is a large concentration of producers and collectives present across the UK, especially London. Additionally, Edmonton, Canada is quickly becoming a significant area for forward thinking Wave producers. Additional producers are scattered across the world, some in Australia, Northern Europe, and pockets around the United States.

Why talk about legitimacy, who cares? Isn't the target demographic for Wave not going to mind if there's a deficiency in printed media for album releases or artist interviews? Plus, hasn't social media already been taking over the roles of PR agencies, distribution, press, and artist management for some time now? Well, the electronic music market is simultaneously changing

and becoming more saturated, and while trends and techniques of yesteryear may be good indications of the future, the reality is that the path to marketing one's music and image is blurrier and more DIY than ever. This isn't a bad thing, it's different thing, and that distinction is often confused and overlooked.

Because the internet was made to share information, crosspollination of genres quickly sprouted smaller subgenres, most of the time having a life cycle of only a few years (that's if they're lucky). The rapid turnover of musical identities creates a preconceived notion that every new internet-based subgenre is a fad, when this simply isn't the case. Take a look at the career evolutions of *Post Malone* and *Lil Uzi Vert*. Having both started as musicians who uploaded their music to Soundcloud, their music transcended the negative vocabulary of "Soundcloud Rapper" into a multi-platinum hit artists. Their styles influenced pop music just as much as an artist who'd signed with a major label since day one of their career.

All this is to say that venue, geography, and history doesn't necessary equal legitimacy and importance. As a matter of fact, the internet acts as a uniform foundational worldwide slate. The fundamental concentration is and will always be on the artist and the music.

Sound

Wave gives you an icy feeling, like the future you never wanted is right around the corner. In a world made out of chrome, everything is both new and all too depressingly familiar. Its goth influence is amplified with heaps of reverb and delay to create a damp atmosphere, like you're walking through thick fog in the middle of the woods, but thankfully, you're also taught how to find your way out again. It's a souvenir from the future, one that will teach you. If the producer does their job properly, a great Wave track will show you the present, how fucked up it is, how grey the world could become if you remain stagnant, but just maybe, everything might be alright.

(Refer to QR code on page 13. Inside "Music" folder is 100 top Wave tracks.)

Wave is in a unique sonic position where it draws from so many established genres and trends, people tend to enjoy it on their first listen. What's missing is the education of the vocabulary "Wave", i.e. more people would listen to Wave music if they knew what it was called. Wave allows for a decent amount experimentation and innovation while still remaining underneath the genre name. There are three defining sonic qualities that the vast majority of Wave tracks share; modern

Trap-style drums, filtered Reese bass / detuned sinewave bass, and ethereal and emotional melodies and harmonies. Each of these qualities will be explained in more detail, but for an overarching summary, HIGHSNOBIETY gives a great condensed synopsis.

"The spacy 808 beat swag of trap, the subby rumbles and halftime pace of dubstep, the dense emotion of sad boy rap, the icy melancholy of witch house, the sci-fi savoir faire of instrumental grime, the loose formula-free experimentalism of the LA beat scene and the synthetic aesthetic of vapor wave…"

A surprising amount of Wave producers started out by making heavier music, specifically Dubstep, only to transition to Wave because of the greater creative freedom they felt the genre provided. But Wave's drums very much borrow from heavier genres and popular Trap production.

Starting from the top, the hi-hats often sound like they're from a classic Lex Luger sample pack, with some further post processing to make them a bit clickier and shinier. Combine their recognizable timbre with a tired and true 1/8th note swag pattern, and Wave producers need only need to make a few rhythmic choices to define themselves from the pack. A common embellishment to a hi-hat line is manipulating the sample to play at an octave lower, often transitioning between two octaves with 1/16th note trills. Other percussive elements such as snares, pan-hits, rimshots, bongos, crashes, whooshes, percussive FX, etc. start out life as a standard Trap-style drum however the genre often allows for a large amount of creative processing and reverb to be added for a more ethereal and unique soundscape.

The bass and low end is a very unique quality of Wave, it sounds unsettled, thick, and provides depth to the track. Its timbre is similar to a classic 808, the differences being that a Wave bass has more sustain, is used more melodically like an instrument than percussively like a drum, and is more detuned with a greater stereo width. A typical Wave bass is most commonly made one of two ways. The first is slightly detuning many sinewave voices, a process known as unison spreading, which gives a thick low-end signal that's clean in timbre and requires minimal EQing to sit well in the mix. The second technique still uses unison spreading, but replaces the sinewave oscillator with a sawtooth, followed by a low pass filter around 150-200Hz. This change makes for a much more synthetic and abrasive bass, great for use in a higher energy track. Whichever

technique is used, post-processing is used to give character and an identity to the sound. Additional low-end voices, often a traditional 808 style bass are supplemented to keep the track interesting and create additional structure.

