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CHILDREN'S MUSIC CULTURE: COMMERCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND TRADITION

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Music is an important part of the social, emotional, and political lives of children and adolescents. Teenagers have long been the primary audience for popular music, and musical media for children of all ages have expanded greatly in the last generation. Children's role as a music audience is a key aspect of their expanding public status as consumers, and music listening is a key practice for working through social relationships with peers and articulating identities around gender, race, class, and sexuality. Children integrate musical media into their long standing cultural traditions, such as handclapping games and play with toys, and products from music and consumer industries are designed to cultivate these sensibilities. This chapter provides an overview of how these issues have been addressed in the US and Europe by scholars from ethnomusicology, music education, popular music, media and cultural studies, and communication, while focusing on recent technological and commercial developments that point to important changes for children's status in public culture. This chapter does not address children's musical culture in non Western contexts.

Children's commercial music industry in the US

The US commercial children's music industry has grown dramatically in the last few years, but these recent trends build on a long history. Predating the recording industry, music publishers in Europe and the United States commissioned original music and printed and distributed collections of music for children. As today, commercial music for children was part of a larger consumer ecology that, for instance, associated children and music with holidays like Christmas (see Kok, 2008, for a discussion of just one such example). Recordings for children were among the very earliest music recordings sold, and they were often cross marketed with toy phonographs and illustrated books (Tillson, 1994, 1995). In addition to such consumer oriented products, record labels marketed educational recordings (largely classical music curated for "music appreciation" curricula) to schools and music educators (Dunham, 1961). In the post war era, more explicitly commercial music, tied to animated Disney movies and television shows, became popular. In parallel, independent labels with ties to the folk revival movement began producing frequently anti commercial music for children, and the folk singing style of artists such as Tom Glazer and Raffi came to characterize the genre of children's music (Bonner, 2008). In the 1990s Disney's animated musicals had a resurgence, and the 1996 launch of Radio Disney, an FM station

programmed with music from young mainstream recording artists as well as child friendly “oldies” and novelty songs, pointed to that company’s renewed commitment to cultivating child music audiences. By the next decade Disney was developing its own artists and releasing pop music—not just musical theater numbers—on its own labels, and its cable TV station The Disney Channel became a key site for launching new musical offerings. While children’s media companies like Nickelodeon and Nintendo successfully cultivated the niche kids’ market in the 1980s and 1990s, in the last decade pop music made for kids has taken a step further, and broken through into broader commercial dominance. One week early in 2006, for example, the three top selling records on the Billboard sales charts were children’s albums (Levine, 2006), and the top selling album in the US for the entire year was the soundtrack to the massively popular Disney Channel original movie *High School Musical*.

Traditional children’s music—in the folk revival style, using simple acoustic arrangements and emphasizing singable songs—has grown along with popular music genres for children. A new generation of children’s music artists, such as Laurie Berkner and Dan Zanes have achieved widespread success producing recordings in this tradition, which maintain the basic characteristics of the tradition popularized by singers such as Raffi, but are frequently described as being more sophisticated and adult friendly. To some extent these artists achieve adult tolerance by doubling down on the folk music and roots rock elements that have characterized children’s music for half a century, as folk music provides a bridge between musical characteristics that are seen as appealing to children and those that upper middle class white adults are disposed to see as markers of authentic and legitimate cultural traditions. The schlocky and saccharine style of acts such as Barney and the Australian group The Wiggles, popular in the 1990s, is increasingly uncommon in the US even in music for very young children.

A key dynamic in the changing music industry for children is the emergence of the demographic marker “tween,” describing children especially from 9–12 years old, but which reaches out to include children as young as 4 and as old as 15 (Cook and Kaiser, 2004). (The term highlights the status of children this age as *between* childhood and adolescence.) “Tween” music is freed from some of the “childish” elements of music for young children, and stylistically resembles mainstream pop music, though with somewhat less emphasis on overtly sexual themes (but still emphatically retaining pop’s heteronormative focus on romantic love). The age ambiguity of tween music makes room for child oriented artists to appeal to a wider listenership. Artists such as Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift, who became celebrities as young teenagers and continue to be associated with young audiences, now command much broader audiences and have become uniquely successful figures in the popular music industry. At times this leads to visible conflict between artists associated with children and “mainstream” artists, such as a moment onstage at MTV’s 2009 Video Music Awards in which prominent rapper Kanye West interrupted Taylor Swift’s speech accepting an award for best music video, and was loudly criticized by many in language that emphasized Swift’s relative youth and corresponding vulnerability, while other children’s media figures explicitly expressed support and solidarity with Swift and against West.

