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### The Future of Music: Exploring Noise and Pop with Cienfuegos

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“The Hills,” by The Weeknd, is an ode to being so famous and on so many drugs that you don’t care who you’re fucking. The Toronto rapper topped the Billboard 100 with the track, and amassed 370 million hits on YouTube. His millennial take on Michael Jackson is modern pop perfection.

Despite its undeniable catchiness, “The Hills” champions over-the-top, blown-out, good-old-fashioned noise. The Weeknd uses noise to introduce the more traditionally melodic moments of the song: four bursts of drawn-out distorted thuds jumpstart the beginning of the track, and a high-pitched scream, cringe-worthy on its own but appropriate when buried in its surrounding soundscape, precedes the hook of the chorus.

Noise tops the charts now. The slick guitar licks of Maroon 5 and belting blonde divas like Beyoncé still populate playlists, but atypically abrasive sounds now lurk in their sonic shadows. Bursts of harsh sound, walls of distortion, and the clatter of grinding gears are seeping into the most unthought-of places, often churned into so many other sounds that many ears will miss it.

Pop without an edge is over. Today’s youth don’t want unadulterated bubblegum. They need something more interesting than that to keep their attention.

“Noise” has existed as a stand-alone genre for a decade and a half, first living in the most underground venues and record shops in New York, Berlin and Tokyo, and spreading from there. The genre generally sounds like what the name implies.

The more I heard noise in pop music, the more confused I became about how it got there. I was hearing sounds I was used to hearing in spaces far smaller than Top 40 radio. I had considered noise and pop to be opposing concepts of music, but they were becoming one and the same. To understand the melding of noise and pop, and thus what the future of pop music would be, I tracked down a little-known experimental musician and DJ who has been crossing the pop-noise border for years.

“You hear a lot of experimental elements in pop music today, and it may stand out because it’s pop,” said Ryan Woodhall, of the infamous New York noise group Yellow Tears. “If you played it for your grandparents in the 60s they would think it’s harsh noise.”

I met Woodhall at Jeremy’s Ale House in downtown Manhattan, one of the few seedy dives left in the Financial District. We sipped foamy Budweisers out of 32 ounce Styrofoam cups, and vaguely paid attention to a Mets game on the big screens around us. Woodhall has been playing in Yellow Tears, a prolific noise trio that has been releasing limited-run records and cassettes, for a decade. They are huge in their tiny community: they’ve played six shows to audiences of less than ten people, and they don’t have a problem with that.

I asked Woodhall about noise. “I have little interest in noise as a genre right now,” he said. “I’m interested in people, pop music, noise and music, expression.” Woodhall DJ’s under the name Debbie DJ’s Dallas at small clubs around New York City. He spins pop and dance records, but only the ones that are full of bizarre, weird, and noisy sounds; music that normal people and freaks alike can dance to. Debbie DJ’s Dallas plays songs like “Inside Out” by Britney Spears, full of grinding machine noises, “Warrior” by Kesha, with its warped electronic breakdown, “Silly Ho” by TLC, with its its amped up mess of disparate electronic sounds, and “Velvet Rope” by Janet Jackson, with its noise-techno intro.

Woodhall said that this crossover between pop and noise is becoming more common as mainstream producers are experimenting with more varied sounds. Everyone has a studio now, everyone has digital recording abilities at their fingertips, and so the possibilities for creating new soundscapes are endless. Pop, according to Woodhall, was where experimental music was actually happening today. As the fried fish that we ordered from the bar arrived, I asked Woodhall about what a pop song needed for him to be interested in it.

“When it’s an environment. An environment that’s more than just music or more than just a track,” Woodhall said, slathering his fish in tartar sauce. “Music can be a life form.”

It started to make sense. Pop had room for noise when it could build to a larger, more encompassing sound that contained those noise elements. Woodhall's answer immediately brought to mind the most glaring example of the noise-pop phenomenon.

"Where Are Ü Now," by Jack Ü featuring Justin Bieber, brought two of the hottest electronic producers in the world (Jack Ü is the duo of Diplo and Skrillex, the innovators of EDM, a broad term for fast electronic music played in today's clubs and at today's festivals) together with today's most iconic teen heartthrob.

Alongside Bieber's boyish croon to a melodic piano line, bleeps and bloops that sound like robots fill the space of the track. The hook to the song, which is insanely catchy, is actually Bieber's voice repeatedly warped and stretched through Ableton, a digital music production workstation, to the point of no longer being recognizably human.

