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## Rock 'n' Theory

### Cultural Studies, Autobiography, and the Death of Rock

This chapter is structured like a record—a 45, to be exact. While the A side provides an anecdotal and autobiographical take on the birth of rock (on the assumption that, as Robert Palmer writes, “the best histories are . . . personal histories, informed by the author’s own experiences and passions”<sup>1</sup>), the B side examines the work of Lawrence Grossberg, in particular his speculations about the “death of rock,” as an example or symptom of the limits of critical theory when it comes into contact with that *je ne sais quoi* that virtually defines popular music (“It’s only rock ‘n’ roll, but I like it, I like it!”). By way of a conclusion, the coda offers some remarks on the generational implications of the discourse of the body in rock historiography as well as, not so incidentally, some critical comments on the limits of the autobiographical narrative that makes up the A side.

#### **A Side: The Birth of Rock, or Memory Train**

Don’t know much about history.

—Sam Cooke, “Wonderful World”

In 1954, one year before Bill Haley and the Comets’ “Rock around the Clock”—what Palmer calls the “original *white* rock ‘n’ roll” song—became number one on the pop charts, marking a “turning point in the history of popular music,”<sup>2</sup> and one year before Elvis covered Little Junior Parker’s “Mystery Train” (then signed, under the self-interested

tutelage of Colonel Parker, with RCA), in 1954—the same year the Supreme Court ruled racial segregation unconstitutional—the nineteen-year-old and still very much alive Elvis Presley walked into the Memphis Recording Service and cut Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup’s “That’s All Right.”

This is Elvis recollecting Phillips’s phone conversation with him: “You want to make some blues?” Legend has it that Elvis hung up the phone, ran fifteen blocks to Sun Records while Phillips was still on the line . . . and, well, the rest is history: by 1957, one year before Elvis was inducted into the army, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, and Little Richard had crossed over to the pop charts, and the “rock ‘n’ roll era had begun.”<sup>3</sup>

The irony of the above ordinary moment, at least for me, is that I somehow missed the Mystery Train. Over the years I’ve come to appreciate Elvis’s music, especially the early Sun recordings (and, truth be told, later kitsch, cocktail-lounge stuff like “Viva Las Vegas”). But to invoke the storied lore of family romance, Elvis is a formative part of my sister Cathy’s life in a way that he’ll never be for me. Though she’s only a year older than me, Elvis for her is *it*, the Alpha and Omega of rock; for me, Elvis has always been more icon than influence, and a rather tarnished one at that.

The seminal musical moments in my life are both later, post-1960, and less inaugural. For instance, I can still remember sitting with a couple of other kids in the next-door neighbor’s backyard, listening to a tiny transistor radio (one of the new technologies that transformed the music industry in the 1950s), and hearing, for the very first, pristine time, “Johnny Angel” (1962). I’m not sure what it was about this song that caught my attention—the obscure, angelic object of desire does not, for instance, have my name, as in “Bobby’s Girl” (and “girl group rock,” as Greil Marcus calls it, was mostly about “The Boy”<sup>4</sup>), but I’m pretty sure sex, however sublimated and prepubescent, had something to do with it.

I can also distinctly remember watching Shelly Fabares sing “Johnny Angel” on an episode of *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC, 1958–66), a program—like *The Patty Duke Show* (ABC, 1963–66)—that was de rigueur or must-see TV at the time. Though Ricky Nelson performed regularly on *The Ozzie and Harriet Show* (and even Paul Peterson had his fifteen minutes of fame with the lugubrious “My Dad” [1962]), Fabares’s small-screen version of “Johnny Angel”—sung, if I remember correctly, at a high school dance—remains a touchstone of sorts for me.

Indeed, “if you were looking for rock and roll between Elvis and the Beatles” (as I no doubt was at the time), girl groups were, as Marcus says, the “genuine article.”<sup>5</sup> Who can forget hokey, genuinely hokey,

"teen morality plays" like the Shangri Las' "Leader of the Pack" (1964), which my sisters, all four of them, would listen to over and over again on my cousin Karen's plastic portable record player? Or the sublime teen romanticism of Lesley Gore, whose songs I still listen to (on my Sony CD player), returning to some fugitive, long-lost source of pleasure, replaying it over and over again like any good arrested adolescent? "Suck—suck your teenage thumb . . ."

