It has been suggested in a number of discussions that genre is a hopelessly ambiguous and inconsistent way to organize and explore music. (McKay & Fujinaga 2006 p.3)

"Good luck pinning down a definition; in metal, even the subgenres have subgenres"

I have been introducing both Music and Music Management students to ideas of genre for around a decade now and in a couple of weeks I will be introducing a new batch of undergraduates to its joys. It is always an illuminating experience to discuss with students the broader contextual, political, economic and social aspects of music making, music business and music fandom beyond the sounds of music itself.

Students invariably struggle with the notion that there are boundaries to genre worlds and there is somehow a rule system for involvement in it, but have not protested too much at the notion of genre itself. However, increasingly in recent years the very idea of genre has become, to me at least, problematic for a number of reasons; some of which I want to explore here.

Firstly - The continuing fracture genres into more and more specific micro-genres. Within the Doom world - itself a genre within the meta-genre heavy metal, there are continuing evolving sub-genres with distinct expectations: musically, sartorially, economically, socially and or politically. Proto-Doom, Traditional Doom, Gothic Doom, Sludge, Stoner Doom, Funeral Doom, Epic Doom, Blackened-Death Doom, Death Doom all exist as subsets of a subset of heavy metal.

Secondly - and in seeming contradiction to the first point. Some music makers seem to be making music across genre boundaries and some listeners explore the musical landscape without care of genre labels. teaching in a vibrant music department at Falmouth invariably means seeing new bands from emerging musicians. Recently I saw a Falmouth band - Sunbruise - who fused numerous genres but broadly shoegaze and contemporary heavy metal.

And Finally - Academic discussion of genre does not seem to have kept up pace with what I would consider the parallel study of subcultures. Simply put we might discuss a post-subcultural world but not a post genre world. We might discuss the fluid, part time involvement with identities and cultural groups, but not how this might impact on how we know genres. Students themselves seem increasingly more interested in other ways of knowing music. I'm about to start supervising a dissertation that hopes to explore what we mean by 'Heavy'.

What I want to do today is to explore these three issues - The naming and splintering of genres, the act of music making and discussion of this music in a post-genre world, and the theoretical exploration of contemporary genre in turn.

So, to start with the fracturing of genres.

The idea of genres, meta-genres and sub-genres can usefully be applied to any and all genre worlds whether heavy metal or not, whether large or small. And the work of Franco Fabbri - still stands, alongside the work of Simon Frith, as a rigorous way to explore the constituent wide-ranging elements of genre worlds. In the early 1980s, when Fabbri produced these ideas, there were arguably fewer genres than there are today. Genres are not (no longer) replaced by newer musical types, erased and disappearing into the past, but are kept alive through a number of routes and formats - whether the practices of record collectors or the digital archiving of Spotify, Tidal, Apple Music et al, or the renaming and grouping of artists retrospectively in to new/old genres. And whilst the New Wave of British Heavy Metal - emerging in 1979 - as a defined journalistically titled genre[1] might be the most specific of all genre names, this was perhaps a useful division in the growing Heavy Metal genre rather than the creation of a divisive micro-genre.

So, how many genres are there? In 1985, Fabbri conducted a study of genre that listed, for its participants 88 genres and then explored the complexity of this level of choice, preference or taste. In 2015 Spotify divided its music in to 1,371 genre tags (Richman 2015) but has, this year, brought in, and subsequently removed, a system where users tag the songs with genre names (Yoo 2018) arguably meaning a potentially limitless number of genres. Glenn McDonald has constructed a series of interactive online maps at 'everynoiseatonce' that track genres against a number of other variables to produce a map of 1,932 genres including Funeral Doom and Lovecraftian Metal - (including acts such as Portal), but not including the aforementioned Blackened Doom. Whether the actual amount of named genres is even calculable, is not the point here, but the sheer number means that the relationship between sub-genre and genre or meta-genre has shifted. These genres are different. They are sub-genres, but what do these naming and dividing exercises mean? They arguably link to contemporary ideas of choice, to Anderson's Long Tail of availability of products rather than any sense of tyranny or impossibility of choice. But this, of course, means that musicians who produce music in identifiable micro-genres have limited appeal and markets to those who fully subscribe to their 'rules', but allow signposted exploration to those who practice some kind of eclecticism in their music listening or streaming. When a sub-genre only contains one artist however, have we reached the end of community and reduced naming to description. **"And they call themselves blackened doom…. I'm no genre nazi but these guys are the least black metal doom band ever."** (Anon 2017)

If the logical conclusion of sub-genres is the genre of one, then at the other extreme is the genre of none, another identifiable practice in this 'post-genre' world; my second point - Genre blurring.

