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From *American Bandstand* to *Total Request Live*:

Teen Culture and Identity on Music Television

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"When we started the show… there weren't any teenagers," remarked Dick Clark to *The Washington Post* in 1977. "They were just miniatures of their parents. They didn't have their own styles. They didn't have their own music. They didn't have their own money. And now, of course, the whole world is trying to be a kid."[1] The show to which he refers, of course, is *American Bandstand,* which paved the way for *Total Request Live (TRL)* and other television shows which aimed to distribute popular music to young audiences. Here, Dick Clark situates the intersection of music and television as an entity that provides great insight into the social dynamics, the media experience, and the very existence of teenagers in the United States. This niche in television presents an opportunity to explore the identities of the creators, musicians, and audience members involved in the production and distribution of each show. It also provides an archive for exploring American teen culture and identity formation as it relates to such cultural products and media experiences. Television shows whose primary objective was the distribution of popular music first appeared in the mid-20th century, not long after teenagers became a popularly constituted distinct social group in the United States. After *Bandstand* became a national sensation, local and national programs throughout the remainder of the 20th century would strive to recreate its hugely successful formula. In so doing, they would shape important narratives about teenage preferences and experiences.

Because of the way television, while responsible to advertisers, responds to social trends and the shifting demands of its audience, some program attributes remain consistent over time but some, including treatment of race, class, gender, and sexuality, shift in very important ways. Each of the programs in question presented the most popular music of the day in ways that drew massive audiences from teens in the United States between 1952-1989 (*American Bandstand)*

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[1]Shales, Tom. "Dick Clark! American Bandstand." *The Washington Post* 4 Feb. 1977: B1.

and 1998-2008 (*TRL)*. For this reason, I understand these shows as venues through which to view the media's characterization of American youth. Operating under this understanding, I chose to explore *American Bandstand* and *Total Request Live* as cultural products that reflect important features of the youth audiences they attracted and claimed on some level to represent. This representation, at times, necessitated deference to generational identity of young Americans, the kinds of music they created or listened to and why, and, over time, the way they located themselves among their generation with regards to race, class, gender, and sexuality. However, this characterization, in turn, played an important role in the identity formation and self-understanding of the teen audience, and because the shows utilized hegemonic assumptions about teenage life, their influence on self-understanding was particularly powerful for teens who came from marginalized identities.

Through consultation of academic and periodical sources, footage from the programs themselves, and personal interviews, I have sought to clarify the ways in which *American Bandstand, Total Request Live,* and other television shows of their genre reflect the social and political atmospheres in which they were made. In so doing, I have focused on the identity politics of the programs, particularly with regards to the experience of home viewers of marginalized identities who observed, but perhaps did not understand themselves as active participants in, the teenage publics the shows constructed. Without often directly speaking to distinctions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, each show shapes popular thought around these hierarchies. An exploration of show content and organization helps to elucidate the level of inclusion espoused on these shows as it shifted over time.

Each show is at least theoretically participatory, as teens vote for songs of their choice and appear on television in the studio audience, and yet the activity associated with their

participation changes. Generational conflict was constantly at play as parents sought to control the media consumption of their children, but *Bandstand* ultimately assuaged the parental generation's fears that rock and roll would corrupt, sexualize, and estrange their children. I have also paid particular attention to the interaction that occurred between adult producers, distributors and hosts and their younger counterparts in the audience. This helps to elucidate several key changes in the American teenager in the late 20th century, particularly between the end of *Bandstand* and the rise of MTV and VH1.

Because they were the predominant music television shows of the day, and thus were entrusted to reflect and determine the hegemonic teen experience, this project has operated under the assumption that popular television conveys some important cultural attributes of its target audience, even while its creators do not realistically expect to reach or to relate to every member of that target population. For this reason, both of the shows on which this project has focused can be used to ascertain some cultural truths about the generations that grew up watching and contributing to these programs. I have chosen to trace the shift from *American Bandstand* to *Total Request Live* because these two programs most successfully dominated the teen cultural atmosphere as compared to smaller or local shows in similar styles, even though they never truly intended to reach every person of the thirteen-to-eighteen age group. While they were based out of Philadelphia (later California) and New York City, respectively, *Bandstand* and *TRL's* nationwide distributions help to make them, in my understanding, the best points of reference for at least the hegemonic approach to music programming and American youth culture. By assessing these shows, I have explored the intersection of music and television, and drawn conclusions regarding the future of this kind of television programming.

