INTRODUCING A NEW DEPARTMENT: THE POPULAR CULTURE

Editor's Note:

In the nearly two years in which the Roper Center has published The Public Perspective, we have tried to follow the course which Bud Roper (the Center's chairman) and I outlined in the first issue. We wrote then that we wanted the magazine to be a source of information both on issues and developments in opinion research, and on the substance of public opinion "on policy issues and on the great political competition we call democracy." The warm response the magazine has received—evidenced by the willingness of so many able people to write for it, the steady broadening of the readership, and the many assessments, formal and informal, which have been communicated to us—is gratifying.

Still, though we think that the basic idea we had for Public Perspective has stood the test of two years' experience quite nicely, we know that improvements can be made. This issue is the first with a new printer (Hall & Bill of Willimantic, CT), a new cover design, and a new paper stock.

We are also introducing a new department on "the popular culture," using the term in its broadest sense: the norms, values, aspirations, worries, "ideational" interests and pursuits, tastes, and styles of the populace at large. Policy and politics will continue to be our staple. But we feel that it's important to expand our coverage of other things which are on people's minds—to chart changes in the popular culture in matters grand and prosaic. The objective is straightforward: to better understand society. While the main focus will be on American popular culture, cross-national comparison is important, though often difficult to achieve, given available data.

Popular tastes—in music, motion pictures, vacations and travel, etc.—are one part of the larger popular culture, and the one we examine a bit here: in nine pages of the Public Opinion Report, and in two interviews. In one sense such tastes are the lighter side of the popular culture. But they can also be, as in the case of music, of real social substance; certainly since the 1890s popular music has been a major American cultural expression, and a window to social values and value change. Moreover, worry about the social consequences of certain types of music, especially about the impact on "the morals" of young people, has rarely been absent over the past hundred years. People in other countries are, in some sense, introduced to "American values" through our extraordinary success in exporting our popular music.

Wayne Shannon, a political scientist at the University of Connecticut and a contributing editor of Public Perspective, plays the piano, favoring ragtime, stride-style jazz, and classic Tin Pan Alley songs. Recently he spoke, separately, to two keen students of popular music and its social role. John Brennan is now director of polling for the Los Angeles Times; previously he held positions in opinion research with ABC News and the Roper Organization. But he has had, as well, a longtime interest in popular music—one expression of which was his hosting of a New York City radio show which featured music of the period from the 1920s through the 1950s. Born in England and now living in Los Angeles, Ian Whitcomb is a composer, performer, and radio personality. In 1965 he wrote and recorded a hit rock song, "You Turn Me On." Since the early 1970s he has written extensively about popular music, including *After the Ball* (1972) and *Irving Berlin and Ragtime America* (1987).

THE FABRIC AND ROLE OF AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC: INTERVIEWS WITH JOHN BRENNAN AND IAN WHITCOMB

Both interviews began with a discussion of the reasons American popular music has been so appealing around the world.

John Brennan: I think it has a lot to do with the diverse nature of our society—the very different groups that have been thrown together on this continent, and also with some of the social rules—or lack of rules—that we have in America. In many of the Old World countries, there is a very strong folk music tradition—a music steeped in history. We, here in America, created something new when we created this country, and to a certain extent what that did was create an open landscape, culturally, philosophically, and sociologically as well. I think this open landscape is part of the explanation for this phenomenon: a landscape that is less cluttered with history than in many other countries. Of course that doesn't mean that we didn't borrow from the past, because we do have a folk tradition in this country. But that tradition had to compete with the immigration of new groups beginning in the late 19th century, and also with the indigenous music of American blacks. The melding together of these groups helped create this phenomenon, and continues to this day.

There is another important reason for our open landscape that should be noted: The reigning American culture and tradition apart from that of the slaves, before the arrival of the great waves of Jewish and Catholic immigrants in the late part of the 19th century, is basically a Puritan based culture. Certainly there were hymns, but I'm not sure how important secular music was to these people, relative to some of the immigrants who came later, and also to the American blacks. Within this Puritan tradition is an element which deemphasizes sensuality and emotion, and therefore left a psychological and artistic gap for others to fill. That gap provided room for American music to be added to by these waves of immigrants, and also by the music coming out of the African-American tradition.

