

From Daft Punk to Stromae, how global is ‘French Music’?

By Virginie Berger, translation Emma Dovey.

Who is the international audience of the francophone music industry? How can we explain the export successes of Daft Punk and Stromae? Is French rap music’s international investment paying off?

While for a long time the appeal of making money was not associated with the cultural economy, the invention of marketing and the internet succeeded in transforming some French artists into products that are consumed all over the world. In order to better understand how the French music scene adopted a strategy of profit and internationalisation, the *French Touch* movement is telling to say the least. It deciphers a musical style that has transcended ‘underground’ music and become mainstream.

To explain this transformation, one supposition suggests that 1970s pop stars coincided with the emergence of marketing theories. At this point in time, thanks to rock music and supermarket shelves which were overflowing with Elvismania and Beatlemania merchandise, North America and Great Britain were innovating, transforming and marking the birth of musical merchandising.¹ A few years later, disco music, the predecessor of the clubbing² and DJing scenes, was emerging in the United States. At the dawn of the 1980s, a major development then took place which suggested a more industrial and more cyclical music genre inspired by pop, funk and soul. This new genre, closely related to party and dance culture, was an ideal birthplace for the worthy heir of disco: house music. This very music would then develop at the start of the 21st century, as an undercurrent in Madonna and Daft Punk’s global smash hits. While disco mainly originates from New York and Philadelphia, over the period of 1970-1980 Europe also gave rise to an artificial and mechanical style of music, thanks to the synthpop movement and bands such as Kraftwerk or New Order (a more electronic reformation of the rock band Joy Division after the death of its singer, Ian Curtis). However, it wasn’t until the early 1990s that artists took up disco DJing techniques and combined them with analogue synthesizers of synthpop in order to transform electronic music into a fully-fledged genre in its own right. At that time, there was a small handful of activists (DJs, party planners and owners of independent record labels) all over the globe who supported this futuristic culture, whether it was in- or outside of clubs. Incidentally, it was this contextual

divide (between clubbing and rave culture³) which would then give birth to the early offshoots of electronic music.

Not to be outdone and although it's rarely mentioned in the history of music, in the 1970s-1990s, France also produced several pioneers, such as Pierre Henry (one of the fathers of *musique concrète*), Jean-Michel Jarre, Motorbass and St Germain. In order to trace the origins of *French Touch*, here is exactly where the story starts. In 1991, DJ Laurent Garnier joined forces with Éric Morand (the former artistic director of the record label, Barclay) to create the record label Fnac Music Dance Division which was where Garnier would release the first mix under his name. The title of this record? *French Connection*, a title hinting at a desire to promote electronic music 'made in France'. However, F Communications didn't stop there. Éric Morand launched the slogan 'We give a French Touch to house', and had it written on a jacket. Not long after, the British press would adopt and popularise the term '*French Touch*'. So, Daft Punk are in fact not the fathers of this trend, but its offspring. In their early days, Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo and Thomas Bangalter performed with their faces uncovered. At the mercy of their success, the two young men then wanted to be more in control over their image. Little by little, Daft Punk began accepting photoshoots, but only if their faces were hidden until they became absolutely certain of their music's potential and the success it would bring. Then came the global smash hits *Homework* (1997), which sold nearly 2 million copies in 35 countries in only a few months; *Discovery* (2001) which sold nearly 1.3 million copies in the first week after its release; and *Human after All* (2005) which doesn't have an exact number of record sales, but certainly exceeds the 1 million mark. After a comeback in 2007 that was highly anticipated by their fans, Daft Punk gave a concert tour where they performed remixes of their greatest hits. All the remixes were quickly released in the rather plainly named album *Alive*, which in the long run was much less successful than the original tracks. Perhaps this is proof that the recycled element was not as appealing to their fans. Meanwhile, they also had marketing plans that were well over budget thanks to use of teasers, over-the-top scenography, violent light shows and merchandise that would make even The Beatles' merchandise stores green with envy. This was the basis of Daft Punk's vision which resulted from their partnership. They were no longer just music, but a symbolic marking of the transition from *French Touch* to *French Hype*.

THE FRENCH MUSIC SCENE: WHO IS ITS INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE?

While the period from 1960 to 1980 saw the peak of the radio and physical record sales, singles or records, the beginning of the 21st century, however, requires a more cross-functional approach when processing musical data as it straddles the decline of physical CDs and the invasion of digital music. The digital age brought with it new developments: rating systems (top charts on streaming services and broadcast analysis services, such as Muzicast⁴, for TV, radio, clubs and online), but also new predictive parameters such as the virality⁵ or the potential buzz⁶ of a song title or clip. In fact, a country's music exports are no longer limited to physical record sales alone.

'In order to explain this international success, there is one common theme between Stromae and David Guetta – the show factor.'

