COLDPLAY
A TALE OF TWO BANDS: ALTERNATIVE ROCK AND ITS FUTURE

Chris Acosta · Jungjoon Choi · Jason Lihuang · Edgar Perches · Ekin Ugurel
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What do the children of today associate Coldplay with? Are they a mainly pop-techno band with elements of EDM? What’s the matter with their Wikipedia page labeling them as “alternative rock”? Well, as most who grew up with their first four albums know, Coldplay’s current musical style and instrumentation gradually evolved into something unrecognizable by their older fanbase. Beginning with the release of Mylo Xyloto (2011), the band has gotten progressively experimental with electronic instrumentation as well as with their collaborations with DJs and pop singers. Whether or not this has been a pleasant change is up to Coldplay’s fanbase to decide, but even that is immeasurable as their audience has become a techno-rock hybrid crowd. Aside all else, to figure out where we’re going, let’s talk about where we came from …

The explosion of punk-rock scenes across the UK and US in the 1970s resulted in the creation of many punk-rock networks, including independent record labels which created an alternative outlet for inspirers and creators that did not mesh with the agendas of major record labels. A couple of decades later, the popularity of punk-rock lead to the development of “grunge” music based in the Pacific NW, USA. Release of albums like Nirvana’s Nevermind (1991) and Pearl Jam’s Ten pushed grunge to the top of the charts, both in the UK and US. In contrast, only a few British alternative bands, most notably Radiohead and Bush, were able to make any sort of impression back in the States. As a retaliation, a medley of energetic British rock bands emerged in the mid-90s to battle American bands on the charts. Dubbed “Britpop” by the media, this movement represented by Oasis, Blur, Suede, and Pulp was the British equivalent of the grunge explosion, for not only did it propel alt rock to the top of the charts in its respective country, it centered it on a revitalization of British youth culture celebrated as “Cool Britannia.”

However, the spark created by Britpop and other British alternative rock bands did not last long. By the end of the 90s, Oasis’ third album Be Here Now received lackluster reviews and Radiohead’s OK Computer was an initially-unwelcome change that directed them away from live performances and focus more on experimentalism (Tzvetkova 17). Hence, a hole was left in England, one that needed to be filled with a new generation of rock. That’s where the roots of post-Britpop alternative rock laid.

With their debut album, Parachutes (2000), Coldplay laid the groundwork for what would later become their defining aesthetic, an emotional small band making big albums. As described by the Rolling Stone: “On songs like the unrepentantly romantic “Yellow,” the band creates a hypnotic slo-mo otherworld where spirit rules supreme.” (Diehl). Two years later, the release of A Rush of Blood to the Head (2002) made Coldplay a household name, both in the UK and the US. Unlike their first album, the band rocked, rolled, edged, and let the nerves out, while also incorporating the piano in most of their songs. The associated lyrics were not dry either, instead showing heavy elements of progressive rock, dealing with issues like punctuality vs. “Carpe Diem” (on “Clocks”) and world peace (on “Politik”).
**top:** frontman Chris Martin performs in Cardiff, Wales during their 2000 Parachutes tour

**left:** an iconic early ‘90s grunge rock album from the U.S. Pacific Northwest
The critical response to their third album, X&Y (2005), was not quite as warm as their first two. By the time people started listening to their mid 2000s songs, ’Coldplay-ish’ had become an adjective for something along the lines of “sad love ballads accompanied by piano”. There was not enough energy or momentum. Though the album was a smashing commercial success, critics were more ambivalent about X&Y. An article from a series discussing top albums deems it as Coldplay’s “first very bad album” (Saraiya). A contemporary Rolling Stones review was less caustic, though it still declared that the album was “a bit of a letdown” and that “a surprising number of songs here just never take flight” (Sanneh). Coldplay itself stated that the album was not their best, saying that it “lacked clarity” (Boucher).

Nevertheless, as a product of the anticipation generated from people’s adoration of A Rush of Blood to the Head, X&Y quickly sped to the top spot on the Billboard 200. In fact, the first single “Speed of Sound” made Coldplay the first British band since The Beatles to reach the top 10 in the U.S., and the album overall topped the charts in 22 countries (Larkin, Healy).