Ian Whitcomb: I want to stress that American popular music was *not* robust, original or exciting until the end of 19th century. It became vigorous mainly because a new music surfaced called ragtime. When you couple the popularity of ragtime, which was America's first indigenous music, with the popularity of the American march, and the propagation of both the march and ragtime by John Phillip Sousa, that's how you explain the initial popularity of American music throughout the world. It seemed to Europeans to sum up this new wild country of America. As we examine the sources of this music as historians, we find that it was not created in a vacuum; in fact the paths come mostly from Europe. Nevertheless, it was seen through European eyes as an exotic music—that's the important word.

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Why did ragtime seem so extraordinary? First because it was non-stop syncopation. Secondly, it was coupled with this exotic image, the myth of the hot black man, this prancing, dancing negro. It is essential to note that American ragtime had an important effect on dancing as well as music. And then, as important, appears the American popular song. Now this was new because for the first time in popular songs, as far as I can tell, slang was used, and American slang is very potent.

Women played a tremendous part in changing the tastes at the end of the century. It was middle class women who should be, according to Victorian thinking, the bastions of home and family, who were supporting this bold new music. So women start buying these rags—whether by Scott Joplin or by Irving Berlin—and playing them at home. They're also, from 1910 onwards, beginning to go out. Husbands began going out with their wives to public places, like cabarets and restaurants, where they have music and where they dance. This was unheard of before. People are going out more to dance to ragtime, and also they're playing it at home on the piano, and increasingly on records as well.

I'm not sure looking back now that all this embracing of American culture—rather like today's throw-away American culture: fast, get it now, do it now—I'm not sure it was a good thing. I'm not sure that the American popular culture invasion of Europe, which is still going on all over the world, was necessarily a good thing. I think it probably started the end of careful, logical thinking, and it taught people to read less. With ragtime, people were antsy all the time; they had to get up and dance. So I'm becoming a bit of a conservative: I'm seeing that ragtime is the harbinger of what we have today—terrifying.

PP: What are the big "revolutions" in American popular music over the past century? Do we know what causes these shifts?

Brennan: American popular music continues to reinvent itself, and so what you have, really, is little revolutions at various periods, at 10, 20, or 30 year intervals. Ragtime all the way to rap and new age, we continue to have this series of revolutions. These new forms, the products of revolution, are appealing to those of us in the US and to a large audience internationally. They're fresh; they're a new way of looking at or feeling things. When the music gets tired or overly sentimental, then you're ready for another revolution.

Ragtime is the first musical motif where blacks and whites are creating and celebrating the same form, or where white America adopts a form that black America has cultivated. With jazz in the Twenties and Thirties there is more integration of American popular music than you have later. For that reason I think these are great moments in jazz. I won't say everybody was listening to the same thing, but I think there was more common ground than at other times. White bands—even Guy Lombardo—could play in Harlem, for example, and certainly Duke Ellington could play to any audience he wanted—if they'd let him in the hall. In the late Twenties to the early Thirties, as jazz develops into swing, one is seeing a "transferring of the baton" or musical knowledge from the black bands to the white bands, from Fletcher Henderson to Benny Goodman, for example.

I don't see these changes linked particularly to economic or cultural conditions. I think there is a certain random quality about them. There is constant innovation on the part of artists. There has to be a certain level of disaffection for something new to occur, and I think that innovation in art is associated with that notion of disaffection with society or with the current state of affairs. That does not necessarily mean that society as a whole is disaffected. I think you can see a certain amount of disaffection in each one of these revolutions: it's a sense of disaffection in the music world with the current status of things, after something is spent or used, or has been corrupted or co-opted. I think a good example of that is the bop movement: There was a feeling on the part of black musicians in the early Forties that swing jazz had been co-opted. It had been transformed into something they could no longer identify with. Glenn Miller is the best example of how much swing jazz had changed—a tightly arranged, very formula based sentimental presentation of jazz, which was really very appealing to broader audiences, but black musicians couldn't identify with it any longer.

