

Standing Next to Everyman: Social Commentary and Classic Rock Music

written by Gavin Lakin | September 13, 2017



There is no place in popular music for commentary, politics, and opinions—essentially sounding “preachy”. Hey, come on now, really? We’ve all been there in our own lives, when someone may be speaking to you directly or to a larger group about some idea or product, and you can feel that oily, snaky and unwelcome intrusion insidiously attempting to seep into and under your skin. Hackles raise.

Art is a subjective and all about perspective. How we interpret music is extremely personal—even proprietary. Don’t be messing with it. Our lives are soundtracks where we can pinpoint moments that songs entered our lives for emotional support or the backdrop for a significant decision. For that first kiss. Or, an association with the loss of a loved one. Songs entertain us—a diversion that carries us away from life’s infernal background noise. Some of us zero in on the music, while for others, it’s the lyric. We crave songs to speak to us in some way without *telling* us how to feel. If they dare cross that definitive line, we sense it and we tune out.

In the 1970s, *effecting change* was synonymous with a large proportion of the music I listened to. Typically, it was the lyric combined with a plaintiff rendering that spoke to me in earnest. (Like Elton John, Joni Mitchell, Carole King and Jackson Browne.) For others, lyrics saturated into the rhythm and groove superseded this (Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, War). Not unlike millions of others influenced by music, over the years, I wrote letters to public officials, dug postholes to build fences at Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant (stood side by side with Jackson Browne as we stuffed envelopes with flyers), ran in distance races to raise funding and awareness for issues pertaining to marine life and putting an end to clear-cutting deforestation, and protested at the nuclear submarine station at Bangor, Washington as the morning shift workers walked by us yelling slurs too odious to repeat here.

Recording artists *always* had something to say about society (yes, even ABBA and The Bee Gees); it’s that they were strategic about *when and how* they did it. Rarely did they blast onto the charts with a song, say like, “Anarchy in the U.K.” Marvin Gaye was performing the *Motown* catalog for over a decade

before he asked that momentous and timely question. Janis Ian shopped her best-selling song for several years before a television performance drew the attention and critical acclaim it deserved. Out of New York, Sylvia Robinson ("Pillow Talk" 1973) was *the* catalyst behind early Rap and Hip-Hop, where The Sugarhill Gang (named for Harlem's Sugar Hill, home to early-mid 1900s affluent African-American music culture) were developing their funky new sound. To underscore the point, in the prior decade, The Beatles didn't explode onto the scene with "Taxman" or "Revolution." They just wanted to hold someone's hand.

Much of what happened from "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head" to "Escape (The Piña Colada Song)" –the first and last #1 singles of the 1970s–was literally *off the charts*. The decade was laden with source material for every possible joint getting out of whack. For example, in 1972, Helen Reddy *roared*. Apparently, Paul Anka missed *that* memo. Research what happened when he released "(You're) Having My Baby" (1974). Women's groups railed out against it as seriously sexist. (In 2006, a CNN poll named it as #1 Worst Song of all Time). In vain, Mr. Anka tried to clarify that the word "my" just "sounded better than "our".

On that note, there is no doubt there are omissions from my list–Reddy's song included–not from disrespect, but from the knowledge that the decade provided a wealth of evocative material (in this case, regarding women's issues I chose Janis Ian and Carole King as more to the point–with less screaming). I submit an array of topics, poetic approaches, music genres–many were subtle and earnest, or they made you want to boogie, while others rattled the eardrums and shook the walls. In the end, no matter the sonic and handwritten approach, is that not what the decade demanded? –to stir things up and move our species to a *higher ground*?

Here then is my compilation of the Top Twenty–okay, twenty-one–1970s social commentary songs, forever and for all time:

Number 20: "Redman" (Rare Bird, 1974)

There are many songs about indigenous people and their unjust, and in most cases, devastating plight. Our country's history is filled with inexcusable injustices and broken treaties from Florida to Ft. Laramie. Though other recording artists have taken on this issue (Elton John's "Indian Sunset," sorry, not Cher's "Half Breed"), this short-lived but talented English band eloquently captured the sorrow without a hint of pretension or *Hey you, feel guilty about what you did to Native Americans!* Lyrically, "the end of the race for the Redman" is a clever and moving *double entendre*.

♪

Number 19: "Big Yellow Taxi" (Joni Mitchell, 1970)

This uplifting storytelling laced with Ms. Mitchell's signature irony is certainly about romantic disappointment through the lens of social

commentary. Youth shines through as this bubbly romp through DDT and tree museums may lack a certain serious quality to the melody and tempo, but, hey, who cares? When you pave paradise with a parking lot, then giggle about it, you automatically make this list.

