

“All I see is dollar signs”

The Grammys, the Super Bowl and the crisis in popular music

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Popular music in the US in particular has degenerated to a remarkable extent, and its decline has serious implications for the overall cultural level and health of society.

Although their artistic quality has always been variable, popular songs once reflected daily life, gave expression to widely felt anger and protest and even addressed broader issues—all of this, of course, within the limitations imposed by the commercial, for-profit music industry.

One could find inspiration and creativity in hit songs and relate to the observations and hopes that their lyrics expressed, in various genres, such as soul, rhythm and blues, folk, country and rock and roll. There were more or less “universal” musical figures genuinely admired and even beloved, if sometimes excessively or misguidedly, by great numbers of people. There are virtually no such personalities at present. The list of the most popular musical artists in 2022 includes undoubtedly gifted individuals, but it is difficult to conceive of any of them seriously enduring or mattering deeply to a vast audience.

Much of the music that the major corporations release and the media promote bears the unmistakable stamp of the production line. It is cold and uninspired. Worse, boorishness and retrogression have flooded the airwaves and streaming services. The lyrics to many popular songs are at an abysmally low intellectual and moral level. Bombast, posturing, vulgarity and pandering confront us from seemingly all sides, with a relative handful of individuals and firms making vast profits out of it all: revenues for the global music business rose for the seventh straight year in 2021 to \$26 billion.

As we noted in a comment on Beyoncé’s *Renaissance*, the appearance of an album by that singer “is not primarily a musical or artistic development,” it is an economic and political one. On the one hand, a portion of the recording and entertainment industry depends on such “blockbusters.” On the other, the identity politics “industry” ties its racist and nationalist program in part to the singer’s success.

The state of mainstream popular music inevitably reflects the state of society. American capitalism is in a condition of profound decay and degeneration. Fantastic wealth has been generated through parasitic speculation, producing obscene levels of inequality. For decades, the US government and military have waged bloody, neo-colonial wars based on lies or no explanations whatsoever. Now, the ruling elite seems intent on provoking catastrophic wars with both Russia and China.

The working population has been made to pay for this rapacity through deepening attacks on its jobs and living standards. The trade unions have become ever more open agents of the corporations and

the state. Former liberals and radicals have enriched themselves and shifted sharply to the right, promoting irrationality and obsession with race and gender as “progressive” perspectives.

These profoundly unhealthy and regressive developments have affected social consciousness and created an inhospitable environment for artists. Instead of facing reality and speaking honestly, many artists have successfully been encouraged to celebrate money, egotism and backwardness. Some do so consciously, having hitched their wagons to the entertainment industry and the opportunities for vanity merchandising that it creates. As we have commented, “the lumpen quasi-pornography that dominates so much of the music and entertainment world functions to pollute the atmosphere, drowning or blotting out social criticism and encouraging the worst, basest instincts.”

The emergence of rapper Kanye West as an open anti-Semite and Hitler admirer does not come out of the blue. No one should imagine that he is alone in his foul views. West has merely raised to the next level the ignorance, selfishness and anti-democratic tendencies that have been brewing for years, cultivated or accommodated to by the music corporations, the media and the so-called left.

None of this means that the spark of musical genius has gone out or even that there is not immense technical and verbal skill already present in what is currently being produced. Moreover, the new media open up previously unimaginable possibilities. A great deal of trivia or worse rises to the top at the moment, but it is not at all difficult to imagine a song that speaks directly to the seething discontent of vast layers of the world’s population attracting almost at once an audience of billions. All the more reason, from the point of view of the powers that be, to nurture the most anti-social, mercenary, individualistic and callous attitudes.

Some of the current problems were on display at the February 5 Grammy awards and the Super Bowl halftime show one week later. These spectacles provided snapshots of the current state of popular music, or a well-promoted portion of it. Many artists thump their chests or offer violence and titillation. Others say as little as possible.

Bad Bunny, the Puerto Rican rapper and singer (and the year’s most-streamed artist in the world on Spotify), opened the Grammys by performing his song “El Apagón,” which means “The Blackout.” Bondholders and banks have plundered Puerto Rico for years, causing a scandalous deterioration in the island’s infrastructure. Despite its title, however, the song barely acknowledges this social crime, let alone the culprits. Bad Bunny makes a fleeting reference to the holes in the highways and briefly badmouths Governor Pedro Pierluisi. But

the rest of the song is given over to crude Puerto Rican nationalism and machismo.

The expletive-flecked declaration that Puerto Rico is great is repeated endlessly, as is a vulgar line that praises a part of Puerto Rican women's bodies. The lyrics are thoroughly puerile and stupid. This intellectual poverty is matched by musical poverty. The first half of the song consists only of a tom pattern and Bad Bunny's slurred, quasi-drunken rapping. The second part is a two-note synth pattern with electro drums. Rather than protesting Puerto Rico's misery and neglect, Bad Bunny turns it into a point of pride. Nothing progressive can come from this outlook.

