

Proof That Music Is Growing Worse Because Of Silicon Valley Millennials

by [Briggs52](#)

In 1946, Perry Como sang:

Alone from night to night you'll find me,
Too weak to break the chains that bind me,
I need no shackles to remind me,
I'm just a prisoner of love!

The song was [Prisoner Of Love](#), penned by Russ Columbo, Clarence Gaskill & Leo Robin. It was [Billboard](#)'s number one song for all of that year.

The lyricism barely extends past that found on a greeting card, but at least the words are intelligible, standard English, and are coupled with music that mates naturally. The song contains 166 words, with a two-quatrain refrain that is sung twice. Overall, 43% of the words in the song are unique.

By 2010, the top song of the year was [Tik Tok](#), sang by somebody called Kesha (who, your author has learned, occasionally replaces the "s" in her name with a dollar sign; in the video of the song linked, the young lady wakes up in the bathtub from the prior evening's debauchery: how proud her parents must be):

I'm talking about errybody getting crunk, crunk
Boys trying to touch my junk, junk
Gonna smack him if he getting too drunk, drunk
Now, now we goin' 'til they kick us out, out
Or the police shut us down, down
Police shut us down, down
Po-po shut us down

The English has been replaced by transient slang, the lyricism now trivial. But Kesha does manage to slip in an allusion to female genitalia, a feat which Como never attained. The major refrain repeats six times; a minor one, twice. There are three times as many words in *Tik Tok* (510) than in Como's hit, but because of the multiple repetitions, only 28% of them are unique.

In 1948, the top tune was Francis Craig & Kermit Goell's [Near You](#). This was a standard big band composition: the majority of the tune is instrumental, the vocalist there only to provide contrast. Craig's playing was sappy but light. As often happened with these standards, the song was taken by others and later turned into something better. Because of the brevity of the vocals, 73% of the lyrics were unique.

In contrast, the 2009 top hit, [Boom Boom Pow](#) by the Black Eyed Peas was unsalvageable, because there is no tune to improve. The song consists in a male vocalist repeatedly intoning "Boom boom boom" and "Shi**in' on yall you with the (Boom boom)" over an even more repetitive beat created on some sort of machine which, all evidence indicates, was broken. A generously counted 23% of the words are unique.

If a pop song had only one word which was repeated multiple times, where it was used like a blunt instrument, over its three-minute lifetime, the chance that that song is bad would be high. Imagine a monotonic single-word chant. The example works with phrases, too. Repeat, for example, "I wanna hold your hand" for two solid minutes, as the Beatles did in 1964, and you'll have the idea.

Limited vocabulary does not guarantee awfulness: if words aren't used as words, but as a means for the vocalist to turn her voice into a raw instrument, then the song can be good or at least passable, as [this counter example](#) demonstrates.

A song with lyrics that are not repetitive is more likely to be good, or at least interesting. It increases the chance of a clear story, or message, the possibility of a beginning, middle, and end. Not that pop music, being popular, will ever be accused of sublimity. Strike that: never was accused of sublimity. Nowadays, we are told we are surrounded by genius. When critics are presented with less, they find more to praise.

Of course, one could sing the dictionary for three minutes, a trick which maximizes unique words, but whose results will be atrocious.

 Pop music's decline

The picture demonstrates clearly that the lyrics in the top pop songs of the year are being more repetitive through time. On average. In the sense just given, this means pop music is growing worse.

Of the three songs with the lowest proportion of unique words, two are by the Beatles. 1964's [I Want Hold Your Hand](#) (21%), and 1968's [Hey Jude](#) (18%), which featured the lyric “na na na, na na na” sang 40 times. Simple to digest, no? The other worst offender was a song called [Too Close](#) by Next in 1998 (18%), which featured the subtle refrain:

Baby when we're grinding
I get so excited
Ooh, how I like it
I try but I can't fight it
Oh, you're dancing real close
Cuz it's real, real slow
You're making it hard for me

There are gaps in the picture. All are instrumentals. The first is 1948: [Twelfth Street Rag](#),¹ by Pee Wee Hunt. The last time was 1962: the extraordinary melancholy [Stranger on the Shore](#) by Acker Bilk, a favorite of the late and lamented [Danny Stiles](#). [Tunes like this one](#), are a nearly forgotten memory.

There hasn't been an instrumental topping the charts in nearly 50 years. And there are other indications that people are growing less tolerant of music. The tunes in the 1940s and 1950s had a higher proportion of music to words. But by the 2000s, even considering the slight average increase in song time, lyrics—if they can be so generously called that—are crammed into songs. Just look at the rapid increase in the number of words per hit song.

