

Love still dominates pop song lyrics, but with raunchier language

May 31 2007

“Make love not war” may have been a popular slogan of the ’60s, but romance still figures prominently — and perhaps even more so — in today’s hit music, a new University of Florida study finds. The difference lies in the “raunch” factor.

Proof that true love never dies shows up in the song lyrics of today’s generation, which match the romantic pantings from the songs of their baby boomer parents’ youth, said Chad Swiatowicz, who did the study for his master’s thesis in sociology at UF.

“American culture is in love with love,” he said. “War may be a national concern today as it was three decades ago, but in both eras it’s the subject of love and relationships that dominates pop music.”

The most notable difference between the song lyrics of the two eras was the prevalence of bad language in today’s songs, Swiatowicz said. Many of the words, particularly in rap songs, are blatantly sexual and would have been considered obscene in the 1960s, he said.

“The tolerance for offensive language in pop music has drastically increased in the last 30 years,” he said. “Older songs like ‘Honky Tonk Woman’ and ‘Hot Fun in the Summertime’ are G-rated compared to today’s lyrics.”

Exactly what the raw verbiage reveals about today’s generation is difficult to ascertain, Swiatowicz said. “It’s often the case that young

people want to distinguish themselves from their parents' generation and the use of language is one way to do so," he said.

Swiatowicz analyzed the lyrics of the year's 10 most popular songs listed in Billboard's online archives for two eras, 2002-2005 and 1968-1971. He found that 24 of the 40 songs in the modern era — 60 percent — and half the songs of the classic era were devoted to the subject of love and relationships.

From "Sunshine of Your Love" in 1968 to "Crazy in Love" in 2003, and "I Can't Get Next to You" to "I'm With You" from 1969 and 2003, the songs are variations on similar themes.

Some were cheerful and celebratory of love, while others sounded a more pessimistic tone, addressing the temptation of infidelity or the insecurities of being at a lover's beck and call, Swiatowicz said. The subject of infidelity came up far more frequently in the modern era, perhaps because younger people were more likely to grow up in families where parents had divorced, he said.

Despite wars marking both eras – the conflict in Vietnam in the late '60s and early '70s and the confrontation in Iraq more recently – few of the most popular songs of either era protested American involvement in these conflicts

"For as much unrest taking place during the Vietnam era, only one top 10 song of the four-year span was explicitly detracting of the war," he said.

This 1970 song, "War," protests sending young men to fight and possibly die, Swiatowicz said. "War has shattered many a young man's dream, made him disabled, bitter and mean," bemoan the lyrics.

“This doesn’t deny that other anti-war songs achieved popularity; they just weren’t big enough to reach the top 10,” he said.

There also was only one hit song from the modern era that was clearly anti-war, but that’s not surprising since the draft no longer exists, Swiatowicz said.

Another difference between the two eras is that songs from the classic period address broader social issues, as with “People Got to Be Free,” “Indian Reservation” and “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” Swiatowicz said. These older songs convey the importance of it being in everyone’s interest to get along peacefully and live a life free of hatred and oppression, as in “Joy to the World” and “Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In,” while only one song from the recent era was more global in addressing current events, he said.

“In the modern era, a lot of these songs were more individualistic, treating subjects like self-esteem and personal issues, such as depression or anxiety,” he said.

Deena Weinstein, a De Paul University sociology professor and author of the book “Heavy Metal,” said she is not sure “love” is the operative word with pop music. “Most pop and popular rock songs have been focused on sex and romance,” she said. “In 1967 the Rolling Stones agreed to change the words to ‘Let’s Spend the Night Together’ to ‘Let’s spend some time together’ because Ed Sullivan’s TV show demanded it; it was the same year as the summer of love.”

Source: University of Florida

retrieved 5 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-05-dominates-song-lyrics-raunchier-language.html>

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