

American Atomization

The Atomization of America and its Popular Music Culture

By Todd Rongstad

A significant cultural shift in the American community is underway that is reflected in dramatic form by a comparative consideration of popular music and its cultural processes over the last century. A fundamentally singular popular culture of the twentieth century is atomizing into infinite parts in the twenty-first. At the same time, we are in the midst of rapid change in popular music culture relative to consumer behavior and genre fracture and its proliferation. These parallel changes in societal and musical culture are more than mere coincidence—they are a popular culture reflection of transformational societal change.

This report will analyze the dramatic change underway in American music production and consumption, and consider this key aspect of popular culture as a bellwether of transformational change in the individual's relationship and engagement with the larger community. We must first consider popular music's profound and market-driven relationship with larger culture, and assess its efficacy in helping us understand an era and its *zeitgeist* (spirit of the age). A look at a prior era in American music juxtaposed with the digital maelstrom of today, as well as the transformation of genre, will then help us frame the territory for further comparison and conclusion.

In order to establish the significance of popular music as a window into a time, it will be helpful to examine earlier efforts to understand the relationship between art and culture

by introducing the idea of the *Kunstwollen*. A recently issued collection of the writings of German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), highlights the significance of this theory, originally posited by the German art historian, Alois Riegl, in the late nineteenth century. The collection's editors, Jennings, Doherty, and Levin, write,

Riegl strove . . . to develop a model of historical causality that could help explain changes in style. At the heart of a complex answer to this question is his theory of *Kunstwollen*—the manner in which a specific culture seeks to give form, color, and line to its art. . . . Riegl sought to show how art tracked major shifts in the structure and attitudes of collectives: societies, races, ethnic groups, and so on. *Kunstwollen* is the artistic projection of a collective intention. . . . Works of art—or rather details within the works of art—are thus the clearest source of a very particular kind of historical information. They encode not just the character of the artistic production of the age, but the character of parallel features of the society: its religion, philosophy, ethical structure, and institutions.¹

In other words, the popular art of a society is a direct expression of that culture and its perspective. When considered fully, art as encoder of cultural information means much more than the superficial. As Andy Warhol's art of commerce and celebrity (and technological reproducibility) can be seen to mirror the America of the 1970s. The popular culture—what moves people—can help us recognize and perhaps decipher the actual working cultural mechanisms of a particular time and place.

Riegl and Benjamin's idea of *Kunstwollen* would seem to have an even greater force in our vastly more advanced technological age of artistic reproducibility, and popular music—along with film—is an ideal medium for consideration of the encoded message from a broad popular culture. The editors of the Benjamin collection expand on this cornerstone concept of human collective perception by stipulating:

Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception.” In this line from section IV of the famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” . . . Benjamin defines programmatically the field in which his work on modern media moves. Within that field—of historical change in the human sensorium—Benjamin concentrates on two questions: the capacity of the artwork to encode information about its historical period (and, in so doing, potentially to reveal to readers and viewers

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael Jennings, Bridgid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin; trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 10.

otherwise inapprehensible aspects of the nature of their own era), and the way in which modern media—as genres and as individual works—affect the changing human sensory apparatus.²

Though there is much to consider in this paragraph, we must stand on the ground with Benjamin in analyzing music and popular culture as a societal mirror and also consider how the accelerated digitization and dispersal of modern media reflects humanity's understanding of and approach to the world. Given that Benjamin wrote while film and recorded music were in their infancy, we will need to extrapolate his conclusions forward into a world where the nature of the “human sensorium” would be almost unrecognizable to a European scholar of the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, his insights into the relationship between human collectives and popular culture seem to stand the test of time—or even ring truer today given how technology has democratized the experience of entertainment in popular culture.

I want to go a bit deeper into Benjamin's idea in order to lay the groundwork for later conclusions and to tie his analysis more directly into the power of music as a communal force and a *Kunstwollen* of epic societal representation. Benjamin's ideas are particularly interesting as he delves into the relationship of modern media with the cosmology of the ancients. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction and Other Writings on Media*, the editors write,

For Benjamin, integration into the Western tradition is coterminous with an integration into cultic practices: “Originally, the embeddedness of an artwork in the context of tradition found expression in a cult. As we know, the earlier artworks originated in the service of rituals. . . . In other words: *the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art always has its basis in ritual.*”³

Understanding the world of popular music in the last century in conjunction with cultic practices seems a particularly rich mine for greater understanding. The ecstatic and adoring crowds who saw The Beatles performing at Shea Stadium or the “Summer of Love,” the peace and chaos of the Woodstock Festival are indeed modern day examples of what we understand of ancient cults of worship—from the painters of Chauvet Cave, to the builders of Stonehenge or Chartres Cathedral. Most importantly, relative to our topic, music is a

² Ibid., 9.

