JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #206

July 2025

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American "Pop:"
Notes on American Popular Music, Part One

Some questions about American "pop" music:

1) What was the most popular song of the 20th century?
Spoiler alert: it wasn't "White Christmas."
2) What was the most popular song of the 1900s (the first decade of the century)?
3) What was the most popular song of the 1990s (the last decade of the century)?
4) What, if anything, does the difference in subject matter and musical styles of these tunes tell us about ***The American Tapestry Project*** and the American story?

I'll answer the third question first: Maybe nothing, but I think not. Double-negative equals a positive.

Pop music does tell us a great deal about what a *people* – a nation or society – think and value. "While open to multiple interpretations," as John Spitzer and Ronald Walters say in "Making Sense of American Popular Song," "songs serve to unify groups of people and to move them to common action or help them express common emotions." [1] We've discussed this before in several ***Book Notes*** on both patriotic music and protest music available here.

It would be easy to slip into a mind-fogging attempt to explain the distinction between "high" art and "popular" art. Once upon a time, cultural elitists argued that "high" art surpassed in virtue "popular" art because "high" artists, true to their own muse, sought to see or hear what others couldn't and then share it by mastering a medium (writing, painting, singing, sculpting, etc.) to bring it to life for others.

"Pop" artists, from this vantage point, while they might also master a medium, were inferior to the "high" artist because they simply fed back to the people what the people wanted to see or hear. In short, the "high" artists were original, and the "pop" artists merely imitative. Although a simplistic analysis, there is more than a bit of truth to that distinction. You need only to think of Edward Hopper and Norman Rockwell, but it also misses the point that "popular" artists are windows into the minds and values of the people.

Edward Hopper *"Nighthawks"*

Norman Rockwell *"After the Prom"*

I'll not parse the difference between Hopperand Rockwell's visions except to say that Hopper "sees" what there is to see and possesses the technical virtuosity to share "it" (is the "it" he shares urban loneliness or urban sanctuary or perhaps both?). Rockwell's technical virtuosity, on the other hand, depicts the world as he and his viewers might want it to be (warm, generous, engagingly innocent, and sentimental). As Jeff Nilsson said in ***The Saturday Evening Post***, "Rockwell freely admitted he painted 'life as I would like it to be.'" [2]

Which immediately brings up the opposite point: If this is how Rockwell wished the world were, then the actual world was something quite different. Which brings

up the next question: If the world was different than Rockwell depicted, what was it actually like?

The point isn't who is the superior artist; it's that they are doing different things. In depicting the world the way their audience wants it to be, popular artists function as windows into the audience's world. It's almost a kind of reading in reverse. Rather than attempting to understand the artist's vision and intentions (almost always a wild goose chase, for the message the audience receives might be very different from the one the artist meant to send), one "reads" the audience's reactions to understand them, their values, needs, and beliefs. In short, from the point of view of ***The American Tapestry Project***, popular culture and music, serves as a window into American culture by answering the question "Why were people at this particular time so receptive to this particular message or image?"

For example, the No. 1 song of the 1950s was "West Side Story: The Album." What does that tell us about American culture – its attitudes, values, and beliefs, its hopes and fears? Yes, Leonard Bernstein's music was terrific; yes, it is a modern Romeo & Juliet love story; but why did the fight between the Jets and the Sharks, two gangs with different ethnic backgrounds, speak so forcibly to Americans as Eisenhower's 1950s slid into the 1960s?

Beginning with this ***Book Note*** and the Aug. 10 episode of my ***The American Tapestry Project*** on WQLN/NPR, I am starting a new series "Popular Music: A Window into American Culture & History." Regarding ***The American Tapestry Project***, from August through November, we'll explore the history of American pop and conclude in December with the "Top 10 Songs About Santa Claus." At the same time, I will be writing a half dozen or so ***Book Notes*** on the topic.

I am not a musicologist, so the musical analysis will be undeniably simplistic. What I am after is what a song's popularity tells us about America, Americans, and American culture at that moment in time.

Who wrote the song?

Why?

When?

Who performed it and made it famous?

And, most importantly, why did the song resonate so loudly with American audiences?

American “pop” – a window into the soul of America.

