

MODEL

Essay Structure

Styles of Popular Music

Music is truly the one universal language. Although all cultures have music, each culture develops its own musical forms and styles. In particular, popular music varies from culture to culture and from generation to generation. In the past 100 years or so, there has been an explosion of popular music styles in the West. Three of the more successful styles are reggae, punk, and rap.

One successful style of popular music is reggae, which was born on the Caribbean island of Jamaica in the 1960s and spread throughout the world in the 1970s. Reggae developed from a kind of Afro-Caribbean music called *mento*, which was sung and played on guitars and drums. Some musicians changed mento into a music style called *ska* by adding a hesitation beat.¹ A few years later, other musicians changed ska, and reggae was born. Reggae's special sound comes from reversing the roles of the instruments: The guitar plays the rhythm, and the bass² plays the melody.³ An important influence on reggae music was the Rastafarian cult.⁴ The Rastafarians added unusual sound mixes, extra-slow tempos, strange lyrics, and mystical-political themes. The best-known reggae musician was the late⁵ Bob Marley. Well-known groups are Toots & The Maytals, Burning Spear, and Steel Pulse. Reggae has influenced later styles of popular music, including punk and rap.

A second successful style of popular music is punk. Punk is a style of rock music that began in the mid-1970s as a reaction against previous forms of rock.

Punks felt that rock music no longer represented the counterculture⁶ from which it had sprung and had, in fact, sold out⁷ to the mainstream culture. With their clothing and hairstyles, punks intended to shock society. The “punk look” included spike hairdos, theatrical makeup, ripped clothing, body piercings, and jewelry made from objects such as razor blades and safety pins. The onstage behavior of punks was aggressive and provocative.⁸ At concerts, fighting and other violent behavior by the fans were common occurrences. Punk music itself is simple (often just three chords), and its songs are short (rarely more than three minutes long). Its songs are anti-government, anti-authority, and anti-conformity. The first bands to popularize punk were the Sex Pistols and Clash in Great Britain and the Ramones in the United States. As with all music styles, punk has evolved⁹ into other styles. Groups such as the Dead Kennedys and Black Flag play hardcore punk, which is a faster and louder punk style. The band Fall Out Boy plays emo, a style in which the musicians become so emotional during a performance that they scream and cry. Pop punk, made popular by the group Green Day, is another new punk style.

A third successful style of popular music is rap, which is also called *hip-hop*. Rap is a type of dance music in which the singers — rappers — speak in rhythm and rhyme rather than sing. The art of rapping originated in Africa and probably traveled to the United States via Jamaica, where it was known as *toasting*. In the United States, rap first appeared in the mid-1970s in the discos of New York City’s black neighborhoods. Disco DJs¹⁰ teamed up with rappers to play songs for dancers at parties. At first, the role of the rapper was to keep the beat¹¹ going with hand claps while the DJ changed records. Soon, rappers added lyrics,¹² slogans,¹³ rhymes, and call-and-response exchanges with the audience, and rap was born. Early rap songs were mainly about dancing, partying, and the romantic adventures of the rappers, but politics became an important theme in rap in the late 1980s and 1990s. Most rappers are young black males, but there have been female rappers such as Queen Latifah and white rappers such as the Beastie Boys and Eminem.

To sum up, popular music changes constantly. New styles are born, grow, change, and produce offshoots,¹ which in turn grow, change, and produce offshoots. Some styles enjoy lasting popularity, but others disappear rather quickly. However, all contribute to the power and excitement of popular music in our time.