# 5 Reconsidering rock

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'L'enfance est plus authentique' 'CYBELE'S REVERIE', STEREOLAB, 1995

'Rock' is a term that is instantly evocative and frustratingly vague. Rock may mean rebellion in musical form, distorted guitars, aggressive drumming, and bad attitude. But rock has also stood for much more than a single style of musical performance. Very diverse sounds and stars, including country blues, early Bob Dylan, Motown, Otis Redding, Kraftwerk, P-Funk, salsa, Run-DMC, Garth Brooks and Squirrel Nut Zippers, have all been called 'rock' at one time or another, even though they are also equally describable as non-rock. If this eclectic set of performers and sounds can be grouped under the heading 'rock', it is not because of some shared, timeless, musical essence; rather, specific historical contexts, audiences, critical discourses, and industrial practices have worked to shape particular perceptions of this or that music or musician as belonging to 'rock'. At the same time, no style or performer is automatically entitled to the 'rock' mantle, since rock culture has also been defined historically by its processes of exclusion. The idea of rock involves a rejection of those aspects of mass-distributed music which are believed to be soft, safe or trivial, those things which may be dismissed as worthless 'pop' – the very opposite of rock. Instead, the styles, genres and performers that are thought to merit the name 'rock' must be seen as serious, significant and legitimate in some way. These various conceptions of rock are made more complicated by the ways in which the meanings of 'rock' have shifted over the past four decades, and by how those meanings have been understood in different contexts or by different communities.

One of the great ironies of the second half of the twentieth century is that while rock has involved millions of people buying a mass-marketed, standardised commodity (CD, cassette, LP) that is available virtually everywhere, these purchases have produced intense feelings of freedom, rebellion, marginality, oppositionality, uniqueness and authenticity. It is precisely this predicament that defines rock, since negotiating the relationship between the 'mass' and the 'art' in mass art has been the distinguishing ideological project of rock culture since the 1960s. Rock involves the making of distinctions within mass culture, rather than the older



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problem of distinguishing mass from elite or vernacular cultures. Rock's values and judgements produce a highly stratified conception of popular music, in which minute distinctions are seen to take on life and death significance. Taking popular music seriously, as something 'more' than mere entertainment or distraction, has been a crucial feature of rock culture since its emergence.

This article attempts to map out a number of rock music culture's dominant features as they emerge, develop and change over time. I will be interested here in dynamic cultural processes rather than static musical–stylistic features. Although each of us may have ideas of what is, or is not, 'really rock', those ideas are not necessarily congruent with what others in the past may have felt, quite justifiably, was 'really rock'. 'Rock', as a term, has always been the focus of debate, and, as such, has come to be embedded within definitions or positions which may seem contradictory or paradoxical.

While rock is frequently treated as a musical genre, it is more useful to approach it as a larger musical culture. There are, of course, particular sounds and styles that tend to be privileged in certain circumstances as the 'core' or essence of rock. However, as we shall see, rock culture both encompasses and transcends various musical styles and genres; those which have been included under the rubric of 'rock' have changed dramatically in the past few decades. For example, the lounge or easy listening revival of the mid-1990s took what had been the mortal enemy of rock culture in the 1960s and 1970s and turned it into a vehicle for rock avantists. Thus, a form of music which had been the absolute antithesis of rock at one historical conjuncture – adult easy listening – could become the keeper of the rock faith for listeners who felt grunge had become too formulaic, too mainstream.

The first part of this chapter offers a critical survey of the three decades leading into the emergence of rock in the mid-1960s. This reconsideration of the pre-history and birth of rock addresses industrial and cultural developments that play a role in the advent of rock. The second part abandons a more-or-less linear historical narrative in order to focus on some of the key principles underpinning rock culture.

## Rock'n'roll and its pre-history

The idea of rock, as I have suggested, involves taking seriously music which may be found within a commercial mainstream. Rock culture presumes that this mainstream is already variegated, containing music and musicians of differing degrees of quality and integrity. Rock culture proceeds to

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sort out and distinguish the music of value from the music that lacks value. But this is not simply about 'likes' and 'dislikes'. Rather, the preferences of the rock fan will always embody ethical judgements about any particular piece of music – musical beauty and pleasure will be evaluated in relation to ideas about the workings of a capitalist system. Rock offers an elaborated worldview in which musical practices (styles and sounds, images and industrial processes) and musical preferences (tastes, pleasures) become intertwined, in which aesthetic and ethical judgements inform each other. The rock fan's claim to 'superior' musical taste involves making serious judgements about popular music, drawing on an awareness of that music's social contexts. This awareness is seen as lacking in the fans of other mainstream music. Thus the distinctions made by rock culture effectively stratify the mainstream of popular music into 'serious' (rock) and 'trivial' (pop) components.

Although it is within rock culture that this activity is at its most intense, some listeners did take mainstream popular music seriously prior to the advent of rock. We can trace the beginnings of a stratified mainstream back to the big band era of the 1930s and 1940s. From around the mid-1930s onward, audience distinctions between performers and styles within the mainstream of popular music began to take on a significance beyond simple personal choice. Increasingly, popular musical tastes could be embedded in forms of ethical judgement concerning the integrity and authenticity of performer, listeners and the music industry (and about the relationships between them). As the big band era progressed, particular musical preferences and tastes began to take on a polemical dimension. This may be seen in the development of oppositions between big band and non-big band popular music styles, and especially in the distinctions made within big band culture between swing and sweet bands (for example, Benny Goodman vs Guy Lombardo), between soloists and singers, between 'jazz' listeners and jitterbug dancers, and even between black and white bands. The first term of each of these oppositions would usually serve to designate a valued, 'authentic' position, while the second would be rejected by many critics and fans as standing for more commercial (and therefore suspect) tastes. We may witness, during this period, a growing sense that the ethical aspects of aesthetic judgement (did the musician really feel the emotions behind the trumpet solo, or was he or she playing merely for money?) could serve as the basis of popular music's value (this band is real, that one is phoney). This development would have far-reaching consequences.

Prior to the big band or swing era, of course, audience members made taste distinctions among singers, bands and songs. The difference is that, in the emerging cultural politics of the big band era, individual tastes came

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to be linked to broader criteria of judgement, such as commercialism, seriousness of intention or authenticity. The stratification of big band culture produced tensions between competing conceptions of popular music. On the one hand, popular music was seen as a form of serious art that was an end in itself ('art for art's sake'); on the other, it was regarded as mere entertainment for profit ('crass commercialism'). These tensions led to the emergence in the 1940s of a distinct form of art music called 'jazz'. Whereas, in the 1920s and 1930s, 'jazz' was commonly used to designate any contemporary popular music, jazz now defined itself in opposition to popular music as it moved away from a mass audience.

Big band culture also saw the rise of age-grading (the recognition of distinct sub-audiences, defined on the basis of age). This division of the audience into teen and adult segments would have the most immediate impact on the development of popular music in the post-war period. Up until the mid-1930s, the products of Tin Pan Alley (the core of the United States music industries) tended to be marketed towards an undifferentiated audience, with the same songs aimed at everyone from grandmothers to grandsons. During the big band era, however, critics and the industry began to distinguish, not only between taste publics, but between age groups as well. As early as 1939, critics were complaining that some novelty swing bands could be 'understood' only by teen audiences; simultaneously, certain older, established popular songs, called standards, increasingly came to be associated with adult audiences. Age-grading was new to popular music at this time, and would become the key means of segmenting the white mainstream in the later 1940s and 1950s.

We are accustomed to thinking of the teen/adult split in popular music as exploding with revolutionary force in the 1950s. This revolutionary upheaval is usually associated with the emergence of rock'n'roll, but a more accurate account would suggest that rock'n'roll marked the culmination of a long evolution within popular music culture. From the big band era through the late 1940s, there is a growing sense that the mainstream is being divided by age as well as taste. It is not until the mid-1950s that teen taste is officially institutionalised as a separate segment of the mainstream, with 'rock'n'roll' as the name for that taste. The arrival of Bill Haley and the Comets' 'Rock Around the Clock' at number one on the *Billboard* pop singles chart in the summer of 1955 is generally taken to mark the beginning of the rock'n'roll era. There are any number of rock'n'roll hit records which precede it – including several Top 20 hits by Haley! – but none reach number one. Thus, the main significance of 'Rock Around the Clock' is that it is the first rock'n'roll record to reach the top rung of the Tin Pan Alley hierarchy. Rather than marking the beginning of a revolution, the success of 'Clock' represents

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the final step in the mainstream recognition of separate, age-graded taste cultures for teens and adults.

Earlier steps that contributed to the institutionalisation of the teen/adult split in the popular audience in the 1950s had included new formats for records and radio. With the introduction of the LP (long-play) album in 1948 and the 45 rpm single in 1949, popular music was no longer embodied exclusively in 78 rpm records that had held one song per side. Soon the two new formats came to be aligned with different segments of the market for popular music: the more expensive LP came to be the format of choice for standards, mood music and theme albums, and the cheaper 45 emerged as the medium of contemporary hits. This alignment between format and material contributed to the growing distinction between adult and teen tastes. As a result, the history of rock'n'roll in the 1950s is etched in singles, not albums. The emergence of a mass market for albums of non-adult popular music does not occur until the mid-1960s and, as we shall see, the development of rock culture (*c.* 1965–7 onward) is crucially tied to a shift from singles to albums and an attendant shift in cultural legitimacy.

