

HOLD MUSIC

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It's May 2020 and I have been dutifully "safer at home" in northeast LA since mid-March. Communication, although already headed in this direction, has officially settled into the virtual realm. Zoom, the video conferencing platform, has unintentionally become a type of public infrastructure. In many ways the visual takes precedence, as it does in most things in our society: the clothing, background, lighting are the prioritized focus and fascination. The standard for the audio is lower: if the audio aligns with the video and maintains a reasonable volume it is essentially flawless. As our communications are increasingly mediated and digital audio becomes a crucial infrastructure to work and social life, what is lost, what is shifted, in this digitization and compression? What follows is essentially a meandering around digital audio and live music in the Covid era, and their capacities and limits in the realms of intimacy, communication, community, connection and temporal experience.



Many musicians have taken to livestreaming as an alternative to live performances. I've enjoyed tuning in and watching some of these livestreams: they are sincere, authentic, in some ways more intimate than a performance at a club or venue. They're relaxed, forgiving and domestic, with a continuous chatroom streaming reactions, impressions and emojis. These virtual performances are social and the connections made and shared through them are real. But, of course, they are also different.

Most of the live music I experience, (electronic, laptop, modular synthesizer music, processed vocals, dance music) comes out of speakers. Even the acoustic signals are usually amplified, processed and mixed. This music is produced, performed and meant to be disseminated through speakers. In this way, this medium lends itself readily to the virtual livestream, as both types of performances are heard through speakers. In contrast, a virtual livestream of an acoustic ensemble or full orchestra is a complete transformation and general flattening of the original acoustic experience. Given this relative consistency, there are two main differences between an electronic live performance and virtual livestream: the diffusion of a variety of speakers instead of one large speaker system and the individual, virtual experience instead of the spatial-social experience. What we enjoy as a physical audience is a combination of the social aspect, the content of the music, and the spatial experience: a complex arrangement of the architecture, sound system, objects in the room (including people) and the content of the sound itself, experienced dynamically, collectively and simultaneously.

Using the term "release" for sharing music to the public, or making it available for purchase, has taken on a new relevance with digital music. Although a nuisance for some artists, listeners have endless options for how, when and where they could listen to music. An activity that was once limited to the living-room speakers by the record player has now expanded to the car, a smartphone speaker, earbuds, computer speakers, smartphone speakers, extensively researched audiophile set-ups, bluetooth mono-speakers, and more, at any time, socially or individually. The individual customization for spatialization and use of speakers is already widely accepted and a part of listening to music, digitally. Given this familiarity of variation, a livestreamed music performance is an opportunity for a shared temporal-social experience.

The nature of this shared temporal-social experience with varying states of attention is what distinguishes the livestreamed concert. In a club or venue, even when audience members aren't giving their undivided attention, there is a general shared focus towards the performance. In virtual livestreams, attention is individual, decentralized, and fragmented. Most often, especially with ambient music, these performances drift into the background.

Even before these circumstances, the contemporary state of attention given to music has never been so scattered. Increasingly, music isn't 'actively' listened to, it's *streamed*. Even more so, listeners aren't listening to specific artists, they are listening to *Spotify*, which implies a playlist, generated by a company, algorithm or individual. Moreover, streaming is generally an accompaniment to an activity: exercising, cooking, driving, hanging out with friends, cleaning, studying and more. Although using background music to aid in an activity isn't new, its contemporary ubiquitousness and cultural insistence in domestic, professional and commercial spaces is unprecedented. This is both a product of the accessibility of music and a result of the refined customization of algorithmic playlists. What was once a grocery store playing music to encourage shoppers to buy more or enhance workers' performance is now layered with individuals choosing their own algorithmically served playlists on earbuds.

In this context, the livestreamed performance designed to function as a type of intentional background music with the option for light interaction is very contemporary. In post-capitalist 2020, where new releases can sound like they're authentically from the 70's or 90's, new genres aren't what define music. Contemporary music is organized, selected and playlisted by its functionality. This new pervasive usefulness of music, the swiss army knife of audio, can be understood as a new genre, which I'll call "all-purpose trance." All-purpose trance is a living background music: functional, customizable, interactive, designed and chosen specifically to sustain a trance-like engagement in an activity or desired emotion.

