

Hip-Hop, Ambient Music, and Genre Ancestry

by Mauro Miller

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree, Bachelor of Arts,
Music

The Colorado College

April 11, 2021

Approved by *Iddo Aharony* Date: April 24, 2021
Iddo Aharony, Assistant Professor of Music

Ryan Bañagale Date: April 24, 2021
Ryan Bañagale, Associate Professor of Music

As time passes, the lines between different types of music have become blurred and more blurred. No longer is it simple to assign a song to just jazz, classical, or rock. Almost every day, a new genre is invented (Söderman 2004).

So how does one go about making sense of this every-expanding soundscape? Well, in order to truly comprehend a genre of music, one must do a deep dive into its history and one must look to understand its predecessors. For example, one must study the blues and gospel music to fully understand rock. Likewise, anyone would gain a lot out of examining the sounds of Detroit Techno and Chicago House before attempting to write a dubstep song.

In order to understand some of my favorite genres of music like trip-hop and bedroom pop, I studied their ancestors: ambient music and hip-hop. Yes, these two genres are different in many ways, but they overlap in modern music quite often and they have quite a few similarities. If you've listened to Clairo, Portishead, or even a lo-fi hip-hop beat, you've listened to a crossbreed between hip-hop and ambient music.

Ambient music is a minimalist approach to music that incorporates ethereal soundscapes and natural sounds. Hip-hop is a genre that uses strong rhythms and repetitive loops. It also emphasizes tone and atmosphere over musical structure and de-emphasizes rhythm. Therefore, ambient music can be enjoyed while listening to it either actively or passively. Ambient music also employs droning sounds that sustain for a long period of time. The genre originated in the 1960s and 1970s and was popularized by British musician Brian Eno with his album *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. Since then, ambient music has grown in popularity.

Hip-hop, on the other hand, focused on brash rhythms and provocative lyrics and originated in the 1970s and has become one of the most important genres of popular music internationally. The genre was created by African Americans and Latinos in the Bronx, New

York City as a type of party music that eventually turned into a mainstream music category. Hip-hop uses style elements like “rapping”, looping, and sampling and places emphasis on beats one and three. The lyrics tend to focus on political and social conflicts as well as motifs of urban life (Chang 2005).

My central research argument is that the extreme juxtaposition between hip-hop and ambient music actually facilitates a stronger understanding between the two genres and their metaphorical descendants like bedroom pop, trip-hop, and downtempo. The borders between the two seemingly very different categories of music have some similarities that only emerge when one puts them side by side. My methodology examined the history, style components, and major artists of hip-hop, ambient music, and their descendants. I also wrote original songs in the style of some of these offspring.

Before diving into these descendants, it is important to understand Hip-hop. As mentioned before, the late 70s were important for the Hip-hop genre. Just as hip-hop influenced multiple genres, many types of music contributed to the conception of hip-hop. Funk, jazz, blues, dancehall, and reggae, among others, came together in the Bronx in perfect proportions to create early hip-hop. Artists like DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa were credited as some of the first MCs. Originally an underground scene, hip-hop quickly gained commercial success with the likes of the Sugarhill Gang (Chang 2005).

Since its establishment, Hip-hop has been a sample-based genre with Afro-diasporic roots. In his book *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*, writer and ethnomusicologist, Joseph G. Schloss (2014), explains the importance of sampling. He proceeds with an explanation of how hip-hop producers collectively developed an artistic system that features strong cultural, political, and racial ties through the practice of sampling. It allows songs

to be upcycled throughout decades, connecting current songs to the past. He continues by stating that hip-hop artists created a genre that reflects moral beliefs, political values, creative aspirations, and modern cultural happenings (Schloss 2014).