♪

Number 18: "Anarchy in the U.K." (The Sex Pistols, 1976)

Simply put, The Sex Pistols were fed up with mainstream, *boring* music—whether in England or across the pond. They answered back with this bust-out smash. It spoke directly to the youth, many of whom related to the rising economic disparity, sung, I mean, yelled in most of the Pistols' tunes. The frenetic energy alone would make any human spring like pogo sticks or dive into mosh pits. We all know the story of Punk's role in music history: it opened a *Pandora's box* of fighting the machine that lasted for—depending how you define it—far into the eighties. Many would argue the scene lives on and never left. Sure, "it" won't ever die. However, *MTV* was more inclined toward Spandau Ballet and Flock of Seagulls than Johnny Rotten going off on the Queen of England. Sid Vicious would soon join in and it was open season on Her Majesty. "God save the Queen/She ain't no human being/There is no future/In England's dreaming." Art Rock settled in and became the soundtrack for the decade, and a whole lot of weddings (see "True"). So, yes, The Sex Pistols are remembered for their prominent role in defining a new music genre based on being pissed off; me, I'll take opera.

♪

Number 17: "Nature's Way" (Spirit, 1971)



Here was Randy California's poignant commentary, in effect indirectly letting "nature" be the song's narrator. *It's nature's way of telling you something's wrong / It's nature's way of telling you in a song* was a simple truth, with gentle guitar beneath it like a forest floor, yet with a trance-like quality that stays with you forever. On Molokai in 1997, Randy drowned rescuing his son, Quinn, from the riptide, the paradox being this talented, heroic musician died at the hands of nature.

♪

Number 16: "Rapper's Delight" (The Sugarhill Gang, 1979)

Full disclosure: I am an ember-encased fossil from the *Jurassic Era*. Music is universal communication defined by humility and generosity of spirit. It can move you, make you move on the dance floor, get you to make a difference, sentimentally wreak havoc with your tear ducts, and it can hold your hand as you fall desperately in love. Without a doubt, songwriting is free expression. *Try*, I told myself. There are some melodies . . . somewhere! During the early 1980s, I spent a lot of time in Manhattan. Watched street performers with their boomboxes. Nothing like it. “Rapper’s Delight” is credited with being the first produced Hip-Hop song. It was a smash single. Followed by heavy hitters such as Grandmaster Flash, Rap and Hip-Hop captivated the nation’s youth (those who eschewed Punk). Time for the dinosaurs to push on.

♪

**Number 15: “To the Last Whale” (A: Critical Mass / B: Wind on the Water)
(David Crosby/Graham Nash, 1975)**



The organization, Greenpeace, was and continues to be a major player with protecting the environment and endangered species, including the controversial practice of whaling. To this day, some countries still butcher these magnificent, intelligent creatures. Crosby and Nash strike the right chord between a poetic homage and a call to action. Haunting, its opening a *cappella* “Critical Mass” is sheer music brilliance. As the song segues with Craig Doerge’s majestic piano motif, I am transported to the ocean where the actual singing takes place. *Wind on the water, carry me home*. They infused me with a desire to become a marine biologist.

♪

Number 14: “A Junkie’s Lament” (James Taylor, 1976)

Originally, I had chosen Neil Young’s “The Needle and the Damage Done”. Without question, both songs go to the heart of addiction. Neil was seriously affected by his Crazy Horse bandmate Danny Whitten’s heroin overdose, as well as that of roadie and friend Bruce Berry’s. Choosing James Taylor’s song had everything to do with his *own* struggles with addiction throughout the decade, and *entirely* through his marriage with Carly Simon. If you listen to the song, you might find its somewhat cheerful and upbeat music disconcerting. Knowing James, this was a conscious choice. By the coda, where the half-time “la-la’s” take on an almost orchestral feel, I finally sense the heaviness and helplessness of being trapped within the alluring opiate. So many

musicians lost their lives to an overdose or being in the wrong airplane. There are no explanations. Thankfully, James Taylor was not someone we lamented over.

♪

Number 13: "Power" (MUSE/John Hall, 1979)



John Hall's "Power" needs no introduction, or any other commentary from me; just complete admiration. *Please take all of your atomic poison power away.* There was one positive result of Three Mile Island's near meltdown: this amazing song, the set of revolutionary concerts and the awesome musicians involved and its subsequent film (not to mention the film *The China Syndrome*). Whether you believe the cumulative impact of these well-organized events or not, no new nuclear power plants have built in this country after 1979. Talk about *power*.

