

DIGITAL ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD
DASH.HARVARD.EDU

HARVARD LIBRARY

Power Chords and Politics: Guitar Distortion as a Topic in American Rock

Citation

Williams, Jeffrey Daniel. 2022. Power Chords and Politics: Guitar Distortion as a Topic in American Rock. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

Link

https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37372257

Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material (LAA), as set forth at
https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFlOWI2M2EwYTg

Accessibility

https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. Submit a story

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences



DISSERTATION ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

The undersigned, appointed by the

Department of Music

have examined a dissertation entitled

Power Chords and Politics: Guitar Distortion as a Topic in American Rock

presented by

Jeffrey Daniel Williams

candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and hereby certify that it is worthy of acceptance.

Signature _____

Prof. Suzannah Clark

Signature _____

Prof. Alexander Rehding

Signature _____

Prof. Ingrid Monson

Date: May 9, 2022

Power Chords and Politics: Guitar Distortion as a Topic in American Rock

A dissertation presented

by

Jeffrey Daniel Williams

to

The Department of Music

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Music

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2022

© 2022, Jeffrey Daniel Williams

All Rights Reserved

Dissertation Advisors: Suzannah Clark and Alexander Rehding Jeffrey Daniel Williams

Power Chords and Politics: Guitar Distortion as a Topic in American Rock

Abstract

Guitar distortion has been a foundational sound of rock & roll since its beginnings in the 1950s United States. That sound has carried multiple meanings for different groups of people within American society, simultaneously representing freedom, rebellion, progress, anger, degeneracy, and even violence. In this dissertation, I trace the semiotic history of guitar distortion through a series of case studies in which the meaning of the music was contested and brought groups of people into conflict. Studies of semiotics in music have primarily concentrated on firmly knowable and clear examples. Guitar distortion and studies in popular music, however, give insight into the workings of symbols in the often-messy real world.

In five chapters I cover the key moments of change in the meaning of distortion. I start by outlining the importance and relevance of semiotics and topic theory, also giving background on the history of popular music analysis and exploring the philosophical definitions of violence, power, and noise. Chapter two begins with the invention and popularization of distortion in early rock and roll, demonstrating how violence was encoded in its meaning both by the technological nature of its creation, but also by social forces of youthful rebellion and racism. The third chapter uses the Parents' Music Resource Center's movement to regulate the music industry in the 1980s to examine the link between sound and lyrics and how sonic morality is contested in the political sphere. Through

investigating the history of distortion in a variety of punk and metal subgenres in the ‘80s and ‘90s, the fourth chapter explores the dissolution of a symbol, as distortion becomes so widespread in popular music that it begins to lose its historical meaning. The final case study re-examines the creation of a new meaning for distortion by analyzing contemporary rock’s tendency to refer to its own nostalgic past in the music of Greta Van Fleet.

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Copyright	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Dedication	x
Chapter 1: Distortion, Noise, and Power: Semiotics and Topic Theory in Popular Music Analysis	1
Chapter 2: The Electric Guitar, Race, and Cultural Conflict in Early Rock & Roll	34
Chapter 3: Violence, Metal, and the Parents Music Resource Center	67
Chapter 4: Punk, Hardcore, and the Disassociation of Distortion with Rebellion	103
Chapter 5: Signification of the Past and Nostalgia in the Music of Greta Van Fleet	133
Conclusion	170
Works Cited	174
Discography	188

List of Figures

1.1	Clean and clipped sine waves	4
1.2	Ferdinand de Saussure's Diagrams of the Sign	7
1.3	Philip Tagg's Diagram of Message Transmission in Popular Music	19
2.1	Lyrics to "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" by Big Joe Turner and Bill Haley, Compared	41
2.2	The inside of a humbucker pickup	49
2.3	Charlie Christian playing a Gibson ES-150 guitar	50
3.1	The "Filthy Fifteen"	68
3.2	Coven's Debut Album: Witchcraft Destroys Minds & Reaps Souls	73
3.3	The "Filthy Fifteen" relisted	82
3.4	The Parental Advisory Sticker	101
4.1	Tom Morello with his Stratocaster	106
4.2	A Twitter Reply to Tom Morello	129
4.3	An Instagram Reply to @blueslawyermemes	130
5.1	Nicholas Russo's Diagram of "Derivateness" in Retro Rock	144
5.2	Analysis of the Songs of *Anthem of the Peaceful Army*	149
5.3	Analysis of the Sections of "Age of Man"	150
5.4	Transcription of "Back in Black" by AC/DC	152
5.5	Transcription of "The Lemon Song" by Led Zeppelin	152
5.6	Transcription of "When the Curtain Falls" by Greta Van Fleet	153
5.7	A Gibson Les Paul	156
5.8	A Gibson SG	158
5.9	Pictures of Greta Van Fleet Performing and the Album Cover to *Anthem of the Peaceful Army*	160
5.10	Album Covers to Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* and Yes' *Tales from Topographic Oceans*	161

Acknowledgements

There are far too many people to thank for helping me get this dissertation past the finish line, but I will attempt to do my best. I need to begin with my co-advisors, Suzannah Clark and Alexander Rehding. From the moment I arrived at Harvard, Suzie has been one of the most dedicated teachers I have ever encountered. The thought, care, and effort she puts into her instruction is readily apparent, and she always places what the students need above her personal interests. She brings the same dedication to her advising; her feedback and comments are incredibly thorough, and she is both generous with praise and constructive criticism when needed. I will also greatly miss simultaneously laughing and groaning at her puns. What I will remember most about Alex is his unbridled enthusiasm for all things music, but especially what his students are interested in. Whatever odd topic or meme I was into at the moment, Alex would always be willing to dive in with me, bringing both the intellectual rigor and whimsical levity required. His efficiency and responsiveness go unmatched, and his enthusiasm and critiques were invaluable in pushing my project to the end. I will forever be grateful for having both of their guidance.

Numerous other faculty aided my doctoral education and dissertation process. My third committee member, Ingrid Monson, designed the course on music and the anthropology of ethics that would spawn this project. Having an ethnomusicological perspective was instrumental in the thinking that led me through my research, and having someone with whom I could share a profound love of Led Zeppelin didn't hurt either. Chris Hasty expanded my thinking on what music theory and, indeed, the study of music at all could be. Ideas I encountered through taking classes from, teaching for, and simply being in the vicinity of Vijay Iyer were also crucial to my project. And Katy Leonard, Wayne Marshall,

and Alejandro Madrid provided the opportunity to explore, teach, and share the love of popular music and politics that otherwise might have proven difficult to find at the Harvard music department. My project would not be what it is without all these wonderful scholars and instructors.

Huge thanks also go out to all those who made Harvard my home for the last seven years. To all those at the Harvard choirs for allowing me to continue to perform and for giving me the chance to grow with you as we explored what music making in the 21st century could be. Particular thanks go out to Andy Clark, Jon Mott, and my childhood friend Adam Kind for connecting me with them. Thank you to all the music department and library staff who supported me throughout the years, including Nancy Shafman, Eva Kim, Karen Rynne, Kaye Denny, Charles Stillman, Liz Berndt-Morris, and Kerry Masteller. An extra thank you to Chris Danforth for always being willing to discuss random facts about sound equipment and guitar gear, and to Rob Hart for allowing me to experiment with constructing guitars and effects pedals in the Harvard maker's space.

So many others helped me get where I am in my music education. My professors at the University of Wisconsin – Madison—Brian Hyer, Lee Blasius, John Schaffer, and Johannes Wallmann—gave me a firm grounding in the practice of academic music theory and jazz studies. Also thank you to my colleagues there—Matt Ambrosio, Erik Gibelyou, Stephen Kovaciny, and Deanna Clement—for guiding my writing and for their friendship. My professors at the University of Virginia started me down this path, and I would not be here without the guidance of Fred Maus, Michael Puri, Richard Will, John D'earth, and Pete Spaar. Also thank you to Ken Elzinga, the famed economics professor who recognized my passion for music and suggested I major in it after hearing me speak for only a few minutes. And my high school (and elementary school) band director, Mary Jo West, instilled in me a love for music and put up with far more antics than she deserved.

I would be nowhere without the companionship and camaraderie of my fellow graduate students in the Harvard music department. A list of names seems maddeningly short for what each has meant to both my musical thought and life in general, but it will have to suffice: Giulia Accornero, Katie Callam, Lee Cannon-Brown, Ian Copeland, John Dilworth, Hayley Fenn, Elaine Fitz Gibbon, David Forrest, Sarah Koval, Giulio Minniti, Felipe Ledesma-Núñez, Laurie Lee, Edwin Li, Bill O'Hara, Kate Mancey, Diane Oliva, Uri Schreter, Henry Stoll, Jacob Sunshine, Danny Walden, Anna Wang, Audrey Woźniak, and Payam Yousefi. I need to give deeper thanks to three of my colleagues. To Samantha Jones, for giving me the idea for the opening to this dissertation, and because she specifically asked for a mention in these acknowledgements as the price. To Alex Cowan for reading and editing significant pieces of this project, and for his consistent friendship and willingness to engage with whatever musical, academic, or political ideas are swimming through my head at any given moment. And to Will Bennett, for also reading and editing my work, for his deep critical engagement, for his relentless piss-taking and his willingness to have it returned, and for being there every step of the way.

And finally, to all my friends and family who have supported my various musical endeavors throughout the years. There are far too many of you to name, but know that you all have had a deep impact on my life. Thank you especially to Jerry Becker for driving me home from hanging out with his son, Yusof, and waiting in the car with us so we could listen to "Won't Get Fooled Again" to the end; that was the moment I decided I needed to play the bass. And to my parents, for always encouraging me and never telling me to put down the "electric twanger" and "do something with my life." I will always be forever grateful.

To Yusof, Nathan, Adam, and Izzat,

or as we were briefly known in 2006-2007, Elephant's Graveyard

Chapter 1

Distortion, Noise, and Power: Semiotics and Topic Theory in Popular Music Analysis

On Sunday, July 25, 1965, Bob Dylan performed for the second night in a row at the Newport Folk Festival in what would become one of the most infamous moments in the history of folk and rock. Unlike the previous night, which had featured all acoustic songs, Dylan performed on an electric guitar backed by a full blues band. Dylan had starred at the previous two Newport Folk Festivals and his performance was one of the most highly anticipated at this year's edition. But by most popular accounts of that night, the audience response was, at best, mixed, with crowd reactions containing a notable number of boos. Particularly upset was Pete Seeger, a folk singer, songwriter, and, in many ways, the leader of the folk revival movement in the 1950s and 60s United States. How and why could a change in instrumentation and the resulting change in sounds and timbres create such a controversy?

To answer that question, it is necessary to go beyond the sounds themselves; we must investigate the context and embedded cultural meanings to grasp the full significance of that event. The folk revival movement had centered on a set of values that placed community building at the forefront. Songs often contained a social or political purpose, and emphasis was placed on the audibility of the lyrics, which, in turn, often led to audience participation. These "singalongs" were encouraged and practiced by those like Seeger and had been in place at the Newport Folk Festival since its first iteration in 1959. Dylan was seen by some to be the heir apparent to Seeger and had performed political songs with easily intelligible lyrics at the 1963 and 1964 festivals. Thus, when Dylan electrified his band, it

was no mere change in instrumentation and timbre; it was a direct challenge to the established values of the folk scene that Dylan had previously adhered to. As Benjamin Filene notes:

> The grinding, distorted roar that Dylan unleashed attacked the very core of Seeger's philosophy of performance—that a concert was an opportunity to build community. Seeger's sing-along techniques strove to engage audience members in a common cause—making music. He tapped into the alternative meaning of the word "concert": he wanted the spectators to join together as a single, united body, working together *in concert*. The blare of Dylan's guitar at Newport suggested a different conception of the spectators' role. The overwhelming volume precluded a group sing: audience members could not have heard one another, and, as Seeger said frantically, "Damn it, you can't hear the words!" Dylan's song set at Newport was a performance done for and perhaps to his audience, but he had little interest in allowing it to be done *by* them.[1]

Note the descriptors Filene chooses to describe Dylan's sound: a "grinding, distorted roar," the "blare of Dylan's guitar," and the "overwhelming volume." Indeed, these were not the sounds and values of folk, but of rock & roll. One of those sounds, in particular, is perhaps the most important to the development of rock: the distorted electric guitar.

We'll begin this exploration of the social and cultural meanings of guitar distortion by examining the technical and acoustical basis of its sound. When designing electronic amplification equipment, early builders and inventors' primary goal was to reproduce sound and audio signals as accurately and "cleanly" as possible. Any alteration that occurs between the incoming and outgoing signals—with the exceptions of changes in signal gain (amplitude/volume) or phase (the initial direction of the sound wave)—is *distortion*.[2] *Linear distortion* occurs, on the one hand, when audio equipment either amplifies some frequencies more than others (acting like an EQ filter) or when some

[1] Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*, Cultural Studies of the United States (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 213.

[2] William M. Hartmann, *Principles of Musical Acoustics*, Undergraduate Lecture Notes in Physics (New York, NY: Springer New York : Imprint: Springer, 2013), 180.

frequencies are delayed more than others, creating a phasing effect. *Nonlinear distortion*, on the other hand, results in additional frequencies in the outgoing signal, which, in many audio applications, are considered undesirable and unpleasant. Nonlinear distortion occurs when the input signal is unable to oscillate feely along its entire wavelength. In an example of a simple sine wave, as in figure 1 below, the middle and bottom examples clip off the top and bottom of the waves; it is as if the wave *should* be able to continue yet has hit some sort of threshold. In practice, this threshold is the result of limitations of either vibrating or purely electronic audio amplification components. If a vibrating component—such as a speaker—is prevented from vibrating in its designed manner, then distortion will result. Purely electronic components in audio circuits, meanwhile, have signal gain limitations, and when an input signal that surpasses these limitations is sent through, the output signal is clipped off, resulting in *harmonic distortion* that adds harmonic frequencies to the audio signal.[3]

[3] Hartmann, 182.

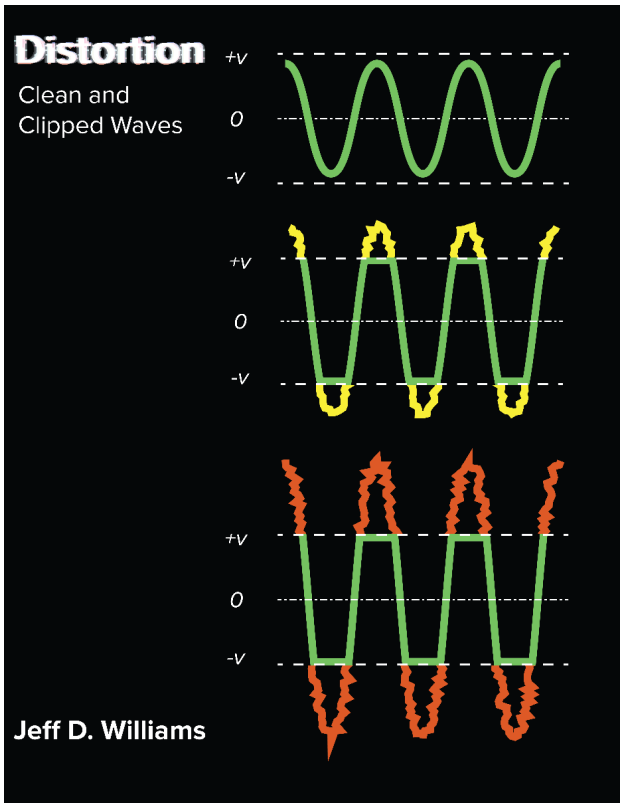


Figure 1.1 - Clean and clipped sine waves.

Guitar distortion has been an important timbre in the construction of all types of rock since its beginnings in 1940s blues clubs, specifically because it has been tied to personal and group identities and song meanings. Crucially, however, those meanings and identities have neither been consistent across time nor even within a specific time period. Instead, distortion's symbolic meaning has been a site of contestation between opposing groups within (Anglo-)American society, and that contestation has served as a proxy for broader political and cultural battles. Indeed, determining what distortion *means* in any given time and place requires the understanding of its surrounding context. *How* was guitar distortion used, and *why*? What did its proponents find so valuable, and what did its detractors (sometimes vehemently) oppose? How do the basic sonic features of this particular timbre relate to the extramusical meanings attached to it?

The following chapters are a sociohistorical chronicle of the semiotic meaning of guitar distortion, and an analysis of the role it played in musical meaning. Through this study, I hope to show how cultural context informs musical features to aid in meaning construction, and conversely, how artists and songs use musical features to comment on and affect the broader culture they find themselves within. This first chapter provides the theoretical and philosophical foundation for that sociohistorical analysis. I begin by overviewing semiotics and topic theory, the former of which discusses the functioning of signs, symbols, and representation generally, while the latter examines the application of semiotics to sound and music. I follow that with a discussion of popular music analysis, making the case why a semiotic/topic investigation is especially valuable. I end with a philosophical overview of noise, violence, and power, all of which are important concepts intimately tied to the meaning of guitar distortion.

Semiotics and Topic Theory

Semiotics is the study of *signs*, a sign being something that communicates a meaning other than itself to another person. Anything can be a sign, including objects, images, gestures, or sounds, but the concept of the sign was originally developed in linguistics to describe words and the function of language, and the two linguists most known for its development are Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure wrote of the sign:

> A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern. The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses. This sound pattern may be called a "material" element only in that it is the

> representation of our sensory impressions. The sound pattern may thus be distinguished from the other element associated with it in a linguistic sign. This other element is generally of a more abstract kind: the concept.[4]

Saussure describes here a bipartite division of *sign* into the "sound pattern" or "sound image"—commonly referred to in English as the *signifier*—and the "concept," otherwise known as the *signified*. For Saussure, both pieces of the sign were psychological in nature, the signifier being a mental interpretation of something registered by the senses—for example, sound in the case of a spoken word—and the signified being an abstract concept. Saussure's diagrams are included below in Figure 1, where he gives the example of the word "arbor" as a signifier for the concept of a tree (the signified).[5] Additionally, Saussure posited that signs are wholly *arbitrary*, meaning there is no evidential reason for the relationship between a particular signifier and signified other than purely cultural or historical reasons (the exceptions he allows are onomatopoeias and exclamations).[6] Meaning, then, is created through the *difference* between arbitrary signs.

[4] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986), 66.

[5] Saussure, 66–67.

[6] Saussure, 67–69.

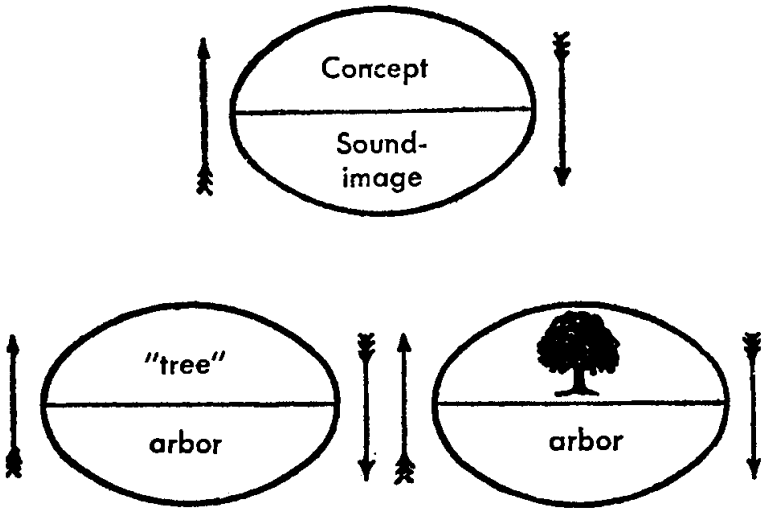


Figure 1.2 – Ferdinand de Saussure's Diagrams of the Sign

Peirce, on the other hand, crafts a tripartite division of the sign into an *object*, a *representamen*, and an *interpretant*. The object is something in the world that is being represented, the representamen is the form that the sign takes, and the interpretant is the sense or interpretation made of the sign (and not, rather, an interpreter or an individual interpreting the sign). In Peirce's own words:

> A sign . . . [in the form of a *representamen*] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen.[7]

As Daniel Chandler explains, "to qualify as a sign, all three elements are essential. The sign is a unity of what is represented (the object), how it is represented (the representamen) and how it is interpreted (the

[7] Charles S. Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corporation, 1994), para. 2.228.

interpretant)."[8] In this formulation of the sign, the representamen is most similar to Saussure's signifier and the interpretant to Saussure's signified (that is, the mental representation of the sign-concept). The additional piece that Peirce's model accounts for is the object (or concept) that exists in the external world.

Peirce further distinguishes three types of signs: *likenesses* (or *icons*), *indications* (*indices*), and *symbols*, all of which have applications in musical semiotics.[9] Icons convey information via imitation of the represented concept or object, such as, in Peirce's own examples, drawings, pictures, and imitative sounds and gestures. An index contains a trace or evidence of the represented concept or object, or in Peirce's words, signs that "show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them." [10] Examples he gives include articles of clothing indicating someone's profession, weathervanes indicating the direction of the wind, sundials indicating the time of day, and a door knock alerting that someone is present. Symbols, meanwhile, are arbitrary, only connecting the signifier and signified through cultural and historical circumstances. Furthermore, Peirce writes of symbols, "They come into being by development out of other signs, particularly from likenesses or from mixed signs partaking of the nature of likenesses and symbols. . . . A symbol, once in being, spreads among the peoples. In use and in experience, its meaning grows."[11] Here, Peirce indicates that a sign be a mix of the three

[8] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 2nd ed., Basics (Routledge (Firm)) (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 29.

[9] Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 4–10.

[10] Peirce, 5.

[11] Peirce, 10.

types, but also that they can change and grow over time as their meanings are used and interpreted by new groups of people.

While there have been significant debates and developments surrounding the semiotic theories of Saussure and Peirce in the decades since their publication, the basic concepts and principles of the sign articulated by them serve well as a foundation for the exploration of semiotics in music. According to Marcel Danesi, the three principles of semiotic analysis are to uncover the history of particular signs, to determine the processes by which something is considered to be "normal," and to determine how particular systems of signs shape the worldview of those who live with and use those signs.[12] Indeed, this sort of semiotic analysis closely resembles what topic theory has attempted to do within musicology and music theory. According to William Echard, a topic is a musical sign that must be "highly conventionalized within a listening community," and "must rely for a large part of its meaning on indexicality of the content."[13] Not all musical signs, then, are topical signifiers, as they may display neither or only one of these features. Echard further makes a distinction between a *topical signifier*, which represents a specific sign relationship, and a *topical field*, which he describes as "a conceptual area for contemplation and discussion, for elaboration, for exploration," and "a field of meaning that is specific

[12] Marcel Danesi, *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 20.

[13] William Echard, *Psychedelic Popular Music: A History through Musical Topic Theory*, Musical Meaning and Interpretation (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), 17; See also Raymond Monelle and Esti Sheinberg, *Music Semiotics: A Network of Significations in Honour and Memory of Raymond Monelle* (Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2012), 17, 80.

enough to be recognizable and coherent but broad enough to wander around in."[14] In practice, both of these definitions can casually be referred to as a "topic."

Because the definitions of musical topics are somewhat confusing and, ironically, not fully conventionalized, it is helpful to cover the history of topic theory. The idea of a musical *topic* was first developed by Leonard Ratner in *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (1980). Examining 18th-century instrumental music from the Baroque through the transition to the Classical period, Ratner describes topics as "materials which composers, performers, and listeners at that time associated with various moods, attitudes, and images; these constituted the *topics* upon which a persuasive musical discourse could be built." [15] By "materials," Ratner is referring to compositional and performative techniques, gestures, and styles that practitioners would employ to represent extramusical ideas, while "musical discourse" refers generally to the meanings drawn from the music and interpreted by its audience. Ratner states that in the Baroque period these styles and meanings were often highly formalized, noting that "status, place, and protocol were carefully defined by signs, badges, and rules of conduct. Specific types of music and expressive qualities were proper for various locales, occasions, or situations."[16] And while Baroque music tended to focus on one idea or affect for "unity and consistency" within a piece, music from the Classical period began to experiment with mixing contrasting styles and affects.[17] Ratner's most complete definition of topics appears here:

---

[14] Echard, *Psychedelic Popular Music*, 6.

[15] Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980), 1.

[16] Ratner, 7.

[17] Ratner, 26.

> From its contacts with worship, poetry, drama, entertainment, dance, ceremony, the military, the hunt, and the life of the lower classes, music in the early 18th century developed a thesaurus of *characteristic figures*, which formed a rich legacy for classic composers. Some of these figures were associated with various feelings and affections; others had a picturesque flavor. They are designated here as *topics*—subjects for musical discourse. Topics appear as fully worked-out pieces, i.e., *types*, or as figures and progressions within a piece, i.e., *styles*. The distinction between types and styles is flexible; minuets and marches represent complete types of composition, but they also furnish styles for other pieces.[18]

In semiotic terms, Ratner's "characteristic figures" are signifiers and the topics are signifieds, which are further divided into entire pieces or movements (types) and individual musical gestures and features (styles). The specific types and styles, furthermore, are fluid and may sometimes fit either category. Examples of types Ratner covers are dances (minuet, gavotte, etc.) and marches, and examples of styles include are military/hunt, singing style, brilliant style, French overture, musette/pastorale, "Turkish music," *Sturm und Drang*, sensibility/*Empfindsamkeit*, strict/learned style, and fantasia. As Raymond Monelle puts it, "Ratner's mission was to show that certain portrayals are conventional, and that musical figures can therefore suggest objects that are not merely contingent, but are part of a semantic universe within which the music is composed. Thus, no text or title is necessary for musical topics to carry signification."[19]

While many others since Ratner have contributed to discourse on topic theory, including Kofi Agawu, Wye Jamison Allanbrook, and Robert Hatten, Raymond Monelle's work in particular is exemplary in exploring the semiotic nature of musical topics.[20] Although much analysis within U.S.

---

[18] Ratner, 9.

[19] Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 14.

[20] See V. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music*, Princeton Legacy Library (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991); Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in*

music theory had focused on "purely musical" features, Monelle notes that semiotics and topic theory provide an arena to examine how cultural and historical features play a role in musical interpretation. He writes:

> All musical signification is social and cultural, and no signification is "purely musical" or "purely linguistic" because topics are paradigms, signifying in relation to culture, not in relation to syntagmatics. Along with everything else, musical topics are signs of our connections with our sisters and brothers in literary criticism, art history, cultural theory, and social history; many of these connections are complex and elusive. The primary concern of the topic theorist is to give an account of each topic in global terms, showing how it reflects culture and society, not to focus on music alone.[21]

And:

> It is not possible to identify musical topics with mere labels. The complexity of literary topics shows this. Musical topics must behave similarly, and in any case are themselves often aspects of literary and cultural topics, inheritors of long histories. In order to understand a topic, we need to relate a long narrative of fantasy and imagination, as well as to understand social and technological history. . . . Both signifier and signified must be investigated if we are to reach some grasp, at least provisional, of the meanings and evocations of each musical topic.[22]

Per Monelle, the role of the topic theorist is to examine in depth both sides of the topic—the musical feature(s) and the socio-cultural meaning—to produce a historical account of the topic's meanings and interpretations.

The vast majority of topic theory has focused on classical music of western Europe and has not concentrated on the nature of semiotic linkages, but rather uses an already established topic as a

---

Mozart: Le Nozze Di Figaro & Don Giovanni (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Robert S. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*, Advances in Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[21] Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral*, Musical Meaning and Interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 9–10.

[22] Monelle, 19.

springboard for further analysis of classical pieces. Robert Hatten's work, in particular, serves as a good guide for this style of analysis. In *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, for example, Hatten argues for a semiotic approach to music analysis that involves elements of structural analysis and hermeneutic interpretation, demonstrating *how* music has expressive meaning.[23] A major contribution from his study is the idea of *markedness*, which is, in Hatten's words, the "valuation given to a difference."[24] Hatten applies markedness to his analyses of Beethoven's works to interpret the meaning of specific semiotic gestures within pieces, which he further links to the solidification of feelings, styles, topics, and genres.[25] This style of hermeneutic analysis has also served as the basis for narrative theory, that is, the application of larger-scope interpretive narratives as interpretations of entire movements or works in classical music, and can be seen in the work of Byron Almén, Fred Maus, Lawrence Kramer, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, and Carolyn Abbate.[26]

Although topic theory has greatly impacted the continued opening of musical analysis to hermeneutic interpretation, it also exhibits some significant self-imposed limitations. A telling example can be taken from Hatten's *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*, in which Hatten makes

[23] Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, 2.

[24] Hatten, 34.

[25] Hatten, 67–90.

[26] Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, Musical Meaning and Interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Fred Everett Maus, "Music As Narrative," *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991): 1–34; Lawrence Kramer, "Musical Narratology: A Theoretical Outline," *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991): 141–62; Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990); Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

the case for the agency of sounds themselves within pieces of music. The following quotations are revealing:

> My interpretations imply a certain kind of listener, which I would frame here as a stylistically and strategically competent listener—one who can hear what is strategically achieved by a work conceived within the constraints and possibilities of stylistic principles. . . .
>
> As for the audacity of presuming to interpret expressive meanings, I share something of the pragmatic stance that [Charles] Rosen enunciates with respect to the problem of a work's unique expression: "It is a contradiction essential to a work of art that it resists paraphrase and translation, and yet that it can only exist within a language, which implies the possibility of paraphrase and translation." Although I cannot pretend to resolve the philosophical complexities of artistic expression, I can at least provide some helpful guidelines for interpretation. . . .
>
> I must also acknowledge a bias in my choice of examples that, for the most part, draw from what are already highly valued works of music. This is also a pragmatic decision—I do not have space to acquaint the reader with less-familiar music and still accomplish my interpretive and theoretical goals. . . . However, I welcome other scholars' productive incorporations and adaptations of the theory of virtual agency for other repertoires, including popular music.[27]

The first limitation Hatten proposes is in his repertoire selection (third quote), not only restricting himself to works from one genre but to "already highly valued works of music." Indeed, much of topic theory has focused on already highly regarded works from the classical canon, and while there are practical reasons for this (as Hatten explains) and scholars encourage topic theory to be applied more broadly, that work has only just begun. The second limitation is in the audience/listener, who are presumed to have a high level of familiarity with the work, genre, and the norms contained therein (first quote). To a degree, this restriction makes sense; those who are "expert" listeners are often the ones who are most engaged with and have the deepest understanding of the music, the author does not need to explain the musical context, and it is those most-informed interpretations that we may care about most. On the other hand,

[27] Robert S. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*, Musical Meaning and Interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 8–9.

this limits the wide range of interpretations and experiences provided by listeners with varying levels of competency, as I will discuss later.

The third limitation (second quote) pertains to the nature of analyzing and discussing music in general and, perhaps, serves as the justification for the other two limitations: the ineffability of music and the attempt to make musical discourse as scientific as possible. By describing the interpretation of expressive meanings in music as "audacious" and stating that doing so is "presumptuous," Hatten implies that doing so is problematic. If the goal of a music analysis is to make objective claims, controlling against humanistic variables, the analyst must try to remove any personal bias from their analysis, and one way to do so is to try to let the music, as it were, "speak for itself." To allow for any interpretation, then, the analyst must focus on music that is highly valued and often has an agreed-upon meaning, at least by those listeners who are deemed to have a base level of competency. The practical reason for limiting topic theory this way is it allows the analyst to focus on the music, and how the music and topic(s) interact, without spending excessive time analyzing the often complex and conflicting social and historical aspects of the music and topic.

This practice, however, also limits the potential explanatory power of topic theory and semiotics in music analysis. Echard elaborates on many of the problems I have already described. He notes that whereas most topic analysts have treated signifiers as clearly defined, the "exact demarcation of any particular topical signifier are complex," and although theorists like Hatten and Almén consider the interaction of multiple distinct topics, those topics "are rarely treated as dynamic and changeable."[28] "In such theories," he writes, "it is the relative fixity of topics that is relied on as a framework against which

[28] Echard, *Psychedelic Popular Music*, 19.

various forms of combination and movement are analyzed."[29] While the historical and social context of topics are deemed to be important, they are often treated as fixed frameworks within which musical analysis can happen, rather than sites for musical analysis themselves. Furthermore,

> For a music semiotician who needs to acknowledge [that factors outside of the music are important to meaning] but still wishes to maintain as much agency as possible for the music itself, the typical theoretical move has been to assert that the relevant cultural knowledge and reading habits are so widely distributed and so standardized that we can consider them as shared by all members of the relevant community.[30]

In practice, however, few communities are so monolithic, and often contain differing levels of *competency*, or the "set of all knowledge and skills necessary to produce and interpret statements in a given sign system."[31] Even within topic theory scholarship on the classical canon, others have noted this exact problem. For example, Melanie Lowe discusses the problematic nature of limiting discussion of context and actively selecting which extramusical meanings become part of the text for analysis and which do not.[32] Mark Evan Bonds notes that classical composers often considered listeners of varying competencies, defining those with a high degree of competency as *Kenner* and those with lower levels *Liebhaber*. He writes:

> When we analyze these works, we typically posit a kind of ideal listener of the time, a retrospective projection of ourselves, as it were, a listener with a wide knowledge of repertory, genres, styles and techniques. There can be no doubt that this sort of approach has deepened our understanding of

[29] Echard, 19.

[30] Echard, 22.

[31] Echard, 23.

[32] Melanie Diane Lowe, *Pleasure and Meaning in the Classical Symphony*, Musical Meaning and Interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 76–77.

these works; yet it suffers from a serious shortcoming in so far as it takes only *Kenner* into account, for our ideal listener is invariably a connoisseur and not an amateur.[33]

For popular music, on the other hand, the sort of contextually restrictive analysis used by most classical topic theorists thus far would prove highly inadequate for explaining the meanings invoked and interpreted by popular music audiences. To return to Echard, he notes that "the relatively contemporary nature of twentieth-century popular music provides an opportunity to examine the process of topic formation close up, not only because many of the participants are still alive but, more interestingly, because topics in this area may still be in the process of coalescing."[34] In the following section I will address the analysis of popular music, demonstrating why it is resistant to the sort of fixed-context structural analysis that is so prominent within classical music analysis.

Popular Music Analysis

One of the pioneers of hermeneutic popular music analysis is Philip Tagg, who argues for the use of structural and interpretive aspects of popular music to understand musical meaning. Tagg's analytical methods provide an exceptional model to gain a full, rich understanding of popular music songs. He notes that formalist music theory alone is unsuitable for popular music analysis due to the "highly referential nature of much popular music."[35] His basic unit of musical meaning is labeled as a

[33] Mark Evan Bonds, "Listening to Listeners," in *Communication in Eighteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 39.

[34] Echard, *Psychedelic Popular Music*, 24.

[35] Philip Tagg, *"Kojak": Fifty Seconds of Television Music: Toward the Analysis of Affect in Popular Music* (New York: Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, 2000), 60.

"museme," which are, in his words, "individual archetypes of coded musical affect."[36] Musemes function very similarly to topical signifiers, attaching a sonic event to an extramusical meaning, and can further be combined into museme "stacks" and "strings," simultaneous and subsequent (respectively) occurrences of different musemes. As Tagg's work is so foundational, his ideological insight is worth quoting at length:

> Our contention is, in short, that hermeneutics and semiology should be combined at the present stage of musical research in order to establish workable hypotheses about the nature, content and function of musical messages, and, in turn, that this task cannot be carried out without making social, psychological and ideological observations about the function of music. Indeed, we may ask ourselves how any musical structure may be considered as such if it is not perceived by a receiver or group of receivers, and how knowledge about musical structures can be gained without permitting social, psychological and ideological determinants of these structures enter into the discussion.
>
> We argue that there is a dialectic relationship between the analysis of music per se and the analysis of its function; for how can anything be known about musical structure and meaning if we do not know what the music is used for, and, conversely, how can we find out anything about uses of music if we know nothing of musical structure and meaning? This is why we advocate the consideration of both formal and functional aspects of musical analysis regardless of the musicological subdiscipline used as basis for approaching the problem.[37]

Here Tagg reiterates the importance of linking structural to hermeneutic analysis, but also emphasizes the importance of investigating meanings via the analysis of *subjects*, that is, the actual people who are creating the meanings. In Figure 3 below, Tagg diagrams a model of the communication process in popular music from the intended message of the transmitter to the "ideal response" from a receiver, which is represented if one follows the path from left to right through the center of the diagram. [38]

[36] Tagg, 50–51.

[37] Tagg, 66–67.

[38] Tagg, 70.

Fig. 6. Communication model for the analysis of popular music

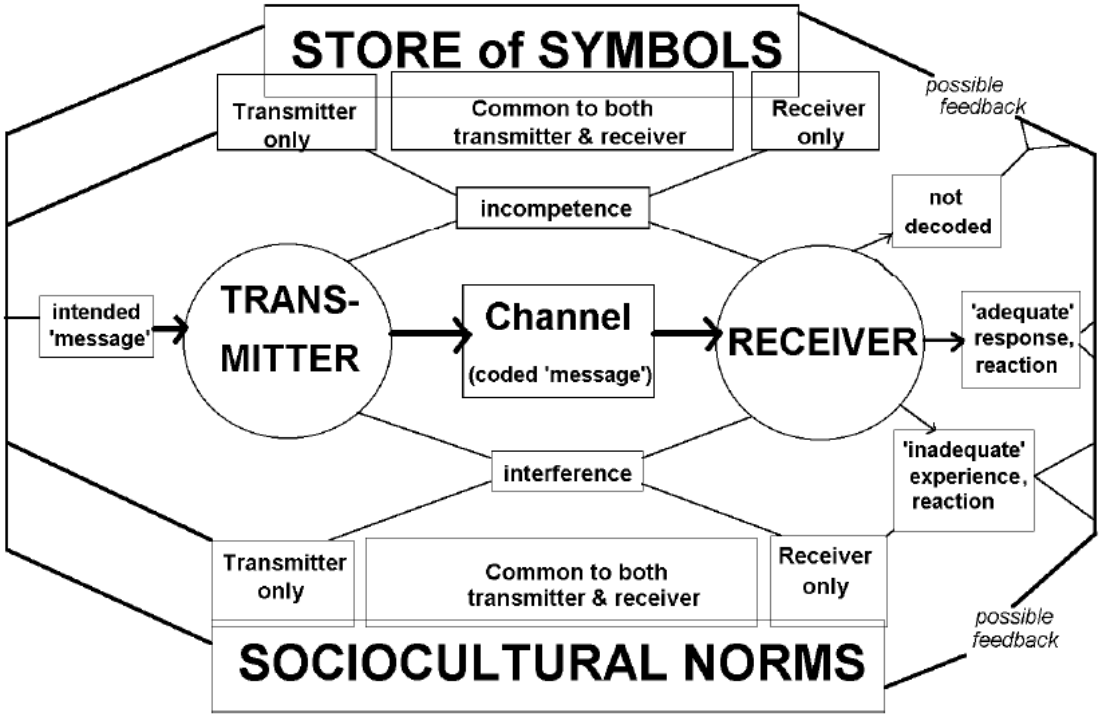


Figure 1.3 – Philip Tagg's Diagram of Message Transmission in Popular Music

At the top and bottom, Tagg introduces a "store of symbols" and "sociocultural norms" that *could* result in the intended message not being received by the listener. The top of the diagram represents possible *incompetence* on the part of the transmitter or receiver, meaning that one of the parties is ignorant of the semiotic meanings and results in the message being "not decoded." On the bottom, interference is possible when the two parties have differing sociocultural norms, resulting in a misinterpretation of the transmitter's message and an "inadequate experience or reaction" by the receiver. Tagg also allows for the possibility of feedback from these misinterpretations to impact both sociocultural norms and the store of symbols. In his later work, such as in *Everyday Tonality*, Tagg puts his method into practice, performing a structural study of harmony and tonality in Anglo-American popular music, while

analyzing meanings by conducting interviews and analyzing a wide array of song lyrics to draw conclusions about the ways certain techniques and elements are applied.[39]

Tagg's variety of popular music analysis that links structural features to semiotic meanings is not necessarily commonplace among academic or public music theory. In fact, in both spheres, the proper method(s) of performing popular music analysis is contested. William O'Hara, for example, has written about shareable internet analyses of popular songs, and notes that these pieces often fall into tropes that mimic those from music theory's own history, including using planetary metaphors to explain the "gravity" of tonal forces, treating music theory as mystical and secretive, and attempting to make musical analysis scientific by tying them to psychological effects. He writes:

> If the reception of music theory and analysis in online venues is any indication, it seems that a large number of readers and listeners to music—perhaps a majority—are likely to hold some sort of "folk theory" about music, and about a variety of musical topics: perception, expression, the place of music in culture, the relationship between music and text, the assumed separation of musical syntax from musical meaning, the innate and inarguable supremacy of certain musical traditions or repertoires over others, and many other topics.[40]

Moreover, these internet analyses *are* concerned with meaning, yet do so by attaching affective labels to structural features without naming the subject that is applying the label, that is, doing the analysis and interpretation. O'Hara thus argues that the more outdated views of formalism and the superiority of Western classical music (justified via its theory) persist within non-academic implementations of musical analysis.

