

They Are Playing Our Song

The grindingly mediocre level of most popular music today is due essentially to what the teen-agers do want

by NAT HENTOFF

ACCORDING to the fervent rationalization of ASCAP (the American Society of Authors, Composers and Publishers), the decline of American popular music in recent years has been largely due to the infestation of the young with rock and roll. The thesis continues that the primary incubi spreading the scourge are the record companies and disc jockeys.

ASCAP is concerned in these matters less for aesthetic reasons than because its chief competitor as a licensing organization to secure payment to composers and publishers for performance rights is Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI). The latter army happens to contain most of the rock and roll composers, mainly because ASCAP's tightly reigning hierarchy made it very difficult for years for new writers to get into the club. Even now, as many younger ASCAP writers keep protesting bitterly, the plebeians in ASCAP are in the position of Cinderella waiting for the Prince (the Justice Department) to come up with even stronger consent decrees so that they can get a more equitable share of the household goods.

In any case, the ASCAP theory—which has been spread widely in the public print and has been trustingly absorbed by most “liberals”—seems to have been neatly knotted by the fact that BMI was in fact set up by the broadcasting industry itself in 1940. (Only the American Broadcasting Company of the three networks still owns stock in BMI, but six hundred out of the four thousand broadcasting stations continue to hold shares). Actually, the birth of BMI was a measure of self-defense by the broadcasters in a field which, as a Federal court pointed out in 1941, had up to then been prey to a monopoly. By the end of 1939, BMI had heard rumors that ASCAP (which controlled all the standards by such native bards as Berlin, Hammerstein, Kern, Rodgers, Harbach, etc.) was going to increase the rates radio stations would

have to pay to use these songs. ASCAP, however, was being smugly coy as to exactly what these new rates would be. The situation was somewhat like dealing with the telephone company without the presence of any state or federal agency empowered to regulate rates.

As BMI continued to flourish, so did rock and roll. (BMI continues to be considerably less affluent, however, than ASCAP. Last year, for example, ASCAP collected some twenty-five million dollars from licensees compared to BMI's twelve million). Finally, it was publicly revealed that a widespread system of payola had long existed by which disc jockeys were paid by record distributors and sometimes by the companies themselves to push particular records, many of them rock and roll inanities. The pattern now appeared complete. BMI, owned by part of the broadcasting industry, was profiting as its radio stations played rock and roll discs which its disc jockeys in turn were bribed to force on the innocent ears of the teen-agers. Our pop music had become withered by avarice and conspiracy. The poor kids had had no choice.

TO paraphrase a geometry teacher of my youth, the equation was symmetrical but wrong. Payola certainly has existed, and continues to. The disc jockeys, however, democratically accept payola from all sources, and BMI tunes are hardly the only ones propelled by greed. In fact, according to recent issues of *Billboard*, the only authoritative music business trade paper, several ASCAP writers and publishers have been engaged in higher echelon payola by insuring the fact that their songs are used as themes and background music for network programs, thereby adding to their performance fees.

Nor has BMI been overly chaste in the way some of its publishers have operated. And certainly the broadcast industry with very few exceptions—most of them in the FM bands—has been guilty of a nearly total abdication of responsibility to the public. The station

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managements have not only evidenced a strange ignorance of their disc jockeys' sidelines but, more seriously, have increasingly turned their plants into indomitable juke boxes.

While it may well be true, therefore, that certain noxious songs have been alchemized into "hits" by various forms of collusion, the grindingly mediocre level of most pop music—and pop singers—is due essentially not to the existence of a little mafia of the music business but to what the teen-agers, the basic consumers of pop music, *do* want. George Marek, head of RCA-Victor, has noted with justice that "rock and roll is not a creation of payola. No form of entertainment can be artificially created. . . . Rock and roll had something that made a fundamental appeal to its generation, just as *Tea for Two* in its day. If The Rock were an outgrowth of payola, why is it that in Japan Elvis Presley and Paul Anka are the most popular singers? . . . And why was rock and roll so popular in England that it spawned a series of artists who specialized in The Big Beat? . . . Jockeys are relatively unimportant, or non-existent, in these countries. It was the music itself that appealed to the buyers."