In the interregnum—between, that is, Elvis and the Beatles—there were of course other standbys, like the Four Seasons and the Beach Boys (East Coast and West Coast, Italian-American doo-wop and So-Cal surf music, respectively), but all this changed, forever, in 1964 with the British Invasion. In his *Rolling Stone* contribution on the topic, Lester Bangs contends that the Beatles phenomenon, set off by their first, tumultuous appearance on American television (February 9, 1964!), was a belated, libidinal response to the national mourning and melancholia that ensued in the wake of JFK's assassination.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, it's hard to imagine two more dramatic and diametrically opposed moments than the depressive, wall-to-wall television coverage of the JFK assassination and the Beatles' first manic appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (CBS, 1948–1971). The '60s, in all their liberatory excess ("sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll"), are born, like some Frankensteinian thing, out of this vertiginous moment.

Although Elvis had already appeared on *Ed Sullivan*, Ed's now notorious reservations notwithstanding, with a "sneer of the lip" and a "swivel of the hip,"<sup>7</sup> the Beatles, with their hook-happy songs and shaggy telegenic appeal, were made, like JFK, for network television. For one thing, unlike Elvis or, later, the Stones, you didn't have to shoot them from the waist up or expurgate their lyrics. However, even as the Beatles were producing pop-romantic masterpieces like "Yesterday" (1965), the Stones were making up for lost time fast with songs like "Satisfaction," their seventh U.S. single, which not so subtly hinted that rock 'n' roll was not, in the final analysis, about romance but, as Mick's snarling voice insinuated, that down-and-dirty thing: sex. If the lyrics of "Satisfaction" mime the slow, painfully pleasurable climb of sexual arousal ("Cause I try, and I try, and I try . . .") only to climax with one of the most exhilarating anti-climactic lines in the history of rock ("I can't get no . . ."), the rhythm, set by the steady four-in-a-bar beat, totally subverts this negation, aurally delivering what the lyrics ostensibly deny.<sup>8</sup> Not that the lyrics were superfluous, mind you, since I spent many an hour listening to this song, trying to determine whether the third verse was, in fact, "about a girl who wouldn't put out during her period."<sup>9</sup>

Given that they're still alive and rockin', the Stones would be a convenient and appropriate place to conclude this, the anecdotal part of this "record." I would definitely be remiss, though, if I did not touch on the third element in the holy trinity of post-'50s youth culture: drugs. If the first wave of rock 'n' roll ends, according to received wisdom, around 1957, the second period, rock and roll (without the apostrophes fore and aft), reaches its musical and psychedelic apex in 1967 with the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

Some thirty-five years later, I can still remember retreating to the basement of my parents' home to play *Sgt. Pepper's* for the very first time. Though I spent hours gazing at the cover, Elvis one face in a sea of famous faces, the song that kept haunting me, déjà vu all over again, was "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds": with its surreal lyrics and trippy melody, it sounded like nothing I had ever heard before. For some reason, perhaps the color of the back cover, I always associate it with the color red, the color of revolutionaries, and *Sgt. Pepper's*, vinyl turning round and round on the turntable, turned me upside down, transporting me, like LSD later, to another, phantasmagoric world.

1967 was also the year a next-door neighbor—I can still recall his name, if not his face, Donnie—turned me on to Jimi Hendrix's *Are You Experienced?* in the basement of his parents' house, basements being the preeminent place of domestic refuge for teens in the late '60s, pre-mall suburbs. Hendrix was subversive for me not so much because of his psychedelia (though I certainly registered this aspect of his music) but because Donnie's parents were racists, albeit the classic sub rosa upstate, New York sort. In other words, it was a black and white thing. It was also, needless to say, a sexual thing, since I can vividly remember Donnie telling me about seeing Hendrix live in concert in Buffalo and how he would look at the white girls in the front seats. I wasn't exactly sure what all this meant (I was thirteen, altar-boy Catholic, and definitely not experienced), but like *Sgt. Pepper's*, *Are You Experienced?* spoke of mysteries of race and sexuality elusive as that sky-diamonded girl, Lucy.

Since rock, especially punk, is inseparable from the culture of amateurism,<sup>10</sup> I would also be remiss if I did not mention that I spent many hours in the mid-'60s playing drums on an incredibly cheap drum kit (one snare, one bass drum, one non-Zildjian cymbal, no tom-tom, no hi-hat), and that one of the things that the kid behind me in high school endlessly talked about was Mitch Mitchell's drumming on "Fire," whose percussive effects we would try to duplicate on our ink-scarred desktops to the consternation of our long-suffering Franciscan instructors. Given Mitchell's rapid-fire drumming, it's not surprising that

“Fire” became our standard. The point is: part, a very big part, of the kick of rock music for me was the beat. How else can one explain the fact that years earlier, at recess, out on the asphalt playground at St. Pete’s, my grammar school, I wanted to be Ringo? Think of it: not John or Paul or even George, but Ringo!

By way of a musical-historical peroration (and before I flip this “record”), I might add that by 1970, even as Elvis was beginning to make his glittery way in Las Vegas, Hendrix was dead, the Beatles had disbanded, and the Stones, post-Altamont, were all “black and blue.”

