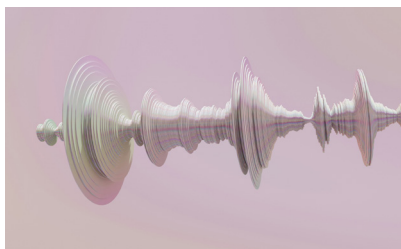




## Artificial & Repertoire: How Has AI Restructured the A&R Industry?



by Anna Hudson

The topic of artificial intelligence has dominated the music industry in recent years, inciting questions, joys, fears, and most prevalently, change. Will AI change the music-making process, and if so, how? What role will it play? Will it displace jobs, or will it enhance creativity in the industry? While AI's usage within the generative, creative realms of the music industry (such as beat-making and idea generation) is very well-known and visible, AI is being used everywhere – whether visible or behind the scenes.

The presence of artificial intelligence in the artist and repertoire (A&R) industry is strong, which has grown steadily over the past six years. Nowadays, AI can serve as an analytical tool. It can discover new artists, predict social media trends, organize music libraries, and use algorithms to determine if your song has hit-potential. AI programs in the A&R industry can help meet the high demands caused by streaming platforms and the gargantuan amount of music being uploaded to them daily. There are numerous apps, companies, and programs available to publishing companies, labels, and representatives that can make the extensive search process for the next big artist much less

tedious and difficult. This article will introduce three musically-inclined AI companies and explore how each serves the A&R industry.

### Instrumental

Instrumental is a data and artist relations company that uses AI to predict, analyze, and sign successful artists. It was founded by Conrad Withey, formerly of Warner Music Group (WMG), and Abi Hanna in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Instrumental sifts through data from streaming services and social websites to find, predict, and analyze emerging talent. Its algorithm can flag potential up-and-coming artists based on its massive scale of data analysis. According to its founders, the program is designed to automate the scouting and profiling process traditionally handled by A&R representatives.<sup>2</sup>

Instrumental can find a budding artist on the internet, analyze their data, decide if the artist will be successful, and then send a quick text to an A&R team to let them know all about it.<sup>3</sup>

The most notable examples of artists found by Instrumental's algorithm are Lil Nas X, Tones and I, and Arizona Zervas—each identified months, or even years, before major labels signed them. As co-founder Conrad Withey explained in an interview with Tim Ingham for Music Business Worldwide: “Instrumental's tools flagged Lil Nas X as ‘hot’ in December 2018, three months before Columbia swooped;

*Continued on Page 3*

### MISSION STATEMENT

The Music Business Journal at Berklee College of Music is a student publication that serves as a forum for intellectual discussion and research into the various aspects of the music business. The goal is to inform and educate aspiring music professionals, connect them with the industry, and raise the academic level and interest inside and outside the Berklee Community.

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Artificial Intelligence

The Marketing Behind Charli XCX's *BRAT*

The Rise of House Music

NDA's & The Culture of Silence in the Music Industry

# EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading our second issue of 2024!

We are so thrilled to be putting out another physical journal. I am so honored to bring you an expanded representation of the modern, global music industry.

Our cover story features a deep dive into three ground-breaking AI companies that are both revolutionizing and assisting the Artist and Repertoire (A&R) industry. Next, Jessie Ellis breaks down the incredible marketing strategies behind Charli xcx's *BRAT* - an album that took the internet - and the world - by storm this past summer. Mandalay Martin explores the dangers of NDAs and the culture of silence often perpetuated by powerful people within the music industry. And lastly, Marc Feliu analyzes the rise in popularity that house music has seen over the past few years.

Our podcast, Cut Time, is available on Spotify, featuring new interviews from Grace Gardner, The Berklee Popular Music Institute (BPMI), and many more. I hope you enjoy this semester's edition of the journal and that you continue to keep up with us!

Sincerely,



Anna Hudson  
Editor-in-Chief

## MUSIC BUSINESS JOURNAL

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Tones and I was flagged in March 2019, two months before Dance Monkey was even officially released as a single in Australia – let alone achieved its world-conquering run; and Arizona Zervas, amazingly, was flagged as ‘hot’ by Instrumental in December 2017, nearly two full years before Columbia snapped up Roxanne.”<sup>4</sup> An artist is flagged “hot” by Instrumental’s algorithm if they are experiencing multiple types of success on the internet at once, such as playlisting and various forms of high social media engagement (shares, subscriptions, etc.).<sup>5</sup>

Instrumental organizes their findings in several different ways that ease the workload of labels and A&Rs. It can find and match artists to micro-genres, matching around 5,000 artists with 4,000+ genres per week. It manages watchlists on behalf of record companies so they can keep an eye on growing artists. Ingham additionally explains: “Watchlists pull in additional social data about each artist, in addition to Instrumental’s own daily ratings – with one based on growth (Gx points) and one based on online engagement/popularity (Ix points). Any spikes in status automatically generate email and/or text alerts that can be sent to label A&R teams.”<sup>6</sup> These watchlists are often used by smaller players in the industry, as major labels are well-off with their own data platforms and resources for data analysis. Watchlists can also be tailored to specific genres or countries.<sup>7</sup>

In 2020, Tencent’s investment in Instrumental led the company to scale back its algorithm licensing business.<sup>8</sup> Instead of primarily sharing their technology with big-

ger companies such as Live Nation and Republic Records, Instrumental launched their own independent “artist services platform” called FRTYFYVE, which is a marketing agency on the surface and a record label at its core. FRTYFYVE is currently the largest and most successful venture of Instrumental. Each artist signed to FRTYFYVE was discovered using Instrumental’s algorithm. Each signee must meet specific developmental criteria. They generate up to millions of streams per Spotify track with loyal, strong listeners, yet they don’t ever hit the Billboard charts. They are encouraged to promote market success by releasing large amounts of music (at least 12 pieces of music each year) and their success is built directly around intense data analysis. FRTYFYVE encourages their artists to allow their marketing decisions be driven by their fanbase, rather than industry experts. Its guide for signed artists, ‘12 Months To Make It’, is designed to de-clutter the artist promotion experience while obtaining real exponential growth in streaming and promotion.<sup>9</sup> Instrumental’s rigorous data analysis algorithm combined with its highly successful artist services venture, FRTYFYVE, make it a powerful example of the endless possibilities for AI in the A&R world.

