

Introduction

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Any biographical volume of contemporary personalities faces an inherent problem; such works are dated from the moment they appear. To a certain extent, attempting to encapsulate the state of popular music “since 1990,” the period on which *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Popular Musicians* focuses, is to aim at a moving target. Given the fleeting nature of stardom—and the evanescence of pop culture as a whole—some “hot new performers” of 2003 likely will be forgotten within five years, others as soon as six months. Ongoing developments in technology and the music industry have accelerated this process, so that artists sometimes release one album and, unable to hold their own amid so many competing outlets for entertainment—DVDs, video games, the Internet—are not heard from again. Trends rise and disappear with equal unpredictability.

For example, the popularity of “divas,” a term previously reserved for only the most venerable female performers but bestowed in the late 1990s upon newcomers such as Shania Twain and Brandy, had largely played out by the early 2000s, as one-time divas Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston released albums that proved critically and commercially disappointing.

Selection and Inclusion of Artists

The question of which performers to include required a substantial degree of judgment. Targeting the top tier, or “most popular,” performers—Eminem, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Nirvana, and others—was simple; choosing the next level and the one below it proved more difficult. The selection process was always challenging and often thorny. The value of an entry on rock and R&B star

Tina Turner, for instance, is clear: Not only did Turner set a standard for energy and tenacity that continues to be an inspiration for younger performers, she also retained her hit-making prowess into the 1990s. At the same time, other talented performers of Turner’s generation—Patti LaBelle, Gladys Knight—are omitted because their commercial success in the 1990s did not reach the same heights. They still perform concerts and sell recordings among a core group of fans, but their appeal is largely confined to those with esoteric tastes. Like Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones, two “veteran” acts also included, Turner has proven consistently relevant from a commercial perspective. When considering entries for younger performers—newcomers who have invigorated pop by presenting old styles in a different way—*Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Popular Musicians Since 1990* has targeted those artists who are likely to have staying power in the years to come, with the understanding that the vagaries of the music business render long-term predictions impossible.

The bulk of the book is devoted to rock, pop, country, R&B, and hip-hop. For entries in these categories, the book’s goal is to spotlight artists who are popular in the current period, those who have established their success with hit recordings, CD sales, and radio airplay. When considering entries for other genres—classical, world, Latin, Broadway, blues, folk, New Age, and jazz—and determining the right balance of entries for each category, the criteria for inclusion were slightly different, but commercial success remained as one factor. In the field of jazz, for instance, the critical attention given to performers often outdistances their “success” from a commercial standpoint. Although the 1990s saw young jazz musicians such as

Diana Krall moving into the pop mainstream, the bulk of jazz artists continued to work far outside the confines of hit radio and music television. The jazz entries, therefore, represent a survey not only of “crossover” artists such as Krall but also of established performers—Keith Jarrett, Wynton Marsalis—who seldom achieve hits on the Top 40 pop charts. At the same time, classically inclined readers may be surprised that an orchestra such as the London Symphony is included while the Berlin Philharmonic, considered one of the most accomplished in the world, is not. In a larger collection both would have warranted inclusion. In this collection, the London Symphony was selected because it epitomizes what contributor Douglas McLennan calls the “entrepreneurial spirit that has made it one of the most recorded orchestras in the world.” The goal in presenting entries for non-pop or rock genres is to provide readers with a sample survey of the field. Although not every worthy artist or group is included, the present collection will give readers a solid base from which to explore these styles further.

Changes in Pop Since 1990

The concept of “crossover,” the transition of an artist from a “niche” or “cult” status into the mainstream of popular recognition, is a recurring theme within the entries, one that has notably characterized the state of pop music since the 1990s. Latin artists Marc Anthony and Ricky Martin, blues guitarist Kenny Wayne Shepherd, and classical performer Andrea Bocelli are just a few of the performers whose careers have benefited from this movement. Crossover, of course, has been a goal of pop performers for decades—the success of the 1960s record company Motown, for example, was built upon crossover from R&B into the pop market—but the 1990s witnessed the enactment of crossover to an unprecedented degree. It became not merely a goal, but a necessity for economic survival. Commercial radio formats in the 1990s grew more conservative, with little attention devoted to new or untested artists; at the same time, the music industry continued to issue new product at a steady pace. As Michael Selverne discusses in his essay within the appendix, approximately 6,500 albums are released each year in the United States. Of these, only two percent are judged successful by attaining “gold” or “platinum” status. Further, the standard channel for music distribution, the CD, has been threatened by the increased number of ways fans can hear music by their favorite artists: MP3 file sharing, audio streaming, and websites. As a result, by 2003 the entire industry was in the midst of one of its worst slumps in history, battling music downloads on the one hand while pushing CDs with the all-time high price of \$19.99 on the other.