 Pop music's decline

Pause to consider this picture. Word count is soaring, but word uniqueness is dropping. We are rapidly approaching the monotonous chant mentioned above. Take this example from 2008, [Low](#) by Flo Rida. Featuring, lest we forget, T-Pain. The refrain comprises nearly the entire song—though Flo does slip in the words “pornography” and “Glock”, and we are informed the object of desire has a “Tattoo above her crack”:

Apple Bottom Jeans (Jeans)
Boots with the fur (With the fur)
The whole club lookin at her
She hit the floor (She hit the floor)
Next thing you know
Shawty got low low low low low low low low

No statistics are needed to demonstrate the increase in crudity, decrease in intelligibility, and the now near lack of musicality, the complete lack of beauty. *Prisoner Of Love* wasn't art, but it tried to be. Beauty, or anything resembling it, is now ruthlessly expunged. The only emotions celebrated are raw, brutish, animal-like. Lyrics used to tell stories, or express desire, but not just for the sake of it. Reasons for the desire were required.

The most rebelliousness song before rock and roll struck was in 1951, where in the top hit of the year [Nat King Cole](#) could lament that “They try to tell us we're too young.” By 2004, [Usher](#) (featuring Lil Jon & Ludacris) could announce in that year's top song, “These women al on the prowl, if you hold the head steady I'm a milk the cow.”

The word “love” used to make regular appearances in popular tunes. It's there in *Low*, but to express the idea, “I love women exposed.” It also found it's way into 2003's biggest hit [In Da Club](#)

by 50 Cent, who warbled, "I'm into having sex, I ain't into making love." He also used the vulgar word for the same act. The Beatles's first hit song was more repetitive, but it at least expressed a sweet sentiment.

Another element lacking in modern efforts is complexity, which is the converse of repetitiveness. Consider the top tune of 1954, Kitty Kallen singing [*Little Things Mean A Lot*](#). It's not Verdi, but a whole suite of different instruments, moods, harmonies, decibel levels can be heard.

Then try to listen to 2002's top offering [*How You Remind Me*](#) by Nickelback, far from the worst of the lot. There's hardly any difference in tone from start to finish, the sounds are muddled, the voice filtered. It is mushy and limited. It is a much simpler song. And still to come were *Boom Boom Pow* and *Tik Tok*.

People now like their music to do away with all necessity of thought or contemplation. If a guiding, demanding beat isn't there to lead them obediently through a tune, they don't like it. Compare the original version of the (not top hit) Nat King Cole's rendition of [*Lush Life*](#) with [*this highly praised "re-mix."*](#) In comes repetition, out goes subtlety. The song has been turned into pabulum. The depth of Billy Strayhorn is too much for the modern mind.

What's to come? If the trends we've noted continue, we can look forward to an increase in crudity, lyrics with blatant narcissism, a further weakening of the demand that a song contain music, a return to neolithic simplicity. The top song by 2020 will be titled, *Sex*, a work with a damning, unchanging beat, with lyric comprised of the lone word "Sex," repeated until the matter inside the listener's skull has been nicely puréed.

¹Only the Lord knows how the person who posted this song to Youtube matched that graphic.

Your authors' [eminently employable number two son](#) compiled the songs and lyrics.

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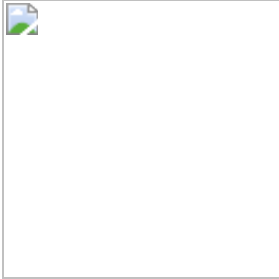
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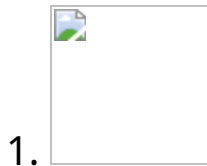
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Briggs

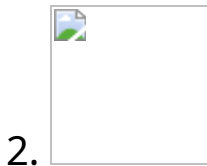
52 thoughts on “Proof That Music Is Growing Worse” [Leave a comment](#) ›



1. **Cris**

[September 28, 2011 at 12:08 pm](#)

I suspect that we'll consider ourselves fortunate if the word repeated in 2020 is actually 'Sex', and not some alternative.

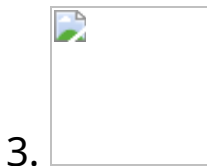


2. **[Silverviddle](#)**

[September 28, 2011 at 1:10 pm](#)

Welcome to Idiocracy.


Excellent breakdown. Reminds me of a more professorial version of Steve Allen seriously intoning the lyrics to disco hits in the 70's. It was complete deadpan and it was hilarious.




