

# **Trapped Deep Beneath the Sewage: Representation of the University in Popular Music**

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## **Abstract**

This article reviews the lyrics of popular music in order to uncover how the 'university' is represented in this art form. The lyrics that feature university are coded into themes and these are discussed. The lyrics are initially coded to negative/positive/neutral, but group of more refined themes is also presented. The analysis reveals that whilst the university is still seen as a place of learning, the lyrics of these songs tend to present and represent the university in a negative light. The intention of this article is to promote debate into the way that the university is perceived by popular music songwriters, but also to demonstrate the importance of assessing the place of the university from outside of the (at times) myopic lens of higher educational research.

## **Key Words**

University, Popular music.

## **Introduction**

*“The university is the only accepted institution of the modern culture on which the quest of knowledge unquestionably devolves; and the visible drift of circumstances as well as of public sentiment runs also to making this the only unquestioned duty incumbent on the university.”*

This quote from Thorstein Veblen's 1918 treatise, 'The Higher Learning in America' (Veblen, 2015), outlines what was considered at the time to be the place of the university within Western society. Whilst there has been much research done since (e.g. Etkowitz, 2000; Chatterton, 2000) to investigate how this role has changed (or not) with the passing of time, such studies have been done almost exclusively within the framework of pedagogical and/or higher educational research. Chatterton (2000) for example, echoes the above in his conclusion which notes that universities are still perceived as distant from the communities in which they are located (“The boundary between the university and the community, then, needs redressing.” p.179). However, there is an argument to be made that in order to consider the role of the university in today's society, an alternative lens can be used. Given its ubiquity in today's society, we argue that popular music presents a unique and unusual viewpoint for such a consideration. Popular music is an important aspect of society, and one which is often championed because it enables the expression of ideas that seek social and cultural change (Longhurst, 2007). For the purposes of this study, and to identify the 'lens', it is conducive to assume a definition for popular music based on that provided by the Collins' English Dictionary (Dictionary, 2003), i.e. "music having wide appeal."

This study aims to determine what popular music lyrics might then tell us about the place of the university in today's society, by analysing popular music song lyrics. Work has previously been undertaken that has examined the role of popular music in youth culture (Bennett, 2002), as well as studies that have investigated the appearance of weather in popular music

(Brown et al., 2015), and the potential role of popular music in geographical analyses (Kong, 1995). However, very little has been written about the relationship between popular music and education, excepting texts that examine music education and pedagogy (see e.g. Green, 2002, Dunbar-Hall and Wemyss, 2000).

We recognise that there are issues in separating the lyrics from their delivery, arguably Bob Dylan's genius stems from the mix of music, lyrics and vocals, rather than lyrics alone, although these have merited a noble prize. Light (1992) described Dylan's lyrics as "genuine components of the song." We agree with Farber (1997) that lyrics can be an engaging way of considering "profound issues of living." (p.xxxii) and in this work we felt that lyrics provided us with a 'way into' what popular music has to say about 'higher education' and 'university'.

By analysing the way in which the university appears in lyrics, this study aims to investigate what, if anything, this can tell us about the perception of the university. In the next section, we present the methodology used to conduct this investigation, with the results and discussion of the findings reported in the third section. Within the results and discussion, we refer to the genre of the song under consideration. We have done this to provide the reader with some description of the song; however, we would recommend that readers seek to listen to the songs (via the Internet) to further their own judgements, both about the genre and our classification and discussion of the lyrics. Finally, the conclusions are presented.

## **Method**

Following the methodology outlined by Brown *et al.* (2015), we searched for songs that referenced 'higher education' or 'university/universities' in the lyrics. This effectively involved using a variety of lists and databases of popular music (e.g. karafun.com, songfacts.com), as well as our own musical knowledge. Interestingly, for example, 'University Staircase' by Morrissey did not feature in the databases searched, but came readily to the minds of the authors. We recognise that this search potentially excludes 'college' or 'school' which are synonymous terms in North America, but we sought to limit our focus in this instance. Perhaps future work could broaden the scope to songs about university experience.

