

Essay on this shits been too long

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Ice T, Taylor Swift, and How Cultural Considerations Inform Their Music

“ Fuck the police” chants Ice T, in his hit “ Cop Killer,” “ tonight we get even.” These are the some of the lyrics to one of his most successful, and most controversial, songs. Released in 1992, this song was written partially in protest of the acquittal of two police officers who beat Rodney King in LA. Conversely, almost twenty years later, we have another pop star, Taylor Swift, singing “ Drew walks by me, can he tell that I can’t breathe?” She continues, “ He’s the reason for the teardrops on my guitar. The only thing that keeps me wishing on a wishing star.”

While the differences between these two pop artists are immediately apparent, what’s also apparent are the similarities between them. Primarily, that each is catering to a specific audience based on their upbringing and life experiences. White teen girls are rarely drawn to songs protesting crime against blacks. Similarly, those in the black community are less likely to be attracted to songs about a white teen girl’s crush. Each song has a clear target audience, and appeals to those things that are important to that audience. Musical merit aside, both artists are shrewd songwriters.

When Ice T raps, he’s rapping about a reality both he and his audience have experienced to varying degrees. The speaker in “ Cop Killer” cites a number of reasons he’s upset with the police, and fantasizes about killing cops to even the score. This message would not have been so popular with audiences if it didn’t resonate with their personal experience.

Gangster Rap, which is what Ice T’s music is considered, historically comes from “ studio funk and street poetry,” and has always emphasized themes of

“injustice and oppression” (Hamm and Ferrell). These themes are tied to the culture of poor, urban blacks. Consequently, they center around violence, drugs, sex, poverty, and oppression (Krohn and Suazo).

Some of these themes, specifically oppression and violence, are quite obviously present in “Cop Killer.” The reaction to this song was swift and severe. Many politicians led campaigns against the song, most notably Tipper Gore (Hamm and Ferrell). The result was that Warner Brothers pulled the song off the album after the first pressing of 500,000 units (Hamm and Ferrell). But was the song really so unique in its message of violence against law enforcement?

A look at the history of blues, rock, and rap show us that Ice T was far from the first to advocate this type of violence. (Herd) As far back as the early bluesmen, songs frequently centered on similar topics, including violence. Some famous blues musicians, including Leadbelly, were known killers themselves. As a matter of fact, these themes are so well entrenched in music, they span time, genre, and even race.

Take Eric Clapton for example. Even he performed a song about killing law-enforcement, “I Shot the Sheriff” (Hamm and Ferrell). Hamm and Ferrell have suggested that it was deemed acceptable for Clapton to do this for a couple reasons. First, the song references events that seem romantic, and are removed from the American audience by location and time (the song is about a “rudeboy” from Jamaica). Second, Clapton is simply a white artist. Clearly, the lyrics Ice T raps hit much closer to home than Clapton’s romanticized protagonist. His lyrics portray images that are familiar to the public, and play on stereotypes about black life. Since the lyrics are more

relatable, they're also more frightening. For instance, part of one verse states:

I got my ski mask on

I got my twelve gauge sawed off

'bout to dust some cops off

While the lyrics of gangster rap have changed significantly since Ice-T first sang " Cop Killer," (Herd) initially, growing more and more violent, some songs from earlier artists had positive messages for the black community. Take, for example, Ice-T's song " I'm Your Pusher." In this rap, the speaker boasts that his raps are a more potent and effect tool for getting high than crack is. He says:

I'm the kingpin when the wax spins

Crack or smack will take you to a sure end

You don't need it, just throw that stuff away

You wanna get high? Let the record play

The song continues on in much this same way, exalting the abilities of the rapper, and putting down the use of drugs, specifically crack. Interestingly, even in this song the speaker includes a jab at the police. They say:

The cops don't know what to do

Because my dope breaks thru

No matter what they do, my stuff gets to you

Although Taylor Swift is separated from Ice T by time, gender, race, and style, she, too has successfully tapped into a passionate fan base. Her songs

about unrealized love, and feeling like an outsider resonate particularly well with teenage women.

Swift, unlike Ice T, did not come from a troubled background. When she was still quite young, her parents move to Nashville to try to help her get a music career started. They succeeded in short order. (biography. com)

It wasn't long before Swift had hits like " Our Song," a country-pop story about riding in her boyfriend's truck. She laments that the two don't have a special song, which leads to her boyfriend's reply and the song's chorus:

Our song is the slamming screen door

Sneakin' out late, tapping on your window

When we're on the phone and you talk real slow

'Cause it's late and your mama don't know

Here, Swift is clearly appealing to a romantic audience. She also uses some very iconic " country" symbols, including a truck, the slamming screen door, and " mama." Her intended audience are those who would recognize and identify with the theme and the symbols. In other words, romantic country fans.

As she grew older and more experienced, Swift began to cross over from country-pop into plain old pop. It's interesting to see her slow progression from one genre to the next. When her career began, she was firmly in the country camp, with songs such as " Our Song" and " Teardrops on My Guitar." However, with songs such as " You Belong With Me" (about a nerdy, teen girl in love with her best friend), and " Back to December" (a melancholy ballad about a lost love), she transitioned toward the place she finally arrived, in " We are Never Ever Getting Back Together." In this song

she's clearly attempting to expand her fan base, by appealing to a non-country audience. However, the topics she sings about still remain largely the same. As with "Back to December," she's the one who is ending things.

Oooh you called me up again tonight

But Oooh, this time I'm telling you, I'm telling you

We are never ever ever getting back together

Swift's most recent single, "Shake it Off," is a more upbeat song about resilience in the face of adversity. In a sense, its social message resembles that of Ice T's "I'm Your Pusher" because both songs encourage their listeners to take a positive attitude in the face of a negative situation. While Swift's song lacks the boasting of "I'm Your Pusher," it does give a message that it is important to stay focused and make healthy decisions in the face of adversity. She literally shouts this message in the chorus of the song:

Cause the players gonna play, play, play

And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate

Baby I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake

Shake it off

One of the first contrasts that is evident between the music of Ice T and Swift is that Swift's music lacks any social commentary. Ice T was writing music aimed at voicing the concerns of a disenfranchised audience. His lyrics were not literal, for instance he never actually killed a cop, but rather they symbolized the anger felt by an entire group of people. This bonding made them loyal to his musical brand.

Swift accomplished the same goal of widespread musical acceptance, but

she did it via a different social route. Her constituency has primarily been young, middle and upper class women. She possessed enough business savvy to make a crossover to a larger market, mainstream pop, but did so in a way that allowed her to retain at least some of her previous fan base while also exposing herself to a whole new one.

It is difficult to say whether any performer is legitimately espousing heartfelt moral views, or rather appearing that way to cater to an audience. However, if their images match reality, it would appear that the primary difference between these two pop stars is that Ice T rapped to express the frustrations felt by an oppressed group of people, while Swift sings to express her feelings about unrequited or lost love. While that may lead one to the conclusion that Ice T was the more consummate performer, the fact is that both artists represent their social groups equally well. It is difficult to say that one group's feelings deserve expression over another's. Swift is giving voice to a group of people every bit as much as Ice T is.

Perhaps ultimately that's what makes popular music popular. It does tap into a feeling felt by a large group of people, and allows them to feel a sense of community through the sharing of that music. Certainly both of the artists discussed in this paper have made careers out of doing just that. While the characteristics of the groups they represent may differ, the end result is the same; popular music, by its very nature, caters to and exploits social groups. It's a rule that has spanned generations, genres, and genders.

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