



*Led by Herman E. Sherman, the Young Tuxedo Brass Band parades in New Orleans, 1973. Marching bands—trailed by a “second line” of enthusiasts or, sometimes, funeral mourners—appeared in the Crescent City as early as the 1850s. During the next half century, they helped create the unique American sound of jazz.*

# American Music

This year, half a century after the guardians of Manhattan's august Carnegie Hall first admitted Benny Goodman and his band to its stage, Congress declared jazz an "American treasure." Scholars have been reappraising American music: popular song, jazz, and classical. Here, music critic Howard Husock recalls how Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, and dozens of other Tin Pan Alley songsters created a lively style of popular music that appealed to Americans of all ages, only to see the audience fragment after World War II. Terry Teachout chronicles the long quest of jazz musicians for cultural "respectability"; he describes some of the surprising effects. And music scholar K. Robert Schwarz traces the history of the nation's classical composers, who have variously embraced "international" music or searched for a distinctively American sound.

## POPULAR SONG

*by Howard Husock*

When Rudy Vallee exclaimed, "Heigh-Ho, Everybody!" through his trademark megaphone, his audience of young (mostly female) fans erupted in screams. The appearance of Vallee and his Connecticut Yankees at Keith's 81st Street Theater in February 1929 had attracted hundreds of delirious teen-agers, as well as a contingent of New York's Finest (on horseback) to contend with them. No popular singing star had ever created such tumult. It was, wrote one show business reporter, "an explosion in the theatrical world."

The Rudy Vallee craze was America's first taste of "youth music." It would be 13 years before the nation saw anything like it again—when a gangly young "Frankie" Sinatra made legions of adolescent bobby-soxers shriek and swoon at New York's Paramount Theatre—and another 14 years before Elvis Presley released his smash record, "Heartbreak Hotel," establishing "youth music" as one of the enduring elements of American life.

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Today, we take for granted popular music's direct and exclusive appeal to the young. So much so that it is tempting to look at pop music, even before Elvis Presley, as a series of youth fads. But Rudy Vallee and Frank Sinatra were anomalies during the 60 years before the advent of Presley and rock-and-roll. Popular music before rock was dominated by Tin Pan Alley, whose diverse singers and songwriters, from George M. Cohan to Cole Porter, spoke to young, old, and middle-aged alike. And they usually spoke from an adult perspective. Whether describing the perils of "Makin' Whoopee" or the emotional strains of "Stormy Weather," Tin Pan Alley's writers and performers were subtle and worldly wise, offering consolation to adults, guidance to the young. Moreover, songs such as "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" and "God Bless America" expressed a shared national mood and culture.

### Writing Songs to Order

Since the rise of rock, the mainstream of American popular music has been aimed narrowly at the young. Predictably, rock is more likely to celebrate youthful excess and alienation than to encourage thoughtful reflection. Even the names of rock groups—Megadeth, Agent Orange, the Dead Kennedys—celebrate the nihilistic underside of adolescence. The overwhelming dominance of rock in today's popular music leaves the young with neither the steadying influence of a tale of personal experience nor the sense of belonging to a national culture, which pop music historically transmitted.

Commercial popular music itself is a relatively recent invention. America's first "hit" song, writes Sigmund Spaeth in his *History of Popular Music in America*, probably was "Yankee Doodle." This sprightly tune (author unknown) was on the American colonists' lips before the Revolution; the Continental Army's fife and drum corps played it at the surrender of General Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781. Most popular songs of the era promoted patriotic or political themes, with new words put to existing European tunes. Francis Scott Key, for example, wrote "The Star Spangled Banner" (1814) to the melody of "To Anacreon in Heaven," an older English song.

The United States did not produce a bona fide hit composer until 1848, when Pittsburgh's 22-year-old Stephen Foster published "Oh! Susanna." The song was an immediate success, carried from coast to coast

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*Tin Pan Alley's notables gather around as Duke Ellington and George Gershwin play the piano. Cole Porter, wearing a bow tie, is flanked on the left by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. In the foreground is Irving Berlin.*

by traveling minstrel shows and, later, by the California-bound Forty-Niners, who made it their anthem. In short order, Foster penned a string of phenomenally successful popular songs, including "De Camptown Races" (1850), "Swanee River" (1851), and "My Old Kentucky Home" (1853). By 1857, he had pocketed some \$10,000 in sheet music royalties—an astonishing amount for a songwriter at the time. Seven years later, however, Foster died in a Bowery hotel, having squandered his talents, the public's affection, and virtually all of his financial assets. A chambermaid found 38 cents in his pocket.

