

Writing Wholeness into the Viral Narrative in Pop Music Criticism

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When I first planned my research into the developing viral narrative in popular music, my focus was set on the critics who used this narrative. As long as musicians have been going viral—the phenomenon of certain online content becoming wildly famous seemingly instantly and out of nowhere—critics have used the perceived “out of nowhere”-ness of virality to dub artists who have made viral music as lucky and with little artistic merit. This viral narrative contests artists’ agency behind their art and its success, and critics employ this narrative especially often with regards to artists who are young women, as well as queer artists and artists of color. The original goal of this study was to analyze this narrative’s pervasiveness and its effects, addressing a common narrative in music criticism that is rarely acknowledged as such.

However, early on in my research, I decided to shift the focus of the project. Several factors pushed me to focus less upon critics’ use of the viral narrative and more upon the artists themselves. First, I had made a similar shift in focus in my Senior 4040 project, *Dresses to Droids: Strategic Ambiguity in Popular Music*, which I had originally intended to focus on critical reception of artists who employ certain types of ambiguity in their identity, but then found a more meaningful direction for the project in analyzing the ambiguities themselves, and how they manifest as power for artists who use them. Second, early on in researching, I felt the best way to push back on the viral narrative was not to focus on it, but present a counter narrative that is more wholly true. The viral narrative focuses on the element of chance to discredit an artist, and while chance plays a role in all aspects of life, it is not the only element that causes success in the music industry, or even virality. In other words, the problem of the viral narrative is not that it is not true, but that it is only a *partial* truth. By using the viral narrative, critics have, in their writing, robbed viral musicians of an inherent artistic and human wholeness.

My goal then became to recount the stories of viral musicians in a way that gives this wholeness back to them. To this end, I studied several artists’ background pre- and post-virality, paying close attention to the artists’ musical intentions and their presentation of that music, on social media and otherwise. This way, a story about a viral musician and their viral moment can accept luck as an inevitable factor in any individual’s success, but still present other truths about viral musicians that are just as inherent.

Perhaps the strongest reason to approach this study in this way is that no viral musician is the same—nor is their viral moment, and nor is the success that the viral moment gains them. The differences between, for example, the success of Maggie Rogers following her song “Alaska” and that of Lil Nas X following “Old Town Road” illustrate the impossibility that the two were benefactors of luck from the exact same system. The writing that came from this project focused on comparing and contrasting these artists’ stories. I envision this research as the foundation for a future collection of several essays or chapters, each focusing on the story of one of these viral artists, presenting it side by side with other viral stories as part of a shared viral experience but without sparing the artist of the wholeness that the project originally aims to give.

By telling a fuller story about a viral musician—one that includes analysis of the artist’s intention, skill, personal background, historical context, and luck—critics can acknowledge multiplicity in an artist’s story while working towards a better understanding of virality and how artists can succeed by using it. In this way, writing a more whole narrative about an artist not only behooves the artist discussed, but it is also paramount to writers who wish to push the discipline of music criticism to be as accurate and holistic as it can be.