

Rock Trolls and Recovery

Revisiting Rockism via Miles Parks Grier

If you were a parent struggling to entertain bored children, or anybody else looking for a distraction from the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, you might have watched *Trolls: World Tour*. In this jukebox musical sequel to 2016's *Trolls*, Poppy and her queendom of other colorful animated trolls live happily in isolation, dancing and singing to *Billboard* hits like "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" (substituting "trolls" for "girls," as you do). But Queen Poppy soon learns that the world is much bigger than her pop music paradise. Beyond the borders of the Pop Trolls' realm, there are other communities of trolls with their own forms of music: the Country Trolls, Techno Trolls, Funk Trolls, Classical Music Trolls, and the Rock Trolls. Once separate and safe from outside interference, the troll tribes are now under attack by the Rock Trolls' Queen Barb, a mohawked, fishnet-wearing guitarist who detests any music but hard rock. "By the end of my world tour, we're all gonna have the same vibe," Barb says before pillaging the land of the Techno Trolls. "We're all gonna be one nation of Trolls . . . under rock!"¹

The idea that zealous devotion to rock music can be an imperialist force is nothing new, although seeing this theme appear in a children's movie is certainly novel.² *Trolls: World Tour* is about rockism, and pop-intolerant Queen Barb is the perfect caricature of a rockist. You don't hear the words "rockist" and "rockism" too much these days—they're of another era, after all. The terms first emerged in the 1980s as British New Wavers sought to distinguish themselves from the self-righteousness of American rock.³ Then, in the aughts, the terms resurfaced in impassioned debates about the ways critics analyze, document, and listen to popular music. Rockism, a value system that lionized rock for its supposed authenticity and aesthetic purity (due to rock's traditional mandate that musicians write, perform, and provide instrumentation for their own songs), stood in sharp contrast to popitism, a counter-effort to celebrate pop, hip hop, and the other genres rockists dismiss as commercial fluff. Much like Poppy's quest to stop Barb from turning

1. *Trolls: World Tour*, dir. Walt Dohrn, 2020.

2. For example, the rocker as epic hero/rock and roll quest narrative in films like *Tenacious D in the Pick of Destiny*, dir. Liam Lynch, 2006, *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, dir. Edgar Wright, 2010, and the animated *Rock & Rule*, dir. Clive Smith, 1983.

3. Robert Christgau, "Decade: Rockism Faces the World," *Village Voice*, 2 January 1990, <https://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/decade-89.php>.

the trolls into mindless rock zombies, popmists and otherwise anti-rockist writers published several pieces challenging what they saw as rockism's dominance in popular criticism. Rockism, they warned, was more than favoritism towards the genre: it was an exclusionary worldview that reproduced more serious forms of prejudice.

In 2013, Miles Parks Grier wrote an article for *JPMS* to make sense of this moment "before the rockism debate is retired."⁴ Following Kelefa Sanneh's "The Rap Against Rockism," a piece that, Grier notes, "revived and popularized the term in the United States," Grier was among many critics considering rockism's connection to racism, sexism, and other systems of identity-based oppression.⁵ In presentations at Pop Con, a yearly gathering of critics, scholars, and tastemakers in popular music, Daphne Brooks and Gayle Wald argued that rockist mindsets elevate the artistry of white men, resulting in a rock canon that is predominantly white and predominantly male. They called on writers, historians, and rock's other canon makers to recognize a wider diversity of artists and to excavate rock's historical memory for submerged narratives about women and people of color.⁶

Grier is all for these recuperative measures. Still, he cautions that canon expansion alone will not cure rockism:

[T]he tremendous work involved in redeeming a dismissed or forgotten artist should be supplemented by a commensurate disinvestment from the search for an uncompromised rebel. For, it would appear that rockism's fundamental power lies not in its capacity to canonize based on social identity but in its echoing the conventional wisdom that only in pursuing absolute independence can one enjoy a taste of freedom.⁷

Rockists, Grier reminds us, are less concerned with an artist's race or gender than with whether an artist embodies an attitude of rugged individualism; therefore, inserting overlooked women and people of color into rock's canon isn't necessarily a transformative act if that canon still "aligns with the pursuit of white male freedom."⁸ If critics truly want to ensure that every rocker gets their due, Grier argues that they must first grapple with rockism's vision of artistic integrity.

