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Winter 12-17-2021

Cross-pollinating music: the past, present and future of genre-blending experimental musicians

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Abstract:

Recently, experimental music that mixes popular genres with academic styles has skyrocketed into the mainstream. Part of that's because of the democratizing power of the internet, part of that's because it's a style that's slowly become more prevalent over many years. This essay explores the different ways experimental musicians blend popular genres into their compositions, providing a succinct timeline of the style's history and a playlist that features musical examples. Link to full capstone project:

<https://medium.com/@vanessa.ague/cross-pollinating-music-the-past-present-and-future-of-genre-blending-experimental-musicians-83f0d2ba9f2d>

Title: Cross-pollinating music: the past, present and future of genre-blending experimental musicians

The faint sounds of two best friends gabbing bleed into wafting electronics, staticky computerized swishes and crunchy autotuned vocals throughout the music of Texas-based experimental musicians Claire Rousay and Maurice R. The latest album, *an afternoon whine*, lilts through its rapid changes of style so gently it's almost hard to distinguish the sheer number of influences held within each track. Piercing percussion motifs and romantic strings fit nicely with Blackbear-inspired autotune and flickering emo chords, uniting the disparate worlds of dissonant, experimental sound and popular music.

Rousay and Maurice are at the forefront of the latest generation of experimental musicians who blend popular with academic genres. There's been a long-running interchange between popular and experimental music—; bands like The Velvet Underground, who are known for their genre-blending innovations, spawned a whole movement of alternative rock—but the walls between the worlds have fully collapsed. That demolition has led to an explosion of experimentation that has opened new sonic territories. Today's artists are now more willing than ever before to branch out beyond their academic training and influences, drawing on techniques from rock, pop and hip hop to broaden the scope of their work. The result is music that sounds unlike anything we've heard before, absorbing all the popular musical movements of the last century and spitting them back in a number of directions that each prove compelling in different ways.

With these new mixes of genre, experimental music is busting out of dusty conventions that were established primarily in academia years ago. Much of it builds on minimalism, a style that emerged in the 1950s and layers and loops short, repeated phrases. It was first seen as a direct opposition to rigid serialism, a type of composition that systematically arranges all twelve tones of the octave, which was the primary avant garde style. Serialism and minimalism, the polar axes of composition, existed on different ends of the academic spectrum and didn't mix. Nor did they mix much with the outside world. Nearly 70 years later, much of the experimental cross-pollination that's popular today builds on minimalist ideals, and has reached a broader audience inside and outside of academia because it often uses tonal chords, rhythmic patterns and catchy phrases that are more common to popular forms.

The practice of mixing academic styles with popular musical frameworks was born sometime in the 1960s, consonant with the rise of minimalism. Artists across genres were coming together in places like downtown New York, which, at the time, was a notoriously cheap place to live. Out of the squalor of the Lower East Side streets came explosive bands, like the Velvet Underground, Fluxus-style chance-oriented experimentalism and minimalist composition from composers like Philip Glass. The Velvet Underground is the best known genre-bending group from those days. Their early albums, like 1967's *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, united La Monte Young and Tony Conrad's drone composition with singer-songwriter structures; the sound became a mix of long-held tones with chugging four-four

rhythms and hazy speak-sung vocals. The group's instrumentation—a regular band plus viola—also lent itself to experimentation. The band's original setup was short-lived, just under a decade, but its legacy has been long-lasting. They've inspired many other alternative rock bands to extend boundaries, from ambient pioneer Brian Eno to shoegaze band Galaxie 500 to indie rock darlings The Strokes.

Nearly two decades after *The Velvet Underground and Nico* was born, composers like Glenn Branca would carry the torch of making far out avant-rock. Branca, who began in Boston as an amateur musician and director of non-narrative theater that favored sporadic, impulsive stories instead of tradition, which was largely unreceptive to his work, moved to New York in the '70s to find a bigger audience. It was there that he brought the ideas of no-narrative theater to music, composing songs for electric guitar that were bracingly loud, fully notated and seemingly directionless. His music that was mathematically intricate, relying on fast-paced, interlocking rhythms and microtonality, engulfing audiences with massive sonic vibrations. It was played in New York and across America by three electric guitarists, a bassist and a drummer, each of whom read Branca's notated sheet music off of music stands at concerts while Branca conducted in a suit as if they were an orchestra.

In 1981, The Glenn Branca Ensemble released the groundbreaking record, [The Ascension](#), which codified their massive, no-wave sound in five abrasive tracks. Throughout the '80s, they continued touring and releasing albums, giving a start to other cross-genre artists like guitarist Lee Ranaldo, who later co-founded one of the most well-known avant-rock bands of all time, Sonic Youth; in fact, Branca himself would release Sonic Youth's very first EP, [Sonic Youth](#), on his short-lived no-wave and post-punk record label called Neutral.

