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Hitting the high notes

Simon Webster
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Popular music has lots of lyrics about drugs, alcohol and tobacco, a study has found. This will come as a great disappointment to parents who had hoped the "sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll" lifestyle appealed only in their era. Alas, their attempts to get teenagers excited about the concept of "holding hands and lemonade and harpsichord baroque" appear to have failed.

Medical researchers in the US studied 279 top songs of 2005 to reach their conclusions, and released the results last week, which just goes to show how hard it is to understand what these pop stars today are singing.

One-third of the songs had references to substance abuse. The other two-thirds could have been about anything - after two years the researchers gave up trying to work them out.

The messages appeared in 77 per cent of rap songs, 36 per cent of country songs, 20 per cent of R&B songs, 14 per cent of rock songs and 9 per cent of pop songs.

Researchers cited the lyrics to *Stay Fly* by rappers Three 6 Mafia: "Breakin down the good weed, rollin' the blunt/Ghetto pimp tight girls say I'm the man."

The use of the word "weed" caused researchers to add this song to the drugs list. However, as the rest of the words make no sense whatsoever, researchers have acknowledged off the record that it's just as likely to be about gardening, a popular pastime in the inner-city Los Angeles suburb of Compton.

The title would seem to confirm this theory. "Stay, hoverfly", the rappers appear to be saying, referring to a beneficial insect that eats aphids and plays an important role in organic integrated pest management schemes.

This wouldn't be the first time innocent lyrics had been misinterpreted. In 1967, against his wishes, Frank Zappa's record company removed eight bars of his song *Let's Make The Water Turn Black* after an executive from Verve Records heard the lyrics "And I still remember mama with her apron and her pad, feeding all the boys at Ed's cafe." The executive thought the "pad" was a sanitary napkin, which just goes to show that record executives aren't averse to a bit of the whacky baccy themselves.

The book *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship In America* by Eric Nuzum details the Zappa story, along with other incidents dating back to 1951, when radio stations banned Dottie O'Brien's *Four Or Five Times* and Dean Martin's *Wham Bam, Thank You Ma'am*, fearing they were suggestive. It's possible they also feared the juxtaposition of the two songs would cast men's approach to lovemaking in a poor light.

The US study, published in the journal *Archives Of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, did not look into sex, violence or expletives in songs, nor did it draw conclusions about the music's effect on young listeners.

It did, however, calculate that with Americans aged 15 to 18 listening to 2.4 hours of music a day, they would hear 84 references to substance abuse a day, or more than 30,000 a year.

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Fortunately, they're all so stoned that their short-term memory is appalling and it all goes in one ear and out the other.

Researcher Dr Brian Primack of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine told Reuters: "It's not going to be feasible or even desirable to censor these messages.

"Probably a more empowering approach is to teach kids to analyse and evaluate the messages for themselves." Unfortunately, finding a method of communicating with teenagers has proved more elusive than talking to extraterrestrials.

We needn't worry too much. Songs about substance abuse have been around as long as the substances. In 1954 Cole Porter's *I Get A Kick Out Of You* was rerecorded for radio airplay with the line "Some get a kick from cocaine" replaced with "I get perfume from Spain". The original lyrics were reinstated when the dangers of duty-free shopping became apparent.

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in *Treasure Island* in 1883: "Fifteen men on the dead man's chest/Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!" That's substance abuse and death themes.

As a French minstrel wrote in 1210 (from beer lovers' website zythophile.wordpress.com): "Or hi parra?/ La cervueyse nos chantera?/Alleluia!" Let it be seen?/The ale will sing to us?/ Hallelujah!

In other news

IN A breakthrough for sleep-deprived neighbours across the city, Sydney nightclubs are about to join in the trend for silent parties, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported last week.

In the craze that has swept Europe (well, bits of it), no music is played through speakers. Instead, partygoers wear headphones that pick up an FM radio signal broadcast by the DJ.

Take off the headphones and you can not only watch people looking really silly as they dance in silence, but you can order a drink or chat to your mates.

This will better facilitate the understanding of tricky song lyrics. "Was that crack cocaine or methamphetamines that the artist was urging us to consume?" one raver can ask another.

"Dunno mate," they will reply. "I can't understand a word those French minstrels say."

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