To get us started, next week in ***Book Notes #207*** we’ll take a quick tour through the history of American popular music — beginning with its colonial roots and 19th-century minstrelsy, through spirituals, gospel, and the Black church tradition, to the blues and the birth of a distinct American sound. We’ll follow its evolution into ragtime, jazz, and the music of a rapidly urbanizing nation, then shift to country, folk, and the white working-class tradition. From there, we’ll explore the impact of recorded music and radio, the rise of rhythm and blues, rock ’n’ roll, protest songs, soul, and eventually the ever-evolving fusion that defines American pop today. A brief history — with a lot of twists and turns.

That’s next week in ***Book Notes #207***, but to conclude today, what are the answers to the questions with which we began?

According to the National Endowment for the Arts and the Recording Industry Association of America, which conducted a survey of the general public, elected officials, teachers, students, and members of the media (that is ***not*** musicians or composers), the No. 1 song of the 20th century was Judy Garland’s “Over the Rainbow” from the 1939 film “The Wizard of Oz.” Rounding out the top five were “White Christmas,” “This Land Is Your Land,” “Respect,” and “American Pie.”[3]

An interestingly eclectic mix.

The most popular song of the 1900s (1900-1909) was “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” followed at No. 2 by Scott Joplin’s “The Entertainer.” [4] We’ve explored “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” and its feminist undertones in an earlier ***Book Note*** that can be found here. “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” came in as No. 8 for the entire century; “The Entertainer” at No. 10.

One of the best-selling songs of all time and considered by some an anthem for Generation X, Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” came in as No. 1 for the 1990s and as No. 79 for the entire century. [5]

If popular culture in general and popular music in particular serve as windows into American culture and society, then spanning the 20th century these three songs reveal a cross-section of shifting American cultural values.

In an era marked by economic depression and looming war, from the 1939 film “The Wizard of Oz,” Judy Garland’s rendition of Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg’s “Over the Rainbow” symbolized not only a national unity that was perhaps illusory but also Americans longing for a better future. Since Dorothy wanted to go “home,” maybe, more accurately, it expressed a nostalgic aching for a better past.

Harburg, who also wrote the lyrics for such standards as “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?,” “April In Paris,” and “It’s Only a Paper Moon” explained the song’s emotional power: “It was a song of yearning—yearning for something better. It was during the Depression. Kids were having a tough time, and they could relate to that.” [6] That yearning was not just personal but national—a dream for a better world “where,” as Garland sang, “troubles melt like lemon drops.”

from Over the Rainbow

“Somewhere over the rainbow
Skies are blue
And the dreams that you dare to dream
Really do come true.” [7]

By contrast, 1908’s “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” reflected a forward-looking nation exuberant in its optimism for the future as it celebrated its rising national pastime. As Mark Twain said, baseball was “the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing booming 19th century.” [8]

Lyricist Jack Norworth penned it when he saw a subway poster promoting “Baseball Today – Polo Grounds” as a ploy to attract the interest of vaudeville star Trixi Friganza. At the time, neither Norworth nor his partner Albert Von Tilzer had ever seen a game. The ploy worked. For a time, Norworth and Friganza were an item. The song’s two stanzas in which Norworth asks “the baseball mad and had it bad” Katie, the name he used for Trixi in the original version, for a date were soon forgotten. Its chorus, however, became an enduring piece of Americana and helped mythologize baseball as a unifying American ritual.

from Take Me Out to the Ballgame (chorus)

Take me out to the ball game,
Take me out with the crowd.
Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack,
I don't care if I never get back,

Let me root, root, root for the home team,
If they don't win it's a shame.
For it's one, two, three strikes you're out,
At the old ball game." [9]

Why was baseball so popular? Answering that question requires another ***Book Note***, but the short answer is that after the Civil War, Americans were hungering for cultural stability. They turned to the non-ideological game as a common

ground where they could all (well, not all – it was a white's only game for most of that time) meet in sporting competition and harmony. For a people seeking unity and stability, as cultural historian Jules Tygiel said, "baseball became a symbol of reunification" and national harmony. [10]

In stark contrast, at the opposite end of the century, Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" (1991) emerged from a profoundly different cultural moment, a moment marked by estrangement and angst. Where once there was only one sport, now there were many; where once, to hear music you had to go to where it was performed, now it was ubiquitous spilling forth from radios and boomboxes; where once to "see" a play you had to go to the theater, now 200 channel cable TV and nascent streaming services made video and film omnipresent.

