

Many Californias: Different Representations of California in Popular Music

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Abstract

This paper presents recurring ideas and themes related to the state of California as represented in popular music lyrics. Particular attention is paid to those lyrics that have contributed to the narrative of the “Californian Dream” in popular culture, as well as those that criticize and challenge it.

Keywords: California, Golden State, paradise, popular music, song lyrics, Los Angeles, San Francisco

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California is one of the most distinct regions of the United States of America. Just as the U.S. has been viewed as the land of opportunity, California is often regarded as the pinnacle of the American Dream. Economically speaking, its GDP rivals that of entire countries such as Italy, France or Brazil (Van Vechten 1). In terms of popular culture, California is probably most famous for being the unofficial home of the American film industry. However, California has also been crucial in the development of popular music, and consequently it has remained a recurring topic in popular culture for many decades. To illustrate, in 2011 *Rolling Stone* magazine published a list of popular songs called “The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time” that contained songs written from the 1940s to the early 2000s.¹ The place which is featured and sung about more than any other in these five hundred songs is,

in fact, California. Four song titles include the word “California” and a total of fourteen songs make references to it. The aim of this paper is to present some frequent themes in song lyrics concerning the Golden State and to analyze the resulting images and representations. Moreover, the contribution of popular music to various narratives concerning California will be discussed. The songs analyzed in this paper were all recorded after 1945 and are not limited to the 2011 list from *Rolling Stone*. They were not chosen solely on the basis of their popularity; rather, they were selected to demonstrate the variety of approaches utilized in popular music with regards to the Golden State.

Probably the most prevalent view of California is that it is a paradise on Earth, evocative of sunshine and promise. This concept dates back centuries and predates the actual discovery of California by European explorers. The name “California” itself is derived from a mythical island kingdom ruled by a fictional female warrior named Calafia. The kingdom appears in an early 16th-century Spanish novel. Several key events in the history of California have contributed to it being perceived as a promised land. The most famous of them is probably the Gold Rush, which started in 1848, shortly before California became one of the United States of America. Other important factors include the discovery of oil, many waves of immigration which greatly diversified the population in ethnic and social terms, and finally the post-WWII cultural boom, during which many movies and songs featuring California were made (May 9).

Before the actual song lyrics are analyzed, it should be pointed out that California gave birth to several notable genres of popular music. It is noteworthy that artists associated with these subgenres often belonged to some sort of subculture and/or countercultural movement which sought to distinguish themselves both from their fellow Californians and the broader musical trends in the U.S., which had dominated in the rest of the country, particularly on the East Coast (Romig 108).

The first of these subcultures emerged in Southern California in the early 1950s around surfers. These young men were often WWII draft dodgers who rejected working day jobs in favour of their passion for the waves. The bands that were founded around these communities in the 1950s developed a style which was musically very much influenced by rock and roll, but the song lyrics endorsed the surfer boards, the ocean, and the sunshine of Southern California. The most famous surfer rock band was the Beach Boys. Their song “Surfin’ USA” is a classic example of surfer rock.² According to the band, the leisurely surfer lifestyle is highly desirable, to the point that the rest of the country should be able to experience it as well by becoming a single happy Golden State with a similarly golden coast. Another song by the Beach Boys, called “California Girls”, also explores the exceptional nature of California.³ In this case, the girls of California are seen as more attractive than their counterparts from other regions, owing mostly to their suntans and bikinis.

The unprecedented popularity of early-1960s surfer rock definitively put Southern California on the musical map and helped make a local, relatively obscure lifestyle highly fashionable. The images of California as a paradise, a place where leisure, sunshine and surfing are prized above all else, were implanted into the public consciousness so powerfully that they have remained there to this day (Lawler 2–6, Romig 52–54).