Popular culture and cultural products are not only valid but also essential as a means for understanding social and political climates. The intersection of music and television shifts the meaning of each of those products as they relate to the American social and political climate, particularly for young Americans who are more likely still formulating their ideas of what it means to be American. No matter what is happening on the large scale politically or socially, the experience of individuals is determined in a large way by their media consumption. Timothy Dale helps to articulate this importance in his essay "The Revolution is Being Televised: The Case for Popular Culture as Public Sphere," in which he expands the conception of the public sphere as "policy-oriented dialogue, formal political protest, or direct appeals to political representatives" by asserting that "the widely distributed productions of television and film often play an even greater role in shaping the dialogue that occurs in the public sphere (and across public spheres.)"[2] I acknowledge that *American Bandstand* endorses an exclusive public sphere, in which teens are seemingly invited to participate but which is actually very difficult to access. *Total Request Live* espoused a voting system that was open to a broader audience of young Americans, but still promoted a hegemonic construction of teenage life. Before acknowledging the impact of this construction on marginalized groups among teenagers, however, it is important to establish teenagers themselves as a distinct subculture within the United States.

Teenagers did not constitute a distinct social group in the United States until the 1940s, when the term came about in response to newfound economic power among the under-18 set. Many other societies still do not recognize adolescence as a distinct phase of development, and instead envision a direct shift from childhood to adulthood, which was the understanding in the

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[2] Dale, Tim M. "The Revolution Is Being Televised." *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington: Dissent through American Popular Culture*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2010. Print.

United States prior to this shift. In the burgeoning post-Depression economy, a record sixty-five percent of teens attended high school, but many still held part-time jobs. Because they worked part-time but still relied primarily on their parents, they were free to use their newfound disposable income on entertainment, which made them an ideal advertising market, and led merchandisers not only to coin the term "teenager" but to focus tremendous amounts of time and energy on understanding and catering to them. Secondly, as Grace Palladino explicates in *Teenagers: An American History*, since these young people spent the majority of their time at school or work with their peers rather than at home with their families, they "learned to look to one another and not to adults for advice, information, and approval."[3]

Thus, teens in the United States have, for the merchandiser, two key attributes: they have consumer power based on part-time employment, and they employ a particular kind of groupthink. This understanding, much like that promoted by music programming, is of course not entirely inclusive. At least thirty-five percent of teens were still unable to attend high school. Of these, many went directly to full-time employment and spent their income on basic needs rather than frivolous expenditures.[4] Despite their age, merchandisers would likely not consider such people teenagers at all, since they did not engage in the key teenage activity of media consumption. Also, particularly with regards to *American Bandstand*, a certain amount of economic power was required even to access the program, since televisions were not universally owned or accessible in the 1950s United States. However, because of the broad dissemination of these shows, teens that were not necessarily targeted by the marketing industry still had some sense of the all-American teenager, and internalized those norms. I have attempted to look specifically at those whose age places them within the adolescent subculture but who possess

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[3] Palladino, Grace. *Teenagers: an American History*. New York: Basic, 1996. Print. 5.
[4] Ibid.

some other identifying attribute that relegates them to the margins and designates them as othered from a teenage target audience.

In order for media producers to reach a teenage target audience, they must carefully balance conformity and rebellion. Conformity is essential because of the way teens seek approval from one another and more importantly because media is responsible to advertisers to encourage teens to consume in a uniform way. At the same time, in order for teens to take media seriously, it must appear to be coming from within their trusted peer group, and to encourage individual expression against the rules pressed upon them by adult authority figures. In any exploration of teenagers, a strong tension emerges between groupthink and individuality, both of which are considered vitally important to the teenage experience. Namely, in order for a product to appeal to teens, it has to be cool. Unfortunately for merchandisers, "cool" is quite an elusive quality, and shifts at frequent but irregular intervals. Trendsetters (usually teens themselves) act or think in some unusual way, but in so doing, actually shift the mindset of the average teen. As soon as an adult acknowledges a new fad as "cool," the average fifteen-year-old will be on to the next big thing.

Because they relied upon their ability to attract a large enough teenage audience to entice advertisers, the creative processes that produced both *American Bandstand* and *Total Request Live (TRL)* seized upon the stereotypical teen attribute of rebellion, but because they needed to both assuage parental concerns and persuade teens to consume in a uniform way, they also encouraged conformity. They did this by expressing appreciation for marginalized genres of music, potentially threatening to the status quo, but presenting them in the most benign possible format. While 1990s MTV standards for acceptability were obviously a far cry from those of 1950s ABC, both creative teams sought alternative, groundbreaking forms of music but pushed

those genres into the mainstream by making them as "parent-friendly" as possible. In the 20th-century United States, however, "parent-friendly" can generally be read as white, heterosexual, middle-to-upper-class, and socially conservative-friendly. Such programs, then, emerged from the tension between young, forward-thinking rebellion and older, traditional social values. While especially at the beginning, teens appreciated the democratic nature of such programs and the opportunity to appear on a show that uniquely reflected their preferences, parents were comforted by all-American looking hosts and non-threatening, predictable programming arrangements.

