

Braindancing Through the Mainstream: Intelligent Dance Music as Popular Music

by

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ABSTRACT

Artists associated with the concept of intelligent dance music (IDM) maintain their underground identity while also benefitting from the commercial and celebrity elements inherent in mainstream popular music culture. In this thesis, I use the theory of subcultural capital to critically examine perceived notions of authenticity in IDM artists' identities and associated fandoms by exploring the ideological boundaries that separate the 'mainstream' from the 'underground'. To do so, I have adapted the theory of subcultural capital by replacing the term "conversion" with "translation" to more accurately describe how members of music subcultures work to maintain a fluid relationship with popular culture and keep their 'authentic' subcultural status. I critically examine the term IDM, a term that has been widely criticized by associated artists and online fandoms, but is still popularly used. Rather than using IDM as a genre term, which is common, I believe that IDM is better suited to describe a philosophy of music making and a way of knowing and being that emphasizes creative individuality and a critical interrogation of the passive consumption of cultural commodities. To explain this difference, I critically analyze the discourses surrounding Warp and Rephlex records in the early to mid-1990s, as well as more recent artist interviews and fan discussions. The main case studies of this paper include Aphex Twin, Squarepusher, and Autechre. Other key artists mentioned include Luke Vibert/Wagon Christ, Mike Paradinas/ μ -Ziq, Jlin, Mira Calix, and Amon Tobin.

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INTRODUCTION

From a personal standpoint, this research tracks my own development as a listener, researcher, and creator of electronic music. Beginning in 2014, IDM introduced me to an exciting catalogue and history of electronic music, including the myriad of genres that defined the UK rave movement and the construction of electronic dance music (EDM) as a popular cultural form. This on-going experience inspired me to reflect on my relationship to music, and to consider how music functions as both a cultural commodity and form of entertainment. Learning to question the content I consumed on a daily basis made me aware of my past practices as a listener and consumer of popular culture, and the structures that guide consumption habits — structures that are hegemonic in the Gramscian sense of being largely taken-for-granted, but nonetheless deeply ideologically coded. Hegemonic ideologies are those which are dominant and often tacitly presumed within a group, shaping accepted cultural norms. Cultural hegemony typically describes those ideologies which are dominant within a society on the macro-scale; however, I am referring to those ideologies which guide specific subcultural practices. I was also inspired to start creating music, something I had never considered until my exposure to IDM. My growing awareness of the extent to which culture industries shape our listening habits was compounded by online IDM communities and the opinions of artists associated with IDM. As a result, my exploration of mainstream media consumption and my perception of the sociality of underground online spaces is highly personal.

From an academic standpoint, my education in cultural studies and music has been inspired by the efforts of musicologists, sociologists, and ethnographers who examine the nature of underground culture and the tensions between the imagined underground and mainstream. During my time as a student, I have been surprised to find a limited amount of scholarly work on IDM, given the extent to which it provides a productive context for critical analysis and discussion of a wide range of topics, such as how notions of authenticity are expressed by popular musicians, what kinds of strategies are deployed by musicians to maintain an underground status in the digital age, and how fans construct meaningful identities connected to these musicians that separate them from other music fans and subcultures. This thesis is an initial attempt to examine these questions and to start a scholarly conversation about IDM.

JUSTIFICATION

There is considerable controversy surrounding the terms ‘intelligent dance music’ and ‘IDM’ among fans of the music and many of the artists associated with its use. We Are The Music Makers forum user ‘toaoaoad’ went as far to tell me that “with all due respect, yeah I can’t help but think the whole premise is flawed from the get-go just for the fact you’re using the term ‘IDM’ at all” (‘headplastic’ 2021). ‘toaoaoad’ makes a good point; I realized my use of the term would be met with rebuttal, especially considering the perceptions of elitism attached to the word “intelligence” and an ongoing disregard for the term among fans. Still, IDM is connected with these online communities and the associated artists by its mainstream use and popularity, which is partly why I am comfortable using the term in this paper. Plus, I had hoped

that using the controversial term might generate curiosity in my topic. In chapter 2, I discuss the term IDM and what it represents for fans.

IDM is ascribed to a wide variety of electronic music styles and artists from around the world. Some fans still prefer to use the term “intelligent dance music,” while others prefer their own interpretations (e.g., “Introspective dance music”), or refer — “in true nerd style” (‘MaartenVC’ 2020) — to IDM as a recursive acronym, an acronym that refers to itself. In this thesis, I adopt the recursive acronym form to demonstrate how IDM as a concept has evolved since its inception in the early 1990s. So, in saying “IDM music,” I am referring to the electronic music(s) associated with a particular subculture, and not “intelligent dance music music”. Also, while I acknowledge that many fans and artists dislike being affiliated with the term, I often speak of “IDM artists/fans” throughout the paper as a convenient, if problematic, shorthand to mean “artists/fans associated with IDM”.

I use the concept of subcultural capital in this thesis to demonstrate how artists and fans shield their subcultural values while being associated with the mainstream and surrounding media. For example, subcultural capital can be used to explain why an IDM fan believes that “Aphex Twin is so popular and underrated at the same time” (2020) because the theory reveals how sociocultural values and practices are embedded in the tension between mainstream and underground ideologies. Subcultural capital is useful as a theoretical framework for this research because it provides a vocabulary for describing the rippling effects that an artists’ popular image and music have on the communities associated with them. Also, subcultural capital can be used to explain the behaviour and meaning-making practices of online fandoms, as made evident in their interactions with each other and the music. I believe that online social

spaces help us to ‘visualize’ the function of subcultural capital by embedding value systems into their platform mechanics, such as ‘like’ buttons or public ‘reputation’ scores.

A significant majority of fans with whom I interacted in this research claimed that IDM is not popular music. Therefore, I also think my study is productive in questioning what defines popular music in the highly personalized digital mainstream and how active online underground communities attribute a sense of authenticity to cultural texts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Initially, the primary goal of this thesis was to posit IDM as a form of popular music. Naturally, this led me to ask a much larger question: What constitutes popular music? Of course, there is no concise answer to this question given the fact that notions of popular music are constantly in flux as new styles of music emerge out of subcultures from lesser-known undergrounds into more popular mainstreams. However, as I began tackling this question and engaging with the online IDM community, it became apparent that I would have to provide an updated account of what ‘IDM’ is, asking questions like: why has ‘IDM’ remained a popular term for describing abstract¹ electronic music? What do popular artists like Aphex Twin, Squarepusher, and Autechre represent for their fans and the community associated with IDM? In exploring these questions, I felt a need to clarify how various online IDM communities form a

¹I use the concept of “abstraction” and its adjective form “abstract” to refer to electronic music associated with IDM throughout my thesis. IDM music is abstract in the sense that the meaning of the music is open for interpretation. Furthermore, it is difficult for listeners to discern the source of many sounds as they are created/distorted by various technologies, and thus many of the sounds in IDM lack familiar sonic referents. Abstraction can also be conceptualized as various layers of understanding, where some tracks may be considered more “abstract” based on the musical/sonic complexity of the track. Sometimes I will use the term “obscure” in a similar fashion to describe how/why IDM is considered to be inaccessible or unfamiliar to the average listener.

“disorganized” subculture that distinguishes itself from mainstream popular music culture. What core values and practices are associated with IDM? In what histories or ideologies are they rooted? Is the online, anonymous IDM subculture made up of people from a diverse range of genders, races, ages, and nationalities? These questions are important because the way in which subcultures develop and maintain ‘authentic’ boundaries effectively separates them from other social groups and shields members’ identities from ubiquity and alienation. For example, the whiteness and masculinity often associated with the IDM subculture may act as a boundary that dissuades potential members from being involved. However, as I discuss in Chapter 3, anonymity may make such social boundaries less important because of how self-identity is often fragmented in online communities using digital avatars or usernames as pseudonyms. Another factor that significantly influences the ‘authentic’ status of the IDM subculture is an overarching philosophy, or a way of knowing and being that more accurately defines IDM’s values and attempts to explain what kind of people participate in the subculture. What kind of philosophy is communicated between artists and fans associated with IDM? How is subcultural capital translated between the underground and mainstream? By attempting to understand how artists and fans of IDM express their individuality and approach to electronic music making, I will provide an explanation of how IDM maintains a fluid relationship between the imagined mainstream and underground.

IDM is better suited to describe a philosophy of electronic music-making situated within a disorganized online subculture, a sociocultural entity that is loosely structured by values affiliated with creative individuality and the subversive ideologies found in rave. While some elements of IDM subculture can be translated into popular culture, fans and practitioners of

IDM implement various strategies that ensure many subcultural elements are untranslatable, consciously, or not. Such strategies effectively shield their subcultural capital and help to maintain their imagined underground status and disassociation with the mainstream.

METHODOLOGY

In March 2021, I attended David Huron's virtual presentation titled "Musicology: The Study of Music," as part of a colloquium series hosted by the Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University. I was inspired by his perspective on what he called "the art of collaboration." He noted that scholars in the arts and humanities often "don't want to admit what we don't know" in contrast to those in traditional science disciplines, where scholars "wear their ignorance upon their sleeve" (2021). Dr. Huron warned us of how arts students are increasingly socialized to mask their ignorance even though our goal is not to discover truth but to explore topics and gather information. This was an important reminder of my duties as a junior scholar and ethnomusicologist. When studying music in, and as, culture, I believe it is essential to conduct and/or reference ethnographic research so that the actual members of a community are represented in academic work. In a macro sense, I think this collaborative approach helps to bridge the gap between higher education institutions (e.g., the 'ivory tower') and the general public. Likewise, I believe that it is important that the work presented is accessible to audiences outside of academic institutions in terms of both language and theory. Just as the term intelligent dance music is held suspect among fans of the genre for its elitist connotations, so too are universities and academic institutions that may at times seem distanced from the actual practices of communities that are subject to research such as this. The voice of community members helps to ground the scholarly research in this paper and

contributes to the validity of the narrative I present. Also, I have included the voices of practitioners by referencing artist interviews and their interactions with fans online as part of the discourse analysis.

Interviews, music videos, liner notes, album reviews, live performance recordings, online forum discussions, and music itself are examples of cultural texts that make up the fabric of musical cultures such as IDM. 'Music itself' includes the original work of an artist, remixes, covers, bootlegs, and mashups. According to Stanley Fish, such texts are meaningless outside of the cultural assumptions that individuals, and the communities to which they belong, place on them (1980). Fish's concept of 'interpretive community' claims that it is the community to which the listener belongs that determines the way in which readers/listeners ascribe meaning to a given text (Fish 1980; Gencarelli 1993, 30). Within IDM, many texts are not defined by any explicit meaning or intention. Rather, the abstract nature of IDM recordings and performances allow for many interpretations and productive discussions. At a global level, no interpretation of a cultural text is more or less valid than another, including the author's intent. However, such a sentiment does not apply to local levels, such as online IDM subculture, where the interpretations of some core members can reshape the perceived subcultural values and practices of various groups within the subculture. This distinction between the validity of interpretations at global and local levels avoids contradicting the entire premise of cultural/subcultural capital. For example, the interpretations and behaviour of older members and successful artists have more influence on the perceived values of online IDM subculture than new fans of the music.

I believe there are functional similarities between Fish's theory of interpretive community and Bourdieu's theory of habitus that can be productively merged for my study. When Gencarelli and Fish speak of how cultural assumptions arise from our past experiences, values, and knowledge, they are explaining the construction of Bourdieu's habitus – where habitus is defined as “a concept that expresses, on the one hand, the way in which individuals ‘become themselves’ – develop attitudes and dispositions – and, on the other hand, the ways in which those individuals engage in practices” (Webb et al., 2002, as cited in Huang 2019, 48). Therefore, how we attribute cultural meaning to texts is a result of our habitus, which then supposes that people who share interpretive strategies may tend to share habitus. Habitus does not refer to all predispositions, but specifically those which are pre-conscious and embodied. This raises all sorts of interesting questions about the role of embodiment and pre-conscious factors in IDM. For example, is a solitary American white man with a college education who self-identifies as a geek and spends a lot of time online likely to share an affinity with members of online IDM subculture? My study primarily focuses on how IDM subculture is often portrayed as somewhat disembodied and self-reflexively intellectual, a portrayal that I feel is emphasized in cyberspace.

I want to be careful in the way that I represent the community members that I interviewed for this research vis-à-vis the term ‘Intelligent Dance Music’. For example, I will not describe them as the “intelligent dance music community,” despite the observation that many participants seem aware of this potential identification. This is because many members do not identify with or endorse the term ‘IDM’ and I have observed that any sense of a stable online community is fragmented across various social platforms. Instead, I specify whether a

member's perspective comes from We Are the Music Makers (WATMM) forums, Reddit, YouTube, Soundcloud, or Instagram. When I discuss shared ideas, responses, or beliefs in the form of collected data between the five platforms, I refer to them as the IDM subculture.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study uses both ethnography and discourse analysis to gather information from online IDM communities to learn how the term 'IDM' is defined and contested, what platform(s) fans use to consume and discover IDM, if fans create their own IDM music, where fans interact with others, how and when they discovered IDM, and what other types of music they listen to. A survey form was created using Google Forms and posted publicly to r/idm on February 10, 2021, featuring eleven questions pertaining to IDM subcultural practices and demographics (see Appendix B for the list of questions). Survey form data was used to confirm the information learned through my discussion with interview participants and my initial hypotheses regarding homogeneity, music consumption, and music-making practices.

I examined five online platforms to gather information about the online IDM subculture. The five platforms are split into two groups, major and minor, to organize how prevalent they are in this study. Major platforms are the social media sites where I performed the majority of my discourse analysis and ethnography, including interviews and forum-based discussions; minor platforms are the social media sites and/or music platforms where I mainly conducted discourse analysis and examined fan practices. Major platforms include Reddit and WATMM and minor platforms include YouTube, Instagram, and Soundcloud. I conducted discourse

analysis on all five platforms, whereas my ethnographic analysis and direct engagement with the community focused only Reddit and WATMM.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

My approach to discourse analysis in this project is partly inspired by the work of Rahma Sugihartati and Thomas Brett. Sugihartati focuses on youth culture fandoms and their relationship to the popular Indonesian band The Mortal Instruments (2020). The research method in his study combined textual analysis and discourse analysis by positioning online fandoms of popular culture as both audiences and producers of cultural-text meaning which supports the globalized popular-culture industry. Sugihartati summarizes the importance of text-based analysis by paraphrasing the work of author Alan Mckee: “text is a form of meaning-making which is interpreted by researchers to understand youth identities and subcultures” (309). While my research does not decipher IDM as a *youth* subculture, these ideas are still meaningful. Similarly, the discourse analysis used in Sugihartati’s study is explained as a way to learn how members of a subculture “understand their world, particularly through the meaning-making of the cultural texts which they produce” (Cavanaugh 1999, as cited in Sugihartati 2020, 309). Perhaps more in line with the content of my study, Thomas Brett’s article titled “Autechre and Electronic Music Fandom,” positions the fans as both consumers and producers of cultural texts. Brett identifies the fandom of Autechre as “techno-geeks,” a type of fan that seeks to understand the mysterious music-making techniques of Autechre and is therefore a group of very productive and knowledgeable electronic musicians themselves (2015, 8). Through his discourse analysis, Brett demonstrates how cultural texts produced by fans of obscure electronic music are able to participate in an online community that finds value in discovery,

learning, and playfulness reinforced within the social spaces of YouTube and online forums. These studies make clear the usefulness of discourse analysis as a methodology to examine how fans interact with — and produce — cultural texts associated with IDM. In my analysis of IDM discourse, I am able to apply the flexible framework of subcultural capital to describe how fans identify with the cultural practices surrounding IDM.

For this project I sourced and transcribed a wide range of artist interviews dating from the early 1990s to June 2021 in audio, text, and video formats. Interviews were selected for reference and transcription if the content of such interviews referred to any of the research themes listed below. Search terms included the artists' names and various pseudonyms, specific dates, and adjectives such as "rare" and "uncut" to find lesser-known examples. While Aphex Twin, Squarepusher, and Autechre were the primary focus for this data collection, other people associated with IDM include Steve Beckett, Luke Vibert, Mike Paradinas, Mira Calix, Jlin, and Grant Wilson-Claridge. During the coding process, I focused on particular themes related to my research topic such as: commercialization in electronic music, how commercialization impacts electronic music-making culture, how artists engage with or perceive their fandoms, if fans and artists identify with the term IDM, their experiences with rave culture, and how the IDM approach to electronic music-making shapes both the popular image of successful artists and supports the IDM philosophy. I also searched for references to women and non-white participants in the IDM scene as practitioners or fans. Popular artists associated with IDM generally do not manage social media platforms as is common practice for many artists in the digital age, so it is rare that fans have an opportunity to engage with IDM artists directly. The two most notable exceptions include the "Ask Autechre Anything" (AAA) event on the WATMM

forums in November 2013 where fans were invited to ask Rob Brown and Sean Booth (the two musicians that constitute Autechre) any questions they would like over a three-day period, as well as the unofficial Aphex Twin Soundcloud page that Richard David James (aka Aphex Twin) hosts under the default username User18081971 where he occasionally engages with fans.

In conducting the discourse analysis, I searched through the comment sections of YouTube videos, Soundcloud tracks, Reddit forums, WATMM discussion threads, and Instagram posts to gather a sense of how users interact with one another and with the content associated with IDM. I also examined the profile pages or YouTube channels of some users to learn more about their connection to IDM. More than seventy texts were examined and analyzed in total between May 2020 and August 2021. I focused my attention on the manner in which community members identified with IDM and their interpretation of IDM, either as a genre, a philosophy for electronic music-making, or something different. Since Instagram is structured around visual media, I conducted a visual analysis of user-created content to get a sense of what online IDM culture looks like. However, it is important to keep in mind that Instagram utilizes individualized algorithms and so my user profile only yields results specific to my activity and history on the application – the results for hashtag searches are not universal. For example, my personalized search results for posts associated with IDM on Instagram feature images or videos of electronic music equipment such as synthesizers, digital audio workstations, or modular synthesis systems in combination with abstract visual art that may be described as glitchy, sci-fi, or fractal. In addition, I examined how the Instagram hashtags #idm, #braindance, and #intelligentdancemusic are deployed, and what kind of visual and sonic content they are used to represent. In contrast to the transitory comment structures on YouTube and Instagram,

WATMM, Soundcloud, and Reddit yielded a wealth of useful information because of the thread-based structure of the platforms. Instagram in particular yielded very little discussion between users which I suspect is a result of how quickly users consume content on the platform. Reddit and WATMM featured several discussions about the meaning of IDM as a genre and as a musical culture, many of which were conveniently active during the course of this research. It seems that new and experienced members of the community alike are curious enough to participate in these discussions.²

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

This project uses a combination of semi-structured interviews, survey data collection, and analysis of public discussion threads with community members associated with IDM to collect information on various topics related to IDM culture. My ethnography was approved on September 22, 2021, by the Carleton University Office of Research Ethics under CUREB-A Protocol. In both the interviews and discussion threads, I maintained a conversational tone as much as possible in order to avoid alienating members of the IDM community who are wary of academic research about the music they love. To conduct my research online, I used two separate aliases named ‘hull657’ and ‘headplastic’ for Reddit and WATMM, respectively.

WATMM is an active community of electronic music listeners, practitioners, and fans of IDM. There are various discussion topics ranging from electronic music production techniques,

²For my research, I approached forum discussions and similar online fan/practitioner activity as *discourse*. If I was to examine this online activity using netnography (see: Kozinets 1998), an online research method used to understand social interaction, then I would consider these texts as if they were public spaces – an approach which might carry different implications.

fandom, and General Banter where users are free to discuss whatever interests or ideas they like as long as they abide by the forum rules. I focused on WATMM because the platform is unique compared to social media sites and other online social forums and because its history as an online community dates back to 2001. Also, I understand WATMM to be the most active online hub for music associated with IDM. For the public discussion thread section of my ethnography, participants discussed the prompts I presented and affirmed each other's perspectives in written responses or by using embedded value systems. While most of the data I analyzed was sourced from my own post, I also examined other threads and posts on the WATMM forum. WATMM users can use one of eight reactions to communicate value: 'Like', 'Thanks', 'Haha', 'Confused', 'Sad', 'Facepalm', 'Burger', 'Farnsworth', or 'Big Brain'. While the first five reactions are self-explanatory, the other four remain ambiguous, even to some users (2021). As will be explored in chapter 3, these value systems provide a visual and symbolic representation of subcultural capital and community reputation, especially on the WATMM forum.

As a social news platform, Reddit is a unique hybrid of forum-based discussion threads and user-created content sharing, both in an anonymous format. Also, Reddit hosts a wide variety of user-generated online communities and fandoms in the form of subreddits. While there are popular subreddits attributed to each artist associated with IDM, such as Aphex Twin, Squarepusher, and Autechre, I chose to focus my research primarily on the IDM subreddit called 'r/idm' because it condenses artist fandom, is more popular and active than other IDM subreddits, and better represents the IDM subculture from a popular culture perspective than the artist-specific subreddits. With that said, I will provide brief analyses of specific artist pages

when relevant. Each post created in a subreddit is monitored by administrators assigned to the respective subreddit to enforce specific rules, and a post's value is determined by an up and down voting system (i.e., 'upvotes' and 'down votes'). Users may also give posts or specific comments in a discussion thread various types of awards that increase the chance of viewership and often reward the specific user financially with ad-free use of Reddit for a limited amount of time. Both votes and awards are embedded value systems and provide insight into how subcultural capital is accrued in online communities. The r/idm subreddit is also the forum with which I have been most involved since becoming a fan and practitioner of IDM in 2014, albeit primarily as a lurker, which means that I tend to observe discussion and vote on posts rather than directly participating in discussion or creating posts.

