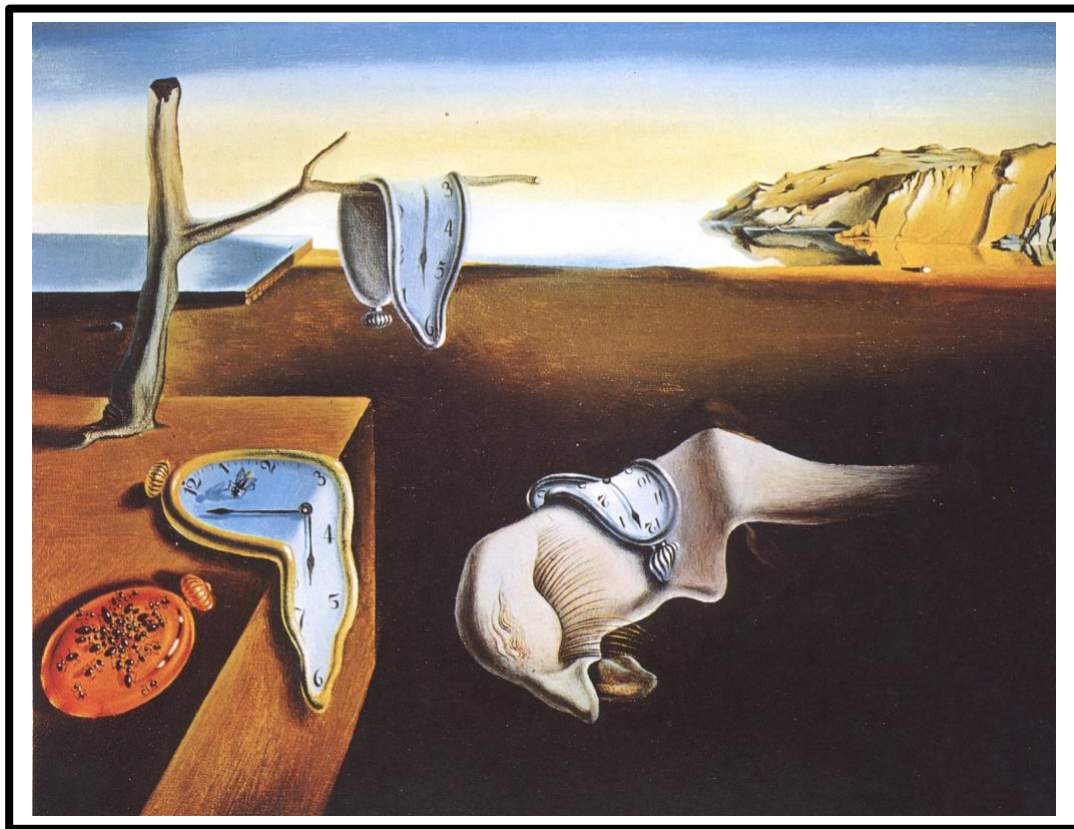


## Today's Pastness Phenomena

Time always moves forward, no matter what. As an award-winning geneticist and broadcaster David Suzuki expressed "The future doesn't exist. The only thing that exists is now and our memory of what happened in the past. But because we invented the idea of a future, we're the only animal that realized we can affect the future by what we do today" (Suzuki, n.d.).



Salvador Dalí, *'The Persistence of Memory'*, 1931

Since the dawn of history, music has always changed and evolved with time itself; it has always been adaptive to changing social circumstances, or in other words, history.

Then why now do we keep talking about the past rather than the present?

**Mark Fisher:** *"It doesn't feel as if the 21st century has started yet. We remain trapped in the 20th century"* (Fisher, 2014).

In today's world, 'nostalgia', 'retro', and 'vintage' are words that repeatedly echo around the globe, especially among young people, in everything from fashion to cars, books, and music. But what are these terms, their differences, and why do we keep encouraging them?

**Kristian Handberg:** *"Using the past as if there were no tomorrow has become a feature of 21st-century culture, often expressed through retro and vintage"* (Handberg, 2015).

Looking at the studies, it is seen that all these words frequently overlap in meaning and are often blurry. 'Vintage', however, has the most unrelated meaning of these three terms. This term means 'of age', and it is much closer to the term 'antique', which means something at least 100 years old. Kristian Handberg defines vintage in modern culture as "a label for objects from the recent past of a specific value and cultural authenticity – not as unique artworks or high-end status symbols of pure material value but as objects of modern mass production and culture now elevated to a status of authenticity and aesthetic remarkability" (Handberg, 2015, pp. 167-168).

Nostalgia, on the other hand, is, as Raymond Williams called it, is a 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1973), and according to Stuart Tannock, this structure of feeling "invokes a positively evaluated past world in response to a deficient present world. The nostalgic subject turns to the past to find/ construct sources of

identity, agency, or community, that are felt to be lacking, blocked, subverted, or threatened in the present" (Tannock, 1995, p. 454). Or in other words, nostalgia is the home of familiarity; a place which is comfortable, safe, and already known.

