

Tuning In While Growing Up: Messages Adolescents Receive From Popular Music

Regarding Relationships

J. Scott Glass

East Carolina University

Russ Curtis

Western Carolina University

George M. Thomas

Mississippi State University – Meridian

J. Scott Glass, Ph.D., NCC, is an assistant professor in the Department of Counselor Education at East Carolina University. Russ Curtis, Ph.D., NCC, is an assistant professor in the Counselor Education Program at Western Carolina University. George M. Thomas, Ed.D., is the Chair of the Division of Education at Mississippi State University, Meridian Campus. All correspondence regarding this article should be sent to J. Scott Glass at [sglass@mail.ecu.edu](mailto:sglass@mail.ecu.edu).

### Abstract

Music has long been important to adolescents. It is one way they can express themselves and find a voice to represent the special circumstances they experience as young people. It is also known that love and romance are an important part of the adolescent experience (Paul & White, 1990). So, what messages do adolescents learn about relationships through popular music? This article examines the romantic themes present in the top songs from the past 20 years of popular music, and presents ideas about how this information can be used by school counselors working with adolescents.

## Tuning In While Growing Up: Messages Adolescents Receive From Popular Music Regarding Relationships

### What Adolescents Learn About Relationships From Popular Music

Erikson (1950) described adolescence as the period of life when each individual must establish a sense of personal identity. During adolescence, peer relationships take the forefront (Paul & White, 1990) and dating relationships are common (Davis & Benschhoff, 1999). However, although relationships are a normal part of this stage of development, many adolescents find it difficult to discuss such issues with their parents (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995). Consequently, adolescents rank the media, in addition to parents and peers, as important sources of sexual information (Brown & Keller, 2000). Music in particular has received attention due to its apparent influence in the lives of adolescents. For example, it has been suggested that popular music influences values and perspectives found outside mainstream adult society (Hebdige 1979), and is an important channel for the communication and expression of adolescent values, conflicts, attitudes, and emotions (Leger, 1980; Santiago, 1969; Davis, 1985; Wells & Hakanen, 1991). In addition, music has been shown to help young people cope with environmental stressors (White, 1985), and influence adolescents' definition of social and subcultural boundaries (Hoga & Bar-on, 1996). In fact, one survey of 2760 14-to-16-year-olds in 10 different southeastern cities revealed that they listened to music an average of 40 hours per week (Klein, et al., 1993). Indeed, it has even been suggested that adolescents' lives are not only heavily influenced by, but centered around music (Hendricks, Robinson, Bradley, & Davis, 1999).

The lyrics of popular music often speak to the concerns, frustrations, and dreams of teenagers (Hebdige, 1979; Lull, 1985). However, the direct effect of musical lyrics on adolescent behavior is not clearly understood. Some research suggests that lyrics do have an effect (Lull, 1985; Toohey, 1982), while other studies indicated that many young people tend to not pay attention to the meaning of the lyrics and mainly listen to the sound of the music (Hirsch, 1971; Lewis, 1980; Prinsky & Rosenbaum, 1987). Two studies did find, however, that messages in the lyrics that are similar to the individuals' preexisting values are listened to and remembered in a manner that is meaningful (Rice 1980; Schlattmann 1989).

Between 1950 and 1992, courtship themes dominated popular music (Cooper, 1993) and lyrics related to sexual intercourse were common (Ostlund & Kinnier, 1997). More specifically, Ostlund and Kinnier (1997) conducted a study which analyzed the lyrics of the 25 most popular songs in America for each of 4 decades (the 50s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s). The most frequently occurring theme dealt with romantic love. In fact, 73% of the top 25 songs over four decades had lyrics about romance. It is interesting to note that songs discussing the pleasure of sexual intercourse slightly outnumbered the songs about long-term commitment in every decade except the 1950s, which is not surprising considering that developmental theorists suggest that adolescents tend to be preoccupied with sexual intercourse and love (Gardner, 1978; Kiell, 1964).

Considering the influence of music in adolescents' lives and the possible impact the lyrics have in shaping their ideas about relationships, the authors examined the most popular songs over the past 20 years, specifically examining relationship themes

within the lyrical content. The purpose of this article, then, is to examine top 40 songs from previous years in order to gain some understanding regarding lyrical content in popular music as it relates to relationships.

## Method

### *Music*

The most popular songs from 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, and 2000 were selected from The ARC Weekly Top 40 (Rock On The Net, 2001). The ARC Weekly Top 40 is a pop chart that has been in existence since 1980 and is the official Top 40 chart for Rock On The Net. From the lists, the top 5 songs of each year (1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, and 2000) were selected. See Appendix A for the five top 5 lists (N = 25) of song titles and recording artists.

