



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on January 9, 2014

Published in the January 20, 2014 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 30, No. 02

Influential Beats: The Cultural Impact of Music

*The Devil really is a fellow of wine and song,
Playing a tune that trades right for wrong.
The tone-deaf man will hear his notes and
say,
What could be wrong with being festive and
gay?
And when a sad tomorrow that tune does
bring,
Few will know that from their own lips it did
spring.*



There perhaps is something primal about music, something that can touch or twist one's soul. This is no doubt why Ludwig van Beethoven said, "Music can change the world," and William Congreve famously wrote that music "has charms to soothe a savage breast." And music's power is tacitly acknowledged all the time. For example, last year Michelle Obama lent her name and image to a rap album that complements her "Let's Move!" anti-obesity campaign. And while a track featuring a trio called "Salad Bar" and a song entitled "Veggie Luv" is easy to mock (given their mother's priorities, I can just hear Sasha and Malia singing, "And we'll have fun, fun, fun till daddy takes the tea cake away"), there is method to the first lady's madness. As Boston College professor emeritus William K. Kilpatrick wrote in his book *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*:

[We] tend to learn something more easily and indelibly if it's set to a rhyme or song. Advertisers know this and use it so effectively that we sometimes have difficulty getting their jingles out of our heads. But there are more positive educational uses. Most of us learned the alphabet this way and some of our history as well ("Paul Revere's Ride," "Concord Hymn"). Recently some foreign language courses have been developed which employ rhyme and song as the central teaching method. Similarly, one of the most successful new phonics programs teaches reading through singing.

Quite true. To this day I can recite a McDonald's Big Mac-recipe jingle I heard as a little child — verbatim. And I only had to hear the weather advice "Red sky in morning, sailor take warning; red sky at night, sailor's delight" once to remember it forever. But since all power can be misused, can music possibly usher in a storm of civilizational upheaval? If it can soothe the savage breast, does it not follow that it can also inflame it?

"Right and Wrong" Music

Plato certainly thought so. He once warned, "Musical innovation is full of danger to the State, for when modes of music change, the laws of the State always change with them." And it's no surprise that Plato was intensely aware of music's power. As Kilpatrick wrote:

If Johnny can be taught to read through rhyme and song, might he also begin to learn right and wrong in the same way? It seems that something like this did happen in the distant past.... The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* played a vital role in the formation of Greek youth. But the ability of the Homeric bards to memorize these vast epics was due in large part to the rhythmic meter and repetitive structure of the poems. In turn, these epics were often sung to the audience to the accompaniment of a stringed



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instrument. In short, the foundational cultural messages of the Greeks were conveyed by sung stories. For sure, but what is music mainly used for today? We still do use it to teach, and we know it can sell junk food. But can it also sell man on the junk food of thought, word, and deed known as sin?

Now, two matters must be addressed before this issue can get a fair hearing. First we must overcome the old-fuddy-duddy phenomenon whereby we say “These kids today...” while reflexively viewing the ways and entertainment of our own generation as the gold standard. We have to ask ourselves: If our “day’s” music were part of a cultural-devolution process, would we know it? Or like a frog spawned in a polluted pond, would we mistake its toxicity for normalcy?

The second matter is one possible response to this: that it is all a matter of perspective, that we respond to sound in accordance with our conditioning. This may be a basic assumption in a relativistic age in which most believe that even Truth is in the eye of the beholder. Yet I would suggest that there are absolutes with respect to sound and that, like the frog, we may accept the noxious as normal, but it will still have its negative effect — it’s just that we may never know the purity that could have been.

As to sound’s universality, consider how no one from any culture seems to like nails scraping across a blackboard. Ponder how a city child who hadn’t ever heard a cougar’s roar would still likely find the sound bone-chilling (I suspect this would be the case even if the child didn’t know about dangerous animals and roars). And even if a girl had never previously heard a baby cry, wouldn’t the sound trigger her maternal instinct to at least some extent? Note here that “instinct” refers to an *inborn* tendency to action, not a quality dependent on conditioning. And, in fact, research also indicates the universality of sound. As professors Donald F. Roberts, Peter G. Christenson, and Douglas A. Gentile wrote in their book *Media Violence and Children (MVC)*, “Even preschoolers and infants as young as eight months can reliably discriminate ‘happy’ and ‘sad’ music.”

