

Sentimental Songs

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The sentimental is an ambivalent category. Ever since the term emerged in European cultural discourse in the 18th century, derived from the French “sentiment”, “sentimentality” has described a state of “excessive emotion or emotionalism” (Fontius 2003: 487). The sentimental was associated with the literary movement known as Sensibility in Europe, but also served early on to characterise US song collections (Gale 2014). In film, particularly in melodramas or “weepies”, the often cross-media or multimedia facet of sentimentality is clearly evident, for example when an ecstatic moment arises from the carefully coordinated interplay of moving images and music (Gotto 2015; Koebner 2008). Ultimately, the sentimental is not necessarily tied to specific media, but should also be understood as a performative practice: Emotional overflow is expressed through tears or other dramatic gestures, which can also take on a symbolic meaning in their own right as signs of the sentimental, for example when concert audiences begin to wave lighters (in the 20th century) or mobile phone torches (in the 21st century) at the opening bars of a rock ballad.

What is striking about the academic discourse on the sentimental is that it has long struggled with the subject – whether it concerns literature, film, music or other cultural phenomena. The reservation of triviality that has clung to the sentimental since the 19th century has frequently hindered an open, value-free examination of the cultural significance of sentimental artefacts and practices. This, in turn, stands in sharp contrast to the extraordinary popularity enjoyed by the sentimental. When we look at music charts – and, in the 21st century, streaming figures and click counts – sentimental songs in particular prove to be especially popular. Even *Guinness World Records* attest to this through its entries for the two best-selling singles: “White Christmas” (music and lyrics by Irving Berlin, 1942) in the version sung by Bing Crosby (1947) and “Candle in the Wind” (music by Elton John, lyrics by Bernie Taupin, 1973) in the version recorded by Elton John in 1997 as a tribute to Princess Diana (Frith 2001). Sentimental songs are popular simply in the sense that they are noticed by many, which in itself implies social relevance (Werber et al. 2023). With their strong, and at times excessive, emotional content, sentimental songs have an everyday aesthetic significance for their listeners (DeNora 2004). However, an experience of emotional exuberance is also capable of momentarily lifting one out of everyday life; and special events – whether political or other public gatherings – acquire a striking intensity of collective experience through emotional excesses. The historic moment when, in 2015, Barack Obama began singing “Amazing Grace” at the memorial service for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney and the other victims of the shooting rampage at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, thereby stimulating the assembled congregation to devoted collective singing, exemplifies the political as well as community-building potential of sentimental song (Paul 2021: 148). The American studies scholar Heike Paul (2021) describes the socio-political relevance of such sentimental practices for the USA using the term “civil sentimentalism”. This suggests that research into the sentimental in the field of song cannot be a purely musicological project, but rather thrives on interdisciplinary exchange. Furthermore, it is important to build bridges between the manifestations of the sentimental in the USA – which are influential in many respects – and other cultural regions, as it can be assumed that sentimental song is to be found worldwide.

With this special issue, we aim to contribute to a broader as well as deeper understanding of sentimental songs – both from interdisciplinary and international perspectives and with regard to the complex and often ambivalent meanings inherent in them. Our aim – and that of the authors of the contributions – is not so much to grapple with the supposed ambivalence of leaving the lofty heights of academia to engage with excessively emotional subjects. The devaluation of the sentimental, as has long been established in various contexts, is not taken for granted in this special issue, but is understood as part of the discursive field under investigation. In this sense, such axiological processes remain certainly relevant, for instance in understanding distinctions from sentimental music in general (Breyley in this issue) or within specific genres such as hip hop (Vrdoljak in this issue) or rock and metal (Gale in this issue; Nink and Heesch 2023). However, in our view, the more interesting ambivalences of sentimental songs lie in their relationship to aspects such as political engagement, the expression of vulnerability and/or empathy, nostalgia, and representations of gender or race. Furthermore, the ambivalence of popularity often implies the tension between an appeal to the many and commodification, which, in the case of sentimental songs, also involves the capitalisation on grand emotions (Illouz 2018).

