

Popular Music and the Civil Rights Movement

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When political activists think about the music of the Civil Rights Movement, they are likely to focus on union songs and spirituals like "Which Side Are You On," "This Little Light of Mine," "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," "This Land Is Your Land," "Down by the Riverside," and, of course, "We Shall Overcome." With their roots in the labor movement and the culture of the black church, the springboards for most civil rights organizing, these songs were critical to activists in the movement. They raised our consciousness, energized our day-to-day political work, and provided us with moments of celebration in the struggle. These were, in the words of Bernice Reagon, the "songs that moved the movement." To the nation-at-large, however, these songs often served as little more than the musical background for terrifying newscasts of racial violence. Interestingly, as the Civil Rights Movement exploded on the national scene, its impact on the national consciousness was more clearly reflected in popular music. As always, this was the music that moved the mass audience.

As any social phenomenon attains national recognition, popular music can be used as an important socio-political indicator of that struggle. In the case of Civil Rights, the trajectory of the entire movement can be traced through an analysis of trends in popular music from 1954 through 1973. Such analyses are often limited to a consideration of changes in lyric content. While there is no question that these changes are, at times, powerful, it is also important to note that changes in musical form, tone, instrumentation, production style, and personnel can be more telling. One pattern related to the Civil Rights Movement is that innovation in these latter areas generally preceded changes in lyric content.

Civil rights activity heated up in the 1950s when a new, activist black clergy, with the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., at its forefront, began to form political alliances with secular organizations like the NAACP, CORE, and,



James Brown

later, SNCC. "While this spiritual-secular coalition was forming in the political sector," states music journalist Nelson George, "the music world was witnessing the breaking of a longstanding taboo, as gospel began to fuse with rhythm & blues."² Prior to this time, gospel singers simply did not perform "the devil's music," and vice versa. But as the faithful began to take their struggle to the streets, the musical influences of gospel—the prominent use of organ, soaring vocals, background choruses, and the call-and-response style—were quickly appropriated by the secular world of rhythm and blues and brought to the attention of a mass public.

Prefigured in the 1953 releases of "Shake a Hand" by Faye Adams and "Crying in the Chapel" by Sonny Til and the Orioles (covered by June Valli for RCA), the fruits of this trend could be seen in the vocal stylings of Clyde McPhatter and Jackie Wilson, both of whom began their careers as lead vocalists for the gospel-tinged Dominoes, and in the spectacular pop career of Sam Cooke, who was already at the top of the gospel heap as the lead singer for the Soul Stirrers. But nowhere was the marriage of gospel and R&B more apparent than in the early recordings of Ray Charles ("Hallelujah, I Love Her So," "What'd I Say"). By 1954, all the elements of the fusion were already present in one of his most influential, if not most successful, releases. The impact of "I Got a Woman" is remembered by music historians as nothing short of apocalyptic. "The very strategem of adapting a traditional gospel song, putting secular lyrics to it, and then delivering it with all the attendant fanfare of a pentacostal service was, simply, staggering," writes Peter Guaralnick. "It was like a blinding flash of light in which the millennium, all of a sudden and unannounced, had arrived."³ In popular music as in the struggle for civil rights, the black church was becoming a force to be reckoned with in the material world.

Integrating the Pop Market

The eruption of civil rights as a national issue was anticipated by a number of regional struggles which also had parallels in popular music. When Rosa Parks moved up to the front of the bus in 1955, black artists like Fats Domino ("Ain't That a Shame," "I'm in Love Again," "Blueberry Hill"), Little Richard ("Tutti Frutti," "Long Tall Sally," "Good Golly, Miss Molly"), and Chuck Berry ("Rock & Roll Music," "Sweet Little Sixteen," "Johnny B. Goode") were just beginning to crossover into the pop market as heroes of rock 'n' roll. Increasingly, regional civil rights struggles, based mainly in the deep South, came to national attention, just as much of early rock 'n' roll was based on regional R&B styles from the deep South which found a national audience. The rebellious tone of this music mirrored the growing demand for political change in the black community. And just as community-based black activism would change the political face of the nation, so

too would the popularization of grassroots rhythm and blues and its pop conversion to rock 'n' roll alter the popular music landscape. As early as 1956, the winds of such cultural change were already apparent. "It was not only the slicker, more pop-oriented singers like Clyde McPhatter and Otis Williams who hit in the pop market," reported *Billboard*, "but also those working in the traditional style like Shirley and Lee, Little Richard, and Fats Domino. Their impact, in fact, has virtually changed the conception of what a pop record is."⁴