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[1] Geoff Barton - Sounds May 1979 although coined by the editor Alan Lewis

This ignoring of genre boundaries, blurring, melting, disregard to conventions or expectations, leaves me simultaneously excited and utterly baffled. When I was approached by a member of Sunbruise - the band I mentioned earlier who blended elements of metal with shoegaze, although I should point out how they described themselves - and asked what I thought, I answered that I had no idea how to listen to them, that I had no idea what they were, I was missing the simple genre guidance, linguistic or visual labelling and the certainty and comfort of such signifiers. I am quite used to the vaguely alternative dress codes of contemporary students, the lack of tribal uniforms - although these still do exist - but was genuinely unable to enjoy this musical performance without a framework of understanding. Their description of themselves is wide-reaching. **[slide]**

It isn't just metal or alternative rock genres that have these multiple signifiers of genre but also the broader pop world. Where artists like Lana Del Ray listed or labelled as **"pop, indie R&B, indietronica, chamber pop, synthpop"** simultaneously. Artists **"now straddle, or exist beyond, genres that seemed set in concrete as little as 10 years ago. They represent a cross-pollination that makes it harder than ever to definitively state that you like or dislike one genre or another."** That is not to say that music is no longer important to listeners **"79% of 13-to 32-year-olds said their tastes didn't fall into one specific music genre. Just 11% said that they only listened to one genre of music."** (Robinson 2016)

so, if at one extreme micro-genres are creating smaller and smaller scenes and at the other extreme multiple genre identities or no genre identity can be ascribed, what theoretical positions are available to analysts of popular music? Is the **"entropy of the musical universe"** that Fabbri hints at in his 1999 paper working at both ends of this spectrum?

Whilst the fracturing and multiplying of genres do not necessarily require new ways of exploring them - Franco Fabbri's early eighties explorations of the "theory of musical genres" still works in the identification of the sound, image, behaviour, ideology and economics of each of these genres, the imagining and description of the relationship between genres might be worthy of exploration. **[slide]** Whilst we might suggest that 'Heavy Metal' is a meta-genre, Fabbri 1999 might suggest that this imagining is at a 'basic level', with Doom being a 'subordinate' of this category needing more information to understand it and its parent category. We might suggest that Doom is a genre as a subset of Heavy Metal and that it, itself, has sub-genres - traditional, funeral, epic etc which, with further information and detail again, **"hierarchically put into order in a system of basic, superordinate and subordinate concepts"** (Eco, in Fabbri, 1999. pp. 2- 3). Whilst this model works, it does seem to suggest a 'Russian doll' scenario with increasing levels of detail and knowledge needed to understand genres that have smaller and smaller communities.

I was taken with Fabbri's geographical and mapping ideas and metaphors when I first read the 1999 article and could not see any new ways of thinking about genre through the rigid hierarchical ordering of genres. As Fabbri himself suggests **"I have the impression that the usage of terms based in the lexicons of geography and topography became more and more common in the last two decades"** (Fabbri, 1999 p.11)

As a doom fan, as part of the community's wider behaviours I have a taste for exploitation and horror films and in particular Italian Giallo movies. I was reading Koven's (2006) book 'La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film' and was struck by this passage.

"Although, in Italian, genere does literally mean "genre," within the context we are currently discussing genre, the Italian filone may be more appropriate. In literary studies, the giallo, like crime or detective fiction as genre, would be considered genere. Filone, on the other hand, would tend to be used primarily in a more scientific context, like geology (where filone would refer to a vein of mineral in a rock) or geography (as in the main current in a river) […] Putting these together, if we think of a larger generic pattern as a river, in this context the giallo as genre, several smaller "streamlets" branch off from the genre-river, occasionally reconnecting to the main flow farther "downstream." Perhaps, in some cases, what we think of as a film genre, like the giallo, may be a cluster of concurrent streamlets, veins, or traditions." (p.6)

So we might, using this model, think of sub or micro genres as 'streamlets', still fed by and connected to their parental rivers and with the possibility of return.

