

The WAGER 7(19): Musical Explorations of Problem Gambling

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This week the *WAGER* announces a Harvard Medical School Division on Addictions web initiative, *Addictions and the Humanities*. The aim of this initiative is to create a public forum to discuss literature, art, music, and performing arts related to addiction. New issues of *Addictions and the Humanities* will be published quarterly. Below is an article from the first issue. The Division on Addictions welcomes article submissions.

Musical Explorations of Problem Gambling

*“Ah let me tell you people
About this blackjack game
It’s caused me nothing but trouble
And I’ve only myself to blame”
— Ray Charles (1958)*

What do AC/DC, The Eagles, Madonna, Bonnie Raitt, The Clash, and Abba have in common? They have all performed or penned songs about gambling. Why is this important? Our understanding of gambling as an addiction is frequently guided by science. However, through art we also might learn about addiction. In songs composers often place gambling within an emotional, social, or psychological context that might be approximated, but difficult to capture with science. In addition to this, by definition, an artist’s output and interpretation of the surrounding world is subjective. Thus, by exploring artistic works we can gain perspectives and viewpoints that might not necessarily be observable through science. This discussion concentrates on gambling in contemporary music. This union has provided keen insights about the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors often associated with gambling in poetic and beautiful ways.

Before turning to music, it is helpful to review gambling. When we talk about gambling, some associate it with casinos; images of slot machines, poker, and craps tables come to mind. But gambling is much more diverse than that. Traditional forms of gambling do include wagering in casinos, horse and dog

tracks, sports betting, and playing the lottery. However, gambling can also include fun bets with friends, investing in the securities market, and Internet wagering on online casinos. Gambling is defined as placing something of value at risk on a future event with the hope of gaining something of greater value. Consequently, any situation in which you risk something on an unknown outcome, no matter how trivial, can be considered gambling.

Contemporary musical artists have often explored dualities associated with gambling: life and death, love and loss, hope and desperation. For example, Bob Dylan wrote a song in 1962 called "*Rambling, Gambling Willie*" about a man named Willie who, although generous with his earnings, met death at a gambling table.

Similarly, Cole Porter wrote a humorous account of love unrequited called "*I'm Unlucky at Gambling*", the refrain of which goes:

*"For I'm unlucky at gambling
And I'm unlucky in love
Why should I go on scrambling
To get to heaven above?
It's bad enough to lose your purse
But when you lose your heart it's even worse.
Oh, I'm unlucky at gambling,
And I'm unlucky in love."
— Cole Porter (1929)*

Finally, in "*Dust Bowl*" Natalie Merchant sheds light on the circle of hope and desperation that can ensnare young gamblers. Some argue that individuals of a lower socioeconomic status are particularly at risk, suggesting that youth gambling is a form of regressive taxation that exploits those who are most vulnerable because of socioeconomic marginality and their feelings of relative powerlessness (Schissel, 2001).

*"I played a card in this weeks' game. Took the first and the last letters in three of their names.
This lottery's been building up for weeks.
I could be lucky me with the five million prize, tears of disbelief spilling out of my eyes.*

I try and try but I can't save.

Pennies, nickels, dollars slip away. I've tried and tried but I can't save.

The hole in my pocketbook is growing."

— Natalie Merchant (1989)

Indeed science has recognized these dualities. However, science places itself in the position of observer. In contrast, artists live communicate their experiences. Highlighting circumstances in this way can make artists' work more accessible to many people.

Consequently, feeling, as well as fact is shared with the audience or spectator. By combining the elements of love and gambling, Porter allows listeners to feel loss. Similarly, by portraying gambling as something that brings about both life and death, Dylan emphasizes unpredictability in life. Finally, by emphasizing the cyclic nature of gambling, Merchant evokes disorientation and pain.

Songwriters also often use gambling metaphorically to express the uncertainty and to a greater extent, lack of control (or intoxication) involved in love and human relationships. We arguably take great risks in our relationships every day, and it is natural that songwriters have been fascinated with this form of risk-taking, where the object of value is ourselves. "*Shape of My Heart*" addresses this issue by discussing probability and chance. This works because statistics and basic mathematical theory is at the heart of every wager, but who among us thinks about probability when dealing with our own heart?

"He deals the cards to find the answer

The sacred geometry of chance

The hidden law of a probable outcome

The numbers lead a dance

I know that the spades are the swords of a soldier

I know that the clubs are weapons of war

I know that diamonds mean money for this art

But that's not the shape of my heart."

— Sting & Dominic Miller (1993)

With science comes the risk of minimalism. Art can supplement scientific knowledge by reminding us of our humanity. These songs, as well as other songs

about gambling, have a melancholic subtext. It is interesting to see how some artists have associated gambling with escape, while others think of gambling as a trap. Although there are plenty of singers and songwriters who glorify gambling, melancholic songs help us explore multiple sides of gambling and realize that, good or bad, it comes with consequences that are difficult to ignore. Art, together with science, may be our best teacher.

Comments on this article can be addressed to Gabriel Caro.

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