

Cash Ain't a Problem, I Know Where It Goes: "Low" by Flo Rida and the Economic Crisis of 2008

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Abstract

Existing research on music listening preferences suggests that when economic conditions are poor, listeners prefer music that is slower and more serious. Terry Pettijohn has applied the Environmental Security Hypothesis to the success of music during varying economic conditions. This hypothesis suggests that when economic conditions are threatening, people prefer features which are comforting and mature; when this hypothesis is applied to music, Pettijohn concludes that music which is slower and more meaningful is preferred during times of economic uncertainty. However, in the economic crisis of 2008, the faster and more lighthearted song "Low" by Flo Rida rose to the top of the Billboard music chart. The current research examines the success of this song in the light of existing theories on listener preferences and investigates which type of music is generally preferred during hard economic times. Through a survey, this research assessed whether participants believe music that distracts from hard economic times or music that represents hard economic times is more successful. It compared the US economy contraction cycles chart provided by the National Bureau of Economic Research to the *Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits 1955-2009* to determine which songs were number one singles in years of economic recession. The number one singles from each recession period were analyzed to determine approximate beats per minute and the seriousness of lyrical content. Results of these comparisons and a survey of 95 participants show that in periods of economic recession songs which are faster and more distracting are preferred.

Introduction

It has long been hypothesized that popular music can reveal clues about the state of a country or society based on the appeal of its tempo and lyrical content, but can it be construed as a definitive marker of the times? Most music can be generally characterized as either slow and serious or upbeat and care-free, and studies have been conducted to test the correlation between the type of song that is most successful and the economic situation in which that song thrived. For Example, Terry F. Pettijohn applies the *Environmental Security Hypothesis* (EHS) to music in his article "And the Beat Goes On: Popular *Billboard* Song Beats Per Minute and Key Signatures Vary with Social and Economic Conditions"; this hypothesis suggests that the most popular music of a time period reflects the economic state of that period.¹ Pettijohn's study seeks to uncover trends between the beats per minute and the lyrical content of *Billboard* number one

single from 1955-2008.ⁱⁱ He concludes that music with slower beats per minute and more serious content is more popular during poor economic times.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the year 2008, however, this was not the case. In a status report in July 2008, former federal analyst Richard Cook stated, “We are seeing the ongoing collapse of the U.S. economy.”^{iv} 2008 brought several crises in mortgage lending, banks, the automotive industry, and the stock market. The National Bureau of Economic Research provides a chart which shows contractions which started in December 2007 and ended in June 2009, leaving 2008 right in the middle of this recession.^v According to Pettijohn’s study, the number one single for this year should have been slower and reflective; however, the number one single of 2008 was “Low” by Flo Rida.^{vi} This song is both upbeat and lyrically care-free, and the success of “Low” in 2008 creates doubt about the validity of applying the EHS to music.

In contrast to Pettijohn’s study, Professor of English and Theater at the City University of New York, Morris Dickstein, suggests that music which distracts from problems tend to be more successful during times of economic hardship.^{vii} Dickstein uses examples from the Great Depression to show that the entertainment being produced at that time was more care-free and distracting. Though Dickstein supplies some limited evidence, his hypothesis seems weak compared to the data presented in Pettijohn’s study. Dickstein uses no numbers and provides no citations which imply he used no outside sources. He does give, though, many examples of movies and shows which were produced during the Great Depression and notes the years they were released. He discusses the 1934 movie *Stand Up and Cheer!* which presents a scenario in which President Roosevelt appoints a Secretary of Amusement whose mission is “to distract the public and get them to laugh, which presumably would bring the Great Depression to an end” and he explains:

...the bubbling wit and syncopated lilt of Broadway and Hollywood songs by the Gershwins, Berlin, Porter, Rodgers and Hart, and Warren and Dubin, and the high-speed verbal duels and physical pratfalls of Hollywood screwball comedy shoed how dissonance could be resolved into harmony, how stagnation could give way to action, and how fear could be turned into hop....”^{viii}

Here we see him making suggestions about the nature of the works being produced during the Depression and their possible role in ending the depression, but he has no numbers or data to support his claims. Pettijohn, in contrast, uses a variety of methods to gather data and provides several graphs and numbers; however, his studies fail to actually ask the question: do listeners prefer music which distracts from the economic and social climate or music which represents it? This research seeks to answer this question, using a survey of 95 students and faculty at a small, liberal arts university in the south to assess what kind of music is most successful during times of economic stress.

