

The Most Significant Factors in the Progression of Mainstream

Pop Music Since the Late 1950s

AP Research

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Abstract

Mainstream pop music has led the music industry through rapid progression in style, composition, instrumentation, and competition since its establishment in the late 1950s. In this study, the swift progression will be observed to better understand what caused such quick change and how this will affect the future of music and the music work force. Interviews and song observations were conducted to explore the many perspectives of mainstream pop music. The results of this research may help music professionals more effectively understand the progression of popular music so they may better navigate the competitive industry in hopes of achieving and sustaining successful music careers.

Introduction

This research paper analyzes the greatest factors that led the progression of mainstream pop music since the late 1950s. First and foremost, it is important to define ‘mainstream pop music’ since this paper discusses the progression of *only* mainstream pop music. Mainstream pop in its most basic element can be described as the most popular music of a certain time period. It resonates with and is enjoyed best by the maximum number of people all around the world. However, according to Darrell Conklin (2014) of the Basque Foundation for Science, general popularity is typically determined by consumers of the United States, Europe, and Canada. As well, it is important to mention that mainstream pop is not a genre. It can be classified as a genre for labeling and generalization, however, in true retrospect it is not one type of music, rather a melting pot of popular music. At times, trends will conclude that pop of a certain era is more similar to one subgenre than another, however, pop is comprised of many subgenres. Popular examples of mainstream pop artists include Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Michael Jackson, U2, Mariah Carey, and Taylor Swift.

Since the late 1950s, pop music has surged through stylistic phases in eras of approximately ten years. Starting with the late 1950s, blues, ballads, and rock-n-roll emerge, quickly leading into the 1960s when rock-n-roll is in full force. Then, the 1970s come about and pop music is sparkly, very defined, and uniform at times, then leading into drastic changes of the 1980s with the digital era. In the 1990s, music progresses into long, polished love ballads which then transform into the 2000s and 2010s with very fun, upbeat, party songs. From these short descriptions, a speedy progression can be seen throughout a very short period of time. There are many factors to consider when considering what made new music popular: technology,

songwriting, advancing instrumentation, business, and stardom. This paper will be observing which factors had the greatest effects on mainstream pop music of the last sixty years in hopes of discovering trends and how these trends might unfold into music in the future.

In the modern day where success in a music industry career is a struggle for the majority of musicians, research is crucial to observe the progression of music to understand where it has been and where it will lead so musicians are aware of what types of music work will yield success. Being that the music industry is very risky, spontaneous, and unpredictable, it was important to discover if there is anything stylistically predictable about it. What aspects drive music forward? What will people want to listen to in the future? Will musicians still be needed? Is there opportunity for aspiring music industry workers? This research will indulge in questions of these sorts. The topic initially started as an observation on specific patterns that could be found in pop music. This is similar to the current topic however it was too certain. Being that the music industry has been and is very hard to predict, finding specific patterns that *always* lead to success would not be possible. Almost every successful music industry worker 'made it' in a unique way. This applies similarly to the actual music in that listeners don't enjoy hearing the same thing over and over again. Lots of successful songs have usually been compositions that surprise the listener's ear, something unique and catchy, that the listener would never have thought of. In addition, the earlier topic was very general and did not observe the many perspectives that compose the music industry. At this point, it was important to observe the more critical components of the industry. The professionals involved in getting music from the writer's pad of paper to the listeners' ears individually contribute heavily to the overall success of a song, album, and/or artist.

Literature Review

Hiesun Cecilia Suhr (2011), an Assistant Professor at Miami University Hamilton in the field of music studies, authored the essay, “Understanding the Hegemonic Struggle between Mainstream Vs. Independent Forces: The Music Industry and Musicians in the Age of Social Media,” which is an overlook at technology’s impacts on music. Suhr starts by explaining how modern technology has impacted the world in general, how people communicate better, more effectively, and much quicker than ever before. She then goes on to narrow down these generalizations to the impacts made on the music industry, mainly social media and its impacts on artists. Social media has changed the entire economy of the entertainment industry as a whole. Self promotion used to be a very expensive process before the internet age without a label or promoter backing up an artist. Nowadays, self-promotion is very inexpensive and many times, free. Suhr goes on to make a striking point that the ‘virtual world’ is where musicians live. It’s the cheapest and most effective method for self-promotion and the chance of success. In rebuttal to her statement, Suhr also mentions that at a certain point all advertising methods are worthless, that at times, God-given talent and a quality product make no match to a proposed ‘DIY: Become Famous’ tool kit. In today’s society, hype around a talented individual can be much more effective than any sort of advertising, because hype is a larger form of advertising in itself.