## B Side: Rock in Theory

Much like rock, [cultural studies] has always been for me empowering and enabling, and like rock, it is always fun.

—Lawrence Grossberg,  
*Dancing in Spite of Myself*

The Stones aside (though it remains almost impossible, when talking about rock, to set the Stones aside for very long), it would not be until that annus mirabilis, 1977, the year that Elvis finally left the building for good, that the world of popular music would begin to understand what had come to pass in the preceding decade—which is to say, in the 1970s, now cinematically immortalized in all its sleazy glory in *Boogie Nights* (1997). “Sister Christian” anyone?

1977 was the year that the Sex Pistols celebrated Queen E’s silver jubilee with their outrageous version of “God Save the Queen,” the lyrics of which (“God save the Queen, the fascist regime”) couldn’t be further from the faux pastoral sentiment of Elton John’s threnody to Diana, “Candle in the Wind” (“Songs for Dead Blonds,” as Keith Richards later acidly put it<sup>11</sup>). 1977 was also the year that Lawrence Grossberg first began teaching classes on rock music. Although the comparison is not a little bathetic, from the national punk-sublime to the pedestrian academic-pedagogical, it underscores an important theoretical moment in the discourse of cultural studies, a moment when, as in *Resistance through Rituals* (1976) and *Subculture* (1979), British cultural studies began to examine the impact of popular music on “culture and society.”<sup>12</sup>

While there are numerous critics associated with the field of cultural studies who have written on popular music (too many in fact to name), Grossberg, unlike a lot of his American cohorts, not only studied at the Birmingham Centre, he is the “dean of academics writing on

popular music," the "CEO of cultural studies."<sup>13</sup> Grossberg himself cannot, of course, be made to stand as some sort of synecdoche for either cultural or popular music studies (especially given that the latter has only recently achieved any semblance of disciplinary coherence), but his writings on rock are nonetheless symptomatic, I want to argue, of a certain unexamined death drive at work in popular music studies.

For example, in *Dancing in Spite of Myself*, a collection that gathers together Grossberg's work on popular music, he persuasively argues that rock is a necessary object of critical investigation because it has frequently been mobilized, often negatively (as in the neoconservatism that he critiques in *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*), as a discursive token in the ideological contest over what he calls the "national popular."<sup>14</sup> Thus, in "Another Boring Day in Paradise," he contends that it is only with *Born to Run* (1975) and *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978) that Bruce Springsteen emerges as a national-popular sign of the body and sexuality, a set of signifiers that receives its most visceral, economic expression in the figure of dancing. For Grossberg, dancing not only bespeaks the body, it embodies release from boredom and anomie—from, that is to say, the sometimes repressive, imprisoning routines of everyday life. It's not for nothing, then, that the title of his collection on rock recalls the trope of dancing—dancing in spite of, or despite, one's self—since as he says in "'I'd Rather Feel Bad Than Not Feel Anything at All'" (1984), "Someone who does not dance, or at least move with the music, is not prima facie a fan" (D 87).

Still, given Grossberg's fascination with the body in motion, or what I prefer to think of as the "body in dance,"<sup>15</sup> one of the retrospective ironies of his interpretation of Springsteen, virtually the only close reading to grace his voluminous work on rock, is that it somehow neglects to mention the moment when the Boss, live onstage in St. Paul performing his top-ten single, "Dancing in the Dark" (1984), pulled a pre-*Friends* Courtney Cox out of the audience and, in an Instamatic MTV moment, became a fully-fledged pop-idol-cum-sex-symbol.<sup>16</sup> Later, Simon Frith, writing in the aftermath of the 1984 presidential election (when "Born in the U.S.A" was opportunistically appropriated by Ronald Reagan's campaign handlers), concluded that Springsteen's *Live* (1985) was a rock monument, albeit a monument to the death of the "idea of authenticity."<sup>17</sup>

## The Culture of Rock

I repeat the above MTV instant not to rehearse the familiar, now-dated critique of Springsteen but because Grossberg, like Frith, has frequently

seized on this national-popular moment in Springsteen's career to deconstruct the idea of authenticity, replacing it with what he calls "authentic inauthenticity" (W 230). In fact, Frith's account of the end of authenticity points up, if only by inversion, the privileged place of authenticity in Grossberg's account of rock: say, the way in which early rock 'n' roll, drawing on the racially charged subtext of rhythm and blues (itself a not so latent critique of white, "I-like-Ike" America), was a highly affective cultural compromise formation, a way to both rock against and roll with the times.