In this shaky climate, artistic risk-taking, even among those known for their iconoclasm, has become rare.

Former music “rebels” such as Randy Newman, while continuing to issue solid material, firmly joined the 1990s Hollywood establishment, composing family-friendly scores for hit movies. In country music, “traditional” artists such as Mark Chesnutt have smoothed out the rough edges in their sound, bringing it into line with the accessible standards of hit radio, in which “playlists”—song sets given regular rotation at stations—are determined by market research strategies such as focus groups and surveys. Similarly, hip-hop artists such as R. Kelly and Mary J. Blige added pop elements—soaring choruses, inspirational lyrics—to their recordings as the 1990s progressed, although, despite the odds, they often succeeded in preserving the integrity of their original artistic vision. Kelly’s “I Believe I Can Fly” (1996), one of the biggest hits of the decade, gained its power from traditional gospel vocalizing combined with a slick pop production, while Blige crafted one of the most appealing albums of her career, *Mary* (1999), by setting her grainy voice against a bed of lush strings and elegant orchestrations.

As Kelly and Blige prove, crossover is not necessarily a negative force. It has, for instance, allowed rap music to retain its commercial potency throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium, as rappers such as Will Smith, Ja Rule, and Eminem have earned lasting favor among a pop audience. If the tenacity of a style is any indication of its value, rap has emerged as one of the most important musical developments of the late twentieth century. As rap has evolved over the course of a 25-year recorded history, it has displayed remarkable staying power and resilience, adapting to new trends by filtering into pop, rock, hip-hop, and R&B. By the early 2000s, rap had enjoyed a longer hit-making life than those of antecedent styles in African-American music such as soul, funk, or disco. Coming to terms with the ongoing development and vitality of rap, a style initially disregarded by the critical establishment as “nonmusical” or “talky,” is one of the most exciting elements of this volume, proof that innovation is not necessarily stifled by the presence of commercial success.

A development separate from, but related to, crossover has been the rise of pluralism within pop music since the 1990s. As pop continues to evolve, a greater number of artists have incorporated elements from outside genres into their work. By the end of the 1990s this musical breadth had become a mark of erudition on the part of the artist, pointing to an awareness of the disparate styles that blend into pop’s musical brew. In previous decades, it was common for performers to remain within a single, definable stylistic pattern. The albums of 1970s singer Carole King, for example, vary little in terms of sound from one to the next. When folk-rock artist Joni Mitchell experimented with jazz on her mid-1970s albums, the effort was viewed as a bold stylistic move. Such ini-

tiatives were the norm by the 1990s, when digital technology and musical “sampling” made it easy for an artist to insert a riff from the past or a snippet of an African polyrhythm into a modern song. Contemporary artists such as Wyclef Jean, Annie Lennox, and David Byrne have made eclecticism their trademark, delving into new musical terrain with each successive release. While it can be argued that many of these explorations are more concerned with style than with substance, it is undeniable that contemporary musicians are more aware than ever of the array of options, or “sound bites,” available for use in their music.

In addition to crossover and pluralism, the entries reflect other changes that occurred within the pop world of the 1990s. In support of the maxim that trends never disappear but are instead recycled and updated, “boy bands”—a staple of pop music in the early 1970s with groups like the Jackson 5 and the Osmonds—returned in the 1990s. Acts such as Hanson, the Backstreet Boys, and *NSYNC attained idol status among one of the pop industry’s primary target markets: teenage girls. At the same time, another branch of pop music appealed to a more mature, music-savvy audience, with older artists such as Santana, Aerosmith, Tony Bennett, and Frank Sinatra gaining a renewed fame that rivaled their success in the past, particularly in terms of record sales (Sinatra’s 1993 *Duets* album became the biggest seller of his career). In a sense, the pop audience’s attentions have always been balanced between a craving for the “new” and a nostalgic yearning for the past; the most successful pop music looks both forward and backward. Music fans of the 1990s took pride in their eclecticism, and it was not uncommon for purchasers of the latest album by Sheryl Crow or Alanis Morissette also to buy a “traditional” CD such as the 1997 crossover hit *Buena Vista Social Club*, which showcased a number of Cuba’s finest, yet most neglected, musicians.

