MALE MANIPULATOR MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

As time progresses and music continues to evolve and transform, new genres and styles emerge out of the proximate culture and add to the ever-growing catalog of works. One such category that has arisen in recent years is "male manipulator music" (MMM). Having been derived from a meme in late 2020, this term has become popularized amongst younger generations and seems to be stapled in modern music culture to describe many bands and artists from The Cure to Weezer to Steve Lacy. Despite the widespread use of this classification, there exists no concise definition of what constitutes this type of music or what the bounds of this genre are given the diverse number of artists it appears to apply to. This paper seeks to answer the question of what male manipulator music is and to explore the source of its negative connotation. It is important to understand why certain music fits into a subset because of implications that arise when such music is classified under specifically denoted categories. Through the analysis of internet platforms and communities where men who constitute this community can be found, two profiles of male manipulators are discovered and put into action through a song analysis from a MMM canon artist. It is revealed that this music and its negative reception are a result of its community of supporters, the male manipulators, who wrongly utilize music within this genre by genuine male artists to uphold their conventional conceptions of masculinity.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout many artistic communities, gender issues have always made themselves present through varying forms of conflict that concern a group(s) that creates problems for the artistic community along binary lines. Such issues present unique problems that emerge from the socio-cultural overlap of different gender and culture norms. For the film industry, the modern rise of "film bros", men who idolize movies and directors that showcase cool, traditionally masculine, usually violent men, has given way to issues regarding the influence these films have over young male cinephiles who cherish problematic characters.[1] These men might overemphasize the influence of Quentin Tarantino or the revolutionariness of Christopher Nolan, pigeonholing themselves within this uber-masculine subset of films all while ignoring the wider scope of films that exist. A similar phenomenon has begun to arise within the music community as well concerning gender and music classification.

As time progresses and music continues to evolve and transform, new genres and styles emerge out of the proximate culture and add to the ever-growing catalog of works. With these new classifications also comes confusion concerning where to group certain artists, whether they overlap among other categories, and what it means when an artist is placed into a certain genre(s). One such category that has arisen in recent years is "male manipulator music" (MMM). Having been derived from a meme in late 2020, this term has become popularized amongst younger generations and seems to be stapled in modern music culture to describe a plethora of bands and artists from The Cure to Weezer to Steve Lacy.[2] Similar to the film bro title, MMM was and continues to be used to describe songs and artists that supposedly embody masculinity in a negative way that belittles women, encourages emotional warfare, and upholds traditional gender norms among other stereotypes that have been cast upon this music and those within the MMM community. While some artists who are considered fundamental to MMM have been around for decades, this classification is a more contemporarily emergent social phenomenon that extends into the past while also applying itself to the present. Despite the widespread use of this classification, there

exists no concise definition of what constitutes this type of music or what the bounds of this genre are given the diverse number of artists it appears to apply to.

This paper seeks to answer the question of what male manipulator music is. It is important to understand why certain music fits into a subset because of implications that arise when such music is classified under specifically denoted categories. Thinking of the concept of genre as a social phenomenon, people have preconceptions surrounding rock music or pop music and stereotypes that exist when musicians and songs are placed under these subsets; artists who become socially affiliated with MMM or essentialized as figures within this grouping can become negatively connoted due to this codification and its associated stereotypes. However, when the conversation shifts to criticize the genre there is a lack of foundation to argue against since there is little to no information regarding the definition of this category. Such implications can affect the image and reception of artists which can lead to misconceptions about them and the music they make. If people are going to put MMM bands and artists on blast, there should at least be some definition as to what this music really is.

DEFINING BOUNDARIES

Before outlining and analyzing the scope of the MMM genre, it is important to first understand what is meant by the word "genre" concerning what this level of classification is and how new genres might emerge. In modern scholarship, genre studies either delve into the technological aspects of music, the distinct musicological qualities, or the sociological constructions that surround it. Music association problems can be solved by statistically sorting songs using characteristics such as audio data, compositional features, musical skills, and mental mechanisms among other components[3] or tracks and artists can be organized along more stylistic elements such as melody, lyric, mood, rhythm, or harmony.[4] However, reducing the concept of genre to mathematical functions or stylistic traits takes away from the expectations of listeners and their own interpretations of music that play a significant role in how people personally and collectively group and identify music. Focusing on genre as a social phenomenon rather than a statistical or musicological analysis is more fruitful to this study since MMM is an emergent social phenomenon itself.

