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To cite this article: Ronald E. Rice (1980) The content of popular recordings , Popular Music & Society, 7:3, 140-158, DOI: [10.1080/03007768008591158](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007768008591158)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007768008591158>



Published online: 24 Jul 2008.



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THE CONTENT OF POPULAR RECORDINGS¹

Ronald E. Rice

A previous paper (Rice, 1978) discussed how the mass medium of popular recordings may perform many of the social and cultural functions associated with other mass media. It has also been argued, as does Gerbner in his studies of TV's symbolic content (1972, 1976), that the content of a mass medium can be considered indicators of our cultural and symbolic environment. As such indicators, popular recording lyrics might be analyzed to speculate upon 1) the images of the dominant (sub)cultures in a society, or 2) what popular imagery reveals about various issues (Lewis, 1978). In changing images, recurrent sets appear. Specific popular recordings are similar to the day's news or a TV series in that those played on the radio change from day to day; they underscore change, impermanence, spontaneity. At the same time the symbolic presence of Chucky Berry, Walter Cronkite, Ann Landers, westerns and love songs remains constant and provides security and counter-balances to the rapid changes in our social surroundings.

As for mass appeal, over \$2 billion were spent on all records and tapes (of which our categories of popular music were a large portion) in 1972, not including the \$150 million committed to concert attendance. This figure grew to \$2.7 billion in 1976 (Chapple and Garofalo, 1977) and to nearly \$4 billion in 1978. These figures can be compared to \$600 million spent on professional sports and \$1.6 billion in movie revenues in 1976. Over 50 pop music stars were earning from two to five million dollars per year in 1972 (Atkin, 1973), while a year later, CBS Records group accounted for 20 percent of CBS' total sales (Chapple and Garofalo, 1977). The growing interconnections among film, TV, record and radio business are particularly underscored by the media activities of stars such as John Travolta.

This paper will review the previous content analyses of popular recordings, and include new research, in an effort to acquire a sense of the direction, content and span of the symbolic indicators of this mass medium.

Validity of Content Analyzing Lyrics--- Methodological Pitfalls

Any analysis of the content of cultural production (here, popular recording lyrics) must understand the weakness of the method in general and of some past research in particular. Several authors (Denisoff, 1975; Denisoff and Levine, 1971b; Denzin, 1970; and Lewis, 1978) have discussed some of these weaknesses. Content analysis, in isolation from other methods, cannot link audience attitudes to behavior; indeed, no impacts by the product on either can be assumed. Invalid inferences must be avoided. In addition, the researcher usually derives the categories to be used and assumes the highest frequency category is most important; this quantification may distort important aesthetic and rare aspects of cultural items. Samples should be representative of the item universe to which the analysis results are generalized; categories must be mutually exclusive and exhaustive; the reliability of categorization should be reported; and previous research should be reviewed and extended to couch the analysis in a useful context. The present research is based on an awareness of, and on an attempt to overcome, these weaknesses of the method and of some previous popular music research.

Popular recordings have often been attributed the same power to influence

audiences as were the other mass media after the apparent successes of the German propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* and Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast. Audience reaction to the Beatles, Ohio Players or Kiss would seem to support this position. An important point to remember, however, is that popular recordings are subject to similar constraints as are other media, such as the context of the person, the surrounding group, the particular medium, social mechanisms and the message itself (Stephenson, 1967). Content analysis alone cannot capture this contextual and social influence. Denzin (1970) emphasizes this point: cultural items are *interactional* creations involving artist and audience, not *social facts*. Some research specifically shows the differential effects of group attributes such as race and class (Hirsch, 1971) on musical taste, or the effect of opinion leaders who influence or at least inform the tastes of other listeners (Harmon, 1972a). And, the responses of the artist and the audience(s) may differ (Denzin, 1970). The very fact that this medium offers choice itself as a main virtue (Hughes, 1964), along with the influence of social contexts, argue against any "hypodermic needle" theory of unmediated influence (Hirsch, 1971; Robinson & Hirsch, 1972) by popular recording lyrics. It is true in general, though, that the media are continually encroaching upon previous human mechanisms for satisfying psychological and social needs (von Foerster, 1966). Thus, although content analysis alone cannot make inferences about effects or audiences, it is one method of gauging the cultural environment in which these needs may be satisfied.

Validity of Content Analyzing Lyrics--- The Role of Lyrics

In such research, of course, there is considerable debate as to what part lyrics actually play in the listener's attention to popular recordings. Robinson and Hirsch (1972) found that surveyed teenagers were unable to describe basic themes or subtle meanings of Top 40 Protest songs which the respondents had claimed to have heard. Denisoff and Levine's (1971a) and Hirsch's (1971) studies of popular protest songs found that only a moderate percentage of subjects was able to provide totally correct interpretations of protest songs or was attracted to their lyrical content. These conclusions are perhaps more relevant when the difference between mass-mediated *commercial* music and "ideologically rich" live *communal* music is considered---concert material is more likely to contain protest material, and thus less likely to be well interpreted (DiMaggio, Peterson & Esco, 1972; Harmon, 1972a; Peterson & Berger, 1972). Cole (1971) was unable to find any specific lyric characteristic that correlated with song popularity.

