Resonance
Notes on Love & Sound

A Master’s Thesis by Ariel Lynch
If you haven’t heard, I make music. People like to beat around the bush and label their music as something good or unique to kind of pop out. Well, I’ll be upfront. They’re beats. Regular, real beats. Beats influenced by American hip-hop music, Southern, Black gospel, 70s/80s soul, straightforward dance music, funk carioca, etc. I could go on. But my point is that when you listen to my music, it’s for you to label if you want. It’s everything I hope you love.
Not too long ago, I attended a concert by rapper Baby Keem and was confused by how few Black people were in the crowd.

Upon reflection, I don’t know why I was so surprised that the crowd was overwhelmingly non-Black. Hip-hop/rap is the most popular genre in the United States and Black people aren’t the only ones listening to this music.

While I was at the concert, looking for more Black faces in the crowd, I felt uncomfortable. Not because I was one of the handful of Black people in the audience, but because I didn’t expect to be.

As of late, too much of my free time has been spent attempting to wrap my head around the ways Black music is consumed by non-Black listeners.

Some questions I find myself returning to:

- Do non-Black fans of Black artists have a different experience when listening to Black music?
- Are they hearing something that I don’t?
- Do I feel something that they can’t when I listen to these sounds?
I'm too aware of the fact that this line of questioning isn't helping me very much.

By asking these questions, I make a number of assumptions about what Black sound is. I define “Black” music as that made by Black artists which often fall into “Black” genres like rhythm and blues or hip-hop and rap.

The maintenance of an essentialist view on Black artistic production while attempting to investigate the mainstream consumption of Black music has proven to be futile. There is no authentic Black sound and there is no authentic Black musical listening experience. Attempting to theorize under the assumption that there is one hasn’t helped me in the slightest.

**So why can’t I seem to move away from this?**

I have this sense of protectiveness (and admittedly, possessiveness) for Black music and sonics that I think is justified.

Presumably, this music, by Black artists about Black lived experiences is best understood by a Black audience. So, how is it that these genres have reached the (non-Black, mainly white) mainstream? How do I reckon with the complicated nature of Black music’s success in the mainstream without staking my own claim on it?

*These* are the thoughts running through my head as I’m standing at the back of the crowd of white teenagers that seem to know every word to Keem’s raps.

I don’t feel like part of the audience. I’m just an observer.

On stage, a lot of fog machines go off, making it difficult to place Keem on stage and nearly impossible to get a clear look at his face. Is this a last line of defense from the gaze of the audience? An audience made up of devoted fans who love the sound but will never get it. An audience that will never get it in the way that I get it. An audience that could never understand that this sound means more to me than this ephemeral concert—this sound always resonates within me.
At the end of the concert, Keem brings a white, college-aged fan named Bryce onto the stage. Keem closes out his set with his most popular song, “family ties”, which features his more-famous cousin, Kendrick Lamar. Bryce dances and raps along with Keem during his verse and before ending for the night, Keem hands Bryce his mic.

Bryce wastes no time in voicing his confusion and frustration about the concert coming to a close. “Oh, we’re not doing Kendrick’s verse? Let’s do it!” he confidently exclaims into the microphone, his words reverberating through the venue.

Bryce reveals a lot to me in his remarks on stage.

Bryce loves Black music. He loves rap so much that he felt empowered to tell a Black artist how to perform. He loves Black sound so much that he assumes he has authority over it.

Will Bryce ever understand that his sense of ownership over this music is pointless?

How could he? He doesn’t get it like I get it.
Note #2: Collections

My father was a bassist.

I don’t remember what it sounded like when he played his guitar and I can’t remember the sound of his voice.

Having died when I was too young to hold any tangible memories, I’ve had to find different ways to remember him.

Music has been the most effective.

My family’s music collection lives in a decommissioned TV stand at my childhood home, along with family photos, books, and the urn that contains my father’s ashes.

This collection of music existed long before I was born and like me, has continued to grow since my father’s death.

At last count, there were 327 CDs in the collection along with a number of cassette tapes and vinyl LPs.

In one cabinet of the TV stand, there’s a small selection of vinyls. These are the last remnants of my father’s signed LP collection. A majority of which were stolen out of a storage unit while he was still alive. Now they’re safe, but have nowhere to be played on. We have a lot of things in my home, but we don’t have a record player to listen to my father’s collection with.

A record collection without a record player.
A daughter without a father.

Tina Campt writes, “...sound need not be heard to be received. Sound can be listened to, and, in equally powerful ways, sound can be felt; it both touches and moves people.”

Although I don’t have any means to play my father’s records, I feel them just the same. These records hold the music that my father loved and the materiality of his memory.

Like the record collection without a record player, my father’s memory lives on—even without a vessel to be fully realized in. Just as sound need not be heard to be received, I do not require tangible memories to remember my father.
2014 was a big year for me. I turned 16, got my driver’s license, and learned how to listen to music.

My first car was a ‘98 Honda Accord. That car had many luxuries but the most valuable was the CD player. That CD player altered the way I listened to music. Because of the car’s age, Bluetooth and auxiliary cables weren’t options for streaming music. I could listen to the radio or to CDs.

I chose CDs.

In a short period of time, I amassed a fairly large collection of CDs to listen to while driving. In that Honda Accord, I was forced to listen to albums the way the artists (presumably) intended me to. No shuffle and no skips. I had to keep both hands on the wheel.

My introduction to collecting music and listening to that collection was shaped by the artistic form of an album. In 2014, so many good albums came out and I listened to my favorites in their entirety, from first track to last.

Albums are an art form that encapsulate a moment. So many components come together to tell a particular story about a specific moment in time. The production, writing, recording process, ordering of the tracklist, choosing a cover photo, creation of liner notes and music videos, and so much more, culminate in this thing that an artist then shares with the world.

My favorite album of 2014 was the Platinum Edition of Beyoncé’s self-titled album. At 16-years-old, I didn’t realize what moment this album encapsulated for me.
I didn’t realize that this would be one of the last albums I would know inside and out.

I remember driving to Best Buy to buy a copy after school on the Friday it was released. The album came in a box set that included two CDs, a DVD of music videos, and intricate liner notes.

Owning this album was so huge. I had it all memorized: the tracklist, the interludes, scenes from the music videos, the features. It was my gospel.

I didn’t realize that this would be Beyoncé’s last “traditional” popular album.

Since BEYONCÉ [Platinum Edition]’s release, Beyoncé’s music has become decidedly more political and Black. Her magnum opus, Lemonade (2016) chronicles her reckoning with her husband’s infidelity and the impacts of slavery on Black love. HOMECOMING: THE LIVE ALBUM (2019) is the live performance of her 2018 headlining Coachella show which was a celebration of HBCUs and Black Southern aesthetics. These works are contemporaneous with the ascendance of the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S. and my own growing consciousness of how I exist as a Black person in an anti-Black nation.

I didn’t realize that this album could still make me feel so much, so long after its release.

BEYONCÉ [Platinum Edition] feels like a sonic representation of one of the most formative moments of my life. Each track elicits different feelings related to my past self’s growing consciousness, many insecurities, deepest secrets, and greatest desires. It helped me understand that my relationship with music is not so much informed by sound as it is by deep, full, and reverberating feeling.
Note #4: Resonance

A record player isn't necessary to feel sound...

Reverberation is the prolongation of a sound; resonance.
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Endnotes