As successful as Foster's confections had been, most scholars agree that no truly national popular American music emerged until the end of the 19th century. Even in Foster's heyday, church hymns and folk tunes made up the musical repertoire of most American households. The popular music business was tiny, with scattered songwriters and music publishers in San Francisco, Chicago, Detroit, New York, and other cities catering mostly to regional markets. Their chief products were one-

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sentiment ditties—about “birds, stars, rippling streams, the perfume of the flowers, and thee-and-thou,” as one publisher summed it up. “Even the biggest song hits,” wrote historian Ronald L. Davis, “met with comparatively modest returns.”

All of that was changed in 1892 by the staggering success of a single tear-jerker, “After the Ball,” by Milwaukee’s Charles K. Harris.

The nation’s first certified million-seller, “After the Ball” alerted songwriters and music publishers to a vast new market for sheet music. Hitherto, they had survived by selling their wares—at 10 to 50 cents per copy—chiefly to professional entertainers in the traveling vaudeville shows (successors to minstrelsy), burlesques, and theatrical “extravaganzas.” Harris showed that there was big money to be made by selling sheet music directly to the growing middle class of industrializing America—and he understood that the songs had to appeal to women.

For many newly prosperous American families, having a piano in the front parlor was a mark of culture and sophistication. As Mother played the upright, the family would gather round of an evening to sing songs that, more likely than not, had caught her fancy at a traveling vaudeville show. (Once intended for “stag” audiences, vaudeville had been largely cleaned up by the 1890s.)

In a variety of ways, Harris set the style for the new popular music. A sign outside his office at 207 Grand Avenue in Milwaukee promised “songs written to order.” That impulse—to assess and cater to the popular taste—would drive Tin Pan Alley for years to come.

Harris even had a hand in creating the semimythical Tin Pan Alley itself. The profits from “After the Ball” (which ultimately sold some five million copies) allowed him to open his own music publishing house in turn-of-the-century New York, and he set up shop among the other flourishing publishers on West 28th Street—the clamorous thoroughfare, hard by the Broadway theaters and vaudeville shows, which the *New York Herald’s* Monroe Rosenfeld dubbed Tin Pan Alley.\*

### Plugging ‘Ragtime Cowboy Joe’

It was a street of low brownstones, grimy from coal smoke, with tailors and small shops occupying the ground floor storefronts, and the music publishers jammed into warrens of tiny cubicles on the floors above. Each publisher operated a kind of musical sweatshop, employing a staff of lyricists, composers, and arrangers to churn out songs in assembly-line fashion. In cramped audition rooms, demonstrators played the piano and sang the firm’s latest offerings for visiting singers and vaudeville performers (many of whom were unable to read music themselves). When all the windows were wide open on a humid Manhattan summer afternoon, the clamor on 28th Street was tremendous.

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\*Tin Pan Alley became the generic term for the popular music industry from 1890 into the 1950s, even though Hollywood and the record industry had deprived 28th Street of most of its publishers by 1930.

The kings of Tin Pan Alley, recalls historian David Ewen, were the "pluggers." This, too, partly reflects the influence of Charles Harris, who demonstrated the importance of the hard sell. In the days before the radio and phonograph, the plugger's job was to find a way, any way, to get his publisher's song directly before the public. He might break into song while riding a horsecar, or at a baseball game, or while standing on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. Harry Cohen, later the head of Columbia Pictures, recalled that as a youthful plugger in 1912 he sang "Ragtime Cowboy Joe" "50, 60 times a night," to help make it a hit.

While it was as emphatic in its commercialism as the rock music industry is today, Tin Pan Alley avoided pandering to the public. Following the precedent established by "After the Ball," popular songs not only told stories, they also imparted lessons.

### Creating a National Repertoire

"After the Ball" is told from the point of view of a young girl who asks her bachelor uncle why he never married. The old man replies by telling how, as a youngster attending a ball, he had spied his beloved kissing another man. In a fury, he stalked out, vowing never to speak to the woman again. Years later, after her death, he learns that the other man was her long-lost brother. The chorus:

After the ball is over, after the break of morn  
 After the dancers' leaving; After the stars are gone;  
 Many a heart is aching, If you could read them all;  
 Many the hopes that have vanished, after the ball.

