

Yesterday morning, my alarm clock awoke me to a radio station playing a song which, until today, I would have considered just another uselessly cookie-cutter track punched through a hip-hop artist's thousand-dollar digi-synth. It was a track by a new "artist" named Kevin Rudolph, featuring a pitiable guest line by Lil' Wayne. What piqued my interest in this single, and what later compelled me to do further research on it, was its title. "Let it Rock," a song you would naturally expect to be riddled with that classic electric guitar flavor, sounded like any ordinary hit one would find across radio stations in this era. The irony of this particular track's title, however, stretched all leaps and bounds imaginable: I couldn't make out a single instance of an electric guitar in this song. This may seem trivial, but examining this instance of reproach compelled me to notice an incredible aspect of contemporary pop music: *the guitars are gone!*

When Lil' Wayne endorses a song, it becomes a strong possibility that the main message of the tune has been lost somewhere between the man's lockjaw mumbling he calls "rapping" and his 5'6" of scrawny rap-star protoplasm. It is especially fitting that Lil' Wayne would situate himself in a song, in which he can babble on about rocking out with guitars, without actually requiring the effort of having to play one. If this isn't the sign of the demise of the guitar, and the beginning of the guitar's purely symbolic purpose in pop music, then it may require the bombing of the Fender factory to seal the deal.

A similar trend recently completed with the saxophone. Like the blues guitar, the saxophone had its humble beginnings, but then blazed its own trail and gathered intelligent, innovative connoisseurs of the instrument in its own right. The saxophone became an instrument beautifully-utilized by incredible thinkers and philosophers of music. Its most lucrative users evolved from the very early blues and big-band practitioners, to the architects of bebop, to the free jazz improvisers of the sixties and seventies, to the avant-jazz continuum, to its present state of mind-numbing muzak from the likes of Kenny G and David Koz. The saxophone's proponents, over the course of several decades, made a rather apparent regression in terms of talent and aesthetic. Today, the saxophone is never brought into the slick production of contemporary pop music, unless for a very illegitimate placement of nostalgic imagery. Fans of jazz music hear it occasionally in pop music and shudder – it sounds *dreadful* when combined with pop music production, because the saxophone has always embodied an aesthetic of untreated emotion, power, and narrative (i.e. lacking in digital production aesthetic). Fans of pop music hear it and give its musical premise hardly any thought whatsoever –

an unavoidable result, as the fans have already diluted their minds to the point of accepting this type of music into their daily repertoires. What's worse, however, is that the saxophone has garnered a strange reputation over the past two decades or so: the most popular proponents of the instrument are among the most talentless of the bunch. This may be passable for other arenas within popular music, but at least most pop singers can sell their "sex and money" aesthetic for commercial value. Kenny G won't be selling his image to PepsiCo, or participating in the revolutionary rebranding of "world-class" headphones, a la Dr. Dre.

The guitar has begun its own path towards "**saxophonization**". It has not been on the receiving end of innovative sound grammar for an unprofitably long period of time. When Jack White – a man undeservingly labeled as the modern-day Jimi Hendrix - sets down his guitar in favor of a poorly-tuned drum set, you know where the future of the instrument is headed. Some musicologists claim that the folk musics of various countries, which helped establish the instrument as such an enormous staple long ago, will bring much-needed guitar revitalization. Think for a moment how absurd this suggestion sounds, though – when was the last time you heard a contemporary artist using the guitar as the one-man band tool that it was originally designed to be? Not even the folk singers of the sixties were able to play much on a guitar resembling anything more than simple chords played to a simple rhythm. Artists that are doing anything new in either folk *or* art music are downsized to a painfully small and insignificant audience. Mary Halvorson, a Brooklyn-based guitarist involved with the quickly-budding New York creative music movement, hardly gets any notice from even the most distinguished of indie music critics for her innovative solid-body electric tone, while the most "talented" popular guitar player of today's standards is John Mayer. The "**saxophonization**" of the guitar is well under way.

Looking back at this Kevin Rudolph song - and its subsequent music video in particular – allows the guitar's regression to be quite evident in pop music. Rudolph can be seen a few times having the guitar strapped to his body, but you only see a chord or two being played. I even have a hard time believing that he was playing chords relevant to the song, despite the fact that there are really no more than four or five different chords played in the entire piece. Lil' Wayne is seen holding a guitar as well, but he is never seen placing a finger on the fret board. All the while, the listener is not able to distinguish a clear guitar passage in the song. *Pathetic*.

Many listeners will likely approach the contexts posed by this song with a few big questions. For example: what was the purpose of having this guitar image in the music video, when it was absent from the song itself? The only logical conclusion I can derive is that the intended purpose was merely superficial. It was used to induce a certain subconscious feeling derived from the “rock n’ roll” image, without having to sacrifice the time and talent to actually produce this feeling legitimately, through musical composition and performance.

If the usefulness of the electric guitar has been reduced to imagery, then what is the electric guitar’s standing in commercial, pop music? If this is indeed the beginning of a trend, the guitar will be reduced to a nostalgic remembrance, just like the saxophone. There is no doubt in my mind that once the electric guitar is through as the stand-out instrument in pop singles, it will have no further useful history in contemporary pop music. If a collaborative single between the burly Young Money crew and Kenny G does not sound like a realistic musical venture, it would be irrational to suggest that the electric guitar is far behind this realm of dejection.

Up until now, you may have wondered what the future of pop music holds. You may likely portray my predictions as cynical, if not completely pessimistic. Indeed, a large majority of “purists” (as they would likely wish to be called) will continue to exist, who will claim that with the destruction of the guitar in pop music comes its inevitable downfall. While these purists wear their twenty-five year old Motley Cru t-shirts and drive their Chevy pickup trucks, cursing the day that drinking cheap beer and dressing in makeup left the typical rock n’ roll aesthetic, a small number of musical visionaries will be blazing a new trail in contemporary pop music. They will be utilizing computer-based sound composition, bringing the industry to new levels of sonic potential. They will make more out of less, which will allow for more unique sound palettes and individualized styles. Pop music producers may even be seen as “composers” in the eyes of the musical elite once this trend takes hold. And undoubtedly, composers are the future of pop music. We already witness a number of new composition-based groups forming each passing year, gaining the stardom and fame that they deserve. Witness the overwhelming successes of Daft Punk, Justice, Daedelus, and Ratatat, as evidence for the computer-music compositional frameworks taking hold in the pop music industry.

The fact that profit motives still exist in the music industry means that there are many distinct directions record labels can take in the next couple of decades. The best scenario that the music industry could enjoy today would involve the executives handing over creative control to the

musicians and composers themselves. If the logical trend of pop music involves becoming more and more computerized, then it would be an absolute shame to see modern computer synthesis being regulated or rejected by the same talking heads, who allowed their firms to collapse on themselves due to their inability to recognize the severe flaws inherent in not allowing pop trends to establish themselves.

So far, the trends being witnessed in 2010's pop music world are mostly positive. We see more and more computer-based pop musicians becoming famous for their innovative, yet listenable compositions, and record labels like Ed Banger, Warp Records, Ninja Tune, and Planet Mu, are becoming more and more common in pop music circles. If seeing this pop music dream to fruition means we need to bear with a few more superficial tracks from the likes of Kevin Rudolph and Lil' Wayne, then I am more than willing to hold my tongue.

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