3. **Mack**

[September 28, 2011 at 1:26 pm](#)

My theory is that modern pop music is laced with subliminal messages to fool people into liking it.

4.  **Greg Sabo**
[September 28, 2011 at 1:35 pm](#)

I mean, why don't you just listen to Shubert or something

5.  **robert burns**
[September 28, 2011 at 1:42 pm](#)

Minor nitpick. Technology changed. The 1948 technology was 78 rpm vinyl with songs about 3 minutes long. Today songs can (and are) much longer in time. So number of words per song may not be the appropriate measure.

And I agree that music has gone downhill.

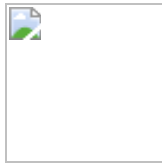
6.  **John**
[September 28, 2011 at 1:45 pm](#)

I'm sure the same applies to church music. Contemporary choruses don't have anywhere near the vocabulary or theological depth of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

7.  **Briggs** 
[September 28, 2011 at 1:46 pm](#)

robert burns,

It is a good nitpick. I did cover it, but not in depth. It turns out that even though songs can be longer, those that made the top position were about the same length.

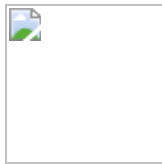


8. **Matt**

[September 28, 2011 at 2:00 pm](#)

I wasn't completely convinced, until you mentioned Nickleback.

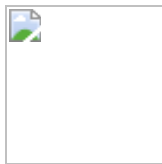
If you want instrumentals, you gotta listen to genres that still have guitar solos!



9. **amir**

[September 28, 2011 at 2:11 pm](#)

I just Ctrl+F ed your article to see the effect of Zipf law but I did not find any! the decrease of words should be compared with some base literature rt?!



10. **[Human Person Junior, Jr.](#)**

[September 28, 2011 at 2:13 pm](#)

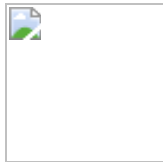
Popular music's yin and yang are memorability, best served by repetition, and interest, best served by new ideas and less

repetition. This concept only works with a moderately well-educated listener base.

Today's listeners are a rare breed in a capitalist society: Too stupid to earn money, yet possessing a plenitude of money to spend on "music" that is either insipid or brutish, and, in either case, requiring no real ability to perform.

I've attempted to get into this groove. I've written verse one of a strong rap:

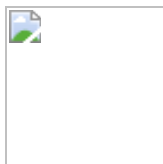
Yo' SIS-tuh, yo' MOM-ma, yo' AUN-tie and yo' CUZ-zin;
Da WIM-minz in yo' FAM-uh-lee, I MUS-sa had a DUZ-zin...



11. **JH**

[September 28, 2011 at 2:20 pm](#)

I can't help but wonder if meaning of love has changed over the years.

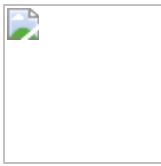


12. **[Chris Hemedinger](#)**

[September 28, 2011 at 2:29 pm](#)

It's true that many of today's "top hits" contain crude, unsingable lyrics. They are the top hits because they are popular in dance clubs, and people listen to them on the radio and buy them on iTunes because they like to be reminded of how much fun they had dancing.

But there is a huge body of Very Good popular music (appealing melodies and lyrics you can repeat, performed by artists that have a strong following), not represented in the top hits. I suspect (but did not verify) that the top hits of the late 40s represents a larger proportion of available popular music of the time. Today's top hits are just a thin layer of crud floating on top of a vast pool of available listening material, much of which might appeal to you or me.



13. **Paddikj**

[September 28, 2011 at 2:49 pm](#)

Good for you, William – you've finally provided a degree of quantification to your music rants and it's very compelling.

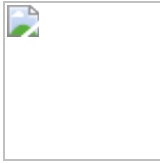
Chris Hemedinger says:

"I suspect that the top hits of the late 40s represents a larger proportion of available popular music of the time. Today's top hits are just a thin layer of crud floating on top of a vast pool of available listening material . . ."

Absolutely perfect summation. It's so good that I hesitate to expand, but feel I must: It's not just music, but all of pop culture which has the thin layer of crud – the cultural crapsosphere. I ignore it as best I can.

Slightly OT, but I've had this notion for years regarding technology that there is some sort of universal law that the sophistication of the delivery technology and the

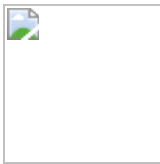
sophistication of the content must always be inversely proportional.



14. **JJD**

[September 28, 2011 at 3:58 pm](#)

My eminently employable son, a classical musician, is sometimes in despair over the quantity of garbage being published and promoted as 'art' and 'music'. I remind him that the technology and the marketing channels developed to handle that ocean of crap has made possible a flowering of recorded classical and early music of exquisite quality. Not to defend the crap at all, but there are some useful side effects.