The driving energy for the track is in the bass, but the kick is no less important, however most kicks follow a narrower sound design path, and serve a more specific purpose. The fundamental of the kick sits at the root note of the song, heavily sidechained with the bass. Because of the heavy sidechaining, the kick becomes punchier and clearer in the mix. For a track that's on the relaxed side, a Wave kick will usually have minimal high end, leaning on the sidechain compression for clarity, but for a more intense track, kicks will have more high end, and on occasion, less low end to make more room for the bass.

Kick, snare and bass are all critical to solidify the foundation of the track, but the most important aspect to Wave production is the melodic content. i.e. melody, harmony, pads, arpeggiators (arps), and vibe. There's a stereotype that EDM producers don't know music theory and don't know how to properly write chords and assemble a cadence, and to be fair, there are countless cases across the EDM umbrella that confirm this point. However, there are also countless cases where EDM producers can write chord progressions, melodies, and cadences just as masterfully as a composer. Because the genre is so melodically driven, Wave producers have to know at least the basics of music theory in order to write properly. It's common for EDM tracks to be written in f, because the lowest fundamental sits in a good frequency range that can be reproduced on a variety of sound systems, but this isn't a hard and fast rule, and all keys and modes are fair game. A larger emphasis is placed on the melody, which usually means that simpler chord progressions are used to make more musical space. The vast majority of harmonic content stays within the key of the song, with little dissonance besides the occasional m2.

The defining timbre of the music, and indeed the greatest appeal of Wave, is its incredibly lush sound design. Lush sounds in composition is nothing new, there have been pretty sounds since the beginning of music, thus pinpointing a genesis moment for Wave is hopeless. EDM's Wave, Western Art Music's Impressionism, Nature's waterfalls, all the give an uplifting feeling. What makes Wave unique is partly because of the juxtaposition between sharp drums and arps, with the swelling attack and slow release of the synths, in combination with super polished sound design.

A note on genre misconceptions; while Vaporwave, Retrowave, Synthwave, Chillwave, and Witch House are related and share some stylistic notes, they are not the type of Wave I've

been describing to you. Vaporwave reminisces on nostalgia about a future that never actually happened, and calls upon an 80's perspective to describe what that future could look like, while Wave is all about the future as we see it right now. Retrowave has a similar mission statement to Vaporwave, but its sonic content refers more to the literal world through an 80's Sci-Fi movie lens and vintage videogame music inspiration. Synthwave is closer to Goth, as it takes its slower tempo and harder drums, but again adding an 80's Sci-Fi movie lens. Upon first listen, Chillwave might sound the most similar to Wave, but while it is a very dreamy genre, it lacks the melancholic and euphoric vibe of Wave. Witch house is the closest in this list to Wave, and its vocabulary is often used interchangeably among Wave producers. While Witch House has the same melancholic and gothic qualities of Wave, I feel as though the term is overused and can only be applied to tracks that are between 120-130bpm and have a four on the floor kickdrum pattern.

Imagery

Without the music, there wouldn't be genre, but audio is only half of the story when it comes to a complete release package. The visual element is extremely important, and even during the extremely brief existence of Wave music, there have been some visual trends that have manifested.
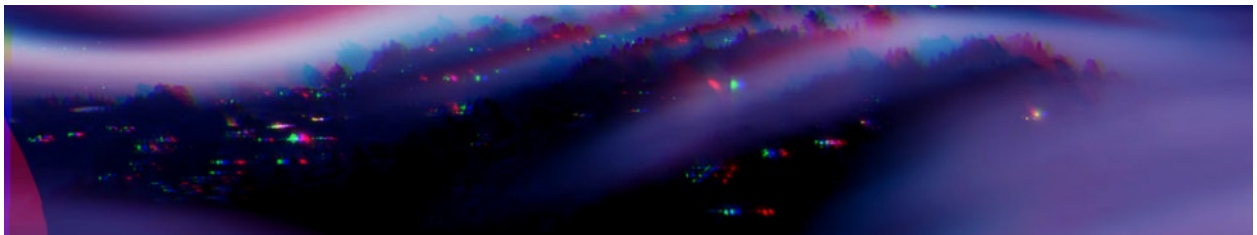

