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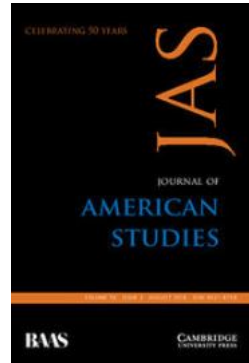
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The Power Ballad and the Power of Sentimentality

DAVID METZER

As is evident in their popularity and uses in television and film, power ballads have been prized for their emotional intensity. That intensity results from the ways in which the songs transform aspects of sentimentality developed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century repertoires, particularly parlor songs and torch songs. Power ballads energize sentimental topics and affects with rapturous feelings of uplift. Instead of concentrating on individual emotions like earlier sentimental songs do, power ballads create charged clouds of mixed emotions that produce feelings of euphoria. The emotional adrenaline rushes in power ballads are characteristic of larger experiences in popular culture in which emotions are to be grand, indiscriminate, and immediate.

Scourge to some and succor to others, the power ballad has become a fixture in popular music over the last four decades. These are the songs that build and build. Catapulted high notes, blaring electric guitars, and climactic modulations are a few of the means used to generate the touted “power.” Singers and groups closely associated with power ballads include Barry Manilow, Journey, Whitney Houston, Guns N’ Roses, Céline Dion, and Josh Groban. As ubiquitous as the songs have become, they have been largely ignored by scholars.¹ The neglect stems in part from the perceived banality of the songs. At the risk of overstatement, popular-music scholars are drawn to new and innovative genres, and when and if they deal with pop boilerplate like the power ballad, they rarely delve into what is considered to be the cliché core of such songs. At the core of the power ballad are the emotional swells that push from soft openings to and through ever more intense music.

Although power ballads may offer few musical surprises, they do yield intriguing critical insights. Under scrutiny, the songs have much to say about the types of emotional experience available in present-day popular culture. In

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¹ For a discussion of the history and musical features of the power ballad see David Metzger, “The Power Ballad,” *Popular Music*, 31, 3 (Oct. 2012), 437–59. Two rich discussions offered by popular-music critics are Chuck Eddy, *The Accidental Revolution of Rock ‘n’ Roll: A Misguided Tour through Popular Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 51–63; and Charles Aaron, “Don’t Fight the Power,” in Jonathan Lethem, ed., *Da Capo Best Music Writing 2002* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2003), 127–34.

particular, they attest to the longevity of sentimentality. Far from being an expressive antique, sentimentality continues to play a role in popular culture. If anything, it flourishes with the power ballad. The songs hold true to features that have long defined sentimentality, but they yield from those features new expressive results. Power ballads create an expressive charge that would have shocked listeners of sentimental ballads from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those listeners would have been struck by songs that sway through the sensations generated by a throng of emotions rather than the evocation of one concentrated feeling, and that achieve transcendence not through commiserated sorrow but rather through euphoria.

Before discussing the emotional blasts of the power ballad, a few words about ballads and power ballads in general are in order. Ballads are a cornerstone genre of popular music. There is always one of them in or near the top of the charts. Calling a ballad a genre, though, requires some explanation, as the ballad is defined differently than other genres in popular music.² The ballad is a type of song defined by characteristic musical elements and topics addressed in the lyrics.³ The most distinctive musical feature is the use of a slow tempo.⁴ The degree of slowness varies from the glacial to the relaxed, but the tempo is slow enough to distinguish ballads from the average pop tune, which usually keeps a connection to up-tempo dance music. Other musical features include long, lyrical melodic lines and rich harmonies to surround those lines and create feelings of warmth and comfort. Ballad lyrics deal with feelings of love and loss, with individual songs as encyclopedia entries in those two vast subjects.

Rock, country, and hip-hop, to name some prominent popular-music genres, are not types of song but rather larger modes of performance, which include such diverse elements as instrumentation, vocal practice, performance venue, and fashion. There is no one type of rock, country, or hip-hop song, yet there are rock, country, and hip-hop ballads. These couplings are the result of musicians in those three genres drawing upon the ballad and inflecting it with the distinct musical and expressive characteristics of their own genres. Through

² The challenging issues raised by genre categories in popular music have received much attention. Notable studies include Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 75–95; Keith Negus, *Music Genre and Corporate Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

³ The heading “ballad” has been used in different ways in popular music. The most common usage today is that of a slow-tempo love song. The term also refers to strophic songs that narrate a story. The latter were a mainstay of popular music in the nineteenth century and returned briefly with the folk revival movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

⁴ The ballad is also not a musical form. On the contrary, the songs typically use the verse–chorus forms common in popular music.

such cross-pollination, we get ballads with the electric guitar blare of rock, the steel guitar laments of country, and the swaggering rap and dense mixes of hip-hop. Ballads, then, offer an interesting case study in popular-music genres, as we have a genre defined in one way (the ballad as a kind of song) interacting with genres defined in other ways (rock, country, and hip-hop as larger modes of performance), with the songs produced by that interaction being identified by listeners as being in one or two genres, a ballad and/or a rock song, for example.