Having conducted this search, 113 songs were found which either mentioned 'higher education' or 'university/universities'. A general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006) was undertaken, in which a number of themes were determined from the lyrics. These were termed macro-categories (positive, negative or neutral) and second-stand themes (see below and table one). Following from this open coding, the responses were re-examined in order to confirm that these themes accurately captured the meaning of the lyrics. Each author carried out these codings, independently, until there were no further themes found to be emerging from the data, i.e. until descriptive saturation had been reached. This use of multiple investigators is a triangulation approach recommended by Merriam (1995) in order to assure internal validity.

Having compiled individual categories and themes, the authors met up to compare their analyses. The next step was to remove songs from the list that were irrelevant to the study. For example, lyrics that referenced a location (e.g. 'Christopher Columbus Transcontinental Highway' by Continental Drifters) but made no other reference to either higher education or university as a concept, system or representation. It was also decided that only those songs

that mentioned 'university/universities' would be used for the remainder of the analysis. This left 101 songs to be further analysed during the thematic rationalising.

At this stage, the sets of categories were compared and contrasted, and it was deduced that there was considerable overlap in terms of the independent sets of themes that had been determined, for example, one author had categorised one of the themes as 'nihilism' the other had created a theme called 'pointless'. These were then compared and combined to create a set of merged, unified themes. Each of the lyrics was also coded into a macro-category as 'positive', 'negative' or 'neutral'. This was undertaken in respect of how the song relates to the university itself directly, and not the experiences of the subject and/or object of the song. For example, in 'Divorcee by 23' by Clare Bowditch, the university plays a supporting role as a scene in the tragedy (in the song the protagonist gives up much of her independence to be with a man who later leaves her), but is itself referred to analogously as a place of learning (and also as a rite of passage), and was therefore coded as 'neutral'. Six second-strand themes were also agreed on during this review process:

- Analogous of learning
- Exclusion
- University as a rite of passage
- Symbol of oppression
- Pointless
- Mystical

The two authors then independently reclassified all the songs according to these macro categories and second-strand themes, before meeting up again for a final refining process. At this stage, every song was rechecked individually to ascertain that lyric codings to both macro-categories and second-strand themes were agreed. A further selection of songs was removed for being irrelevant leaving 89 songs within the analysis below.

## Analysis and Discussion

Discussed is the macro-scale categorisation of the songs followed by the second-strand themes. Table one illustrates how the categories and strands relate to each other.

Table one: Macro-scale categories cross-tabulated with second-strand themes

Macro-scale categorisation	Second-strand themes						Totals
	pointless	symbol of oppression	rite of passage	analogous of learning	mystical	exclusion	
Negative	12	14	3	8	0	6	42
Positive	0	0	0	5	0	0	5
Neutral	8	2	7	46	5	10	78
Totals	20	15	10	59	5	16	125

The total figure of 125 classifications in Table one does not agree with the 89 songs considered because some lyrics were coded to more than one second-strand theme.

### Macro-scale - positive

The first section of discussion of the coding of lyrics reports the broad, overview, level. Here three macro-scale categories of lyrics emerged: those that contained 'positive', 'negative' or 'neutral' statements about 'university'. For the first, 'positive' statements, the song 'Madam Joy' by Van Morrison is quoted here as an example.

Steppin' lightly, steppin' brightly, with her books in hand  
Going to the university to teach them, help them understand  
(Morrison, 1998, track 6)

And a second example, the track 'Seventeen' by Canadian hip hop group Buck 65.

I know that burnin' bridges down will never see the end of traffic,  
still I think we're representin' different sets of demographics.  
I mean, for starters right, I finished university  
and in the end I hope that you appreciate diversity.  
(Buck 65, 1996, track 8)

In each example, the university reference relates to positive outcomes, in 'Madam Joy' the students are aided in their understanding, and in 'Seventeen' the university provides an appreciation of diversity. 'Madam Joy' is in fact the only song that specifically mentions university and learning in the same lyrics. One further song, 'No Fighting' by the American pop/rock band Grūvis Malt, also specifically mentions university in relation to a way of a person gaining perspective on diversity.

Of the five songs within the 'positive' category, the remaining two relate to having a degree as something that is considered of value.