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If you look at mainstream popular music in the late Forties and the early Fifties, I think it's at one of its low points, full of sentimental and novelty tunes. There is a new revolution going on beneath that music, and it's not only in jazz, but it's the rhythm & blues revolution which is about to break forth in rock. When rock first appears around 1954, it was criticized for its subversiveness, but then the same criticism had been made of swing a generation earlier.

As I said earlier, I don't think you can look at the development of American popular music and say, "The unemployment rate dropped 5 points and so we started to get this kind of music." I don't see that. The 1920s and the 1930s have got to be as different sociologically as two generations can get, and yet, ebullient jazz music prospered in both decades. With the economic situation being so different in the two decades, it is hard to explain why the music would be so similar. What if one looks at the Fifties? I don't see the bomb having a psychological effect on people that then causes them to want to do the twist.

Finding a relationship between what you hear on the radio and what's going on in the world is problematic. It's like asking why we had hula hoops, or why ties get wider or narrower, or why hemlines go up and down. I don't see these artistic movements as necessarily being generated by economic conditions. In America—and maybe this is a good thing—there's no structure for regulating culture.

Whitcomb: Looking back now, I don't think that anything happened suddenly; I don't think there were any revolutions, although it appeared that way at the time. It seemed to be a revolution when the original Dixieland jazz band introduced jazz into Europe, and it seemed like another when Elvis Presley first arrived. But looking back with hindsight, none of these musics were revolutionary: They all came from traditional sources. The roots lie in the countryside. All Elvis Presley was doing was taking very traditional songs which hitherto had been confined to the deep south and to a certain underclass, and putting them in a new mold, which seemed brand new when he first appeared. American popular music is in fact extremely traditional. So I would say no, I don't think that there've been any changes. I think if we traveled back to the end of end of the 19th century to off-beat small towns and villages throughout the countryside, we'd probably hear music which was very familiar to us: We'd hear the blues, ragtime, and elements of rock & roll. All the big changes have not been musical; the big changes have been technological.

There was no revolution in the 1950s when rock & roll came along. Rock & roll was nothing to do with songs. Rock & roll was a shout and a style and a beat, but it did not depend entirely upon the song. None of the so-called great or classic American writers, whether it's Richard Rogers, Cole Porter, or Irving Berlin, ever had a song that was going to fit with rock & roll. In fact, their output of hits almost vanishes completely from 1955 onwards. When we talked about revolutions, I said there weren't any, but rock did crowd out other kinds of music.

As for whether music is influenced by economic or social conditions at the time: No, I don't think so. Of course, music registers some social changes like, for example, changes in style of dress. As far as having any serious influence, I don't think it has any at all. I think it's for us to have fun, to dance to.

PP: Who makes popular music popular: the people, more or less independently deciding among various products,

or entertainment industry elites (including entertainers themselves) shrewdly manipulating tastes?

Brennan: That's a tough one to answer, but if I had to say, it wells up more than it's imposed. I don't think that rap was imposed on us by record company executives—they've gotten on board. Rap is a true music of the street, and it's the latest example. We're in the transition period, where it's basically moving from a black to a white art form, or being accepted in wider audiences. There will come a point when it too will spend itself.

Whitcomb: It's a mixture of the two. One would love to be able to control public taste, but you cannot buy yourself into the charts. People cannot be forced, except perhaps at gunpoint, to go into a shop and buy a record or a piece of sheet music. So what Irving Berlin and his colleagues did so well was that they had their ears to the street; they were always in touch with the times. Remember, though, that ninety-nine percent of the songs Berlin wrote were never hits. People say, "You know, if a company could control the market of popular music then they could dictate tastes." It's always been one of these myths. People don't know how the market works or how popular taste works—that it is they who control it.

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PP: What about the oft-discussed issues of popular music's social and moral effects? Did a big counter-cultural, anti-tradition element take over, really for the first time in the 1960s?

Brennan: There was somewhat of a counter-cultural swing in the Sixties, but even in the Vietnam era, when we had songs like "Eve of Destruction," we also had "The Ballad of the Green Berets" on the top of the charts. Our popular music has never been a particularly political vehicle. Our cultural artifacts tend not to have a strong political stripe to them. They emphasize the personal experience of what it is like to be an American, for better or for worse.

