

**Pop Culture in Music & Design**

VIST 409 Final Paper

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Margaret Myers

## **Introduction:**

For my senior capstone studio, I conducted a multipart research and design project to explore the relationships between politics and pop culture, music, and graphic design. This project evaluates current events, popular music genres, and the most notable music posters of each decade from the 1960s to the 2010s. This research is relevant because, since the beginning of time, humans have utilized art and creativity as an outlet for expression. Visual art is a universal language that is easily translated across languages and cultures. I am relating my research to music poster design because often, traditional corporate graphic design can be strict and limiting to the designer's room for creativity. Because music is a very expressive art itself, the visual designs that are used to advertise and promote music are expressive in the same ways. I am also interested in pursuing a career in design for the music industry post-graduation. This essay will explore the relations of pop culture and current events to music and graphic design.

My final deliverables include an in-depth analysis of popular music, current events, pop culture, and design styles of each decade from 1960s-2010s as well as original music festival poster designs for each decade. Along with each poster, there is a t-shirt and festival wristband design. There is one original 18"x24" poster that represents the design styles of each decade (6 posters total). As the semester went on, I decided that I wanted to include an aspect to this project that would showcase my skills in UI/UX design as well, so in addition to these graphic design elements, I have developed a web prototype as an additional way to display all my designs and research using Figma.

## **Essay Overview:**

This essay will explore the relations of art in the music industry to pop culture and current events. For each decade from the 60s to 10s a brief evaluation of relevant events will be demonstrated, followed by an identification of popular music and design styles of the time. Following this, I will identify key design elements that I found for each period and explain my thought process going into creating my designs.

## **Problem Statements:**

The first area of research that will be addressed is the general public's response and overall mood towards pop culture and current events and how this is evident in popular music of each decade. This is important because since the beginning of time, humans have utilized art and creativity as an outlet for creative expression. Musicians are artists, and artists often time use their platforms to voice their positions on current events and politics. There are many correlations of music and politics throughout history. In a generational study done on 8-18 year old's media consumption in 2005, the writers went as far as to claim that "music is a vital component of youth popular culture, preferred over even movies and television"[1]. This claim is further supported as a group of social studies educators push for other teachers to include music into their curriculum to increase their youth's media literacy and to better engage their students, they emphasize the "undeniable success" associated with using music as a medium to introduce critical conversations about pop culture [2]. Their argument for the importance of intertwining music and education only solidifies the inevitable connects between music and pop culture that I plan to further explore.

The second portion of research will explore popular music styles and how those have been and are still being portrayed in design. Music genres directly impact the graphic design styles that are used to advertise the music [3]. As a result of both music and graphic design both

being rapidly developing fields as new technologies emerged, “the forms and atmosphere of music, rhythm and color of the sounds were completely tangible and dramatic in the graphic design related to a specific music genre” [3]. Once I can connect music to pop culture, I will then connect music to its correlating graphic designs, thus yielding relations between all three topics.

This project is specifically relevant to my interests and studies because I am passionate about both music culture and design, the impacts of both art forms on pop culture, and pop culture on them. I have had the opportunity to develop my graphic design skills through the Visualization program at Texas A&M University and I would be very interested in one day pursuing a graphic design career in the music industry.

### **Approach:**

My approach to research and collection of data will be through scholarly sources and articles. I will utilize scholarly sources when in need of factual and scientific based evidence, but because my work is also dependent on how people of different time periods feel towards current events, it is also useful to examine some opinion-based sources for specific eras like magazine articles, newspapers, interviews, etc. Because information is so abundant and easily accessible with the internet, it can sometimes be hard to differentiate between factual and opinion based sources [4]. It is of utmost importance to think critically about the information that is consumed and applied to this project to not blur distinctions between biased and unbiased sources.

### **Research and Evaluation Plan:**

My research and analysis portion to take me around 2 weeks per decade (12 weeks total). In the second week of my research process, I began developing that decade's poster design. I dedicated a week to the research and sketching stage for each era before beginning my actual designs because I felt it was necessary to have a good understanding of the period before trying to recreate the popular styles in my own way. I found it be best to work on and research each decade chronologically, so I have the previous decade's knowledge fresh on my mind when moving to the next one.

The cost of this project was not very expensive. The only expenses I faced were my Adobe Creative Cloud subscriptions. I already had an Adobe subscription, so this is not really an additional expense. I printed my final poster for free at the Visualization Print Lab on campus. This project had no outstanding costs.

