

Shawn
Reynaldo

First Floor
Reflections
on Volume I
Electronic
Music
Culture

Velocity Press

Copyright

First published 2023

velocitypress.uk

firstfloor.substack.com

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Cover design:

Joe Gilmore — qubik.com

Typesetting:

Theo Inglis — theoinglis.co.uk

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ISBN: 9781913231347

Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

I. THINGS HAVE CHANGED

[Electronic Music Is Getting Old](#)

[Maybe Local Scenes Don't Matter Anymore](#)

[Going Through the Motions](#)

[Wrestling with Pop Embarrassment](#)

[Lots of Bangers, Not Many Anthems](#)

[Down with Techno](#)

[Who's in Charge of the Culture?](#)

[Raving as Folk Art](#)

[The Rise of the Avatar DJ](#)

II. THE BROKEN MUSIC BUSINESS

[The Scene Isn't Worth Saving](#)

[Fake It Until... Actually, Just Keep Faking It](#)

[So... Are DJs Actually Just Exploiting Producers?](#)

[The End of Vinyl?](#)

[The Dwindling Power of the Online DJ Mix](#)

[Compilation Fatigue](#)

[The Album You Made Might Have Been a Giant Waste of Time](#)

[Pull Your Music Off Spotify](#)

[The Monetization of Apathy](#)

[Streaming Should Pay More, But How?](#)

[The Cost of Passion](#)

III. THE ELECTRONIC MUSIC PRESS

[Critique vs. Curation](#)

[The Overwhelmingly British Music Press](#)

[The Welcoming of Brands into Music Journalism](#)

[The Other \(Bigger\) Dance Music](#)

[Beyoncé and Drake Aren't Reviving Anything](#)

[The Latin Music Gold Rush](#)

[The Crumbling Palaces of Electronic Music Media](#)

[IV. APPLYING A HISTORICAL LENS](#)

[Electronica's Last Gasp](#)

[Techno and the Alternate Timeline](#)

[Did Basement Jaxx Invent Hyperpop?](#)

[Skrillex Is Green Day, and This Is Dance Music's *American Idiot* Moment](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

Foreword by Martyn

Throughout our careers in music, Shawn and I have run into each other in various capacities. He organized one of the earliest regular “bass music” manifestations in San Francisco, a series of events called Icee Hot, at which I DJed in the late ’00s. He also interviewed me for XLR8R magazine and we met again a few years after that at a conference in Montreal where we spoke as part of a Red Bull Music Academy event. I remember this well, because during this conversation Shawn asked, “I’ve noticed you have been quite feisty on Twitter lately, why is that?” I was taken aback by that question, as it was the first time I was asked about my social media presence as an artist—something that was usually not discussed in an “offline” interview. URL and IRL were two separate worlds then, but perhaps that question signaled a future in which those existences gradually merged into one. Funnily enough, a few friends of mine were in the audience that day and turned that question into kind of a running gag, asking me why I was so feisty on Twitter at the most inconvenient of moments (during dinners, in the middle of DJ sets, etc.) for a number of years!

After being active in the electronic music world for 20+ years both Shawn and I are now slightly uncomfortable “veterans” and consider it both a blessing and a curse. In his piece “Who’s in charge of the Culture?,” Shawn addresses how the moment a music fan enters a new scene defines a ground zero-like frame of reference for their personal experience of the music. In other words, the artists and music that you discover in those early moments become the standard to which you weigh anything that comes after that. The longer you are involved in music, the harder it can be to imagine how that initial, enthusiastic, exciting moment of discovery

would translate to a different set of circumstances, a few decades removed. Whether in the mid '90s you spent hours digging through stacks of vinyl, trying to find that one record that looked intriguing and exciting enough to spend your hard-earned 19 euros on (Autechre on Warp), or whether your best friend on Discord DMs you a Bandcamp link of some complete unknown producer from Brazil with the message “this track made me think of you,” the moments are just as special; one is never better than the other. However long you are involved in music, if you thrive on that energy, you will understand the similarities across generations, even when they manifest themselves in a different form. Instead of getting bitter about how things have changed, you can use your “veteran” experience to provide insight and thrive in a scene for as long as you want. I do a jazz radio show on NTS, and while I am by no means an “authority” on the genre, every month I try to make listeners part of my own journey of discovery in the music; that specific energy, more than the actual music I play, is the key to the show. My favorite pieces in this book are the ones like “The Latin Music Gold Rush,” where you can almost feel that you’re discovering new things about the music (or the industry surrounding it) along with the author. In a good opinion piece, compelling stream-of-consciousness writing demonstrates the process of knowledge gaining and shares that journey with the reader. Even if you don’t agree with the general point of the piece, you still enjoy that journey.

