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Abstract
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Keywords
popular music, tastes, youth culture

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YOUTH AND POPULAR MUSIC: A STUDY IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF TASTE[1]

JOHN JOHNSTONE AND ELIHU KATZ

ABSTRACT

Preferences in popular music among teen-age girls vary according to the neighborhood in which a girl lives and her relative popularity among her peers. Highly popular girls are shown to conform more closely than the less popular to the prevailing neighborhood norms in popular music. Musical tastes and preferences for particular songs and for particular disk jockeys are found to be anchored in relatively small groups of friends, suggesting that personal relations play an important role in musical fads and fashions.

John Peatman in 1942 by content analysis differentiated themes in popular song lyrics.[2] While they deal continuously with "love," Peatman arrived at three main types: the "happy-in-love" ballad, the "frustrated-in-love" song, and the "novelty song with sex interest." Following this lead, in 1954 one of the present authors also made a content analysis of the popular song lyrics[3] of a twenty-five-year period (1927–51), using essentially the same categories as Peatman. Not only did the lyrics deal with the "love" theme about three-quarters of the time but, in addition, an overwhelming majority were either "happy" or "frustrated." Love songs are invariably personal, "ego" either indulging in or being deprived of love.

A further study of the meaning of popular music for its major consumer, the teenager, took as its starting point that of several recent pieces of effective research. Eleanor Maccoby, for one, recently reported the different uses of television among children who show evidence of being frustrated and those who do not.[4] Freidson found that a child's relative preference for television as against movies may be related to his relative preference for family as against friends.[5] Similarly, the Rileys have shown that identical materials may serve quite different functions for children according as they are or are not well integrated in peer groups.[6] Other writers, too, such as Riesman, argue that the same popular materials are used by audiences in radically different ways and for radically different purposes.[7]

The question was raised, then, as to whether the polar types of love songs might not serve different functions for different fans—say, for the popular adolescent as compared with the isolated. Attention was focused on the female adolescent audience, since it is generally agreed that this group constitutes, if not the largest, at least the most vocal, single audience. One of the most

[1] This is a publication of the Center for the Study of Leisure of the University of Chicago; the Center is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

[2] John G. Peatman, "Radio and Popular Music," in Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton (eds.), *Radio Research, 1942–43* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1944), pp. 335–93.

[3] John W. C. Johnstone, unpublished research report, Carleton College, Ottawa, Ontario, 1954. The exact categories used were "indulgent" (where the status of the actor or action was generally desirable), "deprivational" (where the status of the actor or action was generally undesirable), or "neutral" (where the lyrics did not deal with the dimension of attraction-repulsion at all). Among the love songs, then, the correspondence among these categories and Peatman's was virtually perfect.

[4] Eleanor E. Maccoby, "Why Do Children Watch Television?" *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XVIII (1954), 239–44.

[5] Eliot Freidson, "The Relation of the Social Situation of Contact to the Media in Mass Communication," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XVII (1953), 230–38.

[6] Matilda W. and John W. Riley, Jr., "A Sociological Approach to Communications Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XV (1951), 445–60.

[7] David Riesman, "Listening to Popular Music," in *Individualism Reconsidered* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1954).

obvious settings for the enjoyment of popular music by a teen-age girl would be in connection with her social activities, and therefore tastes in popular music were compared with dating. Thus, the original hypothesis of the study sought to relate frequent dating with preferences for the "happy" or "indulgent" love song and rarer dating with preferences for the "blues" or "deprived" songs.

But boy-and-girl activities constitute only a part of an adolescent girl's social life, and a second concern of this study, therefore, is with the part played by the girl's peer group in the formation of musical tastes, in the preference for one song over another, and for one celebrity over another in the world of popular music—in short, with conformity in this area of popular interest. No attempt is made in this study to tell the whole story of a "hit" song or even to relate in detail how a particular song makes its way among members of a given group. Writers like Peatman[8] have stressed the all-important role which radio plays in the creation of "hit" tunes, and others, such as Adorno,[9] point out that the favorites of the popular-music fan will be those which are most played or "plugged" on the radio. While plugging is important, so, too, are leadership in opinion and other group attributes of the audience.[10] It is from the point of view of personal influence and the shared tastes of adolescent peers, in any event, that the subject of musical taste is approached. As such, the investigation involves an examination of the comparative musical interests and tastes of close friends, of more distant friends, of members of the same organizations who are not close friends, and of individuals who do not know each other.

[8] *Op. cit.*

[9] T. W. Adorno, "A Social Critique of Radio Music," in Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz (eds.), *Public Opinion and Communication* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950), p. 314.

