Songs for Social Change: Pro-Social Lyrics in Commercial Music in the U.S., 2017-2022

Carlos Chirinos-Espin
Steinhardt School, New York University

Abstract

This paper reports preliminary results of research on pro-social content in commercial songs (Songs for Social Change) released between 2017-2022 in the U.S., and music industry awards that recognize these songs through the case study of the Grammy Special Award for Best Song for Social Change. Songs for social change can be defined as compositions and performances created spontaneously with a pro-social narrative that promotes empathy and activism about specific issues that are perceived to affect society at large. The questions guiding this research are: What types of pro-social content are being used to create commercial songs? And, does the pro-social content in a song contribute to increased consumption of the song? The hypothesis is that, in an attention economy paradigm, pro-social narratives enable fans to identify themselves with the values expressed in songs which helps build a stronger sense of identification between artists and fans, and this identification acts as an attention-grabbing factor that has influenced contemporary compositional practices.

I employed a participatory action research methodology with my students at the NYU Music and Social Change Lab to create a database of commercial songs with salient pro-social lyrical content using a criterion based on social change indicators outlined by the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) that were refined through guided discussions to recognize social change issues specific to the U.S. context. Simultaneously, I reflected on my role as co-author of the proposal submitted to the Recording Academy to create the Special award for Best Song for Social Change. The paper explores pro-social content in songs and music awards in the context of challenges to implement diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategies in the music industry, and music industry recognition of the craft of songwriting for social change. To conclude, the paper provides reflections on the theoretical implications of the research and the pedagogical challenges to integrate participatory research methodologies and social impact curricula in music and entertainment higher education programs.

Keywords: songs for social change, sustainable development goals, Recording Academy, Best Song for Social Change

Carlos Chirinos-Espin is Assistant Professor and Director of the Music and Social Change Lab at New York University. Dr. Chirinos-Espin's research explores how commercial music impacts human behavior, particularly in the areas of public health and social change, through the lens of music business as a social and economic practice. He has extensive experience working in the music industry and conducting research in Africa and Latin America, and his work has been published and covered by international media outlets. He is a programming consultant to the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York, advisor to the Recording Academy, and is the development editor of a book by the artist and social activist Rubén Blades. Dr. Chirinos holds a Master's degree in Ethnomusicology and a Ph.D. from the University of London, United Kingdom.

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