15. **DAV**

[September 28, 2011 at 4:00 pm](#)

Briggs,

You seem to dwell on the vocal part and continually ignore the rest. Why is that? Because it can't be counted? You should put down the statistical hammer occasionally — not everything is a nail. It's the sum of all that parts of a musical piece that matters.

Chris Hemedinger may have a point. People aren't listening for dinner entertainment. It's dance music. When dancing you aren't likely to be listening to the story in the words. The

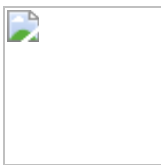
words are inconsequential like a form of scat. Charlie Parker was often berated for his taste for country music (IOW: that junk). When asked why he listened to it, he replied it was because of the stories being told. Not all bread is bad because it isn't buttered and a hamburger isn't necessarily better than a PBJ.

As for good/bad, it's a matter of taste which is quite hard to measure. A large part of music is being able to anticipate so music must have repetition. Part of the anticipation come from familiarity. That implies similarity between works. Nothing stands out as good by itself.

Often, it's the nuances between pieces that make a work great. You don't hear the nuances if you are generally unfamiliar with whatever genre. If you grew up in the jazz age you would be quite familiar with its form(s) and could pick out the nuances with ease. Taste is almost always acquired.

You would think popularity would imply goodness. Yet you seem to be saying that popularity is somehow a mark of mediocrity. By your apparent definition, no one would universally agree with your measures of good./bad.

The Doris Day song was quite love-ly if we were to take her word for it.

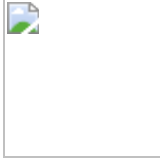


16. **DAV**

[September 28, 2011 at 4:17 pm](#)

JJD, *My eminently employable son, a classical musician,*

Eminently employable? How large is that classical market?



17. **Ken**

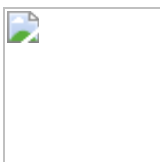
[September 28, 2011 at 4:29 pm](#)

Briggs,

I would argue that some of the word repetitions you've counted aren't. Example, the "na na na..." in the Beatles' "Hey Jude" is, arguably, not really a "word" so much as a harmonic sound incorporated into the overall rhythm (like humming, etc.). If one accepts that, the net effect would be, it appears, to further reinforce the overall trend noted.

Sans the analysis presented, the hit series South Park essentially parodied the same issue via its presentation of the Timmy Band....characterized by a wheelchair-bound retarded kid that can only say "Timmy!" at random intervals, who by chance, replaces the lead vocalist of some band, which as a result becomes a raging success....with all songs having the single word randomly vocalized of "Timmy!"

So there you have it. Your latest analysis is, at some level, an embellishment of a South Park theme.



18. **JJD**

[September 28, 2011 at 5:13 pm](#)

@DAV

Not to distract from Matt's topic here, the situation where I live (Victoria BC Canada) is that the 'music' that is popular here is the usual T&A + obscenities + noise, but at the same time there is a symphony orchestra, a very good music conservatory, a university music department, and numerous community choirs and orchestras. So while the local hockey arena is mostly used for noise concerts and the entire city was recently treated to a high-volume 'rock music' festival hosted in a local baseball stadium, there is also a large enough population of classical music listeners to support the classical musicians. Worldwide there is a large enough population of classical music listeners to support musicians by purchasing recordings and videos on the web. In the middle of all this, my son has a steady gig as a church organist, gets a reasonable number of performing gigs (solo or in groups), and can work as much as he wants to as an accompanist. He has never had a McJob.

The big question is whether the general fashion of stupidity and grossness will grow to the point where the population of classical music (and even Perry Como) lovers will get too small to support musicians locally. In Canada, as I see it, the answer is "probably not."

Finally, to get closer to Matt's subject, I think that a major explanation for the stupidity and repetitiousness of pop music today is alcohol and drug use. Heavy boom-boom-boom and word repetition may seem just sublime if you are zonked out of your gourd.

19.



Briggs 

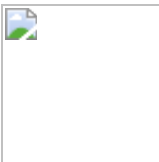
[September 28, 2011 at 5:37 pm](#)

DAV,

People were dancing to Perry Como, too. Buying and dancing to music is not a new phenomenon. Buying and dancing to atrocious music is. So I don't accept Hemedinger's argument, except to agree with him that good music does exist and takes little effort to find. However, if you feel there are nuances to be found in the top songs of the past decade, some shades of importance I must have missed, I'm willing to tutored.