### **Musiio**

Musiio is a Singapore-based music technology startup founded by Hazel Savage and Aron Pettersson in 2018.<sup>10</sup> It sets itself apart from other musically-inclined AI companies by actually listening to audio files to predict a song’s success, rather than using data analysis.

*Continued on Page 4*

1. “Instrumental.” Music Business Worldwide, January 20, 2021. <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/companies/instrumental/>.

2. Tim Ingham. “Conrad Withey, Instrumental: ‘This Generation of Artists Are Savvy about Their Own Potential, Rights and Commercial Worth.’” Music Business Worldwide, January 20, 2021. <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/this-generation-of-artists-are-savvy-about-their-own-potential-rights-and-commercial-worth/>.

3. Tim Ingham. “Conrad Withey, Instrumental:”

4. Tim Ingham. “Conrad Withey, Instrumental:”

5. Tim Ingham. “Conrad Withey, Instrumental:”

6. Tim Ingham. “Conrad Withey, Instrumental:”

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Musiio's core technology is AI/Machine learning, which processes whole audio files to look for patterns and to extract information, such as tags and features. Its products include a more recently developed Hit Potential Algorithm, along with its readily available AI tagging & searching technologies, and additionally APIs, all of which are currently for sale via their website.<sup>11</sup>

Each audio file Musiio analyzes is broken down and translated into a mathematical form that a computer can analyze. Then, data from the song can be extracted and organized in a completely customizable structure.<sup>12</sup> Musiio's technology has been thoroughly trained to look for elements in songs that are also found in viral, chart-topping hits, along virtually every thinkable element that makes objectively good music good. Through machine learning, Musiio can now listen to any song and decide if it will be a hit or miss.<sup>13</sup>

Another advantage to the auditory method of analyzing music is that data and numbers do not matter – meaning any song, no matter how big or small, can be analyzed and categorized as a hit. Musiio can listen to an unreleased song and decide if that song has hit potential simply based on how it sounds. In fact, part of Musiio's rigorous testing for their Hit Potential Algorithm was testing whether or not it could find a hit in a haystack, so to speak. Hazel Savage, in her interview with Music Business Worldwide, also said: "We took 10 viral hits from YouTube, hid them in a database of 10k tracks from the Free Music Archive (creative commons database of music with varying quality) and asked the AI to find the top 20 hits. It found 9 out of 10 viral hits in the top 20."<sup>14</sup>

The greatest appealing quality of this technology is that it can help A&Rs grapple with the influx of new music being released into the world in this digital age. Well over 40,000 songs are uploaded to Spotify every single day, leading to an influx of good music usually lost in the flood of new media.<sup>15</sup> In fact, according to Luminate's 2023 Year-End Music Industry Report, out of the 184,000,000 tracks (ISRCs) streamed worldwide last year, 158,600,000—or 86%—of those tracks had 1,000 streams or less.<sup>16</sup> Hazel Savage believes that Musiio can act as an assistant to A&R representatives, fielding the tens of thousands of new releases in a day to bring the top 20 hits to their desks. In an interview with Music Business Worldwide, she said: "I think good ears and gut instinct are important; people are important. AI should free them up to do what they do best."<sup>17</sup>

Musiio's website also offers two types of services for purchase: tagging and searching. Its detailed technology is quite skilled at automating the tagging process for up to 10,000 songs per day – a service that could be quite useful for music libraries and the sync industry. Additionally, because of its audio file analysis method, Musiio's search technology can literally search a song with a song. Both of these services are revolutionizing the efficacy of managing large libraries of music. Musiio's website specifically markets their services towards the sync industry, music libraries, streaming companies, DJs, and music marketplaces.<sup>18</sup>

*Continued on Page 5*

7. Tim Ingham. "Conrad Withey, Instrumental:"

8. Tim Ingham. "With Awal and Platoon Both Acquired, Tencent-Backed FRTYFVE Is Becoming an Indie Power Player in Artist Services." Music Business Worldwide, November 18, 2022. <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/with-awal-and-platoon-both-acquired-tencent-backed-frtyfve-is-becoming-an-indie-power-player-in-artist-services/>.

9. Tim Ingham. "With Awal and Platoon Both Acquired, Tencent-Backed FRTYFVE Is Becoming an Indie Power Player in Artist Services."

10. "Musiio: Portfolio." Entrepreneur First, June 18, 2024. <https://www.joinef.com/companies/musiio/>.

*Continued from Page 4*

In 2022, Musiio was acquired by SoundCloud, and now officially operates under the name ‘Musiio by SoundCloud.’<sup>19</sup> SoundCloud prides itself on being an equally artist and fan-centric business, operating like a streaming service just as much as it does as an artist services platform. SoundCloud is completely free to use as a customer, but also features options for paid subscriptions. Because it does not provide monetary compensation to artists for uploads, and thus does not require all uploaded tracks to follow copyright law, there are on average at 123,000 tracks added to the platform per day as of 2023.<sup>20</sup> Musiio was acquired by the company to help them categorize and manage their massive catalog of unbridled creativity. SoundCloud’s founder, Eliah Seton, via an interview with TechCrunch, said: “Acquiring Musiio accelerates our strategy to better understand how that music is moving in a proprietary way, which is critical to our success.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Sodatone**

Sodatone is a Warner Music Group (WMG) company that uses both public and private data analysis to “understand and visualize artist potential”. Sodatone provides support for artist discovery, evaluation, marketing, insights, and streamlines the A&R workflow, helping the industry adapt to the constant changes of the streaming world.<sup>22</sup>

Sodatone is another machine learning-based platform that can analyze and assist its artists and their A&R representatives. Part of its goal is to shift the human brain-power of A&R into the artist-development space

rather than the artist scouting/profiling space.<sup>23</sup> Sodatone has a mobile app available on the App Store, but it is an internal application exclusively available to only labels and affiliates that are a part of Warner Music Group.<sup>24</sup> The app features searchable information about both on-roster and off-roster artists – meaning A&R representatives using this app can track their own artists and keep an eye on other, non-WMG artists.<sup>25</sup>

Sodatone’s website boasts some impressive numbers to back up the success of their technology. Its searchable dataset features over 8 million artists and 250 million respective digital service platform (DSP) song releases. Sodatone artists (those who were discovered through the technology), possess a compiled total of 40 billion streams across streaming platforms according to the site.<sup>26</sup>

An image of a young PinkPantheress, sitting in her bedroom, is located front and center on the home page of the Sodatone website. PinkPantheress signed to Parlophone Records (A WMG subsidiary) in early 2022, after building up a huge following on TikTok during 2021.<sup>27</sup> Nowadays, she’s even more popular than before, and was recently honored as Billboard Women in Music’s Producer of the Year award in 2024, after co-producing every track on her debut album, *Heaven Knows*. This album came out three years after the release of her breakout mixtape to hell with it in 2021, the original catalyst of her internet success.<sup>28</sup>

*Continued on Page 6*

11. Dave Roberts. “Artificial Intelligence A&R Tools Keep Finding New Hit Artists. This One Actually ‘listens’ to Music.” *Music Business Worldwide*, December 17, 2020. <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/artificial-intelligence-ar-tools-keep-finding-new-hit-artists-this-one-actually-listens-to-music/>.

