



# Lostwave: forgotten music in the digital era

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With ubiquitous access to the internet comes a notion that it is possible to find anything easily at any time, especially among younger generations who have grown up with computers and smartphones. For this reason, an encounter with a piece of media on which no information can be found may arouse a particular fascination and the need for cognitive closure. On the web, we can observe a niche, but large, community engaged in searching – and researching – the material whose origins cannot be easily identified. Lost media refers to any recorded content that is unavailable to the general public or which became forgotten, typically because its original support got damaged or became obsolete. This happens primarily due to the degradation of carriers that results from the lack of effort in preservation, “wiping” old tapes to save storage space and money, or because of the lack of any additional forms of archiving – a common scenario, especially for early television broadcasts and live performances. Lost media encompasses a wide range of examples, dating from the early silent films of the 1920s to electronic data and tools released on the internet, such as online Flash browser games or some YouTube videos.

One of the most significant branches of lost media is lostwave, which focuses on music of unknown origin, for which Reddit and Discord are the main locations for information exchange and community gathering. The general Reddit subgroup is r/Lostwave, described as “a community dedicated to collecting and putting a spotlight on great music that has gone unnoticed, lost popularity or even lacks identity”.<sup>1</sup> Other subgroups are dedicated to particular lostwave songs. The most popular and sought-after are recordings known as *The Most Mysterious Song on the Internet* (TMS), and *Everyone Knows That* (EKT), both of which were recently identified.<sup>2</sup>

Many examples of lostwave involve a transition from physical media to the digital realm, a practice that aligns with the post-digital concept. Florian Cramer states that post-digital “describes a perspective on digital information technology which no longer focuses on technical innovation or improvement” and “eradicates the distinction between

1 “r/Lostwave”, *Reddit*, <https://www.reddit.com/r/Lostwave/> [accessed 24.03.2024].

2 These subreddits serve as the central hubs for gathering and exchanging information, where users actively report their findings and theories. TheMysteriousSong subreddit even has its own spreadsheet where they meticulously organise possible and dead leads, enhancing the community’s collaborative efforts in solving the mystery: [https://www.docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1GePlaroCOz\\_jYHlR5Gcr4DfdGjUq-12C967ZBln0Rns/edit#gid=0](https://www.docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1GePlaroCOz_jYHlR5Gcr4DfdGjUq-12C967ZBln0Rns/edit#gid=0) [accessed 24.03.2024].

‘old’ and ‘new’ media, in theory as well as in practice”.<sup>3</sup> Post-digital does not mean digital technologies and digital media no longer play a role today. The opposite is the case: deep and sustained implementation of digitisation is necessary for the post-digital state. Cultural and artistic practices can only be meaningfully called “post-digital” when they do not merely revive older media technologies but functionally repurpose them in relation to digital media technologies.<sup>4</sup> In the case of lostwave, the physical media are digitised, shared and archived online. Lostwave communities actively use digital tools, such as Reddit, Discord and other online platforms, to search for, analyse and disseminate these lost songs. Thus, lostwave operates in the post-digital realm by relying on digitisation while maintaining its roots in physical media.

In this article, the phenomena of lostwave and its community are analysed to explore possible intersections between the aesthetic of eeriness conceptualised by Mark Fisher and the anthropological frameworks of liminal proposed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. This study seeks to uncover the broader significance of lost media music within a contemporary digital culture by examining participatory engagement and collective intelligence within the lostwave communities and the liminal nature of the lost media artefacts.

As it turns out, TMS was recorded on a cassette tape during a radio broadcast in West Germany in the 1980s. This recording was then integrated into a mixtape alongside other radio captures featuring songs by such prominent bands of the time as The Cure, Simple Minds and Depeche Mode. A digitised version of the song first appeared in 2007; however, it was not until 2019 that it gained attention within the lostwave community. This interest ultimately led to the formation of a dedicated Reddit subgroup, r/TheMysteriousSong. After 17 years of searching, the song was identified as *Subways of Your Mind* by the German band Fex, released in 1983 as a demo tape. EKT, in turn, is a short, 17-second snippet uploaded in 2021 on WatZatSong – a music identification and social networking website – by user Carl92. He claimed that he found the recording among other old files in a DVD backup, which suggests it appeared there as the result of experiments with capturing audio. He did not provide more information about the audio’s origins, but due to the characteristic sound of the pop music of the era, it was believed to have been recorded in the 1980s. Initial identification attempts proved

3 Florian Cramer, “What Is ‘Post-digital’?” in *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, David M. Berry and Michael Dieter (eds.), New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2015, p. 20.