"Where are Ü Now" is so bizarre, yet has such wide-ranging appeal, that the *New York Times* made an explainer video breaking down its individual sounds. How something so intricately bizarre could possibly be blaring from rolled down SUV windows across America didn't make sense. And how the *New York Times* was documenting it in an 8-minute video made even less. The song is silly, but it is simultaneously mesmerizing. The popularity of "Where Are Ü Now" begs to ask what music is turning into if a song like this was pop. So I set out to find pop's future.

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A half-century after mothers across the western world were telling their Beatles-blasting sons and daughters to "turn down that noise," today's parents are demanding a break from sounds that are much noisier than pop music has ever had.

Granted, noise in pop is nothing new. Since John Cage's "4'33" in 1952, in which the piece's performer remains at their instrument for four minutes and thirty-three seconds doing "nothing," musicians have toyed with what music actually is, and the boundaries of the environments their listeners inhabit.

The underground never owned these auditory concepts. Noise crept into mainstream music for a half century. Even The Beatles experimented with noise. The Fab Four recorded two noise tracks on two different albums, "Tomorrow Never Knows" on *Revolver* and "Revolution 9" on *The White Album*. Both songs built to chaotic, menacing messes of looped tape.

From Kraftwerk's "The Robots" to Pink Floyd's "Money" to Daft Punk's "One More Time," popular music has experienced many moments of noise. But today's noise in pop is different. It is more ominous, unexpected, and encompassing. And it is drawing from a darker, more evolved, noisier underground scene.

Ryan Woodhall used to spend his time at Hospital Productions, a record shop so underground that it hid in the basement of a reggae shop on 3rd Street in the East Village. It closed in 2011, but lives on as a record label.

Woodhall's group Yellow Tears are heroes of the scene of musicians that was anchored around Hospital Productions. They play analog electronic gear, and are more narrowly defined as power electronics. They built a small but obsessive fan base, which reveres Yellow Tears for their volume and intensity. The group is well known for their over-the-top antics, as they scream into microphoned bowls of water and build waterslides out of wood and PVC piping that they incorporate into their live performances.

The basic premise of noise as a genre is to make the most off-putting sounds as possible; sometimes that can build into a structure that is pleasurable to listen to, but other times it accomplishes complete musical anarchy.

"Noise is the ability of one person to explore their obsessions through sound," said Jim Siegel, host of the experimental music show Ning Nong Radio on WFMU. "It uses a lot of feedback and shrill tones.

It's on the more uncomfortable end of the frequency spectrum. It makes the audience experience the sound as something you feel in your body rather than just hear."

The genre evolved from of American hardcore turned indie rock scene of 80's, gaining prominence as one musical aspect of that scene. Bands like Sonic Youth, Big Black, and Butthole Surfers pushed their music to weirder places. Their traditional rock n' roll instruments like electric guitars became more distorted and sent through more Big Muff and Jimi Hendrix Octavio Fuzz effects pedals. When Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth shrieked, "cause it's getting kind of quiet in my city's head, takes a teenage riot to get me out of bed right now," he could not have been referring to rock n' roll. The kids needed something more extreme than that; rock n' roll was no longer a riot.

Sonic Youth brought a new kind of group on tour with them in 2004. They were called Wolf Eyes. One critic went as far to write that, "Wolf Eyes has got to be one of the shittiest bands on the planet. A gargantuan flatulent blast from the very bowels of hell would sound better than these guys." The group built its own electronic instruments, and used modified synthesizers and homemade crude electronics to figuratively shatter every spinal chord and mouthful of teeth of fans that dared see them perform live. When you saw Wolf Eyes play, you felt it.

Now there are noise musicians and scenes all over the country, in towns big and small: Rat Bastard and company in Miami, Domez and company in Dayton, Secret Boyfriend and company in Carrboro, Pedestrian Deposit and company in Los Angeles. There are record labels like Chondritic Sound and Primitive Languages. There are houses that double as noise venues like the Red Light District in the Far Rockaways, the home base of Ryan Woodhall and Yellow Tears.

By understanding where noise was going next, I could understand where the pop producers who are swallowing up its sonic ideas were going next. I needed to find the person who was using noise in its most basic premise and transforming it to something new. I needed to find the great Cienfuegos.