With the expanding selection of choices in pop music, audiences by the early 2000s began to fall into segmented categories associated with their interests: Southern Rock, Speed Metal, Gangsta Rap. These fans found kindred musical spirits through Internet websites and chat rooms tailored to their needs. Traditional marketing initiatives began to seem out of date as more music fans learned about new artists through word-of-mouth and online recommendations. In a mark of the dichotomy that has always characterized popular culture, however, segmented audiences also possessed a greater capacity to branch out into other musical areas. The range of musical subgenres is now wider than ever, but, due to technology and the cross-pollination of pop music styles, the gaps separating one listener from another have grown smaller. Acknowledging this development by featuring entries on a diverse range of styles, the contributors have sought to capture the complex, variegated nature of current popular music.

Format and Style

Within the entries, contributors have represented bands and artists on their own terms; a rock performer such as Bruce Springsteen is not depicted as “greater” or “lesser” in value than Broadway theater composer Stephen Sondheim. Both have been active since 1990, and in this way have contributed immeasurably to the current musical landscape. At the same time, the contributors have exerted critical assessment within each style. Unlike many musical reference works that describe the subject’s work with technical, dispassionate language, the new *Baker’s* offers judgment without entirely discarding the ideals of objectivity and distance with which such volumes are informed.

In this way *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Popular Musicians Since 1990* departs from the Ninth “Centennial” Edition of *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (2001), edited by Nicolas Slonimsky and Laura Kuhn. The emphasis in that six-volume work is classical, and its guiding principles are biographical and bibliographical. Furthermore, it does not attempt to assess the recording achievements of its subjects. Slonimsky’s entry on Ludwig van Beethoven, for example, contains more than ten columns devoted to the composer’s complete output, including orchestral works, chamber works, works for piano, for voice, and for solo instruments and orchestra. Yet *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* does not mention any famous Beethoven recordings by the conductors Wilhelm Furtwängler, Leonard Bernstein, or Carlos Kleiber; the pianists Wilhelm Kempff or Alfred Brendel; or sopranos such as Christa Ludwig and Barbara Bonney. Such a listing would have proved overwhelming, and invariably the question of which recordings are still in print would need to be answered.

In contrast, and as the book’s cover image implies, *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Popular Musicians Since 1990* focuses largely upon the recordings. This is fitting, since the recorded album or single track, unlike a musical score, can be considered a finished work of art. The book assumes that readers will get to know the subject not through formal study of piano, guitar, or voice, but through repeated exposure to recordings. Although the interests of fans and inveterate music lovers have been considered, the book is tailored for general readers, those without formal training in music. Each entry, therefore, strives to provide a general overview while delving deeply enough to seize upon the inherent worth of its subject. On the whole, contributors have not been concerned with assessing an artist’s career on a strict album-by-album basis. Rather, they have employed a selective approach that limns an artist’s special contribution—the elements making that artist worthy of inclusion.

It is hoped that the book’s balance—critical yet inclusive—will be useful for placing each performer’s work

in its proper context. Entries on pioneering artists such as James Brown and George Jones are presented as “appreciations” as much as biographies. Neither performer can be accurately described as a “hot” artist in a contemporary sense. Both have remained active performers since 1990, but their commercial success peaked decades earlier. Without an understanding of the ways in which they have influenced the course of contemporary music, however, the work of their descendants in rhythm and blues and country cannot adequately be assessed. Likewise, the Beatles, a group that has not existed officially since 1970, are given a substantial entry due to the enormous influence they have exerted upon every rock band that has followed them. The volume’s mission, therefore, is to appeal to two different audiences. One can be described as an older reader familiar with the Beatles and James Brown, but for whom developments since 1990 in rock and R&B—grunge, rap, hip-hop—have gone largely unnoticed. The second is a reader born after 1980, aware of young artists such as Mary J. Blige and Britney Spears but oblivious to pop music’s longstanding relation to Broadway, jazz, and Tin Pan Alley. Through categorical inclusiveness, *Baker’s* seeks to bridge the gap between these audiences.