12. “Artificial Intelligence for the Music Industry.” Musiio. Accessed October 22, 2024. <https://www.musiio.com/>.

13. “Artificial Intelligence for the Music Industry.” Musiio. Accessed October 22, 2024. <https://www.musiio.com/>.

14. Dave Roberts. “Artificial Intelligence A&R Tools Keep Finding New Hit Artists. This One Actually ‘listens’ to Music.”

15. Glenn Peoples. “The Ledger: Are There Really 100,000 New Songs Uploaded a Day? Maybe More.” *Billboard*, February 7, 2023. <https://www.billboard.com/pro/how-much-music-added-spotify-streaming-services-daily/>.

*Continued from Page 5*

The reason PinkPantheress's photo is featured on Soda-tone's website is because their technology found her. It was the main reason she was signed to Parlophone.

According to Parlophone co-president Nick Burgess, "It was an old-fashioned signing. PinkPantheress was discovered with a data tool that we have, one of our A&R people spotted the numbers really early. She had the energy and the vision and we shared that vision. We signed her really quickly without any competition."<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, it's quite clear that AI technologies are absolutely revolutionizing the A&R industry, and have been doing so for quite some time now. From using an algorithm to find the next big artists in all corners of

the internet, to breaking down an audio file of a song to analyze its potential success, or to running a major label from a smartphone, the possibilities of using AI are quite endless, even in this particular space of the music industry. Scouting, development, and management of artists, both on the independent and major level can now be done with the help of AI, coming in at any or all steps of the process. These three companies are each aimed to uniquely support the A&R industry as it grapples with and transforms into the music industry of the future.

16. "Luminate Releases 2023 Year-End Report." Luminate, October 22, 2024. <https://luminatedata.com/reports/yearend-music-industry-report-2023/?aliId=eyJpIjoiSzZvWStTdG55N0xVUVITcClIsInQiOiJ3YzFJMThBUjEVLc3Rsc1ZvaVBJSFhnPT0ifQ%253D%253D>.

17. Dave Roberts. "Artificial Intelligence A&R Tools Keep Finding New Hit Artists."

18. "Artificial Intelligence for the Music Industry." Musiiio.

19. Murray Stassen. "Soundcloud Acquires AI Music Company Musiiio." Music Business Worldwide, May 3, 2022. <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/soundcloud-acquires-ai-music-company-musiiio123/>.

20. Glenn Peoples. "The Ledger: Are There Really 100,000 New Songs Uploaded a Day?"

21. Murray Stassen. "Soundcloud Acquires AI Music Company Musiiio."

22. "Tomorrow's Superstars, Discovered Today." Sodatone. Accessed October 29, 2024. <https://www.sodatone.com/>.

23. Murray Stassen. "Warner Is Signing Double the Number of Artists via AI-Driven A&R Tool Sodatone than It Did Last Year. Now, It's Hired a Global Head of Data Science." Music Business Worldwide, November 24, 2020. <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/warner-is-signing-double-the-number-of-artists-via-ai-driven-ar-tool-sodatone-than-it-did-last-year-now-its-hired-a-global-head-of-data-science/>.

24. Warner Music Group. "Sodatone." App Store, October 17, 2023. <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/sodatone/id6451121618>.

25. "Sodatone Mobile App." Sodatone Mobile App. Accessed October 31, 2024. <https://www.sodatone.com/mobile-app>.

26. "Tomorrow's Superstars, Discovered Today." Sodatone.

27. Paine, Andre. "Inside Pinkpantheress' Groundbreaking Campaign with Parlophone, Spotify and up Close Management." Music Week, January 7, 2022. <https://www.musicweek.com/talent/read/inside-pinkpantheress-groundbreaking-campaign-with-parlophone-spotify-and-up-close-management/084919>.

28. Kyle Denis. "Billboard Explains: Pinkpantheress' Impressive Chart Record." Billboard, March 5, 2024. <https://www.billboard.com/music/chart-beat/pinkpantheress-chart-record-women-in-music-billboard-explains-1235622792/>.

29. Paine, Andre. "Inside Pinkpantheress' Groundbreaking Campaign."

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# Marketing in Harmony: Unpacking Brat's Marketing Strategies

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by Jessie Ellis

The summer of 2024, famously dubbed *Brat* Summer, was marked by the release of Charli XCX's sixth studio album, *Brat*. With its gaudy lime-green cover art, subversive themes, and club-inspired soundscape, *Brat* became a celebration of carefree party culture amidst an otherwise politically charged time in history. The project quickly evolved into a cultural phenomenon, dominating both the pop music scene and the digital world. Through its release, Charli XCX transformed from a niche artist into one of the year's most influential pop stars. Although parallels can be drawn between the sonic landscape of this album and her prior work, the true impact can be seen in her masterful marketing plan.

## The Manifesto of a Brat

During a panel with The Recording Academy, Charli XCX revealed that before creating the album, she wrote a lengthy manifesto detailing the essence of "brat."<sup>1</sup> She got specific about what would fit into her sonic world: 808 drum machines are "not brat." 909 drum machines, however, are.<sup>2</sup> The manifesto meticulously described her character's clothing, "where they go out, [and even] what cigarettes they smoke."<sup>3</sup> This attention to detail culminated into a fully realized concept, making the connection between the definition of "brat" and the marketing materials seamless.