At the same time, radio programming in the United States was changing, as the one-size-fits-all family fare of network radio gave way to focused local formats associated with adult or with teen audiences. The most spectacular development was the advent of the Top 40 format, which featured a limited playlist of only the latest and most popular hits and was directed at teen audiences. Unlike the relaxed presentation of established standards on adult radio, the high energy and fast song turnover of Top 40 demanded change and novelty. As a result, styles and musicians previously marginal to the mainstream began to make headway. Rhythm and blues and country songs, styles, and performers offered what Top 40 needed, and the 1950s are marked by the growing diversity of radio playlists. The institutionalisation of teen radio meant a shift in what a 'hit' sounded like.

To this point, I have focused on the white mainstream, in order to highlight the emergence of teen and adult segments within it. Usually, however, the rise of rock'n'roll is said to have been marked by a breaking down of racial barriers in the music industry, an industry whose racial biases were hitherto taken to express those of a predominantly white society. The entry into the popular music mainstream of rhythm and blues songs and styles and, later, of African–American performers, comes with rock'n'roll and marks a crucial moment of 'crossover'. From 1955 onward, the presence of African–American performers on the mainstream pop charts grows, so that by 1963 the trade magazine *Billboard* drops its separate (or, as many would say, segregated) black music chart. (That chart would be revived in 1965 in the wake of the British Invasion and the rise of soul music.)

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*Billboard* had ranked 'race' and then 'rhythm and blues' hits under their own headings since the 1940s, because the separate pop and rhythm and blues charts were understood to describe two racially distinct markets. The 1950s are marked by the entry of ever-increasing numbers of African–American-originated recordings onto the white pop charts, expanding a process that had actually begun earlier, with the successes of black swing bands in the 1930s, and of massively popular small combo performers, like Louis Jordan and Nat King Cole, in the 1940s.

It is important to stress here that it was primarily the institutional demand for new material and novelty sounds that drove these changes in the pop mainstream. To argue, as many historians have done, that white teenagers in the 1950s were free of their parents' racial biases, and therefore actively sought out African–American performers is clearly a retrospective attempt to politicise popular tastes that at the time were only nascently informed by ethical judgements about popular music. (In fact, these arguments actually tell us more about the politics of the period in which they begin to be put forth, the late 1960s.) It is equally important to recall that throughout the 1950s it is white appropriations and hybridisations of 'black' musical styles that sell the most records overall (and white performers of these styles who tend to have the longest careers, for example Elvis Presley).

Music that sounded quite like uptempo rock'n'roll could be found in the 1940s and earlier, but this music was not generally considered rock'n'roll, since it did not involve a specifically white, mainstream and teen audience. We can trace elements of a broadly conceived uptempo rock'n'roll style back to the urban blues styles of the 1930s, to styles associated with African–American musicians and audiences. Boogie-woogie pianists, and those small blues combos of the thirties that evolved into the jump blues bands of the 1940s, are the most obvious antecedents of an uptempo fifties rock'n'roll style. We should remember, though, that these were popular, commercially successful, and cosmopolitan styles. Like the big swing bands, they played a crucial – and often overlooked – role in cultivating popular taste for uptempo, 4/4 dance music, blues chord progressions, and riff-based melodies. The Western swing sound of the thirties and forties was likewise significant for its pre-rock'n'roll synthesis of country, jazz, and blues into a goodtime dance music for a predominantly white, rural audience. While the urban dance bands tended to foreground pianos and saxophones, it was their regional and country counterparts who emphasised the guitar. By the 1950s, white country and western performers playing a hybrid of Western swing and rhythm and blues called rockabilly were also crossing over from the separate 'country and western' chart to both the white pop and the rhythm and blues charts.

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This account of rock'n'roll's ancestry, however, ignores a major current within this history, one marked by slower, more ballad-oriented material. In fact, the first African–American rock'n'roll group to reach number one on the pop chart, the Platters, derived their style from older, mainstream black entertainers who 'crossed over' in the 1930s and forties, performers such as the Ink Spots and the Mills Brothers. It is significant that, after Elvis Presley, the Platters were probably the most successful rock'n'rollers of the 1950s. The Platters occasionally used elements of the uptempo style described above; more often, though, they worked within the mainstream musical traditions of Tin Pan Alley. Nevertheless, because of their teen, crossover audience, they were always considered rock'n'roll.

This is true as well of another key part of 1950s rock'n'roll, a vocal close harmony style called doo wop, which was probably named after the nonsense syllables in the Turbans' 1955 hit, 'When You Dance'. While the Platters came out of the world of professional showbusiness, doo wop performers tended to be groups of young, inexperienced men from the inner city, who practised a cappella, without instruments, and made a record or two before disappearing. Doo wop was the first rock'n'roll style to undergo a revival (in the early 1960s). More importantly, by the late 1960s doo wop could retrospectively be seen as having epitomised many of the key values of rock'n'roll: an innocence with respect to record industry machinations, the spontaneity of amateur performance, and a host of performers no older than their audiences. (Many doo woppers were in their teens, such as the aptly named Teenagers.) While these groups were not as explicitly rebellious as some of the uptempo rock'n'roll performers, the emotional thrill they produced was just as invigorating. Later, however, these groups would be ignored as attempts were made to define an 'essence' of rock'n'roll. This is largely because the Platters and most doo wop groups, though linked to youth culture and its institutions, worked with musical materials similar to those of the pre-rock'n'roll ballad styles that rock culture came to associate with adult easy listening. These sounds do not easily fit into the hard, masculinist aesthetic privileged in dominant accounts of rock as a musical style.

It should be clear by now that any attempt to isolate a definitive or core style of 1950s rock'n'roll is a highly problematic enterprise. It should also be noted that, during the 1950s, rock'n'roll was regularly viewed as just one in a series of passing dance crazes, giving way to the calypso and the twist. Teen culture had yet to acquire the prestige which would mark it in the 1960s, and even rock'n'roll performers themselves might have scoffed at the idea that they were doing anything more than entertaining their audiences. On the other hand, by the mid-1950s, adult popular music had become the most profitable segment of the music industry, and experienced a

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concomitant growth in the cultural esteem accorded it. Adult pop performers like Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald were increasingly received as serious artists, and the vehicle for their artistry was the high-profit, long-play album, where mature and sophisticated themes could be explored in depth. Likewise, while jazz and folk music were less popular, they received even greater respect, and had dedicated audiences of young adults and older listeners who bought albums and approached music as a significant artform rather than a disposable entertainment. Though rock'n'roll may be said to have given teenagers a voice as a social group, that voice was not explicitly raised in artistic debate or social protest at the time. Rock'n'roll, embodied in ephemeral 45s, was dismissed – and not without reason – as a fad and a novelty by those who took music seriously.

## The in-between years and the British Invasion

Following the rock'n'roll era of *c.* 1955–8, but immediately prior to the full flowering of rock in the mid-1960s, there are two important historical moments within what was then called 'teen music'. These moments are of interest in part because of the perspective from which future rock historians would make sense of them. One such moment was 'the in-between years', 1959–63; the other was the British Invasion, *c.* 1964–5. According to many rock historians, rock'n'roll suffered a near-death experience around 1959: Elvis had been drafted, Chuck Berry was on his way to prison, Little Richard had retired, and Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper, and Ritchie Valens had died in a plane crash. Thus the golden age was over, and until the Beatles arrived in the United States to revive the lost spirit of rock'n'roll in 1964, the teen music of the in-between years reverted, it is said, to the bland conformity which had marked it prior to the emergence of rock'n'roll. As is often the case, rock culture, in offering an understanding of its own history, selected certain performers and ignored others in order to suggest that popular taste, during the in-between years, was not what it should have been. As a result, teen idols like Fabian, Frankie Avalon, and Bobby Vee were made to stand for what was, in fact, a rich and complex period in popular music history. Dismissing the music of the in-between years as a formulaic, shallow, and insignificant interregnum between Elvis and the Beatles allowed the arrival of the British beat bands in 1964 to be seen as a heroic overthrowing of the establishment – like rock'n'roll itself, another radical break with the past. This view reinforced the sense of rock as a revolutionary rupture, by discouraging evolutionary accounts of the movement from rock'n'roll into rock (even as it implied a mythical continuity between the two): Elvis started the fire, the in-between years almost

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put it out, but the Beatles saved the day, coming out of left field and showing the United States how it should be done.

The music and culture of the in-between years were incredibly important, and may be viewed as a laboratory of sorts in which different elements of what would later become rock culture took shape. The years 1959–63 saw a great deal of experimentation in the recording studio, with producers like Phil Spector, Berry Gordy, and Brian Wilson using available technologies to create exciting new sounds that could only exist on tape. Rhythm and blues musicians developed new arrangements and rhythms that would nourish the creation of soul and funk. These were the years of the Twist, a dance rhythm that widened teen music's appeal to an older audience but, more importantly, hurried the transition from the swung or shuffled rhythms of rock'n'roll to the straight eighth-note rhythm of much rock music. The rise of instrumental and surf bands contributed to the development of an amateur language for the electric guitar. Folk music experienced a phenomenal rise in popularity during this period, and, as we shall see, contributed greatly to the rise of rock. The in-between years also saw increased representation of African–American and female performers in the mainstream. The desegregation of the charts accelerated, as Sam Cooke and Chubby Checker became mainstream superstars. Unlike the rock'n'roll era, which had virtually no female stars, the in-between years were characterised by highly successful women performers, with exciting and energetic 'girl groups' like the Shirelles and the Crystals, and immensely popular solo artists like Brenda Lee and Connie Francis dominating the charts. Women such as Brill Building songwriters Carole King and Cynthia Weil and record label owner Florence Greenberg also become important industry insiders during this time.