---

[39] Philip Tagg, *Everyday Tonality: Towards a Tonal Theory of What Most People Hear*, [First edition] (New York: Mass Media Scholars' Press, 2009).

[40] William O'Hara, "Music Theory and the Epistemology of the Internet; or, Analyzing Music Under the New Thinkpiece Regime," *Analitica: Rivista Online Di Studi Musicali* 10 (August 2018): 17.

In fact, those who were raised in Western societies may be operating within a subconscious episteme that privileges structural listening due to the prominence of instrumental classical analysis. Nina Sun Eidsheim, for example, argues that listening practices and conceptions of music have been structured by Western modes of subjectivity and by a century of music writing and pedagogy dedicated to Western classical music. Collectively, she labels these practices the "figure of sound." Instead, she advocates for a view of listening as a vibrational practice as a way to open up definitions of what music and listening are. She is interested in answering "how it is that what we think of as the same music can have radically different effects, at different times, on a single person."[41] Later, she describes the issues her project tackles:

> In the end, we are left with the realization that when we do let the figure of sound go, we become able to interact with music in a way that helps make us better able to answer the question to which the figure of sound purported to lead, but did not: how is it that music does what it does? . . . Without breaking through the foundational position that the figure of sound has come to occupy, which prevents us from comprehending music more fully, this question is inaccessible. I propose that we can understand more about music's many dimensions if we do not limit ourselves to the logic presented by the figure of sound, but instead use the perspective of performance and practice to burrow down into expanding notions of music to the material, vibrational, and energetic arenas.[42]

Embedded here are two central questions to musical analysis: *what* does music do, and *how* does music do what it does? To answer those questions, we must, as Eidsheim writes, focus on performance and practice by musicking subjects, using their values as cues for what is valued and considered important.

The paradigm described by Eidsheim and O'Hara is inherited from the history of classical music analysis, and is one whose validity has been questioned before. As Rose Subotnik describes in

---

[41] Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*, Sign, Storage, Transmission (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 154.

[42] Eidsheim, 162–63.

Deconstructive Variations, important historical figures Eduard Hanslick, Arnold Schoenberg, and Igor Stravinsky defined musical meaning within the boundaries of the technical elements of individual composition. "All three men," per Subotnik, "end by locating musical value wholly within some formal sort of parameter, to which it is the listener's business to attend."[43] Labeling this type of analysis "structural listening," she notes that although it has the benefit of eliminating subjective bias on the part of the analyst, it raises a serious problem. She writes:

> The idea behind this attitude is that by concentrating on the abstract logic of structural relations in music, listeners learn to guard against rejecting a composition on grounds of brute prejudice. In other words, by subjecting all music to the same disinterested structural standards of judgment, we allow music in every style, and thus the music of every culture, at least in theory, a fair chance of social acceptance. . . .
>
> Unfortunately for this ideal, its advocates have never been able to define a general principle of musical logic apart from tonality, a historically and culturally specific system of relationships that has been prominent as a first principle of construction only in Western music, since sometime in the seventeenth century. This notion of musical logic has been used by Western musicology for generations to justify excluding non-Western music from the mainstream of musical study.[44]

Although structural analysis can be performed on any variety of music, it has proven to be particularly (and, perhaps, uniquely) valuable with regards to instrumental classical music. And while social and cultural meanings are also always a part of classical music, it is perhaps more possible to perform a rich structural analysis. On the other hand, structural listening and formalistic analysis that separates the "music itself" from social, cultural, and contextual factors may not make much sense at all. Kathleen Higgins explains how essential features of musical life are excluded by formalistic score analysis:

---

[43] Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Deconstructive Variations: Music and Reason in Western Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 152–53.

[44] Subotnik, 187.

> Music's capacity to engage our intellectual, emotional, and physical natures simultaneously, its suitability for promoting social cohesion, its reflection of practical and ideal modes of human social interaction, its ability to stimulate reflections regarding our basic values—consider the role of music in churches—all these are basic features of musical experience. Yet these are lost to philosophical attention when "music" is defined as "a musical score" and aesthetics becomes a technical enterprise.[45]

Other varieties of music, meanwhile, challenge the values of structural listening. External social functions, cultural context, and extramusical ideas are more important; formalistic, structural features are often not the grounds for musical value and praise; musical sounds are valued over the analysis of notated scores; and tonality operates only in some cases, hardly reaching universality. In contrast to the sort of structural listening normalized by classical music analysis, popular music is particularly suited to linking technical features to social analysis. Tia DeNora notes that popular music scholarship has been more adept at addressing audience interpretation precisely because it has not historically been tied to ideas of musical autonomy. She writes,

> Indeed, the very reason pop music culture is, in Willis's terminology, "profane" is that it has traditionally been appropriatable, open to reinterpretation and determination in and through use; it has possessed all the attributes of the non-sacred (despite various attempts by fans and critics to canonize particular pop music works and performers, and to specify ritual appropriations). Because of this, the emphasis within popular music studies on the experience and appropriation of music has flowed more naturally; such an emphasis has neither had to deal with, nor been regarded as hostile to, canonic discourse and the idea of musical "autonomy," both of which are products of late-eighteenth century cultural practice.[46]

Pop music, according to DeNora, resists any sort of static or codified meaning because it so tied up with cultural contexts that it is constantly open to reinterpretation. In other words, its meaning is always open to being contested, and often is. Moreover, this same impulse is not limited to pop music, but

---

[45] Kathleen Marie Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 4.

[46] Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 23–24.

applies to *all* music, including classical (opera in particular, but indeed, instrumental too). DeNora also writes on the authorial subject (recall, for example, the Robert Hatten example):

> Simply put, a sociology of musical affect cannot presume to know what music causes, or what semiotic force it will convey, at the level of reception, action, experience. . . To circumvent this project by pointing to what music represents and how it will structure perception, is to take the kind of theoretical short cut described above. That short cut consists of substituting an analyst's understanding of music's social meanings for an empirical investigation of how music is actually read and pressed into use by others, how music actually comes to work in specific situations and moments of appropriation.[47]

If we are to offer interpretive analyses of music, we need to be clear on *who* is giving the analysis, whether that is the author alone, the author as representative of a larger community, or an ethnographic presentation of a community of listeners.

Indeed, this sort of sociological approach to musical analysis allows for formal discussion of musical meaning, that is, why people compelled to analyze, discuss, break down, interpret, and argue about music (and, indeed, art). In *The Thought of Music*, Lawrence Kramer addresses meaning by clarifying what it means to think, speak about, and discuss music. Analyzing music comes with inherent complications, including the subjective nature of personal opinions and the ineffability of language to describe what happens. Kramer turns this on its head by arguing that interpretation *is* thinking musically. To have any ideas, concepts, or thoughts about music requires that we interpret what we hear, and interpretation requires the use of language in reflection on our experience as listener, performer, critic, scholar, or composer. Kramer notes that interpretation is a risky endeavor that has a venturesome claim on truth. Indeed, when thinking about music we can only approach truth while

[47] DeNora, 31.

never arriving at definite conclusions. That musical interpretations may not be concrete, however, does not make them meaningless; on the contrary, interpretation is, by nature, musical thought. He writes:

> That enjoyment, however, is best regarded as a threshold: the potentiality, afforded by music, of robust and exemplary acts of understanding. The music's immanent demand for surmise, conjecture, speculation, extrapolation, even inspiration, does not expose interpretation as a weak or defective form of knowledge, but, on the contrary, discloses the primary role such processes play in any and all knowledge. To understand music is to respond to musical events in terms—positive, complex, nuanced terms—that acknowledge but are not bound by the apparent underdetermination of the music's content.[48]

Understanding music, and drawing meaning from it, means delving into interpretation, messy as it may be. This is not, however, a problem that needs to be fixed, but is simply the nature of thinking musically.

One of the benefits of topic theory is that it provides a method for deep musical analysis that can also address questions of musical meaning linked to culture and society. As topic theory was developed in the 1980s and beyond, this framing represented somewhat of a shift with the analytic paradigm of instrumental classical music up to that point. Yet despite the emphasis placed on the style of holistic analysis by Tagg and others, only some work in this vein has been done to date, as many large-scale studies of popular music have tended to either be largely historical *or* structural in focus.[49] Some theorists have begun to link sociohistorical and structural analysis together, though those have tended to be shorter-length studies.[50] Instead, the most promising large-scale work of this type has been done in topic theory,

---

[48] Lawrence Kramer, *The Thought of Music* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 168.

[49] For an example of the former, see David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); For an example of the latter, see Drew Nobile, *Form as Harmony in Rock Music*, Oxford Studies in Music Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[50] See, for example, Megan L. Lavengood, "The Cultural Significance of Timbre Analysis: A Case Study in 1980s Pop Music, Texture, and Narrative," *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 3 (2020); Megan Lavengood, "What Makes It Sound '80s? The Yamaha DX7 Electric Piano Sound," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 3 (2019): 73–93;

primarily by William Echard in *Psychedelic Popular Music*, as mentioned earlier. Echard's book chronicles the history of psychedelia as a topic from its emergence in 1960s Anglo-American rock through all of its modern descendants in terms of genres, artists, song forms, and styles. He successfully demonstrates how a topic changes over time and adapts and is integrated into new contexts, and links these elements to sociocultural meanings. He also emphasizes that his is an early study, and future studies of this nature could more deeply explore fieldwork and interviews as well as engage more with intermedia analysis (posters, videos, etc.).[51]

One element Echard's study does not address, however, is what occurs when one or multiple meanings are contested between different groups in society. He documents how the topical area of psychedelia has been added to and transformed over time, yet it is still a topic with one generally homogenous meaning and one social group with competency. What could we learn, however, from studying a topic with multiple meanings spread across different groups in society with varying competencies? What happens when these groups enter into political conflict, and what are the musical and societal consequences?

Distortion: Violence, Noise, and Power

In a literal sense, distortion is *noise*. In audio engineering, noise is any unwanted sound that interferes with the original signal, blocking the transmission. In a social sense, noise has a negative

and Steven Rings, "A Foreign Sound to Your Ear: Bob Dylan Performs 'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding),' 1964–2009," *Music Theory Online* 19, no. 4 (2013).

[51] Echard, *Psychedelic Popular Music*, 264–66.

connotation; it is something *unintended*, *undesirable*, and often *unpleasant*. As will be discussed further in chapter 2, electric guitar distortion also encodes *violence*, as it was (originally) generated either through extreme volumes (sometimes enough to cause physical pain) or through damage to audio equipment. The concept of violence, however, has sometimes had a broader definition than simply physical pain, and has been linked to political power, control, and oppression. Indeed, this dissertation will discuss many points throughout the history of rock when noise, violence, and political power are invoked in social conflict and in representations of music. Toward this end, I begin with a brief overview of all three terms.

In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali argues that music both reflects the current state of society and heralds changes to come, dividing history into specific periods based on the technology and resulting political and economic conditions of the described eras.[52] Through his investigation, Attali also offers insights into the relationships between violence, power, and noise. To work backwards, noise is defined as a disruption and carries a negative connotation. In his own words:

> A noise is a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission. . . . Noise, then does not exist in itself, but only in relation to the system within which it is inscribed: emitter, transmitter, receiver. Information theory uses the concept of noise (or rather, metonymy) in a more general way: noise is the term for a signal that interferes with the reception of a message by a receiver, even if the interfering signal itself has a meaning for that receiver. Long before it was given this theoretical expression, noise had always been experienced as destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, an aggression against the code-structuring messages. In all cultures, it is associated with the idea of the weapon, blasphemy, plague. . . . In its biological reality, noise is a source of pain. Beyond a certain limit, it becomes an immaterial weapon of death.[53]

[52] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Theory and History of Literature v. 16 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

[53] Attali, 26–27.

Noise is also, as Attali goes on to argue, *violence*. He explains, with a certain degree of hyperbole, "it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder."[54] Music, in turn, is a channeling of noise, an imposition of *order* that organizes, codifies, and acts as a "tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality."[55] Thus, music becomes a locus of political power, and can be used to further political and ideological purposes. And when music and ideologies clash—that is, when music reverts to noise—it becomes something necessary to control. As Attali describes:

> [Theorists of totalitarianism] have all explained, indistinctly, that it is necessary to ban subversive noise because it betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality: a concern for maintaining tonalism, the primacy of melody, a distrust of new languages, codes, or instruments, a refusal of the abnormal—these characteristics are common to all regimes of that nature. They are direct translations of the political importance of cultural repression and noise control.[56]

In this regard, noise could offer a pathway of protest to those who feel repressed: by rejecting the dominant ideology of sonic control, they are also challenging the dominant political order.

To return to guitar distortion, we see that noise, violence, and power all play important roles in its meaning and interpretation. In a literal sense, distortion both *is* and *is not* noise. By definition, it results from an alteration of the original sonic signal, and yet because that distortion is *intentional*, it is not an *alteration* of something else but, in a sense, becomes the message itself. Guitar distortion can be achieved in two ways, both of which *allude* to violence but are not necessarily violent themselves.

---

[54] Attali, 26.

[55] Attali, 6.

[56] Attali, 7.

Distortion resulting from damage to a piece of audio equipment perhaps bears a trace of violence, though the act that produced that damage was (historically) often either unintentional or performed intentionally on one's own property. Distortion caused by loud volumes, on the other hand, indicates a potentially *painful* experience; even if the distortion is reproduced (in a recording or with a volume-controlling effect) at a lower volume, it bears the trace of potentially harmful volume.

Following Attali, any sound is violent until it is controlled, codified, and accepted as music. This acceptance needs to be done socially and communally, and can bring about conflict if individuals and communities disagree whether the sounds in question are music or noise. And while that conflict rarely turns *violent* in the narrow sense of bodily harm, it certainly represents a struggle over *power*, that is, the ability to control and influence one's circumstances, representation, identity, and community. In the wider definition of violence, however, this *would* represent a struggle over social, systemic, and repressive circumstances.

An important figure in the relationship between violence and power is Michel Foucault, who argued that true power does not require the use of violent force, but acts upon other people's actions, making them behave in a certain way because they think they want to.[57] Instead, for Foucault, our very construction of reality is a political struggle over competing ideologies, and thus conflict is often inevitable. As Johanna Oksala argues in her commentary on Foucault, "Our political history, as well as the present political order, reveals how the imposition of hegemonic meanings, identities, and

[57] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95.

interpretations has been inseparable from physical violence—the historical facts of wars."[58] Thus the inflicting of bodily harm, while not inevitable, can result from the struggle over politics, knowledge, and the very concept of reality, which, perhaps, *is* inevitable.

Part of what complicates the interpretation of the meaning of guitar distortion, then, are the multiple definitions of violence and the multiple ways of interpreting its operation vis-à-vis distortion. What is clear, however, is that those who have written about distortion in rock are already using the terms violence, power, and noise as a part of their discourse. For example, Robert Walser argues that much of heavy metal is a response to the "violence" of capitalist society.[59] The sounds of metal, then, become a locus of *empowerment* and community building for its fans. Not only does he speak of the personal empowerment created by metal, but of the power inherent in the generation of distortion. He explains, "Distortion functions as a sign of extreme power and intense expression by overflowing its channels and materializing the exceptional effort that produces it."[60] This intensity is given manifest expression through loudness, a feature that is essential to Metal:

> The complete electronic control of sound reproduction that characterizes modern music allows metal to be reproduced, theoretically, at any level. However, the nature of metal and the needs and pleasures it addresses demand that it always be heard loud. Even when it is heard from a distance, or even sung softly to oneself, metal is imagined as loud, for volume is an important contributor to the heaviness of heavy metal.[61]

---

[58] Johanna Oksala, *Foucault, Politics, and Violence* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 46.

[59] Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Music/Culture (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 171.

[60] Walser, 42.

[61] Walser, 44–45.

Other scholars have written on the importance of distortion, volume, and power to rock, metal, and related genres. Olivia Lucas, writing about the metal band Sunn O))), shows how concert attendees consent to a relinquishing of control when faced with the potentially painful experience of extreme volume. [62] Zachary Wallmark, meanwhile, writes on the role that noise, power, and violence play in supporting those who feel alienated, and argues that what sounds like "a bunch of noise" to outsiders is precisely the noisiness that fans of metal find empowering and appealing about the genre. [63] He notes that the use of distorted guitar, though long linked to the power to transgress, is a channeling of noise into something socially productive, and the violence that is signified is part of act: "The timbral signifiers of death metal thus *sound* at the frayed margins of bodies and machines, but in reality, part of this effect is pure trickery—the violence is faked." [64] Theodore Gracyk also notes the close relationship between rock and noise:

> In the first and widest sense, noise is any sound in the environment that interferes with human communication. . . . Secondly, any sounds that disturb or distract us are noise. . . . Third and finally, there is sound which threatens us with physical harm. . . . Rock exploits all three of these categories, but whether in a pejorative sense depends on one's expectations.[65]

Guitar distortion *may or may not* be noise; it depends on the reception of individuals and communities. Guitar distortion *may or may not* be violent, both in the sense of physical harm and in terms of

[62] Olivia Lucas, "MAXIMUM VOLUME YIELDS MAXIMUM RESULTS," *Journal of Sonic Studies*, no. 07 (June 26, 2014).

[63] Zachary Wallmark, "The Sound of Evil," in *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[64] Wallmark, 77.

[65] Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 103–4.

sociopolitical impact. And finally, guitar distortion both represents power and poses a threat to established power as different communities battle over its meaning.

Chapter Outlines

The chapters that follow examine the various meanings of guitar distortion, their origins, and their changes over time throughout the approximately 70-year period of rock's history to the present day. Chapter 2 addresses two critical beginnings: guitar distortion, and rock & roll itself. I demonstrate how both are intimately tied with racial relations and conceptions of African Americans in the United States. I argue that as a product of African American culture, rock & roll was perceived by many white, mainstream conservatives as threatening and a danger to society, and furthermore, that this perception was extended to specific musical features of rock & roll, most notably its beat and its use of distortion. I then observe the change in meaning through the 1960s as rock transitions to a primarily white genre, and I make the case that through the songs and actions of rock's artists, distortion loses its associations with black culture while maintaining its connections to violence, danger, and a threatening nature.

In chapter 3, I focus on heavy metal and the campaign by the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC) to influence the music industry to adopt a warning label system in the 1980s. I claim that by this point, the link between distortion and violence is so strong that members of conservative society, who are generally outsiders to metal, overestimate the effects and consequences of the music. That is, while some metal music played into violent tropes, outsiders believed that anything that sounded like metal was necessarily problematic. I conclude that this episode was a moral panic, but one that is rendered more historically legible after considering semiotics.

Throughout the 1980s and leading into the 1990s, I argue that distortion starts to become so common and is used in such a wide variety of genres that it begins to lose its link to violence and danger. Instead, chapter 4 claims that distortion represents a sort of general intensity without more specific rebellious or threatening links. I start by outlining the history of punk rock and hardcore, demonstrating its ties to left-wing rebellious politics. Following that, I consider various movements where this link is subverted. In vegan hardcore, distortion is more intense than ever, but songs' lyrical messages focus on uplifting environmental and self-help messages. In Christian rock, distortion is used to amplify Christian messages. And finally, in right-wing punk, conservative politics are attached to the sounds of a genre that is now most commonly associated with the left.

Chapter 5 addresses the state of modern rock by examining narratives that rock has become self-referential and obsessed with nostalgia. I examine the band Greta Van Fleet and the backlash they received to their debut album, in which many critics asserted that they sound exactly like Led Zeppelin. I first address the claims of similarity, comparing the use of song structure, rhythm and harmony, lyrical themes, musical equipment and timbre choice, and fashion and presentation between the two groups. I then argue that rock underwent a process of self-canonization in which it froze its ideal features and sounds in time and labeled its possible new offshoots as others. Through understanding musical semiotics, the two narratives surrounding Greta Van Fleet—that they are either the saviors of a dead genre or that they are a parasite offering nothing new—begin to make sense.

Chapter 2

The Electric Guitar, Race, and Cultural Conflict in Early Rock & Roll

Rock & roll (sometimes called rock and roll, rock 'n' roll, or simply just rock), despite being a somewhat nebulous genre, is generally conceived to have surfaced in the early 1950s, arising out of other genres common in the 1940s such as rhythm and blues, country/western, and swing jazz. The emergence of rock & roll has since been theorized as both a cause and signal of new societal trends and a disruptive force threatening an otherwise well-groomed society. From its beginnings, however, rock & roll was never a "respectable" style of music. It arose from parts of society that were disregarded, looked down upon, and suppressed, including the working/lower class, the South, and African Americans. It posed a challenge to a well-established mainstream cultural order. Understanding the history of rock's emergence is critical to understanding how rock's sounds came to signify what they do: violence, delinquency, and a threat to moral society.

While the predecessors to rock & roll carried many of the same associations as rock, they were kept far from any sort of mainstream public consciousness. As John C. Hajduk Explains,

> Economic conditions during the Great Depression made it possible for those in control of the mass media to establish and nurture an identifiable mainstream in popular music. The hit parade in 1940 exhibited a remarkable level of standardization, as a small set of dominant formulas dictated what songs achieved the greatest popularity.[1]

The Great Depression had forced a market consolidation, and previously vibrant genres, including African American "race music" (as it was labeled at the time), collapsed, and other specialized markets

[1] John C. Hajduk, *Music Wars: Money, Politics, and Race in the Construction of Rock and Roll Culture, 1940-1960* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 2–3.

such as country and hillbilly music were pushed to societal margins. The mainstream was dominated by the songwriters of Tin Pan Alley who maintained highly conservative morals and an anti-democratic view of their audience, believing they knew what constituted the "best American music."[2]

In addition to this musical landscape of the late 1940s and early 1950s, a sort of American middle-class morality and lifestyle was projected as an ideal for all to aspire to. Seen in television shows such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Andy Griffith Show*, the suburban, white, nuclear family in which children were mostly obedient, a stay-at-home mother ran the household, and a father worked a steady job, was held as the norm. Beyond this, those who Michael T. Bertand calls "cultural guardians"—public figures who acted as a cultural elite and guided and controlled the American "way of life"—had conceived of a cultural homogeneity within the United States. He writes:

> [Intellectuals] consistently referred to the twin themes of consensus and conformity, arguing that the cold war and economic abundance had conclusively ironed out the nation's internal conflicts and differences. . . . In order to sustain their doctrine that the United States differed from strife-torn Europe, "liberal consensus" adherents stressed that various cultural and ethnic groups lived harmoniously within a pluralistic milieu that negated social strife. Economic growth and paranoia over Soviet expansion helped create the illusion that all Americans happily inhabited sitcom suburbia—that wide, vague expanse referred to as the middle class.[3]

This view of a domestic "end of history" was obviously false as it ignored the experiences of the working-class poor and, most crucially, non-whites. Still, the middle-class consensus remained a goal all were supposed to strive for even if structural barriers made that lifestyle fundamentally impossible for many.

---

[2] Hajduk, 15, 39.

[3] Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, Music in American Life (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 128.

As economic and social conditions changed from the late 40s into the 50s, it became more difficult to marginalize, and thus ignore, non-mainstream styles of music. No cause would prove more important than the emergence of teenagers and youth as a bloc of consumers. Greater high school attendance caused children to remain in their parents' homes longer than before, while the increased affluence in the post-World War II United States meant that those children often had disposable cash to spend. Importantly, those youth started to hold differing social values from their parents. As Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave write:

> The major reason for attacking rock and roll was that it was the music of the young. It symbolized the generation gap. Rock expressed the kind of freedom that was unavailable to a responsible adult. By presenting an alternative to established norms, the music threatened those standards. Parents were accustomed to influencing their children's values, but America's youth had different ideas.[4]

Also related to these trends were changing societal and youth attitudes toward sex and race, themes that would be centerpieces of generational tension for decades to come.

The emergence of rock & roll posed a direct challenge to the middle-class consensus because it represented the ideals, values, and behaviors of those who had been marginalized by the mainstream entertainment industry. As Bertand puts it:

> The mainstream was unprepared for the rock 'n' roll explosion because the music represented groups, values, and standards of taste alien to the approved middle-class social paradigm. In performing and popularizing rock 'n' roll, southern working-class musicians and their audiences were vigorously forcing themselves upon an unsuspecting larger society that had traditionally excluded them. . . . By encouraging behavior that did not fit the corporate, white-collar, bureaucratic norm of the postwar era, the music challenged those who guarded the mainstream. Above all, it shocked a generation of middle-class adults whose "reality" did not include the working class, minorities, or southerners.[5]

---

[4] Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock "n" Roll* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1988), 13.

[5] Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 139–40.

In this case, the representation of rock as rebellious had less to do with anything particularly unique to it as a specific genre, but more to do with timing. That is, blues, jazz, country, and R&B had many of the same social connotations and representations as rock & roll, but at the time when youth began to push against the mainstream, rock & roll was the new hot commodity. Some of this is simply an issue of labeling genres; as will be discussed later, the line between rhythm & blues and rock & roll is already somewhat blurry. The combination of R&B with features from other genres along with the explosion in rock & roll's popularity meant the mainstream could no longer ignore these "lower" segments of musical society.

In a sense, the 1950s "panic" over rock & roll was a larger proxy for three overlapping and intersecting cultural wars: one dealing with race, another with class, and a third with a generational divide. Changing economic and technological conditions, meanwhile, provided the catalyst for these debates to enter the cultural mainstream at the precise moment when rock & roll was coalescing as a genre. Because rock & roll was (largely) a cultural product of the three groups that encapsulate the above-listed cultural wars, it provided an arena for moral panic and cultural conflict. Naturally, the features of this debate began to be attached to the music, and while some of the claims were exaggerated, others were based on some truth. The following section, then, will highlight the primary musicians and artists who shaped the history of rock & roll and its predecessors, demonstrating their role in pioneering the genre's style, sounds, and values. It will also examine the ensuing arguments made by those who were consumed with moral panic, explaining how rock & roll became linked to those ideas.

The Origins of Rock & Roll and Moral Panic

"Rhythm & Blues" has been used contemporarily as a catch-all for, in the words of Brian Ward, "most forms of post- [World War II] black popular music outside the sacred and jazz traditions: namely R&B, black rock & roll, black pop, soul, funk and disco."[6] Indeed, rhythm & blues was the term that replaced "race music" as a category on *Billboard*'s charts as the latter was deemed offensive in the post-war United States.[7] Ward also labels black rock & roll—naming Little Richard and Chuck Berry as exemplars—as a "subcategory" of rhythm & blues, noting that, "By the end of 1955, rock & roll, as performed and consumed by both blacks and whites, had emerged as a distinct musical style, rather than simply a euphemism for the black R&B which spawned it and with which it continued to overlap."[8] Artists who have been labeled under rhythm & blues but whose music could easily also fit within rock & roll include Muddy Waters, Elmore James, Howlin' Wolf, T-Bone Walker, Louis Jordan, Fats Domino, Big Joe Turner, and the aforementioned Little Richard and Chuck Berry. The main differentiating factor between the two genre labels, then, had little to do with musical features; instead, it was that while rhythm & blues was entirely performed by black artists and intended for black audiences, rock & roll would later include white artists and be intended for a multi-racial audience.

Still, some white Americans became interested in and began listening to rhythm & blues, which led to popular music crossover and eventually also to the labelling of rock & roll as its own distinct

[6] Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 2.

[7] Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 4.

[8] Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 2, 20.

genre. As Ward notes, however, white perceptions of rhythm & blues were affected by their preconceived notions of African-Americans and racial prejudices. He writes:

> What is striking about this white R&B consumption and imitation, irrespective of class, gender or geography, is that it all took place within a thoroughly conventional set of white stereotypes about blacks and their culture. Whites habitually reduced R&B, a richly diverse musical genre which embraced every aspect of human experience, to the hypersexual, sensual and instinctual characteristics they had associated with and projected onto blacks for centuries. Consequently, any counter-cultural potential which support for post-war R&B may have had among whites was inseparable from the highly racialized way in which that music was perceived, consumed and redeployed by white fans.[9]

Ward observes that rhythm & blues was already perceived by white audiences to be a hypersexualized and "primitive" style of music. Any derivations of rhythm & blues, therefore, would naturally carry the same connotations.

Rock & roll, even when played by white artists, faced concerns from white, mainstream, conservative America. The first was over lyrics, which in publications of the time were sometimes referred to by the cheeky pun "leer-ics." The lyrical themes were an inheritance from rhythm & blues songs, which sometimes depicted scenes deemed offensive or impolite by conservative whites and African Americans, particularly those related to sex. As Richard Aquila writes:

> Many middle-class blacks, as well as middle-class whites, condemned rhythm & blues as the devil's music and insisted that lewd lyrics should be censored. Upper- and middle-class African Americans were also offended by R&B stereotypes (many of which came from white composers) that depicted blacks as lazy ne'er-do-wells interested only in alcohol, gambling, and sex.[10]

---

[9] Ward, 39.

[10] Richard Aquila, *Let's Rock!: How 1950s America Created Elvis and the Rock & Roll Craze* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 12.

A classic example of such a song is "Shake, Rattle and Roll," written by African American songwriter Jesse Stone (known as Chuck Calhoun), and originally recorded by Big Joe Turner in 1954.[11] The song is a 12-bar blues form with multiple verses and a chorus. The title lyric, "Shake, rattle and roll," forms the chorus, and was a common euphemism for sex. The verses, meanwhile, contain more euphemistic lyrics such as "Get out of that bed, wash your face and hands" from the first verse, "Way you wear those dresses, the sun come shining through" from the second, and "I'm like a one-eyed cat peepin' in a seafood store/ Well, I can look at you and tell you ain't no child no more" from the fourth. The full lyrics are included on the left side of the figure below.

When Bill Haley and His Comets—one of the first white rock & roll groups—covered "Shake, Rattle and Roll," they "cleaned up" the lyrics, which was a tactic used by artists and executives to make rock & roll seem more palatable to middle-class audiences.[12] The changes can be seen in the figure above, where Haley's version is listed on the right. Notable examples of changes include "Get out of that bed, wash your face and hands" becoming "Get out in that kitchen and rattle those pots and pans," and "I'm like a one-eyed cat peepin' in a seafood store/ Well, I can look at you and tell you ain't no child no more" becoming "I'm like a one-eyed cat peepin' in a seafood store/ I can look at you 'til you don't love me no more."

[11] Joe Turner, "Shake, Rattle and Roll," *Shake, Rattle and Roll*, Warner Music Group, 2018, streaming audio, Tidal.

[12] Bill Haley, His Comets, "Shake, Rattle and Roll (Single Version)," *The Best of Bill Haley & His Comets*, MCA Records, 1999, streaming audio, Tidal.

"Shake, Rattle, and Roll" – Big Joe Turner

(Verse 1)
Get outta that bed, wash your face and hands
Get outta that bed, wash your face and hands
Well, you get in that kitchen, make some noise with the pots 'n pans

(Verse 2)
Way you wear those dresses, the sun comes shinin' through
Way you wear those dresses, the sun comes shinin' through
I can't believe my eyes, all that mess belongs to you

(Verse 3)
I believe to the soul you're the devil and now I know
I believe to the soul you're the devil and now I know
Well, the more I work, the faster my money goes

(Chorus)
I said shake, rattle and roll, shake, rattle and roll
Shake, rattle and roll, shake, rattle and roll
Well, you won't do right to save your doggone soul

(Verse 4)
I'm like a one-eyed cat peepin' in a seafood store
I'm like a one-eyed cat peepin' in a seafood store
Well, I can look at you till you ain't no child no more

(Chorus)
Shake shake, rattle and roll, shake shake, rattle and roll
Yeah yeah, rattle and roll, yeah yeah, rattle and roll
You won't do nothin' to save your doggone soul

"Shake, Rattle, and Roll" – Bill Haley

(Verse 1)
Get out in that kitchen and rattle those pots and pans
Get out in that kitchen and rattle those pots and pans
Well, roll my breakfast 'cause I'm a hungry man

(Chorus)
I said, shake, rattle and roll, I said, shake, rattle and roll
I said, shake, rattle and roll, I said, shake, rattle and roll
Well, you'll never do nothing to save your doggone soul

(Verse 2)
Wearing those dresses, your hair done up so nice
Wearing those dresses, your hair done up so nice
You look so warm but your heart is cold as ice

(Chorus)
I said, shake, rattle and roll, I said, shake, rattle and roll
I said, shake, rattle and roll, I said, shake, rattle and roll
Well, you'll never do nothing to save your doggone soul

(Verse 3)
I'm like a one-eyed cat peeping in a seafood store
I'm like a one-eyed cat peeping in a seafood store
I can look at you 'til you don't love me no more

(Verse 4)
I believe you're doing me wrong and now I know
I believe you're doing me wrong and now I know
The more I work the faster my money goes

(Chorus)
I said, shake, rattle and roll, I said, shake, rattle and roll
I said, shake, rattle and roll, I said, shake, rattle and roll
Well, you'll never do nothing to save your doggone soul

Figure 2.1 - Lyrics to "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" by Big Joe Turner and Bill Haley, Compared

Although these lyrical changes helped gain more fans, many middle-class Americans remained unconvinced. Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave note:

> Song lyrics had been greatly "cleansed" by 1956, particularly by the white artists who were trying to reach a larger mass audience. Those who had attacked lyrics found less to complain about and were forced to zero in on other areas. Performers such as [Elvis] Presley were condemned less for the words they sang and more for the way they sang and delivered those words.[13]

[13] Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 60.

Indeed, altering lyrics did little to stem those in the anti-rock camp; instead, the controversy intensified as Elvis Presley entered the national consciousness.

Elvis Presley was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, before relocating to Memphis, Tennessee, where he grew up poor and listened to white and black folk music. Record producer Sam Phillips of Sun Records supposedly once told his receptionist, "If I could only find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars;" Elvis was precisely that performer.[14] His cover of rhythm & blues song "That's All Right, Mama" by Arthur Crudup provided his first hit, which Aquila describes as "neither rhythm & blues nor country. More than a blend of the two, it sounded fresh, exciting, and authentic."[15] On the one hand, Elvis was handsome, polite, talented, and All-American; in other words, a performer who represented youthful authenticity but who was no harm to society or the nation's youth. As Aquila notes:

> If many teenagers viewed Elvis as a rebel, they also knew in their hearts that he was no wild-eyed radical. The rock & roll hero believed in God, respected his parents, was always polite to adults, and loved his country from its purple mountain majesties down to its apple pie, hot dogs, and cars. Most of Elvis's young fans weren't seeking a cultural revolution; they just wanted to have fun. And Elvis was showing them the way.[16]

On the other hand, some saw Elvis' music and popularity as exemplary of all the problems facing the nation. While some critics focused on lyrics, his background, or other aspects of his persona, the most

[14] Quoted in Aquila, *Let's Rock!*, 99.

[15] Aquila, 112.

[16] Aquila, 146.

attention by far was spent on his dancing. Aquila describes the audience reaction to one of Elvis' early television appearances on June 5, 1956 on Milton Berle's show:

> Some viewers thought Elvis' movements were lascivious, if not outright lewd, particularly when at one point the young Presley slowed the pace of the song, bumping and grinding to the sexy beat. A writer in the *San Francisco Chronicle* insisted the performance was "in appalling taste." Another in the *New York Herald Tribune* said Elvis was "unspeakably untalented and vulgar."[17]

The most famous example of outrage directed toward Presley, perhaps, resulted in partial censorship of his third appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* (January 6, 1957) in which he was only shown from the waist up.

To recall Michael Bertrand's argument, these attacks against Presley in particular and rock & roll in general were thinly veiled critiques against elements of African-American, southern, and working/lower class culture entering the mainstream. Cultural guardians feared that the values held by these groups, and represented in their music, would be a bad influence on the nation's youth, particularly toward sexual norms and practices, violence, and juvenile delinquency. Multiple articles in *Variety* magazine warned of the downfalls of rock & roll lyrics. One wrote:

> The common denominator of pop music has alchemist effect on these kids, hence the obligation to feed them the right type of lyrics is more than a casual thing. It is one of the most intimate mediums of mass communications because, emotionally, the audience identification with almost any song is so direct and personal. In an industry where the facts of life can be projected in such euphemistic terms as "hug" and "kiss"—as substitutes for earthier connotations—the creation and popularization of a "cute" song, just because it may sell a few records, carries with it a greater responsibility.[18]

---

[17] Aquila, 130.

[18] "Music: The Fast Buck Vs. Juve Morale," *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000)* (Los Angeles, United States: Penske Business Corporation, November 10, 1954).

Another wrote:

> What are we talking about? We're talking about "rock and roll," about "hug," and "squeeze," and kindred euphemisms which are attempting a total breakdown of all reticences about sex. In the past such material was common enough but restricted to special places and out-and-out barrelhouses. Today "leer-ics" are offered as standard popular music for general consumption by teenagers. Our teenagers are already setting something of a record in delinquency without this raw musical idiom to smell up the environment still more.[19]

Both of these articles show the linking of lyrics to sexual deviance and juvenile delinquency posed by rock & roll, while the second demonstrates Bertrand's argument about parts of lower-class society previously confined entering the mainstream. Martin and Segrave also make this point about the 1955 movie *Blackboard Jungle*, which centered around a classroom of delinquent teens—who enjoyed rock & roll—and featured Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock" over the opening credits:

> [Adults] believed *Blackboard Jungle* advocated violence and disrespect, and they could point to its theme song to confirm their own beliefs. . . . In *Blackboard Jungle*, the students made defiance and insolence the norm, committed acts of vandalism, and assaulted their teachers. In fact, the film simply reflected what was already a national problem.[20]

This film cemented Haley's song as a hit, hailed the growing popularity of rock & roll, and established rock's problematic nature in the eyes of many conservative parents.

The backlash to rock & roll grew so great that it was debated on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1958. Originally billed as hearings and committees on *payola*—the practice of record labels paying radio stations to gain airtime for their records—the debate included evaluations on the problematic nature of rock & roll. As Steven F. Lawson argues, many of the nation's elite believed that rock & roll was so

---

[19] "Miscellany: A Warning To The Music Business," *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000)* (Los Angeles, United States: Penske Business Corporation, February 23, 1955).

[20] Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 7–8.

aesthetically and morally troublesome that the only way to explain its popularity was through some sort of sinister scandal, though what was actually behind the investigative drive was prejudice rooted in social and cultural change. He writes:

> Following the landmark [*Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court] decision, southern segregationists embarked on a campaign of massive resistance to racial equality that included attacks on black-inspired rock and roll. Joining them were northerners who believed that rock and roll, identified with working-class black and white youths, eroded middle-class values and standards of sexual conduct, thereby threatening the morality of their songs and, more important, their daughters. Congressional probes of payola gave voice to the economic and aesthetic complaints of music-business professionals as well as to fears over the erosion of racial and class boundaries by middle-class parents and their congressional representatives.[21]

He continues:

> The Kefauver Committee underscored the extent to which rock and roll had become contested ground between parents and their teenage offspring. Worse than its lack of aesthetics and professionalism, rock, according to its critics, was spreading antisocial, working-class values among America's youth. The words of the songs, even when they were cleaned up for popular radio consumption, combined with the throbbing sounds and pulsating performers, opened the way for sexual expression deemed unacceptable in polite society.[22]

The 1950s was a decade of contrasts in the United States. On the one hand, a (mythical) image of wholesome, prosperous, upward-moving, nuclear families was held as an ideal that "everyone" could achieve. But on the other, threats to that existence were present everywhere, from communism, to Civil Rights, to rock & roll. Rather than directly call out these threats, however, national elites projected other fears on to rock & roll. In other words, the nascent musical genre became a proxy for the national anxiety and cultural fears of the time.