Lyrics may not even be the primary component of recordings for some listeners. Lyrics may represent an explicit, rational meaning often not important to the listener's experience (Denisoff & Levine, 1972b). The non-lyrical components of music are often ignored by content analyses, resulting in a one-dimensional approach (Denisoff & Levine, 1972b; Lewis, 1978), possibly overlooking important attributes of recordings. For example, Murdock and Phelps (1972) concluded that popular recordings were classified into two general subcategories by listeners: "Head" music (audible and intelligible), which was preferred by 22 percent of their subjects, and "body" music (musically exciting with a compelling beat), which was preferred by 36 percent. And Kantor (1974) suggested that the non-discursive aspects of popular music, especially those related to dancing, are necessary to maintain a symbolic equilibrium with discursive elements (syntaxes, written knowledge, etc.) in society. Little research on the non-verbal components in the field of popular

recordings appears in the Literature (but see Keil and Keil, 1966; Kittey, 1974; Robinson and Hirsch, 1969; Royko, n.d.; and Simpkins and Smith, 1974).

There are, however, arguments that lyrics play a significant role in popular recordings, that they are noticed by listeners, and that they do portray some values held by listener subgroups. Atkin (1973) found that 50 percent of his survey's respondents did in fact pay close attention to the lyrics and 93 percent paid at least partial attention. A majority of college students in a 1965 sample also could interpret the meaning of a highly popular protest song (Denisoff and Levine, 1972b), while Hirsch's study (1971) revealed that although deviant messages were likely to be ignored, listeners "tuned in" to songs in their preferred style.

In a more qualitative vein, Christgau (1973) wrote that listeners do not analyze music so much, but do identify with content when they find the same situation in their life; then they listen to every word. The power of the content, he claimed, resides in the context of the listener. Marcus (1972) echoes Christgau: listeners really do hear the lyrics of songs they like, are attracted to, are connected to (admittedly there is some tautology here).

The mere fact that a popular recording has been bought by so many people is an indication that "the language of the text is likely to mirror, to some extent, the values, beliefs and orientations of purchasers" (Walker, 1972). Horton (1957) and Webb and Roberts (1969) agree that popular songs as love poetry have merits as data for content analysis.

Lewis (1978:26) citing Nye and repeating others, feels that the popular artist tends to support existing values of the audience; indeed, "popular (culture) has been an unusually sensitive and accurate reflector of the attitudes and concerns of the society for which it is produced." Popular sociologists in general argue that 1960's rock music, at least, portrayed much about that generation's lifestyle (Harmon, 1972a). Milburn (1979) provided support for the belief that lyrics can reflect subcultural tastes and norms in his study of the reflection of dependency in popular songs. He found a very high relationship between psychologically-determined dependency states of demographic categories (such as different races or sexes) and those states as indicated by prepositional occurrences and context within the lyrics of songs produced by and for the same demographic groups. A study of 2 national samples involving 1200 high school students each also showed a high relationship between surveyed tastes for, and commercial support of, hit songs (Hirsch, 1971).

Finally, concerning the non-discursive elements, lyrical themes associated with dancing, love, etc. are also a part of the non-discursive symbolic process hypothesized by Kantor to be necessary to the health of a society. Besides, the musical standardization of popular music may lessen somewhat the impact of non-discursive components of Top 40 songs in proportion to that of the lyrical components (Denisoff and Levine, 1971b).

The Validity of Content Analyzing Lyrics--- The Source of Lyrics

We may also question just which subculture and whose sentiments Top 40 recordings represent, regardless of whether the lyrics are listened to or of the social context of the listener. The two positions on this issue are 1) the public can only exercise convergent selectivity, choosing from a limited selection determined by a powerful music industry, and 2) the public's purchase patterns provide feedback to the music industry which supports artists productions and which adjusts to release the recordings the audience wants.

The mass media are only apparently a public form of information

transmission, so the first argument goes, while actually being an intertwined oligarchic capitalist industry which does not portray minority views and symbols except as isolated, entertaining and saleable events. The structure of the music industry is such that only during brief spurts of competition and creativity sandwiched in between cycles of oligopoly is there release from and partial breakdown of the institutional barriers within such a closed system (Peterson and Berger, 1975). "There is a full integration of the media conglomerates into the fabric of U.S. industry and capital" (Chapple and Garofalo, 1977:223). Although the government, through antitrust and licensing surveillance and payola inquiries, has maintained a separation of the radio and record companies, the *function* of the radio is to sell records as well as advertisement.

Thus the essential strategies of a music industry are to expose its products through radio and to provide the products for purchase through distribution. The Top 40 playlist becomes simply a marketing tool. The emphasis in lyric production would then not be on creativity or change, but simply on consciously exploiting the themes and ideas extant in the consuming segments of society (Kittey, 1974). Popular songs are thus directed to "consumption communities", to use Boorstein's term. The music industry's highly structured "pre-selection system" involves complex filtering by gatekeepers. These include the artist, agent, producer and cultural gatekeepers such as disk jockeys and program directors (which may be the true industry targets) (Hirsch, 1972, and no date). Seventy percent of the final exposure of new popular recordings is provided by the cultural gatekeepers of radio stations, while only one percent or so of the singles actually provided to an average station ever receive airplay (Blume, 1976). Clearly, this view suggests that popular recordings can be seen as products over which the audience has little control, and which lag considerably behind even the industry's sentiments (Denzin, 1970).

