

THE POPULAR MUSIC RESEARCH PROJECT:
A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

by

Peter Hesbacher, Ph.D. and Bruce Anderson, M.A.

Begun as a collection of sound recordings, the Popular Music Research Project has since undertaken a systematic examination of American popular music. The appeals of such research derive from the music itself. Popular songs are contemporary, embodying the cultural present upon release and preserving its memory as time passes.¹ Popular music is also a unique combination of formula and novelty, of intricate variations on universal themes.² The Project seeks to explicate the richness and vitality of this music.

The present paper describes the archive and the Project's accomplishments. One set of studies has traced general trends in popular music through four key descriptors--manufacturer (market distribution), song type (musical genre), artist type (performance mode), and lyric content (vocal message)--identified for the most popular recordings since 1940. Another set of studies has examined specific issues such as the representativeness of repackaged songs, cross-fertilization of musical genres, and advances in the careers of women singers. Possibilities for future research include both types of studies.

The Archive

The archive began in 1946 and is supplied by a record subscription service; additional sides came from record store basements and format-changing radio stations. Monitored on the popularity charts, these singles led to the first published article,³ proposing a computer-based, statistical study of popular music trends. This proposal stimulated interest⁴ in chart compilation, leading to a consultation for Billboard magazine⁴ and publications about chart strengths and weaknesses.⁵⁻⁷ Simultaneously, studies of station playlists and radio programming identified the symbiotic relationship between radio and recordings.⁸⁻¹⁰ Currently active, the archive contains 44,000 singles of which 25,000 charted and 670 reached number one between 1940 and 1979. It also embraces the 2,048 Billboard general weekly singles charts published during this period. Besides complete data for all number one songs, computerized data exist for all chart singles between 1940 and 1970.

General Trends

In order to systematically examine general trends in popular music,

several study design decisions were required. The starting date became 1940 because the music industry confirmed the ascendancy of records over sheet music with Billboard's first singles chart on July 20, 1940. Only top hits (number one records) were chosen to guarantee widespread public acceptance unaffected by unreliable chart procedures. Hit sides rather than records were used to standardize popularity data.

From a host of possible variables,¹¹⁻¹⁴ four descriptors best comprehend the music, its performance, and manufacture. A twelve category manufacturer classification employed reference works and record labels for documentation.¹⁵ The authors auditioned and coded all recordings independently for song type (ten categories),¹⁶ artist type (eight categories),¹⁷ and lyric content. The last variable evolved from social science tradition¹⁸⁻¹⁹ and posits a ten category classification system.²⁰ The schemas for all four descriptors have proven to be mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

Table 1 provides an overview of the 670 sides to become top hits on Billboard's general popularity chart during the past forty years. Among manufacturers, ten large firms account for 80 per cent, thirty-six medium firms 17 per cent, and sixteen small firms 3 per cent of the top hits. Although no large company enjoys more than a 12 per cent share, WEA has achieved its total in about half the time of CBS, RCA, Capitol, and MCA. Among song types, four mainstream genres account for 90 per cent and six substream genres for 10 per cent of the top hits. Within mainstream song types, ballads consistently outnumber upbeat; within substream forms, all genres except jazz are virtually equally represented. Among artist types, males dominate as soloists (35 per cent) and groups (28 per cent); of the other performance modes, solo female vocalists and big bands are most prominent. Among lyric types, the five relational stages of love account for 62 per cent, narrative ballads and other lyrics account for 38 per cent of the top hits. Within love themes, positive (prologue, courtship, honeymoon) messages outnumber the negative (downward, all alone) by about two to one.

See Table 1

Historical periods or epochs were established by computing Spearman rank correlation coefficients (r_{hos}) of each descriptor for both adjacent and alternate years. Adjacent year correlations show year-to-year popularity stability of descriptor categories, while alternate year correlations join discrepant years to the more appropriate of two historical periods. From these correlations, inferences were made about the length and quality of time frames now characterized as "stability," "transition," or "change."

Composite change for the four depicted descriptors was then determined to arrive at periods for popular music as a whole. From 1956 through 1958, no descriptor was stable; of these three years 1958 evinced the most change. Subsequently, no descriptor was stable in 1969. Therefore, Figure 1 isolates three composite historical periods: Epoch 1

(1940-1958), Epoch 2 (1959-1969), and Epoch 3 (1970-1979).

