

GENRE IN PRACTICE: CATEGORIES, METADATA AND MUSIC-MAKING IN PSYTRANCE CULTURE

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology has changed the way in which genre terms are used in today's musical cultures. Web 2.0 services have given musicians greater control over how their music is categorised than in previous eras, and the tagging systems they contain have created a non-hierarchical environment in which musical genres, descriptive terms, and a wide range of other metadata can be deployed in combination, allowing musicians to describe their musical output with greater subtlety than before. This article looks at these changes in the context of psyculture, an international EDM culture characterised by a wide vocabulary of stylistic terms, highlighting the significance of these changes for modern-day music careers. Profiles are given of two artists, and their use of genre on social media platforms is outlined. The article focuses on two genres which have thus far been peripheral to the literature on psyculture, forest psytrance and psydub. It also touches on related genres and some novel concepts employed by participants ("morning forest" and "tundra").

KEYWORDS: psyculture; genre; internet; forest psytrance; psydub

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INTRODUCTION

The internet has brought about important changes to the nature and function of genre in today's musical cultures. Social media platforms allow users to communicate ideas about musical categories directly to others without the use of intermediaries; the tagging systems they contain encourage a combinatorial categorisation practice in which genre terms are employed alongside other organisational concepts in a non-hierarchical manner. However, the implications of these developments for musical participation and for the nature of musical communities have yet to be fully explored. The present paper aims to contribute to this discussion by offering a close study of genre in the careers of two EDM producers, demonstrating how genre is used to position their output within a wider musical field.

The backdrop to this article is psychedelic trance culture (psyculture), a global EDM culture which holds within it a diverse spectrum of musical styles.¹ Each genre within psyculture has its own set of musicians, event crews and record labels, and yet all are part of a relatively unified culture held together by a yearly calendar of large, multi-genre festivals. Participants use genre concepts as a means of positioning themselves within the scene, when producing music, running a record label, organizing an event or planning a DJ set. Online, genre terms are deployed as a means of drawing participants together, advertising events and releases and organising digital music items.

The article draws partly on ethnographic PhD research conducted in the city of Bristol, UK, between 2014 and 2018 (Charles 2019). Bristol has a vibrant local PEDM scene representing a large portion of the genre spectrum. Here, I attended numerous events and interviewed producers, DJs and event promoters from a range of musical styles. A field diary and interview transcripts contributed to my understanding of local psyculture, whilst social media allowed me to connect with the wider global scene. In ethnomusicological fashion, I also learned how to make psychedelic music of my own, focusing on dark psytrance and psychedelic dub. Two local musicians, Krosis and Globular, acted as my primary informants in this endeavour. The second half of the article looks at these artists, beginning with a description of their music and continuing with an analysis of how genre is used within their online distribution strategies.

GENRE AS WORDS

For the purposes of the following discussion, it is useful to momentarily detach genre terminology from the wider set of concepts and practices which constitute a musical system. Genre terms are often a focus of debate in a music scene, especially where underground or DIY music-making is concerned. More widely, they are a form of cultural knowledge and their deployment is a key aspect of musical participation beyond the maintaining of musical boundaries.

Early popular music scholarship depicted genre as a tool used for organising musical commerce. Frith, for example, describes industry genre categories as a means of "organizing

the sales process”: “genre is a way of defining music in its market or, alternatively, the market in its music” (1996: 75, 76). For record companies, radio stations and record stores, genre categories have been a means of identifying, reaching and, where necessary, creating an ideal consumer. This has often involved the appropriation of terms already associated with niche or marginalised musical practices. Negus observes that “terms such as rock’n’roll, salsa, funk and jazz were drawn from their vernacular use within particular cultural traditions and then used by the music industry as a way of organizing catalogues” (1999: 162). Hierarchies of power within music industries have thus been reflected in hierarchies of power with regards to musical labelling.

More recent writing has suggested that genre terms are not just a way of organising music sales, but also a way of shaping cultural experience. Holt states that “a genre category can only be established if the music has a name. . . . The name becomes a point of reference and enables certain forms of communication, control, and specialization into markets, canons, and discourses” (2007: 3). Similarly, Horner argues that,

to name a set of phenomena ‘rock music’ is to contribute to our sense of it and our experience of it. It gives us a sense of its relation to other phenomena (non-music, other types of music) and the ways in which we should think about, experience and respond to it (1999: 21).

This reflects a general shift towards viewing genre not as separate from music-making but rather as integral to it. Stokes argues that,

when people use words to describe, organize or manipulate musical cognition, those words might be considered adjuncts of musical discourse, part of the process by which musical experience is recognized and organized, and not in some sense alien to it or parasitic upon it (2003: 230).

Today’s music cultures are characterised by stylistic diversity and the use of a wide vocabulary of genre terms. The ability to recognise, distinguish and wield genre concepts is an important component of participation and necessary for creative involvement. Some writers have taken a Bourdieuan approach linking competence in identifying musical genres with the acquisition of “cultural capital”.² McLeod explicitly makes this point with reference to EDM cultures.

The process of naming new subgenres within electronic/dance music communities is not only directly related to the rapidly evolving nature of the music itself. It is also a function of the marketing strategies of record companies, accelerated consumer culture, and the appropriation of the musics of largely non-white, lower-class people by middle- and upper-middle-class Whites in the United States and Great Britain. Further, the naming process acts as a gate-keeping mechanism that generates a high amount of cultural capital needed to enter electronic/dance communities (McLeod 2001: 60).

This approach is useful in highlighting the centrality of cultural knowledge in the shaping of musical communities. However, it is not necessarily representative of the motives behind the creation and sharing of new genre concepts in contemporary music scenes. Certainly, these may have exclusive qualities and may contribute to the formation of insular cultural groupings. On the other hand, genre concepts also have formative properties, allowing participants to make connections and expand musical networks. Musicians certainly have little incentive to limit genre networks, as the success of their careers depend on having as many listeners as possible.

In order to better understand genre categories as an aspect of musical discourse without falling back on insider/outsider dichotomies which characterised subcultural studies and later Bourdieu-influenced writing, it is useful to treat genre terms as *resources* on which participants draw as they engage with a music scene. These are components of the cultural “tool kit” (after Ann Swidler) used to create meaningful forms of musical and social experience, and they are continually tested and re-tested by participants through their strategic engagements with a music scene.³ This approach requires us to assume that “genres are not static assemblages of empirically verifiable musical characteristics” (Brackett 2015: 190), but rather complex, shifting entities. Scene members engage with these actively, bringing their own ideas as to what a term means and where the limits of a genre’s musical network lie.

A key issue here is the changing levels of influence over genre terms held by musicians themselves. Whereas the major music distributors of the 20th century attempted, with limited success, to control genre in order to create a regulated environment for the sale of music, other kinds of musical/social network structures have allowed musicians and fans greater ability to decide how music is classified. Underground music scenes have often possessed their own distribution channels such as zines, pirate radio stations and websites, allowing musicians and fans greater control over genre concepts.⁴ More recently, the internet has allowed scene members to create their own channels for interacting directly with each other, from obscure genre-specific forums to vast social networking sites where musicians feel able to “exercise full control over their careers, gaining independence and empowerment through do-it-yourself methods” (Suhr 2012: 1). As internet-mediated DIY musicianship has moved to the fore as a normative way of enacting a music career, musicians have become increasingly able to wield genre terms themselves, using them to organise cultural material and communicate musical arguments directly to listeners.

