ROCK AND THE CONDITION OF POSTMODERNITY

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To introduce The Mansion on the Hill, his often savvy examination of the rock music industry, Fred Goodman describes the deleterious effects of rock’s increasing popularity and commercial success:

Seriousness and artistic intent were a key part of the growing appeal of the subsequent “underground” rock scene. But the success of that scene also revolutionized the music business. . . . That commercial revolution had a huge and not necessarily positive effect on rock music. It bred financial opportunities for artists and a certain professionalism that has proven to be at odds with a quest for authenticity. I have nothing against commercial success, it’s just not an artistic goal in and of itself. What I find most troubling is that the scope and reach of that business often make it impossible to tell what is done for art and what is done for commerce—which calls into question the music’s current ability to convey the artistic intent that made it appealing and different to begin with. (xi-xii)

In his recent bestseller, Flowers in the Dustbin, former Newsweek music critic James Miller charts a similarly downward arc for rock, as does Martha Bayles in her hand-wringing 1996 book Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music. These pop-culture prophets of rock’s doom are joined by academics such as Lawrence Grossberg, as well as legions of now middle-aged fans who feel that rock’s authentic roots have been betrayed by the current crop of Gen X bands and performers. The notion of an idyllic rock past from which we’ve somehow fallen—or, more to the point, an Edenic garden from which we’ve been expelled—is, for instance, made explicit in the 1970 Joni Mitchell anthem (and a hit, as well, for Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young), “Woodstock”: “We are stardust / We are golden / . . . / And we’ve got to get ourselves
back to the garden.” In this model, Woodstock and Altamont (used as a narrative frame in Hunter S. Thompson’s 1971 non-fiction novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*), or more recently Woodstock and Woodstock 99, become the very symbols of pre- and post-lapsarian rock. With this collection of essays, we would like to rethink this decline and fall narrative in which rock music starts off pure, authentic, primitive, revolutionary, and then—depending on the agenda of the writer—it becomes corrupted by either commercialism or decadence or self-consciousness. Instead, we would suggest that—rather than a throwback to a simpler and more honest time—rock has from its very outset reflected the sort of irony, self-reflexivity, and indeterminacy typically associated with postmodernism and that many of its greatest and most influential artists have become so by adopting an overtly ironic and self-consciousness aesthetic.

It is, of course, ridiculously easy to make the case against rock’s supposed authenticity. Though some like Miller and Greil Marcus have tried to push its birth back to the 30s or 40s, rock as we know it didn’t really gain a wide following until white boys (especially white British boys) started singing the blues. In essence, then, the moment that this music becomes identifiably “rock” is precisely the moment that it departs from its roots and becomes something more marketable, more calculated, more self-consciously constructed—in short, something less “authentic.” Moreover, if we think of authenticity in the sense that Walter Benjamin uses the term in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” rock’s claims to it become even more tenuous:

> The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. Chemical analyses of the patina of a bronze can help establish this, as does the proof that a given manuscript of the Middle Ages stems from an archive of the fifteenth century. The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical—and, of course, not only technical—reproducibility. (220)

Unlike jazz which, because of its emphasis on improvisation, continues to privilege the live performance, the gold standard in rock—as Theodore Gracyk has persuasively argued in his book *Rhythm and Noise*—has always been the record. Consequently, there is in rock music an increased distance between the artist and the listener and a corresponding diminishment of what Benjamin calls “the aura”—the unique quality of the work of art. While the persistence of lip synching and the phenomenon of tribute bands (see Mark Jones’s essay in this issue)

