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“Stop, hey, what’s that sound”: Popular Music at the University of Oregon During the
1969-70 School Year

I must admit, I *love* retro. This obsession with nostalgia has filtered into many parts of my life—my clothing, music, behavior have been greatly influenced by the past. When I turned fourteen, I started to obsessively watch “Behind the Music,” the VH1 show that grippingly profiled musicians’ lives, and it was because of this program that I became obsessed with the music of the late ‘60s/early ‘70s. Led Zeppelin, the Beatles, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Simon and Garfunkel became my soundtrack. I love the raw, revolutionary spirit of music from this turbulent time. Imagine my excitement, then, when I realized I had the opportunity to research the music students attending the University of Oregon thirty-five years ago were “grooving” to. I could retell or interpret the year through its soundtrack; more importantly, perhaps I could better determine whether young people of the sixties were really only about sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll.

Segueing from my earlier research on the tumultuous spring of 1970, I determined to focus my study on the 1969-70 school year. With numerous riots against the ROTC, the student-led barricading of 13th Street, the Johnson Hall Sit-in, and the effects of the Kent State massacre, the UO student body expressed themselves and experienced social change in a unique way that year, unlike the students who preceded them. The music they listened to, then, articulated and reinforced their beliefs and perceptions about the world. The “Eugene scene” was not one of folk “protest” music, as the stereotypical

“hippie stoner” Eugene archetype might suggest. Instead, I have found that students, as homogenous, white, and middle-class as they were (and arguably still are), were anything but uniform as far as musical taste was concerned. Rock, pop, soul, R&B, folk, classical—they listened to everything. As the success of the Woodstock festival held in August 1969 proved, music was a unifying force with these restless, rebellious youths; people recognized this, as is demonstrated by the fact that a Beatles’ song entitled “Come Together” topped the Billboard charts in fall.¹ Of the rallying power of sound during this school year, a young anonymous Oregon freshman writes,

This entire [student] movement is bathed in music, fast, loud, hard-pounding music. It reflects the feelings of the people and helps them to escape from thinking awhile. It really releases tension. I think the next time they begin to riot on ROTC, President [Robert D.] Clark should just set up a band there rather than a line of cops.²

Through my researching, I have found that this freshman’s sentiments quite succinctly convey the attitude UO students had towards music during this year. For the “ducks” who witnessed the end of the Sixties, my parents’ generation, music was an expression of/call for social, political, and sexual change that united and ignited or soothed activist students.

“Coming Down” from Woodstock

Before the young people involved in the “counterculture” movement of the Sixties returned to their respective universities/hippie communes at the end of summer in

¹ Whitburn, Joel. *Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits*. New York: Watson-Guptill, 1996. 819.

² “Diary of a Freshman Co-Ed.” *Old Oregon J/F* 1971. vol. 49-50.

1969, they—around 400,000 of them—attended an open-air festival in upstate New York.³ “Woodstock,” named for the town it took over, acted as the musical exclamation point for an explosive decade, for many reasons. It attracted virtually *all* of the top artists of the day: Arlo Guthrie, Joan Baez, Santana, the Grateful Dead, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Janis Joplin, Sly and the Family Stone, the Who, Jefferson Airplane, Joe Cocker, Blood, Sweat and Tears; Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, and Jimi Hendrix occupied the stage for three days.⁴ As previously mentioned, the attendance rose to around 400,000, due in large part to the management’s decision to waive attendance fees and, in the spirit of sixties “peace and love,” allow free admission. Despite the large, diverse audience, the event remained peaceful. According to my mother, who was a junior at South Eugene High School and thus a few blocks from campus, “Woodstock was a major event because I think it showed our parents and older generations that this counterculture youth movement could work. We could come together and enjoy...sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll without things turning into absolute anarchy.”⁵ Though it might not have proven the power of the youth movement to older Americans, Woodstock provided students with a sense of reaffirmation and belief in their cause. It showed them that the movement for personal freedom and social revolution had some momentum, thus suggesting that optimism was not entirely futile. Woodstock became the phenomena that represented the ideals of the student movement, and its cultural effects quickly reached campus. My mother recalls, “It didn’t take long for people in Eugene to talk about it. I had some older friends and classmates that went and they described it as the ultimate event. I think it

³ “Woodstock Festival.” *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia*. CD-ROM. 2002.

⁴ “Woodstock Festival.” *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia*. CD-ROM. 2002.

⁵ Patricia Roby. 1 May, 2005. Phone interview.

symbolized the best of youth culture.”⁶ With the significance and success of the festival fresh in their minds, those in the student movement returned to school in late September.

