Music Genres as Historical Individuals

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British Journal of Aesthetics. Author's final draft. 22jul2025.

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ABSTRACT: Musicians, listeners, and record labels sort music into genres like jazz, punk, heavy metal, and so on. Metaphysically, what kind of thing is a genre? This paper explores the idea that music genres are historical individuals. The obvious way to develop this is to think of a music genre as being like a biological species. Although that approach has much to recommend it, we argue that it faces an insuperable difficulty: what we dub the problem of independent origins. We argue, instead, that a genre is a historical individual governed by an institution or social practice.

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One promising approach in the ontology of art is to think in terms of historical individuals. Guy Rohrbaugh (2003) argues that this is the right ontology for all artworks, but our interest here is both more narrow and somewhat different. More narrow, because we are just interested in popular music. Somewhat different, because we are interested not in artworks but in genres. In short, we aim to show that popular music genres are *in a sense* historical individuals.

Inevitably, there are complications, and some work is required to say exactly the sense we mean. In section 1, we address some preliminaries about genre and about ontology. In section 2, we consider the advantages of a genre ontology which takes music genres to be historical individuals on the model of biological species. In section 3, we confront an objection which shows that this view cannot be right. In section 4, we consider an alternative which takes genres to be historical individuals in a way that is different from species. They are maintained not by lines of common descent but by institutions and social practices. In section 5, we explore a thought experiment that pushes the boundaries of this account. We detail multiple ways that the puzzle posed by the thought experiment could be resolved and show how, despite their differences, they are all compatible with our broader conclusion that music genres are historical individuals. In section 6, we conclude by restating our central findings and pointing toward directions for further research.

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[1] This paper began from work which Polite presented at *Essence and Context: A Conference Between Music and Philosophy* in Vilnius, Lithuania way back in 2016. He reached out to Magnus, and Malone was invited to the collaboration when it became clear that the argument was leading to a view of genres as practices. The paper could not exist in anything like its present form without all of the authors, and they are listed in alphabetical order. We would like to thank Cristyn Magnus and Ron McClamrock for helpful discussion of these issues. Thanks also to anonymous referees for feedback which was useful in revising the paper.

§1 Preliminaries

Genres are categories of artworks, and a music genre is a category of musical works. We accept a kind of ontological pluralism, according to which musical works include compositions, songs, performances, and recordings.[2] For example, heavy metal songs, recordings, and performances are all members of the genre *heavy metal*.

It is easy to describe collections of musical works that do not count as genres. For example, consider songs which were sung by Elvis Presley (and all the versions of those songs) together with recordings that feature the sound of a cowbell. That hodgepodge does not count as a genre.[3] This, we think, follows from common usage.

Furthermore, let's distinguish between theory of genre and ontology of genre. A theory of genre accounts for why some musical categories (like *jazz*) count as genres and others (like *Elvis+cowbell*) do not. Moreover, it will specify the way in which features are relevant for genre membership. An ontology of genre gives an account of the metaphysics: what there is in the world that explains the unity of the category. Take a preliminary example: A simple theory of genre might hold that members of a genre are distinguished by musical and stylistic features. The category of heavy metal might be distinguished by heavy guitar sounds and a particular kind of vocal styling. This view fits nicely with a Platonic ontology of genre where these criteria constitute a universal. Note that the two accounts are doing different work here. Most universals do not comprise genres, so the theory of genre serves to distinguish which universals do. For independent reasons of metaphysics, one might think that there are no universals; so the categories could be understood instead as indicated types or classes of works that stand in the same-genre relation.

Our interest here is in the ontology of music genres. This focus makes some of the philosophical literature on genre irrelevant to our discussion. For example, Abell (2015) addresses narrative arts like fictional prose and film. Although some of what we say may generalize, our restricted scope is deliberate. There are alternative accounts which are tempting for genres in other media which are not so tempting for music genres. As Noël Carroll observes, 'the genres of suspense, mystery, and horror derive their very names from the affects they are intended to promote—a sense of suspense, a sense of mystery, a sense of horror' (1987: 52). So it is *prima facie* plausible to think of those genres as the sets of works intended to promote those affects—that is, to understand them as functional kinds rather than as historical

[2] This kind of pluralism is defended *inter alia* by Burkett (2015), Bartel (2017), and Magnus (2022, ch. 2).