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1Here, we’re thinking of both the lip-synching that occurs on shows like *American Bandstand* and *Top of the Pops* and in the studio and concert stage as in the well publicized cases of Milli Vanilli, Michael Jackson, Britney Spears and Destiny’s Child.
suggest that rock audiences continue to hunger for "the presence of the original," the popularity of the now-crippled Napster and other internet file-sharing services remind us that rock is the quintessential art of mechanical reproduction. In fact, even on very early rock records we can hear an almost giddy delight in the artificial and reproduced nature of the music. The Beatles, for instance, introduce *Revolver* (1966) with the sounds of coughing, the band noodling on their guitars, various electronic noises, and George Harrison's rather ironic voice counting down to the opening bass riff of "Taxman." Similarly, the first things we hear on the Kinks' *Something Else* (1967) are the album's producer calling out "This is the master" and Ray Davies saying "nice and smooth," thereby clearly signaling that this is the last of many takes. In each case, there is no attempt to simulate a unique live performance, but rather we are made to feel that we are vicariously experiencing the music's "aura" because we seem to be with the band as they are recording the LP, because we seem to be right beside them in the studio. Clearly, a large part of the popularity of a "behind the scenes" rock films like the Beatles' *Hard Day's Night* and *Let It Be* or Dylan's *Don't Look Back* derives precisely from the illusion of intimacy the film projects. If rock has any residual investment in the notion of authenticity, it is primarily in this radically reconfigured sense.

In addition to this distance between the listener and the site of musical performance, there is as well an artificiality and self-consciousness to the very sounds of rock. Ask the average person what rock & roll sounds like, and he will most likely imitate the sound of a fuzz box. To Brian Eno, this aural inauthenticity is all simply "noise," and, in his *Diary with Swollen Appendices*, he uses this concept to present his own pithy aesthetics of rock & roll:

NOISE: In science, noise is random behaviour, or behaviour so complex that we cannot predict it. A signal sent through a medium interacts with it in complex ways and some of the information being sent breaks up into—noise. Noise is unreadable, inscrutable. Noise is not silence but it is also not loudness. It is the absence of coherence.

One history of music would chart the evolution and triumph of noise over purity in music. . . . Indeed, if one measured noisiness of instrumentation on a scale of 100, the classical palette would stop at about 50, but the rock palette wouldn't even start until about 30 (and would then continue all the way out to about 90—a figure constantly rising).

Distortion and complexity are the sources of noise. Rock music is built on distortion: on the idea that things are enriched, not degraded, by noise. To allow something to become noisy is to allow it to support multiple readings. It is a way of multiplying resonances. (194-95)
For Eno, then, noise is a sign of richness and complexity rather than a defect or blemish, and it is what distinguishes rock from other “purer” or more traditional musics. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that rock musicians frequently go out of their way to produce sounds that self-consciously call attention to themselves and signal their own artificiality.²

A particularly striking instance of this is Eno’s own synthesizer solo in “Re-Make, Re-Model” (from the first Roxy Music album, a song discussed by Kevin Holm-Hudson in his essay for this issue)—or even more pointedly, the ludic synthesizer break in “The Paw-Paw Negro Blowtorch” on Eno’s first solo album, Here Come the Warm Jets. The Moog synthesizer, which when it debuted on the pop music scene in the late 60s held out the promise of transparently evoking any instrument in the orchestra, is quickly transformed in Eno’s hands into an instrument that always only sounds like itself. So too, drum machines, we quickly learned, always sound like drum machines—never drums. Any rock fan could effortlessly list countless other examples of rock’s celebratory artificiality, from Phil Spector’s “Wall of Sound,” to the Who’s early experiments with feedback, to Brian Wilson’s use of the theremin on “Good Vibrations,” to the trippy phaseshifting used by the Doobie Brothers on tracks like “Listen to the Music” and “China Grove,” to the stereo-imaging gimmicry of Pink Floyd’s timelessly popular Dark Side of the Moon, right on up to hip-hop and trip-hop’s exploitation of surface noise and the virtual catalogue of unnatural sound effects that pepper Radiohead’s two most recent studio albums. On a track from the first of those records, Kid A, called “How To Disappear Completely,” Thom Yorke sings: “I’m not here / This isn’t happening,” and his words invoke first and foremost the profound sense of alienation that runs through all of Radiohead’s work. But read in another way, the lyric gives voice as well to the somewhat distanced experience of consuming a rock song—an experience in which an intelligent fan is constantly aware that the singer’s not really there, and what she’s listening to isn’t “really happening.”

