Pop looks to the past for a forward-feeling sound

White Stripes, Sean Kingston, Amy Winehouse pay homage to precedent yet move on.

By Ann Powers, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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ELTON JOHN'S recent public outburst about the Internet's effect on pop -- he suggested that a five-year cyberspace shutdown might be the only way to renew the music's creativity -- was greeted with eye rolling and the general consensus that he should splurge on an iPod. But his consternation is understandable.

The music industry is in tatters; the noise that amateurs once kept to themselves emanates from every corner of cyberspace, and between the money-obsessed mainstream and the hype-addled underground, there's no agreement on what will endure. For a traditionalist like John, it's a scary time -- old standards are dying fast.

Consider one of the enduring myths of pop: that originality is paramount. This idea has always been pretty much a lie, given the history of music-making as a borrower's art. In an essay on the merits of playing copycat published in the February Harper's, Jonathan Lethem traced the origins of American pop to the "open source" culture of blues and jazz and noted that recording techniques, which allowed for literal duplication of sounds, have steadily enhanced the artful mimicry, quotation, allusion, and sublimated collaboration consist of a kind of sine qua non of the creative act, cutting across all forms and genres in the realm of cultural production." (Lethem later reveals that he "stole, warped, and cobbled together" his entire essay, including this idea, which came from the book "Owning Culture" by Kembrew McLeod.)

Lethem's point might seem obvious to any sample-chasing hip-hop fan or Dylanologist who's traced the master's loving thefts over the decades. Yet the idea that a song or a sound can be unique remains potent, especially for musicians themselves. Artists like to believe their self-expression is really theirs; perhaps even more importantly, the financial structure of the music industry, which rewards creativity when it's copyrighted, has upheld the idea that one person can "own" a song.

Avril Lavigne is the latest allegedly unwitting magpie to suffer under this system. She's been accused of a host of rip-offs, including the chorus of her monster hit "Girlfriend," which so closely resembles a 1979 song by the power-pop band the Rubinoos that it's spurred a lawsuit. Lavigne's former collaborator, Chantal Kreviazuk, subsequently accused her of pilfering ideas (Kreviazuk recanted her accusation after Lavigne threatened to sue her). And then it surfaced that another new Lavigne song might not have been the only way to renew the music's creativity -- was greeted with eye rolling and the general consensus that he should splurge on an iPod. But his consternation is understandable.

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One would think a striver such as Lavigne would crumble under this scrutiny, but the very fans who’ve been eagerly tracing her transgressions are beginning to make a case for forgiving her. On YouTube, some videos make the argument that Lavigne is just part of a chain: A new single from “High School Musical” star Vanessa Hudgens sounds uncannily like an older Lavigne hit, Mexican pop star Belinda is copying her style and -- hey, you! -- the Rubinoos borrowed their barking chorus from the Rolling Stones in the first place.

The Web as wet blanket

THIS is why the Internet is killing originality, as an idea, anyway: When every source is so easily available, no one can pretend they’re alone. Scholars such as McLeod and Joanna Demers (“Steal This Music!”) have argued about the effects of copyright law on creativity, and last year Timothy English published “Sounds Like Teen Spirit,” a compendium of too-close-for-comfort songs (did you know Nirvana might have re-purposed that famous opening riff from Boston’s “More Than a Feeling”?). But the written word is never as convincing as hearing the musical connections themselves, and the huge archive of recording available online allows for instant comparison.

Where once an old blues that Dylan borrowed from would be known only by the obsessive few, now anyone can argue about it in voluminous posts on the Expecting Rain message board. Hip-hop had already made the patchwork nature of pop obvious years before through the collage technique of sampling. Cyberspace has made everyone a participant in the DJ culture of “digging in the crates.” Artists still might want to make music no one has heard before, but they’re forced to admit that even their most creative moments are just part of a long chain.