Through its format, structure, and content, *Baker’s* hopes to complement, rather than compete with, the Internet. While the editors and contributors understand that a great deal of biographical information is available on the Web, they also believe in the value of two concise volumes that can be browsed and consulted through multiple encounters. Further, given the transitory nature of material on the Web, *Baker’s* will provide readers with a long-lasting, dependable alternative. Acknowledging the importance of Internet research, contributors have included Web links for performers and bands wherever possible. They have also strived for accuracy with regard to the biographical information at the beginning of each entry: birthplace, birth date, best-selling album since 1990, and hits since 1990; although it has not always been possible to unearth more arcane data such as the birth dates of musicians who long ago left a group. The albums listed at the end of each entry reflect the contributor’s assessment of which works are significant—the recordings that best represent an artist’s contributions as a whole—rather than a complete discography.

Selected sidebars, called “spotlights,” target the recordings, events, and movements that have defined popular music since 1990. There are spotlights on special events and cultural moments (such as Farm Aid or Gilberto Gil being named Brazil’s minister of culture); hit songs (Hanson’s “MMMBop”); and pivotal albums (Nirvana’s *Nevermind*). The genre index at the end of Volume 2 supplements the general index and is designed for browsing. Only the largest genre categories are included in this index. Examples include rock and pop, classical, country, jazz, Latin, rhythm and

blues, and world. No attempt has been made to separate rock from pop or to divide rock into its fragmented components. Artists and bands in the genre index appear only once, each within a single category, even though the genre description that appears beneath a subject title in the book may list multiple categories. For example, the subject “Elvis Costello” appears in the genre index under rock; the genre line under Costello’s article lists rock, pop, and country.

Four interpretive essays in the appendix have been commissioned to help expand the use and depth of the book, providing historical context for many of the subjects. The essays address themes of particular importance to popular music in the United States since 1990: the rise and fall of grunge (the dominant popular rock genre at the start of the 1990s); rap music’s emergence within the commercial mainstream; the impact of corporate radio since the mid-1990s and its effects upon musical content; and the role of the Internet and the crisis of the music industry in the early 2000s.

Attempting to Define “Popular”

In conclusion, the term “popular music” can be challenging to define, as it begs the question, “What is popular?” In his book *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music* (1994), music historian Donald Clarke equates “popular” with “commercial.” In contrast to classical music, the creation and performance of which is often aided by governmental or private subsidies, “popular music” is associated with business and enterprise. In general, a symphonic, operatic, or chamber composer creates music irrespective of commercial considerations. A popular music writer, on the other hand, must score some kind of “hit”—whether on the Top 40 charts, in a Hollywood film, or on the Broadway stage—in order to enjoy a full-time career in music. This is not to say that creators of pop music are not simultaneously interested in making “art”; rather, that popular art is often created with commercial considerations in mind. At the same time, the lines between “popular” and “classical” are not always clear-cut. The years since 1990 have witnessed classical performers moving into the cultural mainstream to an unprecedented degree. Opera singers such as Renée Fleming are marketed like pop stars, via advertising campaigns that emphasize their good looks and sex appeal. This development notwithstanding, “classical” and “popular” are still widely perceived as separate areas of appreciation. The difference between the two can be detected through a trip to a local CD store. While the pop, rock, and R&B aisles will be thronged with crowds, the classical section is often empty, an oasis of quiet amidst the hubbub and cacophony that surrounds it.

Moving past categorical divisions, the concept of popular music can perhaps best be described through its entry in the *Collins English Dictionary*: “music having wide

appeal.” It is this definition that most accurately expresses the philosophy of this book and its editor, Stephen Wasserstein. Over the course of almost 600 entries, the two volumes comprising this new addition to *Baker’s* seek to address the question of which musicians have been popular at some point since 1990, regardless of genre or style. For this reason, classical artists such as Fleming, as well as classical “bands” such as the Boston Pops and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, are included; their appeal is so widespread that they can be described as “popular” in their reach and influence. As the first book of its kind

to spotlight all forms of music since 1990, it targets and surveys those artists who have made a significant impact on current popular culture. Although the book’s emphasis is contemporary, the decision to use 1990 as a starting point gives it the historical perspective common to a reference work. Popular music has changed dramatically since 1990; in these volumes, the editorial team and contributors aim to capture the varied, complex nature of today’s pop within a readable, concise format.

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