Another genre associated with California is psychedelic rock, which emerged in the mid-1960s. Though it was an international style which was developed at several places

in the U.S. and the U.K. simultaneously, California played a key role in its development. The hippie countercultural movement of the time advocated peace, non-violence, a return to community-based living and spiritual experiences brought on by the use of psychedelic drugs. Unlike surfer rock, the centre of this movement was San Francisco, a distinctive city and a major cultural hub of northern California. College students from the city were some of the first hippies, and they formed the core of the vibrant San Francisco scene. Some of the California-based artists within this genre include The Doors, Jefferson Airplane, Buffalo Springfield and the Grateful Dead. Psychedelic rock addressed a range of topics, from sexual freedom to avoiding the draft. However, California was also often addressed, as exemplified by the 1965 song “California Dreamin’” by The Mamas and the Papas: “I’d be safe and warm/ if I was in L.A. / California dreamin’ on such a winter’s day.”⁴ This group consisted of members from various parts of the U.S. and even Canada, but two of them came from Southern California. Their most famous song is a call for the return to California, contrasted with the cold weather of New York, which is where the band were living when they wrote the song. For them, the desire for safety and sunshine is even stronger than religion, and the people of the East coast can hardly understand it. This image of California is rather similar to the surfer rock representations, but this song as a whole has a more melancholic tone. Another well-known song from the psychedelic era is “San Francisco” by Scott McKenzie, released in 1967.⁵ This single was released shortly before the 1967 Monterey Pop festival, which took place in Monterey, roughly halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. The song was used to promote the festival. The lyrics invite the listener to come to San Francisco, which is said to be teeming with love and gentle people wearing flowers in their hair. To this day, it is one of the best-known songs of the Summer of Love and the hippie movement, and one of the most famous, though idealized, representations of San Francisco, which has contributed to its sustained image of a free-thinking, liberal city (Romig 54–57, 110).

Surfer rock and psychedelic rock were instrumental in spreading the image of California as a promised land; however, this image has also been spread by artists in other forms of popular music. During every decade since the 1950s, there has been a plethora of very popular songs that have glorified the Golden State. This has been by no means restricted to California-based artists; representations of the state through music and other media have caused it to be seen as a paradise by people around the world. An example of this is the 1971 song by the Canadian singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell, entitled simply “California”.⁶ Similar to “California Dreamin’” in its yearning for the state, the lyrics of this song detail the author’s experiences of visiting various places in Europe, including Paris, Spain and a Greek island. Magnificent though they might be, every chorus reaffirms her desire to return to California, a place she calls home. Another case from the early 1970s is “Going to California”, a 1971 song by the English band Led Zepplin: “Made up my mind to make a new start/ Going to California with an aching in my heart.”⁷ The song depicts California as a place where one can take refuge and have another chance at life. Furthermore, it addresses earlier depictions of Californian hippies, and the singer hopes to find a woman with the attributes that had been sung about so much. More recent songs which promote an idealized or predominantly positive image of California have been written by such diverse

artists as Neil Young (“California Sunset”, 1985), LL Cool J (“Going Back to Cali”, 1987), Phantom Planet (“California”, 2002), and Alice in Chains (“Check My Brain”, 2009).

Although some of the best-known popular songs refer to California as a promised land, the opinions on California as expressed in popular music are far more varied. For example, in the late 1960s, though the hippie movement was spreading to all corners of America, not all contemporary artists viewed this positively. Frank Zappa was one such case. In his autobiography *The Real Frank Zappa Book* (1989), he writes that many young people were drawn to the counterculture movement not because of their sincere convictions, but rather due to the movement being fashionable and synonymous with a good time. The following is an excerpt of a 1968 song by Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention called “Flower Punk”: “Hey Punk, where you goin’ with that flower in your hand? /Well, I’m goin’ up to Frisco to join a psychedelic band.”⁸ Musically, this song is a parody of “Hey Joe” made famous by Jimi Hendrix and, like the original, it features a question/answer style of lyrics. The lyrics reveal an alternative version of what the San Francisco hippie scene looks like. From Frank Zappa’s viewpoint, it seems to be dominated by what is trendy rather than thoughtful, and banal rather than inventive or spiritual. The song is a notable example of popular songs engaging with each other in terms of subject matter, since the lyrics of this piece discuss (and lampoon) images of hippies very similar to those in the song “San Francisco” by Scott McKenzie.

