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An Essay on Popular Music in Advertising: The Bankruptcy of Culture or the Marriage of Art and Commerce?

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Abstract:

This essay examines the union of popular music and advertising. The commercial use of popular music has inspired opposing opinions. It has been termed a "bankruptcy of culture" as well as a "perfect marriage of art and commerce." This essay examines the alternative views that have been expressed about the commercial use of popular music.

It is a social and political indicator that mirrors and influences the society we live in (Garofalo 2001). To its proponents, it is a cultural product that entertains and inspires large segments of society by providing meaningful and chronological reference points. To its opponents, it is part of a vast economic system that hypnotizes and massifies segments of consumers through manipulation and commodification. It is popular music. But these descriptions could also be applied to advertising. Some argue that individually, advertising and popular music each provides a positive influence, both socially and economically. Others stress that the two fields create emotions, expectations, and false needs. Yet, when discussing the integration of popular music in advertising, most popular culturalists and theorists speak negatively, describing it as a "bankruptcy of culture" (McChesney 2001) or the combination of "corporation and culture" ("Merchants" 2001). Most marketers and advertisers, however, describe this production technique positively, as more of a so-called marriage of "commerce and art" ("The Newest" 2003). The question then, and the basis for this discussion, is why are there such varying opinions? If the opponents of the integration of these two communication vehicles, that by definition only become "popular" when they are mass distributed and commercially successful, agree that art and commerce have always been "wicked and bizarrely fused Siamese twins" (Mumford 2004) and that advertising affords new artists without a mass outlet some exposure (Howard 2003), why are they so adamantly against it?

This is an essay determined to find the unpopular. It will present the common ground from something so "commonplace" (Scott 1990, p. 223). It will show how much popular music and advertising have in common. It will argue that it is a marriage of convergence, not just of convenience. It will even attempt to suggest that the use of popular music to brand a product or service in advertising proves how much equity and respect popular music has in our culture.

It is clear that the debate and disagreement over the legitimacy of popular music and advertising begins at the definition stage, so that is where this discussion begins. A brief analysis of how popular music and advertising have been, and are being, described provides helpful insight into how much they have in common.

Defining Popular Music and Advertising

Popular Music

The task of defining popular music has always been difficult. Some researchers have tried to define it for what it is, for example: “music for common people” (Middleton 1990, p. 3); “mass art” (Denisoff and Levine 1972, p. 239); “standardized” (Adorno 1941, p. 25); and for what it is not, for example: not “art or folk” (Tagg 1982, p. 41). Others have tried to define it politically (Attali 1985) and historically (Simmel 1968). Many cultural theorists have found that popular music defies precise definition and origination. Shuker (1994, p. 5) suggested that the term popular meant “of the ordinary people” and was first linked with music in a published title in 1855, William Chapple’s “Popular Music of the Olden Times.” Shuker conceded that popular music encompasses both musical and socio-economic characteristics because it “consists of a hybrid of musical traditions, styles, and influences and is an economic product which is invested with ideological significance by many of its consumers” (p. 7).

Middleton (1990) focused on what popular music was but also found it difficult to define. “What is popular music is so riddled with complexities that one is tempted to follow the example of the legendary definition of folk song—all songs are folk songs: I never heard horses sing ‘em—and suggest that all music is popular: popular with someone” (p. 3). Middleton stated that at different historical moments, it was defined qualitatively (as well-liked) or quantitatively (as well-favored), and he cautioned against an over-rigid definition that fails to recognize both.

Adorno (1941) defined popular music normatively as not “serious music” (p. 17) due to its “standardization” (p. 21) and “pseudo-individualism” (p. 25). Tagg (1979) defined popular music negatively based on what it was not. He argued that it was neither art (complex, difficult, and demanding) nor folk (traditional) music. Tagg (1982) said that “popular music, unlike art music, is conceived for mass distribution to large and often socio-culturally heterogeneous groups of listeners” (p. 41). Denisoff and Levine (1972) disagreed and described popular music in terms of “mass art produced for indiscriminate listeners” (p. 239). Simmel went even further and defined it as a development of musical cultures that allows a composer to create music that is identifiable in a nationalistic sense. Finally, Cutler (1983) defined popular music technologically by suggesting that popular music refers “to a whole genus of music—a genus loosely bound by its particular means and relations of production, circulation and consumption; by its commitment to electric and electronic technology, to radio and the gramophone record; to what we might call a demotic musical use and language” (p. 3).