### **1960's:**

The 1960's was a time of new beginnings and a lot of change. In this decade, John F. Kennedy was both elected as the youngest president in office to date and assassinated a few years after, in 1963. This event set the new precedent for presidential security. In the same year of the JFK assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech as part of his ongoing fight to end segregation. Segregation was legally terminated in 1964 with the passing of the Civil Rights Act. Martin Luther King Jr. was also assassinated five years later, in 1968. Along with the fight against segregation, a major event of this decade includes the “Space Race”. Soviet Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was the first human to go into space. In 1968, Neil Armstrong and Bizz Aldrin land on the moon in 1969.

With the fight for equality and growing push to help those in need, hippies and flower children began emerging in this era. These groups strongly opposed the Vietnam war and protested for world peace. The Peace Corp was created in 1961.

The Beatles and The Rolling Stones were two of the most popular bands of the decade. The Beatles released their first song, “Love Me Do” in 1962 and their popularity skyrocketed shortly after. Another major event of music history was the first Woodstock music festival which took place in 1969. This festival featured Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, and The Who.

Music became more diverse in genre styles and was used by younger generations to define the lifestyles of rockers, hippies, and protestors. During this era, the ending of segregation showed that people were becoming more accepting of other people and lifestyles. This is evident in the increased diversity in popular music genres. The sixties was one of the first eras where music was being used to bring people of all backgrounds and cultures together.

With the slow inclusion of other races and backgrounds, their cultures began influencing design styles. Ethnically diverse art pieces and styles began rising in popularity. The age of hippies and flower children encouraged a brighter, more colorful art wave. This wave includes bright colors, warped text, psychedelic patterns, and expressive illustrations.

My designs for the sixties were heavily influenced by the psychedelic era with warped type using the envelope distort tool in illustrator. The type is warped along the outline of the shape of a popular guitar style for rock bands in the sixties. Halftones were also popular during this time so I chose to use this style for the shape of the guitar with Photoshop filters.



## **1970's:**

The fight for gender, race, sexual equality continued in the 1970s. Americans continued to protest the Vietnam war. In 1970, the Kent State Shooting took place. Americans celebrated the first ever Earth Day in 1970, the same year that Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act. Congress approved the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972, which ensured equal rights regardless of sex. President Nixon resigned after the Watergate scandal.

Americans began to lose faith in the intentions of the federal government. After Watergate, many Americans withdrew from politics. The political movement of the "New Right" went into full effect in the 70s. Conservatives felt like the government was trying to baby poor people at the expense of tax dollars from middle class citizens, so The New Right resisted government interference. Disappointed by the government, many women and feminist organizations began to form outside of politics.

Because of the new distrust in the government, many young people in the 70s chose to take advantage of their freedoms with drugs, sex, and to do as they pleased. People used disco music and dance clubs as a form of escapism. Hippies rose in popularity throughout this decade. An increased interest in soft pop and dance music became evident. Disco music began to surface in this era. Popular artists from the 70s include Elton John, The Beatles, The Jackson 5, Abba, etc.

As Americans wanted to express their freedoms, designs evolved into a hippie and psychedelic style. The psychedelic era replicated hallucinogenic visions powered by psychedelic drugs. This included bright colors, intricate patterns, and curvy lines. Overall, design became more expressive.

Like styles in the 60s, expressive type was still very popular. I chose to use a decorative typeface for the title of the music festival in my designs and edit the shapes to merge with the posterized image of Stevie Wonder. The color scheme of the poster was very popular during this period. Warm colors such as yellows, oranges, and browns were associated with the hippie movements. I chose to include a subtle accent blue to complement the orange colors and add visual interest.



### 1980's:

In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected the president of the US. In the same year, the US boycotted the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. MTV launched in 1981, causing music videos to rise in popularity and create a totally new space for musicians and artists to grow. The first VMAs was held in 1984. In 1983, Sally Ride became the first woman in space. The nuclear explosion, Chernobyl, happened in 1986 in the USSR. The Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988. In 1989, the Cold War ended, and the Berlin Wall was torn down. This signified the collapse of communism.

The 80s was the beginning of the computer age. Motorola released the first mobile phone in 1983. The new age of technology really set the precedent for decades to come as humans had an entirely new world to pioneer.

