

CHAPTER 15: CONCLUSION: THEMES OF AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC

Chapter Outline

I. Music and Identity

A. Race and ethnicity

1. White fascination with black music
2. Relationship between African American and European American musical traditions
3. Latin American tradition

a) A diverse Latin American tradition has reasserted itself again and again throughout the history of American popular music.

B. Sexuality and gender

1. Stylized images and stereotypes of American men

a) Comfortable middle-class husband and father in Gene Austin's "My Blue Heaven" (1927)

b) Footloose hobo in Jimmie Rodgers's "Waitin' for a Train" (1928)

c) Unemployed yet optimistic ex-GI in Louis Jordan's "Choo Choo Ch' Boogie" (1946)

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d) Mythological super-male in Muddy Waters's anthem "Hoochie Coochie Man" (1954)

e) Interracial male bonding in Run-D.M.C. and Aerosmith's "Walk This Way" (1986)

2. Stylized images and stereotypes of American women

a) Stephen Foster's ethereal "Jeanie" (1854)

b) Malevolent super-female in Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog" (1953)

c) Mature, world-weary persona in Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to Do with It" (1984)

d) Young feminist in Ani Di Franco's "Not a Pretty Girl" (1995)

3. Relationships between men and women

a) Many voices, attitudes, and viewpoints have been represented.

(1) Misdirected jealousy of "After the Ball," America's first million-selling song (1892)

(2) Tense call and response of Hank Thompson's "The Wild Side of Life" (1952) and Kitty Wells's "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels" (1952)

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(3) Mature resignation of Carole King's "It's Too Late"
(1971)

(4) Old-fashioned chivalry of Kenny Rogers's "Lady"
(1980)

(5) Freudian angst of Prince's "When Doves Cry" (1984)

4. Love and sex

a) Censorship

(1) Cleaned-up cover versions, such as Big Joe Turner's
"Shake Rattle and Roll" by Bill Haley and the Comets

(2) "Childproofed" versions of hip-hop and alternative
lyrics, with offensive references omitted

b) Nonheterosexual relationships

(1) Many of Cole Porter's love songs were written with
other men in mind.

(2) The Village People's "YMCA" and "In the Navy"

(3) Performers' fashion personas that blur public
perceptions of their sexual orientation.

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(a) Little Richard, David Bowie, Prince, and
Madonna

c) Music seems well suited to carrying multiple meanings in regard to sexuality, depending on who is listening.

5. Class distinctions

a) Popular music is full of references to wealth, poverty, and the effect of economic matters on the human heart.

(1) In Chuck Berry's "Maybellene" (1955), the working-class V-8 Ford and the more expensive Cadillac Coupe de Ville

(2) The Crystals' 1962 hit "Uptown"

6. Generational identity

a) Has been crucial to the workings of the American music industry

b) Twelve- to sixteen-year-old age bracket—patrons of teenybopper acts like the Backstreet Boys, the Spice Girls, and Britney Spears

c) Seventeen- to twenty-five-year-old age bracket—important to the industry's sales of rock, rap, and alternative music

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- d) Popular music provides a unique window into the changing conceptions of adolescence.

II. Technology and the Music Business

A. Technology

1. Innovations that have changed the way popular music has been produced and disseminated via the mass media
 - a) Phonograph (1877)
 - b) Radio (1922)
 - c) Electric microphone (1925)
 - d) Sound film (1927)
 - e) Magnetic tape-recording and the long-playing disc (1940s)
 - f) FM radio (1950s)
 - g) Home video, cable television
 - h) Portable tape player
 - i) Digital recording and the compact disc
2. New technologies have opened up creative possibilities for artists.

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- a) Technology has not always been an agent of change.
- b) Digital technologies have enabled artists to excavate the musical past by sampling segments of earlier performances.

3. The ADAT

- a) Introduced in 1992 by Alesis
- b) Became the new standard for digital music making
- c) Eight-track digital synthesizer recorder that could expand to 128 tracks with the addition of units
- d) Consumers could set up home studios inexpensively.
- e) Professionals could use the same technology to create highly sophisticated digital sound facilities.

4. Pro-Tools

- a) Music software program designed to run on personal computers
- b) Enabled recording engineers and musicians to control every parameter of musical sound, including not only pitch and tempo but also the quality of a singer's voice or an instrumentalist's timbre

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5. The music business

a) Clear Channel

(1) Publicly traded corporation that owns more than 1,200 radio stations, 39 television stations, 100,000 advertising billboards, and 100 live performance venues, enabling them to present more than 70 percent of all live events nationwide

b) The Internet—vast concatenation of millions of computers linked by a global network

c) MP3—digital file compression system that allows sound files to be compressed to as little as one-twelfth of their original size

d) File sharing and free downloading over the Internet

(1) MP3.com

(a) Founded in 1997 by Michael Robertson

(b) The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) filed a lawsuit against MP3.com in 2000.

MP3.com was forced to remove all files owned by the corporations.

(2) Napster

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(a) Internet-based software program that enabled computer users to share and swap files

(b) The RIAA filed a suit against Napster, and a court injunction forced it to shut down operations in February 2001.

(3) “Peer-to-peer” (p2p) file-sharing networks were established in the wake of Napster’s closure. The services claim exemption from copyright law because there is no central server in which music files are even temporarily stored, and thus no “place” in cyberspace to which an act of copyright violation can be traced, apart from the millions of network users.

(4) iPod

(a) Introduced in 2001 by Apple Computer

(b) Could store up to 1000 songs on its internal hard drive

(c) Enabled listeners to create unique libraries of music reflecting their tastes

(5) “Podcasting”—method of online audio distribution in which digital sound files are uploaded to a website, and

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listeners can automatically download files to portable players

6. *MGM Studios v. Grokster*

(1) In June 2005, the Supreme Court handed down a ruling in *MGM Studios v. Grokster* in favor of the music and film corporations, holding that the software companies had in fact actively encouraged copyright infringement.

7. Digital technology liberates the content of a recording from its physical medium.

- a) Involves the translation of musical sound into pure information, encoded in streams of ones and zeros
- b) Music can be transmitted, reproduced, and manipulated in a “virtual” form, free from the constraints of any particular technology.

III. Centers and Peripheries

A. The mainstream and its margins

1. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain the distinction between the mainstream of popular music and its margins.

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2. Two concepts:

a) There is a musical mainstream and there are margins, involving cultural and stylistic distinctions that have grown more and more blurry over time.

b) The market for popular music has an economic and institutional center and a periphery.

3. In the early twentieth century, these two dichotomies fit together neatly.

a) By the end of the century, the two dichotomies as well as the correlation between them had broken down almost completely.

b) The spread of digital technology seems to be completing a process of total decentralization, as anybody with a computer anywhere can, with increasing ease, produce and market his or her own recordings.

c) The rise of international pop superstars and the emergence of world music as a distinct category suggests that the center-and-periphery concept must be recast in truly global terms.