

Daddy Sang Bass. Now, Little Brother Just Listens to iTunes

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In 1968, Johnny Cash's performance of "Daddy Sang Bass" was first played on the radio. The song's nostalgia and vague spirituality were apparently enough to carry it to the top of the billboard charts that year.¹ It was written by Carl Perkins, and was covered throughout the 1970s by many of the luminaries of country music. It describes, in the usual incompleteness of popular culture, a family singing together in the home to "help the troubled soul" as a preliminary for family worship in heaven. Adult listeners in 1968 would have been children in the days before mass commercial culture, especially those who grew up in rural settings. While it is true that radio news was born as early as 1920, broadly received musical programming would not become popular for another decade. The personal radio, as opposed to the family radio, would not be firmly established until 1955 when transistors replaced vacuum tubes. Anyone today old enough to remember the initial release of "Daddy Sang Bass" will be in his fifties. Anyone who remembers the release of the transistor radio by the fledgling company Sony, will be in his sixties.

This belabored chronology points to two cultural shifts. The first shift occurred in the early 20th century. Many of the 1968 recipients of Cash and Perkins's message about family singing would have known such singing firsthand from their childhood homes but would be living in homes where it was then much less common. It seems that the radio displaced family music-making in much the same way that the washing machine replaced basins and boards.

The second chronological shift came more recently. Most of us living today not only cannot remember the age of ubiquitous family singing, but cannot even feel nostalgia for it. I can choose to feel nostalgia for 1980s Rock. I *cannot* feel nostalgia for the Stone Age.

¹ Joel Witburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Country Hits*, 2nd ed. (New York: Billboard, 2004), 75.

What, then, was the common experience to which Perkins' song could appeal but which very few of us now know? Understanding orally transmitted folk music of the sort that would have been made in the American home of the late 19th and early 20th century is very challenging. Recordings of this music were, of necessity, made during an age when technology had already started to displace folk music altogether. By that point, there was a risk that anything recorded would be debased by the alloys of professional performance practice, ambition on the part of the performer, or at least a sense that one's singing is a curio item worthy to be preserved for posterity. All three spoil the organic, unassuming, and unpretentious nature of the thing being recorded.² Nevertheless, perilously late field recordings made by the Lomax family give us access to some scenes and snatches of a behavior that we know, from literature and private journals, would have been ubiquitous in the 19th century.³ Were it not for the Lomax videography, blessing us with quaint scenes from the back porches of Southern homes, we might have precious little concrete evidence of what we read in first-hand accounts from the previous century. Even a cursory survey of diaries and letters from the 19th century, however, will uncover these accounts.⁴

Belle Edmonson, a Tennessee girl with a dutifully kept diary often mentions singing, even in 1864 with the Civil War raging. In March of 1864 she "spent all evening in the Parlor singing and playing," though she was that evening in much pain from a sore back. The next

² Pete Seeger once gave advice to an aspiring folk singer: "Sing for as many different kinds of audiences as you can, for free." (David King Dunaway and Molly Beer, *Singing Out: An Oral History of America's Folk Music Revivals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 111. Here he was only half right in that commercial success and folk music do not go well together, but neither does broad distribution work well, since of necessity the *folk* who made the music are local and distinctive.

³ A footnote will not contain the hundreds of hours of recording and video archived by these pioneers of musical sociology. A good beginning for the novice might be *The Alan Lomax Collection Sampler* (Rounder Records, 1997) or a quick search on the Smithsonian Institute's own record label, *Folkways* for the Lomax name. Also of merit is the video by Media Generation Studio, *American Patchwork: Dreams and Songs of the Noble Old* (2006).

⁴ While a broad sample would yield similar results, I have selected the instances of private diaries and correspondence for this paper based on ease of access. All the diary entries that follow are from archives that have been digitized and made available on the internet by their respective institutions.

night, she records staying up till 11 pm singing and playing. Later on that year, she spent an evening enjoying the sound of her friend's singing voice, though she discovered that day the death of a near acquaintance who fell defending Atlanta.⁵

In that city on Christmas Eve of the same year, 10-year-old Carrie Berry described somewhat ominously the family Christmas party:

We all went down last night to see the tree and how pretty it looked. The room was full of ladies and children and Cap. gave us music on the pianno [sic] and tried to do all he could to make us enjoy our selves [sic] and we did have a merry time. All came home perfectly satisfied. This has ben [sic] a cold dark day but we all went down to see how the tree looked in the day time but it was not as pretty as at night.⁶

The next day her father was sent to Macon to be tried for staying in the city with the Yankees rather than fleeing with the army.