Separate from style and statistics, genre can be thought of as an artistic classification system that is formed along four dimensions: differentiation, hierarchy, universality, and boundary strength.[5] These dimensions can be found within areas of population and production such as the tastes of consumers and the effects of commercial institutions.[6] Each of these qualities present a unique way for people to sort through and order music into categories that can range from broad-based to niche. Certain genres may be rigidly asserted and ordered within society such as rock and hip-hop while others might be less fixed and more ambiguous in definition and bounds such as experimental and alternative. Despite modern assertions that hint at the declining importance of genre and other cultural classifications,[7] it still remains important in the organization of cultural objects like music as well as people. Genre not only sorts music into categories so that people can easily identify their tastes but it also creates an area for social connections to be made between people with similar tastes as well.[8] It isn't just an artistic classification system but a label for similarly identifying people to group themselves under, having the ability to categorize culture and society all through the use of music.

Consider the origins and early development of hip hop and its community of supporters. Author Jeffrey Ogbar credits the Black Power movement as the catalyst that birthed hip hop culture that overtook the popular culture scene of America during the late 20th century.[9] This movement and the genre of music that emerged was a response to the stereotypical criticisms made about the African American community, giving people a platform to respond back to a society and polity that upheld these stereotypes. Artists and groups like N.W.A, Public Enemy, A Tribe Called Quest, and others vocalized and transmitted their messages of resistance to the status quo, reaching an audience of people who not only enjoyed the music but also sympathized with their messages. This sentiment wasn't exclusive to the African American community alone but extended to all people who believed in the power of social change, grouping those who had both similar cultural and social preferences all under the umbrella of the hip hop genre. What at first seemed to be just another new classification of music became much more through the mobilization of like-minded individuals through this genre of music.

With this in mind, it is equally important to understand how new genres can arise given the focus on MMM as one that is newly minted. Historically, culture and music have progressed in tandem with the development of technology that creates new instruments or new techniques in which music can be produced and performed.[10] While this is important to consider, the focus here is on how genres arise in terms of collective identification rather than technological advancements, emphasizing social categorization instead of raw creation. This conception of genre formation considers both the texts within the grouping - the artists and their music - and the context that surrounds the emergence of these new categories. Sociologically, most music genres are at first small and highly specialized but eventually grow in size and popularity until they are integrated as widely recognizable across social boundaries. These niche groups start between a few people that usually share a dislike with modern music and who are looking to create a genre that resonates with their own unique style. They then evolve into locally based scenes that begin to generate a surrounding community which cements a following that invites more and more acclaim until they reach the level of industry recognition. Industries can be as large as multinational corporations to as small as independent labels, but the importance is the level of outreach that the genre has reached.[11] With the questions of what genre is and how new ones emerge clearly defined, further inquiry can now be made into the specifics of MMM.

MEN MISREPRESENTING MUSIC

Masculinity within musical mediums has taken several forms throughout historical musicology. Traditional conceptions of this construct within music as seen in audiovisual forms idealize adolescence as a prominent feature of manhood through the spaces men occupy, such as the streets and locker rooms, and the activities they engage in, such as seducing women or cruising down the street.[12] This in turn means marginalizing women as secondary to men and their "mission" by assigning them minor roles as sexualized figures or antagonists if they are lucky enough to be featured at all. Take, for instance, Bruce Springsteen's song "Darlington County".[13] In it, he and a friend travel down from New York City to Darlington County, South Carolina in search of work and women since they were unable to find either in the city they came from. The content of the song is framed around these working-class protagonists and their attempt to make the best of their lives despite less than favorable conditions, echoing the main themes of the album it appears on. While women are mentioned in the song, they only serve as a plot device and objects of desire that pertain to the mission both men have in mind, being referred to only as "little girl" when they are mentioned. Their role is minimal throughout the song, and they certainly don't contribute to the overall message Springsteen is trying to convey about the struggles of working-class men in America, demonstrating one example out of the many instances of women being marginalized within a mainstream male artist's music.

Studies have gone as far as to define distinct modes of masculinity in music that were first applied to metal music of the 1980s but still hold relevance in modern musical masculinity.[14] These include exscription, writing women out of the narrative, misogyny, the empowerment of men resulting from the subjugation of women, romance, the transcendence of love over all else, and androgyny, the use of female stylistic elements by males that blend the visual representation of gender and smooth the rough edges associated with masculine portrayals. While some of these modes have become outdated or "canceled" in modern times, others have been reimagined and persisted in terms of masculine expression.