If rock assumed this particular existential function in the 1950s, it consolidated this position in the 1960s, so much so that the proper, analytical object of study for Grossberg is not so much rock music as the *culture* of rock or what he calls the "rock formation": "the entire range of postwar, 'youth'-oriented, technologically and economically-mediated musical practices and styles" (D 102). Although Grossberg has typically been more concerned, true to his Deleuzian-Foucauldian cast, with charting the spatial elements of this formation, I want to focus on the temporal or historical register of this project because in his recent work, "Is Anybody Listening? Does Anybody Care?," he has been "obsessed" (his word) with the death of rock.<sup>18</sup>

To be fair, in the revisionary introduction to *Dancing in Spite of Myself*, Grossberg observes that the proposition that "rock is dead" is not so much an evaluative judgment about "particular musical practices or variants of rock culture" as a "discursive haunting within the rock formation" and—a crucial if somewhat contradictory afterthought—a "possible eventual reality" (D 17). In fact, as Grossberg himself seems to recognize (D 103), his speculations about the death of rock are neither new nor news. In 1971, for instance, in *The Sound of the City* Charlie Gillett had announced the death of "rock 'n' roll," if not "rock and roll" or "rock" per se.<sup>19</sup> And more recently, in "Everything Counts," the preface to *Music for Pleasure*, Frith himself composed the following epitaph:

I am now quite sure that the rock era is over. People will go on playing and enjoying rock music . . . but the music business is no longer organized around the selling of records of a particular sort of musical event to young people. The rock era—born around 1956 with Elvis Presley, peaking around 1967 with *Sgt. Pepper's*, dying around 1976 with the Sex Pistols—turned out to be a by-way in the development of twentieth-century popular music, rather than, as we thought at the time, any kind of mass cultural revolution.<sup>20</sup>

For Frith as for Gillett, rock is effectively dead as a mass-cultural force because for all its revolutionary energy and excitement, anger and anarchism, it has finally succumbed to those twin demons: capital and technology.

Now, insofar as rock has not historically dominated the popular-music market (see, for example, Dave Harker's analysis of the 1970s, which convincingly argues that the representative sound of the era was not, say, punk but Elton John<sup>21</sup>), one might counter that Frith's reading of the death of rock is predicated on a substantial misreading of the music industry. Frith's claim about the death of rock also betrays a not so residual romanticism where, as in the ideology of high modernism, the artist-as-rocker steadfastly refuses the Mephistophelian commercial temptations of late capitalism.

Accordingly, it might be useful, before I broach a critique of Grossberg's claims about the death of rock, to review his account of its present state. As Grossberg sees it, rock's original historical conditions of possibility have undergone a radical transformation over the last forty or so years. On one hand, the liberal quietism of the 50s, a political consensus that underwrote the affluence and conspicuous consumption of the period, has been superseded by a neofundamentalist conservatism intent on destroying the last vestiges of the welfare state (one hypervisible target of which agit-prop militancy has been rap music).<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, youth culture, once the ground of the performative ethos of communitarianism, has been subjected to the microdifferentiation and super-fragmentation of the contemporary media market.

As for the structure of feeling (which in the 50s could be summed up by one word, *alienation*), postmodernism has gone from being an emergent to the dominant cultural-political formation, so much so that everything now, including and especially rock, has come under what Grossberg calls, after Walter Benjamin, the "antiaura of the inauthentic" (D 117)—in other words, not alienation but simulation, not parody but pastiche. Finally, in the industrial-technological sphere, even as the "indies" enjoy a less contentious relation with the majors (to the point in fact where leisure-and-entertainment multinationals have come to view independent labels as their "minor league"<sup>23</sup>), revenues derive less and less from sales and more and more from merchandising and secondary rights associated with other, synergetic sources such as film, TV, and advertising.<sup>24</sup> Put another way: in an age of digital reproduction (not LPs but CDs or MP3), rock has become a commodity like any other commodity, at best a depoliticized form of fun and, at worst, Muzak to divert you while you're home shopping.



A number of these transformations, including the paradigm shift from oral-print to cyber-visual culture, are reflected in the studied affectlessness of contemporary rock. To be sure, the concept of affect as it appears in Grossberg's discourse is not simply a synonym for emotion or feeling since it is a function of, among other things, cathexis and libidinal quantification. Moreover, for Grossberg as for Deleuze and Guattari, affect is a "structured plane of effects."<sup>25</sup> Affect, in other words, is the key to what Grossberg calls "mattering maps" or the maps people construct in order to articulate what matters most to them in their everyday lives. Rock is therefore a fundamental "affective articulatory agent" because, to repeat one of Grossberg's favorite maxims, it "helps us make it through the day" (D 20).