Once Charli XCX had established the record's holistic description, she began to explore cover art concepts. She selected a daring and abrasive bright green for its shock value, which she claims "most people [in her circle] had the most adverse reaction to."<sup>4</sup> Additionally, she

chose a lowercase "arial font [with] low-res graphics" to convey a sense of spontaneity and nonchalance, tightening the link between her album and its brand.<sup>5</sup> Rather than incorporating additional visual elements to complement the color and text, Charli chose a minimalist, text-only cover. In an interview with Zane Lowe, she reflected that it "embodies the word brat" to forgo having her image on the album cover, since text-based cover art is not the "norm for female artists."<sup>6</sup> She aimed to provoke "explosive conversations" with this choice to draw attention to her project.

This minimalistic yet daring cover art established a steady connection to the manic nature of the character outlined in Charli's manifesto, bringing the confident yet volatile essence of *Brat* to life.

## The Art of Anticipation: Cultivating Fan Engagement

When it came time for Charli XCX to promote *Brat* and its world, she first reached out directly to her closest fans. In February, Charli sent a message to a private group chat of fans writing, "LET'S RAVE—BOILER ROOM 2/22. We're going to play some stuff from the album."<sup>8</sup> The show had guest appearances from key figures from the *Brat* universe, with performances by Julia Fox and Addison Rae. Fox is featured in the music video for Brat's hit song, "360,"<sup>9</sup> and Rae appears in the remix for "Von Dutch,"<sup>10</sup> another successful song off of *Brat*. Both are public figures who run in the same celebrity circles and share similar audiences. well into the effortlessly cool and sarcastic world that *Brat* would soon encompass.

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1. Recording Academy, "GRAMMY U Fall Summit Featuring CharliXCX and TroyeSivan," 2024.

2. Recording Academy, "GRAMMY U Fall Summit Featuring CharliXCX and TroyeSivan," 2024.

3. Recording Academy, "GRAMMY U Fall Summit Featuring CharliXCX and TroyeSivan," 2024.

4. Apple Music, "Charli XCX: The BRAT Interview | Apple Music," 2024.

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Aesthetically, both are both drawn to the theatrical irony of camp: an art movement coined by Susan Sontag<sup>11</sup> that has had a longtime presence in club culture and gained popularity in online spaces, making their guest appearances fit well into the effortlessly cool and sarcastic world that *Brat* would soon encompass.

Following her Boiler Room Set, Charli capitalized on the buzz she generated with her performance and its celebrity guests by unveiling *Brat*'s cover art. The bold lime green color and minimalist design was immediately met with curiosity and speculation, prompting some fans to circulate memes and others to incorporate a similar lime green into their fashion choices.<sup>12</sup> As the image spread, discussions surrounding the meaning of the word "brat" took over online spaces and fans began to piece together elements of Charli's masterfully crafted world.

Charli XCX continued to spark online conversation and speculation around *Brat* in May, when she encouraged her fans to gather at an unknown New York City address, later known as "The Brat Wall." There, she performed in front of a wall that featured the same lime green used on the album cover. After the performance, the wall stayed blank, fostering online curiosity about its purpose.<sup>13</sup> Eventually, while being live-streamed, the wall was transformed to display different lyrics from songs off of *Brat* and tease upcoming collaborations.<sup>14</sup> By catering her physical marketing materials to her fanbase online, Charli generated buzz about when the wall would transform, attracting viewers eager for her next announcement.<sup>15</sup>

### Catering to the Chronically Online

As discussion about Charli's offline stunts flooded X and TikTok, fans continued to engage with her digital offerings. At the beginning of her marketing campaign, a private burner account called "360\_brat" appeared on Instagram, which accepted follow requests of superfans who gained access to a more vulnerable side of Charli. She shared her private feelings in Q&As and opened up about her uncertainty regarding her friendship with fellow artist Lorde. The exclusive nature of this account left fans eager for acceptance and connection while managing to both reward long-time supporters and pique the interest of newcomers. Furthermore, the conversations on this page indicated that *Brat* would be more than just a club record; it would showcase Charli's vulnerable side, tackle raw, personal topics, and address the complexity and emotional depth of both the album and Charli's character.



*Continued on Page 9*

5. Yao, "The Rise and Fall of a 'Brat Summer,'" 2024.

6. Apple Music, "Charli XCX: The BRAT Interview | Apple Music," 2024.

7. Apple Music, "Charli XCX: The BRAT Interview | Apple Music," 2024.

8. Lloyd, "Charli XCX's Brat Campaign Should Turn You All Green with Envy," 2024.

9. Charli XCX, "Charli XCX - 360 (Official Video)," 2024.

10. Charli XCX, "Charli Xcx - Von Dutch a. g. Cook Remix Featuring Addison Rae (Official Audio)," 2024.



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While Charli's Boiler Room set, *Brat* Wall, and private Instagram account effectively generated buzz for her album, the internet didn't become fully saturated with *Brat* branding until the release of the "Brat Generator": a website<sup>16</sup> that allows fans to make memes and graphics that feature the same green color and arial font as the album cover. This plays into the chronically online nature of her young fan base while making it difficult to open social media without seeing a *Brat*-related post. While several trends took off with this website, none were as impactful as the "brat-ification" of Kamala Harris.<sup>17</sup>

In May of 2023, Vice President Kamala Harris made a remark about the factors that shape one's life, saying, "You think you just fell out of a coconut tree?... You exist in the context of all in which you live, and what came before you."<sup>18</sup> The quote quickly went viral, partly due to its quirky phrasing. Online users affectionately poked fun at the Vice President, while others were left puzzled, speculating on its meaning. Following the announcement that Harris would be running for President, memes featuring Vice President Harris' coconut tree quote set against a lime green filter and Charli's "360" sound went viral, prompting her campaign team to embrace the trend. The Kamala HQ twitter banner displayed the same *Brat* green and arial text as the album, leading to widespread discussions about *Brat* across news platforms.<sup>19</sup> CNN reporter Jamie Gangel explained the phenomenon, saying: "For those who ... are not in the know... that is a cool thing...It has a color. Chartreuse is the color", while holding up a printout of the campaign's X profile page, which bore a banner reading

Kamala HQ. With the album making waves on American news stations, Charli XCX joined the conversation, tweeting, "kamala IS brat." Her quick response and unofficial endorsement of Vice President Harris kept the momentum of her record alive. By capitalizing on the impact of her earned publicity, Charli amplified *Brat's* reach and created countless opportunities for her project to be discussed.