Not only did the sampling and rhythmic roots reflect these ideas, but so did the lyrics of the genre. In her book, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, Imani Perry asserts the significance of hip-hop in America life and explains how it changed the American music scene with its strong political ties and anti-establishment motifs. She argues that hip hop is first and foremost black American music. She supports this statement by citing lyrics by rappers that display the inseparable bond between the Black community and the genre. Perry continues by focusing on the cultural foundations of the music and on the form and narrative features of the songs such as call and response, use of metaphor, reliance on the break, and the common archetypes of the trickster and the outlaw that have been used throughout Hip-hop's lyrical history. Together, these features create a strong bond between the culture and the sound of the Hip-hop genre (Perry 2004).

Another important aspect of Hip-hop that is important to understand is the way in which it is usually taught. Instead of being taught in the classroom, most hip-hop traditions are learned and passed down in one's community. The book investigates music creation within two hip-hop groups in Sweden. The authors address the creative learning process and the meeting between music and lyrics. Next, the authors provide two groups with a backing track from which they were instructed to create a hip-hop tune. The authors videotaped and observed the compositional process. After the recording sessions, both groups watched the video and commented on their process. The results showed that during the creative process, the lyrics are more important than the music, and that the lyrics were very personal and very different. This study provides

information on hip-hop production and I will incorporate understanding that lyrics are very important for hip-hop songs. Being a producer, in the past I have emphasized melody and rhythm (Söderman, 2004).

The Notorious B.I.G.'s hit song "Juicy" is a perfect example of Hip-hop's focus on sampling, tie to the black community, and unorthodox learning style. The Notorious B.I.G., also known as Christopher George Latore Wallace, was born May 21, 1972 in Brooklyn, New York. At a young age, he started rapping with his friends that he met at a day care. None of them received formal teaching but all of them had a deep passion for music. In his hit song "Juicy", Notorious B.I.G. raps about his humble beginning and his unlikely rise to fame despite the odds against him as a black man. He discusses his greatest influences, such as Marley Marl and Mr. Magic, who were pioneers in the early rap industry. Biggy paints the picture of what living in New York was like in the early 1990s. He says, "Time to get paid, blow up like the World Trade" and makes reference to the failed attempt to blow up the World Trade Center in 1993. Biggy explores the chaotic nature of living in New York City in the early 1990s.

The production of the song was just as pertinent as the lyrics. The song was produced by Jean "Poke" Oliver and Diddy, who included the classic "boom bap" rhythm that was common in New York in the 1990s. The rhythm is repetitive in nature and the producers included a vocal sample the lush chord progression from the song "Juicy Fruit" by the funk group Mtume (Notorious B.I.G., 1994).

Modern rappers like 21 Savage preserve the central tenants of Hip-hop that rappers like Biggie set in place. 21 Savage begins his album, *I Am Greater Than I Was* (2019), with an introspective song in which he reflects on the numerous blessings and curses in his life. He talks about how he was shot six times on his twenty-first birthday in 2013. Guest rapper, J. Cole, raps

the second verse and discusses the controversies of the modern hip-hop world such as the incarceration of fellow musician Tekashi69. 21 Savage takes the spotlight back and raps about his current citizenship crisis. In 2019, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) asserted that he is a British national who moved to the U.S. at age twelve and never became a citizen. This outraged 21 Savage, as demonstrated in his lyric, “Been through some things so I can’t imagine my kids stuck at the border”. 21 Savage explains that he can’t imagine his kids going through the same citizenship struggles, for it has been a controversy that he would not wish even on his worst enemy. He then compares his situation to that of migrant children being separated from their parents at the US-Mexico border.

Again, the production was just as related to the central tenants of Hip-hop as the lyrics were. This song was produced by DJ Dahi. Dahi uses a down-pitched soul sample from the song “I Love You” by East of Underground as backing vocals throughout the song, as well as a modern hip-hop rhythm with a strong sub-bass, modern claps, and hi-hat samples. Although some of the sounds and methods of production are different, the similar political and social themes, the focus on sampling, and the tie to the black community remain in modern rap songs (21 Savage, 2018).

As mentioned earlier, Hip-hop and ambient music are very opposite in many ways. When someone thinks about hip-hop, they think about brashness. Ambient music is very much the reverse. It promotes passive listening, as did its predecessor, minimalist music.

