

## ByteNoise

### An Argument for Pop Music

I never really got into the idea of capitalism, despite it being so intertwined with the idea of freedom in my home country, until I heard it put in engineer's terms. I heard a quote that, like many nuggets of wisdom, in retrospect seems obvious but at the time seemed profound. It was during an interview in the Make It Pay episode of Jason Scott's film series [BBS: The Documentary](#).

*"I am a radical free marketeer and I believe that marketplaces are the best way to tell what has value and what doesn't, because I think it's a test, as an engineer, it's just like putting a meter on something, in my view. You can tell yourself what counts and pretty much make anything sound like it counts, but when other people tell you it counts, they can tell you [in] a couple of ways. They can tell you with words, which are cheap, or they can write cheques which say it really does count. I'm very much a believer that money doesn't sully anything. It ratifies it." -- Phil Becker, creator of TBBS and founder of eSoft.*

While Becker was talking specifically about BBS server software, his words were obviously applicable to a much wider range of things. They applied to anything which either was or could become a product. I could at last see a reason to read up on economics: a market shows you how good things are without letting your own opinion cloud your objective observations.

The people who contribute to Wikipedia know this. As they

strive to maintain an objective viewpoint, none of them can tell you how good a given piece of entertainment is, such as a novel, film or album. That would be one person's subjective, personal opinion. They will, however, tell you the opinions of established critics and other people who are seen by many others as knowledgeable in their chosen field.

Even better is the Internet Movie Database's ratings system, which is based on a rating out of ten given by hundreds of thousands of members of the general public who actually paid to see the film in question. Sure, it's not perfect (unless *The Shawshank Redemption* really is the best film of all time), but it's a vast improvement on listening to one person's idiosyncratic viewpoint.

Asking everyone who actually bought a given product for their opinion about it seems like a logical way of trying to objectively work out how good it is. Of course, not everyone who buys a product writes a review about it, or even gives it a rating out of ten. However, once someone has the opportunity to buy a certain product at a certain price, the very act of buying it or not is in itself a form of voting: the consumer is implicitly stating whether she believed, at the time of purchase, that the product was worth buying at that price.

By this logic, the sales charts should therefore be a reliable indicator of how popular something is, and as a result, the closest we have to an objective estimation of how good it is. Both Wikipedia and the Internet Movie Database include sales figures of various products, and it seems a good bet that this shows whether most people like the product or not.

Most people will probably disagree with me at this point. The problem is that, for example, Britney Spears is more popular

than [Aphex Twin](#). This fact has irked me for some time, as I am fanatical about music as a form of entertainment, and for the longest time I lamented that most people didn't seem to want to venture into anything but the most shallow of pop music. However, seeing no apparent flaw in this logic of economics, I decided to investigate whether perhaps Britney Spears was indeed a better artist, and I had previously just refused to notice this because I was too wrapped up in my own personal prejudices against manufactured music.

OK, what I said earlier about not finding a flaw in this logic isn't strictly speaking true. I've so far found one flaw. Just because you thought a product was worth buying before you actually had the chance to use it, doesn't prove you still believed it was worth buying afterwards. Perhaps correlating data from the second hand market could help with this, as people sell what they don't intend to keep using.

This still seems a more accurate indicator than actually asking people for their opinions, however, because people deceive themselves. For example, if you were to ask me, I might tell you that I believed *Silent Running* was a better film than *Notting Hill*, but the undeniable fact of which one is sitting on my shelf proves which I really prefer to watch.

After a bit of pondering, I decided the next course of action was to listen to a compilation of current [pop music](#) I hadn't heard before, to discover if any of it seemed enjoyable from as close as I could come to an objective opinion. In order to not let my disposition against manufactured music cloud my judgement, I purposefully didn't look at the names of the artists singing the pop songs.

Much to my astonishment, I discovered that although I didn't like

Britney Spears, I actually *did* like the [Sugababes](#) and even some of Pink's work. I have since bought all of the Sugababes' albums second hand, along with Pink's album *Missundaztood*, and found out a little bit about the people who wrote most of their songs.

Miranda Cooper and Brian Higgins seem to be the main contributors to British pop music these days. They write under the company name Xenomania for various different pop acts. After a bit of research, I started branching out into other albums sung by different singers but actually written by the same people, such as Frank's album *Devil's Got Your Gold*. No kidding, this is an amazing album. One of their songs for [Girls Aloud](#), *The Show*, even reminds me of Aphex Twin in a weird sort of way, only now I can actually dance to it too.

As far as Pink was concerned, my favourite songs of hers were mostly written by Linda Perry. Perry also wrote *Beautiful*, which she reluctantly let Christina Aguilera sing on her album *Stripped*. As for Britney Spears, a lot of her songs are written by Swedish producer Max Martin, who pretty much invented modern sugar-sweet bubblegum pop music.

So maybe pop music is popular for a reason. Sure, I dismissed it without listening to it properly because, as a musician, it annoyed me that random talentless people are thrust into the limelight. However, upon closer reflection, the fact that these singers have little songwriting ability only means that someone else with genuine talent is employed to write the songs, and these people are skilled in their craft.

So although I still have little respect for Britney Spears, *Girls Aloud* or Pink, I have a lot more respect for people like Miranda Cooper, Brian Higgins and Linda Perry, who lurk behind these

singers, writing catchy music that the vast majority of people would agree is fun to listen to.

Having since hired a session singer to perform one of my own songs, I have more respect for singers now too, the human voice being a very versatile and complex instrument. Still, in the end, I think my aversion to pop music was more due to a belief that the wrong people had become celebrities. Maybe if Brian Higgins was a celebrity, I wouldn't be against pop music so much after all.