"Caught a Vibe": TikTok and The Sonic Germ of Viral Success

Sounding Out! Authors

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Abstract

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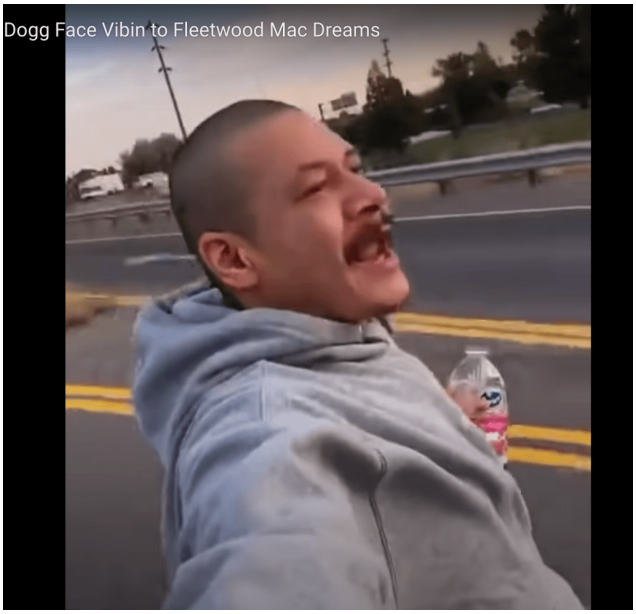
Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Digital Media, Economics, Internets, Listening



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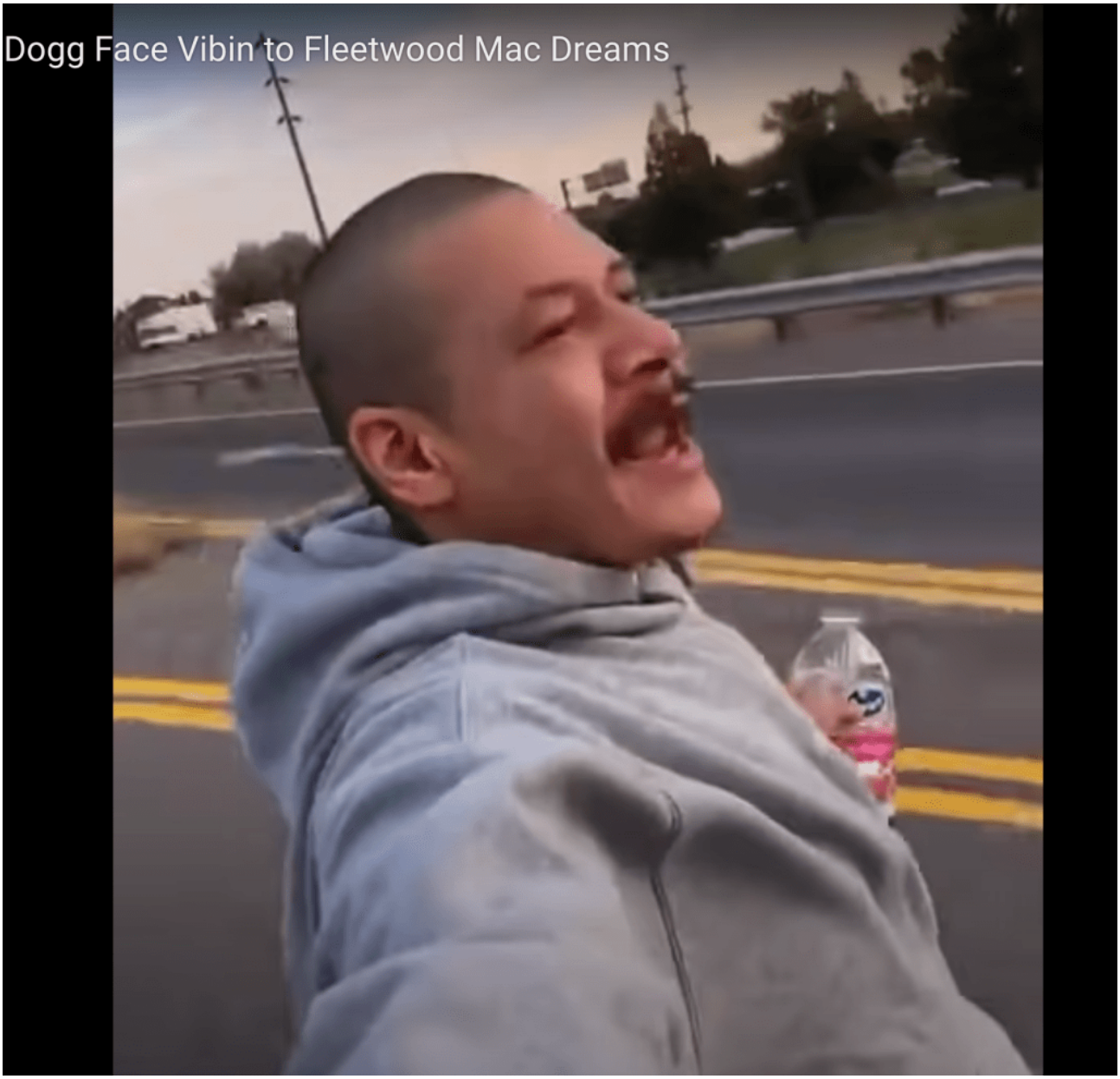