Power ballads fit into the larger genre of the ballad. The label “subgenre” might be too precise for the power ballad, as the line between ballad and power ballad can be open to interpretation with some songs, especially at a time, as discussed below, when there is an emphasis on euphoric fervor in popular song and popular culture in general. What distinguishes the power ballad is the degree of emotional intensity. The emotional heft of the songs exceeds the conventional expressive boundaries of the ballad. The adjective “power” has been applied to all sorts of objects and activities that are taken up another level, including suits, walks, and naps. With a power ballad, a love song no longer whispers and cries but rather belts and roars. Although appearing as early 1970, the term “power ballad” did not gain traction until the 1980s, when it was largely employed to refer to slow, pop-like songs performed by rock groups like Journey and REO Speedwagon.⁵ For many listeners, the power ballad is synonymous with 1980s rock and heavy metal. During that decade, though, the term was applied to songs in other genres, including pop and country, and it became increasingly linked to pop songs around 1990. Power ballads, as the usage of the term makes clear, are not restricted to any one genre or decade. Like ballads in general, they mix with different genres. Since emerging in the 1970s, they have drawn upon the expressive resources of other genres in order to bolster their own expressive strengths. Rock, for example, can give a power ballad raucous sounds and ripping guitar solos, whereas R & B offers ecstatic vocals and sultry grooves.

While mixing with various genres, power ballads have stuck to fundamental musical and expressive qualities. It is the consistency of those elements that allows us to track the songs across decades and the different genre guises assumed by them. A thumbnail sketch of the history of the songs is marked by a roughly simultaneous change of decade and genre, as they have emphasized certain genres during certain decades. The power ballad emerged in the 1970s in the pop songs of Barry Manilow (“Mandy”) and Melissa

⁵ The earliest usage of the term that I have been able to find is that by radio DJ Gus Gossert in “Programmer Speaks Up,” *Billboard*, 21 Nov. 1970, 30.

Manchester (“Don’t Cry Out Loud”), among other singers.⁶ During the following decade, such rock and heavy metal bands as Journey, Heart, and Mötley Crüe enjoyed much success with power ballads.⁷ In the 1990s, Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, and boy bands like Boyz II Men and *NSYNC inflected the songs with R & B idioms. Since the 2000s, the power ballad has mingled with classical crossover (Josh Groban, Il Divo) and teen pop (Miley Cyrus, the Jonas Brothers) genres, while pop, rock, and R & B power ballads have continued to place in the charts as well.⁸

The consistent features that define the power ballad can best be understood as a set of musical and expressive formulas.⁹ In terms of the musical formula, the songs open like a ballad does by establishing a tender, introspective mood through soft dynamics, a vulnerable-sounding voice, acoustic instruments, and a light beat in the bass and drums. Manilow, for example, typically begins his songs by singing softly in a low register and accompanying himself on piano. Jumping across the genre spectrum, a 1980s heavy metal group like Poison starts off with acoustic guitars and raspy, quiet vocals. Having established the intimacy characteristic of the ballad, power ballads quickly move on to their own intense realms. The musical formula of the songs is premised upon constant escalation, with each passage grander than the last. In a Manilow song, a symphony orchestra enters to buttress the piano, and Manilow reaches for high notes. In recordings by Poison and other heavy metal bands, the acoustic guitar gives way to thundering electric guitars and extended guitar solos. Some of the other stages frequently heard in power ballads are the injection of strenuous drumming in rock power ballads like REO Speedwagon’s “Keep on Loving You” and the liquid vocal runs that become longer and longer in the R & B power ballads by Houston and Carey.

The ascent up the power ballad ladder usually concludes with an abrupt change of key, specifically a modulation up a half or whole step from the governing key of the song. All of Manilow’s 1970s power ballads employ these seismic harmonic shifts, and his songs helped make them the standard

⁶ For a discussion of Manilow’s ballads and performances during the 1970s see Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 88–117.

⁷ Rock and heavy metal bands did play slow songs before the 1980s (Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” is a classic example), but those songs typically did not employ the verse–chorus forms and romantic lyric topics used in ballads, nor did they stick to the formula of constant escalation established by pop power ballads in the 1970s. For more on the turn of rock and heavy metal bands to power ballads see Metzger, 446–50.

⁸ For a more detailed history of the power ballad see Metzger, 444–54.

⁹ There were songs before the 1970s that used parts of the power ballad musical formula, but the pattern did not become standardized until that decade. The songs of Manilow played an important role in setting the formula.

climactic gesture of the power ballad. Sudden modulations have long been used in a range of musical genres to convey suspense and feelings of release, among other effects. Power ballads build upon the idea of release, creating the impression that the momentum has reached such a point that the only thing left to do is rip through the ruling key.¹⁰ Some songs end at this fervent point. Others, though, briefly return to the subdued mood of the opening, a reprise that does not so much reestablish that mood as put into relief how towering the song has become since then.

Power ballads also adhere to an expressive formula, which consists of two components: sentimentality and uplift. It is the combination of the two that makes the songs both emotionally enthralling to listeners and a compelling addition to the history of sentimental arts. Before we can discuss the interaction between them, we need to discuss each part independently. Sentimentality has had a long and “strange career.”¹¹ In the eighteenth century, it honored ethical rectitude and “elegance of emotion.”¹² By the nineteenth, it had become a term for strong, edifying emotions and eventually a label to impugn works considered to be mawkish and manipulative.¹³ The qualities of nineteenth-century works that drew both sincere devotion and slurs have shaped characteristics by which scholars have defined the category of sentimentality. The literature on sentimentality is extensive and contested, but scholars have largely agreed on some basic characteristic features.¹⁴ First among them is excess. Sentimental works turn to a collection of trusted topics replete with strong emotions. The stock list includes lost love, talks to God, childhood innocence, and painful farewells, none more so than the final farewell of death. If the topics already overflow with strong feelings, the works add to the spillage through heightened language and dramatic touches, like tears and faints. To be expressive in sentimental works is to be conspicuously so. The effort to express is so strong that it forces a character or performer to cross the closely monitored line between private and public.