[10] Studies of the role of opinion leaders in voting (Bernard Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee, *Voting* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954]) show that personal influences do come between the mass media and the individual and that people who interact with each other typically maintain attitudes in common. The theory of the "two-step flow of communication" was first cited in Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1944), and is elaborated in Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955).

DESIGN AND PROCEDURE OF STUDY

The field work was conducted during the winter and spring of 1954–55 by self-administered questionnaires completed by eight clubs of teen-age girls. Questions covered the following: (1) relative interest in various types of music; (2) preferences in songs in the then-current "Hit Parade"; (3) preferences in disk jockeys; (4) preferences in particular kinds of popular songs; (5) sociometric choices of best friends; and (6) dating.

The respondents were chosen from among members of eight Hi-Y clubs in two neighborhoods of South Side Chicago: four in the Hyde Park YMCA and four in the South Shore YMCA. All were high-school students, aged from thirteen to eighteen years, and the age distributions were practically the same in each neighborhood. The clubs had from 9 to 28 members, of whom a total of 133 girls were questioned—53 from the Hyde Park and 80 from the South Shore clubs. Members of South Shore clubs were, on the whole, from higher socioeconomic backgrounds; this variable was not, however, systematically recorded in the surveys, unfortunately.

The South Shore groups were interviewed approximately four months after the Hyde Park clubs, and the questions which were asked of the first groups were given to the second set. The popular songs listed for ranking were, of course, brought up to date with the "Hit Parade." Each group was questioned separately, either before or following its weekly club meeting. Interest in the questionnaire was high, and, on the whole, the respondents undertook their task with genuine seriousness.

DATING AND POPULAR MUSIC

Does a girl's popularity with boys affect her taste in popular music? The initial hypothesis—that many dates lead to a preference for "happy" or "indulgent" songs and infrequent dates for "blues" or "sad" or "deprived" songs—was tested by posing the question:

> Of all the songs which become popular each year, about three-quarters of them deal with love. In some of these songs the love is a happy love, where the boy and the girl are happy, etc., while in others, as you know, either the boy or the girl has the blues. Generally speaking, which type of song do you like better?
>
> The happy song.....
> The blues song.....

In Table 1 the responses of the original sample of the Hyde Park girls are shown,

TABLE 1

DATING AND TYPE OF SONG PREFERRED IN HYDE PARK CLUBS

Song Preference	Dates at Least Once a Week	Dates Less than Once a Week	Total*
Prefers "happy" songs.....	7	14	21
Prefers "blues" songs.....	23	5	28
Total.....	30	19	49

* $\chi^2 = 11.8$; $P < .001$.

and a striking relationship between frequency of dating and the song preferred is noted. This relationship, however, is exactly opposite to the one originally predicted: "heavy" daters, it is clear, overwhelmingly prefer the "sad" songs, while infrequent daters like "happy" songs.

This finding invited a number of interesting interpretations; for example, the "blues" songs help the frequent dater to add excitement to her relationships—by suggesting crises, breakups, and the like—and thus, perhaps, helping to end an affair that might grow too serious; but the infrequent dater can ill afford these emotional adventures. Another possibility is that the frequent dater is more realistic about love, while the infrequent dater, with relatively little experience, dreams about her "blue heaven"; or that the tunes accompanying "sad" songs were better as dance rhythm and more appropriate to romance and thus more useful to the popular girl.

However intriguing these interpretations may be, there is an important complication: when the second set of interviews was conducted four months later with girls in a second neighborhood, the results were not at all the same (Table 2). In South Shore clubs

TABLE 2

DATING AND TYPE OF SONG PREFERRED IN SOUTH SHORE CLUBS

Song Preference	Dates at Least Once a Week	Dates Less than Once a Week	Total*
Prefers "happy" songs.....	38	18	56
Prefers "blues" songs.....	12	9	21
Total.....	50	27	77

* $\chi^2 = .7$; $P > .80$.

there is so great a liking for "happy" songs that it surpasses the preference for them of the infrequent daters (76 per cent as compared with 67 per cent).

Clearly there is an important difference between neighborhoods. While the proper relationship between popularity and song preferences in Hyde Park is still to be explained, the more pressing problem is the difference in the relationship between the two variables in the two neighborhoods.

THE CULTURE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD YOUTH

The two neighborhoods, we think, represent two "culture areas," not simply because the relationship between frequency of dating and song preferences is different in them but also because the local preferences as a whole are different (Table 3).

A second question used in the study permits a test of the hypothesis that the two patterns of response come from two different cultures. Respondents were to fill in the missing word on the fourth line of what was

described as a "typical love song lyric." The jingle went as follows:

> You were there in my dreamworld,
> In the dreams which I had
> Last night when I saw you,
> When you made me so.....

