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Popularity Through the Unorthodox: A Perspective on Transcendence

One of Abraham Maslow's numerous definitions of transcendence is something that he calls "transcending the opinion of others," in which one is able to be "unpopular when [it] is the right thing to be, to become an autonomous, self-deciding self; to write one's own lines, to be one's own man, to be not manipulatable or desirable." (Maslow 59). In the world of music, this is a foreign and unpalatable concept, as many artists seek popularity and success. There has been a plethora of research done on this topic, with numerous scholars examining the traditional forms of popular music. There are also many scholars, however, who look at unpopular or obscure music, something which can be said to transcend the opinion of others. This research often investigates songs that feature long periods of silence or unorthodox languages, tempos, and meaning. In spite of this, there has been a limited amount of research done on the intersection of these two areas: music that transcends the opinion of others, yet is still popular.

There are three songs that exemplify this concept and will be investigated in great depth throughout this paper: "Nights" by Frank Ocean, "Price of Fame" by Brent Faiyaz and "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst" by Kendrick Lamar. These songs have certain elements that show their transcendence of the opinion of others, including sudden beat switches, abrupt tempo changes and long periods of non-music in the middle of the song. Despite this, all of the aforementioned songs have garnered significant popularity, regardless of whether that was their intention or not.

This essay will first discuss traditional popular music, and will outline what makes music popular. This first section will also look into popular music of the past 20 years, showing trends and outliers regarding the songs. The following three sections will cover each individual song selected for this research essay and will focus on one particular element for each song. Beat switching will be investigated in regards to “Nights”, tempo will be investigated in regards to “Price of Fame” and non-music will be investigated in regards to “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst.” By investigating these three songs, as well as numerous academic sources, this essay will show how music that transcends what is typically referred to as “traditionally popular” can still gain popularity despite its unorthodox qualities.

In recent years, there have been many scholars who have researched traditional popular music as a whole. This has uncovered many patterns and trends that exist within the realm of popular music, all of which will be discussed further in this section.

Bernard Steinbrecher has analyzed the various factors that make certain songs popular through the lens of sonic aesthetics—a term that refers to the elements of music such as the tempo, key, duration, consistency and melody. In his article *Mainstream Popular Music: An Update*, it has been determined that “successful songs seem to ... display a tendency to be happier, more party-like and danceable, less sad, more feminine,” (Steinbrecher 412) in regards to their sonic aesthetics. This is often characterized by a high tempo, consistency and a lack of unorthodox elements to the songs. Mattias Mauch also looks into popular music with his article *The Evolution of Popular Music*, in which he takes a quantitative approach to the study. Through his research, it is determined that since the late 1990s, diversity in popular music has decreased at a consistent rate (Mauch et al. 4–5). This includes elements of music such as content, tempo, duration,

originality and key. Looking at the most popular songs of the past 20 years, these findings are easy to believe. Out of every number one song from the years 2003-2022, there has not been a single one that has had a key change, tempo change or beat switch. The tempo of every song has remained in the range of 100 beats per minute (bpm) to 174 bpm, with one exception being Beyoncé's "Irreplaceable" which had a tempo of 88 beats per minute. These findings confirm both Steinbrecher and Mauch's research in that there are certain elements that make music popular.

Elizabeth Margulis and Mary McGorray have both researched how non-traditional forms of music can be impactful. Margulis looks specifically at silence within music, and how certain pauses can be very impactful for the listener. In her article *Silences in Music are Musical not Silent*, she says that "silences often occur at phrase boundaries in both language and music, allowing time for listeners to shift attention from one syntactic unit to the next," (Margulis 501) providing one explanation for the purpose and impact of silences in music: it allows for the listener to shift focus. Margulis refers to silence in this article in the context of pauses in classical pieces of music, however, which immediately alienates her findings from the world of popular music. McGorray also looks at silence in music, however she too researches from a perspective far from that of popular music. In her article *Gaps in Music: The Neuroscience of Pauses* she says that silence in classical music is "intens[e], sometimes it's relaxing, sometimes it's euphoric: It can be any emotion." (McGorray para.28). While this does speak highly of pauses and non-musical moments in a song, it again does not correlate to popular music.