All of this suggests that rock lives in that postmodern realm that Baudrillard has called hyperreality: the land of the simulacrum, the “copy” (or better, perhaps, “record”) without an original, reference without referent. If, as Eno claims, the history of rock & roll is a history of increasing noise, a natural response on the part of audiences is gradually to internalize and naturalize each

²See Gracyk’s extensive discussion of the aesthetics of noise in Rhythm and Noise 99-124.
new artifice. So that “stereo,” for instance—that most artificial of natural-sounding conventions—or the electric guitar, or the fade-out at the end of a recorded song—cease to call attention to themselves as artificial as a new audience of listeners habituates to them; hence, they come to stand in for the “authentic” once their artifice has been forgotten or effaced. Structurally, this is precisely the genealogy of truth, as Nietzsche famously described it in “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”: “Truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power” (47). Authenticity is simply artificiality whose artifice has been conveniently forgotten.

Hip-hop might seem to pose an important exception to this general rule, for “keepin’ it real” is a value that imbues all but the most overtly parodic rap acts (such as DJ Paul Berman). But the liner notes to the recent Outkast greatest hits compilation Big Boi and Dre Present . . . Outkast suggest one way in which hip-hop artists work with the paradoxical consciousness that their work is both highly original and entirely derivative: “The heart and soul of hip hop culture is deeply rooted in one cardinal principle: originality. With hip hop originality is a must, because it is fundamentally about one’s ability to borrow from previous forms of creative expression and use them to create the most innovative and flamboyant styles possible.” There, in a nutshell, is the fundamental contradiction—or paradox—with which all rock artists must wrestle: originality is something that’s cobbled together out of the resources made available by the tradition. Thus keepin’ it real is finally, in the deft formulation of the Beastie Boys, always a matter of “rhymin’ and stealin’.”

By focusing so heavily on rock’s artificiality and self-consciousness, we don’t mean to suggest that all rock music is necessarily postmodern or that there aren’t many rock musicians who are desperately seeking authenticity. The enormous popularity of bands and performers who have built a reputation for artistic integrity—Pearl Jam, back in the day, as well as bands like Minor Threat/Fugazi and performers like Ani DiFranco—are sufficient evidence that many rock fans crave music that appears somehow to have escaped the taint of the corporate rock machinery. We would argue, though, that rock’s status as both a popular art form and an industry makes a more sophisticated understanding of the mutual interanimation of “artistic” and “commercial” forces central to any serious study of the field. Therefore, while we reject Goodman’s simplistic notion that rock’s growing commercial success stripped the music of its original authen-
ticity, we are equally skeptical of the assumption of many academic critics (going back all the way to Adorno) that all popular music—no matter how defiant or unconventional it may be—is simply an economic commodity, obeying no greater or more complex artistic logic than that of the marketplace. Rather, we would suggest that this tension between art and commerce has been present throughout rock history (witness early rock albums such as Beatles for Sale [1964] and The Who Sell Out [1967]) and that—as the phenomenal output of the Brill Building writers vividly demonstrates—it has often served to spur creativity and innovation. There's nothing in rock history closer to Andy Warhol's famous Factory than the Brill Building pop factory; at its height, 165 music businesses inhabited the midtown Manhattan space, named for its first-floor Brill Brothers clothing store. The teams of Mann and Weil, Goffin and King, Barry and Greenwich, Greenfield and Sedaka, and Lieber and Stoller there wrote some of the most memorable pop songs of the twentieth century; that they did so from 9 to 5, with rents to pay and groceries to buy, seems not to have had the predicted deleterious effect.

