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Book Notes #209

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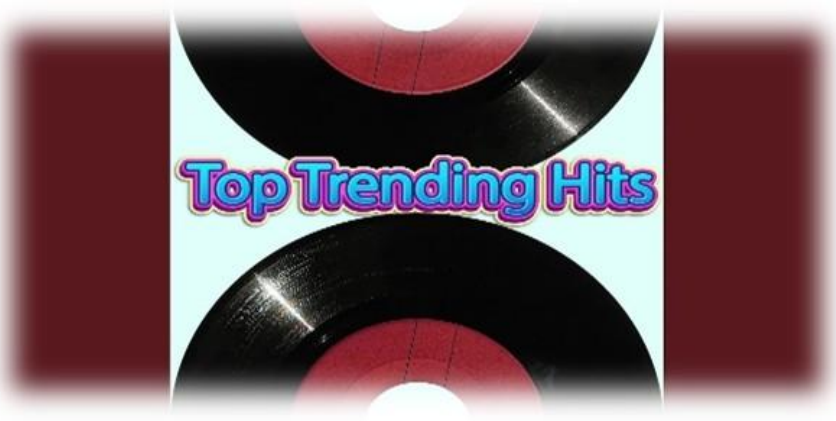
Popular Music: A Window Into the Soul of America Part IIIb
"Top 10 Hits of the 20th Century"



What was the No. 1 pop music hit of the 20th century?

Let's conclude the countdown we started last week of the Top 10 songs of the 20th century. You're recall that numbers 10 thru 6 were: "The Entertainer," "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin,'" "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," "West Side Story, The Album," and "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company C."

#5. <u>American Pie</u>

If, as we said last week, No. 6's "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" was a lasting symbol of American optimism, then 30 years later the optimism faded as No. 5's 1971 hit "American Pie" mourned for a lost American golden age. Until Taylor Swift's "All Too Well" at 10 minutes supplanted it, at 9 minutes-plus "American Pie" was the longest song ever to hit No. 1. [1] Using pop music as a tool for national self-reflection, it sang a lyrical myth of a golden America's past trying to make sense of the 1960s fallout and the turbulence roiling the early 1970s.

In previous ***Book Notes*** about Bob Dylan and several others, I have argued that the great art form of our time is poetry. Usually when I say that, people look at me like I have three heads, the assertion being so off the mark that if they only said that I had two heads, it would understate the absurdity of my claim. But in the past several years, the Nobel Prize committee gave Bob Dylan its much-sought award for literature and just a week or two ago, linguist John McWhorter noted the poetic artistry of Bruce Springsteen. So, if I'm "off my mark," at least I am in good company.

Next week in a *mini-**Book Note*** I am going to pick up McWhorter's claim by examining a Springsteen poem or two and sometime this fall do a deeper dive into McLean's "American Pie," a song that has admittedly annoyed the hell out of me for over half a century because its refrain "Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry…" is an example of earworm music that once you hear it plagues you for the next week.

For now, let's see if we can sort it out its thematic thread:

from <u>American Pie</u>

A long, long time ago
I can still remember how that music used to make me smile
And I knew if I had my chance that I could make those people dance
And maybe they'd be happy for a while
But February made me shiver
With every paper I'd deliver
Bad news on the doorstep
I couldn't take one more step
I can't remember if I cried
When I read about his widowed bride
But something touched me deep inside
The day the music died

So bye-bye, Miss American Pie
Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry
And them good old boys were drinkin' whiskey and rye
Singin' "This'll be the day that I die
This'll be the day that I die…" [2]

McLean memorializes the 1959 plane crash that killed Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson by singing it was "the day the music died." McLean uses the crash to symbolize the shattering of American innocence. For McLean, it denotes the end of rock and roll's golden age and the beginning of, he could not have known it in 1971, a half-century and counting of cultural turmoil. By suggesting that the death of Buddy Holly somehow triggered the cultural change that swept over America in the early 1970s, McLean began the mythologizing of the 1950s as the image of a stable and wholesome but now vanishing America. You could say he foreshadowed the culture wars Pat Buchanan later declared at the 1992 Republican National Convention.