In addition to tween musicians appealing to older audiences, the tween music industry makes mainstream popular music available to children. In part this is through original products from artists such as Swift, Bieber, and the various Disney acts, which direct music with professional songwriting and high production values toward children, whose media have long been characterized by low budgets and indifferent production. In parallel, brands such as Kidz Bop and Radio Disney (mentioned above) market mainstream popular music directly to children, curating it moderately to address adult concerns about inappropriate content. Kidz Bop re records Top 40 pop songs with choruses of children singing along to the choruses and hooks, and occasionally with slightly altered lyrics. Songs on their CD compilations frequently appear within months of

the original song's popularity, and present such music, which parents might normally be disinclined to purchase for their children, as legitimate and appropriate for children. From 2002–5, in the years leading up to the release of *High School Musical* and other original tween acts, Kidz Bop was the top selling children's music act, and in 2005 and 2006 had records among the ten highest selling albums in any category (for an overview and theoretical account of the contemporary tween music industry see Bickford, 2012). While international data is limited, the US culture industries are a major exporter of media, and popular music for children is no exception. Many of the US acts described in this section are popular especially in Europe, and tour around the world.

Children as music audiences

Teenagers and adolescents have long been the primary audiences for “mainstream” popular music, which remains true today. There is significant overlap between children and teenagers in the audiences for acts like Taylor Swift, and in many cases high school and even college students in 2011 (as this chapter was being written) would have been enthusiastic fans of tween music acts in 2006 and 2007, and continued to follow stars like Miley Cyrus or *High School Musical's* Zac Efron as they take on more mature personas and roles. But while some boundary crossing clearly happens, distinctions based on age identities are particularly salient for school aged people, and in my research and teaching I often find that explicit denunciations of child or tween oriented artists are a common discursive technique for expressing maturity and rejecting markers of immaturity. Similarly, the hyper sexualization and other explicit themes of mainstream popular music may appeal to older teenagers in part because they express a break from the largely adult imposed limits of “appropriateness” that children and pre adolescents bear.

A generation ago children in the US and Europe could be seen to move through age graded musical preferences, with the youngest expressing interest in children's music (Raffi etc.) and classical music, pre adolescents preferring popular music in general, and adolescents eventually settling into preferences for specific genres of popular music (von Feilitzen and Roe, 1990). A move from children's and classical genres to pop is correlated with movement away from parental influence, as children report less interest in genres their parents prefer (Christenson, 1994). My own ethnographic research on children's popular music consumption in a small community in the northeastern United States bears this point out in its broad outlines, but suggests that musical taste remains a space for expressions of parental affiliations among middle school age children (Bickford, 2011). Such children's expressed *favorite* genre is frequently from mainstream popular music, but like anyone kids' tastes are not monolithic; many have strong secondary interests in genres like classic rock (bands such as AC/DC or Led Zeppelin), and enthusiastically point out that their enjoyment of such music is learned from and connects them to their parents.

More recent data on large scale trends is limited, but as discussed in the previous section, the range of pop music offerings oriented to children has expanded significantly in the last decade, so kids likely become aware of and interested in such genres of pop music at an earlier age. (Even 6 and 7 year old kids sometimes reject music by groups such as The Wiggles as “baby music,” in an expression of maturity not unlike older youth's rejection of tween pop.) If tween pop is increasingly popular in middle childhood, it is possible that the standard progression from children's music, to generic pop, to specific genres has changed so that tween pop either replaces the generic pop phase, or pushes it back, with potential implications for the timing when teenagers settle into specific genre preferences. A 15 year old who is primarily interested in the Jonas Brothers or Justin Bieber may be following a somewhat different track than the one seen by previous researchers.

Music's influence on children and young people's attitudes, behavior, and development is the subject of frequent adult and scholarly concern, especially for genres of music associated with racial minorities or counter/subcultures. In addition to age, musical preferences are significantly correlated with gender and race (Roberts and Christenson, 2000), and to the extent that music listening habits are correlated with violent or misogynistic behavior, it is difficult to sort out correlation from causation. Experimental studies (in which researchers ask subjects to listen to certain types of music and measure their aggression or other characteristics within a relatively short time frame, and against a control group who listen to other genres of music) suggest that there are some measurable short term effects of heavy metal listening on young men's expression of aggressive and misogynistic traits (Roberts et al., 2003). Studying the larger scale effects of sustained listening across time in an experimentally rigorous way is not feasible (research subjects are unlikely to be willing or able to change their listening habits in randomized and controllable ways, for instance), and with issues such as personality and social behavior music is necessarily one smallish influence, and confounding effects proliferate.

In addition to experimental studies of "media effects," ethnographic studies of the social and cultural contexts of children's music listening demonstrate that young people's music listening is embedded in meaningful social relationships. For children from immigrant families in the US, for instance, the "mainstream" music heard on Top 40 radio stations and emphasized among peers in school settings can become a powerful marker of unmarked white middle class "American" identities (Minks, 1999). For pre teen and teenage girls, "serious play" with popular music in bedrooms and other spaces provides opportunities to develop understandings of their gender and sexual identities in wider contexts (Baker, 2004a, 2004b; Willet, (2011). For very young children, music listening provides soundtracks for play, scripts for understanding emotions, and opportunities for working through relationships with peers (Vestad, 2010).

