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‘Roll Over Beethoven’: new experiences in art

When rock music made its first appearance with American rock’n’roll in the early fifties, using the word ‘art’ in this context would doubtless have seemed sacrilegious. Even today the claim that rock music is an art form still provokes heated discussion and intense resistance, although in the meantime rock has aspired to academic honours and the Beatles count as its ‘classics’. If to some people rock music signals a new musical creativity in the age of the mass media, to others it equally represents the mere substitution of commerce for art. Now we could just leave it at that without further observation. It is irrelevant to the actual effect of rock whether it is honoured with the description of ‘art’ or not. Since its real status in contemporary music culture hardly needs this sort of justification, such arguments are futile and unproductive.

However, if we want to understand what it is that rock evokes in its listeners and why this music has become in quantitative terms such a phenomenon in present-day music culture, we must start from the assumption that it should be regarded not only as the expression of general social relationships and economic mechanisms, but primarily as what it is to its young fans above all else – music. The significance that it holds, the values that it embodies and the pleasure that it provides are linked to its role as aesthetically relevant sound material. Even if it cannot be reduced to this level, but represents instead a very complex form of cultural activity (including, perhaps, dress and hair fashions, dance styles and poster collecting), the basis on which everything else rests is the music. As Michael Lydon quite correctly states: ‘There’s a million theories about rock’n’roll, what it is and what it means, but what is most obvious is most overlooked: it’s music.’ However trite such a conclusion may appear, it is
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anything but self-evident. If rock music is really to be understood in its cultural dimension it must be taken seriously as music and be accepted as a legitimate art form.

This only becomes a problem if it leads to the conclusion that those criteria of musical appreciation should apply for which Beethoven serves as a symbol, a conclusion which argues that the true meaning of music is encapsulated in Beethoven and his tradition. Although not always stated in quite such categorical terms, the majority of the countless misunderstandings that have accompanied the development of rock music are rooted in the transformation of this concept of music into an absolute standard. Measured against this, rock music would indeed be nothing but a meaningless noise, invented by a gigantic commercial enterprise to satisfy its profit requirements and made attractive to susceptible teenagers by an appealing exterior. However, this view can be countered by the fact that music is not defined by its means of expression — loud or soft, simple or extremely complex — but primarily by the effects which these achieve. The assumption that relevant and differentiated content, value and meaning can only be expressed by those musical means developed in the tradition of Beethoven and his successors not only contradicts the facts, but presents an equally ahistorical and mechanistic view of art. Artistic means of expression can never be considered separately from their cultural and functional context. There are a number of factors which affect this significantly — the question of whether music is more genuinely realised in the concert hall or in the mass media, the particular everyday activities, lifestyles and needs which music affects, the particular conditions of its production and distribution — and these factors have led not only to historical changes in the conception of music, but also to quite different perceptions of music. This has always been the case, but previously these differing perceptions did not clash as directly as they do today, when this process even intrudes into family life, creating discord between parents and children.

Thus, in order to take rock seriously as music, we need to investigate the conception of music which underlies it rather than apply aesthetic criteria and musical models that are completely alien to its cultural origins.

It is, however, rock’s champions themselves, musicians,
journalists and publicists, who have contributed significantly to this confusion. They have applied socially established views of music to rock in order to create a respect for it corresponding to its cultural status. In 1963, for example, Richard Buckle in The Sunday Times described the Beatles as: 'the greatest composers since Beethoven'.

A greater misunderstanding is scarcely imaginable, for such deep-seated differences exist between these two musical worlds that the one simply cannot be measured by the standards of the other. No less misleading is the opposing theory that would have rock music understood as a form of folk music, as expressed by the American rock historian Carl Belz, who starts from the premise 'that rock is a part of the long tradition of folk art in the United States and throughout the world'.

Rock music is organised according to principles that are neither those of folk music nor those of bourgeois art music. In trying to measure rock against either of these we fail to recognize its musical individuality and significantly distort the perspective from which we view it. Paradoxically, it was precisely the same originality which made rock stand out from the conventions of the traditional pop song and which led falsely to the attempt to subsume it in the genre of folk music or to declare it to be 'art' according to the standards of Beethoven.

