

Daisy Hershberger
Assignment 1
07/7/2016
ENC 2135
Ashley Rea
1969 words

Modest Beginnings to Not-so-modest Success

Alternative rock music is comprised of many sub-genres, and has many different sounds and styles among those sub-genres, but the one thing that remains constant throughout the entire genre—what makes something “alternative”—is the fact that the musical groups originated underground, or with independent records companies. Alternative rock, back when it was still new, saw most of its airtime on college radios, with very few groups gaining much popularity nationally (and internationally, with “indie rock” being the name often—but not always—associated with the same genre in the U.K.). This changed, however, in the ‘90s and early 2000s; several new bands identifying as “alternative rock” emerged and took the music scene by storm. It sieged the airwaves, exploded in popularity. “Indie bands” became country-wide and world-wide hits, their hard work paying off with their records soaring up the ranks to their rightful places at the top tiers. College radio stations were only the *beginning*; they’d entered a new playing field entirely. Even today, alternative rock remains one of the most popular genres on the radio with countless stations dedicated specifically to play its tune.

As noted earlier, alternative rock is a very diverse genre and, as such, has many diverse sounds. While it’s true much of its content can be described as “hard” or “punk”-like, there are sub-genres within it that take different turns. Some alternative rock songs (and groups) add a jazzy twist to their tune; others add an electronic spin; others still incorporate symphonies and orchestras. There is no *one sound* to alternative rock; there’s something for everyone. This paper will be focusing on three musical groups, all of which belong to the alternative rock category, but all of which have very different sounds to them: Muse, a progressive rock band from the U.K.; Modest Mouse, an indie rock band from the U.S.; and Awolnation, an electronic rock band from the U.S.

Muse is the only U.K. band of the three mentioned, and the band of the three that I've known about the longest. I first became aware of Muse—really became aware of them—back in 2006 with the two songs “Starlight” and “Knights of Cydonia.” At this time, I believe was in California. I remember listening to the two songs on the radio with my mother as we drove the San Diego hills, both of us singing loudly. Being only eight or so at the time, I didn't know to analyze songs and listen for lyrics to any significant extent, but I remember associating the two songs with two scenarios: riding horseback across a red, sunbaked desert (not unlike that seen on the “Black Holes and Revelations” album's cover) like some sort of wild-west outlaw or vigilante to “Knights of Cydonia”; and standing, singing into the wind on an empty aircraft carrier in the middle of the sparkling ocean to “Starlight.”

Many of Muse's songs can fall into a number of sub-genres under alternative rock; however, most of its material fits neatly into that which is progressive rock. Muse is known to incorporate heavy bass beneath the harsher electric guitar riffs and complex drum rhythms, but it's also no stranger to including orchestral aspects into its songs—pianos and strings. [“Butterflies & Hurricanes.”](#) despite being one of Muse's older songs (the album “Absolution” was released in 2003), came to my attention in early 2014, eight years after I'd first been exposed to Muse. I remember falling for the song after having listened to it a couple of times, and falling *hard*. I'd listen to it on repeat to the point where my parents would get annoyed, but I couldn't get enough. I was addicted to the euphoria the aggressive piano strokes gave me, the chills they sent down my spine and across my skin.

The progressive rock elements are evident in the song: right from the beginning, the piano riff starts—a riff that continues throughout the song (except for the piano solo). A few seconds in, the strings start up, subtly at first, with the singer's voice—almost a whisper in the ear, with gentle vibrato—and gradually start to pick up about thirty seconds in when the gentle percussions join in. Strings grow more intense, adopting shriller notes, and the drums speed up, until the listener is assaulted with an incredible piano breakdown, sounding like a series of organized smashes from both ends of the keyboard. No longer is the singer purring; he's howling. Keystrokes are fast, imitating the very movement of the butterfly, yet they hold the strength and power of the hurricane in the song's title.

Awolnation falls more into the electronic sub-genre of alternative rock. Genre and instrument-wise, Awolnation is less varied than Muse, but its sound is undeniably unique. Each song (even within the same album) sounds vastly different from those around it, despite the fact that most (if not all) utilize electronic synthesizers, voice filters, and various “other samples” (recordings on a voicemail, echoing voices—just to name two), along with the more “normal” guitar, bass, and drums seen in other music groups. Like most people, I first encountered Awolnation in 2011 with its single release “Sail.” Ironically enough, despite (and perhaps because of) the song’s sudden and incredible explosion in popularity, I *didn’t* like it, and therefore determined that I didn’t like Awolnation. Fast-forward three years, and I learn my step father ordered the album “Megalithic Symphony”—which I wasn’t too thrilled about. I listened to the album with him, albeit grudgingly, and realized just how wrong I’d been. The blending of electronic music and “traditional” music was everything I loved. Songs like “People” and “Kill Your Heroes” and “Wake Up” had me captivated—so much so that I ended up using an Awolnation quote as my senior quote. I remember for a good few weeks, the album was the only thing I—*we*, my parents and I—listened to. One thing that really appeals to me (other than the incredible differences between each song) is how, in songs like “Shoestrings” and “Not Your Fault,” superficially, the song sounds very happy-go-lucky, but further analysis into the lyrics reveals that they are, in fact, not very happy-go-lucky at all; they’re actually quite deep, addressing issues like moving on and doing what’s best for you, and dealing with mental health.

