

History Lab #2 How to Read a Pop Song**Due Fri 10/4**

Rock 'n' Roll burst onto the music scene in the mid-1950s, quickly becoming the music of choice for teenagers of all races in America. In this assignment, we treat popular songs of the 1950s not only as examples of American musical folk culture and as important midcentury consumer products, but also as an engaging – and often quite revealing – historical source. Sources made during the time period we are interested in are called “primary sources.” Primary sources do not speak for themselves—they have to be interpreted. Although we can still listen to and enjoy 1950s music for its own sake, we can also subject it to close analysis and scholarly study. That said, songs provide some unique interpretive challenges. They are not exactly the same as poems (i.e. just lyrics) but neither are they the same as musical compositions (i.e. just music). It is the specific blend of words and music, often combined with the distinctive performance technique of their artists, that's important to understand as a whole. All three elements: artist, words, and music are all needed to understand a pop song fully.

Some questions to consider with a song: (you might not be able to find out all the answers, but at least ask the questions)

**Historical context**

Who wrote it? Recorded it? Produced it? Covered it? Performed it? What do you know about the people involved in making this song (and it may have multiple versions)?

Where and when was it made?

Does it portray an event? An emotion? Tell a story? Convey a message? Is it meant to be danced to?

What do you know about its audience?

Understanding the song itself

Obtain, or make, a transcript of the lyrics. Look for key words, rhyming, repetition, progression, story, and at the use of specific words/language throughout the song.

What are the key words and what do they mean?

Who is the speaker/protagonist of the song, and is it different from the singer?

What values, assumptions, or identities does the song contain? Does the artist's image (how they portray themselves) affect how you feel about the song? Would you feel the same way about the song if it was sung by someone of a different age, race, or gender? How might someone of a different demographic (someone of a different gender, someone older or younger than you, someone who made more or less money than you, someone with different political values, someone of a different race) hear the song differently.

Study the lyrics as you would any poem: meter, rhyme, literary devices like parallelism, metaphor, poetic structure, hyperbole, attitude, allusions, abstract ideas, symbolism.

Pop Song Genres and Musical Qualities

Can you identify what kind of pop song this is? Some examples from the 1950s include doo-wop, pop, rhythm & blue (R&B), rockabilly, swing, ballad.

Was this song covered by another artist? How do the versions compare?

What instruments can you identify? Is the instrumentation dense or sparse? What kinds of rhythm are used?

What emotions does it invoke? Does the mood of the music match the mood of the lyrics, or are they at odds? (If you know something about music) – what are the chords and chord progressions? What are the important musical qualities or elements in this song?

Songs as a source of historical information

Is this artifact similar to others from the same time period?

How widely was it circulated? How well did it sell; how high on the charts did it go?

What problems, assumptions, and ideas does it share with other documents from the time period?

Why are you looking at it now?

How might you verify the information in this document?

Resources:

Wisconsin Historical Society, "Using Primary Sources," <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/primarysources.asp>

"How to Read a Primary Source," www.ups.edu/faculty/wbreitenbach/how'to'prmy.doc

Library of Congress, "Questions for Analyzing Primary Sources" <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/psources/studqsts.html>

"How to Analyze a Song," <http://www.understandmedia.com/topics/media-theory/109-how-to-analyze-a-song>

Joe Burns, "The Music Matters: An Analysis of Early Rock and Roll,"

http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/VOLUME06/Music_matters.shtml

"Analyzing Blues Songs" (HistoryMatters) <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/sia/blues.htm>

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Using the questions provided, consider **two** rock 'n' roll songs from the 1950s. You will want to listen to a few before settling on your final two. The two can be different versions/covers of the same song, if you choose. Clearly & correctly cite your sources using MLA.

First **DESCRIBE** the song or songs as a historical source, placing them in historical context, answering some of the questions from the list on the previous page (1-2 pages).

Then **COMPARE** them to one another and **ASSESS** their value as historical sources. You're not trying to decide whether one is "better" or "worse." You're just pointing out similarities and differences, strengths or weaknesses of each. What can we learn from them – musically, culturally, in other ways? How might historians use these songs (most likely in ways the creators did not intend or could not have imagined)? (1-2 pages)

Finally, **SHARE** unanswered questions that came up for you in this assignment. What do you wish you had more time to pursue or figure out? What else do you want to know about them? (half a page).

Total length = 4-5 double-spaced pages

Grading: Worth 5% of your grade