

# The Past, Present, and Future Influence of Popular Culture on the Music Industry

Brian Cullinan  
Appalachian State University

Kim L. Wangler  
Appalachian State University

This paper was presented at the [2022 International Summit](#) of the Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association  
May 16-17, 2022

<https://doi.org/10.25101/22.13>

View the Summit presentation at:  
<https://youtu.be/RpxwOulghH8>

## Abstract

From the earliest days of the recorded music industry to the present, popular culture has played an outsized role in informing the production and sale of popular music products. Throughout the mid-late twentieth century, as successive generations of U.S. consumers adopted common trends that coalesced to define each generation's unique brand, the music industry responded by producing recorded music products that were aligned with this collective mass identity. The orientation of record industry product strategy toward American popular culture helped deliver the mass-appeal hits that powered the music industry for most of the twentieth century. The mainstream U.S. recorded music industry and popular culture thereafter became inseparable.

Until recent years, cultural trends were relatively easy for record companies to follow. Scant media choices and the limits of analog communication limited the scope of popular culture outgrowth. During most of the twentieth century, the trends encompassed within each generational expression of popular culture were both widespread among the population and enduring. In the advent of the digital communication revolution, consumers now communicate and interact with multitudes of trends at ever-greater rates of speed. As a result, popular culture has become fragmented and more difficult to track. Popular culture, once defined by prolonged, durable generational arcs, has become highly fragmented and more evanescent. In the age of digital communication, riding the waves of popular culture in order to produce mass-appeal hit records has become a more difficult feat for record companies to accomplish.

This research begins by examining the role that popular

culture had traditionally played in the production of popular music products over the course of the twentieth century. Mass-appeal hit records buoyed by popular culture's sturdy currents drove music industry profitability during most of this period. Now that those currents have become more dispersed and less predictable, what new strategies are being employed to ensure the music industry remains aligned with popular culture trends? This research examines those strategies, and offers insight as to how the music industry can respond to this evolving environment.

Keywords: music industry, popular culture, hit records



**Brian Cullinan** is a member of the Music Industry Studies Program faculty at Appalachian State University. Cullinan is a former senior Sony Music executive whose fifteen-year career included positions in marketing, radio promotion, and digital business. In 2007, he co-founded startup label and management consultancy Left Turn with acclaimed producer Elliot Mazer. Cullinan is currently a partner at Eversong, an intellectual property management firm, as well as a founding partner of business background music startup Canopy Media.



**Kim L. Wangler** joined the faculty of Appalachian State University in 2005 as the Director of the Music Industry Studies Program. Wangler teaches music management, marketing and entrepreneurship. She has served in the industry as President of the Board of Directors for the Orchestra of Northern New York, House Manager for the Community Performance Series (serving audiences of over 1,000 people) and as CEO of Bel Canto Reeds—a successful online venture. Ms. Wangler also currently serves as an independent consultant for entrepreneurial musicians through Ars Nova Consulting, and has held positions as Vice Chairman for the Cultural Resources Board for the town of Boone, North Carolina and on the Music and Entertainment Industry Educators Association national board of directors. Wangler currently holds the inaugural Music Industry Chair for the College Music Society. She is published through Hal Leonard, Sage Publishing, CMS Symposium, and the MEIEA and NACWPI journals. Along with her academic work, Wangler enjoys performing on her bassoon with the Watauga Community Band, Northern Symphonic Winds, and in solo and chamber work at the Hayes School of Music.



MUSIC & ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY  
EDUCATORS ASSOCIATION

**PROCEEDINGS**  
OF THE  
**2022 INTERNATIONAL  
SUMMIT**

OF THE  
**MUSIC & ENTERTAINMENT  
INDUSTRY EDUCATORS  
ASSOCIATION**

**– MAY 16 & 17, 2022 –**

Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association  
1900 Belmont Boulevard  
Nashville, TN 37212 U.S.A.

[www.meiea.org](http://www.meiea.org)

© Copyright 2022 Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association  
All rights reserved