Pretty much any First Floor reader would acknowledge that the power of the newsletter is not in its lyrical waxing, but in its strong opinion writing. And just as I’m sure Shawn doesn’t love all of the music I’ve put out, his pieces have led to some interesting back-and-forths between us. More than once they have given me a different perspective, or provided the opportunity to define my own opinions about the subject more clearly, purely based on how staunchly I opposed Shawn’s view. I think that’s how good music/culture criticism should serve the reader; not by doubling

down on ideas you already agree with, but by providing well-articulated jump-off points for deeper understanding and better consideration. Almost all of the pieces collected in this book have been sources for contentious discussion on the state of electronic music and the industry that supports it. A good example of that, specifically for artists such as myself, is “That Album You Made Might Have Been a Giant Waste of Time.” Shawn’s argument is not against albums per se, but to be more considerate about the decision whether you should or shouldn’t write one and how the current reshaping of the music industry is affecting that decision. Seasoned musicians often forget to question the things they have been doing for years.

Several pieces in this collection deal with music media itself. In “The Crumbling Palaces of Electronic Music Media,” Shawn laments the gradual decline of traditional music journalism, which, over the last few years, has suffered from strained budgets, declining ad revenue and a severe shrinking of its workforce. But good opinion writing hasn’t left the music world altogether, and (almost ironically) First Floor is an example of that. It’s a fact that music writing is heavily in flux; an increasing amount of quality writing has moved from the traditional outlets to independent, subscription-based Web 2.0 platforms. It is more direct, less edited and less constrained perhaps by format and word count, and most importantly it leans on direct support from readers instead of ad clicks or sponsored content. Writers decide their own scope, can be hyper focused on niche subject matter, or take a comparative view on cultural movements across different disciplines of art. I think Shawn’s work in that realm is a great example of a reshaping of the music writing ecosystem. Within the electronic music media industry, First Floor is one of the most successful outlets, and so while Shawn signals there’s a problem with media, he himself is helping to shape the solution.

Introduction

First Floor started small.

Truth be told, it actually started as a weekly radio show, and ran for more than three years while I was working with the Red Bull Music Academy. But when that gig suddenly evaporated in 2019, I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do next. By that point, I'd already been working as a music journalist for more than a decade (and had logged nearly another decade in radio before that), and was all too aware of how quickly circumstances could change (often for the worse) at more traditional media outlets, yet the freelance grind of constantly pitching to editors didn't sound particularly appealing either. I wanted a project that I could control, and eventually settled on a newsletter, figuring it was something manageable that I could take on—at least until my next proper job came along.

A weekly digest that included a round-up of electronic music news, some track recommendations and a little bit of my own commentary, First Floor wasn't launched with any real expectations. The first edition only went out to 89 people. Within a few months, however, those numbers had climbed significantly, and I gradually came to a realization: people were actually reading this thing. Moreover, they seemed to really like it. Friends and colleagues who'd seen my work for years suddenly started saying things like, "I can hear your voice when I read the newsletter." I'd spent my entire career striving to keep myself out of my writing, literally avoiding the use of the first person whenever possible, but First Floor was something different. Though it was still rooted in journalism, it was also a personal endeavor, and little by little, I began to take down artificial barriers. I was still writing about the various goings-on of electronic music and its associated industry, but for the first time, I was openly filtering those topics through the prism of my own thoughts, opinions and

experiences—and, much to my surprise, that was what people responded to.

At some point, First Floor basically became my full-time job, and has continued to grow, despite being published in an era when long-form writing is said to be on the decline and music journalism on the whole is routinely whittled down to whatever works best in a social media post. Admittedly, many of the articles and essays I've put together have been critical—a fact that isn't always appreciated, especially by folks working in the music industry—but even at their harshest, my words are driven by one thing: a genuine passion for electronic music. Having spent more than half my life immersed in various facets of independent music culture, I've seen a lot of artists, trends, scenes, hype cycles and operating practices come and go. Electronic music—and dance music in particular—has always been a highly transient space, and there's something undeniably exciting about that, but when even the most engaged participants tend to drop out of the scene after a few years, it does frequently feel like historical perspective and institutional knowledge are in short supply.

