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MAKING SYNTHWAVE

HOW AN ONLINE MUSIC COMMUNITY INVENTED A GENRE

JESS BLAISE WARD



A Focal Press Book

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Making Synthwave: How an Online Music Community Invented a Genre documents the journey of an online community in their formation of the synthwave genre.

Taking an emic perspective that delivers a behind-the-scenes, access-all-areas telling of synthwave's story from the very beginning to the mid 2020s, this ethnographic account offers a full history and development of the online synthwave community. Through an insightful longitudinal virtual ethnography by a composer, producer and performer, the book observes how artists, audiences, musicians, producers and performers have come together to negotiate the musical and cultural boundaries of 1980s 'throwback' style synthwave. The book makes visible tacit knowledge of the synthwave creative process, as well as providing rich and experiential subcultural detail that situates synthwave as an active community of practice which formulated its roots as a music genre exclusively online in the mid to late 2000s.

This book is essential reading for music makers in a variety of genres and scholars of popular music, cultural theory and music production, as well as those interested in the nuances of music-making on the internet, creative processes with synthesizers and the mechanics of genre theory and community music in the digital age.

Jess Blaise Ward (Leeds Beckett University, UK) is a synth artist and researcher of genre formation, online music communities, subcultural

theory and feminist scholarship. Past publications include *Who remembers post-punk women?* (2019) and her paper on metalheads in the online synthwave community at the Internet Musicking conference (2022).

‘*Making Synthwave* captures the complexities, passion, politics, and sounds that make this genre so meaningful. Tracing a compelling narrative of the key players in the synthwave community of practice, the book reveals a sophisticated investigation with rigour, richness, and depth that pays wonderful attention to the subtleties of genre studies.’

Laura Glitsos, *Senior Lecturer, Coordinator of Media and Cultural Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University, Australia*

‘*Making Synthwave* is an in-depth account of a musical genre that is little studied, but has a distinctive presence in popular culture through its close connection with film, TV and videogames. Through close musical analysis and interviews with musicians, podcasters, label heads and more, Jess Blaise Ward astutely navigates the interplay of online and offline creative and community-building activity that has contributed to the formation of synthwave, from YouTube tutorials and Reddit groups to gigs and festivals.’

Frances Morgan, *author of Delian Modes: Listening for Delia Derbyshire in Histories of Electronic Dance Music*

MAKING SYNTHWAVE

How an Online Music Community Invented a Genre

Jess Blaise Ward

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PREFACE

‘Fly for your life’, track nine of GUNSHIP’s eponymous album (2015), was the beginning of my journey with synthwave. I was captured by the bright synths in the introduction, the thunderous reverb on the snare and the vocal harmonies in the chorus. Of all of the music I had ever heard, this sounded the most like home. Looking back now, between the synths and the stacked vocal harmonies, it really was the perfect sonic cross-section of the sounds of my childhood; with my real ’80s girl and singer Mum, and synthesizer-obsessed Dad. I first heard GUNSHIP’s album in 2017, when I was studying for an MA in Popular Music and Culture, being particularly interested in subcultural theory and genre formation. I had also taken some electives in songwriting and production, as a continuation of the work from my BA in Music Production. At the time, I was grappling with the what, the why, the how and the who of musical groupings e.g. subgenres, subcultures, scenes and communities. When I eventually discovered synthwave music online, I simultaneously found an entire community of other listeners. On Twitter/X, they identified themselves with #synthwave and #synthfam, and many were music creators themselves. As a musician, songwriter and producer, I was intrigued to know more about the creative processes and practices of making synthwave.

Online, Reddit users characterised synthwave as an ‘80s throwback’ or ‘80s nostalgia’ style of music, and discussions or ‘threads’ that I read made clear a privileging of 1980s aesthetics. I pondered what sort of creative

processes and practices were being undertaken to achieve (or reimagine) the sounds of this decade. Lots of popular music from the 1980s was created with hardware synthesizers, such as the synthpop music by Human League or Depeche Mode. From synthwave subreddits, it became apparent that most creators of synthwave weren't only using those (if at all, due to cost, logistics and availability) but were exploiting affordances of 21st century digital music technology – such as virtual synthesizers and plug-in emulators of legacy synths. I wanted to know more about the community, as it was apparent that these internet users were managing or negotiating what appeared to be the social and subcultural capital of synthwave. Not only were they continually establishing boundaries of what could only be described as a musical genre, but they had a clear group identity as an online music community. What was particularly fascinating was their *sense of community*, which seemed to go well beyond their privileging of the 1980s decade and synthesizers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey with synthwave has been ongoing since 2017 and it has changed my life. None of my conference papers, my PhD thesis or this book would have been possible without the contributions of the online community. To the synthwave community, I am immensely grateful for every interview, every survey response, any and all email exchanges, every song and artist recommendation and more. Thank you for supporting me in representing a genre of music which I know means so much to all of you. A particular thank you goes to David O'Meara from the community, who designed this book's incredible front cover! It has been a privilege to speak on behalf of the #synthfam, and I proudly continue my endeavors as a synth artist, music researcher and community member. I owe thanks to my family, particularly my Nan, Grandad Frank, Mum and Aunt Lisa, who inspired me to perform from a young age and study music through a formal education. My Dad's passion for songwriting and synthesizers has also been influential to my journey as a musician. To my siblings – Aaron, Toby, Libby and Theo, thank you for your unfailing humour, friendship and support. To Josh, my absolute rock, my best friend and life partner, thank you for absorbing synthwave into your life as much as I have. A special thanks also to Dr Tenley Martin, for her kindness and guidance over the years. This book is in memory of my Grandad Phillip Ward (1948–2012), and Father-in-law Robert 'Bob' Geoffrey Foster (1959–2018).

AN INTRODUCTION TO MAKING SYNTHWAVE

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This book is about the genre formation of synthwave online, and its position as not only an online music community but a community of practice ([Wenger-Trayner, 1998](#); [Waldron, 2012](#); [Kenny, 2016](#)). The central question of this research is how the online synthwave community constructed and negotiated parameters of a musical style and genre in the 21st century. It charts a timeline of synthwave from its roots to the present day (upon publication, 2025), identifying key moments in its history and exploring key facets of the genre. My study extends to understanding how this online community maintains itself, in the definition, promotion and dissemination of its existence. The research for this study was conducted between 2018–2025. The seeds of what became the online synthwave community were laid in the mid to late 2000s. In the 2010s, synthwave started to gain some mainstream recognition due to a number of synthwave artist soundtracks and music synchronisations to movies, television and video games, such as: *Drive* (2011), *Kung Fury* (2015), Devolver Digital's games *Hotline Miami* (2012) and *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number* (2015) and Netflix's television series *Stranger Things* (2016–2025). The *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) series has continued to be particularly impactful in this regard, totaling five

seasons by 2025 and having featured the iconic and recognisable soundtrack by two members of synth artist S U R V I V E.

My research of synthwave was initially conducted between 2018–2023. During this period, I was an active synth artist who wrote and released her own music, as well as being a co-writer and collaborator on many musical projects across pop, EDM and metal styles. It was also at this time that I joined 1980s synth band The State of Georgia (lead by Georgia Jakubiak), as a backing singer and synth player. Towards the end of 2023, I began conducting further primary research on synthwave, ahead of this book's publishing in 2025.

This book addresses how and why emergent music cultures develop on the internet in the 21st century and contributes to an existing body of work on genre formation in the popular music tradition. The study of popular music is a field which since the 1980s (and formation of IASPM¹ in 1981) has 'emerged as a globally established and multi-disciplinary field' ([Bennett, Shank, Toynbee, 2006](#), p. 5). Within the field, styles of popular music have been explored from a variety of perspectives, including media and cultural studies, popular music history, music technology, sociology, musicology and ethnomusicology. Whilst the 1980s saw a formalisation of analysing popular music (and proposition of appropriate methodologies – such as the work by musicologist Phillip Tagg), since the 1990s, popular music scholars have been interested in methods of music consumption by the individual and society and popular music creative processes. Both of these interests have continued to be relevant with advancements in music technology and communication technologies, and particularly in the progression of Web 2.0 to 3.0 (which are conceptualized 'waves' of time which demonstrate the capabilities, opportunities and modus operandi of the internet since its invention). Through these interests, popular music scholars have navigated concepts of musical identities and collectives, such as the neotribe ([Bennett, 1999](#)), scene ([Bennett and Peterson, 2004](#)), music subculture ([Hebdige, 1979](#); [Hesmondhalgh, 2005](#)), genre ([Fabbri, 1981, 1982](#); [Hesmondhalgh, 2005](#); [Holt, 2007](#); [Brackett, 2016](#)) and music

community ([Waldron, 2012](#); [Glitsos, 2018](#); [Born, 2018](#)). Of these concepts, music community and genre are the theoretical foci of my study.

My research responds to a knowledge gap in studies of synthwave, which are limited mainly to undergraduate and MA theses ([Kataja, 2017](#); [Miranda, 2018](#); [Hornyak, 2019](#); [Kraujalis, 2020](#); [de Mesquita, 2022](#)), all of which are outside of the English language and all consisting mainly of secondary research (the closest to primary research is Kataja's thesis, which documents their production process of writing three synthwave songs).² Some references to synthwave are present in academia e.g. Paul Ballam-Cross's paper on synthwave, vaporwave and chillwave ([2021](#)), Guillaume Dupetit and Kevin Dahan's paper on synthwave, Timecop1983 and memory ([2024](#)), Mattia Merlini's journal article on synthwave and cinema ([2023](#)) and one contribution to a book series by Andrei Sora (though the book series itself is not about synthwave) ([2019](#)). In 2023, one text, *The History of Synthwave* (2023), was published by Canadian journalist Herkimer Throckmorton, though this does not utilise primary research nor is it designed for an academic audience (no in-text citations nor a bibliography are included in the book). I address this gap in academic literature through offering the first ethnographic account of a full history and development of the online synthwave community. In accounting for the lifespan and history of the online synthwave community, I examine its genre and ecosystem holistically: the musicians, the audiences, the technology, community practices and creative processes and community members' usage of online spaces. As a composer, performer and producer, I offer a practitioner's perspective to the material in the book. My emic perspective provides readers with a 'behind-the-scenes' view of the online community's activities and practices, revealing tensions and developments of the community since its inception. As an ethnographic study, the book is suitable as a 'thick description' ([Geertz, 1973](#)) of an active online music community and community of practice.

My research responds to a theoretical gap in studies of online music communities of the 21st century, particularly of the potential for these to be considered a 'community of practice'. Studies of communities of practice

are yet to take genre theory as an area for application, which is a central feature of this book through my consideration of the synthwave genre as an online musical community of practice. In addition to being informed by those who first conceptualised the ‘community of practice’ (hereafter CoP), there are notable scholars who have used the CoP theory in their research that informed my study. The theory of CoP was conceptualised by social anthropologist Jean Lave and social learning theory scholar Etienne Wenger (now Etienne Wenger-Trayner) in 1991 with their text *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Later additions to the theory were formulated by Wenger-Trayner and various other scholars in [1998](#) (Wenger-Trayner), [2000](#) (Wenger-Trayner), [2002](#) (Wenger-Trayner et al.) and [2015](#) (Wenger-Trayner and B. Wenger-Trayner). Key academics who informed my usage of the CoP through their own applications of it include music education scholar Ailbhe Kenny and her text *Communities of Music Practice* ([2016](#)). Kenny utilised multiple case study communities in her study to examine ‘a means of understanding the nature of communities of musical practice (CoMPs) and their potential for transformation in community and educational contexts’ ([Kenny, 2016](#), p. 128). I also draw attention to the work of Janice Waldron – a professor of music education with interests in informal music learning practices and community music. Her journal articles ([2009](#), [2012](#), [2013](#)), chapter (six) in Bartleet and Higgins’ text (*The Oxford Handbook of Community Music*, [2018](#)) and chapter with Kari K. Veblen (Chapter 33 in *The Routledge Handbook to Sociology of Music Education* edited by [Wright et al., 2021](#)) were influential to my research. Further influences (though to a lesser extent) include various case study applications of the CoP theory, such as Sophie Hennekam et al.’s journal article about female composers and online spaces ([2020](#)), and Christopher Cayari’s chapter about a collaborative vlogging project (Chapter 32 in [Wright et al., 2021](#)). Most of these examples are concerned with teaching practices, education and pedagogy (with the exception of Hennekam et al.’s paper), which evidences where the CoP theory is currently being applied. Some of Waldron’s research of online

music community learning mentions music genre (2009, 2012, 2013), but her studies do not take genre theory as a focus, which my research does.

Making Genres: Music on the Internet

The principal aim of this study is to examine the cultural tenets and musical genre of synthwave. To do this, I investigate the online synthwave community (including relevant offline activity such as live concerts) and its subcultural capital, examining facets of the community's identity. This includes community activities, spaces, values and practices but focuses also on the community's connection to 1980s popular culture, and their engagements with music technology (specifically virtual synthesizers) to formulate a musical and community identity. In doing so, I critically assess tensions and negotiations observable within the outputs, interactions and discourses of the online synthwave community with relevance to their genre formation and community identity (e.g. knowledge legitimisation, community demographics, issues of style authenticity [[Moore, 2002](#)]). Importantly, I argue that the online synthwave community is a CoP ([Wenger-Trayner, 1998](#)). Whilst the present text's theoretical foci are music communities and genre formation, issues of gender representation are important to my enquiries, namely of women's agency and representation within music spaces. This extends to their creative roles as musicians, artists, producers and DJs, their choices of instruments or technology when performing or composing and opportunities afforded to them by organisations in the music industry. This aligns with work conducted by feminist scholars of popular music (across various genres), including Sheila [Whiteley \(1997\)](#), Marion [Leonard \(2007\)](#), Rosemary Lucy [Hill \(2016\)](#) and Mary Celeste [Kearney \(2017\)](#). Mavis Bayton (in Whiteley's 'Sexing the Groove' [[1997](#)]) outlined the gendered nature of musical instruments, noting how women are institutionalised to play instruments such as the piano or the flute, where men are associated with the electric guitar or drumming (Bayton, in [Whitely, 1997](#), p. 39). Published 20 years later, Kearney argued that perceptions of female artists remain problematic, with

many presumed to be singers rather than instrumentalists ([Kearney, 2017](#), p. 119). She acknowledged how patriarchal ideologies have impacted women's historical position as composers and musicians, a matter complicated by issues of sexualisation and subordination ([Kearney, 2017](#), pp. 120–121). Despite this, Kearney's text charts well some of the progress made regarding women and gender representation, asserting how 'since the 1980s, several feminist scholars have brought critical attention to, and attempted to redress, music studies' traditional patriarchy' ([Kearney, 2017](#), p. 20).

Women and the history of music technology are an independent area of contention, since female contributions to this domain have often been overlooked or underrepresented, e.g. the work of Pauline Oliveros, Wendy Carlos, Rachel Elkind, Suzanne Ciani, Clara Rockmore, Daphne Oram, Bebe Barron, Delia Derbyshire, Maryanne Amacher, Éliane Radigue, Laurie Spiegel and many more. The documentary *Sisters with Transistors* (2020) recognised and celebrated many of these women and their creative works, alongside an increasing number of academic texts, articles and chapters which do so (e.g. [Pinch and Trocco, 2004](#); Waller in Farias and [Wilkie, 2015](#); [Morgan, 2017](#); [Sewell, 2020](#)). There are also numerous female scholars working in the field of music technology ([Schmidt-Horning, 2013](#); [Brøvig and Danielson, 2016](#); [Rietveld, 2016](#); [Bennett, 2018](#); [Wolfe, 2019](#); [Kardos, 2024](#)). In particular, Paula Wolfe's text recognised the disparity between 'the work women do and the gendered identities imposed upon them, which undermines their work and/or renders their positions invisible' ([Wolfe, 2019](#), p. 53). She highlighted how males are assumed as the primary users of recording technology, with marketing and advertising targeting them (Theberge, 1997 in [Wolfe, 2019](#), p. 8). More progress is needed to shift the perception of music technology being imbued with maleness, an idea owed to traditional traits of masculinity and issues of normative gender roles ([Kearney, 2017](#), p. 79). There are also issues with genres being gendered, as Leonard critiqued of the rock tradition ([Leonard, 2007](#)). Gender was an important theme in the findings of my research (see

[Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) in particular) and as such I draw on the aforementioned sources where relevant.

Of music genre, both the stylistic and cultural tenets of synthwave are examined with equal importance, and inclusive of the impact of music production. A principal aim of this study is to examine the musical and music technology parameters (style parameters) of the synthwave style, including an assessment of how they are realised, recognised and valued by the online community. In examining these, I inform of style parameters and their nuances via community definitions, revealing their contextual and historical significance with reference to 1980s (and neighbouring decades) music technology. Where I analyse synthwave compositions, I focus on both their ‘sonic dimensions’ ([Butler, 2014](#), p. 15) as well as traditional musical analysis. With this, I found the work of music technology scholar Samantha Bennett particularly helpful, being influenced by her tech-processual analytical methodology, which ‘examine[s] the contribution made by technology and process to the overall aesthetic of the recording [...] situated in their wider musical genre and aesthetic contexts’ ([Bennett, 2018](#), p. 135). S. Bennett authored *Modern Records, Maverick Records* ([2018](#)) and is a co-editor to *Gear: Cultures of Audio and Music Technologies* (2025), and her work addresses the importance of sound and music technologies on popular musical recordings, from ‘recordist agency’ to the affordances of production technologies ([Bennett, 2018](#), p. 133). Her tech-processual approach is apt for the present research in examining synthwave’s stylistic parameters and creative process, situated within the context of the online community, as well as with relevance to synthwave’s position as a musical genre.

A cornerstone in the history of a theory of musical genre is the work of musicologist Franco Fabbri, who defined a genre as: ‘a set of musical events, real or possible, whose course is regulated by a definite arrangement of socially accepted rules’ ([Fabbri, 1982](#), p. 136). Fabbri argued that genres are an extremely useful tool in a researcher’s analysis ([Fabbri, 1982](#), p. 137), and that genres can help us to both understand musical events and evaluate a new genre in reference to existing genres ([Fabbri, 1982](#), p. 141).

He recognised that genres can branch into subgenres ([Fabbri, 1981](#), p. 1), and proposed five rules for musical genre of: Formal and technical rules, semiotic rules, behaviour rules, social and ideological rules and economical and juridical rules ([Fabbri, 1981](#), pp. 3–5). Musicologist Phillip Tagg's definition is similar, who specified genre as 'a larger set of cultural codes that also include musical rules'. He explained that 'musical-structural rules' have an 'emphasis on the musical code' ([Tagg, 2012](#), p. 267). Further theorisations of genre were undertaken by sociologist Fabian [Holt \(2007\)](#), with his text about genre categories in American popular music ([Holt, 2007](#), p. 1). He recognised a complexity in the web of individuals and groups which proliferate a genre, through their forming conventions of musicals texts, artists and performance contexts. He added that genres are not only music ([Holt, 2007](#), p. 2), and outlined how a process of genre formation in turn forms new social collectivities such as the music scene ([Holt, 2007](#), p. 3). Such a statement clearly bears relevance to my study, which examines the formulation of a community of practice around the synthwave genre. This extends to how such a formation is carried out.

Various academics of popular music and media have theorised genre, such as media and communications scholar Johan Fornas in his study of the rock genre. His discussion asserted that genres are not fixed, and continually transform or are reinterpreted ([Fornas, 1995](#), p. 118). He alluded to subgenres in his discussion of genre and power, where alternative discourses form around canonic and dominant narratives of genre by oppositional agents ([Fornas, 1995](#), p. 120). Popular music scholar Keith Negus also discussed agency over genres in his text *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* ([1999](#)), examining how organisations and practices of the music industry shape and mediate the adoption and reception of genres ([Negus, 1999](#)). Additionally, in his chapter about genre in *Performing Rites* ([1996](#)) sociologist and popular music scholar Simon Frith provided a similar viewpoint to Negus of genre's links to music industry – in how genres are labels used to organise music making, listening and selling ([Frith, 1996](#), p. 88). In a more contemporary study (of the last decade), professor of music history and musicology David Brackett sustained that

music genres are ever-shifting systems ([Brackett, 2016](#), p. 15) which depend on a ‘feedback loop’ of producers, musicians, industry workers, audiences and critics (p. 16). His text, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-century Popular Music* ([2016](#)), asserted that the ‘branching off process’ of musical genres could continue indefinitely. Of this matter, Brackett noted the citationality or iterability of genres, in that conventions of genre are ‘constantly being modified by each new text that participates in the genre’, and that ‘no single text seems to fit all the “rules” of a given genre’ (p. 12). He suggested that authorship and creativity (in terms of the individual creator within a genre) are of a lesser importance when musical texts resultantly enter an ‘ongoing dialogue with other participants in a given artistic field’ (p. 14). For the purposes of my study, the formation of the synthwave genre has been constantly subjected to an ever shifting and temporal dialogue, mainly by artists and audiences online. It has too been impacted by citationality or iterability, given the development of synthwave subgenres in the 2010s, and the ever-growing roster of artists which has occurred since the formative era of the genre in the mid to late 2000s.

Of genres and musicians or audiences, Brackett observed how some musicians and consumers resist in identifying or categorising their musical tastes (p. 1). He also noted how popular music genres have the ability to evoke a demographic group, of the assumed audiences or producers, in that ‘categories of people are associated with categories of music’ (p. 3). Of an artist’s recognition within a musical genre, Brackett exemplified the music charts as a function of inclusion or exclusion in the narrative and social boundaries of a genre (p. 28). In examining the genre formation of synthwave, my study takes into account the demographics of its leading artists and members of the online community, exploring reasons for inclusion or exclusion in the canonic narrative of the genre. It also explores the self-identifications and audience identifications of artists within the synthwave genre, extending to the motivations for this and the methods in which such identifications are expressed or made known. With a focus on synthwave and its online community, this exploration mainly assesses the online manifestations of synthwave-identifying artists and audiences,

examining how the genre's progression is continually mediated by users on various platforms of the internet.

Synthwave's position as a music genre which was 'born' online is comparable to the music genre vaporwave, which is considered by popular music and cultural studies scholar Laura [Glitsos \(2018\)](#) as an 'internet genre' which 'emerged solely on and through digital platforms' ([Glitsos, 2018](#), p. 103). Georgina Born, a professor of anthropology and music, also conducted a study of internet-mediated music (microsound, hauntology, hypnagogic pop, chillwave, vaporwave), all genres which had 'substantial internet-based manifestations [...] central to their communicative practices, the social formations they assemble [and] aesthetic dimensions' ([Born, 2018](#), p. 602). Born valued mechanisms of the internet in the formation of a genre and concluded that 'the exponential growth of internet-based creative musical practices necessitates a new approach to the theorization of genre' ([Born, 2018](#), p. 606). My study supports and advances this statement, in an assessment of synthwave – the genre, an online music community and CoP.

Several studies since the mid-2010s have noted the significance of internet-mediated music genres, particularly of vaporwave. Some have commented on vaporwave with subcultural terminologies, including references to the internet in their descriptions. For example, in a study by marketing scholar Sharon Schembri and psychologist Jac Tichbon, vaporwave is termed as a 'digital music subculture' ([Schembri and Tichbon, 2017](#)). Georgina Born referred to vaporwave as both a nostalgia genre and online subculture ([Born, 2018](#), pp. 633–634). The term subculture has been broadly understood in reference to the work of the Chicago School of deviant and undesirable groups ([Jensen, 2018](#), p. 406), and later of research by the Contemporary Centre of Cultural Studies (CCCS). The CCCS discarded the idea that lack of social status was the main motivation of participation in subcultures, and no longer viewed subcultures as youth groups that were exclusively 'pathological, criminal or deviant' ([Jensen, 2018](#), p. 407). Instead subcultures were viewed as creative collectives by young people who sought to 'answer' society's problems through group symbolism and unity ([Jensen, 2018](#), p. 407). Dick [Hebdige's](#)

([1979](#)) landmark text *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is significant for subcultural theory, as is Sarah Thornton's text *Club Cultures* ([1995](#)), which is based on Pierre [Bourdieu's \[1986\]](#) concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu described three types of capital: economic, social and cultural, explaining that the latter is: 'convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications' ([Bourdieu, 1986](#), p. 242). He defined social capital as the 'actual or potential resources [whether tangible or intangible] which are linked to possession of a durable network' ([Bourdieu, 1986](#), p. 248). In my usage, the online synthwave community may be considered the network of relations, who mobilise its social (or subcultural) capital through the creation of associated resources e.g. music, videos, graphics, webpages, events and community activities. Thornton denotes that subcultural capital 'confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder' and ascribes it as being 'in the know' and having the potential to acquire 'hipness' or varying levels of reputation ([Thornton, 1995](#), p. 27). Online community members must be 'in the know' about the synthwave genre to participate in it, and in my assessment of synthwave as a genre, online music community and CoP, I utilise tenets of subcultural theory such as subcultural capital.

Making Communities: From Offline to Online

Community was formed as a sociological construct by German theorist Ferdinand Tönnies ('Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft' [1887], translating to: 'Community and Association'), and explored later by sociologists Émile Durkheim ('The Division of Labour in Society' [[1893](#)]) and Max Weber (*The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* [[1947](#)]) (Waldron, in [Bartleet and Higgins, 2018](#), p. 109). The germinal concept of community is rooted in Tönnies' ideas of social organisation and Durkheim's two societal organisms: mechanical (simple) and organic (complex). The former refers to simple societies such as traditional and autonomous villages, while the latter to complex societies where 'no one household, neighbourhood, town, or company can produce everything its members need to survive' ([Hornsby,](#)

[2013](#), p. 100). In the first half of the 20th century, terms such as ‘society’, ‘culture’ or ‘peoples’ appeared with far greater frequency than ‘community’. The shift to community reflected a greater consideration of wider social and cultural contexts, as opposed to communities being ‘unitary isolates’ ([Amit, 2002](#), pp. 2–3). Community at its core is anthropological and sociologist Max [Weber \(1947\)](#) proposed two types of institutional structures – the economic and the political (p. 30). He opposed some of philosopher Karl Marx’s views that the ruling class were the only ones with economic power and asserted three further types of legitimate authority in society – charismatic, rational and traditional ([Weber, 1947](#), p. 328).

Whilst a universal definition of community has been historically problematised, useful indicators of community involve ‘a group of people with something in common’ which ‘may be associated with particular places’ ([Crow, 2020](#), pp. 1–2). Relevant to community is the idea of social solidarity, ‘a shared sense of belonging and commitment’ where groups of people ‘are bound together in some way (despite their myriad differences of social class, age, gender, disability and other lines of social cleavage)’ (p. 3). A pioneer in community studies is Helen and Robert Lynd’s ([1929](#)) study, alongside the work of the Chicago School ([Crow, 2020](#), p. 10) and the Institute of Community Studies (ICS) ([Crow, 2020](#), p. 14). Criticisms of community studies from this time observe that they were ‘insufficiently theoretically informed and overly concerned with small-scale, local issues in a way that left the impact of larger social and economic forces unaddressed’ (p. 14). They were also criticised for holding a romanticised viewpoint of communities, where post-ICS research recognised that ‘communities were about competition and conflict as well as co-operation’ ([Crow, 2020](#), p. 17).

Studies of community in the 1950s and 1960s were considered ‘traditional’ in that they ‘typically devoted more attention to the description of everyday life than to its explanation in terms of abstract theoretical ideas’ ([Crow, 2002](#), p. 2). With some exceptions, studies of this period were ‘predominantly descriptive in character’ and generalised or impressionistic.

This period of research was followed by a ‘dead period’ for community studies, the 1970s ([Crow, 2002](#), p. 3). A lack of published research at this time was due to an emphasis on conflict within communities, and the concept of community itself having been challenged for ‘glossing over’ inequalities of social class, gender, race and ethnicity ([Crow, 2020](#), p. 18). This period was in turn criticised for its ‘partial coverage’, particularly of male researchers overlooking or misrepresenting marginalised voices, such as those of women ([Crow, 2020](#), p. 16). By this time, community studies considered the notion of social divisions within communities, as well as the idea of ‘outsiders’ or ‘strangers’ (Frankenberg, 1976, cited in [Crow, 2020](#), p. 11).

The 1980s marked a new period of community studies, in which studies were ‘informed by a diverse array of theoretical perspectives and [had] a renewed concern to engage creatively with empirical data’ ([Crow, 2002](#), p. 2). Studies moved past ‘backward-looking nostalgic celebrations of disappearing ways of life’ and recognised the significance of geographical mobility ([Crow, 2020](#), p. 19). This period is considered a milestone ahead of what became the ‘old tradition’ of community studies ([Crow, 2020](#), p. 14), and recognised the advent of globalisation ([Crow, 2002](#), p. 1). It also gave rise to new concepts such as Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ ([1991](#)), alongside the development of Web 1.0 ([Singh et al., 2011](#), p. 147) which foregrounded virtual communities. For a more detailed account of the history of ‘community’ and (pre-internet) community studies, I recommend the work of Graham [Crow \(2002, 2020\)](#) and Vered [Amit \(2002\)](#).

Jenny Preece, Diane Maloney-Krichmar and Chadia Abras (in Christensen and Levinson *Encyclopedia of Community: From Village to Virtual World*) offered a definition of online communities as ‘a group of people who interact in a virtual environment’ with a purpose, which includes rules and norms ([2003](#), p. 1023). The terming of online communities, like community, has been problematised for the array of factors which impede a universal definition. Preece, Maloney-Krichmar and Abras suggested factors of online communities as community size (50

people vs 50,000), the age of both the community and its members, the culture of members of the community and the level of interaction with offline activities (p. 1,023). The activities undertaken by online music communities also vary considerably, including on which platforms they choose to operationalise participatory activities (Lazar et al., 1999 in [Preece et al., 2003](#), p. 1,023).

The roots of online communities or ‘open online communities’ (Waldron in [Bartleet and Higgins, 2018](#), p. 110) are credited by Janice Waldron to ‘the 1960s counterculture movement, specifically in the ideals and actions of thinker/entrepreneur Stewart Brand, founder of the Whole Earth Catalogue in 1968 (WEC), and it’s later successor, the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (aka the WELL)’ (Waldron in [Bartleet and Higgins, 2018](#), p. 111). Cybertheorist Howard Rheingold was the first academic to research the WELL in 1993, coining the term ‘virtual community’ ([Rheingold, 1993](#), p. 1) in reference to what he termed the virtual ‘gift economy’ of sharing knowledge on the internet.

The emergence of the internet in the 1990s certainly disrupted previous ideas of what constituted community (Waldron, in [Bartleet and Higgins, 2018](#), p. 110), and online communities at this time were notably pre-social media and generally a forum and or/bulletin board based around a specific interest. This period (the 1990s up until the advent of social media in 2004) is considered Web 1.0, ‘a system of interlinked, hypertext documents accessed via the Internet’ (Singh et al., 2011, p. 147). Web 1.0 is characterised as ‘read-only’, with few content creators and minimal user interaction (Singh et al., 2011, p. 147). Ethnomusicologist René [Lysloff’s 2003](#) study of mod composers is an example of Web 1.0, since his data collection took place on the internet in the late 1990s ([Lysloff, 2003](#), p. 234). The 2004 study of music genre alt country by Steve S. Lee and Richard A. Peterson also demonstrates tenets of Web 1.0, with their data collection period having been between 1998 and 2003. The advent of social media such as Facebook (established in 2004), YouTube (established in 2005), Reddit (established in 2005) and Twitter (established in 2006) changed the nature of online communities in the 21st century and is

characterised as the beginning of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 focuses on ‘users and their active participation’ and is a period of web usage coined initially by Dale Dougherty (O’Reilly Media) and Craig Cline (Media Live) (Singh et al., 2011, p. 148). A Web 2.0 site ‘gives its users the free choice to interact or collaborate with each other in a social media dialogue as creators (prosumers) of user-generated content’ (Singh et al., 2011, p. 148). This may take place ‘in a virtual community, in contrast to websites where users (consumer[s]) are limited to the passive viewing of content that was created for them’ (Singh et al., 2011, p. 148). Web 2.0 is slightly more centralised than Web 3.0, with Web 2.0 about bidirectional communications through ‘social networking, blogging, wikis, tagging, user generated content and video’ ([Hiremath and Kenchakkanavar, 2016](#), p. 709). The Nine Inch Nails remix site study by Sirkka Jarvenpaa and Karl Lang ([2011](#)) (the former a business and technology scholar and the latter a scholar of information systems) is an example of Web 2.0, where band members participated in official remix practices based on official band-provided resources. This demonstrates bidirectional communications (Nine Inch Nails and remixers), particularly since there were several rules and restrictions about remix dissemination and website engagement.

A decade after the rise of social media, Web 3.0 is considered a more personalised and multiuser virtual environment (which includes AI). It is overall more decentralised than Web 2.0 with a more sophisticated searching, connecting, creating and storing of knowledge and data ([Hiremath and Kenchakkanavar, 2016](#), p. 708). Key components of Web 2.0 and 3.0 align with facets of online music communities, such as Web 2.0’s participatory nature and 3.0’s ‘semantic web’ (more sophisticated search functions and data integration) and ubiquity (content is accessible via multiple applications and devices e.g. smartphones) (Singh et al., 2011, p. 151). It ought to be noted that issues of accessibility are still relevant to Web 3.0. As Christine Hine (a sociologist of science and technology) explained, ‘The Internet is a mass phenomenon, but it is not universally available, and there are still some underlying inequalities that structure access’ ([Hine, 2020](#), p. 6).

Communities of Practice

Anthropologist Jean Lave and computer scientist Etienne Wenger coined the term ‘community of practice’ while studying apprenticeship as a learning model ([E. Wenger-Trayner and B. Wenger-Trayner, 2015](#), p. 4). Their 1991 text *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* documented how practitioners learn through social relationships in the workplace, known as ‘situated learning’ ([Lave and Wenger-Trayner, 1991](#)). In his 1998 text *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Wenger expanded and refined the concept, defining it as: ‘a special type of community’ which has three dimensions: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. Mutual engagement refers to what community members do and in what context, how they are ‘engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another’ ([Wenger-Trayner, 1998](#), p. 73). The second dimension, joint enterprise, ‘keeps a community of practice together’ ([Wenger-Trayner, 1998](#), p. 77) through collective negotiation, mediating power through a production of practice which takes into account a CoP’s ‘rules, policies, standards, goals’ ([Wenger-Trayner, 1998](#), p. 81). The final dimension, shared repertoire, refers to a CoP’s ‘routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions ... which have become part of its practice’. It refers also to the styles in which members express their membership and identities ([Wenger-Trayner, 1998](#), p. 83). Importantly, Wenger emphasised how practice is the source of coherence which unites such a community ([Wenger-Trayner, 1998](#), p. 72), and that a CoP is resultantly ‘not a synonym for group, team, or network’ ([Wenger-Trayner, 1998](#), p. 74).

In 2002, Wenger co-wrote *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder) which expanded his 1998 text’s focus on individual learning and identity, to suggest that businesses might create and cultivate CoPs to improve their competitiveness (p. 6). Wenger and his co-authors revised the three dimensions of a CoP, demonstrating how the concept has evolved over time. They defined three core characteristics: the *domain* (a common ground with a sense of community identity), the *community* (a

social structure of engaged members which facilitates learning) and the *practice* (the shared repertoire or knowledge maintained by the community) ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), pp. 28–29). In my study, these three core characteristics are used to assess how the online synthwave community operates as a CoP. In tandem, I consider both synthwave community design and community goals in achieving what the authors defined as ‘aliveness’, in that CoPs invite interaction which makes them alive ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 50). Growth and aliveness are paramount in the primary goals of CoPs and unlike more traditional organizational goals which may be more fixed, designing community for aliveness requires a different set of principles ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 51). The authors named seven such principles:

1. Design for evolution.
2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives.
3. Invite different levels of participation.
4. Develop both public and private community spaces.
5. Focus on value.
6. Combine familiarity and excitement.
7. Create a rhythm for the community.

(Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002, p. 51)

Designing for evolution refers to the communities’ ‘natural evolution’ and progression, which occurs through ‘pre-existing personal networks’ (p. 51), while insider and outsider perspectives refer to how community issues are dealt with by insiders and how outsider perspectives encourage further community potential ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 54). Levels of participation (across public and private community spaces) include the core group, active groups and peripheral members (p. 56) and are of particular relevance to my study. Wenger et al. noted, ‘The heart of a community is the web of relationships among community members’ ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 58). Value is created and maintained by communities through events, activities and relationships and community life must balance an ‘ebb

and flow’ or community rhythm, the latter of which is the strongest indicator of community ‘aliveness’ (p. 63). In addition to the three core CoP characteristics, my study also examines the online synthwave community with reference to these seven principles. The authors defined CoPs as ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise of this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 4). Such knowledge is recognised as ‘continually in motion’, dynamic and changeable ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 10).

One significant application of the CoP theory was undertaken by music education scholar Ailbhe [Kenny \(2016\)](#), who focused on communities of musical practice (abbreviated to CoMPs). Her central question was how CoMPs are developed and sustained and she utilised three case study communities in her study. These case studies spanned online and offline communities, with the overall research situated within music education (p. 128). The communities ‘developed in response to local circumstances’ (p. 129), which differs to my study, since I do not center on any one geographic locality nor attest any one locality’s circumstance as the reason for a CoP’s development. In Kenny’s selection of three case study communities, their potential as CoMPs was considered first, given the recognition of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder’s three core characteristics ([2002](#)). Only during the analysis of her research were CoMPs determined (p. 30). This differs to my study, where I have identified the online synthwave community as a CoP through previous research and argue this (in the present text) from the outset. Across Kenny’s three case study communities, she concluded shared themes and categorised these with Wenger et al.’s three CoP characteristics, arguing that all communities are CoMPs ([Kenny, 2016](#)). One of Kenny’s remarks in her research findings resonated with my study, where she likened participants’ experiences to *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) in how they: ‘encounter new situations and characters, they learn, negotiate and interpret “the rules”, and in doing so make meaning from their experiences to inform (and potentially transform) their individual and collective identities’ ([Kenny, 2016](#), p. 128).

The work of Janice [Waldron is significant in the theory of CoP. I draw particular attention to her 2009, 2012](#) and 2013 journal articles, her book chapter in [Bartleet and Higgins' \(2018\)](#) text and her chapter with Veblen (in [Wright et al., 2021](#)). In the aforementioned texts, Waldron shares both theoretical and methodological perspectives of communities of practice, as well as providing illustrations of CoPs from her own research and other significant authors. Three of her journal articles make reference to music genre in the context of online music communities, though all are situated within music education contexts. Her 2009 study, for example, assessed informal music teaching and learning practices of the Old Time (OT) online music community ([Waldron, 2009](#), p. 97). In her assessments, Waldron acknowledged how music genres had begun to coalesce around online spaces at the turn of the 21st century, stating: 'online communities of practice have evolved in cyberspace ... formed around different folk music genres, including Bluegrass, Irish Traditional, and Old Time (OT) music' (p. 97). Through identifying core characteristics of a CoP, she concluded that the OT music community operates as one. A later study by [Waldron \(2012\)](#) of the Banjo Hangout community sought to understand how belonging to an online music community can facilitate informal learning for participants (p. 3). She noted in particular the role of YouTube as a function of participatory culture in the community (p. 4). Waldron continued to report on the Banjo Hangout in a later journal article ([2013](#)), and again referred to YouTube as a popular form of user-generated content which instigates discourse in an online music community (p. 259). She asserted the significance of Web 2.0 applications in this regard ([Waldron, 2013](#), p. 260), a point she expanded on in a book chapter years later (in [Bartleet and Higgins, 2018](#)). Here she described YouTube as an: 'inviting platform for online music community formation and growth' (Waldron, in [Bartleet and Higgins, 2018](#), p. 119). Whilst her studies do not take genre theory as foci, in her 2021 chapter she commented that future publications will research informal music education alongside 'genre (vernacular, traditional, popular)' (Waldron, in [Wright et al., 2021](#), p. 456).

Also within the field of music education, a further application of the CoP theory was undertaken by Christopher Cayari (in [Wright et al., 2021](#)). His study focused on online manifestations of CoPs, supporting Waldron's suggestion that informal learning practices by internet users form the potential to 'develop communities ... for music-making' (Cayari, in [Wright et al., 2021](#), p. 443). Cayari acknowledged that Wenger's 1991 and 1998 texts do not consider CoPs in relation to online spaces (p. 444). As an educator, Cayari's study aimed to 'facilitate social connections and learning through CoPs', and his student participants undertook a collaborative vlogging project which centered around the usage of YouTube (p. 447). He wanted his students to: 'create a community around music, find meaning in doing so, and further develop their own identities' (p. 448). Research findings were analysed in reference to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder's seven principles of aliveness, and concluded that the CoPs were 'advantageous for undergraduate music courses' and provided opportunities for self-growth, reflection, developing relationships and co-constructing knowledge (Cayari, in [Wright et al., 2021](#), p. 453).

As a final example, the CoP framework was used by Sophie [Hennekam et al.'s \(2020\)](#) study of female composers, in examining how 'women composers acquire knowledge and skills and develop their careers' in online spaces (p. 217). The study concluded that the 'online environment can provide a safe place where women can connect with other women' (p. 221), and highlighted how an online CoP should be 'supplemented by other opportunities to learn, connect and share best practices, preferably in a blended (online and offline) format' ([Hennekam et al., 2020](#), p. 227). This study demonstrates how practices and activities of an online community have the potential to support the challenging of gendered spaces in offline settings.

Methodology

The primary method of my research is ethnography, a method which originates in anthropology but is applicable to other disciplines such as

ethnomusicology. Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl described ethnography as two things, ‘doing fieldwork and then rationally organizing and writing about what you found’ ([Nettl, 2015](#), p. 248). The concept grew out of ‘the insistence that all domains of a culture are interrelated’ ([Nettl, 2015](#), p. 249). Ethnography is defined as ‘the study of music in culture ... with the use of fieldwork’ ([Nettl, 2015](#), p. 16), and coined as ‘thick description’ by sociologist and anthropologist Clifford Geertz (p. 10). Geertz described the role of the ethnographer, which involves: ‘establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts’ ([Geertz, 1973](#), p. 6).

My research of the online synthwave community was a combination of overt participant observation and full member ([Bryman, 2012](#), p. 432) and my identity was known throughout the course of the study. My position as a participant observer is notable of my concert ethnographies and interviews, the latter of which employed a snowball sampling technique. My virtual ethnography adhered more to ‘overt full member’, in a similar capacity to that of [Hodkinson’s \(2002\)](#) study on ‘goths and their culture and lifestyle’ ([Bryman, 2012](#), p. 441). Hodkinson’s position as a self-identified goth ([Hodkinson, 2002](#), p. 4) is comparable to my own position as a composer, performer and producer of synth-based music, which afforded me continued access to the online synthwave community. My emic positionality was key to my research to fully engage with the creative processes of creating synthwave music, in tandem with studying the ecosystem of the online community.

Interviews were conducted as an extension of virtual fieldwork, with participants sourced through their engaging with synthwave online. No less than 150 interviews took place throughout the research, with a mix of written email interviews, Teams video calls and phone call interview modes used. Four synthwave concert or event ethnographies took place during the course of my research, in: November 2019, February 2020, April 2024 and June 2024. Two surveys were carried out, one having taken place in September 2019, and one in November 2023. My online surveys were also considered an extension of my virtual ethnography and the former’s response rate was aided by the community’s support in sharing and

promoting it. This is demonstrable of how my research was constantly in dialog with the online synthwave community.

Part of my virtual ethnography also encompassed tracing synthwave style parameters. The identifying of synthwave style parameters took place through a cyclical process of immersing oneself in the field, identifying key popular synthwave artists and songs and then conducting music analysis of a sample of these. All of the research for this book (inclusive of my virtual ethnography, interviews, concert ethnographies and surveys) was granted full ethical approval by the Leeds Beckett (UK) Research Ethics Policy.

Book Structure

[Chapter 1](#), ‘From *Synthetix.FM* to *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) Making Synthwave Subcultural Capital’, uses virtual ethnography, artist interviews and two online surveys to provide a chronological reading of the online synthwave community. In doing so, key musical genres which influenced synthwave are established. Through survey data in particular, I assert and demonstrate the community’s privileging of 1980s culture and aesthetics, as well as affiliations of synthwave with the concept of nostalgia ([Boym, 2001](#)). Significant milestones of the synthwave community are established e.g. the formation of synthwave subgenres in the 2010s. I also establish some ‘key figures’ ([Rice and Ruskin, 2012](#)) of synthwave e.g. Rick Shithouse, Marko Maric and others, who contributed to the community’s formation and development. I illustrate the reception of these individuals by community members, as well as the result of their contributions to synthwave subcultural capital. Key media (e.g. the movie *Drive* [2011] and television series *Stranger Things* [2016–2025]) are also discussed for their significance to synthwave, with two songs from the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack analysed as case study pieces, which were ultimately influential to the development and progression of the synthwave genre (‘Nightcall’ and ‘A Real Hero’ [2011]). The chapter seeks to characterise the online synthwave community and its history, establishing how the genre formed on the internet at the start of the 21st century.

[Chapter 2](#), ‘Making Synthwave Music With Music Technology’, explores the online synthwave community’s engagements with music production and technology, particularly in using virtual synthesizers, hardware synthesizers and plugin emulations of legacy synthesizers (e.g. from the 1970s–1990s) for creating the style. The chapter establishes (through virtual ethnography, artist interviews, musicological and production analysis and participant–observer audio experiments) key considerations in the synthwave creative process and ultimately illustrates recognised synthwave style parameters. A further case study analysis of a track associated with synthwave is included (‘The Comeback Kid’ [2016]). Ultimately, the chapter outlines how the

community engages with music and creative technologies to privilege 1980s culture and emulate sonic markers from this decade, as well as how they convey nostalgia through music made with ‘retro’ synths (1970–1990). I also illustrate how community spaces and resources support the continued creation and dissemination of synthwave music.

[Chapter 3](#), ‘Metalheads in the Synthwave Community – Making Darksynth’, explores darksynth, one of synthwave’s most popular subgenres. Darksynth incorporates musical elements from horror and sci-fi film soundtracks, cyberpunk styles and metal styles, and has often acted as an entryway from the metal community to synthwave. Through artist interview data, virtual ethnography, survey data and two case study analyses of songs affiliated with darksynth (‘Diabolic’ [2016] and ‘A Long Walk’ [2017]), the subgenre is examined. Through a discussion of the subgenre’s influence, development and progression, I refer in particular to the work of John Carpenter, a director and film composer highly valued by the community. Whilst Carpenter is more broadly revered by the community for his links to soundtrack music and speciality with synths (which align strongly with the identity of synthwave), it is the darksynth subgenre which takes musically from his horror soundscapes. His impact on synthwave overall has led to knowledge of the director and film composer being legitimised as synthwave subcultural capital. In addition to exploring darksynth’s cultural roots, I consider issues of gender and representation within the darksynth subgenre, questioning to what extent progress of gender and representation has been made within the subgenre since the late 2010s and early 2020s.

[Chapter 4](#), ‘Making Space for Vocals and Women: The Vocal Synthwave Subgenre’, examines vocal synthwave, a subgenre which established a shift from synthwave as a predominantly instrumental genre to a genre which platforms vocals. The style is uniquely represented by female artists, who through their role as toplineers and collaborators, paired with their skills in music performance and production, have made a significant contribution to the genre. This was supported by, and took place alongside, the release of key synthwave tracks by high-profile artists (e.g. GUNSHIP, The

Midnight), who platformed female artists as feature artists on their respective albums in the mid-to-late 2010s. Several male vocalists are also significant in vocal synthwave history, e.g. Ollie Wride and Michael Oakley, who have in turn collaborated with several female artists within the community. With vocal synthwave, women (inclusive of non-binary identities) have increased their overall standing within the synthwave community, negotiating space for themselves as not only topliners, but as live performers, songwriters, arrangers, producers, DJs and more. The chapter furthers a discussion of gender representation within the online synthwave community, discussing creative roles in particular and introducing a discussion of live synthwave practices. In an analysis of vocal synthwave, [Chapter 4](#) includes virtual ethnography, survey data, artist interview data and one case study analysis of a vocal synthwave song ('Beyond Memory' [2018]).

[Chapter 5](#), 'Making 'Live' Synthwave Performances – Tensions in Live Synthwave Practices', examines synthwave style parameters and subcultural capital through live music practices. Three live concert ethnographies (of The Midnight, SIERRA VEINS and Dance with the Dead) provide a basis for analysis through which style parameters of synthwave in a live setting can be observed. Concert ethnographies also assess attendee demographics and audience behaviour, 'liveness' ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#)) and authentic ([Moore, 2002](#)) realisation of synthwave style parameters. I examine community expectations of a live synthwave performance, considering to what extent such performances exist within traditions of EDM. Through artist interview data, I also explore some of the challenges and barriers to synthwave artists touring. The chapter ultimately investigates tensions within the synthwave community of expectations in live synthwave music practices.

[Chapter 6](#), 'Keeping Synthwave 'Alive': Key Organisations, Events and Community Practices On/Offline', examines synthwave community practices through the lens of music industry. Through interview data, it establishes structures and organisations within the online synthwave community ecosystem, including record labels, music publishing,

distribution, promotion and live events. This extends to how structures and organisations are engaged with by fans and music audiences. It serves as an extension of [Chapter 1](#) which noted significant individuals in the formation of the online community. Here I present further significant individuals and their organisations, providing these as examples of how the community has sustained itself nearly two decades after the earliest developments of synthwave. As further illustration of community activity and events which evidence ‘aliveness’ ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#)), the chapter also presents firsthand ethnographic data of *Hotline Bristol Part Deux* (Bristol, UK, June 2024), as well as other significant online and offline synthwave community activities e.g. online radio station *Nightride FM*.

‘A Conclusion to Making Synthwave’. I conclude by summarising key findings of the study with relation to the online synthwave community’s stylistic parameters, subcultural capital and position as a CoP. I return to [Wenger-Trayner et al.’s \(2002\)](#) frameworks of the CoP including the three core characteristics (the *domain*, *community* and *practice*) and the seven principles of aliveness ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 51). I synthesise theoretical strands of subcultural theory and genre theory, with a specific account for how these concepts have morphed in the 21st century, and now recognise new arrangements of music making on the internet. I provide an analysis of synthwave through the lens of subcultural ([Hebdige, 1979](#); [Thornton, 1995](#)) and post-subcultural theory ([Jensen, 2018](#)), assessing the usage of terms by the community in describing synthwave as a ‘scene’ ([Bennett and Peterson, 2004](#)) and ‘genre’ ([Fabbri, 1981, 1982](#); [Hesmondhalgh, 2005](#); [Holt, 2007](#)).

Notes

1. IASPM: International Association for the Study of Popular Music. [↗](#)
2. Štrukelj (2023) does also mention synthwave in their MA thesis (written in the English language) about retro music and education. [↗](#)

1

FROM *SYNTHETIX.FM* TO *STRANGER THINGS* (2016–2025) MAKING SYNTHWAVE SUBCULTURAL CAPITAL

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In an examination of the online synthwave community of the 21st century, this chapter evaluates the cultural beginnings of synthwave, highlighting who, what, where, how and why the genre was formed. Specifically, I examine community spaces online, including their activities, values and practices. In doing so, I assess tensions and negotiations of synthwave subcultural capital, with relevance to its genre formation and the community's collective identity. This chapter foregrounds (and in some ways, serves as a pairing to) [Chapter 2](#), which details music practices in creating the synthwave style. The present chapter also serves as a theoretical foundation for all later chapters, which explore specific elements of, and negotiations within, the online synthwave ecosystem.

[Chapter 1](#) depicts synthwave's chronological development, common narratives and significant milestones. Firstly, I provide an account of synthwave's musical parentage and subgenre deviations (1.1); secondly, I

discuss early community founders and ‘key figures’ ([Rice and Ruskin, 2012](#)) including their roles and impact within synthwave’s history (1.2); thirdly, I discuss synthwave as soundtrack music (1.3). [Section 1.3](#) includes two breakdown analyses of two songs from the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack, ‘A Real Hero’ (2011) and ‘Nightcall’ (2011). Finally, I present the data from two of my online surveys (conducted in September 2019 and November 2023 respectively), revealing key synthwave values and aspects of synthwave subcultural capital (1.4).

1.1 Key Beginnings: Musical Roots and Synthwave Subgenres

Common narratives of synthwave suggest that its musical beginnings originated in the mid to late 2000s. Interviewees commented how ‘French House’ ([Timecop1983, 2018](#); [DEADLIFE, 2019](#)), ‘French Touch’ and various electronic styles of music are formative to the synthwave style ([Shaun of LeBrock, 2018](#); [Gregorio Franco, 2023](#)). One record label, *Ed Banger Records* (who Daft Punk were signed to) ([Timecop1983, 2018](#); [D/A/D, 2020](#)) as well as a number of key artists – Kavinsky and *The Valerie Collective* (College, Anoraak, Minitel Rose, amongst others) – were suggested as central to the synthwave style in its infancy ([Sunglasses Kid, 2019](#); Johan Agebjörn of Sally Shapiro, [2023](#); [W O L F C L U B, 2023](#)). Other key influences on synthwave were described as 1980s synthpop ([Abigail Gordon of Bunny X, 2023](#)) and 1970s and 1980s soundtrack music such as the work of John Carpenter [the *Halloween* franchise] ([Sunglasses Kid, 2019](#); [Taurus 1984, 2024](#)), Vangelis [*Blade Runner* 1982] and Jan Hammer ([Bart Graft, 2019](#); [Cat Temper, 2019](#)). Further influences noted included electronic music composers such as Tangerine Dream ([Cat Temper, 2019](#)), Wendy Carlos ([Digital Love, 2025](#)), Jean-Michael Jarre and Giorgio Moroder (Survey Anons, 2023). Of the latter, one survey respondent remarked how: ‘[Synthwave is] a direct line from Giorgio Moroder and Italo disco’ (Survey Anons, 2023). Holistically, survey respondents referred to synthwave as a ‘subgenre of electronic dance music’, ‘a style of music with a focus on synthesizers’, ‘a sub-genre of

electronic music rooted in [19]70s, [19]80s, [19]90s pop culture and sound’ (Survey Anons, 2023).

Since the early 2010s, synthwave has splintered into various subgenres. Before this, and in the late 2000s, synthwave was better known as outrun. Whilst outrun is now better understood as a synthwave subgenre (certainly to distinguish it musically from other subgenres such as darksynth, vocal synthwave, chillsynth) the ‘formative days’ of synthwave ‘in the late 2000s’ utilised outrun as the overarching genre title ([Rick Shithouse, 2019](#)). One of the original artists of the era explained: ‘when we first started we didn’t have a name for it, so we called it outrun... . I know a lot of people still refer to certain things as outrun’ ([Miami Nights 1984, 2024](#)). Rick Shithouse, owner of the synthwave blog *Synthetix.FM*, acknowledged that synthwave somewhat replaced outrun in later years ([Rick Shithouse, 2019](#)). Musically, outrun is described as ‘fast paced racing-themed music influenced by the old *OutRun* [Sega] video game from 1986’ ([Freewave, 2018](#)). It is best characterised by artists such as Kavinsky, [Miami Nights 1984](#), Lazerhawk, Robert Parker and Mitch Murder. Kavinsky in fact named his album (*OutRun* [2013]) after the *OutRun* video game (1986) ([Battaglia, 2013](#)), though it ought to be noted that the artist ‘wouldn’t consider [their] music synthwave’ ([Crumlish, 2022](#)). The imagery from within the *OutRun* game is potent within the synthwave style, including palm trees, sunsets, gridlines and cars such as the Ferrari Testarossa.

Other notable synthwave subgenres include darksynth, vocal synthwave, italo disco synthwave,¹ dreamwave and chillsynth. Whilst outrun, dreamwave, italo disco synthwave and darksynth are earlier in the lineage of synthwave subgenres (i.e. the earlier half of the 2010s), vocal synthwave became more established in the latter half of the 2010s. Chillsynth was emerging at the tail end of the 2010s decade, becoming widely recognised and established in the 2020s. [Table 1.1](#) demonstrates a brief description, as well as example artists for each of these most recognised synthwave subgenres.

Vocal synthwave is the only synthwave subgenre which has vocals by default, with all other subgenres generally being instrumental. Community

members have often remarked particularly on the appeal of darksynth, highlighting its influence of horror film soundtrack and metal music, and links to cyberpunk culture. Later chapters explore both the darksynth subgenre and vocal synthwave subgenre in particular ([Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) respectively).

One of the most recent synthwave subgenres to date ([2025](#)) is chillsynth. Understanding chillsynth requires an understanding of chillwave, a ‘mainstream American indie genre that rehabilitates 1980s sounds and production styles’ ([Born, 2018](#), p. 601). Coined in 2009 alongside the ‘summer of chillwave’ ([Zistler, 2020](#)) with associated artists such as Neon Indian, it is separate from the late 2010s and early 2020s chillsynth. Chillwave’s name is credited to ‘a writer known as “Carles” on the influential Hipster Runoff blog’ ([Born, 2018](#), p. 631), and the style ‘centres unambiguously on “proper” pop songs with verses and choruses’ ([Born, 2018](#), p. 632). By comparison, chillsynth is generally instrumental and shares more musical features with Lo-fi. Michael Oakley described chillwave as ‘that old music from Washed Out and Brothertiger’, distinguishing it from chillsynth which he described as ‘a newer [sub]genre and it’s ... mostly instrumental’ ([Michael Oakley, 2023](#)). The most significant chillsynth artist is HOME, who released *Odyssey* in 2014 through *The Midwest Collective*. He released a further album, *Falling into Place* in 2016 and a six-track EP, *Hold* in 2019. In referring to chillsynth as a synthwave ‘subgenre’ ([Zistler, 2020](#)), *NewRetroWave* music editor Andrew Zistler remarked chillsynth’s position as ‘nostalgia-based music, although not really fully in the [19]80s’ ([Zistler, 2020](#)). In an interview with me, he explained chillsynth’s expansion of nostalgic para-musical references, from solely the 1980s to include also the 1990s. Zistler also recounted how Nat of *The Midwest Collective* had referred to ‘HOME clones’, speaking of HOME’s significant impact on chillsynth’s sound ([Zistler, 2020](#)). [Miami Nights 1984](#) felt that Com Truise had influenced what many chillsynth artists of the 2020s are making ([Miami Nights 1984, 2024](#)). Further subgenres recognised by the community include sovietwave, as well as others such as sweatwave, saxwave, chipwave and several others.

Synthwave subgenres reflect David Brackett’s discussion of the citationality or iterability of genres, in that conventions of a genre are ‘constantly being modified by each new text that participates in the genre’ ([Brackett, 2016](#), p. 13). For a more comprehensive discussion of synthwave style parameters, I refer readers to [Chapter 2](#), where they are specifically detailed.

TABLE 1.1 Example Synthwave Subgenres. [↗](#)

<i>Synthwave Subgenre</i>	<i>Musical Description</i>	<i>Representative Artists</i>
Outrun (Freewave, 2018).	‘fast paced racing-themed music influenced by the old <i>OutRun</i> video game from 1986’ (Freewave, 2018).	Kavinsky, Mitch Murder, Lazerhawk, Miami Nights 1984 , Robert Parker.
Dreamwave (Freewave, 2018).	‘slow tempos and cinematic sounding tracks’ (Freewave, 2018).	Timecop1983, Trevor Something, The Northern Lights.

<i>Synthwave Subgenre</i>	<i>Musical Description</i>	<i>Representative Artists</i>
Darksynth Dark Synthwave (Survey Anons, 2023).		
Darkwave ² (Survey Anons, 2023).		
Horror Synth (Freewave, 2018).	‘cyberpunk-style harder and darker electronic metal’ (Survey Anon, 2023).	Perturbator, Carpenter Brut, Mega Drive (Freewave, 2018), Dance with the Dead, GosT, Absolute Valentine, Power Glove, Magic Sword, SIERRA VEINS.
Slasherwave (Survey Anons, 2023).	‘faster tempos... . Many in the darksynth scene have metal backgrounds’ (Freewave, 2018).	
Shredwave (Meteor, 2024).		
Cyberpunk (Freewave, 2018 ; Absolute Valentine, 2024).		

<i>Synthwave Subgenre</i>	<i>Musical Description</i>	<i>Representative Artists</i>
Vocal Synthwave (Freewave, 2018).	‘vocal arrangements and lyrics writing’ (Abigail Gordon of Bunny X, 2023).	NINA, Bunny X, Parallels, The Midnight, Ollie Wride, GUNSHIP, Michael Oakley.
Italo Disco Synthwave Neo Italo Disco (Johan Agebjörn of Sally Shapiro, 2023). Nu-disco (Clive Lewis, 2024).	‘The roots of Italo disco date back to the late [19]70s... . The Italian take on disco established itself as a style in its own right, influencing everything from house to synthwave’ (Music Radar, 2022).	Vincenzo Salvia, Sally Shapiro, Andy Fox, AM 1984.
Chillsynth (Zistler, 2020 ; Michael Oakley, 2023).	‘not really fully in the [19]80s’ (Zistler, 2020). ‘[M]ostly instrumental’ (Michael Oakley, 2023).	HOME (Zistler, 2020), Hotel Pools (Michael Oakley, 2023).

1.2 Key Figures of Synthwave: Individuals, Artists, Organisations

1.2.1 David Grellier/College/COLLEGE and The Valerie Collective

In 2007, David Grellier of College created *The Valerie Collective*, the creative outputs of which were represented initially on <http://valeriecherie.blogspot.com> and later www.valeriecollective.com (both now defunct websites, [Figures 1.1 & 1.2](#)). I accessed these sites through Wayback Machine (abbreviated to WM hereafter), as well as having interviewed Grellier myself (2024). *The Valerie Collective* was described by Grellier in 2009 as a ‘blog’, a ‘multimedia project’ and a ‘new collective’, as a ‘means to celebrate ... our artistic references, while also serving as [a] kind of exercise book of inspiration, fed every week by new discoveries’ (valeriecollective.com, 2009, WM). In 2013, the blog showed an updated biography, which read: ‘*Valerie* is a blog and an artistic network created in 2007 by College, a musician and a producer from Nantes’ (valeriecollective.com, 2013, WM). The aim of the collective was: ‘to value and share the musical and artistic resources of its members’ (valeriecollective.com, 2009, WM), all of whom were posting music to Myspace at the time. In interview with me, Grellier explained the values of *The Valerie Collective*: ‘It’s a network of passionate people who want to share their favourite movies, favourite music, favourite visuals’ (Grellier, 2024). When I asked him if the project was economically concerned or artist career focused, Grellier remarked: ‘No, I never considered that’. He emphasised how much he enjoyed the ‘creativity’ of the blog (Grellier, 2024).



FIGURES 1.1 AND 1.2 The icons for *The Valerie Collective*.

Copyright David Grellier (Figure 1.1, left image), Alexander Burkart (Figure 1.2, right image). [↗](#)

Grellier explained the naming of the collective in his website's biography and confirmed this to me in interview: 'When I created this blog back in April 2007, I wanted to name it "*Valerie*" as an echo of a popular name from the 1980s, a period which has always inspired me' (valeriecollective.com, 2009, WM; Grellier, 2024). The blog named the founding and initial members of the collective as David Grellier himself (College), Anoraak, Minitel Rose, Russ Chimes, The Outrunners and Maethelvin. Short biographies for each artist allude to a germinating synthwave genre, a term which at this time was not quite in usage. The biography for College, for example, describes him as someone who: 'revisits the culture and the soundtracks of American TV shows and movies of the [19]80s ... intended as an echo of the cinematic themes of his childhood'. Anoraak is described as having 'seen [*The*] *Karate Kid* [1984] too many times ... plays synth and sings ... never leaves [without] his sunglasses ... likes sunsets [and] has released his first mini album *Nightdrive With You* [2008]'. Russ Chimes 'blends some seriously catchy '[19]80s synth hooks ... that can keep you dancing until the sun comes up over the beach front palm trees ... that sort of Miami-neon ... mood', whilst Maethelvin: 'provides a perfect soundtrack for car-chasing and TV shows from the [19]80s' (valeriecollective.com, 2009, WM). In reference to *Valerie*'s work, Grellier concurred that synthwave as a term had not quite unfolded at this time: 'When we did *Valerie*, the words came after the *Drive* [2011] success. I said that we did nostalgic music, we were influenced by artists like Daft Punk, Jacques Lu Cont, Lifelike, Alan Braxe and the French Touch scene' (Grellier, 2024).

A blog post from 2009 discloses the collective's release of *Valerie and Friends* (in collaboration with label *Endless Summer Recordings*), a compilation album which epitomizes *The Valerie Collective*'s 'creative theme'. The website also shared information about '*Valerie Parties*', where music would be played (e.g. Russ Chimes playing a DJ set, or the launch of the *Valerie and Friends* compilation) (valeriecollective.com, 2009, WM). Grellier explained that: 'the most important thing for the parties was to invite people we like... . For the event in Paris we invited Lifelike'

One highly significant individual in the history of synthwave is Rick Shithouse, an independent music reviewer who founded music blog *Synthetix.FM* (synthetixmusic.blogspot.com) in the early 2010s ([Rick Shithouse, 2019, Figure 1.3](#)).³ The significance of *Synthetix.FM* was affirmed by several synthwave artists that I interviewed, with Sunglasses Kid crediting it as the ‘only blog on synthwave’ at the time ([Sunglasses Kid, 2019](#)). When I interviewed Shithouse, he explained that his intentions during that time were to showcase ‘[19]80s-inspired synth releases’ by independent music producers. Initially, Shithouse was ‘following the [19]80s revival that occurred in electronic music, mainly in the French House scene in the mid 2000s’. As a ‘huge fan of [19]80s synth-based music in the [19]80s’, he found this ‘new revival of [19]80s sounds really engaging’ ([Rick Shithouse, 2019](#)). He explained the roots of *Synthetix.FM*, in that through other blogs not dissimilar to what *Synthetix.FM* became, he ‘found a subset of producers making music that was completely [19]80s oriented’. He named ‘Neros77’s YouTube channel’ as just one of many places where he found music, and at the approach of 2010, when ‘the [19]80s influence had been replaced with new electronic music trends, namely dubstep and ballaeric sounds’, he wanted to create a ‘permanent home’ for producers of [19]80s style music ([Rick Shithouse, 2019](#)). This was achieved through the creation of a Facebook group for producers and later *Synthetix.FM* as a space for the reviews, both spaces ‘launched in February 2012’. In reference to an appreciation for [19]80s music, Shithouse asserted how ‘the [synthwave] scene itself came about from *Synthetix* filling a gap’ ([Rick Shithouse, 2019](#)). Several artists I interviewed remarked the significance of Shithouse’s work, as well as crediting him for his support:



FIGURE 1.3 The icon for *Synthetix.FM*. Copyright Rick Shithouse.



D/A/D: he [Rick] was ... very pivotal in kind of getting the scene together ... amalgamating [it] into one place which was this Facebook group ([D/A/D, 2020](#)).

Bart Graft: I recorded [a] [19]80s album after watching the first season of *Miami Vice* ([1984](#)) and uploaded it to Bandcamp. It was discovered by Rick [Shithouse] (creator of [*Synthetix.FM*]) and given a review. This was my introduction to synthwave ([Bart Graft, 2019](#)).

Sunglasses Kid: After putting a bunch of stuff out on SoundCloud and tagging it [19]80s, I was contacted by ... Rick Shithouse. He had the only blog on synthwave, called *Synthetix* and he reviewed some of my tracks ([Sunglasses Kid, 2019](#)).

Tommy '86: I can never thank enough Rick Shithouse and his *Synthetix* blog for putting me in the spotlight ([Tommy '86, 2024](#)).

Shithouse did not claim the term 'synthwave' as his own, preferring: '[19]80s synth-based music' ([Rick Shithouse, 2019](#)). He felt that 'the music [was] way too diverse for one genre title' and expressed a general preference for '[19]80s inspired synth music as an overarching term'. However, at the turn of the 2010s decade, a variety of artists began hashtagging their music on YouTube, SoundCloud and MySpace as '#synthwave'. Shithouse was keen to distinguish that at this time such engagement with synthwave was on a much smaller scale in terms of a

cohesive online community: ‘there was no scene at this stage, in the sense of an active community online and certainly not in real life’. Commenting on the progression of such a community in 2019, he asserted: ‘The [synthwave] community is what makes everything happen... . People supporting producers, sharing the love, going to shows, buying releases, preordering physical releases, it’s all about the audience/producer relationship’. Of synthwave’s appeal, Rick Shithouse commented: ‘There’s an emotional context to great [19]80s inspired synth music that gives you a very deep reward. Due to the soundtrack-oriented nature of much of it, there’s another element of connection, something that allows for individual interpretation’ ([Rick Shithouse, 2019](#)). Whilst *Synthetix.FM* is still live, Rick Shithouse declared via blog post in 2018 that *Synthetix.FM* would no longer be updated.

1.2.3 Jurgen Desmet and Playmaker, Clive Lewis and Electronic Rumors, Aaron Vehling and Vehlinggo

In addition to Rick Shithouse’s blog, another early source which wrote and published about synthwave artists was music blog *Playmaker* (established in 2009), which reviewed early synthwave artists. The site moved from its original Blogspot⁴ to another domain in 2018 (which is now defunct). From observing *Playmaker*’s Blogspot, an array of artists affiliated with synthwave were reviewed from 2009–2017. For example, in 2009 they covered Lazerhawk, in 2010 Mitch Murder and Futurecop, in 2011 [Miami Nights 1984](#) aka ActRazer, Mitch Murder, Power Glove and Lazerhawk, in 2012 Lost Years, Perturbator, Arcade High, 80s Stallone and Digikid84, in 2013 SelloRekt/LADreams, Protector 101, Ogre, Carpenter Brut, D/A/D and Vincenzo Salvia, in 2014 VHS Glitch, Arcade High, Timecop1983 and Dan Terminus, and in 2017 Bart Graft, Who-Ha, Sferro, Beckett and Mega Drive.

Electronic Rumors, a music blog and website, also wrote about synthwave artists, and began in 2008. Founder Clive Lewis described *Electronic Rumors* as ‘one of the first ... outlets to write about synthwave.

Even before the scene as it is now coalesced, we were writing [features and promoting artists who made] dreamwave, outrun, nu-disco, italo etc’. He explained his journey into the genre, commenting on the scope of the community at the time: ‘when I discovered synthwave it was incredibly exciting to me. This was back in the MySpace day when the scene was in its embryonic state’ (Clive Lewis, 2024).

Another significant journalist in synthwave history is Aaron Vehling, who operates vehlinggo.com ([Figure 1.4](#)).

The website is:

a music publication ... started in 2014 in New York. In the synthwave space, it has featured interviews with key players in the genre – especially pioneers. It also has reviews, mixes, a podcast, and one compilation that features a host of synthwave stars.

([Vehling, 2024](#))

Vehling has been ‘a professional journalist for 20 years’ and considers his role as: ‘applying the professional ethic to what is traditionally a DIY space’ ([Vehling, 2024](#)). Speaking of his role in the community, he stated:



FIGURE 1.4 The logo for Vehlinggo, created by Alexander Burkart. Copyright Aaron M. Vehling. [↗](#)

in the world of synthwave, I've become part of a tight-knit, international community of musicians, writers, video producers, curators and fans. That is a glorious thing. I've made lifelong friends over the nearly ten years I've been running the site.

([Vehling, 2024](#))

1.2.4 Marko Maric and Synthwave Sundays/Synthetix Sundays

Another 'key figure' ([Rice and Ruskin, 2012](#)) with relation to an early and growing synthwave community is Marko Maric, founder and host of podcast *Synthwave Sundays* (later *Synthetix Sundays*), who 'around 2013 ... wanted to contribute something other than just listening' ([Maric, 2023](#)). Initially, Maric had been engaging with the *Project Friday* online radio show produced by artist Silent Gloves, which was hosted on [MixLR.com](#).

Maric likened MixLR.com to what Twitch is now, though MixLR had no video functions. It did have a chat function however, which is where Maric initially interacted with many synthwave artists, such as ‘[Miami Nights 1984](#), Sferro, Mitch Murder’ and where he was eventually recommended to join Rick Shithouse’s Facebook group *Synthetix*. He had been informed, ‘this is where all the synthwave people hang out’ ([Maric, 2023](#)). It is through joining the *Synthetix* Facebook group that Maric came to interact with Rick Shithouse, who later became a part of *Synthetix Sundays* as a regular guest.