It is easier to replicate the house music of the middle and upper classes from which these two young ladies came, for there we have evidence of the thriving sheet-music industry that provided amateur pianists and singers with ballads, songs, and dance music. The financial success of Stephen Foster's "Oh! Susanna" may serve as proof of the importance of published music. It saw 21 printings from 1848-1851 with estimated profits suggesting in excess of 100,000 copies printed.⁷ This is more impressive when we remember that the first all-inclusive census of 1850 yielded a mere 23 million. Songwriter William Hays outstripped Foster in the following years. His sentimental song "Molly Darling," though now happily unknown, may have

⁵ Tuesday, 8th of March, Tuesday, 9th August, 1864, *Diary of Belle Edmondson: Jan-Nov 1864, Documenting the American South* (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1997).
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/edmondson/edmondson.html>.

⁶ Sunday, 25th of Dec. 1864, *Diary of Carrie Berry: August 1864- January 1865*, a transcription of the manuscript held by the Atlanta History Center for Duke University, distributed through AmericanCivilWar.com, http://www.americancivilwar.com/women/carrie_berry.html.

⁷ John Spitzer, "'Oh! Susanna: Oral Transmission and Tune Transformation,'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 47:1 (Spring 1994): 90-136 (see pp. 90-91 and Appendix A, pp. 132-136). See also William W. Austin, "*Susanna*," *Jeanie*," and "*The Old Folks at Home*": *The Songs of Stephen C. Foster from his Time to Ours*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 11. See p. 207-8 for one publisher's list of sales for Foster songs, including 130,000 for "Old Folks at Home" ("Way Down Upon the Swanee River," 1851).

printed as many as three million copies.⁸ In 1872 when it was published, that would have accounted for nearly ten percent of the country owning it. This may not seem like the ubiquity of iTunes, but remember that of the 31.5 million people in the country, many were ex-slaves and Native Americans with their own robust family and community singing traditions that did not involve sentimental love-songs about “Jeanie with the light brown hair.”

The Americans who did buy this sheet music were amply supplied with instruments to play it on. As Jacques Barzun put it in 1954, “for the last century and a half the piano has been an institution more characteristic than the bathtub—there were pianos in the log cabins of the frontier, but no tubs.”⁹ In 1891, a landlord in West Harlem built pianos into all eighty-four of his dwellings, suggesting the instruments were analogous to today’s white goods.¹⁰ Indeed, in that year traveling salesmen sold pianos and sewing machines from the same wagons. Some manufacturing companies actually specialized in both.¹¹

Nevertheless, parlor piano music was not the only, nor necessarily the most robust, kind of family music. Hymn singing was in its zenith in the 19th century, thanks to the development of singing schools in the 18th.¹² A distinctly American invention, the singing school involved itinerant music teachers circulating the country, setting up short-term music schools that met at night, and often during the long winters when farmers were less busy. These became social events and soon they ran themselves without the need of teachers. “Singings” of various sorts

⁸ On the popularity of William S. Hays, see Bill C. Malone, “William S. Hays: the Bard of Kentucky,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 93: 3 (Summer 1995): 286-306. The figure of 3 million is claimed in many places, though it is a hard one to substantiate. Perhaps most credible is the entry under Hays’s name in *The Kentucky Encyclopedia*, ed. John Kleber (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1992) 419.

⁹ In the introduction to Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), vii.

¹⁰ Loesser, *Men, Women*, 549.

¹¹ Loesser, *Men, Women*, 561.

