

Of Resilience and Men: How Bieber, Skrillex, and Diplo Play with Gender in “Where Are Ü Now”

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Abstract

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Keywords

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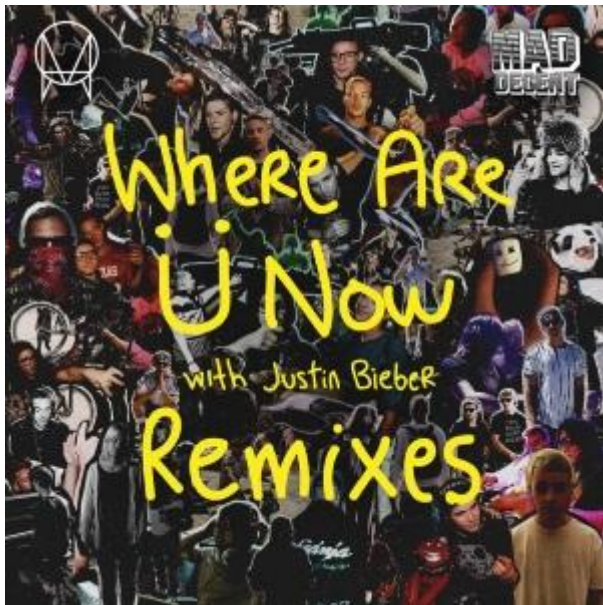
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Justin Bieber caught me off guard last year. There I was, minding my own business, listening to a pop station, and this breathy little thing, this delicate vocal wrapped in a halo of shimmering effects starts piping through my car. I didn’t even realize it was him at first; it had been so long since I’d heard a new Bieber song. And I had no clue the production was from Skrillex and Diplo (from their 2015 *Skrillex and Diplo Present Jack Ü*), which is why I was probably also not ready for the drop, that moment when the song’s tension releases and I’m suddenly gliding across a syncopated bass synth while Bieber’s vocals are pinched into a dolphin call. Somehow, two of the most notoriously unsubtle producers and the posterboy for “too much, too soon” had snuck up on me with “Where Are Ü Now” (WAÜN).



WAÜN’s drop from nowhere isn’t brand new. Subtle soars and understated drops are officially A Thing. More importantly, they do work beyond the sonic aesthetic. In this case, I want to listen to WAÜN in the context of Bieber’s performance of gender, specifically with an ear toward the way Skrillex and Diplo mix elements from dancepop’s 2015 toolkit to produce a track that plays on feminine tropes, which articulate a kind of masculinity. Listening to WAÜN alongside Robin James’s *Resilience & Melancholy* (2015) amplifies the male privilege at play in WAÜN. James calls attention to the way drops can sonify feminine resilience, and WAÜN’s surprise drop toys with that resilience in a thoroughly heteromasculine way. I’ll first set up how drops usually work, then read James in the context of Bieber’s gender performance as heard in WAÜN.

Drops, at their most basic, are climactic moments when a song’s full instrumental measure hits (hence “drop”), often after some key elements of the instrumental have been removed so that the climax can sound more intense. At that broad level, any genre can employ a drop of some sort. EDM and dancepop drops—the kind that most directly inform the music of Skrillex, Diplo, and Bieber—are bass-heavy and typically follow a soar that intensifies volume, texture, rhythm, and/or pitch: you soar to a sonic plateau or a cliff, and with a “YEEEEEEES!!!!” coast on some wobbly goodness to the next verse.

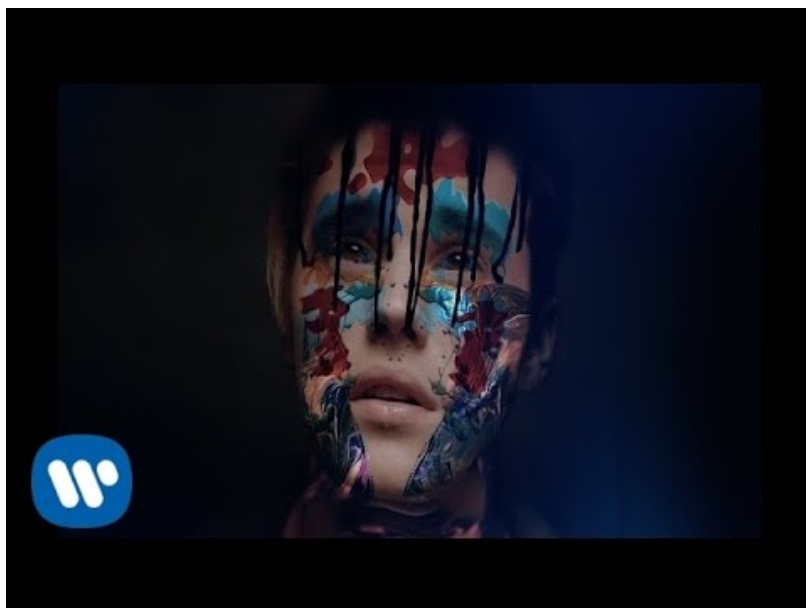
The pre-chorus soar in the Messengers/Sir Nolan/Kuk Harrell-produced “All Around the World” from Bieber’s 2012 *Believe* is a solid example. In the video below, the soar starts at 0:45, the

