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Popular Musical Subcultures: A Contrarian Analysis*

1. Introduction

A news story circulated widely in 2023 about a curious social practice that was described as a new "subculture" (Edwards 2023; Ives 2023). Residents of a suburb of Wellington, New Zealand, were registering many complaints about the level of noise generated in a downhill neighborhood. Late at night when most people sleep, residents were frequently awakened by Celine Dion's recording of "My Heart Will Go On," broadcast on loudspeakers at extremely high volume. The music was played from vehicles – often bicycles – by members of "speaker clubs" who were competing to demonstrate their ability to play music loudly, yet without distortion, on commercial speakers designed for public-address systems (Edwards 2023). The challenge is that these speakers are not designed for music, but for voice alone. Therefore, the competing speaker clubs select music with limited low notes and dominant treble. Thus, Celine Dion songs are ideal for the competitions. The practice seems to have started in 2022.

Is this a subculture? I think not, or at least not yet. Although it is described in this way, a practice that has united a group for only one year has not yet shown itself to be a subculture. Furthermore, the selection of popular music in this hobby is semiotically inert. That is, neither the meaning of "My Heart Will Go On" nor the meanings that have accrued to the performer play any role in the selection of the music. The selection is made for purely sonic reasons. If known to members of the speaker clubs, Debby Boone's 1977 hit song "You Light Up My Life" might be waking people up at 3 a.m. in New Zealand instead of "My Heart Will Go On." Despite the use of popular music, the rivalry of the speaker clubs is not a popular music subculture.

The example is offered because it invites scrutiny of the intension and extension of the concept of a popular music subculture. In recent years,

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the study of popular music subcultures has been challenged as outdated and unhelpful. The following discussion argues that abandonment of the concept is premature. Although the concept of subcultural identity was poorly framed when it was incorporated into the academic study of popular music, there are social phenomena in everyday life that fit the concept. Some contemporary patterns of music use and music making are distinctive as popular music subcultures. As such, we can see that these subcultures are different from scenes and tribes, two classifications that have been advanced as alternatives to subcultural analysis.

2. Skepticism toward the concept of popular music subcultures

To begin, here is a potted history: The core concept of subculture dates from at least the late 1920s, when sociologists noted that "differences in customs, attitudes, and … behavior patterns" frequently align with occupation, economic status, and religious affiliation (Palmer 1928, p. 73). Among "customs," we find distinct patterns relating to popular music production and use. For example, if we examine music in Chicago at that time, we can identify a vibrant popular music subculture of jazz speakeasies that differed from the subculture that still favored minstrel shows. From a sociological perspective, both of those subcultures were different from the polka halls of "Old Polonia" dotting Chicago's near west side. As the century progressed, the appearance of radio, television, and other modes of mass media liberated musical styles from their close association with local scenes, ethnic groups, and specific cities. Influential voices concluded that mass culture and "the culture industry" were rapidly homogenizing popular music (Adorno 1941).

In the latter half of the century, fresh perspectives emerged, challenging the thesis of ubiquitous homogenization. Scholars affiliated with Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies explored ways in which popular music subcultures are oppositional to the pervasive mass culture. For the most part, "Birmingham" subcultural theory became the standard approach to the study of popular music subcultures (Blackman 2005). On the positive side, it rejected the assumption that mass-marketed consumer goods are antithetical to subcultural formation, and called attention to active agency in which groups use consumer goods to signal their (relative) autonomy and creativity (Bennett 1999, pp. 599-600). This includes, of course, popular music. Then, beginning some 35 years ago, a strong backlash formed among social theorists of popular culture as they increasingly challenged the core concept of subcultural identity. Critics voiced several concerns about the efficacy of discussing popular music in terms of subcultures, leading to an era of analysis of post-subcultural

affiliations (see Bennett 2011). The new consensus holds that we have entered an era where there is so much individualism and "subcultural fragmentation and proliferation" that there is insufficient agreement to establish the group solidarity required for subcultural identity (Muggleton 2000, p. 47). Consequently, the concept has largely fallen out of use in popular music studies.