"After the Ball" is a story of the consequences of youthful intemperance told, as a lesson, to a girl on her uncle's knee. Like many popular ballads through the early 1900s, it transmitted the folk wisdom of the society to the young. In those days before television and the Walkman, moreover, the songs were often sung by entire families around the parlor piano, reinforcing the notion that these were values to be shared.

Among the many songs in this vein were Paul Dresser's "The Convict and the Bird" (1888), about a criminal's longing for freedom, and Harry Von Tilzer's "Bird in a Gilded Cage" (1900), the sad story of a woman who married for money. These songs concerned what might be called the pathos of embracing the wrong moral values.

By no means were all, or even many, of Tin Pan Alley's early creations somber or serious. Hundreds of forgettable songs were published every year on whatever subject seemed to strike the public fancy. Of the dozens of songs inspired by the bicycle craze of the 1890s, for example, only "Daisy Bell" ("A Bicycle Built for Two") has survived.

But, in searching for songs that would sell, Tin Pan Alley also

turned out hundreds of songs keyed to current events and to the national mood. Without consciously seeking to do so, the songsmiths of Tin Pan Alley bound the nation together. “The Sidewalks of New York” (1894) and Paul Dresser’s “On the Banks of the Wabash Far Away” (1897) were just two of the more popular numbers that familiarized listeners with American cultural geography. Tin Pan Alley ground out dozens of sentimental Irish ballads (including “My Wild Irish Rose”) in response to the massive Irish immigration of the late 19th century—tunes that were aimed at a special interest market, but that surely also helped to remind native-born Americans of the humanity of the new immigrants.\*

The years between the turn of the century and World War II brought vast changes to popular music—as it moved from vaudeville and the musical theater to the movies, and from live performance to radio and phonograph. In Tin Pan Alley, a new generation of songwriters took over, led by Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Harold Arlen, and a handful of other great talents. They were mostly Jewish immigrants or sons of Jewish immigrants—who, consciously or not, helped create an inclusive national repertoire of songs. It is work that, in a stunning number of cases, is still familiar to Americans today.

### Talking Up to the Audience

Tin Pan Alley’s crystallization of national culture could not fail to yield songs unsurpassed in inspiring national pride: George M. Cohan’s “You’re a Grand Old Flag” (1906) and Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” (written in 1918 but not recorded until 1939, when Kate Smith made it famous). But commercial songwriters were seldom jingoistic. Berlin, for example, also wrote “Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning,” a heartfelt gripe about life in the army.

Tin Pan Alley, in the person of lyricist E. Y. “Yip” Harburg, provided what might be viewed as bookend anthems of the Depression: the brooding, sardonic “Brother Can You Spare a Dime?” (1932) and the optimistic “Over the Rainbow” (1939).

Unlike many protest songs of the 1960s, “Brother Can You Spare a Dime?” made its case without indicting the entire society. The song is a capsule of the recent American past—a World War I doughboy “builds a dream” during the 1920s, only to find himself in a Depression breadline. His plight sums up the *nation’s* plight. As always, Tin Pan Alley—in this case, Yip Harburg—talked up to its audience.

They used to tell me I was building a dream  
And so I followed the mob

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\*However, Tin Pan Alley did not do well by blacks, producing an entire genre of “coon” songs (e.g., “All Coons Look Alike to Me”). It did welcome a few black songwriters, including Shelton Brooks, whose accomplishments include “The Darktown Strutters’ Ball” (1917), and James Weldon Johnson, famed for “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (1901).

### DANCING IN THE DARK

"Modern ballroom dancing may easily degenerate into . . . unruly behavior and not infrequently [into] sexual immorality," warned two English sociologists in 1951, several years before the birth of rock-and-roll.

For centuries, virtually every new style of music has spawned dance fads among the young—and alarm over "licentiousness" among adults. The Waltz, introduced to the royal courts of Europe during the late 18th century, outraged some aristocrats. In the United States, during the pre-World War I ragtime craze, polite society was scandalized by the Turkey Trot and Kangaroo Dip. But new steps were quickly transformed into "proper" ballroom numbers. Before long, even the Rockefellers and Hearsts were doing the Fox Trot at debutante balls and wedding receptions.