♪

Number 12: "Us and Them" (Pink Floyd, 1974)

In this set piece from the entire musical enigma known as *Dark Side of the Moon*, I gravitate (in my spacesuit) to this particular lyric: "And after all we're only ordinary men." Sexist, yes. Still, sifting through the sand hidden by the Moon's shadow—at least that's what it feels like—the song's sultry saxophone and mesmerizing tempo suggest a tiny ray of optimistic light for the human race; even if "the old man died".

♪

Number 11: "Beautiful" (Carole King, 1971)

The first line alone is not a request, it's a demand! "You've got to get up every morning with a smile on your face and show the world all the love in your heart," and later, ". . . you're gonna find, yes you will, that you're beautiful as you feel." By the time *Tapestry* was released, Carole had written so many hits without ever proclaiming that she was an (inadvertent) symbol for the emerging women's movement. From the same album, we can juxtapose "Will You Love Me Tomorrow," its lyric written by Gerry Goffin, her former husband. Hey, she's curious if when she wakes up in the morning, will he still love me, or was I simply a "moment's pleasure?" Conversely, "Beautiful"

is asserting itself, as women were around the world, that beauty is on the inside. It wasn't men *per se* who were the majority oppressing women, potentially it was also a woman's insecurity. Why don't we show all the love in our hearts? Every day? As one of Khaled Hosseini's main themes in *The Kite Runner* (2003), with so many demons rattling around in our heads, it's difficult to find perspective. Carole offered it and if *Billboard's* charts are any indication, millions *did*.

♪

Number 10: "Wake Up Everybody" (Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes, 1975)

Written by the masterful team of Whitehead and McFadden, Teddy Pendergrass sang this embattled plea for every day folks to rise from their apathetic slumber. After the general public came teachers, doctors and builders. Unfortunately, the fretting 1970s were riddled with racial bias, misappropriation of school funding, cities filing for bankruptcy, bussing, and inner-city schools as bastions of hopelessness. How much effect did songs like this have? Though it can't be measured, its melody and lyric were accessible to the ear, especially the uplifting chorus. To this day, every time I listen to it, I want to change *something*.

♪

Number 9: "For Everyman" (Jackson Browne, 1973)

Jackson Browne has made a career of commentary songs, though I'm sure he would not describe them as such. The title track—with its hook *just another dreamer dreaming about everyman*—brought optimism to a country reeling from the Flower Power 1960s far back in the rearview mirror, being on the losing end of the Vietnam War, Watergate and the mistrust of our government, and a country with rising unemployment and an unreached mountaintop of societal ills. His soothing voice and vision of better days may have been and continue to be anachronistic, or even folly; yet one wonders how many lives Jackson has incited toward action.

♪

Number 8: "The World is a Ghetto" (War, 1972)

Once the band War broke away from Eric Burdon in 1971, they "exploded" on the charts with several hits including "All Day Music," "Slippin' Into Darkness" and later "The Cisco Kid" and "Low Rider." But squeezed in between those, is their socially-conscious masterpiece. This was 1972: lush, mildly funky, with legato harmonies, and simple but introspective lyrics: "*Wonder when I'll find Paradise / Somewhere there's a home / Sweet and nice / Wonder if I'll find happiness / Better give it up now I guess.*" Here was a definitively honest look at the inner city, holding it up ironically with a beautiful day at odds with the harsh economic realities.

♪

Number 7: "Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters" (Elton John, 1972)

Spanish Harlem. New York City. Bernie Taupin. According to Mr. Taupin, he was inspired to write this lyric (a 1972 version) as an homage to Ben E. King's "Spanish Harlem". However, the ultimate catalyst for completing it was hearing a gunshot outside the hotel. Add the fact that it was the first time he had stayed in The Big Apple. So that beautiful Spanish rose had grown some deadly thorns. Hand the imagery over to Sir Elton and you can feel the uncertainty and the narrator's shift to a lonelier life via the verses' *staccato* chord progressions and the chorus's more legato feel. "*While Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters, sons of bankers, sons of lawyers, turn around and say good morning to the night, for unless they see the sky, but they can't and that is why, they know not if it's dark outside or light*". Like so much of their work, this song can be interpreted in so many different ways. Subjectivity . . . art's through line. For me, it's about disillusionment, vacuous existence, and those who suffer through the cold city streets. Artists paint the picture; we have the pleasure of gazing further within the light and shadows.

