

The Quality of Music Has Decreased Over Time

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Abstract

The quality of music reigning in the top charts has decreased over time. Music technology, the lack of musical literacy and lack of diversity in lyrics have all led to this demise. This paper aims to expose the falling progression of modern music.

With the increase of musical literacy and medley of lyrics and the decreased reliance on music technology, the quality of music itself and the music industry will improve. By searching through music industry professionals' websites, problems with modern music were uncovered. My analysis showed the lack of originality has greatly hindered the continuation of music appreciation. The only way back from the big gray canvas is the encouragement of music literacy, exploring creativity and leaving Autotune behind.

“I think music in itself is healing. It’s an explosive expression of humanity. It’s something we are all touched by. No matter what culture we’re from, everyone loves music.”

— Billy Joel

Have you ever thought to yourself, "Why isn't there any good music anymore?" or, "Why does every song sound the same?". Many have pondered these exact questions and reminisced back to when music was at its best. A time where some artists weren't even a thought: the 1960s and 70s.

The 60s/70s music scene had such a smorgasbord of music and different music types, with all the orchestra-based songs with a leading lady providing the heavenly, emotion-filled vocals like Dusty Springfield and Cilla Black. Or the seductive voice of Nat King Cole, making the most sad and/or innocent lyrics sound like flirting. How about the story-telling guitar of John Denver, Harry Nilsson, and Jim Croce. Elton John, Freddie Mercury, and Billy Joel tickled the ivories with such swagger that it was heard around the world.

Many long to be transferred back to the time of sexual expression, hippies, feminism, and the work-in-progress of civil rights. Wait a minute, that sounds like today! So how can we, as a working society, stay so similar to the past, but our music is nothing compared to what was being produced back then? We should have gotten better music with the progression of time? Why not? What is causing modern music to go to the dogs? The quality of vocals has decreased, the depth of the lyrics has decreased, and the importance put on reading music has decreased. All of these factors have greatly contributed to the demise of music quality over the past few decades.

Imagine modern artists as a baby bird, staying in the nest, having a grand old time. It is comfortable and safe, being fed by momma bird. Soon the bird fully develops its wings and has

the ability to fly, but refuses due to its fear of falling. But how can it learn without taking the chance? It needs to leave its comfort zone. It needs to take the chance and learn from its mistakes. It can no longer stay in the nest and live in fear.

The nest, in the reference, is the program named Autotune. Modern artists stay within the comfort of autotune, and some never leave and see if they are any good on their own. Autotune is "a piece of software that digitally corrects the pitch of your voice."(6)

Are there any genuine singers that do not rely on technology? Sure, there are some top-charted that do not use Autotune (i.e., Adele, Bruno Mars, Ariana Grande, Lady Gaga), but it does not stop other artists from using this handicap.

Music up until 1997, never ever had Autotune. That means Frank Sinatra belted all those notes all by himself. The Mamas and The Papas did not have any technology to make their voices magically sound sweeter. Artists before autotune were performing off of raw, spectacular talent. Why is there no revival of such spectacles? Why do modern artists stay comfortable inside of their nests? It is almost like there is not enough talent to go around. Again, there is still quality music being released to the world, just not as good of a quality as the one heard in the sixties. That is not some loose statement. There is an actual study that proves that point.

A study was conducted where music was measured by timbral diversity, pitch, and loudness. Timbre is the color, texture, and tone quality of sound. What was found was that modern music has gone through a system called "compression," which is when all three of those aspects, timbre, pitch, and loudness, are all digitally leveled and turned all the way up. It is like cooking meat and having an equal amount of salt as there is sauce. It is too gross for anyone with a

sensible palette but enjoyed by others who appreciate any of the flavors. However, one cannot discern anything from the rest of the mess.(4)

The study showed that modern music is no longer complex. At least not as complex as music was in the sixties. It stated that timbral quality was literally at its climax in the sixties. The problem now is that artists are so scared of someone not caring to listen to the entire song. So, they put the attention grabbers at the beginning of the song. They are not taking any chances. Even the lyrics are simply to please listeners. Modern musicians are nothing but people pleasers. Modern music is no longer for the actual art of music. It is all about the money. (4)

"Music isn't about what's cool or what's trendy. It's about what feeds your soul- something no machine or software can ever accomplish." - Society of Rock

Maybe it is the fault of consumers for having weak attention spans. MTV is no longer truly music television. No one turns on MTV to see what songs are cool right now. It is all about Youtube or other streaming platforms. If an artist gets money per stream, it could be the same person all at once on different devices. Imagine how much fear of failure modern musicians must have. So afraid of being ignored. That is what gets them to make more music. Fear controls them.