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Cienfuegos hypnotizes his listeners with Latin-infused industrial dance noise. We made plans to meet at Sabor Nuñez, a Dominican diner full of neon lights and mirrors in Bushwick, Brooklyn, the neighborhood where Cienfuegos lives.

He suggested there because Dominican food is the closest thing Cienfuegos can find to good Cuban food in New York. "If you come here enough, like I've come here three times in a week, every time it gets a dollar cheaper," said the blue-collar Cuban, who scrapes together his living from odd jobs, music, and well-below-market New York City rent. The cooking reminded him of his Cuban grandmother. His stage name is homage to the city his grandparents were from.

As we pushed around our rice and beans with our plastic forks, and my pile of stripped chicken bones grew on the side of my plate, Cienfuegos told me stories from his childhood. He grew up in Hialeah, a working-class city within the larger municipality of Miami, which has the highest percentage of Cuban residents in the county.

We talked about Santería, translated to The Way of Saints, an Afro-Caribbean religion most famous for its animal sacrifices. The Supreme Court case that upheld the constitutionality of killing animals for religious purposes came from a local ordinance in Hialeah against the Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye. When Cienfuegos was a kid, he saw Santería ceremonies, and music, around his neighborhood.

"Instrumentation-wise it's a lot of congas, batá drums, claves, güiros, and vocals, which don't necessarily line up exactly with the rhythm," he said. "But there's harmonies and everybody knows common ones and they sing them together and people dance in the center and they have spiritual experiences based off of that."

As I heard about this context, Cienfuegos's music started to make sense to me. His beats, his swagger, the way he moved his hips. I could imagine him as a child, dancing and singing with his neighbors.

And as I thought about noise, it made sense how that is a global concept too, just like dance music. We hear it all around us every day. It's impossible to escape it. It springs from the city bus below our windows to the crying baby on our flight to the tree branch snapping in the wind. Eventually, by sheer experimental destiny, it had to make its way into our music. Cienfuegos's environment, just like the rest of the world's, was reflected in his sounds.

"There's constantly noises happening. And they end up being rhythmic and work with each other if you know how to listen to them," said Cienfuegos, who not only contemplates these sounds as he walks around the city, but also records them into the Voice Memo application of his iPhone, distorts them, and inserts them into the textures of his songs. "A sound of metal hitting another piece of metal on the side of a building. A flagpole scraping the wiring on it. Dumpsters being dragged. Wheels rolling. Those things just seep in and play a part."

As it neared 10 P.M., the restaurateurs started mopping and turning off lights. Cienfuegos said his goodbyes, and we stepped into the street. We walked back to his loft apartment, passing the health food stores and restaurants that lined Wyckoff Avenue. I asked him what he wanted to do with his music.

"Noise is a response to these structures of pop and culture and society around us that need to be torn down in order for growth to happen or for the next movement to come," said Suárez, flicking his cigarette as we walked. "And the most noble way to do that I think is to destroy notions of harmony and classic form and song structure, you know?"

We passed from the residential neighborhood of the diner into the industrial zone of the blocks surrounding his apartment. Food processing factories and municipal waste facilities encircled us. A car alarm went off. A garbage truck rumbled by.

A few weeks later I met Cienfuegos again. The Chinatown basement bar that he was playing looked straight out of *Blade Runner*, and at the same time could have been any cool New York club since the 1970's. The lights were so low and the fog was so heavy that you could barely see a few feet in front of you. People wore all black, and pompadours, high fades, and chelseas dotted the heads throughout the room. The strobe lights were bright enough to disorient. People clinked bottles of Sierra Nevada and vodka sodas, nodding their heads to the DJ spinning industrial records.

I stepped outside for some fresh air before Cienfuegos was set to play, and saw him smoking a cigarette on the sidewalk. He showed me a picture he had just taken on his iPhone with A\$AP Rocky, the famous rapper, who was coincidentally walking past the venue.

After I descended the metal stairs back into the club, I gently elbowed my way to the front of the short stage as Cienfuegos lit a candle. People started to clap and yell out phrases in Spanish, but Cienfuegos took his time setting up his MPC1000 sampling production station and MacBook Pro.