See Figure 1

The dominant forms for individual time frames and for all epochs combined appear in Figure 2. Manufacturer shifts from old large firms to new large firms, while medium firms become important during the two most recent epochs: Song type changes from pop to rock by Epoch 2, although ballads are popular in all time periods. Artist type confirms the dominance of male performers; male solo vocalists are ascendant throughout, with male vocal groups supplanting big bands after Epoch 1. Lyric content underlines the continuing significance of narrative ballads; among love themes, downward lyrics temporarily replace honeymoon messages during Epoch 2.

See Figure 2

Determination of historical periods allowed additional questions. A study of manufacturers compared CBS hit recordings with the rest of the industry. CBS's eighty-two hits and those of all other firms changed over time for song and artist type but not for lyric content. However, CBS more than other companies favored big bands during Epoch 1, country and folk songs and narrative ballad lyrics in Epoch 2. Although CBS was slow to change from big bands and temporarily resisted rock, it conformed completely to industry practice during Epoch 3.

A study of song type investigated how substream genre hits, often not intended for mass acceptance, differed from mainstream hits. The sixty-seven substream (non-pop, non-rock) songs changed much less than mainstream songs over time. Mainstream hits differed for manufacturer, artist type, and lyric content; substream hits only changed for manufacturer. However, substream more than mainstream songs were narrative ballads performed by male solo vocalists during all three epochs. The ability of substream recordings to resist change implies that their popularity is largely independent of fashion, making commercial appeal difficult to predict.

A study of artist type examined the qualities of female solo vocalists' hits in relation to other performance modes. The eighty female solo vocalists' hits changed somewhat less than all other artist types over time. Other artist types differed for manufacturer; both performance groups changed for song type; neither artist group altered for lyric content. However, women singers more than other performers sang positive (prologue, courtship, honeymoon) lyrics during Epoch 1 and rock and pop ballads in Epoch 3. Overall, female solo vocalists appear more likely to follow rather than initiate trends.

A study of lyric content asked whether love negative (downward, all alone) lyrics evinced characteristics similar to other lyric types. The 145 love negative hits and those of all other vocal messages changed over time for manufacturer, song type, and artist type. However, love negative

lyrics more than other message themes accompanied pop and rock ballads during the first two epochs. Otherwise, these lyrics aligned with the dominant descriptors of each period.

Specific Issues

An understanding of trends within recorded popular music also provides a context for assessing other developments within the music industry and the larger society. Recent studies examined the relationship between regular and anthology album manufacturers, described the strategies regular manufacturers employ to incorporate country and soul music into mainstream markets, and assessed the career progress of women singers.

Anthology albums recycle popular music product. They are usually packaged and promoted by auxiliary firms instead of regular record companies. Although anthology album firms seek recent hits from a variety of artists, the companies who regularly record these performers may resist selling supplemental rights to their songs. Some record executives believe that anthology albums introduce their artists to new markets, but others claim these albums compete with the performer's regular product.

Table 2 compares by manufacturer all selections on seven anthology albums with the top singles hits of the same time period. Of the three top firms, only Polydor, a fast-growing conglomerate, appears receptive to this sales device. On the other hand, medium firms are quite responsive to the licensing of supplemental rights.

See Table 2

Research indicates that regular and anthology albums are relatively independent of each other. Consumers buy regular albums to hear the artist, anthology albums to experience hit records. There appears to be no reason for regular companies to resist anthology albums as a source of additional revenue. By extending singles product life, anthology albums simply meet a need that regular manufacturers presently ignore.²¹

To investigate how regional and racial music enriches the urban pop/rock mainstream, country and soul hits were compared for their manufacturer strategies and crossover characteristics. Songs were catalogued into "pure" and "composite" forms; the former signifying an original country or soul hit that "crossed over" to the mainstream, the latter identifying alternative strategies which blend mainstream and substream characteristics. A contracted artist may be asked to "cover" a country or soul tune with a more commercial arrangement, typically rock or pop in ballad or upbeat tempo. A substream country or soul "composed" song structure can be produced with a mainstream vocal or instrumental arrangement. Country or soul "flavor" results when a rock

or pop song structure is enhanced by a substream country or soul vocal style, lyric, or orchestration.

