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Identity Through Anonymity: Aliases Among the Youth in the Modern Electronic Underground

“...and when I ask if there’s any significance behind choosing the name SOPHIE as a moniker, the response is even more oblique: ‘It tastes good and it’s like moisturizer.’”

—Larry Fitzmaurice, “SOPHIE”¹

The *Nom de Plume* as a Means to an End

This is nothing new, of course. Artists of all different mediums—not just music—have opted to release their works under a name that does not match their birth name for centuries. This practice is most commonly observed in literature with the concept of pen names. Common historical examples thereof include Samuel Clemens, writing as Mark Twain; Emily Brontë as Ellis Bell; and the collective of James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay as Publius. These prominent figures elected to obscure their own identities for a myriad of reasons. Twain chose his name in reference to his previous work as a member of a steamboat crew, wherein the phrase “mark twain” signified a water depth of 12 feet—a career that would shape the themes and style of his work after his departure from the job.² Brontë elected for a masculine pen name due to both the time period in which she wrote—the early 19th century, a period of significant sexual prejudice predating the American women’s rights movement by nearly a century and a half³—as well as her interest in a quiet life away from controversies and major publicity.⁴ The three aforementioned men that comprised the pseudonym Publius, under which the pivotal collection of essays known as *The Federalist Papers* was published in 1788, chose to conceal their true identities out of fear of persecution from the government and its construction that they were criticizing in their work.⁵ In these historical examples, it is observed that the nom de plume often took on more of a utilitarian role in the presentation of the work rather than an aesthetic one. However, this aesthetic practice is also present in works of the same time, namely outside of the realm of literature; the visual arts of East Asia carry with them too a rich history of pseudonyms, known as “art names” or “gō” in Japanese. Artists studying under mentors as apprentices would be assigned an art name deriving from that of their superiors—reminiscent of the dynastical system of government to which Japan adheres. They would sign all their works with that name, notably predating the common practice of attributing one’s own work to

¹ Fitzmaurice, Larry. “SOPHIE.” *Pitchfork*, October 10, 2013. <https://pitchfork.com/features/rising/9237-sophie/>.

² Floyd, Rebecca. “Frequently Asked Questions.” *Mark Twain House*, October 26, 2017. <https://marktwainhouse.org/about/mark-twain/frequently-asked-questions/>.

³ Aleksiejuk, Katarzyna. “Pseudonyms.” Edited by Carole Hough. *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*, March 7, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199656431.013.55>.

⁴ Thompson, Nicola Diane. “The Unveiling of Ellis Bell: Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*.” *Reviewing Sex*, 1996, 42–65. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230376229_4

⁵ History.com Editors. “Federalist Papers.” *HISTORY*. A&E Television Networks, August 4, 2022. <https://www.history.com/topics/early-us/federalist-papers>.

themselves which arose with the advent of the printing press⁶. These art names would often be changed in parallel with significant events occurring in the artist's life, and their work would then in turn reflect these changes.⁷ A modern example of the use of the pseudonym in terms of visual art is found in the work of Banksy, whose real name has remained unknown since becoming active in street art in the early 1990s. His use of an alternate name not only obscured himself from persecution, but also allowed his work to become respected worldwide while being able to maintain a life away from the limelight.

Defining The Artist

The concept of the pseudonym is thus one that has a rich history in multiple different artistic fields. The tackling of the abstract within these fields not only speaks for itself in the content generated, but also heavily relies on how this content is presented to the viewer. I posit in a previous paper, "...and Time Again: Tense, Nostalgia, and the Music of Jane Remover," that one of the cruxes of the possible statement(s) put forth by a given work of art is the aesthetic that accompanies it—speaking in terms of music, I acknowledge details such as its title and the stylization thereof, as well as its cover art.⁸ The presentation of a musical work outside its aural content is key to both communicating the place from which the music comes—deconstructing the ideological biases that contribute inherently to the work—as well as enticing others to listen and subsequently relate to it. Equally as important to the deconstruction of a musical work, however, is the name to which it is attributed. The artist's name is not only practically important for the purposes of filing it under a certain letter in a record store, but also is where one's first exposure to the artist's expression of self often lies. The pseudonym has a similarly rich history in music; more historical instances of their use have explanations akin to their application in the world of literature. Classical composers such as Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven published their works under different names depending on the country in which they were being presented in an attempt to be more palatable for citizens of that country. This trend persists into the modern day; the Italian-American singer Dino Paul Crocetti changed his name twice—once to "Dino Martini", and the second time to a fully Americanized moniker, "Dean Martin"—leaning fully into the audiences for which he performed.⁹ The pseudonym that has ingrained itself most into American pop culture, however, is that of Prince Rogers Nelson—known mononymously as Prince. Performing and releasing music under multiple different monikers over the course of his career, The Artist (as he was also known) released several projects under the name "♯"—an original glyph known colloquially by fans as the Love Symbol—during a dispute regarding the terms of his contract between him and the record label to which he was signed.¹⁰ This symbol is an amalgamation of three crucial to Prince's identity as an artist and a human at large; the male and female gender symbols (♂ and ♀, respectively) and the peace sign (☺). Being arguably the most widely known androgynous pop

⁶ Dewar, James. "The Information Age and the Printing Press: Looking Backward to See Ahead." *RAND Corporation*, 1998. <https://doi.org/10.7249/p8014>.

