

"The Influence of Science Fiction

on Modern American Folk Music"

...concerning the integration of stinal concepts in a current Art
Form...

by

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FOREWARD:

In the last few mailings, SAPS has become quite scholarly.

WARHORN, for example, has presented such erudite items as the Virginia Blish analysis of "La Dolce Vita", Walter Breen on "Stranger in a Strange Land", and James Blish on a variety of topics. The friendly AL LEWIS provided a fine article on prison ships. F. M. BUSBY is always intellectual.

What can I do, I asked myself, to provide similar erudite, thought-provoking, and philosophical material for SAPS. The answer was obvious. To reprint an erudite, thought-provoking, and philosophical article which circulated in The Other Apa more than half a decade ago.

This article was written almost ten years ago, but the passage of time has only implemented its basic promise. The type of music discussed in this article has greatly increased in popularity in the last ten years, with ever widening circulation to all age groups. Similarly, the Race for Space, long one of the major types of science fiction topics, is finally becoming a fact of our mundane life.

Perhaps, however, this article is dated in one sense. The overall interest of fandom in science fiction has dropped remarkably in the last ten years. Therefore, there may be some of you who will not like this article. No matter. I like science fiction. I like to write about science fiction. Those of you who do not like science fiction articles had best go on to other publications...

At the Chicago Convention in 1952, John W. Campbell, distinguished editor of Astrounding Science Fiction, gave a highly interesting dissertation concerning the influence of Science Fiction upon the world. His speech was well presented and the audience quite receptive.

However, Mr. Campbell's speech was shockingly incomplete!

As all of us know, Science Fiction--S-F--scientifiction--stf, call it what you will, has influenced the world. And since World War II, the popularization of Science Fiction has started a snowballing of general interest in imaginative literature. And this greater general interest in Science Fiction has, in turn, been instrumental to a greater influence of Science Fiction upon our lives.

One can find its effect upon nearly every field of human endeavor. Concepts, once found only on pages of pulp paper, are now applied both in theory and in practice toward the day when the Great Jump will be a fact and Mankind will no longer be bound to a single planet.

However, the influence of Science Fiction is usually considered in the grossly material sense of technology and associated human behavior. True, we have noticed its effect in Literature, both in fiction and non-fiction. And who will deny that Literature, even the highly mercenary field of commercial writing, is still a basic form of Art? But the influence of Science Fiction has gone much deeper than such superficial designations.

It has invaded the heart of American music!

Music is the voice of the people. In the Middle Ages, wandering minstrels carried triumphs of the Great to even greater glory through verse and song. This modern era finds their feats duplicated by a small number of talented and discriminating artists.

I don't refer to the lushly sickening, inconsequential trivia turned out by the hacks of Tin Pan Alley. Artificiality in any form of Art is popular with the non-discriminating masses, but quite disgusting to serious students of Modern American Music. We are referring to Folk Music, music by the Common Man for the Common Man, and not slick creations mass produced for a rapid financial gain. And in this field, the honest expression of an honest American population, the influence of Science Fiction is most pronounced.

It is not apparent. One must paw through a vast amount of commercially created pap to find sincere music of the people. And then, one may overlook a stirring example because the lyrics

are not couched in the technical jargon of a Science Fiction style. But nevertheless, all the concepts of stf--time, travel, inter-planetary exploration, extrapolated research and the thousand other ideas that compose modern Science Fiction are abundant in modern American folk music.

I only have room for a few examples in these pages. Tabulation and critical analysis of accumulated data would fill many volumes, indeed, many Mailings. And I know that many of you are not the slightest bit interested in modern American Folk music, although you do like Science Fiction. But through this article, I hope you will see as I have seen, the tremendous influence that our literature has exerted in this field.

You will find commentary with each example, of course. As previously stated, folk lyrics invariably cloud the serious stfnal implications of most pieces. Naturally this is due to the fact that the average person is not interested in Science Fiction as such, but must take its erudite concepts with a touch of everyday language. Since a jay is known to attract the most intelligent Fans, you should not have difficulty translating common expressions into our uncommon tongue; nevertheless, to make certain that none of the significance will escape even the neofan, I will give my own interpretation along with each set of lyrics.