[3] Regarding this kind of constraint, see Malone (forthcoming, 2024).

individuals. Music genres, however, are not primarily intended to promote a particular affect or execute a particular function.[4]

We start by exploring the suggestion that music genres have the same ontology as biological species. The suggestion can only be partially right, and seeing why will also reveal some lessons about the theory of genre.

§2 First try: Genres are like species

A number of authors have argued that songs and other musical works are historical individuals in the same sense that species are (Nussbaum 2007; Nussbaum 2021; Magnus 2012a; Magnus 2022, ch. 6). So a promising possibility is to say the same for music genres.

A traditional view of species treats a species as a class of similar organisms. Just as particular bits of matter count as part of the kind gold and other bits count as part of the kind water, an organism is taken to belong to the species because it possesses necessary and sufficient intrinsic properties. But this became untenable in recent centuries, owing to advances made within evolutionary biology—e.g., the overwhelming evidence that there is at least as much genotypic variation within species as there is between species. The traditional view has been supplanted by one that treats a species instead as an individual lineage within the genealogical tree of life. The view of species as historical individuals was articulated by Ghiselin (1966; 1974) and Hull (1976; 1978). It is now almost a consensus in philosophy of biology. Whether a historical individual can count as a *natural kind* is a contested issue.[5] Regardless, its members cannot be distinguished just in terms of their intrinsic features. As individuals, species are aggregates whose parts (the organisms that comprise them) are joined together by hereditary relations rather than merely by shared intrinsic similarity.

Belonging to a particular species requires that an organism stand in the right causal and historical relationship to other members of that species. Classifying species in terms of ancestry relations accommodates the biological facts that species come into existence, evolve, and go extinct at definite places and times. If we were to encounter a group of organisms in Alpha Centauri that are indistinguishable from the dodo in their genetic code, their biochemistry, and their morphology, we would not have thereby encountered a group of dodos. The same would be true if, many years from now, a species of wild turkey were to give rise to a population that is indistinguishable from the dodo. The fact that the hypothetical organisms in both cases are parts of separate lineages having different

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[4] One might be tempted to say that the genre of *dance music* could be defined by its intended effect, namely getting the listener to dance. It is not so simple, however, because different varieties of dance music encourage different dances. One of the current authors explores this point in more detail elsewhere (Malone 2024).

[5] See, e.g., Magnus (2012b, ch 6).

origins would mean that they belong to distinct species, regardless of their shared intrinsic properties (Hull 1989: 155).

Let's try to think about music genres along similar lines: as individual evolving lineages whose parts (the works of music that comprise them) are joined together by causal and historical relations of influence, not by shared intrinsic properties. The fact that the organisms of a species share common ancestors accounts for their qualitative similarities. In the same way, the fact that musicians working within a given genre share a common set of ancestors (namely, influences) largely accounts for the sonic and other qualitative similarities that obtain between the pieces they produce.

This view possesses several advantages over one that takes genres to have qualitative essences. It can accommodate the wide degree of variation we typically find within music genres, both at a given time and across time. Although pieces of soft rock, doom metal, and new wave rarely sound much alike, they are all properly classified as *rock music* because their lineages (the causal-historical chains of influence on the groups that produced them) extend back to a set of common ancestors. In the case of rock music, nearly all roads lead back through the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Kinks, the Who, and Bob Dylan—and through them to the rock and roll, rockabilly, skiffle, electric blues, and R&B groups that influenced them.

