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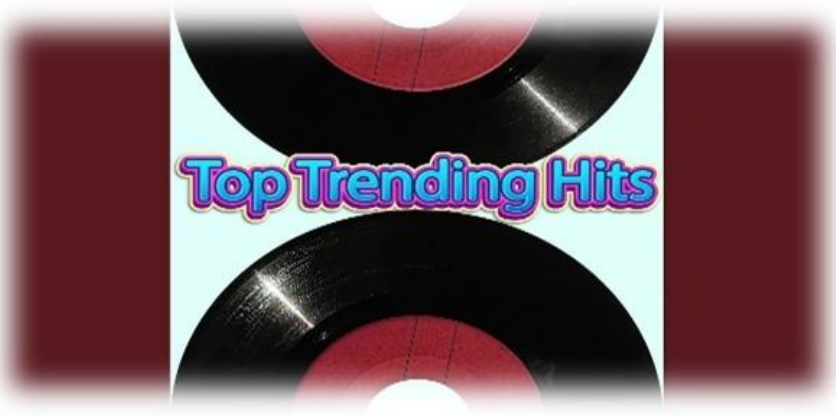
Popular Music: A Window Into the Soul of America Part IIIa
"Top 10 Hits of the 20th Century"



What can you learn about America and Americans from popular culture?

What does it tell you about Americans, for example, that at the beginning of the 20th century their favorite spectator sport was overwhelmingly baseball followed

in a distant second place by college football, which was almost banned for excessive violence? But at century's end, and now well into the first quarter of the 21st century, football — both collegiate and professional — dominates Americans' sporting imagination. Why?

Or, more to the point of this series on popular music: As a window into the soul of America, what does it say about Americans that the No. 8 most popular song of the 20th century was "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," and that it probably ranks second only to "Happy Birthday" as the most frequently sung or played song in American culture? While, on the other hand, what, if anything, does it mean that the current sport of consumer choice, football, does not have a single, readily identified song capturing its spirit? I must quickly concede that there are at least two football "fight" songs whose melody almost every American knows: the University of Notre Dame's "Notre Dame Victory March" and the University of Michigan's "The Victors." But neither occupies a place in the fabric of American stories nor offers a glimpse into the American soul like "Take Me Out to the Ballgame."

Why?

We began trying to answer that question in the previous two ***Book Notes*** as we explored American popular music as a window into American culture. Popular culture has a number of definitions, but I am using it here in its most general sense as "the traditions and material culture of a particular society." [1] In its simplest definition, it is the "culture that is widely favored or well-liked by many people: it has no negative connotations." [2] It can be commercial culture or folk culture, but it is the culture (or cultural objects) most widely consumed and enjoyed by a people or society. It "includes everyday cultural products like music, art, and movies…" [3]

In ***Book Notes #206***, we distinguished pop culture from "high" culture by noting that in pop culture, we seek to understand why people liked it and not what the artist was trying to say (although many a popular artist had/has very insightful and important things to say). In short, we flipped the script from trying to understand the artist to analyzing why the artist's message resonated with its audience. What was the audience hearing or seeing that so moved them? Because pop culture is the essence of commercial culture and commercial culture needs to "read" its audience closely, as Sharon Waxman recently said, "Hollywood is in the business of giving its audience what it wants, not what it thinks it should want…" [4] As a result, understanding what the audience "wants" provides a window into their values, attitudes, and beliefs – in short, their culture.

So, today let's continue exploring popular culture as a window into the soul of America by examining what the Top 10 Songs of the 20th Century say about what

America, Americans, and ***The American Tapestry Project*** wanted at various checkpoints during that booming, bursting, frequently fractious century.

If this were old-time Top 40 radio, we'd have already given away the close by telling you in ***Book Note #206*** what three of those tunes were, including the century's No. 1 hit. To sustain a trace of suspense, I'll not repeat them here. Today, let's look at Nos. 10 through 6, and next week, Nos. 5 through 1.

Here, in reverse order, are numbers five through ten:

> #10. Scott Joplin's 1902 hit "The Entertainer"
> #9. The Righteous Brother's 1964 hit "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin"
> #8. 1908's seemingly ever-present "Take Me Out to the Ballgame"
> #7. The 1957 original cast album from the Broadway show "West Side Story"
> #6 To me, somewhat of a surprise, is 1941's "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B" by one of the very first pop girl groups – the Andrews Sisters. [5]

At the risk of sounding a bit pretentious, what is the sociocultural significance of these songs' origins and backstory? In short, what do they reveal about the soul of America and what light do they shine on the tapestry of America's many stories?