EXAMPLE #1 "Jockey Blues"

As a preliminary example, let us examine two verses from a song that came out just after World War II.

1. "My daddy was no jockey, but he sure taught
 me how to ride.
 "My daddy was no jockey, but he sure taught
 me how to ride.
 "Says you sink into the saddle, and then you
 sway away from side to side.

2. "My daddy told me, 'Son, '
 "When I was only one.
 "Never ride your horse too fast,
 "Or you'll never, never last. . . '
 "Well I'm no jockey, but I sure know how
 to ride.
 "You sink into the saddle, and then you sway
 from side to side. "

COMMENTARY

This simple selection illustrates one of the most common and fundamental ways in which Science Fiction influences Modern American Folk Music; the lyrics are fashioned around a single stf story. During World War II, the aristocratic Amazing Stories

published a story concerning a race track jockey with a negative total mass. Shortly afterward, "Jockey Blues" was released. The relationship between story and song should be obvious.

A person with negative mass cannot function in a normal manner; he needs the advice of an elder and wiser individual. Who would be more qualified to cope with such a situation than a parent? Hence-- "My daddy was no jockey, but he sure taught me how to ride, " " " you sink into the saddle and then you sway from side to side. " is particularly significant, since with such action, negative mass would be distributed over a larger area of the horse, thus insuring full utilization of the jockey's unusual condition.

Of course the age level mentioned in the second line of Verse 2 is incorrect and chosen for rhyming value, but the advice is invaluable. The latter can be seen from the study of any equation involving velocity and mass. Since mass, in this instance, is negative, "you'll never, never last. " could well be taken literally!

EXAMPLE #2 "Steady, Daddy"

The above example was too simple for practical consideration. But simplicity is the exception rather than the rule as will be shown in this and succeeding examples. Example #2 is an extremely interesting instance of a general Science Fiction theme translated into an allegorical folk melody. The lyrics:

1. "All the world's in such a hurry; seems like
folks have lost their minds.
"All the world's in such a hurry; seems like
folks have lost their minds.
"But just take it easy, Daddy--I like a man
who takes his time.
2. "Steady, steady Daddy, just you wait and see.
"Take it slower, Daddy, just you wait and see.
"There's sixty minutes in an hour; that's lots
of time for you and me.
3. "Now I know what you like
"And you know what I got.
"Take it easy, Daddy,
"Don't flip your top.
"Steady, steady, Daddy, if I can wait than so
can you.
"Control yourself a little longer; it's that much
better if you do.
4. "Some may crave the frantic kind,
"But I like a man who takes his time. . . "

COMMENTARY

Idiomatic phraseology complicates detailed analysis of this selection. Such wording as "flip your top" is not common in our stfnal field, and therefore one might not think that "Steady, Daddy" had anything to do with Science Fiction. But such is certainly not the case.

No indeed! "Steady, Daddy" is based on one of the earliest and most basic themes in all Science Fiction--the idea that Science is All, and being a Scientist is the acme of individual progress and the highest aspiration of every truly intelligent man.

I have stated that this work is allegorical in nature. Obviously, the narrator of the classic words is Science, Herself, and "Daddy" is a vulgarian for the prospective Scientist.

Verse 1 provides the initial clue. The first two lines are a plaintive lament against the state of modern Mankind, a stirring indictment against shoddy research. But in Line 3, Science warns that the sincere Acolyte should have thorough training in his chosen field and not be influenced by such detrimental activity. "I like a man who takes his time." implies that greater spiritual and financial rewards will come to the person that sincerely applies himself to Study, instead of spending some of his time in idolent pleasure.

Verse 2 emphasizes the general theme of the first stanza. Note particularly Line 3. The time relationship is necessarily specific due to the basic audience of this type of folk song, but the implied meaning here is that the student should painstakingly cover all available material, rather than to purposely omit seemingly trivial data to hasten his graduation from college.

The remaining verses in "Steady, Daddy" supplement these ideas. Verse 3 emphasizes the warning expressed in Verse 2, while Verse 4 provides a precise summation of the other stanzas. Yes, some professions require little prior study, but a Scientist must study to achieve success. Science likes a man who takes his time!"

