

Syncopation and Syllabic Stress in 20th-Century Popular Music

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Syllabic stress rarely factors into theoretical models of syncopation. Most studies define syncopation purely in terms of note positions in relation to the meter (Gomez et al. 2007). For styles of music where stressed syllables almost always fall on strong beats, it is reasonable to design a model of syncopation that forgoes syllabic stress. This is not true of popular music, where stressed syllables often do not align with metric accents (Tan et al. 2019). Syncopation in popular music may even arise from syllabic stress alone: from a stressed syllable that is metrically weaker than a following unstressed syllable. Such syncopations are striking because they involve a direct conflict between syllabic stress and metrical strength. In this paper we explore the rise of this unprecedented type of syncopation in American popular music of the 20th century. In a survey of top Billboard songs from each year of the 20th century, we find that over half of all syncopations of this type occur after 1975, and over 75% occur after 1950. In contrast, our survey suggests that traditional syncopations, those with no note on the following strong beat, are common in all decades of the century. We show how syncopations arising from a mismatch of syllabic stress are often capable of greater expressivity than traditional syncopations, particularly in musical contexts where traditional syncopations are very common.