

CHAPTER ONE: THEMES AND STREAMS OF AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC

Chapter Outline

Introductory Perspectives

A. Goals

1. Think creatively and critically about popular music
2. Listen to popular music and learn something about its history and the people and institutions behind it
3. Cover a wide range of music from the nineteenth century to the 1990s and beyond

B. Popular music

1. Created with commercial success in mind
2. Popularity measured in numbers (e.g., how many albums sold, how many Number One hits)
3. Can be compared with styles that differ in intent as well as musical result
 - a) Popular—strives to be commercially successful
 - b) Classical—art for art's sake
 - c) Folk—created anonymously and passed down orally from generation to generation without the thought of commercial gain

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d) Definition is problematic because many pieces of music cross the boundaries of pop, classical, and folk.

(1) “Garage band” tradition of rock music—more similar to folk music than popular music

(2) Difficult to separate the “artistic” from the “popular” in music such as a piano rag by Scott Joplin or the Beatles’ album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*

C. In broad terms, popular music

1. is mass-produced and disseminated via the mass media,
2. at various times has been listened to by large numbers of Americans, and
3. typically draws on a variety of musical traditions.

D. Within the landscape of popular music, various styles, audiences, and institutions interact in complex ways. This landscape is always in motion, always evolving.

II. Theme One: Listening

A. Critical listening

1. Listening that consciously seeks out meaning in music
 - a) How music is put together
 - b) Its cultural significance

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c) Its historical development

2. Even nonmusicians have much more knowledge about music than they may realize:

a) A chord that sounds “wrong”

b) A note that is “out of tune”

c) A singer who is “off key”

3. In everyday life, people often do not think carefully about the music they hear.

4. Much popular music is designed not to call critical attention to itself.

5. Other types of popular music—big-band swing, funk, punk rock, hard rap, thrash metal—seek to grab your attention, but do not, by and large, encourage you to engage them analytically.

6. The point of analyzing popular music is not to ruin your enjoyment of it. You are encouraged to

a) expand your tastes,

b) hear the roots of today’s music in earlier styles, and

c) be a more critically aware “consumer” of popular music.

B. Formal analysis

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1. The structure of the music
2. A few basic formal structures in popular music

a) Twelve-bar blues

- (1) Glenn Miller's 1939 big-band hit "In the Mood"
- (2) Little Richard's rock 'n' roll anthem "Tutti Frutti"
- (3) James Brown's "I Got You (I Feel Good)"
- (4) The Doors' "Riders on the Storm"
- (5) Theme song of the 1960s TV show "Batman"

b) AABA melodic structure

- (1) George Gershwin's 1930 song "I Got Rhythm"
- (2) The Penguins' 1955 doo-wop hit "Earth Angel"
- (3) "Yesterday" by the Beatles
- (4) Theme song of the 1960s cartoon show "The Flintstones"

C. Musical process

1. How is a song interpreted?

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2. Listening to and studying popular music is not simply analyzing a song but also studying interpretations by particular performers.
3. Traditional musicology, which focuses on the written scores that serve as the model for performances in classical music, is often of little relevance in helping us understand popular music.

D. Terms specific to popular music and this course

1. Riff—a repeated pattern designed to generate rhythmic momentum
2. Hook—a catchy musical phrase or riff
3. Groove—the channeled flow of “swinging” or “funky” or “phat” rhythms
4. Timbre—the characteristic sound of an instrument or voice
 - a) Sometimes called “tone color”
 - b) Plays an important role in establishing the “soundprint” of a performer
 - c) Vocalists have distinctive and easily recognized timbre—any knowledgeable listener will be able to identify the singer by the “grain” of his or her voice.

(1) Louis Armstrong

(2) Frank Sinatra

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(3) Johnny Cash

(4) Aretha Franklin

(5) Neil Diamond

(6) Bruce Springsteen

(7) Bonnie Raitt

(8) Dr. Dre

(9) Bono

d) Many instrumental superstar performers also have highly memorable “soundprints.”

(1) Jimi Hendrix

(2) Eric Clapton

(3) Eddie Van Halen

(4) Kenny G

e) Other instrumentalists are unknown to the general listening public although their soundprints are very familiar.