Further, the medium is not just a set of products, but pushes consumption and thus is a socializing agent for capitalism, the argument holds: a vehicle for peer group training in expressing consumer preferences (Reisman, 1950). To this point, Hirsch (no date) concluded that the only demonstrable effects of popular recordings are

- the association of Top 40 stars with a client's products resulted in increased sales
- progressively larger audiences are exposed to successful Top 40 stars via TV shows or movies
- song content influences sales of musical instruments

The opposing argument claims that although an interpretation of popular recordings as a medium with a one-way flow was essentially valid for earlier times (Mooney, 1968), events such as the end of ASCAP's monopoly, the incursions of TV into radio's audience (which forced local stations to concentrate on identifiable, local audiences because the national audience went to TV), and Top 40 formats all allowed new companies to enter the market. Indeed, Peterson and Berger (1972) feel that the "outspoken rock lyric of 1960's...were (sic) largely unintended byproducts of earlier mundane changes in technology, industry structure, and marketing." These changing patterns helped create a seller's market and enabled today's performers to obtain greater artistic control over their songs (Harmon, 1972a; Hirsch, 1971); in the early 1950's very few artists wrote (or were allowed to write) their own material. (It is likely, however, that some of this greater candor and creativity moved to FM after the late 60's (Harmon, 1972a).)

This second view also holds that some stages in gatekeeping (especially by

public gatekeepers such as record reviewers) actually lessen the industry's influence. The quick rise of *The Eve of Destruction* on the charts despite tremendous efforts to suppress the protest song is often cited in support of the position that consumer feedback through purchasing cues the producing institutions to the tastes, opinions, and themes of the various audiences (Denisoff and Levine, 1971a; Hirsch, 1972; Rosenstone, 1969).

Summary of Introduction

In general, popular recording research would do well to integrate "one-dimensional" content analysis with analysis of industry structure, the impact of changes in recording technology, and the relationships of specific audience attributes to content preference (see for example, Anderson et al., 1980). Taking note of the weaknesses of this methodology, we agree with Carey's reply to Denzin (1970): by comparison to previous studies, studying symbolic indicators represented partially by popular lyrics may indicate the validity of *trends* in content, and *may* reflect shifts in either (or both) audiences' and artists' tastes. Such accounting may then be integrated with much of the current research in industry and technology trends.

Popular music is increasingly part of our symbolic environment and this paper describes that part, with a summary of historical trends and an analysis of 1976 Top 40 songs to bring the research up to date.

Previous Content Analyses of Popular Recordings

A comprehensive review, in a personal and eclectic style, of popular music sources and trends from 1890 to 1950 is provided by Mooney (1968, 1974). In general, almost all lyrics of popular songs in the first 50 years of this century concerned abstract and romantic views of courtship; the remaining few concerned novelty, nostalgia or occasionally the closest war. Both Peterson and Berge (1972) and Peatman (1944) found that 90 percent were about love; Peatman reported that these were evenly split between "happy-in-love" and "frustrated-in-love" themes (although this split varied considerably from year to year). Johnstone (cited in Johnstone and Katz, 1957) sampled songs from 1927 to 1951 and found about 75 percent about happiness or frustration in love.

Horton (1957) began to explicate the kinds of love relationships in song themes more fully: he suggested that early popular songs essentially provided a "conventional language in which adolescents may formulate changing and developing reciprocal expectations and self-conceptions... a conversational language for use in dating and courtship." Across all music types (Country and Western, Rhythm and Blues, Pop), this universe of courtship discourse appeared to be common symbolic material, with 87 percent of song themes in those sampled by Horton about love and 4 percent about dance or music. Country and Western did place more emphasis on marriage and the pre- and post-relationship "all alone" category, while Rhythm and Blues emphasized the "downward course" along with the physical aspect of love. Horton's categories of the stages of courtship portrayed in songs have provided guidance for subsequent research.

Kitney's extensive analysis (1974) investigated song elements such as chord structure, musical traits, song form, style, originality and content. His study revealed the following distribution of themes in early rock and roll:

- lost/separated/parted lover narrative (28 percent)
- possession/security (16 percent)
- companion/party/group (15 percent)
- identity (25 percent)

Country and Western songs also included the theme of "escape". In general, the songs of the fifties were largely concerned with love themes and not much with social issues (Denisoff, 1972). (Although some argue that early rock and roll was revolutionary and provided a sexual outlet for repressed teenagers; if so, this impact was not primarily due to the lyrics (Denisoff and Levine, 1970). On the other hand, "Bopa loobop, a lopsham bam" are called by Sarling (1973) the most revolutionary lyrics ever written because they express freedom, unrestraint and movement in tribal manner. Peatman (1944) would likely object, as he cites equally silly lyrics).

There were differences between white and black popular song content in the fifties. Oliver analysed "race" records (blues up to the early fifties) in 1968 and found them to be predominantly concerned with sexual themes. Hayakawa (1957) posited that performers' and composers' lifestyles seemed to determine large differences in 1950's lyrics. Claiming that blues and jazz lyrics were more realistic, candid, and less self-pitying than (white) pop lyrics, he showed that black music probably prepared listeners better for life experiences than did white music. White music was more concerned with the internal psychological state, and more concerned with the "unhappy-in-love" themes. The romanticized, "ineffectual nostalgia, unrealistic fantasy" and self-pity portrayed in pop lyrics were likely to lead to frustration in real life experiences and emotional demoralization, he argued. Fifties' popular white music, then, could be characterized as "a form of mystical hypnosis in the never-never land of moon in June with the popular songs built on romantic love, dreams, and fantasy" (Hayakawa, 1957; see also Wolfe, 1975).