The semi-structured interviews and the discussion thread both proved to be productive methods on Reddit. To recruit participants, I posted to r/idm on January 12, 2021, inviting members to reply in the discussion forum based on my prompts (see: Appendix B) and/or to privately message me for a more personal, in-depth conversation (['hull657' 2021](#)). Five members of the r/idm community reached out to me via private message for interviews and the discussion post was well received with 95% upvotes and seven commenters, some of which provided highly detailed responses. On WATMM, my initial post received two 'likes' and one 'burger', and there was a total of 94 responses on the post including my own replies to members of the community. Many users offered in-depth replies and answered all of the questions I presented yet rarely responded to my prompts for further discussion. At times, my interest was met with sarcasm and minor criticism, but all responses were helpful in

understanding how the community perceives IDM as a concept and what subcultural values and practices are associated with IDM.

Although my role as a researcher was generally well received on both Reddit and WATMM, there were some difficulties in conducting the ethnographic portion of this research. Specifically, the tone of conversation and my use of language seemed to hinder my ability to acquire information, likely because of the tensions between my position within IDM subculture and my status as a graduate student. My attempts to mediate and inspire meaningful discussion on the topics of defining IDM and how the IDM community is represented demographically were only partially welcomed. I found most of these difficulties were apparent in my engagement with the WATMM community and I suspect that it was a result of either my inability to clearly communicate the intentions of the research, my lack of reputation in the community, or some users' general disdain for academic research and/or disinterest in the topics presented. I also believe that some of the pushback was related to the fact that I was asking questions about the lack of diverse representation in the community, specifically women and non-white participants. Despite these difficulties, the initial discussions on both platforms were generally insightful, humbling, and reassuring. Most users were pleased to contribute their ideas and tackle challenging questions. In regard to the structured survey forms posted to r/idm on February 10, 2021, members submitted 42 responses and in the discussion section some users expressed that they found the survey to be "kinda weird" or offered a sarcastic response; however, most commenters expressed interest in the research and asked to receive updates on my progress, which I have provided. On WATMM, I offered the community a similar

survey form a month after my initial conversations with them, yet only two members submitted responses and the discussion post was left inactive.

I conducted five semi-structured interviews with members of the r/idm community where the majority of participants were exuberant in their replies and offered honest, thoughtful responses to my questions, and were happy to share personal experiences. Interviewees include ‘-The-Space-Cadet-’, ‘inlet-manifold’, ‘-ToxicPositivity-’, ‘Nadavcohenmusic’, and ‘boolaids’. All semi-structured interviews were conducted using either Reddit’s direct messaging system or chat system. I believe that the anonymous nature of these online communities allows for open discussion and offers users the freedom to disclose information without compromising their real-life identities. No semi-structured interviews were conducted on WATMM.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The usefulness of the concept of subcultures has long been debated in regard to socially deviant social groups (Bennett 1999; Hannerz 2013; Williams 2019). Ryan Moore and many other ‘post-subculturalists’ claim that sociologists in the 1960s-70s, particularly those belonging to the Birmingham Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), overlooked how subcultures grew in popularity alongside new entertainment media and consumer markets as young people became more interested in “rebellion” on a mass scale (2005). While the notable work of Dick Hebdige and his contemporaries offered valuable insight as to how subcultures expressed value and ‘authenticity’ in their repurposing of clothes, media, and social norms to oppose dominant society, sociologists have since critiqued how subcultures are essentially

“frozen” in time when the analysis fails to take the dynamic role of media into account (Thornton 1996, 119). By 2010, the term “subculture” was widely critiqued and largely abandoned in favour of terms like “neo-tribe” and “scene” in Western scholarship (Threadgold 2015; Patton 2018, 56; Straw 1991, 2004). Nonetheless, the concept of subculture is still commonly used in recent subcultural studies and remains useful for the present study because it supposes an ideological resistance against dominant cultural forms, such as the imagined mainstream. The notion of neo-tribe will be defined in chapter 3 when I discuss the formation of online subcultures and subcultural identities.

Subcultures can be defined as social groups that subvert what are considered mainstream ideologies by repurposing technology and conventional approaches to cultural production in a manner that may be perceived as deviant or oppositional in practice thereby distinguishing themselves from other social groups (Beekhuyzen et al 2011, 701; Patton 2018, 55). Historically, subcultures have been associated with countercultural groups such as the hippie, disco, and rave movements that were founded on ideologies that promoted independence, experimentation, and freedom of expression as opposed to conformity, convention, and the standardized practices associated with commercialism (Williams 2019, 90).

Today, subcultures are understood less as oppositional, countercultural social forces that rebel against dominant society; rather, they espouse dominant ideologies of their own which encompass the values, beliefs, practices, and interests of authentic, or “core,” group members (Dupont 2020, 650). Subcultures and mainstream popular cultures are determined by the ways in which social groups outline boundaries around themselves via specialized practices, uses of slang or argot, and cultural knowledge. Those who are considered posers, outsiders, and

plebs are those who do not belong to a subculture's imagined boundaries of authenticity in the 'underground' and may include newcomers that wish to belong to a subculture for reasons that may be considered phony by experienced members.

Subculture and the concept of underground are often used synonymously with youth cultures and their associated practices and media; however, the most diverse aspect of IDM as a subculture is age. Therefore, I do not consider the process of appealing to the mainstream as necessarily "growing out" of youth or entering the adult world (Threadgold 2015); rather, appealing to the mainstream just means communicating with cultural forms that are more accessible to those who exist outside of the elite subcultural sphere. Core members (Dupont 2020, 648), also known as "hardcore" members (McCutcheon 2005, 62-64) or true fans are terms used to describe individuals who strongly identify with their respective subculture and act accordingly, typically embodying the values and beliefs of the group's ideology and helping to adapt those beliefs and values, and construct meaningful social spaces and media. Despite the imagined boundaries that surround subcultures, wider appeal and popularity threaten the constructed identities and feelings of authenticity that core members develop over time (Conner & Katz 2020). Therefore, while subcultures may not have the power to fully resist the curiosity of larger audiences, resistance strategies are nonetheless essential in preserving a unique sense of belonging. To do so, subculturalists focus their efforts on constantly constructing and reinterpreting authentic identities that distinguish themselves from others.

'Authenticity' is not easily defined because it can be interpreted in a variety of different ways depending on the subculture in question. Basically, authenticity can be understood as a key element of someone's identity that distinguishes them as a core member of a subculture

from an inauthentic onlooker, poser, or pleb. As Tyler Dupont puts it, “authenticity is not an inherent attribute of a person, performance, object, or habitus; rather, it is an achieved, contestable, and revocable characteristic” that is acquired by learned behaviour and by positioning oneself within the heart of a subculture (2020, 650). Furthermore, an individual’s subcultural authenticity is further validated by other group members (Stets and Burke 2000, 233-234). In the case of interpretive communities, such as those tied to IDM, I believe individuals can find a sense of belonging via self-validation, group validation, or a combination of both. These forms of validation change over time and depend on the individual’s perceived role within their respective subculture. Authenticity is emphasized by members of a subculture when their identities and meaningful status is threatened by mainstream commercialization or industrialization and mass production (Rodger 2020, 163). From a distance, the way authenticity functions in a subculture may be perceived as elitist and condescending; however, Rodger notes that the evaluations of authenticity and selling out “should be understood as an important means for establishing control and fostering a sense of social cohesion and shared identity” (2020, 172). Framed another way, authenticity is the crucial element that distinguishes subcultural capital from cultural capital.

Aspiring members of a subculture, or subculturalists, must observe the behaviours of more experienced members of a subculture, interact with them, and pay close attention to how what is deemed authentic changes over time. To acquire a valid sense of authenticity, participants must consume and/or produce cultural texts that relate to the values and beliefs associated with the particular subcultural ethos. In doing so, they perform their identity. Identity performance is a key aspect of subcultures and is directly connected to the

development and maintenance of an individual's authenticity and validated position within a subculture (Dupont 2020, 652).

Digital music technologies and social media have forever changed the way members of a subcultures interact with one another and engage in identity performance (Nowak & Bennett 2020). Both IDM artists and fans have continued to present a subcultural identity beyond the confines of traditional media, where traditional media includes newspapers, magazines, posters, zines, television, and radio. The virtual world of social media offers unique tools for users to craft and curate their own identities in relation to a largely anonymous fandom (Campbell 2012; Gottsdchalk 2010; Williams 2006; Woerman 2012). As suggested in a thesis dissertation by Raeleen Damian, anonymity in fandom, or 'fanonymity', is a measure of self-protection motivated by one's desire to preserve privacy, personhood, and career via the maintenance of an online persona (2008, 3). Fandoms are not just a group of fans constantly consuming media and expressing appreciation for the music they love. Rather, fandoms are "active and cohesive" subcultures, "a community of both *interest* and *activity* [...] they take their readership a step further than the average consumers," creating new meanings for cultural texts through social activity (Damian 2008, 7-9; original emphasis). As subcultures, online fandoms like WATMM and r/idm are outlying communities generally misunderstood by outsiders and often misrepresented by mass media, if mentioned at all. As Henry Jenkins notes in his book *Textual Poachers*, fans are "active producers and manipulators of meanings," and not the purely fanatical "cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers" that mainstream media tends to stereotype them as (1992, 23). Identity performance is practiced online in various ways: an individual's profile picture or avatar, description or bio, and their use

of subculture-specific slang are examples of identity performance. Today, online social media platforms and discussion forums are the most popular and accessible community spaces that allow users to construct, perform, and alter their identities to fit within subcultures, while observing and interacting with others who are engaged in the same process. As individuals learn more about their online community, the subculture it pertains to, and their role within it, they continue to “refine” an authentic identity (Dupont 2020, 654). However, to form an authentic identity that reflects the values of the particular subculture, individuals must perform their identities and interact with others in authentic spaces, otherwise known as the *underground*.

Loaded concepts such as underground and mainstream are constantly being redefined and their definitions vary depending on the context in which they are used (Rodger 2020, 163). Although the mainstream and underground are connected and both contribute to the formation and understanding of a subculture (Thornton 1996), there still exists an ideological tension between the two: the ‘authentic’ underground is continually threatened by the domination of the ‘inauthentic,’ commercial mainstream (Rodger 2020, 160). In reality, the binary of mainstream and underground subculture does not exist, as recent studies have pointed to “the plurality of subcultural authenticities and mainstream” of these ideological tropes (Hannerz 2013, 50; Dupont 2020). The Australian hip-hop enthusiasts from Rodger’s recent study on authentic subcultures understood the mainstream as an undefinable, “imagined other,” a discriminating, elitist distinction that positions the mass audience of the mainstream against the small, tight-knit underground community in an attempt to establish social structure in subcultures (Rodger 2020; Thornton 1996). Furthermore, an imagined

mainstream is associated with the “adult world,” a world into which subcultural youths must eventually pass (Threadgold 2015). For most members of a musical subculture, the mainstreams are largely perceived as negative and associated with poor taste, the mindless consumption of trends, and formulaic musical production. By employing this polarizing ideology of mainstream versus underground, subcultures differentiate themselves from the commercialized, and easily accessible forms of popular culture. Theoretically, the concept of mainstream is not a monolithic whole that sits in opposition to that of the underground. Rather, the mainstream is plural and imminent to the concept of underground. Any imagined mainstream cannot exist without an imagined underground, and vice versa.

As Rodger suggests, subcultures may further develop and specify the authentic boundaries which separate them from the mainstream, or the imagined other, and differentiate experienced core members from new members (2020, 161). Instead of using the concept of ‘mainstream’ to define how subcultures are positioned in society, Hannerz claims that “the mainstream is embedded within the subcultural: it is given its meaning by the prohibitions that set it apart” (2013, 59). Given the extent to which subcultures are associated with the underground, I feel it is crucial to explore the significance of the underground as a concept.

It might be simple enough to say that if something is truly underground, we wouldn’t know about it. But in our age of information and Web 2.0, is anything truly inaccessible to the point of being classified as “underground”? The term underground implies the unseen, the things that lie below us. The etymology of the word underground reveals that it was used as a noun by the 1570s to mean “below the surface,” and it came to be used as an adjective by 1600. Its figurative meaning as “hidden, secret” is attested from the 1630s and it wasn’t until

1953 that underground was first documented as an adjective meaning subculture, where it was used in reference to World War II resistance movements against German occupation ([Online Etymology Dictionary](#)). Mark McCutcheon cites the romance of the underground trope in his dissertation, stating that the underground describes subcultures and their practices as “covert, nocturnal, authentic, exotic, and transgressive,” descriptors which represent an ideology that reproduces “conservative social hierarchy by masquerading as radical opposition to the same” (2005, 47). What McCutcheon is defining is a philosophical underground that casts the illusion of authenticity and distance from the mainstream when in fact the two interact with one another and are tethered by media representation (Thornton 1996, 6-8). Here we note that the underground may in fact be paradoxically shaped and guided by the mainstream in the same moment that it ideologically opposes it (McCutcheon 2005, 48-49). The concept of the underground embraces an ideology that is historically tied to countercultural activity and a “nether world,” or a world of crime, opposition, and intimate community (49-53). The underground is a messy and “real” depiction of life, and not some clean and carefully managed place. This theoretical distinction between clean as fake and dirty as real is promoted by Aphex Twin when, for example, he explains to fans that pop music is “generally a very average meal, served on a very clean, possibly silver plate with clean knives and forks, just the right size portion, easy to digest” ([2015](#)).

In terms of music, the underground has been used to describe the psychedelic hippie counterculture of the 1960s, the punk and disco scenes in the 1970s, rave scenes in the 1980s-90s, grunge rock in the 90s, and some forms of hip-hop from the 1970s to the present day (Graham 2013; Fikentscher 2000). It is crucial to note that the underground was used

historically to describe gay and black club scenes as well (Thornton 1996, 6). McCutcheon notes that the underground can be deployed by subcultures in an attempt to remain unpopular or be used to discern sell-outs from “hardcore” members (2005, 61). However, in recent decades the term has become less relevant, or at least understood differently than it was previously when used to describe music subcultures. Martin Raymond, co-founder of The Future Laboratory, has outlined an old process where trends used to be passed upwards through different levels of hierarchical mainstream access, moving further from its origin in the underground. Now, Raymond claims, trends are passed laterally, without stages of intermediation, straight from the innovator into the mainstream online ([Independent 2013](#)). Raymond’s position introduces the possibility that the underground has been dismantled by the instantaneous, information-rich internet, an idea that was proposed earlier by music critic Simon Reynolds. In his article titled “Where is the Underground?” Stephen Graham considers Reynolds’ idea that “the web has extinguished the idea of a true underground; it’s too easy for anybody to find out anything now,” proposing instead that the underground is “essentially a practice, a cultural philosophy of music that exists outside [a] mainstream” ([2010](#)). Graham’s philosophy of the underground references “a sense of concealment, even of contraband,” and applies to music that is “abrasive” and unconventional such as drone, noise, and the work of contemporary improvisors. Consequently, this form of underground music “repels the mainstream” and thus causes the majority of listeners to ignore its existence if they find it. According to Graham, this means that popular music platforms such as SoundCloud still qualify as underground spaces because the *location* of underground music is not what defines it; rather, it is defined by the level of *interest*. Framed in this way, the concept of underground maintains its historical

significance and proves that the term can still be useful in describing music subcultures that deviate from, and critique, the mainstream, fostering a space for experimentation, and promoting innovation (Graham 2010). Despite the arguments that claim underground *space* has been dissolved by the internet, I think it is still worth acknowledging how vast and mysterious the internet can be; it is a digital environment that does allow for privacy and hidden spaces. Even with the progression of algorithmic culture (see: Werner 2020; Webster 2020), and the theoretically public and accessible community spaces online, the underground cannot be found if you do not know what you are looking for. Indeed, access to such spaces remains highly controlled by a series of cultural gatekeepers. As Frank Zappa allegedly said, “the mainstream comes to you, but you have to go to the underground” ([kill ugly radio 2007](#)).

In the underground, those who maintain an authentic identity and act within the boundaries of their subculture accrue forms of capital which are inherently unquantifiable and unique within the subculture and underground space. In other words, individuals build rapport with one another and earn reputation, clout, “cred,” and power that not only further validates their position and identity in the subculture, but also grants them the ability to determine what values, beliefs, and practices are authentic, and thus alter the meaning of subcultural capital.

In principle, subcultural capital is nearly synonymous with reputation; however, subcultural capital is rooted in a long history of social theory most famously described by Pierre Bourdieu in his essay “The Forms of Capital” (1986). According to Bourdieu, as agents who traverse dynamic social worlds, or “fields,” we accrue various forms of capital over time through social interaction and labour, and this capital allows us access to new opportunities and successes. While capital is colloquially associated with economic capital (i.e., money and

financial assets), Bourdieu extends the concept of capital to include various types such as social, symbolic, and cultural capital that function to explain the “price of priceless things” (2).

Basically, cultural capital is power in the form of knowledge which we accumulate through life experience and education (Bourdieu 1986, 3). Therefore, embodied cultural capital is the “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body,” such as mannerisms, skills, dialects, and beliefs that exist within us (4). Institutionalized cultural capital represents the certificates, degrees, or credentials that are recognized by established entities such as universities, clubs, and record companies. And finally, objectified cultural capital includes the cultural texts or “goods” such as vinyl records, instruments, and posters that “can be appropriated both materially – which presupposes economic capital – and symbolically – which presupposes symbolic capital” (6).

Social capital is defined as “who you know (and who knows you)” and can be understood as an individual’s social network (Thornton 1996, 10). Symbolic capital is the final, or “legitimate,” form of social, cultural, and economic capital; its meaning and value are determined by specific fields. For example, if someone is highly skilled at playing the guitar (objectified and embodied cultural capital) and has a large amount of money (economic capital), they can enroll in a prestigious university (institutionalized capital) where they may meet similar people who later form a successful band (symbolic capital). For my purposes, Bourdieu’s forms of capital are useful in explaining how popular IDM artists navigate the subcultural field that is IDM and use their various forms of capital to achieve commercial success while maintaining subcultural authenticity.

Sarah Thornton proposed a subtype of cultural capital called subcultural capital in her book *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (1996). Thornton’s work focuses on

club cultures to explain how forms of mass and niche media converge to influence the supposedly authentic identities and social structures of underground UK dance scenes. Thornton's main argument claims that both niche forms of media (i.e., fanzines, posters, pirate radio features) and mass media (i.e., TV, mainstream radio, newspapers, magazines) contribute to the construction and dissemination of subcultural content and associated values, beliefs, practices, and aesthetics. Niche media, in contrast to mass media, provides a space for participants to develop and maintain their subcultural capital. By proving that they understand the media they consume and that they are able to critique it, members of a subculture demonstrate the accumulation of their subcultural capital (Dupont 2020, 652). For example, showing you went to a concert or recreating a certain sound on a synthesizer proves to other members that you possess a set of relevant skills and knowledge pertaining to IDM subculture. In sharing your understanding of the associated media, your sense of authenticity is validated by other members and subcultural capital is accrued.

While subcultural capital may be deemed *intangible*, or unquantifiable, it is possible for purveyors of subcultural capital to *translate* their subcultural capital into more recognized and even tangible forms of capital, such as cultural capital and economic capital (Threadgold 2015, 6). Subcultural capital is accrued and diminished but not spent or bartered like a currency, despite the possibility of translating some forms of capital into economic capital (Patton 2018, 55). Subcultural capital is not necessarily exchanged, transformed, or converted, as these terms imply a more conventional trade and structural change where each party loses a form of capital and gains another. I use the term "translate" instead as it suggests that one form of capital is rearticulated or reinterpreted into a state that is valuable to someone else, in a manner

analogous to linguistic translation in which one language is translated so that conversing parties can understand one another. As in language, the translation of one form of capital to another carries the possibility of mistranslation. It is possible that some elements of a subculture cannot be translated and therefore cannot be recognized by mainstream institutions because their meanings have complex links within the subculture that cannot be disassociated from it. Untranslatable elements of a subculture reinforce constructed notions of authenticity by validating certain beliefs or practices as unique and hidden from the mainstream. In fact, participants of a subculture may deeply value these untranslatable elements simply because they allow participants to distinguish themselves from other subcultures and from the mainstream.

Steven Threadgold further nuances the notion of capital translation when he explains that forms of subcultural capital must be successfully disassociated from the respective subculture in order for a purveyor of subcultural capital to create a “subcultural career” (2015, 5). This idea supposes that like subcultures, subcultural capital exists in fields that are separate from other subcultures and the imagined mainstream. Threadgold argues that “the ability to package one’s subcultural capital into a *form recognizable* in these other fields becomes paramount,” because if that initial translation is impossible then the subculturalist requires more traditional forms of capital such as social, cultural, or economic (2015, 6; emphasis added). Purveyors of subcultural capital essentially need to convince mainstream institutions, or what Threadgold calls “adult institutions,” that their subcultural capital will appeal to a wider audience and therefore generate profit. Through this translation process, subcultural capital becomes cultural capital, a more recognized form of capital that, from the subcultural

perspective, is devoid of authenticity and co-opted by dominant forms of culture. Therefore, subculturalists may be risking their accrued subcultural capital by stepping out of the respective subcultural sphere as a means to earn economic capital, expand their social network, or haphazardly appeal to pop culture – all of which can be considered selling out. However, Threadgold thinks that this transition “is not necessarily ‘selling out’ or ‘co-optation’, but *delicate conversion*” (7, emphasis added). Basically, participants of a subculture must carefully navigate the processes of capital translation because they risk dismantling their position within the subculture, or even compromising the values, practices, and beliefs of the subculture itself (Rodger 2020, 168; cf. Hibbett 2005). For example, if a core fan of IDM was hired for a position in the Artist and Repertoire (A&R) division of a record company, their subcultural capital (knowledge and understanding of IDM), is translated into cultural capital (accessible, valuable, intriguing music), that is economically profitable in the mainstream (albums sales, branding, wages). In doing so, this core fan might diminish their subcultural capital by leaving the underground to appeal to the mainstream. This complex process of capital translation is crucial to my explanation of how IDM artists maintain a fluid relationship with the mainstream, as discussed in chapter 3.