⁷ Chiappa, Joseph Noel. "Painting Schools and Art Names (Go)." *J. Noel Chiappa*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Accessed March 21, 2023. <http://mercury.lcs.mit.edu/~jnc/prints/artname.html>.

⁸ Custer, Ethan. "...and Time Again: Tense, Nostalgia, and the Music of Jane Remover." Essay, Ramapo College of New Jersey, 2023.

⁹ Massimo, Carlo. "The Truth About Dean Martin's Real Name." *Grunge*, February 4, 2023. <https://www.grunge.com/773877/the-truth-about-dean-martins-real-name/>.

¹⁰ Hohenadel, Kristin. "The Story Behind Prince's Unpronounceable 'Love Symbol #2.'" *Slate*, April 21, 2016. <https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/04/the-story-behind-princes-unpronounceable-love-symbol-2.html>.

figure of his time, the influence that this symbol—let alone his music—has had on artists in terms of their self-expression as well as a profound growth in the confidence to do so is one unmistakable.

“Virtual Fragmentation”

In the 1970s and 1980s, decades comprising a time period where gender identity was still heavily compartmentalized to the typical male-female binary in society at large, Prince was one of the most influential figures in breaking free from this binary through the means of artistic expression. His impact in the LGBTQ+ community—let alone on music as a whole—is one that only grows further immeasurable with the rapidfire developments in the artform. It is his use of the pseudonym as not just a tool to obfuscate his true identity, but to build an entirely new and cutting-edge personality embodied in both physical and musical aspects, that has gone on to inspire generations after him to embrace their own identities through similar means. In the present day, this has become all the more easily attainable with the Internet—especially through platforms such as SoundCloud, where musicians can, within minutes, begin the process of virtual fragmentation: create new accounts under any given name, begin posting their musical works, and grow a community around them. Jane Remover, as mentioned briefly before, is one such example of this trend of pseudonymity—besides publishing their primary works under her given name, she has released many other works to critical acclaim under a variety of names.¹¹ Arguably Remover’s most famous alias is that with which she published the *Dariacore* trilogy of albums—credited to the names “Ieroy” or “c0ncernn” interchangeably. Some of her lesser-known aliases vary significantly in style, however; adept at immersive worldbuilding, Remover has created multiple different alternate realities of sound with accompanying storylines to boot. Whether it be the fictional band *venturing*, whose recordings are “archived” on a dedicated SoundCloud account by the character “Violet”, or the *Jamison Bleached Waters* project, which catalogs the desolate, tenebrous soundscapes of a city whose water supply has been sabotaged with bleach by an unknown perpetrator, Remover has built for herself a repertoire of timbre at the age of nineteen that plenty of artists are unable to reach across their entire careers.

The online collaborative music database *Rate Your Music*, frequented in particular by those in their adolescence / early adulthood,¹² houses plenty of modern examples of the trend of forming multiple identities under which different styles of music are released. Each artist cataloged on the site has a profile with an accompanying “Also Known As” section where these aliases are contained. Artists with a RYM account—especially younger members of the site—will often add themselves to the database, meticulously cataloging all the musical works that they have released to the public. From there, users often use the site’s social features, such as following other users with similar musical taste and commenting on their page, to gain a following towards their own creations. The breakcore project Lily of the Moon is one notable example; comprising two identities of a person with dissociative identity disorder, both figures have their own separate entries in the database, as do all five of their alternate aliases.¹³ Another example is the works of the 14 year old Canadian producer Alena Phoenix, totalling another five different pseudonyms under which they have released projects varying wildly in sound from

¹¹ “Jane Remover - Rate Your Music.” *Rate Your Music*. Sonemic. Accessed March 26, 2023. <https://rateyourmusic.com/artist/jane-remover>.

¹² “Site Demographics - Rate Your Music.” *Rate Your Music*. Sonemic. Accessed March 27, 2023. <https://rateyourmusic.com/discussion/rate-your-music/site-demographics/>.

¹³ “Lily of the Moon - Rate Your Music.” *Rate Your Music*. Sonemic. Accessed March 27, 2023. <https://rateyourmusic.com/artist/lily-of-the-moon>.

glitched ambience to ethereal cloud rap.¹⁴ Countless further instances of this phenomenon can be found through exploration into the millions of albums that have been entered into the database since the site's inception in 2000,¹⁵ and through even a cursory deep dive, the correlation between LGBTQ musicians and the creation of alternate aliases signifying a different style or approach to production is a striking one that certainly warrants rich and in-depth discussion in the world of musicology.