With the arrival of the Beatles in the United States and the start of the British invasion in 1964, female and African–American performers experienced massive career setbacks, as white, male British bands like the Dave Clark Five, the Animals, and the Rolling Stones reduced the presence of girl groups and rhythm and blues singers on the charts. There is no conspiracy here, but it is significant that rock culture celebrates two highly male-dominated periods (fifties rock'n'roll, British Invasion) as its foundational moments. An important part of rock's taste war against the mass mainstream is conducted in gendered terms, so that 'soft', 'sentimental', or 'pretty' become synonyms for insignificance, terms of dismissal, while 'hard', 'tough', or 'muscular' become descriptions of high praise for popular music. Even the increasing acceptance of the term 'rock' rather than 'rock-'n'roll' in the mid-1960s is tied to this opposition; by excising the trivial ''n' roll', and proudly holding up the naturally hard 'rock', rock culture could express its seriousness and its maturity in implicitly masculine language.

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The British Invasion is seen to mark a turning point in the movement toward rock culture for a number of reasons. Because the impact of United Kingdom performers on the US charts prior to 1964 had been negligible, the British Invasion was taken to represent a sudden shift in United States popular taste. However, the sound of the British beat bands was not radically different from that of US groups like the Beach Boys, and, of course, many US bands flourished alongside those of the British Invasion. Explanations, in magazines and interviews, of what was special about the British bands provide important clues toward understanding their role in the emergence of rock. There is a recurring sense that the Invasion bands represented a revivalist sensibility, that they were re-presenting a lost musical spirit with a new twist and a new seriousness previously foreign to the Top 40. The fact that the Beatles' recordings of fifties rock'n'roll, rhythm and blues and Motown songs were seen as homages, rather than commercially motivated covers, is evidence of the fact that the tastes of the musicians themselves begin to be taken seriously as signs of artistic ambition. Even more significantly, bands that had begun as part of an early sixties United Kingdom revival of United States blues, such as the Rolling Stones and the Animals, appear almost messianic in their desire to convert mass taste, with their connoisseurist appreciations of overlooked, non-mainstream, African–American musicians.

The British invasion occurred at a moment when a number of trends that had been developing over the previous few years had begun to bear fruit, and it may be the very punctual quality of the British invasion – its clearcut location in time – that has lead to an oversimplified sense of cause and effect in popular memory. For example, teen LP sales, which had hitherto been negligible, began to rise just before the British Invasion, and really took off in 1964. The LP was at this time considered the serious medium for 'respectable' music (whether adult pop, jazz, folk, or 'classical' music), and the emergence of rock is crucially tied to the rise of the non-adult album market. By 1967, 'teen' albums would overtake sales of adult albums on the *Billboard* charts for the first time, marking a milestone in the establishment of rock culture. Rock's commercial success (LPs are more profitable than singles) and its artistic legitimacy (albums can be serious 'statements', unlike ephemeral novelty singles) thus developed hand in hand. Folk music (and its LP culture) had been building in popularity for several years prior to the arrival of the British bands, but the folk performer Bob Dylan (who had been releasing albums since 1961) entered into mainstream stardom as a performer only in the wake of the Invasion, further complicating accounts of musical change in the period.

The period between1964 and 1968 was characterised by unprecedented and rapid stylistic change for which the British bands are only partly responsible. In fact, it is the intense cross-fertilisation and exchange

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of ideas between British and American musicians that contributed to the sound of rock as it was being born. Just as black and white musicians in the United States had been in constant creative dialogue for over a century, now United States and United Kingdom sounds were interwoven as well. British skiffle (a kind of rhythmic acoustic folk music popular in the late fifties) was an adaptation of US folk-blues songs whose roots lay back in the British Isles and in Africa; the Merseybeat bands of the early sixties started out playing skiffle and then began re-working US rock'n'roll and rhythm and blues records in live performance settings to create the sound of the British Invasion; folk-rockers like the Byrds performed United States folk songs with British invasion rhythms and arrangements; Bob Dylan's move from acoustic to electric accompaniment, from folk to rock, was in part influenced by the Beatles' and Byrds' innovations; and the middle-period Beatles were heavily influenced by Dylan and the folk-rock sound (listen to 'You've Got to Hide Your Love Away' to hear John Lennon imitate Dylan). Similar transactions were occurring on the blues revival side of the equation, with Chicago-style electric blues being re-imagined as a proto-hard rock by the Rolling Stones and then Cream in the United Kingdom, and by the Blues Project and Paul Butterfield in the United States.

Rock emerged out of the overlapping of several musical cultures, none of which on its own would be considered rock: a teen, Top 40 pop world, no longer rock'n'roll but not yet rock, that was invested in Brill Building professional songwriting, studio production, new sounds and dance rhythms; surf and garage bands in suburbias everywhere; a variety of African–American musical cultures, especially Chicago electric blues and gospel-influenced soul sounds; 'trad jazz', skiffle, folk and blues revivalists in the United Kingdom, and a complex US folk music culture, which included Anglo-Celtic folk, country and blues revivalists, bohemian protest singers and best-selling pop-folkies. Rock did not draw simply on the sounds, styles and techniques of these musical cultures. Perhaps more importantly, rock adopted and adapted aspects of their worldviews, their aesthetic and political sensibilities, and their varied approaches to relations between music, musicians and listeners in a mass mediated, commodity-driven, corporate society. Out of the teen Top 40 came an investment in rapid stylistic turnover, in the exploration of novel sound textures through the technology of the recording studio and a belief that the charts could function as a meritocracy, with the best songs and performers reaching the biggest audiences; from suburban surf and garage bands came an appreciation for passion and spontaneity over technical ability and a musical celebration of primitive aggression; soul music and Chicago electric blues offered performed autobiography as a pinnacle of musical authenticity and provided the technical skills for signifying

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hard-won truths through vocal and guitar sounds; and, as we shall see in some detail below, the various folk music cultures and their elaborated conceptions of authenticity presented perhaps the richest and most fully articulated source of ideology for what would become rock culture. And it is to the origins and tenets of rock ideology that we now turn.

## Folk versus mass society in the USA

While many different musical cultures contributed to the formation of rock, the culture of 'folk' expressed so many ideas that would become central to rock, and in so explicit a fashion, that we must examine this culture more closely. The backdrop against which folk (and ultimately rock) developed in the United States was often called 'mass society'. (Because of post-war austerity, issues around mass society emerge somewhat later and in modified form in the United Kingdom.) This is a term that simultaneously described and critiqued a range of social and cultural developments. Rapid rates of urbanisation and industrialisation were felt to have resulted in a loss of community, tradition and meaning in the lives of ordinary people. More and more of the population in the industrialised West were living anonymous lives in large cities, working at routinised jobs in factories and offices, and seeking escape in the mass-produced fantasies of the culture industries. Massive corporations, institutions and bureaucracies could now affect individual lives to an unprecedented extent. The scale of society had grown so huge that the historical foundations of social interaction were believed to be shifting. As everyday life became increasingly distanced from its traditional, community-based roots, as experiences were more and more mediated or corrupted by technology and commerce, individuals were thought to be becoming more conformist, more susceptible to manipulation, more alienated.

Increasingly, the 'mass' was seen to overwhelm the 'individual' and the 'mass media' were often blamed for a perceived homogenisation and debasement of modern culture. While 'mass society' offered an important critique of the upheavals of industrial capitalism, this was, strictly speaking, neither a populist nor radical perspective. It could equally serve to fuel elitist dismissals of the majority of the population as a kind of ignorant, inhuman and indistinct clay, a shapeless 'mass' that was being moulded and brainwashed by advertising and amusements. From an elitist perspective, the mass culture of comic books, movies and popular music was simultaneously cause and symptom of mass society's failure. This aspect of the critique co-existed with its more progressive side; ultimately 'mass society' articulated a growing anxiety about the unbridled growth of distant, commercial-bureaucratic interests over those of individuals and

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communities. 'Mass society' signalled the sense of alienation that increasingly accompanied modern, industrialised, urban life.

It is significant that this critical view of mass society was not the exclusive property of marginal folk musicians, nor of an emerging rock culture. It was widely disseminated by influential intellectuals and novelists at the centre of society, and found expression in the 1950s in popular anxieties around 'conformity', 'the rat race' and 'suburbia' in the United States. While these problems have little to do with youth or with rock music, by the 1970s this perspective could be seen to have found its fullest expression in rock music and rock culture. To trace the process by which an emerging rock culture was nourished by the critique of mass society, we must look briefly at the role played by folk music in refashioning many of the elements of this critique.

Folk culture emerged in reaction to the developments of mass society. Folk defined itself in its rejection of mass society and mass culture. It viewed what I am calling the 'mass mainstream' (the Hit Parade of the Top 40 and established commercial popular music) as an enemy emblematic of all that was wrong with modern life: soulless songs and suspect success, manufactured teen idols and manipulated masses. Folk culture saw itself as the serious alternative to the mass mainstream. It was serious because it intertwined social and aesthetic concerns, bringing them together in the folk concept of authenticity. The development of that concept within rock culture will be discussed below. At this point it is important to note that folk authenticity refers to musical experiences that are valued as unalienated and uncorrupted, 'anti-mass' pleasures which were perceived to be musically pure, genuine and organically connected to the community that produced them. By emphasising roots, tradition, the communal and the rural ('folk' was sometimes used as a synonym for what we would now call 'country' music), folk pursued musical authenticity as a bulwark against the alienation of mass society.

