

ByteNoise

On the Origin of Genres

After reading chapter eleven of Richard Dawkins's book *The Selfish Gene* (the one where he introduces the term "meme" to the public consciousness) and thinking about my record collection, it occurred to me that each song or piece of [music](#) can be thought of as a memeplex, while any constituent part of it could be thought of as an individual meme, be it an instrument, sample, melody, rhythm, chord progression, time signature, or even the topic of a song's lyric.

A meme is essentially an idea, and a memeplex is a group of compatible ideas. Specific examples of musical memes might include such diverse elements as the sound of an acoustic piano, the Amen break, the main melody to Beethoven's Ninth, the four-to-the-floor beat of house music, blues chord progressions, four over four time, or the lyrical theme of falling in love.

It would even appear that just as certain genes work better together, such as those for creating sharp teeth and those for digesting flesh, so do certain musical memes. For example, the memes of an acoustic drum kit, an electric guitar, an electric bass guitar, power chords, singing aggressively and four over four time all work well together, whereas a combination of, say, power chords, singing softly and singing a lyric about the theme of falling in love wouldn't work as well together.

When an artist's music is said to be formulaic, it generally means that they have stuck with a certain combination of memes for several songs. This is usually because they've found that particular combination to be more popular than the memeplexes they've offered on previous songs, so it's understandable that they might want to stick with the successful memeplex until it ceases to be popular.

A good example of this is the memeplex of Moby's successful work, which for the most part consists of the following memes: an old recording of someone singing a blues vocal; religious wording in the lyric; a lyric dealing with the emotions caused by hard times; the house style playing of chords on a piano; dramatic strings; breakbeats; four over four time.

If a [song](#) is a memeplex, then a genre is roughly analogous to a species. The combination I mentioned earlier of acoustic drum kit, electric guitar, electric bass guitar, aggressive singing and - more likely than not - power chords is the baseline (so to speak) memeplex of modern rock music, although it can still work in combination with enough of a diversity of other memes to provide a rich memetic environment in which to work.

Where the analogy to genetics falls apart is that breeding between more than one parent, and even between different species, can work and should even be encouraged. Although certain combinations of memes work better together than others, it can often be surprising which memes get plucked from their native genre to be used in an entirely different one, from the ethnic vocal used in the bridge of The Prodigy's hit Smack My Bitch Up to the use of reggae skanks and dub techniques in [Leftfield's](#) album [Leftism](#).

Pop music is well known for assimilating memes once they have

been established in more interesting genres. For example, hip-hop, which became popular in the eighties, incorporated the vocal style of rapping. As a result of its popularity, by the early nineties many pop songs had incorporated the meme of rapping, although it was mostly confined to the bridge of an otherwise more orthodox song.

Popular music, even that which has artistic merit, is always the result of combining established memes with only one or two fringe memes. Relatively obscure recordings may consist of, say, rapping over the top of a [drum machine](#) playing simple rhythms, such as is the case with LL Cool J's album *Radio*. However, rapping was only introduced to the mainstream when Run-D.M.C. combined these fringe memes with the familiar memes of electric guitars and melodic riffs in *Raising Hell*.

Not only is it difficult to make a song or piece of music that consists entirely of original memes, it's also guaranteed to make your music unpopular. The replicating equipment of these memplexes is the general public, and they won't buy or copy music consisting of entirely original memes in sufficient quantities to propagate it throughout the public consciousness. Only memplexes based mostly on established memes are likely to survive, with at most one or two new ones thrown in for novelty.

For example, when synthesizers were first manufactured, several musicians released albums consisting of original music played solely on the new devices. These albums quickly faded into obscurity. For them to catch the public attention, it took [Wendy Carlos's](#) performance of well known classical music on one of these new instruments on her album *Switched-On Bach*, not to mention various rock musicians who incorporated some of the new, synthetic sounds into their otherwise orthodox rock

music.

In other words, popular music is always the result of gradual evolution, never intelligent design. If you consciously try to sit down and invent a whole new genre, then at best you will only influence other musicians. The most you could hope for would be that they would in turn create music that fused one or two of your memes with many more accepted memes as this would likely create the first popular music that incorporated your memes. At worst, even that won't happen and your music will instantly fade into obscurity.

If you feel that your music should be original for artistic purposes, then bear in mind that it is enough for the *combination* of memes to be unique - or at least relatively rare. The individual memes themselves seldom need or even benefit from being entirely new, untried ones.

Don't worry if this Darwinian process of evolving music seems painstakingly slow. It should be greatly sped up by the many musicians and vocalists starting to release their work under various Creative Commons licenses. The easier it is for musicians to legally remix, cover and build upon each other's songs, even taking snippets of someone else's work and putting it in an entirely new context, the faster music will evolve.

If you remix someone else's song, then whichever version is objectively seen as the best - quantifiable as which is the most popular - is the version which other people will hear, and therefore have the opportunity to remix and build upon in turn. This survival of the fittest model closely resembles biological evolution, and should result in the most popular memes sticking around for a long time, merging with new ones and disregarding the less popular ones as people's tastes change.

It's an exciting thought to realise that we are able to witness such an explosion of new ideas being mixed in with established ones. It will be interesting to see what emerges as a result of musicians making a conscious effort to work together for the good of their music. After all, as Richard Dawkins points out, these memes will likely long outlive their creators' biological genes.