

## A sociology-light moment: Pop Sociology! (or some sociology of pop)

*"What will survive of us is love"*<sup>i</sup> Philip Larkin

Whilst we have been on the happiness topic, or sexual freedoms for that matter, let us look at the nature of joy and love in pop music. From the social revolution of the 1960s to the new *Birth of the Cool* of today love in various forms has remained at the centre of music.



One of the artworks for *All You Need is Love*, by The Beatles, 1967

**Popular music is the most popular leisure activity in the world** – pause on that claim for a moment. Music is popular as in: listening to it; buying it; dancing to it; dressing like it's proponents; talking about it; and holding pop artists and celebrities in the highest esteem. Pop music in the west is subtly changing some of its subject matter. It is straying from its main diet of romantic love.

*Because I'm happy  
Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof  
Because I'm happy  
Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth*

*"Happy"* by Pharell Williams<sup>ii</sup>

It may be a debatable ruse to attribute song titles and lyrics to the state of contentment across the western world but it is interesting nonetheless. Pharell Williams' monster sized hit is just about happiness and it dispenses with the usually compulsory attachment to romantic love, familial love or even *confluent love*<sup>iii</sup>. This is a rare departure from the normal pop music diet of love, loss or angst – or a mixture of these. So what's in the pop lyric anyway? Does it tell us anything about the times

we are in? The numbers at least tells us about a desire for a simple manifestation of joy and happiness that is expressive, energetic, accessible and fun.

### **'What's Love got to do with it?' ...**

This was a news headline discussing the changing themes of the most popular songs over 5 decades. The *American Journal of Advertising Research* compared the song titles of the 1960s with the words in the song titles of decades since. In modern times frequent references to 'desperation', 'ambition' and 'pain' were common in song titles; topics almost unheard of back in the 1960s. Past times pop music mercilessly sold the listener the goal of undying love as the root to happiness – without it was pain, with it salvation. The pop chorus is the modern paean to romantic love and happiness. But the nature of contentment is a complex thing and discontentment started to appear in a few 1960s pop songs albeit rarely.

### **The comfort and sadness of the minor key**

Another bit of evidence that tells us tastes have changed with values - or that values have been shifted through tastes - is how the pop song's actual musical structure has changed. Music in a minor key has long been associated with sadness or emotional connection whilst music in a major key invokes happy, easy, cheerful emotions. In fact it had been shown that music in a minor key, whilst emoting sadness or urgency, also invokes emotions that are beneficial. Both women and men can produce more of the hormone prolactin directly upon hearing music in a minor key. This musical form and its attendant emotions can be comforting and soothing; and in turn producing prolactin aids cognitive clarity and empathy with others. In the 1960s most pop songs were written and recorded in a major key; by 2000 most songs were written in the minor key. So minor key modern pop music can actually induce pro-social emotional states.

Songs like this one that have been reconfigured for the twenty-first century (in the film *the Big Lebowski*<sup>iv</sup>) with its individualistic, psycho-analytical themes:

*"I pushed my soul in a deep dark hole and then I followed it in  
I watched myself crawlin' out as I was a-crawlin' in  
I got up so tight I couldn't unwind  
I saw so much I broke my mind  
I just dropped in to see what condition my condition was in"*<sup>v</sup>

*"Just dropped in"* by Mickey Newbury

As a final note on happiness here's what the funny yet sympathetic character of Gary says about therapy from the Radio 4 comedy-drama *Nurse*<sup>vi</sup>. The hapless Gary is being asked to think about having CBT - Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. Gary is morbidly obese and his mum keeps feeding him up. In response to the nurse's offer of therapy Gary says:

*“That’s like counselling is it? You lie on the couch and say ‘sorry Mr Freud it was all my mother’s fault!’”*

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<sup>i</sup> Last line of the poem *An Arundel Tomb* by Philip Larkin 1956

<sup>ii</sup> Here is the very cheerful video to Pharrell Williams’ ‘Happy’

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6Sxv-sUYtM&feature=kp> The song has had 730 million You Tube hits and rising.

<sup>iii</sup> Confluent love meaning love that emerges depending upon the circumstances. It is contingent, conditional, active and not like the forever qualities of romantic love.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhOKhJaM1QE>

<sup>v</sup> Written by Mickey Newbury made famous by Jerry Lee Lewis and Kenny Rodgers plus it has been covered many times by the likes of Tom Jones and for film and TV. The song was thought to be written as a cautionary tale against the ‘false happiness’ of hallucinogenic drug use.

<sup>vi</sup> *Nurse* broadcast on BBC Radio 4 March 19<sup>th</sup> 2014 with Paul Whitehouse sympathetically and warmly depicting a powerless character.

### **Further Reading:**

**For more samples or to buy “*Back For the Future: Sociological Theory and Today’s Big Issues*” go to my bookseller and website below:**

To order or to browse in the Lulu world bookshop go to:

<https://www.lulu.com/shop/view-cart.ep>

For samples and background go to:

<http://www.jimsimpsonconsultancy.co.uk/resources-library/back-for-the-future-sociological/>