This points toward a further advantage of a causal-historical account over an essentialist one. It captures the fact that the qualitative features that appear to be essential to a genre's identity can change significantly over time.[6] If one were to compare the music of the Beatles and the Norwegian black metal band Gorgoroth in complete ignorance of the chain of influence that connects them, perhaps the only clue that they belong to the same genre would be the heaviness of the Beatles' 'Helter Skelter.' Yet, apart from its energy and distinctive roar, this song is otherwise quite dissimilar to Gorgoroth's works. The latter are typically louder, longer, faster, more aggressive, more structurally complex, and more texturally dense than pretty much all of the Beatles' output—'Helter Skelter' included. What joins the Beatles and Gorgoroth together within the rock genre, according to this view, is how significantly the Beatles influenced the development of heavy metal during the late 1960s and early 70s, especially the music of Black Sabbath and Deep Purple. By the mid-70s, Judas Priest, Motörhead, and other groups helped unmoor metal from its blues roots and infused it with an emphasis on speed. This was further refined during the so-called New Wave of British Heavy Metal by bands such as Iron Maiden, Saxon, and Diamond Head (Hann 2022). All of these developments were instrumental to the emergence of thrash metal and death metal during the early 1980s, which together gave rise to black metal. If we were to conceive of music genres in terms of intrinsic or non-historical features of works, it is unclear how we could accommodate drastic changes of this sort.

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[6] In the terminology used by Rohrbaugh (2003), music genres are temporally flexible.

Thinking of music genres as lineages, we could readily understand how they come into existence and evolve in the way we have just described. And although the advent of recording technology may give them the illusion of permanence, music genres can also go out of existence.[7] We do not have an uncontentious example, but here is a grim thought experiment: The sun explodes, Earth is annihilated, and all genres go out of existence. If genre membership were just a matter of having intrinsic properties, in contrast, instances of a genre could occur at any place and time—wherever and whenever the essential properties were instanced. It is easy to construct further thought experiments which show the folly of that.

Imagine that, while mucking about on the piano, Beethoven had hammered out the same notes as the piano part of Elton John's 'Crocodile Rock.' If possessing intrinsic properties of the right sort were sufficient for belonging to a particular music genre, it would follow that Beethoven had played a work of rock music if and only if Elton John did. This seems like the wrong result. Seeing rock music as a lineage avoids it, because Beethoven's noodling on the keyboard would have been outside the rock lineage.

Imagine instead that extraterrestrials from Alpha Centauri created music that was sonically indistinguishable from Gorgoroth's output. They would not be playing black metal. Understanding genres as lineages, it would not count as black metal or even as rock for the same reason that dodo-like organisms there would not be dodos. They would not have the right causal-historical lineage. (Although these outcomes fit with our intuitions, perhaps they do not fit with yours. We return to a case like this one in section 5.)

In addition to accommodating the wide degree of variation *within* music genres, a causal-historical view can also accommodate the many similarities *between* them. Consider Frank Zappa's 'Don't Eat the Yellow Snow,' which originally appeared on his 1974 album *Apostrophe (')*. The song has several features that, out of context, sound like jazz. However, embedded within the song and album as wholes, situated in the context of the work Zappa had produced up until that point, those jazz-sounding parts become rock. As Theodore Gracyk writes, 'Auditory qualities alone are insufficient to classify a musical work.' He gives this example: 'When Branford Marsalis releases an album, it is jazz. But when he appears on a Grateful Dead album… he's playing rock, even if he's playing exactly the same horn part that he might play on one of his own albums' (Gracyk 1996: 5).

The analogy between music genres and species can be useful in understanding how certain genres develop. It is common for a musician to set out to create a new musical work within an already existing genre or subgenre. Yet, mere intention is not enough. The artist might fail to create a work in their intended genre, instead originating a new genre. Consider what happens with species. A novel mutation can produce an individual who lacks the typical features of its species. If it dies without

[7] In the terminology used by Rohrbaugh (2003), music genres are temporal. They begin, and they can end.

reproducing, then it need not be counted one way or another. If it spawns a new lineage, then a new species may result. Works that spawn new genres can be understood similarly. Consider two examples.

First, the Velvet Underground & Nico deliberately set out to create rock music that didn't sound like the Beatles and the Stones, and in 1967 (seemingly unintentionally) produced what many consider to be the first art rock album: their self-titled debut studio album. Had they exerted no influence on other artists like David Bowie, the art rock line that arguably originated with the Velvet Underground might not have come into being. Their music could have been a musico-evolutionary dead end, a failed attempt to create rock music and a terminal node on the rock family tree.