Advertising

Whether you agree that it cultivates or contaminates, mirrors society or manipulates it, you cannot avoid advertising. The definitions of advertising, while not as extreme as popular music, have varied. Ironically, communication theorist Marshall McLuhan called advertising “the greatest art form of the twentieth century” (Andrews 1987, p. 5) and “the cave art of the twentieth century” (Fitzhenry 1993, p. 19). Advertising pioneer David Ogilvy said he did not regard it as an art form but as “a medium of information” (Ogilvy 1983, p. 7). Richards and Curran (2002) went in search of a consensus on a definition and suggested a pre-study definition: “Advertising is a paid nonpersonal communication from an identified sponsor, using mass media to persuade or influence an audience” (p. 64) and a post-study definition: “Advertising is a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future” (p. 74). Probably more beneficial to this discussion is the definition: “paid-for messages that attempt to transfer symbols onto commodities to increase the likelihood that the commodities will be found appealing and be purchased” (Fowles 1996, p. 13). Popular culture in general and popular music in particular is a “popular” technique used to facilitate this symbol transfer, and this is what seems to cause the most animosity among opponents. “The real insidiousness lies in the theft of musical-countercultural ideologies of freedom, dissent, and revolution by TV hucksters who feel free to use any piece of music to sell any product” (Burns 1996, p. 133). While the animosity is understandable, two points need to be made. First, the music is certainly not “free” or obtained by means of “theft” by the advertiser; it is sold, usually by the writer and/or the artist, for compensation, often as the result or in pursuit of popularity. Second, the resulting combination of popular music and advertising creates a new cultural artifact that, like all advertising, plays at least some role in defining the society in which it was produced.

How Music and Advertising Become Popular

There are similarities between how music and advertising become “popular.” Both share a common path to acceptance and notoriety. Before music can become “popular” it must be produced, distributed, and exposed to the masses (Denisoff and Levine 1972; Hall 1980; Hirsh 1969; Longhurst 1995; Shuker 1994; Tagg 1982). Once a song has been mass produced, the next step is mass distribution and exposure. Although the downloading of music from the Internet is growing, the primary vehicle for the mass exposure of music is the medium of radio. Not surprisingly, the earliest critics of popular music (Adorno 1950; Peatman 1944; Reisman 1957) were also critical of radio as it related to the distribution of popular music. Adorno felt that radio was the means to mass distribution and promotion of an inferior product. “To be plugged, a song-hit must have at least one feature by which it can be distinguished from any other, and yet possess the complete conventionality and triviality of all others” (Adorno 1941, p. 27).

Most agree that popularity includes an economic component. Denisoff and Levine (1972) said “popular music is only profitable when it has a high sales volume” (p. 240) and “economics determine content” (p. 243). Longhurst (1995) agreed that pop music is produced in an industry attempting to make profits but argued that it also has a social context or what he called the “social production of music” (p. 55). This involves the interaction of art and commerce of musicians, producers, engineers, and industry executives. Thus, the production of popular music is at some level a marriage of art and commerce. Why then should advertising not be invited to the wedding?

Before advertising can become popular it must also be produced and exposed to the masses. Popular advertising is determined by its “popularity” to the public, for instance when a Gallup poll appears in the mainstream and trade press the day after the Super Bowl announcing the broadcast’s most popular television commercials. The advertising industry itself also determines “popularity” by the Clio Awards, given to advertising judged to be creative. (Ironically, the Grammy Awards provides a similar function in the music industry.) Finally, popularity of advertising can be determined economically, by analyzing its success in accomplishing the marketing objectives of generating sales.

It appears that contrary to what Adorno might argue, the process of becoming “popular” for music and advertising is arguably quite “serious” and extensive. “From all of their triviality and frivolity, the messages of popular culture [advertising and popular music] circulate in a network of production and reception that is quite serious. At their worst, they perform the dirty work of the economy and the state. At their best, they retain memories of the past and contain hopes for the future that rebuke the injustices and inequities of the present” (Lipsitz 1990, p. 20). If this is the case, then is the integration of popular music in advertising, involving the “dirty work of the economy,” a “selling out” or is it simply a “cashing in?”