4 *ibidem*, p. 21.

unsuccessful, and the discussion soon moved to the Reddit subgroup r/Lostwave, which then gained its own subreddit. After three years of searching, it was revealed that the source of a short fragment was the 1986 pornographic film *Angels of Passion*, and the authors, Christopher Saint Booth and Philip Adrian Booth, were contacted immediately.

The pursuit of lost media exemplifies Henry Jenkins' concept of convergence culture, where boundaries between producers and consumers blur, fostering participatory engagement and collective intelligence. Jenkins views this concept primarily as a circulation of content across various media platforms driven by active user participation.<sup>5</sup> Convergence involves corporate initiatives, such as media companies seeking to extend their reach, and consumer dynamics, such as users navigating various media technologies to control content flow and engage in collaborative creation.<sup>6</sup> Jenkins illustrates one facet of convergence culture through the lens of collective intelligence – a concept he borrows from Pierre Lévy. He examines this phenomenon within the context of the reality show *Survivor*, where online fans collaboratively pieced together information about future episodes. The filmmakers filmed and edited the entire season in advance but created enough suspense and surprise to give the audience an impression of watching real-time events. Following each episode, fans of the show would search for signs to unravel forthcoming events. For instance, they would look for clues by investigating episodes frame by frame, travelling across the world to see the shooting locations, or even taking satellite pictures.<sup>7</sup>

These activities mirror lostwave community investigations of unknown songs, where users actively participate in the distribution of content. When investigating TMS or EKT, users tried to analyse the lyrics, melody and style of the music, as well as to identify the singer's accent, transcribe the song into a music sheet, cross-reference it with other compositions or even get in touch with individuals who could provide clues. From an in-depth analysis of a very short fragment of EKT, users were able to recognise that the drum machine used in the song was probably Linn Electronics LinnDrum and that the synthesiser responsible for the melody was a Yamaha DX7. They also established that the recording might have been captured from an NTSC TV based on the analysis of

5 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press 2006, p. 3.

6 *ibidem*, p. 18.

7 *ibidem*, p. 25.

the background frequencies.<sup>8</sup> The motivations for searching expressed by community participants included: making sure that the creators would be acknowledged for their work,<sup>9</sup> the mysterious nature of the track and the challenge of uncovering its origins,<sup>10</sup> and the appeal that stems from the contrast between the difficulty in locating the song and the apparent ease of accessing information online.<sup>11</sup>

The prevalence of digital archives and online repositories often leads people to assume that most information is digitised and readily accessible online. This creates the expectation that, with the right tools and resources, even the most obscure or niche cultural artefacts should be searchable. Members of the lostwave community act as amateur media conservators who collect, archive and disseminate unidentified music. According to Rinehart and Ippolito, there are four strategies for rescuing the disappearing cultures: storage, emulation, migration and reinterpretation.<sup>12</sup> While storage is a rather common and conventional preservation method, it is prone to obsolescence, regardless of whether the work is analogue or digital. Therefore, it is important to rely also on alternative strategies that offer more adaptable approaches to safeguarding cultural heritage in the digital age.<sup>13</sup> One of them is emulation – the replication of the functionality of one computer system on another, allowing software or hardware designed for the original system to run on the emulated system. Yet, it should be stressed that even if they can function as a method for preservation, emulators can also become lost media. A good example is LadyNES, a pioneering NES emulator developed by Alex Krasivsky in 1996, which laid the groundwork for modern emulation by introducing the “.nes” format. After years of obscurity, a copy was rediscovered via an archived ISO file in 2023.

8 Carrie O’Grady, “Everyone Knows That: can you identify the lost 80s hit baffling the internet?”, *The Guardian*, 28.02.2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2024/feb/28/everyone-knows-that-can-you-identify-the-lost-80s-hit-baffling-the-internet> [accessed 23.03.2024].

9 See: David Browne, “The Unsolved Case of the Most Mysterious Song on the Internet”, *Rolling Stone*, 24.09.2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/most-mysterious-song-on-the-internet-885106/> [accessed 23.03.2024].

10 See: Carrie O’Grady, *op.cit.*; David Browne, *op.cit.*

11 See: Carrie O’Grady, *op.cit.*; Laura Holliday, “Everyone Knows That: how the internet became obsessed with lostwave”, *Dazed*, 27.02.2024, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/62053/1/lostwave-youtube-everyone-knows-that-reddit-lost-songs-like-the-wind> [accessed: 23.03.2024].