The *Synthetix Sundays* shows were weekly from ‘early [20]14 to [20]17 ... about a three-year period’ and on them, Maric would interview synthwave artists, ‘about 250 interviews’ total by the time the show’s running ended (Maric, 2023). The show was hosted on MixLR.com and replays of the show were uploaded to SoundCloud. Maric had only intended to do *Synthetix Sundays* for a year but observed how the show ‘was quite successful ... within the underground scene’. As well as interviewing artists, Maric’s show had various different segments, such as that of ‘Paul Daly. He did [a segment called] 100 followers or less’ (Maric, 2023). Another segment was that of Rick Shithouse, named ‘Quality Time with Shithouse’. Maric explained how ‘we would just talk about what was going on in the scene’ e.g. ‘Oh look *Stranger Things* [2016–2025] just came out’, or Rick would ‘talk about [an] album, you know, and then he would ... play some songs off it’ (Maric, 2023).

Maric shared with me the reaction to the show eventually ending, which coincided roughly with the time when Rick Shithouse announced he would no longer be updating the *Synthetix.FM* blog (in 2018): ‘[Some people said that] when we [meaning Rick and Marko] stopped, you know, that was when the Golden Age [of synthwave] ended’. When I quizzed Maric’s motivations for ending *Synthetix Sundays*, he explained: ‘I’d put like 30 to 40 hours a week into it, plus [I was] working 40/50 hours a week so I didn’t have a lot of spare time other than that’. He commented also on changes within the synthwave community at the time: ‘Things [were] kind of changing in the scene a little bit ... Facebook groups weren’t the same

anymore’. Maric concluded: ‘We did one more farewell show in 2017... . It was ... a nine-and-a-half-hour bonanza’. He reflected warmly on his time as a podcaster within the synthwave community:

I can’t even explain to people what it’s done for me, you know ... I’ve just felt so connected... . It’s funny how things work out ... I’m in New York now and I’m married ... it’s all because of synthwave.

(Maric, 2023)

Speaking of their roles in the synthwave community, Maric spoke fondly of Rick Shithouse: ‘we’re always kind of like brothers in a way, because we went through all that ... [I eventually met him offline in] Melbourne because I lived in Perth at the time’. Maric also spoke highly of Shithouse’s reviews on *Synthetix.FM*: ‘He really had a way with words. Rick was very ... articulate’. The logo for *Synthetix Sundays* was designed by Basil Murad aka Blood + Chrome, who Marko described as ‘the most talented designer in the scene’ (Maric, 2023).

1.2.5 Andy Last and BEYOND SYNTH

Another key figure who also found their feet in the scene as a result of Shithouse’s *Synthetix* Facebook group is Andy Last, ‘host and producer of *BEYOND SYNTH*, a synthwave focused podcast ... since 2013’ ([Andy Last, 2024, Figure 1.5](#)).⁵ Last had always been interested in ‘electronic music and [19]80s music in general ... like film scores and ... synthpop from the [19]80s. I love Depeche Mode’ ([Andy Last, 2024](#)). In the early 2010s, in his search for electronic music of this sort through Bandcamp and SoundCloud, Last came across #synthwave, ‘which was relatively new ... not a lot of people were using it then [but] through that I discovered a bunch of other artists’ including OGRE and Who Ha. It was Who Ha who introduced Last to the Facebook *Synthetix* group, which was ‘the [synthwave] hub at that time’ ([Andy Last, 2024](#)).

Speaking of his motivations for creating the *BEYOND SYNTH* podcast, Last explained: ‘I always wanted to make something ... because I love the

music ... when I found synthwave it was like this light bulb went off’. He continued: ‘Once I was in that group [*Synthetix*] that’s where I was pulling my guests from’. Last explained the general format and content for his podcasts:

I interview people ... a lot of it is focused around retro pop culture [and we] talk about movies we like and games we like... . Every eight to ten minutes, we’re gonna play a song. That’s the only format thing and I write down the five or six songs that fit into an hour interview.

The shows were not live, and as an ‘editor by trade’ Last would ‘spend a lot of time editing each episode’ ([Andy Last, 2024](#)).



FIGURE 1.5 The icon for *BEYOND SYNTH*. Created by Andy Last. Copyright Andy Last. [↗](#)

The show had ‘a lot of returned guests’, and at the time of my interview with Last (January 2024) he was editing episode 390. Guests on the show include Perturbator, D/A/D, Magic Sword, GUNSHIP, Protector 101, Vincenzo Salvia, Sunglasses Kid, Dream Kid, as well as artists who were concerned with ‘the formation of the scene ... like [Miami Nights 1984](#), Lazerhawk’ ([Andy Last, 2024](#)). Other artists Last has had on the show include: Jessie Frye, Michael Oakley, Primo the Alien, Arcade High, Glitbiter, Waveshaper, Bunny X, Mecha Maiko, Droid Bishop, NINA, JJ Mist, Timecop1983, Dana Jean Phoenix and Roxi Drive. The show has ‘a

small but loyal audience’ and each episode is posted to SoundCloud, with guests selected mainly by Last ([Andy Last, 2024](#)). Last explained his motivations when selecting artists are purely musical and related to his passion for the artist and their music. He made clear that he does not ‘care about the popularity of the artists. It doesn’t change the amount of work I put into a show’. Of the show’s future, Last concluded, ‘I’m a creative guy by nature and so I want to be making things... . The juice for me is meeting new people and chatting, finding new music, so I will continue to do it’ ([Andy Last, 2024](#)). As of 2025, the podcast is still in operation.

There are several other individuals and organisations who have had a profound impact on and made their contributions to the synthwave genre and I detail these other parties and their work in [Chapter 6](#) (e.g. *NewRetroWave*, *Rosso Corsa*, *Outland Recordings*, *Nightride FM*, plus others).

1.2.6 Key Synthwave Artists

In addition to those who have facilitated or supported synthwave artists and their work, the artists themselves are highly significant to the community. To represent some of these, I present a specific portion of my November 2023 survey data, where I asked respondents to name five of their favourite synthwave artists (with 159 respondents in total). A total of 245 different artists were named in response to this question altogether. The graph in [Figure 1.6](#) shows the results, representing all artists who were named at least three times. Artists named twice (but not represented on the graph) included: Yota, Desire, Roxi Drive, College, Le Matos, Daniel Deluxe, Josh Dally, Russell Nash, PRIZM, Von Kaiser, Moonraccoon, Midnight Danger, Alpha Chrome Yayo, Volkor X, Hollywood Burns, September 87, KRISTINE, Laura Fares, Brothertiger, Mayah Camara, Phaserland, We Are Magonia, Hotel Pools, Thomas Barrandon, Tokyo Rose, Pensacola Mist, Satellite Young, King Stephen, Scattle, Gibarian, Syst3m Glitch, Dark Smoke Signal. Artists named once (but not represented on the graph) included: Makeup and Vanity Set, Jessie Frye, Arcade High, Futurecop!,

Rogue VHS, Who Ha, Parallels, C Z A R I N A, Lost Years, S U R V I V E, Dimi Kaye, SelloRekt/LA Dreams, Megan McDuffee, CyberFlower, Oceanside85, VHS Dreams, Calico Sky. The top five named artists were: The Midnight, GUNSHIP, Timecop1983, Carpenter Brut, FM-84.

Also in representation of synthwave artists, I present a specific portion of my September 2019 survey data, where I had also asked respondents to name five of their favourite synthwave artists (with 94 respondents in total). A total of 132 different artists were named in response to this question altogether. The graph in [Figure 1.7](#) shows the results, representing all artists who were named at least three times. Examples of artists named twice (but not represented on the graph) included: SelloRekt/LA Dreams, Daniel Deluxe, Hollywood Burns, Droid Bishop, Lost Years, Tommy '86, OGRE, KRISTINE, S U R V I V E, Occams Laser and Volkor X. Artists named once (but not represented on the graph) included: Power Glove, We Are Magonia, Michael Oakley, Makeup and Vanity Set, Arcade High, Moonraccoon, Von Kaiser, Betamaxx, Kalax, Anoraak, W O L F C L U B, LeBrock, D/A/D, Le Matos, College, IRVING FORCE, The Bad Dreamers. The top five named artists were: Carpenter Brut, The Midnight, Perturbator, FM-84 and Dance with the Dead.

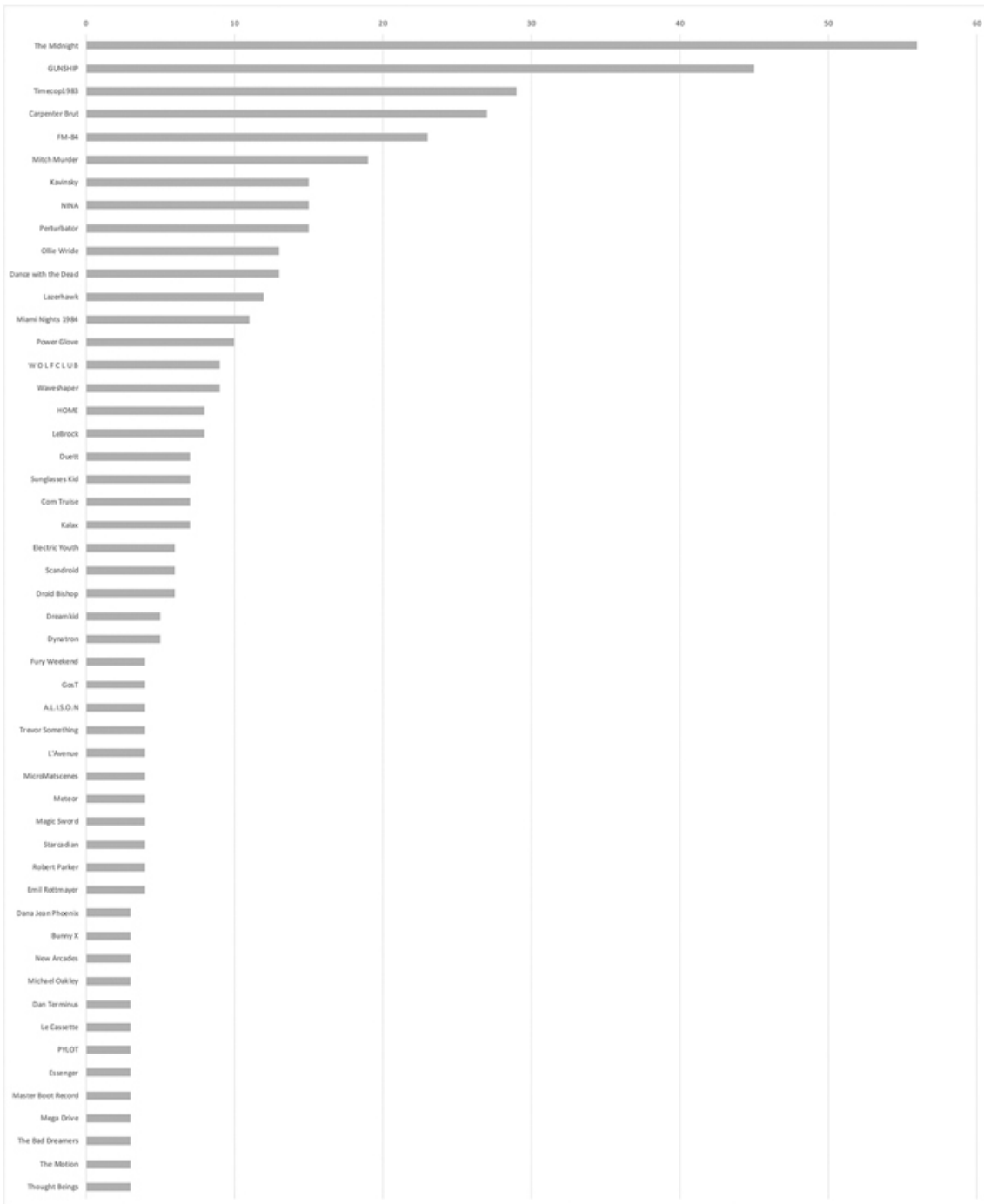


FIGURE 1.6 A graph representing responses to: ‘Name five of your favourite synthwave artists’ (Synthwave Survey November 2023). [📄](#)

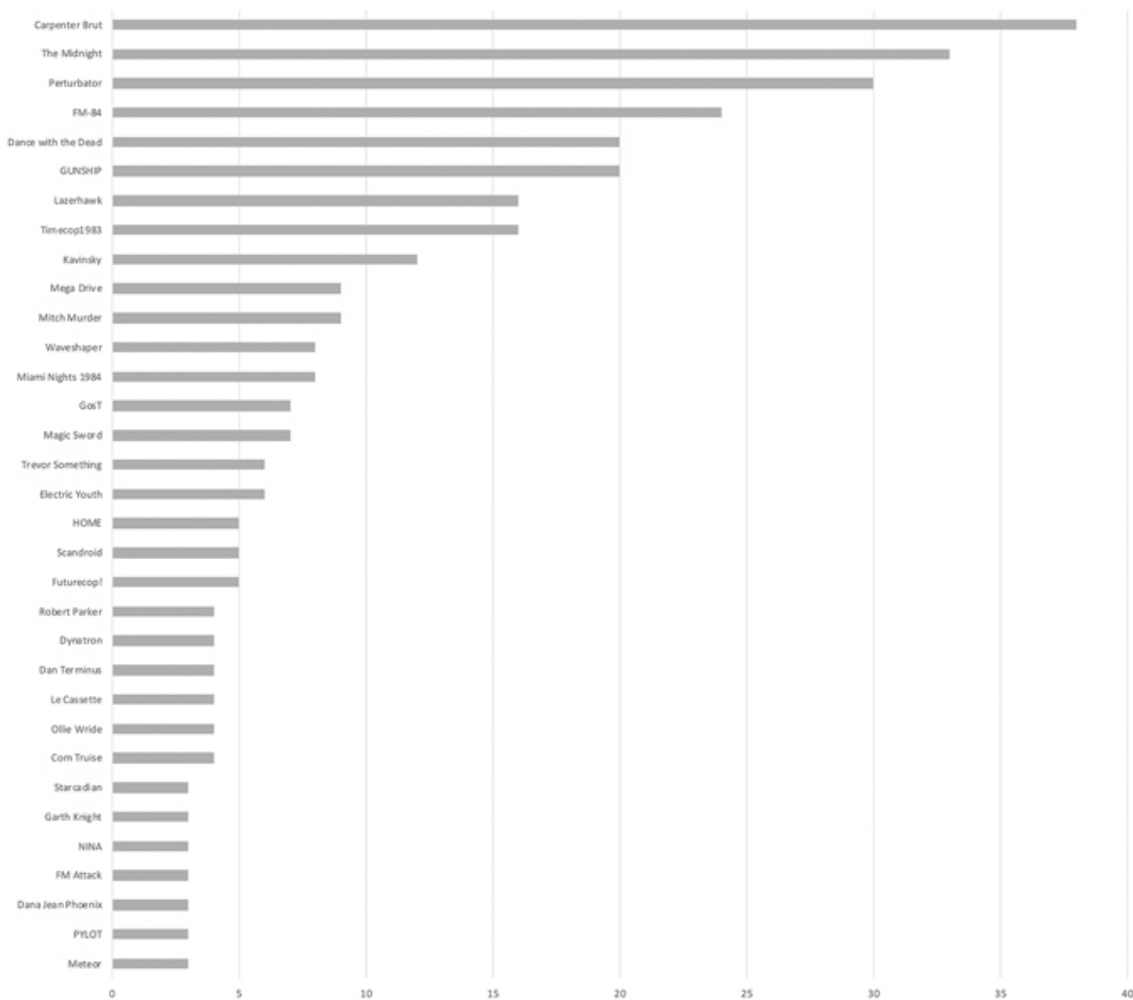


FIGURE 1.7 A graph representing responses to Q6: ‘Name five of your favourite synthwave artists’ (Synthwave Survey September 2019). [↗](#)

1.3 Key Synchronisations and Synthwave Music as Soundtrack Music

In the mid 2010s, the synthwave community saw both an increase in members as well as increased recognition by people outside of the community. This was due to some key synchronisations to various forms of media as well as original soundtracks (OSTs) (see [Table 1.2](#)).

These movies, video games or television series were named in my Synthwave Survey (November 2023) in response to, ‘When, and how, did

you first come across synthwave?’ Further examples not listed in [Table 1.2](#) were also named, including: *Hotline Miami* (2012), *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002), *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), *Synth Riders* (2018), *Cobra Kai* (2018–2025), *Knight Rider* (1982), *Miami Vice* (1984), *Cold in July* (2014), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). The *Drive* (2011) movie was named so many times it warranted its own category separate from movie OSTs on my data results graph. Of my total 159 responses, 20 gave no tangible or specific enough response (e.g. only responding to the ‘when’ and disregarding the ‘how’). These 20 are represented by ‘Partial/unspecified response’ on the graph in [Figure 1.8](#).

Of soundtrack music, one of the synthwave community’s largest milestones occurred in 2011 with action–drama movie *Drive* (2011). A very large proportion of artists that I interviewed remarked the significance of *Drive* (2011) to synthwave, and particularly its original soundtrack. Several cited it as one of the gateways which led them to synthwave:

TABLE 1.2 Key Synchronisations and Synthwave Music as Soundtrack Music. [!\[\]\(00560314de30f551331cfe01eac12d7c_img.jpg\)](#)

<i>Synthwave Artist</i>	<i>Movie, Video Game or TV (Year Released)</i>
Various: Kavinsky, College (+ more)	<i>Drive</i> (2011) [Movie]
Various: M O O N, Perturbator (+ more)	<i>Hotline Miami</i> (2012) [Video Game]
Power Glove	<i>Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon</i> (2013) [Video Game]
Le Matos	<i>Turbo Kid</i> (2015) [Movie]
Various: Magic Sword, Mega Drive (+ more)	<i>Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number</i> (2015) [Video Game]
Various: Mitch Murder, Lost Years, Betamaxx (+ more)	<i>Kung Fury</i> (2015) [Short Film]

<i>Synthwave Artist</i>	<i>Movie, Video Game or TV (Year Released)</i>
Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein of S U R V I V E	<i>Stranger Things Season 1</i> (2016–2025) [TV]
Various: Carpenter Brut, Waveshaper (+ more)	<i>Furi</i> (2016) [Video Game]
Fixions	<i>Mother Russia Bleeds</i> (2016) [Video Game]
Magic Sword	<i>Thor: Ragnorok</i> (2017) [Movie – Song Featured in Movie Trailer]

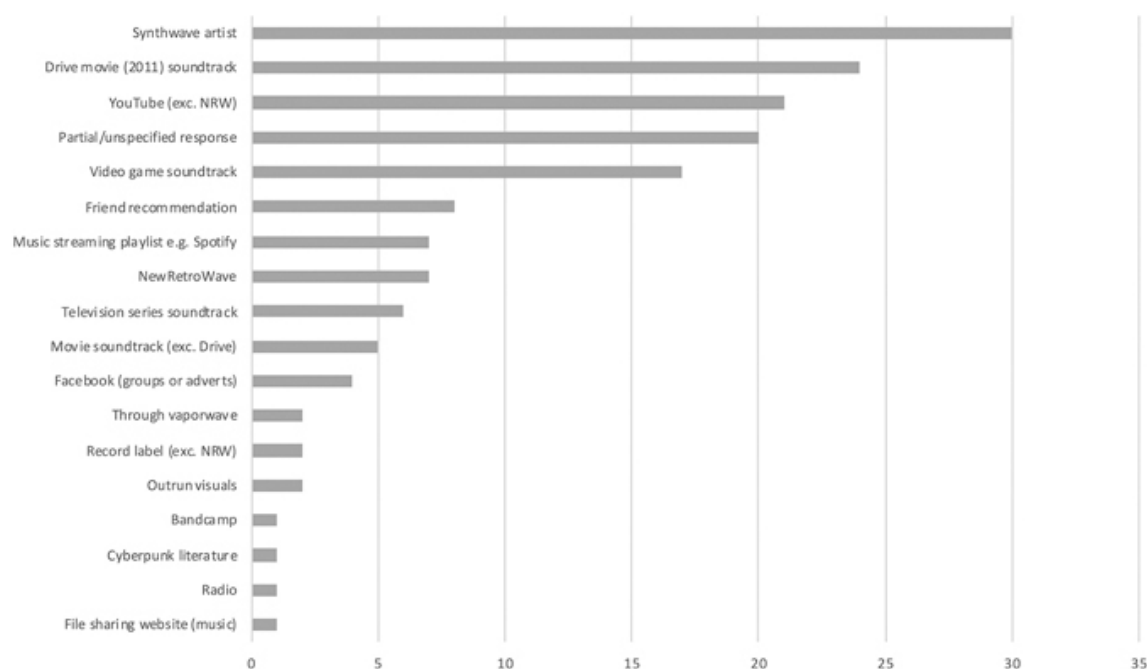


FIGURE 1.8 A graph representing responses to Q5: ‘When, and how, did you first come across synthwave?’ (Synthwave Survey November 2023). [↗](#)

Alpha Chrome Yayo: The soundtrack to the movie *Drive* was probably my first introduction to what is now generally referred to as synthwave ([Alpha Chrome Yayo, 2023](#)).

Yota: I was also listening to Kavinsky but I never thought about it being synthwave back then. It feels as if the genre was existing long before the definition of it! ([Yota, 2023](#))

Arcade High: Ryan [member of Arcade High] saw the movie *Drive* (2011) and discovered the genre ([Arcade High, 2024](#)).

Hearts in Beta: I unknowingly stumbled across the sound in 2011 when the movie *Drive* came out and I purchased the soundtrack on vinyl ([Hearts in Beta, 2024](#)).

NINA: I became aware of the synthwave scene after watching the movie *Drive* ([NINA, 2019](#)).

Oblique: It was when we saw the film *Drive* and we fell in love with the soundtrack ([Oblique, 2020](#)).

Bunny X: I also fell in love with the *Drive* soundtrack ... in 2011 and really got into the genre ([Abigail Gordon of Bunny X, 2023](#)).

CyberFlower: Watching the film *Drive* and hearing tracks like ‘Real Hero’ and ‘Nightcall’! The film was so good, but it’s the soundtrack that really captured the mood (2023).

Nightstop: When I first saw the movie *Drive* (2011) and Kavinsky and College were on that movie’s soundtrack ([Nightstop, 2024](#)).

Other artists who spoke of *Drive* (2011) as one of their gateways to synthwave included: [Taurus 1984 \(2024\)](#), [Anniee \(2024\)](#), [FacexHugger \(2023\)](#), [Lyst \(2023\)](#), [Madelyn Darling \(2024\)](#), [Occam’s Laser \(2023\)](#), [The Lightning Kids \(2024\)](#) and [TONXY \(2023\)](#). Several artists considered it a significant milestone in synthwave’s history:

Michael Oakley: [W]hen synthwave kind of started, it started in ... the late 2000s and there was a whole bunch of people on Myspace. Then ... the movie *Drive* came out ([Michael Oakley, 2023](#)).

Shaun Phillips of LeBrock: Kavinsky ... got the song in that killer movie *Drive* and that pushed things ([Shaun Phillips of LeBrock, 2018](#)).

Bart Graft: I think traditional synthwave emerged from the influence of *Drive* (2011) ([Bart Graft, 2019](#)).

Timecop1983: The ... soundtrack of *Drive* (2011) sparked the synthwave scene. Especially [songs] by College/Electric Youth and Kavinsky ([Timecop1983, 2018](#)).

Drive (2011) is an action–drama film directed by Nicolas Winding Refn, based on the 2005 book of the same name by James Sallis. It stars Ryan Gosling as ‘The Driver’, an enigmatic young man who works as a mechanic, stunt double and criminal-for-hire. Its soundtrack was written by Cliff Martinez, a film score composer also noted for his work as a drummer in the Red Hot Chili Peppers. As well as featuring soundtrack music by Martinez, the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack includes works by various synth-style artists: Kavinsky, Electric Youth, College, Johnny Jewel (aka Desire aka Chromatics). Martinez alluded to the sonic cohesion that this gave the film, despite his assertion that typically, ‘a song compilation score is too eclectic for a composer to follow in its stylistic footsteps... . But four of those songs could be the same band ... so it [the soundtrack] felt stylistically unified’ ([Moayeri, 2021](#)).

For the non-source music, Martinez used more virtual synths via a DAW: ‘It’s almost all software synthesizers ... software emulations of vintage synthesizers from the [19]70s, like the ARP 2600, there’s a software version of that [as well as] vintage software emulations of synthesizers from the [19]80s’ ([Hemsworth, 2016](#)). Martinez explained how the pre-chosen source material led the rest of the score musically, and how he felt that the score’s cohesive and unified sound character contributed to the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack’s success and popularity ([Britt, 2019](#)).

Before Martinez had been selected to write the score, the role was tentatively offered to Johnny Jewel ([Grellier, 2024](#)) at the recommendations of Refn and Gosling ([Moayeri, 2021](#)). Though later Martinez was hired for the role, two of Jewel’s tracks were used for the soundtrack, ‘Tick of the Clock’ and ‘Under Your Spell’. The other artists on the soundtrack were approached for their respective songs’ usage, as Electric Youth’s Austin Garrick explained for the usage of ‘A Real Hero’ (‘we were approached’)

([Maduka, 2011](#)), and Vincent Belorgey explained of ‘Nightcall’ (‘They just contacted us and asked’) ([Battaglia, 2013](#)).

Journalist Vehling offered his thoughts on *Drive*’s (2011) impact on the synthwave style: ‘*Drive*’s use of some elements of the 1980s to create something new and contemporary has over five years led to some extraordinary escalations of nostalgic expressions’ ([Vehling, 2016](#)). He concluded ‘The music and film have certainly had their impact on the popularity of [19]80s retro... . People seeing the [19]80s so much in *Drive* amplified an interest in the burgeoning synthwave scene’ ([Vehling, 2016](#)).

Drive (2011) was the second highest response to ‘When, and how, did you first come across synthwave?’ in my November 2023 survey, and community members online continue to attest its significance in synthwave history to this day. The most important reason for this is because of the film’s soundtrack, which supported the community’s solidification and recognition of synthwave style parameters. This is despite the fact that artists from the *Drive* soundtrack have never formally identified with synthwave as a genre. Nonetheless, to establish links between the *Drive* soundtrack and synthwave style parameters which are recognised by the community, I now present two breakdown analyses of two *Drive* soundtrack songs: ‘A Real Hero’ (2011) by College and Electric Youth, and ‘Nightcall’ (2011) by Kavinsky. These analyses are provided ahead of [Chapter 2](#), which formerly details the idiomatic and stylistic features of synthwave (as recognised by the community).

1.3.1 Analysis of ‘A Real Hero’ (2011) College and Electric Youth

‘A Real Hero’ (2011) is a collaborative effort by both College (real name David Grellier, a French electronic composer and producer) and Electric Youth, a Canadian duo and couple comprising of Austin Garrick and Bronwyn Griffin. Grellier has released an eclectic range of albums and EPs since 2009, as well as having founded *The Valerie Collective*. Electric Youth formed ‘when Griffin was in her second year at her university, around 2007–2008’ ([Vehling, 2019b](#)). Their music has been described as

having a ‘mix’ of ‘elements’, which do not solely constitute ‘overt 80s nostalgia pieces’ ([Vehling, 2016](#)). Instead, they utilise ‘80s-esque arpeggiated synthesizer bass parts with modern-sounding patches and styles to create an extraordinarily rich and genuine brand of synthpop’ ([Vehling, 2016](#)).

‘A Real Hero’ featured on the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack and also on Electric Youth’s album *Innerworld* (2014). Austin Garrick of Electric Youth spoke to me in interview about their studio albums’ creative processes:

With our studio albums, musically, it’s usually 70–90% finished in my head pretty instantly, then we undergo the process of getting it into the machines, which takes time. Then vocal melodies and lyrics, then we record the vocals, any additional production and mix.

He described his favourite types of music to listen to as: ‘emotive and timeless’ ([Garrick of Electric Youth, 2024](#)). ‘A Real Hero’ includes vocals by Electric Youth’s Bronwyn Griffin, and was produced by Electric Youth’s Austin Garrick along with David Grellier of College. In interview with Grellier, I was informed that ‘A Real Hero’ had been written in 2009, upon Grellier having found Electric Youth’s work on Myspace. Grellier was impressed by the ‘charm’ of Bronwyn’s voice and through a series of online exchanges became friends with the two (Grellier, 2024). When ‘A Real Hero’ was initially created in 2009, Grellier had been forming an EP ‘without lyrics’ and sent the ‘.wav’ to Bronwyn and Austin (Grellier, 2024). The meaning behind the lyrics was decided mainly by Garrick, who had been ‘thinking of ways to put his grandfather’s words into a song’ ([O’Connell, 2011](#)). He explained in interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*,

I had this conversation with my grandfather ... he had been really moved by Captain Sully Sullenberger ... [who was a] US Airways pilot who safely landed an Airbus in the Hudson River in 2009 after

the plane was disabled by a flock of geese... . He was the one who came to me talking about ‘a real human being and a real hero’.

[*\(O’Connell, 2011\)*](#)

Grellier explained in more detail, that it was Austin’s grandfather who had written a poem about ‘the accident under the Hudson river’, and that Austin was ‘inspired to write the lyrics’ as a result (Grellier, 2024). Grellier’s intentions for the instrumental differed but did revolve around the idea of a lonely hero. He explained to *The Hollywood Reporter*, ‘[my] inspirations were more focused on 1980s cinema. I wanted to give a homage to that lonely hero that we see in movies like *Mad Max*’ ([*O’Connell, 2011*](#)). In interview with me, he confirmed that he was ‘inspired by the hero theme which is very iconic [of the 19]80s. I was influenced by *Mad Max* – the George Miller movie... . Heroes who don’t speak aloud, exactly like in *Drive* [2011]’ (Grellier, 2024).

Regarding the usage of ‘A Real Hero’ on *Drive* (2011), Grellier ‘received an email from the music supervisor’ (Grellier, 2024). Grellier recognised what a ‘great opportunity’ this was and given the narrative and visuals of *Drive*, how closely it aligned with his love for 1980s movies (Grellier, 2024). He also supported that the *Drive* soundtrack had so many independent artists on it, which he felt was rare (Grellier, 2024). My virtual ethnography has consistently shown community members affirming the significance of ‘A Real Hero’, many of whom have often referred to it as the bittersweet love anthem of *Drive* (2011). Given this reputation, it follows that there are several tutorials for how to recreate the song’s synth sounds within the synthwave community (particularly on YouTube), such as [Colby Latocha \(2020\)](#), [Post Pop \(2020\)](#), as well as various synth ‘covers’ and ‘remakes’ ([Matheo Ramone, 2020](#); [ALADEN RADIO, 2022](#); [Major Tom, 2023](#), [Reverb Machine 2024](#)). Despite not identifying as synthwave artists themselves (rather, synthpop [[Vehling, 2016](#)]) Electric Youth are a well-renowned and revered artist in the synthwave community, and several comments were made about them in the online survey I conducted in November 2023: ‘[Electric Youth are] profound talents who infuse all of

themselves into their music’ with ‘beautiful and dreamy ethereal songs’. Others remarked, ‘*Innerworld* is an untouchable album ... the vocals are gorgeous’, with one stating ‘Final Girl’ (2014) (a bonus track on *Innerworld* [2014]) is ‘one of their favourite songs ... a powerful, wistful evocation of lost youth’ (Survey Anons, 2023).

I now provide a short analysis of ‘A Real Hero’, which includes sound design, structure and arrangement, instrument pitches and ranges, harmonic and rhythmic analysis (which includes some reduced scored parts) and melodic spectrogram analysis. All scored excerpts are indicative of core parts only and any which contain bar numbers are arbitrary (i.e. bar numbers do not necessarily reflect the track). My audio experiments can be accessed on my personal website.⁶

I firstly present a structural-arrangement overview of the song which may be used in conjunction with my analysis, to represent core parts which appear in the song (shown in [Table 1.3](#)).

‘A Real Hero’ (2011) functions diatonically in the key of F major with a tempo of 112bpm and time signature of 4/4. The song comprises of the bassline, the introduction synth (which begins on an F4 before alternating this note with Bb4 and A4), the drums, a further high-pitched pad synth in verse 1 at 1’12 (which has a similar timbre to the introduction synth strings) and various vocal parts. There is one hearing of a different synth at 1’27. Prominent backing vocals include the harmonies heard in chorus, including one higher harmony and one lower harmony (with the main melody pitched in between these). At points, a synthesizer accents the vocal melody, such as at 1’44, where a synthesizer doubles the vocal melody (‘a real hero, real human being’) and these are both heard in unison (*melodic unison*). The drums maintain a four-on-the-floor pattern for most of the song, beginning with a kick-only pattern at 0’13 before swapping to a kick–snare pattern at 0’21. The kick-only pattern is heard again for the first half of verse 2 (2’37) before the kick–snare pattern at 2’56 returns.

TABLE 1.3 ‘A Real Hero’ (2011) A Structural Representation Overview.

	<i>Intro</i> [0'00–1'11]	<i>Verse</i> 1[1'12–1'36]	<i>Chorus</i> 1 [1'37–2'20]	<i>Instrumental</i> [2'21–2'36]	<i>Verse</i> 2 [2'37–3'02]	<i>Chorus</i> 2[3'03–3'46]	<i>Ins</i> [3'46–3'59]
Main Vocals							
Backing Vocals							
Pitch Bend Synth							
Introduction Pad	0'36				2'50		
Synth as Vocal			1'44				
Sound FX Synth		1'27					
High Pad		1'12		2'31			
Bass Synth							
Kick and Snare							

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Of vocals, the verse vocal melody gradually ascends in pitch within the range of an octave from F3 to F4 (see [Figure 1.9](#)).

The chorus section includes two vocal harmonies (see [Figure 1.10](#)).

Use of echo is prominent of the vocals throughout the track. A noticeable echo set to a ½ rate and mapped to tempo is heard (1'38) in the chorus part, of which the lyrics are: ‘and you, have proved, to be, a real human being, and a real hero’. Further use of echo is evident in the instrumental section

(2'20), where the 'being' of 'human being' lingers, through a ½ time echo which is applied to the word 'being'.

I used Arturia's Mini V to recreate the bassline's synth timbre. Through critical listening I identified the bassline's pitches as F, D, C, Bb, C (in the F2 and F1 octaves – confirmed by Sonic Visualiser's melodic spectrogram, where I identified the fundamentals ranged from 53–91hz – though I have notated these higher in [Figure 1.11](#) for ease of reading). The bassline utilises eighth notes which are gridded (i.e. quantized), but the pitches do not change on the downbeat of each new bar (see [Figure 1.11](#)). As I worked out the notes of this bassline with a piano and by ear, it became apparent how much detune is applied to the bassline on the track.

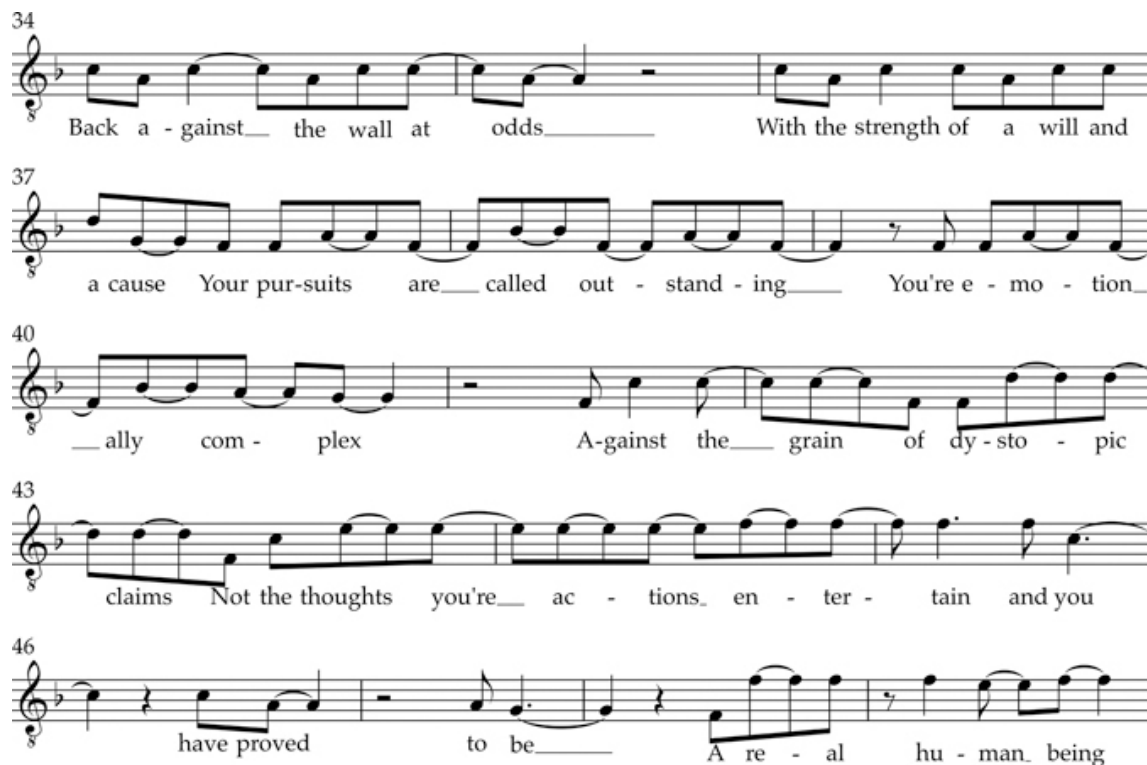


FIGURE 1.9 Verse 1 vocals in 'A Real Hero' (2011) (Timecode 1'12). [↗](#)

47

Main Vocal

to be A re - al hu - man being

High BV

re - al hu - man being

Low BV

re - al hu - man being

50

Main Vocal

re - al

High BV

and a re - al he - ro re - al

Low BV

and a re - al he - ro re - al

FIGURE 1.10 Chorus vocals in ‘A Real Hero’ (2011) (Timecode 1’41). [↗](#)

♩ = 112

F Dm Bb

5 C F Dm Bb

FIGURE 1.11 Bass synth in ‘A Real Hero’ (2011) (Timecode 0’04). [↗](#)

For the synth timbre, I used a mixture of two saw waves and one square, all with the same amount of volume. I set the filter’s cutoff frequency to 150Hz, filter emphasis to 25% and amount of contour to 55%. I set the filter envelope’s attack and sustain to 0 and decay time to 210ms. I set the amplitude envelope’s attack to 0.52ms, and sustain to 10 (100%). To enhance the sound, I added some detune and some subtle chorus (with the rate at 0.400hz and the mix at 12%).



FIGURE 1.12 Introduction pad in ‘A Real Hero’ (2011) (Timecode 0’37). [🔗](#)

For the introduction synth, I used Arturia’s Jun-6 V. I identified the pitches for the pad part: A, F and Bb, all in the C4 range (see [Figure 1.12](#)).

To emulate this synth timbre, I set a sawtooth wave and square wave with sub oscillator. I set a HPF at 975hz, and my filter settings with a cutoff frequency of 100hz, resonance at 0, env amount at (27%) (set to positive) and KBD at 1 (on). I set the amplitude envelope with an attack of 109ms, sustain at 100%, and release of 2.5s. I applied the Jun-6 V’s inbuilt chorus II, as well as drifted the master tuning on the right-hand side of the Juno to 434hz. I experimented with delay settings too, using the Jun-6 V’s onboard delay. I set the time to 1/8 sync, set feedback to 50%, stereo to 0.308 (30%), and dry/wet to 20%. I also added a Jun-6 V reverb, with a size set to 1.00, decay set to 0.734 (73%), damp set to 94%, predelay set to 0.108s, and dry/wet set to 0.64 (64%). Based on critical listening, I altered the velocity of the notes, with the F4 set as quieter, and Bb4 and A4 to be louder or slightly more pronounced. I also set a volume automation for the first few notes to enter gradually, starting quieter and getting louder (audible at 0’36 on the track). I finally added further chorus using Logic Pro X’s inbuilt chorus, with a rate of 1.567hz, intensity of 10% and mix of 32%.

The song begins with three synth tones which have audible pitch bends. I noted how a comparable effect can be achieved using Serum, by modulating the coarse pitch and adding bitcrusher to the sound. The pitch bends heard in the track were visible on Sonic Visualiser’s melodic spectrogram (using the ‘high gain’ colour setting), with clear lines shown: one that descended from around 1900hz to 1125hz, one that descended from 750hz to 312hz, and one that ascended from 425hz to 683hz (see [Figure 1.13](#)).

In interview with David Grellier of College, he revealed to me that ‘A Real Hero’ (2011) was entirely created with the Pro-52 (a Prophet-5

emulator plugin by Native Instruments) on a copy of Fruity Loops version 3. His final words on the matter were amusing, when I informed him of the myriad of theories by community members of which synths were actually used on the track: ‘Sometimes people think that I use very complicated things, but no, [and] even if I’m using a Prophet-5, I’m not a prophet’ (Grellier, 2024). I now provide a short analysis of ‘Nightcall’ (2011) with the same approach taken as that of ‘A Real Hero’ (2011).

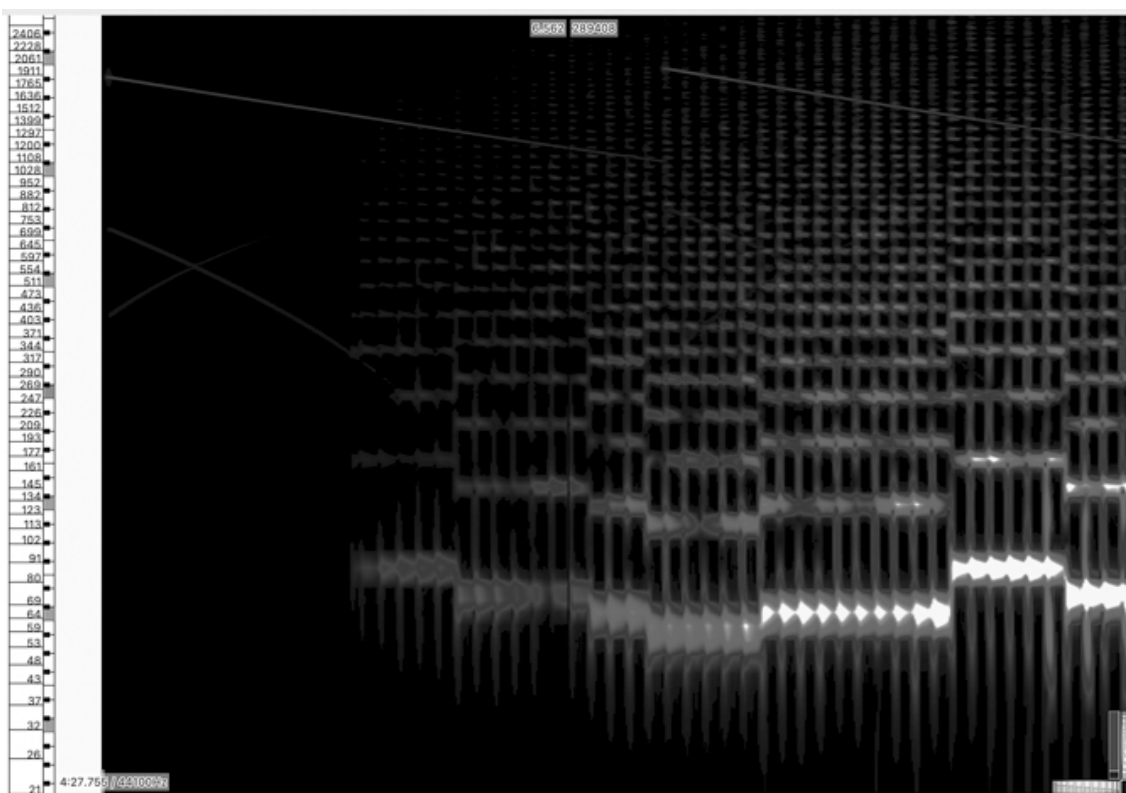


FIGURE 1.13 The pitch bends heard in the introduction of ‘A Real Hero’ (2011). [↩](#)

1.3.2 Analysis of ‘Nightcall’ (2011) Kavinsky

Kavinsky’s ‘Nightcall’ was written by French electronic musician Vincent Belorgey, produced with Daft Punk’s Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo and mixed by SebastiAn (Kavinsky Bandcamp, n.d.) (who is affiliated with *Ed Banger Records* and has produced for Daft Punk, Nero and the Beastie Boys [[Thomas, 2013](#)]). The song was initially released as part of Belorgey’s

2010 EP, later as part of the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack and included also on Belorgey's 2013 album *OutRun*. Interviews with Belorgey have characterised his music as 'a specific type of electronic music that's decidedly dark but danceable' ([Buyanovsky, 2013](#)) and remarked its 'very cinematic and atmospheric' qualities ([Buyanovsky, 2013](#)). Belorgey has made clear his affinity for soundtrack music and described *OutRun* (2013) as a concept album of sorts, or a movie soundtrack without the movie, remarking that he 'can't imagine creating music for nothing ... but [he] used to love soundtracks to movies' ([Battaglia, 2013](#)). He cites key influential soundtracks such as the work of director and film soundtrack composer John Carpenter, and film director Dario Argento, with 'Italian movies and American movies' being his favourites ([Battaglia, 2013](#)).

Kavinsky, the alter ego of Belorgey, is the central character of *OutRun* (2013), an album which tells the story of a man who turns into a zombie following a car crash and must explain to his girlfriend what has happened to him. The chorus lyrics of 'Nightcall' present the girlfriend's point of view in reaction to her partner's post-car-crash personality: 'there's something inside you, it's hard to explain, they're talking about you boy, but you're still the same' (sung by Lovefoxx). Belorgey cited in interview that his first synthesizer was the DX7: 'My first EP, *Teddy Boy* [2006], was just made by one synthesizer ... the DX7' ([Soniccheese78, 2007](#), [1:00]). Kavinsky is considered one of the original synthwave artists by the community, with remarks of this nature stated by respondents of my online survey in November 2023:

Survey Anon: 'One of the OG's [originals] and still great'.

Survey Anon: '[I have] many favourite tracks, and [he is] among the first [synthwave] artists'.

Survey Anon: '[He is an] early pioneer of synthwave'.

Survey Anon: '[His] music videos are unreal, [his] music is the sound of synthwave'.

Survey Anon: 'He is like Daft Punk's little brother and ... will always be the one who started [synthwave]' (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Despite this firm categorization by the community, Belorgey has stated in interview: ‘I’ve definitely heard about synthwave... . But ... I hate to put my music in one genre, in one box ... I wouldn’t consider my music synthwave’ ([Crumlish, 2022](#)). He conceded however, ‘if ever my music would put people or musicians to work on their music and [enable them to] be creative, I am of course very glad about that’ ([Crumlish, 2022](#)).

‘Nightcall’ is one of the most highly valued synthwave songs within the community, having been played in the opening scene of *Drive* (2011). It has been covered or remixed by many artists, including those which appeared on Belorgey’s 2010 EP (Dustin N’Guyen, Breakbot, Robotaki, SAWAGii) plus covers or remixes such as that by NINA and Essenger (2020). Given that ‘Nightcall’ is so highly valued by the community, it follows that several tutorials for how to create its synth sounds exist within community spaces. YouTube tutorials are particularly common, with examples such as: [Ste Ingham, 2017h](#); [Imaginando, 2018](#); [Splice, 2018](#); [Production Music Live, 2019](#); [Colby Latocha, 2021](#); [Banana Labs, 2022](#); [Reverb Machine, 2024](#). Sonic Academy also released ‘How To Sound Like Kavinsky with Taylor Franklyn’ ([Sonic Academy, 2024](#)). These tutorials make the focus of the analysis the sound design, and achieving synth sounds which mimic those heard on the track. I now provide a short analysis of ‘Nightcall’ in the same manner as ‘A Real Hero’ previously.

‘Nightcall’ functions diatonically in the key of A minor, with chords i, VII, iv, VI (1, 7, 4 and 6, in Am these are Am, G, Dm, F) heard in the verse part. The tempo is 91bpm, and the time signature is 4/4. The chorus chords are VI, VII, v, VI (6, 7, 5, 6, in Am this is F, G, Em, F). The song comprises seven main parts, the main arp, the drone bass, the chorus chords (which have several layers), the verse vocoder (which has two layers of voice), the electric guitar, the drums and female chorus vocal. Mid-side analysis evidenced that the drone bass, main arp and male verse vocals are narrow and more central in the stereo image, while the electric guitar is wide out in the stereo field. The verses’ male backing vocals (‘we’ll go all all all night long’) appear to be slightly wider out in the stereo field, but to a lesser degree than the electric guitar.

TABLE 1.4 ‘Nightcall’ (2011) A Structural Representation Overview.

	<i>Intro</i> [0’00– 0’31]	<i>Verse</i> 1[0’32– 1’14]	<i>Chorus</i> 1 [1’15– 1’56]	<i>Verse</i> 2[1’57– 2’38]	<i>Chorus</i> 2[2’39– 3’42]	<i>Instrumental</i> <i>Outro</i> [3’43– 4’18]
Male Vocals Vocoder						
Female Vocals						
Male BVs						
Female BVs						
Main Arp Synth						
Synth Chords						
Electric Guitar						
Drone Bass Synth						
Sound FX						
Kick and Snare						

The opening of ‘Nightcall’ presents a plethora of sound effects. We hear the sound of money being dropped into a telephone box (which may have been achieved with a stereo spreader effect which resultantly places the coin drops partially left and right of the stereo field), the sound of a person pressing the number keys (panned centrally, lower in the mix volume wise), and the howling of a wolf (panned partially right and with a noticeable echo at 0’09). The wolf howl descends in pitch as it is heard. Meanwhile, the sound of a dialling tone is heard fairly centrally in the stereo image (confirmed by mid-side analysis). As these sounds are heard, naturistic noises which simulate the feeling of being outside are faded in, mainly cricket noises. In support of this, a high-pitched animal cry (possibly a bird) is heard panned right at 0’07. Using Sonic Visualiser’s melodic spectrogram, I was able to see that the phone dial sound at 0’08 has two prominent stable pitches at 436hz and 479hz, and that the wolf howl has prominent frequencies at 300–527hz (see [Figure 1.14](#)).

At 0’12, the main arp enters. To recreate the main arp of Nightcall (see [Figure 1.15](#)) I utilised Arturia’s Juno-6 emulator, the Jun-6 V.

The arp’s notes are in the C4 range. For the arp’s tone generation, I used a square wave with pulse width modulation at 100% and one sawtooth wave. I set a HPF to 400hz, and the filter’s cutoff to 275hz, with the resonance around 30% up the slider. I set the filter envelope amount to 25% (set to positive) and the KBD to 1 (on). I set the amplitude envelope to have a short attack of 1ms, decay of 2.8s (50% on the slider) sustain at 0% and release of 1.3s (50% on the slider). As I was editing, I noticed how significant the envelope amount was, even minute changes completely transformed the sound. Edits to the decay and release setting, particularly the former (in getting that ‘pluck’), as well as Jun-6 V’s Chorus I setting, were also vital in emulating the sound. For further enhancement to the sound, I added some detune, and an additional chorus through Logic Pro X, setting the rate to 0.400hz, intensity to 45% and mix to 25%.

I identified the drone bass notes as A1 B1 G1 F1 E1 D1 (confirmed with Sonic Visualiser’s melodic spectrogram where they showed as ranging 59–30hz). Using colour setting ‘High Gain’ on the spectrogram, I was able to

see some pitch descents on each of the drone notes (from 3200hz to 900hz) which may have been achieved with a LPF and filter envelope. I chose the Arturia Jun-6 emulator to recreate this part. For tone generation, I used a saw wave and square wave (with the sub oscillator engaged). I set the LPF's cutoff to 100hz with resonance turned up to 75% on the slider. I set the filter envelope amount to 44% and KBD to 0 (off) and shaped the envelope with the following settings: a long decay at 7.5s, medium-long release at 3.5s, attack at 1ms and sustain at 0%. The filter envelope's decay and release settings were key to achieving the pitch descents I saw in the spectrogram ([Figure 1.16](#)).

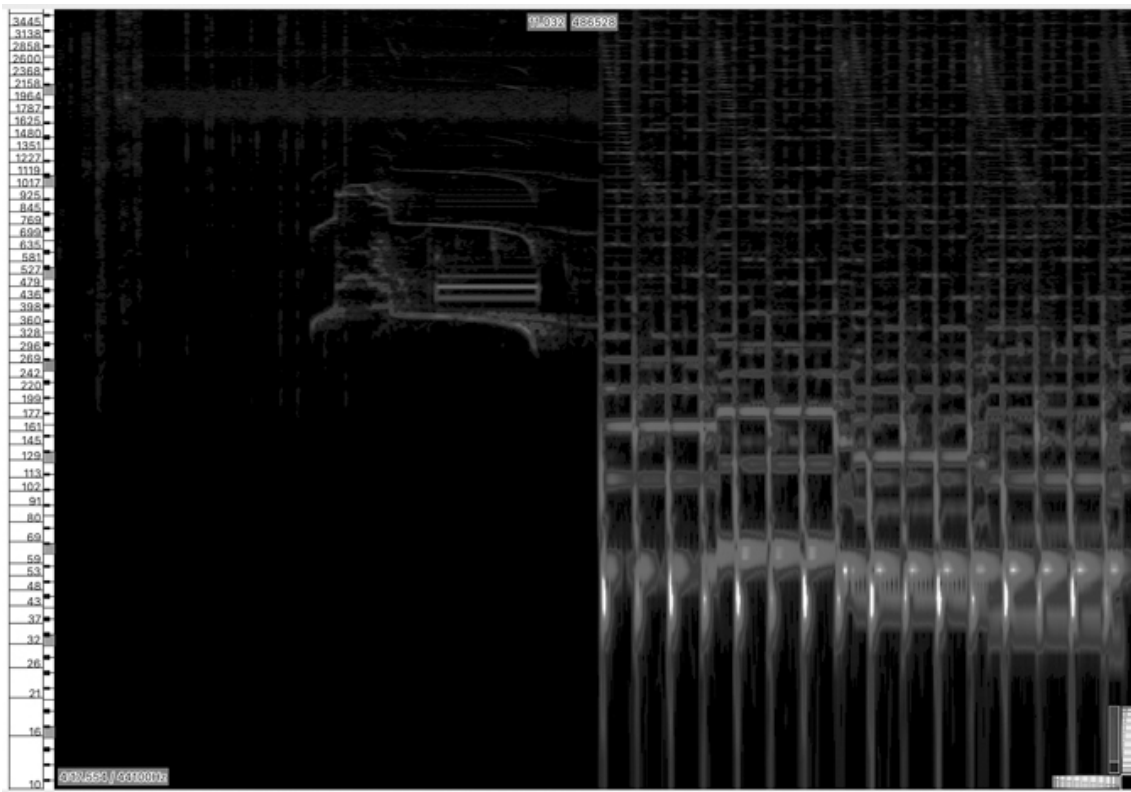


FIGURE 1.14 The wolf howl and phone dial heard in the introduction of ‘Nightcall’ (2011). [↵](#)



FIGURE 1.15 The main arp synth in ‘Nightcall’ (2011) Kavinsky (Timecode 0’11). [↵](#)

The drone bass becomes more distorted in the chorus. In this section I identified the bass notes as F2, D2, G2, A2, E2, C3, F2 (confirmed with Sonic Visualiser’s melodic spectrogram where they showed as ranging 86–134hz – though I notated them higher in [Figure 1.17](#) for ease of reading). Rather than my Jun-6 emulator, I used a Mini V, a Minimoog emulator. I set two saw waves, with oscillator I set to an eight range and oscillator II set to a sixteen range (both with an even balance in volume). I set the cutoff to 4khz, filter emphasis at 0 and amount of contour at 30%. I set the filter envelope’s attack at 0ms, sustain at 0% and decay at 400ms. I set the amplitude envelope settings to short attack and sustain at 100%. I added some detune via the Mini V to enhance the sound.



FIGURE 1.16 The introduction drone bass synth in ‘Nightcall’ (2011) (Timecode 0’11). [↵](#)



FIGURE 1.17 The chorus drone bass synth in ‘Nightcall’ (2011) (Timecode 1’15). [↵](#)

The chorus chords appear to have several layers, which with critical listening and mid-side analysis, I noted as: 1) a more hollow sounding set of chords, which have a shorter attack and longer release time (mid-side analysis confirms these are wider in the stereo image), 2) a ‘fizzier’ sounding set of stab-like chords with a much shorter release time (mid-side analysis confirms these are narrower and more central in the stereo image) and 3) a full-bodied sounding (as opposed to high pass filtered or ‘tinier’ sounding piano chords) piano-timbre set of chords which are identifiable as wide in the stereo field (confirmed by mid-side analysis). These layers of

chorus chords are most audible at 3'43 when the vocals drop out and the chorus is heard as instrumental only. To create the hollow sounding chords, I used Arturia's Prophet-5 with the following settings: two square waves both with pulse width modulation around 80% and KBD on. The filter cutoff was set to 108hz, with resonance and filter envelope amount at 0. For the amplitude envelope, I set the attack to 70ms, decay to 1.1s, sustain to 30% and release to 705ms. I added some detune. For the stab-like chords, I used Arturia's Jun-6 V with the following settings: one square set to 100% pulse-width modulation and one saw wave, high pass filter set to 1126hz, and filter envelope settings of cutoff 4khz, resonance about 40%, envelope amount 50%. I set the amplitude envelope to 168ms attack, 3.4s of decay, 0% sustain and 2ms release. I engaged Jun-6 V's inbuilt Chorus I. For the piano layer, I used Spitfire Audio's piano ([Figure 1.18](#)).

The drum groove for 'Nightcall' is shown in [Figure 1.19](#). The snare appears to have a gated reverb effect, and the drum timbre is comparable to a LinnDrum (sources online have also guessed a TR-626 could have been used, though this matter remains unconfirmed by the song's producers). Vocal parts heard include the main vocoder vocal in the verse, the main female vocal in the chorus and several backing vocals. Backing vocals heard include the male backing vocal in the verse, as well as some female backing vocals heard at 3'42 and 3'53 ('uh'). There is a notable 'master' low pass filter heard at 3'16, which affects all instruments except the vocal. This low pass filter is gradually automated and all instruments are unfiltered by 3'43. The song has both a female and male vocal part, with the male vocal heard in the verses and the female in the choruses. The higher of the two vocoder layers heard in the male vocal part is scored in [Figures 1.20 and 1.21](#).

The song also has a muted electric guitar part in the introduction (see [Figure 1.22](#)).



FIGURE 1.18 The chorus chords in ‘Nightcall’ (2011) (Timecode 1’15). 

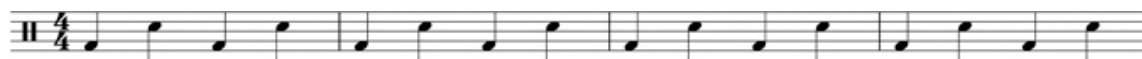


FIGURE 1.19 The main drum groove in ‘Nightcall’ (2011) (Timecode 0’11). 

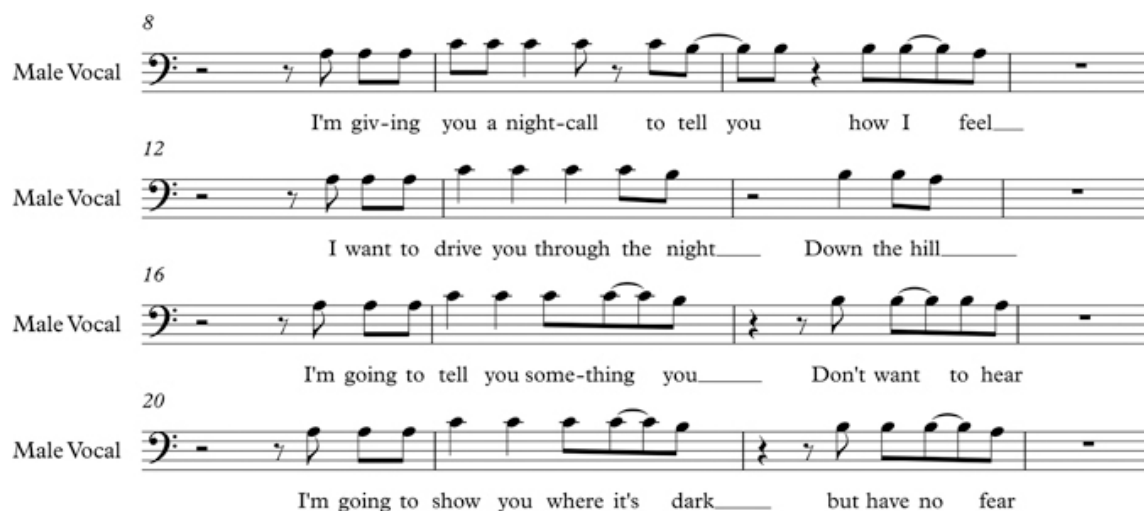


FIGURE 1.20 The higher of the two vocoder parts sung by a male vocal in verse 1 of ‘Nightcall’ (2013) (Timecode 0’32). [↩](#)



FIGURE 1.21 The female vocal part (heard in the chorus) of ‘Nightcall’ (2013) (Timecode 1’15).



FIGURE 1.22 The electric guitar part of ‘Nightcall’ (2013) Kavinsky (Timecode 0’11). [↵](#)

1.3.3 S U R V I V E and Stranger Things (2016–2025)

One television show, the *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) series, was particularly prominent in raising the profile of the synthwave style, due to the series’ immense popularity and success. The series was greatly accepted into the wider discourse of synthwave because of the story’s chronological setting in the 1980s. The soundtrack for *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) was written by two members of S U R V I V E, a four-piece synth artist based in Austin, Texas (US). The group are collectively Adam Jones, Mark Donica, Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein, with the latter two having written the *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) music. They started as a music group in 2009 and released their first EP LLR002 in 2010 on the *Light Lodge* label ([Simpson, All Music, n.d.](#) 2024).

When asked how the *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) music was different to their own, Dixon remarked:

dealing with a film ... or a TV show, there’s a broad range of emotions that you have to touch on, and a lot of that’s a little more childish, a little more playful, than something that we would release as S U R V I V E.

([Weingarten, 2016](#))

Whilst cognizant of 1980s influences, they were ‘drawn to seventies recording styles a little more ... to make it sound a little warmer’ ([Weingarten, 2016](#)). When asked how they were approached to write for *Stranger Things* (2016–2025), they explained how the Duffer Brothers

‘emailed us and asked if we were available. They put our song “Dirge” from our last LP in their trailer for the show... . They made a little mock trailer to pitch their concept to Netflix’ ([Weingarten, 2016](#)). Several musical ideas were shared with the Duffer Brothers by Stein and Dixon, and the Duffer Brothers had some specific requests e.g. ‘write a theme for some of the characters to use’. Stein and Dixon were onboard ‘before [the show] had even cast anyone’ and ‘there weren’t scripts yet’, only ‘vague ... character descriptions’ ([Weingarten, 2016](#)).

In interview with *Sound on Sound*,⁸ the composers illuminated some of their compositional process, which wasn’t entirely ‘in the box’ (within a DAW) and instead incorporated hardware analog synths. For example, they used synths such as the Jupiter-8 (1981), which was ‘retrofitted with MIDI’ (and plays the lead part of the *Stranger Things* main theme) ([Betts, 2017](#)). For the theme ‘Kids’ (2016), an Oberheim SEM Two Voice (1976) was used on the main arpeggio line, and the ‘Upside Down’ (2016) theme was ‘purposely programmed on an eight-step analogue sequencer in [Stein’s] 5U modular’. A Polymoog (1975) and ARP 2600 (1971) were used on ‘Upside Down’ (2016). The composers described how they used analog synths to subtly detune notes, ‘to create a desired amount of dissonance and tension’ ([Betts, 2017](#)). They spoke about the practical implications of using hardware analog synths, where some of them did not facilitate sound recall. For this reason, they incorporated synths such as the Prophet-6 (2015), which has sound recall through patch memories. ‘MIDI to CV/Gate’, as well as ‘clock or MIDI to DIN converters’, were also used, ‘to get all the analogue equipment sync’ed up’ ([Betts, 2017](#)).

1.3.4 Ivan Castell and The Rise of the Synths (2019)

Another significant milestone for synthwave was in 2019, when a documentary called *The Rise of the Synths* (2019) was released. It was directed by Iván Castell, narrated by film composer John Carpenter and featured interviews with synthwave artists who described their journeys

with the style. In interview with Castell, he explained to me the roots of the documentary and his introduction to synthwave:

The documentary came to me very naturally. I wasn't looking for it. In 2013 ... I was making a video for a friend of mine who really digs electronic music. [I asked him] what type of music do you want me to put on the video? The person [sent me a YouTube video] called '80s Stallone – Cobretti'. I started to see the related videos and ... neon colored thumbnails with ... names like [Miami Nights 1984](#), Perturbator, Carpenter Brut, College, The Midnight ... two weeks later I was just listening to synthwave and that that was the beginning of the documentary.

([Castell, 2023](#))

Of his motivations for creating the documentary, Castell explained how he had noticed the 'passion' and 'engagement' in the YouTube comments of the videos he had seen, and how videos had 'so many views'. He observed that this wasn't just one 'main artist', but many and with a distinct 'fanbase with a lot of engagement and people [saying] that this music had changed their life'. He mused why 'nobody [was] paying attention to it' and at that point felt there was a story to be told, leading to his decision to 'make a film about this scene' (Castell, 2023).

During 2014 and 2015, Castell contacted various synthwave artists via email. When he had ten or so responses from artists who were interested in being in the film, he decided to go forward with it and pitched it to producer [Javier] Moreno. In 2016, Castell began finalising the list of those who would appear in the documentary, intending to capture a 'wide range of different types of music [from] the scene' (Castell, 2023). He wanted to capture, for example, 'originators who started this thing on Myspace' e.g. Lazerhawk, College, and the 'the dark side of the scene' e.g. Perturbator, Carpenter Brut, Dance with the Dead, GosT, plus 'new voices' such as NINA, Mecha Maiko, The Midnight, GUNSHIP, plus 'other characters' to reflect that synthwave is a 'worldwide movement' (Castell, 2023). He

mentioned countries such as France, the United States, the UK, Sweden, Belgium and Australia in particular. Following the creation of a short teaser for the documentary (The Rise of the Synths, 2016),⁹ which featured a main ‘synth rider’ character, Castell sought funding. Castell has said previously in interview how the synth rider character was a ‘homage [to] the *Mad Max*’s nightrider character and Ryan Gosling in *Drive* [2011]’ ([Lines, 2020](#)).

Castell tried to ‘pitch [the documentary] to broadcasters’ but no one wanted to take ‘the risk’ at that point. In early 2016, he decided to crowdfund it, beginning with Kickstarter. He didn’t meet the target of 100,000 dollars, only reaching ‘almost 90%’, and thus failed to secure the funding. Castell reminded me that with Kickstarter, ‘if you don’t make 100%, it all gets returned [to those who pledged]’. Castell announced on social media that he was ‘not continuing with the project’, which queued many messages of support and prompts to try for more funding (Castell, 2023). Coincidentally, upon failing to secure funding via Kickstarter, rival company Indiegogo contacted Castell, having seen the failed Kickstarter. They offered to help through their film division and consultants service, and in late 2016, the crowdfunding campaign was attempted again, this time on Indiegogo’s platform. They set a core target of 50,000 dollars, as well as ‘overfunding’, ending up with around 75,000 dollars in total. With this, Castell began making the documentary.

In early 2017, Castell began shooting the film, which went on for two years. Castell explained the intended structure of the documentary, describing it as ‘fragmented’ and referencing the internet specifically:

The design of the movie was made ... to mimic the YouTube rabbit hole ... to mimic the experience most ... people have when they discover [synthwave], which is basically they go ... from one video ... to another one to another one to another. [So in the documentary] you start with one [artist], then you jump to another one [in] another country, [then] you go to another one, which is another country.

(Castell, 2023)

Artists interviewed by Castell for the documentary (amongst others) included Electric Youth, Power Glove, Robert Parker, Waveshaper, OGRE, *The Valerie Collective* (College, Maethelvin), NINA, Scandroid, 80s Stallone, The Midnight, GUNSHIP, Dance with the Dead, Mecha Maiko etc. The soundtrack was composed by OGRE and the documentary also included other pieces of music by synthwave artists, such as NINA's 'One of Us' (2018). Of the synthwave artists interviewed for the film, Castell noticed two types of artist presentation, in that some desired anonymity and some not. Castell felt this aligned with phases of synthwave artists over time, where earlier artists participating in the genre (in the late 2000s and early 2010s) sought anonymity more commonly, where later artists (in the mid-2010s onwards) did so much less. He explained how in the earlier days of synthwave, many artists had: 'no information, pictures or face ... [if] you googled [Miami Nights 1984](#) there was just an avatar'. Of this, Castell remarked how one of the most important things *The Rise of the Synths* (2019) achieved was in fact speaking to:

Composers who had never been interviewed on camera and always wanted to remain anonymous to be involved, i.e. It was the first (and last time) that [the] mysterious MPM Soundtracks was on camera. Another [original artist] from the Myspace era, 80s Stallone, had never until that point revealed his identity.

(Castell, 2023)

Castell also named 'Power Glove, Carpenter Brut, GosT, Lazerhawk, [Miami Nights 1984](#)' as artists who had never been interviewed on camera prior to *The Rise of the Synths* (2019).

The final scene to be shot was the John Carpenter interview, which was filmed in 2019. Carpenter had been contacted via email and agreed to partake, with Castell commenting that he was 'very supportive from the beginning'. Castell felt that Carpenter's creative approach and values as a composer aligned with those in the synthwave scene, describing him as 'this rebel [with a] really underground attitude to the creative process,

[which] I think people in the scene ... all ... related to' (Castell, 2023). He also noticed how important Carpenter was to the artists he had interviewed for the film, many of whom had cited Carpenter as influential to their work (alongside naming other synth-user inspirations such as Giorgio Moroder, Vangelis, Tangerine Dream, Suzanne Ciani). This synchronises with some of my own findings from having interviewed synthwave artists, in that generally, John Carpenter is revered by community members for his work as a director and film soundtrack composer (see [Chapter 3](#)).

The reception to *The Rise of the Synths* (2019) 'was really good' and Castell recalls when they premiered the documentary at 'In-Edit Festival ... in Barcelona [01.11.2019], which is one of the most renowned festivals for music documentaries in the world' ([Figure 1.23](#)). Further screenings of the documentary were shown, e.g. at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, where 'the two venues were sold out' (Castell, 2023). Further showings of the documentary took place at Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema, F.A.M.E. Festival Paris (France) and Melbourne Documentary Film Festival (Australia) (Castell, 2023), amongst others. DJ Kaarin Zoe Lee remarked that she had attended a premiere in London in 2019 ([Kaarin Zoe Lee, 2023](#)). Castell reports that both fans and artists of synthwave attended showings, and commented how 'the community part of it' was 'the most enjoyable part of the whole process'. When the film was released on DVD and Blu-ray (which Castell self-distributed), many copies were sold, and people contacted Castell via social media to thank him for making the movie. My final question to Castell was if he would change anything about the movie, to which he responded, 'I wouldn't change anything because ... *The Rise of the Synth* (2019) was my love letter to the scene and [to] the underground artist' (Castell, 2023).



FIGURE 1.23 The poster for *The Rise of the Synths* (2019). Poster designed by Miguel Frago. Copyright Castell and Moreno Films. [🔗](#)

1.4 Synthwave Survey Results (September 2019 and November 2023)

1.4.1 Survey 1 – September 2019

In September 2019, 94 survey responses were collected through a survey named ‘Synthwave’. The survey was posted on four different synthwave subreddits simultaneously (r/synthwave, r/outrun, r/newretrowave, r/darksynth), and all responses collected within 48 hours. Survey questions were aimed specifically at examining synthwave subcultural capital and community member engagement motivations.

The ten survey questions are listed in [Table 1.5](#), of which questions two, four, five, seven and eight yielded the most results.

The survey results revealed a number of key themes, which are presented sequentially in the following sections. Theme one is ideas of nostalgia and engagements with 1980s pop culture (which I converge with a discussion of survey respondent demographics), theme two is ideas about technological progress, escapism and capitalism in 21st century society, and theme three is community member engagement modes and motivations. Themes one and three include triangulation with data from my virtual ethnography.