Ironically, advertising is now another way for music to become popular. “All the rock tunes popping up in commercials are turning unknown acts into the next big thing” (Block 2003). The best example of this is Moby. All 18 songs on his 1999 album *Play* were licensed to commercials or movies. Past Moby albums had never sold more than 50,000 copies and this album was following suit. After the exposure in advertising, *Play* went on to sell over 10 million copies. Moby did not consider it “selling out” but a means to mass exposure. “The role of popular music is democratic. I feel I have to do everything in my power to at least make what I have done available to people and then trust the wisdom of the democratic consumerist process to sort it out” (Kot 2002). Does selling music while selling products and services mean “selling out?” Advertisers argue that “the term ‘selling out’ has almost vanished” (Patton 2002, p. 1). But opponents disagree.

Popular Music and Advertising

Bankruptcy of Culture?

In his song “This Note’s For You,” Neil Young of Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young warned about the dangers of ties between musicians and major corporations (“Ain’t singing for Pepsi, ain’t singing for Coke. I don’t sing for nobody, makes me look like a joke”). It is a sentiment being echoed today by many who are still describing the licensing of popular music by the artists in

terms of “selling out” (Lubrano 2004; Michaels 2002). “Rock-n-Roll has been selling out, in the minds of some fans, since at least 1970, when some members of the Doors agreed to license “Light My Fire” to Buick. The deal enraged the band’s mercurial front man, Jim Morrison, who scotched it by threatening to smash a Buick on television” (Patton 2002, p. 1).

Those that oppose the use of popular music as an advertising effects tool are passionately against its use. Burns (1996) argues that advertising “recontextualizes old songs in ways that are disturbing and even shocking; does not at all honor what the song originally meant but rather the sales object of the moment” (p. 133). Some, rather than criticizing popular music in advertising for cultural reasons, dissuade its use citing its potential danger caused by the music’s original meaning. Ives (2002) warned that “these odd couplings of anti-establishment music and conspicuous consumption could end up alienating the very consumer the ads are meant to seduce” (p. 3). Fowles (1996) suggested that “the music may have initially achieved its sacred standing because of its oppositional stance to mainstream culture. This music then defines the true, nonexploitative camaraderie of the likeminded, speaking to and reflecting sincere needs. Once that music is expropriated and applied to commercial purposes, to the extraction of the consumer’s money, then it has violated its covenant with those who originally possessed it and gave it meaning” (p. 133). There is no hesitation, however, from most advertisers. Bill Ludwig, chief creative officer at agency Campbell-Ewald in Warren, Michigan argues that “rarely is there a risk in using popular music in advertising” (Ives 2002, p. 3).

Marriage of Art and Commerce

Ironically, another member of Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, Graham Nash said: “I’m not that precious about my music. We’re not talking Mozart here” (“Just in Case” 1994, p. 23), when asked for justification of the use of his song “Teach Your Children” in an advertisement for “Fruit of the Loom.” Those individuals, primarily in the advertising field, who applaud the use of popular music in advertising are just as passionate as those in opposition. “Vincent Picardi, senior VP and associate creative director of advertising agency Deutsch creator of the Mitsubishi commercials using Dirty Vegas’ “Days Go By” called it “the perfect marriage of commerce and art” (“The Newest” 2003).