GENRE AND THE INTERNET

When the first internet music distribution services (CDNow, Amazon) emerged in the mid-1990s, decisions about musical genre were made by the individual or group responsible for managing a given website: the webmaster. Like traditional record store owners, webmasters primarily used genre as a tool for the sale of musical product, although their

actual knowledge of genre was limited. Surveying the music websites of the late-1990s, Fabbri states that webmasters “seem to agree that certain kinds or types of music are broadly acknowledged, though they are probably much less interested in understanding how this knowledge is organized” (1999: 10). There was little room for musicians, or even other intermediaries such as record labels, to make decisions about how music was classified.

The subsequent emergence of Web 2.0 placed the focus of attention on the user and the sharing of user-generated content.⁵ Within this paradigm, it became common for the user of a website to be responsible for classification of information, rather than the webmaster. This was facilitated by the emergence of the “tag”, a piece of information appended to a digital item in order to classify it and to help users find similar content. Early internet music platforms such as MySpace gave musicians the ability apply genres to their own music in the form of tags. By 2007, musicians on MySpace could choose up to three genres from a selection of 122 categories (Silver et al. 2016: 7), allowing them to describe their musical output with some degree of subtlety. This is a top-down tagging system, meaning that the tags defined by the creators of the website, and there are a finite set which can be used.

Later, towards 2007-2008, services such as SoundCloud and Bandcamp gave users the ability to create their own classifications. This is a bottom-up tagging system, meaning that tags are created by users and there is no limit to the number or variety of terms which can be used. This system may also be referred to as a “folksonomy”, highlighting the informal, collective means by which tags are generated.⁶ Not all of today’s services fall into this category—indeed, many maintain a top-down system, which has its own advantages including the reduction of redundant or duplicate tags (e.g. “rock & roll” and “rock ‘n’ roll”). However, such systems are slow to catch up with emerging musical terminology. Gaffney and Rafferty suggest that “folksonomies, with their adaptability, can better account for this rapidly changing vocabulary than a controlled vocabulary” (2009: 376).

Genre is not the only principle used to organise music digitally, but rather is one among several types of *metadata* associated with music files. Other examples include track title, album title, artist name, date of release and artwork. These metadata allow for multiple ways of searching through a collection of music by drawing similarities between items and creating connections between pieces of data held in different locations. Different people will have different criteria in their use of metadata and will bring different forms of cultural knowledge to bear on the process of organising music. Metadata are thus “entangled within the creative inclinations and existent knowledge practices” of users (Audette-Longo 2016: 522).

When given free-reign to create their own tags, internet users employ a range of terms that they find suitable for describing their music. These often include a mixture of genre concepts and other types of metadata. Figure 1 shows the list of tags chosen by the psychedelic dub producer Globular for the release of his album *Holobiont* (2016) on Bandcamp.



FIGURE 1. THE BANDCAMP TAGS USED BY GLOBULAR FOR HIS ALBUM HOLOBIONT (2016).

This list contains several different kinds of information, including genre terms, geographic locations and the name of the artist and album. The genre terms vary in terms of the range of musical activity that they encompass, including broad categories (electronic, downtempo) and narrower ones pertaining specifically to psychedelic music (psydub, psybient). However, there is no indication of hierarchy here, nor that certain styles are embedded within others. The tags are merely strings of letters used to draw comparisons between files in its database, and they perform their linking function without reference to the meanings of the words in question. Looking at LastFM, a user-made radio station streaming platform, Sordo et al. observe that “users browse a—albeit very rich—*flat* list of terms” (2013: 347, emphasis in original).

The flat nature of bottom-up tagging systems gives users a great deal of scope for creativity and the ability to deploy organisational ideas that do not neatly align with conventional genre categories. These may be part of a musical culture’s wider vocabulary for music. In psytrance culture, for example, there are certain frequently-used terms which are not understood as freestanding genre categories, but are nonetheless used to describe and to organise music. Examples include “tribal”, “uplifting” and “old-school”, which do not appear on their own but always appear in conjunction with more well-defined musical terms. Others, such as “morning” and “night” (referring to psytrance music suitable for particular times of day) have more precise stylistic implications, but they are nonetheless modifiers rather than freestanding genre concepts.

Other concepts are used in tagging that are not understood as genres at all, but rather as descriptions of the sonic or affective qualities of a particular piece of music. Normative examples in psyculture include “glitchy”, “funky”, “atmospheric” and “euphoric”. Classification is not their primary function, and they are not normally understood as genres

even where they pertain to generic terminology (e.g. glitch or funk). However, like genre terms, they can be used to draw attention to similarities between different pieces of music and may therefore act in an organisational as well as descriptive capacity.

In today's tagging systems it is not only the meanings of individual tags, but also their meaning when used in combination, that contributes to their semiotic properties. Certain genres make sense only when used alongside stronger musical concepts: for example, "instrumental" and "lo-fi", which may be applied to instances of rock or hip-hop music. As noted earlier, this problematises the notion of subgenre and hierarchical genre structures in general. Borrowing from Slobin's (1993) idea of "interculture", these terms might be thought of as intergenres which cut across musical systems.⁷ This is not to say that subgenre is no longer used as a categorical principle, nor that hierarchical structures cannot emerge within tag systems. Indeed, subgenre remains an important organisational force within many musical cultures, and tag systems can demonstrate hierarchical properties, as suggested by Silver et al. (2016). Rather, hierarchies emerge within tag systems through the act of labelling musical material, and they are maintained by participants according to their own understanding of the real-world relationships between musical practices.

A term which must be briefly addressed here is "metagenre". Shuker defines metagenres as "loose amalgams of various styles (e.g. alternative rock, world music)", contrasting these with "actual" genres, which "arguably exist in a purer, more easily understood and specified form (e.g. disco)" (2005: 122). The term has appeared in the literature on psytrance: for example, Lindop notes that psytrance has qualities consistent with Shuker's "metagenre" in that it is used as an overarching category for a wide range of psychedelic EDM styles (2010: 117-18). Although useful in highlighting the relative specificity of different genre terms, this idea is not in common use within today's musical cultures, and it does not help us understand how participants themselves distinguish between different *types* of musical categories. Indeed, the prefix "meta-" should point to a higher level of organisation altogether. Genre itself is already a meta-category, as are style, subgenre, tempo and various culture-specific principles which are used to organise musical material. For the purposes of the present discussion, it is therefore better to reserve the "meta-" prefix for this higher level of taxonomic behaviour.

CASE STUDIES: KROSIS AND GLOBULAR

The following sections look at the music of two PEDM producers in Bristol, Krosis and Globular. Here, the artist is taken as the unit of analysis, allowing for an exploration of the range of generic concepts which they use and the means by which they position their output within the PEDM genre spectrum. Each profile will begin by looking at a selection of genres with which these musicians are associated, before moving on to analysis of how tags are used to describe their music online.

