

POP AND CIRCUMSTANCE

IS POPULAR MUSIC JUST A BIT OF FUN OR SOMETHING THAT CAN PROMPT EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS? TOM HAWKING DELVES DEEP INTO THE OSTENSIBLY SHALLOW HIT PARADE.



IN 1996, *Harper's* magazine printed an essay by the late American author David Foster Wallace about a week on a Caribbean cruise ship. The idea was that the magazine would send him on the trip and get him to write about the experience. Nice work if you can get it, you might say. But, as it panned out, he hated it, and the resultant essay (republished in his 1997 non-fiction collection, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*) is classic Wallace: acerbic, perceptive and frequently hilarious.

He wrote: "There's something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that's unbearably sad. Like most unbearably sad things, it seems incredibly elusive and complex in its causes and simple in its effect: on board the [ship] – especially at night, when all the ship's structured fun and reassurances and gaiety-noise ceased – I felt despair. The word is overused and banalified now, despair, but it's a serious word, and I'm using it seriously. For me it denotes a simple admixture – a weird yearning for death combined with a crushing sense of my own smallness and futility that presents as a fear of death."

This particular excerpt got me thinking about how experiences that are supposed to be 'just a bit of fun' can induce a profound sense of futility and dread: to wit, listening to pop music. This may sound overly dramatic (and it may indeed be overly dramatic) but still, the music we are supposed to *want* to listen to says a great deal about us and the world we live in.

The most frequent accusation bandied at chart pop music is that it is formulaic and has little to do with creativity or artistic expression. In one sense, this isn't so much an accusation as a truism. The whole idea of the four-minute chart single is an accident of history, dictated by the technical limitations of the seven-inch gramophone disc. The format has stuck, and decades of refinement have contributed to the evolution of what we call the pop song. This accumulated experience can certainly be distilled into a set of de facto rules about what works and what doesn't. A formula, if you will.

But still, it's worth thinking about exactly what this means. The idea that music can be analysed so reductively has an uncomfortable implication: that the nature of the things we enjoy can be quantified and distilled into some ideal form, designed for optimum effect and mass appeal.

Idealists would argue that a song should be written purely as self-expression, with no thought of an audience. This is nonsense – everyone wants to be heard. But with pop music the balance has shifted so dramatically that any semblance

of self-expression is gone. The music has been produced for one reason: to sell. It has nothing to say beyond "buy me". In the same way that fast-food companies do their best to design their food to keep you coming back, pop music is designed to keep you listening and buying – particularly if you fall into the key demographic that only buys a few records a year.

The ideal end product is a 'classic', which in this context basically means a record that never stops selling. When everything comes together, you get a song like, say, Cher's 'Believe' (1998), which to many is a dreadful song, but has nevertheless sold millions of copies worldwide on the back of a then-novel Auto-Tune pitch-correction effect.

Commercial songwriters and producers are constantly searching for a similarly pop-tastic philosopher's stone. This doesn't, of course, mean that any of this theory is guaranteed to work: just as there are plenty of big-budget films that have stiffed, a great many expensively produced albums have sold disastrously. The public are a fickle bunch. But that's beside the point. If a large volume of music is made with the same intention, there's inevitably a homogenisation, a leaning towards features that do work, or *have* worked – hence the Auto-Tune epidemic, which shows no sign of abating 12 years after 'Believe' unleashed it on the world.

It is generally at about this point in discussions about pop music that people start calling me a miserable bastard. They insist it's all 'just a bit of fun' and tell me I should lighten up. All three points are probably valid, but so is this one: music is something we should take seriously. Not seriously in a beard-stroking Dylan-fan kind of way, but seriously in the sense that it is serious art. It is powerful. It can affect you viscerally and



cerebrally, sometimes simultaneously. It can make you dance and make you think.

This isn't, I hasten to add, an argument that music (or art) should always be po-faced and serious. Maudlin Céline Dion balladry can be just as emotionally manipulative and hollow as four-to-the-floor let's-get-this-party-started anthems. The point is this: if music is nothing more than a disposable background soundtrack; if art is nothing more than pretty pictures to hang on walls; if photography is happy snaps from last night to put on Facebook; then what is the point of any of it? If art has nothing to say, then what is it *for*?

The answer, presumably, is that it's 'just a bit of fun' – nothing more, nothing less. This, I think, is desperately sad. And 'desperately', in this case, comes straight from 'despair'.

Tom Hawking's last contribution to The Big Issue was an interview with the Drones' Gareth Liddiard in Ed#366.

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