



A BRIEF HISTORY OF EMO AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY

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Music is a vast world with a history that dates all the way back to the beginning of human history. Since that time, it has expanded exponentially to become a massively complex entity that has had innumerable effects on culture, politics, and society. To this day, music continues to shape the world we live in. One of the great appeals behind music is how it gives a voice to people. Whether those people are from younger generations, marginalized minorities, or specific religious groups, there is a type of music out there for everyone. When music resonates with one's personal values and beliefs, a deep connection is able to be established between the artist and the listener. When an artist is able to touch many people with their music, they are able to garner an audience that can sometimes even manifest its own subculture. One musical genre that has an extensive and well-founded subculture is emo. Emo — born from the genre “emocore” and the word “emotional” — is a genre popularized in the early 2000’s that swept a generation of teenagers and young adults. Emo appealed to a generation of kids fresh out of the punk movement who needed not so much a political voice, but one that spoke to their own.

The roots of emo go back to the mid-1980’s in Washington, D.C., developing from punk and post-hardcore (King). Punk included raw, often stripped down instrumentals, centered around the electric guitar, electric bass, and a drum kit. The vocals were also raw as well, advertising unrefined vocals that sometimes included shouting. Lyrics were confrontational and bold, often taking on political and social issues. Early punk bands included the Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Ramones, and Black Flag while more modern examples include those more catered to pop such as Blink-182 and Green Day. The pop characteristics of the latter foreshadowed emo and its more commercial nature. The characteristics of punk and post-hardcore would give way to a more toned-down, melodic sound with deeply confessional lyrics (Julita). As Andy Greenwald states in his book *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo*, “What had happened in D.C. in the mid-eighties—the shift from anger to action, from extroverted rage to internal turmoil, from an individualized mass to a mass of individuals—was in many ways a test case for the transformation of the national punk scene over the next two decades.”

At first, the term emo was a highly unacceptable term, even by the artists who were developing the genre. To this day, there are few if any artists that self-identify as emo. Artist Ian MacKaye of

post-hardcore band *Embrace* dubbed the term, “the stupidest fucking thing I've ever heard in my entire life” in an interview with *Thrasher* magazine in 1986. It was disliked by artists and fans alike for many and different reasons. Mainly, the true definition of emo was and is impossible to pinpoint. Especially during its development, it would be hard for artist to have agreed they were something that nobody could even define. There was also the belief that the precursory genres had were also emotive and meaningful, and that this new genre was nothing different. It was also used as an insult, namely due to the fact the up and coming genre was associated with sensitivity, introversion, and angst; the heart-on-your-sleeve male was seen as weak. Whatever the case, the name clearly stuck and began to show up all over to describe bands. Some of the first bands attributed to emo included *Minor Threat*, *Rites of Spring*, *Jawbreaker*, and *Sunny Day Real Estate*. The latter two redefined emo and brought it into the mainstream scene by the 90's. The lyrical characteristics within *Jawbreaker's* songs set them apart by focusing on personal subjects that were obscure and full of metaphors. The complexity and frustration drew young audiences in, as it resonated with their own feelings. Grunge band *Nirvana* had unintentionally popularized underground music at the time, causing interest to gravitate to the emo scene. By the late 90's, emo had not only exploded but brought the scene to the midwest with bands like *Cap'n Jazz*, *Midtown*, *Brand New*, *Taking Back Sunday*, *Jimmy Eat World*, *Dashboard Confessional*, and *Senses Fail*. The current genre had become a fusion of hardcore's passion, indie rock's intelligence, and punk's power and work ethic (Greenwald, p. 34–35).