As noted earlier, psyculture is a vast musical field encompassing "a shifting sonic quilt of genre influences as well as a diversity of national/regional populations and scenes in which recognisable sounds have emerged" (St John 2010: 1). An exhaustive list of PEDM genres cannot be provided here, nor is there space for a musicological history of psytrance.⁸

However it is necessary to establish some musical details in order to contextualise the genres discussed in the following sections. Briefly, psytrance itself is a four-to-the floor EDM style focusing on “trippy” synthesizer sounds: highly modulated, unusual sounds designed to augment a psychedelic experience. Rhythmically it is distinguished by a sixteenth-note rhythm in the kick and bass parts, overlaid with a complex layer of synthetic leads and abstract sound effects which are usually generated using various forms of FM synthesis. Full-on and progressive psytrance are the most popular kinds of psytrance and are often the musical focus of PEDM events (Lindop 2010). These are relatively melodic genres with a tempo of 135-145 BPM and a bright, digital-sounding production aesthetic.

Beyond this, the wider field of PEDM genres is conceived by participants in terms of a tempo spectrum. At one end are slow genres which are based on non-trance musical styles, including psybient (ambient music), psydub (dub reggae) and psybreaks (breakbeats); in the middle are trance-based genres such as full-on psytrance, progressive psytrance, and Goa trance; at the far end are very fast, intense genres meant for performance at night, including dark psytrance, forest, hi-tech and psycore, the latter reaching tempi upwards of 190 BPM. Large-scale psychedelic events such as festivals are discursively structured around this spectrum, with faster genres being played at night and slower ones during the day, an ideal format which is referred to as a “full-spectrum” event. This scheme is not always followed in practice, however, with differing tastes and the practicalities of event organisation giving rise to other ways of structuring an event. In addition, many event crews and labels specialise in a particular genre or portion of the spectrum. Psyculture thus has “many internal differences and micro-taste cultures rapidly forming, merging or falling away” (St John 2010: 7).

Having highlighted the complex relationship between terminology and practice, the genre definitions given in the following sections may seem rather static. These must be understood as the researcher’s own interpretation of the common meanings of PEDM genre concepts based on several years of listening to, performing, and producing such music. They are by no means definitive and are subject to change as psyculture develops.

KROSIS: FOREST PSYTRANCE, MORNING FOREST AND TUNDRA

Krosis is a Bristol producer who works in several different genres of psytrance, with a focus on the darker styles and sounds. At the time of writing he has three musical projects: Krosis, which is dedicated to the genres dark, full-on night (or night-time) and forest psytrance; Final Form, which is for faster hi-tech psytrance; and Murk Squad, an experimental collaboration combining psytrance with hip-hop. Although they overlap stylistically in some ways, these projects represent separate creative endeavours on the part of the producer and require him to engage with different stylistic strands within psyculture.

In an ideal psytrance party, lower-tempo melodic music is played during the day and faster, more abstract music is played at night. Two common terms used to describe the latter in the UK are night (or night-time) and dark psytrance (darkpsy). These are relatively

similar genre concepts and are often used interchangeably, although closer examination reveals distinct usage. Night-time is related to full-on psytrance and retains some of its melodic characteristics; its production aesthetic is similarly clean and digital-sounding. Darkpsy, by contrast, is understood as a separate genre altogether. Its production aesthetic is murky and aggressive, with shredding buzzsaw-sounding FM leads and horror-themed atmospheric sounds.⁹ The all-night performances of DJ Goa Gil, who helped to establish darkpsy stylistically in the late 1990s and early 2000s, have infused the genre with occult or ritual connotations.¹⁰ There is no precise cutoff point between night-time and darkpsy—many tracks could fall into either category and both might be applied simultaneously to a musical item.

Forest psytrance, the focus of the current section, is a more specific category than either night-time or darkpsy and might be considered a subset of one or both genres. The name refers to an ideal performance location—an outdoor party in a wooded area—as well as an imaginary space described by the musical. The album *Tumult* (2005) by Swedish duo Derango is often cited by fans as the genre's point of origin, although the term has a longer history, notably in Finland (Aittoniemi 2012). Today forest psytrance is a largely European phenomenon. Noted producers in the current scene include Muscaria (Austria), Dohm (Lithuania), Goch (Macedonia) and Fafazz (France).

Forest's tempo range is very narrow, rarely straying outside of 148-150 BPM. The genre is characterised by organic sounds which contrast with the technical sounds of most psytrance. Forest tracks tend to burble, squawk and chirp rather than buzz, bleep or glitch. These sounds are not normally acoustic in origin but rather generated using software synthesis. In an extended article on dark psytrance genres, Argentinian darkpsy duo Megalopsy explain this aesthetic:

Forest is oozing, organic music that crinkles and crackles, and crunches all the way thru. The name says it all, it's really all about using the music to create an atmospheric feeling, almost like being swallowed by the forest itself, showing you the dark and bright aspects of nature, nature as a force itself, sometimes you don't need to put birds singing, sometimes you can make a synth 'become' a bird. There are a lot of 'becomings' in forest music; synths are turned into leaves, branches, water, etc (Megalopsy 2013).

In addition to these organic leads and FX, forest is characterised by atmospheric sound effects which are achieved through the use of extensive reverb and delay. The intended effect is that of being lost in a deep, dark woodland, surrounded by unusual creatures. These themes are further explored through track titles, album artwork and event decorations, which often evoke foliage or mythological creatures (fig. 1). Trolls, goblins and ents are especially popular. In this respect, forest also has several commonalities with black metal, a fast, highly distorted form of heavy metal with pagan or satanic themes, which also draws on Northern-European mythology and nature imagery.¹¹ Many forest artists, including Krosis, have a history as fans and performers of black metal.



FIGURE 2. THE FRONT COVER OF UNDER THE MOSS VOL. 3, A COMPILATION OF LITHUANIAN FOREST PSYTRANCE. ARTWORK BY FOREST FREAKS, REPRODUCED UNDER A CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0).

Forest shares uncertain boundaries with darkpsy. Both might be considered subgenres of psytrance but whether one is further embedded within the other is unclear. The following is a description of forest given by DJ Basilisk, who runs a free psytrance distribution service called Ektoplazm:

Murky, organic, and complex. An extension of darkpsy but different in some way that is sometimes hard to describe. Forest music has a particular vibe that you will learn to recognize over time but most of it will forever remain somewhat hard to distinguish from regular darkpsy (Basilisk n.d.a).

On Ektoplazm, forest is always used in conjunction with the tag “darkpsy” and is never used on its own, suggesting a hierarchical relationship. However, the website is not organised hierarchically and in theory forest could be paired with other terms. Indeed, many forest tracks have a melodic quality reminiscent of Goa trance and an overall sound-world which

is softer than that of most contemporary darpsy.¹² More recently, lower-tempo forest has emerged, leading to the addition of the category “swamp” on EktoPlazm in 2015, described by Basilisk as “the downtempo counterpoint to forest music” (Basilisk, n.d.b). As such the organic sounds and natural imagery of forest psytrance have the potential to be combined with other genre concepts from across the PEDM spectrum.

