Popular music and the social crisis in 2020

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The year 2020 was dominated globally by the COVID-19 pandemic. Every area of social life was significantly and irrevocably altered by the pandemic, including artistic and cultural life.

The impact on the latter sphere—one of the most cherished, sensitive and vulnerable human achievements—has been enormous, although uneven. Live music and movie- and museum-going, for example, have been devastated for obvious reasons.

Recorded popular music has continued to thrive during the pandemic, in many cases breaking previous records in terms of its reach. This is due in part to the unprecedented extent and demand of a global audience facing unique forms of social isolation and quarantine.

Given this situation, it is worthwhile probing how contemporary popular music is responding to and reflecting—or not reflecting—the circumstances at the forefront of present-day reality. What has the music had to offer in terms of social insight and challenging artistry? This article considers a selection of the most popular songs of 2020.

In February, before the pandemic had officially been declared, Canadian singer Justin Bieber released "Intentions," featuring rapper Quavo. The song and music video have since collected close to half a billion views on YouTube alone. A fund drive was launched with the song for Alexandria House—a transitional housing residence in Los Angeles for poor and homeless women and children—to which Bieber donated $200,000.

The lyrics of "Intentions" aim at empowering a partner ("Heart full of equity, you're an asset"), while the music video features Alexandria House and focuses on three struggling women seen as pillars in their community who Bieber meets, praises and showers with expensive gifts.

Asked about the song on MTV , Bieber commented, "We just wanted to shine a light on social issues that are happening in our world and in our country… People are marginalized and overlooked, and I just wanted to make people aware of the hurting and broken people that are suffering in humanity." The "intentions" may be perfectly decent, but the results are distinctly limited, artistically and socially.

At the beginning of April, as mandatory stay-at-home orders were being enforced throughout the world due to the spread of COVID-19, Canadian rapper-entrepreneur Drake released "Toosie Slide," which debuted at number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart and currently has over 250 million views on its accompanying music video. Referencing and instructing how to perform a dance move by choreographer Toosie, the song has sparked millions of dance videos on the short-video social media platform, TikTok.

The music video opens with nighttime shots of a city in lockdown. It then cuts to the garish interior of Drake's $100 million Toronto mansion (complete with an NBA regulation-size basketball court). Alone, wearing black gloves and a ski mask, the rapper proceeds to give a tour of his dreadful palace while performing the titular dance. The video ends with Drake dancing in front of a fireworks show in his backyard.

Though the music video directly references the pandemic, the song's lyrics make no mention of it and lack any shred of substance ("Got so many opps [opponents], I be mistakin' opps for other opps"). The synth melody repeating every four bars is melancholic yet wispy, barely present and stretched thin throughout, indirectly reflecting the poignant emptiness of social life under lockdown, or perhaps Drake's life, at any rate.

Pitchfork described the song as "an afterthought, a blank slate that actively tries to not distract from the dance" and, better still, "strictly a business decision."

In May, "Stuck with U" by Ariana Grande and Justin Bieber and "Gooba" by 6ix9ine were released, followed by "Rain on Me" by Lady Gaga and Ariana Grande.

"Stuck with U" is a direct response to society sheltering in place, painting an ode to love during the hardest of times. It was released as a charity single for the First Responders Children's Foundation and debuted at number one on *Billboard*'s Hot 100. The music video for the song features homemade videos created by Bieber and Grande, as well as other celebrities and fans, depicting quarantine life with their partners.

"Stuck with U" puts forward love in the abstract as a panacea and reveals the artists' general complacency in the midst of a horrific social crisis. "Got all this time on our hands/Might as well cancel our plans/I could stay here for a lifetime." And later, emphasizing the point—"Kinda hope we're here forever." One truly has to have one's head in the sand to come up with such a line.

Pitchfork summed up the song's sentiment. "Instead of Pollyannaish optimism, they sound a note of resignation: 'Lock the door and throw out the key/Can't fight this no more/It's just you and me.'"

"Gooba" by rapper 6ix9ine debuted at number three on *Billboard* 's Hot 100 and broke the record for most viewed hip-hop video within 24 hours, racking in 38.9 million views. It currently has 647 million views on YouTube. The main feat of the song is how much wealth, sex and violence-obsessed filth it can cram into its two-minute track length, delivered with aggressive yelling.

"Rain on Me" by Lady Gaga and Ariana Grande was released May 22—three days before the police murder of George Floyd—and is a 1990s-influenced dance-pop song, which debuted at number one on *Billboard*'s Hot 100. Its music video has been streamed 258 million times on YouTube. The song centers around overcoming personal challenges, which both artists have publicly spoken about—Gaga with alcoholism and PTSD stemming from sexual assault and Grande with trauma from the bombing of her 2017 Manchester concert that killed 22 people and the overdose of her ex-boyfriend, rapper Mac Miller.