With First Floor, I do my best to counter that, diving deep into not just electronic music, but the culture and industry that surround it. There's practical stuff in there too (e.g. news, reviews, links to things I find interesting), but on a larger scale, the newsletter is an ongoing attempt to reckon with electronic music as it moves through a period of intense economic, cultural, stylistic and generational change. Though the genre has never been static, its recent evolution has repeatedly unfolded in ways few would have anticipated, and sometimes seems to run entirely counter to the norms and values the culture was founded upon. That's not always a bad thing, but such a profound transformation does at least merit a bit of consideration and conversation—something that today's electronic music press, weakened by years of structural decay, is increasingly ill-equipped to provide.

As a longtime writer and editor, I've worked within that press machinery for much of my career, and very much sympathize with the struggles faced by music publications both big and small. (For those interested in specifics, I've previously been on staff at XLR8R and RBMA, and have also contributed to Pitchfork, NPR, Resident Advisor, SPIN, DJ Mag, Beatportal and Bandcamp Daily; I list those outlets here to avoid having to include a disclosure every time one is mentioned in the pages of this book.) First Floor may not be the antidote to those struggles, but it is a blank canvas, one in which opinions can be expressed and ideas can be explored without worry of turning off advertisers or potential brand partners.

That, at its essence, is what this book is all about. Though it's ostensibly a collection of my most thought-provoking pieces, those pieces together form what I hope is a nuanced, wide-ranging exploration of contemporary electronic music. To make things easier, I've grouped the selected essays by topic into four separate sections, and while the individual pieces appear largely unchanged from when they were first published in the newsletter, I've written a brand-new introduction for each one. Some of these reach into the past, providing additional context about what I was thinking at the time or how the piece was initially received, while others break down how my thoughts on the given subject matter have changed since I first wrote the essay. The book also contains one wholly new piece, an afterword that casts an eye toward the future of electronic music culture—and may surprise readers with its assessment of where things stand.

Like any culture and industry, electronic music has its problems and challenges, and admittedly I don't have all the answers. First Floor is meant to foster discussion, not agreement, and regardless of whether I'm dissecting the inequities of the streaming economy or examining the changing nature of fandom and artistry, the pieces I write and perspectives I provide are rarely designed to be a definitive final word. In my experience, asking thoughtful questions can often be just as important as

providing actionable solutions, and if my words stimulate further dialogue on a topic that's generally been ignored—or has simply been superficially talked about the exact same way for years on end—then I feel like I've made a positive contribution.

During the past few years, I've often self-deprecatingly said that First Floor is “just a newsletter,” but as I've pored through the thousands of words I've written, I've started to realize that it's something more. This book is a testament to that, and I'm immensely thankful to everyone who's ever taken the time to read what I have to say.

I.
Things
Have
Changed

Electronic Music Is Getting Old

a.k.a. What does futurism mean in the context of a genre that just turned 40?

October 19, 2021

Electronic music and I are roughly the same age.

The veracity of that claim of course depends on what one considers to be the origin point of modern electronic music, but with all due respect to Kraftwerk, disco and the various synth explorers of the '60s and '70s, I tend to point to the early 1980s, when techno was first created in Detroit. That moment, at the very least, laid down a template for not just how the music sounded, but what it was meant to represent, projecting futuristic visions of joy, liberation and world-altering innovation that eventually became a defining part of the genre's character.

It took a while for those visions to find their way to me—although I was born in 1979, it wasn't until the latter half of the '90s that I took a proper interest in electronic music—and while I can't deny their ageless appeal, in recent years I have found myself pondering whether or not they truly represent the reality (or even the aims) of electronic music as it exists today.

Admittedly, much of this pondering has taken place during a time when I've increasingly found myself away from the dancefloor. The pandemic obviously had something to do with that, but even as things have reopened during the past year or so, my appetite for late-night revelry remains diminished. Nightlife has always been—and probably should always be—fueled by youth, and I, strictly speaking, am no longer young.

That said, neither is electronic music, and in many ways, the genre is

starting to show its age, settling into comfortable patterns and increasingly adopting practices that don't quite square with the revolutionary vigor of its youthful rhetoric. A gap exists between electronic music's stated priorities and its contemporary practices, and it's only widened in the time since the following essay was first published.