The music industry must also be taken into account as it has experienced a certain revival over the last 15 years. This observation is largely due to the hyper-circulation of music on digital platforms. Thanks to this digitisation, live performances have become essential in order for artists to make themselves known to the major labels and to increase their income. At this current point in time, exporting music can't be taken for granted. Without the artist's considerable success in their home country (through media outlets, TV/radio appearances, number of sales) and without a substantial budget allocated to promote them, selling them to foreign promoters (for concerts and festivals) proves to be extremely delicate. In short, today the national success of an artist is an inevitable passport which allows them to set out and conquer the globe.

France has tackled this issue well, as it's one of the only countries to have a Bureau Export (French Music Export Office)! Ever since 1993, this one-of-a-kind institution has been promoting the development of the French classical and contemporary music industry on an international level. How? Through different roles: offering advice regarding specific characteristics of the countries in question, connecting local artists, providing financial aid for projects, supporting broadcasts and promoting musical releases. The Bureau Export is a comprehensive programme which aims to satisfy the desires of French artists and make them famous all over the world. In a press release concerning the years 2013 and 2014, the Bureau Export stressed that 'since 2010, the French music industry at an international level, and the combination of classical and contemporary music has been steadily increasing in value [and] passed the €600 million mark (approximately £543,250,950) in 2014'. Revenue generated from

the international market rose from €201 million (approximately £179,702,670) in 2010 to €251 million (approximately £224,404,825) in 2014, a 25% increase in only four years. We can see from this report that the artists who drum up the most business are this decade's French-speaking popstars – with Stromae, David Guetta and Zaz all at the number one spot! In order to get our heads round this international success, we can highlight one common factor of Stromae and David Guetta (and also Daft Punk): the show factor – both Stromae and David Guetta make France want to dance. Plus, with this use of media and commercial immunity, the undisputed party kings had absolutely no problem in seducing foreign audiences – whether it was on the dancefloor or in a festival mosh pit! As for Zaz, her aesthetic, although similar to Stromae, is rather different. While *chansons à texte* (lyrical songs where the lyrics take precedence over the music) are a French tradition, the simple lyrics and the catchy and easy-to-understand choruses of these two songwriters have certainly helped them appeal to foreign audiences. The combination of the two genres – electronic music and *chanson à texte* – unearths a French-speaking recipe that works all over the world: the genius that is Stromae. The following statistics from the Bureau Export's 2014 report alone are enough to prove this. Stromae sold 650,000 copies of his album *Racine carrée* (2013) and 1 million copies of his single *Papaoutai* were sold internationally. However, if we set aside the giants of the music industry, other specific characteristics of French music come to light. For example, some French bands sing in English and so manage to avoid the 'Made in France' label. This is particularly so for Woodkid, Phoenix, Cocoon, Moriarty, Gush, Concrete Knives and also Skip the Use. At the same time, if we examine the line ups of some international festivals over several years, such as Sziget in Hungary or Coachella in the USA, we can see that French artists are hardly topping the bill. There is still room for improvement regarding the presence of French artists at major festivals. On the other hand, when considering places geographically closer to home and targeting French-speaking countries, such as Belgium, French artists are rather more common. Two hypotheses should be considered when explaining this phenomenon: the language, obviously, and a reduction of costs (and making it easier to organise tours). Lastly, streaming services continue to be excellent witnesses to the appreciation of the recorded music market. In 2014, aware of this new order, music producers who were members of the National Syndicate of Phonographic Publishing (SNEP), as well as the majority of streaming services, entrusted the Growth from Knowledge (GfK) institute with creating a weekly ranking of the top 200 most-listened-to tracks – *Top Streaming* [top charts for streaming platforms]. In terms of distribution, *Top Streaming* demonstrates a certain standardisation of French people's taste in music as around 40% of the most-listened-to tracks

were by foreign artists. It's still hard to predict whether this phenomenon will stabilise or, on the other hand, whether it will continue to develop over the coming years. However, one thing remains sure: streaming plays a crucial role in this trend of 'globalised' music.