This relationship between socioeconomic conditions and musical preference has been debated and studied for years. As stated earlier, Terry Pettijohn produced three separate studies with different partners focusing on musical preferences. Two of these studies examine number one *Billboard* singles and the conditions of the years in which they were successful. The first study argues that preferences for certain songs can be understood in the context of the Environmental Security Hypothesis (EHS).^{ix} The article discusses this context and predicts that “more meaningful, mature themes and items should be preferred during these difficult situations to help mitigate the threat and uncertainty.”^x This study investigated the number one singles from each year from 1955-2003 in comparison with changes in the social and economic climate of the United States during these same years. Pettijohn used the General Hard Times Measure

(GHTM), a standardized, global measure consisting of the US unemployment rate, change in disposable personal income, change in consumer price index, death rate, birth rate, marriage rate, divorce rate, suicide rate, and homicide rate, a measure he also used in previous studies to produce values which represent harder or better times.^{xi} Pettijohn's first study used a questionnaire in which participants listened to songs and rated to what extent the songs "explored real, meaningful issues," and whether they believed pace of the song to be slow.^{xii} The results of this study show that when social and economic conditions were poor, songs that were longer, more meaningful in content, and slower were popular.

Terry Pettijohn conducted another study in 2012 along with Jason Eastman, and Keith Richard that investigated the beats per minute and key signatures of popular *Billboard* songs and changes in social and economic conditions in accordance with the EHS. The second study used a professional musician and a computer software package to assess the beats per minute of popular songs. The researchers reported that occasionally the computer software measured the beats per minute in a song as twice as fast as the actual pace and faster songs at half the actual pace. The research also used a professional musician to transcribe the chords of every song to determine the key signature. The results of this study show that the *Billboard* number one pop songs with more beats per minute and songs in standard keys were most popular during social and economic good times while songs with fewer beats per minute and in sharp or flat keys were most popular in hard social and economic conditions.^{xiii}

In his article "Facing the Music: What 1930s Pop Culture Can Teach Us About Our Own Hard Times," Professor Morris Dickstein discusses the different kinds of art which helped lift American spirits during the Depression. Dickstein notes that many serious novels and murals were produced, but he also discusses the rise of swing and choreography. Dickstein seems to

suggest that using the arts in the same way they were used during the Depression could help boost morale in the recession which began in 2007. He notes that people commonly expect recessions to produce realistic, gritty art which reflects the hard times, but asserts that “hard times demand lighter fare as people look to escape their troubles.”^{xiv}

Pierre-Loius Vézina responds to Pettijohn’s studies, but he examines the quality of music in relation to economic conditions. The article, “Economic Growth and the Quality of Music,” examines the “ten best albums of all time” as determined by *Acclaimed Music*, a music critics’ aggregator which measures professional music critics’ album rankings to determine the best 3000 albums of all time, and the GDP growth in which those albums were produced.^{xv} Vézina found that the top ten albums were all produced in the United States or the United Kingdom during years of higher GDP growth for the country of origin. Interestingly, the albums he lists are albums which would be considered more serious and also contain a high number of slower songs. Examples of these albums are *Revolver* by The Beatles (1966), *Nevermind* by Nirvana (1991), and *What’s Going On?* by Marvin Gaye (1971).^{xvi}

These studies all discuss successful music and the relationship between musical characteristics and economic conditions, but what they do not consider is whether, during rough economic conditions, music listeners truly prefer slow, serious songs that reflect the current times or if they prefer faster, lighthearted songs that distract from these economic troubles. Pettijohn’s studies investigate the question, but the results of his studies do not include any data in which participants indicate which type of music is preferred during hard economic times. This research seeks to address the question using not only *Billboard* single results in comparison with economic conditions, but also a survey in which participants indicate which type of music they believe to be most successful.

