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MEDIA REVIEWS

Genius (formerly Rap Genius). Genius Media Group, Inc. genius.com.

If you have ever used an internet search engine such as Google to look up the words of an American pop song, especially a rap song, a page from the website Genius (genius.com) most likely appeared at the top of your search results, or at least was one of the first ten. The site has become ubiquitous for finding song lyrics. Unlike other lyric websites, however, it was not originally designed to be simply a lyric database. In fact, the site was created as a forum for deciphering meanings behind the words.

Formerly Rap Genius, Genius is a collaborative, crowd-sourced annotation platform. The website was founded in 2009 by former Yale classmates Mahbod Moghadam, Tom Lehman, and Ilan Zechory as a place for hip hop fans to find and share lyric transcriptions and their own interpretations of rap songs. In 2014 the site expanded to include other texts, and now, in addition to rap, has a number of topic categories referred to as "channels." These include (but are not limited to) rock, pop, lit (literature, including the collected works of Shakespeare and Jane Austen), news, history, sports, and screen, but rap continues to be the site's most-used channel. Each text, such as song lyrics, a poem, or a chapter from a novel, appears on its own page where contributors can highlight portions of that text and write their own commentary. The annotations appear on a side bar when users click on highlighted text. Multiple contributors can comment on any portion of text, and users can choose to "upvote" annotations that they find useful or entertaining by clicking on a thumbs-up icon below the annotation (similar to "liking" a post on Facebook), giving the contributor "IQ points." Contributors earn various numbers of IQ points each time they write an annotation (+100 IQ points for their first annotation, +5 for subsequent annotations), have their annotations upvoted (+2 if upvoted by a contributor, +4 if upvoted by a contributor who has 1000+ IQ points), or otherwise engage with site material. Users who accumulate many IQ points are considered "scholars" of the subjects or artists on which they frequently comment. Contributors can also lose points by having their annotations downvoted (done by clicking a red thumbs-down icon next to the upvote icon) or having their contributions rejected by other users.

Additionally, a mobile app for iPhone and Android operating systems allows users to retrieve lyrics for songs currently playing in iTunes. The app can play songs or videos through YouTube in a little pop-up window that appears in the lower left-hand side of the screen while the user scrolls through the song's lyrics. It can find lyrics using Genius Song Recognition by holding the device up to an external music source and clicking an icon at the bottom of the screen labeled "Identify." (This feature works best with very popular songs, such as rapper Desiigner's "Panda," and not as well with lesser-known tracks, like New York City–based artist Cakes da Killa's "Goodie Goodies.") Users can also search for a specific song or artist by typing names into the search box at the top of the screen or browse the top music news stories that appear on the home page.

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Because the content of the site is crowd-sourced (meaning anyone can create a mostly anonymous account and contribute), the quality of the texts and annotations relies primarily on what contributors have to offer. As with Wikipedia, that translates to some very high-traffic entries that have been extensively and insightfully annotated. This is especially true for songs that have done well on *Billboard* charts and those with a great deal of radio play. There are, however, texts that have not been annotated at all, such as the entry for Zebra Katz's "Tear The House Up," and others not on the site at all. (There are no entries for New Orleans bounce artist Katey Red, for example.) The site encourages annotators to share not only information and their own exegeses of lyrics, but also humorous commentary. Some annotations are actually just memes that have either been generated from the song's music video (see especially the entry for Drake's "Hotline Bling") or simply offer funny responses to the texts.

On the other hand, part of the cultural cachet of the site is that it has engaged some artists in explicating their own work. In 2012 Genius began offering annotations attributed to artists through what they call verified accounts. Rappers such as Nas, Eminem, Kendrick Lamar, and RZA have all used verified artists accounts to comment on their music. Artists often share interpretations of songs as well as stories about collaborative creative processes and inspirations behind their work, adding a deeper level of analysis to the song's entry.

For teachers interested in using the site as a pedagogical tool to extend learning beyond the classroom, especially at the high school or college level, there is Education Genius, which works across all of Genius's channels. Educators can register for verified educator accounts (like verified artists accounts) and create class pages. There, they can upload texts from other parts of the site without annotations, or even upload new texts to allow their students to annotate the texts themselves. Teachers moderate posts by accepting (or rejecting) student annotations, making suggestions and offering feedback through private or public means, and even upvoting annotations, thus giving students additional IQ points, which could potentially increase their engagement in the assignment as well as improve their standing on the site beyond the class page. Educators can design course assignments that allow students to not only engage in close reading of texts, but also with each other's ideas about those texts, all the while promoting digital literacy. Although class pages can be private, providing access only to those participating in the course, Genius encourages educators to help students connect with the larger global digital community of annotators and share their ideas widely. Additionally, Genius favors open pedagogy and urges teachers to share sample assignments and lesson plans. There are resource guides for students and educators available on the site; these texts may be annotated as well.

As a music scholar, however, I find the website's focus on word texts disadvantageous. Rap lyrics are poetic, but rap songs are not just poetry; they are musical texts. Although the lyrical focus stems from Genius's origins as a site for fans to discuss the meanings of words, musical characteristics also impart meaning. While the site was still Rap Genius, developers added an extension called Producer Genius to shine light on the work that producers and DJs do mostly behind the scenes. As a result, some producers are now verified artists and comment on their own work,

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such as producer A-Trak's notes on collaborating with Kanye West on his single "Stronger," which uses a sample from a track by Daft Punk. These annotations are generally fewer than those on the lyrics, however, especially for tracks that are not sample-based. Listeners must still largely do the legwork of identifying and analyzing musical characteristics and how they relate to the texts on their own.

Ultimately, Genius.com, like other crowd-sourced sites such as Wikipedia, is only as insightful as the people who contribute to it. And like other sites, the information and interpretations it provides can reflect the biases of its users. That raises concerns about what kinds of knowledge can or should be generated by anonymous users. Because place, for example, often plays an important role in hip hop, some texts mention specific locations or employ regional slang that is designed not only to represent where the performer is from but also speak to other members of her or his community. Beyoncé's controversial single "Formation" is one such song, as it features several references to black experiences in New Orleans specifically and the American South more generally. Genius annotators have dug into possible meanings behind phrases found in the song, such as "albino alligator" (perhaps "a sign of flyness" or "a veiled jab at white/racist haters") and "I got hot sauce in my bag, swag" ("a must have for a southerner in need of spice at any given time"), but judging by the pictures and profiles the contributors used, most of them are neither black nor from the southern region of the United States. Although these readings are legitimate and, as far as this white Midwesterner can tell, mostly accurate, they beg the question: how did these contributors come to understand the place-specific texts and extend that understanding to other users? Genius.com provides a diverse audience access to certain kinds of knowledge that might otherwise be reserved to particular communities or social groups. At best, that access can extend understandings of marginalized experiences to listeners from across the globe. We must, however, remain cognizant of who might be ascribing meaning to the words of others as we search online for meaning ourselves.

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Lukas Foss. *Lukas Foss: Complete Symphonies*. The Boston Modern Orchestra Project; Gil Rose, Conductor. BMOP/sound 1043, 2015, 2 CDs.

Classifying the musical style of Lukas Foss (1922–2009) is no easy task. Known as a neoclassicist in his youth, Foss seemingly shifted gears to become one of America's most forward-looking composers in the 1950s and 1960s. Copland–influenced compositions such as *The Prairie* (1944) gave way to "experimental" works such as *Time Cycle* (1959–60), which includes improvised interludes, and *Echoi* (1961–63), which uses free serialism and allows the performers to skip back and forth

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