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Hit songs take devil-may-care approach to drugs and alcohol

Dipesh Gadhur, Media Correspondent

FOR the likes of Amy Winehouse and Pete Doherty, the drug-addled British pop stars, it will probably come as little surprise. A new study by American academics will reveal this week that one in three hit songs contains references to illicit substances.

The research is expected to single out rap music as the worst offender, with nearly 80% of lyrics mentioning marijuana or alcohol.

Of 279 songs examined by the study, only four hits are thought to have carried an explicit anti-substance abuse message, prompting concerns that drinking and drug-taking will be seen by young audiences as glamorous activities.

Researchers from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine based their findings on five different musical genres from the US Billboard charts in 2005. According to preliminary findings, 20% of R&B and hip-hop songs contained references to drugs and alcohol, while the figure fell to 14% for rock songs and 9% for pop songs.

The worst offender after rap turned out to be country and western music (37%) – fuelled by the convention of sorrows being drowned in honky tonks.

Speaking at a recent scientific conference, Brian Primack, assistant professor of medicine at the Pittsburgh faculty, who led the research, said: “We’re learning that the media affect a lot of health behaviours. Tobacco in movies, for example, is now known to lead to smoking.

“We started realising adolescents are exposed to 2½ hours a day of music. What’s in the music? It’s good for us to know this exposure is there so that we can go the next step . . . We can talk to kids about it and say what we think is correct and what is not.”

While smoking tobacco is thought to have featured in no more than 3% of songs studied, drinking was mentioned in almost a quarter of hits and marijuana use in about 14%.

A typical example is Disco Inferno, a No 3 single by 50 Cent, the American rapper, which is littered with drug references. In one line he raps: “Let’s party, everybody bounce wit’ me. Sip champagne and burn a little greenery.” Another line is: “I ain’t stupid – I see Doc and my dope come quicker.”

Peter Stoker, director of the UK-based National Drug Prevention Alliance, said: “It’s very important to focus on the culture around drug use and the impulses that young people respond to – and this is one of them. Most young people are mad keen on music, even if they have a greater love like soccer.

“It doesn’t surprise me that the majority of these references are positive or neutral. The more you hear about something in a positive way, the more likely you are to give it a try.”

Stoker, however, said he was against censoring musicians and pointed out that substance abuse has been a long-running theme for tortured artists.

He recalled his folk club days and Bert Jansch, the influential singer-guitarist whose antidrug song The Needle of Death – written after a friend died – could still have been a lure to the impressionable: “People would have listened to that and said ‘That’s cool, that’s edgy – maybe I should give it a try’.”

Tunes for a wasted generation

Mr Brownstone, Guns N’ Roses

Pass the Kutchie, Musical Youth
Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll, Ian Dury
Golden Brown, The Stranglers
Gin & Juice, Snoop Dogg
Sister Morphine, The Rolling Stones
Because I Got High, Afroman
Cokane in My Brain, Dillinger
Ebenezer Goode, The Shamen
Heroin The Velvet, Underground
Chinese Rocks, The Heartbreakers
Kaya, Bob Marley
Eight Miles High, The Byrds

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