

Episode 1: Post Malone and the Death of Popular Culture

Hi. Welcome. If you're listening to this, you probably know that I ran a mildly successful pop culture blog back in 2013 or 14. It was called Pop Culture Boner, and its crowning glory was that it's the number one Google result if you search "Matthew McConaughey tiny arms". Keeping in mind, this was pre-McConaissance and I still got a bunch of emails accusing me of being a jealous man with a tiny penis. Neither of these things is true. My dick is enormous.

Anyway, I had a bit of a breakdown at 23 and stopped writing just as it became apparent that I probably could've made some advertising money from the blog. Self-sabotage is one of my primary talents. So now, I'm almost 30 and I realised that I haven't used my brain for a while. At least, not for anything more complicated than yelling half-articulated opinions on the Fast and Furious movies at my friends in the pub. And now, they're getting sick of me, so I thought, why not scream at the void and give those people the option of pretending they listened to my podcast.

Every week, I'm going to try and force myself to get all the screaming out here. I don't know to what end. I genuinely don't think anyone will listen. But, I have journalism degree, so we'll see if this works. And if it doesn't... you can find me back at the pub, I guess? Apologies to my friends.

Without further ado, I'm Alex. Welcome to Pop Culture Boner the podcast edition. This week, I've been thinking about Post Malone.

I'll admit, I'm not actually very good at pop music and so for a while I didn't really know anything about Post Malone. I could only really identify him by his face tattoos, but I couldn't like...name a song off the top of my head.

But then this Washington Post article came out. If you haven't seen it, it's by Jeff Weiss from like October 2018. No one could ever accuse me of being timely with my opinions. The headline is "Post Malone is the perfect popstar for this American moment. That's not a compliment" followed immediately, by the most amazing opening line I think I've ever read: "The most popular young artist in the most unpopular young nation is a rhinestone cowboy who looks like he crawled out of a primordial swamp of nacho cheese." That sentence is a real emotional rollercoaster because part of me knows that it's meant to be a dig, but the other, perhaps larger, part of me that loves rhinestone cowboys and nacho cheese is a little bit like "hell yeah, give me that horror movie".

So the article itself is actually a review of Posty Fest, which as far as I can tell is a music festival hosted by Post Malone in Dallas. He headlines and brings a bunch of his famous friends out to perform,

sort of like Tyler the Creator's Camp Flognaw, but probably with less booing of Drake. The review walks us through the festival crowd, the prevalence of corporate branding and the calibre of some of the performances. Eventually, it moves on to broader themes – such as what the success of Post Malone actually says about the state of hip hop and race in America. (Abridged version: racism is real.) I'll read out the closing paragraph because I think it gives you the flavour of the piece:

"What Post Malone so perfectly represents is the idiotic currents that have carried us to this present cultural submersion – where an objective notion of the truth has been systematically muddied, facts are negotiable and any hint of criticism – be it for lacking integrity, dignity or talent – can be brazenly dismissed as the pitiful cries of the "haters"."

He then goes on to refer to Post as a "greasy discarded barbecue rapper", which is a fun play on words.

Weiss is pretty obviously trying to compare Post Malone's success to that of Donald Trump. He's effectively implying that one mirrors the other. In fact, I think if I read you the last two lines, said it was from the Washington Post and asked you what the article was about, I think you'd probably say Trump. One of the reasons I really liked this article initially, was that it was the kind of writing that I really wanted to do about 10 years ago. At the time, I was sort of floating through part of an undergraduate degree, and realising that you could think and write critically about pretty much everything.

Which is a really exciting Pandora's box to open. You want to write an essay about Charlie's Angels? Sick one. Do it. You want to talk about the impact of emo music on your teen heart and also the world? Get in there! You want to spend some time mulling over why Jackass had such a huge cultural moment? Awesome. Let me know what you come up with... Seriously. Let me know what you come up with. There's a like, 75% chance I'm thinking about Jackass at any given moment.