Although we draw very different lessons from the same material, the foundation of the present essay is my agreement with the core insights of David Hesmondhalgh's (2005) much-cited challenge to the usefulness of discussing popular music subcultures. Skepticism about the concept of subcultures was already increasing in the social sciences (e.g., Dominguez 1992). Importing this skepticism into popular music studies, Hesmondhalgh rejects both the concept of subcultures and its successors in "post-subculture" theorizing about popular music. However, the lesson of Hesmondhalgh's analysis is not necessarily the one he extracts, which is abandonment of subcultural analysis. Another route is open to us. We can retain it. However, this route requires articulation and substitution of a more consistent and fruitful understanding of the concept of subcultures. I argue that popular culture subcultures only emerge over time. Short-lived social groups are misdescribed when identified as subcultures. I propose that a return to the conceptual linkage of culture and subculture will affirm cultural connections and patterns that undercut prevailing assumptions about the supposedly ephemeral and trivial status of popular music.

3. The objections, explained

What, then, is my agreement with Hesmondhalgh? Primarily, it is that we are not talking about popular music subcultures unless "musical elements and processes" give meaning to membership in that subculture (Hesmondhalgh 2005, p. 31). George H. Lewis had already articulated this point in the 1980s: "the majority of [studies] are based on a conceptual framework that fails to treat musical content as a realm of symbolic communication" (Lewis 1982, 183). Hesmondhalgh does not cite Lewis, but instead refers back to Paul Willis on the need to connect music and group identity in a manner that is not "an arbitrary or random juxtaposition" (Willis 2014, p. 82). Andy Bennett endorses a more recent variant of this point. He challenges the usefulness of the idea of popular music subcultures on the grounds that they have been routinely reduced to a shallow "unity in terms of style and musical taste" that illuminates nothing (Bennett p. 96). In short, we need to keep popular music central, not peripheral, to *meaningful* participation in a popular music subculture.

Surveying academic studies produced in the twentieth century, Hesmondhalgh doubts that the concept of subculture has ever been used in a way that meets this requirement.

Hesmondhalgh's specific academic targets are not my concern. With respect to the core concept of subcultures, his point is that the music associated with various subcultures is neither distinctive in its musical characteristics nor aligned with values that are distinctive of the subculture. For example, Willis studied English motor-bike [motorcycle] boys who listen to Buddy Holly, but most of the people who love Buddy Holly (and I am one of them) don't have much in common with the motor-bike boys. The connection between this music and this group is a short-term historical contingency. Suppose Holly had died even earlier in his brief career, just after "That'll Be the Day" was a hit record. Other music would have taken the place of "Peggy Sue" and "Rave On" in the English biker subculture, and any substitution would have served their needs equally well. Provided, of course, that some other subculture understood to be culturally antithetical to the motor-bike boys was not already affiliated with that other music. Hesmondhalgh also warns that the concept has been too closely aligned with youth culture, which has been "an obstacle to a developed understanding of music and society" (Hesmondhalgh 2005, p. 38; see also Snyder 2009, p. 164). He concludes that we must question whether popular music subcultures exist, that is, ones that are genuinely centered on the particularity of the music favored by the subculture.

Hesmondhalgh says little about two classic books in the field: Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* and Simon Frith's *The Sociology of Rock*. Together, they embody all of the basic problems that Hesmondhalgh advances against subcultural analyses of popular music. For Frith, rock music is youth music. It is "a means by which a group defines itself," which is primarily a matter of "distinguish[ing] young from old, but [also] one peer-group from another" (Frith 1978, p. 46). Popular music that might have an intergenerational following is excluded from consideration. Apart from the music's function as a mechanism of group differentiation, popular music's semiotic dimension is regarded as of no consequence. Instead, Frith proposes that "[t]he music is an accompaniment of an activity, not its expression" (Frith 1978, p. 49). In line with the point made just above about British bikers and Buddy Holly, other music might always have played the same role for the same activity. Indeed, relative to the goal of identity signaling, rock music fans might have been cinema fans, or "season ticket holders to football games" (Frith 1996, p. 9) and it would seem to make no difference (just as it seems to make no difference which films are preferred, or which football club inspires allegiance). Except, of course, that with U.K. football clubs, we might see an intergenerational subculture in action. Marginalization of