The most recognizable song, “Fix You”, is a clear progression from earlier hits such as “Yellow”, “The Scientist”, or “Clocks”. It starts as an organ-driven ballad featuring a high-pitched, falsetto-tastic version of Chris Martin’s vocals (Shannel). The piano playing makes a comeback, though traditional rock instrumental do not make appearances until much later in the song (Coldplay).

Though some of the tracks showed signs that the band was dabbling in different music genres, the overall essence was still very Coldplay. They retained their ultra-chill ambiance tinged with sorrow. The bigger transitions come with the next album.

After another three years, the band took a more ambitious turn with Viva la Vida (2008). At this point, Coldplay’s sound became distinctly less rock-based and more experimental as the band sought new sources of inspiration (Boucher). “Strawberry Swing,” one of the more recognizable tracks from the album, sounds less like a soft-rock piece and more of an atmospheric psychedelic, ethnic-influenced sound (Dombal). Coldplay’s aura has always been atmospheric, but “Strawberry Swing” takes it to a new level, as its “plinking melody,” light tribal drums and circular guitars envelope the listener in a blanket of serenity (Dombal, Hermes). The title track, “Viva la Vida”, is uncharacteristically “strung out” by prominent violin tracks (Dombal), and features other unusual elements such as church bells (Coldplay).

The album marks the first out of two collaborations with producer Brian Eno; he accomplished the same feature with U2 by “keeping the formula fresh” (Jones). If X&Y was proof of Coldplay’s wide appeal, Viva la Vida presents a new level of success. It was the best selling album of 2008, spawned the band’s first number one charting song in the U.S. and U.K., and won them three more Grammys (2009 Grammy). If anyone had not already heard of Coldplay before, they certainly had now.

It’s worth noting that the EP that was released along with Viva la Viva featured the first of what will be a series of many previously unthought-of collaborations. “Lost+” featured long-time friend Jay-Z in a move that Coldplay explained would “keep everything fresh,” though frontman Chris Martin first worked with the rapper in 2006 and also was featured in Kanye West’s “Homecoming” a year later (Goodman, Dharmic).

It was another three-year wait for Mylo Xyloto, which came into the scene 2011. This album was a marked departure from Coldplay’s rock-based roots, as its lead single “Paradise” featured heavy electronic background music. The entire concept album was a blend of “club beats and jittery synth” (Mapes). Coldplay’s collaborations further branched out into the mainstream as well, with “Princess of China” – a song so electronic it’s hard to believe it came from the same people who conceived “Yellow” – featuring pop princess Rihanna. Ghost Stories (2014), a highly experimental album, brought more pop-influenced sound in the Avicii-produced hit “Sky Full of Stars” (Bein). A Head Full of Dreams (2015) continued the solidification of new Coldplay, as it featured collaborations with pop idols Beyoncé and Tove Lo in addition to more production by Swedish DJ Avicii (Coldplay, A Head Full of Dreams). That brings us to Coldplay’s most recent hit, “Something Just Like This”, a dance track collaboration with electronic music production and DJ duo The Chainsmokers.

Although Coldplay does not identify itself to exclusively be a rock band, the lineage of their music style can be viewed as a representation of rock’s decline in the industry. The band declared recently with the release of their latest album that “Rock music has nowhere left to go” (McCormick). As the tides in the music world change, Coldplay’s music evolves with them.
top left: Chris Martin and longtime friend Jay-Z perform together. Jay-Z was the first of Coldplay’s collaborations indicating their drift away from alt-rock.

top right: Brian Eno, the producer for Viva la Vida and Mylo Xyloto. He is an experienced musician and producer in the rock world.

bottom left: Rihanna in Coldplay’s “Princess of China” music video.