Branca's work went on to inspire other genre-blenders in the world of academic, composed music. His work in the early '80s served as a direct inspiration for composer Michael Gordon, a founder of Bang on a Can, which has served as a home for classical composers who want to infuse rock and pop in their work since 1988. Gordon's music builds on Branca's work by centering rhythmic intricacy. Some of his most popular works, like [Timber](#), written for six percussionists, explore the textural possibilities of minimalism and mathematical complexity.

Bang on a Can quickly became the U.S. nexus of experimental composition and popular music. Julia Wolfe, one of the other founders of the organization, was drawn to '60s folk and political singer-songwriter works. She eventually shifted to composing long oratorios that often tackle historical and political topics, like 2014's [Anthracite Fields](#), which centered the stories of Pennsylvania's coal miners workers, and 2019's [Fire In My Mouth](#), which told the story of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. Bang on Can went on to create its own band called The Bang on a Can All-Stars to perform a mix of rock and classical; their cheeky slogan—"UNSTOPPABLE, SEXY, LOUD"—was plastered on traditionally classical music venues, like the halls of Tanglewood and Lincoln Center.

By that point, the first wave of cross-pollination had gained ground and was about to accelerate, largely due to the rapid ascent of the internet in the early 2000s and 2010s. On the internet, all kinds of music became available to everyone and anyone and sounds from across the globe became easy to access. On sites like Limewire, and later what.cd, the music-obsessed could download as many MP3s as they wanted for free, taking in every single sound and throwing it back in the art they'd make later on. Today's streaming services like Spotify, YouTube and Apple Music followed suit, providing a constant stream of new music for listeners and makers. With such easy discovery, it's no wonder mixing and matching in music has continued to proliferate, reaching a fever pitch over the past few years.

In the early 2000s, too, Bang on a Can established a summer music festival at MASS MoCA, a contemporary art museum in North Adams, Massachusetts, for emerging, cross-pollinating composers. Many of today's genre-blending composers have attended the festival, like Missy Mazzoli, whose work contains threads of minimalism with its continuous repetition and intricate flow, but uses electronic instruments like synthesizers and vocoders to create fuzzy washes of sound. Mazzoli often works in traditional forms, like opera, but brings a shoegaze intimacy to it by using simple, catchy song structures instead of the showy nature of a 17th century Aria.

Composers like William Brittle follow similar routes as Mazzoli in terms of playing with modern rock structures. In Brittle's music plain spoken vocals meld seamlessly into stoic classical melodies, dramatic electronica and electric guitar riffs. His work has often been performed by the similarly eclectic a cappella ensemble Roomful of Teeth, and has been performed by orchestras across the country. But his best-known work is 2019's [Spiritual America](#), a modern oratorio that layers every one of his genre interests on top of each other: fuzzed-out electric guitars and drum beats explode from sweeping brass fanfares and grainy electronics. Brittle's music isn't just a hybrid, it's a whole new form.

Brittle co-runs [New Amsterdam Records](#), a label that champions many composers who write music like his. He's also inspired a new generation of composers who've built off of his example. One is the singer and composer Holland Andrews, whose work is a delicate mix of hip hop, electronica and minimalism. Their work often centers their own singing voice, but on their debut solo EP, [Wordless](#), released in early 2021, it's purely instrumental. Its sound has had hints of Brittle's punchy, post-genre sensibility, expanded to include jazzy riffs, hip hop beats and gentle melodies. Andrews uses genre-blending as a jumping off point for something new, a sound that unites a greater variety of styles than their forebears, but maintains a smooth composure.

Other artists allow their mixing to feel more jarring, layering different styles on top of each other and letting jagged parts roam free. For orchestral composer Michael Vincent Waller, who recently released a new album titled [CLASSIC\\$](#), trap and post-minimalist classical music complement each other. On the album, gentle instrumentals that sound akin to composers like Brittle and Bang on a Can sift in-between trap beats and rhythmic rap, combining the composer's two passions into one package that encompasses both disparate styles at the same time.

In electronic music, percussionist claire rousay and her frequent collaborator, guitarist mari maurice/more eaze, have codified a style of field recording that blends their love for pop punk, Soundcloud rap and electronic dance music into experimental soundscapes. To make their music, the two record their everyday surroundings—people chatting in the backyard of a bar, the squeak of the door to the garage, the gentle breeze on a summer afternoon—to form a base of musique concrète akin to artists like Graham Lambkin and Gabi Losoncy. On top of that more experimental soundscape, they layer their singing voices, manipulated by autotune like Blackbear or Post Malone; sometimes, a clip from an Our Lady Peace track seeps into the music, too, (see rousay's [it was always worth it](#)) and even a Fall Out Boy cover. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, these two artists have shot to prominence by making music that grounds a multiplicity of their musical interests, rather than focuses on their training—rousay, a free improvising percussionist, maurice, a CalArts trained musician.