the music is also present in Hebdige's work, which emphasizes the task of "discern[ing] the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style" (Hebdige 1979, p. 18). And yet he was overwhelmingly concerned with the styles of clothing associated with distinct music subcultures, rather than the style of the music. A reader in the twenty-second century who reads Hebdige's analysis of punk will come away with no clear idea about what the music was like.

Coming at the same issue from a different angle, Andy Bennett challenges the applicability of the idea of popular music subcultures on two grounds. First, the term "subculture" was used in so many ways by so many theorists that there was no shared concept unifying their work (Bennett 1999, p. 599). Second, the concepts of culture and subculture (as a culturally distinctive subgroup of a culture) ignore the degree of self-construction of personal identity afforded to individuals in contemporary consumer culture (Bennett 1999, p. 607). Cultures and subcultures, the objection runs, are relatively stable social formations that assign an identifiable identity to participants. The crux of the objection is that contemporary society – especially in urban centers – is better understood as a conglomeration of loose "tribes" and "scenes" that encourage a more fluid and self-selected form of personal identity. As Hesmondhalgh notes in his response to this idea, this line of resistance to subcultural theory underestimates the constraints on consumer culture that arise from institutional obstacles such as poverty and social marginalization (2005, p. 25). Conversely, Tracy Shildrick and Robert MacDonald (2006) argue that there are important social factors that allow us to recognize the continuing relevance of youth subcultures. However, music is not an important organizing focal point for these youth subcultures.

I agree with Hesmondhalgh that academic work on popular music subcultures has largely failed to identify a strong connection between musical taste and social meanings that confers a unifying significance that is understood–however implicitly–by members of the subculture (Hesmondhalgh 2005, p. 31). In practical terms, demanding a non-arbitrary connection between music and subculture will have the effect of modifying and restricting the concept, replacing the one that has predominated in studies of popular music cultures up to now. However, Hesmondhalgh complains that he can locate no successful analysis that meets this more restrictive standard. Therefore, he can see no reason to revive subcultural analysis.

Noting that subcultural analysis (in its existing, impoverished form) is losing support, other popular music scholars have responded by doubling down on the "classic" analyses of Hebdige and Sarah Thornton (1995). Ray Kinsella's (2022) interesting and thorough study of the bebop subculture of London in the 1950s is a prime example. At the same

time, Kinsella proceeds without addressing the body of criticisms that have led others to reject subcultural analysis. Obviously, critics of the subculture approach can dismiss studies of this sort on the grounds that they replicate the flaws of the earlier analyses. The chorus of skepticism is not addressed unless we show that a fresh analysis of the core concept generates new insights.

To summarize this section, three reasons have emerged why many scholars have abandoned the notion of popular music subcultures. First, there has been little evidence that a specific style or genre of music makes a critical difference to any subculture's self-understanding and identity. Second, the primary focus has been on deviant modes of youth culture, and this emphasis has directed attention toward short-term phenomenon. Third, the social sciences and humanities lack agreement about the basic concept (Williams 2011, p. 5). The core concept of subculture is too unstable.

Because the first and second issues can be seen as methodological problems arising from the third, the utility of subcultural analysis will remain low unless we revise the core concept. The next section offers a proposal of how we should stabilize it. In this way, my endorsement of criticisms made by Lewis, Willis, and Hesmondhalgh does not lead to Hesmondhalgh's conclusion that popular music subcultures are a chimera, nor to his conclusion that the concept belongs to the ash heap of history.