Gaga described the song as a "celebration of all the tears."

A pre-chorus states, "It's coming down on me/Water like misery," while the chorus exclaims, "I'd rather be dry, but at least I'm alive/Rain on me, rain, rain/Rain on me, rain, rain." *Consequence of Sound* noted that the chorus line is one "that should make us count our blessings to be alive, hopefully healthy, and, if we're really blessed, maybe even employed."

Billboard recently named it the number one best song of 2020, describing it as a "testimonial to the power of crying and persevering through your own trauma" and proclaiming it "2020's unofficial theme song." However, the song's undercooked message stops at embracing personal misery as part of life, never probing its sources. The concluding line of the song, "Won't you rain on me?," seems to offer wallowing in one's emotional difficulties as some sort of solution, rather than struggling with them and facing life head-on.

In August, Cardi B released "WAP," which features fellow rapper Megan Thee Stallion. The song is an unpleasant exercise in turning pornography into music, throwing in wealth obsession as a bonus. "WAP" debuted at number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and broke the US record for opening-week streams, drawing 93 million.

The song has been lauded "for its sexually charged lyrics and its open expression of women's sexuality" and, ludicrously, deemed "a liberating anthem for young women this year," according to *Revolt.tv*. It was named the number one song of 2020 by *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork* and NPR, which suggested that "at its core, 'WAP' is Cardi and Meg's assertion that their expression, both artistic and sexual, belongs to them *and them alone*." This is rubbish, and an apology for social backwardness.

Much could be said in response to this brief survey of some of 2020's most popular music.

First and foremost, a staggering contradiction exists between the global-technological possibilities and the ability to reach and influence hundreds of millions of human beings almost instantly, on the one hand, and the poverty of the musical ideas and the reality of unprepared music personalities, essentially overwhelmed in the face of the enormity of the devastation and death toll of the pandemic, on the other. What will future generations think of this artistic response?

Half of the songs above reflect little to nothing of what the broader masses are going through, while an obsession with wealth, sex, drugs and aggressive boasting dominates throughout. The other portion make an attempt to respond to the broader situation, yet they fail to put forth any opposition to or even questioning of the status quo. Empowering a partner, turning to love in hard times and overcoming personal difficulties are all well and good, but an exclusive focus on individual transformation leaves the very system that gives rise to the mounting social crises the artists are supposedly addressing entirely off the hook.

The wealth of the pop stars certainly has something to do with their limited perspectives (the average net worth of the seven artists discussed above is $138 million). However, the critical factor is not so much money as it is the intellectual and artistic atmosphere that has prevailed for several decades: the worship of wealth and greed, the glamorization of military and patriotic violence, the obsession with race and gender.

These limitations and contradictions are reflected in the musical content, which deserves a comment.

While pop music has traditionally contained chord progressions that differ for the verse, chorus and bridge of the song, more and more, contemporary pop is ridding itself of harmonic changes. Harmony—the sound of two or more notes heard simultaneously—is one of the central musical means of exploring emotions and moods. Although many examples of memorable popular music can be found without harmonic motion, little or no such exploration and, generally, an absence of musical complexity is becoming *the norm*, with four of the six songs previously analyzed utilizing only one or two chords throughout.

Another musical trend in 2020 of significance is the prevalence of "throwbacks," which consciously look to the past for inspiration. While "Rain On Me" is the only throwback referred to above, many top 40 hits this year mimicked production styles of the 1970s, 80s and 90s, including The Weeknd's "Blinding Lights" (80s) and Dojo Cat's "Say So" (70s).

It is worth asking why artists are returning to these styles and what they find meaningful in them, as opposed to developing new forms derived from delving more deeply into contemporary life.

Neither music nor any other art need obey external criteria or "rules," but these developments are noteworthy and, in our view, given their present trajectory and influence, help to impede the emergence of greater artistic and emotional expression.

The massive success of these songs reflects the wider cultural difficulties, including the state of popular consciousness, which asks far too little at present. The chief blame lies with a social system that has reached the end of the road and has almost nothing of value to transmit through official culture. Innovative work will only arise in opposition to the status quo.

Some popular artists have shown healthy signs of development this year and are beginning to put forward a social critique, such as Lil Baby's "The Bigger Picture," which responded to the mass protests over police violence and racism. But even as worsening social issues come to the fore in popular music, big contradictions remain.

To address the underlying objective social problems and point the progressive way forward via their music, a serious and critical examination of the present social and economic reality is needed by artists, while pushing the language of music in every direction.