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ABSTRACT

Communication scholars have recently focused attention on songs as artifacts of popular culture. Current literature implies that the contexts of music communication are defined by the relationships that songs establish between artists and their audience: persuasive, expressive, and commercial. As the commercialization of music is an inherently rhetorical process, it is in this commercial context that rhetorical theory and popular song must find union. The appeal of popular songs can be explained through Kenneth Burke's concept of identification with others, an essentially rhetorical process. Thus, a song that begins as an artist's personal expression becomes, through identification, a vicarious expression by the listener. Music serves as a repository for the concerns of the society in which it is found, both communicating and reflecting normative values. It is also the nature of the music itself, and not the vocal or lyrical aspects alone, that accounts for its popularity. Thus a rhetoric of popular song would be incomplete if it failed to address the rhetorical implications of music style. Audiences either relate or fail to relate to music according to their ability to identify with the particular style. Taken as a whole, the social theory of music suggests that popular songs function as communicative events. In addition to serving the ends of persuasion and artistic expression, music is a medium of vicarious expression for audiences as collectives and as individuals. (HTH)

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The Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Song

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The Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Song

Music has long been recognized to be an important mode of human expression. Sociologist R. Serge Denisoff notes that songs have figured prominently in strategies for motivating social protest, citing the writings of Marx and Lenin in which music is discussed as equal, and possibly superior, to speechmaking as a means of promoting class consciousness.¹ In his surveys of American protest movements, Denisoff has traced musical persuasion from 1820s leftist activities through the 1960s Vietnam protests. A number of communication scholars, recognizing this persuasive potential, have included music within their scope of inquiry. Consonant with the discipline's timely interest in strategies of social protest, most early discussions of music communication focused on the medium's potential as an instrument of overt persuasion. For instance, after examining the way songs were used in a number of American social movements, Steven Kosokoff argued that "[S]ongs have played an integral rhetorical role in many social-action movements in American history" and concluded that "The sheer weight of historical evidence establishes the thesis that song was and is used by activists concerned with persuasion."² Music as a tool of activism was similarly addressed by Bowers and Ochs in their handbook for social protest, The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control, where they noted music's possibilities as a stratagem of solidification or polarization.³ Irving Rein theorized that songs might be likewise successful in attracting new members to a movement, writing that "while as yet there may be no scientific proof that popular music can influence conversion to ideas,

political and cultural, it dins into our ears so constantly and bombards our minds so heavily that the possibility of such influencing cannot be shrugged off." ⁴ The implication for rhetorical scholarship was expressed by Charles Stewart in a paper presented to the 1979 meeting of this Association. "I believe social movement songs serve important rhetorical functions for social movements and contain enough substantive content to warrant classification as discourse [and are] a legitimate area of study for rhetorical critics and theorists." ⁵

In recent years a new trend has developed. Rather than limiting the scope of inquiry to the persuasive use of music, a number of communication scholars have focused attention on songs as artifacts of popular culture. ⁶ This research grows out of an assumption that popular songs, like their persuasive counterparts, are legitimate objects of rhetorical criticism. As appealing as this may seem, the assumption has yet to be connected to an appropriate theoretical construct. In lieu of pursuing a rhetoric of popular song, scholars have grounded popular music criticism in existing discussions of the rhetorical implications of persuasive music. It is the purpose of this paper to review the settings in which rhetorical music criticism has been justified, and to advance a construct which argues why the rhetoric of music should include songs in their commercial as well as their persuasive and expressive contexts.

The Contexts of Music Communication

For the most part, current literature implies that the contexts of music communication are defined by the functions songs serve in relationships between artists and their audiences. Irvine and Kirkpatrick lay a foundation for distinguishing between these functions in their

discussion of music as a form of communicative interaction. Initially, they indicate, musical symbols are manipulated in the mind of an artist. On this level, the song is a communicative act by which the composer or performer uses music to satisfy intrapersonal drives requiring interpersonal interaction. On a second level, manipulation occurs in the minds of the audience and the song becomes a communicative event relating the artistic act to an audience response. Thus, songs may be viewed as conscious discursive interacts relating artists and audiences. Existing research identifies three contexts in which these relationships develop.