In the wake of the new millennium, emo continued to grow as a genre. A serious driving force that propelled it to true mainstream status was the September 11th attacks. The media was desperate for a way to bring back stability to people and emo happened to be the perfect poster child. While the nation struggled to heal, emo was advertised as the antidote, ironically marketing lost and confused kids to an equally lost and confused nation. 2001 band *My Chemical Romance* was formed directly in lieu of the tragedy. Frontman Gerard Way wrote one of the bands first songs, *Skylines and Turnstiles*, in direct response to his feelings regarding the attacks. By the mid-2000's, the economic recession sparked even more turmoil within the nation. During this time, people felt especially hopeless and helpless, many of them questioning humanity, mortality, and self-significance. While teenagers didn't weren't directly

affected by economic troubles, their parents and families were. These difficult times caused family and financial problems, putting pressure on teens. Seeing parents as well as the world in such a dark and helpless state caused many teenagers to question their own self-worth. Feeling lost and even like a burden in such times, kids needed a light in the dark. Emo was able to provide what so many teens and young adults needed at the time. “Emo is a specific sort of teenage longing, a romantic and ultimately self-centered need to understand the bigness of the world in relation to *you*. [...] Emo—or whatever you call it—doesn’t happen on the stage and it doesn’t happen in the diary. It happens somewhere between the two. It is the act of reaching out towards something larger to better know yourself. It’s the desire to make yourself bigger by making yourself part of something bigger” (Greenwald, p. 5).

By the mid 2000’s, emo was reaching its commercial success. A major asset to its success was the internet. This was a huge driving force that brought emo to every kid’s house and ears. Early social networking websites like Makeoutclub and Livejournal cultivated an expansive subculture of teens who divulged extremely personal thoughts with one another. These sites revealed young people’s struggles with family, relationships, mental health, sense of self, self worth, and humanity. Their common ground was found in emo bands, in music they felt resonated with their own personal struggles. The problems that teenagers of the age felt were revealing themselves in these online communities. Sharing ones feelings online established a sense of validation when a peer shared their own, similar problems. In many cases, under the guise of the internet, it was done in a theatrical and overdramatic fashion. These platforms are where emo truly garnered its stereotypes of cynicism, angst, sensitivity, depression, self-harm, and even suicide. They were outlets for teens to pour their hearts into, a place to be somebody. The internet offered a place for everyday kids to go onto to escape their dull or even painful lives. Emo resonated so well with this party because, just like them, they were revealing, recontextualizing, and romanticizing the everyday struggles of life and coming of age.

The internet also made music in general much more accessible. Record labels and bands took advantage of this, advertising their music on sites such as Napster and PureVolume. Illegal MP3 downloads from sites like Limewire also influenced the sharing of music, spreading it to a wider

audience. In an era where image meant everything, the internet was vital in advertising emo (Futterman). Many bands, of course, were self-aware to the fact they were being used as marketing tools. *Panic! at the Disco's* song, *London Beckoned Songs About Money Written By Machines* takes a jab at this tactic with the lyrics, "Well we're just a wet dream for the webzine / Make us it, make us hip, make a scene / Or shrug us off your shoulders / Don't approve a single word that we wrote." *Fall Out Boy* — founders of *Panic!* — expressed similar feelings in their 2007 song *Thriller*: "Make us poster boys for your scene / But we are not making an acceptance speech / I found the safest place to keep all our old mistakes / Every dot com's refreshing for a journal update." Bands like *The Academy Is...* and *Cobra Starship* had similar confessionals in their songs *Black Mamba* and *Pete Wentz Is The Only Reason We're Famous*. This self-criticism and awareness provided a transparency fans valued. A key principal of emo was the fan-artist connection; communication from bands to fans provided validity and, in turn, loyalty. The accessibility of now-famous bands brought on a new wave of emo where fan's passion bordered on entitlement (Maloney).

One of the criticisms behind this new wave of emo the internet garnered was its largely female audience. While emo was and still is a mostly male-dominated scene, emo was able to provide a space for women with its more down to earth nature. Emo was less political in its subject matter, which reduced controversy and intense zealousness from fans. The focus of emo music was more on personal expression, exploring subjects like internal struggle, relationships, and mortality, with often confessional lyrics. The scene was more appealing and inviting to female listeners as it contained less violence and misogyny. While most previous genres were not necessarily or outright pitted against women, they didn't necessarily come off as the most safe place for them. It didn't help that there were very few female bands or artists in the punk and grunge scenes; they were male-dominated spaces whose intense masculinity complex intimidated and discouraged many female artists and fans. The scenes presented risk of not only physical danger, but of criticism, objectification, and ridicule. At the same time, a number of bands and songs within emo still contained violent anti-woman sentiments under the guise of the "lonely boy's aesthetic" and catchy hooks (Greenwald, p. 135). While early emo was known for glorifying heartbreak and often victimizing the usually male artists, it seemed to evolve to more inclusive and complex subjects. As the genre strayed away from tales of