³ Ibid., 15.

manifestation of both ancient and profound human desires and a reflection of the nature of that society itself.

Benjamin extends this identification with a particularly insightful articulation of man's historic and prehistoric relationship to the cosmos and communality:

The ancients' intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance [Rausch]. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us, and never of one another without the other. This means, however, that man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally. It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights. It is not; its hour strikes again and again, and then neither nations or generations can escape it, as was made terribly clear by the last war, which was an attempt at new and unprecedented commingling with the cosmic powers.⁴

Here, Benjamin is addressing a number of points central to our thesis. First is his trenchant observation of the ecstatic trance as an ancient manner of gaining knowledge of the cosmos as an exclusively communal practice. Rather than a simplistic endorsement of spirituality—Benjamin's analysis provides us with something much more profound relative to human experience. When he writes that “we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us through ecstatic communal contact with the cosmos,” he could be speaking directly to modern man's quest for connection, representation, and voice in modern media and popular music culture.

When Marvin Gaye sang “What's Going On?” in 1971, was he not speaking communally for a time and a generation? And while the communal upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s provides the most obvious examples of artistic *Kunstwollen*, this process seems to continue today while altering and reflecting the times and its technology. The advent of recorded music, and other media, at the turn of the twentieth century, created a unique space for the study of humankind and our relationship to the cosmos and each other. Radio, television, and movies in popular culture both reflect the *Kunstwollen* of a time and establish a broader culture of shared human experience, thus opening the culture of the village, valley, or neighborhood up to the possibility of wider communality and shared (cultural) experience.

1930s America is a particularly enlightening place to bring Benjamin's concept of *Kunstwollen* into the real world of twentieth-century popular culture. An exploration of Depression-era artistic expression, as well as a more specific and in-depth look at the Carter

⁴ Ibid., 58.

Family will enable us to identify how the combination of new technology and folk tradition were woven into a more broad-based popular culture, never before possible in a pre-modern world defined as much by separation and distance as by communal experience. This place and time is both a crucible of change and a high watermark for the development of shared communal experience in the wide and diverse world of the United States of America. This age and the dissemination of its popular music will also serve as a key point of return during our ultimate consideration of modern-day musical community and its atomization.

A particularly observant work written by the scholar Morris Dickstein, entitled *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*, does an exceptional job of examining popular culture during this period and its direct reflection of a very powerful and frightening time in our history. Although Dickstein makes no explicit connection to *Kunstwollen*, he is obviously speaking about similar processes when he writes,

The transition from vaudeville to radio, from silent film to talking film, from live music and sheet music to recorded and broadcast music, all gave impetus to a more pervasive popular culture that reached a huge new audience. . . . The living room intimacy of FDR's fireside radio chats and later the orotund periods of Churchill's stirring oratory were matched by the malignant power of Hitler's hypnotic speeches. From his parish near Detroit, Father Charles Coughlin, the populist priest, could use the radio to stir up grievance and resentment, but it also enabled FDR to create the feeling of community, a shared perception of crisis, hope, or reassurance, a sense that someone cared and was not daunted or afraid.⁵

One cannot underestimate the significance of this change in American and world culture. New technologies opened the way for a more national culture by providing a mechanism for broader community and shared experience. In pre-mass-communication America, community was a smaller place of neighbors helping neighbors and coming together in town squares, tenement neighborhoods, or rural valleys. This regionalism diminished, and a shared American culture strengthened, as radio began training American ears in a common direction.

Dickstein goes on to emphasize the significance of this change:

The thirties also witnessed the momentous growth of a new kind of popular culture in America, national rather than regional, amplified by technology,

⁵ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: a Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), xvii.

creating new folkways in a country still relatively isolated from the world. . . . Thanks to the new media, created by early twentieth-century technology, the thirties proved to be a turning point in American popular culture. Radio had grown exponentially in the late 1920s. By the early 1930s it came of age, binding together audiences living far apart with shared amusements as well as anxieties.⁶

The families that had grown up listening mostly to their neighbors and getting their news from various print sources, their entertainment from traveling shows or the relatively new phonographic record, could now all gather around a radio and hear the same material as strangers across the country. Rather than a distant echo of events or the occasional communal thrill of a live musical performance, Americans started to share their experience in real time. Shared crises like the Great Depression and World War II would weave American diversity into a quilt of shared experiences, exemplified by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR's) fireside chats or the foundational country music of the Carter Family from Poor County, Virginia.