In the essay, “Recorded Music: Philosophical and Critical Reflection,” Helen Daynes (2009), an Associate Researcher from the University of Hull, proposes an insightful graph depicting how certain pop subgenres are most easily expressed, comparing studio performance versus live performance and the necessity of certain kinds of performance pertaining to subgenre.

Firstly, she discusses how music recorded live is more desirable than studio recordings, just for effect and live ensemble interaction. Generally, this is true, however, does not function for all subgenres. She states that classical music is typically represented by its live performances and its ensemble operation and cooperation, whereas, rock-n-roll is most typically a studio art, using effects, and processing, and more complicated technicalities to produce a desirable sound. As well, she found a medium between live and studio performance in pop-jazz. Jazz is heavily comprised of improvised solos and musical settings making it very unpredictable and in the moment. Thus, pop-jazz is not represented by its written works but rather by the actual live performance, what the musicians were able to concoct at that very moment in time whether it is a live show or a studio recording.

Maria Styven (2007), a researcher in Industrial Marketing from the Lulea University of Technology, Sweden, discusses a detrimental epidemic that has gradually haunted musicians as the 20th century progressed in her essay, "The Intangibility of Musicians in the Internet Age." As music technology became increasingly advanced, music jobs that used to be done by specialists were being taken by all sorts of new devices and machines. Guitarists and keyboard players were replaced by automated synths. Drummers were replaced by drum machines. Recording engineers fell short to computer recording software. As the beginning of the Internet neared in the 1990s, many musicians and music workers had no competition to computers and machines. They had been replaced and had very limited options to seek for work. Styven goes on to explain how this epidemic has not improved at all in the 21st century and has only worsened. As more music is computer generated, the necessity for musicians in music is no

longer needed. Because of the computer's dominance in modern music, she expects this issue to remain for a long time if not forever.

Adam Ockelford, a lead researcher at the University of Roehampton, explains how the familiarity of a song plays into its popularity and longevity in his essay, "Expectations Evoked On Hearing A Piece Of Music For The First Time: Evidence From A Musical Savant."

Ockelford's first point states that often when someone hears a song for the first time, and the production is very original, it will be desired by the listener, because it is something they've never heard before. Every succeeded hearing will potentially decrease the emotional value of the song for the person as they get more used to it. When older music influences newer music it is more familiar and can cross itself with other songs or musical groups. The relations between newer songs and older songs can cause a new song to sound boring or unoriginal. Specifically inside of an original song, an aspect that makes it desirable and memorable is the use of musical motifs, or melodic/rhythmic consistencies that are recognizable and appear several times in a song. Ockelford conducted an experiment where he took fifty forty year old participants and had them listen to three songs that sounded similar. In the observations, it seemed that the participants were able to expect what would come up in the third song because they were already used to the structure of the first two songs. As well, the participants commented feeling that the music was pointless by the time they heard the third song, their interest was no longer stimulated.

A researcher from Gheorghe Dima Music Academy, Rodica Trandafir's (2010) essay, "Time and Music," goes through the significant change in musical writing and performing that came about in the 20th century. She begins by explaining how she believes music exists on three levels: composition, performance, and perception. In composition, having symmetry in

songwriting makes it easily perceived by more people. However, sometimes this will end up (and has ended up) as sounding fairly unoriginal. Throughout the 20th century, according to Trandafir, music was progressive mainly because of the advances in complex songwriting and how this music was perceived through recorded performance.

These academics essays provided concrete background information that helped make connections between the results of the original research conducted. Primarily, they were able to support connections between stylistic changes in pop music and how they correlate to the work demands in the music industry. As well, they all included aspects covering technology's impact on several key areas of the industry.

