

NoiseFloor slides

Slide 1: Many thanks for your introduction. I am delighted to be presenting today with my project partner representative and Label Content Manager, Joe Gilling from Loopmasters as it's a rare opportunity to share the journey of a research project with a collaborator here in-person.

This paper discusses an on-going project focused on the representation of diversity within sample-packs specifically those which contain non-Western instrument sound.

Slide 2: Sample packs are commercial products and are collections of sounds specially designed for end-users to use as building blocks in their music productions. Sample packs are typically divided into loops and one-shots. Loops can be melodies, rhythms, drones, or beats which are created to seamlessly loop if placed in a repetitive sequence within a DAW. One-shots are single gestures, such as a note, chord, percussive hit, beat, vocal stab or sound effect.

As a part of the music industry, the stakeholders around sample packs consist of: producers who make or construct the packs, musicians who provide who generate sound, distributors who sell sample packs on online platforms and end-users who are the consumer of these products. This stakeholder group sits within a larger music industry network which also connect and distribute and promote music made with samples.

Slide 3: Through an AHRC-funded fellowship in 2021, I began a project looking into the approaches to handling and representing non-Western instrument content in sample packs motivated by an ambition to make my own sample pack and an awareness of sample providers and their commercial stock.

The research project focused on surveys of titles, descriptions, labelling, tagging, and visual artwork attached to existing sample packs and how these visual extras are all used to represent the sonic content as marketing devices for selling sound.

The project's trajectory has continued since this work and has resulted in policy updates and good practice guidelines.

Slide 4: Before jumping into the details of the policy change, I want to spend some time on some of the project's key concepts, many of which have been illuminated by the discourse initiated in the research.

Selling non-physical digital products:

The first point is that sample packs or any **sound for sale doesn't have a physical presence.**

Sound, as an entirely aurally consumed product requires a helping hand from visuals, titles, labels and categories for end-user comprehension and for encouraging commercial consumption. These extra components operate together within a "signifying practice", forging a representation of the sound in much the same way that book covers, album art, video game iconography and downloadable app thumbnails represent interior content, on behalf of the actual content. The intention of packaging samples is to "connect graphic elements closely with specific musical content" (Ashby 2003, 21) and can have significant business consequences, such as determining a product's success (Moore, 2004). New unions are forged when sound and image meet during the assigning of sample pack visual art, solidifying associations, links and depictions.

With this in mind, it has been important to see the typical ways in which non-Western instrument content appears and what terms and visuals they are paired with.

Our findings indicated high instances of misrepresentation in these categories. For example, misrepresentation is exemplified within sample pack artwork via the continued use of visual clichés, stereotypes and "markers of the exotic" (Whitmore 2016, 344). These include Hindu gods, Buddha sculptures, eroticised and scantily dressed belly dancers, totem poles, carved masks and geishas waving fans. These symbols "speak volumes and require little explanation" (Moore, 2004) and are so readily drawn upon for representing non-Western instrument sounds to establish a visual shorthand for difference and 'othered' content. Reductive imagery of this kind limits the end-user's understanding of these cultures and sounds.

Distribution platforms: The second point is about **distribution platforms which operate as the gateway to accessing non-Western instruments sound.**

Distributors host plentiful amounts of non-Western instrument content on their sites, many of which are created by external or affiliated producers. The opportunities for misrepresentation, inaccuracies, inauthentic submissions are

many and part of the collaboration has been about considering the ways to reach all members of this community to encourage better practice regarding content and representation of diversity.

In the wake of Black Lives Matter, which continues to highlight the need for open dialogue on addressing inequalities, biases and racism, there is a sense that sample packs, as a pocket of the music industry, have operated for too long without questions asked of its responsibilities and duties around the representation of diversity. While other areas of the music industry such as concert programming, live music and workforce diversity have outwardly expressed statements, self-reflections and pledges to dismantle structural racism in the industry (along with dedicated movements and campaigns to support inclusive participation) sample pack production and distribution have somehow dodged this same reckoning. The sample pack industry is not specifically challenged by the need to diversify its product lines as one might observe in the beauty brand industry; in contrast, the challenge is problematised by the frequent misrepresentations of diverse voices, content and contributions on digital platforms via the inaccurate depictions on the wrappers or digital fronts distributors place upon them.

Themed packs: The third key concept to introduce is the way that sample packs are **themed products**. You might get a sample pack focused entirely on tabla rhythms or lo-fi soul for example. The sample pack industry has witnessed surges in popularised musical styles or fusions that quickly catch on as themes. In the case of psytrance or tribal house sample packs these themes have proved problematic in different ways. For example, psytrance packs appear inseparable from the visual images of Hindu gods.

