

From PRESENT TENSE: Rock & Roll
and Culture (Anthony DeCurtis, ed.)

Glenn Gass

Why Don't We Do It in the Classroom?

It could be a scene out of any college classroom at exam time: the nervous looks, head-pounding and frustrated I-knew-that-last-night expressions as the students grope to remember if Brian Jones was (a) the leader of the Beach Boys? (b) the Beatles's manager? (c) one of the original Rolling Stones? (d) none of the above?

Brian Jones?! The correct answer, by the way, is "c." The next question on more than a few minds might be, "Why is this being taught in a college class?" (a) because university standards have sunk to new lows? (b) because music departments need the money generated by large course enrollments? (c) because rock is a vital musical form and cultural force? (d) because Brian Jones was also a classical violinist of exceptional ability? Again the answer is "c," though opinions on that vary, to say the least (and "b" would, too often, be a correct response as well). In spite of the predictable complaints and resistances, classes on rock music, such as the series of rock history courses I teach at Indiana University,

are being offered by a rapidly growing number of universities, reflecting a general trend toward interdepartmental studies of popular culture that is only now reaching most music schools and conservatories. Roll over, Beethoven: thirty-seven years after Elvis's first recordings, rock has its own traditions and its own treasured "classics."

Seeing Rock & Roll next to Symphonic Literature and Music Appreciation in course listings must seem like a nightmare come true for more traditionally minded faculty members whose view of culture involves a refined sensibility that must be learned and earned. Rock courses are still waging the same struggle for acceptance that jazz studies faced on their way to becoming standard offerings, and facing the same prejudices that view "popular" as synonymous with cheap, crude, and unrefined. I know I get my share of horrified looks when "Satisfaction" comes blasting out of my classroom. Composer Milton Babbitt once lamented that his students studied "serious" music all day, then went home and listened to "the same music the janitors liked."¹ As Allan Bloom put it, "[Rock music] ruins the imagination of young people and makes it very difficult for them to have a passionate relationship to the art and thought that are the substance of liberal education. . . . [A]s long as they have the Walkman on, they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say."²

The Great Tradition is apparently in serious trouble, and rock music makes an easy target for those who need something to blame for the fact that classical music is losing the depressingly small audience it had to begin with. On the other hand, the Great Tradition itself is an easy target in these politically correct times. Rock's assault on academia mirrors a heightened interest in world music and ethnomusicology and a general acknowledgment of the need to move beyond the near religious canonization of Western (white male) art music that has been the entire focus of musical higher education.³ It seems, though, that the validity granted the popular musics of other cultures is only grudgingly granted that of our own, and that even when ours is approached, rock and pop still tend to be viewed merely as illegitimate offspring of "authentic" musics like the blues, country, and gospel. As a classical composer and rock fan who likes Milton Babbitt and Bruce Springsteen (and a lot of other things serious musi-

cians and janitors listen to), I have a hard time understanding how anyone could argue with the simple assertion that the best of any type of music can reward repeated listening and, in a classroom, help to sharpen aural skills and musical awareness. Ideally, one could hope that studying one type of music will inspire students to explore another, that rock history will lead to jazz and classical appreciation courses. This happens occasionally and should surely be encouraged (this is often used as a rationale for nontraditional offerings). Most often, though, the students who enroll in rock courses would otherwise avoid music offerings and will probably not take another—all the more reason to reach them now, any way we can. Since they will listen to rock & roll in any case, why not help them to listen more creatively and with greater insight into the music's history, techniques, and cultural role?

Granted, it's still hard to compare "Tutti Frutti" with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, but why compare them? Rock music—indeed, all music—must be approached and appreciated within the context of the era and aesthetic in which it was created, and at the same time made fresh and vital for today. The amateurish quality, in the best and worst senses, of most rock music does pose special problems in the classroom, but it also offers an opportunity to address and discuss the music on the type of straightforwardly emotional level too often neglected in traditional music courses. There are, of course, many musical elements to notice as well: songwriting and vocal styles, instrumental and production techniques, song forms, band arrangements, musical influences, lyrical references, and rhythmic patterns, to mention only a few. But rock & roll can be as dull and repetitious as some of my classical colleagues say if it is approached with the same methods and criteria one applies to a Mozart sonata—if Bob Dylan's voice is evaluated as if he were auditioning for the Met, or if the chord structure of "Louie Louie" and the melodic contours of "Mother Popcorn" are analyzed in terms of pitch sets and Schenkerian reductions. Theoretical abstractions and rote memorization tend to take students further away from the music itself, while musical transcriptions and technical analyses are scarcely more effective at getting at the energy that made the music so exciting to begin with.