Bob Horn's Bandstand, the show that would become American Bandstand within the decade, set the precedent for such a programming formula. It debuted on Philadelphia's ABC affiliate, WFIL-TV, on Tuesday afternoon, October 6, 1952, and adapted a popular radio format for television. Its time slot, 3:30-4:45 PM each weekday, had previously been filled with leftover tape from filmed musical performances, but these films were deemed uninspiring and failed to draw an audience.[5] This will present an interesting point of origin for comparison. A few decades later, our taste in television would be so radically changed that we would primarily experience music on television through music videos, essentially embellished versions of these original filmed recordings of songs. Instead, it was decided, *Bandstand* would allow local teens the opportunity to dance along to the newest records and to guest musical performances (albeit lip-synched) each weekday at WFIL's studio at 46th and Market Streets, in West Philadelphia.[6]

Local teens responded positively to the inclusion many of them found here and their investment made the program an instant success. Within three months, five thousand high school

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[5] Jackson, John A. "Genesis." *American Bandstand: Dick Clark and the Making of a Rock 'n' Roll Empire*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.
[6] Ibid.

students bore membership cards that would grant admission to the show on two specific days per week.[7] In the years before the program went national, teens named their high school as part of their introduction. Teens could watch their classmates dance their way to popularity and sometimes even fame. The television itself was still a novelty, and the opportunity to watch their most popular peers dancing in this public venue each afternoon brought teenagers into the adult-dominated television industry in a big way. Teens on the show were aged fourteen to seventeen. Those with membership cards could attend the show on specific days and were termed periodic visitors. Good dancers who were popular with viewers could become studio regulars, and if they continued to acquire a fan base they could become part of the elite committee of fifteen teen experts for consultation with producers in Bob Horn's years (a thirty-member committee after Dick Clark took over the hosting position).

Bob Horn's Bandstand became *American Bandstand* in 1957 with two drastic changes. First, Bob Horn was arrested for driving while intoxicated—in the middle of WFIL's anti-drunk driving campaign.[8] To make matters worse, he was also accused of some twenty charges of statutory rape by a girl who had appeared on *Bandstand* beginning at age thirteen. The trial would be postponed repeatedly, and legal technicalities prevented a jury from ever deciding whether Horn was guilty of rape, but he had undoubtedly lost all credibility as a trustworthy cultural arbiter and at the outset of the ordeal he was swiftly replaced with the all-American, fresh-faced Dick Clark. [9] Terrified a of fate similar to that of his predecessor, Clark was extremely careful to engage in only the most platonic friendships with the teens on the show, and

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[7] Ibid.
[8] "American Bandstand." *The Museum of Broadcast Communications*. Web. <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=americanband>.
[9] Jackson, John A. *American Bandstand: Dick Clark and the Making of a Rock 'n' Roll Empire*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.

paid special attention to the social standards for which the show had been known prior to the scandal. He vowed that "if the new show did not become a roaring success it would at least slip unobtrusively into television's function as a bastion of stability."[10]

Clark's wholesome image was a top priority at WFIL and soon the stakes would be raised even higher for both adult producers and teen producer/consumers. The second major change to *Bandstand* occurred on August 5, 1957, when, for the first time, 90 minutes of the 2.5-hour program were broadcast by ABC affiliates all over the United States. With this, the name of the program was changed to *American Bandstand,* which more explicitly stated the connection of the show to the American teenage experience, which would contrast with *TRL*'s emphasis toward an international teen public. With its new national distribution, the show had to contend more directly with social norms that varied regionally. For instance, racially meaningful narratives now were delivered not only to the mid-Atlantic region, but also to more critical audiences in places like the Deep South. At the same time, the teens who had gained notoriety in Philadelphia by seeming just like the kids next door or popular classmates were suddenly catapulted into the national spotlight.

Teens were being allowed to participate in the creation of media to a greater degree than ever before, but strict codes governing their behavior and appearance had to be followed if they were to participate at all. For all levels of involvement, the *Bandstand* dress code required a jacket or sweater and tie for boys, who could be kicked off set for jeans or open shirts, and dresses or skirts for girls, who could be removed for pedal pushers or other tight clothing.[11] Gum chewing was strictly forbidden, until, interestingly enough, Beechnut Gum became a sponsor for the Saturday night *Dick Clark Show.* Frequent dance competitions among regulars brought new

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

dance moves and trends to light, yet any new moves were subject to close scrutiny, particularly since most new moves emerged from black communities rather than from the featured white teens themselves.

Codes of behavior and appearance were the most effective way to assuage parental concerns about programming, but also functioned as the key means of exclusion to marginalized teens within *Bandstand's* target age range. They demonstrated exclusive standards based on race, economic class, gender, and sexuality. These restrictions complicate the basic assumption that these shows allowed teens a venue for self-expression and even rebellion, but because of the tightly controlled home environments in which most 1950s teens were raised, the teens reveled in the opportunity to listen to records, dance on television, and observe their peers, even in a limited context. At the same time, parents generally appreciated the sense of structure and good conduct throughout the program, and so a hugely successful show emerged from the tension between rebellion and conformity that is crucial to bridging the generational gap.