Anyway, I'm saying that I wanted to write funny, well-thought out pieces about what the pop cultural products we consume say about us. That is... not what I ended up doing. For a couple of reasons, which I'll kind of come back to. The breakdown mentioned in the opening is one of them, but there are others, I swear. And they're relevant.

So, having read this totally scathing article I decided to actually listen to some of ol' Posty's music. I kind of recognised a couple of them from some movie soundtracks and some from unfortunate recent forays into clubbing. They've got some poppy hooks and I'll admit some of them kind of get stuck in my head. Weiss' article refers to this "bubbling misogyny" in Post's lyrics. You can't see me, but I'm doing air quotes. Now, as a woman battle-hardened by just like... having to exist near men, they didn't really strike me as an outstanding example of misogyny. I don't know if it's bad that I need something more than lines from 'Rockstar' like "fuckin' hoes and poppin pillies" to get me outraged. Or the example of Weiss used, from 'Too Young' in which Post says he's got a slow

bitch, but she keeps him on his toes. Someone correct me if I'm getting the slang wrong... and I'm old, so I'm definitely getting the slang wrong... but if you've got a bitch who's a bit slow, and you're having trouble keeping up with her... are you not...slower? Somehow? Is this a self-own? I don't know. Anyway, I'm sure I could find more egregious examples in his catalogue, because fuck it, there always is, but nothing did me in.

I'm a visual learner though, so after I listened, I wanted to watch. And I think this was probably the most surprising part of the whole thing for me, coming from a place of knowing nothing about Post Malone. The videos are just... so fucking nerdy. It's incredible. I'll walk you through what I mean.

The first video I watched was for Rockstar, which, as mentioned, is about fucking hoes and popping pillies. I want you to think of every music video you've ever watched on a similar topic. Close your eyes with me. Picture it. They're like... walking slow mo through a club. The lights are like neon red, or blue. There's a girl in a thong... her ass is bouncing. It's also in slow mo. At some point, Post sits down and faces the camera... he's got a bottle in one hand, and probably a stack of bills in the other. He's gonna throw that stack of bills. That cash is gonna fall... also in slow motion.

You can see it, right? That's what this video is, right? WRONG. Rockstar is in an all-white room and Post Malone has a samurai sword. He beheads some dudes. He bathes in their blood. At some point 21 Savage shows up, 'cos he's got a verse. He does not participate in the bloodbath.

There is a long scene where Posty does a Kill Bill style run through the room, stabbing everyone who comes at him while wearing all white and Cuban heels.

I don't know how much time you've spent with teenage boys, but it feels like a teenage boy's fantasy after they've discovered Tarantino and vintage kung fu movies. As a side note, 21 Savage, I looked him up because I didn't know that much about him... he's a pretty fucking hard dude. He used to be in a gang, he's been shot like 6 times, he's definitely seen people die. So I really would have paid good money to be a fly on the wall for the meeting where Post Malone and the director showed Savage the concept for the shoot and being like "so we're gonna give you a sword and you're gonna learn some knife choreography", and then the awkward silence that would've followed until someone broke and said "it's cool... no problem. You can just stand on this cool box."

Anyway, I was like, a little surprised. Then I thought, one weird video is probably an outlier and shouldn't be counted. So then I watched Circles. Circles is classic "musician trying out some sad boy shit" - you see it kind of often with stadium rock bands, where they get really big for like a song about sex and doing coke and then they follow it up with something about how a woman hurt their feelings one time. And the video is always shot in like, a sepia haze and there's a wind machine. And everyone is wearing white linen.

Circles is not that. In Circles, Post Malone is a knight. Yep. Full blown, Dungeons and Dragons. He's on a horse. He's got

a suit of armour on. He's on his way to rescue a princess. At some point the dead awaken. Or he dies. Or both. It's hard to say. He has a sword. Again. It's wild. And again, it reads like the same teenage boy nerd fantasy. He's the hero and he's gonna rescue the princess.

In another video, he's on a tank. Three nerd-boy fantasies – DnD, samurai and war.

So you've gotten to this point, and you're like "What do these music videos have to do with rhinestone cowboys and nacho cheese? I thought he was killing the music industry."

