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What Does Pop Music Have Against Marriage?

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William Weir of *The Hartford Courant* asks a very interesting question. What does pop music have against marriage? The central institution of human social life is largely missing from the musical scene, and positive references to marriage are virtually non-existent. Given the influence of pop music, what does this say about marriage in American culture?

As Weir observes:

A look at last week's Billboard Top 50 finds plenty of songs about relationships in general, a few about dancing; there's even one about moving to Boston. But a single ditty about two people living in wedded bliss? Not a one. Television and the movies abound with weddings and marriages. The tabloids obsess over celebrity nuptials, or who's horning in on someone else's marriage. Pop culture loves marriage. So why doesn't pop music?

That is a very good question. As Weir notes, popular music was once filled with references to marriage. "Marriage was once something to sing about, and people did — a lot," he remembers.

Some argue that the absence of marriage is not ideological, but demographic in origin. "Part of it is that it's a young person's market," says Steve Seskin, a California songwriter who has written hits for Tim McGraw and Kenny Chesney. "If they're thinking about getting married, they're not thinking too hard. They're thinking about next week." Well, maybe the next minute. Weir explains that "the gap between pop consumers and the marriage-minded" is now much wider than before.

When marriage is not ignored, it is often presented in what Weir calls "a tortured view of the institution." Some assert that marriage just isn't very conducive to the musical form. Why? As Weir reports:

"The subtle beauty of keeping a relationship together, there isn't a lot of glamor in it," says Glen Ballard, who co-wrote Alanis Morissette's album "Jagged Little Pill," as well as hits for Christina Aguilera, Michael Jackson and others. "It's about hard work and trust and commitment."

Still, there is a sense that marriage has simply fallen off the charts, so to speak. Daniel Goldmark of Case Western Reserve University explains it this way: "We're not seeing so much focus on marriage because there isn't a central idea about relationships. There isn't this great narrative that everyone has tapped into. Now, there are a lot more ways of living your life that people are happy with."

That is a most interesting observation. Professor Goldmark's suggestion that marriage is no longer the "great narrative" of life and love in America is haunting. Indeed, all too many Americans do see "a lot more ways of living your life" than marriage, and popular music inevitably reflects this trend.

We should pause a moment and reflect upon what is missing in our popular music — marriage. Music is a reflection of our souls, our aspirations, and our expectations. What does it say about us that our music is devoid of marriage?

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