KROSIS

Krosis started his musical career as a black metal drummer and vocalist before discovering psytrance in the early 2010s. He was immediately attracted to the speed and heaviness of darkpsy and began learning to DJ and produce in this style. By 2014, he was performing regularly at Tribe of Frog (one of the largest psytrance nights in the UK) and soon became a resident DJ, requiring him to frequently give DJ sets in a range of high-tempo psytrance styles. As a resident, Krosis must complement performers from outside Bristol, so a high degree of stylistic understanding and flexibility is key to his musical career.

As a producer Krosis has focused on darkpsy and forest psytrance, the latter appealing to his past experience in black metal and affinity for fantasy video games; his alias, for example, comes from the 2011 game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, which draws on traditional fantasy themes and imagery. In our first interview in 2014, Krosis described the challenge of recognising forest among other psytrance variants.

Krosis: Trying to define forest is the hardest one. That took me so long, and then thinking I knew what it was, and then finding out that still I didn't quite have my definition right.

The challenge here lies in perceiving subtle differences in timbre, atmosphere, melody and harmony, drawing connections between tracks in order to create coherence in his DJ sets. Krosis sifts through vast numbers of new tracks every year, assessing them for their quality and stylistic content, and records his favourites in a spreadsheet colour-coded by genre. (Green, naturally, represents forest.) However, he is keen to emphasise the flexibility of his categorical approach:

Krosis: I always see them as descriptions rather than definitions, and you're trying to define it in that sense then you're missing the point, because, you know... It should be about the vibe of the actual track.

Krosis uses the music streaming platform SoundCloud to distribute DJ mixes and previews of his own upcoming tracks. Here, he has the opportunity to describe his music directly to listeners using tags and descriptive writing. Classification on SoundCloud is divided into two parts: a principle genre which is displayed in the top right corner of a track, and a set of additional tags which are displayed underneath. For the most part, Krosis gives psytrance as the principle genre for his tracks, with various uses of “twilight”, “night”, “forest” in the additional tags (see fig. 3).

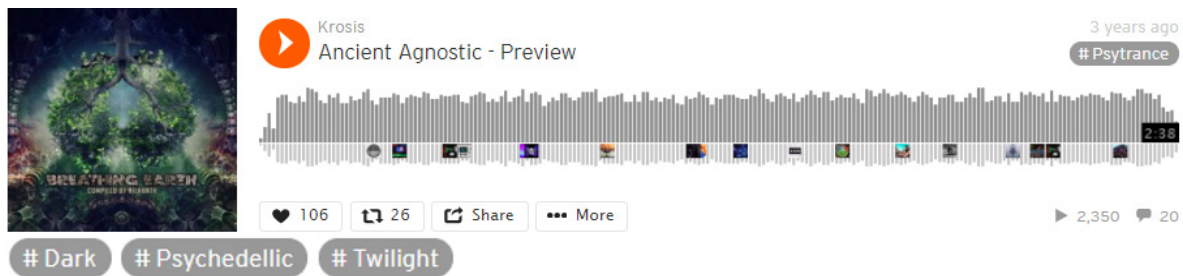


FIGURE 3. THE TRACK “ANCIENT AGNOSTIC” ON KROSIS’ SOUNDCLOUD PAGE.

One of Krosis’ tracks, “Ice of Phendrana”, is marked “Tundra :P” on SoundCloud, with an emoticon indicating playful intentions (fig. 3). This term is Krosis’ own invention; it refers to a particular kind of psytrance with an atmosphere reminiscent of a frozen, barren landscape. Similar imagery is found in heavy metal cultures, in particular black metal and power metal. It is also found in fantasy literature and video games; Phendrana is a snowy region in the 2002 Nintendo game *Metroid Prime*. On SoundCloud the tag has been combined with “forest”, suggesting some stylistic overlap between these genres. Musically, “Ice of Phendrana” is characterised by sustained pads and icy synthetic bell sounds with some sparse, organic-sounding FM leads suggesting a few straggling trees, perhaps at the edges of a vast boreal forest. Krosis later released an EP on Bandcamp, *Tundra* (2020), exploring the concept more fully (fig. 4), although he was not responsible for tagging the album and “tundra” was not used as a tag.

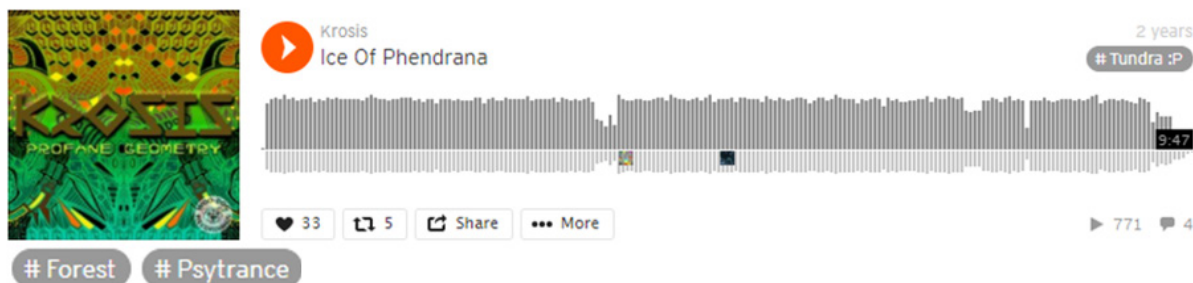


FIGURE 4. “ICE OF PHENDRANA” ON KROSIS’ SOUNDCLOUD PAGE.



FIGURE 5. THE FRONT COVER OF KROSIS' EP *TUNDRA* (2020).

ARTWORK BY JAZZMINE, CO-FOUNDER OF BLUE HOUR SOUNDS, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION.

Krosis' output also explores another unusual concept, "morning forest". This is a seemingly contradictory idea: "morning" is a term used to refer to upbeat, daytime psytrance designed for the early hours after a night of dancing. Most DJs will play upbeat, melodic music at this time, a tradition with long history dating back to the original Goa scene. Today, morning is used to describe particular instances of full-on or progressive psytrance. (Again, like forest, this is a modifier rather than a full musical description.) However, Krosis finds this music inappropriate in many situations.

Krosis: The amount of times I've had a booming hot sunrise and morning prog—there's been a few, but mostly it's grey miserable sunrises with triumphant morning prog and, nah, sometimes you need some more misanthropic kind of grey-weather forest for the people that don't quite want to slow it down yet but do still want some melody.

Finding that he enjoyed playing at this transitional time during parties, but lacking a repertoire which suited the often-drizzly atmosphere of UK outdoor parties, Krosis began producing and performing music which combined features of both musical styles. This idea crystallized in 2015 when he discovered the Italian psytrance label Blue Hour Sounds, the name of which refers to the colour of the sky in the twilight hour just before dawn. The following description is given for the compilation *The Dark Side of Dawn* (2015) on the label's Bandcamp page:

Blue Hour Sounds artists and passionate DJs Robin Gaiana and Peyo selected these stunning sonic sculptures, searching for music that can forge a bridge from dark foresty nights into mystical misty mornings.

Expect serious rolling basslines, deep atmospheres, crunchy leads and dense forest sounds, with just a hint of color to call out for the coming of day (Gaiana and Peyo 2015).

