

Mass Media Images in Popular Music: An Examination of Media Images in Student Music Collections and Student Attitudes Toward Media Performance

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Article:

Popular Music: Harbinger of Social Change?

Symbolic interactionists Kenneth Burke¹ and Hugh Duncan² have stressed that social interaction is not a process, but a dramatic expression, an enactment of roles by individuals who seek to identify with each other in the search to create a social scheme. A community presents itself through art or popular culture, which in turn determines society. The master symbols through which the world is viewed (and in terms of which its citizens act) are created and manipulated through popular culture. Pitirim Sorokin³ argued that changes in popular culture foreshadow changes in society. Since music is one aspect of popular culture it seems only reasonable to conclude that attitudes expressed musically may have emotionally strengthened and politically meaningful effects.

The question of whether popular culture leads, follows or even reflects social attitudes was studied in the early 1970s, when parents, teachers and political leaders were concerned that rock and roll music was a major aid in the "subversion" of American youth. Denisoff and Levine⁴ and Robinson and Hirsch⁵ investigated whether subject matter of protest songs was perceived by teenagers and discovered that liking a particular song and understanding the meaning of its lyrics were two distinct phenomena. In the Robinson and Hirsch survey conducted in 1967 and 1968, over 70 percent of the young people sampled were attracted to the sound of the song rather than its meaning. The researchers concluded that, although student receptivity to what was formerly "underground" music would cause this music to become increasingly popular, the vast majority of teenage listeners would be unaware of what the lyrics were about. The findings of both studies supported earlier conclusions by C. Greenberg⁶ and Jacques Barzun⁷ that popular music is simply background noise. However, given the fact that drug use in this country and protests against the Vietnam war, conservative policies of the Nixon administration and social hypocrisy (all subjects of "deviant underground music") continued to grow after 1968, a conclusion that popular music does not influence and rarely reflects social values would be overhasty.

Media Image and Public Confidence:

Of immediate concern to the communication industry is the question of government supervision. John Hohenberg in *Crisis for the American Press*⁸ claimed that the concept of an independent press has fewer defenders than it had for many years. The implicit fear in the industry is that Congress, stimulated by an offended public, may take steps to curtail media freedoms. Could media-critical music be an indicator of a growing popular attitude? Is there an increasing lack of faith in the responsibility of an independent media?

Gallup polls indicate that public confidence in the media is not total, but better than many institutions and fairly steady from 1973-79. However, the polls also indicate that the public may blame media for some social problems. The polls additionally show that the public believe both print and broadcast news media are apt to slant coverage of political and social issues.

Negative Media Images in Popular Music:

In 1982 following some unfavorable treatment by the press, rock singer Don Henley together with producers Danny Kortchmar and Greg Ladany released a five and a half minute rock satire on television news called "Dirty Laundry." The song was a success for Asylum Records with nine weeks on the charts in 1982 and was still being charted in January and February of 1983. The song reached fifth on the charts and is listed by Variety as one of the best sellers of 1982. Although the impetus for the song's creation was one person's disappointment in the sensational character of a television news program, could the song's wide popularity signal a growing doubt about the reliability and judgment of the media among the young?

A cursory glimpse of recent popular music turned up many disturbing media images. Several songs pictured the media as powerful manipulators of individuals as in Ozzy Osbourne's 1981 release of "Crazy Train" in which the media controls by peddling a certain way of life. Joe Jackson's 1982 release of "TV Age" describes a period governed by television:

Here we stand
Remote control buttons in our sweaty little hands,
As one man
(We're lining up and waiting for someone's command),
We don't move
(We send out for food, get the news on video).

Frank Zappa's "I am the Slime," which is concerned with television content, declares:

I'm the best you can get
Have you guessed me—yet?
I'm the slime oozing out
From your TV set.

Other songs picture the news content of media as instruments of depression. Mac Davis' current country song, "The Beer Drinking Song," advocates beer drinking rather than news watching because watching the news is too depressing.