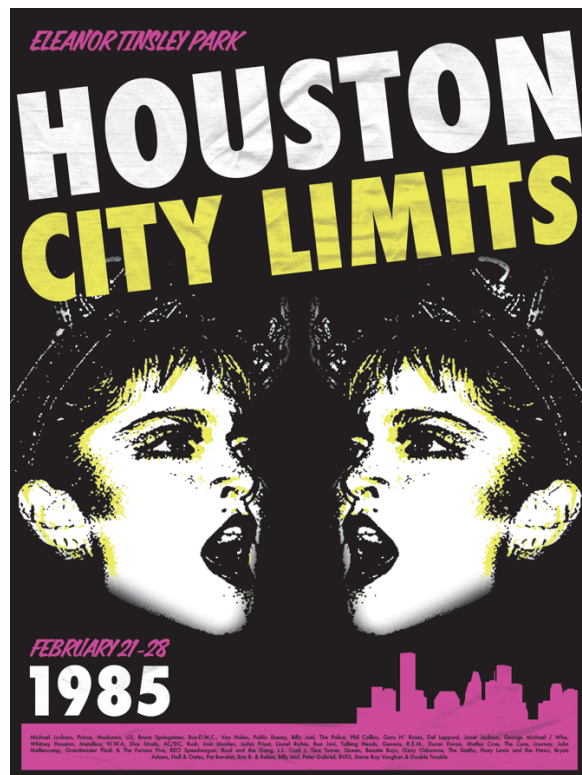
People in the 80s were coming out of their hippie phase and going into a more rock and roll/ metal era. With bands like the Motley Crue, the idolization of rebellion increased. Sex, drugs, and freedom were still very much important to young people of this generation.

Popular genres ranged from pop to metal to hip hop. Michael Jackson's iconic album, *Thriller*, was released during the 80's. New genres emerged in this decade, including- hip hop and new wave metal. Popular musicians of this era include- Madonna, Prince, Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, David Bowie, Run DMC, Duran Duran, The Police, Billy Idol, Van Halen, Motley Crue, Guns n' Roses, Metallica, and Aerosmith.

With the rise in television and MTV, music of this era was highly motivated by image and video. The first music video to be played on this channel was "Video Killed the Radio Star" by the Buggles. The inclusion of video to the music industry completely changed the way artists were perceived. The rock and roll lifestyle greatly increased in popularity.

During this era, visuals were becoming more and more relevant to musician's work. This included more imagery in posters. Neo-expressionism rose in popularity of art styles across the globe during this period. With rock and roll, a more grunge style was introduced to design.

For my poster, I chose to use blacks, pinks, yellows, and blues taking inspiration from Miami Vice. This poster is also strongly influenced by popular posters from the band, The Police. A subtle element that I think really makes this poster match the decade is the diagonal type, which was very common during this time.



## 1990's:

In 1991, the internet becomes available for unrestricted use. Google was founded as a search engine in 1998. The iMac Computer was also revealed in 1998. Freddie Mercury died from AIDS in 1991. Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992 and elected for a second term in 1996. In 1999 he is faced with the impeachment process. The genocide and civil war and Rwanda took place in 1994, where over 500,000 people were killed. In 1997, Madeline Albright was appointed first female Secretary of State in the US. The US had a budget surplus in 1998.

Many Americans still did not trust the US government during this time. Americans felt they government was unresponsive to their wants and needs. They were very dissatisfied with Bill Clinton as their president and moved forward with the impeachment process.

Pop, rap, and alternative music was very popular during this decade. Techno and house music began to emerge. This decade had a lot of emerging artists that began in the 90s and will remain in the spotlight throughout the early 2000s.

Popular music during this time varied heavily, similarly to the various events that were happening. Grunge rock was seen as a rebellious genre. Hip hop and rap emerging in the 90s



brought attention to lower class communities. Club and rave culture were still being used as a form of escapism because people wanted a place to forget about current events and politics.

The 90s was a decade of bold type, patterns, and neon colors. This design era was a combination of psychedelic and cyberpunk. The design styles were often made to imitate club and rave culture.

For my designs of the 90s, I was very inspired by David Carson's designs for Ray Gun Magazine. I really enjoyed pushing the limits of expression and experimentalism. Leaning into the idea that not all designs are meant to be legible was out of my comfort zone, but I really enjoyed getting to try it. This is one of my favorite designs that I have produced all semester.



## 2000's:

This decade marks a new millennium. The 9/11 tragedy took place in 2001, killing nearly 3,000 people. On October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2001 the US-UK Invasion of Afghanistan took place. Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans on August 29, 2005. In December 2007, the US experienced its worst recession since the Great Depression. In 2008, Barack Obama was elected and served as the US first black president.

People were excited and generally optimistic about a fresh start in the 2000s. After 9/11 a lot of changes were made in the general mood of the country. TSA and security checks became significantly more rigorous. People were generally fearful of large grounds and threats of terrorism. More people had technology and cell phones.

Popular genres of this time remained to be pop, alternative rock, and hip hop/ rap. Popstars were wildly popular. Emo music rose in popularity. American Idol played a big role in the music scene.