Theme 1: Nostalgia and Engagements With 1980s Pop Culture

The first theme from the survey respondents was of synthwave’s relation to the 1980s decade (and comments about childhood nostalgia). When asked ‘What do you associate with (or as) synthwave?’ half of respondents named the 1980s (decade) or 1980s pop music, 1980s soundtrack music etc. A quarter of these respondents also named nostalgia or positive/childhood memories, an intriguing notion when considering the age demographics of some respondents ([Figure 1.24](#)).

TABLE 1.5 Synthwave Survey Questions (September 2019). [📄](#)

Q1.	Please indicate your consent in completing this survey.
-----	---

Q2.	What year were you born?
Q3.	What types of music do you like?
Q4.	This survey was posted on an online synthwave forum. What does synthwave mean to you?
Q5.	If any, what synthwave communities or groups do you interact with? Why do you interact with them?
Q6.	Name five of your favourite synthwave artists. Why have you chosen to name those five artists?
Q7.	What do you associate with (or as) synthwave?
Q8.	If any, in what ways do you create (whether music, artwork, anything else) in relation to synthwave?
Q9.	How much do you agree or disagree that nostalgia for the 1980s is a big part of synthwave?
Q10.	Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. Is there anything else you would like to add about synthwave?

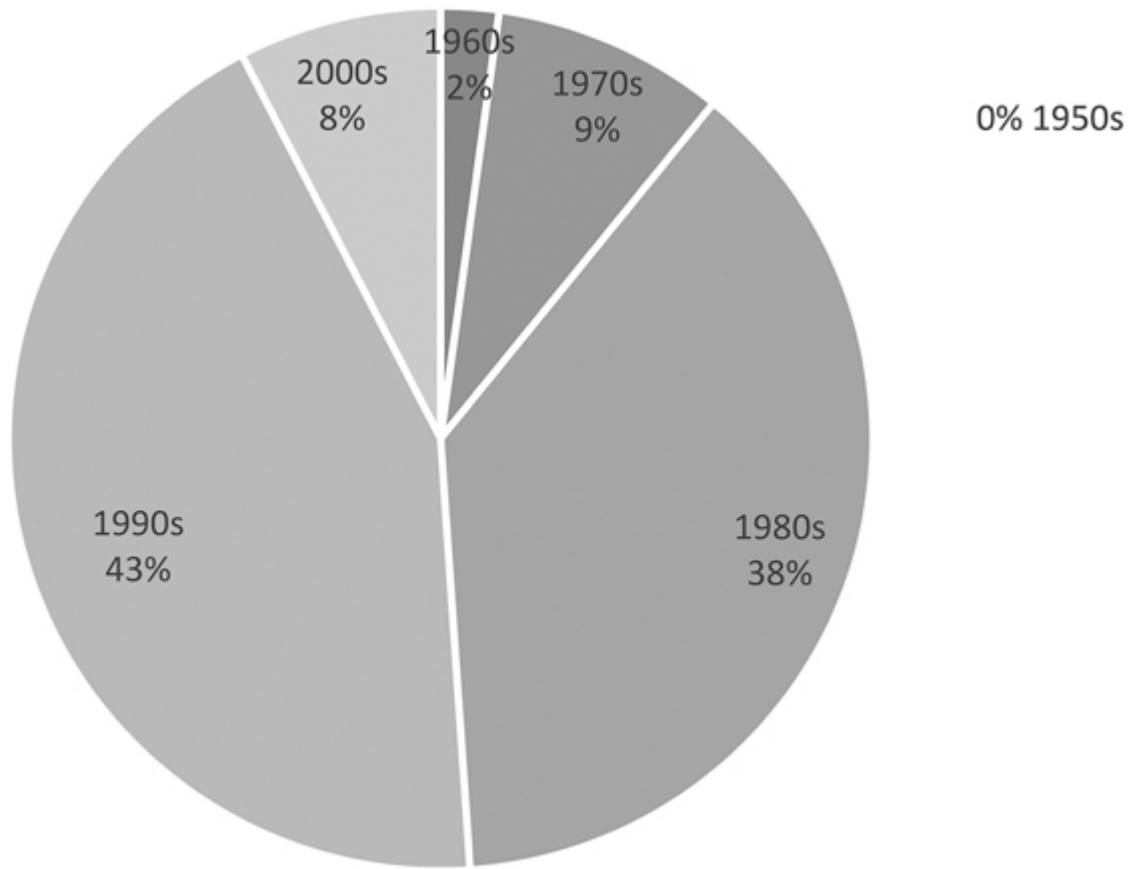


FIGURE 1.24 A pie chart representing the ages of survey respondents: Q2: ‘What year were you born?’ (Synthwave Survey September 2019). [↗](#)

The youngest participant’s birth year was 2002, whilst the oldest 1964. The majority of respondents were born in the 1980s (38% of respondents) or 1990s (43% of respondents). Those born in the 1990s or 2000s made up 51% of responses, hence, approximately half of respondents did not live through the 1980s. To have nostalgia for the 1980s without having experienced that decade aptly captures Appadurai’s ‘ersatz nostalgia’, a ‘nostalgia without lived experience ... collective historical memory’ ([Appadurai, 1996](#)). It also bears resemblance to cultural theorist Boym’s ‘reflective nostalgia’, which ‘lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time’ ([Boym, 2001](#)). Reflective nostalgia ‘dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging’ ([Boym, 2001](#)). Boym’s ‘restorative nostalgia’, by comparison, ‘attempts a

transhistorical reconstruction [and] protects the truth’ ([Boym, 2001](#)). Respondents recognised a lack of ‘restorative’ nostalgia ([Boym, 2001](#)), and clarified their nostalgia for ‘the imagined [19]80s’ (Survey Anon, September 2019), or their having nostalgia for ‘a glamorous, dreamy [19]80s era that never really existed’ (Survey Anon, 2019). Respondents acknowledged that the 1980s which they hark back to is idealistic: ‘Synthwave is a genre that aims to capture a feeling of nostalgia for a time that never was. [It is] a fictionalised version of a 1980s future’ (Survey Anon, September 2019).

Some respondents clarified what was meant by nostalgia with examples of music, movies or social phenomena – much of which made direct reference to 1980s films or icons of 1980s popular culture. Examples included films such as: *Halloween* (1978), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Kung Fury* (2015), *Drive* (2011), television series such as *Stranger Things* (2016–2025), *Miami Vice* (1984) and video games such as: *OutRun* (1987), *Hotline Miami* (2012), *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number* (2015) and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002). Other less specific comments or keywords included: 1980s movie soundtracks, director John Carpenter, 1980s sci-fi, cyberpunk, futurism, retro, neon colours, grid patterns, sunsets, beaches, Miami, letterman jackets, varsity jackets, futuristic cars, Wayfarer sunglasses, visual art, driving, nighttime cities (Survey Anons, September 2019). Some of these responses were expanded in response to Q4: ‘What does synthwave mean to you?’ and Q7: ‘What do you associate with (or as) synthwave?’ where several responses referred to the concept of driving (late at night):

Survey Anons: ‘Driving at night’, ‘Late night driving’ (Q7).

Survey Anon: ‘Driving along highways or a tree lined beach’ (Q7).

Survey Anon: ‘Driving mindlessly’ (Q7).

Survey Anon: ‘I listen to retro synthwave all the time, especially while driving’ (Q4).

Survey Anon: ‘Songs can be slow, melodic, downers, or fast paced high energy songs that make you wanna drive fast on a highway late at night’ (Q4) (Survey Anons, September 2019).

These keywords and explanations refer to icons or imagery from 1980s popular culture e.g. the settings of the aforementioned 1980s films and video games, which take place at night in a city, or in the sun-soaked palm tree spaces of Miami. The imagery and fashion shown through characters, locations and promotional materials of these medias is also relevant to and emulated by synthwave's visual culture, such as the palm trees on the cover of *Miami Vice* (1984), the letterman jacket worn by Gosling in *Drive* (2011) and the futuristic cars of *Blade Runner* (1982). My virtual ethnography demonstrated the importance of the gridded sunset in particular, which is demonstrable on FM-84's album cover *Atlas* (2016), on GUNSHIP's album cover for their eponymous 2015 album (2015) and on KRISTINE's EP cover *The Deepest Blue* (2015). To test the importance of these visual identifiers of synthwave, I used them in a custom design for my laptop case and iPhone (with an image I found online credited to Rafaël De Jongh,¹⁰ 4kwallpapers.com). I posted the results on various synthwave Reddit pages, which were met positively, receiving three figures worth of Reddit 'upvotes' in less than two days. I also tested the significance of the sunset grid design by posting a photo of my birthday cake from 2019, which my partner Josh designed and made based on synthwave community imagery. Like my custom phone case and laptop skin, my cake was met with upvotes suggesting that it was in keeping with synthwave subcultural capital. These visual identifiers serve as examples of Franco Fabbri's 'semiotic rules' of a genre, which refer to: 'the communicative functions ... referential, emotional, imperative, phatic, metalinguistic, poetic ... codes which create a relation between the expression of a musical event and its content' (Fabbri, 1981, p. 4, [Figures 1.25 and 1.26](#)).

Many respondents of Q4, 'What does synthwave mean to you?' explained the significance of the 1980s decade to the synthwave style: 'I think it's impossible to remove nostalgia for the [19]80s from synthwave' (Survey Anon, September 2019). This respondent also alluded to synthwave's nostalgia as 'ersatz' (a 'nostalgia without lived experience' [[Appadurai, 1996](#)]), remarking: 'I don't believe someone has to have actually experienced the [19]80s to have it [the nostalgia]' (Survey Anon,

September 2019). Another respondent reflected this sentiment in reference to their own experience of synthwave:

I think it's funny that we're seeing a resurgence of the culture of the [19]80s. Even though I was born in 1998, synthwave still brings out a bit of nostalgia in me, probably from watching old VHS tapes back when I was a kid.

(Survey Anon, 2019)

As well as childhood, some ideas about different generations were hinted at by respondents; one outlined: 'Synthwave is a genre that harnesses the [19]80s for today's [younger] generation' (Survey Anon, September 2019). A 1995-born respondent reflected specifically: '[synthwave] music reminds me of the crap I used to hear in the cheap [19]80s/[19]90s VHS movies my mom would rent' (Survey Anon, September 2019). Another respondent offered their thoughts more broadly:



FIGURES 1.25 AND 1.26 [Reddit Screenshot] Posted to Reddit by author (taken December 2019, posted to Reddit June 2022). Copyright

I think that, for a lot of the people who grew up in the [19]80s, it [synthwave] is very reminiscent of their past lives, and for the younger generations, the remnants of the [19]80s [that have] been available to them as kids [e.g.] materials that have been collected by their parents through the years.

(Survey Anon, September 2019)

Other responses to Q4 characterised the feelings or emotions that listening to synthwave provided. Many described synthwave as having a specific purpose to them: as ‘background music’ for driving, studying, working out, or dancing. Others described it as motivating (‘[I] wanted some mostly lyric-less and high energy music to help keep me motivated’ [Survey Anon, September 2019]), supporting research that nostalgia (here enacted through hearing synthwave music) supports goal pursuit ([Sedikides and Wildschut, 2018](#), p. 52). Some spoke more directly of the positive emotions that listening to synthwave evoked:

Survey Anon: ‘Listening to synthwave is like there is a dome of silence and peace coming over me’.

Survey Anon: ‘I find the nostalgic and otherworldly feel to it calming’.

Survey Anon: ‘Songs are easy to listen to and make me feel happy’.

Survey Anon: ‘Listening to synthwave makes it feel like my memories now have a soundtrack’ (Survey Anons, September 2019).

Such responses suggest synthwave’s nostalgic abilities in fact maintain or support well-being, which marries research that: ‘Nostalgia conveys wellbeing benefits to individuals’ ([Sedikides and Wildschut, 2018](#), p. 55).

Theme 2: Ideas About Technological Progress, Escapism and Capitalism in 21st Century Society

The second theme drawn from survey responses was that of technological progress, as well as ideas of escapism and a resistance to capitalism and 21st century life. A number of responses received from Q7 ‘What do you associate with synthwave?’ described a backlash against contemporary capitalism and technological advancements, framing synthwave music as a form of escapism. One respondent commented, ‘It’s [synthwave is] an escape and a critique of our hyper capitalist reality’ (Survey Anon, September 2019). Another described: ‘It [synthwave] represents escapism in the dawn of the digital age’ (Survey Anon, September 2019). Some of the comments about escapism and capitalism extended to cyberpunk themes found in sci-fi films, of: ‘anti-corporate morals of [19]80s sci-fi films such as *Blade Runner* (1982), or *RoboCop* (1987)’ (Survey Anon, September 2019). Visual cultures scholar Mark Fisher recognised some of the challenges of the digital age in his text about nostalgia and hauntology, in that: ‘those 30 years have been a time of massive, traumatic change ... with globalisation, ubiquitous computerisation and the casualisation of labour’ ([Fisher, 2014](#)). In line with comments about escapism in the 21st century, one respondent specified the lack of privacy in today’s digital society, expressing their admiration for synthwave artist Trevor Something, who (for a large period of time up until 2022) practised anonymity and to date (2025) refuses to tour (Survey Anon, September 2019). Another respondent named some of the challenges they perceived of the 21st century: ‘The present is not that great, just think about climate change... . That’s why living in the past and feeling nostalgic feels great ... for me’ (Survey Anon, September 2019). A similar-toned response commented on the state of music more broadly in the 21st century:

Synthwave in a way, saved my life. I was tired of today’s music. Tired of radio ads. I didn’t know what I was doing in life or where I wanted to go... . It gave me a community that I could be a part of and be myself.

(Survey Anon, September 2019)

These comments are reflective of Fisher's summary of the 21st century, which he asserted is 'oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion. It doesn't feel like the future' ([Fisher, 2014](#)). It follows that synthwave (linked closely to its subcultural capital of nostalgia) is considered to be a form of escapism or therapy in the 21st century.

Also regarding technological progress, a quarter of respondents for Q7 'What do you associate with [or as] synthwave?' associated synthwave with older media technologies, including: 'Primitive, cheap-sounding synths, fuzzy VHS tapes', 'old drum machines and Roland synths ... cassette tapes', 'Moog synthesizers', 'Walkman', 'Gameboy' and '[19]80s computer graphics' (Survey Anons, September 2019). Musicologist Timothy Taylor commented on musicians' 'resurrection[s]' of 'synthesizers such as those by Robert Moog', in relation to their creative possibilities when compared to the 'automated features' of 'today's [21st century] instruments' ([Taylor, 2001](#), p. 97). This certainly prompts a discussion of music creation values in the 21st century when compared to a pre-digital landscape. Creative processes of synthwave are explored specifically in [Chapter 2](#), though comments of this nature were made by survey respondents, unprompted by my questions, such as: 'The synths themselves often emulate dated instruments and technology' (Survey Anon, September 2019). Moreover, one respondent framed the uniqueness of synthwave as being the combination of 1980s technology with that of the 21st century: 'It's through the fusion of glossy [19]80s synths with modern music-production that makes synthwave such a unique genre within modern music' (Survey Anon, September 2019).

Theme 3: Community Member Engagement Motivations and Modes

One question specifically probed community member motivation (Q5 'If any, what synthwave communities or groups do you interact with? Why do you interact with them?'). Over half explained their motivations were to seek new synthwave music, or to find 'new releases' (Survey Anon, September 2019). Other reasons referenced bonding over shared musical

interests and sourcing what many characterised as ‘non-mainstream’ music such as ‘YouTubers promoting small artists’ (Survey Anon, September 2019). Some characterised the finding of music or playlists as only ‘lurking’ (with many naming *NewRetroWave*’s YouTube channel as the place for this) or referred to themselves as ‘consumers’ (Survey Anons, September 2019). On the other hand, some respondents described using community social media pages to promote their own synthwave music or using Facebook groups to garner advice and support for creating and producing it. Most commonly, respondents spoke of Reddit as their main source of interacting with synthwave online (which is biased – Reddit is primarily where this survey was posted), outlining how synthwave subreddits specifically provide inspiration for them to create synthwave visual art or music. Some respondents mentioned using social media within the community to contact synthwave artists directly, or to discuss the experience of live synthwave concerts with other people who attended. These responses demonstrate a diversity in community engagement motivations, with a majority wanting to find new music or synthwave releases.

Q8 explored levels of participation within the community, asking specifically about creation modes: ‘If any, in what ways do you create (whether music, artwork, anything else) in relation to synthwave?’ A quarter of responses reported that they created synthwave music, with another quarter admitting to designing graphics, imagery, games or video content. The other half admitted creating nothing, with half of these respondents expressing a wish to create if they had the time or skills. This would suggest some community members feel unequipped to adequately contribute to the synthwave community. Some comments hinted at this, with a few respondents disclosing that whilst they did create, they did not make synthwave ‘professionally’ (Survey Anon, September, 2019). Responses indicated a variety of activities that takes place within the community, including: music, graphics, imagery, video content, game content, playlists, remixes, scripts, models, synthwave podcasts and interviews. This provides a snapshot of how members of the synthwave

community logistically use the internet (as a facilitator) and their skills (whether musical or otherwise) to proliferate this style of music. Examples of my own contributions to the community in this vein include playlists (e.g. my public Spotify playlists ‘Darksynth Synthwave Artists female and non-binary’, ‘Vocal Synthwave Artists female and non-binary’, ‘[People I interviewed: Making Synthwave 2025](#)’), having released my own synthwave-influenced songs (which have been recognised by playlist curators within the community), participation in the GUNSHIP Remix Competition, etc. Responses to this question indicate that an oblique criterion of professionalism exists within the community. From the responses to other questions, I believe popularity or widespread recognition by the community is a relevant factor in affirming those who are considered professionals.

1.4.2 Survey 2 – November 2023

In November 2023, 159 survey responses were collected through a Microsoft Forms survey named ‘Synthwave Survey November 2023’. The survey was posted to:

- My personal Twitter (@blaisejess) as a pinned post, which as of April 2025, had received 127 likes, 34 reposts, 20 comments and approximately 7,000 impressions
- Five different synthwave subreddits: r/outrun, r/synthwave, r/darksynth, r/synthwaveproducers, r/newretrowave
- Nineteen different synthwave Facebook groups, including: Synthwave, UK Synthwave, Synthwave LA, Synthwave Producers, Synthwave Germany, Synthwave Belgique, Synthwave Retrowave Brasil, Synthwave Australia, Synthwave Hamburg, Synthwave Ireland¹¹

The survey was published in November 2023 and closed in May 2024. The majority of responses were gained within the first three months of the survey’s publishing. The survey aimed to examine synthwave’s subcultural capital, culture and values, associated artists, manifestations online and

offline, style parameters, progress as a genre since 2016 and importance to the community. Results were analysed using thematic analysis. The thirteen survey questions are listed in [Table 1.6](#), of which questions five and eight were reported on earlier in this chapter. Results from these questions were represented with a graph. The present chapter reports on questions two and three with a discussion of respondent demographics (including pie charts), on question four through a word cloud, and questions six, seven, ten and twelve through graphs. Questions nine and thirteen are reported on through a discussion.

TABLE 1.6 Synthwave Survey Questions (November 2023). [↗](#)

Q1.	Do you consent to this survey?
Q2.	What year were you born?
Q3.	What is your gender/what are your pronouns?
Q4.	In your understanding, what is synthwave?
Q5.	When, and how, did you first come across synthwave?
Q6.	Do you engage with synthwave online? If so, how?
Q7.	Do you engage with synthwave offline (or “in real life”)? If so, how?
Q8.	Name five of your favourite synthwave artists, with reasons if you can.
Q9.	If any, in what ways do you create content (e.g. music, artwork/images/memes, playlists, podcasts, websites etc) in relation to synthwave? If so, do you earn any income from your creations?
Q10.	What do you believe are important parts of synthwave’s identity and culture?
Q11.	What sounds or musical parts would you expect to hear in a synthwave track?
Q12.	In what ways, if any, do you believe synthwave has changed or progressed since 2016?
Q13.	Is there anything you would like to share about your experience and

engagement with synthwave?

Of the 159 participants, seven respondents were female (citing she/her as pronouns), three were non-binary (citing they/them as pronouns), one did not answer, and 148 were male (citing he/him or Mr).

Of ages or birth year, nine participants misread the question and gave their place of birth (and as a result did not provide their birth year). Of the remaining 150 participants, the most common birth years were between 1970–1999, with 36% of respondents born in the 1980s, 27% in the 1970s and 21% in the 1990s ([Figures 1.27](#) and [1.28](#)).

The youngest participant was born in 2008 (with only eight of 150 participants born in the 2000s) and the oldest in 1953 (with only two of 150 participants born in the 1950s). Seven of 150 participants were born in the 1960s. The number of respondents born in the 1980s (36%) is similar to that of my 2019 (38%) survey, with a higher proportion of 1970s-born respondents this time (9% in the 2019 survey and 27% in the 2023 survey). The percentage of respondents born in the 1990s is approximately half of that compared to the 2019 survey (43% in the 2019 survey and 21% in the 2023 survey). It is possible that since the first survey was only posted to Reddit, while the second to Reddit, Twitter and Facebook, this caused different age demographic results, given that different age groups gravitate more commonly to different social medias ([Gottfried, 2024](#)).

To represent responses to Q4, ‘In your understanding, what is synthwave?’ a word cloud was created. This question aimed to understand respondent perceptions of synthwave, both conceptually (e.g. as a genre, movement, era, musical style, community) and of subcultural capital ([Figure 1.29](#)).

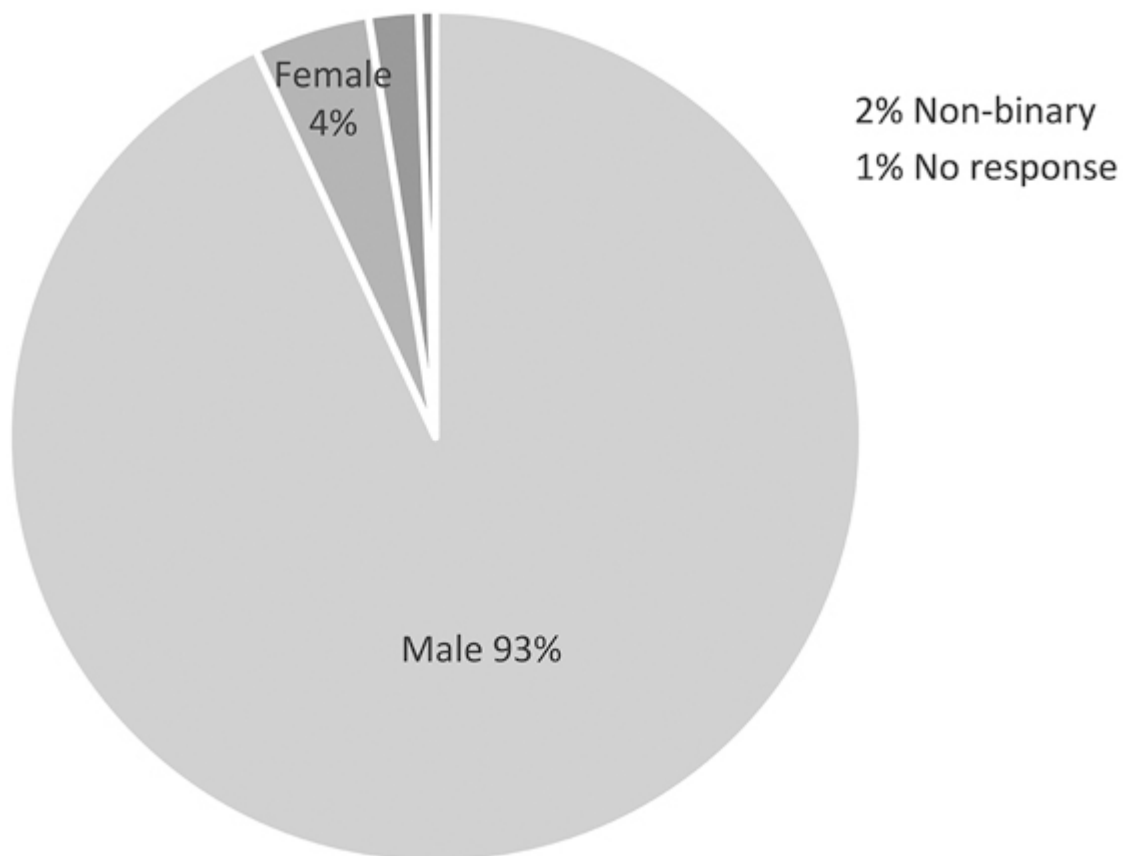


FIGURE 1.27 A pie chart representation of the responses to Q3: ‘What is your gender/what are your pronouns?’ (Synthwave Survey November 2023). [🔗](#)

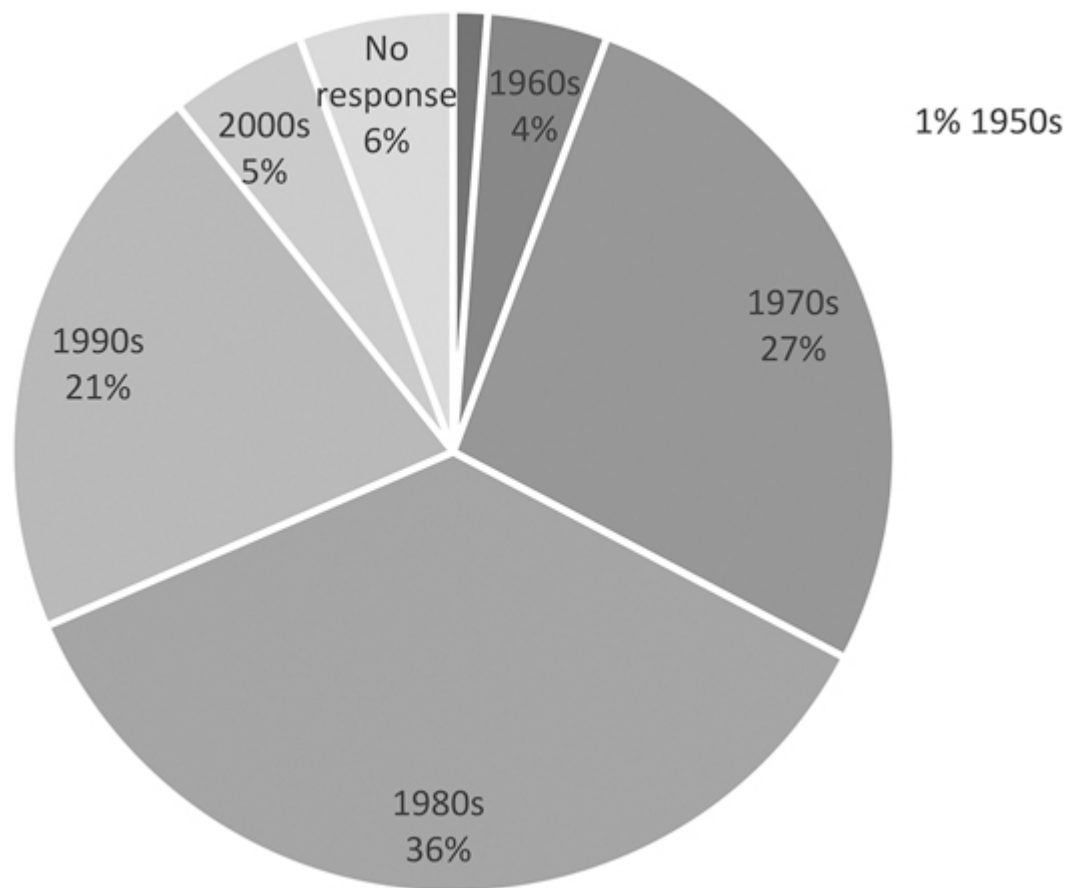


FIGURE 1.28 A pie chart representation of the responses to Q2: ‘What year were you born?’ (Synthwave Survey November 2023). [↗](#)

Results showed a high number of responses with regards to synthwave’s position as a style or genre, e.g. ‘electronic’, ‘genre’, ‘synthesizer’, ‘EDM’, ‘1980s’, ‘nostalgia’, ‘genre’. Other popular responses included ‘retro’, ‘modern’, ‘futuristic’, ‘sci-fi’, ‘neon’, ‘community’. There were several stylistic and musical responses e.g. ‘outrun’, ‘french house’, ‘horror’, ‘1980s new wave’, ‘1980s hair metal’, ‘cyberpunk’, ‘darksynth’, ‘retrowave’, ‘chillwave’, ‘1980s synthpop’, ‘vaporwave’, ‘industrial’, ‘1980s pop music’. Other responses referred to film, game, documentary or television media such as *Drive* (2011), *Stranger Things* (2016–2025), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Miami Vice* (1984), *Knight Rider* (1982), *The Rise of the Synths* (2019), *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002) as well as film soundtrack composers John Carpenter and Vangelis. Some responses

referred to age groups (naming Gen X and Millennials) or conceptualised periods of time: ‘digital age’, ‘analog’ (Survey Anons, November 2023). Results closely correlated with those reported in the 2019 survey, in reference to synthwave subcultural capital (responses to Q4, Q7, Q9, Survey September 2019).



FIGURE 1.29 A word cloud representation of the responses to Q4: ‘In your understanding, what is synthwave?’ (Synthwave Survey November 2023). [↗](#)

Q6 targeted online engagements with synthwave, asking: ‘Do you engage with synthwave online? If so, how?’

The results from Q6 showed that the most common methods of engagement are listening to or creating synthwave playlists, and through membership in Facebook Groups (or viewing Facebook pages). This survey was posted to many synthwave Facebook groups, so the frequency of these responses is biased in that regard. Several respondents spoke of their position as group moderators, and some spoke of friendships they had gained (and continue to make) through social medias within the synthwave community. This graph totals more than 159 responses (the total number of respondents) because many respondents gave more than one answer to this question and all answers were accounted for. Of synthwave playlists, comments often made reference to playlists on YouTube such as those by *NewRetroWave*, *The ‘80s Guy*, *Nightride FM*, *Revival Synth* and *Neros77*. Some comments were more general, such as: ‘I subscribe to several YouTube channels that post “synthwave mixes”; hour+long playlists featuring different artists’ (Survey Anon, November 2023). Use of Reddit was a common response, with pages named by respondents including *r/outrun*, *r/darksynth*, *r/futuresynth* and *r/synthwave* (some of these spaces I had posted this survey to). Many respondents described their engagements with synthwave in reference to their position as creators, e.g.: ‘I am a producer so I engage with fellow producers’, ‘I create synthwave music’, ‘I am one half of a synthwave band so we’re quite active ... on social media’ (Survey Anons, November 2023). Some described their engagement with synthwave via the work of synthwave record labels, e.g. *NewRetroWave*, *Aztec Records*, *Outland Recordings*, *RetroReverbRecords*. Some respondents, whether creators or not, named podcasts or radio shows that they engaged with, such as the *BEYOND SYNTH* podcast, *The Quarantine Club* podcast, *The Fratelli ‘85* radio show and the *Synth Zone* online radio show. Some respondents spoke of how they used ‘online radio station channels’ for ‘seeking out new artists’ (Survey Anon, November 2023). In reference to purchasing synthwave music, Bandcamp was named frequently by respondents and particularly in reference to buying ‘physical media

(cassettes ... vinyls)’ (Survey Anon, November 2023). In general, respondents spoke of using social media to follow artists and those artists’ upcoming releases. Common responses named Twitter/X and Instagram in this regard also. Some responses described engaging with Twitch, particularly for watching synthwave DJ sets. Some respondents (who identified themselves as artists or creators) discussed engaging with synthwave online through sharing and promoting their music/music videos/album artwork/upcoming live performances/merchandise for sale online etc. (Survey Anons, November 2023). Other responses included those who engaged with synthwave online through: ‘custom art’, synthwave music tutorials, podcasts, radio shows, online publications, ‘personal playlists’, ‘sound responsive LED lighting projects’, ‘memes’, ‘tabletop RPGs with synthwave elements’, a ‘sci-fi audio project’, ‘images, mostly photography’, ‘music reviews’ and ‘graphic design’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

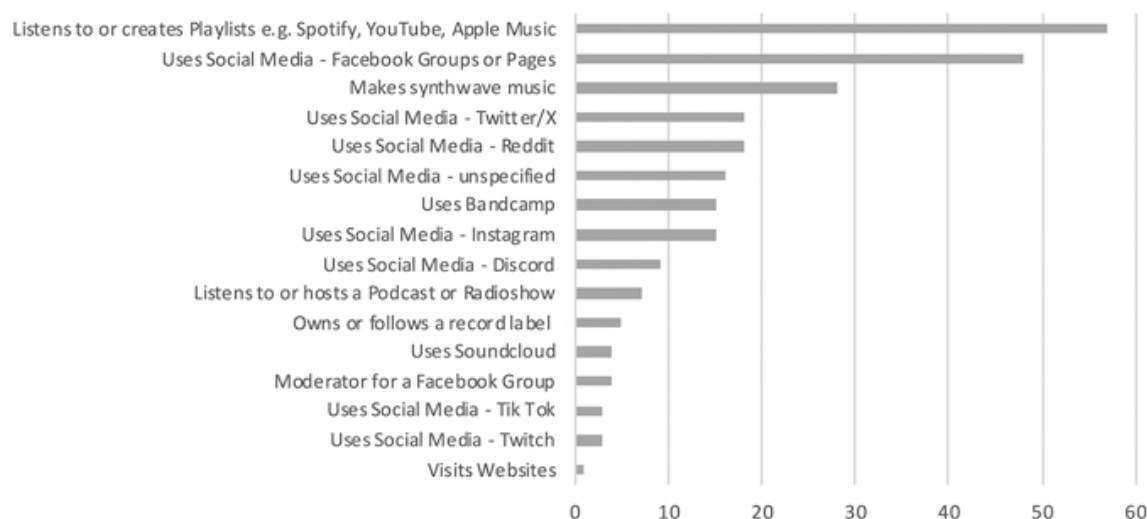


FIGURE 1.30 A graph representation of the responses to Q6: ‘Do you engage with synthwave online? If so, how?’ (Synthwave Survey November 2023).

In reference to creation (and specifically Q9), several comments denounced their own professionalism and self-identified as ‘amateur’:

Survey Anon: ‘I’m an amateur music producer with a SoundCloud page’.

Survey Anon: ‘I’m a guitarist, only amateur though, so nothing I play is part of the whole scene’.

Survey Anon: ‘No [I do not create], because I’m doing it [creating] in an amateur way’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Some of these comments, amongst others, emphasised creator values of art for arts’ sake (e.g. for self-expression or creative experimentation):

Survey Anon: ‘[with] Music [we make] very little [money] but that is not our goal’.

Survey Anon: ‘I make artwork and music. I do it for myself [to] express [myself]’.

Survey Anon: ‘Our gigs are free. I don’t make income from it (I have a proper job for that) it’s a niche genre – I do it because I enjoy giving something back’.

Survey Anon: ‘I have made some fanmade artwork ... I do it just for fun’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Whilst some comments clearly outlined where income was earned from their artist work or otherwise synthwave-ventures (see the following examples), on balance, comments show that there are a mix of artistic goals within the community, some of which are not economically focused.

Survey Anon: ‘[refers to streaming] I earn whatever the royalty payouts are ... and if someone decides to buy music from Bandcamp’.

Survey Anon: ‘I produce and release [music]... . I earn a very small income from affiliate marketing and music sales (Bandcamp etc)’.

Survey Anon: ‘I make a little bit of money from selling physical copies e.g. tapes/CDS’.

Survey Anon: ‘I am a SW [synthwave] musician. We gig/tour and record singles/albums. This forms a significant part of my annual income’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Q7 targeted how those who engage with synthwave do so offline, asking: ‘Do you engage with synthwave offline (or “in real life”)? If so, how?’ This graph totals more than 159 responses (the total number of respondents) because many respondents gave more than one answer to this question and all answers were accounted for ([Figure 1.31](#)).

The most common response involved respondents having attended a live synthwave show:

Survey Anon: ‘I’ve been to a LeBrock gig in Newcastle upon Tyne’.

Survey Anon: ‘I’ve been [to a] Kavinsky concert in Istanbul, Turkiye’.

Survey Anon: ‘I live for the music, [I’ve] seen Timecop1983 twice, The Midnight twice, NINA, Bunny X’.

Survey Anon: ‘I have attended some live gigs for bands such as LeBrock, Droid Bishop and Magic Sword’.

Survey Anon: ‘I have been to see Dana Jean Phoenix [live in concert]’
(Survey Anons, November 2023).

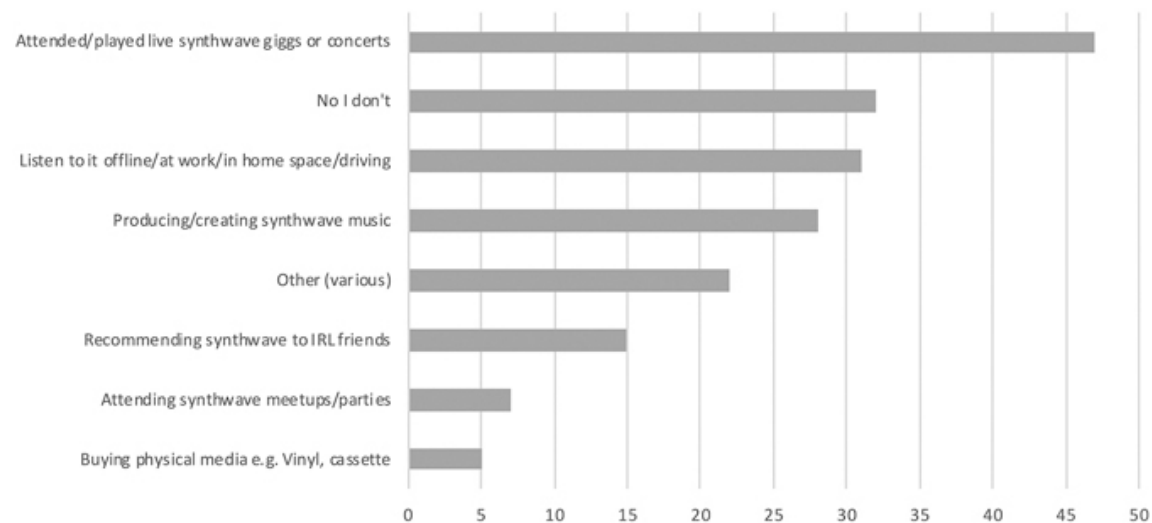


FIGURE 1.31 A graph representation of the responses to Q7: ‘Do you engage with synthwave offline (or “in real life”)? If so, how?’ (Synthwave Survey November 2023). [↗](#)

The second highest response was not having engaged with synthwave offline, with reasons named such as geographical barriers, time constraints,

availability of synthwave artist concerts in that area or commonality of other synthwave fans in the area:

Survey Anon: ‘Not enough time for me to do so’.

Survey Anon: ‘Not much in real life ... synthwave is not so popular ... in my country Greece’.

Survey Anon: ‘Sadly there are no shows or clubs playing synthwave where I live’.

Survey Anon: ‘Pre-pandemic there used to be quite a lively synthwave scene in Helsinki, Finland ... but after lockdown it never revived’.

Survey Anon: ‘I couldn’t find any synthwave parties in Israel’.

Survey Anon: ‘Unfortunately, concerts are few and far between considering I live in Norway’.

Survey Anon: ‘There aren’t many [people] that know what synthwave is and the people I know online live in other countries’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

A further discussion of live synthwave shows is detailed in [Chapter 5](#). Aside from live concerts or gigs, several respondents spoke of synthwave ‘parties’, ‘meetups’ or ‘festivals’:

Survey Anon: ‘I did go to a few synthwave parties, most notably the first Retro Synth Fury in Paris in 2017’.

Survey Anon: ‘There’s a synthfam that formed and all try to meet up at the synthwave events or gigs around the country (Hotline, Neon Rush, Outrun)’.

Survey Anon: ‘I organised synthwave parties in Brussels’.

Survey Anon: ‘[I went to a] synthwave gathering in 2016. Human Music 2. Nightwav NYC. NEON RetroFest 2018’.

Survey Anon: ‘I co-run ... one of the only surviving synthwave event concepts in Belgium, Outrun Antwerp’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

I was able to find further information about these events through community resources online, which gave details of synthwave artists who performed, and synthwave organisations who supported funding or organizing the events, etc. For example, though it was unspecified which Retro Synth Fury event was attended by the survey responder, one event by this name included Retro Synth Fury – The Last Race (2017) (which had performances by Timecop1983, VHS Dreams and others). According to event posters online, the event promoter was Batofar, with further organization by *Lazerdisc Records* (<http://lazerdiscs.com/>) and *Drive Radio* (<https://driveradio.be/>) (plus several others – see event information: <https://ra.co/events/1031704>). Hotline Bristol Deluxe was the first of two Hotline Bristol events, the first having taken place in June 2022. Their Facebook event gave a description: ‘*Space Jams* and *Steel City Collective* team up to bring you a fresh gathering of synthwave splendour to kick off the summer of 2022’ (Facebook, 2022). Artists who played included Waveshaper, W O L F C L U B, Future Human Evolution, Beckett, Brandon, Iversen, Young Empress and Paradise Walk. Hotline Bristol Part Deux took place in June 2024, described in the Facebook event as: ‘A *Space Jams* and *SCC [Steel City Collective]* event, sponsored by Excel Inspection Solutions Ltd. We return to the acclaimed Exchange venue for an all-day summer splendour of synthwave superstars’ (Facebook, 2024). Artists playing included: NINA, Radiowolf, Robert Parker, W O L F C L U B, Dana Jean Phoenix, [Taurus 1984](#), Aeronexus, Pensacola Mist. I attended this event and report my experience and findings of it in [Chapter 6](#) as a case study of synthwave events. Neon Rush was an all-day live music event which took place in Preston, UK in 2021, with performances from several artists including Beckett and Aeronexus. Outrun Antwerp took place in April 2017 and included performances by: Devereaux 85, Absolute Valentine, Discoballistic (amongst others). Human Music 2 (2018) is described on its Facebook event page as: ‘The annual Human Music festival is a radical retro synthwave event-infused with laser grids, neon lights, darksynth, synthpop, dreamwave, outrun, and more!’ Artists who performed included: Glitbiter, Korine, The Encounter, Protector 101,

Betamaxx, Timecop1983, FM Attack, Shredder 1984, Tokyo Rose, Arcade High, Makeup and Vanity Set (amongst others). Andrew Zistler, a music editor and web producer who has worked (freelance) for *NewRetroWave* reported on the event, quoting journalist Vehlinggo's reflections of the event: 'Human Music 2 was a truly special event for those in the scene. Personally, it was great to see old friends, meet new ones, and meet those in person – finally' (Zistler, 2018). Though unspecified by the survey responder ('Nightwav NYC'), it is likely that they are referring to events held by NIGHT.Wav, an organiser of 'Darksynth/Synthwave/Future Funk/Retrowave Parties' (stated on their Facebook page). There was a NIGHT.Wav after-party following the Human Music 2 event ([Vehling, 2018](#)). Finally, NEON RetroFest was an event held in 2018 in Rhode Island, US. Artists who performed included: Robert Parker, Waveshaper, Dana Jean Phoenix, Protector 101, Absolute Valentine, Glitch Black, Mecha Maiko. Vehlinggo reported on the event with his article ([Vehling, 2018](#)). A further discussion of synthwave events, parties and festivals is included as part of [Chapter 6](#).

In reference to how members engage with synthwave offline, many responses referred to either creating or producing synthwave, or being in a synthwave group or band. Equally, many respondents described listening to synthwave as part of their daily life, whether in the background at work, when driving or in personal spaces such as homes. Many considered recommending synthwave to 'IRL [in real life]' friends as engaging with synthwave offline. Others spoke of buying physical media, decorating their personal spaces in a synthwave style, or buying clothes of a synthwave style as engaging with synthwave offline:

Survey Anon: 'I have bought hard copies of albums [such as] CDs and Vinyl records'.

Survey Anon: 'I've decorated my studio in [the] synthwave ... style with pink and blue neon lights'.

Survey Anon: 'I've framed and hung [synthwave art] in my house'.

Survey Anon: 'My last birthday was synthwave themed'.

Survey Anon: ‘I’ve always loved vintage style neon designs in fashion ... my fashion sense is a blend of late [19]80s early [19]90s’.

Survey Anon: ‘[I seek] out thrift store clothes and fashion items with synthwave or late [19]80s early [19]90s vibe’.

Survey Anon: ‘I’d like to make a tattoo on my arm with [the] *Atlas* cover from FM-84’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

In response to Q10: ‘What do you believe are important parts of Synthwave’s identity and culture?’ my survey showed:

This graph totals more than 159 responses (the total number of respondents) because many respondents gave more than one answer to this question and all answers were accounted for. The most common response about synthwave’s culture was the 1980s decade. Many of these responses simply listed the 1980s as a decade with no further specific qualifications ([Figure 1.32](#)).

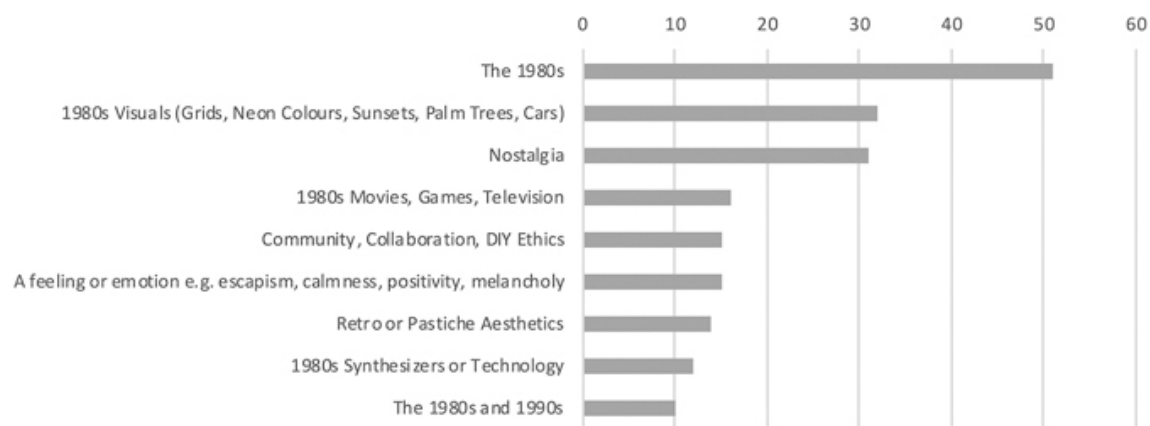


FIGURE 1.32 A graph representation of the responses to Q10: ‘What do you believe are important parts of synthwave’s identity and culture?’ (Synthwave Survey November 2023). [↗](#)

Survey Anon: ‘[It] wouldn’t be synthwave without its link to the 1980s pop culture’.

Survey Anon: ‘[Synthwave is] keeping alive the incredible zeitgeist from the 1980s’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Some respondents were more specific of the 1980s and named 1980s movies, games or television as integral to synthwave culture:

Survey Anon: ‘[19]80s movies, video games, music’.

Survey Anon: ‘Appreciation of [19]80s cultural themes, movies, music’.

Survey Anon: ‘[19]80s sci-fi and horror movies, [19]80s video games, [19]80s synthpop’.

Survey Anon: ‘Homage and references to 1980s synth-driven soundtracks, instrumentals, art, media, and pop culture’.

Survey Anon: ‘There are definitely links with the metal, horror, and film buff subcultures’.

Survey Anon: ‘When I think of synthwave I think of John Carpenter’s movies, [and] I think of ... *Miami Vice* [1984]’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Specific examples of the aforementioned included the work of film composer and director John Carpenter, film director John Hughes, *Blade Runner* (1982), the *Terminator* (1984) films, and television series *Miami Vice* (1984). The second most common response to this question was also 1980s-related, but specifically of visuals. These visuals are evident across media and materials associated with the 1980s e.g. movie and television posters, movie and television series locations (both geographic and temporal) and their narratives etc. The responses to this question were very similar to that of Survey 1 (September 2019 – theme one).

Survey Anon: ‘Sunsets and palm trees’.

Survey Anon: ‘Miami and palm trees and Lamborghinis and laser-grids’.

Survey Anon: ‘Cars, night drive, sunset drive ... sunset in Miami’.

Survey Anon: ‘The culture is uniquely represented by nighttime cityscapes and neon’.

Survey Anon: ‘[...] like seeing a skull on an album cover and the instant association with metal, a neon sun is that for synthwave’.

Survey Anon: ‘Pink/purple/blue neon’.

Survey Anon: ‘Neon, Miami, DeLorean and Lamborghini cars and night driving’.

Survey Anon: ‘The synthwave sun’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Named cars and the idea of driving through a neon-lit city at night are themes present in the named film and television series, e.g. *Blade Runner* (1982), the *Terminator* (1984) films, *Miami Vice* (1984) television series. Nostalgia was commonly noted as important to synthwave culture, with an emphasis on the fact that synthwave nostalgia is ‘reflective’ rather than ‘restorative’ ([Boym, 2001](#)):

Survey Anon: ‘Synthwave for the most part doesn’t even try to be authentic in creating songs that are truly reflective of the 1980s ... [it] mainly just takes the essence of the [19]80s sound to create that nostalgic feeling’.

Survey Anon: ‘This nostalgia is driven by concepts from a period before I was born... . Synthwave music gives a specific idealized sense of the time period [from which] it draws ... influence’.

Survey Anons: ‘[Synthwave is] creating a new universe of collective imagination’, ‘Nostalgia for the popular culture of the 1980s’.

Survey Anon: ‘Those within the scene are aware that it is not a genuine desire to evoke the ‘actually existing’ 1980s. Rather, it’s about an imagined vision ... a pleasurable nostalgia for a time that never was’.

Survey Anon: ‘[Synthwave is] nostalgia and yearning for a certain innocence of the 1980s. It never actually existed, but we’re all trying to find each other in the same fantasy’.

Survey Anon: ‘Having been a teenager in the real [19]80’s it’s of course quite heavily romanticized’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Many described synthwave’s effects as not only nostalgic, but in reference to a number of other feelings, moods or emotions, such as optimism and escapism:

Survey Anons: ‘The key aspect would be the feeling that it gives you’, ‘how it makes you feel’.

Survey Anons: ‘[Synthwave] provides escapism’, [it is] ‘a form of escapism’.

Survey Anon: ‘the ability to draw on the past through synthwave enables an escape from this reality with nostalgia for ‘simpler times’.

Survey Anons: ‘[Synthwave has] a bittersweet emotional resonance with nostalgia’ [as well as evoking] ‘Naivety, hope, nostalgia, melancholy, introspection’.

Survey Anon: ‘Synthwave, to me, recalls the optimism that I remembered in the 1980s. Technological progress was exciting and would lead to a better world, the future seemed brighter ... I know the 1980s weren’t perfect from an economic and social justice perspective, but we’ve lost something as a society since then – perhaps a shared vision that the future will be better... . Synthwave reminds me of that earlier optimism’.

Survey Anons: ‘Synthwave is uplifting and thought-provoking’, ‘it can be very introspective’, ‘telling a story/conveying emotion, every amazing synthwave track has told a story or incites feelings’.

Survey Anons: ‘Synthwave is not just music ... it’s an energy!’ ‘Synthwave helps mental health’. (Survey Anons, November 2023)

Several comments alluded to technological dystopia or a resistance against 21st century technology in their discussion of synthwave’s escapism and ability to evoke optimism:

Survey Anon: ‘echnological dystopia has certainly become our reality with the way social media dominates our lives’.

Survey Anon: ‘People want respite from the perils of modern society, and with synthwave they can be transported back to a time before social media and before they were adults with adult responsibilities. A time when ... the internet was right around the corner, and a time when people were optimistic of the future’.

Survey Anon: '[Synthwave] nostalgia [encompasses] a desire to return to a more innocent, pre-digital age'.

Survey Anon: 'Nowadays the world feels broken, hopeless ... synthwave tries to ... recharge the listeners' batteries' (Survey Anons, November 2023).

These remarks support previous comments from Survey 1 (reported in Theme two) that nostalgia can support well-being: 'Nostalgia conveys wellbeing benefits to individuals' ([Sedikides and Wildschut, 2018](#), p. 55). Another key finding from this question was how survey respondents spoke of synthwave's culture with reference to community, collaboration and DIY ethics, and particularly of synthwave's welcoming and inclusive environment. Related to collaboration and DIY, several comments spoke of creativity, artful expression and synthwave's musically inspirational qualities.

Survey Anon: 'I think synthwave's identity stems from its community'.

Survey Anon: 'It is a wonderful way to bring people together, and it is a wonderful community overall'.

Survey Anon: '[...] if you enjoy the style ... people will give you their time ... I had many opportunities through the synthwave scene that wouldn't exist in other music scenes'.

Survey Anon: '[There is] mutual respect for diverse backgrounds and sounds [and] acceptance ... the culture really is international'.

Survey Anons: '[It has a] DIY ethic', 'A very important part of synthwave culture is DIY – most producers are “bedroom producers” who are working with little more than their creative drive', '[Synthwave is] DIY (similar to the punk scene)', 'the culture [lies] in innovation'.

Survey Anon: '[Synthwave] has all the tools ... [to] push our boundaries of creativity'.

Survey Anon: 'It helped reinvigorate my passion for music making'.

Survey Anon: music making. Without synthwave, I don't think I would be where I am today, creatively speaking'.

Survey Anons: ‘It helped me to become inspired and to create my own compositions’, ‘I don’t care if anyone hears my work, I love the process of making it’.

Survey Anon: ‘Synthwave has been a source of endless inspiration and has been instrumental in my becoming excited again about new music’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

A number of comments referred to synthwave as ‘retro’ (Survey Anons, November 2023). Popular music scholar Reynolds affirmed that ‘retro’ refers to a ‘self-conscious fetish for period stylisation (in music, clothes, design) expressed creatively through pastiche and citation’ (Reynolds, 2012, p. 8). Further comments about synthwave culture spoke of stylistic traits of the genre (which are detailed in [Chapter 2](#)), with comments including ‘use of synths and synth culture’, and ‘musically, old drum machines and synths’ (Survey Anons, November 2023). Finally, some comments noted that synthwave is not considered exclusive to the 1980s: ‘The retro aesthetics from [the] 1980s ... but not exclusively’, ‘nostalgia for the 1980s and early 1990s’, ‘homage to 1980s/early 1990s themes’, ‘a genuine love of the [19]80s and [19]90s and a faithfulness to the aesthetic’ (Survey Anons, November 2023). Some of these comments refer to the progression of synthwave’s stylistic parameters, discussed for example of chillsynth in [Chapter 1](#).

Finally, I present comments given in response to Q12: ‘In what ways, if any, do you believe synthwave has changed or progressed since 2016?’ This year was chosen due to it being the year *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) was released, which I believe is a significant milestone in synthwave’s history following the release of *Drive* (2011). 2016 can also be considered nearly a decade after synthwave’s initial beginnings in what later became an established genre ([Figure 1.33](#)).

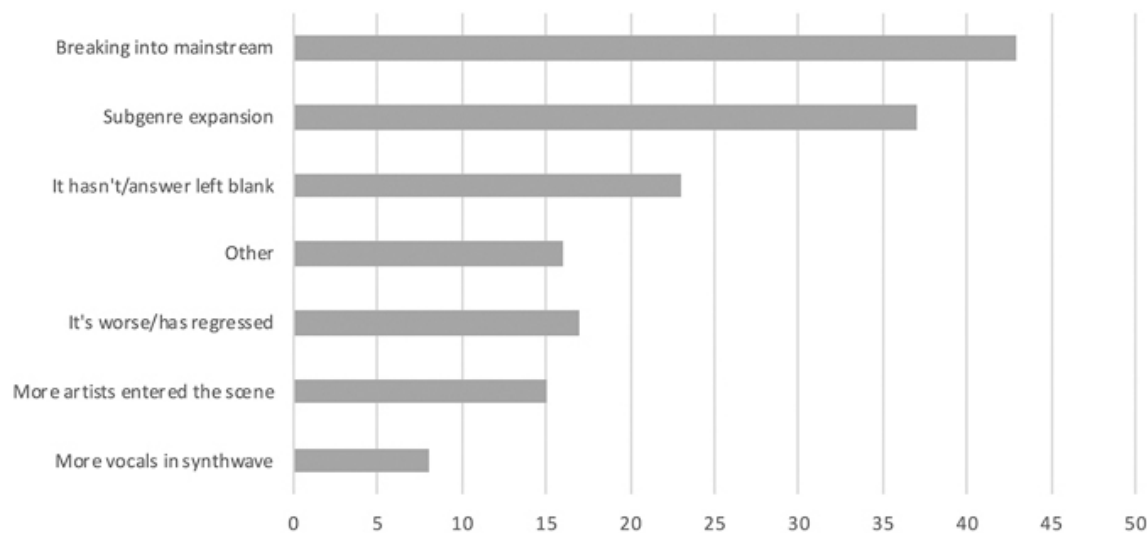


FIGURE 1.33 A graph representation of the responses to Q12: ‘In what ways, if any do you believe synthwave has changed or progressed since 2016?’ (Synthwave Survey November 2023). [↗](#)

The most common response to this question was synthwave’s recognition in more mainstream spaces, which respondents mainly attested to synthwave music as soundtrack music to popular forms of media e.g. television shows, or Top 40 artists emulating the synthwave sound:

Survey Anon: ‘[It is] more commercially and culturally accessible. Used more in programmes’.

Survey Anons: ‘it has clearly crept its way into mainstream charts’, ‘I believe the Weekend’s “Blinding Lights” had a lot to do with it’.

Survey Anon: ‘Synthwave has progressed towards modern pop music, perhaps most visible in The Weeknd’s collaboration with Kavinsky “Odd Look”’.

Survey Anon: ‘It has become more popular. If you think of ‘Blinding Lights’ or ‘Save Your Tears’ by The Weekend, or ‘Physical’ by Dua Lipa, you can clearly see that even popular artists incorporate the genre in their music’.

Survey Anon: ‘2016 [is the year that] *Stranger Things* premiered and the genre grew to include a much bigger audience’.

Survey Anon: ‘It has ... gained mainstream visibility. The soundtrack to *Stranger Things* is a huge one [example]’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Whilst Dua Lipa has no known ties to the synthwave community, it seems that The Weeknd’s collaboration with Kavinsky affords him a perceived legitimate affiliation with synthwave. Equally, all songs named in the comments do contain some style parameters of synthwave, which explains why survey respondents highlighted their significance.

The second most popular response to this question was subgenre expansion. As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), outrun is earliest in the lineage of synthwave subgenres, with example expansions to the genre of vocal synthwave and darksynth in the 2010s, and chillsynth in the 2020s. Comments generally noted the stylistic diversity that synthwave encompasses now, as opposed to earlier points in the genre’s history (i.e. late 2000s and early 2010s).

Survey Anon: ‘Synthwave has so many subgenres [now]’.

Survey Anon: ‘Many artists branched out to subgenres like darksynth, cyberpunk, chillwave, futuresynth’.

Survey Anon: ‘The outrun style movement has diminished a bit’.

Survey Anon: ‘It seems to me that both heavier and softer subgenres like darksynth and cyberpunk, chillwave and dreamwave, have overtaken the traditional retrowave/outrun sound’.

Survey Anon: ‘I think there’s been a growing diversification of subgenres ... more people with diverse tastes, entering the scene’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Many offered their thoughts on the expansion of stylistic parameters through different subgenres of synthwave:

Survey Anon: ‘I think artists are expanding the boundaries of synthwave in wonderful ways to broaden the overall style and sound’.

Survey Anon: ‘It’s great to see so many SW [synthwave] artists pushing those boundaries and keeping it fresh, but still rooted in those original ideas’.

Survey Anon: ‘Many artists have deviated from the core sound and I honestly think it’s cool’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Some respondents specified more artists entering the scene as a change they had observed, with a mix of thoughts and feelings presented about this. Some felt neutrally or positively about new artists engaging with synthwave:

Survey Anon: ‘From about 2016 through to 2019 [there was a] massive influx of artists’.

Survey Anon: ‘[There are] a lot more artists in this space now. The envelope is pushing beyond typical sound[s] into new subgenres, this is exciting’.

Survey Anon: ‘The market is much more open now and there are so many more up-and-comers than old war dogs out there who are pushing the genre forward’.

Survey Anon: ‘We’ve seen revolutionary new bands and musicians producing tracks that have new sounds and more diversity in terms of sound’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Others were less enthusiastic and felt that new artists have caused a sense of style homogenisation or saturation within synthwave, which they consider regressive to the genre:

Survey Anon: ‘[Since 2016 synthwave has gotten] a little flooded with bad/poor quality artists and many of the bigger artists that frequented the scene have stepped back’.

Survey Anon: ‘Pre-2016 synthwave emulated the [19]80s the best. After 2016 the genre became flooded with new artists all building off of one another’.

Survey Anon: ‘Many artists have discovered it ... this has caused a saturation of poor quality music in the scene’.

Survey Anon: ‘There are way more artists now, mostly bad, in my opinion’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Linked to comments like this are the more general comments which expressed they had observed a negative change or progression in synthwave since 2016. Reasons given ranged from a lack of genre innovation, the perceived (in)authenticity of newcomers, and a perceived low bar to entry.

Survey Anon: ‘There are lots of copycats, and it seems like the genre is pretty stale now’.

Survey Anon: ‘People do not innovate enough, that is why the scene is dying’.

Survey Anon: ‘It has regressed. Despite its growth in popularity, I truly believe it had a peak period ... 2011 to 2018. Many of the great synthwave producers from that era are still active but a lot have ... just stopped making synthwave’.

Survey Anon: ‘It has all gone downhill. Anyone who [owns] a keyboard is now a synthwave artist’.

Survey Anon: ‘Synthwave vultures ... the barrier to entry is low’.

Survey Anon: ‘People who label themselves synthwave ... are just bandwagon jumping’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

One particular change noted to synthwave was that of vocals being added, given that synthwave was originally predominantly instrumental:

Survey Anon: ‘It’s become more of an actual ‘song’ genre instead of music for movies and films’.

Survey Anon: ‘[There are] more ‘pop’ sensibilities: more pop music structures, vocal and music hooks’.

Survey Anon: ‘The genre has opened up and embraced more lyricism and vocals’ (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Some respondents felt that synthwave hasn't changed or progressed, or left the answer blank. A group of responses were categorised as 'other', as responses were unclear in meaning or didn't address the question.

Responses given to Q13: 'Is there anything you would like to share about your experience and engagement with synthwave?' was designed to give survey respondents the space to speak about anything my questions didn't address. Responses were largely repetitive of what has already been reported through my analysis of questions 1–12, with themes noted such as community, nostalgia, positive feelings, synthwave going mainstream, DIY and creativity. Some comments noted that the COVID-19 lockdown had been their entry to synthwave, and there were also some heartwarming comments about how synthwave had had a profound effect on some respondents' lives.

Chapter 1 Conclusion

[Chapter 1](#) has outlined key early founders and contributors to the synthwave genre. It has noted significant subgenres, significant artists and detailed one significant film as subcultural capital of synthwave (*Drive* [2011]). The chapter included two analyses of two songs from the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack, ‘A Real Hero’ (2011) and ‘Nightcall’ (2011). I have also outlined further significant milestones in synthwave history, particularly those that are post-*Drive* (2011). These included the *Stranger Things* television series (2016–2025) and *The Rise of the Synths* (2019) synthwave documentary. This chapter has also revealed key synthwave values and aspects of synthwave subcultural capital through two sets of survey data, from September 2019 and November 2023. Specifically, the survey revealed primary methods by which community members have discovered synthwave, how they engage with it online and offline, how they believe it has progressed or changed since 2016 and what they believe are core components of the genre’s identity. This chapter did not report on Q11: ‘What sounds or musical parts would you expect to hear in a synthwave track?’ since the next chapter focuses on style parameters and creative processes of synthwave, and hence reports on the responses to this question there instead.

Notes

1. Named as such here to distinguish it from the original 1970s genre Italo disco. Italo disco synthwave is a 2010s reimagining of 1970s Italo disco. [↗](#)
2. I acknowledge here the late 1980s genre darkwave (associated with new wave, post-punk and goth rock), which does have musical relevance to synthwave particularly in terms of synthesizers. The term darkwave is also used by community members to abbreviate dark synthwave or darksynth – or used interchangeably with these terms. [↗](#)

3. Access *Synthetix.FM* here:
<<http://synthetixmusic.blogspot.com/2018/01/the-end-of-synthetixfm.html>>. ↵
4. Access *Playmaker* here:
<<https://playmakersplayground.blogspot.com>> [Accessed April 2025].
↵
5. Andy Last's website can be accessed at
<<https://www.beyondsynth.com/>> [Accessed April 2025]. ↵
6. Link to my website:
<<https://jessicablaiseaward.wixsite.com/blaiserunner/phd-research-information-1>>. ↵
7. Timecodes on this diagram indicate where parts are heard clearly in the track. ↵
8. 'Scoring *Stranger Things*' Available from:
<<https://www.soundonsound.com/techniques/scoring-stranger-things>>
[Accessed April 2025]. ↵
9. Teaser trailer available from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCYAjkWZcd0>> (*The Rise of the Synths*, 2016). ↵
10. Image available from: <<https://4kwallpapers.com/sci-fi/retrowave-synthwave-vaporwave-digital-art-neon-art-purple-5592.html>>
[Accessed January 2025]. ↵
11. Facebook groups targeted different nationalities of people specifically.
↵

2

MAKING SYNTHWAVE MUSIC WITH MUSIC TECHNOLOGY

DOI: [10.4324/9781003448075-3](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003448075-3)

In this second chapter I illustrate synthwave creative processes and indicate style parameters which attract the label of synthwave by the online community. In doing so I highlight how the online synthwave community engages with synths and music technology to formulate its musical style, as well as convey its relationship to, and aesthetics of, the 1980s decade (as well as other relevant decades, but with a focus on this decade). This is shown through virtual ethnography data, survey data (November 2023), artist interview data and one case study discussion of ‘The Comeback Kid’ (2016) by The Midnight. The research in this chapter was underpinned by listening to many synthwave songs (of which indicative works are named) and I utilise Samantha Bennett’s tech-processual methodology as part of my analysis. I support Bennett’s view that ‘the impact of sound and music technologies on popular music recordings cannot be illuminated via musical descriptors alone’ ([Bennett, 2018](#), p. 133), and as such make reference to her ‘four cornerstones of record production study’ in my analysis of synthwave works: ‘the recording and production workplace ... sound recording and production technology, sound recordists, processes and techniques’ ([Bennett, 2018](#)). Bennett suggested ‘sound recordist’ in her

discussion of the diversification of the recording and production role since the 1950s – with tape op, artist-producer, recordist, auteur, and several others discussed ([Bennett, 2018](#), p. 96). The present text opts for ‘creators’ in place of any one sound recordist role, to account for the diverse range of individuals in the synthwave community (e.g. producer, songwriter, performer, DJ, etc.). As part of her tech-processual methodology, Bennett asked: ‘Are they [the sound recordist] aligned with a particular musical genre, form or aesthetic?’ For my purposes, the musical genre in question is synthwave, and ‘they’ refers to named synthwave artists.

My analysis was informed by findings from my virtual ethnography and my positionality as participant observer, for example my having engaged with community resources such as synthwave subreddits, synthwave YouTube tutorials and synthwave Facebook groups. In my assessments, I debate some of the negotiations present in the synthwave creative process, reflecting also on some of my own audio experiments and compositions.¹ I begin the chapter by providing a brief overview of sound recording and production technologies significant to synthwave (both hardware and software), particularly of performative and compositional instruments and virtual subtractive synthesis (2.1). I next establish key synthwave style parameters based on my own tech-processual ([Bennett, 2018](#)) analysis of various synthwave songs: triangulating data from my virtual ethnography, online survey (November 2023), artist interviews and participant observer audio experiments (2.2). I conclude my discussion of synthwave style parameters by presenting an analysis of ‘The Comeback Kid’ (2016) by The Midnight, a highly revered artist within the community and who is often described in reference to synthwave by community members (2.3). I conclude my findings by highlighting key considerations in the synthwave creative process.

2.1 Synthwave and Synthesis: Making It Sound Like the 1980s (and Neighbouring Decades)

Style parameter choices of synthwave are an important way in which the community convey their group identity, and they function as the genre's sonic markers. One of the most significant ways in which sonic markers are recognised is through creators' privileging of synthesizer and music technologies (e.g. drum machines) from the 1980s decade. It should be noted that whilst the 1980s decade is central to the synthwave community, their focus on synths, samplers and drum machines from this era extends to music technology from the 1970s (e.g. the Minimoog or the ARP Odyssey) and the 1990s (e.g. the KORG M1, manufactured 1988–1995) due to these items' legacy status within the synth domain and synthesizer history overall. Equally, where in previous decades (i.e. the 2000s and 2010s) synthwave perhaps made itself more exclusive to the 1980s, since the 2020s, community members are less stringent of this. This is linked to synthwave's affiliations with nostalgia, where sound timbres of synthesized instruments from past decades (mostly the 1980s, with an account for the 1970s and 1990s) are significant to synthwave's musical recognition. Synthwave creators use a combination of hardware and software synthesizers to achieve these timbres, though generally, virtual synthesizer plugins are more accessible. Such plugins house both timbral and skeuomorphic emulations of the original hardware counterparts and allow creators to reimagine music made with 'retro' ([Reynolds, 2012](#)) synths.

Virtual synths used in the synthwave creative process range from free (instantly downloadable to your computer) to affordable (two figures) to higher in cost (three figures or more), an example of the latter being the Arturia library of synthesizers (599 euros from the official Arturia website [January 2025]).² Arturia is highly recommended by the community, though recognised as a high-cost investment. Notwithstanding that some creators have original or contemporary synthesizer hardware, it is common for creators within the community to utilise software libraries or plugins to make synthwave. Original 1970s and 1980s hardware in particular have many challenges in terms of cost, availability, physical storage and maintenance, plus the need for converters if a synth is pre-MIDI (e.g. using CV/Gate). Creators also use hardware which is more contemporary and not

necessarily based on a legacy synth, such as those I identified through my virtual ethnography of several synthwave Facebook groups:

- The KORG Volca Keys (released in 2013) (£129)
- The KORG Monologue (released in 2017) (£269)
- The microKORG (released in 2002) (£389)
- The KORG Minilogue (released in 2016) (£429)
- Novation's MiniNova (released in 2012) (£429)
- Novation's Bass Station II (released in 2013, a reworking of the original Bass Station [1993]) (£449.99)
- Arturia's MicroBrute (released in 2014) (£259 [PMT Online])
- The Behringer Odyssey (released in 2019) (£449 [Andertons Music Co]).³

The KORG Minilogue was a clear favourite as a starter synth, for its accessibility and immediate building of sounds. It is a very tactile synth with a relatively straightforward emulation of subtractive synthesis. Facebook groups I observed also discussed synths of a higher price range, including the Behringer Deep Mind 12D (released in 2017) (\$549.00) and the Roland's Alpha Juno-2 (released in 1985) (circa £800 [[Reverb.com](https://www.reverb.com)]). Artists I interviewed for this book named some of their favourite pieces of hardware, including ones they owned or had access to. Many in fact owned original 1970s, 1980s or 1990s synthesizers, or contemporary reissues of such synthesizers. Popular choices included synths by KORG, Roland, Sequential, Yamaha and Oberheim, amongst others:



FIGURE 2.1 Moonrunner83's custom-designed Moon Studio v2.1 nestled beside the Rocky Mountains in Calgary, Canada. [↗](#)

Glitbiter: 'Hardware-wise, the one "vintage synth" I own is a Yamaha DX7' ([Glitbiter, 2024](#)).

2Morbid: 'I have two hardware synths, Behringer Deep Mind 12 and a real Yamaha DX7 from the early [19]80s' ([2Morbid, 2024](#)).

FM Attack: 'My favourites to use are the Prophet-5, Roland Jupiter-8 and Juno-60, and LinnDrum/Oberheim DX drum machines' ([FM Attack, 2024](#)).

Absolute Valentine: 'My journey began as a Roland enthusiast, but I've since embraced Behringer's reissues of classic analog gear, such as The Crave [a Prophet-5 emulator]' ([Absolute Valentine, 2024](#)).