The statistics I provide are on the lyrics, true. But today's analysis comprises the music as well, just not statistically. I'm actually working on a way to statistically describe the music. But since the data sources are so different, it's a more difficult task. Preliminary findings indicate that being deaf can no longer be considered a curse.

20.



DAV

[September 28, 2011 at 6:38 pm](#)

Briggs,

You are still left with the problem of defining 'good'. You can't go by vote since that would make it 'popular' and that alone seems *a priori* to preclude 'goodness'. You shouldn't

use the definition (whatever it is) of critics because perforce they must appear discriminating to prove their 'sophistication' to deserve the title of expert.

Think about this: if popular music is bad why do so many people listen to it? You seem to be saying it's good if us Patricians like it and it somehow gets soiled if it's enjoyed by the Plebes. Incidentally, that is where the term "common time" for 4/4 comes from. It was the time signature of popular music (as opposed to the obviously more sophisticated 3/4).

Is classical music good? I don't like some of it so it's a hard question to answer but I know 'good' when I hear it. It means 'I like that'. In any case, my definition of 'good' applies only to me. I wouldn't think of pressing it upon anyone else.

21.  **DAV**
[September 28, 2011 at 6:51 pm](#)

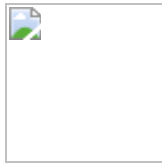
Maybe you should be trying to identify "mediocre"/"popular" and let "Good" and "Atrocious" be outliers? There's money in guessing "popular". That's what A&R guys do.

22.  **Jason Fruit**
[September 28, 2011 at 6:52 pm](#)

I agree with your conclusion, but I can't agree that the statistics are meaningful — except for the decreasing

frequency of the word "love". If you're going to judge the quality of a lyric by its percentage of unique words, the most worthless song I could quickly find, "Go Forth and F***", matches Perry Como at 47%. (It's not worth a listen, and I don't recommend Googling it.)

In a judgment of artistic value, a statistical approach is almost certainly wrong.

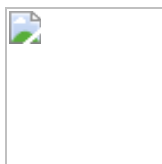


23. [49erDweet](#)
[September 28, 2011 at 6:52 pm](#)

Thanks for picking my best tried and true croon tune for your prime example. Mrs. Dweet loves it, and has probably requested it a couple of hundred times in our 40+++ years. The stories I could tell . . .

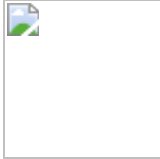
@ JH hit it. "I can't help but wonder if meaning of love has changed over the years." It has as far as popular music is concerned.

@ John's comment re: church music is somewhat true, except - and as JJD may have picked up on - good lyrical music is alive and well on the church front, all over the world aamof.



24. [Jon Peltier](#)
[September 28, 2011 at 7:09 pm](#)

Popular music always seems to be the crappiest, lowest common denominator stuff. There is always good music which is unknown to those who follow popular music. All that you've shown is that today's bad, popular music (Kesha and Black Eyed Peas) are worse than the bad, popular music of decades ago (Perry Como).



25.

DAV

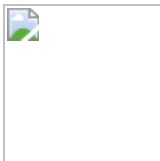
[September 28, 2011 at 7:18 pm](#)

Briggs,

The top song by 2020 will be titled, Sex ...

Not the top song but Berlin's *Sex (I'm a...)* hit #5 in Canada in 1982. It was banned by a lot of radio stations in the U.S. Incidentally, it was released on the flip side of *Metro* which has some interesting emotion changes (sadness to anger) over a love rejection. I happen to like both — in particular, *Metro*. Not the only reason for liking it but *Metro* has a click-clack in the background appearing at odd times which increases the feeling of riding along on the Paris Metro with the singer creating empathy.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_%28I%27m_A...%29



26.

DAV

[September 28, 2011 at 7:26 pm](#)

Jon Peltier ,

Not to pick on you but don't you think *Popular music always seems to be the crappiest, lowest common denominator stuff*. is a strange definition? Well, of course not, you said it. But it equates to *it has something everybody likes it so it must be bad*. There's a lot of that going around in the above posts and the blog post is a major contributor.



27. **JH**

[September 28, 2011 at 8:31 pm](#)

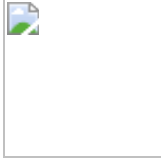
Human voice is not my favorite instrument. My kids think the music is less meaningful without vocals. Maybe songs with lyrics allow them to interpret the songs more readily. I am not crazy about some of the songs my kids listen to, well, somehow those songs resonate with them. (My older daughter plays classical piano but she dislikes classical music. She might like it in the future though.)

