

Popular music and politics

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It is impossible to imagine twentieth-century American culture without the various strands of popular music that have both enlivened and confounded it. To be sure, the industry of American popular music, as we currently understand it, was created in the nineteenth century, before the advent of electronically reproduced sound. Tin Pan Alley, home of the American pop song; race music or the racialized categorization of commercial music based in minstrelsy; the creation of American patriotic music—from “The Star Spangled Banner” to “Dixie” as the national anthem of the confederacy; American folk music, from Shaker hymns to Negro Spirituals; and the cult of “genius” popular composer (Stephen Foster), the popular band leader (John Phillip Sousa) and the prodigiously popular pop singer (Jenny Lind) were all products of the nineteenth century.

Yet in the twentieth century, music has reigned supreme in American cultural life. No other country has been more shaped by its popular music or more entranced and disturbed by the music industry's financial success, the course of its aesthetic expression, and the unpredictable ends of its social possibilities. Historian Jacques Barzun called the transformation in the public reception of music in the twentieth century “a cultural revolution,” as amateur passion, unbridled zeal, and wearisome ubiquity characterize the presence of music—particularly popular music—in public life. Popular music became impossible to escape in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as it fell upon the public in torrents, from the sonic wallpaper of piped-in music heard everywhere from sporting events to the grocery store to the doctors office, to the music videos of MTV and VH1 that have made the public think that every image or picture requires a soundtrack, to the obsession with portable “personal” music players: there is music not just for every major occasion in life but for every moment of it.

Indeed, American popular music—from ragtime, jazz, and swing, to Broadway show tunes and standards, to country, to blues, rhythm and blues, rock, punk, hip-hop and beyond—is arguably the single most impressive of Americas cultural exports and among its most influential. The young everywhere seem to admire American popular music, and that appeal is what gives it such power. Even many stodgy American leaders recognized this in the cold war era when they used popular music as a cultural and ideological tool in the fight against communism. (In the current war on terrorism, Islamic extremists have pointed to American popular music as a sign of decadence and moral corruption, an opinion held by more than a few Americans.)

The dramatic impact of U.S. popular music has resulted from a set of circumstances that are not unique to the United States but are indeed unique in their combination:

- the introduction of recorded sound at the turn of the twentieth century, which transformed the music industry and spread music faster than ever before
- the rising number of immigrants—especially Jewish, and to a lesser extent, Irish immigrants who, because of their status of being not quite the equal of white Protestants and thus frequently condemned to the cultural margins, played an essential role in the creation and marketing of popular music
- a significant population of African Americans—for whom music always had important cultural and

social functions—that has helped to shape American musical tastes and dance forms

- the advent of radio, which exposed millions of people to a variety of music
- the advent of the long-playing record album, which changed the way artists conceived of recorded music and the way the music business packaged and marketed it
- the influence of Latin America from musical forms like the tango and the mambo to musicians, including the Cuban bandleader Xavier Cugat, who appeared in a number of American movies in the 1930s and 1940s; Brazilian singer, guitarist, pianist, and songwriter Antonio Carlos Jobim, who helped invent the bossa nova craze of the 1960s; and Mexican American guitarist Carlos Santana, who was among the first to create the genre now known as Latin rock via his blend of rock, salsa, and jazz
- the rise of American urban life at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the resulting expansion of the machinery of American popular culture into music

No country developed such an extensive and intensive commercial “mass” culture as the United States, and music was its centerpiece, as important to Hollywood film as it was to social dance, important as a programmatic art meant to accompany or explain or contain a narrative and as an art form referring purely to itself as music with no narrative references. The power of popular music to arouse an emotional response helps explain its strong appeal to young people and its use as an erotic or romantic stimulant.

Popular Music and Politics

Although little American popular music is explicitly political in the sense of advocating a specific political ideology or interpreting current events in an overtly political way, 1930s leftist folk music by performers like Pete Seeger, Josh White, Woody Guthrie, the Almanac Singers, and others made songs like “United Front,” “On the Picket Line,” “Jim Crow Train,” “Bad Housing Blues,” “Hard, Ain’t It Hard,” “No, No, No Discrimination,” and “The Hammer Song” popular. Folk music had a resurgence in the late 1950s through the mid-1960s, with performers like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, the Chad Mitchell Trio, Odetta, and Phil Ochs making, on occasion, explicitly political music, spurred largely by the civil rights movement and protests against the war in Vietnam. Some of these songs—“I Ain’t Marching Anymore,” “Blowing in the Wind,” “The Times, They Are a-Changin’,” “Alice’s Restaurant,” and “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?”—became famous and commercially successful. But it would be incorrect to characterize the folk resurgence of this period as preoccupied solely or mostly with political music or, more accurately, songs with politicized lyrics. Dylan, for example, influenced other musicians more with his poetic and cryptic lyrics than with any political implications his lyrics may have borne. He liberated the pop song more than he politicized it.