“Come Together”: Eugene’s Amalgamation of Musical Genres

Initially, my perception of what students here were listening to was limited; I, like many of my friends, thought that the homogenous campus would choose rock or folk over any other type of music. After browsing through a few issues of the *Oregon Daily Emerald*, however, I realized how misinformed I was. Though the student body was not diverse, its soundtrack was. Record stores around campus advertised heavily for the arrival of “Abbey Road,” the Beatles second-to-last album debuting in October.⁷ As I noted earlier, the first track from the album, “Come Together,” rose to the top position on the Billboard pop charts. The newly-formed campus radio station, KWAX 91.1 FM, aired the album in its entirety on Friday, October 3rd.⁸ The album was huge in Eugene, my mother pointed out, because “everyone, no matter what type of music they usually listened to, listened to the Beatles.”⁹ The boys from Liverpool by no means monopolized the music that fall, however. Albums by the Temptations (who would later play McArthur Court), Gladys Knight and the Pips, Fleetwood Mac, Jefferson Airplane, Frank Zappa, Country Joe, Flaming Groovies, Yes, and Led Zeppelin, to name a few, were promoted in the *Emerald*.¹⁰ In the winter and into spring, Jackson 5, Sly and the Family

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Campus Happenings.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 1 October, 1969. 12.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Patricia Roby. 1 May 2005. Phone interview.

¹⁰ “Chrystalship advertisement.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 31 October 1969. 5.

Stone, and Simon and Garfunkel dominated the charts¹¹, while ads for The Band¹² and Joan Baez filled the *Emerald*.¹³

In addition, staff writers for the campus paper reviewed new releases weekly, ranging from artists like Elvis and Tom Jones¹⁴ to Steve Miller and Joe Cocker.¹⁵ Many of the concerts advertised in the *Emerald* were held at the EMU Ballroom or at Mac Court; I believe this demonstrates how central and integral the physical campus was to students at this time. University grounds provided the logical meeting places for the activists and other young people associated with the “student movement” to gather. Many off-campus venues were movie theaters and bars. The local acts advertised in the *Emerald* had somewhat of a blues and/or bluegrass vibe; names like “Hootenanny,”¹⁶ “Hard Tack County Spit Shine” and “Notary Sojac” played venues like “the Attic”.¹⁷ Eugene, at this point, was “an ex-logging community taken over by college students and hippies,”¹⁸ so it makes sense that the “homegrown” music would have more of a country or earthy feel (a further example of this is the Oregon Country Fair, held every summer, which serves as a sort of testament to the hippie/folksy population that remains in the area). Essentially, the “popular” music that Eugene students listened to had more of an R&B, soul, or rock edge; their local music, on the other hand, had a folksier or

¹¹ Whitburn, Joel. *Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits*. New York: Watson-Guptill, 1996. 819

¹² “‘The Band’ album advertisement.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 12 February, 1970. 2.

¹³ “Joan Baez album advertisement.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 23 February 1970. 4.

¹⁴ Hilburn, Robert. “Elvis, Jose, Tom Jones reflect ‘live’ album trend.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*.

¹⁵ Hougum, Chris. “Steve Miller, Joe Cocker impressive on new releases.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*.

¹⁶ “‘Hootenanny’ concert advertisement.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 12 November, 1969. 2.

¹⁷ “‘The Attic’ advertisement.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 9 January, 1970. 5.

¹⁸ Patricia Roby. 1 May, 2005. Phone interview.

“countrified” sound, reflecting the residents of what I have come to know as a sort of half-hippie, half-hick town.

At the dawn of “college radio”

Some of the most interesting things I found while reviewing the *Emeralds* from the year were articles pertaining to the University radio station. I was shocked to discover that 1969 was the year of its debut; I had assumed that since the University had thousands of students, young people who turned to and depended on the radio, that it would have had its own station. At any rate, the station was run by students,¹⁹ which perhaps indicates a move towards what David Frohmeier, current UO President and former Legal Counselor to President Robert D. Clark, described as a youth movement advocating personal freedom, self-expression, and “anti-establishment” ideals.²⁰ The September 23rd edition of the *Emerald* reported:

KWAX, University FM station (91.1) will begin broadcasting at 7:30 a.m. tomorrow with registration and University news. Lee Wood, acting student program director, said...the station will broadcast live from the New World and Odyssey coffee houses Friday and Saturday nights. During the year, the station offers public affairs programming for students plus classical, concert and progressive music.²¹

The radio station provided students with a public forum, not only on which they could express themselves through music, but on which they could broadcast pretty much

¹⁹ “KWAX” turns on, programs begin.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 23 September, 1969. 5.

