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**Los Angeles Through Song:
Driving, Danger, Sun, Stars, Women, and Loneliness**

Music is a way of expressing things that may not be able to be expressed through words alone; "Music is the soul of language" (Max Heindel). Los Angeles has many different songs written about it that articulate the essence of Los Angeles. Songs describe parts of places in depth and LA songs can be divided into six different categories: driving, danger, sun, stars, women, and loneliness. This project will explore how some of the most famous songs about Los Angeles express part of the LA identity and will try to answer the question: does Los Angeles need every part for its true identity?

Los Angeles was founded in 1781 by the Spanish on the site of a Native American village, but it wasn't until the first film studio was established in 1911 that Los Angeles really began to soar. In the 1920s and 1930s the box office began to boom and thus the population of Los Angeles did too. Easterners began the move West in search of their fortune and during the Great Depression the population began to increase even more. Life was grim, but the cinema provided an escape and made California seem idyllic and glamorous. But, as the city grew so did the need for water; LA was built on an arid basin. Water had been an issue since the Spanish were settled in Los Angeles in 1799 when Spanish padres in San Fernando dammed up the river. The film *Chinatown* shows an example of an LA water crisis, the battle over the rights of the Owen's Valley water that was eventually "stolen". In 1940 the opening Arroyo Seco Parkway linked Downtown LA to Pasadena; this was the start of car culture. As the automotive industry grew it began to undermine the public transportation system in LA and helped the development of auto-friendly roads. As the car culture expanded Los Angeles became a place of suburban sprawl. During WWII the population increased again as workers were needed in LA and these workers needed cheap housing. But, what really made car culture stick and why it is so special in LA is because, as movie director Cecil B. DeMille once said, "both cars and movies capture Americans' love of motion and speed." During the early 1920s, movie comedians Laurel and Hardy and the Keystone Cops began to blend their physical humor with the popular Ford Model

T, while Harley Earl, a coach builder, was busy in his shop on South Main Street, building special vehicles for the movies and designing flashy custom cars for wealthy movie stars (Fommers). Any city could have an increase in population and thus a need for water and housing leading to sprawl and the need for highways and cars, but because this happened in this glamorous city cars became part of the image and Hollywood images rarely fade away. Two songs that really emphasize this side of LA, the car culture, are “Why You’d Want To Live Here” by Death Cab for Cutie and “The L.A. Song” by People Under the Stairs. In “Why You’d Want To Live Here” a stand out lyric is “I’m in LA today and it smells like an airport runway” (Pietzman). Driving, freeways, and car culture have led to LA’s well known smog and pollution. The People Under the Stairs song has a different view on LA driving, the view of freedom. They say “buddy I’m all smiles, I’m counting the miles” (Pietzman). And there is even a country song by Susan Raye called “LA International Airport”. In LA people have to travel in order to live in the sprawl.

Almost everything in life has a dark side, including Los Angeles. There is a “hood life” and gang culture in LA and Los Angeles has had its fair share of riots. The Watts Riots occurred in August 1965 when an African American motorist, Marquette Frye, was pulled over by a white police officer, Lee W. Minikus, under the suspicion that Marquette was driving under the influence. As a crowd looked on Marquette was arrested and tension between the police on onlookers grew into violence. This tipping point started the Watts Riots. Watts is a very African American populated and impoverished neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles. The riots went on for six days while Watts citizens looted stores and tipped over cars. Thirty four people were killed, over a thousand were injured, and four thousand were arrested. The riots only stopped once the National Guard was called in (Civil Rights Digital Library). This may seem like a random event, but in Los Angeles there had been tension between the poor minorities and the brutal police officers for some time, the dark and dangerous side of “glamorous” LA. And this tension wasn’t just going to go away. Twenty years later Rodney King, an African American motorist, was pulled over and beaten up by multiple white police officers and the scene was caught on film. When the officers were found innocent in court riots in South Central Los Angeles started all over again. From these run down parts of Los Angeles rap and hip hop began to thrive in the 1990s. The most notorious artist in rap history is unmistakably Tupac Amaru Shakur, better known as 2pac. His music was usually about the “gritty tales of thug life”

(Bradley, 511). 2Pac showed the world the real ugly side of Los Angeles life which was emphasized through his profane, misogynistic, and violent lyrics. Rap really went mainstream from 1993 to 1999 and although 2Pac was not born in LA he really helped the rise of his music. In one of his raps, one of my favorites on showing how life really is, is called "Brenda's Got A Baby". In this song Tupac talks about Brenda's life: she never knew her mom and her dad is junkie. Her family doesn't care if she has a ton of kids as long as they got money. One of the most emotion provoking lines is "She's twelve years old and she's havin a baby/ In love with a molester who's sexin her like crazy" (Bradley, 513). In the end Brenda tries to throw the baby away and becomes a prostitute. This is the side of LA that is not part of the glamorous and perfect image of Hollywood, yet it is still very much part of the identity of LA. 2Pac also wrote a song called "To Live and Die In LA" where he wrote that "La is the city of angels and constant danger" (Pietzman). Bad Religion had another take on the dark side of LA in their song "Los Angeles Is Burning." They were not just talking about the wildfires. In the music video they show all of these men with camera heads shooting fire out. The movie industry and its pressures are a leading cause in all of the hardships in LA. And lastly Guns N' Roses' "Welcome To The Jungle" celebrates the craziness in LA. But, in LA everything has it's cost: "you can taste the bright lights, but won't get here for free" (Pietzman).