He hit the first note, and the crowd started to sway back and forth as a crunchy, Latin-feeling beat built in both structure and volume. You could feel the bass washing over your body like waves in the ocean. The crowd of 50 was instantly hooked, their shoulders and hips following every move Cienfuegos made. He sounded psychotic. His beats felt like a metal box full of rocks rattling around as layers of feedback flowed over everything else. His deep croon eventually came in, sung in Spanish. It was haunting. It left my body and mind confused.

Cienfuegos had combined the Santería music of his childhood with the noise music of his peers and the techno of the clubs he dances in, churning out his blend of global freak-dance music. I had never heard anything quite like it.

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Cienfuegos was not playing any synthesizers live, but he uses them when recording music. Instrumentally, the synthesizer fulfills the role of common denominator between noise and pop. The UK birthed synthpop in the 1980s with acts like Gary Numan, Duran Duran and the Pet Shop Boys.

Today, pop superstars like Lady Gaga, Beyoncé and Katy Perry utilize synths. And from disco to Krautrock to new wave to noise, the synth has long been a standard tool of underground electronic music.

Buchla and Moog, the instrument's godfathers, built the machines that would become the standards, and today their producers range from boutique outfits like Make Noise, Intellijel and Mutable Instruments to major electronic manufacturers like Roland. Control is a boutique shop showcasing modular synthesizers in the heart of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The shop resides just south of one the neighborhood's busier strips, across the street from a Section 8 housing project.

As I walked in to the shop, Daren Ho, the proprietor of Control, sat behind a glass display case with tangles of colorful wires steamed across the wall behind him. Ho sells timeless-sounding instruments; a synthesizer makes sounds that could be in a science fiction movie, but it's hard to tell if it would be set in the past or the future.

As I sat across from Ho's perch on a quiet weekday afternoon, I asked him to explain to me how it all worked.

"You're not only effecting your sound, but you're also automating the process of how the sound's being shaped," he said. "I can assign one module to control the knob for me. And basically you're having these weird controls that are controlling not just certain parameters on your effects, but you can also control your controls."

The instrument is infinitely intricate – a synth can be stripped to its most basic components, which can then be multiplied upon themselves, creating pathways and patterns upon pathways and patterns. A synthesizer generates electronic signals that are translated into sound by passing them through a speaker or headphone. To play a synthesizer is to control the voltage of that signal through a variety of techniques, depending on the machine you are working with, which thus controls the sound it is making.

This sounded like it could be where music was going, to places that were infinitely complex. But as I asked Ho about it, he told me the future would be created on a laptop rather than a synthesizer, where synth sounds could be digitally mimicked.

Ho pointed me to EDM, the genre made popular by Skrillex and Diplo. He sees EDM, and its over the top, break-beat speed and volume, as indicative of what popular music is becoming today. And Ho, just like the lyrics of songs played at a high school graduations, sees the future in terms of the kids.

"I think EDM comes from people, I guess basically the youth, being really bored of rock music. Because all their dads listen to it," said Ho. "It's weird. It's still rock to them. Rock is supposed to mean rebellion and be loud and obnoxious. This is the next step."

Skrillex and Diplo and the rest of the EDM world are recreating the sounds that are made in Ho's shop, and pushing everything happening with them as far as possible through digital manipulation in Ableton (software that is produced in Berlin, a town long romanticized for its experimentation in electronic music).

Skrillex is huge, and has carved out his own space at the top of the international DJ scene. But Diplo is really the poster child of EDM in the sense that he is injecting his sound into the rest of pop beyond EDM. Diplo is one of the most influential electronic producers in the world right now. His dive into the weirdest places in pop blew up with his work with M.I.A. in 2007, the radical English-Sri Lankan rapper who stormed the music blogosphere with her bombastic world dance music and don't-give-a-fuck attitude. Today Diplo throws sold-out concert cruises around the Caribbean, and has a residency in Las Vegas that brings in hundreds of thousands of dollars each show. He has made tracks for Madonna, Beyoncé, and Usher. You don't even know you're listening to Diplo half of the time you're listening to Diplo.

Diplo tours to places like China, Russia, Kenya, South Africa, and Peru, collecting new international dance music along the way. He is taking the most exciting grassroots musical movements from around the world, warping those sounds through his laptop, and churning out a signature brand of dance music. This concept is most visible in his project Major Lazer, where Jamaican dancers flaunt the sexually explicit dance style called “dagging,” as Diplo puts his own EDM spin on a mix of dancehall and reggaeton.