¹⁰ In a brief remark on power ballads, Simon Frith describes them as “songs of feeling bottled up and bursting out; musical, emotional, and sexual release somehow all equated.” Simon Frith, “Pop Music,” in Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 91–108, 101.

¹¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 160.

¹² Robert C. Solomon, *In Defense of Sentimentality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.

¹³ The path from eighteenth-century conceptions of sentiment to later ones of sentimentality is expertly charted in James Chandler, *An Archeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

¹⁴ A discussion of such features can be found in key studies like Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Anchor–Doubleday, 1977); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and June Howard, “What Is Sentimentality?” *American Literary History*, 11, 1 (Jan. 1999), 63–81.

Feelings that are normally kept to oneself can no longer be locked inside; they break free through effusive gestures. The rupture adds to the emotional display, which only further pulls in the audience. Sentimentality depends on a vicarious relationship between work and audience. The latter is to feel the emotions put forward by a character or performer, and in doing so audience members may also find themselves crossing the line between private and public through their own effusive responses.

The ever-excessive and demonstrative power ballad, as this précis suggests, sticks to sentimental conventions. But considering that the songs arose around a century after those conventions took hold, the question becomes, which ones do they uphold? And, just as intriguing, why and how do they do so? Lauren Berlant's work on sentimentality provides departure points for a discussion of the sentimental bearings of the power ballad. She has expanded conceptions of sentimentality.¹⁵ For example, Berlant has revealed the vast economic reach of sentimentality made through the "women's culture" industries that sold romantic ideals to a female audience, and she has also thrown light on the political roles of sentimentality, particularly how overwrought emotional pleas and patriotic clichés have been used to unite people around political causes and to quell dissenting opinions. Berlant's equally expansive work in regard to chronology and affect proves most relevant to the power ballad. Like other scholars, she has pursued sentimentality into the twentieth century, instead of consigning it to a dusty Victorian parlor.¹⁶ The path that she follows is one of continuity and disruption, along which works both extend and break away from arch sentimental materials.¹⁷ In particular, Berlant discusses how the "affective range" of the category has been widened by works holding to and branching out from sentimental conventions.¹⁸ Mid-twentieth-century works, like nineteenth-century sentimental pieces, delved into tales of emotional suffering, but they drew upon psychoanalytical discourse to depict that suffering, casting it as conditions like depression and anxiety.¹⁹ Works from both periods offer the expressive reward of emotional

¹⁵ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ See the discussion of films by Frank Capra in Chandler, 37–138.

¹⁷ Berlant tracks such a path in her discussion of novels and other works that refer to aspects of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She also follows sentimentality to a point of "postsentimentality," a term that refers to works, like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, that turn to scenarios favored by earlier sentimental works but that resist subsuming stories of personal suffering into conventional narratives and shun hollow rewards of redemption and transcendence. Berlant, 65–67.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 169–263.

edification extended by sentimentality, but the later pieces add to it a round of therapeutic consolation.

Power ballads have also broadened the “affective range” of sentimentality and have done so through an emotional quality that can best be called uplift. So prominent and independent is uplift that it functions as a counterpart to sentimentality in the expressive formula adhered to by the songs. Uplift is not usually associated with sentimentality, nor has it received the historical and critical attention that sentimentality has. Yet uplift is a crucial part of how power ballads have extended the history of sentimentality, and, as such, demands discussion. One way to approach uplift would be as a stirring emotion, like elation, release, and joy, a form that it takes in a broad range of popular-culture works. With power ballads, though, it comes across as a visceral sensation, one charged by a cluster of strong emotions, which can include such contrasting ones as joy and despair. The emotions may be contradictory, but they are equally fervent. Rather than canceling each other out, they fuel a rapturous rush. The expressive reward for the power ballad is euphoria.

Euphoria is a much different reward than the emotional solace typically offered by sentimental works. Power ballads, however, have exploited sentimental conventions to agitate such ecstatic emotional whirls. In other words, they carry on and depart from aspects of sentimentality. That dual approach can be better understood by comparing power ballads to two earlier types of sentimental ballad. Parlor songs and torch songs may be relics in the world of popular music, but they have much to say about the expressive qualities of the new and thriving power ballad.

Parlor songs have become synonymous with sentimentality, as they were the cornerstone of domestic music making and public entertainments in American musical life during the mid- to late nineteenth century.²⁰ The songs were typically scored for solo singer and piano, and the lyrics catalogue the emotionally profuse topics central to sentimental arts, particularly those of death and loss. As one early twentieth-century historian of popular song said of parlor songs: “Nothing had surer sales appeal than a nice dank grave with an errant son or faithless lover adding his tears to the already considerable humidity.”²¹ The lyrics were saturated in sorrow, as were the performances. Another early twentieth-century historian observed, “circumstances [of performance] permitted

²⁰ On aspects of sentimentality in the parlor song repertoire see Nicholas E. Tawa, *Sweet Songs for Gentle Americans: The Parlor Song in America, 1790–1860* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1980), 46, 75; and Susan Key, “Sound and Sentimentality: Nostalgia in the Songs of Stephen Foster,” *American Music*, 13, 2 (Summer 1995), 145–66.