The following sections will look at the three songs researched in this paper and relate them to the scholars mentioned above. Elements from all of their various studies will be referred to as a means of proving that transcending the norms of popular music can still result in a song gaining fame and recognition in the mainstream.

The first song to be looked at in this paper is “Nights” by Frank Ocean, and is perhaps the most peculiar example of how transcending the opinion of others in regards to music creation can still yield popularity. Despite numerous elements of the song acting in direct contrast to the popular sonic aesthetics highlighted by Steibrecher, “Nights” has had massive commercial success, reaching nearly 700 million streams on Spotify alone. Along with these stats, the song peaked at spot 96 on the Billboard Top 100 chart and has had significant radio success to accompany that.

This success is peculiar considering one of the key elements of the song: an unorthodox beat switch that occurs at the 3:30-mark. The first three minutes of the track are quite normal, and follow many of the sonic aesthetics outlined by Steinbrecher in his article *Mainstream Popular Music: An Update*. “Nights” maintains a tempo of 160 bpm, does not have any inconsistencies or key changes and does not have any elements of non-music or silence present. However, at the 3:30 mark, there is a rather abrupt shift in which the beat changes in its entirety—almost as if it is an entirely separate song. The second half of “Nights” is entirely different from the first, as it maintains a much slower tempo of 90 bpm, is in a different key, has a different melody and even has a slightly altered pitch on Ocean’s vocals. Also, the content of the second part is very different from that of the first. According to my own research, of the top-charting songs of the past 20 years, there has not been a single one that has had any of these elements. Of the top-charting albums of the past 20 years, there has been a total of 10 songs with beat switches on all of said albums combined out of a possible 361, amounting to 2.8%. This shows the rarity of this unorthodox element of music in popular music.

Regardless of how rare a beat switch is, the fact of the matter is that Frank Ocean implemented one in a song that has gained massive success. As a direct result of transcending the

opinion of others in the creative process, he has created a song that many people find to be thoroughly enjoyable. “Nights” exists on an album that is “one of the most intriguing and contrary records ever made,” (Jonze para.1) and is ranked 79th in The Rolling Stone’s *Top 500 Albums of All Time*. Both of these feats add to the idea that, despite its obscurities, “Nights” is an incredibly popular song. Although it does not follow the sonic aesthetics of the most popular songs of the past two decades, Frank Ocean’s song shows that transcending the opinions of others can still lead to mass success.

The second song being looked into for this paper is Brent Faiyaz’s “Price of Fame,” a song that was only released in 2022 yet has garnered a plethora of popularity and positive reviews. While the song in question has not made it into the Billboard Top 200, *Wasteland*, the album in which it exists, has stayed there since its release—a total of 74 weeks. It peaked at number two and is currently in spot 121. Despite “Price of Fame” featuring numerous elements that set it apart from popular music, it has had great success. The track has been played nearly 40 million times on Spotify alone, which puts it in the top half of songs from his album. While these statistics may appear underwhelming in comparison to Frank Ocean’s “Nights,” they are still extremely impressive when considering the absurd elements of Faiyaz’s work, particularly in regards to the numerous tempos that the track consists of.

“Price of Fame” is split up into three distinct parts. The first is a slow, melodic R&B track that has a heavy bass and slightly pitched-down vocals. The tempo of this part is 99 bpm, which is ever-so-slightly below the typical tempo of pop songs according to the past 20 years. The second part of the song begins at the 1:36 mark and is a rather sudden shift. It is very similar to the first part, however it is sped up to a bpm of 117. This change in tempo also results in the pitch of the

song being altered, bringing Brent Faiyaz's natural vocals out. The third part of the song is the most noticeably different, and brings along with it a third change in tempo. At the 2:58 mark of the track, the beat shifts suddenly to an extremely slow, melodic and soft instrumental with a tempo of 77 bpm. This change is not considered a beat switch, however, as the key stays the same as well as the instrumentation and lyrical content. Regardless, these changes in tempo go directly against the sonic aesthetics in regards to consistency in music. By altering the tempo numerous times throughout the course of one song, the listener struggles to connect with the song as they are not allowed to get comfortable. This is because slow-tempoed songs often make the listener sad while fast-tempoed songs often make the listener happy (Steinbrecher 413), resulting in mixed emotions for listeners.