4. Multigenerational subcultures

Given that contemporary cultures are neither monolithic nor uniform, which groups are subcultures? Casting a critical eye on studies of youth culture that have dominated discussions of popular music subcultures, J. Patrick Williams suggests that we should limit the concept to groups that demonstrate "perpetuated marginalization" (Williams 2011, p. 5). I endorse this approach because it aligns the concepts of culture and subculture, with subculture clearly positioned as a special mode of culture. To count as a *cultural* formation, a group must be both adaptive and persistent (Handler 2005, p. 164). As such, a subculture is an adaptive and persistent cultural formation that coexists with a dominant culture. In other words, subcultures are distinctive subgroups of a culture that perpetuate and sustain themselves within the "parent" culture. In brief, we should adopt a neo-Boasian concept grounded in traditions of American anthropology (Elliott 2002).

This approach has delivered interesting results when applied to non-music subcultures. Examining illegal cannabis use in Norway, Sveinung

Sandberg (2013) shows that an ongoing subculture can be distinguished from more casual participation in shared activities by looking for transmission of cultural continuities centered on "symbolic consumption" (a combination of symbolism, practices, and oral tradition). From this perspective, groups stabilize as distinct subculture when they perpetuate a shared understanding of how their shared practices reflect symbolic differences from a larger culture. A subculture's marginalization is self-recognized through historical memory and attendant symbolic differentiation. Songs are a powerful tool for the perpetuation of subcultures: "Through song, a collective, such as a movement, can objectify itself and its history, making itself visible to others, as well as creating and establishing a sense of continuity" (Eyerman 2002, p. 447). In the absence of symbolic continuity, a group should not be counted as a subculture.

This proposal addresses the complaint, voiced by Bennet and Hesmondhalgh, that studies of popular music subcultures have applied a disjointed, fuzzy understanding of subcultures. At the same time, it supports their finding that studies of popular music have not, generally, been studies of subcultures.

As a corrective to these problems, I am emphasizing two aspects of subcultures. The first is a requirement of persistence through social learning. The second is that subcultures are not necessarily oppositional to the dominant culture (e.g., Bisin, Patacchini, Verdier, Zenou 2011).

Developing the first point, we should treat subcultures as precisely that: they are cultural formations and not merely short-lived social formations. Culture is learned, "transmitted from one generation to another generation through social learning" (Bates and Plog 1990, p. 7). Talbot Brewer puts it neatly: "we cultivate successive generations of human beings and try to make their lives fruitful by passing along the received practices that we call culture" (Brewer 2023). A culture may be more or less static or dynamic, but a social formation is not a culture (or subculture) unless core values and practices are successfully passed along to younger people. Subcultures persist through intergenerational transmission.

The importance of this requirement has only recently been recognized in studies of popular music (Fogarty 2012; Raine 2020). It gives us another reason to be cautious about the lessons that we should extract from the classic studies of punk (Hebdige 1979) and biker boys and hippies (Willis 2014). Like Hebdige in relation to British punk, Willis examined recent social formations that were aligned with a style of popular music. Hippies and the motor bike boys were deemed to be subcultures almost immediately after they emerged as offshoots of their home cultures. Ironically, their short-lived social cohesion dissolved by the time Willis published his research in the later 1970s. When a group has only recently emerged as self-consciously distinctive and marginal, it might or

might not engage in self-perpetuation through symbolic continuity. Although self-perpetuation did not materialize in the groups Willis studied, he was on the right track in emphasizing "shared material experience" as a touchstone for "reciprocal, expressive and developmental" relationships with others who are similarly situated in society (Willis 2014, p. 4). Returning to the earlier example of the speaker clubs in New Zealand, they are also too new to count as subcultures.