EXAMPLE #3 "Old Woman Blues"

Since Space Opera was among the early types of Science Fiction, this type of story would greatly influence modern American Folk Music. "Old Woman Blues" demonstrates this fact quite graphically, as one may trace an infinite number of plots from the ideas expressed in this melodious masterpiece. The selection is much too lengthy to be fully represented in these too few pages, but only a few verses are required to show you that Space Opera is not always qualified to

Captain Video and Captain Future.

Refrain:

"Get yourself an old woman, boys, for they sure know
what to do.

"They give you lots of money, and they give you lots
of lovin' too.

1. "They scratch you on your stomach.
"They tickle you on your sides.
"They say, 'Wake up you bright young rascal;
"Give me my morning exercise. . . REFRAIN:

2. "Now I got me a chick.
"She's sweet sixteen.
"But she keeps me broke
"Buyin' vaseline. REFRAIN

3. "Now I took this young chick to a ball game
"To see what we could see.
"When the umpire called, 'Four balls on
that man, '
"She wouldn't go home with me. . . REFRAIN:

COMMENTARY

In this particular selection we find our hero as the narrator, telling us of his various adventures upon the different worlds, warning us of the treachery of numerous alien races, but continually reminding us that "an old woman" is best. Elementary deduction tells us that "old woman" is a synonym for "native planet" and the refrain, translated into more stfnal terms, means that although one may roam over a hundred planets, be he Sclarian or Arcturian, his native world is the best for him. Verse 1 goes even further, implying that not only is he psychologically and physiologically adapted to his home planet, but his greatest opportunity for self-advancement is to be found there.

Usually Space Opera, when printed in Science Fiction Magazines, does not carry such serious themes. But music generally has a much stronger emotional appeal than does literature, hence you find such expression in this peice.

Verses 2 and 3 illustrate one of the adventures our hero finds with a "young chick" i. e. on a new planet. Line 4 of Verse 2 mentions "vaseline. " Vaseline is the trade name (remember, this is continually intended for a non-fannish audience, so technical formulae and

language must be held to an absolute minimum) for petroleum jelly, a fatty, semi-solid mixture of paraffin hydrocarbons, distilled from the residue left by the more volatile elements of petroleum.

From this, it is simple to deduce that our hero is engrossed in a gigantic game of intrigue on this new planet which involves a new type of rocket fuel. The narrator pauses in his tale to remind us that as always the home world is best and then qualifies our initial hypothesis by recounting an extraordinary adventure. Verse 3 must be clarified somewhat because of its regrettably vague terminology.

"Now I took this young chick to a ball game" in Line 1 of Verse 3 refers to our hero's "game" of intrigue on this new planet, i. e. a literal translation would be: "After a thorough investigation of Carr II, I decided to establish myself as a small merchant from Sol III, intending to control glyptal trade on this planet. "

Line 2, " ...to see what we could see" is transitory phraseology noting further plot development unnecessary to general understanding of the theme by a non-stfnal audience. To the trained observer, this can be interpreted to mean: "Although meeting with opposition from other galactic cultures, I soon became the controlling factor in the production and marketing of glyptal throughout the "Carrite worlds. I decided to expand. "

Lines 3 and 4--"when the umpire called 'four balls on that man,' she wouldn't go home with me... " provides a smashing climax to this episode. "Umpire" refers to one of the standard devices in Space Opera---an ancient, omniscient culture that guides the destinies of a galaxy (Dr. EESmith's Arisian's are but one example). Since the control of glyptal could conceivably retard the growth and progress of galactic culture, the "watchers" released psychologically forces to break our hero's grasp upon the glyptal market, and he was ultimately forced to leave Carr II, a sadder, but much wiser individual.

He has reason for repeating his advice!

EXAMPLE #4 "My Baby's Business"

Almost as fundamental as Space Opera has been the Time Travel concept in Science Fiction. Hence we should expect to find this concept also expressed in modern American Folk Music. It is. "My Baby's Business" is but one of many selections that are based upon this theme. The lyrics:

1. "My baby's got a business; it keeps her busy
as a bee.
"My baby's got a business; it keeps her busy
as a bee.