Youngsters maintained a monopoly on the latest dance fads, but the generations also mingled on the dance floor, doing the Two-Step, the Waltz, the Lindy. Teen-agers learned the accepted steps from their elders: Social dancing was not just a pleasure/ordeal but an introduction to the adult world. It taught the sexes about etiquette, and about each other. "Dancing is wonderful training for girls," quipped essayist Christopher Morley in 1939, "it's the first way [they] learn to guess what a man is going to do before he does it."

Then came rock and the 1960s. Recalling the Philly Dog, one of the first rock steps, author Don McDonagh observes that "its back-and-forth shuffling and snapping fingers . . . indicated a certain heedlessness for anyone outside the dancer's own world. The emphasis was shifting away from the socially approved couple to extreme preoccupation with the [self]."

Suddenly, dance floors were segregated by age. The conventions of social dancing withered. Until the disco craze of the 1970s, even the notion of established steps was endangered. "Did any of us really know how to do the Funky Chicken or the Frug?" asks novelist Jay McInerney, 33, author of *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984). Freedom from social dancing's restrictions has also deprived the young of its skills and shared pleasures. Now, when a turn on the floor is "unavoidable," McInerney says, he does an "all-purpose shuffle."



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When there was earth to plow  
 Or guns to bear  
 I was always there  
 Right on the job  
 They used to tell me I was building a dream  
 With peace and glory ahead  
 Why should I be standing in line  
 Just waiting for bread?

The continuing impulse to mold a national culture was reflected, particularly before the Depression, by tributes to America's many locales that helped, albeit unintentionally, to unify the nation. Among the still-familiar examples are Mary Earl and Ballard MacDonald's "Beautiful Ohio" (1918), George Gershwin's "Swanee" (1919), Fred Fisher's "Chicago" (1922), Jerome Kern's "Ol' Man River" (1927), and Hoagey Carmichael's "Georgia on My Mind" (1930). There were plenty of more obscure tributes as well—to Tampa, to the Rio Grande, to "the girl in the heart of Maryland." In 1914, Irving Berlin, a quintessential New Yorker, even came up with "I Want to Go Back to Michigan."

#### Cole Porter's Scandal

Indeed, Berlin's songbook, more than most, reveals the Tin Pan Alley perspective. The Russian immigrant, who celebrates his 100th birthday this year, composed an ode to ethnic assimilation, "Yiddle on Your Fiddle" (1909), and also wrote classic songs that helped create common secular images for Christian holidays: "White Christmas" and "Easter Parade." (Less memorable was Berlin's attempt at a Thanksgiving hymn, "I Have so much To Be Thankful for.")

More than anything else, of course, the Tin Pan Alley composers produced songs about matters of the heart. Sentimental morality plays in the style of "After the Ball" fell out of fashion after the turn of the century, and Tin Pan Alley deserted the form without looking back. In many ways, however, the perspective and implicit lessons remained the same. Writing frequently in a more intimate, first-person vein, the leading love balladeers—Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, George and Ira Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Johnny Mercer, Harold Arlen—infused their songs with adult themes and a poignant sense of personal experience.

The new frankness inevitably led to occasional scandals. Cole Porter's "Love for Sale" (1930), for example, was banned from the airwaves by most local radio stations, more for its title, apparently, than for its sobering message:

Let the poets pipe of love  
 In their childish way,  
 I know ev'ry type of love

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Better far than they  
 If you want the thrill of love  
 I've been thru the mill of love,  
 Old love, new love,  
 Ev'ry love but true love.

Tin Pan Alley assumed that marriage and family were integral to "true love." Romance was more than a matter of hormones. Not that its view of love and family was utopian. Consider the 1928 hit by Walter Donaldson and Gus Kahn, "Makin' Whoopee"—which, in detailing the effects of an impetuous fling, reinforced the then-common belief that romance generally led to responsibility and its burdens.

Picture a little love nest  
 Out where the air is clean  
 Picture the same sweet love nest  
 See what a year can bring  
 He's washin' dishes, baby clothes  
 He's so ambitious, he even sews  
 But don't forget folks  
 That's what you get folks  
 When you make whoopee.

Because audiences expected an adult view of the world, Tin Pan Alley could deal with some of the harsher realities of life: the plight of the aging woman, hoping against hope for the arrival of "The Man I Love" (George and Ira Gershwin, 1924), or the affection that survives "Come Rain or Come Shine" (Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer, 1946) for reasons that only adults, conscious of their own limitations and those of their partners, can understand. Singers as different in their appeal as Doris Day and Billie Holiday, or Bing Crosby and Billy Eckstine, performed the songs for an audience that spanned the generations, as well as the races and social classes.