A total of five responses were given by 111 individuals: "glad" (by 57), "sad" (by 24), "mad" (by 15), "blue" (by 10), and "happy" (by 5). Among these, "glad" and "happy" were assumed to be "indulgent" responses, and "sad," "mad," and "blue" to be deprived. In Table 4 these responses are sorted according to the neighborhood affiliations of the respondents, and the differences revealed are seen to coincide with the differences found in the question of preference in songs.[11] The large majority of Hyde Park girls, that is, respond with "sad" or "mad," while the majority of South Shore girls say "glad." This seems to be evidence of a difference in outlook between the two nieighborhoods on boy-girl relations.

TABLE 3

SONG PREFERENCES BY NEIGHBORHOOD

	Hyde Park Girls		South Shore Girls	
Stated Preference	No.	Per Cent	No.	Per Cent
Prefers "happy" songs.	21	43	56	73
Prefers "blues" songs...	28	57	21	27
Total*.....	49	100	77	100

* $\chi^2 = 11.1$; $P < .001$.

Unfortunately, we are not in a position to report on the possible determinants of this difference in outlook. The only clue available is impressionistic—that the South Shore girls are, on the whole, wealthier and more solidly middle class than the Hyde Park girls. If this is true, it may help explain the particular *content* of the two "cultures."[12]

But, whatever accounts for the difference in the content of the two neighborhood norms, the strong relationship between frequency of dating and song preferences in the "blue" neighborhood and the virtual absence of such a relationship in the "happy" neighborhood remain. Two very tentative explanations suggest themselves.

One possibility is that more popular girls embrace the neighborhood norms more. To explore this possibility, we separated the respondents according to the number of sociometric choices they received, and the sociometric status is then compared with their preferences in type of song. In each case the predominant mood of the neighborhood is most strongly affirmed by the most popular girls, although the relationship is considerably more pronounced in Hyde Park (Table 5).[13] Moreover, on the whole, the Hyde Park girls are relatively more interested in popular music than are the girls of South Shore, which may be why the relationship between popularity and conform-

TABLE 4

RESPONSES TO PROJECTIVE QUESTION BY NEIGHBORHOOD AFFILIATION

	Hyde Park Girls		South Shore Girls	
Type of Response	No.	Per Cent	No.	Per Cent
"Indulgent".....	13	39	49	63
"Deprivational"....	20	61	29	37
Total*.....	33	100	78	100

* $\chi^2 = 5.1$; $P < .05$.

[11] The responses of Hyde Park girls to the projective question were obtained from a follow-up survey, and it is impossible, therefore, to compare their answers to the projective question with their answers to the question on song-type preferences.

[12] This, of course, raises the possibility that the relationship between socioeconomic status and song preferences may be individualist in that rich girls (even in poor neighborhoods) would prefer "happy" songs and poor girls (even in rich neighborhoods) would prefer the "blues." If so, the neighborhood norm would not be a product of group interaction at all, which seems highly improbable.

[13] That the behavior of a neighborhood may be reflected in the habits of its "leaders" is affirmed in a recent study of the adoption of new farm practices. C. Paul Marsh and A. Lee Coleman, in "Group Influences and Agricultural Innovations: Some Tentative Findings and Hypotheses," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXI (May, 1956), 588–94, report that, in areas of high adoption, those from whom other farmers obtain farming information have higher adoption rates than farmers in general, while, in areas of low adoption, the adoption rates of leaders are similar to the rates of all farmers.

ity is so much stronger in that neighborhood.[14]

The other possible explanation is that there is something special about the "blues"—that girls in "blue" neighborhoods may lead a more intense adolescent life and move out of the orbit of their families earlier and more drastically. The meaning of heavy dating in this kind of neighborhood may be quite different from what it is in the "happy" upper-middle-class neighborhood, and it may be that the heavy-dating girls really "use" popular music in ways discussed above.

TABLE 5

SOCIOMETRIC STATUS AND CONFORMITY TO NEIGHBORHOOD NORM

No. of Sociometric Choices Received	Hyde Park Girls Prefer "Blues" Songs		South Shore Girls Prefer "Happy" Songs	
	No.	Per Cent	No.	Per Cent
Three or more	16	88	15	87
Two	9	56	23	78
One or less	24	38	39	64

THE OVERLAPPING TASTES OF PEERS

If neighborhoods and popularity in groups have a role in shaping preferences for popular songs, the more minute details of the mechanisms of group life which breed similar opinions, attitudes, tastes, and habits ought to be examined more carefully with reference to the world of popular music. Accordingly, the questionnaire sought to tap behavior in which the influence of friends upon each other might be apparent. Three of these are: general tastes in music, favorite disk jockeys, and the ranking of "Hit Parade" songs.

