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Science Proves: Pop Music Has Actually Gotten Worse

Science confirms what you've always suspected: music these days is worse than it used to be.

By Rose Eveleth
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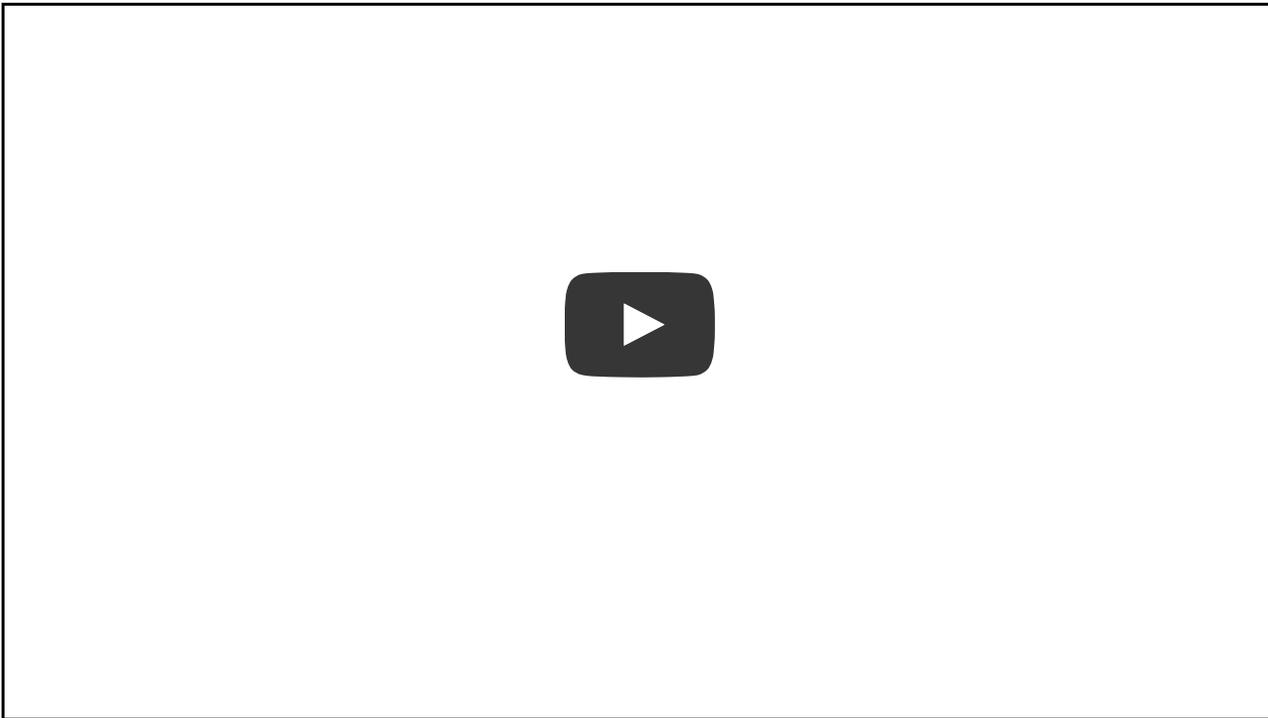
Your pop music is probably too loud. Image: matthijs

If there's one thing everyone can agree on, it's that everyone else's music is bad. And if there's something everyone but teenagers can agree on, it's that today's pop music is terrible. But what if the issue isn't inherent bias and nostalgia? What if today's music really is that bad? To find out, we'll need some science.

Scientific American reports on a study that tried to track changes in pop music over the last half-century.

Joan Serrà, a postdoctoral scholar at the Artificial Intelligence Research Institute of the Spanish National Research Council in Barcelona, and his colleagues examined three aspects of those songs: timbre (which “accounts for the sound color, texture, or tone quality,” according to Serrà and his colleagues); pitch (which “roughly corresponds to the harmonic content of the piece, including its chords, melody, and tonal arrangements”); and loudness (more on that below).

So, what happened since 1955? Well, timbral variety went down. That means that songs are becoming more and more homogeneous. In other words, all pop music sounds the same now. Take this fake pop song for example.



The study also found that pitch content has decreased – which means that the number of chords and different melodies has gone down. “Musicians today seem to be less adventurous in moving from one chord or note to another, instead following the paths well-trod by their predecessors and contemporaries,” Scientific American explains.

And the next time an old person complains that your music is too loud, well, it probably is. Music has gotten a lot louder in the past half-century. This is a problem, Scientific American says, because:

Loudness comes at the expense of dynamic range—in very broad terms, when the whole song is loud, nothing within it stands out as being exclamatory or punchy. (This two-minute YouTube video does a great job of demonstrating how excessive loudness saps richness and depth from a recording.) Indeed, Serrà and his colleagues found that the loudness of recorded music is increasing by about one decibel every eight years.

So what this study is saying is that your parents are right, music just isn’t what it used to be.

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About Rose Eveleth



Rose Eveleth is a writer for Smart News and a producer/designer/ science writer/ animator based in Brooklyn. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Scientific American*, *Story Collider*, *TED-Ed* and *OnEarth*.

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