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A Conspicuous Gap in Cultural Studies: Popular Music in the English Studies Classroom

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The question we ask most often—on one level or another—about a literary text is, "What does it mean?" Generalizing rather wildly, I would argue that when popular music was first brought into English studies classrooms during the 1960s (on vinyl LP records), it was treated as a living, contemporary, and (especially) "relevant" kind of *verse* that happened to be set to a melody. That is, the song lyrics of Dylan, Simon, Mitchell, and Lennon were treated as a form of literature to be mimeographed in aniline purple ink, published in anthologies, and given the honorary distinction of being discussed right alongside good old Coleridge and Auden. Musical style and form were briefly noted but almost always subordinated to analysis of the lyrics. In short, the songs were colonized as verse. The key questions raised about that verse were *What statement is being made? What does it mean?*

It is unsurprising that this phenomenon happened when it did, because popular music had become at that historical moment a force of such generational potency, political urgency, and unprecedented social impact that its "relevance" could no longer be ignored—certainly not by socially engaged young scholars of the written word. However, with all due respect to those

pioneers who acknowledged a broader cultural landscape in the English studies classroom, the pop-song-as-a-slightly-lesser-poem approach to music turned out to be, in the long run, not the luckiest ray of academic limelight for songs within the discipline of English studies. Missing from the analysis was any historical understanding of musical style and form. Missing too was an account of how technological developments (multi-tracking, transistor radios, stereo sound, FM radio) had created new avenues of popular music's production, dissemination, and consumption. The euphoria of acknowledging the brashly contemporary gave way to the slowly dawning realization that the professors were not always quite as strong on these lyrics as they were on Coleridge and Auden. In addition, pop songs were considered by some to represent a private area of experience, and the sometimes awkward practice of playing them and discussing them in the incongruous setting of the English classroom simply faded away at some point.

For me, the key analytic question about a popular song is not "What does it mean?" or "What hidden or coded meaning does it express?" but "What does its popularity tell us about the cultural moment when it resonated with its public?" How did the song "create its audience," so to speak? Obviously, a 1973 hit song, if it could time-travel, would meet with a different fate in 1943 or 2013. It's not in a vacuum that a song makes a splash, pushes psychic buttons, rings a bell, creates good vibrations, or bangs a gong in the public mind. It is a *hit* in the sense that contact is made with the hearts and minds of particular people at a particular moment in their history. It is the *reception* of a song that can be most productively analyzed—not timeless meanings. Songs are cultural artifacts that are uniquely and especially of their moment.

For that reason, I've been experimenting with a Popular Song Analysis assignment in advanced composition courses—an assignment in which I try to steer students away from

limiting their analysis strictly to lyrics. The lyrics are definitely fair game, on the table, one component of what's being discussed. However, I ask students to attend to musical style and sound as well—and especially to consider question of reception, of how the song tapped into the cultural psyche of its historical moment. Students are welcome to do some research into the composing or production history of the song, incorporating into their writing some descriptions of the recording process, anecdotes about songwriting inspiration, the biographies and life circumstances of the songwriters, and so forth. The weak essays, though, simply let the information take over and become Wikipedia reports on the song – (though sometimes fervently enthusiastic reports) – while the successful essays make some explanatory claim about the song's commercial success vis-à-vis its cultural moment.

During this unit of the course, we read a sampling of popular music theory, such as Simon Frith's "The Industrialization of Music" or Tia deNora's "Musical Memories and the Choreography of Feeling." More useful for students, though, tend to be the excerpts from books that perform this type of analysis in a specific way, such as Jonathan Gould's account of how the death of John F. Kennedy was especially hard on young people in the U.S., who experienced a rather profound period of mourning and gloom that in effect lasted a couple of months and created the perfect timing for the welcome distraction of the Beatles' arrival in New York City in February of 1964. Or Peter Carlin's book on the Beach Boys, linking the invention of polyurethane foam and fiberglass to the development of lighter, more affordable surfboards—long with the jump in disposable income among teens—to the surfing craze of the early 1960s.