Maybe the depth of Kesha is too much for the non-modern me.

Anyway, I sure hope that the number or the fraction of unique words in a song is not an objective measure of music quality and that the top pop song doesn't represent the best pop music or the music of the time.

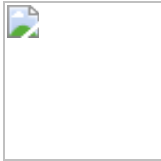
And, hey, Mr. Briggs, the rule of repetition is very powerful.

49er, I believe you.



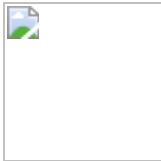
28. **Jeremy Das**
[September 28, 2011 at 9:23 pm](#)

Vulgar & talentless



29. **John R T**
[September 28, 2011 at 9:42 pm](#)

I think you insult sounds of the other beings: "animal-like."




30. **Greg Cavanagh**
[September 28, 2011 at 11:18 pm](#)

DAV,

I believe it's called popular music because the record companies advertising their products call it "popular music". It may in fact NOT be popular with the buyers, but new. They have their old favourites, and this new album is from their favourite band. But classifying any particular song in the popular music category, doesn't make it so.


Also the discos will play new music from whatever bands are currently selling records. They won't (usually) play music, say 12 months old. So what they play isn't conducive to knowing what is good, it's simply newer. And people will dance to anything with a beat. It's not proof of goodness.

31.  [Human Person Junior, Jr.](#)
[September 28, 2011 at 11:38 pm](#)

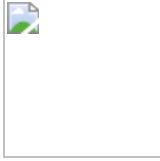
The term “popular music” has nothing to do with the popularity, or lack of popularity, of a piece of music. It is used to distinguish serious music (fine art) from popular music (art or folk art). Rarely if ever does a piece qualify as both.

Serious music is usually at least fifty years ahead of popular music, particularly in the quality of listening required to enjoy it. Popular music doesn't seek to bring about anything truly new. Its purveyors realize that evolution, not revolution, is the key to the success of popular music. If a popular piece actually showcased groundbreaking work in melodic or harmonic content, it would NOT be well received by its audience.

Serious music, on the other hand, often brings forward new tonalities, etc.

32.  [49erDweet](#)
[September 29, 2011 at 2:17 am](#)

Just for fun substitute the word “science” for “music” in junior juniors last comment and it makes almost as much sense. Is that coincidental or serendipitous?



33. **Michael Larkin**

[September 29, 2011 at 3:03 am](#)

Dr. Briggs,

A couple of songs sung by Kathleen Ferrier must be way up there in the words stake, for example –

“I will walk with my love” (my personal favourite of hers, with a tingle factor of 100%):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0jFB4xIiOo>

“Now sleeps the crimson petal”, with words by Tennyson:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUUcR05VqG4>

Yet despite this, one of the most repetitive and banal songs I can think of, Daft Punk’s “Around the world” is also one of my favourites – but must be viewed with the video, which is imo what makes it a work of art:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9MszVE7aR4&ob=av2e>

Many operatic and choral pieces are highly repetitive – I can remember singing Handel’s Hallelujah chorus, for example, with the top sopranos at school. My favourite version of this bar none is the Flash mob rendition:

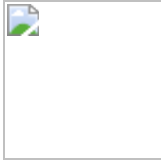
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXh7JR9oKVE>

And what about singin’ in the rain, sung by Gene Kelly?:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1ZYhVpdXbQ>

Brilliant, though there aren't many lyrics and a fair number of doody-loo-doody's.

When it comes to music, there ain't no accountin' for taste.

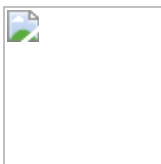


34. **DAV**

[September 29, 2011 at 6:07 am](#)

HP Jr²,

Perhaps, but if it is as prevalent as Matt thinks then "popular music" must be close to equaling "popular". Not to mention that "popular music" outsells just about everything else which also indicates popularity. Other than that, I agree with you.



35. **n/a**

[September 29, 2011 at 7:21 am](#)

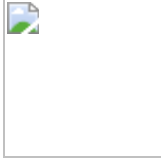
I refute it thus:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ssoBUb2cJk>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xmRt_2Aia0

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHlsrbAdKlk>



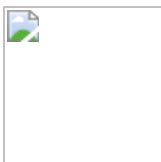


36. **[Human Person Junior, Jr.](#)**
[September 29, 2011 at 9:17 am](#)

Dweet — Thanks for the reply! In my mind, there is a direct equivalence: popular music; popular science. I think, in this case, “popular” means “of the people (masses).” On the other hand, I could be full of a well-known substance. (It’s been known to happen...)