Aligning subcultures with multigenerational transmission of tradition supports Hesmondhalgh's complaint that the best-known studies of popular music subcultures wrongly assume that the proper focus is youth culture (e.g., Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004). The vast majority of studies have assumed that popular music culture is, for the most part, youth culture, involving teens and, in dwindling numbers, people in their early twenties (see also Snyder 2009, p. 164). Hesmondhalgh points out that this is simply false in light of data available on spending patterns in relation to popular music. (When U2 takes up a music residency in Las Vegas in 2023, the audience is not filled with young people.) Despite these spending patterns, there has been limited empirical research about popular music in the lives of older people. We can take Hesmondhalgh's criticism another step. Because researchers were not interested in the question of how these groups persist, they frequently studied groups that did not become subcultures.

In contrast to the biker boys and hippies studied by Willis, punk sustained itself for decades, becoming a distinctive transnational subculture that has broadened beyond its early formation around popular music (Moran 2010). Hip-hop and death metal developed self-perpetuating cultures, but ones that have continued to center on music as central to the expression of its values (Oswald 2019; Purcell 2003).

Taking up the second main point of my proposal, we should not assume, with Willis and Hebdige, that popular music subcultures are "oppressed, subordinate or minority groups" (Willis 2014, p. 1). This assumption has been so common in studies of popular music subcultures that Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson offer it as their primary reason to replace subcultural analysis with the less restrictive concept of music scenes (Bennet and Peterson 2004, p. 3). Taking advantage of hindsight, we can agree with them that that this assumption was a mistake while also noting that it is not an intrinsic feature of subcultures. Looking beyond youth culture for guidance on what to count as a subculture, we can see that ethnic subcultures can remain distinctive for generations without opposing the general trends of the dominant culture. Furthermore, popular music is often one of the ways that a group preserves a distinctive ethnic identity. Charles Keil has documented the tradition of polka music around the American Great Lakes. It has sustained two related

yet distinct subcultures: Polish-Americans in Chicago and Buffalo, and Slovenian-Americans in Milwaukee (Keil, Keil, and Blau 1992).

The presence of oppression and opposition was not assumed by the generation that launched subcultural studies. Influenced by the emerging field of cultural anthropology, T.S. Eliot remarked, "We may find ourselves led to the conclusion, that every sub-culture is dependent upon that from which it is an offshoot" (Eliot 1948, p. 75). An offshoot can be group that is distinctive within the larger culture without being either oppressed or subversive. In an analysis that rubs against typical views of heavy metal, Leigh Krenske and Jim McKay (2000) argue that heavy metal subculture is not rebellious or subversive in relation to the dominant culture (see also Turley and Jocson-Singh 2023). Specifically, it is strongly aligned with dominant culture's oppressive sexism and misogyny. In other cases, marginalized or "deviant" groups have stabilized into long-term subcultures by finding ways to channel their values into activities and careers that coexist with the dominant culture (Snyder 2009). U.K. punk originated among oppressed youth, but some groups used it to reaffirm their ties to traditional culture. For example, the death of Shane MacGowan unleashed reflections on how the punk-folk music of The Pogues became a cornerstone of intergenerational transmission (through adaptation) of a subculture of traditional Irish music, which in turn kept traditional music relevant for people throughout Ireland and the broader Irish diaspora (e.g., O'Loughlin 2023). This case also reminds us that although studies of popular music subcultures generally focus on the audience, groups of musicians also form distinct subcultures within the larger culture.

Subcultures are often "invisible, while ironically in plain sight" (Spraklen 2015, p. 354). There are many legitimate reasons why oppressed and subordinate groups have invited closer study than have Freemasons, the American Watercolor Society, and the Society for Creative Anachronism. However, these three groups are ongoing subcultures with a strong middle-class constituency. Distinct subcultures are also found within more privileged groups. Just as some religious groups form subcultures within the working class and middle class, other religious groups form subcultures within the privileged class (Mckinnon 2017). We speak of the culture of medicine, and the culture of academia, both of which tend to function as subcultures within contemporary societies. Similarly, the culture of education contains many distinct subcultures. The elite private "prep" schools in the American northeast serve as feeder schools to the Ivy League universities and constitute a distinctive educational subculture (Karabel 2014). At the same time, this subculture intersects with other recognized subcultures that are not specific to the privileged class. An elite private school will have distinct subcultures of jocks and goths, with little overlap between the two groups.