The folk music culture that influenced the emergence of rock was, in fact, a folk revival that had been gaining wider interest throughout the 1950s. It attracted educated, urban people who rejected mainstream, mass-produced music as artificial and trivial. In its place, they sought out the musically 'authentic', marginal musical traditions that were associated with rural, pre-industrial and communal music-making, both white and black. Thus they embraced acoustic instruments, orally transmitted songs and vernacular modes of performance. By reviving older styles and songs, folk culture presented an implicit critique of contemporary music. Its emphasis on the blues (in its older and agrarian forms) meant that folk was also a crucial conduit through which African–American musical culture and ideology reached the white middle class.

Folk culture was complex and stratified, and an important wing was

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more explicitly concerned with music as an engine of social change, embracing folk as a 'people's music'. Protest singers began with traditional styles and songs, adapting lyrics to address contemporary issues. By the early 1960s, however, a great deal of new material in a folk style was being written that presented a polemical view of mass society. Both the explicit polemic of the folk protest singer and the implicit critique of mainstream music by revivalists and college-based pop-folk stars like the Kingston Trio helped shape rock culture's own developing polemic against the mass mainstream.

Since rock emerges in the overlapping of a number musical cultures, however, rock does not simply adopt folk ideology wholesale. Rather, because of crucial differences in the age profiles of their respective audiences and due to diverging attitudes toward success and popularity, rock adapts key aspects of folk ideology to rock's unique situation. Folk culture saw itself as distinct from popular music and was wary of folk performers who crossed over from folk's self-segregated world into the mainstream. The folk polemic had used the issue of authenticity to police the boundaries of folk music against the mainstream of popular music. (Bob Dylan's shift from 'authentic' acoustic instruments to the allegedly 'alienated' and 'artificial' technology of electric guitars *c.* 1965 was seen by the folk community as a betrayal and a sell-out, a move away from folk and into the mass mainstream.) As well, folk culture was marked by a high degree of inter-generational involvement and included college students, middle-aged bohemians and respected older musicians like Woody Guthrie and Mississippi John Hurt.

Conversely, rock was born *within* the popular mainstream as an *exclusively* youth-oriented music. These differences crucially affected the way rock culture played out its folk-influenced world view, because they allowed rock to emerge in the simultaneous embrace of anti-mass ideology *and* mass commercial success. Raised on Top 40 and unafraid of popular success for select, *authentic* rock performers, the newborn rock culture featured a massive youth audience which saw itself, nonetheless, as opposed to the mass mainstream and all that stood for. This apparent contradiction was fostered by the unique situation of youth in the 1960s.

## Youth

From *c.* 1964–5 on, rock's internal diversity of sound and attitude cohered around the category of 'youth', a more complex term than 'teen'. 'Youth' was not simply a stage of life, although of course the new massive youth population empowered rock's intertwined claims to cultural and marketplace

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legitimacy. By around 1967, rock had incorporated much of the 25-and-under college audience who, traditionally, had been folk fans. But 'youth' was also an idea and an ideal, and it was during this period that an important cultural shift in the relative valorisation of 'adulthood' and 'youth' was consolidated. Rather than striving for adulthood and its traditional privileges, the desire to stay 'young' for a longer period had become more and more widespread. Rock provided a signal means of affiliating with 'youth'.

Rock culture seemed to have emerged most obviously from the 'teen' side of the adult/teen split institutionalised in the 1950s, and this had important implications for rock's attitude toward success and popularity. The 'teen' was critically shaped by the sensibilities of the Top 40 and the Hit Parade, which did not necessarily consist of one uniform sound or style. Rather, Top 40 could bring together a variety of music, which often shared only the 'fact' of popularity. Rock's stylistic eclecticism and its strong belief that the best music not only had the potential to find a mass audience, but, in fact, *ought* to reach that audience, developed out of this teen Top 40 mentality, and were further amplified by the baby boom's extended buying power. Folk culture, drawing on romanticised – and even invented – agrarian traditions, had often preached populism while practising elitism, suspicious of truly popular taste. Rock's pop-derived 'populism', on the other hand, was born on the terrain of the popular. The continuing sense that sales charts are important indices of the state of rock is a legacy of pre-rock, teen music culture.

So rock retained a symbolic empathy for the 'teen', even as it clandestinely modelled its artistic ambitions on important elements of the 'adult' popular music culture of the 1950s. This is most evident in the way rock stakes its claims to seriousness on the historically 'adult' musical institutions of the album (especially 'theme' or 'concept' albums) and the extended career, rather than on the 45 rpm record and one-hit wonder typical of teen music. (The emphasis, in indie and alternative culture of the 1980s and 1990s, on the independent label 45 was in this regard a contrarian move away from the old rock orthodoxy, even as the rock investment in an ongoing artistic career was maintained.) Like the term 'rock'n'roll', 'teen' wasn't a sufficiently serious label to carry the new weight of 'rock' culture's ambitions. 'Youth' signalled this new seriousness, a maturity that was nonetheless not adult. Like rock, 'youth' exists in tension with both the teen and the adult. Rock culture thus rejected adult easy listening, along with music that was seen as too 'teenage' (such as that of the Monkees).

Teens and youth were not associated with the power and authority of the adult cohort that dominated social institutions. 'Youth' was most

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crucially defined in opposition to the 'adult', the symbolic representative of mass society. From the 1950s into the 1960s, adult-oriented popular music had dominated films, television, advertising and most importantly, record sales. Adult-oriented LPs (including adult pop, jazz, classical, and folk) accounted for over 60 per cent of dollar sales in the United States in the 1950s, while less than 40 per cent was spent on teen singles. Economically, as well as culturally, the dominant force in popular music was 'adult' music. The economic dominance of adults, like their social power more generally, made it easy for 'adult-ness' to be conflated with the characteristics of mass society in the perspective of an emerging youth culture. Anxieties about mass society's alienation were thus effectively displaced into the category of the 'adult'. If 'youth' was opposed to the 'adult', and the 'adult' was responsible for 'mass society', then 'youth' could understand itself as inherently 'anti-mass', regardless of how many million rock records were sold. Re-reading the 'teen/adult' opposition of 1950s music in terms of a folk-derived – but now youth-articulated – polemic, the 'youth' and the 'adult' became 'two cultures', locked in a taste war that would last long after rock had taken over adult music's position as the dominant segment of the mainstream, and long after the baby boom had left its biological youth behind.

This oppositional conception of 'youth' drew, as well, on a longstanding association of youth with purity and innocence. This link was implicit in the mass society critique, and may be traced to one key influence on that critique: the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the 1960s, the Hippies, who actually sought to live out rock's Romantic critique of 'straight' society by 'dropping out', signalled their investment in the ideal of 'youth' by calling themselves 'flower children' (even though they tended to be older adolescents and young adults). Hippies embraced an idea of themselves as metaphorical children, and this privileging of a symbolic childhood (e.g. the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*) became an ongoing feature of rock culture, seen subsequently in the alternative rock community's celebration of the deliberately 'amateur', 'naïve' or 'twee', from Jonathan Richman to Shonen Knife. Stereolab's claim that 'childhood is more authentic' stems from the belief that it is the ultimate realm of innocence and freedom, set apart from the corruption and alienation of the adult world. But this Romantic conception of childhood is, of course, not unique to rock, and it is significant that childhood is privileged more generally by the white middle-class that spawned so much of rock culture. This is further evidence of rock's ongoing reproduction, even in its apparent rebellion, of many of the core values of rock's reviled parent culture.

This emblematic embrace of the child as an extreme 'anti-adult' foregrounds the sense of social subordination and powerlessness associated

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with the category of youth. As we have seen, the 'adult' served as the repository for all the ills of mass society. Youth could thus see themselves as outsiders, an 'anti-mass' social subgroup with almost subcultural connotations. This sense of difference, of 'otherness', allowed youth to imagine affinities with the cultures of disempowered minorities. Thus, millions of white, middle-class rock fans could appropriate a range of forms of difference, whether these be racial, sexual, class-based or other. This underpins rock culture's continuing fascination with and appropriation of all kinds of marginality and otherness. Whether 'black' music, androgynous style, or working-class rebellion, rock processes each as a surface sign of distinctive difference, to be grafted onto the mass marginality of youth. This is also why so many rock historians have misinterpreted white youth tastes for African–American music, for example, as overt 'political' statements. Instead, white youth tends to adopt this music as a sign of youth's own, privileged difference, expressing above all else their refusal of the mass mainstream.

