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America from the Jazz Age to the MTV Age
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1729 Words

Lyrical History of American Culture

I Want to be Bad (1929) Lew Brown B.g, Annette Hanshaw

The song performed by Annette Hanshaw is about a woman who casually wishes “to be bad,” meaning that she wishes to go against the conservative Christian norms of the early 20th century, according to a statement made on the book *Only Yesterday* “Women were the guardians of morality; they were made of finer stuff than men and were expected to act accordingly” (Allen, Chapter 5). In “I Want to be Bad” Annette declares she rather “be bad” than live with the feeling that it is naughty to wear lipstick. This wish to wear makeup and other beauty products previously worn exclusively by sex workers is proven to be a common feeling among woman of the 1920’s, according to the testimony “Back in 1917, according to Frances Fisher Dubuc, only two persons in the beauty culture business had paid an income tax; by 1927 there were 18,000 firms and individuals in this field listed as income-tax payers” (Allen, Chapter 5). This quote documents the unprecedented growth on the number of beauty product companies in the United States.

One aspect of “I Want to be Bad” that differs from later songs about breaking tradition is that Annette casually sings about dancing and kissing men for the sake of fun rather than active protest against oppression. The feeling of boredom towards behaving as a Victorian lady likely comes from the new freedoms of city living, where young men and women can easily find independence from their parents’ conservative thinking at petting parties and closed automobiles as per these account made written in *Only Yesterday*. “Maiden aunts and unmarried daughters were leaving the shelter of the family roof to install themselves in kitchenette apartments of their own” (Allen, Chapter 5).

Ain’t Got No Home (1931) Woody Guthrie

The folk song “Ain’t Got No Home” by Woody Guthrie exposes the misery of someone who lost their home and now lives in misery. This was a common occurrence in the 1930’s due to the mass poverty created by the stock exchange crash in the late 1920’s and early 1930’s. In the beginning of the song, Woody Guthrie sings, “Rich man took my home and drove me from my door.” This line resonates when paired with John Hersch’s accounts on the book “Hard Times,” which claims that rich people foresaw the great depression and were unaffected by it. “They lived like kings, right through the Depression” (Terkel. 76).

In the first verse of the song, Woody Guthrie sings about roaming from town to town while the police make his life harder wherever he goes. This scenario mirrors the life of countless young man who left their homes and illegally rode the trains from town to town in search of work and better living, as observed in the documentary *Riding the Rails*. The film depicts scenes of policeman violently mistreating these “bums.” In an interview of the book “Hard Times.” Jimmy McPartland describes an event in which three or four sheriffs were on the verge of murdering a poor citizen for no reason, “They’re gonna kill a guy for nothing. Just because.” (Terkel. 71).

With the lines, “I been working, mister, since the day I was born/ Now I worry all the time like I never did before“ and “Oh, the gamblin’ man is rich an’ the workin’ man is poor” the song “Ain’t Got No Home” suggests a sentiment of blame towards the rich who effortlessly made their wealth in the stock exchange and generated the misery of the poor who worked all their lives. This parallels the reckless economic practices of the 1920’s proposed by Robertson in *Hard Times*. “In 1929, it was strictly a gambling casino with loaded dice. The few sharks taking advantage of the multitude of suckers” (Terkel. 65).

You Can’t Say no to a Soldier (1942) Joan Merrill , Harry Warren , Mack Gordon

This song is one example of many military pieces that were written in the 40s. The purpose of these songs were to convince young men to go to war as well as inspire a feeling of patriotism among the nation. The lyrics directly discourage young women to refuse dancing or kissing men in the army. The lines, “You can’t say no to a soldier” and “If he’s not your type, then it’s still okay, you can always kiss him in a sisterly way” send a message to listeners without the use of metaphors, using very directly language, unlike other songs on the top of the billboard charts in 1942, such as “A String of Pearls” and “Moonlight Cocktail” which addresses it’s listeners with the use of metaphors.

The practical purpose of this military song musically reflects the many World War II posters containing messages such as “Follow ration rules” and “Buy and hold War Stocks.” These posters served to inform the population on how to behave in a communal fashion in order to achieve a common goal and win the war.

The line “So, get out your lipstick and powder/ be beautiful and dutiful too” attempts to give women a role in fighting the war by inspiring a feeling of civil duty towards dating a soldier. Although this duty is reflected by the large number of women who entered the labor force for the first time in American history, the song doesn’t waste time foreshadowing women’s participation in the war, but won’t give them credit for wining it: “Oh, you can’t say no, no you gotta give in, If you want him to win for you.”