Even artists who do burst forth with a startling take on pop will eventually find themselves accused of being derivative. Maybe that’s why M.I.A., the British-Sri Lankan polymath who’s as fresh as artists come these days, shouted “This is my song!” as she began “Jimmy,” from her new album, “Kala,” during a show at the Echoplex last month. “Jimmy” is not technically M.I.A.’s song; it’s a cover of a song from a 1983 Bollywood movie “Disco Dancer.” M.I.A. can’t pretend she never knew that source -- she grew up loving Bollywood music. But her statement of ownership also held an opposite meaning: Past versions be damned; the vigorous new beats and vocals she applies makes her “Jimmy’s” rightful owner now.

With the very idea of originality in flux, another trait defines today’s most interesting stars. Distinctiveness is what matters: the ability not to separate from the crowd but to stand out within it. The occasional lawsuit aside, pop stars are now much more willing to wear their influences proudly and make clear how they’re building their own music from them.

Pop that aims for distinctiveness acknowledges its influences, tries to do them one better and, at its best, works real transformation. The White Stripes are distinctive because they’re high-concept, putting the blues through an art-school wringer and coming up with a sound that’s so far from “authentic” it finds a different road into truth. Brad Paisley is distinctive because he combines a neo-traditionalist Nashville sound with lyrics that poke gentle fun at contemporary mores. Beyoncé is distinctive because her rhythm-conscious vocal style updates the approach of the soul divas she emulates.

Some artists seem more beholden to their sources than others; this is where self-awareness comes in. Imitation becomes creative only when it’s acknowledged and truly examined. Amy Winehouse, the young English singer whose work with producer Mark Ronson painstakingly re-creates the feel of 1960s girl-group soul, offers the most obvious example of how bold imitation can become personal expression. Winehouse’s personality has proven strong enough to make her costume dramas come across as method acting.

The Brooklyn band Interpol, currently on the charts with its third album, “Our Love to Admire,” channels departed spirits in a way similar to Winehouse. Since its chilly sound and executive vampire style captivated hipsters in 2002, detractors have accused Interpol of being little more than a post-punk tribute band, especially indebted to the much-mythologized Manchester, England, group Joy Division. Younger fans always heard something else, though -- a richer tone, also inspired by New York club favorites such as Luna, and a more distanced, sometimes cynical stance than Joy Division singer Ian Curtis (who committed suicide in 1980) could manage.

In hot pursuit

SOMETIMES it’s the thrill of the caper that gives music that borrows heavily a distinctive ring. Sean Kingston’s debut album is a case in point. The young singer, who was born in Miami and raised in Jamaica, has one of the year’s biggest hits, “Beautiful Girls” -- a song that sounds just like a chart-topper by the ubiquitous R&B
crooner Akon.

In a hip hop-dominated scene full of mercenary lovers and ghetto businessmen, Kingston projects sweetness. In the end, "Beautiful Girls" isn't an Akon song as Kingston is slightly in awe of women. Akon, an ex-con and strip club habitué, would never sound this vulnerable.

For all his charm, Kingston might have just ridden on Akon's Lamborghini fumes, but he and producer J.R. Rotem didn't stop at seizing that Top 40 moment. Like much bubble gum, "Sean Kingston" has more going on beneath the shiny surface.

Mining the rich connections between Caribbean music and hip-hop -- and incorporating elements of classic rock (the current single turns Led Zeppelin's "D'yer Mak'er" Jamaican), gangsta rap, jazz and even vaudeville -- the album presents Kingston as a kid roaming freely through the candy store of popular music, delighting in the flavors he finds. Best of all is "Got No Shorty," the song owing the most unexpected debt. Over a hand-clap beat, Kingston sings the melody penned by pioneering black composer Spencer Williams in 1916. It's "I Ain't Got Nobody," one of the 20th century's most enduring little ditties.

It would have been easy for Kingston and Rotem to reference David Lee Roth's post-Van Halen version, which brought it to the attention of rock-era listeners. Instead, they reach back to Bing Crosby, pulling out the horns from his 1941 version with the Woody Herman Band. That move makes another connection: "Hey Ya!," OutKast's genre-redefining hip-hop hit, used a similar horn sample.

To music fans who still believe that heroic individualism is the essence of great music, the clever juxtapositions within Kingston's hits will seem shallow. But they are the ones pop is leaving behind. Originality is dead. Long may creativity flower as it rises from the earth of a million songs and sounds that have come before.