

American Popular Song: Propositions

1. One can and should look at individual songs (as musical objects), but it's important also to look at the larger systems or fields within which each song is embedded. Sometimes the things that are closest to us ("obvious") in our current times are the hardest things to grasp for future generations and historians.
2. American popular culture involves issues of "commercialized leisure" (George Lipsitz). We see an increasing growth in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries toward the production of a vast, rapidly shifting network of competing, commercialized images: a system in motion. In music recordings (and often in performances as well) these are brief, packaged *sound images*.¹ All such sound images are in constant circulation in the marketplace, competing for attention, consumption, and commercial dominance. At its core, popular song is engaged with the fluid circulation of commodities within modern economies. To isolate a song or single product from the active field of circulation can be to misrepresent what is most fundamental about it.
3. Consequently, for the historian or analyst, an important feature to consider is the existence at all times of a swirling marketplace of sound images. "Intensities of circulation" envelop each sound image: Barthes's "jolts of fashion." This free churning of technology and commerce sets the terms under which sound images are manufactured, performed, target-marketed, and consumed.
4. From the point of view of production: Each sound image is manufactured to compete in a highly charged marketplace of competitors and alternatives, within what Bourdieu called the larger field of cultural production. Each sound image (or each producer of each sound image) seeks to position itself (himself, herself) within that larger field, allying with others nearby (in the "space of possibles"; the differing, possible *prises de position*) and sharply distinguishing itself from more distant others—other styles targeted toward other cultural groups.
5. Restated from the point of view of reception: One consumes a sound image largely in relation to the competitors that immediately surround it. One chooses to admire or purchase *this one* rather than *that one*, typically with a clear understanding that one is passing up the latter option consciously. Prestige and distinction, social-class identification, cultural attitudes, etc., are very much in play. ("I'd never buy *that*.") In this sense, each sound image is defined by its relationship to the marketplace that surrounds it. Each image is therefore also characterized, sometimes emphatically so, by its "not being" one of its competitors.
6. All of this suggests that a central feature of meaning in popular song is *relational meaning*—how that product positions itself vis à vis the marketplace, vis à vis past traditions, vis à vis the

¹ The term "sound images" stems from Saussure in relation to a feature of a word or signifier. Here it is adapted to mean a fixed or preserved (or repeated) musical utterance, especially those preserved on sound recordings.

generic family within which it participates, vis à vis the dialogue that it undertakes with all such things—and more. Consistently to focus only on the individual sound image, extracted from its self-positioning within the marketplace (that is, on its apparent, *immanent meaning* or set of meanings—what it implies as a single object or statement) is to ignore a central feature of this music that is, on whatever level, self-evident to most of those who chose to produce or consume it.

7. Sound images—the commodities in circulation at any given point—can be relatively flexible and unpreserved (as with private performances of purchased sheet music), but in time they grew more and more fixed through mechanical reproduction (sound recordings).
8. One axiom (or implication) of the popular-music marketplace is that all participants normally agree that each sound image is to be short-lived in its intensity and attractiveness: it is to be an *ephemeral* product to be manufactured and marketed for immediate, quick-term gain, following the track-record success of others in its genre. In any event, the individual product will soon be outdated, old-fashioned, or obsolete. In other words, there exists a consensus—as something of a founding principle—that whatever round of images is being marketed today will be replaced by a new constellation of images tomorrow. This assertion says nothing about the issue of quality. The technique or quality of the image can be stunning—or less than stunning (however one might assess this difficult matter). The important point is that the product occupy its *prise de position* within the cultural field in an attractive and strong way. In sum: the psychology of the push toward a brief, intense, short-lived success—evaluated most prominently in economic terms—dominates this field.
9. If a central feature of the marketplace is ephemerality and anticipated obsolescence, this suggests that seeming permanence or canonicity (wherever or whenever that might happen) is a secondary feature, something of an unplanned accident or fortuitous secondary-effect of reception. Typically, songs can be encouraged (or permitted) to live past their original period of marketability as nostalgia or as “oldies” (what once was vital—and for which we have affection—but which is agreed to be no longer so). Still, such a claim requires qualification. On the one hand, certain repertoires (such as vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley, or Broadway songs) were specifically written in order to be reperformed and reinterpreted—composed as “scripts” more than as “scores”—in various ways, thus extending the original song’s shelf life as an object of [re]interpretation. This suggests a different kind of emerging canonicity (standard popular songs). On the other hand, with the rise in importance in popular music in the twentieth century, there arose something of a historical canon (or better, a set of differing canons) of recorded popular songs—specific versions or sound images) that in themselves took on, within various interest groups, a classical or venerated (or at least beloved) status.
10. Popular music is more open to collaboration and group effort to produce the final, marketable product than is the tradition of European/American art music. This becomes even truer as we move through the twentieth century—as the sound images (in studios, etc.) become more and more fixed. Thus a central feature of popular music is a welcome reliance on teamwork and specialization, the appeal to specialists at various stages of production, performance, and distribution: composer, lyricist, arranger, producer, performer, and so on), normally without the slightest sense that anything artistic is being compromised. (Once that latter sense begins to emerge, one begins to pull oneself out of the popular-music sector of the field of

cultural production—begins to take up a more self-consciously “artistic” position in opposition to mainstream marketing.)

