

# Why Old People Hate New Music

By Professor Frank T. McAndrew, [www.frankmcandrew.com](http://www.frankmcandrew.com)

**W**hy do we think that today's music is not as good as the music from our youth?

When I was a teenager, my parents were not terribly interested in the music I liked and thought that it just sounded like “a lot of noise.” Meanwhile, my father regularly referred to the music that *he* liked as “beautiful music.”

This attitude persisted throughout his life, and when he was well into his 80s he turned to me during a TV commercial featuring a 50-year-old Beatles' tune and said: “*You know, I just don't like the music of today.*” The fact that he thought of a 50-year-old song as being “the music of today” speaks volumes about when his interest in new music ended. And it turns out that my father is not alone.

As I've grown older, I've often heard people my age say things like “today's music sucks” or “they just don't make good music like they used to.” So, what is it with old people and new music?

## Older People Really Don't Like New Music

We know that musical tastes begin to solidify as early as age 13 or 14, and that they get locked into place pretty firmly in our early 20s. Studies indicate that most of us stop exploring new music entirely by the time we turn 33, and if a song was released when you are in your early teens, that song is likely to remain quite popular among your age group throughout your life.

Curiously, men are even less likely than women to explore new music and listen to new artists as they get older.

## Why does this happen?

For starters, there is evidence that the brain's ability to make subtle distinctions between different chords and other musical elements gets worse with age, so new, unfamiliar songs may in fact sound more alike to older ears than to younger ears. But I believe that the aversion that older



Prof. McAndrew's research has appeared in dozens of professional journals and is regularly featured in popular media outlets such as The New Yorker, NPR, the BBC, The New York Times, The Atlantic, and NBC's Today Show.

people often have to new music also has a simpler explanation.

## The Mere Exposure Effect

One of the most reliable laws of social psychology is something called *the mere exposure effect*. In a nutshell, this means that within certain limits, the more familiar we are with something and the more often we are exposed to it, the more we tend to like it. This works for other people, consumer products, and yes, even for songs.

When you are in your early teens, you probably spend a lot of time listening to music, discussing it with your friends, and watching music videos. The songs and artists who are popular during this time become familiar, comforting parts of your life.

For most people over 30, life is too busy to allocate much attention to discovering new music. Advancing one's career and raising a >>>



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family eats up most of the available time, and so we tend to listen to comforting old favorites that connect us to a simpler time and place. And with familiar songs, we can fill in words and sounds that elude us even when there is a lot of background noise or other factors that prevent us from hearing the song clearly.

Consequently, we prefer familiar music, and it is the music that we hear when we are young that is most familiar to us.

### Most Popular Music is Written for Young People

Let's face it; one of the reasons why older people don't like a lot of popular music is that it is not written for them. In fact, it is often written for the explicit purpose of riling up older listeners. Punk, rap, hip-hop, heavy metal, anti-war folk music, and many other genres of music began as a youthful rebellion against authority figures and outdated ways of doing things, and this resonates more successfully with younger audiences. On top of this, many popular songs feature themes such as young love and peer rejection that are less relevant to older individuals.

### The Teen Years are an Emotional Time

The teen years are famously turbulent, which is why so many TV shows and movies revolve around high school. "Beverly Hills 90210," "Glee," "Love, Simon," and "Eighth Grade," all revisit the turmoil of these years.

The emotions that we experience as teens seem more intense than what comes later, and strong emotions make for strong memories and strong likes and dislikes - including the music we listen to.

These strong emotions are clearly related to changes in the brain's sensitivity to certain types of information during adolescence. Emotions signal the brain that

important events are happening, and the teen years are chock full of important social feedback about one's skills, attractiveness, status and desirability as a mate.

So, there is nothing wrong with your

parents because they do not like your music - it is the natural order of things. Having said this, I can say from personal experience that I developed a fondness for the music I was hearing when my own children were teenagers, so it may be possible to rehabilitate your parents after all.

And it may even be that listening to new music can help them avoid stagnation in one small corner of their life and it may also be good for their continued personal development.

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