bottom right: Chris Martin in the “Fix You” video, singing the band’s signature encouraging lyrics.
TOP CHARTS

have always been a quick way to judge popular music. This is because they rank albums and EPs based on how much they sold. They work as a reliable source of popularity simply because most of them do this without using any sort of bias, focusing on sales number alone. Billboard 200 is a current example of this and its story dates all the way back to 1945 when it was first created. Today, Billboard 200 uses a more sophisticated way of looking at sales statistics, an information and sales tracking system called Nielsen Soundscan which is able to look at more than 39000 artists as of 2018 (“Music Sales Measurement”). In a 1992 New York Times article about pop music, David Smith, the marketing chief for DGC and Geffen makes it clear Nielsen Soundscan is credited as one of the main reasons for the rise-to-fame of the grunge band Nirvana, as it showed real data no one was aware of, leading stations to change what they played to the public. According to Mr. Smith: “At first Nevermind (1991) was receiving airplay on only a few radio stations, but Soundscan data revealed that, in some markets, the record was selling four times as many copies as Metallica, a best-selling heavy-metal group. We used that information to get Nirvana’s record played on radio stations that were playing Metallica” (Woletz).

Billboard 200 makes it clear who dominates current popular music. This music has changed over time. In fact, while alternative rock music can still be found in the charts with artists like Imagine Dragons, it is much less common with the explosion of rap, pop, and hip hop artists such as Drake, Ed Sheeran, and The Weeknd. This was not always the case. As little as ten years ago, rock music had a prominent spot in these charts. Along with the aforementioned success of Coldplay’s Viva La Vida, The Killers’ Hot Fuss reached #7 (2004) and 30 Seconds to Mars’ This is War reached #19 (2009), all of which are classified as alternative rock albums from household alternative rock bands. Today, while these bands’ albums still reach top charts, but they can be hardly be classified as alternative rock anymore. The Killers’ Wonderful Wonderful (2017), Coldplay’s A Head Full of Dreams (2015) and 30 Second to Mars America (2018) all have much greater electronic and pop influences compared to their earlier work and are officially classified as pop and electronic by iTunes and Spotify. Even when pure alt rock albums appear in the charts, such as U2’s Songs of Experience (2017), they do not sell as well as previous alternative rock albums such as No Line in the Horizon (2009), with 200,000 units in difference (Sexton). According to Christine Pawlak, a DJ for Q101 Chicago, radio stations such as WYSP in Philadelphia, WYSP, and WVRX have all shifted from rock music to talk radio formats. New York’s K-Rock, Indie 103.1 and WBCN have even gone silent. According to the same source, this is mostly attributed by conglomeration
efforts coupled with advertisers seeking more Top 40/Top 100 stations for sales (Pawlak). Jim Farver from NY Daily News argues how MTV’s VMA Awards no longer incorporate rock artists. He states: “In the ’90s, the prizes vacillated, from rock (Pearl Jam’s "Jeremy") to R&B (TLC’s "Waterfalls") to dance (Madonna’s "Ray of Light") to hip-hop ("Doo-Wop" By Lauryn Hill). The last decade saw many African-American top winners, including Missy Elliott, OutKast, Rihanna and Beyonce.” There thus seems to be a clear decline in alternative rock popularity in general, which is transitioning into the current hip-hop, rap and pop music we see today constantly played on the radio.

That being said, the notion that alternative rock is dying is a pessimistic viewpoint that requires further explanation. It should be mentioned that like every social matter, no one knows the exact reason for the shift in the music industry, but some critics do offer their insights into the matter. Some blame the new style of alt-rock for taking the path of assimilation into instead of alienating itself out of the norms of the mainstream (Hyden 25), while some blame the sheer boredom of the current alt-rock music (Lipez 13), with its message becoming too casual, too lenient to capture the millennials that drive the music industry nowadays. Still others believe the days of group alt-rock bands are bygones and that this is the new era of solo artists and of unshared spotlights such as St. Vincent or Father John Misty (Sackllah 11). Whatever the case may be, the one of critical factors in the transition away from alt-rock could be that alt-rock is not selling like it used to in 2000’s. Money talks, and it’s what the industry listens to at the end of the day.