Methods

To conduct original data, two methods were used: interviews with music industry professionals and music academics and a case study of American Billboard #1 hits.

Beginning with interviews, music industry professionals were contacted from all over the United States, Canada, and Europe. These individuals spanned many different areas of the music industry including artists, musicians, producers, educators, historians, and songwriters. After several weeks of contacting and researching, interviews were secured with six individuals, a majority of which are based out of New York State and Los Angeles, California, the largest hubs of the mainstream pop music industry. These individuals include:

1) Mitch Holder, a world renowned L.A. Studio guitarist, active since the late 1960s who has done session work for many major pop artists such as Barbra Streisand, Barry Manilow, and the Bee Gees. As well, he was a guitarist on the Johnny Carson show for ten years (Personal communication, 2017).

2) Matthew Malley, a founding member, songwriter, and bass player for the multi-platinum selling band, The Counting Crows. After departing from the group in 2004, he built a recording studio where he records all types of acts and does session work and writing (Personal communication, 2017).

3) Tim Godwin, originally a touring guitarist for the 1970s band Air Supply (Personal communication, 2017). After leaving this group, he went on to play as a studio guitarist, a network television guitarist, and created a new band called Farmer that was the first band to sign with Aware Records, which soon after discovered artist John Mayer. Today, he works as an Artist Relations Director for Taylor Guitars in San Diego, California.

4) Phil Blackman, a very active individual in the industry since the early 1990s as a producer for acts such as The Fugees, Tony Iommi, and Stevie Wonder. After pursuing this for ten years, he went on to run a recording studio in Los Angeles for half a decade, then went back to school to get law credentials at UCLA Law School. Currently, he is a professor of Entertainment Law at Ithaca College, New York (Personal communication, 2017).

5) Bjorn Englen, a popular full-time Los Angeles Studio bassist, active since the late 1980s (Personal communication, 2017).

6) Austin Uphill, a Los Angeles Studio bassist, who entered the industry in the mid-2000s as a full-time studio musician (Personal communication, 2017). Recently, he has pursued a career in practicing law, and works as a bassist part-time, but is still heavily involved in the industry.

The professionals interviewed provided a useful mix of perspectives from all around the music industry. It ranges from writers, to studio musicians, to people involved with very famous acts, and educators and academics in the industry. As well, three of the six professionals have been involved in the industry since the early 1970s and the other three have been active since the 1990s and 2000s eras. This was constructive because a large variety of information and perspectives were collected from all over the last sixty years of music. The types of questions asked varied slightly between each professional because of the nature of their profession. However, the main theme was kept in mind during interviews: What did they do in the music industry? How did it effect the music industry? How did their work change over time? What is the tangibility of their original music profession today? They were also asked their general view of the mainstream pop music industry and what they envision for the future to understand how experienced professionals see the progression of the industry and their expectations for the future of the music industry as a whole.

The second method was a case study on #1 hit songs from the most notable music archive agency, the American Billboard Association, from their popular “Hot 100” charts. These charts display which songs and artists have the top one through one-hundred selling songs in America and for how long. Because the charts were founded in 1958, the top two hit singles from every year since 1958 were chosen, listened to, and analyzed for similarities, differences, patterns, and progression in mainstream pop music over the years. Additional aspects observed were tempo, mood, subgenres, theme/meaning, instrumentation, length, and inclusion of instrument solos in the song. These elements are insightful to observe because they uncover elements of the songs that can be easily compared. They are elements that define the way a song is composed and

constructed and how it fits or innovates the era it was popular in. The most critical factors observed were subgenres, meaning of the lyrics, and length and how it correlates to the construction of the song.

The reason that subgenre is so important is that it helps define eras. Most pop music is comprised of inspiration from other genres from a certain period of time, and then once it becomes outdated musicians find the next popular subgenre and invest their efforts into these. This study of the Billboard Hot 100 hits unveils a multitude of trends throughout pop music in the last sixty years.

Data

Digressing into data now, the late 1950s sets the scene. Mainstream pop music is born right after the jazz era with the new rave of Elvis Presley. Elvis is universally considered the start of mainstream pop music because his music was very catchy, it blended new genres, and he was the first superstar celebrity musician (Blackman, Godwin, Malley, 2017). Screaming fans were attached to his catchy tunes and his personality. In addition to Elvis, acts such as Chuck Berry and The Everly brothers rose to great fame because they had “catchy music in addition to likeable, fun, and attractive personalities” (Styven, 2007).