The point is, I read this scathing article about Post Malone and how he's this mirroring of the decline of American culture, and on listening to and watching that content, I somehow expected... something more? It feels weird to be pointed to the decline of American popular culture and find a product that feels like just a teenage boy's wet dream.

I think Weiss raises some good points about the shallow nature of the music and the appropriation of black culture. He mentions a Post Malone quote where Post says that if you want to cry or think about life, you shouldn't listen to hip hop. And we know that isn't true.

There's an episode of *The Patriot Act* where they discuss the fact that hip hop is such a global product now that it's overtaken rock music in Nielsen ratings. In fact, Spotify's most streamed artist of 2019 was Post Malone. That is something of a disconnect right? – the world's

biggest genre, born defiantly out of black neighbourhoods, generated as protest music and to reflect marginalised experiences, being dominated by a white rapper with some face tats and no point of view.

But I think there are like three stumbling blocks I hit with Weiss' line of thinking. The first is that, somehow hip hop HAS to be thoughtful. Not to sound like a dumb bitch, but there's nothing wrong with a good hook and some stupid lyrical content. (I mean... with limits, obviously... fuck a Nazi, ya know) Let's think about Drake for example – he's the most streamed artist of the 2010s. Now, I know Drake makes some emo shit lyrically, but his most streamed song is *One Dance*, which is literally just about needing to have one more dance with your girl before you leave town, and also some weirdly controlling shit about she has to text him back. There's a reason it's so huge – it's got a good hook, and you don't have to think too hard about it. Or you can be like me, and hugely overthink it in the context of the rest of Drake's behaviour... but that's not for everyone. Sometimes you just want a song about getting drunk and sweaty and having a boogie. And yeah, there are definitely examples of artists that manage to blend thoughtful lyrical content with party tunes, but whether or not they're better artists for it is kind of subjective.

This line of reasoning also keeps the onus on artists in a predominantly black genre to continuously produce meaningful content, while simultaneously denying them access to the kind of dumb party tunes that translate to a mass audience.

My second issue with Weiss' commentary is the white hip hop artists he holds up as examples of doing something right. The artists he mentions by name are kind of a list of the usual suspects – Eminem, obviously takes up the most column inches, but he also namechecks Macklemore and G-Eazy, praising them for confronting their white privilege and, in G-Eazy's case, dropping out of a racist H&M ad campaign.

The bar is... too low, I think? I grew up with Eminem and so, despite the many hideous things about him – his liberal use of homophobic slurs, for example, or the extensive fantasies about killing his ex-wife that formed the backbone of so much of his early music – I still know all the words to Lose it and Real Slim Shady. And I do think he has an element of self-awareness – D12's song 'My Band', is essentially an extended bit about how people only give a shit about Eminem and not the 7 equally talented black guys behind him. But I don't think it's fair to say that he's constantly attacking the hypocrisies of contemporary American culture that got him famous. He's said some great things in the last couple of years, about police brutality, particularly as it impacts African American boys. And he denounced Trump, telling his audience if they weren't with him, they could fuck off. But those statements only came with age and enough of a sense of security in his career, that telling what I can only assume is half his audience to fuck off has absolutely zero impact on his finances. He's already ridden that wave to his current spot.

Macklemore, despite the fact that he probably spends...or spent... has

anyone seen Macklemore lately? ... let's go with spent... SPENT more time actively talking about white privilege in public, is somehow even more irritating. Weiss references a specific incident where Macklemore posted a text he sent to Kendrick Lamar after the Grammys as an example of Macklemore not reading the social cue correctly, but still doing his best. If you don't remember, Macklemore beat out Kendrick Lamar for best rap album a few years back and then sent Kendrick a text saying "you were robbed. By me. I'm sorry." And posted the text to Instagram. Let's be clear – there's absolutely no timeline where Macklemore should be winning if he's in the running against Kendrick, short of Kendrick recording himself pissing for five minutes and calling it a hit. But beyond that, sharing the private guilt of winning with his overwhelmingly white audience who are already ready to slap him on the back for being woke or whatever is deeply distasteful. Also, there's nothing stopping you from just... not taking that award. Just handing it over to someone else if you think they're more deserving. So even if he did spend a chunk of his album doing some weird rap-skit about how his audience needs to confront their prejudices about race, sexuality and thrift shopping, he was clearly still learning himself. And then he did that weird anti-Semitic bit on stage a few months later (surprise, anti-Semitism is everywhere) and it became apparent that he was really probably not on as much of high horse as he would have us believe. Also, it would be remiss of me to not also say, while talking about Macklemore, that Same Love fucking sucks as a song.


