

WHAT IS POP MUSIC?

People have always entertained themselves and others with music. Music that is simple and catchy enough to immediately appeal to a large audience was considered popular. There was a large body of music that fit this description before Rock music ever appeared on the scene.

Before it was possible to listen to music on the radio or with high quality recordings, the only way people could enjoy music was to go to performances or to make the music, themselves. Pop music is music that is simple enough that relatively unskilled persons can create it themselves.

In addition to having broad appeal, pop music is also typically secular. Though, this is not always the case. During the 60's many performers were performing renditions of sacred spirituals and these were well received.

Over the years, pop music has become very big business and is usually produced primarily to generate financial gain. Again, this was/is not always the case, but money is closely tied to pop/rock.

The earliest pop music was brought to the colonies by the British and other European settlers. In 1790, the first American National Copyright Act was passed. The Copyright act protected the composer. With many people willing to buy sheet music, the popular music industry grew rapidly during the 19th century. With the advent of recording, film, radio, and television in the 20th century, pop music exploded. Rock music developed into a large-scale industry of its own in the 50's, but that only happened after and because of the popular music that preceded it.

European Influences from Colonial Days through the Early 19th Century

As this country was being settled, all American music was European in nature (except music of the American Indians, but their impact was minimal). Serious music maintained a somewhat European flavor with the center of serious output shifting from Europe to the US after WWI.

The term *popular music* has been most commonly applied to the music of and since the *Tin Pan Alley* era---1880's to the present. A society for pop music had been developing prior to that. The term *pop music* needs to be applied to the music that began to develop distinct characteristics in line with the tastes and interests of the expanding urban middle classes. It would include some types of comic opera, dance music, and *light* music. There is much overlapping with concert art music and oral folk tradition.

Pop music must be readily comprehensible to and performable by a large proportion of the populace. Appreciation of it must require little or no knowledge of music theory or

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compositional techniques. It is of modest length with a prominent melodic line and a simple and restricted harmonic accompaniment.

Musical life in America was closely linked to England. Professional musicians trained in London Opera companies performed standard English operas---Thomas Arne, *Love in a Village*, etc. Songs were printed and became common in homes. Musical societies were formed in Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and other places, performing English, Scottish, and Irish pieces among their repertoire. People enjoyed songs of early 19th century Italian opera---Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, etc. These songs were arranged so the average person could sing and play them.

In 1835, Henry Russell, a pop singer, arrived from England. He composed sentimental ballads that touched the American audience. These songs included a concern for **social issues**. While societal concerns might have been incorporated into much classical music, this was new for the pop scene and became important in the development of pop music.

At the outset, the market for published music was not very large. The people were largely musically illiterate. New Englanders, William Billings, Thomas Hastings, and Lowell Mason, to name a few, engaged in singing schools in churches and communities and helped develop systems of music education. Mason was largely responsible for music being included in Boston Public Schools. As a result of these efforts, music became a desirable social skill. Thousands and millions of Americans became musically literate, helping publishing houses to flourish.

Minstrel Shows

Slavery and a general view that African Americans were inferior individuals were common among most Americans through most of the 19th century (and, to a large extent) through most of the 20th century). Slavery was not completely abolished until 1865 when the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was passed. The very popular minstrel shows only reinforced these views.

Early songs of the late 18th and early 19th centuries occasionally used the Negro slave as their subject matter. Black characters were introduced into ballad operas, as noted in the 1796 production of *I Sold a Guiltless Negro Boy*. By the late 1820's, *black face* was common. Songs were sung in between acts of operas---sort of intermezzi---and depicted the times---*Turkey in the Straw* (1830's). Negro impersonations were very popular in *Minstrel Shows*.

Minstrelsy began with performances by English performers such as Charles Dibdin. By the 1820s, white American performers put on black make-up to play African American characters. This is called *black face*. The first American to become famous for his black face performances was George Washington Dixon. He played the two most popular characterizations.

The *Dandy*:

a.k.a. *Zip Coon* or *Dandy Jim*

An urban African American dressed in ill-fitting clothes, who looked ridiculous as he spoke with mispronounced and incorrectly used words. He appeared as though he was trying to imitate his white “betters.” Unfortunately, he wasn’t up to the task!

Black Sambo

A foolish, superstitious, poor, lazy character.

A third character type was called *Jim Crow*, a type of shuffling clown, similar to the Black Sambo portrayed by Dixon. The Jim Crow character was made popular by Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice. Rice eventually became known as the Father of American Minstrelsy.

Minstrel shows included skits, dances, and crude jokes, all of which were planned to make fun of African Americans. Common instruments were the banjo, violin, tambourine, and bones (lengths of rib bones held between the fingers and shaken rhythmically).