Methodology

This research consists of two main components: a survey of listener preferences and a musical and lyrical analysis of the 2008 number one *Billboard* single “Low” by Flo Rida compared to lyrical analysis and beats per minute of other number one singles of recession years. Participants consist of ninety-five students and faculty, the majority of whom were enrolled in or teaching MUS 121: Invitation to Listening, at a small liberal arts university in the South. The survey was designed by the researcher specifically for this project and it contains twelve items. The first four questions collected demographic information concerning gender, ethnicity, economic class, and typical musical genre preferences; economic class was measured using Linda Levine’s division of incomes based on the distribution of household wealth. This divides economic classes into quintiles including: Lowest (\$0-\$20,262), Second (\$20,263-\$38,520), Third (\$38,521-\$62,434), Fourth (\$62,435-\$101,582), Highest (\$101,583-\$186,000), and Top 5% (\$186,000 or higher).^{xvii}

After the demographic section, the survey asked participants to identify which they believed to be the most popular song of 2008 based on given choices which were determined, using the *Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits* and a list of number one singles from *Billboard’s* website, to be in the top ten number one singles of 2008. The four song choices were “Low” by Flo Rida, “No One” by Alicia Keys, “Hot N Cold” by Katy Perry, and “Bleeding Love” by Leona Lewis.^{xviii} These songs were chosen because of their success on the popular music charts and because “Low” and “Hot N Cold” are less serious and more upbeat, while “No One” and “Bleeding Love” are more serious and slower. Participants were also given the option to select “I am not familiar with any of these songs.” Participants were then asked why they believed the songs they chose were most successful and whether they believed that song distracted from or

represented the economic hardships of the time. Participants also indicated which they believed to be most successful: songs that distract from poor economic and social conditions, or songs that represent them. The results of the survey have been recorded, totaled, and analyzed to measure the number of subjects who correctly identified the number one song of 2008 as the most popular (35.29%), as well as the number of subjects who believe music that distracts is the most successful (73.53%). These numbers have been used to test the validity of applying the EHS to music and determine if there is a direct correlation between economic threat and the characteristics of the most successful songs during threatening times.

The score of “Low” was analyzed to determine key signature, beats per minute and lyrical content. These characteristics were compared to models of other number one singles in Pettijohn’s studies. A comparison of the components of this song to other number one singles in years of economic stress showed several differences between Pettijohn’s predictions of tempo, or beats per minute, and the lyrical content. Data gathered from the surveys is also used to give some explanation of why this song was so popular even though it does not conform to Pettijohn’s presumptions based on the EHS. After the song and the survey results concerning its popularity were analyzed, they were then examined within the context of the economic and social hardships of 2008. The researcher also did a brief analysis of all number one singles, songs which had the highest number of weeks on the chart and the highest sales, from each year in which there was a recession. The analysis determined approximate beats per minute by listening to each song several times and measuring the beats against different tempo settings on a metronome until a consistent tempo could be identified. The key signatures were determined through listening to the songs and researching sheet music for the songs. A wide variety in the key signatures showed

that no correlation could be drawn which supported Pettijohn's assertion that songs in unfamiliar, minor, or sharp or flat keys are more successful in times of economic hardship.

The researcher then examined the lyrics of a sample of four of the seventeen singles. Two of the sample songs were selected from songs which were considered slow and were popular during a contraction, and two of the songs were selected from the songs which were found to be moderate-to-fast and were popular during a contraction. The four songs whose lyrics were analyzed are "Killing Me Softly with His Song" by Roberta Flack (1973), "Lady" by Kenny Rodgers (1980), "I Love Rock N Roll" by Joan Jett & the Blackhearts (1981), and "I Gotta Feeling" by The Black Eyed Peas (2009).^{xix} The analyses of other number one singles were used to determine how often songs which are faster and more distracting are the most successful during a year affected by recession.

Results of Musical Analysis

The researcher analyzed the score of "Low", which suggests an average beats per minute (BPM) of 126 which is considered moderately fast, and comparison of the recording of the song to a metronome set at BPM=126 confirmed the suggested tempo to be accurate. The rhythm is articulated in quick eighth and sixteenth notes, which places less emphasis on the lyrical content and more on the beat. However, looking at the lyrics of "Low" reveals flippant subject matter which focuses around money, dancing, and assertion of status. Several lyrics of the song overlook the economic hardships facing the country at the time. Flo Rida begins the first verse saying, "I ain't never seen nothin' that'll make me go so crazy all night spendin' my dough." This line sets up the tone for the dancing and monetary references which follow.

