

Father John Misty's *I Love You, Honeybear* in Popular Music

Theodor W. Adorno's "On Popular Music" asserts that popular music is "fundamentally characterized" by standardization that "aims at standard reactions," and is "pre-digested" so it "[does not] require [the listener's] effort to follow its concrete stream."¹ On the other hand, in serious music, the details and the whole of the piece are inextricably linked such that the details derive its "musical sense" from the "totality of the piece," and the whole consists of the "relationship of [these] details" rather than a "mere enforcement" of a pre-given "musical scheme."² If so, Father John Misty's *I Love You, Honeybear* is neither strictly "popular" nor "serious" music as per Adorno's definitions, but rather occupies a middle ground on a spectrum between these two extremes; while the album presents an easy listening experience that is inspired by other artists and follows standard structures, unique musical elements, such as uncomfortable lyrics and themes, ensure that it does not go down without some bumps and kinks along the way. Thus, Adorno's ideology may not fully apply to today's music industry, where popularity is not so strictly defined, and varies from niche to niche.

Josh Tillman, alias Father John Misty, is a singer/songwriter with a certain "warped appeal" and personality that is "unlike any other in indie rock."³ He has always been one to push the envelope – he dropped out of college, rejecting a devout, "fundamentalist Christian" background, to start anew as a musician.⁴ He got his big break when he was picked up as Fleet Foxes' new drummer, but "[felt] diminished" and grew tired of "robotically playing.... night after night."⁵ He soon quit the band to focus

1. Theodor W. Adorno, "On Popular Music," *Soundscapes* 2 (January 2000)
http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/DATABASES/SWA/On_popular_music_1.shtml

2. See note 1 above.

3. Jonah Weiner, "The Gospel of Father John Misty," *Rolling Stone*, last modified February 19, 2015, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/the-gospel-of-father-john-misty-20150219/>; David Bevan, "Father John Misty: How to Make Love," *Pitchfork*, last modified February 5, 2015, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/9589-father-john-misty-how-to-make-love/>

4. Sean Fennessey, "The Third Revelation of Father John Misty," *Grantland*, last modified February 6, 2015, accessed February 11, 2016 <http://grantland.com/features/father-john-misty-i-love-you-honeybear/>

on his own creative pursuits. Now reborn as Father John Misty, Tillman has developed the persona of a “droll and devastating... literate rascal,” a “self-described... satirist, provocateur, philosopher,” and “sarcastic, overcompensating asshole.”⁶

Honeybear is Tillman’s second album, but his “first foray into matters of love.”⁷ Basically, the album is Tillman’s attempt to monumentalize the love and intimacy he shares with his wife, Emma, and “[document this] relationship evolving in real time.”⁸ Adorno claims that there are general, standardized “types” and “characters” in popular music, and songs about love are undoubtedly the biggest perpetrators.⁹ However, from the outset, Tillman intends to write songs that are “an assault on the institution of love songs as a whole,” songs about love without “banality” or any of “the trappings” of generic love songs.¹⁰ The name of the album sets the precedent for the album as a whole – “honeybear,” a vapid pet-name that neither Tillman nor Emma have purportedly ever used, is a mockery of how “lame and predictable it is to make an album about falling in love;” however, it is also a warning against the shocking sincerity, vulnerability, and “emotional glop” that Tillman has poured into this album.¹¹ It is an

5. See note 3.

6. Sean Fennessey, “The Third Revelation of Father John Misty,” *Grantland*, last modified February 6, 2015, assessed February 11, 2016 <http://grantland.com/features/father-john-misty-i-love-you-honeybear/>; David Bevan, “Father John Misty: How to Make Love,” *Pitchfork*, last modified February 5, 2015, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/9589-father-john-misty-how-to-make-love/>

7. David Bevan, “Father John Misty: How to Make Love,” *Pitchfork*, last modified February 5, 2015, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/9589-father-john-misty-how-to-make-love/>

8. See note 4.

9. See note 1.

10. See note 6.

11. Tom Breihan, “Album of the Week: Father John Misty’s I Love You, Honeybear,” *Stereogum*, last modified February 10, 2015, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://www.stereogum.com/1736169/album-of-the-week-father-john-misty-i-love-you-honeybear/franchises/album-of-the-week/>; see note 4.