In addition to her previously mentioned digital endeavors, Charli XCX achieved every record label's marketing dream: a viral TikTok dance. "In June, TikTok creator, Kelley Heyer, created a dance to the song that has found its way into all corners of the Internet," with over 1.7 million uses of the sound on TikTok as of November 2024.<sup>20</sup> The trend features simple choreography set to "Apple," an upbeat track about generational trauma, making it easy to recreate and perfectly summarizing what *Brat* embodies: vulnerable yet upbeat dance music. Celebrities including Brooke Shields, Kerry Washington, Ashley Tisdale, and the US Women's Rugby team quickly embraced the trend, propelling its popularity.<sup>21</sup> As more influential figures joined in, the dance became a cultural touchstone, bridging the worlds of pop music, online influencers, and mainstream celebrities. Following celebrity participation in the trend, Charli further amplified the dance's virality by posting a video of herself, Troye Sivan, and Terrence O'Connor joining in, sparking even more attention and participation from fans. By participating in the trend, Charli harnessed fan-driven creativity to further amplify her album's reach and solidify her place at the forefront of the digital music landscape.

*Continued on Page 10*

11. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 1964

12. Lloyd, "Charli XCX's Brat Campaign Should Turn You All Green with Envy," 2024

13. Mlnarik, "A Brief History of Charli XCX's 'Brat' Wall," 2024

14. Mlnarik, "A Brief History of Charli XCX's 'Brat' Wall," 2024

15. Mlnarik, "A Brief History of Charli XCX's 'Brat' Wall," 2024

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### **Beyond Brat Summer: Sustaining a Cultural Moment**

*Brat* Summer, the season defined by the initial release of *Brat* and its bold, irreverent aesthetics, was a time of heightened celebration and unapologetic self-indulgence that became a cultural phenomenon. Although it will be remembered by its viral moments and party culture, like all trends, *Brat* Summer will eventually be replaced by something new. While many albums experience a few weeks of significant impact followed by intermittent resurgences with singles and music video releases, Charli implemented a strategic plan to maintain the enduring popularity of *Brat*. She played into the online declaration that “brat summer is dead,” writing “goodbye forever brat summer” in an Instagram post. Following this acknowledgment, the commencement of “bratumn” was announced.<sup>22</sup>

Rather than allowing the excitement and *Brat* Summer to fade, a remix version of *Brat* was revealed in September.<sup>23</sup> The new album, titled *Brat and It’s Completely Different but Also Still Brat*, promised to reimagine the original project with a fresh twist while staying true to the essence of *Brat*’s aesthetic. The cover art mirrored this concept, with the same color and font written in reverse, reflecting the album’s playful sense of contradiction. Further, the album title itself echoed this blunt, unapologetic approach. Alongside the announcement, the “Talk Talk” remix featuring Troye Sivan was revealed, marking the start of their collaboration on the upcoming Sweat Tour. Both the remix and the tour news sparked excitement, leaving fans eager to hear the reimaged project.

As anticipation built for *Brat and It’s Completely Different but Also Still Brat*, Charli XCX and Troye Sivan kicked off the Sweat Tour. The collaboration between these two artists was tactful. Both of their music appeals to audiences that are young, LGBTQ+, and enjoy dance music. Charli and Troye’s single, “Talk Talk,” was integrated into the show and helped promote both the tour and create buzz around Charli’s remix album.

Shygirl, who would be featured on the “365” remix, was an opening act for the Sweat Tour and joined Charli during her set for a live performance of the track before its release. The collaboration between Shygirl, Charli XCX, and Troye Sivan sparked excitement among fans while earning high praise for the tour.

On each night of the tour, arenas were transformed into high-energy clubs, with cage-like staging that mirrored the aesthetic of both Charli XCX’s *Brat* and Troye Sivan’s *Something To Give Each Other*, amplifying the immersive atmosphere. Both albums tap into the electric pulse of club culture, but *Brat* and *Something To Give Each Other* share a deeper theme: “the joy of being on a dance floor and fostering an electrifying connection” with the community.<sup>24</sup> This sense of unity was brought to life during the Sweat Tour, where fans participated in a recorded version of the viral Apple Dance that was projected for the crowd to see, further strengthening the bond between fans and fostering a strong sense of community at the show. This interactive element not only maintained the popularity of *Brat* online with new videos of fans and influencers participating every night but also reinforced the popularity of the Apple Dance in an era of fleeting trends. By leveraging social media and real-time engagement, the marketing campaign ensured that the excitement surrounding the album and tour resonated well beyond the events themselves.

Charli brought the last piece of *Brat*’s marketing plan, the remix album, into fruition by announcing a variety of new artists she’d be collaborating with through billboards displayed throughout the United States.<sup>25</sup> The billboards featured the same lime green and reversed font used on the *Brat and It’s Completely Different but Also Still Brat*’s album cover.

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Through this campaign, it was revealed that the remix album would feature a diverse lineup of artists, including musicians from various genres, spanning from Ariana Grande and Bon Iver to Bladee and BB Trickz. Released on October 11th, the 18-track record showcases a unique perspective on each track, with every artist contributing their distinct style and interpretation of the original topic.

As pitchfork writer Kieran Press-Reynolds points out in his article, “5 Takeaways from Charli XCX’s New Brat Remix Album,” *Brat and It’s Completely Different but Also Still Brat* highlights the original album while reinterpreting it, writing:

“With *Brat and It’s Completely Different but Also Still Brat*, fans were introduced to a transformed version of the upbeat club record they originally fell in love with. The remix album offers a more melancholy mood, reflecting the transition from “brat summer” to “bratumn.” “Her anxieties and confessions were the heart of *Brat*’s sleaze manifesto, and they’re more upfront here.”<sup>26</sup> Pitchfork describes the transformation, saying, “Unlike those remix albums that tack on five DJ flips of the same tune or specific genre edits of a handful of hits, *Brat and It’s Completely Different but Also Still Brat* is pretty much a whole new project. The guts of most songs—lyrics, structures, beats, even the feelings—have been rewired, but without completely erasing the essence of the originals. Some bits seem to respond to the post-BRAT mega-fame; others turn completely haywire, like the mad detonation at the end of ‘Sympathy is a knife.’”<sup>27</sup>

With its impressive list of features and an intensified sense of vulnerability, the remix album paves the way for the *Brat* to thrive in another season.

