DISertation Abstract: Saesha Mary Senger

Gender Politics, Market Segmentation, and Taste: 
Adult Contemporary at the End of the Twentieth Century 
(research director: Donna Kwon)

Abstract

This dissertation explores the stylistic variety, critical reception, audience reach, social and political import, and musical and lyrical content of music by several artists who have achieved Adult Contemporary chart success. The scope of the project is limited to a period when many artists who figured prominently in both the broader mainstream of American popular music and the more specific Adult Contemporary category were most commercially successful: from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. My contention is that, as gender politics and gendered social norms continued to change in the United States at this time, Adult Contemporary – the chart, the format, and what some might loosely consider a genre – was an important, if overlooked or even trivialized, arena in which these shifting gender dynamics played out. Other formats, Album-Oriented Rock in particular, and other artists, such as Madonna, have received scholarly attention in terms of their musical, social, and political import. This dissertation explores the import of the Adult Contemporary format through analysis of chart performance, artist image, musical works, marketing, and contextual factors. Thus, the significance of a format and artists neglected by scholars becomes clear.

I explore these issues in the form of case lengthy studies. Examinations of how adult contemporary artists such as Michael Bolton, Wilson Phillips, Matchbox Twenty, David Gray, and Mariah Carey were produced and marketed, and how their music was disseminated, illustrate record and radio industry strategies for negotiating the musical, political, and social climate of this period. These musicians serve as examples of many categories of music that have achieved success on the AC chart, and some arguments made for specific artists may apply to others not discussed here. Significantly, musical and lyrical analyses of songs successful on AC stations, and many of their accompanying promotional videos, form integral components of this project, as they highlight messages about musical genre, gender, race, and age (AC is a format that targets females age 25-39). Ultimately, this dissertation demonstrates that adult contemporary-oriented music figured significantly in the culture wars, second and third wave feminism, expressions of masculinity, Generation-X struggles, postmodern identity, and market segmentation.

This study also discusses the continuing effort in popular music criticism to support the illusion of veracity conveyed by interconnected popularity charts and genre distinctions, while questioning the use of charts and categories to determine musical quality and audience competence. Such tactics illustrate the record and radio industries’ management of audience composition and behavior as a means for effectively and more predictably producing and marketing music in the United States. This dissertation argues that the record industry, radio programmers, and Billboard chart compilers and writers have made and reinforced certain assumptions about who listens to which music and why they do so, while critics have weighed in as well on what different musical genres and artists have offered and for whom. However, the audience certainly plays a role in this process, even if this is difficult to document with the resources that inform this dissertation.