---

[21] Steven F Lawson, "Race, Rock and Roll, and the Rigged Society: The Payola Scandal and the Politcal Culture of the 1950s," in *The Achievement of American Liberalism: The New Deal and Its Legacies*, ed. William H. Chafe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 206–7.

[22] Lawson, 209.

As part of this proxy battle, some rock & roll critics began to focus on detrimental musical elements in addition to lyrics and dancing. Early in rock's history, the number one targeted musical element was the pulse, backbeat, or simply just its beat, which critics pejoratively labeled as "incessant" or referred to by the non-veiled racist term "jungle beat." Bertrand notes the reactions from some church officials to rock & roll's beat:

> Cardinal John Stritch held that rock 'n' roll, as a "manner of dancing and a throwback to tribalism in recreation, cannot be tolerated by Catholic youths." According to another member of the clergy, "Rock 'n' roll music inflames and excites youth like the jungle tom-toms readying warriors for battle." Elsewhere, in a highly energetic sermon on the sinfulness of rock 'n' roll, the Rev. Jimmy Snow, arms flailing, shouted, "I know how it feels when you sing it. I know what it does to you. I know the evil feeling that you feel when you sing it. I know the lost position that you get into. And the beat. . . . Well, you talk to the average teenager of today, and you ask them what it is about rock 'n' roll music that they like, and the first thing they'll say is 'the beat, the beat, the beat.'"[23]

In the hearings for a 1958 U.S. Senate bill to regulate radio and television (and specifically to examine BMI and Payola), writer/cultural critic Vance Packard said:

> Our airways have been flooded in recent years with whining guitarists, musical riots put to a switchblade beat, obscene lyrics about hugging, squeezing and rocking all night long.[24]

And:

> [Rock & roll] was inspired by what had been called race music modified to stir the animal instinct in modern teenagers. Its chief characteristics now are a heavy unrelenting beat and a raw, savage tone. The lyrics tend to be either nonsensical or lewd, or both. Rock and roll might best be summed up as monotony tinged with hysteria.[25]

---

[23] Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 161.

[24] "Amendment to Communications Act of 1934 (Prohibiting Radio and Television Stations from Engaging in Music Publishing or Recording Business)," Pub. L. No. Y4.In8/3:C73/34/958, § Interstate and Foreign Commerce; Senate Subcommittee on Communications. Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce. Senate, 1245 pp. (1958), 109.

[25] Amendment to Communications Act of 1934 (Prohibiting Radio and Television Stations from Engaging in Music Publishing or Recording Business), 136.

The fear of lewdness and sexual innuendo is present again, as is a fear of rock being "nonsensical." Because so much of the music was already considered to be laced with sexual innuendo and could provoke youth violence and delinquency, any nonsensical words or phrases may have been viewed with an additional air of suspicion. Furthermore, the "raw, savage tone" that Packard mentions hints at another musical element beyond the beat: noise and volume. Lawson quotes author/critic Jeff Grenfield on this issue, writing: "According to Jeff Greenfield, the 'honking tenor sax and the vibrating electric guitar and the insistent drum beat,' were considered by his parents' generation as 'fearful engines of immorality, driving daughters to strange dance steps and God knows what else.'"[26] Bertrand, meanwhile, quotes a network executive commenting on what songs they would and would not play: "We are eliminating only those rock 'n' roll tunes which are distorted, monotonous, noisy music and/or suggestive or borderline salacious lyrics. . . . I believe the policy will attract more listeners and still retain teenage groups who will still get their rock 'n' roll, but of a better type."[27] Again, noise is presented as a problematic element, but this time *distortion* is added.

In the following section I will focus on how distortion is produced and its historical usage in rock, but I will first summarize some key points. The 1950s were a turbulent time in the United States, far from the idealized versions presented in that time's media. Many of the fears of that era were projected on to rock & roll, which was deemed immoral by the cultural elites of the nation. The labeling of that immorality had more to do with prejudice toward difference and cultural change than

[26] Lawson, "Race, Rock and Roll, and the Rigged Society: The Payola Scandal and the Politcal Culture of the 1950s," 210.

[27] Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 84.

with actual elements of the music, yet nevertheless, that prejudice was projected on to the music. The surface-level problems with rock & roll, as stated by critics, were its lyrical themes, proclivity toward dancing, and musical elements such as the beat, noise, and distortion. Ultimately, rock & roll in the 1950s would end with a whimper. Pressure from cultural elites led to "taming down" or "sanitizing" of rock & roll lyrics and music, not only practiced by white rockers such as Elvis and Bill Haley, but also in the promotion of artists like Pat Boone. As Bertrand notes, despite the controversy Elvis caused, his career also aided this process of sanitization:

> No longer strictly representing the tastes and values of the underclass, rock 'n' roll had become the diverse, identity-free entertainment form that [RCA repertoire chief Steve] Sholes had foreseen in Presley's music. From a corporate standpoint, rhythm and blues had matured. It had exchanged its more "savage" or vulgar qualities for sophistication.[28]

For his part, Elvis left show business to join the military at the end of the 50s, while many of rock & roll's biggest starts also met various degrees of demise. Bill Haley's popularity plummeted; Chuck Berry was arrested for having relations with a minor; Carl Perkins' career suffered due to a car accident; Jerry Lee Lewis was disgraced after it was discovered he had wedded his 13-year-old cousin; Buddy Holly died in a plane crash at age 22, the famed "The Day the Music Died;" and Little Richard briefly left rock & roll to study theology and perform gospel. Rock & roll, it seemed to some, had had its moment as a cultural fad and was passing away; unfortunately for rock's critics, however, they would prove to be very wrong.

[28] Bertrand, 83.

Distortion and the Electric Guitar

The electric guitar, in particular, has a special relationship with distortion. Acoustic varieties have a long history on the American continents, originally arriving via Spain. In the United States in the early 1900s, however, it was relegated to being a parlor instrument due to its relative lack of volume, and early Dixieland jazz bands often featured the banjo instead because of its ability to project certain frequencies. When jazz bands did have a guitar, the instrument was typically relegated to a purely rhythmic instrument within a full band texture, where guitarists would play what was known as "chunking," that is, strumming chords on every downbeat. In the 1930s, guitar manufacturers and inventors began experimenting with electronic pickups, an example of which can be seen in figure 2 below. Comprised of copper wire wrapped around or above a magnet, a pickup could be placed under the guitar's strings where its generated magnetic field would be disturbed by the vibration of the guitar's magnetic strings to the exact frequencies of the strings' vibrations.



Figure 2.2 - The inside of a humbucker pickup.[29]

[29] Image taken from "Guitar Pickups," MichałKaszczyszyn.com, accessed July 29, 2021, http://www.michalkaszczyszyn.com/en/tutorials/pickups.html.

The disturbance in the pickup's magnetic field would then create a voltage difference which could be sent into an amplifier and reproduced as audible sound. Along with improvements to the playability of electric guitars, the invention of guitar amplification allowed guitarists such as Charlie Christian to step to the front of jazz ensembles as soloists rather than performing chunking rhythmic parts.



Figure 2.3 - Charlie Christian playing a Gibson ES-150 guitar, the pickup can be seen at the end of the fretboard near his right hand.[30]

[30] Image taken from English: Published by DownBeat magazine Photographed by Charles B. Nadell, *English: Photo Portrait of American Jazz Guitarist Charlie Christian Playing a Gibson ES-150 Guitar at the Waldorf Astoria New York, October 1939. (Source of Information: SoloFlight.Cc Photo Gallery, Photo #13).*, October 1939, English: *Original source: The photo was originally published in the December 1, 1939, issue of DownBeat magazine (Vol. 6, No. 14) alongside "Guitarmen, Wake Up and Pluck!", an article written by Christian. A scan of the original page can be seen at WorthPoint in low resolution, or a higher-res scan of an exact reprint can be seen via Twitter. Instant source: Scan via PBS. Cropped (to match original dimensions as published in DownBeat) and retouched by uploader. This is a retouched picture, which means that it has been digitally altered from its original version. Modifications made by Brandt Luke Zorn., https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charlie_Christian_(1939-10_Waldorf-Astoria_portrait).jpg.

In the 1940s and 50s, rhythm & blues guitarists discovered their guitar signals would distort when they turned the volume up on their amplifiers, but they found *this* type of distortion to be pleasing. According to Robert Palmer, guitarists had been playing loud and distorted in clubs far earlier than had appeared on records. He writes:

> If recording had simply documented the music of the juke joints and taverns, we would have examples of jacked-up guitar sizzle and the edgy hum of overdriven amps from the 1940s—the noisier the gig, the louder an electric bluesman like Muddy Waters would play, just to cut through the din. The problem was studio recording technology.[31]

Indeed, guitarists, for the most part, turned down their amplifiers when recording in the studio to appease recording engineers. Some early examples of recorded guitar distortion can be heard on Goree Carter's 1949 single "Rock Awhile," and on Muddy Waters' 1947 recording of "I Feel Like Going Home."[32] As can be heard in both tracks, guitar distortion is present in the introductions, but only when the guitarists are playing double stops; by playing more than one note, enough volume is being sent into the amplifier to cause the sound to distort.

"Rocket 88," a 1951 song written by guitarist and bandleader Ike Turner and saxophonist/vocalist Jackie Brenston is often cited as the first rock n' roll recording to feature a "fuzzy" distorted guitar sound.[33] The distortion occurred because guitarist Willie Kizart's amplifier had fallen

---

[31] Robert Palmer, "The Church of the Sonic Guitar," in *Present Tense: Rock & Roll and Culture*, ed. Anthony DeCurtis (Duke University Press, 1992), 20.

[32] Goree Carter, "Rock Awhile (Remastered)," *The Genius Little T-Bone (Remastered)*, Master Tape Records, 2021, streaming audio, Tidal; Muddy Waters, "I Feel Like Going Home," *The Anthology*, MCA Records, 2001, streaming audio, Tidal.

[33] Jackie Brenston, "Rocket 88," *The Sun Records Story*, Disc 3, Charly Records, 2002, streaming audio, Tidal.

from the top of a car as the band was driving to Sam Phillips' studio, the same producer who would later record Elvis. Phillips recalled:

> When it fell, that burst the speaker cone. We had no way of getting it fixed. . . . It would probably have taken a couple of days, so we started playing around with the damn thing. I stuffed a little paper in there where the speaker cone was ruptured, and it sounded good. It sounded like a saxophone. And we decided to go ahead and record.[34]

From this point on, when Phillips recorded blues guitarists, he allowed them to turn up their amplifiers to achieve this mild distortion. An example that quickly followed "Rocket 88" was Howlin' Wolf's debut single, "Moanin' at Midnight" and its B-side "How Many More Years," recorded by Phillips and Memphis and released by the Chicago R&B label Chess Records.[35]

These early examples demonstrate the ways that guitar distortion was created and give hints toward their symbolic meaning. As detailed in the previous chapter, guitar distortion occurs either because an amplifier has been damaged or destroyed (whether intentional or not), or because the input signal is boosted to such a loud volume that it surpasses the limitations of one or more of the amplifiers' components. This is an example, in Charles Sanders Pierce's categorical system, of an *index*: the signifier—distortion—cannot exist without the presence of the signified—either damage or volume. "Rocket 88" is an example of damage, while the Muddy Waters tracks are an example of distortion from volume. Also as detailed in the previous chapter, both causes of distortion give the *impression* of violence, without necessarily being violent themselves. After all, distortion caused by damage is typically

[34] Quoted in Palmer, "The Church of the Sonic Guitar," 22.

[35] Palmer, 24–25; Howlin' Wolf, "Moanin' At Midnight," *Moanin' In The Moonlight*, UMG Recordings, inc., 1959, streaming audio, Tidal; Howlin' Wolf, Howlin' Wolf, "How Many More Years," *Moanin' In The Moonlight*, UMG Recordings, inc., 1959, streaming audio, Tidal.

either accidental and/or done to one's own property, while distortion caused by loud volume is (often, though not always) consented to by the audience. At the same time, the impression of violence—through the representation of a powerful force—was enough for members of conservative society to believe that the music was either inherently violent or would cause listeners to become violent or disobedient.

Thus, noise, volume, and distortion became one of the targets of rock & roll's critics in the 1950s. As previously argued, this had as much to do with a backlash to the entrance to the mainstream of the cultural products of marginalized groups, specifically African Americans and lower-class southerners, as it did with the inherent properties of distortion. Although there were definite traces of violence present in distortion, there is no reason for it to *necessarily* have formed that semiotic link. Instead, the cultural and the sonic combined to create the narrative around distortion. As also noted previously, the larger trend by the end of the 1950s was to "clean up" and "sanitize" those most problematic elements of rock & roll, making the genre palatable to upper-class, white, mainstream America. Some artists, however, went in the opposite direction, leaning into the relationship between noise, violence, and delinquency.

One such example was guitarist Link Wray, whose single "Rumble" inspired a generation of guitarists who would come after.[36] Wray was born in North Carolina to Shawnee parents and grew up playing guitar in jazz and country/western groups. "Rumble" came out of instrumental jam during a 1958 recording of *The Milt Grand Show*, for which Wray played with his brothers as the house band.

[36] Link Wray, His Wray Men, "Rumble," *Rumble/The Swag* (Single), Barnaby Records, 1958, streaming audio, Tidal.

The song has no lyrics, but punctuates the bass and drum grooves with distorted guitar chords that are allowed to ring out.[37] To recreate the distortion sound originally achieved from the overdriven PA system at the live show, Wray damaged his amplifier's speakers by poking holes in them with a pencil.[38] Guitarists who would later cite this record's distorted guitar sound as inspirational and influential to their development include Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Jimmy Page, Bruce Springsteen, Neil Young, Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, and Jimi Hendrix. In a 1974 interview, guitarist Pete Townshend of The Who said, ""I remember being made very uneasy the first time I heard ["Rumble"], and yet excited by the savage guitar sounds."[39] Wray is also cited as one of the first guitarists to use "power chords," that is, guitar chords played with only a root and fifth (sometimes with an additional root an octave above). Played cleanly, these chords would sound open and austere, but with amplifier or speaker distortion, additional harmonics are added, creating (to some) a pleasing, blooming quality.

While "Rumble" proved popular, charting all over the United States, multiple radio stations censored the song for fear of inciting teenage violence.[40] In a documentary about Native American influences on rock & roll, author and filmmaker Antonino D'Ambrosio said about the song,

> The idea, "rumble," just from a superficial, almost reactionary level, is to fight. But for me it means "to disrupt, to roar, to be active." So Link Wray announced with "Rumble" that there

[37] Scott Prinzing, "Brothers of the Blade: Three Native Axmen: Link Wray, Robbie Robertson, and Jesse Ed Davis," in *Indigenous Pop: Native American Music from Jazz to Hip Hop*, ed. Jeff Berglund, Jan Johnson, and Kimberli Lee (University of Arizona Press, 2016), 76–78.

[38] Michael Molenda, "Classic Riffs: Link Wray's 'Rumble,'" *Guitar Player* (New York, United Kingdom: Future Publishing Ltd, March 1998).

[39] Quoted in Prinzing, "Brothers of the Blade," 78.

[40] Anonymous, "Wray Inspired Rockers, Punks," *Variety* (Los Angeles, United States: Penske Business Corporation, December 28, 2005).

> was a shift happening in the culture. This was not going to be the bop and the stroll, it's going to be "the rumble."

Guitarist Steven Van Zandt, meanwhile, commented, "Here comes Link Wray with the theme song of juvenile delinquency. . . I'm surprised it got any airplay to be honest, I'm not surprised it was banned."[41] Indeed, the term "rumble" at that time was commonly used to refer to fights and brawls, some of which had broken out at rock & roll concerts. A 1956 *Washington Post* article on such an occurrence, for example, wrote:

> We pass this information along, for whatever it may be worth, to the District Commissioners who have the responsibility of deciding how to prevent repetitions of the nasty brawling that took place Sunday night in the National Guard Armory. Was it really the intoxication of the big-big-beat that set these boys and girls to beating one another with chairs and slicing one another with switchblade knives? That is much like asking whether the *Carmagnole* and the *Ça ira* were to blame for the excesses of the French Revolution. It is our unscientific impression that among the sort of drapes and chicks who sometimes frequent these affairs almost any pretext—musical or otherwise—will serve for beginning a rumble.[42]

In this manner, the titling of the song "Rumble" along with the distortion on the recording reinforced the nascent semiotic link; distortion signified violence.

From Rock & Roll to Rock: The British Invasion and the Whitewashing of Rock & Roll

Despite electric guitar distortion being linked with violence and juvenile delinquency—ultimately tying back to rock & roll's associations with African American working class culture and the threat it posed to upper-class, white, conservative American society—a peculiar trend came to pass in

[41] Catherine Bainbridge et al., *Rumble* (San Francisco, CA: Kino Lorber, Kanopy Streaming, 2017), pt. 9:40-10:45.

[42] "Rhythm and Rumble," *The Washington Post and Times Herald (1954-1959)*, June 6, 1956.

the 1960s: the unlinking of rock & roll with black culture. This topic is explored in depth by Jack Hamilton in *Just around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination*, where he proposes that this narrative emerged from the stories crafted both by critics and fans at the time and by historians after the fact.[43] He argues that narratives about white appropriation of black music and of the "self-segregation" of black popular music into "others" like soul and Motown, even though both contain elements of truth, are incomplete to explain the disassociation. Instead, ideologies emerged focusing either on "Great Men" or on the working-class populism of rock & roll's roots. He writes:

> [Rock's] ideology of authenticity functions as a way of delineating what constitutes "real" rock music, including who is authorized to play that music and who is authorized to talk about and listen to it. . . . Rock music takes the reality of its own "realness" for granted, and by the end of the 1960s "real" rock music had been colored white. Playing and consuming rock music offered new ways into being a "real" white person—most often a white man—and in many quarters being a white man had become a precondition for making "real" rock music. . . .
>
> What these ideologies reconstructed in tandem was a sonic worldview in which black musical authenticity was defined in relation to a set of imagined aesthetic strictures imposed onto a group, while white musical authenticity was seen in terms of individuality. In rock music the very act of imaginatively engaging with and "putting on" black musical authenticity while keeping black bodies at arm's length became, simply, a new way of being white.[44]

As Hamilton argues that this dissociation between rock and black culture occurred, I suggest that the same dynamic occurred with guitar distortion and its signification: distortion continued to signify violence, delinquency, and rebellion, while disassociating itself from blackness.

A few events and trends from the 1960s are critical to understanding the separation of rock & roll from black culture, none perhaps more important than the "British Invasion." Multiple styles of

[43] Jack Hamilton, *Just around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[44] Hamilton, 15–16.

American rock & roll and rhythm & blues took hold in Britain in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, centered around a few distinct, but overlapping, groups. One of these, "Teddies," were interested in and became associated with rock & roll, consuming the music and taking on its cultural mores, specifically adopting rebellious, sometimes violent attitudes. Hamilton notes, however, that teddies had a tenuous relationship with race. He writes:

> Several historians have argued that the "rock and roll riots" helped cement a connection between rock and roll and juvenile delinquency in the 1950s British cultural imagination. Even more specifically, I would suggest that a racialized imaginative link between the teddy boys (white English youth), rock and roll (interracial American music), and "riot" violence was forged during this period that would take on even greater proportions in the wake of the Notting Hill riots of 1958, one of postwar England's most destructive outbreaks of racial violence and, like the cinema riots, an event for which the teds were widely blamed.[45]

The teddies, perhaps because of geographical distance to the United States, separated rock & roll music and culture from its racial and political connections. This theme was echoed as well in the British blues movement, which focused on more traditional and less "commercial" American rhythm & blues artists such as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Robert Johnson. These musicians, which included the likes of Eric Clapton and Keith Richards, idolized their American forebears, both living and deceased, as pillars of authenticity. At the same time, however, to be able to play this music themselves, they needed to, in a sense, de-racialize the genre, separating the political and social from the musical. As Hamilton notes:

> The potential for white male cooptation was present in British blues since its inception: by conflating fantasies of racial authenticity with fantasies of personal authenticity, British blues had already de-racialized itself. The British blues community embraced a notion of the blues as a deeply democratic form: if one were compelled to sing the blues, then by all means one should, regardless of skin color, provided one treated the music with the respect and rigor it deserved.[46]

[45] Hamilton, 101.

[46] Hamilton, 115.

The coalescing of these subgenres in Britain began the process of separating rock & roll from its associations with African Americans, a process that would continue as artists made the leap to the United States.

The most important artists of the British Invasion were the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, who made their debuts in the United States in February and June 1964, respectively. To begin with the former, the Beatles were, perhaps more so than Elvis, the epitome of what Sam Phillips might have been looking for in a group that could popularize rock & roll while making it palatable and harmless to conservative, white audiences. The Beatles began in the late 1950s playing skiffle, a style of British/American folk music that emerged from the British "trad" movement.[47] At the same time, the Beatles' members were infatuated with rock & roll—covering songs by Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Carl Perkins, Buddy Holly, and others—and were influenced by the teddy boy fashion style, dressing in leather pants and jackets and slicking back their hair early in their careers in Liverpool and during their time in Hamburg, Germany in the early 1960s. This style also reflected their modest, working-class backgrounds, all members hailing from working class Liverpool. It was only after hiring manager Brian Epstein that the Beatles were "cleaned up," dressing in matching suits and letting down their hair into the "mop top" style they made famous. Their constructed image of "nice, young boys" was carefully maintained by the group members and their management, as this image was one of the key reasons for their immense success in the United States. When this image began to break apart—most notably when John Lennon commented that the Beatles had become "bigger than Jesus" and when Paul McCartney

[47] The trad movement itself focused on American jazz and American and British folk styles.

admitted to having taken LSD—the group faced backlash from more conservative parts of American society, even leading to some fans burning their records in 1966.

The Rolling Stones, despite being close friends with the Beatles, often served as their foil. Compared to the innocent and harmless Beatles, the Rolling Stones cultivated an image of "bad boys," out to tempt and corrupt youth. Like the Beatles, the Stones' image was also part fiction, playing up a rough image while coming from middle-class London backgrounds. As Hamilton notes,

> Crucial to the fomentation of the Rolling Stones' mythology was the band's purported connection to blackness and racial transgression, both in a musical sense and a more vague, imaginative one. . . . From their earliest coverage in both the British and American presses the Stones were characterized as harboring a preternatural fluency within black music and a prodigious knowledge of blues and rhythm and blues traditions. . . . The Rolling Stones were also described as a public menace, scourges to society, the embodiment of all the fears of generational overthrow and cultural disruption that the cuter and cuddlier Beatles had so effectively managed to sublimate.[48]

The Stones' image proved commercially successful, and the band would continue to lean into their image as the decade progressed. The Stones first major hit, 1965's "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," was one of the first uses of a fuzz pedal—the Maestro FZ-1—to achieve distortion.[49] And although the band would not go on to be pioneers of increasing amounts of distortion, their more important semiotic contribution was leaning into themes of violence and rebellion, particularly in their late 1960s output. Hit songs such as "Jumpin' Jack Flash," "Street Fighting Man," "Sympathy For the Devil," "Brown Sugar," and "Gimme Shelter" all dealt lyrically with violent themes. And most famously, the Rolling Stones headlined the 1969 Altamont Speedway Free Festival, where the Hells Angels were

[48] Hamilton, *Just around Midnight*, 249–50.

[49] The Rolling Stones, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction (Mono Version)," *Out of Our Heads*, London Records, 1965, streaming audio, Tidal.

hired to run security, one of whom stabbed and killed attendee Meredith Hunter during the Stones' set. Ironically, the Rolling Stones maintained a fierce devotion to their African American forebears, consistently crediting and praising black musicians. As Hamilton notes, however, the Stones' "insistence on the continued relevance of black music to rock & roll was never fully heard."[50] Instead, much of the Rolling Stones' legacy is in further intertwining rock & roll and violence while separating rock from black music.

Another British Invasion band would have an enormous impact on the use of guitar distortion: The Kinks. Hailing from north London and forming in the early 1960s, the Kinks followed the Beatles and Stones crossing the Atlantic, but it was their third single, 1964's "You Really Got Me," that would have a lasting impact on rock.[51] The song is based around its opening guitar riff comprised of alternating power chords a step apart. The most notable feature of that riff, especially for its time, was the distortion present on the track, which was achieved by guitarist Dave Davies slashing the speaker cone of his amplifier with a razor blade. Davies tells the story in an interview:

> I always liked how our band sounded at clubs—coarse and sort of stripped down. Months earlier I had passed a radio shop a few doors up from my parents' house on Denmark Terrace. In the window I saw a small teal space-age Elpico amp for 10 quid. I bought it, but when I got home, I was alone and had a moment of teenage inspiration or rage. I had just learned to shave, so I took one of my razorblades and slashed up the amp's speaker cone. I had no idea whether what I had done would work, but when I plugged in the guitar, I was blown away by the raucous sound that came out. It was gritty. Up until then, rock guitars in London had sounded very

[50] Hamilton, *Just around Midnight*, 271.

[51] The Kinks, "You Really Got Me (Mono Mix)," *Kinks*, Sanctuary Records, recorded 1964, rereleased 2004, streaming audio, Tidal.

> clean and polished, except for blues players. But the blues sound wasn't what I had in my head then. It was just rage.[52]

This song, as with "Rocket 88" a decade earlier, records distortion as a semiotic index, where the fuzzy sound serves as evidence of the damage done to Davies' amplifier. Davies' quote also shows the emotions that *he* was encoding in the band's sound, highlighting the "raucous" and "gritty" sound, and his own rage. The Kinks would have a short-lived career in the United States due to a four-year permit ban from the American Federation of Musicians stemming from the Kinks' stage behavior and a violent incident that occurred when the band was taping for the Dick Clark Show in 1965.[53] The sound and attitude of "You Really Got Me," though, was highly influential to artists who followed.

One such artist was The Who, another London-based British Invasion band that came slightly after the Kinks, forming in 1964 and first visiting the United States in 1967. The influence of the Kinks, both in terms of songwriting and guitar distortion, can be heard on early singles such as 1964's "I Can't Explain" and 1965's "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere." The former owes much to the Kinks' single "All Day and All of the Night" (itself heavily based on "You Really Got Me"), while the latter made extensive use of distortion, feedback, and extended guitar techniques, particularly in the guitar solo.[54] The Who quickly began to extend their use of distortion and violence, both on stage and in the studio.

---

[52] Quoted in Marc Myers, "How the Kinks Roughed Up Their Sound; To Come up with the Fuzzy Distortion on 'You Really Got Me,' Members of the Kinks Distressed Their Speakers with Knitting Needles and Razor Blades. A Look at How the Influential 1964 Hit Took Shape," *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, October 29, 2014.

[53] Mark Savage, "To Ray Davies, America Is a 'beautiful but Dangerous' Place," *BBC News*, April 22, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-39665367.

[54] The Kinks, "All Day And All of the Night," *Kinks*, Sanctuary Records, recorded 1964, rereleased 2004, streaming audio, Tidal; The Who, "I Can't Explain (Mono Version)," *My Generation (Mono Version)*, Geffen Records, 1965, streaming audio, Tidal; The Who, "I Can't Explain (Mono Version)," *My Generation (Mono Version)*, Geffen Records, 1965, streaming audio, Tidal, 1:10-1:45.

During live performances, the band would sometimes smash their instruments into their amplifiers and other stage equipment, quite literally enacting both physical and sonic violence. The two most famous occurrences were at the Monterrey Pop Festival (June 18, 1967) and on a taping for *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (September 17, 1967). In the latter, in addition to guitarist Pete Townshend throwing and smashing his guitar, drummer Keith Moon lit explosives inside of his drum kit, causing damage to the studio and injuring himself and Townshend.[55] In the studio, their 1967 single "I Can See For Miles" featured Moon's frenetic drumming style along with Townshend's distorted guitar, which along with Townshend's lyrics create a dark and heavy track. In another famous anecdote, when Paul McCartney read a critic who called the Who's single the "heaviest" song he'd ever heard, it inspired McCartney to write "Helter Skelter," a track released on the Beatles' self-titled 1967 album that would later inspire Charles Mansons' murder spree in 1969.[56]

It is worth pausing here to take stock of the rock scene in the late 1960s. By this point, rock & roll had begun to blend with blues and rhythm and blues, particularly through the music of artists like the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton (guitarist for the Yardbirds, John Mayall, and Cream). Bob Dylan and the folk movement, meanwhile, had influenced rock & roll artists to play more "serious" music, but, as Hamilton argues, took this charge for white musicians and separated it from black musicians of the same period. He writes:

---

[55] Dave Marsh, *Before I Get Old: The Story of The Who*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 275–76; Star Man, *THE WHO on Smothers Brothers TV Show 1967*, December 2, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZkjA8DTg4o.

[56] Chris Gill, "Song Facts: The Beatles — 'Helter Skelter,'" guitarworld, October 13, 2015, https://www.guitarworld.com/gw-archive/song-facts-beatles-helter-skelter.

> The notion of white performers sonically transcending racial category had been part of rock and roll music at least since Elvis Presley, and it was a shared tenet of the folk revival through its linkage of political authenticity to the performance of black music. When this formulation traveled from the folk revival to rock music, the "political" element disappeared, and not particularly gradually. By placing the burden of "serious" rock music squarely on Dylan's shoulders, the music thus became naturalized as the birthright of white men, a development that radically reracialized rock and roll as a cultural form.[57]

The style of blues rock that British Invasion bands practiced merged with folk and art music sensibilities, birthing psychedelic art rock, perhaps best encapsulated in the Beatles' 1967 album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and the Beach Boys' 1966 album *Pet Sounds*. By the end of the decade, these combinations of styles and subgenres would drop the "roll" moniker and be referred to solely as "rock," a predominantly white genre. Meanwhile, black artists—such as James Brown, Marvin Gaye, and Sly and the Family Stone, for example—began to be classified under different subgenres such as Motown, soul, and funk. Moreover, these predominantly black subgenres are known neither for featuring heavy amounts of guitar distortion nor for having any associations with violence.

The one artist whose specter hangs paradoxically over this history, as it did in the present, is James Marshall "Jimi" Hendrix. Hendrix was, and still is, considered one of the most talented and influential electric guitarists in history, often topping popular guitarist ranking lists, and for good reason: his guitar playing techniques and stage theatrics and persona were beyond anything previously seen. Musically, Hendrix pushed the use of distortion, feedback, and soloing speed to new heights, stunning even the most accomplished guitarists of the day (such as, famously, Eric Clapton).[58] His use

[57] Hamilton, *Just around Midnight*, 84–85.

[58] In one of the most famous anecdotes in rock history, Hendrix sat in with Cream, Clapton's band, shortly after arriving in London. He played a version of Howlin' Wolf's "Killing Floor" with such speed and virtuosity that it left Clapton stunned. Julian Piper, Jamie Dickson, and David Mead, "'There Were Guitar Players Weeping, They Had to Mop the Floor up. He Was Piling It on, Solo after Solo' – How Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton

of multiple high-wattage Marshall amplifiers turned up to near-maximum volume along with the Dallas Arbiter Fuzz Face pedal were key parts of his distorted, feedback-laden sound. As Steve Waksman writes:

> Hendrix's use of electronic sound significantly expanded the musical vocabulary of rock. Indeed, his array of bent, distorted notes teetering over the edge of tonality and feedback shrieks struggling to avoid the inevitability of sonic decay introduced sounds that had really never been heard before in any musical setting.[59]

On stage, Hendrix became renowned for non-musical uses of his guitar, playing behind his head, playing with his teeth, and thrusting with his guitar in a sexual manner. At the same Monterrey Pop Festival concert where The Who smashed their instruments, Hendrix one-upped them by pouring lighter fluid on his guitar and setting it aflame. To cite Waksman again:

> Through the medium of the electric guitar, Hendrix was able to transcend human potential in both musical and sexual terms. The dimension of exaggerated phallic display was complemented by the array of new sonic possibilities offered by the instrument, possibilities he deployed with aggressive creativity. Hendrix's achievement therefore rested upon a combination of talent and technology in which the electric guitar allowed him to construct a superhuman persona founded upon the display of musical and sexual mastery.[60]

While Hendrix's sound and actions were not as inherently "violent" as some of his contemporaries, his superhuman mastery of the guitar along with his trademark sound forever shaped guitar distortion's meaning within rock.

Changed Guitar Forever," MusicRadar, December 29, 2021, https://www.musicradar.com/news/jimi-hendrix-eric-clapton-1966.

[59] Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 182–83.

[60] Waksman, 188.

No moment would better encapsulate the paradox of violence than when Hendrix played the "Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock in August, 1969. Hendrix mostly plays the song's melody solo with occasional accompaniment from drummer Mitch Mitchell. The guitar starts off somewhat distorted, but just after he plays the melody to the line "And the rocket's red glare," he stomps on his fuzz and wah-wah pedals. What follows is a feedback and distortion-laden explosion of improvised runs over the guitar neck with added use of the vibrato arm. Hendrix continues for the rest of the song interspersing the lines from the original melody with these noise-like, sonic improvisations.[61] Some likened the moment to a protest on the Vietnam War, and Hendrix's guitar tone as representative of the United States' violence in that theater. For his own part, Hendrix would later say in an interview on the Dick Cavett show that he did not know why there would be any controversy around his playing the anthem, and that he thought his version was "beautiful."[62] Perhaps he was simply being coy in that interview, even though his comments appear to be genuine. Still, the connections between the politics of the time, the meaning of the national anthem, and the noise and volume of the guitar meant that violence would become pivotal in popular interpretations of that moment.

By the end of the 60s, Hendrix's blackness was not representative of a dangerous African American genre coming to threaten a generation of middle-class white youth (as it had in the 50s), but was an anomaly. Rock had already become conceptualized as a predominantly white genre, even though

[61] Jimi Hendrix, "Star Spangled Banner (Live at the Woodstock Music & Art Fair, August 18, 1969)," *Experience Hendrix: The Best of Jimi Hendrix*, Sony, 1997, streaming audio, Tidal, 1:00-2:25.

[62] The Dick Cavett Show, *Jimi Hendrix on Performing The National Anthem at Woodstock | The Dick Cavett Show*, April 22, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGf9PTYyJ4A.

that vastly oversimplified reality, and Hendrix faced a different sort of racism than black musicians had faced a decade earlier. As Hamilton writes:

> Cosmopolitan versatility among African American artists was not heard as identity transcendence but rather as racial betrayal, in accusations that were frequently lobbed by white critics. Again, perhaps the most torturous example of this was Jimi Hendrix, who during his career was judged by many as a fraud or sellout, his blackness rendering his music as inauthentically "rock" at the same time that his music rendered his person as inauthentically black.[63]

Caught in this liminal space, Hendrix's blackness was not representative of rock, but was something additional to it. It added to his mystical, superhuman persona and playing ability, calling back to British blues musicians' reverence for older American blues artists. His blackness also served as an extension to the semiotic link between violence and distortion rather than something foundational to it. In the span of less than two decades, rock & roll transformed from something subversive, threatening, and black, to something subversive, threatening, and white. Guitar distortion, in turn, was symbolic of violence and destruction, but was no longer directly related to racial relations in the United States.

[63] Hamilton, *Just around Midnight*, 15–16.

Chapter 3

Violence, Metal, and the Parents Music Resource Center

In the middle of 1985, fifteen artists each found one of their recordings on "The Filthy Fifteen," a list of popular songs created by the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) with the purpose of publicizing the extent of obscene content in popular music (see Table 1 below, the songs are organized in the order presented by *Rolling Stone*, whose article on the PMRC was cited in the congressional record).[1] Their stated aim was for the record industry to adopt a self-regulatory system that would label obscene content, serving as a warning to parents concerned about the exposure of their children to said content. The movement, however, faced strong backlash from artists, the recording industry, and fans, who said any labelling system would encroach upon their rights to free expression. In the end, record labels capitulated and agreed to implement the Parental Advisory sticker system that came into effect a few years later.

[1] Robert Love, "Furor over Rock Lyrics Intensifies," *Rolling Stone* (New York, United States: Rolling Stone Licensing LLC, September 12, 1985).

Artist	Song	Content Label
Judas Priest	"Eat Me Alive"	Sex
Mötley Crüe	"Bastard"	Violence
Prince	"Darling Nikki"	Sex
Sheena Easton	"Sugar Walls"	Sex
W.A.S.P.	"Animal (Fuck Like a Beast)"	Sex
Mercyful Fate	"Into the Coven"	Occult
Vanity	"Strap On 'Robbie Baby"	Sex
Def Leppard	"High 'n' Dry (Saturday Night)"	Drugs/Alcohol
Twisted Sister	"We're Not Gonna Take It"	Violence
Madonna	"Dress You Up"	Sex
Cyndi Lauper	"She Bop"	Sex
AC/DC	"Let Me Put My Love Into You"	Sex
Black Sabbath	"Trashed"	Drugs/Alcohol
Mary Jane Girls	"In My House"	Sex
Venom	"Possessed"	Occult

Figure 3.1 – the "Filthy Fifteen"

The climax of the PMRC's campaign occurred on September 19, 1985, in the chamber of the United States Senate during a hearing on lyrical content in music by the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. The hearing was the peak of national media attention and publicity directed at the issue, but also was unusual for multiple reasons. The goal of the hearing was rather unclear, as according to the senators who convened it, the purpose was merely discussion over general concern and legislation pertaining to the recording industry was off the table. And yet, legislation was threatened by some senators and discussions about free speech and artistry ensued. On the one hand, a significant portion of the hearing was spent discussing practical issues of a potential advisory system and its potential consequences to artists.[2] But on the other hand, the hearing and the PMRC's campaign

[2] The PMRC used the movie industry's rating system as an example. It was pointed out, however, that only a few hundred movies needed to be rated every year compared to thousands of songs and albums. Questions also arose about the criteria for applying a rating and who would be responsible for doing so.

became less about the regulation of a small subset of problematic music, and more about painting popular music as a whole—and heavy metal in particular—as a societal ill that needed to be addressed. Ironically, given the reception of early rock & roll discussed in the previous chapter, multiple senators and witnesses gave testimony stating that modern music represented a *real* threat compared to the more innocent music of the 1950s. What accounts for the disparity between views of 1950s and 1980s music in the minds of those who were so concerned?

This chapter uses the PMRC campaigns, the 1985 Senate hearing, and the eventual implementation of the parental advisory sticker to examine the role played by guitar distortion in the interpretation of 1980s metal, which was, perhaps, the primary genre singled out by the PMRC. I argue that the PMRC campaigns were both responding to very real trends in the music industry while also overstating those trends in a moral panic that echoed that of the 1950s. While the PMRC focused primarily on lyrical content, it is impossible to ignore the role that the music and its context played in their assessment of certain songs as obscene. Music videos, aspects of live performances, and stories of the "rock star lifestyle" from bands and artists contributed to the perception of the artists as dangerous and poor role models for children. Musically, I argue that the construction of the songs themselves—the timbres, vocal delivery, harmony, and other factors—evoked already-established topics of violence, such as rebellion, drug use, and the occult, which were the very themes the PMRC argued the songs represented. Those topics therefore reinforced those violent resonances even if those songs' lyrics had no clear references to those themes; in other words, if it *sounded* dangerous, it *was* dangerous. In particular, I will focus on Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It," one of the songs on the "Filthy Fifteen" and the only one whose writer (Dee Snider) defended himself at the senate hearing. It is a song

that while on the surface does little to earn the violent label given to it by the PMRC, uses the violent topic contained in much of past and present rock & roll.