11. It may be in part for this reason that reinterpretation (sometimes radical reinterpretation) and individual, performative stylizing of pre-existing songs is certainly possible, and indeed (in the first half of the twentieth century) encouraged as an expected part of the game—the adding of another important, personalized collaborator to the mix.
12. Sound images have attributes that are essential parts of their positioning and marketing. They include;
 - a) Stylistic tone, sonority, timbre, vocal quality, technique (or its opposite), “attitude,” and the like. All of these features—and more as well—align the sound image with the fashions, values, or idealized life-styles of a targeted audience. The targeted audience consists of a clearly identified sector of the marketplace, perhaps rendered desirable by age, class, race, income, education, attractions to icons of cultural prestige, and the like. The point is that the sound image must convey by such means an immediacy of appeal on the level on style, sonority, technique, and so on. On another level, for example, the “grain” of the singer’s voice (and stylization) may be understood as a representative voice of the audience addressed (or clearly understood sectors thereof). This involves the addressing of certain sectors of the market, niches perhaps describable by age, race, class, income, and so on (that is, on their position on the Bourdieuan field of production and prestige). The sound and quality of the voice itself is to have an immediacy of appeal—on the level of style, sonority—to the targeted audience.
 - b) The sheer unalterability of the *recorded*-sound image’s shape—the actual image (sound-sculpture) placed onto the disc—is an important factor to consider. A sound image is a fixed shaping of time via contours and repetitions, through musical hooks and other attractive devices that invite mechanical repetition. (“Play it again!”) These fixed shapes matter. In nearly all cases they are not merely incidental or accidental but rather the results of a planned (recording) strategy. The larger questions are: how are we expected to be manipulated by the sound image? What are the trajectories and goals of its shape? How does it set itself up relationally to other, similar sound images? How does that particular image seek to manipulate us over its three or four minutes? How is that image a carefully planned show? Or is it? And so on.
 - c) An immediate appeal to issues of *genre*. Genres—almost always instantly recognizable by listeners (“Ah yes! One of *those!*”), however intuitively—are families or types of musical pieces with which the recorded sound image, setting off usually unmistakable signals, sets itself into dialogue. Genres are family-categories (niches) within which listeners are asked to attend to and enjoy the music. Genres have social implications. Standard forms are subsets of social genres. The genre system in which a sound image participates—relationally—is the main key to the piece’s (and the audience’s) most fundamental sense of its own identity and social purpose. Choice of preferred genre is typically a sign of choice of class—or a sign of aspiration toward or admiration for a choice of class.

13. The essence of a popular song (piece of popular music) is the tidy, commercial packaging of (usually) a single, brief melody—the commodity packaging of a short, memorable tune (with appropriate harmonization, of course). Typical packaging-formats include:

- a) the parallel period (ab || ac) over a shorter span of measures
- b) the larger, compound period (“double period”): A B || AC
- c) the 16- or (more often) 32-bar “lyric binary” (rounded binary): A A’ B || A’’

These formats are often combined with verse-refrain structures, in which the verse section(s) set up the (normally or traditionally) invariant, punch-line refrain, deployed, for instance, in one of the above formats.² Other structures (rotational, cyclical, etc. [as in blues rotations] are also possible. The central things are: repetitions of a short, recognizable pattern; brief; memorable.

14. The melody or other relevant features of a (successful) popular song must be readily graspable by the targeted audience. On whatever level, it must be “catchy”—including the words. And it must be repetitive: packaged single melodies for sale. Above all, a popular song (to be successful *as* a popular song) must never suggest to the targeted audience that effort is needed to assimilate it. Nothing in the music or text should suggest that the (in-group) audience is inadequately prepared to understand (enjoy) the piece. Thus the goal is the impression of an unmediated communication with the intended recipients. (The sound image is something like a shared wink—or affirmative handshake—with the targeted in-group.) Ideally, the impression should be that there is no potentially blocking system of thought between *you* and *it*. (We just “get it.”) (This, of course, is an illusion inviting deconstruction.)

15. In turn this implies that—in terms of evaluation and assessment—a sound image (of a popular song) is *not* primarily validated either by musical means (theoretical/technical means; analysis) or by the obvious skill or technical ability/virtuosity of its performer(s)—at least not among most of its listeners. Rather, the primary appeal is more normally made to the (constructed) life experience of the listener. (“You ‘understand’ this music—resonate with it,” claims the system, “because you *are* who you *are*.”)