There is nothing new about underground music genres being appropriated by mainstream artists. It happened with jazz, disco, punk, techno, and so many others. Grassroots musical movements have been swallowed up by huge music-makers before, and they will be again. World dance music melding into pop isn’t particularly surprising. Noise melding in is a whole different story. Noise is practically anti-music. Instead of melodies and harmonies, there is distortion and feedback. It is purposely unpleasant. The prospects of its assimilation into mainstream music are creatively explosive because it is sonically so different from what has traditionally filled the radio waves and iTunes playlists of the world.

Like Diplo, who creates much of his sound by melding the dance music he hears while touring and traveling, Cienfuegos is pulling from global dance music to make his sound. But unlike Diplo, Cienfuegos has never gotten the chance to visit his home country of Cuba, or other far-off destinations around the world. Diplo is skimming from the top, as he picks and chooses interesting world music he comes across while on major arena and club tours. In contrast, Cienfuegos is building his global sound from the bottom, sampling ideas from the music that his family and neighbors of his childhood played in the streets and in their homes. But as both artists push the experimentation in their music, the results start to experience commonalities. And in those commonalities is where the future would be.

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I sat in my room on the Lower East Side, listening to the new Cienfuegos record and blowing Marlboro Red smoke out my window. The first notes of the opening track on *A Los Mártires*, or “to the martyrs,” filled my head with a primitive drumbeat, rattling bells, and a dissonant chant.

I felt like I was in another place. Closing my eyes and hearing this song brought me to Cuba, to Hialeah, to Bushwick. It brought me to a Sentería ceremony and it brought me inside a factory in the building next to where Cienfuegos slept. The track is powerful.

I thought of the life form that Woodhall of Yellow Tears had told me about. About how Woodhall only listened to music “when it’s a projection of a person, when it’s above a person,” he had told me. When it was a living, breathing environment, but also an extension of its creator. Cienfuegos had made an environment of himself. He had created a future that I could live in, if only for a few minutes. The more I listened, the more I felt like I could be transported into the head of someone else. It was all becoming a little overwhelming. I was confused. I got out of my head and back to my room, and changed the song.

I pulled up Justin Bieber’s voice. I figured if anyone could do it, the pop voice of a generation would ground me. I couldn’t be transported far away by someone that a 13-year-old girl in Kansas was also listening to. “Where are you now that I need you?” he continually asked, his voice becoming stuttered with Diplo and Skrillex’s manipulation, over the all-encompassing wash of melody built from of a collection of cruder sounds. It was happening again. My head was leaving my room.

I hit pause.

I needed someone to explain to me these simultaneous feelings of transcendence and confusion. I called Cienfuegos on the phone. I needed to know what he thought of this song. He answered, and I asked him if he knew the track.

“The one that’s like, ooo-ooo?” He sang the Bieber hook. Yes, that was the one. I asked him if he liked it.

“Of course. A lot of electronic musicians in my circle are trying to sound like that, at least in our own way,” he said, as he then listed off a handful of his noise peers. “We all vibe on that track pretty hard.”

I was shocked. Here I was talking to the great Cienfuegos, a giant in the underground scene of noise music, a scene that was making intensely do-it-yourself music for an intensely do-it-yourself community, telling me that him and his friends were trying to sound like Justin Bieber, Diplo and Skrillex, the antithesis of the underground. How could this possibly be the case? How could the underground emulate the mainstream like that? But of course, in my deepest cultural consciousness, I knew these artists were doing the same thing. I knew it made complete sense.

I asked Cienfuegos if he knew how Jack Ü made that song. It was made, more or less he said, through a process called "warping." Skrillex and Diplo would take a distinct noise and stretch the time of it, altering its basic sound. They would then export the new file from Ableton, and then import that one. And then they would do it again. And again. And again.

"They're fucking up Bieber's voice. Warping it, changing the pitch. It starts becoming its own beast," he said. "And if you keep on warping it and importing it, it becomes more and more its own sound."

By manipulating the sound, they make an entirely new and distinct one. I asked Cienfuegos if there were any similarities in process between him and Jack Ü. He said that it was exactly the same concept. That he too takes his own samples, puts them into Ableton, and warps them until they "become their own beasts."

Instead of Bieber's voice, he was using the dump trucks and car alarms on his street.

"A lot of these processes are similar, but the end result is different," he said. "They make pop music. But I guess I kind of do too."