Background: Heavy Metal and its Associations

Just as with rock & roll and rock, (heavy) metal is a loose genre label that coalesces around a general set of characteristics. Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene say, "The term *heavy metal* has come to denote a cluster of rock music styles that emphasize loud, distorted guitars; prominent and aggressive drums; emotionally extreme singing techniques; and musical complexity and esotericism."[3] Robert Walser, meanwhile, says, "'Heavy metal' now denotes a variety of musical discourses, social practices, and cultural meanings, all of which revolve around concepts, images, and experiences of power," and goes on to describe identifying features: loudness and intensity of the music; shouting, headbanging, and high energy of performances; a particular visual language of album covers, band names, and fashion; and feelings of spectacle and of being larger-than-life.[4] To understand how metal acquired these features requires the excavation of its history, picking up in the late 1960s where Chapter 2 ended.

The term "heavy metal" has two possible origins. The first comes from Barry Gifford's review of the band Electric Flag's album *A Long Time Comin'* in *Rolling Stone*, in which he wrote, "This is the

[3] Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene, eds., *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music around the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

[4] Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Music/Culture (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 2.

New White Soul Music, the synthesis of White Blues and Heavy Metal Rock."[5] The second—and much more commonly accepted origin—was from the second verse of Steppenwolf's June, 1968 hit "Born to Be Wild," where they sing, "I like smoke and lightning/Heavy metal thunder." Neither instance would encapsulate particularly well how metal would come to be defined: Electric Flag are generally thought of as a standard American rock group, while Steppenwolf's lyrics were in reference not to a musical style but to a car (and would later become associated with motorcycle culture due to the song's use in the 1969 film *Easy Rider*).

Instead, heavy metal came to define a subgenre of rock that was emerging from American and British psychedelic rock in the late 1960s. Three bands that pushed rock toward metal were Blue Cheer, Iron Butterfly, and Coven. Blue Cheer came out of San Francisco, and their 1968 debut LP *Vincebus Eruptum* is sometimes considered to be the first heavy metal album. Bassist and lead singer Dickie Peterson said of the band:

> People thought we were just making noise. . . . They thought we were a detriment to the scene. I just knew we wanted to be loud. I wanted our music to be physical. I wanted it to be more than just an audio experience. This is what we set out to try and do. We ended up being in a lot of trouble with other musicians of the time. I remember [Bob Dylan guitarist] Mike Bloomfield came up to me at the Avalon Ballroom, and he says, "You can't do that." I said, "C'mon, Mike, you can do it, too. All you gotta do is turn this knob up to 10.[6]

Their version of "Summertime Blues"—a cover of Eddie Cochran's 1958 single—demonstrates their new, proto-metal sound. Compared to Cochran's original, Blue Cheer's version opens with heavily

[5] Barry Gifford, "A Long Time Comin'," *Rolling Stone* (New York: Rolling Stone Licensing LLC, May 11, 1968).

[6] Ken McIntyre, "Cult Heroes: Blue Cheer - the Band Who Invented Heavy Metal," *loudersound*, November 4, 2016, https://www.loudersound.com/features/cult-heroes-blue-cheer-the-band-who-invented-heavy-metal.

distorted guitar playing a power chord riff while the drums hammer on the toms.[7] This overall heavy timbre continues through the start of the verse (0:12), matched by the intensity of the vocals. At the textural break in the verse where the instruments drop out, Cochran's version has softly spoken lyrics (0:25 in in the Cochran recording), but Blue Cheer replaces these with distorted, sustained guitar playing syncopated octaves (0:36 in the Blue Cheer recording). The heavy drums and distorted guitars pushed louder and more intense than before cleared the way for metal bands that followed.

Iron Butterfly and Coven both also explored distorted, more intense timbres, but brought new elements to the table that would lead to metal. Iron Butterfly's most famous song, 1968's "In-a-gadda-da-vida" (from the album of the same name) is seventeen minutes long, consisting of a short verse/chorus section—comprising approximately two of those seventeen minutes—followed by an extended jam of organ, guitar, and drum solos.[8] Long, extended solos in this vein would later become a common practice of many metal bands. Coven, meanwhile, is most famous for introducing themes of the occult, Satanic references, and the "sign of the horns" (raising one's fist while extending the first and fourth fingers) to rock and metal.[9] These themes can be seen in their song titles, for example, "Pact with

[7] Eddie Cochran, "Summertime Blues," The Best of Eddie Cochran, EMI Records, released 1970, rereleased 1996, streaming audio, Tidal; Blue Cheer, "Summertime Blues," *Vincebus Eruptum*, The Island Def Jam Music Group, January 1, 1968, streaming audio, Tidal.

[8] Iron Butterfly, "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida (2006 Remaster Full-Length)," *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*, Atlantic Recording Corp., 1968, streaming audio, Tidal.

[9] Jamie Ludwig, "How Coven Pioneered Occult Rock With 'Witchcraft Destroy Minds & Reaps Souls,'" *NPR*, October 25, 2017, https://www.npr.org/2017/10/25/559501959/shocking-omissions-coven-s-witchcraft-destroy-minds-reaps-souls.

Lucifer," "Dignitaries of Hell," "Satanic Mass," and "Black Sabbath," as well as in the cover of their 1969 debut album, *Witchcraft Destroys Minds & Reaps Souls*—shown below in Figure 1.[10]



Figure 3.2 – Coven's Debut Album: *Witchcraft Destroys Minds & Reaps Souls*

While the aforementioned artists are generally thought of as precursors to metal, three bands are generally considered to be its "founders," having a relatively greater cultural impact and influence on future artists: Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, and Deep Purple. To start with the former, Led Zeppelin grew out of the 1960s British blues-rock band The Yardbirds, playing adaptations of American blues standards with a harder edge pioneered by earlier bands. As Robert Walser writes, "Led Zeppelin's sound was marked by speed and power, unusual rhythmic patterns, contrasting terraced dynamics, singer Robert Plant's wailing vocals, and guitarist Jimmy Page's heavily distorted crunch."[11] And

[10] "Witchcraft Destroys Minds and Reaps Souls – Official Reissue," *Coven* (blog), July 27, 2018, https://covenband.com/product/witchcraft-destroys-minds-and-reaps-souls-official-reissue/.

[11] Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 10.

although Led Zeppelin played a variety of styles, including acoustic songs influenced by English and Celtic folk and songs with Middle Eastern influences, they were most known for their development of blues rock, hard rock, and heavy metal. One of their most famous tracks, "Whole Lotta Love" from their second album *Led Zeppelin II* (1969), demonstrates most of the qualities described by Walser. The song is based on a simple pentatonic blues riff, played by a heavily distorted guitar and doubled by the bass, that spans nearly the entire length of the song and creating a relentless, hypnotic groove. In the introduction and first verse and chorus, for example, the riff is joined by Plant's vocals and John Bonham's steady drumming and rhythmically complex fills.[12] In the breakdown middle section of the song, Plant and Bonham engage in a vocal-drum dialog. This section demonstrates Plant's wailing vocals and Bonham's drumming skill, particularly when Bonham plays a snare drum fill to launch into a guitar solo that precedes the return of the riff (at 3:00 in the original recording).

Black Sabbath, on the other hand, wrote more songs that featured heavily distorted guitar riffs in comparison to the more blues-influenced music of Led Zeppelin. Also hailing from England in the late 1960s, Black Sabbath's early albums were both tonally and lyrically darker than most of their contemporaries. Sabbath's riff and jam-based songs were backed by lyrics that often dabbled with (sometimes metaphorical) themes of witchcraft and the occult, similar to those written by Coven. The first two minutes of the opening track from their first album, both titled "Black Sabbath," demonstrates their early style.[13] The track opens with almost 40 seconds of rainfall and a thunderstorm while church

[12] Led Zeppelin, "Whole Lotta Love (Remaster)," *Led Zeppelin II (Remaster)*, Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1969, streaming audio, Tidal.

[13] Black Sabbath, "Black Sabbath (2014 Remaster)," *Black Sabbath (2014 Remaster)*, Warner Records Inc., 1970, streaming audio, Tidal.

bells ring, before guitarist Tony Iommi plays an ominous distorted guitar riff accompanied by heavy drums and bass. The accompaniment becomes quieter and more sparse when singer Ozzy Osbourne enters and sings the first verse: "What is this that stands before me?/ Figure in black which points at me/ Turn 'round quick and start to run/ Find out I'm the chosen one."

Black Sabbath's song "Sabbath Bloody Sabbath," from their 1973 fifth album of the same name, is an example of a song built on multiple sections with different riffs, all of which use "power chords."[14] The power chord would become extremely important to metal, as Robert Walser explains:

> If there is one feature that underpins the coherence of heavy metal as a genre, it is the power chord. . . The power chord seems simple and crude, but it is dependent upon sophisticated technology, precise tuning, and skillful control. Its overdriven sound evokes excess and transgression but also stability, permanence, and harmony.[15]

The introduction and first verse are based upon another heavy riff and feature wailing vocals in a high register. The chorus which follows creates a shift in mood, as the distorted electric guitar is replaced with acoustic guitar, the vocal register drops in register and intensity, and the drums reduce their intensity. A second verse and chorus are followed by an instrumental break until a drum fill introduces a tempo change and a new riff. This guitar riff is at the bottom of the guitar's range and is even more distorted than the earlier riff. There are two verses in this section that are split by a short instrumental jam that features yet another riff. The lyrics of the song are about a number of themes including that band's reactions to drugs, critics, and success, but on a literal level also portray occult themes. The two final verses, for example, read:

---

[14] Black Sabbath, "Sabbath Bloody Sabbath (2014 Remaster)," *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath (2014 Remaster)*, Warner Records Inc., 1973, streaming audio, Tidal.

[15] Walser, 2.

Where can you run to? What more can you do?
No more tomorrow, life is killing you
Dreams turn to nightmares, heaven turns to Hell
Burnt out confusion, nothing more to tell, yeah

Everything around you, what's it coming to?
God knows as your dog nose, bog, blast all of you
Sabbath bloody sabbath, nothing more to do
Living just for dying, dying just for you, yeah

These hallmarks of Black Sabbath's style—heavily distorted riffs, structuring sections on contrasting riffs and instrumental jams, virtuosic drum fills, and wailing vocals—would become staples of many metal bands that followed. Themes of witchcraft and the occult, meanwhile, were not particularly prevalent in Sabbath's catalog, yet would, perhaps, have an outsized influence on the mythology of metal.

Following the early pioneers, a second boom of hard rock/heavy metal artists arose in the mid and late 1970s including AC/DC, Aerosmith, Judas Priest, Motörhead, Van Halen, and Kiss. Kiss, in particular, were known for crafting on-stage personas in which each member wore heavy makeup, marketing around band merchandise, producing large stage shows in major arenas, and engaging in copious sexual activities on the road. As Steve Waksman writes, "Kiss and Led Zeppelin have achieved considerable repute and infamy for their sexual exploits, which have been recounted in many of the media accounts and other publications surrounding the bands' respective careers."[16] Van Halen, in addition to being known for their own large arena sows and sexual activities, developed further virtuosic guitar techniques within metal. Guitarist Eddie Van Halen became famous for his extremely fast

[16] Steve Waksman, "Arenas of the Imagination: Global Tours and the Heavy Metal Concert in the 1970s," in *Metal Rules the Globe* (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020), 230.

playing, including the use of "tapping," wherein the guitarist plays by using both hands to quickly press the strings against the fretboard (a technique that is only made possible with the use of heavy amounts of distortion and/or compression). The larger-than-life personas crafted by Kiss, Van Halen, and their contemporary bands would contribute to metal's image in the larger populace.

In the early and mid 1980s there were two additional waves of new metal bands that launched its popularity. The first came from Great Britain with bands such as Def Leppard and Iron Maiden, while the second centered in Los Angeles and included bands like W.A.S.P., Poison, Guns N' Roses, Ratt, and Motley Crüe. Walser notes that while metal records accounted for only 8 percent of total sales in the United States, that increased to 20 percent in 1984.[17] And although metal began to develop and separate into subgenres around this time, metal bands shared similar features of power and excess. To recap, those include loudness and intensity in the music; shouting, headbanging, and high energy at performances; and larger than life personas and the creation of spectacle. Some metal bands also dealt with personal excess, including drug and alcohol abuse and sexual promiscuity. Those themes also made their way into the song lyrics of some of those bands, whether they reflected real experiences or were imaginary or metaphorical.

Walser links the musical features of metal to the themes that are represented. Most important is the distorted guitar, particularly when playing power chords or when used for virtuosic solos. Distortion affords the guitar two qualities it would otherwise lack: a longer note duration before decaying (called "sustain") and new harmonic content resulting in the production of both higher and lower frequencies than the fundamental notes played. The production of distortion is historically and

[17] Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 12.

semiotically linked to the technology and volume required to produce it, but also to the bodily effort required for humans to produce vocal distortion (which also plays a significant role in metal). As a heavy metal producer states, "Distortion gives that feeling of ultimate power. The more distortion you get, the more satisfying it is. There's something slightly superhuman, psychologically speaking, about the sustain, the nearly endless notes."[18] Walser himself notes, "The power of power chords, the weight of heavy metal, the hardness of hard rock are all constructed and maintained discursively by factors besides time, but the sustain, distortion, and resultant tones. . . are absolutely crucial."[19]

The leap from "power" to "violence" made by the PMRC and other critics, however, does not necessarily follow. To the contrary, Walser characterizes metal as reflective of a discourse framed by late capitalism, and emphasizes that "heavy metal revolves around identification with power, intensity of experience, freedom, and community."[20] In other words, the themes that occur in metal are representative of people who are disaffected and dissatisfied with the society and institutions in which they find themselves, and the power that is represented is not seen as a violent backlash to that society but as a path to self-empowerment, control, freedom, and belonging in a community. He writes:

> Rebellion and escapism are always movements away from something, toward something else. Rebellion is critique; whether apparently effectual or not, it is politics. But even more important, what seems like rejection, alienation, or nihilism is usually better seen as an attempt to create an alternative identity that is grounded in a vision or the actual experience of an alternative community. Heavy metal's fascination with the dark side of life gives evidence of both dissatisfaction with dominant identities and institutions and an intense yearning for reconciliation with something more credible. To explain this side of metal as the pathological

[18] Quoted in Walser, 42.

[19] Walser, 43.

[20] Walser, 53.

> imprint of malicious musicians or as adolescent socialization gone awry (as is often done) is to dehistoricize the specific forms and practices of heavy metal.[21]

Walser argues that metal's "dark side" is not evidence of malicious intent, violence, or aimless rebellion, but a search for identity from those who do not fit easily into societal norms. This view also coincides with Walser's ethnographic study of metal fans who listed the most important features of the metal musical experience. He notes:

> There was solid concurrence that the intensity and power of the music, its impressive guitar solos, the relevance of its lyrics, and its truth value were crucial. Surprisingly, fans overwhelmingly rejected the categories of the pissed-off and the fantastic. The most common grounds for dismissal of heavy metal—that it embodies nothing more than adolescent rebellion and escapism—were the qualities least often chosen by fans as representative of their feelings.[22]

To summarize, the most important features to metal fans were the quality and intensity of the music, and the relevance and truth of the music's messages. Conversely, fans were not looking toward the themes of violence, drugs and alcohol, sex, and the occult as an escape or out of a desire to do harm to themselves or society.

At the same time, despite the stated values of metal fans, flirtations with some of the darker and more obscene parts of society were an important part of metal's mythology, and one that was pushed by some of its artists, even if those flirtations were more playful than serious. The increasing popularity of metal in the early 1980s within the United States combined with the disparity between metal fans and outside observers about the meaning and quality of the music set the stage was set for a major conflict. Of the fifteen songs on the Filthy Fifteen, seven were from metal bands already mentioned (Judas Priest, AC/DC, Motley Crüe, W.A.S.P., Twisted Sister, Def Leppard, and Black Sabbath), and two

[21] Walser, xxxvii.

[22] Walser, 19.

more are also from metal bands (Venom and Mercyful Fate). By the mid-1980s, some members of more mainstream U.S. society had decided there was a problem that was too big to ignore.

The Parents Music Resource Center

The PMRC's origins lie in an incident involving Tipper Gore and her then-eleven-year-old daughter. Gore was in a record store with her daughter, who wanted to buy the soundtrack to the movie Purple Rain, featuring the music of Prince. Despite the movie's R-rating, and despite the widespread popularity of Prince's music that regularly topped the charts, Gore decided to purchase the album anyway. After returning to their house and playing the album, Gore was appalled by the obscene content contained on the record, particularly by the song "Darling Nikki," whose lyrics open: "I knew a girl named Nikki, I guess you could say she was a sex fiend/ I met her in a hotel lobby masturbating with a magazine."[23] Gore also cites the obscenity of music videos seen on MTV, and after connecting with other concerned parents—in particular, Susan Baker, the wife of then U.S. Secretary of the Treasury James Baker —that Gore decided that some form of warning/labelling system for recorded music should exist to aid parents when purchasing music for their children.[24]

After forming the PMRC, Gore's cause quickly gained momentum and drew much publicity and press. Despite the speed of the movement's growth, however, some, including Senator John Danforth, became frustrated at the stalling of negotiations between the PMRC and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), an organization of most of the major record labels at the

[23] Prince, "Darling Nikki," *Purple Rain*, NPG Records, June 25, 1984, streaming audio, Tidal.

[24] Tipper Gore, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 17–19.

time. Senator Danforth also happened to be chair of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, and called for a hearing that took place on September 19, 1985.[25] In addition to testimony from Gore, Baker, and several other witnesses, three popular music artists gave their own testimonies: Frank Zappa, John Denver, and Dee Snider of Twisted Sister. Because the PMRC stated they wanted not legislation but a self-implemented warning system, Zappa and Senator J. James Exon questioned the purpose of the hearing. Nevertheless, in many ways, the hearing became the defining moment in the debate over the content of popular music and the tension between free speech and censorship. It was in its time, according to Gore, the "the most widely publicized media event in congressional history."[26]

As it proved to be such a critical point in discussions over obscenity in music, it is worth examining the songs selected for the "Filthy Fifteen" in detail (Table 2 lists the songs again, but organized by release date and including genre and some information about the origins and popularity of each song/artist). Information is scarce both on who selected the songs and what the criteria were, though some trends can be gleaned from analysis. Just under two thirds of the songs are easily classified as either hard rock, heavy metal, or both, while the rest are some form of pop, dance, or R&B. Almost all of the artists are also white, the exceptions being Prince, Vanity, and Mary Jane Girls. Five of the tracks are from female artists, all of which gained the "sex" content label from the PMRC (as, in fact, did every song that was *not* rock or heavy metal).

[25] Gore, 22–25.

[26] Gore, 32–33.

Artist	Song	Content Label	Year	Genre	Notes
AC/DC	"Let Me Put My Love Into You"	Sex	1980	Hard rock/metal	From *Back in Black*, a famous album but not a single
Def Leppard	"High 'n' Dry (Saturday Night)"	Drugs/ Alcohol	1981	Hard rock/metal	Popular single
Mötley Crüe	"Bastard"	Violence	1983	Hard rock/metal	From *Shout at the Devil*, famous album but not a single
Black Sabbath	"Trashed"	Drugs/ Alcohol	1983	Hard rock/metal	From *Born Again*, was a single from a moderately successful album
Mercyful Fate	"Into the Coven"	Occult	1983	Hard rock/metal	A Danish band that never charted in the U.S. or U.K., though are considered early founders of thrash metal
Judas Priest	"Eat Me Alive"	Sex	1984	Hard rock/metal	From *Defenders of the Faith*, a popular album, but not a single
W.A.S.P.	"Animal (Fuck Like a Beast)"	Sex	1984	Hard rock/metal	The band's first ever single, not included on their first album due to concerns about obscenity
Twisted Sister	"We're Not Gonna Take It"	Violence	1984	Hard rock/metal	A very famous single from *Stay Hungry*
Prince	"Darling Nikki"	Sex	1984	Pop/R&B	From the incredibly famous *Purple Rain*, but not a single
Cyndi Lauper	"She Bop"	Sex	1984	Pop/new wave	A famous single from *She's So Unusual*
Mary Jane Girls	"In My House"	Sex	1984	Pop/R&B	A famous single from *Only Four You*
Vanity	"Strap On 'Robbie Baby"	Sex	1984	Pop/R&B	From *Wild Animal*, the first of only two generally unsuccessful albums; not a single
Sheena Easton	"Sugar Walls"	Sex	1984	Pop/dance	A famous single from *A Private Heaven*
Venom	"Possessed"	Occult	1985	Hard rock/metal	Another early pioneer of thrash metal, but were also not widely popular
Madonna	"Dress You Up"	Sex	1985	Pop/dance	A popular single from *Like a Virgin*

Figure 3.3 – the "Filthy Fifteen" relisted

Most of the songs were released either as singles or on albums between 1983 and 1985, though two songs (by AC/DC and Def Leppard) are from a few years earlier. Of the fifteen songs, seven were popular songs from famous artists, five were more obscure songs from still famous artists, and three were relatively obscure. This last point is of particular interest, as it means the PMRC was not selecting songs solely based on their popularity or by their chart position, but were perhaps aiming at some mix of popularity along with being a representative sample. But aside from generally leaning toward heavy metal—which, given the genre's reputation described earlier, is not surprising—the sample the songs seem to represent is the four categories of obscenity the PMRC wanted to highlight: sex, violence, drug and alcohol usage, and the occult. For each of these, they needed at least a few demonstrative examples, and while some songs were extremely popular, the PMRC was willing to include less popular songs if they provided a good example.

As Dee Snider was the only artist listed in the Filthy Fifteen to respond directly to the PMRC at the Senate hearing, and because Twisted Sister were one of two artists whose songs were given the "violent" label, they provide a prime test case for investigation. The other artist was Mötley Crüe, who, in many ways, could have been the poster child for the PMRC's cause. One of the most popular glam metal artists of the 1980s, they were known for their androgynous fashion and sexual exploits while on tour. Many of their most popular songs dealt directly with violence, sex, and drugs and alcohol, two examples of which are "Girls, Girls, Girls"—about women in strip clubs—and "Dr. Feelgood"—about a cocaine dealer (both songs were released after the events of 1985). While the song that made the Filthy Fifteen, "Bastard," was never released as a single or was particularly popular, it was released on the highly

successful album *Shout at the Devil* and could certainly fit the PMRC's accusation of violent content.[27] Although guitarist Mick Mars has stated the song is about a fantasy of taking revenge on someone the band had worked with, at the surface level, the lyrics describe a number of violent acts:

Out go the lights
In goes my knife
Pull out his life
Consider that bastard dead
Get on your knees
Please beg me, please
You're the king of the sleaze
Don't you try to rape me

Bastard
Consider that bastard dead
Bastard
Won't get screwed again
Whoa! Whoa!
Bastard
Make it quick, blow off his head
Got your neck in the noose
I got nothing to loose [sic.]
We're really gonna screw you
Consider that bastard dead
Quick as a shark
Beast has its mark
You can't beat the dark
Don't you try to rape me

Twisted Sister, on the other hand, got their start in the New York/New Jersey area in the mid-1970s. Their heyday began, however, in the mid-1980s, particularly after the release of their third album *Stay Hungry* was released in May, 1984, and featured hit songs "We're Not Gonna Take It" and "I Wanna Rock." "We're Not Gonna Take It" became the band's only top 40 single, reaching number 21 on the *Billboard Hot 100* and selling over 500,000 copies worldwide.[28] The song, moreover, has endured in U.S. cultural memory, appearing in a variety of movies and TV shows (both in its original

[27] Mötley Crüe, "Bastard," *Shout At The Devil*, BMG, 1983, streaming audio, Tidal.

[28] "The Hot 100," *Billboard* (blog), January 2, 2013, https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/1984-09-22/; "Gold & Platinum," *RIAA*, accessed January 21, 2022, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&ar=Twisted+Sister&ti=We%27re+Not+Gonna+Take+It&format=Single&type=#search_section.

form and in parodies), as well as being used in commercials and political campaigns.[29] Twisted Sister were widely known for their stage appearance with heavy makeup and crossdressing, similar to that of other bands like Mötley Crüe. At the same time, they certainly did not have the same sort of wild reputation that Crüe had. Snider stated his personal beliefs and practices in his opening testimony to the senate on September 19, 1985:

> I am 30 years old, I am married, I have a 3-year-old son. I was born and raised a Christian and I still adhere to those principles. Believe it or not, I do not smoke, I do not drink, and I do not do drugs. I do play in and write the songs for a rock and roll band named Twisted Sister that is classified as heavy metal, and I pride myself on writing songs that are consistent with my above-mentioned beliefs.[30]

"We're Not Gonna Take It" itself is also not particularly violent, at least in the same way as Crüe's "Bastard."[31] The lyrics—listed below—come from the perspective of someone fed up with an authority figure, institutions of power, or a state of normalcy. Indeed, the "it" in "We're Not Gonna Take It" is left purposefully vague. Snider says of the song, "It's very general – we weren't specific about just what it is we aren't taking – work, school, whatever – so you can apply it to anything you want."[32] Lines that indicate the presence of authority are in both verses: "We'll fight the powers that be just/ Don't pick our destiny 'cause/ You don't know us, you don't belong" from the first verse, and "Oh

---

[29] Rolling Stone, "Dee Snider Rips Paul Ryan for Using 'We're Not Gonna Take It,'" *Rolling Stone* (blog), August 22, 2012, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/dee-snider-rips-paul-ryan-for-using-were-not-gonna-take-it-188966/; Zach Schonfeld, "Dee Snider on Why Donald Trump Can Use 'We're Not Gonna Take It,'" *Newsweek*, September 8, 2015, https://www.newsweek.com/why-dee-snider-let-donald-trump-use-were-not-gonna-take-it-campaign-stops-369563.

[30] Senate U.S. Congress, "Record Labeling," Pub. L. No. S. Hrg. 99-529, § Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation (1985), 73.

[31] Twisted Sister, "We're Not Gonna Take It," *Stay Hungry*, Atlantic Records, 1984, streaming audio, Tidal.

[32] Quoted in Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 33.

you're so condescending/ Your gall is never ending/ We don't want nothin', not a thing from you/ Your life is trite and jaded/ Boring and confiscated/ If that's your best, your best won't do" from the second. Additionally, the prechorus after the second the verse features a call-and-response between Snider and the other singers that rings like a rebellious rallying cry; Snider makes emphatic declarations ("We're right/ We're free/ We'll fight/ You'll see") which are punctuated by yells of "Yeah!" from the rest of the band.

[Chorus]
We're not gonna take it
No, we ain't gonna take it
We're not gonna take it anymore

[Verse 1]
We've got the right to choose and
there ain't no way we'll lose it
This is our life, this is our song
We'll fight the powers that be just,
don't pick our destiny 'cause
You don't know us, you don't belong

[Chorus]
We're not gonna take it
No, we ain't gonna take it
We're not gonna take it anymore

[Verse 2]
Oh, you're so condescending
Your gall is never ending
We don't want nothing, not a thing,
from you
Your life is trite and jaded
Boring and confiscated
If that's your best, your best won't do

[Bridge]
We're right, (yeah)
We're free, (yeah)
We'll fight, (yeah)
You'll see, (yeah)
[Chorus]
We're not gonna take it
No, we ain't gonna take it
We're not gonna take it anymore

Although it is unclear exactly whom the "you" or "we" in the song are—as Snider indicated in the earlier quote—the music video presents one possible interpretation.[33] The video opens with a three-

[33] *Twisted Sister -- We're Not Gonna Take It [Extended Version] OFFICIAL MUSIC VIDEO - YouTube*, August 3, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9AbeALNVkk.

minute skit before the song begins, in which a strict father scolds his adolescent son. The son is playing guitar along to a recording of another Twisted Sister song—"I Wanna Rock"—when the father bursts into his room. The father is, in many ways, a caricature of strict fathers that one may find on television or in cartoons; indeed, the father is played by actor Mark Metcalf who reprises his role as Douglas C. Niedermeyer, the ROTC fraternity leader from the 1978 comedic film *Animal House* (Metcalf also played this role in the video for "I Wanna Rock"). The father's scolding includes a number of cliché lines such as "You call this a room? This is a pigsty," and "Stand up straight, tuck in that shirt, adjust that belt buckle, tie those shoes!" He then berates his son's Twisted Sister merchandise while offering this about his son's guitar: "You do nothing! You are nothing! You sit in here all day and play that sick, repulsive, electric twanger! I CARRIED AN M16 AND YOU, YOU CARRY THAT… THAT… THAT GUITAR!" (note which instrument of violence is considered credible, here). After asking "What do you want to do with your life?" the son replies—in a voice that seemingly belongs to a much older man—"I wanna rock!" The son strums the guitar and a distorted power chord emerges, whose force is strong enough to launch the father out of the second-story bedroom window. The father lands on hard pavement, apparently unharmed, as his son, back in his room, transforms into a fully made-up Dee Snider himself while the song begins. Throughout the music video, the father continues to be the victim of other episodes of cartoonish slapstick while the rest of the family members transform into the other members of Twisted Sister, who then proceed to "rebel" through the power of metal.

From this interpretation of the song, the authority figure is clearly an overly strict parent. The lyrics could, however, just as easily reinforce a theme of solidarity and freedom against some form of oppression rather than rebellion against authority. Indeed, this is consistent with the interpretation of

distortion and the meaning of heavy metal timbres that Walser describes. The video leads us to empathize with the son and believe that his feelings of frustration and oppression are valid. Additional lyrics support this, most obviously in the anthem-like chorus, featuring repetitions of "We're not gonna take it!" and in the first verse, "We've got the right to choose it/ There ain't no way we'll lose it/ This is our right, this is our song."

To summarize, Twisted Sister's music, lyrics, and general persona do not approach the level of obscenity, generally, and violence as other metal bands such as Mötley Crüe. Their lyrics and music videos do not contain the same level of violent or sexual themes, and they do not engage in violent or overly sexual acts on stage or on tour. "We're Not Gonna Take It" does present a general theme of anti-authoritarianism and its music video portrays that authority as parental, but the anti-authoritarianism is portrayed as justified in the face of overbearing oppression and the music video is more cartoonish than serious.

This is not, however, how the PMRC portrayed Twisted Sister, as they chose to place the band alongside other, more obscene examples. Senator Paula Hawkins began by suggesting that a labeling system be extended to music videos as well as albums, noting that "One criticism of the rock industry is the way it portrays values in rock videos which are viewed by the kids."[34] She then shows two clips, one from Van Halen's video for "Hot for Teacher" and the other Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It." Minister and PMRC consultant Jeff Ling also cited Twisted Sister when giving his examples, including an album cover, the "We're Not Gonna Take It" music video, and song lyrics to "Under the Blade" and "Shoot 'Em Down":

[34] U.S. Congress, Record Labeling, 10.

> This is the cover of Twisted Sister's high selling LP for Atlantic Records called "Stay Hungry." An example of Twisted Sister's appeal to young people is evident in the back to school contest being run by MTV. First prize is a get together with Twisted Sister. The first prize is a meeting with Twisted Sister.
>
> The hit song from the album, "We're Not Going to Take It" [sic.], was released as a video, which you saw just a moment ago, a video in which the band members proceed to beat up daddy, who will not let them rock. Their first album, which has been rereleased by Atlantic Records, is called "Under the Blade." The title song includes words like "Your hands are tied, your legs are strapped, you are going under the blade."[35]

Snider replies directly to most of these accusations in his Senate testimony. Specifically pertaining to "We're Not Gonna Take It," he stated:

> You will note from the lyrics before you that there is absolutely no violence of any type either sung about or implied anywhere in the song. . . . The video "We're Not Gonna Take It" was simply meant to be a cartoon with human actors playing variations on the Roadrunner/Wile E. Coyote theme. . . . You will note when you watch the entire video that after each catastrophe our villain suffers through, in the next sequence he reappears unharmed by any previous attack, no worse for the wear.[36]

Snider also addresses the issue of misinterpretation, particularly related to "Under the Blade" as it was cited in an article written by Tipper Gore. Snider stated the song was about Twisted Sister guitarist Eddie Ojeda's fear of surgery and Snider's imagining of a fearful hospital scene. Snider stated,

> The lyrics she quoted have absolutely nothing to do with [sadomasochism, bondage, and rape. On the contrary the words in question are about surgery and the fear that it instills in people. Furthermore, the reader of this article is led to believe that the three lines she quotes go together in the song when, as you can see from reading the lyrics, the first two lines she cites are an edited phrase from the second verse and the third line is a misquote of a line from the chorus.[37]

[35] U.S. Congress, 14.

[36] U.S. Congress, 74.

[37] U.S. Congress, 73.

Snider was later questioned about the interpretation of those lyrics by Senator Al Gore, who noted that the lyrics referred to someone whose legs were tied down and was going to be cut, and that there was no mention of a hospital. Snider responded that there was also no reference to a woman or sadomasochism either, to which Gore asked if it would be a "wild leap of the imagination" to interpret the song as about something other than surgery. Snider replied:

> No, it is not a wild jump. And I think what I said at one part was that songs allow a person to put their own imagination, experiences, and dreams into the lyrics. People can interpret it in many ways. Ms. Gore was looking for sado-masochism and bondage and she found it. Someone looking for surgical references would have found that as well.[38]

Snider summarizes the issue at the end of his opening testimony:

> The beauty of literature, poetry, and music is that they leave room for the audience to put its own imagination, experiences, and dreams into the words. The examples I cited earlier showed clear evidence of Twisted Sister's music being completely misinterpreted and unfairly judged by supposedly well-informed adults.[39]

As I explored in Chapter 1, interpretation is a critical but often thorny aspect of popular music analysis. Still, Snider's account, overall, seems quite reasonable, and the PMRC's interpretation, while not completely outlandish, is likely exaggerated. At the very least, Twisted Sister and "We're Not Gonna Take It" do not seem to demonstrate a level of violence and obscenity that make them worthy of placement on the PMRC's list of primary examples.

Although "We're Not Gonna Take It" and Twisted Sister were generally popular, the PMRC could have selected any number of other songs to use as an example for the Filthy Fifteen. That they chose to use *this* song and artist to exemplify the level of violence and obscenity in popular music speaks

[38] U.S. Congress, 78.

[39] U.S. Congress, 75.

volumes about how they perceived heavy metal. Although Twisted Sister may not approach the level of obscenity and violence in their lyrics as some other metal bands, they do exhibit many of the traits of the metal genre as a whole, notably in their musical sound and songwriting style and in their fashion and stage persona. To demonstrate the PMRC's views on heavy metal, and on Twisted Sister in particular, I will examine three sources: Tipper Gore's 1987 book *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, statements made at the 1985 Senate hearing, and excerpts from *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development*, a textbook written by musicologist Joe Steussy (who also testifies in the Senate hearing and is cited heavily in Gore's book).

Gore offers a quick summary of the history of heavy metal, writing:

> Heavy metal and its loyal fan following represent a new phenomenon in rock music. Focusing on this darker, violent side of life, this brand of music was first played in England some twenty years ago as a vehicle for countercultural rebellion. Many of the songs were political. But the frustration and rebellion that is a normal part of the maturation process for many young people who are critical of adults and "the Establishment" seemed to turn to greater and greater despair. The music took an even darker turn and explored subjects like devil worship and the occult, sadistic sex, murder, rape, and suicide.[40]

She also notes that in concerts, "Heavy metal headliners are now competing with each other to be the most outrageous and socially unacceptable, which seems to assure them instant success among young fans."[41] For Gore, the escalation in "dark" themes and outrageous behavior is not something exceptional, but rather something inherent to heavy metal. In other words, she is not referring to a smaller subset of songs that are problematic, but is painting a broad stroke about an entire genre.

[40] Gore, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, 49.

[41] Gore, 51.

Similar sentiments about the ubiquity of obscene themes in rock and metal were presented at the 1985 Senate hearing. Jeff Ling, for example, stated:

> What you are about to see and hear is a small sample of the abundant material available today. Today the element of violent, brutal erotica has exploded in rock music in an unprecedented way. Many albums today include songs that encourage suicide, violent revenge, sexual violence, and violence just for violence's sake.[42]

Examples of music videos, album covers, and (primarily) song lyrics were given throughout the hearing by Ling, Hawkins, Susan Baker, Tipper Gore, and psychologist Paul King. Throughout the hearing, it was insinuated that there was an unprecedented level of obscenity, and the primary culprit was rock/heavy metal. In her testimony, Baker stated:

> It is no secret that today's rock music is a very important part of adolescence and teenagers' lives. . . . While a few outrageous recordings have always existed in the past, the proliferation of songs glorifying rape, sadomasochism, incest, the occult, and suicide by a growing number of bands illustrates this escalating trend that is alarming.[43]

Baker, Ling, and King, in particular, tie the rising trend in obscenity to other societal problems such as teenage suicide, pregnancy, and rape.

Musicologist and composer Joe Stuessy submitted a nine-page testimony to the Congressional record and appeared as a live witness during the hearing. While Stuessy acknowledges that a variety of genres of music throughout history have been classified as scandalous, and that rock's own history is filled with such labels, he argues that then-contemporary heavy metal is different:

> Dwight Silverman, a writer for the *San Antonio Light*, may have put his finger on it best when he wrote, "Heavy Metal rock 'n' roll is a different beast from the music that ruled the late '60s and early '70s, the music that was supposed to bring a generation together. Heavy metal is a mean-spirited music. In it, women are abused, parents are objects of derision and scorn and

[42] U.S. Congress, Record Labeling, 13.

[43] U.S. Congress, 11.

> violence, education is a foolish waste of time. Rock 'n' roll always has been a music of rebellion and frustration, but never of hatred."
>
> Hatred. A mean-spirited music. To my knowledge, [there] has never been a popular style of music which had as a central characteristic the element of *hate*. This is something new and different. Its seeds may be found back in the mid-1960s. It was nourished and developed in the late '60s and throughout the '70s. It has burst upon the 1980s as a full-grown force.[44]

Combined, these testimonies present a blanket view of all heavy metal as morally problematic, a stance that goes far beyond making the case for a labelling system to warn parents about the content of some music lyrics. Indeed, the artists who appeared at the hearing and metal scholars like Walser questioned multiple arguments made by the PMRC: that the values held by most metal fans were not those that the PMRC asserted (as cited by Walser, earlier); that the obscene examples cited by the PMRC were less prevalent and common than made out to be; and that some of the PMRC's examples were interpreted as being much more obscene than they actually were, even given rock's history and allowing for some interpretive license.[45] Twisted Sister, in particular, fits the latter of these criteria, as their lyrics, music videos, and public persona and actions—the PMRC's main focuses of attention—do not conform to the PMRC's perception of heavy metal.

Twisted Sister *does*, however, share other commonalities with metal bands: their appearance and, more importantly, their sound. The sound of metal bands is only hinted at once each in the Senate

---

[44] U.S. Congress, 122.

[45] For example, Walser writes: "In both his testimony and his pamphlet, Stuessy argued that heavy metal lyrics are violent and deviant and that metal music is artistically impoverished. 'Most of the successful heavy metal,' he testified, 'projects one or more of the following basic themes: extreme rebellion, extreme violence, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity/pervesion (including homosexuality, bisexuality, sadomasochism, necrophilia, etc.), Satanism.' In fact, heavy metal lyrics dealing with these topics are uncommon. For example, examination of eighty-eight song lyrics reprinted by *Hit Parader* reveals relatively little concern with violence, drug use, or suicide. . .. Moreover, when such transgressive lyrics do appear, it is in contexts where they often function in ways that are more complex and sophisticated than Stuessy recognizes." Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 139.

hearing and in Gore's book, which makes some sense as it was not among the PMRC's stated criteria for obscenity. In Gore's book, it is the aforementioned subheading for the history of metal that included the words "throbbing chords." In the Senate hearing, Paul King offers this description of heavy metal: "Heavy metal refers to a type of music that was first developed in England. The music is loud and powerful, with most of the strength coming from electric guitars. The makeup or facial expressions are either hateful or demonic or have symbols and costumes representing power, which the basic core issue."[46] King identifies the electric guitar as the source of loudness (perhaps through the use of Gore's "throbbing chords"), leading directly to strength and power.

