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[Andrea Estrada](#)

UCSB Sociologist Examines Realism and Emotion in Love Songs

Love songs -- the pouring out of one's heart in words and melody -- are as ubiquitous and timeless as the emotion itself. Whatever their focus, however -- requited, unrequited, or infatuation -- they tend to present a perception of love that is, at best, unrealistic.

So says Thomas Scheff, professor emeritus of sociology at UC Santa Barbara, in his new book, "What's Love Got to Do With It? Emotions and Relationships in Pop Songs" (Paradigm Publishers, 2011). Scheff has studied popular lyrics from 80 years of American song, and concludes that, in many ways, they actually do more emotional harm than good. Popular love songs, he said, generally steer listeners away from a healthy connection to the emotions surrounding love.

"Music informs our ideas about emotions, and love in particular," Scheff said. "But most love songs are terrible models." As he writes in the book, "Lyrics maintain the mystery of love, but they reveal next to nothing about the look and feel of actual love."

Songs about requited love, for example, idealize love, Scheff continued. "You hit the jackpot when you find the right person, and you'll never have to deal with grief or shame or anger. But that's not the case." He noted the high divorce rate in the United States, and cited society's general misconception about love as one likely cause. "I don't think it's entirely the fault of the love songs, but they play their part."

They keep regenerating that false idea, which makes people ill-prepared for real relationships."

Like doughnuts and soda pop, however, love songs may not be good for us, but we consume them anyway. According to Scheff, love songs have comprised the largest category of music on Top 40 lists since the lists began in the 1940's. Within the love song category, the largest segment is made up of those devoted to heartbreak and unrequited love. Following, in order, are infatuation and requited love.

"Infatuation means you're totally in love with someone you don't know, which, in reality, is impossible." Scheff said. "And with requited love you're happy as a clam because you've found the right one and you'll be together forever." Until you aren't, he added, in which case you will find yourself in the heartbreak category.

Nearly as large a segment as that of heartbreak songs, he continued, are those that fall into the miscellaneous category. These include comedy songs, sex songs, and songs that reflect pure anger. "I call sex songs 'anti-love songs,' because they celebrate sex without love," Scheff noted.

Among the love songs that are most meaningful to him are George and Ira Gershwin's "They Can't Take That Away From Me." Said Scheff, "It's a love song that doesn't fit any of the formulas. We loved, and now you're gone, but it was worth it. That's an extremely unusual thought in a love song."

[Learn more from Scheff about his research in a video interview about his book.](#)

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