This is exactly what Grier undertakes in "Said the Hooker to the Thief: 'Some Way Out' of Rockism." Synthesizing debates about rock's aesthetics and identity politics, Grier charts an expansive history of the "rockist imaginary" absent from most writing on the subject.⁹ He identifies two persistent tropes of rock culture that "have incited visceral

4. Miles Parks Grier, "Said the Hooker to the Thief: 'Some Way Out' of Rockism," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 25, 1 (2013): 32.

5. *Ibid.*, 31. See also Kelefa Sanneh, "The Rap Against Rockism," *The New York Times*, 31 October 2004.

6. Gayle Wald, "Sister Rosetta Tharpe and the Pre-History of 'Women in Rock,'" in Eric Weisbard, ed., *This is Pop: In Search of the Elusive at Experience Music Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004): 56–67; Daphne Brooks, "The Write to Rock: Racial Mythologies, Feminist Theory, and the Pleasures of Rock Music Criticism," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 12 (2008): 54–62. Brooks's most recent manuscript also illuminates a "counterhistory of popular music criticism." See Daphne Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021), 5.

7. *Ibid.*, 47.

8. *Ibid.*, 34.

9. *Ibid.*, 32. It's worth noting that Grier's study is the only peer-reviewed scholarly article devoted to rockism.

desires to purify, protect, and strengthen rock in relation to competing genres”: the “cult artist” and the “prostitute.”¹⁰ The “cult artist,” an independent and self-possessed auteur, defends rock from the “prostitute,” an exhibitionist sell-out whose seemingly compromised agency threatens rock’s authenticity. While anyone can fill these roles regardless of identity—which Grier demonstrates by analyzing the critical discourse surrounding Joni Mitchell—the “cult artist” and the “prostitute” are tied to historical formations of race, class, and gender. Grier traces these tropes back to the Jacksonian Era when white, unpropertied men used ideas about their labor to distinguish themselves as a dignified working class separate from aristocrats, enslaved people, and sex workers. He explains that as white, countercultural men flocked to rock and roll in the mid-twentieth century, they used similar language to celebrate ambitious, convention-defying rockers, forging a slippery and sanctimonious attitude that we’d later come to understand as rockism.

Rockism is a junk drawer of social and cultural beliefs. It’s somehow all at once a critical mode, a historical framework, and a sneaky, incessant ideology. That’s exactly why I love unpacking rockism with students. In my undergraduate courses, I’ve used Sanneh’s “The Rap Against Rockism,” video footage of Comiskey Park’s 1979 Disco Demolition Night, and the Lady Gaga take on *A Star is Born* to introduce students to rockism’s shapeshifting. Until recently, however, I hadn’t thought about the ways Grier’s article could bring nuance to these classroom conversations. I’ll admit I never really gave the article a fair shake: the title turned me off, and seeing the word “prostitute” occupy the piece—a carceral term that now reads as an anachronistic and punitive way to refer to sex work—gave me the impression that Grier’s analysis would also be outdated. Thankfully, the opposite is true. Grier deconstructs the term to understand its weaponization, specifically the ways (typically white, male) rock musicians use derogatory images of sex work to position other musical performers (typically women) and genres (typically pop) as less “free.” It’s a powerful critique, and Grier provides vivid evidence of the disdain for “whoring performers.”¹¹ Still, I wonder if Grier’s illustrative language sometimes replicates the rockist dynamics he works to challenge.

“For those seeking some way out of rockism,” though, Grier’s article proposes a necessary solution: confront your musical biases and embrace the metaphorical “prostituting” musician.¹² When people understand that no artist in the capitalist music industry can be completely “free,” and when rock fans accept that all rock musicians sell their image, make compromises for the sake of their career, and, most of all, *perform* in ways that may or may not reflect their truest self, the rockist paradigm of the “uncompromised rebel” unravels. After all, isn’t rock’s grandiose performativity exactly what makes it so much fun? How is Miley Cyrus grinding on a motorcycle any different than Rob Halford’s “Hell Bent For Leather” shtick? Or what about Phoebe Bridgers smashing her guitar a la Kurt Cobain, Pete Dinklage, and Jimi Hendrix? These stunts are virtually indistinguishable, and yet, you could probably guess which of these artists rockists revere and which they think are

10. Ibid., 32.

11. Ibid., 48.

12. Ibid., 47.

big ole fakers. This is where the rock(ist) trolls of reality differ from their animated counterparts: clinging to entrenched narratives about identity, agency, and genre, ideas about to whom rock truly belongs and to whom it does not get sticky. And that's why Grier puts the onus to confront rockism on "those seeking some way out." Most people under rockism's spell don't recognize that they're enchanted.