Rock's constitutive paradox – that it is a massively popular anti-mass music – was fuelled by a demographic anomaly. By the mid-1960s, the segment of the United States and Canadian populations that was aged twenty-five or younger had risen dramatically, approaching nearly 50 per cent of the total population. This meant that a group that had historically been socially marginalised – youth – now possessed an unprecedented social visibility and economic force. Youth formed an economically significant mass market, not only as a result of their numbers, but because this cohort experienced a rapid increase in disposable income in the post-war years. Youth's income tended to be spent almost entirely on leisure. More than any other cultural industry, the music industry was able to offer products that appeared tailor-made for young consumers. This combination of social marginalisation on the one hand, and newly magnified purchasing power (and thereby cultural presence) on the other, contributed to the development of rock's peculiar cultural politics. These contrasting aspects of 'youth' allowed rock simultaneously to revere on a mass scale those phenomena which were perceived as 'anti-mass' – to criticise some performers as sell-outs even as respected rock stars sold in the millions – and to conceive of itself as an underground cult even as rock became the dominant force within the music industry by the 1970s.

## Stratification

Rock mythology asserts a creation story whose primal scene is beyond the mainstream: the illicit coupling of marginalised blues and country traditions spawns a bastard wild child, who, after a fleeting, authentic

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childhood, is captured, co-opted, and corrupted by the music industry. Rock, originating organically outside of mass culture, is thus tamed in the process of its mass distribution (called 'commercialisation'). While this myth tells us a great deal about the structuring principles of rock ideology, it ignores the absolutely central role of an affluent, mass-mediated youth culture in rock's birth in the mid-1960s. The career trajectory of the Beatles, from best-selling teen idols to best-selling rock artists in the space of three years, is emblematic of rock's birth and growth on the terrain of the truly popular. *Circa* 1963–4, the Beatles are not oppositional poet-visionaries, but just a phenomenally successful teen pop group. Still selling millions of records, with a growing percentage of these in album form, the Beatles, by 1967, have come to represent a new stratum of the popular mainstream that is taken to be the very opposite of disposable pop. The Beatles have become serious and significant artists critiquing and contesting the dominant values of Anglo-American society. This contestatory cultural current is carried, nonetheless, by millions of televisions, radios and phonographs, promulgated by mass market magazines, newspapers and cinemas.

The massive youth demographic of the 1960s allowed rock to be born within the mainstream of popular music and, at the same time, to organise itself around an oppositional stance toward mass culture. Arguably the first 'oppositional' form of popular culture to be born within the mainstream, rock grew up and flourished there as well. This is a key element in what makes rock historically and culturally distinctive. Jazz had moved from being a music of marginalised African–Americans, into the mass mainstream with swing, and then out of that mainstream as it became an 'art' music, seeking the deliberate marginality of a more select audience in the 1940s. Folk music struggled against moving into the mainstream, cherishing its relative marginality despite the popular success of a handful of folk songs and performers in the 1950s. While jazz's crossover to a mainstream audience was initially seen as elevating the music, folk's forays into the mainstream were almost always seen to lower that music's cultural prestige.

Unlike jazz and folk, however, rock's history cannot be understood in terms of processes of crossover. At the outset, there is no 'elsewhere' from whence rock is taken and then 'mainstreamed', no 'outside' or place apart from the mainstream that might serve as rock's birthplace. For all of rock's appropriation, modification, or outright theft of African–American, agrarian, or working-class musical cultures, it is not itself a form of crossover, nor a subculture incorporated by the dominant culture, nor a counterculture (the term most associated with rock politics in the 1960s). Rock may wear subcultural clothes, identify with marginalised minorities,

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promote countercultural political positions, and upset genteel notions of propriety, but from its inception it has been a large-scale, industrially organised, mass-mediated, mainstream phenomenon operating at the very centre of society.

As rock developed over time, it would eventually spawn styles and genres that moved away from mainstream rock and become part of true subcultures, such as hardcore punk or death metal in the 1980s. Elements of these subcultures might subsequently be incorporated into the mainstream, revitalising rock with their subcultural credibility and cachet (the case of grunge is exemplary here). However, these rock-spawned subcultures contribute to a process of internal stratification that rock experiences only *after* it has begun to dominate the mainstream (this internal stratification will be addressed further below). At its very birth, rock is already a component of that mainstream.

The persistent belief that rock somehow emerges outside the mainstream, prior to the involvement of the record industry, mass media, or large audiences, expresses a widespread feeling that, despite its success, rock remains magically untainted by 'the mass'. Rock's mythical, originating 'elsewhere' is neither a time nor a place, though. Instead, it designates the distinctive identity rock carves out of the centre of mass culture. In celebrating authentic individualism via electronic mass media, rock seeks to produce a virtual cultural space outside of consumer capitalism – a space that is, ironically, up for sale. Rock proffers musical shelter from the complexities and contradictions of capitalism and consumerism by conceiving of itself as a 'special case' of mass consumption. Seriousness and self-consciousness serve to distinguish the rock listener's participation in consumer culture from that of the trivialised and unaware 'masses'. This parsing of musical consumption into 'good' and 'bad' spheres is initially manifested as the division of the popular mainstream into 'rock' and 'pop'.

Rock adapted elements of folk's polemic against mass society, and deployed them within (rather than against) the mainstream. The new rock polemic resulted in a stratification of the mainstream, effectively cleaving popular music into two opposing spheres that came to be known as 'rock' versus 'pop'. (In the United Kingdom, the term 'pop' never underwent the sustained critique it did in the United States and Canada, and thus refers in a more neutral fashion to the wider field of popular music.) From the perspective of rock culture, its own sphere consisted of superior, authentic music while the pop sphere contained inferior, alienated music. The significance of this division of the mainstream is that while some previous musical cultures had also sought to distinguish their music from a corrupted mass music, they did so most effectively by segregating themselves from the mainstream, limiting the size of their audiences, and/or moving

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away from the marketplace entirely. In erecting a new hierarchy on the terrain of the popular, rock broke the pejorative association of mass consumption with degraded and debased art, and abandoned an isolationist struggle against the market system (claiming, in some cases, that it would transform the system from within). However, rock culture retained – and indeed, amplified – many of the core concerns of the mass society critique, most notably its preoccupation with questions of mediation and alienation, authenticity and community, conformity and complicity. Most importantly, perhaps, it maintained the critique's overarching emphasis on distinctive individualism as the key defence against the alienation of mass society.

Thus rock emerges in a stratification that is accomplished through the making of distinctions, within the mainstream, between the 'serious' and the 'trivial', the 'oppositional' and the 'complicit', the 'truthful' and the 'fraudulent', the 'anti-mass' and the 'mass', the 'authentic' and the 'alienated'. The second term of each of these oppositions describes qualities rock ascribes to 'pop'. Like rock itself, pop is not a musical style but a sphere of popular musical culture. From the rock perspective, pop is defined by its obliviousness to the broader social implications of musical production and consumption. 'Pop', of course, is that area of popular music said to be marked by ethical compromise and capitulation. 'Pop' operates as a catch-all category, into which rock dumps adult easy listening, bubblegum teenybop, and sell-outs, frauds and musical trifles more generally. Pop is understood as popular music that isn't (or doesn't have to be, or can't possibly be) 'taken seriously'. Rock, in contrast, is mainstream music that is (or ought to be, or must be) taken seriously.

First-generation rock bands like the Beatles or Rolling Stones were able to move out of teen pop and into youth rock because of their attendance at the birth of rock. With the consolidation of the rock polemic with the expansion of rock magazines and critics in the 1970s, the only movement between the rock and pop spheres will typically be one-way. From the viewpoint of rock, that direction is 'downward' (e.g. Rod Stewart's fall from rock grace to pop pathos). The infrequency with which trivialised pop performers succeed in becoming serious rock artists (e.g. John Cougar becoming John Mellencamp; teen dance queen Alanis becoming Alanis Morisette) proves the rock rule that it's easy to sell out but hard to regain rock respectability.

Rock's displacement of the 'bad' – the negative and corrupt features of mass society – into pop serves to shore up rock's apparent authenticity and autonomy. However, it also obscures rock's own status as mass-mediated, commodity culture. It is interesting that while rock regularly chastises pop for its over-commodification of musical culture (Backstreet Boys lunch-

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boxes, anyone?), rock is less concerned with its own forms of consumption, focusing instead on the conditions of aesthetic and industrial production within rock. (Rock consumers are scrutinised less frequently – and less critically – than are rock musicians and record companies.) Mass commodity *consumption* no longer seems incompatible with rock because rock's critique of the alienation and complicity implicit in that consumption is reworked as a critique of the means of musical *production*.

For example, indie rock's valorisation of non-major label productions, and of the act of purchasing music directly from bands themselves at gigs, misses the fact that indie and mainstream musical consumption are both part of consumer capitalism, different only in the degree of their complicity. Indie rock is defined by its concern for the scale of consumer capitalism, rather than by its radical rejection of an economic system. This concern with reduced scale may also be glimpsed in indie culture's investment in the miniature: in boutique record stores, 45 rpm singles, small runs of home-made cassettes, or the reverent recreation of miniature models of past eras or albums.

To single out seriousness as an overweening value driving so much of rock culture is to challenge the conventional account of rock as a radical and rebellious force actively opposing the dominant values of society. What is truly at stake in rock culture is the differentiation of taste, not an affiliation with forms of cultural action. In simultaneously highlighting, harmonising and hiding the contradictions of consumer capitalism, rock does not in fact contest the system. Instead, rock's oppositionality operates in the service of a different agenda. Rock draws its lifeblood from the systematic stratifications of capitalist consumer society, and it is rock's investment in the idea of seriousness that endows it with oppositionality, rather than the reverse. Seriousness is the key concept here, because rock's distinctiveness from mass pop can be manifested in explicitly non-oppositional ways (for example, the classical ambitions of progressive rock, or the use of innocuous, 'retro' sounds – particularly bygone, mainstream pop styles – by innumerable avant-garde bands, or by U2 launching their 'PopMart' tour in a K-Mart department store). More crucial than overt oppositionality, seriousness is the defining feature of rock, which must always be seen to be engaging with something 'more' than just pleasure or fun. Rebellion, in this sense, is simply the most spectacular 'something more'. Even those bands like the Ramones, who celebrate mindless fun, do so by rebuking pompous and pretentious elements of the dominant rock culture; they distinguish themselves and their fans – who are all 'in' on the critique of 'bad' rock – through an actually quite 'mindful' attitude toward what they see as the mistakes or excesses or trivialities of 'bad', mainstream rock.

