



Obituary

Richard A. Peterson (1932–2010)

We are saddened to report the passing of Richard A. Peterson. As readers of *Poetics* likely know, “Pete” was a major figure in the sociology of culture and the arts. His impact was due, in part, to his ability to identify promising lines of inquiry while also providing clear models of how to pursue such inquiry. In the early to mid 1970s, for instance, he and David G. Berger published work that would motivate many to consider whether diversity suffers when a few corporations dominate a media industry (e.g., [Peterson and Berger, 1975](#); see also [Peterson and Berger, 1996](#)) – thus stimulating an interdisciplinary line of inquiry that continues to the present ([Dowd, 2007](#)). In the mid-1970s and beyond, Pete broadened his approach by examining how a shifting confluence of factors – including (but not limited to) organizational and industry factors – shapes the creation and dissemination of media content (e.g., [Peterson, 1976, 1979, 1985](#); [Peterson and Anand, 2004](#)). Consequently, he was a prime-mover in the “production of culture” approach that proved so influential for decades to come ([DiMaggio, 2000](#); [Santoro, 2008a,b](#)).

As time moved forward, so too did Pete’s intellectual agenda. While continuing his concerns with diversity, in particular, and the production of culture, in general – he also offered a seminal statement on “authenticity” via his book on country music ([Peterson, 1997b, 2005a](#); see [Hughes, 2000](#)). This served as a touchstone for other scholars who view authenticity not as something that merely resides within (musical) content but, instead, as an emergent and evolving category that depends on the definitions of key actors (e.g., [Grazian, 2003](#); [Santoro, 2002, 2010](#)). In considering Bourdieu’s work on tastes and preferences, Pete and his collaborators helped launched a line of inquiry that has proven tremendously fertile – that dealing with the omnivorous tastes of high-status individuals (e.g., [Peterson, 1992, 2005b, 2007](#); [Peterson and Kern, 1996](#); [Peterson and Rossman, 2008](#); [Peterson and Simkus, 1992](#)). Indeed, this work has continued to inspire scholarship around the globe – as shown by special issues in *Poetics* (e.g., [Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007](#); [Janssen and Peterson, 2005](#); [van Eijck, Ollivier, Warde, 2008](#)). More recently, Pete collaborated with Andy Bennett and Stephen Lee to mine the burgeoning topic of “music scenes” ([Bennett and Peterson, 2004](#); [Lee and Peterson, 2004](#)). This allowed him to examine the creation and consumption of music as it occurs at the grass-roots level – thereby complimenting his concerns with formal organizations that disseminate music (e.g., corporations), as well as with aggregate patterns of musical tastes (e.g., omnivores). He also joined forces with Jennifer Lena to document patterns in how musical genres evolve within and beyond the United States ([Lena and Peterson, 2008, forthcoming](#)). Their ambitious efforts augmented and systematized

some of his earlier interests – such as the transition of both jazz and country music from once peripheral genres to commercially successful genres (Peterson, 1972, 1997b).

Our listing of Pete's contributions does not do justice to either his scholarship or influence. Consequently, we encourage readers to read anew his oeuvre – re-considering and re-discovering what he had to say over the years. We also suggest that readers skim the issues of *Poetics* to find the numerous citations of Pete's work – seeing how his impact on the sociology of culture has played out both in the past and in the present. Finally, we recommend that readers re-visit the special issue of *Poetics* that celebrated and charted the accomplishments of Pete's scholarship (Ryan and Hughes, 2000) and that they consult an upcoming issue of *Poetics* that will contain an extended tribute to Pete.

There was obviously more to Pete than his publications and their impact. For instance, he worked tirelessly to foster the community of cultural sociology (see Santoro, 2008a,b). This is evident in the major role he played for *Poetics* – particularly by serving on the editorial board for years, by guest-editing special issues (Janssen and Peterson, 2005; Peterson, 1997a; Peterson and Dowd, 2004), and by providing numerous and helpful reviews to those submitting papers to the journal. Of course, Pete enjoyed the social side of this community. Indeed, many people have fond memories of encountering Pete at conferences all around the world. As those people will testify, Richard A. Peterson was not just an influential scholar – he was also a colleague, a friend, and an inspiration. He will be sorely missed.

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