"But everything with my baby is strictly
C. O. D.

2. 'Now her bread is nice and brown...
'Her prices ain't too high.
'She's got a sign on the wall...
'Says, 'I aims to satisfy.'

REFRAIN:

"That makes good business; keeps business going all night long.
"My baby's got a business, and her business is really going strong.

3. 'Her steak is nice and tender,
"You'll never find it tough.
"You'll keep craving more and more,
"Though you know you've had enough. .

REFRAIN:

COMMENTARY:

In this selection, as in most of the others, we find colloquial phraseology marring a basic stinal theme. However, interpretation of "My Baby's Business" is not too difficult, since it is a fundamental development of the idea expressed in Example #1.

You will remember that in our first example, we had a case of a folk song based on a single Science Fiction story. As such, the relationship between story and song was quite simple to visualize. In this case, the selection is not based upon an individual story, but on a series of stories from Astounding Science Fiction.

This series concerned the adventures of workers for Anachron Inc., an organization based upon the retailing of commercial goods produced in the "present" to individuals in the "past" being careful not to disrupt the culture of the affected era.

Our selection may be thought of as a recruiting song for Anachron Inc. Verse 1 states the basic premise quite simply--a literal translation might be "Anachron Inc. is an industrious and profitable organization, however its standards are quite high and its personnel must accomplish their assignments with minimum delay. " This warning in the last line of Verse 1 is placed presumably to deter any undesirables from applying for a position, uselessly involving interviewing personnel and possibly other sections of the business.

Verse 2 refers to specific benefits derived from working for Anachron inc. The specific meaning of "Her bread is nice and brown"

might escape the average fan. "Bread" is an uncommon colloquialism for "money" hence Line 1 of Verse 2 states that salaries for Anachron Inc. personnel are quite high. "Her prices ain't too high" is merely another way of informing prospective employees that duties with Anachron Inc. will not unduly tax his physical or mental well-being. Notice that this clever phrasology does not contrast in the slightest with the warning expressed in the last line of Verse 1. And of course the last two lines of Verse 2 expresses the company-worker relationship, i.e. the Company is always eager to please its employees in every possible way, and hopes the worker will remain in Service for a long period of time.

With experience gained from the previous examples, you should have no difficulty interpreting the refrain yourself.

It is readily apparent that "steak" in Line 1 of Verse 3 is the usual vulgarity, in this case referring to the principle advantage employees of Time Travel Inc. will possess over all who work for lesser concerns.

This is, naturally, the chance to travel through time.

Notice how Verse 3 emphasizes this point. Placed in our own unconventionally conventional terminology, it would read: "The physical processes involved in time travel are not unpleasant. Emotionally, the sheer psychological lift resulting from talking to the great men and women of the past is incalculable. Our employees are entitled to a liberal vacation program, however we find they would rather continue their travels through time."

With such numerous advantages as reported in "My Baby's Business" how could a person possibly refrain from desiring a position with Anachron Inc. ?

EXAMPLE #5 "Hip Shakin' Mama"

The last example was more of a sociological study of time travel upon a general culture, than the usual time travel theme so prevalent in Science Fiction. "Hip Shakin' Mama" by contrast, deals much more with specific facts and time stream effects. The lyrics:

1. I'm goin' up on a mountain
To face the risin' sun.
If I find somethin' good,
I'll bring my sweet man some...

REFRAIN:

'Cause I'm a hip shakin' mama,
And I rock with a steady roll.

Now he used to be your man,
But he won't be your man no more.

2. My man's got somethin'
And he kept it hid.
But I got somethin'
I can find it with.

REFRAIN:

3. It takes a rockin' chair to rock;
A rubber ball to bounce.
It takes a big long daddy
To get my every ounce.

REFRAIN:

COMMENTARY:

As was the case with Example #2, "Steady Daddy: this selection is an allegorical folk melody. This is easily determined by a casual inspection of the lyrics. However, "Hip Shakin' Mama" is particularly interesting because it traces the development of time travel from its first beginnings to its ultimate commercial exploitations. "Hip Shakin' Mama" is, quite obviously, a time machine.