### **Capturing Commercial Success**

Prior to *Brat*, Charli XCX had made appearances through her features on commercially successful hits such as “I Love It” by Icona Pop (2012) and “Fancy” with Iggy Azalea (2014). Additionally, her skillful pop songwriting has long been evident on her own successful singles, including “Boom Clap,” which was released in 2014 and also garnered mainstream success. She has opened for superstars like Taylor Swift, Halsey, and Sia, and has even acted as a pioneer in the hyperpop genre. However, despite these impressive accomplishments, it wasn’t until *Brat*’s album cycle that Charli XCX achieved a mainstream and viral level of stardom. Her newly recognized success can be attributed to her intentional approach to every aspect of *Brat*’s rollout. By establishing a clear concept before recording, Charli XCX cultivated a cohesive brand identity. Each artistic decision was made deliberately to challenge established norms, which ultimately worked in her favor. The consistency in her appearance and behavior, strategic marketing, and thoughtful selection of collaborators contributed to *Brat* becoming a powerful cultural phenomenon and established Charli XCX as a key player in pop music.

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## Breaking the Sound Barrier: Sean Combs, NDAs, And the Culture of Silence in the Music Industry

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by *Mandalay Martin*

The recent arrest and charges against Sean “Diddy” Combs have brought the music industry’s “culture of silence” and its inherent dangers to the spotlight.<sup>1</sup> Combs faces over one hundred twenty allegations of sexual assault, twenty-five of which involve victims who were children at the time of the alleged incidents. In total, over three thousand individuals have come forward with accusations of his criminal behavior.<sup>2</sup> This wave of media attention on the alleged atrocities committed by Combs has ignited two critical questions within the entertainment industry: what other misconduct may be hidden behind closed doors, and how can we put an end to it?

### I. COMB’S ALLEGATIONS

The first lawsuit against Combs was filed by Chicago producer Rodney “Lid Rod” Jones, Jr., accusing Combs of being part of an illegal racketeering enterprise and stating that he has “irrefutable evidence of: (a) the acquisition, use, and distribution of ecstasy, cocaine, GHB, ketamine, marijuana, and mushrooms; (b) the displaying and distribution of unregistered illegal firearms; and (c) the solicitation of minors and sex workers.”<sup>3</sup> Other plaintiffs report enduring sexual assault, sex trafficking, drugging, non-consensual filming of sexual acts, physical assault, and a seemingly endless list of other heinous abuses.<sup>4</sup>

The allegations against Combs beg the industry to ask how someone could have been performing so many highly criminal acts in secret for so many years. Since

founding *Bad Boy Records* in the 1990s, Combs has been a central figure in hip-hop and the industry as a whole, being entangled in the infamous feud between Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G., publicly dating Jennifer Lopez, and cultivating an image as a charismatic yet driven producer.<sup>5</sup> While his public persona exuded talent and charm, and rumors of his volatile temper and controversial sexual history pervaded the industry for decades, it appears that Combs evaded accountability for years because of his power and influence within the industry.<sup>6</sup>

Combs was arrested on September 16, 2024, and the indictment included graphic details that have since reached virality on social media. Among the allegations are accounts of narcotics use and the usage of over one thousand bottles of baby oil as lubricant for Combs’ abusive sex parties, which he referred to as “freak-offs.”<sup>7</sup> The indictment further claims that “Combs relied on the employees, resources, and influence of the multi-faceted business empire that he led and controlled—creating a criminal enterprise whose members and associates engaged in, and attempted to engage in, among other crimes, sex trafficking, forced labor, kidnapping, arson, bribery, and obstruction of justice.”<sup>8</sup> It alleges that Combs used deadly threats, bribery, and the power of his influence to silence victims and keep them from coming forward.<sup>9</sup>

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Combs's actions have led to public criticism against other industry members associated with his famous White Party and other frequent social gatherings, including Leonardo DiCaprio, Jay-Z, Beyoncé, Ashton Kutcher, Paris Hilton, Mariah Carey, Aretha Franklin, and many others.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, both Motown Records and Combs's label, Love Records, have been named as parties to related lawsuits.<sup>11</sup> Combs's arrest has drawn attention to a pattern of sexual abuse within the industry and the ways in which legal documents can hinder progress and perpetuate a culture of silence.

## II. NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENTS

A Non-Disclosure Agreement (an "NDA") is a legal contract that governs the exchange of confidential information between two parties.<sup>12</sup> They can be unilateral or bilateral and specify the types of information that are restricted and how that information can be used.<sup>13</sup> NDAs have long been used in the entertainment industry to hide dangerous activities, silencing victims. Many victims fear that speaking out about these occurrences could jeopardize both their careers and personal safety.<sup>14</sup> The NDA is a defining document of every industry in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Celebrities use them extensively, not only in business relationships but in romantic relationships and even friendships.<sup>16</sup> In 2022, the Biden Administration took a significant step against workplace sexual harassment and assault by passing the Speak Out Act.<sup>17</sup> The Speak Out Act "prohibits the use of pre-dispute NDAs in cases of workplace sexual harassment and assault."<sup>18</sup> While this legislation helps

prevent harassment in the workplace, NDAs continue to be widely used in the entertainment industry, and are frequently signed at parties, on dates, and even by housekeepers, security guards, assistants, real estate agents, etc.<sup>19</sup> In the industry, individuals often gain corporate-level protection through NDAs, effectively treating their personal lives as if they are trade secrets.<sup>20</sup>

Combs's standard NDA was included in the complaint filed against him by Lil Rod.<sup>21</sup> The NDA is overly broad and "attempts to be a non-disclosure, non-disparagement, intellectual property rights and indemnification agreement all at once for Diddy and anyone affiliated with him, in any shape or form."<sup>22</sup> The NDA is essentially designed to intimidate signors.<sup>23</sup> Any person with legal knowledge would likely find it to be unenforceable, but the average person would likely be so intimidated by the document itself that they would comply with its terms without a second thought.<sup>24</sup>

Combs is not the only celebrity associated with a notorious NDA. Recently, it was revealed that Donald Trump provided Stormy Daniels with an NDA in an attempt to silence her ahead of the 2024 election.<sup>25</sup> In his final days, O.J. Simpson required friends and family visiting his deathbed to sign NDAs for "privacy reasons."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Taylor Swift has alleged that Scooter Braun, the catalyst behind her decision to re-record her first six albums, insisted she sign an NDA that prohibited her from making any statements about him unless they were positive.<sup>27</sup> NDAs clearly permeate the music industry and impact players throughout.

