

POP CULTURE IN NY TIMES CROSSWORDS

The following material, extracted from a National Puzzlers' League round-robin letter, should be of interest to Word Ways readers.

Faith Eckler

For many years I've prided myself on being able to complete the New York Times Sunday puzzle in half an hour or less, without recourse to references. No more! I still usually manage a complete without helps, but it takes a whole lot longer. Reasons? Two. The many oblique clues which are generally quite fair and often clever (once you figure them out) but whose solutions don't immediately leap into mind. Clever examples include "war story" = Iliad, or "perfume dispensers" = lilacs. Less clever are those which depend on slang. The sense of "get down, so to speak" = boogie escapes me.

The second reason it takes me longer is the frequent use of clues which depend on a knowledge of pop culture. I see a clue like "record producer Brian" and haven't the faintest idea who he is (or was). I'm learning slowly to put my mind into wacky gear for the oblique clues, but the pop facts continue to frustrate.

Has the Times ever done a market survey to determine its readership? I would guess that the age of the average reader is 40-plus. My sense is that the young people who are up on the pop culture scene don't read newspapers any more. Certainly the people I see buying the Sunday Times at my local supermarket seem generally to be more seasoned citizens. Other people of my generation with whom I have discussed the problem share my unhappiness with the current emphasis.

Will Shortz

Starting with difficulty: I hear different things from different types of solvers. Older ones tend to find my puzzles harder than Maleska's (sometimes very much so), while younger and middle-aged solvers say mine are about the same or slightly easier than his. I'm sure these varying reactions have a lot to do with my adding more modern culture and language to the puzzle.

I'd like to think my puzzles are better balanced agewise than those of Maleska, who seemed to stop learning about 1965--but everyone's entitled to their own opinion...On balance, the current puzzles probably are harder than Maleska's, but still completable by any intelligent, educated person who has a lively mind and perseveres.

Regarding popular culture in the puzzles: I do hear from many older solvers with a beef similar to Faith's. They say there's too much of it they don't know. On the other hand, there's a generation gap the other way, too. Just this week I got a letter from a young reader regarding the clue "Dogpatch's ----- Joy Juice" (answer: kickapoo) which was meaningless to him. He said he keeps seeing references in crosswords to Dogpatch, and he wants to know who or what Dogpatch is!

And Dell puzzle magazines got a letter from a teenage solver who kept seeing the clues "Actress Gardner," "Actress Gardner." "Who is this Ava Gardner?" she wanted to know.

So crosswords are not just for older folks, as both my mail and personal experience show. And, frankly, if younger readers don't get hooked on crosswords, as the older generation has, there may not be crosswords in the future.

In my humble opinion, the range of culture in the current Times puzzles--both high and low, old and new--is pretty balanced. In fact, if anything, it's skewed to the older solver, because of the amount of education it requires. And if the younger set has to cope with Irma la Douce, Oona O'Neill, and Una Merkel, who are obscurities to them, then the older set shouldn't grumble too much over the occasional Brian Eno, Ren and Stimpy, and R.E.M.

Of course, the beauty of a well-made crossword is that you work out what you don't know from the crossings. To ensure that the crossings are fair, every Times puzzle is pretested by three people, who range in age from the 20s to the 70s. If it gets past this diverse group, I call it a fair challenge.

Eric Albert

The idea of what is fair in crosswords is currently a heated one, but I'm firmly on the side of Will Shortz in this matter. Crosswords have always been full of pop culture. The peculiar thing is that the pop culture in crosswords has remained the same while decades have passed. I remember vividly solving puzzles when I was ten or so, and I quickly learned that "apple cider girl" was "Ida". I had no idea what it meant, and it was a real thrill twenty years later when I was playing through a collection of early 20th century sheet music and came across "Ida, Sweet as Apple Cider."

When I was ten, that clue was referring to the pop culture of my grandparents! Now I'm an adult, and there's yet another adult generation after me, and it's about time that my and their culture began being reflected in puzzles. It may well be that the readership of the Times is mostly over 40, but they could well want to broaden their appeal. And, of course, today's teen-ager will eventually be 40. I'm almost 39, and the answer to your example ("record-producer Brian") is right in the heart

of my prime listening years, making it, in fact, a pop culture reference for 40-year-olds.

Marjorie Friedman

I've been doing the Times Sunday crosswords only since Will Shortz's elevation, but I sure agree that they're tough, probably largely for the reasons you mention. Often, it takes me a long time to get started, but I think I haven't failed to complete one yet--eventually--and always without references.

I believe you [Will Shortz] are getting borderline, over 40 ... So it'll be interesting when the entries apply to things that you are too old to know about. Guess you can consult your 20-year-old tester.

Philip Cohen

My sister (44) finds the NYT crossword harder than before, but she likes it. The only crosswords I do are the Stamford tournament puzzles, which are quite New Wave, so I don't have much of a basis for comparison. I did do one Maleska Friday puzzle a few years ago and thought it dry and too esoteric.

Today's kids may not be totally clueless about our grandparents' pop culture thanks to Nickelodeon and the Cartoon Network. I think I learned about "Ida, Sweet as Apple Cider" from an ancient Warner Brothers, or maybe Fleischer, cartoon. Did you ever watch those Fleischerian "follow the bouncing ball" singalongs as a kid? That only works for verbal nostalgia, though.