What kind of student writing, then, can be elicited by an assignment such as this? Students are given total freedom to choose a song from any cultural and historical period. The

majority of them will pick something British or North American from about the mid-1960s to the present day. Only a few venture further back in history. One student wrote about "The United States Air Force Song," sometimes called "The Wild Blue Yonder"—a song that resulted from a 1938 contest in *Liberty* magazine that called for songwriters to create a theme for the Air Corps. This student discussed the prevalence of melodic phrases that "rise," notes that "climb" the scale, soaring crescendos, and so forth. Another wrote about Billie Holliday's "Strange Fruit," discussing how the figure of fruit not only provides necessary distancing from the unspeakably gruesome practice of lynching—a distancing that cannot be called euphemistic because its referent is beyond sanitizing and beyond denying—but also carries the sense of repercussion or product—as in "the fruits of one's labor" or "the fruits of slavery, the fruits of segregation." Another student wrote about "I'll Be Seeing You (in all the old familiar places)"—which was written in 1938 as a simple sentimental Depression-era "I miss you" song with a small town setting and a lethargic, "last-dance" melody but which did not peak in popularity until the early 40s, due to the massive number of couples separated by the war. Another student wrote about "Rock Around the Clock," asserting that in 1954, "The U.S. was, for the moment, removed from war, which meant relief for many families throughout the country. As life became more carefree, so did the younger generation when it came to acceptable social behavior. It was a combination of this reprieve from wartime worries and the desire of teenagers to break away from the parents' ideals that led to the worldwide success of a new genre of music called rock and roll."

Speaking of popular music's prehistoric period, if I ask students in what form songs like "Sidewalks of New York," "Bicycle Built for Two," or "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" were first disseminated, I receive looks of the utmost blankness—which then can lead into a mini-

lesson about parlor pianos, sheet music, and sing-alongs and a certain sociable tradition of popular music consumption—from the fireside hearths, malt shops, dance halls, head shops, and key parties of yesteryear to the fingernail salons and latte emporia of the current moment.

At this point we can talk about the sense in which, during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, *recorded* popular music on the radio was essentially aimed at all ages. The music enjoyed by granny was, for the most part, the same music enjoyed by the children, the teens, middle-aged people, and everyone else. It was during the 1950s that a generational split in musical taste became unmistakable—a split that intensified during the 60s and 70s—and that has since more or less continued splitting *Ice Age* avalanche-like into the fragmentary situation of many little niches of specialized or balkanized tastes, and of course culminating in everyone's own private iPod playlist.

Digital culture turns up in these essays in all manner of intriguing forms. One student discusses the 8-bit music that accompanied early video games of the 1980s—the sort of arppegiated computer-ey music of Pacman and such—that didn't hog much memory—and proves that it has had a structuring effect on the musical imagination of groups such as Depreciation Guild in whose recordings you can hear 8-bit-music-like effects as a texturing element behind the vocals. Many students deal with the musical intertextuality and sampling so endemic to the music of today's young people. Then there's the song "Friday" by Rebecca Black—an insipid, monotonous song that was produced as a kind of vanity project financed by the performer's parents. The song went viral on YouTube, but as they were watching and listening in massive numbers, listeners were also registering their dislike of the song by clicking "dislike"—and I think here you have a somewhat new pop phenomenon, analogous to reality

television, where the pleasure that the text provides is the mildly masochistic pleasure that involves feeling superior to what you are hearing. Or maybe the better analogy would be not to reality TV but to *Mystery Science Theater*—just having a great time in the presence of a few friends watching something truly and magnificently bad, united in a bemused, playful relation to that badness.

Another way in which students respond to this assignment is by writing about songs that make political statements. (This option cannot reasonably be denied students, even if they sometimes seem to expect the political statement to serve as a shortcut to historical understanding.) The early 70s, when Motown became politicized, is a popular period in this respect. If one thinks about the kind of work generated by Berry Gordy in the mid-60s—"My Girl," "Stop in the Name of Love," "You Can't Hurry Love"—it was all about being nicely dressed, proper, apolitical, and above all, inoffensive. By 1971, Marvin Gaye, an established Motown star, had to fight the strenuous objections of Gordy to get "What's Going On" released by Motown, and it became one of the great singles and albums of all time. Even the Temptations did "Ball of Confusion" in 71, whose sound is described by one student this way: "The song produces a grinding, psychedelic beat from a bass guitar with an eccentric rhythm, giving the song an ominous feel that makes the listener feel that they are about to hear something very wrenching and thought-provoking."