Early pop music, developing right out of the forties and fifties jazz era had notable jazz influence. Instruments such as acoustic guitar, upright acoustic bass, piano, drums, orchestras, and big bands were the very first instruments to come together to form what most consider a normal band layout (Austin Uphill). The instruments stayed traditional, but began to expand in functionality and use. Guitars were used more heavily to develop the new rock-n-roll sound of

the late fifties while still keeping a traditional backing of drums and upright bass, with appearances by backing orchestras and big bands.

Progressing into the 1960s, there was a large new infusion of subgenres including blues, latin, folk, acoustic/singer-songwriter, soul, and a massive uptake in rock-n-roll. The majority of the instruments from the fifties were used to infuse these subgenres, however the new additions of horn sections, electric bass, electric keyboards, background vocals and the revolutionary distorted electric guitar inspired the new types of sounds discovered in this era. As well, according to Thomas Shafer (2016) of the Chemnitz University of Technology, such broad use of instruments required lots of musicians and workers, which prompted a thriving music workforce. The new stylistic changes of the sixties were still based very much on the fifties with progress into more complex music that ranged from soft pop to deep ballads to powerful rock. Themes of the music were based on genuine love but also expanded into a new trend of cheapened love, an expression of love and romanticism as if it is very universal and simple in all aspects. These types of songs dominated the charts and averaged around two minutes fifty seconds.

In the 1970s, music was very similar in most aspects to the 1960s. Subtle differences include more progression in instrumentation and studio techniques. Guitars, basses, and keyboards had more effects and studios could support more instruments recording at once. New subgenres of disco and funk emerged and with this, more fun and upbeat themes about everyday love were popular. At the same time, serious, wholesome ballads were still of substantial popularity. The most impactful advancement of the 1970s was songwriting. The average song

length increased to three minutes forty seconds because of more in-depth writing and production styles with inclusion of instrumentals and repetition of catchy choruses.

In the 1980s, the computer became very popular and as this changed the entire world, it also changed the entire pop music industry. Two major new instruments, electronic synth-keyboards and electronic drums sharply changed the way musicians played, performed, wrote, produced, and envisioned music. The instruments introduced new subgenres of techno-pop, computerized rock, and more ambient sounding ballads. At this point in time, many instruments were computerized and pre-programmed to the extent that they did not always require much human interaction to play. This introduced the decline in necessity of studio musicians (Shafer, 2016). Many were still needed to perform, write, and produce, however lots of musicians were put out of work in the 1980s. The new subgenres brought forth very fun and spontaneous sounds, singing themes about fun love, genuine love, unity, and world peace. Love songs were the bulk of the pop music and were typically short and sweet which caused music to narrow towards 'The 3:30.' Three minutes and thirty seconds is considered by most musicians to be the average time for songs in general and in the 1980s songs became very uniform and all neared three minutes and thirty seconds (Blackman, Englen, Godwin, Holder, Malley, Uphill, 2017). In the 1990s, music took another sharp turn, however it was not as impactful as the 1980s. Subgenres all quickly headed toward a mix of Ballads, Rhythm & Blues (R&B), and hip-hop. R&B required lots of electronic back-beats and percussion and use of keyboards, pianos, and synthesized instruments, while most other instruments died out in popularity.

During this period, most high-charting hits had extremely similar aspects in the writing, production, and instrumentation. This yielded a popular trend of writing a catchy chorus and

then repeating it over and over again in songs, to engrain it in the listener's ears so they want to come back and hear it again. The average song length dramatically rose all the way to four minutes fifteen seconds, with number one hits ranging from three and a half minutes up to eight minutes. As well, themes started to become very sexual. Language was becoming descriptive, suggestive, and explicit. This seemed to keep listeners engaged and interested according to Professor James Young (2015) from the University of Victoria, Canada.