This thesis makes sense within both the creationist and evolutionist contexts. Whether a species was given its instincts via divine design or developed them through adaptation, it wouldn’t survive unless those instincts were equal to the task of negotiating this world. So it’s not fanciful to conclude that man is born with a somewhat “trained ear.”

As Goes Music, So Goes a Culture

Given this seeming universality of “sound effect,” did you ever wonder why our music continually changes? Sure, we accept the phenomenon unthinkingly as we do rising prices, but there is no genetic difference that could account for why each generation now finds the music of the last unsatisfactory. And note that tastes in food don’t change so radically; for instance, today’s youth love McDonald’s and pizza just as their parents did 35 years ago. Moreover, musical tastes weren’t always quite so transitory, either. There were times and places — in the Europe of the Middle Ages, as an example — where music might remain largely the same for hundreds of years.

And it is no coincidence that in medieval times something else also remained quite constant: culture. It is clear to me that changes in music hew closely to changes in society’s consensus world view. This explains why musical tastes change so quickly today: With no dominant cultural stabilizer, such as the Catholic Church (whose medieval influence is undeniable); the ability to transmit ideas worldwide at a button’s touch via modern media; and the prevalence of relativism, which disconnects people from unchanging principles and leaves them with only emotion (or taste), that most mercurial of things, to



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guide their choices, society is prone to continual arbitrary change. This gives us the Infantile Civilization. This means that unlike an adult, who has become a relatively stable being more resistant to flights of fancy, it is like a child, prone to instability, undisciplined change (and hope?), and irrational emotionalism.

But what are the particulars of how music influences emotion? If there are sound universals, doesn't it follow that there should be music that would fall into the category of a cougar's roar and induce fear or into a category associated with different feelings? Mind you, this isn't to say we would necessarily recognize such music as reflecting a roar, but that it would possess certain relevant tonal elements that would cause it to have the same general effect. Also note that there is individual variation. After all, a tune that would normally induce, let's say, sadness, may induce happiness in an individual who strongly associates the melody with a joyful life event (e.g., the day he met his true love). Yet particulars don't change principles, and as the *Guardian* pointed out in 2011 when reporting on research out of Bristol University's Department of Physiology, "Watching a thriller wouldn't be the same without some tense music at the crucial moment, while a romantic meal would soon lose its appeal if accompanied by some heavy metal. Without a doubt music affects the way we feel and our bodies respond to the sounds that we hear. Shopping centres try to exploit this fact by playing music to encourage people to buy, or to keep the crowds moving, while therapists may use music as a medication for their patients."

The last thing that should be emphasized is that, just as with television or the Internet, since music can have influence, it follows that it can have a destructive influence if misused. There is no shortage of examples insofar as this goes, either, so pick your poison. Marilyn Manson sang in "Get Your Gunn," "God**** your righteous hand. I eat innocent meat, the housewife I will beat, the prolife I will kill, what you won't do I will "; and Jay-Z disgorged in "D.O.A.," "My raps don't have melodies. This should make ni**as wanna go and commit felonies" — and note that far more vulgar lyrics can be found. But what is the precise effect of such material? Is it possible it simply facilitates the release of negative emotions, as the "venting" theory suggests?

Research indicates the opposite. As *Science Daily* wrote while reporting on a 2003 Iowa State University study by doctors Craig A. Anderson and Nicholas L. Carnagey:

Songs with violent lyrics increase aggression related thoughts and emotions and this effect is directly related to the violence in the lyrics, according to a new study.... The findings, appearing in the May issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, contradicts [sic] popular notions of positive catharsis or venting effects of listening to angry, violent music on violent thoughts and feelings.

... The violent-song increases in aggressive thoughts and feelings have implications for real world violence, according to lead researcher Craig A. Anderson, Ph.D.... "Aggressive thoughts can influence perceptions of ongoing social interactions, coloring them with an aggressive tint. Such aggression-biased interpretations can, in turn, instigate a more aggressive response — verbal or physical — than would have been emitted in a nonbiased state, thus provoking an aggressive escalatory spiral of antisocial exchanges," said Dr. Anderson.

In other words, garbage in, garbage out. Note, too, that this aggression is also directed at the self. As Roberts, Christenson, and Gentile report in *MVC*, "20 percent of the male and more than 60 percent of the female heavy metal/hard rock fans [studied] reported having deliberately tried to kill or hurt themselves in the last six months."



