

4 Pop music

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The biggest selling pop single of all time is the version of 'Candle in the Wind' Elton John recorded as a tribute to Princess Diana, and his Westminster Abbey performance of the song, during Diana's funeral service in September 1997, can be considered as the ultimate British pop moment. It was controversial. Pop music is still regarded as a vernacular form unsuitable for a religious occasion, a vulgar form unfit for royalty; and Elton John was not an obvious representative of the state (though he was soon to be knighted, joining Sir Cliff Richard, Sir Paul McCartney, and Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber in the official pop pantheon). He was chosen to sing because he was an intimate of Diana and, in this respect, simply represented her social circle. But it was precisely because she was an Elton John fan that Princess Diana could be described as 'the people's princess': John was an appropriate singer at her service not just as a personal friend but also as the emotional voice of a generation.

In the 1970s Elton John and his lyricist, Bernie Taupin, perfected the musical form that came to dominate Anglo-American pop music in the last decades of the century: the rock ballad. They took the sentimental song (as commercialised in the late nineteenth century), keeping its easy melodic lines, its use of rising pitch to unleash emotion, its lyrical sense of expansive self-pity, but giving it a new rock-based dynamism (in terms of rhythm and amplification). In particular, Elton John's vocal approach was taken from soul music: he sings with a hesitancy, an introversion, an intimacy which contrasts markedly with the full, extrovert, confident vocal tone of the Victorian ballad singer. And this relates to what was most striking about his Westminster Abbey song: the crowd in Hyde Park, watching the service on television relay screens, clearly saw it as a performance. They applauded, and the applause resonated in the Abbey itself. When Earl Spencer spoke, his speech was also heard as a performance, and the applause rippled around the Abbey audience too.

Now of course everyone at Diana's service was performing one way or another, but Elton John's was a specifically pop performance. He was applauded less for being sincere than for performing sincerity; applause was necessary to confirm the skill – the effect – of the performance. Someone just being sincere – crying, say – is not applauded because this

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involves neither skill nor calculation; it is not an act designed for an evaluative response. Elton John's performance, by contrast was precisely a display of what we might call emoting skill. What the audience applauded was not John's actual feeling of grief (his business alone) but his ability to provide a performance of grief in which we, as listeners, could take part. 'Candle in the Wind' was, after all, first written for Marilyn Monroe, and it became popular because its feelings were so easily transferred; it was a song through which every lost love could be remembered. It was Diana's song not because she was now its object but because she had so liked it too.

Here are clues as to the ways in which pop performers can be distinguished from rock musicians, on the one hand, and from classical musicians, on the other. Elton John is a pop not a rock star because his authenticity – the authenticity of his expressed emotions – is not an issue. 'Candle in the Wind' is not a song of self-exposure; it was not written to mark off John's difference, his unique artistic sensibility. It was, rather, a pop song, designed for public use. At the same time its pleasures are neither abstract nor in any musical sense transcendent. It is a song infused with Elton John's personality and, for its emotional effect, infused too with a kind of collective sigh. Compare John Tavener's contribution to the funeral service. This also struck an emotional chord with the public (and duly turned up in Classic FM listeners' list of favourite works); but it was clearly a spiritual piece, lifting listeners out of the mundane. It was not applauded.

Definitions

Pop music is a slippery concept, perhaps because it is so familiar, so easily used. Pop can be differentiated from classical or art music, on the one side, from folk music, on the other, but may otherwise include every sort of style. It is music accessible to a general public (rather than aimed at elites or dependent on any kind of knowledge or listening skill). It is music produced commercially, for profit, as a matter of enterprise not art. Defined in these terms, 'pop music' includes all contemporary popular forms – rock, country, reggae, rap, and so on. But there are problems with such an inclusive definition as has become apparent when states have attempted to define pop in law. When in 1990 British legislators (concerned to regulate the content of music radio) defined 'pop music' as 'all kinds of music characterised by a strong rhythmic element and a reliance on electronic amplification for their performance', this led to strong objections from the music industry that such a musical definition failed to grasp the sociologi-

cal difference between pop ('instant singles-based music aimed at teenagers') and rock ('album-based music for adults').

Here pop becomes not an inclusive category but a residual one: it is what's left when all the other forms of popular music are stripped away, and it is not only rock ideologues who want to distance their music from pop, for them a term of contempt. Country music performers have objected similarly to 'pop stars' like Olivia Newton-John getting country music awards, and these days rap fans dismiss cross-over stars like Will Smith as just 'pop acts'. From this perspective pop is defined as much by what it isn't as by what it is.