With the advent of rock 'n' roll, the form and style of popular music changed dramatically and irrevocably. But these changes were not yet accompanied by analogous changes in lyric content. Brown may have rocked the Board of Education in the historic school desegregation case in 1954, but Chuck Berry's depiction of "School Days" in 1957 did not describe the educational experience in Little Rock, Arkansas that same year. Berry conjured up the image of teachers teaching "the golden rule" even as Eisenhower had to send federal troops to Little Rock to enforce the Supreme Court's school integration edict. Berry was a true storyteller in the folkloric sense of the term, but he was also a man for his time. As he recently told his audience, "I said: 'Why can't I do as Pat Boone does and play good music for the white people and sell as well there as I could in the neighborhood?' And that's what I shot for writing 'School Days.'"⁵

The strategy of the early Civil Rights Movement was integrationist, and it was in this historical context that Berry pursued his career. While he never disowned his blackness, his goal was full acceptance in the white mainstream. In keeping his eyes on that prize, Berry's intent was not significantly different than that of the other black rock 'n' rollers who crossed over. He just did it better. Interestingly, a more compelling vignette of the black educational experience was captured—albeit somewhat tongue-in-cheek—in the Coaster's "Charlie Brown" (1959), written and produced by the white songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.

Neither popular music nor the Civil Rights Movement were without their contradictions. In its integrationist phase, the movement tended to play down real differences in favor of the slogan "Black and White Together." Issues like white skin privilege on the one hand and black self-determination on the other were not yet prominent on the political agenda. If the movement itself avoided confronting pressing issues at the time, it should come as no surprise that civil rights themes were nowhere to be found in the lyric content of popular music. In this period, the movement exerted its influence on music in other ways.

Following a period of repression of both civil rights activity and rock 'n' roll in the late fifties, bland, white vocalists like Fabian, Frankie Avalon, and Bobby Rydell gradually took over the pop market. However, as civil rights activity gathered momentum once again in the early sixties with

sit-ins, freedom rides, the March on Washington, and the Mississippi Summer Project, a new phenomenon appeared in popular music—the “girl groups.” Black female vocal groups such as the Shirelles (“Will You Love Me Tomorrow”), the Crystals (“He’s a Rebel”), the Chiffons (“He’s So Fine”), and the Ronettes (“Be My Baby”) provided a polar opposite to the white males in the pop market. Corresponding to the increase in civil rights activism, there were more black women—indeed, with the continued success of artists like Sam Cooke and Ray Charles, more black artists of both genders—on the pop charts in the early sixties than at any point in history. In 1962, 42 percent of the best-selling singles of the year were by black artists. Their music was a refreshing change of pace (and race) in the pop market.

It was also during this period that Berry Gordy founded the most significant black-owned record label ever—Motown, until recently the centerpiece of the largest black-owned corporation in the United States. There can be no doubt that the growing Civil Rights Movement provided a climate which encouraged the development of such an enterprise. Gordy was brilliant as a producer in that he was able to incorporate white audience tastes without abandoning a black sound. In the process he created a formula that was the perfect metaphor for the early Civil Rights Movement—upbeat black pop that was acceptable to a white audience, interestingly danceable, and not threatening to anyone in tone or content. Dozens of early Motown releases such as the Marvellettes’ “Please, Mr. Postman” (1961), “Dancing in the Streets” by Martha and the Vandellas (1963), the Supremes’ “Where Did Our Love Go” (1964), or “My Girl” by the Temptations (1965) could serve as examples.

While the influence of the early Civil Rights Movement clearly extended to the music business, the major pop styles still showed virtually no change in lyric content. During this period, civil rights texts were performed mainly in the folk idiom and, to a lesser extent, in jazz. At the time, however, even these musics experienced some brief successes in the pop market.