album that is at once “so cynical [it is] repulsive and so openhearted it hurts.”¹² In fact, Tillman’s depiction of love is so uncomfortably sincere and candid it becomes unconventional. In the title track, “I Love You, Honeybear,” Tillman paints a graphic image of “Mascara, blood, ash, and cum / On the Rorschach sheets where we make love.” In “Chateau Lobby #4 (In C for Two Virgins),” Tillman likens Emma eating bread and butter to a queen having “ostrich and cobra wine.” In “When You’re Smiling and Astride Me,” he confesses that he has “nothing to hide” from Emma, even “Kissing my brother in my dreams or finding God knows in my jeans.” The depiction of himself in the album’s controversial cover art as the child in the arms of the Madonna is also telling of his relationship with her – he sees himself as a “petty,” “needy,” “jealous,” and “greedy” baby that worships Emma as a “sacred object and diety.”¹³ Instead of adhering to the romanticized and patriarchal narrative of Prince Charming that woos and sweeps the girl off her feet, Tillman casts himself as the album’s “anti-hero” as he bares himself, warts and all, and “[runs] every note through an elaborate machinery of irony and self-criticism.”¹⁴ Thus, while *Honeybear* is an album about love, it does not subscribe to popular music’s standards and conventions on what or how that should be presented.

Adorno also argues that “the whole structure of popular music is standardized.”¹⁵ From the structure of the song to the melodic range, everything follows a rigid pattern, a “standard scheme” that “emphasizes the most primitive facts no matter what has harmonically intervened.”¹⁶ For the songs in *Honeybear*, this is true to some extent. In structure, some songs follow typical models – “When You’re Smiling and Astride Me” follows a simple strophic form, and “Holy Shit” follows a simple verse-chorus

12. Mike Powell, “Father John Misty: I Love You Honeybear,” *Pitchfork*, last modified February 9, 2015, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/20131-i-love-you-honeybear/>

13. Jonah Weiner, “The Gospel of Father John Misty,” *Rolling Stone*, last modified February 19, 2015, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/the-gospel-of-father-john-misty-20150219/>

14. See note 13 above.

15. See note 1.

16. Ibid.

form. These arrangements are so straightforward that they function as an immovable framework that does not add anything to and “[exists] independent of... the specific course of the music.”¹⁷ However, Adorno also specifies that the “harmonic cornerstones” of any hit are the beginning and end of each song that must “beat out the standard scheme” to guarantee the listener that “the hit will lead back to the same familiar experience.”¹⁸ While “The Night Josh Tillman Came to Our Apartment” follows a typical AABA song form, the song ends in a sort of half cadence, leaving the listener stranded in the middle of the song, never returning to the “home base” that Adorno described as a “cornerstone” of popular music. Moreover, for other songs, the structural elements are not so fixed. For example, the title song, “I Love You, Honeybear,” starts with the chorus, and crescendos using two distinct verses to a theatrical ending, with the drums crashing and Tillman fervidly singing “oh” until the track fades. In such songs where a musical scheme is not enforced, the progress of the piece as a whole relies on the precise position of the sum of its parts, and these details, in turn, have a musical purpose only in the context of the whole song. This is an effect Adorno ascribes to “serious” music; he uses the second theme of the introduction to the first movement of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony as an example. According to Adorno, this theme “gets its true meaning” and “lyrical and expressive quality” only from its precise position in the composition, particularly its contrast to the “cantus-firmus-like character of the first theme.”¹⁹ Similarly, the second verse of “I Love You, Honeybear” has a certain musical weight because of its similarity and contrast to the first verse; it is not just a repetition of the first verse, but a device that creates emphasis and tension through slight changes in dynamics, background vocals, and percussion that push the song towards its climactic ending.