In analyzing MMM, this category seems to have spawned from the indie genre[15] and is currently at the scene level of recognition, having support from subgroups of men who identify with this music. Looking at indie closer, this music is a male-dominated genre with a male-dominated audience that phenomenologically upholds some of the described aspects of hegemonic masculinity while also "constructing alternative masculinities" that challenge the current structure.[16] The independent aspect of this genre that is antagonistic with mainstream music industries allows artists to freely express themselves in their defiance of the status quo while also allowing them to criticize other established structures such as masculinity. While some might equate the utilization of androgyny and romanticism by male indie artists as a modern conception of the previously mentioned modes that appropriates feminine characteristics, these methods are used not to invade female spaces as gender tourists but to

reconceive these modes in a healthily masculine way that isn't reliant on criticizing or parodizing femininity.[17] Such a reconstruction allows for male artists and listeners to express themselves and their manhood in a normative way as opposed to the classical way masculinity has previously been practiced and expressed. This also allows for said artists to expand their audience base through with a type of female address that tempers previously misogynistic aspects of masculine expressions within music and plays to both sides of the gender aisle.

Despite this modern approach to defying music and gender norms, MMM appears to be regressive in its messaging and surrounding culture. One could look towards the music being grouped into this genre as the source for this backwardness, but the messages of artists seem to be genuine in their personal introspections and criticisms of society and themselves rather than promoting traditional features of masculinity. This isn't to discount certain MMM tracks that clearly demonstrate an upholding of hegemonic masculinity such as "Scott Pilgrim vs. the World Ruined a Whole Generation of Women" by Negative XP[18] but to say that the majority of indie music grouped under this genre doesn't exhibit traditionally masculine behaviors. Insight is then directed towards the audience that supports this genre as the supposed source of the negativeness associated with MMM.

THE MANIPULATORS

When looking closer at these men who constitute this audience, they fall into two categories: the posers and the players. These models are constructed along the lines of observations of self-purported MMM supporters and their statements and arguments made on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Reddit amongst other places along with personal experience that adds insight into fleshing these profiles out. The manipulative aspect of these types of men comes into play either through the way the music is used or the way the music is conceptualized. Posers are emotionally manipulative in the way they utilize the music to their own benefit while players manipulate the messages and meanings of songs to fit their perception of masculinity. Although the structure of this manipulation is dichotomous, men can inhabit both roles and utilize both forms of manipulation through their enjoyment and use of MMM. The following is a more detailed analysis of both characters to create a comprehensive picture of who these manipulators are.

In line with the messaging of indie music, the posers purport to be akin to MMM artists in the way they healthily express their own masculinity and may do so, but they use this practice as a tool to appeal to others, usually women, rather than as a genuine expression of healthy masculinity. If an artist were to discuss his feelings of regret for the past mistakes he's made in a relationship and promise to change for the better, a poser might don this persona and use it to make himself seem like a troubled but changed man despite him only impersonating such a person. Relating back to the conversation on film bros and the questionable characters they support, the archetype of this kind of male manipulator can be related to the character of Tom Ripley created by Patricia Highsmith and presented in the film *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.[19] This movie focuses on Tom's use of deception and manipulation in order to live a lavish Italian lifestyle during the late 1950s which ends with his success rather than him being apprehended for the crimes he committed along the way, making him an easy protagonist for film bros to admire. What makes him so talented is his ability to quickly observe and digest information about someone and almost flawlessly impersonate them and their identity down to the smallest of details, a talent he employs after murdering and assuming the identity of a rich American socialite he befriended while in Italy. Tom is completely aware of his actions and the consequences that will follow if he is caught yet he takes up the identity of the murdered man for months, acting as if he were this person himself. While the case of Tom Ripley is on a much larger and fictional scale, his essential element of imitation and the way in which he carries this out can be related back to the poser. The poser and Tom may have different goals with their manipulation, but both share the same motivations in doing so. This person is a microcosm of who Tom is, someone who impersonates and lives through the identities of others for their own personal gain, all while fully cognizant of what they are doing.

On the other hand, the players misinterpret the messages of MMM artists by viewing them in a traditionally masculine way rather than as progressive concerning gender norms. Where an artist might be blaming himself for the failure of a relationship, a player may instead misinterpret this as an attack on

the woman for ruining the relationship. Utilizing another film bro figure to develop this manipulator's model, look to the character of Teddy Daniels from Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island*.[20] Teddy is a U.S. Marshal who travels to an island that houses a hospital for the criminally insane in search of an escaped patient who was admitted for murdering her children. After searching the island for the woman for the duration of the film, it is revealed in the end that Teddy is a patient on the island and his real name is Andrew Laeddis, a former U.S. Marshal committed to the hospital after murdering his manic-depressive wife after she had murdered their children. His delusional state as Teddy is a result of his guilt for the deaths of his children, and the whole plot is an attempt by the doctors to help him regain his true personality. Although the staff does feed into the delusions of Andrew, he himself creates the false image that he purports to be his reality through his reworking of actual events into the narrative that is Teddy Daniels. Again, while the example of Teddy and his delusions of himself and reality are both exaggerated and fictitious, scaling down his state of mind presents a persona on par with the player. This manipulator similarly takes reality, in this case the lyrics or messaging of an artist, and shoehorns it to fit his own interpretation of what's being said, changing a song that might be dealing with a progressive expression of masculinity into one that fits his traditionally masculine conception. His misconceptions are not as serious or dangerous as Teddy's case, but both figures replace the facts of a situation with their own fabricated version of the world that outright denies the reality in front of them. With both profiles being developed, further insight can be conducted into how these manipulators would interpret a song within their canon.