Table 3 compares country and soul crossover hits with pop covers, substream composed, and substream flavored for three historical epochs. Each time period shows increasing numbers of top hits with country or soul influence--country has its greatest success during Epoch 1; soul is peaking in Epoch 3. Of the mainstream manufacturing strategies, country and soul pop covers dominate Epoch 1, while country and soul composed and flavored characterize Epochs 2 and 3.

See Table 3

Overall, country qualifies as an established force within popular music; in recent years, soul has become the dominant substream song type. Close examination shows that both genres influence the mainstream more than each other. Country and pop share a respect for the distinctive lyrics of reassuring solo vocalists; soul and pop favor hypnotic polyrhythms and kinetic vocal groups. Although country and soul commonly employ a simple harmonic and lyric structure, only soul is committed to improvisational, ornamented singing. While country is slowly adapting to contemporary entertainment trends, soul has kept pace with the aesthetic and technological complexities of city life. Unless urban flight augurs a shift in taste as well as residential preference, soul will likely remain the most vital substream contribution to American popular music.²²

A third study assessed whether women's gains in other fields have been reflected in recorded popular music. The 190 female and male solo vocalists to make number one comprise the study subsample. All singles chart recordings by these artists are used to determine career patterns. Study indicators are longevity (time from first to last chart appearance), stardom (time from first chart appearance to initial number one hit), and mobility (number of firms associated with chart recordings). These variables are classified by epoch in Table 4.

See Table 4

In every epoch, male solo vocalists have a longer career than females. Epoch 2 is particularly disruptive for women--their careers are shortest here and no singer who made number one in this epoch hit in Epoch 1 or 3. Women approach parity in Epoch 3, when men only outlast them by half a year. Stardom takes 2.5 years overall for both female and male vocalists, but it varies by epoch. A noticeable increase in time to first top hit occurs for both sexes during Epoch 3. Among hit singers, 38 per cent of the first recordings to chart reach number one, a figure that does not differ by sex or epoch. When it occurs, stardom takes place relatively early in many chart careers. Intra-industry mobility does not differ by sex, except during Epoch 2 when males are more mobile. Hit vocalists typically affiliate with two firms during their careers, although Cher and Lou Christie charted with seven labels

and Brian Hyland with six labels respectively.

In examining the careers of hit solo vocalists since 1940, one can appreciate the obstacles women singers have experienced. More male artists enjoy top singles and longer careers. Females encounter restrictions in choice of musical genre and message theme from manufacturers who rely primarily on male singers to remain solvent. Nevertheless, female vocalists have made genuine advances in recent years. Their future gains will depend on public support more than industry enlightenment.

Project Future

The Project's future is only partly defined by its accomplishments. Continuation depends upon maintenance of the archive--the addition of approximately 1000 singles per year, cataloguing and monitoring according to tradeweekly charts, and periodic coding of recordings for inclusion in the data bank. Possible studies which exploit the archive and its computerized data base include an annual review of hit records to identify recent developments, a report on leading tradeweeklies' charts using a computational model to permit popularity comparisons across time, continuing examination of salient issues in popular music and society, and further documentation of general trends in popular music.²⁴

The archive has also been utilized without the computerized data--to program a "gold" format for radio stations; to reprise hits, as in a recently broadcast "countdown" of the top seven tunes for a mid-October week at seven-year intervals from 1941 to 1976; to develop rating procedures for testing audience perceptions of different versions of the same song; and to assemble a variety of historical tapes.

Archival research preserves our musical culture and stimulates different ways to comprehend it. Nevertheless, the chief purpose for recorded music remains listener enjoyment. The Popular Music Research Project is committed to an art form that millions love, but few have attempted to understand.