Figure I: Skeler – Untitled

Instagram and personal websites are the primary showcase locations for Wave visual work, just like Soundcloud and Spotify are the main platforms for Wave music. The color palette is the most constant and established aspect of the visual language of Wave music. Pink, blue, purple, black, white, with the occasional green accents make up the majority of colors in Wave art. Hue and saturation often borrow from a VHS type look, using cool colors but with a warm analog tape

feeling. Logos and imagery trends tend to quickly come and go, but computer-generated elements remained at the center of attention. Infinite neon roads, looping futuristic abstract art, glitchy atmospheres of found footage and images, and female figures all consistently appear across the scene.
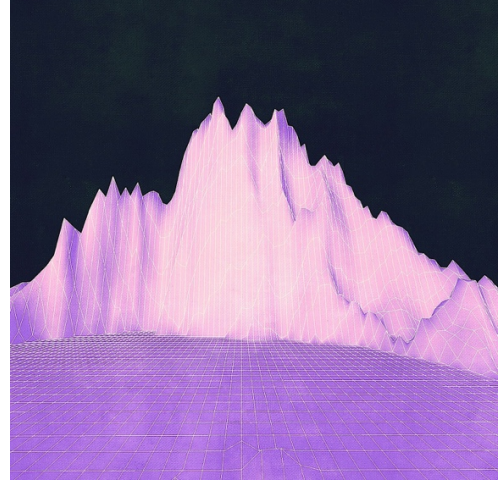

Figure II: Wave – Resize

Figure III: mix005 – Kareful

Figure IV: We're Burning

Figure V: mix014 – Klimeks

There is a large range of talent on the visual side of Wave, from plagiarism to stunning original work, and I believe this is because producers are in the center of the genre, but this is one area I think could use the most improvement. Firstly, the scene is small, which means that budgets very rarely exist, and are spent almost exclusively on promoting music and rentals. Secondly, producers are already so used to doing everything themselves such as recording, arranging, mixing,

mastering, promoting, etc. their mentality is that they might as well do the visuals too. I hope the future of Wave puts more energy into its visual language.

Future

I see the evolution of a genre like the growth of a person, let me explain using Hip-Hop as an example. Rapping was born out of Funk, as Funk allowed for instrumental and structural possibilities to allow lyrical experimentation. The biproduct of this was rapping, the birth of Hip-Hop (early - mid 80's). As Hip-Hop reached early childhood, it realized it was its own identity, which manifested in its own production style and use of sampling (late 80's – early 90's). Hip-Hop then started to understand itself on a deeper level, what cloths it liked to wear, having original thoughts, and an expanded perspective on self-growth. (Think 2-Pac and Biggie in the 90's.) But inevitably, Hip-Hop started making questionable decisions in its early teenage years, it smokes its first cigarette, and it slacks off in school because it was sure it was going to be the next big skateboarder. (Think Flava-Flave in the early – mid 2000's) But in its junior year of high school, it gains some more life experience, becomes more level headed, and realizes that it really likes woodworking, learning about the craft and incorporating its talent into its personality. (Think early Kendrick Lamar in the late 00's to early 10's) But now Hip-Hop is out of college and is a member of the workforce, its mature, established, and capable to make its own life decisions. (Think present day Hip-Hop)

If we compare Wave in the same way, I think it's really enjoying elementary school and is pretty sure finger-painting is the greatest thing ever. We've only just begun to explore what the genre is capable of, let alone what it might become. Even though we're in the discovery phase, questions like "Could and/or should Wave be a commercial genre?" and "Does the genre have mass appeal?" all feel like they're jumping the gun, but it's important to ask these kinds of questions early on so we can collectively set goals.

Wave doesn't require a huge learning curve to enjoy, because it's such a specific collection of already popular genres recombined in a unique way. On the other hand, the structure of a Wave track (at the time of writing this) does not follow pop structure. For Wave to be "radio ready" it's structure would need a complete Pop overhaul. Would this make the songs better? In my opinion, no, it just makes them more digestible and sellable, which is the whole point of Pop. People crave

authenticity in their music and art, and I believe good Wave tracks deliver on that front. The sound captures our uneasy but beautiful relationship with modern technology and the world, and then asks us questions we might not know the answer to. Over the past 3-5 years the mainstream has transitioned from Tiësto, David Guetta, and Progressive House over to Travis Scott, Drake, and Trap. Wave bridges these two trends so perfectly it's like a reflection of the 2010's.

For Wave's popularity to spread, I think there needs to be a larger breadth of energies, from super relaxed *Nocturnal* to club smashers. Wave has the potential to take over either end of the spectrum, if evolved properly and marketed well. And while I previously argued that Soundcloud is a perfectly legitimate platform for music, I think most people would take the genre more seriously if it's whole approach and attitude shifted away from URL and into IRL. Wave needs more shows, tours, and articles, as well as bigger followings, better visuals, and a hint of professionalism that says "this is here to stay."