THE MUSIC IN QUESTION

Knowing now how male manipulators view MMM and interpret messaging from artists and songs grouped under this genre, these theoretical inferences can now be empirically tested by analyzing a song from a band reputed to be at the top of the MMM hierarchy. The selected track "Creep" by Radiohead[21] is best suited for this analysis as it comes from a band that is well known within and outside of the MMM community and is considered to be the most famous glorifying anthem that any male manipulator will most certainly have in his discography. Important in this analysis is the differentiation between intention and reception, what's being said versus what's being heard since this genre is upheld by audience standards.

To give a brief overview of the artists in question, Radiohead is an English rock band consisting of members Thom Yorke, Johnny Greenwood, Colin Greenwood, Ed O'Brien, and Phillip Selway, originating from Abingdon, Oxfordshire in 1985. The band is well rooted within the alternative rock genre and is famous for their experimentation with their sound and their wide-ranging themes addressing issues such as impermanence, alienation, and the war on terror amongst other things, all complemented by Thom Yorke's memorably haunting and melancholic vocals. Among the acclaim and awards the band has received are six Grammys, seven top ten singles, and induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, all of which attest to the popularity and recognition the band has received throughout their career. The MMM community gravitates toward Radiohead and apotheosizes the band as one that is at the heart of MMM because of the plethora of themes the band addresses that are either shared by or relatable to the audience of male manipulators; these themes can be summed up as either critiques on modern society or emotionally charged divulgences which are usually taken out of context by the community and repurposed in their own light to support their ideologies and behaviors. Looking closer at "Creep", the band's most streamed and highest performing single, the way in which male manipulators interpret and utilize this work will be seen as well as how the community's reception of this song is a departure from the reason for its creation.

ARE YOU REALLY A CREEP?

"Creep" is the debut single off Radiohead's debut studio album *Pablo Honey* which was released in 1993 and is triple platinum as of 2013. Yorke had written the song while attending school in the 1980s about a woman he began to follow at the time who coincidentally attended a Radiohead event.[22] He never actually interacted with the woman but only observed her from a distance. The song is told from his perspective about him dealing with his emotions surrounding that woman who he found to be

captivating and beautiful, so much so that he felt that he wasn't worthy of her and that he was a "creep" for even admiring her. In the first verse, he describes her as "an angel" and notes how she "float[s] like a feather/In a beautiful world," delicately articulating his feelings about her. This quickly sours as the verse transitions into the chorus of the song about how he's a "creep" and a "weirdo", vocalizing his internal insecurities about himself and how he doesn't deserve her nor to be in a world that contains such beauty. These insecurities are further explored in the second verse where Yorke laments about wanting control over himself and his self-doubt, wanting "a perfect body/… a perfect soul" so that he might be more appealing and memorable to the woman, but again he returns to the main refrain of self-criticism and degenerates even further. After the second chorus, the bridge comes in and he bemoans that the woman is running away, that she's "running out the door", a line that could be interpreted literally or figuratively. Either way, both interpretations emphasize the feeling of rejection from the woman which touches again on his anxiety and lack of self-confidence. The song closes out with his despondent resignation about never being good enough for the woman, singing "Whatever makes you happy/Whatever you want" as if to say she would be happier without him before returning to the final recitation of the chorus. The oscillation between verses about unattainable beauty and the self-deprecating chorus mimic the mind's indecisiveness and Yorke's inability to resolve his conflicting emotions. It's a simple but harsh introspection surrounding the woman he followed and how she made him feel, allowing the audience to witness this deeply visceral experience. When asked about the song in an interview, Yorke responded:

> I have a real problem being a man in the '90s, anyway. Any man with any sensitivity or conscience toward the opposite sex would have a problem. To actually assert yourself in a masculine way without looking like you're in a hard-rock band is a very difficult thing to do…. It comes back to the music we write, which is not effeminate, but it's not brutal in its arrogance. It's one of the things I'm always trying: To assert a sexual persona and on the other hand trying desperately to negate it.[23]

His progressive views on masculinity and demonstrations of it within the band's music and performances weren't unheard of at the time but were not normalized outside of the indie culture, showing how Radiohead laid foundations for these views to be further expanded upon by future artists. However, reception of this song by certain fans who fall within the MMM community presents a marked departure from the views expressed above.