♪

Number 6: "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (Gil Scott-Heron, 1971)

With respect to Sylvia Robinson and Sugar Hill, Gil Scott-Heron, pride of Chicago, Illinois, is the founder of Rap and Hip-Hop. Period. One addendum: Research Gil's discography. The majority of his work is about injustice not only in America but around the world. He described himself as a "bluesologist". Fair enough. Tell that to the thousands of Rap and Hip-Hop artists who cite him as their singular inspiration. From his debut studio LP *Pieces of a Man*, this flute-infused, occasionally musically dissonant song's conversational style delivers a range of caustic reference points like *Bullwinkle*, the nubs, giving your mouth sex appeal, a tiger in your tank, a giant in your toilet bowl, and the revolution will not go better with *Coke*. Meanwhile, Gil pelts the listener with serious social challenges including pictures of pigs shooting down brothers, black people looking for a brighter day, and its button ending, "*the revolution will be live*". Gil was a master at choosing when to groove, when to be more balladic, and when to bash you on the head with something. I was fortunate to see him at The Roxy back in his heyday around the time of the release of *1980*. Not only was the evening memorable for being a part of something that motivated me to take more action, Kareem Abdul Jabbar entered (late) and took in the show from a table nearby. I felt bad for the folks seated directly behind the Big Fella.

♪

Number 5: "At Seventeen" (Janis Ian, 1975)



When Norah Jones arrived on the airwaves, I thought I was listening to Janis Ian. You may recall that Ms. Jones took home eight Grammys between her debut in 2003 and 2005. Yes, sorry, she *came away* with them. New Yorker, Ms. Ian, took her open wound homage to ugly duckling girls to #1 in 1975 where it won her a Grammy as well. Cheers to Helen Reddy as she gathered the forces and inspired millions when she released “I Am Woman” in 1972. However, Janis beat out Helen, Linda Ronstadt and Olivia Newton-John for her award. It took nearly eight years for the powers-(men)-that-be to recognize her talent. Other obstacles included at least one major record company not backing her because of her perceived sexuality preference. The individual involved eventually apologized. Since those earlier years, Ms. Ian has spent her later life creating positive energy, with a healthy following of fans, and thrives with her writing and acting. Hallelujah, life is no longer about beauty queens—a large part due to Janis.

♪

Number 4: “Living for the City” (Stevie Wonder, 1973)

Stevie Wonder has many songs that would qualify for anyone’s list, but since I can only choose one, it must be the ultimate #1 R&B commentary hit on inner city life circa late 1973. By the time the LP *Innervisions* took the country by storm, Stevie was becoming less “Little Stevie” and more like *the* spokesman of his generation. This could have been *only* a three-minute song, but the permissive decade allowed artists to take artistic license. The song goes into what sounds like a fadeout (the single version edit was 3:41) with Stevie and the backing vocalists giving the hook all they could. But then we got the story of the young man arriving in NYC with its “*skyscrapers and everything*”. From bus to the drug deal to the courtroom to the prison cell. What we really got was a smack-in-your-face look at the daily injustices that were occurring set to a funky keyboard-driven boogie. Stevie, without question, sees just fine.

♪

Number 3: “Won’t Get Fooled Again” (The Who, 1971)

Chalk one up for a title that misleads, yet still applies to the list. Pete Townshend originally wrote it for his musical, *Lifeforce*. Instead, it became the closing track on the unparalleled record *Who’s Next*. The song is a staple at performances, usually the closing number. Sadly, it was the last tune played live by drummer extraordinaire, Keith Moon. When the *Lifeforce* project

was abandoned, Townshend was in a phase of his life not uncommon for rockers who'd followed George Harrison: spirituality. "Fooled" is less about getting the wool pulled over by The Man, about being angry, and more about a diffidence toward revolution and power. Additionally, the actual synthesizer work involved human speech tones. Like Brian Wilson and The Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations," the new technologies invited the abstract mind to let her rip. Eventually, Townshend, with help from several engineers and producers got the sound right. However, there was a catch: Moon and bassist John Entwistle no longer had a click to play to—they had to play to a slowed-down version in real time! One author, Dave Marsh, wrote that Daltrey's scream near the song's conclusion as "the greatest scream of a career filled with screams".