The lyrics contain several monetary or status-related references, and the first actual line of the song, and the chorus, states, "Shawty had them Apple Bottom jeans, boots with the fur,"

and later adds, “[she had] Them baggy sweatpants and the Reeboks with the straps.”^{xx} The brands of clothing and shoes mentioned, with the exception of the sweatpants, are products which are priced in a range that would be considered moderate to high. In the first verse after Flo Rida notes his crazy spending habits, he mentions “a million dollar vibe.” Flo Rida wraps up the verse with an assertion of financial security proclaiming, “Make it rain, I’m makin’ it snow, Work the pole, I got the bank roll.”^{xxi} The most striking line of the song, which could easily be missed because of its quick eighth note, triplet rhythm and because it is the last phrase before the second chorus, is “Cash ain’t a problem I know where it goes.”^{xxii} This line shows no reference to the economic insecurity audiences were dealing with at the time, and it would be expected to isolate this audience which was, for the part, very scared and unsure about what was happening financially to the nation as a whole in addition to individual households. The second verse continues to use the money-minded language with a combination of eight references to expensive name brands, “Cadillacs, Maybachs for the sexy grown,” and blatant mention of large sums of money, “One stack, Two stacks, Three stacks, now that’s three grand”.^{xxiii} The cars mentioned in this verse are extremely expensive, luxury cars which the majority of popular music consumers would not be able to afford, and this combined with his continued frivolous attitude about giving this girl large sums of money just because he likes her dancing would be expected to isolate an audience scrounging to hold their lives and finances together. The third verse is more conservative and contains only three monetary references, but when Flo Rida is not rapping about money or brands, he focuses on the “shawty”’s skillful dancing, sex, and self-aggrandizement. The song in no way reflects or represents any serious issues facing the United States during the contractions and market crashes surrounding 2008, and “Low” even depicts a

world or lifestyle in which money is not something to be worried about, but simply something which is used to promote status and finance a having fun.

“Low” begins with an eight-measure introduction which establishes the arpeggiated tonic chord which serves as the harmonic and melodic material for the entire song. The form is fairly common for popular songs, a chorus-verse form consisting of three verses and four choruses (one before each verse and after the last verse). The form results in forty measures of original material including the eight-measure introduction, sixteen-measure chorus, and sixteen-measure verse. The song is strophic and the melodic and harmonic material of the first verse is also used for the second and third verses, however; the rhythms vary slightly in each verse. For example, the first verse ends with triplet eighth notes, the second verse ends with triplet eighth notes with a dotted quarter note and eighth note rhythm added to the ends of the last three penultimate lines, and the third verse ends with four lines of straight eighth notes with quarter notes at the end of phrases.

The quick rhythm is syncopated, and the bass punctuates the melody with a complementing syncopated ostinato. The two-measure bass ostinato begins with an eighth note pick-up into the first measure of the chorus and starts on the pitch Eb which is doubled at the octave. The first measure’s rhythm is a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note tied to a half note, and the second measure contains a dotted quarter note followed by two tied eighth notes and then another dotted eighth note. Like the verse material, the bass occasionally varies the rhythm, but the deviations in rhythm are all syncopated and still closely related to the original ostinato material. The chorus ostinato is modified for the verses, and the rhythm from the second measure of the chorus ostinato becomes the first measure of the verse ostinato. The second measure is a dotted quarter note, two tied eighth notes, a quarter note, and an eighth note. Again,

there are variations on this rhythm, particularly at transitions, such as the end of verses. It is important to remember that, though, the researcher analyzed a score for “Low,” the score is only the best available transcription of a song which has several small nuances in rhythm and pitch that can sometimes be difficult to record with traditional musical values used in scoring. To account for this lack of accuracy, the researcher listened extensively to “Low” and recorded differences in rhythm between the recording and the score to provide the most accurate analysis possible.

