Music and Its Relation with Society

From One Generation to Another

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**Introduction**

Music has a magical ability. It has the power to captivate the listener and set the mood. A melancholy song can cause someone to reflect solemnly about events in their own lives. In contrast, an upbeat song can invigorate people and get them to sing along and dance. Music is not made in a vacuum. It is created by artists who capture the mood of the moment and preserve it in the medium of song. Throughout the twentieth century, as society changed, music captured the mood of the time and preserved it for future generations to experience.

**1960s**

The 1960s was a period of rapid change for the world. The Soviet Union launched the first man into space, the European powers were ending colonization, and the Cold War was heating up, culminating in the Cuban Missile Crisis. For the United States, the 1960s would be even more turbulent. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon, and the war in Vietnam was escalating.

Overshadowing all of this was the Civil Rights Movement, which championed equality and advanced the rights of African-Americans, Latinos, Native-Americans, women, and members of the LGBT community. A new generation was challenging traditional social norms and soon a counter culture developed.

This experimental mindset of the time led to a great diversification of music. Out of the 1960s came the continued development of pop and rock and roll, as well as whole new genres such as psychedelic rock, funk, soul, and rhythm and blues (R&B). It was during the 1960s, that the Beatles made their debut, arguably the most influential music bands in history.

Perhaps the best song to define this turbulent time in American history is “Stop Children What’s That Sound”, by the band Buffalo Springfield. The song begins with the lines “There’s something happening here. What it is ain’t exactly clear.” Those who lived during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s knew that they were witnessing history. This generation had grown up in a world full of prejudice and violence and didn’t know what to expect from the massive changes occurring in society.

**1970s**

After the crazy events of the 1960s, America woke up with a massive hang over. The 1970s is a decade often associated with gloom, cynicism, and a sobering reality. After experiencing rapid growth during the post-war boom, the economy entered into “stagflation”, a combination of stagnating wages and high inflation. This was made worse in 1973, by an oil embargo imposed by the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) against Western countries for their perceived support of Israel in the Yom Kippur War. This embargo lead to rationing and worsened the United States’ economy, which depended on oil (Corbett 2013).

It wasn’t only the economy that suffered. Confidence in government institutions were severely undermined when President Richard Nixon was caught spying on the Democratic National Convention in 1972, in what would become known as the Watergate Scandal. Ultimately, the constitutional crisis that erupted from this event would lead Richard Nixon to resign in order to avoid impeachment. Things didn’t improve much throughout the 1970s. In 1979, 52 American diplomats were taken hostage during the Iran Hostage Crisis as a part of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Attempts to negotiate for their release were unsuccessful until Ronald Reagan became president. In total, and the hostages remained captive for 444 days. These events pretty much sum up the feeling of the 1970s. President Jimmy Carter would later go on to say there was a “Crisis of Confidence” plaguing American society.

Despite hardship, diverse genres of music flourished in the 1970s. Genres such as metal, punk rock, reggae, funk, soul, and of course, disco, made their way into mainstream musical culture. However, most of the music at the time reflected the attitude of dread that dominated the headlines. The song “Seasons in the Sun” by Terry Jacks, sets the tone. It’s a song about a dying man recounting fond memories of days past. There can hardly be a more fitting song for someone who lived through the optimism of the 1960s and found themselves living through the malaise of the 1970s.

**1980s**

Fortunately for America, things would get better. The hostage crisis that began in the seventies came to an end when Roland Reagan was sworn in as president in 1981. Under his presidency, the economy was once again booming. Reagan’s economic policy of “Trickle-down economics”, sometimes referred to as “Reagonomics”, advocated reducing taxes on businesses and the wealthy in order to encourage more investment.

Besides the economy, the 1980s were a time of revitalized confidence. The Cold War was winding down, the Berlin Wall fell, and there was a technological boom taking place. Technological products such as personal computers (PCs), cell phones, and video games were being introduced to the consumers for the first time. Americans were eager to put things like the Vietnam War, the Iran Hostage Crisis, and stagflation behind them.