Carey reviewed popular songs of the period from Horton's study to 1966, and identified a distinction between "older values", largely similar to Horton's typology, and "newer values" (1969a, b):

- active courtship, looking for a physical affair, romance downplayed
- happy, ecstatic period
- unreasonableness of the woman, and a realization that the relationship has gone bad
- decision to breakup
- isolation, rediscovery
- choice in personal relationships and social involvement

By the 1966's only 67 percent of song themes dealt with love.

These new issues in songs of the sixties, such as the role of the individual in a conventional world, social protest, and the change in courtship, were considered by Hirsch (1971). Mooney, in his sweeping overview of popular music (1968), remarked on how the new music rejected older views of love, including possessiveness, monogamy, jealousy, euphemistic passion, romantic love, etc. The outstanding trend in the 1950's and early 1960's was a "rejection of prettiness, over-refinement, academic orchestration and lyrics, smoothness, even subtlety." Not to condemn this particular generation, he noted that 1960's music only repeated the "perennial reaction of youth against the norms of older people." Among the descriptions of the subtleties and moral implications of the new treatments of love and the influences of earlier styles as well as rising ethnic forces are some plausible factors in this shift of the 1960's:

- increased diversity from the released ASCAP monopoly, subcultural artists and geographically dispersed recording locations

- rising affluence of minority taste groups
- larger percentage of affluent youth
- black music's contribution to the sensory aspect of music
- general change in sexual and religious mores
- entry of "highly permissive and hedonistic lower classes" into the market.

In spite of Mooney's excesses, his review provides a rich context for viewing recent popular music lyrics.

A considerably more theoretical study by Harmon (1972a) used Lasswell's 8 values categories to study the changes in political values (such as power, well-being, affection, skill) in the lyrics of 1000 "best-selling" songs from 1945 to 1969. The strength of using five expert judges in the study is unfortunately off-balanced by the fact that they relied on their expert memories to categorize the songs. As we've seen, until 1955, "affection" dominated (65 percent), followed by a mixed category called "whimsicality" (other, well-being, wealth and skill). This status quo was joined by the entry of "power", "rectitude", and "respect" around 1955, and these categories held constant from then on. Harmon sees a new value---general "enlightenment"---involving knowledge, understanding and information concerning relations and realism entering strongly around the same time, reaching a peak of 30 percent in 1969 and afterward declining. Older views of courtship decrease sharply to about 5 percent in 1965, then increase at the expense of enlightenment. The newer forms of love increase to 35 percent in 1958 until 1966, and then begin to decline in frequency.

Overall, a shift from functional status-quo escapism to vehicles of identification and change was noted in the music of the early 1960's (Hirsch, 1971). For example, black popular music grew into "Soul" just as the civil rights movement gained impetus (Emerson, 1977). Larkin (1972) notes the rise of soul and R&B as both an artistic form and a source for political messages during this period. The 1970 top 50 contained many "black message" songs, while in 1960 only a very few recordings had serious lyric content---the personality of the singer was emphasized over the song in 1960.

Hirsch, Robinson, Taylor and Witney (1972) also marked the rising influence of R&B songs, first introduced into white popular culture via covers (white version of R&B originals) which often removed the deviant lyrics of the original (Denisoff and Levin, 1971b). They noted other trends:

- the vast majority of singers were male
- groups were replacing individual superstars
- hit records turned over on the charts more quickly
- a greater variety in manufacturers and distributors
- increasing artistic control of the product

Cole (1971) also noted the shift from the predominance of single, male vocalists to the presence of vocal male groups in the late 1960's. He reported an increase in themes concerning love and sex, violence, religion and social protest (which increased from 0 percent in 1960-64 to 10 percent in 1965-69). In spite of the rise of many of these novel themes, the majority of the themes were still about happy love-sex, falling in love, and romance. Indeed, Cole remarked that contemporary critics of popular recordings grossly overrated the amount and nature of lyrical content involving violence, social protest and religion.

Another longitudinal study over the period from 1955 to 1972 (Kantor, 1974) provided the following changes:

- love---73 to 64 percent
- drugs---0 to 7 percent
- religion---0 to 17 percent
- social change---1 to 7 percent
- dance---7 to 0 percent

A considerably more comprehensive over-time analysis by Peterson and Berger (1972) suggested that, on the basis of lyrical content, the years from 1948 to 1970 can be broken into a series of distinct, stable periods. Sampling 10 songs from each year until 1960, and then from each year until 1970, the authors called the first period "Tin Pan Alley", recalling the foundation of its 90 percent conventional love songs (with "dissolution" the predominant courtship stage).

1954-58, called "teen-oriented rock", was overall less romantic, yet of its 73 percent conventional love songs, 59 percent concerned the initial courtship stage. However, 20 percent of the songs involved comical or dance themes. 1960-65 was a period of "commercialization and formula rock and roll", with 77 percent about love (48 percent dissolution), 8 percent dance and 8 percent social commentary. The songs of this period were characterized overall as very unromantic. The next four years provided great difficulty in categorization, and was called "electronic rock and self-conscious artistry". The 64 percent love songs in the first two years were severely unromantic, of which 73 percent were "dissolution" themes, while "initial courtship" bounced back to match dissolution at 38 percent in the remaining two years, which also saw 10 percent religious themes. The authors noted the entry of protest songs, but generally felt that rebellion in popular lyrics is co-opted into a marketable style.