Persuasive context. The most apparent context is formed from attempts to use songs as overt instruments of persuasion. In a suasory setting, artist and audience interact in a relationship Irvine and Kirkpatrick describe as one of rhetorical intention. They write, "If the artist is functioning within the rhetorical category of intent, the formulation of variables is carried on with one of two possible goals: to reinforce an existing attitude of [sic] value, or to alter existing attitudes or values in a persuasive manner. Within the rhetorical category of intent, the artist is directly and deeply concerned with the possibility of his personal musical art [sic] becoming a communicative event inviting a specific response from other persons." A similar view of music used as a tool of persuasion was provided by John David Bloodworth. "[W]e have those songwriters who do have a definite instrumental purpose in mind, and who write lyrics to an audience in terms of an action they would like to see performed or a change they would like to see come about." Denisoff concurred in his discussion of magnetic songs. These are, he wrote, action oriented songs which are intended to

appeal to an audience in a way which might attract new members to a
cause or reinforce the commitment level of adherents.¹¹

The rhetorical scholar's interest in persuasive songs is easily defined. Aristotle observed that discussing the various ways of persuasion is clearly within the legitimate province of rhetoric. "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. This is not a function of any other art."¹² This was, in fact, the starting point from which Kosokoff argued "[One] is hard-pressed to argue against the study of one previously-ignored rhetorical medium. That medium is the song. . . ." It is this¹³ classical construct of rhetoric as persuasion to which most rhetorical music criticism has been tied. In a persuasive context, the rhetorical value of music communication seems obvious.

Expressive context. A second context is formed from attempts to use music as a medium of personal expression. In this context, creative expression is pursued for self-fulfillment with only tangential concern for whether the musical act becomes an event inviting response. Denisoff recognizes expression as a legitimate motive for musical interaction, noting that music may stress "individual indignation and dissent but . . . not offer a solution in a movement. The song [may be] a statement of dissent which [says] 'I protest, I do not concur,' or just plain 'damn you.'" ¹⁴ Denisoff identifies the protest songs of Bob Dylan as classic examples of this form. Expressive songs are not, however, thematically limited to declarations of protest. Kosokoff indicates, "Man is a singing being. He has created songs to express every human emotion. . . ." ¹⁵ As such, music communication occurs more frequently in an expressive than in a persuasive context.¹⁶

Irvine and Kirkpatrick imply that expressive songs are of potential value to rhetorical scholarship, arguing that expressive songs must be either reinforcive or persuasive to fall within the legitimate province of rhetoric. Songs which are intentionally expressive must undergo metamorphosis in the minds of the audience and become existentially
¹⁷persuasive. A similar position was articulated by Bloodworth, who saw

value in expressive songs only in their potential for instrumental effect. He writes, "That is not to say that expressive communication in the above sense is mere babbling and only instrumental communication is effective. In the case of recent rock songs, we have no way to distinguish whether or not a song was originally written with an expressive purpose or instrumental purpose or both. But when a song is sung publicly or is recorded it becomes potentially goal- or effect-oriented as it gains an audience. The song never loses its expressive purpose, but it may gain an instrumental function as soon as it is heard by an
¹⁸audience." Thus, songs which are not intended to be persuasive or

reinforcive may be transmuted by the audience to a rhetorical form. From this perspective, the expressive song is a pseudo-rhetorical act which may assume legitimate rhetorical properties when transformed into a persuasive event.

