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The Cyclical Influence of Society and Music

Throughout time, there have been discussions over the age-old question: ‘which came first, the chicken or the egg?’ This type of question applies to many other areas of life and it is the basis for this paper. The question that this paper explores is ‘does society change music, or does music change society?’ This paper will show that neither came first, but rather they exist simultaneously in a never-ending cycle. By discussing the influences of two musical icons, Pearl Jam and Lady Gaga, this paper will show the perpetual cycle of how society and music influence each other.

Society is constantly changing and there are always movements that gain public attention. Whether that attention is positive or negative does not matter; it is attention nonetheless. This attention does not go unseen by musical icons. Music is incredibly influential and many musicians use their music to promote social change and activism. When major events and movements grab the attention of musical icons, these icons take advantage of their huge social platforms to bring about change. They will join movements and speak up through their music for those who do not have as loud of a voice. In doing so, musicians also increase their own platforms which continues to spread the message to more people. By speaking out, they spread awareness of the issues and those movements continue to grow. As the movements grow, so does the social pressure for change. Because of the music, society changes and the cycle begins again. The cycle breaks down into three basic parts, and this paper will illustrate various examples of this cycle in action. The steps are as follows: (1) an event or movement surfaces, (2) musicians take notice of the movement and begin to change their music to speak out about it, and (3) the music informs more people and leads to social change and awareness.

Pearl Jam: Vitalogy Foundation

Pearl Jam is a grunge band founded in Seattle, Washington that got their start in the underground scene, and has grown to see immense fame. With this fame, the band has used its wide platform to be a loud advocate for change. Pearl Jam created the Vitalogy Foundation, a nonprofit organization that supports numerous charitable organizations including Teen Cancer America, Conservation International, and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (Pearl Jam, n.d.). In addition to this philanthropic work, Pearl Jam actively supports environmental movements. They also wrote the song 'Do the Evolution' in 1998 in response to how humanity ruins nature just because they can. The song contains the lyrics "All the rolling hills, I'll flatten 'em out, yeah" and "This land is mine, this land is free / I'll do what I want but irresponsibly" (Pearl Jam, 1998) which highlights mankind's tendency toward destruction. In an effort to combat their own carbon emissions from touring, Pearl Jam has calculated the output of carbon emissions in metric tons from every concert and tour since 2003, and has donated part of their tour proceeds to environmental groups to offset their carbon emissions (Pearl Jam, n.d.). One of their recent projects has been to combat the rate of homeless teens in Seattle, Washington. They are working with the groups All Home and A Way Home Washington to reduce the amount of homeless teens in the city (Cornell, 2018). When they saw these problems in society, Pearl Jam was inspired to do something about it. They started educating and advocating for these issues and because of their large platform, people took notice. The charity concerts and fundraisers that the Vitalogy Foundation put on were wildly successful. In addition to the charity auctions, Pearl Jam donated a portion of every concert ticket they sold to a charity of their choice. By simply spreading awareness and raising money for these causes, Pearl Jam was able to make social change.

Lady Gaga: Born this Way Foundation

Lady Gaga is a musician known for her crazy outfits, but beyond the glitz and glamor lies a woman who fights for her beliefs. Throughout her entire career as a pop star, Lady Gaga has advocated for the LGBTQ+ community as well as for many other minority groups. She created the Born this Way foundation named after her all-inclusive 2011 anthem of the same name, which preaches acceptance and self-love. In the song *Born this Way*, she sings “No matter gay, straight, or bi, / Lesbian, transgendered life, / I’m on the right track baby, / I was born to survive. / No matter black, white or beige / Chola or orient made, / I’m on the right track baby, I was born to be brave” (Lady Gaga, 2011). Gaga wrote the song as a response to the homophobia and racism that still runs rampant in society today. The Born this Way Foundation has the same goals that her song did: to empower minorities to love and accept themselves and others. It also works to provide readily available mental health resources to young people (Hendricks, 2019). Like Pearl Jam, Lady Gaga has also done charity benefits to raise money for homeless youth organizations and she raised \$500,000 for hurricane relief in Haiti (Hendricks, 2019). Most recently, she has raised 35 million dollars to help fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and provide relief (Specter, 2020). She also organized the One World: Together at Home concert which encourages people to stay home to reduce the spread of Covid-19 through social isolation (One World, 2020). Lady Gaga is one of the largest advocates for human rights in the music industry, and through this activism, she influences society. Lady Gaga looks at the problems in the world and tackles the challenges head on with everything she has. She has promoted extensive social change, and has worked incredibly hard to change society through her music and activism.

Conclusion

The activism of these musical icons has provided some much-needed relief for various groups over the years. Musical icons see major events and movements and become motivated to spread positivity and social change through their music and platforms. Eddie Vedder, the front man of Pearl Jam, and several other famous musicians committed to performing online musical acts as a part of Lady Gaga's One World: Together at Home concert (One World, 2020). These musicians, along with several others, have observed the issue of people not quarantining, and have chosen to use their music to promote social distancing and healthy habits. The concert, which happened on April 18, 2020, hoped to influence society by promoting self-isolation. Every day society is changing, and music takes that change and promotes further evolution of society. Through the actions of Pearl Jam and Lady Gaga, this paper has shown the cycle of how society and music influence each other simultaneously.

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