Sune Qvotrup Jensen argues that the concept of subcultural capital is indeed useful when analyzing subcultures, but only if the analysis considers the socio-structural variables and social positions related to participants of the subculture. He suggests that by considering these variables and social positions we can learn more about *why* subcultural activities accrue subcultural capital and *how* it works in specific subcultures (2006, 272). Discovering these socio-structural variables, such as race, ethnicity, wealth, occupation, class, family life, education, etc.

is challenging, especially for a study such as mine, which involves input from anonymous fans on the internet and the study of popular yet profoundly elusive artists. However, it is possible to consider an individual's social position *within* the subculture of IDM by analyzing the social value systems embedded in an online community's platform such as the Reputation and Karma point systems on WATMM and Reddit, respectively. Although I did not originally intend to discover the socio-structural variables that pertain to the individuals I interacted with in my study (nor did I develop an in-depth ethnography to do so), I was able to learn about the general level of education, race/ethnicity, age, gender, location, and political views of various participants via surveys and forum discussion. Therefore, I aim to heed Jensen's main argument and criticism of subcultural capital in my analysis by discussing the socio-cultural boundaries surrounding IDM subculture.

Ryan Moore discusses the appropriation of subcultures by mass media and consumer markets, arguing that commercialization "dilutes" the oppositional qualities of subcultures. Moore uses the concept of subcultural capital to explain how subcultures may be "appropriated when absorbed into consumer cultures" (2005, 229). As a result, the subculturalist expressions of alienation and rebellion become valuable commodities (231), and the mechanics of subcultural capital are challenged as dominant culture impedes on the 'underground'. With even the most niche markets being widely accessible, few subcultures are able to avoid the far reaches of infiltrating "cool hunters" and the corporations that hire them to report the latest subcultural trends (232). To maintain their sense of authenticity, subcultures must implement strategies such as disguise and parody to appeal to both mainstream audiences and their respective subcultures (Thornton 1996, 126). Moore's goal is to extend Thornton's notion of

subcultural capital “beyond the study of in-group hierarchies” to demonstrate how the culture industry attempts, and often succeeds, at profiting from subcultural capital by commercializing and marketing certain trends, fashion, and music. This translation of subcultural texts into widely accessible commercial products appeals to a large number of young consumers, and possibly even older consumers, who wish to keep up with new trends and feel part of a defiant community without necessarily integrating themselves into the subculture. The key factor that makes these subcultures and their productions so alluring to wider audiences is *disinterest*. Consumers must demonstrate that they are interested in the “wrong” type of music, that is, music that is distinctly separate from popular culture and is aesthetically inaccessible, in order for their apparent hipness to seem natural and untainted by mass media (Moore 2005, 233; Atton 2012). However, it is not easy for consumers of popular culture to blend in with a subculture, even if they look the part, because of various other factors that act as subcultural gatekeepers. As Moore states, the “crucial factor is that knowledge about music and style cannot appear to have been acquired through the mainstream media or other outlets of the culture industry,” where commercial hype and conformity is considered the enemy of subculture (232-33). Moore’s ideas are useful in explaining how IDM can be defined as popular music, and why IDM subculture appeals to audiences outside of its underground space.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

My thesis is organized into three chapters, each including various hyperlinks to musical examples on YouTube to provide easy access when listening along to the paper. Tracks that are unavailable on YouTube are typically linked to Bandcamp or other online music sharing platforms. All tracks are also listed in the discography section of my bibliography organized by

corresponding chapter, artist, and chronology. In chapter 1, I provide a brief history of the UK rave scene from its origin circa 1988 and eventual decline during the early 1990s. This chapter includes a commentary on the commercialization of underground dance subcultures, the emergence of superstar DJs, and electronic dance music more generally. I also discuss subcultural values in the rave underground, the changing role of the “bedroom producer,” and Warp Records’ reframing of techno DJs into rock stars. In discussing Warp’s impact during the UK rave era, I will describe the origins of “intelligent techno,” or “electronic listening music,” and how the emergence of the internet propagated the music’s popularity and eventually formed an online music subculture. The historical background also introduces the three featured artists for my thesis and my justification for choosing them. Chapter 1 concludes with the question what exactly is IDM?

Chapter 2 is dedicated to defining IDM as a disorganized online subculture and a philosophy of electronic music-making rather than a genre or style descriptor. The chapter begins with various accounts from IDM fans and practitioners who share their interpretations of IDM subculture, why IDM does not function as a traditional genre term, and what differentiates IDM from mainstream popular music. As part of this initial discussion, I draw from the results of my ethnography and from interviews with popular artists to consider the anti-mainstream values and practices found in IDM subculture. Eclectic taste, productive fandom, and creative individuality are three crucial elements of online IDM subculture that help to distinguish core members of IDM from outsiders. As such, I explore the relationship between these three elements and the notions of accessible listening and temporal capital, examining why and how it takes IDM fans and practitioners a significant amount of time to become familiar with

complex, abstract electronic music and implement eclecticism into their own electronic music-making practices without resorting to ready-made solutions, such as pre-sets and sample packs.

Finally, chapter 3 dives deeper into the “disorganized” structure of online IDM subculture by exploring the ideological differences between the imagined underground and mainstream. I have observed that fans and practitioners of IDM largely consider themselves to be underground and thus position their identities vis-a-vis commercialism and broader trends in popular music. To secure and perform their underground status, core members of IDM subculture deploy various strategies to alienate themselves from the imagined mainstream and remain somewhat hidden in the digital underground. I demonstrate how such strategies relate to the authentic value of certain online community spaces and music platforms, and discuss the role that anonymity plays in the construction and performance of subcultural identities. I discuss several aspects of contemporary online electronic music communities, including how algorithms shape such communities and why online IDM subculture remains a relatively homogenous social entity despite its longevity in anonymous online space.

Finally, chapter 3 examines how subcultural capital is accrued and translated by IDM artists and the community associated with IDM, and how artists shield their subcultural capital to avoid selling out and to remain underground. In this discussion, I explore broader topics regarding mainstream media and the commoditization of electronic music, ultimately explaining how IDM maintains a fluid relationship with mainstream popular music. This final chapter synthesizes the main points of previous chapters and outlines the strategies used by IDM artists and fans to discern themselves from the mainstream.

The existing core values and practices of IDM can be traced back to the UK rave movement and acid house explosion in the early 1990s. Electronic music-makers capitalized on the creative affordances made accessible by commercially available synthesizers, independent labels, and the autonomous ethos that inspired several generations of ravers and DJs. Once the UK rave scene began to attract larger crowds, media outlets, and large corporations, ideological divides were established around music scenes to preserve the sovereign spirit of underground subcultures. In the following chapter, I examine IDM's early history as an online subculture after demonstrating how popular IDM artists transitioned from solitary bedroom producers to superstar DJs.

CHAPTER ONE

WE ARE THE MUSIC MAKERS, THE DREAMERS OF DREAMS

“Growing up in Cornwall we kind of had to make our own scene, really. We were at least a year or two behind London. Whenever I’d pop up to London to buy some records, they would always just say names of genres I’d never heard of before. You’d think, ‘Oh god,’ we’d just think of it all as dance music, or all acid house, or whatever we called it at the time. So, we kind of had to make our own parties, really, which was wicked for us because we didn’t quite know what we were doing, and did it slightly wrong and played our own music and mixed it up with live things”

- Luke Vibert, 2011 RBMA Radio

Beginning with a brief overview of the UK rave movement and the cultural impacts of acid house in the late 1980s to mid-1990s, this chapter traces the history of IDM, exploring how the values, beliefs, and practices of the rave movement inspired the core values of the IDM subculture. At the peak of the UK rave movement, independent record labels such as Warp and Rephlex achieved commercial success and global demand for their rosters. The emergence of bedroom producers and independent labels, the evolution of DJs from countercultural selectors to sensationalized superstars, and the rave-revolution-turned-commercial-enterprise contextualizes how music-obsessed practitioners such as Aphex Twin, Squarepusher, and Autechre went from underground ravers to the popular figureheads of what became known as IDM. The advent of online music subcultures during the mid-1990s contributed to the dissemination of IDM as a popular term and since then many dedicated online communities have emerged to form a disorganized music subculture.

“SPACED OUT!”: ACID HOUSE & UK RAVE

Acid house is a subgenre of house and techno, which were born out of the Black American club undergrounds in cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York during the 1980s. These genres achieved great international success and quickly spread to vibrant nightlife scenes in other places, notably in Europe (see: [“Acid Tracks” by Phuture](#) (1987); and [“Acid Attack” by Mr. Fingers](#) (1987)). Club culture in the UK was well-established by the early 1980s, marked by the growing success of labels such as Factory Records and clubs such as the Hacienda, Thunderdome, and Conspiracy (Reynolds 2016, 70). Club-oriented pop music from groups such as The Smiths, New Order, and Culture Club had a considerable influence on the emergence of indie labels and inspired the famous Manchester party scene (Bainbridge 2012). Party goers such as those active in Ibiza, Spain during the late 1980s combined the hypnotic effects of repetitive beats and bass-heavy, fully electronic dance music with the trance-inducing, high-energy effects of ecstasy to dance from sunset to sunrise. Inspired by the intense party experiences and eclectic selection of music in Ibiza during the summer of 1987, British DJs Paul Oakenfold, Johnny Walker, Nicky Holloway, and Danny Rampling returned to the UK with a new club scene in mind that would revitalize the otherwise stagnant, “uncool” nightlife in major cities such as London and Manchester (35-37). Small clubs like Rampling’s Shoom and Holloway’s The Trip began as intimate, exclusive subcultural events motivated by an ethos of “losing it – your cool, your self-consciousness, your *self*,” and surrendering one’s mind to a “parallel universe” (39, 48). Within weeks, these small events grew from hundreds to thousands of participants and by the end of 1988 the UK rave movement had been firmly established in the mainstream as a result of demonizing media coverage (Thornton 1996).

The countercultural behaviour associated with UK rave shares a similar subcultural ethos with the UK free festival movement that began in the 1970s. Free festivals such as those held in Glastonbury (1971), Windsor (1972 – 1974), and Stonehenge (1972 – 1984) provided a “miniature utopia of joy and communal awareness” for participants seeking an autonomous social experience and living an “alternative manner” (McKay 1996, 15; “The Free Festivals” 2021). Free festivals, or free parties, created a sense of community for those who wished to escape from urban city life and embody a countercultural spirit. Unruly and unifying, the UK raves from 1988 into the early 1990s are deeply coded in a sense of independence, community, and experimentation (see: [“1989 Illegal Rave, Acid House”](#)). The emergence of new subgenres and styles from ambient techno to breakcore, and jungle to 2step demonstrates how constant musical innovation remained central to rave culture from the very beginning. For a time, UK youth were scaling residential buildings to find the best, most covert placement for transmission equipment in their attempts to create pirate radio stations; rave promoters outsmarted police databases by devising sophisticated, codified networks for sending out party invitations; and convoys of cars packed with ravers navigated the newly built M25 orbital highway system in search of massive open-air events often held in abandoned aircraft hangars, warehouses, and farmlands (“Everybody in the Place,” 2019). Such illegal, subversive activities are what led many participants and onlookers alike to believe the UK rave movement was indeed a ‘revolution’ of sorts, as British youth worked to create their own form of culture, translating the post-human, machine music of Black America’s underground to fit their purposes (Reynolds 2016, 19; 56-57; 63). Tracks such as [“So Where Are You \(Hashish Dub\)” by Corporation of One](#) (1989), and [“Box Energy” by DJ Pierre](#) (1988) were in high demand as DJs

competed for the best dance singles, also referred to as “white labels,” in order to energize dance floors and accrue subcultural capital in the process. This meant that record shops and radio stations became important sources for both the newest imports and UK-produced dance music while DJs and producers worked to get their latest records playing in the mix. Rave DJs, record producers, shop owners, and promoters were able to create and profit from a lucrative enterprise on their own terms and express individuality (“The Chemical Generation” 2001).

While the UK rave era is often regarded as a socio-cultural movement or revolution by its participants – a revolution rooted in an ideology of resistance, autonomy, and spiritual awakening – the result was ultimately apolitical in terms of activism and protest. In many ways, it was a “surrender” to the dividing, atomising effects of Thatcherism and “a kind of spiritual materialism” (Reynolds 2016, 47-48). In the 1980s, prime minister Margaret Thatcher notoriously claimed that “there is no such thing as society, just collections of individuals,” a sentiment that rippled across the UK as mass unemployment and the defeat of workers’ unions brought despair to the already gloomy streets of working-class England (45-47; 61). Any sense of a collective identity was in peril as the individual was prized over the community. As this sentiment trickled down to youth, rave offered a countercultural experience that promised participants an opportunity to feel involved in something meaningful, exciting, and communal – a space that was “relatively their own” (Thornton 1996, 16). While raving may have been an escapist activity for many involved, many ravers saw the UK scene as a “miracle cure for the English disease of emotional constipation, reserve, and inhibition,” that offered youth a sense of “we” when the mainstream called for “I,” even if it was temporary (Reynolds 2016, 45-47). When rave became more popular, the romanticized togetherness of the movement was

dismantled. Tensions mounted as the “true” philosophy and aesthetic of rave was put into question. The increasing commodification and media coverage of raving led to the “erosion of EDM’s culture” and “expanded the importance of visual aesthetics” (Conner and Katz 2020, 455-456). Electronic music itself was subjected to the social boundaries put in place by clubbers and artists to distinguish their tastes from others, in what Thornton claims is ultimately a “taste culture” (1996, 3). Notions of elitist hierarchies, such as those found in ‘intelligent’ styles of dance music like techno and drum-n-bass, fragmented subgenres and caused social divides (see: [“Bike Pump Meets Bucket” by Polygon Window](#) (1993); [“Horizons” by LTJ Bukem](#) (1996)).

Each generation of ravers drew their own boundaries around what they deemed to be the hippest music and club experience in keeping with the cyclical nature of trends in popular culture. Licensed club environments helped thwart police interference, provided a reliable and organized sound system, and kept music sales alive. However, many young aspiring ravers were left at the door because of 21+ age restrictions and the subcultural boundaries that defined the original movement (“Everybody in the Place” 2019; Thornton 1996). Many of the original adopters of acid house, and thus purveyors of subcultural capital in these early scenes, claimed that the media exposure attracted “unwanted and unhip” participants (Reynolds 2016, 51), or what Thornton refers to as the handbag-wielding “Sharons and Tracys” (1996, 100). By the early 1990s, the success and popularity of UK raves attracted unreputable promoters, criminal enterprises, and government legislation that dissuaded many promoters and DJs from hosting illegal parties in the countryside and post-industrial spaces (Reynolds 2016). The move back to city centres and licensed clubs meant a safer and more structured party experience; however, it also repositioned rave culture closer to the “corporate ethos” that it initially rejected (Anderson

2009, 319). Eschewing the control of major record labels and developing local DIY practices are subcultural values that were also present during the wave of indie rock bands emerging from post-punk scenes in the UK during the 1980s. The mainstream popularity of bands such as the Soup Dragons and Primal Scream (e.g. *C86* by various artists (1986)) demonstrated the success of independent labels and contributed to the business/production practices of the UK rave movement and early acid house scene (Hasted 2006).

Commercialization of the rave scenes did not necessarily cause them to “decline,” as the economic success of clubbing culture was exponential (Thornton 1996, 15), but rather altered them in a way that disrupted the original Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect (PLUR) values crucial to the identity of Gen X ravers who pioneered the scene (Reynolds 2016, 319-320). As raving and club culture became ingrained in the UK mainstream, ticket prices soared when DJs were sensationalized by promoters as celebrity performers and came to be considered the main event. This was a far cry from the early days of British rave culture when the DJ was cloaked behind curtains or tucked away in the corner of dark nightclubs to mix records: the sonic immersion and music was the main attraction for crowds (Rietveld 2013, 79-86).

By 1990, DJs and record producers were largely a “faceless group with collective goals, such as musical enlightenment, taking fans on journeys, and keeping people dancing” (Anderson 2009, 320). Rave DJs in particular helped establish the practice of spinning records and building sound systems as an art form (Fikentscher 2000, 35). In rave culture, dancers were “born again” within the thrall of the DJ and intense drug trips (Reynolds 2016, 46). Selecting tracks, conquering audio technology, and experimenting with different mixing techniques reframed the DJ as a performing artist and their equipment, such as mixers and turntables, as

instruments which required practice and skill to operate effectively and keep audiences engaged (Fikentscher 2000, 37-42). While the commercialization of DJs did not alter their collective goals, superstar DJs were no longer just selectors. They climbed on stage above the audiences and into the spotlight, becoming the focal point of electronic pop-dance (see Montano 2013, 174-194), colloquially referred to as EDM today (Rietveld 2013, 3-5). DJ stardom corresponded with the emergence of superstar producers – often young men who created music in the comfort of their own home at little expense who were nudged into a life of fame by record labels. These DJs following the path of conventional rock stars who traveled on world tours, got their photo taken for magazines, appeared on popular programs such as MTV, responded to an onslaught of interviews, and generated a dedicated fandom. Warp records was a leading record label that helped to develop the careers of DJs signed to their label, often at the cost of artists' privacy. In contrast, Rephlex records provided a safe haven for popular electronic music artists that teetered closer to the underground origins of dance music and club culture. Though both labels share conceptual roots in UK rave culture, each took their own unique approaches to promoting signed artists.

THE LONDON CONNECTION: WARP & REPHLEX RECORDS

The deviant climate and autonomous ethos of UK rave coincided with a broader DIY approach to cultural production. The rise of the bedroom producer in relatively affordable computer-based home-studios, coupled with the emergence of independent labels such as Warp and Rephlex records, further demonstrated how UK youth were able to successfully seize the means of production in order to distribute their music throughout the UK and beyond. Artists such as Aphex Twin often played a crucial role in managing these independent labels,

using the available distribution networks to sell their own music and generate a global following. International acclaim and the roots of IDM's status as popular music was spearheaded by Warp's *Artificial Intelligence* series and their decision to apply a conventional rock star model to market their artists.

Sheffield, a post-industrial city in northern England, established a local infrastructure for recording studios and record shops beginning in the 1970s. Bands such as Cabaret Voltaire, Clock DVA, and Chakk inaugurated "a tradition of experimenting with synthesizers, drum machines and tape loops" (Reynolds 99). In addition to providing a surplus of abandoned industrial spaces for illegal raves, the infrastructure and electronic music roots planted in Sheffield by the early industrial scene paved the way for Warp (see: Reed 2013, 59-83). Inspired by the sound of [Unique 3's "The Theme"](#) (1989), university friends Steve Beckett, Rob Mitchell, and record producer Robert Gordon founded Warp records (Reynolds 2016, 98). Before officially establishing the label, the founders of Warp operated a record shop called FON that mostly sold hip-hop and rock records, rarely selling electronic dance music. When the acid house scene reached Sheffield, FON played a key part in the UK musical revolution by trading American house and techno imports from labels such as Transmat, Bigshot, Nu Groove and Trax around 1987-88 (Beckett 2007). Soon after the sale of imports became popular and the rave movement gained mainstream momentum, UK-produced white labels started to flourish in the scene (Reynolds 2016, 98-99).