Rockism does seem less powerful than it used to be. As Gen Z rockets towards pop culture ascendancy, they're modeling a kind of knowing and playful relationship to rock culture that aligns with Grier's call to divest from rockist notions of authenticity. Think of the response to Doja Cat's performance at the 2020 MTV Europe Music Awards. After transforming her pop hit "Say So" into an early-2000s goth rock ballad, fans delighted over the "Evanescence vibes" and pleaded for Doja to put out a rock album.¹³ What's important to note here is that fans' enthusiastic reactions to the rock version of "Say So" weren't an endorsement of Doja Cat as a "serious" rock artist. Instead, they exploded notions of what being a "serious" rock artist means. For the same young fans who danced to "Say So" on *Tik Tok* months before the EMAs, Doja's ability to perform as a disco diva, a fire mc, and a rock queen was proof of her brilliance rather than cause for suspicion.¹⁴

Maybe younger generations will leave rockism in their dust. Even so, it's likely that rock's history will remain highly contested.¹⁵ Since 2013, the canon expanding efforts Grier identified have only gained momentum. In 2017, *NPR* published "a new canon" of popular music composed solely of albums by women and non-binary artists.¹⁶ This list mirrored scholars' continued work to reimagine rock's lineages and legacies. Maureen Mahon's *Black Diamond Queens*, Karen Tongson's *Why Karen Carpenter Matters*, and the documentary *RUMBLE* are only a few examples of recent works revising well-known histories of rock and examining discounted artists' contributions to the genre.¹⁷ Yet no institution has received more attention for its role in rock's canonization than the Rock

13. Quoted from comments on Doja Cat's Instagram. See Doja Cat, "Had such a great time performing 'Say So' at this years @mtvema's!" Instagram post, 8 November 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHWk4w3DL56/>. Fans responded similarly in comments on the performance's YouTube video. See Doja Cat, "Doja Cat - Say So (MTV EMA 2020), YouTube video, 11 November 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3Yk6FrjMkQ>.

14. Of course, Doja Cat isn't the first artist to blend rock with other musical traditions; we could place her within the lineage of Rosetta Tharpe, Chaka Khan, Nona Hendryx, and Santi White (Santigold). But as several scholars have shown, Black women musicians' inability to fit neatly within the racialized and gendered boundaries of popular music genre has historically been a liability for their careers rather than an advantage. Mix this with the racist and sexist biases that separate Black women from rock, and the overwhelmingly positive reaction to Doja Cat's performance becomes all the more remarkable. For more on Black women rockers and genre, see Gayle Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout! The Untold Story of Rock and Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007); Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Sonnet Retman, "Between Rock and a Hard Place: Narrating Nona Hendryx's Inscrutable Career," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 16, no. 1 (2006): 107–18.

15. Isn't historical memory always the last stronghold of angry white dudes?

16. "The 150 Greatest Albums Made By Women," *NPR*, 24 July 2017. See also Ann Powers, "A New Canon: In Pop Music, Women Belong At The Center of the Story," *NPR*, 24 July 2017.

17. Maureen Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); Karen Tongson, *Why Karen Carpenter Matters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019); *RUMBLE: The Indians Who Rocked The World*, dir. Catherine Bainbridge, 2017.

and Roll Hall of Fame. Articles critiquing the hall's induction process and petitions for the hall to recognize snubbed artists surface annually, and there are now multiple podcasts devoted to analyzing the hall's vision of rock.¹⁸ Rockism is still alive and well inside the critical apparatus, and "best of" lists, academic texts, museum exhibitions, and award ceremonies such as the Rock Hall's still play a massive part in defining rock's parameters. Representing people of marginalized identities within these bounds not only rectifies the insidious workings of historical erasure, it also expands ideas about what rock can be in the future.