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Yet it would be a mistake to simply focus on lyrics. After all, music played during a thriller or romantic meal is usually instrumental, yet it can still have profound effects. In fact, MVC tells us, “Studies suggest that the *main effects* of music may be carried by the emotional ‘sound’ of the music rather than by the lyrics.... The ‘sound’ of heavy metal [for instance] serves to cue more aggressive schemata, and thus increase the likelihood of aggressive responses.” (Emphasis added.) It’s undoubtedly true that certain musical sounds correlate with certain “schemata,” or patterns of thinking. For example, almost no one understands the Latin most Gregorian chants are sung in, yet even self-professed atheists will speak of how the music touches their souls. (Such testimonials can be found on YouTube Gregorian chant pages); likewise, heavy metal’s lyrics also can seem a different language and be unintelligible to most, yet its discordant sounds also can touch us.

Rock’s Realm

But what rock music touches is very, very different. I remember when a friend told me that he would stand in front of a mirror listening to rock and fantasize about being a music star, and an athlete may listen to a song such as Survivor’s “Eye of the Tiger” and imagine glorious victory on the athletic field. Could you visualize Gregorian chants facilitating this kind of fantasy? It’s a comical notion. And while these ideations are *relatively* innocuous, what of the stoking of darker urges? Which of the aforementioned two kinds of music would be used to get psyched up to commit a crime or a war atrocity, for instance? As to the latter, in “African Rebel Soldiers and Their Eerie Obsession With Tupac Shakur,” Paul Rogers of LAWeekly.com quoted a Libyan fighter as saying, “I only listen to 2Pac before going to shoot Gaddafi boys.” Rogers also cited Sierra Leone’s soulless Revolutionary United Front rebels and wrote of how they “started donning Shakur shirts en-masse in 1998. They mimicked Shakur’s hairstyle. They wrote things like ‘Death Row,’ ‘Missing in action,’ and ‘Only God can judge’ on their rag-tag vehicles, and danced to his music between firefights.” By the way, this is the band of musical warriors whose greatest accomplishment was chopping off the hands of innocent villagers.

But whether the matter is the playing field, the battlefield, or the field of dreams betwixt the ears, the passions stoked by rock and rap tend to have one thing in common: focus on — and often exaltation of — the *self*.

Drawing heavily from Allan Bloom’s seminal work *The Closing of the American Mind*, the aforementioned Professor Kilpatrick explores this ego factor brilliantly in *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right From Wrong*. Addressing the argument that rock’s value is in “the feeling of spiritual oneness it can create: the feeling that there are no boundaries, that the whole world is one large community,” he writes:

When one looks more closely at rock, the notion that it is solidarity music falls apart. What it is, essentially, is performance music. It is not intended for participation but for dramatizing the ego of the performer. For the most part, it is too idiosyncratic and exaggerated for any amateur to sing. People do not stand around pianos and sing “Cum On Feel the Noize” or “Let’s Put the X in Sex”; songs like these are basically unsingable. Even if audiences at rock concerts tried to sing along, they would be drowned out by the amplification.... At the outset, then, rock music denies its audience one of the most powerful of all unifying experiences, the opportunity to join together in song. In a sense, it is the culmination of the Romantic shift of emphasis from the work of art to the artist himself. The song doesn’t matter; what matters is the artist and his emotions.



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In contrast, consider that in many churches the choir would traditionally be situated in a loft well above and behind the congregation (not always the case today, unfortunately). The musicians were in a position of humility, where they'd be invisible to the congregants and it would seem as if the music was coming down from Heaven. But the modern singer? Not only do his emanations often seem anything but Heaven-sent, his performances certainly do not reflect humility.

Kilpatrick then elaborates on rock's isolating effect, writing:

What is the trade-off? What do young people get in exchange for giving up genuine participation? The answer is that like the performer on the stage, they get to feel and show their own emotions — if only through body language. Rock confirms their right to have and express strong, sensual emotions. The message is “Your feelings are sacred, and nothing is set above them.” At the beginning of adolescence the discovery of one's emotional self seems like a profound discovery. This is the part of the self that adults “just don't understand.” But rock music does understand, and what's more, it sanctions these feelings.

This, in its essence, is all that rock is about. And it is precisely because of this juvenile core that rock never delivers on its promise of creating community.