12 Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito. *Re-collection: art, new media, and social memory*. Cambridge: The MIT Press 2014, pp. 8–10.

13 *ibidem*.

Another option is migration, which involves updating the medium by transferring its contents to another support, as happens in the case of digitalising snippets of songs from old CDs or cassettes. This method is common among the online communities interested in lost media and it plays a crucial role in establishing and sustaining them on the basis of sharing and trading rare (or hard-to-find) pieces of media. In the context of lostwave, the most interesting method of preservation proposed by Rinehart and Ippolito may be a reinterpretation, as it goes way beyond the usual archival efforts. This facet encompasses a spectrum of fan activities, including covers, remixes, remasterings or mashups. Enthusiasts often engage in reinterpretation to reconstruct the context surrounding obscure music by making collective attempts at deciphering muffled song lyrics from lo-fi audio. Sound restoration is also a common practice where audio software is used to enhance the quality of the song and transfer it from the physical support. This process serves the dual purpose of enabling thorough analysis and restoring a song to its authentic rendition. Certain lostwave tracks are paired with visual components to form their representation and commodification. For instance, a pink Nextplay boombox from 2006, which emerged as a visual symbol for “Everyone Knows That”, was actively sought after by fans online, eventually circulating on the internet as the “EKT boombox”.

Both TMS and EKT embody the essence of 80s music, with TMS reminiscent of exemplary new wave sounds, and EKT – those of typical pop songs of the period. The disconnection between a familiar musical style and the mystery surrounding the recording’s origins creates a fascination with its ontological status. Many members of the community refer to lostwave as “eerie” or “uncanny”.<sup>14</sup> The unidentified status of the songs and snippets seems to evoke a sense of discomfort when paired with uncertainty about the artist’s identity and whereabouts: “I find it uncanny to listen to a song that no one knows the creator of. It’s like the song just appeared out of thin air. There’s no connection to the artist which gives me a very unsettling feeling. It feels like I should be connecting with someone but it’s just a void,” “I find it eerie and weird because if you think about, that singer probably had a family, relatives he was just a normal person who possibly had some short fame and now, all his songs are lost.”<sup>15</sup> It also represents the fear of fading into obscurity: “Someone, somewhere, poured their heart and soul into that song, and they got nothing for it. It almost became completely forgotten and lost to

14 All user statements come from Reddit (specifically from the subreddits [r/everyoneknowsthat](#), [r/themysterioussong](#), and [r/lostwave](#)), accessed on 30.04.2024. In all quotes, I keep the original spelling.

15 *ibidem*.

time forever... saved only by a low-quality 30-second clip. And it makes you realize that for every well-known song, there were probably thousands, if not millions, that suffered the same fate, only they were not saved by this low-quality clip. They, like all of us will be eventually, were completely lost to time.”<sup>16</sup>

Some listeners describe the experience as akin to hearing something forbidden or catching a glimpse of a parallel dimension: “I think many people feel this way. I certainly do. It’s like these are songs we were never meant to hear, they weren’t written and recorded for us. It’s a really weird feeling,” “It’s like if EKT came from another dimension where it was this massive 80s hit. It somehow crossed over from its timeline, but only barely to where we only received it as a low-quality snippet. Listening to EKT makes me think of memories that never happened.”<sup>17</sup> In this sense, lostwave is often likened to liminal spaces, particularly their uncanny and solitary qualities: “I’m the same. When I listen to lost wave songs, I imagine that I’m somewhere in an abandoned shopping center where I’m alone, the atmosphere is like in the backrooms, and somewhere someone turns on this song. Although sometimes it’s sad to hear somewhere a very cool energetic song, but only a 30 second fragment,” “The first one I heard was ‘everyone knows that’ and it creeped me out. It sounded like every 80s song in a nutshell, yet it’s like it had a purpose. You get a visual idea, but it is just like uncanny. Like you’re in a liminal space where there used to be so much energy and life.”<sup>18</sup>

Users are also expressing a collective fascination and unease with lostwave music, finding it haunting: “So glad i’m not the only one who feels this way! There’s something so eerie about lostwave. I don’t know how else to describe it but when I first heard EKT, it felt frightening. Oddly like seeing the ‘you will die in 7 days’ video from *The Ring*, or something along those lines. It was haunting. I know that’s a dramatic example, but it’s the only similar vibe I can think of. Thankfully doing a deep dive into EKT and lostwave was very grounding lmao. So fuckin’ creepy to begin with, though,” “I think it’s due to how degraded the song is and the way it sounds like the ending credits for... something.”<sup>19</sup> Some express displeasure with the songs, implying that the only intriguing aspect is the mystery surrounding them: “Just my personal opinion. It’s not ‘terrible’ but for me it’s below ‘allright’. The music is technically good, but there’s something unpleasant in this

16 *ibidem*.