Hairspray, a film which was later made into a musical, is centered around a fictional music television program called *The Corny Collins Show*, which is based on a combination of *American Bandstand* and its local counterpart in Baltimore, *The Buddy Deane Show*. This fictionalized account speaks to the experience of teens who did not see themselves reflected in the teen dance shows they watched religiously. Its main characters have to work hard to earn a place on the program because one of them, a white girl, is overweight, and another, a young man, is black. The song "The Nicest Kids in Town" sarcastically interprets the codes of behavior and appearance that governed selection of teen stars, with an overzealous host exclaiming "And when you've practiced every step/ That's in your repertoire/ You better come on down/ And meet the nicest kids in town!/ Nice white kids who like to lead the way/ and once a month/ we have

our Negro Day!"[12] Teens watching *Bandstand* were told daily that the images being shown reflected what they themselves should aspire to be: attractive, popular, and most importantly, *nice*, which here essentially means non-threatening to the status quo. Seemingly innocuous depictions of these "nice kids," young, smiling, thin, attractive, and talented, narrowed the possible formations of the ideal teenager and instead glamorized a new standard to teens who, for the most part, knew they would never be more than fans.

Race on *American Bandstand* and its local counterparts can best be understood in terms of different policies governing artists and audience members. Throughout their decision-making processes the show's producers exhibit an awareness that white adults, in particular, already feared the influence the black community was having on their teenage sons and daughters through music and dance. Therefore, for performances on the show, black artists with a white audience, or vice versa, were much more acceptable than a racially mixed studio audience. This is because a racially mixed studio audience of teens from area high schools would encourage interracial social mixing, and especially dancing, which carried romantic implications. Dick Clark was reminded not to push his luck when he witnessed the huge backlash New York DJ Alan Freed faced when Frankie Lymon was caught on his cameras dancing with a white woman in 1957. Reportedly "thirteen affiliates, not all of them in the South, canceled the program, which was soon dropped by the network."[13] Especially in the program's early years in the national spotlight, Dick Clark felt he could hardly risk such a loss.

Black teens were technically allowed into the *Bandstand* audience from the earliest days of the show, but only in small numbers, and certain policies functioned to exclude black teens

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[12] *Hairspray.* Alliance, 2007. DVD.
[13] Altschuler, Glenn C. "Yakety Yak, Don't Talk Back: Rock 'n' Roll and Generational Conflict." *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. Print. 61.

even if not literally. At first, the show's policy dictated an integrated studio audience in which people danced only with others of their own race, but producers soon realized that black dancers exhibited a confidence that white dancers didn't. They feared being viewed as a black program, so they instated a policy that black teens could only stay for half the show.[14] When this did not accomplish their goals either, they updated the dress code. This code excluded most black teens because the boys had to wear a jacket, which they most likely would not own unless they attended private school—a rarity among black Philadelphians. Interestingly, most of the new dances introduced by *Bandstand,* and later by *American Bandstand,* emerged from Philadelphia's black communities, but they entered the national stage being danced by well-dressed, well-behaved white teenagers. Viewers nationwide from other geographic regions would likely never have surmised that Philadelphia was home to one of the country's largest black communities.

White teenagers, based on their penchant for music and dance out of the black community, were largely more prepared than their parents to welcome integration, especially in a pop culture setting. It was the teenage regulars who protested to Bob Horn in the early years of *Bandstand* that he wasn't playing "the real version" of the 1954 hit "Sh-Boom," by The Chords. Instead, he was playing the cover by white group The Crew Cuts. This was a standard practice, but the teens eventually convinced him to use the original Chords recording for the Rate-a-Record section, upon which it received the highest possible score and after which it was the only version featured on *Bandstand.*[15] In so doing, teens acted upon their opportunity to influence the show, whether or not they recognized that in so doing, they were putting pressure on adults to

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[14] *Dance Party: The Teenarama Story*. Prod. Beverly Lindsay-Johnson. DVD.
[15] Jackson, John A. *American Bandstand: Dick Clark and the Making of a Rock 'n' Roll Empire*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.

create a more equitable media atmosphere. Their economic leverage, which they derived from their consumer power and disposable incomes, enabled them to grant credit and exposure to the people who deserved it, rather than the people who were reappropriating new music in a way that compromised the ability of marginalized artists to support themselves.

The sociopolitical implications of *American Bandstand* with regards to class rest primarily on the assumption that all teens had access to television and could relate to the well-dressed students enrolled in high school who could spend their afternoon hours dancing for fun and for (perhaps) fame, despite the fact that they would never be paid regardless of their success. Teens who had to work after school would likely not even be able to watch the program, at least on a regular basis. Here, ABC likely faced a slight conflict of interest from an advertising perspective. Their target audience was made up of teens who attended high school but who held part-time jobs, whose salary could go toward entertainment. Those who worked after school, however, would likely miss the program. Perhaps the producers relied upon the ability of trends promoted by the show to travel amongst the teenage audience on a peer-to-peer basis to those with more economic power, but this discrepancy in access to the show among economically empowered teens likely speaks to *Bandstand*'s eventual relegation to Saturday afternoons.

