

Why Do So Many Smart People Listen to Such Terrible Music?

by
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This is a conundrum that has puzzled me off and on for decades. But there are so many more important matters to solve, this one hardly seems worth the bother. So the mystery gets pushed to the back of consciousness, surfacing from time to time, usually after observing what seems some particularly onerous contradiction in what one would expect to be the natural order of things. But maybe there is some value in exploring this: Quality music needs greater audiences. And if we can get to the bottom of it, or at least some better understanding, maybe there's hope that someday the pieces we pour so much of our energies into will be listened to and appreciated by more people. So when a few months ago, while attending a party given by a good friend of mine, this disturbing anomaly reared its ugly head again, I decided to give it some thought and bring the matter up to my fellow composers.

This friend of mine is a remarkably intelligent guy, a Ph.D. economics professor, and someone with wide knowledge outside his field, good judgement, and refined tastes in many things. Yet his musical tastes are similar to those of my non-music major students: popular music, specifically rock-and-roll in all its distinctions that are the mainstays of commercial radio. There was another fellow there, a physician whom I'd met at other gatherings, who was too apparently an avid rock-and-roll fan, judging from his guitar playing later in the evening. And yet another friend, an extremely intelligent engineer, joined in the guitar-accompanied sing-along that, for me, signaled time to leave. It was becoming much too much like some kind of hootenanny. I began to feel really the outsider. Mind you, all these guys are very smart, very accomplished, professional, and really decent people. They go to work, do their jobs well, have wives, girlfriends, families, pay their taxes, return their library books on time, pay their parking tickets, vote, contribute to charity . . . in short, are exemplary members of society. Yet when it comes to music, they're (in my mind anyway) completely backward. If that sounds harsh, I suppose it is. But exemplifies the incongruity I sense in the apparent gulf that separates their musical choices and the other choices in their lives.

And it's not just these folks, either. National Public Radio, for example, can hardly go a week without featuring some young, articulate commentator as "rock critic" who'll regale listeners with their observations on the profound significance of the latest release by whatever band is their current discovery. They'll ascribe social and aesthetic virtues to awful music that should serve as cautionary examples of what results when musical instruments are given to adolescents without supervision. These reviewers are obviously intelligent, wordy, enthusiastic, and probably well-educated individuals who can craft beautiful paeans to simplistic, redundant, naive, crude, even offensive junk. Now I recognize that I'm sounding a bit like a curmudgeon, and that beauty is in the eye of the beholder; everybody has a right to listen to whatever they like, and that, for this person, the music means all those glowing things they describe. But WHY does it represent that to them? That's what's puzzling.

A musician I once knew made a comment that has always stayed with me: "If you love music, if you really love music, you'll appreciate all music, in some way or another, because ANY music is better than NO music." And there is certainly truth in that. My mother, who grew up in a time and place where good reading material was relatively unavailable, said that as a kid she'd read the labels of cans and boxes in the kitchen cupboard, just to be able to read. So for those youngsters who find themselves growing up in circumstances or environments where good music is not immediately available, certainly any music will be better than not listening at all. But the mystery is why growth in musical taste becomes arrested at an adolescent level in so many accomplished, intelligent ADULTS. People who certainly have brushed against more worthwhile music in their lives and surely are aware that there is a universe of sophisticated, rewarding musical experiences available to them. They have advanced their tastes in other things. Why not music? And why don't their simplistic tastes in music cause them embarrassment? Certainly few adults would want it known that their reading material consisted solely of comic books. Sure, we all enjoy magazine cartoons and the comic strips in newspapers. Often they're tremendously insightful and clever. But they're not our ONLY reading. Strangely, for many - perhaps most - adults, their collections of recordings consist of only rock-and-roll, or country and western, or rap, or whatever popular music style is their preference.

I'm sure that most of us composers also enjoy popular music. There are times and places where we don't want anything serious, anything that requires significant attention. We can't (and shouldn't) be "serious" musicians all the time. But there's a world of very high quality, accessible music other than the more commonly encountered rock, rap, country, etc., that you would expect to be the light fare of intelligent, educated people. Why isn't it? Of course there's a place for all kinds of music, for all kinds of people. So individuals who haven't been as fortunate as we, or have less innate musical intelligence, talent, musical sensitivity, or whatever we choose to call the complex of attributes that drives us into this discipline, can't be expected to have as varied tastes and wide knowledge as we. But that still doesn't entirely account for why people who are as smart or smarter, as educated or more so than we, entirely restrict their listening to junk.

Education in the arts, or rather lack of it, is often cited as a contributing factor if not a major cause. And perhaps that is so. But I have a few additional observations . . .

One is that music seems to serve a very different function in the lives of many non-musicians. For many people, music is not an art form, the intricacies of which they enjoy or are even aware. For them, music serves a kind of cathartic, almost medicinal purpose. Whenever I see some young person, bouncing up and down in their car stopped at a red light, sometimes so energetically the whole car shakes, I realize it is not the satisfying form or interesting textures, rich harmonies or rhythmic diversity that captivate them; it is the sheer energy (and volume) of the sound. It is the very repetitiousness of it that overwhelms them and temporarily numbs critical perception and intelligence, and alleviates whatever worries or tensions they're experiencing. It's a way of relaxing, I suppose, like consuming alcohol. But even alcohol varies greatly in quality; and if not consumed judiciously, can do more harm than good. So as with alcohol, some moderation in the consumption of pop music is also wise.