The argument may also be made that expressive songs fulfill legitimate rhetorical functions without audience transmutation. Such an argument is grounded in Ernest Bormann's concept of rhetoric as fantasy. According to Bormann, "reality" is a subjective symbolic construct. In the act of communicating, individuals express their personal constructs as dramatic fantasy themes which reflect the nature of their percep-
¹⁹tions. While this expression may, intentionally or existentially,

function in a persuasive manner it may also function on a purely personal level. Personal expression as a rhetorical act can be explained two ways. First, personal expression is a necessary stage of reality construction. As we communicate, our percepts are made available to ourselves as well as others and thus may be "refined."²⁰ Aronson explains that when reality is uncertain other people become a primary source of validation.²¹ Second, personal expression serves to satisfy the drive to be understood. The psychological theories of Maslow and Katz, in particular, postulate that man derives personal satisfaction from the act of expression.²² Music as a discursive, and particularly poetic, act is a means by which validation and value-expression may be achieved.

Commercial context. There is a final potential relationship between artist and audience which may demand musical interaction. In this relationship, artistic intention may be accurately described as pecuniary; the musical product is a commercial venture of the artist. The commercial song is neither intentionally nor existentially persuasive. nor does it satisfy a psychological desire for expression. What the artist intends is to make a commercial success of the music as entertainment. Bloodworth explains, "[T]he commercial influence upon music as entertainment must also be remembered. . . . This commercialism has been attacked and condemned by the critics of rock but many new and struggling artists cannot resist the notoriety, fast money, and status [it offers]."²³ The pervasiveness of this commercial influence was expressed by Mohrmann and Scott in their analysis of popular music during World War II. According to the authors, during the early 'forties the medium controlled the message to such an extent that the

persuasive and expressive potential of music communication was mitigated
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by the rhythms, tempos and lyrics of popular swing.

It is in this commercial context that rhetorical theory and popular song must find union. Rhetorical theorists have given scant attention to commercial songs. In fact, Bloodworth goes so far as to warn scholars to be wary of music produced solely for commercial profit. However, the commercialization of music is an inherently rhetorical process. The appeal of popular songs can be explained through Kenneth Burke's concept of identification. Burke argues that man aspires to be consubstantial, or together in substance, with other men. Man's effort to be consubstantial (identify) is an essentially rhetorical process; the ambiguous intersection of natural division and latent identification
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creates an "invitation" for symbolic interaction. This concept of rhetoric sets well with our understanding of commercial music. Commercially successful songs may be distinguished from unsuccessful songs in that, when the former present messages formed from the concerns or views of artists, those feelings are described in terms with which audiences identify. Music as a consubstantial experience was discussed by Mark Booth as fostering "some degree of identification between singer and audience. When this happens the performance is for the audience. . . ; the singer's words are sung for us in that he says something that is also said somehow by us, and we are drawn into the state, the pose, the attitude, the self offered by the song."
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The relationship between this rhetorical process of identification and the commercial success of music communication was discussed by Hal Levy, an Instructor in Popular Songwriting at U.C.L.A. "In addition to the point of view, a song writer must consider the matter of identification, the relating of

listener to singer. Depending on the nature of the song and the sex of the singer, the listener might identify with the singer and project himself into the singer's role, or he might identify with the theoretical person to whom the singer is singing. Either way, this a large part of the vicarious enjoyment the listener gains from a good song well sung." ²⁷ Thus, a song which begins as an artist's personal expression becomes through identification a vicarious expression by the audience. As with the transformed expressive song, rhetorical interest is not defined by the nature of the musical act as much as it is by the musical event. Unlike this counterpart, however, the value of commercial music is not found in the event as a rhetoric of persuasion. Rather, it is found in the event as a rhetoric of identification.