I agree with Grier that canon makers should be cautious when they bring "forgotten" artists under the rock umbrella. As Grier so presciently demonstrates through his restoration of Aretha Franklin to Queen of Soul, "importations of musicians from other genres into rock's canon tend to misrepresent the musical priorities of communities."¹⁹ Grier also reminds readers that part of undoing rockism is denying the assumption that "all popular music criticism is rock-based" and examining a wider critical archive than the one that descends from *Creem* and *Rolling Stone*.²⁰ This allows us to problematize what "forgotten" truly means, since there have always been writers who celebrated the artists that rockists ignored. But what about the fans? Something Grier and many other critics seem to miss is that rockism isn't limited to criticism, academia, or popular music's other governing bodies. To adapt an Ann Powers quote, the idea that rock is the purview of white men "is a truth reinforced in many different ways."²¹ So what if those of us "seeking some way out of rockism" shifted our focus from rock's institutions to rock fans themselves? What would we learn about rockism if we approached it as something quotidian and constantly transforming, rather than as a debate amongst critics?

Grier's article hints at these possibilities. In the section "Recovering Rockists," Grier examines the writing of "a number of confessed rockists [who] have proposed reforms of rock's critical habits."²² What strikes me here is the idea that rockism is something from which people need to recover, as if it were a sickness or a traumatic event. Grier doesn't theorize what it means to recover from rockism, but other critics give us insight on the banal ways people become rockists in the first place: Jessica Hopper remembering how she wore a Soundgarden T-shirt in high school to impress boys, or Norma Coates fashioning herself as "a precocious fan of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones" rather than admitting her childhood love for the Monkees.²³ More recently, Maureen Mahon reflected on how rock's assumed whiteness and maleness affected her identity formation as a young Black woman. Describing her book *Black Diamond Queens* as one "I wish I had been able to read years ago when I was a teenager dedicating a sizable portion of my time, energy, and

18. Specifically, the podcasts *Who Cares About The Rock Hall?* and *Hall Watchers*.

19. *Ibid.*, 46.

20. *Ibid.*, 45.

21. Powers, "A New Canon."

22. Grier, 43.

23. Jessica Hopper, "Louder Than Love: My Teen Grunge Poserdom," in *The First Collection of Criticism By A Living Female Rock Critic* (Chicago: featherproof Books, 2015): 57–60; Norma Coates, "Teenyboppers, Groupies, and Other Grotesques: Girls and Women and Rock Culture in the 1960s and Early 1970s," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 15, no.1 (2003): 65.

cash to rock and roll,” Mahon explains how transformative it would have been to know about more Black women rockers at a young age.²⁴ Whether from friends, family, classmates, or the media that surrounded them, these writers learned that there were certain, “appropriate” ways to engage with rock and framed their actions accordingly.

It seems then that rockism, like other ideas about musical taste, is something people internalize at an early age. When they later realize how rockism shaped their musical experiences, usually by steering them away from particular artists or genres, there’s a reckoning of their listening habits, and, more poignantly, a real sense of loss about what their younger selves’ relationship to music could have been. This is why I want us to take Grier’s idea of recovering from rockism seriously. Even more, I want us to think about how we can help young rock fans resist rockism if and when it rears its head. Girls’ rock camps have been doing this work for years, and when I started volunteering with my local girls’ rock camp, I was surprised at how much anti-rockism factored into the organization’s culture. Girls’ rock camp isn’t about training the next generation of technically proficient rockers, it’s about providing youth with a safe place to express themselves and tools to make musical performance accessible. If campers want to be rock stars, great! But no genre reigns supreme, and volunteers deliberately introduce campers to all kinds of music. We also establish house rules to help campers support each other, such as “be a croissant, not a bagel” (be open minded, not closed off), and “don’t yuck my yum” (don’t put someone down for the music they like).²⁵ It’s rare that kids get the freedom to explore music in encouraging, non-judgmental spaces, especially girls who face so much scrutiny for every little thing they do. There’d be a lot less “recovering rockists” if the jam sessions, music classes, and guitar centers of the world operated like girls’ rock camp.

So, to mimic Grier and quote a line from a band that my students hail as the epitome of classic rock, “Where do we go now?”²⁶ The way out of rockism has many paths, but I’d suggest that the simplest route is treating anti-rockism as an everyday practice. In short, don’t be a rock troll. ■

24. Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens*, 17.

25. Much love to the Girls Rock Austin community for teaching me this kid-friendly pedagogy.

26. Learning that your Gen Z students worship Guns N’ Roses is a uniquely jarring experience.