Brooklyn-based guitarist Rachika Nayar, who released her debut album earlier this year, [Our Hands Against the Dusk](#), draws from similar influences as rousay and maurice. In the nostalgic twinkle of the harmonies she chooses, there's more than a hint of midwest emo à la American Football. Her work is primarily instrumental, centering a melancholic electric guitar and piano, but occasionally adds hints of

field recording— : on the album's closing track, "No Future," Nayar's voice can be heard in the distance speaking "there is no future" after the abrupt, emphatic resolution of the piano. Nayar seeks to paint her music as a holistic image of herself: a person who grew up with both soft indie rock and jazz improvisation . In her music, genres collide to form an instrumental sound that feels like an emo band stripped of its lyrics and steady structures in favor of a starry-eyed flow.

Sometimes a background in rock, electronic or pop influences the branch of experimental music these innovators choose to explore. Brooklyn-based composer and electric guitarist Brendon Randall-Myers grew up in the world of punk pits and Mr. Bungle's metal. He studied classical guitar, but never really found himself in it. Rather, he wanted to discover ways of uniting his experience in punk and metal with his interest in classical composition. That eventually led him to New York, where he joined a 2000s iteration of The Glenn Branca Ensemble and later conducted the group after Branca's passing; he attended the Bang on a Can Summer Festival and performed Philip Glass's *Two Pages*. The result of years of genre mixing came through on his 2020 album, [dynamics of vanishing bodies](#), a modern take on the electric guitar quartet that combines explores ?heady ideas, like how our minds can perceive sounds that aren't really there when many loud tones echo into each other, using h the constant pulse and rhythmic intricacy of metal music. In 2021, he extended that genre mixing impulse to his album [A Kind of Mirror](#), written for classical pianist Miki Sawada, which showcases relentless, repeating phrases, a distant relative of head-banging punk that often reaches euphoric highs through pummeling, nonstop sound.

Some blend genres by playing in a variety of different bands, letting sounds and styles seep between their projects. In Cleveland, percussionist Jayson Gerycz splits his time between playing free jazz and straight ahead punk in the band Cloud Nothings. His drumming style is often frenetic and spasmodic. He uses found objects like bolts and screws as well as traditional drumsticks to play his instrument and when he performs as a soloist or collaborator, he creates a multitude of different textures. And while the idea of free jazz seems distant from the one-two-three-four rhythm of rock, in Cloud Nothings' thrashing music, hints of Gerycz's untethered energy seep into the music's fast-paced, grungy runs.

Mary Lattimore, a harpist, also straddles the line between being a soloist who makes ambient music and being a band member. Her 2020 album, [Silver Ladders](#), was even produced by a member of the prominent 90s alternative rock group Slowdive, bringing into it a sparkling, shoegaze-y sound; she's toured with everyone from Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore to folk singer Kurt Vile, becoming a sought-after harpists across musical genres. And violinist Darian Donovan-Thomas makes ambient electronic music as a soloist and collaborator, but frequents as a background violinist for a variety of popular artists, like indie soul artist Moses Sumney and jazz singer Arooj Aftab.

Genre-mixing may have accelerated in our current moment because the Internet has made every style more available to us. Despite the long history of American experimental musicians who've dabbled in popular styles, today, the mixing has gone farther than it ever has. This is where American experimental music is changing—it's moving into exhilarating territories where any sound is one that's possible to explore. Any sound can become experimental if it's played with long enough, even the most conventional autotune or straight-ahead pop punk.

Now, formerly groundbreaking movements like minimalism, have become standard themselves, and experimental music is again finding new avenues of exploration. The result is music that refuses categorization, unbounded by the previously established rules, undefined by expectation. In turn, it's appealing to larger audiences: Gerycz, for example, recently played free jazz with the psych-folk improvisation duo Powers/Rolin Duo at the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, and Brittelle's *Spiritual America*

went on tour with indie-folk icon Bon Iver. Likewise, mainstream, general interest publications like the *New York Times* have run lengthy profiles on artists like Claire Rousay and Mary Lattimore.

Some critics fear that genre-blending leads to music that all sounds the same. That somehow, if we're all imbuing our music with similar influences it'll converge into one mash someday and innovation will be dead in the water. But if anything, the last year in music has shown us just how different each of these genre-blending experiments truly are: There's lush piano music and spliced up electronics and heart-wrenching guitars and field recordings of everyday life. None of it sounds alike. Now that the walls between genres have come down, we're seeing how many adventurous ways there are to reconfigure old genres into new ones.