17 *ibidem*.

18 *ibidem*.

19 *ibidem*.



song that's hard to describe. If not a mystery surrounding it I wouldn't listen it again. I can see why despite being catchy it have never became a hit," "Maybe an unpopular opinion but most if not all songs are Meh and have the vibe of like mid album filler songs."<sup>20</sup>

As it can be seen on the examples presented above, the eeriness of lostwave results not solely from the music itself but also from the context in which it was encountered. Mark Fisher described an important distinction between the Freudian *unheimlich* (uncanny) and his notions of the weird and the eerie. These phenomena are often evoked by cultural mediums, despite not being literary genres; they are emotional responses or affects.<sup>21</sup> Although these concepts seem analogous, as they share a preoccupation with the strange, they diverge in their focus. The weird indicates an intrusion of something alien or otherworldly into the familiar, causing a disruption that is difficult to understand, which is often associated with Lovecraftian themes.<sup>22</sup> The uncanny is about "the strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange – about the way in which the domestic world does not coincide with itself".<sup>23</sup> Unlike the eerie, which looks to the outside, the uncanny operates within that, which is considered well-known and domesticated. Eeriness is based on a failure of absence ("there is something present where there should be nothing") or a failure of presence ("there is nothing present where there should be something").<sup>24</sup> The sense of eeriness forces us to ask questions about the nature of what lies beyond. The sense of eeriness vanishes once we have the answers.<sup>25</sup> The peculiar quality of lostwave comes from the fact that it simultaneously represents a "failure of presence" and a "failure of absence": it encompasses an unexpected presence when a piece of media that should exist (because there are records or memories of it) is nowhere to be found.

Similarly, when a piece of media that should have disappeared or become obscure somehow persists in the collective memory and discussions of the lostwave community, it creates a feeling of something forbidden, as expressed in the previously cited user's quote ("It's like these are songs we were never meant to hear, they weren't written and recorded for us."). Once embedded in the cultural semiotic systems of their time, lost

20 *ibidem*.

21 Mark Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie*. London: Repeater Books 2016, p. 9.

22 *ibidem*, p. 16.

23 *ibidem*, p. 10.

24 *ibidem*, p. 61.

25 *ibidem*, p. 62.



songs have become “eerie traces” of the past that is no longer accessible. They are metaphorical ruins discovered in the digital landscape that can be heard but are never fully contextualised. This parallels Fisher’s analogy to ancient ruins like Stonehenge or Easter Island: tangible but incomprehensible remains of long-gone civilisations. Notably, the eeriness of lostwave immediately disappears when a song gets attributed to a specific author based on credible evidence – there can be no eeriness without the mystery. Fisher emphasises, however, that not all mysteries cause eerie feelings.<sup>26</sup> The perception of difference is crucial to eerie mysteries – an awareness that an explanation can involve forms of understanding that go beyond ordinary encounters. Lostwave enigmas represent uncharted territories with no paths that could lead to solving the mystery. Moreover, there is no certainty that a given song is not a hoax. This underscores another intriguing aspect of the community: its reliance on trust, with members taking the subject seriously while constantly exposing internet “trolls”.

The core question of eerie lies in the issue of agency. When there is a failure of absence, the question is whether there is an active agent behind this, observing us without our knowledge. If failure of presence occurs, the focus immediately shifts to understanding the nature of the involved agent.<sup>27</sup> That is also true of the lostwave community’s pursuit of lost media, as the questions that arise from the perspective of failure of absence include: Who were the original creators of these songs? What caused their disappearance, and why? Adapting the lens of failure of presence, we can also ask: How did these songs end up circulating anonymously on the internet? How did these songs end up as lostwave? As long as the recordings remain “lost”, they occupy a peculiar epistemological space of what is familiar yet unknown.