Looking at both groups of male manipulators, each interpret and utilize this song in their own unique fashion. The posers hear and understand what is being said, recognizing the level of emotional intimacy present in Yorke's raw and honest admittance about his feelings. Instead of adopting the healthy approach towards processing their emotions, these manipulators emulate his emotional awareness for their personal benefit in terms of desirability towards women. This tactic of appeal may not work on all women, but the aim is that by flaunting their vulnerability by talking about how they want that "perfect body/… [that] perfect soul" and how they "want her to notice/When [he's] not around", that this will make the man seem inwardly aware of himself and his flaws which softens his exterior image and heightens his attractiveness. They aren't presenting themselves as the "creep" necessarily but are purporting to be the type of man that has the ability to recognize himself as such. Even if they are metacognitively aware of their emotions as Yorke is, they aren't genuinely practicing a tool of healthy masculinity but parodizing it for the benefit of their manipulative interests.

On the contrariy, the players completely misinterpret the message being put forth and the intention behind the song, translating its self-examination as celebratory rather than critical. The repeated refrain of "I'm a creep/I'm a weirdo/… I don't belong here" becomes reconceived as an ode to a toxic masculine personality that is regressive in its portrayal of the self instead of progressive as Yorke intended. They aren't seeing themselves as the tender emotionally cognizant man but as the degenerative figure that arises from this introspection. Where in the second verse he talks about wanting control and perfection of himself and his mind was a source of replication for the posers, players instead manipulate these lines to become a testament to male entitlement, that they deserve to have that control and

perfection because of the way they traditionally conceive masculine expressions. There's a sense of pride in knowing that they resemble the creep and exhibit the same kind of demeaning behavior that they interpret throughout the song and transform what was a personal reflection into a paean that idolizes conventional and harmful displays of masculinity.

While some might argue that the selected case cannot be extrapolated to the entire MMM genre because of its mainstream prevalence that doesn't resemble the nicheness of this community, changing the song in question to one that is less recognizable won't affect the way in which the MMM audience perceives any work they consider to be within their musical catalogue. The MMM genre doesn't originate from the music that is grouped under it but from the men who create the community that surrounds it and upholds the hegemonic masculine standards that the indie genre tries to combat. This being said, the negativeness that is sometimes associated with MMM isn't directed at the artists who create this music then but the men who listen to it and exhibit these kinds of behavior. Artists aren't "red flags" because of the content of their music but because of the audience that surrounds them and indulges in their work. Although art is an interpretive medium, utilizing it in a way that adversely affects others in practice or mentality is contrary to the reason it is created. Art is meant to be enjoyed in its consumption, not employed as a means for manipulation that empowers one group over another. In the same way that film bros may put *American Psycho* on a pedestal despite the character of Patrick Bateman being a parody on traditional masculinity, the MMM community will continue to thrive off their delusionary takes on artists who are attempting to genuinely reimagine masculinity.

CONCLUSION

Indie artists and their music are usually center stage when it comes to identifying MMM, but musicians outside of this genre such as MF DOOM and Future who are revered hip-hop producers tend to be associated with this label as well. When presented with these artists who are drastically different in presentation and style from the indie groups analyzed, the framework for MMM doesn't neatly apply to their music, begging the question of how MMM is received outside of the indie model presented. An area for further research could be expanding the definition and scope of MMM to apply to all genres of music rather than a select few ones as this study has done. Though the audience may be the same in terms of the group of men who listen to and misconceive indie artists, the way in which these same men listen to and interpret artists in other genres might differ from the original framework proposed.

Keeping this in mind, the answer to the question proposed at the beginning of the paper can now be fully answered. Male manipulator music isn't about what the artists are saying but what their audience is doing. The musicians may have honest intentions in the work they put out, but the men who consume their art don't. Male manipulators flip the script concerning the messages artists are trying to convey about reconstructing masculinity in the present day and continue to stand by their retrogressive displays of hegemonic masculinity out of pure ignorance to the modernization of gender norms. In short, male manipulator music collectively groups progressive displays of masculinity in music and misrepresents them as symbols to the existing ways in which men have previously asserted their virility. These men should not be cast aside as lost in their own masculinity but instead should be educated on the messages their musical figures are promoting and illuminated on the irony present in their thinking so that they may be able to truly understand what their beloved artists are trying to say.

NOTES

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