Soon after discovering this release, Krosis decided to create a morning forest-themed mix for SoundCloud. This included several of his own tracks and some others which he felt were representative of the concept. A suitable picture was chosen for the thumbnail: a few solitary trees on snowy ground with a distant church looming in the mist, suggesting a solemn, reverent atmosphere reminiscent of heavy metal (fig. 5). The use of the tag “ultra-spiritual” lightens the tone, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the work of internet comedian JP Sears, who satirizes new age spirituality. Krosis’ mix succeeded in attracting the attention of Blue Hour Sounds, and shortly afterwards they asked if he would like to join as a producer, culminating in the release of his EP *Tundra* on the label in 2020. SoundCloud thus offered a means for Krosis to assemble various resources, including genre terms, music and visual imagery, in order to communicate a complex musical idea to listeners and to advance his career by creating new connections within the psytrance scene.

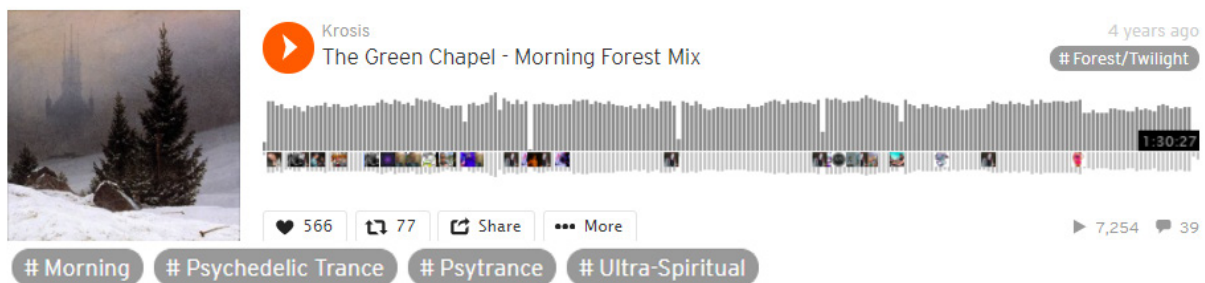


FIGURE 6. KROSIS’ MORNING FOREST MIX, *THE GREEN CHAPEL* (2016), ON SOUNDCLOUD.

GLOBULAR: PSYCHILL AND PSYDUB

Globular writes a kind of music known as psychedelic dub or psydub, which combines the musical attributes of psytrance music with those of dub reggae. Psydub is one among several psychedelic downtempo or psychill genres which cover the lower end of the PEDM tempo

spectrum.¹³ Other terms include “psybient” which refers to a relatively pure form of psychill with roots in Goa trance and psytrance; “psybreaks” which indicates the use of breakbeat rhythms in the percussion parts and “psybass” which suggests crossover with newer styles of bass music, such as dubstep or trap. As with the psytrance variants in the previous section, these terms can be used interchangeably or in combination according to the characteristics of a given project. Most psychill artists produce in more than one style and a psychill album will usually contain a range of tempos and textures (see, for example, the music of Shpongle, Ott or Solar Fields).

These various downtempo PEDM genres are united by the use of production techniques found in psytrance and Goa trance, including FM leads, 303-like filter resonance and prominent delay or echo effects. Alongside this Goa-trance lineage, however, psychill also has roots in the experimental and ambient music of artists such as Jean-Michel Jarre and The KLF. Because of this wider history, psychill acts as a point of contact between psyculture and other electronic music cultures. Psychill also has links to music for films, TV and video games. For example, producer Solar Fields’ music was used in the game *Mirror’s Edge* (Electronic Arts 2008). Many psychill artists are also part of a wider music scene focused on world music or “ethnic” sounds. These artists, such as Kaya Project, Desert Dwellers and Hilight Tribe, are notable for their acoustic instrumentation and live, band-format performances, and they may appear at world music or transformational events rather than psytrance festivals.¹⁴

The distinguishing characteristics of psydub, the genre to which the present section is devoted, involve the use of musical features found in reggae and dub music including the “skank” (offbeat chord stabs), acoustic percussion and sustained bass notes. This music is largely associated with the UK, and many of the genre’s most famous producers live in the south of England.¹⁵ The album *In Dub* (2002), in which producer/engineer Ott remixed tracks by the celebrated Goa trance artist Hallucinogen, is considered by fans to be the genre’s point of origin. However, psydub’s lineage also lies in the ambient dub music of the 1990s characterized by artists like The Orb and Orbital and, beyond this, in the work of Jamaican dub reggae pioneers such as King Tubby and Augustus Pablo. As such, psydub is not a pure genre of PEDM but rather has considerable overlap with other kinds of music and other scenes outside of psyculture.

Like other psychill genres, psydub is not normally played on the main stage at psytrance events, but rather on smaller secondary stages. Only very recently have psychill-focused events begun to appear in the UK (such as Anthropos festival in 2019), and it is not yet clear whether these will become a long-term addition to the PEDM event calendar, joining the darkpsy-focused festivals noted in the previous section. More widely, downtempo musicians are somewhat peripheral members of the psytrance scene, and are rarely the main focus of attention at PEDM events. This has both advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand, they do not have the same level of visibility as festival-headlining psytrance artists; on the other hand, they may cast their net wider and gain fans among people who do not listen to psytrance at all.

GLOBULAR

Globular is a relatively well-known psydub producer who performs at major psychedelic events around the world. He has adhered closely to the psydub genre throughout his musical career and has only the one musical project; he does not have another alias or run a record label. Globular's music is highly melodic and features guitar, folk music samples and acoustic percussion alongside software instruments and effects. It also features harmonic progressions and chord sequences more reminiscent of rock or reggae music than EDM. The tracks "Synchronicity City 3.0" (2013) and "Infinity Inside" (2014) use a changing bass line to reharmonize lengthy recurring melodies, for example, whilst "...And it speaks of Everything" (2016) and "Up the Xylem Elevator" (2013) are ambient, guitar-based pieces reminiscent of grunge and alternative rock. These characteristics differentiate Globular from many of his psydub-producing peers who largely make timbral, digital-sounding music with a static approach to harmony (e.g. Quanta, Land Switcher).