In trying to make sure that I teach rock & roll for the same reasons

that I love it, I find that I constantly walk a tightrope between the need to make my courses “serious” enough for a college classroom and fun enough to keep Keith Richards from gagging, should he happen to wander in. It’s a hard balancing act, though I try to err on the side of irreverence and make no apologies for having strong personal tastes that are inevitably reflected in course material. My first concern is that students know and love the music—learning details *about* the music is important, but secondary. Even then, I try to focus on what they hear and on what made the artist unique, and tend to shy away from pointless guitar solo transcriptions or overly technical discussions of chord progressions, “rock lyrics as poetry,” rock as “ritual dance music for a new tribe of disaffected youth,” and the like. The music itself needs no justification and yields its own rewards as long as it is not forced into a strict analytic model or academicism that loses sight of the music’s emotional power, spontaneity, and sheer fun. The strict “cultural studies” approach to rock music gaining currency in academic classes and journals can, with the best intentions, render an even greater disservice by focusing so exclusively on audience responses, ideological agendas, mind-numbing charts of lyrical references, and abstract, post-Marxist theories on the popular that tend to ignore the fact that these are *songs*, written, played, and sung by real people with guitars in their hands. This peculiar type of reverse discrimination tends to validate popular music, only to consign it to a cultural studies ghetto where it is still “only rock & roll,” but now interesting as an assumed background “text” that gains importance when it is manifested as a function of youth, a product consumed in fascinating ways, a reflection of society, class structures, etc. These are all important issues, to be sure, but “Eight Days a Week” is just fine all by itself, too.

There are, of course, many rewarding approaches to rock/pop music possible within the framework of a university. Sociology, English, Cultural Studies, Telecommunications, Comparative Literature, and other departments—even Music departments—can all embrace rock & roll as a legitimate and compelling topic applicable to their interests. The fact that it is a popular subject and already an integral part of most students’ lives should be cause for celebration rather than scorn. Isn’t helping students make sense of their own lives, world, and culture one of the central aims of higher education?

While some still argue that rock will “cheapen” curricula and academic standards, there is a different and more valid concern coming from the opposite direction—that rock’s ascent to the classroom is, at best, a hollow victory for such gloriously unacademic music. Whether or not rock “deserves” to be taken so seriously, it certainly never asked to be taken so seriously. At the 1990 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame ceremony, Kinks leader Ray Davies looked out at the sea of tuxedos and noted that rock & roll “has become respectable.” Visibly shaken by the applause (applause?!) that greeted his remark, Davies quickly added “what a bummer.”

Indeed, the last—and worst—thing anyone thought rock & roll could ever become was “respectable,” yet here it is, crammed into tuxedos at awards ceremonies, embraced by middle-aged babyboomers, exploited by Madison Avenue as an effective marketing tool and fast achieving the ultimate stamp of legitimacy as a subject for college classes. How respectable can you get? Or, more to the point, how respectable can rock get before it loses the very urgency and rebellious spirit that made it so exciting to begin with? The Band’s Robbie Robertson once said that “music should never be harmless,” but isn’t rock rendered exactly that when it is studied in a classroom and assigned as homework? You must address historical and musical details, but can students get emotionally involved with Little Richard while they’re worrying about remembering who his sax players were or what year he recorded “Long Tall Sally” or whether it’s a 12-bar blues?

Those questions continue to haunt me, as I’m sure they haunt many others trying to force “All along the Watchtower” into the Ivory Tower, though my misgivings about the classroom as a viable arena for rock have lessened over the years. When I was first hired, much to my surprise, to teach jazz and rock history at a junior college in Wisconsin in 1977, the thought of sticking rock in a classroom and assigning it as homework seemed absurd. I was quite comfortable with the musical schizophrenia that separated my classical training and composing from my love for rock & roll and feared that combining the two would cheapen both (the same sort of feeling I had later when I heard the Kronos Quartet playing “Purple Haze”). The rock music I loved still seemed too new to be “history,” too emotionally personal to discuss coherently, and far too exciting and rebellious to be deemed respectable enough for a college class. In those disco-

mad days, though, it seemed that rock might indeed be history, as in “dead.” I quickly learned, for example, that my students had only the faintest knowledge that the recently deceased King of Rock & Roll had ever been anything but a running joke on late-night movies. Most had never heard of—much less heard—Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, Martha Reeves, Roy Orbison, or Smokey Robinson, and were quite surprised to learn that Linda Ronstadt wasn’t the first to sing “That’ll Be the Day,” “When Will I Be Loved” and “Heatwave,” not to mention “Blue Bayou” and “Tracks of My Tears.” Not all of the students were of the “I hear Paul McCartney was in a band before Wings” variety, but enough had never heard “Great Balls of Fire” to make me think there was a point to teaching rock after all, if only to make sure they’d heard it.