You can't even look at TV these days
Without getting scared half to death;
The Eyewitness News leaves me used and abused
And I find myself gasping for breath.

Similarly, news, depression and alcohol are linked in the lyrics of "Too Much Time On My Hands" by Styx. A similar refrain is also found in "Cruiser" a 1981 release by the Cars, which advises flipping the switch or pulling the plug.

One of the most popular rock and roll artists, Billy Joel, presents several unnerving media images in his 1980 album Glass Houses. Of ten songs recorded four referred negatively to some form of mass communication. News is painted as an institution concerned more with its own policies and constraints than in human suffering. For example, in "Close to the Borderline" a young girl about to commit suicide times her death to make the six o'clock news deadline. In the rock ballad "Sleeping with the Television On" Joel describes a person waiting hopefully for something good to come on TV only to fall asleep and wake up to white noise. In Joel's latest album, Nylon Curtain, which spent eleven weeks on the charts in 1982 and was also charted in 1981, the song "Pressure" describes media as another of the disconnected pressures of contemporary life.

Popular music also points up the sensational qualities of the media as in Don Henley's description of TV's love for "Dirty Laundry."

She can tell you about the plane crash
With a gleam in her eye
It's interesting when people die
Give us dirty laundry.

In the song "Desperate But Not Serious" the new wave group Adam Ant says the better qualities of people aren't exciting enough to be newsworthy. Similarly, Joe Jackson complains of the superficiality and prying of news media in his song "Sunday Papers."

Another image presented of the media in popular music is that of a tease, arousing and frustrating the public by showing us an ideal life we can't have and things we won't possess. An example of this is a song by the Jukes called "I'm So Anxious" in which TV advertising arouses the troubled desires of a viewer. Other examples of media as tease include the title cut from the album *Magazine* by Heart, "Centerfold" by the J. Giles band and a 1980 song by Bruce Springsteen called "You Can Look but You Better Not Touch," in which a television viewer is teased into feeling mean by what he sees on T.V.

In a song called "Sexuality" the singer Prince expresses a broad mistrust of a pervasive medium that deals in sex and violence. In Chick Corea's "Hot News Blues" sung by Al Jarreau (1978) a similar complaint is made about sex and violence in the newspaper.

Finally, the other popular lyrics describe a general disgust and boredom with the media such as Pink Floyd's "Nobody Home," Peter Townsend's "Empty Glass," a song by Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five called "The Message," and a song by the Boomtown Rats called "Nothing Happened Today."

The purpose of this study is not to suggest that criticisms of the media in popular music aren't deserved. Inevitably there have been times when the mass media have earned disapproval. The media do have their weaknesses. However, under the threat that public censure of mass media content may lead to government supervision, it seems appropriate to test again the proposition that popular music may be the prophet of public opinion. Specific questions under investigation in this study were: what kinds of media images are commonly found in the music collections of college students? Are some media more favorably portrayed than others? Are young people today more aware of lyrics than the young people of earlier studies? Do lyrics influence musical preference? Are negative media images consistent with student opinions of media performance? And, finally, would a special orientation toward media, which might be found among communication majors, account for differences in perceptions of lyrics?

Hip To Hate TV?

Two separate methods were employed to answer the questions above. The first step was to analyze the content of popular music to discover how the media are described and the extent to which media images are negative or positive. Undergraduate students from an introductory communications class were asked to bring in titles of songs from their own music collections that contain media references. Of the more than 200 song titles received, 85 separate songs were left to be analyzed after duplicate song titles were discarded.

The sample was analyzed according to media emphasis (whether media were given a dominant theme, moderate theme or given only a passing mention), the valence of the media image presented (whether the media were given a positive, negative or neutral image), and which medium was presented. (In some cases a song presented more than one medium; a total of 93 images were analyzed). Intercoder reliability for these four judgments averaged 91.4% for two coders.