In light of this analysis, let us revisit an important point of agreement among Hesmondhalgh, Lewis, and Willis. Studies of popular music subcultures have neglected the symbolic dimension of music as a binding agent for a group. As explained above, this criticism aligns with the worry that the concept of a subculture is frequently reduced to the weaker notion of a structured group. Gary Alan Fine and Sherryl Kleinman correct this error by stressing that a combination of "values, norms, behaviors, and artifacts constitute a subculture only insofar as individuals see themselves as part of a collectivity whose members attribute particular meanings to these 'objects'" (Fine and Kleinman 1979, p. 13). Amend "artifacts" to the more specific case of music of some distinctive sort, and we arrive at the requirement that popular music subcultures are present only if the participating individuals are aware that they are unified by their collective investment in shared meanings for this music. In particular, this shared meaning includes the group's sense that the relevant artifacts (for our purposes, the music) reflects shared values that are not simply those of the larger society (Fine and Kleinman 1979, p. 7).

Regrettably, this approach produces the result that some of the clearest examples of a popular music subcultures are ones aligned with reactionary racism and xenophobia (Dyck 2017). When we focus on music as symbolic material that serves a focal point for sharing (that is, perpetuating) a distinctive set of values, stories, and beliefs, we find that some of the most coherent and stable popular music subcultures involve nationalistic White supremacists. Because they are nationalistic, they form distinct subcultures organized by languages and countries, yet they adopt a common approach of utilizing hard-edged music. In Sweden, for example, a White power subculture emerged in the late twentieth century in which older men recruit the next generation through music that "seeks to invent tradition through linking itself with an imagined glorious past and, through that, with an older generation that might act as mentors" (Eyerman 2002, p. 452). Exploiting the ease of digital music distribution, recorded music serves as an entry point into a radical political subculture. As Ron Eyerman explains, popular music is potent because recordings "make possible participation without apparent commitment, especially when they are easily available on the Internet, either downloaded directly or purchased through mail order. They can thus be listened to anonymously. This first step opens the door for more contact" (Eyerman 2002, p. 450). Eyerman is writing about white nationalism in just one country, but the central point directs us to see that parallel subcultures exploit popular music in the same way in many other countries. In England, the music is extreme metal and folk-metal (Spracklen, Lucas, Deeks 2014). The United States favors radical-right punk music scenes (Katz 2020).

These examples illustrate that subcultures do not align neatly with musical styles and genres. The symbolic uses of the music are not fixed by the boundaries of musical style and genre (de Boise 2020). This lack of alignment suggests that genres and styles are better understood from the perspective of post-subculture analyses that discuss tribes and scenes. As such, subcultural analysis does not conflict with studies that concentrate on scenes and tribes. Subcultural analysis supplements those approaches.

At the same time, saying that popular music plays a semiotically important role for a subculture does not imply that the music will be the exclusive focal point for transmission of values.

5. Popular music subcultures individualized by musicians

Because my purpose is to reply to skepticism about popular music subcultures, it is fitting that I should provide more details about what we might expect to find (provided we look in the right place for them). Because my approach is philosophical, employing conceptual analysis, what I propose must be understood as speculative hypotheses.

As a first stage of speculation, I have three basic suggestions. First, sonicism cannot guide us. Second, many subcultures will form within the fanbase of specific popular musicians and groups. Third, the criterion of self-perpetuation suggests that subcultures are most often present when they involve popular musicians with multi-decade careers. After I sketch my reason for these three hypotheses, I will conclude by pointing to some examples that invite further study.

