

Questions to ask when analyzing Popular Music

Musicians often disregard popular music because of its simple and repetitive nature. Often, the harmonic structure of a pop song will be just a few chords repeated incessantly through-out the song (see Axis of Awesome's *Four Chords* video on YouTube), and the predictable verse-chorus form offers little variety. However, even this simple formula offers many avenues for expression. The following is a list of questions that one may ask when searching for meaning in popular music.

1. What are the lyrics about?

- a. This is often something overlooked by instrumentalists. The content of the lyrics is an excellent starting point for analyzing popular music, as it leads to several other questions.
- b. Is there a story? How is this story portrayed in the music, if at all?

2. Who is singing? Who is being sung to?

- a. The obvious answer to this question is "the singer is singing!" But, there are several ways to think of this question.
 - i. Often, singers will have a *perceived persona*. What is the persona of the singer like? While you feel like you may know a singer or songwriter, usually you are only aware of the persona they set forth in their music.
 - ii. Is the singer embodying a character? (Daft Punk is known for this.)
 - iii. Is the singer discussing their real-life experiences? (Eminem often discusses things that actually happened to him.)
 - iv. Is the song introspective or an inner monologue for the singer?
- b. If there is a solo instrument along with the vocals, do you imagine the singer playing the instrument or being accompanied by somebody else?
- c. Does tense (past/present/future) change throughout the song?

3. What is the role of the background vocals?

- a. Do they agree or disagree with the lead vocals? Are there several characters involved? Do they offer another perspective?
- b. Occasionally, background vocals can tell a different story. In Death Cab for Cutie's *What Sarah Said*, the lead vocals are removed from the song and only the background vocals are left, representing the death of the singer.

4. What part of their *Vocal Space* is the singer occupying?

- a. Whether somebody is singing high or low in their respective range can be important. Note that this does not refer to high or low voices, but whether a singer is singing high or low in their personal range.
 - i. The high end of the spectrum may represent rebellion, angst, anger, excitement, insanity, or fear.
 - ii. The low end of the spectrum might indicate complacency, relaxedness, intimacy, sensuality, anguish, sadness, or loneliness.
- b. The content of the lyrics in moments where this changes is often meaningful. This could reflect a change in mood, attitude, or emotion for the singer or the listener. Nirvana's *Smells like Teen Spirit* is a good example of this.

5. **Does the *environment* of the accompaniment match the content of the lyrics?**
 - a. In many songs, the mood of the accompaniment will match that of the lyrics. However, when the accompaniment carries a noticeably different mood than the lyrics, this creates *irony*.
 - i. This sort of irony is common in the music of Streetlight Manifesto. Often, their lyrics are morbid or depressing, but the musical accompaniment is typically upbeat and energetic.
6. **How does the instrumentation reflect the music?**
 - a. Consider things like acoustic vs. electric instruments. For example, the acoustic guitar will often invoke a different mood than an electric guitar.
 - b. Are there wind or stringed instruments? What is their role in the ensemble?
 - i. The acoustic guitar and wind instruments at the beginning of Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven* help set the pastoral and balladic mood of the song.
7. **How does harmony change between different sections of the song?**
 - a. The harmony of a section (like a verse or a chorus) might change dramatically. Consider key changes, chord substitutions, and changes in mode (major to minor).
 - i. In Taylor Swift's "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together," the verses feature diatonic harmony while the choruses utilize pentatonic harmony. The pentatonic scale does not include the dissonance created by half-steps seen in diatonic harmony, reflecting the resolute and "drama-free" attitude of the chorus.
8. **Does gender play a role in interpreting this music?**
 - a. Consider how the meaning of a song might change if the gender was swapped.
 - i. A good example of this is Cake's cover of Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive*.
 - b. Considerations of gender are often unavoidable in popular music. In most cases, there will be some sort of significance to the singer's gender.
9. **How do things change from track to track in an album?**
 - a. Sometimes there may be a connection between songs on an album, but it may not always be obvious.
 - i. Pink Floyd's album *The Wall* tells a larger story that is fairly apparent to most listeners, while some listeners disagree about whether *Dark Side of the Moon* has a deeper story or not.
10. **Does the song stick to the prescribed form?**
 - a. Diversions from the typical verse-chorus form, or elongations of particular sections can be meaningful.
 - b. Are there occasions where the singer "breaks out" and continues without regard for the form or accompaniment?
11. **Is there an official music video? How does it relate to the story?**
 - a. Sometimes, music videos can enhance or reveal