What happened to bands that were dedicated to their work and knew they had to produce hit after hit. Bands that would yell at the producers and those working on the sound, and even feud amongst themselves, because they did not want to be musically "safe." How is it possible to make an omelet without breaking a couple of eggs? Those types of bands sacrificed months of their life to release not just top-charting but also quality songs. All modern music mostly sounds

the same because every song is made of a mixture of a drum machine, keyboards, and a computer software. How can any original piece be produced if it all strains from the same source?

Time to talk about lyrics. Of course, over time, different subjects are definitely going to lose their taboo-ness. In the '50s, one would never hear a man sing, in detail, about how he would like to sexually please his lover. (At least not directly saying so). Back then, lyrics really did not reach out of the category of "first love" anyways. They always sang about the person who broke their heart or the one who put it back together. The '50s was no time for inappropriate content. It does not mean that they did not have "hidden" messages that anyone with half a brain cell could realize what they are saying ("Sixty Minute Man" by Billy Ward and His Dominoes). Sure, scatting might have been just interjections that came out whenever the singer's soul led them to, but it is better than Justin Bieber speaking Spanglish trying to rhyme "despacito" with "burrito".

In the 60s, lyrics were a bit more roaming and free. Like when "Come Together" by The Beatles talked nonchalantly about experimenting with psychedelics. "Brown-eyed Girl" by Van Morrison had to be censored when he spoke of "makin' love in the green grass." That was out of bounds at the time, but no artist really cared, and they just kept popping out quality songs. Lyrics of the 60s/70s were also written during a time of protests, reflecting feelings of the song itself. (5)

Although sometimes rejected by public authority, music in the sixties was experimental, but also high quality. Music such as that does not really exist anymore. Today, music talks more about sex and drugs, if not solely just that. The only musical controversies are when artists diss their

former lovers or other artists. What is even worse, is that most of those lyrics are not even created directly by the performer.

The top-charting songs of today are written by the same two people. (1,2). Their names are Lukasz "Dr. Luke" Gottfield and Max Martin. They have written so many songs for so many artists. To name a few; "Katy Perry, Britney Spears, Kelly Clarkson, Taylor Swift, Jessie J., KE\$HA, Miley Cyrus, Avril Lavigne, Maroon 5, Taio Cruz, Ellie Goulding, NSYNC, Backstreet Boys, Ariana Grande, Justin Timberlake, Nick Minaj, Celine Dion, Bon Jovi, Usher, Adam Lambert, Justin Bieber, Domino, Pink, Pitbull, One Direction, Flo Rida, Paris Hilton, The Veronicas, R. Kelly, Zebrahead" -Jon Henschen, 'Intellectual Takeout'.

How can we hear anything new and/or experimental if everything written is by the same two brains over and over again? So when musicians say something along the lines of "I write all my songs." or "my love life/exes inspire(s) the music that I release." it is absolute B.S. Back in the sixties, writing and singing your own music was the norm, a trend that started with The Beatles (1). A study was executed by Joan Serra, where songs from a span of ten years were put through a program named the "Flesch Kincaid Probability Index"(2). The program scans for the quality of understanding and writing of songs. The results are that in the past decade (2008 to 2018), the quality has dropped by one whole grade. Obviously, that is not a good thing whatsoever. With our technological and cultural advances, the music scene should be drastically sky-rocketing, not plummeting.

The lack of lyrical genius and originality are not the only reasons why modern music is lame and repetitive. The American school system can also share a portion of the blame. There is a movie

called "Here Comes the Boom." The movie stars Kevin James as a biology teacher that has lost all motivation in keeping the joyous spirit of learning alive. In the movie, the school is drowning in debt (which is later revealed to be an embezzlement issue from the treasurer). Due to the financial setbacks, the school must cut all extra-curricular activities, including the music program. The music teacher (played by Henry Winkler) is absolutely devastated because of the time and effort he put into teaching these teenagers and his pure passion for music. Kevin James feels he must do something about it, so he raises all the funds needed by being paid to fight in mixed martial arts matches. Anyways, a (sort of) similar situation has been happening for multiple decades.