¹² See Gilbert Chase, “The Fasola Folk,” *America’s Music from the Pilgrims to the Present* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 170-191.

became common events and the music there learned was taken back home.¹³ An entry from the diary of a young New York girl, from the village of Canandaigua gives us a sense of the attraction of the singing schools:

January 1859: Mr. Woodruff came to see Grandfather to ask him if we could attend his singing school. He is going to have it one evening each week in the chapel of our church. Quite a lot of the boys and girls are going so we were glad when Grandfather gave his consent. Mr. Woodruff wants us all to sing by note and teaches do re me fa sol la si do [sic] from the blackboard and beats time with a stick. He lets us have a recess which is more fun than all the rest of it. He says if we practice well we can have a concert in Bemis Hall to end up with. What a treat that will be.¹⁴

The rise of Sunday School also helped develop a repertoire of singing in the home with many songbook publications testifying to the popularity of this literature.¹⁵ Children who were given a singing experience in the Sunday School likely brought this home with them in the mid-century. By the 1870s the Sunday School itself was no longer for children and neither were the songs it produced.¹⁶

We encounter something of these practices in the correspondence between the members of the Oblinger family. Uriah Oblinger was forced to head west from Indiana to Nebraska in 1872 to make a place for his family. He was, thus, separated from them for long periods, catalogued by colorful and well-preserved correspondence. After the family joined him, correspondence headed back east to the extended family. In these letters, ranging from 1862-

¹³ Consider, as a late vestige of this, Alan Lomax's 1982 recordings of Lonnie and Vivian Rogers singing tunes from the *Sacred Harp* (the most popular book for singing schools) or of Martha Woodward playing the same music on the banjo and singing it. (*Cultural Equity* has released these recordings to the public domain at the following link: http://culturalequity.org/rc/videos/video-guide_ap_4.php).

¹⁴ *Village Life in America, 1852-1872*, ed. Margaret E. Sangster (New York: Henry Holt, 1912), 117.

¹⁵ William Bradbury, the editor responsible for the setting of "Jesus Loves Me," published 59 books of music for the Sunday School. Among them, the popular *Golden Trio* (*Golden Chain* (1861), *Golden Shower* (1862), and *Golden Censor* (1867)) sold 3 million copies. His *Fresh Laurels* (1867) sold 1.2 million in America with less than 40 million people in it. See David Music and Paul Akers Richardson, *I Will Sing the Wondrous Story: A History of Baptist Hymnody in North America*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2008), 317-18.

¹⁶ Music and Richardson, *I Will Sing*, 325-326.

1911, we see numerous mentions of singing in the home. For example, a young Ella Oblinger writes from the Nebraska Prairie to her grandparents, using her mother as an amanuensis:

[I]f I was at your house I would sing lots for you I like to sing Fairy land & Come over the lake & The Brooklet & I know a farry bower & Oh the merry chime I can sing lots in the Pure Gold [i.e. Lowry and Doane, *Pure Gold for the Sunday School* 1872] too Ma helps me and some times Pa helps.¹⁷

This should not suggest, however, that singing was a particularly childish activity, for young Ella's Pa, when living with two other working men alone in the Prairie settlement in Fillmore County finished their day's work by singing a few songs out of a Sunday School song book.¹⁸ Indeed, he commends his family to learn the first song from the particularly popular collection of Sunday School songs, *Pure Gold for the Sunday School*, because, he says, "I love to sing it when lonesome."¹⁹ The song in question was Fanny Crosby's "Like Gentle Dew, the Blessings Fall" set to a tune by Robert Lowry. The chorus has the singers entreating each other with the petition "may our grateful lips proclaim His goodness in the notes we raise." No doubt this type of singing "helped the troubled soul" as Perkins put it in his song.

But even those unfamiliar with all this will know something of the role of music in the home, thanks to literature. From the accomplished but plain Mary Bennet to Pa Ingalls' fiddling his daughters to sleep at night, music apparently played a very large part in normal homes in former times; otherwise the novelists of those times were extremely dishonest about the matter.

It has been convenient to mark the changes in this family pastime through contemporary changes in technology. The decline of the piano began in 1914 and its sales would drop 57%

¹⁷ Letter from Mattie V. Oblinger to Thomas Family, January 26, 1874, made available by the Nebraska Historical Society, Uriah Wesley Oblinger Collection 1842-1901.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhihtml/psbibdateindex.html>.

¹⁸ On April 6th, 1873, in a letter back to his wife and daughter, Uriah Oblinger writes, 'We had a little sing just now out of the gem's.'