The whole issue of protest songs in particular has attracted considerable research. The folk revival greatly contributed to the rise of political content in popular recordings, and indeed the lyrical content, of a nonconformist and personal choice nature (to some extent, as we have seen), received more emphasis. These values (considerably divergent from those of many elders in the 1960's (Rosenstone, 1969)) were increasingly popular but the market for them seems to have been restricted to white, middle- and upper-class listeners---who still didn't remember much of specifically protest lyrics (Denisoff and Levine, 1972b; Robinson and Hirsch, 1972). The latter authors in an earlier article (1969) do point out that protest music in the context of drug-taking was seen by respondents as a lifestyle symbol, legitimizing the drug subculture. Protest songs were not seen as "danceable" music, nor as usually generating emotional commitment (Denisoff and Levine, 1972b). This support for protest or social commentary is seen by some, on the basis of empirical research, as more cultural than political---cultural expressivism is emphasized over political instrumentality (Harmon, 1972a).

Country and Western music has received some detailed consideration. DiMaggio, Peterson and Esco (1972) sampled 40 random songs every 5th year from 1950 to 1970, and 80 songs from 1965-66. C&W songs told complete stories in unambiguous lyrics and accented the words at the cost of musical complexity, providing considerably more valid material for content analysis. The basic themes found were love, liquor, work, and the passing of the good old ways. (General tendencies of C&W themes to consider fundamentalism, racism and super-patriotism are discussed by Lund, 1972). The predominance of love remains (75 percent in 1960-70), but of a form more concerned with anguish or decline. Women are turned to for comfort, stability and strength by males who feel dependency and remorse when they leave their women; women generally have greater control, and show dignity and stoicism as they feel victimized. (Lewis, 1976, also remarked that women are rarely maligned in C&W lyrics, both because of the importance of the family to country audiences

as well as because of the large female segment of the country market.) Alcoholic themes rose from 4 percent in 1950-55 to 15 percent in 1965-70, but are seen by the authors as part of a new frankness and return to classical topics. Work-related themes (16 percent in 1960-70) present "an ideological assertion of working-class worth in the face of urban white collar ways", while the few class or race comments are directed against hippies and urban delinquents; no anti-black lyrics were found. The growing inadequacy and near-failure of lifestyles based in the good old days, but not occurring in a fast-paced urban context, is an overall thematic current, and a number of accommodations toward the problem are revealed in C&W lyrics.

Returning to sex-related lyrics, 1976 was called the Year of the Erotic Song, and disco lyrics became obsessively sexual (Emerson, 1977). The main difference from the lyrics of previous years, however, may be in their unambiguousness rather than the simple presence of sexual content (Rice, 1978). From another view, however, some critics claim that sexism is reinforced. Christgau (1973) felt that most popular music reinforces the existing male (pursuer/actor) and female (pursued/acted-upon) relations. Duffy (1976) used transactional analysis to content-analyse popular recording lyrics and concluded that the images presented are similar to those found on TV, with material wealth and power identified with success, and where "women must be weak and sex equals love." Some of the stereotyped roles Duffy suggested included the Jock, Sir Walter Raleigh, the Rock, Queen Bee, Plastic Woman, and Mother Hubbard. A rather one-sided evaluation of selected songs led Meade (1972) to conclude that "rock music and its culture is degrading to women" and abounds with "multifaceted putdowns...sexual objects...misogyny...women as emasculators...servile...rabid machismo." At least in the 1950's, she claims, women were portrayed as nice and men only wanted to hold hands.

There are indications that higher level methodologies will be brought to bear on analyzing lyrical content, in addition to the related analyses noted above. Using semantic differential analysis, Keil and Keil (1966) found that the dimensions of "flexibility" and "atmosphere" were viewed by respondents as "basic in the response of most Americans to musical stimuli." Other dimensions isolated included "agitation", "stability", "potency", and "warmth". The authors presented some intriguing conclusions, such as that the moods of somber Indian music were located in the same semantic space as that of the blues. Walker (1972) proposed to use the General Enquirer Content Analysis Program with factor analysis to determine trends in black lyrical themes, and possibly to create a popularity function for popular lyrics.

Hypotheses

Our purpose is to discern the similarities and differences in types of contemporary U.S. popular recordings and to relate differences and similarities to the variable of thematic content, race, sex, target market and amount of the performer's artistic control over the recorded material.

From the discussion in a previous paper (Rice, 1978) and the above review, nine hypotheses about 1976 Top 40 songs were proposed:

- H1. All four music types (as used by Billboard magazine: R&B, Pop, C&W, Easy Listening (EZL)) will have high frequency of performers who also write the music and/or lyrics of their records.
- H2. Frequency of certain themes will vary across musical types. This would imply differing subcultural tastes associated with each music type.

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- H3. Each music type will contain one or more unique themes.
- H4. Pop and C&W will show the largest diversity of themes.
- H5. Records crossing over into other music types will have this pattern: high amount between Pop and R&B, low amount between C&W and all music types, and low amount between EZL and all other music types.
- H6. Racial makeup of performers will have this pattern: R&B dominated by blacks, C&W dominated by whites; Pop and EZL will have the highest percentage of racial mix and number of groups with members of different races within them.
- H7. Love themes will again predominate in all types of music, but will be less frequent than in previous periods.
- H8. Stages in romantic relationships portrayed in the lyrics will vary in frequency, with music types having this pattern: "honeymoon" most frequent in EZL and Pop, and "downlone" (the downward course, and all alone) will be most frequent in R&B.
- H9. Male performers will dominate in all music types.