### *Extraction of Romantic Value Themes*

Three adult raters, who were generally familiar with popular music of the past 20 years, independently compiled headings for various types of romantic themes that appear within musical lyrics. Each rater is a professor of various rank in a Counselor Education Program, and has had experience working with adolescents in a variety of settings, dealing with relationships and adjustment issues. The lists of romantic themes were combined and a master list was created (see Appendix B). Each adult rater was then given a copy of the lyrics for the top 5 songs of 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, and 2000, as well as a compact disc of each song. Separately, the raters examined each song and marked the romantic themes judged to be present within each song. It was possible for a variety of romantic themes to be present within each song. Only one mark was placed

within each theme regardless of the number of times the theme may have appeared within the song.

### Results

The most popular themes of the songs reviewed were as follows: unrequited love (14), infatuation (13), love of sex-(12), lost love (12), unconditional love (8), long-term (7), spiritual (5), and friendship (1).

### Discussion

The results revealed some interesting trends within the lyrics of popular music. First, the most frequent theme represented within the selected songs was unrequited love and while adolescent relationships may not be viewed by many adults as being noteworthy, there appears to be something about unrequited love that resonates with young people. Perhaps songs help put into words what adolescents experience within their relationships, and therefore songs dealing with this topic are particularly popular with this age group. Only recently has the importance of intimate relationships been acknowledged as a key factor in identity development for young people (Davis & Benshoff, 1999). Often times, parents, school counselors, and adults fail to recognize adolescent relationships as meaningful or serious. It is important to note that in these early relationships, young people learn more about themselves in ways that benefit identity formation, as well as learning how to behave within intimate relationships with their peers (Davis & Benshoff, 1999). For example, Roscoe, Kennedy and Pope (1987) asked a sample of late adolescents (mean age 19.1 years) "what they thought made a relationship one of intimacy" (p. 513). Most frequently cited were sharing, physical/sexual interaction, trust/faith, and openness.

Sexuality is one of the central issues in youth culture (Netting, 1992). Therefore, it is not so surprising that love of sex and lost love tied for the third most popular romantic theme found in the musical lyrics. It has long been accepted that love, romance, sexual experimentation, and intense friendships are part of the adolescent experience (Paul & White, 1990). A number of researchers have given support to the idea that late adolescence is typically a time in which individuals grow in both personal identity and intimacy resolution (e.g., Hodgson & Tischer, 1979; Kacerguis & Adams, 1980). It is important for all people to answer the question of when, how, and with whom to express intimate sexual feelings, but especially for young people. Consequently, Netting (1992) stated that it is during this time that "issues of sexuality are intertwined with the processes of choosing a mate and delineating a personal identity" (p. 961).

Among the adolescent population, there has been a lowering of the age of first intercourse, an increase in the number of unmarried youth with sexual experience, and an increase in the number of premarital partners (Netting, 1992). Muuss (1982) suggested that adolescents must adapt their newly matured sexual drives into their personalities, requiring them to redefine sexuality in relation to societal values and their own internal psychological processes. There is substantial evidence that some very important changes have occurred in both sexual attitudes and behaviors (Kallen & Stephenson, 1982). While the 1970's are characterized as being a time of liberal premarital sexual attitudes and behaviors, research on sexual behavior has shown that the most significant changes have been in women's behavior. This has evolved to make the behavior of women more similar to that of their male counterparts (Stevens-Long & Cobb, 1983). Some researchers suggest that since the late 1960's, sexual intercourse

has come to be expected in love relationships, even when that love relationship is not necessarily a part of the dating process leading to matrimony (Kallen & Stephenson, 1982).

Perhaps most interesting is that the four themes likely seen as being the most negative and most painful (i.e., unrequited love, infatuation, love of sex, and lost love) appeared most frequently within the lyrical content of popular music. Those themes viewed as being more positive (i.e., unconditional love, long-term relationships, friendship, and spiritual love) appeared much less often in the songs-reviewed for this article. Unconditional love was the fifth most popular theme followed by long-term relationships, spiritual love and friendship. Specifically related to lost love, music does help individuals deal with pain and anxiety (Hanser & Thompson, 1994; Linoff & West, 1982; Maranto, 1992; Standley, 1986), then it could explain why these themes are commonly found within the lyrics of popular music. It is important to remember that some songs are created from the personal experiences of the songwriter, and that the creation of the music can be healing to those individuals as well as to those who listen to the songs.

One limitation to this research is that only a small sample of songs were chosen to be examined (top 5 of five separate years). This provides a limited amount of exposure to the vast number of songs released each year and listened to by adolescents. It is possible that the songs chosen were more heavily geared towards particular romantic themes, while the majority of music bought and enjoyed by adolescents would reveal a different breakdown. In addition, three raters were used in



identifying the themes apparent in the music. It is a possibility that the use of additional raters would have revealed different results.

Future studies might benefit by examining a larger list of songs across a larger span of time. These studies can examine songs from the past several decades to try and determine if song lyrics have undergone any drastic changes over the years, as well as gaining a stronger sense of the messages expressed in music. In addition, an examination and comparison of song lyrics across musical genres might shed light on the different relationship messages which resonate across musical boundaries. A more thorough investigation of musical lyrics with regards to relationship messages could reveal greater insight into adolescent relationships.

