

Popcast: A music podcast with unexpected scholarly angles

A review and highlighted episode selection.

Fall 2019

Arthur J. Boston

Scholarly Communication Librarian, Assistant Professor

Murray State University Libraries

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8590-4663>



Popcast is a freely-available weekly podcast produced by the *New York Times*, hosted primarily by music critic Jon Caramanica. Episodes from August 2015 to present are available to stream on the *Times* website, and through Apple and Google. Episodes dating back to August 2014 are available exclusively through Spotify Premium. Hip-hop music is a prominent subject, but a variety of genres are covered, along with industry, cultural, and technological trends. Guest with pop culture expertise often appear (e.g. Jia Tolentino, Jenna Wortham, Wesley Morris); they regularly bring race and gender perspectives alternative to the host's white, cisgender male.

The program is an outstanding site of scholarship on pop music in the online-era. Librarians broadly concerned with pop culture may additionally find the show to be broadly applicable to issues in scholarly communications. Copyright, metrics, and preservation are all covered, if only in the context of Charlie Puth and Ariana Grande. Personally speaking, listening to *Popcast*, since 2016, has been surprisingly informative in developing my professional understanding of the research publishing industry. The utility of this connection inspired me to write a full article.¹

Host Jon Caramanica takes a democratic, even *knowing* approach to music criticism, in a way that is in line with the dispositions encouraged for librarians by the recent “Open and Equitable Scholarly Communications: Creating a More Inclusive Future” report from ACRL. The report is

designed to provide practical, actionable information for academic librarians; include the perspectives of historically underrepresented communities in order to expand the profession’s understanding of research environments and scholarly communication systems; and point librarians and other scholars toward important research questions to investigate.²

On the first episode, Caramanica said he feels like “when someone tries to tell me what the song of the summer is, all I know is what *their* summer is like.” Caramanica demonstrates how to interrogate the systems responsible for topics, even as seemingly-light as songs of summer. “It’s very, very hard when I see these universally accepted songs of summer. It just strikes me... it’s a very particular demographic’s song of the summer. Or a song of a particular demographic’s summer. That doesn’t do a lot for me.”³ This is a notion directly relevant to our practices. For instance, in this light, librarians might consider publisher imprimatur: how that mechanism elevates the sensibilities of a few to a status of assumed universality.

At the close of a recent two-part reconsideration of Hootie & the Blowfish, Caramanica offers comments which should speak to librarians rethinking what counts, and why, in our

research practices. He says criticism “is an act of love, it’s an act of generosity, it’s an act of giving the fullness of my attention and my care and my curiosity to this work of art.... It’s not about liking or not liking... it’s context, it’s big picture, it’s also a foil for your personal ideologies that you develop in real time as you are engaging with the art, and I wish more people understood that.”⁴ Replace the term *art* with *scholarship* and it’s an immediately salient point for peer-review and research assessment.

This brief guide recommends episodes of *Popcast* where the scholarly communication angle is particularly evident. Access: <https://www.nytimes.com/column/popcast-pop-music-podcast>

- **Taylor vs. Scooter: The Pop Music Civil War of 2019 (July 3, 2019).** Access:

www.nytimes.com/2019/07/03/arts/music/popcast-taylor-swift-scooter-braun.html

When authors want major publishers to distribute their research, they often sign over the copyright in exchange. Recording artists have traditionally done the same. Both types of creators do so because the career benefits are immediately clear, whereas the consequences are often not. This episode goes in on Taylor Swift’s publicly-expressed disappointment about the original deal she signed to Big Machine at a very young age. Conversely, new generations of artists are increasingly savvy in their contract negotiations, for instance, taking smaller advance payments in exchange for retaining copyright to master recordings. In Swift’s particular deal, she was allowed to retain copyright on her songwriting, which leaves open the possibility of re-recording her catalog. Scholars with works published in paywalled journals might reclaim

control over their research by posting author-version manuscripts to open access repositories—and, by retaining copyright on future works.

- **Can Record Labels Be Trusted to Preserve Music History? (June 13, 2019).** *Access:*
www.nytimes.com/2019/06/13/arts/music/popcast-universal-music-fire.html

Fire destroyed the master recordings of up to half a million songs held by Universal Music Group in 2008. This was devastating, as UMG had amassed a staggering archive of precious yet-to-be-digitized cultural documents by Ray Charles, B.B. King, Etta James, Sting, Joni Mitchell, Tupac Shakur, and many others. Jody Rosen guests on this episode to discuss his reporting on the catastrophe. Rosen questions the “big three labels’ commitment to preservation” which he calls a “slow-motion assault on our musical heritage that is poorly understood by many within the record industry, to say nothing of the public at large.”⁵ In contrast, the Library of Congress is discussed as an example of demonstrating best practices of preservation for music archives.

