

What's in

a song?

Inside the pop music industry

It is relatively common for someone to sit down with pen, paper and a stack of top forty records and go searching for Deep Psychological Meanings which may or may not exist in them.

Whether these deep meanings are getting across to the record-buying Now Crowd is another matter . . . and much more difficult to assess.

There's no denying that a new excitement has been generated by current trends in pop music. For over four years now, rock 'n roll, folk rock, funk, folk and other facets of so-called "young music" have had a dominant place in the show business world.

"Legitimate" musicians began to take notice. Suddenly everyone wanted to be in a band. Things began to happen. But this excitement seems to be sort of an inbred excitement, an excitement generated and maintained by the people who make the music, play the music, and write about the music. The people who listen to the music don't seem to be part of it.

To get views on the validity of this statement, I went to

Garry McDonnell of CJCA and Mike Marshall of CHED. Both these men compile the weekly charts for their respective stations, and both are active at dances in either a performing or emceeing capacity (McDonnell is the leader of the Nomads).

Kids like the music "their buddies like," said McDonnell. "It's the same as with clothes. They're wearing what everyone else does, and the bands wear the clothes because they're good business."

In music tastes, the kids "are easily led and—well—exploited" by the business, he added. Did this mean that the record-buying people have no discrimination whatsoever? McDonnell didn't think so. "A song's got to have something", but there's a lot more to selling a song than its quality. It's amazing what a good PR job will do, he mentioned, citing the case of The Monkees.

Putting out a winning record requires "the right timing" in order for it to make the charts. "It's pretty difficult to promote a nothing record, but it can be done. You have got to be clued right in; you've got to know how to

get it played", where to get it played, and what kind of style will catch on at the time.

And, McDonnell claims, there are people who do just this—people who read, and manipulate, the music market like so many games of chess. It's frightening, in a way, but these people can predict hits with uncanny accuracy.

The existence of these people proves that tastes in pop music may not be so individualistic and original as one likes to think they are.

Actually, McDonnell said, "kids don't always think for themselves. There are very few leaders" among them. And again the "very apathetic" tag was put upon them, not, it would seem, unjustifiably.

Marshall's opinions were much similar to McDonnell's.

background

Last week in Casserole, Leona Gom dissected a few pop songs and tried to find what made them tick. This week features editor Lydia Dotto again examines pop music, but this time it's more of an autopsy. It seems it doesn't really matter what the song is, it can be made to sell. It can be made "popular." Two local experts—CJCA's Garry McDonnell and CHED's Mike Marshall—give their views on the whole mess.

Do the kids want quality and meaning from their music, or do these things really matter? As long as it's loud and has a strong beat to dance to, is this all they want? Marshall started by saying: Impact notwithstanding, "music today is, in an overall way, probably the most creative, inventive and expressive music that's ever been put out." That speaks for his impression of its quality. How much, if any, of this inventiveness gets across?

Every record has its reason. The songs have "to communicate, say something important" Marshall said, in order for the listeners to really like them. But, by and large, nobody really cares that much about them.

This fact is borne out in that very few standard pop songs have been written. Most chart



MIKE MARSHALL
... songs must say something

songs have very limited lasting appeal. Of the standards, Yesterday, Michelle and Sunny are among the more widely known.

The discussion turned to the quality of music being written today. "The North American music scene was very lethargic," Marshall said, "until the Beatles broke it open. Then the Americans realized they had to work harder in order to produce like the English groups were producing."

The result has been an increase in the quality of music all over.

McDonnell agreed that there is a lot of really good music being written today. Part of the reason is that sheer force of numbers compel a group to be good, or they die. "There are so many records being made now that it's becoming harder and harder to compete" said McDonnell. "Yet this has resulted in a higher quality of music too."

Yes, there's the good music and the bad on the charts. There's lots of it, and it's always changing. It's a fascinating sort of world—full of the typical ups and downs. It's fascinating and sometimes

rugged. Does this make any difference to the average joe who spends his dollar on a single?

Are the kids ever interested in what goes into putting the music together on stage, I asked McDonnell. He just laughed, and said: "Sometimes I think all they want is a slot to put their nickel in." In other words, a jukebox would do just as well.

"It's hard to get a reaction from a crowd. Maybe they're enjoying themselves, but they don't show it. It's a reciprocal thing—if they enjoy themselves, then we enjoy ourselves."

But this reciprocity is an uncommon thing.

Nobody really cares about the sweat that goes into a recording session, Marshall said. "Nobody cares that a record was recorded on April 14 at 2:30 a.m. in Studio B with 76 musicians, 4,500 singers, where the temperature was 76°" he added.

That's the way it goes.

Nobody cares.

Perhaps the next question to ask is, why should they?

Think about it.



GARRY MCDONNELL
... kids are easily led