#### Implications for School Counselors

The search for romantic themes in popular music may give some insight into the relationship issues typically dealt with by adolescents. If this population represents the bulk of the music buying public, then it is sensible to believe that music is created with the purpose of selling to these young people in mind. Therefore, some songs are created, recorded, and promoted to adolescents with the belief that the message, as well as the music itself will resonate with this population. As school counselors, it is important to pay attention to the messages that adolescents are receiving as a result of their music selections. Instead of listening to music and reacting negatively to what it sounds like, or what words are being said, school counselors should listen for what adolescents are trying to say and what is being said to them through their choices in music.

Adolescence can be difficult, and it is possible for adults to lose sight of how trying that period of life may be for some. Romantic relationships are a normal part of adolescence and should not be minimized by those who have already passed through this particular stage. Sharing music may be one way that young people can communicate with counselors, giving them some awareness of issues and feelings they are experiencing. School counselors can use music as a means of connecting with clients, similar in nature to how play therapy is often used with young children. Music may be a means of adolescents expressing emotions they are too uncomfortable sharing verbally. It is important that school counselors have an understanding of the power of music in the lives of young people, and to use this mode of communication positively when possible.

The efficacy of using music therapy to treat adolescent depression has already been demonstrated (Hendricks et al., 1999) and school counselors can build upon this work by encouraging their adolescent clients to bring music to their sessions. Encouraging clients to bring to session particular songs that express their current experiences may help to build rapport and facilitate a deeper sharing than what may occur without music. It is important for school counselors to pay close attention to their clients' musical selections because this could provide insight into the severity of the clients' issues and help set the direction for future sessions. For example, if a client brings in music that speaks largely of violence, it may prudent to assess the client for possible suicidal or homicidal ideation. This same music may also serve to inform the counselor of how isolated the adolescent feels and then time can be spent helping the client process his/her feelings regarding his/her current relationships.

## Conclusion

The preceding article has not been written as a call for censorship of any kind regarding the lyrical content of songs. The authors do not support censorship, nor do they suggest that the lyrics of popular music have a negative effect on those young people who listen to these particular songs. Instead, the authors recognize the importance of music in the lives of adolescents and suggest that school counselors may be more effective working with this population if attention is given to the lyrics of popular music. White (1985) suggested that the types of music adolescents listen to may be an indication of loneliness or other issues being dealt with currently. If this is the case, then perhaps school counselors can gain some insight into current problems of adolescents by examining music with which they identify.

The music industry is big business and relies in large part on the purchasing power of American adolescents. Purchasing one's own cd's or tapes is a manner of self-expression and allows young people an opportunity to stretch their boundaries. While the impact of lyrical content may be debated, the importance of music in the lives of adolescents is not. School counselors can use adolescents' interest in music as a starting point for conversation, and in the process gain some insight into the individual's perspective on relationships.

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Appendix A

	Unrequited	Unconditional	Infatuation	Love of Sex	Long Term	Lost	Friend	Spiritual
<b>1980</b>								
Call Me		X	X	X	X			
Lady		X			X			X
Do That To Me				X				
Woman In Love		X	X	X	X	X		
Upside Down		X	X	X				
<b>1985</b>								
Like A Virgin			X	X				
Careless Whisper	X					X		X
I Want To Know		X	X			X		
Crazy For You		X	X	X				
Separate Lives	X					X		
<b>1990</b>								
Nothing Compares	X					X		
Vogue	X					X		
Vision of Love		X	X		X			X
Poison	X		X	X				
From A Distance							X	X
<b>1995</b>								
Take A Bow	X			X	X	X		
Water Runs Dry	X					X		
Kiss From A Rose			X		X			
Fantasy	X		X	X				
I Know	X			X		X		
<b>2000</b>								
Bye Bye Bye	X					X		
With Arms Wide		X	X		X			
Bent	X			X				
Jumpin' Jumpin'	X		X	X		X		
It's Gonna Be Me	X		X			X		

## Appendix B

### Romantic Themes

1. Unrequited Love
2. Unconditional Love
3. Infatuation
4. Love of Sex (one night stand)
5. Long-term Relationship
6. Lost Love
7. Friendship

### Spiritual Love



## Biographical Statements

Dr. J. Scott Glass, Assistant Professor

East Carolina University

Greenville, North Carolina

sglass@mail.ecu.edu

Has expertise in and has published on the topic of adventure based counseling including its use in schools. Has interests in and has published regarding spirituality and group processing. Has supervised school and community counselors.

Dr. Russell C. Curtis, Assistant Professor

Western Carolina University

Cullowhee, North Carolina

Has published in areas of treatment for anxiety disorders, spirituality, and integrated health care. Has interests in using the creative and expressive arts with children and is a trained facilitator for providing substance abuse prevention for adolescents. Provides clinical supervision for school and community counselors.

Dr. George M. Thomas, Professor and Chair of the Education Division

Mississippi State University – Meridian

Meridian, Mississippi

Worked with and trained counselors within the school system. Has supervised school and community counselors for many years.