



# The times they are a-changin’

Keith Cutten

Had Bob Dylan been a new artist in the 1980s, 1990s or early 2000s, would he have received a recording contract? And, one wonders, would his distinctive look and voice struck a chord with the masses?

Recently, researchers at the Artificial Intelligence Research Institute undertook a quantitative analysis of nearly half a million songs to look for widespread changes in music’s character over the years. Published on 26 July 2012 in *Scientific Reports*, its online findings revealed that some trends do emerge over the decades; but none of them are positive for music.

The team examined three aspects of those songs: *timbre*, which accounts for the sound texture or tone quality; *pitch*, which corresponds to the harmonic content of the piece—including its chords, melody, and tonal arrangements—and *loudness*. The Institute’s research team discovered that, over time, both the timbral variety and the pitch content of music had diminished.

These trends suggested a homogenisation and lack of experimentation by contemporary artists and, notably, how the study demonstrated that music’s decibel level had increased. This loudness should not be confused with the listener-controlled

volume. Instead, in an apparent effort to grab attention, it refers to the gradual upping of recorded music’s intensity. Sadly, loudness comes at the expense of dynamic range, which, in very broad terms, removes the highs and lows, rendering the whole song to a more monotone arrangement.

In the same way, golf course design has not been immune to change. Following a progression which started organically on the links of Scotland, the profession of golf course architecture first blossomed amid the heathlands of Surrey and Berkshire, England. This ever-expanding knowledge was then transported to America following the First World War, culminating in the era many refer to as the ‘Golden Age of golf course design.’ The design pillars of the Golden Age, frequently described in the evocative writings of the era’s most luminary practitioners, were variety, width and angles, and contour.

However, following the conclusion of the Great Depression and the Second World War, the discipline of golf course architecture entered a new era in course design: *The Modern Era*. Also referred to as the *Signature Era*, golf courses built between the early 1950s and the mid-1990s emerged where, typically, they were



Cabot Links, Canada, Sixteenth hole: A rousing par-4 to ignite the senses, it is one of five holes that plays directly alongside the ocean.

As the first member of the design team on-site in 2008, Keith Cutten worked to clear and stake the golf course destined to become Cabot Links. Under the watchful eye of his mentor, fellow Canadian golf course architect Rod Whitman, Keith shaped greens, bunkers and fairways over a two-season period. Cabot Links opened to rave reviews in 2012.

This design-build collaboration was the second major project for Cutten Golf Inc. under the Whitman Golf Course Design company banner: an ongoing relationship that works on both renovation and new build projects. (Photograph by Keith Cutten)



the products of extensive earthmoving. Designers imposed their 'style' onto any given site, regardless of the inherent attributes of the existing landscape. Considerable maintenance effort and cost are necessary to maintain patterns that conflict with natural processes—all to obtain a certain marketable 'look'.

Initiated by American golf course architect Robert Trent Jones Sr, classic and original layouts were stretched, tightened and flattened to negate the skills of the elite golfer (those which represent less than one per cent of the golfing population). Seemingly, the accumulated professional knowledge in the field of golf course architecture, which had been progressing since the 1840s, was abandoned.

The new ideology dictated that modern methodologies were superior to those employed previously. Reminiscent of changes in the music industry over this same timeline, the offerings of golf course architecture had become more homogenised as its design practitioners sought to standardise their craft and market a singular style or brand. Furthermore, as big business permeated the golfing world, golf architects relinquished creative control in response to a considerable shift in the industry's primary

focus: from traditional golf course-inspired development, to one underpinned by real estate-inspired development. The designers who employed the most photogenic style, which displayed well on the pages of the major magazines, received the lion's share of work in a booming industry.

Likewise, the desire to grace the covers of the magazines produced a superficial style, whereby all the design elements were emphasised in order to create a visual spectacle. Sadly, these visuals never related well to the quality of golf, nor did they provide the contrast seen in efforts from the Golden Age designers. In essence, and again analogous to happenings in the music industry, by making everything bold, golf course architects limited the dynamic range of their work.