Over time, some troupes began to downplay the ridicule of the African American. They sometimes used songs by Stephen Foster, and others, that were more genteel and softer. After the abolishment of slavery, a number of African American minstrel troupes were formed. These actors still wore black face and pandered to the white audience, but without the extreme racial overtones. This allowed for more acceptance of black performers and helped establish them in the mainstream of American show business. Al Jolson became an important black face actor in the early 20th century.

Stephen Foster

Stephen Foster (1826-1864)---Scotch-Irish descent

Stephen Foster was the first really successful native American song writer. He composed some 200 songs, including:

- Oh Susanna
- Old Kentucky Home
- I Dream of Jeannie
- Camptown Races

Foster also composed a number of songs for Sunday School.

The texts Foster used are nostalgic and the music is simple, many including only the I, IV, and V chords and progressions. Foster understood that pop music had to be grasped

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at the 1st or 2nd hearing and remembered soon afterward and easily performed. The music is simple enough that anybody could have written them. Foster was the first American composer to sell enough music to give up other employment and make a living from his song royalties.

The Civil War brought a large amount of music of sentimental and patriotic nature. It also dealt with the horrors of war and related subjects.

Battle Hymn of the Republic
Tenting on the Old Camp Grounds
When Johnny Comes Marching Home

Henry Clay Work (1832-1884) was an extremely popular composer of the time.

Come Home Father and *Grandfather's Clock* are representative of his works. He is not at all dissimilar from Stephen Foster.

After the civil war, many composers went to Germany to study. As a result, many of their songs had Germanic traits. And, songs from Schubert, Wagner, and others became popular.

After the war and until about 1880 was a fairly insignificant time for pop music. Because of the war, publishers of pop music had been scattered. The last 15 years of the 19th century, however, saw a rise in the importance of pop music, particularly in New York. Publishing houses were located there and marketing surveys were done to determine what would sell. Composers were contracted and performers were encouraged to plug the new material.

Most of the major publishers had their offices on 28th St. between 5th Avenue and Broadway. This strip became known as *Tin Pan Alley*. This also came to describe the music of the period, much like the term *Motown* came to describe much of the music of the 60's and 70's.

Vaudeville became popular and was responsible for popularizing much music and increased the prosperity of the publishers.

Successes of Tin Pan Alley.

The Band Played On
In the Good Old Summertime
Give My Regards to Broadway
Shine On, Harvest Moon
Let Me Call You Sweetheart
Has Anybody Seen My Gal

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The texts are generally happy, suggesting a peaceful climate in this country. They presented an image of little trouble, much like that of the *gay 90's*. Tin Pan Alley was selling songs, not social issues.

By this time, there is a considerable distance between pop music and serious art music. Pop music was extremely simple while serious art music was becoming more complex.

By the turn of the century, Jazz was becoming more popular. Its beginnings were on plantations prior to the Civil War. After the war, this music found its way to Storyville, the red light district of New Orleans. Jazz had a significant impact on the pop music to come. Ragtime, especially, as promoted by Scott Joplin and Thomas Turpin, had an impact.

This style and other jazz styles found their way into pop music.

Now, the importance turns to the dissemination of music rather than the changes in the music. The music actually remained basically the same. By the end of WWI, more than 100 piano making companies were operating in the US. Most educated people had a piano. Devices could be attached to standard pianos and mechanical pianos were made to play piano rolls. Everybody could enjoy music.

Thomas Edison experimented with recording in 1877. Soon, his *talking machine* was sophisticated enough to make recordings of classical music. By the 1890's, the *nickel in the slot machine* (juke box) was popular. By the 1920's about 100 million records were being pressed each year.

In 1920, the first commercial radio station began operating in Pittsburgh, PA---KDKA. Within 10 years, more than 600 commercial stations were in operation. Their staple, pop music. Patterns of home life changed and many stars were made---Rudy Vallee, Kate Smith, etc.

By 1930, the leading show was *The Lucky Strike Hit Parade*. This show played the most popular songs of the week. The first film with continuous sound was *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson in 1927. From that point on, pop music and film were linked. By the mid 1930's, about 60 million cinema tickets were sold each week, creating a huge demand for new songs.

Up until WWI, the songs were frequently better known than the composers. Between WWI and WWII that changed. Composers took on added distinction.

A popular composer between 1907 and the 1950's was Irving Berlin.

God Bless America---1918

White Christmas

Annie Get Your Gun---1946

Berlin's songs were performed by the best performers.

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Others as popular included:

Jerome Kern

Show Boat---'Ol Man River---1927

George Gershwin

Cole Porter

Begin the Beguine

Richard Rogers

Oklahoma!

Carousel

South Pacific