The Rhetoric of Popular Song

The rhetoric of popular song is based on the commonsense notion that the music which is popular with a social group reflects the beliefs and values which shape the group and thus the music. Ernest Wraga described this construct as it relates to traditional public address. "Because speeches are instruments of utility designed in the main for the popular mind, conversely and in significant ways, they bear the impress of the popular mind. It is because they are pitched to levels of information, to take account of prevalent beliefs, and to mirror tone and temper of audiences that they serve as useful indices to the popular mind." ²⁸ This populist view of rhetoric can best be explained through the interconnections between fantasy expression and identification. Bormann theorizes that fantasy expression plays an important role in public discourse. When individuals or groups communicate with larger publics there is the possibility that their preconscious fantasies will

chain out as audiences recognize shared perceptions of reality. As explained earlier, it is this process of identifying with expressed fantasies which accounts for a message's popularity. Wraga assumed that the substance of popular messages must reflect public fantasies and thus that rhetorical scholars should be able to gain insight into a public's prevailing values and attitudes. Rather than looking at speeches as instrumental or expressive acts and attempting to explain how speakers use speeches to affect audiences, reflective criticism views speeches as consubstantial events and examines the relationships between speeches and audiences. Messages are treated as repositories of the fantasy themes which comprise a public's vision of reality.

The argument that the construct of reflective criticism may be extended to include criticism of music communication is grounded in the ethnomusicological theories of Alan Lomax and Alan P. Merriam, and the psychoanalytic observations of Dr. Frances Hannett. For a number of years, Lomax has argued that song style reflects and defines a society's way of life. Although his work has been limited to the idiom of folk music, much of what Lomax observes supports a general theory of reflective music communication. In the introduction to his collection of folk songs of North America, Lomax argues that music functions for social as well as personal expression. "[M]usic is a magical summing-up of the patterns of family, of love, of conflict, and of work which give a community its special feel and which shape the personalities of its members. Folk song calls the native back to his roots and prepares him emotionally to dance, worship, work, fight, or make love in ways normal to his place." ²⁹ Fundamental to Lomax's social theory of music is the belief that songs are unique to the social groups which produce them.

When compiling texts of folk songs for his collection, Lomax professes to have been "profoundly impressed by the comparative paganism and resignation of Britain, as contrasted with the Puritanism and free aggressiveness of America" as reflected in the way British folk songs had been consciously and conscientiously adapted to harmonize with American folk values.³⁰ Lomax argues that song style appears to be one of the most conservative of culture traits. While new tunes or rhythms or harmonies may be introduced over time, "in its overall character, a musical style will remain intact. Only the most profound social upheavals -- the coming of a new population, the acceptance of a new set of mores -- or migration to a new territory, involving complete acculturation, will profoundly transform a musical style, and even then the process takes place very slowly."³¹ While Lomax's definition of song style is fundamentally musicological, he does allow that the "total human situation which produces the music" affects substance as well as sound and is reflected in the "psychological and emotional content as expressed in the song texts and the culture's interpretation of this traditional poetry."³² In illustration, he refers to the relationship between the psychological fantasies of Nineteenth Century frontier women and the songs they favored.

In the popular mind a gulf was fixed between pleasure and righteousness, thus inflaming the old wound of guilt and sexual anxiety which has so often characterized our civilization. Although the young democracy gave women more political rights and social status than they had known for centuries, nineteenth century prudery designed to rob them of sexual pleasure. A majority of our ancestors believed that only bad women enjoyed sex: a dutiful wife suffered it for the sake of her husband. Thus the women of the frontier, whose lives were hard, lonely, and comfortless at best, found solace in romantic or vengeful fantasies. Their favourite ballads and love songs were shrouded in gloom, drowned in melancholy, and poisoned by sado-masochism./33

Lomax concludes that "the chief function of song is to express shared
feelings and mold the joint activities of some human community. . . ." ³⁴
The music favored by this community "reflects and reinforces the kind of
behavior essential to its main subsistence efforts and to its central
and controlling social institutions." ³⁵