#### Macro-scale - negative

There were rather more songs coded to the 'negative' category (42 compared with five 'positive'), two examples are firstly, Bad Religion's 'The Biggest Killer in American History':

But stealthily, in the land of the free, he's lurking there  
Most are unaware of The biggest killer in American history  
And god shed his grace on thee, Business institutions universities  
(Graffin, 1998, track 4)

And secondly, singer-songwriter, Billy Bragg's 'Qualifications':

And the government gave it away. So what's the point in university?  
For three years I read philosophy. Now I read barcodes all day long  
(Bragg, 1997, track 2)

In these examples the negative is readily apparent. In the first quote there is a strong resonance with Stefan Collini's (2015) suggestion that in Britain universities are being repurposed with a business focus and profit purpose, "centres of applied expertise ... subordinate to society's 'economic strategy'" (p.34). The tenor of this comment is similar to Dylan's (1991, track 13) Foot of Pride lyric "they take all this money from sin, build big universities to study in" which, like the rest of the song, is biting and cynical (Gossman, 2014).

It is worth noting that the images conjured up by the 'negative' lyrics tend to feel more powerful than the 'positive' ones. Consider "... send the rich ones to university, the rest get

comics and TV" (De Amitri, 1998, track 13) or "kids in universities, drowning in an ocean of apostate philosophy" (The O. C. Supertones & Terusa, 1999, track 6).

### Macro-scale - neutral

Two examples of songs that were coded as 'neutral':

So you married him and made him home  
Dropped out of university  
All because he said well, honey you're pretty  
(Bowditch, 2005, track 5)

Or

My father was lawyer, mon's at university  
My brother and my sister, they both have their Ph.D.  
My grampa was a pilot shooting Nazis from the sky  
But I am the most famous, I'm a TV weather guy  
(The Arrogant Worms, 1997, track 7)

Two other songs are worth consideration here, Fang's 'Berkley Heathen Scum' and Joan Baez's 'Song of Bangladesh', songs which are similar in respect of their neutral categorisation due to university simply being a location, rather than being representative of something. 'Berkley Heathen Scum' by the hardcore punk band Fang (McBride & Flynn, 1982), suggests that the University of California at Berkley is a place where the aspirant "bitches" of the lyrics hang-out and that the narrator, "a junkie drunken bum" has given them herpes. Similarly, in 'Song of Bangladesh', the singer-songwriter tells us how the students at a university are shot, at night, in their beds. The lyrics refer to the indiscriminate killing of students at Dhaka University in 1971. The song is overriding negative and clearly about the mindlessness of war and the killing of students, in response to their perceived status (as with the similar killing of intellectuals in many conflicts). In the case of these two songs it is difficult to categorise them as 'negative', as the tenor of the songs might suggest. The 'university' in the lyrics simply represents a place of change and development.

In some instances, we allocated songs to the 'neutral' category as we considered that we were projecting our interpretations on to the lyrics. This is akin to Middleton's 'under-coding' where a song's meaning is developed from the listener's experiences (1990) or Moore's (2012) belief that meaning is only a possibility, i.e., "we can say what they are not about, we can only specify a range of possibilities as to what they might be thought to be about" (p.6). Hence, our reluctance to code some lyrics as 'positive' or 'negative'. Of course, we cannot actually know the writer's intention and so any coding is our own and we hopefully have undertaken it in a credible and trustworthy way. However, we suggest that the finer second-strand coding, is perhaps dependent on less uncertain judgements, is what makes songs and their lyrics 'resonate'.

### Second-strand - pointless

Twenty songs were coded to the second-strand theme 'pointless'. In this theme the lyric-writer suggests that a university education is for some reason or another essentially 'pointless'. In some cases, the 'pointlessness' of university is referenced against other forms of knowing, for example:

Cause nuff a wah dem learn in university and college  
(Cause a lot of what you learn in ...)  
It water down and dilute  
I tell you street smarts wi (will) carry you through life like a carriage  
(Livingston, Marley & Marley, 2005, track 4)

Or the rather bleak:

From a university degree to driving a taxi  
72 kilos of Nigerian weed  
I'm there in the place where they do the '419'  
(Jones, 2005, track 6)

The 419 in the above lyric refers to the police code for a dead body.