Students gravitate toward all manner of notable transitional moments in pop history, discussing for instance how the circularity and repetition-based structure of the three-minute pop song (verse/chorus/verse/chorus/bridge/verse/chorus) was in the early 70s displaced—in "Stairway to Heaven" and "Bohemian Rhapsody," for instance—by compositions that more

closely resembled a classical suite, with a prelude followed by an ordered series of movements, in the same or related keys, that might incorporate dramatic dynamic variation and might stretch on for seven or eight minutes. This could be described as the moment when pop music *smells itself*, or, sensing its cultural impact, becomes ostentatious, pretentious, gaudy, and inflated. In some sense this progression grows out of the earlier transition made in about 1966 and 67 by the Beatles—when they switched from being live performers to being primarily recording artists free to write with more lyrical complexity and to experiment with more versatile instrumentations and studio sound effects to match the depth of the lyrics. A student writes, "The songs written for live performance such as 'She Loves You' and 'Please Please Me' were written for a concert-going public, whereas songs such as 'Eleanor Rigby,' 'Penny Lane,' and 'Strawberry Fields Forever' were written for a record buying public. This change was spearheaded by George Martin, who encouraged the Beatles to write with a more classical structure to create 'sound pictures' such as the brass band in 'Yellow Submarine.'"

On and on it flows, a great river of cultural history: Jay-Z, David Bowie, Credence Clearwater Revival, Lady Gaga, Nirvana. I tend to be struck by the moments when songs evoke other media forms—for example, REM's "That's great it starts with an earthquake, birds and snakes, an aeroplane"—the first line of "It's the End of the World as We Know It," a song that hit in the 1980s, the decade of the sound bite and the widespread emergence of cable television. A student writes, "The fast and rhythmic lyrics combined with the restless, driving beat imply the motion of flipping through television channels at a fast pace and hearing the news brought forth through that small lapse of time."

The recurring refrain of Crosby Stills Nash and Young's "Ohio"—"Four Dead in Ohio"—is compared by another student to a newspaper headline. This song, quickly written, recorded, and released in response to the Kent State shootings of May 4, 1970, illustrates a highly specific sense of audience, since the implied meaning is four *of us* dead in Ohio, four *on our side* down—it has the character of a domestic body count (the war has officially come home) or of a telegram or news flash or smoke signal sent from ally to ally. This song's dissemination must be understood in relation to FM radio (a radio band initially developed by the Army for communicating classified information during WWII) and the proliferation by 1970 of FM radio stations with a looser, more permissive format, stereophonic sound, and a slightly anti-commercial, anti-establishment edge. There were no "voice of God" announcers on these stations, which sometimes played entire album sides with a wink to home recording.

Sometimes students observe instances when songs function onamatopoeically, imitating extra-musical sounds, as the TV news jingle evokes the Morse code of ticker tape. Ozzy Osbourne's "Crazy Train" deploys not just the image but the sound of a runaway freight train as the metaphor of an out-of-control arms race. In Jimi Hendrix' iconic Woodstock performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner," the improvised guitar solo seems to veer into the sound of bombs dropping on Vietnam—sometimes protest is, as with Bob Dylan, registered through lyrics, while sometimes it is inscribed into the sound of a song. For another example, "American Idiot" by Green Day—a 2004 song—offers acid commentary on the U.S. public's gullible response to the Department of Homeland Security Advisory System and the war in Iraq. Here is a sample of the lyrics:

Well maybe I'm the faggot America

I'm not a part of a redneck agenda

Now everybody do the propaganda

And sing along to the age of paranoia

Each of the lines is, of course, punctuated by an answering, echoing guitar riff of the same length (part of a rock tradition going back to "Summertime Blues")—a riff that in this case seems stylistically somewhat mock moronic or mock automatic, enacting within the sound of the record a tidy drama of submission and obedience.

Some students are possessed of a sophisticated understanding that allows distinctions between countercultural forms. One writes of the rift between two apparently allied forms, folk and rock:

> Folk fans prided themselves on the traditional roots and soulful quality of their music, and were often offended by the dynamic sounds of the electric guitar that characterized rock and roll. Even though folk music was a strong influence in the formation of rock, and they shared many of the same topical themes of protest, there was still an opposition between the two.

In the face of all this counterculture, some students will choose songs that defiantly assert traditional values, such as Merle Haggard's 1969 release, "Okie from Muskogee," an anti-hippie, proud-to-be-traditional song intended for the citizens whom President Nixon called the "silent majority" of Americans: the people who worked hard, went to church, raised their families, and kept their families, and kept their opinions to themselves. That song provides some ancestry to post-9/11 country songs that express patriotism and sometimes even xenophobia. This can all get slightly sticky during class discussion. During this unit, each student takes a turn punching up an

interesting song on YouTube on the classroom computer for just about 60 seconds—one verse, one chorus, just a taste of how the song sounds—for purposes of brainstorming and general discussion. An instructor might suddenly find the salty exchanges between Toby Keith and the Dixie Chicks being re-enacted in the classroom. The entire enterprise, though, can be safely negotiated so long as the instructor enforces an atmosphere of what first Otis Redding and then later Aretha Franklin called "R-E-S-P-E-C-T."