At the same time, the stigma of commercialism has sometimes had an equally inspiring and invigorating effect. As the album's cover photo suggests, the artistic experimentation of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band grows as much out of the Beatles' desire to bury their commercial past as it does their attempt to match the aural sophistication of the Beach Boys' Pet Sounds. U2's embrace of an overtly postmodern stance for their Achtung Baby album similarly reflects the band's desire to recreate itself and escape the shackles of being the "world's greatest [and most sincere] rock band"; on the other hand, their latest album, All That You Can't Leave Behind, has enjoyed enormous critical and popular success, in large part because the band set out to make music that would succeed in the commercial marketplace: an album full of hits. Hence—tragic cases such as Kurt Cobain notwithstanding—"the head-on collision of rock and commerce" that Goodman bemoans in his book's subtitle, it needs to be remembered, can sometimes be a fecund one.

But, if emotion and expression are being harnessed in the service of commercial ends, doesn't that necessarily result in a drastic cheapening of the artist's original sentiment? Doesn't it inevitably lead to the sort of split between affect and meaning that Lawrence Grossberg has so frequently observed and Neil Nehring so vehemently decried? We can think of no better illustration of this dilemma than Nicole Kidman and Ewan MacGregor's duet in the recent film
Moulin Rouge where the couple play out their courtship by exchanging snippets of pop songs from the last forty years. Mingling the sublime (the Beatles’ “All You Need is Love,” U2’s “Pride (In the Name of Love)” with the ridiculous (Phil Collins’s “One More Night”) with the simply banal (Paul McCartney’s “Silly Love Songs”), this sonic montage poses the question: How can I express sincere emotion in a form that has so often been used for treacly sentiment or crass manipulation? As Umberto Eco reveals in his postscript to The Name of the Rose, the problem is not insoluble, and he describes precisely the solution that Kidman’s and McGregor’s characters happen upon:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, “I love you madly,” because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, “As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.” At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony. . . . But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love. (32-33)

The best rock music, we would submit, is often full of these hidden quotation marks and strategies of indirection. In “Human Hands,” for instance, Elvis Costello struggles for the track’s entire two minutes and forty-two seconds to resist falling into the conventions of the standard rock love song. Faced with a medium that typically expresses emotion without any reservation whatsoever (think of Whitney Houston’s top-of-the-lungs declaration, “And I-ay-ay-ay will always love you-oo-oo-oo”), he refuses to follow suit, for, just when he seems to be building up to the obligatory expression of love, he stops short, saying simply and somewhat petulantly: “Do I have to draw you a diagram?” By the final verse, he does manage to force out, “You know I love more than slightly,” but even here he is playing Eco’s “game of irony” since, with this highly qualified admission of love, he knowingly asks his beloved to fill in the blanks.

On Exile in Guyville, Liz Phair adopts the reverse strategy; rather than going out of her way to avoid the established conventions, she contests the endemic sexism of rock music by self-consciously co-opting the idiom of that most misogynistic of bands, the Rolling Stones. Thus, unlike other female rockers such as Melissa Etheridge or Joan Jett, attempting to craft their feminist message
out of whole cloth, Phair doesn’t simply strap on an electric guitar and do what male rockers have been doing for decades. Instead, she aurally calls to mind the very attitudes she is rebelling against, invoking this tradition in order to transform it into a medium suitable for female anger and desire. The album’s opening track, “6’1,” begins with a straight-ahead blues-rock intro broadly reminiscent of the first few bars of “Rocks Off,” the first song on the Stones’s Exile on Main Street. Consequently, when Phair begins singing in a nasal, waifish monotonous tone that has none of Mick Jagger’s sneering bravado, the result is initially quite jolting—and it becomes even more so when we realizing that she is criticizing the song’s male addressee in terms that rock usually reserves for women: “I know you fall in bed too easily.” On the ironically titled “Flower,” she creates a similarly disorienting effect by superimposing two competing vocal lines over one another. The first, sung in high, surprisingly sweet tone, is suggestive of feminine vulnerability: “Every time you pass me by / I heave a sigh of pain.” The second, sung in a far huskier voice, catalogues all the sexual acts that she imagines performing on this man of her dreams, culminating with the lines: “Everything you ever thought of is everything I’ll do to you / I’ll fuck you till your dick is blue.” Clearly, this is the classic male fantasy of the sexually voracious bad girl—the Honky-tonk Woman as it were. But, because it’s the woman who’s initiating the contact and saying what she wants to do, the effect is ultimately rather threatening to a male audience, reducing them into objects of sexual desire much as the Stones and other male rock bands have so often objectified women. In this way, Phair defies the skepticism of a feminist thinker like Audre Lorde, deftly dismantling the master’s house with the master’s tool (with the master’s axe, we might even say).