In addition to policing racial and class boundaries, policies like the dress code reinforced strict gender binaries since producers generally insisted that teens adhere to gender-appropriate performances and appearances. While girls made up the majority of *Bandstand* dancers and studio audience members, they generally conveyed a very eager and demure "girl next door" image, while their male counterparts conveyed enjoyment of the music, but only balanced with a certain control and measured nonchalance. If they were going to be, as *Hairspray* dramatized, "the nicest kids in town," it was important that the ideal *Bandstand* regular was pretty or

handsome and followed the expected performances associated with each. Their social interactions had to be safe, predictable, and noncontroversial.

For that reason, caution regarding any display of sexuality, whether with regards to promiscuity or sexual orientation, was a primary concern of producers, because the key fear of American parents was that rock n' roll would hypersexualize and endanger their children. As *Bandstand* regular Arlene Sullivan explained in an interview, "Dick Clark would not allow us to do a slow dance with a grind in it or anything like that. Any kind of dirty dancing was out."[16] These were tied into racial concerns since most new dances were emerging out of Philadelphia's black communities, and since stereotypes had persisted of "historical understandings of Black women's assumed promiscuity," as well as that of black men.[17] Promiscuity was not permitted, and since the teens on the show were unpaid local high school students, there was an assumption that the romantic rituals that they performed on screen were genuine, innocent, and accurately portrayed on camera. One fan site that insists, "if you watched every day, you could tell who was breaking up and who was making up," reflects the assumption that the teens were not simply doing as they were asked by producers and as was reinforced by the increased fan mail that the audience's favorite couples would receive on air.[18] *Bandstand* was more obviously heteronormative than *TRL* not only because the social climate demanded it but also because it required dancers to pair off with a member of the opposite sex, while *TRL* visitors were always one among a crowd. The "regulars" always had to perform as though their identity fit the

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[16] Phalen, Richard C. *How We Have Changed: America since 1950*. Gretna, LA: Pelican Pub., 2003. 43. *Google Books.* Google. Web.
[17] Hill, Collins Patricia. "Get Your Freak On: Sex, Babies, and Images of Black Feminity." *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
[18] "Classic TV Shows - Dick Clark's American Bandstand." *The Fifties Index*. Web. 1 Dec. 2010. <http://www.fiftiesweb.com/american-bandstand-1.htm>.

hegemonic mold even though this was not always the case. For instance, Arlene Sullivan danced in the Philadelphia studio daily between 1956 and 1960, where she and her boyfriend Kenny Rossi were one of *Bandstand*'s most popular couples. Within a year of leaving the show because of age limitations, Sullivan came out as gay. While in her case she did not identify as gay even privately until after her years on the show, one has to wonder what would have happened if she had presented her sexual identity openly on the program by seeking a female dance partner. This is especially interesting because she later claimed in an interview with Thom Nickels that many of the regulars on the show were gay, although they suppressed this identity during the show.[19] Dancing in heterosexual pairs was part of the producers' assumed teenage experience, and very likely alienated LGBTQ teens who watched the show that for so many defined teenage romance.

Some marginalized groups gained acceptance into the mainstream over time, especially in the leap from ABC to MTV, but others turned to emerging local programs like Washington DC's *Teenarama.* Beverly Lindsay-Johnson, who produced a documentary about the show, which specifically featured and reached out to black teens in the metro area, explained in a phone interview that shows for black teens increased self-esteem by providing a rare positive depiction of a black person on television and by providing a safe space to dance, socialize, and be affirmed in one's personal identity. She also explained that for the most part, black teens were watching both the national show and the local show that spoke directly to them. To her knowledge, they did not choose African-American programming over *American Bandstand* but rather, used it to supplement the more exclusive mainstream programming that was available.

In August 1963, much to the chagrin of Dick Clark, the show was relegated to Saturday afternoons. The shift away from its original provinciality combined with the departure from live

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[19] Nickels, Thom. *Gay and Lesbian Philadelphia*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2002. 33. *Google Books*. Google. Web.

broadcast took away from the show's tangible spontaneity and, ultimately, its momentum. The show took a major hit when The Beatles were propelled into success by appearing on the previously inferior *Ed Sullivan Show*, a precursor to the kind of damage MTV would inflict on *American Bandstand*'s control of the market.[20] Memorializations of *Bandstand* appeared even while it was still on the air, including Dick Clark's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and the renaming of Philadelphia's Market Street as "American Bandstand Boulevard." Despite thirty-seven unprecedented and unrivaled years of success, the show struggled to maintain relevance to teens and slowly lost touch with an audience that was finding new means of media participation. *Bandstand* would broadcast its final show in September 1989. John A. Jackson, who wrote a history of the show, wrote that "given today's multicultural, one hundred- plus TV channel culture it is almost impossible to appreciate the impact *American Bandstand* had on popular music, the business of music, and American society itself."[21] This may be true, but by delineating the story of the program and its race, class, gender, and sexuality narratives, we can see the ways the show responded and reacted to the sociopolitical atmosphere of its time.