Popular Culture, Popular Music, and Advertising

Described as “public art” (Fowles 1996, p. xiii), advertising and popular culture appear to share more than just the road to definition and popularity: they share a common origin. “Popular culture is entertainment that is produced by the ‘culture industries’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1977), composed of symbolic content, mediated widely, and consumed with pleasure” (Fowles 1996, p. 11). Even the most ardent opponents of the integration of popular music in advertising will admit that popular music is a commercial cultural product. “Hit songs are by definition enmeshed in the commercial system through which radio plays records and sells shoes, cars, and practically everything else that can be sold” (Burns 1996, p. 133). On this fact, the proponents agree. A Pepsi executive said about “Billy Jean” by Michael Jackson, “It’s not like Tchaikovsky, writing for posterity. This is pop music, and it’s written on a commercial basis” (Schwartz 1988, p. 49). The distinction between popular and classical music has been argued since the beginning of popular music study. “With serious (classical) music every detail derives its musical sense from the concrete totality of the piece which, in turn, consists of the life relationship of the details and never of a mere enforcement of a musical scheme. Nothing corresponding to this can happen in popular music” (Adorno 1941, p. 19). Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the culture industry produced forms of culture, which were commodities that were bought and sold and that possessed exchange value. Thus, companies produced culture just to make money. Finally, “the genre of popular music more clearly illustrates popular culture’s primary appeal. Because music is largely devoid of narrative devices, it represents popular culture stripped to its emotional core” (Fowles 1996, p. 119). Some of those in favor of its integration in advertising argue that popular music has become more commercial and less cultural. Heinz Henn, senior VP of international A&R and marketing at BMG, said, “What has changed is that music has become more of a commercial product. It has become less the voice of the youth. The credibility factor is perhaps not as relevant anymore as it used to be, because music today is far more another form of entertainment than it is a social outlet and a political outlet for the youth. I think that the youth of today is [are] far less concerned about the credibility of their artists than it [they] used to be even 10 years ago” (Morris 1998, p. 1). Many popular culturalists would certainly refute this convenient

opinion (Denisoff and Levine 1972). Most currently believe that popular music is as much a part of popular culture today as it ever was in the past (Fiske 1989; Grossberg 1992). "Hit music conveys implications of the entire domain of popular culture and the pleasures and satisfactions of that domain" (Fowles 1996, p. 133).

Fiske (1989) might argue that advertising can be categorized as a cultural product because "the combination of widespread consumption with widespread critical disapproval is a fairly certain sign that a culture commodity is popular" (p. 106). The most support, however, seems to lie in the belief that advertising, while separate, is similar to popular culture. "The argument here is that advertising, while sharing many attributes with popular culture, is a categorically different sort of symbolic content" (Fowles 1996, p. 11). The similar attributes with popular culture include: "Both [advertising and popular culture] are the careful products of sizable 'culture industries'; both traffic heavily in images; they borrow themes, sounds, and personalities from one another; and they frequently appear in the presence of each other" (Fowles 1996, p. xiii). Finally, explaining why advertising and popular music may be the perfect compliment to each other Fowles (1996) argued that "advertising and popular culture have taken on their modern forms as thoroughly economic entities: Advertising links producers directly to consumers, and popular culture is saleable and purchasable entertainment" (p. 48). Of course, popular music is a prime example of "saleable and purchasable entertainment." Adorno would certainly agree. "Entertainment may have its uses, but a recognition of radio [popular] music as such would shatter the listeners' artificially fostered belief that they are dealing with the world's greatest music" (Adorno 1950, p. 316).

Adorno's negative opinion of popular music aside, he did foresee its similarities to and complement to advertising. Adorno (1941) argued that the standardization of the music allows for repetitiveness and its pseudo-individualism provides the "hook" resulting in the conditions favorable for greater attention and memory. The producer of popular music, he said, "must write something impressive enough to be remembered and at the same time well known enough to be banal. It must catch the listener's attention, must differ from other popular songs if it is to sell, to reach the listener at all" (Adorno 1941, p. 31). Adorno believed that popular music must simultaneously meet two demands: "One is for stimuli that provoke the listener's attention. The other is for the material to fall within the category of what the musically untrained listener would call 'natural' music" (Adorno 1941, p. 24). These traits of popular music, while meant as criticism by Adorno, are critically important for its effectiveness as a stimulus to advertising.