"When I wake up, I can't even stay up/I slept through the day, fuck/I'm not getting younger," laments Willow Smith of The Anxiety on "Meet Me at Our Spot," a track released through MSFTSMusic and Roc Nation in March of 2020. Despite the song's nature as a "sludgy alternative track with emo undertones that hits at the zeitgeist," "Meet Me at Our Spot" received very little attention after its initial release and did not chart until the summer of 2021, when it went viral on TikTok as part of a dance trend. The short-form video app which exploded in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, catalyzed the track's latent rise to success where it reached no. 21 on the *US Billboard Hot 100,* becoming Willow's highest charting song since her 2010 hit, "Whip My Hair".

The app currently known as TikTok began as Musical.ly, which was shuttered in 2017 and then rebranded in 2018. By March of 2021, the app boasted one billion worldwide monthly users, indicative of a growth rate of about 180%. This explosion was in many ways catalyzed by successive lockdowns during the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the relaxation and subsequent abandonment of COVID mitigation measures, the app has retained a large volume of

its users, remaining one of the highest grossing apps in the iOS environment. TikTok's viral success (both as noun and adjective) has worked to create a kind of vibe economy in which artists are now subject to producing a particular *type* of sound in order to be rendered legible to the pop charts.



https://youtu.be/2dTMIH5gCHg

For anyone who has yet to succumb to the TikTok trap, allow me to offer you a brief summary of how it functions. Upon opening it, you are instantly fed content. Devoid of any obvious internal operating logic, it is the media equivalent of drinking from a fire hose. Immersive and fast-paced, users vertically scroll through videos that take up their entire screen. Within five minutes of swiping, you can–if your algorithm is anything like mine–see: cute pet videos, protests against police brutality, HypeHouse dance trends, thirst traps, contemporary music, therapy tips, attractive men chopping wood, attractive women lifting weights, and anything else you can fathom. Since its shift from Musical.ly, the app has also been a staging ground for popular music hits such as Lil Nas X's' "Old Town Road", Lizzo's "Good As Hell", and, recently, Harry Styles' "As It Was."

The app, which is the perfect–if chaotic–fusion of both radio and video is enmeshed in a wider media ecosystem where social networking and platform capitalism converge, and as a result, it seems that TikTok is changing the music industry in at least three distinct ways:

First, it affects our music consumption habits. After hearing a snippet of a song used for a TikTok, users are more likely to queue it up on their streaming platform of choice for another, more complete listen. Unlike those platforms, where algorithms work to feed a listener more of what they've already heard, TikTok feeds a listener *new* content. As a result, there's no definitive likelihood that you've previously heard the track being used as a sound. Therefore, TikTok works the way that Spotify used to: as a mechanism for discovery.

Second, TikTok is changing the nature of the single. Rather than relying upon a label as the engine behind a song's success, TikTok disseminates tracks–or sounds as they're referred to in the app–widely, determining a song's success or role as a debut within a series of clicks. Particularly during the pandemic, when musicians were unable to tour, TikTok's relationship to the industry became

even more salient. Artists sought new ways to share and promote their music, taking to TikTok to release singles, livestream concerts, and engage with fans. Moreover, Spotify's increasingly capacious playlist archive began to boast a variety of tracklists with titles such as, "Best TikTok Songs 2019-2022", "TikTok Songs You Can't Get Out Of Your Head", and "TikTok Songs that Are Actually Good" among others. The creation and maintenance of this feedback loop between TikTok and Spotify demonstrates not only the centrality of social media ecosystems as driving current popular music success, but also the way that these technologies work in harmony to promote, sustain, or suppress interest in a particular tune.

https://youtu.be/h0OTzVYXQjE

Most notoriously, the bridge of Olivia Rodrigo's "drivers license", went viral as a sound on TikTok in January 2021 and subsequently almost broke the internet. Critics have praised this 24-second section as the highlight of the song, underscoring Rodrigo's pleading soprano vocals layered over moody, syncopated digital drums. Shortly after it was released, the song shattered Spotify's record for single-day streams for a non-holiday song. *New York Times* writer Joe Coscarelli notes of Rodrigo's success, "TikTok videos led to social media posts, which led to streams, which led to news articles , and back around again, generating an unbeatable feedback loop."