Often interpreted as an allegorical journey through the 1960s, "American Pie" surveys an era of cultural fragmentation, political assassinations, the Vietnam War, and the unraveling of the idealistic counterculture. [3] No spiritual fan of the early 1960s folk revival or the edgy rock Bob Dylan created in 1965 with "Like a Rolling Stone," the song laments that music, once a unifying force, became entangled in protest, rebellion, and ultimately violence. An elegy for the failure of 1960s idealism, "American Pie" captured the confused mood of a generation caught between the promise of social change and the reality of social chaos.

Creating a new kind of epic in the evolving pop-rock genre and rooted in the folk ballad tradition, McLean's introspective approach fused long-form narrative songwriting with pop music's appeal to the masses. Ironically, a lot like Dylan and others he seemed to reject, McLean spoke to an audience trying to make sense of recent history, to an audience seeking depth and meaning in pop music.

In doing so, "American Pie" itself entered American myth.

It captured the mood of early-1970s America when the promise of "the mythical '60s" shriveled and sank beneath the era's social chaos. Naively and ironically blaming the messenger, serious pop music, "American Pie" both criticized its era while romanticizing a simpler and more innocent time – the 1950s and its bubble-gum rock 'n' roll. The same era one of its contemporary pop phenomena, the TV show "Happy Days," also bathed in a nostalgic and romantic glow. The great irony which the song and the TV show completely miss is that that world never really existed. We have explored this at some length in ***The American Tapestry Project*** and the ***Book Notes*** series "The Seeds of Our Discontents."

So, the question for that future ***Book Notes*** is: What characterized that "gone America" for which people yearned, and still yearn for, 25 years into the next

century, and which yearning might now be bringing the American experiment to an end?

Still, the song incarnates all the confusion that has consumed American culture the past 60 years as many Americans seek a return to a way we never were. The song's very title invokes a homespun American image (the proverbial "as American as apple pie"), but in the context of the song, it becomes a metaphor for a lost America: innocent, unified, musical, and gone.

#4. Respect

Known as the "Queen of Soul," Aretha Franklin's No. 4 "Respect's" significance isn't just about music. It's about how one artist reshaped a song into a call for cultural transformation and gave America a new vocabulary for Black and, more importantly, female empowerment. [4]

Originally written and recorded by Otis Redding in 1965, in its original version, "Respect" was a man's plea for loyalty and recognition from a woman: he'd provide materially for her, and in return, he wanted "respect" when he got home. [5] In essence, it's the man pleading for a return to the values of the cult of true womanhood we've examined in several ***Book Notes*** on the birth of the women's movement.

Two years later, Aretha Franklin reversed the script, transforming it into a woman's demand for equality, dignity, and control over her own life. [6] Her version added the now-famous "R-E-S-P-E-C-T / Find out what it means to me" and her backup singers' "sock it to me" chants turned the song into a declaration of self-worth and female empowerment. Capturing the energy of the second-wave feminist movement, Franklin gave voice to women, especially Black women, asserting their rights in a male-dominated society.

The song became a feminist anthem.

from Respect

"R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me
R-E-S-P-E-C-T, take care of T-C
(Sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me)
A little respect
(Sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me)
Woah, babe
(Just a little bit) A little respect
(Just a little bit) I get tired
(Just a little bit) Keep on tryin'

Just a little bit) You're runnin' out of fool
(Just a little bit) And I ain't lyin'
(Just a little bit)
(Re, re, re, re) Start when you come home
(Re, re, re, respect) Or you might walk in
(Just a little bit) And find out I'm gone
(Just a little bit) I gotta have
(Just a little bit) A little respect
(Just a little bit)" [7]

The daughter of Rev. C.L. Franklin, a prominent civil rights preacher, Franklin's musical roots were in gospel. Released during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, "Respect" is fired with gospel intensity and fervor fusing sacred power and secular content giving the song spiritual authority. No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1967, "Respect" made Franklin a household name. [8] A Black woman dominating American airwaves while singing about power, equality, and dignity was revolutionary. An intergenerational anthem, "Respect" is cited in feminist literature, used in films, played at political rallies, and referenced across popular culture.