²⁰ David Frohmeier. 10 January, 2005. Eugene, Oregon.

²¹ “KWAX turns on, programs begin.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 23 September, 1969. 5.

anything. When asked if she listened to the campus station, my mother responded, “Every now and then I would turn to it, but as cool as it could be sometimes, it also aired a lot of weird, experimental stuff. Definitely very Sixties and *very Eugene*.”²² The station gained an audience by doing precisely that—featuring both more nationally popular rock and pop music (like the “Abbey Road” broadcast) and local artists and activists.

Judging by the popularity of college radio now, I assumed that KWAX would succeed and sustain itself simply by gaining a large student audience. This was not the case, proving again that my assumption was incorrect. On April 28, a few days after the Johnson Hall Sit-In, a student announcer for the station wrote the *Emerald* a letter, asking for the support of the student body in maintaining the station and preventing administrative censorship:

The Division of Broadcast Services has decided that our type of programming, including classical, pop, folk, and progressive rock music is not educational and have decided that they will change the musical format to primarily classical music. It is our feeling that due to the programming that we the students presented and the efforts we have shown is one reason why KWAX has been selected to receive funds. The faculty is trying to take what we have built. We ask your support. The “Sound of the University,” should be primarily the students but if support is not shown by you our listeners the sound will be that of the faculty.²³

²² Patricia Roby. 1 May, 2005. Phone interview.

²³ Goat, Billy. “KWAX threatened.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 28 April, 1970. 6.

The University administration was a target of the movement during this time, thus it makes sense why one of the radio announcers on a fledgling student-oriented station might attack it. The rhetoric of this letter proves quite interesting; the student presents himself as part of a larger, revolutionary unit that has been threatened. He appeals directly to his fellow students so that they might join in his and the station's struggle to remain expressive and provocative. He and other advocates for the station must have done something right: college radio became a counterculture symbol in subsequent years and the University of Oregon station is currently active.

Songs of protest and rebellion

The quote I employed in the title of this piece comes from the Buffalo Springfield song "For What It's Worth." In "Diary of a Freshman Co-Ed," the anonymous student refers to the hit as the "strike 'theme song' of the year."²⁴ It was a rock song with a message of protest, which seems to have been the trend during this time. Gone were the days when "folk" and "protest" music were one in the same. The popular music of '69-'70 had a "protest" element running through it, as indicated by a rougher, more exciting sound with an often subtler protest message. For instance, Sly and the Family Stone's R&B single "Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)" topped the pop charts with a message of personal freedom and individuality.²⁵ Rock groups like Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones pushed the limits of sexuality in music, "protesting" traditional sexual standards, in a way; they harnessed and expressed sexual energy through an aggressive, heavy sound and blues-y lyrics.

²⁴ "Diary of a Freshman Co-Ed." *Old Oregon J/F* 1971. vol. 49-50.

²⁵ Whitburn, Joel. *Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits*. New York: Watson-Guption, 1996. 819.

This is not to say that more traditional “protest” music—folk—did not resonate with Eugene students. Nationally, Simon and Garfunkel’s melodic “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” a ballad which approached a spiritual hymn with the duo’s trademark folk-rock sound, dominated the pop charts in winter ’70.²⁶ Arlo Guthrie’s “Alice’s Restaurant,” a popular folk/ Vietnam-protest song, had become a national anthem and was adapted into a movie (it was screened at the Fox Theatre in January).²⁷ Locally, Eugene’s live music scene, it seems, was strong with folk performers. A November 19 article entitled “Crowds rally for ‘Environmental Change’” describes one such artist:

Mason Williams, writer, poet and philosopher, played a benefit concert Tuesday to aid the Save French Pete Movement. While playing to about 4,000 people in the EMU Ballroom, he commented on the plight of nature...“Nature has a great many things worth saving. When we let progress rule we lose sight of its gains.” The overflow crowd received Williams well. Whenever he mentioned conservation or ecology, loud applause broke out.²⁸

The connections with folk music, activism, and a “hippie” existence were being made amongst young people and students nationally. The folk-as-protest music scene was not unique to Eugene; nonetheless, many of its residents chose such lifestyles and listened to/ created such music.

Perhaps one of the most influential movies of the sixties debuted in fall ’69. “Easy Rider,” starring Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, used a charged, rebellious

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “‘Alice’s Restaurant’ movie advertisement.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 6 January, 1970. 6.

