

Rock and Roll Rebellion

Teenage Wasteland

Rock and Roll has always been *not* your parents' music. Bill Haley and His Comets achieved notoriety when their songs were included on the soundtrack to *Blackboard Jungle*, a film about rebellious high school students. *Blackboard Jungle* was one of the first waves of anti-social teenager movies like *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Young Ones*, which showed the reality of social change that had taken place after the Second World War. Thanks to the war, Western economies had recovered from the Depression, and there was more money to be spent, and less pressure to work. With the expansion of secondary school, teenagers found themselves with more time on their hands, and their more affluent situations meant that they could stay in school for longer, reducing the pressure to work even more. The parents of teenagers, brought up on privation and war rations could not understand or tolerate this laxity, but they recognized it (albeit unconsciously) as the sign that their children were better off than they had been. This generation gap exacerbated the rebelliousness of teens, who now felt adrift in a society that did not need their work or their talents as the world of their parents had. Their talents and their energies, then, would be poured into other arenas: the social microcosm of peer-groups ("gangs"), cars, non-traditional sports like surfing, and, of course, Rock and Roll music. All of these things fed the teenage rebellion against their parents' world. It didn't matter what it was – sex, drugs, rock n' roll – as long as the parents wiggled out about it. When Marlon Brando is asked in *The Young Ones* what he is rebelling against, he casually replies, "Whaddaya got?"

Bill Haley, Chuck Berry, and the rest sound strangely "safe" to our ears now, after the sexual liberation of Rock music by the end of the sixties. In the mid to late 1950s, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, and Elvis Presley all achieved fame by injecting sex into teenage rebellion by incorporating more sensual rhythms into the R&B/skiffle sound of acts like the Comets. These sensual rhythms infuriated the prudish older generation, who saw themselves as the defenders of a social order that had been brought to the brink of destruction by war and depression. Sexuality was anarchic, socially irresponsible, and even dangerous. But the hidden hand of the market was against them. Radio and record sales responded to the teenage need for rebellious music that their parents hated, and so helped spread the message of

"Rocking Around the Clock", "Little Sister Don't You Do What Your Big Sister Done", and "A Womp Bama Loo-Bop, A Womp Bam Boom!"

Rock and Roll Rebellion, however, was innocent. It was the relaxing of Adam and Eve before the fall. The blues was a genre filled with sex, but for a real political edge, Rock and Roll had to turn to folk music.

Dust Bowl Blues

The economic recovery of the affluent cities far outstripped the rural areas of North America, where the Depression and the War had a different effect: the development of working class and trade union consciousness. Radical folk music became a unifying construct for the workers and the trade unionists, and the greatest exponent of this music was Woody Guthrie. As the 1950s wore on and Rock and Roll became more commercial, its lack of political consciousness made it irrelevant to a new class of youth. In the cities, political consciousness grew with education and improved technology. In the years leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), more news and more information reached teenagers and made them aware, not only of the world at large, but of how much their chosen music ignored such an important part of their lives. Folk music moved from the country to the cities, most importantly New York, and following it came a young man from Minnesota. Part of the Dylan legend is how he went to Woody Guthrie's hospital bed to take the mantle from the dying folksinger. In the mythos of Rock music this is about as important as Beethoven receiving the spirit of Mozart from the hands of Haydn. Bob Dylan created a new kind of Rock music, politically aware, artistically rich, and capable of focusing the chaotic rebellion of the 1950s teenager into the very real rebellion of the children of the 1960s.

You Say You Want a Revolution

It was Dylan who gave the Beatles their politics – Dylan and their own working class backgrounds. Prior to their discovery of Dylan, however, the Beatles had restricted themselves to 1950s teenage rebellion, sharpened in the stews and fleshpots of Hamburg. Coming from a country foreign to the blues, the Beatles could never really *do* sex (if the Rolling Stones did not exist, we would have to invent them).

Their early version of Long Tall Sally is as antiseptic as only Paul could make it. But politics they could handle. A healthy dose of eastern mysticism, and the Beatles were ready to promote any kind of revolution - as long as it brought peace. Starting with *Revolver*, a new level of hippy consciousness was accessed by Rock music. But this was a mystical version of it, the rebellion of flower children. Dylan was angry - the Beatles were never angry.

But the Who were angry. These were rebellious teens with a passion for social change and disregard for private property (including their own). The Rolling Stones were about sex, the Beatles were about drugs, and the Who were about "Maximum R&B". Arguably, Pete Townshend's songs were more politically aware than John Lennon's (compare "5:15" with "Give Peace a Chance"), and the Who were more in touch with the sixties counterculture than the Beatles were.

By the end of the 1960s, a radical transformation had taken place across much of Western society. The student revolts in France in 1968 gave expression to the new political intelligence and sophistication of Western youth, and their music had to reflect that new political dimension. From now on, even the most aloof of Rock acts had to be aware ("turned on"), and socially conscious, if not politically radical. In fact, the early seventies is a fallow period for activism, although acts like Pink Floyd and David Bowie maintained a socially progressive politics and (at least in Bowie's case) a transgressive persona. Even Dylan, though, withdrew from protest songs to covers and country music. It wasn't until the late 1970s that a new kind of Rock music would fully embrace radical politics once again.

I Hate Pink Floyd

In the late 1970s, disaffection with a period of economic stagnation provoked young people once again to rebel against their parents' morals, standards, and fashion

sense. The safety-pin through the nose, the spray-painted Mohawk, the studded jacket, were as threatening to the older generation as James Dean's t-shirt and biker jacket had been twenty years previously. But in order to rebel against the politics of the baby-boomers, punks had to adopt a nihilistic, anarchistic attitude. While Pink Floyd were singing that the kids "don't need no thought control", the Johnny Rotten was crowing that he was the antichrist ("Anarchy in the U.K"): Rotten was recruited into the Sex Pistols on the strength of his customized *I Hate Pink Floyd* t-shirt.

The Sex Pistols were a crude manifestation of punk's attitude: bands like the Clash and the Jam were more sophisticated, taking the formless rebellion of Brando and Dean and applying it to the urban (and suburban) of the seventies, post-women's liberation, post-1968, post-Woodstock. The unifying effect of the cold war between the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) and the end of the Vietnam War (1975), gave Western youth something to struggle against. The enemy was more or less gone (despite Reagan's "evil empire"), but the need to struggle was still strong in the young punk rockers. Only in the affluent eighties, when synthesizers and cocaine became the rule rather than the exception, was rebellion tranquillized. There was money and opportunity again, and the punk message seemed irrelevant.

Grunge resuscitated the punk ideal of transgression, the need to shock, to prove that this was not your parents' music. Nirvana promoted escape from suburban boredom through apathy and suicide. It seemed as if the nihilism of inchoate rebellion had finally caught up with rock and roll. Other than the rampant politics of bands like Rage Against the Machine, it is difficult to see what popular music can replace it with. At the moment Rock and Roll rebellion and transgression really does seem as dead as Kurt Cobain.

Top Five Radical/Dystopic Albums:

Bob Dylan - *The Times They Are a-Changing*
 Rage Against the Machine - *Battle of L.A.*
 Sex Pistols - *Never Mind the Bollocks*
 Public Enemy - *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*
 Pink Floyd - *Animals*

Honourable Mentions:

Pink Floyd - *The Wall*
 The Who - *Tommy, Quadrophenia*
 David Bowie - *Ziggy Stardust, Diamond Dogs*
 The Clash - *London Calling*
 Nirvana - *In Utero*