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('Mindless fun', in this case, is self-consciously elevated into a kind of critical philosophy.)

We should recall that the mass society critique is neither purely radical, purely elitist, nor purely populist. It combines elements of all these, but 'individualism', in one form or another, runs through its various manifestations. The critique can fit easily into the everyday ways in which people cling to their tastes and employ them to differentiate themselves from others. The folk polemic was adopted and used by rock culture, not because of an innate opposition to – or even dissatisfaction with – mass society. (Indeed, one could argue that teenagers in the 1950s and 1960s were the greatest beneficiaries of that society.) Instead, the folk polemic offered a means of distinguishing one segment of the youth audience, with its different, serious attitude toward popular music, from a segment which lacked this attitude. The critique of mass society, central to the folk polemic, was reduced to a critique of mass pop.

In the post-war period, large numbers of teens who grew up in a commodity-saturated world wished to stay intensely involved with the pleasures of commercial popular music well beyond their teen years. Having acquired, via media, marketing and demographic forces, a sense of their own special, distinct identity as a kind of vanguard of modernity, post-war youth had become increasingly wary of the traditional ways in which musical tastes were meant to change with age. Typically, 'maturity' had meant a shift to 'adult' popular music (or classical music, or jazz), and away from those sorts of music which were now, with ageing, meant to seem trivial. Rock culture managed to adopt the dominant culture's value system (with its claims that the serious was better than the trivial), but to find the serious within the realm of mass-produced popular music. To find it there meant that one could continue listening to rock music, and buying it in its various commodity forms, throughout the ageing process, throughout those years in which tastes were to 'mature'.

To take popular music seriously, as something 'more' than mere entertainment or disposable distraction, also meant rejecting those ways of experiencing popular music that cast it as functional – as designed *for* dancing, *for* romancing, or *for* relaxation. In removing musical experience from the realm of trivial or functional diversion, rock listeners were able to engage self-consciously with music as the mark of a distinctive seriousness. They distanced themselves from those fans who didn't take music seriously, setting their own true individualism above and apart from the 'mass'. Rock became the name for this serious stratum of popular music's mainstream. At the same time, authenticity emerged as the over-arching value that brought a unity to rock's various notions of seriousness.

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## Authenticity

Authenticity can be thought of as the compass that orients rock culture in its navigation of the mainstream. Rock fans, critics and musicians are constantly evaluating the authenticity of popular music, on the lookout for signs of alienation and inauthenticity (including, for example, over-commercialisation, insincerity, manipulation, lack of originality and so on). This preoccupation with 'authenticity' helps rock culture constantly to draw lines of division within the mainstream of popular music – lines which divide rock from pop, and, even within rock culture, divide some versions of rock from others.

'Authentic' designates those music, musicians, and musical experiences seen to be direct and honest, uncorrupted by commerce, trendiness, derivativeness, a lack of inspiration and so on. 'Authentic' is a term affixed to music which offers sincere expressions of genuine feeling, original creativity, or an organic sense of community. Authenticity is not something 'in' the music, though it is frequently experienced as such, believed to be actually audible, and taken to have a material form. Rather, authenticity is a value, a quality we ascribe to perceived relationships between music, socio-industrial practices, and listeners or audiences. Thus, what we feel to be 'really rock' might be 'authentic rock' for us, but not necessarily for everybody, nor for all time. What we might have felt was authentic in our early teens we may now reject as inauthentic; conversely, music we may have deemed 'inauthentic' at the time, (e.g. Kiss, disco, Abba, old-school rap) may now, in retrospect, feel truly authentic. Authenticity is a complex phenomenon, and involves more than personal preferences. It requires a sense of music's external contexts, and a judgement of the 'objective' effect on music of such factors as record company marketing strategies, music-making technologies, or the ongoing history of music's broader stylistic changes.

Much writing on post-war youth music gives the mistaken impression that authenticity is somehow the exclusive property of rock. While notions of authenticity are absolutely central to any account of rock culture, the concept of authenticity has, in fact, been a core value of Western society for centuries. By conspicuously embracing authenticity, rock aligns itself with longstanding and important currents in Western thought. Here, again, rock perpetuates many of the key traditions and values of its parent culture. Because authenticity is such a core cultural value, it generally provides the foundation on which rock's sense of its own seriousness has been built. Rock culture is preoccupied with seriousness, but is forever grappling with the ways in which 'seriousness' may carry negative connotations. Seriousness may be associated with elitist and superior attitudes, or

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with the exclusivity of 'highbrow', non-mass audiences. Seriousness may also be defined in purely formal terms, divorced from awareness of the social and industrial circumstances under which musical experiences are produced. None of these definitions of 'seriousness' has ever been central to rock culture.

Rock culture asserts its superiority over the 'mass', and this is absolutely crucial to the role it assumes for itself within contemporary societies. However, rock's own mass audience prevents traditionally elitist criteria from holding sway in rock culture. For all of rock culture's polemical concern with rejecting the trivial aspects of mass culture, and with 'correcting' the mistakes of mass taste, rock nonetheless possesses an equally important populism (as in the ideal of the Top 40 as a potential meritocracy). Indeed, it is likely to see mass success as the birthright of those who deserve it. Rock culture embraces authentic success as a validation of artistic quality. For example, while some devout fans of obscure indie or alternative bands might deny their neglected heroes access to a wider audience, the majority would cheer their favourite little band onward and upward, recruiting new listeners, cursing the narrow-mindedness of MTV or BBC radio for ignoring such high-quality music, and then celebrating the band's eventual breakthrough as a kind of 'justice at last'. Though they might turn against the group if it seemed that either the new, mass audience liked them for the 'wrong' reasons (failing truly to appreciate the band as its initial connoisseurs had), or that the band itself appeared to change, losing touch with its core constituency through its pandering to the crowds of the 'big time', most rock fans would want at least some popular success for their favourite performers. Indeed, they would view that success as a vindication of their own, individual, superior taste. Sometimes the mass audience will get it right, sometimes not, but rock culture, having broken the connection between mass popularity and 'bad' music, nonetheless patrols popularity for inauthentic and therefore undeserved success.

Authenticity operates as a criterion of judgement in rock's evaluations of music and musicians. It is a value that coordinates a whole series of calculations of cultural worth, and its foundation is an insistence upon the integrity of the individual self. By focusing most obviously on authenticity as its central value, rock culture can link its emphasis on 'taking popular music seriously' to the dilemma of being an individual in mass society. Rather than simply aping the seriousness of a 'highbrow' culture which might disdain the social dimensions of art, the rock fan's knowledge of the social and industrial contexts of popular musical production, distribution and consumption, together with a self-consciousness about individual musical choices, highlight a commitment to integrating artistic and social criteria in the evaluation of popular music. This means that an ethical

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dimension is perceived in aesthetic experience, so that 'good' rock music must also be somehow 'just' or 'true'. 'Authenticity' captures this intertwining of judgements. This is, in large part, why the taste preference for rock music can be claimed as 'legitimate', as something 'more' than 'mere' entertainment. Again, rock taste defines itself through more than purely personal preferences or feelings. Authenticity can effectively structure public discussions of the status of popular music because much of the debate is conducted in implicitly ethical terms, organised around apparently 'objective' questions of material success, record industry strategies, and the political economy of mass media. By insisting on a kind of ethical accounting of popular music's involvement in commercial, mass culture, rock culture distinguishes itself from other, supposedly unselfconscious segments of the mainstream.

Through its concern with finding a true self in the midst of corruption and conformity, rock authenticity mingles aesthetic evaluation (is this music beautiful?) with ethical judgements about the degree of music's complicity with the alienating aspects of mass society (is this music compromised?). For example, the common dismissal of music that sounds 'machine-made' involves a complex claim about textual and industrial relations simultaneously. 'Machine-made' music may sound 'slick' or 'formulaic'; but this judgement of composition or arrangement practices is also linked to a concern with the industrial and technological conditions of production. Dismissing music as 'machine-made' equally signals a suspicion that the musical experience in question has been alienated, through the intervention of forces that are interpreted to be somehow anti-individualistic, and thereby inauthentic (synthesisers or samplers, studio musicians, assembly-line songwriting, multi-national record conglomerates, etc.).

Broadly speaking, alienation is the undesirable opposite of authenticity. Authentic musical experiences can serve as bulwarks against the fraudulent and alienating aspects of modern life. The alienation of music and musicians in the twentieth century has largely been understood in terms of mediation, of those things which interfere with an ideal of direct communication between artist and audience. Nevertheless, different segments of rock culture will define 'interference' in very dissimilar ways. For some, the 'machine-made' sounds of industrial music, for example, may actually be the mark of a certain authenticity, of an affinity with the harsh reality of a mechanised, machine-dominated life. A whole range of phenomena may interfere in the link of artist to audience: forms of technological mediation, the involvement of superfluous personnel or industrial procedures, monetary corruption of the performer's motives for performing, an over-investment in sounding 'up-to-date', the repetition of old ideas, or any

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number of forces which render musical expressions of the self compromised or distorted.