### Rock, Rap, and Riot Grrrls

While Grossberg's theorization of everyday life, together with his neo-Gramscian elaboration of affect and the rock formation, represents an important contribution to the critical discourse on rock, the problem, as the above Deleuze-inflected synopsis suggests, is that his writing on popular music tends to be extraordinarily "abstract and speculative" (D 30) or, in a word, affectless. Grossberg has freely conceded—too freely, for my money—the limits of his project, observing in the apologetic preface to the Dylan-titled *Bringing It All Back Home* that "almost everything he has written on rock music," operating as it does on a "particularly high level of abstraction," is "too theoretical"; that his work has, in sum, become a "constant detour deferring the concrete."<sup>26</sup>

One, dare I say glaring, manifestation of this pervasive theoreticism is his persistent neglect of issues of race and sexuality.<sup>27</sup> Although John Gill's and Angela McRobbie's critiques of, respectively, gay disco and subcultural theory (to adduce only two examples<sup>28</sup>) indicate that rock is by no means a function of identity politics, I think it's fair to say that Grossberg's preemptive, categorical disregard of gender has blinded him to recent transformations in rock music. To wit, despite what sometimes seems like the hard-wired masculinism of rock (though as Robert Walser has shown, even heavy metal is not without its moments of gender trouble), Riot Grrrl music suggests—if, say, Patti Smith or Joan Armatrading hadn't already—that women can rock too.<sup>29</sup>

As for race, though Grossberg has summarily discussed the role of "Black music," in particular R&B, in everyday life (D 151–52), he has had surprisingly little to say about rap. I say "surprisingly" because rap has been viewed, as Grossberg himself attests, not only as a "site of

authenticity" but as the heir apparent to rock's potential as a symbolic mode of resistance (D 104). Accordingly, if it is true, as Grossberg has claimed, that he is less interested in the death of rock than in "rock's becoming something else" (D 22), it follows that his work, "abstract and speculative" as it is, would benefit from some consideration of the specific preconditions and continuing longevity of rap as well as, more generally, hip-hop culture.

History, in fact, is instructive in this regard since the very first rap records, such as the Fatback Band's "King Tim III" and the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight," appeared in the immediate wake of the so-called punk apocalypse and are therefore an integral part of the rebirth of postpunk popular music. (Significantly, both records were released in 1979.)<sup>30</sup> Although rap did not cross over to the mainstream until well into the next, disco-driven decade when Run-D.M.C.'s Aerosmith-spiked "Walk This Way" (1986) became hip-hop's first MTV hit, in the process thrusting rap "strategies of intertextuality into the commercial spotlight" (and rap records into the "hands of white teen consumers"<sup>31</sup>), rap music, it is clear, has irrevocably altered the rock/pop landscape.

The point is, from Afrika Bambaataa, one of the seminal old-school master of records, to Run-D.M.C. and new school, pre-"Walk This Way," rap 'n' rock tunes such as "Rock Box" (1984) and "King of Rock" (1985), rock has been part and parcel of that eclectic mix that is rap, a musical *mélange* forever memorialized in the lyrics of "Payoff Mix": "Punk rock, new wave and soul / Pop music, salsa, rock & roll / Calypso, reggae, rhythm & blues, / Master, mix those number-one tunes."<sup>32</sup> An exchange between Rolling Stone and P. Diddy (aka Puff Daddy) confirms the intimate/extimate relation between rock and rap. *Rolling Stone*: "What bands do you like now?" P. Diddy: "Radiohead."

I hasten to add that if the relation between rap and rock is not one of simple exteriority, this is not to claim, as Grossberg does, that "for practical purposes," there are "no musical limits on what can or cannot be rock" (W 131). On this particular score, one must, I think, be vulgar: rock is, first and foremost, music—with the critical proviso that, to paraphrase Roland Barthes, if a little formalism turns one away from history, a lot brings one back to it.<sup>33</sup>

I'm not talking about musicology here, useful as it is (especially in the proper hands),<sup>34</sup> nor am I suggesting that the issue of reception, or even fandom, is negligible, since one of the very real virtues of Grossberg's work has been its extensive investigation into the various extra-musical contexts of rock reception. What I am suggesting, to "bring it all back home," is that it's difficult to talk about rock or popular music in the 1990s without engaging the issue of both genre and production.

## World Musics: After Rock Imperialism

On the constitutive difference between rock and the pre-rock 'n' roll tradition of popular music, Robert Palmer has written:

Today's popular music could hardly have evolved out of "Your Hit Parade" and the pre-r&r popular mainstream. . . . Rap, metal, thrash, grunge have different attitudes towards the organization of sound and rhythm. Their distance from pre-r&r norms cannot be explained by advances in musical instruments and technology alone. Far more than musical hybrids, these sounds proceed from what amounts to a different tradition, different from the old mainstream pop and different right on down to the most basic musical values.<sup>35</sup>

Given Palmer's riff here on rock's traditional difference from the popular music that precedes it (for example, Frank Sinatra or, before him, Bing "The King of Croon" Crosby), it would appear that although one can speak of rock as a species of popular music, one cannot make the opposite claim (not all popular music is rock).