Ambient music’s older cousin, Minimalism, is described as a “reductive approach to composition most often characterized by simple repetitive structures, restricted diatonic pitch materials, and a steady, unflagging pulse” (Riley p. 4, 2015). According to scholar Edward Strickland (2000), minimalism first appeared in the mid-1960s in sculptures. Over time,

minimalism influenced other visual arts and music, with composers such as Philip Glass. In the late 1970s, minimalism became known through the repetitive music of musicians Steve Reich and Terry Riley and Stephen Scott. Minimalism offered a rethinking of the main schools of thought within the art world. In a way, minimalism represented the antithesis to the music and art that came before it, which was constantly becoming more and more complex.

Eventually, composer Brian Eno came along and evolved minimalist music into ambient music. Most people consider Brian Eno to be the creator of modern ambient music. Brian Eno contributed to many different genres including rock, pop, and ambient music. He produced pieces for the bands U2, Coldplay, and Slowdive, among others.

Ambient music emerged from Muzak which began in the 1950s (Riley 2015). Muzak refers to light, minimalist popular songs. According to Eno, ambient music involves creating a soundscape with a particular landscape in mind. He states that, “Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting” (Eno 2004). Ambient music creates a zone in which listeners can explore their emotions while engaging in work or other activities. Echoes, delays, loops, and drones, and samples are all essential audio components in the ambient music genre.

One of the most influential ambient albums was Eno’s sixth studio effort titled *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1978). It starts with a simple and slow piano loop backed by droning synths. As the individual tracks progress, Eno brings the synths into the foreground of the soundscape, giving the sound a darker timbre. As the looping continues, more textures emerge. Note that this is not too different from how a Hip-hop song builds on itself typically with drums, then a melody loop, and then with lyrics. The heavy reverb and sustained tones on both the piano and the synths provide a sort of metaphorical glue. As the song progresses, the frequency of the

synths rises, and slowly, a happier soundscape emerges as Eno begins to paint a landscape for the listener. In part two, Eno uses choir samples and layers them to create an ethereal effect. The longer the song continues, the more the voices drone. In Part three, Eno brings the vocals and piano together to create a dreamy, relaxing sound. In the fourth section, Eno incorporates more droning synths as well as horn and brass samples. Together, these sounds create a cold and nostalgic soundscape. Eno alternates between soft and harsh audio effects and completely changes the feel of the synthesizers. The title “Music for Airports” makes sense, considering that the timbres of the piece effectively contradict the rambunctious nature of airports. This music can be listened to both actively and passively while walking through an airport. Eno displays the importance of droning and sampling in ambient music.

Like any other genre, ambient music has evolved since its conception in the 1970s. As the genre changed, new artists emerged. One of which was Tensu Inoue. Like Eno, Inoue tried to develop a sense of place for the listener. However, Inoue made the point that ambient music should also alter the listener’s mood. He did so with the use of hypnotic sequences. Where Inoue creates music that alters mood like a pharmaceutical drug, Eno creates music that sets a stage or landscape. Not all ambient music sounds like Brian Eno’s early works (Roquet 2009).

When ambient music and hip-hop come together, something special happens. Somehow, they juxtapose yet complement each other at the same time. Since the 1970s, Hip-hop and ambient music have crossed paths multiple times: Trip-hop, Instrumental Hip-hop, and Downtempo in the 90s, as well as Lo-fi Hip-hop and Bedroom Pop in the 2010s. In the following section I will be switching between the history and analysis of different genres, and the analysis of my own songs created in the style of said genre.

One such overlap between hip-hop and ambient music is known as “Trip-hop”. Trip-hop was a genre of atmospheric, down-tempo music that was heavily influenced by movie soundtracks. Starting in Bristol, England in the early 1990s, the genre brought together elements of 1970s funk, cool jazz, and sampling. Groups such as Massive Attack and Portishead were credited for creating the genre and brought it to popularity (Roquet 2009).