¹⁹ Oblinger, 1st Dec., 1872, letter.

from 1925 to 1929, though the depression was not yet underway.²⁰ Arthur Loesser, in his seminal work on the social role of pianos, attributed the initial decline of interest in pianos to the development of the player piano. The player piano was a mere mechanical device that involved no accomplished skill to be played. This device could then be replaced by better and better devices, the radio being the best of all at reproducing music.²¹ We are all familiar with pictures of families in the 30s gathered around large tube radios listening to professional programming.²² When small portable transistor radios displaced tube sets, listening was no longer even a family affair, so that in the course of thirty years, families went from singing together, to listening together, to listening apart from one another. Yet, that normal people still felt comfortable with their singing voices well into the 1960s, is apparent from a number of recordings. Perhaps the most striking one comes from the 1965 World Series where, during the singing of the national anthem, the singing of the crowd drowns out the band accompanying them. Even in those supposedly rebellious years,²³ Americans still knew how to sing for civic events. This may be due in part to vestiges of singing in the home.

Of the technology of our own age, we are all familiar. A study from 2009 reported that 92% of teens own a portable media player (of which, for 86% it was an iPod).²⁴ It probably takes no sociological study to prove that the owners of those ipods probably have vastly different playlists than their parents. And they also probably do not listen to this music *with* their parents.

²⁰ Loesser, *Men, Women*, 601.

²¹ Loesser, *Men, Women*, 602.

²² See *Girl Listening to the Radio* (ARC195876), or *Farm Family Listens to their Radio* (ARC 5729282), Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Public Domain Photographs, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²³ In 1965, for example, the Rolling Stones' song "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" was number one on the Billboard charts.

²⁴ Piper Jaffray, "15th Semi-Annual Taking Stock with Teens Survey, 2009," e-mail, PiperJaffray.com, <http://www.piperjaffray.com/2col.aspx?id=178&releaseid=1127632&title=%27Discretionary%20Recession%27%20in%20Teen%20Spending%20Detailed%20in%2015th%20Semi-Annual%20Piper%20Jaffray%20%27Taking%20Stock%20With%20Teens%27%20Study>.

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that necessity is the mother of invention. There are, after all, current technologies that other ages would neither have been able to make nor care to make. Today, for a mere dollar, one can step into a booth and enjoy the wind force of a tornado. If we could ask Uriah Oblinger, the Nebraska farmer, whether or not he would be willing to pay even a penny to enjoy the feeling of being in a tornado, we would easily see that technologies develop to suit contemporary tastes as much as they command them. When the family as an institution wishes to relate to itself, it develops and engenders music as one way to do so. When it does not, it ceases to develop such music. There once was an age when, we might assume, the appeals of a player piano—or even, perish the thought, iTunes—would have been so small as to offer no necessity for its being invented. One proof of this is that music boxes of various sorts did develop in the 18th century but did nothing to displace family music-making through their popular existence in the 19th.²⁵ They were a delightful novelty but not a substitute for actual music-making.

Technological advances are neither the entire problem nor are they entirely a problem, as many of our vast CD libraries should attest. No one, or at least no one who has used one in earnest, is mourning over the loss of washing boards. It is convenient to blame technological forces—to pretend that radios were bombs dropped into the midst of the unbroken circle of family song. In reality, they are commodities that normal people elect to buy because they like them. Technologies like the radio are an easy scapegoat. You cannot compel a box of transistors to repent.

Likewise, just as technology cannot be blamed for the fall of family singing, so the fall of family singing cannot be necessarily blamed for the fall of the family (as much as this music

²⁵ See David Fuller, “An Introduction to Automatic Instruments,” *Early Music* 11:2 (Oxford University Press), 164 - 166.

professor would like to pretend otherwise). There are plenty of other reasons for the erosion of family values, and my esteemed colleagues are addressing those topics elsewhere. We might be in danger of getting the cart before the horse here in that the downfall of the family as an organizational unit of culture might more intuitively precede the downfall of the folk music it produced. We cannot now hear Tasmanian Aboriginal music because there are no longer any Tasmanian Aboriginals. Likewise, we are not likely to hear family music-making because there are not many families left—at least of the sort that haven't been assimilated by their colonizers.