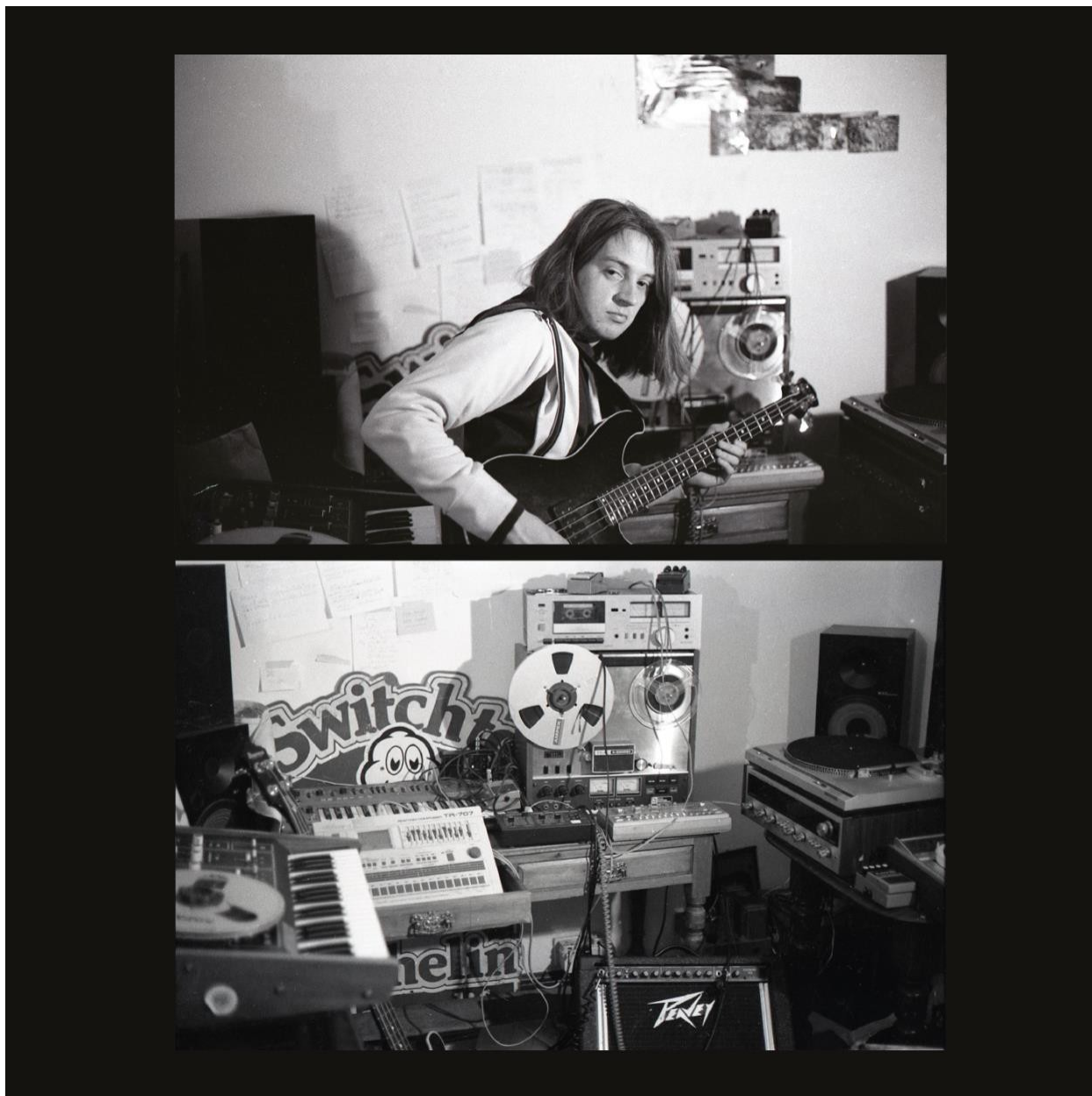


Figure 1: Squarepusher's Home Studio (1994)

With close ties to the record shop, DJs were visiting FON to buy the latest records for upcoming parties, and with access to affordable music-making equipment, some DJs even tried their hand at producing records as well. New artists from Leeds such as Nightmares on Wax and LFO would bring demos to FON, acquire a test pressing, and see how crowds would react during raves

(Beckett 2007). Using their earnings from record sales and selling concert tickets at universities, FON officially transitioned to Warp records in August 1989 when they pressed 500 copies of [Forgemasters' "Track with No Name,"](#) released in association with Outer Rhythm (Haddon 2019, 573). To situate themselves within UK rave culture, the Warp founders and their associated artists declared themselves as committed to "hardcore tracks" to discern themselves from the 'inauthentic' crowds who had followed the trail of mass media coverage (Reynolds 2016, 114; Thornton 1996). Perceptions of Warp's authenticity were strengthened by their niche status in the wider rave community and the affective alliances created through informal social networks, or in other words, the "connections made between diverse groups of individuals based on a shared enthusiasm for a genre, track or artist" (Haddon 2019, 573). The success of [Nightmares on Wax's "Dextrous"](#) (1989), [LFO's eponymous chart-topping single](#) (1990), and [Sweet Exorcist's "Testone"](#) (1990) cemented Warp into a label and spawned their defining bleep-and-bass sound, or bleep techno, a genre central to the northern UK house scene.

In contrast, in the southern county of Cornwall, the newest dance music of the late 1980s was hardly accessible to young ravers (Weidenbaum 2014, 8). Richard D. James, better known as Aphex Twin (and perhaps lesser known in the guise of his various other monikers like Bradley Strider, Power Pill, AFX, The Tuss, Phonic Boy on Dope, and GAK to name a few) spent his younger years tinkering with electronics and experimenting with the sonic possibilities of old pianos. Today, James is best known for his innovative contributions to electronica, namely [Selected Ambient Works 85-92](#) (1992), [Come To Daddy](#) (1997), [Windowlicker](#) (1999), and [Syro](#) (2014) for which he won a Grammy award. James' interest in making music began at twelve-

years old, driven by “boredom” and the desire “to get something together which was my own, and to get more of myself into music as possible, not using pre-set sounds and instruments” (Peel 1999; KISS FM 1993). Music writer John Doran considers James to be “a conduit to the pre-Christian culture of the Cornish past, not just through the song names [he’s] chosen (see: [“Logan Rock Witch”](#) (1996); [“Jynweythek”](#) (2001)) but also because [he’s] a product of the Cornish myth-making tradition. Part of a cultural heritage that includes mermaids, giants, piskies, and pobel vean” (Doran 2018). James’ ‘magical’ Cornish upbringing was shared with other electronic-savvy musicians such as Tom Middleton, Mark Pritchard, Piers Kirwan, and Luke Vibert. The Cornish crew found themselves isolated from the city-centric rave activity that flourished in the rest of the UK; however, it did not stop them from living within the ethos of rave culture and forming their own free party scene in illegal areas, makeshift clubs, and licensed venues such as the Bowgie Inn in Crantock (Muggs 2015; Snapes 2016). Without any local record shops and a long drive to London, James and his mates had to source samples from any tracks they could find and get creative when making the dance music they wanted to hear. When producing [“Window Peeper”](#) (approx. 1987) around the age of sixteen, James mentions he had created a home-made mixer using “2 big breadboards slotted together that did some odd phasey stuff. Before that I used to just twist all the wires together as a mixer! Not many have tried that I don't reckon” (“Syrobonkus” 2014).

How the haphazard, homegrown style of raving that developed in the folkloric countryside of Cornwall eventually led James and his friends to achieve international success is extraordinary. On his 1999 BBC Channel 4 documentary feature “Sounds of the Suburbs,” John Peel described Cornwall as an economically desolate county, which offered few chances for

young people to develop. Yet the open fields, old ruins, and secluded coves of Cornwall provided ample space for free parties and little distraction away from electronic music-making (Snapes 2016). Tom Middleton recalls one “loopy” Cornish rave occasion in late 1989 when James ended the party night with a track from his own cassette collection, “[1 Human Rotation](#)” (approx. 1989): “After an ear bleeding analogue Roland drum machine and Synth assault of obscure white label imports, Rich closed the night with this insane twisted acid tech funk track that spun us *right* out from the start [...] ‘Mindphued’ by Rich!” (Muggs 2015; emphasis original). When fellow Cornish DJ Grant Wilson-Claridge learned that James had been playing most of his own records in his sets, the pair founded Rephlex records in Cornwall 1991 “for a laugh” and to sell records to their friends, later relocating to London in 1992 once James’ tracks “[Analogue Bubblebath](#)” (1991) and “[Digeridoo](#)” (1992) started attracting the ears of notable radio stations such as Kiss FM (Aitken 2003). By 1993, Rephlex records had an established roster of artists such as [The Kosmik Kommando](#), [Drexciya](#), [μ-Ziq](#), and [Vibert / Simmonds](#), selling records to both British and European markets, particularly in Germany and Belgium (KISS FM 1993). Sire records, one of Warner Music Group’s subsidiaries, further propagated James’ work as Aphex Twin to American audiences, including the [On](#) EP (1993), [Selected Ambient Works Volume II](#) (1994), and [Richard D. James Album](#) (1996) (Weidenbaum 2014). Of working with a major label, James said, “I thought they/[Sire] were going to go mental, but they’ve been really cool about it all actually. When I signed this deal, I have *total control* with my own label [Rephlex], which is probably about the biggest loop hole any artist has ever gotten on Warner Brothers, probably” (1993; emphasis added). Additionally, James declared that Rephlex would never sell-out to a major label, even for the right price, unless he and cofounder Wilson-

Claridge had “100% control” over its operation (KISS FM 1993). Staying true to his independent ethos, James signed the Aphex Twin moniker to Warp, a label that sees itself as a “service” to its artists (Beckett 2007), and an entity “synonymous with technologically-enabled music performance” which also appealed to the likes of jazz bass virtuoso Squarepusher and Manchester duo Autechre by the mid-1990s (Hill 2013).³

In 1990, two years before Rephlex moved to London, 15-year-old Tom Jenkinson heard [LFO's eponymous single](#) for the first time at a house party, claiming it was a “turning point” in his musical life which up until then was primarily jazz influenced and band-oriented as a bass player (2015; May 2021). Aside from his interests in jazz and bass guitar, Jenkinson says that building radios and listening to radio static itself was a “formative part” of his interest in sound at an early age because of its ability to produce “unplanned sound” (2016). Throughout the early 1990s, Jenkinson slowly accumulated an arsenal of electronic music-making equipment using grant money and borrowing from anybody he could, acquiring machines like the SH-101 synthesizer and TR-707 drum machine, which would allow him to explore the compositional possibilities of jazz-infused electronica (June 2021). Jenkinson released his first electronic music through Spymania records, including [Stereotype](#) (1994) and [Crot](#) (1994) where he explored hardcore, jungle, techno, breakbeat, ambient, and acid styles, later debuting the alias Squarepusher in 1995 on the drum-n-bass EP [Conumber E:P](#) where his jazz influence became more evident. Jenkinson notes that in practicing electronic music, machines provide feedback that musicians can learn from in order to adapt their techniques in an effort to emulate the

³ Warp describes itself as “the home of visionary post-genre music” on [Instagram](#).

machine (May 2021). The question of whether a track is performed live by a human or sequenced by a computer program is what drives the Squarepusher project (June 2021). Jenkinson attempts to implement the musical dynamic between human and machine in his live performances as Squarepusher. During an interview with Lauren Laverne on BBC 6 in 2015, Jenkinson recalls:

When I started doing Squarepusher gigs, I used to try and set up behind the speaker stacks because I didn't really want to be looked at, particularly. As well, going to raves was a big inspiration for me doing electronic music. In the early 90's there wasn't that big cult of DJ personality, fame garbage that there is now. The DJ was just someone 'over there' playing the tunes, and the crowd was more focused on itself which is one of the things I really liked about it, as against the experience of playing rock gigs and jazz where you are on the stage, and you are the focus. So, I tried to extend that mentality into performing electronic music, but promoters weren't ever very happy about it, so you've got to actually be on stage (@16:19)

After one such performance at the George Robey pub, a venue known for hosting a vibrant punk scene, acid house nights, and abstract electronic music shows, Jenkinson befriended Richard D. James who happened to be in the audience (May 2021). James later compiled the tracks for Squarepusher's debut on Rephlex records, [Feed Me Weird Things](#) (1996), and introduced Jenkinson to Warp records who would sign him to a five-album record deal by the end of 1995 (May 2021; Beckett 2007). Using the aliases Squarepusher and AFX, Jenkinson and James also recorded music together, such as the track "[Freeman, Hardy, and Willis Acid](#)" (1998) which appeared on Warp's 100th release. In describing Squarepusher's signing to Warp, Steve Beckett explained, "A lot of drum and bass for us felt too straight for the Warp label but then this freak started coming out of the scene that was called Squarepusher who had this depth of musical knowledge and that link into musique concrete, and was an incredible bassist; so, he had that *real* musicality" (2007). What Beckett refers to as "real musicality" is explained as an

artists' "personality" unobstructed by the limitations of instruments and technology so that "people can hear that direct emotional contact to the artist rather than just hearing what the equipment is," admitting that it is "a real danger of modern electronic music, sometimes the equipment can get in the way" (2007). Unlike today, where a surplus of free and widely accessible musical technologies exists, practitioners of electronic music in the 1990s had to work within the limitations of what gear they could acquire. While Jenkinson admits that young musicians today are generally better off in learning to make electronic music, he stresses that "perhaps a benefit of how it was in those days was that I had to imagine everything, and not everything I imagined was correct! I just had to make it up" (June 2021).

Sean Booth and Rob Brown, the Manchester duo better known as Autechre, echo this sentiment in their own music-making: "I think cos we grew up using anything we could get our hands on we don't really care about what's supposed to be the 'right thing' to use. you can get good stuff out of anything really" (Booth 2013). The two met through mutual interests in hip-hop and graffiti during their teen years, trading cassette tapes of their own DJ mixes back and forth (2021). Eventually the duo found themselves "over-producing" the DJ mixes they were recording by dubbing them with sounds from their drum machines and samplers such as the Casio SK-1 and TR-606, essentially creating their own tracks (2021). Inspired by electro acts such as [Mantronix](#), [Art of Noise](#), [Latin Rascals](#), and [Man Parrish](#), Brown recalls how they were captivated by the seemingly limitless sonic possibilities of machines (2008). Although these artists were using the same equipment, they each produced their own unique sounds. The duo first released an eponymous EP under the alias [Lego Feet](#) on Skam records in 1991, and debuting as Autechre with the release of their single "[Cavity Job](#)" on Hardcore records the same

year. Over the years, their sound has fluctuated stylistically from techno, ambient, and hip-hop to musique concrete, minimal, and glitch. On their approach to music-making, Brown states “we're just in our own little world trying to have our new ideas in slightly newer contexts. I think that's the same plan that we've always had since day one, slipping into the cracks in a society of music that doesn't quite deliver the things that we need personally from it” (2008). The duo has mentioned that “unusual” sounding records are most appealing, and how conventional instruments like guitars are generally uninteresting to them, unless their sounds can be implemented and explored in the world of electronic music, such as the way in which [Seefeel](#) produces their music (1993). Autechre experienced the early years of UK rave, but claimed that “greed” had overwhelmed the scene throughout the 90s which was “originally a punk approach to club culture [...] Now there is a gathering of people who grew up in this company-controlled clubland” (2021). In his article “Alternative to What?” scholar Ryan Moore explores the commercial dilution of music subcultures, claiming that subcultures and their associated subcultural capital are leveraged by large corporations and reappropriated for commercial profit (2005, 232). Therefore, the largest threat to subcultures such as the initial rave scene is both the mass media coverage that attracts perceived outsiders and the resulting power of formal institutions that take control of club operations, effectively dispelling the authentic sense of DIY (Anderson, 2009).

Autechre distanced themselves from rave early in the 1990s because of the values and practices the scene had developed.⁴ As Booth states, the dance culture returned to the violence, “excessive drinking, and cocaine use” of the 1980s, from which rave had tried to escape in the beginning (2021). By 1992, Autechre shared the independent ideologies similar to that of James and his label Rephlex in Cornwall and Warp records in Sheffield. Booth says the duo approached Warp records because “they seemed to be up for taking chances with artists” and they liked Nightmares on Wax’s and LFO’s first albums released by the label (2013). After the success of LFO’s first album [Frequencies](#) (1991), Warp founders Beckett and Mitchell decided to evolve their approach to branding and marketing their artists by taking inspiration from more rock-oriented labels such as Mute and Factory records (Beckett 2007). This decision coincided with the aforementioned rise of the ‘superstar DJ’. Warp artists were prompted to make “electronic albums that people could really appreciate from start to finish rather than being one-off dance records,” similar to that of Kraftwerk, Pink Floyd, and Tangerine Dream. Warp wanted to help its artists develop their careers as electronic musicians outside of the dance canon while ensuring Warp’s longevity as a business (2007). Beckett observed that “the scene seemed to just be repeating itself,” and the interesting music was to be found in the chillout zones at parties where artists were playing their own music and B-sides that were not designed for high-energy dance floors. Chillout music provided a soundtrack for the post-rave and inspired electronic music-makers to experiment beyond the dance music formula.

⁴ See “Electronic Dance Music: From Spectacular Subculture to Culture Industry” by Christopher T. Conner and Nathan Katz (2020) for a critical perspective on the commercialization of UK rave, including the accounts of DJs and club promoters.

Chillout music originated in 1989 and was common by 1992 as tired ravers enjoyed hanging out and listening to ambient-styled⁵ music during their post-rave come-down from drugs like speed and ecstasy (Reynolds 2016). Albums such as [Chill Out](#) (1990) by The KLF and [The Orb's Adventures Beyond the Ultraworld](#) (1991) by The Orb were designed for the purpose of easy listening and relaxation in the rave scene. In noticing the post-rave trend of electronic music, Warp coined and advertised the term "electronic listening music" with the release of the *Artificial Intelligence* (July 1992) compilation. Compiling the sounds of Aphex Twin and Autechre, among other prominent electronic music practitioners including The Orb, Richie Hawtin, and B12, Warp made a significant effort to establish longevity for the label and its artists while appealing to a much larger audience, namely non-ravers who purchase music and listen at home. Rephlex's analogous compilation *The Philosophy of Sound and Machine* (Jan 1992) also helped to proliferate the sounds of these artists and those affiliated with Rephlex.

GOING THE DISTANCE: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE & 'IDM' AS POPULAR MUSIC

The use of the term "intelligent" to describe new styles of techno was introduced as early as 1991. While Warp's first compilation in the *Artificial Intelligence* series is often credited for first popularizing electronic listening music and "intelligence" as a musical descriptor, by 1992 Warp and Rephlex were not the only indie electronic dance music labels releasing the first sounds of intelligent techno. In fact, other labels such as General Production Recordings, Origo Sound, FAX +49-69/450464, Skam, Planet E, Rising High records, Soma Quality Recordings,

⁵ 'Ambient' music was described by Brian Eno in the liner notes of his album *Ambient 1 – Music for Airports* as "music that must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting" (1971). For more information see Toop (2019) and Viega (2014).

WAU! Mr. Modo, Torso, ZTT and Apollo, a sublabel of R&S Records, were actively releasing new forms of techno and ambient electronic music during the early 1990s before Warp's release of *Artificial Intelligence* in July 1992, and before the term IDM became well-known (Ramsay 2013). The first documented use of the term "intelligent techno" occurred on November 6, 1991, within a Usenet discussion thread about Coil's EP titled [The Snow](#) that was released the same year on Torso records. User Greg Earle mentions how the EP is "clearly dance-oriented but with interesting sound collages instead of the mindless monotony that passes as a lot of Techno these days..." (Usenet 1991). Here the formation of authentic subcultural boundaries is evident as users distinguish between the techno mainstream and the innovative other. Although many fans and scholars agree that the term "intelligent dance music" is connected to the release of Warp's *Artificial Intelligence* compilation ('apaloosafire' 2021; Fell 2015; Ramsay 2011), the Usenet discussion suggests that a fresh form of techno was being noticed by fans a year prior. In the context of Earle's post, it seems the use of "intelligent" corresponds to his description of the music style as a divergence from the "mindless monotony" of techno imitators and an embrace of "interesting sound collages".

Warp's long-term vision focused on the individual-as-auteur and the artists' ability to create fresh productions that could attain longevity in the otherwise ephemeral realm of dance music. In doing so, Warp stressed the importance of creative freedom for their artists, a set of values rooted in the rave culture with which they had been so involved. This creative freedom included who the artists wished to collaborate with when presenting their music alongside other forms of media like film (Haddon 2019, 576). Securing this longevity meant sensationalizing artists who "quite often make weird things that don't necessarily fit into a

specific box” (Hill 2013). Combining the punk DIY sensibilities with a “techno-geek” popular image designed by long-time collaborators The Designers Republic, Warp began their transition from a subcultural “micro-capitalist” label to a pop-cultural “macro-capitalist” brand with the release of their first [Artificial Intelligence](#) (1992) compilation and introduction of ‘electronic home-listening music’ (Reynolds 2016, 520; Brett 2015). Warp had been micro-capitalist in the sense that they were one of the indie organizations that made a significant profit in the underground of the UK rave movement. They became macro-capitalist in the sense that their early success and desire for longevity propelled them into wider markets and mainstream popularity during the mid- to late-90s. From the perspective of Warp and their affiliated artists in the early 1990s, dance music had become oversaturated with “corny rip-offs” from bandwagoners trying to make a quick profit from white label records (James 1993; Reynolds 2016, 159). Warp’s *Artificial Intelligence* series was an artist-oriented attempt to refocus listeners’ attention on how electronic music was presented while informing audiences that they “weren’t *supposed* to dance to it” (158; emphasis original).

In addition to being “simultaneously an aesthetic initiative and business strategy” (158) Warp’s *AI* series also honoured the experimental roots of electronic music while acknowledging the influence that early practitioners had on the musical practices of Warp artists. For example, the inclusion of David Toop’s essay “Where in Your World?” in the liner notes of Warp’s final release from the *AI* series, [Artificial Intelligence II](#) (1994), draws listeners attention to the music of [Karlheinz Stockhausen](#), [John Cage](#), and [Steve Reich](#). Similarly, Steve Beckett commented on Autechre’s music being described as “abstract or leftfield,” claiming that “compared to the music they listen to like [Tod Dockstader](#), as far as they’re concerned, they’re doing pop music”

(1998). Beyond Warp's *AI* series, Squarepusher and Aphex Twin have also commented on the influence of artists such as [Olivier Messiaen](#) and [Erik Satie](#) (2015). Around 1998, Aphex Twin commented on the general perception that "jungle and drum & bass is the future of music," stating that such an idea is "a load of rubbish. It's no better than music from 300 years ago. You could take all the records made in the last five years and they wouldn't stand up to one Satie track" ([approx. 1998](#)). Four months before the release of Warp's first *Artificial Intelligence* compilation, Rephlex records partnered with Applied Rhythmic Technology (ART) to release a similar compilation titled [The Philosophy of Sound and Machine](#) (1992) featuring three of the same artists, albeit with different monikers. James is featured on *The Philosophy of Sound and Machine* under three distinct monikers: Q-Chastic, Soit.P.P, and Blue Calx. On *Artificial Intelligence*, he is credited as Polygon Window. Ken Downie and Ed Handley, members of The Black Dog, are featured on *The Philosophy* as Twelve Days of Night and Balil, respectively. On *Artificial Intelligence* they appear together under the moniker I.A.O. Michael Golding and Steve Rutter, popularly known as B12, are featured on *The Philosophy* as Redcell and Cmetric, and on *Artificial Intelligence* as Musicology. It is common for artists associated with IDM to use multiple monikers to distort their identities and release music without the constraints of label contracts. This will be discussed in more detail within the model of subcultural capital in chapter 3. The cover sleeve of the first *Artificial Intelligence* compilation describes the record as being "for long journeys, quiet nights, and club drowsy dawns. Listen with an open mind," while the cover sleeve of Rephlex's *The Philosophy of Sound and Machine* describes itself as "a collection of Electronic Music... for Dance and Thought".

