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## Here, there, and everywhere: Rock music, mass culture, and the counterculture

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HERE, THERE & EVERYWHERE  
Rock music, mass culture & the counter culture

Rock music has always been at odds with mass culture. It is at the same time one of its essential components and among its most vocal critics. Rock benefits from mass culture's economic framework and in return feeds it with its remarkable energy. But musicians and fans alike have repeatedly expressed feelings of uneasiness or even downright rejection at this close interdependence. It is precisely such tensions that give rock music its momentum.

The ambivalent nature of rock music as regards mass culture stems in fact from a well known dichotomy that permeates most 20th-century analyses of cultural productions. For Marxian or Veblenian<sup>1</sup> criticism, the ideological contents of rock music derive from its economic status. Being nothing more than a merchandise, it has to abide by manufacturing and marketing principles such as market research, standardization, advertising and profitability. These imperatives deprive the consumer of his free-will and turn rock music into an anti-revolutionary art, more concerned with profit margins than the advancement of radical theories or popular causes. Such views were particularly propounded in the 1960s by journalists or academics like Donald Horton and Paddy Whannel in England, or Jean-François Hirsch in France, but all agreed on the fact that rock music defied reductionistic analyses and was a more delicate subject to tackle than other aspects of mass culture. Paradoxically, Marxian perspectives linked up with the harsh comments passed on rock music by numerous conservative scholars (Allan Bloom, Alain Finkielkraut, etc.) who, drawing on, and distorting, Theodor W. Adorno's theories on jazz, described rock as a degrading and stupefying music. For them, it had nothing to offer but an ersatz of individualism, as it in fact standardizes cultural tastes and practices.

But rock music can be seen as more than the stale product of capitalism. Contrary to the early hostile reception, a different and more positive analysis gradually emerged, prompted by F.R. Leavis' works in the 1930s, and more particularly D. Riesman's in the 1950s. It upheld the opinion that rock is a popular and authentic artistic medium, the spontaneous expression of minority groups (colored people, the youth...), which was reflected by the change in terminology: from the analysis of "teen culture" rock studies became that of "youth culture." The most active representatives of this new trend were to be found at Birmingham University, at Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which conciliated Marxian theories with a positive approach of rock music, thus rendering traditional political divisions obsolete. Patrick Mignon synthesized perfectly these contrasting viewpoints when he noted that "rock music is the universalization of both market logic and individualism, the standardized product of cultural industries and the true expression of the people."<sup>2</sup>

In France, rock music has retained part of its early seduction insofar as it does not belong to mass culture to the same extent as in English-speaking countries. Though obviously it now is part of mass consumption, it somehow remains on the fringes of consumer society. For a long time, it had been restricted to an elite (whether it be students or working class) which had been "initiated": rock was an exotic idiom, the music from the other side of the Atlantic, an element of the American Dream, of the American Way of Life. As such, rock has preserved an aura of mystery and acquired a more prestigious, mythical status. French rock magazines, for instance, are more glamorous than their American counterparts and rock critics see themselves as missionaries or apostles (*Les Inrockuptibles*, the most fashionable magazine of the day, is a pun on the French for "the untouchable"); the only rock program left on French TV is entitled *Rock Culture*. And if few French artists could be rightly described as rock artists (when they are, their life's goal is to play in America), most popular middle-of-the-road singers integrate rock sounds into their music.

What our central issue, i.e., the conflicting relationship between rock music and mass culture, eventually boils down to is in fact a matter of assessing the value of this culture, and more particularly the concept of "mass." Some consider it as synonymous with standardized consumption, bad taste and fleeting fads; others, less contemptuous, give it a positive value and stress that "popular" does not necessarily rule out "quality." However, the very relationship between rock and mass culture is seldom questioned; almost everyone agrees on equating rock music with one of the commonest definitions of mass culture : produced for the greatest number, consumed by the greatest number. It must be that the intimate links of rock music with mass consumption blur all tensions and contradictions between the two.