The 1960s folk revival is more rightly understood as a “roots” movement, or an attempt to return to “authentic” American music, which was always the claim for this music by its adherents. This return to the “primitive church,” as it were, happens from time to time in American popular music as a revolt against commercialism and the formulaic. (In jazz, bebop was much the same kind of “primitive church” creative reaction to the big band swing that preceded it. In black dance music, rap was a “primitive church” creative reaction to the commercialism of disco.)

Such movements, though, are not purely aesthetic in nature. There is an underlining political impulse that informs most “roots” challenges against what is seen as an illegitimate hegemony that has both stolen the music from its rightful owners and creators and debased it in a process that dilutes or contains the music’s original insurgent implications. Bebop as a self-consciously black music created by black musicians is a good example of this sort of roots revolt against the whiteness of swing.

Other overtly political songs appeared occasionally in popular music genres throughout the twentieth century—including jazz singer Billie Holiday’s performance of the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit” in 1939; folk-rock singer Barry McGuire’s “Eve of Destruction” in 1965, a song protesting political violence; Mac Davis’s “In the Ghetto” (1969), sung by Elvis Presley; and pop-folk singer Tracy Chapman’s “Talkin’ ‘bout a Revolution” in 1988—but never consistently or in large numbers. Not even rap, a music whose appeal was in part based on the reality of the street and implicit protest against the hypocrisy of the status quo, produced many overtly

political songs.

Popular music creators never thought it was a good idea to make “political” music as it did not, in most instances, sell well. “If you want to send a message, call Western Union,” was the common retort of most music creators and businesspeople when asked about making music with an obvious or clear political slant. (Elvis Presley was reluctant to record “In the Ghetto,” a huge hit for him, for that very reason: he did not want to be associated with “message” music.) The assumption was that people listened to popular music for escape or entertainment, not for political indoctrination, to shape their political consciousnesses, or to become politically aware—although, to be sure, people may go to some explicitly political music to have their political beliefs affirmed.

What Is Political Music?

The existence of political music—or, more accurately, politicized popular music—raises two questions. The first is whether politically oriented popular music is largely protest and leftist oriented. Irving Berlin's “God Bless America” (written in 1918 and revised in 1938) is a political song, even though it is clearly not a protest or leftist piece. George M. Cohan's jaunty World War I song “Over There” (1917) is clearly political, as is Sergeant Barry Sadler's “Ballad of the Green Berets” (1966), but neither is leftist nor antiestablishment. The same can be said for more recent patriotic songs like country singer Toby Keith's “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” (2003), Neil Diamond's “America” (1980), Dan Hartman and Charlie Midnight's “Living in America” (1985; sung by James Brown), and Sammy Johns' “America,” (1986; sung by Waylon Jennings).

James and Rosamond Johnson's “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (1900), also known as the “black national anthem,” is not leftist; its lyrics tell the story of endurance and triumph rather than protest, and it is thus essentially a patriotic song for African Americans. And James Brown's paean to staying in school, “Don't Be a Dropout” (1966), or his antidrug song “King Heroin” (1972), or Chuck Berry's “Back in the USA” (1959) are not ironic or “edgy” in the obvious way that Jewel's “America” (2003) is, but all have political messages. Political popular music is more likely to be patriotic or conventionally bourgeois liberal in its sentiments than leftist in orientation.

In short, what constitutes the political in popular music may be more complex and varied than many people think. The great bulk of political music in the nineteenth century, some of John Phillip Sousa's marching tunes or “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” among other examples, are not protest pieces but patriotic ones.

The second question is whether political music can only be political per se if a song has intelligible lyrics. If political music depends on its lyrics to convey its message, how can any musician be sure that listeners even understand the lyrics, much less the intended message of the words? Studies have discovered that most people do not fully understand the lyrics to most of the songs they like, except for those written for musical shows or films. If listeners misunderstand many of the lyrics they hear, do lyrics really contribute to the emotional impact of a particular tune? Even more important, can instrumental music be political? When jazz saxophonist Sonny Rollins released his 1958 album, “Freedom Suite,” how could a listener know from anything except the title (and the artist's accompanying notes) that it was meant as a musical commentary about the civil rights movement? The same might be said for the 1961 tune “Freedom March” by guitarist Grant Green, or saxophonist John Coltrane's 1963 tune “Alabama,” which was meant to be a musical commentary on Martin Luther King's bloody Birmingham campaign of that year.

To be sure, a great number of political issues and concerns are implicit in American popular music, sometimes reflecting the politics of the people who created it, but much of it reflects the beliefs and anxieties of the general public or the political strains in the culture. Frequently, American political leaders have used popular music at political rallies, such as Harry Truman using “I'm Just Wild about Harry” when he ran for the presidency in 1948. (Whether Truman knew the song was written by black songwriters Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake is interesting to consider, but it hardly mattered in the way that he used the song because it was not intended to convey any political message other than the positive, rousing use of his name.)