NOTES

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TABLE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF NUMBER ONE RECORDINGS
BY FOUR KEY DESCRIPTORS (1940-1979)*

MANUFACTURER**			SONG TYPE		
	N	%		N	%
Large Firms			Mainstream		
CBS	82	12	Rock upbeat	81	12
MCA	64	10	pop upbeat	63	9
RCA	81	12	pop ballad	138	21
Capitol	76	11	rock ballad	321	48
Polydor	43	6	Substream		
Phonogram	30	5	folk	16	2
ABC	23	3	country and western	15	2
WEA	71	11	rhythm and blues	12	2
UA	19	3	jazz	2	-
Motown	45	7	comedy/novelty	12	2
Medium Firms	116	17	seasonal	10	2
Small Firms	21	3	Total	670	100
Total	671	100			
ARTIST TYPE			LYRIC CONTENT		
	N	%		N	%
Female			Love Lyrics		
solo vocal	80	12	prologue	27	4
vocal group	31	5	courtship	99	15
Male			honeymoon	140	21
solo vocal	234	35	downward	88	13
vocal group	186	28	all alone	57	9
Mixed			Other Lyrics		
duet	18	3	narrative ballads	196	29
vocal group	41	6	religious	4	-
Orchestra			dance	10	2
big band	71	10	comic	15	2
small combo	9	1	tune	34	5
Total	670	100	Total	670	100

*Source: Billboard (Los Angeles: Billboard Publications, Inc.), July 20, 1940 through December 29, 1979.

**One recording, the Troggs' "Wild Thing," hit with two different firms; therefore, 671 labels are reflected among 670 hits.

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF SELECTIONS BY MANUFACTURER:
 ANTHOLOGY ALBUMS AND TOP SINGLES HITS

MANUFACTURER	ANTHOLOGY ALBUM SAMPLE*		TOP SINGLES HITS (1976-1978)**	
	N	%	N	%
Large Firms				
CBS	9	6	9	12
MCA	2	1	2	3
RCA	6	4	2	3
Capitol	9	6	8	11
Polydor	32	23	14	19
Phonogram	0	0	1	1
ABC	5	4	2	3
WEA	24	17	17	23
UA	9	6	1	1
Motown	5	4	8	11
Medium Firms	35	25	8	11
Small Firms	6	4	1	1
	(142)	(100)	(73)	(99)

*With one exception, all songs licensed for anthology album use were published during 1976, 1977, or 1978 and achieved popularity by 1979.

** r_s (rho) = .62

TABLE 3

MANUFACTURER STRATEGIES: A COMPARISON OF COUNTRY AND SOUL RECORDINGS

COUNTRY	TIME PERIOD+						Combined (1940-1977) N %	
	Epoch 1 (1940-1958) N %	Epoch 2 (1959-1969) N %	Epoch 3 (1970-1977) N %	Epoch 3 (1970-1977) N %	Epoch 3 (1970-1977) N %	Epoch 3 (1970-1977) N %		
Pure Form*	3	10	6	23	6	27	15	19
country and western								
Composite Forms**	9	29	2	8	1	4	12	15
pop cover	4	13	3	11	5	23	12	15
country composed	15	48	15	58	10	46	40	51
country flavored	31	39	26	33	22	28	79	100
Total								
SOUL								
Pure Form*	1	5	1	2	10	13	12	8
rhythm and blues								
Composite Forms**	5	25	4	7	3	4	12	8
pop cover	4	20	32	56	38	51	74	49
soul composed	10	50	20	35	24	32	54	35
soul flavored	20	13	57	38	75	49	152	100
Total								

*Pure form refers either to substream recordings produced for a country market or substream recordings produced for a black market.

**Song types for composite form recordings are typically mainstream pop or rock ballads and upbeats which contain elements of country or soul style.

+Source: Billboard (Los Angeles: Billboard Publications, Inc.), July 20, 1940 through December 31, 1977.

TABLE 4

CAREER PATTERNS

CAREER QUALITIES	TIME PERIOD*			
	Epoch 1 (1940-1958) X Years	Epoch 2 (1959-1969) X Years	Epoch 3 (1970-1978) X Years	Combined (1940-1978) X Years
Longevity				
female solo vocalists	10.9	6.3	6.8	8.1
male solo vocalists	11.9	9.0	7.3	9.2
Stardom	X Years	X Years	X Years	X Years
female solo vocalists	2.4	1.3	3.3	2.5
male solo vocalists	1.7	1.9	3.7	2.5
Mobility	X Firms	X Firms	X Firms	X Firms
female solo vocalists	1.8	1.6	1.8	1.75
male solo vocalists	1.8	2.4	1.9	2.00

*Calculations for career qualities utilize all charted singles for all 190 vocalists who achieved a top hit.