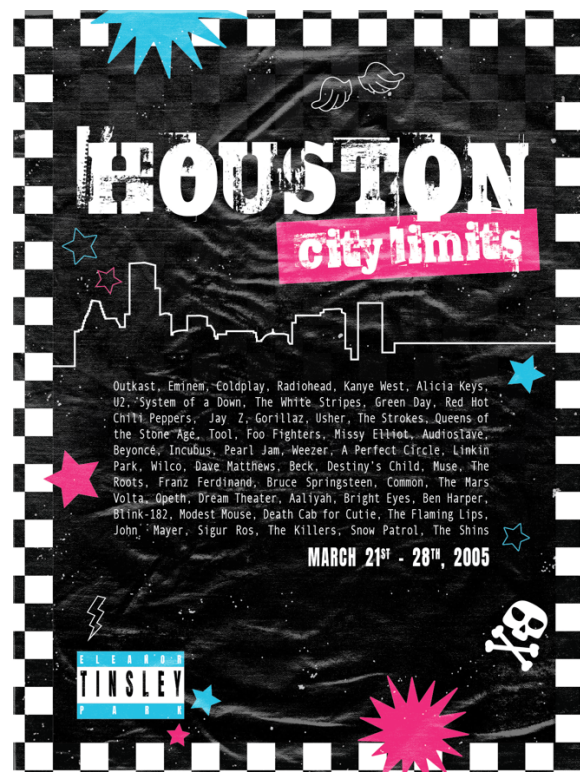
A lot of trends carried over from the 90s. Artists were able to share music in online spaces, like MySpace. Lil Wayne blew up from releasing free music on MySpace. People used



music as an escape from the tragedies of this decade. More people were trying to become famous by using the internet or shows like American Idol.

Art and design of this time was heavily influenced by technology. People were no longer designing just for printed materials. Elements from 80s glam design reappeared in the 2000s for nostalgic purposes. The 2000s was looking to move away from the 90's grunge era. A lot of pink was used during this time.

Because there was so much going on in the 2000s and so much content to choose from, I found this to be one of the most difficult posters to produce. I ended up needing to pick one specific style of this era and go with it. A classmate of mine suggested that I do a 2000s emo inspired theme, which really helped me narrow down my ideas. I ended up with a very Avril Lavigne-esque design that I really enjoy. I took inspiration from a lot punk and emo bands and ran with the checkerboard and doodle theme. Still including pink was a crucial part of this design.



## 2010's:

In 2010, an earthquake with a magnitude of 7 struck Haiti killing an estimated 225,000 people. This disaster struck a worldwide humanitarian response. Mass shootings became a common occurrence in this decade. The Sandy Hook School Shooting occurred on December 14, 2012 killing 20 first graders and 6 employees. The Occupy Wall Street march happened in New York in September 2011 to protest income inequality and the influence money has in politics. The Boston Marathon Bombing occurred on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013. In 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement began in response to the death of Trayvon Martin by a police officer in 2012. In 2016, Donald Trump was elected president of the US. The slogan "Make America Great Again" was his leading campaign material. This was one of the most dividing elections in

history. In 2019, Donald Trump was faced with his first impeachment. In 2017, Hurricane Harvey hit Texas.

Trump faced a lot of backlash with US citizens. People came together to protest police brutality. Majority of US Citizens seemed generally dissatisfied with the government and law enforcement. A huge divide between liberal and conservatives seemed to become even greater in this era.

Hip hop and rap were two of the most popular music genres of this era, passing rock and pop on genre growth charts. New smaller genres were able to emerge with social platforms like YouTube, Tik Tok, and Soundcloud. Pop and Electronic music remained popular.

As fights for racial equality continued, diversity in music skyrocketed. Because social media platforms were becoming more and more popular, people were able to release music and gain popularity without a record deal. This made it easier to produce music independently. Developing technologies changed the way music was made and sounded.

With the creation of smartphones, people needed to start designing responsively. Gradients were a common theme going in and out of popularity throughout this decade. Technologies allowed for creative photo manipulations and three-dimensional effects. There is not a big different between “graphic art” and “graphic design”. Some designers of this era were also trying to reject emerging technologies in their work and reverted to a more vintage, hand drawn design approach.

My designs for this decade are completely hand drawn using Procreate. I chose to make something that resembles the graphic design styles that were rejecting technologies because it was such a stark contrast from the rest of my designs for this project.



## Conclusion:

From this project, I verified assumptions that I had prior to conducting my research. These assumptions include ideas like- people use music as an escape from reality, each decade

was looking to evolve past the previous decade sometimes bringing in elements from the past to induce nostalgia, and the US trust in government officials seems to decrease throughout the years. I found that the youth of each decade generally decipher popular music of the time and music could be seen as the voice of the youth. The general response of youth to current events is evident in the popular music genres.

I also found that music and design are closely related and vital to the human experience. Both music and art are forms of expression that humans have practiced since the beginning of recorded history. Humanity would be bleak without these forms of creative expression. Music and design will still be heavily related to pop culture and current events for years to come.

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