Clearly, these two songs; the reggae, 'The Master has come back' (by Damian Marley) and the funk, '72 Kilos' (by Keziah Jones) fit as macro-scale 'negative'. The songs 'Qualifications' (by Billy Bragg) and 'Full Turn' (by Facing New York) are also examples classified as both 'negative' at the macro-scale and 'pointless'. There is also a spectrum of 'pointless' with the Bragg (1997) lyric directly asking, about the whole experience, i.e. "so what is the point of university?" Conversely, songs like 'Patience' (Jones & Marley, 2010, track 11) suggest that universities are learned places, i.e. that "Scholars teach in universities and claim that they're smart and cunning" but that such learning is not sufficiently applied: "Tell them find a cure when we sneeze and that's when their nose start running." Of particular interest here is the fact that the rap/reggae collaboration here was part of a charity project for African schools. The previously mentioned 'Grounded' (by the O. C. Supertones, see above) suggests, in the context of what universities could provide, "We need apologetic instruction, mental reconstruction, ignorance reduction, to halt the mass abduction", presumably into secular and materialistic society as The O. C. Supertones are described by Bush (n.d) as a "Christian ska-punk band."

### Second-strand - oppression

For the next coded theme, 'symbol of oppression', the macro-codings also tended to be 'negative'. Oppression as defined by the second-strand coding refers either to the university doing the oppression, or it being or acting as an agent for the oppressor, most often society in a general sense:

Me say: da Babylon system is the vampire, falling empire  
Suckin' the blood of the sufferers, yea-ea-e-ah!  
Building church and university, woo yeah!  
(Marley, 2001, track 4)

Another example of university as a 'symbol of oppression' in society is the Street Dogs song 'Declaration', "How many soldiers march and die under the blanket of democracy, While the rich man's sons conveniently go to Ivy League University" (Guidotti & McColgan, 2003, track 11).

An example of when the university is the oppressor:

Don't like scholarships because they hurt me  
Nothin' but a slave to the university  
That's why ya see me on the track field run by ya  
Caught by a liar who wanna take me higher  
(Ice Cube, 1995, track 1)

This song features in the film 'Higher Learning,' which deals with issues of racial and sexual prejudice in a fictitious southern American university (Maslin, 1995). The song illustrates how universities can reinforce, and in some cases encourage and even develop social class divides. Similarly, the song 'Young Conservatives' (by The Kinks) is an excellent example of the university as a societal instrument of oppression, or at the very least an institution that perpetuates the status quo, stating "And the schools and universities are turning out a brand-new breed of young conservatives" (Davies, 1983/2010, track 7).

### Second-strand – rite of passage

Because study at university occurs for many 'traditional' students at an age of transition into adulthood, it is unsurprising that a theme relating to 'rite of passage' emerged from the lyrics. It might be anticipated that this would be perceived as a 'positive' thing, but the macro-categories were either 'neutral' or 'negative'. In the example the change in situation - home to university - is also associated with a change in the relationship:

You went to university  
You lost your virginity  
Saw more of him and less of me  
(Little Man Tate, 2007, track3)

The lyrics was macro-coded as 'neutral', as the university itself was analysed as not being the sole cause for the breakup, but rather as providing a setting or context within the narrative., This song, again, highlights the difficulty faced in ascertaining the role of the university (either implicitly or explicitly) in terms of perceived 'negative' impacts. A further example, illustrating the importance of university in a person's life comes from 'For Sasha':

Your youth unbreaded takes form in words  
And the ghosts of the past are kind  
For this was your university  
The years were long but the spirits free  
(Baez, 1979, track 6)

Given that the university was once more simply providing context to the narrative, this lyric was also coded as 'neutral.'

### Second-strand - analogous of learning

Like 'rite of passage', the emergence of 'analogous of learning' is unsurprising because of the educational role universities have. However, the analogies tend towards the 'negative' macro-categorisation, where the subject of the learning might be viewed as counter to culturally acceptable.