Whatever the cause of the fall of family music, it certainly has fallen. While some families still sing together, this is almost always a conscious recovery of a lost practice rather than something that has been sustained organically across the generations. It is beyond my purposes here to prescribe a cause for this loss, but it is my purpose to explore the concomitant losses attending it. One way to do so is by noticing how communal folk music worked in other social units back when it was a natural part of life. Where and how the want of folk music is felt elsewhere, it might also be felt in the family.

One obvious place where music-making once was prevalent and now is not is in the context of war. From Ancient Sparta²⁶ to Spartanburg, South Carolina,²⁷ soldiers have sung to bolster morale and increase camaraderie.²⁸ Glen Watkins's authoritative work on music and The Great War is filled with accounts of singing among the soldiery.²⁹ We can mark clearly when this singing stopped, thanks to anecdotes like this one, from Dwight D. Eisenhower:

I have participated in two world wars, and there was one striking difference between the first and the second that perplexed me and made me a little sad. The

²⁶ Thucydides often mentions music in *The Peloponnesian War*. Consider V.lxx “The Spartans came on slowly and to the music of many flute-players in their ranks,” trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1954) 392.

²⁷ i.e. the site of the Battle of Cowpens and at least 4 other major battles in the Revolutionary War.

²⁸ See Raul F. Camus, *Military Music of the Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976) and Irwin Silber, *Soldier Songs and Home-Front Ballads of the Civil War* (New York: Oak, 1964) for examples of music literature obviously made for these purposes.

²⁹ *Proof Through the Night: Music and the Great War* (Berkeley University of California Press, 2003), 265-269.

American Army in the first World War was a singing army; in the second it was not. Now, I don't mean that our American soldiers in World War II were not deeply loyal to their country, nor do I mean that they failed, in combat, to perform as well as any of their predecessors. Neither of these is true. But there was a difference in attitude. Somehow, somewhere along the way between those two wars, we had lost something.³⁰

Ike wasn't alone in noticing the loss. Capitan Joseph Skomicka noted in an interview with the *Music Educator's Journal* in 1943:

Men who have been in the Army for some time are responding with great enthusiasm to the efforts of our Special Service Division to create a singing army. The new recruits, however, must be urged and prompted to sing, because they have just left a citizenry that doesn't sing. . . . Americans should get the habit of singing again—a habit which has been largely lost since the time of the last war.³¹

No one obeyed Capitan Skomicka's orders. People cannot be made by zealous social organizers, to produce folk song in their homes and with their friends. They may sing, alright, but their singing will be the song of the museum exhibit. Self-aware, and convicted of the importance of their behavior, their singing will take on the look of the Dallas businessman who wears cowboy boots with his Brooks Brothers suit. Now, this may be a valuable behavior in its own right. I fault neither museums nor cowboy boots with suits. But neither presents the real thing in its native habitat.³² The rise of the radio had changed the common soldier's ability to sing naturally with his messmates. Expectations about music had been formed, thanks to the Andrews Sisters, not one's own sisters. How this affected the soldiery is analogous to how the loss of family song affected the home.

First, there's a loss of camaraderie. Family songs, like war songs, are distinctive features of a small social unit. They are the shared but special behavior of the family alone. This may

³⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Danger from Within," *The Saturday Evening Post*, 26 January 1963, 15.

³¹ "A Singing Citizenry," *Music Educators Journal* 29:6 (May-June 1943):61.

³² I am told that now Marines do not so much sing as chant in cadence, with the one exception of singing the Marine Corps Hymn before "hitting the rack." Many thanks to Corporal Jeff Edwards, Kilo Co, 3rd Battalion/ 23rd Marines for the lively account of song in boot camp and elsewhere.