Moonrunner83: 'Roland Juno-60, Roland JX-3P, KORG Micro X, KORG X50, Oberheim Matrix 1000, Sequential Circuits Prophet Rev2' ([Moonrunner83, 2024](#), [Figure 2.1](#)).

Scandroid: ‘I LOVE hardware... . Synthesizers ranging from classics like the Oberheim OB-Xa, Juno-60, Juno-106 and KORG Mono/Poly ... I distinctly remember using my Roland Juno-106 for many of the synths on “Neo-Tokyo” [2016]’ ([Scandroid, 2024](#)).

[Miami Nights 1984](#): ‘There’s the Model D, there’s the knockoff Mono/Poly, Prophet-6, the custom Miami Nights edition of the Kiwi-106, which is probably my most used synth, [there’s] the Juno-60’ ([Miami Nights 1984, 2024](#)).

2Libras: ‘KORG hardware synthesizers’ ([2Libras, 2024](#)).

Pensacola Mist: ‘Hardware ... KORG Minilogue’ ([Pensacola Mist, 2024](#)).

NINA: ‘I have a KORG MS-20 and a KORG Minilogue’ ([NINA, 2024](#)).

Betamaxx: ‘In the early days of this project ... Roland Juno-60 and Juno-106 hardware synthesizers’ ([Betamaxx, 2024](#)).

Neon: ‘I started creating synthwave using KORG Synths. [I also have] a Volca Bass and then during lockdown I acquired a MicroKORG’ ([Neon, 2024](#)).

LAU aka Laura Fares: ‘Roland Gaia synth, Roland SPD-SX drum pad, KORG Monologue synth’ ([LAU aka Laura Fares, 2023](#)).

FM-84: ‘My favourite hardware synth is the Ensoniq SD-1, which is an early 1990s workstation synthesiser. It doesn’t feature on *Atlas* [2016], but it’s where it all started for me. I learned to write and produce music on it when I was at school. Michael Oakley recently managed to [find me a mint condition one that was being sold] in Canada’ ([FM-84, 2025](#)).

Rogue FX: ‘My first tracks as Rogue FX used almost exclusively hardware synths – specifically a Roland JD-XI’ ([Rogue FX, 2023](#)).

Whether hardware or software, there is evidence of gear acquisition syndrome (GAS) within community discussions, for example of acquiring ‘genre-specific gear’ ([Herbst and Menze, 2021](#), p. 28) which both identifies with synthwave and supports creators’ player identities (p. 17). This is particularly notable of ‘audio plugins’ (p. 6) and the musical practice of sound design ([Herbst and Menze, 2021](#), p. 59). With plugins, synthwave is

commonly created through virtual analog subtractive synthesis, alongside wavetable and FM synthesis. Subtractive synthesis is the process by which harmonically rich sounds (such as saw or square waves) are filtered to alter their tone. The Arturia collection facilitates this, including synths such as the Mini V (modelled on the original Minimoog [1970], which had voltage-controlled oscillators) and the Jun-6V (modelled on the Juno-6 [1982], which had digitally controlled oscillators). FM (frequency modulation) synthesis involves an oscillator's pitch being modulated by another oscillator. These are referred to as the modulator and the carrier, with a key component of FM synthesis being that oscillators interact with each other. Examples include the Dexed plugin, which emulates the DX7 (1983), and the Vector Pro 22 plugin, which emulates the Yamaha SY22 (1990). Wavetable synthesis involves capturing a single cycle of a waveform and reproducing it as the basis for a sound. Wavetable synths allow you to import your own audio files into a wavetable, enabling you to create complex sound timbres through morphing, blending and transitioning waveforms. Massive X (Native Instruments) and Serum (Xfer Records) are examples of wavetable synths.

A DAW is required for synthesis, and common choices of DAW by the community include FL Studio, Ableton Live, Logic Pro X, Reaper, Cubase, Studio One and ProTools. Artists I interviewed for this book spoke of their DAWs of choice, with popular choices being:

- Logic Pro ([Anniee, 2024](#); [Arcade High, 2024](#); [Dana Jean Phoenix, 2024](#); [JJ Mist, 2023](#); [MicroMatscenes, 2023](#); [ELYXIR 2023](#); [Lazermortis, 2023](#))
- Ableton Live ([Bart Graft, 2023](#); [Abigail Gordon of Bunny X, 2023](#); [Color Theory, 2023](#); [Meteor, 2024](#); [Starcadian, 2024](#))
- FL Studios ([exandroid, 2021](#); [Diamond Ace, 2024](#); [Gregorio Franco, 2023](#); [GosT, 2024](#))
- Cubase ([CyberFlower, 2023](#); [D/A/D, 2023](#); [Violet Fears, 2024](#); [Jolie, 2023](#))
- ProTools ([Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2024](#))

- Reason ([Michael Oakley, 2023](#); [Powernerd, 2024](#); [Niser, 2024](#))

With a DAW, synthwave creators can operate virtual synthesizers, of which popular choices by the online community include:

- Serum (Xfer Records)
- Vital (Matt Tytel)
- Sylenth1 (LennarDigital)
- Synth1 (Ichiro Toda)
- Tyrell N6 (U-he)
- Diva (U-he)
- ANA 1 and ANA 2 (Sonic Sounds)
- Massive X (Native Instruments)
- Spire (Reveal Sound)

Operating synthesis via virtual synths on DAWs is considered either an alternative to, or in addition to, buying plugin versions of legacy synths (such as those by Arturia) and purchasing hardware (which has its own challenges beyond financial). Virtual synths are a more affordable option in some cases, where reverse engineering the sound of, say, a KORG Polysix via Synth1 is more accessible than purchasing a plugin copy. This method does require knowledge of and experience with sound design and music production. Community members with a background in music production have dedicated time to creating supportive resources for less experienced members, placing these in video or written form on YouTube and Reddit. This is in addition to the ongoing dialogues (or general discussions) about synthwave creative processes which take place on Reddit threads, in Facebook Groups and on Discord. These places have the added feature of facilitating audio files, which enable creators to post their work to other community members for feedback or advice. Such community spaces are an excellent starting point for those wanting to make synthwave and streamlines the process from creation to dissemination.

2.1.1 Community Spaces and Resources: Making Synthwave Music

YouTube tutorials designed for improving knowledge of synthwave sound design are frequently for Serum (Xfer Records, \$189.00), a wavetable synthesizer, or Sylenth1 (LennarDigital, €139), a virtual analog synthesizer. Subtractive synthesis is a common style of synthesis used for synthwave and creators will often operate Serum (for example) in its basic waveform setting. Creators may refer in short to subtractive synthesis as VA (virtual analog). The price of the resources required to make synthwave (with a suitable computer, a DAW and even one virtual synth being the minimum) must be acknowledged here. Positively, this is something the community is aware of and as such recommended resources for creating synthwave are often listed separately as either free or paid. This refers not only to virtual synths but DAWs, legacy synth emulation plugins, drum plugins and more. There are also companies who have asked synthwave artists to make official synthwave tutorials for their platforms, such as Sonic Academy and their work with Timecop1983 (‘How To Make Synthwave Retrowave with [Timecop 1983](#) in FL Studio’ [[Sonic Academy, n.d.](#)]) and The Midnight (‘How to Make Synthwave with The Midnight’ [[Sonic Academy, n.d.](#)]). The tutorials can be accessed from Sonic Academy’s official website, ranging in price with monthly subscription access, or outright download costs of £29.95. Many synthwave creators will also, generally, share production tips on their social media accounts. Popular choices of virtual synths and samples used by the online synthwave community are listed:⁴

TABLE 2.1 Synthesizer and Drum Plugins.

<i>Free</i>	<i>At Cost</i>
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<i>Free</i>	<i>At Cost</i>
• Synth1 (Daichi Laboratory) • Vital (Vital Audio) • Mono/Fury (Full Bucket) • SQ8L (Siegfried Kullmann) • Dexed (Digital Surburban) • TyrellN6 (U-he) • PG8X (ML-VST) • OB-Xd (discoDSP) • Helm (Matt Tytel) • VK-1 (Blamsoft) • SuperWave P8 (SuperWave) • ZynAddSubFX (Paul Nasca) • VProm V2.0 (AlyJamesLab)	• Arturia's V Collection X (Prophet-5, Jupiter 8, etc) \$599 • KORG's Collection 4 (MS-20, Polysix, M1, TRITON etc) \$399 • Omnisphere (Spectrasonics) \$499 • Analog Lab (Arturia) \$199 • TAL-U-No-LX (TAL) \$69 • FM8 (Native Instruments) £89.00 • DCO-106 (Cherry Audio) \$29 • Diva (U-he) €179 • Hive 2 (U-he) €149 • Zebra Legacy (U-he) €99 • Dune 3 (Synapse Audio) €199 • Pigments (Arturia) \$199 • Oberheim OB-E (GForce Software) £149.99 • Oberheim SEM (GForce Software) £49.99 • Nexus 5 (reFX) £251 • All The Drums From Mars (Samples From Mars) \$89 • Splice (various subscription options) • Serum (Xfer Records) \$189.00 • Sylenth1 (LennarDigital) €139

Artists I interviewed spoke of their preferences for software synthesizers, with popular choices including Serum, Arturia, TAL, Omnisphere, U-he, amongst others.

Dana Jean Phoenix: ‘Synths from the KORG collection – ARP Odyssey, M1, and Polysix. I also love the TAL-U-No-LX’ ([Dana Jean Phoenix, 2024](#)).

D/A/D: ‘I use everything from the Arturia synth plugins, to the KORG legacy synths, Hive, Zebra and Serum’ ([D/A/D, 2023](#)).

Hearts in Beta: ‘TAL-U-No-LX, U-he Diva, Sylenth 1, Arturia Mini V, BM Vice’ ([Hearts in Beta, 2024](#)).

NINA: ‘My favourite software to use is mostly from Arturia, Universal Audio, Native Instruments, and Waves. I also love Freakshow Industries because they’re really innovative and playful’ ([NINA, 2024](#)).

Laura Dre: ‘Soundtoys, Universal Audio, Arturia’ ([Laura Dre, 2024](#)).

Lazermortis: ‘The Arturia V Collection’ ([Lazermortis, 2023](#)).

IRVING FORCE: ‘I used PX7 a lot, which is an emulation of the classic DX7 FM synthesizer’ ([IRVING FORCE, 2023](#)).

Occams Laser: ‘I am almost exclusively software based ... virtual instruments I use are made by Arturia and U-he ... Diva ... Prophet-5/Mini-V by Arturia’ ([Occams Laser, 2023](#)).

Von Kaiser: ‘The u-he Diva and Zebra (used on almost every record we’ve made) and the Spire synth’ ([Von Kaiser, 2024](#)).

Parallels: ‘Some of my favourite plugins are by Arturia, Roland, Spire and Synapse’ ([Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2024](#)).

Starcadian: ‘Analog Lab V, VocalSynth, Ozone, Addictive Drums 2’ ([Starcadian, 2024](#)).

Michael Oakley: ‘[My] mainstays [are] Spire ... Omnisphere ... VPS Avenger by Vengeance Sound ... Serum ...’ ([Michael Oakley, 2023](#)).

Megan McDuffee: ‘Spectrasonics Omnisphere’ ([Megan McDuffee, 2023](#)).

Jessie Frye: ‘[There is] a lot of Omnisphere on the record[s]’ ([Jessie Frye, 2024](#)).

Meteor: ‘My first two albums ... Sylenth, TAL-U-No-LX, Dexed, and other free synth plugins’ ([Meteor, 2024](#)).

Glitbiter: ‘Dune3, Diva, Obsession, Arturia’s CS-80 and Jup-8’ ([Glitbiter, 2024](#)).

JJ Mist: ‘Dexed (which is closely modelled on the Yamaha DX7)’ ([JJ Mist, 2023](#)).

Star Cassette: ‘Various plugins from UVI, U-he, Softube, Roland etc.’ ([Star Cassette, 2023](#)).

The Blue Book Project: ‘The Arturia V Collection’ ([The Blue Book Project, 2023](#)).

Vincenzo Salvia: ‘Arturia Analog Collection, U-he Diva, U-he Hive, U-he Zebra, and several [19]80s drum samples’ ([Vincenzo Salvia, 2023](#)).

Synthwave creators approach sound design to all degrees, i.e. they may design sounds with basic waveforms through virtual synthesizers, they may take virtual legacy synths as starting points for editing and creating their own sounds, or they may use synth presets. These options do not depend entirely on sound design ability and are general considerations for the synthwave creative process with relation to time, inspiration, experimentation, song aim and concept, etc. Many community members will save and share their patches (i.e. a virtual synth setting edited by them which they have saved as a custom preset). This is one example of how the community support each other and share resources, which has the additional benefit of allowing newcomers to engage with the creative process of synthwave without the barrier of sound design knowledge. It is community activity such as this which leads to creators being formally asked to create synthwave sound libraries by companies, with example libraries such as:

- Synthwave FLEX Library (free with a copy of FL Studio 20.5)
- Spire’s Retro Synthwave (Ancore Sounds €11.99)
- Massive X Synthwave (Native Instruments [available at Loopmasters] £16.95)
- Replica Serum Synthwave Presets (ModeAudio £14.95)
- Synthwave Sample Pack (Sonic Academy Sounds £34.95)
- 80s Synthwave opsix soundpack (KORG \$10.00)
- Synthwave Reflections (Resonance Sound €29.95)
- Synthwave Volume 1 Sylenth (Xenos Soundworks €10.45)
- Synth Wave (Creative Worship Sounds \$40.00)⁵

Michael Oakley confirmed that he had made resources for a synthwave sample library ('Retro Future' by Sample Magic), and that the terms of using such samples were considered royalty free. He receives a royalty payment for each sale of the product ([Michael Oakley, 2023](#)). He also offered his thoughts on the creative dilemmas of these sample packs, recalling one song's usage (which he recognised as containing his samples) which he felt was unoriginal: 'some people will just drag and drop things ... where's the originality?' ([Michael Oakley, 2023](#)). He referred me to an article he had written some years ago about synthwave 'borrowing', known as 'Synthwave and the Curious Case of "Copywave"' (Michael [Oakley, 2022](#)), which provides some food for thought, of synthwave's potential to musically stagnate or innovate.

Community resources also provide support with DAW-specific methods in creating musical parts for a synthwave arrangement. Ste Ingham and The Encounter (aka Nigel) are two community members who have been well-known for their synthwave tutorials. Ste Ingham created synthwave music tutorials in 2017, with his popular 'Synthwave Sessions' (including 'Writing Melodies' [[2017c](#)], 'Snare' [[2017b](#)], '80s Vocals' [[2017g](#)], 'Tom Fills' [[2017a](#)], 'Structure' [[2017d](#)]) and 'Synthwave Sounds' series. Both sets of tutorials exist on YouTube, with 20+ videos for 'Synthwave Sessions' and at least six videos for 'Synthwave Sounds'. Other 'Synthwave Sessions' videos include basic layering, transitions, basic EQ, using effects, movie vocals, templates/workflow and reverse reverb. The 'Writing Melodies' video presents an accessible method of chord and melody creation through the piano roll on FL Studio. Ingham consistently avoids names of chords (though does say major and minor on occasion), does not recognise semitones by this term (even when counting them) and only makes brief reference to suspended chords (preferring instead to call these 'dreamy' or 'synthwave' chords). He assures the watcher that you do not need 'musical experience' to make synthwave, and that his instructions will remain as 'simple as possible'. His pedagogical approach in the tutorials is purely through his DAW (which is shown fully as a screencast), and in the 'Writing Melodies' video, he demonstrates creating musical parts

purely through the piano roll on FL Studio. Instead of being focused on composition in a music theory sense, synthwave tutorials are generally DAW-focused or sound design/synthesis based. Ingham's 'Tom Fills' ([Ste Ingham, 2017a](#)) tutorial, for example, discusses DAW-specific methods in treating tom fills (with pitch shifting, panning and velocity). His 'Snare' ([Ste Ingham, 2017b](#)) tutorial instructs on how to use gated reverb, white noise, EQ, as well as suggesting suitable timbres for snares such as the Aly James Lab (a Simmons simulator). His 'Q+A 1' ([Ste Ingham, 2017e](#)) suggests plugins for synthwave songs such as Sylenth1 (LennarDigital), Synth1 (Ichiro Toda), Dexed (Digital Surburban) and Diva (U-he).

2.2 Synthwave Style Parameters

Core style parameters of synthwave are often known as bass, beats, leads, pads, arps. Other less core style parameters (though well recognised nonetheless) include use of saxophone solos, electric guitar melodies, use of spoken monologues (usually from 1980s film or media), use of vocoder, movie-style sound effects and *melodic unison*. Next I list an indicative selection of synthwave style parameters, which is based on a triangulation of my data.

- SP1a *Ostinati* or 'Sequenced' Synth Bass (eighths or sixteenths)
- SP1b Drone Bass
- SP2a Plucked Arp
- SP2b Brass Arp
- SP3a Detuned Saw Lead
- SP3b FM Bell Lead
- SP4a Lush Moving Pad
- SP4b Brass Pad
- SP4c Brass Synth Stabs
- SP5 Four-on-the-Floor Drums
- SP6 Saxophone Solos
- SP7 Electric Guitar Melodies

- SP8 Spoken Monologues
- SP9 Vocoder
- SP10 Movie-Style Sound Effects
- SP11 *Melodic Unison*

This list accounts generally for synthwave and some of its subgenres, with extra style parameters notable of darksynth (discussed in [Chapter 3](#)), vocal synthwave (discussed in [Chapter 4](#)) and more. This list is not exhaustive, nor do I suggest that synthwave creators should adhere to it, given the many comments by community members that synthwave has become too standardised or homogenised. Instead, this list accounts for which style parameters are being *recognised*, valued and discussed openly by the community. Franco Fabbri may consider these recognised and valued style parameters as ‘formal and technical rules’, which ‘on a compositional level, play a major role’ in a genre ([Fabbri, 1981](#), p. 3).

I now discuss each style parameter in detail.⁶

- SP1a *Ostinati* or ‘Sequenced’ Synth Bass (eighths or sixteenths)

The synthwave bassline (SP1a) was referred to in my survey data frequently, with comments such as ‘eighth or sixteenth note basslines’, ‘that repetitive analog 8th note bass!’, ‘a repeating 1/8 bassline (sometimes 1/16 ...), often on the same note ... often with the filter opening towards the end of each bar’ (Survey Anons, 2023). Several comments referred to the *ostinati* rhythm of these basslines with phenomenological or impressionistic descriptions: ‘rolling or pulsing bass’, ‘rolling bass with sidechain’, ‘galloping basslines’, ‘pulsating synth bass’, ‘throbbing bassline’ (Survey Anons, 2023). My virtual ethnography showed many comments describing the *ostinati* bassline as ‘plucked’, in reference to its amplitude envelope. One survey comment suggested the ‘KORG Polysix’ specifically as the timbre of the synth’s bassline (Survey Anon, 2023). My virtual ethnography supported this, with many describing the KORG Polysix’s ‘Fat Line Bass’ patch as common.

Tutorial creator Ste Ingham has a specific YouTube tutorial, ‘Synthwave Sounds 03: Polysix Bass’ ([2017f](#)) for creating this type of bass. Use of the KORG Polysix *ostinati* bassline has certainly become a stylistic tension in the community, now so well known that some synthwave creators consider it unimaginative, while others require it as a moniker of synthwave due to its high recognition. The *ostinati* bassline can be heard on synthwave tracks such as:

- Jessie Frye feat. Timecop1983 ‘Faded Memory’ (2018)
- [Miami Nights 1984](#) ‘Sentimental’ (2022)
- Timecop1983 feat. The Bad Dreamers ‘Back to You’ (2018)

Harking back to the 1980s, tracks with similar basslines include:

- Kim Wilde ‘Kids in America’ (1981) (which has a little more resonance and overdrive heard)
- Tiffany’s ‘I Think We’re Alone Now’ (1987)

Suggested plugins and synth timbres for creating a synthwave *ostinati* bass include:

- KORG’s Polysix V2, particularly patch ‘Fat Line Bass’
- Arturia’s Prophet-5 V (based on Sequential’s 1978 analog subtractive synth)
- Arturia’s Mini V (based on Moog’s 1970 Minimoog)
- Digital Suburban’s Dexed or Arturia’s DX7-V (both based on Yamaha’s 1983 digital FM synth, the DX7)
- KORG’s Mono/Poly V2 (based on KORG’s 1981 paraphonic subtractive analog synth, often known as the sibling synth of the Polysix)

In my own experiments of a synthwave *ostinati* bassline, I trialled forming the sound with Serum by choosing simple waveforms (one square wave [minus one octave] and one saw wave, both with four voices of unison) and

set the amplitude envelopes attack to a very short attack, decay at 652ms, sustain to 0 and release at 643ms. Some detune was applied to both oscillators. I set a 24db LPF (applied to both oscillators) and then modulated the filter cutoff with the amplitude envelope. I also trialled creating an *ostinati* bassline tone through altering an Arturia Prophet-5 V preset, using patch ‘Lotta Bass’ as a basis. I made edits to the patch, setting one saw wave (osc 1) and one square wave (osc 2) with 100% pulse width. I set the amplitude envelope with a short attack (2ms), medium decay (879ms), sustain at 34% and short release (10ms). I applied some finetune. Many artists who used the Prophet-5 were prominent in the 1980s, with examples noted in Arturia’s product manuals: Duran Duran, Depeche Mode, Vince Clarke, No Doubt, Gary Numan, New Order, Phil Collins, Eurythmics, Pet Shop Boys and director/film soundtrack composer John Carpenter ([Arturia, 2014b](#)). Synthwave eighth and sixteenth basses are commonly sidechained (often to the effect of pumping) to the kick (through a compressor). One suggested plugin for this by the community is Kickstart (Cableguys).

- SP1b Drone Bass

The synthwave drone bass (SP1b) appeared less in my survey data (November 2023), with only one comment remarking: ‘the growling long bass’. My virtual ethnography data showed further descriptions of the drone bass, with descriptions such as: ‘dirty, legato’, ‘pedal’, ‘long and low’, ‘throbbing rich low-end’. It would appear that the *ostinati* bassline is more recognised than the drone bass overall. Musically, the drone bass does not use the eighths or sixteenths *ostinati* rhythms and instead uses whole note rhythms for sustained bass notes. Example synthwave tracks with the drone bass include:

- Kavinsky ‘Nightcall’ (2011)
- SIERRA VEINS ‘Intro’ (2017) [0’20]
- GUNSHIP ‘Maximum Black’ (2015)

Harking back to the 1980s, an example track with the drone bass is:

- The Police ‘Don’t Stand So Close to Me’ (1980) (though unconfirmed, many people suspect this was voiced by a Moog Taurus).

Suggested plugins and synth timbres by the community for the drone bass include:

- Arturia’s Prophet-5 V (based on Sequential’s 1978 analog subtractive synth)
- Arturia’s CS-80 V (based on Yamaha’s 1977 analog subtractive synth)
- Arturia’s Jup-8 V (based on Roland’s Jupiter-8, a 1981 analog subtractive synth)
- KORG’s M1 V2 (based on their 1988 workstation synth)
- KORG’s MS-20 V2 (based on their 1978 analog subtractive synth)

Use of sidechaining or bass-ducking would also be common with the drone bass. I trialled forming the drone bass (SP1b) with Serum, choosing two simple waveforms (one saw and one sine) and adding a sub oscillator (triangle wave). I set an LFO (with a 1/2 rate) to modulate the filter cutoff of a 12dB LPF (with the cutoff set about 30% and resonance at 25%). I also edited one of Arturia’s CS-80V patches (‘Unison Syn Bass’) as a starting point for creating this tone, based on the original hardware synth’s usage in *Blade Runner* (1982) and reputation for deep bass drones. I set oscillator I as a square wave and oscillator II as a mix of a square, triangle and saw wave. I modulated each oscillator with a sine wave LFO set to retrigger mode (i.e. restarting the envelope every time a note is played), synced to tempo at a rate of 1/4. I added some noise to oscillator I, and some detuning. I set the amplitude envelope to a very short attack (2ms) and release also short, at 34ms. The sustain was set at 100%. Finally, I set a sine wave sub oscillator to modulate the filter of both oscillator I and II, synced to tempo at one bar speed (anything faster than this lessened the ‘growl’ of the drone bass). Of the latter, the drone bass (SP1b) aims to semiotically signal the sort of bass drones heard in 1980s films such as *Blade Runner*

(1982), which in large had parts voiced by the CS-80. This synth's pitch ribbon could bend up an octave but down 'all the way below the deepest bass notes humans can hear' ([Metlay, 2021](#), p. 82). This film is considered key subcultural capital of synthwave, due to the film's temporal narrative in the 1980s, and the film's composer being Vangelis, who is highly respected by the online community for his work with synths and soundtracks.

Overall, my virtual ethnography showed that popular choices for synthwave basses are KORG synths (e.g. the Polysix for SP1a), the Yamaha DX7 (SP1a), the Prophet-5 (both SP1a and SP1b) and the CS-80 (SP1b). This relates to popular usages of these synths from the 1980s. Though unconfirmed by the original artists and producers, listeners suspect that the DX7 was used for the basslines of Cyndi Lauper's 'Change of Heart' (1986) ([npr.org](#), 2021), Depeche Mode's 'People Are People' (1984) ([Bobbyblues, n.d](#)) and Tiffany's 'I Think We're Alone Now' (1987). The latter of these examples demonstrates the *ostinati* eighths and sixteenths heard in synthwave basslines (SP1a), a style parameter which mimics songs of the 1980s which used these patterns. Such patterns were in part due to capabilities of sequencers in the 1980s, which if unaltered, would run continuously, 'producing incessantly repeated patterns of eighth-notes' ([Vail, 2000](#), p. 242). It should be noted that my comment here does not argue technological determinism, but rather highlights one of the ways in which the synthwave genre conveys its connection to the 1980s.

- SP2a Plucked Arp

The plucked arp (SP2a) was referred to numerous in my survey data (November 2023): 'arpeggios', 'arpeggiated melodies', 'synth arpeggios are very common', 'short repetitive sequences in the upper registers ... characterised as arp' (Survey Anons, 2023). My virtual ethnography data showed descriptions by community members of 'plucked' arps, in reference to the style parameter's amplitude envelope. Arps are usually minimalist in terms of notes (often three to four different notes maximum) and generally move in one direction pitch wise. They are usually written in an octave

which complements (or rather differs from) other parts (e.g. SP3 lead, SP4 pad) in the arrangement. Sometimes arps will act as a lead in their own right e.g. ‘Outrun This!’ (2012) by Arcade High [1’00]. Example synthwave tracks with the plucked arp include:

- The Midnight and Jupiter Winter ‘Monsters’ (2020)
- [Von Kaiser ‘Night Stalker’ \(2024\)](#)
- Yota ‘Hazy Paradise’ (2020)

Harking back to the 1980s, one example track with a (descending) arp similar to the synthwave plucked arp is Cyndi Lauper’s ‘All Through the Night’ (1983). Suggested plugins and synth timbres for the synthwave plucked arp include:

- TAL-U-No-LX and TAL-U-No-62 (TAL’s emulations of Roland’s 1982 analog synth the Juno-60)
- Arturia’s Jun-6 V (based on Roland’s Juno-6)
- KORG’s Mono/Poly V2 or Full Bucket Music’s Mono/Fury (both based on KORG’s Mono/Poly)
- Martin Lüders PG-8X (based on Roland’s 1985 analog synth the JX-8P)

It is advisable to vary the velocities of arp notes to lessen their monotony/repetitiveness (this is subtle but effective). Arps are usually affected with a LPF (hear NINA’s ‘One of Us’ (2018) for an eight-bar looped LPF [0’00]). If applying a one-off (e.g. introduction) filter, automation in the DAW can be utilised. When doing so, this ought to be done on a separate EQ plugin at the end of your effects chain, so as not to impede the track’s main EQ settings. For a ‘looped’ filter which is continuous (as with NINA’s ‘One of Us’ [2018]) this can be achieved using an LFO to modulate the filter cutoff point and syncing it to tempo with a rate of your choosing. Use of this technique appears to mimic analog hardware synths which had low pass filter modules e.g. the Minimoog (1970) and KORG MS-10 (1978).

In my own audio experiment of the plucked arp, I used Serum and set two basic waveforms (both saws, one with five voices and one with two). Both had detune applied. I then set the amplitude envelope to have a short attack, decay of 419ms, sustain about 25% and release at 249ms. I mixed in a small amount of noise and set a 6dB LPF, setting the cutoff to 50% on the dial and resonance at about 30% on the dial. With Arturia's Jupiter-8 I edited the 'Classic Brass' patch and set two saw waves (50% each on the source mix). I set my amplitude envelope (env2) to have a fast attack (4ms), fast decay (2ms), sustain at 35.8% and a release setting of 2.796s. Several prominent artists from the 1980s used the Jupiter-8 in their work, and examples are noted in Arturia's product manuals e.g. Frankie Goes to Hollywood ('Relax' [1984]), Depeche Mode, Prince, Tears for Fears ([Arturia, n.d.](#)).

- SP2b Brass Arp

The brass arp (SP2b) was referred to more generally by my survey data (November 2023), through comments such as: 'synth brass parts'. Through my analysis, I identified example synthwave tracks with the brass arp such as:

- [Vincenzo Salvia 'White Lines, Red Sunset' \(2018\)](#)
- The Abyss 'Faded' (2020)
- Dana Jean Phoenix 'In Borrowed Times' (2016)

My virtual ethnography found that recommended plugins for the brass arp include:

- Siegfried Kullmann's SQ8L or Arturia's SQ80 V (both based on Ensoniq's 1987 hybrid synth the SQ-80).
- Arturia's Jup-8 V (based on Roland's Jupiter-8)

An example track with a brass-style melody is Yazoo 'Don't Go' (1982). Examples of arp-style parts generally (i.e. not limited to brass-styles) can be

heard in songs of the 1980s, such as:

- Cyndi Lauper's 'All Through the Night' (1984)
- 'Rio' (1982) (played by a Jupiter-4 [[Bein, n.d.](#)])

Synthwave arps are an interesting example of how the community do not seek to faithfully recreate the music of the 1980s, (i.e. it is 'reflective' not 'restorative' [[Boym, 2001](#)]); they instead reimagine it. This is evident when listening to examples of arpeggiators on songs of the 1980s, which are not as rigid in their use of note minimalism or one-direction melodic contouring as the synthwave style (i.e. synthwave arps bear less resemblance to arpeggios heard on 'Rio' by Duran Duran [1982], for example). A closer resemblance to synthwave style arps can be heard on Vangelis' 'Spiral' (1977), Eurythmics 'Here Comes the Rain Again' (1984) and Cyndi Lauper's 'All Through the Night' (1984), but even these are still not entirely commensurate with synthwave arps.

For my audio experiment of the brass arp, I selected one oscillator in Serum, a sawtooth wave, and applied a 12db LPF with the amplitude envelope modulating the filter cutoff (and key follow on). My oscillator had six voice unison and detune applied. The amplitude envelope settings were 133ms attack, 1.57s decay, sustain at about 60% and release at 477ms. To form the brass arp through editing one of Arturia's Jupiter-8 patches (the 'Classic Brass' patch), I altered my 'Plucked Arp' patch to have a different amplitude envelope: short attack 6ms, sustain 100% and release 9.084s.

- SP3a Detuned Saw Lead

The detuned saw lead (SP3a) frequently appeared in my survey data (November 2023), with comments such as: 'detuned saw waves', 'lead sawtooth synths', 'defined sawtooth oscillators', 'big soaring synth solos, often made using sounds based on detuned saw waves, with extensive use of vibrato' (Survey Anons, November 2023). Other comments were more general of the synth lead, with some making reference to melodic direction and contouring or timbre: 'bright leads', 'keytar leads', 'soaring leads', 'a

synth as the lead’, ‘synth motifs’ (Survey Anons, 2023). The detuned saw lead sometimes uses rhythms which have shorter values at the start of a melodic phrase and longer values at the end, to make use of portamento, pitch bend or finetuning overt. Examples of songs with some these effects include:

- Pitch bends in Overvad ‘Red Nebula’ [2017] [1’26]
- Pitch bend and portamento in NINA and Ricky Wilde’s ‘Fade Me Out’ [2’41]
- Pitch bends in Beckett ‘Retrograde’ (2015) [1’33]

I found that the detune nature of synthwave lead synths (SP3a) aims to emulate original modular synths, which had temperature issues resulting in synths drifting in and out of tune ([Pinch and Trocco, 2004](#), pp. 179). Leads are often thickened with use of chorus and delay, used also to convey a detuned sound. The idea of a thick lead is also linked to synthesizers using multiple oscillators for one voice e.g. the Minimoog, which was monophonic but had three oscillators. My virtual ethnography showed that Juno’s chorus was a popular choice to support the feeling of pitch drift, with other popular effects for achieving pitch drift being portamento, pitch bend and finetuning. Further techniques for emphasizing or thickening the lead include *melodic unison* (SP11) between a vocal and synth, e.g. Parallels ‘Heart of the Wild’ (2017) [0’22], Jessie Frye ‘Wild In My Arms’ (2021) [1’08] or duplicating leads at octave e.g. Scandroid ‘Rendezvous’ (2017) [0’24]. Also in service of this, leads typically occupy their own octave (e.g. C4 or C5) to allow them a dedicated space in the mix (i.e. different to the octaves that the pads and arps occupy).

Common descriptions of synthwave leads describe them as ‘saw leads’ which tend to bias use of saw waves (as either one oscillator or multiple oscillators as saw waves). Some use of square wave (and pulse width modulation) is often employed and has affiliations with game music (hear the lead in ‘Start to Begin Your Journey’ by Rosentwig at 0’20 [2019]),

which harks back to the 8-bit era and use of programmable sound generators.⁷ Example tracks with the detuned saw lead include:

- Mecha Maiko and Dana Jean Phoenix ‘Cold’ (2018) [0’15]
- Circe Electro and Wolf Saga ‘Sweet Agony’ (2016) [0’39]
- Bending Grid and Jolie ‘Neon Heat’ (2024) [1’20]

Suggested plugins for the detuned saw lead include:

- KORG’s Mono/Poly V2 or Full Bucket Music’s Mono/Fury (both based on KORG’s Mono/Poly)
- KORG’s ARP Odyssey (an emulation by KORG of the 1972 ARP Odyssey analog synth)
- TAL-U-No-LX and TAL-U-No-62 (TAL’s emulations of Roland’s 1982 analog synth the Juno-60)
- Arturia’s Jun-6 V (based on Roland’s Juno-6)
- Arturia’s Jup-8 V (based on Roland’s Jupiter-8)
- Arturia’s CS-80V (based on Yamaha’s 1977 CS-80)

Several prominent artists from the 1980s used the Juno-6 in their work, and examples are noted in Arturia’s product manuals: Madonna (‘Borderline’ [1983]), Duran Duran (‘Save a Prayer’ [1982]) and Mr. Fingers (featured in ‘Can You Feel It’ [1986]) ([Arturia, 2021](#)). Additionally, the main riff for Aha’s ‘Take on Me’ (1985) was voiced by a Juno-60 (layered with a DX7) ([Arturia, 2021](#)).

In my own experiment of a detuned saw lead, I trialled Arturia’s Jup-8 V (Jupiter-8) with the ‘Carpenter Brass’ patch as a basis, setting two saw waves (VCO 1 and VCO 2 50% each), with VCO 2 detuned (−0.2st). I applied portamento, pan spread and an amplitude envelope of short attack (1ms), medium-long decay (7.101s), 0% sustain and medium release (3.752s). In the DAW, pitch shift was added and cents were automated to drift the tuning in a way that feels more organic, gradual and continuous, and is emulative of oscillators on analog synths which would drift out of tune.

- SP3b FM Bell Lead

The FM Bell Lead (SP3b) was referenced several times in my survey data (November 2023), with comments such as: ‘twinkling synths’, ‘DX7 treble lines’, ‘high note melodies’, ‘the Yamaha DX7’, ‘the sparkly effects’ (Survey Anons, 2023). Example synthwave tracks with the bell lead include:

- JJ Mist ‘Test My Love’ (2017) [0’01]
- Roxi Drive ‘Shame on You’ (2021) [2’38]
- Parallels ‘The Kids Will Save Detroit’ (2018) [0’43]

Harking back to the 1980s, an example track with the bell lead is Taylor Dayne ‘Tell It to My Heart’ (1988) (which many suspect was voiced by a TX7, a module form of the DX7). Bell leads are commonly designed with FM synth timbres such as:

- Yamaha’s 1983 DX7 (e.g. its preset ‘tubular bells’)
- Roland’s 1987 D-50 (e.g. the presets ‘fantasia’ or ‘staccato heaven’), which technically used linear arithmetic synthesis ([Freke, 2021](#), p. 11).

FM synthesis was particularly well-suited for creating bell-like timbres, due to its creation of complex waveforms and inharmonic overtones that are characteristic of such timbres. Bell leads might be created using organ or glockenspiel timbral presets which can be altered to give bell-like qualities. My virtual ethnography showed community members remarking the bell leads’ ‘glassy’ qualities, or its ‘clearer’, ‘cleaner’, ‘sparkly’ sound. One common plugin suggestion for creating the bell lead was Dexed, a DX7 emulation. The bell lead has the additional usage as a countermelody e.g. Glitbiter ‘Fall Apart’ (2021) [3’01] or Primo the Alien ‘Do It Again’ (2021) [0’26]. Like the detuned saw lead, the bell lead too has chorus and detune effects.

In my own audio experiment of the bell lead, I edited Arturia’s DX7 preset ‘TUB BELLS’. I added a HPF since bell leads tend to operate in the

upper registers (e.g. C4 and C5+), and I applied some chorus. Leads are arguably the most variable style parameter timbre-wise but do have some common features, notably the considerable use of detune and finetuning, portamento and pitch bend. Their melodic contouring also carries some common traits, to emphasise the aforementioned effects. Where the detuned saw lead clearly gives a nod to subtractive synthesis, the bell lead is typically designed with FM synth timbres as originally voiced by synths such as the Yamaha DX7. Several prominent artists from the 1980s used the DX7 in their work, and examples are noted in Arturia's product manuals: Tears For Fears ('Shout' [1985]), Phil Collins ('One More Night' [1985]), Berlin ('Take My Breath Away' [1986]) and Whitney Houston ('I Get So Emotional' [1987]) ([Arturia, 2017](#)).

- SP6 Saxophone Solos
- SP7 Electric Guitar Melodies

Other relevant information about lead instruments from the survey data included saxophone leads (or solos) (SP6) and guitar solos (SP7), summarised well by this comment: 'a kind of solo, whether it be on synth or guitar or sax' (Survey Anon, 2023). Of saxophones, comments included: 'sax lead breaks', 'saxophone solos', 'definitely saxophone', 'heavily delayed sax solo', 'saxophones ... work almost universally!' One specified, 'it's not just the presence of the sax ... it's the way it's used in creating emotions' (Survey Anon, 2023). Examples of saxophone solos in synthwave songs can be heard in:

- Megan McDuffee and Moonrunner83 'Streets' (2018) [2'08]
- The Midnight and Nikki Flores 'Jason' (2016) [3'10]
- GUNSHIP 'Empress of the Damned feat. Lights' (2023) [2'39]

Of guitar leads, survey comments included '80s lead guitar', 'clean and clear guitar', 'shredding guitar solo', 'phased guitar', 'overdriven guitar'. Electric guitar melodies or solos (SP7) can be heard in:

- [Taurus 1984](#)'s 'Dream Warriors' (2020) [1'53]
- Futurecop! And Parallels 'Home' (2022) [1'18]
- LeBrock's 'Call Me' (2016) [2'58]

One comment about guitars referred to the darksynth subgenre of synthwave: 'if we're talking about darksynth or cyberpunk ... harsher, grittier, more distorted tones' (the darksynth subgenre is discussed in detail in [Chapter 3](#)). Overall, comments about lead instruments in synthwave tracks clearly indicated that the synth, saxophone or an '80s style guitar' is most recognised and valued. Of the latter, my virtual ethnography suggested Stratocasters or a type of 'Superstrat', with comments such as 'soaring lead Strat synthwave tone[s]'. Comments recommend high-gain amps such as those by Marshall (e.g. JCM800) or Soldano (e.g. SLO-100). Guitar plugins suggested by the community for achieving an '80s style guitar' included: those by Neural DSP, those by Ample Sound, Guitar Rig 7 ('80s Stadium Rig') (Native Instruments), Shreddage 3 Series (for Kontakt by Impact Soundworks) and AmpliTube (IK Multimedia). Use of TAL chorus was generally highly recommended.

- SP4a Lush Moving Pad

The lush moving pad (SP4a) was referenced numerous in my survey data (November 2023), with many phenomenological or impressionistic comments such as: 'lush synth keys', 'lush synth chords', 'lush pads', 'dreamy epic pads', 'sweeping synthesizer pads', 'a dreamy synth', a 'warm hum of synth in the background' (Survey Anons, 2023). Synthwave pads refer to chords, and in general these have slow-moving harmony and a long release on the amplitude envelope. Others' comments about the lush moving pad were more specific of timbre or musical technique: 'pads (using usually suspended chords, especially 7ths)', 'Prophet chords', 'string pad', 'solina strings pad', 'soft analogue pad sounds, often with gentle swells caused by the filter slowly opening and closing' (Survey Anons, 2023). The latter comment clarifies why the pad is often described as

‘moving’; it has a sense of movement or swelling due to LFOs modulating the filter, with these LFOs often having slower sync rates such as 1/2, one bar or two bars. Musically, use of suspended chords and seventh chords is common to pads in synthwave. This is due to their perceived ‘dreamy’ qualities by the community (in the case of the suspended chords, this is likely due to obscured harmony in the absence of the third). An example of a synthwave song with suspended chords is NINA ‘Automatic Call’ (2020). Usage of seventh chords appears to relate to many 1980s pop songs which used these chords.⁸ Usage of such chords by 1980s songs could have been in part related to emerging capabilities of synths in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when polyphony was advancing year on year, and increased polyphony afforded a more straightforward approach to playing richer and harmonically more complex chords. Creators may use mid side mixing (EQ) for pads, which allows you to isolate different frequency ranges at the center or sides of your mix. Sometimes synthwave pads are less overt in their presence or conveying of chords, and simply act as sonic padding to a track (i.e. designed to be in the background of the arrangement). Examples of synthwave tracks with the lush moving pad include:

- Bunny X ‘Come Back’ (2018)
- Sunglasses Kid ‘Brokedown Love’ (2022)
- Star Cassette ‘In Your Eyes’ (2020)

Harking back to the 1980s, an example of synth pad is Cyndi Lauper ‘Time After Time’ (1983), which was voiced by a Juno-60 ([Rosenschein, n.d.](#)). The Juno-6, Juno-60 and Juno-106’s onboard chorus effect is particularly well-renowned ([Roland, n.d.](#)) and certainly supports the ‘lush’ associations of the pad. Suggested plugins and synth timbres for the lush moving pad include:

- Arturia’s OP-Xa V (based on Oberheim’s 1980 analog synth the OB-Xa)
- DiscoDSP’s OB-Xd (based on Oberheim’s 1979 OB-X)

- TAL-U-No LX and TAL-U-No 62 (TAL's emulations of Roland's 1982 analog synth the Juno-60)
- KORG's M1 V2 (based on KORG's M1)
- Arturia's Jun-6 V (based on Roland's 1982 Juno-6)
- Arturia's Jup-8 V (based on Roland's 1981 Jupiter-8)

In my own audio experiment of the lush moving pad, I used simple waveforms on Serum (one saw and one triangle, the saw with six voices and the triangle four). Both had detune applied and the blend edited. I set the amplitude envelope to 104ms attack, 1s decay, sustain at 75% and release at 4.49s. I set an LFO (at a one bar rate) to modulate the filter cutoff, with both the filter cutoff and resonance set about 40%. I turned up the drive, mixed in some noise and added some chorus. I also trialled editing Arturia's Jun-6 patch '11 Strings 1' to achieve this tone, as well as trialling Logic Pro X's Autofilter to form the main character of the sound, namely its movement or swell. I set a 12dB LPF with a cutoff of 70% and a resonance of 25%. I set a triangle LFO to modulate the cutoff of the filter at a rate of two bars (synced to tempo). I added some detune, as well as adding a pitch shifter on Logic to automate cent detuning on the pad.

- SP4b Brass Pad
- SP4c Brass Synth Stabs

The brass pad (SP4b) and brass synth stabs (SP4c) were present in my survey data (November 2023), with comments such as 'rich synth pads', 'synth brass', 'synth brass parts are common', 'pads (like Van Halen – Jump)', 'analog saw pads', 'oberheim stabs' (Survey Anons, 2023). Example synthwave tracks with the brass pad include:

- Bunny X and SelloRekt/LA Dreams 'Still On My Mind' (2021) [0'02]
- Laura Dre 'Twilight' (2023)
- Mitch Murder 'After Hours Run' (2017)

Harking back to the 1980s, example tracks with the brass pad include:

- Toto ‘Africa’ (1982) (a CS-80 plays the pad in the intro [[Reverb, 2018](#)])
- Van Halen’s ‘Jump’ (1984) (‘While the “Jump” video features an Oberheim OB-Xa, it’s thought that the synth heard on the recording is this earlier variant, known as the OB-X’ [[Google Arts and Culture, n.d.](#)])

Notably, synthwave group The Midnight’s ‘Heartbeat’ (2022) bears very strong resemblance to Van Halen’s ‘Jump’ (1984), as does ‘The Video Game Champion’ (2018) [0’08] by GUNSHIP, as does ‘Galactic Warfare’ (2024) by Russell Nash and RAN. The ‘Jump’ (1984) brass pad intro is clearly influential in synth circles! My virtual ethnography found that these plugins were recommended for brass pads:

- Arturia’s OP-Xa V (based on Oberheim’s 1980 analog synth the OB-Xa)
- DiscoDSP’s OB-Xd (based on Oberheim’s 1979 OB-X)
- Siegfried Kullmann’s SQ8L or Arturia’s SQ-80 V (both based on Ensoniq’s 1987 hybrid synth the SQ-80)
- Arturia’s Jup-8 V (based on Roland’s 1981 Jupiter-8)
- Martin Lüders PG-8X (based on Roland’s JX-8P)
- Arturia’s Prophet-5 V (based on Sequential’s 1978 analog subtractive synth)

In my own audio experiments of the brass pad, I used the Prophet-5 V (patch ‘11 Brass’) with two saw waves as a basis for creating the sound. I set my filter envelope to a short attack (13ms), short decay (328m), sustain at 50% and long release (1.76s). I set the amplitude envelope with a short attack (5ms), decay (406ms), 70% sustain and medium release (2.43s). I set a saw LFO to modulate the filter at a rate of one bar (synced to tempo), which achieved a swell similar to that of the lush pad. I applied detune, Chorus Jun-6 and ping pong tape echo via the Prophet-5 V synth, and varied the velocity of the notes. This timbre of brass is more suited to

longer-duration notes. For my brass stabs experiment, I played 1/4 notes instead of semibreves/whole notes, and changed my filter envelope to a short attack (2ms), decay (347ms), sustain of 69.4% and medium release (2.15s). I changed my amplitude envelope to a short attack (1ms), decay (446ms), sustain of 76% and medium release (3.79s). This timbre of brass is more suited to shorter duration or staccato-style notes, and gives a ‘rubbery’, ‘bouncier’ sound than the brass pad. ‘The Wizard’ (2024) by Futurecop! is a good example of brass stabs (hear in the intro).

- SP5 Four-on-the-Floor Drums

The four-on-the-floor drums (SP5) were mentioned frequently in my survey data (November 2023), with many suggesting indicative timbres: ‘Drum machine sounds, especially Rolands TR-505, TR-707 and some TR-808’, ‘80s drum machines like LinnDrum, DMX or Simmons’, ‘LinnDrums/Simmons/any 80s drum machines’, ‘LinnDrum/Linn 9000 and Oberheim DMX’ (Survey Anons, 2023). Some spoke of particular production effects, particularly in reference to the snares and toms: ‘gated snares’, ‘gated reverb snare’, ‘gated reverb on the drums’, ‘gated snares and tom fills’, ‘lots of toms’, ‘Simmons tom drums’, ‘Simmons electronic drums’, ‘killer drum fills’ (Survey Anons, 2023). The patterns themselves were commented on: ‘simple drum patterns – snare on two and four’, ‘snare on two and four with gated reverb’, ‘four-on-the-floor rhythms’, ‘a four-[on]-the-floor beat, drums generated by a drum machine preferably a Linn but there are some Emus and Roland 808s/909s’ (Survey Anons, 2023). Some other general comments were made: ‘tight and punchy drums’, ‘clicky kick drum sound and a big snare, with that Phil Collins-style gated reverb’ (Survey Anons, 2023). Synthwave drums are usually in 4/4, which favours simple four-on-the-floor dance rhythms. Tempo choices are typically 75–120bpm on average, to accommodate faster rhythms (e.g. eighths and sixteenths basslines) and to give a feeling of drive and movement in line with the concept of driving through a neon city at night. My virtual ethnography showed that 90–120bpm is frequently

recommended by the community, with subgenres such as outrun and darksynth perhaps having a faster tempo e.g. above 120bpm. Example synthwave tracks with four-on-the-floor drums include:

- Parallels and Futurecop! 'We Belong' (2019) [0'24]
- Trevor Something 'Girlfriend' (2016)
- VHS Dreams 'Nightdrive' (2021) [0'11]
- Nightstop 'Streetwalker' (2016) [0'34]

Harking back to the 1980s, drums with gated reverb include:

- Peter Gabriel's 'Intruder' (1980)
- Phil Collins 'In The Air Tonight' (1981)

Examples of 1980s songs which used a LinnDrum include:

- Human League's 'Don't You Want Me Baby' (1981) ([Buskin, 2010](#))
- Madonna's 'Dress You Up' (1984) ([Matthew Perpetua, n.d.](#))
- Stevie Wonder's 'Part Time Lover' (1985) ([Breihan, 2020](#))
- Kate Bush 'Running Up That Hill' (1985) ([Trash Theory, 2022](#) [13'31])

Simmon's tom hits are common for toms, and gated reverb is also common, to convey the sound of the 1980s. My virtual ethnography showed that drum plugins or 'one-shot-samples' usually emulate the LinnDrum, LM-1, Roland TR-8, Roland-707, Roland TR-808, Drumulator or Simmons Drums (Simmons toms are frequently chosen). Drum hits are often reversed and used as risers. Drums are often pitch shifted for variety, and use of tape saturation or white noise is often used to make the drum timbre appear more analog and 'warm'. Gated reverb treatment is often heard on the snare and toms. In my experiment, I used the Linn LM-1 plugin and achieved the gated reverb effect through using an aux track. On this aux track, I set a large space reverb first, and a noisegate second, as well as sidechaining the noisegate to the snare.

Further style parameters of synthwave commented on by survey respondents (November 2023) included use of vocoder (SP9) and use of movie-style sound effects (SP10) or spoken monologue (SP8). Of SP9 (vocoder) and SP10 (movie-style sound effects) comments included: ‘sound samples from 80s era movies or tv’ and ‘sound bites from movies, music, video games’ (Survey Anons, 2023). Further general comments referenced movies or soundtrack/cinematic components as important: ‘*Blade Runner* style [synths]’, ‘synthwave tracks sound like they could be inserted into any 80s movie’, ‘the track has to bring me inside a movie that doesn’t exist’ (Survey Anons, 2023). Examples of synthwave songs with movie-style sound effects or spoken monologue include:

- Oblique ‘Operator Message’ (2017) [4’20]
- Lazerhawk ‘Redline’ (2010) [0’08 car sound effects]
- GUNSHIP, John Carpenter, Charlie Simpson ‘Tech Noir’ (2015)

Songs which include a vocoder include:

- Betamaxx ‘Disco Dreamgirl’ (2020) [2’26]
- Kavinsky ‘Nightcall’ (2011) [0’32]
- PYLOT ‘Lost’ (2019) [0’02]

Several comments were made about which timbres would be suitable for making synthwave (with no style parameter necessarily mentioned); these included: ‘analog poly synthesizer sounds like Roland Jupiters and Junos, FM synth sounds like the Yamaha DX7’, ‘80s polysynths’, ‘KORGs, Rolands’, ‘Roland Juno and Moog recreations’, ‘drum machine samples and emulations from the 80s’ (Survey Anons, 2023). Other comments simply emphasised the lack of acoustic instruments, supporting that synthwave ought to be made with synths: ‘featuring sounds that cannot be produced by a traditional instrument (only a computer)’, ‘EDM elements, sometimes rock/metal influences’, ‘just synthesizers’ (Survey Anons, 2023).

Some comments were compositional in focus, including: ‘4/4 time signature’, ‘a bpm between 80 and 110’, ‘80–140bpm’, ‘*ostinato*, arpeggio,

repetition’, ‘primarily minor keys’, ‘simpler song structures’ (Survey Anons, 2023). One comment cautioned of differences between subgenres within the synthwave genre: ‘[songwriting and arrangement choices] depend entirely on the style of synthwave track i.e. outrun, dreamwave, cyberpunk, darksynth ... they all vary massively in tempo [and] synth sounds used’ (Survey Anon, 2023). Another theme of the style parameters comments was a debate of synthwave as purely instrumental or not.

In addition to the comments discussed in this section, in response to the question ‘What sounds or musical parts would you expect to hear in a synthwave track?’ some answered that they did not know, or only provided example songs. One respondent suggested: ‘Listen to “Ocean Drive” by [Miami Nights 1984](#). Lazerhawk’s “Electric Groove”, Kavinsky’s “Nightcall”... . This is synthwave’ (Survey Anon, 2023).

The synth timbres suggested for each parameter (previously) are not exhaustive but are common suggestions by the community for creating synthwave-styled music. With this section, I have illustrated what many synthwave listeners may perceive (through hearing) as ‘authentic’ ([Moore, 2002](#)) components of synthwave-styled music. I now provide an analysis of ‘The Comeback Kid’ (2016) by The Midnight, a group whom the community consider representative of synthwave. With my own analysis and comments from Tim McEwan, I illustrate an example of the creative process of synthwave, and some of the previously named synthwave style parameters and plugins.

2.3 Case Study Analyses of a Synthwave Track

2.3.1 Analysis of ‘The Comeback Kid’ (2016) The Midnight

The Midnight is a songwriter-producer duo who have six studio albums to date (May 2025 – this count does not include instrumental, live or remix version albums). As stated on their Bandcamp, ‘The Midnight consists of Tyler Lyle (a songwriter from the Deep South) and Tim McEwan (a producer from Denmark)’ (The Midnight Bandcamp, n.d.). One journalist

referred to them as ‘leaders in the ever-burgeoning synthwave scene’ ([Laing, 2022](#)) who have achieved ‘one of the most successful fusings of rock and electronic music with pop songcraft’ ([Laing, 2022](#)). On the matter of their associated genre, Tim explained in interview with me: ‘We never know if we’re synthwave enough or not’ ([McEwan of The Midnight, 2024](#)) and Tyler characterised a ‘push-pull’ relationship with the term ([Lyle of The Midnight, 2024](#)). Rather, the two emphasised how The Midnight is ‘a project focused on [the] idea of nostalgia’ ([The Midnight, 2024](#)). Tyler was born in 1985 and listened to ‘primarily country music during the 1980s and early 1990s’. He explained how: ‘my Father was a songwriter ... I grew up with very narrative based storytelling kind of songs’ ([Lyle of The Midnight, 2024](#)). Tim, born in 1979, remembers ‘vividly the 1980s and 1990s ... these types of sounds were around me as a kid ... the Juno, the DX7 ... it’s highly nostalgic for me’ ([McEwan of The Midnight, 2024](#)). The two met in 2012 due to their respective publishers’ pairing them up for a ‘songwriting blind date’ ([The Midnight, 2024](#)). Tim recalls the point at which the group ‘started to take off’, following the release of *Days of Thunder* (2014), and specifically when he had uploaded some videos of ‘old vintage car commercials’ ([McEwan of The Midnight, 2024](#)) synchronised to some of the songs from that album online. These videos later appeared on the front page of r/outrun, a significant reddit forum for the synthwave genre. The group had considered several names before settling on The Midnight, initially thinking it would be ‘The Midnight *something*’ e.g. ‘The Midnight cassettes’, before deciding on simply The Midnight ([The Midnight, 2024](#)). Of their creative process, Tim explained how before 2020 (and album *Monsters*) all The Midnight’s song were created ‘in the box [i.e. in a DAW]’ with ‘plugins’, e.g. ‘Zebra ... Spire ... a great emulation of a Juno called LX ... and Diva’ ([McEwan of The Midnight, 2024](#)). The band later acquired hardware synths such as the Prophet-6, the OB-6, the DX7, the OB-Xa, a Moog sub 37, Moog vocoder and an unspecified Juno ([McEwan of The Midnight, 2024](#)). The group commented how they often write songs remotely given their different geographical locations, though they do write songs within the same physical space also when possible ([The Midnight,](#)

[2024](#)). Both members expressed their gratitude to the community in interview with me: ‘Thanks to the community of people latching on to [our music], and connecting with it, it’s a gift’ ([The Midnight, 2024](#)).

TABLE 2.2 Comments About Vocal Synthwave (Synthwave Survey November 2023).

<i>Prefers NO Vocal</i>	<i>Likes SOME Vocal</i>	<i>YES to Vocals</i>
• ‘No real instruments or vocal parts’ • ‘No rap’ • ‘Vocals. And this is the problem’ • ‘I really don’t expect SW track[s] to have lyrics’ • ‘no vocal’ • ‘I’m not too big on the move into more modern poppy vocal songs’	• ‘when appropriate, strong ballad like vocals’ • ‘mostly instrumental but vocals can add another layer to the music’ • ‘vocals are optional’ • ‘I’m happy with instrumental or vocal tracks’ • ‘with or without vocals’	• ‘nice vocals’ • ‘melodic vocals’ • ‘emotionally driven female vocal’ • ‘I like good vocals, mostly female. I’m kinda more vocal-synthwave oriented, but of course [there] are many brilliant instrumentals out there’ (Survey Anons, 2023).

<i>Prefers NO Vocal</i>	<i>Likes SOME Vocal</i>	<i>YES to Vocals</i>
	• ‘singing seems to be optional’ • ‘I like vocals too, but I don’t think it’s required’	

TABLE 2.3 ‘The Comeback Kid’ (2016) A Structural Representation Over

	<i>Intro</i> [0’00–1’04]	<i>Verse 1</i> [1’05–1’29]	<i>Verse 2</i> [1’30–1’53]	<i>Chorus 1</i> [1’54–2’09]	<i>Verse 3</i> [2’10–2’33]	<i>Chorus 2</i> [2’34–3’06]	<i>Instrumental</i> [no drums] [3’07–3’39]	<i>Instrumental</i> [guitar] [3’40–]
Main Vocals								
Backing Vocals								
Main Synth	0’33							
Dreamy Synth	0’49							
Synth Bell		1’22						
Outro Synth								

	Intro	Verse 1	Verse 2	Chorus 1	Verse 3	Chorus 2	Instrumental [no drums]	Instrumental [guitar]
	[0'00–1'04]	[1'05–1'29]	[1'30–1'53]	[1'54–2'09]	[2'10–2'33]	[2'34–3'06]	[3'07–3'39]	[3'40–]
Electric Guitar								
Bass								
Synth								
Hi-Hats								
Kick and Snare								
Toms								
Handclap								

The group have recognised the synthwave community in interview (such as when discussing collaborator Nikki Flores: ‘before we collaborated with her, the synthwave community knew her’ [Laing, 2022]). My survey data from November 2023 revealed many references to The Midnight, where respondents named them as a favourite artist: ‘The Midnight will always be #1’, ‘*Endless Summer* is the perfect synthwave album’, ‘I discovered synthwave through them’, ‘[they are an] impressive live synthwave act’ who ‘consistently [put] out good music’. Other comments focused on nostalgia: ‘there is an instant nostalgia in their music’, ‘The Midnight have my soul, their nostalgic and melancholic tracks have me addicted’ (Survey Anons, 2023).

‘The Comeback Kid’ is track seven of The Midnight’s album *Endless Summer* (2016). My discussion of this track includes comments from Sonic Academy’s ‘How To Make Synthwave with The Midnight’ series, which was necessary to access knowledge of specific plugins used and creative processes undertaken by the band to make the song. In the video series, McEwan introduces himself as ‘one half of The Midnight, I produce all the

tracks' (Sonic Academy 01 Playthrough and Introduction', n.d). My discussion also includes melodic spectrogram analysis, (through Sonic Visualiser), a structural-arrangement visualization (see previous) as well as short excerpts of scored parts. All scored excerpts are indicative of core parts only and any which contain bar numbers are arbitrary (i.e. bar numbers do not necessarily reflect the track).

'The Comeback Kid' is in C major and has a tempo of 118bpm. The track has four main synth parts: main synth, dreamy synth, synth bell and outro synth. It operates a mostly verse-chorus structure and includes a guitar solo. The chords of the introduction, verse and chorus are C, G and F, with one use of Am towards the end of the verse phrases. The drums (SP5 Four-on-the-floor Drums) include further percussion of handclaps. The kick on 'The Comeback Kid' is Sonic Academy's Kick 2 plugin, which McEwan used as a sampler. He applied EQ to the kick through the FabFilter Pro Q, stating how a 'clicky kick' sound is usually his preference. He also used some U-he Satin Tape Distortion, to 'fatten' the sound and add 'presence' and 'warmth'. The snare on 'The Comeback Kid' is two layered snare samples, one which has EQ (Waves V-EQ3) and bitcrusher (Digital Grimebox) applied, and one which has FabFilter Pro Q applied. Use of reverb on the drums is mostly Valhalla Vintage Verb, as McEwan felt this gives a 'retro [19]80s touch' (Sonic Academy 03 Snares, n.d). Handclaps are heard in 'The Comeback Kid', which McEwan created through two samples. Of the two sample layers, he applied bitcrusher (Digital Grimebox) to one layer and a Vulf compressor (a 'vintage compressor') to the other (Sonic Academy 04 Claps, n.d). McEwan explained that the claps were intended to 'sound cheap and degraded and retro' (Sonic Academy 04 Claps, n.d). The hi-hats heard on 'The Comeback Kid' are also created from two layered sounds, both through a Kontakt sampler and one of these being a LinnDrum sample. McEwan quantised the sixteenth notes heard on the track, and commented, 'I kind of embrace that it sounds like a drum machine. I never go for realistic drumming' (Sonic Academy 05 Hats, n.d). The toms heard on 'The Comeback Kid' are from 'Logic's own EXS24 Sampler' using a 'bunch of retro drums ... drum machine samples [the] SC-

6



FIGURE 2.3 Introduction bassline heard in ‘The Comeback Kid’ (2016) (heard at 0’33 when the drums enter). [🔗](#)



FIGURE 2.4 Dreamy synth heard in ‘The Comeback Kid’ (2016) (Timecode 0’49). [🔗](#)

Another synth heard is the ‘bell synth’ (SP3b FM Bell Lead – here heard as a countermelody) which is created with Spire and the ‘sms keys kingdom hearts’ patch. McEwan adds a Valhalla Shimmer reverb to this synth, explaining how: ‘The shimmer is an absolutely gorgeous reverb, it’s amazing on pads I used it on the ‘Memories’ [Track 12 from *Endless Summer*] pads’ (Sonic Academy 11 Bell, n.d). The bell has two layers, representing two octaves. Each layer has a pitch range of an octave (G4-G5 and G5-G6). [Figure 2.5](#) represents the G5-G6 octave layer.

The final synth named by McEwan is the ‘soft outro synth’, which he explains is a ‘synth from Diva, U-he ... it’s called [HS] Flaming June’ (Sonic Academy 12 Soft Outro Synth, n.d). The part has a pitch range of a fifth, C5-G5 ([Figure 2.6](#)).

McEwan explained how the guitar solo (SP7 Electric Guitar Melodies) heard at 3’40 ‘is a lead synth with guitar distortion’, the Rob Papen Blue Synth (Sonic Academy 15 Guitar Lead, n.d). He adds ‘Devastor’, a multiband distortion unit, and explains how ‘its about distorting it and making it sound like a slick 80s metal lead’ (Sonic Academy 15 Guitar Lead, n.d). Of the notes played in the solo, McEwan explained, ‘it’s definitely me jamming around in the studio and building the solo bit by bit’. Chorus and reverb are added to the guitar synths, and McEwan explains, ‘Chorus is a great way of making it sound [19]80s, they put chorus on

everything in the [19]80s and that's why it's fun making synthwave' (Sonic Academy 15 Guitar Lead, n.d).



FIGURE 2.5 Synth bell heard in 'The Comeback Kid' (2016)
(Timecode at 1'22). [↗](#)



FIGURE 2.6 Outro synth heard in 'The Comeback Kid' (2016)
(Timecode 4'20). [↗](#)



FIGURE 2.7 Vocal 'Ye-ah!' heard in 'The Comeback Kid' (2016)
(Timecode 0'33). [↗](#)

For the vocals, Tyler performs the lead vocal, while McEwan sings the 'yeahs!' heard in the introduction and instrumental sections ([Figure 2.7](#)).

An example of the lead verse vocal is shown in [Figure 2.8](#), which has a fairly narrow vocal range of C3-F3. The verse part has a mostly ascending melodic contour, while the chorus part is mainly descending, offering the listener a sort of mirrored effect.

An example of the lead chorus vocal is shown in [Figure 2.9](#), which has a vocal range of B3-F4.

Use of filtering in the track is noticeable. In the introduction, the main synth and the bass synth have a LPF applied, using the 'Lohi' (Goodhertz) filter for the former and the 'Runciter' for the bass synth. In the introduction, the LPF of the main synth is set at 480hz, and gradually enables more frequencies to be heard until the drums enter at 0'32. This

filtering is visible on Sonic Visualiser's melodic spectrogram. For the outro, McEwan does the opposite with the filtering, gradually closing the filters so that the sound dies away (Sonic Academy 19 Automation 1, n.d).

Chapter 2 Conclusion

Through virtual ethnography, interview data, analysis and participant–observer audio experiments, this chapter has exemplified the synthwave creative process. I have outlined specific style parameters which are important to synthwave, in addition to how they are created, valued and understood by the community. I have drawn links to 1980s music technology (and neighbouring decades) to explain how the synthwave community privilege this decade in their music. I have demonstrated how community discourse and tutorial resources contribute to how synthwave creators learn and hone and develop their own synthwave creative processes. Later chapters will consider particular subgenres of synthwave, such as the vocal synthwave subgenre ([Chapter 4](#)) and the darksynth subgenre ([Chapter 3](#)). A later chapter reviews synthwave style parameters in a live setting ([Chapter 5](#)), through live concert ethnographies.



FIGURE 2.8 Verse vocal ‘The Comeback Kid’ (2016) (Timecode 1’06). [🔗](#)

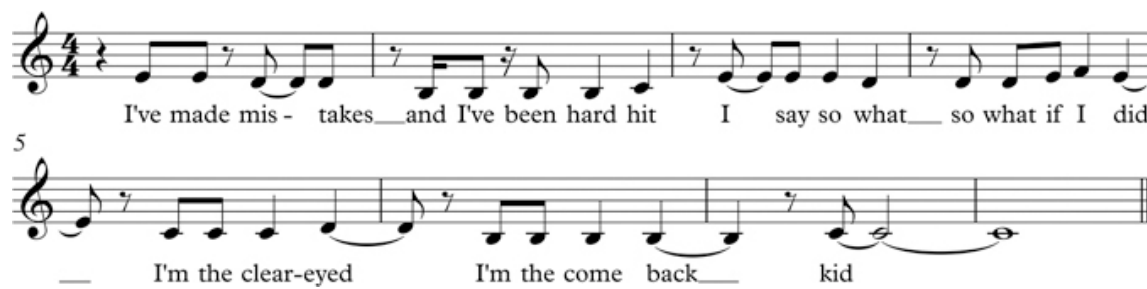


FIGURE 2.9 Chorus vocal ‘The Comeback Kid’ (2016) (Timecode 1’55). [↗](#)

Notes

1. Audio experiments are accessible from my website: <https://jessicablaiseward.wixsite.com/blaiserunner/phd-research-information-1> (see ‘Style Parameter Audio Experiments are available to view from this Google Drive’). Should this link disappear please contact the author: jessicablaise.ward@gmail.com (<https://linktr.ee/blaisejess>). [↗](#)
2. Arturia V Collection: <https://www.arturia.com/products/software-instruments/v-collection/overview> [Accessed April 2025]. [↗](#)
3. Prices accurate as of May 2025 and sourced from official websites unless otherwise stated. [↗](#)
4. Prices accurate as of May 2025 and sourced from official websites unless otherwise stated. [↗](#)
5. Prices accurate as of May 2025 and sourced from official websites unless otherwise stated. [↗](#)
6. Audio experiments are accessible from my website: <https://jessicablaiseward.wixsite.com/blaiserunner/phd-research-information-1>. [↗](#)
7. For example, ‘the first three channels of the SN76489 are fixed and can output only square waves, while any of the AY-38910’s three channels can output sound from the square wave generator, the noise generator or both simultaneously’ ([Grimshaw-Aagaard and Gibbons, 2024](#), p. 161–162). [↗](#)
8. E.g. Pet Shop Boys ‘West End Girls’ (1984): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKUaYvGMj8Q> (Paul Shepherd, 2014). [↗](#)
9. Timecodes on this diagram indicate where parts are heard clearly in the track. [↗](#)

3

METALHEADS IN THE SYNTHWAVE COMMUNITY – MAKING DARKSYNTH

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In this chapter, I examine one synthwave subgenre, darksynth, including its musical and cultural tenets, and notably its links to metal, horror film and sci-fi music soundtracks. By extension, I investigate the synthwave community's relationship to 1980s popular culture, which they use to construct a community identity and formulate elements of synthwave subcultural capital. One element of this capital is the work of American filmmaker and music composer John Carpenter, who is highly regarded by the online community. Whilst Carpenter's significance and legacy within the film industry is well recognised overall ([Conrich and Woods, 2005](#)) and not specifically by the synthwave community, he has actively engaged with synthwave artists and audiences. Examples include his participation in synthwave documentary *The Rise of the Synths* (2019) and his spoken monologue performances on GUNSHIP's songs 'Tech Noir' (2015) and 'Tech Noir II' (2023) for albums *GUNSHIP* (2015) and *UNICORN* (2023) respectively. Actions such as these, paired with synths being the 'distinctive sound of many early Carpenter movies' ([Conrich and Woods, 2005](#), p. 60),

have solidified knowledge of the filmmaker and composer as subcultural capital of synthwave.

Despite a universal recognition of Carpenter by the online community, it is the darksynth subgenre which draws the strongest ties to him musically. When paired with influences of metal, and in some cases, influence from sci-fi soundtracks within the cyberpunk genre, results in the musical characterisation of the darksynth sound. These combined influences have led many to consider darksynth as a ‘gateway’ style to synthwave (including a gateway to other synthwave subgenres that are not darksynth) and particularly for listeners of metal.

In an analysis of the darksynth subgenre, this chapter investigates associated artists (including artist demographics – see discussion of gender in particular), music, musical and cultural influences, as well as providing an account of synthwave subcultural capital in line with the community’s privileging of 1980s popular culture and aesthetics. The chapter is structured as follows: I provide a community definition of darksynth, which consists of survey data (September 2019 and November 2023) and findings from my virtual ethnography (3.1). Following this, I analyse the interview responses of artists who have been affiliated with the darksynth subgenre (3.2). To investigate the darksynth subgenre stylistically, I analyse ‘Diabolic’ (2016) by duo Dance with the Dead and ‘A Long Walk’ (2017) (3.3) by French solo artist SIERRA VEINS – these are both artists whom the community affiliate with darksynth and synthwave. I conclude the chapter by collating my findings about darksynth’s subgenre formation within the online synthwave community.

3.1 Born of John Carpenter and Metal: The Darksynth Subgenre

For a community definition of darksynth, I refer to [Table 1.1](#) from [Chapter 1](#). This table presents alternative names used by the community for darksynth, such as ‘horror synth’ ([Freewave, 2018](#)), ‘slasherwave’ (Survey

Anons, 2023) and ‘cyberpunk’ ([Absolute Valentine, 2024](#)). It also shows musical descriptions of darksynth with suggested representative artists.