Even though these songs do not align perfectly with the standardized structuring Adorno considered indicative of popular music, there is a familiarity and “popular” element to these songs that may be attributed to the fact that Tillman was inspired by other artists. Adorno argues that the

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

standardization is linked to a competitive process that leads to the imitation of other artists, themes, and characters. In *Honeybear*, “stylistic nods” to Jim Morrison, Papa John Phillips, James Taylor, John Lennon, Kurt Cobain, Harry Nillson, and Neil Young produce a general standardized folk rock or indie rock sound.²⁰ However, there is still variety with an album that includes everything from “somber acoustic arrangements,” to “sweeping orchestral suites and one synth jam,” and this conglomeration “pushes the possibilities of what ‘folk rock...’ can sound like.”²¹ One song, “Chateau Lobby,” about Tillman and Emma “running around L.A. when [they] first met,” includes a mariachi band in the background – an unusual choice, but one Tillman includes because he “[hears] it in the air” in L.A.²² Then there is “True Affection,” the aforementioned “synth jam” and the only primarily electronic song on the album. It is a meta-commentary of intimacy in the 21st century, using an electronic medium to talk about how intimacy is expressed through electronic mediums. Although *Honeybear* is influenced by other artists, it is also inspired by and reflects Tillman’s own unique, individual experiences and perspective. As such, they diverge from mere imitative “conventions” and “material formulas.”²³

That a contemporary album like *Honeybear* does not fit perfectly into either of Adorno’s criteria for serious or popular music demonstrates that the scope of existing popular music has changed drastically since Adorno’s time, and can no longer be strictly characterized in that way. Adorno’s *On Popular Music* was originally published in 1941, when popular music was still firmly connected and limited to its roots as a predominantly African American expression.²⁴ Blues and jazz, popular forms of

19. Ibid.

20. Ann Powers, “Sympathy for the Devils,” *NPR*, last modified February 28, 2015, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2015/02/28/389569706/sympathy-for-the-devils>; see note 13.

21. See note 4.

22. Ibid.

23. See note 1.

music in the late 1930s and 1940s, both have its roots in the Black musical tradition, where many of what Adorno claims of popular music rings true.²⁵ However, popular music has now evolved beyond its origins, and more recent studies on popular music have established more relevant and expanded definitions of what constitutes “popular” music today. For example, Jason Toynbee’s 2000 publication *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity, and Institutions* claims that popular music has historically developed “in and through the mass media.”²⁶ In turn, popular musicians are concerned with “exchanging sounds, styles, musical ideas and forms” by taking what already exists and is known “in the field of the social,” and “recombining them.”²⁷ *Honeybear’s* sound is just that – a combination of Tillman’s many musical influences, from other artists to different genres of music, such that something new and novel is produced in the process. Although Tillman may not be “expressive” in that he “[does] not generate music from within,” Toynbee would concede that Tillman still possesses a “more modest conception of creative intention and control.”²⁸ According to Toynbee, the popularity of popular music is also based on an ideal of a musician that comes from the people and “[stays] in touch with [their] roots,” but has managed to “[transcend...] the ordinary” by virtue of their extraordinary talent and “human agency.”²⁹ Tillman’s backstory of a struggling and tortured artist in search of his own sound and voice coheres with this “ideal” narrative. As popular music is a music of the people, it also functions as a “banner under which ordinary people” can identify themselves with and band together. As such, genres emerge with either of two “divergent tendencies”: one that identifies with its resistance and difference to dominant cultural values,

24. 5th Concise Edition: *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, ed. Colin Larkin (London: Omnibus Press, 2007), 17.

25. *Ibid.*, 20.

26. Jason Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions*, (London: Arnold Publishers, 2000), xix.

27. *Ibid.*, xiv.

28. *Ibid.*, xv.

29. *Ibid.*, xiii.

and another that pushes towards a mainstream desire for music that works for all people.³⁰ Whereas the album fits in neither of Adorno's definitions of music, *Honeybear* fits squarely into the former category of popular music under Toynbee's specifications.

In lyrics, themes, structure, and musical genres and influences, Tillman's *Honeybear* is an album that possesses some notion of conventionality, but largely marches to the beat of its own drum. Consequently, the album's ambiguous status with respect to Adorno's definitions of music reveals that his ideologies are outdated and do not pertain to the popular music of today. However, *Honeybear*'s clear classification as popular music in Toynbee's more recent theory indicates that the latest studies on popular music provide more applicable definitions that describe contemporary popular music more accurately. Thus, this case demonstrates that conceptions of "popular music" must be constantly revised to reflect the ever changing and expanding scope of popular music.

30. Ibid., xxiii; *ibid.*, xix.

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