

Pop

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Often used as a term interchangeable with “popular music,” pop refers more precisely to a genre of popular music or an attitude toward making popular music that is typically seen as distinct from other genres such as rock, soul, or country. Indeed, pop is often defined in negative terms; Simon Frith argues that pop is “what’s left when all the other forms of popular music are stripped away. . . . From this perspective pop is defined as much by what it isn’t as by what it is.” While a genre like Rock has identifiable sonic markers and characteristics—such as an emphasis on electric guitar, extensive use of blues-influenced structures, an ideology of authenticity and sincerity—pop as a genre cannot be said to have a coherent style. Pop’s voracious borrowing and adaptation leads not only to new stylistic combinations but also to “pop” versions of country, rock, hip hop, heavy metal, and other styles. Rather than a specific set of sounds, pop is a sensibility.

Pop performers frequently pick and choose repertoire and mimic effects from other genres in crafting new material. The magpie-like nature of pop leads Eric Weisbard to call it “a hybrid, a category fouler” and Ann Powers to identify Prometheus the thief, rather than Orpheus the rebel, as pop’s favorite god. In the face of charges of being derivative and banal, pop remains cheerfully indifferent to the value of originality. At the same time, the creators and producers of pop are often pioneers of new technologies, sounds, and styles, so that pop is frequently at the vanguard of experimentation. This paradox is one of many that make definitions of pop slippery and elusive.

While “pop” derives from “popular,” the designation is often applied in the absence of market success or other indicators of actual popularity. Thus, a song or other piece of music can achieve tremendous popularity without being thought of as pop, and a song with a certain sensibility is considered pop even if it does not catch on with a wide audience. Consider the massive popularity of Nirvana’s 1991 “Smells Like Teen Spirit” in contrast to Debbie Gibson’s release of that year, “Anything is possible,” ineluctably pop even though its sales were modest. For such reasons pop is a classification that may be assigned on the basis of sonic qualities, expressive themes, expected fan base, or assumptions about artistic integrity, rather than empirical evidence of popularity.

Note also that this comparison points to gendered associations of rock with masculinity and pop with femininity. Pop of the type produced by Gibson is generally considered the province of female performers and listeners, if only because of its safe, predictable language and thematic content. While rock culture encourages rebellion, models a quest for independence, and fits well with the expectations and standards of manhood, pop is family-friendly and connected to women and girls above all, reaffirming the ideology of romance and the safe, domestic space. Thus, while a young female performer of rock like Joan Jett had to work hard to prove herself along the lines of an honorary male, a young male performer of pop like Justin Bieber finds that his masculinity is called into question.

Age also has a bearing on the “pop” associations of individual performers. Pop is often associated with youth (and childhood) and produced by young (and sometimes child) performers; a connection to young, female audiences and performers can be sufficient to conjure the designation pop. Thus, when 19-year-old former television star Miley Cyrus included “Smells Like Teen Spirit” in her 2011 “Gypsy Heart Tour” (dedicating it to her little brother at home, because they had grown up singing it together), she was seen to have brought the song into the realm of family-friendly pop rather than having the performance transform her into a rock artist, even though her raspy vocals evoked Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain more than Debbie Gibson.

At the same time, pop is also linked to middle-aged listeners, particularly middle-class suburbanites and most particularly women. Comforting older artists such as Barry Manilow are overwhelmingly understood to offer tame material oozing with false sentimentality and clichés, and their fan bases are largely assumed to be housewives, seeking the illusion of intimacy. The anodyne character of music associated with middle-aged housewives also connects it more strongly with bland fare suitable for family consumption, reinforcing associations with domesticity, conventional femininity, and children. A young listener's turn away from family-sanctioned pop to music genres associated with nonconformity can be perceived as a step toward adulthood, so that adult listeners preferring pop can be seen as immature.

Pop music is inextricably associated with commercial concerns, mass production, and charges of pandering to the least sophisticated tastes. The songwriter Stephen Foster, arguably the first purveyor of pop in the United States, wrote unfailingly pleasing tunes that relied exclusively on diatonic melodies, major keys, and basic harmonic movement, although he had received formal training in music and presumably was capable of greater complexity. Foster sought simplicity and transparency, crafting a language that could be grasped quickly by the majority of listeners after only one or two hearings. Such direct and pleasing pop music is often criticized on the grounds that it is simple to the point of inanity, and its fans unsophisticated and passive. This line of analysis, expressed most forcefully in the work of Theodor Adorno, assumes the existence of cynical businessmen, with no genuine interest in making good music, assembling shoddy product and force-feeding it to the mindless masses. Whether or not one subscribes to Adorno's position, there is no doubt that pop's appealing hooks and grooves worm their way into our consciousness, often without our consent or awareness, as in the famous Noël Coward line "Extraordinary how potent cheap music is."