The story of the Carter Family is an exceptional representation of what can happen when music that resonates with an immense community is given the pioneering opportunity to reach that audience. In their in-depth study of the Carter Family, entitled *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone*, co-authors Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirschberg try to sum up the unique appeal of the Carters by writing,

What set the Carters' music apart from the crowded field of country acts was the intimacy of their harmonies; the closeness of Sara and Maybelle, the twenty-nine year old guitar player, who sounded for all the world like a single person with four arms playing two instruments at once; and the unself-conscious ease with which A.P.'s high bass strolled in and out of each song, as if he were leaving the studio from time to time to chop some wood or hoe some corn, then returning to join the singing when the chores were done. There was nothing squared off or predictable about the way they made music, and their genius was giving a modern sustain to decades- and centuries old songs. "They were the best loved in our valley," remembers one Arkansan whose entire family would walk three miles to the nearest neighbor with a radio, "They were singing our songs."⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirschberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone? The Carter Family and Their Legacy in Country Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 5-6.

In an America unsettled by the stresses and separations of the Depression, the Carter Family struck a musical and narrative chord that spoke to the souls of country people across the nation. Whether still living in rural valleys or looking for work in the big cities, much of America could tune in to the Carter Family and feel a shared connection to their old country home.

As we attempt to understand the relationship between American popular music of yesterday and today, we must spend some time discussing the nature of musical genre and its meaning in popular culture. The major categories of American music in the twentieth century were consumed by a national audience that was listening with one ear. Popular music was produced by a centralized industry and distributed in identifiable formats. Yes, certain people listened to country music and others listened to Top 40, or rhythm and blues—but the sources for American music were rather homogeneous in nature. Large record labels like Columbia and Victor bought up their smaller competitors and controlled the marketplace; radio stations soon followed strictly limited formats meant to appeal to a specific kind of general audience. While variation and innovation did occur, the industry itself was designed to push artists into particularly safe, sellable and definable categories. The audience had little option but to choose from the musical styles and genres that it found on its radio stations and in its record stores.

In an investigatory work, written ten years ago about the music industry, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, author Keith Negus somewhat critically expounds on the practices of a label and Top 40 dominated century of the music industry that was approaching transformational jolts:

When we hear our favorite performer singing to us, whether we are driving through open spaces in the country or immersed in the sounds of a personal stereo on a crowded bus or train, it is easy to forget the business context within which popular music is recorded and circulated. When the musician's artistry connects directly with our daily lives and everyday concerns, it is perhaps inevitable (and probably necessary) that we suspend belief and knowledge of how the music we are listening to has come to be heard in this way. Yet the mundane mediations of the music industries are important, and have a direct impact on the songs that come to be recorded and the way we get to hear them.⁸

⁸ Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 172.

This music industry mediation was soon to be challenged further by the technology of the internet and the digital revolution, but it is a telling and recent reminder of how record labels and relatively few people at the top managed a national marketplace of one listening audience that could be reached in only a number of predictable ways. Artists and innovation were only incidentally a part of this process, and only when stylistic shifts tapped into a *zeitgeist* that the record label and radio station managers could eventually translate into profit.

In Fabian Holt's influential 2007 study, *Genre in Popular Music*, he describes genre as the way that the world understood its music throughout the twentieth century and pulled it together into understandable and marketable categories.⁹ Prior to the fragmentation of Top 40 radio, one resident of western Wisconsin in the 1970s, would listen to WAXX and consider himself a fan of country music, while another would listen to his only popular music station, Z100, and consume only whatever its programmers and the record labels provided. While there have always been aficionados who looked further and dug deeper for musical sustenance, the vast majority of Americans settled into a category of commercial and monolithic spoon-feeding.

The music industry itself, of course guided by the reactions of popular taste and record sales, was for most of the century the filter that prevented certain musical trends and promoted others. This machine killed the raw sexuality of Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry, and promoted the homogeneousness and interchangeability of Frankie Avalon or Fabian. More importantly, the filter of the major labels and the national network of rigidly formatted radio stations was in many ways a continuation of what the Carter Family had made possible. The music industry discovered formulas that worked and then rushed in to manufacture a product that would satisfy the needs of that audience.

But then—in music and culture—something, perhaps everything, began to move in a more atomized direction.

