

The Declining Value of Music in American Culture

Lauren Bruce

For many centuries, music has played a vital role in the development and sharing of a culture and its values. Music has been used to convey emotion, to pass down stories through generations, and to celebrate the life of mankind. The modern American's appreciation of music has steadily been declining since the middle of the twentieth century. This decline has gone hand-in-hand with the gradually increasing belief that a person's value in life is solely dependent on his or her wealth and the contributions to society based on this wealth. This American greed can be seen in the entertainment industry and in its stress on mass production and quantity of products, rather than in the importance of the quality of entertainment. Many years ago, music in this country was highly regarded for its creativity and soulful expression, but now, much music is simply a performer's attempt to produce something "catchy" that will become popular and lead to fame and fortune. Most Americans in the twentieth century have lost the appreciation for good music and the driving forces behind its creation, mainly as a result of technology and the technological ability to mass reproduce and alter sound.

Once, listening to music was a personal affair with an artist, in which a listener was able to feel a true connection with the melody, verse, or emotional expression. It was easy to understand the emotion in a piece by either listening to the pure, unaltered voice of the singer, or by listening to the intensity created by instruments. In her lecture, "Letters from Lenny," A Musical Crossroads," Dr. Oeida Hatcher quoted Leonard Bernstein as stating, "How music develops is the most important part." Whereas creating the perfect piece was once a journey for a musician, it has now become a simple process which can be changed with the use of technical equipment in any way deemed necessary. Musicians once struggled through experimentation to

find the perfect sound to convey their message, but now all one needs to produce a popular song is a technician who knows which buttons to push on a machine to produce or alter a musical sound artificially. If what Leonard Bernstein said was true and the process of creating music was the most important part, the “music” so quickly and cheaply produced in today’s popular culture is merely an orgy of meaningless tunes lacking in originality and content.

Even networks that once focused on the promotion of this popular music have lost their desire to do so. The television channel MTV, which, surprisingly these days still stands for “Music Television,” has demonstrated its loss of concern for the music industry through its programming. Out of forty-eight shows currently produced and broadcast by the network, only twelve are in any way related to music. Of these twelve shows, seven are reality shows based on the lives of pop-culture musicians, and only two are shows where actual music videos are broadcast. Realizing that they had completely disregarded the driving force behind the network, MTV created “MTV2” in 1996 as a channel which vowed to broadcast constant music videos, with no commercials. While MTV2 does still broadcast music and music-related shows, its programming is starting to follow in the footsteps of its mother-channel, with an increasing number of shows such as “Celebrity Death Match,” “Kickass Combat” and “Wildboys,” which have absolutely nothing to do with music or the industry. Could it be that these music networks are gradually abandoning their industry because they, too, see the lack of value in the music of today’s popular culture?

Many of today’s American musicians may have started out with good intentions in their musical interests but soon get wrapped up in the “fame and fortune” aspect of the current industry. As a result, they begin to produce lower quality music that appeals to the people in their culture, rather than that which expresses their true emotions. One major phenomenon in

pop culture has been that of the “boy band” or “girl group.” Members of groups such as N*Sync or the Pussycat Dolls most often not only have nothing to do with the composition of the music (even when there are any instruments involved at all), but they also have no part in writing the lyrics either. They function as performing machines with the sole purpose of acquiring wealth and fame. Music traditionally celebrated humanity and emotions through original verse and competition, but now it merely exists in our culture as something thoughtless and catchy to listen to on the radio as we drive to work.

There is no end in sight to the downhill spiral that music in our society is on. Leonard Bernstein recognized this problem in *The Joy of Music* as early as 1959, commenting on the public’s lack of a desire to hear quality music: “Can you honestly name me two or three people in all America who actually *care* whether you or anybody else ever writes another symphony or not? ... The more you consider the question, the clearer will come the answer: that nobody...will be any sorer if you or any of your symphonic colleagues never writes a symphony again” (Bernstein 457). As new forms of music are now becoming popular in our culture, previous trends in music should be regarded as sacred links to our past and should be respected for the sincerity with which they were created. Unfortunately, our society functions on a “move forward and forget the past” mentality, and as we do so, we are losing all of the value that once was embedded in musical works.

Works Cited

Bernstein, Leonard. 1959. “The Joy of Music.” Excerpted in *Shaping Truth: Culture, Expression, and Creativity*. Lynchburg College Symposium Readings. Vol. III. Ed. Barbara Rothermel. 3rd ed. USA: Xlibris. 2005. 454-467.

Hatcher, Oeida. 2006. "“Letters from Lenny,’ A Musical Crossroads.” Senior Symposium
Lecture, Lynchburg College. Videocassette.

MTV Networks. 2006. June 14, 2006. www.mtv.com.