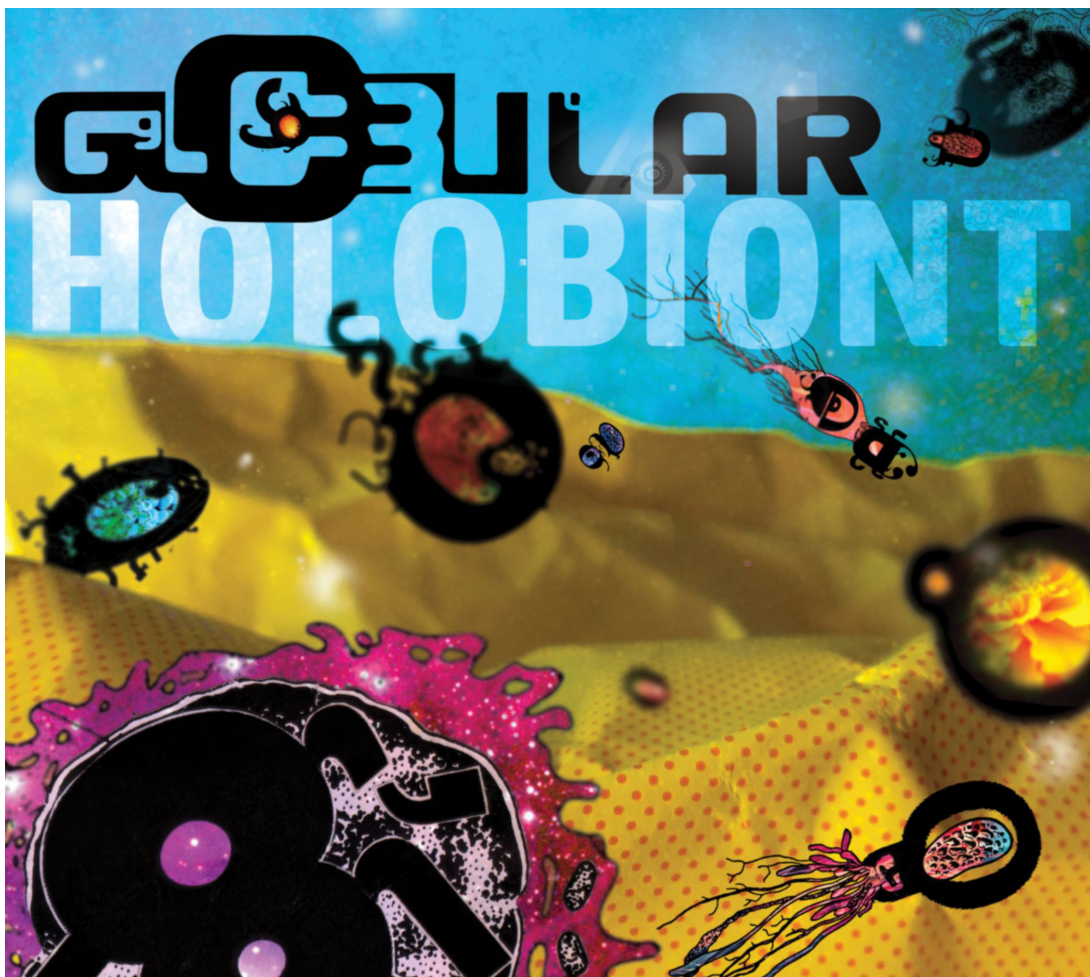


FIGURE 7. THE COVER OF GLOBULAR'S ALBUM *HOLOBIONT* (2016).
ARTWORK BY OBJECT, REPRODUCED UNDER A CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0).

The relationship between Globular's music and psytrance is not entirely straightforward; similarly, it is not clear that he is a dub producer, as this entails a certain set of production processes and sounds.¹⁶ Globular outlined these issues in our first interview in 2014.

Christopher Charles: *So how would you describe your style? What exactly do you do? Is it a type of dub music, is it reggae?*

Globular: I guess I call it psydub because that's what everyone recognises it by, but in reality I would say it's more reggae than dub. [Laughs]

Yeah.

And the people that are doing, like, deep techno dub and stuff like that, that's more dub, I think. Because the more I kind of really think about it in terms of dub, I realise that it's not—it's too fast, it's too kind of, there's too much going on. Like, dub's like really pared down, slow and kind of simple.

Yeah. Nice and echoey.

Yeah. But obviously it takes huge influences from dub.

So would you say that psydub is related to psytrance, is it a type of psytrance, or is it nebulous sort of something that hovers around psytrance?

I personally, pretty much... the similarities kind of end at the psy. [Laughs] But, I mean, there's some pretty big similarities. Like, there's a lot of squelchy kind of lead sounds and kind of very specific psy-scene sounds that do cross over a lot. But for me the main thing... I mean, I don't listen to psytrance basically. I'm not a psytrance person. My music just seems to fit into the psytrance scene. And that's why people think that it fits in and I'm happy for that to be the case.

Globular contrasts his position with that of the other psydub producers whose music is sonically closer to psytrance than his own.

Globular: I feel like they know the scene and they kind of came at it from a psy angle. They've always been going to psy parties and stuff like that, and that's not where I came from, that's all.

The detachment that Globular experiences from psytrance culture is not unusual. There are many PEDM scene members who enjoy the atmosphere of psychedelic parties but struggle with the intensity and repetitiveness of psytrance music. During my research from 2014-2018, several participants expressed a wish for a separate downtempo event scene in the UK, and this began to materialise around 2017 with the emergence of Anthropolos festival and the Psychedelic Jelly club night in Bristol. This problematises the notion of psychill as a subset of psychedelic trance culture. Rather, it might be understood as a parallel culture drawing on a shared pool of musical, visual and thematic resources.

Globular does not normally release his music through record labels but rather publishes it himself directly via internet platforms. He is associated with the group Shanti Planti, but this is more of a collective than a record label in the traditional sense, and they do not act as intermediaries between artist and audience. Similarly, he is a member of a booking agency called Feel Life Music (formerly Sofa Beats) which specialises in downtempo music, but they do not represent him online except where bookings are concerned. Rather, Globular distributes his music directly to listeners using platforms such as Bandcamp, SoundCloud and EktoPlazm. He maintains a large web of connections on social media, giving potential listeners as many ways as possible to discover his music.

We have already looked at Globular’s use of tags on Bandcamp, noting the various types of metadata incorporated including geographic locations, the name of the artist and album and a variety of genre terms. For example, on SoundCloud he tends to use “psydub” as the principle genre of his tracks whilst using additional tags for a range of other concepts and metadata (fig. 8). Occasionally, other pieces of information are used in place of the principle genre. A recording of his set at Boom Festival in 2016 is marked “Boom”; a track which appeared on the Shanti Planti compilation *Middle Peace* (2014) is marked “Middle Peace” (fig. 8). The latter was a charity compilation raising funds for Save the Children. The aim with this tag was not to create further links within the online psychill network, but rather to highlight the project and raise its profile on social media.



FIGURE 8. GLOBULAR’S TRACK “THE INTRALOCUTER” ON SOUNDCLLOUD.

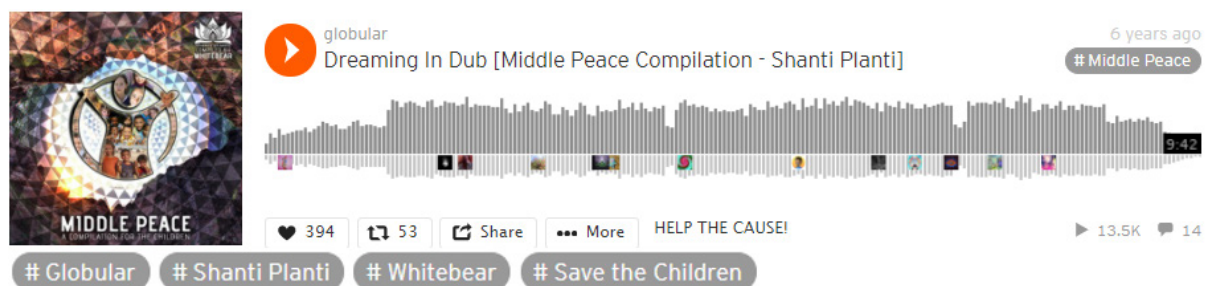


FIGURE 9. GLOBULAR’S TRACK FROM THE SHANTI PLANTI COMPILATION MIDDLE PEACE.