In folk music, whether one looked at old-timers like Pete Seeger or new-comers like Joan Baez, the best-known performers who addressed civil rights themes in their music were white. This phenomenon probably had more to do with the process of becoming famous in the United States than who was performing civil rights-related material. In the context of the integrationist phase of the Civil Rights Movement, it was not identified as a major contradiction. The new-comer who became the most famous of all the folkies was, of course, the enigmatic Bob Dylan. With selections like “Oxford Town” (1962) and “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” (1963), Dylan was early on proclaimed a “leader” of the Civil Rights Movement. He performed his “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” a song about the murder of civil rights leader Medgar Evers, at the 1963 March on Washington. That

same year, the more commercial Peter, Paul, and Mary scored a Top Ten pop hit with Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind.”

Soon a number of black folk artists like the classically-trained Odetta, the unorthodox Richie Havens, and the gospel-influenced Staple Singers also gained prominence as voices of the Civil Rights Movement. As more black performers achieved recognition, the style of civil rights-related music moved closer to pop production. The Staple Singers, for example, performed “We Shall Overcome” with electric guitar and drums. Of critical importance in linking “folk consciousness” with pop appeal was the often under-appreciated Curtis Mayfield. Like fellow Chicagoan Sam Cooke before him, Mayfield left the gospel choir for the secular world of popular music, there to become, in the words of Nelson George, “black music’s most unflagging civil rights champion.”⁵⁶ With his pop/gospel trio, the Impressions, Mayfield utilized full studio production to achieve major pop successes with a series of “sermon” songs like “Keep on Pushing” and “Amen” in 1964, and “People Get Ready” in 1965. In 1964, Sam Cooke, inspired by Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind,” tentatively attempted a similar fusion with “A Change Is Gonna Come.” By the time the record was released as a single, though, Cooke had already been shot to death under unsavory circumstances. When his friend Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965, just two months later, “A Change Is Gonna Come” was a pop hit. It stands as Cooke’s monument to civil rights.

From Integration to Black Power

For the Civil Rights Movement, 1965 was a pivotal year. Activists marched in Alabama from Selma to Montgomery. The Voting Rights Act was passed. Rioting broke out in Watts, ushering in an era of urban unrest. And Stokely Carmichael coined the term “Black Power.” In the jazz arena, Nina Simone captured the tenor of the times, in content and in tone, as her 1965 recording of “Mississippi Goddam” anticipated the militance that was about to erupt (just as her “Backlash Blues” would anticipate the reaction). This transformation was also reflected in black popular music but, again, changes in form, tone, and production style preceded changes in lyric content.

As the liberal Civil Rights Movement gave way to the more radical demand for black power, Motown’s hegemony over black pop was successfully challenged by a resurgence of closer-to-the-roots, hard-driving rhythm and blues from the Memphis-Muscle Shoals region of the deep South. Chiefly responsible for the popularization of Southern soul, as this music was called, was a short-lived but highly successful collaboration between Atlantic Records and a number of Southern studios, most notably Stax in Memphis and Fame in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. From 1965 on, artists

like Otis Redding ("I've Been Loving You Too Long"), Wilson Pickett ("Land of 1,000 Dances"), Sam and Dave ("Soul Man"), Arthur Conley ("Sweet Soul Music"), and Percy Sledge ("When a Man Loves a Woman") were prominent among the new chart toppers. Echoing the spirit of the emerging new militance, their recordings were raw, basic, and almost angry in tone, as compared to the cleaner, brighter Motown sound.

Striking differences between Motown and Southern soul can be seen in a comparison of Motown and its chief competitor, Stax. Both founded around 1960, Motown was as secretive and tightly controlled as Stax was open and disorganized. Stax was originally a white-owned company; its creative functions were as likely to be handled by whites as by blacks, and the "Memphis sound" which they spawned was almost invariably the product of cross-racial teamwork. Initially, the credits on all Stax recordings read simply: "produced by the Stax staff." Motown was not only black-owned, but virtually all of its creative personnel—artists, writers, producers, and session musicians—were black as well. It was clearly a haven for black talent. Paradoxically, Motown is remembered as being "totally committed to reaching white audiences," while Stax recordings, by contrast, were "consistently aimed at r&b fans first, the pop market second."⁹

In context of black pride, Motown's lavish use of multi-track studio production to achieve a more "pop" sound seemed somehow out of synch with the search for African roots. "Motown does a lot of overdubbing," commented Stax artist Otis Redding just before his death in 1967. "At Stax...[w]e cut together, horns, rhythms, and vocal...Until last year, we didn't even have a four track tape recorder. You can't overdub on a one track machine."¹⁰ In many ways, it was the very simplicity and straightforwardness of Southern soul production which gave the music its claim on authenticity. When this music crossed over into the pop market, it wasn't because the music had changed, it was because black pride had briefly created a climate wherein unrefined rhythm and blues could find mainstream acceptance on its own terms.

