

Music and the American Ethos  
April 10, 2016  
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The sermon today is about popular music and how it reflects American culture. I will play snippets of all the songs below and then discuss each one briefly. So sit back and enjoy the music my friends!

1. *Sound & Color, Alabama Shakes*: We begin with what seems like a look at a future world of sound and color which is both beautiful and strange, in which so much is altered. It seems we have entered a kind of apocalypse. We long for human touch, so much has been given away...and yet we are still here, still reaching, still longing, still seeking.

It is a new world though, one strange and far from the one we used to know. This theme ran through much of the popular music I listened to: A sense that a new world was coming, one in which we would find ourselves unmoored, for better or worse.

2. *We Stand at the Back of the Bus, Uptown Funk Empire*: Social Justice in popular music has changed. In the 60s, the music resisted, pushed against, refused the back of the bus. The music now rocks free in the back of the bus, reclaims territory lost, says: We name who we are now and where we stand and in reclaiming it, it becomes ours in a new way, it becomes the best place to be. Social justice now is not about territory and grand narratives. It is local, it redefines spaces, it reclaims and renames.
3. *Really Love, D'Angelo*: Love looks much the same in the Rhythm & Blues world, still sounds like something very physical, in the moment, dependent on chemistry, vibes, sensuality, time. We still remain deeply tied to our bodies and youth in this world though not as tied to convention as the words become more and more explicit.
4. *Til It Happens to You, Lady Gaga*: The right of those whose voices to be heard that have not been part of the dominant narrative has grown strong. No longer can doctors, psychiatrists, sociologists, anthropologists, teachers and other experts tell others what their experiences are.

The other speaks loudly now with a clear voice and demands a seat at the table. Local narratives once again demand room for the personal, insist that there is no such thing as objective knowledge, lift up situated perspectives and ask us to listen.

5. *Close your Eyes, Meghan Trainor*. Our local hero Meghan Trainor is the champion of body positivity. She tells young people and all people that we are all

beautiful, that to spend time trying to look like everyone else is a waste of time, that the only person we can be is who we are and that this is great gift not to be wasted.

I close with 2 songs that are glimpses of a popular spirituality. The first was written for a young man who died in a car accident.

6. *See You Again, Wiz Khalifa*: Wiz Khalifa wrote this song about the late Paul Walker who died in a car accident. It promises that friendship never dies, that love is stronger than death, that we never part, that we are joined in death. This is not a new theme but I enjoyed this rendition of this theme.

7. *I am Light, Indie Arie*: This last song by Indie Arie moved me with its notion of light and divinity, of the oneness of all that is, that we are all star dust, part of it all, part of each other. The theme here again that the color of skin, eyes and place do not contain the deepest meaning.

I found it very Unitarian Universalist.

We are in a new time, one in which there is a fear that we can't turn back the tide of climate change and that the future will be much different from one that we have now. What counts as social change in this time is new. We no longer push against oppressive structures, we occupy them and change them from the inside, planting flowers in the sidewalk cracks.

We still love and lust in much the same ways as we have always done but women and minorities are no longer quiet when relationships are abusive, or require erasure of self and identity to maintain. And it seems that in it all, we still hope, we still long for a love stronger than death, a connection that makes us one with the universe, belonging to each other and all that is.

It seems to me my friends that all in all, we are in good hands.

Amen.