Markets

Pop does not have a specific or subcultural, communal market/culture. It is designed to appeal to everyone. Pop doesn't come from any particular place or mark off any particular taste. The partial exception to this rule is teenpop which does appeal to a specific market segment (young girls) but it is misleading to conclude from this that pop is a female form or has primarily female appeal. Much of pop could be called family music. Europop, for example, has been the sound of the summer holiday since Los Bravos's million selling 'Black is Black' in 1966. Los Bravos were a Spanish group with a German lead singer and a British producer. Their success was a model for both cross-European collaboration and commercial opportunism. The skill of the Europop producer (and this is a producer-led form) is to adapt the latest fashionable sounds to Euroglot lyrics which can be followed by everyone with a high-school foreign language, and to a chorus line which can be collectively sung in every continental disco and holiday resort. Thus Boney M, a foursome from the Caribbean (via Britain and Holland), brought together by German producer Frank Farian, sold fifty million records in 1975–8, while the Swedish group Abba, had eighteen consecutive European top ten hits following their 1974 victory in the Eurovision Song Contest. Both groups appealed (particularly through television) to listeners older and younger than the dedicated holiday disco dancers, combining child friendly chorus lines with slick choreography and a tacky erotic glamour that gave Abba, in particular, a camp appeal that was a major influence on late 1970s gay music culture. The most successful British pop production team of the 1980s, Stock, Aitken, Waterman, were clearly influenced by this pop genre, and by the promotion processes that supported it. A group like Steps, which found fame at the turn of the century under Waterman's guidance, managed to combine an up-to-date sense of the Europop sound with British seaside hoover values which would have been familiar to musical entertainers at the end of the nineteenth century.

Ideology

Pop is not driven by any significant ambition except profit and commercial reward. Its history is a history of serial or standardised production and, in musical terms, it is essentially conservative. Pop is about giving people what they already know they want rather than pushing up against technological constraints or aesthetic conventions. The new in pop thus tends to be the novelty (an instrumental hit like the Tornados' 'Telstar', an 'exotic' number like Alhitha and Donna's 'Uptown Top Ranking'), and pop is marked by the continuity of its musical values. Common pop terms – easy listening, light entertainment – and the familiar image of fireside crooners like Bing Crosby and Val Doonican suggest that pop is meant to be unobtrusive: if rock involves a kind of in-your-face presence, pop aims to soothe. The contrast can be heard in, say, James Last's orchestral versions of Sex Pistols songs!

Production

Pop is music provided from on high (by record companies, radio programmers and concert promoters) rather than being made from below. Pop is not a do-it-yourself music but is professionally produced and packaged. Hence the pop importance of song writers and record producers, on the one hand, and singing stars, on the other. The singer-songwriter is not a common pop figure (though Barry Manilow has shown what can be done with this role). Rather, the key people are commercial songwriters from Stephen Foster and Irving Berlin to Carole King and Dianne Warren, entrepreneurial producers like Berry Gordy and Mickie Most, and versatile performers like Jessie Matthews and the Spice Girls.

Aesthetics

Pop is not an art but a craft. It is not about realising individual visions or making us see the world in new ways but about providing popular tunes and clichés in which to express commonplace feelings – love, loss, jealousy. But to work pop must do this in sufficiently individualised ways to appeal to us as individual listeners. And the secret here lies in the pop singers' ability to appeal to us directly, to lay their personality on a song such that we can make it our song too. This is the paradox of pop that Noel Coward described as the 'potency' of cheap music. We can and do despise pop music in general as bland commercial pap while being moved by it in particular as a source of sounds that chime unexpectedly but deeply in our lives.

History

From a rock perspective pop is seen as a kind of unchanging 'old' music, to be contrasted with 'progressive' rock or dance music. This is partly an

effect of the way generations work culturally (though the identification of rock with youth does have the odd effect that thirty-year-old tracks can still be used by advertisers and style consultants to provide a youthful ambience) but it also reflects the underlying nostalgia of pop music culture: pop songs are designed both to sound familiar and, often enough, to make one regret that times and people change. But pop itself is implicated in such change: there can be few people over twenty-five who don't agree that they don't write songs like that anymore.

One reason they don't is technological. Pop was the product of a sheet music and then a record industry; it has been shaped by its use in the cinema, on radio, by television. (The most revolutionary moment in pop's technological history was undoubtedly the development of the electrical microphone, which I discuss further below.) Another is sociological. As a mass market music, pop reflects the changing nature of its audience and, in particular, is a kind of musical measure of migration, demographic change and the breakdown of geographical sound barriers. If American pop thus became dominant globally in the twentieth century, pop in the United States was itself the music of Jewish migrants from eastern Europe and the descendants of slaves from Africa. Pop music may come from no particular place, but it absorbs musical sounds from everywhere. And there is a further point to make here. In their very determination to mark themselves off from pop, fans of focused music genres like rock and country are admitting that the lines of demarcation are blurred. It has often been remarked that anything can be rocked; anything can also be popped. The history of pop is marked by the traces of all sorts of musical form – ragtime and blues, jazz and hillbilly, reggae and disco, rock and soul. Even classical music has been popped, as it were, whether in the marketing of opera singers as stars, from Enrico Caruso through Mario Lanza to Luciano Pavarotti, or in the pilfering of classical scores for good tunes – the Boston Pops Orchestra was formed (as an offshoot of the Boston Symphony Orchestra) early in the twentieth century. The success of Classic FM suggests that in Britain, at least, classical music can provide the basic programming for pop radio.