In the opening essay of this special issue on sentimental songs, **Andrew Wildermuth** addresses the current state of sentimentality by looking at two historical events in US political history from a contemporary perspective. Drawing on Bob Dylan's and Joan Baez's concerts as part of the 1963 "March on Washington", as well as a White House commemoration of the Civil Rights Movement in 2010, he explores the conditions under which sentimentality can unleash emancipatory potential. Wildermuth reflects on today's possibilities to generate a unifying political sentiment within the increasing algorithmisation of everyday life, which tends to lead to isolation rather than fostering a sense of connection between people.

By looking back over the last 250 years of sentimental English-language music, **Emily Gale** shows that the notion of emotional excess, that is commonly used to define sentimentality, has shifted particularly with regard to masculinity. Looking at "sentimental men" at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century Gale not only demonstrates how "men of feeling" openly expressed their perspectives on romantic love in sentimental songs but reveals at the same time that the gender-specific attribution of sentimentality with femininity is, in fact, a historically development from the second half of the 19th century.

In the first musicological study on the 1940 painting *Sentimental Ballad* by the American artist Grant Wood, **Florian Heesch** explores the specific historical situation of the painting's depiction of weeping men singing the Tin Pan Alley song "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" – a scene from the Hollywood Movie *The Long Voyage Home* (directed by John Ford), based on plays by Eugene O'Neill. From a situational analysis perspective, the article examines Wood's painting in relation to contemporary concepts of high/low-hierarchies and popularity, to nostalgia for Irishness in popular culture as well as to processes of negotiating the relation of masculinity and sentimentality.

Contrary to the widespread belief, much of American hip hop culture draws on sentimental elements, as **Hana Vrdoljak** demonstrates in her article, describing the shift towards male vulnerability in the 1990s and 2000s rap music as a "sentimental turn". Notably, this shift encompasses works that critically engage with the US penal system: by casting the Black male prisoner as a suffering child and the grieving mother, such productions aim to elicit empathy from their audience, while at the same time counteracting pathologizing notions of Black masculinity. Drawing on the depiction of prison experiences in hip-hop songs by 2Pac and YNW Melly, Vrdoljak situates the sentimental narratives within a broader theoretical backdrop of prison abolitionist theory.

Los Angeles-based pop diva Googoosh is regarded as the most commercially successful Iranian-born performer, while having had the height of her career in the 1970s. **Gay Breyley** demonstrates in her article how Googoosh's ballad "Hamsafar" (1975) can, 50 years after its release, foster a sense of connection amongst people across generations and locations – including diasporic contexts. The multiple layers of meaning of the symbolic lyrics enable not only the sharing of personal feelings, but also political solidarity. Gay Breyley illustrates this role of "Hamsafar" in Googoosh's tour in 2025, set against the backdrop of the protests against the Islamic regime.

The fact that sentimental music is a global phenomenon is also reflected by **Patricia Marie U. Dizon**. Her article highlights the transnational circulation of Original Pilipino Music (OPM) as of singer Christian Bautista, who has enjoyed success in other Asian countries such as Indonesia. Dizon illustrates Bautista's transnational success as a specific development of the 2000s, as he conveys the sentimental emotions of his songs particularly through the visual presentation of his star image. This "semiotic alignment" between sentimental music and the star persona plays a central role in enabling the transnational dissemination of "kilig", a culturally specific Filipino affect associated with romantic excitement.

Toivo Burlin focuses on the Swedish musician and accordionist Carl "Calle" Jularbo (1893–1966), whose large number of recordings released between 1913 and 1966 reached a huge audience and remain popular to this day. Burlin demonstrates how sentimentality is evoked in Jularbo's songs through romantic and nostalgic lyrics, musical arrangement and recording techniques. He situates his sentimental melodies within a historic period of upheaval marked by the modernisation of Swedish society.

With focusing on the power ballad, **Knut Holtsträter** approaches a popular song format of Western pop culture of the 1980s and 1990s. Analyzing Michal Bolton's power ballad "How Am I Supposed to Live Without You" (1983), Holtsträter demonstrates that the song's media transition between the radio edit and the visual presentation in the music video give rise to varying meanings of the expressed sentimentality, with regard to masculinity, race and genre.

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