Joe Stuessy, however, is much more explicit about the relationship between the sounds of heavy metal and what he perceives as their inherent meaning. His claims can be seen in his textbook on the history of rock, first published in 1990 and edited by Scott Lipscomb through the seventh edition (an eighth edition was published in 2020, though Lipscomb is the only listed author). Despite claiming to be an "objective" narrative that states "the facts," Stuessy's personal interpretations clearly make their way into his chapter on heavy metal (he has another chapter where he allows for his "subjective evaluations").[47] He begins by offering an overview of metal:

> Broadly considered, heavy metal has been a rather static style—not dramatically changed from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s. What has changed over the years are the lyrics and the extramusical factors (e.g., image and theatrics). Beginning with Alice Cooper's shocking theatrics to metal's original antihero mentality, each band must be louder, grosser, more rebellious, and more shocking than its predecessors. . . .
>
> It appealed primarily to those whose self-image was that of the angry, macho, antiestablishment rebel. The general profile of the heavy metal fan was that of a 13- to 18-year-old Hispanic or

[46] U.S. Congress, Record Labeling, 128.

[47] Joe Stuessy, *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), 361.

> Anglo male, often from less affluent and turbulent family circumstances. (Of course, there are also a vast number of exceptions to the general profile.) It is often assumed that heavy metal consumers were disillusioned and angry and that the music helped them act out their frustration with society.
>
> Certainly the lyrics were a big part of this angry rebellion. Violence, suicide, and the occult are not uncommon themes in heavy metal songs, but anger was not expressed only by the lyrics. Musical elements, such as extreme volume, distorted timbre, screaming vocals, insistent, repetitive riffs, and screeching, high-speed solos, all seem to reinforce the disaffected youth who has decided that he is "not gonna take it anymore" (in the words of heavy metal band Twisted Sister).[48]

Indeed, the musical elements Stuessy lists—loud volume, distorted timbres, screaming vocals, "insistent" repetitive riffs, and "screeching" high-speed solos—*are* the musical elements that define metal, even if Walser and most metal fans would question the adjectival qualifiers of "insistent" and "screeching" (or, at least, their connotation as negative). They would disagree, however, with the rest of Steussy's evaluation.

Stuessy goes on in the chapter to highlight volume and obscenity in metal, using those as reasons to discount the style. He writes, "Many critics agreed that heavy metal had all of the musical value of an electric razor. Loudness and grossness sold records to ever-susceptible teenagers but contributed little to the evolution of rock as a musical style."[49] To give a more specific example, Stuessy turns to the thrash metal band Metallica, once again highlighting musical elements alongside lyrical themes:

> Nonetheless, [. . . *And Justice for All*] as whole is a good representation of Metallica's style. Musically, there are the requisite pounding, distorted, low guitar riffs, insistent heavy beat (and constant duple subdivision), growling vocals, and speed metal guitar solos. A few of the song titles suggest the rather gloomy tone of the album: "Blackened," "Harvester of Sorrow," "The

[48] Stuessy, 275–76.

[49] Stuessy, 282.

> Frayed Ends of Sanity," "To Live Is to Die," and "Dyer's Eve". . . . Most of the album's songs are about the miserable ways of society and how they overpower the helpless victim (presumably Metallica's teenaged listeners). Whether Metallica's music is helpful or harmful to their angry, rebellious listeners is a serious question.[50]

Stuessy also discussed distortion and loudness, along with simplicity and repetitiveness, in punk music, linking it to similar (though sometimes opposing) tendencies in metal:

> The harder style of mainstream rock, from the Stones through heavy metal, set itself in opposition to the sophisticated experimentation and artistic ambitions of the post-Beatles branch of mainstream rock. Hard rockers stressed simplicity and repetitiveness; they preferred basic rock and roll; they hoped to shock "straight" society. The punks extended all these characteristics, playing music that was even simpler, more repetitive, and louder; their lyrics were patently gross; their images and antics were far more shocking. While extending these characteristics, they openly rebelled against the long, technically demanding instrumental solos, the serious art rock aspirations, and the wealthy, commercially successful rock star syndrome of the many mainstream groups. . . .
>
> The other major British punk band, the Clash, sounded significantly more musical when compared with the Sex Pistols. Slightly less outrageous than the Pistols in terms of lyrics and antics, the Clash nevertheless carried on the musical style of simple, basic, and repetitive harmonies, simple melodies, basic rhythms, and lots of screaming and distortion.[51]

Stuessy finally summarizes his view of all modern rock genres that employ heavy distortion and volume (grunge, hardcore, and thrash metal):

> The apparent purpose behind grunge and, for that matter, hardcore or thrash metal is not aesthetic beauty of the sort revered by the mainstream pop culture. Rather, these alternative artists revel in dissonance, the sound the purposely pervades their music at almost every turn, as if challenging the listener to move away from the comfortable place of the familiar, the tried and true.[52]

---

[50] Stuessy, 287.

[51] Stuessy, 337.

[52] Stuessy, 344.

Ultimately, Stuessy connects multiple musical styles and subgenres and labels them as lacking in value. Their purpose is not some higher quality of "aesthetic beauty," but are there to capture and corrupt disaffected youth. The musical elements of these genres—distortion, volume, and intense vocals and drums—aid in this process, as those dangerous meanings are mapped on to those musical features. Considering Twisted Sister, it is their use of musical features more than any other factor that connect them to the other metal bands the PMRC wanted to use as examples of obscenity. Any violence that may have been in their lyrics or actions was exaggerated, but to Stuessy and the PMRC, any artist that uses those musical features is, by definition, obscene, and creates music that lacks any value. In other words, if it *sounds* bad, it *is* bad, and metal sounded bad.

The PMRC's characterization of heavy metal and, concurrently, their actions regarding obscenity in music, begin to approach the level of a "moral panic." According to Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda:

> During a moral panic. . . a substantial number of the members of a given society harbor and express the feeling that evildoers pose a threat to the society and to the moral order as a consequence of their behavior, and therefore "something should be done about them and their behavior. A major focus of that "something" typically entails strengthening the social control apparatus of the society.[53]

In this case, the popular music industry, and heavy metal in particular, were portrayed as a threat to society and the moral order, and the aim of the PMRC was social control through industry self-regulation or (if it came to it) legislation. Goode and Ben-Yehuda also describe five criteria for labeling a moral panic: an increase in *concern* toward the behavior of a group and the potential consequences of

[53] Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, 2nd ed. (Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 35.

that behavior; an increase in *hostility* toward the group; a certain amount of *consensus* about the behavior, either within a whole society or within designated segments (that does not necessarily need to be a majority); a sense of *disproportion* with reality, either in regards to the number of people exhibiting the behavior or in the described threat or danger posed by the behavior; and a certain amount of *volatility*, that is, the suddenness with which the panic appears and/or disappears.[54]

The concern about obscenity in popular music certainly had concern, hostility, and volatility, and while it may or may not have had the consensus of American society, it did have a consensus among those wielding governmental power. The major question, then, is whether the perceived threat was disproportionate to the actual problem. Judging from Walser's work on heavy metal as a whole and analysis of the PMRC's own examples, it does seem to be the case. Both the proportion of heavy metal songs that exhibit obscenity and the interpretations of the level of obscenity in some songs were exaggerated. Links between heavy metal and drug use, satanism, suicide, crime, and violence were emphasized but never proven, often falling to problems of correlation and causation, and people as a whole (but particularly teenagers and adolescents) were portrayed as empty vessels incapable of sophisticated interpretation.[55] Walser summarizes these views of heavy metal:

> All of these critics share the notion that heavy metal is bad because it is perverse deviance in the midst of a successfully functioning society. They ascribe much too much importance to a transhistortical notion of "adolescence," which allows them to overlook the specific forms that culture takes in particular circumstances of power and pain. They believe that insisting that "healthy minds don't think negative thoughts" will make people overlook the devastation caused by deindustrialization and disastrous social policies. They imagine that fans are passive, unable to resist the pernicious messages of heavy metal, and thus they themselves commit the

[54] Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 37–43.

[55] Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 141–43.

> sort of dehumanization they ascribe to popular culture. . . . But heavy metal exists not in a world that would be fine if it were not marred by degraded culture, but in a world disjointed by inequity and injustice.[56]

Walser describes the societal problems that heavy metal was blamed for, but argues that popular culture reflects those ills more than acts as their driver. Instead, heavy metal more often serves as a positive force for its fans to build community and experience self-empowerment in the face of those very problems.

At stake in the debate between metal artists and the PMRC was the level of violence and obscenity inherent in the music. As I argued, this did not only rely on lyrics, music videos, or actions—the criteria set out by the PMRC—but relied heavily on the musical features themselves. Just as the portrayal of the danger posed to society by heavy metal by the PMRC was disproportionate to the actual threat, their portrayal of violence in the meaning of guitar distortion was also disproportionate. To both groups, the semiotic meaning of distortion was *power*. For the PMRC, that power was interpretated as violence because of the threat it posed to their vision of societal order. But to most metal artists and fans, that power meant freedom and belonging in a world that was not constructed for them.

[56] Walser, 144.

Aftermath

Although many of the major record labels had already agreed to place some form of warning label on their records, the RIAA officially announced an agreement with the PMRC on November 1, 1985. However, the famous warning sticker, did not make its actual debut until March of 1990 (the second version that appeared starting in 1996 is shown below in figure 2, the original read "explicit lyrics" instead of "explicit content").[57] During the intervening five years, numerous states attempted to pass laws restricting the availability of content, while some retailers began using their own labelling system. When the labels finally did come out, many retailers, including Walmart, refused to carry any record baring the sticker, while some artists, in response, began to release "clean" versions of their albums. Many states also introduced bills aimed at restricting or banning records with a parental warning sticker.[58] Additionally, Joanne McDuffie (the singer of the Mary Jane Girls), described how the warning sticker blocked their consideration for certain record industry awards, likely leading to much lost publicity and acclaim.[59] Other artists, including Frank Zappa, believed that the new label became a badge of honor and would serve as a signal to children of which albums were "cool." Throughout the 1990s, artists also began producing "clean" versions of songs for radio or television play in which curse words were omitted or replaced with other words.

---

[57] RIAA, *English: The Parental Advisory Logo*, RIAA, accessed January 17, 2022, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Parental_Advisory_-_explicit_content_-_label.jpg.

[58] Eric Nuzum, *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America*, 1st ed.. (New York: Perennial, 2001), 34–43.

[59] Zach Schonfeld, "Parental Advisory Forever: An Oral History of the PMRC's War on Dirty Lyrics," *Newsweek, Global Ed.* (New York: Newsweek Publishing LLC, October 9, 2015).



Figure 3.4 – the Parental Advisory Sticker

Ironically, none of the songs on the Filthy Fifteen received the Parental Advisory label.[60] Instead, by the time the warning labels were rolled out, heavy metal, while not completely out of the purview of those concerned with obscenity in the media, was no longer the primary target. Indeed, as I will argue in the following chapter, guitar distortion begins to become so ubiquitous in popular music, that is, used by so many various subgenres to represent so many varying themes, that is *loses* its connection to violence and power. Instead, record labels primarily applied the warning label to hip-hop and gangsta rap records, which received much of the attention and focus of concerned parties.[61] As chart analyst and critic Chris Molanphy said, "If you were a white rock act, you could get away with a couple of F-bombs or a couple of curses on your album and not get stickered. . . but if you were a rapper or even a hard R&B singer and you said something as daring as 'pee,' you could get labeled."[62] Many of

[60] Nuzum, *Parental Advisory*, 43.

[61] Nuzum, 107–15.

[62] Zach Schonfeld, "Does the Parental Advisory Label Still Matter?," *Newsweek*, November 10, 2015, https://www.newsweek.com/does-parental-advisory-label-still-matter-tipper-gore-375607.

the themes that were considered dangerous in heavy metal were repeated in rap, including sex and misogyny, violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. Tricia Rose writes eloquently of the characterization of hip-hop:

> The excessive blame leveled at hip hop is astonishing in its refusal to consider the culpability of the larger social and political context. To many hot-headed critics of hip hop, structural forms of deep racism, corporate influences, and the long-term effects of economic, social, and political disempowerment are not meaningfully related to rappers' alienated, angry stories about life in the ghetto; rather, they are seen as "proof" that black behavior creates ghetto conditions. So decades of urban racial discrimination (the reason black ghettos exist in the first place), in every significant arena—housing, education, jobs, social services—in every city with a significant black population, simply disappear from view. In fact, many conservative critics of hip hop refuse to acknowledge that the ghetto is a systematic matrix of racial, spatial, and class discrimination that has defined black city life since the first half of the twentieth century, when the Great Black Migration dramatically reshaped America's cities. For some, hip hop itself is a black-created problem that promotes unsafe sex and represents sexual amorality, infects "our" culture and society, advocates crime and criminality, and reflects black cultural dysfunction and a "culture of poverty."[63]

Many of the societal ills that hip-hop was blamed for were the same that were ascribed to heavy metal a decade earlier, except, just as in the 1950s, race re-entered the picture.

[63] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop—and Why It Matters*, African American Music Reference (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 5–6.

Chapter 4

Punk, Hardcore, and the Disassociation of Distortion with Rebellion

One of the stranger intersections between politics and popular music in the last decade occurred in August 2012 after the *New York Times* ran a profile on Paul Ryan. Ryan, the then-rising congressman, had recently been chosen by Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney to be his vice-presidential running mate. In other words, he was a rapidly ascending into a Republican star, and was considered a darling of American conservatives. In the *Times* story, however, the reporters noted a peculiarity:

> Yet even if he is viewed as politically pure by the modern-day standards of his party's base, he is not without contradictions. The nation's first Generation X vice-presidential candidate, he is an avowed proponent of free markets whose family has interests in oil leases. But he counts Rage Against the Machine, which sings about the greed of oil companies and whose Web site praises the anti-corporate Occupy Wall Street movement, among his favorite bands.[1]

Ryan had both stated that Rage Against the Machine was one of his favorite bands and had them listed on his Facebook profile under favorite musicians.[2] But while Ryan is a noted conservative libertarian who often sung the praises of figures like economist Friedrich Hayek and novelist Ayn Rand, the politics of Rage Against the Machine are the complete opposite. The irony was not lost on Rage Against the Machine's guitarist Tom Morello, who wrote an Op-Ed in *Rolling Stone* published three days after

[1] Jennifer Steinhauer et al., "Conservative Star's Small-Town Roots," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/13/us/politics/family-faith-and-politics-describe-life-of-paul-ryan.html.

[2] Jeff Labrecque, "Paul Ryan Loves Rage Against the Machine, Monty Python," *EW.Com* (blog), August 15, 2012, https://ew.com/article/2012/08/15/paul-ryan-pop-culture/; Allison Brennan, "Ryan Rages Against the Machine - CNNPolitics," *CNN*, August 16, 1012, https://www.cnn.com/2012/08/16/politics/ryan-music-taste/index.html.

the original Ryan profile saying, "Paul Ryan's love of Rage Against the Machine is amusing, because he is the embodiment of the machine that our music has been raging against for two decades."[3]

Rage Against the Machine is not a rock band that also happens to be political; politics is often essential and central to their music and their engagements with the public. Their first single off of their 1992 self-titled debut album, "Killing in the Name," addressed police violence and brutality in the wake of the Rodney King incident and the following Los Angeles riots, and included the lyrics "Some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses," and "Those that died are justified by wearing the badge, they're the chosen whites."[4] The lead single off their 1996 album *Evil Empire*, "Bulls on Parade," discussed the military and prison-industrial complexes, while lamenting how politicians who preached family values then spend money on foreign wars while refusing to address domestic social issues, as can be seen in the lyrics of the second verse:

> Weapons, not food, not homes, not shoes
> Not need, just feed the war cannibal animal
> I walk the corner to the rubble that used to be a library
> Line up to the mind cemetery, now
> What we don't know keeps the contracts alive and movin'
> They don't gotta burn the books, they just remove 'em
> While arms warehouses fill as quick as the cells
> Rally round the family, pockets full of shells[5]

[3] Tom Morello, "Tom Morello: 'Paul Ryan Is the Embodiment of the Machine Our Music Rages Against,'" *Rolling Stone* (blog), August 16, 2012, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/tom-morello-paul-ryan-is-the-embodiment-of-the-machine-our-music-rages-against-246033/.

[4] Rage Against the Machine, "Killing In the Name," *Rage Against the Machine*, Epic Records, 1992, streaming audio, Tidal.

[5] Rage Against the Machine, "Bulls on Parade," *Evil Empire*, Epic Records, 1996, streaming audio, Tidal.

Outside of their music, members of the band foreground political activities and use their voices to support left-wing politics. For example, the band notoriously had their 1996 appearance on *Saturday Night Live* cut short as they attempted to hang an American flag upside-down for their performance in protest of guest host and Republican presidential candidate Steve Forbes.[6] As part of their 2001 concert documentary *The Battle of Mexico City*, the band included an interview between vocalist Zack de la Rocha (a Mexican-American whose grandfather was a Mexican revolutionary) and linguist and left-wing intellectual Noam Chomsky in which they discussed the perils of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).[7] And in 2011, Morello performed at and participated in rallies in Madison, Wisconsin (the capital of Ryan's home state) against governor Scott Walker's eventually successful campaign to remove collective bargaining rights from public employees.[8] It is in this context that Morello wrote:

> I wonder what Ryan's favorite Rage song is? Is it the one where we condemn the genocide of Native Americans? The one lambasting American imperialism? Our cover of "Fuck the Police"? Or is it the one where we call on the people to seize the means of production? So many excellent choices to jam out to at Young Republican meetings! . . .
>
> You see, the super rich must rationalize having more than they could ever spend while millions of children in the U.S. go to bed hungry every night. So, when they look themselves in the mirror, they convince themselves that "Those people are undeserving. They're . . . lesser." Some of these guys on the extreme right are more cynical than Paul Ryan, but he seems to really

[6] Jack Whatley, "The Ludicrous Reason Rage Against The Machine Were Banned from Saturday Night Live," *Far Out Magazine* (blog), April 13, 2020, https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/rage-against-the-machine-banned-saturday-night-live-snl-1996-video/.

[7] Epic Music Video, Rage Against the Machine, and Inc Sony Music Entertainment, *The Battle of Mexico City* (New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 2000).

[8] Patrick Doyle, "Tom Morello Rages Against Anti-Union Bill at Wisconsin Rally," *Rolling Stone* (blog), February 22, 2011, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/tom-morello-rages-against-anti-union-bill-at-wisconsin-rally-178716/.

> believe in this stuff. This unbridled rage against those who have the least is a cornerstone of the Romney-Ryan ticket.[9]

And one of Morello's favored guitars has the words "Arm the Homeless" written on it (as seen in the below photo), reminiscent of Woody Guthrie's guitar that famously displayed the slogan "This Machine Kills Fascists."[10]



Figure 4.1 - Tom Morello with his Stratocaster

Momentarily setting aside the irony of the situation, I would like to focus on a clarification Ryan made after being pressed on his fanship, saying of the band, "I hate the lyrics, but I like the sound."[11] Morello laments Ryan's focus on "the sound" over and above the band's messages, stating:

[9] Morello, "Tom Morello."

[10] Raph_PH, *English: Tom Morello Play as Supporting Act for Muse in Bristol, UK.*, June 5, 2019, June 5, 2019, MuseBristol_050619-15, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tom_Morello_-_MuseBristol_050619-15_(48035800936).jpg.

[11] Jim Rutenberg, "Paul Ryan: 'I Call This Getting Wienermobiled,'" *The New York Times*, September 12, 2014, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/magazine/paul-ryan-wienermobiled.html.

> Rage's music affects people in different ways. Some tune out what the band stands for and concentrate on the moshing and throwing elbows in the pit. For others, Rage has changed their minds and their lives. Many activists around the world, including organizers of the global occupy movement, were radicalized by Rage Against the Machine and work tirelessly for a more humane and just planet. Perhaps Paul Ryan was moshing when he should have been listening.[12]

While Morello is disturbed by Ryan's practice of willful non-listening, he admits that for some fans—like those who mosh in the pit—this is the norm. Many people listen to music for its utility as a soundtrack to their daily lives, selecting music for its perceived aesthetic qualities and moods rather than for its lyrical message.[13] Still more pay some attention to lyrics, but misinterpret the message intended by the artist.[14] I struggle to think, though, of a band *more* upfront with their message and beliefs than Rage Against the Machine, and *still* their message can be convoluted and lost, as it were, in "the sound."

No less bizarre than Ryan's claim to "hate the lyrics" of a band he supposedly admires, perhaps, is the revelation that he—an American conservative—loves "the sound." As I argued in the previous two chapters, conservative society and rock were often caught in a struggle over the meaning of lyrics, sound, and differing values and visions for society. As a consequence, very few conservatives, if any, professed to "love" it. There is certainly no compelling case to be made that Rage Against the Machine are somehow sonic outliers: while they were influenced by a variety of genres with unique sounds,

---

[12] Morello, "Tom Morello."

[13] See, for example, the many personal stories about realtionships with music documented in Susan D. Crafts et al., *My Music* (Middletown, CT; Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

[14] A classic example is Bruce Sprinsteen's "Born in the U.S.A.", and a classic misinterpretation of this song can be seen in a 1984 op-ed by conservative columnist George Will. George F. Will, "Bruce Springsteen's U.S.A.," *Washington Post*, September 13, 1984, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/09/13/bruce-springsteens-usa/f6502baa-a8eb-48ad-ba85-7fa848d8833e/.

including punk, funk, and hip-hop, their core instrumentation is unambiguously inspired by that of hard rock and metal, featuring drums, bass, and electric guitar that often uses heavy distortion and other effects. Despite the often-messy nature of meaning and the interpretation of messages in music, it is somewhat difficult to see how one of the leading figures of conservative America would be able to count himself as a fan of rock-related groups considering the deep associations and meanings rock had generated in its first four decades. Yet evidently, by the 2000s, this antagonism had dulled to the point where Paul Ryan and other conservatives' fandom had become, if still somewhat ironic, unremarkable. How and why did this transformation occur?

In this chapter, I will examine the relationship between sound and the creation of meaning by examining guitar distortion in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s in the overlapping scenes of punk, hardcore, and straight edge, while also considering the politically nonadjacent genre of Christian rock. I argue that this period saw a gradual "decoupling" of distortion's meaning with violence, rebellion, and anti-establishment themes. Although some of those themes persisted, new, sometimes opposing ideas came to be signified by distortion as well, including political ideologies of both the left and right, abstinence from alcohol and drugs, veganism, and Christian salvation. Throughout this multiplicity of genres featuring a variety of musical differences, distortion was used as an intensifier, or a way to—figuratively and literally—amplify the sentiments, emotions, and ideas of the artists. I begin with an analysis of subgenres, artists, and songs that demonstrate this multiplicity followed by a discussion of text, sound, and the creation of meaning.

The Beginnings of Punk in New York and London

"Punk" is a somewhat elusive term, simultaneously referring both to a musical genre and to a larger set of stylistic and (counter)-cultural trends. Roger Sabin describes the conflict:

> At a very basic level, we can say that punk was/is a subculture best characterised as being part youth rebellion, part artistic statement. It had its high point from 1976 to 1979, and was most visible in Britain and America. It had its primary manifestation in music—and specifically in the disaffected rock and roll of bands like the Sex Pistols and the Clash. Philosophically, it had no 'set agenda' like the hippy movement that preceded it, but nevertheless stood for identifiable attitudes, among them: an emphasis on negationism (rather than nihilism); a consciousness of class-based politics (with a stress on 'working class credibility'); and a belief in spontaneity and "doing it yourself."[15]

This section will outline some of the precursors to punk and its early practitioners, focusing on musical style and the ideas represented by the music and artists. Musically, I focus on distortion, noise, and intensity, and the themes ideas they most commonly represented: the disaffected, downtrodden, and outcasts in society who focus on community, self-realization, and left-wing politics.

The New York rock scene in the mid-1970s may not best be described as "punk," considering the elements that term would later come to represent. It might instead be labeled "experimentalist," as it featured artists and bands exploring new themes and sounds outside of rock's mainstream. Punk was only one of the many streams that emerged from this scene, but a brief overview of some of the groups will elucidate punk's origins. The Velvet Underground were an early influence on what would become punk's attitude. While mainstream rock of the late 60s was dominated by San Francisco hippie culture,

[15] Roger Sabin, *Punk Rock-- so What?: The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 2–3.

British blues-rock, and Anglo-American psychedelia, the Velvet Underground wrote songs about the underside of New York city life: drug use, prostitution, and BDSM.[16]

"Heroin," off their 1967 debut album *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, exemplifies their sonic experimentalism and edgy lyrical themes.[17] The song is about the experience and effects of using heroin, but is ambivalent about its use, alternating condemnations and commendations in equal measure. It is written in a narrative style without a repeating chorus, and begins with spare electric guitar arpeggios and a drone from John Cale's electric viola, only picking up in energy by adding more guitar strumming and drums for the second half of each verse. During the fourth verse, the viola drone transforms into a cacophony of distorted noise as singer/songwriter Lou Reed sings:

> Heroin, be the death of me
> Heroin, it's my wife and it's my life
> Because a mainline into my vein
> Leads to a center in my head
> And then I'm better off than dead
>
> Because when the smack begins to flow
> I really don't care anymore
> About all the Jim-Jims in this town
> And all the politicians making crazy sounds
> And everybody putting everybody else down
> And all the dead bodies piled up in mounds

Here, the noise complements and represents the singer's loss of consciousness as his heroin trip becomes an escape from his destitute surroundings.

---

[16] Clinton Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk Rock* (Chicago: Review Press, 2005), 22.

[17] The Velvet Underground, "Heroin," *The Velvet Underground & Nico (45th Anniversary)*, Universal Records, released 1967, rereleased 2012, streaming audio, Tidal.

Another early punk pioneer was Detroit's Iggy Pop and the Stooges, whose 1973 album *Raw Power* proved influential to later punk rockers. The album featured the guitar sounds of James Williamson's Les Paul plugged into a Vox AC30 amplifier with high gain and volume, a sound that became so iconic that pickup maker Jason Lollar would later design a guitar pickup to capture.[18] Clinton Heylin described their live shows, meanwhile, as "a form of terrorist assault resonating deep into witnesses' psyches."[19] The sound can be heard on many of the album's tracks, including the lead single "Search and Destroy," whose lyrics evoke the violent nature of the Vietnam War (see the opening lyric: "I'm a street-walking cheetah with a heart full of napalm/ I'm a runaway son of a nuclear A-bomb/ I am a world's forgotten boy, the one who searches and destroys").[20] The guitar is heavily distorted and intense from the song's opening and is supported by a fast tempo, driving bass, and heavy drums. The song's intensity picks up in the final course and outro, however, as the guitar grows ever louder and more distorted, which is matched by Iggy Pop's louder and more distorted vocal cries.

Although the New York scene birthed a variety of non-mainstream artists, such as Patti Smith, the New York Dolls, Suicide, and the Talking Heads, the band it generated that would become associated with punk was the Ramones. The Ramones took the themes of the other New York bands and combined them with a simplified musical form reminiscent of early rock & roll, albeit louder,

---

[18] Gary Walker, "The Genius Of... Raw Power by Iggy And The Stooges," *Guitar.Com | All Things Guitar* (blog), December 9, 2020, https://guitar.com/review/album/the-genius-of-raw-power-by-iggy-and-the-stooges/; "Raw Power," Lollar Pickups, accessed December 14, 2020, https://www.lollarguitars.com/lollar-humbucker-pickups/raw-power.

[19] Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 36.

[20] The Stooges, "Search and Destroy (Iggy Pop Mix)," *Raw Power*, Sony Music Entertainment Inc., 1973, streaming audio, Tidal.

faster, and more intense. Lead singer Joey Ramone described their musical style as such: "[Rock & roll] was a hodge podge of Pink Floyd and [Emerson, Lake & Palmer] and all this crap, so basically what we did was we stripped it right down to the bone and we disassembled it and reassembled it and put all the excitement and fun and spirit, raw energy and raw emotion and guts and attitude back into it."[21] Heylin describes the role that the Ramones' equipment played in their sound: "The likelihood of producing an album of guitar noise was greatly increased by the Ramones lack of certitude about how to get the best sound out of the new Marshall amps they had inveigled out of Sire. As [bassist Dee Dee Ramone] later commented, 'we just turned everything up all the way.'"[22] Indeed, despite using the same amplifiers favored by blues-rock and metal guitarists that had come earlier, the way the Ramones set their amplifiers produced a different, "rawer" variety of distortion. Jon Savage describes the irony of the "simple yet novel" sound of the Ramones' first (self-titled) album:

> *The Ramones* was a formalist's delight. The mix was simple but artful: a minimal drumbeat (both channels) provided a basic structure for clipped vocals (centre); a bass guitar carried both melody and minimal rhythmic variation (left) and the guitar sound (right) was merely a distorted, rhythmic texture. *The Ramones* now sounds laughably simple: at the time it was brutal and divisive. After hearing it, everything else sounded impossibly slow.[23]

The key elements of the Ramones' sound and style, then, were loud, rhythmic, distorted guitar; driving bass and simplistic but intense drums; vocals that were a mix of singing and yelling, and often distorted themselves; and simple song forms that, when combined with fast tempos, resulted in relatively short

[21] Quoted in Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 166.

[22] Heylin, 251.

[23] Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock and Beyond* (New York: StMartin's Press, 1992), 157.

(many under two minutes) songs. The selected quotes also show the aesthetic values represented by the musical elements: simplicity, intensity, rawness, energy, and a sense of doing-it-yourself.

Take, for example, their song "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue" off their debut album.[24] The song has four lines of lyrics:

> Now I wanna sniff some glue
> Now I wanna have somethin' to do
> All the kids wanna sniff some glue
> All the kids want somethin' to do

These are repeated four times throughout the song over alternating A and G power chords played in a steady and driving eighth-note pattern (with the exception of the second repeat where the accompaniment drops out leaving just vocals and hi-hat). Between the second and third repeats the band plays two instrumental passages, one with descending A, G, F, and E power chords, and another with a single-note riff played by the guitar and bass. With a tempo of around 175 bpm, the song's runtime is an extremely short 1:36, especially given the number of sections the song contains. The impression many listeners are left with is a burst of energy that ends just as it's begun.

If the general aesthetic of punk began in New York, and its core sound found its beginnings with the Ramones, the maturation of both occurred in London, particularly with the Sex Pistols. The Pistols were the brainchild of artist/clothing designer/manager/promoter Malcolm McLaren, explicitly established, perhaps, to be as much a statement of lifestyle and politics as they were about music. They were assembled because of their attitude rather than their musical abilities: Paul Cook could play the drums, but Steve Jones couldn't sing and had to learn the guitar, while vocalist John Lydon (Johnny Rotten) couldn't sing either. Bassist Glen Matlock was eventually replaced by Sid Vicious who,

[24] Ramones, "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue," *Ramones*, Sire Records, 1976, streaming audio, Tidal.

unsurprisingly, couldn't play bass. They were a band that represented and reflected the growing pessimism of the British working class, expressed in bold, aggressive, and outlandish ways. As Jon Savage describes:

> The whole idea of "consensus" that had dominated postwar politics and social life was disintegrating: it was as though the whole postwar ideal of mass consumer enfranchisement fostered by Prime Ministers of both parties was being proved a sham. The bright colours, the "classlessness," and especially the optimism of the sixties, now seemed like a mirage. Just as the pop culture of its mid-decade had fragmented into small segments, so the country's social life seemed to be degenerating into warring factions.[25]

Much like the Ramones, the Sex Pistols utilized volume, noise, intensity, and aggression in their music. Savage explains, "Electric amplification had provided much of the excitement of early Rock'n'Roll: pushing their equipment to the limit—even further than the early Who—the Sex Pistols twisted their limited repertoire into a noise as futuristic as their rhetoric."[26] Unlike the Ramones, however, the Sex Pistols not only channeled youthful disenchantment, but directed those feelings into aggressively critiques of mainstream politics, as in their two well-known songs "Anarchy in the U.K." and "God Save the Queen."[27] The first verse of the latter reads:

God save the queen
The fascist regime
They made you a moron
Potential H-bomb

God save the queen
She ain't no human being
There is no future
In England's dreaming

[25] Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 109.

[26] Savage, 177.

[27] Sex Pistols, "Anarchy in the U.K.," *Never Mind The Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols*, Warner Records Inc., 1977, streaming audio, Tidal; Sex Pistols, "God Save the Queen," *Never Mind The Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols*, Warner Records Inc., 1977, streaming audio, Tidal.

The Pistols shared many of the sonic qualities employed by the Ramones that became foundational for punk: loud, distorted guitars playing mostly open power chords; a driving bass and drums; fast tempos; group choruses; and lead vocals that are spoken or yelled as much as they are sung. And particular to the Pistols were singer Johnny Rotten's heavy working-class English accent.

The Sex Pistols are at the center of some of punk's greatest paradoxes. They are commonly cited as one of the most influential punk acts, despite releasing one album and breaking up a few years after their formation. They offered an entirely new sound by returning to the simpler elements of earlier rock. Despite representing the struggles of the working classes and the exiles of society, they toyed with references to right-wing symbols, particularly anti-gay elements. And to achieve any type of commercial success meant that the group would have outlived their professed aesthetic. To, again, quote Savage:

> Contained in this package were problems which would take several years to work out. How could you be tough and a loser at the same time? How could you play with right-wing imagery and not get trapped by it? How could you take a script from Rimbaud and avoid the mythological trajectory of that poet's life? Built into Punk from the beginning was not only a tendency to self-destruction, but a short shelf-life. Despite what many of the groups professed, the movement enshrined failure: to succeed in conventional terms meant that you had failed on your own terms; to fail meant that you had succeeded.[28]

If the Sex Pistols represented a more anarchist punk group, the working-class mantle was taken up by the Clash. While the Clash wrote songs about a variety of subjects, including traditional themes like love and relationships, they also became known for their songs containing political or social commentary, and unlike the Pistols, the Clash's songs often contained a more positive outlook or a call to action. Savage describes the contrast:

[28] Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 140.

> The Sex Pistols uncompromisingly set themselves apart, while the Clash were warmer and more of the people; if the Sex Pistols implicitly and then explicitly advocated the destruction of all values, the Clash were more human, closer to the dialogue of social concern and social realism—more in the world.[29]

Predictably, perhaps, the Clash also enjoyed a longer, more stable career, releasing six albums between 1977 and 1985, and while the Pistols might be said to have had a larger cultural impact, the Clash became a more lauded musical group.

"White Riot," from the Clash's 1977 self-titled debut album, demonstrates the marriage of their written themes with their punk sound and aesthetic.[30] Written by singer and guitarist Joe Strummer after attending a London festival in which black youth fought with police, the lyrics note that while black youth are willing to take solving problems into their own hands, working class whites lacked that sort of drive. The first verse and prechorus, for example, read:

> Black man gotta lot a problems
> But they don't mind throwing a brick
> White people go to school
> Where they teach you how to be thick
>
> And everybody's doing
> Just what they're told to
> And nobody wants
> To go to jail

Speaking about the song, Strummer said:

> The only thing we're saying about the blacks is that they've got their problems and they're prepared to deal with them. . . . But white men, they just ain't prepared to deal with them—everything's too [cozy]. They've got stereos, drugs, hi-fis, cars. The poor blacks and the poor whites are in the same boat.[31]

---

[29] Savage, 231.

[30] The Clash, "White Riot (Remastered)," *The Clash (Remastered)*, Sony Music Entertainment, released 1977, rereleased 2013, streaming audio, Tidal.

[31] Richard Buskin, "CLASSIC TRACKS: The Clash 'White Riot,'" *Sound on Sound* (blog), October 2013, https://www.soundonsound.com/people/classic-tracks-clash-white-riot.

Musically, the song reflected the roughness, intensity, and DIY nature of punk, much of which was channeled through Strummer. Not known for having a technically outstanding voice, Strummer compensated by singing with high energy and passion, and aided by meaningful lyrics. Both on stage and in the studio, Strummer was a physical performer, singing with intensity while hammering his guitar. In an interview with recording blog *Sound on Sound*, engineer Simon Humphrey noted how the band wanted different recording techniques and were often against aesthetic "perfection." Often, the group would use one take with little editing or overdubbing, save perhaps, for some by lead guitarist Mick Jones. Humphrey explains:

> Joe didn't show much enthusiasm for overdubbing. His vocals largely consisted of single takes, he played his guitar live on the backing tracks and there was very little fixing of the bass. When we put a track down, the drums, bass and two guitars were played live and they mostly would have been retained.[32]

Humphrey also notes how the equipment the Clash used reflected this aesthetic:

> Joe had this Fender Telecaster which was like this beaten-up old rusty guitar—obviously his punk special; it was very much him—and he plugged it into this Fender Twin reverb. It made a horrendously toppy, hideous sound, and Mick said, "God, that's awful." However, we never, ever thought about trying to improve it, we just thought, "This is what it sounds like and this is what we're gonna have." I didn't try to change them. I was only interested in recording them the way they wanted to be: the truth of how they sounded and what they wanted to be, in the raw.[33]

To summarize, while nearly impossible to define neatly, punk as a musical and cultural style displayed a few key qualities. It was fanbase was generally made up of the downtrodden, disaffected, and outcasts of society, whom artists tried to represent. It was aligned with working class and left-wing political sentiments. It toyed with violence, both in terms of actions of musicians and fans at concerts.

[32] Buskin.

[33] Buskin.

Musically, the songs were intense but compact, with songs played at ever faster tempi resulting in shorter and shorter lengths. Technical proficiency of both vocals and instruments were deemphasized in favor of more "raw" performance. And guitars and electronic equipment grew even louder and more distorted, reclaiming the youthful rebelliousness of early rock and roll and channeling into a new punk spirit.

Hardcore and Straight Edge

Hardcore was an offshoot of punk that arose in the 1980s and was more aggressive, both in terms of its sound and its political messaging. The hallmarks of punk were taken to new extremes: guitars and vocals were more distorted, songs were faster, drums were quicker. Politics also came to the fore, even more than they had with bands like the Clash. As Francis Stewart explains:

> There arose a great concern to distinguish between the real and the contrived or "faux punk," and there was a stronger political consciousness and a belief in the necessity to make a difference through action. The political consciousness was different to the somewhat nebulous affiliation punk had originally claimed, in equal amounts, with anarchism and nihilism. Increasingly, it was to the left and was concerned with democracy, the environment, human rights and animal welfare.[34]

The Dead Kennedy's 1980 debut album *Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables* contains songs with messages pertaining to multiple political and social causes, such as class warfare ("Kill the Poor"), the military-industrial complex ("When Ya Get Drafted"), fascist leadership ("California Über Alles"), and the Khmer Rouge ("Holiday in Cambodia").[35] Attending a live performance was another critical part of the

[34] Francis Stewart, *Punk Rock Is My Religion: Straight Edge Punk and 'Religious' Identity*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 30–31.

[35] Dead Kennedys, *Fresh Fruit For Rotting Vegetables*, Decay Music, 1980, streaming audio, Tidal.

experience, as audience members would engage in aggressive, sometimes semi-violent, dancing. Per Stewart again:

> A hardcore show is an extremely visceral experience: loud music, screaming and shouting back and forth between the band(s) and audience, "sing-alongs," stage-diving, head-walking, and extremely physical dancing which could, to an outsider, closely resemble an out of control riot![36]

Just as with punk, the musical style went together with messaging, the energy of the music, amplifying whatever message the artists and fans were expressing.

