

Glee: Give Us Something to Sing About **Meenasarani Linde Murugan**

Good Vibrations: *Glee*'s Pop Music Archive

Glee occurs at the intersection of various genres: teen program, musical, and variety show. Though the copious amount of musical numbers makes it difficult to parse out the various ways music is integrated into the show, what is apparent is the show's enacting of an archive of pop music. The show revives forgotten songs, puts them in dialogue with or at least puts them next to recent hits, reinvigorating them for viewers of a wide age range.

In featuring young performers doing renditions of old songs, *Glee* is similar to *American Idol*. On *Idol*, a pop archive is presented to the audience and in some cases to the singers as well. On a Stevie Wonder-themed episode, beginning music buffs can learn his body of work, devotees can see their favorite songs reinterpreted, and a singer can learn that even though he's a rocker, soul can too work for him. A similar moment of singer-song incompatibility happens when Mr. Schuester makes the boys sing Madonna's "What It Feels Like For a Girl." Here, a legendary artist's pop song is taken off its pedestal, free from the assessment of judges, and into the realm of the relational and interior. Unlike *Idol* where young singers are trying to be deserving of the pop song they choose to sing, *Glee* presents a youth that is often best expressed with the songs of an earlier generation.

This interest with songs of the past is not foreign to teenagers, on screen and off, but demonstrates how teen television uses music to add depth to their characters. *The O.C.* used indie rock to make the drama hipper than is suggested by its wealthy milieu, aiding in the show's appeal to a wide age range. On *Glee*, when the group tries to exude sex at the assembly, they opt for Salt 'n Peppa's "Push It," as opposed to a recent song. Here, the added depth given to characters is the cultural capital given to a love for retro. But beyond taste, the characters are made more appealing and relatable to viewers of all ages, as there is often an embrace of '80s and '90s hits, the teen years of the show's older audience members.

By engaging with the songs of the past and not so distant past in a modern teen context, the songs are given a new immediacy. *American Dreams*, a show about teens in the 1960s, was given some novelty by having contemporary artists perform as the legendary ones. Though the performances happen within the space of *American Bandstand*, the editing between the performance and the narrative, often demonstrates how the artist conveys what the characters cannot. Usher as Marvin Gaye performs "Can I Get a Witness," which is crosscut with Sam Walker, one of the black students at the high school getting harassed by white football players. Though Sam remains stoic, the song seems to acknowledge his frustration. While Gaye's song is really about a woman who treats him badly, the racial reverberations are heard, as it is coupled with Sam's mistreatment in the '60s, as well as our pre-existing knowledge of the political nature Gaye's music would take on. In *Glee* the use of music to voice character interiority is more literal than suggestive. Because the music is often being performed, the numbers do more than set a mood; they often have to carry the burden of explicit character development.

This emphasis on performance is what makes this pop archive distinct from other programs. The show consistently takes pleasure in its performers finding their voice. Often it is in the form of a spectacular number, but it can also be seen in a classroom jam session, doing karaoke, starting an a capella group, or singing in one's bedroom to a webcam. It is a pop archive that hinges on not just listening to forgotten songs, but singing them and/or dancing to them. It is

an archive of emotion and motion. It is similar to *Guitar Hero* and/or *Rock Band* allowing one to perhaps be a star, but more accurately, enjoy time with others in discovering, practicing, and performing a new song or an oldie but goodie. The “guilty pleasure” of singing along to your favorite song shifts from a private act to a collective fantasy and achievable goal.

Still, this optimistic take on the particularities of *Glee*’s archive exists in an industrial context. We see evidence for how *Glee* reinvigorates old songs, by looking at how iTunes sales spike for the original version on the night of the broadcast. What is the economy of this pop archive? Rather than recapturing the spirit of an era, it seems to sell adolescence, and its accompanying music, to various ages. How does this compare to other nostalgia-related industries?