Pop has a history, then, with key moments of change. Perhaps the most important, as I have already noted, followed the marketing of the electrical microphone in the 1930s. Technically the microphone was a way of amplifying the voice, and its immediate use was to enable singers to make themselves heard above the noise of a jazz band or swing orchestra. The amplification of the voice ran parallel to the amplification of the guitar, wind and brass instruments that transformed rural blues into urban rhythm and blues and Western Swing into honky-tonk (out of which came rock'n'roll). But in pop terms the microphone's importance was not that it enabled people to sing loudly but that it let them be soft. The electric

microphone's immediate impact was in the radio and recording studio rather than on stage. The microphone meant new vocal techniques (crooning, torch singing) and new kinds of singer whose skill was microphone technique rather than diaphragm control.

What the best of these singers (notably Frank Sinatra and Billie Holiday) quickly realised was that they could sing with a new expressive intimacy. A tone and pitch that were previously only heard in private conversation could now be reproduced publicly, and, of course, central to such intimate conversations are declarations of love and intimations of desire. Listeners could now pretend that they knew the singer, that the singer understood or, at least, articulated their own feelings. This brought a new kind of emotionalism and eroticism into pop, an eroticism most obvious in the emergence of Frank Sinatra's young female fans (who prefigured teen crushes to come), and thus a new kind of stardom: the pop singer as idol.

By the end of the 1930s pop meant vocal rather than instrumental records, and the singer (rather than band leader) dominated the stage (soon displacing the big band altogether). This process was an effect too of radio and cinema, both of which played a central role in the making of the new sort of singing personality, and by the end of the 1940s its consequences for the music industry had become far reaching. Pop songs were increasingly written to display a singer's personality rather than a composer's skill; they now had to work emotionally through the singer's expressivity (rather than the mood being determined by the score) – it was Sinatra's feelings that were heard in the songs; he sang rather than their writers'. The new kind of vocal pop star thus needed simpler, more directly emotional songs than those provided by jazz or theatre-based composers, and singers (and their record companies) began to draw on the folk, country and rhythm and blues repertoires. Witty lyrics and sophisticated melodic lines were replaced by melodramatic narratives and unabashed sentimentality. The rise of television reinforced the importance of pop singers as family entertainers (Dean Martin became the biggest television draw in the United States) but brought a new kind of self-consciousness and irony into pop performance (personified most flamboyantly by Liberace).

In many ways the television version of pop that was established in the United States and (with some different national characteristics) in the United Kingdom in the mid-1950s provided a blueprint of pop performance and stardom with which we are still familiar. But two complicating factors should be noted. First, the 1950s also saw the emergence of a teenage market and a teenage taste and if one aspect of this (youth marking itself off from adult entertainment) was rock'n'roll, another

(youth music as a new strand of showbiz) was teen pop. Teen pop idols were manufactured (Pat Boone, Fabian) or evolved from rock'n'rollers to all-round entertainers (Cliff Richard, Tommy Steele; in the end, Elvis Presley). Adult pop conventions were adapted for the teenage market. Television was important: American teen idols appeared on *American Bandstand*, British teen idols on 6-5 *Special* and *Oh Boy!* On these shows rock'n'roll songs alternated with ballads, and the most successful young performers were pretty but knowable, like the ideal boy next door. When Billy Fury, say, came on to sing 'Halfway to Paradise' he was in essence just a young and more vulnerable version of David Whitfield. Trouser shapes and hair styles change, but there are obvious musical and ideological continuities between Ricky Nelson and David Cassidy, George Michael and Robbie Williams, Pat Boone and Roland Keating, and there have always been model female teen pop singers too, from Connie Francis and Helen Shapiro to Tiffany and Britney Spears.