Second, the 1951 track 'Rocket 88,' credited to Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats but recorded by Ike Turner and his Kings of Rhythm, is widely (but debatably) held to be the first true rock and roll record.[8] What distinguishes it from the jump blues it was derived from is largely the prominence of distorted electric guitar. Legend has it that this resulted from guitarist Willie Kizart's amplifier being damaged on the ride to the recording session, either from rain or falling out of the trunk. If this record had not exerted the influence that it did on subsequent artists, it would not have any claim whatsoever to being the first instance of rock and roll. Instead, it would likely be unnotable as one among many instances, though perhaps a deviant one, of jump blues. We distinguish 'Rocket 88' as something else precisely because it spawned a separate lineage with a different sort of sound.

To sum up: Modeling the ontology of genre on the ontology of species, we could take genres to be lineages of inspiration. The result is perhaps similar to the account of genre that Simon Evnine offers, according to which a genre is a tradition. On Evnine's view, 'What is essential to a tradition's being a genre is that the works themselves are responsive to the tradition and, in particular, responsive to other works that are parts of the tradition' (2015: 6).[9] Whether we call it a lineage or a tradition, the view identifies a genre as a historical individual which is continued by connections of influence, inspiration, and responsiveness—that is, through musicians self-consciously making new works in the genre.

§3 The problem of independent origins

The ontology of genre which we described in the previous section fails, precisely where the analogy between genres and species breaks down. A member of a species must be historically descended from other members of the species. Once a species exists, every member is a member from the moment it comes into existence. Members of a genre, however, might have independent origins.

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[8] See, e.g., Petridis (2004) for a discussion of the debate surrounding this issue.

[9] This is not the only possible reading of Evnine. See section 4, below.

Consider, for example, the genre *Christmas music*. While it may not be obvious that Christmas music is a genre, it is commonly regarded as one by music critics and commentators (e.g. Taylor 2023). This provides prima facie evidence for it being a genre, since music critics are competent, well-informed members of the artworld.

Although the properties of songs which count as Christmas music are many and varied, it is an important musical category. It provides reasons to play songs in the genre at certain times and not at others. A musician might decide at a certain point in their career to record a Christmas album, in the same way that they might decide to record a jazz album or a rock album. And Christmas albums can be grouped separately in a record store or music catalog. The genre also guides critical practice. It is not hard to imagine saying something like *'Fairytale of New York' isn't my favorite song, but it's my favorite Christmas song.* Nor is it hard to imagine an argument about whether the Kink's 'Father Christmas' is a real Christmas song. Regardless of where one stands on those propositions, they are entirely parallel to claims about other songs in other genres. This parallel marks Christmas songs as a genre.

Of course, some songs are written with the genre of Christmas music in mind. For example, Paul McCartney wrote 'Wonderful Christmastime' as an instance of Christmas music. He was both influenced by and contributing to the genre. In other cases, though, songs which are written with no particular influence from the Christmas music genre and with no intention of contributing to the genre nevertheless become Christmas songs. 'My Favorite Things' was written for the non-Christmassy 1959 musical *The Sound of Music*. Before the release of the movie version of the musical, a promoter encouraged the song's inclusion on 1964's *The Jack Jones Christmas Album*. The producer of the album countered that 'My Favorite Things' is not a Christmas song, and at that time he was right. The promoter re-countered, 'Just add sleigh bells' (Bronson 2017). They did, and that release established the song's Christmas bona fides. Ever since, 'My Favorite Things' has been part of the Christmas music genre.

This is not like the cases we discussed in the previous section, where new works were part of a different genre than their inspirations because they spawned a new genre or subgenre. 'My Favorite Things' is not the progenitor of Christmas music. The genre of Christmas music was well established when it was written. The problem is precisely that 'My Favorite Things' began life as a show tune and only later *became* a Christmas song.

This puzzle case would not be resolved by reverting to thinking of genre in terms of intrinsic features. The lyrics of 'My Favorite Things' include references to sleigh bells, snowflakes, and mittens (markers of winter and so perhaps Christmas). But they also include raindrops on roses and bee stings

(warm weather phenomena with no connection to Christmas).[10] It has silver white winters, yes, but they melt into springs. It is easy to see what the producer of the Jack Jones album was thinking when he said it was not a Christmas song.