With Southern soul in its ascendancy, unencumbered production was soon joined by social consciousness in black popular music. In January 1967, Aretha Franklin was signed to Atlantic Records, and after one legendary session in Muscle Shoals, she found her sound. Later that spring, she cut a version of what had been Otis Redding's signature tune, "Respect" was instantly "transformed from a demand for conjugal rights into a soaring cry of freedom."¹¹ Shortly thereafter, Aretha was crowned "Lady Soul." The vocal and emotional range of her early Atlantic releases ("Baby, I Love You," "Natural Woman," "Chain of Fools," and "Think," to name a few) uniquely expressed all the passion and forcefulness of the era. Fittingly, the summer of 1967 was dubbed by *Ebony* as "the summer of 'Retha, Rap [Brown], and Revolt."¹²

The insistence of black power was echoed perhaps even more forcefully in the music of James Brown. When James Brown had his first Top Ten pop hit with "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" in 1965, he billed himself, with some justification, as "the hardest working man in show business." By 1968, he was "Soul Brother #1." His string of uncompromising Top Ten hits ("I Got You," "Cold Sweat," "I Got the Feelin'") made fewer concessions to mainstream sensibilities than any other music in the pop market. During this period, according to critic Robert Palmer, "Brown and his musicians and arrangers began to treat every instrument and voice in the group as if each were a drum."¹³ The connection to African roots and black pride was made explicit in 1968, as his hit single, "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud," became an anthem in the struggle for black liberation.

By 1967, socially conscious texts were becoming common in popular music, as artists of all styles and personal backgrounds got on board the civil rights train. Janis Ian's "Society's Child" (1967) lamented the entrenched separation of the races on a personal level. Releases such as Dion's "Abraham, Martin, and John" (1968), the Rascals' "People Got to be Free" (1968), and "Everyday People" by Sly and the Family Stone (1969) were reminiscent of the more moderate themes of the early Civil Rights Movement. Curtis Mayfield continued his run of socially conscious "sermon songs" with "We're a Winner" in 1968, and "Choice of Colors" in 1969. Even Elvis Presley's "In the Ghetto" (1969), a rather unlikely entry, went to Number Three on the pop charts.

The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968 left a void in civil rights leadership; the movement became increasingly fragmented. "The civil-rights struggle was not dead, but its energy was increasingly scattered," writes Nelson George. "The Black Panthers embraced communism. Ron Karenga's U.S. [United Slaves] organization advocated an Afrocentric cultural nationalism... Black Power came to mean whatever its user needed it to...the assimilationists pressed on..."¹⁴ By the early seventies, fragmentation had begun to give way to disintegration.

The career of Sly and the Family Stone echoed this phase of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1968, the group's first hit single, "Dance to the Music" transcended the confines of musical style, much as the band crossed the boundaries of race and gender. Comprised of black and white men and women, they were a model of racial and sexual harmony. Following King's death, their 1969 LP, *Stand!*, included not only the all-inclusive Number One single, "Everyday People," but also the bolder title song and the more provocative "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey." Turning up the heat further, their 1971 LP, *There's a Riot Goin' On*, was considered even more controversial, but by this time Sly's growing militance was more than offset by his drug-induced unreliability. Following a number of personnel changes, the group, not unlike the movement itself, slowly disintegrated over the

next few years. "Family Affair," released as a single in 1971, was Sly and the Family Stone's last Top Ten pop single.

The year 1971 was, in fact, a watershed year for the Civil Rights Movement as reflected in popular music. Recalling the heyday of the Black Panthers, John Lennon's exhortation, "Power to the People," tried to offer an upbeat anthem. But, Bob Dylan's tribute to the memory of slain black leader "George Jackson" reminded us that the more radical elements in the struggle for black liberation had already been neutralized. The confusion and disillusionment of the period were evident in Marvin Gaye's "What's Goin' On" and "Inner City Blues," both of 1971. On a more positive note, Aretha Franklin's recording of Nina Simone's "Young, Gifted, and Black" that same year captured the spirit of a community which had weathered a storm of urban violence. Her stirring celebration of black pride provided the musical capstone for a decade of civil rights struggle.