Critics have accused popular music of promoting vice and moral decay since the ragtime era, but we're all still here. That reaction is very common when a new art form is introduced, and of course this happens in dress, like with the long hair of the Sixties. I just think that's a symptom of these revolutions: there's always going to be someone who's disenchanted with what's coming up. I must admit I'm having difficulty appreciating rap music.

As for the question of moral decay being caused by popular music, Tipper Gore's predecessors were saying the same thing about jazz, jitterbugging, and Fifties rock and roll. Certainly swing or ragtime or jazz didn't destroy American society, and I'm not ready to say that rap and heavy metal are going to either. Clearly, we have major problems in American society that we're probably not addressing, but music isn't one of them. I don't think that the condition of our music is some kind of indication that we're in trouble—I don't find that. Rock and rap are subversive in some instances—but the glorification of sexuality has been present in American music for decades; for example, many people don't know what "Jelly Roll" really means. Bessie Smith could have given Madonna a run for her money, believe me.

Whitcomb: I think that a popular song becomes popular, whether it's talking about drugs or instant sex, because it reflects how people are thinking. I don't actually think it influences people all that much. But having said that, and having been through the Sixties and survived it, I do think that some of our heroes of that time were more than a little irresponsible. Take a Bing Crosby: Although he was apparently a lush in private life, he never went on the stage with a bottle like Janis Joplin did. Behind the scenes, Crosby bashed up his children, but on stage he sang about "Galway Bay." I look back on the Sixties now almost as many people look back on the McCarthy era.

The Sixties were different. What happened then was that university types like myself, the middle and upper middle classes, began to get involved in music, which hitherto had been confined to the middle and lower middle classes. They got ahold of rock music and used it to preach and destroy. What I don't like about the Sixties is that they put nothing in its place—they just said "Do your thing." In our society now, the children of that generation cannot read. They're not interested in reading, and they're antsy; they're tuned to visual things and they're tuned to slogans, but they're not tuned to the old logical way of thinking, and they're not tuned to print. I really do feel that we're reaching an age of barbarism, a new Dark Ages, as we had in Britain when Bede and a few monks had to keep the

flame alight by sitting in their little cells in the North of England, protecting themselves against the barbarians. Well, those barbarians are around us now. They are the people who are reared on TV and rock & roll. I don't want to sound like a doomsayer, but I do think that Western Culture is breaking up, and I pinpoint the Sixties as being the beginning of that. By destroying the past in the Sixties we did the most terrible thing, and rock & roll had a part to play in that.

The changes of the Sixties are still with us. Yes, it terrifies me to see a group like *The Grateful Dead*, who advocate death through drugs—and they're so popular today. How can people admire Jim Morrison of *The Doors*, who was no kind of example to anybody—a complete and total failure? It's sickening to me that he's become a cult figure among young people. The idols of the past may not have had particularly good private lives, but they kept them private. They stood for positive values, they stood for hearth and home and love. I know this sounds terribly old-fashioned, but I'm sure those things are going to go on as long as we have people in the world. But this destructiveness and suicide, which is what Jim Morrison was about, and what *The Grateful Dead* are about (the very title spells that), is to me anathema and is to be fought. So yes, side me with Tipper Gore if you like. I think these are fighting times, and I'm out there fighting. I think I speak for a lot of people because I find when I say these things on my radio show, I get a tremendous amount of support. It's because there's nobody saying this, because we are in the thrall of, I hate to say it, hideous distorted liberalism.

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I think the Sixties was probably one of the most destructive decades of all time. It was an appalling period culturally. First of all, more fine old buildings were destroyed in that period. Writing was scorned; if you wrote a book or read—oh, you were looked down upon. The past was ignored, and if you were over 30 you're no good. The whole period was one of total, unthinking, barbaric iconoclasm. I hated it at the time. I think they destroyed a tremendous amount, whether it was buildings or just respect for tradition, and because of that, America and the world has got a lot of rethinking to do.

John Brennan

Ian Whitcomb