In 2012, just before Christmas, Eric Harvey, US music writer, compiled the sales figures for the top 50 albums in Pitchfork’s end-of-year poll. Of the 5 that had sold more than 100,000 albums, only two (Bon Iver and Fleet Foxes) were indie artists. Pitchfork’s poll, of course, cannot serve as the authoritative source of economic success of an album. Especially, with many internet music platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, and SoundCloud, sales figure aren’t the only measures of success. However, with that said, the current climate has become unforgivable to crossover alternative rock music with many of the surviving bands being decades old, selling albums to old loyalists than to new fans (Lynskey 7).

Coldplay’s transition into electronic music is unsurprising. Modern electronic music is made by altering and synthesizing. It is a genre that any alt-rock band, including Coldplay, is bound to explore even without the economic factor. Moreover, it is an economically safe transition. EDM is an explored territory that has exploded in popularity over the last 4-5 years. It is popular and, therefore, money-making. According to IMS (International Music Summit) Business Report, the global EDM industry is worth a staggering $7.4 billion. There is a great economic incentives for all bands to include elements of, if not make, EDM for their music from an economic point of view. When economic push came in the alt-rock industry, it was only natural to migrate to the pulling EDM market.
What is your background with Coldplay?
I’ve been a huge fan of them for the past several years now, I think starting in early middle school. I loved seeing them grow and evolve as the years went by, and got to attend a Coldplay concert while they were touring for their A Head Full Of Dreams album.

How did you first hear about them? How did you become familiar with them?
Before I really got into them, I heard a couple of their songs on the radio, which at most generated lukewarm interest and basic name-recognition of the band. I became more familiar with them as I looked into their Vevo channel on YouTube.

What is your favorite thing about Coldplay’s style? What drew you to them?
Their music has this gentleness and unpretentiousness to it; everything is so sincere and has this grounded, “softening” effect on you when you listen to it. Even their more melancholic songs have no twinge of bitterness or acidity to them, yet they still convey that raw emotion so well. I’m pretty sure I actually cried when I first heard their songs The Scientist and Fix You when looking into their music for the first time. Their melodies are really impressive and unique, and the lyricism of their music is beautiful too.

Favorite songs? Album(s)?
Yellow, Fix You, and The Scientist were the first songs I heard from them, and I still rank them pretty highly among my favorite Coldplay songs. It’s really hard to narrow down my favorites or even my favorite albums... I love Parachutes, but I also really love their Ghost Stories album. They were super experimental with this album, and it was starkly different from the others. It was so melancholic and had this somber, spiritual, contemplative resonance that rang through.
How do you think Coldplay has changed?
They started out as pure alternative rock, specifically “limestone rock” as Chris Martin liked to call it. It’s an interesting term, but it definitely described them; soft, non-abrasive, yet still substantial. After the first three albums, they started to transition into a more “pop rock” band, with lots of synth and EDM motifs. The “mood” of their albums always fluctuated; the first few albums took a more gentle yet serious sound, but with the genesis of the Mylo Xyloto era, they were suddenly upbeat, catchy, carefree, and optimistic. This took a 180 degree turn with their Ghost Stories album (created during Chris Martin’s divorce from Gwyneth Paltrow), where each song was saturated with a somber, melancholic, and contemplative vibe. With the release of A Head Full Of Dreams, though, they renewed a sense of optimism and even incorporated a lot of disco elements. Their entire music career embodied unceasing experimentation, something they never shied away from.

Do you agree with their change? Are you a fan of Coldplay now, not anymore, or are you a new fan of them?
Honestly, the first time Coldplay really started to branch out of their familiar rock style for a more contemporary pop sound, I was a pretty staunch opposer. I felt that their newer music, which was definitely more upbeat and easily-digestible for mainstream reception, did not have the same resonance or craftsmanship as the songs constituting Parachutes or A Rush Of Blood To The Head. I’m not sure why I was so obstinate in the midst of this transition; I guess I felt that the pop transition was a cheap undercut to the sound that had made me like Coldplay so much in the first place. Admittedly, this mentality was kind of silly now that I look back at it. Yeah, most of the instrumentation has changed, and they’ve progressed to embedding more pop elements and EDM elements, which saturates a lot of popular music these days. But they still have the same emotion and unpretentiousness that set them apart from others from day one; they’ve always excelled in the experimentation of complex and unique melodies, which is starkly evident in their rock albums, and their newer albums are no exception. The musical transition was necessary because they’ve always embraced malleability in their art, as I feel any artist should. It also allowed them to stay relevant in the rapidly-evolving music industry, which isn’t an easy feat. After abandoning the notion that Coldplay “belonged” to a small, specific niche and style, I felt that I could properly appreciate everything they were doing right.