Indeed, rock depends for its growth on the basic principles of consumer society. To launch an artist, produce a record or mount a tour takes time, men and machines, which require heavy investment. American capitalism offers rock its potency and its taste for business ventures. Contrary to European businessmen, American entrepreneurs are not suspicious of entertainment. Since popular music, musicals or plays can be profitable, they deserve the interest of investors. As a result, show business is more integrated in the United States than it is in European countries. In France rock music was able to develop thanks mainly to student societies, which organized concerts, published magazines, etc. Major record companies, often the subsidiaries of foreign multinationals, imported British or American rock albums irregularly, under simplified sleeves (words, for instance, were not printed). Rock music represented just a fraction of their turnover. The whole music industry feared rock

audiences, the questioning of deeply ingrained habits of dealing with mainstream performers. It is only by the early 1980s that the specialized companies (studios, halls, tour operators) that still function today took shape.

In the U.S., rock music has benefited from the conjunction of various economic factors peculiar to consumer societies. The inner logic of capitalism demands that consumption should be freed from the guilt inherent in it, turned even into a civic duty justified by national economic imperatives. The contradiction between capitalism and consumption, which stemmed from the Protestant foundation of American society, died out. The overall process was amplified by the post-war baby boom. A new class of consumers emerged, the teenagers, freed from the work ethic and commanding a huge monetary mass these new customers were encouraged to spend rather than save. They were being educated to consume. To meet the demand, new products appeared, which fitted adolescent life style and tastes. Rock'n'roll was one of them, offering for a few cents unpretentious commentaries on everyday life topics (cars, school, parents, love etc.) over a pleasant musical background.

At this point, a word should be said of the consequences of the integration by capitalist economies of cultural products. If cultural production was to become a profit making niche, it required the implementation of a mass market. Now, cultural artefacts have no intrinsic worth, their use value is purely hypothetical. Their consumption depends on their symbolic value based, in rock music as in the motion pictures industry, on the star system which rationalized consumer demand. This is why, as David Buxton put it, "the consumer must be created alongside the product."<sup>3</sup> Hence the setting up of various middlemen, "gate-keepers," such as critics, DJs or radio announcers whose task it is to launch new fashions and mold public taste. Such practices cannot of course but comfort in their opinion those for whom rock music is the soulless product of capitalist industry.

Today, rock is solidly established as a major component of mass culture. A few figures should make this clear. Since 1969, overall rock records sales have generated higher profits than the other sectors of the entertainment industry. From 1980 on, and despite fears of slumps and recessions, rock related sales (records, videos, concerts) have increased by an annual average of 13.2% (slightly less for rock shows alone, 8.2%), generating in 1993 a \$13 billion turnover. Rock albums (including rap) make up 52.1% of the market, as compared to 4% for classical, and 3.3% for jazz. In 1993, 6 rock albums were certified multi-platinum, i.e., more than 2 million units sold in the year in the US. Some even reached 10 million units (the soundtrack of the film The Bodyguard). The same year, 33 albums were certified platinum (above 1 million units sold).<sup>4</sup> Cumulated figures

for the U.S. over several years are even more impressive; 14 million units for the Eagles' *Greatest Hits*, 13 million for Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, 43 for Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and more than a billion for Elvis Presley's complete recordings. In the same time, the break-even point for a rock album jumped from 20,000 units sold to 100,000. (Significantly, a look at France's Top 20 sales for July 1994 reveals that only 7 foreign records had entered the charts, 4 of rock, 3 of dance music. Likewise, France accounts for only 6.7% of the world market for rock music, ranking 5th after the U.S., Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom). The profits generated by rock shows is also telling. In a single concert at New York's Yankee Stadium on June 10th 1994, for instance, Pink Floyd grossed an astonishing \$3,765,090.<sup>5</sup>

Another significant fact is the growing interdependence between rock and movies. Among the all time top-30 American films, 8 relied for their appeal on a rock soundtrack: *Batman*, *Ghostbusters*, *Grease*, *The Exorcist*, *Pretty Woman*, *Rocky*, *Saturday Night Fever* and *Ghost*. It is obviously difficult to determine in such cases which, the film or its music, drew the crowds; their interaction, most certainly. But choosing a well-known artist or song increases the prospect of success.