chorus enters at 1:00, and the drop lands at 1:15. It’s textbook: the instrumental is stripped back and filtered, and in the opening moments, we hear a descending bass glide. A filter does what its name suggests—it filters out a prescribed set of frequencies so that we only hear a certain range, and in this case it’s the low end that comes through. The effect makes the synths sound like they’re pulsating through water, and the higher frequency overtones take on a shimmery quality. Over the course of the 8-measure soar, the higher frequency range is brought into earshot, and then, on the second half of the eighth measure...nothing. This nothingness is integral to James’s central argument in *Resilience & Melancholy*: nothingness intensifies what follows. In these eight measures, we’ve glided down to the low end only to soar up up up until all that’s left is Bieber’s voice, confident, nasally, with just a touch of autotune as he sings the titular line that will take us to the chorus. That chorus bangs harder because of the soar to oblivion before it.



<https://youtu.be/wIAw48HucqY>

WAÜN’s drop lands at 1:09. For full context, start from the beginning and listen for the soar. (If you also need to stare dreamily into Bieber’s eyes, then by all means.)



<https://youtu.be/nntGTK2Fhb0>

There’s not really a soar there. No intensifying volume, texture, rhythm, pitch. The not-soar (starting at 0:48) is even a weird length, clocking in at 12 measures after an 8-measure intro and 16-measure verse have established a multiples-of-8 structural rhythm; even if we were expecting a drop, it comes four measures early. The clearest sign we get that a drop is imminent is that moment where the instrumental reduces to a quiet hiss for two measures as Bieber sings “Where are you now?” That hiss is the structural equivalent of the nothingness we hear just before “All Around the World”’s chorus, and with no traditional soar before it, we have just enough time to think “Oh shit, are they gonna....?” before we’re off, clutching tight to Justin Bieber as we ride a dolphin through the more tender parts of Skrillex’s and Diplo’s musical oceans.

Until that nothingness, this could just as easily be one of those heartfelt Bieber tunes where he reaches to the high end of his range for a chorus full of feels. That Bieber? He’s incredibly self-assured, bearing his soul because he’s certain you’ll love him. The bait-and-switch of WAÜN’s soarless drop highlights Bieber’s insecurity in this song—he’s just dolphin calls and “Where are you now”s—by creating expectations for a different persona.

So what we have here is an atypical drop, a drop that calls attention to itself by behaving differently than we expect it to, a drop that’s a study in understatement—all courtesy of three of dancepop’s resident maximalists.



“143 Diplo and Skrillex at Burning Man 2014 Opulent Temple” by Flickr user Duncan Rawlinson, CC BY-NC 2.0

Atypical soars and drops aren’t new, as producers will always toy with musical conventions as a way to disrupt expectations. Skrillex’s own “[Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites](#)” (2010) includes a pre-drop that doesn’t soar at all. In 2015, two big acts in the dance scene, Disclosure and The Chemical Brothers, released singles that don’t soar right, either. Disclosure, whose big 2013 hit “Latch” soared rather traditionally into Sam Smith’s chorus, is cover on “Bang That” and “Jaded.” “[Bang That](#)” includes three separate 8-measure phrases (at 0:30, 0:45, and 1:01, respectively, in the linked video) that never take off, finally settling into a descending bass line (starting at 1:09) that just repeats a rhythmic motif, running out the clock on the final four measures before the chorus. “[Jaded](#),” at the other end of the spectrum, includes only a 4-measure pre-chorus (1:18-1:27) that seems to be sweeping upward like a traditional soar, then roller coasters down and back up over the final two measures. The instability of this soar/not-soar is punctuated with an additional eighth note tacked onto the end of the fourth measure, throwing the chorus off-kilter. The Chemical Brothers employ a similar roller coaster sweep in “[Sometimes I Feel So Deserted](#)” that marks out an even eight measures (0:58-1:13) without either intensifying rhythmically or pushing to a pitch ceiling at the drop.