I'm not gonna tackle G-Eazy because I don't know anything about him and I saw his face and was kind of hit with a wave of exhaustion, but the bar shouldn't be so low as to count "not participating in a racist ad campaign" on the list of good-boy moves. My point is, there's this kind of fantasy that Weiss indulges in, where there's a magical threshold of "tackling race" that artists need to achieve in their lyrical content in order to be able to produce hip hop music. And while I do think that white artists should have some sort of fundamental appreciation for hip hop's roots, and repay their creative debt, to use Weiss' phrasing, I don't think there's a good way to do it when they're essentially selling a product.

Which brings me to my final issue with Weiss' article – Post Malone is an easy target designed to distract us from the actual issue. Which is, hip hop is a product now. It's a global product. Remember all that stuff that I said about it overtaking Rock in the Nielsen ratings? I had a look at the Nielsen report because I'm a fool who likes a bit of data visualisation. Seven of the ten most streamed artists were rappers. Of those seven, four are with labels under the Universal Music Group, two are with labels under the Warner Music Group, and one is currently on an independent label, but was previously on a label associated with Universal. That's a huge amount of money funnelling back into a very small group of white men who saw dollar signs to be made from biting black culture. Not to be wildly cynical but as technology progresses, the guesses that these people make about what's gonna blow up, become less guess, more

chomping of your data. There are men in a room vested interest in billion-dollar profits trying to understand what might be missing from a black genre to make the dollar bills stack even higher – and because of the casual and internalised racism that underpins everything we do, the answer is always white dudes. And that's why we end up with Post Malone. Or Eminem. Or Macklemore. Or any of them, really.

And while we can hope and pray that our favourite musical artists might somehow have enough of a brain to understand that this might be the case – that their success is actually probably reflective of our prejudices and broader failings as a species – they're probably not going to. Circling back on the point I made earlier about why I never made the leap to writing funny and insightful think pieces about pop culture – beyond the breakdown, it's actually really difficult to get it right. Is there a problem with the fact that Post Malone doesn't think hip hop should be smart? Yeah. Does that say more about Post Malone, or the way the genre is marketed? Who knows!? If we keep pulling on that thread, do we just end up back at "capitalism is an inherently racist system that slowly eats us all from the inside – nothing and no one is safe"? I mean... yes. Absolutely. That's where we always end up.

Post Malone just seems like a teenage boy with some video game fantasies and an ear for a catchy hook. While literary part of me is like "ah yes, the perfect metaphor for crumbling Americana", to be honest, I'm not even sure he's the worst or most insidious example. And the decline of popular culture is never



down to an individual artist. Or the audiences who listen to them. If we really believe popular culture is in decline, then the fault lies with companies who cynically back and promote particular artists in order to continue to generate profit on a known formula, a therefor keep the status quo white regardless of genre.

Well... that's the end. Did I make a point? Hard to say. In all honesty, I started writing this because I wanted to talk about Posty's weird as fuck music videos. So, you should check them out and tell me about it next time you see me at the pub.

Peace.

This episode premiered on 10th June 2020.

Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.

Theme tune by Wes Fahey. ([Soundcloud: lee snipes](#))

Visit us:

Web: www.popcultureboner.com

Twitter: [@popcultureboner](https://twitter.com/popcultureboner)

Instagram: [@popcultureboner](https://www.instagram.com/popcultureboner)