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History of Music: How History Shaped Music, and Music Shaped History

Jiya Doshi

jiyahdoshi@gmail.com

Prabhavati Padamshi Soni International Junior College, Mumbai, Maharashtra

ABSTRACT

Music is not merely a reflection of history—it is a force that has shaped it. This paper explores the symbiotic relationship between music and historical events, illustrating how melodies, rhythms, and lyrics have influenced societies, driven political movements, and preserved cultural identities. Music has acted as a catalyst for social change, fueling revolutions, advocating for justice, and even altering the course of global diplomacy. Genre hybridization and technological advancements have further expanded music's impact, allowing for cross-cultural fusion and worldwide accessibility. By analyzing key moments in history where music played a pivotal role—whether through protest anthems, nationalistic compositions, or groundbreaking innovations—this study highlights music's enduring power as both a historical artifact and an agent of transformation.

Keywords: Music, History, Social Change, Periods of Music History, Development of Studio, Genres

INTRODUCTION

The one reason that stopped me from titling this as the History of Magic is that it already exists. So, I went with the next best option – the History of Music.

But honestly, music is so much like magic (not considering that they both distantly rhyme and have five letters), that it's really interesting to dive deep into its evolution.

Elements of music – particularly melody and rhythm in the sounds other creatures make, and that we generate – surround us as we move through our environment. And there are other natural sounds such as the wind, waves, thunder, and so forth. (Burgess, 2014) So long as man accepted the various phenomena of musical sounds as isolated facts, there could be no art. But when he began to use them to minister his pleasure and to study them and their effects, he began to form an art of music. (Baltzell, 2017)

However, music is more than just entertainment. It's done more than just reflect times – it shapes them. As the eras progressed, so did music, from songs composed for protests to those we listen to today after a long day of work. These songs demonstrate emotions, and as music progressed, history was shaped, across its several eras, it transformed people's taste and the way they looked at the world.

ACOUSTIC PERIOD (1890S – 1925)

Music shaped protests to be more than just signboards.

The slaughter of World War I. The screams of the dying soldiers. The tears of the public. The song 'I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier' by Alfred Bryan and Al Piantadosi symbolized the reaction of most of the public towards this horror.

The wretched conditions of mill workers. Loud, hot, cramped, damp, dangerous (First Amendment Museum, 2022). During the late 1920s, cotton mill strikers sang "Cotton Mill Colic" by David McCarn, and this song shaped their history, this song helped them fight for their rights.

This was a period so starkly distinct from modern times that the difference is jaw-dropping. Imagine an era without electric guitars, synthesizers or auto-tunes. It was based on pure talent. Imagine a world where the coolest gadget was a well-made lute. Bards and troubadours were like the super stars, roaming around with their instruments, their concerts at royal courts, taverns or any spot with an audience. No tickets, no roadies, simply unplugged, pure music.

Composers like Bach and Mozart were the most popular ones, crafting symphonies that awed crowds without a single amp. There weren't any speakers or recorded music – orchestras were the surround sound systems, blending strings, brass, and woodwinds into musical magic.

To make a sound recording prior to 1925, instrumentalists, singers, and speakers performed in front of a flared metal horn. All adjustments to the sound were made by altering the performer's position relative to the horn or by trying horns of differing sizes or diaphragms of varied thickness. (Acoustical Recording | Articles and Essays | National Jukebox | Digital Collections | Library of Congress, n.d.)

Country music, practiced popularly in Nashville, was a genre first produced in the 1920s using these acoustic instruments. Country music continues to evolve and adapt, reflecting the changing times and tastes of its listeners. From the early settlers to the present day, the genre has remained a powerful form of storytelling, capturing the essence of the human experience. Whether it's the heartfelt ballads of the past or the energetic anthems of today, country music has a way of connecting people and creating a sense of belonging. (Country Music: Telling America's Stories, 2024)

THE ELECTRIC PERIOD (1925 – 1945)

Next came the Electric Period in music. During this period, things changed, or should I say, 'electrified'. Imagine this: musicians ditched their acoustic guitars, plugged in, and turned up the volume. Welcome to the era of rock 'n' roll!

One of the pioneers of the electric guitars was George Breed, a naval officer who filled a patent for "a method of and apparatus for producing musical sounds by electricity" in 1890.

By the 1950s, Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley became popular. The 1960s and 1970s saw rockstars like Jimi Hendrix making guitars scream around in ways no one thought possible.

