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This Is My America: Songwriting and the American Dream

Ever since the founding of America, the American Dream has been a pervasive part of the country's ideology; its existence throughout each generation, from the first settlers of this new world to their distant progeny, cannot be denied. Because of its lasting impact, understanding what the dream means to the general American populace throughout history has been a constant and important field of study. Often, the American Dream is oversimplified as a white picket fence and two and half kids, however, the truth is much more complex than that. The form that the dream took within each respective decade has constantly shifted, often in subtle yet essential ways. One of the most accessible and effective methods of conceptualizing these minute differences has been through the analysis of literature, as we have done through the course of this class. For my final creative project, I sought to define the variants of the American Dream by analyzing the shifting musical genres of the twentieth century. Using this knowledge of how song form and style can be used to represent a cultural atmosphere, I composed a song to describe the American Dream that exists within the generations of the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first century.

My journey through the song styles of twentieth century America began with the Jazz Age, a time during the 1920's that was characterized by a thriving economy, extravagant lifestyles, and most importantly, endless opportunity for a citizen to become successful (Matthews). The American Dream of this time was focused on grandeur, success, and marriage; this dream was both accessible and exciting during the time period. Jazz music, the defining genre of the time, mirrored and influenced this culture through syncopation, improvisation, and upbeat tempos (Matthews). Just as individuals had more freedom and opportunity than ever, so did the music; musicians expanded on a basic structure and experimented with new sounds and exotic rhythms. However, when the Great Depression hit, this wild optimism was almost immediately shut down. The extravagance of the Jazz Age was lost, and instead, the songs of Tin Pan Alley took over the popular sphere, even though many of them were also popular in the 1910's (Starr 33). These songs were highly structured and focused on the little pleasures of life. The American Dream was now not a path to grandeur; it was simply to have a stable lifestyle and enjoy what little pleasures still existed within a depressed America. Songs like Ed Meeker's "Take Me Out To The Ball Game," came to the forefront during this time. The song emphasizes the pleasure of going to a baseball game and forgetting the hardships of life. Other songs that were similarly about forgetting hardship and pursuing passion and love defined the time. This trend continued even into the Swing Era, where the same topics began to be backed by the big bands. Swing was very much a combination of jazz's optimism and the highly structured awareness of reality that Tin Pan Alley expressed, as is seen throughout Frank Sinatra's music. I focused on one of his songs in particular, "That's Life," that discussed the hardships and simple pleasures of life, while remaining optimistic about America. Throughout the next few decades, as

Rock and Roll and Folk Counterculture dominated the musical sphere, a common song structure was maintained, with cultural criticisms becoming more and more common lyrically. Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" and Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changing" told the story of a generation dissatisfied with America's political and social atmosphere. It was a time of change, and more importantly, a time where a desire for change was blatantly expressed through song. Up to the end of the twentieth century, and now as well, this style of direct or clearly metaphoric attacks on American life was seen throughout all genres. Because of this analysis, I chose to give my song a very stable structure and lyrics that directly address the social problems that my generation faces while pursuing the American Dream.

Researching my generation's American Dream, I reassured the trends that I had seen growing up. My classmates and I are right on the cusp of the Millennial Generation and Generation Z. These generations do differ in key places, but they both share a desire to have highly successful careers and make a difference in the world (O'Connell, Millennials). This comes above marriage and family, and so a larger portion of the population than ever before will not get married, and those who do are more likely to get divorced (O'Connell). In my song, I described these trends and gave my view that forsaking the simplicity of family life is detrimental to life; the endless pursuit of job mobility is important, but not worth losing the stability of a home life. In the song, I call our generation astronauts for reaching higher than ever before, but not being as concerned with coming back down or staying within Earth's gravity.

Overall, I believe that writing a song was the most effective way to describe this idea of the American Dream; the combination of stable and somber chord changes with the direct nature of the lyrics harkens back to the late twentieth century, yet also poses a spin on the style that connects to a modern demographic. Writing the song went as planned once I had a plan for what I wanted to do, but the creative act brought me new appreciation for social commentary songs written before. As I developed the song, I went back to the songs I picked in each genre for reference, marveling at the effective choices they made to bring their message to life. Because of this project, I not only understand that songs have been effective in defining the American Dream, but why they are effective on a melodic, structural, and lyrical level.

Works Cited

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