²¹ Edward B. Marks, *They All Sang: From Tony Pastor to Rudy Vallée* (New York: Viking Press, 1934), 43.

exaggerations of sentiment which might not otherwise have been possible.”²² Those exaggerations produced tears, lots of tears. Sobs that would normally be kept private were allowed to flow at a performance. Singers would cry, and listeners would respond in kind. Charles K. Harris, composer and lyricist of the huge hit “After the Ball,” instructed one vocalist that she must “cry every line.”²³ Vaudeville singer Lottie Gilson was praised for getting “that tear in her voice” and having “her audience bawling after the first chorus.”²⁴ Composers even cried while writing the songs. Paul Dresser, composer of the classics “My Gal Sal” and “On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away,” “would often break down when composing his melodies,” and when presenting the songs to performers in his office “he would sing them with tears in his eyes and his voice.”²⁵

The perpetual tears were liquid testament to the belief that, as one nineteenth-century writer put it, vocal music is “a powerful assistant to sentimental expression.”²⁶ Composers and performers sought to deliver the emotional bounty of sentimentality. Harris remarked, “In all my ballads, I have purposely injected goodly doses of sentiment.” According to him, “sentiment plays a large part in our lives” and “the most hardened character or cynical individual will succumb to sentiment sometimes or other.”²⁷ If parlor songs could break such misanthropes, it is no wonder that they enthralled listeners for decades.

Torch songs were a popular repertoire during the 1920s and 1930s.²⁸ Performed by female singers, they were sung in nightclubs but also found their way to stage and screen. The singer portrays a woman who remains devoted to, or carries a torch for, a lover who has humiliated and most often abandoned her. Abject, she extols him, blames herself, and promises to remain faithful to him “body and soul,” as one classic torch song puts it. At the time, critics connected the songs to nineteenth-century parlor songs. One writer, for example, called them “a jazz age equivalent” of “sentimental balladry.”²⁹ The linkage was not so much the dramatic situation – the “low

²² Sigmund Spaeth, *The Facts of Life in Popular Song* (New York: McGraw–Hill, 1934), 84.

²³ Charles K. Harris, *After the Ball: Forty Years of Melody. An Autobiography* (New York: Frank–Maurice, 1926), 254.

²⁴ Marks, 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁶ Quoted in Tawa, 75.

²⁷ Harris, 62.

²⁸ On the torch song see John Moore, “‘The Hieroglyphics of Love’: The Torch Singer and Interpretation,” in Richard Middleton, ed., *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 262–96.

²⁹ Charles Collins, “Libby Holman’s Brief, Brilliant Career as a Muse of Torch Songs,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 17 July 1932, F1. For another linkage with parlor songs see Spaeth, 39.

state of morals” in the songs was more appropriate for the jazz age than the Gilded Age – but rather the emotional theatrics of performances.³⁰ “Repeated wailings,” “emotional gurgling” and “chin quivering” were all part of the show.³¹ Torment and desperation that typically remain coiled up inside emerged in the tears and other demonstrative gestures that captivated audiences, as seen in the popularity of such singers as Ruth Etting, Helen Morgan, and Libby Holman.

Both parlor songs and torch songs sway listeners through similar maneuvers. In the two types of ballad, the music wavers as it approaches heightened expressive moments. The tempo often slows down and there may even be a pause. The singer’s voice trembles, and he or she may turn to dramatic gestures, which, besides the requisite tears, include the vivid facial expressions of parlor song performers or the fluttering of a handkerchief, the torch singer’s woeful accessory. The expressive outcome of these points is one of excess. The emotions are so strong that they have overwhelmed the music and caused it to falter. The outcome is also one of distillation, as the feelings attain distinct and concentrated forms. The “doses” of sorrow may be “goodly,” as Harris put it, but they are largely sorrow and not tainted by a plethora of other emotions. It is these ample distilled doses that performers in both repertoires sought to deliver and listeners to receive.

The power ballad sticks to some of the same ploys of sentimentality used by parlor songs and torch songs. The songs, it goes without saying, are conspicuous in the effort to be expressive. They have also embraced treasured sentimental topics at a time when most pop songs have dropped them. In Céline Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On,” for example, a deceased lover comes to her from “far across the distance” and they assure each other that their love will last forever.³² Charice’s “A Note to God” (2009) revives another hoary sentimental scene.³³ A child, the young Charice, writes to God to plead for love for all and an end to war. The feminine self-abjection and delusion of torch songs even pop up in unexpected places, none more so than the masculine bluster of 1980s rock power ballads. In REO Speedwagon’s “Keep on Loving You,” lead singer Kevin Cronin curses his snake-like girlfriend only to abase

³⁰ Collins.

³¹ Gilbert Seldes, “Torch Songs,” *New Republic*, 19 Nov. 1930, 20; and Collins.

³² For a discussion of aspects of sentimentality in the music and reception of Dion see Carl Wilson, *Let’s Talk about Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 127–34.

³³ The song was composed by Dianne Warren, a master of the power ballad genre, for R & B star JoJo’s 2006 CD *The High Road*. Charice, it should be mentioned, was an adolescent, not a child, when she performed the song; however, her presentation in the media has linked her with childhood, as she has appeared on several television programs devoted to talented children, like the Oprah Winfrey show mentioned below.

himself by declaring that he will love her forever. As in the two earlier repertoires, the exorbitant emotions of sentimental topics are taken further through performance. Power ballads, too, uncork tears from both singers and listeners. Befittingly they also marshal forceful gestures, like Dion bouncing her fist off her chest or rock singers falling to the ground. In all of these cases, power ballad performers suggest that they have left the space of private rumination well behind as they bare their souls to audiences in such effusive ways.

