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How a Spotify Playlist Became Gen Z's *TRL*

The era of MTV's chart-making show and the high-gloss talent it championed are long gone. On Lorem, a new generation of bedroom pop hitmakers gets its due.

by **Kyle Munzenrieder**
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Remember when record label A&R guys scouted dingy rock clubs and open mics looking for the next big thing? Today, that dream job is about as obsolete as a fax machine. Generation Z decides for itself what the next big thing is, whether anyone who owns a suit notices or not. Take the musician Benee's single "Supalonely," which was a Top 40 hit everywhere from America to her native New Zealand last year; you might have completely missed its rise if you weren't on TikTok. When *The New York Times* called Girl in Red, aka the Oslo, Norway-based 22-year-old Marie Ulven, "one of the most astute and exciting singer-songwriters" working today, it was two years after cool teens had already figured that out. R&B stars Umi and Omar Apollo got their start on the music-sharing site SoundCloud purely by chance, and are now on the road to becoming the next Erykah Badu and Prince.

If you don't recognize any of these names, you aren't alone—but you are probably over the age of 25. “We all came from the Internet. We were all just normal kids making music,” says 22-year-old Conan Gray. Four years ago, he was a high school senior who uploaded a homemade music video of his self-produced song “Idle Town” to YouTube. In April, he had a little over 4 million more monthly listeners on Spotify than Mariah Carey, and 7 million more than Nick Jonas. “We weren't signed to developmental deals when we were 12 years old,” Gray says. “It's just not that kind of a story anymore.”

While music execs have now been scouting young talent on the Internet for almost two decades (the 12-year-old Justin Bieber, to whom Gray is referring, was famously found on YouTube in 2007), artists were usually whisked away to record label finishing school and reintroduced to the world as fully packaged pop stars engineered to snag *Tiger Beat* covers and Pepsi commercials. The new up-and-coming teen idols, however, have a DIY ethos that is more in line with that of indie bands—long before any label approached them, they had already recorded songs, in some cases made videos, and generated their own connections with fans. Some get tagged with the term “bedroom pop” because, well, they literally started making music at home, appealing to other kids around their age looking for music to listen to while scrolling through their phone. “The essence of being a bedroom pop artist is relatability,” says Umi, 22. “You don't feel out of reach as a person.”



Even as their Instagram followings climb into the millions, many of these new stars have remained almost invisible to the culture at large. Traditional gatekeepers like MTV, radio, awards shows, music review sites, and most magazines haven't paid much attention—which is why others are stepping in to fill that void. A few years ago, the higher-ups at Spotify realized they had no idea how Gen Z got excited about new music. “If you were a young listener trying to figure out who you were, you'd open Spotify, and there wasn't anything that really spoke to you,” says Lizzy Szabo, a senior editor at the streaming service. The app had been making curated playlists since its inception, but most were neatly defined by either genre (rap, indie, pop hits) or functional purpose (working out, chilling, singing in the shower). No one was going to become a star by appearing on a playlist called something like “Indie Rock Road Trip.” So in 2019, Spotify set out to create a new playlist that could encapsulate the zeitgeist of an emerging generation the way MTV's *Total Request Live* and *Soul Train* once did. “Let's say the next Billie Eilish came along,” says Szabo. “Where could we feature that artist so we knew there was going to be an audience waiting with open arms?”

The result was Lorem, a playlist that quietly debuted that summer. The name stems from “lorem ipsum,” the scrambled Latin placeholder text that is often used in graphic design. Like its audience and many of the artists featured in it, Lorem is still trying to figure out exactly what it is, and it certainly isn't rushing to put definitive labels on anything. “It's not up to us. It's up to the community, the artists, the listeners to kind of tell us where things are headed,” says Szabo, who sees the list as something of an in-house music blog offering new finds. What binds the Lorem community sonically is a hodgepodge of influences, from the millennial-favored genre of chillwave to the cult favorite YouTube livestream “lofi hip hop radio—beats to relax/study to” and Lorde's moody dream pop. Lyrics hew to the youthful angst traditions of emo, '90s mall punk, and Taylor Swift. It's casually hip, but not posing to be achingly cool. It's the soundtrack for sending memes to your friends, writing your Sarah Lawrence application essay, or dancing in your room after your second iced coffee.