Much like its rock and roll predecessors, punk maintained a destructive side, with both artists and fans succumbing to problems with drug use, alcohol, and other harmful behavior. To this end, *straight edge* became yet another offshoot of hardcore punk that was specifically aimed at curbing these destructive activities. As Ross Haenfler writes:

> Though [straight edge] has its roots in kids' practical desires to see the bands they loved, the movement arose primarily as a response to the punk scene's nihilistic tendencies, including drug and alcohol abuse, casual sex, violence, and self-destructive "live fast, die young" attitudes.[37]

To mark themselves as adherents to straight edge, some participants would draw or tattoo X's on their hands, practice behaviors like veganism/vegetarianism or abstaining from caffeine or other medication, and seek community-focused jobs such as counseling or care work.[38] The straight edge community could often be quite strict, and any deviations or slips from the lifestyle could result in one becoming an

[36] Stewart, *Punk Rock Is My Religion*, 72.

[37] Ross Haenfler, *Straight Edge: Clean-Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 8.

[38] Stewart, *Punk Rock Is My Religion*, 85.

outsider.[39] The difference between hardcore and straight edge, then, is more related to the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of fans in their daily lives and musical experiences than it is about the sound and orientation of the music itself.

Before reflecting further on the ideological difference between hardcore and straight edge I want to analyze the musical features and experience. I must also note that even though my examples will be from studio recordings and adequately represent the musical features, the experience of attending live performance is repeatedly emphasized by scholars as critical to the genre. Frances Stewart describes the attendance of a hardcore show as both a visceral, bodily experience, and one that also serves as an emotional release:

> Hearing [punk] songs performed live is akin to simultaneously being hit by a wall of sound that can stop you in your tracks and feeling your entire body yearn to react to the rhythm or tempo. One's entire body is consumed by the impact the music pounding and pulsating from the speakers is having upon it.[40]
>
> Having this music screamed in your face (often literally) compels an emotional response, a release of a scream you had haled inside perhaps, or a scream of agreement, or maybe even a scream to urge your body into action.[41]
>
> For a few hours a night, the individual can attend a Straight Edge or hardcore show and leave aside their ordinary, mundane work-a-day lives and for a short time step into, and be a part of something much larger than themselves. . . . They are not undertaking or partaking in this musical experience with the express purpose of obtaining a rapturous experience or connecting with the divine or spiritual in some way. Rather, their concern is for an enhancement or arousal of their own emotional state, an emotional release and a fulfilment of a deep longing to connect with the communal dimension of music.[42]

---

[39] Haenfler, *Straight Edge*, 10.

[40] Stewart, *Punk Rock Is My Religion*, 68.

[41] Stewart, 71.

[42] Stewart, 78.

It is important to keep these sorts of experiences in mind as I discuss the studio recordings of these songs.

The song that kicked off straight edge as a subgenre was Minor Threat's song "Straight Edge," originally released on their 1981 self-titled EP.[43] The song is a mere 45 seconds long, but opens thunderously with heavily distorted guitar power chords. The drums enter in the second bar, playing a sped-up backbeat pattern that sounds as though it could be from a double-time section of a more typical rock song. The result is a high-energy, furious backdrop for Ian MacKaye's spoken/yelled vocals, which blaze through two verses and a one-line refrain:

I'm a person just like you
But I've got better things to do
Than sit around and fuck my head
Hang out with the living dead
Snort white shit up my nose
Pass out at the shows
I don't even think about speed
That's something I just don't need

I've got the straight edge

I'm a person just like you
But I've got better things to do
Than sit around and smoke dope
'Cause I know I can cope
Laugh at the thought of eating 'ludes
Laugh at the thought of sniffing glue
Always gonna keep in touch
Never want to use a crutch

I've got the straight edge

Although the lyrics are somewhat difficult to discern through MacKaye's mumbling and yelling, their message is fairly clear: MacKaye does not want or need drugs or other like substances to function and sees them as an unnecessary social crutch and a timewaster. With this song, Minor Threat took the same sound used by other punk and hardcore groups and used it to amplify a message antithetical to the behavior many of those groups exhibited.

[43] Minor Threat, "Straight Edge," *First Two Seven Inches*, Dischord Records, 1984, streaming audio, Tidal.

Straight edge was taken to further heights in the '90s with bands like Earth Crisis. As their name implies, Earth Crisis focused both the lyrics of their songs and their general activism around issues such as veganism and animal rights. As Stewart notes:

> [The music of Earth Crisis] is one of unbridled aggression and sing-along chants, but it is coupled with a specific statement during songs (importantly usually while the band provides a background sound). . . . Littered around the venue they are playing at will often be tables and people handing out literature about PETA, veganism, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), Greenpeace and others.[44]

The "unbridled aggression" that Earth Crisis direct at environmental issues is a direct reference to the band's musical style, which combines elements of hardcore punk and metal into a subgenre called *metalcore*. Despite sharing some of the same musical elements—heavy guitar distortion, for example—metal and punk were often seen to be at odds due to aesthetic differences. While punk bands often eschewed technical skill in favor of a DIY approach, metal singers and instrumentalists were commonly virtuosos. As documented in chapter 3, metal songs were often longer, featured sections with changing tempos and styles, and contained instrumental sections called "breakdowns" that would display this virtuosity, in contrast to the short and basic punk song. In many of their songs, Earth Crisis employed heavier guitar distortion, "death growl" vocals, and multiple sections with fluctuating tempos typical of thrash metal, while keeping the fast tempos, short song length, and high intensity of punk.

Take, for example, their song "Forced March" from their 1995 debut album *Destroy the Machines*.[45] The song opens with an extremely distorted ominous guitar riff, joined by drums at the end of a four-bar cycle. While the song is in 4/4, an extra eighth note is added to the end of a second four-

[44] Stewart, *Punk Rock Is My Religion*, 70–71.

[45] Earth Crisis, "Forced March," *Destroy the Machines*, Craft Recordings, 1995, streaming audio, Tidal.

bar cycle before the vocals enter, at which point the drums double the speed of their pattern. The vocals are growled/screamed, and the lyrics cover the wasteful lives led by many, as can be seen in the first verse:

> Humanity devours itself alive
> Forced march down this path of sorrow to an end that doesn't justify
> Hands chained, running driven upon those that fall they tread
> Conditioned by a warped value system to not look back, just push ahead
> Lives of excess, lust and material greed
> A slave to their own desires, apathetic to those in need
> Devoid of love no peace inside. Blinded by their manic greed
> Thoughts consumed with the thoughts of the worthless, this is their reality

The first two lines of the verse follow the same pattern of the intro, but a new guitar riff and drum pattern accompany the next four lines, while yet another riff and pattern are played for the final couplet. This structure of changing guitar and drum patterns follows for the rest of the song, with a total length of 3:47.

In the previous chapter, I argued that by the mid-1980s a large enough segment of the American public associated the sound of rock, particularly guitar distortion, with ideas of destructive behavior that they were willing to advocate for legislative regulation. Bands like Earth Crisis and the hardcore and straight edge genres show, however, the beginnings of the breakdown of this semiotic association. While early punk continued and amplified the sonic messages of earlier rock, including flirtations with violence, resistance against authority and the establishment, and destructive personal behavior, straight edge built its entire genre around counteracting these trends. Although the dancing performed at concerts may be intense, it never perpetrates violence against others. And while anti-authority themes continued in lyrics, they increasingly became directed at more specific political causes. Most importantly, the prevention of destructive behavior became the *raison d'être* for straight edge.

Over these two decades of punk history, the sound of the music grew more and more intense, but the target of that intensity began to broaden and shift.

Christian Rock and Right-Wing Punk

The semiotic link between guitar distortion and anti-establishment violence deteriorated further as distortion became more widely used in a variety of genres and lyrical themes. To start, Christian rock began to flourish in the 1990s with bands like DC Talk and Jars of Clay, whose sounds were more similar to lighter rock genres such as alternative and soft rock. Some artists who came in the late 90s and early 2000s, however, owed their sounds to harder genres like punk and metal, such as P.O.D. and Creed. While Creed was not explicitly Christian rock—that is, their music was not marketed and sold to the contemporary Christian audience—P.O.D. was, and both bands wrote songs containing clear Christian themes and had crossover, mainstream success. A 2001 profile of the two bands in *Christianity Today* opens, "The Christian penetration of popular music has taken a surprising step: the sheep have found a small place in the wolves' den of sex, drugs, and ear-busting rock." It continues:

> Christians generally gave up on hardcore as the province of hedonistic wastrels spewing lust and violence. . . . But now, surprise, Christians who play hardcore, thrash, rap, and metal are shooting to the top of secular *Billboard* charts and landing major tour gigs and broad video and audio play.[46]

While this development was somewhat remarkable to the Christian audience, the seeds had been set years earlier.

[46] Kevin A Miller, "Rock's Real Rebels," *Christianity Today* 45, no. 1 (January 8, 2001): 90–91.

Miller writes that P.O.D., moreover, "is gaining attention by combining lyrics of faith and a grinding sound akin to Rage Against the Machine."[47] Indeed, both the grinding sound and lyrics of faith can be heard in many of their songs, such as their 2001 single "Alive."[48] Stylistically, the song has more in common with hard rock and grunge rather than hardcore, but shares the heavily distorted guitar which plays an opening chord riff. During the verses, the vocals are mostly rapped, while the chorus is sung. And although the subject of the lyrics remains somewhat ambiguous, they retain fairly evident Christian themes, and the "you" could easily refer to God or Jesus:

> Every day is a new day
> I'm thankful for every breath I take
> I won't take it for granted
> So I learn from my mistakes
> It's beyond my control, sometimes it's best to let go
> Whatever happens in this lifetime
> So I trust in love
> You have given me peace of mind
>
> I feel so alive for the very first time
> I can't deny you, I feel so alive
> I feel so alive for the very first time
> And I think I can fly

P.O.D. lead singer Sonny Sandoval commented on their Christian influences and noted the shift in lyrical topic related to their sound:

> We play concerts full of [other bands'] acts telling kids to put their middle finger up in the air, sleep with women, and do all the drugs they can. . . . When you get up and talk about love, people say, "What do you mean? Rock and roll is about anarchy." They say there's no room for God in rock. So you look at it and tell me who's the rebel.[49]

---

[47] Miller, "Rock's Real Rebels."

[48] P.O.D., "Alive (2021 Remaster)," *Satellite (Expanded Edition) [2021 Remaster]*, Atlantic Recording Corporation, released 2008, rereleased 2021, streaming audio, Tidal.

[49] Miller, "Rock's Real Rebels."

Mark Allen Powell, meanwhile, argues that what makes rock, and P.O.D.'s music in particular, an effective vehicle for their message is the way the music channels emotion. He writes:

> P.O.D. screams anguished laments about urban blight and broken homes with enough streetwise agitation to appall many listeners. Band members also relate sordid testimonies of growing up in a drug-ridden ghetto in southern California. Printed on a page, their lyrics might seem a tad predictable or simplistic. It is the band's defiant delivery of those lyrics that renders them prophetic, transforming them into postmodern, melodramatic oracles of doom.[50]

It is worth noting, however, that some Christians—particularly evangelicals—reject the repackaging of Christian messages into rock and maintain rock's older semiotic associations. In her dissertation on fundamentalist Christian musical practice, Sarah Bereza notes the faculty of Bob Jones University hold negative views of Christian Rock:

> In their views, popular styles of music (especially ones with roots in rock 'n' roll—styles they most often refer to collectively as "rock" or "pop") are always and necessarily sinful because their intrinsic properties promote sins such as illegitimate sexual activities, anger and rebellion against God-ordained civil and familial authorities, and other mental, emotional, and physical states that do not glorify God. For example, faculty members at BJU assert that "the rock genre is distinguished by the combination of some or all of the following characteristics—sensual singing styles, dominating beat, heavy percussion, overwhelming volume and an overall atmosphere that counteracts self-control, especially when coupled in performance with elements such as a defiant demeanor, immodest attire, sexually suggestive dancing or crude gestures." Other fundamentalist authors use "rock" even more connotatively. For example, Tim Fisher's "honest definition of rock music" is "that music where text, music, performers, and performance practices are conforming to the image of the earthly, sensual, and devilish."[51]

For these fundamentalist Christians, there is nothing that can be done lyrically to disassociate the sounds of rock from its past meanings, making bands like P.O.D. problematic. Also worth noting is the faculty members seem to cite physical effects "caused" by the music as much as they do its semiotic

---

[50] Mark Allan Powell, "Jesus Climbs the Charts," *Christian Century* 119, no. 26 (December 18, 2002): 20.

[51] Sarah Bereza, "The Right Kind of Music: Fundamentalist Christianity as Musical and Cultural Practice" (Ph.D., United States — North Carolina, Duke University, 2017), 4–5.

associations, evoking some of the critiques of early rock I document in chapter 2. But on the whole, distortion and the sounds of rock became newly contested territory in the early 2000s.

As mentioned earlier, despite being mostly associated with left-wing tendencies, punk had engaged in flirtations with right-wing politics. Because punk often positioned itself as a reaction to the mainstream, artists and fans sometimes found themselves reacting to more liberal components of the mainstream, such as hippie culture. And despite the interest in black music and often explicit anti-racist messaging of bands like The Clash, their political positions were not necessarily adopted by fans. A prime example is the usage of the swastika symbol by Malcolm McLaren and the Sex Pistols; intended to be displayed for its shock value in the post-war climate, a different message was absorbed by neo-Nazi punks.[52] Indeed, some punks would have tenuous relationships with race, black music, and homosexuality, and sometimes showed interest in anti-political correctness, right-wing symbols, and Nazism.[53] There was certainly tension between left and right-wing elements, as punk simultaneously exhibited right-wing "manly" culture and cross-dressing, and simultaneously disavowed black music despite fairly clear historical ties. The paradox begins to make sense when considering that much of the early punk scene gained support from white, suburban youths, who were disaffected and felt little ties to liberal culture. Jon Savage writes:

> This element of polemic and put-on masked the real return of the repressed: a white, suburban, adolescent nihilism that had been forgotten since sixties Punk Rock. Just as much of the music bled out any black influence in favour of a monolithic, unsyncopated sound, some of the

[52] Alexis Petridis, "Misunderstood or Hateful? Oi!'s Rise and Fall," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/mar/18/oi-cockney-rejects-garry-bushell-interview.

[53] Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 138–40.

> accompanying attitudes held both the excitement of the broken taboo and queasiness about the possible implications. Yet this examination of the forbidden was the source of Punk's power.[54]

In the end, more energy was directed at reacting to conservative authority, particularly in the context of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher's administrations in the U.S. and United Kingdom, respectively. But these right-wing tendencies had been lingering within the punk scene for years.

As the link between punk's sound and the left-wing dissipated, it perhaps became easier to be accepted expressing right-wing views within the punk idiom. The Right Brothers may not have been a major player on the charts, but they received notoriety after the release of their 2006 song "Bush Was Right," which triumphantly praises the actions and policies of U.S. president George W. Bush.[55] As a *Guardian* article from that time noted:

> The Right Brothers, it turns out, have been putting out conservative-themed songs for some months, addressing everything from abortion and racial profiling to the wonder and beauty of love, provided that it takes place between a man and a woman within the framework of a traditional marriage.[56]

As can be heard in "Bush Was Right," the Right Brothers sound owes itself to the pop-punk subgenre pioneered by bands like Green Day and Blink-182, which keeps the distorted guitar and fast tempos but substitutes intense vocals and overall aesthetics for playfulness.

In some ways, both Christian rock and right-wing punk were notable for the irony of their own rebelliousness, in this case not against society as a whole but rather against the traditional messages carried by the sounds they were employing. At the same time, both developments were also reflective of

---

[54] Savage, 138.

[55] The Right Brothers, "Bush Was Right," *No Apologies*, The Right Brothers, 2006, streaming audio, Tidal.

[56] Oliver Burkeman, "The Song That Might Save Bush," *The Guardian*, April 4, 2006, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/apr/05/usa.popandrock.

the ubiquitous nature of the sounds of rock and punk. In other words, once those sounds begin to penetrate and saturate the popular consciousness, the very specific meanings with which they had come to be associated began to gradually lose their semiotic power. At that point, it is worth asking: beyond some form of generic "intensity," does guitar distortion carry any meaning at all?

Epilogue: Reconsidering Paul Ryan

In June, 2020, another round of flare-ups between Tom Morello and conservatives began after Morello made some social media posts related to the George Floyd protests. For example, in a now deleted Tweet, a fan posted this reply to a Morello post:



Figure 4.2 – a Twitter Reply to Tom Morello

to which Morello replied, "Scott!! What music of mine were you a fan of that DIDN'T contain 'political BS'? I need to know so I can delete it from the catalog."[57] As another example, here is a reply I found to the Instagram account @blueslawyermemes commenting on the situation:[58]

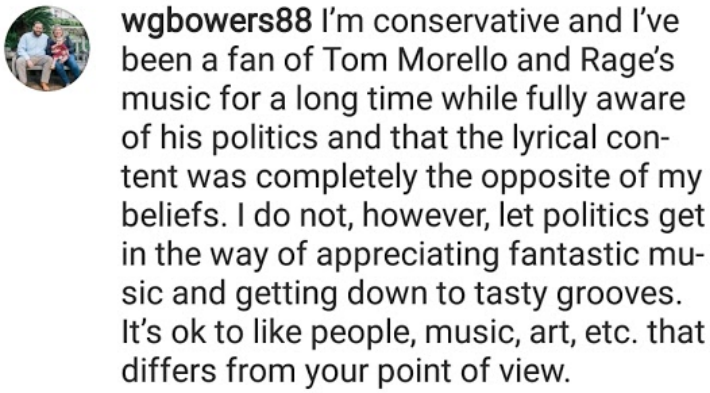


Figure 4.3 – an Instagram Reply to @blueslawyermemes

While replies of the first sort are certainly more ironic and amusing, the second reply is, perhaps, much more telling. This response is from a self-proclaimed fan who is fully aware of the political stance and activism of both the music and the musicians and actively chooses to *ignore* them. A decade or two earlier and this might not have been so easy; the sounds used by Rage Against the Machine had

[57] Bryan Rolli, "Conservatives Roasted for Discovering Rage Against the Machine Is Political," The Daily Dot, June 10, 2020, https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/rage-against-the-machine-political-conservatives/; Tom Morello, "Scott!! What Music of Mine Were You a Fan of That DIDN'T Contain 'Political BS'? I Need to Know so I Can Delete It from the Catalog.," Tweet, *@tmorello* (blog), June 9, 2020, https://twitter.com/tmorello/status/1270419869524094976.

[58] "BluesLawyer Memes (@blueslawyermemes) Instagram Photos and Videos," June 11, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CBS8RyAnhDX/.

previously been so tied to messages antithetical to conservatism that many conservatives actively rejected rock and its various offshoots. By the 2000s, that was no longer the case.

As much as Rage Against the Machine may try to intimately link their music to their message, it simply is not possible to affect every fan. Morello acknowledges this dynamic between music and message. In a recent interview he notes:

> It's a testament to the compelling nature of the music. It's not a dry college lecture. Noam Chomsky will never start a mosh pit. It's a testament to like the power of the rock and roll. I know from personal experience, and every time I go to get a coffee or go to the grocery store, that there are people who have come to my music for the guitar solos and then later on became a public defender or a brick-throwing anarchist, because they were exposed to a set of ideas that harmonized internally in a way that they would not have gotten down with had it not been a great rock and roll song to begin with.
>
> So, there's a lot of Trump clowns out there who love to drunkenly mosh Rage Against Machine. And it's cringey and embarrassing, but when you look at those mosh pits, and you wonder what percentage of the people really understand what's going on, I don't know that it's 50, or even 20. But 20 on a global scale is a significant number.[59]

While Morello is content with a 20 percent message delivery rate, it once again raises the question that Morello asked of Paul Ryan eight years ago: what are the other 80 percent raging against? Morello speaks to the "power of rock and roll," seemingly for its ability to draw people into its emotional experiences and "tasty grooves." And yet, I've been struck when watching Rage's performance of "Killing in the Name Of" at PinkPop in 1993 at the seemingly all-white makeup of the audience.[60] Indeed, there is a longer tradition of ignoring the political nature of black music, as Rage Against the

[59] "Grandson and Tom Morello on What Rock and Roll Means in 2021," *Interview Magazine*, January 8, 2021, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/music/grandson-and-tom-morello-on-what-rock-and-roll-means-in-2021.

[60] Raymond JE, *Rage Against The Machine - Killing In The Name - 1993*, October 13, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8de2W3rtZsA.

Machine are fronted by two people of color (Morello and de la Rocha). For a song about racial justice, is 20 percent—which may well be an overestimate—enough?

In this light, ironic as it may be, Paul Ryan is likely closer to the norm than the exception. Indeed, music's messages have long had a tenuous relationship to their sounds, and are ever in fluctuation as debates over interpretation are played out in public discourse. Morello's solution seems to be to continually push his message in any way he can, whether that is through interviews, social media, grassroots political activism, or musical performance. To that end, perhaps 20 percent is not only good enough, but a raucous success.

Chapter 5

Signification of the Past and Nostalgia in the Music of Greta Van Fleet

Greta Van Fleet are a rock band comprised of the three Kiszka brothers, Josh, Jake, and Sam along with their friend Danny Wagner (all in their early 20s). Hailing from Frankenmuth, Michigan, the band has risen quickly, with their debut single "Highway Tune" topping the Mainstream and Active Rock charts for five weeks in the fall of 2017, and their debut LP, *Anthem of the Peaceful Army*, reaching number 3 on the Billboard charts and selling 80,000 albums (not including streams) in its first week in the fall of 2018.[1] The band has since sold out numerous concerts and toured through the beginning of 2020.[2] However, their similarity to Led Zeppelin—a highly influential rock band from the late 1960s and 70s—has placed them at the center of a fierce debate in the rock community.

The most vitriolic criticism, perhaps, came from a review of their debut album by *Pitchfork*, an online publication that focuses on popular music. A sampling of quotes from the review gives a sense of the critique:

> They are a new kind of vampiric band who's there to catch the runoff of original classic rock using streaming services' data-driven business model. Greta Van Fleet exist to be swallowed into the algorithm's churn and rack up plays, of which they already have hundreds of millions. They make music that sounds exactly like Led Zeppelin and demand very little other than forgetting how good Led Zeppelin often were. . . .

[1] Corbin Reiff, "Greta Van Fleet's Debut Was The Best-Selling Album Of The Week," *UPROXX* (blog), October 29, 2018, https://uproxx.com/music/greta-van-fleet-anthems-of-the-peaceful-army-no-3-billboard-debut/.

[2] The band, like most artists, paused touring due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but is embarking on a new tour in 2022 that is selling out arenas.

> But for as retro as *Anthem of the Peaceful Army* may seem, in actuality, it is the future. It's proof of concept that in the streaming and algorithm economy, a band doesn't need to really capture the past, it just needs to come close enough so that a computer can assign it to its definite article. The more unique it sounds, the less chance it has to be placed alongside what you already love. So when the Greta Van Fleet of your favorite artist finally lands on your morning playlist, spark up a bowl of nostalgia and enjoy the self-satisfied buzz of recognizing something you already know. It's the cheapest high in music.[3]

Winnowing through the colorful putdowns, there are a few distinct critiques that are worth listing plainly. First, the root of the problem is that not only does Greta Van Fleet sound *reminiscent* of Led Zeppelin, but they sound *exactly* like Led Zeppelin, while at the same time they imitate them lyrically and in their presentation (fashion, style, etc.). From this, the critic extracts a reason for the similarity, accusing the band (or, perhaps, the executives behind the band) of targeting their sound to take advantage of new technology, specifically algorithms used by media platforms such as Spotify and Pandora. And finally, he concludes the band's success is not due to their musical talent or songwriting ability, but to the commercial forces centered around an industry of nostalgia.

Greta Van Fleet's rapid ascension and the intense discourse surrounding them prompt multiple questions. Just how similar are Greta Van Fleet and Led Zeppelin, and in what aspects and under what criteria can such a determination be made? If Greta Van Fleet is exploiting nostalgia, what, exactly, is the nature of that nostalgia? How does the current status of rock and its relationship to mainstream commercialism feed into that nostalgia? What does that nostalgia sound like and how is it encoded in music? How might different groups of listeners interpret what the music *sounds* like and how does that affect their view of the music as representative of the past?

---

[3] Jeremy D. Larson, "Greta Van Fleet: Anthem of the Peaceful Army," *Pitchfork*, October 23, 2018, https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/greta-van-fleet-anthem-of-the-peaceful-army/.

In this chapter, I argue that the sounds and timbres of the electric guitar have come to represent the past, though that past is interpreted in different ways depending on the context of different listening communities. I begin by discussing the changing landscape of popular music between Led Zeppelin and Greta Van Fleet, focusing on the rise of "classic rock," the fading of rock from the mainstream, and the rise of "retro rock." Following this, I perform a close analysis of Greta Van Fleet's music to determine the elements that make it similar to classic rock generally and Led Zeppelin specifically. I conclude that timbre plays the largest role, though in comparisons of musical similarity and difference the sum of multiple factors is greater than the parts. I end by offering thoughts on the many "rock is dead" narratives and how nostalgia contributes to the critical discourse in modern rock.

Context of the Signified

It's been a long time since I rock and rolled

"Rock and Roll," – Led Zeppelin

In case you haven't heard, "Rock is Dead!" In "The Death of the Electric Guitar" from the *Washington Post*, an interviewee blames the decline in guitar sales on the lack of modern "guitar heroes."[4] In a *New York Times* article—"Is Rock 'n' Roll Dead, or Just Old?"—Bill Flanagan tells us, "We have to face it—rock has grown old," and that "Rock is now where jazz was in the early 1980s. Its

[4] Geoff Edgers, "The Slow Death of the Electric Guitar," *Washington Post*, June 22, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/lifestyle/the-slow-secret-death-of-the-electric-guitar/.

form is mostly fixed."[5] The tagline to *The New Republic's* article "What Happened to Rock Music?" by Alex Shephard reads, "The genre hasn't been this irrelevant in decades, which was only underscored by a slew of memoirs by aging rock stars."[6] The opening paragraph of Carl Wilson's *Billboard* article asks, "So much of the major music news of 2016 involved death: David Bowie, Prince, George Martin and Leonard Cohen were among the legends on this year's grim roster. Is it time to add rock music itself?"[7] And in *The Week*, Damon Linker declares, "Rock music isn't dead, but it's barely hanging on."[8]

The assertions from those articles can be summarized into a few main points: the guitar has faded from popular culture, as might be measured by the status of guitar "heroes" and number of guitar sales; rock is a fixed genre and is no longer at the front of public consciousness; and rock's most popular artists are either already dead or are aging and will pass soon. These arguments, however, raise some important questions: what, exactly, is "rock," and how is it defined? What does it mean for a genre to, as they write, "die"? And what does this discourse reveal about the state of popular music and how we hear genres?

If rock "died," then it would seemingly be possible for it to be revived, resurrected, or saved. For example, Jason Flom—the Lava Records executive who signed Greta Van Fleet to their first record

---

[5] Bill Flanagan, "Is Rock 'n' Roll Dead, or Just Old?," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/is-rock-n-roll-dead-or-just-old.html.

[6]Alex Shephard, "What Happened to Rock Music?," *The New Republic*, December 30, 2016, https://newrepublic.com/article/139572/happened-rock-music.

[7] Carl Wilson, "Is Rock Still Relevant In 2016?," *Billboard*, December 12, 2016, https://www.billboard.com/articles/events/year-in-music-2016/7616418/rock-relevant-2016.

[8] David Linker, "The Coming Death of Just about Every Rock Legend," *The Week*, August 31, 2019, https://theweek.com/articles/861750/coming-death-just-about-every-rock-legend.

deal—stated, "It's almost like they were sent in a time capsule to save rock 'n' roll. They wouldn't say that, but I will."[9] To this end, Nicholas Russo coined the term "retro rock," which he describes as:

> New original rock music which utilizes the form and style of earlier rock music such that it overtly suggests the artists, style and era of its influence. . . . However, there is often a marked difference between new rock music which through genre classification falls within the generic confines of the rock style, and rock music which is explicitly identifiable as "retro." While the lines between a derivative and innovative musical work can be blurred, retro rock predominantly features compositions and song structures which are derived from a particular style or trend in rock music which were previously popular or in vogue in a past era.[10]

Russo notes that while there have been multiple revivals of past styles within the history of rock—typically on a 20-year lag—what makes the modern retro revival unique is its return to an era that the artists themselves never experienced. Contemporary retro rock, he argues, is obsessed with rock of the late '60s and '70s, which occurred decades before most modern rock artists were born.[11] He also identifies some factors that place artists into the retro rock category, including crafting a sound by utilizing specific instruments and equipment, employing certain "compositional" elements, and using retro themes in fashion and album covers.

A question raised by retro rock's evolution is *how* the elements Russo lists became associated with a past era—the '70s and late '60s—in the first place. While I will discuss those elements in further detail later, it is important to note that there is continuity between 1979 and 2018 in *all* of those elements, from timbres, to compositional style, to fashion. Instead, the story is one of rock gradually

---

[9]Mark Kennedy, "Some Call Greta Van Fleet the Saviors of Rock. But Not Them," *AP NEWS*, January 24, 2019, https://apnews.com/1c25ef288a4e4bf59cdbf4ad56724345.

[10] Nicholas Russo, "'Feels Like We Only Go Backwards': Nostalgia and Contemporary Retro Rock" (PhD diss., School of the Arts, English and Media, University of Wollongong, 2015), 14.

[11] Russo, 34.

fading from the mainstream as new genres with new sounds begin to challenge rock's supremacy (the results of which can be seen in the articles quoted above). A second, critical piece of the story is the canonization of rock, which began in earnest in the 1980s. Together, these two trends contributed to a "freezing in time" of classic rock associated with the '60s and '70s.

Regardless of genre labels, there were significant changes in the overall sounds and individual timbres in popular music that defined the 1980s. These changes began to raise questions about how to categorize different styles of music within genres and subgenres, and, in particular, what was considered to be rock and what was not. Sometimes those questions were answered in the moment, while at others the answer shifted over time with historical perspective. For example, one way to get a general sense of popular music in a past time period is to examine "best of" lists. Although these lists are curated by individuals and publications with biases, they are a general attempt at capturing what music was most popular and important. As *Pitchfork* writes, "Every time we do one of these lists we learn something about how perceptions of decades change over time, and how the musical ideas from a given era filter through to later generations."[12] Examining the sampling of songs and artists compiled by *Pitchfork* and *VH1* reveals a few trends in instrumental timbres.[13] First, there was a significant rise in artists and songs that used or featured the synthesizer and electronic effects. Examples run the gamut from mainstream rock artists (Van Halen, Phil Collins) to alt-rock (the Talking Heads, U2) to synth-pop (Michael Jackson, Madonna, Culture Club, Depeche Mode) to electronic music (Kraftwerk). Another rising

[12] "The 200 Best Songs of the 1980s," *Pitchfork*, August 24, 2015, https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/9700-the-200-best-songs-of-the-1980s/.

[13] "VH1's 100 Greatest Songs of the '80s," *Spinditty*, November 15, 2021, https://spinditty.com/playlists/Top-100-Songs-of-the-80s.

trend was the use of sampling, which can be seen in the parallel rise of hip-hop. Throughout these lists, the guitar is still used and featured in numerous songs, though its role is somewhat diminished compared to the 70s.

In fact, *Pitchfork*'s "The Best 200 Songs of the 1970s" reveals significant timbral diversity and does not show a decade completely dominated by electric guitars. Their list is littered with artists and songs from Motown, Soul, and Funk, such as Stevie Wonder, Al Green, Funkadelic, Marvin Gaye, James Brown, and Bill Withers. Pop also appears with artists like Kate Bush, ABBA, and Michael Jackson, as do other genres like Reggae (Bob Marley) and Disco (Donna Summer). Even though a perusal through *VH1*'s "100 Greatest Rock Songs" list begins to show signs of guitar-dominance, there is still a wide array of styles and timbres present.[14] What this demonstrates is the wide *inclusiveness* of rock as a genre label; at least to some degree (and one that, perhaps, came about with some hindsight) rock was a broad term that encompassed many subgenres. Further emphasizing this point, *Billboard* did not introduce a separate chart for "rock" until 1981, and since the creation of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's first inductions in 1986, every artist listed earlier has been inducted with the exception of Kate Bush (who has been nominated).[15]

Browse *VH1*'s list of the "100 Greatest Hard Rock Songs," however, and a new picture emerges: one that is considerably *exclusive,* both sonically—it is dominated by loud guitars—and in terms of

[14] This list was compiled in 2000, and thus does not look back from the same point as most of the other lists, which came 5-10 years later. Associated Press, "VH1 Names 100 Greatest Rock Songs: Stones Get Satisfaction," *Deseret News*, January 7, 2000, https://www.deseret.com/2000/1/7/19484459/vh1-names-100-greatest-rock-songs-stones-get-satisfaction.

[15] "Billboard Charts History: How the Charts Evolved," *Billboard*, November 14, 2019, http://www.billboard.com/articles/business/chart-beat/8543482/billboard-chart-history-evolution-milestones.

diversity—it is strikingly white and male.[16] *This* is the image of rock that is conjured in the term "retro rock" and in the idea that "rock is dead." I suggest the association of rock (generally) with this particular type occurred in the 1980s as a result of a process of canonization in which rock—or, more specifically, "classic" rock—defined itself against multiple others. I have already mentioned two signs of this process: the first *Billboard* chart dedicated to rock and the creation of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, which, despite its relative inclusiveness, is by its very nature dedicated to memorialization. Another critical canonizing process was the creation and rise of classic rock radio. Classic rock first appeared in Dallas in 1983, though 1986 is generally cited as the year when it took hold.[17] Articles from that period describe a few trends: the fading of "rock" from Top 40 radio; the desire to draw in listeners over the age of 25 who grew up with music from the '60s and '70s; and the difficulty of promoting new album-oriented rock with the pressure from the first two trends.[18]

Classic rock, however, was not only defined by age but also by its timbre. The *Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio* distinguishes classic rock from other "oldies," saying, "The format features hits of the past but with a harder musical edge than other popular formats for adults. Typical artists in the Classic Rock format include Bob Seger, ZZ Top, Bruce Springsteen, and the Rolling

---

[16] "100 Best Hard Rock Songs Ever (According to VH1)," *Stereogum* (blog), January 5, 2009, https://www.stereogum.com/43591/vh1s_100_greatest_hard_rock_songs/franchises/list/.

[17] Christopher H. Sterling and Cary O'Dell, *The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio* (Routledge, 2010), 153; Kim Freeman, "Labels Fight Losing Battle Vs. Classic Rock," *Billboard (Archive: 1963-2000)* (Cincinnati: Prometheus Global Media, December 26, 1987).

[18] Sean Ross, "Can Top 40 Really Play Classic Rock?," *Billboard; New York* 102, no. 50 (December 15, 1990): 12; Denis McNamara, "Radio: 'Classic Rock' Forces Defensive Strategy," *Billboard (Archive: 1963-2000)* (Cincinnati: Prometheus Global Media, June 21, 1986); Kim Freeman, "Radio: PD OF THE WEEK," *Billboard (Archive: 1963-2000)* (Cincinnati: Prometheus Global Media, March 28, 1987).

Stones."[19] The "harder musical edge," they describe is better elucidated in a 1986 *New York Times* article on the rise of oldies stations:

> Aimed at listeners 18 to 34 years old (particularly males), album-rock stations emphasized guitar-driven hard rock and became more selective about which songs, new or old, could be added to play lists. Black music—soul, funk and dance records—virtually disappeared from album-rock radio, and the core of the sound became the blues-rock and hard rock of the late 1960's and early 1970's, the songs now heard on "classic rock" stations.[20]

Here is the timbral consolidation that began to move rock from an inclusive to an exclusive term.

A missing piece of the puzzle thus far is how classic rock othered *itself*. If classic rock began to define itself around "guitar-driven" hard rock, other types of rock that centered around different aesthetics, making use of the new instruments and timbres introduced in the 70s that grew in popularity in the 80s, needed new labels. Some of these labels included punk, new wave, and the ever-elusive "alternative." While alternative has now, ironically, become somewhat mainstream, it is important to remember that from its beginnings it did represent *an alternative* to *something*. Bob Boilen, the long-time host of *NPR*'s *All Song's Considered*, discusses the origins of these trends in an article on Fleetwood Mac's album *Rumours*:

> 1977 felt like one generation giving the big finger to the previous one, and it felt good. Rock was shedding its skin; it was a constant amazing rush of wonder and surprise. Attitudes changed. My musical heroes were more likely to be DIY kids than superstars in supergroups. The shows I went to moved from soulless stadiums and arenas to clubs and found spaces. Small labels with tightly defined sounds were popping up everywhere, another middle finger to the corporate bloat that shaped and controlled the music we heard. . . . Back in 1977, my world had zero room or tolerance for a middle-of-the-road, though pretty, rock band like Fleetwood Mac. The shiny

[19] Sterling and O'Dell, *The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio*, 153.

[20] Jon Pareles, "Oldies on Rise in Album-Rock Radio," *The New York Times*, June 18, 1986, https://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/18/arts/oldies-on-rise-in-album-rock-radio.html.

> production on *Rumours* felt planned and orderly, which made it suitable for moms and dads in their 30s and up but not for unsettled 20-year-olds and teens.[21]

What began in the late '70s continued in the '80s, as classic rock and alternative defined themselves against each other, and in 1988 *Billboard* created their first alternative chart.[22]

According to one radio programmer at the time, age—presumably represented by the *classic* in classic rock—is not, in fact, such an important identifier of the genre. He noted: "It doesn't have to be old to be classic. The reincarnations that classic rock has go on and on and on."[23] Indeed, the *VH1* list of best hard rock songs had plenty of songs from the '80s and even some from the '90s. What makes classic rock "classic," then, is its adherence to the timbral norms of this new (or old?) style, which primarily meant loud guitars. Classic rock, then, is also a moving target; new music is added to the canon as it ages, provided it employs those timbral features. Ironically, a significant portion of music that was originally "alternative" can now be found as staples of modern classic rock radio.[24] But most importantly, classic rock—and, with it, rock in general—have come to be defined more narrowly by their overall sound and specific timbres. Subgenres and new trends that might have been subsumed under a larger rock umbrella were declared to be "other," while rock was declared "dead."

---

[21] Bob Boilen, "Why I've Never Liked Fleetwood Mac's 'Rumours,'" *NPR.Org* (blog), January 29, 2013, https://www.npr.org/sections/allsongs/2013/01/29/170552631/why-ive-never-liked-fleetwood-macs-rumours.

[22] Chris Molanphy, "Radio-Friendly Unit Shifters," *Pitchfork*, September 9, 2013, https://pitchfork.com/features/article/9214-radio-friendly-unit-shifters-25-years-of-billboards-alternative-music-chart/.

[23] Freeman, "Radio."

[24] Walt Hickey, "Why Classic Rock Isn't What It Used To Be," *FiveThirtyEight* (blog), July 7, 2014, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-classic-rock-isnt-what-it-used-to-be/.

The Signifiers of Classic/Retro Rock

California sunlight
Sweet Calcutta rain
Honolulu starbright
The song remains the same

"The Song Remains the Same," – Led Zeppelin

Retro rock—which could also be labeled with oxymoronic term "contemporary classic rock"—has had a few artists declared to be revivalists since the 1980s. The first was possibly the Black Crowes in the early 1990s, about which David Fricke wrote:

> The Crowes had material they deemed worthy of their renewed allegiance to late-Sixties and Seventies rock classicism. . . . [Their songs] were all steeped in the blues-based verities of established predigital rock tradition and charged by the brothers' determination to make music equal to that tradition in every detail.[25]

Another wave came in the early 2000s with bands like The Strokes and the White Stripes.[26] Still, as Nicholas Russo notes, retro rock has been having its particular moment over the last decade, and Greta Van Fleet have ignited a fierce debate. This section will analyze the musical elements that link classic and retro rock generally, and Greta Van Fleet and Led Zeppelin specifically. Semiotics provides a useful frame for examining this relationship, as these elements represent rock's partially-imagined past from the '60s and '70s. Here, the musical elements are the signifier end of the semiotic chain.

[25] David Fricke, "What's So Bad About the Black Crowes?," *Rolling Stone*, May 30, 1991, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/whats-so-bad-about-the-black-crowes-101507/.