Further descriptions by my survey respondents (November 2023) included reference to darksynth’s: ‘harsher, grittier, more distorted tones’ (Survey Anon, 2023) and ‘cyberpunk dystopia experience’ (Survey Anon, 2023). *Blade Runner* (1982) and the work of film composer Vangelis is quintessentially cyberpunk in matter ([Hamblin and O’Connell, 2020](#), p. 1) and the online synthwave community certainly consider this film significant to synthwave (Survey Anons, 2023). This is related to the soundtrack’s prominent use of synths (particularly the Yamaha CS-80) and the fact the film was released in the 1980s, a decade which the community privilege. Music technology scholar KC Collins provided a short overview of the term cyberpunk:

TABLE 1.1 (Restated From [Chapter 1](#)) Example Synthwave Subgenres.



<i>Synthwave Subgenre</i>	<i>Musical Description</i>	<i>Representative Artists</i>
-------------------------------	----------------------------	-------------------------------

<i>Synthwave Subgenre</i>	<i>Musical Description</i>	<i>Representative Artists</i>
Darksynth Dark Synthwave (Survey Anons, 2023).		
Darkwave (Survey Anons, 2023).	‘cyberpunk-style harder and darker electronic metal’ (Survey Anon, 2023).	Perturbator, Carpenter Brut, Mega Drive (Freewave, 2018), Dance with the Dead, GosT, Absolute Valentine, Power Glove, Magic Sword, SIERRA VEINS
Horror Synth (Freewave, 2018)	‘faster tempos... . Many in the darksynth scene have metal backgrounds’ (Freewave, 2018).	
Slasherwave (Survey Anons, 2023).		
Shredwave (Meteor, 2024).		
Cyberpunk (Freewave, 2018 ; Absolute Valentine, 2024).		

The term cyberpunk is generally credited to Bruce Bethke’s 1983 story of the same name, but it became recognised through its use a year later

by journalist Gardner Dozois to characterize the predominantly dystopian (anti-utopian) science fiction sub-genre incorporating writers such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and John Shirley. Cyberpunks are associated with technophilia, computer and hacker culture, smart drugs, and dark futuristic narratives.

([*Collins, 2005*](#), p. 165)

Through darksynth's influences of metal, horror film soundtracks and cyberpunk styles, the subgenre is in some cases musically broader than other subgenres of synthwave. This has led to community members asserting that it warrants its own genre, rather than being known as a subgenre of synthwave: 'Darksynth used to be part of synthwave and it has grown into its own genre' (Survey Anon, 2023). This certainly speaks to darksynth's popularity within the online community. When respondents of my November 2023 survey named favourite artists of the darksynth subgenre, common choices included Perturbator, Carpenter Brut, Power Glove, Dynatron, GosT, Dance with the Dead, Dan Terminus, DEADLIFE, Volkor X, Magic Sword, LeBrock, Dimi Kaye, Zombie Hyperdrive, Meteor and others. Many qualified their reasons for liking these artists with reference to metal, horror film soundtracks and cyberpunk. They also praised how well artists fused synthwave with these styles:

Survey Anon: 'Carpenter Brut – straddles the line between synthwave and metal'.

Survey Anon: 'Dance with the Dead – [a] great mixture of metal with electronic parts'.

Survey Anon: 'Volkor X: [has a] strong connection with metal'.

Survey Anon: 'Carpenter Brut – dark, heavy, brutal. I listen to a lot of heavy metal ... CB manages to marry both genres [synthwave and metal] quite beautifully, especially on his *Leather Terror* [2022] album'.

Survey Anon: 'Perturbator – [a] darksynth pioneer. As a metalhead I really enjoyed [his] stuff'.

Survey Anon: ‘CB [Carpenter Brut] creates high-energy, danceable music that is the heavy metal soundtrack to an 80s [1980s] slasher flick that blends synths and guitars to great effect’.

Survey Anon: ‘Power Glove ... cyberpunk cinematic sounds’ (Survey Anons, 2023).

Some respondents commented more broadly on darksynth in reference to its stylistic roots: ‘Darker subgenres of synthwave (like darksynth) are great reminders of a time of classic horror movies’ (Survey Anon, 2023). These comments recognise key influences of darksynth as metal, horror film (and by extension sci-fi or cyberpunk) soundtracks. My survey data from September 2019 reflected these findings also. Specifically, where respondents had named metal as one of their preferred music types, they also named some of their favourite synthwave artists as from the darksynth subgenre (GosT, Perturbator, Dance with the Dead, Carpenter Brut, DEADLIFE, Mega Drive, Dynatron, Magic Sword, Dan Terminus, and Tommy ’86). This clarifies some of the musical links between metal and darksynth. Some respondents also suggested what they named as ‘gateway’ artists from metal to synthwave, for example one who named Dance with the Dead as their ‘favourite darksynth group ... whose music got me interested in [synthwave]’ (Survey Anon, 2019). A similar comment was made about Dynatron, who ‘got me into the genre [synthwave]’ (Survey Anon, 2019). One survey respondent noted broadly how darksynth ‘draws in a lot of metalheads who wouldn’t usually listen to electronica’ (Survey Anon, 2019). My survey data from September 2023 contained similar comments about ‘gateway artists’: ‘Carpenter Brut – He introduced me to darksynth... . I came to synthwave from a metal background, so this music hit home’ (Survey Anon, 2023). Carpenter Brut reflected on his style in interview with *Metal Hammer*: ‘I’m a son of metal... . With Carpenter Brut, I gather completely different people. Metalheads, electro fans’ ([Chillingworth, 2022](#)).

When referring to horror film soundtracks and classic horror films, respondents of my surveys (September 2019 and November 2023) also

spoke of John Carpenter specifically (amongst other historical film soundtrack composers e.g. Vangelis, John Hughes, Brad Fiedel), referring to the use of synths in his soundtracks:

Survey Anon: ‘The whole genre came out of appreciation for [19]80s synth music, especially stuff like John Carpenter’s soundtracks’ (*Survey Anon*, 2019).

Survey Anon: ‘It’s a rereading of the music of pioneers such as John Carpenter, Vangelis, Brad Fiedel’ (*Survey Anon*, 2023).

Survey Anon: ‘Synthwave is a genre born in the early 2000s that emulates the sounds of the [19]80s, specifically scores of John Carpenter’ (*Survey Anon*, 2023).

Key horror film soundtracks by Carpenter include the *Halloween* franchise (e.g. *Halloween* [1978], *Halloween II* [1981], *Halloween III: Season on the Witch* [1982]), as well as *Prince of Darkness* (1987). Synthesizer text *Synth Gems* (2022) notes how Carpenter used the Sequential Prophet-5 on *Halloween* (1978) and *Halloween II* (1981) ([Metlay, 2021](#), p. 116). Whilst John Carpenter has directed across several genres of film (e.g. sci-fi films such as *They Live* [1988]), action/sci-fi films such as *Escape from New York* [1981]) ‘horror is the genre with which [he] has been most associated’ ([Conrich and Woods, 2005](#), p. 1).

While John Carpenter is well recognised within the film industry ([Conrich and Woods, 2005](#), p. 3), it is notable how he has engaged with the synthwave community: ‘I had the privilege of narrating a documentary about the origins of synthwave music’ (17.10.2022, Twitter/X). Several of my survey respondents (November 2023) praised Carpenter’s more direct work with synthwave: ‘I’ll never forget the first time I heard that John Carpenter intro on “Tech Noir” [2015]. And the way they followed it up with “Tech Noir 2” [2023] on *UNICORN* [2023] almost 10 years later was just magical’ (*Survey Anon*, 2023). Comments such as this demonstrate how the community value John Carpenter’s work, view his input to synthwave and resultantly consider knowledge of him and his work as key

subcultural capital of synthwave. The recognition by John Carpenter of synthwave only reinforces this capital.

When reviewing synthwave subcultural capital of John Carpenter, it is noteworthy how the filmmaker's work has not only manifested musically, but also of artist names: 'Carpenter Brut's name is almost certainly inspired by John Carpenter's surname' ([Sunglasses Kid, 2019](#)). This was confirmed by Carpenter Brut, in interview with *Decibel Magazine*: 'the name comes from Charpentier Brut champagne. But it also made sense with John Carpenter's universe' ([Dick, 2018](#)). Further reverence of John Carpenter's work is evidenced by survey comments which described him as 'the grandfather of synthwave', with his 'undersigning of the entire movement' (Survey Anon, 2019). This comment seems to position the creative works of synthwave artists as inspired by, and celebratory of, the work of John Carpenter (and particularly of creative musical works made with synths).

It is useful here, in an understanding of darksynth, to review descriptions of both horror film soundtracks, metal and to some extent cyberpunk, to unpack how darksynth artists combine these influences musically and culturally into their sound. Film scholars consider 'classic slasher franchises' such as *Psycho* (1960) to have influenced key horror film releases from the late 1970s and 1980s, such as *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) ([Francis, 2013](#), p. 8). Film scholar James Francis Jr outlined the specific sound coding of horror film soundtracks, which teach audience members 'narrative formulas and film techniques that are specific to the field' ([Francis, 2013](#), p. 13). For instance, Francis described John Carpenter's work on *Halloween* (1978), in which: 'the piano, synthesizer, and other instrumental sounds give weight to the onscreen action, but Carpenter also uses key sound effects, such as heavy breathing, screaming, whimpering, gasping, potted plants breaking, and car tires screeching' ([Francis, 2013](#), p. 40). Carpenter's work has also been noted generally for 'synthesizer score[s]' ([Odell and Le Blanc, 2001](#)), with: 'mood tones [that] set up suspense in a scene. They often take the form of ominous drones, occasionally accompanied by continuous staccato rhythms' ([Odell and Le Blanc, 2001](#), p. 16). Use of leitmotifs are also key

to horror, defined as: '[different to] motifs, in that they more specifically represent repeated musical compositions (or sounds) related to a particular character. [E.g. *Halloween's*] The Shape has the continual exclamatory synth-stingers, and ominous breathing' ([Muir, 2005](#)). Whilst not strictly musically staccato, one of the most famous leitmotifs from a horror film soundtrack is the high-pitched string stabs from the shower scene in *Psycho* (1960). Equally, horror soundtracks must accommodate the inevitable 'anxiety-inducing chase scene' ([Muir, 2005](#)), which often utilise musical components of rhythm and meter (e.g. an increasing or faster tempo or use of faster rhythms) to convey a sense of urgency and terror. It is horror film coding such as these examples which darksynth artists incorporate to their songs (expanded shortly).

In tandem with horror coding, darksynth artists incorporate metal guitar parts, which typically utilise guitar riffs ([Bayer, 2009](#), p. 79) and 'virtuoso solo guitar playing' ([Herbst, 2017b](#), p. 232). 'Virtuosity' in this context is understood as 'shredding', which means 'fast playing combined with a range of playing techniques ... tapping, string skipping, bended tones, artificial harmonics' ([Herbst, 2017b](#), p. 232). Of metal harmony, sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris described how speed metal is often 'Phrygian or Locrian' ([Kahn-Harris, 2007](#), p. 31), while musicologist Esa Lilja demonstrated the prevalence of the Aeolian mode in heavy metal music ([Lilja, 2009](#)).

When considering darksynth's cyberpunk influences in musical terms, KC Collins notes how: 'industrial music ... seems to have a particularly close affinity to cyberpunk' ([Collins, 2005](#), p. 166). She expanded: 'Industrial artists frequently sample from popular cyberpunk films such as *Blade Runner* [1982] or *The Matrix* [1999]' ([Collins, 2005](#), p. 166). Her discussion of industrial music's 'bricolage' and 'detournement' are particularly interesting, the former of which refers to the creation of things through diverse materials and the latter: 'the use of appropriated materials in ways that alter their original meaning' ([Collins, 2005](#), p. 169). As a direct example of the latter, several synthwave songs (and darksynth songs in particular) include samples of 1980s film character dialogue, such as

Perturbator's 'Humans Are Such Easy Prey' (2014), which uses dialogue from *The Terminator* (1984). Collins recognised how the sci-fi genre has impacted industrial and cyberpunk music: 'The most important influence on industrial and cyberpunk is the long history of science fiction, particularly that of dystopian sci-fi' ([Collins, 2005](#), p. 170). Of sci-fi in particular, the soundtrack to *Blade Runner* (1982) is notably revered by the synthwave community, written by Greek film composer Vangelis. Perturbator praised *Blade Runner* (1982) in an interview with *jeszczenie*: 'I ... find a lot of beauty in those dark and moody visions of the future as seen in movies like *Blade Runner* (1982), *Akira* (1988) or *Escape From New York* (1981)' ([Rajmund, 2014](#)).

3.2 Issues of Representation in the Darksynth Subgenre

My survey data from September 2019 and November 2023 evidenced a lack of female and non-binary artists associated with darksynth. Only one was named in my September 2019 data with relation to a 'favourite artists' question (Powder Slut). No other female or non-binary artists associated with darksynth were named e.g. Glitbiter, exandroid, SIERRA VEINS, Zith, Kriistal Ann, Isabella Goloversic, Greta Link, Rose Thaler, Surgeryhead aka Valentine Loughcrewe (they/them), Virtual Intelligence aka Lacrimorta (she/they), Varien, Lazermortis, Circe Electro, Nuda, ZXSP (they/she), Nuovo Testamento, Maniac Lover, 2Morbid and 2Libras (both groups include a female member). Equally, no female or non-binary artists associated with darksynth were named in my November 2023 data. I use the phrase 'associated with darksynth' here to allow for the degree to which any of these artists identify with the subgenre, and refer primarily to discourse which surrounds these artists (i.e. where listeners, fans, community members etc. have labelled these artists as darksynth or with similar terminology). When consulting sources within the online community, I noticed that one dedicated article to darksynth¹ showed little to no evidence of representing female or non-binary artists, predominantly representing male artists (of those I could verify through pronouns used

across artists' social medias, music reviews or other relevant online sources e.g. Bandcamp, writing credits etc.). Equally, one blog page on darksynth shows only male artists ([Freewave, 2018](#)). Given darksynth's ties to metal, these findings were not entirely unexpected, but still informative of a lack of representation for female and non-binary darksynth artists within the community. At its core, metal is 'a discourse shaped by patriarchy' ([Walser, 1993](#)). Many of metal's key traits have been characterised in reference to masculinity, such as 'power, expressed as sheer volume' ([Weinstein, 2000](#), p. 23). Sociologist Deena Weinstein also highlighted the importance of the guitar to metal, which 'distorts and amplifies' with 'virtuoso lead-guitar techniques' ([Weinstein, 2000](#), pp. 16–23), and is part of an arrangement which connotes masculinity through pitch ([Weinstein, 2000](#), p. 122). In particular, metal audiences appreciate 'the bottom sound, the source of the term "heavy" in "heavy metal"' ([Weinstein, 2000](#), p. 122). When considering darksynth's links to horror film and sci-fi soundtracks, it is notable that women are less represented as film composers overall ([Grills, 2019](#)), and so too as film directors of horror ([Peirse, 2020](#), p. 3). It is possible that darksynth's stylistic and musical roots (which evidence a lack of gender representation) have trickled down to darksynth as a subgenre, and as such play a part in reducing the visibility of female and non-binary darksynth artists when compared to their male counterparts. In particular, metal's historically majority male artist demographic is well documented ([Weinstein, 2000](#); [Walser, 1993](#)), though artists such as Spiritbox, Jinjer, Poppy, Within Temptation, Evanescence, Nightwish, Lacuna Coil, Halestorm, Emily Armstrong of Linkin Park, The Iron Maidens, Conquer Divide, Harper, amongst others, continue to challenge this.²

To understand more about the experiences of those affiliated with the darksynth subgenre, interviews were conducted. Questions targeted artist identification with darksynth, musical influences, artist background, artist song arrangements and experiences within the online synthwave community. Male, female and non-binary artists affiliated with the darksynth subgenre were interviewed. Male artists included: Dance with the Dead, GosT, Gregorio Franco, Absolute Valentine, Dynatron, Aeronexus,

Tommy '86, Ultraboss, Facehugger, Occams Laser, DEADLIFE, GhostDrive, Meteor, IRVING FORCE, Midnight Danger, VHS Glitch, Fixions, Shaun of LeBrock, Volkor X, Venturer, Pownerd, Glitch Black, Nightstop, Jon of the Shred. Female and non-binary artists or groups which include female artists included: SIERRA VEINS, Glitbiter, exandroid, Kriistal Ann, Rose Thaler, Surgeryhead aka Valentine Loughcrewe (they/them), 2Libras, Virtual Intelligence aka Lacrimorta (she/they), 2Morbid, Maniac Lover, Lazermortis, ZXSP (they/she) and Circe Electro. Regarding interview questions, my question about identifying with darksynth served two purposes: one, to examine if artists self-identified with darksynth or the degree to which the community had applied that label, and two, to examine female and non-binary artists' inclination to self-identify with darksynth given the subgenre's strong reputation for male artists. Questions about artists' musical influences aimed to understand how impactful (or not) key darksynth influences such as horror, metal and cyberpunk influences were to artists.

When speaking of musical influence (in reference to themselves and darksynth more broadly) several male interviewees named 1980s metal styles as influential, particularly thrash metal, glam metal, death metal and black metal. For example, Tony Kim of Dance with the Dead suggested that thrash metal was of influence to them through naming representative artists, such as Metallica, Megadeth and Pantera ([Tony Kim of Dance with the Dead, 2021](#)). Occams [Laser \(2021\)](#) felt that glam metal's 'over the top guitar solos [and] some sort of synth playing a solo part' had influenced darksynth. Midnight Danger made similar comments: 'I notice that many darksynth artists listen to black metal [and] death metal. I myself listen much more to [19]80s glam metal and traditional heavy metal' ([Midnight Danger, 2021](#)). Gregorio Franco also cited 'death metal' as one of their influences ([Gregorio Franco, 2023](#)), while Meteor explained that he: 'started mixing electronic synthwave with classic glam and AOR [adult-oriented rock] guitar riffs and solos ... the scene itself gave a name to this combination, titling it: shredwave' ([Meteor, 2024](#)). Slo from Fixions summarised: 'I think every darksynth artist [has] got an extreme metal

background. We are mainly 30+ [age] boys, so we grew up listening to metal in the [19]80s and [19]90s' ([Slo from Fixions, 2021](#)). Glitch Black concurred darksynth's ties to metal: 'Several darksynth artists have their roots in metal and were part of metal bands before transitioning to solo electronic projects that many would consider darksynth' ([Glitch Black, 2021](#)). GosT, Dynatron and Venturer spoke more generally of 'metal' as influential to their songwriting style ([Venturer, 2023](#)), with GosT referencing also EBM and industrial music ([GosT, 2024](#)) and Dynatron mentioning 'soundtrack' music (Dynatron, 2024). Facexhugger also cited 'metal' as one of their influences ([Facexhugger, 2023](#)). While these comments include recognition of 1980s metal styles as influential to darksynth (thrash, glam, death and black metal), demonstrating one way in which the subgenre harks back to and communicates components of this decade, other influences named account for other decades (e.g. industrial music of the 1990s, and it should be noted here that black metal extends to the 1990s e.g. Norwegian metal). Volkor X's comment suggested that the influence of metal is not necessarily fixated on the 1980s:

I think a majority of darksynth artists come from or are very influenced by the metal scene. There's definitely a relationship between the heavy guitars and the distorted synths, but I think the artists are more influenced by the imagery, the folklore (Satanism, inverted crosses and pentagrams, skulls ...) than by any band or metal genre in particular.

([Volkor X, 2021](#))

VHS Glitch made similar comments: 'I think it is influenced by metal music in general, [but] not a specific decade or subgenre' ([VHS Glitch, 2021](#)). These comments recognise a diversity in metal subgenres as influential to darksynth.

Artists also spoke of metal in reference to musical components (which formed part of their creative process, or in reference to ones they had noted in other darksynth artist's songs): 'I'd say there's influence from all sorts of

metal in darksynth, a lot of groove-based stuff when it comes to riffs' ([IRVING, 2021](#)). VHS Glitch described similarly: 'some artists add a lot of distorted guitar riffs to make it sound literally like metal with a few synths on top of them' ([VHS Glitch, 2021](#)). Shaun of LeBrock spoke of 'shredwave', naming artists such as 'Dance with the Dead, Ultraboss – people just shredding guitars' ([Shaun Phillips of LeBrock, 2018](#)).

Male interviewees identified their music with darksynth or synthwave to varying degrees, with the strongest agreements from Occams Laser: 'Yes I would definitely define myself as a darksynth artist' ([Occams Laser, 2021](#)). Midnight Danger: 'Yes I do! ... to describe the mood ... of my music' ([Midnight Danger, 2021](#)). IRVING FORCE: 'I would definitely consider my earlier stuff to be partially darksynth, yes!' ([IRVING FORCE, 2021](#)). And Powernerd: 'Yes! [Do you consider yourself a synthwave artist]' ([Powernerd, 2024](#)). Aeronexus also agreed: 'I am a mix of synthwave and darksynth I like to dabble in them all as I really enjoy the range ... I make both. As I have releases in both!' ([Aeronexus, 2024](#)). Facexhugger focused more broadly on synthwave than darksynth: 'my trademark sounds fit the synthwave genre best' ([Facexhugger, 2023](#)). Some responses were less committal, instead describing darksynth as one 'flavour' of their music ([Volkor X, 2021](#)), or their being 'darksynth influenced' ([GhostDrive, 2021](#)). Dynatron explained how their music has: 'synthwave elements ... but it's pulling a lot of inspiration from metal [too]' (Dynatron, 2024). DEADLIFE felt that some of their music fit the darksynth subgenre: 'I'm not confined to that [darksynth], but I definitely have some releases that fit' ([DEADLIFE, 2021](#)). Equally, GosT explained: 'I do sort of. [I'm] based in synthwave but seem to be looped in with darkwave and slasherwave' ([GosT, 2024](#)). Gregorio Franco spoke similarly, describing their music as a combination of synthwave, darksynth and metal ([Gregorio Franco, 2023](#)). Tommy '86 also recognised a multitude of styles that he writes in: 'I consider myself an electronic music artist. I don't like to lock myself in a box and do the same thing all the time... . For a little over 10 years, I made synthwave, italo-disco, darksynth' ([Tommy '86, 2024](#)). Absolute Valentine stated that his music explores 'soundscapes that draw from cyberpunk, dark electro, and

many other styles’ ([Absolute Valentine, 2024](#)), with IRVING FORCE (in an additional interview in 2023) making comparable comments: ‘I ... think of what I do now as cyberpunk’ ([IRVING FORCE, 2023](#)). Ultraboss stated that he used to consider himself a synthwave artist, but now incorporates several styles beyond this including ‘retro AOR [adult-oriented rock]’ ([Ultraboss, 2023](#)). Notably, one of his EPs is titled *This Is Shredwave* (2020). I found artist responses about community labelling particularly interesting, e.g. VHS Glitch’s response: ‘Listeners like to tag me as a darksynth artist, so I guess that’s what [I am]’ (VHS Glitch, 2021) and Volkor X’s comments in an updated interview, where he stated that he did not necessarily identify his music with synthwave anymore, but acknowledged that ‘some of my fans still do’ ([Volkor X, 2023](#)). Comments such as this suggest some darksynth artists are fan-termed, as opposed to artists wholly identifying with the subgenre themselves.

Horror film soundtracks were also cited as influential, with many naming John Carpenter specifically. Gregorio Franco confirmed, ‘I am heavily influenced by John Carpenter’s synthesized soundtracks’ (Gregorio Franco, 2023), and Facexhugger concurred: ‘John Carpenter and Goblin are also very influential to my song writing style’ (Facexhugger, 2023). VHS Glitch spoke more broadly: ‘anything that involves ... horror ... definitely influences my music’ (VHS Glitch, 2021). Occams Laser agreed, ‘I definitely take inspiration at least tonally from some of the [19]70s and [19]80s horror [and their] synth sounds’ ([Occams Laser, 2021](#)). Midnight Danger explained how his work is ‘highly inspired by horror movies soundtracks’ (Midnight Danger, 2021), and IRVING FORCE reported that ‘John Carpenters soundtracks were a big inspiration... . He is a legend’ (IRVING FORCE, 2021). Slo’s comments were similar: ‘I really dig [John] Carpenter’s movies original soundtracks’ ([Slo from Fixions, 2021](#)).

In addition to comments about the musical influence of horror film soundtracks, three male artists outlined a more direct use of horror films as part of their creative process. Facexhugger explained: ‘I try to imagine scenes in a horror/sci-fi movie and I picture what I’m creating playing in the background’ (Facexhugger, 2023). Tony Kim of Dance with the Dead

spoke similarly: ‘When we were writing (*The Shape* [2016] album), we would also have movies playing in the background ... we would write to what we were watching as if we were scoring it’ (Tony Kim of *Dance with the Dead*, 2021). Finally, *Midnight Danger* described the added use of his album work as soundtrack music for his horror style comics (*Midnight Danger*, 2021). These responses support horror film soundtracks as a key influence on darksynth, as well as demonstrating how John Carpenter is considered subcultural capital of synthwave.

Most of the female and non-binary artists I interviewed (inclusive of groups which include female/non-binary artists) considered themselves darksynth or synthwave artists to some extent. In response to, ‘Do you identify as a darksynth/synthwave artist?’ Rose Thaler said ‘Yes absolutely! ... I write synthwave/darksynth/electro dark’ ([Rose Thaler, 2023](#)). Kriistal Ann (aka one half of ‘Greek darkwave duo Paradox Obscur’)³ responded with: ‘Yes, some might put me in that category of darksynth, but ... my music ... could be characterized as ... electronic alternative [or] synthwave ... with experimental approach’ ([Kriistal Ann, 2021](#)). Virtual Intelligence explained: ‘during my *PAINSYNC* era [2020 album] I considered myself to be a synthwave artist’ ([Virtual Intelligence, 2020](#)). Some responses were more partial: ‘I’ve made some tracks that have darksynth elements’ ([exandroid, 2021](#)), ‘Yes ... I love to create dark synthwave (darkwave) music’ ([Maniac Lover, 2021](#)), or ‘I do consider myself synthwave ... adjacent’ ([Glitbiter, 2024](#)). Lazermortis explained: ‘I do have several songs that would be classified [as darksynth] ... I identify as a satanic multi-genre synthwave artist’ ([Lazermortis, 2021](#)). Circe Electro described how ‘darksynth is definitely a realm that I love to write for, but I don’t limit myself to one aspect of a much broader soundscape’ ([Circe Electro, 2021](#)). 2Libras did not identify their music with synthwave but said: ‘we add synthwave elements in our songs’ ([2Libras, 2024](#)). These comments demonstrate two important points: one, that a level of ‘bottom up’ fan-terming of darksynth artists is applicable (hinted at by Lazermortis and Kriistal Ann), and two, that some artists view identifying with darksynth wholly as potentially musically restrictive or unrepresentative of their entire

creative and musical style (Circe Electro, 2021; Kriistal Ann, 2021). Of the latter, this did seem to be the case with several male artists too, suggesting several artists affiliated with darksynth do not want to be confined to this label exclusively.

I found it interesting that the instrumentation of songs by female and non-binary darksynth artists featured less guitar parts than are typically heard across darksynth songs by male artists (where the guitar is prominently featured rhythmically and melodically). I also noticed how female and non-binary artists were more willing to use instruments not heard in highly popular darksynth songs (e.g. by Perturbator, *Dance with the Dead*, *Carpenter Brut*), with many incorporating vocal parts (e.g. 'Essential Mist' [2015] by Kriistal Ann, 'Gone' by SIERRA VEINS [2019], 'The Road is Found' [2016] by Rose Thaler). Apart from some examples of female artists featuring as toplineers on darksynth songs, darksynth is traditionally instrumental. I also noticed some piano and acoustic guitar parts across some of exandroid's songs (e.g. 'Bait and Switch' [2020] and 'e.g. never' [2020]) which is unusual for darksynth. These examples demonstrated to me how some female and non-binary darksynth artists are diversifying the darksynth subgenre further with alternative arrangement decisions.

I correlated these findings with musical influences cited by female and non-binary darksynth artists. I found that fewer female and non-binary respondents named styles of metal or horror film and sci-fi soundtracks as musically influential to them. This is despite the fact that horror soundscape drones are prevalent in their musical overall. Five interviewees: Surgeryhead aka Valentine Loughcrewe, exandroid, Rose Thaler, ZXSP and Maniac Lover named metal as influential to their style. Surgeryhead aka Valentine Loughcrewe named 'death metal, industrial ... thrash metal, power metal' ([Surgeryhead aka Valentine Loughcrewe, 2024](#)), exandroid named industrial metal ([exandroid, 2021](#)), Rose Thaler specified 'symphonic metal ... Within Temptation [band]' ([Rose Thaler, 2023](#)), ZXSP named '80s [1980s] metal' ([ZXSP, 2023](#)) and Maniac Lover named 'Black metal... . Doom metal... . Industrial' (Maniac Lover, 2021). Other

respondents named mainly EDM-related styles as influential, such as: ‘electronic alternative’ (Kriistal Ann, 2021) and ‘darksynth, electronica’ (2Libras, 2024). Other respondents were more specific and named influential artists, such as ‘synthpop from the [19]80’s like Gary Numan’ ([Lazermortis, 2021](#)). Circe Electro gave a short list of artists and film composers that she considered influential, including: Gary Numan, John Carpenter, Vangelis, Kate Bush, Debbie Harry, Siouxsie Sioux (Circe Electro, 2021). Only Circe Electro and Virtual Intelligence mentioned the work of John Carpenter or other sci-fi and horror film soundtracks (‘I grew up loving music from movies such as *Blade Runner*, *Aliens*, *Escape from New York*’ [[Virtual Intelligence, 2024](#)]), with no other female or non-binary artists mentioning horror film soundtracks specifically. Some responses included ‘soundtracks’ more broadly (Surgeryhead aka Valentine Loughcrewe, 2024; ZXSP, 2023). These responses reflect well-recognised influences of synthwave more broadly within the community, of film soundtracks, and 1980s synthpop in particular. Generally, there were fewer links drawn to metal and horror film soundtracks by female and non-binary artists.

When I asked female and non-binary artists what their experience of the synthwave community was, many referred to successes: ‘I’ve had some tracks published on big-ish synthwave channels like *The Prime Thanatos*, *Astral Throb*, and *The ‘80s Guy*’ ([exandroid, 2021](#)). 2Libras commented: ‘We were interviewed by Kaarin Zoe Lee on *Nightride FM*’ (2Libras, 2024). Some made observations about gender in the community: ‘it [music] is a heavily male-dominated industry and most women who are in the synthwave scene ... are usually ... vocalists’ ([Lazermortis, 2021](#)). Of the synthwave community generally, 2Libras observed: ‘There is a huge lack of female representation’, though felt that: ‘it now seems to be opening ... up and expanding’ (2Libras, 2024). Some described positive experiences regarding working within the darksynth subgenre, especially those who had worked as feature artists for other (male) darksynth artists. For example, Kriistal Ann explained her work on ‘Arise’ (2016) with GosT: ‘GosT himself approached me for this collaboration after ... admiring my vocals’

(Kriistal Ann, 2021). Other examples of darksynth songs which include female vocals include:

- Pertubator's 'Desire' (2012) and 'Venger' (2016) both featuring Greta Link
- Perturbator's 'Naked Tongues' (2012) and 'Hard Wired' (2014) both featuring Isabella Goloversic
- Gregorio Franco's 'Awakening' [YouTube] (2019) featuring Glitbiter
- Protector 101 and Mecha Maiko 'Dead Broke' (2018)
- DEADLIFE and Mecha Maiko 'Digital Rain' (2018)

Glitbiter ([Figure 3.1](#)) described her collaboration with Gregorio Franco in interview with me:

I got to know Gregorio at first through the synthwave online community, and then met him in person at Atlanta's *Echosynthetic Fest* back in 2017... . Since [his] music was more on the metal side, I figured I'd go back to my roots of opera training, and do something more along the lines of Nightwish/power metal.

(Glitbiter, 2024)

Greta Link spoke about her collaboration with Perturbator on her public Facebook page in 2017, making the suggestion that the music video for 'Venger' (2016) bore resemblance to *Blade Runner 2049* (2017): 'Pretty fucking trippy to hear my voice over these visuals after just watching *Blade Runner 2049*!'



FIGURE 3.1 Glitbiter (artist photo). Photo credit Cameron Loewenstein. Copyright Glitbiter. [↗](#)

Though not interviewed specifically for her affiliation to darksynth, Mecha Maiko (also producer and lead singer of the Dead Astronauts) has done several collaborations within the darksynth subgenre, as well as having had darksynth artists remix her work:

Early on in my career, back when I was still producing music in Dead Astronauts, there was a really strong spirit of collaboration in the synthwave scene. We had reached out to Perturbator to do some remixes for us [and] he agreed to remix the whole EP [2014]. Since then, I [did] more vocal collaborations with Perturbator, GosT, Protector 101, DEADLIFE, to name a few folks who fall into the darksynth scene... . These artists gave me so much room to flesh out ideas of my own. [Despite these collaborations] I don't identify as a darksynth artist [myself]. I feel like darksynth usually nods to metal in some way and that's just not really a part of my musical upbringing/inspiration.

([Mecha Maiko aka Hayley Stewart, 2020](#))

Perturbator spoke in interview about his collaborations with vocalists:

Isabella, Greta Link, Le Cassette are all extremely talented singers and, luckily for me, good friends of mine. Most of the times I like to make the track just for them. ‘Hard Wired’ [2014], for example, was meant to be ‘Naked Tongues’ [2012] part 2 right from the beginning.

([Rajmund, 2014](#))

There were fewer female and non-binary artists interviewed for this chapter than male artists. In the course of my research, I have continually approached the online community seeking further female and non-binary artists associated with the darksynth subgenre. These searches were generally met with support and positivity, though on one occasion, my search for recommendations was downvoted on Reddit. A commenter quickly commented in my defense, but assumed I was male, questioning:

why did anyone downvote this? ... This guy is trying to engage our small community with a prompt like this and people go bury it? Why? Because you hate women? Transwomen? To me it seems you simply hate darksynth, so why don't you fucking leave.

([Reddit, Anon, 2021](#))

Though I was encouraged by this response, I theorised that the assumption I was male was likely related to darksynth's majority artist demographic as male. When I commented back that I am in fact female, this was met with several upvotes, and people continuing to recommend names of artists to me on the thread. However, one commenter stated that they did not consider feature artists as ‘actual’ darksynth artists: ‘I don't think I personally would count the feature female artists as actual darksynth artists’ (Reddit, Anon, 2021), which I felt was too quick an assumption to make and places a lesser value on featured singers over instrumentalists. I do appreciate, however, that this comment may have been implying that

feature artists in general do not necessarily come from the same scene or genre as the artists they collaborate with, though they may. On the whole, this thread's interactions did reinforce my thoughts that the darksynth subgenre carries a relatively male-dominated discourse.

A month later I shared a playlist to Reddit that I had created specifically for female and non-binary artists associated with darksynth, which prompted the first comment: 'music is music, what's the point of this' (Reddit, Anon, 2021). The comment was promptly downvoted, signalling a disagreement with this statement by other community members. Further comments to this thread were positive, with members naming artists that I could add to the playlist and thanking me for creating it.

In an analysis of darksynth music, I now formally analyse and deconstruct two case study darksynth songs. Whilst the present section has focused on representation and gender within the darksynth subgenre, the song analyses section illustrates some of the breadth of musical styles which exists within the subgenre. Particularly, my analysis of *Dance with the Dead* illustrates horror themes and strong metal themes within darksynth, whereas my analysis of *SIERRA VEINS* illustrates some of the more industrial and EBM (electronic body music) styles within darksynth.

3.3 Case Study Analyses of Darksynth Tracks

3.3.1 Analysis of 'Diabolic' (2016) Dance with the Dead

'Diabolic' (2016) is track eight of *Dance with the Dead*'s album *The Shape* (2016) ([Figure 3.2](#)), an album which shares its title with the alternative name for character Michael Myers from horror film *Halloween* (1978) by John Carpenter. *Dance with the Dead* naming songs after characters from films by Carpenter demonstrates one way in which artists express their knowledge of the filmmaker, which resultantly demonstrates subcultural capital of synthwave. I selected 'Diabolic' (2016) to represent darksynth because of the duo's recognition by the synthwave community – enabling me to theorise which musical parameters are accepted and privileged as

darksynth. I also selected Dance with the Dead because of their overt associations to horror and strong affiliation with the metal community, enabling me to test theories from my virtual ethnography that darksynth draws musical ties with these two musics. Within the community, Dance with the Dead are regularly suggested by community members to those who ask for darksynth recommendations, along with other high-profile artists Perturbator, Carpenter Brut and GosT – these artists are considered cornerstones of the subgenre.



FIGURE 3.2 Album artwork for Dance with the Dead *The Shape* (2016). Image credit to Ruben Martinez. Copyright Dance with the

Dead. [📄](#)

Dance with the Dead have seven studio albums to date (May 2025, not including remastered albums or B-sides). The duo consists of guitarists Tony Kim and Justin Pointer. Tony Kim has often spoken of the duo's key influences: 'We wanted the horror influence from all the movies we loved and also wanted to squeeze in some electronic and metal' ([Cryptic Rock, 2018](#)). In interview with me, Tony Kim (shown in [Figure 3.3](#)) explained further, 'When we were writing that record [2016 album *The Shape*], we would also have movies playing in the background ... we would write to what we were watching as if we were scoring it' (Tony Kim of Dance with the Dead, 2021). This synchronises with other comments the duo have made in interview: 'If a horror director approached us, we'd be open to scoring' (Vehling, 2019a). These comments demonstrate Dance with the Dead's affinity to the horror film soundtrack genre, and given the name of album *The Shape* (2016), their reverence of filmmaker John Carpenter.

Before I present my analysis, I provide a graphic representation of Diabolic's (2016) structure and arrangement ([Table 3.1](#)), to establish the names of song components I will later refer to in analysis.

As shown by [Table 3.1](#), 'Diabolic' (2016) is mainly populated by synths but has several guitar parts. The presence of the guitar for rhythmic parts, especially, emanates from the metal style. In line with traditions of darksynth, 'Diabolic' (2016) is instrumental. Due to this instrumental nature, [Table 3.1](#) names sections as letters rather than using verse–chorus terminology. When interviewed, Tony Kim of Dance with the Dead stated that the synths they used comprised of: 'some analog synths and ... plugins ... Omnisphere and Predator' ([Tony Kim of Dance with the Dead, 2023](#)).

My analysis of darksynth is structured into three key style parameter sections, where I demonstrate characteristics of darksynth in line with its influence from metal and horror film soundtracks. For clarification of musical parts which I refer to in analysis, [Table 3.2](#) details timecodes and musical description. My analysis of 'Diabolic' (2016) is divided into three sections which outline key style parameters. First, combining metal,

synthwave and EDM, second, innovating metal 'heaviness' ([Herbst, 2017a](#)) and 'virtuosity' ([Herbst, 2017b](#)) and third, use of arrangement including horror melody motifs and metal harmony.



Section	Intro	A	B	C	A	B	D	B	A
		Section	Section	Section	Section	Section	Section	Section	Section
Handclap									
Bass									
Synth									

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TABLE 3.2 Instrument Parts ‘Diabolic’ (2016). [📄](#)

Instrument and Timecode	Style Parameter/Music Production
Guitar 1 0’00	The introduction guitar melody has notes based around the chord of Em. It is the main guitar riff of the song and has a pitch range of b2-b3.
Guitar 1b 0’00	A rhythmic <i>ostinato</i> heard as part of guitar 1. It has the same timbre as Guitar 1, with a starting note of E2.
Guitar 2 0’31	Single strum chords heard in the A section, with further strummed chords heard at 2’10.
Guitar 3 1’19	The guitar melody heard in the B section. It has a clean sound (it is not distorted) and a noticeable delay effect.
Guitar 4 3’14	A guitar solo heard in the B section at 3’14.
Guitar 5 3’20	Guitar 5 comprises harmonised notes which accompany the guitar solo in the B section at 3’14. It has a noticeable delay effect.

*Instrument
and
Timecode*

Style Parameter/Music Production

Synth 1 0'08	Synth 1 is an octave-above version of the guitar 1 introduction melody. It is affected with an automated LPF as it enters, the synth becoming more prominent at 0'08–0'10. It has a pitch range of b3-b4 (SP3).
Synth 1b 0'08	A rhythmic <i>ostinato</i> heard as part of synth 1. It has a similar timbre to Synth 1 but has a staccato feel due to its amplitude envelope settings which include a short attack and short release. It has a starting note of E4.
Synth 2 0'31	A pad synth (SP4) in the A section which uses root positions of the chords. It has a smooth, bright sound with a medium attack (sounding a fraction late). The synth 2 part is doubled at octave, creating a six-note part per bar.
Synth 3 1'03	A lead synth melody (SP3) heard in the B section.
Synth 4 1'03	A lead synth melody (SP3) which acts as another layer of synth 3, heard in the B section.
Synth 5 1'34	An anacrusic melody (i.e. some of its notes begin before beat 1 of the bar) which begins at the end of the B section.
Synth 6 1'51	A pad synth heard in the C section which uses inverted position chords.
Synth 7 1'03	Synth 7 is an octave higher than the bass synth, performing syncopated <i>ostinati</i> sixteenth notes. Its timbre is the same as the bass synth.
Synth 8 2'46	Pad stabs heard at 2'46, of an Em root position chord. It is doubled at octave creating a six-note chord. It has noticeable tempo mapped delay applied.

<i>Instrument and Timecode</i>	<i>Style Parameter/Music Production</i>
Bass Synth 0'31	The bass synth performs syncopated <i>ostinati</i> sixteenths (SP1a). The bass synth appears sidechained to the kick and this bass ducking is particularly noticeable at 2'42.

3.3.2 Three Key Style Parameters of 'Diabolic' (2016)

1) Combining Metal, Synthwave and EDM

When interviewed, Tony Kim informed me that the 'drums [were] all audio samples', using a mix of virtual drums and real sampled hits and that the song was written riff-first (labelled guitar 1 and synth 1 in [Table 3.2](#)) (Tony Kim of Dance with the Dead, 2021, 2023). Writing riff-first reflects songwriting methods of thrash metal ([Kahn-Harris, 2007](#), p. 3), while use of audio samples is common in contemporary metal overall, particularly 'kick-drum sampling' ([Thomas and King, 2019](#), p. 503). Guitar riffs were noted in some of my artist interviews (IRVING FORCE, 2021; VHS Glitch, 2021), supporting that this is one way in which darksynth artists realise metal musically in this subgenre. The drum patterns consist of four-on-the-floor patterns, which is indicative of synthwave and EDM. Through my initial listen to 'Diabolic' (2016) without a click, it first appeared that the song has minor variations in tempo (particularly in the first 30 seconds of the song). However, my perception was likely due to the melodic contouring and rhythm, plus syncopation, of the combination of guitar 1, guitar 1b, synth 1 and synth 1b, when paired with the medium-fast tempo (121bpm). Once the drums in 'Diabolic' enter (at 0'31), the song clearly has a very stable tempo, which suggests the hits have been quantised or gridded ([Marrington, 2017](#), p. 106), as is often heard across synthwave and EDM. This level of precision is increasingly being associated with metal, as Niall Thomas and Andrew King explain: 'Precision, synonymous with

tightness, now takes precedence over feel'. They summarise metal's 'technologically-informed precision', attesting this partially to 'the availability of affordable software packages of drum samples recorded by world-class engineers' ([Thomas and King, 2019](#), p. 501). They also suggest that metal's 'energy' emanates from the drums, with 'pre-recorded sounds being added, programmed, or selected from libraries of sonically, or aesthetically pleasing samples' ([Thomas and King, 2019](#), p. 510). 'Diabolic' (2016) also contains prominent use of sidechaining, of the bass synth and synth 7 to the kick. The bass-and-synth-7-ducking is particularly noticeable at 2'42. This technique is typical of EDM (sometimes to the effect of 'pumping'), a style synthwave has roots in. Sidechaining is also used in metal, particularly if the bass guitar masks the kick drum (Mynett, 2017, p. 286). Use of gated reverb is heard on the toms, an effect which is common to synthwave due to gated reverb's usage within songs of the 1980s decade. Use of cymbals and handclaps are chosen as percussive drums, the latter of which are more indicative of EDM than metal. Bernardo Attias, Anna Gavanias and Hillegonda Rietveld discuss this in 'describing the impact of the Roland TR-808 "handclap" sound on dance music' (Attias, Gavanias and Rietveld, 2013, p. 40). When reviewing instrument, arrangement and production choices – it is clear that 'Diabolic' (2016) combine influences of metal, synthwave and in turn EDM.

2) Innovating Metal 'Heaviness' and 'Virtuosity'

My analysis showed that one key difference between styles of metal and darksynth are the panning positions of the lead guitar and melodic parts within the stereo field, which result in an altered or innovated treatment of metal 'heaviness' ([Herbst, 2017a](#)). Within metal, lower-equalisation and rhythm instruments contribute musically to 'heaviness', a descriptor considered central to the genre ([Weinstein, 2000](#); [Herbst 2017a](#)). Specifically, 'heaviness' is often communicated through 'quad-tracking' (panning two rhythm guitar takes hard-left and two hard-right) ([Marrington, 2017](#), p. 137) and sonic blending of the bass and rhythm guitars through

application of distortion ([Marrington, 2017](#), p. 145). As such, rhythm guitars in metal are panned outwards (e.g. hard left or hard right), while lead guitars (e.g. performing solos) are central in the stereo field ('It is standard practice to pan guitar solos to the center of the mix' [[Marrington, 2017](#), p. 205]) to emphasise virtuosic playing – a key value of metal ([Herbst, 2017b](#), p. 232). My analysis of 'Diabolic' (2016) found the opposite, where melodic parts and guitar solos were panned outwards or off-centre, rather than centrally (see [Figure 3.4](#)). What was panned centrally were synthwave-adjacent style parameters, notably the four-on-the-floor drum part (SP5) and bass synth (SP1a) (doubled at octave – synth 7).

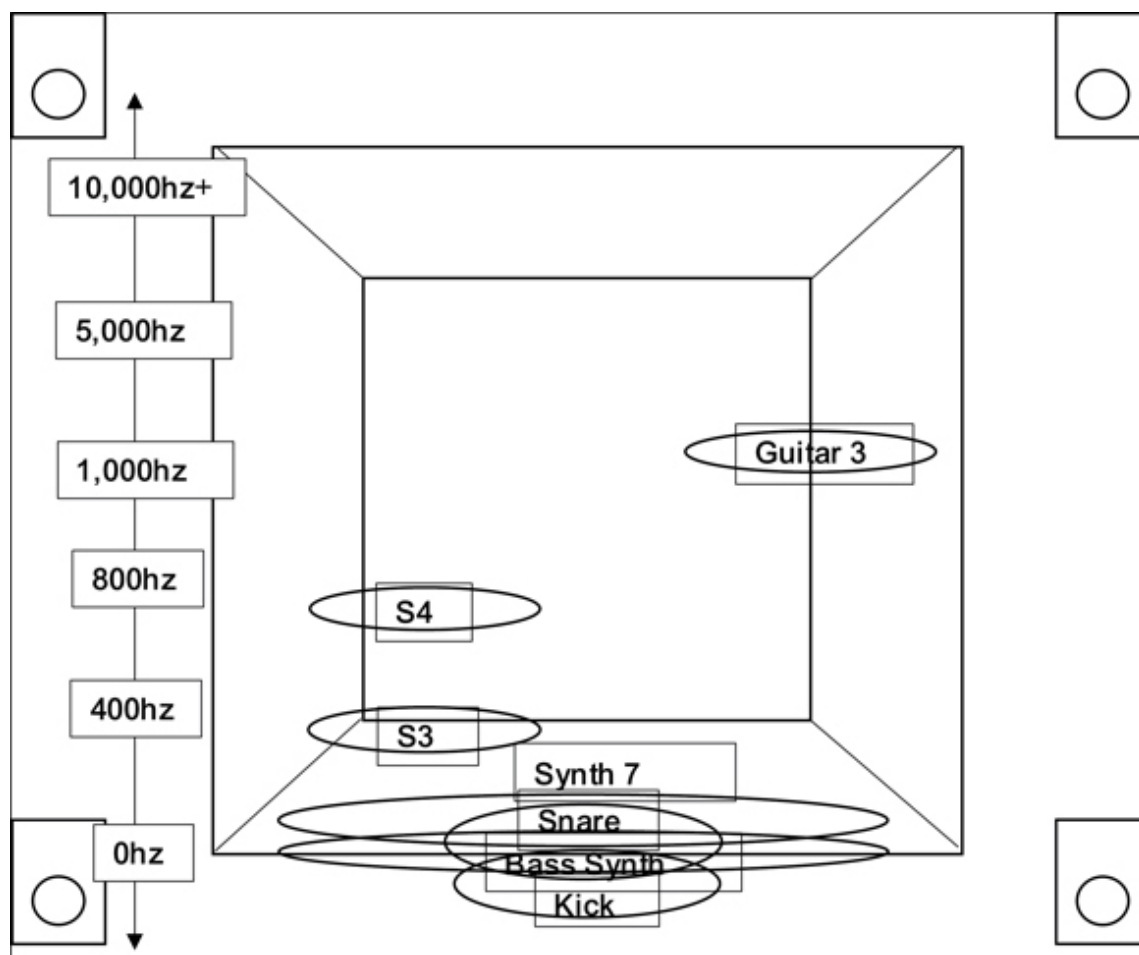


FIGURE 3.4 Mix diagram of the B section (1'03–1'34) 'Diabolic' (2016). Copyright © 2023 Dr Jess Blaise Ward. [↗](#)

With Sonic Visualiser, I used a melodic spectrogram to view instruments with relation to their frequency content. I represented this analysis in a diagram to demonstrate the mix of ‘Diabolic’ at 1’03 ([Gibson, 2019](#)). [Figure 3.4](#) illustrates the guitar solo (guitar 3) panned right of the stereo field. Lead melodies synth 3 and 4 are also panned outwards (heard off-centre left) and these instruments have a noticeable high passed reverb or delay applied. Panned centrally are the synthwave-adjacent elements, including the kick (SP5) and bass synth (SP1a). Mid-side listening confirmed that the drums are panned centrally, as the drums were essentially missing (the snare only just to say decipherable) when listening to the sides. Mid-side listening also confirmed that the guitar is panned out wide. The bass synth is doubled at octave (named synth 7) and could be heard in both the mid and side channels when analysed. The kick, snare, synth 7 and bass synth drive this section, perceivably the loudest parts. It is notable too that ‘Diabolic’s (2016) rhythmic elements (kick drum and bass synth) are sidechained. The heavy compression (e.g. high ratio) applied to the kick and snare also makes these parts perceivably loud. This relates to the production values of synthwave, which in part derive from EDM, where the drum groove drives the track ([Butler, 2014](#), p. 187). Overall, metal ‘heaviness’ ([Herbst, 2017a](#)) and ‘virtuosity’ ([Herbst, 2017b](#)) are treated differently when balanced against synthwave elements, with panning decisions as per metal altered when within a synthwave context, here the darksynth subgenre.

3) Arrangement: Horror Melody Motifs and Metal Harmony

The third key style parameter of darksynth relates to use of arrangement, with specific reference to harmony, melody and rhythm. Firstly, harmonic choices of ‘Diabolic’ (2016) reflect styles of metal. In the A section, synth 2 plays diatonic root position chords in the key of E minor, comprising a four-bar progression which uses chords VI, VII, and i (in E minor these are C major, D major and E minor, or chords 6, 7 and 1). The VI-VII-i chord progression is ‘one of the most frequent heavy metal chord progressions’

([Lilja, 2009](#), p. 87), and is heard on ‘The Trooper’ (1983), a song by metal group Iron Maiden. Melodies heard throughout ‘Diabolic’ (2016) use the Aeolian (natural) minor scale of E minor, with one use of a chromatic note A#5 (through a pitch bend at 3’29), heard at the end of the guitar solo in the B section. The Aeolian mode is one of the most common modes to metal ([Walser, 1993](#), p. 46).

Of rhythm and melody, ‘Diabolic’s (2016) main guitar riff (guitar 1, 1b) (heard also an octave higher on synth 1 and 1b – hear at 0’10) bears resemblance to the *Halloween* (1978) theme motif. Specifically, the *ostinati* nature of synth 1 and 1b (notated in [Figure 3.5](#) and heard clearly in ‘Diabolic’ [2016] at 0’08) reminded me of the *Halloween* main theme.



FIGURE 3.5 Guitar 1, Guitar 1b, Synth 1, Synth 1b at 0’08 in ‘Diabolic’ (2016). [🎵](#)

Ostinato is a prominent style parameter, having been discussed in [Chapter 2](#) of synthwave’s *ostinati* basslines, which derive from such basslines usage in 1980s music. In ‘Diabolic’ (2016), the bass synth (SP1a) is heard in all sections besides the introduction, with both bass synth and synth 7 performing *ostinati*. Rather than being continuous sixteenths, the bass synth and synth 7 perform a syncopated sixteenth rhythm which creates a sense of urgency. The use of faster rhythms in general (e.g. eighths and sixteenths) are present across melodies in ‘Diabolic’ (2016) (guitar 1, synth 1, synth 3, synth 4). This reflects stylistic parameters of metal, of ‘fast’ virtuoso melodic parts ([Herbst, 2017b](#), p. 232). It also reflects faster tempi or faster rhythms often heard across horror soundtracks (particularly

slasher films), in line with characters running away in urgency from an antagonist ([Muir, 2005](#)).

Of metal influences, the guitar solo heard in ‘Diabolic’ (2016) bears resemblance to that of the solo in ‘Crazy Train’ (1980) [2’59] (by Ozzy Osbourne, lead member of metal group Black Sabbath). Specifically, ‘Diabolic’s (2016) solo has very similar melodic contouring to the solo heard in ‘Crazy Train’ (1980). This is in addition to both solos having similar use of harmonised guitar lines, with both incorporating this technique at the end of their respective solos. This style of harmonised guitar lines was used frequently by British metal artists, with Iron Maiden’s ‘Powerslave’ (hear the solo at 4’22) being another example. Sociologist Deena Weinstein asserted how ‘guitar solos are an essential element of the heavy metal code’ ([Weinstein, 2000](#), p. 24), and metal scholars have recognised how ‘melodic patterns in heavy metal frequently include long notes at the ends of phrases ... to signify power and intensity, like sustained notes on the guitar’ ([Walser, 1993](#), p. 49). Such long notes at the ends of phrases are heard at the end of ‘Diabolic’s (2016) guitar solo, supporting the song’s emulation of metal contouring ([Figure 3.6](#)).

3.3.3 Analysis of ‘A Long Walk’ (2017) SIERRA VEINS

‘A Long Walk’ (2017) is the final track of album *Strange Valley* (2017) by French EBM artist SIERRA VEINS. She has several albums/EPs to date, including *Strange Valley* (2017) [EP], *Gone* (2019) [EP], *Left Behind* (2022) [Album] and *A Story of Anger* (2023) [Album]. Of these, she described *Strange Valley* as ‘very much influenced by the whole synthwave scene, the *Blade Runner* [1982] aesthetic and those sorts of moods’ ([Ono, 2019](#)). Her YouTube describes her music as a mix of sounds: ‘With violence and melancholy, gentleness and brutality, SIERRA VEINS mixes moods and styles to create a singular, overpowering universe inspired by synthwave, EBM and darkwave’. When I interviewed SIERRA VEINS in 2024, she spoke of her ‘respect and love’ for the synthwave community. She remarked that she had ‘started [her] project SIERRA as [...] mainly

influenced by this scene'. She also explained that 'I do everything on my project. I am a music songwriter, producer, I mix or co-mix my sounds [and I am a] music performer' ([SIERRA VEINS, 2024](#)). Given that her music is a 'mix of many ... things', she would not 'consider [herself wholly or only] a synthwave artist' ([SIERRA VEINS, 2024](#)).



FIGURE 3.6 SIERRA VEINS (artist photo). Image credit to Benoit Julliard. Copyright Benoit Julliard. [🔗](#)

Within the online synthwave community, most people would consider SIERRA VEINS as most sound-adjacent to the darksynth subgenre. She

signed with French record label *Lazerdiscs Records* in the past ([Ono, 2019](#)) but in interview with me said she now works with ‘Virgin Music France (Universal Music)’ ([SIERRA VEINS, 2024](#)). Her most recent album, *A Story of Anger* (2023), follows her recent support slot touring with Carpenter Brut, for his 2022 *Leather Terror Tour*. Carpenter Brut is of the highest-profile darksynth artists within the synthwave community, alongside others such as Perturbator, GosT and Dance with the Dead. This shows some of SIERRA VEINS’ ties to synthwave. SIERRA VEINS also had her track ‘Stronger’ (2023) remixed by GUNSHIP in 2024, showing further ties to the scene (‘Stronger – GUNSHIP Remix’ 2024).

Journalists have continued to characterise SIERRA VEINS’ work in line with the darker side of synthwave, such as [Paltrocast \(2023\)](#), who spoke of album *A Story of Anger* (2023) as ‘inspired by synthwave, EBM and darkwave’ ([Paltrocast, 2023](#)), and [Ono \(2020\)](#), who referred to SIERRA VEINS as a ‘darkwave producer’. SIERRA VEINS has commented on the film soundtrack influences of her music, ‘I like the idea of having a cinematic feel to my tracks. I’m a big fan of sci-fi and thrillers ... I’d love to compose a score for a thriller or sci-fi movie’ ([Ono, 2020](#)). She has also described her love of synthwave’s ‘relationship to analog sounds’ and its nostalgic tendencies which ‘turn ... to the past’ of the ‘eighties and early nineties’ ([Ono, 2020](#)). In interview with me, she described her favourite types of music as, ‘Classical music, synthwave, darkwave, ebm, pop music’ ([SIERRA VEINS, 2024](#)). She acknowledged the online community and described how she engages with them by being ‘part of many FB [Facebook] groups of synthwave... . I follow most of the channels of the scene on YouTube, FB [Facebook], IG [Instagram], etc’ ([SIERRA VEINS, 2024](#)). She also spoke of her discovery of synthwave, through her interests in the music of Kavinsky and College. Years later, she ‘realize[d] there was a big community about this type of music’ ([SIERRA VEINS, 2024](#)).

Whilst SIERRA VEINS has more recent work than *Strange Valley* (2017), this EP is the closest to synthwave sonically (though clearly retaining her hallmark EBM style), as well as being the EP she described to journalists as being the most directly influenced by synthwave. Before I

present my analysis, I provide a graphic representation of ‘A Long Walk’s (2017) structure and arrangement ([Table 3.3](#)), to establish the names of song components I later refer to in analysis. All scored excerpts are indicative of core parts only and any which contain bar numbers are arbitrary (i.e. bar numbers do not necessarily reflect the track).

TABLE 3.3 ‘A Long Walk’ (2017) A Structural Representation Overview. [📄](#)

	<i>Intro</i> [0’00– 0’38]	<i>Section A</i> [0’39– 1’41]	<i>Section B</i> [1’42– 2’13]	<i>Section C</i> [2’14– 3’16]	<i>Intro Reprise/Outro</i> [3’17– 3’5]
Two-Layer Synth					
Pad Synth Chords					
Piano					
A Section Lead Synth					
Drone Bass					
B Section Lead Synth					
C Section Lead Synth					
C Section Countermelody				2’46	
BV					
Bass Synth					
Kick and Snare					
Toms					

<i>Intro</i>	<i>Section A</i>	<i>Section B</i>	<i>Section C</i>	<i>Intro</i>
[0'00– 0'38]	[0'39– 1'41]	[1'42– 2'13]	[2'14– 3'16]	<i>Reprise/Outro</i> [3'17– 3'5]
Hi-Hats				

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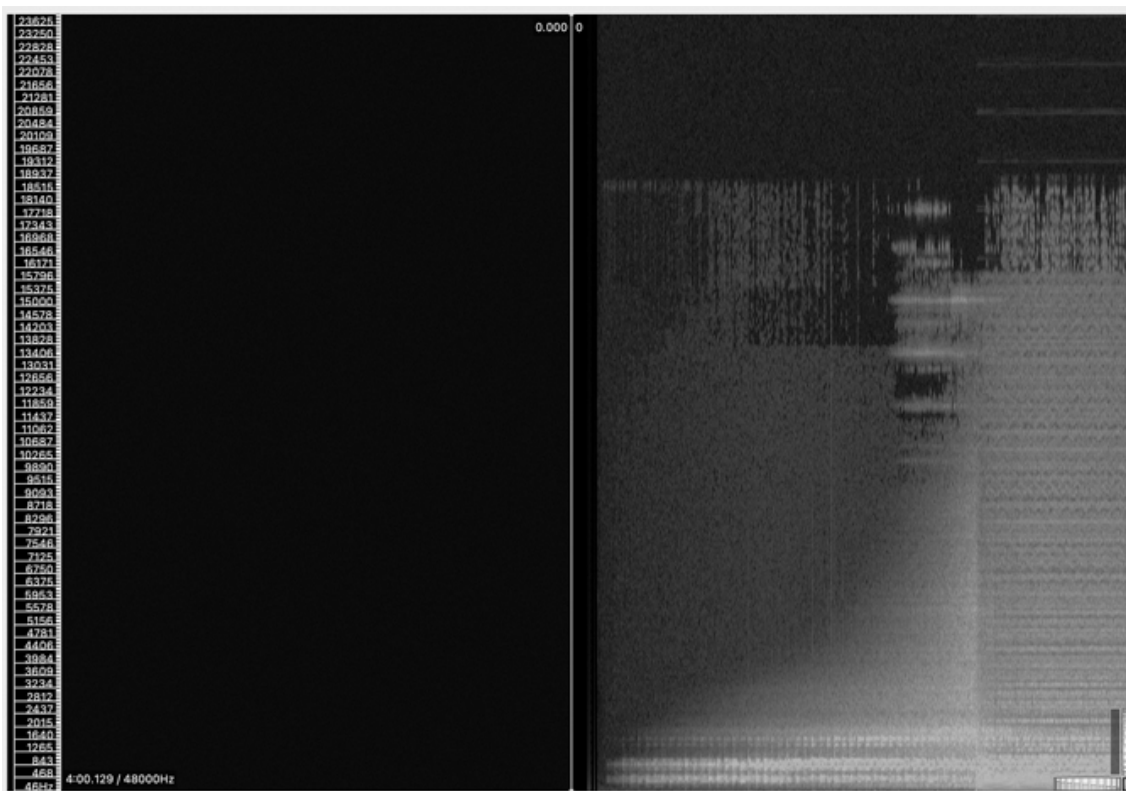


FIGURE 3.7 A melodic spectrogram view of the introduction of ‘A Long Walk’ (2017). [↗](#)

‘A Long Walk’ is track six of *Strange Valley* (2017). The track begins with a two-layer synth which has a low pass filter applied (which lifts gradually by 0’08 – viewable in [Figure 3.7](#)).

The layers each have two alternating pitches, the lower layer F# and G#, and the higher layer A and B (these two layers are heard at both the C4 and

C5 octaves, confirmed by Sonic Visualiser's melodic spectrogram). A pad synth (SP4) enters playing chords at 0'08, with piano bass notes in the F1 range (confirmed by Sonic Visualiser's melodic spectrogram which shows frequency content at 20–65hz). The chords play once per four bars, first F#m, then D/F#, then Bm/F#, then D/F#. The song is rooted in F# minor (see scored notation in [Figure 3.8](#)).

The chords have a relatively short attack and long release time (amplitude envelope). At 0'24, the pad chords are accompanied by a tom drum part.

At 0'39 (named Section A), a lead synth (SP3a) enters (scored in [Figure 3.9](#)), which has very noticeable pitch bending applied. This is indicated also by Sonic Visualiser's melodic spectrogram, where the part is visually a horizontal zigzag (see [Figure 3.10](#)). The Section A lead synth is accompanied by a drone bass synth (SP1b) ([Figure 3.9](#)). This drone synth is likely affected with an LFO or a tempo mapped delay, as faint 1/4 echoes can be heard (most audible at 0'43 or 0'52). These echoes or swells are observable on the melodic spectrogram, where the bass notes or hits are not viewed as long continuous lines, but short choppy portions of sound (occupying around 30–80hz – see [Figure 3.10](#)). Such a bass drone is consistent with many other darksynth-styled tracks, songs such as 'Welcome Back' (2014) [0'15] by Perturbator and 'Sweet Agony' by Circe Electro and Wolf Saga (2015) [0'19]. These sorts of horror timbres or tones (often manifested through synth drones) were commented on by artist interviewees, correlating that these are important to the characterisation of darksynth (VHS Glitch, 2021; Occams Laser, 2021). Such bass drones certainly bear resemblance to those heard in *Blade Runner* (1982), and support connections with sci-fi and cyberpunk to darksynth.

The image displays a musical score for the track 'A Long Walk' (2017), specifically at the 0'08 mark. It consists of four systems of staves, each with a treble clef (top) and a bass clef (bottom). The key signature is F# major (three sharps: F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system (measures 1-4) is labeled with the chord F#m. The second system (measures 5-8) is labeled with the chord D/F#. The third system (measures 9-12) is labeled with the chord Bm/F#. The fourth system (measures 13-16) is labeled with the chord D/F#. In each system, the top staff contains pad synth chords represented by whole notes with a '3' in a circle, indicating a triad. The bottom staff contains piano bass notes represented by whole notes. Brackets connect the chords in the top staff to the corresponding bass notes in the bottom staff across the measures.

FIGURE 3.8 Pad synth chords and piano bass notes ‘A Long Walk’ (2017) (Timecode 0’08). Top staff (pad synth chords), bottom staff (piano bass notes). [↩](#)

At 1’02 some hi-hats gradually enter, which have noticeable high pass filtering on them and likely other effects to alter the timbre, which is somewhat tinny. At 1’11 the main drum groove enters, a kick and snare four-on-the-floor (SP5). With this drum groove, a further bass synth enters, playing syncopated sixteenth notes (SP1a). For each group of four sixteenths in a bar, the first sixteenth is removed (i.e. in each bar, the sixteenth one, five, nine, thirteen are missing and instead heard as sixteenth rests). This part is quite buried in the mix, and I had to use a stem splitter, as well as mid-side listening to confirm it was there. There is noticeable sidechaining heard in this part, which is typical of EDM ([Figure 3.11](#)).



FIGURE 3.9 A Section lead synth and drone bass synth ‘A Long Walk’ (2017) (Timecode 0’39). Top stave (lead), bottom stave (drone bass). [🔗](#)

The song’s tempo is 122bpm but to me feels faster than this pace wise – certainly in the A Section due to use of sixteenth rhythms. At the end of Section A, the lead melody from Section B acts as a transition to Section B, first heard at 1’39 before its proper hearing in the B Section at 1’42.

At the end of the B Section, backing vocals are heard (chant like ooo’s), alongside the entrance of the B Section lead synth, a higher-pitched descending synth which has a short release time (amplitude envelope). Its melodic contouring is largely that of an arpeggio and it is clearly heard at

1'43. The notes of this melody are mainly a backwards playing of a C#sus4 chord in the C5 octave, with a hearing also of B5-G#5-F#5 at the end of the phrase (heard at 1'56). See scored notation in [Figure 3.12](#).

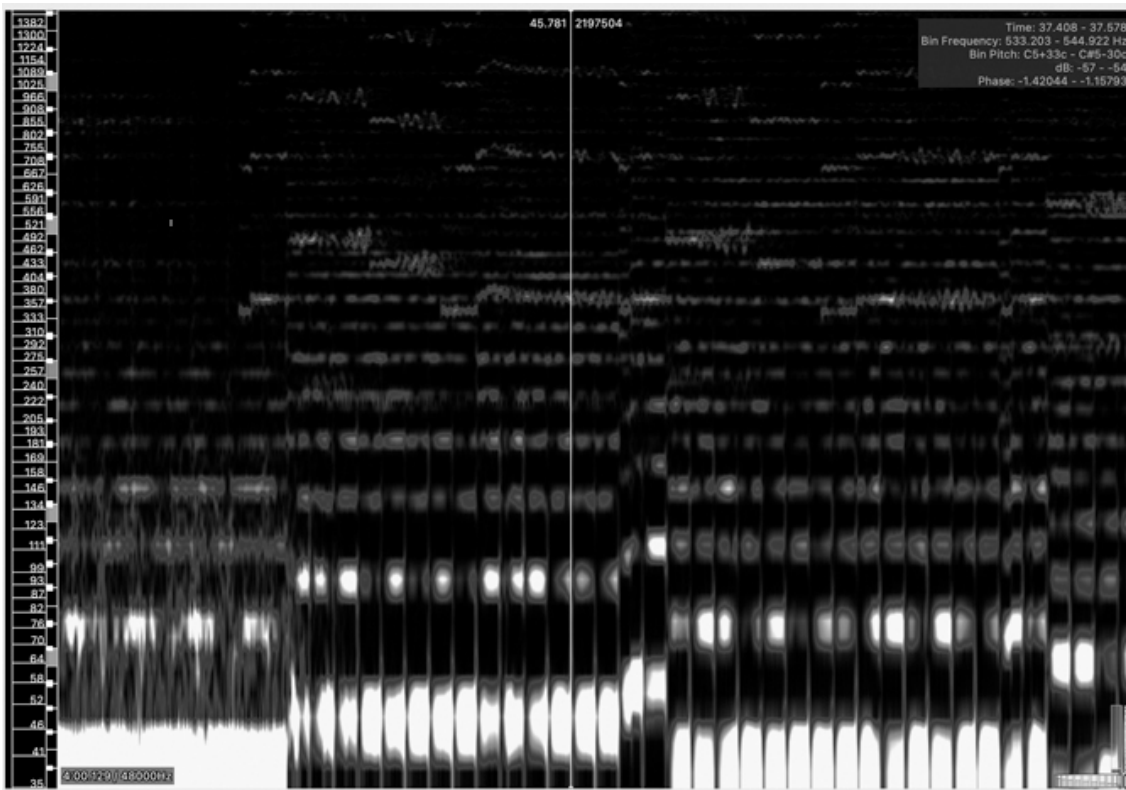


FIGURE 3.10 A Section lead synth pitch bends ‘A Long Walk’ (2017). [↗](#)



FIGURE 3.11 Bass synth ‘A Long Walk’ (2017) (Timecode 1'12). [↗](#)

No drums are heard in Section B apart from the reintroduction of the high pass filtered hi-hat which transitions us into the C Section. The C Section lead synth also appears at the end of the B Section as a transition, heard in the B Section at 2'01 and then in the C Section properly at 2'14, [Figure 3.13](#).

The C Section sees the return of the drone synth bass (SP1b), and at 2'46, a new synth lead (or here, countermelody) enters, which is stringlike in timbre. It plays a descending melody across two octaves. The notes of the phrase are A-G#-F# (2'46) and these are repeated throughout the section ([Figure 3.14](#)).

The sixteenth note bass synth (SP1a) returns in Section C and is more noticeable in the mix than previously. At 3'17, the drums (SP5) drop out, and the introduction is heard as a reprise. The pad chords return (SP4), though fainter in the mix now due to the addition of the backing vocal chants from the B Section. The piano is more prominent than heard in the introduction, and the two-layer synth returns. The song ends with the piano's bass notes.



Chapter 3 Conclusion

Artists interviewed recognise their creative works in relation to the darksynth subgenre. It is clear from survey and interview data that a level of ‘bottom up’ categorising is undertaken by community members, who consider and label artists as darksynth even if artists themselves do not wholly assume that label. Survey data also shows that community members have a strong perception of what they think darksynth sounds like musically, and it is clear that these perceptions present a bias towards the sound of male darksynth artists. In this regard, it appears that the music made by male darksynth artists is validated by community members as the most indicative of the darksynth sound, and that such artists take clear influence from metal, horror film soundtracks and cyberpunk styles. Music made by female and non-binary darksynth artists appears to be less (or less prominently) influenced by solely metal or horror film soundtracks, and as a result these artists are less recognised in the discourse of darksynth and less visible in the community. Despite this, male artists associated with the darksynth subgenre recognise the contributions of female and non-binary artists, inviting them to collaborate on music or remixing their work, for example. High-profile darksynth artists have toured with female artists (e.g. SIERRA VEINS touring with Carpenter Brut). These examples show progress in support of female and non-binary artists in a male-dominated subgenre.