By century's end, American culture was saturated with choices and entertainment's easy availability seemingly fulfilling Neil Postman's prediction that Americans would amuse themselves to death. [11] Rather than national unity, Americans were fragmenting not only over politics, but into different subcultures because of the deluge of diverting entertainment littering the landscape. Rather than satisfaction, they felt a sense of entitlement, ennui, and bored privilege eating away at the social fabric.

With the lyric "Here we are now, entertain us," Kurt Cobain captured a generation's sense of alienation from consumer culture and its boredom with mass entertainment.

from Smells Like Teen Spirit

"Load up on guns, bring your friends
It's fun to lose and to pretend
She's over-bored and self-assured
Oh no, I know a dirty word...

With the lights out, it's less dangerous
Here we are now, entertain us
I feel stupid and contagious
Here we are now, entertain us
A mulatto, an albino
A mosquito, my libido, yeah." [12]

It's a long way, not just in time, from Norworth's Katie saying, 'if you want to take me out, take me out to the ballgame.' Rather than affirming national unity or shared dreams, "Smells Like Teen Spirit" not only articulated the confusion and rebellion of Generation X, but it hinted at the social fragmentation and moral decay of a culture that had had maybe too much material success and had begun

to lose its way. What was it Nietzsche said? I think in "***Notes from Underground"*** he predicted that 'in paradise man *(sic)* will prick his chest with golden pins to break the boredom.'

Taken together, over the arc of the 20th century, these three songs trace a shift from a nation characterized by optimistic ambition about the future to a culture yearning for a return to a better past to, finally, a society characterized by social fragmentation and individual disillusionment. "Over the Rainbow" dreams of a better, or maybe it's an older, world; "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" revels in communal togetherness; "Smells Like Teen Spirit" voices the loss of meaning in a fragmented age. Each became iconic not only for its music, but because each evoked the emotional life of its time.

Pop music – it's more, to use an old commercial line, than the "snap, crackle, and pop" of a catchy tune.

It's a window into the American soul.

Next week, to set some context, a brief survey of "American pop's" history.

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"After the Prom" at **The Saturday Evening Post** available at Rockwell Files: After the Prom | The Saturday Evening Post accessed July 25, 2025.

End Notes

1. Spitzer, John and Ronald G. Walters, *"Making Sense of American Popular Song"* in the **"Making Sense of Evidence"** series on **History Matters: The U.S. Survey** available at http://historymatters.gmu.edu accessed July 25, 2025, pp. 8 & 7.
2. Nilsson, Jeff, *"Rockwell Files: After the Prom,"* at **The Saturday Evening Post** (February 11, 2020) available at Rockwell Files: After the Prom | The Saturday Evening Post accessed July 25, 2025.
3. *"RIAA Announce 'Songs of the Century'"* at **Music History Calendar** available at RIAA Announce "Songs Of The Century" - March 7, 2001 accessed July 25, 2025.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Clarke, Gerald, **Get Happy: The Life of Judy Garland** (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 211.
7. Harburg, Yip and Harold Arlen, *"Somewhere Over the Rainbow, lyrics,"* at **GENIUS** available at Judy Garland – Over the Rainbow Lyrics | Genius Lyrics accessed July 26, 2025.
8. Quoted in Jules Tygiel, **Past Time: Baseball as History** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 9.
9. Norworth, Jack, *"Original lyrics to 'Take Me Out to the Ballgame,'"* at **ESPN** available at Original lyrics to `Take Me Out to the Ball Game' - MLB - ESPN accessed July 26, 2025.
10. Tygiel, ***cited above***, p. 13.
11. Cf. Postman, Neil, **Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business** (New York: Penguin Books, 1985 Kindle Edition).
12. Cobain, Kurt, *"Smells Like Teen Spirit, lyrics,"* at **GENIUS** available at Nirvana – Smells Like Teen Spirit Lyrics | Genius Lyrics accessed July 26, 2025.

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