Harry's House, by English singer Harry Styles, won the title of Album of the Year. Styles got his start in the boy band One Direction, which was manufactured by the entertainment industry like New Kids on the Block and the Monkees once were. After the band's de facto breakup in 2016, Styles pursued a solo career, gaining notice for his gender-bending fashion sense and his upbeat, playful persona.

Styles performs an updated "blue-eyed soul" that's light on "soul": a pleasant amalgam of disco and '80s synth pop suitable for piping into a hotel lobby. The album conveys little sense of musicians interacting with each other; it is a professional product, polished to a sheen.

Styles sticks to harmless love songs and displays a modicum of cleverness, but not depth. His gentle warble is as unthreatening as can be. His demonstrations of sensitivity and words of reassurance to his romantic partners are gentlemanly and might well be sincere. But if the album is as introspective as Styles claims it is, then he spends little time thinking about anything of substance. His only comment about the outside world is that listening to the news is unpleasant. He'd rather focus on sushi restaurants, red wine and romance.

Lizzo's "About Damn Time" won Record of the Year. The upbeat song evokes disco artists such as Chic and Donna Summer. Lizzo says that she wrote the song to "celebrate our survival and celebrate how far we've come" from the "major traumas and hard experiences" of the past few years. But the singer fails to name any of these "hard experiences" (such as the pandemic, police killings, inflation and the attempted fascist coup), which are by no means behind us. Instead, she celebrates alcohol and luxury goods, throwing in a few gratuitous profanities along the way. "It's bad bitch o'clock, yeah, it's thick-thirty. / I've been through a lot, but I'm still flirty," she sings. The implicit (and false) return to normalcy has Lizzo "feelin' fussy, walkin' in my Balenci-ussies," and she needs "two shots in my cup." Lizzo is not an especially good singer, and the escapism and lack of serious commentary in this supposedly topical song are conspicuous.

The song "Unholy" by Sam Smith and Kim Petras won the award for Best Pop Duo or Group Performance. It combines electronic instruments, mechanical rhythms, an ersatz church choir and minor chords to little purpose. Smith sings about a married man who visits a mistress or prostitute to do something "unholy" (a word that is frankly silly in this context). Petras, in her turn, demands accessories from Prada, Miu Miu et cetera before touting her discretion and continual availability for sex. This is a joyless celebration of libido and materialism; it elevates sensation over substance. The duo's much-noted nonbinary, transgender status does not make the song any more meaningful.

To close the Grammys, DJ Khaled performed his song "God Did" alongside rappers Rick Ross, Li'l Wayne and Jay-Z. This opus grinds on for more than eight minutes without any musical development. In an apparent attempt to create an atmosphere of reverence, the song

begins with a clumsy, autotuned, unintentional insult to gospel singing. Rick Ross and Li'l Wayne indulge in braggadocio but connect it, however tenuously, with the religious theme of the song.

Not so Jay-Z, who makes the song all about himself. He changes the refrain "God did" into "Hov did," Hov being his nickname (short for the modest "Jay-Hova"). Our hero sucks up all the oxygen and turns the song into a tedious paean to his wealth and power. He brags about his personal brands of marijuana and champagne, his collaboration with Rihanna on lines of makeup and lingerie, and his tax shelter in the Bahamas. Every line is about how he made a million dollars on some venture or other, yet he has the audacity to claim that his goal is to make "real" people "feel seen." Do the real workers who toil to produce his luxury goods feel seen? Jay-Z is a foghorn of megalomania. The song is truly insufferable.

During her Super Bowl performance February 12, Rihanna proved to be little better than her business partner Jay-Z. She sang a career-spanning medley of hits such as "Bitch Better Have My Money," "S&M" and "Rude Boy." The cultural and moral void of her music was embodied in lyrics such as "You wanna see me naked," "Strippers and dollar bills," and "Money makes the world go round." Rihanna grimaced, grabbed herself strategically and wagged her rear end in a remarkably perfunctory performance. The robotic moves of her horde of white-clad dancers matched her robotic music. Rihanna herself showed little energy or stage presence.

The most revealing, and obviously planned moment came when she paused to apply some of her vanity brand setting and blotting powder. This was likely the first time that a Super Bowl performer has interrupted her show to advertise her own wares. Rihanna previously had refused to perform at the Super Bowl in solidarity with former quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who was blacklisted by the National Football League for protesting police brutality. But perhaps her true principles are summarized in her lyric "All I see is dollar signs."

Today's popular musicians are by no means responsible for the far-advanced economic, social and cultural breakdown. But how can anything remotely progressive come from artists who have embraced capitalism with both arms? This embrace commits them to a rejection of social responsibility and a refusal to address the conditions in which masses of people live. In other words, it commits them to a rejection of art's capacity to illuminate and inspire. Reversing this cultural degradation will involve an attack against its root cause. It will require the inspiration generated by a mass movement of the working class against the tyranny of corporate and financial capital.



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