But what do they bare, or blare, as the case may be? A listener accustomed to parlor songs or torch songs may pose that question, so different are the expressive level and focus of the earlier repertoires from those of the power ballad. The difference between the two can be summed up as that between specificity and diffusion.³⁴ The former two types of song refine an emotion, even if in large quantities. Power ballads amass many emotions – all of them, too, in copious amounts. Or, to put it more accurately, the songs create a charged cloud of emotions. It is this cloud of several, and often seemingly contradictory, feelings that characterizes the new experience of sentimentality put forth by the power ballad. Charice's performance of "A Note to God" on the Oprah Winfrey show provides an apt example of this type of emotional miscellany.³⁵ During the performance, Charice whirls around the stage and throws out her arms, lights flash like fireworks, a gospel choir joins in, and a massive stepwise modulation stirs up Charice and the music even more. The audience, too, is stirred up, so much so that while she is singing, and not after, several people, including Oprah, rise to their feet. All of this for a girl's letter to God about war, peace, and love? Would not feelings of penitence or humility and reflective music be more appropriate? Rather than build upon any one such feeling, the performance throws out several emotions through propulsive music and gestures. Viewer comments on a YouTube clip of the show reveal the variety of emotions that are to be had in the performance. Some viewers talk about how the song makes them cry; some say that they are emboldened by the performance; some praise the power of Charice's voice; some are angry about the state of the world; and some feel closer to God. That all of these emotions and more could be experienced only shows how multifarious the emotional spells created by power ballads can be.³⁶

³⁴ Drawing upon Schiller's distinction between "naive" and "sentimental" poetry, Chandler argues that works adhering to what he calls the "sentimental mode" feature "mixed emotions." Chandler, though, never describes the charged clouds of different, and often conflicting, emotions characteristic of power ballads. Chandler, *An Archeology of Sympathy*, 152–53.

³⁵ The show aired on 18 May 2009 and was the finale program in Oprah's "Search for the World's Most Talented Kids" series.

³⁶ Music is, of course, far from emotionally precise, and listeners respond to pieces with a great deal of latitude. What stands out here, though, is the difference between older

The crowd of emotions in Charice's performance and in power ballads in general creates the feeling of uplift so crucial to the expressive impact of power ballads. Uplift, as described earlier, takes the form of a force field of sensations charged by strongly presented and felt emotions, in which specific emotions dissolve into a sense of euphoria. Having isolated uplift, the question becomes, how is such a vigorous force used? In particular, how does it interact with sentimentality, an expressive category with its own expressive effects?

One use that has been made of uplift is uplift. In other words, the exhilarating music of the power ballad has been applied to lyrics that present more conventional notions of uplift, such as hopefulness and the triumph over adversity. The euphoric buzz of the songs suits such scenarios. In some power ballads, those sensations magnify ecstatic moments. Songs like Whitney Houston's "One Moment in Time" and Kelly Clarkson's "A Moment Like This" promise escape from the vicissitudes of life into the transport offered by a rapturous four-minute song. Other power ballads focus on self-affirmation, raising listeners' esteem through soaring music. They tell listeners that they are beautiful (Christina Aguilera, "Beautiful") or a hero (Mariah Carey, "Hero"), and that they can fly away from their problems and limitations (R. Kelly, "I Believe I Can Fly"). The lyrics in these songs do touch upon sadness and despair, but such feelings are overcome in the quick declaration of personal exultation.

Most power ballads, however, build upon the sorrowful emotions of sentimentality. Sentimental works, on the other hand, have no truck with euphoric uplift. If anything, uplift would be anomalous in parlor songs and torch songs, both of which rake despair. Power ballads achieve a confluence that would have been inconceivable in those previous repertoires. The success of the songs reveals that uplift and sentimentality can come together, and do so forcefully. One reason that the union is possible is that it plays into the emphasis on excess characteristic of both sides. Each offers a rich expressive store: rousing music for uplift and heartfelt sorrow for sentimentality. Moreover, the one can enhance the other. The music can swell romantic anguish, and the sorrow can build musical swells. The two, however, cooperate up to a point. In power ballads, uplift ultimately checks the tendency of sentimentality to concentrate an emotion. Rather than refine a single intense feeling, the songs stoke sensations of intensity. To be clear, the woe that previous sentimental ballads draw out is still in a power ballad, and listeners do respond to it. That sorrow sets the scene, providing a fervent emotion upon which

sentimental repertoires that used specific and highly conventional means to target particular emotions and the power ballad, which whips up euphoric blasts to offer sensations of emotionality.

to begin the escalation, but it eventually gets lost in the buildup and the mix of emotions that creates the euphoria of uplift. Moreover, listeners primarily respond to the euphoria, which far exceeds any one emotion.

A clearer idea of the expressive differences between earlier sentimental songs and power ballads emerges by comparing versions of the same song. Alas, there are no power ballad covers of parlor songs or torch songs, but there is a cover of a song that offers just as compelling a comparison as such pop music oddities would if they ever existed.³⁷ Moreover, it is one of the most successful power ballads: Whitney Houston's 1992 rendition of Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You" (1974).³⁸ The latter is what is called a "country weeper," a sentimental name if there ever was one. The song lives up to the billing, presenting a scene in which Parton, realizing that she will "only be in [his] way," decides to leave her lover and tells him not to cry (a hollow injunction in a country weeper) and that she will always love him.³⁹ This sad scene of parting and self-sacrifice places Parton's song in the sentimental tradition of parlor songs and torch songs. In Charles K. Harris's "I've Just Come to Say Goodbye" (1897), for example, a husband realizes that his wife has fallen for his best friend (whom he asked to watch over her while he was away) and accepts that he must let them be together, but not before coming to say a final tear-drenched goodbye. In torch songs, the singers are usually the ones who are said goodbye to and passionately resist farewells, but not in Helen Morgan's recording of "The Little Things You Used to Do" (1935). She may have "let [him] go," but she is still caught up in suffering, surrounded by "a million memories" of him, including, with the self-abasement typical of torch songs, "the ashes on the floor" that he would leave for her to pick up.