Frequently, however, politicians use popular music to promote cultural and political values and not merely to

wind up a crowd at a political rally. For instance, in the 2008 presidential race, Alaska governor Sarah Palin, only the second woman to run on a major party ticket, often used Shania Twain's "She's Not Just Another Pretty Face" to end her rallies, which underscored not only the governor's good looks but also acknowledged her nod to feminism as she wished to be judged as a capable politician. The song attacks sexism while slyly evoking it. Its popularity with working-class whites was also intended to stress the governor's populist aspirations. Many politicians look for a popular song to do just this sort of symbolic work for them when they are running for office.

Race and Censorship

Two particular areas in which politics has had an impact on American popular music are race and censorship. American popular music has been sold by race since the days of minstrelsy; that is, in the United States, there is "black" music and "white" music, and each presumably bears the racial traits of its creators. Blacks were good for rhythm and sensual music; whites were better at harmony and more cerebral music. In the twentieth century, music composed and performed by black artists became a distinct commercial category known as "race music" or "race records," a classification eventually replaced by rhythm and blues, then soul music, and finally black music.

Black music is perhaps easier to recognize than to define. But many African Americans themselves have never been fully comfortable with what they felt to be the exploitation of ethnic content of their music, often wishing to self-consciously reethnicize it (as in the case of soul music or "gangsta" rap), so that whites could not copy it; or blatantly politicize it (as in the case of songs by a host of artists including Curtis Mayfield, Public Enemy, Gil Scott-Heron, and Nina Simone), as something suitable only for a black artist performing before a black audience. Historically, the designation of black music not only characterized and categorized but also stigmatized this music culturally, artistically, and politically.

For much of the twentieth century, black musicians were not permitted to perform "white" music or any nonexplicit racial music. For instance, it was thought that blacks were not culturally or temperamentally suited to compose for strings, to play classical music, or to write or perform "art" music generally. They were denied both jobs and creative outlets (from film scoring to chairs in symphony orchestras), and also were paid less for doing the same work as white musicians. In the racialization of popular music, blacks were not permitted to play "non-black" music, by and large, because it was thought they could not; on the other hand, whites were thought to be insufficiently intuitive to be able to play black music. "Crossing over" was fraught with all sorts of anxiety: many African Americans have never liked the George and Ira Gershwin/Dubose Heyward opera **Porgy and Bess** (1935)—the most important operatic work written for black performers and probably the most famous opera produced by an American—in part because it was written by whites; and many see such artists as Benny Goodman, called the "King of Swing," and Elvis Presley, the king of rock and roll, as imitators and thieves who profited by stealing black musical idioms and performing them for a larger white audience. Until the 1960s, whites controlled all aspects of the music business: the performance venues, the press and critical apparatus, the record companies, the music publishing houses, and the unions. Some African Americans also have been suspicious of certain black musicians who have had great appeal to white audiences, like rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix and jazzman Louis Armstrong or even less seminal artists like Johnny Mathis, Tracy Chapman, and Richie Havens. Even the black-owned record company Motown went through a period in the late 1960s when many blacks thought the company, led by the great crossover group, the Supremes, made music that sounded "too white."

Popular music has always been subjected to censorship on grounds as diverse as sexual indecency, poor quality (thus, fostering bad taste), moral corruption, and excessive racial or ethnic content (therefore Africanizing or "niggerizing" the culture). Ragtime and especially jazz were condemned on these grounds by the white musical establishment, the white conservative Christians, and black bourgeoisie and black religious groups, who believed either that popular black dance music was low-class, bred crime, and failed to uplift the race or that it was the devil's music and celebrated sin. These factions, with varying amounts of energy, sought to suppress these forms of music by discouraging the young from listening to them and banning their sale or performance when they could.

Such efforts intensified after World War II with the rise of rock and roll, which many thought to be an even

more virulent musical disease than jazz or ragtime. Censorship efforts included the banning of rock and roll on certain radio stations, the destruction of rock and roll records in mass demonstrations, and attempts to water down the more explosive or less seemingly elements of the music through more traditional arrangements sung by “respectable” performers. In the mid-1980s the Parents Music Resource Center, led by wives of prominent politicians, instigated congressional hearings on the subject of heavy metal and rap song lyrics that it considered obscene. Some critics saw similarities between this effort and the comic book scare of the early 1950s: in both instances, the industries under attack chose to regulate their content through labeling rather than engage in a fight over First Amendment rights. Some blacks thought this was simply another way for the white establishment to attack the “immorality” of black music, although, to be sure, many blacks were made uneasy by the explicit lyrics of many rap songs. Music companies agreed to put warning labels on recordings with song lyrics that contained obscene or pornographic language or violent imagery.

Politics and popular music is a complex subject, for so much beyond the will or inclination of the artist determines what music will be popular in any commercial or aesthetic way: where and how the music is recorded; what instruments are used and the musical abilities of the performers; how the music is distributed, marketed, and sold (the Internet has greatly affected this in recent years); how listeners choose to listen to the music; how successfully the music accommodates some visual representation of itself (music videos have become essential for nearly all popular music in the last 30 years); and how the music is reviewed and criticized. The incredible complexity of the role popular music plays in American life is contradictory enough to ensure that the politics popular music both evokes and is subjected to will always be difficult to measure.

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GERALD EARLY

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