(1) James Jamerson, the master bassist of Motown

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(2) King Curtis, whose gritty tenor saxophone is featured on dozens of soul records from the 1960s

(3) Steve Gadd, studio drummer, who played on records by Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Barbra Streisand, Steely Dan, and Paul Simon during the 1970s

f) Recording engineers, producers, arrangers, and record labels may also develop unique “soundprints.”

(1) The distinctive “slap-back” echo of Elvis Presley’s early recordings on Sun Records

(2) The quasisymphonic teen pop recordings produced by Phil Spector

(3) The stripped-down, “back to basics” soul sound of Stax Records in Memphis

(4) The sampled bass drum explosions used by engineer Steve Ett of Chung House of Metal

g) The production of a particular “sound” often involves many individuals performing different tasks.

E. Lyrics

1. In many cases, lyrics are designed to be one of the most immediately accessible parts of a song.

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2. In other cases, the lyrics seem to demand interpretation, as in the songs of these artists:

- a) Robert Johnson
- b) Bob Dylan
- c) John Lennon and Paul McCartney
- d) David Byrne
- e) Kurt Cobain
- f) Ice-T

3. Dialect has also been a crucial factor in the history of American popular music.

a) Some musical genres are strongly associated with particular dialects.

(1) Country music with southern white dialects

(2) Rap music with certain urban black dialects

(3) 1970s punk rock with working-class British dialects

b) The ability of African American artists such as Nat “King” Cole, Chuck Berry, and Diana Ross to “cross over” to a white

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middle-class audience was, to some degree, predicated upon their adoption of a dialect widely used in the mass media.

c) In other cases, the mutual incomprehensibility of varieties of English has been consciously emphasized.

III. Theme Two: Music and Identity

A. We use popular music to find and express our identity (e.g., generation, race, memory)

1. Popular music in America has, from the beginning, been closely tied to stereotypes.

a) Common portrayal in song lyrics and music videos of women as sexual objects, and the association of men with violence

b) Image of African American men as playboys and gangsters

c) Stereotype of southern white musicians as illiterate, backwoods “rednecks”

d) Association of songs about money with supposedly Jewish musical characteristics

e) Caricatures of Asian and Latin American people found in many novelty songs from the 1920s through the 1960s

B. People value music for many reasons.

1. To escape from the rigors of the work week

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2. To celebrate important events in their lives, to help them make money, war, and love

C. To understand the cultural significance of popular music, we must examine

1. the music—its tones and textures, rhythms, and forms; and
2. the broader patterns of social identity that have shaped Americans' tastes and values.

IV. Theme Three: Music and Technology

A. Technology has shaped popular music and has helped disseminate it.

1. Printed sheet music in the nineteenth century
2. The rise of the phonograph record
3. Network radio
4. Sound film in the 1920s
5. Digital recording
6. Computerized sampling
7. Internet-based radio

B. Older technologies often take on value as tokens of an earlier, often claimed “better,” time.

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1. Old forms of musical hardware and software—music boxes, player pianos, phonographs, sheet music, 78s, 45s, and LPs—become the basis for subcultures made up of avid collectors.

C. The relationship between human musicality and technology is evolving.

1. Technology has long been used to manipulate the public into buying certain kinds of music, but it is also a way for people to exert creative control over the music in their lives.

- a) *Guitar Hero* is an instance of the multiple, contradictory possibilities built into the latest music technologies.

- (1) helps nonmusicians develop their sense of musical form and their rhythmic skills, but high score is not in essence a musical accomplishment

- (2) means of promoting contemporary musicians and introducing young gamers to the rock music of decades past

V. Theme Four: The Music Business

A. The production of popular music typically involves the work of many individuals performing different roles.

B. From the nineteenth century until the 1920s, sheet music was the principal means of disseminating popular songs to a mass audience. This process typically involved a complex network of people and institutions:

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1. The composer and lyricist, who wrote a song
 2. The publishing company, which bought the rights to it
 3. The song pluggers, who promoted the song and convinced big stars to include it in their acts
 4. The stars themselves, who toured a circuit of theaters, controlled by yet other organizations
 5. The consumers, who bought the sheet music and performed it at home
- C. The rise of radio, recording, and movies as the primary means of popularizing music added many layers of complexity to this process.
- D. Today, hundreds of people will have had a hand in producing the music you listen to.
- E. The music business relies on predicting popular musical tastes and trends.
- F. The relationship between “majors” and “indies” has been an important factor in the development of American popular music.