This notion of fluidity maps against post subcultural theory where participants **"do not therefore exhibit stable practices of inclusion and exclusion– they are integrative and distinctive at the same time. These new network socialities seem to encourage plural, fluid and part-time rather than fixed, discrete and encompassing group identities – individuals are able to flow between multiple signs of identity conceptions."** Or as journalist Peter Robinson puts it **"Perhaps, in the age of endless ways to express yourself, it's also less necessary to define your identity in your teenage years by clinging to genres."**

Or in the case of the cultures that operate around musical activity and genre:

"it is possible to participate simultaneously in the activities of two or more such network socialities. The single members of these groups do not foster their community as a priority but use the group to satisfy their individual needs." (Muggleton & Wienzierl 2005, p. 23)

Perhaps it is not the imagining, theorising and describing of genres that is the problem here but the very notion of genre itself. Perhaps - whilst still a useful way to explore snapshots of musical production and consumption - it is no longer the primary marker for categorising music outside of the portfolios of record companies and their respective marketing and PR departments. There are

other ways to describe music that still arises categorisation. The aforementioned exploration of 'heavy' that students are about to embark on as a way to categorise certain qualities of music - sonically or ideologically. But perhaps the most accepted and current way of categorising music in an age of streaming is the playlist. The playlist does not necessarily mean the death of genre and many playlists are genre specific. However, Samuel Potts - head of radio for Columbia records suggests **[slide]**

"look at some of the top Spotify playlists: Your Coffee Break, Feel Good Friday, Songs to Sing in The Shower. It's a 24-hour service providing a soundtrack to every moment in your life." (In Robinson 2016)

Include list of metal playlists from spotify

Fabbri draws on Eco a number of times in his explorations of mapping and musical categorisation. Eco suggests that for things to be categorised they need **"to be recognized as such, they need reference to a framework of cultural norms"** (Eco 1997, p. 139 in Fabbri, 1999 p.3)

The playlist, it would appear, is, or has become, a cultural norm and so can be seen as a recognisable form of categorisation and perform some of he same functions that genre can, where **"Labels such as genre and mood have the important advantage that they provide one with a vocabulary that can be used to discuss musical categories."** (McKay & Fujinaga 2006 p.4)

Spotify users surveyed by Norwegian researchers seemed to need this categorisation and **"made efforts to save or stabilize their music listening by creating playlists to combat the tendency for their listening to become fragmented and ephemeral through music-streaming services."** (Hagen & Lüders 2017 p. 648)

Whilst the playlist is a categorising device, it - the playlist - differs in a number of respects from genre.

firstly, it is only recognisable in its totality. Individual songs in isolation can not be identified in this way, whilst they can be seen as part of a genre world, even if the musician changes genre.

Secondly - the playlist is not defined by the community but by the playlist maker - its popularity might be defined by the community but not its inclusivity.

Thirdly - the further reaches of genre do not necessarily apply to playlists. Whilst playlists may link to behaviours, or at least soundtrack them, they do not speak about broader behaviours or ideologies, nor do they link to the visual performance or packaging conventions that Simon Frith suggests in his reworking of 'genre rules'.

It may well be that genre is no longer the dominant way in which we categorise music particularly where it is consumed and discussed in online spaces. However, the badge, patch, jacket, t-shirt, haircut, walk, etc, still acts as a form of capital to be exchanged in the offline world.

Apple Music has managed to churn out 14,000 playlists in its single year of existence, according to a recent Buzzfeed profile on digital music curation. What's more: It's done so with only a dozen employees, all of whom have "embarked on a never-ending quest to organize every song in history into concise playlists that you can't live without." The team is led by Scott Plagenhoef, the former editor-in-chief of Pitchfork, and based in Culver City, California. https://qz.com/735240/all-those-apple-music-playlists-are-produced-by-just-a-dozen-people/

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