Merriam expresses a similar belief that songs mirror society. Like
Lomax, Merriam argues that music involves collective emotion and
functions as a vehicle for its expression. Social songs are "the result
of human behavioral processes that are shaped by the values, attitudes,
and beliefs of the people who comprise a particular culture." ³⁶
Accordingly, music serves as a repository of the concerns of the society
in which it is found, both communicating and reflecting normative
values. Merriam pays particular attention to the lyric elements of song
style, observing that "music cannot be defined as a phenomenon of sound
alone. . . ." ³⁷ Song texts, he indicates, reveal much about a society.
"In discussing song texts, we have had occasion to point out that one of
their outstanding features is the fact that they provide a vehicle for
the expression of ideas and emotions not revealed in ordinary dis-
course." ³⁸ Merriam observes that the language of song is often more
permissive than other forms of discourse. Music thus functions as a
safety valve for expressing deep-seated values and aspirations which
would otherwise be stated only with the greatest reluctance. Merriam
concludes, "In music, as in the other arts, basic attitudes, sanctions,
and values are often stripped to their essentials. . . . In this sense,
music is a means of understanding peoples and behavior and as such is a
valuable tool in the analysis of culture and society." ³⁹

A wealth of behavioral data indirectly support the social theory of music. Lomax, using data drawn from other researchers, found that song styles shifted consistently with certain facets of social structure and were thus good predictors of such aspects of society. Merriam cited a number of anthropological community studies which observed songs being used as vehicles for expressing feelings not acceptably verbalized in other contexts. A number of researchers have noted relationships between the themes of American rock music and changing concerns of the youth subculture. Both Shapiro and Rosenstone, for instance, observed that the appearance of "hard" themes in 1960s rock corresponded with teenagers' developing social and political awareness. In a different vein, Johnstone and Katz found a distinct difference in the musical tastes of teenage girls from two Chicago neighborhoods, with subjects from the "wealthier and more solidly middle class" neighborhood preferring songs with a more positive emotional outlook than did their counterparts from a neighborhood of lower socio-economic status.

The only direct attempt to test social music theory was provided by Julia Kunz in her doctoral dissertation on the social meaning of song style. Kunz noted that Lomax had tested his theory in cross-cultural groupings separated in time and space and suggested that songs might likewise reflect the life styles of subcultural or subsocietal streams in a heterogeneous society. Using samples which varied within social parameters of age, ethnic background, geographic background and socio-economic status, Kunz had subjects listen to songs recorded in distinct classical, country-western, rock and soul music styles and then respond to an extensive questionnaire relating to song interpretation and style preferences. From her data, Kunz concluded that music is received in a

"social envelope." Within a heterogeneous society, songs are socially identified by music style, particular styles carry similar social meanings for individuals sharing a common socio-cultural stream, and song style preferences are related to interpreted meaning and social background.

Dr. Frances Hannett has taken this audience centered perspective on song another step, arguing that popular music serves psychological functions for individual audience members in contexts unassociated with public performance. Hannett's specific interest is in the psychoanalytic significance of "haunting melodies" -- melody phrases unconsciously snatched from songs which linger in the mind to later emerge as a medium of psychological expression. Hannett argues that haunting melodies are the "voice of the preconscious and must be understood in the same way as a dream fragment, a fantasy, or a repetitive act." ⁴³ In illustration, Hannett suggests that early morning whistlers are often expressing the mood of the moment. Usually, only a phrase or two is whistled and the whistler often cannot consciously recall the lyrics which accompany the tune. However, if the appropriate lyrics for the phrase could be identified they would prove to explicitly describe the psychological state which prompted the whistling. Hannett notes that haunting melodies have received only scant attention in psychiatric literature. Riek does suggest that inward singing carries "secret messages" and is never accidental. ⁴⁴ Similarly, Freud has observed that "the tunes which suddenly come into a man's head can be shown to be conditioned by some train of thought to which they belong, and which for some reason is occupying his mind without his knowing about it. It is easy to show that the connection with the tune is to be sought either in the words

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which belong to it or in the source from which it comes." Hannett indicates that this preconscious expressive function of music has been confirmed by personal clinical observations. Accordingly, Hannett believes that people grow attached to songs expressing emotions with which they can identify. To Hannett, this means that hit songs reveal an undercurrent of common concern affecting large numbers of people.