In the meantime, in 1981, Music Television (MTV) and sister network Video Hits One (VH-1) began broadcasting music videos around the clock. Music videos are a complicated media entity in and of themselves, particularly as they are distributed to young audiences, since as they place visual plotlines alongside popular music, they frequently contain problematic sexual objectification and imagery. On their most basic level, however, as R. Glenn Cummins writes, "the music video remains at its core a three-and-a-half-minute advertisement designed to

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[20] Jackson, John A. *American Bandstand: Dick Clark and the Making of a Rock 'n' Roll Empire*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.
[21] Ibid. x.

sell everything from the actual artist and records, to clothing and lifestyle, to motion pictures."[22] For this reason, the transition from records and live unprofessional dancing to music videos fit in perfectly with the advertising agenda of *Total Request Live.*

The unofficial flagship program of MTV, *Total Request Live* (known only as *TRL* after its first season), was a daily broadcast in the same after-school time slot as *Bandstand* that began on September 15, 1998 with host Carson Daly. It was essentially a Top 10 music video countdown for which viewers could vote, punctuated by musical performances as well as visits from actors and other key players in pop culture. Just as *American Bandstand* had, but perhaps in an even more obvious fashion, the show functioned as a site for marketing to teens. As the *New York Times* music critic Ann Powers explained in an interview with *PBS Frontline*, "the brilliant idea behind *TRL* that really works…is that kids are consumers and that their power is mostly the power of consumption."[23] Rather than local high schoolers dancing on camera, teenagers from all over the mid-Atlantic and Northeast—and much further, if they happened to be visiting New York—flooded Times Square for the chance to see their favorite stars and welcome them to the show.

This formula was successful for ten years, but due to the rapid ascendancy of user-generated content, teens no longer rely on adults to create musical programming that will shape or confirm their musical tastes. Since the target audience now possesses the technological ability to access one another directly, quickly, and effectively, the media atmosphere is no longer conducive to any televised entity that seeks to act as a cultural arbiter to a youth subculture to

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[22] Cummins, R. Glenn. "Selling Music with Sex: The Content and Effects of Sex in Music Videos on Viewer Enjoyment." Journal of Promotion Management 13.1/2 (2007): 95. Communication & Mass Media Complete. EBSCO. Web. 11 Dec. 2010.

[23] "Frontline: Merchants of Cool: Interviews: Ann Powers | PBS." *PBS: Public Broadcasting Service*. Web. 4 Nov. 2010. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/interviews/powers.html>.

which the creators do not themselves belong. As teens embraced an even less mediated venue for sharing music—the Internet—*TRL* was broadcast for the last time on November 16, 2008. On the finale episode, original host Carson Daly returned and mused, "At the core of *TRL,* this was always a show about you and people watching; this was a show built for music fans before MySpace, before Youtube, before Facebook… and this show that started with just me and one camera guy… it took off."[24] After *TRL* was cancelled, MTV pursued a failed project called *YouRL*, which would have had a stronger Internet participation component. Afterwards, the show was briefly replaced by *FNMTV (Feedback New MTV/ Friday Night MTV*), which lasted fewer than two full seasons. Since the demise of *FNMTV,* MTV has almost entirely shunned music videos in favor of reality television.

In negotiating the tension between rebellion and conformity, *TRL* usually proclaimed an agenda of rebellion with the genres and artists it featured, but minimized any potential offensiveness with its predictable format. *TRL* was known for seeking out unknown acts and then diminishing the edginess of formerly alternative artists by making them commercially successful and mainstream. MTV had teams of "cool-hunters" whose entire job was the pursuit of cool, but unfortunately for them, almost as soon as they pointed something out, it seems, it ceased to be cool. This meant constantly revamping their approach and the genres they would include. Sometimes, the tension on *TRL* slipped by unnoticed, but occasionally it became so obvious it was ironic.

Take, for instance, the 2001 song "Fat Lip" by Canadian pop punk band Sum 41. The lyrics glorify total rejection of societal demands and approval; the refrain insists, "I don't want to

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[24] *Damien and Carson's Grand Entrance*. Perf. Carson Daly, Damien Fahey. *MTV Total Request Live*. 16 Nov. 2008. Web. <http://www.mtv.com/videos/misc/318543/damien-and-carsons-grand-entrance.jhtml#id=1598862>.

waste my time./ Become another casualty of society./ I'll never fall in line/ Become another victim of your conformity/ And back down."[25] Yet, with its catchy sound and widespread popularity, the music video was retired from *TRL* under the 65-show limit. That means it was one of the ten most-voted for songs in the country for more than sixty-five days, and that it must not have been so alternative as to escape major mainstream attention.