The term “liminal” stems from the Latin word *limen*, which means “a threshold”, and was coined by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in the context of rites in small societies. There, rites of passage served as a framework in the pivotal periods of individuals’ lives, often linked to changing the status within a group. Van Gennep describes the liminal rite as a transitional state – a midpoint between ritual or ceremonial passages. It comes after the preliminary rite, which marks a separation from the previous identity and precedes the post-liminal rite – a re-incorporation into society with a new identity.<sup>28</sup> The liminal

<sup>26</sup> *ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> *ibidem*, p. 63.

<sup>28</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee. London: Routledge 1960, p. 62.

phase marks a period of existential transformation: “To cross the threshold is to unite oneself in a new world.”<sup>29</sup> Following van Gennep’s work, Victor Turner developed the concept of liminality even further. To him, it referred not only to a condition of someone passing from one stage of a ritual to another, but also the condition of someone – or something – suspended or trapped in between two sets of role expectations, which may lead to ambiguity. As he writes: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a wide variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualise social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.”<sup>30</sup>

When we apply this concept to lost media or lostwave, we can describe these pieces of media as existing in a liminal state, as defined above. They are in transition from their original, unknown context to a new, yet-to-be-determined one. In this sense, lostwave represents a form of cultural liminality, as it exists in a state of ambiguity, caught between its unknown past and its newfound presence on the internet. Although it left the original context of a physical medium on which it was found but has not yet fully transitioned to being identified and placed within a specific time or geographical location, as well as being attributed to an author, it remains in a liminal state. Moreover, the experience of the listeners or the online communities that engage with it can also be seen as liminal, resembling a rite of passage that leads from the initial discovery to eventual recognition and closure if the song’s origins can be traced.

An example of a lostwave recording that transitioned from liminal to post-liminal status is the demo EP *D>E>A>T>H>M>E>T>A>L* by the British band Panchiko. In 2016, a user on the 4chan website posted a photo of a CD cover on a music board, claiming they had found it in a charity shop, and asked for help identifying the artist. Eventually, some tracks were shared, revealing heavy distortion caused by the disc’s deterioration. Sceptics dismissed the band as a hoax, suggesting the post might be a publicity stunt. Nevertheless, the unknown band garnered significant interest, leading fans to engage in research. After four years of collective efforts, they contacted one of the band’s members, learning that the CD was a demo EP sent to several record companies. Due to the lack of interest, however, the group disbanded. Taking advantage of the keen interest of

<sup>29</sup> *ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University Press 1977, p. 95.

searchers, Panchiko remastered their EP and released it through Bandcamp, expanding it into a full-length album. Then, they collaborated on reuniting the band, releasing the previously unheard tracks composed between 1997 and 2001. They also made new original songs, which were launched on streaming platforms and in various physical formats, such as cassettes and vinyl. After a year of their discovery by the lostwave community, they made their first live show and, soon after that, went on a tour.

Panchiko's trajectory can be seen as a process of passing through what Turner defines as a "limbo of statuslessness".<sup>31</sup> Their music was disconnected from its original context and yet had not been fully incorporated into a new one. On the one hand, it was an artefact from the past – a physical medium that somehow ended up in a charity shop. On the other, it was a mystery to be solved by the online community – a puzzle that sparked interest. The preliminal rite was marked by the moment when Panchiko created their demo EP and sent it to several record companies, which was a clear attempt at separating from their previous identity as a garage band and transforming into a recognised entity within the music industry. The four years between Panchiko's reappearance as an obscure recording and their identification by the online community represented a liminal period when they went through a process of recontextualisation. The post-liminal stage was achieved when they re-entered the music industry, this time with a new identity and recognition, which were solidified by the decision to remaster their EP.

Often, works labelled as lostwave have no distinct cultural status and mainly consist of unreleased songs, demo tracks or unfinished and abandoned projects. Nevertheless, none of this matters in the modern digital culture, as all kinds of information seem to be archived indefinitely. However, contact with lost or forgotten media often reveals the fragility of preservation and the selective nature of cultural memory. In this regard, it is curious to note that, rather than being just a collection of unidentified music, by now, lostwave has become a genre of its own, with a large community dedicated to rediscovering unique stories and bringing back human agency to what is merely a drop in the ocean of the internet's content. Among other things, lostwave challenges the conventional notion of digital omnipresence and analysis of its eerie and liminal nature provides a framework that helps to understand the nature of this phenomenon, while illustrating how different lost media are from conventional mysteries and why they attract so many people, dedicated to networking, exchanging observations and sharing their knowledge with the common aim to uncover the history of lost-and-found tracks.

31 *ibidem*, p. 97.

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