*"History never repeats itself. Man always does".*

-Voltaire

In the customary nostalgia revival program of Western Pop music, the resonance and even occasional return of a trend have already been acknowledged by its past examples, like the obsession of the 1950s being slid into the 1970s (e.g., 'Grease', 'American Graffiti'), or the 1960's to the 1980s (e.g., 'Dirty Dancing' and classic rock) (Chaney, 2016). We can call it a *nostalgia cycle*. This nostalgia cycle is directly related to the term 'retro,' which refers to anything reminiscent of the past (Young, 2021). Looking at its etymological backgrounds, the word 'retro' comes from the Latin prefix *retro-* which means "backwards; behind" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Although retro is often interpreted as a look back to the past or old-school, Elizabeth Guffey states that its many meanings exist in its "little nuances", from the saddle shoes and tail fins belonging to the American material culture in mid 20th century to a traditional outlook on life that "carries a darker suspicion that recent social, cultural and political developments are profoundly corrosive" (Guffey, 2006). According to her, "Retro allows us to come to terms with the modern past" (Guffey, 2006). According to Guffey, it was not common for the word retro to be used before the 19th century, and when it was used, it generally meant a "powerful counter to forward propulsion", still, during the end of the late 20th century's cold war, however, it

started to gain much more association with its opposed meaning to the positivism of the space programme (Guffey, 2006).

**Elizabeth Guffey:** “Retro came to symbolize a deviant form of revivalism” (Guffey, 2006).

As Chaney mentions, even though it has been usual to have around 20-year-long resonance of each previous trend, it feels like we are stuck with 80s nostalgia in the 21st century, from TV shows such as 'Stranger Things' to Bruno Mars's '24K Magic'. As Chaney puts it, "Its spindly, E.T.-like fingers still seem to be touching almost every form of popular entertainment" (Chaney, 2016).



*"The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects".*

-Merleau-Ponty, (1962) Phenomenology of perception, p.430

Music's evolution is inseparable from the social changes around the world. Music is a statement, predominantly an uprising. That is why popular music has always been connected to the youth and has even evolved with each generation, as Jean Hogarty points out in his book. However, he asserts this dynamic has begun to shift by 1980, and popular music is no longer about youth, or at least not solely (Hogarty, 2016, p. 2).

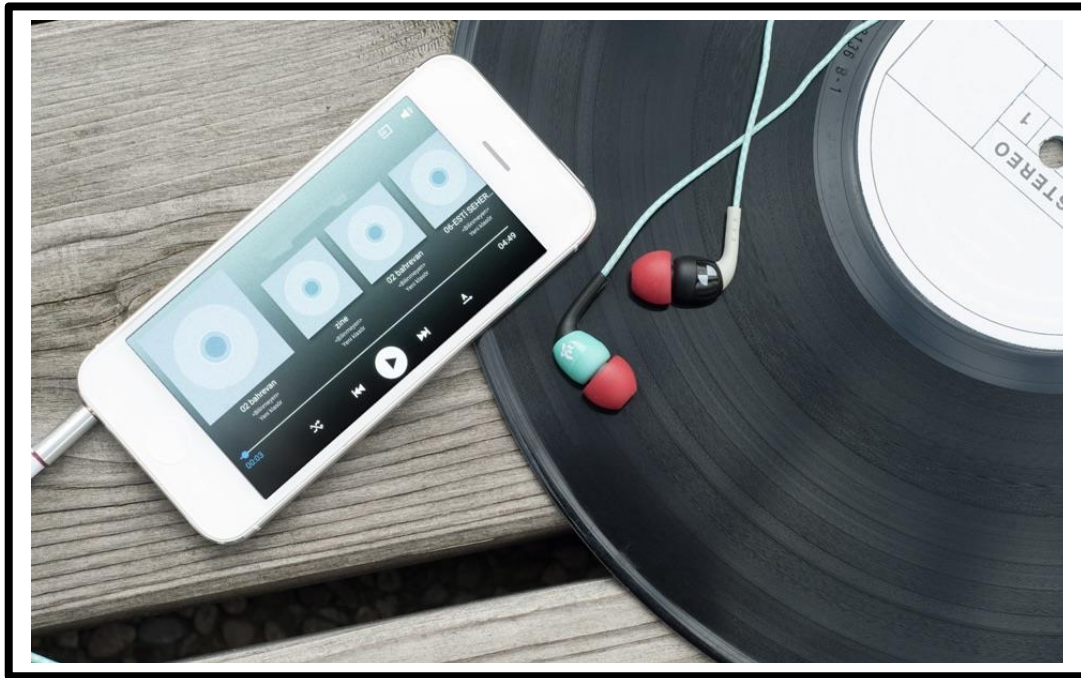
Although not directly political, music has played a significant role in politics, by becoming a vehicle for social change, especially around the mid-20th century.