### Hound Dog

What killed Tin Pan Alley? The music publishers on West 28th Street began to disappear as early as the 1920s, when the rise of the phonograph diminished sheet music sales. Another blow came in 1927; Al Jolson's sensational appearance in *The Jazz Singer*, the first full-length talking picture, prompted Hollywood film executives to buy out many New York music publishers and to lure songwriters out West.

Still, the Tin Pan Alley style and sensibility survived, even if the place itself had vanished. Through the 1930s and '40s, film musicals and network radio shows such as "Make Believe Ballroom" carried Tin Pan Alley's tunes to a national audience. Then, as historian James Morris

wrote, the rise of television during the 1950s gradually killed off many network radio broadcasts. Increasingly, "the radio waves were turned over to inexpensive and locally produced disc-jockey shows . . . Radio stations began to serve specialized audiences, playing only records by country musicians, or only rhythm and blues."

"Hillbilly" and "race" music, which had been growing and crosspollinating since the turn of the century, richly deserved a wider audience. But their arrival on the airwaves heralded the splintering of America's popular music culture. Now, rural white Southerners and blacks in the big cities each had their own music.

The energized hybrid of country and rhythm and blues, rock-and-roll, would be a rich new indigenous American art form. But the beat, the melodies (or lack of them), and the very message of rock music were pitched exclusively to another large specialized radio audience of the 1950s—the emerging baby boom generation.

The lyrics of the earliest rock songs did not explicitly cater to youthful sensibilities. Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog," for example, was originally a blues hit for Willie Mae Thornton, written as a woman's complaint about a freeloading man: "You ain't nothin' but a hound dog."

As a result of rock's sudden popularity, witty and inventive writers such as Chuck Berry and the prolific team of Jerry Lieber and Mike



*Rock in the USSR: Moscow's popular Mister Twister pays homage to Elvis Presley and the rock-and-roll of the 1950s. Along with movies and blue jeans, rock music is one of America's most successful cultural exports.*

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Stoller, who once might have made careers in Tin Pan Alley, devoted themselves instead to writing music for teens. Lieber and Stoller's 1957 hit "Yakety Yak," performed by the Coasters, satirized parents who imposed restrictions on their offspring:

Take out the papers and the trash  
 Or you don't get no spending cash  
 Just tell your hoodlum friends outside  
 You ain't got time to take a ride  
 Yakety yak  
 Don't talk back.

For a time, mainstream America sought to embrace or at least contain rock. Ed Sullivan, whose Sunday night television variety show (1948–71) was in some ways the last vestige of the old-time vaudeville hall, with a faithful national audience of all ages, showcased Elvis Presley and the Beatles. But Sullivan's producers felt compelled to show "Elvis the Pelvis" only from the waist up; rock-and-roll was not family music.

During the 1960s, virtually all popular music came to be defined as the province of the young. When Berry Gordy, Jr.'s Motown Records began to dominate pop music with a Tin Pan Alley-style stable of brilliant black singers and songwriters, Gordy felt constrained to market Motown as "the sound of Young America." By 1969, when half a million youngsters gathered at Woodstock, New York, to smoke marijuana and celebrate peace and love (and, nominally, to protest the Vietnam War), the schism between the generations was deep. One of the acts at Woodstock was the Who, a British group known (and admired) for smashing its instruments on stage during major performances. "(Talkin' About) My Generation," their signature song, summed up the youth culture's attitude toward adulthood: "Hope I die before I get old."

### **Mock Hangings and Electrocutions**

The rise of a popular music meant exclusively for the ears of the young had predictable results. Rock—lyrics, music, and performances alike—crystallized a generation's ennui, but it also descended into adolescent fantasy, despondency, and self-indulgence. Romance, the great subject of Tin Pan Alley, was replaced by sex, the great preoccupation of teen-agers. The love songs of rock are—with some exceptions—about initial attraction far more than the complexities of what might follow. "Come on, baby, light my fire," the Doors' invitation in 1967, is a long way from Cole Porter's "What is this thing called love?" (1929).