In contrast, the conception of music which is genuinely at the centre of the development of rock music – even though rock has developed in many often opposing directions in the wake of stylistic differences – was formulated at a very early stage and quite unmistakably in the music itself. It was in 'Roll Over Beethoven', the Chuck Berry song that appeared in 1956, that the musical self-awareness of the rock'n'roll craze, then at its height in the USA, found a provocative and challenging expression, one which has remained something of a leitmotif. In the song the fascination of this music is compared with fever and illness, whose inevitability is taken as a metaphor for the overwhelming effect rock had at that time. Not without irony, while claiming the same status and cultural relevance, rock music appears self-consciously juxtaposed to an artistic appreciation, represented by the names of Beethoven and Tschaikowsky, for which we cannot imagine greater contrasts than a jukebox and a self-sufficient sensuousness. There is, no doubt, more to this than the simple provocation of adults by a pointed lack of respect.
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for their musical gods. What the black singer and guitarist Chuck Berry was screaming to his fans in this song, in his breathless ‘Roll Over Beethoven’, heralded a conception of music which had become aware of its own novelty and which challengingly contrasted this with all other musical traditions.

What was really new about rock was its relationship with the means of mass communication – record, radio, television and film. American rock’n’roll found its basic conditions of existence in these media and accepted this fact without compromise as a prerequisite for artistic creativity. Its commercial effectiveness, which no other form of music before it had possessed, was not attributable, as is usually claimed, to the supposed exotic nature of its Afro-American roots. Even in the swing era more than two decades earlier black musicians and bands had been acclaimed by a white audience, just as there had been exchanges between ‘black’ and ‘white’ music even before this, in spite of assertions to the contrary. The assumption of a completely separate development of Afro-American and European-American music is more a racist argument that [still] legitimises the established barriers between the races by accepting a real cultural contrast between ‘black’ and ‘white’ based on skin colour, a contrast first overcome by rock’n’roll. The relationship between the Afro-American minority in the USA and white Americans, against the background of arbitrarily established barriers between the races, is far more complex than such simplistic ‘black/white’ thinking makes clear.

The reason for the swift and spectacular spread of rock’n’roll lay, instead, in the fact that it was so much a part of the mass media, which developed explosively after 1945. Rock’n’roll was the first form of music to be distributed in mass quantities on record, the first form of music whose development was linked to radio, film and television. It is true that in the thirties records had already been so successful that an independent industry was established on the basis of this success. But its products still went mostly to jukebox installers or were reserved for the rather more exclusive body of classical music purchasers. In the early fifties this situation changed in the wake of a number of innovations in media technology which led to a rapid reduction in the price of records.

In 1948 CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) introduced the
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high fidelity long-playing record (LP), which was made possible by reducing the playing speed from 78 to 33⅓ revolutions per minute using vinyl plastic (with its twin advantages of low noise characteristics and great strength) instead of shellac. Not long after this RCA (Radio Corporation of America) brought out the 45 r.p.m. single, based on the same technology, as their answer to the competition’s LP. The single was aimed at the new teenage market and was priced within reach of teenagers’ pocket money. But probably the most far-reaching development in the realm of media technology was the introduction, directly after the Second World War, of magnetic tape for recording music. This replaced the costly electrical recording method in record production and created the necessary technical conditions to allow recordings to be corrected afterwards. In 1947 the swing guitarist Les Paul was already using the so-called sound-on-sound method for producing backing tracks, copying a finished recording together with an additional section onto a second tape. In multi-track recording – first used in 1954 with two separate recording tracks [the two-track method] and then developed step by step to the current standard of 24, 32 or 64 tracks – this principle became the basis of studio music production, with far-reaching consequences for musical performance. Up to this point, developments in media technology had never interfered directly with the structure of music. They had remained external, merely allowing the performance to be stored or reproduced, although even this did not leave music completely unaffected. Harvey Fuqua, lead singer in the fifties with the Moonglows – one of the hundreds of vocal rhythm & blues ensembles around at that time – and now a producer and manager, recalled those times in 1978 and offered a vivid description of how things were done in the studios before the introduction of multi-track recording:

It wasn’t like they’ve got 32 and 64 tracks to play with like today. They’d put the microphone right in the middle of the room and everybody stood round it, the band, the singers, everybody. If you wanted more of an instrument or a singer you’d have to move either back or forward. And you didn’t necessarily use drums then; you could use a telephone book and slap it. It was wild.
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This meant that in theory there was virtually no difference between the recording and the live music played on stage, although in practice the playing time of the record and the recording characteristics of the microphone already imposed constraints which had to be considered when songs were conceived. But while these remained exterior constraints, multi-tracking techniques literally revolutionised musical performance from within. It was now possible to separate the music into individual parts which were then put back together in the final mixing process. Instead of the reproduction of an acoustic totality, or musical snapshot, a sort of montage principle developed. The consequence of this was that the musical result became divorced from the actual performance and feedback between the two was only partially possible. As George Harrison once said: ‘Nobody knows what the tunes sound like till we’ve recorded them, then listened to them afterwards.’

