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AIID-201-03
17 February 2023

...and Time Again: Tense, Nostalgia, and the Music of Jane Remover

There is something interesting about the intersection of music and time. It is something about time itself, really. The lyrical content of a given song concerning the time, or the **tense**, in which the events described are taking place, has one of the strongest impacts on the connection that the song's listeners build with it. Songwriters proficient in writing music of a specific genre tend to focus on one specific tense within the three basic categories: the past, present, and future. Pop music, in particular, often elects for the present tense—writers seek to capture the all too human tendency to live in it, under the assumption that it is there where we might live most freely. Hot Chelle Rae, an American pop rock band from Nashville, Tennessee, do so glaringly in “Tonight Tonight,” from their sophomore album *Whatever* (2011). They *are* going at it tonight. They *are* dancing on the edge of the Hollywood sign¹. Rihanna, in “Don’t Stop the Music”, from 2007’s *Good Girl Gone Bad: it is getting late*. She *is* making her way over to her favorite place². These all are actions described as occurring in this here and now, immersing the listener deeply in an alternative point of view, and it comes as no surprise that these songs would go on to achieve widespread popularity. In a sense, this is music for the ideal state of mind—in these examples as well as countless others throughout this era of pop music, the artists put forth a set of circumstances that the average listener itches to find themselves in. Breaking free from the monotony of day to day life, willfully entering a state of blissful ignorance in hedonistic pursuit, and cherishing the moments that humanity brings are all themes explored in both of the aforementioned songs—and in the case of the latter, too acknowledging that at some point, this special moment of self-expression, of present-living, must at some point or another draw to a close. Here, even when the future’s existence is implied as a mere possibility, Rihanna pushes against it and stands firmly in the present, even suggesting to a prospective suitor the concept of entering an abstract environment in which time plays no role in the human experience³. When songs are written in the present tense, it can be assumed that time as it is traditionally known is sought to be ignored. This alternative form of time passes instead in a series of explicitly depicted moments, blurring together as the mind and body do, with no clear indication of concrete durations between each one—mirroring perfectly how one might interpret the passage of time during a high energy, enjoyable, and memorable experience in one’s life.

By contrast, songs that are past-centric become far more versatile in their constructed worlds and interpretations thereof. The passage of time, an unavoidable and unrelenting force of

¹ Hot Chelle Rae, "Tonight Tonight," track 2 on *Whatever*, RCA Records, 2011.

² Rihanna, “Don’t Stop the Music”, track 3 on *Good Girl Gone Bad*, Def Jam Recordings, 2007.

³ Ibid.

the universe, is inherent to these songs' very existence. Even in the description of one very powerful moment, placing it within the past tense powerfully shifts the manner in which such a moment is perceived by the listener. Phil Elverum's groundbreaking indie folk album released under his former pseudonym The Microphones, *The Glow Pt. 2*, makes use of the past tense to create a very powerful narrative that courses deep through the album's runtime. Inspired in large part by the singer's previous relationship and subsequent falling out, the track "The Moon" is written entirely in the past tense as Elverum croons about the loneliness of revisiting places and activities once shared with a lover⁴. Time here is explored in multiple interwoven forms; reminiscing all at once about the relationship he once was in ("It was intense just getting to be there next to you"), how it ended ("I went back there by myself and gave up on everything we'd felt), and the moments he spent attempting to cope with the aftermath of the break-up ("And I was happy to let you in / "I went back and wished I hadn't"). The introduction of the past has also found its way into modern pop music as the genre's sound has taken a more alternative turn inspired by genres more introspective, intimate by nature. Steve Lacy's "Bad Habit" exemplifies this longing in its infectious hook that took the popular social media platform TikTok by storm in the summer of 2022: "I wish I knew you wanted me", he calls out to a nameless ex-partner.⁵ Capturing another facet of the human condition, Elverum and Lacy here both paint the picture of a young person made directionless by the turmoil that comes with a heartbreak, stumbling through dark hallways, running their hand across the wall for support and wincing at how it feels. In this way, the past swallows the present whole, eschewing the "here and now" and instead dissociating into an emotional, memory-driven fugue. Music written of love—especially of tragic love—tends to evoke this displacement out of time, and often serves as the perfect drug for those looking to escape from its ceaseless march. The universe crafted by these songs is, then, all the more immersive when the very basis of the story it tells is to lift the listener out of their place in time and into one very specific, emotionally charged moment.

