**Identity and Consumerism**

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Today culture is bought and sold as a commodity. Is this good or bad and am I perpetuating this phenomenon? How much has this phenomenon shaped who I am, and my choice of music? How has the commoditization of culture shaped our society?

For one, culture is no longer about what is progressive or fun, it is now about what is profitable.

Dictionary.com defines [Culture](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/culture) as: “the quality in a person or society that arises from a concern for what is regarded as excellent in arts, letters, manners, scholarly pursuits, etc.” If what is desirable or excellent in society is purely decided by what sells, then the entirety of the nation’s culture only strives to the most profitable, form fitting, non-innovative product.

Two excellent examples of artists that are fed up with this mediocrity can be seen in the following examples.

The Axis of Awesome’s [4 Chords](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOlDewpCfZQ) is an exposition of the four chords used to create a gigantic majority of today’s modern pop music. It opens by introducing the band, begins playing a familiar riff that could be from any number of songs, and then begins switching pop songs, but continues to use only the same four chords over and over again. Beyond using only four chords, these chords are mostly played with the exact same rhythm. Nothing quite drives home how formulaic our moder music has become like this performance. I have to admit, I happen to love many of the songs played in the video, and it does make me feel a bit gross. Each of these pop songs conforms perfectly to the same old formula used to create pop hits. This practice, clearly holds back the progress of arts and culture.

Bo Burnham’s [Repeat Stuff](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nt9c0UeYhFc) rails against today’s modern pop targeting young women. He begins by talking about love songs and how they’ve become simpler and simpler (or maybe broader) over the years. Burnham then talks about the patterns used to make young women basically fall in love with an artists. At one point he talks about the vagueness of the love messages used so that every girl will think he’s talking about them. As a joke, he works from vague statement to even more vague statements like ‘I like how you have an arm on either side of your torso.” Then his agent apparently tells him he’s not appealing to little girls without arms, to which he replies “F\*\*\* them, they can’t use iTunes anyway.”

In both videos, the artists point out that much of modern music is created from a mold and uses small cheap tricks to treat it as though it’s something new. Burnham’s video even points out that sex is used to sell something as edgy. By following the same form, but then introducing something that makes this music ‘push the bounds,’ the music can still seem like something new without actually being something new. One could argue that constantly pushing the bounds by stretching what’s culturally acceptable drives depravity, but whatever the case, it certainly doesn’t drive better and more intelligent music.

Even today I’ve given into this drive to be ‘hip’ to the most modern thing. Something about finding a really cool cultural piece and being the first to share it is just really exciting. But today I try to be more conscious of sharing things that are just using cheap tricks to pretend to be new. Joshua Becker writing about consumerism states “Less need to keep up with evolving trends.” as a reason not to continue being a mindless consumer. He also writes:

*A culture built on consumption must produce an ever-changing target to keep its participants spending money. And our culture has nearly perfected that practice. As a result, nearly every year, a new line of fashion is released as the newest trend. And the only way to keep up is to purchase the latest fashions and trends when they are released… or remove yourself from the pursuit altogether.*

When applied to music, I take this to mean that finding new musical performances and styles is great, but falsely new or edgy music is abundant, and if we continue to chase these latest fads, we’re only chasing what’s fake and pretending.

Culture as a commodity has lead to marketing of music and culture through multiple means. This sounds like a great idea, but on the scale of an entire nation this really means that only a few artists get recognized for their works, and these artists are the ones that can sell. I like to think that I’m more isolated from perpetuating this synergy of media than others, but I certainly do still watch big ticket shows. For example, Mr. Robot has an excellent [soundtrack](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAqEdpWxRTk) which can be heard for free via YouTube. Still, this show seems to have created music for itself, and only a handful are retakes on popular pop songs.

As a kid I definitely fell for this synergy of media. The Batman Forever Soundtrack was actually my first CD, and I listened to a lot of FM radio. Still, I don’t know how I would have found music without these venues as I didn’t have the choice that most adults did. I couldn’t purchase an album—they were usually gifts, and I didn’t have the internet. Eventually, my friends did get the internet, and craving something different we torrened and shared music between each other.

Today, music videos help to propagate an artist’s music, but a decent music video can be prohibitively costly. I actually found my current favorite band because of a music video posted on a music discussion website. The video of King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard’s [Gamma Knife](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nC7ii3Ir-no)  from their album Nonagon Infinity was very tongue and cheek, but also very well produced. Something about the energy encouraged me to seek out more of their music. Hopefully as technology continues to improve the barrier to creating a decent music video reduces the need for a large production team.

To further explore my role in this, I researched King Gizzard’s record label. As it tuns out, King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard have signed with ATO records. ATO stands for According to Our Records, and is an independent record label started in 2000 by Dave Matthews and Coran Capshaw. It’s difficult to tell whether King Gizzard is treated fairly without being able to see the contract they’ve signed. I do hope that the independence of the record label does actually mean that artists are treated fairly.

I’ve also noticed that many other artists I’ve enjoyed throughout the years such as My Morning Jacket which can be heard here in their music video for [Touch Me I’m Going to Scream, Part 2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zs7FG7usAAw).

Since I first heard of King Gizzard a year ago, I’ve seen them perform live twice, and I’ve yet to have actually purchased any of their music.

The truth is though that I don’t tend to pay for music other than live performances. There are any number of ways for a smart person to find music for free. I justify this because I don’t believe music should be something someone records once and rides for income. Spotify has been a recent development for me, but I do feel a bit lame for using it. I know by relying upon Spotify, I’m not getting all the possible artistry I could. For example, Tool doesn’t put their music on Spotify. Also, the convenience of an app like Spotify means that I won’t likely listen to music that is not present on Spotify.

What do my musical selections say about me? Clearly I like modern western instruments. I don’t tend to listen to the most popular of pop music. I clearly grew up in a time when rock music was quite popular, and I love weird tongue and cheek things. Still, I grew up when radio was everywhere, and I listened to the four chord pop songs as did nearly everyone else.

I’ve always hated what’s considered mainstream, but even at times when I tried to rebel against mainstream I’ve played into the system. For example, I definitely purchased a Disturbed album when I was a teen. Disturbed of course is signed with Warner as can be seen on their [artists page](http://store.warnermusic.com/all-artists). I’m sure everyone says this in this paper, but I do feel that I’m less plugged in to the culture commoditizing machine than the average American. Still, I feel that even though I’m less plugged in, I suffer because culture doesn’t propagate in the healthy way it would. If these media oligarchs would stop controlling our culture for commercial purposes we might all be happier and enjoy shared experiences much more. I for one cringe most of the time a friend or family member puts on whatever overly produced junk. I would love it if they could see outside of the simplistic form they’ve grown accustomed to.

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