Playlist Link:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3gjycKqNO2d6DsUekBNeGI?si=7W5GHHA5SEGIGHROQrWrOA&nd=1>

The Velvet Underground, "Heroin" (1967)

When the Velvet Underground formed, they combined brought together '60s singer-songwriter and rock, Lou Reed's specialty, with drone and minimalist composition, John Cale's wheelhouse. "Heroin" is a great example of this mixed style: On this track, you can hear Reed's signature speak-singing vocals, chugging guitars moving in standard 4/4 rhythms, and Cale's viola humming with a long-held tone in-between.

Terry Riley, "A Rainbow In Curved Air" (1969)

Terry Riley was a pioneering composer of minimalist music, a style of composition that features short phrases that loop and layer on top of each other in intricate patterns. Riley's *A Rainbow in Curved Air* showcases that patterning, and the outer space sound of electric keyboards. The track is said to have inspired songs like The Who's "Baba O'Riley."

Julius Eastman, *Femenine* (1974)

Julius Eastman was another pioneering minimalist composer whose works drew on classical composition and disco and often addressed social issues. Much of his work was lost to time, but recently, he's been getting his proper due. *Femenine* is a work for a small instrumental ensemble that unites upbeat, dance rhythms with gentle repetition. It's one of his most recorded works.

Sonic Youth, "Starpower" (1986)

Sonic Youth shot to the spotlight in the 1980s for their blend of punk rock with no wave and noise. They codified an avant-rock sound built on shredding, loud guitars that focused more on texture and volume than tonality. "Starpower" was one of their hits on their 1986 album *Evo!* and continues to be popular today.

My Bloody Valentine, "Only Shallow" (1991)

Irish-English band My Bloody Valentine inspired many American composers throughout the 90s and 2000s. They codified the shoegaze sound, which centered distorted, droning guitars and fuzzed-out vocals. "Only Shallow," the opening track on their shoegaze canon album, *Loveless*, features one of the band's most unforgettable riffs.

Julia Wolfe, *my lips from speaking* (1993)

Julia Wolfe is a postminimalist composer known for co-founding Bang on a Can. *my lips from speaking*, composed for six pianos, demonstrates how she extended the minimalist language into new territories by bringing in noisier sounds and more unexpected patterning.

Loose Fur, "Laminated Cat" (2003)

Loose Fur explores a softer side of avant-rock. The trio comprised Wilco's Jeff Tweedy and Glenn Kotche and former Sonic Youth member Jim O'Rourke. They made only a couple of albums, but each united the folk-rock sound of Wilco with O'Rourke's off-kilter singer-songwriter style. "Laminated Cat," from their 2003 self-titled album, showcases their structured but spun-out sound that draws on a variety of folk, drone and noise influences.

William Britelle, "Forbidden Colors" (2019)

William Brittelle's 2019 album, *Spiritual America*, is possibly his most well-known record that codifies his post-genre vernacular. "Forbidden Colors" highlights his stylistic amalgamation by uniting a lush orchestra, chorus, auto-tuned vocals, vaporwave-reminiscent electronics and cutting electric guitar.

Mary Lattimore, "Chop on the Climbout" (2020)

On "Chop on the Climbout," Mary Lattimore's ethereal harp is layered over fuzzy electronics, blending a traditionally classical instrument with a more modern soundscape. She often creates music that mixes her interests in rock and electronic music with her virtuosic harp playing, and even chooses to play in bars and parking lots rather than stuffy concert halls.

Gerycz/Powers/Rolin, "Lamplighter" (2021)

The trio of Jayson Gerycz (percussion), Jen Powers (hammered dulcimer) and Matthew Rolin (guitar) brings together free jazz improvisation, acoustic folk and drone. These influences are clearly identifiable, but intersect to create a cohesive package.

claire rousay & more eaze, "Floor PT 3" (2021)

"Floor PT 3" provided a window into claire rousay and more eaze's mix of field recordings, auto tune and ambient electronics. The track bubbles up from distant electronics, blending alien hums with far away conversations and sporadic percussion.

Holland Andrews, "Gloss" (2021)

Holland Andrews' "Gloss" showcases their work as a contemporary of artists like William Brittelle. Here, they create an ambient, electronic soundscape, building up from twinkling electronics, a fuzzy beat and airy strings, but bring in laid back rhythms and steady structure from their work singing pop music.

Rachika Nayar, "The Trembling of Glass" (2021)

"The Trembling of Glass" codifies Rachika Nayar's roots in improvisation and wistful midwest emo. The track is made of a shuddering electric guitar that starts and stops while electronics swirl around it to convey a feeling of poignancy and nostalgia, moving through sporadic riffs and rhythms with the spontaneity of improvisation.

Brendon Randall-Myers & Miki Sawada, "Cascade" (2021)

On "Cascade," Brendon Randall-Myers brings his background in relentless punk and metal music to the piano, a traditionally classical instrument. The result is a pummeling track that's reminiscent of minimalism with its layers and repetition.