A close analysis of a trip-hop song reveals the influence that hip-hop and ambient music had on the genre. One of the most famous trip-hop songs was “Glory Box” by Portishead. Written collectively by members of the band, the lyrics of “Glory Box” are about a woman who is frustrated by love and is about to give up on her relationship. The singer begs men to treat her with equality and respect, especially in the bedroom. Her sultry voice creates a space of intimacy and sensuality. In the chorus, there is a hint of anger in her voice. The singer and guitarist create a call and response with mini solos between the verses and choruses. The band uses a sample of Isaac Hayes’ “Ike’s Rap II” from the 1971 double-album, *Black Moses*. Although the sample is a simple, four-note bass line, it is the foundation of the song and helps to set a somber, angry, and pensive mood. Towards the end of the song, the band adds a bridge with strong, abrupt, and abrasive sounds that take the listener out of the slow feel of the rest of the song (Portishead 1994).

Like many hip-hop and ambient artists, Portishead recognized the power of sampling and created a hit song around one. Additionally, Portishead capitalized on drones to create a dismal soundscape, which was common amongst hip-hop and ambient music. Glory Box is also a great example of hip-hop’s influence on other genres with a brash break beat for a bridge. Even outside of the bridge, the rhythm has a classic boom-bap feel, drawing heavily from the music

scene across the pond at the time. Although Portishead's influences are apparent, their sound is very much their own. This originality was the key to their commercial success.

When setting out to create my own trip-hop song, "Untitled", I kept a few things in the front of my mind. I wanted to make it sound cinematic like most trip-hop songs, so I added a sultry vocal sample to the song during its climax. This singing was complemented by brash drum samples that cut through the mix in an abrasive manner. However, most of the song had no percussion at all which juxtaposed the aforementioned climax.

I paid homage to trip-hop's ambient roots by creating a strong sense of ambiance throughout the song. I achieved this with wide panning, a plethora of samples, and droning synths. Bird noises were added at the end of the track as a type of tribute to ambient music's father, Brian Eno. Eno was well known for sampling animals in his music.

About eight months earlier, I created my song "Orange". This track was much simpler than my other trip-hop track "Untitled". It fit into the trip-hop world in that it relied heavily on sampling, contained movielike vocals, and had experimental and ambient qualities. I made sure to include a brash hip-hop beat as well as an eerie melody, which in my opinion, added to the filmic listening experience of the song.

Trip-hop was an important crossbreed between hip-hop and ambient music. The late 1990s brought on a wave of chillout music called Downtempo. This music would be played in clubs all over the United States in relaxation sections. Starting in Ibiza, Spain, Downtempo was used by DJ's as an end-of-the-night genre that would be played at sunrise because its slow build ups went along nicely with the rising sun. In a way, Downtempo was a response to the Trip-hop scene of the previous decade. Downtempo is a more beat-driven version of ambient music at a tempo of around 90 to 110 beats per minute. People often use trip-hop as a synonym for

downtempo, but it is important to recognize the differences between the two genres. Where trip-hop incorporated strong beats, drum and bass breaks, and ambient atmospheres, downtempo emphasized electronic melodies and acoustic sounds (Hinkes-Jones 2010).

Downtempo was popularized by Australian duo Kruder & Dorfmeister in the late 1990s (Hinkes-Jones 2010). The duo drew influence from pop, hip-hop, ambient music, and drum and bass tracks. Their most famous track “Black Baby” was released in August 1996. The track starts with a sample of chirping crickets and a creaking moan, setting the obscure tone for the piece. After the intro, a vocal sample saying “oh baby” is repeated over a jazzy break beat. A bass sample plays duplets alongside the drums. From time to time, the break beat is overshadowed by rising synth pads which create a very wide atmosphere and are a nice pause from the marching rhythms.