1. Majors

- a) Large record companies
- b) Lots of capital and power
- c) Tend to be more conservative

2. Indies

- a) Small, independent labels operating in marginal markets

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- b) Have to be more daring, searching out new talent, creating specialized niches
 - c) Mostly the small labels popularized blues, country music, rhythm & blues, rock 'n' roll, funk, soul music, reggae, punk, rock, rap, grunge, worldbeat, and other “alternative” styles
 - d) Some indies have grown large and powerful (e.g., Atlantic Records)
3. Today, the relationship between indies and majors has been extended over the globe.
- a) Five corporations (only one of them based in the United States) now control at least 75 percent of the world's legal trade in commercially recorded music.
 - b) Each of these transnational corporations has bought up many smaller labels, using them as incubators for new talent.

Theme Five: Centers and Peripheries

G. The history of American popular music may be broadly conceptualized in terms of a center-periphery model.

1. “Center” refers to several geographically distinct centers (New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville) where power, capital, and control over mass media are concentrated.

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2. “Periphery” refers to smaller institutions and to people historically excluded from the political and economic mainstream.

3. This center-periphery model has profoundly shaped the development of popular music in the United States.

H. The stylistic mainstream of American popular music was, until at least the mid-1950s, largely oriented toward the tastes of white, middle- or upper-class, Protestant, urban people.

1. Supposedly marginal music and musicians have repeatedly helped invigorate the center of popular taste and the music industry.

2. Many times, the people most responsible for creating the music that people in the United States and elsewhere consider quintessentially American have not profited from the fruits of their labor.

VI. Every aspect of popular music that is today regarded as American in character has sprung from imported traditions.

A. Traditions may be classified into three broad “streams” made up of many styles of music. Each has profoundly influenced the others.

1. European American music

2. African American music

3. Latin American music

VII. European Music in America

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A. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, American popular music was almost entirely European in character.

B. The cultural and linguistic dominance of the English meant that their music (e.g., folk ballads, dance music) became a mainstream around which other styles circulated.

C. Ballad

1. A type of song in which a series of verses telling a story are sung to a repeating melody

2. Often about a historical event or personal tragedy

3. Strophic musical form

4. Originally, these ballads were passed down through an oral tradition, but they were eventually written down and circulated on large sheets of paper called *broad-sides*.

D. Pleasure gardens

1. A forerunner of today's theme parks

2. The most important source of public entertainment in England between 1650 and 1850

3. One of the main venues for the dissemination of printed songs by professional composers

4. In the 1760s, the first American pleasure gardens opened in Charleston, New York, and other cities.

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E. The English ballad opera tradition—also extremely popular in America during the early nineteenth century

1. These stage productions drew on ballads, some of which had previously been circulated as broadsides.
2. *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) by John Gay
 - a) Perhaps the best known of the English ballad operas
 - b) Designed to counter the domination of the British stage by Italian composers and musicians
3. The main characters in ballad operas were common people, rather than the kings and queens of imported operas; the songs were familiar in form and content; and the lyrics were all in English rather than Italian.
4. The pleasure gardens and ballad operas both featured songs produced by professional composers for large and diverse audiences.
5. Melodies were designed to be simple and easy to remember, and the lyrics focused on romantic themes.

F. The English folk ballad tradition

1. Popular in America
2. Songs were reworked to suit the life circumstances of new immigrants.

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3. In the early twentieth century, folklorists interested in continuities with English traditions were able to record dozens of versions of old English ballads in the United States.

- a) Songs are preserved mainly by folk music enthusiasts.
- b) The core of the tradition lives on in contemporary country and western music musical forms and storytelling techniques.
- c) Vocal qualities derived from the Anglo-American tradition continue today as markers of southern white identity—notably the thin, nasalized tone known as the “high, lonesome sound.”