The problem of independent origins arises for other genres as well. Consider the genre of *world music*, sometimes called *world beat*. It was devised in 1987 at a meeting of independent record labels. Simon Frith quotes an industry document which describes the genre as a polymorphic catch-all, saying 'that it means practically any music that isn't at present catered for by its own category' (1996: 85). That is, it was the records they published from around the world which they could not already sell under the label of reggae, blues, folk, or some other existing genre. The records which counted as world music had not been made with the genre in mind, because there had been no term or concept for this genre before. And it could also be used going forward to classify musicians who simply did not fit in any of their label's rubrics, whether they were inspired by earlier works of so-called world music or not. Even if one hesitates to say that the industry decision in 1987 instantly made it a genre, subsequent musical practice adopted world music as a genre category. Once the concept was in play, there could be world music radio shows, a world music section at record stores, and fans—but also haters—of world music.

§4 Second try: Genres as social practices

A genre is held together in part by the diverse influences and impulses of the artists who make music of that kind, but the problem of independent origins shows that the creators are not doing all the work of holding a genre together. The subcultures which organize themselves around genres also do important work. As Jesse Prinz (2014) and Roger Scruton (1987) point out—with special attention to punk and classical, respectively—there is a mutual dependence between kinds of music and the kinds of people who produce and enjoy them. As Scruton puts it, 'a musical culture does not exist *in addition* to the music which compels it. The culture creates the music which creates it, by providing the only conditions under which composition is possible, or under which the work of music can be heard' (1987: 358). Once it exists, the culture can recognize works which were not originally created to be part of the genre.

Unlike a biological species, the boundaries of music genres are socially delineated. That is, the boundaries of a genre are the result of an ongoing negotiation between those who produce, promote, and enjoy music of that kind. That negotiation is not (or it least not only) a direct matter of deciding which works count as part of the genre, but instead a matter of deciding on the kind-relevant features.

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[10] On a features-based account of genre (where genre membership is secured by works having the characteristic features associated with that genre), typical features of the genre are referred to as *standard features*, while those that work against genre membership (like the warm weather terms mentioned here) are referred to as *contra-standard*. See Abell (2012).

These kind-relevant features can be quite diverse.[11] For rock music and its various subgenres, they are *functional* (to get people to dance, deal with their angst, etc.); *structural* (punk is typically simpler than prog rock); *sonic* (psychedelic rock typically utilized fuzzed out guitars); *aesthetic* (as Prinz describes, punk rock elevates ugliness to the place typically enjoyed by beauty); *attitudinal* (punk's disdain for the mainstream); *lyrical* (death metal is distinguished from other sorts of heavy metal music largely by its lyrical fixation on death); and *technological* (Krautrock and New Romanticism employed synthesizers and de-emphasized the guitar typical of earlier rock music). This list is meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. It captures many of the standard features we typically point to when, in conversation with others, we attempt to put pieces of music in their proper categories. A legitimate conversation in terms of genre is simultaneously an application of criteria like these and a negotiation about which criteria should be relevant.

This resembles Enrico Terrone's account, according to which genres are 'normative clusters grounded in patterns of expectations' (2021: 21). The *normative cluster* is the collection of kind-relevant properties, normative because they set the standards for genre membership. Yet *patterns of expectation* are only part of the social practices that ground and sustain genres. This leaves out the important role which artists can play in creating works of a genre, where their intentions as much as their expectations are at play. That is typical, even though the problem of independent origins shows that it is not the *only* way a new work gets added to a genre. Even the role that fans play in constituting and shaping genre is more active than mere expectation: fans can mark new works as members of the genre, explore to find unrecognized instances, and police the genre's boundaries.[12]

A broader understanding is provided by thinking of genres as institutions (Sen 2022) or social practices (Malone 2022, 2024). What brings together all of the Christmas music and none of the not-Christmas music is that, for any given work of Christmas music, nominating it for inclusion in the genre constitutes a legitimate move within Christmas music practice. The legitimacy of nominations such as this are governed by rules which are negotiated by members of that community.