Adopting hip-hop’s emphasis on rhythm and ambient music’s love for atmosphere, downtempo creates a safe, fun, and pleasant listening experience. On top of having many applications from soundtracks, to hotel lobbies, to clubs, downtempo also continues to evolve today while keeping its roots intact with artists like Thievery Corporation and Flume (Hinkes-Jones 2010).

Another important crossover between hip-hop and ambient music is a genre that has existed for the most part only on the internet: Lo-fi hip-hop. Although there are little to no concerts, music videos, and public artist presence, lo-fi has gained a mass following on the internet. The genre is characterized by hazy samples, fuzzy sounds, poorly recorded break beats, and whimsical noises. Like ambient music, lo-fi is an offspring of the minimalist movement. These songs usually have very few tracks and are quite uncluttered. The key feature of the genre is in the name itself. Lo-fi is short for “low fidelity”, which is a technical term for sounds and

qualities that are usually unwanted in a professional setting. Things like poor recording, imperfections, and white noise are usually unwanted in a professional environment but are embraced in lo-fi. This makes lo-fi a very Do-It-Yourself variety of music. Like ambient music, lo-fi promotes a passive listening experience. Many people prefer to listen to it while studying for this very reason. Although lo-fi hip-hop shares many qualities with its relatives like downtempo and trip-hop, the poor recording quality is what sets it apart from the rest (Stellie 2020).

Nujabes' "Feather" (2005) is a very important song for the genre. This track helped bring lo-fi into the spotlight. The song starts with a simple piano loop (quite possibly a sample) and a wooly percussion loop. Although the genre is usually without lyrics, a rapper comes in after 15 seconds along with a bass riff. An inoffensive break beat then enters, presenting the rhythm for the rest of the song. This may look like a short list of events, but this is normal for lo-fi hip-hop. The songs cannot continue to evolve if they are designed to promote passive listening. The "lo-fi-ness" is apparent with the washed reverb and imperfect timbres.

When trying to create my own lo-fi hip-hop song, I had troubles keeping the track as simple as is common for the genre. I wanted to add more to the track, but I had to constantly remind myself how important simplicity is to this vein of music. I started with distorted, poorly recorded drum samples that sounded like they were off of an old vinyl. I then created a melody on which I placed many effects to generate a strong sense of distance and ambience. I then went on to add a spoken word bridge which is commonplace for many lo-fi songs. All in all, the focus of the song was the embracing of all things low fidelity.

Lo-fi hip-hop has had a very important impact on internet music and has helped bring ambient music's influence into the mainstream (Gray 2020). Pop culture is now enjoying the lushness of "soundscaping" presented by ambient music because of it.

Eventually, another DIY offspring of ambient music and hip-hop came along: bedroom pop. The name speaks for itself. This genre was popularized by producers who created music in their own homes with the help of accessible digital audio workstations. Artists can now write, record, and produce music in the comfort of their own homes. The genre reflects this hominess with its slightly out of tune chords, cozy pads, and warm textures. Creators of this genre fuse nostalgic melodies and lo-fi sounds with rock, alternative, and pop influences. Once again this is a genre that promotes passive listening much like ambient music and although these songs may not always use hip-hop breaks beats, almost all of these songs use digital drums sounds taken from the likes of rap tunes. Like lo-fi hip-hop, bedroom pop was popularized by young talents such as Clairo and Cuco (Gray 2020).

"Lo Que Siento" (2017) by California Chicano artist Cuco is an essential song for the genre of bedroom pop in that it increased the popularity of the genre. Cuco begins the song with an out of tune guitar sample and a bit-crushed drum loop which includes many digital samples. As he begins to sing his love story, a deep field of synths join in and create a very thick support. The chorus hits with a xylophone melody that compliments the sincerity of the lyrics. The song is quite cyclical, bringing about the passive listening experience.

Setting out to make my own bedroom pop track, "Wooden Walls", was problematic at first. I could not decide if I wanted to include a hip-hop beat or a mellower rhythm. Eventually, I decided to stay away from a hip-hop sound and go with subtler drums. I attempted to gain the bedroom aesthetic by incorporating slightly out-of-tune chords and a kick drum that was not

quantized to perfection. Next, I added the sounds of a harsh winter storm to add a sense of warmth and hominess to the song's title. I further achieved the bedroom aesthetic through the use of droning pads and analog sounds.