By the 1970s, the hippie movement lost much of its influence and innocence, and California as well as the values associated with it began to be evaluated more critically (Romig 65). In 1977, The Eagles, an American band based in Los Angeles, released the single “Hotel California” which was also featured on an album of the same name released a year earlier.⁹ Like many other songs on the album, the song is a critical statement about America and, in this instance, uses a hotel as a metaphor for California. The poetic, almost surreal lyrics tell a story about a weary traveller who decides to spend the night at Hotel California and discovers that it is a place of materialism, drugs, and excess. The lyrics are also arguably depicting acts associated with drug use, such as overdose and withdrawal. When the protagonist wants to leave, he discovers that this is no longer possible: “You can check-out any time you like /But you can never leave!” A possible reading of those lines is that although anyone is free to leave California at any time, the experiences and lifestyle alter them forever and cannot be disregarded or simply forgotten.

One of the more critical songs concerning the Golden State is “California Über Alles”, first released in 1979 by the San Francisco-based punk band The Dead Kennedys.¹⁰ Being Californian, the band was unique in achieving renown in the late 1970s, an era during which the majority of punk music made outside of Britain was shunned (Petridis n.pag.). Sung from the perspective of California’s then-governor Jerry Brown (who became governor again in 2011), the song “California Über Alles” is a bitter satire of his Presidential ambitions, as well as the values he endorsed. The title and chorus is a reference to the first stanza of the national anthem of Germany, which was banned due to its association with Nazism. The lyrics blend liberal attitudes and images often associated with California with fascist rhetoric (e.g. die on organic gas, the suede-denim secret police, jog for the master race and always wear the happy face, etc.), in order to warn that any belief system, no matter how progressive on the surface, can become oppressive if forced on the public.

The song remains one of the most critical statements about Californian values and politics. Interestingly, the Dead Kennedys recorded another version of the song in 1981, called “We’ve Got a Bigger Problem Now” which satirizes the newly elected U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who was also a former governor of California, along with his conservative Republican policies.

After positive representations of California from the 1960s and 1970s met with varying degrees of criticism, a synthesis was achieved in songs written during the final years of the 20th century. Lyrics which simultaneously praise California yet also discuss some of its less glamorous aspects became somewhat more common in the face of California’s continuing prevalence in popular culture. For instance, Randy Newman’s 1983 song “I Love L.A.” starts out as a straightforward ode to this city, and to driving around California, although the following lines complicate the message: “Look at that mountain, look at those trees/ Look at that bum over there man, he’s down on his knees.”¹¹ This ironic statement shows how easy it is to see only the beautiful side of California and its landscape and to completely disregard the many problems which might not be as obvious. This ambiguous view is reinforced by the author listing the names of the most famous streets in Los Angeles followed by some of its poorest streets, while the choir’s response is always the same: “We love it!” Another example can be found in the 1998 song “Malibu” by the band Hole.¹² The singer is addressing a beloved person who seems to be hurt and tired of life, and is offering advice to save them. At various times, the concerned person is supposed to drive *from* and *to* Malibu and “swim in the sea to drown their scars”, though this act can refer both to getting better and dying. Although the lyrics are ultimately tragic, as the narrator and the addressee are separated, a part of California is represented as being capable of both healing and hurting.

The mass popularity of hip-hop in the mid-1980s gave rise to gangsta rap, a highly controversial subgenre of popular music. Gangsta rap songs were usually performed by young African American men from poor communities, such as South Central Los Angeles. The subject matter involved sex, drugs, partying, fighting between gangs, as well as representing the place of one’s origin, which led to the East Coast-West Coast rivalry between rappers from both areas. Most of the criticism came due to the frank depictions of violence and misogynist treatment of women in the song lyrics (Romig 57–59). However, West Coast-based gangsta rap was one of the most influential place-based rap subgenres. Furthermore, West Coast rappers offered a new, more complex perspective on California (Krimms 77). This can be seen in 2Pac’s 1995 song “California Love”: “The life of a west side playa where cowards die and it’s all ball/ Only in Cali where we riot not rally to live and die!”¹³ This song depicts the West Coast as a dangerous paradise, where one can party and become rich, but where death is always close due to the feuding gangs, crime and the police. This reality does not lead to caution; instead, a *carpe diem* outlook on life is adopted. On the one hand, the lyrics convey exclusivity due to the high amount of slang words used. On the other hand, the sense of belonging to a common place is reinforced by listing many Californian cities and proclaiming that they are all great. Furthermore, lines from songs by the Beach Boys and the Mamas and Papas are quoted and recycled. These songs maintain a positive view of California, and “California Love” ultimately fits a similar narrative.