Published lyrics reveal an explicit and implicit preoccupation of song writers with the same theme. Since these lyrics were 'hits,' it is concluded that their mass appeal depended on a general readiness to accept this theme. The poignant and haunting quality of these lyrics and tunes reveals the prevalence of a depressive mood in American society during the last half century. It seems that the sales appeal of popular songs of this period is not to be found in their sex appeal but rather in their expression of this depressive mood or of correctives for it./46

Thus Hannett, like Lomax and Merriam, supports the claim that the lyrics of popular songs reflect the hidden perceptions of popular audiences.

Thus far, the rhetorical dimensions of popular song have been discussed only as they relate to lyric content. However, music communication is a phenomenon of substance and sound. As trite as this observation may seem, its implication is important to the study of popular music. As James Carey noted a number of years ago, "Lyrics may reveal general values, but this is not necessarily the stated reason for listening to them. It seems to be the nature of the music itself, and not the vocal or lyrical aspects alone, which accounts for its popularity. The words are only part of the total sound and are responded to as such."⁴⁷ Further, Lomax and Merriam each suggest that social meaning is defined through both lyric content and musicological character. Thus, a rhetoric of popular song would be incomplete if it failed to address the rhetorical implications of music style.

According to a number of critics, music style serves both verbal and nonverbal ends in music communication. The groundwork was laid by Leonard Meyer in Emotion and Meaning in Music.⁴⁸ Meyer argues that music style represents learned behavior and functions as a musical syntax. "[W]ithout a set of gestures common to the social group, and without common habit responses to those gestures, no communication whatsoever would be possible. Communication depends upon, presupposes, and arises out of the universe of discourse which in the aesthetics of music is called style."⁴⁹ Music style serves as a language for musical expression within the particular social group with which a style is identified. Musical messages are, intentionally or existentially, targeted for particular audiences through music style -- audiences attend to musical messages which are "phrased" in a music style with which they identify. This suggestion is consistent with efforts to use music style as a descriptor for teenage oriented popular music, guided by the assumption that "the music [style] itself is attraction enough for a large part of the rock audience."⁵⁰

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Wilson Coker extended this thesis in Music and Meaning. According to Coker, music style conveys both syntactic and affective meaning. The affective element is related to the listener through musical gestures, or the qualities of movement and mood created through manipulation of musical symbols. Audiences either relate or fail to relate to music according to their ability to identify with the particular style of musical expression. Coker indicates, "[W]hen we hear those tell-tale qualities and sorts of peculiar movement reproduced in music, we identify them as the particular qualities and special combinations that are appropriate to specific attitudes we have felt and ways

we and others have behaved. [E]ither we recognize the expressive qualities of musical gestures and, hence, recognize the peculiar attitudes revealed and signified, or we fail to grasp any affective-connotative meaning of the qualities."⁵² Denisoff and Levine argue that popular music criticism which fails to consider style is "one dimensional" in that it ignores musicological nonverbal cues. The keys to interpreting popular music are found in both lyric content and the presentation of that content. Together, they comprise the gestalt of popular song.⁵³

Taken as a whole, the social theory of music suggests that popular songs function as communicative events. In addition to serving the ends of persuasion and artistic expression, music is a medium of vicarious expression for audiences as collectives and as individuals. Popular songs are shaped by the societal audiences which make them popular. As artifacts of that process, popular songs serve as repositories of the fantasies which comprise the rhetorical visions of their audiences. By examining popular songs, rhetorical scholars should, like Wraga's speech critic, gain insight into cognitions and affections of the popular mind. The value of this inquiry was clearly expressed by Merriam. "[B]ecause of the freedom of expression allowed in song, texts seem clearly to provide an excellent means for the investigation of the psychological processes of the people who constitute a culture."⁵⁴

Notes

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8. Ibid., 277.

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12. Aristotle Rhetoric, 1355 25-30, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle, ed. Friedrich Solmsen (New York: Modern Library, 1964), 24.
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14. Denisoff, "The Evolution," 18.
15. Kosokoff, "The Rhetoric of Song," 2.
16. Ibid.
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