Forgoing the discussion of the future tense as it presents itself in popular music, as it is generally an element used with moderation into songs as opposed to one that forms the groundwork for them, the next logical step in this exploration of tenses is the usage of two or more within a single work. Delving into this concept following the previous two may initially seem rudimentary—any written work, after all, will more often than not make use of more than one tense. Aubrey Graham, known mononymously by his middle name, Drake, uses all three basic tenses in his debut solo single released in 2010, "Over": the past in "I did it overnight, it couldn't happen any quicker", the present in "I know way too many people here right now that I didn't know last year", and the future in "I'll probably still be the man when everything is over".⁶ When this tense-mixing is executed in a very specific manner, however, songs transcend the general boundaries of popular music—whether it be a short biography on the artist in the case of "Over", or a straightforward tale of two persons coming together to bask in the fleeting moment

⁴ The Microphones, "The Moon", track 3 from *the Glow, pt. 2*, K Records, 2001.

⁵ Steve Lacy, "Bad Habit", track 5 from *Gemini Rights*, RCA Records, 2022.

⁶ Drake, "Over", track 4 from *Thank Me Later*, Young Money Records, 2010.

in “Don’t Stop the Music”. With the right production and lyricism, songs that incorporate multiple different tenses begin to evoke a feeling both uniquely powerful and powerfully unique: **nostalgia**. An amalgamation of the Greek words ‘nostos’ (return home) and ‘algos’ (pain) that came about in the mid 18th century, the word encapsulates a phenomenon the world at large has grown all too familiar with in the present day especially—a sort of a chronic homesickness, a *present* longing for a fonder time in the *past*. From the baby boomer mumbling to themselves on the recliner about the “good ol’ days” to the millennial remembering their family’s first personal computer, nostalgia has pervaded all walks of life for centuries. Members of Generation Z, however, seem to be experiencing this phenomenon at quicker rates than seemingly any other generation before them—quick enough that they can translate these sentiments to profound musical statements that both derive from their childhood and create a new sound all their own, perhaps due to both living through an onslaught of major world events within recent years and the rather bleak future to come depicted by recent news headlines.

Jane Remover, a 19-year-old non-binary electronic musician from Newark, New Jersey, has cemented their name in the underground as one of the pioneers of this new form of nostalgia felt through sound. Having begun music production as early as 2011, inspired by figureheads of electronic dance music such as Skrillex, Kill The Noise, and Virtual Riot, Remover would go on to experiment with making a myriad of different subgenres of EDM throughout the mid-2010s.⁷ In 2018, they found themselves at the forefront of the development of a new microgenre called “digicore”, joining multiple production collectives during this time and creating fast-paced, high-pitched, and heavily distorted hip-hop instrumentals for other rappers in the genre’s SoundCloud scene, initially shying away from taking on vocal performances themselves until a couple years later. After the release of a multitude of singles and an extended play, *Teen Week*, that would go on to amass over 100,000 streams within the first two weeks of its availability on streaming platforms, they released their debut studio album, *Frailty*, in late 2021 via the deadAir Records label. *Frailty*, undeniably, is an album that bleeds with nostalgia. Many of the songs on the project are pitched slightly higher than their original keys, putting them in microtonal areas that emulate the 16-bit music of older video games, especially Undertale (2015) and Pokémon: Diamond and Pearl (2006), which inspired the album’s overall atmosphere.⁸ Stating in an interview with Insider that nearly all the songs they make are about “crossing the barrier between childhood and adulthood”, Remover seeks to rekindle flames of the former in both the lyrical content and the production style of *Frailty*—the usage of an effect called “bitcrushing” exemplifies both the aforementioned video-game soundtrack inspiration, as well as conjuring to

⁷ Jordan Darville, “5 Fast Facts with Dltzk, the Teenage Digicore Producer with Adrenaline and Heart,” The FADER, November 12, 2021, <https://www.thefader.com/2021/11/12/5-fast-facts-with-dltzk-the-teenage-digicore-producer-with-adrenaline-and-heart>. Remover began production under the pseudonym “dltzk”, but would later retire this alias in favor of “Jane Remover” in June 2022.