In 2017, it was added to the National Recording Registry by the Library of Congress and Rolling Stone consistently ranks it among the greatest songs of all time. [9]

#3. This Land Is Your Land

Far from a simple patriotic tune, Woody Guthrie's No. 3 "This Land Is Your Land" stands as a musical manifesto of contested American identity insisting that the country belongs to everyone, not just the few. In addition to Anton Dvorak's "String Quartet No. 12 in F major" – nicknamed "The American Quartet," I use Guthrie's song as a sub-theme for my ***The American Tapestry Project*** on WQLN Public Media and for many of the presentations on the American story I do at the Jefferson Educational Society and elsewhere. I first wrote about Guthrie's patriotic song in ***Book Notes #64*** in part two of "Six Patriotic Songs for a Joyous Fourth of July" which can be found here. And, of course, Guthrie was the young Bob Dylan's hero whom he sought to emulate, a theme we discussed in ***Book Notes*** on protest music and several on Dylan himself which can be found here.

In light of all that, just a few comments on a song that is as American as a song can be. Guthrie wrote "This Land Is Your Land" in February 1940 while traveling across the country during the Great Depression. He felt frustrated by Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," which Guthrie believed presented an overly sanitized and idealized version of American life that ignored the struggles of everyday people. Originally titled "God Blessed America for Me," the song was Guthrie's counter-narrative — an

assertion that if America was indeed blessed, it belonged to everyone, not just the wealthy or powerful.

It offered populists a critique of inequality. At its heart, "This Land Is Your Land" is an anthem of economic justice and inclusion. Guthrie hoboed with migrant workers, stood with union organizers, and lived with poor families displaced by drought and economic collapse. His lyrics evoke a vision of America open to all, not privately hoarded. An America meant to serve all people regardless of class, race, or status. In it he sang:

from This Land Is Your Land

"This land is your land and this land is my land
From California to the New York island
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me

As I went walking that ribbon of highway
I saw above me that endless skyway
Saw below me that golden valley
This land was made for you and me

I roamed and rambled and I've followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts
All around me a voice was sounding
This land was made for you and me…" [10]

Part of the American folk music revival we detailed in the ***Book Notes*** on Bob Dylan and protest music, Guthrie's music served as both a cultural preservation project and a platform for political protest. It inspired future generations of protest singers — from Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan to Bruce Springsteen. Guthrie's plainspoken delivery and simple guitar accompaniment gave the song wide appeal. But during the Cold War, the song's radical verses were largely omitted from official performances and school curricula. Ironically, the song that critiqued exclusion was itself excluded. When permitted to be performed, it was revised to fit a conformist version of American identity. Over time, however, "This Land Is Your Land" was reclaimed by civil rights leaders, labor activists, indigenous advocates, and immigrant rights groups.

Sung at marches, rallies, and protests, often in its original version, its call for equality and justice urges America to fulfill its promises. Sung by Pete Seeger and Bruce Springsteen at Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration, with the original verses included, demonstrates how the song has been reinterpreted as a patriotic anthem, one that challenges America and Americans to live up to American ideals.

#2. White Christmas

The most popular Christmas song ever recorded remains Irving Berlin's "White Christmas." In fact, it is the best-selling single of all time. Bing Crosby's version alone has sold an estimated 50 million copies. "White Christmas" debuted on Crosby's Kraft Music Hall radio show on Christmas Day 1941. It then reappeared in the 1942 film ***Holiday Inn***, a musical starring Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire, Marjorie Reynolds and Virginia Dale.