The Return to "Normalcy"

As radicalism in the black community was systematically repressed, either by the cooptation of key leaders or the more sinister effectiveness of the FBI's COINTELPRO agenda, there was a corresponding decline in the popularity of the more militant sounding rhythm and blues from the deep South. By the early 1970s, Stax had begun its descent into bankruptcy, the other pioneers of the Memphis-Muscle Shoals axis were no longer producing rhythm and blues, and even Atlantic had changed direction to focus on its British rock acts. Atlantic's Jerry Wexler explained that radio stations didn't want to "burden" their listeners "with the sound of breaking glass in Watts or the sirens coming from Detroit, which is what r&b music meant at the time... so they took most of it off the radio."¹³

Reflecting the "quieter" mood of the early 1970s, the black popular music which came to the fore was the "soft soul" sound pioneered by the Philadelphia-based writer-producer team of Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, and producer-arranger Thom Bell. Joining forces with Sigma Sound Studios in Philadelphia, they developed the style in the late 1960s, working with artists like Jerry Butler and the Intruders, and Delfonics, whose classic 1968 hit, "La La Means I Love You," was a harbinger of sounds to come. But the Philadelphia enterprise didn't hit its stride until 1971, with the formation of Philadelphia International Records (PIR) and a distribution deal with CBS Records. Employing lush orchestral arrangements over a polite rhythmic pulse, groups like the Stylistics ("You Make Me Feel Brand New"), produced by Thom Bell for the Avco label, and Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes ("If You Don't Know Me By Now") and the O'Jays ("Back Stabbers," "Love Train"), produced by Gamble and Huff on PIR, set the standard in black pop for the next few years.

Personally, Gamble was a nationalist with inclinations toward Islam. He saw PIR as a platform for pushing a message. "Along the way, Gamble and Huff contemplated slavery (the O'Jays' minisepic "Ship A'Hoy"), ecology ("The Air I Breathe"), spiritual enlightenment ("Wake Up Everybody"), corruption ("Bad Luck"), and the male-dominated nuclear family ("Family Reunion")."¹⁴ In the context of the increasingly conservative Nixon-Ford era, however, certain aspects of nationalism—like the economic self-sufficiency provided by the CBS distribution deal—were as likely to resonate with Nixon's call for "black capitalism" as with the development of a strong opposition movement. (In 1972, even James Brown endorsed Nixon for the presidency.) The bottom line was that Gamble and Huff infused the market with romantic ballads and stylish dance music more than they rejuvenated the movement with a message of black liberation. Other artists like the Chicago-based Chi-Lites ("Oh Girl"), the ever-changing Isley Brothers ("That Lady"), and the Spinners ("Could it be I'm Falling in Love") from Detroit quickly tuned into the new soft sound. Even Southern soul yielded the velvety smooth Al Green ("Let's Stay Together," "I'm Still in Love With You").

With the movement in disarray, civil rights themes were on the decline in popular music. Among the soft soul groups, the Chi-Lites had a pop hit with "For God's Sake Give More Power to the People" in 1971. War scored with "The World is a Ghetto" in 1972. By 1973, only Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City" was noticeable in the pop singles market. More to the point, the softer production style of the ascending Philadelphia sound clearly signaled the end of an era of turmoil, ferment, and rebellion, as it provided one of the formative influences for the style that would dominate the latter half of the decade—disco. Interestingly, in 1972, an all-time high of 44 percent of the best-selling singles of the year were by artists of color.