Musical media and children's own cultural traditions

Children's traditional culture, including playground songs and toys, increasingly incorporates musical media, and elements of these traditions are increasingly taken up in mainstream popular music. Children's handclapping and singing games, for instance, are a classic topic of folkloristic inquiry. These traditions are still practiced in playgrounds around the world, and children incorporate textual and musical elements from advertisements, television shows, popular songs, and the internet into their playground songs (Grugeon, 2001; Harwood, 1994; Marsh, 1999). Children's handclapping games also become educational media, as educators and folklorists collect and distribute collections for use in the classroom, and these games are themselves a form of media that creates opportunities for transnational and cross cultural interaction and understanding among children around the world (Marsh, 2008).

Like handclapping games, play with physical toys is a key element of children's traditional culture, and musical media for children are increasingly embedded in toys to appeal to children, facilitating children's integration of musical media into their own play practices. Electronic toys for young children commonly include musical elements, often in the form of snippets that play in response to an infant or young child's action. The music in such toys is often in the classical style, reflecting the association of such genres with young children, mentioned above, and pieces like Rossini's *William Tell Overture* seem to have become canonical in these settings (Young, 2008). Older children's uses of portable music devices like MP3 players often resemble toy play too, as kids decorate their devices, trade and share them, and tinker with their physical form (Bickford, in press b). Musical media are also a very common part of children's physical and kinesthetic play, accompanying dancing or games like musical chairs (Young and Gillen, 2007).

Elements from children's cultural traditions also filter into mainstream popular media in various ways. Textual elements from children's musical games, such as "Down Down Baby," are found in mass media products like the 1988 movie "Big" and the 2000 song "Country Grammar" by rapper Nelly (Marsh, 2006). Characters and themes from children's literature and nursery rhymes can be found in mainstream popular music throughout its history (Cooper, 1989). And it is increasingly common for mainstream artists, such as Nicki Minaj and Cee Lo Green, to dress in childlike colorful and playful costumes (that are doll like; and one performance by Green included accompaniment by The Muppets) that increase their appeal to children, even if kids are not the primary audience for such music.

Music and digital media

Digital technologies have created new contexts for children and young people to engage with musical media. In fact music and young people frequently figure centrally in discourses of technological change. Napster, a 1990s file sharing service on which young people would exchange music, was a prominent early example of panicked discourses about challenges the internet might pose for traditional media industries. File sharing discourses participate in common anxious and celebratory tropes of children as both problems and sources of promise (Stephens, 1995), framing children and youth in terms of theft, piracy, and the break down of legal order, but also in terms of sociality, sharing, cooperation, and collaboration. In the era since courts ordered Napster to shut down, social network sites like Facebook that appeal to youth encourage sharing information about listening habits among friends as a form of social advertising.

Portable music devices like MP3 players are also prominent in discussions of technological change and are commonly associated with young people. Apple's iPod is an icon of new media, and commentators often link the iPod to young people as a marker of their identities as "digital natives." In fact, the iPod is such a prominent image in these discourses that nearly every study of young people and digital media mentions the device in the introduction (e.g., Palfrey and Gasser 2008; Ito et al., 2009; Montgomery 2007). Palfrey and Gasser, for instance, define digital natives as "those who wear the earbuds of an iPod on the subway to their first job, not those of us who still remember how to operate a Sony Walkman" (2008, p. 4). Interestingly, none of these studies builds on this initial reference to the iPod and youth in the body of the study, ignoring iPod practices in favor of discussions of the internet and mobile phones.

So music is associated prominently in images of youth and digital technology, but young people's musical practices are largely understudied. What studies of youth and digital music have been done suggest that music editing software affords young people increasing abilities to produce music, while technological complexity encourages collaboration, and online social networks create opportunities for distribution and public performances (Mahendran in Ito et al., 2009, pp. 270–72). My own research on children's uses of MP3 players demonstrates that physical interaction and face to face sociability are key values that structure children's portable music listening, and common practices like sharing earbuds so that two friends can listen together create new contexts for intimacy in the joint consumption of music (Bickford, in press a). In such ways, children and teenagers' uses of portable musical media are dramatically different than the isolated, cocooning practices that scholars have found among adult users of similar technologies (Bull, 2008; Ito et al., 2008). But at the same time, such an emphasis on face to face sharing is perhaps of a kind with the importance of real world social relationships to young people's uses of social network sites and other information communication technologies.

Conclusion

Children's music culture is thoroughly intertwined with all aspects of children's media culture. Children's commercial music is among the most visible elements of children's expanding consumer role and the dramatic changes this role has had for the entertainment and consumer industries. Music is an important element connecting children's long held cultural traditions with an ever changing mass media and technological environment. As audiences for music, children locate themselves in increasingly powerful positions in mass culture, and in everyday listening practices they express personal investments and organize relations among friends and peers. Music is a key element linking youth and technological change, while children's uses of new technologies emphasize their existing social relationships and cultural traditions. Music often goes unnoticed in studies of media, but music is among the most important and meaningful forms of media in children and adolescents' lives, and links children's small scale face to face sociality to national and transnational configurations of commerce and mass media.

SEE also in this volume chapter by Mesch and chapter by Lim.

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