This allows us to understand the case of 'My Favorite Things,' which began as just a show tune. Its inclusion on *The Jack Jones Christmas Album* can be seen as its nomination, and its subsequent uptake by the community made the song part of the genre. It has been recorded on other Christmas albums, and it is played along with other Christmas songs. This also allows us to understand cases where inclusion on a Christmas album is insufficient to make something into a Christmas song. The a capella group Pentatonix included a version of the Leonard Cohen song 'Hallelujah' on their hit 2016 album *A Pentatonix Christmas*. Beyond the repetition of the title word and a pretty arrangement, 'Hallelujah' has

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[11] For an account of kind-relevant features for human artifacts in general, see Thomasson (2003, p. 598ff.).

[12] Terrone also insists that the work, as a matter of ontology, is the cluster of properties rather than the practices. This is a point we return to in the next section.

nothing to recommend it as a Christmas song. Pentatonix's inclusion of it on their album nonetheless nominates it to the community. The nomination has already had some small success. The Pentatonix version of the song counts as a Christmas record and is played, for example, in shopping malls in December. But it has not succeeded in making 'Hallelujah' into a Christmas song. Many listeners still associate the song with Jeff Buckley's 1990s version. Others think of it as a song from the movie *Shrek*. This lack of uptake means that 'Hallelujah' is not a Christmas song—at least not yet. Attitudes toward the song could shift, and the audiences, publishers, and programmers who curate the Christmas music genre could come to count 'Hallelujah' as a Christmas song. They would thus belatedly accept the nomination, changing what counts as a song in the genre and so too changing the genre itself ever so slightly.

We can imagine the origin of any genre beginning with a community of people who gather together and curate a body of works according to some criteria. These criteria are, while in use, constantly up for debate. New criteria can be added to the list. Others can be dropped or modified. Individual works are nominated by members of the community. This can be done explicitly (by calling the work a member of the genre) or implicitly (by treating the work as if it were a work of that kind). Some community members produce their own works and nominate them for inclusion. When these comply with some criteria and not others, the rules governing the practice may be called into question. The community changes over time, with some members aging out, losing interest, or dying, and with new members joining. The body of rules that emerged from the first iteration of that community continues, along with the corresponding playlist of canonical works, but both the rules and the collection of works will slowly change.

For the genre of Christmas music, this is a just-so story. There was no first moment when the community that grounds the genre got together, no official institution that started curating it. For the genre of world music, this origin story is more literal.

Note that this still treats genres as historical individuals. They come into existence, change over time, and might stop existing. A biological species is an historical individual where all of its parts have the right kind of origin, a lineage where each member is descended from earlier members. Yet that is only one way for an historical individual to maintain cohesion. For a music genre, all of its members stand in the right relation to the community of listeners, artists, publishers, critics, and promoters who collectively determine the genre's boundaries.

On one reading of Evnine (2015), these institutions or practices might be what he calls 'traditions.' While Evnine does discuss retrospective genre membership, his discussion is limited to cases where the work was created before the corresponding genre category existed; he also discusses the contemporary exclusion of things that used to be part of a tradition (2015: 5, fn. 8). He does not directly address the possibility of a work created outside of an existing genre which is brought into that genre only later. In such cases, the songwriter could have made reference to works of the genre, taking them

up as influences and thereby making their work part of the relevant tradition, but they did not. This contrasts with the cases Evnine discusses where relations of influence are centrally important. Treating this as a friendly addition to Evnine's account rather than a criticism, our discussion in this section could be read as working out how his view about science fiction extends to music genres. In the general case, on this reading, a genre is a tradition consisting of social practices over time.

It would be possible to say instead that a genre does not *consist* of a social practice but instead that it is an abstract object *created and maintained* by a social practice. Consider the ontology of musical works defended by David Friedell (2020). He argues that a musical work is a partless abstract object which is associated with performance rules, such that performances that follow those rules are instances of the work. Importantly, the rules themselves are not timeless, intrinsic features of the abstractum. Instead, they are determined—and can be changed—by the composer. For folk songs, this power to revise the rules belongs to an ongoing community rather than to a solitary composer. One might, by analogy, think of a genre as a partless abstract object in the same way. A genre is created by a community. The community both specifies some members of the genre directly and also specifies rules for which works should count as members of the genre. And these specifications can change over time. Note, crucially, that Friedell's partless abstracta are not the timeless, complex objects posited by musical Platonists. Instead, they come into being, they could have had different musical features than they do, they change over time, and they can go out of existence. These are precisely the hallmarks of historical individuals! So to understand genres as abstract objects on the model of Friedell is arguably an instance of the account we offer here rather than a rival to it. Although one might quibble over whether Friedell's abstracta are individuals, they are certainly more like individuals than they are like Platonic universals. So even if the metaphysical view is not strictly an instance of the one we develop here, it is an anodyne alternative which concedes all of the points we are concerned to make.[13]

