

December 2018

Grit & Ghetto: American Pop Music from the '90s to the '00s

Ernest M. Oleksy
Cleveland State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Ethnomusicology Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Recommended Citation

Oleksy, Ernest M.. "Grit & Ghetto: American Pop Music from the '90s to the '00s." *The Downtown Review*. Vol. 5. Iss. 1 (2018) .

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr/vol5/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Downtown Review by an authorized editor of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

In the 1990s, the U.S. experienced an economic boom following a slight recession during the late 1980s. This is American Enterprise Institute's rundown:

The United States economy grew by an average of 4 percent per year between 1992 and 1999. (Since 2001, it's never grown by as much as 4 percent, and since 2005 not even by 3 percent for a whole year.) An average of 1.7 million jobs a year were added to the American work force, versus around 850,000 a year during this century so far. The unemployment rate dropped from nearly 8 percent in 1992 to 4 percent — that is, effectively zero — at the end of the decade. ... From 1990 to 1999, the median American household income grew by 10 percent; since 2000 it's shrunk by nearly 9 percent.

Not only did the nation as a whole experience appreciable growth, but the music industry, in particular, witnessed the largest revenue that it would ever make in a decade. The music industry tends to experience peaks and troughs along with national economies as when consumers have more purchasing power, they are more likely to spend it on luxury items, like music (Waldfogel, 2017). Even though the CD was invented in 1982, it was not until the 1990s that it would make an incredible impact on recording companies. CD sales actually reached their peak in the year 2000, with 943 million CDs sold. It should also be noted that the '90s hold the record for most top-selling records in a decade ever, with 13, well above the second place decade, the '70s, which only had 7 top-selling records (Covert, 2013). The music industry was having a heyday, and it showed in elaborate music videos, sunny bubblegum pop, and angst-ridden alternatives.

Perhaps one of the most notable features of '90s music is how far music videos had come. When MTV began in the 1980s, many acts struggled to figure out how to fit themselves into this new medium. Artists like Michael Jackson set the precedent for emerging '90s acts in his dynamic performances for "Billie Jean" and "Beat It," where Jackson not only sings, but also has tightly choreographed dance routines that come with dynamic set pieces with multiple locations and also background dancers. Janet Jackson, sister of The King of Pop, reprised the idea of an elaborate setting, choreographed dancing, and background dancers in her music video for "Rhythm Nation."

Janet Jackson also typifies an emerging trend in pop music: the diva. The diva refers to a strong, single female personality who dances and sings. Diva songs often fit an ABAB song structure with an emphasis on a catchy beat and chorus. The new-age diva is very popular in today's mainstream and includes personalities like Beyoncé, Katy Perry, and Taylor Swift to name a few. While it arguably dates back to Madonna, the most successful and clearly recognizable diva is top-selling '90s artist, Mariah Carey. Despite a wider music-purchasing

demographic in the '90s, teenagers still dominated in pop music targets. Carey had an easy time attracting girls, with her assertive voice and fun-loving personality, as well as guys, for the same reasons in addition to her movie-star looks. Carey's number one smash "Fantasy" can be viewed as the archetype for '90s diva bubblegum pop. The song exhibits Carey's soaring soprano, so fluid that it is difficult to make out individual lyrics, a simple, funk-sampled beat perfect for casual dancing, lyrics relating to a romantic fantasy, and an expensive video that is headlined by Mariah Carey dancing and gallivanting. This music video has expert lighting and a plethora of hip-hop inspired dancers, most likely to appeal to the growing fan base of rap, making it very reminiscent of videos like "Beat It" and "Rhythm Nation."

Although pop artists were making record earnings, it is '90s alternative that harbors interesting trends and styles. Despite a burgeoning economy, the '90s are notorious for being filled with anxious rebels who are confused about what they are supposed to be doing. While the '70s had punk to express a furious youth, '90s had grunge, a derivative of punk characterized by heavy distortion, lo-fi recording, loud drums, and unrefined baritone vocals. Without a doubt, the anthem of grunge, as well as '90s youth, is Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Exhibiting all the aforementioned attributes, this track is also notable due to a tuneful melody and headbanging chorus that made it easily consumable to a mainstream audience, as well as ambiguous, unfocused lyrics that could easily represent the inner monologue of a young adult growing up in the '90s. In particular, the lyrics "Here we are now, entertain us!" and "oh well, whatever, nevermind," exemplify the lack of direction that many '90s teens felt. Another grunge crossover hit, Radiohead's "Creep," exhibits the same soft-to-shouting buildup from the verse to the chorus that Nirvana had. The lyrics of "Creep" are notable as well, singing from the perspective of a social pariah who is infatuated by a girl far too good for him, a sentiment anyone of any age could relate to. Self-deprecation was a common lyrical theme in '90s alternative styles, also seen in Beck's song "Loser." Also, because of money, artistic bands were able to take risks similar to those of progressive rock groups in the '70s. Radiohead's "Paranoid Android" exhibits tempo changes, melodic shifts, social commentary, and virtuosic guitar solos, much like Led Zeppelin's archetype of artistic rock, "Stairway to Heaven."

Grunge was not the only gritty alternative to arise. Gangsta rap was taking the world by storm, and Tupac and Dr. Dre's collaborative hit "California Love" may have been the genre's archetype. With lyrics focused on money, drugs, and alcohol, elaborate but bass-heavy soundscapes, and another expensive music video selling the life of a gangster as a never-ending party, audiences nationwide were captivated and fully committed to this new take on rap. Gangsta rap became so popular that it is still used as the template by rap today (2010s), with examples

in Lil Wayne, Jay-Z, and T.I. Eminem also found success with hip-hop, but his approach revolved around rapping the inner monologue of his insane alter-ego “Slim Shady,” heard in his hit “The Real Slim Shady,” which mocks celebrities like Gwen Stefani and pokes fun at hypocritical parenting in front of a taunting beat which made snarky smart-alecks fall in love with his music. Thanks to an influx of money, musical creativity was possible during the ‘90s and its artists fully embraced it.

Works Cited

- Covert, Adrian. "A Decade of iTunes Singles Killed the Music Industry." *CNN Money*. Ed. CNN. CNN, 25 Apr. 2013. Web. 7 Dec. 2015.
<<http://money.cnn.com/2013/04/25/technology/itunes-music-decline/>>.
- Pethokoukis, James. "Explaining the 1990s Economic Boom — before Hillary Does." *AEIdeas*. Ed. American Enterprise Institute. American Enterprise Institute, 12 Feb. 2015. Web. 7 Dec. 2015.
<<https://www.aei.org/publication/explaining-1990s-economic-boom-hillary/>>.
- Waldfoegel, Joel. "How Digitization Has Created a Golden Age of Music, Movies, Books, and Television." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2017, pp. 195–214., doi:10.1257/jep.31.3.195.