In the last few months, I'm getting tons of algorithmic suggestions for music or playlists with hashtags like 'chill,' 'cozy,' 'quarantine,' or 'indoors.' Self care, mental health and staying calm is crucial to these times and I'm thankful for the outpouring of music that promotes calmness, opportunities for meditation, reflection and domestic bliss. I consider this a type of introspective inquiry as much of the music I produce and listen to is ambient, abstract and pleasant. But should music be comforting right now? Where is the music that is galvanizing, brewing, threatening a revolution? Where is the cathartic, completely unironic, furious music? Is it even possible for music to be countercultural and anti-corporate in the age of streaming? How could there be a diy scene in a corporate-internet?

The fallout of the touring industry due to Covid has left many musicians in a state of precarity. The misfortune isn't that tours have been cancelled, it's that musicians are pressured by the current economy to tour relentlessly. Contemporary music is primarily made to be heard through speakers: it is composed, arranged, recorded, mixed and mastered with great deliberation. Although under very unfortunate circumstances, this global lockdown has created excellent conditions to listen to *recorded* music! Unlike many other media, recorded audio is the perfect medium for solitary confinement. If musicians received decent royalties from streaming, endless touring would not be a necessity.

Suffice to say, you won't find protest music on Spotify. Even if it is 'protest music,' it inherently can't protest if it is consumable within that system. Even if the subject matter or associated politics of the music is radical, controversial or empowering, this is all just content from the platform's point of view. Content, especially highly streamed content, just reinforces the platform, by providing and appealing to endlessly detailed, honed in niche markets.

A majority of these livestream concerts have taken place on Twitch, a platform known for gaming. Witnessing the experimental music community migrate to Twitch seemed at first like a gamification of contemporary music. As musicians livestreamed sets, it could appear as if musicians were unintentionally conforming to the format and values of a gamer's livestream: playing for likes, comments, donations and digital engagement. But after watching and participating in some of these concerts as well as some gamer streams, perhaps it's more of a 'musification' of gaming. Gamers watch Twitch for the company of people, for the ambient experience of playing video games with friends. Gaming is usually regarded as anti-social, but it's intensely social, just in a mediated way. The same can be true of the electronic music community: on first glance, and in comparison to other cultures, experimental music can be regarded as anti-social and esoteric. The music *can* be hostile to an audience, something to endure or understand more than to entertain. Going to a show or a concert implies a duration of time where you may not be talking, in contrast to attending a party or art opening. But not unlike video games, whether in a club or online, the social aspect is essential. Twitch is ultimately a platform to hang out with people. Twitch streamers are playing to play, not necessarily to 'win;' their success relies more heavily on their consistency, hours online and charisma. Musician streamers are also playing to play, extending the experience of sharing music.



Music is a model of society: beyond the significance of the music itself, its associated cultures and modes of distribution and consumption reflect and reinforce societal conditions. This isn't just about independent musicians vs. spotify, this is also about independent businesses vs. amazon. This isn't just gigging musicians: this is the gig economy, named after gigging musicians in the first place. This isn't just the lack of protest in music subcultures: this is the irony and futility of protest within for-profit virtual spaces without privacy or transparency. I choose to focus on music because I believe that it is simultaneously reflective of the conditions that produce it as well as capable of changing those conditions. Music, after all, is predominantly experienced as something that is consumed and received, and has tremendous power to encourage, uplift, connect, express, bond and activate.

In mid-March, right before safer-at-home regulations were announced and right after three performances of mine with collaborators were cancelled at Zebulon, we decided to organize a series of 'drive-in concerts' as an alternative. I had wanted to do a drive-in concert for years, but always felt that it would inevitably reinforce the social isolation and car culture that already plagues Los Angeles. How would a concert with an audience of individuals in their cars escape cynicism? What I value most about the experimental music community in Los Angeles is the collective experience of sharing time, space and attention together in intentional ways and I couldn't figure out how to reconcile the two.

In collaboration with Jeremiah Chiu, Ben Babbitt, Booker Stardrum and support from Dublab, we hastily organized a live broadcast performance in the Vons parking lot in Echo Park, Los Angeles. Broadcasting live from Jeremiah's van, we took turns setting up and playing individual sets, creating a show that lasted a little over an hour. About 100 cars attended, honking and flashing their headlights in applause after our individual sets. In this alternate reality of the covid era, FM radio was the most direct, tangible, intimate and physical form of communication and sitting alone in a car in a parking lot with others became a radical act of community.



