

SoundCloud as a Genre: Looking Beyond the Music

Madeleine Renken

In this article, Madeleine Renken examines the genre of music streaming service SoundCloud through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory.

There are so many ways to listen to music today. We have vinyl records, tapes, CDs, and digital downloads from online stores such as Amazon Music, Google Play, and iTunes (at least for now). However, the most prevalent method is streaming. The possibilities for streaming are endless with choices like Deezer, Pandora, Apple Music, Spotify, and much more, but SoundCloud has been one of the most influential services, from the start of its existence to the present.

According to its website, SoundCloud is “the world’s largest open audio platform, powered by a connected community of creators, listeners and curators on the pulse of what’s new, now and next in culture” (*Soundcloud.com*). Creators can compose music in a separate computer program and upload it to the website to share with their followers via feeds. This kind of social media component may result in an artist’s popularity so they can kickstart their professional careers. Many musicians started out by making music on SoundCloud and have grown their fanbase almost purely on the social streaming platform due to the ease of sharing. Altogether an effective platform for audial creators, SoundCloud easily stands as a prime individual genre in the literary world.

In order to better examine SoundCloud as a standalone genre, I conferred with an actual SoundCloud artist. Lachlan McArthur-Self (also known as Candidate) specializes in electronic music production, and I had the opportunity to interview him to see what the process looks like from start to finish and how his work is taken up on the Internet.

Why SoundCloud, and How Do I Begin My Music Career?

Why are streaming services like SoundCloud a great option? Simply put, they're a quicker way to spread your music (more on that later). Getting record labels to notice you is nearly impossible with so many musicians flooding the market, so sending in recordings is not the most effective way to get noticed, anymore. With SoundCloud, you can literally show the world who you are with the click of a button. And, with so many aspects to SoundCloud's platform, there is much to explore within its genre! Through this lens, we can link SoundCloud's attributes to the literary world. To better explain the basics of music production and consumption processes, I will break them down using the ISU Writing Program's CHAT terms.

But wait, what is CHAT? CHAT refers to cultural-historical activity theory with which we can study real-life examples of genres from around the world. However, these don't have to be literary examples; in fact, almost anything can be a genre. The Illinois State University Writing Program uses a specific set of terms, based on CHAT theory, to explore different literacies and literate activity in more complex ways. I'm going to be using these terms to help explain the music production process, using SoundCloud, in more detail.

To begin, **production** (the means or ways in which a text is produced) is probably the most difficult and time-consuming element of the whole process. This involves writing the lyrics and subsequently creating the musical sounds, either with physical instruments or with compositional software, called a DAW (Digital Audio Workspace). Within this part of the process, though, we must consider **multimedia composing**. The term multimedia is often used to describe the different kinds of tools and materials that people use when they compose. For some artists, lyrics can be written down while on the move through a note taking app, while others choose pen and paper as a preferred medium. Obviously, any one of these systems is effective as long as you have a method for keeping track of the lyrics. As for his lyric-writing process, Lachlan says, "I constantly keep records and notes on my phones of either voice memos of me singing brief ideas I have or really small snippets of lyrics—just like, two lines or something. Then I'll try to come back to

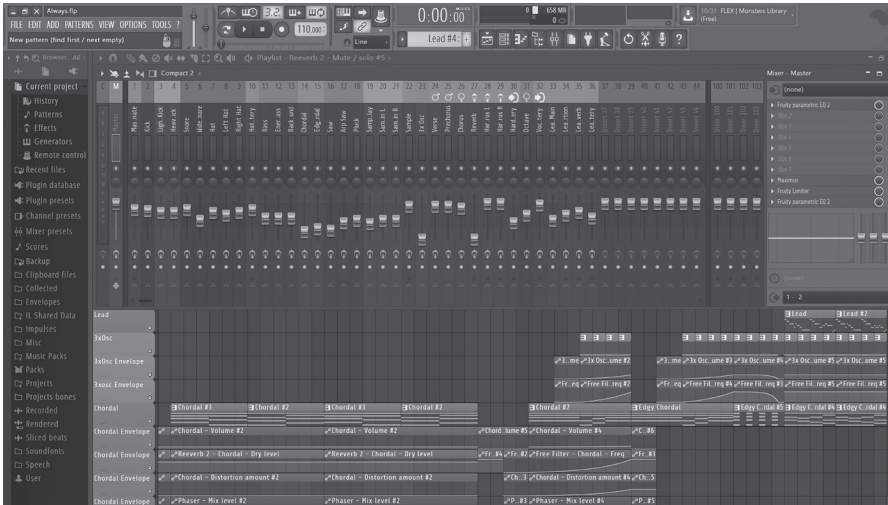


Figure 1: Example of a Digital Audio Workspace, FL Studio.

them later or fuse some together.” Lachlan then goes on to say that even though he uses the Notes app on his phone for lyrics because it’s convenient, he still prefers pen and paper for writing poetry and thought flow.

