SONGS OF PERSUASION STILL EXIST

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[Assignment: To apply the methodology of Serge Denisoff to a contemporary song of the student's choice.]

(1) During the period of the 1950's and 1960's, our country experienced many radical and/or explosive events in which music, in the form of protest songs, played a vital role influencing events and their outcomes. But such events as the Civil Rights movement, Bay of Pigs, Vietnam Conflict, and labor strikes belong to a different past. From a period of history that was known for its social consciousness, we have come to a present where the individual is paramount. Apparently, there is not the same devotion to social change in today's music as there was twenty to thirty years ago.

(2) The issues of today, such as nuclear war and apartheid, do not draw the masses of supporters as they did in the past. Today's issues do not express the specific goals and opinions of one group. The issues today are more universal. More often than not, they involve less organized movements that encompass a variety of supporters from all over the world.

(3) Serge R. Denisoff, a sociologist and music critic, draws on this shift in attitudes for his study on the effects of songs of persuasion. In his book, Sing a Song of Social Significance, Denisoff lists several requirements that must be met in order for a song to be deemed persuasive. They are as follows:

A. The song attempts to solicit and arouse outside support and sympathy for a social or political movement.

B. The song reinforces the value structure of individuals who are active supporters of the social movement or ideology.

C. The song creates and promotes cohesion, solidarity, and high morale in an organization or movement supporting its world view.

D. The song is an attempt to recruit individuals for a specific social movement.

E. The song invokes solution to real or imagined social phenomena in terms of action to achieve a desired goal.

F. The song points to some problem or discontent in the society, usually in emotional terms.

Denisoff claims that unless these requirements are met, the song is not effective and therefore is not a true song of persuasion. It is also Denisoff's belief that
given the changes in music and society, "popular" music today can rarely serve as a persuasive tool. According to him, popular music today is far less the weapon of political and social change than it once was. It is my belief, however, that music still can act effectively as a persuasive tool.

(4) Even today, many songs can qualify as persuasive music, as, for instance, the song entitled "Russians" by Sting. This song deals with nuclear war. As in many of today's persuasive songs, the author expresses his or her own opinion rather than stating the position of a specific movement. In "Russians," Sting admits this song represents his opinion. After every fact he presents about the issue, he offers the refrain, "I don't subscribe to his [their] point of view." True, Sting's kind of persuasion does not exactly meet what Denisoff prescribes as his first quality for a persuasive song—to arouse outside support. Rather, the song attempts to solicit and arouse outside awareness of and sympathy for a political issue.

(5) However, "Russians" does fulfill Denisoff's second criterion—reinforcing the values of active supporters. The song reinforces a shared belief against nuclear war and for peace by letting others know that they are not alone in their sentiments.

(6) In measuring "Russians" against Denisoff's third criterion, I find that the song is particularly persuasive. Denisoff says that the song must create and promote "cohesion, solidarity and high morale in an organization or movement supporting its world view." Here is one verse of "Russians":

"We share the same biology,
Regardless of ideology,
Believe me when I say to you,
I hope the Russians love their children too."

In this verse Sting promotes peace. Peace is a world view. The organization is the human race, and the movement it promotes is for survival. In "sharing the same biology" we are unified. Finally, differences in ideology are of little importance compared to the common cause of human existence.

(7) When comparing "Russians" with Denisoff's fourth criterion (active recruiting tool for a specific movement), we see, once again, that it does not meet the requirements exactly. Sting's intent is not to recruit as much as it is to express a belief or opinion. Still, sharing an opinion often includes an unspoken wish for others to agree with it and to accept it as their own. Therefore, although recruitment is not Sting's sole purpose, it is there as an added dimension.
"Russians" fits Denisoff's last criterion very closely. In the refrain, especially the last time, Sting makes an emotional plea:

"What might save us, me and you
Is that the Russians love their children too."

This strong emotional content heightens the persuasive appeal.

According to Denisoff, a song like "Russians" would qualify as a rhetorical song rather than as a persuasive one. A rhetorical song describes a social condition--peace versus threat of nuclear war--yet it doesn't offer any ideological or organizational solution for its disagreement with current policy. Denisoff also says that "the rhetorical song poses a question or a dissent in relation to the institutions of the social system" (61). I would argue, however, that "Russians" does more than merely pose a question. Rather, the song aims to persuade and does so effectively.

In recent years, Sting has assumed a more political and social stance for his music. "Russians" shows this shift in orientation but so do other songs by Sting. In 1985, in Dream of the Blue Turtles, Sting treated the issue of nuclear war which had been prominent in the 1984 United States Presidential elections, as well as commenting on drug use and labor problems occurring in England ("Children's Crusade"; "We Work the Black Seam Together"). In 1987, Sting's second album, Nothing Like the Sun, was strongly flavored with anti-apartheid sentiment.

Given these examples, it is clear that some of today's music can be regarded as a form of persuasive music. True, "Russians" offers a kind of symbolic protest rather than active, embroiled protest. Sting writes this song far away from the everyday heated discussions of the Defense Department or Soviet regime and he does not lead any form of protest in front of a missile silo. However, this should not discredit symbolic songs as ineffective. Surely, such songs can affect those people who are similarly physically removed from any actual protest.

Lastly, when measuring a song as persuasive, one has to consider the song's exposure, intelligibility, and response it gets from listeners. Among people I have spoken with, "Russians" seemed to be highly intelligible, many saying at least 75% of the words could be understood. At the time of its release, "Russians" received regular exposure on most Top 40 and Rock radio stations, although not as much exposure as some of Sting's less political songs (e.g., "If You Love Someone, Set Them Free").
Overall, the song "Russians" is directed first to true Sting admirers and only secondarily to anyone who is willing to listen and accept the emotional appeal of the song. Today's popular artists aim for a different kind of persuasiveness than that assumed in Denisoff's description. Today's songs retain social significance even when they don't aim directly or exclusively at protest or persuasion. Granted, in general, contemporary music does not stir as many people to social change as it once did. Yet any song that can persuade even a small number to take notice and become concerned does make a difference. So it would seem that even though the style of music has changed over the years, what has not changed is the ability of music to change the listener's outlook on the world.