The single, [“Hollow Moon \(Bad Wolf\),”](#) from Awolnation’s most recent album, “Run” (released in 2015), holds a special place in my heart because it started the countdown to the end of Awolnation’s three-year radio silence. I remember first hearing it on the radio while I was in Okinawa, and not realizing immediately that it *was* Awolnation. I was skeptical of it at first, unsure of whether or not I liked it, until I realized that it was, in fact, by Awolnation. The bias kicked in, and I couldn’t seem to get enough of it, despite its tragic *little* airtime on the military base radio station.

“Hollow Moon (Bad Wolf)” demonstrates just why the band fits so well in the electronic rock sub-genre: it starts with a quick “tapping” of a few notes on the synthesizer, then the listener is blindsided

with the singer's voice, sharpened by filters and enhanced with an echo. At 1:15, a sample of quiet chatter from a crowd of people can be heard, with the disenchanted, sarcastic "*you're all still here*" spoken over it (this sample is also heard a few more times throughout the song). Intense bass strokes underly the song, keeping the pace relatively quick, and the singer's voice, for the most part, remains fairly even, if not a bit forceful, until around 3:28 (preceded by several gasps of anticipation) when he starts shouting at the listener with a harsh, raw "they won't ever find me here!"

Modest Mouse, of the three bands discussed, has the "least punk-y" sound to it, generally speaking (there are a sparse few exceptions), and falls firmly within the "indie rock" sub-genre. It tends to have a bit of a "gentler," more upbeat feel to it, nowhere near as sharp or intense as Muse or Awolnation. Guitar riffs and drum beats have a natural feel to them, not distorted or fed through filters or synthesized. "[Dashboard](#)" was the first Modest Mouse song I (knowingly) heard, back in early 2007, and today remains my favorite. I was still in California at the time, and gradually came to associate the song and its guitar strums with my sunny San Diego home. I remember being confused about its meaning: what did "oh the dashboard melted but we still have the radio" mean? To which my mother explained that the song was about the environment—more specifically, about global warming—and about society's ignorance (or *indifference*) to very real and very serious issues. I, being quite an advocate for environmental assistance and preservation both then and now, found my love for it solidified even more. When my mother bought the album it had come from, "We Were Dead Before the Ship Even Sank," I remember uploading it onto my little iPod shuffle, and I remember us listening to it together as we drove around, did housework—did *anything*. It was our album; they were *our songs*.

Seven years later, I'm in 2014 in Okinawa, buying two Modest Mouse albums, including the one "Dashboard" came from, and preordering a third set to be released in 2015. I'd already cultivated my taste for their music, came to appreciate the general sarcasm and pragmatism and cheeky bitterness in their songs—namely about religion and social issues and humanity's faults in general. Songs like "The Ocean Breathes Salty," "We've Got Everything," "Lampshades on Fire," and "The Ground Walks, with Time in a Box" were—and still are—among my favorites because of those very traits. When I listen to Modest

Muse, I feel connected to what I believe, feel happy to know that I'm not the only one that's feeling cynical about the world's current state.

“Dashboard” starts with a simple-yet-catchy guitar riff and quick-paced drum beat, the singer's voice floating in within the first few seconds, his “well it would've been, could've been worse than you would ever know” encompassing the song's message in twelve words. A second guitar joins shortly in brief intervals, and a surprisingly *involved* bass riff soon after. At around 0:30, trumpets join in, which gradually grow in sound value until they reach their peak in the song's chorus. The singer's voice sounds more like *talking* than singing, and gives off the impression that he's mocking or satirizing the listener—or another third party. In the song's end, he's shouting, forcing his point across with only that quick drum beat behind him.

Muse, Awolnation, and Modest Mouse are just three of *hundreds* of bands that fit into the alternative rock genre and its many, *many* sub-genres. I chose these three bands to discuss because they make up my three favorite bands, but also because they demonstrate the sheer variety—only a *portion* of it—found within alternative rock. They show that there's a little something for everyone, be it harder rock, something more symphonic, something with an electronic feel, or something with a gentler “indie” feel to it—and so much more. Alternative rock represents the underdogs of the rock music industry—those without the means or the money to sign off on contracts with big record companies that still managed to succeed, and eventually even thrive. It represents those that don't start off big and make millions overnight. No, the first of this genre's musicians had to scrape and scrounge and crawl, climb their way through the low-attention airwaves until they finally—finally—got a shot at being a part of something bigger, got to pave the way for a truly incredible sound.