Another form of media that these artists work with is (obviously) the audio file as they continue to add to and manipulate it. The file is saved on the computer while the writer is working in the DAW (Figure 1), so they are able to constantly make edits to the song. Once those changes are finalized, the song is uploaded to SoundCloud.

Rap-resenting Ourselves as Artists

Another factor to consider is **representation**, which deals with the ways a text or genre is understood and planned, especially involving how an author deals with this understanding (including the audience and purpose for a text) when composing. How will you attract new followers while engaging your current ones? The answer: branding. On SoundCloud profiles, there is an area where artists upload a photo that best represents who they are as an artist and what type of content they produce. Some artists upload a photo of themselves, and others opt for a symbol or logo instead. There is also a header section (Figure 2 below) for the moment users open that particular artist’s page, which is another opportunity to upload a photo. This area is typically where a logo or symbol would go to establish their identity. Lachlan explains his approach to representation:

“When I post stuff on my SoundCloud, I try and make it a fully produced song. I’ve put a lot of thought into all the lyrics, and I

want it to mean something, so don't produce just anything and throw it up on there . . . All the logos and album art I do on my profile picture and stuff like that, I try to have that same vibe of . . . [being] professional, serious, [showing] stuff that I've put time and work into."

Now, all of this information about composition and branding is great, but how do you go about getting that out there into the world? Enter **distribution**, which deals with how texts are dispersed and taken up. In SoundCloud, distribution is carried out through hitting that "upload" button, which sends the song out to music feeds throughout the platform. After this, the song can be accessed anytime online thanks to the cloud hosting service. (Get it, SoundCLOUD? . . . Ha, sorry.)

Now that you've got that next hit uploaded to SoundCloud, it's time to make a name for yourself! And there's no better way of understanding how that happens than with **socialization**, which helps us understand how others interact with the activity. Much like Facebook and Twitter SoundCloud contains a social media component; you can "like," repost, and comment on artists' songs to show support and/or share constructive criticism for that particular piece. You can also support the artist by "following" them to hear more of their work while continuing to give additional feedback. In general, having these features as assessments for projects can be helpful in one's musical growth as a creator.

This feedback also goes hand-in-hand with **reception**, which refers to how the audience takes up a text—not just by reading it (or in this case, listening to it), but also how they might use or repurpose it in ways the author might not have expected. For instance, someone might like a song so much that they create a remix or two of that song and upload it to SoundCloud as well (with a nod to the original artist, of course). An individual could also use the song in a YouTube video they captured to make their content even more interesting to their audience, which is a great example of **trajectory**. With trajectory, we can see what texts do and how they move around the world as they get produced, distributed, and repurposed.



Figure 2: Screenshot of Lachlan's SoundCloud Profile Picture and Header.

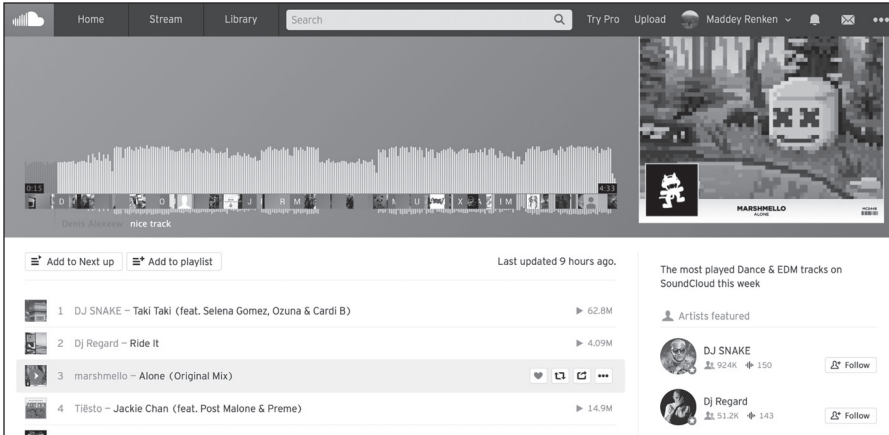


Figure 3: This is a screenshot of SoundCloud’s playback interface. One can easily select where they want to go to in the song and view comments in this window.

Different Modes in Composing (Not Just for Musical Scales)

Now that we’ve delved into the basics of becoming a SoundCloud artist, let’s discuss the components of **multimodal composition** that are involved with the streaming service. Multimodal composing refers to all the modes that humans use to communicate (ISU Writing Program). We examined all the different tools, materials, and spaces used to create a text. We will now be extending this to how the text interacts with human perception through our different senses.