Results of Survey

The survey of ninety-five participants provided results for several different aspects of the research. The first significant result is that thirty-six of the ninety-five participants (37.89%) indicated that “Low” was the most prominent song of 2008. Of those thirty-six participants, twenty-seven (75%) responded that they believed music which distracts from hard economic conditions is the most successful. The total number of participants who responded this way was sixty-nine (72.63%), and the total number of participants who indicated they believed music which represents hard economic times is most successful was twenty-two (23.16%). Three participants indicated they believed both were successful and one participant did not answer. When participants were asked if they believed the song they chose as the most significant distracted from hard economic conditions or represented the hard economic conditions of 2008, the majority (forty-eight participants or 50.53%) indicated they believed the song did neither. 33.68% (thirty-two participants) responded that they believed the song distracted.

These two responses were the most common across all demographics, but charts produced using the software Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SSPS) showed that the number of those who indicated the song neither distracted from nor represented the economic

struggles of 2008 may have been higher because those who answered question 5 (Which popular song from 2008 would you consider the most prominent (or popular?) with “I am not familiar with any of these songs” also answered question 9 (Do you feel this song represented or distracted from the economic state of 2008?), and these participants responded “neither” because they did not actually indicate a song. However, those who responded that the song they chose was distracting (thirty-two participants) still outnumbered those who responded that it was representative (fourteen participants); in fact, the number of those who responded “distracted” to question 9 was more than twice the number of those who responded “represented”.

Of the thirty-six participants who indicated “Low” as the most prominent song, fifteen (41.67%) responded they felt the song distracted, four (11.11%) responded that the song represented the times, four (11.11%) indicated that the song accomplished both, and thirteen (36.11%) responded that the song accomplished neither. Though the total (fifteen participants) of those who indicated the song distracted is fewer than half of the participants, it is the largest portion of this section of participants. The results indicate that participants who claimed they believed the song they chose distracted were more likely to respond that music which distracts from harsh economic times is most successful when answering question 10 (Which type of music do you think is most successful?). Surprisingly, even those who indicated more serious songs on, such as “Bleeding Love,” to be the most prominent on question 5 and responded “represented” on question 9 sometimes indicated that music which distracts from harsh economic times is most successful. When asked why they believed the song they chose was successful (question 7), most participants stated, in one way or another, that the song was “catchy.” One participant suggested that “Low” was the most successful because it was, “lighthearted; not focused on problems.”

The researcher anticipated that the demographic information would significantly affect how participants responded to the survey, especially demographics such as ethnicity and economic class, however; this was not typically the case. The results show no direct correlation between the demographics of ethnicity, gender, and economic class and the way members of each demographic answered questions 5, 9, and 10. Though participants in the third and highest economic classes chose Katy Perry's "Hot N Cold" over "Low." These results may be attributed to a small sample size, and it is important to note that the current data shows a difference of two participants in each of the classes, for example, ten of the twenty-three participants in the third economic class selected "Hot N Cold" and eight of the twenty-three participants selected "Low." There was a correlation between question 4 (Typically, what genre(s) of music do you listen to?) and questions 5, 9, and 10. This correlation shows that participants who listen to music in genres which are further removed from popular music, genres such as Classical, Folk/Indie (or Independent Rock), and Electronica, were more likely to answer, "I am not familiar with any of these songs" on question 5, "neither" on question 9, and "represents" on question 10. Though on question 10, many of these participants remarked that popular music is typically distracting and genres such as rock, blues, and country are more representative. Participants who responded this way often listed a genre of music which they indicated on question 4 they typically listen to as an example of music which represents harsh economic times. This suggests that different genres, other than standard pop music, may yield different types of successful songs within the fan base of that genre, i.e. country music is perceived as being a more serious genre, therefore; country songs which are more serious tend to be the most successful.