With relation to the musical influences of darksynth, these are predominantly metal and horror film soundtracks, with an account for cyberpunk styles also. This is evident from survey data, interviews with artists and my virtual ethnography. Whilst John Carpenter is more broadly acknowledged by the community for his links to soundtrack music and speciality with synths (two facts which synchronise key identity components of the online synthwave community), it is the darksynth subgenre which is most musically influenced by his soundscapes. In incorporating horror themes to their music, darksynth artists identify with

the subgenre, whilst simultaneously identifying with broader subcultural capital of synthwave (e.g. soundtrack music and John Carpenter).

Importantly, there are clear crossovers in thematic material between horror film soundtracks and metal. Both have historically involved themes of Satanism, devil worshipping and the occult. It is hence unsurprising that this combination of musical and thematic ideas has yielded such a successful subgenre within the synthwave discourse, a genre which is already imbued with concepts of soundtrack music, and which prioritises synths in the same way that John Carpenter historically has. The darksynth subgenre has enabled and supported metalheads to gateway from metal to synthwave because of this suitability in combination of musical styles. Such styles can be thought of and represented by a musical family tree, which posits soundtrack music and EDM as parents to synthwave and grandparents to darksynth, and horror film soundtrack and metal as parents to darksynth. [Figure 3.15](#) demonstrates this.

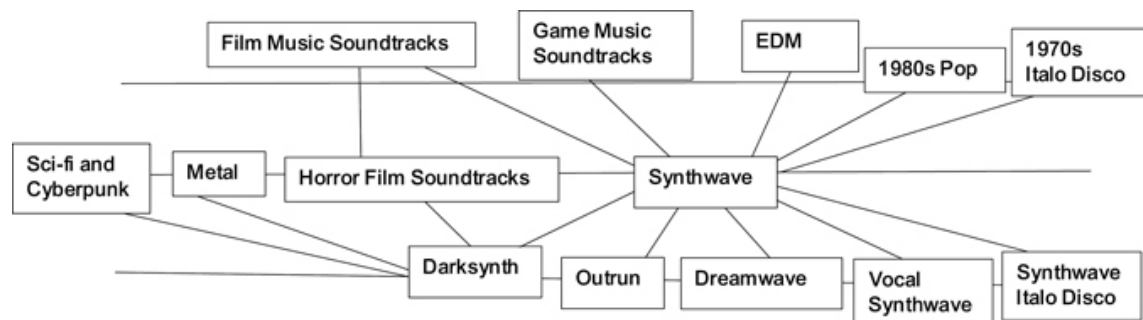


FIGURE 3.15 A ‘family tree’ of synthwave i.e. influential genres to synthwave and subgenres of synthwave. Copyright © 2023 Dr Jess Blaise Ward. [📄](#)

The darksynth subgenre is a highly recognised and valued subgenre in the synthwave community, and its popularity has only increased since its inception in the early 2010s.

Notes

1. The article is no longer available directly from its author, but has been reuploaded by someone else here:
<<https://electrozombies.com/magazine/article/why-darksynth-deserves-its-own-genre/>> [Accessed April 2025]. 
2. I would recommend Spotify's 'Women of Metal' playlist for further suggestions. 
3. Quoted from Bandcamp:
<<https://waverecords.bandcamp.com/album/kriistal-ann-touched-on-the-raw>> [Accessed May 2025]. 

4

MAKING SPACE FOR VOCALS AND WOMEN

The Vocal Synthwave Subgenre

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In this chapter, I examine one subgenre of synthwave, vocal synthwave. In doing so, I consider issues of gender and female representation in the online synthwave community. Female artists constitute the majority artist demographic of vocal synthwave, a unique trait only applicable to this particular synthwave subgenre. I investigate also the role of female (and male) artists as toplineers within the online synthwave community. This supports an investigation of synthwave's creative processes. The chapter presents findings from my virtual ethnography, as well as including interview comments from those who have engaged with vocal synthwave. I also present relevant findings from my survey data (September 2019 and November 2023). The chapter is structured into two sections: Firstly, a community definition of vocal synthwave is provided, synthesising interviews, survey data and findings of my virtual ethnography (4.1). Secondly, one representative vocal synthwave song is analysed and deconstructed for synthwave style parameters ('Beyond Memory [Extended

Version]’ [2018] by NINA) (4.2). I conclude by summarising vocal synthwave’s position as a subgenre of synthwave in 2025.

4.1 Defining Vocal Synthwave

Vocal synthwave solidified as a synthwave subgenre in the mid 2010s, alongside the release of key synthwave albums by artists such as NINA, The Midnight, GUNSHIP, Dana Jean Phoenix, KRISTINE and others.¹ The vocals by Ollie Wride on FM-84’s album *Atlas* (2016) as well as tracks from Michael Oakley’s *Introspect* (2019) are also significant in the progression of synthwave with vocals. While synthwave had initially been largely instrumental in the late 2000s and early 2010s, the gradual increase of vocals on synthwave tracks in the mid 2010s began to form the subgenre. The work of female vocalists and artists was particularly significant in solidifying the subgenre, in addition to many high-profile synthwave artists collaborating with female vocalists at this time, e.g. GUNSHIP, The Midnight, Timecop1983 and Michael Oakley. This over time has supported the representation of female artists within the community more broadly. Andy Last, host and producer of *BEYOND SYNTH*, commented in particular on Dana Jean Phoenix’s role as an artist and collaborator to the synthwave community, explaining that she:

kind of got the ball rolling for artists to start collaborating with vocalists. Dana was one of the first vocalists, it was sort of this rite of passage [for] synthwave artists [to] have a collab with Dana Jean. And then more singers started joining.

([Andy Last, 2024](#))

Equally, many of my survey respondents recognised NINA’s contributions to vocal synthwave: ‘when I think of vocal synthwave music I think of NINA’ (Survey Anon, 2023). Others remarked: ‘NINA is a huge female vocalist in the scene’, with one describing her as: ‘one of the first women in synthwave’ (Survey Anon, 2023). Many of my survey respondents named

vocal synthwave artists as some of their favourite synthwave artists, supporting that it is a popular and recognised subgenre of synthwave:

Survey Anon: ‘Jessie Frye, her voice is so amazing and so angelic’.

Survey Anon: ‘Megan McDuffee: I love vocals in tracks, and she features heavily’.

Survey Anon: ‘Bunny X – great songcrafters’.

Survey Anon: ‘Dana Jean Phoenix – best live female performer’.

Survey Anon: ‘Roxi Drive – the reason I write/play SW [synthwave]’.

Survey Anon: ‘NINA – beautiful voice, always works with different producers but keeps the vibe her own’.

Survey Anon: ‘Yota for her voice and the variety in the style’ (Survey Anons, 2023).

Discourse around the vocal synthwave subgenre has not always supported female representation however, for example one dedicated article written about vocal synthwave. The article² discussed the (now defunct) Spotify playlist ‘Popwave/Dreamwave (GUNSHIP, The Midnight, FM-84, etc)’ and named representative artists of the subgenre. When scrutinising the article, it is notable that it is not very representative of female artists, nor does it reflect that vocal synthwave is in fact an area where female artists and vocalists have been particularly active within the synthwave community. Of the ten artists mentioned in the article, eight are male and two are female [PRIZM and NINA]. Whilst the playlist did include female artists, no female artists appeared in the title (‘Popwave/Dreamwave [GUNSHIP, The Midnight, FM-84, etc’]).

4.1.1 Interviewing Artists and DJs About Vocal Synthwave

Vocal synthwave is unique in its artist demographic when compared to other synthwave subgenres, with a prominent representation of female artists. Overall, the synthwave community has a majority male artist demographic. This may link to synthwave artists’ commonly being music producers, an area where men have been historically prominent ([Wolfe](#),

[2019](#), p. 23). Given female artists' contributions to the vocal synthwave subgenre, I was curious to investigate their experiences of synthwave, and thus the following artists (which includes artists who also have male group members) were interviewed: Dana Jean Phoenix, NINA, Bunny X, Parallels (Holly Dodson as front-woman), Jessie Frye, Megan McDuffee, Roxi Drive, Polychrome (aka V. Harrison), Mecha Maiko (aka Hayley Stewart), INDIGO, Oceanside85 aka Chelsea Owen, Daria Danatelli, Oblique, Sally Shapiro, Laura Dre, Diamond Field (Andy Diamond and Jenny Bates), Star Cassette, Yota, JJ Mist, Madelyn Darling, Neon aka Sheridan Black, Anniee, Lisa Marie Perkins aka Radical Bicep, Chloe Deroy, Laura Fares, Mayah Camara, Adryelle, ELYXIR, Jolie, Digital Love, Candy Apple Blue, Magenta Soulstar, Pensacola Mist, The Lightning Kids, Von Kaiser and three anonymous artists. DJ Kaarin Zoe Lee and DJ She-Ra were also interviewed, alongside other artists who made relevant comments about vocal synthwave (in section 'Further Collaborations'). Other female synthwave artists recognised by the community include: KRISTINE, Primo the Alien, C Z A R I N A, PRIZM, Game Genie Sokolov, Kid Moxie and many others. Further female synthwave artists are notable on *RetroSynth's Ladies of Synth* (2017) compilation album made available on Bandcamp.³

Interview responses from female artists were categorised thematically: 1) responsibilities in the creative process, 2) female representation within the synthwave community and 3) nostalgia and the 1980s. The latter category comprised comments which were freely inducted by interviewees. A mix of solo and group artists were interviewed (see [Figures 4.1-4.5](#) for images of some of those who were interviewed), with some groups inclusive of at least one male member. When a group was interviewed, one member reported for the whole group, except in the case of Bunny X, where both members (Abigail Gordon and Mary Hanley) were interviewed.



FIGURE 4.1 Dana Jean Phoenix. Photo credit Hayley Stewart.
Copyright Hayley Stewart and Dana Jean Phoenix. [↗](#)

Theme 1: Responsibilities in the Creative Process

Artists spoke of both collaborative working and toplining in their responses about creative process. Mary Hanley of Bunny X emphasised the collaborative nature of their band's work: 'We both contribute lyrics and write the vocal arrangements for our songs... . We both [Abigail Gordon and I] have a steady hand in production also' ([Mary Hanley of Bunny X, 2020](#)). Gordon added: 'We've been working with NYC-based producer Gosteffects for the past several years and I've been doing the majority of the songwriting' (Abigail Gordon of Bunny X, 2023). Jessie Frye described her multifaceted role as an instrumentalist, vocalist and songwriter:



FIGURE 4.2 Bunny X *Love Minus 80* (2023) album artwork. Photo credit to Andrea C. Netherwood. Graphic design by Poul Norton. Copyright Abigail Gordon and Mary Hanley.

I'm a vocalist ... I write on the piano [and] let's say I have a song idea ... I'll do a demo of it on Logic... . I bring it into the studio... . I work with a producer ... Matt Aslanian ... he's literally the other half of Jessie Frye.

([Jessie Frye, 2024](#))

Dana Jean Phoenix remarked her own position as a ‘singer, live music performer, and songwriter first’ in addition to her role as a music producer. She explained how her creative process takes the form of musical ‘sketches’, which ‘sometimes I’ll ... pass on [my sketch] to another music producer to help me to fully realize the idea of the instrumental’ ([Dana Jean Phoenix, 2024](#)). Some artists demarcated roles in the creative process more clearly, such as Polychrome, who spoke of their producer (who is simultaneously one of the two group members) being responsible for ‘production and instrumentation’, where she is responsible for ‘vocals and songwriting’ (V. Harrison from [Polychrome, 2020](#)). Roxi Drive’s comments were similar: ‘I write the lyrics and the topline and the producer creates the track’ ([Roxi Drive, 2024](#)). For Diamond Fields, producer Andy Diamond clarified that prior to Jenny joining the group, he would primarily write the instrumental track and toplines, before giving said topline to a vocalist to perform. Since Jenny joined, Andy clarified ‘a more collaborative effort’ between the two, where ‘both of us work on lyrics and toplines together’ ([Diamond Field, 2024](#)). LAU aka Laura Fares also spoke of working with producers: ‘I wrote and recorded [album *Believer* 2021] during the pandemic, in my London studio, and I worked remotely with different producers from around the world like Brian Skeel, Ends 84, and others’ ([LAU aka Laura Fares, 2023](#)). LAU also self-produces, for example tracks on her album *Digital Dream* (2024).



FIGURE 4.3 Parallels aka Holly Dodson. Photo credit Brad A. Kinnan. Copyright Holly Dodson.



FIGURE 4.4 Jessie Frye *Kiss Me In The Rain* (2020) cover. Photo credit Jamie Maldonado. Copyright Jessie Frye.

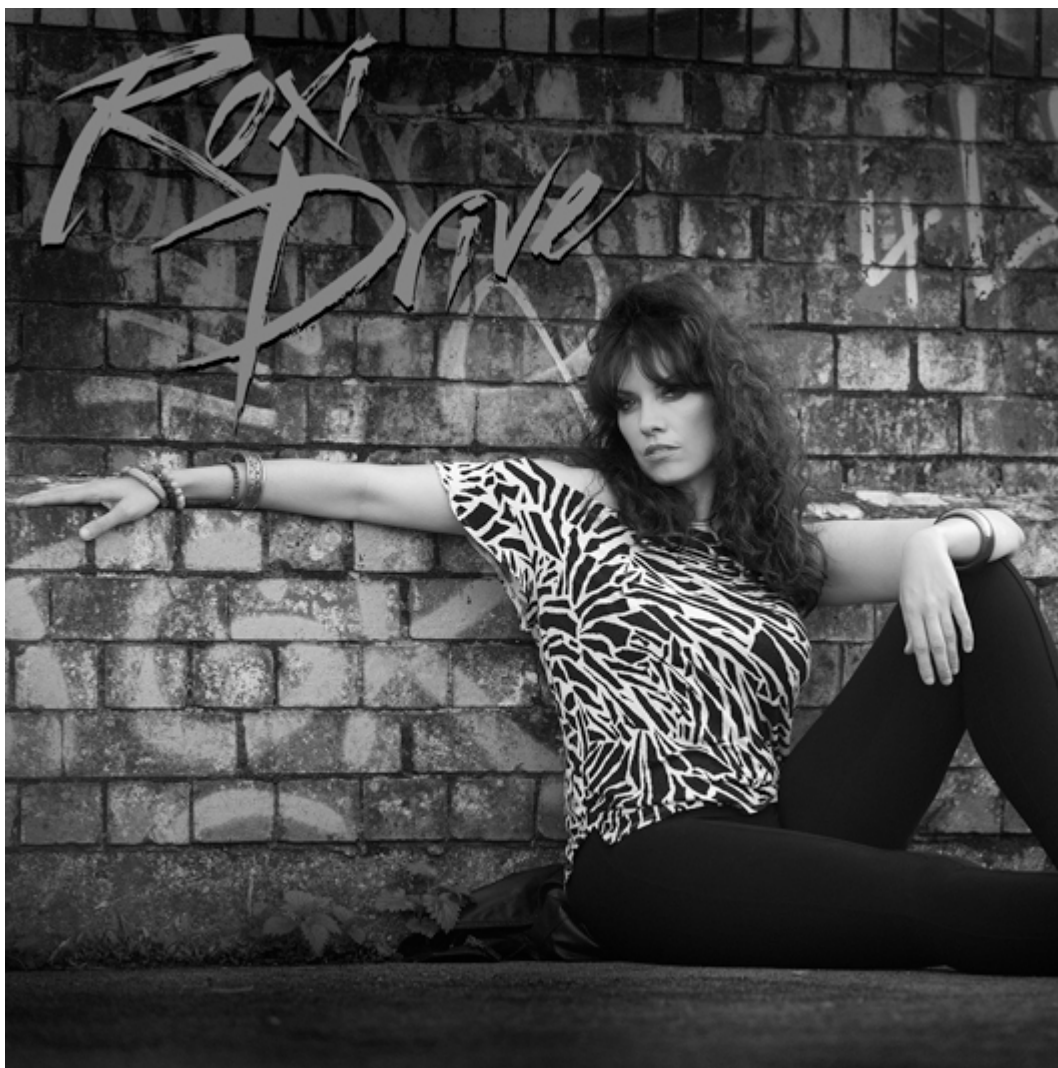


FIGURE 4.5 Roxi Drive. Photo credit Glen Jevon. Copyright Roxi Drive. [🔗](#)

When speaking of collaboration (outside of artists' own projects or releases), interviewees commonly reported providing toplines for producers, though many described having also contributed to the production, arrangement and instrumental. Megan McDuffee explained, 'I [started] doing synthwave collabs or vocals [in] 2017. I usually handle the melody ... the lyrics and the vocal performances' ([Megan McDuffee, 2020](#)). Parallels described a similar experience of her collaboration with Futurecop!, in that she 'wrote and performed melodies and lyrics to the songs' ([Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2020](#)). In addition to this topline,

Parallels ‘added some additional production ideas, synth lines and ... wrote some guitar parts’ ([Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2020](#)). Jessie Frye described her experience collaborating with Timecop1983: ‘He sent me a few tracks ... instrumentals ... I wrote the melody and the lyrics’. She commented on having changed the instrumentals’ structure in the process: ‘they’re not always written in Top 40 formats ... so as a singer, I have to ... make that a verse and ... edit and copy and paste and arrange it’ ([Jessie Frye, 2024](#)). Sally Shapiro (consisting of Sally and Johan) described their collaboration with Tommy ’86 on ‘Why Did I Say Goodbye’ (2014), in which ‘Sally recorded the vocals and I [Johan] added some synth parts’ ([Johan Agebjörn of Sally Shapiro, 2023](#)). NINA described some of her collaborations more generally:

I write a lot of poetry, which I often turn into lyrics. My favourite way of writing is when my collaborator/producer sends me an instrumental and I have the freedom to write a song on top of it.

([NINA, 2024](#))

Mayah Camara also spoke generally, of a: ‘producer or beatmaker providing an instrumental that I would then write and perform lyrics [to and create] the vocal melodies’ ([Mayah Camara, 2023](#)). Other artists who spoke of toplining for producers include [Daria Danatelli \(2020\)](#). INDIGO described several of her collaborations:

Some of the artists I have worked with include W O L F C L U B, 10eighty6, Turbo Knight... . [With W O L F C L U B] together we wrote some incredible tracks including ‘Can’t Stop Falling in Love’ [2018]’.

([INDIGO, 2024](#))

Dana Jean Phoenix remarked on some of her toplining experiences: ‘The first two synthwave artists I had heard were Betamaxx and Sunglasses Kid. We collaborated on songs together’ (‘Only In Movies’ [2013] with

Betamaxx, ‘1980s Summer Breakup’ [2013] with Sunglasses Kid) ([Dana Jean Phoenix, 2024](#)). Further collaborations by Dana include: ‘Genesis’ (2014) with Nightcrawler and two tracks with Timecop1983: ‘Don’t Let Go’ (2015) and ‘Dreams’ (2016) [all feat. Dana Jean Phoenix]. She described the Timecop1983 collaborations as ‘the first ones to reach multimillion plays on YouTube and Spotify’ ([Dana Jean Phoenix, 2024](#)). Dana also explained:

I’m particularly proud of my collab with Mecha Maiko ‘Cold’ [2018] for my first ever all female collab. I’m also proud of my collab album *Megawave* [2020] with Powernerd for the added instrument solos I played. And of course, [my collab] with [Taurus 1984](#) ‘Dreamin’ [2022], as that song led to Alastair and I finding a life-long collaboration in love and life!

([Dana Jean Phoenix, 2024](#))

Other collaborations spoken about by interviewees concerned performing live shows. Parallels explained, ‘We’ve toured with NINA and performed with many synthwave artists such as Dana Jean Phoenix, Michael Oakley, Timecop1983, Kalax, FM Attack, Mecha Maiko, C Z A R I N A and Bunny X’ (Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2020). It was clear from comments such as these that many of my interviewees had met each other offline and were not just familiar with each other via the online synthwave community. Just as Parallels had spoken about performing a show with Bunny X, Bunny X described performing a live show with Parallels. This took place in Brooklyn (New York), and had an ‘all female [...] line up’ (Mary Hanley of Bunny X, 2020). Hanley described how ‘The bill consisted of us, C Z A R I N A, Parallels and NINA’ (Mary Hanley of Bunny X, 2020). Glitbiter (whose creative work was discussed in [Chapter 3](#)) also spoke of collaboration with Parallels, in that the latter had ‘asked [Glitbiter] to play keyboards and provide backing vocals’ for their next live show (Glitbiter, 2024). Other collaborations spoken about included graphic design or event support, spoken about by DJ She-Ra:

I have helped with art direction on some synthwave artist's music [promotion] [and] I was involved in producing a live, all-day, all synthwave event that had eight synthwave live acts and two DJs... . It was called *Outrun The Sun* [2021].

([DJ She-Ra, 2023](#))

Some artists spoke of their sole role as producers. Representative of this, Laura Dre remarked that she is a 'one-woman army/powerhouse' who produces her own songs and 'get[s] hired to mix other artists' projects' ([Laura Dre, 2024](#)). Megan McDuffee (who was previously a 'video game composer by trade' [Megan McDuffee, 2020]) is also a producer, and credited on Bandcamp as such for her singles 'Barely Covered' (2019) and 'Pulse' (2020). Mecha Maiko spoke in interview about her role as a music producer ([Mecha Maiko aka Hayley Stewart, 2023](#)), which is additionally visible on her Bandcamp page e.g. EP *Unloved and Unreleased* (2018). Parallels also self-produces, e.g. her album *Mad But Soft* (2018). Parallels spoke quite plainly about her role as a producer:

As someone who identifies as female and is a producer, writer, performer and mixing engineer, I have at times encountered people who are surprised that I'm involved in so many aspects of the creative process. I'm not sure if it's a gender-bias to be honest. But I don't think it's limited to synthwave in that there are far fewer female-identifying engineers/producers, so I have encountered many people who assume I'm solely a singer/songwriter.

(Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2020)

DJ Kaarin Zoe Lee made similar comments:

One of the more innocent observations that I made is that female producers are often sought after just for their vocals. In fact, I could probably connect you with plenty of women who are annoyed at being

regarded as ‘just a singer’ when in fact they’re behind all their own masterful production.

([Kaarin Zoe Lee, 2023](#))

Other artists who cited producing their own work include Adryelle ([Adryelle, 2024](#)), JJ Mist (JJ Mist, 2023), Sheridan Black ([Neaon aka Sheridan Black, 2024](#)) and Digital Love (Digital Love, 2025). JJ Mist remarked positively on the progression she has observed: ‘I love seeing more and more female producers emerge’ (JJ Mist, 2023). Oceanside85 aka Chelsea Owen also recognised female artists and producers present in the synthwave community: ‘there are many more women in the scene [2023] than five years ago [2018]. I am really happy to see so many female artists and producers releasing ... music’ ([Oceanside85 aka Chelsea Owen, 2023](#)).

Artists also spoke of their creative role as a DJ, e.g. the work of Kaarin Zoe Lee: a ‘radio broadcaster and live DJ’ ([Kaarin Zoe Lee, 2023](#)). DJ She-Ra: a ‘synth-based DJ’ (2023). Bunny X: ‘Mary and I both perform and DJ’ (Abigail Gordon of Bunny X, 2023). Laura Dre: ‘I am both the Live Music Performer and DJ’ ([Laura Dre, 2024](#)). And LAU ([LAU aka Laura Fares 2023](#)).

Theme 2: Female Representation Within the Synthwave Community

One question asked interviewees directly about their experiences as synthwave artists. A mixture of responses was received with regard to gender. DJ Kaarin Zoe Lee commented: ‘I have heard some female artists who feel neglected by the scene ... some of the top recognized artists are female (but of course, not THE top artist)’ ([Kaarin Zoe Lee, 2023](#)). Abigail Gordon of Bunny X furthered this comment in suggesting why female artists may not be as recognised within the community: ‘female artists don’t enjoy the same attention as some of their male counterparts, [who are] on popular playlists with large followings. That is definitely an area for improvement’ (Abigail Gordon of Bunny X, 2023). Of representation generally, Megan McDuffee characterised the synthwave community as ‘male-dominated’ though remarked that this was the case for ‘most music

professions’. She felt that she had been treated differently because of her gender on occasion: ‘I’ve faced some stronger scrutiny than perhaps some of my male peers’ ([Megan McDuffee, 2020](#)). Mary Hanley of Bunny X described a similar scenario with regards to one music venue that they performed at: ‘Unfortunately, we got stuck with quite a few seemingly unnecessary charges. The lineup was all female ... I’ve always wondered if it would have been that way if we were dudes’ (Mary Hanley of Bunny X, 2020). Abigail Gordon of Bunny X highlighted issues on social media which women face, of: ‘unfortunate comments ... on YouTube for example that attempt to tear female artists down by commenting solely on their looks (whether positive or negative) and disregarding their music’ (Abigail Gordon of Bunny X, 2023). Further to this, one interviewee reported instances of unfavourable treatment she had experienced within the synthwave community. She described: ‘being bullied for being a feminist ... being ignored when offering help because certain males can’t stand it when a woman has more experience’ (Anon 3, 2020).

Positively, support for female artists (and support in general) within the synthwave community was echoed by numerous artists. Roxi Drive described the community as: ‘a really positive, friendly bunch and I feel lucky to be a part of it’ ([Roxi Drive, 2024](#)). INDIGO commented: ‘I love how supportive and collaborative the community can be’ ([INDIGO, 2024](#)). Chloe Deroy said: ‘it’s joyful to meet other passionate people all around the world thanks to the internet!’ ([Chloe Deroy, 2025](#)) and Lisa Marie Perkins aka Radical Bicep spoke similarly: ‘The synthwave community is the best part about [the] music’ ([Lisa Marie Perkins aka Radical Bicep, 2023](#)). Oblique explained: ‘I’m surprised about how [many] female artists I have met that make synthwave. We’re connected through the social networks and we support each other. It’s great!’ ([Oblique, 2020](#)). Dana Jean Phoenix agreed: ‘I am very fortunate to have forged some very close and important friendships through the synthwave community’ ([Dana Jean Phoenix, 2024](#)). Parallels made similar comments but framed these more as a necessity due to being female: ‘with other female artists in the synthwave scene, we’ve needed to actively make ourselves more visible by teaming up to play

shows together or do tours’ (Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2020). She explained one way in which her and NINA addressed this back in the late 2010s:

In 2018 and 2019 – having talked about how male-dominated synthwave was, NINA and I decided to hit the road together so ... put together a little ‘ladies of synth’ run of dates in the US where we also connected with C Z A R I N A, Bunny X, Jessie Frye, Glitbiter.

(Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2020) [the Sleepwalking in Metropolis tour]

At the turn of the 2020s, Parallels recognised a positive progression in the inclusivity of the community: ‘It feels like it’s becoming more inclusive thanks to awesome promoters like *Outland* and *VHS Vision*’ (Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2020). She named The Outland Toronto 2019 Retrowave Festival as an example of this positive progression, which featured a ‘four-female/female-fronted synthwave’ lineup including Mecha Maiko, Parallels, Dana Jean Phoenix and DJ She-Ra (Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2020). Abigail Gordon of Bunny X concurred: ‘I think there is a desire amongst many men in the scene (whether they be bloggers, reviewers, writers, interviewers, hosts, content creators and fellow artists, etc) to help lift female artists up’ (Abigail Gordon of Bunny X, 2023).

Relatedly, Jessie Frye spoke positively of her collaboration with Timecop1983. With one of his instrumentals, Jessie brought to life a track which became ‘Faded Memory’ (2018). She toplined the track (writing the vocal melody and lyrics), as well as rearranged the track’s structure, while her producer Matt added guitar parts, drum fills and produced the final track. Timecop1983 assisted in production. The song has shared ownership between Jessie Frye and Timecop1983 and was released as ‘Jessie Frye feat. Timecop1983’ ([Jessie Frye, 2024](#)). What was interesting about this collaboration is that the community didn’t immediately recognise Timecop1983 as the feature artist. Jessie explained: ‘in the beginning, I think because I was female ... people assumed it was the other way around’

(i.e. that Jessie was the featured artist). In reference to gender perceptions, Jessie reflected: ‘It’s subtle things [sometimes]’ ([Jessie Frye, 2024](#)). The song went on Jessie’s highly successful album *Kiss Me in The Rain* (2020), which also featured artists Ollie Wride and Robert Parker. Jessie spoke highly and graciously of Timecop1983 and her experience collaborating with him: ‘He’s always been so lovely to me’. She recognised that Timecop1983’s established profile in the community supported the representation of her work in the community ([Jessie Frye, 2024](#)).

Theme 3: Nostalgia and the 1980s

There were many comments about nostalgia and the 1980s, with relation also to the online community and synthwave as a genre. Of nostalgia, Daria Danatelli remarked: ‘I love synthwave because this genre gives me that very opportunity to be teleported into the time when I was a child and to shape my childish impressions and memories into ... modern music’ ([Daria Danatelli, 2020](#)). Mayah Camara spoke similarly: ‘Synthwave ... is the nostalgia of the [19]80s with modern production techniques ... it’s a nice place to call home musically!’ ([Mayah, 2023](#)). Neaon observed the reflective ([Boym, 2001](#)) nature of synthwave nostalgia: ‘The nostalgic bliss that synthwave offers isn’t about revisiting the actual [19]80s, it is about recapturing the hope, anticipation, innocence and wonder that those days were filled with’ ([Neaon aka Sheridan Black, 2024](#)). JJ Mist exclaimed: ‘Long live the 1980s!’ (JJ Mist, 2023). Despite many positive comments about synthwave nostalgia, DJ She-Ra felt there were some negative consequences in privileging the 1980s:

I love retro [19]80s stuff! But there are things from the [19]80s that haven’t aged well and don’t need to be revived... . The objectification of women. Half-naked female bodies being used as objects to decorate album covers, promo art and video clips.

([DJ She-Ra, 2023](#))

It should be noted that such imagery is not entirely confined to 1980s-inspired context, and feminist cultural theorists have recognised how ‘contradictory’ contemporary feminism and post-feminism can be through its ‘entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes’ ([Gill, 2007](#), p. 151). In particular, feminist Rosalind Gill recognised a ‘modernization of femininity’ in the 21st century, which shifts women from passive objects of the male gaze to active, autonomous subjects who ‘choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner’ ([Gill, 2007](#), p. 151). This comment recognises women’s agency and choice, in, for example, designing imagery for their creative works (and presenting themselves in any manner they choose). Despite this, gender and media culture scholar Mary Celeste Kearney recognised the patriarchal contexts in which female artists’ visual representations exist, also citing Laura Mulvey’s male gaze theory ([Kearney, 2017](#), p. 262). Her chapter titled ‘On The Cover’ provides insightful food for thought on this matter, where she discusses practices of ‘costuming’ in visual media of different genders ([Kearney, 2017](#), p. 243). Whilst her text is primarily rock-focused, she refers to other genres and the music industry more broadly: ‘although sexual attractiveness has not been as important in rock culture as it has in pop, postfeminist media promote the idea that women should exhibit their agency primarily through sexually attractive bodies’ ([Kearney, 2017](#), p. 245). The complexities of post-feminist discourses are great (and particularly the arguments and spectrum of empowerment and objectification) and in order to keep this chapter’s focus (and word count!) I here signpost further reading of the ‘waves’ of feminism, in addition to the nuances of post-feminist discourse.⁴

4.1.2 Further Collaborations

Though not interviewed, KRISTINE has spoken in interview (with *Rock Overdose*) about her collaborations with other synthwave artists, e.g. ‘Alright’ (2014) with Mitch Murder, or ‘Magic’ (2013) with FM Attack ([Πανταζόγλου, 2024](#)). Other notable collaborations within the community include the work of Ollie Wride. In addition to writing his own solo albums,

Ollie has collaborated with artists such as: ‘Jessie Frye, David Schuler [The Bad Dreamers], Michael Oakley’ ([Ollie Wride, 2024](#)). Jessie Frye described her collaboration with Ollie in interview with me, remarking that she had continued to make ‘friendships’ and ‘musical connections’ with people in the synthwave community post-‘Faded Memory’ (2018):

I had this demo, it started out as this really sad song on the piano. I sent it to Ollie, and he did some work on it, the track [went] in a different direction, more upbeat, and then my producer got hold of it and took it even further.

([Jessie Frye, 2024](#))

The track became ‘Malibu Broken’ (2020), appearing on *Kiss Me In The Rain* (2020).

Ollie has also collaborated with FM-84 and reflected in interview with me his experience co-writing three tracks for album *Atlas* (2016): ‘Usually I like to get separate stems and pull it apart and maybe add some chords ... work on the arrangement, then a lyric, then I’ll throw it back to him [Col of FM-84]’ ([Ollie Wride, 2024](#)). Col of FM-84 gave his reflections too, recalling, for example, some of the process of writing ‘Don’t Want To Change Your Mind’ (2016):

Ollie wrote the chord progression at the beginning and sent over an initial topline demo. I remember absolutely loving it and sitting up all night producing an epic track around it with huge synth stabs and downtempo drums. I also remember spending ages writing a bassline melody to perfectly complement the chords.

([FM-84, 2025](#))

Col of FM-84 spoke fondly of his time working with Ollie, describing it as ‘a match made in heaven’, and felt that in general, the creation of *Atlas* (2016) was ‘a defining moment’ in his life (FM-84, 2025). *Atlas* (2016) has been highly revered by the online community since its release and is

considered a cornerstone of the genre. Comments by my survey respondents (2023) remarked, for example: ‘[I] really got into it [synthwave] because of FM-84 *Atlas*’ (Survey Anon, 2023). Another said: ‘*Atlas* is another near perfect album’ (Survey Anon, 2023), while one suggested, ‘I’d like ... a tattoo on my arm with the *Atlas* cover from FM-84’ (Survey Anon, 2023).

The Midnight have also engaged in community collaborations, such as their collaboration with Essenger on ‘Silence’ (2024). Tim of The Midnight described his thinking at the time: ‘[I thought] let’s collab with someone, [let’s] pull in someone I can co-produce with. I had my eye on Essenger’s stuff for a while’ ([McEwan, The Midnight, 2024](#)). Equally, Moonrunner83 spoke of his collaborations in interview with me:

Moonrunner83 represents the collaborative effort of more than 50 people – musicians, writers, vocalists, and producers from all over the world... . Simple instrumentals tracked in my studio take on a life of their own once other musicians become involved.

([Moonrunner83, 2024](#))

Further collaborations noted by artists interviewed for this book include David Schuler aka The Bad Dreamers, who described his experience working with Timecop1983 on track ‘Back To You’ (2018):

Jordy emailed me asking if I would be interested in collaborating on a track for the new album (*Night Drive* [2018]). I wrote him right back. His only prerequisite was that the song be written about driving at night... . He sent me an instrumental that wasn’t necessarily finished at that point... . I landed on the idea of having it be a breakup song. Once I wrote a verse and a chorus, [I] sent that to him and he was really enthusiastic about it.

([The Bad Dreamers, 2024](#))

Speaking of this particular collaboration, Schuler of The Bad Dreamers remarked that he had performed the song on tour with Timecop1983, as

well as with Josh Dally: ‘To perform “Back To You” was always a highlight of the night’ ([The Bad Dreamers, 2024](#)). Timecop1983 also reflected in interview on the collaborative process of ‘Back To You’, as well as his collaboration with Josh Dally on ‘Neon Lights’:

My collaborations generally are with vocalists. On my ... album [*Night Drive*] I worked with Josh Dally (‘Neon Lights’) and The Bad Dreamers (‘Back to You’) extensively to create the track... . We worked on the arrangements together, so their vocals would fit in better. I really enjoyed that process and [it] gave me insight in how other people do arrangements.

(*Timecop1983, 2018*)

I have been involved in my own collaborations within the synthwave community, having been invited to write and perform the topline for The Ocean Beneath’s ‘Fluorescent Light’ (2022), as well as to write and perform several toplines for eponymous EP *Superterranea* (2020). The Ocean Beneath had approached me via Twitter having heard some of my own releases e.g. ‘Killing Dreams’ [2019] and ‘Futures Promise’ [2021] – for which I am the sole songwriter and performer, with the songs having been co-produced by me and final mixes produced by Jan Hajsen. This gives an example of how collaborations in the community are formed. Upon ‘Fluorescent Light’s (2022) release, it was added to several synthwave and synth or electro music playlists within the community, including *Forever Synth*, [RevivalSynth.com](#), *SynthProf* and *Electro Tunes*. Reviews were also posted about the song and shared on Twitter, #hashtagged as #synthwave. I have remained in contact with many of those reviewers, who later reviewed music I released myself (i.e. not collaborative works) such as tracks ‘Ragequit’ (2023) and ‘Resistance Song’ (2024). This is one way in which I actively engage with the community, as do many, in the sharing of their creative works.

4.2 Case Study Analyses of a Vocal Synthwave Track

4.2.1 Analysis of ‘Beyond Memory [Extended Version]’ (2018)

NINA

The song I chose to analyse to represent vocal synthwave is ‘Beyond Memory [Extended Version]’ (2018), track one of NINA’s 2018 album *Sleepwalking*. NINA, real name Nina Blair (nee Boldt), is a German synthwave artist with four albums listed on Spotify to date (May 2025, not including those that are remix, deluxe or instrumental). NINA is a highly regarded synthwave artist within the community and remarked in interview with me that she identifies with the genre: ‘Yes, of course! I love synthwave and I got my start in this wonderful scene’ (NINA, 2024). Several of my survey respondents (2019 and 2023) spoke highly of her and her work:

Survey Anon: ‘NINA has a gorgeous voice’ (Survey Anon, 2019).

Survey Anon: ‘I call her the queen of synthwave, her album *Synthian* ... made me fall in love with [her] style and her voice is so easy to listen to’.

Survey Anon: ‘NINA – My favourite female artist, a great singer and musician’.

Survey Anon: ‘NINA – absolutely love her, electronic pop perfection!’ (Survey Anons, 2023).

Artists interviewed for this book also revered her work, and particularly her impact on vocal synthwave ([Figure 4.6](#)). Michael Oakley, for example, commented: ‘Her music is phenomenal. She’s a great singer, great performer. My contribution is [also] in the vocal synthwave realm ... people like me and Ollie [Wride] and NINA and Dana Jean Phoenix are in that ballpark’ ([Michael Oakley, 2023](#)). Journalists outside of the synthwave community have also characterised NINA’s creative works alongside synthwave, with one report naming her a ‘synthwave queen’ who ‘redefine[s] nostalgia’ with her ‘sounds ... redolent of the best of “[19]80s pop radio”’ ([Moyer, 2018](#)). NINA confirmed her allegiance to the 1980s in her interview with me: ‘The [19]80s has a massive influence on my sound. I was born in the [19]80s, so I feel very connected with that era, the fashion,

the movies and overall aesthetics’ (NINA, 2019). Representative of this, one of NINA’s Instagram posts (dated August 2019) cites 1980s artists that she admires, including: Kim Wilde, Madonna, Kraftwerk and Tears for Fears. In addition to music of the 1980s, NINA credited a plethora of styles of music that she enjoys listening to: ‘pop, synthwave, new wave, electronica, rock ‘n’ roll, blues and motown’, and described of her songwriting persuasions: ‘The more poetic and mysterious a song is, the more I like it. I’m guilty of writing melancholic and dreamy love songs; I’m a sucker for romance’ (NINA, 2024). She also reflected more broadly on her journey with synthwave in interview with me:



FIGURE 4.6 Artist photo of NINA aka Nina Blair (nee Boldt).
Copyright Nina Blair. Photographer Joakim Reimer. [🔗](#)

NINA: ‘I’ve been a part of the synthwave world since 2013 and in that time I’ve experienced some real-life magic. Working with one of my heroes, Ricky Wilde, on our album *Scala Hearts* (2023) was a dream come true! Performing live and sharing the stage with Erasure,

De/Vision, Cannons, and Johnny Jewel was stellar! Creating a whole new sonic universe with my partner Oliver aka Radio Wolf has been revelatory and beautiful! The synthwave scene has changed my life. I've made so many friends and collaborated with wonderful fellow artists over the years' (NINA, 2024).

Of collaborations, NINA spoke further about some of her most recent, such as those with Radio Wolf (e.g. singles 'Tokyo Cowboy' [2024] and 'Don't Trust The Night' [2024]):

NINA: 'My recent team-up with Radio Wolf has inspired more experimentation. We wanted to break free from genre-specific forms... . We looked at synthwave as just one (yet vital) component of a vaster spectrum of the sonic universe. This meant fusing electronic music with more organic forms like rock 'n' roll and adding atmospheric SFX. Radio Wolf's live guitar, for example, augments the synthwave element... . It's all kind of cinematic in feel' (NINA, 2024, [Figure 4.7](#)).

Radio Wolf aka Oliver Blair also reflected on his recent collaboration with NINA: 'Lyrically and vocally [NINA] summons up a kind of romantic spirit world where dreams run wild and free. Making music with her has always been and continues to be an inspiration' ([Radio Wolf, 2025](#)). NINA also reflected fondly on her collaboration with Ricky Wilde, on album *Scala Hearts* (2023), noting particularly the 1980s influences:

NINA: 'Ricky and I forged a powerful friendship through making our album *Scala Hearts* (2023) ... I learned so much from him during the process of writing and performing the songs. His production and sound style are products of a legendary musical legacy. His [19]80s work with his sister Kim (Wilde) is an example of synthpop sublimity which always sparks a deep nostalgia and respect in me. I think we created a beautifully timely album together – a healthy balance of modern pop

with classic [19]80s vibes that keeps faith with his fans and mine’ (NINA, 2024).

Ricky Wilde in turn remarked positively of his collaboration with NINA:

I had the honour of collaborating with [NINA] in 2020 when we recorded *Scala Hearts* (2023) together... . NINA had the ability to put a totally different spin on every track, both lyrically and melodically, which in turn took each track to places I never thought possible. Along with the amazing Radio Wolf (who also added so much to our sound and vibe).

([Ricky Smith aka Ricky Wilde, 2025](#))



FIGURE 4.7 Single artwork ‘Don’t Trust The Night’ (2024).
Copyright Nina and Oliver Blair. Photography: NINA and Radio Wolf.
Artwork/design: Pure Eye Arts. [↩](#)

Of collaborations and ‘Beyond Memory’ (2018), NINA confirmed that synthwave artist Sunglasses Kid ‘sent [her] the instrumental’, to which she helped reshape the creative direction of the song and contributed to the topline, [Figure 4.8](#). She confirmed that the topline was written by herself, LAU (aka Laura Fares) and Luke Simpkins. Richard X produced the final recording (NINA, 2024). She also clarified how: ‘the main lyrics of the

song derived from a poem I'd written before [I'd heard the instrumental]’ (NINA, 2019).



FIGURE 4.8 Album artwork for *Scala Hearts* (2023). Copyright Nina Blair and Ricky Wilde. Photographer Paul Johnson. [🔗](#)

Before I present my analysis of ‘Beyond Memory’ (2018), I provide a graphic representation of ‘Beyond Memory’s (2018) structure and arrangement ([Table 4.1](#)), to establish the names of song components I will later refer to in analysis.

	<i>Ethereal</i>	<i>Intro 2</i>	<i>Verse 1</i>	<i>Chorus 1</i>	<i>Intro Reprise</i>	<i>Verse 2</i>	<i>Chorus 2</i>	<i>Verse 3</i>	<i>Cl</i>
	<i>Intro</i>	<i>[0'43–1'34]</i>	<i>[1'35–2'05]</i>	<i>[2'06–2'47]</i>	<i>[2'48–2'52]</i>	<i>[2'53–3'24]</i>	<i>[3'25–3'54]</i>	<i>[3'55–4'05]</i>	<i>4</i>
Synth 3	*one single note at 0'42								
Synth 4									
Synth 5									
Synth 6									
Synth 7									
Bass Synth									
Cymbals									
Kick and Snare									
Toms									
Percussive sound FX									

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To collate my analysis of ‘Beyond Memory’ (2018), I provide a discussion which is structured into three sections. The first two sections highlight key style parameters pertaining to melodic form and music production aesthetics, where the third illustrates broader analysis of the song’s arrangement (with specific reference to structure, rhythm and melody).

TABLE 4.2 Instrument Parts ‘Beyond Memory [Extended Version]’ (2018). [📄](#)

<i>Instrument and Timecode</i>	<i>Style Parameter/Music Production</i>
Synth 1 0’10	Synth 1 is heard first in the ethereal introduction and later functions as a descending melody heard at the end of the chorus. It has a short attack (amplifier envelope), noticeable reverb and high-pass filtering (SP3).
Synth 2 0’52	A six-note repeated figure heard first at 0’52. It has noticeable delay applied.
Synth 3 2’06	A high-pitched synth heard during the chorus (B-C#-B-A-F#-B) and once at 0’42 as a singular note. It is also heard in verse 1 in partial <i>melodic unison</i> with ‘time has won’. It has a short attack and longer release (amplifier envelope), making the notes appear to linger.
Synth 4 1’29	A pad/chord synth (SP4) heard in the ethereal introduction, at 1’29 and in later choruses.
Synth 5 2’37	Synth 5 is heard after chorus sections and before introduction reprises (hear clearly at 2’37). Its melodic contour is ascending, and it has a short attack and short release (amplifier envelope) making it appear staccato like.
Synth 6 0’43	A rising <i>ostinato</i> synth B-D-E-F# (SP1a). An LFO modulates the filter throughout introduction 2 which makes it appear distant at times (e.g. 1’20).
Synth 7 0’43	Synth 7 is the bass synth doubled an octave higher. See bass synth next.

Instrument
and
Timecode

Style Parameter/Music Production

**Bass
Synth**
0'43

The bass synth bears sonic resemblance to the Korg Polysix style of bass ('fat line bass' preset) used across many synthwave tracks (SP1a). The bass synth is heard clearly at 1'25. The sound may have in part been achieved by setting an amplitude envelope to modulate the filter (e.g. a 12db LPF).

4.2.2 Three Key Style Parameters of 'Beyond Memory' (2018)

1) Melodic Form

The first key style parameter pertains to vocal melody, with reference to vocals within the wider arrangement, as well as vocal phrasing and vocal hooks. Of vocals within the wider arrangement, one particular technique heard in 'Beyond Memory' that signals the 1980s is *melodic unison* (where the vocal melody and synthesizer perform pitches and rhythm in unison, termed SP11 in [Chapter 2](#)). This technique was used by artists on songs of the late 1970s and 1980s in particular, for example across styles such as krautrock, synthpop and pop music. *Melodic unison* was heard when I reviewed a selection of songs from the 1980s, as well as artists from which NINA reports inspiration. Examples included Taylor Dayne's 'Tell It to My Heart' (1987),^{[5](#)} Kraftwerk's 'The Model' (1978)^{[6](#)} as well as Madonna's 'Papa Don't Preach' (1986)^{[7](#)} and Kim Wilde's 'Chequered Love' (1981).^{[8](#)} NINA's usage of *melodic unison* (heard at 1'53) is partial, in that the rhythms are the same (across synth and vocal), but only the first note of the three heard are the same (i.e. the synth matches the vocal's pitch on 'time' of 'time has won', but does not match the vocal for 'has won'). Provided this, NINA's influence of 1980s pop artists is demonstrable through her partial use of *melodic unison*. Such usage is also in line with synthwave's privileging of 1980s aesthetics.

Musically, the verse vocal melody uses B natural minor with a short vocal range of A3-F#4. The verse vocal melody makes some use of syncopation, likely to counter the other instruments' strong emphasis on the downbeat.

There are a high number of vocal phrases in the first verse, with little direct repetition from phrase to phrase. The only phrases which do repeat are: 'time has won' and 'our moment was stolen'. These two vocal phrases are contrasting (hear at 1'53–2'05 and see [Figure 4.9](#)). The verse vocal phrases seldom rhyme, likely due to their constant variations (high number of different vocal phrases) resulting in an inconsistent number of syllables to facilitate rhyming. Contrastingly, the chorus melody uses much more vocal repetition than the verse, showing a tradition for creating chorus vocal hooks. The chorus vocal melody also incorporates more syncopation than the verse (again to offset the instrumentations' downbeat and emphasise the vocal hook) and ascends in range to B3-C#5. The section alternates two main vocal phrases, the first of which is partially doubled an octave below (heard on lyric 'beyond memory' at 2'07), and the second which begins by repeating F#4 three times (heard on lyric 'only shadows'). An arch shape melody is formed through the combination of these vocal phrases, the first a scalar ascent from F#4 to C#5, and the second a descendent contour from F#4 to B3 (see [Figure 4.10](#)).



FIGURE 4.9 Vocal phrases in verse 1 of 'Beyond Memory' (2018).





FIGURE 4.10 Vocal phrases sung by the main vocal in chorus 1 of ‘Beyond Memory’ (2018). [🔗](#)

The use of repetition by the vocal phrasing in the chorus shows NINA’s awareness for creating strong vocal ‘hooks’ (Burns, 1987, p. 1). As shown by [Figure 4.10](#), the chorus vocal hook ‘beyond memory’ is a melodic phrase repeated continuously throughout the section. NINA’s hook is also emphasised by an extra backing vocal, which performs the hook an octave below. Rhyming is much more present in the chorus, owed to the repeated phrases (e.g. ‘beyond memory’) which facilitate a more consistent number of syllables. This repetition contributes to a more memorable vocal part, as per vocal hooks.

2) Music Production Aesthetics

Vocal effects were prominent throughout the song, likely used to decorate and emphasise the vocal arrangement – a central component of vocal synthwave. Whilst it is important to highlight that music production effects such as reverb, echo and delay are common to many styles of popular music, it is what their uses in ‘Beyond Memory’ (2018) suggest semiotically which makes them significant as style parameters to vocal synthwave. We hear vocals immediately from 0’00 (‘ahhs’), as part of an ‘ethereal introduction’. At this point, the vocals have a large room setting and very wet reverb, making the listener feel as though in a large space. The reverb appears to have a low frequency boost effect, making the ‘ahh’ vocals fill the mix space or dominate the stereo field. Where the main introduction (0’43) emphasises the downbeat prominently with *ostinati* synth parts (heard on the bass synth [SP1a] and synth 6 [SP2a]), the ethereal introduction section is entirely contrasting, lacking pulse or clear downbeat rhythms. This is because the reverb applied to the vocal obscures

the tempo and creates a feeling of free metre, which when combined with the long-duration notes of the synths, appears to merge or bind the two sonically. This combination consequently obscures the rhythmic value of the ‘ahh’ vocals, which present a distant and ghostlike vocal character. This manipulation of acoustic spacing makes the vocals and synth 4 appear to swell, which is aided by a slight crescendo heard 0’00–0’06.

Vocals in the ethereal introduction function more like backing vocals, producing long sustained ‘ahh’ notes. The only distinct melodic part heard is performed by synth 1, a short two-phrase descending figure which is heard throughout the section twice. Harmonically, a synth pad (synth 4 [SP4]) is heard throughout, playing long sustained notes. The instrumental nature of this section makes it function more like soundtrack music, where musical and music production components (here reverb) usually support an on-screen narrative or characters’ emotional states. This idea is in keeping with synthwave, a style which is affiliated strongly with soundtrack music.

In particular, I noticed that the ethereal introduction of ‘Beyond Memory’ (2018) bore resemblance to songs from the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack, in particular: ‘Rubber Head’ and ‘I Drive’. These songs too have long held synth pad parts and an obscured sense of pulse due to reverb treatment. It is due to this that I argue ‘Beyond Memory’s (2018) ethereal introduction is emulative of soundtrack music. However, NINA’s addition of melodic elements to ‘Beyond Memory’s (2018) ethereal introduction (see synth 1) show her taking into account the pop influences of vocal synthwave. I argue also, that in mimicking musical-structural elements of the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack, NINA signals key traditions and aesthetics of synthwave. When I interviewed NINA, she cited the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack as a source of her inspiration when beginning to engage with synthwave-styled music: ‘I became aware of the synthwave scene after watching the movie *Drive* (2011). I immediately felt super inspired listening to the soundtrack, so I checked out some of the bands and fell right into it’ (NINA, 2019).

Vocals, a central component of vocal synthwave, are emphasised in the arrangement by use of echo (a type of delay) effects. The use of echo on the chorus vocal phrases appears to thicken its holistic sound (hear at 2’07),

with a reverb applied which appears to boost high-end frequencies and emphasises higher pitches sung by NINA. The high-frequency boosted reverb becomes apparent when listening to the lower octave part of lyric ‘beyond memory’, which is quieter in the mix and appears less reverberant. Echo is heard throughout ‘Beyond Memory’ (2018), emphasising various vocal parts. Firstly, the chorus lyric ‘to me’ has a $\frac{1}{4}$ time echo, making the lyrics ‘to me’ essentially heard twice (2’13), once in the original vocal signal (2’13) and secondly as a delayed signal (2’14). This is demonstrative of the interesting rhythmic effects that delay can create, yielding in particular a rhythmic multiplication effect (where replications of the original signal combine with the original signal to multiply heard rhythmic beats). Another example of echo is heard at 3’55 (verse 3 – ‘paint me, with your colours’), where a $\frac{1}{2}$ time echo is applied. This again allows the lyrical phrases to be heard twice. In this instance, the replications of the original signal have a telephone filter EQ effect applied, making them stand out sonically as well as rhythmically. Whilst music production effects such as echo are common across multiple areas of popular music, I argue that their uses in ‘Beyond Memory’ (2018) are prominent, functioning to emphasise the vocal arrangement which is a key component of the vocal synthwave style.

3) Song Arrangement (Structure, Rhythm and Melody)

‘Beyond Memory’ combines pop structure verse–chorus form with elements of EDM and other key influences of synthwave (soundtrack music). This is notable after the ‘ethereal introduction’, which, as outlined in my analysis, is indicative of (non-diegetic) soundtrack music. Once past the ethereal introduction, ‘Beyond Memory’ (2018) has larger sections of instrumental music in between sung verses and choruses which wouldn’t be considered traditional of commercial pop music. These instrumental sections instead identify more with EDM (discussed of techno by [Rietveld, 2018](#)) or game and film soundtrack music. An example of this is heard at the ‘introduction 2’ section (0’43) which immediately follows the ‘ethereal

introduction' (0'00). In stark contrast to the 'ethereal introduction', a host of new melodic parts are heard at the 'introduction 2' section (0'43), including a bass synthesizer (SP1a), synth 7 (the bass synthesizer doubled at octave) and synth 6 (SP2a). The rhythmic drive is emphasised by the downbeat, with a prominence of sixteenth rhythms emphasised by all heard melodic parts. There is an emphasis on the tonic note, which all melodies and bassline begin on and repeat through *ostinati*. Verse 1 begins at 1'35, collectively making the 'ethereal introduction' and 'introduction 2' over a minute and a half in length. The instrumental nature and length of these sections reflect key influences to synthwave, including EDM, game music and film music soundtracks. In particular, the early synthwave subgenre outrun set a precedent for instrumentality within synthwave.⁹ Synth 6 is heard at 'introduction 2', which is affected with a LPF to vary its tone throughout. The only sections in which synth 6 (SP2a) does not appear are the 'ethereal introduction', 'intro reprise' and 'verse 1 reprise' sections. Synth 6's filter is most noticeable at 1'24, where the synth appears to drop out, but is in fact just less apparent in the mix at that moment due to the modulated LPF.

Another example of 'Beyond Memory' (2018) identifying with EDM rather than pop-styled arrangements is the use of shared lead melody parts ([Solberg and Dibben, 2019](#)). Whilst the vocal is the main lead, some instrumental sections have lead melodies on synths. An example can be heard after chorus 1, where synths 1 and 5 (SP3) lead a short section before an introduction reprise is heard. From a general mix point of view, the stereo field is densely packed with different synth parts, and as such, panning is strategic to ensure all synths can be distinguished in the mix. The drums appear thickened by sound effects at points; for example, sound FX at 2'17 and 2'27 take the place of what might otherwise have been a crash cymbal, with sounds which may have been achieved with tape saturation and white noise. These sounds are heard again at 4'06, incorporated as part of a tom fill.

In summary, 'Beyond Memory' (2018) emphasises vocal parts through music arrangement and music production choices – establishing the vocal

as a key component of vocal synthwave. Music production choices which emphasise vocal parts in particular included different treatments of reverb, echo and delay. Music arrangement choices which emphasise vocal parts include *melodic unison* (SP11). Vocal arrangements like this differentiate vocal synthwave from other synthwave subgenres (such as outrun and darksynth).

As demonstrated by ‘Beyond Memory’ (2018), one of the ways in which vocal synthwave-styled songs maintain their synthwave identity (as opposed to being considered purely pop music) is through incorporating broader components of synthwave, namely EDM, film music soundtrack and game music influences. A prominent example of film music soundtrack influence, for example, is the ethereal section heard as the introduction of ‘Beyond Memory’ (2018). Also, key synthwave style parameters heard throughout the song include the *ostinati* bassline (SP1a), four-on-the-floor drums (SP5), lead melodies on synth (SP3) and pad synths (SP4).

Chapter 4 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates how vocal synthwave is a space for women to negotiate both their skills and creative roles within the synthwave community. It evidences further the differing creative roles within the synthwave community, and particularly how the role of toplineers has established vocal synthwave as a subgenre since the late 2010s. It is clear that vocal synthwave artists are talented music performers and toplineers that have much to contribute to the community (both on record and live on stage), something that is notable of both male and female (inclusive of non-binary) artists. In particular, vocal synthwave has created opportunities and a platform for women to negotiate and challenge often preconceived or gendered creative roles, with many vocal synthwave artists identifying as music producers, songwriters and performers (and not ‘just’ singers).

When considering how synthwave subcultural capital manifests in vocal synthwave, it is evident that artists utilise both personal and community understandings of the 1980s and nostalgia, implementing these ideas musically into their songs, such as was the case with NINA. NINA cites specific musical influence from the 1980s (based on her own upbringing as a 1980s child) as well as musically referencing key synthwave subcultural capital such as the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack. This shows how she realises the privileging of 1980s aesthetics in her songs, through a negotiation of personal influence and synthwave subcultural capital. Further examples of incorporating synthwave subcultural capital into vocal synthwave include the Timecop1983 and The Bad Dreamers collaboration ‘Back To You’ (2018), a song which is about ‘driving at night’. Such a theme is considered core to synthwave. Relatedly, collaborations themselves were noted as significant in this chapter, demonstrating how more established synthwave artists have supported new artists in engaging with the scene. More broadly, synthwave collaborations demonstrate highly creative endeavours which showcase artists in new contexts and combinations, which in turn supports the community through expanding and sharing artists’ audiences. Such

collaborations also yield other exciting consequences, such as going on the road together to perform creative works live.

In 2025, vocal synthwave is a highly recognised and popular subgenre of synthwave, and artists, such as NINA, Dana Jean Phoenix, Jessie Frye, Bunny X, GUNSHIP, The Midnight, Michael Oakley, Ollie Wride (including many more), continue to make music which the community characterise in relation to this subgenre. Since its inception, vocal synthwave has demonstrated a notable shift in the synthwave community, which prior to this particular subgenre, could be characterised as male-dominated. However, as explained by the artists interviewed as part of this chapter, vocal synthwave is increasingly changing the artist demographic of synthwave, with an increased number of female artists negotiating a path to challenge preconceived notions of historically gendered creative roles. With this, vocal synthwave has become a gateway for female artists to establish themselves across other synthwave subgenres, as well as becoming a mainstay synthwave subgenre overall.

Notes

1. Albums by The Midnight include – *Days of Thunder* (2014), *Endless Summer* (2016), *Kids* (2018), albums by GUNSHIP include – *GUNSHIP* (2015), *Dark All Day* (2018), albums by NINA include – *Sleepwalking* (2018), albums by Dana Jean Phoenix include – *Drrrrty Shooz* (2014), *Le Mirage* (2016), *PixelDust* (2018), albums by KRISTINE – *Kristine* (2015). [↗](#)
2. The article is no longer available for viewing. [↗](#)
3. *Ladies of Synth* (2017) compilation album available from: <https://retrosynthrecords.bandcamp.com/album/ladies-of-synth>. [↗](#)
4. Parry (2013), [Lumby \(2013\)](#), [Banet-Weiser et al \(2019\)](#), [Whiteley \(1997\)](#), [Leonard \(2007\)](#) and [Kearney \(2017\)](#). [↗](#)
5. ‘Tell It to My Heart’ is accessible from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ud6sU3AclT4> (Taylordayne, 2009). Melodic unison at 0’50. [↗](#)

6. 'The Model' is accessible from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFq2pU21cNU>> (Scatmanjohn3001, 2009). Melodic unison at 0'24. [!\[\]\(189c499b5808d66c21fbffde3cea3087_img.jpg\)](#)
7. 'Papa Don't Preach' is accessible from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G333Is7VPOg>> (Madonna, 2011). Melodic unison at 2'11. [!\[\]\(16f1a9eb24aee6bb02e372d463eca808_img.jpg\)](#)
8. 'Chequered Love' is accessible from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNjFm7CoE84>> (Irma0815007, 2010). More rhythmic unison but has a similar effect 0'16. [!\[\]\(b25d60e05bc34574cc4e347018a1f36b_img.jpg\)](#)
9. As outlined in Chapter 1, the outrun subgenre was named after the 1980s arcade game of the same name. [!\[\]\(e7c644f29f0766441ed8a0277f1fe414_img.jpg\)](#)

5

MAKING ‘LIVE’ SYNTHWAVE PERFORMANCES – TENSIONS IN LIVE SYNTHWAVE PRACTICES

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This chapter observes and interrogates synthwave practices in a live setting. It centres around three live concert ethnographies which took place in November 2019 (of The Midnight), February 2020 (of Dance with the Dead) and April 2024 (of SIERRA VEINS) respectively. Through these concert ethnographies, ideas of ‘liveness’ (Auslander, 1999/2023) and practices of synthwave performance are considered, exploring in particular how synthwave style parameters are manifested in a live setting. I consider also to what extent synthwave’s live music practices can be situated within the EDM tradition, given synthwave’s musical lineage in forms of electronic music as well as more contemporary subgenres of EDM. Data from my virtual ethnography contextualises my discussion, reflecting community members’ viewpoints and experiences of synthwave artists’ live performances. The chapter is structured as follows: Firstly, I present a very brief contextual section about synthwave and EDM, discussing terminologies of EDM ([Attias et al., 2013](#); [Mazierska et al., 2021](#)), ‘liveness’ (Auslander, 1999/2023) and practices of EDM music

performance ([Butler, 2014](#); Attias et al., 2013; [Mazierska et al., 2021](#)) (5.1). Secondly, I present three live concert ethnographies, of The Midnight (5.2), Dance with the Dead (5.3) and SIERRA VEINS (5.4). [Section 5.5](#) includes artist interview data specifically about synthwave and live performing. A summary draws together the findings of my live concert ethnographies and relevant parts of my virtual ethnography.

5.1 Synthwave, Electronic Music and ‘Liveness’

As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), synthwave has roots in various electronic musics throughout history, with significant examples noted from film soundtrack music of the 1970s and 1980s, synth-focused genres such as 1980s synthpop and various pioneers from electronic music history (e.g. Tangerine Dream, Wendy Carlos, Jean-Michel Jarre). Survey respondents also made references to EDM (Survey Anons, 2023) and artists spoke of some of its subgenres, such as French House ([Timecop1983, 2018](#); [DEADLIFE, 2019](#)), a derivative style of House music (which is a well-recognised sub-genre of EDM). Also in reference to EDM, survey respondents named EBM (electronic body music) as musically relevant to synthwave (Survey Anons, 2023). It is useful here to clarify some genre terminologies and their temporality, particularly of electronic music, EDM and dance music. For my purposes, I use electronic music to refer to both early pioneers and significant figures in the history of music made with synthesizers, accounting for different stylistic frameworks (artists across different genres and decades) as well as different contextual usages (e.g. music for film and television). My operational usage of ‘electronic music’ does not necessarily presume the implied purpose of ‘dance’, rather focusing on the ‘electronic’ production of the music. I do acknowledge, however, that the term ‘electronic music’ has been understood (in common discourse) in reference to ‘dance’, as well as within the temporal lineage of more contemporary terms such as EDM. Mazierska, Rigg and Gillon considered such nuances: ‘Before the term electronic dance music [EDM] was coined, there existed music for dancing which was in a sense electronic [e.g.] French New Wave

... disco ... [Detroit] techno ... Krautrock' ([Mazierska, Rigg, Gillon, 2021](#), p. 5). Other relevant examples include 1960s Jamaican Dub and 1980s Chicago House, the latter of which Simon Reynolds described as: 'the culmination of an unwritten ... history of black dance pop' ([Reynolds, 2013](#), p. 26). Of Chicago House and Detroit Techno in particular, Reynolds highlighted the significance of creative work undertaken by 'black youth from Detroit and Chicago' in forming these styles ([Reynolds, 2013](#), p. 6). Mazierska, Rigg and Gillon acknowledged how: 'Gay people and gay culture also played an important role in the development of House, the Chicago-produced dance music' ([Mazierska, Rigg, Gillon, 2021](#), p. 6).

Collectively, there has been a 'wide consensus' that EDM as a term was coined 'sometime between the 1980s and the 1990s' ([Mazierska, Rigg, Gillon, 2021](#), p. 4). Mazierska, Rigg and Gillon also observed how the term 'dance' (music) is now increasingly common, with 'electronic' fairly redundant given the now 'ubiquitous' nature of synthesizers in 'all genres of popular music' (p. 12). Nonetheless, scholars recognise journalists' usage of electronic dance music and abbreviation of EDM, which may encompass a 'myriad of subgenres' (Rietveld, in [Attias et al., 2013](#), p. 2). In my November 2023 survey data (particularly the results from Q4 – reported in [Chapter 1](#)), the term 'electronic' was more prevalent than EDM or dance, though all terms were present, showing a recognition of synthwave's varied stylistic lineages. Considering these stylistic influences, and in acknowledging that synthwave is a mainly electronic and synth-focused genre, this chapter questions how synthwave music ought to be manifested in a live concert setting. To unpack this further, I first provide further context on the practices of EDM (or dance music) as a genre.

Dance music genres developed 'in response to the musical preferences of the participants on the dancefloor' and practices of the DJ (Rietveld, in [Attias et al., 2013](#), pp. 3–6). EDM is 'consumed socially and in public places ... entangled in electronic technology which changes more rapidly than traditional instruments' ([Mazierska, Rigg, Gillon, 2021](#), p. 4). These sources recognise differing instrumentation and location practices of an

EDM performance, explained further when compared against practices of pop and rock music:

While ... forms of commercial popular music, most importantly pop and rock, focused on the performer (typically singer-songwriter in the case of rock) ... in EDM the audience cares much less about the authors of the song, if at all; it is the experience on the dancefloor which matters most.

([Reynolds, 2007](#), p. 315 in [Mazierska, Rigg, Gillon, 2021](#), p. 2)

With links to ‘club culture’ ([Mazierska, Rigg, Gillon, 2021](#), p. xiv) EDM has its own set of practices for performance. These practices come with their own issues of legitimacy and authenticity (p. 111) in conveying what Auslander has termed as ‘liveness’ ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#)), for example Jonathan Yu’s comments about ‘cheating’ in a live performance (Yu, in [Attias et al., 2013](#), p. 154). Notably, Auslander’s 2023 text asserted how ‘the value of liveness is continually being renegotiated’ (p. 3) and argues through several contexts and circumstances where the distinctions between ‘live’ and ‘mediatized’ diminish, particularly with reference to recorded technology, genre and other cultural perceptions. [Chapter 3](#) (‘Liveness and discourses of authenticity in music’) of Auslander’s 2023 text is a particularly apt read with relation to the present chapter’s content, and I draw upon it later when discussing concert ethnographies.

The main focus of the present chapter is to investigate live performance practices of synthwave, alongside concepts of ‘liveness’ ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#)) and authenticity ([Moore, 2002](#)). I consider, for example, to what degree live synthwave performances are aligned with practices of EDM, given the technology-focused creation modes with which the latter’s records are usually made. I consider to what degree this is not the case, questioning if band-oriented performances (i.e. with live performers on ‘traditional’ [[Auslander, 1999/2023](#), p. 107] instruments, as seen in commercial contexts like pop and rock) are expected of live synthwave performances by the community. In a discussion of liveness and

authenticity, Auslander refers to this as ‘canons of instrumental acceptability’ (1999/2023, p. 107) within musical contexts. Of Moore, his third-person authenticity (authenticity of execution or tradition) is notably relevant, in how performer(s): ‘accurately [represent] the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance’ ([Moore, 2002](#), p. 218). For my purposes, this refers to the live performance of synthwave (which is embedded in a history of synth-focused genres), and I consider what the community’s expectations of a live synthwave performance are. To assess the contexts of EDM specifically, I briefly review practices of live EDM performance.

Historically, traditions of EDM performance require a number of skills associated with the role of the DJ, such as ‘mixer basics, beatmatching and EQing’, a type of ‘technocultural capital’ (Yu, in [Attias et al., 2013](#), p. 154). Relevant to this capital is the usage of hardware and software in an EDM performance, which Mark Butler names as interfaces and suggests examples of: ‘analog turntables, DJ mixing boards, laptop computers, drum machines, synthesizers, and various kinds of MIDI controllers’ ([Butler, 2014](#), p. 70). The interaction by the performer with these interfaces is key for an EDM performance (whilst also presenting challenges for an audience), as Butler explained: ‘in an electronic dance music context ... many of the musician’s interactions with interfaces may be invisible, and the unfamiliarity of the instrument renders their performance techniques gesturally opaque to most audience members’ ([Butler, 2014](#), p. 99). One such example includes the ‘problems associated with performing with laptops’ ([Butler, 2014](#) p. 95), which one of Butler’s interviewees described of a performer using Ableton Live. The interviewee criticised the laptop’s usage as being ‘very boring’, ‘just clicking the parts on ... and from an audience point of view [the performer could be] checking their emails or playing Tetris’ ([Butler, 2014](#) p. 96). Auslander also recognised some of the challenges with laptops in an EDM context, which: ‘generally employ materials that are recorded or programmed prior to live performance’ and thus to some, ‘do not seem to be legitimate instruments’ ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#), p. 108). This suggests some of the expectations of ‘liveness’

([Auslander, 1999/2023](#)) in contemporary contexts of EDM, as also described by Tristan Kneschke (in [Mazierska et al., 2021](#)):

As EDM has evolved, more attention has ... been paid to the visual component of the live show. It has become less acceptable, at least for a live [set] as opposed to a DJ set, to simply play tracks through a computer and pantomime performance.

(Kneschke, in [Mazierska et al., 2021](#), p. 133)

One method used by performers to engage with audiences and convey gesture more clearly is through hardware: ‘Many performers today ensure they remain active onstage, at the very least tweaking song parameters or sections via controller knobs, sliders and buttons. Others use a conventional instrument, often a keyboard, to create a spectacle’ (Kneschke, in [Mazierska et al., 2021](#), p. 133). Kneschke’s comments here suggest a level of using hardware superficially or gesturally (e.g. miming gestures) to convey ‘liveness’. Butler’s views are to some extent sympathetic of these ideas, recognising how audiences’ expectations of a performer ‘involve a coupling of aural and visual signals through the medium of movement’ ([Butler, 2014](#), p. 66). Auslander concurred: ‘The visual information provided by musicians in performance shapes the listener’s perception and experience of the music’ (1999/2023, p. 97). His chapter supports that ‘liveness’ is highly nuanced when navigating issues of (perceived) authenticity ([Moore, 2002](#)), technological capital (Yu, in [Attias et al., 2013](#), p. 153) and style legitimacy of contexts such as the EDM tradition. [Section 5.1](#) has provided important context which foregrounds three live synthwave concert ethnographies, all which act as case studies in live synthwave performance.

5.2 The Midnight – Live Concert Ethnography

A live ethnography of The Midnight was conducted in November 2019 in Manchester (UK) (the performance was part of the ‘FALL 2019 EU

TOUR’). The Midnight are frequently associated with the vocal synthwave faction of synthwave due to their incorporating popular style vocals (often with verse–chorus structures) to their songs. They are a considerably high-profile synthwave group within the community. Of their six studio albums (not including their several live, instrumental or remix albums), their most recent is *Heroes* (2022) (to date, May 2025).

When I interviewed The Midnight they spoke of their considerations in designing a live show, particularly given their work with synths and their position as a two-piece group:

[Tyler] I come from a singer-songwriter world and I played with bands ... when we were putting our heads together to figure out what this could look like live, it was assumed that it would be a live band.