These soars and drops stand out precisely because, like WAÜN’s, they aren’t the norm. To help theorize WAÜN’s not-soar, I want to think with Robin James, whose *Resilience & Melancholy* hears soars and drops in the context of contemporary race and gender politics. James situates soars and drops as the sonic equivalent of resilience—a performance of feminine overcoming that ultimately only strengthens the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that inflicts the damage that is being surmounted. In other words, women can only attempt to overcome through the damage that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy inflicts upon them. Sonically, the soar is an accrual of damage that is spectacularly (and profitably) overcome in the drop, the music that resiliently endures on the other side of nothingness. Melancholy, on the other hand, is failed resilience, a handling of damage that does not directly profit white supremacist patriarchy and that could sound any number of ways, including like a non-traditional soar. While admittedly these soars and drops aren’t always about gender politics, *R&M* opens space for us to think about gender and soars/drops together.

I don’t think WAÜN’s non-soar/drop is resilient or melancholic, but I do think it’s helpful to think of it as being *about* resilience and melancholy. This is where Bieber’s performance of masculinity comes into play. From his earliest poofy-headed, babyfaced performances, Biebs has done a modified bro thing: his heart’s on his sleeve, but mostly as a strategy for sexual conquest. “All Around the World,” again, is exemplary. In the lyrics, Bieber uses his worldly experiences to woo a potential lover, who he also negs, keeping himself in a position of power as someone who knows more, has seen more, and is willing to accept this woman despite her obvious flaws.



*“143 Diplo and Skrillex at Burning Man 2014
Opulent Temple” by Flickr user Duncan
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In WAÜN, though, I hear his performance of masculinity complicated further, as he tries out a number of more feminized tropes all at once. Lyrically, Bieber is the scorned lover who claims to have done all the care work in his relationship. Visually, he’s the pop icon whose body is ogled, scrutinized, and marked. Vocally, he receives the pitch-shift treatment that has most recently been associated with DJ Snake’s production of diva vocals (think “[You Know You Like It](#)” and “[Lean On](#)”). He also sings in a breathy style that [James has elsewhere noted mimics Ellie Goulding’s vocals](#). Musically, Skrillex and Diplo give him the soar/drop construction to undergird his pain, a musical technique that most often signifies feminine resilience.

What bubbles up is a heteromasculine play on resilience and melancholy. Skrillex and Diplo liquidate the soar until all that’s left is a nothing-hiss before the drop. In the context of the other feminized tropes Bieber is messing with in WAÜN, this failed soar could feel melancholic, a refusal to spectacularly overcome. Overcome what, though? Bieber gets to sound resilient or melancholic without ever experiencing damage. That’s his male privilege. James points out that one of the most violent outcomes of resilience discourse is the re-enforcement of damage. If resilience is the way women become legible and profitable, then the damage inflicted by ablist white cisheteropatriarchy becomes a necessity, something that must be endured to gain access to power and resources. This is the lynchpin of James’s critique: resilience is a harmful discourse because it ultimately benefits the system it purports to overcome. Melancholy turns resilience logic on its head by refusing to treat damage as something an individual is responsible for overcoming. WAÜN, though, erases damage altogether in its initial drop. WAÜN’s feminized tropes ultimately highlight instead of unsettle Bieber’s performance of hetero-masculinity: what’s more man-ly than accessing power and resources without the threat of institutional violence?

Importantly, these feminized tropes don’t undermine Bieber’s heteromasculine performance; rather, they only seem to add nuance to the slightly bro-ier [that’s a word] Bieber performance we’ve become accustomed to. That’s what I mean when I say WAÜN is *about* resilience and melancholy; Skrillex and Diplo use the markers of queer or feminine overcoming and failed overcoming to re-construct Bieber’s masculinity, to toss some more ingredients into his manly

mix, and the not-soar is a big component of that. Skrillex and Diplo tap into this soar experimentation, then drop it into the middle of a slightly more gender-fluid Bieber.



Screenshot from “Where Are Ü Now” official video

WAÜN’s high water mark is a few months behind us at this point, but Bieber remains hotter than ever, with “What Do You Mean?,” “Sorry” (another Skrillex production credit), and “Love Yourself” still dominating US and UK charts. Several more singles from *Purpose* (including two more Skrillex collaborations) are poised to do the same in 2016. Each of these singles extends some of the same tropes Bieber, Skrillex, and Diplo explore in WAÜN—breathy vocals, misunderstood and mistreated pop icon, resilience and contrition and care in the face of a failed relationship—and I hear WAÜN’s initial drop as the sonic moment that preps Bieber’s return to the pop charts. He wades back into the mainstream with a more complex performance of heteromascularity and reaps the profits that come with it.

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Justin D Burton is Assistant Professor of Music at Rider University, and a regular writer at Sounding Out!. His research revolves around critical race and gender theory in hip hop and pop, and his current book project is called *Posthuman Pop*. He is co-editor with Ali Colleen Neff of the *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27:4, “Sounding Global Southernness,” and with Jason Lee Oakes of the *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music Studies* (2017). You can catch him at justindburton.com and on Twitter [@justindburton](https://twitter.com/justindburton). His favorite rapper is Right Said Fred.

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