

POP SONGS SING A DIFFERENT TUNE

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A look at this 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 hornning in on someone else's marriage.

Pop culture loves marriage. So why doesn't pop music?

It used to. Marriage was once something to sing about, and people did -- a lot. In 1939, Hoagy Carmichael and Frank Loesser hit it big with "Two Sleepy People." Earlier in the 20th century, Tin Pan Alley's songwriters drew freely from marriage for inspiration ("By the Light of the Silvery Moon," "Mr. and Mrs. Is the Name"). And Frank Sinatra had a hit with "Love and Marriage" in 1955, long before it became the ironic theme of the sitcom "Married ... With Children."

So what happened? Much of it is simple demographics. With people marrying later in life, and the hit-making corporations aiming their marketing magic on ever-younger audiences, the gap between pop consumers and the marriage-minded has widened since Hoagy Carmichael's day.

"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."

Hamden singer James Velvet has written hundreds of songs, but not one about marriage. Not that's he against it -- he's been married for 24 years -- he's just following a tradition.

"Rock 'n' roll, and popular music ever since, is so much of the moment, so much about now, that there haven't been many marriage-as-a-good-thing songs," he says in an e-mail. The last one he can remember is the Dixie Cups "Chapel of Love" ("Going to the chapel and we're/gonna get married") from 1964.

And when pop and marriage do merge, the results show a tortured view of the institution. Take Meat Loaf's "Paradise by the Dashboard Light," a song that embodies pop's all-or-nothing take on romance and marriage.

It's sung from the perspective of a married man looking back to when he and his future wife were "barely 17 and barely dressed." It's all rock 'n' roll heaven, until the girl interrupts the boy's advances (and Phil Rizzutto's play-by-play), demanding a promise of marriage before he goes any further. The frustrated young man gives in, swearing to love her "til the end of time." It ends with the long-suffering narrator "praying for the end of time."

Eric Clapton's "You Were Wonderful Tonight" presents a rosier view of the long-term relationship. Marriage isn't mentioned directly, but the lyrics paint a picture of domesticity that certainly suggests a married couple. It's a romantic song, but one less concerned with sex than the comforts of familiarity (the narrator, feeling under the weather, is lovingly put to bed by his inamorata).

That's a curious thing about marriage songs: Statistics show it's the married folks who are having the most sex, and there's certainly no shortage of sex in pop songs -- but songs about married people who have sex is a scarce commodity.

That's not so new; Velvet points to Eddie Cantor's 1928 hit "Makin' Whoopee," a warning to men thinking of tying the knot: "He's washing dishes and baby clothes/He's so ambitious, he even sews." Singer Amy Rigby continues the tradition, albeit with a feminine twist, in her 2003 song "Are We Ever Gonna Have Sex Again?" ("We used to be triple x-rated/Look at us now, so domesticated/What happened to babe and stud?/Too much KFC and Bud.") One of the few pop songs we could find where marriage and sex weren't exclusive of each other comes, unsurprisingly, from the contrarian Prince.

Despite the old-timey-sounding title, his "Let's Pretend We're Married" is a long way from Tin Pan Alley. "I won't stop until the morning light/Let's pretend we're married and go all night" are some of the more printable lyrics.

And when marriage does show up on the charts, it's usually a song about getting married, rather than being married. For instance, the Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice," or Al Green's "Let's Get Married." That makes sense. The Quest is often touted as one of a handful of basic plots in literature. The "happily married" phase, on the other hand, can be summed up easily enough with "happily ever after."

Another problem with writing about marriage, songwriters say, is that it's hard. "The subtle beauty of keeping a relationship together, there isn't a lot of glamour 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."

That's a lot to capture in three to four minutes. Ballard says he's never written any songs about marriage, but once he got to talking about it, he promised to

do so immediately. "It's time somebody took the time and wrote what it really is," he says.

Others have tried, often using several songs to do it. Songs on Bruce Springsteen's album "Tunnel of Love" tell of his ambivalence about his first marriage. John Doe and Exene Cervenka, leaders of the 1980s punk band X, sang often of their stormy marriage (which ended in divorce), often portraying it as a combination of genuine affection, insecurity and envy.

Maybe the most basic reason for pop's change of heart about marriage is our own change, says Daniel Goldmark, a music historian at Case Western Reserve University. The Tin Pan Alley writers wrote about getting married, getting a home and settling in with your loved one because that's what everyone did. People today have other options.

"We're not seeing so much focus on marriage because there isn't a central idea about relationships," he says. "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."

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