Method

The variables mentioned above were measured as manifested in the most commercially successful records of 1976 in each of Billboard's types of popular music: Rhythm and Blues (R&B), Country and Western (C&W), Popular (generally Top 40 rock and roll) and Easy Listening (EZL---a descendant of "older kind of music popular before 1955" (Harmon, 1972a)). Year-end compilations of the rankings of the top-selling records of 1976 in each of Billboard's music types identified the recordings to be used as data. Billboard is considered the most successful magazine in reporting the public's taste in music². Partial data for the top 40 songs of each type and complete data for at least 39 of C&W, 37 of R&B, 34 of Pop and 27 EZL songs were collected. Performer data were collected from record labels and retail catalogues. Content categories (operationalized, mutually exclusive, exhaustive and pre-tested) were derived from the review of the literature:

- sexual, with no stage context
- prologue, and initiation of courtship
- honeymoon of the relationship
- downward course of the relationship and all alone afterward
- reunion
- social and political commentary
- drugs
- family values
- dance
- religion
- musician
- identity, including growing-up
- other

Each 1976 Top 40 record's lyrics were coded for one of the above major themes (these as multiply-occurring minor themes were also coded, but that analysis is not reported here). A test for interjudge reliability resulted in a phi of .88.

Results and Discussion

H1. In general, the data supported the hypothesis. See Table 1. C&W had the lowest amount of performer input, with 31 percent of its top recordings

having the performer in a dual or triple role of composer, lyricist and performer. Pop showed 64 percent multiple participation, EZL 63 percent and R&B 41 percent. The lower R&B figure is indicative of the fact that black music entered the major music market later, and thus black artistic control lags behind that in the overall industry; in addition, the major black music company, Motown, exercises very tight control over its performers. Differences in performer input compared to C&W's was significant for EZL (chi-square of 7.6, $p < .03$, $N = 71$) and Pop (chi-square of 7.8, $p < .03$, $N = 72$). This seems consistent with Lewis's study (1976) which states that C&W songwriting is a different process from that of other music types.

Table 1. Number of Top 40 Songs in Each Music Type Exhibiting Artistic Control (the Performer Is Also a Lyricist and/or a Composer).

Music Type	Artistic Control	
	combination of roles	performer has no other role
C&W	12	27
R&B	12	17
EZL	20	12
POP	21	12

$$X^2 = 11, p < .02, N = 133$$

Another issue that is related to artistic control, and perhaps to the issue of crossovers, is that of *cover songs*, performed by one artist after the release of the same song by the original performer (because of the known appeal of an old "hit" or as a means of introducing/stealing a song from one musical type into another type's audience). EZL, with 28 percent of its songs as covers (C&W 10 percent, R&B and Pop 2.5 percent each; chi-square of 28.9, $p < .001$, $N = 160$) seems to have more of a penchant for the past, and is less an original musical type, than the other musical types.

H2. As predicted, there were differences in the frequency of particular themes represented in each music type. See Table 2. Each music type had one or two themes that dominated the type. C&W was differentiated by the Family theme. It is often said that C&W dwells on heartbreak and in fact the "downward course" and "all alone" category was the most frequent theme in C&W. R&B and Pop were differentiated from the other types by the Dance theme³. R&B also had more "happy-in-love" songs than did any other type. EZL was differentiated by the Identity theme. Each music type also had certain themes that were absent. The thematic categories with the consistently lowest frequencies were Drugs, Social-Political Commentary, Religion and Sex (with 8 to 9 percent in R&B and Pop). The brouhaha over the sexual and drug-related content of Top 40 songs in the 1960's and early 1970's does not seem to be appropriate for the most popular records of 1976.

H3. This hypothesis was not expressly supported. The only themes that were unique to any type were so rare as to reflect more on our coding categories than on the lyric content. For example, Alcohol and Drugs, which were separate

Table 2. Percentages of the Three Most Frequent Themes of 1976 Top 40 Songs for Each Music Type.

Music Type	C&W	R&B	EZL	Pop
Percentages and Themes	31---downlone	22---honeymoon	26---downlone	27---dance
	18---honeymoon	22---dance	11---honeymoon	24---downlone
	15---family	16---downlone	11---identity	15---honeymoon
N of Songs	39	37	27	34

categories, occurred only once each in C&W and R&B, respectively. CB songs may have been the closest example of a unique theme; two of these were on the C&W charts, and one crossed over to the Pop Chart.

H4. This hypothesis was not supported. There were similar ratios of the number of different themes contained in a music type, divided by the number of songs representing that music type: .31 for C&W, .32 for R&B, .29 for Pop and .33 for EZL. The percentage spread of themes across all four types was fairly similar: one or two categories represented by 20 percent or more of that type's songs, one to three categories with 10 to 20 percent, and the rest with less than 10 percent.

H5. EZL is apparently more influenced by other music types than we had hypothesized. Eleven songs crossed between Pop and EZL, while 14 crossed between Pop and R&B. Two themes that crossed over from R&B to EZL were the highly popular themes, across all music types, of "downlone" (downward and alone), and "honeymoon" (33 percent and 11 percent of crossovers, respectively). But the largest theme to cross over between Pop and EZL was Music and included "I Write the Music". The 12 R&B and Pop crossovers were in the most popular categories for both types: 58 percent were Dance⁴, 25 percent were "honeymoon," and 17 percent were "downlone." We suggest that race of performer is not a barrier to reaching different subcultural audiences as long as the lyric deals with currently symbolic and socially pervasive themes in those other audiences' environments. Many crossovers also are by "Superstar" or completely new performers, or are smooth ballads. There were no crossovers into C&W, indicating a loyal audience, a tight C&W music industry, and a unique style (emphasizing lyrics).