Making a cover of a bedroom pop track was another good experience. When covering Cuco's "Bossa No Sé", I decided to bring the song's rhythms closer to its bossa nova roots with percussion that almost lagged behind the beat. In order to achieve the bedroom pop aesthetic, I set out to find the most unpolished sounds I could find. I wanted to find samples that sounded like they were literally recorded in someone's bedroom. Eventually, I found what I was looking for and I created the only cover on my album.

Bedroom Pop is another prime example of how hip-hop and ambient music's influences have protruded into modern, mainstream music. Although this genre doesn't focus as much on sampling as say, trip-hop, it remains true to its predecessor hip-hop in its informal teaching practices as well as its drum sounds.

The next crossover between hip-hop and ambient music that I came across was Instrumental Hip-hop. In most hip-hop derivatives, rapping is the primary focus of the song. It is usually this rapping that provides the majority of the depth in the song.

This is not the case for instrumental hip-hop. In this genre, the complexity, nuance, and depth are all provided by the intricate sampling and beats. Furthermore, a strong sense of ambiance is characteristic of most instrumental hip-hop tracks as well. Swelling synths, washed out samples, and droning 808s are all common themes in instrumental hip-hop that lead one to believe that the genre pulls almost as much from ambient music as it does from hip-hop. Many tracks of this variety can also promote a strong passive listening experience. It is not unusual to

hear these songs while strolling through boutique clothing stores, hotel lobbies, or art galleries (D,Errico 2008).

It would be a sin not to talk about DJ Shadow's 1996 album *Entroducing...* when on the topic of instrumental hip-hop. This album is arguably as important to this genre as Brian Eno's *Music for Airports* is to ambient music. One of the most iconic tracks off of *Entroducing...* is "Midnight in a Perfect World". This song flawlessly captivates what instrumental hip-hop is all about. Basing the song around a sorrowful piano sample, DJ Shadow builds a soundscape that constantly changes. At times, the song is gentle and atmospheric, at other times, the track is uncompromising and in the face of the listener. DJ Shadow creates a perfect balance between passive and active listening experiences with swelling background noises, dynamic gain changes, and constant musical movement. The song almost sounds like everything in it is a sample. Perhaps this is what gives the song such a multifaceted listening experience.

Setting out to create my own instrumental hip-hop track was challenging. For the longest time, it sounded disheveled with too many samples and too many beat changes. I eventually decided to focus the song on Nirvana and Portishead samples. This was a song that came to life before my eyes as I experimented with balancing atmosphere with boldness. I drew inspiration directly from DJ Shadow by including a beautiful string break right before the tough drums came back into play.

At its core, instrumental hip-hop is a sonic collage. When listening to a song in this genre one can hear soul samples, break beats, and experimental sounds all stitched together to make a musical quilt.

Zooming back out to the topic of ambient music and hip-hop, it is astonishing that two genres, so different, have come together and continue to come together in such blissful harmony.

Perhaps this is due to the common saying that opposites attract. As evidenced by concepts like sampling, looping, and unconventional teaching methods, ambient music and hip-hop have more in common than one may have previously thought. However, when combining the two genres, hip-hop supplies ambient music with qualities that ambient music does not possess on its own and vice versa. As time goes on and genres become less relevant, one will still be able to trace the roots of many songs back to ambient music and hip-hop.

From trip-hop, to bedroom pop, to downtempo and beyond, hip-hop and ambient music have created a symbiotic relationship that continues to surprise with its beauty, originality, and catchiness. Studying these genres gave me a much greater appreciation for the music that I love. The atmospheric synths of Clairo make more sense, and the sampling of Portishead sounds more thoughtful. All things considered; a genre's ancestry is just as important as its present form.

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