The music featured on these records is principally structured as dance music – repetitive beats, fast tempos, and synth riffs. This is why the language used to describe these compilations is crucial in revealing how IDM achieved commercial success and popularity: one did not have to belong to or understand rave subcultures to be able to listen to and identify with this music. Throughout the 1990s, Warp and Rephlex’s popularity was enhanced by MTV programming and the surrounding commercialization of rave culture. Music videos featured on MTV advertised the music and the cultural products⁶ associated with artists as “home video retail products” (Jones 2005, 86). Presented as reality television, MTV helped to shape the global demand of various artists through its branding and commercial context (87). The global popularity of Warp’s ‘electronic listening music’ was boosted by [Autechre](#) (1994) and [Aphex Twin’s](#) (1996) interview appearances on MTV, as well as the series of music videos directed by Chris Cunningham which included Squarepusher’s [“Come On My Selector”](#) (1997) and Aphex’s notorious [“Come to Daddy”](#) (1997) and [“Windowlicker”](#) (1999), for example. WATMM member ‘alcofribas’ explains the rationale behind Warp’s *AI* compilation: “what if we combined the rave music and the chill out music? what if it was music meant for dancing but also for just sitting there doing nothing and not even moving? thus, idm was born. they had to call it this because only intelligence could comprehend this paradoxical musical form. the rest is history” (2021). This tongue-in-cheek response is similar to Warp co-founder Rob Young’s statement that the name *Artificial Intelligence* was a “dig at the people who said it was music made by computers that had no soul,” emphasizing the technical achievement of Warp artists and appealing to

⁶ Cultural products include films, film soundtracks, recorded music, live concerts, and fashion apparel (86).

audiences with science fiction aesthetics (Alwakeel 2009; Reynolds 2016, 159). As the notion of intelligent dance music became more popular and various other intelligent subgenres of electronic dance music emerged,⁷ elitist social boundaries were placed around musical taste. Therefore, Simon Reynolds argues that Warp's electronic home-listening music was founded on both musical and social exclusions from the start (158). Retreating from the unifying, posthuman values⁸ inherent in the first generation of rave, intelligent dance music reprised the independent creativity of the auteur and separated itself from its roots in Detroit techno (156-157). Derrick May, cofounder of the Detroit techno sound, notes that any sense of elitism associated with an underground music scene leads to its self-destruction (7-8). As if to challenge May's belief, intelligent dance music was adopted by American fans who quickly formed an online music subculture that is still active nearly thirty-years later.

TECHNOGEEKAGE: ONLINE MUSIC COMMUNITIES & 'DISORGANIZED' IDM SUBCULTURE

To echo the words of J. Patrick Williams, "digital technologies and social media are arguably having the most effect on subcultures today" (2019, 99). Since the mid-1990s, IDM has grown as an online subculture, one that is splintered into a variety of online communities and discussion forums across the web. Aside from r/idm and WATMM, other online IDM communities such as [Xltronic](#) (est. 2001), [Twoism](#) (est. 2004), and even the original [Hyperreal](#)

⁷ E.g., intelligent jungle or intelligent drum and bass. For an example, listen here: [LTJ Bukem 1996](#).

⁸ In this context, posthumanism represents the philosophy behind the experimental electronic music-making of Juan Atkins and Rick Davis who pioneered techno in Detroit during the mid-to-late 1980s. Reynolds references how Atkins and Davis integrated technological language and machine behaviour into the spirituality of human beings, embodying concepts such as pattern and randomness in rave. See: *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* by N. Katherine Hayles (1999) for a similar, critical perspective.

[IDM mailing list](#) are still active today, in addition to other subreddits such as [r/idmproducers](#), [r/autechre](#), and [r/aphextwin](#). Though many of these communities are oriented around specific artists associated with IDM, users will often discuss various facets of electronic music and share their observations, productions, and techniques. For example, on [Xltronic](#), a message board extension of the Aphex Twin fan site, several users recently spoke about the negative effects of Spotify on less popular artists ('ijonspeches' [2021](#)). As Gene Barrett notes, "community" is a ubiquitous term used to describe types of interactive social formations, each consisting of certain forms and practices (2015, 182). Hartman et al suggest that online communities contain a "nucleus" or a focal point of the community that attracts like-minded participants who then "localize" the space through unique social interactions and cultural production/consumption (2015). In the case of IDM, there is no central nucleus around which the community orbits; rather, collections of individuals from the IDM scene are sprawled across multiple online communities and thus form a disorganized subculture. Mike Paradinas, popularly known as [µ-Ziq](#), states that the concept of IDM is largely ignored in the UK and stems from the United States of America (2003). This suggests that the concept of IDM and the formation of IDM subculture was an American response to the cultural influences of UK electronica throughout the 1990s. The results of my survey found that half of the participants (21/42) currently live in the United States. Additionally, various IDM-focused record labels emerged out of the United States during the 1990s and into the 2000s, such as Drop Beat Records, Schematic, Beta Bodega Coalition, Hefty Records, and Tigerbeat6.

The emergence of the World Wide Web and accessible computer networking hardware contributed to the popularization of IDM by providing new opportunities for listeners and

practitioners to interact with one another outside of the imagined mainstream of electronic dance music. In 1992, American computer programmer and technologist Brian Behlendorf used computer tech from Stanford University to develop a website dedicated to archiving information on rave culture, drugs, and electronic music called Hyperreal.org.⁹ Hyperreal also hosted the IDM mailing list so that users could discuss electronic music and artists such as Aphex Twin, The Black Dog, B12, and “various others from Warp’s artificial intelligence series” (Parry 1993). In the mission statement for the website, Behlendorf states that the information on Hyperreal “needs a place to be expressed independent of any overriding responsibility to a larger institution” (1997). In reference to the IDM mailing list, Warp artist Mira Calix explains how it was the “first social media” as it “created a culture, a scene, a new form of communication” (Davies 2018). Inspired by their roles in American rave scenes, Behlendorf, IDM list co-founder Alan Parry, and Hyperreal’s early participants adopted the values of creative individuality and experimentation, utilizing the newly available online social spaces to grow a community while reinterpreting Warp’s electronic listening music as intelligent dance music. Mike Brown, a list member and curator of Hyperreal content, recalls how the label ‘IDM’ was not taken seriously by the community and certainly not intended to “imply the artists and fans were geniuses” (Davies 2018). However, IDM and its first online fandoms were founded as exclusive communities that required (sub)cultural and economic capital. As artist and former list member Jon Drukman notes, “It was an exclusive club. You didn't have YouTube or Spotify; if you wanted to participate, you had to scour import bins in Tower Records or DJ-specialty

⁹ Behlendorf later created his own web server separate from Stanford or any other institution/company to host Hyperreal.

shops [...] Remember, the web didn't even exist yet. Getting on the internet wasn't easy" (Davies 2018). One needed to have an internet connection, access to a computer, the technical know-how to navigate through a network, and the exact information on where to access the list. Similarly, artists needed money to purchase equipment and the time to create electronic music.

As scholar Mimi Haddon suggests, intelligent dance music appeals to the stereotypical "male 'nerd/cult' fan identity that coalesces around notions of technological innovation/mastery, video games, sci-fi, retro futurism, and sinister humour" (2019, 577). Haddon's description is echoed by members of r/idm, such as '-The_Space_Cadet-' who believes "a majority of the people into/making electronic music are likely nerdy types who are active internet users and are more likely to read about new technology, psychology, philosophy, psychedelics, quantum physics..." (Reddit message to Author, February 8, 2021). A similar perspective was shared by Mira Calix who explained that "because the music was hyper-experimental and had a connection with technology it attracted those kinds of people as well" (Davies 2018). In terms of a cultural aesthetic, style, or fashion, r/idm user 'TheJunkyard' observes that since IDM is "listen at home type music," it has avoided "developing much of the fashion and other cultural baggage that go along with most musical genres. Nobody knows whether you're at home listening to Syro on release day in a dinner jacket or a mankini" ('flproducer909' 2020). This idea is in accordance with Simon Reynolds' description of IDM as "a nerdy subculture, happier at home with a bunch of weird sounds than out there in the collective social spaces of raves and clubs" (Davies 2018).

Through my discourse analysis, I found that the most stylized elements of IDM subculture include the iconography of popular IDM artists, a wide variety of electronic music-making technology, and abstract or glitchy visual art. As suggested by Haddon, science fiction and retro futurism are also commonly associated with IDM. Examples include Autechre's [music video](#) for "Second Bad Vilbel" (1995), Warp's [Motion](#) film (1994), and the design of [Aphex Twin](#) and [Squarepusher's](#) respective web stores. Also, several artists associated with IDM, such as Autechre, Squarepusher, Holly Herndon, and Ryoji Ikeda, have included their music on [Sónar's 120 trillion-kilometre trip](#) (2021) to a potentially habitable planet called Luyten, in search of extra-terrestrial intelligence. I developed a mosaic from the top hashtag search results of #idm, #intelligentdancemusic, and #braindance on Instagram to capture a sample of IDM's visual aesthetic (see: Figure 2). Otherwise, any sense of fashion or branding is absent in IDM subculture because image is not considered important for IDM fans and practitioners, something I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3. Discussing IDM as a subculture is a common practice in various online communities. In 2020, r/idm user 'flproducer909' asked the community "Does IDM have a specific culture?" that was upvoted by 96% of engaged users. In the discussion, a r/idm member known by the unfortunate moniker of 'peepeeland' shared a detailed synopsis of IDM subculture based on their extensive experience:

I used to hang out on IDM forums for ~15 years (xltronic, watmm, braindance, and planet mu phorum reprazent)- Here are some general IDM people things, I gathered from hanging out online and in real life with IDM people, for more than 20 years: Good number are college educated, many from middle-middle-upper class upbringings, depression not uncommon, solitude not uncommon, having good taste in many types of music and films is common, memes and joking is common, drugs are common, above average intelligence is common (being able to have thought provoking and insightful conversations about all sorts of topics), surprising number 'don't dance' much, high percentage make electronic music themselves, good percentage own vinyl, and hoodies (2020)

In mentioning there is a “high percentage” of IDM fans who make electronic music themselves, user ‘peepeeland’ alludes to the notion of productive fandom. In his research on Autechre fan activity, Thomas Brett acknowledges that music fans are often amateur musicians themselves (2015, 11). Brett describes fans of Autechre as “techno-geeks,” a fandom of “perceptive listeners who perform their curiosity and [subcultural] knowledge of electronic musical technologies” in pursuit of recreating Autechre’s sound design and discussing their music-making techniques (2015, 8).

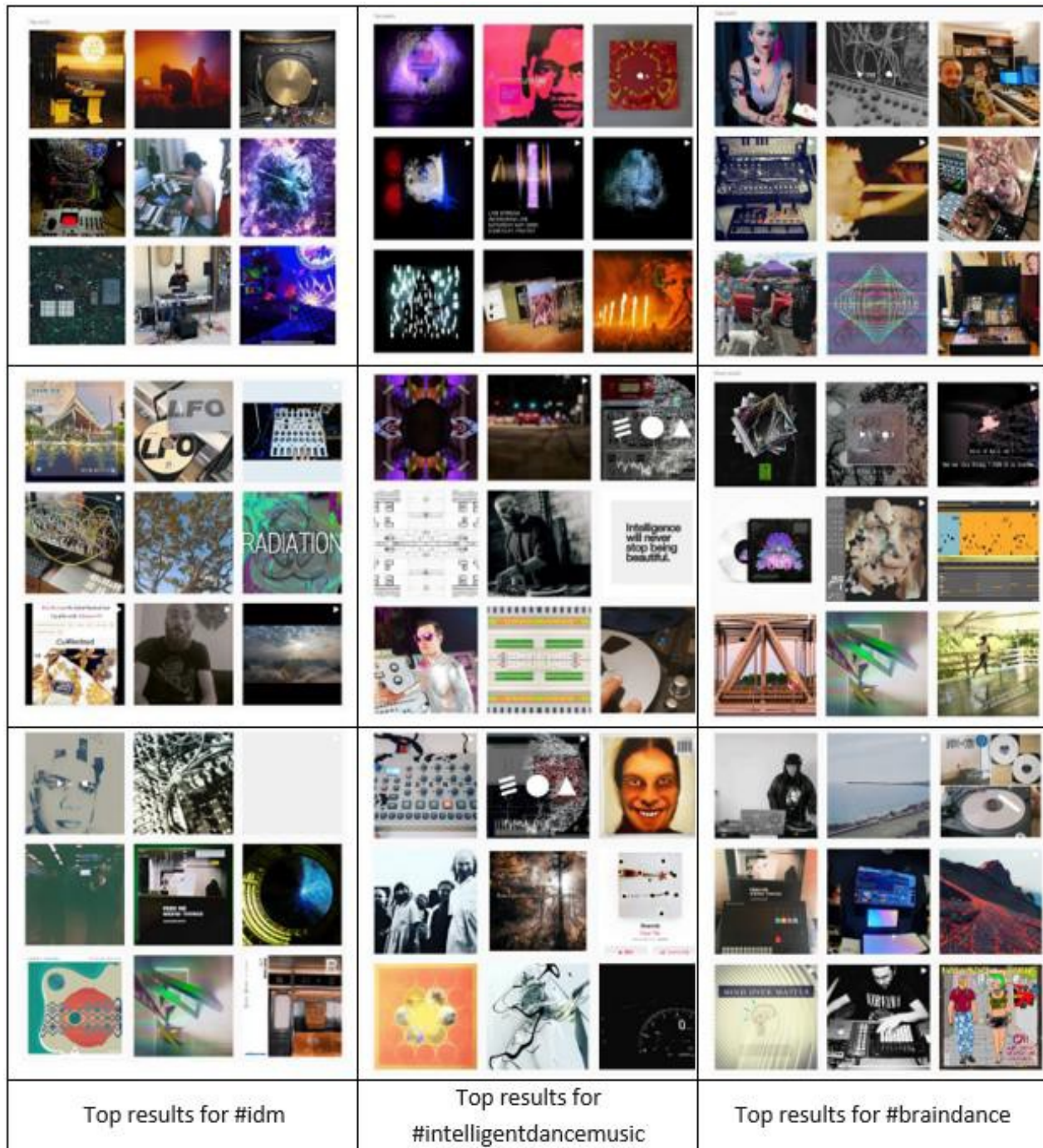


Figure 2: Visual representation of IDM aesthetic, sourced from Instagram

Techno-geek fandom is effectively a “call and response dialogue” between the “abstract” music of IDM artists and the culturally productive activity of fans. Brett also proclaims that “the meaning of Autechre’s music resides in the endless ways of making electronic music and the creative process itself” (8). I believe that Brett’s observations and classification of Autechre fans as productive “techno-geeks” applies to IDM fans in general, particularly the way in which they seek to make music for themselves. In my semi-structured interview with r/idm member ‘inlet-manifold’, they disclosed how:

finding IDM was really crucial for listening to any kind of music really. Listening to (and loving) experimental music also influenced me to make all kinds of electronic and experimental music myself too and I'm extremely happy with the work I have created up to now, even if no one (except for my friends) knows it exists [...] I found that IDM is one of the genre[s] with the highest percentage of listeners who are musicians themselves (Reddit message to author, January 2021)

Several other members on r/idm have expressed their belief that a significant number of IDM fans are actively interested in making music and learning about electronic music-making. In a separate semi-structured interview, r/idm user ‘-The_Space_Cadet-’ explained how they believe many IDM listeners also identify as music producers themselves (Reddit message to author, January 22, 2021). During a discussion on what constitutes IDM culture, members such as ‘Acixcube’ responded with their own interpretations:

I feel like idm fans have a bigger interest in the process of making music than other subcultures [...] the density of people who actually produce music (or sound designers) also seems exceptionally high. Even if its a bit more abstract than let’s say wearing black clothes, it still feels pretty tangible (‘flproducer909’ 2020)

Acixcube’s response was the top-voted comment in the discussion thread with 40 upvotes.

Another user, ‘datcoolboi’, thinks that IDM listeners work on music in various forms using

electronic music-making technology such as modular synthesizers, digital audio workstations, and computer programming techniques. Additionally, 'datcoolboi' suggests that "vintage clothing" and "the branding of obscure and ambiguous/vague artwork" relates to making music in the sense that it supports the broader visual aesthetic of IDM through DIY creative practice (2020). Meanwhile on WATMM, user 'Zephyr_Nova' stated that most IDM artists "make it out of the joy of pure self expression. I find the idea of anyone here making it for reasons beyond that quite unlikely" ('headplastic' 2021).¹⁰ In the survey I posted to r/idm, 28/42 participants said they make music associated with IDM/braindance. This productive, collaborative, and playful fan practice "enables new kinds of interactions" with electronic music made possible by popular music and online discussion forums (20). However, not all members need to be *active* to participate in online IDM communities. Lurkers, or members of online communities that solely observe and do not actively participate in discussions or produce cultural texts, still play valuable consumptive roles that shape imagined communities. According to Hartmann et al: "Community creates itself, its participants, and its objects not only through productive moments, but critically also through consumptive moments" (2015, 337). For example, new fans of IDM might find lurking to be a useful method for learning about the authentic practices and values associated with the localized activity of specific IDM online communities.

¹⁰ One counterexample is Autechre's *Anti* EP (1994), released as an explicit protest against the UK's Criminal Justice and Public Order Act where all proceeds from the record's sales were donated to the human rights advocacy group Liberty (Pattison 2014). However, Autechre insisted they are not "politically non-aligned. This is about personal freedom."

How fans and practitioners operate in IDM subculture and what the term IDM represents has evolved to include a myriad of interpretations that remain ideologically perceived as underground. Therefore, what it means to be a core member of IDM subculture depends on how one interacts with — or resists— mainstream trends. In the next chapter, I explore how IDM is ideologically situated in popular culture by sharing responses from online IDM community members and their definitions of popular music and mainstream. To support these observations and to reinforce the logic behind my framing of IDM as a disorganized subculture, I draw upon recent subcultural studies and offer an updated theory of subcultural capital to illustrate how IDM fans and practitioners differentiate themselves in an age where accessible electronic music-making technology and the means to discover music have become ubiquitous in Western culture.

CHAPTER TWO

DO YOU KNOW <IDM>?

“Forget about the genre: that’s anything from bloody drum and bass to a symphony”

- Chantal Passamonte, AKA Mira Calix (Davies 2018)

“Look, I wouldn’t stick my neck out unless I was convinced what I was putting forward was original and worth while. I really don’t want to waste anyone’s time. I mean, it’s tough, because I don’t honestly appreciate it when I’m bombarded with things that just sound mundane and repetitious and retro. I hate it, y’know, it wastes my time. I don’t want that stuff in my ears, and I wouldn’t do that to someone else. But I’m pretty hardline, y’know it’s just like, I wouldn’t bother, I’d just go and get a different job once I’d run out of ideas.”

- Tom Jenkinson, AKA Squarepusher (2015)

Intelligent dance music’s prominence in the mainstream has diminished since its inception in the early 1990s. In a 2007 magazine article titled, “Is IDM Dead?,” Thaddeus Hermann, label boss of City Centre Offices (i.e., [Go Hawaii by Casino Versus Japan](#) (2000)) replied to the author saying, “somehow the term made it into mainstream media, and it turned into a description for anything without 4/4 rhythms. That’s when it got bad” (Winfield 2007). Similarly, WATMM user ‘Satans Little Helper’ attributes IDM’s position in popular music to its crossovers with artists such as Madonna and Bjork (“headplastic’ 2021). Just as Warp and their early roster of artists distanced themselves from the “corny” dance music in the early 1990s, Hermann noted that by the mid-2000s IDM was “made more accessible” and compromised by imitators. This notion of accessibility is key when discussing how members of IDM subculture

differentiate themselves from the imagined mainstream of electronic music, both in terms of listening accessibility (e.g., familiar song structures, song length, lyrics, etc.) and the accessibility of online community spaces (e.g., r/idm, WATMM, YouTube). Related to these forms of musical accessibility is the perceived value of celebrity and branding in the mainstream, where artists typically engage with their audiences via social media platforms such as Instagram or Twitter, selling their sensationalized persona through viral trends and interactions with their fans (Shuker 2016, 60; 178-187). Through my research, I observed that popular IDM artists and their dedicated cult fandoms deploy strategies to shield their subcultural capital, distance themselves from the imagined mainstream, and maintain an underground status online.