Some additional comments on record crossovers---between music types, and across generations---may be appropriate here. Occasionally, critics have felt that the greater familiarity white audiences have with black music (through crossover recordings and covers) is simply a sign that black music is diluted and culturally repressed in mass society. Emerson (1977) and Vuilliamy (1975) feel that soul music lost its primary function when successful black musicians got access to the latest technology and turned to disco music. The crossover between country and western music and Pop music (and performers) is changing the traditional stars and symbols of the country sound (*Horizon*, 1977). The C&W music industry was astonished when Olivia Newton-John was voted best female C&W vocalist. Nashville writers feel they are losing some of their control because of such crossovers (Lewis, 1976).

The crossing-over of performers and musical symbols is seen by some, however, as an opportunity to allow different subcultures to experience and understand others (Kamin, 1972). For example, rock dancing became more

expressive because of the injection of rhythm from black music. The fact that country music is entering the mainstream (e.g., Dolly Parton, Willie Nelson) can be seen as a sign that "country" is no longer a self-maintained cultural entity, while presenting a different way of life and music. Indeed, "country" has taken over as the latest fad as represented in a variety of movies and fashions. Historically, low-taste and liberal subcultures tend to have less access or marketability; the crossover of black popular music into the mainstream market conferred financial legitimacy on elements of black culture. In turn, the reduced level of cultural oligopoly allows further experimentation by and attention to subcultures and their tastes.

Concerning cross-generational transmission, after the 1950's, popular recordings has been the music of the young. Rock and roll in particular is seen as adolescents' own music, a secret, cult or communal language which provides identification for the listener as well as a sense of power: the listener is independent from older membership groups, which cannot grasp the contextual clues and meanings (Denisoff, 1972). A generational style develops from these shared meanings (Harmon, 1972b). Popular recordings are thus seen by some as a major factor in transmitting roles, values and modes of action of the youth subculture (Cole, 1971). In this sense, they may function to socialize the listening audiences in different directions than those of preceding generations. This process would seem to accentuate existing generation gaps and create gaps in cultural transmission.

But the channel of popular recordings is not one-way, nor are listeners of rock and popular music limited to teenagers (indeed, the generational cohort which grew up with rock seems to still like it). Although it speaks primarily to itself (younger generations), Top 40 also speaks from and to older generations via the presence of shared symbolic themes and music styles. As most Top 40 music themes concern the universal issue of the stages of love, there is much inter-generational appeal in their content. Whereas in the past, media such as newspapers and books transmitted cultural traditions and symbols largely downward to newer generations only, the mass medium of popular recordings often transmits cultural traditions in both directions. Extant themes and ways of approaching them are transmitted from the past to the future; and new themes, mostly fads, along with aesthetic elements such as musical style, melodies and technologies are transmitted to older generations (Simply listen to the melodies and beat of "Beautiful Music" stations---a considerable percentage comes from Top 40 songs, suitably toned down and arranged). Certainly the development of music styles is heavily dependent on the innovations of younger practitioners.

Conservative older generations may criticize popular music (but not Top 40 as much: Witness the cross-generational appeal of Captain and Tenille, Cher, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, Stevie Wonder and others) for its deviant themes, while an underground or liberal youth audience may criticize the same songs as stereotypical; but the songs sell big. In a sense then, some popular music maintains a dialogue (though often mediated) between the generations. Popular recordings may provide a mechanism for "generational overlap", a mutual transmission by different generations of values and styles. This is not to claim any strict unity of cross-generational symbolic environments as far as taste is concerned: Denisoff and Levine (1970) found that intra-generational differences were far less than inter-generational differences for musical tastes; this difference was not very pronounced for political beliefs.

H6. This set of hypotheses was supported, with exception of EZL's racially mixed groups. Even with 35 percent crossover between R&B and Pop, R&B remains almost exclusively the domain of black artists (86 percent). The three percent white artists in R&B were instrumentalists and studio disco singers. It is

interesting to note that even though C&W remains uncontaminated by thematic crossovers from other musical types, it does have some non-white artists among its ranks: C&W's symbolic integrity is more powerful than racial boundaries. See Table 3.

Table 3. Race of Performer (or Group) for Top 40 songs of 1976 for Each Music Type.

Music Type	Race		
	black	white	other
C&W	1	38	1
R&B	31	1	4
EZL	3	34	2
Pop	11	22	5

$X^2 = 89.3, p < .001, N = 153$

Expected cell sizes for "other" cells too small for accurate X^2 .

H7. As discussed earlier, love themes have consistently been the most frequent theme in all types of music, but the particular make-up by courtship stage has changed, and the overall percentage has declined. To compare our data with the earlier studies reviewed, love themes were broken into the stages of courtship (see content categories above). In our study the combined "downlone" stage occurred in 24 percent of the major themes, "honeymoon" in 17 percent, "initiation" in 5 percent and "reunion" in 2 percent. Love themes were represented in 59 percent of C&W songs overall, 43 percent of R&B songs, 44 percent of EZL songs and 41 percent of Pop songs. These figures are complicated by the fact that different studies defined their themes in different ways; but our figures, for all music types, indicate that love themes are still the most popular yet declining, and that they take on a predominantly sad tone.