There are still college students who have never listened to Jerry Lee Lewis, but, happily, far fewer these days. Yesterday’s hits, formerly relegated to the Oldies bins and a few AM nostalgia stations, are now enshrined as Classic Rock—timeless works of the Old Masters who live on in CD reissues and reunion tours and carry the weight of their legacy like an elderly Stravinsky conducting the *Rite of Spring*. Free from the confines of MTV and specific video imprints, they live on as songs, suspended in time for each new listener to claim, define, and apply to his or her own life (unless they have already been rendered lifeless in California Raisins or Coke commercials). Even the newer artists tend to define their stance and claims to “authenticity” in terms of rock’s glory days, many invoking their ancestors directly with reverent covers of old hits or with sounds, images, and fashions that evoke the aura of rock’s noble and defiant past. For all the new stars, trends, and technologies that appeared in the 1980s, the decade seemed dominated by triumphant comebacks, rock anniversaries—of the Summer of Love, Woodstock, the Beatles hitting America—and one musical “revival” after another, ranging from the rockabilly revival that opened the decade to the psychedelic revival that closed it, with blues, heavy metal, folk, mainstream pop, roots rock, traditional country & western, and even punk and disco revivals thrown in along the way, as if the basic parameters within which rock works had all been explored and fixed by the end of the 1970s.

There were also, of course, plenty of new stars, visions, and voices

to give rock's heritage a personal stamp, and plenty of rap groups and alternative bands to prove that it has not all been done or said. Most of my students, nonetheless, continue to list bands and albums from the 1960s as their personal favorites and seem quite fascinated by that decade (especially for a generation otherwise known for its historical amnesia); more than a few dress and act as if they'd just returned from Woodstock and none of them were alive when Woodstock took place! Classic rock is history to them, their Great Tradition, and the giggles at getting course credit for rock & roll, and the delight at "pulling one over on their parents" I encountered a decade ago, have been replaced by a genuine desire to learn about rock's heritage—the type of searching curiosity that should make even Allan Bloom feel heartened. The reaction of my students' parents has changed even more dramatically: I used to spend a good deal of time writing notes explaining that "Rock History" was indeed a real and worthwhile class; these days I spend more time fending off parents' requests for copies of my class listening tapes and nodding politely as they tell me how happy they are that their sons and daughters are being exposed to good music like the Beatles and Elvis rather than the junk they play on the radio. It's getting harder for rock to perform its most crucial function (driving parents crazy) now that Dad keeps yelling "Turn it up!" or "I used to love that song!" In any case, it's worth remembering that most current college students were first exposed to "classic" rock by their parents; and instead of rebelling against it, they found lyrics that still spoke to their lives and concerns, and a musical vitality undimmed by the decades. Although this might be a rather sad commentary on the music scene of today and the suffocating media stranglehold of the babyboomers and "classic rock," it also speaks well of rock's ability to retain its youth and resonance, and bolsters the arguments for rock as a musical form of lasting value that deserves attention, even in classrooms.

Rock & roll is here to stay, as they say, or said, thirty-three years ago (Danny and the Juniors, that is, Question #23, answer "b"). Its uniquely American roots in blues, rhythm & blues, boogie-woogie, country & western, pop, and gospel musics make it a fascinating melting pot that should be a great source of interest and pride. Still rightly claimed as "our music" by each new generation, rock's em-

bodiment of the dreams, values, experience, and worldview of those generations also offers a vital focal point for discussions of recent times and culture. The current controversies surrounding rap and heavy metal prove that even its ability to challenge and threaten remains intact. It's heartening, in a way, to hear Tipper Gore and the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), the archbishop of New York, several state legislatures and other defenders of morals attacking rock & roll, and heartening for the same reasons to know that there are still plenty of people who think rock has no business in a college classroom. The day rock truly becomes respectable will be sad indeed, but it might be inevitable. We're close enough to it already to make poor Brian Jones roll in his grave: "Satisfaction" has become homework, his former bandmates are encased in the Hall of Fame, and by now he could have been a Distinguished Professor.

Notes

- 1 Milton Babbitt, lecture at Indiana University, 1987.
- 2 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York, 1987), 79–80.
- 3 The history and fallacy of our obsession with the Great Tradition is presented convincingly in a paper by Austin B. Caswell, "How We Got into Canonicity and What It Has Done to Us: An American Music Historian's View of Music in Academia," forthcoming in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*.