The 2000s era trailed heavily off of the 1990s in the beginning and ended in a resurrection of the 1980s. Lots of 1990s ballad influence can be heard in the 2000s while the tempos start to become increasingly upbeat with the new explosion of electronic bass (not to be confused with electric bass, it is a computerized bass sound) and computerized drums and synth. Because music starts to become very upbeat again, the song length decreases and is short and sweet, similar to the 1980s. However, stylistically, music becomes very powerful, loud, and extravagant to get listeners dancing. The themes are still consistent with mature love, cheap love, and everything in between, but new themes about human power, woman power, and individuality emerge. These themes, while not rivaling themes of love for the highest chart positions, were popular for the purpose of empowering people of all kinds and making people feel accepted.

So far in the 2010s, mainstream pop music is mostly electronic instrumentation. There is almost no use of non-computerized instruments other than lead vocals, background vocals, and an occasional guitar or drum. Today's music was referred to in interviews with Phil Blackman, Austin Uphill, and Bjorn Englen as a piling of electronic instrumentation. Most aspects of the music are sequenced and computerized so that the listeners' focus will go onto the vocalist

(Young, 2015). Additionally, songwriting and production have become very universal, as if there is an equation that makes up every hit song. Today's hits are a split between short (narrowing towards 'The 3:30'), upbeat catchy pop songs and short, dramatic ballads. These styles have tended to prove most popular among listeners thus many writers and artists reproduce the same sounds over again in many songs (Styven, 2007).

Although the sound of pop music has become very similar between many songs, the themes have expanded in unique ways. Of course, themes of love still dominate the landscape. And within love, lyrics have become very sexually suggestive and fairly explicit. Modern society has "more tolerance towards explicit language and connotations today," (Trandafir, 2010). Aside from this, themes continue to heavily express empowerment and acceptance to try and unite people, but a unique new theme has recently emerged in pop: expression of hard work. Popular 2010s hits such as "Stressed Out" by Twenty One Pilots and "Work" by Rihanna are key examples of hits that express the struggles and stresses that everyday people face in the complicated modern world. Its popularity can be credited to the fact that people can express their stresses through music.

Discussion and Results

It was discovered that three main areas affected the mainstream pop industry most significantly. Because of this, the discussion and results will be separated into three sub-sections: Instrumentation/Technology, Songwriting/Production, and Artists/Public Image.

Instrumentation and Technology

Throughout the decades, a general decrease in use of instrumentation can be found as the complexity of technology increases. Throughout the fifties, sixties, and seventies, the necessity

for musicians was large because there was no sort of technology that could sequence or perform an instrument by itself. L.A. Studio guitarist, Mitch Holder, mentioned a notable point that every sound heard on a recording in these eras had to be created by a real instrument played by a professional musician. Whereas, once the 1980s digital era came upon the music industry, many instruments didn't have to be played by musicians but could be programmed and automated through computers. Mitch Holder also mentions that the peak of his work as a studio guitarist was in the 1970s as he remembers demand for his work started to decrease as the digital era took over more and more. The Counting Crows bass player, Matthew Malley also states how his studio work became very sparse in the 1980s as a bass player, but his work was almost completely eliminated by the 2000s because of the introduction of electronic bass. The need for musicians and studio technicians has decreased over the last sixty years, and today, almost no musicians are needed for creation of mainstream pop because the music is primarily composed on a computer. This has created lots of competition and struggle between working musicians, technicians, and individuals who aspire to work in the music industry.