The survey also asked participants questions assessing ways in which they access music. Question 11 asks, "How many times have you requested a song [on the radio, at a club, ect.]?"

and question 12 asks “How do you access music? (i.e. downloads, youtube, radio, etc.)” The researcher included these questions to assess any possible relationship between how participants access music and how they responded to questions 5, 9, and 10, but just as with most of the demographic categories, there was no connection between how these questions were answered. The researcher did learn, though, that many participants now use music streaming services, for example Spotify and Pandora, which provide free music through funding from limited ads or commercials. Many participants said they listened to the radio, but the number of participants who answered that they used a free music streaming service or Youtube was higher (approximately 30% more) than those who listened to the radio. This finding suggests that magazines, websites, etc. which chronicle the top songs in the country may need to adapt how they assess the success of songs.

Discussion

“Low” is upbeat and the lyrics focus on frivolously spending money and dancing, but one element of the song does fit Terry Pettijohn’s findings of songs during economic hardship. “Low” is in Eb minor, and Pettijohn found that songs during economic hardships are typically in minor or uncommon keys. This finding cannot be disputed by the current research as there is a large variety in the key signatures of songs during recessions. There is also variety in the tempos, however; eleven of the seventeen number one singles (64.7%) from recession periods had beats per minute ranging between 82 and 140 which would be considered moderate to fast tempos. Six of the songs (35.29%) had beats per minute between 62 and 72, and these tempos would be considered slow. An example from the slower songs is “Killing Me Softly with His Song” by Roberta Flack (1974)^{xxiv} which has a BPM of 62 and is the slowest of all the number one singles during contraction cycles. Another slow song is “The Theme from ‘A Summer Place’” by Percy

Faith (1960)^{xxv} which has a BPM of 72 and is the fastest of the slower songs. “Bridge Over Troubled Water” (1970)^{xxvi} has a BPM of 82 and is the slowest of the moderate songs, and “All Shook Up” by Elvis Presley (1957)^{xxvii} is one of the fastest songs with a BPM of 140. Even songs with tempos which would be considered slow are near the top of the slow BPM range. As noted earlier, the slowest of all the number one singles during recession years, “Killing Me Softly with His Song,” has a BPM of 62, and the approximate range for a “slow” piece is considered 40-76 beats per minute. The beats per minute of the popular slow songs tend to be closer to a moderate tempo.

Five of the six slower songs have lyrics which are romantic and serious in nature, and two of the songs, “The Way We Were” by Barbra Streisand (1974) and “Because I Love You: The Postman Song” by Stevie B. (1990) are “break-up” songs which reminisce about better times when the singer had a love in his or her life.^{xxviii} “Theme from ‘A Summer Place’” by Percy Faith (1960) is an instrumental piece and has no lyrics which could be analyzed, but the title implies the music will either elicit a romantic, and possibly even nostalgic and reflective response from listeners or the music will help listeners “escape” to a place which is more peaceful, like a summer retreat. The sweeping violins conjure a romantic and peaceful atmosphere around which delicate accents and interjections are provided by other sections of the orchestra. Though this song seems romantic and it has fewer beats per minute, “A Summer Place” is in Bb Major which is perhaps the most common key. With the possible exception of “A Summer Place,” all of the slow songs deal with extremely similar subject matter in the lyrics.

The faster songs provide more variety in lyrical content than slower songs, and the lyrics are mostly not as serious as those of the slower songs. “At the Hop” by Danny and the Juniors (1958) and “I Gotta Feeling” by the Black Eyed Peas (2009) emphasize going out and having

fun, while other songs such as “Umbrella” by Rihanna (2007) and “Bridge Over Trouble Water” by Simon and Garfunkel (1970) affirm the comfort of friendship in hard times.^{xxix} In “I Gotta Feeling,” not only does the group introduce the song with the repetition of the phrase, “I gotta feeling that tonight’s gonna be a good night, that tonight’s gonna be a good, good night, the Black Eyed Peas also sing, “I got my money, let’s spend it up,” and imply that they “party every day.” These lyrics are an example of the subject matter of the faster songs which typically focus on enjoyment or pleasure. Nine of the seventeen songs (52.9%) contain lyrics which are mostly lighthearted, and these nine songs are all classified as moderate or fast songs. These songs focus on activities such as going out to a bar, having a party, dancing, sex, new experiences, and states of being, for example the innocence of falling in love for the first time and resulting jitters as in “All Shook Up” or the conscious awakening of a new “age” dawning and the peace and harmony of this new age of understanding as demonstrated in “Aquarius/ Let the Sunshine In” by The Fifth Dimension (1969).^{xxx}