And third, where songwriting was once oriented towards the creation of a narrative, TikTok's influence has led artists to a songwriting practice that centers on producing a mood. For *The New Yorker,* Kyle Chayka argues that vibes are "a rebuke to the truism that people want narratives," suggesting that the era of the vibe indicates a shift in online culture. He argues that what brings people online is the search for "moments of audiovisual eloquence," not narrative. Thus, on the one hand, media have become more immersive in order to take us out of our daily preoccupations. On the other, media have taken on a distinct shape so that they can be engaged while doing something else. In other words, media have adapted to an environment wherein the dominant mode of consumption is keyed toward distraction via atmosphere.



"Vibes graffiti, Leake Street," Image by Flickr user Duncan Cumming (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Despite their relatively recent resurgence in contemporary discourse, vibes have a rich conceptual history in the United States. Once a shorthand for "vibration" endemic to West Coast hippie vernacular, "vibes" have now come to mean almost anything. In his work on machine learning and the novel form, Peli Grietzer theorizes the vibe by drawing on musician Ezra Koenig's early aughts blog, "Internet Vibes." Koenig writes, "A vibe turns out to be something like "local colour," with a historical dimension. What gives a vibe "authenticity" is its ability to evoke–using a small number of disparate elements–a certain time, place, and milieu, a certain nexus of historic, geographic, and cultural forces." In his work for *Real Life*, software engineer Ludwig Yeetgenstein defines the vibe as "something that's difficult to pin down precisely in words but that's evoked by a loose collection of ideas, concepts, and things that can be identified by intuition rather than logic." Where Mitch Thereiau argues that the vibe might just merely be a vocabulary tick of the present moment, Robin James suggests that vibes are not only here to stay, but have in fact been known by many other names before. Black diasporic cultures, in particular, have long believed sound and its "vibrations had the power to produce new possibilities of social attunement and new modes of living," as Gayle Wald's "Soul Vibrations: Black Music and Black Freedom in Sound and Space," attests (674). We might then consider TikTok a key method of dissemination for a maximalist, digital variant of something like Martin Heidegger's concept of mood (*stimmung*), or Karen Tongson's "remote intimacy." The vibe is both indeterminate and multiple, a status to be achieved and the mood that produces it; vibes seek to promote and diffuse feelings through time and space.

Much current discourse around vibes insists that they interfere with, or even discourage academic interpretation. While some people are able to experience and identify the vibe—perform a vibe check, if you will—vibes defy traditional forms of academic analysis. As Vanessa Valdés points out, "In a post-Enlightenment world that places emphasis on logic and reason, there exists a demand that everything be explained, be made legible." That the vibe works with a certain degree of strategic nebulousness might in fact be one of its greatest assets.



"Vibes, Shoreditch" by Flickr User Duncan Cumming, (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Vibes resist tidy classification and can thus be named across a variety of circumstances and conditions. Although we might think of the action of 'vibing' as embodied, and the term vibration quite literally refers to the physical properties of sound waves and their travel through various mediums, the vibe through which those actions are produced does not itself have to be material. Sometimes, they name a genre of feeling or energy: cursed vibes or cottagecore vibes. Sometimes, they function as a statement of identification: I vibe with that, or in the case of 2 Chainz's 2016 hit, "it's a vibe." Sometimes, vibes are exchanged: you can give one, you can catch one, you can check one, So, while things like energy and mood—which are often taken as cognates for vibes—work to imagine, name, and evoke emotions, vibes are instead *invitations.*