(Lyle of The Midnight, 2024)

As such, the show at Manchester included two other musicians, Lelia Broussard (a multi-instrumentalist) and Jesse Molloy (saxophonist). Tyler explained: ‘I knew Lelia from ... mutual friends... . She auditioned [for us] with some shredder metal ... I knew that she would be an asset’ (Lyle of The Midnight, 2024). Tim also clarified: ‘The guy who started playing live with us in the very first few shows was Jesse Malloy’, and later Jacob Scesney (McEwan of The Midnight, 2024). An Instagram post by Jesse Malloy confirms that he performed the Manchester show in November 2019.

The band recalled their first live experience as The Midnight, which took place in the DNA Lounge in San Francisco in 2017, alongside FM-84:

That was the first ever show... . We did [another] show with FM-84 in LA a couple months later [at The Globe Theatre, Los Angeles]. It was after the Globe Show [that we signed with] our now manager Justin and booking agents ... a year later we did our first real tour. That was [the] *Kids* [tour] [‘FALL 2019 EU TOUR’].

(Lyle of The Midnight, 2024)

Tim recalled some of the performative nuances of their earliest live shows: ‘We didn’t have any in ear monitors, we didn’t have [a] click track ... I just pulled my laptop onto the stage’ (McEwan of The Midnight, 2024). The show was organised by Devon Dossett as part of the venue’s *Turbo Drive* night. Ollie Wride explained:

[There was this] club night called *Turbo Drive* and it was a platform for independent producers and artists, mainly in the electronic sphere. Both of our records at the time were the records of the genre [FM-84’s *Atlas* [2016] and The Midnight’s *Endless Summer* [2016].

(Ollie Wride, 2024)

Col of FM-84 had performed a solo set for the DNA Lounge prior to this, in May 2015: ‘The DNA Lounge contacted me way back in 2015 ... they said: “would you ever be up for doing a live show?” They were a real champion of synthwave at the time’ (FM-84, 2025). Meikee Magnetic, a DJ and promoter for *Turbo Drive*, also remarked on these events: ‘*Turbo Drive* was responsible for booking the very first live performances of The Midnight and FM-84 in San Francisco at the DNA Lounge’ (Meikee Magnetic, 2023).

I was curious and excited to see The Midnight live.¹ I wondered how much of the performance would be set to track or triggered. I was also motivated to see synthwave offline, and if any of synthwave’s ties to 1980s culture synthwave would manifest in a live setting. My reasons for choosing to see The Midnight were partly logistical, since few other synthwave artists at the time had any UK dates (and I did not have the time nor resources to travel further afield). The gig took place at the Royal Albert Hall in Manchester, a relatively large venue with a capacity (according to their website) of 2,290. The show was part of the ‘FALL 2019 EU TOUR’, or as Tim and Tyler referred to it in interview, the *Kids* tour (in reference to their 2018 album) (The Midnight, 2024).

Upon our arrival, the sound of applause reverberated around a nearly at-capacity room. We had arrived late and missed the support act, Violet Days.

As we fought through the crowd, I observed the people around me. At the time when this gig was attended, Josh and I were both 26. Others looked a similar age. Most people were in their 20s or 30s, with some people looking older than 40. Some wore synthwave artist band T-shirts, of: The Midnight, Timecop1983 and Carpenter Brut. In terms of gender ratio, I estimated around three quarters of attendees to be male-presenting and one quarter female-presenting. Something about the female-presenting attendees was noticeable: most of their fashion choices mimicked subcultural styles. I saw women taking fashion tropes from Goth (my notes said ‘fishnets, netted tops, all in black, coloured hair’) as well as Grunge (‘converse and plaid shirts or plaid pattern clothes’). I pondered what this might suggest about their music tastes. Many men showed tropes of the metal style (my notes read ‘guys with very long hair’). I considered if these listeners had found The Midnight through an engagement with darksynth (a gateway metal-infused synthwave subgenre, discussed in [Chapter 3](#) for its propensity to lead metalheads to other subgenres of synthwave).

As well as more general subculture fashions, there was a prevalence of 1980s fashion (a physical manifestation of synthwave’s privileging of this decade). Many attendees wore head sweatbands or bomber jackers (and both of these items were available for sale at the merchandise stand). I also saw style icons of synthwave on people’s clothing, such as the neon sunset, which some people had on their T-shirts. The merch stand sold CDs, vinyl and cassette tape versions of The Midnight’s album *Kids* (2018). These media forms, especially cassette tapes, demonstrated synthwave’s privileging of the 1980s decade. Alongside the fashions, music formats and neon lighting (which permeated the whole room in pink, orange, purple and yellow), I felt an odd sense of unity. Perhaps it stemmed from being in a room with such a concentrated age group – it felt like being in a high school class or attending a school disco.

There were other indicators of attendees’ age besides my visual assessments. A number of attendees wore T-shirts with famous 1980s and 1990s game characters (*Super Mario Bros.* [1985], *Crash Bandicoot* [1996], *Pokémon Blue Version* [1998]). I recall one person in particular wearing a

Spyro the Dragon (1998) T-shirt (and excitably tapping on Josh' arm to point it out). Just seeing these images made me feel nostalgic, for the games I loved so much as a child.

As Josh and I waited for the show the start, we began scrutinising the stage setup. There were two laptops (placed sideways to the audience, facing inwards to the stage), one bass guitar, two electric guitars, a drum pad, three synths and a live sax. There were no live drums (i.e. a mic'd up acoustic drum kit) apart from one snare next to the drum pad. These choices signalled a mix of the EDM tradition (multiple laptops, synthesizers) and rock aesthetics ('traditional' musical instruments) of performance. The group later confirmed in interview the drum pad setup: 'The least live [instrument was] the drum ... I'm playing live, but on pads and then there's a drum track underneath [i.e. to track] in case I'm playing something else' ([McEwan of The Midnight, 2024](#)). Tyler also clarified: 'A lot of it controlled via MIDI ... Tim has the perfect kick drum. These are triggers and you know it's live drums but the triggers are perfect samples of the record' ([Lyle of The Midnight, 2024](#)).

When the show was about to start, the room went dark before neon lights lit up the stage. Four people walked onto the stage: Lelia Broussard, who picked up the bass guitar and positioned herself next to a microphone on a stand. She stood back and central of the stage. The lead singer Tyler walked on, picking up one of the electric guitars and positioning himself front and centre of the stage. Tim (dressed in a shiny silver bomber jacket) walked on, standing stage right behind the drum pad and within reach of one of the synths. Jesse Molloy stood stage left behind another of the synths, within reach of the saxophone. All band members largely matched the age demographic of the audience. It was clear at this point that all performers would be playing multiple instruments throughout the set. I observed later that this was the case: Lelia at points moved forwards to duet with Tyler or sing entire songs by herself; she also played the guitar or bass in some songs. Jesse, the saxophonist, also played a synth. Tim played the drum pad, live snare, a synth, as well as operating a laptop and occasionally

singing. Lead singer Tyler also played electric guitar and played another synth.

The band opened with their song 'The Years (Prologue)' (2014), before playing a second song, 'Lost Boy' (2018). The neon lights continued throughout the show with pink, orange, yellow and purple prominently featured. This matched The Midnight's album colours and merchandise styling, as well as supporting subcultural capital of synthwave, where such colours are iconic. They also performed 'Shadows' (2017) during the set, which on the record has a vocoder part. For this live performance, the vocoder was set to track, which seems reflective of Auslander's comments that: 'live performances' have come to be 'modelled on recorded music' ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#), p. 82). Usage of the vocoder is also an apt example of the performance aligning more with the EDM tradition, with the vocal part sounding 'like one of the instruments, de-humanized and robotic' ([Mazierska et al., 2021](#), p. 1).

The crowd were especially receptive when Jesse Molloy stepped forward to perform saxophone solos, cheering loudly. The group remarked in interview with me that Molloy is: 'incredibly talented' (The Midnight, 2024). The audience were extremely engaged and interactive throughout the show, clapping, swaying, dancing, singing along and chanting. There were no mosh pits but instead euphoric jumping around and dancing. The audience knew most of the lyrics to the songs, especially 'Jason' (2016), 'Sunset' (2016) and 'Lost Boy' (2018), and they sang these loudly especially at the point of vocal hooks or chorus sections. The show was highly engaging, and the musicians moved fluidly around the stage to interact with each other, the audience and to swap instruments in between songs. The fact that they were all multi-instrumentalists allowed for a diverse set with not only different lead singers, but different combinations of the four musicians playing at once. In this sense, the performance felt notably unlike the EDM tradition, and further towards a live band performance as per the rock tradition.

At one point the group performed a cover of 'Don't Stand (So Close To Me)' (1980) (originally by The Police). It was a pared down arrangement,

with a slightly slower tempo than the original. No drums were performed as part of the cover, and the song was set to a backing track. The backing track contained a swirling montage of pad synths, with a simple root note bass part (playing long-duration notes rather than any constant rhythm). Over the track, Lelia performed a syncopated melody on the electric guitar. Tyler sang lead vocals, changing the vocal melody considerably from the original. Prominently, he ascended pitches at the end of lines, with a crescendo heard on the lyric ‘age’ (‘this girl is half his age’). Tyler made frequent use of head voice for some of the vocal lines (‘so bad it makes him cry’), again unlike the original. In general, Tyler chose higher pitches than the original melody, and interspersed these parts with loud, cathartic chest voice notes. When these loud cathartic chest voice notes were sung, the audience cheered loudly, clapping in applause.

At the end of the show lead singer Tyler addressed the crowd, expressing his amazement that ‘1800 people even know about us!’ He shared his thoughts about the impact he felt the internet had had on the band’s success: ‘we wrote an EP and said well that was fun ... then you guys wrote us (and hounded us!) on the internet and we had to write more!’ Though he didn’t say the online synthwave community, his recognition of those online who follow The Midnight was clear.

This concert ethnography illustrated synthwave’s privileging of 1980s aesthetics, as well as the demonstration of synthwave subcultural capital. This refers to merchandise media choices such as the cassette tape, as well as the performance of a 1980s song cover, the use of pink neon lighting and tropes of 1980s fashion. The concert ethnography also offers insight of synthwave performance aesthetics e.g. performer lineups. The financial costs of hiring session musicians for tours cannot be understated, and it is possible that this is one of the reasons why many synthwave artists do not (or cannot) tour. This is in addition to the fact that permanent band members may not be performers themselves or may not wish to perform even if they are. Relevantly, in 2024, Tim stepped down from touring with The Midnight, as he explained in interview with me: ‘We made it public earlier this year for me to step down from touring so I could focus more on

the projects. [That's] really where my heart is, it's the creation of it' (McEwan of The Midnight, 2024).

Whilst the group's performer lineup for their 2024 tour 'EU/UK Summer' was slightly different (no longer including Tim, adding a live drummer, a further guitarist and including a new saxophonist) it occurred to me that this 2019 performance of The Midnight treaded a fine line between EDM and rock genres. Though the band lineup, song arrangements and multi-instrumental live performer abilities were more reflective of performances within the rock tradition, their performance was punctuated by traditions of EDM through phenomena such as: use of drum pads rather than a traditional drum kit, use of laptop as instrument, and use of synthesizers. Of 'traditional' instruments and concepts of authenticity, Auslander remarked:

In the 1970s, some rock groups (Queen, for instance) wrote in the liner notes to their albums that they did not use synthesizers, thus stressing their connection to the traditional instrumentation of roots rock ('real' electric guitars, drums, etc.) The advent of digital musical instruments, however, changed the historical status of the analogue synthesizer relative to authenticity.

([Auslander, 1999/2023](#), p. 107)

In contrast to the latter point, when within a synthwave context, use of synthesizers (and arguably any hardware synthesizer, whether analog or digital or otherwise) would lend this performance authenticity, given synthwave's canonic ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#), p. 107) use of synth on records (and musical roots in synth-based genres such as 1980s synthpop and contemporary forms of EDM). Such a notion might be considered a marker of Moore's third-person authenticity (2002). In turn, the usage of synths, as well as incorporation of backing track ('employ materials that are recorded or programmed prior to live performance' [[Auslander, 1999/2023](#), p. 107]) aligns this performance with the EDM tradition. However, the strong representation of vocal parts in the set overall (delivered mainly by

Tyler and Lelia) speaks more to the rock tradition. Of vocal performers and microphones in particular, Auslander explained how use of the microphone conveys an immediate sense of ‘liveness’ with its ‘status’. He described: ‘the very presence of the microphone and the performers’ manipulation of it are ... markers of the performance’s status as live and immediate’ ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#), p. 29).

In interview with me, Tim reflected on the group’s first tour *Kids* (i.e. ‘FALL 2019 EU TOUR’) and remarked on some of the challenges of designing a live show, especially when many of their tracks’ arrangements are synth-heavy:

One of our biggest struggles to begin with was ... How can we pull this off live? ... We felt like we were just like bloop bloop bloop [refers to the synthesizers] on stage, it’s always that gamble of, how does this translate? How does it hit the listener?

(McEwan of The Midnight, 2024)

Despite some initial reservations, both members of The Midnight reflected fondly on the Manchester show and their first tour in general, recognising the success of their performance: ‘[Tim] We remember that show in Manchester very well because it was a highlight of ... our live career... . We came off stage really high from the energy’ (McEwan of The Midnight, 2024). Tyler concurred: ‘that Manchester gig was awesome. What a beautiful venue’ (Lyle of The Midnight, 2024).

5.3 Dance With the Dead – Live Concert Ethnography

A live concert ethnography of Dance with the Dead was conducted in February (2020) in London (UK). Dance with the Dead is a group associated with the darksynth faction of synthwave, and consists of two members, Tony Kim and Justin Pointer. This concert was part of the ‘Tales from the Boneyard Tour’ (2019–2020) and comprised a variety of songs from their discography. Tony Kim discussed in interview with Vehling and

Bloody Disgusting the group's love of touring: 'Justin and I both have backgrounds in bands – punk rock, hard rock, metal bands. It's in us to want to perform as musicians rather than just releasing [our music] on the internet' ([Vehling, 2019a](#)).

I was intrigued to see this group live for three main reasons: attendee demographics and audience behaviour, 'liveness' ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#)) of performance and realisation of synthwave style parameters (including to what extent the performance existed within the EDM tradition) and tangible or intangible manifestations of synthwave subcultural capital. By extension of performance style, I wondered how much of their metal influences would be clear in the set, since the group are considered as belonging to the darksynth subgenre. With regards to live performances, I was curious as to what combination of technology, instrumentation and session musicians would be used, having previously read:

At shows, Kim and Pointer alternate their approach: sometimes both are on axes [guitars] and let the machines do their work, at other times it's one of them on guitar and another behind the synthesizers, or both are at the keys.

([Vehling, 2019a](#))

The gig took place at 'The Dome' in Tufnell Park, an area just north of Camden Town in London, UK. The Dome is a small venue with a capacity of 500 (according to their website). As we entered the gig room, support act Das Mortal had just begun his set. The room was not full to capacity, and Josh and I could move freely around the room without physically bumping into anyone (I estimated about three quarters full). Through Google, I learned that Das Mortal had written soundtrack music for a short French film. He appeared to associate with synthwave, with some of his song titles on YouTube including '[SYNTHWAVE]' as part of their title. His Twitter also included '#synthwave', a hashtag which accompanied some of his tweets. I noticed Das Mortal's setup was more like a DJ set, with the artist himself and a laptop present onstage. As I listened, the set reminded me of

techno music or EBM. I joked to Josh that all we were missing was glow sticks and drugs, that this live gig felt much more like a rave. Raves are associated with the EDM tradition (Jori, in [Mazierska, Rigg, Gillon, 2021](#), p. 26), demonstrating another example of how this performance might be situated within live practices of EDM. Das Mortal's instrument of choice, a laptop, also supported this idea ([Butler, 2014](#), p. 68). To engage with the audience, he would occasionally cheer or gesture his arms in the air. Butler recognised potential issues with laptop performances within the EDM tradition, naming occasions when the 'musician must devote full attention to the screen: this precludes the performer from making contact with the audience' ([Butler, 2014](#), p. 96). On balance, I could not confirm via tour posters, marketing materials or social media if this performance was a DJ set or not.

I spent the remainder of Das Mortal's set looking around the room at the crowd. I noticed 'metal heads', or men with long hair ([Kahn-Harris, 2007](#), p. 1; [Hutcherson and Haenfler, 2010](#), p. 114) wearing Doc Martens, with lots of tattoos and black clothing or band T-shirts. These observations reinforced associations with the metal genre, captured well by one man wearing a Download 2019 T-shirt (a UK festival renowned for its allegiance to metal music), and another wearing a Carpenter Brut T-shirt (a high-profile darksynth artist). Equally, a large number of people wore Dance with the Dead T-shirts, suggesting again that the group has a loyal following. Women fit the alternative category, dressed in tropes of goth or metal or grunge clothing. I saw dyed hair, heavy eye make-up, plaid or flannel shirts, fishnet tights and, again, Doc Martens and black clothing. Of gender ratios, I estimated a 60:40 split in the male-presenting peoples' favour, with Dance with the Dead attendees looking largely aged 18–40.

When Das Mortal had finished his set, I turned my attention to the merch stand where I noticed Das Mortal and Dance with the Dead T-shirts being sold, as well as Das Mortal vinyl records. Dance with the Dead were instead selling CDs (though upon checking, they also sold vinyl online). Dance with the Dead was offering a £10 signed Polaroid photo opportunity (similar to a short meet and greet) after the gig. Seeing these older

technology formats (vinyl records and Polaroid photos) indicated synthwave's privileging of 1980s aesthetics. Following Das Mortal's set, Dance with the Dead's stage setup was being slowly assembled. Roadies were bringing on parts of a live drum kit, two guitars and one synth. Dance with the Dead's links to metal were visually apparent, with one of their synths being balanced on a giant skull figure. This is consistent with the band's skull imagery (e.g. their album cover *Driven to Madness* [2022]), as well as reflective of skull imagery used by metal artists generally (e.g. of album covers, such as Black Sabbath's *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath* [1974] [[Bayer, 2009](#), p. 135]).

When the set started, three performers came on stage. Justin, Tony and a session drummer, John Terry. Each song performed was introduced by a triggered monologue, and all songs performed to backing tracks. The laptop was not visible on stage, and backing tracks appeared to be being triggered by the sound engineer at the back of the room. Backing tracks had elements of drums on them as well as bass guitar, and nearly all of the synth parts. Justin Pointer at points would play an arpeggiator on a synth, triggering full arpeggios by playing singular notes. There were no vocal mics set up and at no point did any band member address the audience vocally. Tony Kim did interact with the audience occasionally, waving at the audience in between songs. This was recognised by the audience, who cheered in response. The lack of human voice and strong representation of parts set to track demonstrated traits of the EDM tradition, although the group's affiliation to metal was also overt – given Tony and Justin's focus on live guitars and styles of playing.

In terms of the audience's interaction throughout, there was a noticeable split halfway through the room – of the front half and the back half (in terms of closeness to the stage). People towards the back (where Josh and I were stood) were nodding their heads in time to the music, simultaneously standing still with their hands in their pockets (or hand in their pocket and drink in the other hand). The front half formed mosh pits and circle pits, on one occasion motivated by Tony Kim, who gestured a circle pit by making a spinning motion with his fingers. Kahn-Harris described moshing as 'a

form of dancing involving intense and violent physical activity’ ([Kahn-Harris, 2007](#), p. 44). The people at the front were more aggressively head nodding, or ‘headbanging’ instead ([Hutcherson and Haenfler, 2010](#), p. 110). Many moved their head in a circular motion (causing those men with long hair to consequently whip their hair around) whilst raising their hands in the air. Audience members also displayed the horns hand gesture, which is ubiquitous to metal (see [Figure 5.1](#)) and might be referred to by Fabbri as a ‘semiotic rule’ ([Fabbri, 1981](#), p. 4) of this genre. These audience behaviours align with traditions of live metal shows, supporting the band’s allegiance to metal genres.

At one point the group played a remixed cover of Metallica’s ‘Master of Puppets’ (1986), furthering their allegiance to metal. The differences between the original and their cover were as follows: a slower tempo, altered drum patterns and synth arps. The song was played to a backing track and was inclusive of the original vocals by Metallica. It incorporated synth parts not heard in the original, such as the supportive arpeggiated melody, heard on the track amongst the live rhythm and lead guitar parts that Justin and Tony were playing. The drums on the backing track were different from the original Metallica version, instead more reflective of synthwave style drums. This refers to their timbre and drum patterns. The drum timbre emulated songs from the 1980s, many of which used original hardware drum machines. The drum patterns were simplified (i.e. synthwave and derivatively some forms of EDM) to four-on-the-floor patterns (specifically, quarter note beats with the kick and snare alternating each beat).



FIGURE 5.1 The audience raising their hands in response to Dance with the Dead’s performance (14 February 2020). Copyright © 2023 Dr Jess Blaise Ward. [↵](#)

As the show ended, Josh and I reflected our thoughts walking back to the tube. In terms of performance aesthetics and ‘liveness’ ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#)), we observed that the bulk of the synth parts (crucial to style parameters of synthwave) were all set on the backing track and the only live synth used was used mainly for triggering occasional arpeggios. This use of synth may be considered partially representative of Moore’s third-person authenticity ([2002](#)), as whilst the canonic instrument to synthwave was present, its execution was less focal to the overall performance. However, on balance, the synths heard did sound like the records, which my virtual ethnography has shown is also of importance to those who attend live synthwave shows. It is also important to highlight that the performance

clearly had a focus on metal, particularly notable in the audience behavior ('behaviour rules' [[Fabbri, 1981](#)]).

This concert ethnography witnessed a privileging of 1980s aesthetics both tangibly (through older music formats as merchandise and the performance of a 1980s song) and intangibly (through a meet and greet experience with a Polaroid photo). It also observed how Dance with the Dead's performance modes are in some ways consistent with traditions of EDM, given the prevalence of parts set to track and modes of communicating with the audience. An allegiance to metal was also clear from Tony and Justin's focus on live guitars and style of playing.

5.4 SIERRA VEINS – Live Concert Ethnography

I attended SIERRA VEINS' show on Friday 26th April 2024. This was the second London (UK) date of her Spring/Summer tour (2024), which had been added when the first London date sold out. The venue was Oslo in Hackney, which has a capacity of 375 (referring to the live-music room upstairs [[Hirespace, n.d.](#)]). I had three main aims in attending this show: to observe synthwave style parameters in a live context (and by extension examine SIERRA VEINS' performance of them), to view audience demographics and behaviours, and to observe any manifestations of synthwave subcultural capital or evidence of an acknowledgement of the genre.

Josh and I arrived at the venue when the support act, FlowerBoyDeMii, was finishing their set. An internet search of them shows that they are a techno, house, dance and dreamcore music producer and DJ. The performance appeared to be a DJ set (though I could not officially confirm this), which read as very EDM. Onstage, FlowerBoyDeMii operated a laptop (which was front and centre on stage) and had one MIDI controller just to the side of the laptop. As the set finished, I surveyed the room for capacity and demographics. At that point, I estimated around 40 people to be in the audience, with a 75:25 ratio of male-presenting to female-presenting audience members. The audience immediately struck me as

somewhat goth, with a high degree of people wearing black, leather, chains, fishnets ([Hodkinson, 2002](#), p. 49) and black lipstick, or having mohawks or coloured hair. The age demographic appeared to be mostly 30s (which Josh and I fit at the time), with some early 40s. When FlowerBoyDeMii's set ended, I noticed GUNSHIP were stood at the back of the room and approached them to introduce myself. Dan (Haigh) explained that he and the rest of the band (Alex Westaway and Alex Gingell) were there to watch the show tonight (since they intended to remix one of SIERRA VEINS' songs 'Stronger' [2023]).

Since SIERRA VEINS' set was about to start, Josh and I returned to the front of the room. The room had been filling up since the end of the support act's set, and I now estimated at least 80 people to be in the room. A group of three friends stood directly in front of us, having a conversation about gig-attending habits. I overheard one of them enthusiastically say, 'if a synthwave gig comes around then we go to them!' Their comment seemed to suggest that there aren't enough synthwave shows, and that they would attend more if there were. As I looked around the room at this point, I looked for evidence of synthwave through people's dress. As well as the goth types, there were people with rave sunglasses on, as well as several people wearing bomber jackets. Hair colours were varied, with many blacks, greens and blues for example. As well as mohawks, I also noticed men with long hair and ponytails. Several people wore synthwave band T-shirts, with more than a few wearing Carpenter Brut hoodies or T-shirts (which is unsurprising given that SIERRA VEINS toured with Carpenter Brut in 2022). Other synthwave T-shirts included Perturbator, The Midnight and one simply had a 'synth rave' slogan on it. Some wore metal band T-shirts, such as someone wearing a Megadeth T-shirt. In general, there was less in the way of metal band T-shirts and band T-shirts overall, with a much higher proportion of attendees in more traditional goth dress including spikes, chains, leather etc.

With only a couple of minutes until the show was due to start, I surveyed SIERRA VEINS' stage setup. She had a laptop with Ableton Live on the floor at the back of the stage, which was clearly not designed to be in view

by the audience (i.e. it was not a performance instrument). In the centre of the stage, a microphone stand was placed with a microphone. To the left (stage left) an AKAI MIDI controller was placed, and to the right (stage right) a three-piece Alesis drum pad was placed. It had two main pads, as well as an additional cymbal pad. Behind SIERRA VEINS' setup were light strips, which were long thin light strips about two feet long each, and positioned in diagonal lines.

At this point SIERRA VEINS entered the stage and the show began. The lights lit up white to begin with, but throughout the show also shone red, pink, purple and dark blue. She carried two red drumsticks on stage with her. She was cheered on as she began her first song and people immediately began dancing along to her performance. The set was performed to track, with most of the synths, some of the drums and some vocals and backing vocals set to track. Parts performed by SIERRA VEINS included synth parts, drum parts and vocals, and she would perform any combination of these depending on the song. In some songs, she played the drums with her right hand and the synth with her left. In others, she played only the drum pads with her two red drumsticks (such as 'Wait and See' [2023], which she performed second). For other songs, she stepped forward with the microphone stand and performed with this only (e.g. 'Gone' [2019]). As she sang, it was noticeable that effects were being fed live through her microphone, matching the effects on her voice on the records. At no point during the set did she speak to the audience through the microphone. Only at the end of the set, when she thanked the audience for coming, did the microphone have a 'clean' feed.

People would suddenly and periodically cheer and shout for SIERRA VEINS, because the set had little designated room for applause, as songs were performed seamlessly from one to the next. This lent the set a real EDM rave atmosphere, and lessened its performance mode as a traditional band performance (not that it had been presented as such). By the time a few songs had been performed, the room felt full and I estimated about 120 people to be in it. I felt the gender representation had increased in terms of female-presenting attendees, with a now 65:35 male-presenting to female-

presenting split. Of race, most attendees were of white ethnicities, with some Asian and Black ethnicities.

Though in general many people in the room were head banging, the front rows and central portion of the room were displaying more EBM dance movements, throwing their whole bodies from side to side to the tempo of the music. Rather than head bang, they seemed to be throwing their shoulders from side to side and moving their full bodies. Some mimed punching the ground, or jumped up and down. SIERRA VEINS seemed to be moving around the most, rarely standing still during her performance. She would stop moving to address the audience nonverbally, such as using arm movements to queue people to sing lyrics with her (e.g. lyric ‘take back the power’ in Power [2023]). Another way was through her holding her arms up in the air before dropping them, to signal a ‘drop’ (Kneschke, in [Mazierska et al., 2021](#), p. 138) in the track. One of her songs, ‘Stronger’ (2023), was performed in a ballad version which was different to the record. Parts of the song were sung with just piano and her vocal, and she stood alone at the mic to perform this. The lights were blocked out red at this point. After several verses and choruses, the track had a ‘drop’ which led into the full and record version of the track, with all of the synths, drums etc. The timbres of parts heard reflected the records. Of all the tracks she performed, there seemed to be a 50/50 split of instrumental songs vs songs with significant vocal parts.

As I danced to the last song, ‘Never Right’ (2023), I reflected on how much the show had felt like a German cold wave, industrial or rave-style club night. When compared to Dance with the Dead’s show, which was more metal in terms of culture, attendee image and behaviour, SIERRA VEINS’ show was far more EBM (electronic body music), cyberpunk or ‘straight-up goth’ (as Josh described it). There were no circle pits or mosh pits at SIERRA VEINS’ show (which I had observed at Dance with the Dead’s show), instead just continuous rave-style dancing, which was encouraged by a set where songs were seamlessly performed one to the next. The lighting supported the idea of an EBM rave, which had rapid and continuous changes throughout and were all synced to each track’s tempo.

To clarify my experience of this live performance by way of a definition, [Spracklen and Spracklen \(2018\)](#) referred to EBM (referring to it as electronic beat music where I have used electronic body music) in their 2018 text about goth, stating that the former is: ‘a loose phrase that captures fast electronic, rave-style goth dance music, which spread from Germany into the rest of Europe and North America as music with which one can dance infectiously’ ([Spracklen and Spracklen, 2018](#), p. 57).

When I spoke to SIERRA VEINS after the show at the merchandise stand (where she was selling vinyl, T-shirts and caps), I enquired about her Alesis drum pad and AKAI MIDI controller, and she informed me that both were utilising samples through Ableton Live. It was clear that usage of Ableton Live in this regard would enable the live performance of SIERRA VEINS’ songs to represent the records. This choice seemed to be aligned with the live effects on her microphone, which made her voice also sound like the record.

This concert ethnography illustrated traits of synthwave through attendee dress, audience members (GUNSHIP) and audience member conversations (e.g. the group of friends discussing synthwave) as well as having observed style parameters of synthwave performed by SIERRA VEINS. Given that parts were performed largely through non-acoustic instruments (namely drums via drum pad and synth via MIDI controller) as well as these being performed to track, this demonstrates an approach situated more within the EDM tradition. However, such a performance certainly possessed an increased sense of ‘liveness’ due to these instruments mimicking the function of acoustic instruments, hence allowing audience members to more clearly and visually connect performer movements with instrument sound (as opposed to these actions being ‘opaque’ to the audience [[Butler, 2014](#), p. 99]). The prominent use of lead vocals by SIERRA VEINS also lends her performance a sense of ‘liveness’ ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#)), though use of live effects on her microphone feed were overt and not a ‘clean’ feed. Generally it was clear that SIERRA VEINS’ performance aimed to present the songs as heard on the records.

When reviewing some of my virtual ethnography data, I found that several community members had expressed opinions about artists affiliated with synthwave and perceived ideas of ‘liveness’ ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#)), with comments such as:

Anon: ‘Daniel Deluxe just put on a playlist with his songs and acted like he was dialing some knobs on a MIDI controller’.

Anon: ‘[on Daniel Deluxe and Dance with the Dead] I would have loved if they would have interacted more with the crowd – they did not even have microphones to talk to the audience’.

Anon: ‘[on Pertubator] His first shows were much more traditional EDM ... but over time he [has] incorporated more live elements ... a drummer’.

Anon: ‘I wonder if there are any bands which play live synthwave [perform] live instruments instead of DJ-ing. Like live drumming, keyboards, guitar etc.’.

Anon: ‘Magic Sword has live drums and guitar ... lots of interaction with the crowd. GosT plays with a live bass... . His newer songs he sings and he spoke to the crowd. That stood out for me. I think live instruments are the key to a good performance, as it changes the landscape of just pushing a button to actually ... seeing a performance’ (Anons, Reddit, 2022).

Anon: ‘I sometimes feel a little disappointed in how [synthwave] music is performed live. I’ve played guitar for years and have played mostly in a rock/punk setting where having anything pre-recorded is kind of frowned upon’ (Anon, Reddit, 2020).

Anon: ‘Most of my favorite acts have disappointed me to the point I gave darksynth concerts a break. Very bad mixes ... no audience participation’.

Anon: ‘I went to a Midnight concert a couple years ago ... and it was so rad. Awesome atmosphere, retro apparel everywhere, and people absolutely flipped out for every last sax solo... . As far as instrumentation [goes] it was a bit closer to a rock concert than ... electronic’ (Anons, Reddit, 2022).

Many of these comments emphasise the value of ‘live’ instruments, as well as audience engagement and interaction. However, some comments certainly recognise synthwave with relation to practices of EDM and DJ-ing (quotation four seems to take it as a default), and particularly the last comment which recognises The Midnight’s performance as ‘rock concert’ coded, with a slight suggestion that ‘electronic’ would be the norm for synthwave.

Some viewpoints (shown next) felt that fewer ‘live’ instruments are acceptable within an electronic music genre, as well as acknowledging that synthwave does have more practices of EDM (and DJ-related practices) inherently. Reddit users also commented on other aspects of a live show which they felt were important, e.g. lighting, graphics, the performance sounding like the track and good quality of sound:

Anon: ‘They [refers to Dance with the Dead, Carpenter Brut, GosT, Perturbator] don’t really talk on the mic. And that’s okay for me. I prefer it when DJs at EDM shows aren’t constantly shouting into the mic, I would much rather just have them play their set’ (Anons, Reddit, 2022).

Anon: ‘I know a few people in real life who think a live show with [a] drum machine is boring but I don’t think so – it’s electronic music after all’.

Anon: ‘It’s a bit of a balancing act trying to make a live show feel physically “live” and engaging and enjoyable for ... the audience, whilst still keeping it sounding like the record. But I think most audiences are more open-minded about using backing these days for more electronic genres, as long as you are entertaining somehow’ (Anon, Reddit, 2020).

Anon: ‘I went to Carpenter Brut with SIERRA ... the sound quality was great, both artists have great lighting and ... Carpenter Brut has amazing background[s] of pixels art’ (Anon, Reddit, 2022).

These comments show differing expectations of live synthwave shows, with some being more accepting of synthwave’s EDM roots (and recognising

challenges such as trying to make the live performance sound like the track). Such viewpoints are relevant in light of Moore's third-person authenticity (2002), where it would appear that canonic synthwave instrumentation (e.g. synths), in addition to synthwave's position as an electronic music genre, makes a certain amount of backing track usage or triggered elements more acceptable in a live synthwave performance (than would be the case for, say, a rock performance). Related to this, some discussions I noted in my virtual ethnography evidenced synthwave creators asking the community for advice on how to perform with technology (e.g. questions about Ableton Live's capabilities or necessary hardware gear), supporting that this is considered an acceptable practice within the synthwave genre.

I believe it is relevant to note the differing contexts of my three concert ethnographies. Despite all having been used to discuss synthwave (and community members do affiliate these artists with synthwave) there are additional contexts of pop/rock (The Midnight), EBM (SIERRA VEINS) and metal (Dance with the Dead). This, in, turn, changed the audience behaviour at each gig, and will in some ways be mediating the expectations of how the music is carried out performatively also. Put simply, it is not just expectations of synthwave at play at these shows, but additional subcultural rules and genre expectations also. Some of my virtual ethnography evidenced this (shown previously).

5.5 Interviews With Synthwave Artists About Touring

Artists I interviewed for this book remarked on their experiences with touring, with some commenting on the opportunities to work with other synthwave artists that this brought them:

Arcade High: 'We did one tour in 2019 with Timecop1983 and Korine [*We are Dreamers* tour 2019]' ([Arcade High, 2024](#)).

The Bad Dreamers: 'We [The Bad Dreamers and Timecop1983] did a full US tour [2023] and it was always the highlight of the night ... doing

‘Back to You’ together during the set’ ([The Bad Dreamers, 2024](#)).

Glitbiter: ‘I got the opportunity to join the band Parallels, last year [2023], and go on a two-week tour with them, playing keyboards’ ([Glitbiter, 2024](#)).

Dana Jean Phoenix: ‘Live touring is my absolute favourite part of being a musician – especially in the synthwave scene [*Synth City* European tour 2018]’ ([Dana Jean Phoenix, 2024](#)).

Taurus 1984: ‘I play live and tour with Dana Jean Phoenix as her drummer/guitarist’ ([Taurus 1984, 2024](#)).

Some spoke of the nuances of organising a live performance, particularly when negotiating parts played live and parts set to track:

FM-84: ‘At the DNA Lounge [in 2017] I had two MIDI controllers playing virtual instruments live through Ableton with the rest of the mix bounced down. [I played] leadlines, arpeggios, chord sections and Ollie sang [the] topline vocal. We didn’t have a live guitarist [or] live drums at this point. We also didn’t use in-ears or a click’ (FM-84, 2025).

Diamond Field: ‘Due to the nature of Diamond Field using lots of different vocalists on songs, it made it difficult to play live... . That’s where Jenny came in [she became] the vocalist for live shows. [We now] perform as a duo with backing tracks plus guitar and synth’ ([Diamond Field, 2024](#)).

MD: ‘Until my last concert in 2019, I had backing tracks with drums, bass and other synths and I played all of the guitar lines and main synth melodies’ ([Midnight Danger, 2023](#)).

Some artists spoke of the challenges of live performance and going on tour, or explained why they don’t do it:

The Midnight: ‘It’s very expensive to tour ... [but] you know you want to pay for good people. It’s been a slow growth [for us]. We’ve got a

killer live drummer for the next couple of tours [refers to ‘Summer 2024 EU/UK Tour’]’ (The Midnight, 2024).

FM-84: ‘The tour [2019] was incredible, but the reality of touring costs hit hard. We sold out most nights, but still lost money on the shows. I’m not sure how bands afford to tour. Being unsigned and self-managed I had to upfront all costs. I put in around \$60k of my own personal savings to cover the lighting rig, lighting engineer, sound engineer, sprinter van, accommodation, flights, insurance, and visa costs for Ollie Wride and Josh Dally. The list goes on. We lost around \$7k on the shows, but thankfully T-shirt sales saved the day. Ollie and I walked away with around 1000 bucks each in total for fourteen shows. Touring is expensive, plus you’ve got venues that want a percentage of your merch sales too. Of course, the experience of playing our music to packed venues and meeting fans was worth way more than the money. I’m just glad it broke even’ (FM-84, 2025).

Diamond Ace: ‘I don’t own a lot of gear or resources for touring’ ([Diamond Ace, 2024](#)).

Violet Fears: ‘We [have] performed [live] since 2015, but now we are in different parts of the world and trying to work remotely on new music’ (Violet Fears, 2024).

Moonrunner83: ‘In 2009 I played over 150 shows that year alone across West Canada. Setting up for a live show is a ton of work with rehearsals and bouncing studio tracks for the live environment’ ([Moonrunner83, 2024](#)).

Meteor: ‘I don’t tour because [of] the limitation of musicians. I never wanted to make a solo or DJ tour, I prefer a full band performance’ ([Meteor, 2024](#)).

Neaon: ‘Once I acquire all the necessary equipment to perform my music live I certainly will. I’m learning how to synchronise and manage live elements so I can use as little backing track as possible’ ([Neaon aka Sheridan Black, 2024](#)).

Ultraboss: ‘I have a live band now, finally. We plan to play live shows in 2024 and maybe even tour’ ([Ultraboss, 2023](#)).

Fixions: ‘I did it a couple of times before [I] decide[d] to focus mainly on production. I [didn’t] really enjoy these sessions of being alone in front of 300 people... . I’m simply not a DJ’ ([Slo from Fixions, 2021](#)).

MicroMatscenes: ‘I don’t play live ... I really can’t see myself behind a keyboard with a computer making live performances, I have to move or it would be boring’ ([MicroMatscenes, 2023](#)).

Candy Apple Blue: ‘We find the most joy in the recording studio’ ([Candy Apple Blue, 2024](#)).

Volkor X: ‘Touring is where I lose the most money’ ([Volkor X, 2023](#)).

Several barriers or challenges to live performance or touring were noted here, such as: geographical proximity to other band members, equipment and time costs, performance mode preferences such as the desire to use live musicians rather than set parts to track, cost of and access to live musicians, cost of touring as a whole entity and general preferences related to artistry (e.g. ‘not a DJ’ or preference as a recording artist rather than a live performing artist).

Other artists in the scene who have their reasons for not touring include GUNSHIP and Trevor Something. Reasons stated in a Reddit AMA (ask me anything) by GUNSHIP included wanting ‘at least 2 albums worth of material’, as well as having specific ideals for how the live performance would be carried out:

We are figuring out how we’d take GUNSHIP live ... we have to work *really really* hard on every aspect of the production. [We have to figure] out how to do justice to the songs live ... creating an engaging and cinematic overall experience.

(GUNSHIP Reddit AMA)

Trevor Something’s Reddit AMA described not wanting to tour due to considering themselves more a ‘creative artist’ than ‘performing artist’. Other feasible barriers or challenges of synthwave live performance include: lack of live performance skills or access to performers. This is

particularly apt if synthwave artists' first specialism is music production, or if the group constitutes mainly songwriters and producers rather than live performers. Whilst a possible solution to these issues is the use of session musicians, this could be prohibitively costly. Another possible solution is to set parts to track and trigger these live, but this may creatively compromise the performance (i.e, potentially lessening its 'liveness'), which the artist (or audience) may feel does not adequately represent the songs when in a live setting. This may result in artists not wanting to tour unless they can carry out the performance exactly as they wish, e.g. with X number of session musicians, with only X number of parts set to track, etc. What is significant of these logistic and financial barriers is that they are mediated by audience (here community) expectations of what a live synthwave artist should look and sound like. This is relevant of genre expectations also, of whether live traditions of synthwave adhere more closely to live traditions of EDM, or something else such as the rock tradition. These expectations in turn may restrict synthwave artists from touring, for fear of not doing so authentically.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated some of the tensions within the online synthwave community with regards to live music practices, notably of barriers to touring and expected modes of live synthwave performance by the community. Most significant of these tensions is that despite synthwave's musical roots in electronic music and EDM (which on balance, do lend live synthwave more leeway with using backing track than, say, a rock performance) many community members do still place value on traditional band performances with live instruments. Comments by artists in this chapter also showed that having live instrument performers is desired (or is a priority) when planning a show or tour. Some commented that they would not perform live without this, demonstrating some of the barriers synthwave artists face in organising a show or going on tour.

Through my ethnographic data of three live synthwave shows, as well as my virtual ethnography, I have illustrated tensions in performing synthwave live. On the whole, artist interview data suggests that many artists want to convey 'liveness' ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#)) through the actions of live performing musicians, but that it is not always possible due to time-related, financial (e.g. session musicians or required gear and resources), creative or geographic barriers. This recognises the globality of synthwave, as well as the variety of creative endeavours which surround synthwave, for example those who are considered 'studio artists' only. My concert ethnographies also recognised the additional contexts which may be mediating expectations of live synthwave shows, e.g. pop (The Midnight), EBM (SIERRA VEINS) and metal (Dance with the Dead). There is much more to be learned about live synthwave practices as artists continue to tour, and especially of synthwave artists who are yet to tour, such as GUNSHIP. This chapter has highlighted how live synthwave practices are being mediated by community expectations.

Note

1. All concert ethnographies were undertaken with myself as participant observer (an audience member), and the only person I conversed with was my partner Josh (who accompanied me). [!\[\]\(e79f74f372dae60b4ffe57242e4501bc_img.jpg\)](#)

6

KEEPING SYNTHWAVE ‘ALIVE’

Key Organisations, Events and Community Practices On/Offline

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This chapter details further key figures of synthwave with specific reference to record labels, events management, music journalists and online radio stations. Key individuals and organisations are reported on through interview data and virtual ethnography and by extension, I include artist interview data (and survey data) which accounts for their experiences with such organisations. This serves in part as an extension of [Chapter 1](#), which noted significant individuals in the formation of the online community. Here I present further significant individuals (and importantly, their organisations) and provide these particularly as examples of how the community has sustained itself nearly two decades after the earliest developments of synthwave. I link my discussions of synthwave organisations to synthwave community practices, some of which are online (e.g. remix competitions) and some offline (e.g. synthwave meetups, events or festivals). These are certainly examples of the community’s continued ‘aliveness’ ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), pp. 50–51).

The chapter begins by noting key figures within the synthwave community specifically of record labels and event organisers (6.1). Secondly, I present an ethnographic commentary of one live synthwave event, Hotline Bristol Part Deux, which took place in Bristol (UK) in June 2024, to illustrate an example of a community-organised event (6.2). Lastly, I outline examples of community engagement both online and offline, specifically of remix practices, online radio stations and offline meetups.

6.1 Key Individuals and Organisations of Synthwave: Record Labels

6.1.1 Teniola Sodeinde and NewRetroWave

NewRetroWave (NRW) is a synthwave and retrowave YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@NewRetroWave>) created by Teniola Sodeinde (who is known to the community as Ten, [Figure 6.1](#)). The channel formed in 2011 and later expanded to become a record label in 2015 ([Ten, 2024](#)). Ten described in interview with me his journey in discovering synthwave, which was born out of his love for music of the 1980s, particularly 1980s freestyle: ‘it was specifically that freestyle sound that I fell in love with’. He named example artists such as Debbie Deb and The Cover Girls ([Ten, 2024](#)). Through a number of suggestions by Pandora and YouTube, Ten eventually came across ‘Nightcall’ (2011) by Kavinsky and ‘Faces’ (2011) by Electric Youth, noticing the 1980s style these songs had and recalling his excitement that ‘people [were] still making it ... the spirit of the [19]80s, the sound of the [19]80s’ ([Ten, 2024](#)). Reflective of his own entry into synthwave, Ten acknowledged the significance of *Drive* (2011), a ‘huge proponent for the scene’ ([Ten, 2024](#)). His searches from here led onwards to the music of artists such as [Miami Nights 1984](#), Lazerhawk, Mitch Murder, Digikid84 and Futurecop! and he recalled how synthwave’s nostalgic qualities reminded him of his childhood: ‘It’s just nostalgic ... it just takes me back to ... when you think about your childhood’ ([Ten, 2024](#)). Like David Grellier of *College/The Valerie Collective* (2024), Ten noted how

synthwave as a term was less solidified pre-*Drive* (2011): ‘[it was a] retrowave sound which ... there was no name for then’. Ten also described how *Drive* (2011) had led him to *The Valerie Collective*: ‘*Drive* [2011] was definitely what led me to the people making music in this scene. Electric Youth’s ‘Faces’ [2011] led me to ‘A Real Hero’ [2011] and then I found *The Valerie Collective*’. When the *NewRetroWave* channel was eventually up and running, Ten reflected that *Drive* (2011) was a: ‘staple point for a lot of people who discovered the channel’ ([Ten, 2024](#)).



FIGURE 6.1 The icon for *NewRetroWave*. Copyright *NewRetroWave*. [🔗](#)

When I asked Ten about his motivations to start *NewRetroWave*, he responded emphatically: ‘There [just had] to be a place where people can hear this music ... I want[ed] to make a hub where it [could] all be in one place’. To this end, when the channel first started, Ten created a submissions portal for artists to submit their music to. At first, this was an all-year-round open inbox, but this quickly gained so much traction that Ten had to formulate set submissions periods ([Ten, 2024](#)). When I asked Ten for a rough figure of how many submissions he would receive each period, he guessed at least 1,000 for a three-to-four-month period of time. He explained that *NewRetroWave* would release these ‘on compilation tapes. We put [them] out for free for people to download’. A total of three compilation tapes were created before the formalisation of *NewRetroWave* as a record label ([Ten, 2024](#)). In terms of the selection process, Ten explained that he and some others would shortlist the submissions, ‘trying to keep it as diverse as possible’ as well as catering to the tastes and likes of the community at any given time, e.g. darksynth-styled pieces, or vocal-led pieces. Sometimes *NewRetroWave* would submit a poll to the community to ask what they wanted to hear ([Ten, 2024](#)). Andrew Zistler, a music editor and web producer who has worked (freelance) for *NewRetroWave*, was one of the individuals who helped to shortlist submissions:

I would also choose some of the videos for the YouTube channel. [Ten] would pick the final songs. Ten will open it up once every three or four months ... he doesn’t really even have to announce it on social media or anything. And we get thousands of submissions every time it’s open.

(Zistler, 2024b)

Regarding follower metrics or popularity, Ten emphasised how ‘anyone can get on the channel’ ([Ten, 2024](#)).

When the channel was formalised into a label, Ten explained that he did pursue some specific artists that he wanted to work with, naming examples such as Timecop1983, Robert Parker and Waveshaper. However, he noted

also that the continuation of the submissions portal (amongst other communications directed towards him) meant that there was ‘a good balance’ of who approached who with relation to the *NewRetroWave* label. Ten confirmed with me that the types of agreements by the *NewRetroWave* label are ‘licensing deals for specific time periods’ ([Ten, 2024](#)). Artists I interviewed for this book spoke fondly of their work with *NewRetroWave*:

Jessie Frye: ‘In the summer of 2019 [I] started working on the album *Kiss Me In The Rain* [2020] that came out on *NewRetroWave*. I really enjoyed releasing the record with them... . They have facilitated and created a space for all of these people. I try to think about where any of this [would] be if we didn’t have *NewRetroWave*’ ([Jessie Frye, 2024](#)).

Michael Oakley: ‘*NewRetroWave* is just such a wonderful station. The amount of bedroom producers and musicians that have been given a platform. I’ve released four albums with them (*Introspect* [2019], *Odyssey* [2021], *One Night Only* [2021 – an exclusive vinyl/DVD on *NRW* Bandcamp] and *California* [Deluxe] (2021))’ ([Michael Oakley, 2023](#)).

Ollie Wride: ‘He’s wonderful [Ten], he’s kind of this entrepreneurial spirit that has this platform [which has] emerged and evolved... . I started writing my first solo record around 2018... . That was put out by *NewRetroWave* ... I’m very grateful to him’ ([Ollie Wride, 2024](#)).

W O L F C L U B: ‘We submitted a song to the *NewRetroWave* YouTube channel from [our] album *Chasing the Storm* that we [had] released with *TimeSlave Recordings*. That track, “Summer Lights” (2018) ... was featured on the [*NewRetroWave*] YouTube channel ... and an online following grew from this. We sent our album *Infinity* (2018) to *NewRetroWave* records to release and since then we have released a total of six albums with them and are about to release a seventh in summer [2024]’ (*W O L F C L U B*, 2023).

Other artists who stated they had been signed to NRW at some point included Mecha Maiko ([Mecha Maiko aka Hayley Stewart, 2023](#)), INDIGO

([INDIGO, 2024](#)) and Yota ([Yota, 2023](#)).

Additionally, several artists I interviewed for this book cited *NewRetroWave* as significant to their discovery of synthwave, or spoke of the significance the YouTube channel had had on their music:

IRVING FORCE: ‘When I started discovering the scene, YouTube channels like ... *NewRetroWave* were among the first that led me down the rabbit hole’ ([IRVING FORCE, 2023](#)).

Glitbiter: ‘[From having discovered] Dance with the Dead, that eventually led me down a rabbit hole straight to *NewRetroWave*, and beyond’ ([Glitbiter, 2024](#)).

Sally Shapiro: ‘Why Did I Say Goodbye’ [2014] is our most successful track on streaming platforms, much thanks to ... [the] *NewRetroWave* YouTube channel’ (Johan Agebjörn of Sally Shapiro, 2023).

In addition to consuming synthwave music through *NewRetroWave*, other ways in which the community engage with the channel is through its remix competitions, of which previous artists (who have been remixed) are Scandroid, Michael Oakley, NINA and Ricky Wilde. Regarding the channel’s remix competitions, *NewRetroWave* music editor and web producer Andrew Zistler remarked their benefits to both the community and *NewRetroWave*’s artists: ‘The remix competitions are a way [to] drive community engagement. It’s also a good way to promote ... our artists’ ([Zistler, 2024b](#)). *NewRetroWave* also publish written articles, of which Zistler has written some: ‘[Ten] would say [for example] review this album [or create an] end of the year ... top ten synthwave albums’ ([Zistler, 2024b](#)). Examples include: ‘Top 10 Synthwave Albums of 2023’ ([Zistler, 2024a](#)) and ‘Top 10 Synthwave Albums of 2022’ ([Zistler, 2023](#)). Some articles are written by Steven Wilcoxson ([Wilcoxson, 2023](#)). In interview, Zistler confirmed that music editors at *NewRetroWave* are hired on a freelance basis ([Zistler, 2024b](#)).

When I asked Ten about the future of *NewRetroWave*, he responded:

We're gonna continuously keep bringing more talent in for the label and grow the channel, to get more ears and eyes to it. We're looking to expand more [also, with] our first production company movie. It started off as a short, but now it's becoming a ... 60-to-90-minute runtime picture [film]. We're going to make a really killer soundtrack for that!

Ten reflected fondly of his time with *NewRetroWave*, referring to the importance of the community: 'Thank you for all of these years being awesome. The support, the energy, the love that [you all] pour into the scene. Without [all of you] there definitely is no scene'. Of synthwave more holistically, Ten concluded: 'I believe there's so much life that's gonna come from it. It's going to evolve [with] even more exciting things to come' ([Ten, 2024](#)).

6.1.2 [Miami Nights 1984](#) and *Rosso Corsa*

Rosso Corsa is a synthwave record label initially founded by synthwave artists [Miami Nights 1984](#) ([Miami Nights 1984](#), also formerly ActRazer) and Lazerhawk in 2009 ([Miami Nights 1984, 2024, Figure 6.2](#)). It is described on their website as: 'Your one stop shop for the best in outrun and synthwave music' (<http://rossocorsarecords.com>, n.d). In interview with me, [Miami Nights 1984](#) explained the roots and motivations of *Rosso*:

Back in 2009, I met some really incredible people and one of them being ... Garrett Hayes, aka Lazerhawk. I believe it was 80s Stallone at the time who had connected us and all three of us were like, hey, we got all this music. We know all these fantastic artists on Myspace, but I mean big labels ... don't want anything to do with us. The only other people at that time that were really doing anything were *The Valerie Collective*.

([Miami Nights 1984, 2024](#))

Having identified the need to support artists in the synthwave scene, the friends concluded: ‘why don’t we just start a record label ourselves and just turn out all of our friends’ music?’ [Miami Nights 1984](#) named examples of such artists: ‘At that time, it would have been Mitch Murder, 80s Stallone, Multipac’. He explained further his actions as a newly created record label, which aimed to support synthwave artists: ‘Me and Garrett went really hard ... trying to push the stuff and turn *Rosso* into this ... main pillar at the time for synthwave artists’ ([Miami Nights 1984](#), [2024](#)).



FIGURE 6.2 The icon for *Rosso Corsa*. Copyright *Rosso Corsa Records*. [↗](#)

By 2012, Mitch Murder had two releases through *Rosso*, one EP *Burning Chrome* (2010), and one album *Current Events* (2011). Lazerhawk had released *Redline* (2010) and *Visitors* (2012). [Miami Nights 1984](#) had released *Early Summer* (2010) and *Turbulence* (2012). [Miami Nights 1984](#) commented on some of the functions and values of *Rosso*: ‘I feel like *Rosso* is an exposure tool ... something to build your credentials with and ... get more people looking at you. [It is] one of the original labels in the scene’. Such comments are notable in light of Mitch Murder’s later releases, which were through EDM label *Mad Decent*. *Rosso*’s links to other labels in the scene are also notable:

[We’ve] got connections with *NewRetroWave* ... I’ve built a good friendship with Ten and we have a good understanding... . When we have a new release, I have a direct connection to him and can promote

our works through them through their channel. I think that's been ... one of the good strong bonds through the community.

([Miami Nights 1984](#), [2024](#))

Of contracts and agreements, [Miami Nights 1984](#) stated that: 'We give the majority of the percentage to the artists'. According to the website, artists who have been signed to the label include: Ultraboss, Silent Gloves, Highway Superstar, Lost Years, D/A/D, Betamaxx, amongst others. Betamaxx spoke in interview with me about his experience with *Rosso*:

Betamaxx: 'Although brief, my experience with *Rosso Corsa* was a good one. I felt that I was finally a part of a collective... . It was an accomplishment to release *Archaic Science* on vinyl LP with them. [*Rosso Corsa* and its artists are] a good group of guys and trail blazers of the synth movement in all regards' ([Betamaxx](#), [2024](#)).

In addition to the label, [Miami Nights 1984](#)'s work as an artist is highly recognised by the community:

Diamond Field: 'Around 2010 I came across [Miami Nights 1984](#) and that was it' ([Diamond Field](#), [2024](#)).

Survey Anon: '[Miami Nights 1984](#) – an early pioneer of the genre. Truly defined some of the staple sounds' (Survey Anon, 2023).

Survey Anon: 'In 2012 I heard [Miami Nights 1984](#) "Ocean Drive" ... I then went down the rabbit hole of discovering synthwave artists' (Survey Anon, 2023).

Survey Anon: 'I came across [Miami Nights 1984](#)'s song "Accelerated" [2022] on YouTube' (Survey Anon, November 2023).

Of [Miami Nights 1984](#)'s name, the 1984 is named after the year television series *Miami Vice*'s first season aired ([Miami Nights 1984](#), [2024](#), [Figure 6.3](#)). *Rosso Corsa* is still in operation as of 2024, and was praised highly by Clive Lewis of *Electronic Rumors*:

The music coming out of the likes of *Rosso Corsa Records*, and the visual language that went along with it (exploding out of the incredible artwork The Zonders [were] doing for the *Valerie* crew [*Collective*]), solidified and synthwave became a definitive genre you could point at.

(Clive Lewis, 2024)

Artist Timecop1983 concurred, ‘The soundtrack of *Drive* (2011) sparked the synthwave scene [plus] [Miami Nights 1984](#) and the other original *Rosso Corsa* guys were creating synthwave before [that]’ ([Timecop1983, 2018](#)).



FIGURE 6.3 Michael Glover aka [Miami Nights 1984](#). Copyright Michael Glover. [📄](#)

6.1.3 Stuart McLaren and Outland Recordings

Outland (<https://www.weloveoutland.com>) is a brand which was founded in the year 2017 by Stuart McLaren and Brett Simpson (McLaren, 2024, Figure 6.4). The brand started as a ‘live synthwave events promoter, which ... grew into *Outland Recordings* and artist management as a boutique record label’ in 2018 (McLaren, 2024). When *Outland* was a live events promoter, a significant event that they planned was Outland London (2017) at the Clapham Grand. The event’s Facebook page states that the standard ticket was £20 and that the movie *Drive* (2011) was shown as part of the event. They wanted to also play the at-the-time new *Blade Runner* sequel (*Blade Runner 2049*) (2017) but this wasn’t possible as it wasn’t due to screen in UK cinemas until a week after the event. The event also had live music, with artists such as NINA, Neon Lines, 80s Stallone, Sunglasses Kid and Timecop1983 performing. McLaren described how he generally sources artists for live events: ‘when it’s an event *Outland* are running, we pitch to artists and make them offers to perform at *Outland*-produced shows’ (McLaren, 2024). Another event organised by *Outland* was Outland Toronto [2019] (Andy Last, 2024), a synthwave festival with artists on the bill such as DJ She-Ra, Mecha Maiko, Parallels aka Holly Dodson, Timecop1983, Dana Jean Phoenix, Michael Oakley, Kalax and FM Attack. *Synthwave/Synthetix Sundays* founder Marko Maric confirmed that he attended this event (Maric, 2023).



FIGURE 6.4 The icon for *Outland Recordings*. Copyright Stuart Michael McLaren. [↩](#)

McLaren described in interview with me some of the label's practices: 'Synthwave artists generally submit their demos to the label and pitch for inclusion on *Outland Recordings*' release roster'. Of contracts and agreements, he explained:

McLaren: 'we generally sign master copyright license agreements with our artists, where the masters remain with the label from anywhere between two years to five years, depending on if they're a discovery artist or not... . The royalty split over these terms is usually 50/50. Once the term is up, the masters revert back to the artist and the full 100% royalty share' (McLaren, 2024).

McLaren explained that they don't offer advances but noted the reasons for this:

McLaren: 'There [are] always advance costs to cover like promoting releases, paying for publicity, paying for artwork and actually manufacturing the physicals... . We also try to seek syncs for the tracks... . As a label we also provide help to our roster to ensure they register their songwriting or publishing copyright, which is 100% theirs. We are also in a unique position to offer our roster of artists first dibs on synthwave events we curate' (McLaren, 2024).

In addition to label operations, co-founder McLaren 'tour manages artists, forming part of ... Ollie Wride's management team and touring party' (McLaren, 2024). Ollie spoke highly of McLaren in interview with me:

when it came to me realising my solo work out on the road, Stu was instrumental in me taking that leap; helping facilitate and promote my first solo show at the Camden Assembly [UK] in 2019 ... we've now racked up a lot of miles together and sold out shows on both sides of the pond. He's the first person I call when setting out plans for live work and a tremendous support system both on and off stage.

([Ollie Wride, 2024](#))

Equally, [Taurus 1984](#) and Laura Dre spoke of their dealings with *Outland*:

[Taurus 1984](#): '[I] was signed to *Outland Recordings* for the previous two full length albums, it was a wonderful experience to work with Stu and Brett' ([Taurus 1984, 2024](#)).

Laura Dre: 'I had the experience of being signed to a synthwave record label, a journey that significantly contributed to my growth as an artist [refers to album *Moving Spaces* 2021 on *Outland*]' ([Laura Dre, 2024](#)).

Outland's website states some of their key values as an organisation: '*Outland* remains at its core a small artist-based label which values

creativity and intuition, whilst promoting the burgeoning synth and retrowave scene’ (weloveoutland.com/about, n.d.).

6.1.4 Ariel Amejeiras and Laura Fares Aztec Records

Aztec Records is ‘a British independent record label founded in 2010 by Laura Fares (aka LAU) and Ariel Amejeiras, specialising in synthpop, retrowave and synthwave’ (<https://aztecrecords.com/pages/about-us>, 2024). Amejeiras, who is ‘one of two directors, CEO and Label Manager’, spoke of the label’s beginnings: ‘When we started in synthwave [it] was mainly instrumental and male dominated, we carved a niche for vocal synthwave’ ([Amejeiras, 2024](#)). Laura Fares concurred: ‘We decided to focus especially on vocal synthwave. Until then, most synthwave tracks were instrumentals... . We have signed over 100 synthwave, synthpop, retrowave artists worldwide and we continue to find and develop new talent regularly’ ([LAU aka Laura Fares, 2023](#)). Amejeiras reflected positively on his role at *Aztec*: ‘I love working with new artists, hearing the potential and guiding them to make the best out of their talent’ ([Amejeiras, 2024](#)). Laura Fares commented on some of the opportunities that the label has had since its inception: ‘We eventually got into publishing, as we were getting requests to use our music on TV shows, film and adverts, so that happened organically and we now have a catalogue of over 2000 songs’ ([LAU aka Laura Fares, 2023](#)). Artists who have been signed to *Aztec Records* include: Bunny X, Sunglasses Kid, Thought Beings, Kidburn, Coastal, Kalax, LAU (Laura Fares’ work as an artist), Pensacola Mist, Oblique, The Lightning Kids, NINA, amongst others. Several of these artists confirmed to me in interview that they were signed to *Aztec* at one point ([Abigail Gordon of Bunny X, 2023](#); [Pensacola Mist, 2024](#)). DJ She-Ra also spoke of her relationship with *Aztec*: ‘I get music sent to me from *Aztec Records* regularly, that I fit into my [DJ] sets’ ([DJ She-Ra, 2023](#)).

6.1.5 James Rhodes and FiXT

FiXT (<https://www.fixtmusic.com>) is a ‘an independent, artist-owned record label, music publisher and merchandise company, serving a roster of diverse and forward-thinking artists from across the globe’ ([fixtmusic.com/about](https://www.fixtmusic.com/about), 2024, [Figure 6.5](#)). Whilst *FiXT* is not considered an exclusively synthwave record label, it has signed several synthwave artists. One of the co-founders, James Rhodes, confirmed that *FiXT* is: ‘an artist owned label’, and that Klayton aka Celldweller aka Scandroid ‘funded it, he owns it [and] we cofound it together’. Rhodes explained how the label began working with synthwave artists: ‘Klayton started Scandroid [which was] a side project for him from his main project, Celldweller... . It [became] quite successful and then we ended up signing ... a dozen different synthwave artists’. Rhodes reflected on how Klayton had come across synthwave, both musically and in terms of the online community:



FIGURE 6.5 The icon for *FiXT*. Copyright © and ® *FiXT* LLC. [🔗](#)

Klay was aware of *NewRetroWave*, the YouTube channel [and he started] discovering some early synthwave. He was ... old enough that he lived through the [19]80s. He got all the references of ... synthwave ... and this kind of nostalgic [19]80s inspiration and he was like, man, if there’s a scene for this and there are people that like this.

([Rhodes, 2024](#))

Klayton confirmed his love for the 1980s (and 1990s) in interview with me:

When I started making music as Scandroid in 2012, it was completely fueled by my desire to chase the sounds of the music I loved in the

[19]80s and [19]90s ... I loved bands like Depeche Mode, The Cure, Tears for Fears.

He also confirmed one of the ‘early synthwave’ artists Rhodes had been referring to: ‘I came across Lazerhawk’s album *Redline* [2010]’ ([Scandroid, 2024](#)).

In 2016, Klayton released his first album as Scandroid (named eponymously) and it was promoted through *NewRetroWave*’s channel (Rhodes, 2024). Speaking of *FiXT*’s relationship with *NewRetroWave*, Rhodes explained:

We would pitch [to them and their] YouTube channel e.g. ‘here is one of our new synthwave releases’ [and] they would upload it to their channel... . They did reviews of some of our albums on their website. [Since] we’re a label, we weren’t working with their label side, just their YouTube channel.

(Rhodes, 2024)

Rhodes named examples of synthwave artists signed by *FiXT*: Ace Marino, Essenger, PYLOT, LeBrock, PRIZM, Signal Void, Cassetter, The Bad Dreamers (Rhodes, 2024). The Bad Dreamers confirmed his work with *FiXT* in interview with me: ‘My experience with *FiXT* was wonderful. They played a key role in helping my music grow an audience and were always super supportive’ (The Bad Dreamers, 2024). Other artists *FiXT* has worked with include LeBrock (confirmed in interview [[Shaun of LeBrock, 2023](#)]), Moonrunner83, DEADLIFE, Volkor X and Fury Weekend. Of their contracts and agreements, Rhodes explained:

We sign masters and publishing... . We do 50/50 profit split deals on everything and we believe for us to give the best value to artists to maximize the revenue we need to own and control it, to properly exploit it to its fullest extent. It’s pro artist ... we built our model on [building] revenue streams that are going to last... . We do all of the

distribution [and] marketing, we go [and] talk to Spotify and all the DSPs, we are getting our music featured on official editorial playlists.

(Rhodes, 2024)

For distinction purposes, *FiXT* did operate a sub label known as *FiXT Neon* for a few years: ‘that’s where all of our synthwave was. We don’t use *FiXT Neon* currently, everything’s just *FiXT*, but ... there was a period where we operated as *FiXT Neon* in the synthwave scene’ (Rhodes, 2024).

6.1.6 Lazerdiscs Records

Lazerdisc Records have been in operation ‘since 2016’ ([Lazerdiscs Records, 2024](#), [Figure 6.6](#)). They started: ‘as a small, community-focused initiative’ and their aim was to: ‘unite like-minded artists and fans within this niche genre [synthwave]’ ([Lazerdiscs Records, 2024](#)). Their ‘mission has been to support the synthwave, darksynth, and cyberpunk scenes’ and they consider themselves ‘an independent label that operates predominantly in the synthwave genre’ ([Lazerdiscs Records, 2024](#)). In terms of label operations, they operate out of France and England as a staff ‘team of three’ and their main outlet ‘is Bandcamp where you can purchase music and merchandise, digitally and physically’ ([Lazerdiscs Records, 2024](#)). *Lazerdiscs* described how their label work extends to organising events:

In addition to music distribution, [*Lazerdiscs*] actively engages in community building and scene promotion... . We do this by hosting and participating in events, both online and offline, that celebrate the culture surrounding synthwave music. These events range from live concerts and DJ sets to virtual gatherings and listening parties, providing fans with immersive experiences.

([Lazerdiscs Records, 2024](#))



FIGURE 6.6 The icon for *Lazerdiscs Records*. Copyright *Lazerdisc Records*. [↩](#)

Examples of such events include *Retro Synth Fury – The Last Race* (2017), which had performances by Timecop1983, VHS Dreams and others.

Artists that have been signed to *Lazerdiscs* include: Absolute Valentine, Robert Parker, SIERRA VEINS, Shredder 1984 and Powernerd (confirmed in interview [[Powernerd, 2024](#)]). Absolute Valentine also confirmed in interview with me his relationship to *Lazerdiscs*:

Lazerdiscs Records is my main platform for releasing music, providing a supportive and expansive network that connects my work with audiences globally. This relationship, along with my collaborative ventures, not only stems from my deep involvement in the synthwave scene but also actively contributes to its growth and evolution.

([Absolute Valentine, 2024](#))

6.1.7 Clive Lewis and Electronic Rumors

Electronic Rumors (<https://electronicrumors.com/about/>) was described in [Chapter 1](#) as a music blog and website which began in 2008, but it

expanded into a record label (<https://electronicrumors.com/releases/>) in 2011. Founder Clive Lewis explained:

In 2010 we curated a release – an *Electronic Rumors* compilation album of synthwave, synthpop and nu-disco tracks with American record label *Ninthwave Records*... . The following year [we] launched our own imprint releasing electronic music ... from artists and producers working in the synthwave, dreamwave, synthpop, italo, nu-disco, house and experimental genres.

The record label is operated solely by Lewis: ‘Everything on the website was written by me and the record label is run solely by myself’ (Clive Lewis, 2024). He affirmed that: ‘the label seemed like the logical evolution of my enthusiasm for promoting new music’. Like *Outland*, *Electronic Rumors* also organise live events for synthwave artists: ‘We [have] put on a handful of synthwave adjacent events in both London and Bristol [UK] over [the] years, and as a label, while we aren’t strictly a synthwave label we’ve released a bunch of synthwave releases’ (Clive Lewis, 2024). Specific events organised by *Electronic Rumors* include an album launch party of the label’s first compilation album, which took place in London in 2012. The label also supported Futurecop!’s launch party of their ‘We Are the Future’ synthwave compilation (which took place in London, UK).

Lewis made clear his passion for the artists on his roster: ‘We’re not in this for the money. After professional mastering, distribution, promotion, and advertising costs; about half of the releases on the label we lose money on. If I was in this for the money I would stop’ (Clive Lewis, 2024).

6.1.8 Pedro Winter aka Busy P and Ed Banger Records

Though not a synthwave record label, the work of *Ed Banger Records* is considered highly influential to the synthwave style by the community:

D/A/D: ‘[In] the timeline of synthwave ... the first wave is around 2006 to 2008. You have Kavinsky, the artist from France who collaborated

with Daft Punk, he was on *Ed Banger Records*' (D/A/D, 2020).
Timecop1983: 'To me it's logical that [synthwave] has been derived from French house. Inspired by guys like Justice, Daft Punk ... SebastiAn and pretty much all *Ed Banger* guys' ([Timecop1983, 2018](#)).
[Miami Nights 1984](#): 'In 2007 ... The *Ed Banger* stuff was really at its peak' ([Miami Nights, 2024](#)).

Ed Banger Records was founded in 2003 by Pedro Winter aka Busy P and is 'one of the most respected French record label[s] in the world', with a 'revered roster' including 'Justice, DJ Mehdi, SebastiAn, BreakBot, Mr. Oizo, Boston Bun' (<https://www.edbangerrecords.com/about>, 2024).