From 2008 to 2013: an era referred to as the Great Recession, a long period of slow growth and rising unemployment resulted. The catalyst for this economic downturn was the global credit crunch of 2007 and 2008. Housing bubbles, bad loans, and banking losses combined to produce lasting impacts. In 2008, all major economies experienced a sharp drop in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which, predictably, was the banking industry's cue

to severely curtail normal bank lending. Reduced levels of both investment and consumer spending ensued and, inevitably, the global nature of the crisis led to a drop in world trade. The result? A period of worldwide deglobalisation and protectionism ensued.

The collective impact of these trends led to the closure of thousands of golf courses. Some have labelled it a 'thinning of the herd', whereby the many unimaginative designs of the 1950s to 1980s were subjected to intense scrutiny. In this environment, only the best of them survived, which may have been due to the course design or the club's business model.

In North America, these global patterns resulted in an anti-big-box consumerism craze, which has been dubbed the *Shop Local Movement*. Ongoing deglobalisation has spurred public interest in hand-made, high quality, and locally sourced products. Markets include food, art, fashion, music, and even golf course architecture. The emergence of income generated by Xennials and Millennials (Gen Y) into the global markets has revealed a willingness to pay more and travel further for authenticity and quality.

In a music-buying industry now dominated by iTunes and music-streaming sites, the CD and the physical music store are

reportedly in a potentially terminal decline. However, a curious development in music consumption has seen vinyl—the format once rendered extinct by the compact disc with its 'perfect' digital sound—make an unlikely, but significant, cultural and commercial comeback. A major technological characteristic cited in the comeback of vinyl is its distinctive lack of audio cleanness and perfection. This is what fans call the 'warmth' of the vinyl sound. Furthermore, an ever-increasing number of consumers harbour dissatisfaction with the music machines' latest offerings and, instead, elect to do their own 'digging'.

In golf, social media and global access to information has created a similar search for warmth. Led by those dubbed *Minimalists* by the media, designers employing a design-build methodology are returning Golden Age ideology to the craft of golf course design. Due to some practitioners willing to spend extended time in the field to ensure seemingly insignificant details are correct, the practice of golf course design is positioned more advantageously than it has been in decades. Complacency, though, is a fool's paradise.