In commercial terms, then, the 1950s manufacture and marketing of teen pop stars was not a very different process than the manufacture and marketing of pop stars generally, and by the 1960s the pop market was predominantly the teenage market anyway. But there was significant difference in the detail. The writers and producers of teen pop, for example, tended to be young themselves, with a better grasp of teenage vernacular, a better feel for teenage emotions, a better ear for what was hip than the established Tin Pan Alley hacks. The Brill Building became the Tin Pan Alley port of call for young songwriters pitching teen pop songs, and its associated producers were much more at ease with the new technology of tape recording than the established record company studio teams. The record producer changed from being a skilled arranger like Mitch Miller, getting everything in its right place before the session started, to being an inspired sound engineer like Phil Spector, treating the musical tracks as just raw material. Most importantly of all, though, this new generation of pop song writers and producers blended African-American musical conventions into the mix in new ways. In the 1950s black singers had found a television pop niche, whether as a genius entertainer like Louis Armstrong or in the mellow, sophisticated and sexy stylings of Nat 'King' Cole and Johnny Mathis. But what interested the new class of Jewish writers and producers like Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller and Phil Spector was not the jazz that had influenced their parents, the generation of the Gershwins, but the music they'd heard directly from their African-American neighbours when growing up: rhythm and blues, doo wop, the sound of vocal groups.

The move from pop singer to pop group (which had its ultimate commercial triumph with the Beatles) partly reflected the increasing use of

multi-voices for telling teenage stories: teen emotions were seen to be an aspect of everyday conversation that adult emotions are not, and so Phil Spector and Shadow Morton made their 'little operas for kids' with the Crystals and Ronettes and Shangri-Las. But in the longer run the more important point is that multitrack recording found its aesthetic equivalent in the way in which doo-wop broke up the standard pop song into vocal parts, giving it a new rhythmic and timbral complexity, and in the call/response structure of gospel music. While there was a white pop tradition of group singing (Barbershop groups, for example), its use of close harmony was only really developed by the Beach Boys. For pop in general the group sound came to mean a seductive lead voice (on the gospel derived model of Sam Cooke and Ben E. King) with a chorus of supporters, the sound perfected in the 1960s (and soon dominating the pop sales charts) by the Motown label and acts like Martha and the Vandellas, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, the Supremes, Temptations and Four Tops.

These pop sounds were fed into rock by British beat groups and then dismissed as 'commercial' by the newly emergent rock fans, and in the last decades of the twentieth century musical influences worked the other way, less pop developments affecting rock, than rock sounds affecting pop. Two trends in particular should be noted: the rise of the power ballad, and the prominence of the soul diva.

Although rock was a musical form that defined itself against pop, the ballad remained central to its appeal. And if jazz performers had used ballads' melodic familiarity as the basis of improvisation – transforming a standard pop song into something quite different – rock musicians (following the Beatles' lead with 'Yesterday') wrote their own ballads but used them in familiar pop ways to bind their audiences into an emotional community. The original rock'n'rollers like Elvis Presley drew on established ballad traditions, whether Italian ('It's Now or Never') or American (country rock balladeers like Roy Orbison, Charlie Rich and Willie Nelson gave Tin Pan Alley sentiment a new edge of melancholy). But the rock ballad as such derived from soul music and, in particular, from Ray Charles, whose gospel reading of a country song, 'I Can't Stop Loving You', became its inspiration. Charles' emotional sincerity was marked by a distinct vocal roughness and if his tempo was slow it was also insistent. He had a direct influence on such singers as Eric Burdon (of the Animals), Tom Jones and Joe Cocker who, in turn, established the conventions of the ballad as a rock form, as a vehicle for male vocal virtuosity (emotive singing at high pitch and high volume) and chorus line exhilaration. Foreigner's 'I Want to Know What Love Is' (with choral support from the New Jersey Mass Choir) and Aerosmith's 'I Don't Want to Miss A Thing'

(with Steven Tyler's vocals so over-the-top as to be parodic) are the classic power ballads, songs of feeling bottled up and bursting out musical, emotional and sexual release somehow all equated.

This was balladry in a rock context, but such an amplified approach to wanting-songs soon affected pop singing conventions too, as marked initially, as I have already mentioned, by the 1970s emergence of Elton John and then by the success of Michael Bolton in the United States and Mick Hucknall and Simply Red in Britain. The best-selling pop singer of the late 1990s, Celine Dion, started out as a child singing French Canadian folk songs and won the Eurovision Contest for Switzerland, but she became a superstar with a singing style that was clearly drawn from power balladry (even working with Meatloaf's producer, Jim Steinman, on one album), and this brings me to the pop importance of the soul diva. In many ways the history of female pop singing follows along the same lines as the history of male pop singing. In the 1960s the sophisticated night club approach of Dionne Warwick (mostly singing the notably adult songs of Burt Bacharach and Hal David) was overlaid by the gospel soul bearing of Aretha Franklin and the more adolescent pop seductiveness of Diana Ross in the development of a new kind of vocal virtuosity (and fame) for Gladys Knight, Tina Turner and then Whitney Houston. But in other respects the role of the female pop singer has been different from that of the male pop star, just as a matter of a wider gender ideology: women singers are heard to have a pathos or vulnerability that men lack – they can make us feel sorer for them. And then, by this same token, they are also taken to be more skilled at the nuances of emotional expression, more powerful at emotional warfare, more confident at holding up their emotions for our exploration as it were. It is not surprising that Judy Garland, Shirley Bassey, and Dusty Springfield, for example, have had a certain camp appeal, a gay following precisely interested in the performance of emotional excess, nor that there's an element of kitsch in the sexual appeal of the biggest women pop stars – Dion, Houston, Maria Carey and, of course, Madonna.