As with parlor songs, torch songs, and other country weepers, "I Will Always Love You" wells up with tearful sounds, like Parton's quivering voice and the liquid moans of the steel guitar, which become only more tremulous and lachrymose as the song progresses. Country weepers, similar to parlor songs and torch songs, move to bare points of expressive resonance, like the solo tears in those two earlier types of ballad. That moment comes in the

³⁷ There might be such a song: Josh Groban's 2003 recording of "You Raise Me Up." It melodically paraphrases "Danny Boy," a classic sentimental number. The weepy graveside vigil of the treasured song now gives way to praises of spiritual and emotional uplift, conveyed through two modulations in Groban's recording.

³⁸ A comparison of the Parton and Houston recordings can be found in Richard Rischar, "A Vision of Love: An Etiquette of Vocal Ornamentation in African-American Popular Ballads of the Early 1990s," *American Music*, 22, 3 (Autumn 2004), 419–22.

³⁹ Parton wrote the tune as a response to her parting with mentor Porter Wagoner. The song, though, can also be heard as a lover's farewell, as Parton used it in the 1982 film version of the musical *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. After Houston's success with the number, Parton later recorded a new power ballad version of the song with Vince Gill in 1995.

third and final statement of the verse (prior to this passage, the song has presented two statements of the verse/chorus unit). For that section, Parton speaks, a common turn in country weepers as it suggests someone speaking from the heart in the most simple and direct terms about the emotions that have seized him or her. It is through speech that she concludes her farewell and wishes her lover “joy” and “love.” Parton resumes singing by the end of the verse, a preparation for the closing chorus in which, joined by the full ensemble, she aches over each of the country-styled melodic lilt on the words “I” and “you.” The lilt is indeed heartfelt, but, through the alembic of sentimentality, it is the few spoken words before them that bring about a more refined sadness and a deeper ache.

Houston adapted the song for the film *The Bodyguard*. The transformation, true to the power ballad, is excessive. This is especially the case when it comes to genre. Power ballads, like ballads in general, draw upon the expressive resources of other genres in order to enhance their emotional might. One other genre is usually enough, but not for Houston’s recording, which combines four different ones. Syncopated rhythms, a prominent bass line, vocal runs, and a sax solo give the song an R & B cast. The recording also appeals to gospel idioms, which is not surprising given Houston’s roots in that genre. The ebullient leap on the word “joy” (a word that Parton tellingly speaks) comes right out of a church service and brings with it feelings of strength and transcendence that are part of the “gospel impulse,” Craig Werner’s name for the streaks of gospel running through popular music since around 1960.⁴⁰ The string orchestra, lyrical singing, and pure vocal timbre are trademarks of pop ballads. Finally, some country residue can be heard. Although Houston forgoes Parton’s yodel-like tremor on the melodic lilt in the chorus, she brings out the lilt, and they, along with the acoustic guitar in the opening verse, hark back to the country origins of the song. These genres all bear strong emotional associations. By drawing upon musical elements of each one, Houston taps into those associations. R & B evokes soulfulness, gospel conjures rapture, pop suggests warmth and pleasantness, and country adds a plaintive touch. Like any other power ballad, the song already exudes different emotions. With the different genre associations, it conveys even more.

The dimensions of the song are also excessive. It is hard to think of another power ballad that climbs as steep a grade as this one does. The typical power ballad opens with a quiet passage for voice and piano or acoustic guitar accompanied by a light beat. Houston’s “I Will Always Love You” begins with just

⁴⁰ Craig Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race, & the Soul of America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 28–31.

voice. The *a cappella* rendition of the first verse is full of melodic filigree and striking changes in vocal color. Not only is there no accompaniment but there is also no sense of pulse. Rather than progressing beat by beat, Houston moves word by word, lavishing attention on each one. The free tempo and vocal elaborations are another gospel touch, as they recall the type of singing used for especially reflective moments in a church service. The introduction adds another stage to the power ballad formula of escalation. In this preliminary stage, we have to wait for around forty seconds to reach the moment where most power ballads begin, the entrance of the strings and guitar and the laying down of a beat in the first chorus. Having finally arrived at that point, the song quickly expands. The second verse and chorus bring a heavier beat in the bass and drums as well as a larger ensemble and more passionate singing. After a sax solo, Houston takes up the third verse, the section in which Parton speaks. The verse is more subdued than the preceding passages, but the momentary reduction serves as a setup for the grand conclusion. A cavernous pause and a spontaneous modulation sweep us into two, not just one, closing statements of the chorus. The second statement proves even bigger than the first, with Houston reaching the highest notes in the recording. The song concludes with a brief return to the hush of the opening, a change that reveals the heights to which the piece had ascended since those first words for solo voice.