What warrants a bit more analysis here is this exaltation of emotion, a realm that can become the surrogate god of the godless. Saying “Your feelings are sacred, and nothing is set above them” is a very seductive message, indeed. For what do we feel as intensely as our feelings? We don't in fact *feel* anything but our feelings. We should be governed by Truth, by moral absolutes, but except insofar as our emotions have been shaped by them, they're only apprehended by the intellect. And this is trumped by living the quoted proposition because if nothing is set above our emotions, they are then the best available yardstick for determining behavior, leaving us with no reason to even think. Saying that nothing is above our emotions implies that there is no Truth (no moral absolutes), which certainly would be above them, and this is the precise message of moral relativism, the philosophical disease sweeping the West.

This brings us to the contradiction inherent in the assertion that rock is a genre of brotherhood involving “the feeling that there are no boundaries, that the whole world is one large community.” The fact is that a community is defined and woven together by a set of norms, and norms are boundaries; thus, to reject norms is to unravel your community. This should be fairly obvious — if one thinks. Feelings, however, have no acquaintance with logic.

In point of fact, nothing fractures community more than the deification of emotion. Why? Because if people who believe in Truth disagree, they can settle matters by referring to, and then deferring to, transcendent principles. Oh, this doesn't mean it will always feel right, but they can be satisfied that it is right with Truth as their mediator. But if people en masse believe that “it can't be wrong, when it feels so right,” as Debby Boone's “You Light Up My Life” says, what can be that credible arbitrator? For then it follows that there is no objective universal residing outside of man, only subjective particulars originating within every man. So in a relativistic, emotion-driven society, you end up with millions of people guided by a multitude of different feelings. And then it is not truly a society, but a land with nothing to bind people together but the iron fist of government.

And the feelings rock and rap trade on are our most basic. As Kilpatrick also wrote:

“Anger is what helps you relate to the kids,” said W.A.S.P. band member Blackie Lawless in a 1985



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interview. “That’s what makes rock ‘n’ roll what it is. You’re p****d off. I’m still p****d off about a lot of things.”

One of the things that rock and the rock industry do best is to take normal adolescent frustration and rebellion and heat it up to the boiling point. A lot of this hatred is directed toward parents — the people who usually stand most directly across the path of self-gratification. Antiparent themes are quite common on MTV, and heavy metal has been described as “music to kill your parents by.” When I once asked some recent college graduates to explain what they thought was the deeper meaning of rock, I was surprised at how frequently the word “alienation” came up over the course of several separate conversations. Robert Pittman, the inventor of MTV, confirmed this interpretation of the “meaning” of rock in a published interview with Ron Powers: “It’s all attitude. The attitude is: nothing is sacred. We’re all having a rilly [sic] good time. We’re all in on something everybody else doesn’t get. We’re special cause we’re keeping everybody else out.” Thus much of the solidarity rock supplies its young audience is a negative solidarity, a bond achieved by excluding those who should be closest.

Now, note that there will be more alienation in a relativistic land because, again, owing to divisive emotionalism, people will have little in common. Anger will be prevalent because individuals bred to believe they have a right to emotional satisfaction will ever be disappointed. And rock and rap both clearly fuel, and are fueled by, these problems. Yet this matter cannot be fully understood if we view it as merely an “adolescent” problem.

I can also say that adults “just don’t understand” me (heck, neither do kids), and I’m well into middle age. (Remember, though, if people want to understand you, you’re interesting; if they can, you’re not.) I also feel far more alienated — and could feel angrier — than I ever did in high school. After all, I’m now basically Mayberry meets the Middle Ages living in a land that increasingly is Beelzebub meets the Tower of Babel. But my point is this: As a young child, you’re generally like water and take the shape of the vessel in which you find yourself. When you reach adolescence, however, you start to develop a mind of your own and a sense of how you want the world to be. Then you often notice something: It doesn’t conform well to that image. (Note: This is relevant in our fractured civilization. In an insular tribal society with iron-clad traditions unchallenged by competing cultural influences, it likely wouldn’t apply.) But then there are some questions. First, are you pulled from your society’s center by the Truth or simply a different lie? And, then, how do you react? Do you seek to be light or do you lash out?