This concern with directness and an absence of mediation may be traced to the origins of the word 'authentic' in ancient Greece, where it referred to the 'self-made'. The 'self-made' can stand against the mass-produced, money-driven, anonymous and alienating aspects of modern life. In this context, rock's search for authenticity underlines a general anxiety about the status of the modern self. Musical experiences considered 'authentic' are thus those which highlight or nourish individual identity, or signal affinities with the smaller communities and subcultures which sustain that identity.

Rock culture's embracing of performers who author their own songs is one key instance of this concern with mediation. Like 'authenticity', the word 'author' is etymologically related to the 'self'. If the rock musician's 'self' is not involved in originating the text she or he performs, rock believes that self is more likely to be corrupted or alienated (and that, in turn, the listener's sense of self may be diminished). Rock is highly suspicious of those singers and musicians who are not also 'authors', involved in the composition of words and music. The singer–songwriter emerged as the ideal of authentic rock in the late 1960s, fostering a sense that the integration of authorship and performance was evidence of ethical integrity. While many popular music cultures are unbothered by a division of musical labour (in which songwriters write songs, arrangers arrange them, sidemen play them, and vocalists sing them), rock culture views it as a potentially distorting and corrupting form of mediation, one that may get in the way of the direct expression of authentic thoughts and feelings. Rock thus favours performers who overcome this division of labour and demonstrate an organic expressivity, through a unity of creation and communication, of origination and performance. In particular, the ideal of the rock band as a self-sufficient and self-contained unit encourages a sense of freedom from mediation, a feeling of autonomy (another word linked to 'self'). This 'self-direction' of the ideal rock band signifies an independence from external interference and control, and, therefore, a greater authenticity. Appearing to be free of any structured organisation of musical creation, the rock band may thus be seen to escape that alienation of musical labour and expression which an involvement in the cultural industries would otherwise imply. (Conversely, well-established rock bands who begin to rely increasingly on outside songwriters, such as Aerosmith, may experience a concomitant decline in their perceived authenticity.)

The recent emphasis on 'unplugged' or acoustic performances by otherwise electrified musicians is another gesture toward this critique of

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mediation. By removing *some* technology from the communication process, a feeling of directness and intimacy may be achieved (in fact, the Canadian MuchMusic video channel calls its 'unplugged' show – in which the audience may also request songs – *Intimate and Interactive*). However, these must be understood as *symbolic* 'unpluggings' and *virtual* intimacies, since without microphones, video cameras and massive electronic networks these acts of 'direct' communication would not occur. Similarly, the so-called 'lo-fi' movement of the 1990s is yet another symbolic refusal of electronic mediation. In using 'older' (e.g. non-digital) recording equipment (along with a kind of deliberate 'naïvete' in relation to writing and performing), lo-fi bands seek to escape the slick machinery of contemporary sound (re)production. Nevertheless, these bands don't refuse to use electronic recording equipment entirely; they merely scale down its efficiency and reduce its prominence, just as indie and alternative cultures generally underline a commitment to direct communication and authentic performance through their emphasis on the 'miniature' and the scaled-down.

These conceptions of authenticity, autonomy and authorship emerge out of two complementary but distinct historical movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Romanticism and Modernism. Both are crucial sources of the mass society critique, and major influences upon rock culture as well. Both Romanticism and Modernism challenged the emergence of industrial, urban capitalism, and both celebrated the author, artist, or musician as a privileged representative of an authentic, individual self. However, they did so in complex and somewhat different ways, and those differences have contributed to rock culture's own complex (and often divergent) formulations and expressions of authenticity.

Authenticity is central to both Romanticism and Modernism. A late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century social and artistic philosophy, Romanticism emerged in response to the social dislocations of the Industrial Revolution. Romantics valued traditional, rural communities, where life could be lived close to nature, and where people's labour was an integral part of their identity, rather than something to be sold for a paycheque. The Romantic artist was seen to be involved in a personal journey of self-discovery and fulfilment, through the direct expression of his or her innermost thoughts and emotions. Developing out of Romanticism in the mid-nineteenth century, Modernism extended and expanded the Romantic notion of the artist as society's conscience, but imagined the artist's political role to be more overtly contestatory. While Romanticism valued nature and the country as genteel escapes from urban blight, Modernism embraced the chaos of the city and the aesthetic possibilities

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of the machine. Where Romanticism believed in an organic, and even traditional, connection between the artist, the material means of expression and the audience, Modernism encouraged shock effects and radical experimentation, contending that the relationship between artistic materials and meanings was, like power relations in society, ultimately arbitrary and therefore open to change and improvement. Modernism believed that the true artist must break with the past, while Romanticism cherished the pre-industrial past. By rejecting the current state of things in favour of the new, the different and the radical, Modernism produced an implicit political critique of society as it was at that moment. This commitment to radical innovation and experiment is especially evident in the Modernist belief that the true artist must keep moving forward, constantly re-inventing him or herself.

While Romanticism locates authenticity principally in the direct communication between artist and audience, Modernism manifests its concern with authenticity more indirectly, at the aesthetic level, so that the authentic artist is one who is true to the Modernist credos of experimentation, innovation, development, change. Where Romantics see sincere, unmediated expression of inner experience as essential, Modernists believe their first commitment is less to reaching an audience than to being true to their own artistic integrity. This involves rejecting aesthetic complacency and, implicitly, complacency *vis-à-vis* the social world in which the artist lives. Both Romantics and Modernists are anxious to avoid corruption through involvement with commerce and oppose the alienation they see as rooted in industrial capitalism.

These brief characterisations of complex historical and philosophical movements can help us understand and categorise key tendencies and tensions internal to rock culture. Emerging as it does out of the confluence of a number of distinct musical cultures, rock culture is seldom univocal in its beliefs, agendas or practices. Rock's complex genealogy means that there are a number of fault lines running through the centre of rock, and these are perhaps most visible in the competing definitions of authenticity. While rock emerged in a division of the mainstream between rock and pop, it began subsequently to subdivide, stratifying internally into various camps and factions. Although all rock genres emphasise authenticity as their core value, not all understand and express authenticity in an identical fashion. In fact, we can identify two broad families of rock authenticity – what I will call Romantic authenticity and Modernist authenticity. For the purposes of illustration, it may be useful to group together *some* of the key expressions of these two sorts of rock authenticity, while keeping in mind that these are tendencies rather than absolutes:

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| *Romantic authenticity tends to be found more in* | *Modernist authenticity tends to be found more in* |
|---|---|
| tradition and continuity with the past | experimentation and progress |
| roots | avant gardes |
| sense of community | status of artist |
| populism | elitism |
| belief in a core or essential rock sound | openness regarding rock sounds |
| folk, blues, country, rock'n'roll styles | classical, art music, soul, pop styles |
| gradual stylistic change | radical or sudden stylistic change |
| sincerity, directness | irony, sarcasm, obliqueness |
| 'liveness' | 'recorded-ness' |
| 'natural' sounds | 'shocking' sounds |
| hiding musical technology | celebrating technology |

These tendencies serve simultaneously to position rock *against* the mass pop mainstream *and* to create and organise internal differences within rock culture. Many rock fans will reject those performers or genres who highlight Modernist authenticity as being somehow 'artificial', while other fans might dismiss Romantic rock as being simplistic or compromised by its populism. Rock's dual versions of authenticity may thus contribute to the formation of diverging scenes, communities, and taste cultures *within* rock. Even as there is a basic, underlying agreement between the various versions of rock that *some* form of authenticity is required to distinguish rock from the corruption of the mainstream, there may be polemical disagreement over what form it should take. Often these distinctions are deployed to divide cultural spaces that are otherwise homogeneous – say, a white, middle-class suburb – so that the minute details over which rock fans argue obsessively may become the only apparent source of individual differences.

We might suspect that fans of, say, Oasis and fans of Blur will both assert that their favourite band is truly authentic, yet each would see that authenticity as being demonstrated differently. Oasis might be valued because they assert a continuity with a Romantic rock tradition from the 1960s, because they emphasise live performance, direct expression, and a sense that they are populists, working-class punters little different from their fans. Blur might be valued because of their Modernist experimentation with various pop styles, because they foreground synthesisers and the recording studio, irony, and a sense that they are part of a rock elite, college-educated and more 'knowing' in their self-conscious playing with sounds and identities.

But, of course, Oasis use the recording studio as expertly as anyone, Blur 'rock out' with noisy, classic 1960s guitars, and both are basically part

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of the same, vaguely defined rock genre called 'Britpop'. Thus, even though identifying Romantic and Modernist tendencies can help us discern differences between performers or genres, they also can be and often are combined or mixed up in a single genre or performer.