Results of the analysis show television as the most sung about medium with radio coming a close second. However, most songs about television presented negative images whereas most songs about radio were positive. These differences might be explained by the natural reluctance of musicians to harshly criticize the medium which promotes the music industry. Newspapers did little better than television in these lyrics.

What Students Say About Media And Music:

The second step was to discover to what extent lyrics influence musical preference, whether media images in music were consistent with students' confidence in media performance, and whether a special orientation toward the media, which was assumed to be characteristic of students intending to major in mass communications, would cause differences in a student's perception of lyrics.

On Friday, January 21, 1983, students from two introductory mass communications classes were surveyed. Of the 223 students surveyed, 94 indicated they were planning to major in mass communication.⁹ The students were nearly evenly divided between men and women (109 men and 114 women) but there were more women among majors (60%) than non-majors (45%). These students were questioned about their music listening habits, their familiarity with four specific songs, their recall of lyrics and agreement with the message that was presented in the four specific songs. Finally, students were questioned about their confidence in the performance of newspapers and television news.

Response to the questions about general listening habits showed clearly that Rock and Roll was the favorite type of music. Eighty percent of the respondents expressed a preference for Rock and Roll or some subcategory, such as Punk Rock, Acid Rock, Pop Rock, Soft Rock Rhythm and Blues or Beach Music. The next most popular category was Easy Listening at 8.5% followed by Country at 6% and Classical at 1%. Least liked musical types were more divided among the categories.

TABLE 1

MEDIA IMAGES IN POPULAR MUSIC: FROM STUDENT COLLECTIONS

| Media Emphasis | N=31 | N=29 | N=17 | N=8 | N=7 | N=1 |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|-----------|-----------|------|-------|
| | TV | Radio | Newspaper | Magazines | Film | Books |
| If Media Theme | | | | | | |
| Dominant: | | | | | | |
| Positive | 6% | 34%** | 0% | 12% | 14% | 0% |
| Negative | 29% | 7% | 24% | 25% | 29% | 0% |
| Neutral | 3% | 3% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| If Media Theme | | | | | | |
| Moderate: | | | | | | |
| Positive | 3% | 10% | 6% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Negative | 19% | 3% | 24% | 0% | 14% | 0% |
| Neutral | 10% | 0% | 17% | 0% | 14% | 0% |
| If Media Theme | | | | | | |
| Passing Mention: | | | | | | |
| Positive | 3% | 21% | 0% | 0% | 14% | 0% |
| Negative | 6% | 0% | 12% | 13% | 0% | 0% |
| Neutral | 19% | 21% | 17% | 50% | 14% | 100% |
| TOTALS | 100%* | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

*(Allow for rounding error.)

** (Differences between TV and Radio for positive/negative dominant imagery were significant beyond .001, $\chi^2 = 15.6$, DF = 1. Comparisons were not made for other media due to cell sizes.)

The four songs students were questioned about ("Dirty Laundry," "The Beer Drinking Song," "I am the Slime," and "TV Age") which were chosen from titles submitted by students in November of 1982. "Dirty Laundry"

was chosen for its popularity as a single. "TV Age," although not popular as a single, was on one of the fifty top selling LPs of 1982. (Thirteen weeks on the charts and also charted in 1981, the album's highest position was fifth in the nation.) "The Beer Drinking Song" was chosen as a representative of country music and "I am the Slime" as a representative of older (1976) hard rock. Students were played 12-second musical introductions as a memory cue prior to answering the questionnaire.

TABLE 2

Students' Comprehension of Lyrics of Selected Popular Songs *

| | "Dirty Laundry" n=211 | "Beer Drinking" n=69 | "I am the Slime" n=44 | "TV Age" n=26 |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| Lyrics Recalled and Understood | 58.7%** (124) | 27.5%** (19) | 18.1%** (8) | 26.9%** (7) |
| Lyrics not Recalled or Understood | 41.2% (87) | 72.4% (50) | 81.8% (30) | 73.0% (19) |
| | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

* (Respondents were students who reported they were familiar with a song, and who were asked to demonstrate knowledge of the lyrics or the meaning of the lyrics.)