The challenge to adult authority that began in wiseacre innocence with "Yakety-Yak" during the 1950s took a turn toward overt rebellion during the early 1960s under the influence of Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, among others, and finally veered into nihilism. By

### REACTING TO ROCK

Rock-and-roll "is sung, played and written for the most part by cretinous goons and by means of its almost imbecilic reiteration and sly, lewd, in plain fact, dirty lyrics . . . [it] manages to be the martial music of every side-burned delinquent on the face of the earth."

Thus, in 1958, singer Frank Sinatra expressed the antipathy of many adults toward the raucous music that was pulling teen-aged fans away from the wholesome sounds of Pat Boone and Patti Page. At times during the 1950s, some parents did more than worry out loud. Authorities in New Haven, Connecticut, outlawed rock-and-roll dances; the Catholic Youth Organization urged teens to smash all the rock records they owned. One Columbia University psychiatrist likened the "prehistoric rhythmic trance" and wild gyrations induced by rock-and-roll to the medieval affliction St. Vitus Dance, where "as in drug addiction . . . a thousand years of civilization fall away in a moment."

Thirty years after Sinatra spoke out, the music that once scandalized parents has been assimilated to such an extent that it is used to advertise everything from Big Macs to Chevrolets. The early history of rock has been reduced to pop mythology: The young "taught a lesson" to an ignorant America.

During the same 30 years, however, the content of rock lyrics has changed dramatically. Rock idols, no longer confined by convention to innuendo and suggestion, now sing not only about sex but also about sexual perversion and violence. "Whips, chains, handcuffs and leather masks are being popularized in songs and as images in videos and on album covers," writes Tipper Gore, wife of Senator Albert Gore (D-Tenn.). The most objectionable songs tend to be performed by "heavy metal" bands and other groups that appeal chiefly to the youngest (often pre-teen) listeners.

Gore became concerned over the content of these songs in 1985, when she discovered a song about a masturbating female "sex fiend" on a Prince album in her 11-year-old daughter's collection. Along with other prominent Washington wives, Gore organized the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC). In a highly publicized Senate hearing in September 1985, Gore and her colleagues called on the record industry to put warning labels voluntarily on records containing sexually explicit lyrics. The PMRC also urged record companies to

the early 1970s, Detroit-born Alice Cooper (née Vincent Furnier) was delighting youthful fans with his boast, "I'm 18, I don't know what I want" (he was 25 at the time), accompanied by a stage show that featured mock hangings and electrocutions. *Rolling Stone's* history of rock music hailed Cooper's act as "the hippest rock rebellion yet."

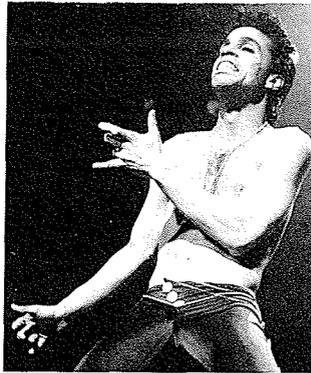
By the end of the 1970s, this lone rock star's bizarre and troubling antics were being reproduced on a mass scale by the "punk" music movement and its offshoots, spearheaded by the likes of Sid Vicious and the Sex Pistols. Today, the teen-agers of Middle America routinely don punk regalia—black pants and shirts, chains and studs, hair dyed Halloween colors—to impress their peers at suburban shopping malls. Punk

print lyrics on album jackets to alert parents to the contents.

Most disturbing, according to Gore, are the dozens of songs that portray "sadomasochism, killing and raping as [a] . . . normal way to treat women." The popular group Judas Priest, for example, sings of forcing a girl at gunpoint to have oral sex. In Mötley Crüe's million-selling "Too Young to Fall in Love," the band sings, "Not a woman, but a whore/I can taste the hate./Well, now I'm killing you/Watch your face turning blue."

To Gore's surprise, she found herself denounced, as she put it, as "a prude, a censor, a music hater, even a book burner."

Civil libertarians and music industry executives, ignoring the fact that the PMRC had asked only for voluntary labeling, attacked the proposals as "a complete intrusion on artistic expression." Other critics have raised practical objections. One is the sheer size of the task of rating records: While about 300 movies are rated every year, the record industry pumps out some 25,000 new rock songs. Moreover, contends industry spokesman Stanley Gortikov, "lyrics are not like motion pictures. Standards, precise standards cannot be developed for language."