Unlike most Christmas songs, "White Christmas" is a sad song. Its singer, far from home, hearth, and friends, yearns for a Christmas "just like the ones I used to know…":

from White Christmas

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas
Just like the ones I used to know
Where the tree tops glisten
And children listen
To hear sleigh bells in the snow, oh, the snow… [11]

"White Christmas'" pathos springs from two sources. Crosby sang it on the radio a mere two weeks after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It was a December of gloom, as everyone intuited the coming storm. It also spoke, indirectly and metaphorically, of Berlin's own loss. The exact date of its composition is unknown; one of Berlin's daughters speculated it could have been in 1938 or 1939. What is known is that Berlin's infant, three-week old son died on December 25th, 1928. Every year thereafter, Berlin and his wife visited their son's grave on Christmas Day. [12] So, for Irving Berlin Christmas Day was a day of sorrow, loss and yearning for the unattainable.

One of America's greatest songwriters, in addition to "White Christmas", "Easter Parade," and "God Bless America," Irving Berlin composed many of America's most famous tunes like "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody," "Alexander's Ragtime Band," "Always," "Anything You Can Do (I Can Do Better)," and that's just the "A's"! Born in Russia, Israel Beilin immigrated to America with his parents in 1893, settling on Manhattan's Lower East Side. With a knack for music – Berlin could not read sheet music and was limited as a piano player – he began as a street singer. He quickly found success, publishing his first song in 1907 and in 1911 his first hit, "Alexander's Ragtime Band." When his name was misspelled on an early sheet of music as "Irving Berlin," he took the change and ran with it.

Berlin's family of Russian Jews was part of the massive immigration between 1880 and 1915 into the United States of new Americans from southern and Eastern

Europe. As I detailed in my ***The American Tapestry Project's*** "Immigrant's Tale" Episode #6, which can be found **here**, waves of Christian and Jewish immigrants, including Italians from southern Italy, Greeks, Poles, Hungarians and other Slavs from throughout the Balkans, much to the chagrin of nativist bigots, transformed American culture. One of the greatest transformations was in entertainment and popular music. Many Jewish immigrants were attracted to the world of Tin Pan Alley, America's turn of the 20th-century music industry then located in New York City. As Michael Feinstein, sometimes known as "Ambassador of The Great American Songbook", observed "In the first half of the 20th century, Jews flocked to the music industry. It was one business where they didn't face overwhelming anti-Semitism." [13]

So, as a glimpse into the soul of America, "White Christmas" not only sings about home as the heart of American culture and the ideal American Christmas (snowy, child-centered as the family gathers round the warmth of the fireplace in a metaphorical embrace), "White Christmas" also testifies to the great contribution immigrants of every imaginable stripe have made to the American experience. In fact, it is their contributions that make America "America."

#1. Over the Rainbow

In ***Book Note*** #206, I said of "Over the Rainbow:"

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." [14] 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." [15]

***

That's quite a list. As insights into the soul of America and American culture, its repeating themes are: home as sanctuary, the need to respect all Americans, and the contributions of Black Americans, women, and immigrants are the essence of the American experience. They also sing of America as an ideal to which Americans are not always faithful but to which in times of strife they always return.

Popular music and popular culture ***are*** American culture.

Pop songs reveal the soul of America: an essential, a core meaning in sync with ***The American Tapestry Project's*** main threads. Those threads tell the stories of Americans' belief in the idea of America: liberty, equality, and opportunity.

And, if Americans occasionally fail to live up to their glittering ideals, popular music serves as a spur to remind them of the better Angels of their Nature.

American pop – a window into the soul of America.

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Don McLean's "American Pie" in the long version can be heard here.

Aretha Franklin's "Respect" can be heard here.

Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land" can be heard here.

The classic 1942 Bing Crosby rendition of "White Christmas" can be found **here.**

Judy Garland's "Over the Rainbow" can be heard here.

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