For many people both from and outside the U.S., California is synonymous with the filmmaking industry, which has had an immense influence on popular culture. This fact is discussed in the 1999 song “Californication” by the Red Hot Chili Peppers, a band whose songs prominently feature California in their lyrics.¹⁴ The term *Californication* originally referred to the influx of Californians into adjacent U.S. states, which their inhabitants found undesirable. This song depicts and condemns the less savoury ideas and practices caused by the Hollywood film industry, such as wanting to become a star, undergoing plastic surgery to look young, creating films that endorse wars, sex being ubiquitous to the point of pornography, and appropriating artists from other regions of the U.S. (Kurt Cobain) and from the U.K. (David Bowie). Although it is somewhat less vicious in its assessment than some other examples mentioned above, this song nevertheless gives a critical view of an industry that is often uncritically admired (Kiedis and Sloman 214).

The act of moving to California from other parts of the United States or from other countries has also led to some negative appraisals. For instance, the pop punk band Yellowcard was formed in Florida but later moved to Los Angeles. Their 2003 song “Back Home” details their childhood dream of moving to the West Coast and how the reality of that dream failed to live up to their expectations.¹⁵ Although they acknowledge the beauty of their new home, they see California as a place of loneliness where people live in fear of “falling out of line”, where casually forming relationships and breaking them down, hurting many people in the process, is just another way of passing the time. Anyone living there for long enough eventually becomes “blinded” to this lifestyle and learns not to worry about it. For other outside artists, California is not an attractive destination, or, when experienced, leads them back home. For instance, Rufus Wainwright’s 2001 song “California” mocks the notion that the rest of the world should adopt the Californian lifestyle and states that “life’s the longest death in California.”¹⁶ Ultimately, being a New York City-based artist, Wainwright describes the Golden State as so overwhelming that it is better to “just stay in bed” and avoid it altogether.

This paper has sought to demonstrate that popular music lyrics often transcend entertainment value in their subject matter. Rather, they are cultural artefacts that can play a significant role in shaping public opinion of or informing about a particular issue. The analysis of the song lyrics has made it clear that California is a place of contradiction, eliciting both praise and scorn. Generally speaking, views on California as represented in popular music have changed from mostly positive in the 1950s and 1960s to either outright critical or more layered, ambiguous views in later years. The Golden State has remained a frequently recurring theme in popular music and, due to its cultural prominence, will likely maintain its status in the following years.

Notes

¹ The full list is available at <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/the-500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-20110407>

² Wilson, Brian. “Surfin’ USA” In *Surfin’ USA*. Capitol, 1963. Album.

- ³ Wilson, Brian, and Mike Love. "California Girls." In *Summer Days (And Summer Nights!!)*. Capitol, 1965. Album.
- ⁴ Phillips, John and Michelle Phillips. "California Dreamin'." In *If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears*. Dunhill, 1966. Album.
- ⁵ Phillips, John. „San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair).“ Ode, 1967. Single.
- ⁶ Mitchell, Joni. "California." In *Blue*. Reprise, 1971. Album.
- ⁷ Page, Jimmy and Robert Plant. "Going to California." In *Led Zeppelin IV*. Atlantic, 1971. Album.
- ⁸ Zappa, Frank. "Flower Punk." In *We're Only in It for the Money*. Verve, 1968. Album.
- ⁹ Felder, Don, Glenn Frey and Don Henley. "Hotel California." Asylum, 1977. Single.
- ¹⁰ Biafra, Jello, and John Greenway. "California Über Alles." Optional Music, 1979. Single.
- ¹¹ Newman, Randy. "I Love L.A." Warner Bros., 1983. Single.
- ¹² Corgan, Billy, Eric Erlandson and Courtney Love. "Malibu." Geffen, 1998. Single.
- ¹³ Shakur, Tupac et al. "California Love." Death Row, 1995. Single.
- ¹⁴ Kiedis, Anthony et al. "Californication." In *Californication*. Warner Bros., 1999. CD.
- ¹⁵ Key, Ryan et al. "Back Home." In *Ocean Avenue*. Capitol, 2003. CD.
- ¹⁶ Wainwright, Rufus. "California." In *Poses*. DreamWorks, 2001. CD.

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