Mr. Sandman (1954) Pat Ballard

The still popular song by Pat Ballard is sung as a woman is praying to Mr. Sandman (a fictitious character) requesting that he brings her the perfect man to end her loneliness. The repetition of the word ‘dream’ can be interpreted as a direct reference to the 50’s “American dream” of having a perfect suburban house with a perfect husband, a dream constantly displayed in TV shows of the era such as *I Love You Lucy* and *Father Knows Best*.

With the lines “Don’t have nobody to call my own” and “Then tell him that his lonesome nights are over” the song exposes a constant feeling of loneliness, which laid beneath the surface of the dreamy façade of the 50’s. With the end of the war, women left work however, unlike 1920’s after a decade of behavioral propaganda women find themselves locked inside their houses on their own as man goes to work and children go to school.

Additional evidence that the song is speaking about the lonely feeling of every woman trapped in this false dream is the switch from “bring me a dream” in the beginning of the song to “bring us a dream” in the end. Leaving the work force left women powerless in society since their contributions to the household were merely taking care of the house and children in order to keep the illusion of a dreamy life for the rest of the neighborhood to see. This powerlessness is made obvious when comparing the lyrics of “Mr. Sandman” with 1920’s “I Want to be Bad,” which featured a woman wishing to take action on her own, go out to party and choose partners for fun. In “Mr. Sandman,” instead of taking action, the singer wishes for a fictitious creature to take over and bring her a lonely man and end her solitude.

Different Drum (1965) Mike Nesmith

This Mike Nesmith song, made popular by Linda Ronstadt, is sung from the perspective of a woman who is breaking up with her partner. In the lyrics, the singer says the reason she wishes to break up are not because her partner isn’t good enough but for her personal feelings such as not being interested in having relationships or simply not “being on the market.” When comparing “Different Drum” to the popular music of the 1950’s such as “Mr. Sandman” the songs appear to be completely opposite of each other. In the 60’s, instead of hoping someone will bring her a perfect man who fits all, women decided not to be with the perfect man and possibly not settle with anyone at all. This drastic change can be attributed to the youth protests against institutions and the government’s interference with individual liberty as well as the civil rights movement, as shown in the book *The Sixties* in the statement “Students made demands for more freedom and fewer rule” (Anderson. 53). These protests later included movements such as the “women’s liberation movement,” which demanded gender equality and the end of what were then considered American values. These values mirrored the Christian rules of gender normality and the expectation that women were expected to marry one man for the rest of their lives. These protests resulted in LBJ’s signing an executive order which required the government to provide “equal opportunity in Federal employment and in employment by federal contractors” (Anderson. 78) free of discrimination based on “race, color, religion, sex or national origin” (Anderson. 78).

A more speculative analysis of Mike Nesmith’s lyrics is made by examining the line, “You and I travel to the beat of a different drum” as a metaphor for the divide between politicians’ approval of the Vietnam war and the younger generation’s distaste for it. The drums are a symbol of the military bands, which suggest the singer is marching but against the war rather than in it. When the war started losing its secrecy through drafting and its more pronounced appearance on television, a vocal minority of students started to question America’s role in this conflict. The questioning later lead to a bloody protest in the University of Wisconsin where “the university called the police equipped with riot gear, tear gas and billy clubs” (Anderson. 80). The line “You can’t see the forest for the trees,” which is addressed to the “perfect looking man” as a possible symbol of the 50’s mentality, exposes the sentiment that the older generation was blinded to the horrors of the war and that the younger generation was able to see things more clearly. Therefore, the youth felt like they had to take action and stop the war. Although their success is hard to determine, the action they took perhaps changed American culture for years to come.

Song Lyrics:

I Want to be Bad (1929) Lew Brown B.g, Annette Hanshaw

To be or not to be?
That is not the question,
'Cause I decided long ago to be!
With me it's what to be,
Now making some suggestions,
Good or bad, which is the best for me?
When you're after
Fun and laughter,
This aggravates you!
Some reformers
Say a warmer
Climate awaits you!

If it's naughty to rouge your lips,
Shake your shoulders and shake your hips,
Then the answer is, "Yes, I'd wanna be bad!"

If it's naughty to vamp the men,
Sleep each morning till after ten,
Let a lady confess, "Yes, I wanna be bad!"