*Prince*

Nevertheless, in November 1985, the Recording Industry Association of America, representing most major U.S. record companies, agreed to a compromise. The companies would either put warning labels on albums containing "explicit" lyrics or print the words on the album jackets. But it was left to individual record companies to decide what is "explicit."

Since then, Gore writes, "some companies have complied in good faith, although others have not complied at all." Reluctant to concede failure, the PMRC is now concentrating on alerting parents and teachers to the dangers of media "sexploitation." The defenders of Mötley Crüe and Judas Priest, meanwhile, seem convinced that the next generation will regard them, like the defenders of Elvis Presley during the 1950s, as enlightened heroes.

music and its fashion "look," like virtually all the youth styles and fads (e.g., high-decibel "boom boxes") before and since, is also a calculated affront to adult sensibilities, or at least a flouting of convention. It is the musical equivalent of subway graffiti.

There are, of course, popular stars who have not embraced the juvenile preoccupations of rock. Ray Charles—one of the nation's premier popular singers, though not necessarily a "rock" artist—integrates virtually all strains of American music, from rhythm and blues to country, into his repertoire. In the patriotic Tin Pan Alley tradition, he has made "America the Beautiful" his signature tune. Aretha Franklin certainly rivals any of the great singers of the 1930s in sophistication and

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emotional depth. And the staying power of many Beatles songs (e.g., "Yesterday" and "In My Life") is due in part to the fact that the group was able at times to transcend purely youthful concerns. More recently, rock superstar Bruce Springsteen has established himself as a sophisticated story-telling songwriter.

A few other stars have also grown disenchanted with the adolescent posturing of rock. In recent years, longtime rocker Linda Ronstadt has recorded two collections of Tin Pan Alley standards, complete with orchestral backing. Buster Poindexter, the flamboyant former member of the New York Dolls, has taken to reviving standards as well. On a recent *Tonight Show*, Poindexter said he had tired of rock concerts that reminded him of "Hitler youth rallies."

Revivals, however, are not the same as a living musical culture. And even when rock songs are subtle and mature, they are not likely to have much impact on young listeners. The words *are* hard to understand; the youth fads and antics that surround rock do not encourage adult sentiments. For a possible successor to the Tin Pan Alley tradition, one has to look South, in the unlikely direction of Nashville's Music Row.

Today, scores of talented young singers and songwriters hoping to capture the attention of publishers or record producers head for Nashville—to its ultramodern studios sprinkled among the fast food franchises on the outskirts of town, and to 16th Avenue in the old downtown, near the original Grand Ole Opry house and songwriter hangouts such as Tootsie's Orchid Lounge.

Most "cosmopolitan" music fans in New York or Los Angeles would be loathe to admit it, but much of the nation's most sophisticated popular music today is coming out of Nashville.

### Country Grows Up

Of course, Nashville has been a major force in popular music for decades. During World War II, the music of Roy Acuff and his Smoky Mountain Boys (e.g., "The Great Speckle[d] Bird") became so popular among G.I.'s overseas that Japanese troops taunted them by shouting "to hell with Roy Acuff!" The mixing of men from North and South, East and West, in military units gave wider exposure to what had been a regional phenomenon. When they returned home, ex-G.I.'s all over the country began tuning in the Grand Ole Opry, the weekly live radio broadcast from Nashville's WSM. The Opry sound had distinctly Southern roots in fiddle tunes and bluegrass, but it also had been keeping alive the sentimental ballad tradition of the 1890s.

By the 1950s, songs reflecting the exigencies of life—the truck driver who sacrifices his life to save a bus full of school children (Red Sovine's "Phantom 309") or the convict who dreams of his small-town youth while he awaits execution (Porter Wagoner's "Green Green Grass of Home")—had become virtually the exclusive province of Nashville.



*Country goes mainstream: On her weekly TV variety show, Dolly Parton welcomes country-western veteran Willie Nelson, who has revived "Blue Skies" and other Tin Pan Alley standards.*

(Black gospel music, with a considerably narrower audience, also continued the story-telling tradition.)

Country-western music was an important element of the mix that became rock-and-roll. Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis had their roots in up-tempo country, or "rockabilly." But Nashville continued along its own evolutionary path after the 1950s: The Sun Belt's prosperity and the dispersion of Southerners to the North and West spread the Nashville sound, and the new audiences pushed it in more sophisticated musical and lyrical directions.