- **Drake vs. Pusha-T, Unpacked (May 31, 2018).** *Access:*
www.nytimes.com/2018/05/31/arts/music/popcast-drake-push-t.html

Authorship of one’s own bars is an expectation in traditional hip-hop circles. By contrast, Drake’s use of uncredited songwriters has long been an issue, famously raised by Meek Mill during a 2016 battle, and again by Pusha-T in a 2018 battle, as discussed here. It is notable that such repeat allegations have left Drake largely unscathed in terms of popularity or credibility. This dissonance between ideals and practice occurs in academia, too, when junior researchers

are tasked to ghostwrite peer reviews for their more senior counterparts, or when their contributions to projects go uncredited or under-credited on resulting article publications.

- **Pop's Category Killers, From Live Nation to Spotify, Under the Microscope (April 20, 2018).** *Access:*

www.nytimes.com/2018/04/20/arts/music/popcast-live-nation-ticketmaster-spotify.html

Vertical integration is a maximization strategy, taking different stages of a supply chain normally run by separate companies, and combining them. This results often in higher margins for the companies doing the integration, but squeezes out smaller rival companies, leaving consumers with fewer choices. Librarians will be familiar with this concept, as commercial vendors increasingly insert themselves into every conceivable stage of scholarly production by acquiring scholarly tools like citation managers, repository software, and analytic services. This episode discusses how specific antitrust conditions, set during the approval of a 2010 merger between management and touring agency Live Nation and ticketing agency Ticketmaster, have proved difficult for the government to monitor for monopolistic practices.

- **What Are the Billboard Charts Really Measuring? (October 27, 2017).** *Access:*

www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/arts/music/billboard-chart-streaming-rule-change.html

The Journal Impact Factor and Journal Citation Report from Clarivate/Web of Science have long affected publishing behavior by researchers. On this episode, Caramanica asks critical questions about the Hot 100 list. Billboard has measured the popularity of music for decades

using models that have grown to include radio play, physical sales, and paid or free ad-supported streams. While these numbers may be recorded objectively, how the numbers are then weighted is a subjective, undisclosed calculation made by Billboard, prone to reverse-engineering by labels. Goodheart's law (when measures become targets, they are no longer good measures) is an important principle to bear in mind for any librarian becoming involved with bibliometrics or research assessment on their campuses.

- **Is SoundCloud a Business or a Community? (August 25, 2017).** *Access:*

www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/arts/music/popcast-soundcloud-online-music-culture.html

Open access preprint repositories are online spaces where researchers can upload and disseminate original works, ahead of the time-consuming process of peer-review, and without worry over the citation impact-minded decisions of some editors. While such archives offer great benefit to the communities they serve, their funding models (usually non-profit) can leave long-term sustainability an open concern. This episode discusses the financial troubles SoundCloud has faced, and the possible consequences for the culture it supports. SoundCloud is an online streaming site that allows anyone to upload and share audio content. The influential subgenre of SoundCloud rap (e.g. 21 Savage, A Boogie wit da Hoodie, Juice WRLD, and Lil Pump) was first developed in this space.

- **Revisiting Kanye West's 'The Life of Pablo' (November 25, 2016).** *Access:*

www.nytimes.com/2016/02/19/arts/music/popcast-kanye-the-life-of-pablo.html

A rosy view of article writing is that ideas are first polished and produced by an author and editorial team, followed by a discrete and complete item being distributed to an audience. A messier view is that authors go through several drafts, present versions of the research at conference, circulate preprints among peers for feedback, and sometimes have minor corrections or full retractions issued after publication. This episode covers a 2016 Kanye album which diverged from the traditional album drop, and exemplified the complicated new modes of digital-era releases. Over a weekend, a version of the album was previewed at a massive public listening session, two versions of songs premiered on a *Saturday Night Live* episode, and finally, after technical hiccups, a streaming-only version was released exclusively on Tidal, resulting in the piracy of half a million copies. Over the next few weeks, mistakes in the track-listing and credits were fixed, and guest verses were altered based on fan feedback. This story may ring true for many digital scholars, who polish ideas iteratively and publicly.

Notes

1. Arthur Boston, "Hip-Hop librarianship for scholarly communication: An approach to introducing topics," *Journal of New Librarianship* 4, no. 1 (2019): 1-62.
<https://www.newlibs.org/article/7283-hip-hop-librarianship-for-scholarly-communication-an-a-pproach-to-introducing-topics>
2. Association of College and Research Libraries. Open and Equitable Scholarly Communications: Creating a More Inclusive Future. Prepared by Nancy Maron and Rebecca Kennison with Paul Bracke, Nathan Hall, Isaac Gilman, Kara Malenfant, Charlotte Roh, and Yasmeen Shorish. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.5860/acrl.1>
3. Ratliff, Ben. "Popcast: The Songs of Summer." *New York Times*, 1 August 2014.
<https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/01/popcast-the-songs-of-the-summer/>

4. Caramanica, Jon. "How Hootie & the Blowfish Inspired Both Love and Hate." New York Times, 8 July 2019.

www.nytimes.com/2019/07/08/arts/music/popcast-hootie-blowfish-love-hate.html

5. Rosen, Jody. "The Day the Music Burned." New York Times, 11 June 2019.

www.nytimes.com/2019/06/11/magazine/universal-fire-master-recordings.html