Much of pop music's simplicity is deceptive, however. The creations of Burt Bacharach and Hal David in the 1960s, for example, frequently employ shifting meters and surprising melodic and harmonic language, but this did not prevent songs like "I say a little prayer for you" (originally recorded by Dionne Warwick, 1967) from being "catchy" and popular. Bacharach, a formally trained composer, drew on his familiarity with the European art music repertoire, and many of his peers associated with the Brill Building similarly employed a harmonic palette wider than the I-IV-V language of the blues. Likewise, earlier Tin Pan Alley songwriters reworked familiar classical works into songs such as "I'm always chasing rainbows" (1918, based on Chopin's *Fantasy-Impromptu*, op.66) or "Our Love" (1939, based on Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*); this strategy is also used in the 1975 hit "Midnight Blue" (based on the second movement of Beethoven's "Pathétique" sonata, op.13). The association of this sort of pop music with learned music practices also connects it with privileged middle- and upper-class listeners.

Pop music is overcoded, rooted in its cultural moment without pretensions of transcendence or lasting value. Pop's appetites range widely, often irreverently combining sounds of the moment and fashioning new hybrids, as when heavy metal guitarist Eddie Van Halen soloed in support of Michael Jackson (the anointed "King of Pop") on "Beat It" (1984). Even before the studio wizardry of Phil Spector and Brian Wilson in the 1960s, pop has historically stood at the forefront of exploration with new technologies of music and recording. We hear these qualities in "This Diamond Ring," a 1965 multitracked and overdubbed studio recording attributed to Gary Lewis & the Playboys (though its vocals were not even provided by the ostensible singer, Gary Lewis) and "Believe," the 1998 single by Cher that became a worldwide sensation in large part for its intriguingly distorted vocals. The production used Auto-Tune, a studio tool, to create what would come to be called "the Cher effect." Although Auto-Tune was originally designed to unobtrusively correct imprecise intonation, her producers used it to exaggerate the artificiality of abrupt pitch correction, a technique that

became widespread in pop recordings and live performance throughout the first decade of the 21st century.

Yet pop may also lean toward the old-fashioned and nostalgic, recycling sounds and styles that were once associated with other genres. Pop relies on cultural amnesia, presenting “new” music uncannily resembling old music and seeming tame, even quaint, in its new setting. Sounds that shocked audiences when played by punk bands in the 1970s had become mainstream pop 25 years later in the hands of pop-punk groups. Often, pop artists specifically revive long forgotten songs to appeal to new listeners; the careers of teen idols such as Connie Francis and Leif Garrett (among many others) involved the strategic use of decades-old hits such as “Who’s Sorry Now” and “Put your head on my shoulder.” Old songs presented by young performers—thus combining fresh, youthful energy with reassuringly old-fashioned sounds—offer reactionary alternatives to new, subversive musics. Pop thus presents its listeners a distraction from contemporary musics and subcultures that threaten the *status quo*. In times of widespread duress, pop music also can offer soothing relief, as Rudy Vallee demonstrated with “Life is just a bowl of cherries” (1931), recorded during the Great Depression.

Pop’s preference for personal themes, involving relationships and feelings, rather than explicitly political ones, helps it to exist simultaneously on the margins and at the center of social experience. Pop’s essence is, perhaps, its ephemerality; pop songs can seize the public ear for a brief time and then evaporate, often ceding the ground to other musical styles when histories of music come to be written. Thus, the accepted narrative of significant music in 1969 attaches importance to Jimi Hendrix’s accomplishments, but not to those of the Fifth Dimension or Tommy James and the Shondells, both of which groups far outpaced Hendrix that year in terms of chart success. The pleasures of James and the Shondells’ “Crimson and Clover,” though widely enjoyed, were easily discarded, leaving no lasting trace on the historical record.

At the same time, some pop songs pass into the vernacular and endure for decades or more—like the song “Oh! Susanna” (1848), originally composed by Stephen Foster for performance on the minstrel stage—in some cases coming to be understood as folk songs that seemingly exist apart from the commercial music publishing industry. Pop’s later inclination for the single format characteristically has made its recorded products quicker and cheaper to make and distribute than the album format long preferred in rock culture (particularly rock with pretensions of grandeur and timeless artistic merit). Even confections such as the Archies’ “Sugar Sugar” (1969)—a studio concoction credited to the band from a children’s cartoon—have proven relevant and recognizable 40 years on. Created in a single recording session as a novelty song, “Sugar Sugar” has proven surprisingly durable, gaining “oldies” radio play in the 2010s comparable to that of art rock album tracks months in the making (for example, “Money” from Pink Floyd’s 1973 *Dark Side of the Moon*).

Arguably, the freshness and unambiguousness of a pop confection like “Sugar Sugar” is the key to its lasting appeal, still audible decades after its creation. The banality of clichés used to convey commonplace emotions and experiences are in this way crucial to pop, leading to songs that express the familiar and acutely personal to the widest possible range of listeners. Unburdened with any claim to serious artistic worth, a pop song can articulate profound personal sentiment with breathtaking immediacy. Urging its listeners to dance or sing along, pop music offers transparency, directness, and access to innermost feeling.

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