*Continued on Page 14*

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8. See supra note 5.

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### III. THE FUTURE OF NDAs IN THE INDUSTRY

There have been efforts to address the problem of overly broad NDAs in the industry—one such example being the #MeToo movement—but the efforts so far have been futile.<sup>28</sup> Actress Miram Shor and other members of SAG-AFTRA encouraged the organization to negotiate a ban on NDAs that were overly broad in the context of movie production, but to no avail.<sup>29</sup> Zelda Perkins, former assistant to notorious former film producer and convicted sex offender Harvey Weinstein, is the co-founder of *Can't Buy My Silence*, a campaign “committed to end the misuse of NDAs to buy victim’s silence” in the United Kingdom and Canada.<sup>30</sup> These two women represent the hope of change in the entertainment industry, sparking optimism that the recent Combs arrest will lead to similar transformative movements in the music industry. Music has avoided its own #MeToo movement for many years, and this may be the reckoning necessary to end a culture of silence and generate a culture of progress and respect.<sup>31</sup>

The use of NDAs in the music industry, as exemplified by Combs’s overly broad, threatening example, demonstrates the perpetuation of a culture of silence in favor of business interests and career promotion. NDAs, while serving a legitimate business purpose of safeguarding intellectual property and personal privacy, have become a tool for manipulation and deception in the industry, shielding their proponents from public or even personal accountability. Combs is just one example of how power and influence in the industry are used to silence others and endanger lives.

The shift toward transparency and reform in the industry will require significant effort. An initial step in furtherance of this goal would be to reform the existing language common in industry NDAs. Reevaluating how and when NDAs are used can help balance the need for confidentiality with the need for ethical conduct.

Increased standards and scrutiny for NDAs and a reformed regulatory framework could be the foundation of a more responsible use of these agreements, assuring that they protect both the interests of parties wishing to secure their intellectual property and confidential information, but also the safety of all parties involved. Uniting musicians, executives, lawyers, and all industry members is crucial in creating a safer industry, where those with power and influence cannot manipulate legal documents or human beings into serving as tools in furtherance of personal or business goals. As stated by Shor to *The CUT Magazine*, “It’s insane that the plot of the next *Spider-Man* movie and raping a person are given the same contractual treatment. Abuse is not IP.”<sup>32</sup>



(Willy Sanjuan / Invision via AP)

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# From Underground to Mainstream: How House Music is Captivating the Young American Crowd

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by Marc Feliu

## Introduction: The Shift in Music Tastes

Born in the underground clubs of Chicago, house music has been more than just a genre—it's a movement. Since the 1980s, its hypnotic beats and four-on-the-floor rhythm have inspired connection, expression, and liberation for those who needed it most. From the sweaty dance floors of the Warehouse to the neon-lit stages of global festivals, house music has shaped cultures, challenged norms, and united communities. It's a sound that transcends boundaries, making the listener feel alive, free, and part of something bigger.

In recent years, house music has seen a resurgence in popularity among young Americans, stepping out from its underground origins to gain mainstream appeal. Originally associated with underground, Black-owned nightclubs that served as cultural havens for marginalized communities in the 1980s, house music is now a prominent feature of music festivals and streaming playlists, captivating a generation that grew up on hip-hop, reggaeton, and pop. This shift reflects more than a change in music tastes; it highlights a renewed appreciation for house music's roots, especially within marginalized communities. This generational trend highlights how "the phenomenon of embracing music from a decade they did not grow up in is somewhat unique to Gen Z," connecting them to house music's rich history while adding a modern touch.<sup>1</sup>

Recent releases by artists such as Beyoncé and Drake are bringing house music back to the forefront, sparking interest in its infectious dance beats and encouraging cultural reclamation.

## A Brief History of House Music and Its Underground Roots

House music's roots lie deep in Chicago's 1980s underground scene, where it served as both an escape and form of expression for those who faced social and economic marginalization, including LGBTQ+ and minority communities. During this time, "the underground scene stepped off and was beginning to develop a new music style that was deeper, rawer, and more designed to make people dance," capturing the essence of house music's evolution.<sup>2</sup> Originating at clubs that served as safe spaces for the community, such as the Warehouse, the genre was pioneered by DJs like Frankie Knuckles, whose sound "blended disco, funk, and electronic beats to give birth to what became known as house music," making his contributions foundational.<sup>3</sup> This provided a haven, allowing individuals to connect in ways that transcended societal barriers, establishing house music as a symbol of resilience and freedom.

House music's steady, four-on-the-floor beat became the heartbeat of Chicago's underground, eventually spreading to cities like New York and London. As the genre evolved, subgenres like acid and deep house emerged, each bearing the imprints of its creators' lived experiences. However, with house music's expansion into mainstream culture, its original intent was often erased or diluted.

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1. Fazali, "Gen Z's Love for Nostalgia."

2. Ivry, "Miami's Electronic Scene."

3. Shimazu, "What Is House Music?"



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By the 1990s, the genre had been “appropriated by mainstream audiences and EDM,”<sup>4</sup> often shedding its cultural significance in favor of “commercial appeal.”<sup>5</sup> Today, there’s a conscious revival within the music community to reclaim house music’s legacy, honoring the contributions of the original artists and the genre’s role as a sanctuary for the marginalized.

### **Why House Music Appeals to Today’s Young Adults**

House music’s resurgence among today’s young adults is no accident. In a world overwhelmed by stress and uncertainty, house music honors its original intent by providing a therapeutic escape through its uplifting rhythms. With its repetitive four-on-the-floor beat and energizing drops, the genre offers a release, making listeners feel part of something larger, just as it did for its original audience in the 1980s. House music’s deep-rooted vibe and history hold particular appeal for Gen Z, who are drawn to nostalgic styles and retro aesthetics.

Social media has also played a massive role in house music’s comeback. TikTok’s influence “introduce[s] younger audiences to songs from previous decades through viral challenges and trends,” connecting them with house music’s retro appeal.<sup>6</sup> These platforms have transformed house music tracks into viral soundscapes, amplifying songs through dance trends, lifestyle reels, and DJ tutorials. The accessibility of “digital audio workstations (DAWs) and AI-driven music tools have enabled bedroom DJs to remix, create, and share music with ease,” sparking a new wave of creativ-

ity without much musical knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Online tutorials empower anyone with a laptop to engage with house production, pushing forward a new generation of artists who blend old-school elements with innovative digital sounds. This democratization of music production has expanded house music’s reach, breaking down barriers and making it easier for fans to experience the genre both as listeners and creators.