To measure relative taste for various kinds of music, each respondent was asked to imagine that she was choosing ten free recordings and to decide how many of the records she would choose from each of five different types of music—classical, semi-classical, popular, jazz, and western. The choices of each were then compared with those of every other member in her club simply by deriving the percentage of overlapping choices. At the same time sociograms of best friends were constructed, thus making it possible to compare overlapping musical tastes, first, among mutual-choice friends where each chooses the other; second, among one-way choice friendships where one chooses the other but is not chosen in return; and, third, among individuals who did not choose each other as close friends (Table 6). The overlap percentages have been averaged, and, while the differences are not large, the trend indicates that close friends do tend to have similar musical tastes.

From this finding alone it cannot be argued that peer groups influence an individual's listening habits, but whether or not "other people" are instrumental in formulating these attitudes is a difficult question. It may very well be that cliques emerge within larger groups primarily because of pre-existing similar attitudes, although it is also likely that influence would operate in both directions. Unfortunately, this study provides little to solve this question; only a developmental study which starts with a group at its inception could do so.

TABLE 6

IDENTICAL MUSICAL TASTES BY DEGREE OF FRIENDSHIP

Degree of Friendship	No. of Comparisons	Index of Agreement (Per Cent)
Mutual-choice friends	72	59
One-way-choice friends	79	52
Non-close friends	998	49
Total	1,149	50

That the peer group may direct an individual in listening to music, however, is indicated in data on favorite disk jockeys. While practically every girl in the whole sample named one disk jockey, Howard Miller, as a favorite, there are nonetheless indications from among other choices that specific groups name specific disk jockeys as favorites.

In one of the clubs (Club B), for ex-

[14] Asked to select free recordings from five possible types of music, Hyde Park girls made 54 per cent and South Shore girls 44 per cent of their choices from popular music.

ample, there are wide differences among the major clique groups as to favorite disk jockeys (Table 7). Disk Jockey Dalie was

TABLE 7

FAVORITE DISK JOCKEYS OF GROUP B

Disk Jockey	Clique I	Clique II
Miller	3	3
Hubbard	0	2
Trompeter	0	1
Dalie	4	0
Porter	1	0
Total	8	6

the exclusive and unanimous favorite of the four members of Clique I. This is especially striking in that only 2 other persons in the whole sample of 133 named Dalie as a favorite. Furthermore, Howard Miller was the only one of five disk jockeys named by members of both cliques.

homogeneity correlation was found for each club and for each of the three subgroups defined by degree of friendship (Table 8). Here again the differences

TABLE 8

IDENTITY OF SONG PREFERENCES BY DEGREE OF FRIENDSHIP

Degree of Friendship	No. of Comparisons	Mean Rank Correlation
Mutual-choice friends	72	.38
One-way-choice friends	79	.28
Non-close friends	998	.25
Total	1,149	.26

among groups are not great, but, again, the values form a trend consistent with expectation. Identical choice of songs is uncommon but at least more common among friends of mutual choice.

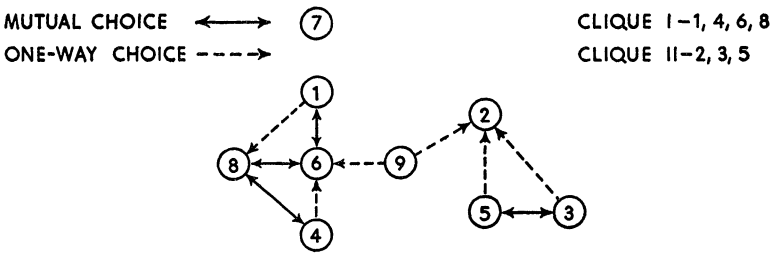

FIG. 1.—Sociogram of group "B"

For other cliques, too, similar findings—although by no means as clear cut—emerged, suggesting that a peer group may influence and restrict preferences in disk jockeys and, consequently, in the music to which its members will listen.

THE RANKING OF "HIT PARADE" SONGS

Analysis somewhat similar to that used in studying interest in different types of music showed that degree of friendship does relate to agreement on "Hit Parade" preferences. The data for this analysis were derived from asking respondents to rank five popular songs drawn from the current "Hit Parade," rank-difference correlations being then computed between each respondent's rankings and those of every other member of her group. Then a mean

Song preferences change much more rapidly than does the general musical taste: the current "Hit Parade" is very seldom the same two weeks in succession. We might expect, therefore, that there would be considerably greater chance for personal influence to determine specific song favorites. In many cases popular songs are very much alike, and, without other influences, an individual may really have a hard time in deciding which songs to single out as favorites. In any event it seems extremely far-fetched to argue that individuals choose their close friends because they prefer certain songs. It is more reasonable to argue that they choose friends because of their general interest in music.

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