What do you have to say about the considerable criticism that Coldplay has garnered since its inception?
Honestly, it was a bit difficult to read a couple of those sentiments. I agree that a lot of their later music didn’t carry the same magnitude as their earlier music, and because much of their earlier music was so great, it can be easy to perceive them as going “downhill” from there. Some reviews seemed a bit unnecessarily harsh, though; I think Coldplay has done well for themselves, and has competently satisfied their fanbase for years.

Are you a fan of rock in general? What other rock do you listen to?
I’m not extremely versed in the genre, but I do like rock music in general. I love other post-90’s rock bands like Radiohead and Green Day, and I like to listen to alternative metal bands like Korn.

How do you think the influence of rock in the music world has changed in the past 20 to 30 years?
In the wake of pop, rap music, and electronic music, its mainstream influence probably hasn’t been as prominent as it was 30 years ago, where it was practically the genre of music that people listened to. Not to say that it doesn’t have prominent mainstream influence, though; pop radio stations still religiously play Imagine Dragons, and it’s not uncommon to see rock musicians collaborating with hip-hop and EDM artists (like U2’s collaboration with Kendrick Lamar and Coldplay’s collaboration with The Chainsmokers). Even though rock as a genre shares a smaller sector on the charts as it competes with other genres, in my opinion it’s still going strong, especially among the more indie niches of the music world.

“Their entire music career embodied unceasing experimentation, something they never shied away from.”
Whether it be Coldplay’s waning presence in the alternative rock world or the increasing dominance of the rap/hip-hop atmosphere as a whole, the term “popular music” seems to be defined as nothing but a genre that is radically and subjectively ambiguous in nature. The boundaries of what is alternative and what is mainstream remain vague and highly up to the listener’s discretion, for what is “alternate” to one may not be “alternate” for another. Thus, in discussing the future of alternative rock, it is reasonable to say that alternative music, in general, will always be contingent on the boundaries that society places upon the definition of popular music at the current time. Any type of music that is dissonant with its respective popular genre to a degree that is noticeable but still retains some popular characteristics will inevitably be categorized as “alternative”. To demonstrate this, Coldplay, in example, came into relevance at the time when rock music was defined as implementing a heavy emphasis on the guitar and drums. Their music differed from these characteristics of mainstream rock by incorporating the use of a piano to provide a hymn-like sound, yet still keeping a moderately upbeat tempo. Thus, Coldplay didn’t exactly fit the mold of popular rock, but was nonetheless recognizable as some “different” form of rock, hence alternative.

Now, a particular band’s motive behind crossing into the mainstream by incorporating similar musical techniques as the popular genre brings alternative music as a whole into another light. Coldplay’s transition into a more electronically popularized atmosphere has made some think they are “selling out” and succumbing to the commercialization of mainstream pop and losing their foundational authenticity. Others may think that all bands, including Coldplay, simply deserve the right to explore and diversify their sound and in no way does this change their overall identity. Whatever their motive, it should be noted that a purely alternative band cannot reach the top of the charts without simultaneously being a pop band to a certain measure. This is simply because purely alternative bands are not defined to achieve this: they are an alternate to the popular, not the popular itself. In order to broaden their audience, in order to achieve widespread success across the masses, Coldplay must incorporate sounds that share similarities to what is in popular music at the time, and it is evident they have done this.

All in all, the conflation of alternative rock and popular music might be inevitable, but whether it is detrimental to any genre is simply a question for the listener themself. Perhaps Coldplay is enticed by the economical riches of reaching the top of the charts brought about by pop music, or perhaps they are just experimenting with different sounds, we simply don’t know. One thing is for certain however: alternative rock will continue to expand the limitations of rock music, and we believe all music lovers can agree upon this.
CONCLUSIONS & THE FUTURE