6.1.9 Further Synthwave Record Labels or Synthwave-adjacent Record Labels

RetroSynth Records is a US-based record label which began as a YouTube channel in May 2016 ([Dan Eachus, 2024](#)). The label's president is Dan Eachus aka synthwave artist Neutron Dreams (which includes bandmate Christopher J Payne). The *RetroSynth Records* website states that they are: 'Your source for synthwave, retrosynth, newretrowave, cyberpunk, dreamwave, spacewave and synthpop' ([retrosynthrecords.com](#), n.d.). Artists who have been signed to them include Von Kaiser, Power Rob, Phaserland, Let Em Riot, Russell Nash (confirmed in interview [[Russell Nash, 2023](#)]) and Arcade High. Von Kaiser described their current relationship with *RetroSynth Records*: 'We've been working with Dan Eachus and *RetroSynth Records* for some promotion, and we plan to release a single with them soon' ([Von Kaiser, 2024](#)). *RetroSynth Records* includes the artists of: '*RetroSynth Records, Retro Reverb Records, Emotiv Records* and *Lazersteel Records* [as] one company'. Despite having merged into *RetroSynth Records*, each of these previously separate labels (i.e. the latter three) have retained their branding 'for maximum impact and exposure' ([Dan Eachus, 2024](#)). Specifically, '*Lazersteel* is our vinyl division of the company' ([Dan Eachus, 2024](#)). Arcade High confirmed in interview with me their past

relationships to *RetroSynth* and *Lazersteel Records*: ‘We’ve worked with ... *RetroSynth*, and *Lazersteel Records*, specifically [them] producing and distributing vinyl albums for us’ ([Arcade High, 2024](#)). Eachus summarised the label’s offering to synthwave artists: ‘full distribution services, full physical media offerings, full promotion including playlists, blogs, websites and YouTube channels as well as radio air play, live shows and bookings’. Eachus also confirmed his label’s relationship with fellow synthwave labels *NewRetroWave* and *TimeSlave Recordings*: ‘We collaborate on compilations and will help promote each other’s artists. Some of our artists have releases with either of them’ ([Dan Eachus, 2024](#)).

RetroSynth Records were a partner of NEON RetroFest 2023, a synthwave festival (along with *Nightride FM* and several others [[neonflorida.com](#), n.d]). NEON RetroFest first took place in 2018 in Rhode Island ([Vehling, 2018](#)) and in 2023 in Tampa, Florida ([neonflorida.com](#), n.d). Marko Maric confirmed in interview that he had attended NEON RetroFest 2018 (Maric, 2023). Artists who performed at the 2018 event included: Dana Jean Phoenix, Betamaxx, Robert Parker, Future Holotape, Absolute Valentine, Waveshaper, Robert Parker, Mecha Maiko, amongst others. Artists who played the 2023 event included: Phaserland, Arcade High, Sferro, Neutron Dreams (confirmed in interview [2024]), Von Kaiser (confirmed in interview [2024] – ‘we were featured at NEON RetroFest in Tampa, Florida, USA, which was an absolute blast, and there couldn’t have been a better place to have a synthwave festival’ [[Von Kaiser, 2024](#)]), amongst others. A poster of the 2023 lineup is available to view online.¹ The official website described the event: ‘The ultimate event for retro culture enthusiasts, NEON RetroFest is a hybrid festival and convention showcasing the hottest in live synthwave music paired with a fully interactive classic arcade, retro console, vintage computer gaming, and cult film wonderland’ ([neonflorida.com](#), n.d). Michael Oakley confirmed that the tickets for NEON RetroFest (2023) were 105 USD ([Michael Oakley, 2023](#)) and described his experience of the event:

We were out in the pool hanging out, having food at the bar ... and you just walk out and watch whoever was on. It was everything because all of us who only talked ... online, we were all finally in the same room with each other ... it was beautiful.

([Michael Oakley, 2023](#))

PurZynth Rekords is a Mexico-based label founded in the early 2000s, owned by Oscar Murguia aka DJ Kaleido ([Murguia, 2024](#)). Label activity began in 2001 but since the 2020s, Murguia has pursued more ‘modern synthwave/cyberpunk/chillsynth producers’ (Murguia, 2024). To date, *PurZynth Rekords* has ‘a roster of 30 artists visible on Bandcamp and ... focus[es] on the Latin-American synthwave producers market and its audience’ (Murguia, 2024). The label has an ongoing podcast, where they once interviewed Ivan Castell, director of the documentary *The Rise of the Synths* (Murguia, 2024).

Aphasia Records are a French label founded in 2012 by Michael Brun (aka Lueur Verte) and co-founded by James Kent (aka Perturbator) ([Aphasia Records, 2024](#)). In interview with me, Brun described *Aphasia* as ‘primarily a collective of artists [which] also function[ed] as a record label, specifically an independent netlabel. We release[d] [19]80s-inspired electronic music, known as synthwave[,] focusing mainly on instrumental tracks’ ([Aphasia Records, 2024](#)). Of their roles, Brun dealt with ‘digital distribution, cover art design, promotion, accounting, payouts, and more’, as well as releasing his own music under the label as Lueur Verte. Kent aka Perturbator ‘played a crucial role in reaching out to artists and bringing them into the project, which resulted in a diverse and impressive roster’ ([Aphasia Records, 2024](#)). *Aphasia*’s original roster included: ‘Perturbator, Dynatron, Lueur Verte, STARFORCE, Vector Hold, Arcade High, Protector 101, Flash Arnold and Judge Bitch’ ([Aphasia Records, 2024](#)). Arcade High confirmed in interview that they had been signed to *Aphasia* at one time: ‘Arcade High started on *Aphasia Records* in 2012’ ([Arcade High, 2024](#)). Dynatron also confirmed this: ‘I was lucky to be a part of *Aphasia Records* from the beginning together with Perturbator, Lueur Verte, Starforce and

Protector 101. The label was pure synthwave’ ([Dynatron, 2024](#)). The label ceased operations in 2016 ([Aphasia Records, 2024](#)).

Blood Music Records is based in Finland and, though not overtly a synthwave record label, has many artists signed to them whom the community consider as part of the synthwave genre, e.g. Perturbator, Hollywood Burns, Dynatron, Dan Terminus, Master Boot Record, GosT. Dynatron confirmed he had been signed with the label after his time with *Aphasia*, as well as commenting on *Blood Music*’s work with metal releases: ‘Later I joined *Blood Music*. ... While they have had big synthwave releases (Perturbator, GosT, Hollywood Burns), they started out with metal releases and continued to do so for years’ ([Dynatron, 2024](#)).

TimeSlave Recordings is a UK-based record label founded in December 2016 by Enzo Van Baelen and his brother Jay, aka synthwave artist Kid Neon ([Enzo Van Baelen, 2024](#)). The label’s creation was inspired by the two having seen *Drive* (2011) and is described on their Bandcamp as: ‘The home of UK synthwave’ (timeslaves.bandcamp.com, n.d). The label considers themselves ‘archivists for the scene, bringing the best music to physical formats’. To date they have pressed ‘more than 100 albums to vinyl, [and] a similar number to cassette’ (Enzo Van Baelen, 2024). Examples of artists who have been signed to their label include: Kid Neon, Occams Laser, Futurecop!, Timecop1983, Mitch Murder, W O L F C L U B (Enzo Van Baelen, 2024), as well as Aeronexus, New Arcades, Highway Superstar, Le Cassette, MicroMatscenes and Waveshaper. Several artists I interviewed for this book spoke of their dealings with *TimeSlave Recordings*:

MicroMatscenes: ‘One of my albums was also released in vinyl format by *TimeSlave Recordings*, another known label of the synthwave scene’ ([MicroMatscenes, 2023](#)).

W O L F C L U B: ‘We reached out to *TimeSlave* sometime ago for our second album *Chasing the Storm* [2018]. They are great to work with and we still release a few other projects with them’ ([WOLFCLUB, 2023](#)).

Aeronexus: ‘I have just released my first album [*Fusion Break* 2024] through them [*TimeSlave Recordings*] and they have offered ... to press my work onto vinyl’ ([Aeronexus, 2024](#)).

Occams Laser: ‘As a side-job to my music I create promotional pictures and videos for a synthwave label called *TimeSlave Recordings*’ (Occams Laser, 2023).

Regarding their contracts with artists, Enzo explained: ‘We license [music] for release on our label ... we tend to do [agreements] on an album-by-album basis’. Enzo made clear his dedication to synthwave and ongoing dealings with it:

Our longevity comes from the fact that we are fans at heart and the success of the wider scene matters to us... . We’d like to believe that we make a positive impact on the enduring health and prosperity of the scene.

(Enzo Van Baelen, 2024)

Girlfriend Records is a San Francisco, California-based record label initially founded by Eric Sferro aka artist Sferro. Their bandcamp describes the label as: ‘Electronic/Synth/wave/Outrun/Vaporwave/French Touch since 2010. Started by Sferro, now run and operated by Johnatron’ (girlfriendrecords.bandcamp.com, n.d.). Artists who have been signed to *Girlfriend Records* include Vector Hold and Tommy ’86.

Steel City Collective (formerly *Steel City Synthwave*) was founded by Jonny Lazer and Graham ‘Bones’ Jones in 2018. The UK-based label operated between the years of 2018 and 2024 and signed approximately twelve artists, including Aeronexus and MASKED. Lazer described the support his label would give artists:

Distribution ... publishing ... we did some cassettes and things and T-shirts ... [we would] improve the music, improve their image, their design, the logos ... give them the platform in the hope that one day they would get elevated up to a bigger label.

([Lazer, 2024](#))

This was in return for ten percent of the artists' income ([Lazer, 2024](#)). Lazer had found his way to synthwave around 2016 when he stumbled across Kavinsky's 'Nightcall' (2011) on his partner's iPod, which led him to search the artist on YouTube. Through YouTube's recommendations, Jonny found many more synthwave artists and grew a passion for the genre. He would later join forces with Jack of *Space Jams*, and the two resultantly organised the Hotline Bristol all-day-live synthwave events in the UK (Hotline Bristol Deluxe – 2022, Hotline Bristol Part Deux – 2024). Having ceased formal label operations in early 2024, *Steel City Collective* is now 'an entity that exists for gigs' ([Lazer, 2024](#)).

Further labels not detailed here include: *Keytar Records*, which is owned by Luboš Fritz and was founded in 2016. Fritz is the sole staff member of the label and organises distributions of vinyl for artists ([Fritz, 2024](#)). Neon remarked she had 'released a vinyl record via *Keytar Records*' ([Neon aka Sheridan Black, 2024](#)). Other labels which utilise the term synthwave to describe the music of their label include: *Electric Dream Records* (Chicago, US), *Neon Retro Records*, *Retrowave Touch Records* (London, UK), *Italians Do It Better* (who Sally Shapiro confirmed they have released with [[Johan Agebjörn of Sally Shapiro, 2023](#)]), *Telefuture Records* (California, US), *Future 80s Records* (UK), *Lipstick Crush Records*. Kriistal Ann described in interview having been signed to synthwave label *Werkstatt Recordings*: 'I have released my solo albums from the Brazilian label *Wave Records* [and also] *Werkstatt Recordings*... . Artists such as GosT, Protector 101, Perturbator, Electric Dragon, Fixions, Cosmo Cocktail, have released songs in compilations there [*Werkstatt*]' ([Kriistal Ann, 2023](#)). This list is not exhaustive and there are other labels associated with synthwave.

In terms of synthwave as a genre, organisations such as the ones listed in this chapter might be considered in line with Fabbri's 'economical and juridical rules' ([Fabbri, 1981](#), p. 5), where commercial and legal frameworks support and regulate synthwave's existence and functioning as a genre. Specifically, the presence of labels managing artists' copyrights, or

managing their careers as live artists, or putting work forward for synchronisation to various forms of media, supports this.

6.2 Live Event Ethnography – Hotline Bristol Part Deux (2024)

6.2.1 Offline – Music Events

Hotline Bristol Part Deux (2024) was organised by Jack of *Space Jams* and Jonny Lazer of *Steel City Collective*. The two synthwave enthusiasts had originally met in Bristol (UK) at Jack's first synthwave event, Tales from the Crypt ([Lazer, 2024](#)). Whilst the first iteration of this event, Hotline Bristol Deluxe (2022), was primarily funded by Jack and Lazer's personal funds, Hotline Bristol Part Deux was sponsored by Joe of *Forever Synth*, a synthwave online radio show ([Lazer, 2024](#)) (<https://www.foreversynth.com/>). Lazer explained his reasoning behind self-funding Hotline Bristol Deluxe (2022), citing a love of synthwave and his passion for supporting the community: 'I'm going to do this as a one off event with ... my mate [Jack] and this is really for the community ... it's not for making money' ([Lazer, 2024](#)). Jack, a radio DJ (of *Space Jams Radio* 2019–2023), also highlighted his support for synthwave and the community, and reflected on his role in organising synthwave events: 'This is a passion hobby that allows me to meet so many amazing people and put together unique line-ups... . Synthwave gigs are rare and it brings so many awesome people together' ([Jack, 2024](#)). Regarding the lineup, both Lazer and Jack spoke of their intentions to have a mix of bands and DJ sets. Jack explained: 'You need to have variety, vocal artists and non-vocal, artists that use MIDI controllers and artists that operate as a full band and a mixture of both darksynth and retrowave'. Despite this intention, Jack spoke of some of the challenges of synthwave artists residing around the globe: 'There are synthwave artists all over the world and it's tricky to get everyone together for one date and place' ([Jack, 2024](#)).

The Hotline Bristol events can be recognised from their iconic event posters, of which the Hotline Bristol Deluxe (2022) event poster was created by Glenn Jones (Lazer, 2024) and the Hotline Bristol Part Deux (2024) event poster was created by [Instagram] @synthazor (Jack, 2024). I

attended Hotline Bristol Part Deux (2024) and share my ethnographic account of the event here.

My partner Josh and I arrived at Exchange in Bristol at 2:30pm. The venue had a small bar area and the Hotline Bristol merch stand was placed directly opposite. A set of narrow and winding stairs led up to the toilets, greenroom and also a record shop, and there were two stages signposted – one on the bar level and one in the basement. The one on the bar level had a 250 capacity according to Exchange’s website. There were several people in all areas of the venue when we arrived – at the bar, around the merch stand, directly outside of the venue (where there were some benches), and they were all chatting, socialising and drinking. Music was being played on some speakers in the bar, ‘Jason’ (2016) by The Midnight when I arrived. The room was brimming with colour, from men in Hawaiian holiday shirts, people in neon sunglasses, people with bright eye make-up and people in synthwave band T-shirts (e.g. Carpenter Brut, GUNSHIP, Perturbator, W O L F C L U B, Timecop1983, Pensacola Mist, Ollie Wride). Others wore letterman jackets, such as the GUNSHIP letterman jacket, and some showed more punk or goth aesthetics, with chains or heavy black eye make-up and shaved or long hair. One woman wore a patchworked denim jacket with a neon sunset on the back, which also had various synthwave artist patch badges all around the rest of the jacket e.g. The Midnight. Some people wore clothing which referenced the 1980s, such as someone with a *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) bag, or someone with an *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) T-shirt. Several guys wore sleeveless denim jackets, or baseball caps, and on the whole, the outfits worn by most were highly expressive. As I was looking around the room, I spotted Dan from Pensacola Mist (one of the artists performing at the event) and we chatted briefly as the show was about to start.

It was nearing 3pm so Josh and I headed into the mainstage to watch the first band of the night, Pensacola Mist, where approximately 50 people were in the audience. The set included numerous Pensacola Mist songs as well as some covers, such as The Midnight’s ‘Gloria’ (2014), and Evanescence’s ‘Bring Me to Life’ (2003) (which had been transformed into

a synthwave arrangement). The audience sang loudly along with the band as they performed these. Dan, playing guitar and singing vocals, stood stage right, and spent most of the set throwing some larger-than-life dance moves. Oliver, playing bass and performing vocals, took stage left and Melissa stood centrally in between them. All three were head to toe in sequined outfits, and their first song, 'The Dying Light' (2022), contained clearly synthwave-inspired lyrics: 'From the beaches to the palm trees. You'll be lost in Los Angeles'. The lights also signalled synthwave, which were mainly pink, blue and red, including a pink neon sign with the band's name on it backlighting the stage. Partway through the set, the band asked the audience if they would all film the next song, 'Christina', as the band wanted to cut together a multi-angle video of the performance. This highly supportive audience contained at least two members who shouted: 'portrait or landscape?!' As the band were about to perform their last song, Dan advised the audience that the song had a saxophone part, and that 'if you like synthwave' you would enjoy it. As the set ended, Patrick Fakeman began to DJ.

Next on the bill to perform was Aeronexus, who presented a darksynth set. My notes read: 'enthusiastically played an air saxophone' – this instrument is a recognised marker of synthwave. After Aeronexus' set, Patrick Fakeman came on to DJ. The act which followed was Dana Jean Phoenix and Taurus 1984's joint set, which Jack literally shouted out in the middle of the bar: 'Dana Jean and Taurus on in five minutes!' He had done this for all acts of the day. It was a nice touch for an underground-coded event, which certainly had the markings of a DIY, community-centred gig. This was evident from the handwritten artist set times sellotaped to the main stage door and the merch stand having been sporadically staffed by the artists throughout the night (mostly because they were either playing on stage, watching each other perform or chatting to attendees of the event). The whole day's event had also put back half an hour to accommodate late arrivers who had got caught up in local traffic. A sense of collapsed boundaries was notable of the event, with the artists moving freely through the venue and socialising with everyone.

As Dana and Al's set started, I noted their setup of Dana's Alesis keytar, her microphone and laptop and Al's guitar and Alesis drum pad. Dana's sparkly jacket shone under the stage lights as she addressed the audience, 'you're coming to a synthwave show tonight!' As the two began their set, a screen behind them backlit their artist photos and images, as well as their different artist icons. I estimated around 80 people to be in the audience at this point. The show contained a mixture of live parts and parts set to track, with examples of the former including live synth, live guitar, live vocals and live drum parts via drum pad. The audience cheered wildly at Dana's solos, particularly as she ascended up the keytar in pitch and with accelerating rhythms. I noted her using some of the features of the Alesis, such as the tilt motion, use of the ribbon, octave bumpers and sustain pedal button. As well as performing keytar solos, Dana also performed several melodic parts, as well as stab or pad chords throughout the set. The culture of the 1980s was noticeable to me in the audience, as I could see someone filming the set with some sort of VHS filter applied to their phone.

Towards the end of the set, Dana addressed the audience and mentioned that she would be at the merch stand afterwards. She said: 'we can all be friends, come and say hi! That's the great thing about the synthwave community, we all come together!' When the set was over, Josh and I socialised outside of the venue with various people at the event, including all three of Pensacola Mist (Oliver, Melissa and Dan). I asked them about their posters on the merch stand, which were all quite synthwave-coded in their design (e.g. the grid lines and the neon pink and blue designs). Dan informed me that this poster was actually a fictional tour poster he had created, which included made-up US states and the year 2029 on it. He explained that the fictional states were named from those which appeared in various 1980s movies, such as *The Goonies* (1985). This was another example of the 1980s being celebrated at this event, a signal to synthwave.

At this point, I heard Jack shout out in the bar that the next artist was about to start (W O L F C L U B), so Josh and I headed toward the main stage. On guitar, Steven stood stage right, while lead singer Chris took centre stage. Steven also controlled a laptop on stage. One song, 'Just

Drive' (2022), felt highly thematic of synthwave, including the lyrics: 'Crashing waves and a shore that we can't find. Is there something, somewhere, we can drive to'. DJ Max Speed performed after W O L F C L U B.

At around 8:30pm, NINA and Radio Wolf entered the main stage room to set up – which comprised Radio Wolf's guitar, guitar pedals, a laptop for tracks and a KORG synth (which Radio Wolf would later use for playing short melodic fragments during the set). When the set started, I estimated around 80 people to be in the audience. Radio Wolf took stage left, while NINA took centre stage and led the songs on vocals. The pair opened with 'Tokyo Cowboy' (2024) and throughout their songs performed a signature move of sorts, by dancing back to back. Their cohesion as a duo translated brilliantly onstage, notable particularly when Radio Wolf performed an unexpected harmonica solo, and NINA held up her microphone to the harmonica for him. After a few songs NINA thanked the audience for their attendance, referencing the synthwave scene specifically: 'Thanks for coming and supporting the synthwave scene!' She then introduced one song as 'for all of you', immediately performing 'Synthian' (2020), a term she uses to describe her listeners ([NINA, 2024](#)). The audience cheered in response, before enthusiastically singing along with her as she performed. After the set, I spoke to NINA at the merch stand. I could see many around me waiting to speak to her, and it was clear that she holds a special place in the synthwave community for many. I chatted with Dana and Al for a while after this, about our common interests in gigging, writing music and of course synthwave.

'Robert Parker in 8 mins!' Jack shouted. As soon as it began, Robert's set was high in energy and the room was electric. I noticed his laptop on stage, and he had a synth up there which he played various solo synth parts on. His set comprised a mix of songs, including some covers, e.g. 'Relax' (1983). As I left the set to get a drink, I ran into Aeronexus, who excitedly spoke about his passion for synthwave. I later noticed Jack come down the stairs of the venue and asked him if I could purchase an A2 poster from the merch stand (which was unstaffed at this point). It was a shockingly low

£5.00, which reinforced my thoughts about the event's position as a DIY, community-centred gig. At some point during my chats with Aeronexus and Jack, Robert Parker's set had finished, and Jack announced to the room (again, by way of shouting out) that Max Speed had offered to do an impromptu 'after party' DJ set until 12:30am.

On Sunday morning, I flicked through my phone at all of the photos from the night before and noticed that Jack had posted a photo of all of the artists to his Instagram, with an additional note on his Instagram story: 'Guys, honestly we need to keep the synthwave scene going, it's kinda the best thing'. Artists who had performed at the event also posted on their social medias, reflecting fondly on their experiences of the night and thanking Jack/*Space Jams* and Jonny/*Steel City Collective* for their organisation of it. Hashtags of #synthwave accompanied artists' posts. As I smiled scrolling through my camera roll, my only regret was not having gone to Hotline Bristol Deluxe (2022)!

6.3 Community Engagement (On/Offline)

6.3.1 Online – Remixes

A significant community activity is certainly the creation of remixes, which may be independently held or supported through platforms such as *NewRetroWave*. Examples of independently held remix competitions include those by GUNSHIP and The Midnight. The former hosted a competition in 2019 with 'The Drone Racing League' (a song taken from album *Dark all Day* [2018]). According to GUNSHIP's Facebook account, they had 70 submissions at the point of two days before the remix deadline. The winners were confirmed by GUNSHIP on Twitter as VHS Glitch, Castroe, Vicious and Russell Whitfield.

The Midnight hosted a competition in 2021 with all of the tracks from *Monsters* (2020). For this, all of the stems for all of the tracks on the *Monsters* (2020) album were made available for purchase via Bandcamp, at a flat cost of \$20 and with the exception that the stems for 'Deep Blue'

(2020) were free to download. This Bandcamp page clarified: ‘The winner will have the opportunity for their remix to be released commercially by The Midnight + five runner ups will receive a signed copy of *Monsters* (2020)’. The winner was Droid Bishop, with their remix of ‘Deep Blue’ (2020). This was actually the second remix competition The Midnight had hosted, having also hosted a lockdown remix competition in 2020. For this, they provided the stems for one track each from four of their albums: ‘Los Angeles’ (from *Days of Thunder* [2014]), ‘The Comeback Kid’ (from *Endless Summer* [2016]), ‘River of Darkness’ (from *Nocturnal* [2017]) and ‘Explorers’ (from *Kids* [2018]) through Bandcamp. Tim McEwan of the Midnight commented in interview with me about their use of remix competitions during the pandemic, ‘Everyone’s stuck at home ... we gotta do something to keep people entertained’ ([The Midnight, 2024](#)). The band followed up the competition with a live stream on 03 April 2020 (which was later uploaded to YouTube) where they stated that around 500 remixes had been submitted and proceeded to play an assortment of some of their favourite remixes.

Other remix competitions within the community are organised by record labels, such as *NewRetroWave*. In January 2024, *NewRetroWave* hosted NINA and Ricky Wilde’s remix of ‘Causeway’, ahead of the artists’ remix album release of their 2023 album *Scala Hearts* (2023). The winner would have their remix placed on the *Scala Hearts* remix album. This practice is common to the synthwave community, for artists to release whole remix versions of studio albums, and to include the community’s contributions in this release. *NewRetroWave*’s YouTube channel has also hosted other labels’ remix competitions, such as Scandroid’s 2017 remix competition (who is signed to *FiXT*). For this, the stems for three songs were made available for remixing: ‘Aphelion’, ‘Neo-Tokyo’ and ‘Awakening With You’ (2016). Following the competition, three remix albums (2017) (one for each song) were released, each of which contained twelve of the competition entries. Co-founder of *FiXT* James Rhodes remarked two purposes of remix competitions, one being collaboration and the second being to facilitate fans ‘that want to do a remix’ of an artist’s work (Rhodes, 2024). Various artists

within the community have hosted remix competitions, such as Droid Bishop's 'Doin' It Right' (2020) ([Findremix.com](https://findremix.com), 2020), PRIZM's 'Mine' (2020) ([Labelradar](https://labelradar.com), 2020) and many more.

Other notable sources of synthwave online are personal web domains, such as Forged in Neon, owned and created by Ashley Anita:

The website has been live since May 2020 ... I review, post, interview and promote synthwave artists and their respective projects to include music events and festivals. [The website] gives ... new fan[s] a chance to delve into the genre. [It] gives artists an outlet to promote their new or existing tracks [and] helps promoters with their respective events... . I have always been and remain an ardent fan of the genre. I came for the music and stayed for the community.

([Forged in Neon](https://forgedinneon.com), 2024)

6.3.2 Online – Radio Station Nightride FM

One highly significant online radio station within the synthwave community is *Nightride FM*, which was established in 2019, and 'originated as a synthwave Spotify playlist' ([Dennis G](https://dennishg.com), 2024). It was a progression of the formerly known *Rektro* radio station, a 'cyberpunk internet radio station' (Dennis G, 2024). In interview with me, Dennis G spoke of those who formed part of *Nightride FM*'s journey in becoming an established online radio station. He named Z, 'an Australian programmer', Vosto, 'a producer and radio host that runs a show called *Vosto's Sound Explorations*', Icarus, 'the curator of the *Nightride FM* playlist on Spotify', Straplocked, a mutual friend of Icarus and Dennis, and Vaag, who 'played a key role in building the music library during the station's early days' (Dennis G, 2024). Vaag is also the moderator of subreddit r/outrun, created in 2013 ([Julian Green aka Neon Fawkes](https://neonfawkes.com), 2024). With regards to how *Nightride FM*'s popular programme *The State of Synth* (<https://thestateofsynth.com>) formed, Dennis explained that he and Straplocked had suggested the idea for a 'weekly synthwave news show'. To create it, Dennis G wanted input from someone

‘who really [knew] the scene’ and thus contacted ‘synthwave super fan’ Neon Fawkes (aka Julian Green) via Twitter (Dennis G, 2024). Julian is a DJ of synthwave in Toronto, and through his social media (where he operates with his online name Neon Fawkes) he follows, engages with and shares posts from synthwave artists across the community – as do Kaarin Zoe Lee and Dennis G ([Julian Green aka Neon Fawkes, 2024](#)). As well as working with *Nightride FM*, Julian is the moderator of subreddit r/newretrowave (not affiliated with YouTube channel and record label *NewRetroWave*). The official website for *The State of Synth* states that it is ‘one part news show, two parts music, with interviews and just a touch of old time serial radio. It’s funny, surreal, yet hugely informative and features great music from synthwave’s best artists’ ([thestateofsynth.com](#), n.d.). Each week includes a special guest and past guests have included: Makeup and Vanity Set, Megan McDuffee, Primo the Alien, NINA, Robert Parker, Cannons, Lifelike plus many more ([thestateofsynth.com](#), n.d.). Dennis remarked that *The State of Synth* does ‘two seasons a year (over 30 shows)’ (Dennis G, 2024).

Kaarin Zoe Lee is a DJ for *Nightride FM*, and spoke in interview with me about her role in this regard, as well as her engagement with the online synthwave community more broadly:

I have accounts on Facebook, Twitter/X, Bluesky and Instagram where twice a week I make a post about that night’s episode on *Nightride FM*. *Nightride FM* also has an IRC [internet relay chat] chat space, as does our YouTube channel, where we get to engage with other fans and artists.

She continued: ‘Artists and indie labels are always sending me submissions for *Nightride FM* (my submissions are always open)’ ([Kaarin Zoe Lee, 2023](#)).

Several of the artists I interviewed for this book described their engagement with *Nightride FM*, speaking highly of the radio show and KZL in particular:

Bending Grid: ‘A big shoutout to *Nightride FM*. They foster a warm environment and a safe place for all fans to commune... . The KZL show is very open to newcomers on the scene and is open to songs from new or lesser known artists’ ([Bending Grid, 2023](#)).

Mecha Maiko: ‘My main forays into the synthwave community these days come from interviews or radio appearances I do with channels like *Nightride FM*’ ([Mecha Maiko aka Hayley Stewart, 2023](#)).

Lyst: ‘There also are a couple of radio shows you really want to get on – for instance KZL live on *Nightride FM*’ ([Lyst, 2023](#)).

Several respondents of my November 2023 survey also described their engagement with *Nightride FM*: ‘I listen primarily to *Nightride FM*’, ‘I am purely a listener and supporter to indie synthwave artists and *Nightride FM*’, ‘[I] stream music on Spotify and YouTube (*Nightride FM*)’ (Survey Anons, 2023). Julian described the passion that he, Kaarin and Dennis G have for synthwave:

Kaarin, Dennis, and myself are avid synthwave concert attendees, often breaking the bank to fly to shows. We maintain a list of tours and events on the *Nightride FM* blog (<https://nightride.fm/blog/synthwave-events/>) so people can see what may be coming to their neck of the woods.

(*Julian Green aka Neon Fawkes, 2024*)

Nightride FM continues to be highly popular and successful within the synthwave community.

6.3.3 Offline – Synthwave Meetups

Several synthwave artists I interviewed mentioned the concept of synthwave meetups, best explained by *Synthwave/Synthetix Sundays* founder Marko Maric:

Marko Maric: ‘This was before there was any really major festivals [or] events. We had a New York synthwave meetup, one, two and three, [which were] 2014, 2015, 2016... . There wasn’t even any music at the first one, it was just we meet up at this bar in New York City in Manhattan. [Approximately] fifteen of us [attended]. The second one was at a beer garden in Brooklyn ... that was probably about 30–40 people. And again, there was no music, but [someone] organized so we could actually DJ there’ (Maric, 2023).

When I asked who set up the meetups, Marko said he essentially did, but with ‘a lot of advice from friends that are from there [New York]’ (Maric, 2023). Marko informed me that Facebook event pages had been set up for these meetups. Mecha Maiko confirmed that she had attended this meetup: ‘I attended a *Synthetix* meetup in New York years ago’ ([Mecha Maiko aka Hayley Stewart, 2023](#)). Maric explained that the meetups weren’t just attended by artists, but a mix of fans, artists and graphic designers.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Synthwave organisations and events are extremely impactful to the community and in many ways are the structural cornerstones of it. The services they provide to artists and audiences within the community provide a sense of ‘ebb and flow’, or combination of ‘familiarity and excitement’ (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002, p. 63). All such actions, by both the organisations and those interacting with them, express community ‘aliveness’ (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002, pp. 50–51) and further the lifespan of the genre. As time has passed, synthwave organisations and events have become in some ways ‘canon’, with certain organisations marked in history for their contribution to the genre. This has lent a high degree of credibility to some organisations, which has formed perceptions of synthwave authenticity by association. As time goes on, synthwave organisations and events serve as regular meeting points (whether offline or online) for community members and artists to engage with and celebrate the genre. Community organisations indeed mirror, or act as, a microcosm of the music industry, with specific synthwave record labels, events management and online radio stations in operation. This ecosystem or infrastructure continues to support the development of emerging synthwave artists, as well as provide community spaces for listeners to engage with the community in a tangible way (beyond just listening to synthwave privately).

Note

1. Poster for NEON RetroFest 2023: <<https://neonflorida.com/index.php/programming/music>> [Accessed May 2025]. ↵

A CONCLUSION TO MAKING SYNTHWAVE

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7.1 The Online Synthwave Community – A Community of Practice

With ethnographic methods, this study has explored the genre formation of synthwave, including its stylistic and cultural tenets. It has investigated synthwave's position as a genre within the context of Web 2.0 and 3.0, and its ecosystem as an online music community which operates as a community of practice (CoP). The core argument I have presented is that the online synthwave community operates as a CoP, 'a special type of community', where *practice* is the source of coherence that unites such a community. A CoP is resultantly 'not a synonym for group, team, or network' ([Wenger-Trayner, 1998](#), p. 74). I contend that a CoP's three core dimensions ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), pp. 28–29) when applied to synthwave are as follows:

- The *domain* relates to synthwave's genre formation as an online music community which extends to offline realisations of this.
- The *community* relates to positions held by its members and is inclusive of the power relations and resultant negotiations between

such members (as individuals or groups), which in turn form and finesse community values and practices.

- The *practice* may be thought of as a type of subcultural capital which is communicated, negotiated and maintained by members. It may also be thought of as synthwave's affiliated community knowledge of, and expected engagement with, key artists, media and creative processes.

One key tenet of synthwave's *domain* (a common ground and sense of community identity) is their fictionalised and reimagined expression of the 1980s decade, which may be thought of as vicarious nostalgia, or Boym's 'reflective' (and not 'restorative') nostalgia ([Boym, 2001](#)). In other words, the community do not seek to recreate a faithful 1980s through synthwave music; they instead reimagine a new, selective and eclectic version of 1980s music. This extends to cultural references which are not exclusive to the 1980s, such as those from neighbouring decades. This is certainly a development in synthwave history, with the genre having once been fairly loyal to the 1980s, but in recent years having lessened an exclusive focus on this decade. Nostalgia is key to the synthwave community's collective identity, contributing also to member self-identity and self-concept. The vicarious nature of synthwave nostalgia is particularly interesting, with many members having never lived through the 'real' 1980s. Such members are not excluded from 'feeling' synthwave nostalgia or engaging with the genre. On the contrary, those who did live through the 1980s appear to embrace the opportunity to engage with nostalgic reminders of their childhood and youth and find it unproblematic that those who have not lived through the 1980s embrace tropes of it too. Further tenets of the synthwave *domain* include past and present (as well as alternate or subgenre) terminologies associated with the genre, such as retrowave, outrun, vocal synthwave, darksynth, shredwave, dreamwave, chillsynth and more. The presence of an established synthwave vocabulary (in reference to style parameters) is also notable of the genre, outlined in [Chapter 2](#). As I argued in [Chapter 2](#), this list is not designed to be exhaustive, nor do I suggest that synthwave creators should adhere to it. I do not wish to

encourage the standardisation or homogenisation of synthwave, a notion which was commented on freely and without prompts by many artists I interviewed for this book. Instead, this list accounts for which style parameters are being *recognised*, valued and discussed openly by the community. Other more community-direct identifiers include synthwave's hashtag #synthfam, which appears across social medias such as Twitter/X, Instagram, Bluesky and more.

Synthwave's *community* in terms of Wenger's CoP (a social structure of engaged members which facilitates learning) relates to power structures and agency held by members based on their knowledge levels. Knowledge by members over time has collectively formed and finessed community values and practices of synthwave and such practices are engaged with by members who have a diverse range of abilities and experience. A good example of this knowledge would be the practice of synthwave music production or songwriting, of which there are varying skill levels and varying skill roles performed within the community. Of the latter, examples include songwriter, producer, performer, arranger, DJ. The different standards of such performance roles are recognised by the *community*, as was evident by some of my survey respondents' comments describing themselves as 'amateurs' rather than 'professional[s]' (Survey Anons, November 2023). Of this matter, other relevant comments included those who recognised professionalism but rejected it in place of self-expression or creative experimentation (Survey Anons, November 2023). This is not to say that all synthwave community members eschew professionalism (nor that professionals are not creatively expressing themselves); such a statement would certainly be doing a disservice to the community and their work. What is important here is the opportunities that various members see in synthwave – for experimentation, exploration and self-expression, where music creates meaning and not all artistic goals are career-related. What's more, the skills required to engage with synthwave music production and songwriting are accessible through a plethora of community resources. YouTube tutorials, Facebook groups and Reddit threads make up a large proportion of supportive resources for synthwave members, including

computer and DAW recommendations, music theory resources, songwriting and arrangement resources, mixing and mastering practice recommendations and synthesizer and sound design sources. What is significant about these resources is that they demonstrate an awareness of potential access restraints, and with few exceptions include recommendations of a free or alternative version (e.g. of a plugin, DAW, software synth etc.). These resources support a more inclusive community in terms of access (as far as is possible with an online music community), which contribute also to the community's values in creating art, self-expression or creative experimentation.

In addition to YouTube tutorials, Facebook groups and Reddit threads which support the creative endeavours of synthwave, community spaces also provide community members with a variety of nonmusical and logistical skills in gathering resources for the creation and dissemination of their synthwave music. This includes support with selecting and installing a DAW, sourcing and installing plugins for creating synthwave on a DAW, signposting where to post songs for feedback from other community members, advising on the processes of submitting a song to a playlist curator and more. Feedback from community members takes many forms, from comments within Reddit threads to formal feedback from playlist curators or platforms on web domains such as *The Synthwave Charts* (<https://synthwavecharts.home.blog/>). For example, Parallels named some of the playlists that she submits her music to: 'Playlist curators I always submit to [are] CatBear's "Ladies of Synth" playlist, Color Theory, 2DCat, Synthwave Sounds, aofd3, *NewRetroWave*' ([Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2024](#)). Other sources of support include members in synthwave Facebook groups, who may make their plugin patches available to other community members. With this inbuilt support permanently available within the community, synthwave's *community* dimension as a CoP is clear, and facilitates a continuous loop of learning and support, newcomer and mentor, experiencing and experienced. In a rather meta sense, the ability and opportunity to learn is one of synthwave's values in itself.

Synthwave's *practice* dimension as a CoP (the shared repertoire or knowledge maintained by the community [[Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), pp. 28–29]) might be thought of as its subcultural capital, or its affiliated community knowledge of key artists, media and creative processes. Examples of the latter include media such as the *Drive* (2011) movie, the *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) Netflix series, *The Rise of the Synths* (2019) synthwave documentary and individuals such as (and including the work of) John Carpenter (director and film composer for the *Halloween* franchise [1978–]) and Vangelis (film composer for *Blade Runner* [1982]). Each of these examples harbour some connection with the 1980s, for example the narrative time setting of the 1980s in the *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) series and implied time setting of the 1980s or 1990s (or at least emulation of fashion, culture and imagery from these decades) in the movie *Drive* (2011). The *Drive* (2011) movie has direct links to synthwave, since the soundtrack includes numerous artists whom the community consider as synthwave artists (Kavinsky, Electric Youth, College). This is in spite of those artists never directly identifying as such, but rather the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack having supported the community's solidification and recognition of synthwave style parameters.

I have explored in this study which style parameters are validated the most by the community, including how (e.g. which timbres, which application of music production), in what settings (e.g. which subgenre) and by which creators (i.e. artist demographic) these are typically realised. Style parameters of synthwave are created mostly through virtual analog subtractive synthesis and wavetable synths are used also. Particularly, with DAWs and plugins, synthwave creators can operate skeuomorphic representations of synths, samplers and drum machines from the 1980s (and neighbouring decades). Interview data also showed creators use hardware synthesizers and that generally, certain synths, samplers and drum machines are preferred by the community, including which style parameters these usually correspond with. With this, I have illustrated what many synthwave listeners subconsciously perceive (through hearing) as 'authentic' ([Moore, 2002](#)) components of synthwave-styled music. As such, it is possible that

the online community would reject a song as synthwave-styled if simply any combination of 1980s (and neighbouring decades) synths, samplers and drum machines were used with any combination of synthwave style parameters. Having said this, I reiterate here Brackett's comments about the citationality or iterability of genres, which are 'constantly being modified by each new text that participates in the genre', and 'no single text seems to fit all the "rules" of a given genre' ([Brackett, 2016](#), pp. 12–13).

Though much of my summary here references the 1980s, throughout the course of my research I have observed the community become less exclusive about their 1980s nostalgia. However, much of early synthwave was grounded in this and as such, many continue to privilege this decade over others due to a somewhat canonised synthwave history. This is particularly notable of synthwave artist names, which commonly include the 1980s in their name (e.g. Timecop1983, moonrunner83, [Miami Nights 1984](#), [Taurus 1984](#), Tommy '86), as well as including technology from the 1980s decade in their name (e.g. Rogue VHS, VHS Dreams, Cassetter, FM Attack).

Of Wenger's CoP theory, my introduction chapter drew particular attention to their seven principles of 'aliveness' ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 50):

1. Design for evolution.
2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives.
3. Invite different levels of participation.
4. Develop both public and private community spaces.
5. Focus on value.
6. Combine familiarity and excitement.
7. Create a rhythm for the community.

([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 51)

Of 'design for evolution', I recognise the progression of synthwave as a genre and community which has grown through 'preexisting personal networks' ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 51) such as those by 'core

members' (p. 56) e.g. those outlined in [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 6](#). Early core members in this regard include the work of Rick Shithouse and his blog *Synthetix.FM*, Marko Maric and his online podcast *Synthwave Sundays*, David Grellier (aka College) and *The Valerie Collective* and Andy Last and his *BEYOND SYNTH* podcast. Further early core members include individuals who reviewed or reported on synthwave in its infancy, including: Jurgen Desmet and *Playmaker*, Clive Lewis and *Electronic Rumors*, Aaron Vehling and *Vehlinggo*. The work of early synthwave record labels is particularly notable of synthwave's progression as a community and genre, including the work of Teniola Sodeinde and *NewRetroWave*, Miami Night 1984 and *Rosso Corsa* and *Ed Banger Records* (though the latter did not/does not identify with synthwave specifically – this affiliation is more retrospective and community-granted, in that *Ed Banger Records* and many of its artists are considered influential to a once emerging synthwave genre).

By the mid 2010s, many more synthwave record labels contributed to the progression of the genre and community, such as Stuart McLaren and *Outland Recordings*, *Lazerdisc Records*, and Ariel Amejeiras and Laura Fares of *Aztec Records*. Individuals such as Ste Ingham and The Encounter are also notable, both having been prominent synthwave music and production tutorial creators in the mid 2010s and having provided multimodal resources which allowed new members to learn how to make synthwave. This is in addition to everyday members reverse engineering synths from tracks through critical listening, and sharing this information online for other members. Synthwave artists themselves have posted videos or tutorials which break down the synths, sound design and production techniques of their tracks, e.g. Timecop1983 ('How To Make Synthwave Retrowave with [Timecop 1983](#) in FL Studio' [Sonic Academy, n.d.](#)) and The Midnight ('How to Make Synthwave with The Midnight' [Sonic Academy, n.d.](#)). Such resources have made visible examples of the creative process in making synthwave.

Whilst an infant synthwave community's progression was almost exclusively online (notably on spaces such as MySpace, Bandcamp,

YouTube, Reddit, Facebook groups, [MixLR.com](https://mixlr.com) and more) interactions offline in the mid 2010s contributed also to its progression. Events such as synthwave meetups (reported by [Marko Maric, 2023](#)), as well as the advent of live synthwave gigs and tours were particularly impactful to a developing synthwave genre and community. In addition to these ‘insider’ ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 54) community events, external events such as synthwave as soundtrack music and key synchronisations to movie, video game and TV shows (by artists associated with synthwave) also propelled the genre forward. Notable examples named by my survey respondents (November 2023) included video game soundtracks such as *Hotline Miami: Wrong Number* (2015), *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* (2013), *Synth Riders* (2018), television series such as *Stranger Things* (2016–2025), *Cobra Kai* (2018–2025) and movie soundtracks such as *Drive* (2011), *Kung Fury* (2015) and *Cold in July* (2014). Synchronisations and soundtracks such as these, as well as online platforms such as YouTube, have been particularly impactful in people’s discovery of synthwave. When I interviewed people for this book, as well as reviewed comments by survey respondents, I noticed many referring to the YouTube synthwave ‘rabbit hole’, which ultimately progressed these individuals’ immersion in synthwave ([Lazer, 2024](#); IRVING FORCE, [Vincenzo Salvia, 2023](#); Survey Anons, 2023; Castell, 2023; [Kaarin Zoe Lee, 2023](#)):

IRVING FORCE: ‘When I started discovering the scene, YouTube channels like ... *NewRetroWave* were among the first that led me down the rabbit hole’ ([IRVING FORCE, 2023](#)).

Survey Anon: ‘[I came across synthwave] Through the soundtrack of *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*. Then [I came across] Carpenter Brut, [and] after that came the rabbit hole’ (Survey Anon, 2023).

Vincenzo Salvia: ‘[I came across synthwave in] 2011, [when I] randomly stumbled on some YouTube related songs. That was one of the best things [that] happened in my life’ ([Vincenzo Salvia, 2023](#)).

Survey Anon: ‘In 2016, I was hooked on Kavinsky tracks, and discovered GUNSHIP videos through YouTube suggestions. From there, it was [a]

rapid fall down the rabbit hole into synthwave and its sister genres ([e.g.] darksynth) (Survey Anon, 2023).

Survey Anon: ‘[I’ve] always liked movie OSTs, [and] enjoyed Kavinsky... . But I was converted to modern synths through a music video using Lazerhawk’s “Redline”. That made me go deeper down the rabbit hole’ (Survey Anon, 2023).

Kaarin Zoe Lee: ‘Sometime around the release of *Drive*. I was listening to Ratatat (one of my husband’s favorite [artists]) on YouTube, and it auto-played Kavinsky’s Nightcall. The synths in the intro hooked me. It didn’t hit me right away that I was experiencing nostalgia. And I had no idea it was an entire genre’ ([Kaarin Zoe Lee, 2023](#)).

Ivan Castell: ‘The design of [*Rise of The Synths* (2019)] was made ... to mimic the YouTube rabbit hole ... to mimic the experience most ... people have when they discover [synthwave], which is basically they go ... from one video ... to another one to another one (Castell, 2023).

Of Wenger’s second principle of aliveness, to ‘open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives’ ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 51), the aforementioned examples of offline synthwave meetups provide an apt example of insider activity and perspectives. Similarly, the reception of artists affiliated with synthwave in their role as soundtrack creators for various games, films and television shows are one way in which synthwave is recognised or understood by people outside of the community and genre. The soundtracks for movie *Drive* (2011) and television series *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) are particularly significant in this regard, having both become an entry point for many to synthwave (which was supported by my survey data in [Chapter 1](#)).

Of this principle, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder explained:

Only an insider can appreciate the issues at the heart of the domain, the knowledge that is important to share, the challenges their field faces, and the latent potential in emerging ideas and techniques. Only an insider can know who the real players are and their relationships.

([*Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002*](#), p. 54)

Examples of challenges faced by synthwave creators include artist representation (noted particularly in [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#)), with a disproportionate representation of female and non-binary artists present within the community generally. However, as demonstrated in [Chapter 4](#), action is continually in motion by community members to address this. Only insider members of the community could recognise and address this issue. For example, artists Parallels and NINA set up an all-female tour in the late 2020s:

In 2018 and 2019 – having talked about how male-dominated synthwave was, NINA and I decided to hit the road together so ... put together a little ‘ladies of synth’ run of dates in the US where we also connected with C Z A R I N A, Bunny X, Jessie Frye, Glitbiter.

([*Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2020*](#)) [*the Sleepwalking in Metropolis Tour*]

Support from other female artists within the online community was also recognised as a supportive resource for female artists, expressed by several artists in interview. Such comments expressed a comparable sentiment to that of the 1990s female Riot Grrrl movement. More directly, where Riot Grrrl artists banded together to form their own record labels ([*Kearney, 2017*](#), p. 82), vocal synthwave artists banded together to form an ‘all female ... lineup’ ([*Mary Hanley of Bunny X, 2020*](#)) for a live show. Synthwave festivals and live events have recognised and celebrated the work of female artists, presenting lineups which are much more balanced in terms of their gender representation. Whilst there is more room for improvement here, positive examples include Outland’s Toronto Retrowave Festival in 2019, which featured a ‘four-female/female-fronted synthwave’ lineup including Mecha Maiko, Parallels, Dana Jean Phoenix and DJ She-Ra ([*Parallels aka Holly Dodson, 2020*](#)) and Hotline Bristol Part Deux (UK) (see [Chapter 6](#)) where at least half of the performing acts included a female artist.

Further areas for improvement with regards to female and non-binary representation are notable of the darksynth subgenre of synthwave. My research showed that these artists are less visible within the subgenre than their male counterparts, despite support from male artists within the community e.g. SIERRA VEINS touring with Carpenter Brut, or the several female artists who have collaborated with male darksynth artists. A key finding here was that darksynth's dominant male narrative may have (in part) been impacted by the subgenre's musical roots, particularly metal and horror film soundtracks. Both metal and film soundtracks have historically under-represented women, and metal in particular is characterised for its masculinity ([Weinstein, 2000](#)). Similarly, women are less represented as film directors of horror ([Peirse, 2020](#), p. 3) and film composers overall ([Grills, 2019](#)). It is possible that such musical roots have systemically created a trickle-down effect to darksynth as a subgenre, and accounts in part for the reduced visibility of female and non-binary darksynth artists when compared to their male counterparts. I signpost here the work of female metal artists, such as Spiritbox, Jinjer, Poppy, Within Temptation, Evanescence, Nightwish, Lacuna Coil, Halestorm, Emily Armstrong of Linkin Park, The Iron Maidens, Conquer Divide, Harper, all of whom continue to challenge systemic and historic representations of metal. Notable women who have written for film soundtrack (and here specifically horror) include Daphne Oram, Delia Derbyshire, Wendy Carlos, Rachel Elkind, Elisabeth Lutyens, Shirley Walker, Mica Levi and more. As a further point of representation, the vast majority of those who contributed to my November 2023 survey (148 of 159 respondents) were male, suggesting that a large proportion of synthwave listeners and fans are male. Whilst this does not mean that these people only listen to male synthwave artists, or represent the entire community as a whole (only representing my survey sample), it still correlates with some of my other findings that female and non-binary identities are less visible or have 'less space' within the community.

I have contended that darksynth has certainly made less strides in terms of gender inclusivity than the vocal synthwave subgenre. It appears to me

that vocal-centred synthwave is somewhat aided by the fact that vocalists are traditionally and historically female, whereas instrumentalists (and especially guitarists) are traditionally and historically male ([Kearney, 2017](#), p. 119). Thus, women and non-binary artists have less inbuilt or systemic barriers (such as gendered instrument roles) with vocal synthwave than darksynth. My research concluded that vocal synthwave has made more strides in the gender representation of women and non-binary artists. It has afforded them more space in the community, and ultimately laid important groundwork for further action and better representation in the community more broadly (i.e. outside of vocal synthwave).

Further challenges noted in my data related to the style parameters of synthwave, including the notion of style homogenisation (discussed across [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#)). My interviewees summarise well some of the more critical sentiments regarding this, as well as some of the reasons for it:

Daria Danatelli: ‘It’s hard to compose anything beyond the traditional synthwave sound since the audience doesn’t always like it’ ([Daria Danatelli, 2023](#)).

Candy Apple Blue: ‘It feels like in the past few years ... artists ... are starting to sound “samey” ... how many times can you hear an eighth-note rolling bassline?’ ([Candy Apple Blue, 2024](#)).

Michael Oakley: ‘There’s a lot of people ... copying... . There’s definitely a lot of borrowing. Imagine someone who’s never heard synthwave music before, and they hear a production that sounds [like a] watered down version of the *Drive* (2011) soundtrack... . [On synthwave sample libraries] Some people will just drag and drop things ... where’s the originality?’ ([Michael Oakley, 2023](#)).

Cat Temper: ‘Synthwave has reached a saturation point of musicians recycling the same formula ... though the formula is a good one’ ([Cat Temper, 2023](#)).

Jessie Frye: ‘I think that’s what the genre needs though, is people stepping away from the palm trees and the neon. [They should be] more creative while still exploring synthwave’ ([Jessie Frye, 2024](#)).

Venturer: ‘I hold the opinion that playlist curating can be very bad for music and innovation in genres. Play[listing] encourages artists to make songs in a certain way to be added [to playlists, and] playlist creators can be too strict with their criteria’ ([Venturer, 2023](#)).

Comments here recognised the impact of community *practice* which is perhaps too well regarded (e.g. the *Drive* [2011] soundtrack), or suggested reasons why they feel style homogenisation has formed (e.g. certain playlist practices or the misuse of synthwave sample libraries). Further factors that stood out with relation to creative process and synthwave creativity included Gear Acquisition Syndrome (or GAS) ([Herbst and Menze, 2021](#)), particularly in reference to ‘genre-specific gear’ ([Herbst and Menze, 2021](#), p. 28) which both identifies with synthwave and supports creators’ player identities (p. 17). The GAS phenomena is described as: ‘a complex cultural practice [within] popular music’ ([Herbst and Menze, 2021](#), p. 6) which involves ‘a pronounced interest in music equipment, combined with a ... desire to acquire and possess certain items of gear’ ([Herbst and Menze, 2021](#), p. 14). Whilst broadly my data found a plethora of creative processes with regards to software and hardware (shown in [Chapter 2](#)) I also found that to some extent, synthwave community members experience (or even simply express) GAS to profess an identification with the genre conventions of synthwave, which takes the synthesizer as profoundly central to its genre and stylistic identity. The motivations for GAS are ‘cultural, social and psychological’, and pertain to key components of ‘a player’s identity’ ([Herbst and Menze, 2021](#), p. 17). By extension of personal identity, they meet genre conventions and sustain community interests and membership. Several interviewees spoke of synthwave in reference to their identity, for example Meteor: ‘Once I knew about Kavinsky electronic music, specifically synthwave, [synthwave] became part of my life and my identity’ ([Meteor, 2024](#)). And Russell Nash: ‘This wonderful genre re-ignited my passion for being creative again. It also gave me a renewed sense of purpose, with my newfound identity as an artist’ ([Russell Nash, 2023](#)). Equally, many survey respondents (Survey November

2023 – see [Chapter 1](#)) spoke of how inspired they were by synthwave, in how it ignited their creativity and supported their progression as musicians.

Of Wenger's third principle of aliveness, 'invite different levels of participation' ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 51), I refer again to the varying skill roles performed within the community e.g. songwriter, producer, performer, arranger, DJ, graphic and artwork designers, photographers, podcasters, radio show hosts and many more. Of this, Wenger acknowledges how 'people participate in communities for different reasons – some because the community directly provides value, some for the personal connection, and others for the opportunity to improve their skills', and as such, 'people have different levels of interest in the community' ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 55). As stated previously in my discussion of synthwave's *practice*, many members engage with creating synthwave music for reasons which vary from: personal and creative expression, the opportunity to learn sound design (discussed in [Chapter 2](#)) or creating careers as professional musicians and artists. Further motivations to engage with synthwave (whether through listening to the music or engaging with the community generally) included making and maintaining friendships, as well as enjoying synthwave's propensity to provide escapism and provoke positive memories and nostalgia (Survey Anons, November 2023).

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder suggest types of member participation, e.g. 'the core group', who 'take on community projects, identify topics for the community to address, and move the community along its learning agenda'. Another example is the 'active groups', who are 'members [that] attend meetings regularly and participate occasionally in the community forums, but without the regularity or intensity of the core group'. Another is the 'peripheral members', those who largely 'keep to the sidelines, watching the interaction of the core and active members' ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 56). Some peripheral members were noted by my survey respondents, particularly those who were hesitant to frame their musical contributions to synthwave as professional. Wenger suggests that: 'Some remain peripheral because they feel [they] carry no authority. Others do not

have the time to contribute more actively’ ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 56). Several made comments of the latter in my survey (September 2019), citing time as a reason why they could not engage with synthwave as much as they wanted. Further reasons for not being able to engage with synthwave more included that survey respondents lived in countries where synthwave artists do not perform live (November 2023). Examples of the core group certainly involve community ‘hotspots’ such as YouTube channels like *NewRetroWave*, an organisation which is also a record label, who regularly host remix competitions ([Chapter 6](#)) and other events. Other ‘hotspots’ include weekly or regular online shows e.g. *Nightride FM* or *BEYOND SYNTH*, which are also gathering points for peripheral or active members. Such online spaces relate to Wenger’s fourth principle of aliveness, ‘develop both public and private community spaces’ ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 51). This notion is particularly interesting when considering the technically public spaces of the internet (e.g. synthwave subreddits or public YouTube video comment sections) which the community may nonetheless consider private or ‘inside’ of the community. Certain YouTube channels may be considered spaces ‘inside’ of the community for example, such as those named by survey respondents in [Chapter 1](#). Bunny X summarised well some of these spaces within the community:

There is ... a wonderful and supportive synthwave presence on YouTube, particularly on channels like *NewRetroWave*, *Retrowave Cinema*, *The Prime Thanatos*, *The ’80s Guy* and *Luigi Donatello*. And we cannot forget the awesome synthwave radio shows, podcasts and blogs such as *Vehlinggo*, Andy Last’s *BEYOND SYNTH* and *Nightride FM*.

([Abigail Gordon of Bunny X, 2023](#))

Further ‘insider’ spaces include private Facebook groups, such as those used by music producers and creators of synthwave. These spaces are inhabited by both core and active members of the community. I also noticed

a sense of inside and outside spaces when the 2024 Olympics (Paris) was airing, and community members flocked online to discuss the playing of Scandroid's 'Neo Tokyo' (2016) during the event, as well as a playing of Kavinsky's 'Nightcall' (2011) during the closing ceremony – both were considered examples of synthwave appearing in a mainstream setting 'outside of the community'. Community members would certainly consider high-profile synthwave artists as part of the 'core group' of synthwave, for example 'favourite artists' noted in my survey (November 2023), of which the top five were The Midnight, GUNSHIP, Timecop1983, Carpenter Brut, FM-84. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder remarked how 'The heart of a community is the web of relationships among community members' ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 58), and in reference to their fourth principle of aliveness, that 'Because participants know each other well, they often come to community events with multiple agendas: completing a small group task, thanking someone for an idea, finding someone to help with a problem' ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 59). A good example of this would be the music producer Facebook pages or subreddits where members gather to discuss plugins, mix techniques, release strategies, song ideas and more. Such interactions also relate to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder's fifth principle of aliveness, 'focus on value' ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 51), which considers the events, activities and relationships of those in a CoP. They contend how: 'Many of the most valuable community activities are the small, everyday interactions – informal discussions to solve a problem, or one-on-one exchanges of information about a tool, supplier, approach' ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 60). Problem-solving here might take the form of best practice in sidechaining a bass to a kick, or what plugins to use to emulate a certain synth. All of these interactions, brick by brick, build a CoP, and day by day create value and meaning for members.

Of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder's sixth and seventh principles of aliveness, 'combine familiarity and excitement' and 'create a rhythm for the community' ([Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002](#), p. 51), they consider the latter as the most important:

The rhythm of the community is the strongest indicator of its aliveness. There are many rhythms in a community – the syncopation of familiar and exciting events, the frequency of private interactions, the ebb and flow of people from the sidelines into active participation, and the pace of the community’s overall evolution.

([*Wenger-Trayner et al., 2002*](#), p. 63)

In addition to online radio shows, podcasts, remix competitions or other regular online events (which provide familiarity and a sense of rhythm), excitement may refer to one-off events or large-scale events which have taken years of planning before the final output. An example of this might be *The Rise of the Synths* (2019), a significant milestone in synthwave history ([Chapter 1](#)). Further examples include synthwave parties (noted in [Chapter 1](#)) or festivals, such as Retro Synth Fury – The Last Race (2017), Outrun Antwerp (2017), NEON Retrofest (2018 – Rhode Island, 2023 – Florida), Hotline Bristol Deluxe (2022) and Hotline Bristol Part Deux (2024) (UK).

The live touring shows of high-profile synthwave artists are certainly examples of aliveness and excitement, though as highlighted in [Chapter 5](#), live synthwave shows are not without their challenges. I identified tensions with live practices of synthwave, in that despite synthwave’s musical roots in EDM, some community members’ expectations of ‘live’ synthwave align more closely with rock and pop traditions, and traditional band performances with live instruments. Virtual ethnography data showed that markers of ‘liveness’ ([Auslander, 1999/2023](#)) were expected by some members of the community, such as the use of microphones for artists to speak or sing with and use of live instruments. Equally, comments by artists in this chapter showed that having live instrument performers is generally desired when planning a show or tour, but that this isn’t always possible due to several reasons (time-related, financial, creative or geographic barriers). These reasons recognise several important points: the globality of synthwave, the time and monetary costs associated with touring and the variety of creative endeavours which surround synthwave, for example those who are considered ‘studio artists’ only. My virtual ethnography also

evidenced community members who felt that fewer live instruments are acceptable within an electronic music genre such as synthwave, by acknowledging that synthwave does have practices of EDM (e.g. DJ-related practices) inherently. With relation to this, my concert ethnographies recognised the additional contexts which may be mediating expectations of live synthwave shows, e.g. other relevant genre expectations or subcultural rules alongside synthwave. Of my synthwave concert ethnographies, I noted the additional contexts of pop/rock (The Midnight), EBM (SIERRA VEINS) and metal (Dance with the Dead), which altered audience behaviours (noted in [Chapter 5](#)) and as such, demonstrates how audiences have different expectations of the live experience from one synthwave artist to the next.

It could be argued that in some ways, synthwave is not necessarily naturally poised for live performance, with reasons which range from: structural (some synthwave artists are lone producers, or teams of songwriters rather than being ‘bands’, hence many session musicians would be needed to tour), financial (synthwave artists might not be signed to a record label where financial support for a tour might be available, or are not earning enough from record sales to tour as a DIY artist) and ideological (some synthwave artists have no want or will to tour for whatever reason e.g. they started their artist work on the internet, and that’s where it stays). To finalise my points here, I don’t believe that community members assume live performance skills of their favourite synthwave artists arrogantly, but rather, they simply enjoy synthwave so much that they want to see it live, just like any other artists they enjoy (outside of the synthwave genre) where this is available.

7.2 The Online Synthwave Community – A Genre, Subculture, Scene

Whilst this book has clearly outlined the synthwave genre as an online music community and CoP, my virtual ethnography data showed that members’ most frequent terminologies are community, genre or scene.

Equally, some of my survey respondents (September 2019) termed it a ‘virtual subculture’ (Survey Anon, 2019). In my view, use of ‘subculture’ demonstrates an attempt by community members to establish synthwave as a recognised genre, by placing it alongside musical genres with longer and more well-known histories and legacies, such as the late 1970s and early 1980s punk and post punk, 1980s goth or 1990s grunge. These styles are notably pre-Web 1.0 (and resultantly pre-Web 2.0, 3.0), and emerged in line with the CCCS’¹ definition of subculture, which viewed the latter as creative collectives by young people, who sought to answer society’s problems through group symbolism and unity ([Jensen, 2018](#), p. 407). However, in using ‘virtual subculture’ (Survey Anon, 2019), the contemporary context in which this music community formed is recognised, against the backdrop of Web 2.0 (and in more contemporary timelines of the mid-2020s, Web 3.0).

The idea that community members would want to establish synthwave through subcultural terminology is relevant of memory scholar Jean [Hogarty’s \(2016\)](#) work, who found that many young people attested style authenticity to ‘older music and [music technology] formats’ ([Hogarty, 2016](#), p. 53), in her text about music fans across three generations (Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers) ([Hogarty, 2016](#), p. 24). This is relevant to the online community’s occasional incorporation of ‘synthpop’ to synthwave playlist titles, music reviews and the genre’s general discourse. This occurs to me as a further attempt by the community to establish synthwave as a genre, whilst also positing synthwave as stylistically comparable to 1980s synthpop, a genre which too takes the synthesizer as a key component of its musical identity (characterised by artists such as Depeche Mode, Eurythmics, Human League, Pet Shop Boys). Also, synthpop emerged in a decade that the community privileges (the 1980s), thus supporting synthwave subcultural capital. Community discourse aside, it should be noted that there are key musical differences between 1980s synthpop and 21st century synthwave (e.g. synthwave’s soundtrack influences), as well as obvious historical and temporal genre differences (i.e. synthpop did not emerge in the period of Web 2.0 and

would not be considered an online music community). What is most significant of the community's usage of the term synthpop is their attempt to situate their own collective community identity in reference to an existing and recognisable musical genre, which acts as a model through which to begin to understand synthwave.

It is synthwave's genre formation on the internet which makes it so significant; synthwave never existed offline (or 'in real life') before it existed on the internet. It is a genre which formed only because of, and was facilitated by, the internet. For this reason, it might be more appropriate to use post-subcultural terminology to frame synthwave, such as 'scene', which is used commonly by members (evident by virtual ethnography and noted in my surveys). Bennett and Peterson defined a scene as: 'situations where performers, support facilities and fans come together to collectively create music' ([Bennett and Peterson, 2004](#)). Whilst members did not term synthwave a *virtual* scene in my surveys (rather, simply 'scene'), in practice, the significance of the internet to synthwave, as well as the act of being online to engage with its 'scene' 'facilities' ([Bennett and Peterson, 2004](#)), is understood by members. Bennett and Peterson defined a virtual scene as: 'Net-mediated person-to-person communication between fans ... the scene is therefore much ... in the control of fans' ([Bennett and Peterson, 2004](#), p. 11). Though an earlier term in the online music community lexicon (which better refers to musics of Web 1.0 and an emerging Web 2.0, the period in which Bennett and Peterson's text is set), the 'virtual scene' does recognise the agency held by its members. Synthwave community members' use of 'scene' rather than virtual scene also shows an increasing acknowledgement of synthwave's reputation and manifestation *outside* the online community. Though born online, synthwave has not remained exclusively online since its inception in the mid to late 2000s.

Another reason why post-subcultural terminology may be more appropriate for synthwave relates to criticism of subcultural theory's 'gendered epistemology', which inadequately deals with the experiences of women (Hill, 2016, p. 174). In response, authors such as Rosemary Lucy Hill have suggested post-subcultural terminology including 'community of

imagination’ and ‘imagination community’ (rooted in Benedict Anderson’s 1991 imagined community concept) (Hill, 2014, p. 182). Both advance some of the epistemological concerns of subcultural theory, and to some extent support the usefulness of the online music community as a musical and cultural framework in the 21st century. However, terminologies within the post-subcultural landscape (such as scenes or online music communities) are not without their criticisms, with one of the main concerns being access to cultural commodities ([Bennett, 2011](#), p. 500). This criticism recognises one of the key tenets of post-subcultural theory, in its proposition of ‘conceptual alternatives which ... better reflect the reality of contemporary youth cultural terrains’ ([Jensen, 2018](#), p. 409). Such alternatives, such as ‘scene, lifestyle and neotribe’ (as well as online music community in this context, though not noted by Jensen) emphasise ‘agency, choice, reflexivity and individuality’ by young people ([Jensen, 2018](#), p. 409). Relatedly, post-subcultural theory proposes an advancement of the CCCS’ subcultural framework, criticising the latter for being ‘over[ly] preoccupied with structuralist concerns[,] and to have never considered that young people might play with subcultural roles for fun’ ([Jensen, 2018](#), p. 409). However, access to cultural commodities which enable this ‘play’ are not universal. To access an online music community, for example, requires the internet, which Hine described as: ‘a mass phenomenon, but it is not universally available, and there are still some underlying inequalities that structure access’ ([Hine, 2020](#), p. 6). This should be acknowledged when discussing online music communities.

Ultimately, access to cultural commodities is restricted by an individual’s level of accessibility, be it financial, time-related or other factors. With an online music community such as synthwave, an individual’s access may be restricted by their music technology resources or education, which may limit or impair their ability to engage with community activities such as songwriting or music production (e.g. possession of a computer which facilitates a DAW, ability to purchase plugins or software synths, knowledge and understanding of music theory or songwriting, knowledge and understanding of practices of DAW usage and sound design etc.). As

such, whilst post-subcultural terminologies might be more appropriate to acknowledge the contemporary landscape of the online synthwave community, this is not without recognising issues of access.

Viewing the study as a whole, the synthwave genre has clearly formed cultural, social, musical, stylistic and technological traditions. To revisit definitions of genre by [Fabbri \(1981, 1982\)](#), [Hesmondhalgh \(2005\)](#), [Holt \(2007\)](#) and [Tagg \(2012\)](#), genres entail ‘a group of people’ ([Holt, 2007](#), p. 3) who produce, and act upon, conventions and expectations, or ‘cultural codes that ... include musical rules’ ([Tagg, 2012](#), p. 267). Musical rules were termed by Fabbri as ‘formal and technical rules’ ([Fabbri, 1981](#)) which for synthwave particularly relate to subtractive synthesis and software synthesizers. The manifestation or realisation of synthwave as a genre is through an online music community, which has been termed, ‘a group of people who interact in a virtual environment’ with a purpose, which includes rules and norms ([Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, Abras, 2003](#), p. 1023). Examples of rules and norms include the traditions of synthwave subgenres (which have defined musical differences that set them apart from each other), or the visual expectations of synthwave artwork (the neon sun and grid lines). Visual expectations might be termed by Fabbri as ‘semiotic rules’ ([Fabbri, 1981](#)). Other rules include traditions of synthwave artists’ names, which commonly include the 1980s decade or make reference to 1980s technology formats e.g. VHS Dreams, Digikid84, [Miami Nights 1984](#).

Drawing on the contributions by members of the synthwave community to this book, I feel it is important to highlight the globality of synthwave as a genre and online community. This was evidenced by the wide variety of nationalities represented by interviewees, which spanned those who are German, French, Finnish, Australian, Swedish, Greek, Spanish, Argentinean, Austrian, Italian, Caribbean with Irish, Finnish, Dutch, Ukrainian, Russian, Northern Irish, Welsh, Scottish/British, British, Canadian, American and more. It is notable that the most popular and well-known synthwave artists (if including vocals) perform in English, however,

my research evidenced that plenty of non-English synthwave lyrics in songs exist, including:

- ‘Digital Heaven’ (2022) by Monflame, ‘Jero’ (2013) by Capo Blanco (Russian)
- ‘Jeepney’ (2023) by Brisom (Tagalog)
- ‘Wszystko, czego dziś chcę’ (2018) by Brodka and A_GIM (Polish)
- ‘Strangers on Film’ (2019) by Yota, ‘Scar’ (2016) by WARNG (French)
- ‘U’ (2023) by Do You Remember Love? (José Luis Garza), ‘Algo Mágico’ (2025) Lex Lüger (Spanish)
- ‘80-as évek’ (2020) by Plazmabeat (Hungarian)
- ‘Street Desire’ (2012) by Australian artist Power Glove (which uses Japanese spoken word).

I would recommend further research of synthwave within non-English speaking and non-Western spaces, with further recommendations also for synthwave and practices of AI. This is something I noticed being discussed in online spaces in early 2025 as I was finalising this book and particularly of synthwave AI-generated artwork and music.

I would like to highlight some of the comments of gratitude by artists I interviewed for this book, many of whom expressed what a profound effect synthwave and the community have had on their lives, as well as those who noted the importance of community with relation to synthwave specifically:

Michael Oakley: ‘Synthwave is something that I’m really passionate about ... it would be an understatement for me to ... diminish how much it’s changed my life’ ([Michael Oakley, 2023](#)).

Absolute Valentine: ‘Synthwave is more than just music; it’s ... a fusion of past and future, and a community of passionate artists and fans’ ([Absolute Valentine, 2024](#)).

Dana Jean Phoenix: ‘In my travels with synthwave, I have met so many wonderful people who are friendly, kind, talented... . Community and

passion is what drives us’ ([Dana Jean Phoenix, 2024](#)).

I would also like to mention specifically the work of Starcadian, an artist who I interviewed for this book and who tragically passed away in 2025. RIP Starcadian (2025). I quote here an excerpt from my interview with him, which took place in 2024: ‘Synthwave is a fascinating case study... . It’s turned into a very strange and elaborate system of wildly different sounds, held together by the crowd and camaraderie’ ([Starcadian, 2024](#)). As a final point, I would like to sincerely thank each and every single person who completed an interview or survey for this book; it has been a joy to hear your experiences and stories with synthwave. It was particularly heartwarming to hear of people who have met through synthwave and gone on to get married, which was the case for Marko Maric and his wife, Michael Oakley and his wife and Dana Jean Phoenix and her husband [Taurus 1984](#)!

Overall, this book has advanced our understanding of how retro music styles are making a comeback in the 21st century, and utilising the power of the internet for cultural expression and genre formation. Through embracing music of the past, the online synthwave community have reimagined music from the 1980s (and neighbouring decades) in a 21st century rebirthing of music made with synths. The result is an exciting and creative style of music – synthwave.

Note

1. This refers to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural studies at Birmingham University. [↩](#)

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All interviews were conducted by Dr Jess Blaise Ward and are unpublished. The bracketed dates show the year(s) the interview(s) took place. Interviewee names listed adhere to interviewee consent forms and include any combination of: artist name, online handle name, birth name, common name, etc. Artist names include stylistic capitalisations/decapitalisations (etc.) as specified by interviewees. In a small number of cases, the interview

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