Even more importantly, though, the very emotional impact of this singing style, its sense of raw feeling bravely dressed, has enabled its sound to be removed from its context: such strong feeling doesn't need an occasion, it can just be added into the mix. From the moment Giorgio Moroder realised that Donna Summer had the ideal voice to put over his machine music, the popper end of the dance floor in Europe and North America has been dominated by the sound of (mostly anonymous) soul divas, by a kind of collective gospel choir of women wanting love, losing love, celebrating love, bemoaning love, boasting of love found, contemptuous of love lost. It's as if only such voices can guarantee the humanity of the electronic world.

The sentimental song

Paul McCartney once summed pop up as 'silly love songs', and the earliest content analysis of the American hit parade, carried out by J. G. Peatman (1942-3) in the 1940s duly found that 'all successful pop songs are about romantic love'. Indeed, Peatman claimed that he only needed three descriptive categories to characterise American pop: the happy-in-love song, the frustrated-in-love song, and the novelty song with sex interest. In historical terms, though, the popular song hasn't always been about love, and I think it makes better sense to define pop as the sentimental song and then suggest that in the twentieth century (in the West, at least) sentiment came to be applied almost exclusively to affairs of the heart.

This wasn't the case when the pop industry was first shaped in the nineteenth century. The first great commercial songwriter of the sheet music era, Stephen Foster, wrote his best-loved songs for minstrel shows. Plantation numbers like 'The Old Folks at Home' were sentimental about family, rural life and the past rather than about particular girls or boys, and the song catalogues and manuals for would-be pop composers in the 1900s suggest a range of possible lyrical topics. The pop repertoire was divided into ballad and novelty songs, and the former included not just love songs but also country or rustic songs, Irish songs, songs about Mother.

The obvious question here is what happened to pop in the first half of the twentieth century: why was it reduced to love songs? I'll come back to this. First, I just want to note that although the 1900s classification of song types is quaint it is not incomprehensible. I know what is meant by an Irish song ('Danny Boy', 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling') and a rustic song (country songwriters like Dolly Parton were coming up with variations of 'My Old Kentucky Home' well into the 1980s). And even Mother songs or, rather, Absent Mother songs are not completely unfamiliar (in the musical *Annie*, for example), while Clive Dunn's 'Grandad' was a British hit as late as 1970. My point here, then, is that while Peatman's findings might accurately reflect the hit parade, by the 1940s the hit parade didn't accurately reflect pop. Certainly by the end of the 1950s, when singles sales charts were primarily a measure of teenage taste, 'chart pop' had become a specific and relatively insignificant strand of the pop music to which most people listened – musicals, film soundtracks, oldies, supper club songs, television variety, jazz and country easy listening standards, and so on. It is, in short, misleading to equate pop with record sales.

One of the implications of Peatman's findings was that music that had once had resonance in a variety of social settings, for a variety of social reasons had become focused on the narcissistic feelings of one individual

for another. Such individualisation was obviously tied into a shift in pop music marketing: the move from a sheet music to a record industry was a move from collective to individual consumption. But again the interesting question here is not so much why people buy records but about the occasions for sentiment. Pop's history is obviously marked by moments of collective sentimentality. Twentieth-century wars, for example, were fought to the sound of songs of pathos: 'It's A Long Way To Tipperary' (an Irish song to boot!), 'We'll Meet Again'. Even the Animals' 'We've Gotta Get Out of This Place', an obvious favourite for American soldiers in Vietnam, is essentially sentimental (and a love song only in the vaguest way). Twentieth-century migration also involved the use of sentimental songs to remind people of their homelands and to idealise old ways. The Irish song thus continued to be significant throughout the century, meaning among other things that the Irish folk revival of the 1960s (and the pop success of Tommy Makem and the Clancy Brothers and the Dubliners) originated in the Irish bars of New York and that the Riverdance phenomenon started out as interval entertainment, a tourist package, for the Eurovision Song Contest. At a more mundane level, collective sentimentality remains a feature of sports spectatorship (whether the old Wembley tradition of 'Abide With Me' or the more recent use of Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'You'll Never Walk Alone' on the terraces at Anfield) and drinking. The *karaoke* phenomenon has certainly given new sentimental life to old sentimental songs, turning 'I Will Survive' and 'My Way' into anthems of feminist, gay and heterosexual cultures.