Because of rock’s hybrid genealogy—a whole lotta blues, lil’ bit o’ folk, some doo-wop around the edges, etc.—the search for what Benjamin would call rock’s “original” is almost sure to be a fruitless quest. Finding rock’s origin means artificially narrowing one’s focus, concentrating on one of the streams that flows into the mighty river of rock. Hence rock literature is replete with ironic moments of the uncovering of a rock band’s supposedly more authentic “roots.” In the mock-rock-umentary The Rutles: All You Need is Cash, for instance, an investigative reporter/documentarian (Eric Idle) goes off in search of the authentic roots of the wildly popular “pre-fab four,” The Rutles. His search leads him, ultimately (and predictably), to the Mississippi Delta: “I’m standing by the banks of the Mississippi, in Louisiana, the cradle of the blues. That’s black
music sung mainly by whites. And we’re here to find out the black origins of Rutle music.” He first interviews bluesman Blind Lemon Pie, but doesn’t get the expected response:

Interviewer: From the Rutles. Really?
Pie: Yes, everything.
Interviewer: But surely you were singing the blues back in the early 30s.
Pie: No, I was working on the railroad.

Blind Lemon Pie directs the ethnographer to the shack next door, where he speaks with Ruttling Orange Peel, who claims to have taught the Rutles everything they know. Mrs. Orange Peel, however, sitting next to him during the interview, keeps insisting that it’s all lies: “Every time there’s a documentary on white music round here, he claims he started it all. Last week, he claimed he started the Everly Brothers, Frank Sinatra, and Lawrence Welk.” A similar send-up of this Alan Lomax-inspired search for roots and origins opens the recent Outkast greatest hits compilation. The CD begins with a parody of this fetishized “ethnographic” gesture, in which an interviewer draws his Uncle Jesse out on the subject of the mythic beginnings of the now-legendary Outkast, the sounds of a campfire crackling in the background:

Long, long, long, long time ago—before the beginning of time—there was a group, a group called Outkast. Yeah. There were two of them. One was named Big Boi, and one was named Andre 3000, 300, or something like that. Anyway, them boys made some of the coldest music I ever heard in my life. Legend has it that if you close your eyes, and be real still, you can hear them boys at night. Listen.

The listener is rewarded only with the sound of a fireside fart.

In general, then, we would suggest that there is no shame in rock’s illegitimacy and that—despite the lamentations of such as prophets of doom as Goodman, Miller, and Bayles—there may be some genuine satisfaction in embracing its inauthenticity. After all, rock’s discourse is built up of the most artificial of “pet sounds”: the distorted harmonics that resulted from Jimi Hendrix playing a right-handed Stratocaster upside-down (or worse yet, with his teeth); hitting the drums so hard your sticks keep snapping, à la Keith Moon and John Bonham; turning the Marshall amps up to “11,” like Spinal Tap’s Nigel Tunsel. The most interesting rock has always worked according to Courtney Love’s credo: “I fake it so real I am beyond fake.” This, finally, is rock’s postmodern authenticity.
WORKS CITED