This approach to rock authenticity can help clarify some of the apparent contradictions of rock culture. For example, in the 1970s, punk was seen as the antithesis of rock, a mortal enemy intent on destroying rock culture. But punk was simply fulfilling rock's traditional investment in differentiation and authenticity, distinguishing itself from the rock mainstream. Punk drew on Modernist conceptions of authenticity to attack the dominant Romanticism of 1970s rock. Similarly, while a number of rock critics view artifice as the negation of authenticity, juxtaposing David Bowie's playful obliqueness to Bruce Springsteen's sincere directness, what is at issue is the difference between the two families of authenticity. It is never the artificial alone that is the point of rock artifice. Instead, rock artifice involves a deliberate rejection of the Romantic mode of authenticity, in favour of a complex and nuanced Modernist strategy of authenticity in which the performer's ability to shape imaginary worlds – rather than being shaped by this world – is foregrounded. For example, Prince's flashy androgyny and trickster sexuality highlighted his status as a distinctive artist, operating above mundane norms and conventions of gender and sexuality. In playing with rock artifice, Prince is true to the artist's prerogative to remake himself, employing artifice as ultimate evidence of his Modernist authenticity.

We might think that Romantic authenticity emphasises the rural, while Modernist authenticity values the urban; and yet much so-called 'heartland rock', such as that of Springsteen, celebrates urban backstreets and rooftops even as it is a predominantly Romantic genre. Conversely, we can perceive a kind of pastoral quality in Modernist groups such as the Smiths, who use acoustic or undistorted guitars and Romantic imagery as part of a larger Modernist strategy (that is, playing with the politics of gender and sexuality, heard particularly in Morrissey's subversion of the 'natural' codes of rock singing, even as Johnny Marr's guitar virtuosity works toward Romantic rock's musical 'naturalism').

While most performers or genres will line up on one side or the other of the above table, rock's internal complexity makes it difficult to label individual genres or performers as completely and exclusively 'Romantic' or 'Modernist'. Many will move back and forth across the table. Numerous rock genres or performers work with hybrid versions of authenticity, taking elements of Romanticist authenticity and mingling them with bits of Modernist authenticity (for example, Bob Dylan's mid-60s mix of folk Romanticism in his music and Modernist artistry in his lyrics and

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attitude). Rock culture tends to regard as most innovative those rock performers who deploy Romantic and Modernist authenticity more or less equally, in a productive tension, as with the Sex Pistols in the 1970s or Suede in the 1990s. Sometimes performers will shift from one form of authenticity to the other across an extended career. The case of U2 is interesting in this regard; beginning as rock Modernists experimenting with sound, they very quickly moved into a Romantic phase, which climaxed with *Rattle and Hum*'s celebration of gritty rock and blues roots traditions from the United States south. In the 1990s, U2 returned spectacularly to their formative Modernism on *Achtung Baby*, yet without losing their Romantic grandeur and epic rock ambitions. The different forms of authenticity, rubbing up against each other, produce work that is celebrated for its complexity, energy and artistic innovation.

Though we are long accustomed to perceiving these different manifestations of rock as evidence of fundamental disagreements about what constitutes rock, it is clear that they possess an underlying coherence. Rock's wide range of styles and genres, scenes and communities, are called 'rock' because they are all invested in the overarching value of authenticity. The individual gestures of 'making music seriously' may vary, the particular formulations of authenticity may differ; conflicts between them may drive rock forward, producing what are often viewed as cataclysmic moments or musical revolutions. Nonetheless, the key structuring principles of rock remained relatively stable in the last three decades of the twentieth century, even as its cultural prominence declined from the 1980s onward.

## Conclusion

Rock emerged because one segment of the popular mainstream was associated with a particular demographic anomaly – a huge increase in the number of affluent youth born in the wake of the Second World War. Paradoxically, the baby boom's numbers magnified – rather than 'massified' – youth culture. The longstanding sense of youth as marginal and subordinate allowed this newly dominant culture to continue to imagine itself as subcultural. (In fact, post-war youth have at times been mistaken for a subculture as a result of being viewed through the lens of rock ideology.) Thus, rock was born as a mass phenomenon that retained its distinctly anti-mass sensibilities. The baby boom's own grand, generational narrative became the story of the epic struggle of outsiders who, nevertheless, occupied the very centre of society. Their purchasing power gave legitimacy and significance to teen music, even as that musical culture was defined by its antipathy to commerce. Rock's sense of entitlement and

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legitimacy stemmed largely from the massive generational support accorded it, a support that led rock musicians and fans to believe that they could quite seriously 'revolutionise' the world around them. As the number of teenage baby boomers waned, so too did the rock polemic wane. By the mid-1980s, it was no longer taken for granted that 'rock' represented the most powerful expression of the critique of mass society – it had been so successful, in fact, that it was increasingly just one version among many. As well, the sorts of polemics that had marked rock's rise to cultural prominence were no longer moored in the certainties of a coherent idea of 'youth'.

The result was a decline in the perceived differences between musical cultures, such that many rock fans, regardless of what they may have felt in their hearts, no longer were fearless in their condemnations of putatively 'inferior' or 'alienated' musical tastes. The declining birthrates since *c.* 1960 contributed to what we might call a 'miniaturisation' of rock culture. The fact that a key segment of contemporary rock is called 'alternative' – a term which guilelessly describes a definitive aspect of *all* rock ideology – suggests a capitulation, an abandonment of the ambition and proselytising that marked rock's expansion in the 1960s and 1970s. 'Alternative' implies a loss of rock's originary desire to transform the mainstream, to 'correct' the mistakes of mass taste, and thereby change the world. Instead, the miniaturised contingent of alterna-rock fans are resigned to being just another segment in a fragmented marketplace, adjusting their expectations and their musical experiments to the reduced scale of post-boomer musical culture.

But another reason rock has become just one of many mainstream musical cultures is because it is a victim of its own success in transforming popular conceptions of what popular music can be and do. On the one hand, rock no longer occupies the centre of popular music, no longer commands the singular attention and respect it once did. On the other hand, as rock has become 'miniaturised', the scale of its ambitions and audiences reduced, its cultural values have been dispersed into a range of musical fields. Authenticity, rebellion, oppositionality, artistic legitimacy and seriousness now feature prominently in musical cultures that hitherto lacked or downplayed these features. Worldbeat, dance music, 'new country', and a seemingly infinite variety of other forms now seek and create their own legitimacy by wielding these terms, challenging their historical trivialisation and deploying rock-derived ideas to claim their own value.

Finally, rock's development of an 'anti-mass' culture on a massive scale is arguably the first and certainly most influential example of a broader tendency. The mainstream celebration of oppositional attitudes and the tastes of subcultural or subordinated segments of society is a significant

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development within contemporary life. Prior to rock, high and low cultures, cultural mainstreams and margins, were seen as clearly distinct. Once rock broke the symbolic link between mass culture and mindless conformity, it became possible to build new distinctions within and upon the terrain of the popular, to express oppositional sensibilities via commercial, mass mediated culture. Rock helped to reorder the relationship between dominant and dominated cultures, producing something that was simultaneously marginal and mainstream, anti-mass and mass, subordinate and dominant. While rock has long served as the most compelling model of what we might call 'subdominant' culture, some of its defining features have begun to appear in other areas of cultural life. Opposition to the 'mass' from within mass, commercial culture is prevalent today, in the bad-boy movie star, the people's princess who breaks with protocol, explicit tabloid talk shows and scatological cartoons on television, or fictional FBI agents who operate beyond the bounds of law, organisation and even rationality. All of these show the dispersion of subdominant cultural impulses far beyond their birthplace in rock.

**Further reading**

Much of what I've argued here runs counter to dominant versions of rock history, and certainly seeks to challenge the rebellious and countercultural identity that rock ideology affirms for its fans and musicians. Therefore it is difficult to recommend any book-length overviews of rock culture or rock history which take a similar position. Nonetheless, I have drawn heavily on the groundbreaking work of Simon Frith, and would suggest that the interested reader track down two articles in particular: 'Art versus technology: the strange case of popular music' (*Media, Culture and Society* 8(3), 1986, pp. 263–79) and 'The industrialisation of music' in *Music for Pleasure* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988, pp. 11–23). The first piece addresses the indeed strange status of technology within rock ideology, while the second provides a quick overview of key historical shifts in the emergence of rock. Of course, Frith's *Sound Effects* (London: Constable, 1981) and *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) will also reward the reader interested in the way rock music and culture work, more socially in the case of the former, and more aesthetically in the case of the latter book. For the reader interested in the prehistory of rock, parts one and two of Philip H. Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1992) offer a detailed history of the industrial and institutional shifts that led to the rise of rock. The statistics on album versus singles sales in the 1950s can be found in a fascinating 1958 overview of the

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United States popular music scene, Richard Shickel's 'The big revolution in records' (*Look*, 15 April 1958, pp. 26–35). If you are interested in swing, Lewis A. Erenberg's *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) is an important recent account an of the rise of this prototype of rock culture. For a useful discussion of the tensions within the concept of authenticity, see the analysis of the Sex Pistols in Dave Laing's *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985). For those interested in what became of rock, I highly recommend Gina Arnold, *Route 666: On the Road to Nirvana* (New York: St Martin's, 1993); Arnold's story of the years between punk and grunge is a wonderful, lived account of post-baby-boomer rock. Will Straw's 'Systems of articulation, logics of change: scenes and communities in popular music' (*Cultural Studies* 5(3), 1993, pp. 368–88) is a brilliant analysis of the same era from a more complex theoretical perspective. Finally, the work on taste and the status of art in contemporary society by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is absolutely essential to any understanding of what rock does, even though Bourdieu is himself uninterested in rock. A good introduction to his thought can be found in Pierre Bourdieu, 'The field of cultural production, or: the economic world reversed', in *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 29–73.)

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