In Los Angeles, everything and its opposite are true. LA has a dark side, but it is also thought of to be magnificently sunny all the time; Los Angeles can feel safe and welcoming. Even 2Pac agreed. In "Brenda's Got A Baby" he says "Just 'cause you're in the ghetto doesn't mean you can't grow" (Bradley, 513). There is a sense of warmth and hope in LA that balances out the darkness of street life. Usually this light and airiness surrounds the infamous California beaches. If you look up images of California pictures of beaches, palm trees, the bright lights at night, and the Hollywood sign are usually what pop up. According to the VisitCalifornia website "Los Angeles is known for its consistently sunny, desert-like, coastal climate." California is even called the Golden State. In the Mama's and the Papa's song "California Dreamin" they sing "I'd be safe and warm if I was in LA" (Pietzman). Los Angeles and Hollywood have been the place to come to start over new with hopes of making it big. For example, this Christmas Day it was 85 degrees in Southern California and in the Midwest and East Coast the temperature is currently negative. LA has the best weather around and good weather makes people happier. The weather in Los Angeles is well known and consistent that Albert Hammond even wrote a song called "It

Never Rains in Southern California". The beaches and nice weather also give the air that it is always summer in California and during summer people let loose and have fun. Best Coast wrote a song called "The Only Place" and the music video is of two people just having fun going to the beach and driving in a convertible in the sunshine.

The sun and weather are a big part in the identity of LA, but one of the other most common pictures is the Hollywood sign. Not only do people come to LA because they want a fresh start and the warm weather, they believe that they can make it big here. Los Angeles with its movie studios and star walk draw people from all over. From the very beginning when the first film studio opened in 1911 men and women began flooding to California. When you are from LA the first question you get asked if you travel abroad is "do you live next to a movie star?" or "how many famous people do you know". It is assumed that famous people are all around Los Angeles and sometimes it is even thought of to be the main characteristic when people think of LA. Shawn Mullins touches on this idea of living among stars in his song "Lullaby" with the line "she grew up with the children of the stars, in the Hollywood Hills, in the Boulevard." The Kink's song "Celluloid Heroes" talks more about the famous walk of stars, one of the most iconic and well known images of LA. In their song they say "you can see all the stars as you walked down Hollywood Boulevard", but in the title of their song they are also hinting at the fakeness of Hollywood. Celluloid means "artificial" and "synthetic" and it is also used to make film (The Free Dictionary). The Kinks are implying that all the stars are as fake and shallow as their film.

Many famous stars, especially in all the fashion magazines, are women. But, what makes the LA women so important, famous, and irresistible to write songs about? There are a surprising number of songs solely about women in LA. Think about all of the famous women in top ten lists the majority of the women live in LA because they live where the fame is. And there are also these ideas of California girls being beach blonde beach babes or valley girls. Like Snoop Dog and Katy Perry say in "California Gurls" that California girls have "daisy dukes bikinis on top sun kissed skin so hot it melts your popsicle". California girls are supposed to be gorgeous because the weather is so nice here that they can wear bikinis all day and always have highlighted hair and sun-kissed skin. The Beach Boys, a very California band who wrote the majority of their songs about the beach, also had a "California Girls" song. Where they talk about the beach babes that are California girls. But, the Doors with their "LA Woman" song they

talk about the night life of LA and how adventurous and fun LA women are. They sing “are you a lucky little lady in the City of the Light?”. A lucky little lady talks about the more scandalous and fun side of LA women. According to Usher every man wants a “lady in the street and a freak in the bed” and that’s what LA women are made up to be. California girls or Valley girls and then there’s the night life of lucky ladies. Once fame is thrown in they’re really irresistible.

And then there is feeling lonely in Los Angeles. In such a big city that is always moving it is always easy to get lost in it all. Ariel Pink’s song “Life in LA” is all about him feeling lonely and almost left behind. Pink’s music video starts off with just a lonely palm tree. Since LA is talked about so broad sometimes the people living here get lost. Not many people know every part of LA. Maybe they know the beach girls or the valley girls or fame or South Central, but one group is always lost. Just like the lone palm tree even though palm trees are iconic to LA. The Red Chili Peppers also wrote “Under the Bridge” they say “sometimes I feel like my only friend is the city I live in, the city of angels”. In this big city the only friend one has is the city itself.

There have been many songs written about Los Angeles covering everything from driving to the women, but what makes LA so compelling to write about? Artists and bands from all different genres seem to be drawn to writing songs about LA. Some live in Los Angeles, and song writers do like to write about what they know, but many are outsiders. Los Angeles is so written about because it has all of it’s different parts and there is always more to explore. With all the diversity and parts of LA there is always a unique air of Los Angeles. No other place in the world could be anything like Los Angeles and people are unable to describe it’s real essence in words. Music is the sole of language and it expresses the soul of Los Angeles.