§5 The alien jazz problem

We have argued that genres are not lineages like species. Rather, they are individuals grounded in social practices of curation. Those practices involve artists, audiences, critics, and the music industry. Yet we began, at the outset, exploring how to think about genres as historical individuals. So one might think that all we have shown is that *if genres are historical individuals* then they are institutional or social in the way we have described.

Pressing this problem: Recall the thought experiment from section 2 about aliens from Alpha Centauri who played music that sounded just like Gorgoroth's oeuvre. It would not be black metal, we

[13] Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing our attention to the potential similarities between Friedell's view and ours.

said, but one might disagree. Since semantic content is plausibly a kind-relevant feature for black metal, we can make the case harder by shifting to an example of pure music. Suppose the aliens from Alpha Centauri engage in an improvisational practice of music making, and on a particular day play things that are note-for-note identical to Miles Davis' 'So What' and some other canonical jazz standards. Suppose an observer from Earth is listening and says, *These aliens have jazz*. Has the observer said something true?

It seems as if the account of genres as historical individuals requires us to say *No*. The aliens cannot have jazz any more than they can have black metal. If this is your intuition, then you can stop at this point. An advantage of our account is that it can readily make sense of that.

Yet one might think this is too quick. The observer from Earth carries with them the social practice of the genre. They are an agent of the institution, as it were, and so can certify this alien practice as being bona fide jazz. This would mean that the aliens' music *becomes* jazz when it connects to the Earthly historical individual. It would be true that aliens have jazz when the observer says they do, but not that they had it before the observer started listening. Again, if this is your intuition, then you can stop at this point. But it may strike one as a bit odd.

Even if the observer's utterance is strictly-speaking false, it might still be permissible. It conveys the fact that the aliens' music has the kind-relevant features for the genre jazz. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that these kind-relevant features could comprise an essence for jazz, so that the genre could be understood as an ahistorical universal. As we have discussed, the kind-relevant features for a genre change over time. So the observer is just reporting that the aliens' music meets the current criteria for jazz. Modal jazz like 'So What' has been accepted as jazz for 75 years, but might not have counted as jazz earlier in the 20th century.

Regardless, one might still feel that the answer ought to be *Yes*. There is a sense in which the observer has correctly reported something by saying that the aliens have jazz. It is not merely because the observer has looped them into the social practice. And it is not merely a false but permissible way of saying that the aliens have jazz-like music.

Indeed, it is easy to imagine the observer feeling somewhat conflicted. They might think to themselves that there is a real sense in which the aliens do have jazz, but that there is another sense in which they do not. Our intuitions can be pushed toward one sense or another by context and focus. As Joseph Moore writes, our musical judgments 'can shift with the explanatory purposes, evaluative foci, and pragmatic considerations that characterize the different judgmental and conversational settings in which we find ourselves' (2012: 286). With respect to identifying musical works, Moore argues, we are 'variously sensitive to structure, or to provenance, or to both in a way that occasionally pulls us in different directions' (2012: 286). So he proposes that there are two parallel ontologies for musical works, that 'bound up in our concept of a musical work are two distinct criteria of individuation, one musico-structural and the other provenancial' (2012: 301). Moore gives this view the ugly name *shiftism*.

Regardless of whether this succeeds as an understanding of musical works, one could adapt shiftism as an account of genre. When we think of genre, our thinking is typically ambiguous between the cluster of kind-relevant criteria which hold now and the historical individual grounded in the social practice of the community. Someone who is not an active member of the community might be more prone to take the list of criteria as a kind of checklist, to diagnose works as members of the genre rather than to curate them. Artists, aficionados, and record executives are more likely to focus on the social practice, because they are in a position to argue for or against the inclusion of nominated works. For most of us, however, different contexts can get us to think more in one way or more in the other.