This distinction would appear to be commonsensical enough, but rock imperialism, as Keith Negus has demonstrated, is pervasive in English-language writing on popular music. One problem with such an approach, of which Grossberg's work is a paradigmatic example (as his assertion about musical limits indicates), is that it consistently ignores "vast numbers of generic distinctions made by musicians and audiences across the world."<sup>36</sup> The net result is a rockist methodology that, paradoxically enough, is at once inclusivist and exclusivist—inclusivist because generically different kinds of music such as rap are reflexively included as rock, and exclusivist because generically related kinds of music such as country are simultaneously excluded.

This problem is compounded when the universalist category of rock is applied to popular music in the global context, so-called world beat or world music. Thus, if it is true, as Negus states, that there is a lot of music "being listened to by the 'youth market' that would be described using a label other than rock," it's equally true that "for many music fans across the world, there are numerous musics that cannot be rock."<sup>37</sup> Not so incidentally, the global deployment of the concept of rock also tends to reproduce the classic division between rock and pop, where rock refers to the "musical and lyrical roots that are derived from the classic rock era" and pop to rock's "status as a commodity produced under pressure to conform by the record industry."<sup>38</sup>

The way this binary gets played out in the context of the rock/world music opposition is, alas, all too predictable: American Western-style rock is “impure” or passé (passé because impure), while virtually all non-Western popular musics are “authentic” and, therefore, “vital.” Not so surprisingly (especially if one remembers that rock was originally black slang for “having sex”), this sort of racial-ideological thinking is frequently the product of a colonialist mentality. As Timothy D. Taylor puts it in *Global Pop*, “rock music, which used to be pure sex, has lost its grinding energy; musics by others (read: people of color) still have something to do with sex.”<sup>39</sup>

Still, the real political-economic paradox is that although world musicians are considered inauthentic if they begin to sound too much like their Western counterparts, they are doomed to a discourse of authenticity “since the structures of the music industry exclude virtually all world musicians from the venues, visibility, and profits that might make them appear to be sellouts to their fans.”<sup>40</sup> This, then, is the bottom line of the asymmetrical relations of production that subtend the global music marketplace. Due to the concentration of capital in a handful of multinational corporations (which are located, in turn, in a handful of core countries), Western popular music is increasingly available in the traditional peripheries, but the semiperipheries do not have the same access to their own music. Hence the distinctly inequitable system of distribution that currently obtains where, say, “it is much easier to buy . . . Madonna in China than Cui Jian, the leading Chinese rock musician, in the US.”<sup>41</sup>

## Production of Culture

I will return to these issues in the context of contemporary youth culture, but this might be an appropriate place to mark the limits of the classical-Marxist account of the mode of production and propose instead what I take to be a more immanent, constructive model of the music industry. An innovative work in this regard, innovative because it draws equally on both reception and production studies without the theoretical baggage of either approach, is Negus’s *Producing Pop* which in displacing the methodological emphasis from the “production of culture” to the “culture of production” retains a role for what Marxists used to call the “primacy of production” even as it demarcates a space for what Negus calls the “cultural practices of personnel” (press officer, A&R person, studio producer, and so on).<sup>42</sup> Noting that writing on popular music often works from unexamined predicates about art and commerce, creativity and capitalism, Negus insists that such a perspective tends to

"overlook the temporal dimension which cuts through the production of commercial music"; equally importantly, it also underestimates the extent to which the various personnel involved in producing music are actively "contributing to the aesthetic meanings employed to appreciate the music," thereby substantially defining the contours of what in fact popular music means at any given time.<sup>43</sup>

The value of the culture-of-production approach is that by concentrating on what Pierre Bourdieu calls "cultural intermediaries," it usefully blurs the hard-and-fast distinction between labor and leisure, production and consumption. Rather more to the point, Negus's perspective emphatically reaccentuates the music in the music business, foregrounding the sorts of music that people in the business actually listen to. To tender such a claim is not, of course, to proffer a covert defense of the music business; in fact, Negus's work provides a trenchant critique of the way in which the "recording industry has come to favor certain types of music, particular working practices, and quite specific ways of acquiring, marketing, and promoting recording artists" (and here issues of race and sex-gender rematerialize in all their social-institutional force).<sup>44</sup> Simply put, Negus's approach, attuned as it is to both the cultural and industrial demands of the music industry, elucidates the intricate, conflictual web of relations out of which popular music is wrought.