What happens when an innovative cultural movement stops innovating? Can a genre truly represent the future when so much of its output sounds like the past? Electronic music is in the midst of wrestling with those questions, and the genre's core identity may very well be retooled in the process.

Techno turned 40 this year.

Is that old? Maybe not, especially in comparison to other genres, but it's fair to say that techno's days of being a plucky young upstart have long since passed. Like it or not, the music has officially entered middle age, and that transition hasn't necessarily been a graceful one.

From the very beginning, the philosophy (and mythology) of techno has been tied up in ideas of futurism. Cybotron's Juan Atkins and Rik Davis were famously both fans of futurist philosopher Alvin Toffler, and the aspirational, forward-facing, technology-driven aesthetic they established with 1981's "Alleys of Your Mind"—which is widely regarded as the first techno record, alongside "Sharevari" from fellow Detroit outfit A Number of Names—remains the dominant stylistic blueprint for much of electronic music, four decades later.

As the years pass, however, it's sometimes hard to differentiate between which artists are truly pushing things forward, and which ones are merely maintaining a sort of techno pastiche. Although the future that techno artists imagined in the '80s (i.e. robots, lasers, interplanetary space travel, liberation through technology, etc.) is still largely the stuff of fantasy,

sheer repetition has sapped that vision of its prior potency. After 40 years, those dreams have already been dreamed too many times.

Over time, electronic music has widely settled into a particular set of conceptual tropes, to a point where even explicitly future-oriented works often feel more like retro-futurism. The music itself has also proven to be increasingly rigid. It's difficult to make a track sound like it's from 2099 when its drum pattern is something that's been endlessly recycled since 1999 (or probably earlier), yet many of the biggest trends in electronic music over the past few years (e.g. electro, UK garage, drum & bass, trance, industrial techno) have effectively been revivals of older sounds, as opposed to something genuinely new.

Does this mean that electronic music is out of new ideas? Probably not, but even if that were true, would it definitely be a problem? Quality releases still land in my inbox every week, and although few of them are taking the music in bold new directions—in fact, many of them are actively mimicking records from decades gone by (the '90s in particular)—that doesn't necessarily make them less enjoyable. If innovation is the primary thing you're after, then yeah, a lot of contemporary electronic music might seem pretty stale, but if you're merely looking for something that'll get hearts pumping and dancefloors moving, the genre still does the trick.

That basic functionality is commendable (or at least useful), but it does come at a cost. There's no getting around the fact that something approaching a formula does exist for techno and most other branches of the electronic music family tree, and these formulas have a lot more to do with musical parameters than any sort of attitude, philosophy or worldview. The genre's revolutionary vigor has faded with time—in some cases, it's been diluted into little more than hackneyed marketing slogans—and while futurism might still be part of the music's conceptual "brand," so is nostalgia, and the latter has arguably taken up a dominant position.

Even the production side of electronic music has caught the nostalgia bug, as today's artists continue to fetishize vintage gear, wildly driving up the price on machines that, ironically, were already out of date in the 1980s.

And when it comes to marketing and promotion, electronic music regularly throws the nostalgia floodgates wide open, touting countless artists and releases as “legendary” (regardless of whether they actually deserve that descriptor) and celebrating a seemingly endless stream of anniversaries. It's an inevitable part of the aging process for any genre—just look at how much time and effort rock music has spent regurgitating and mythologizing its own history in recent decades—but it now feels like electronic music is celebrating a new “milestone” anniversary nearly every week.

In 2021 alone, both Tresor and Nervous Records have celebrated their 30th anniversaries with expansive new compilations. James Ruskin's Blueprint label is doing the same thing for its 25th anniversary, while Metalheadz has spent this year honoring its 25th trip around the sun with a special series of reissues. Squarepusher's debut album *Feed Me Weird Things* also turned 25 this year, and was remastered and reissued on Warp. Dub-techno outpost Echocord and techno label EPM are both celebrating 20 years of existence with new compilations, and The Avalanches offered up a deluxe version of their landmark LP *Since I Left You* to mark its 20th birthday. Daft Punk didn't do anything to celebrate the 20th anniversary of their seminal *Discovery* album, but music journalist Ben Cardew did write a whole book (*Daft Punk's Discovery: The Future Unfurled*) about it.