Not only do vibes serve as a prompt for an attempt at articulating experience, they are also invitations to co-presently experience what seems inarticulable. By capturing patterns in media and culture in order to produce a coherent image/sound assemblage, the production of a vibe is predicated upon the ability to draw upon large swathes of visual, aural, and environmental data. Take for example, the story of Nathan Apodaca, known by his TikTok handle as: 420doggface208. After posting a video of himself listening to Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams" while drinking cranberry juice and riding a longboard, Apodaca went viral, amassing something like 30 million views in mere hours. This subsequently sparked a trend in which TikTok users posted videos of themselves doing the same thing, using "Dreams" as the sound. According to *Billboard,* this sparked the largest ever streaming week for Fleetwood Mac's 1977 hit with over 8.47 million streams. Of his overnight success, Apodaca says, "it's just a video that everyone felt a vibe with." To invoke a vibe is thus to make a particular atmosphere more comprehensible to someone else, producing a resonant effect that draws people together.



https://youtu.be/lcWA2wEFkeY

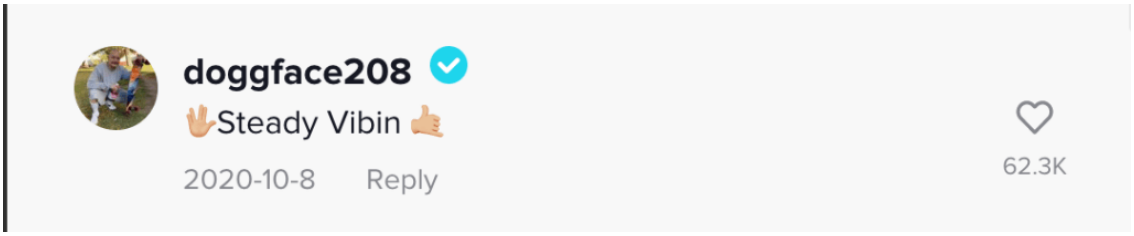
As both an extension and tool of culture, vibes are produced by and imbricated within broader social, political, and economic matrices. Recorded music has always been confined—for better and worse—to the technologies, formats, and mediums through which it has been produced for commercial sale. On a platform like TikTok, wherein the emphasis is on potentially quirky microsections of songs, artists are invited to key their work towards those parameters in order to

maximize commercial success. Nowadays, pop songs are produced with an eye towards their ability to go viral, be remixed, re-released with a feature verse, meme'd, or included in a mashup. As such, when an artist 'blows up' on TikTok, it does not necessarily mean that the sound of the song is *good* (whatever that might mean). Rather, it might instead be the case that a hybrid assemblage of sound, performance, narrative, and image has coalesced successfully into an atmosphere or texture – that we recognize as a/the vibe – something that not only resonates but also sells well. As TikTok's success continues to proliferate, the app is continually being developed in ways that make it an indispensable part of the popular music industry's ecosystem. Whether by exposing users to new musical content through the circulation of sounds, or capitalizing upon the speed at which the app moves to brand a song a 'single' before it's even released, TikTok leverages the vibe to get users to listen differently.



https://youtu.be/JCIQOVj2Z44

> *@jimmyfallon This one's for you @420doggface208*
> *#cranberrydreams#doggface208#dogfacechallenge original sound – Jimmy Fallon*



We might indeed consider vibes to be conceptual, affective algorithms created in the interstice between lived experience and new media. "Meet Me At Our Spot," the track through which I've framed this article, is full of allusions to youth culture: drunk texts, anxiety over aging, and late-night drives on the 405. It is buoyed by a propulsive bass line that thumps with a restless energy and evokes a mood of escapism. Willow Smith's intriguing timbre and the pleasing harmonies she achieves with Tyler Cole invite listeners to ride shotgun. For the two minutes and twenty-two seconds of the song, we are immersed within their world. In the final measures the pop of the snare recedes into the background and Tyler's voice fades away. The vibe of the track – both

sonically and thematically – is predicated on the experience of a few, fleeting moments. Willow leaves us with a final provocation, one that resonates with popular music's current mode: "Caught a vibe, baby are you coming for the ride?"

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Featured Image: Screencap of Nathan Apodaca's viral TikTok post, courtesy of SO! eds.

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***Jay Jolles** is a PhD candidate in American Studies at the College of William and Mary currently at work on a dissertation tentatively titled "Man, Music, and Machine: Audio Culture in a/the Digital Age." He is an interdisciplinary scholar with interests in a wide range of fields including 20th and 21st century literature and culture, critical theory, comparative media studies, and musicology. Jay's scholarly work has appeared in or is forthcoming from* The Los Angeles Review of Books, U.S. Studies Online*, and* Comparative American Studies*. His essays can be found in* Per Contra, The Atticus Review, and Pidgeonholes, *among others. Prior to his time at William and Mary, he was an adjunct professor of English at Drexel University and Rutgers University-Camden.*

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