As for Grossberg, in his anxious swerve away from anything that smacks of Marxism or economism (which sometimes appear to be the same thing for him), he has been intent to develop what he calls a "spatial materialism" (D 10). While this spatial-materialist perspective might conceivably offer a novel way to talk about the production and consumption of popular music, the aggressively theoreticist cast of Grossberg's approach is evident in his palpably thin description of his project: "to find a radically contextual . . . vocabulary that can describe the ongoing production of the real as an organization of inequality through an analysis of cultural events" (D 24). In other words, if Grossberg's analytical focus on space in rock provides a valuable complement to the general underdevelopment of spatiality in the discourse of Marxism, this very same valorization also comes at the direct expense of a proper consideration of the dialectical other of spatiality: temporality or, more precisely, historicity.

Bluntly, it will not do, on one hand, to ruminate about the death of rock and, on the other, confess that one has "given too little attention to the changing shape of the rock formation across space and over time" (D 19). Given this performative contradiction, though, what, one wonders, is driving Grossberg's obsession with the death of rock?

## Forced Choice: Britney or Avril?

The above not simply rhetorical question about the death of rock returns us to the beginning of this chapter—to, that is, the birth of rock and the formative popular-musical influences in my life. My life aside (for the moment!), I want to submit that detailed, medium-specific attention to the temporality and spatiality of rock suggests that it has by no means died but has merely become, among other things, “more geographically mobile.”<sup>45</sup>

The value of this geopolitical perspective is that it assumes one of Grossberg’s signature Deleuzian themes, what one might call the “mobility of rock” (classic rock ‘n’ roll is frequently about, as almost any Chuck Berry song proves, automobility), and situates it in a specific national-historical context. In other words, it’s not merely that rock has become part of transnational capitalism (though this proposition is undoubtedly true and has any number of implications for the present rock formation<sup>46</sup>); rather, it’s more that a certain form of rock may well be dead, or at least embalmed, in the United States or North America but is flourishing elsewhere—say, in Cuba or China, Argentina or South Africa, Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union.<sup>47</sup>

As for the United States or North America, some form of postrock music is obviously here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future, given that it has become an indispensable part—along with the iPod—of contemporary youth culture. But if MTV is youth-skewed (as opposed to, say, VH1), what exactly does it mean to invoke the category of youth today, early in the twenty-first century?

Although there is a statistically determinate audience, defined by age, for rock/pop music (say, conservatively speaking, fourteen to twenty-four), the idea of youth, as Donna Gaines has documented, is simultaneously a “biological category,” a “distinctive social group,” and a “cultural context.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, while there’s little doubt that age-driven demographics drive corporate marketing and advertising, it’s also no secret that in the age of Viagra, cosmetic surgery, and hyperhealth and fitness, the “signifier ‘youth’ has been detached from the age-grade and made available to everyone”<sup>49</sup>—to, in other words, anyone who has the requisite desire and economic resources. With the last scenario firmly in mind, it’s clear that rock is no longer, if it ever was, the “music of youth.”

One consequence of this process of democratization is that the concept of youth today retains only a residual, even vestigial, connection to its biological referent. In fact, the rapidly changing cultural construct of the term since World War II—from, say, youth culture to counterculture to

youth subcultures (the last with a decidedly post-Parsonian emphasis)—has thoroughly dedifferentiated its social distinctiveness. For one thing, the category of childhood, of which youth is the antithesis and adulthood the synthesis, is shrinking by the moment: “People as young as eight or nine years old are sharing in the youth life-style in terms of consumption of products such as clothing, leisure activities . . . and knowledge of the ‘real world’—sexual, political, ecological, etc.”<sup>50</sup> For another, the social idea of youth has expanded so fast that young people, as Deanna Weinstein remarks, “have become marginal to the idea of youth itself.”<sup>51</sup>

Since the central feature of youth culture, at least in the United States since the 1950s, has been music, *rock* music, this trend—what one might call the colonization or reterritorialization of youth—has had a profound influence on contemporary music. In an epigram: “Rock, like youthful looks, is no longer the province of the young.”<sup>52</sup> As in some grade-B werewolf movie, the rock-around-the-clock teenagers have become the classic-rock baby boomers, and the latter constituency, in turn, a prime target for the increasingly competitive music industry. More specifically yet, since the youth market cannot productively sustain long-term artistic development (and, consequently, new artists are no longer aimed at youth in the restricted biological sense), there are powerful economic imperatives to appeal to the expanding class of middle-aged consumers.<sup>53</sup>

To be sure, “young people” have actively, sometimes even violently, resisted the wholesale appropriation of their subcultures. If this has occasionally meant distancing themselves from adulterated discourses such as, precisely, rock (hence the pejorative epithet “rockist”), in other cases it has involved a complex process of reappropriation of the popular-cultural terrain. (Witness the revival of Rat-Pack-styled lounge music.) More generally, this ritualistic resistance has involved the formation of subcultures that entail a determinate dialectical relation not only with the dominant parent culture (itself in the process of being made over in the eternal image of youth) but with the dominant, corporate-sponsored youth culture.