When the lyrics of the other sixteen songs studied are compared to the lyrics of “Low,” several similarities are found, especially between “Low” and the songs with faster BPM. What sets “Low” apart from the rest of these songs is that it was the number one song in the middle of a recession which, according to a Congressional Research Service article written by Marc Labonte, featured “the largest decline in output, consumption, and investment, and the largest increase in unemployment, of any post-war recession” and it contains more monetary references than any other song in any other recession.^{xxxi} The monetary language and perspective toward money also does not match the economic trends; as Lebonte mentioned, and Richard Cook asserted, consumption decreased as financial markets failed and unemployment rose. “Low” and

Flo Rida seem completely unconcerned with, and possibly unaware of, the economy which was crashing down around them.

Researching some of the brands mentioned in “Low” helped the researcher gain an understanding of the severity of the gap between the amounts of money Flo Rida alludes to in the song through his mention of specific brands of products and the financial insecurity of his audience. Apple Bottom jeans, the brand Flo Rida mentions the “shawty” wearing, are made by Dr. Jay, a clothing company, and prices for these jeans with prices ranging from \$18 to \$318.^{xxxii} Depending on the type of jeans the woman was wearing, these jeans could be affordable for someone in a lower economic class, however; the jeans at the top of the price range would not have been affordable for someone in a lower economic class, especially during the time frame in which the song was popular. In the second verse, Flo Rida mentions two types of cars: Cadillac and Maybach. According to Cadillac’s website, 2013 prices range from approximately \$33,000 to \$63,000.^{xxxiii} Maybach, a brand of luxury sedans, has prices ranging from approximately \$300,000 to more than \$1,000,000.^{xxxiv} Though I could not find price information on Maybach’s official website, I located a Maybach dealer in the Birmingham, AL area that provided a list of models and prices for 2013. Because of factors relating to inflation and deflation, these prices may not represent the exact costs of these items in 2008, but they provide an estimate which reveals that the products being mentioned by Flo Rida (specifically the cars) distance him and his song from the financial status of a large portion of potential consumers of “Low.”

Conclusions

According to the EHS, “Low” and songs like it should not have been successful during recessions, and the discrepancies between Terry Pettijohn’s predictions and findings and the data and findings of this research show that the EHS is not a valid measure for predicting lyrical

content, beats per minute, or key signatures. Furthermore, through the study done by Pierre-Louis Vézina, the researcher found that in years which have higher economic growth music which would be considered more meaningful is the most successful, which leads to the prediction that financial security positively affects the artists' and the audiences' willingness for experimentation with unfamiliar keys and more serious subject matter. Morris Dickstein's article along with the survey results, show that music which more distracting is the most popular during times of economic hardship, however; Dickstein clearly asserts that he considers the arts and entertainment produced during the Depression which were more serious and portrayed or evoked the broken spirit of the Depression to be of a greater artistic quality.

Dickstein associates the desire to escape through our entertainment with a hunger for change in financial and social status. He implies that this hunger is what leads to the production of more pleasant, distracting, cheap, and low-quality entertainment:

For tomorrow's television viewers we can safely predict a glut of upholstered period and costume dramas, such as this year's [2009] Jane Austen and Agatha Christie adaptation on Masterpiece Theatre, as well as game shows, talent competitions, and reality shows, which are cheap to produce and which satisfy the audience's hunger for sudden changes in fame and fortune.^{xxxv}

Dickstein's final point urges writers, artists and entertainers to use their skills to capture an image and show the struggle of the crisis from 2007-2009, an action which could possibly counteract Richard Cook's observation that before and during the economic collapse, Americans had been "lulled to sleep."^{xxxvi} If Americans are not listening to the music which reflects their lives and strives to wake them up, they must be listening to the music which is giving them a false sense of security and a desire for fame and fortune. The false sense of security created by

songs like “Low” and “I Gotta Feeling” combined with a desire for sudden changes in financial status suggests that those who listen to popular music which is distracting may spend more, and this could lead to an increase in personal debt and/or an increase in consumption which could both positively and negatively influence the economy.