Like Tin Pan Alley, Nashville had to keep its ear to the ground. As its listeners left the farms for the tract housing of Houston, Atlanta, and Bakersfield, Nashville kept up—fashioning a music that spoke to the condition of more and more Americans. Instead of the "home out on a rural route" described in a heavy twang by Hank Williams, the "hillbilly Shakespeare," during the early 1950s, Nashville stalwarts such as George Jones and Tammy Wynette are now more likely to sing of life in a "Two-Story House" (by Wynette, Glenn Tubb, and David Lindsey):

She: "I have my story"  
 He: "I have mine, too"  
 Both: "How sad it is  
 We now live  
 In a two-story house."

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Today, in commercial terms, country is not nearly as big as rock, annually claiming some \$400 million in record sales compared to rock's \$1.6 billion. But Nashville's appeal, like Tin Pan Alley's before it, is intergenerational. Country music concerts, whether at state fairs or in high school gyms, attract gray heads as well as grandchildren. A recent Country Music Foundation survey of the audience at a major country music festival, for instance, found that 19 percent were between 26 and 35 years old, and 18 percent were 56 and over.

### A Fragmented Culture

Over the years, country has strengthened its claim to be our national music. Nashville now welcomes both black and Mexican-American stars—Charlie Pride is black, Freddy Fender is Hispanic. It is also, like Tin Pan Alley, a source of idealistic anthems (which are not always predictably right-of-center in their sentiments) about the nation as a whole. Waylon Jennings' recent hit "America," for example, praises the veteran who fought in Vietnam, but adds:

And the ones who could not fight  
 In a war that didn't seem right  
 You welcomed them home  
 America, America.

Bruce Springsteen and a few other rock and "urban contemporary" (black) stars do occasionally come up with songs that have a sense of the trials and triumphs of daily life as lived by ordinary Americans. But only Nashville is doing so consistently. Its songs may not always match those of classic Tin Pan Alley in grace and subtlety, but the same sense of adult experience and maturity pervades what my local country-western radio station likes to call "songs about love and life, sung straight from the heart."

The reigning king and queen of country are singers Randy Travis and Reba McEntire: She is a former rodeo rider from Oklahoma, he, a onetime Nashville catfish cook.

In "Somebody Should Leave" (by Charles Rains and Harlan Howard) McEntire captures the pathos of a couple considering separation—but mindful of the consequences.

Somebody should leave  
 But which one should it be  
 You need the kids  
 And they need me.

In "Forever and Ever, Amen," the biggest country hit of 1987, Travis pledges fidelity in marriage "as long as old men sit and talk about

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the weather/As long as old women sit and talk about the old men." The music video of the song even recalls the story line of "After the Ball," with vignettes from what appears to be the wedding of Travis's real-life sister, where young nieces and nephews beg their uncle for a song. The video, like the song, emphasizes kinship across the generations.

At times, country music has explicitly embraced the Tin Pan Alley tradition. The Country Music Association paid tribute to Irving Berlin during its televised annual awards ceremony two years ago; Willie Nelson has revived and reinterpreted "Stardust," "Blue Skies," and other standards. Accepting a Grammy award this year for writing (with Paul Overstreet) "Forever and Ever, Amen," songwriter Don Schlitz said: "I grew up hearing about a place in New York . . . called Tin Pan Alley, and grew up listening to the music from Motown and the Brill Building, where a bunch of people went into rooms and banged out a song. And that tradition lives on in our hometown in Nashville, Tennessee. And I am very proud to be a part of it—one of those guys who goes into an office every day and writes a song."

Yet Nashville's appeal does have its limits, both of region and of class. "Sophisticated" listeners, who may still relish Gershwin and Porter, generally have little enthusiasm for country-western music. Nor is Nashville likely to get much of a hearing from teen-aged rock fans.

Nothing more aptly symbolizes the fragmentation of our popular musical culture than the headphone selections offered on commercial airline flights: Channel One for classics, Two for country, Three for rock, Four for jazz, and so on.

Today, Americans seem to share fewer and fewer tastes in national entertainment of any kind—from movies to television programs to radio. We have extraordinary electronic technology, but we lack songwriters like Irving Berlin, described more than half a century ago by his colleague Jerome Kern as an artist who "absorbs the vibrations emanating from the people, manners, and life of his time and, in turn, gives these impressions back to the world—simplified, glorified, clarified."

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