** (Z tests showed significant differences at .05 level or better between groups recalling and understanding and groups not recalling and understanding lyrics for all four songs.)

TABLE 3

How Students Who Heard and Understood Songs Agreed with the Song's Media Imagery.*

| | "Dirty Laundry" | "Beer Drinking Song" | "I am the Slime" | "TV Age" | TOTAL |
|-------|-----------------|----------------------|------------------|--------------|-------|
| TRUE | 39 (31.4%) | 6 (31.5%) | 2 (25.0%) | 2 (28.5%) | 49 |
| FAIR | 79 (63.7%) | 11 (57.9%) | 3 (37.5%) | 4 (57.1%) | 97 |
| FALSE | 6 (4.8%) | 2 (10.5%) | 3 (37.5%) | 1 (14.5%) | 12 |
| N | 124 | 19 | 8 | 7 | 158 |
| % | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | |

*(A Chi-square value larger than 12.6 with 6 DF is significant at the .05 level; the Chi-square value for this table was 12.47; n.s. However, several cells were too small for reliable analysis. When "true" and "fair" were collapsed into a single category ("fair") and compared with "false," it was apparent that the students who heard and understood the lyrics of these songs thought they were fair representations of the media. The Chi-square value of 12.3 (DF = 3) for the reconstructed table was significant at the .01 level.)

The determination of whether a student remembered and understood lyrics was made from an analysis of responses to a question asking for a summary of a song's message. (See Table 2). Students either left the space blank, adequately summarized the message, made an inadequate response or replied that they didn't know what the song meant. For example, the responses, "The media rely on sensationalism" and "... the media try to get some great stories about tragedies because people like to hear gory stuff" were recorded as indications that subjects remembered and understood the lyrics to "Dirty Laundry." Responses such as "Gossip" and "Life is full of struggles to-overcome—it is a constant job like doing Laundry" were coded as inadequate responses. Other examples of answers coded as inadequate included the following summary for "I am the Slime": "... everybody

in the world ought to think of themselves as Slime because that's the way they are treated." Responses coded as adequate included "Drink your problems away" and "Forget bad news and get stoned" for "The Beer Drinking Song," "... the stuff on TV is garbage" for "I am the Slime," and "Government and TV control us" and "...people are different now because of TV" for Joe Jackson's "TV Age."

Table 2 shows that a large number of students understood or could recite some of the lyrics of "Dirty Laundry," but few of the students could explain the meanings of three other songs. Why this mixed response, this ambiguity? It might be explained by the pervasive popularity of "Dirty Laundry." Knowledge of the song might have been socially requisite, or the song may have been so often played that otherwise disinterested listeners might have been incidentally exposed. When all four of the songs are considered, the data seem to confirm earlier research indicating that young people most often do not pay a great deal of attention to lyrics. As further evidence, we asked each of our respondents which aspect of a song was more likely to determine their liking (preference). Thirty-one percent pointed to tempo; 25% said lyrics; 14% said they were attracted by musical instrumentation; 13% said their preference was defined by the vocalist, and 10% said the musicians. Others pointed to other factors such as "a general liking," or to a combination of qualities.

Our next step was to sort out respondents who heard and understood the lyrics, and to determine whether those respondents believed the lyrics to be true, fair, or false representations of media reality.

Table 3 shows that among those who were familiar with the lyrics, most by far believed the lyrics about media were true or fair. This outcome probably can be explained adequately by consistency theory. Students for whom lyrics were important were those who understood the lyrics, and those lyrics likely were gratifying to them, consistent with their conceptions of reality.