Music programs in schools are being significantly forgotten and deprioritized. Back in the sixties and seventies, schools had choir, orchestra, jazz, and symphonic band programs. Those are no longer things due to "financial setbacks." This lack of musical education has caused many generations to no longer learn how to read music. It does not sound so important, but music literacy would definitely aid musicians in the quest for individuality. Even Billy Joel said that what makes him stand out in the music industry is the fact that he can both read and write music. Unfortunately, music, art, and other elective teachers are in a sort of financial Hunger games. The prize is the funding for their classes. (2)

This situation should not be so empathetic to the school itself. The answer as to where all that money is headed is the standardized testing prep administrators. They are taking up the elective spaces that were used for expression and creativity and are now being used for students to simply be another "check in the box". The reason that schools are giving an arm and a leg to standardized testing preparation is because of status and wanting to be the best at birthing little

worker ants for the future. Everything is just preparation for another test. One right after the other. No time for free-thinking. There are four answers, and only one is correct. It is similar to sucking the color and joy out of learning. Schools give more time and money to sports programs. Whatever for? Status and reputation. Brawn and brains over heart. Graduates are simply a statistic. Nothing more. (2)

So yes, school boards do have a major effect on the music industry. How can one run without being taught to walk? It just does not make sense to take out such critical talent-growing programs. How can modern artists be blamed for buying their music when the majority of famous artists cannot even read what it is they are playing? It is truly depressing. The importance of music literacy should be more acknowledged, especially since it drastically helps with the style, and detail, and structure of a quality product of music.

Again, this is not a complete hate letter towards modern music. It is more of an appreciation of the past. An appreciation of the superior music of the sixties. Even current artists honor the best of the best by creating covers of old songs. Jay-Z samples sixties music all the time. Melanie Martinez's twist on "It's my party" by Lesley Gore is an absolute pleasure to listen to. A personal favorite is the incredibly talented Lana Del Rey, who does both covers of sixties music, and her entire song aesthetic is inspired by the era, with a modern twist.

The sixties were something else. Many wish they could have experienced listening to those songs for the first time.

"I'm not kidding myself. My voice alone is just an ordinary voice. What people come to see is how I use it. If I stand still while I'm singing, I'm dead, man. I might as well go back to driving a truck."

—Elvis Presley

Wow. The fact that a man, who was probably one of the best musicians of his era, had the cojones and deprecated himself, admitting that his performances are what kept him afloat in the industry. Does he know that his music is still, if not even more famous than when he was still alive? Something that the live music performers have today, is that their shows and tours can be more visibly attractive and spectacular due to our increased and constantly upgrading the use of technology.

The statement that "The King" made is partially true. Average music enjoyers were probably more picky then. That is the problem with our society today. We swoon too easily. We settle for mediocracy. What is worse is that we also praise these artists that are musical cowards. These modern musicians are no longer thinking, or writing, or performing outside of the box anymore. There is a formula that they follow and it is the fault of consumers for setting it up. Artists simply follow the equation of what tickles the brain, they plug in their own "unique" content, and VOILA! outcomes a top-chartter that is just a chewed-up, reconstructed version of the last top-chartter. The public needs to be more picky.

The quality of music has decreased over time. Autotune has changed and ruined the vocalist world. It spreads light on lyrics and their content and quality. It goes on about how the quality of

the sounds created today is nowhere near as fantastic as the sixties, and a machine proved the statement right. It lectured about how most famous songs are written by the same two people. Imagine that. A whole entire culture is surviving off of what two men come up with in their brains. Modern music is so repetitive, and that is a completely valid reason because it all (mostly) comes from the same source. This paper also included the lack of musical literacy in the industry. The quality of music needs to start increasing in the future.

In conclusion, popular, top-charting music peaked in the 1960s. Not only because of lyrical genius and jaw-dropping vocals, but because the actual skeleton quality was, and is, superior to the music that followed afterward.

What needs to happen today is that adults in America (especially if they are a parent), should encourage and reinstate the passion for music into the public school system. Schools should no longer be worrying about their social status, or about how many obeying consumers they birth out every twelve years. Rediscover the importance of musical literacy. The grip on standardized testing needs to be relaxed. Symphony and jazz bands and choir and band need to be revived! Do not let them make it so that each elective has to butt-kiss and fight to the death for the spot of having a classroom.

That is not the only problem that can be fixed. Again, consumers have to stop letting mediocracy into the music industry. Maybe it cannot be fixed. And perhaps the age of when music was actually enjoyable and fantastic has faded away. What a horrible idea to ponder upon; the world becoming one big gray canvas where everything is exactly the same. A world where all color and creativity has been stripped from the very skin of the Earth. It is not that difficult to support and

create new, quality music. This should have been done a decade ago. The quality of music has the ability to reclaim the title it once held in the sixties. It is up to the artists, and artists-to-be, of today to change the future of music. It is up to them to write quality music. It is up to them to improve lyrics. It is up to us to reinvigorate the passion of music. The future of music is up to us.

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