Of course, all that has been discussed so far could be, and has been, described as the "commercialization of culture" (Kammen 1999, p. 66) or the "hypercommercialization of culture" (McChesney 2001). Some would even argue that "culture itself comes to us as commodity" (Lipsitz 1990, p. 4). But if this is true, why popular music combined with advertising has such great potential becomes even clearer. "Lyrics can deliver a straightforward sales message, and carefully selected notes can be the musical signature of a particular brand" (Fowles 1996, p. 132). Because of this and the other similarities previously mentioned, there should be little surprise that popular music and advertising have been utilized together. "Deriving emotional benefits from popular music and developing taste in particular types and instances of music are practices that live on in the minds of adult consumers. They endure as pleasurable and ever renewing experiences, ones that advertisers, seeking less defended entrances into consumers' minds, will exploit" (Fowles 1996, p. 121). Advertisers appreciate popular music for its great power and potential to elicit an emotional response. They want to form a bond between bands and brands. "The alliance between advertising and popular music is so strong as advertisers attempt to drape their products in the same meanings that greet popular hits and genres, that no one should have been stunned when Chevrolet, trying to find the appropriate hyperbole to announce its redesigned Camaro in 1993, reared back and brayed, 'What else would you expect from the country that brought you rock 'n' roll?'" (Fowles 1996, p. 136).

Criticize or Celebrate?

Popular culture, especially music, has always been in the critical spotlight. "Bitter criticism of popular culture is hardly a phenomenon limited to the 20th century. As long as there have been social classes, the higher have demeaned the diversionary tastes of the lower" (Fowles 1996, p. 53). Perhaps it is simply a class struggle, because it is true that "nothing more clearly affirms

one's class, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 18). The Frankfurt School of cultural studies certainly stressed the class distinction between the "mass-listening" of popular music and the "elite listening" of classical music (Adorno 1951, p. 313). Or perhaps it is "because popular music always interacts with its social environment, [that] it often serves as a lightning rod for the political controversies that invariably accompany change" (Garofalo 2001, p. 13). This might explain the animosity toward popular music in advertising. Adorno (1941) did note their similarities when he suggested that "the interplay of lyrics and music in popular music is similar to the interplay of picture and word in advertising" (p. 34). This comparison was obviously not made to celebrate the combination of popular culture and advertising. Many in the academic community have joined in this criticism. "Those who are trained to investigate social phenomena of this magnitude often regard these two symbol domains with condescension if not disdain" (Fowles 1996, p. xiv). This "disdain" seems to result from the mass exposure that each receives and the resulting "popularity" if successful. "Mediated popular culture [popular music] and advertising suffer similarly sorry fates at the hands of culture critics, who often seem disposed to drain the lifeblood from both symbol domains" (Fowles 1996, p. 52). This "disdain" has been so strong for so long that it does seem "to have obliterated other perspectives" (Fowles 1996, p. 52). But what about the possibility that all that is popular (culture, music, and advertising) is just as relevant and serious?

With so much in common, both positive and negative, it is ironic that most popular culturalists who are justifiably fighting for the legitimacy of other forms of mediated popular culture, like popular music, are unwilling to consider advertising as having been unfairly discriminated against. And while some will entertain the possibility that advertising may be some type of related cultural product, their objectivity ends when the subject of popular music in advertising is introduced. Why do they not celebrate the common ground? Is it because, unlike popular music, advertising is considered by most to be solely entrenched in commerce? Some in the advertising industry might make the argument that advertising is art. Should advertising be similarly degraded for its economic component? Clearly, popular music has a commercial aspect, yet it is accepted into the popular culture fraternity by some popular culturalists. To discriminate against advertising for the same commercial aspect would be at best unfair and at worst hypocritical. "A desire to create, and a need to live, and a yen for money or recognition are not warring, but joined elements in human beings. To decry popular culture because it is involved with profit motives is to disparage all levels of culture, all similarly tinged with personal adulterated motives" (Grimsted 1985, p. 301). Consider that if advertising were to be given the same status as popular music in the discipline of popular culture, then the combination of these two cultural symbols might also achieve greater acceptance. Then, the resulting alliance of popular music and advertising might be a more powerful lobby for the respect of those that continue to question the academic legitimacy of popular culture. "Vincent Picardi, called his Mitsubishi commercials "little pieces of pop culture" (Scott 2002, p. Y6). This suggests that the combination of popular music and advertising actually creates a new cultural product. Is it possible that at some time in the not too distant future, classes of students will be performing analytical academic exercises using "classic" commercials like Windows 95's use of "Start Me Up" by the Rolling Stones or Chevrolet's use of "Like A Rock" by Bob Seger to understand and explain society in the 90's?

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