Shiftism can accommodate the competing intuitions voiced by Evnine (2015) and Terrone (2021) in debating the nature of *science fiction*. Evnine argues that genres are traditions, because this makes sense of the continuity of a genre over time. He considers the alternative that 'a genre might not *be* a region of conceptual space, but be associated with, or realized by, one such region at one time, and a different region at another time, and have a history in that sense.' But the genre is not a cluster of features, Evnine thinks, because the lists of features across time without the social practice are just mysterious grab bags of properties and relations. He writes, 'why we should then think of these different regions of conceptual space as realizations, at different times, of the *same* genre would be a mystery' (2015: 10). Terrone accepts the alternative and resolves the mystery precisely by appealing to the social dynamics of genre. He writes, 'Different regions of conceptual space count as realizations, at different times, of the *same* genre because those realizations are connected through a *social relation* that involve patterns of expectations in the relevant community' (2021: 21). So, Terrone argues, the genre is the property cluster. Science fiction is outside the scope of our argument here, but their dispute transposed to music genres is tantamount to saying that the genre must be the social practice itself or the list of criteria—just one or the other. For music, according to shiftism, genre talk shifts between picking out the two kinds of things.

Note that shiftism is different than the suggestion that a genre concept is disjunctive. It starts from a conflicted intuition when asked whether the alien music is jazz: *Yes*, but also *No*. This requires that it is *Yes* in one sense but *No* in another sense. On a disjunctive conception, where the alien music would satisfy one of the two disjuncts, the answer would simply be *Yes*.

So shiftism would still deliver the promised conclusion that music genres are historical individuals *in a sense*. The kind of historical individual that they are is not one grounded in the pedigree of its members but instead one held together by the social practices of the community. The sense of genre as a historical individual (on this final proposal) would stand alongside a sense in which genres can be thought about in terms of the criteria for membership, but the criteria for membership hold only at a time and result from the history and social practices up to that point.

The foregoing considerations offer three possible answers to the Alpha Centauri scenario: (1) The aliens cannot have jazz because their traditions are unconnected to Earthly social practices that

constitute jazz as a genre. (2) When Earthlings observe the alien traditions, they can act as agents of the institution and confer jazz status on it. So alien music-making past and present can be made into jazz in the way that 'My Favorite Things' became Christmas music. (3) By adopting shiftism as the semantics for 'jazz', one can say that the term refers either to the historical individual governed by a social practice or to whatever meets the conditions demanded by the social practice. Aliens can have jazz in the latter sense regardless of whether Earthlings notice or not, but that sense is parasitic on the first.

These possibilities align with different intuitions, and we do not claim to have offered decisive reasons to prefer one over another. Indeed, the authors of the present paper are not of one mind on this point. The crucial thing to note is that all three possibilities—along with the authors and our argument—converge to the conclusion that a music genre is a historical individual governed by social practices.

§6 Conclusion

The concept of historical individuals has been fruitfully applied to other objects in the philosophy of art, making it a promising approach for the ontology of music genre. In this paper we have defended two main conclusions: one negative and one positive. Negatively, taking biological species as the model for genre does not yield a satisfactory account, primarily due to the problem of independent origins—that a work may be created outside an existing genre and only later become a member of it. Positively, by focusing not on the lineages of works themselves but on the social practices that create and sustain genres, we avoid this problem and offer a plausible ontology of music genre in terms of historical individuals.

These conclusions leave open two significant questions. First, our positive conclusion is not drawn at the level of fundamental metaphysics. It is compatible with the view that a music genre is constituted by and thus identical with a social practice or tradition, but it is also compatible with the view that a music genre is a distinct entity created and sustained by such a practice. On this latter possibility, it might be a simple abstract object or a fusion of works. Second, our account is compatible with different conclusions about alien musical practices like the one imagined in the Alpha Centauri thought experiment. Although we leave these questions open, our account can readily be extended to fit different possible answers. We leave that task to future work.

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