It was no longer absolutely necessary for musicians to play together at recording sessions, indeed they no longer even needed to know one another in order to produce music together; the individual parts of the music could now be recorded at distant locations and at different times. Paul Simon’s description of the production of ‘The Boxer’, his first real success with Art Garfunkel, provides a classic example: ‘It was recorded all over the place – the basic tracks in Nashville, the end voices in New York St Paul’s Church, the strings in New York Columbia Studios and voices there too.’ Music created in this way naturally demanded different principles of performance and followed new structural and organisational rules. Rock music was based on far-reaching changes in music production. The foundations for these were laid in the fifties and first came to fruition in rock’n’roll. The impact of these new developments has lasted to the present day, changing the traditional relations of popular music production and distribution (previously dominated by the mighty music publishers of Tin Pan Alley) just as much as people’s contact with music in their daily lives. Yet the musical basis for this was already present in rock’n’roll, which has constantly served as a reference point for the vast majority of rock groups and rock musicians.

Two other innovations in media technology were to have equally important consequences: television and the portable
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radio, the latter made possible by transistor technology. Radio, which had previously been the most important means of distributing music, lost its audience to television, which was introduced at the end of the forties and was quickly accepted as the new family entertainment medium. Television also offered new prospects for the distribution of music, although at first its effect was indirect. Cinemas, coming under pressure from the unwelcome competition, reacted by orienting themselves to a young audience which was trying to escape the new family ritual in front of the television screen. Rock’n’roll was the perfect aid in this. Film, already important in the thirties in the development of hits, film hits, once again began to play a decisive role in the music business, except that the films now revolved around musical stars – whose acting often left something to be desired – and their songs. The worldwide success of a song like ‘Rock Around the Clock’ would have been unthinkable without the assistance of film, where it appeared more than once as a dramatic set piece – in The Blackboard jungle (1955),9 as well as in Rock Around the Clock (1956)10 and Don’t Knock the Rock (1957).11 In fact, when the record was first released in 1954 its sales were anything but good.

With the introduction of programmes for teenagers, television also proved to be an ideal platform for the spread of rock’n’roll, even if at first rock’s appearance provoked argument. The commercial status of a programme like American Bandstand – started in 1952 in Philadelphia by WFIL-TV and, from 1957 on, transmitted every Saturday morning across the whole of America by the ABC-TV network – with more than twenty million viewers every week can hardly be overstated. There can scarcely be a famous rock group or musician, from Chuck Berry through the Beatles and the Rolling Stones to Bruce Springsteen, who has not appeared on it during the thirty-plus years of the programme’s history. Video technology and above all the introduction in 1981 by the Warner-Amex Group (a joint undertaking of Warner Communications and American Express) of Music Television (MTV) on one channel of its cable network, playing hit performances in the form of video clips nonstop, around the clock, have made television a tremendously important factor in the development of music.
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Radio had found itself in a vacuum after the loss of its traditional audience and responded by focussing on specialist musical interests and target groups that could be defined as closely as possible. Through programmes reserved exclusively for rock and pop, radio became the teenager's daily companion. When the first battery driven and relatively cheap portable radios came on the market in the USA in 1954, teenagers held in their hands a medium that was out of reach of parental control and influence. From the mid-fifties in the USA alone some ten million radios were sold every year. With these radios, teenagers for the first time had a fully independent access to the media through which they could assert their own musical interests. This was to prove the decisive precondition for the shaping of age-specific music needs, and rock developed in this environment. It was no coincidence that the worldwide spread of rock’n’roll coincided everywhere with the introduction of the 45 r.p.m. single and the portable radio.