16. Consequently, within their limited circles of intended production and reception, popular sound images must “tell the truth” to the sector that they target. (Here by “truth” is meant, of course, truth as perceived and encouraged to be true by that sector’s strongly held beliefs and convictions.) Popular music must accurately and meaningfully intersect with that group and their moment in time, always reinforcing and affirming the prevailing beliefs, attitudes, and axioms of its consumers (“giving them what they want”). In that sense, the sound images of (successful) popular music “reveal the truth” about the real desires or fantasies of their consumers—at times, apart from what those consumers might otherwise describe (more politely, if interviewed) as their desires or fantasies. (To be sure, popular music can also convey painful messages of shared melancholy, frustration, disappointment, protest,

² A caveat with regard to refrains: By the 1920s and 1930s, several composers (Porter among them) delighted in refrain-space treatment in which one had multiple, related “refrain” texts, either extravagant lists (“Let’s Do It; Let’s Fall in Love”; “Anything Goes”) or ongoing narratives (“It’s De-Lovely”). Such treatments occupy refrain-space but are not literal (textually invariant) refrains.

resistance, and so on—if and only if that is what the targeted consumers want at that moment [as part of their own social moment of self-affirmation and bonding], and if and only if [in songs of self-evident social resistance] the projected villains or scapegoats are clearly identifiable by that targeted consumer-sector. (“We all know *who* is causing us to feel this way!”)

17. Continuing the above thought: Choosing a genre of song—or a set of performers—to identify with is in part to construct oneself as a personality in the present. It is in this way that this music can become an accessory to identity, built by assembling and identifying with certain styles of commodities. This touches on the huge topic of style and fashion, within free-market economies, as commercial identifiers of the person. Groups come to form and define themselves by style choices, among which music plays an important role. One important goal within a shifting, fluid, increasingly rootless society: to bond together communities of listeners (who may not know each other), by means of fashion and common purchases—the creation of virtual communities, in part imagined by consumers and aided, prodded onward, by journals, reviews, advertisements, promotions, media reports, and so on.
18. Similarly, popular-music sound images must be understood to articulate in some way the “reality” (or myth) of their own present. Thus what is crucial is the sense of an intensity of “now-ness” within an ever-changing fashion system.
19. It might follow that one function of the popular-music system (or networks of competitive subsystems) is explicitly to orient a consumer toward a constantly shifting, fluid present (or, better, to a preferred sector of that present); to mediate or establish a relationship to a specifically textured present (or set of perceived surrounding conditions).
20. In that role of orientation the sound image, paradoxically, strives to fulfill yet another function. Amidst the swirl of flux it presents something fixed and stable—unalterable—even as it simultaneously is implicated within that relational swirl, whose contemporaneity it somehow articulates. As such, these sound images, particularly for consumers, are also strategies of coping within an increasingly decentered (but commercially stimulated) world. This may [or may not] be related to the “escape” function of music in general—fantasy or role-playing? Or perhaps to its entertainment or amusement functions, coupled with music’s traditional abilities to project vivid and alluring moods and/or induce quasi-hypnotic engagement.
21. Considerations along these lines might help to account for the rapid dating of popular songs: their foundational ties to a given, but passing, moment of fluid, elapsing time. Conditions and social attitudes change rapidly in twentieth- and post-twentieth-century America. One way of grasping and coping with the instability of time, the sheer flux of conditions and expectations, is through popular-music sound images. And those attuned to the demands of the present (the essential demand of commercialized popular culture) must be uncomfortable in one way or another with the attitudes of the past, especially the recent past, against which the new present must distinguish itself and define itself.
22. This also accounts for the nostalgia of the oldie—and the “they’re-playing-our-tune” or “remember-when-we-were-young” syndromes. Like a faded snapshot of lost time, like a preserved souvenir, the sound image artificially recreates an irrecoverable slice of diachronic time, perhaps even of a personal moment in one’s life. It remains an anchor point or mooring

of autobiography, a collectible, something that can be re-experienced, though never again as a true slice of current time—for the point, always and everywhere, is that that music, that piece, that style, has obsolesced, has been erased by change, is now gone forever. Thus the oldie is typically maintained like an entry into a personal photo album, of little interest to anyone except the person (or group) who seeks out these personalized sound images. Again, the task of the historian is made more difficult under such circumstances. The professional historian typically has little or no desire to revive or turn into permanent “art” such oldies. One seeks only to account for their once-held charm or fascination: how they helped to write the cultural history of their time. It often happens that one person’s meaningful popular music is another person’s kitsch. How to overcome this obstacle? Does it matter?

23. It can be helpful to consider popular music as a site or arena (a space) within which certain deep-rooted tensions and conflicts of modern industrial/technological society are allowed to be articulated. This is a view of popular culture not only as a site of negotiation but also a site of struggle (sexual and/or gender-role tensions, modern class or racial or economic tensions, and so on).