²⁸ Bucy, Bill. “Crowds rally for ‘Environmental Change.’” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 19 November, 1969. 3.

soundtrack to accompany a story of sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll—and motorcycles. To my surprise, my mother had quite a bit to say about the film: “‘Easy Rider’ was a great flick. It showed counterculture in a new way...and it used rock...a lot of Steppenwolf songs...to tell this story of drugs and the youth of America.”²⁹ Indeed, with songs like “Born to be Wild” and “The Pusher” (both by Steppenwolf), the movie articulated the restlessness of America’s youth, providing them with counterculture themes. An underground hit nationally, it took off as a cult classic.

“Benefit for the Conspiracy 8” and the legend of “Woodstock”

While scrolling through the *Emerald* one afternoon, I was stopped by a large ad for what appeared to be some politically-affiliated concert. Upon further inspection, I realized that the advertisement was promoting a “benefit” concert for the “Conspiracy 8.” Entitled just that—“Benefit for the Conspiracy 8”—it showed illustrated outlines of what I assume are students and young people raising their arms in solidarity.³⁰ Several bands were slated to appear, including local acts like Cleveland Wrkg. Co., Portland Zoo, Fourplay, and the Conspirators.³¹ Guest speakers were also scheduled to take the stage, including Elaine Brown, a Black Panther representative, and Anne Froines, wife of John Froines, the UO professor/activist tried for his alleged involvement with the riots at the Democratic Convention in Chicago.³² In an article reviewing the event, an *Emerald* reporter writes,

²⁹ Patricia Roby. 1 May, 2005. Phone interview.

³⁰ “‘Benefit for the Conspiracy 8’ advertisement.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 18 February, 1970. 4.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

After Scheer's speech, Elaine Brown, Southern California member of the Black Panther Party, sang several original compositions while accompanying herself on the piano. Her singing of "The End of Silence" brought the rustling and noise in the audience to a bare minimum as total attention was fixed upon her. The refrain line of the composition was "Can you believe it my friend, that this silence can end; we'll just have to get guns and be men." She also sang an original piece, "The Black Panther National Anthem."³³

I believe this excerpt demonstrates how serious and expressive music could be at this time. With just a piano to accompany her, a black woman hushed an audience of student-activists; she infused her lyrics with radicalism to make simple, original compositions more significant. In general, the Benefit reinforced how young people used music to unite themselves and demonstrated how important music was in the student movement for social change. Along these lines, I believe the Benefit was important because it demonstrated to the University administration, and, to a degree, the community, that students would and could organize to further their agenda. They could, with the help of rock music, attract other young people to their cause.

Another interesting event that demonstrated the social significance/influence of the Woodstock Festival was the attempt made by students in spring to hold a "Woodstock Northwest" festival along the closed-off 13th Avenue. An article in the *Emerald* reported:

A group of University students plans to begin a "Thirteenth Avenue Closure Faire and Woodstock Northwest" at the University early this afternoon to commemorate the temporary closure of 13th Avenue through the campus. The

³³ Eals, Clay and Art Bushnell. "Festival employs serious, entertaining format." *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 23 February, 1970. 5.

faire, including bands, free food, booths, alternate university classes and political activities, will continue until the end of the school year if the students have their way.³⁴

The attempt was made to turn what was a successful act of protest on the students side—the closure of the avenue—into a larger festival celebrating the power of the youth movement. Like Woodstock itself, the students wanted to create a fair that would promote the ideals of the movement: peace, love, freedom, and self-expression.

Their efforts failed, unfortunately; no such festival took place because of a lack of administrative approval.³⁵ The fact that such an event was attempted at the end of a violent spring term undoubtedly influenced the University administration's decision to deny it. They had seen their campus erupt into disorder and wanted to prevent such a situation from happening again. A spontaneous, student-produced event such as the "Woodstock Northwest" proposed could very potentially cause the University many problems. Therefore, as hard as they may have tried, students here could not get the ball rolling on a Eugene festival of free love and flower power.