G. Irish, Scottish, and Italian influence on early American popular song.

- 1. Copies of Thomas Moore’s multivolume *Irish Melodies* (a collection of Moore’s poems set to Irish folk melodies, published in London and Dublin between 1808 and 1834) were widely circulated in the United States.
- 2. Scottish songs such as “Auld Lang Syne” (written probably in the late seventeenth century and still performed today on New Year’s Eve) also enjoyed wide popularity.

H. Italian opera

- 1. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, Italian opera was also very popular in the United States.

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2. Songs by Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and other Italian composers were published as sheet music
3. The bel canto style of singing—light, clear, flexible, and intimate—had a major effect on the development of popular singing style.

I. Dance music

1. Until the late nineteenth century, European American dance was closely modeled on styles imported from England and the Continent.
2. Country dances were popular.
 - a) Dancers arranged themselves into circles, squares, or opposing rows.
 - b) In the United States, the country dance tradition developed into a plethora of urban and rural, elite and lower-class, black and white variants.
 - c) The tradition continues today in country and western line dances and in the contradances that form part of the modern folk music scene.
3. The nineteenth century also saw a move toward couple dances, including the waltz, the galop, the schottische, and the ballroom polka, the last based on a Bohemian dance that had already become the rage in the ballrooms of Paris and London before coming to America.

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4. Later, in the 1880s, a fast dance called the *one-step*, based in part on marching band music, became popular.
5. These couple dances are direct predecessors of the African American–influenced popular dance styles of the early twentieth century, including the two-step, fox trot, bunny hug, and Charleston.

J. European folk music

1. Immigration brought a wide variety of European folk music to America.
2. From early on, the mainstream of English-dominated popular song and dance music was surrounded by a myriad of folk and popular styles brought by immigrants from other parts of Europe.
3. The descendants of early French settlers in North America and the Caribbean maintained their own musical traditions.
4. Millions of Irish and German immigrants came to the United States during the nineteenth century seeking an escape from oppression, economic uncertainty, and—particularly during the potato famine of the 1840s—the threat of starvation.
5. Between 1880 and 1910, an additional seventeen million immigrants entered the United States, mostly from eastern and southern Europe.
6. Immigration contributed to the diversity of musical life in the United States.

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7. European-derived musical styles have each contributed to mainstream popular music while maintaining a solid base in particular ethnic communities

- a) Cajun (Acadian) fiddling
- b) Jewish klezmer music
- c) The Polish polka—an energetic dance, quite different from the “refined” style of polka discussed above

K. European religious music

1. The Europeans who came to America also brought many styles and traditions of religious music to our shores.

- a) Echoes of synagogue cantorial in Tin Pan Alley songs
- b) Christmas music

VIII. African American Stream

A. African American culture

- 1. Between one and two million people from Africa, about 10 percent of the total transatlantic traffic in slaves, were forcibly brought to the United States between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.
- 2. It is misleading to speak of “black music” as a homogeneous entity.

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3. Black culture took different forms in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, and the United States, shaped by the particular mix of African and European (and in some cases American Indian) source traditions, and by local social conditions.

B. The genesis of African American music involved two closely related processes.

1. Syncretism, the selective blending of traditions derived from Africa and Europe

2. The creation of institutions that became important centers of black musical life (e.g., families, churches, voluntary associations, schools)

C. Certain features of African music form the core of African American music and, by extension, of American popular music as a whole.

1. Call-and-response forms, in which a lead singer and chorus alternate, the leader allowed more freedom to elaborate his part

2. Repetition

a) Regarded as an aesthetic strength

b) Many forms are constructed of relatively short phrases—often two to eight beats in length—that recur in a regular cycle.

c) These short phrases are combined in various ways to produce music of great power and complexity.