The transformation of Top 40 radio is an integral source for a better understanding of what happened to the music industry's singular national marketplace. The trends in popular radio from the 1960s to the 1990s anticipate, in many ways, the exponential changes

⁹ Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2-3.

that would occur with today's digital music revolution. In a book entitled *The Hits Just Keep On Coming*, by Ben Fong-Torres written in 1998, he quotes music radio executive Bill Gavin:

Ask not what happened to Top 40 radio. Ask rather what's happened to the competition. The answer is "diversification." In other words, specialization: a concentrated appeal to a selected segment of the available audience.¹⁰

Fong-Torres goes on to say, "Bill Gavin wrote that in 1966, in response to declining ratings for Top 40. A quarter century later, as the nineties began, radio continued to fragment, and, as Top 40 ratings dipped, station owners looked to flip formats.¹¹ . . . This statement of fact from the radio industry is another important marker in the move from one audience to many. While the change from the Carter Family and FDR, to the proliferation of subcategory radio stations across the dial did not happen overnight, it has continued to happen at a steady pace. People developed different tastes than their neighbors and radio market atomization ensued.

In the groundbreaking work, *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, social scientist Robert Putnam sounded the alarm about transformational changes underway in American society relative to the loss of community. In his book, Putnam argues that social bonds and civic engagement have plummeted over the last third of the twentieth century. Putnam's critique is built on the theory of social capital—the idea that connections among individuals provide great value to a society. His work, and subsequent research, has proven that social capital is on the decline. And, most interestingly for our purposes, the period of this decline corresponds directly to four decades of genre-marketplace-community atomization in the music industry.

In summarizing his findings, Putnam writes of both the way things were and how they have changed:

During the first two-thirds of the century Americans took a more and more active role in the social and political life of their communities—in churches and union halls, in bowling alleys and clubrooms, around committee tables and card tables and dinner tables. . . . Then, mysteriously and more or less simultaneously, we began to do all those things less often . . . compared with our recent past, we are less connected. We remain interested and critical spectators of the public scene. We kibitz, but we don't play. We maintain a

¹⁰ Ben Fong-Torres, *The Hits Just Keep On Coming: The History of Top 40 Radio* (San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 1998), 245.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

façade of formal affiliation, but we rarely show up. We have invented new ways of expressing our demands that demand less of us. We are less likely to turn out for collective deliberation—whether in the voting booth or the meeting hall—and when we do, we find discouragingly few of our friends and neighbors have shown up. We are less generous with our money and . . . with our time, and we are less likely to give strangers the benefit of the doubt. They, of course, return the favor.¹²

The reasons for these changes in society are many (from suburbanization to interstate highways, to war and Watergate, to cable television, to higher divorce rates, to technology, the internet, globalization, and many others) but the conclusions are inescapable: people are less connected to their neighbors and their communities, and there is an increased experience of separation and alienation from the larger society. Changes in the world of music have mirrored these seldom-noted societal realities in a similarly stunning and transformational manner.

Ironically, technological advances that made the Carter Family and a fundamentally homogeneous American popular music marketplace possible are playing a similar role in its dissolution and atomization. The twentieth century was primarily an era of a small array of genres dominated by an ever-changing, but singular American pop music scene. This near singular musical marketplace atomized into genre and subgenre, and increasingly narrowed and targeted radio programming. When we look further in time to the digital iPod culture of today, this fragmentation of the American music marketplace has become even more profound. The proliferation of radio subcategories was a mere foreshadowing of the immense change to come.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the current accelerated dissolution of American popular music culture is to consider how consumers themselves attempt to describe modern musical genre. If we count the musical subgenres on the consumer-written site Wikipedia,—www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Music_genres—we come up with a total of 740 separate genres as of December 8, 2011, and this count is clearly only in the early stages of accelerated distinction and separation in today's musical culture. Setting aside the issue of that genre lists lack of academic rigor, these categories do represent distinct musical communities that speak to increasingly narrow bands of community and culture—from speedscore to bluegrass to ghettotech and many more. The *Kunstwollen* has become sliced,

¹² Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 183-184.

diced, and atomized into an infinite listing of unrecognizable and alien tongues. The ocean of musical choices has become so vast, that there can be no common cultural ground for the development of Riegl and Benjamin's idea of art as a reflection of a singular popular culture

Today we are in the midst of the digital music revolution, where consumers purchase most of their music over the internet on sites like Apple's iTunes, or increasingly, from instant access streaming services of which Spotify, at the close of 2011, is the most prominent. Most Americans now access their music with a click of their mouse or from a cloud-supported smartphone. There is no actual physical product connected to this process, which has a profound impact on how people purchase and listen to music. iTunes also helped create an isolate mixtape culture where the typical user has thousands of songs shuffling randomly on their own ever-shifting personal playlist. Spotify expands this model exponentially by making nearly the entire catalogue of the world's recorded music available on demand.