The good news is that genuine youth subcultures have emerged by “marginalizing themselves from the leisure culture’s free-floating definition of ‘youth.’”<sup>54</sup> The bad news, as if the double alienation consequent on the above self-marginalization were not enough, is that young people are now free to choose from among a bewildering “array of confrontational youth subcultures”<sup>55</sup> where “free-floating” is not so much a term of liberatory potential, however slim, but a euphemistic signifier for the forced choice that is postmodern consumer capitalism. In a nutshell: Britney or the anti-Britney, Avril.

While one might argue that the current musical culture is merely yet another moment in the ongoing cyclical history of pop/rock (where, to revisit the late 1950s and early 60s, the choice between the Crystals and Chiffons, Ronettes and Shirelles or, to attend to the “boy groups,” the Four Seasons and the Beach Boys was for some no choice at all), the difference between the immediate post-rock ‘n’ roll period and the present moment is the sheer volume of recorded music that is now available.<sup>56</sup> The almost exponential increase in the production of rock/pop music has resulted in an almost infinite array of musical subgenres, as a recent postcard survey distributed by Atlantic Records illustrates: Children’s/R&B/Pop/Rock/Dance/Singer Songwriters/Traditional Jazz/Contemporary Jazz/New Age/Ambient/Classical/Country/Metal/Alternative/Rap/Theatre Music/World Music/etc.

About this list, I would make only two observations. First, most, if not all, of these genres can be further subdivided. For example, to take just one genre, “New Age/Ambient” can, and probably should, be divided into two separate categories, where Ambient or, more properly, Electronica can then be divided into various subgenres such as Techno, Jungle, Trip Hop, Drum and Bass, and so on. Second, the culture of rock or what Grossberg calls the “rock formation” may still exist for contemporary youth (see, in this context, the introduction to chapter 2), but rock music is arguably now only one genre or category among a host of genres and categories, subgenres and niche markets.

## My Generation

Drivin’ around in my automobile . . .

—Chuck Berry, “No Particular Place to Go”

Although the concept of youth is crucial, it is clear, to any future discussion of the death of rock, another, perhaps more pointed way to reframe this issue—to return to the larger, historical shifts in the meaning of youth culture—is to reconsider the generational axes of rock. Thus, to recite Frith, conventional wisdom has it that rock was born around 1956 with Elvis, peaked around 1967 with *Sgt. Pepper’s*, and died around 1976 with the Sex Pistols. Or, as Negus metaphorically puts it, in the mid-1970s, “the blooms start wilting, the body decays, and rock starts dying.”<sup>57</sup>

This late-Spenglerian vision—*Verfallsgeschichte* made flesh—offers a peculiarly seductive image for some people of the history of rock, with rock consuming itself, never mind Nirvana, in one final catastrophic conflagration with punk. Indeed, with the late Elvis and Sid Vicious squarely



in mind, the one bloated from food and drugs almost beyond recognition, the other an early poster boy for heroin chic, it sometimes seems, if only in retrospect, that the banks of flowers on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper's* were funereal after all, florid intimations of rock's mortality, "flowers in the dustbin" (to echo the Sex Pistols).<sup>58</sup>

Still, as Negus's meta-organic metaphor insinuates ("the blooms start wilting, the body decays . . ."), it's probably inadvisable to interpret musical genres such as rock "as if they were living bodies which are born, grow, and decay."<sup>59</sup> When it comes to composing the history of rock, one might do better to attend, as Barthes advises, to the form of the music, a turn that inevitably returns one to history, to the form of history and the history of the form, where the former signifies the various, sometimes radically divergent histories such as rap that have generated what Palmer calls the "rock tradition" and the latter references historicity itself in all its gross materiality.

In fine, if writing on rock is going to matter today, it must remain alive to a veritable forcefield or constellation of factors: to the various histories of rock with all their zigs and zags, swerves and curves; to the "culture of production," at once macro and micro; to the complex play of identities, raced, sexed, gendered; and, of course, to the music itself. As for theory, if it's going to matter, if it's going to rock, it must not only move with the times, it must also remember that as in dancing or cruising (and this is the trickiest part), the point is, as Chuck Berry says, there's "no particular place to go."