Assignment One: Description and Analysis of a Musical Text

Closely analyze ONE popular song that you deem to be significant in the history of recorded popular music in the U.S. Your objective will be to prove to the reader that this song represents an important moment in musical history, building your case by using evidence from your description of the song itself. Although there are no limitations on what song you choose, the strongest papers will make links between the music and the larger cultural and historical climate at the time the song was released. As such, in examining this musical text, you should perform two levels of analysis:

1. Listen to the song closely, multiple times, taking careful notes. Provide a detailed description of the song, paying attention to the instrumentation, melody, the arrangement, vocal styling (if applicable), and lyrics (if applicable). The bulk of the body of your paper should describe this song in minute detail. I do not expect you to know musical notations or be able to identify chord progressions. You should, however, be able to use descriptive language to talk about mood, tone, rhythm, and harmony. If you are not certain about the instruments that are being played, you will need to research the performers or band. Find out (to the best of your ability) who the performers are, what instruments are being used, who wrote the song, and as many details about the production as possible (be sure to cite any outside sources you use). Know when this song was recorded and the label on which it was released.

2. Use your description as the raw material for a blog posting presenting your analysis. Along with this close, textual description, tell the reader how this song fits into a larger historical context. Why is this song in particular important? Was it different from songs that preceded it (and how, exactly was it different)? Is it a prototypical example of a genre of music that had a large impact on the industry or the culture at large? If so, what are the qualities of that genre and how are they manifested in this song? Is this song politically significant? How does it express its politics musically? Can you provide any evidence to suggest that this song (or artist or genre) influenced or changed the evolution of popular music or the culture at large?

Even though this is a blog entry, not a formal paper, you should present a clear argument about the significance of this song. To do this, you will need to support your claims with specific evidence drawn from your description. Give your reader enough historical background to understand the context of this text, but be sure to discuss the song itself in great detail. Use the material from your description to “prove” your point. Your analysis should be focused on the MUSIC, not the video or other visual representation that might have accompanied the song.

What makes a song “historically significant”? The song might represent:

- technological advancements in playing or recording (e.g. synthesizers, multi-track recording, sampling, scratching, internet distribution)
- shifts in genre or style that impacted later music
- a “cross over” success from different national or musical contexts (e.g. the success of Latin American music in the U.S., African American pop hits of the 1960s)
- a political or social commentary (e.g. songs about war, civil rights, gender issues, inequality)
- a new musical movement or subculture (e.g. Riot Grrrl, punk, indie rock, electronic music)

3. Finally, you must read and comment on a minimum of two of the analyses posted by the students in your blog group.