SOUND, MACHINE, MAINSTREAM: IDM AS POPULAR MUSIC AND SUBCULTURE

In the ethnographic portion of my study, I asked WATMM users what they thought constituted popular music in this digital age and if IDM can be considered popular music. Several members, such as 'usagi', acknowledged that the "creativity and experimentation" of classic IDM (e.g., Warp releases from mid to late 90s) have "seeped into popular music" and inspired various production techniques in today's EDM mainstream. Similarly, 'Satans Little Helper' mentioned how the music of more recognizable names like Timbaland, Massive Attack, Portishead, John Frusciante, Trent Reznor, Daft Punk, Prodigy, and Chemical Brothers are examples of how IDM "leaks over to 'popular music'," stating that "it's all about crossing certain barriers either by sampling underground stuff directly or being influenced" by successful IDM artists such as Aphex Twin ('headplastic' 2021). User 'MaartenVC' agreed that production techniques of IDM have been borrowed by musicians in the realm of popular music. However, he "wouldn't define IDM as popular music though" because IDM is not consumed via traditional

popular music sources such as the radio ('headplastic' 2021). In fact, the majority of respondents were clear in stating that IDM is *not* popular music. At this point in my study, it became apparent that indeed subcultures tend to distinguish themselves less by defining what they are, than by what they *are not* (Thornton 1996). User 'zero' defines popular music as the "radio pop crap my wife listens to. 'The Voice' type stuff, and probably whatever is trending on Spotify or those streaming sites" ('headplastic' 2021). Meanwhile, user 'Stickfigger' stated that popular music can be "objectively quantified" by searching through Spotify's top 50 playlists and listening to the radio:

Which playlists are being put on Spotify's splash page? Is it IDM? No. Flick your radio around a few times. How many Ed Sheeran songs did you hear? Write it down. Now flick around and write down how many Autechre songs you heard. Compare and contrast. IDM is not popular ('headplastic' 2021)

Other users in this discussion forum wrote similar responses agreeing with the idea that popular music today is defined by trends on popular music streaming services, Tik Tok, major motion pictures, and internet memes ('Picklish' & 'Ambermonke' 2021). User 'Kid Lukie' offered a thoughtful, structured response to the discussion that is worth including in its entirety:

Popular music is a distillation of those elements of originality, creativity and spontaneity, both derived from and generated by the artistic process, and which are potent enough to captivate a mass audience. The "dubstep drop" is the obvious example-- where did those heavy bass drops occur in popular music prior to dubstep, as a genre, going through the process of cultivating an audience and being marketed by independent record labels. (*I would definitely like to hear counter-examples!*) Certainly, a large enough crowd of consumers existed at some point in time for dubstep to crossover from fringe to niche, and finally to mainstream, fuelled by a genre-defining feature of composition and timbre. So, of course, popular music would adopt the genre-defining feature of dubstep and remix it with elements that have also stood the test of time as popular musical elements. What we're left with- what popular music is- is an ever-evolving melange of borrowed musical elements and concepts that, via various means, have transcended beyond the defining limits of a genre and made accessible through a largely

predictable and familiar (see: *safe* and *secure*) format. This is self-sustaining as the very point of popular music is that it is *popular*, and so targets the widest possible consumer base and doesn't particularly have to "go deep" ('headplastic' 2021)

Here 'Kid Lukie' introduces two points crucial to my discussion of IDM as popular music: the "limits of a genre" and listening accessibility. While IDM has typically been referred to and used as a genre term, the majority of fans I interacted with and observed believe that IDM represents something beyond a genre descriptor or electronic music style indicator. This is what I refer to as the IDM philosophy of electronic music-making, or the core values of IDM subculture, that attract dedicated fans and practitioners. Scholar Ben Ramsay defines IDM as "more of a social movement that, at its very core, was based around exploratory composition, sound design and the use of new tools that composers had at their disposal" (2013). This notion was echoed in a discussion thread on r/idm about which albums started the IDM sound or genre, where member 'peepeeland', a self-acclaimed "old school mang," expresses that to them, IDM is "just a way of life – about sincere expression and doing next level shit always – and finding and knowing yourself and letting go and expressing, using all influences in life and crystallizing it into sonics" ('apaloosafire' [2021](#); emphasis added). WATMM user 'zkom' admitted that they can "barely call IDM a genre because it doesn't have much genre defining musical features like trance or jungle. It's just some electronic weirdness that defies categorization [...] so there isn't much to build a scene around because the concept is so vague" (2021). User 'MaartenVC' agreed, stating that "IDM is not a clearly defined genre of music". He goes on to note that IDM may have a core concept but tends to be "more eclectic, experimental, fuzzy" and "uses, incorporates, molds and experiments with other genres" (2021).

IDM is typically characterized by vintage synthesizer sounds reminiscent of science fiction, complex drumbeats, dynamic rhythms, melodic song structures, sonic atmospheres, careful attention to audio effect automation,¹¹ and complex compositions (i.e., [“Beep Street”](#) (1997) by Squarepusher; and [“Swurllk \(Snarlfingercroak Mix\)”](#) (2017) by EOD). Other characteristics include shifting time signatures, varied instrumentation, bleeps and glitches, unusual and unrecognizable sound sources all sequenced through a combination of hardware and software devices ([Stephens 2003](#); ‘Netw3’ [2018](#); Discogs “IDM”). The scope of what is considered IDM has expanded since the 1990s. As a result, what defines an ‘IDM’ style is also highly interpretive and subject to debate among fans. Ryoji Ikeda’s [“Supercodex 03”](#) (2013), [“Hajnal”](#) (2005) by Venetian Snares, and [“El Cargo”](#) (2005) by Amon Tobin are all associated with IDM, yet each track sounds unique, suggesting that the IDM tag does not indicate any reliable stylistic elements or genre conventions apart from electronic production. Broadly speaking, these examples illustrate how electronic music “erases the frame that has encased music for centuries,” where a musical frame is defined as “a collection of expectations for how music should behave and what distinguishes it from non-musical sound” (Demers 2010, 149).

Many fans, especially those in the UK, refer to IDM-affiliated music as Electronica. So does Joanna Demers when she defines electronica as one of three “metagenres”¹² of electronic

¹¹ Automation occurs in electronic music production when users program a computer to change a parameter(s) automatically. E.g., programming the synthesizer to decrease in volume after ten seconds. The volume control is ‘automated’.

¹² ‘Metagenre’ is defined as “An organizational grouping used to illustrate affinities among the many genres of recent electronic music [...] A metagenre contains multiple genres; thus, electronica includes techno and house plus their various progeny such as ambient house, dub techno and so on. Participants in these three metagenres define their music in relation to other metagenres as well as to a vaguely defined musical mainstream. Inherent in the discourses of metagenre is the irreconcilability of aesthetic quality with commercial success” (2010, 171).

music, the others being electroacoustic music and sound art ('Netw3' 2018; 2010, 43-65).

Demers defines genre as: "a collection of works sharing a common set of conventions," that are established once "formal attributes" are repeated enough to form "listening expectations," and serve as "effective marketing tools encouraging connoisseurship among fans and consumers" (2010, 168-169). The difficulty in framing IDM as a genre is its fundamental evasion of "convention" and thus any "formal attributes" that would help to identify the music are never fully materialized. In describing the music-making practices of Aphex Twin, friend and fellow artist Leila Arab admits, "For all the cleverness stuff, there is someone who really works at this [...] The minute he's getting too good on one set-up he'll modify it because he knows then the methodology is dictating your composition" (Doran 2018). Squarepusher has spoken of his disdain for conservative mainstream trends in electronic music and the "margarine" products of the industry, staying true to his claim: "I just want to press ahead and try out new ideas as I find them [...] I think once the formula starts getting nailed down and people start treating that area of endeavour as if it's circumscribed by a set of conventions and rules, particularly for me it's where I start losing interest" ("WFMU" 2015). When asked by WATMM user 'mizuki' how Autechre "preserves an unsophisticated playfulness," Booth replied, "keep moving out of your comfort zone [...] soon as you feel like something is easy, change things to taste [...] follow taste where it leads you," also admitting that once an established workflow is set, he "can't help fucking it up" ("AAA" 2013). Similarly, Luke Vibert admits that his music-making process is unstructured and the range of genres he creates and takes inspiration from is eclectic ("RBMA" 2011). Unlike typical genres that are rooted in defining elements, such as the squelching bass sound of the Roland 303 in acid house or the cut-up breakbeats of jungle, IDM is not limited to

any specific set of instruments or established rules. Demers argues that for some electronic artists “sound should aspire to abstraction” (Demers 2010, 149), a belief also noted by other scholars. In his article “IDM as a ‘Minor’ Literature,” Ramzy Alwakeel contends that IDM “rejects the very notion of genre,” where the “locus of IDM lies neither in the dance lexicon nor in the rock lexicon, but in the tension between the two” (2009, 5). In other words, IDM has no set *meaning*, and therefore cannot be situated in any static context where its development may be stifled. IDM is a perplexing term because it “breaks the rules of genre” and is always affiliated with other genre terms (Demers 2010, 169). A sentiment shared by r/idm member ‘wintermute306’ who states that IDM is ambiguous because of its “experimental nature” further elaborating that “once a genre has such tight rules it loses it’s shine. IDM isn’t by the numbers and should never be” (‘Netw3’ [2018](#)).

Eclectic taste is a defining characteristic of IDM subculture which further complicates the potential of IDM to function as a genre term. Broadly speaking, the DJ sets performed by artists such as Autechre, Aphex Twin, and Squarepusher illustrate the wide range of musical influences associated with IDM subculture (E.g. Autechre [Breezeblock set](#) (2008); Aphex Twin & Luke Vibert [Ultrasound set](#) (1997); Squarepusher [Breezeblock set](#) (1999)). This characteristic of IDM subculture is reminiscent of Rephlex’s manifesto, which claims that braindance¹³ “is the

¹³ ‘Braindance’ is a term coined by Rephlex records to refer to their catalogue of electronic music. Some members of IDM subculture prefer to use ‘braindance’ as a synonym for ‘intelligent dance music’ or IDM. Rephlex records released two official ‘braindance’ music compilations to showcase the variety of sounds from their leading artists, the first titled [The Braindance Coincidence](#) (2001) and the second titled [Rephlexions! An Album of Braindance!](#) (2003). Both compilations are cited under the genre ‘Electronic’ and stylistically categorized as IDM, experimental, leftfield, and abstract (Discogs 2021).

music that has always existed, but was not discovered until 1991, by us! Braindance encompasses the best elements of all genres” (2001), and Toop’s essay included in *Artificial Intelligence II* which deems Warp’s ‘electronic listening music’ as “a prime example of an art form derived from and stimulated by countless influences,” acknowledging the “labyrinthine entwinements of culture” in a globalized world (1994). When discussing what IDM culture is, r/idm user ‘Acixcube’ expressed:

The love for all facets of music and sound, not just their home subculture. That’s what I think is characteristic for the idm subculture [...] There are also very few people who "only" listen to idm without having at least a few favorite artists in other genres too [...] density of musically open-minded people seems greater in the idm community (‘flproducer909’ 2020)

My survey results found that 7/42 participants claim to listen to all genres of music or “everything” and 23/42 participants listen to a many other genres of music, including: hyperpop, indie rock, alternative, classical, ambient, drone, noise, shoegaze, metal, jazz, drum and bass, hip hop, techno, psychedelic rock, folk, and experimental. Only 4/42 participants claim to only listen to IDM/braindance. Recalling that music subcultures are “taste cultures” (Thornton 1996), Karakayali et al explain how musical taste is an example of what Foucault calls ‘ethical substance’, or an aspect of a fan’s *self* “that they *care* about and feel the need to *work upon*” (2018, 12; emphasis original). In terms of subcultural capital, this suggests that having a diverse, wide-ranging taste in music is seen as an authentic value in IDM subculture: demonstrating one’s catholicity of musical taste through seemingly unrelated influences or sample sources indicates core membership and social power.

Using Nuttall et al’s descriptions for “young music consumer tribes,” IDM fans can be considered as Techys, Loyalists, Preachers, and Experience Seekers that disagree with the

values of Conventionalists (2011). To elaborate, dedicated IDM fans pursue an interest in music technology and sound quality, use music to “help create and define their identity,” possess a passion for “non-mainstream and relatively obscure music,” and find great value in nostalgia and music collection, in high-quality digital format or physical form (158). In disagreeing with the values of Conventionalists, IDM fans are careful not to “confine their listening and music consumption to mainstream artists” and spend their time carefully searching for reliable sources that satisfy their need for more obscure music. WATMM user ‘Kid Lukie’ elaborates on this idea:

To be actively engaged in and willing to seek out music that might come under the IDM label, you'd have to already have a penchant for the esoteric, the alternative, the abstract, leftfield, or just plain weird. That would put you at odds with the mainstream because the very nature of IDM shirks those repetitive and predictable strains of composition and timbre that essentially define popular music (‘headplastic’ 2021)

Similar to ‘Kid Lukie’, r/idm member ‘inlet-manifold’ expressed that “one has to be open to new forms of art/music to be able to get into this stuff in the first place. If you look for new music outside of the mainstream, you will find it” (2021).

An eclectic musical taste is also associated with the productive “techno geek” practices of IDM fans/practitioners and the value that IDM subculture places on freedom of expression: “We’ve got no rules, no prelearning, no standards to uphold. Just taste, really” (Autechre, early 2000s). IDM subreddit member ‘-ToxicPositivity-’, one of the participants I interviewed, spoke of their music-making practice and how they find IDM to be the “most freeing to produce” (Reddit message to author, January 21, 2021). Some IDM artists find that conventions and stereotypes associated with electronic music-making ultimately stifle creativity and thus the

potential to find new ways to express oneself through electronic music. In dialogue with Autechre, WATMM user 'chim' asked about their sound production methods as separate from composition, where Booth simply responded, "production *is* music, same thing" ([2013; emphasis added](#)). Recently, members of the subreddit r/autechre discussed the duo's prowess, concluding that Autechre "actively use[s] equipment in a way you're not supposed to... and thus create unfamiliar sounds" ('[asherr' 2021](#)). The duo have commented that "there is not much room for deviation" as an individual in globalized society, "yet if you manage to crack it, then you can express things that actually do sound unique and genuinely original" (2008). For Squarepusher, it is his custom-made System 4 that opposes what he refers to as an "off-the-shelf culture of music gear": an expensive obsession with collecting vintage synthesizers and a limitless cycle of commercialized electronics where certain equipment is thought to "sound better" than others because of its apparent aura¹⁴ ("Laverne" 2015). Similarly, Aphex Twin has long advocated for contemporary electronic music-makers to "think for yourself" and resist the "brainwashing" effects of equal temperament, instead embracing one's own intuition when tuning their music ("Syrobonkus" 2014; 'user18081971' [2015](#)). When I asked Aphex Twin on his lesser known SoundCloud profile User18081971 if he thinks real-time micro-tuning will rejuvenate electronic music, he replied, "yes hope so, feels like most people have painted themselves into a 1cm box inside the universe at the moment". He went on to indicate that he

¹⁴ 'Aura' is a concept first described by cultural theorist Walter Benjamin (1936), where an 'aura' is the 'authentic presence' of a piece of art that cannot be reproduced. For example, some individuals believe that they must purchase and use a rare and expensive Roland 303 synthesizer to create 'real' acid house music.

feels as though the most important thing he can contribute to the contemporary musical landscape is to make micro-tuning tools more widely accessible ('user18081971' 2021).¹⁵

Philosophically, a sense of creative individuality is highly valued in IDM subculture, one that ideologically opposes mainstream practices and values that are perceived to be standardized and formulaic. The emphasis on individuality is evident in the tendency to refuse easy, ready-made solutions to music-making such as sample packs and pre-sets (and sometimes advice from others entirely). Instead, IDM practitioners take a DIY approach to music-making, creating a unique sound that helps to progress the potentials of electronic music. Describing IDM practitioners as “omnivorous” and “restless”, Simon Reynolds compares IDM to punk, claiming that there is “an ethos of autonomous cultural production” reminiscent of punk movements like Riot Grrrl, at least in terms of “an international network of home-studio do-it-yourselfers and laptop improvisers” (2019). When discussing what IDM represents, r/idm member 'teig_' states that “IDM is just kinda punk to me in a sense. No rules, no boundaries, just make stuff” ('flproducer909' 2020). Alwakeel's article “IDM as a ‘Minor’ Literature” (2009) hints at a subtle resistance to convention hidden in the ways in which IDM artists commercialize their music. IDM also shares a “rejection of mass-produced, commercialized culture” with other subversive subcultures such as punk, grunge, and alt rock (Shaw 2013, 335). Popular IDM practitioners have expressed their frustrations at the notion of music as

¹⁵ Aphex Twin has collaborated with [KORG](#), [Novation](#), and [ODDSound](#) to release electronic music hardware and software with easy-to-use micro tuning features allowing users to explore extended possibilities of sound design and music-making. In a recent interview he said “You now have 63,050,394,783,186,944-128 more frequencies to play with” (2021).

entertainment (Tobin 2014) and have warned against the dangers of becoming a “demonstrator for presets” and only using gear for what it was commercially intended (“WFMU” 2015). Rob Brown of Autechre has admitted that the duo has struggled with notions of “going commercial” and ‘selling-out’ when reflecting upon the sonic contrasts between [Incunabula](#) (1993), [Amber](#) (1994), and [Quaristice](#) (2008). For example, the song structure and melodic elements of [“Bike”](#) (1993) are drastically different from their later work such as [“Outh9X”](#) (2008). In my view, this aesthetic difference is closely related to ‘listening accessibility’, or the song structures and sonic elements most familiar to a large audience. The convenience of “instant gratification, a cliché every four bars” is affiliated with the mainstream and the stasis of musical innovation (Reynolds 2012, 159). As WATMM guest user ‘David R James’ states, IDM artists “are on a quest to try and follow directions that others are not” (‘pissflaps’ [2009](#)). In terms of subcultural capital, IDM subculture values the experience of listening to difficult albums and electronic music that requires multiple listens to fully appreciate.

DOES NOT COMPUTE: LISTENING ACCESSIBILITY & TEMPORAL CAPITAL

The notion of accessible listening was explored by scholar Chris Atton who suggests that the “difficulty” found in listening to certain kinds of music is based on a listener’s previous experience with music and familiar song structures. A piece of music may be perceived as difficult by the listener if it extends or complicates those familiar song structures “to the point of incomprehensibility” (Atton 2012, 348). Furthermore, Atton finds that as listeners we must have a “reference point” to be able to identify with a particular sound or song structure. When asked in an interview about the abstract nature of their music, Autechre’s Sean Booth replied:

And is our music abstract and weird? To us or our mates it's not! Maybe if you've only listened to pop music, then yeah, it's weirder, because you've not been exposed to it. But that works the other way, too. I don't listen to pop, but someone dumped a load of Max Martin tracks on me to try and explain what he was about, and it seemed really, really alien to me, like Nazi youth music or something. I think everyone has a different idea of what weird is (2016)

Members of r/Autechre have recently discussed the listening accessibility of Autechre's music where many agreed that much of the duo's recent music requires "continuous revisiting" and listeners must be willing to "put in the effort" to understand how abstract electronic music is meant to make them feel ('TheUnReturned' [2021](#)). Other members claim that since Autechre "respects the listener's intelligence" and "at its core it's still just pop music", it requires an "open mind" for listening. Atton's idea that popular music is normally "capable of renewal" yet "never strays so far beyond critical expectations as to be incomprehensible" is useful when considering how abstract, difficult music like Autechre's can still be considered 'popular' (2012, 348). WATMM user 'Satans Little Helper' explains that over time, certain sounds become "part of the zeitgeist" in popular music when they are used in popular culture texts. 'Satans Little Helper' uses the example of popular Hollywood films and their soundtracks, such as Bladerunner, the Matrix, Clockwork Orange, and the Transformers franchise ('headplastic' 2021). In choosing which music to release, IDM artists may be traversing lines of "high competence" and "popular competence," where music with a high competence is considered "highly autonomous" and requires certain skills and knowledge to understand properly, and popular competence music is "heteronomous," or shaped by standardized external factors, and does not require any special skills (Longhurst & Bogdanovic 2014, 163). These categories are not limited to any type of music, although the concept of competences may help to explain

listening accessibility and IDM's associated theme of intelligence. Scholar Mark Fell describes IDM as music that is "unfamiliar" and features "no other special status or character" (2015).

Atton notes that those who are associated with musical experimentation, such as IDM artists, consider popularity an "index of failure" (2012, 348). Thus, popular IDM artists must deploy certain strategies, consciously or not, to alienate themselves from popular culture in order to secure and maintain their status as underground and authentic. Aphex Twin has admitted that he would "rather annoy people" during a live show than make everyone dance because he wants to play music that "they don't expect to hear" ("MTV" 1993; 1995). This attitude may also explain, in part, his growing penchant for microtonality. IDM is situated in a dynamic process similar to that of experimental music more generally, where it "may be part of a mass culture, separate from it, antagonistic towards it or a necessary part of its development" (Atton 2012, 349). In terms of subcultural capital, this variability explains how IDM is capable of maintaining a fluid relationship with the imagined mainstream while remaining ideologically separate from it. To elaborate in reference to Threadgold (2015), IDM artists possess an understanding of what makes a recording popular based on their interpretations of accessibility and novelty in the consumer trends of electronic music. In this sense, their subcultural capital (e.g., musical taste; the ability to manipulate electronic music-making equipment and draw upon an eclectic array of musical influences) is *translated* into more recognized forms of cultural and economic capital (e.g., Warp's marketing tactics, promotional art, record sales). This supposes that outsiders or the plebs of IDM subculture will appreciate tracks that are most popular, such as Aphex Twin's "Avril 14th", whereas core members of IDM subculture take the time to listen through and appreciate tracks deemed to be less familiar and therefore less

accessible, such as “Ziggomatic 17” from the same album (*Drukqs* 2001). Notions of accessibility are also apparent in the production of IDM music because practitioners typically draw on multiple musical influences and must take time to learn and master their equipment. The time required for core members of IDM subculture to fully appreciate, or “grow into,” difficult music is closely related to the longevity of IDM subculture in general and how older, more experienced members maintain social power and hierarchy. This is what Paul O’Connor refers to as temporal capital (2018).