DAV — I appreciate your writing back, and, as someone in my family might say, we’re in complete agreeance. When you take popular music as a whole, everything from country to rap and beyond, it is more “popular” than the fine art sort of music, the serious music.

My comment had to do with a single piece of music, and I qualified it for that reason: There has to be, within popular music, some very unpopular pieces, given the potential consumers versus the actual. A recording of popular music might sell hundreds of copies, which makes it a total bust, but it’s still called popular music. The paradox is apparent, but not actual.



37. **Rich**
[September 29, 2011 at 11:22 am](#)

You’re not alone analysing music. Check out http://www.theregister.co.uk/2011/09/29/catchiest_song_eve

[r/](#). Mind you, these guys are getting paid for it.

A top ten because we love top tens:

Top 10 most annoying songs

By their reckoning, these are the top ten catchiest songs of all time:

We are the Champions, Queen (1977)

Y.M.C.A, The Village People (1978)

Fat Lip, Sum 41 (2001)

The Final Countdown, Europe (1986)

Monster, The Automatic (2006)

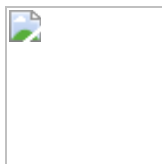
Ruby, The Kaiser Chiefs (2007)

Always Here, Jimi Jamison (1996)

Brown Eyed Girl, Van Morrison (1967)

Teenage Dirtbag, Wheatus (2000)

Livin' on a Prayer, Bon Jovi (1986)



38. **POUNCER**

[September 29, 2011 at 8:10 pm](#)

You're using the wrong data set and the wrong baseline period.

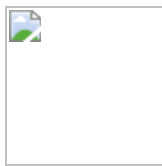
If you use the GRAMMY AWARD winners instead of best sellers, and start in 1960 you'll see that the number of unique words, now, is MUCH higher now than then.

This is of course because we're talking about performances by Percy Faith, two by Henry Mancini and another by Herb Albert — tunes with no lyrics at all.

Anyone who argues is a denier opposing the ...

(wait for it...)

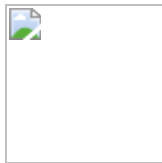
INSTRUMENTAL RECORD!



39. **jae**

[September 30, 2011 at 5:25 am](#)

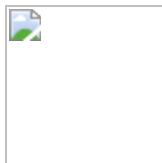
Another dimension: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2043089/Queens-We-Are-The-Champions-voted-catchiest-pop-song-time-scientists.html>



40. **Chris**

[September 30, 2011 at 11:52 pm](#)

William, these are all valid points but you forgot to mention one thing: Kesha looks way better in "short shorts" than Russ Columbo, Clarence Gaskill & Leo Robin ever would!



41. **Ken**

[October 1, 2011 at 8:09 am](#)

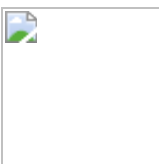
I ran the stats on the Hallelujah chorus: only 14.45% of the words are unique. Clearly Handel was a hack. Thank goodness Ke\$ha has better writers, ones who know how to get their percentages higher.

Ken Stephenson
Russell Professor of Music Theory
The University of Oklahoma

42.  **Briggs** 
[October 1, 2011 at 8:41 am](#)

Ken,

Thanks! Makes me happy I merely said repetition increases the chance of, but does not guarantee, badness. And that, sometimes, repetition can be used to good effect. Wouldn't you agree?

43.  **[Pompous Git](#)**
[October 1, 2011 at 8:59 pm](#)

Sarah Elizabeth Blaskow is an Australian singer-songwriter and musician. In 2007, she won the 'Best Pop Release' for What the Sea Wants, the Sea Will Have at the ARIA Music Awards, which peaked at #7 on the ARIA Albums Chart. Her recent album, As Day Follows Night, reached #5 and won the 'Best Female Artist' at the 2009 ARIA Awards.

I don't give a fiddler's fart for her popularity; I do enjoy her singing and her lyrics. The Git & Mrs Git go to a concert she will be performing at St David's Cathedral later this month and expect to be well-entertained.

I also note that sexual allusion in pop culture is hardly new:

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Ophelia: No, my lord.

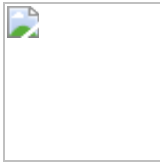
Hamlet: I mean my head upon your lap.

Ophelia: Aye, my lord.

Hamlet: Or did you think I meant country matters?

Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.

Hamlet: That's a fair thought, to lie between maid's legs.



