

THE COMING DEMISE OF POP MUSIC

DON MCLEAN'S AWFUL PROPHECY COMES TRUE

A Doom Announcement by

ALTON THOMPSON

Something has been gnawing at the conscience of classical musicians lately. We have come to fear for the future of an important musical art form. You know which one I mean. The clock is ticking and our culture is faced with The Impending Demise of Pop Music.

THE CRISIS

Everyone knows how much the major record companies are struggling these days. But do you know what the problem is? Get this: pop music's *own fans* have decided by the millions that the product is *no longer worth paying money for*.

Can you believe it? With fans like that, who needs detractors? Talk about an imperiled art form!

And have you noticed what is happening to pop music's stars? Research shows that one-time chart toppers like Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, John Bonham, Keith Moon, and half the Beatles are all *dead*. The trend continues in the world of rap, where stars like Notorious Big, Jam Master Jay, and ODB are now cruising the Great 'Hood in the Sky.

A look at the pop stars who are still with us shows how the art form continues its downhill slide. Did you see the way U2 had to *sit there* at the Grammys a few years ago and watch all those rustics from *O Brother Where Art Thou* take the awards? Did you see how Bruce Springsteen lent all his energies to John Kerry's 2004 campaign—then Kerry *lost*? Then there's *Mariah Carey*, formerly ubiquitous MTV diva, whose movie *Glitter* actually *bombed* at the box office. Did you know record executives paid millions

of dollars after that to *avoid* recording her music? It's true. You can look it up.

Who can doubt anymore? Pop music is losing ground right and left!

But here's the clincher. Have you noticed the age of pop's audience? Look around at any hip-hop concert, and you're likely to see a disproportionate number of audience members who are *under thirty*.

Anyone can see that this ominous sign bodes ill for the future of the art form. Why isn't pop music appealing to a more diverse fan base? Why isn't its audience more diverse? Why aren't its outreach programs working? What will happen when these people turn thirty? Forty? Fifty? (Current trends suggest that, by the time their hair turns gray, they will be seen at—get this—orchestra concerts!)

How will pop music survive? Who will listen to Justin Timberlake in fifteen years? Can't you imagine the poor guy, standing alone on stage in an empty hall, tugging at his jacket in a futile attempt to create one last wardrobe malfunction? Oh, the humanity!

VERDI AND MONTEVERDI – GREENER GRASS?

The picture is even sadder when the dismal state of pop music is set against the heady success being enjoyed today by other musical styles. Take classical, for instance. Here the comparisons are cruel.

In the classical music world we see glistening new concert halls open for orchestras in Shanghai, Los Angeles, Chevy Chase, and Philadelphia together with spectacular upgrades in London, Washington DC, and Europe. The orchestras in those halls play premieres for packed houses. We see 24-year-old Hilary Hahn touring the world, playing premieres for packed houses. We see Yo-Yo Ma touring the world, playing premieres for packed houses.

What's pop music been doing? Well . . . they lost millions of dollars in potential revenues again last year. And there's Michael Jackson.

Sad, isn't it? We classical musicians are so lucky.

Pop music wasn't always in such a sad state. There was a time when Huey Lewis and the News could sing *the oboe may be barely breathin'/but the heart of rock'n'roll is still beatin'*.

All the more ironic, then, that rock was the music that flatlined. Shortly after these lyrics were recorded, The Three Tenors and a bunch of monks in France each outsold the Rolling Stones. Today we look out upon a scene in which Mr Lewis and his old News have not produced a hit in ten years . . . while in that same period, thousands of students all over the world began taking their first woodwind lessons!

Roll over, Selena, and tell Tupac Shakur the news!

Pop stars, desperate to infuse something novel into their dying art, long ago began taking theatrical measures—donning garish costumes, smashing guitars, wearing diabolical names, overblowing the volume, shouting obscenities, drinking spit—to keep the audience from noticing that the music had no ideas. They lived in fear of their audiences discovering that their so-called 'radical' sound didn't involve a single chord progression that wasn't old hat to Mozart by his sixth birthday.

Today pop's stars lag so far behind their classical counterparts in charisma and know-how that they can't even get the theatrics to work. When Madonna kisses Britney, people protest. When Beethoven kisses the whole world, people applaud. When Janet Jackson shows skin, people protest. When Maria Ewing shows skin, people buy tickets.

Pop stars just don't have the knack. They can't win for losing.

And when you think about Mariah Carey being paid millions so her singing *won't* be recorded, you have to feel for this poor person. Florence Foster Jenkins got more respect.

ALLE MENSCHEN WERDEN BRÜDER

How long we classical artists continue thinking only of ourselves? We can't just keep playing spectacular premieres, wearing elegant formals in our glimmering concert halls, while our pop music counterparts and their entire way of life goes the way of the hokey-pokey. Can we?

We should do something. A benefit concert.

We could call it Rock-Aid, maybe, or Roll-Aid. A gala of sumptuous music for the benefit of our needy colleagues in the pop music industry. A few of our many acclaimed composers could contribute works for the occasion:

- *A Woodstock Requiem*
- *Oboe Variations on a Theme by Huey Lewis (fl.1988)*
- *Adagio for Wild Things*
- *Violin Concerto for Hilary Hahn (on an Unrecorded Theme by Mariah Carey-fl. 1999)*
- *A Survivor from Neverland*
- *Threnody for the Victims of Napster*

It's hard to know how much this will help. The hour is late and the situation is dire. No wonder pop stars today wear names like Usher. But it's a start. At least we classical musicians will know, when pop music finally does its ultimate dancing in the dark, that we did our part.

Don't give up, Snoop. Help is on the way!

© 2005 Alton Thompson. All rights reserved.