H8. This hypothesis follows up on Horton's study, and is linked to Hayakawa's theory on popular music. See Table 2. However, our data do not support the hypothesis. "Downlone" and "honeymoon" were both popular themes, but "honeymoon" was actually highest in R&B (22 per cent) and lowest in EZL (11 per cent). "Downlone" was highest in C&W (31 per cent) and lowest in R&B (16 per cent). R&B, as the commercial version of the blues, is not concerned with "frustrated-in-love" as much as is C&W. R&B's presentation of the idealized vision of love is, of course, tempered by its share of "downlone" songs.

H9. As predicted, male soloist and male groups did dominate the top records of 1976. Male performers outnumbered female performers 61 to 27, while male groups outnumbered female groups 39 to 3. Pop had the largest percentage of male performer (81 per cent) followed by R&B (70 per cent), C&W (65 per cent) and EZL (62 per cent). Sexually mixed groups had surprisingly large percentages at 21 per cent each for EZL and Pop, 11 per cent for R&B and 10 per cent for C&W. However, C&W mixed groups were the only kind of group in that music type; rather than being established groups, C&W groups are usually a duo consisting of solo recording stars in their own right, such as Tammy Wynette and George Jones, or more recently, Dottie West and Kenny Rogers. This may indicate that the country value of rugged individualism carries over to its performers as well. Group performers in general (male,

female, mixed) were most frequent in Pop (67 per cent); perhaps the communal aspect and the hazy sexual boundaries in some youth symbols are represented in their performers.

Summary

Following a discussion of the arguments and research concerning the validity of content analysis of song lyrics, the historical trends in the thematic content of popular recordings were reviewed. Essentially the predominant theme has been "love", and this theme can be divided into several stages of courtship. The frequency of the theme of love has been steadily decreasing over the years. There have been different emphases on themes in different musical types (C&W, R&B, Pop, EZL): early R&B emphasized sexual themes and provided a realistic view of life; C&W offered themes of marriage, heartbreak and escape while portraying women of dignity and control; Pop provided themes of romantic love, social protest and the role of the individual. In addition, songs from one musical type began crossing over into other musical types, or were "covered", as performers gained artistic control and the mass medium expanded.

Our own research on 1976 Top 40 songs concluded that performer control over popular recordings is increasing, particularly for Pop and least for C&W. The EZL type contained the most cover songs, indicating it caters to an audience which is familiar with musical styles and content of several years ago. Different music types can be differentiated by particular (though not most frequent, necessarily) themes: C&W with Family, the downward course of a relationship, and being all alone; R&B with Dance and the honeymoon stage; Pop with Dance; and EZL with Identity. No music type had strong unique themes or varied greatly in diversity in themes. Pop contained the most crossover records (with common themes) from R&B, indicating a breakdown of the barriers between white and black music as long as the song themes share similar symbolic environments.

Racial patterns of performers in each music type were as expected, except for a large amount of integration in the Pop recordings. C&W does have some small racial mixture in spite of its thematic integrity (it received no crossovers). Love themes, although still predominating, continue to decline in frequency, with C&W having the highest overall percentage of love songs. R&B has become more concerned with the honeymoon stage of love than before. Finally, males continued to dominate Top 40 song performance and creation (especially in Pop), but there is increasing sexual integration in group performers.

Popular recordings are a mass medium in their own right, and there is a growing amount of research concerning function, industry structure, effects and content. Our research continues in an attempt to understand the medium, its directions, and its contributions to our symbolic environment.

FOOTNOTES

1. The author would like to acknowledge the help of Marilyn Fife and Cheryl Hall, both of Stanford University, and the helpful comments of this journal's reviewer.
2. Every week, Billboard composes a list of the top 100 45 r.p.m. records in the United States, using a complex system of ratings that involves both record exposure (polling 54 radio stations, and TV airplay, jukebox play, etc.) and public and intra-industry sales (weighted and random samples of 65 retail

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stories, 10 distributors, etc.) (Csida, 1969a, b). Although the system has some methodological problems, one can presume some degree of high public consumption for those weekly recordings that achieve a position of 30 or higher (Hesbacher, 1974; Hesbacher, Downing and Berger, 1975b,c). It can determine record categories not only by overt characteristics of songs, but also by which retailers are selling the song and by the consumer demographics for those stores.

3. While the disco craze has been proclaimed by the media and taken over by the jet set, our results show that it really began to exist in 1976 in terms of record sales. However, we would not wish to imply the dawn of an original cultural age. "Just a Gigolo" was a hit many decades ago, and it initiated a vibrant succession of dance songs (Spaeth, 1934). The contemporary re-emergence of dance themes is put in perspective by the fact that "Dance Music Through the Ages" was proclaimed the number one classical album for 1977 (Tircuit, 1978).
4. The disco craze may have been what boosted these records across musical types, and would thus imply a symbolic theme acceptable to several subcultures. The growth of this theme may require a more complex categorization in future research: although the distinctions were clearcut in 1976, disco soon became a *style* and even gained Billboard classification as a music type, so there will be interactions between themes. Indeed, such interaction may be an interesting question.

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Dr. Ronald E. Rice
Stanford University
Institute for Communication Research
Stanford, California 94305