The Effect Music Is Having on Us

And now we come back to Plato’s warning and the big question: What effect is our modern music having on our laws (governmental and social)? It has already been pointed out that when people are thoroughly unmoored from one another, only tyranny can bind them together, as was the case in the former Yugoslavia. Yet there is far more to it. Plato asserted that the purpose of the arts was to help shape emotions properly, to take children too young to grasp virtues in the abstract and instill in them a passionate (feelings-based) attachment to virtue, so that they would become instinctively virtuous and fertile ground for the acceptance of reason’s dictates later on. “As an example,” writes Kilpatrick, “Allan Bloom mentions the statues that graced the cities of Greece, and attracted young men and women to the idea of nobility by the beauty of the hero’s body.” Unfortunately, attachment to vice can be created in the same way through exposure to corruptive arts — and far more easily.

The problem that Plato recognized and sought to remedy was summarized nicely by C.S. Lewis in *The*



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Abolition of Man when he wrote, “No justification of virtue will enable a man to be virtuous. Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism.” Lewis was likely, of course, thinking primarily of personal temptation, but there is another time this phenomenon becomes apparent. If you’ve engaged in political debates, you’ve no doubt encountered people who operate based on feelings and are so resistant to reason’s dictates that your intellect is powerless against them. This is especially typical of a certain type of political partisan in our time, one I won’t call by name here (though I can tell you what I’d like to call him), but with whom, let’s just say, conversations can’t exactly progress. But whatever you call such a person in a given time and place, what you’re witnessing is always the same: an individual with a corrupted emotional framework that engenders attachment to misguided ideas.

And what again happens with laws when such people become numerous enough and vice waxes in a civilization? This is clearly a complex matter, but here are a few obvious examples:

- Characteristically greedy, slothful, and covetous people will be more willing to steal from others via government and more likely to have a sense of entitlement.
- Characteristically envious people will be more susceptible to class-warfare appeals that promise to stick it to the rich.
- Characteristically lustful people will go to great lengths to justify and facilitate their sexual activity. They will seek to avoid the consequences of it (legal abortion); will want others to fund it (taxpayer-provided contraception); and, not wanting truths expressed that might make them feel guilty, will support hate-speech laws silencing those who criticize it.
- Characteristically wrathful people will be more susceptible to agitation against other groups (e.g., today’s demonization of men and whites) and divide-and-conquer tactics.
- Characteristically prideful people will tend to think they know it all and have difficulty acknowledging fault; they thus don’t seek greater wisdom and knowledge and are resistant to correction. This means they can never be that bulwark against tyranny: an informed electorate.

Having said all this, I don’t want to be misunderstood as placing the onus solely on music. There are other powerful agents of cultural change today, and we can imagine what Plato would have said about television and the Internet. But this essay’s focus is music, and with 16 percent of young people ranking it “among the top three sources of moral guidance, and 24 percent [placing] music in the top three for information on social interaction,” as MVC tells us, it deserves some scrutiny.

Yet, as Allan Bloom lamented, a serious critique of music “has never taken place.” This is not only because we tend to be that proverbial frog mistaking toxicity for normalcy, but also because we become emotionally attached to our entertainment and then reflexively justify and defend it. But if we’re governed in this by what feels right, are we giving “reason’s dictates” their day in court? Most of us would recognize “If it tastes good, eat it” as a prescription for a junk-food diet and possible heart disease. But, likewise, isn’t “If it sounds good, listen to it” a prescription for a jukebox-junk-food diet and heart-and-soul disease? Wisdom informs that we must question not just the musical taste of the next and previous generations, but also our own. Because America might have gone from Daniel Boone to Debby Boone and beyond, but it can be wrong — even when it feels so right.

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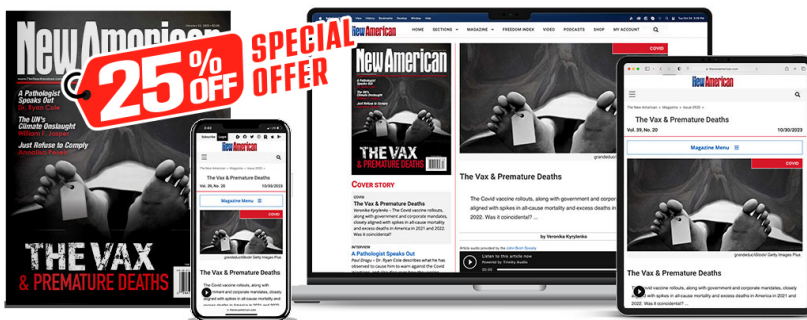
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