FIGURE 1

HISTORICAL PERIODS (1940-1979)

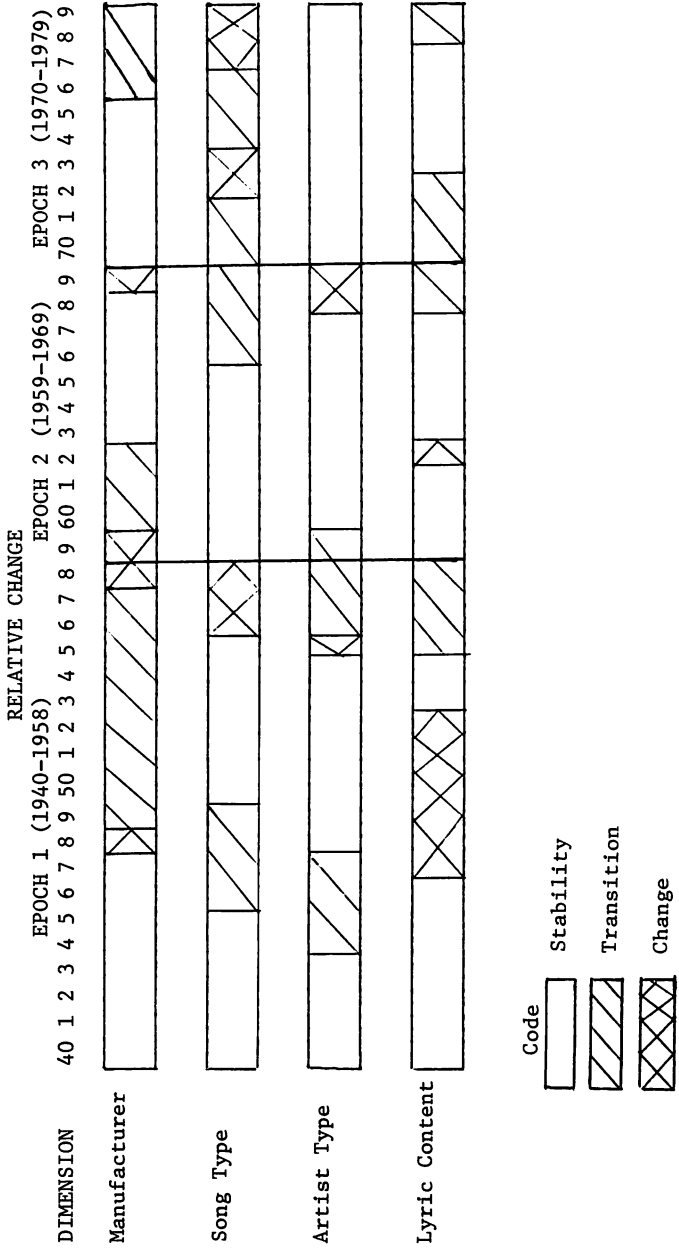


FIGURE 2

MUSIC PATTERN BY TIME PERIOD

MUSIC PATTERN (Key Descriptors)	TIME PERIOD+			
	All Epochs Combined	Epoch 1 (1940-1958)	Epoch 2 (1959-1969)	Epoch 3 (1970-1979)
Manufacturer (Market distribution)	Medium firms CBS RCA	RCA MCA	Medium firms	WEA Medium firms
Song Type (musical genre)	Rock ballad Pop ballad	Pop ballad Pop upbeat	Rock ballad Rock upbeat	Rock ballad
Artist Type (performance mode)	Male solo vocalist Male vocal group	Male solo vocalist Big band	Male vocal group Male solo vocalist	Male solo vocalist Male vocal group
Lyric Content (vocal message)	Narrative ballads Honeymoon	Honeymoon Narrative ballads	Narrative ballads Downward	Narrative ballads Honeymoon

+Source: Billboard (Los Angeles: Billboard Publications, Inc.), July 20, 1940 through December 29, 1979.