Taking up the fist suggestion, sonicism is the position that musical works are individuated by "how they sound" and nothing else (Dodd 2010, p. 33). So, in saying that sonicism is not going to guide us to the groups of listeners who might constitute popular music subcultures, I mean that the attractions of popular music are not exclusively – perhaps not even mainly – sonic. Because popular music subcultures are unified by the music's symbolic function, sound alone cannot be the relevant focal point that sustains a group's self-identity. The symbolic element is going to be the key ingredient, and the symbolic dimension is always highly contextual (Gracyk 2022). This rejection of sonicism is supported by evidence, presented in the last section, that the sonic groupings we identify as metal and punk can support more than one subculture. It also dovetails with Hesmondhalgh's reasons to reject an alignment of subcultures with musical styles (Hesmondhalgh 2005, pp. 33-34).

If not generally aligned with boundaries associated with musical genres and styles, what serves as the organizing principle of a popular music subculture? Following Lewis, we should expect to find it in "a realm

of symbolic communication" (Lewis 1982, p. 183). Approaching the issue from a theoretical perspective, the symbolic activity that underlies the impact of popular music is, to a large degree, stabilized by listeners' understanding that they are responding to the utterances of particular, socially-located individuals (Gracyk 2022). Popular music is not a sonic tabula rasa onto which the audience projects interpretations. Despite five decades of theorizing about "the death of the author," it remains the case that many popular music fans become invested in the music of specific artists, and these fans seek to understand how the music and performances of their favorite artist encode a set of beliefs and values that are, in turn, aligned with those of the fans. Having rejected the expectation that subcultures will be oppressed and oppositional groups, the relevant beliefs and values can be ones that are already common in the broader culture (e.g., the masculinity tropes of the broader culture resurface in metal subcultures).

The third suggestion is relatively straightforward. A culture–and therefore also any subculture–is a self-perpetuating group that unites, in part, around its shared history. Given this requirement, a fan base will not count as a subculture until aging members are supplemented by notably younger ones. No group counts as a popular music subculture if the group is concentrated in a narrow range of birth years, or if the music is less than a decade old. In the same way that a sustained graffiti subculture emerged and persisted for several generations in New York City (Snyder 2009), we can begin to look for popular music subcultures after a new style or musician has persisted beyond an initial burst of fame and popularity.

Pulling these suggestions together, we find popular music subcultures organized around the music of The Beatles, the Grateful Dead, and Taylor Swift. There are many other candidates (e.g., Elvis Presley, Dolly Parton, Bruce Springsteen, Michael Jackson), but these three are among the clearest cases. This brief exploration is consistent with the idea that some artists will be the focal point of overlapping subcultures. There are, for example, distinctively queer subcultures among fans of both Taylor Swift and Beyoncé.

The era of The Beatles may be waning, but the band still serves as a paradigm case of fandom that contains, at its core, a strong subculture that has attracted multiple generations of fans (e.g., Leonard 2014; Mills 2019; Feldman-Barrett 2020). In part, this might be due to the fact that the group did not retain lasting associations with the 1960s counterculture. Additionally, it persists because the subculture has successfully transitioned into the digital era. Second, third, fourth, and fifth generation fans populate the Internet with "digital collaborative spaces shared with other fans" (Gerghty 2014, p. 9). Most recently, fans born in the

twentieth century build community on the social media platform TikTok, where one posted of the song "Now and Then," "Can't believe it's 2023 and I get the joy of hearing a new Beatles song for the first time ever" (Kircher 2023).

The community of Taylor Swift fans did not have to transition to the digital realm. Her self-titled debut album appeared in 2006, and we are approaching the end of her second decade as a professional musician. Her career has attracted a large, well-formed, connected, multi-generational legion of "Swifties." They are, famously, attuned to the complex messaging that Swift directs at them in the music, its marketing, and in social media, and upon which they, in turn, comment (Kingsbury 2023). As with many Beatles' fans, love for the music is often intergenerational within a household (Carras and De Loera 2023). In contrast to members of white power subcultures who use music as an initial social glue, Swift is not overtly political nor overtly feminist. Yet since at least 2019 she has been both of those things, and her fans respond to the message in her figurative lyrics and public battles about control and self-authorship without subjecting it to the labels used in academic discourse (Zolkifli, Ghani, Sa'ad, Azdmi 2023).