Eminem is another artist whose relationship with TRL manifests this tension. He appeared on the finale episode, where he said that "*TRL* is one of the reasons that I'm here to begin with."[26] He was certainly not alone in this sentiment, and countless artists appeared on that episode to thank *TRL* for its role in their careers. However, Eminem's song "White America," which never appeared on the *TRL* countdown, includes references to the show in comments upon race in hip-hop. When acknowledging the role of his whiteness on his public persona, he raps, "white America, I/ Could be one of your kids…I go to *TRL/* Look how many hugs I get."[27] Here, he comments that despite its attempts to appear postracial, the show remains a tool of white cultural hegemony in the United States. His relationship with *TRL* is tense, because as an artist who fell outside of the mainstream they promoted his material, and yet he recognizes that the program has exclusive elements, particularly along racial lines.

Since there were no teenagers on *TRL* on a regular basis, Carson Daly and his team of VJs, along with guest stars and superfan studio audiences, did not enforce as many studio rules for the purpose of creating a hegemonic teen idol for viewers to aspire to be. However, as previously mentioned, and as has been explored in much more depth elsewhere, the music videos

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[25] Sum 41. "Fat Lip." *All Killer No Filler*. Island, 2001. MP3.
[26] *TRL's Total Finale Live: Highlights*. *MTV Total Request Live*. 16 Nov. 2008. Web. <http://www.mtv.com/videos/misc/318538/counting-down-the-top-trl-moments.jhtml#id=1598862>.
[27] Eminem. "White America." *The Eminem Show*. Dr. Dre, 2002. MP3.

themselves added not only a new layer of advertising, but also a new venue for subconscious messages to teens regarding their identities. If a studio audience is perfectly integrated and yet every other video on screen portrays black women as promiscuous sexual objects (as has certainly been true at some points in the history of the countdown), young black girls watching the show are still receiving problematic messages about their role in the American public sphere. Despite some efforts on behalf of MTV to diversify their visible leaders on screen, these destructive messages are not overcome only by the addition of a woman of color onto the hosting staff.

Class distinctions were perhaps the strongest long-term exclusive assumption *TRL* made about their audience since the show was almost unapologetically an advertising forum. The show would quickly become frustrating for a viewer without disposable income and without the economic agency to participate in the markets being glorified on screen. Particularly once women were added to the group of VJs, gender and sexuality narratives fell primarily to the realm of the music videos themselves, which is not to say that viewers no longer received messages about their gender identities, but which is to say that MTV often left such narratives up to artists and kept their own introduction and framing as neutral as possible. In so doing, however, they passively validated the messages the music videos put forth, and affected the self-understanding of viewers with regards to their own gender and sex.

Both *Bandstand*'s Dick Clark and *TRL*'s Carson Daly are white, male, and not conceivably threatening, and they both often attempted to bracket their adulthood in their on-air interactions with teens. Clark was called "America's Oldest Living Teenager," and a similar title could safely be assigned to Daly, since these two figures toed the line between authority figure and hip young music fan. However, Carson Daly and the team of VJs led by Damien Fahey who

took over when he left the show in 2002 did possess some unattainable attributes, particularly from the point of view of a young home viewer. Since they were the closest things to teenagers on the program regularly, they had in some ways assumed the place of the regulars. The audience could aspire to be like them, but the task would be very difficult. Despite greater racial diversity, they still represented hegemonic models for young adults that were representative of dominant class and sexual identities. They were thin, well-dressed, ostensibly straight, and (unlike the regulars, who did not have to be as cool) never starstruck no matter who the day's guests were.

One of the most important points of comparison between *Bandstand* and *TRL* that reflects a changed formula for their planning and creation was the role of the studio audience. The studio audience on *TRL* was noticeably different from that on *Bandstand*, largely because teens on Bandstand produced culture with the dances and input they contributed, whereas those who visited *TRL*'s studio usually did it for only one day, and would be featured on camera only if they were cheering and watching a performance or video, and therefore consuming culture themselves. Teens that appeared on *Bandstand,* tightly controlled as their atmosphere may have been, could still achieve personal notoriety or at least localized fame for becoming a regular on the show. The show confirmed their popularity and, in some cases, propelled them to fame for which they were unprepared. *TRL*, on the other hand, got a much larger number of teens involved but with a much less serious degree of commitment to the program. Teens could casually vote from time to time, or perhaps those who grew up in the city would attend on big days, but they were not as emotionally invested as their predecessors on *American Bandstand.*

