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“Only The Good Die Young”: A Different Path to Popularity

When a new song is released to the public, the potential for change is present. Songs have a way of expressing emotions that affects a person on a deeper level when compared to simply hearing spoken words. By piecing together meaningful words and an enticing beat, people can be inspired to change their feelings about particular situations. They can find light when in the dark, happiness after being left heartbroken, or comfort in knowing they are not alone in a situation. No matter what the effect, the song in its entirety, the lyrics, musical style, and performance all contribute to its effectiveness on and reception by the audience. However, there have been songs released in the past that did not become popular solely for all the exceptional musical elements it integrated, or at least not at first. Billy Joel’s single “Only the Good Die Young” became a popular song in the late 1970s-1980s, but its rise to fame did not progress in the traditional way most famous songs of the past have.

Billy Joel, also known as “the piano man” was a classic musical entertainer in second half of the 20th century. He released many popular songs and has gained renowned fame in the music world since the start of his career. One song in particular entitled “Only the Good Die Young,” grew in popularity by means of a different path in comparison to his other hits. This single was released in 1977 off his most popular album *The Stranger* and did not gain immediate acceptance among listeners in the United States. Although the song had a catchy beat, the lyrics and their interpretation among critics led to harsh analysis early after the song’s release.

The song tells the story from the singer’s own point of view about a young Catholic girl who will not agree to have sex with him. The inspiration for the song was Virginia Callahan, a girl Joel had previously had a crush on in high school. (DeMain) Given the fact that the song attempts to convince a young women with certain religious beliefs to engage in premarital sex, it is not completely irrational to understand why the Catholic community would not endorse this song. Since Catholics do not support premarital sex, a song that blatantly encourages such an act is not well accepted amongst this group of people. In fact, a Seton Hall College radio station in New Jersey banned the song from being played, solidifying negative views about the song’s message. From that point on, problems grew and Joel’s newest single was being banned in other places around the U.S. such as in St. Louis and Boston. At the time, Joel was upset and fearful of what this would mean for his future career, but as surprising as it may seem, the fact that the song had been prohibited in certain areas is the reason why it was successful.

Similar to today’s young generation, the generations of the 1970’s had a rebellious side to them. Growing up always being told what to do and how to do it, many children eventually wanted to take chances and break the rules. They wanted to forget what most of society was doing and take matters into their own hands. With this mindset, if someone tried to forbid a particular activity that once was accepted, there would be a group of people willing to go against the grain in order to regain access. The song “Only the Good Die Young” had this effect; Joel himself said, “this record would have died out. Nobody would’ve heard it if they hadn’t tried to cut people off from it. As soon as the kids found out there was some authority that didn’t want them to hear it, they bought it in droves and it became this big hit” (DeMain).

Aside from the song’s attraction due to its prohibition, it also presents exceptional musical elements, which enhance its appeal. Several instruments complement each other in order to create an upbeat tune including drums, guitar, and piano. The introduction of the song is a strong piano solo that immediately captures the attention of the listener, which is a well-known strength of Joel’s career as an artist. Additionally, Joel’s voice changes in pitch and tone throughout different portions of the song, generating captivating and impressive vocals. Furthermore, although the verses translate a controversial topic, the actual phrasing of the lyrics still forces the listener to interpret the words. For example, the lines “the stained glass curtain you’re hiding behind never lets in the sun” has a deeper meaning that cannot be understood without having an idea of the song’s general message. The “stained glass curtain” that Joel says Virginia would be “hiding behind” is referring to a church, which he believes is preventing her from having a brighter life.

To emphasize, in this particular case, it was not an overwhelming new source of sound, unheard vocals, or world changing message that originally brought this song fame. Rather, it was the idea that this song generated animosity in the Catholic world to the point where the single was outlawed that led people to start the rebellion. Joel’s hit single “Only the Good Die Young” made U.S. Billboard’s hot 100 and peaked at #24 as well as taking the #18 spot on Canadian Singles Chart. Overall, the original controversy that resulted from the song’s release does not mean it was an unsuccessful point in Joel’s career. The song continues to be played on oldies radio stations and listened to among many music fanatics to this day. The main component of the uniqueness of “Only the Good Die Young” is the path it took to become a well-known hit and that is something worth remembering.

Works Cited

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