seem to be undermined by the wild popularity of “Oh! Suzanna” or *Pure Gold for the Sunday School*, but remember that publications are not recordings. Every performance of these works is subject to the individual quirks of the family member or members involved in the performance. Many even in our own age may have a family member that sings a particular song in a particular way with a particular turn of voice or mistake in the lyrics. These peculiarities become the secret code that the family shares, laughingly, with itself. In his book *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, Joshua Meyrowitz reminds us of how a shared but special behavior is essential to intimacy.³³ But if experiences like the music you listen to are entirely universal, they cannot build intimacy. The ways by which music builds camaraderie are, however, still known. They survive even now, in communities less adamantine than the family. The college fraternities to which some of us embarrassingly belonged, were probably full of chants and rally songs, sung tunelessly through hoarse shouting. When I lived in Glasgow, the Protestant Lodge—populated by non-church going, but thoroughly Protestant thugs—routinely paraded through the streets with song and drum. And the enthusiasm of the 14-year-old freshman at the school pep rally of my adolescence cannot be doubted, though if you ask her what she was excited about, she probably couldn’t tell you. It is the chant and song that raised enthusiasm, even for these doubtful causes. Most of us probably know our college Alma Maters and think fondly on them, though they are probably not very good songs. The family once used song in a similar way. It may or may not be a good song they sing. They may or may not sing it well. But it is the song *they* sing—just as the smell of your grandfather may or may not be a good smell (Of mine, it was the smell of flannel and Warren County Twist.), but it is his smell.

Songs in war build courage. So did singing in the home. This is part of the purpose of lullabies—they calm a frightened child. One thinks of the scene from Humperdinck’s *Hansel und*

³³ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 53-57.

Gretel when the siblings sing the evening prayer while frightened and lost in the forest³⁴ or the episode of *Little House on the Prairie* when the children are trapped in the house by wild dogs and sing (“Oh! Suzanna,” no less) to keep calm.³⁵

One of the key features of family music-making is even more basic than all this and it can be found in many communal songs both in war and peacetime. Making music is a sort of communal labor. This extends to the family as easily as anywhere. Our own age of crunchy conservatives has seen the rise of white collar families leaving suburbia and moving out to the land so that they can work it together.³⁶ The wisdom of this behavior will be clearer as starvation records are updated in the next census. In the meantime, we can at least acknowledge that the appeal of working together as a family is still with us. Music is a kind of work that a family can do without any major overhead costs and with some obvious benefits.

And just as it takes work to make music, music is often the ancillary result of work. Workers of all sorts have used music. Sailors sang sea shanties and foc’sle songs to keep rhythm while turning the capstan or to make the watch go by faster.³⁷ Another blessing from the Lomax legacy are recordings of work songs from chain gangs in the American South.³⁸ It is incomplete to explain this behavior by saying that singing removes the drudgery of labor. It removes it in a way particular, perhaps unique, to it—by allowing individuals to connect to one another through shared ideas while still getting on with their drudgery. A family that sang together while working could do this same thing. The child who scrubbed the sink while his sibling swept the kitchen

³⁴ Humperdinck, *Hansel und Gretel*, Act II, scene ii.

³⁵ Episode 405, “The Wolves,” *Little House on the Prairie*. Dir. William Claxton et al. NBC. 1974-1983.

³⁶ See Rod Dreher, *Crunchy Cons* (New York: Three Rivers, 2006).

³⁷ Consider the text of the Napoleonic era sailor song, “Don’t Forget Your Old Shipmate”: “When the middle watch was on/ and the time moved slow boys,/ who could choose a rousing stave?/ who like Jack and Joe, boys?”

³⁸ Negro Prison Songs. Mississippi State Penitentiary. 1957 Traditions TLP 1020-LP.

floor was connected to his sibling if they were both singing within earshot of one another. In an age where this practice is lost, family chores become isolating rather than unifying.

I have now hinted at what might be called the negative losses that probably attend the departure of family music—what older social groups, including families, gained from their songs and what we have lost in not making music in our own families. But there are also what might be described as positive losses that come from what displaces family music. Family music has not only been removed, it has been replaced. Amputation is bad enough, but infection from the surgery is much worse. Everyone here knows, by mere consideration of the families he knows, with what it has been replaced. In our own age, the television has replaced it—a device that would take ascendance in this paper were it allowed to do so. By the time radios were small enough to be personal, the family radio had been supplanted by the television. The effect this had on the family has been articulated at length by media ecologists and need not detain us here.³⁹ Nor is it the purpose of this paper to explore the ills of mass commercial television. Perhaps another time. It is safe to say, however, that mass commercial music and television have replaced family music. In a certain sense, I mean this without a hint of judgment. Television and mass commercial music do partly accomplish the same purposes of family music. They do not accomplish them, however, in the service of the family as an institution. We can leave the television off, for the purpose of this discussion, and focus on the ways mass commercial music can do what music has always done, though it does it in the service of something other than the family.