♪

Number 2: "Ohio" (Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, 1974, originally written 1970)

Neil Young wrote it in the time it has taken you to read this . . . really. His outrage, along with the nation's, dictated an immediate response to what he and his bandmates David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash assumed was the work of President Nixon. The vehement rocker was recorded live at L.A.'s Record Plant in only a few takes. Kent State University. Four dead. *How many more?* Yes, David Crosby *really* was crying at the song's fadeout. And so were millions of us. The mobilization of the National Guard had actually been ordered by Governor Jim Rhodes, not the president. Weren't National Guardsmen taught to err on the side of non-lethal force? As a result, as time passed, radio stations banned the song as it was perceived as an affront to the White House. However, the Man in Charge would get his comeuppance when there was an incident at some sleazy hotel. A note of irony: just a few weeks later "Teach Your Children" was on the airwaves as the group released "Ohio" (before being banned on most stations). We remember the fallen:

Allison B. Krause (age 19)

Jeffrey Glenn Miller (age 20)

Sandra Lee Scheuer (age 20)

William Knox Schroeder (age 19)

♪

Tie for Number 1: "What's Going On" (Marvin Gaye, 1971) and "Imagine" (John Lennon, 1971)



"Father, father, we don't need to escalate, you see, war is not the answer, for only love can conquer hate, you know we've got to find a way, to bring some lovin' here today." Let us praise Marvin Gaye's "sociological" hit (#4 on the Hot 100). The Motown master spent most of the 1960s cutting records that made people dance. However, the visionary he was, in 1965, he was dealing with the idea of *What was the point of doing love songs while the world was being torched around him?* (For example, The Watts Riots.) Even more troublesome was that Motown mogul Berry Gordy was adamant about Gaye *not* releasing the song ("taking things too far"), even after its in-depth recording sessions. (More examples: Detroit Lions football players adding spoken word to create the ghetto party vibe, choosing to double the lead vocal instead of choosing between two, to its resolution when Smokey Robinson essentially convinced Gordy that changing Gaye's mind about being socially conscious—making a very decisive decision about his music—well, Smokey made a remark about a bear in the woods (if you follow my drift). The song's critical success merged smoothly with the cultural introspection from Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, to Stevie Wonder, and to War. Though there would always be the grinding guitars and smashing of drum sets, to those sensitive types like me, Mr. Gaye reached out and gently invited me in—invited me to *question*—with what I consider to be the finest sonic novella involving social commentary. And it was an *escalation* between he and his father that caused his own death. Which brings me to . . .

♪

John Lennon was murdered by a psychopath whose name I will never mention or speak out loud. December 8, 1980, those of us very much alive were emotionally stunned, distraught, forlorn, plain old spaced-out, and many placed under suicide watch. My friends and I gathered in downtown Olympia, Washington, under a park's gazebo. Chilled to the bone, we grasped hands, swayed in a circle, and sang Beatles songs well into the early hours of the morning. What had become of the dreamer? To cite Marvin Gaye's outright indignation: what was going on?

Which brings us full circle. Mr. Lennon was perhaps the most respected and adored musician (and human being) on the planet at that time. Controversial and feared by governments? Sure. But beloved worldwide? No doubt. His producer Phil Spector insisted "Imagine" be a commercial success, which it was. It would not just be an add-on, B-sider. It achieved an almost National Anthem status. Lennon's plea was an elegant light so desperately needed by those still carrying a hangover from the '60s. "Imagine" and its staying

power is a touchstone, a point of global connectivity, where even today at gatherings and events you'll feel it in the swell of common voices wafting above the hypnotic piano progression.

Rolling Stone described its lyrics as "22 lines of graceful, plain-spoken faith in the power of a world, united in purpose, to repair and change itself". Change agent? Governments, organized religions, and theocracies around the world were not about to instantly disavow doctrines and customs rooted in thousands of years of lizard DNA. Lennon was quoted as saying: "Now I understand what you have to do. Put your political message across with a little honey". I fear that there just aren't enough bees on the planet to provide us with the sweetness that most of us are graced to be born with; over time that special quality tends to decompensate for one reason or another.



In the end, human beings lean toward being intractable. What Lennon requested of us, to live as one, and what Gaye proposed regarding de-escalation, were unintentionally naïve, inevitably destined to have no long-lasting effect whatsoever. All one has to do is read today's headlines. *I read the news today, oh boy*. Art can move us, create inspiration within the most inner reaches of our souls, even change how we approach those in our lives and the career path we choose; yet, songs are not at all like bullets, WOMDs, power-hungry leaders of unstable countries, or terrorists that value the word of invisible, unproven deities to justify brutal slaughtering of innocents—including children. Sadly, songs can only do so much.

Art is subjective and all about perspective. Joni Mitchell, the brilliant painter and poet who never wanted to be a pop star, brush-strokes a portrait and perspective of humanity I do not believe I have ever heard its equal in the pop world. From *Hejira* (1976), its closing track, "Refuge of the Roads," Joni sings, "In a highway service station, over the month of June, was a photograph of the Earth, taken coming back from the Moon, and you couldn't see a city, on that marbled bowling ball, or a forest or a highway, or me here least of all."

Astronauts returning to Earth have remarked similarly. When you are up there, you finally see.



This marbled bowling ball is the only one we have.