Temporal capital is linked to the process of translating types of capital and can be conceptualized as an attribute used to measure an individual’s experience within a subculture. Primarily, O’Connor uses the concept of temporal capital to highlight “how time is at once a path to subcultural authenticity, but also a resource to be managed and scheduled for continued engagement and participation” (2018, 928). Temporal capital is significant in regard to the popular artists associated with IDM, as they are older, yet their younger selves are still available online – age is “recast as a positive value” (931). If legacy is considered as a form of temporal capital, then the legacy and image of older, successful IDM practitioners is empowering, motivating, and validates the practice and social engagement for younger members of the subculture. Their appearance, or often lack thereof, holds value in the “saturated social media landscape” on popular platforms such as Instagram or YouTube (931). Being “old school” is a sign of respect and the experience that comes with age is an indication of increasing proficiency and the quest for mastery (936). In his study on goth culture, Paul Hodkinson notes how subcultures are mostly considered youth-oriented and a temporary stage in one’s life as they enter into adulthood (2011, 262). While subcultures are commonly youth-

dominated cultural fields, many dedicated members continue their involvement despite allocating time to develop “adult responsibilities, interests, bodies and identities”¹⁶ (263). In his study Hodkinson found that rather than clinging to youth, participating in subcultures as an adult is part of the process of adulthood. Thus, older members play a significant role in shaping the “collective values, norms and infrastructure” of their subculture often embodying wisdom and leadership. There is a balance between “personal authenticity” and understandings of “age-appropriateness” (264-265). More responsibility means less time active in a subculture and less opportunities to accrue subcultural capital (268-274). I argue that online subcultures require less time to actively participate in and therefore allow adult members, such as those in IDM subculture, to participate more often, ultimately shaping what constitutes the authentic practices and values of IDM.

In terms of demographics, I found that the most diverse statistic in online IDM subculture was age. In addition to my survey results, which found that 22/42 participants were over the age of 25, several members also shared their observations. Reddit user ‘TheJunkyard’ suggests that IDM does not have the “old man music image that prog rock is labelled with,” but they also believe IDM does not “appeal to youth in the same way that say hip hop or EDM does” (2020). WATMM user ‘ambermonke’ noted how IDM subculture mainly consists of “Gen X and Millenials,” and user ‘Valleyfold’ attributes the appeal for younger listeners to the musical legacy of IDM, such as Autechre’s influence on [SOPHIE](#) (‘headplastic’ 2021). Furthermore,

¹⁶ Hodkinson defines adult responsibilities as serious long-term commitments, such as mortgages, marriage, children, and career progression; he contrasts these commitments with the impulsiveness associated with youth lifestyles and their values, such as maintaining a distinct appearance and going out frequently (2011, 264).

WATMM user 'zero' expressed that IDM is comprised of "mostly white males ranging in age from 20 – 50 who overwhelmingly adhere to liberal/left-wing ideologies" ('headplastic' 2021). How temporal capital is deployed to explain the value and social power associated with experienced members can be simply illustrated in reference to WATMM's embedded social value system. For example, each profile for WATMM members showcases the day they joined the community as well as various badges, ranks, and reputation points that quantitatively tracks one's value in the community. High-level rankings such as "Mentor," "Veteran," and "Grand Master" communicate to others that certain members have accrued more subcultural capital than "Newbies" or "Rookies" in this particular community, and that their practices and values are considered more 'authentic' (see: profile for WATMM [user 'Alcofribas'](#)). Furthermore, members that have been actively participating in online IDM communities since the late 1990s and early 2000s have spent more time shaping and reshaping the 'authentic' values and practices of IDM subculture and therefore can use their subcultural capital to influence the interpretations of new members.

The ways in which the interpretive communities surrounding IDM shape a broad understanding of IDM's disorganized subculture and its core values also determine what online spaces are considered to be underground and who gets to participate therein. In the next and final chapter, I explore how IDM fans and practitioners shield their subcultural capital by taking refuge in perceived underground online spaces on platforms such as WATMM and SoundCloud and discuss the enduring homogeneity of IDM subculture despite the disrupted, hidden identities afforded by anonymity in online communities.

CHAPTER THREE

TECHNOPUNK CYBERGEEKS

“Exchanging subcultural capital for regular capital damaged a band’s credibility in the punk scene, where it was perceived as ‘selling out’. Yet, this exchange was also essential, since cooperation with the music industry – capitalist or communist – was inevitable for anyone who wished to move beyond playing in a garage or a living room”

- Patton (2018, 57)

“The IDM underground has certainly eroded over time, in the sense that, like other styles of music that burst on the scene with freshness and creativity and leave something new in their wake before disappearing/being subsumed, the IDM heavyweights are less unknown/niche now. not a bad thing per se. IDM itself is an increasingly meaningless term, it's had its golden age. the artists will keep doing their thing but the old scene is gone.”

- ‘usagi’ (WATMM 2021)

Scholars Mengyu Luo and Wei Ming suggest that once a subculture is “empowered and becomes mainstream, [the subculture] establishes new styles and sounds which are packaged into fashionable products”. This “empowering process” erodes and modifies the subversiveness of the subculture (2020, 10). IDM fans, such as WATMM’s ‘Kid Lukie’ describes this process as “mass appeal for a highly desired and prized musical element” that is no longer “hidden” in an underground (‘headplastic’ 2021). Fans and practitioners have their own strategies for navigating the ideological tensions between the mainstream and underground, and those who position themselves in a subculture develop strategies to shield their subcultural capital and

maintain a sense of imagined authenticity. Commonly, IDM fans and practitioners alienate themselves from trends in popular music and reemerge when it is commercially convenient to do so. In this third and final chapter, I discuss how members of IDM subculture differentiate themselves from inauthentic fans by participating in online spaces they consider to be underground, rejecting the notion of branding and image, and disrupting a cohesive sense of identity by using multiple aliases and staying anonymous online. To conclude the chapter, I discuss anonymity in relation to the enduring homogeneity of IDM subculture and I provide several ideas as to why IDM remains dominated by white men.

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: IDM 'UNDERGROUND' & SHEILDING SUBCULTURAL CAPITAL

The formation of IDM communities and their imagined notions of authenticity are largely impacted by where and *how* listeners consume their music. The results of my survey revealed that a majority of respondents find new IDM music using streaming platforms such as Spotify, SoundCloud, and YouTube, and social media platforms including reddit, WATMM, and 4chan. Today, subcultures and the corresponding tastes of participants are being increasingly shaped by the recommender algorithms prevalent on music streaming platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music, and SoundCloud (Karakayali et al 2018, 4). The diverse musical influences and stylistic elements associated with IDM have the potential to be explored by such algorithms, and when combined with music-sharing in conventional forum discussions the result is a “virtually endless care and cultivation of music taste” in the digital age (13). This never-ending reflexive process through which users interact with artificial intelligence reveals how individuals are “constructed” by their consumer data (Prey 2018, 1088). In having access to

our “cultural consumption history” we are able to reflect on previous listening practices and adapt our identities to match the fluidity of contemporary subcultures (Karakayali et al 2018, 8). However, if all recommender systems “gather data about particular characteristics (e.g., interests, tastes, or curiosities) of an individual user and offer information and services particular to the activity data collected,” then the autonomous aspects so crucial to an IDM philosophy are placed into question (5). On the other hand, an algorithmic system like Spotify’s The Echo Nest is able to create a dynamic, personalized “Taste Profile” that might be considered the perfect tool for finding new music and differentiating one’s listening habits from others (Prey 2018, 1092). It is also possible that recommender algorithms can create a “filter bubble” which “progressively isolates individuals into ever narrower cultural niches,” and thus limits their access to diverse musical selections, thus disrupting the ability to explore eclectic tastes, a key aspect of IDM subculture (Karakayali et al 2018, 14). According to Karakayali et al, such access is not necessarily limited in the sense of less but *overwhelming* to a point of “taste-expanding paralysis.” Just as a DJ searches for the best records and IDM practitioners seek to push boundaries in electronic music, these recommender algorithms commonly seek *novelty* for users and act as “lasting companions” that help to guide cultural consumption patterns (Karakayali et al 2018, 17). By doing so, these algorithms work *with* individuals to shape their social world and self-identity, or “algorithmic identity,” and therefore connect users to one another based on shared interests and consumption habits (6; Prey 2018, 1088). While Karakayali et al contend that recommender systems are not designed “to facilitate self-other encounters in virtual space,” I think they do so peripherally, especially on platforms with built-in discussion forums such as YouTube (2018, 5). As a result, prevalent algorithmic recommender

systems play a key role in forming online music subcultures such as IDM by grouping listeners together based on their listening habits. On social music streaming platforms that are integrated with recommender systems, listeners have the opportunity to engage with IDM by interacting with one another, sharing knowledge, and advancing the flow of subcultural capital. On less social platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music, however, many of these communities are ‘unseen’ because users are typically unaware of who is providing data for their personalized recommender systems.

The role that algorithmic recommender systems play in forming fragmented communities in cyberspace corresponds with some WATMM users’ perspectives on the IDM community. During a discussion I prompted in the WATMM forum about IDM as a cohesive or fragmented community, user ‘MaartenVC’ responded:

I'm not sure there even is a clear-cut IDM community. Isn't it just people who happen to be attracted to the same kind of music? I feel like the IDM community is rather small pockets of friends, or acquaintances finding out about a common love for the same kind of music, or even just individuals, rather splintered over the real world. More-so, I think they find connection on specific places on the internet (like WATMM I guess). (‘headplastic’ 2021)

User ‘zero’ agreed that IDM is cohesive in the sense that every participant was once drawn to the music associated with IDM and desired to be included in relevant online forums, such as WATMM. However, ‘zero’ also states that this sense of cohesion is fragmented when considering the “personal beliefs and attitudes of said people” (‘headplastic’ 2021). Furthermore, r/idm user ‘juanfetuccini’ suggests that IDM has a less identifiable culture because the IDM fanbase has diverse tastes, although other members claim that such diverse taste is a central characteristic of IDM (‘flproducer909’ 2020). What ‘juanfetuccini’ may be

referring to, however, is how IDM attracts many listeners and practitioners from other music scenes such as drum-and-bass, jungle, ambient, or breakbeat as suggested by WATMM's 'picklish' who claims that IDM "attracts some people of each of those scenes" (i.e., an imagined point of connection), and thus disrupts a conventional sense of togetherness or cohesion ('headplastic' 2021). Through my ethnography, I found that IDM fans' understanding of what constitutes the imagined underground has changed since they first began participating in the subculture. WATMM user 'J3FFR00' described how he thinks that underground is "probably whatever obscure musical movements are starting to gain traction on SoundCloud and Bandcamp," further explaining that since our access to music has changed so drastically, "you could practically interpret anything with only a handful of listeners as underground" ('headplastic' 2021). Meanwhile, user 'Stickfigger' defines underground as spaces where people come together to share what they are listening to without such interactions ever reaching someone "who wasn't actively searching for it" (2021). Similarly, 'Picklish' expressed that:

I feel like we're in an era where cleverly constructed music is happy to be in its equivalent of museums, where electronica, jazz, metal or classical don't need to interact with the plebs anymore because they have got enough of a platform and reach for a few of them to make enough money to keep making records (2021)

The WATMM members I spoke with emphasized that what separates the underground from the mainstream in the digital era is an active willingness to search for music that is not readily available on popular streaming platforms or social media sites. For example, the splash page of Spotify would not be considered underground. Furthermore, accessing underground spaces requires an individual to dedicate their time to exploring various music sharing platforms, learning how those platforms function, and constructing a listening profile that reflects their

musical tastes. WATMM user 'Kid Lukie' describes this process as a "hobby," and states that "for someone who is not willing to invest time into discovering strange, newly-woven sonic tapestries, popular music is there for them" (2021). In other words, IDM fans and practitioners "live inside" of their subculture (Rodger 2020).

As suggested by Hesmondhalgh et al (2019), Reinhard (2020), and several IDM fans, certain online streaming platforms and social media/discussion forums are considered more authentic and underground than others because they lack ties to major record labels, large corporations, and an active user base. For example, in response to one of my questions in the WATMM discussion forums, user 'zero' replied, "isn't WATMM considered more or less underground? It's certainly no reddit or other mainstream site where people comment back and forth with each other a lot of times about music" ('headplastic' 2021). David Hesmondhalgh et al have observed that music platforms such as SoundCloud and Bandcamp are more likely to appeal to indie listeners and practitioners who value DIY approaches to sharing electronic music rather than sites like Spotify or Apple Music which are riddled with advertisements and present music as a "malleable cultural commodity" (2019, 8). For example, r/idm member 'The_Space_Cadet-' described Spotify as "competitive/gatekeep-y" when explaining why he would rather use Bandcamp to find new IDM music (Reddit message to author, January 22, 2021). On WATMM, 'Zephyr Nova' shared that they think IDM practitioners tend to be more thoughtful in what music they choose to release and "find a lot of the really commercial stuff out there to be cheesy/disposable" and therefore naturally "don't want to be associated with it" ('headplastic' 2021). Furthermore, some music is deliberately withheld from popular streaming services such as Aphex Twin's newest rereleases that sprawl across several eras in his

career including tracks like "[Mangle 11](#)" from *Drukqs* (2001) and "[sekonda e,+2](#)" from *...I Care Because You Do* (1995), tracks that are only available digitally on his Warp website. Another example is Squarepusher's album [Buzz Caner](#) (1998) released under the alias Chaos A.D. on Rephlex, which is only commercially available as a physical release. Similarly, popular social media websites such as Instagram and Twitter blend user content with advertisements, promoting commercialization and the branding of users' identities, values that are closely associated with the imagined 'mainstream'.

Reinhard (2020) suggests that the celebrity of popular musicians, such as Autechre or Aphex Twin, offers fans a narrative in helping them form their own identity in online space, an environment where anonymity and curation allows users the freedom to create any persona they like. This means that IDM fans and practitioners will often congregate in the same online spaces used by the artists they identify with and attribute a sense of authenticity to those spaces. Today, internet audiences are characterized as "users," or what Alex Bruns refers to as "producers" (2008). Through their interaction with online media, 'producers' "provide media industries with finely detailed consumer data which allow for more precise targeting and personalization of media content" (Prey 2018, 1087). In terms of the productive, techno-geek practices in IDM subculture, audiences outside of IDM fandom benefit and learn from these processes of discovery and experimentation in the form of instructional content that also has the potential to attract new listeners and fans. Fans have been used historically for marketing purposes. They have become increasingly more public as fandom has spread across multiple digital communities as a result of popular music stars adopting social media (Reinhard 2020). Artists associated with IDM rarely engage with the community in a manner that is typical of

music celebrities' use of social media platforms. For example, Aphex Twin/Richard D. James uses his Soundcloud account 'user18081971' to communicate with fans and post his recent music outside of label responsibilities and record contracts. Similarly, Autechre has directly engaged with their fans on WATMM, most notably during an Ask Me Anything event where fans were invited to ask Autechre any questions during a fixed time period. Autechre members Sean Booth and Rob Brown answered nearly every question asked and engaged in a discussion thread with the community. I have observed that these forms of fan engagement are considered to be more authentic than typical forms of fan engagement on social media because the artists are using non-traditional platforms to engage with their fans, and it is a direct, personal communication (Reinhard 2020). Popular IDM practitioners such as Aphex Twin, Autechre, and Squarepusher still have popular social media accounts on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. However, the accounts are used solely for commercial purposes such as advertising upcoming tours and performances, new records, and rare musical artifacts from their earlier years.¹⁷ As a result, popular IDM practitioners shield their subcultural capital by separating their personal identity and direct interactions with fans from traditional marketing techniques and commercialism in peripheral online spaces. Aphex Twin illustrates the ideological differences between underground and mainstream online platforms in the comment section of his upload of "[Love 7](#)" as 'user18081971' on SoundCloud, explaining that the SoundCloud upload "diffuses the hype" around him and "fucks off most of the 4 second

¹⁷ For example, Aphex Twin recently used his [Twitter page](#) to sell a [Non-Fungible Token](#) (NFT) for \$213,070.02, and Squarepusher created a [new Instagram page](#) to promote the re-release of *Feed Me Weird Things* (1996) including a rare white label vinyl draw-to-win event from the original Rephlex release.

attention span internet click posse” (2016). In doing so, Aphex Twin is alienating himself from those who supposedly follow the latest popular trends.

In terms of branding and popular image, a majority of fans feel that an IDM artist’s success is nothing more than a boon. In discussion with fans on r/idm about what IDM is, user ‘TURBOGARBAGE’ shared that as an IDM artist, you do the “music *you* want to do, experiment, and don’t care if the masses like it or not. [IDM artists] don’t care about exposure or popularity,” and making money is not their primary goal when making music (‘Netw3’ [2018](#)).

During our semi-structured interview on Reddit, user ‘inlet-manifold’ explained:

IDM is not about the 'image' of the artist and how trendy it is. Our artists don't dress fashionably or give many interviews. They either are normal people or seem like outsiders. But in general, it is a rather anonymous scene. And it's the same thing for the music itself. It's abstract. It doesn't have a social metatext [...] there's nothing more I hate than branding. I feel like I just don't want to do this stuff with my music. I would really like it if there were people listening to and liking my music but I just can't stand this kinda stuff really (Reddit message to author, January 22, 2021)

There are various historical examples of IDM artists alienating themselves from perceived trends in the ‘mainstream’ and it is my belief that persistent alienation helps IDM fans and practitioners remain untethered from conventions that may render the subculture as static or trendy. For example, Aphex Twin failed to show up to the Grammy award ceremony for *Syro* (2014) and several fans from both WATMM and r/Music explained how they believe such award shows are “clever marketing tools” (‘[ecc7473](#)’ [2015](#)) and “a joke” in the music industry (‘[Delzoid](#)’ [2015](#)). Additionally, Squarepusher has admitted that his use of cryptic track titles, a stereotypical characteristic of IDM (e.g. “[Brunchusevenmx](#)”; “[Exjag Nives](#)”; “[syro u473t8+e \[141.98\]\[piezoluminescence mix\]](#)”; “[ΦΩδ\|JδQΦ](#)”), is a practice that resonates with his “approach to things, which is to keep things open – allow and not try to direct interpretation”

(2016). The abstraction associated with IDM subculture and its cryptic aesthetic grants fans and practitioners the opportunity to distance themselves from popular music conventions.

Elements of IDM subculture that are considered untranslatable are more likely to be perceived as authentic by core members who identify with popular IDM artists and thus drive their interest in IDM. Kristine Fritz et al suggest that if a consumer's behaviour is "congruent with a specific cultural script they will be regarded as authentic by that society," and their self-identified position in IDM subculture will be validated (2016, 329). As a result, dedicated fans are more likely to "pay a price premium" and look past any negative experiences associated with popular artists such as scandals or conspiracy theories (339).

As outlined in Chapter 2, there is evidence to suggest that both fans and popular practitioners associated with IDM believe their music to be progressive and distinct from the conservative beliefs of conformity, tradition, and security, and from mainstream values such as obedience, devoutness, and social order. If creative individuality and freedom of expression are the focal points of IDM subculture, then IDM might belong to what Halnon calls a *high underground*, or the "artists and bands that teeter at the border of the mainstream, have quite a large following, but (at least) not *everybody* knows about" (2005, 441; original emphasis). For Halnon, alienation can be commodified and advertised as a pseudo-subversive punk attitude that attracts listeners and practitioners who are ideologically opposed to the culture industries and the mainstream values mentioned above, despite operating within —and benefitting from — standardized, large-scale infrastructures such as Spotify and SoundCloud. While IDM fans and practitioners proclaim their music-making to be emergent and outside the authorities of commercialization, this very proclamation may invite those who are "slightly less passionate in

seeking purist alternatives” (441) to pursue new sonic and musical experiences. For example, Reddit user ‘Tortuosit’ positions Autechre as “very mainstream in the non-mainstream” (‘TheUnReturned’ [2021](#)). Such a comment reinforces my belief that popular IDM artists are ideologically situated in the realm of popular music yet are generally viewed as less *accessible* to many listeners of electronica, securing their status as alternative. The ideological relationship between the underground and mainstream can be described as *agonistic*: emphasis is not placed on an end result (i.e., “victory or defeat”), but on the struggle that is marked by the “mutual admiration” between opposing sides of a conflict where neither “opponent” exists without the other (Riegert et al 2015, 776). This metaphor is useful in describing why the mainstream and underground need one another to exist and function ideologically. In other words, the imagined conflict is a continuous, never-ending foundation that allows IDM subculturalists to mark authentic boundaries and to continue producing and consuming cutting-edge electronic music-making.