What's important to note about all these examples is that pop here doesn't just mean buying records but also performing them, and performing them in a particular way. Sentimentality describes not just how we listen but also how we sing, *from the heart*, and however embarrassingly we somehow all seem to know how to do that. One way of putting my argument here is to suggest that it is not strong feelings that determine how we sing, but that how we sing gives us the experience of these sorts of feeling. It's the music not the situation that makes us cry, as Hollywood film scores have long known. To put this another way, it is the sentimental song, sentimental singing, that has come to be the public sign of sincerity. From the earliest days of the music hall, comic turns would wrap up their act with a sentimental song: forget the cynicism and humiliations of music-hall humour they seemed to say, this is the real me, the real you. This became a feature of television comics too (Ken Dodd singing 'Tears', for example) and even a much more aggressive performer like Millie Jackson brings her show to an end by moving out of her contemptuous man-mocking rap into a sentimental soul ballad.

It is perhaps not surprising then that in the latter half of the twentieth

century the sentimental song became the sales focus of the musical, on the one hand, and the film soundtrack, on the other. Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1940s transformation of the musical into a spectacular narrative form (with *Oklahoma*, *Carousel* and *South Pacific*) also involved a new sort of show stopper, the ballad that could stand free of the story ('If I Loved You', 'Some Enchanted Evening'). Such ballads, marketed as pop songs (*West Side Story*'s 'Somewhere' being the classic example), became, in turn, a way of selling a show. This was the promotional strategy mastered by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Hit songs like 'I Don't Know How to Love Him' (*Jesus Christ Superstar*), 'Don't Cry For Me, Argentina' (*Evita*), and 'Memories' (*Cats*) drew people to his shows (rather than the show producing hits on the back of its success – as had been the case with *The Sound of Music* or *Oliver*). This is the reason, I think, that Webber works seem less like musicals than elaborately staged pop shows (one reason, perhaps, why *Cats* works best).

The big ballad has become equally important for film marketing in the last thirty years. Henry Mancini's 'Moon River', written for the opening credits of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, is usually taken to mark a new relationship between the film and music industries. It was not just that here a song was used to sell a film (rather than vice versa) but also that the song had an accidental relationship to the plot, as it were. It might have had an obvious musical affinity to the rest of Mancini's score, captured the film's ambience, but lyrically it was quite vague and the film would lose nothing if it were removed or replaced. This use of a pop song as simply a film commercial was exploited brilliantly by the James Bond films and by the 1980s stand alone songs were being used over the closing titles too. Here the purpose wasn't just promotional. Audiences were now being sent out of the cinema uplifted by power ballads which bore little musical or lyrical relationship to the rest of the film's score. This trend gave big-voiced singers like Joe Cocker and Jennifer Warnes new careers and culminated in the simultaneous cinema and pop triumph of *Titanic* the film, James Horner's *Titanic* score, and Céline Dion's 'My Heart Will Go On'. What was most interesting here was not how film and music sold each other, but how the very meaning of the film (as a romance rather than a disaster movie) was determined by its closing sentimental song.

Pop music and society

Pop music could be defined as the music we listen to without meaning to; the songs we know without knowing how we know them. These days we

equate pop with pop records. Much of the music we hear despite ourselves is 'canned'. Pop music thus reaches us over the radio, through passing car windows, as sound around a shopping centre. Pop songs lodge themselves maddeningly in the mind after holidays, children's parties, visits to the dentist, 'La Paloma Blanca', 'Barbie Girl', anything by Abba or Andy Williams. But to use the term 'pop' to describe all the music that insinuates itself into our lives and commercial music is only part of the story. We all grow up into musical cultures, collections of songs and tunes and styles that become our taken-for-granted musical knowledge. And for at least one hundred and fifty years commercially produced music has been an inescapable part of this. But only part, and with various consequences.

As children, for example, we hear lullabies, learn nursery rhymes, join in family songs. Schools teach us folk songs, children's songs; in the playground we join in skipping and jumping songs, on school outings rude songs. Most of us remember these songs throughout our lives, pass them on to children and grandchildren, and the result is a remarkably rich and jumbled repertoire, from traditional tunes which can be traced back over hundreds of years to recent pop tunes whose immediate provenance is soon forgotten. In their classic studies of the lore and language of school children, the Opies (1985) traced the wondrous 1950s journey of 'The Ballad of Davy Crockett' from American television series across English speaking playgrounds around the world, picking up a myriad of local variations along the way. Any hit pop song, it seems (Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody', Spice Girls' 'Wannabe'), can be given the a cappella playground treatment.