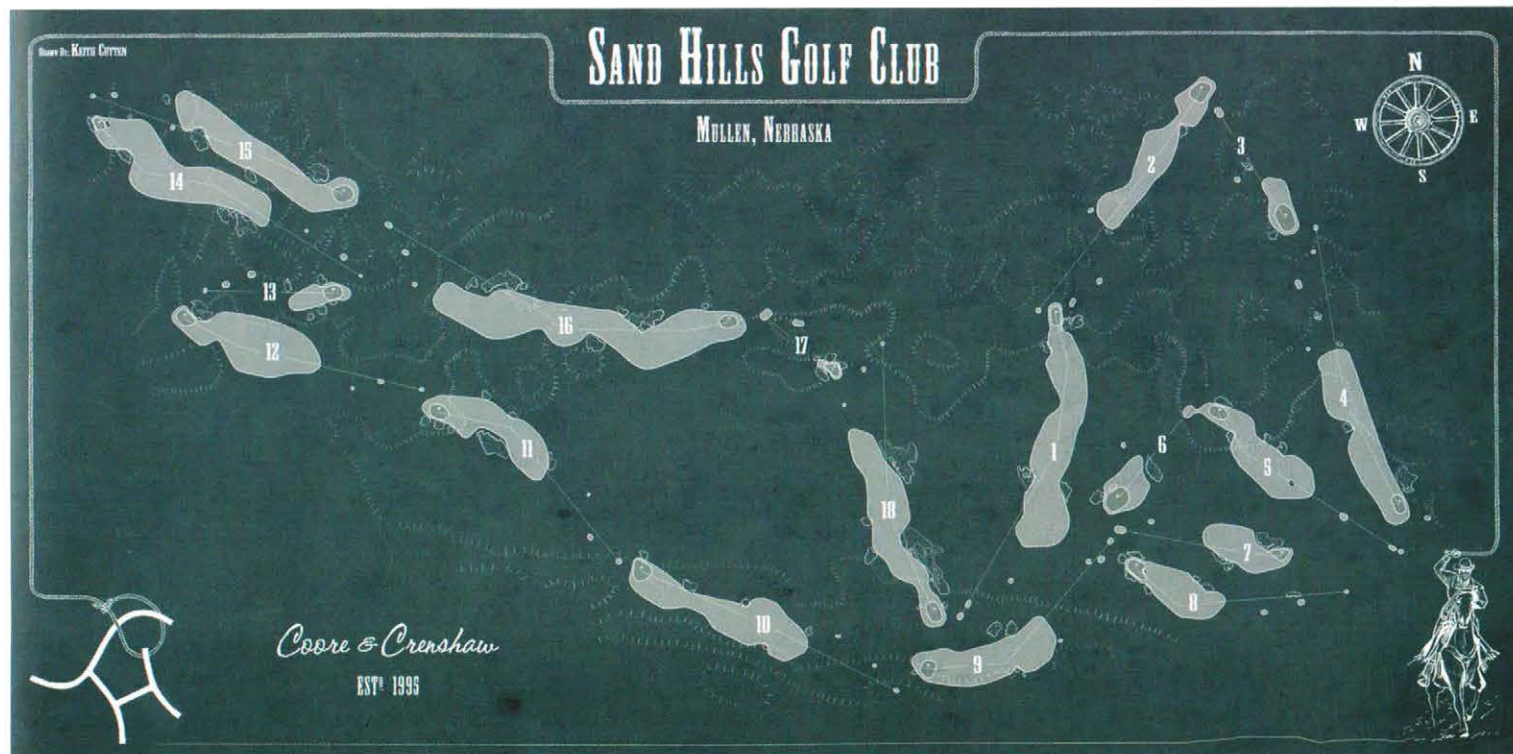




Typically, those practising the design-build methodology employ shapers. Essentially, shapers are a rag-tag group of nomadic golf geeks. Said more eloquently, shapers are well-travelled and schooled in the fundamentals of golf course architecture. Further, their ability to run the equipment necessary to shape their ideas is paramount to this contemporary design process. Yet, and perhaps most importantly, the collaborative nature of this design-

build process is what most elevates the quality of the product. Shapers work together on-site, in much the same way that a group of artists in the music industry would once share the studio. Essentially, and for the betterment of the final result, the ability for improvisation and 'happy accidents' has been returned to golf course design. The architect operates as editor, as ideas are fleshed out on the ground.





Sand Hills Golf Club, USA: This routing plan serves as a fine study as to how Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw returned Golden Age design principles to the world of golf course architecture. (Plan drawn by Keith Cutten)

Akin to the making of modern music, where each instrument is recorded separately, the architect-contractor model involves the various artists working in isolation. Sometimes, the only form of communication is delivered through detailed plans. The design-build process has returned collaboration to the craft of designing golf courses.

While the economic downturn allowed the design-build process to come to the fore, we cannot expect the industry to remain

stagnant forever. Eventually, fortunes will turn and golf will again boom. However, the design-build process, which is only capable of completing one or two projects a year, will inevitably fail to keep pace with demand. It begs the question: will the industry learn from its previous mistakes, or return to the business of making money?

After all, as Mr Dylan so eloquently foretold: 'the times they are a-changin.'

OPPOSITE  
Cabot Cliffs, Sixteenth hole: Audaciously fitted into a tight junction, composure is the order of the day when tackling this remarkable par-3.

Carved from the breathtaking and rugged Cape Breton landscape, Cabot Cliffs is a Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw masterpiece where rolling fairways reward creativity.

From cliff-top to rolling sand dunes, the stiff coastal breeze at Cabot ensures a sense of purpose in your swing. (Photograph by Keith Cutten)