In keeping with the times, music was becoming more upbeat. The 1980’s saw a huge surge in music. Dance music, new wave, and synth-pop emerged and defined the energy of the 1980s. Pre-existing genres, such as rock and metal, reached new heights and some of the best songs of these respective genres were created in the 1980s. MTV debuted in 1981, introducing the new musical medium of the “music video”, revolutionizing the music industry. Perhaps the song that best exemplifies this new era of hope is “Living on a Prayer” by Bon Jovi. In it, Bon Jovi tells of a couple, who despite hardship, believe love and ambition can get them through anything. This belief of better things to come is quintessential of the 1980s.

**1990s**

The feeling of hope that emerged in the 1980s, carried on into the 1990s. Things could not be better for the United States. The Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, leaving the United States as the sole superpower in the world. The United States also won a quick and decisive victory in the Gulf War. Furthermore, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was ratified, the World Wide Web made its debut, and the Dot Com Boom was taking commerce online. Things were looking up for the United States.

To top it all off, the economy was doing great. In fact, according to the New York Times, it was the empirically the happiest decade for Americans since the 1950s. From 1992 to 1999, the economy grew an average of four percent per year. In that same time, unemployment fell from eight to four percent. Also, an average of 1.7 million jobs was being added to the economy every year, more than double than what is being added now (Andersen 2015).

Like the 1980s, the 1990s witnessed huge success in rock music. Subgenres such grunge and alternative rock dominated the music scene. Other genres like hip hop, rap, and techno became mainstream and enjoyed huge commercial success. By the end of 1990s, pop music saw a resurgence in popularity. Divas, like Britney Spears and the Spice Girls, and boy bands, like the Backstreet Boys, were all the rage. Their upbeat tone was symptomatic of the times. People were happy about the times they were living in and saw no reason for things to change. That’s why the song to best define the 1990s has to be “I Want It That Way” by the Backstreet Boys. The song is catchy and is declaring without shame that it doesn’t want things to change.

**2000s**

However, we can’t always have “our way”. Inevitably, the good times come to an end. The year 2000 brought us a new millennium and with it, a variety of problems. During this decade, acts of terrorism became a new reality for the world. The most infamous of these terrorist attacks was the hijacking of commercial airplanes and the subsequent destruction of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11th, 2001 that killed over 3,000 people. As result, President George W. Bush declared a “War on Terror” and the United States found itself marred in two wars, one in Afghanistan, and another in Iraq. These two wars would become long and costly for the United States. Even worse, the war is Iraq generated huge international protests. According to French political scientist Dominique Reynié, approximately 36 million people took part in nearly 3,000 protests around the world.

The economy also took a catastrophic hit. In 2008, the housing market in the United States collapsed and took the world economy with it. In that year, the stock market lost 33.8% of its value and the gross domestic product (GDP) of the US economy shrank six percent. The unemployment rate doubled from 5% to 10% (Havermann 2010).

The rise of international terrorism ended the façade of American invulnerability. The United States would no longer be a bystander to world affairs and would increasingly lead efforts to resolve international incidents. Critics of America’s increased involvement in international affairs have dubbed the United States as the “world’s police”. This sentiment was parodied in the 2004 film, “Team America: World Police”, which portrayed Americans as gung-ho counter-terrorists that cause as much trouble as they alleviate

This sentiment is echoed in the song “Amerika” by the German band Rammstein. The song is about America’s dominant influence and is sung primarily in German. However, one verse is sung in English; “This is not a love song. I don’t speak my mother tongue. No, this is not a love song.” This verse was added to make it clear that the band isn’t praising the United States for its dominance and the fact it’s in English means they want Americans to understand this. The song “Amerika” is the defining song of the 2000s because it brings to light America’s new place in the world.

**Summary**

Music has an intimate relationship with society. As society changes, so does the music that is produced. We have witnessed how music diversified and captured the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s. This creation continued into the 1970s, but the somber events of the time led to some of the most melancholy music of the twentieth century. Eventually things turned around and throughout the 1980s and the 1990s society was reinvigorated by a booming economy, great technical advancements, and a more peaceful world. The music of the time captured this new energy and some of the best music ever made was created during this time. The 2000s saw a return to the problems of the 1970s. Once again war, a bad economy, and lack of faith in government institutions caused society to feel cynical. This was reflected in the music produced at the time.

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