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- d) In African American music, repeated patterns are often called *riffs*.
- 3. Multiple repeating patterns interlock to form dense polyrhythmic textures (textures in which many rhythms are going on at the same time).
- 4. One common West African rhythm pattern has generated many variants in the Americas, including the hambone riff, popularized during the rock 'n' roll era by Bo Diddley, Johnny Otis, and Buddy Holly.
- 5. African singers and instrumentalists often make use of a wide palette of timbres.
 - a) Buzzing tones are often created by attaching a rattling device to an instrument.
 - b) Singers frequently use growling and humming effects.
- 6. In West African drumming traditions, the lead or master drummer often plays the lowest-pitched drum in the group.
 - a) This emphasis on low-pitched sounds may be a predecessor of the prominent role of the bass drum in Mississippi black fife-and-drum ensembles.
 - b) “Sonic boom bass” aesthetic in rap music (the *whoooomp!* created by heavily amplified low-frequency signals)

IX. Latin American Stream

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A. Musicians in Latin America developed a wide range of styles blending African music with the traditions of Europe (including colonial powers such as Spain, Portugal, and France).

1. Latin music, particularly from Cuba and Brazil, has increasingly influenced popular music in America.
2. Caribbean, South American, and Mexican traditions have long influenced popular music in the United States.

B. Cuban habanera

1. An African-influenced variant of the European country-dance tradition that swept the United States and Europe in the 1880s
2. The characteristic habanera rhythm—an eight-beat pattern divided 3–3–2
3. Influenced late nineteenth-century ragtime music and was an important part of what the great New Orleans pianist Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton called the “Latin tinge” in American jazz

C. The tango

1. Came from Argentina
2. Initially played by musicians in the capital city, Buenos Aires
3. Influenced by
 - a) the Cuban habanera rhythm,

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b) Italian and Spanish songs, and

c) the songs of gauchos (cowboys).

4. The tango reached Europe in the 1910s and was brought to the United States around 1914 as a dance form by the popular dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle.

5. It became the first Latin American dance to achieve a permanent place in American popular music.

D. The rumba

1. Came from Cuba

2. Grew out of a Latin dance called the *son*

3. A “refined” version of rumba, developed by musicians working at tourist hotels in Cuba, was introduced to the world by Don Azpiazu and his Havana Casino Orchestra.

4. The rumba peaked in popularity in the United States during the 1930s.

5. Was succeeded by a series of Cuban-based ballroom dance fads, including the mambo (1940s) and cha-cha-chá (1950s)

E. Variants of Cuban-based music in the United States

1. Blend of modern jazz and rumba pioneered by Machito and Dizzy Gillespie in the 1940s

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2. Tourist-oriented style performed by Desi Arnaz's orchestra on the "I Love Lucy" TV show

F. Salsa

1. Emerged in the 1960s
2. A rumba-based style pioneered by Cuban and Puerto Rican migrants in New York City
3. The stars of salsa music include the great singer Celia Cruz and bandleader Tito Puente.
4. In the 1980s, Miami Sound Machine created a commercially successful blend of salsa and disco music.
5. "World beat" musicians such as Paul Simon and David Byrne began to experiment with traditional Afro-Cuban rhythms.

G. Brazilian music

1. The Brazilian samba, another dance style strongly rooted in African music
2. Carioca
 - a) The variant of samba that had the biggest influence in the United States
 - b) A smooth style developed in Rio de Janeiro

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- c) Boosted in the 1940s by the meteoric career of Carmen Miranda, who appeared in a series of popular musical films

3. Bossa nova (“new trend”)

- a) A cool, sophisticated style of Brazilian music
- b) Became popular in United States during the early 1960s
- c) “The Girl from Ipanema” (1964)

H. Mexican music

1. The two best-known Mexican-derived styles today

- a) Conjunto acordeon (“accordion band”) music, played in northern Mexico and Texas
- b) Mariachi (“marriage”) music, a staple of the Mexican tourist trade, performed by ensembles made up of guitars, violins, and trumpets

2. Country and western music has been influenced by Mexican styles since at least the 1930s.

3. Mexican immigrants in California (Chicanos) have also played an important role in the development of rock music.

- a) Ritchie Valens’s 1959 hit “La Bamba,” based on a folk tune from Veracruz

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- b) Guitarist Carlos Santana, who developed a mixture of salsa and guitar-based rock music in the late 1960s
- c) Recordings of traditional Mexican songs by Linda Ronstadt
- d) Hard-rocking style of the Los Angeles-based band Los Lobos