The Grateful Dead stand out as the most countercultural of my three examples. With a fan base rooted in the American middle class, "Deadheads" were one of the first popular music subcultures to be singled out for academic study (Smith 2021). The group disbanded in 1995, yet they continue to attract new fans, who immerse themselves in the original group while also flocking to the communal experience of shows featuring the former group members (e.g., Porter 2023). However, the primary reason to discuss them is that the community of Deadheads can serve as a cautionary tale about the search for popular music subcultures. Alex Kolker argues that empirical data shows that Deadheads do not form a subculture. Rightly, he thinks that a subculture will display a degree of agreement about "values and moral codes" informing their way of life (Kolker 2012, p. 190). However, Deadheads routinely decline to identify any such values. Instead, they most often articulate a "live and let live" philosophy that offers no moral advice beyond compassion and tolerance. The only behavioral rule is "that you cannot interfere with anyone else's code of behavior" (Kolker 2012, p. 191). Therefore, Kolker concludes, there is too little agreement to count as shared culture, and it is a mode of organization that "transcends culture as it is normally defined" (Kolker 2012, p. 190). However, Kolker's conclusion does not follow. What he describes is the central principle of classical liberalism that is explained and defended in John Stuart Mill's (1859) "progressive" application of utilitarian thought, *On Liberty*. The one scholar who seems to have noted subcultural organization around classical liberalism is Muggleton, who

contends that many of the most flamboyant and studied popular music subcultures represent a "liberal declaration of freedom of expression" flaunting "dominant social conventions" (Muggleton 2000, p. 161). The ethos of the Dead and the Deadhead community is fully aligned with Mill's principle of individual liberty. Consequently, Kolker is looking for something highly specific, which has the effect of oversimplifying what it is to share a moral code, leading him to deny subcultural status to Deadheads. The lesson here is that a subculture can coalesce around a higher-order statement of values that gives shared meaning to a popular music community that looks (at first) overly heterogeneous, or that is inarticulate about its shared values.

In conclusion, I have argued that the concept of subcultures remains useful for understanding some activities surrounding popular music. However, this prospect requires disentangling the concept from problematic assumptions that arose when popular music subcultures were reduced to youth subcultures. Some popular music subcultures will be found within oppressed groups, but many will be fan formations that are not, for the most part, oppositional to the larger culture.

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Popular Musical Subcultures: A Contrarian Analysis

Although under attack for reasons articulated by David Hesmondhalgh, the concept of subcultures remains useful for understanding some activities surrounding popular music. However, the concept of subculture must be liberated from problematic assumptions that arose when popular music subcultures were reduced to youth subcultures. Subcultures are cultural formations. As such, they involve persistent symbolic distinction. Understood in this way, some popular music subcultures will be found to align with particular ideologies, but many will be fan formations that are not, for the most part, oppositional to the larger culture.

KEYWORDS: Popular music, Subculture, Culture, Hesmondhalgh, Hebdige

Popular Musical Subcultures: A Contrarian Analysis

Sebbene il concetto di sottoculture sia sotto attacco per le ragioni articolate da David Hesmondhalgh, esso rimane utile per comprendere alcune attività che circondano la popular music. Tale concetto, però, deve essere liberato da alcune assunzioni problematiche emerse quando le sottoculture musicali popular venivano perlopiù ridotte a fenomeni giovanili. Le sottoculture sono formazioni culturali. In quanto tali, esse comportano una distinzione simbolica persistente. Così comprese, alcune sottoculture musicali popular si troveranno ad allinearsi con ideologie non-mainstream, mentre molte altre saranno formazioni di fan, per la maggior parte non opposizionali rispetto alla cultura più ampia.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Popular Music; Sottoculture; Cultura; Hesmondhalgh; Hebdige.