Then came the synthesizer. Bands like Kraftwerk and artists like David Bowie took the public on electronic trips, paving the way for Electronic Dance Music. By the 1980s, MTV brought music videos into our living rooms, making stars out of musicians with electrifying performances. Remember Michael Jackson's "Beat It"? Or Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues"?

The hit record "Rock around the Clock" started the rock craze in 1955. While Nashville was making traditional country music, reverent and melodic, Bakersfield and other industrial towns in northern California were celebrating the hard-edged dancing and drinking music of the honky-tonks where musicians had to compete with the amplified jukebox and the roar of the crowd. The new sound of country music had a raw energy and an imposing presence, which was enhanced by the piercing tones of the solidbody guitar. (Millard, 2004)

Between 1925 and 1945, protest songs played a pivotal role in highlighting social injustices and galvanizing movements for change. Florence Reece's "Which Side Are You On?" (1931) emerged from the Harlan County War, becoming an anthem for labor rights and solidarity among coal miners, talking about their extreme hardships and low wages.

During the Great Depression, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" (1931) by Yip Harburg and Jay Gorney captured the despair of the American working class. Woody Guthrie's "The Ballad of Pretty Boy Floyd" (1939) and "Pastures of Plenty" (1941) highlighted social inequalities and the plight of migrant workers, while his iconic "This Land Is Your Land" (1940, released 1944) critiqued inequality and became a folk classic.

Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" (1939) powerfully condemned the lynching of African Americans, bringing widespread attention to racial violence. Lead Belly's "No More Mourning" (1940s) called for an end to suffering, reflecting the resilience of marginalized communities. The Almanac Singers' "Talking Union" (1941), featuring Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie served as a rallying cry for union organizers. These songs, addressing issues from labor rights and economic inequality to racial violence and civil rights, provided a powerful voice for the oppressed and continue to inspire social justice movements today.

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THE STUDIO BECOMES INTERACTIVE

Over the decades, the studio has evolved dramatically, becoming increasingly interactive and offering musicians greater control over their sound.

In the early days of recording, musicians had limited control over the final product. Everything was captured in a single take, and any mistakes meant starting over. The introduction of magnetic tape in the 1940s revolutionized this process, giving artists and producers unprecedented control over recording and editing. Despite the labor-intensive nature of early tape editing, it allowed for a level of precision and creativity previously unattainable.

One of the most exciting developments made possible by magnetic tape was "sound on sound" recording. This technique involved layering multiple recordings on top of each other, creating complex and rich soundscapes. Pioneered by artists like Les Paul, sound on sound allowed for the creation of harmonies, instrumental overlays, and intricate arrangements, all by a single artist or a small group of musicians.

Overdubbing was also possible where artists could record a basic track and then layer vocals, instruments, and effects, one at a time. This method became a staple in music production, enabling the creation of lush, multi-layered recordings that would have been impossible to capture in a single take.

This shift allowed for more experimentation and creativity, laying the groundwork for modern music production.

Mastering also became more sophisticated, making sure the recorded audio was fine-tuned to the best possible sound quality across all playback systems. Engineers could adjust levels, equalize frequencies, and apply compression to create a polished final product. This step ensured that the music sounded great whether played on a high-end stereo system or a simple radio.

The introduction of the microgroove LP (long-playing) record in the late 1940s allowed artists to create more cohesive and expansive works, such as concept albums and live recordings. The LP became the dominant format for music distribution, complementing the advancements in recording technology and offering listeners a richer, more immersive experience.

POST WORLD WAR II

World War II was so full of bloodshed and sorrow that people needed something to cheer them up. New record labels sprung up, enjoying high profits and public demand as everyone needed music for entertainment and optimism.

It's hard to pinpoint who exactly is the first radio DJ, as several broadcasting developments happened throughout the early 1900s to late 1920s. The popularity of these DJs grew post World War II.

Between the 1950s to the 1970s, you would not be able to run a successful radio station without having an entertaining DJ at the forefront. It was during this time - the postwar period - that disc jockeys were hailed as celebrities separate from the radio stations they manned. (Milewsky, 2023).

Record sales increased from 275 million to 400 million within just the first two years after the war (1946-47). (Wayte, 2023)

Social songs post-World War II have been instrumental in addressing critical issues such as civil rights, peace, and social justice. Iconic anthems like "We Shall Overcome," which became the rallying cry of the Civil Rights Movement, and Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," which captured the sentiments of the anti-war movement, resonated deeply with audiences and inspired generations to advocate for change. Other notable songs like Sam

Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come," Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On," and John Lennon's

"Imagine" tackled themes of equality, social unrest, and global unity, respectively, contributing to the era's social and political discourse. These songs became anthems for movements, reflecting the hopes, struggles, and aspirations of the post-war generation and reminding us of music's enduring power as a catalyst for social change.