McArthur Court

One of the most obvious differences between music and student life today versus thirty-five years at Oregon is the significance of McArthur Court. Known to students simply "Mac Court," the stadium now primarily houses basketball games, yet in '69-'70, it was definitely more of a concert arena. The six major concerts sponsored by the

³⁴ Lander, John. "Street closure celebrated with 'Woodstock Northwest.'" *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 20 May, 1970. 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

ASUO (Associated Students of the University of Oregon) were held there, undoubtedly due to the size of the audience. In October, students rocked at the Rainer Pop Festival, which featured Three Dog Night and Ike and Tina Turner.³⁶ Soon after, they heard the folk/pop protest songs of Donovan, “the celebrated young Welsh pop vocalist, who has recorded more best-selling albums and singles than can be counted on two hands.”³⁷ The Temptations’ November 15 performance was heavily advertised, due in part to the fact it was the Homecoming concert. Continuing the R&B trend, students booked Sly and the Family Stone—a national favorite with a couple chart-topping singles under its belt—to perform in January.³⁸

When Chicago played Mac Court on March 8, disorder occurred as two hundred or so high school students attempted to gain free admission.³⁹ Pushing and shoving, breaking a few windows and unhinging a few doors, the students were able to successfully see Chicago, live and without paying.⁴⁰ As I discovered and read more on this incident, I could not help but make a connection with Woodstock. Like hundreds of thousands had successfully done in August, the high school students attempted to waive any sort of “entrance” fee to see the rock music they wanted to see. The administration and community reacted strongly to the incident, blaming SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) for instigating the event. Furthermore, University and high school authorities

³⁶ Houglum, Chris. “Donovan, Temptations slate fall appearances.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 23 September, 1969. 18.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “Sly and the Family Stone’ concert advertisement.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 10 December, 1969. 13.

³⁹ Lanier, John. “200 gain free admission to concert.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 10 March, 1970. 6.

⁴⁰ Unrest at State System Institutions—A Progress Report; Student Unrest, Unrest at State System Institutions; Office of the President, coll. UA16; Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

met to try and prevent such a future event from happening.⁴¹ Though not much physical damage was done, the younger students rather screwed themselves over by demonstrating irresponsibility and “mob rule” to wary administrators.

The final concert of the year, Blood, Sweat & Tears performing May 1 on a revolving stage, again proved the popularity of R&B and soul on the Oregon campus.⁴² My mother recalls seeing this⁴³ show: “It was pretty cool to have a set-up like that. You have to understand the level of technology back then; a revolving stage was big stuff.” Having a venue like Mac Court, a place which could serve as both a basketball and concert stadium, on campus must have provided students with something “cool” to do; it gave them a reason to be on campus for “entertainment” purposes, a tie to campus which, as a current University student, I do not feel I have today.

Conclusions

The students of this year were embracing the seventies, evolving musically and socially. The ASUO placed an ad in the *Emerald* on April 17, asking students to vote for the acts they wished to see on Campus during the next school year; twenty-eight artists were listed, varying from the Jackson 5 to Johnny Cash, Isaac Hayes to Simon and Garfunkel.⁴⁴ Looking forward to the concerts and music of the '70-'71 school year, the students must have been effected by the deaths of two rock revolutionaries. Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin both died from drug overdoses in the fall of 1970, publicly symbolizing

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “‘Blood, Sweat & Tears’ concert advertisement.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*.

⁴³ Patricia Roby. 1 March 2005. Phone interview.

⁴⁴ “‘Which of the following would you like to see on Campus during Fall of 1970?’ advertisement.” *Oregon Daily Emerald*. 17 April, 1970. 3.

the fragility of the youth movement's idealism and excess. The Sixties were over and the student movement peaked; it was thus experiencing its descent.

Thirty-five years after it peaked, what should we conclude about this year in music? Well, like the anonymous freshman co-ed wrote, it seems to have been “fast, loud, hard-pounding music.” Students here seem to have embraced experimental or cross-genre styles, listening to albums and performers who mixed many different popular genres with socially, politically, and sexually charged messages. They went to concerts and festivals, often supporting local musicians who had a decidedly “Eugene” or folk/hippie/country feel. Overall, they found music that articulated the sentiments of a tumultuous time, music that articulated the chemical, social, emotional ups and downs they were experiencing.

In some ways, the University music scene is not so different today. Students come to Eugene (to any college, really) to expand their horizons—most of the time, that means growing musically. As college educates us academically and socially, we search for new sounds that will articulate that growth. And even if those around us are racially or economically homogeneous, taste in music most likely varies. We are exposed to diverse sounds. The process by which we get that sound, however, is dramatically different than it was. Acquiring an artist's music today is as simple as downloading computer files, free of charge. Students of '69-'70, on the other hand, had to spend money on records and listen to the radio in their cars; I find it funny that records have now become a sort of quaint hobby for my hipster generation.

For the most part, the legacy of the music of this period has remained strong. Songs like “Come Together” and “For What Its Worth” have come to symbolize

revolution. And on that “Behind the Music” note, I am going to program some Led Zeppelin and Jackson 5 into my iPod, find a sunny spot on campus, and try to visualize what the view from my spot might have looked like thirty-five years ago...