Could Wave take over the mainstream? Chances are good it won't, not without major backings across the music business. I think the more interesting question is should Wave take over the mainstream? On one hand, it's great to have a little world away from the madness of life, where you know everyone and everything. But on the other, there's massive potential for the greater good of the genre with new perspectives and investments from major music industry leaders. My vote is to grow, but there's no perfect answer.

Personal Statement

The first electronic song I'd ever heard was when I was carpooling with a friend in 6th grade, the Dubstep track sampled Tim Burton's Beetlejuice. *Beetlejuice (Figure Remix)*. When it dropped, it blew my mind and Dubstep instantly became all I cared about.

No one in my family is a musician, so I had to start from scratch and learn everything about the EDM world myself. I started making House music, then transitioned into making Dubstep once I got a little better at producing. Dubstep was always a struggle to make, and it never felt like I was in my element. It felt dishonest, and I only have one good track to show for countless hours of sitting behind my laptop. But Dubstep was my first love, and I would always come back to producing it after brief hiatuses. But dreamier, more ethereal sounds meant more to me, and once I stumbled across #Wave on Soundcloud, I knew what to look for. Wave combined my musical

influences in such a synergetic way, I knew what I was finally meant to make. It's a genre where I finally have something to say, a platform to make art that meant anything to me. I stopped talking about my music like "Dude, check out this bass… shit slaps so hard" and started asking people "what do you see?" Wave music means a lot to me, and has given me so much therapeutic creative direction in my music making practice as Skullmatter, as well as guiding my future life.

I'm only able to touch on each aspect of Wave music and culture in this paper, but if after reading this you're inspired to learn more about the genre, I urge you to scan the QR code on page 13 for more content. Then surf Soundcloud and Bandcamp for the freshest Wave content available.

Badass Artists

Kareful	https://soundcloud.com/karefuluk
Skeler	https://soundcloud.com/skelermusic
Sorcari	https://soundcloud.com/sorsari
Noah B	https://soundcloud.com/thisisnoahb
iSorin	https://soundcloud.com/isorin
Skit	https://soundcloud.com/skit
WRCKTNGL	https://soundcloud.com/wrcktngl
Yedgar	https://soundcloud.com/yedgar
Yusoul	https://soundcloud.com/yusoul
niteboi	https://soundcloud.com/niteboi6
Plastician	https://soundcloud.com/plastician
Deadcrow	https://soundcloud.com/deadcrxw
Barnacle boi	https://soundcloud.com/barnacleboimusic
Enjoii	https://soundcloud.com/enjoii
foxwedding	https://soundcloud.com/fox-wedding
Øfdream	https://spoti.fi/35MtpE3
Brothel	https://soundcloud.com/brothelmusic
Sidewalks and Skeletons	https://soundcloud.com/jakeleeismyname
buttxrfly	https://soundcloud.com/butterflyblade
「error」	https://soundcloud.com/errxrmusic
MYSTXRIVL	https://soundcloud.com/mystxrivl
Sace	https://soundcloud.com/sacemusicsc
Loneliness	https://soundcloud.com/ukowens1
ESSEX	https://soundcloud.com/essex
MVEJIMV	https://soundcloud.com/mvejimv
gl00my	https://soundcloud.com/gloomysounds
avæ	https://soundcloud.com/avaedreams
KTRL	https://soundcloud.com/ktrl
Luminance	https://soundcloud.com/luminance000
Trashlord	https://soundcloud.com/trshlrd
Dyzphoria	https://soundcloud.com/dyzphoria
LUDICY	https://soundcloud.com/ludicysounds
MRKRYL	https://soundcloud.com/mrkryl
Fyoomz	https://soundcloud.com/fyoomz
Hellion	https://soundcloud.com/hellionn
Cat/	https://soundcloud.com/catslash
Deadwinter	https://soundcloud.com/deadwint3r
Fifty Grand	https://soundcloud.com/fiftygrand
LTHL	https://soundcloud.com/lthl
HXV	https://soundcloud.com/heroesxvillains

Noteworthy Labels & Collectives

Liquid Ritual	https://soundcloud.com/liquidritual
Wavemob	https://soundcloud.com/wavemob
Titan Cult	https://soundcloud.com/titancult
Restricted Collective	https://soundcloud.com/restrictedcollective
Sekai Collective	https://soundcloud.com/sekai-collective
SYNES	https://soundcloud.com/synesuk
terrorhythm	https://soundcloud.com/terrorhythm
YUME	https://soundcloud.com/yumecollective
SPECTRAL	https://soundcloud.com/spectralcollective
Vibe.digital	https://soundcloud.com/vibe-digital

Music, Samples & Patches

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