The machine itself is the narrator in this selection. Note how cleverly it traces its history. Verse 1 refers us to time travel in its most rudimentary form, since "I'm goin' up on a mountain..." simply states that the time machine must be separated from solid surroundings to minimize the danger of materializing within a physical object. "To face the risin' sun" should not be taken in its literal sense, since day or night has no effect on time travel, but refers to the dawn of a new adventure for humanity. This idea is more fully expressed in the last two lines of Verse 1. "Good man" refers to Man (with the capital "M"), symbolizing the entire human race. A stinal paraphrases the last two lines as, "If initial attempts are successful, time travel will be available to everyone."

The refrain is self-explanatory. The narrator, i. e. the time machine, refers to the physical sensations of actual time travel, and states that with the perfection of such diversional means, all other forms of amusement are hopelessly outdated.

Verse 2 refers to an interim period of time travel development. In this period, the general public was quite sceptical about the practicability of time travel. This is shown in the first two lines.

In our language this verse would be expressed as: "Although confronted with the practicability of time travel in its various forms, the general public was reluctant at first to accept this method of recreation. While it is true that Mankind has always had a suppressed desire to participate in such unusual activities, the theoretical danger of personal injury denied many the courage to travel through time. However, this period was to end shortly. The physical and mental stimulation resulting in time travel more than make up for the ever so slight physical danger inherent in such pastimes. Finally, time travel became commercially feasible."

A more literal translation is possible, too. We have the time machine saying: "Mankind has always wanted to time travel, but he is afraid. As soon as he experiences the adventures, I offer, this frustration will be removed."

You will notice that heretofore we have assumed that all of Mankind utilizes time travel. This is not true, as is shown in Verse 3. In this stanza, after two very obvious platitudes, we find: "It takes a big, long daddy to get my every ounce..." Such is the qualifying statement that tells us that while time travel is available to everyone, everyone does not use it. It is readily apparent that the adjectives "big" and "long" do not refer to physical characteristics, but to mental ability. In other words, the time machine states: "In order to get maximum enjoyment from time travel, the man who uses me must be intelligent and emotionally stable." This would seem perfectly logical, since a person of superior mental calibre could conduct himself more satisfactorily when brushing with cultures of past eras.

Yes, Science Fiction was definitely responsible for the composition of "Hip Shakin' Mama."

At this point, some of you may be asking, "Yes, now I see how Science Fiction has influenced modern American Folk Music, but I desire to do additional research myself. How am I able to do this? Where do I begin?"

The answer to such a question is rather difficult. It cannot be overemphasized that the language difficulty is the most pregnant problem confronting the beginner. Too, some of the more modern readers of Science Fiction do not yet have the stiff background that would enable them to accurately analyze more obscure examples than have been presented in this article.

Finding folk music to analyze is another matter. While such music is quite plentiful, one must know where to look. Hearing it over the radio is, of course, out of the question. Commercial broadcasts cater to the Great Masses who perennially enjoy the mass-produced

tripe of Broadway and Hollywood. The sheer lyrical excellence of modern American Folk Music is wasted upon such as they, hence you will find a conspicuous absence of this type of music over the air.

I would suggest a record store for your usual attempts, preferably a large record store. Serious music, i.e. "classical music" should normally be avoided since the great bulk of serious music was composed before the evolution of Science Fiction. As another time saver, you may usually avoid the records of extraordinarily popular singers, since the great majority of these handle material of Hollywood quality. This latter is not always true, however. One of our examples, "Steady, Daddy", was performed by Miss Kay Starr, one of the biggest female "names" on Capitol Records.

I cannot help you, even with my vast experience. We all know that conflicting opinions exist, even within our own specialized sphere. The "Analytical Lab" department of Astounding Science Fiction is a vivid example.

However, with painstaking research, reference to a large collection of books and magazines, a basic understanding of the origins and usage of the English language, and a complete knowledge of the fundamental themes in Science Fiction, you, too, should be able to trace the vast influence of Science Fiction upon Modern American Folk Music.

Good luck and happy hunting!