This explosive development of the mass media heralded a radical change in the conditions of production, distribution, reception and effect of music, a change which first took place in the industrially highly developed USA, a country not faced with the devastating destruction of the Second World War. Chuck Berry’s ‘Roll Over Beethoven’ reflected this change quite precisely, not only the superficiality of the rock’n’roll craze which was fanned by commercial interests, but even more the feeling that against this background all established musical conventions could be called into question. The development of rock’n’roll, with the technology of audio-visual mass communication and the social changes within the culture which it provoked, did in fact literally roll over the aesthetic maxims of Beethoven and the great bourgeois musical tradition. The changes were far-reaching.

The bourgeois musical tradition is grounded in an essentially contemplative mode of listening in the concert hall, immersed in the structural detail (of the music) and requiring ‘understanding’. It is not at home in a media reality which slots music into as many contexts as possible. Via the media, reception of the same piece of music can vary from the intensive, demanding concentrated attention, to the partial, switching between listening and not listening, or even to the casual, since music is
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continually present in different everyday contexts, from homework to housework. The traditional criteria of bourgeois musical appreciation were bound to come into conflict with such a complex web of relationships. In parallel with this, the relevance of the Tin Pan Alley hit, the ‘pleasant, universal, well-constructed song’ of the pop music tradition, linked to the great New York publishing empires and the printing of music, was increasingly called into question. These hits had become meaningless mechanical music which followed patterns of success preserved over decades, at odds with the everyday experiences to which the media were attempting to link music in an increasingly complex fashion. Above all, however, the possibilities of mass media studio production went beyond the limits of what could be set down in musical notation, which soon put these studios beyond the use of the composers and music publishers. Both traditional songwriters and music publishers became less and less relevant in the process of music production.

The conception of music which was beginning to develop in this context was forced to differ significantly from all earlier ones. For it was faced with continuing changes in the conditions of music production and distribution, due to the new technical media, as well as changes in the way music was received and had its effect, now that most people's contact with music was via record, radio and television. Rock music was the product of the social processes provoked by these changes, social processes which signalled a radical alteration in the social conditions (of existence) of music culture. Commenting on this period, Kurt Blaukopf spoke correctly of a ‘mutation of musical behaviour within the social totality’. This mutation became apparent first and most clearly in the way teenagers made use of music, since they were the age group with the most intense involvement with music.

Of course this is not the only explanation for the change in the position of musical culture which took place with the blossoming of the mass communications media. The more direct cause of this change was the change in living and working conditions after 1945 in all the countries of developed capitalism, resulting from the scientific and technical intensification of production processes. Probably the most significant indication of this is a comprehensive shift in value from work to leisure, where those
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things which could no longer be found in work – a purpose in life, opportunities for personal realisation and personal values – were increasingly sought. The growing automation of industrial production finally destroyed the traditional ties of the working class to its work. The division of work into routine operations, within the framework of capitalist exploitation, offered a declining opportunity to identify with work as the central purpose in life. The changing structure of production, with its tendency to polarisation between machine-run, depersonalised manual work on the one hand and a highly qualified technical specialist class on the other, excluded the possibility of individual promotion just as much as the naked attitude of exploitation itself did, an exploitation which could no longer be circumvented by the traditional craft ethics of work, by pride in individual skills and their realisation in the finished piece of work. Work degenerated completely to a mere money-earning activity, to an interchangeable ‘job’, which was only encouraged by the trend towards a mobile and flexible workforce in this type of production. In this way, all the ideals of life were transferred to leisure, a transfer that gradually took place in all social classes and which was accompanied by an extensive expansion of the consumer goods sector within capitalist production industry. The slogan ‘consumer society’ was coined. This term concealed an idolisation of leisure and consumption, which saw in these twin pursuits the only important realm of human fulfilment and believed the loss of purpose at work to be compensated by an increase of purpose in leisure. But even David Riesman, who in the fifties constructed one of the most influential cultural theories of his time in his book The Lonely Crowd, later had to admit: ‘that the burden put on leisure by the dis-integration of work is too huge to be coped with; leisure itself cannot rescue work, but fails with it, and can only be meaningful for most men if work is meaningful’.

In spite of this, the process of increasing the value of leisure proved to be a cultural phenomenon with almost unlimited implications whose consequences were not restricted to the change in attitudes to work and the compensation in leisure for deficits in meaning and experience. The evolution of leisure into a field of personal development, experienced as increasingly important, also spawned cultural demands. This not only gave the mass media