#10. The Entertainer

Published in 1902 (remember, in the pre-electronic era a "hit" song was measured by sheet music sales), Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer" embodied Black American musical genius. An important thread in ***The American Tapestry Project's*** "Freedom's Faultlines," it played a crucial role in the emergence of ragtime as a distinctly American musical genre. Joplin epitomizes Black American musical innovation and American musical culture as prime examples of ***The American Tapestry Project's*** "Fusion Thread."

"The Entertainer" is one of the leading examples of ragtime. "Ragtime" is a musical genre that grew out of Black musical forms like cakewalks, spirituals, and work songs. It was shaped by performance settings such as saloons, brothels, and minstrel shows. Sometimes called innovative, infectious and subversive, its syncopated rhythms contrasted with mainstream late 19th-century American music. [6]

In a racially segregated society, "The Entertainer" asserted Black artistry. Joplin viewed himself as a serious composer, seeking to elevate ragtime to the level of

classical music. He insisted that ragtime be played as he wrote it, not improvised or caricatured, which was a common practice among white performers who used ragtime for comic effect in blackface minstrelsy.

In 1902, the popularity of ragtime coincided with the rise of Tin Pan Alley and the American sheet music industry. Joplin was among the first Black artists to achieve commercial success. His first great hit was the "Maple Leaf Rag." [7] In an era when Black music was often copied by white musicians without attribution or dismissed as primitive, in "The Entertainer" Joplin sought cultural legitimacy for Black composers. He paved the way for future Black musicians in blues, jazz, and popular music.

Although ragtime declined in popularity by the 1920s, it experienced a dramatic revival in the 1970s when "The Entertainer" was the theme of the Paul Newman/Robert Redford film "The Sting."

"The Entertainer" signals a pivotal moment in the American tapestry: the moment when Black creativity fused with the larger culture to fashion a new kind of American music.

#9. You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'

Illustrating how popular music shapes and reflects American culture during a period of profound change, "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'" expressed shifting concepts of race and gender roles and the resulting emotional confusion. In the early-1960s the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s moved out of the south and became a national phenomenon revealing many of ***The American Tapestry's*** fractures and cross-currents. When "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'" was first played on the radio, many listeners assumed the singers were Black— a phenomenon that tested racial boundaries in 1960s American pop music.

Purveyors of a "soulful style," The Righteous Brothers, who weren't really brothers, were white. Bill Medley and Bobby Hatfield "met while in their own Orange County, California-based musical groups, the Paramours and the Variations, respectively." [8] They were labeled "blue-eyed soul," a term coined specifically to describe white artists performing a Black musical idiom. [9] In addition to "You've Lost That Lovin Feelin'," their other big hits were "Unchained Melody" and "(You're My) Soul and Inspiration." [10]

"You've Lost That Lovin Feelin'" became part of a broader cultural blurring of racial lines. Written by Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, it also worked against the gender stereotype of the strong but emotionally reticent male. [11] These singers

weren't the emotionally stunted cowboy or detective movie hero afraid to show his feelings. In the face of a newly asserted Second Wave feminism and reflecting 1960s cultural anxieties about shifting gender roles, The Righteous Brothers represented a shift toward a more emotionally expressive masculinity when they sang:

from You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'

"You never close your eyes anymore
When I kiss your lips
And there's no tenderness like before
In your fingertips

You're trying hard not to show it (Baby)
But baby, baby I know it

You've lost that lovin' feelin'
Whoa, that lovin' feelin'
You've lost that lovin' feelin'
Now it's gone, gone, gone, whoa-oh-oh-oh…" [12]

Marking a turning point in the history of musical production, the song is also noteworthy as an example of record producer Phil Spector's "Wall of Sound" technique, which layered multiple instruments and echoed vocals into a dense, symphonic pop texture. [13] It elevated the role of the record producer as a creative visionary: think of George Martin and The Beatles.

#8. Take Me Out to the Ballgame

A song written to seduce a woman – so much for authorial intent – whose innocuous chorus became a piece of sporting Americana, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" has been the subject of several ***Book Notes***, the most comprehensive of which can be found here and in ***Book Notes*** #206, which can be found here. I have also done an episode of ***The American Tapestry Project*** on it, which can be found at all podcast platforms. The woman in the photo accompanying this paragraph is Trixi Friganza, the great vaudeville comedienne and women's suffragist lyricist Jack Norworth was "hitting on" when he first penned the song about 'baseball mad Katie, who had it bad.'