### **House Music’s Takeover of Major U.S. Cities: LA, NY, and Miami**

House music’s rise in major U.S. cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Miami shows both a cultural revival and growing commercial appeal. Each of these cities contributes a unique flavor to house music’s resurgence. Los Angeles holds iconic venues like Exchange LA and Sound Nightclub, where house enthusiasts gather for immersive, all-night sets that celebrate both established and emerging DJs. New York, the birthplace of house’s predecessor, disco, keeps its underground roots alive at spots like Brooklyn Mirage, while Miami’s annual conference Miami Music Week and Ultra Music Festival positions the city as a hub for electronic music, drawing massive crowds and introducing newcomers to the genre. This growth is evident as “Miami’s electronic scene is at a high water mark, with iconic festivals like Ultra shaping the city’s identity,” positioning the city as a house music hub.<sup>8</sup>

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4. Shimazu, “What Is House Music?”

5. Shimazu, “What Is House Music?”

6. Soaverecords, “Impact of Social Media” Is House Music?”

7. Ivry, “Miami’s Electronic Scene.”

8. Ivry, “Miami’s Electronic Scene.”



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The genre's mainstream momentum has brought much-needed attention to its history and the contributions of foundational artists like Frankie Knuckles. His increased visibility also shapes how house music's narrative will evolve. As cities like LA, NY, and Miami continue to build house music's presence, they offer a platform for honoring its legacy while expanding public awareness of the genre's roots. These cities aren't just stages; they're cultural arenas where house music's past and future intersect.

### **From DIY to Commercial Appeal: The Mainstreaming of House Music**

House music's shift from DIY origins to mainstream appeal highlights its journey from underground clubs to the center stage of global culture. Initially a genre driven by community and crafted in intimate, DIY settings, house music now headlines major music festivals like Coachella, EDC, and Ultra. These festivals not only amplify house music's presence but transform it into an experience intertwined with modern culture. These events demonstrate how "festivals like Coachella and Ultra Music Festival have become the pinnacle of house music's commercial success," turning underground sounds into global phenomena.<sup>9</sup> Alongside this festival success, brand partnerships, social media influencers, and exclusive merchandise are reframing house music's image, bringing it into the fashion and lifestyle world further fueling its popularity.

Streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music have

made house music more accessible than ever, curating playlists that expose new listeners to the genre's variety. Streaming platforms play a vital role, as "Spotify's curated playlists allow users to explore house music easily, with playlists like 'Deep House Relax' gaining massive followings," introducing the genre to new listeners.<sup>10</sup> These platforms allow Gen Z to shape the genre's image, melding nostalgic sounds with contemporary trends to create something uniquely resonant with their generation's craving for connection and nostalgia. Influencers and content creators introduce tracks and remixes to millions, often sparking viral moments that propel songs onto global charts and onto dance floors worldwide.

### **The Future of House Music in America**

The future of house music in America hints at a continued rise in both mainstream appeal and cross-genre fusion. As artists increasingly experiment with Latin beats, hip-hop rhythms, and house's characteristic electronic pulse, the genre will reach new audiences while pushing musical boundaries. This cross-genre fusion shows how "the blending of house music with Latin rhythms and Afrobeats creates opportunities to connect with new audiences," keeping the genre fresh and versatile.<sup>11</sup> This fusion taps into the tastes of diverse listeners, making house music adaptable, especially in live settings where audiences are drawn to its high-energy, communal vibe.

In festivals, house music offers logistical advantages over live bands, as DJ sets require less equipment, fewer personnel, and lower costs.

This efficiency underscores how "electronic music festivals continue to dominate because DJ sets are easier and cheaper to organize than traditional live bands, requiring less equipment and fewer personnel," contributing to house music's growing presence in festivals.<sup>12</sup>

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This efficiency, paired with the captivating, immersive experience of electronic music, has contributed to house music's dominance in festivals like Coachella and Electric Daisy. For post-pandemic audiences craving escapism and connection, house music's blend of pulsating basslines and collective energy provides a release from everyday pressures, tapping into Gen Z's yearning for both nostalgia and novelty.

However, as house music permeates mainstream culture, questions arise about its ability to retain the underground essence that once defined it. With mainstream success, there's a risk of losing house music's roots in community-driven expression. Still, the genre may find a way to honor its origins while exploring new sounds in today's music scene. As house music evolves, it's likely to keep its popularity by adapting and staying diverse, showing the cultural richness and flexibility that started it all.

### **The Lasting Impact of House Music on American Youth Culture**

House music's resurgence signals more than just a shift in musical preference—it calls attention to a movement rooted in connection, unity, and emotional release in a time when it is most needed. Much like the 1980s, when house music emerged as a sanctuary amidst social and economic challenges, today's landscape of post-pandemic uncertainty and societal division mir-

rors the same need for communal spaces and cathartic experiences. From the sweaty dance floors of iconic clubs to massive festival stages, house music continues to build spaces where people from all backgrounds can come together and experience a sense of freedom. This appeal has extended far beyond its Chicago origins, inspiring new styles like Afro-house, which integrates African rhythms, underscoring house music's adaptability and cultural depth. "Afro-house not only brings a distinct African rhythm to the genre but also solidifies house music as a global unifier, connecting audiences across continents," further enriching house music's legacy.<sup>13</sup>

As house music gains fans worldwide, especially in countries like South Africa, it raises an intriguing question: Will this genre's influence continue to grow, or is it simply enjoying a momentary resurgence? House music's ability to evolve with the times and blend diverse cultural influences suggests a staying power that could solidify its role in American youth culture for years to come. In an era where young people increasingly seek shared experiences and authentic connections, house music stands as both a soundtrack and a bridge, uniting listeners around the world and keeping its beat alive across generations.

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9. Levin, "Growing Presence of Electronic Music"

10. Groove, "From Underground to Mainstream"

11. Shimazu, "What Is House Music?"

12. Groove, "From Underground to Mainstream"

13. Levin, "Growing Presence of Electronic Music"



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