Despite Brent Faiyaz straying away from the sonic aesthetics of popular music, "Price of Fame" has still reached an impressive level of popularity. While there may be numerous reasons for this, it is undeniable that by transcending the opinions of others and making music that does not conform to popular standards, Brent Faiyaz still managed to find success.

The third and final song being investigated for this paper is Kendrick Lamar's "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst," whose lengthy title is fitting given the duration of the song. Clocking in at 12:04, this song is certainly obscure on many levels, yet has been hugely popular since its release in 2012. The song itself has been played 154 million times on Spotify, and the album which it is a part of—*good kid, m.A.A.d city*—has remained on the Billboard Top 200 charts since its release, totalling 579 weeks at this point in time. Two of the key features of this song are the periods of conversation that occur from 6:58 to 7:22 and from 10:17 to 12:04. Because of the lengths of these

conversations—a total of 2:09—it is surprising that the song has had as much commercial success as it has.

In Steve Ott's review of Sigur Rós' album *()*, he says that a pause in the middle of the artistic work is “a maneuver any number of bands have employed to replicate the artistic freedom of vinyl and cassette having separate and distinct sides.” (Ott para.5). While this may be true, it is not applicable to 21st-century popular music. “Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst” goes against the sonic aesthetics of popular music and revels in inconsistency and non-music, something that does not appear in any of the songs on the number one albums of the past twenty years. In the midst of music, Kendrick Lamar inputs two conversations as an artistic expression to “engage listeners in [a] complex” way, as silence and non-music often does (Margulis 485). While the non-music component may have been a choice in an attempt to produce a level of intensity or emotional reaction that could not otherwise be produced (McGorray para.28), the silence in “Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst” is undoubtedly a unique and unorthodox element of the song. Without it, the song would not be the same and would potentially lose some of its meaning.

Despite Kendrick Lamar's intentional ignorance of the sonic aesthetics of popular music, he has still created a song that has gathered critical acclaim. This in and of itself shows that by transcending the notions surrounding popular music and ignoring the opinion of others, popularity and success is still a very real possibility.

It can be fairly concluded that music that transcends the notions of popular music can still be successful and achieve massive popularity. This is evident in the work of Frank Ocean, Brent Faiyaz and Kendrick Lamar, all of whom have created songs that are incredibly popular despite not complying with the sonic aesthetics of popular music.

Frank Ocean's "Nights" is a track with hundreds of millions of plays, yet is very unorthodox in nature. This is because at the 3:30 mark, the song undergoes a sudden and extreme change in which it sounds like an entirely new track. This goes against Steibrecher's ideas surrounding consistency in popular music, as "Nights" is anything but consistent. Brent Faiyaz's "Price of Fame" is another popular song that has a very peculiar feature. It is sectioned off into three different parts, all of which have a different tempo. This inconsistency goes against the idea of popular music, as it does not allow the listener to connect with any part of the song due to the sudden and harsh changes. Despite this, it has gained significant popularity. Kendrick Lamar's "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst" is a track with over 100 million plays, yet contains two long periods of non-music. This is something not found in popular music, and is typically only evident in classical music or more experimental songs. Despite this, Kendrick Lamar implemented two full conversations into his track, opting to go against the norms of popular music.

All three of these examples show that transcending the opinions of others can still result in popularity and success in the world of music. This provides inspiration for artists to not feel confined by popular music before them, as there is always room for new ideas. The mantra of Brent Faiyaz in "Price of Fame" is an appropriate one to end this paper with:

"fame isn't everything."

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