Well, listen, okay  
Class, today at Break-a-bitch University  
We will teach young bustas, playa-hatas

(Smith & Goodwin, 1994, track 11)

Or, as adopted in the title of this article, these cynical lyrics:

Trapped deep beneath the sewage  
I attend the university of making money

(Huston (Prince Paul), 1999, track 8)

However, there are also less challenging negative references; consider the subject's viewpoint on his "perfect cousin" from the Undertones:

He's got a degree in economics  
Maths, physics and bionics  
He thinks that I'm a cabbage  
'Cause I hate University Challenge

(O'Neill & Bradley, 1980, track 1)

The 8Ball & MJG rap song 'Break a bitch college' (Smith & Goodwin, 1994) is interesting, as the song's content is arguably offensive but the outcome is learning, which is normally constructed as something positive. The 'university' in the song is portrayed as successful and this might be interpreted as a satirical comment on the huge range of subjects that universities teach, but are easy to ridicule for their unusualness. A common understanding of a university education, especially in a performative age, is that what is beneficial for the individual is beneficial for the society (see for example Brancalone & O'Brien). This is not the case for these songs, where 'beneficial' for the individual is perhaps not advantageous to the collective.

Within this theme the comparison between formal university and the 'university of life' is also made. For example, the Prince Paul lyric and the Faithless song 'Reverence' which contains the lyric "I'm from the street university, where we learn to earn even in times of adversity, and always find the easy way out of a hard time, Petty crime sometimes" (Bliss, Jazz & Armstrong, 1996, track 1). There are also positive examples:

I left barber college, searchin' for knowledge  
Went to the university. I must confess, sir  
This lady professor, she turned me on to anthropology

(Friedman & Red, 1974, track 3)

In each of these the analogy of learning and the link to university, as representative of learning is clear.

### Second-strand - mystical

The fifth theme 'mystical' had five songs coded to the theme and in each the university is associated with some recondite 'neutral' meaning; all macro-coded as being 'neutral'. Here the coding was relatively straightforward, but the meaning in the lyrics is probably left to individual construction. An examples:



She's a well to be dug, she's a university  
A cosmic library, wait and see

(Ashcroft, 2002, track 6)

### Second-strand - exclusion

The final second-stranded theme, 'exclusion', identified lyrics that deal with the university as a source of exclusivity, and where like oppression the actual excluder varies in identification. Societal democracy in the first example, 'others' ("your friends") in the second, and the subject themselves in the third. No songs were categorised as 'positive' with most featuring as 'neutral'.

How many soldiers march and die under the blanket of democracy  
While rich man's sons conveniently go to Ivy League University

(McColgan & Rioux, 2003, track 11)

Or

Never been near a university  
Never took a paper or a learned degree  
And some of your friends think that's stupid of me  
But it's nothing that I care about

(Partridge, 1989, track 2)

Or

Go to college, a university, get a real job  
That's what they said to me  
But I could never live the way they want

(Feldmann, Madden & Madden, 2002, track 2)

Arguably the subject and the object of the 'exclusion' view it in contrasting ways. For the subject it would be easy to consider the exclusion as being negative, although ambivalence is perhaps a more accurate evaluation in the second example ('Major of Simpleton' by XTC), whilst in the third song ('The Anthem' by Good Charlotte) there is an element of disappointing someone (parents).

In the songs where society is the excluder, university is the institution that people have been excluded from. In each of these cases the implication for the excluded is negative, access discrimination to the same education (implied by university). This is clearly the case in the 'Declaration' (McColgan & Rioux, 2003) and in 'So many souls to change' by Del Amitri, which contains the lyric: "you are complicit in this conspiracy, you are unable to get free. They send the rich ones to University and the rest get comics and TV." (Currie, 1990/2014, track 6).

### **Further Discussion**

It is worth discussing how an alternative analysis might have been conducted via a brief case study of Pete Seeger's version of Malvina Reynold's 'Little Boxes'. When we started to

consider 'university' in the songs and their lyrics we also discussed what measures might be utilised in developing debate. For example, we might have categorised the songs in relation to genre (folk) or according to key (F) or tempo (moderate waltz). A more unusual categorisation might have been according to one of Daniel Levitin's (2008) six song categories: friendship, joy, comfort, religion, knowledge, and love (arguably 'Little Boxes' is a knowledge song about the conformity of the American middle-class). We might also have considered the instruments used, the sound of the vocals, the songs structure and so on. A disaggregated discussion provides a unique case study at odds with the songs' lyrics.