While the use of Hindu iconography in psytrance culture may be seen as an attempt to reflect the genre's emphasis on spiritual and transformative musical experiences, it is important to note that this use of imagery has no meaningful connection to the religion itself. This adoption can be seen more so as an example of cultural appropriation, which involves taking elements from another culture without showing respect for their original context or meaning – disconnecting the imagery from the cultural traditions from which it originated and using it solely for aesthetic purposes without acknowledgement of its significance.

This commodification, where cultural symbols are transformed into marketable products has been historically used across the music industry amongst others.

For example, the genre tribal house emerged in the 1990s, used to describe house music incorporating complex and layered percussion instruments. The term tribal has since been used to describe music that incorporates any combination of African, Latin, and other non-Western musical elements, but it overlooks the fact that these cultures are diverse and distinct and cannot be reduced to a single monolithic category. Tribal house does not often involve meaningful engagement with the communities from which they are drawn, bringing significant criticism of the term today as being used as a stereotypical generalisation for commercial purposes.

Taking elements from different cultures and genres and combining them to create something new is one of the main exciting reasons why musicians utilise content from sample packs and can be a really positive force for cross-cultural exchange, however, it must be done with the care and respect for the diverse and complex heritages involved to avoid reinforcing the stereotype that all spiritual and mystical musical experiences, or the use of non-Western instrument content is somehow linked to Eastern religions or cultures.

As Borgeson and Schroder explain, “The harm of such imagery is that “marketing representations have the power to make us believe that we know something of which we have no experience and to influence the experiences we have in the future.” Further, the critical damage of this reductive imagery is not the offence caused in the moment, but the impact these misrepresentations have on the semiotically and ontologically associated groups and individuals and their opportunities for the future.”

Anonymised samples:

The last point on this slide is anonymised samples. This refers to the life cycle of the samples within the sample pack. If we think of this tail end of the cycle where sounds are consumed, used and mixed within music productions, samples requires no crediting, acknowledgement or reference to their origin. This upfront condition, written in the terms of use, removes the headache for the end-user regarding sample clearance, payments of royalties and importantly mitigates future lawsuits for copyright infringement. In a system that enables the anonymisation of samples use post-purchase, the reluctance to properly credit musicians, label sounds with care and accuracy and attend to claims of authenticity might well be deprioritised or deemed irrelevant. This is worth airing to present the reality of a sample’s lifecycle and ultimate destiny, and while void of identity, it still deserves to start its journey in an accurately represented form.

Slide 5:

The project made use of a mixed method approach involving the exploration of sample pack history via two surveys of content. First, a survey on sample library CDs (the pre-cursor to sample packs) and a survey on current sample pack provision featuring non-Western instrument sound.

Interestingly the history exploration revealed a wonderful timeline of different technologies starting from LP sound effects provision, sampler-specific sound libraries, floppy disc libraries and then CD/CDrom libraries. Many conventions witnessed in sample packs can be traced back to conventions begun in these earlier forms, but this is probably content for a separate paper! What this process confirmed was the product evolution, along with the legacy, pointed to some highly questionable practices.

Stage 2 of the methodology involved the creation of a new sample pack containing Indian musical instrument samples, drawing upon my on-going interactions with Milap and their associated artists who co-created the pack with me.

Slide 6:

This slide summarises stage 2 which converted a sound archive of over 5 hours of music into a 300 sound sample pack which is now commercially available on Loopmasters. The co-creation of the pack sought out equitable and mutually beneficial ways of working together, operating as a working group in lockdown to slowly sift and select audio to take forward. Importantly the musicians had the lead on this and the final say on what went into the pack.

Slide 7:

The methodology revealed that its rare to have musicians credited on non-Western instrument sample packs. There were frequent instance of misrepresentation of instruments names and inaccurate tags to enable searches.

These packs are within distribution systems that use the term 'world music' as a top level search function. This is along with other words such as 'tribal', 'exotica' 'oriental' and 'ethnic' which run deep, existing as accepted and popular musical styles and genres. The term 'World music' has been branded by many as 'flawed', 'controversial' 'toxic', 'racist', 'bad culture' and 'offensive'.

Artwork relevance was another significant issue in the findings which I have discussed earlier.

I'll hand over to Joe who will talk about Loopmasters Content Branding Policy

Slide 8: JOE

Thanks, Manuella. This month, Loopmasters celebrates its 20th anniversary. From humble beginnings, a small family-led business on the South coast, to now being a part of the international Beatport Group of companies, a lot has changed not only in how the business operates but how music producers and consumers interact with sample pack content. We know customers are today a lot more conscious about where they place their money and know that the sample pack world needs more transparency as to where content is sourced to deepen the connection between producer, distributor, and the end-user. At Loopmasters, we've taken this time to look back and also plan for the future on how we can continue to be the most inspiring and diverse place to find samples.