Furthermore, as Tom Morgan pointed out in a generally perceptive article, "Teen-Age Heroes: Mirrors of Muddled Youth," in the March *Esquire*: "Paralleling the adult world, Teen-Land is built on insecurity and its greatest concern is for safety. The cost of safety is uniqueness of personality and the measure of it is membership in the herd. To understand this complex, young world, one should get to know the heroes of teen-agers. . . . Today, a young man is elected to heroship by teen-age girls. . . . The hero, after a short wait, is then accepted by teen-age boys, who buy him uncritically, perhaps to please the girls. There are girl singers who are popular with teen-agers, but none receive the adulation that the girls lavish on the males. It seems that teen-age girls, maturing faster than boys, have no interest in worshipping a member of their own sex. They are prepared to accept a male symbol long before the boys have extricated themselves from Mother."

Paul Goodman has gone considerably deeper than Morgan, and any other writer so far, in a series of articles that began in the February *Commentary* with "Youth in a Disorganized Society": ". . . It is hard to grow up when existing things are treated as though they did not exist. For then there is no dialogue, it is impossible to be taken seriously, to be understood, to make a bridge between oneself and society."

MORGAN, in his article, writes of the prototype of the teen-age hero in popular music, Fabian, who literally cannot sing. His manager subjected the boy to four singing teachers, but "fortunately, all efforts failed. Here was the ultimate in humbleness and teen-age iden-

tification. Nobody in the audience could sing either, so that made the inept sex-pot, Fabian, seem all the more accessible. Mediocrity fell in love with its own image."

Morgan also interviewed Dick Clark, the teen-agers' favorite disc jockey and a pervasive power in the industry although he may soon be painfully deflated by Congressional investigators of payola. Mr. Clark feels "there's no difference between teen-agers and adults" in contemporary society and, in a way he doesn't understand, he may be right. Clark's T.V. program has often had as many as twenty million young viewers. Ostensibly selecting his recordings on the basis of what the teen-agers want to hear, Mr. Clark, however (until ordered to be discreet), held interests in various publishing and recording firms and even was part owner of a plant that pressed recordings. He has, in short, been touched by a few conflicts of interest in programming his shows, and there is some evidence that he was not always entirely able to transcend temptation.

The disc jockeys who have been caught at payola are, after all, not so different from the parents of many in their audience. If only by osmosis, the young learn something of how income tax returns are prepared, of how "angles" are manipulated in "legitimate" businesses and other commonplaces of our acquisitive society. Several recent polls—and admittedly polls are not an infallible measure of public opinion—have indicated that while the majority of our citizens believe that payola is deplorable and should be eradicated along with the common cold, it has become, as poll director Jack Boyle put it, "part of the American way of life."

In his book, *The Thief in the White Collar* (J. P. Lippincott, 1960), Norman Jaspan indicates that some one billion dollars will be stolen by white-collar ferrets in 1960. Aside from this area of enterprise—which ranges from rifling office supplies to outright embezzlement of cash—there is the widespread avocation of evading taxes. Estimates vary, but most tax experts agree that "business expenses" on tax returns add up to from five to ten billion dollars a year, some of which has been rather fancifully deducted.

With this criterion of diurnal morality, it is not surprising that cheating in class, for example, particularly in high schools, is commonplace, and that immediate gratification of desires and other material concerns are of paramount importance to more and more of the young. In a recent address at the National Conference of Higher Education, Dr. Howard R. Bowen, president of Grinnell College in Iowa lamented that on many campuses "the accepted style of life includes automobiles, liquor, fraternities or luxurious dormitories, expensive wardrobes, night clubs and extended ski trips."

Margaret Mead, in an advance study paper for the recent White House Conference on Children and Youth was more incisive and basic than Dr. Bowen: "There

has been an increasing shift throughout this generation from the pursuit of long-time goals . . . to the 'more, more, more now' philosophy. Immediate sex gratification as represented by early marriage; early attainment of full adult status including parenthood; and the possession of the material attributes of economic independence, such as house and car, T.V., a full and complete way of life bought on the installment plan rather than saved for. . . . Where these marriages are successful, it seems to be through the permanent acceptance by the husband of domestic goals as primary goals, with his career and personal interests subordinated to the demands of house and children."