Mass commercial music does partly create a sense of community—the teen who listens to Ke\$ha or Kindra sees herself as distinctive from the teen who listens to Tracy Underwood and

³⁹ Consider Meyrowitz, *No Sense*, 187-258, on the effect this has on roles in the family, or for a more complete analysis, consider Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

also as distinctive from her parents, who listen to Jimmy Buffet. Yet the communities distinguished by mass commercial music are made up of one age group alone. They are identifiable through dress code and through hairstyles but not by last name. And they behave with complete disregard to the family as a unit of social organization. These musics bind youths together, not through shared experience, but through pre-prepared and generated experiences that are as predictable as the emotions generated by hard drugs.⁴⁰ Mass commercial music organizes groups of teens, isolated from their families and from other rival groups, into tribes of fans.

Roger Scruton's articulation of this problem is so helpful it bears repeating:

The group offers membership. It is therefore imperative for the fan—or at least a certain kind of fan—to choose his group, and to exalt it above any rivals. The choice is, in the end, arbitrary—or at least, not guided by any criterion of musical merit. But it is a choice that must be made.⁴¹

Just like music among the soldiers, mass commercial music instills courage. The recent hit, “Live While We’re Young” gives a sample of this courage. The song is made famous by the band, One Direction, whose music has been described as “PG pop.”⁴² The singer begins by asking a girl to sneak out presumably from her parents’ house. Then, in the especially catchy chorus, she is encouraged to go crazy, to “pretend it’s love” and then, in a final effort to raise her courage, the singer urges her with the moving lines that provide the song’s title: “Tonight, let’s get some. And live while we’re young.” I must leave the meaning of “get some,” as One Direction does, to our imaginations. One cannot help thinking that whatever it is the couple will be getting, it would likely spoil the band’s PG rating. In the same fashion as old war songs that

⁴⁰ Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* (South Bend IN: St. Augustine's, 2000), 115-116.

⁴¹ Scruton, *Intelligent Person's*, 108. Scruton here also references Simon Frith's article, “Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music,” eds. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁴² Robert Copley, “One Direction: ‘Up All Night.’” *Digital Spy* (album review). UK: Hearst. <http://www.digitalspy.com/music/review/a352333/one-direction-up-all-night-album-review.html#~oLqVXmf9x7i5o5> (accessed 28 November 2011).

begged “let us die to make men free,” so this song begs for courage to do something difficult too—only the nobility, let alone the morality, of this new type of courage may be brought into question.

As music-making relates to labor, it is enough to point out that passing time passively in front of an entertaining device does not connect family units in as successful a way as passing time in the collective labor of music-making. The last thing we need is another variant on Scalpone’s “the family that prays together. . .” cliché, but if a family sings together, they literally must be together to do so, both mentally and actually. Free time thus spent would have connected families in ways to which the modern family has no access.

We know that mass commercial music is also used partly to alleviate the drudgery of boring tasks. A quick glance through the school bus windows will offer a group of pre-teens with white buds in their ears trying to make the long commute to school go by more quickly. But notice that this prohibits their interrelationship (by contrast, recall the song “the wheels on the bus go round and round” that many of us sang). Most important here, isolated use of mass commercial music ensures that the listener is left to his own thoughts in response to the provocatively vague music he enjoys. This may make the drudgery pass more quickly, but it will not do so in a way that allows the listener to escape from his own mind into the world around him.

Carl Perkins’ song begins by admitting that, “times were hard and things were bad.” We might say the same now, both for the family and for family music-making. Recovery of the latter, and perhaps the former, as mentioned earlier, may inevitably bring with it the glare of museum glass. Nowadays people put white stick-figure badges on their minivans to prove their devotion to the family, and some parents enforce family-singing hour to prove their devotion to

family music-making. There may be no alternative to this, and certainly there is no scholarship yet in place to show how to avoid this—if, even, it should be avoided. But perhaps some friendly advice would do. Music-making in the family, where it is organic, is spontaneous, bears characteristics distinctive to the individual family making it, can be performed even without optimal conditions (i.e. it can be made in the car or while gardening, without accompaniment or with it), and has the feeling of a conversation. It may not recreate “the family circle at the throne,” but it will keep a family seated in the living room together, which may be as good as we can hope for in this life.

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