What's involved here, though, is not just the makeover of new best sellers, the translation of pop into folk, as it were. 'Children's song' is itself a commercial category. Ever since there has been a music business there has been a children's music business, and such 'children's favourites' are resold to generation after generation. BBC radio may have long since dropped its *Children's Hour* and family record request programmes, but the songs these once featured are now performed on children's television programmes (and videos), by children's entertainers like the Singing Kettle. Children's records and cassettes are still a flourishing (if little discussed) sector of the pop industry. An historian could doubtless trace the various musical origins of 'Nellie the Elephant' and 'Going to the Zoo', 'Puff the Magic Dragon' and 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight', 'The Runaway Train' and 'How Much is that Doggie in the Window?' But these songs have become, in effect, timeless, as freshly enjoyed by four-year-olds today as they were by their parents, grandparents and even great grandparents.

This process of musical absorption doesn't stop with childhood, of

course, although that is when we hear the most extraordinary range of musical material, and in adult life I have often been struck by how many songs I seem to know without any idea of how I know them. Music hall songs ('My Old Man Said Follow The Van'); cabaret songs ('Mad Dogs and Englishmen'); Disney songs ('Whistle While You Work'); Gilbert and Sullivan songs ('Three Little Girls From School Are We'); film songs ('White Christmas'); songs which come from I know not where ('I Love To Go A-Wandering, A Knapsack On My Back'). What we know this way is obviously shaped by class and place and family and friends, by ethnicity and nation. Most people in Britain probably know the opening lines of 'Auld Lang Syne'; Scots people are likely to know the next lines too, and one feature of a multicultural society is an expansion of the common pop repertoire, as 'Pass the Dutchie', say, takes its place in the playground. Pop defined this way thus provides a kind of map of a changing society just as it maps our own lives, helping give emotional shape to our memories of childhood, friendship, love affairs, life changes. And pop becomes too a resource, a social storehouse from which musicians of all sorts draw and quote and sample.

Pop is not usually treated so positively, so I should stress the two assumptions I'm making here. First, that a song's origin is really only of academic interest. The commercial intent behind 'How Much Is That Doggie In The Window?' is as irrelevant to a young listener now as the political intent behind nursery rhymes like 'The Grand Old Duke of York' or Bobby Shafto's 'Gone To Sea', while Davey Crockett and Tom Dooley are no more or less folk heroes than John Henry or John Barleycorn. Attempts to draw a clear distinction between authentic and inauthentic popular songs, whether using musicological or sociological criteria, are pointless. It's not where pop songs come from that matters, but where they get to. 'Jingle Bells' and 'White Christmas' are every bit as authentic Christmas songs as 'I Saw Three Ships' or 'Silent Night' simply because they are now part of everyone's musical Christmas portfolio.

My second assumption is that pop describes songs that we can and sometimes do perform as well as listen to. Much of this singing is collective – we sing at school, in the pub, at football matches, during weddings and funerals, at the end of parties. But we sing individually too – to our children, with our best friends, above all to ourselves. Indeed, I would add to the definition of pop as accessible music that it is also singable and performable music; it doesn't need the skills that classical or jazz or even rock musicians must acquire. And this argument about participation leads me to a kind of music which is not usually thought of as pop but which has some claim to have determined what pop music means. I refer, of course, to church music: even in these relatively Godless times most of us have

sung hymns and carols at some stage of our lives, have come to associate church music with rituals of grief and celebration.

Tim Fleming (1999) has argued persuasively that the contemporary sentimental song has its roots as firmly in the eighteenth-century sentimental hymns of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley as in the romantic secular songs which were the source of the first big sheet music sales. It was these hymns that gave popular song emotional tropes that we still recognise: a regret for lost innocence, a yearning for paradise as a rustic idyll, a definition of love as comfort in distress. Robbie Williams' 'Angel', to put this another way, is not so different from Isaac Watts', and the translation of gospel into soul shows how easy it is to love a man or woman musically in the same way that one loves God. It could also be said that the Church has been as significant as the music industry in the process of cultural imperialism, spreading Western musical forms East and South. I've always assumed that one reason for Jim Reeves' remarkable global popularity was because his singing style was familiar from years of American missionary work.

Whatever the reason for Jim Reeves' success, pop certainly doesn't work in the straightforward ways that the simplest accounts of commercialism suggest. Why did King Sunny Adé like Jim Reeves' songs so much? How did Smoke become a talisman for radical students in South Korea? Why do some songs become standards the moment they're first heard ('Yesterday', for example) while others not very different make no public mark at all? What's sure is that pop can't be sensibly analysed just in terms of musicology or aesthetics. Yes, we do respond to the song-in-itself but that song-in-itself is soon encrusted with uses and memories and references. Once a pop song is launched on the world, all sorts of things can happen to it. When Bobby Vinton was in the studio laying down 'Blue Velvet', one of his soprier tracks, could he have foreseen that the song would accompany one of the great homoerotic scenes in Hollywood cinema, in Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, or become forever menacing, following its use by David Lynch? When Elton John and Bernie Taupin first crafted 'Candle in the Wind' could they have imagined it becoming an official state mourning song?