[26] Andrew Sacher, "If Rock Is 'the New Jazz,' Then I Blame The Strokes," *BrooklynVegan* (blog), November 30, 2016, http://www.brooklynvegan.com/if-rock-is-the-new-jazz-then-i-blame-the-strokes/.

Russo discusses a dichotomy that rock artists—and indeed, any artists who participate within an established musical tradition—face between originality and adherence to tradition. In other words, how can artists craft their music to fit within a genre while still offering something considered novel, avoiding charges of being derivative or a copy? To demonstrate how various artists have approached the problem, Russo constructs a diagram that maps a spectrum from totally derivative to totally innovative, which is copied as Figure 1 below.[27]

Table 2: Continuum of derivativeness for contemporary retro rock recordings

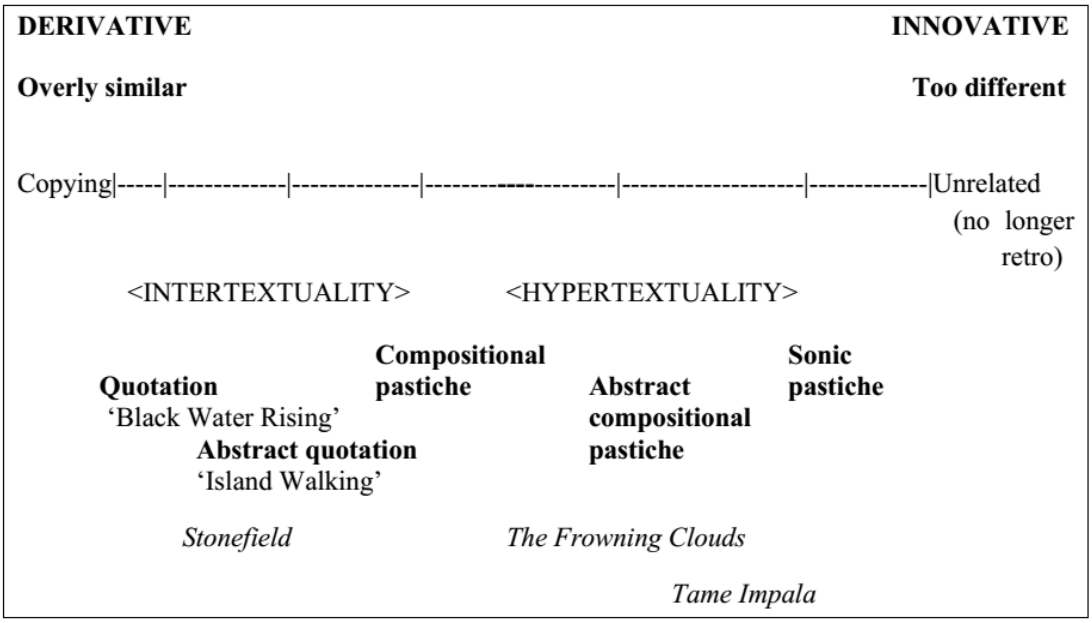


Figure 5.1 – Russo's Diagram of "Derivateness" in Retro Rock

Quotation, abstract quotation, compositional pastiche, abstract compositional pastiche, and sonic pastiche are all techniques that Russo asserts that retro rock artists use, while the bottom of the diagram contains songs and bands that he examines.

[27] Russo, "'Feels Like We Only Go Backwards': Nostalgia and Contemporary Retro Rock," 122.

Indeed, Tame Impala provide a good comparison for Greta Van Fleet, as Tame Impala have been one of the most successful rock acts of the 2010s. Take, for example, *Pitchfork's* reviews of Tame Impala's first two albums. Here is how the reviewer describes their 2010 album *Innerspeaker*:

> By all accounts, fixing their gaze so intently on established influences should play as either disingenuous or forced. It's difficult to be so plugged-in to a vintage feel without the music seeming time-capsuled, but the band's vibrance help these songs sound very much alive. Tame Impala aren't taking a purely revisionist approach—you aren't left with a feeling that their intention was to recreate some lost Love demo or [a] Jimi Hendrix Experience deep cut. If anything, their record points to some of the same roads traveled recently by bands like Animal Collective or Liars, but dials back the eccentricities and difficulty level, leaning on the guitar rather than electronics, and focusing their efforts through more traditional psych-rock prisms. They aren't as adventurous as their more offbeat peers, but because of their lazer-guided hooks and tangible pleasures, they might wind up reaching more people.[28]

And here is an excerpt from *Pitchfork's* review of the band's 2012 album *Lonerism*:

> If their debut was any indication, Tame Impala's second full-length, *Lonerism*, will once again be compared to albums from the late 1960s and early 70s. But if their intent was to make a record that sounds like it came from that era, they've failed and ended up with something more fascinating. Sure, there's merit to the countless groups and scenes that seek out the right tube amps and compressors and microphones in order to create flawless period pieces. They're often called "revivalists," even though the actual term is wasted on them. Are they really breathing new life into this form by keeping it cryogenically frozen in ideas nearly a half-century old? Tame Impala prove far more exciting because, by maximizing the use of the available technology, they tap into the progressive and experimental spirit of psychedelic rock, and not just the sound.[29]

In both cases, the reviewer describes Tame Impala's music as fitting within the psychedelic rock scene with definitive ties to 1960s and 1970s rock while still offering listeners new experiences and new takes on an already established genre. Perhaps if Russo had to place Greta Van Fleet on his diagram, taking

---

[28] Zach Kelly, "Tame Impala: Innerspeaker," *Pitchfork*, May 28, 2010, https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/14279-innerspeaker/.

[29] Ian Cohen, "Tame Impala: Lonerism," *Pitchfork*, October 8, 2012, https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/17131-lonerism/.

the *Pitchfork* and other reviews as a starting point, they would be placed on the far left under the "wholly derivative" category. For all that Tame Impala must do to sound "retro," they cannot be said to sound like any particular band from the past; the same cannot be said for Greta Van Fleet.

A sizable number of rock critics and commentators have noted the similarity between Greta Van Fleet and Led Zeppelin. In one example, Steven Hyden tells us, "Let me be clear: Greta Van Fleet sounds *exactly* like Led Zeppelin."[30] In another particularly snarky example, the *Vice* music blog *Noisey* produced a listicle of the nine best Greta Van Fleet songs, only for the reader to find the nine tracks of Led Zeppelin's first album with accompanying satirical commentary.[31] Actually describing *how* the two bands sound alike and what musical elements are in play is a more difficult proposition. Even before considering the fact that Led Zeppelin produced eight studio albums over ten years with songs that covered multiple genre labels, breaking down comparisons into individual elements has the effect of rendering those comparisons almost pointless. In other words, a rock band is going to use elements that make them sound like a rock band. Indeed, the similarity only becomes clear when all of the elements are reassembled and a more complete view of the groups' outputs comes together.

The framework developed by Peter Burkholder in his article on musical borrowing elucidates the issues described earlier.[32] For determining *if* something was borrowed, Burkholder divides analytical

[30] Steven Hyden, "Greta Van Fleet Wants To Be Led Zeppelin For Generation Z," *UPROXX* (blog), November 7, 2017, https://uproxx.com/music/greta-van-fleet-from-the-fires-review/.

[31] Noisey Staff, "The Nine Best Greta Van Fleet Songs," *Vice* (blog), September 26, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/a38kag/the-nine-best-greta-van-fleet-songs.

[32] J. Peter Burkholder, "Musical Borrowing or Curious Coincidence?: Testing the Evidence," *The Journal of Musicology* 35, no. 2 (2018): 223–66.

evidence into four categories: extent of similarity, exactness of match, number of shared elements, and the distinctiveness of the shared elements. Although the first three points apply equally to all genres of music, distinctiveness depends on the genre. As Burkholder writes, "The case for borrowing is stronger when the traits shared between an older and a newer piece are relatively distinctive, and strongest if they are unique to these pieces. To establish distinctiveness one must compare the given works to a wider repertory."[33] A similar model can be found in Robert Hatten's concept of "markedness."[34] Something that is marked, according to Hatten, is significantly different from a standard or prototype, and this difference is what allows interpretation of meaning in musical topics. While I am not specifically concerned with topics in this instance, I am searching for what is marked in Greta Van Fleet's music. As such, I analyze musical elements on three levels: those that are not distinct (in that they are common across many genres of popular music), those that are distinct to classic and retro rock, and those that are distinct specifically to Greta Van Fleet and Led Zeppelin.

Below is a table overviewing every song on *Anthem of the Peaceful Army* in terms of some basic features including form, harmonic/tonal foundation, motivic features, and instrumentation. What is notable about the features I have selected is, in fact, how unremarkable they are when compared to most rock, and even most popular music. Every song on the album is in verse-chorus form, the most common form for popular songs. The band show more variety in harmonic foundation and tonal center, using a variety of major and minor flavors—or alternating between the two—and sometimes inserting blues-influenced elements such as ♭III or ♭VII chords. This variety is still somewhat common in popular

[33] Burkholder, 234.

[34] Robert S. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*, Advances in Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

music, but is definitely par for the course in classic and retro rock. Even the selection of keys tends to favor the more guitar-friendly sharp keys that are common in rock (generally between G major and E major on the circle of fifths; the F major and B major songs stand out ever-so-slightly on the album in this regard). Motivically, most of the songs feature the guitar either playing chord or single-note riffs, with the occasional song that uses open-strummed acoustic guitar chords and one that features slide guitar. The instrumentation is the first element to seat the group firmly within classic rock, utilizing the standard "rock quartet" format—vocals, electric guitar, bass, and drums—while sometimes adding additional instruments (strings, flutes, keyboards, organ) and/or switching the core instrumentation (replacing electric guitar with acoustic or the drumset with hand percussion, for example).

Song	Form	Harmonic Foundation	Motivic Features	Instrumentation	Other notable features
Age of Man	Verse-chorus (with interludes)	F♯ Aeolian/A major	Chord-based guitar riffs	Rock quartet with flute, organ, and strings	"epic" length
The Cold Wind	Verse-chorus	A blues/pentatonic	Chord-based guitar riffs	Rock quartet	
When the Curtain Falls	Verse-chorus (with bridge and solo)	G blues/pentatonic	Single-lined guitar/bass riff	Rock quartet	
Watching Over	Verse-chorus	A Dorian (verse) E Dorian (chorus)	Arpeggiated guitar chords	Rock quartet	Sitar-sounding guitar effect
Lover, Leaver (Taker, Believer)	Verse-chorus with long interludes	E minor/Dorian blues	Chord-riffs with pentatonic blues runs	Rock quartet with slide guitar, keyboards, pre-recorded speaking	"epic" length; a shortened version was released as a single
You're the One	Verse-chorus	D major	Arpeggiated guitar chords	Acoustic guitar, organ, electric piano, bass, drums	Acoustic ballad, organ solo
The New Day	Verse-chorus	F major (with ♭VII chords)	Strummed open guitar chords with some runs	Acoustic guitar, bass, drums, electric guitar (solo only)	
Mountain of the Sun	Verse-chorus	F major (with ♭III chords)	Slide guitar chord riff	Rock quartet	Slide guitar in open D tuning
Brave New World	Verse-chorus	D Aeolian/blues	Single-lined blues riff	Rock quartet with "ethereal" keyboards	Guitar and bass tuned to D standard; interlude in 12/8 blues shuffle
Anthem	Verse-chorus	B major (with occasional ♭VII)	Strummed open guitar chords	Acoustic guitar, lap steel, bass, hand drum	Choir chorus at end

Figure 5.2 – The Songs of *Anthem of the Peaceful Army*

Even just within rock, there are hundreds of bands that share these elements, and they only scratch the surface of describing how Greta Van Fleet sound like Led Zeppelin. To begin to dig deeper, the first track on the album, "Age of Man," provides a good example.[35] In the table below I have divided the song into sections, and while it is a verse-chorus form, the instrumental interludes and number of verses and choruses make for a longer-than-typical runtime of 6:06.

Section	Begin time	Notes
Introduction	0:00	Quiet strings
Verse 1	0:20	
Interlude	0:48	Flute or erhu? Drums, acoustic guitar Electric guitar plays a new riff (1:08)
Verse 2	1:35	Short interlude before chorus
Chorus	2:23	Interlude before next verse
Verse 3	3:13	Interlude before chorus
Chorus	4:00	
Interlude	4:28	Longer than previous interludes, uses a different harmony Bridge-like?
Chorus	4:56	
Outro	5:24	Non-vocalized lyrics on chorus chord up to 5:53 Quiet strings from 5:53 to end of track (6:06)

Figure 5.3 – Sections of "Age of Man"

The gradual building of instrumental textures and energy—beginning with quiet strings and progressively adding guitars and drums—contributes to a more "epic" rock style. While not exclusive to Led Zeppelin, longer "epic" rock songs with building instrumental textures were a hallmark for many classic rock bands, and Led Zeppelin used this technique in famous songs such as "Stairway to Heaven," "Achilles Last Stand," and "No Quarter." At the end of the first minute, an instrument that sounds like a wood flute or Erhu plays a short melody, evoking a psychedelic "Far East" sound of the type described

[35] Greta Van Fleet, "Age of Man," *Anthem of the Peaceful Army*, Republic Records, 2018, streaming audio, Tidal.

by William Echard in *Psychedelic Popular Music*.[36] Additionally, Greta Van Fleet use the line "To wonderlands of ice and snow" at the start of the second verse, which evokes the well-known opening line from Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song": "I come from the land of the ice and snow."

The album's third song and lead single "When the Curtain Falls" provides another example. As indicated in the table, the song is based on a G pentatonic blues single-note guitar riff, a transcription of which is seen below. The riff is similar to those written by classic rock bands like Led Zeppelin's "The Lemon Song" and AC/DC's "Back in Black," and transcriptions of all these riffs are included below. [37] The performance style of the bass and drums, however, begin to move Greta Van Fleet closer to Led Zeppelin and away from AC/DC. AC/DC's drummers tended to play simpler drum patterns that followed the main beat, while their bassists either did the same as the drums or played in imitation with the main guitar riff. Both the bass and drums in Led Zeppelin, meanwhile, tended to be more active, playing more complex patterns that were sometimes independent of each other. Examples of both can be seen in the drum and bass transcriptions of "Back in Black," "The Lemon Song," and "When the Curtain Falls" below. Here, the activity of Greta Van Fleet's bass and drums more closely resemble Led Zeppelin than AC/DC.

[36] See William Echard, *Psychedelic Popular Music: A History through Musical Topic Theory, Musical Meaning and Interpretation* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017). The album credits offer no hint to the origins of these instrumental tracks, in particular whether they are played on live instruments or on synthesizers.

[37] AC/DC, "Back in Black," *Back in Black*, Leidseplein Presse B.V., 1980, streaming audio, Tidal; Led Zeppelin, "The Lemon Song (Remaster)," *Led Zeppelin II (Remaster)*, Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1969, streaming audio, Tidal; Greta Van Fleet, "When the Curtain Falls," *Anthem of the Peaceful Army*, Republic Records, 2018, streaming audio, Tidal.
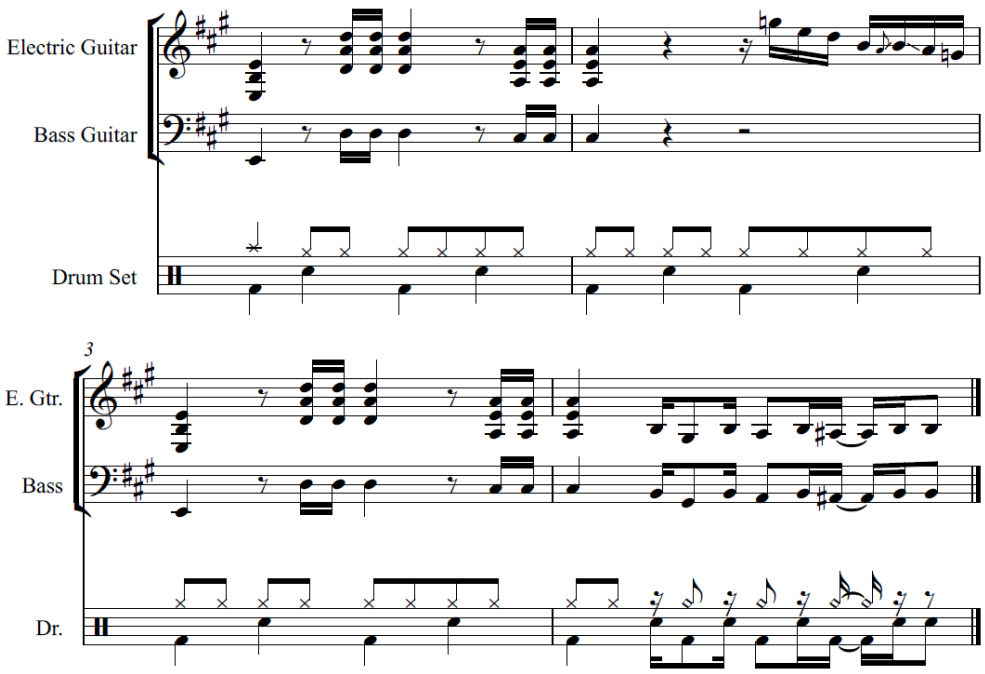


Figure 5.4 – "Back in Black" by AC/DC
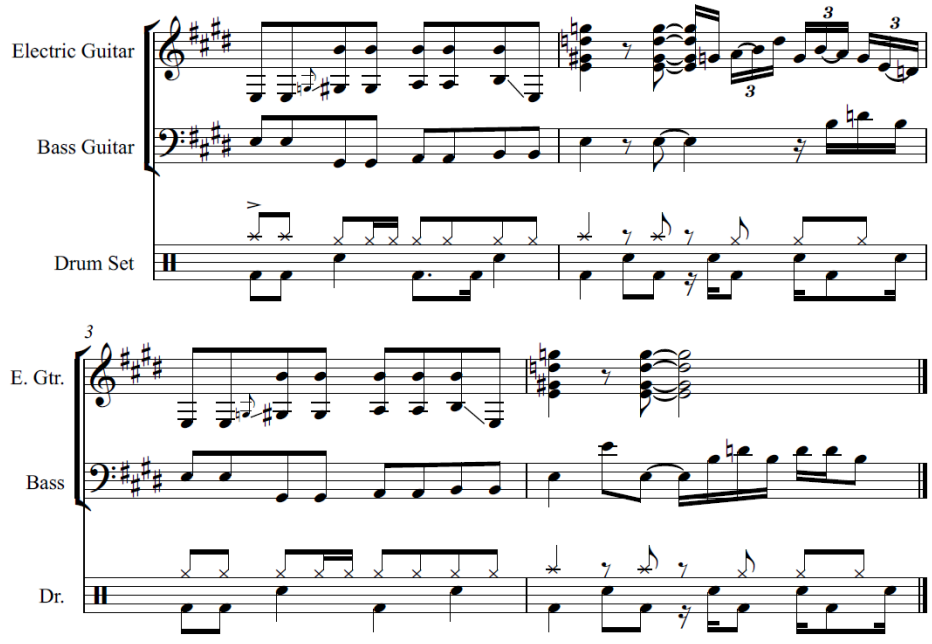


Figure 5.5 – "The Lemon Song" by Led Zeppelin
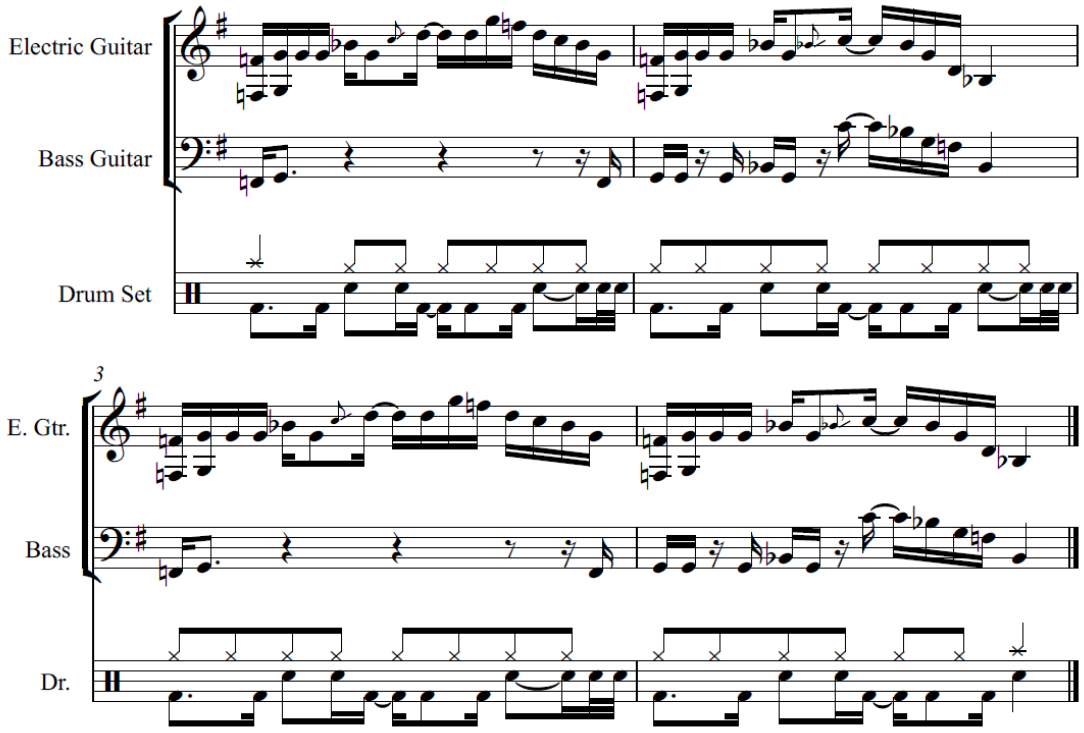


Figure 5.6 – "When the Curtain Falls" by Greta Van Fleet

A useful framework for thinking about musical *texture* is that proposed by Allan Moore. Moore describes four "functional layers" that, when taken as a whole, form what he calls the "principal norm of popular music."[38] In other words, although all four layers are not always present in all songs, any exception is typically judged against a standard backdrop. The four layers are the "explicit beat layer," whose role is to articulate a pattern of beats and establish a groove and is often filled by unpitched percussion; the "functional bass layer," also tasked with a rhythmic groove role, as well as a pitch role connecting root-position harmonies; the "melodic layer," that establishes primary and secondary melodic lines from voices and solo instruments and often provides the "identity" of the song; and the

[38] Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Farnham, Surrey ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 20.

"harmonic filler layer," that "fills the registral space between the bass and treble layers" and often has the greatest impact on attributing a song to a genre or style.[39] To these, Megan Lavengood advocates for the addition of a fifth layer she labels the "novelty layer," which offers contrasting material to the melodic layer presented in marked timbres that often contain additional semiotic significance.[40] The concept of functional layers can be used to examine or compare songs in terms of how the employ one or multiple specific layers, but also in terms of how the layers combine and interact. Applying these layers to Led Zeppelin and Greta Van Fleet reveals a similar conclusion to that before, namely that the bands are quite alike, though in the same manner that many rock bands in that style are alike. Per the above transcriptions, the explicit beat, functional bass, and harmonic filler layers share much in common between the two bands. Both bands also occasionally make use of the novelty layer, particularly when employing "Eastern" sounds, as discussed earlier.

What these analyses point toward is the necessity of looking beyond formal and instrumental elements to explain the similarity between the two groups, not because those elements are not important and do not contribute, but because alone they are not enough. I suggest two additional factors for consideration: timbre and contextual presentation. Timbre, in this case, applies not only to voice and instrument, but to the recording and amplification technology used in studio recordings and live performances. Moore also notes that the specific timbres used by pop music artists contribute more

[39] Moore, 20–21.

[40] Megan Lavengood, "What Makes It Sound '80s? The Yamaha DX7 Electric Piano Sound," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 3 (2019): 73–93.

to a song or artist's identity than the use of the functional layers themselves.[41] Contextual presentation refers to the bands' appearance, including fashion, stage presence, and performing style. Together, I argue that these elements have much more to do with the similarity between Greta Van Fleet and Led Zeppelin than the previously analyzed factors, and more specifically tie them to groups from the 60s and 70s.

One of the most important sites for discussion of timbre in rock is the electric guitar. Beyond the basics of the use of electric guitar in the catalog of rock music, a discourse has developed in the last few decades around the specific selections of guitars, amplifiers, effects pedals, and recording techniques. In the guitar world—comprised of both professional and amateur guitarists as well as guitar, amplifier, and effects pedal manufacturers, dealers, advertisers, and critics/reviewers—the combination of a guitarist's equipment results in a particular guitar timbre that is often referred to as "tone." Amateur guitarists will sometimes go to great lengths produce a specific guitar sound (often in imitation of their professional heroes), spending thousands of dollars in the process. United Kingdom guitar retailer Andertons, meanwhile, has an entire series on YouTube called "Sound Like" dedicated to suggesting guitar gear to sound like various favorite artists on a limited budget.[42] For professionals, meanwhile, similarity is sometimes not desirable, as novelty is often held as a prime value among fans, and experimentation in timbre can be one area to provide that. At the same time, similarity can be difficult to avoid as equipment is produced by a small handful of manufacturers who design products on a spectrum from innovation to vintage reproduction. And although the differences between pieces of

[41] Moore, *Song Means*, 45.

[42] "Andertons Music Co - YouTube," accessed March 19, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/user/AndertonsMusic/featured.

equipment are sometimes so small they are barely audible to most listeners, the perceived effect of using the same or similar gear can deepen claims of similarity.[43]

Greta Van Fleet, as it turns out, use similar equipment and produce similar guitar timbres to Led Zeppelin. Although Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page was known for using a variety of guitars and amplifiers throughout his career, he is most associated with playing a Gibson Les Paul through either a Marshall or Hiwatt amplifier and using limited or no effects pedals. Pictured below, the Les Paul model—named after the jazz guitarist and technological innovator who lent his name to the design—is known for producing a wide and full frequency spectrum with long sustain due to its relatively thick mahogany body with a ¼ inch maple cap.



Figure 5.7 – A Gibson Les Paul [44]

[43] This can also be seen in the practice of producing "relic" guitars, which are purposefully damaged and worn to imitate the natural wear of an old, vintage instrument.

[44] Image taken from "Gibson | Explore The Les Paul Collections," accessed April 16, 2020, https://www.gibson.com/Guitars/Les-Paul.

Its two humbucker pickups, meanwhile, provide a few tonal options depending on which are active, but in comparison to single coil pickups are usually described as having a smoother and darker tone as a result of less pronounced treble frequencies and more mids and bass.[45] In terms of amplification, Marshall and Hiwatt have slightly different characteristics. While both use EL-84 or EL-34 power tubes, the tone stack section in the preamp of the Marshall circuit is designed to boost mid frequencies while cutting treble and bass, allowing for a distinctive tone when pushed into distortion, which it can accomplish at relatively lower gain settings. Hiwatts, meanwhile, are designed to remain distortion-free at higher volumes, and retain a "hi-fi," professional stereo-like sound. Although they will, too, eventually distort, they often require blisteringly loud volumes to do so, such as those employed by Jimmy Page in live settings throughout the 1970s.

Jake Kiszka, guitarist for Greta Van Fleet, uses a very similar setup to Page. He primarily uses a Marshall Astoria amplifier—a recreation/reissue modeled after some of the classic 1960s Marshall amps—with limited use of effects pedals.[46] This setup was much more common in the 60s and 70s, and although it never disappeared entirely, it is much more associated with the sounds of that era. The more interesting point of similarity, however, is in his choice of guitar. Kiszka plays what looks like a standard Gibson SG (pictured below)—a guitar *not* used by Jimmy Page, but more linked to Angus Young of AC/DC and Tony Iommi of Black Sabbath. Although the guitars share many features and sound *very*

[45] To hear the tonal difference in different styles of guitar pickups, a basic YouTube search of "single coil vs humbucker pickups" will yield dozens of results.

[46] Jake and brother/bassist Sam can be seen talking about their equipment in Premier Guitar's popular online video series "Rig Rundown." *Rig Rundown - Greta Van Fleet*, February 13, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWDf_CEkpoU&feature=youtu.be.

similar to most ears, they are not quite the same, as the SG's thinner mahogany body without a maple cap results in less bass frequency resonance and creates a slightly brighter and sharper guitar tone.



Figure 5.8 – A Gibson SG [47]

History and context create another important link, however, because Kiszka does not, in fact, play a Gibson SG; he plays a 1961 Gibson Les Paul. In 1961, Gibson decided to remake its Les Paul model, yet never consulted Les Paul himself. When Paul finally saw the remade instrument, he disliked it so much he told Gibson to remove his name from it, and thus, by 1964 Gibson had rebranded the new instrument the SG and reissued the old Les Paul model as *the* Les Paul, which it remains to this day.[48] Kiszka plays his particular vintage guitar even though the condition and quality is not as good as modern instruments, even noting that at one point a piece of the guitar had broken off forcing him to

[47] Image from "Gibson | Explore The SG Collections," accessed April 16, 2020, https://www.gibson.com/Guitars/SG.

[48] "Former Gibson Chief Ted McCarty on Tonewoods and the Problems of 'Top-Heavy' Management | Bacon's Archive," reverb.com, accessed March15, 2018, https://reverb.com/news/former-gibson-chief-ted-mccarty-on-tonewoods-and-the-problems-of-top-heavy-management.

temporarily hold it together with duct tape.[49] Though some vintage instruments are renowned for their particular tones, in this case the social signal sent by playing a vintage instrument has a greater effect on audience interpretations. If playing the same guitar type as a guitarist from the past is a way to sound like them, playing a vintage instrument is a step further in that direction, and although the use of new versions of classic guitar models is widespread among modern groups, the use of vintage instruments is not.

Continuing the vintage theme, Greta Van Fleet also incorporate visual elements that are reminiscent of 70s classic rock groups, as *Pitchfork* noted in their review:

> Brothers Jake and Sam Kiszka, on guitar and bass, are both wearing hippie costumes they 3D-printed off the internet. The singer, the wretched and caterwauling third brother, Josh, is in dangly feather earrings and vinyl pants, like he was dressed by a problematic Santa Fe palm-reader with a gift certificate to Chico's. It's a costume—Greta Van Fleet is all costume.[50]

While some—like Youtuber Tyler Larson ("Music is Win")—argued that this piece of the *Pitchfork* critique was unfair as it wasn't "about the music," the way the band presents themselves plays a significant role in their association with the past.[51] Russo, in a discussion of the role of album covers in creating a sense of nostalgia, writes, "Contemporary retro rock, like other music genres, relies on a kind of visual language where certain images and signs help contextualize the music and direct the audience to read the musical text within an identifiable historical and/or nostalgic discourse."[52] A sampling of

[49] *Rig Rundown - Greta Van Fleet*.

[50] Larson, "Greta Van Fleet."

[51] Music is Win, *Pitchfork Is Too Cool for Greta Van Fleet*, October 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5WnypErVko.

[52] Russo, "'Feels Like We Only Go Backwards': Nostalgia and Contemporary Retro Rock," 165.

photos included below show the band wearing clothing inspired by trends from classic rock: leather pants, flowery and sequined shirts and jackets, and vests open to display bare chests.[53]



Figure 5.9 – Pictures of Greta Van Fleet Performing and the Album Cover to *Anthem of the Peaceful Army*

[53] Troy Larson, *English: Greta Van Fleet Onstage at the Red River Valley Fair, West Fargo, North Dakota, July 14, 2017*, July 14, 2017, July 14, 2017, Own work, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greta_Van_Fleet.jpg; Stefan Brending, *ARGO-Konzerte,Festival,Greta Van Fleet,Jacob Kiszka,Konzert,Livekonzert,Livemusik,Musik,RiP,Rock Im Park 2018,Zeppelin Stage*, June 2, 2018, June 2, 2018, Own work, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2018_RiP_-_Greta_Van_Fleet_-_by_2eight_-_3SC6986.jpg; Stefan Brending, *ARGO-Konzerte,Festival,Greta Van Fleet,Joshua Kiszka,Konzert,Livekonzert,Livemusik,Musik,RiP,Rock Im Park 2018,Zeppelin Stage*, June 2, 2018, June 2, 2018, Own work, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2018_RiP_-_Greta_Van_Fleet_-_by_2eight_-_3SC6922.jpg.

Also included is a picture of their album cover, which contains a psychedelic image—either two planets or a sun and moon within a starry background above a majestic landscape—reminiscent of those found on album covers in the '60s and '70s. Two examples are displayed below: Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* (1973) and Yes' *Tales from Topographic Oceans* (1973). While these elements may not be considered traditional musical elements, they are an important part of the band's live performances, music videos, and overall presentation, and they collectively create another symbolic link to a past era.[54]



Figure 5.10 – Covers to Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* and Yes' *Tales from Topographic Oceans*

To return to the sonic, while the elements analyzed thus far have firmly placed Greta Van Fleet within classic/retro rock and have begun to create the link to Led Zeppelin, the last factor that must be mentioned is vocal timbre. Nearly every commentary on Greta Van Fleet mentions the similarity

[54] Images taken from Led Zeppelin, "Led Zeppelin - Houses of the Holy - Discography - Official Website," accessed April 3, 2022, https://discography.ledzeppelin.com/hoth.html; yesadmin, "TALES FROM TOPOGRAPHIC OCEANS - YES," *Yesworld* (blog), accessed April 3, 2022, http://yesworld.com/discography/tales-topographic-oceans/.

between the voices of singers Josh Kiszka and Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin, and it is the element that takes the comparison from sonic and compositional "pastiche" (to use Russo's term) to novelty cover band-like similarity. Unfortunately, description and mapping of timbre remain elusive, particularly when examining the human voice. As Jean-Claude Risset and David L. Wessel have written, it is possible to map multiple categories—including temporal and pitch spectra—to synthesize various instruments, yet synthesizing the voice and distinguishing the factors that allow us to identify individual voices is much more difficult.[55] Kate Heidemann has written about the physical and practical characteristics that contribute to vocal timbre, and even mentions Robert Plant, describing his singing as having a "less severe constriction of the pharynx," an epiglottis drawn toward the back of the throat, and a raised larynx.[56] Language describing the physical nature of singing, however, does not demonstrate vocal similarity in the same way that describing guitar equipment does. In the same paragraph, Heidemann also lists Aretha Franklin and Chaka Khan with Plant as singers who demonstrate the characteristic of "nasal twang." Those three singers sound quite different, indicating that although some of their vocal techniques are similar, there are other important factors that form their complete vocal timbre. In the end, the best determinant of vocal similarity will be your own ears and the ears of others who have thought to compare the two bands.

To briefly summarize the semiotic links between Greta Van Fleet and Led Zeppelin, classic rock and retro rock, and popular music as a whole, many of the "compositional" elements—such as form and

[55] Jean-Claude Risset and David L. Wessel, "Exploration of Timbre by Analysis and Synthesis," in *The Psychology of Music*, ed. Diana Deutsch, 2nd edn., Academic Press Series in Cognition and Perception (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999), 118–28.

[56] Kate Heidemann, "A System for Describing Vocal Timbre in Popular Song," *Music Theory Online* 22, no. 1 (2016): para. 3.17, https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.22.1.2.

harmonic structure—do little to distinguish rock from much of popular music. While specific Greta Van Fleet songs use compositional forms that are more typical in classic rock and Led Zeppelin's music, there are not enough distinct links to show they are more similar to Led Zeppelin than to the majority of pop music. Focusing on instrumental timbres, however, reveals a firm link between Greta Van Fleet and classic rock, and begins to establish a connection to Led Zeppelin. Both of those ties, meanwhile, are enhanced by the social signals sent by Greta Van Fleet's choice of instruments, clothing, lyrical themes, and album cover. Finally, the similarity of the vocal timbres of the two lead singers is another strong point of similarity between the two groups. At the same time, it is difficult to know just how great a factor the voice is in determining similarity; in other words, it is not only Josh Kiszka's vocal timbre, but the manner in which he is singing, combined with all the other factors that contribute to the comparisons to Led Zeppelin.

Revisiting the Signified

Talk and song from tongues of lilting grace
Whose sounds caress my ear
But not a word I heard could I relate
The story was quite clear

"Kashmir," – Led Zeppelin

The signifiers described in the last section combine to represent a somewhat amorphous "past" that is complicated by multiple factors. As written earlier, this specific image of the past has been at least partially constructed. That past—unlike during the actual past—is much easier to access and recall due to the internet and streaming (to say nothing of recent holographic concerts). The signifiers never

completely disappeared, though they may have faded in prominence. And despite the press declaring rock "dead," a variety of rock genres exist and are thriving today. Rock critic and *Celebration Rock* podcast host Stephen Hyden summarizes the "rock is dead" argument:

> Reports of rock's death stem from a preoccupation with commerciality and celebrity as the defining metrics for which musical artists are considered worthy or "relevant" in 2017. Essentially, the argument forwarded by these "rock is dead!" thinkpieces goes like this: Because there are currently no rock bands as famous as Beyonce or Taylor Swift or Adele, the entire genre is in a death spiral. Whether the music is actually, you know, *good* doesn't seem to matter. . . .
>
> Opting to making art outside of the industrial-celebrity complex seems to be regarded more often than not with suspicion by the music press. It's this suspicion that lurks behind every "rock is dead!" thinkpiece. For many critics, it's become de rigueur to equate existing outside of the mainstream with cultural insignificance or even (here's that word again) death.[57]

Although Hyden admits that rock does not hold the same status or appear in the same way as it had previously, he describes a thriving scene:

> Rock bands have proven amazingly resilient as the music industry has reverted—as it always does—to a pop-centric focus in response to prolonged economic hardship. One only has to do a cursory search on Bandcamp to find literally thousands of rock bands that have taken it upon themselves to distribute their music directly to fans. And those fans, in turn, have started up their own websites to cover punk, emo, and metal acts in spite of mainstream media indifference, and even established DIY music venues to host live performances for kids who can't afford to attend expensive music festivals like Coachella and Lollapalooza. Rock, which is frequently dismissed as nostalgia-obsessed and geared toward senior citizens, has endured precisely because passionate teens and twenty-somethings have fought to carve out their own spaces for the music that moves them, media-driven cultural trends be damned.[58]

Indeed, there are two narratives concerning the history and trajectory of rock that affect how listeners interpret the past. In the first, rock is defined narrowly and is interpreted to have faded in both

[57] Steven Hyden, "For The Last Time: Rock Is Not Dead, You're Just Not Paying Attention," *UPROXX* (blog), February 1, 2017, https://uproxx.com/music/rock-music-dead-2017/.

[58] Hyden.

prominence and influence. In the second, rock is perceived as having evolved into a multiplicity of offshoots that continue in the present day. This dynamic explains the two narratives that follow Greta Van Fleet: either they are the saviors/revivers of a dead genre, or they are parasites leeching off the success of past bands while offering little new. To return to *Pitchfork*'s review, they mention another factor at play—nostalgia: "So when the Greta Van Fleet of your favorite artist finally lands on your morning playlist*, spark up a bowl of nostalgia* and enjoy the self-satisfied buzz of recognizing something you already know."[59] Importantly, while nostalgia can be signified in music, it is not specifically being signified in Greta Van Fleet's music; in other words, the band is not trying to write music to make audiences feel nostalgic, nor do audiences and critics seem to interpret their songs in that way. There is, however, a general specter of nostalgia that surrounds Greta Van Fleet as whole, which also affects the reception of their music.