More interesting still is the way rock artists have subverted the Grammy Awards, an establishment of popular culture. Until 1966, the most coveted award (Best Album) went to artists such as Henry Mancini, Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, Stan Getz or Herb Alpert. In 1967, rock music entered for the first time with The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Since then, rock artists only have received the prestigious award, other musical genres having to make shift with minor ones; recipients have been Blood Sweat and Tears, The Eagles, Fleetwood Mac, Stevie Wonder, Billy Joel, The Doobie Brothers, John Lennon, Toto, Tina Turner, Lionel Richie, Phil Collins, Stevie Nicks, Paul Simon, U2, Bonnie Raitt, etc. To know whether all of these artists can still be labelled "rock" is another issue. With the opening of a rock'n'roll Hall of Fame or the systematic use by television of rock music in the soundtrack of various commercials, sports programs or serials, rock has become even more ensconced in mass culture.

The situation is particularly interesting as rock music has always defined itself as a reaction to mass culture. The grounds on which rock has confronted mass culture have obviously varied in time, as this culture itself was altered by the impact of previous rock genres. But rock dynamics stems from the tension between the centrifugal movement required by the entertainment industry and the centripetal dimension of each new musical wave. It may sound paradoxical to credit rock music with a centripetal force, as most artists seem rather motivated by a craving for the largest possible

success and recognition. However, their work is often sustained by a desire to prevent rock music from growing flat and dull, from losing its roots, its soul. Music has to be brought back to a center, a core, an origin all the more mythical as it combines at the same time with a quest for newness. Each new style consequently entails a redefining of existing links with mass culture as a whole and with previous rock genres. Rock music feeds on this tension between mass culture expansionism and the artist's will to remain "outside," "on the fringes." Rock progresses through a series of breaks and assimilations, its final aim being to become popular without selling out.

Year after year, rock artists have modified their demands. The glorification of consumption offered by Chuck Berry and the other early rock'n'rollers can be taken as a disapproval of the ideals still prevalent at the time: work, moderation, disregard for racial minorities and the youth. But such a stand was in turn criticized during the 60s, particularly in the U.S., by the Hippie movement. Material possessions ceased to be attractive and were superceded by more ethical values still looked down upon by the society of the time: love, pacifism, recognition of racial and sexual minorities, exploration of the self, concern for nature and so forth. By integrating the positions of the counter culture, rock became its mouthpiece; it rejected the tenets of mass society, the apology of consumption and of the American Dream, the stranglehold exerted by industry and technocracy over the country's cultural and intellectual life. Different rallying cries appeared ("Small is beautiful", "I'm black and I'm proud") which crystallized the refusal of the dominant cultural and economic ideology.

Obviously, continental Europe was somewhat left aside by these sweeping movements. True, 1968 was for France a time of deep change in which American popular music played a part. To keep in line with the spirit of the time, magazines were launched which devoted much space to rock music. But French youth were mere witnesses of what was going on in English-speaking countries. French youth gladly and readily acknowledged the new musical forms, going as far in some cases as translating the songs into French (as the lyrics had become meaningful) but they seldom actually took part in the musical evolution.