RAP IN FRANCE: INFLUENCES, FRENCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES AND RELATED DISCIPLINES

Hip-hop, just like electronic music, wasn't always a booming market. Before it became a movement bringing the high life and extreme media exposure, it was a means of expression for disadvantaged African-American youth. Block parties began to crop up in the Bronx in the 1970s. These parties gathered together the very first dance, graffiti, DJing and rap performances. Although hip-hop and rap are often confused, they aren't one and the same. Hip-hop includes multiple disciplines (including dance, graffiti, beat-making⁸ and scratching), one of which is rap. Hip-hop arrived in France in the 1980s via dancers from New York who introduced the dancers at the Trocadéro⁹ (in Paris) to breakdancing. Four years later, hip-hop took over French television through the cult TV show 'H.I.P. H.O.P.' that was broadcast on the channel TF1. This was the first time that this movement, which was considered a counter-culture, was given media attention. At this point in time, French rap wasn't yet a musical genre in its own right and young people who were influenced by hip-hop mostly practised dance. Rap would only really become more accessible in the 1990s. It would be first introduced by founding groups such as IAM, Suprême NTM and Assassin, whose music would then be broadcast by DJs and radio programmers. It wasn't until 1990-2000 that this protest movement became a real commercial success. Without the intense fascination of certain radio stations, rap music would never have become so popular. It began to feature more and more in radio shows aimed at younger audiences. In 1999, the radio station Skyrock traded in its then slogan 'music comes first' (*'priorité à la musique'*) for a new but at the very least symbolic signature 'the no. 1 rap station' (*'premier sur le rap'*). To some extent, France appears to mimic American rap trends and developments (such as the 'bling-bling' or trap styles¹⁰). However, if we focus on French-speaking communities, French rap enjoys much greater visibility in the Maghreb region of north Africa, in west Africa, Switzerland, Belgium as well as in Canada, although this last example should be examined in more detail. French-Canadian rap music is making quite an impact in its home country. It's the only form of rap to simultaneously use both English and French to compose its rhymes. Today 'Frenghish' rap is considered as a by-product which developed from artists such as Dead Obies, Loud Lary Ajust and Alaclair Ensemble.

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DANCE AND BEAT-MAKING 'MADE IN FRANCE'

The scope of those who listen to French rap suggests there must be one prerequisite which ensures its circulation and its popularity: the ability to speak French. However, France has much more representation in disciplines such as dance or beat-making. As far as dance is concerned, some renowned break-dancers earned their stripes in the USA. This was exactly the case for Brahim Zaibat, a French-Algerian choreographer who worked with Madonna at the 2012 Super Bowl, as well as Les Twins, a duo consisting of Laurent and Larry Bourgeois, whose choreography is used by Beyoncé' in her concerts. For example, in 2003 Brahim Zaibat won the international breakdancing competition *Battle of the Year*, as did the French dance troupe Vagabond Crew (three times – in 2006, 2011 and 2012). Likewise, the production of the 'made in France beat¹¹' has also proved its worth through beatmakers such as Al'Tarba or Onra, whose respective Facebook fan pages have 40,000 and 72,000 followers. While beat-making remains a relatively unknown profession (in comparison to rap), these two artists wouldn't have been so successful without the free circulation of their work. Al'Tarba is a beatmaker who currently divides his time between New York and Toulouse. In particular, he has composed instrumental pieces for major American rappers such as Raekwon (Wu-Tang Clan) or the group Onyx, as well as for artists of more diverse backgrounds, including Lord Lhus (a Columbian rapper) and Paloma Pradal (a Romani singer). For Onra, whose work is more refined than Al'Tarba's, the blueprint is rather different. His track *The Anthem* kickstarted his career when it was used for Coca-Cola's advert for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. While the spread of French rap music remains limited, dance and beat-making seem to have their pawns ready to play on the immense chessboard of the global hip-hop scene.

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This article is available at nectart-revue.fr with an analysis grid on international music festivals.

1. In music-related marketing, merchandising is a practice that refers to the sale of products that are related to the artist in question (other than physical and digital music), such as t-shirts, posters or books. Sales generated by marketing originate predominantly from the fans.
2. Clubbing: derived from the term 'nightclub' which refers to going out to night clubs.
3. Rave culture: a trend that developed from the acid house genre which is associated with the underground electronic music that was played at parties, which were most often illegal. Raves took place in the middle of the countryside or in any other places that were not intended to be party venues (such as warehouses or abandoned factories, etc.).
4. Muzicast: a research institute which specialises in the analysis of music broadcasting on TV, radio, in clubs and online.
5. In an online context, virality refers to the online success of content that results from its extensive and rapid dissemination by people on the internet as well as the media.
6. The term 'buzz' refers to a phenomenon linked to a marketing technique which consists of generating word of mouth and excitement about a product or content.
7. www.french-music.org
8. Beat-making refers to the composition of pieces of instrumental tracks intended for rappers to insert their lyrics in.
9. Dancers at the Trocadéro: this refers to Sugar Pop and Mr. Freeze, the dancers responsible for the introducing hip-hop to France, who performed pop-and-lock moves and breakdancing on the Place du Trocadéro in Paris during the 1990s.
10. The hip-hop bling-bling style refers to the style of clothing as well as the deliberately inflammatory and excessive characteristics of some rappers. Trap is a music style similar to electronic music, but with a beat more like those used in hip-hop.

11. In hip-hop slang, the beat refers to instrumental music which rappers can use as a base for their lyrics.

FURTHER READING

Patrice Bardot, Alexis Bernier et Jean-Yves Leloup, *L'Histoire secrète de la French Touch*, Green Room Session, 2014.

Joseph Ghosn, *Musiques numériques. Essai sur la vie nomade de la musique*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2013.

Karim Hammou, *Une histoire du rap en France*, Paris, La Découverte, 2012.

Jean-Yves Leloup, *Musique non stop : Pop mutation et révolution techno*, Marseille, Le Mot et le Reste, 2015.