Despite its Greek etymology, nostalgia was first coined by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in the late 1600s. Hofer studied the homesickness felt by Swiss mercenaries while away at war, and his term merged the Greek *nostos* (return) and *algos* (yearning, pain, suffering).[60] Originally thought to be a physical disease or psychiatric disorder, nostalgia has since acquired new meanings and been used to describe different phenomena. Specifically, nostalgia added to its spatial displacement an element of temporal displacement, which presents a dimensional problem: one may return to a specific place, but

[59] Larson, "Greta Van Fleet." (emphasis mine)

[60] Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut, and Denise Baden, "Nostalgia: Conceptual Issues and Existential Functions," in *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*, ed. Jeff Greenberg, Sander Leon Koole, and Thomas A. Pyszczynski (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 200–202.

one can return to neither a specific time nor a place within time. Svetlana Boym offers multiple descriptions/definitions of nostalgia in *The Future of Nostalgia*:

> Nostalgia. . . is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy.[61]

> In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.[62]

> Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory.[63]

Here, Boym shows that nostalgia not only manifests itself as an individual longing to return to a specific space-time, but can also appear as a group or collective longing for a return to an era or way of living/being. But as Linda Hutcheon notes, the past that is longed for may contain more fantasy than reality:

> Simultaneously distancing and proximating, nostalgia exiles us from the present as it brings the imagined past near. The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present—which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational.[64]

Although both positive and neutral nostalgia exist, Hutcheon provides a description of a sort of negative nostalgia, one in which the past is idealized in contrast to a less-than-ideal present. Sedikides et

---

[61] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii.

[62] Boym, xv.

[63] Boym, xvi.

[64] Linda Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," in *The History on Film Reader*, ed. Marnie Hughes-Warrington, Routledge Readers in History (London ; New York: Routledge, 2009), 250.

al. hypothesize that nostalgia is an emotional reaction to discontinuity or a response to a threatening stimulus.[65] Boym labels this type of nostalgia as "restorative nostalgia," whose goal is to "rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps."[66] Speaking about its cause, Boym writes, "What drives restorative nostalgia is not the sentiment of distance and longing but rather the anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and thus question the wholeness and continuity of the restored tradition."[67] Thus, if restorative nostalgia is a way to replicate "the way things were" in order to escape a less-desirable present, attempts to shatter any illusory characteristics of the historical narrative can be taken quite negatively. Boym labels a second type of nostalgia as "reflective," in which "the home is in ruins or, on the contrary, has been just renovated and gentrified beyond recognition."[68] In this case, the nostalgic recognizes the past as unrecoverable, but presents no solutions to the nostalgic malaise.

History, mythology, and narrative of the past play key roles in the construction and conception of nostalgia, and it is here that philosophy and film studies have made significant contributions. In *Simulacra and Simulation,* Jean Baudrillard laments the loss of history and historical narrative in modern societies. Cinema, he argues, has replaced mythology with history as its standard subject matter, but this history is not accurate portrayal of or reflection on the past, but rather an idealistic and fantastical reconstruction that serves to make profits. He writes:

---

[65] Sedikides, Wildschut, and Baden, "Nostalgia: Conceptual Issues and Existential Functions," 208–10.

[66] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

[67] Boym, 44–45.

[68] Boym, 50.

> The great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation. Whereas so many generations, and particularly the last, lived in the march of history. . . today one has the impression that history has retreated, leaving behind it an indifferent nebula, traversed by currents, but emptied of references. It is into this void that the phantasms of a past history recede, the panoply of events, ideologies, retro fashions—no longer so much because people believe in them or still place some hope in them, but simply to resurrect the period when *at least* there was history... Anything serves to escape this void, this leukemia of history and of politics, this hemorrhage of values—it is in proportion to this distress that all content can be evoked pell-mell, that all previous history is resurrected in bulk—a controlling idea no longer selects, only nostalgia endlessly accumulates: war, fascism, the pageantry of the belle epoque, or the revolutionary struggles, everything is equivalent and is mixed indiscriminately in the same morose and funereal exaltation, in the same retro fascination. . . .
>
> History thus made its triumphal entry into cinema, post-humously. . . . Its reinjection has no value as conscious awareness but only as nostalgia for a lost referential.[69]

In place of actual history we are left with mythology presented as history, along with nostalgia for a time when society shared unifying historical narratives. Baudrillard uses American war movies—such as *Apocalypse Now*—for his examples, while Boym discusses Civil War reenactments:

> Civil War battlefields have been turned into nostalgic sites where history might be buried but the "experience of battle" can be thoroughly recreated... Recreated battles do not approximate the actual experience of war as much as another real-life experience—that of being an extra on a movie set. Authenticity here is visual, not historical. There is a deep-seated fear of reflection on history and its blank spots, on the irreversibility of time, that challenges the dream of eternal youth and possibility of eternal recreation.[70]

From these examples, I summarize a few key points about history and nostalgia. In modern times, nostalgia is conceptualized as an emotional reaction involving longing for an out-of-reach place and time. Nostalgia is sometimes triggered by a dissatisfaction with the present moment or state of affairs. Nostalgic portrayals of the past, meanwhile, are often idealized and contain imagined or

---

[69] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, The Body, in Theory (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 43–44.

[70] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 37–38.

fantastical elements. And finally, this idealization of the past can present a troublesome relationship with history, particularly when history and nostalgia are presented as one and the same, such as when the culture industry creates nostalgia films.

Restorative nostalgia, then, describes those that view Greta Van Fleet as the "saviors" of rock. The signification of the past within Greta Van Fleet's music triggers a sense of nostalgia among fans and critics for a time they cannot return to, even if that period is somewhat idealized. That nostalgia also, perhaps, blinds them to the larger trends that have shaped and continue to shape rock through the present day. Perhaps what is at play, then, in the discourse about Greta Van Fleet between these two groups is a battle over cultural significance. While it would be inaccurate to say that Greta Van Fleet's success is entirely due to Boomers experiencing restorative nostalgia, the mainstream press has generated that narrative and the band's executives have been happy to capitalize. Cultural significance is what makes something mainstream; discovering the more niche scenes described by Hyden takes some effort, while exposure to the mainstream is often inevitable. While many modern rock fans are content with this dynamic, there is certainly jealousy and exasperation that when the cultural gaze finally turns their way again, it is to a group deemed to be somewhat of an imposter peddling a false narrative. For them, there is no Boymian reflective nostalgia and no homeland in ruins; they simply have no use for conjurations of the past cast by Greta Van Fleet. Classic rock, in many ways, has become the rock canon, even as a modern rock scene exists alongside it. This episode is the working out of the relationship between the canonized past and evolving present.

Conclusion

This dissertation grew from my attempts to understand how and why certain styles of music could become divisive. While matters of musical preference or taste are as widespread as the art form itself, the way music becomes a battleground for social, political, and moral concerns seems like a strange fate ill-befitting the "universal language." I soon realized that arguments about "the good" and "the bad" in music were often tied to sounds and sonic qualities as much as they were to the social circumstances and context in which the music and artists were situated. The examples I found myself most drawn to were in rock, and guitar distortion stood out: not only as a consistent component of rock, but as a sound whose meaning had shifted multiple times. Isn't it absolutely fascinating that this could happen? The unifying theme of the dissertation, then, is the history of the meaning of guitar distortion, as explored through moments of societal conflict. I would like to dwell on three questions that this dissertation speaks to: what does this research have to say about topic theory, what does this research say about the history of rock, and what does this research say about music, identity, and social conflict?

To do justice to the listening practices and priorities of those listening to and participating in rock—either as devotees or detractors—an expansion of the conventional domain of topic theory was required. There, the most common practice is to assume that the semiotic relationship of the topics in question are commonly understood by a competent audience, and these topics are then analyzed within specific pieces of music to learn more about those works. Instead, I have chosen to investigate a topical relationship in which meaning not only has changed over time, but has been contested between groups

of people with varying competencies. Because of that, I focused on moments of societal dispute, demonstrating how those disputes shaped the meaning of the music as well as how interpretations of the music shaped society. As a result, this dissertation has expanded the bounds of what topical analysis can entail by comprising a deep investigation into the formulation and evolution of a topical relationship. Hopefully, I have demonstrated the richness of meaning and understanding that is possible when doing this sort of investigation, both for the music and the context in which the music is situated, and more will be inspired to examine this aspect of topical relationships.

The scope of this dissertation spans nearly the entire history of rock in the United States, and as such, a few long-term trends and themes have emerged from my chronicle. Indeed, the last four chapters form a narrative of stages within the history of rock: its formation and rise to prominence, its position as the most dominant genre of mainstream music, its dissolution into a variety of subgenres and offshoots, and its exit from the mainstream and entrance to a period of canonization and self-referentiality. Indeed, the meaning of rock songs and artists and the importance of the genre to society are more easily understood in reference to these distinct periods. Additionally, because rock has entered a state of nostalgia and self-reference, history itself becomes an important theme, that is, the ways in which rock artists and fans understand, interpret, and place themselves in reference to what has come before. Another theme that emerged through my research was the role played by race within rock history, which, although it may seem obvious, can sometimes go unspoken in rock narratives. In my second chapter in particular, I show how interpretations of guitar distortion at the beginning of rock and roll were intimately tied with racial relations in the U.S., and how that changed over the following decades. While race does reappear as a theme in later chapters, there is certainly much more research to do. Furthermore, my dissertation speaks to the relationship between history, meaning, and technology.

As new technologies developed, not only did artists need to figure out how to make use of the new sounds and affordances, but society also had to work out how to interpret what they were hearing.

Finally, the role played by music in the formation and expression of personal identity has been readily apparent throughout my research. In particular, another theme I have noticed appearing throughout my chapters is our tendency to judge the unfamiliar; that is, an individual or a group of people judging a style of music and/or the people participating in the musicking process without taking the time to learn what others find valuable. This is not something unique to rock; far from it, I have observed it in online music forums and from personal acquaintances with regards to genres as seemingly disparate as classical European opera and American hip-hop. Indeed, I have been guilty of this myself in the past, particularly with country music, as I realized when I encountered this passage from Nadine Hubbs:

> "Anything but country" is not only and not simply about the music. But neither is this charged exclusionary gesture or its considerable cultural baggage removed from the music. Country music is a flashpoint. Within and around it, class tensions that are elsewhere quiet hum, crackle, and emerge audible. Country songs take part in cultural dialogues that both produce and push against class and status, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and other formations. The songs do their cultural work by means of sounds wedded to lyrics and images, which both reflect and produce various cultural notions. Country music is thus for some hearers the sound of working people, small-town America, and an idealized simpler time, while for others it is the sound of closed-mindedness, racism, sexism, and homophobia.[1]

Growing up in northern Virginia on the edge between the cultural north and south of the United States, I would associate the timbres of country music with a "backward" part of the country that I wanted nothing to do with. I wonder what misunderstandings could be avoided if we were willing to take the time to engage with the musical experiences of others before rushing to judgement.

[1] Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 49.

It was in this vein that Joe Stuessy wondered in his textbook: "If these principles continue to operate for the next 10 years, as they have for the last 50, what will rock and roll be like in 2020? What will today's 18-year-old face as he or she attempts to raise a child in the rock culture in the year 2023?"[2] Stuessy was, of course, referring to the excessive vulgarity he perceived in mainstream rock and pop. But with the gift of hindsight, we can actually answer his question. The culture of the year 2023 will almost certainly not be one dominated by rock, even though it has undeniably been heavily influenced by its history. At the same time, rock's modern offshoots are alive and thriving, as is an intense discourse surrounding its meaning. Musical equipment and technology has also become more affordable while improving in quality, and while some of that innovation has been directed at reproducing sounds of the past, just as much energy has been spent creating new sounds for novices, amateurs, and professionals to experiment with. I opened this dissertation with a consideration of Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*; his introduction contains an eerily applicable quote:

> Today, music heralds—regardless of what the property mode of capital will be—the establishment of a society of repetition in which nothing will happen anymore. But at the same time, it heralds the emergence of a formidable subversion, one leading to a radically new organization never yet theorized, of which self-management is but a distant echo.[3]

Despite the repetition of the past that appears in artists like Greta Van Fleet, there are so many new musicians exploring new styles of performance and production, both in recording studios and on stages across the globe, that it is difficult to not be excited. The future of rock is bright; I'm looking forward to seeing what the next fifty years will bring.

---

[2] Joe Stuessy, *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), 369.

[3] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Theory and History of Literature v. 16 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 5.

Bibliography

"100 Best Hard Rock Songs Ever (According to VH1)." *Stereogum*, January 5, 2009. https://www.stereogum.com/43591/vh1s_100_greatest_hard_rock_songs/franchises/list/.

Abbate, Carolyn. *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Agawu, V. Kofi. *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music*. Princeton Legacy Library. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Allanbrook, Wye Jamison. *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le Nozze Di Figaro & Don Giovanni*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Almén, Byron. *A Theory of Musical Narrative*. Musical Meaning and Interpretation. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Amendment to Communications Act of 1934 (Prohibiting Radio and Television Stations from Engaging in Music Publishing or Recording Business), Pub. L. No. Y4.In8/3:C73/34/958, § Interstate and Foreign Commerce; Senate Subcommittee on Communications. Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce. Senate, 1245 pp. (1958).

"Andertons Music Co - YouTube." Accessed March 19, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/user/AndertonsMusic/featured.

Aquila, Richard. *Let's Rock!: How 1950s America Created Elvis and the Rock & Roll Craze*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Theory and History of Literature v. 16. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

Bainbridge, Catherine, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Iggy Pop, Martin Scorsese, Kino Lorber, and Kanopy. *Rumble*. San Francisco, California, USA: Kino Lorber, Kanopy Streaming, 2017.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. The Body, in Theory. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Bereza, Sarah. "The Right Kind of Music: Fundamentalist Christianity as Musical and Cultural Practice." Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2017.

Bertrand, Michael T. *Race, Rock, and Elvis*. Music in American Life. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

"Billboard Charts History: How the Charts Evolved." *Billboard*, November 14, 2019. http://www.billboard.com/articles/business/chart-beat/8543482/billboard-chart-history-evolution-milestones.

"BluesLawyer Memes (@blueslawyermemes) Instagram Photos and Videos," June 11, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/CBS8RyAnhDX/.

Boilen, Bob. "Why I've Never Liked Fleetwood Mac's 'Rumours.'" *NPR.Org* (blog), January 29, 2013. https://www.npr.org/sections/allsongs/2013/01/29/170552631/why-ive-never-liked-fleetwood-macs-rumours.

Bonds, Mark Evan. "Listening to Listeners." In *Communication in Eighteenth-Century Music*, 34–52. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.

Brackett, David. *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.

Brennan, Allison. "Ryan Rages Against the Machine - CNNPolitics." *CNN*, August 16, 2012. https://www.cnn.com/2012/08/16/politics/ryan-music-taste/index.html.

Burkeman, Oliver. "The Song That Might Save Bush." *The Guardian*, April 4, 2006. http://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/apr/05/usa.popandrock.

Burkholder, J. Peter. "Musical Borrowing or Curious Coincidence?: Testing the Evidence." *The Journal of Musicology* 35, no. 2 (2018): 223–66.

Buskin, Richard. "CLASSIC TRACKS: The Clash 'White Riot.'" *Sound on Sound* (blog), October 2013. https://www.soundonsound.com/people/classic-tracks-clash-white-riot.

Chandler, Daniel. *Semiotics: The Basics*. 2nd ed. Basics (Routledge (Firm)). London ; New York: Routledge, 2007.

Cohen, Ian. "Tame Impala: Lonerism." *Pitchfork*, October 8, 2012. https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/17131-lonerism/.

Crafts, Susan D., Daniel Cavicchi, Charles Keil, and Music in Daily Life Project. *My Music*. Music/Culture. Middletown, CT: Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press,1993.

Danesi, Marcel. *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things: An Introduction to Semiotics*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

DeNora, Tia. *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Dick Cavett Show, The. *Jimi Hendrix on Performing The National Anthem at Woodstock | The Dick Cavett Show*, April 22, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGf9PTYyJ4A.

Doyle, Patrick. "Tom Morello Rages Against Anti-Union Bill at Wisconsin Rally." *Rolling Stone* (blog), February 22, 2011. https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/tom-morello-rages-against-anti-union-bill-at-wisconsin-rally-178716/.

Echard, William. *Psychedelic Popular Music: A History through Musical Topic Theory*. Musical Meaning and Interpretation. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017.

Edgers, Geoff. "The Slow Death of the Electric Guitar." *Washington Post*, June 22, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/lifestyle/the-slow-secret-death-of-the-electric-guitar/.

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*. Sign, Storage, Transmission. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Epic Music Video, Rage Against the Machine, and Inc Sony Music Entertainment. *The Battle of Mexico City*. New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 2000.

Filene, Benjamin. *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*. Cultural Studies of the United States. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Flanagan, Bill. "Is Rock 'n' Roll Dead, or Just Old?" *The New York Times*, November 19, 2016, sec. Opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/is-rock-n-roll-dead-or-just-old.html.

"Former Gibson Chief Ted McCarty on Tonewoods and the Problems of 'Top-Heavy' Management | Bacon's Archive." *reverb.com*, March 15, 2018. https://reverb.com/news/former-gibson-chief-ted-mccarty-on-tonewoods-and-the-problems-of-top-heavy-management.

Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95. https://doi.org/10.1086/448181.

Freeman, Kim. "Labels Fight Losing Battle Vs. Classic Rock." *Billboard (Archive: 1963-2000)*, Cincinnati: Prometheus Global Media, December 26, 1987.

———. "Radio: PD OF THE WEEK." *Billboard (Archive: 1963-2000)*, Cincinnati: Prometheus Global Media, March 28, 1987.

Fricke, David. "What's So Bad About the Black Crowes?" *Rolling Stone*, May 30, 1991. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/whats-so-bad-about-the-black-crowes-101507/.

Gifford, Barry. "A Long Time Comin'." *Rolling Stone*. New York: Rolling Stone Licensing LLC, May 11, 1968. 2509575241. The Rolling Stone Archive.

Gill, Chris. "Song Facts: The Beatles — 'Helter Skelter.'" *guitarworld*, October 13, 2015. https://www.guitarworld.com/gw-archive/song-facts-beatles-helter-skelter.

"Gold & Platinum." *RIAA*. Accessed January 21, 2022. https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&ar=Twisted+Sister&ti=We%27re+Not+Gonna+Take+It&format=Single&type=#search_section.

Goode, Erich, and Nachman Ben-Yehuda. *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*. 2nd ed. Chichester, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Gore, Tipper. *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987.

Gracyk, Theodore. *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

"Grandson and Tom Morello on What Rock and Roll Means in 2021," *Interview Magazine*, January 8, 2021. https://www.interviewmagazine.com/music/grandson-and-tom-morello-on-what-rock-and-roll-means-in-2021.

"Guitar Pickups." *MichałKaszczyszyn.com*. Accessed July 29, 2021. http://www.michalkaszczyszyn.com/en/tutorials/pickups.html.

Haenfler, Ross. *Straight Edge: Clean-Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006.

Hajduk, John C. *Music Wars: Money, Politics, and Race in the Construction of Rock and Roll Culture, 1940-1960*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018.

Hamilton, Jack. *Just around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Hartmann, William M. *Principles of Musical Acoustics*. Undergraduate Lecture Notes in Physics. New York, NY: Springer New York: Imprint: Springer, 2013.

Hatten, Robert S. *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*. Musical Meaning and Interpretation. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018.

———. *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation*. Advances in Semiotics. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Heidemann, Kate. "A System for Describing Vocal Timbre in Popular Song." *Music Theory Online* 22, no. 1 (2016).

Heylin, Clinton. *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk Rock*. Chicago: Review Press, 2005.

Hickey, Walt. "Why Classic Rock Isn't What It Used To Be." *FiveThirtyEight* (blog), July 7, 2014. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-classic-rock-isnt-what-it-used-to-be/.

Higgins, Kathleen Marie. *The Music of Our Lives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.

Hubbs, Nadine. *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern." In *The History on Film Reader*, edited by Marnie Hughes-Warrington, 249–57. Routledge Readers in History. London ; New York: Routledge, 2009.

Hyden, Steven. "For The Last Time: Rock Is Not Dead, You're Just Not Paying Attention." *UPROXX* (blog), February 1, 2017. https://uproxx.com/music/rock-music-dead-2017/.

———. "Greta Van Fleet Wants To Be Led Zeppelin For Generation Z." *UPROXX* (blog), November 7, 2017. https://uproxx.com/music/greta-van-fleet-from-the-fires-review/.

Kelly, Zach. "Tame Impala: Innerspeaker." *Pitchfork*, May 28, 2010. https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/14279-innerspeaker/.

Kennedy, Mark. "Some Call Greta Van Fleet the Saviors of Rock. But Not Them." *AP NEWS*, January 24, 2019. https://apnews.com/1c25ef288a4e4bf59cdbf4ad56724345.

Kramer, Lawrence. "Musical Narratology: A Theoretical Outline." *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991): 141–62.

———. *The Thought of Music*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016.

Labrecque, Jeff. "Paul Ryan Loves Rage Against the Machine, Monty Python." *EW.Com* (blog), August 15, 2012. https://ew.com/article/2012/08/15/paul-ryan-pop-culture/.

Larson, Jeremy D. "Greta Van Fleet: Anthem of the Peaceful Army." *Pitchfork*, October 23, 2018. https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/greta-van-fleet-anthem-of-the-peaceful-army/.

Lavengood, Megan. "What Makes It Sound '80s? The Yamaha DX7 Electric Piano Sound." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 3 (2019): 73–93.

———. "The Cultural Significance of Timbre Analysis: A Case Study in 1980s Pop Music, Texture, and Narrative." *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 3 (2020).

Lawson, Steven F. "Race, Rock and Roll, and the Rigged Society: The Payola Scandal and the Politcal Culture of the 1950s." In *The Achievement of American Liberalism: The New Deal and Its Legacies*, edited by William H. Chafe, 205–42. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Linker, David. "The Coming Death of Just about Every Rock Legend." *The Week*, August 31, 2019. https://theweek.com/articles/861750/coming-death-just-about-every-rock-legend.

Lollar Pickups. "Raw Power." Accessed December 14, 2020. https://www.lollarguitars.com/lollar-humbucker-pickups/raw-power.

Love, Robert. "Furor over Rock Lyrics Intensifies." *Rolling Stone*. New York, United States: Rolling Stone Licensing LLC, September 12, 1985.

Lowe, Melanie Diane. *Pleasure and Meaning in the Classical Symphony*. Musical Meaning and Interpretation. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.

Lucas, Olivia. "MAXIMUM VOLUME YIELDS MAXIMUM RESULTS." *Journal of Sonic Studies*, no. 07 (June 26, 2014).

Ludwig, Jamie. "How Coven Pioneered Occult Rock With 'Witchcraft Destroy Minds & Reaps Souls.'" *NPR*, October 25, 2017. https://www.npr.org/2017/10/25/559501959/shocking-omissions-coven-s-witchcraft-destroy-minds-reaps-souls.

Marsh, Dave. *Before I Get Old: The Story of The Who*. 1st ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983.

Martin, Linda, and Kerry Segrave. *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock "n" Roll*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1988.

Maus, Fred Everett. "Music As Narrative." *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991): 1–34.

McIntyre, Ken. "Cult Heroes: Blue Cheer - the Band Who Invented Heavy Metal." *loudersound*, November 4, 2016. https://www.loudersound.com/features/cult-heroes-blue-cheer-the-band-who-invented-heavy-metal.

McNamara, Denis. "Radio: 'Classic Rock' Forces Defensive Strategy." *Billboard (Archive: 1963-2000),* Cincinnati: Prometheus Global Media, June 21, 1986.

Miller, Kevin A. "Rock's Real Rebels." *Christianity Today* 45, no. 1 (January 8, 2001): 90–91.

"Miscellany: A Warning To The Music Business." *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000)*. Los Angeles, United States: Penske Business Corporation, February 23, 1955.

Molanphy, Chris. "Radio-Friendly Unit Shifters." *Pitchfork*, September 9, 2013. https://pitchfork.com/features/article/9214-radio-friendly-unit-shifters-25-years-of-billboards-alternative-music-chart/.

Molenda, Michael. "Classic Riffs: Link Wray's 'Rumble.'" *Guitar Player*. New York, United Kingdom: Future Publishing Ltd, March 1998.

Monelle, Raymond. *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral*. Musical Meaning and Interpretation. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

———. *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Monelle, Raymond, and Esti Sheinberg. *Music Semiotics: A Network of Significations in Honour and Memory of Raymond Monelle*. Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2012.

Moore, Allan F. *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*. Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series. Farnham, Surrey ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012.

Morello, Tom. "Tom Morello: 'Paul Ryan Is the Embodiment of the Machine Our Music Rages Against.'" *Rolling Stone* (blog), August 16, 2012. https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/tom-morello-paul-ryan-is-the-embodiment-of-the-machine-our-music-rages-against-246033/.

Music is Win. *Pitchfork Is Too Cool for Greta Van Fleet*. October 25, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5WnypErVko.

"Music: The Fast Buck Vs. Juve Morale." *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000)*. Los Angeles, United States: Penske Business Corporation, November 10, 1954.

Myers, Marc. "How the Kinks Roughed Up Their Sound; To Come up with the Fuzzy Distortion on 'You Really Got Me,' Members of the Kinks Distressed Their Speakers with Knitting Needles and Razor Blades. A Look at How the Influential 1964 Hit Took Shape." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*. October 29, 2014.

Nattiez, Jean-Jacques. *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Nobile, Drew. *Form as Harmony in Rock Music*. Oxford Studies in Music Theory. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Noisey Staff. "The Nine Best Greta Van Fleet Songs." *Vice* (blog), September 26, 2018. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/a38kag/the-nine-best-greta-van-fleet-songs.

Nuzum, Eric. *Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America*. 1st ed.. New York: Perennial, 2001.

O'Hara, William. "Music Theory and the Epistemology of the Internet; or, Analyzing Music Under the New Thinkpiece Regime." *Analitica: Rivista Online Di Studi Musicali* 10 (August 2018).

Oksala, Johanna. *Foucault, Politics, and Violence*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2012.

Palmer, Robert. "The Church of the Sonic Guitar." In *Present Tense: Rock & Roll and Culture*, edited by Anthony DeCurtis, 13–28. Duke University Press, 1992.

Pareles, Jon. "Oldies on Rise in Album-Rock Radio." *The New York Times*, June 18, 1986. https://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/18/arts/oldies-on-rise-in-album-rock-radio.html.

Peirce, Charles S. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Past Masters (InteLex Corporation). Charlottesville, Va: InteLex Corporation, 1994.

———. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Petridis, Alexis. "Misunderstood or Hateful? Oi!'s Rise and Fall." *The Guardian*, March 18, 2010. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/mar/18/oi-cockney-rejects-garry-bushell-interview.

Piper, Julian, Jamie Dickson, and David Mead. "'There Were Guitar Players Weeping, They Had to Mop the Floor up. He Was Piling It on, Solo after Solo' – How Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton Changed Guitar Forever." *MusicRadar*, December 29, 2021. https://www.musicradar.com/news/jimi-hendrix-eric-clapton-1966.

Powell, Mark Allan. "Jesus Climbs the Charts." *Christian Century* 119, no. 26 (December 18, 2002): 20.

Press, Associated. "VH1 Names 100 Greatest Rock Songs: Stones Get Satisfaction." *Deseret News*, January 7, 2000. https://www.deseret.com/2000/1/7/19484459/vh1-names-100-greatest-rock-songs-stones-get-satisfaction.

Prinzing, Scott. "Brothers of the Blade: Three Native Axmen: Link Wray, Robbie Robertson, and Jesse Ed Davis." In *Indigenous Pop: Native American Music from Jazz to Hip Hop*, edited by Jeff Berglund, Jan Johnson, and Kimberli Lee. University of Arizona Press, 2016.

Ratner, Leonard G. *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1980.

Raymond JE. *Rage Against The Machine - Killing In The Name - 1993*, October 13, 2007. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8de2W3rtZsA.

Reiff, Corbin. "Greta Van Fleet's Debut Was The Best-Selling Album Of The Week." *UPROXX* (blog), October 29, 2018. https://uproxx.com/music/greta-van-fleet-anthems-of-the-peaceful-army-no-3-billboard-debut/.

"Rhythm and Rumble." *The Washington Post and Times Herald (1954-1959)*. June 6, 1956.

Rig Rundown - Greta Van Fleet. February 13, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWDf_CEkpoU&feature=youtu.be.

Rings, Steven. "A Foreign Sound to Your Ear: Bob Dylan Performs 'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding),' 1964-2009." *Music Theory Online* 19, no. 4 (2013).

Risset, Jean-Claude, and David L. Wessel. "Exploration of Timbre by Analysis and Synthesis." In *The Psychology of Music*, edited by Diana Deutsch, 2nd ed. Academic Press Series in Cognition and Perception. San Diego: Academic Press, 1999.

Rolli, Bryan. "Conservatives Roasted for Discovering Rage Against the Machine Is Political." *The Daily Dot*, June 10, 2020. https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/rage-against-the-machine-political-conservatives/.

Rose, Tricia. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop--and Why It Matters*. African American Music Reference. New York: BasicCivitas, 2008.

Ross, Sean. "Can Top 40 Really Play Classic Rock?" *Billboard; New York* 102, no. 50 (December 15, 1990): 12.

Russo, Nicholas. "'Feels Like We Only Go Backwards': Nostalgia and Contemporary Retro Rock." PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2015.

Rutenberg, Jim. "Paul Ryan: 'I Call This Getting Wienermobiled.'" *The New York Times*, September 12, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/magazine/paul-ryan-wienermobiled.html.

Sabin, Roger. *Punk Rock: So What?: The Cultural Legacy of Punk*. London; New York: Routledge, 1999.

Sacher, Andrew. "If Rock Is 'the New Jazz,' Then I Blame The Strokes." *BrooklynVegan* (blog). November 30, 2016. http://www.brooklynvegan.com/if-rock-is-the-new-jazz-then-i-blame-the-strokes/.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986.

Savage, Jon. *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock and Beyond*. New York: StMartin's Press, 1992.

Savage, Mark. "To Ray Davies, America Is a 'Beautiful but Dangerous' Place." *BBC News*, April 22, 2017. https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-39665367.

Schonfeld, Zach. "Dee Snider on Why Donald Trump Can Use 'We're Not Gonna Take It.'" *Newsweek*, September 8, 2015. https://www.newsweek.com/why-dee-snider-let-donald-trump-use-were-not-gonna-take-it-campaign-stops-369563.

———. "Does the Parental Advisory Label Still Matter?" *Newsweek*, November 10, 2015. https://www.newsweek.com/does-parental-advisory-label-still-matter-tipper-gore-375607.

———. "Parental Advisory Forever: An Oral History of the PMRC's War on Dirty Lyrics." *Newsweek, Global Ed.* New York, United States: Newsweek Publishing LLC, October 9, 2015.

Sedikides, Constantine, Tim Wildschut, and Denise Baden. "Nostalgia: Conceptual Issues and Existential Functions." In *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*, edited by Jeff Greenberg, Sander Leon Koole, and Thomas A. Pyszczynski, 200–214. New York: Guilford Press, 2004.

Shephard, Alex. "What Happened to Rock Music?" *The New Republic*, December 30, 2016. https://newrepublic.com/article/139572/happened-rock-music.

Star Man. *THE WHO on Smothers Brothers TV Show 1967*, December 2, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZkjA8DTg4o.

Steinhauer, Jennifer, Jim Rutenberg, Mike McIntire, and Sheryl Gay Stolberg. "Conservative Star's Small-Town Roots." *The New York Times*, August 13, 2012. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/13/us/politics/family-faith-and-politics-describe-life-of-paul-ryan.html.

Sterling, Christopher H., and Cary O'Dell. *The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio*. Routledge, 2010.

Stewart, Francis. *Punk Rock Is My Religion: Straight Edge Punk and 'Religious' Identity*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

Stone, Rolling. "Dee Snider Rips Paul Ryan for Using 'We're Not Gonna Take It.'" *Rolling Stone* (blog), August 22, 2012. https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/dee-snider-rips-paul-ryan-for-using-were-not-gonna-take-it-188966/.

Stuessy, Joe. *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009.

Subotnik, Rose Rosengard. *Deconstructive Variations: Music and Reason in Western Society*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Tagg, Philip. *Everyday Tonality: Towards a Tonal Theory of What Most People Hear*. 1st ed., New York: Mass Media Scholars' Press, 2009.

———. *"Kojak": Fifty Seconds of Television Music: Toward the Analysis of Affect in Popular Music*. New York: Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, 2000.

"The 200 Best Songs of the 1980s." *Pitchfork*. August 24, 2015. https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/9700-the-200-best-songs-of-the-1980s/.

"The Hot 100," *Billboard*, January 2, 2013. https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/1984-09-22/.

Tom Morello. "Scott!! What Music of Mine Were You a Fan of That DIDN'T Contain 'Political BS'? I Need to Know so I Can Delete It from the Catalog." Tweet. *@tmorello*, June 9, 2020. https://twitter.com/tmorello/status/1270419869524094976.

Twisted Sister -- We're Not Gonna Take It [Extended Version] OFFICIAL MUSIC VIDEO - YouTube. August 3, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9AbeALNVkk.

U.S. Congress, Senate. Record Labeling, Pub. L. No. S. Hrg. 99-529, § Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation (1985).

"VH1's 100 Greatest Songs of the '80s." *Spinditty*, November 15, 2021. https://spinditty.com/playlists/Top-100-Songs-of-the-80s.

Waksman, Steve. "Arenas of the Imagination: Global Tours and the Heavy Metal Concert in the 1970s." In *Metal Rules the Globe*, 227–46. New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020.

———. *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Walker, Gary. "The Genius Of... Raw Power by Iggy And The Stooges." *Guitar.Com* (blog), December 9, 2020. https://guitar.com/review/album/the-genius-of-raw-power-by-iggy-and-the-stooges/.

Wallach, Jeremy, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene, eds. *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music around the World*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Wallmark, Zachary. "The Sound of Evil." In *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Walser, Robert. *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Music/Culture. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2014.

Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.

Whatley, Jack. "The Ludicrous Reason Rage Against The Machine Were Banned from Saturday Night Live." *Far Out Magazine* (blog), April 13, 2020. https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/rage-against-the-machine-banned-saturday-night-live-snl-1996-video/.

Will, George F. "Bruce Springsteen's U.S.A." *Washington Post*, September 13, 1984. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/09/13/bruce-springsteens-usa/f6502baa-a8eb-48ad-ba85-7fa848d8833e/.

Wilson, Carl. "Is Rock Still Relevant In 2016?" *Billboard*, December 12, 2016. https://www.billboard.com/articles/events/year-in-music-2016/7616418/rock-relevant-2016.

"Wray Inspired Rockers, Punks." *Variety*. Los Angeles, United States: Penske Business Corporation, December 28, 2005.

Discography

AC/DC. "Back in Black." *Back in Black*. Leidseplein Presse B.V., 1980, streaming audio, Tidal.

Black Sabbath. "Black Sabbath (2014 Remaster)." *Black Sabbath (2014 Remaster)*. Warner Records Inc., 1970, streaming audio, Tidal.

———. "Sabbath Bloody Sabbath (2014 Remaster)." *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath (2014 Remaster)*. Warner Records Inc., 1973, streaming audio, Tidal.

Blue Cheer. "Summertime Blues." *Vincebus Eruptum*. The Island Def Jam Music Group, 1968, streaming audio, Tidal.

Brenston, Jackie. "Rocket 88." *The Sun Records Story*. Disc 3. Charly Records, 2002, streaming audio, Tidal.

Carter, Goree. "Rock Awhile (Remastered)." on *The Genius Little T-Bone (Remastered)*. Master Tape Records, 2021, streaming audio, Tidal.

Clash, The. "White Riot (Remastered)." *The Clash (Remastered)*. Sony Music Entertainment, released, 1977, rereleased 2013, streaming audio, Tidal.

Cochran, Eddie. "Summertime Blues." *The Best of Eddie Cochran*. EMI Records, released 1970, rereleased 1996, streaming audio, Tidal.

Dead Kennedys. *Fresh Fruit For Rotting Vegetables*. Decay Music, 1980, streaming audio, Tidal.

Earth Crisis. "Forced March." *Destroy the Machines*. Craft Recordings, 1995, streaming audio, Tidal.

Greta Van Fleet. "Age of Man." *Anthem of the Peaceful Army*. Republic Records, 2018, streaming audio, Tidal.

———. "When the Curtain Falls." *Anthem of the Peaceful Army*. Republic Records, 2018, streaming audio, Tidal.

Haley, Bill, and His Comets. "Shake, Rattle And Roll (Single Version)." *The Best of Bill Haley & His Comets*. MCA Records, 1999, streaming audio, Tidal.

Hendrix, Jimi. "Star Spangled Banner (Live at the Woodstock Music & Art Fair, August 18, 1969)." *Experience Hendrix: The Best of Jimi Hendrix*. Sony, 1997, streaming audio, Tidal.

Howlin' Wolf. "How Many More Years." *Moanin' In The Moonlight*. UMG Recordings, inc., 1959, streaming audio, Tidal.

———. "Moanin' At Midnight." *Moanin' In The Moonlight*. UMG Recordings, inc., 1959, streaming audio, Tidal.

Iron Butterfly. "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida (2006 Remaster Full-Length)." *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*. Atlantic Recording Corp., 1968, streaming audio, Tidal.

Kinks, The. "All Day And All of the Night." *Kinks*. Sanctuary Records, recorded 1964, rereleased 2004, streaming audio, Tidal.

———. "You Really Got Me (Mono Mix)." *Kinks*. Sanctuary Records, recorded 1964, rereleased 2004, streaming audio, Tidal.

Led Zeppelin. "The Lemon Song (Remaster)." *Led Zeppelin II (Remaster)*. Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1969, streaming audio, Tidal.

———. "Whole Lotta Love (Remaster)." *Led Zeppelin II (Remaster)*. Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1969, streaming audio, Tidal.

Minor Threat. "Straight Edge." *First Two Seven Inches*. Dischord Records, 1984, streaming audio, Tidal.

Mötley Crüe. "Bastard." *Shout At The Devil*. BMG, 1983, streaming audio, Tidal.

Muddy Waters. "I Feel Like Going Home." *The Anthology*. MCA Records, 2001, streaming audio, Tidal.

P.O.D. "Alive (2021 Remaster)." *Satellite (Expanded Edition) [2021 Remaster]*, Atlantic Recording Corporation, released 2008, rereleased 2021, streaming audio, Tidal.

Prince. "Darling Nikki." *Purple Rain*. NPG Records, 1984, streaming audio, Tidal.

Rage Against the Machine. "Bulls on Parade." *Evil Empire*. Epic Records, 1996, streaming audio, Tidal.

———. "Killing In the Name." *Rage Against the Machine*. Epic Records, 1992, streaming audio, Tidal.

Ramones. "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue." *Ramones*. Sire Records, 1976, streaming audio, Tidal.

Right Brothers, The. "Bush Was Right." *No Apologies*. The Right Brothers, 2006, streaming audio, Tidal.

Rolling Stones, The. "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction (Mono Version)." *Out of Our Heads*. London Records, 1965, streaming audio, Tidal.

Sex Pistols. "Anarchy in the U.K." *Never Mind The Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols*. Warner Records Inc., 1977, streaming audio, Tidal.

———. "God Save the Queen." *Never Mind The Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols*. Warner Records Inc., 1977, streaming audio, Tidal.

Stooges, The. "Search and Destroy (Iggy Pop Mix)." *Raw Power*. Sony Music Entertainment Inc., 1973, streaming audio, Tidal.

Turner, Joe. "Shake, Rattle and Roll." *Shake, Rattle and Roll.* Warner Music Group, 2018, streaming audio, Tidal.

Twisted Sister. "We're Not Gonna Take It." *Stay Hungry*. Atlantic Records, 1984, streaming audio, Tidal.

Velvet Underground, The. "Heroin." *The Velvet Underground & Nico (45th Anniversary)*. Universal Records, released 1967, rereleased 2012, streaming audio, Tidal.

Who, The. "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere." *My Generation (Mono Version)*. Geffen Records, 1965, streaming audio, Tidal.

———. "I Can't Explain (Mono Version)." *My Generation (Mono Version)*. Geffen Records, 1965, streaming audio, Tidal.

Wray, Link, and His Wray Men. "Rumble." *Rumble/The Swag* (Single). Barnaby Records, 1958, streaming audio, Tidal.