Between 2017 and 2020, I had the opportunity to collaborate with Globular on a large-scale musical project. The resulting album, *Messages from the Resonator* (Globular and Geoglyph 2020) contains elements of our respective musical languages as well as further influences which neither of us had previously explored in our own music. (My own music as Geoglyph tends also towards a conventional psydub/psybreaks sound similar to Globular's.) At that time we were interested in the relationship between trip-hop—a genre that originated in our hometown of Bristol through bands such as Massive Attack and Portishead—and psychill, which inherited some of its musical characteristics from the former. Two tracks on our album, “Take Down Everything” and “M.I.N.D.,” demonstrate jazzy hip-hop and drum ‘n’ bass characteristics respectively, whilst “A General Benevolent Presence” has a trip-hop inflected electric piano part.

After we finished the album in early 2020, the question of musical categories arose. How should we market this multi-genre album? After some discussion, Globular suggested the set of tags in fig. 10 for the album's Bandcamp page.

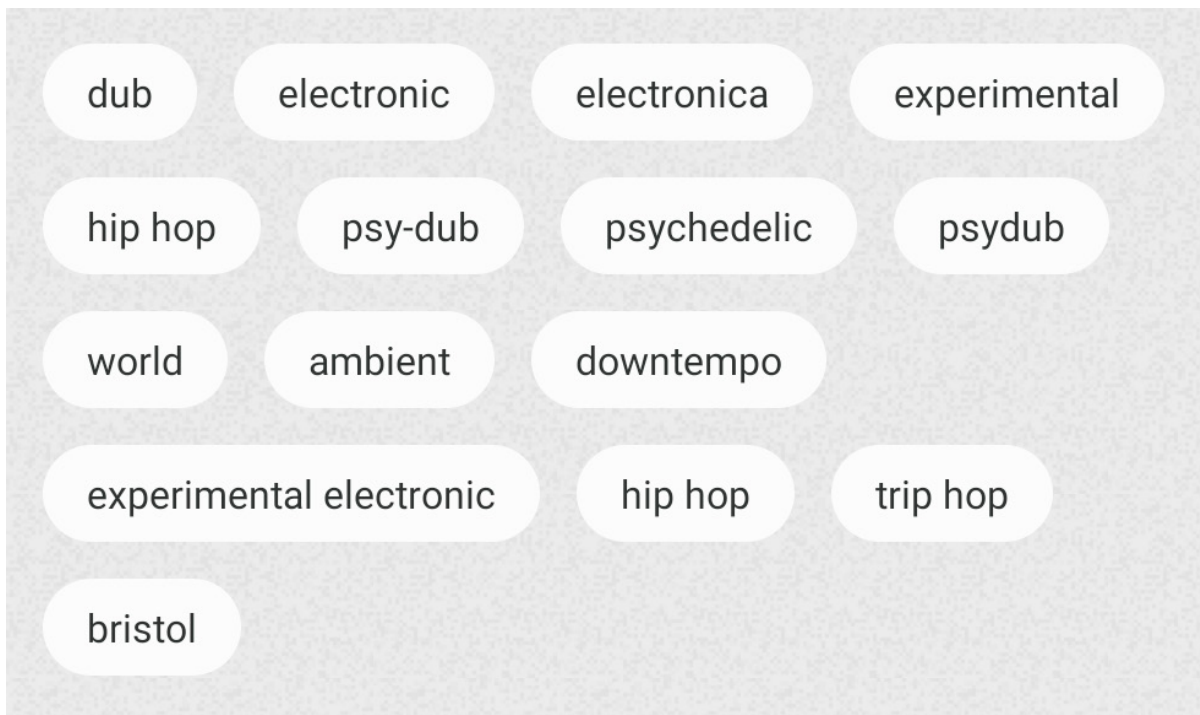


FIGURE 10. THE BANDCAMP TAGS USED BY GLOBULAR AND GEOGLYPH FOR THE ALBUM *MESSAGES FROM THE RESONATOR* (2020).

Here the tags normally associated with psydub are accompanied by terms from outside of psychulture: “electronica”, “hip hop” and “trip-hop”.¹⁷ In this way, tagging systems can accommodate polystylistic projects in which different tracks have different combinations

of genre characteristics. Whether this actually helps an album to reach a wider audience is unclear. Nonetheless, the tagging process also helped us to reflect on the project, to note its roots in Bristol's musical legacy and its connections with other music outside of psyculture. The descriptive aspect of tagging may therefore also be important, helping artists to understand their own output and how it fits into a wider cultural context.

DISCUSSION

As categories within the PEDM spectrum, forest psytrance and psydub have quite different relationships with their parent culture. Forest psytrance is a relatively "pure" form of PEDM like those discussed by Lindop (2010: 121-24): its roots lie in the Goa trance/psytrance tradition and it has little overlap with genres outside of psyculture (except for a few commonalities with black metal as noted earlier). These characteristics have arisen from a developmental process which Toynebee calls "intensification" (2000: 143), meaning that a set of stylistic conventions have been refined and reinforced by participants. This gives rise to a culture-specific vocabulary of concepts which can be used to place creative work within a given cultural sphere. As demonstrated by Krosis, this can be done subtly, with participants combining contradictory concepts ("morning forest") and making novel contributions of their own ("tundra").

By contrast, psydub is a clear example of the "psychedelicised" music identified by Lindop (2010: 121); that is, psydub is a non-PEDM genre that has been imbued with psychedelic characteristics in order to make it suitable for performance at PEDM events. Lindop describes this process in terms of "subcultural capital".¹⁸

The process of *psychedelicisation* is analogous to the means by which knowledge, style and taste generate 'subcultural capital' among participants. By adapting a given style to the expectations of a psytrance party crowd, the music takes on a greater level of authenticity (Lindop 2010: 121).

As argued earlier, this Bourdieuan approach has been useful in recognising the importance of stylistic competence (recognising, naming and producing certain musical styles) in the formation of underground musical cultures in the late-twentieth century. However, it is no longer a useful way of understanding genre in today's complex, overlapping, internet-mediated musical worlds. Here, there is no stable field within which aesthetic judgements are made, nor a "conscious and mutually agreed set of standards" by which the boundaries of a musical culture are enforced (Hodkinson 2002: 81). Rather, today's internet users engage with a plurality of musical cultures and frequently create artifacts with contrasting or conflicting features drawn from different cultural spheres. Lindop comes to a similar conclusion, noting the emergence of "practices not considered by Thornton" in the psychedelicisation process (2010: 124).

A more constructive approach is taken by Madrid who, in his study of Nor-tec music in Tijuana, argues that Nor-tec "should be understood as a strategy based on the social

signification of an aesthetic idea”, and that genre is “used to identify the specific niches in which these artists want to fit within the international cosmopolitan community of electronic music” (2008: 10, 77). This gives the musician more scope for creativity and the ability to imagine how their output will give them access to certain cultural spheres. Crucially, artists may position themselves between cultures, opting for an interstitial existence which allows them to engage with multiple genre concepts, discursive strands and musical histories. This, I suggest, is a more appropriate way of understanding downtempo music, which has often occupied an ambiguous position between other music scenes (EDM, dub, electronica).