#7. West Side Story – The Album

"West Side Story's" love theme emerges against the backdrop of an ethnic "rumble" – 1950s slang for a gang fight – between white and Puerto Rican teenagers on Manhattan's west side. Three quarters of a century later, the tension hasn't slackened: ethnic edginess is still the temper of our times. 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? Answering that is too much for a "snapshot" of a song, but the answer speaks directly to two of ***The American Tapestry Project's*** major threads: "Freedom's Faultlines" and the "Immigrants' Tale."

#6. Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B

"Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy's" cultural impact stems from its musical expression of pre-war patriotism, and a white girl-group adopting the style of hot licks boogie-woogie. As they note at GENIUS, the best online site for song lyrics, "Bugle Boy" was a studio creation for the 1941 film "Buck Privates" and was originally meant to be sung by Lou Costello of "Abbot and Costello" fame. It was reassigned to the Andrews Sisters and became part of pop music lore. [14] Released in January 1941, "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" emerged nearly a year before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Although the America-firsters sought to keep the U.S. out of the war in Europe, there was an inevitability to it in the public mood and "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" typified a pop culture blending patriotism with entertainment.

from Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy

He was a famous trumpet man from out Chicago way
He had a boogie style that no one else could play
He was the top man at his craft
But then his number came up, and he was gone with the draft
He's in the army now a-blowing reveille
He's the boogie woogie bugle boy of Company B

They made him blow a bugle for his Uncle Sam
It really brought him down because he couldn't jam
The captain seemed to understand
Because the next day the Cap' went out and drafted a band
And now the company jumps when he plays reveille
He's the boogie woogie bugle boy of Company B... [15]

It sings the story of a Chicago street musician turned Army bugler who loses – and then regains – his swing in a military band. An early form of wartime propaganda, it romanticizes conscription and military life while bringing women into the nascent war effort.

Among the swing era's most popular all-female vocal groups, The Andrews Sisters' – Minneapolis's LaVerne, Maxene, and Patty – really were sisters. Children of Norwegian and Greek parents, they illustrate the immigrant influence in American pop. Winners of a variety show at Minneapolis's Orpheum Theater, they went on the road to support their family when their father's restaurant failed. [16]

They were a huge success with a string of hits, including: "Bei Mir Bist Du Schön," "Beer Barrel Polka," "Beat Me Daddy, Eight to the Bar," "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree (with Anyone Else But Me)," and "Rum and Coca Cola" – the latter introducing Americans to calypso. [17] Just as "The Immigrants' Tale" and the "Fusion Thread" celebrate, their music fused the sounds of a mix of ethnic heritages.

Normalizing the idea of women working at important roles in American life and "Nicknamed 'America's Wartime Sweethearts,"" [18] the Andrews Sister's popularity during World War II anticipated the shifting roles of women in American society, especially as millions of women entered the workforce to aid the war effort.

Musically, "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" taps into the boogie-woogie style, a style with deep roots in Black piano traditions. An example of jump blues – an up-tempo style of blues, jazz, and boogie woogie – it was a forerunner of rhythm and blues and rock and roll. Associated with the juke joints and rent parties of Black urban communities, the genre had been popularized by Black performers such as Pinetop Smith, Meade "Lux" Lewis, and Albert Ammons. [19]

Part of a broader pattern fusing Black and white musical styles, the song represented a racial crossover and commercial repackaging of boogie-woogie for mainstream white audiences. Tamed and polished, the boogie-woogie rhythms were adopted by white performers. We'll see it again in the 1950s when early rock n roll stars like Pat Boone "covered" Black hits like Fats Domino's "Ain't That a Shame." In the process, "Bugle Boy" contributed to the gradual integration of Black musical styles into the mainstream of American commercial and pop music.

A nostalgic symbol of American optimism, “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” had a second life as a mega hit when revived by Bette Midler in 1972.

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Next week, the countdown continues, but in the meantime, you can hear:

Scott Joplin playing “The Entertainer” here.

“You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’” here. The original “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” in its original 1908 recording here.

“The Rumble” scene from West Side Story here.

“Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” performed by The Andrews Sisters here.

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