I think part of this is generational, too. My generation is known as baby-boomers, people whose formative years coincided with the advent and growth of TV, popular media entertainment in

general, and . . . rock-and-roll! For most individuals of this age, rock-and-roll is synonymous with youth. And baby-boomers are a generation that seems determined to remain youthful. In fact, in many ways this is the generation that, more than any other before in history, seems to feel a sense of control over their lives. So perhaps this determination to resist growing old, to remain connected with their young selves, is part of why so many middle-age people stubbornly cling to the adolescent music of their youth. The result, though, is an entire generation of adults who are so determined not to grow old; they refuse to grow up - musically, at any rate.

And speaking of the development and role of media in popular culture, let's not forget the colossal marketing efforts of record companies, movie studios, and entertainment conglomerates to pander to and perpetuate these tastes. So there is a tremendous economic support structure that maintains these listening habits. And among all the other things affluent, educated baby-boomers are, they are first and foremost, consumers. Of course the marketers themselves would say they only respond to public tastes, that free-market economics are the most democratic of systems; an argument often heard in support of many things - some undesirable - in our society. But undeniably, people do tend to react to purveyors as arbiters of what is good. Rightly or wrongly, in a Capitalist culture, the media giants are seen by many as the standard bearers of aesthetic values. This is why the "rock criticism" on NPR is so egregious to me. One would hope that this organization, more than other media organizations, would maintain some standard for listeners. But alas, in an era when money is hard to come by, even public radio, I suppose, must sway to popular taste, rather than help educate. And it is the baby-boom generation that are the bulk of the audience for NPR - people exactly like the friends I described earlier: Educated, professional, intelligent, decent, hard working, middle-aged . . . rock-and-roll fans! Or as, I guess is now the correct term, just rock. At least that how NPR always refers to their "critics" . . .

Perhaps too, this attraction to unsophisticated music, music that is often the expressions of segments of society associated with uncultivated behaviors, has a social/psychological component. Like the eighteenth-century Europeans, most notably the British, whose empire brought them in contact with indigenous populations of foreign lands, and who found fascination with the noble savage, perhaps contemporary yuppies experience vicarious satisfaction by attempting to experience, through the music of less sophisticated subcultures, some earthy, "down home" life experiences they never had. We've seen it before: From the nineteenth-century mansions of the English landed gentry, to the forays of Manhattanites in the forties to the hot spots of Harlem, to the suburbanite professionals of today, playing gritty, funky, folksy blues on custom CD systems in their upscale luxury sedans, sports cars, and SUVs. . . it seems there is an inverse relationship between the social circumstance of some people and their attraction to the primitive; the more educated they are, the more privileged and sheltered their upbringing, the more they're attracted to and assign virtue to less sophisticated things - music included. And perhaps, as it was with the cult of the noble savage, this fascination by the more accomplished or privileged for the less developed elements of society, is a reaction to and against their own social class. Although this kind of reaction formation is more common in adolescents than in adults, we are talking mostly about baby-boomers, a generation that, in some respects, hasn't entirely shed adolescence.

When I was a teenager playing in the barrooms and dance halls of south Louisiana, playing a regional style of rock-and-roll and rhythm & blues that has now come to be known (and

increasingly revered by middle-aged yuppies in this area of the country) as "Swamp Pop," I longed for a high school where I could study harmony and composition, and participate in an orchestra, rather than the poor little football-oriented high school band that constituted the only academic opportunity available. One or two other musicians I knew also had the hunger for better musical education and performing experiences. We encountered a lot of gritty, funky, down-home, barroom music - Cajun, zyedeco, blues, honky-tonk music of various sorts - day in and day out. We practically couldn't escape it. But it held no glamour or mystique or appeal. To us, it just seemed to typify what became of musicians who didn't have the talent, initiative, or opportunity to do better. These days, however, with the overwhelming media domination of popular music and culture, these musicians are the successes. Touted by NPR, and fueled by misguided, affluent adults who can do better - in terms of their listening habits - but, because of whatever combination of personal inadequacies, psychological needs, or naive romanticism for what they evidently consider the direct and "honest" expressions of uncultivated traditions, don't, exert their economic influence and contribute to the proliferation of sorry music that fills our world.

It's a shame when people reject the best traditions and practices of the world's most talented, artists, in favor of music that is the most amateurish and least sophisticated. In few other areas of human activity do people reject the best and prefer the worst. Not many people would prefer to watch sporting events featuring the most poorly trained and least accomplished athletes, or buy clothes designed and crafted by amateurs in a folksy, homespun style; prefer that a complicated surgical procedure be performed by a self-taught physician, or trust their financial futures in a civil suit to a untrained "garage" attorney. Strangely, when it comes to music, it seems for some otherwise intelligent, educated adults, the cruder the better. Go figure.