We recently launched new content branding and product optimisation policies which cover areas ranging from the way artwork and titles represent sound content to promoting transparency as to where diverse sample pack content comes from, to technical specifications and formatting structures to allow these sounds to be found and utilised. These policies are in addition to the best-practices guidance document Manuella will share shortly. The policies reflect the changing attitudes within the music industry and how it represents and approaches non-Western musical content. They also show the more hands-on approach Loopmasters takes as a distributor, rather than just a gateway to market or a middleman, but more as a collaborative partner who is there to provide advice, expertise, and help curate our partners' catalogues.

We have recently flagged just over 100 sample packs from across the store for review against our new policies and are currently taking decisive action to either permanently remove or reposition content where applicable. Our partners have been understanding, cooperative, and happy to update their product branding where required. We are in constant dialogue with our third-party label partners around these topics and work collaboratively to ensure all future sample pack releases are in line with our updated policies and reflect the enclosed sound content accurately and authentically.

It's important to note that Loopmasters at its core is a marketplace alongside hosting its own in-house produced content, we distribute sample packs from over 90 diverse independent providers. We love the individuality and uniqueness each one of our label partners brings to the platform and always aim to support their personal brand visions alongside offering our guidance to best present and market their sample packs. We have a subsequent product called Loopcloud which is powered by Loopmasters sample content and gives customers access to a growing catalogue of over 4 million samples where they can search by instrument, genre, and key information, amongst other factors.

As highlighted by Manuella, historically non-Western instrument content has either been mis-tagged or been forced to conform to certain genre or instrument categorisations as a by-product of the constraints of the distribution platforms themselves. This has meant that vague generalisations have sometimes been made which don't accurately represent the musicians behind the samples. With the Loopmasters store continually growing to incorporate more of these sounds, we identified a need to change and highlight them. So, we've located over 30 non-Western instrument tags which are now in the process of being added to the platform, primarily in the string/drum/percussion sound families including instruments such as biwas, shamisens, frame drums, and more. We are also currently reviewing our 'world' music sub-genres to more accurately assign regions and locate sample origins, moving away from the previous industry standard as 'world' being a classification for all things non-Western and instead considering sub-categories of countries of origin or continents when content cannot be assigned an electronic music sub-genre. These we feel will make a big difference in customers being able to explore new sounds they may not be familiar with and represent those amazing instruments and the cultures and traditions they reflect.

This process of change is our ongoing commitment and one which will change over time and as we adapt with the ever-evolving music community.

Slide 9: JOE

I'd also like to mention here what the future looks like for Loopmasters as part of The Beatport Group. Over the past 6 months, TBG has worked with external DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) consultants to develop new company purpose, values, and operating principles addressing historical issues of inequity and to guide the continued development of our culture and community.

These are aptly named (D.A.N.C.E):

- (we) **Demand diversity** – we reflect the communities we serve and aim for a balanced representation of genders, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds in our workforce, partnerships, and community.
- (we are) **Accountable to our communities** – we stand united with historically marginalised communities and remain accountable to supporting efforts to improve diversity, equality, inclusion, and mental health.
- (we) **Nurture our ecosystem** – we hire and partner with those who share our passion for a collaborative process, providing a platform and voice for the creative community making and promoting music of all types.
- (community comes...) **Community first, always** – emphasising acceptance of all musical experiences whilst providing a safe environment for the community.
- (the) **Evolution of our mission** – the natural diversity of our community and infinite evolution of music is the heartbeat of our business – we look to constantly evolve to serve the genres most demanded by customers.

While statements can be powerful, they can be meaningless when they're not backed up by actions which is why TBG has also created some operating principles that promise to help guide all teams across the company. These include setting new industry standards such as our content branding policies at Loopmasters, the commitment we have to our partners and customers to represent all music accurately and with respect, utilising our connections to musicians leading the respective genre scenes and celebrate them whenever we can.

TBG operates a Diversity, Inclusion and Social Action committee that is composed of employees from across the business units with the aim of evaluating public statements, D&I guidelines, and partnership opportunities. At every step we evaluate who we're partnering with to ensure diverse perspectives and succinct operating values, we encourage regular open conversations including at the recent International Music Summit in Ibiza. TBG have also taken on a new Chief Community Officer to manage its efforts in these areas and expand into new communities and markets around the world.

Slide 10: to finish off, I wanted to show you the guidance document which was created to acknowledge the suggestions of the musicians featured in Instruments INDIA. With Loopmasters, we've worked on this and refined this to reach out to the 90+ producers Loopmasters work with. ---- END