

TWENTY ØNE PILOTS: IN THE TRENCHES

Annie Nardone on the Impact of Popular
Music

Welcome to our Brave New World where we live in a society of anger, autonomy, and division: beauty wrung out and replaced by a meme. More than ever, we are searching for meaning and significance in our daily lives. Finding our place (and we all have one) is a challenge even for adults who have weathered life's journeys and become familiar with the peaks and valleys, joys and betrayals, mountains and muck. But for teens trying to navigate through ever-increasing pressures to come in first at all costs, land scholarships and degrees from the best schools, secure a stellar position in a Fortune 500 company — to be perfect — for most teens, life feels more overwhelming now than in the past. Stir in the negative impact of social media and you have a toxic latte that our younger generation sips every day.

Music is a cultural bellwether that shows us trends and factors influencing the social condition. Pay close attention to the lyrics of today's hits and you will hear confirmation of what studies have found to be the deepest and darkest issues of our day. *The New York Post* recently reported on a study by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health that "looked at mental health in teens and young adults." The study found a steep decline in their well-being. Rates of major depressive episodes in the last year jumped 52 percent among adolescents aged 12 to 17, the study noted, and 63 percent among young adults aged 18 to 25."¹ Scary statistics. The music of Gen Z is a window we can look through to see their struggles. One action that will help to stem the tide of growing alienation and desperation in our young people is to enter their world. Lyrics give a voice to the teen who is crying out and trying to make sense of this increasingly uncertain society. Music is communication from the deep soul.

¹ Karol Markowicz, "An Epidemic of Teenage...Loneliness," *New York Post*, last modified March 26, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/03/26/an-epidemic-of-teenage-loneliness/?fbclid=IwAR0neNSmepcVOjLA4c48mxMnMVefkKpwPM704608ICRhhNIf6d4D546080E11>

*When everyone
You thought you knew
Deserts your fight
I'll go with you.*

Thanks to my daughter, alternative music duo Twenty Øne Piløts has been on constant rotation in my car for over a year. I'm fairly open to new music and since it was so meaningful to my girl, I held my breath when she hit 'play' for the first time. Giving this band a listen was a call to engage with the music she liked. Did I enjoy it the first time I listened? Not really. But I was going to hang in there and try to understand the Twenty Øne Piløts culture. To understand its popularity, I had to engage with it.

*You're facing down
A dark hall
I'll grab my light
And go with you.*

We turned the corner by the stadium in downtown DC, clutching our Twenty Øne Piløts tickets and searching for our friends. We joined a

crowd representing every age, clad in colors of khaki and black, and trimmed in stripes of yellow duct tape to represent “Jumpsuit,” one of the tracks on their new release, *Trench*. This was love for a band that went beyond the commitment of a swag t-shirt. My own daughter had bleached and dyed strands of yellow in her dark brown hair just for the occasion; she and her friends had been plotting and planning their clothing for weeks. We filed to our seats, stood, and waited. The screaming and cheering was deafening. But this was nothing like a Justin Bieber fan only interested in attractive musicians. It was the cheering for a particular message: “This band gets me. They understand what hurts, what’s scary, what I’m up against.”

Surrounded and

Up against a wall

I’ll shred them all,

And go with you.

Perhaps the lyrics of this band and others of the alternative genre have a fair amount of angst, but let’s be honest and acknowledge that major shifts in life are usually rife with doubt, confusion, frustration, longing, and very big questions. Society tends to dismiss teen angst (Haven’t adults walked

their eyes at movies like *Pretty in Pink* and *Twilight*? Okay, *Twilight* deserves the eye roll.), and shows disregard for the struggles tweens and teens crawl through on a daily basis. We turn away and cast them adrift, disconnecting them from the community.

When choices end

You must defend

I'll grab my bat

And go with you.

Because of fragmenting of relationships and the influences of social media, society has achieved new levels of alienation. Teenagers are feeling more than the usual coming-of-age angst. Communicating with a short text or tweet is more about disconnection than discussion. Heart-to-heart conversations are rare because they've been replaced with a few words and a meme. The need for real connection and real friendship still resides at a soul level, but that need cannot be filled without face-to-face relationship. They struggle to find their place amidst the chaos of competition, bullying, alienation, and social media can be overwhelming.

Do you find it difficult to talk to a teen? Then consider the words of Tyler Joseph, lead singer of the group, as he distills high school life down to the essentials. Life is ugly and tough; everyone needs a friend who would defend to the end.

If there comes a day

*People posted up at the end of your
driveway.*

*They're calling for your head and
they're calling for your name*

*I'll bomb down on them, I'm coming
through*

Do they know I was grown with you?

Here's a little help with this stanza from the song "My Blood" on Twenty One Pilots' latest album *Trench*. Several messages are packed inside. The first way to connect with a teen is to ask them "What does that mean, 'my blood'?" This particular song references a blood brother who has your back and will stand by you when everything falls apart. Will he literally "drop a bomb" on the bad guys? No, but that brother will fight by your side and assure you: "Stay with me. No, you don't need to run. Stay with

me, my blood. You don't need to run." We want a friend who will stand by our side and lay down his life to save ours.

We have lost our way, pulling further away from each other and filling the gaps with social media and electronic brain candy. As culture slips into becoming a real-life dystopian novel, the hunger for what makes life meaningful won't be satisfied, can't be ignored, and doesn't disappear. We need each other. This is a spiritual battle as much as a worldly one. It comes down to having a relationship with a true friend who won't desert you or turn on you; someone who says:

If you find yourself

In a lion's den

I'll jump right in

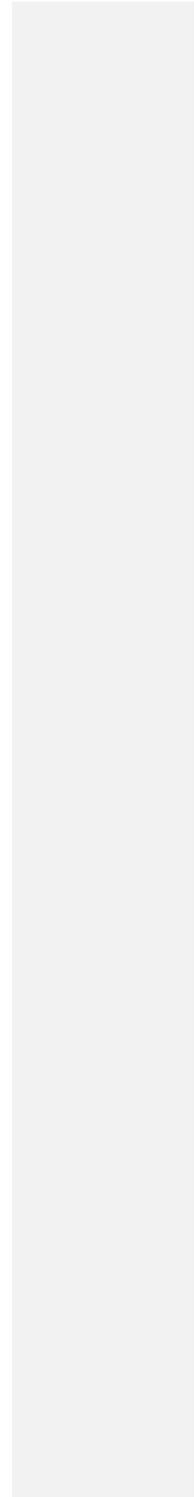
And pull my pin,

And go with you.²

Listen to lyrics. Engage with teens and the Generations Z culture. What you'll find in Twenty

²Twenty Øne Piløts, "My Blood," written by Tyler Joseph on *Trench*, released August 27, 2018, produced by Fueled by Ramen, Warner Music Group

Øne Piløts and a few other alternative bands are strong and redemptive messages about loyalty, friendship, hope, and bravery. Be the one who looks at someone in the eye and promises, “I’ll go with you.”



Bibliography

Twenty Øne Piløts: In the Trenches

Markowicz, Karol. "An Epidemic of Teenage...Loneliness." *New York Post*. Last modified March 26, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/03/26/an-epidemic-of-teenage-loneliness/?fbclid=IwAR0neNSmepcVOjLA4c48mxMnMVefkKpwPMZQ46O8JCBbbNJfqdP546qSeEU>.

Twenty Øne Piløts. "My Blood." written by Tyler Joseph on *Trench*. Released August 27, 2018. Produced by Fueled by Ramen, Warner Music Group.