GENRE HYBRIDIZATION

Genre hybridization is something like painting – you mix two or more colors to form new ones. Well, this concept has been happening almost forever, but this gained utmost popularity in the 20th century.

If you go around asking people the genres they listen to, each person will list out at least a handful.

When genres are too broad, they “lump[ing] together musics that bear tremendous differences in history, style, aesthetics, and meaning, as well as degree and strategy of hybridization” and as a result “obscures, rather than clarifies” (Zheng 2010) the music it is intending to categorize. When genres are treated narrowly, they can act as barriers that treat innovation and new sounds like a bad thing. (Deconstructing Genre Through Hybridization by Max Newman / Chronicles of Song and Society, n.d.)

Genre hybridization has been happening forever. Remember rock and roll? It's a blend of blues, country, jazz, and gospel. A few more genre hybrids are Rap Rock, Country Rap, Jazz Fusion, Reggae Pop, Electronic Rock, Pop Punk and Latin Trap.

Genre hybridization keeps music fresh and exciting, breaking down barriers between genres and exploring new horizons of music. The evolution of music has also been deeply influenced by technological advancements. The introduction of the phonograph in the late nineteenth century transformed how music was consumed, making it more accessible to a larger audience. Radio and television broadened the reach of music, allowing performers to have a large impact on public opinion and cultural trends.

The digital era has tremendously enhanced music's influence. The internet and streaming services have torn down geographical borders, allowing for the worldwide interchange of musical genres and ideas. This has resulted in a more linked globe, with music from many cultures influencing one another, producing a more diversified and inclusive global music scene.

HOW MUSIC SHAPED HISTORY

Music drove political and social commentary. David Bowie's 1987 performance of "Heroes" near the Berlin Wall was one of the most inspirational ones to those living in East Berlin. The song, combined with other cultural forces, played a role in boosting morale and fostering a sense of unity that contributed to the wall's eventual fall in 1989.

Songs like "Sun City" by Artists United Against Apartheid and "Biko" by Peter Gabriel drew international attention to the injustices of apartheid, contributing to the global pressure that eventually led to its dismantling.

Music also fueled nationalism and revolution. The French national anthem, "La Marseillaise," composed during the French Revolution, became a symbol of revolutionary fervor and unity. It rallied troops and citizens alike, helping to shape the identity of the new French Republic.

In Czechoslovakia, the music of bands such as The Plastic People of the Universe became a form of resistance against communist regimes, playing a part in the broader movements that led to the fall of these regimes in 1989.

Lastly, music helped establish cultural diplomacy. During the Cold War, the U.S. government sent jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington on international tours to promote American culture and counteract Soviet propaganda, using music as a tool of soft power and diplomacy.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND MOVEMENTS

Music has had a central role in societal development, independent of politics. The counterculture movement of the 1960s, typified by Woodstock, utilized rock and folk music to question conventional standards, promote peace, and campaign for civil rights and environmental issues. Artists such as The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, and Joan Baez became symbols of an age that challenged authority and sought social change, shaping the counterculture movement. Music festivals became symbols of peace, love, and resistance to mainstream societal norms, promoting ideals such as civil rights, anti-war sentiments, and environmentalism.

Hip-hop, which first emerged in the Bronx, New York, in the 1970s, has grown into a global movement that confronts topics such as systematic racism, poverty, and police brutality. Tupac Shakur and Public Enemy used their music to expose societal injustices, influencing public opinion and activism.

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND PRESERVATION

During slavery and the post-slavery era in the United States, African American spirituals and blues served as a way to preserve cultural history while also expressing the African American community's challenges and hopes. These musical styles paved the way for numerous American music genres, including jazz, rock, and hip-hop.

Irish folk music has played an important role in preserving Irish cultural identity, particularly during British control. Songs like "Danny Boy" and "The Fields of Athenry" portray the Irish people's difficulties, perseverance, and aspirations, encouraging solidarity and national pride.

CONCLUSION

Music has influenced history. It's been a catalyst for metamorphosis, from rallies in social and political movements to bringing cultures together. And over the course of all these years, music has been shaped over and over again.

Music has shaped political movements, sparked social change, preserved cultural identities, and accelerated advances in technology. Its ability to inspire, unite, and mobilize people has made it a crucial factor in the evolution of cultures throughout time, leaving an indelible impact on the world.

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