It is no wonder, then, that the music to which the teen-agers gravitate for relief should be, according to successful pop composer Jerry Leiber, ". . . a means of escape from reality. We write the lyrics deliberately vague. The songs aren't addressed to anybody real, but to dream characters. The songs are egocentric and dreamy. Lots of basic blues ideas wouldn't work as rock and roll ideas because the blues are too real, too earthy. You have to make them dreamlike and very moral. That's why you're rarely going to hear even a plain *happy* rock and roll song, because happiness is a real emotion."

REAL emotions are dangerous because they could jar the status quo, and the worst fear of all in our present society—teen-age and adult—is fear of the unknown. Yet this fear too has to be released in some way, and the result includes popular songs such as "Teen Angel." Writes Ralph Gleason in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "A syrupy, quavering voice describes the fatal night when a stalled car on the railroad track caused the death of 'teen angel.' Quick reflexes got the pair of them out of the way of the oncoming train, but 'you went running back' and 'they said they found my high school ring clutched in your fingers tight.' . . . It's all part of the same pattern that has the rock and roll stations deliberately using the gruesome items in the news (as well as the juicy ones).

"Imagine," Paul Goodman draws a broader design, "as a model of our society: an apparently closed room in which there is a large rat race as the dominant center of attention. And let us consider the human relations possible in such a place. This will give us a fair survey of what disturbed youth is indeed doing: some running that race, some disqualified from running and hanging around because there is nowhere else, some balking in the race, some attacking the machine, etc."

It's not surprising, then, that so many pop song hits shake with formularized frenzy, emotions that cannot be directly expressed, that cannot be fulfilled, because frustration and daydreaming are preferable for most of the young to taking a chance, to being unique, let alone uniquely wrong. Being oneself, or trying to be, may

mean being totally alone, and that prospect is for most of us unbearable. The overall context is somewhat similar to that in Southern cities where moderate and "liberal" whites have become increasingly silent. "The whites in this town," said a friend I recently saw in Alabama, "are not afraid of the Negroes. They're afraid of each other."

And so the National Juvenile Delinquency Study, as presented by the United States Children's Bureau and the National Institute of Mental Health, predicts a rise of four to five million children in the courts in the next ten years. Mrs. Katherine Brownell Oettinger, chief of the Children's Bureau, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, cited as probable causes of rising delinquency in our "affluent society" such factors as population mobility, corrosion of values because "everything comes too easily," and conflicts that arise from exposure to "false standards of value."

In New York, the Catholic Charities Guidance Institute noted in its annual report that emotional disturbances among the young are growing in seriousness. Those from five to eighteen "evidenced a continuation of the more serious disturbances and destructive family and social pathology reported last year. . . . The root causes are complex, and fundamentally involve problems of personal and public morality as well as emotional disturbance and social privation."

Jimmy Driftwood, a teacher and folk singer who has had some popular success in recent months, agrees: "It seems to me that the pop music scene would change a great deal if the kids felt sure they were going to be around in twenty years." Driftwood's thesis is oversimplified, but it does underline one element of the inchoate unlife situation in which most of these teen-agers exist.

They spend—these eighteen million teen-agers—some ten billion dollars annually pursuing pleasure in much the same manner as the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass*. And much of that money is spent on pop music, their prescriptionless Milton. "Now," concludes Tom Morgan, "except for Dick Clark, every first-class teen-age hero is a recording star. No athlete, politician, businessman, or intellectual is accorded comparable esteem, nor could he be, given the teen-agers' demand for safety."

Or, as Pat Boone writes in an article, "The New and More Popular You," in last December's *Ladies' Home Journal*: "Are we smiling, happy, friendly-looking people, at least as much interested in others as we are in ourselves? If so, we have an attracting attitude, a magnetic hook already out as a people-catcher. If not, here is the place to start building the New You."

With a "Beatnik Fly," a "Teen Angel," a "Money, That's All I Want," a "Wake Me When It's All Over" and an "Ooh Poo Pah Doo"! (From the *Cashbox Top 100 Best Selling Tunes on Records*, March 26, 1960.)