44. **Paddikj**

[October 2, 2011 at 2:05 am](#)

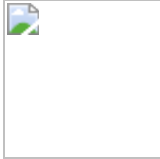
Repetition is absolutely essential to music and poetry, and sometimes even prose. Rhythm IS repetition. Like its close cousin, ritual, it comes from our reptilian hind-brain. It encompasses everything from the subtly repeating chord progressions of a late-Beethoven string quartet to the hypnotic and slowly transforming patterns of Steve Reich's Drumming.

So, no; repetition is not sometimes used to good effect. It is always used to good effect except when in the hands of the untalented.

One of my favorite examples of repetitive good effect:

This is the way the world will end
This is the way the world will end
This is the way the world will end
Not with a bang, but a whimper

45. Pingback: [William M. Briggs, Statistician » Global Warming Increases Disastrous Music: A Scientific Paper](#)



46. **Cam S**
[October 4, 2011 at 8:52 pm](#)

Not to start off negative, but the title of this article is misleading. I didn't read any of the comments, so I'm not sure if anyone said this already. The title claims that music (in general) is getting worse. I agree that mainstream music is getting worse because all teens (main music consumers) want is a catchy tune with racey hedonistic lyrics, but certainly not all music is getting worse.

Also, the comparison of the two songs. Very good choice of songs, but you could see that the range of years is very great and doesn't help with your argument. Maybe a progression of lyrics for top songs every ten years would have been more suitable.

On another note, I don't know of your music library, but expanding your taste and looking for current artists could help restore your faith in humanity's culture. Looking for songs categorized by 'Songwriter' or 'Singer' may devastingly prove against this article. To give an example:

Kings of Convenience – Freedom and its Owner from
Declaration of Dependence (2009)

“Show a view to someone who chose to live his whole life in
a cave

He’ll raise his arms to protect his eyes from learning

And the blindness to which he belongs

This time it’s me it’s me

Cascades of chances i’ll just let them be

The unfamiliar is right below our eyes

Don’t look for what we know

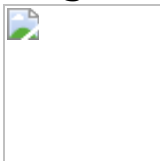
The unfamiliar is right below our eyes”

Note the lyrics talk about people’s unwillingness to be
introduced to new culture because they are comfortable
with what they are familiar with. Which could easily be the
cause of all this pop crap seen on Billboard top today.

Lastly, I’d like to say I really appreciated the article and the
statistics. I’m glad to see that other people realize the
average decline in the quality of music. -Cam

47. Pingback: [Proof That Music Is Growing Worse «
thereformedmind](#)

48. Pingback: [Is Pop Music Getting Less Intelligent? | Matt Ritter](#)



49. **PB**

[June 4, 2015 at 8:39 am](#)

Briggs,

When you say repetition – I assume you only consider lyrical repetition and not melodic, harmonic or rhythmic elements.

In a song with melody and lyrics unlike a rap song, repetition can be made interesting with the use of musical variations in successive repetitions even while using the same set of words. For example, in Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's A-gonna Fall", the same repeated lines are made interesting by use of melodic variation:

And it's a hard
And it's a hard
It's a hard
And it's a hard
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall

For a listen: <https://youtu.be/-ex-m-eEKsg?t=154>

Many rap songs do use repetition with lyrical variations in their lyrics: One example would be from the "Drop It Like It's Hot" by Snoop Dog:

When the pimp's in the crib, ma
Drop it like it's hot,
Drop it like it's hot
Drop it like it's hot
When the pigs try to get at ya
Park it like it's hot
Park it like it's hot
Park it like it's hot
And if a nigga get a attitude
Pop it like it's hot

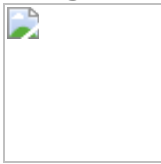
Pop it like it's hot
Pop it like it's hot

The repeated use of the lines with minor variations and a catchy rhythm pattern makes this section interesting even though there isn't any melody to speak of.

Interesting analysis though, but I would also argue its not just the lack of unique words but use of rich figurative language and interesting themes which is one of major components of such banal songs.

50. Pingback: [Wszystko ju? s?yszeli?my_|_haniako](#)

51. Pingback: [Wszystko ju? s?yszeli?my_|_haniako](#)



52. [Howard Tate](#)

[August 27, 2016 at 9:12 pm](#)

Good music is still being created and there are still people capable of appreciating good music. But the record companies and radio stations must court the most populous demographics. More listeners means more money. And it's a simple fact that there are more musically unsophisticated people than there are musically sophisticated people. Quality programming for the sake of quality was a good thing but it was costly. Consider the cable channel A&E which originally aired plays and operas but now airs Duck Dynasty. American media thrives on selling the equivalent of junk food.