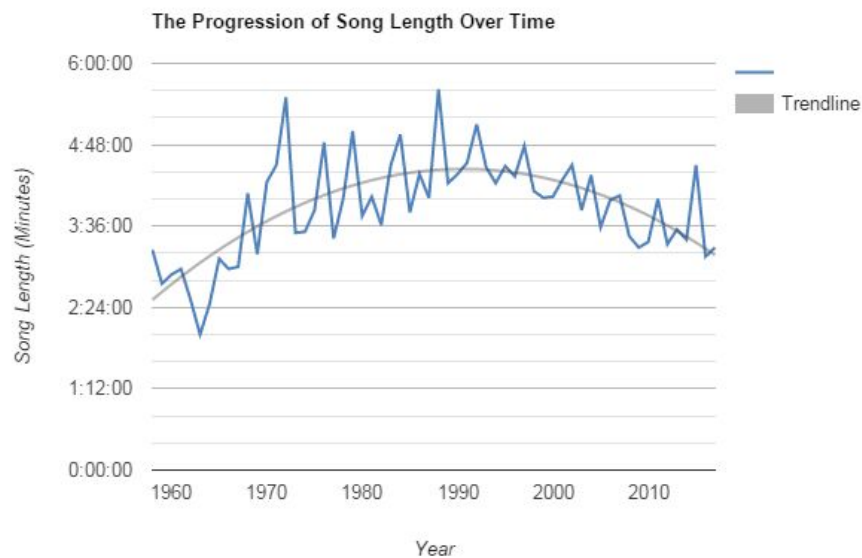
Songwriting and Production

Although the musician workforce struggles today, songwriting is and has always been in high necessity for all eras. As Rodica Trandafir mentions "all music, no matter how it is performed, must be written and notated in some fashion," (2010). Writers still have vast amounts of opportunity and always will according to Phil Blackman because new music always has to be created to keep the industry moving. Along with songwriters, producers and creative assistants will also stay in high demand because they are the contributors that give the

songwriter’s music style and individuality. Without this work, music will have no way to have unique, progressive aspects.

In the art of songwriting and production, the most popular recurring theme is love. All sorts of instances and situations have been written about over the years and sometimes songs are very passionate and genuine while others are cheap and suggestive. Either way, songwriters and producers understand that love sells easily to listeners so they continue writing about it. Plenty of other topics have become popular, however “love songs have the tendency to top the charts and may always be the chart toppers” (Young, 2015).

One remarkable trend found through this research is that over the last sixty years the complexity of songwriting has directly correlated to the length of songs. On average, as song length increases, so does song complexity. As it is shown through the trend line of the original graph below, songwriting becomes more complex as it nears the 1990s, peaks in the 1990s, and then declines in length as songs become more uniform in arrangement towards today.



A notable point that Helen Daynes describes is that a good song will always be a good song, no matter the complexity or instruments used or the work it took to make (2009). If a song resonates well with listeners, none of the other parameters matter. A song was a success and the writers and musicians should try and learn from this success to reproduce more success.

Artists and Public Image

The way mainstream pop artists and performers have progressed in the last sixty years has also yielded some interesting conclusions. According to Austin Uphill and Tim Godwin, artists used to be mainly picked by music labels for talent and ability up until the 1990s. When the 1990s came, the entire dynamic changed. Primary focus was on more of a public image that would sell an artist's music to more people. Artists were signed for talent but also for beauty and sexual appeal, to match the sexuality of themes and lyrics in the music. This factor increased in the 2000s and today, where most artists are a large entity of much higher stature than their music. Mainstream pop artists, such as 2017 Grammy-winner Chance the Rapper, have millions of followers on social media, large endorsements from companies such as Nike and Kit Kat, and are often featured wearing the greatest fashion to urge stylistic and sexual emphasis to consumers. The celebrity factor has always been a crucial factor in mainstream pop music, however most recently it has become one the most important, if not *the* most important factor in the popularity of an artist and their music.

Limitations

Several limitations occurred while performing this research including contacting famous artists, avoiding bias, and researching culture around music. Because famous music artists are hard to get in contact with, it limited research in how artists have perceived the music industry

and how it affected their work over time. Bias was also a limitation that was unavoidable at times. Lots of this research involved hearing professionals' opinions on the music industry to understand progression of where the industry is going. Finally, world culture has influenced music in important ways, however it was too intense and broad of an aspect to have time to effectively observe in each decade and include in this paper.

Conclusion

Mainstream pop music has gone through drastic changes in its sixty year life-span to satisfy the ears of numerous listeners. Early pop music was very raw, created with what musicians had, and once the digital era came about, music became unlimited in its potential. The songwriting also complemented the technology and kept work in the industry as the demand for musicians weakened. Stardom has driven the industry into a more physical focus over musical focus and this is what the industry is projected to be like in the future as well. Music industry workers will have to seek a profession in composing music or performing with the most popular acts to have a sustainable career in the pop music industry. Although most aspects of the industry are very competitive, there is still ample work and hope to rely on for a chance at musical success.

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