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Bon Iver: A Hidden Power

Time stood still the first time I immersed myself in Bon Iver's music. I vividly remember laying in bed in the middle of the day listening to the self titled album, *Bon Iver*. As soon as the drum sequence started in "Perth," I jolted upright - almost as though I was possessed. Possessed by the haunting and magical force of music that Bon Iver is to me.

Bon Iver, the revolutionary band spearheaded by singer-songwriter Justin Vernon in 2006, is truly one of its kind. Bon Iver's music skillfully combines traditional folk and indie rock elements with a unique electronic and experimental sound to create something brand new. I have never been able to pinpoint the emotions Bon Iver makes me feel as the music seems to morph to enhance my current emotional and mental state, eventually leading me to a state of peace and deep introspection. Many songs also incorporate harshly intense and borderline unpleasant sounds, which have the unique power to capture and describe my mental state in ways that words often can't. From the acoustic and folk nature of *For Emma*, *Forever Ago* and *Bon Iver*, to the heavy synths and electronic nature of *22, A Million* and *i,i*, their discography is truly versatile.

While categorized as an indie-folk band largely based on their earlier two projects, *For Emma*, *Forever Ago* and *Bon Iver*, Bon Iver's music has truly matured into a genre of its own with the addition of *22, A Million* and *i,i*. The synergy between electronic experimentation and heavy production with the traditional singer-songwriter poetry lends to an emotional depth far

greater than the sum of its parts. I used to despise autotune and over-production, particularly in the context of modern rap, but the way Bon Iver is able to manipulate human voices and use them as instruments only enhances the vocals through the distortion - something that seems so counterintuitive but works incredibly well. Icelandic musician Bjork once said, "I find it so amazing when people tell me that electronic music has no soul. You can't blame the computer. If there's no soul in the music, it's because nobody put it there." Bon Iver's heavy instrumentalization combined with a sort of jagged electronica has allowed them to capture the most vulnerable and honest state of the human soul and carved the path for the indie folktronica sound I've grown so fond of.

Bon Iver's music pulls from the likes of jazz legends such as Chet Baker, the haunting melodies of Radiohead, the deep psychedelia of Pink Floyd, and even contemporary rap figures like Kanye West speaking to how they are constantly breaking and pushing musical stereotypes and boundaries. The versatility and range of Bon Iver's discography makes it nearly impossible to classify them under any particular genre and therefore difficult to compare them to other artists within any pre-defined category. Given that the current landscape of the music industry is highly subcategorized and formulaic, Bon Iver's unconventional sound hasn't seemed to find its place within it. Even though they are one of today's most popular bands with a fan base of over 18 million listeners on Spotify alone and three Grammy Awards, Bon Iver's songs have yet to make it onto mainstream charts, a common metric of success within the industry.

I believe this categorization of Bon Iver as an indie-folk band (based on a simple Google search) is largely due to the phenomenon of artists' work being popularized by Tik Tok and social media trends well after its initial release. TikTok tends to trivialize deep works of music by showing people a limited view of an artist's work and who they are through short clips of a select

few songs popularized by unpredictable trends. This lends to the idea that once an artist publishes their body of work and shares it with the world, it is no longer theirs. They have no control over the audience of their work or how it will be interpreted and perceived. While many upcoming artists prioritize understanding and capitalizing on how social media can boost their image and popularity, artists with limited social media presence such as Bon Iver, seem to just ride the wave of unpredictable trends and industry shifts. Rather than focusing on creating marketable music, Bon Iver creates for the sake of the art and self expression and doesn't try to cater his work to any particular audience. Such genuine art feels rare in this new digital age and should be given more respect.

Beyond making a mark in the alternative and indie sectors, Bon Iver's influence constantly seeps into unexpected realms including hip hop and rap. Kanye West, who is largely acknowledged as one of the most influential hip hop artists, once said Bon Iver is who he admires most in music. I have always found the way in which these artists influence each other's music to be fascinating and a testament to the fact that music has no borders. However, Bon Iver's influence on the current musical landscape is largely unnoticed by mainstream charts. Bon Iver's music is also largely influencing the next generation of experimental and folk artists such as Sid Sriram and Phoebe Bridgers, who are unafraid to take risks in their artistic journeys.

Overall, Bon Iver's presence in the music industry seems to mirror the actual nature of their music - seemingly unassuming, but innately powerful and life changing to those who tap into it. Their direct and indirect influence on the music industry and future artists exceeds any mere chart rankings or radio presence and their ability to convey emotional depth and through unconventional and genre defying means speaks to the fundamental artistry and innovation they represent.