Looking back to the origins of 1940s jazz and blues offers a reflection of discrimination, and physical and physiological torment applied towards African American people who were enslaved for many decades. Then in the 1950-the 60s, these genres paved the path to Rock n' Roll, Pop, and Folk music, which, as William Danaher put it, became a "glue for social movements concerning race, gender, and peace" (Danaher, 2010). As Larry Ford stated, the emergence of such music genres also led to the unification of the time's black and white teenagers. Now they were breaking the racial barriers of white Americans by singing and playing these topical and protest songs together (Ford, 1971)! Ironically, this unification widened the gap between the younglings and their parents, since they were now rioting against all the injustices that had been accepted or excused by their parents. But by the late 20th century forwards, Hogarty describes parent-

child relationships as becoming much more ‘democratized’. At the same time, children's tastes in music became increasingly shared with their parents (Hogarty, 2016, p. 4). Regardless, the parents were not listening to the new era popular music, whereas their children were starting to have a great desire to listen to the music inspired by memories they never had at a time they never lived (Hogarty, 2016, p. 4). Or as Hogarty put it, " [...], they did not appear to possess their own unique generational culture or structure of feeling. Rather, their generational structure of feeling was formed through popular music produced before they were born" (Hogarty, 2016, p. 4).

**Jean Hogarty:** *“[...] we are in the age of retro culture that is occupied by the ghosts of popular music’s past”* (Hogarty, 2016).

With significant technological developments, music (not only the new music but almost every known music of the 20th century as well) has become more and more accessible since the vinyl era of the 1965s-1970s and ended up being utterly digital through smart devices we carry everywhere without the need for any other mediums. If you already have a smartphone, now accessing music is much faster and cheaper. So, what is the reason why old formats such as vinyl and CD still attract people, especially young people who are not from those times and make them eventually buy them?



Could it be that they are seeking authenticity? However, does authenticity not mean being true to oneself? Even if listening to a song through the medium used when it was released seems authentic, isn't that betrayal of today's mediums which are the truth of today?

Still, as Hogarty put it, to obtain this sense of 'authenticity', "they assimilated an impressive knowledge and memory of the history of popular music, exhibited vicarious nostalgia, regularly attended reunion gigs, and purchased material formats" (Hogarty, 2016, p. 5).

In this case, Nicholas Russo suggests the idea of 'vicarious nostalgia', which "evinces a yearning for a past outside of lived experience" as an opposition to the classic nostalgia comprehended as a "predilection for one's own personally lived past". By this 'vicarious nostalgia', he argues that it is possible for the nostalgia phenomenon to exist without a first-hand lived experience (Russo, 2015).

**Mark Fisher:** *“Compare the fallow terrain of the current moment with the fecundity of previous periods, and you will quickly be accused of ‘nostalgia’. But the reliance of current artists on styles that were established long ago suggests that the current moment is in the grip of a formal nostalgia, of which more shortly”* (Fisher, 2014).

Mark Fisher argues in this book that music was much more forward-looking and futuristic before the 1980s. In his view, the new generation of artists born in Western society now had less time, money, and energy left to experiment with popular music due to neoliberal policies such as Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal program and global capitalist restructuring, which caused the cost of living to rise. According to him, this decrease in welfare now only allowed people who belonged to the upper-middle-class status and above could afford to pursue a career in the music industry, and it was the reason behind the production of the unoriginal and bland songs released afterwards (Fisher, 2014), which almost felt like avoiding making a sound about the things going on around them, unlike the ones before them, such as The Beatles, Bob Dylan, The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd .

**Mark Fisher:** *“ [...] there’s an increasing sense that culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present. Or it could be that, in one very important sense, there is no present to grasp and articulate anymore”* (Fisher, 2014).



Hogarty commented in his book, "popular music once defined generations in the mid-to the late twentieth century". Because all these generations had some fight to give and a message to deliver; therefore, music was the perfect tool to convey it. Then what has happened? What is the reason behind this pastness phenomenon? Why does it not feel like popular music is not evolving like it was in the mid to late 20th century? Does this mean today's social movements are less necessary to speak up about than once they did? Or, as Fisher suggests, "there is no present to grasp and articulate anymore"?

Even though everything around us is moving faster than in any previous period, are we moving forward as a society? Or are we stuck in a reality that drags us into a comfort trap that sabotages our productivity and creativity? Do we not believe today is distinctive enough to sing about? Or maybe the reason behind this pastness phenomenon is, as Hogarty put it, today we believe that the "unlived past was a better place" (Hogarty, 2016, p. 5)?

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