Given negative images of media in music, and given that a large number of respondents perceived and understood the images, and given that—for those who understood the lyrics—the lyrics were often considered true or fair, what would be the "confidence level" students have for media? In other words, how confident would be the general student population in media performance? We asked our 223 students to estimate the extent to which news stories are "accurate," and we interpreted their response in terms of "confidence" in the media. Table 4 shows that 73% of the respondents believed that "nearly all" or "most" tv stories were accurate, but only 42% believed "nearly all" or "most" newspaper stories were accurate. The difference was significant by Z test at the .01 level. Why the difference, especially when tv was the most sung about medium, and when most of the tv images were negative? One possibility is the distinction between entertainment programs and news; the respondents may object to some aspects of programming, yet remain convinced that tv news, with its emphasis on video tape, is highly accurate. National polls have shown television news to be highly credible. The responses to newspaper accuracy are more worrisome; but they also are consistent with polls which indicate young people are not enamored of newspapers.

TABLE 4

| STUDENTS' CONFIDENCE IN MEDIA ACCURACY | | |
|--|----------------|-----------------|
| | TV NEWS | NEWSPAPERS |
| a NEARLY ALL STORIES ARE ACCURATE | 15% (N=34) | 10% (N=23) |
| b MOST STORIES ARE ACCURATE | 58% (N=130) | 32% * (N=72) |
| c ABOUT HALF ARE ACCURATE | 20% (N=44) | 43% (N=96) |
| d FEWER THAN HALF ARE ACCURATE | 6% (N=13) | 13% (N=28) |
| e HARDLY ANY ARE ACCURATE | 1% (N=2) | 2% (N=4) |

(*When levels a and b were combined, and percentages for tv and newspapers were compared, the difference between proportions was significant by Z test at the .01 level.)

Summary:

Do these results portend worsening attitudes toward media, and thus somehow imply a hostile or critical environment for the exercise and maintenance of the First Amendment as it relates to the free press? We cannot say for certain, of course, just as researchers are unable to say categorically whether music teaches attitudes or attitudes lead music. We can only speculate based on our data and on our study of the previous research. It does seem to us that there is more media-critical music today, and that its mere existence is a likely source of social change, assuming that art reflects life. Further, it is clear that some media-critical songs are heard and comprehended by an appreciable percentage of persons for whom popular music is an important part of socialization. But comprehension may be more a function of the popularity of a particular piece of music than any pervasive critical attitude. Only a small portion of our sample reported the lyrics of a song usually attracted them. So NVC see a bit of discontent, a willingness to hear of media criticism, but no up-rising—no deepening cloud of concern that would pose a threat to the institution. The fact that our samples were "confident" about tv news but not newspaper news is worrisome. The newspaper industry is aware that readership among the young has declined. But students' apparent lack of confidence in newspapers may be related to some other factor, such as declining reading skills, rather than any particular newspaper failing. We have to conclude that the existence of heightened media-critical music makes possible or reflects the potential for social change, but that at this time the level of discontent with media is not well articulated; at this time, it is merely a mumble, related through songs.

Notes

- 1 Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1954).
- 2 Hugh Duncan, *Symbols in Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).
- 3 Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamic* (New York: Bedminister, 1937).
- 4 R.S. Denisoff and M. Levine, "Brainwashing or Background Noise: The Popular Protest Song." in *The Sounds of Social Change*: 213-221 (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972).
- 5 J. P. Robinson and P. Hirsch, "Teenage Response to Rock and Roll Protest Songs," in *The Sounds of Social Change*: 222.231 (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972).
- 6 G. Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitch," in B. Rosenberg and D. Manning White (eds.), *Mass Culture*: 98-107 (New York: Free Press, 1957).
- 7 Jacques Barzun, *Music in American Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1958).
- 8 John Hohenberg, *A Crisis for the American Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).
- 9 It should be noted that the survey was conducted in the first week of the introductory course, so differences between majors and non-majors would be due to personal inclination and not to instruction.