

COMMENTARY

In defense of pop music

By Mike Leonard

I am more or less a child of the Pop Music ear. I grew up with the Beatles. Literally, grew up with them, through their immediate impact on the rock 'n' roll world, through their psychedelia, their East Indian gurus and finally, through their breakup. Their influence on me is limitless. They are probably responsible for a series of text book stages in child development. But their influence on the rest of the pop music world is even more vast. After the Beatles and Motown, everyone was buying 45's and the then-small record companies were drooling over the profits.

Today, most everyone takes for granted the inevitability of hit singles, instantly famous bands and conglomerate record companies. Pop music is so huge in terms of its commercial impact, as well as its effect on the ears of countless radio listeners, that it defies description. So, of course, what I would love to do is to describe in detail the myriad elements that make up pop—their sources, roots... the different sub-genre, if you will, that diversify and make pop interesting, as well as those elements that make it boring and banal. The problem is I'm not sure that I can. Popular music is not only diverse in its particular brands and formulas, but especially the effects it has over different groups of people. Herein lies the key, and my thesis if you can call it one — Popular music, however commercially viable it may be, is first and foremost *accessible*. You know, listenable, danceable, full of those hooks and rhythms that hit your insides and make you feet bop. Right on down to *The Record Bar* to sink another \$8.99 into that good feeling.

Pop tends to incorporate what is timely, what is the trend in musical fashions, and grow with it, evolve. The music industry depends on this ongoing musical evolution to support its livelihood. It wishes more than anything to feed the ravenous appetites of album consuming radioheads til the end of eternity, and it precisely this wish that keeps them tuned into the new trends and sounds

that will make up the crest of the next new wave. They must market a sound that is accessible. They'd like to know what you'd like to hear before you hear it.

But they don't know and you don't know and the bands that write the songs that become the hits don't really know what works. That's the beauty of popular music, or any popular art form in general. There is an ambiguity to its composition, an amorphousness to its structure because it is a hodgepodge of so many different influences and styles. Popularism is the melting pot of art, stimulating in its relationship to mass society, compelling in the expressions that it evokes, intellectually and emotionally, from the average man-on-the-street. When it is good. It can be the most inane and odious garbage that ever graced your ears when it is bad.

Popularism in art is always disdained by purists. A purist can be defined as someone who won't like something that a hundred or more people ascribe to. Most people who are "into" a certain genre of music—funk, reggae, classical, country, heavy metal, Southern rock, opera, polkas—and then tend not to appreciate mainstream, i.e., popular music because it is too diluted, too lacking in musical substance or tradition to be reputable. They are not shaken by the argument that maybe millions of records buyers are on to something. To me, a person isn't really listening for music if he is "into" only jazz, or Shostakovich and Mendellson, or whomever. They are only taking from music what they want and discarding the rest. Such narrow mindedness is against what music stands for as an art form.

It is ironic, then, that popular music perhaps best expresses art's freedom, gathering and synthesizing the many influences that one finds in life. Yes, it seems that Men at Work has accomplished something in the world of performing arts, simply by creating its particular sound. Yes, the same can be said of Police, or Alabama, or Hall and Oates. The fact that the groups make tremendous amounts of money is incidental. They first devised a sound that would prove accessible to millions. They

rake in their cash only after the people are frolicking on the dance floor.

It angers me that a person, a friend, says they won't go to see *Return of the Jedi* or won't buy The Polices' "Synchronicity" (though they might like both) because they refuse to belong to a popularist public that endorses these things. It is the greatest form of hypocrisy to dislike something on *purpose*. If taste cannot be spontaneous, then it is not taste, but rather intellectual posturing—unreal because it is unfelt and contrived.

There is a reason why this defense of pop art is necessary, though you might have given up finding one long before now. There is a change being wrought by the music industry that will effect our access to popular music and the tidy sub-culture that surrounds it. It comes in the guise of MTV and can be properly subsumed in the current "video revolution." Quite simply, video is going to change the way we experience music. At its best, any good music worth its vinyl is going to evoke emotional as well as intellectual responses. The responses are rarely similar since the nature of human response to art is to confound logic; it is never the same in different people and hardly ever the same in the same person hearing the same music twice.

Got that? What video allows that audio can't do is to provide mental images for us. To do the work of our imagination for us. To daydream over a song for us; to attach a romantic memory to a song for us. Eventually feel for us, if you care to take it to the extreme. No, I do not think that MTV is undermining the imaginative fiber of America's youth. But I do think that it threatens to make popular music something it is not. Pop visual art.

I can't help but feel that all these videos are nothing more than elaborate advertisements for the record albums themselves, that they are packed away in record stores everywhere, waiting to be picked, sans video, from the shelves. It's as if the thing we most liked about a hot tune, the rhythm, the vocals, the hooks, maybe even the lyrics, are suddenly not good enough. Now we want to see the lead singer chasing some painted chick through the Philippine underbrush. Or do we? I think that rather the record company executives have *decided* that we want to see it, which somehow makes the music more accessible, more lucrative. "Too bad," I can hear them saying, "the Beatles didn't make videos."

Mike Leonard is a senior Interdisciplinary Studies major from Lexington.

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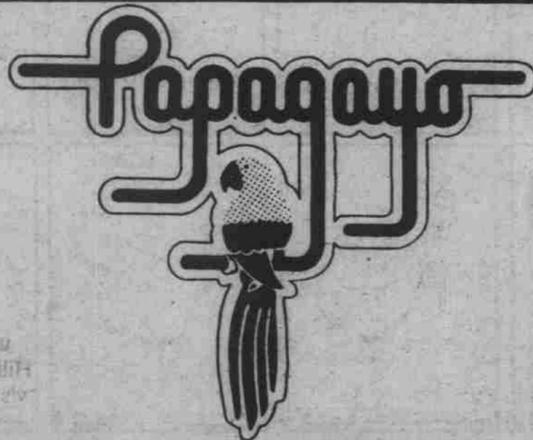
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