Most of my personal interviews with visitors to *TRL* revealed that they noticed a predominantly white, female, and younger studio audience, and that no dress code was enforced besides a ban on brand names. One who attended an episode featuring Hanson in 1998

remembered only the following rules: "no pushing or grabbing the bands" and "no screaming until you are asked." She noted that on the day of her visit, the audience was about "90% females, 10% males" and "95% white, 5% people of color." One 2007 visitor said that while deciding who would go into the studio, "they definitely were looking for trendy-looking girls" and later added that "it was a lot lamer than (she) had hoped."[28] One major difference between the experiences of a 1998 visitor and a 2007 visitor was that the 2007 visitor noted a much younger audience. This, in addition to the advent of peer-to-peer music distribution, may help to explain the downfall of *TRL.* It was important to continue to appeal to teens with disposable income, which were usually older teens, but over time, *TRL*'s audience shifted to include more middle schoolers, who were a much less appealing audience to advertisers.

The creative teams behind *American Bandstand* and *Total Request Live* acted, according to my understanding, based on three main responsibilities. They promised advertisers to deliver their products to a teenage audience with disposable income. They told teens that they would allow them to set the schedule and would play the music that they wanted to hear each afternoon. They assured parents that they could feel secure allowing their children to watch the shows with or without close supervision. Despite close attention to teen desires, perhaps *American Bandstand*'s most notable contribution to American popular music was the way in which it ultimately assuaged the parental generation's fears that rock 'n' roll would corrupt, sexualize, and estrange their children. It pushed, but never outright violated, social norms that maintained the status quo. As previously discussed, *TRL* was likewise known for diminishing the edginess of formerly alternative artists (most famously, Limp Bizkit) and making them not only commercially successful but also increasingly mainstream by promoting them on the program.

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[28] "TRL Studio Audience Interviews." E-mail interview. 9 Dec. 2010.

The shows in question had to synthesize the democratic model that attracted teens and the safeguarding of the status quo that calmed their parents, so questions of agency with regards to the production of teen culture have been central to my research project. Because producers deduced that teens want as little mediation as possible, both of these programs embraced democratic models and concealed the adult producers' input as much as possible. Teens fulfilled the participatory roles they were offered (as dancers or committee members for *Bandstand;* as voters or audience members for *TRL*) but just as Palladino theorized, teens sought affirmation from one another, and cared more about being heard than they did about adult producers' input. Teens chosen as *Bandstand* regulars or committee members utilized Bob Horn's "Rate-a-Record" system for numerically scoring new tunes and shaping the direction of the program. Home viewers voted for *TRL's* Top Ten daily, and in 1999 teens even tested *TRL* to ensure that their voices were being heard. As *Rolling Stone* reported, "(they) organized online voters to write in New Kids on the Block's 1988 'Hangin' Tough.'" After ensuring that the votes were not the result of a computer error, *TRL* followed through by playing the video at Number Two for the day.[29]

While the parents of *Bandstand*'s earliest audience had never been teenagers themselves, successive generations of parents likely had a much easier time appreciating the position of media directed specifically at their children since they had enjoyed the same kind of programming. Because of these greater allowances, MTV was able to feature greater rebellion and less control in their programming, as we saw with their vastly shifted standards for broadcast. In this project, I have consulted academic and periodical sources, viewed footage from the programs in question themselves, and conducted personal interviews in hopes to promote a

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[29] Edwards, Gavin. "The New American Bandstand." *Rolling Stone* 834 (2000): 13. Academic Search Complete. EBSCO. Web. 25 Oct. 2010.

greater understanding of youth culture as it is reflected by youth-directed music media and as it relates to greater social trends in the United States. Of primary concern throughout have been identity formation in audience members and the identity politics of program planning.

Teens of marginalized identities faced exclusion from these mainstream cultural products because in order to attract advertisers, the producers needed to encourage a uniform kind of consumption. However, because these shows function not only as revenue-producing businesses but as indicators of social values and norms, in overlooking marginalized identities, pop culture products have long assumed a hegemonic teenage experience and sent a message to marginalized young Americans that they are unwelcome to participate in the socially constituted teenage public.

Dick Clark, the host of *Bandstand,* famously stated "I don't make culture; I sell it."[30] While he likely believed this to be true, the shows in question did "make culture" in very important ways by organizing and presenting music in a way that assigned value to certain forms of creativity and self-expression. I have attempted to clarify the ways in which music television continually positioned itself as a trustworthy cultural arbiter by carefully balancing individualism with community and rebellion with conformity. I have attempted to illuminate the way youth culture and social trends are reflected in and engaged with the programming that packages and commodifies music of the day, that both attempts to decipher and at times serves to define the music that is worth listening to. Music as a cultural product and television as a venue for presenting that product are reflective of the ways youth experience their identity in a given historical moment, through deliberate processes of inclusion and exclusion.

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[30] Jackson, John A. *American Bandstand: Dick Clark and the Making of a Rock 'n' Roll Empire*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. Print. ix.