Sound is always compared to sight, as they tend to be perceived as the most dominant sensations, but sound has more in common with touch. Sound travels through pressure waves, rattles our eardrums, vibrates a chain of 3 small bones, vibrates inner ear fluid, moves tiny hair cells and sends electrical signals to the brain. Sound is perceived through more than just our ears, it is physically a full body sensation. Deaf people enjoy attending concerts and raves because they can *feel* the vibrations.

In the virtual realm where things can only be seen and heard, sound becomes synonymous with touch. Sound is representative of touch in most interactive software and user interfaces. In video games, sounds are always used to confirm that the player has touched, procured, hit, or made impact with something. These flourishes, or 'stingers,' are crucial to the immersive experience as they provide feedback of contact, no matter how fantastical. In user interfaces or software, sound is used in the same way; sending messages on an iPhone, typing or pressing buttons. Signals to confirm and create a sense of satisfaction: something is on, something is off.

As sound acts as a symbol of touch it is also a physical sensation of touch, although focused on the eardrum. All digital sound signals need to be converted to an analog speaker to be heard. The ASMR community is the most direct example of sound as touch in the virtual realm. ASMR stands for "auto sensory meridian response:" felt by a minority of people, it is a specific set of physical sensations including but not limited to chills, tingles, relaxation in the scalp, shoulders, and spine, triggered by sounds. ASMR is a direct physical full body sensation, through digital audio alone, with a massive community of artists and audiences around the world. These videos are typically sought after for the purposes of relaxation, sleep, entertainment or focus. The "trigger sounds" share some characteristics, usually close-mic quiet sounds such as whispering, tapping, brushing or handling different objects. Listening to ASMR is listening to sounds entirely for a physical sensation, stripped of content, information or musical expression (although there is nuance, expression, artistry and craft to the practice and ASMR has been utilized in advertisements). These sounds can create a trance-like effect, leading susceptible listeners into deep states of relaxation, not unlike a mass, mediated hypnosis.

Marcos Lutyens, an LA based artist, writer and hypnotist, has been leading weekly group Zoom hypnosis sessions since mid-March. The sessions can be understood as a type of guided meditation, each focusing on a topic such as 'honey,' 'cloud, and 'touch.' The audience that tunes in is international and multi-generational, attending from different time zones, countries and lockdown regulations, but all affected by circumstances of the pandemic. Lutyens' voice and practice as a hypnotist transcends the compressed audio of Zoom, smoothing over digital artifacts and sustaining a collective focus.

The session on April 9 focused on touch. Through a guided visualization, I descended a spiral staircase (turning left) to find myself in my studio with eight arms, unevenly distributed and proportioned. My left arm was able to reach out to every point of my studio, restless, insatiable, and expandable. My right arm, and the arms that were connected to it, were lethargic, overworked, heavy, uninterested. My left arm was too big for the room of my studio. It was touching the ceiling, falling down the right wall, hitting the ground, trailed across the ground, up the left wall. My left arm was inside of a dog-house, able to touch and feel every surface of the enclosure, while my right arm was in a room twice the size of the actual room I was in. I never felt so claustrophobic and expansive at the same time.

The actual room I was in, currently am in, and will be spending my days in for the foreseeable future, is a very small music studio in my house. From a certain perspective, the visualization that I experienced wasn't so outlandish: all day I touch every surface and object in this room via soundwaves from my speakers. Everything in here and the structure beyond this room vibrates. This manipulation of pressure waves and their interaction with architecture and objects is tactile.



It's well into May now, and many things seem less certain than in March when we did the first drive-in concert. In a way we're all on hold: as if we all froze in a game of freeze dance in mid-March, struggling, shaking with effort to hold the same positions for so long. But this game of freeze dance has background music. The first manufactured background music, by muzak, was made to quicken the sense of time enduring waiting periods, such as elevator music, waiting on hold on the telephone or waiting in a doctor's office. This pandemic has impacted everyone's lives, in very different ways. I can only directly speak to my privileged experience of being a homebound composer. I feel like I'm waiting indefinitely, without knowing what type of outcome to reasonably expect. The music that I consume and create during this time has felt like a type of 'hold music.' In a time marked by enforced physical isolation, music is contact, holding me through an indefinite duration, making the uncertain tolerable.