That list is by no means comprehensive, and if it was expanded to include 10-year anniversaries, then I'd also need to mention the compilations offered up this year by 100% Silk, Auxiliary, Acid Test, Dome of Doom, Infinite Machine and Butter Sessions. (I'm not even going to bother with five-year anniversary releases and celebrations, but those definitely exist too.)

Now, is looking backwards (or simply stopping to take a victory lap) inherently a bad thing? Of course not. Electronic music hasn't been the best steward of its own history during the past 40 years, so there's obvious value in examining (and celebrating) the past.

On a more cynical level, nostalgia also sells. In a time when everyone is chasing clicks and even established artists and labels often struggle to garner attention, it's hard to fault anyone for playing the "remember when?" card—it's a lot more likely to get people reading, engaging or buying than any "check out this new thing" plea they might put together. (Yes, this is depressing, but it's one of the many unfortunate byproducts of an oversaturated media marketplace in which the deluge of new content basically never stops.)

Nostalgia is a tricky thing, mostly because it's so damn easy. Looking to the past (particularly when it's done with rose-colored glasses) is one of the fastest ways to get people excited and bring them together. Does it move culture forward though, or even prompt bouts of thoughtful reflection? Maybe on occasion, but not usually, and that speaks to its specific shortcomings in the world of electronic music. How can a genre that constantly wraps itself in the flag of futurism be so deeply (and increasingly) in thrall to the past? It's a glaring contradiction, and one that flies in the face of where the music came from.

Knowing this, it would be easy to crank out a jaded "electronic music sucks now and things were better before" diatribe, but even that would feel like an overly nostalgic (not to mention pointless) exercise. Plus, I still like electronic music. Lots of people do. On a global level, it's arguably more popular now than it ever has been before. The genre has undoubtedly drifted over the years, both stylistically and culturally, and not always in a positive direction, but it's still incredible that its Detroit originators (and the many artists they inspired during the '80s and '90s) created sounds and templates that continue to resonate so strongly today.

That said, it's also disappointing that so many of today's electronic music producers and fans don't seem to share their predecessors' pioneering spirit.

Like many 40-year-olds, techno has gotten comfortable, and many of electronic music's other genres seem to have plunked themselves down on the couch right alongside it. Considering the impact they've had on the world, maybe they've earned it. Electronic music innovation hasn't stopped, after all—it's just that very little of it seems to be happening under the banner of techno, house, electro and all the other styles with multiple decades of partying under their belt. Newer sounds—many of which are emerging from places outside of Europe and North America—often flicker out as quickly as they appeared, but regardless of their staying power, it's hard not to appreciate their willingness to push the music into places it's never gone before.

In the meantime, electronic music is left with its own sort of generational divide, one in which the traditions and routines it's built up over the past 40 years often come into conflict with the boundary-pushing instincts of certain (usually younger) artists and fans—many of which have been relegated to the genre's fringe. What's more important: protecting the vision of the future that Cybotron and their followers dreamed up in the '80s and '90s, or maintaining a constant push into new futures in response to the ever-evolving demands of the present?

There's no definitive right answer, and that uncertainty is at the heart of many conflicts that spring up in electronic music circles today. On a more basic level, there's also the fact that many people who got into the music in the '80s and '90s are now literally approaching their 50s and 60s (if they're not already there), while newer fans tend to be millennials and Gen Z. These generations already have trouble seeing eye to eye—why would it be any different when it comes to electronic music?

What does the future of electronic music look like? I don't know, but its

current attempt to simultaneously be both a constant source of innovation and a glorified (albeit highly enjoyable) nostalgia-based feedback loop likely isn't sustainable in the long run. That said, regardless of which side "wins" this conflict (or if some new "third way" emerges), the genre's future will ultimately be shaped by younger artists and fans, and what they come up with might very well look, sound and feel a whole lot different from what Cybotron imagined back in 1981.

After decades of laying claim to the future, electronic music's most experienced practitioners are getting old, just like everyone else. They've picked up plenty of wisdom over the past 40 years—and hopefully we'll all be smart enough to tap into it—but the levers of control are already slipping from their grasp. That's a tough pill to swallow, especially because there's no guarantee that whatever's coming next is going to be better—and yes, even the idea of "better" is totally subjective—but electronic music's collective ability to accept that reality will likely determine just how bumpy the transition is going to be in the years to come.

Welcome to middle age.

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