Sound is clearly fundamental to SoundCloud, which means the platform is **aural** in nature. With that, a good number of artists are either singing or rapping in their songs, so in addition to being aural, SoundCloud is also **oral (spoken)** because the composition is literally produced by the mouth. It is **alphabetic**, too, in that it uses letters from the alphabetic system (ABCs) for artists’ names, biographies, songs, and album names, and playlist titles (as shown in Figure 4). With its viewing profiles, playlists, playback bar, and interface, SoundCloud is also considerably **visual** as images capture the listener’s interest and make the website altogether more user-friendly.

Finally, besides being visual, SoundCloud is inherently **symbolic**. One of the symbols commonly used is the “like” symbol in Figure 3, where listeners can let the artist and other listeners know whether they enjoyed the song and want to listen to it again. This like symbol is represented in the shape of a heart next to the song title. Other symbols include a play button in the shape of a triangle (also next to the song title), which reveals how many times a song has been played, and arrows in a circular formation

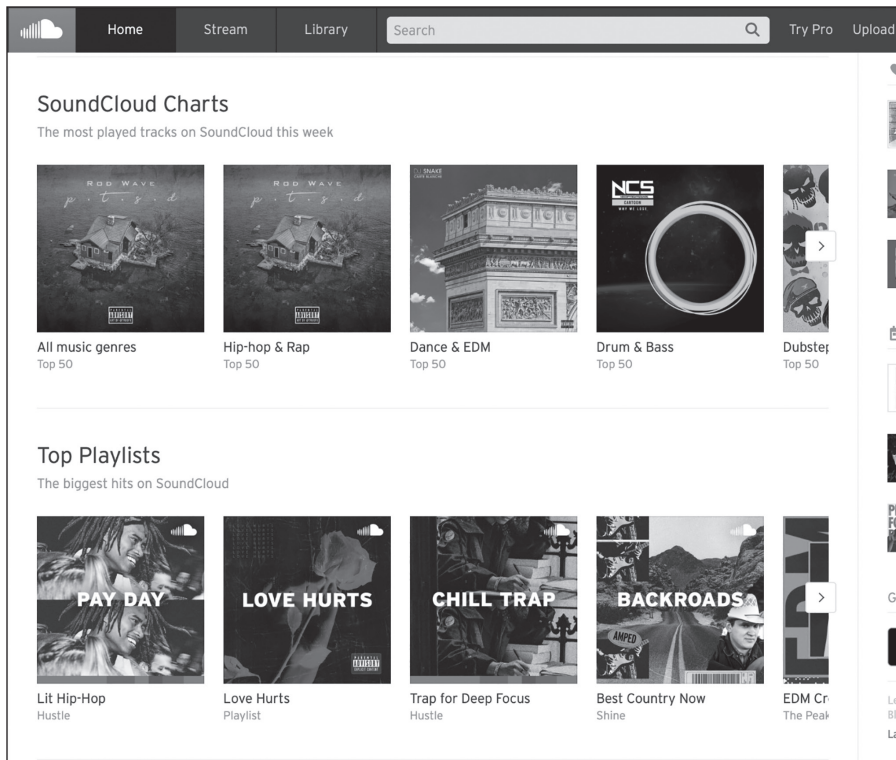


Figure 4: This screenshot shows a wide selection of playlists to choose from on the SoundCloud homepage.

denoting the repost action, which allows listeners to repost that song to their own followers' feeds. All-in-all, SoundCloud is a certainly symbolic genre and utilizes all modes to further its potential.

In Summary

This CHAT-based analysis allows you to better see the complexity of how the genre of SoundCloud works. Who knows, you might even use this article as a starting point to go and produce a song for your new SoundCloud account! Overall, SoundCloud is a great service for musical artists to start sharing their music with others. With this intuitive social interface, virtually anyone can easily record, upload, and distribute while discovering some talented artists from around the world. There is one last piece of advice in Lachlan's words for those who may doubt their writing abilities:

"I think more people should create stuff just 'cause they like to . . . I think that's healthy and part of what makes life unique and cool. Making art adds meaning to it. It doesn't have to be good.

If you want to make something, just go for it, regardless of how professional you think it is. I mean, being bad at something is the first step towards becoming at something. . . If you want to make something, don't make other people's perceptions or your own inhibitions and your own insecurities hold you back from doing that."

I learned so much from interviewing Lachlan—from the process of starting out as an artist to learning how to properly exemplify that artistic identity on this platform; but perhaps the most valuable lesson was his last quote. What matters is not being the best but creating in the first place. Now, go out and create!

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