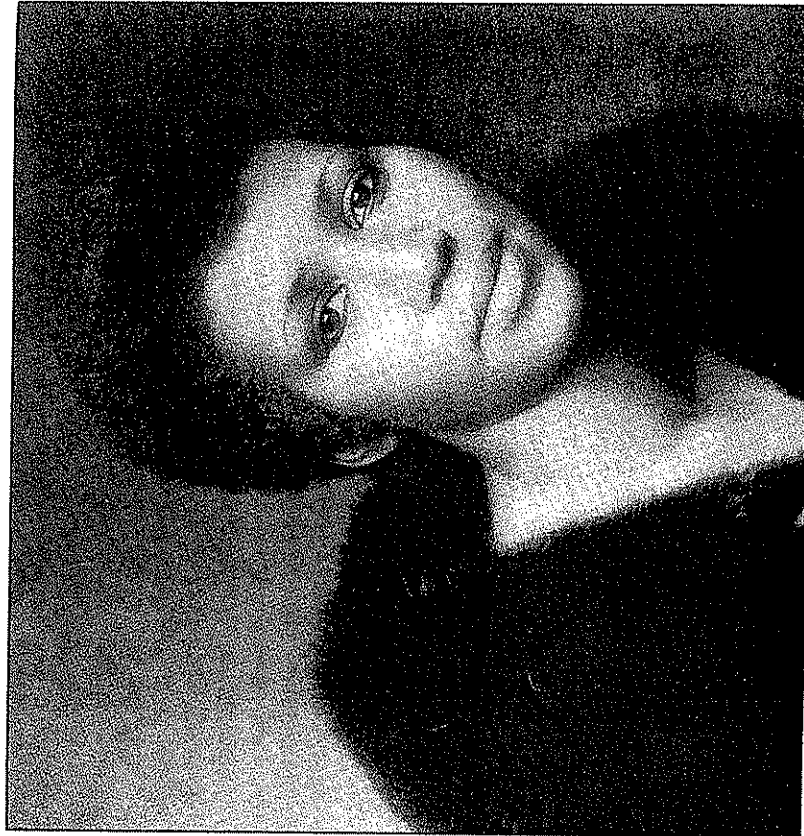
By the early seventies, the Civil Rights Movement appeared to have run its course. Activists knew that the issues it raised would surface again in different contexts and new organizational forms, but for the time being the movement had been forcibly rendered dormant, its 20-year history of peaks and valleys, successes and failures, contradictions and divergent tendencies chronicled in popular music. Struck most by the recollection of the progressive change, Curtis Mayfield offered the following summation of the previous decade:

You know, to talk about the '60s almost brings tears to my eyes. What we did. What we all did. We changed the world—me, us, Smokey Robinson, Jerry Butler, the Temptations, Aretha, Otis, Gladys Knight, James Brown. We really did. Barriers broke down for us. And for all black musicians afterwards. I mean, to have lived through that, and to have been a part of that, is more than anyone can ask.¹⁵

The battles of the 1960s were hard fought; in popular music as elsewhere, they were not without their victories.

Postscript

It wasn't until 1983 that anyone recorded a song about one of the most important leaders of the entire Civil Rights era—Malcolm X. In this instance, it was Malcolm himself, from beyond the grave, who provided the content. "No Sell Out," the brainchild of a white, apolitical percussionist named Keith LeBlanc, is a rap treatment of snippets of Malcolm's actual speeches mixed over a computer drum track. It is fitting that Malcolm X should be issued on a rap record; his influence on the current generation of rappers with an Afrocentric bent has been of paramount importance.



Aretha Franklin

Women's Music

No Longer a Small Private Party

Cynthia M. Lont

We never wanted to be perceived as women's music. We don't want to be found only in the specialty bin at the record stores. We want to be in your face.

—Gretchen Phillips of 2 Nice Girls'

This chapter has two intentions, neither primary. First, I want to document the history of women's music. While some musicologists and cultural critics have listened to women's music, and/or know something about it, few have a firm understanding of its cultural basis. Unlike other subcultural music forms, women's music has received little attention in either mainstream or music industry media. Such "symbolic annihilation" of women's music is not surprising. That is the norm concerning women and their inclusion in the media. With rare exceptions (Cris Williamson on the front cover of *Ms.* or Holly Near on the "Today Show"), women's music performers have been blatantly absent from mainstream and other subcultures' press. If the media pay no attention to you (whether it be good or bad press) you don't exist. In the case of women's music, the media's silence is mostly due to the music's foundation in the lesbian community.

My second intention is to detail the relationship between the 1970s and 1980s phenomena of women's music and the new wave of women performers who've become popular in the late '80s and '90s: Tracy Chapman, Michelle Shocked, k.d. lang, and others. Do these performers represent the cooptation of women's music by major labels that now realize the buying power of feminist and lesbian audiences (for example, Michelle Shocked's *Campfire Tapes*, an album originally recorded on a Walkman, sold 30,000 copies to the women's community in England)? Are the more "androgynous" artists (we don't say "lesbian" on major labels) now acceptable to fans who have tired of the stereotyped male fantasies of female pop singers, or is this another quickly passing trend in the music business?