heteronormative relationships gone wrong, it was able to attract a wider audience who were able to relate better. It even gave way for female-fronted bands like *Paramore*, *Tonight Alive*, and *We Are The In Crowd* to flourish. The angst-ridden, heartbroken boys grew up over the following few years, and so did their music. While emo kept up its references and discussions about love (as most music does), it became more gender-neutral. Many bands used “you”, “they”, or “we” to refer to a person, rather than “he” or “she” in their lyrics. This left the subject of a song ambiguous and allowed for a more universal listening experience. Self-victimization eventually seemed to give way to the exploration of broader, deeper subjects. Rather than sing about blaming girls and the world for their troubles, they began to self-reflect. The change in itself revealed a sense of maturity and inclusiveness, creating something all people could appreciate. The lyrical contrast between two songs on *Fall Out Boy’s* 2003 album versus their 2008 album is a perfect example of this change: “Breaking hearts has never looked so cool / As when you wrap your car around a tree / Your makeup looks so great next to his teeth” vs. “You can only blame your problems on the world for so long / Before it all becomes the same old song”.

Another aspect of emo that made it more gender inclusive was the fact that many artists were very young. Artists were oftentimes around the same age as fans, which made them more relatable as well as accessible. *Panic! at the Disco* wrote and recorded their debut album when their youngest member was still seventeen, and they began touring immediately after. Most emo artists started off playing in their garages or at festivals or small venues, giving them that boy-next-door quality. These young suburban boys singing songs about their suburban lives were relatable and approachable. While most bands would eventually experience commercial success, many stuck to their roots by continuing to play small venues, attend festivals such as *Vans Warped Tour* — a popular platform for emo, punk, rock, and alternative bands — and interact with fans.

The integrity of emo was also often questioned due to the way artists were not only advertised, but how they presented themselves. By the mid-2000’s, bands like *My Chemical Romance* and *Panic! at the Disco* were on headlining tours. This allowed them the freedom to experiment with theatrics and stage antics. And experiment they did. Both bands utilized stage costumes,

heavy makeup, stage decorations, and even actors and dancers during their performances. These antics were a step up from boy-next-door and a nod to their punk roots. While this style came under fire by many fans of emo and similar genres, punk had begun as a counterculture that sported crazy hair, makeup, and outfits. It was argued, however, that punk's style was used as a form of rebellion, while emo was just a flashy, experimental costume. Experimentation with gender and gender roles, however, was an important and defining aspect of emo. It made sense that experimentation with fashion came along with experimentation of subject matter. Androgynous or experimental fashion allowed for even more inclusivity in gender.

Emo is a truly unique genre that extends over multiple decades of history. The uniqueness of the genre comes with the fact that it means something truly unique and personal to everyone. Emo has gone through countless transformations over the years, and it is still continuing to do so. Since emo has no definitive definition, chances are its going to carry on to future generations in some form. Emo bands of the 00's have already begun to experiment with new sounds and branch out into pop, synth, and electronic. Its characteristics of nostalgia, romanticization, longing, sensitivity, poetry, and complexity are all things that can be applied to many different genres of music. For many of us, the years of being a teenager were filled with confusion and loneliness. One of the most common feelings was that nobody understood what you were going through. But everyone does, we do, and emo does. It's there to console the lost teen and to remind the adult where they came from. Emo is truly a genre created and influenced by fans, more so than most genres. Its direction has been dictated by its fanbase since the beginning, and the relationship between fan and artist has caused fans to become so fiercely loyal to not only the artist but the genre as a whole. Emo allows us to to be expressive, emotional, and embarrassing, as teenage-hood should. It gives us the keys to self-exploration, examination, and learning how to cope with life. In today's music, it may be argued that emo is no longer relevant, that it's over and done with. But what would emo be without death? If emo has taught us anything, it's that we're all capable of rising from the ashes, changing, and creating something new.

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