ASSISTED OR GENERATED?

Who Really Made the Music in the Age of AI?

By Jon KT

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I've been making music for more than 30 years. During that time, I've watched music technology transform almost every part of the creative process. I've worked with analog recording, tape machines, MIDI, synthesizers, samplers, digital audio workstations, software instruments, digital effects, Auto Tune and streaming.

So when people ask me what I think about artificial intelligence in music, I don't think the answer is simply, "I hate it," or, "AI is the future." It's more complicated than that. Because musicians have always used technology. The real question is not whether we should use technology. The question is where assistance ends and generation begins, and whether we're being honest about the difference.

WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

Every generation of musicians has experienced technology that changed the way music was created.

- The synthesizer didn't eliminate the keyboard player.
- The drum machine didn't eliminate the drummer.
- The sampler didn't eliminate the producer.
- MIDI didn't eliminate musicians.
- Digital recording didn't eliminate the recording engineer.
- And the DAW didn't eliminate the songwriter.

Instead, these technologies changed the tools available to us.

They allowed musicians and producers to experiment faster, create sounds that weren't previously possible and accomplish things that would have required an entire studio full of equipment only a few decades earlier.

I've always embraced new technology because that's part of being a producer. We learn the tools. We experiment. We create.

AI is another technological development. But this time, there is an important difference.

Today's generative AI doesn't simply give us another instrument or a faster way to manipulate something we created. It can actually generate the musical material itself. And that's where the conversation becomes much more complicated.

ASSISTED AI ISN'T THE SAME AS GENERATIVE AI

I believe we need to make a clear distinction between AI assisted music and generative AI music.

AI assistance can be compared with many of the tools musicians have already been using for years.

- AI can help clean up a recording.
- It can separate stems.
- It can assist with an arrangement.
- It can help with mixing or mastering.
- It can help a songwriter brainstorm ideas.

In these situations, the human can remain the primary creative force. The technology is assisting the process.

Generative AI is different. If I enter a prompt and a system generates the melody, harmony, instrumentation, arrangement, vocals and overall production, I haven't simply used AI as a tool to execute my musical ideas. The system has generated a substantial portion of the creative material.

That doesn't necessarily make the music illegitimate. But it does make accurate attribution more important.

SO, WHO WROTE THE SONG?

This is where I believe the music industry needs to have a much bigger conversation. We need to stop treating "making a song" as one single creative activity. A song can contain many different creative roles:

- Lyrics.
- Melody.
- Harmony.
- Composition.
- Arrangement.
- Performance.
- Production.
- Engineering.

Those roles aren't automatically interchangeable.

If I personally write the lyrics to a song but use generative AI to create the musical composition, I can legitimately say I wrote the lyrics. But that doesn't necessarily mean I composed the entire piece of music.

If I write the melody and lyrics and then use AI to help develop an arrangement, that's different.

If I generate an entire song from a prompt and make only minor changes afterward, that's different again.

And if AI generates the lyrics while I select, edit and arrange them, the question of who should receive the songwriting credit becomes even more complicated. This is why I believe claiming roles accurately matters.

THE PRODUCER ISN'T NECESSARILY THE SONGWRITER

This isn't actually a new concept. We've always had different people involved in creating records. A producer can shape the sound of a recording without writing the song. A songwriter can write the song without performing on the recording. A vocalist can perform a song they didn't write. A session musician can contribute an incredible performance without receiving a songwriting credit. An engineer can completely transform the sound of a recording without being the composer.

We already understand that these are different creative contributions. AI doesn't eliminate those distinctions. If anything, AI makes them more important.

TECHNOLOGY DOESN'T DESERVE THE CREDIT, BUT NEITHER SHOULD WE CLAIM WHAT WE DIDN'T CREATE

Here's where I think the conversation sometimes gets lost. I'm not interested in policing how another musician creates music. If someone enjoys using AI, that's their choice. If AI inspires someone to make music who otherwise wouldn't have made anything, that can be a wonderful thing. If AI helps a songwriter overcome writer's block, experiment with an arrangement or explore an idea, I'm not going to tell them they're not a musician.

I've experienced enough technological changes in music to know that innovation isn't going away.

But I do believe in transparency. If I use AI to assist my creative process, I should be comfortable explaining how I used it. If AI generated a significant portion of the music, I shouldn't present the work as though I personally played, composed or produced every element. That's not an anti AI position. That's simply creative honesty.

A PROMPT ISN'T AUTOMATICALLY THE SAME AS WRITING A SONG

This may be one of the most controversial parts of the conversation. Someone can enter a detailed prompt into a generative music system and receive a finished song.

- They selected the concept.

- They may have selected the genre.
- They may have refined the prompt.
- They may have generated dozens of versions before finding one they liked.
- They may have edited the result afterward.
- There is certainly human involvement.

But we need to be careful about automatically equating directing a generative system with traditional songwriting or musicianship. Telling a system what you want isn't necessarily the same thing as personally writing the melody, lyrics, chord progression, instrumentation and arrangement. That doesn't mean the person did nothing. It means we need better language for describing what they actually did. Perhaps the future of music credits will contain roles that we haven't even fully defined yet.

WE'VE ALWAYS ADAPTED

As someone who has spent decades working with music technology, I'm not afraid of new tools. I've watched technology change the entire workflow of making a record. What once required expensive studios can now happen inside a laptop. What once required a room full of synthesizers can now happen with software. What once required tape editing can now happen with a mouse. Technology has made music production more accessible.

AI is likely to do the same thing in ways we haven't completely understood yet. But accessibility also creates another responsibility. We need to understand what we're actually creating. If I use AI as an instrument, I should understand that instrument. If I use AI as an assistant, I should understand what it assisted. And if AI generates the majority of the creative work, I should be honest about that too.

THE FUTURE ISN'T ABOUT HUMAN VS. AI

I don't think the future of music needs to be a battle between humans and machines. I think the more important conversation is about human creativity and technological collaboration.

- There will be musicians who never touch generative AI.
- There will be musicians who use it occasionally.
- There will be producers who integrate it deeply into their workflow.
- And there will be people who use AI to generate almost everything.
- All of those approaches are going to exist.

But as the technology becomes more sophisticated, the words we use to describe our creative contributions will matter more than ever. Because there is a difference between saying: "AI helped me make this." and. "AI made this, and I directed the process." Those are not necessarily the same creative contribution.

AFTER 30 YEARS, I'M STILL LEARNING

After more than 30 years of making music, I've learned one thing: You never stop learning. Every new technology forces us to reconsider what is possible. That's part of what makes being a musician, songwriter and producer exciting. I'm not interested in pretending technology isn't changing music. It is. It always has.

But I believe we owe something to the music, to the audience and to ourselves. Be creative. Experiment. Use the tools. Push boundaries. But also, claim the role you actually played.

The future of music shouldn't be about hiding the technology. It should be about understanding it.

And perhaps most importantly, understanding the difference between what we created, what we directed, and what the technology created for us. That's where the real conversation about AI and music should begin.

Jon KT