As mentioned in the survey results, the majority of participants stated they accessed music through free music streaming services which brings into question the validity of radio airplay as an indicator of the most successful music. *Billboard*, the standard authority in popular music charts, determines its number one singles using charts from six different categories: Best Sellers in Stores, Most Played By Jockeys, Most Played In Juke Boxes, Top 100, Hot 100, and Hot 100 Airplay.^{xxxvii} These charts track the success of singles across a variety of factors including sales, number of weeks at number one, and most-played songs on the radio. The growing popularity of streaming music stations as an alternative to radio should lead publications like *Billboard* to consider developing a method for gathering data about which artists and songs are listened to most on stations like Spotify and Pandora in order to gain more a comprehensive representation of the most popular music.

Suggestions for Further Research

This research and the survey designed for it are relatively original and provide information which mostly has not been gathered and analyzed before, therefore; the structure and administration of the survey could be improved. Ways to improve the current research are to gather demographic information concerning the age of participants, playing portions of the songs mentioned in the survey during administration, and expanding survey questions to include information about participants’ spending habits. For example, an additional questions could ask, “When you listen to music which promotes spending more money or buying expensive items, are you more likely to spend money or have the desire to spend money?” This research lays fundamental groundwork which could easily be

manipulated to consider several different factors and comparisons about music and its relationship to the economy. This research could be used to examine the effects of economic crisis on artists and the music industry and how it shapes the types of singles they produce and play, as well as how they are affected if consumers stop paying for music due to financial stress. Future research could also examine reasons behind music listening preferences, for example differences in coping mechanisms to enhance understanding of why listeners choose certain types of music.

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ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Pettijohn, “And the Beat,” 316.

^{iv} Richard Cook, “Status Report on the Collapse of the U.S. Economy,” July 16, 2008, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/status-report-on-the-collapse-of-the-u-s-economy/9596>.

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^{vi} Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits*, 9th ed. (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2010), 900.

^{vii} Morris Dickstein, “Facing The Music: What 1930s Pop Culture Can Teach Us About Our Own Hard Times.” *American Scholar* 78, no. 4, (2009): 91-95.

^{viii} Dickstein, “Facing the Music,” 91

^{ix} Terry F. Pettijohn and Donald Sacco, “Tough Times, Meaningful Music, Mature Performers: Popular *Billboard* Songs and Performer Preferences Across Social and Economic Conditions in the USA,” *Psychology of Music* 37, no. 2, (2009): 158.

^x Pettijohn and Sacco, “Tough Times,” 158.

^{xi} Pettijohn and Sacco, “Tough Times,” 161.

^{xii} Pettijohn and Sacco, “Tough Times,” 162.

^{xiii} Pettijohn, “And the Beat,” 313-317.

^{xiv} Dickstein, “Facing the Music,” 91-95.

^{xv} Pierre-Louis Vézina, “Economic Growth and the Quality of Music,” accessed April 24, 2013, http://www.weebly.com/uploads/2/3/4/2/2342194/growth_and_the_quality_of_music.pdf.

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^{xx} Flo Rida, *Low* (n.p.: Universal Music Publishing Group, 2007), accessed January 28, 2013, <https://www.musicnotes.com/commerce/mydownloads.asp>.

^{xxi} Ibid

^{xxii} Ibid

^{xxiii} Ibid

^{xxiv} Whitburn, *The Billboard Book*, 885.

^{xxv} Whitburn, *The Billboard Book*, 880.

^{xxvi} Whitburn, *The Billboard Book*, 884.

^{xxvii} Whitburn, *The Billboard Book*, 878.

^{xxviii} Whitburn, *The Billboard Book*, 886+.

^{xxix} Whitburn, *The Billboard Book*, 880.

^{xxx} Whitburn, *The Billboard Book*, 879.

^{xxx} Marc Labonte, “The 2007-2009 Recession: Similarities to and Differences from the Past,” Congressional Research Service, October 6, 2012, accessed June 7, 2013, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R40198.pdf>.

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^{xxxvi} Cook, “Status Report.”

^{xxxvii} Whitburn, *The Billboard Book*, 10.