There are perceived tensions between art and commerce in these discussions of authenticity, music, and culture. While members of a subculture may engage in commodification and commercialization, they might still “frequently [espouse] anti-commercial ideologies and [make] distinctions between authentic and inauthentic forms of commerce” (Rodger 2020, 160). Joanna Demers suggests that “alienation from mainstream culture is a sign of aesthetic integrity” when referring to the “subcultural cliquishness in academic and institutional circles.” I would extend her insight to include online music subcultures such as IDM because fans and practitioners of IDM place value on the extensive time it takes to find and create electronic music (2010, 147).

Maintaining a sense of alienation from mainstream platforms and the commercialized cultural practices associated with popular music is often achieved by disrupting a sense of identity. For popular IDM practitioners and dedicated fans who actively live inside IDM subculture, their identities are often shrouded in anonymity and molded to reflect their own self-perceived values and position in the subculture and local communities. In theory, the anonymous nature of the internet should cultivate diverse sociocultural spaces that include persons from diverse race, gender, and education backgrounds. Instead, I have observed that online IDM subculture has remained relatively homogenous due to received stereotypes and previously established affective alliances.

MONIKERS AND MASKS: REPRESENTATION, ANONYMITY, & IDENTITY IN IDM

Post-subculturalists claim that an emphasis on individualism and self-identity has supplanted the importance of community and collectivity in subcultures (Bennett 2011, 495). The resulting “temporal nature of collective identities” means that individuals are able to easily traverse from one group to another based on their consumer choices and desired self-identity (Bennett 1999, 606-607). Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, and WATMM can be considered “technologies of the self,” that “enable users to experiment with various forms of ‘self-writing’ or ‘self-publishing’, giving way to practices of self-discovery, self-mastery and self-care” (Karakayali et al 2018, 7). Therefore, an individual’s identity and sense of belonging is divided across an array of communities both online and offline, each offering fluid memberships that allow participants to construct and configure their identities freely. When examining IDM as a subculture, this theory seems to resemble the self-reflexive attitude of many IDM fans who do not think IDM has a “cohesive community” (‘picklish’ 2021). Bennett has

acknowledged that social identities are becoming more “reflexive, fluid, and fragmented” because of an “increasing flow of cultural commodities, images and texts” that enable us, as consumers with a desire to be true to ourselves, to create and modify our own notions of self-identity (2011, 493). Barry Wellman has described this social phenomenon as networked individualism, a perspective shared by Autechre who noticed that as social media platforms became more ubiquitous, people seemed to be “less interested in culture and more interested in each other and themselves” (Barrett 2015, 183; [2010](#)). Similarly, Paul Nicholson, Aphex Twin’s friend and the artist responsible for creating his logo, notes how there have been massive changes in youth and music culture: “When I was in my teens and twenties you kind of went out of your way not to be liked. That was the whole point of being young [...] Now people go out of their way to be ‘liked’ on social media” (‘Number3_’ [2020](#)). Furthermore, studies have found that young people in particular are struggling to develop and maintain “meaningful interpersonal connections,” despite the tools provided by social media (Williams 2019, 93). Meanwhile, other studies find that older subcultural participants have to balance the responsibilities of adult life while still making time to meaningfully participate in their respective subcultures and accrue subcultural capital (Hodkinson 2011, 268-274). This argument is reflected in Michel Maffesoli’s concept of ‘neo-tribes’, especially online (Bennett 1999).

The concept of neo-tribalism has been used by post-subcultural theorists to describe how and why social groups, or “collective affiliations” of people, are formed by individuals who seek “desirable visual images” as they “construct sociocultural identities for themselves” (Bennett 2011, 495). The concept has also been used to describe “electronic tribes,” or “fluid

social formations located in cyberspace” (Norman 2012, 396). According to Maffesoli, neo-tribes are collectives of individuals who share a “state of mind” and express themselves through “lifestyles that favour appearance or form” (Bennett 1999, 605). A lifestyle, or a “creative project which relies on displays of consumer competence,” differs from a “way of life” where individuals belong to a “more or less stable community” with shared norms and rituals (Bennett 2011, 495). Goulding and Shankar expand on neo-tribes by defining them as playful, transient, multiple, and without “long term moral responsibilities” while still requiring participants to learn the respective “rules of engagement” to be recognized as core members (2011, 1436-1437). In relation to IDM, such rules of engagement include the perceived authentic values, beliefs, and practices of the subculture: an emphasis on novelty, musical eclecticism, creative individuality, technological innovation/mastery, and an awareness of consumer trends and popular culture. The shared state of mind among those affiliated with IDM reveals how a subculture is formed despite the general lack of cohesion in the absence of a shared lifestyle or way of life. Reddit user ‘inlet-manifold’ explains how they believe there is “no lifestyle element” to IDM in contrast to other subcultures such as goth or punk. From their perspective, IDM is oriented around “sonic objects” and is “expressed as such” in a self-conclusive manner, lacking the “metatextual elements” such as a general “social functioning” that pertains to other music subcultures (Reddit message to author, January 14, 2021). This perspective references back to Awakeel’s theorization of IDM as “meaningless” or abstract, and similar ideas expressed by IDM listeners and practitioners who believe IDM represents the unending pursuit of novelty in electronic music.

Online IDM communities primarily consist of anonymous participants, where anonymity is typically motivated by one's desire to perform an online persona while protecting their private, offline life (Damian 2007, 53). The self-construction of online personas is a defining element of post-subcultural studies in the digital age. As members of online music fandoms, participants are "mediated by a variety of digital personas and avatars through which [they] project and internalize [their] personalities, desires, and capital" (Korkeila & Hamari 2020, 14). Communicating through display pictures and their behaviour within online communities, avatars shroud the real identity of their creators within anonymous digital space. The virtual identity of a user is embodied by their avatar and acts as an extension of their real personality and values. As such, avatars themselves, or the digital personas we create, are able to accrue, diminish, and translate forms of capital in a manner that might not translate to the real world. This idea is useful when discussing how fans and practitioners of IDM navigate between different online social spaces and music platforms. For example, user 'Ivan Ooze' maintains the same persona on both WATMM and SoundCloud, and in doing so they consolidate their subcultural capital. Describing an avatar's capital is helpful in explaining how certain monikers of popular IDM artists accrue subcultural capital compared to others. For example, Richard D. James' SoundCloud account, '[user18081971](#)', is used more as a personal account where he engages with fans and uploads music freely, in contrast to the official Aphex Twin Facebook page which announces shows, releases, and merchandise without interacting with fans. While the use of various monikers is typically a business strategy to avoid record label disputes and contract violations (see: [James 1993](#)), it is also an effective strategy for shielding subcultural capital and disrupting the kind of brand continuity that is associated with the 'mainstream'.

Furthermore, by using various aliases, successful IDM artists emphasize the importance of the music itself and not its affiliation with the fame and celebrity image of recognized names such as Aphex Twin and Autechre.

For example, Autechre members Rob Brown and Sean Booth play various roles within the secretive electronic music collective [GESCOM](#). The anonymous nature of the collective separates their work in that context from their success as Autechre and dismantles any preconceived notions of what GESCOM records will sound like. In other words, those who listen to GESCOM and are oblivious to Autechre's role in the project will judge the music from a neutral perspective instead of as fans of Autechre. Another prominent example is Aphex Twin's moniker The Tuss. At the time of release in 2007, The Tuss was apparently a duo made up of husband-and-wife Brian and Karen Tregaskin (Discogs 2021). For seven years after the release of *Rushup Edge*, fans of Aphex Twin investigated the potential trickery behind this new alias, drawing conclusions based on The Tuss' relation to Rephlex records and a Tuss track being played live at an Aphex Twin show in 2005 (Pattison 2007). Even Wikipedia editors had a lengthy discussion on how to portray The Tuss in connection to Aphex Twin's original wiki page (2014). During the press tour for *Syro*, it was confirmed that The Tuss was another one of his many monikers (Hogan 2014). Other users in the comment sections express their subcultural capital either by confirming their knowledge that The Tuss is in fact an alias of Aphex Twin, or by continuing the original gag by referring to The Tuss as Brian and Karen long after the true alias was confirmed ('wilson smith' 2015). By publicly displaying their subcultural capital, users are validating their own knowledge of Aphex Twin and IDM subculture, and perhaps offering new information to the community. The anonymous aspects of IDM subculture disrupt a sense

of identity online and shroud fans and practitioners in their own custom-made visage that grants them the freedom to be and act without revealing the sociocultural attributes that they possess in the real world. However, it is evident from the responses to my survey and the interviews I conducted that IDM subculture consists of mostly college-educated, straight, white males ('headplastic' 2021). The relatively homogenous demographics of IDM subculture were established early on as a result of the increased access that privileged white men had to computer technologies and the networking power of the internet. Theoretically, the "facelessness" and anonymity associated with IDM, especially in online communities, should permit anyone to participate and identify with IDM. But the subculture appears to have remained relatively masculinist in nature.

My survey found that 30/42 respondents identified as male, while 5/42 identified as non-binary and 3/42 identified as female.¹⁸ In conversation about the homogeneity of IDM subculture, Hyperreal member and mailing list participant Jon Drukman notes how "if you're a nerdy white guy, most of your friends are likely to be nerdy white guys" (Davies 2018). While several IDM fans avoided the topic of representation and diversity, others offered some insightful ideas regarding IDM subculture. In our semi-structured interview, r/idm member '-The_Space_Cadet-' felt a "bit puzzled" by the lack of female producers in IDM, despite seeing "a lot of women at shows" enjoying the music (Reddit message to author, January 22, 2021). Despite the pioneering roles that many women have played throughout the history of

¹⁸ The remaining four respondents preferred not to answer the question.

electronic music,¹⁹ women have been under-represented in IDM and popular electronic music more generally as creative producers (Miller 2017). Acclaimed electronic music practitioners such as Holly Herndon find that “many people simply doubt that a woman can do a lot on her own” (2014). Gender inequality has also been cited as a persistent issue in DJ culture (Gadir 2017; Rietveld 2013, 8-9). Similarly, Mira Calix has noted that only 3-4% of composers featured in the BBC Proms archives are women and that female composers have effectively “vanished from history” (2012). When asked by WATMM user ‘ifeelspace’ if “women are under-represented in the world of IDM,” Sean Booth of Autechre responded:

early on they weren't at all, in the uk you'd see tons of women at club nights we'd play at all the way thru the 90s, all across Europe actually. But it changed a bit when the art scene started getting in on it, that's when it became less sexy. That and Americans thinking idm is a thing, labels there selling it as brain music for white males (“AAA” 2013)

In her dissertation titled “Beyond Gender?: Women in the Cultural Economy of Electronic Music,” Stephanie Kale argues that the gendered stereotypes associated with women in subcultures and their relationship to electronic music technology create structural limitations that prevent them from participating equally with men in IDM (2006, ii). The dominance of white men in IDM is largely attributed to representation as the “IDM fan culture simply reflected the artists: again, very male and very white,” as observed by Simon Reynolds (Davies 2018). Alan Parry, cofounder of the IDM mailing list, stated that “the subject of race or gender

¹⁹ A short (and incomplete) list of pioneering women in electronic music includes Clara Rockmore, Daphne Oram, Suzanne Ciani, Delia Derbyshire, Pauline Oliveros, Laurie Spiegel, and Wendy Carlos. For more information on women in electronic music, see the documentary film *Sisters with Transistors* (2020).

never really came up. So much of IDM was faceless” (2018). As noted by Mimi Haddon and IDM fans such as ‘inlet-manifold’ and ‘-The_Space_Cadet-’, the exclusion of women in IDM is not considered deliberate (2019; Reddit message to the author January 2021). Reflecting on the male dominance at Warp and the surrounding IDM subculture in the 1990s, Mira Calix expressed that IDM was not a “macho culture,” but that geekiness is considered to be “more of a masculine trait” (Davies 2018). However, she also adds that electronic music is still male dominated in general and in an earlier interview she explained that women working in electronic music “make up a niche within a niche” (2012). In Haddon’s interview with Warp’s Steve Beckett, Beckett admitted that technology seemed to be the most significant barrier separating women from men, a factor only reinforced by gendered stereotypes of what is considered masculine or feminine (2019, 578).

Reddit user ‘boolaids’ expressed that while they acknowledge IDM does have a “bar for entry,” the overarching “ambiguity of IDM allows anyone to identify [...] as a genre that draws from everywhere, boosting its accessibility” (Reddit message to author, January 28, 2021). WATMM user ‘Stickfigger’ suggests that the lack of diversity in IDM is not “a function of the community itself as opposed to the specific personality types that the music attracts” (‘headplastic’ 2021). ‘Stickfigger’ also suggests that defining the boundaries of diversity and representation in IDM is contingent on which artists are considered to be IDM or not. Female artists such as Holly Herndon, Mira Calix, upsammy, Arca, Jlin, Bjork, Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith, Kelly Lee Owens, SOPHIE, and Arushi Jain are examples of electronic music practitioners who are associated with IDM, yet are not typically included in what Kale refers to as an “exclusive cultural fragment of post-rave” (2006, ii). Popular IDM artists such as Autechre, Aphex Twin,

Squarepusher, Boards of Canada, Mike Paradinas, and Luke Vibert — all men — remain as the figureheads of IDM subculture. Although, as some IDM fans suggest, the abstract nature of IDM and the increasing success of female composers associated with the term may point towards a more inclusive and diversified future for IDM, despite its masculinist roots. WATMM user 'usagi' explains that while IDM subculture is situated in the open space of the internet age, the community is not “diverse in the sense that it attracts and retains a certain demographic predominately and tends to drive away others” who do not align with the values related to “art, music, production, aesthetics, etc.” ('headplastic' 2021). I think it is possible that IDM's relative homogeneity also contributes to its perceived status as underground in the sense that the subculture largely appeals to American, white, male techno-geeks.

This chapter draws upon recent post-subcultural theory to further describe the formation of online IDM subculture and the ways in which IDM fans and practitioners create and maintain their identities as core members. The fluid and anonymous nature of online IDM subculture demonstrates its disorganized structure in cyberspace. Popular IDM artists such as Aphex Twin and Autechre strategically position themselves outside of the imagined mainstream by remaining elusive and releasing their music through various monikers, effectively alienating themselves from popular music trends even as they use (and depend crucially on) the mass media. Despite the anonymous nature of online communities and the interpretive nature of IDM, online IDM subculture continues to be dominated by techno geeks, the majority of whom are white men.

CONCLUSION

Studying IDM from the perspective of popular music studies provides valuable insight as to how fans and practitioners of electronic music differentiate themselves from the imagined mainstream and find new ways to construct meaningful, underground identities in the digital age. Sarah Thornton's original concept of subcultural capital and the recent developments of the theory are useful in demonstrating how core members of IDM subculture remain hidden and alienated from recent popular music trends. Although the disorganized IDM subculture examined in this thesis is fragmented into various online communities, its members share a set of core values and musical practices that emerged in the 1990s. Although the IDM subculture I refer to in this study does not embrace the intelligent dance music label, it is nonetheless tied to its complex, controversial history of fandom and musicianship. Although the findings of my research offer some initial steps towards a more thorough understanding of IDM as a subculture, I believe there is still much work to be done on this subject.

IDM provides an ideal case study for examining what constitutes the musical underground and mainstream, how eclectic musical taste disrupts established genre conventions, how older and more experienced members of subcultures shape and reshape the values and practices of their subculture, what it means to listen to difficult music in an age of seemingly limitless access to music, how online music communities are constructed, and why sociocultural variables permit some fans to engage with online communities and not others. Furthermore, my thesis demonstrates the value of including the opinions and critical thoughts of individuals who live inside of a musical subculture that does its best to stay hidden across cyberspace. It is evident that the fans and practitioners I interacted with during this research

take the time to carefully think about the music they love and their position in the communities of which they are a part. The interpretive, fragmented nature of IDM will continue to attract new members from a variety of different genres and scenes ideologically situated in an underground. IDM communities will continue to explore the affordances of electronic music-making technologies and sound design through live-coding events and the mainstream adoption of microtonal music.

I wish to further develop this project to include participants from different IDM-related communities and continue to learn how the interpretive community surrounding the music shapes the understanding of what IDM represents. Expanding my scope includes sourcing information from different music platforms, social media sites, artist interviews, and conducting more nuanced surveys. Using the knowledge and techniques I have learned through this research project, I want to examine IDM in relation to broader trends in popular electronic music, connecting it to other electronic music subcultures that reject the notion of genre and instead place value on how electronic music is able to reconfigure our notions of music and sound.

Going forward, I will also continue to develop and refine the theory of subcultural capital in relation to online music subcultures such as the one associated with IDM. Several members of the IDM communities with whom I interacted suggested that there may be correlations between those with Autism Spectrum Disorder and IDM. This is an insight that warrants further investigation. I also look forward to further exploring how sociocultural variables such as gender, race, education, class, and nationality impact electronic music fandom and the construction of related subcultures.

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APPENDIX A

Extensive List of Artists Associated with IDM:

	Bola	Demdike Stare
Access to Arasaka	Bonobo	Deru
Actress	Boom Bip	Diagram of Suburban Chaos
Acustic	Boxcutter	DMX Crew
Air Liquide	Brothomstates	Dntel
Alarm Will Sound	Burial	Dopplereffekt
Alva Noto	Bvdub	Drexciya
Amon Tobin	C418	edit
Andy Stott	Cabaret Voltaire	Eight Frozen Modules
Ansaugkrümmer	Capitol K	Empty Set
Aphex Twin	Carbon Based Lifeforms	EOD
Apparat	Caribou	Esem
Arca	Casino Versus Japan	Fake Contest
Arovane	Ceephax Acid Crew	FaltyDL
Atypic	Cex	Fennesz
Autechre	Clark	Floating Points
B12	Clatterbox	Flying Lotus
Barker	Clocolan	Forest Swords
Beaumont Hannant	Coil	Four Tet
Ben Frost	Cylob	Freescha
Biosphere	D'Arcangelo	Funkstörung
Bjork	Daedelus	Future Sound of London
Blanck Mass	Daniel Myer	GAS
Boards of Canada	Deadbeat	Gescom
Bochum Welt	Deathgrips	Global Communication
Bogdan Racynski	Deepchord	

Goldie	Kid606	Moderat
Gooooose	Kim Hiorthøy	Modeselektor
Gridlock	Kodomo	Monolake
Hecq	Koreless	Mouse On Mars
Helios	Kosmik Kommando	Mujuice
Herrmann & Kleine	Kuedo	Murcof
Higher Intelligence Agency	Lackluster	múm
Himuro Yoshiteru	Laurel Halo	Nathan Fake
Holly Herndon	Legowelt	Neotropic
I am Robot and Proud	Lelia	Obfusc
Igorrr	LFO	Ochre
Innovaders	Link	Oneohtrix Point Never
ISAN	Locust Toybox	Orbital
J Lesser	Lone	Oval
Jackson and His Computer Band	Lorn	Pan Sonic
Jan Jelinek	Loscil	Pedro INF
Jega	Ludwig A.F.	Peshay
Jello	Luke Vibert	Phoenecia
Jlin	Lusine	Photek
John Beltran	Machinedrum	Pilote
John Frusciante	Mark Pritchard	Plaid
John Tejada	Marumari	Plone
Jon Hopkins	Matmos	Prefuse 73
Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith	Meat Beat Manifesto	Proem
Kelpe	Metamatics	Psyche/BFC
Kettel	Mick Harris	Push Button Objects
Kevin Blechdom	Mike Paradinas	Pye Corner Audio
Kiasmos	Mira Calix	Qebrus

Raoul Sinier	Stendeck	Thom Yorke
Req	Stenny	Tipper
Richard Devine	Steve Hauschildt	Toxic Positivity
Richard H Kirk/Sandoz	Subheim	Trentemoller
Richie Hawtin/Plastikman	Sun Electric	TRS-80
Rival Consoles	Superstructure	Two Lone Swordsman
RX-101	Susumu Yokota	Tycho
Ryoji Ikeda	Sweet Exorcist	Ulrich Schnauss
San Soda	Sweet Trip	Universal Indicator
Satori	Syndrone	Vector Lovers
Secede	System 7	Venetian Snares
Secret Mommy	Team Doyobi	Virtual Mage
Seefeel	Telefon Tel Aviv	Vulva
Seekae	The Black Dog	Weell
Shigeto	The Field	William Orbit
Skee Mask	The Flashbulb	Wisp
Skylab	The Glitch Mob	Xanopticon
Solvent	The Orb	Xela
SOPHIE	The Sabres of Paradise	Xena Glas
Spacetime Continuum	The Space Cadet	Yppah
Speedy J	The Synthetic Dream	Zoon van snook
Squarepusher	Foundation	

APPENDIX B

Survey Questions for r/idm:

Do you make music associated with IDM/braindance?

What platforms do you use to find IDM/braindance?

Approximately how long have you been listening to IDM/braindance?

How did you discover IDM/braindance music?

What kinds of music do you listen to outside of IDM/braindance?

What online platforms do you visit to interact with the IDM/braindance community?

What do you think of the labels 'Intelligent Dance Music' and 'Braindance'?

How old are you?

What is your gender?

What is your racial background? What is your ethnicity?

What country do you live in?

Discussion prompts for r/idm:

Can authentic artistry/musicianship still be commodified?

What constitutes "popular music" in this digital age?

Does the online underground exist? What kind of impact does it have on listeners? Does it even matter?

Discussion prompts for WATMM:

Would you consider the IDM community a diverse social space? Is it a cohesive community or fragmented in some way?

What constitutes "popular music" in this digital age? Is IDM popular music?

Does the online underground exist? What kind of impact does it have on listeners?