“The artists that I'm placed with are all artists that I listened to,” Benee says. “Lorem is an exciting kind of new wave.” Remi Wolf, a 25-year-old singer-songwriter who mixes funk with pop and a little bit of electro, says her first EP took off primarily due to Spotify playlisting; now she has '90s alt-icon Beck remixing her songs. Older songs, as well as tracks by more established musicians, also float in and out of the playlist. On any given day, you might find Ariana Grande or Post Malone on it. Szabo has even been inspired by memes. When a tweet pointing out that in the aughts, the younger sisters of successful pop stars all seemed to get record deals went viral, she added songs by Ashlee Simpson and Solange to the mix.

The Lorem crew uniformly bristles at any distinction between their music and the glossiest of Top 40 productions. Apollo, 24, casually name-checks 1970s studio maven Steely Dan and '80s avant-pop composer Arthur Russell as influences, but the first name out of his mouth when asked for dream collaborators is Mariah Carey. Gray says he's streamed Britney Spears's "Toxic" about 300 times in the past month. "I fuck with Ariana Grande so hard. I don't think it's cool to be anti-popular," says Ulven. Wolf's streaming hit "Photo ID" borrows from soul, funk, and bubblegum pop before crescendoing with a minute-long psychedelic synth riff. "Genre is sort of a moot point now," Wolf says. "Everybody's pulling inspiration from everywhere."

When Lorem and the artists it features first started gaining attention, that lack of neat categorization even led to online conspiracy theories. One Reddit post proffered that Spotify was hiding the list from millennials, lest their taste somehow taint the Gen Z algorithm. (Spotify says this isn't true.) Meanwhile, many critics have derided younger artists who find success on the app as "Spotifycore," and theorize that their music is somehow engineered for maximum success on the platform. The music itself doesn't reflect that. In fact, Apollo says he was a bit perturbed when industry figures suggested that he start writing songs in the traditional verse-chorus-verse format. "I didn't have any structure," he says. "When I was making my first songs, it was just based off of feeling."

Szabo says she realized Spotify had really captured something when artists frequently featured on the list began performing together and collaborating: “After about six months of programming the list and not really explaining ourselves, we were over the moon because there were tours involving all these artists we had featured.” Both Umi and Girl in Red opened for Gray in 2019; Wolf toured with Cautious Clay and recruited young rapper Dominic Fike for a remix of “Photo ID”; and Bennee’s “Supalonely” featured indie pop artist Gus Dapperton on a verse.

Now, it finally feels like the wider world is starting to take notice. Many of these artists have made their late-night talk show debut over the past year. Taylor Swift has routinely shouted out Gray’s music in her Insta-gram stories. Elton John, who has an endearing knack for keeping up with young musicians, has heaped praise on Gray and Bennee for their songwriting abilities. Both Wolf and Apollo are booked to play Bonnaroo, among the first of America’s major post-lockdown festivals. Paul McCartney recently celebrated on Twitter when his collaboration with Fike was added to the list. Girl in Red worked with Finneas, Eilish’s brother and producer, and her track “Serotonin,” a bop about mental health, has broken through onto Billboard’s rock charts.

As their profiles grow, these musicians will be challenged to maintain an intimate connection with their fans. The Spotify playlist might have given them a platform, but they know their true success comes from the young listeners with whom they first connected directly, from one bedroom to another. “A lot of the times, the youth were told what to listen to, but nowadays, they get to tell people what they want to listen to,” Gray says. “They’re so aware of when they’re being sold something that’s fake.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YsXkVI15Ls>

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