And the people in the houses all went to the university,  
Where they were put in boxes and they came out all the same,

And the children go to summer camp and then to the university,  
Where they are put in boxes and they come out all the same.

(Reynolds, 1962, track 3)

'Little Boxes' is a good example of how university is part of "the man's" system (see Orbison, 1962/87, track 9). In this case the style and the content are incongruent; the heavy sardonic political satire is set to a major key, and a moderately upbeat, cheerful tune/tempo. Moore (2012, p.5) notes "too often in the literature, whether academic, journalistic, fan posting, or whatever, interpretations are made without adequate anchorage in the details of an actual aural experience of a song." Perhaps reader's interest will be piqued by some of the lyrics and provoke investigation of song genre, instruments, vocal style and other aspects of music and performance.

It is important to consider the way in which this lyrical shorthand 'university' is used to represent other concepts, perhaps most particularly in the use of 'analogous of learning'. An example of this comes from the song 'Kuruptioned Flesh' by the rapper Kurupt:

They asked some students in a major eastern university ...  
do you think that God understands reggae?

With the answer:

And the overwhelming majority of these students said no  
God doesn't understand reggae  
There was blindness in menace

(Elliott & Brown, 2000, track 9).

Arguably the "blindness" relates to the lack of thought by students who, assuming God exists and is all powerful, would surely therefore understand reggae. The implication, perhaps is that university is a positive place to attend and is used here to represent an intelligent group of people, who however, do not fully analyse the question posed to them. In addition, the question can also be linked back to the value judgment that can be made about the point, purpose and focus of university study.

In several lyrics a particular aspect of university 'pointlessness' emerges, often raised in the context of something that is not taught. For example, the pop/rock band Metronomy note, "Never learned about it [love] in university" (Besson & Mount, 2014, track 2). The Pet Shop

Boys lyric contradicts this as it explicitly states that universities do teach about love, or at least how it is socially constructed.

When you walked out you did me a favour  
It's absolutely clear to me  
That love is a bourgeois construct  
Just like they said at university

(Tenant & Lowe, 2013, track 1)

The link in this lyric is sophisticated as it illustrates 'university' as 'analogous of learning' but also highly personalises the subjects feeling about a lost love.

## **Conclusion**

As is often the case we now have more questions than answers. For example, we did not consider the songs' date of writing; could it be that the positive/negative ratio has dynamically changed over time, and if so then what might have caused that change? However, we hope that our analysis prompts some discussion and at the very least has highlighted some songs and artists that you might 'check out' in order find out what they are saying about universities.

The nature of university as a place of learning was not unexpected, however, the number of negative ways that this analogy was made was revealing. This negative tone seems to generalise the way in which songwriters perceive universities. Inglis (2000) notes that popular music is “consistently referenced through a discourse of anti-intellectualism which admits the physical, the emotional and the behavioural impacts” (p.2) so its negative view of education is perhaps not that surprising.

This in turn raises the broader question of whether art imitates society or vice versa. If it is the former, then universities have quite a PR job on their hands! Of course the song writers considered here only represent a small proportion of the population, but our analysis reveals an image problem that universities may be facing. The issue of who is writing the lyrics is worth considering, but beyond the scope of this study. Equally worthy of consideration, but again beyond our scope, is the function popular music might serve as a critic, in this case, of universities / higher education.

The emergence of the 'analogous of learning' and 'rite of passage' second-strand themes seems to suggest a common understanding of the pivotal role going to and studying at university has in someone's life. However, the slightly nihilistic second-strand theme of 'pointless' emerges and echoes Mats Alvesson's (2014) writing about consumption, higher education & work organisation, particularly in relation to graduates compared with employment requiring a degree. The prevalent 'analogous of learning' theme is one synonymous with the starting quote from Verben (2015), our analysis suggests that the place of the university is something “on which the quest of knowledge unquestionably devolves,” although the emergence of other themes means that this role is not quite so unquestionable.

Most troubling is the emergence of the second-strand themes of 'oppression' and 'exclusion.' Even with a widening participation agenda universities in these songs act as oppressors and societal gatekeepers and even when they are only passively responsible for the exclusion, it is

an indictment that they are not active challengers to these behaviours. To paraphrase Chatterton (2000), the perception of universities by popular music needs redressing.

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