This thing of being a good little goody is all very
well,
What can you do when you're loaded with plenty of
health and vigour?

When you're learning what lips are for
And it's naughty to ask for more,
Let a lady confess, "I'd wanna be bad!"

Oh, if it's naughty to rouge your lips,
Shake your shoulders and shake your hips,
Then the answer is, "I wanna be bad!", boop-ooop-
a-doo!

And if it's naughty to vamp the men,
Sleep each morning till after ten,
Then the answer is, "Yes, I wanna be bad!"

Nobody cares just how blue and how lonesome I am,
If I have troubles and laugh like I don't give a damn,
you'll credot!

If it's wrong to let someone take
Just a little kiss by mistake,

Ain't Got No Home (1931) Woody Guthrie

I ain't got no home, I'm just a-roamin' 'round
Just a wandrin' worker, I go from town to town
And the police make it hard wherever I may go
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore

My brothers and my sisters are stranded on this road
A hot and dusty road that a million feet have trod
Rich man took my home and drove me from my
door
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore

Was a-farmin' on the shares, and always I was poor
My crops I lay into the banker's store
My wife took down and died upon the cabin floor
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore

I mined in your mines and I gathered in your corn
I been working, mister, since the day I was born
Now I worry all the time like I never did before
'Cause I ain't got no home in this world anymore

Now as I look around, it's mighty plain to see
This world is such a great and a funny place to be
Oh, the gamblin' man is rich an' the workin' man
is poor
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore

You Can't Say no to a Soldier (1942) Joan Merrill, Harry Warren , Mack Gordon

Listen little lady, it's the order of the day
Issued by the highest of authority
Fellows in the service simply can't be turned away
You know that defence must get priority
So if you're patriotically inclined
Heed the call to arm and keep this thought in mind

You can't say no to a soldier
A sailor or a handsome marine
No, you can't say no if he wants to dance
If he's gonna fight, he's got a right to romance

So, get out your lipstick and powder
Be beautiful and dutiful too
If he's not your type, then it's still okay
You can always kiss him in a sisterly way
Oh, you can't say no, no you gotta give in
If you want him to win for you

You simply can't say no, no, no, no, no, no, no
To a soldier or a handsome marine
Lady, what would you say, if he said, "Let's
dance"
I'd say, "Brother, you have got a right to romance,
let's dance"

So, get out your lipstick and powder
Be beautiful and dutiful too
If he says it's cold on those submarines
You can knit a sweater, but that's not what he means

Oh, you can't say no, no, no, no, no, no, no
They're not made of tin
So, you'd better give in
If you want him to win for you

Mr. Sandman (1954) Pat Ballard

Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream (bung, bung, bung,
bung)
Make him the cutest that I've ever seen (bung, bung,
bung, bung)
Give him two lips like roses and clover (bung, bung,
bung, bung)
Then tell him that his lonesome nights are over
Sandman, I'm so alone
Don't have nobody to call my own
Please turn on your magic beam
Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream

(scat "bung, bung, bung, bung")
Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream
Make him the cutest that I've ever seen
Give him the word that I'm not a rover
Then tell him that his lonesome nights are over
Sandman, I'm so alone
Don't have nobody to call my own
Please turn on your magic beam
Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream

(scat "bung, bung, bung, bung")
Mr. Sandman (male voice: "Yesss?") bring us a
dream
Give him a pair of eyes with a "come-hither" gleam
Give him a lonely heart like Pagliacci
And lots of wavy hair like Liberace
Mr Sandman, someone to hold (someone to hold)
Would be so peachy before we're too old
So please turn on your magic beam

Mr Sandman, bring us, please, please, please
Mr Sandman, bring us a dream

Different Drum (1965) Mike Nesmith

You and I travel to the beat of a different drum.
Oh, can't you tell by the way I run
Ev'ry time you make eyes at me. Wo oh.
You cry and you moan and say it will work out.
But honey child I've got my doubts.
You can't see the forest for the trees.

Oh, don't get me wrong. It's not that I'm knockin'.
It's just that I'm not in the market
For a girl who wants to love only me.
Yes, and I ain't sayin' you ain't pretty.
All I'm sayin's I'm not ready for any person,
Place or thing to try and pull the reins in on me.
So Goodbye, I'll be leavin'.
I see no sense in the cryin' and grievin'.
We'll both live a lot longer if you live without me.

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We'll both live a lot longer if you live without me.

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