In order to understand this new artist-led environment, scholars must move away from a Bourdieuan model in which genre terms are a means of excluding unwanted elements from a musical system, and towards a more inclusive, connective view of genre. If, as Frith argued, popular music categories once functioned as a means of creating the ideal consumer (1996: 85), their function today is the creation of new networks, often integrating existing musical practices and infrastructure in the process. The result is that genre has become more modular; rather than full descriptions, many of today’s genre terms function as units which can be joined together into larger assemblages. These might not even be full words but rather fragments of words, for example the prefix “psy” which is prepended to downtempo genres to indicate that they have been psychedelised. (Another example is the set of “wave” genres which have arisen on streaming platforms—synthwave, vaporwave, Soviet-wave.) More widely, descriptive approaches are coming to the fore as a means of organising music on streaming platforms, for example the popular “beats to study/relax to” playlists on YouTube and Spotify.¹⁹

As shown by Krosis and Globular, genre plays an especially important role in shaping DIY music careers. Strategic use of genre can help forge vital connections, increasing an artist’s reach within a music scene, as well as helping them to understand their position within a wider cultural field. However, it is not just producers who do this. Other scene members also make strategic use of genre: DJs when creating mixes for MixCloud; listeners when uploading their favourite albums to YouTube; event promoters when creating advertising material for Facebook. In this way, bottom-up tagging systems perform their function as folksonomies, allowing everyday users to contribute to a culture’s stylistic vocabulary and not just gatekeepers or prominent scene members.

This is not to say that intermediaries are absent from today’s musical networks. Indeed, as demonstrated in this paper, online labels still play a role in forming connections between artist and audience. However, these relationships are normally sought out voluntarily, with musicians using labels strategically for their signifying power in relation to genre. (See, for example, Krosis’ relationship with Blue Hour Sounds or Globular’s relationship with Shanti Planti.) Furthermore, distribution services with intermediaries (e.g. Ektoplazm and its webmaster, DJ Basilisk) can perform a stabilizing function, creating durable connections between concepts and sounds. Thus it is neither disintermediation nor reintermediation alone, but rather the interplay between the two, which shapes today’s musical landscape.

Further developments may occur as services begin to make connections and distinctions of their own. Recommendation algorithms are already a central means by which listeners discover new music, and it seems likely that platforms will begin to seek out real-world meanings and relationships as a means of organising content, perhaps through automated analysis of musical material. What will happen if a major platform such as YouTube begins to have its own ideas about the difference between PEDM genres, for example? This is unlikely to change musical practice overnight, but it will require musicians to explore new labelling strategies and new ways of communicating with listeners online.

NOTES

- 1 I will refer to this musical field as “psychedelic electronic dance music” or PEDM.
- 2 Bourdieu describes cultural capital as a familiarity with cultural norms, tastes and expectations “which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital” (1986: 243).
- 3 In her widely-cited 1986 paper, Swidler outlines “an image of culture as a ‘tool kit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (1986: 273).
- 4 See Fikentscher (2000) for a discussion of DIY and underground dance music culture, and Haenfler (2015) for a discussion of punk rock, which is perhaps the genre most closely associated with “DIY” cultural production.
- 5 Baym and Bunnett (2009) offer a description of musical fandom and Web 2.0, describing it as an era “in which user-generated content stands alongside professionally produced content in claiming audience attention” (2009: 434).
- 6 The term “folksonomy” was coined by Thomas Vander Wal in 2004 and later formalised on his personal website in 2007, where he offers the following definition:

Folksonomy is the result of personal free tagging of information and objects (anything with a URL) for one’s own retrieval. The tagging is done in a social environment (usually shared and open to others). Folksonomy is created from the act of tagging by the person consuming the information (Vander Wal 2007).
- 7 Slobin’s book *Subcultural Sounds* (1993) presages several key issues later raised by Web 2.0 tagging systems, in particular by examining the notion of hierarchy or embeddedness between musical styles. Slobin expands on the then-prevalent notion of subculture by offering “superculture” and “interculture” as complementary concepts: “super- suggests an overarching, sub- an embedded unit, and inter- a crosscutting trend” (1993:12).
- 8 See Rietveld (2010), St John (2012) and Aittoniemi (2012) for further musical and historical details on psytrance culture.
- 9 Vitos (2009, 2015) has written several papers on dark psytrance music and culture. He states that darkpsy “can be considered the hard core of psytrance, sending its acid-infused musical structures into overdrive at a tempo that ranges from 150 to 200BPM (beats per minute), and it is played predominantly during the night at out-door psytrance festivals” (2015: 262).
- 10 See McAteer (2002) and St John (2011) for further details on Goa Gil, whose marathon dark psytrance DJ sets are often described in religious or mystical terms.

- 11 Baulch (2007) offers a discussion of black metal's musical, visual, and performative characteristics—albeit in the unusual context of the extreme metal scene in 1990s Bali, Indonesia.
- 12 See, for example, the *Under the Moss* series of compilations by the Lithuanian label Forest Freags.
- 13 Here I am using “psychill” as an umbrella term due to its relative neutrality, but in practice its relationship with other downtempo genres is non-hierarchical.
- 14 “Transformational” in this instance refers to a wider psychedelic/hippie festival culture which overlaps with, but does not encompass, psytrance culture. Prominent examples of transformational festivals include Burning Man (US) and Shambhala (UK).
- 15 Notable psydub acts based in the south of England include Ott, Globular, Quanta, Shpongle, Kuba and Gaudi.
- 16 Veal (2007) and Henrique (2010) have written book-length descriptions of dub reggae's history and production techniques. A key feature is the remixing or ‘versioning’ of pre-existing reggae tracks in real time using a mixing desk. Psydub, by contrast, is not usually remixed (except for Ott's famous album *Hallucinogen in Dub*) and is therefore an example of what Veal calls “designer dub”, referring to “music designed as a work of dub from the beginning” (2007: 228).
- 17 In the UK, electronica has a specific meaning roughly synonymous with trip-hop indicating jazz-inflected, sample-based electronic music. Artists working in this genre include Bonobo, Mr Scruff and Lemon Jelly.
- 18 Like Bourdieu's cultural capital (see above), Thornton's “subcultural capital” entails familiarity with a particular set of cultural norms and values, albeit those of underground youth cultures rather than high culture. She describes this in terms of the “fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections” which distinguish subcultural club-goers from the mainstream crowd (Thornton 1995: 11).
- 19 Winston and Saywood (2019) offer one of the first analyses of the “Beats to Relax/Study To” phenomenon and the lofi hip-hop genre with which it is associated. Observing the use of these mixes for performing intellectual work (e.g. studying, coding) in a relaxed and efficient manner, the authors find lofi “reflective of lived experience within the material conditions of post-Fordist late capitalism” which requires “emotional and personal investment” from workers (Winston and Saywood 2019: 48).

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