On Usernames

The previously mentioned historical figures that chose to identify themselves in their relative spheres certainly set precedents that would allow for this musical trend to take shape. However, I find it remiss to cite these figures as a sole root cause and to understate the impact of the Internet on artists in the scene. Every artist hitherto mentioned that has utilized the tactic of virtual fragmentation for their artistic presence was born into an era where the Internet almost totally defines the world around them, often entering the online world at a very young age. It is through this online world that these artists' identities were molded at an impressionable age, and whether it be for the better or for the worse, the practices of the Internet had become a substantial part of their identities. It is the idea of the username, by extension, which is a key factor in determining even a general origin point for this phenomenon as it presents itself in the modern electronic underground. Aleksiejuk raises several key facets of the username in her entry in the Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming on pseudonyms, but crucially puts forth that they are predicated upon two points: restriction and self-reflection.¹⁶ Restriction comes from the limitations of the platform that the username is being registered on; for example, certain characters may be disallowed, and there may be a limit to how many characters can be used in the username. Self-reflection is inherent in the creation of a username due both to the concept of restriction, and in the sense that the user often seeks to choose a name that represents themselves without giving their true identity away. Sonya Hofer elaborates further in "I Am They": as the Internet has become more a necessity than a convenience to everyday life, the creation of multiple identities has followed a similar pattern.¹⁷ Herein lies the most basic form of identity found through anonymity: one's username becomes not just an extension of themselves, but a *tabula rasa* for a new self to be inscribed unto.

Conclusion: Queering the Artist

The musical pseudonym, in this way, seeks to link the artist to their work and add to it a more personable, intimate experience. More importantly, however, the process of pseudonym creation via virtual fragmentation serves as an outlet for musicians to experiment with their identity; both in the sense of their growth as a producer or performer, as well as their personal identity as it pertains to constructs like gender, sexual attraction, and the acceptance thereof. Electronic dance music as a genre and as a scene has historically been a similar outlet, in that it allowed for LGBTQ+ youths of generations previous

¹⁴ "Alena Phoenix - Rate Your Music." *Rate Your Music*. Sonemic. Accessed March 27, 2023. <https://rateyourmusic.com/artist/alena-phoenix>.

¹⁵ See user-created lists such as ~ElizabethShadowLazuli's *The Transgender Music Index* (<https://tinyurl.com/3cf8fby3>), ~FinleyUnreleased's *Artists with RYM account* (<https://tinyurl.com/8zbnzmbh>), and ~code_gs' *Artists who use RYM* (<https://tinyurl.com/2p966wn6>).

¹⁶ Aleksiejuk, "Pseudonyms", 10-11.

¹⁷ Hofer, Sonya (2006). I Am They: Technological Mediation, Shifting Conceptions of Identity and Techno Music. *Convergence*, 12(3), 307–324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856506067203>.

to explore and accept their identities in a way that other facets of their lives may have inhibited.¹⁸ The genre was innovative and experimental by nature; compared to popular music of the time that relied heavily on acoustic instrumentation, EDM was groundbreaking for the artform and created an entirely new space for artists to experiment and create sounds that had never been heard before. The Internet, by comparison, was an outlet for experimentation with identity through its intrinsic anonymity at the time: brand new identities could be created by persons looking to escape from their real-world identities.¹⁹ These two major innovations in self-expression—let alone global society—coalesce in the modern electronic underground scene and become an expansive space for today’s youth to do just the same as EDM’s earliest fans did nearly half a century ago.

The story of the late transgender electronic producer Sophie Xeon, known mononymously as SOPHIE, is arguably the finest example of all: she began her career as someone incredibly private, conducting very few interviews and revealing very little about her identity—and when she did, purposefully giving abstract and vague answers to the questions provided. As the years progressed, however, she would eventually come to embrace her identity as a trans woman and officially come out—or, as she preferred, “become visible”—with the release of “It’s Okay to Cry” in late 2017. From then on, Xeon was an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ+ youth across the globe, using her platform and emergence from the underground as a way to inspire others to embrace their own identities unashamedly through art up until her untimely death in early 2021.²⁰ In an interview with Paper Magazine following the release of her revolutionary debut album, *Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides*, Xeon summarized her experience with identity, anonymity, and music altogether matter-of-factly: “There’s no more rules here. The point is you are given the authority to choose yourself what feels right — what’s going to allow you to live your best life.”²¹

¹⁸ Black, Blair. 2020. “The Queer of Color Sound Economy in Electronic Dance Music”. *Current Musicology* 106 (July). <https://doi.org/10.7916/cm.v106iSpring.6764>.

¹⁹ Hofer writes in “I Am They” that “Cybertheorist Sadie Plant has estimated that in the internet’s earliest years only 5 percent of users were women, but she observes, ‘if so few women really were online, there was certainly no shortage of female names in use’” (310).

²⁰ Crooked, Emily. “What I Learned Reading Every Sophie Interview Ever.”. *British GQ*, August 29, 2021. <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/sophie-what-i-learned>.

²¹ Moran, Justin. “Sophie’s Whole New World.” PAPER. PAPER, June 18, 2018. <https://www.papermag.com/sophie-pride-2579165152.html>.