And if unexpected things happen to songs, so songs have unexpected effects on us. My favourite Abba song, 'The Day Before You Came', describes the wonder of falling in love by flatly documenting how banal life was before love struck. It could equally be a song about the transforming power of music. And so the irony remains. If pop is precisely the music we would usually include in such banality, it is also pop – more than any other form of music – that changes if not our lives then certainly the ways in which we feel about them.

Further reading

Some of my arguments here are taken from my book *Performing Rites. On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press / Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) though that deals with popular music rather indiscriminately. The best academic studies are historical. For an overview see Peter Van Der Merwe, *Origins of the Popular Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). Tim Fleming's doctoral thesis, cited above, is the best study I know of the origins and commercial and cultural impact of the sentimental song. For the United States see Nicholas Tawa, *The Way to Tin Pan Alley: American Popular Song 1866-1910* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990). For the United Kingdom see Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) and Derek B. Scott, *The Singing Bourgeois. Songs of the Victorian Drawing Room and Parlour* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1989). I don't know of any good pop histories covering the rest of the twentieth century though most of the biggest stars have useful biographies. From the perspective of academic research, pop seems to be that music that isn't much studied. Most books written in the last twenty years with pop in their titles are really about rock, the most suggestive studies of popular music are focused on genres like rap or country. When pop singers or composers are taken seriously it is usually in order to suggest that they transcend their commercial context, can be treated like classical composers or as jazz singers. With the exception of Henry Pleasants' fine *The Great American Popular Singers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) the resulting studies are often interesting but not often about pop, and I've yet to see an academic article on, say, Perry Como, Andrew Lloyd Webber or Cher.

For music and everyday life on the ground, as it were, see Ruth Finnegan's richly suggestive ethnography of the musical worlds in Milton Keynes: *The Hidden Musicians. Music Making in an English Town* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and the engaging interviews about people's musical lives collected by Susan D. Crafts, Daniel Cavicchi and Charles Keil as *My Music* (Hanover and London, Wesleyan University Press, 1993). For illuminating if oblique approaches to pop see Mark W. Booth, *The Experience of Song* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) historically arranged essays on songs from madrigals to advertising jingles, and Michael Billig, *Rock'n'Roll Jews* (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2000) ostensibly a history of Jews in rock'n'roll, in fact a moving meditation on popular music and cultural identity.

5 Reconsidering rock

KEIR KEIGHTLEY

¹ 'enforce et plus authentique' 'CRYSTAL'S REVENUE', STEREOGRAM, 1995

'Rock' is a term that is instantly evocative and frustratingly vague. Rock may mean rebellion in musical form, distorted guitars, aggressive drumming, and bad attitude. But rock has also stood for much more than a single style of musical performance. Very diverse sounds and stars, including country blues, early Bob Dylan, Motown, Otis Redding, Kraftwerk, P-Funk, salsa, Run-DMC, Garth Brooks and Squirrel Nut Zippers, have all been called 'rock' at one time or another, even though they are also equally describable as non-rock. If this eclectic set of performers and sounds can be grouped under the heading 'rock', it is not because of some shared, timeless, musical essence; rather, specific historical contexts, audiences, critical discourses, and industrial practices have worked to shape particular perceptions of this or that music or musician as belonging to 'rock'. At the same time, no style or performer is automatically entitled to the 'rock' mantle, since rock culture has also been defined historically by its processes of exclusion. The idea of rock involves a rejection of those aspects of mass distributed music which are believed to be soft, safe or trivial, those things which may be dismissed as worthless 'pop' – the very opposite of rock. Instead, the styles, genres and performers that are thought to merit the name 'rock' must be seen as serious, significant and legitimate in some way. These various conceptions of rock are made more complicated by the ways in which the meanings of 'rock' have shifted over the past four decades, and by how those meanings have been understood in different contexts or by different communities.

One of the great ironies of the second half of the twentieth century is that while rock has involved millions of people buying a mass-marketed, standardised commodity (CD, cassette, LP) that is available virtually everywhere, these purchases have produced intense feelings of freedom, rebellion, marginality, oppositionality, uniqueness and authenticity. It is precisely this predicament that defines rock, since negotiating the relationship between the 'mass' and the 'art' in mass art has been the distinguishing ideological project of rock culture since the 1960s. Rock involves the making of distinctions within mass culture, rather than the older