⁸ Kieran Press-Reynolds, “An 18-Year-Old Invented a New Genre of Meme-Heavy Music Called 'Dariacore' That's like 'Pop Music on Steroids,’” Insider, November 24, 2021, <https://www.insider.com/dltzk-frailty-hyperpop-dariacore-digicore-soundcloud-rap-internet-musician-osquinn-2021-11>.

the ear the sound of a low-bitrate YouTube video from 2008⁹. Melodic motifs introduce themselves and reintroduce themselves like an old memory; all things considered, this is a project predicated on the very concept of nostalgia. It comes as no surprise to their listeners, then, that Remover has an entire body of work dedicated to the remixing of songs from their childhood and of the present day with their signature chaotic, fast-paced, multi-layered production style. Given the tongue-in-cheek moniker “Dariacore” after the former MTV animated sitcom *Daria*, Jesse Taconelli, the founder of the aforementioned deadAir Records, described the microgenre as “electronic music that's been filtered through over a decade of the internet's love-hate relationship with big-stage EDM and dubstep”, and their primary influences as mentioned before already give credence to such a statement. Here again do the past and present collide at mach speed—rapid-fire lasers and distorted drum samples meet the likes of former boy band Big Time Rush, pop legend Mariah Carey, and even relatively newer artists such as rapper Cardi B and the English bedroom pop musician PinkPantheress.¹⁰ As songs in the *Dariacore* series of albums whiz by at breakneck speeds, with many tracks lasting no longer than two or three minutes, it may be hard upon first listen to pin down exactly what is happening—as one might reflect upon their own childhood as an adult in the present. Cultural references of the present via snippets of popular TikTok trends and viral videos combined with songs of the past entangle themselves in one another and become a paroxysm of sound that quickly becomes an emotional experience felt throughout the body. However, this facet of Remover’s music alone is what makes it so unique, and so important. Not only does it intersperse both the past and the present, perhaps mirroring an idyllic childhood viewed through the lens of a chaotic adulthood, but a future is imagined here, too; no other project exists like *Frailty*, and certainly none like the *Dariacore* series. Critics and interviewers alike agree that Remover is in a genre all their own; formerly at the cutting edge of one of the newest genres in electronic music, they broke clean off into their own sound and redefined the scenes whence they came, just as their influences had years before.¹¹

Exploring the framework upon which any given song is built is a task that, at its very core, is an interdisciplinary one. Much is to be considered with any piece of art and its place in the sphere that it occupies beyond an analysis of the musical content itself—from where did it come? In other words, who exactly is the artist, and what are the primary influences and inspirations that led to the music’s creation? Another question—how does it choose to present itself? This question ties itself most closely to the tenses involved. Is it a retrospective look on events in the singer’s life like “The Moon”, or does it posit an ideal present like “Don’t Stop the Music”? However, it also transcends the music in favor of an analysis of the aesthetic with which it is bundled, including important aspects such as the song’s title and the stylization thereof, as well as the art that accompanies it. What is arguably most important to ask though, is simple:

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jane Remover, *Dariacore 2: Enter Here, Hell to the Left*, self-released, 2022.

¹¹ Mano Sundaresan, “Dltzk: Frailty Album Review,” Pitchfork, November 23, 2021, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/dltzk-frailty/>.

what statement might it be making, either intentionally or unintentionally? These questions tend to get very complicated, and in truth have no true clear-cut answer. Music, let alone art as a whole, is made for a myriad of reasons, and from there further discussions could begin on the necessity of reason and meaning in art entirely. Remover themselves, however, summarize their artistic expression succinctly: speaking on *Frailty*'s overarching message with Insider, they proclaim that “despite the pressure to become an adult when you turn 18, you still have so much time left — and you can still do the things you used to do, like play video games”¹². Even with the expert inclusion of all three basic tense categories in a large majority of their music, the concept matters naught to them. Music, to Remover, is an expression of the self, and all the same a reminder that that expression—and who they are—is not only valid, but something to be embraced with open arms.

¹² Kieran-Press Reynolds, Insider.