The points of expressive resonance reached by the two performances could not be more contrasting. The points fall during different sections in each version and are defined by disparate vocal styles. Parton's original tellingly places the point in the third verse, an undistinguished formal section that possesses little potential for a climax. Her performance appropriately marks it with the humble recourse to speech. Houston's version draws out the escalation and waits for the clear structural high point, the final chorus, which is ushered in by the stepwise modulation and delivered with full-throated singing. The contrasting musical means, of course, yield dissimilar emotional resonances. Parton's speech speaks to resignation and sacrifice. Houston's belting is enigmatic. It is surely emotional, but, as is often the case with power ballads, it is more about the sensation of emotionality than about a particular emotion. Within the rush of sensations, it is difficult to discern resignation and sacrifice, the two feelings that led the singer to make her tearful farewell and that Parton captures in her tremulous speech. With the final chorus, Houston appears to have moved beyond those emotions and to have been elevated rather than chastened. And what about listeners? Placed in the emotional sprawl of the power ballad, some may feel buoyed, some saddened, and others will come to an array of individual responses. Whatever they take from the song, listeners, willingly or not, become caught up in the euphoria of uplift. The impact of the song is one of sheer emotionality.

It is also one of excess, which provides another connection between power ballads and previous sentimental songs. Even here, though, there are differences between the two. One difference is rather obvious. Power ballads have more “more” than the earlier songs. They are bigger songs with bigger musical elements and with more, and bigger, emotions. Parlor songs and torch songs typically pare down to reach points where a gesture, and often one gesture, is used to create the emotional high point of the song. There may be only a single gesture, but it is robustly plangent, as is the emotion to which it panders. Excess in earlier sentimental songs results from crossing over a line, one that separates decorous from flagrant expressive behavior. With the power ballad, there is no such line. Once the formulas kick in, fervency becomes the norm, and the songs only become more fervent. Finally, the previous two genres and power ballads offer different experiences of excess. In the former, excess is felt in moments of transgression, and listeners partake in the emotional gush that results from those moments. Listeners of power ballads, on the other hand, enjoy the excess of excess, the feeling of there already being so much and more to come. As with emotions in the songs, excess becomes a sensation.

The two repertoires also converge and diverge when it comes to transcendence. Both emotionally elevate their audiences but to different effect. Berlant has taken apart and examined the kinds of transcendence offered by sentimental arts. She discusses how consumers of those arts identify with anguished characters. The characters are either redeemed through their tribulations or exalted in death. In both cases, they become a lofty figure, and, through them, a reader or listener can become a new, if not so lofty, person, one who becomes emotionally enriched and escapes the expressive confines of his or her own life.⁴¹ Berlant also explores how individuals can be edified by coalescing with larger emotionally unified groups, be it the loyal consumers of the women’s culture industry or the groups rallying around sentimental patriotic entreaties.⁴² Through these bonds, individuals may assume a fuller emotional life, but it is also a simpler one.⁴³ They become enmeshed in the cliché plots that captivate them. Their new emotional life can be just as commonplace. Yet those banalities can also provide comfort, as individuals, for example, find fulfillment in reaching the expected resolution of standard narratives. Moreover, such simplicity can serve as a tonic to the intricate woes of

⁴¹ Lauren Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” in Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, eds., *No More Separate Spheres!* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 303.

⁴² Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 34–37.

⁴³ Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” 292.

their own lives. With these different responses, sentimental works produce an affective tangle in which transcendence and reduction cannot be separated.

The experiences of transcendence described by Berlant are similar to those offered by parlor songs and torch songs. The two create taut lines of emotional connection between performers and listeners. In a performance of either genre, singers represent characters who occupy emotionally laden scenarios, be it the wayward child perched above a parent's grave or the delusionally faithful young woman abandoned by her abusive boyfriend. The situations elicit sympathy, as do the performers, through theatrical touches. Drawn into the songs, listeners become exalted sufferers by taking on the ordeals of the characters. They also become sufferers of clichés by becoming involved in the hackneyed scenarios. The tears poured by audiences bear witness to how listeners were both elevated and diminished by the songs. The copious sobs confirm that that they were stirred by the emotions served to them. The tears, however, were also a cliché. They were not only part of the singer's expressive arsenal, but, as contemporary depictions of performances of both genres suggest, they were expected of audiences as well.

Power ballads are as set on emotional transcendence as the earlier two types of ballad. Yet once again there are significant differences beneath the general parallels. In power ballads, transcendence comes through in the euphoric rush of the music. It, too, emerges from a direct line of communication between performer and listeners, but in this case the "power" of the music overcharges the line and reduces individuals on both sides. On the performer's side, the singer does not draw in listeners by depicting a character in an emotional scenario, as is the case with parlor songs or torch songs. There may be characters and stories in the lyrics of a power ballad, but they tend to get lost in the escalation of the music. Lyrics, it could be argued, are secondary to the propulsive musical flow, proof being how that flow is applied to songs dealing with subjects and moods of all sorts. What matters most is that the emotional account in the lyrics is intense enough to warrant such musical treatment. If the lyrics cannot assert such a figure or a distinct emotional setting, then the singer cannot fully capture a character. The vocalist instead becomes a conduit for the surging music. With that in mind, it is interesting to note that listeners typically praise performers for the "power" of their voices and say little about any character or emotional experience that they might represent.