Technological advance—which also arises from collective desire and intent—is an accelerant to the disintegration of a unified national or global community marketplace. Human agency—not mindless technology—is behind each and every leap forward. Our digital music revolution has opened the door to a more specialized and individualistic process of musical assimilation. Old genres are devolving into infinite subgenres, and musical choices have become so overwhelming and disparate that we are becoming lost in an ocean of sound. Set free from the coherence and mediation of traditional genre and music label spoon-feeding, we are finding our musical options so varied, that we are responding with the creation of narrower and more individualistic musical tastes and community. There is no single source or shared mediating presence—spawning infinite individualized playlists from innumerable eras and genres with only a random connection to the shuffled songs on the iPod of the earbud stranger passing us on the street.

There is something dramatic happening in American culture relative to community that is somehow reflected in popular music. If Walter Benjamin is correct that music is a communal reflection of a particular society at a particular time and place, then this *Kunstwollen* has taken on a new manifestation in twenty-first century America. The substance of *Kunstwollen* remains the same, and holds its relevance to the study of popular culture as a window into understanding our culture—so the idea itself has not transmogrified. Instead, the atomization of American popular music is also the atomization of *Kunstwollen* into an

infinite variety of *Kunstwollens*. The American community itself has both demanded and created this cultural diversification in reaction to its increasingly fractionalized and alienated nature.

The consumers of American popular music are in constant search of entertainment that speaks for their time and place. But, as Robert Putnam has shown, we no longer find ourselves in the same place as most of our neighbors. We maintain social networks mediated by distance and computers, but remain disconnected to virtually everyone on our list of Facebook “friends.” Our *Kunstwollen* is no longer the *Kunstwollen* of the family down the street or the rest of the people in our homes. Is it any surprise, then, that modern Americans are unlikely to have a common playlist? We do not listen to the same music because we are not occupying similar space or doing similar things. We have separated ourselves from substantive functional community and collectivity, and this reality is naturally reflected in our music and the method of its consumption.

When we go to iTunes to purchase our next single or star a song from a Spotify mixtape we do so as nearly blind and individuated fisherman in an ocean of disparate sound. We can find things here and there that speak to us; increasingly, we turn to the music of the single-market era where we first heard our popular music. We latch on to a particular genre or specific band that satisfies the craving for an “ecstatic trance” of our own that speaks to the cosmos as well as our lives. But these *Kunstwollen* are of personal construction, and if we can even find the music that matters—that speaks—to us, it will seldom have a great deal in common with the music of the people around us. Were we to randomly grab one hundred people wandering any university with their iPod or iPhone between classes, the diversity would be immense and playlists would not match. This was not the case during the era of Top 40 Radio, when almost all of us would have been humming the same tune. Today, we each have our own music, our own genre, and our own idea of what matters and resonates.

There is no value judgment in the recognition of these changes in popular culture and its reflection in our music, rather there is an open window into a better understanding of our world. Studying the workings of a popular entertainment medium like music is not some random subjective abstraction of the academy, and connections between a time and place and its music are not coincidental or capricious. Popular music is like a winding road that we can follow with signs and sights that can answer our questions and broaden our understanding of events

It is often difficult to recognize the nature and impact of societal transformation while it is underway, especially without in-depth consideration of our relationship to the past. But as we have seen, an analysis of popular music's place in American culture over the last century points to a kind of bell curve of societal transformation. Starting with an isolated world of regional musical distinctions as the twentieth century began, technology and common challenges moved us to a more singular and shared musical culture, and eventually to a fast-moving dissolution of common culture into an ocean of self-centered and individuated infinite choice. The pre-modern separations of geography were replaced by technological and cultic connectivity only to double-back into a new world of culturally and digitally enabled musical atomization.

An analysis of American popular music's dynamic marketplace points to a cultural *Kunstwollen* of diminished connectivity, communality, and community. Ironically, at a time when technology allows us to reach more people than ever before, we find ourselves actually connecting with fewer and fewer of them in decreasingly meaningful ways. The diverse nature of today's music marketplace and the new processes of musical consumption are much more than a byproduct of new technology; rather, they are a symptom and reflection of an atomized society of accelerating and consequential loss. If we look and listen closely, we can feel it in the music.

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