In America, the changes in popular music were carried out in the name of authenticity. The new principles were a quest for simplicity and the pureness of the origins, the questioning of large-scale marketing operations and standardization. Throughout the 1960s, a number of artists, by putting back in fashion white and black American traditional music and incorporating the rock idiom (folk-rock, blues-rock), managed to topple classic rock'n'roll, which had become solidly entrenched in mass culture, thus exposing the discrepancy between two deceptively similar notions: mass culture and popular

culture. The tension between mass and the fringe to which we initially referred, overlaps this opposition mass/popular insofar as within industrialized societies, returning to traditional values (here traditional music) testifies to the same desire of breaking with the current values of these societies.<sup>6</sup>

The first wave of contestation culminated in the second half of the 60s with acid-rock and the black music associated with the counter-culture (soul and funk). It is the same counter cultural dimension that can be found at other times and for other musical styles which do not bear any direct connection with the counter culture of the 60s (whether it be punk, reggae, pub-rock, thrash, hard-core, rap, grunge, etc.); what matters is to break with established traditions, with the musical code.

All these styles operate on the same small-scale basis, the exact opposite of what mass culture advocates. This is true not only of the size of the bands, of the management companies, of the concert halls, of the budgets involved, but also of the technical know-how of the musicians. A too high degree of musicianship and technical command, as it fits the demands of the record industry, is considered suspiciously. The emphasis is rather on amateurism and improvisation, on careless and ephemeral attitudes. Ideally, one should remain a "cult" band, whose success depends more on the grapevine than on the marketing strategies peculiar to mass culture.

The very organization of the record industry reflects the tension between the mass and the fringe. In English-speaking countries, business is shared between separate but complementary bodies: independent companies (the "indies") and large corporations (the "majors"). Multinational corporations are a key element of mass economies but they are too slow in decision making to match the spirit of rock music; it takes swiftness and flexibility to grasp the volatile quality of new bands and styles. Smaller companies are better equipped in this respect. They are responsible for the discovery and the initial "harnessing" of a great number of artists (thirty-three of 1956 top fifty recordings, e.g., were released by independent companies). Large corporations, which have the manufacturing, distribution and marketing clout and the capital necessary for worldwide developments come in later.<sup>7</sup>

This organization of the record industry brings to light an essential ambiguity of rock music. If most new musical trends result from the criticism of mass consumption (including of music), they seldom resist very long the relentless attacks of the industry and its assimilating powers.<sup>8</sup> The most unorthodox practices are rapidly popularized and made palatable, losing in the process their radical character<sup>9</sup>. The latest example being that of the Seattle band Nirvana, jumping in a few weeks from the status of garage-band to the #1 position in the charts. Each musical trend, after a few months of

existence, thus faces two alternatives: either to slowly fade away, or to integrate into mass culture. The evolution of the record industry lies on this well-documented process (see, for example, Richard Peterson and David Berger or John Fiske in *Introduction to Communication Studies*), the fierce and unrelenting competition between majors and indies, which is often closer to plunder than collaboration.<sup>10</sup>

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Rock music is never counter cultural for long. As a rule, after a short period on the fringes, each new style becomes a mass counter-cultural movement, before eventually joining the mass culture merry-go-round. Mass industry cares little about the subtle differences between culture and the counter culture. In fact, its essential feature is precisely its ability to digest any form of deviancy or marginality. As Herbert J. Gans noted in 1974:

... the youth culture of the 1960s has now declined, at least in public visibility, and no longer looks as threatening to the advocates of high culture as it did only a few years ago. Indeed, much of that youth culture is now being incorporated into commercial popular culture.<sup>11</sup>

In the end, one may wonder how relevant is the questioning of rock music as it is carried out by the various schools of criticism mentioned earlier. The central question is not one of origin. To ask whether rock is a commodity manufactured and imposed by cultural industries or the authentic offspring of popular culture is pointless. In any case, it takes both to make rock commercially viable as well as artistically exciting; a commodity which doesn't rely on a popular taste is bound to flop. As Todd Gitlin put it regarding television programs:

... capitalism implies a certain sensitivity to audience taste, taste which is never wholly manufactured. Shows are made by guessing at audience desires and tolerances..." Similarly, rock music cannot be content with keeping a low profile. It needs the limelight to thrive.<sup>12</sup>

What makes rock so special is its volatile and radical nature. It is actuated by a tension, the necessary resistance to an unavoidable commercialization, which creates new forces, prompts new talents. By regularly breaking free from cultural industries, by opposing the individual to the community, by questioning its involvement with mass culture, rock manages to stay alive. It may then resume its position within this culture with a renewed potency, until the next break. Rock music is not a state. It belongs neither to an individualistic



counter culture nor to mass culture. Rock could be best described as a passage, an interval, the space between. Rock is a dynamic, the dynamic of change.

1. Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), an American economist, who wrote in 1899 *Theory of the Leisure Class* in which he described how in modern society productive work becomes a mark of infirmity and leisure becomes evidence of pecuniary strength, thus giving rise to a new elite, the leisure class.

2. Patrick Mignon, *Rock, de l'histoire au mythe* (Paris: Anthropos/Vibrations, 1991). For further discussions on the same topic, see for instance Daniel Kingman, *American Music: a Panorama*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), 220: "If [rock] is a folk art [...] it is one that was born and is living out its entire existence in the very maw of commercialism. This is what has imparted rock its essentially equivocal nature. In a subject rife with paradoxes, the most basic one is that what began (and in essence still remains) as "underground" music - a vernacular, anti-commercial, "protest" kind of art - has become an almost unimaginably big business"; Devo, interview in *SoHo Weekly News*, n.d.: "what do you think rock'n'roll is in America... besides Propaganda for Corporate Capitalist life?"; Anthony DeCurtis, *Present tense, rock & roll and culture* (Duke University Press, 1992), xii : "[Rock music] is both fully woven into the fabric of the American corporate structure and endlessly the subject of efforts to censor its rebellious, anarchic impulses. It is safe as milk and a clear and present danger."; Dan Graham, edited by brian Wallis, *Rock my Religion, writings and arts projects 65-90*, (MIT Press, 1993), 89: "Rock is the first musical form to be totally commercial and consumer-exploitive. It is largely produced by adults specifically to exploit a vast new adolescent market whose consciousness it tries to manipulate through radio, print and television... But, ambiguously built into rock'n'roll is a self-consciousness that it *is* a commercialized form and thus is not to be taken totally seriously by the teenagers who listen to it"; 146: "Rock is the first commercial form of music that contains this self conscious knowledge of contradiction within its structure".

3. David Buxton, *Le rock. Star-système et société de consommation* (Grenoble: La Pensée Sauvage, 1985).

4. At the time of writing, July 1994, 10 albums have already been certified multi-platinum for 1994, Mariah Carey's *Music Box* topping at 7 million units. Sources: courtesy the Recording Industry Association of America.

5. Sources: *Billboard*, July 9, 1994.

6. cf. Dwight Mac Donald, "A Theory of Mass Culture", and Leo Lowenthal, "Historical Perspectives of Popular Culture", *Mass*

*Culture: the Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg & David Manning White (Glencoe, Il.: Free, 1957).

7. The archetype of this principle can be found in Elvis Presley who recorded his first songs for Sam Phillips' Sun Studios before being "sold" in 1955 to RCA.

8. The issue has in fact a broader scope; it includes the appropriation of African-American music by white musicians which can be seen as the exploitation of an authentic folk culture by the industry; but once again, one must bear in mind that even African-American music results from a process of industrialization.

9. As Glenn Gass puts it, rock'n'roll has become "respectable", "crammed into tuxedos at awards ceremonies, embraced by middle-ages babyboomers, exploited by Madison Avenue as an effective marketing tool and fast achieving the ultimate stamp of legitimacy as a subject for college classes." "Why Don't We Do It in the Classroom?", in *Present Tense, rock & roll and culture*, Anthony DeCurtis ed., (Duke University Press, 1992), 97.

10. Recent developments though, like the 1993 deal between Atlantic Records and the independent Matador Records seem to point the way to more collaboration between major and independent companies.

11. Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic, 1974), 6.

12. Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology: the Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment", *Social Problems*, Feb. 1979, 263.