As for listeners, they, like those of parlor songs and torch songs, are both elevated and reduced. They feel enraptured by the emotional fervency of the performances and the songs. Yet that euphoria springs from cliché means, and, as in earlier sentimental works, such means diminish audiences. In particular, the listener becomes a receptor, not someone who personalizes the emotions limned by a singer but rather someone who sops the emotional

spills of the songs. Many listeners tellingly say that they disappear into a power ballad. The same remark is heard about songs of all sorts, but it comes up time and time again with power ballads. It shows how much listeners lose their identities in the songs as they fade away into the orotund intensity. As Berlant describes with previous sentimental works, listeners can also melt into larger emotionally bonded groups. At a rock concert, a power ballad can inspire the audience to hold up lighters and to sway back and forth en masse. Then there are the millions who watch *American Idol* and vote for the contestant who passionately sings a favorite power ballad. With the songs, the line of communication between performer and listener, unlike that in parlor and torch songs, has no distinct endpoints. On one side, there is the performer who emits vocal “power” rather than depict a character, and, on the opposite side, there is the listener who absorbs that energy and vanishes into a momentary euphoria, be it alone or in large groups.

The transcendence offered by power ballads is indeed momentary – as short as a pop single. The songs offer what amounts to an emotional adrenaline rush. No sooner does the trademark euphoria kick in than it is depleted, leaving listeners looking for another burst. Given that need, listeners keep turning back to the songs, and the recording industry, not surprisingly, keeps releasing them. Earlier sentimental literary works created similar emotional needs, as readers sought out yet another story of suffering. The women’s culture industry, as Berlant describes, met those needs, just as faithfully as recording companies have done so today. What has changed is the expressive goods being sold. The goods, or the packages for transcendental emotional experiences, are more intense than those offered by earlier sentimental works. Power ballads deliver sensations of hyper-expressivity, which are made all the more stimulating and wanted by being so fleeting.

Power ballads are not the only such goods out there in the popular-culture marketplace. The emotional crescendos in the songs also build in other media. A closing look at different media formats shows how pervasive the euphoric uplift characteristic of power ballads has become. Equally short and intense quantities can be found in clips and athlete profiles in sports programs, which, using the songs as background music, quickly bound from scenes of struggle to exultant moments of victory. Then there are reality television shows that turn people’s lives into emotional crescendos. The “personal-journey” narratives assigned to contestants on *American Idol*, for example, take a singer and his or her loyal fans on a journey from nobody to superstar. To crown the season’s winner, the show has him or her sing a power ballad composed especially for the occasion. Such disparate film genres as action movies and “chick flicks” also mount ecstatic finales in which evil is pummeled or romance found. Both outcomes are also typically celebrated with a power ballad. Even Disney animated films have turned to the power ballad grand

finale. Such movies as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Mulan* feature quiet ballads for introspective scenes and follow them up with power ballad versions of the songs during the closing credits. The swirling music and feelings confirm a happy ending and story of personal growth. The emotional swirl in many of these films and television programs may not be as mingled with conflicting feelings as the swirls in some power ballads, but there are still mixed emotions in even these more celebratory moments. The celebration, for example, is often that over sorrow; however, sorrow is never completely vanquished. It lingers in these final moments, as something remembered or as an emotion that viewers themselves may be experiencing and wanting to overcome.

These examples reveal how much the power ballad has served as a soundtrack for popular culture. If we look beyond the songs, though, we can see how common the type of emotional experience that they offer has become. In that experience, emotions are to be large, immediate, and indiscriminate. Pervasive in popular culture, that experience has become an important part of the emotional history of the United States from roughly the 1970s to the present day. The experience could be what Peter N. Stearns calls an “emotional style,” a concept that captures the ways in which emotions are felt and understood by particular groups. Stearns has described the emotional style of “cool,” the dispassion and emotional control that has characterized middle-class white America beginning around the middle of the twentieth century.⁴⁴ The restraint of cool was enforced through various social channels, including religion, business, education, and medicine.

If the emotional extravagance of power ballads and other media formats is an emotional style, then it marks a departure from the “aversion to intensity” dictated by cool.⁴⁵ Stearns would view such fervor as one of the sanctioned “outlets” allowed for in cool, vents typically found in what he calls “leisure,” which includes sports, films, and popular music.⁴⁶ Besides a few vague references to sad country songs and wild rock styles, he has little to say about music. Those rock songs and other types of leisure, according to him, offer only moments of release that never “imperil” the “emotional control” of cool.⁴⁷

Popular music and other forms of popular culture are not just occasional emotional safety valves. Individual songs and television shows may be brief, but, taken as part of a larger, nearly ubiquitous, popular culture, they significantly shape the ways in which we experience emotions. The hyperemotional

⁴⁴ Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 264–84.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 280–81.

power ballads and other popular-culture formats reveal a need to have emotions pitched at intense levels and a belief that meaningful emotional experiences are born in a rush of feelings. There is still much more work to be done to ascertain how power ballads and their fervent ilk have shaped our emotional expectations. For example, the range of this emotional experience across popular culture has to be charted; not to mention the fact that a name for it would be helpful, ideally something as concise and evocative as “cool.” The power ballad is a good place to begin to scrutinize this experience, as the songs encapsulate this emotional frenzy and have spread across different media. At this point, a few historical conclusions can be drawn. Cool, contrary to Stearns’s claims, does not still “prevail,” at least not unchallenged. There are rival emotional styles, like the one fostered by power ballads. It is difficult to think of any one emotional style holding the sway that Stearns argues cool has held for decades. One emotional experience that has been around for far longer – centuries as opposed to decades – is sentimentality, another challenge to the reign of cool. Far from having aged, it has taken on a new life in popular culture, becoming part of a new emotional style. Power ballads reveal that sentimentality continues to have “power.”

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