

HISTORY OF ROCK MUSIC

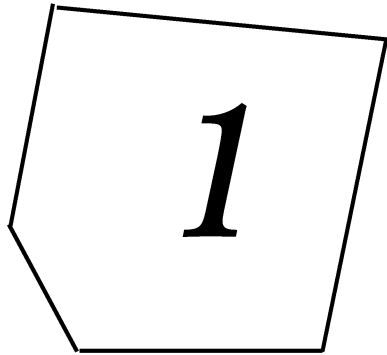
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INTRODUCTION

TO: Trog Zaxtrax, Imperial Governor for the Thirteenth Galactic Sector.

Greetings!

Most noble Trog, I have the misfortune to inform you that I have been forced to cancel our colonization mission to Sol III and return to Digopek for reassignment. This has been made necessary by the fact that Sol III's inhabitants have somehow discovered our approach, and are bombarding our vessel with electromagnetic wave-pulses of astonishing violence. The pulses are periodic, and when converted to sound consist of forceful pounding, together with howling or wailing noises and wild electrical shriekings. I believe this weapon, which the natives call "rockaroar," or perhaps "lokenlol," is designed to shake our space vessel to pieces if we approach much closer. Our soldiers have headaches from the violence of this weapon, and the androids twitch in time to the pulses. I will report to you personally, with recordings of this awesome weapon, in six gبزots.

Hail the Emperor!

Maglev,

Commander.

In all probability, no Commander Maglev ever sent such a message. Still, one wonders what an alien race might make of the radio and television broadcasts that this planet constantly emits. Rare is the Earthling who has not been exposed to, even saturated with, rock and roll during most of his or her life. Russian teenagers listen to Russian rock groups playing and singing American songs as well as their own creations. A jukebox in Niamey, Nigeria, included "Rock Around the Clock" among its selections

in the 1960s. Natives in the jungles of Sarawak were hooking electric amplifiers to a native stringed instrument called a *sapeh* at about the same time. Eskimo youngsters wear T-shirts with “AC-DC “ printed on them.

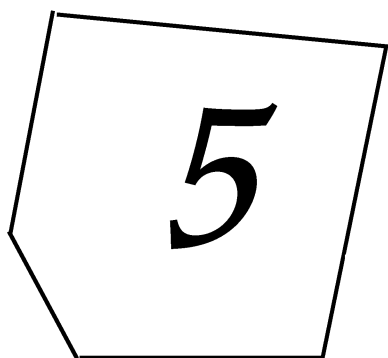
Obviously, this music called rock must address something very basic in the human makeup. It somehow bridges cultures as different from each other as Alaska is different from Zaire. What is the magic that *this* music, of all the many musical “languages” and “dialects” around the world, has for so many people in so many different places?

To be truthful, we don’t know some of the answers to this question, and the answers we do know aren’t simple. To young East European fans, rock offers a way to show a sense of unity with the youth of the West. To Third World fans, it offers a chance to taste the lifestyle of the affluent First World of Europe and America. To West Europeans, rock is the unifying element of an international youth culture whose members share more or less common attitudes toward their respective societies. To an extent, rock means something different to each of its constituencies.

In most places, however, rock is associated with young people who live in the fast lane. Its essence is the primacy of now over later and of feeling over intellect. It speaks the language of the world’s Peter Pans, people who want to remain teenagers forever. To its partisans, rock represents the freedom to try new lifestyles and to discover one’s own self, rather than simply to fulfill parental expectations. Detractors view rock as the expression of depraved degenerates, the sick sludge of a permissive generation. Both views find support in rock’s tendency toward romantic excess, theatrical gestures, and pompous display. The young might see Michael Jackson as a superhero, wonderfully free of mundane existence, a twitchy, beanpole analog for Spiderman. Their parents often perceive the group as tasteless, a carnival freak show that makes loud, horrid noises.

In short, rock is controversial. It always has been. From its earliest beginnings, rock has been the musical expression of adolescent rebelliousness. As parents gradually came to terms with rock, and gradually transformed it into Muzak, new and more outrageous styles of rock emerged.

Rock is also, like jazz, uniquely American. In fact, it’s hard to imagine a musical idiom such as rock beginning anywhere else in the world. Where but in America could the fusion of black rhythm-and-blues and white hillbilly music take place? Who but an American, half folk artist, half gadgeteer, would create the electrically amplified guitar? True, the British have done much to alter the direction in which rock has evolved, but the *invention* of rock and roll—that was as American as shoofly pie and black-eyed peas. The *History of Rock Music* is the story of how rock was born, and grew to a ripe age.



THE BEGINNINGS OF ROCK AND ROLL

The deluge began in 1953. That was the year that a boisterous group called Bill Haley and the Comets (a pun on Halley's Comet; never mind that the spelling isn't the same) released a jangling single called "Crazy Man Crazy." The song welded country-and-western singers and instruments to the infectious rhythm-and-blues beat, and set millions of adolescent bodies into gyrating motion. Rock 'n' roll had hit the beach, and soon captured everything in sight.

To their older brothers and sisters, raised on the lilting sophistication of big-band swing, the young rock 'n' rollers' musical tastes seemed vulgar and primitive. To their parents, never entirely reconciled to jitterbugging and swooning over Frank Sinatra, rock 'n' roll seemed barbarous, a musical concoction crafted by the dregs of society. Few of them recalled that *their* parents had expressed the same objections to the jazz songs, the animal dances, the "Oh, you kid" moral laxity of their own teen years.*

More than a generation gap yawned between the supporters of Artie Shaw and Tommy Dorsey and the wriggling, jigging Presley partisans. The new music was more than just *new*, it was *revolutionary*. It rejected the sound, the rhythm, the instruments, the singing style, the very aesthetic of swing. It was no outgrowth of previous trends; it was, instead, a radical departure from them. One took sides: one liked swing, and loathed rock 'n' roll; or one identified totally with the rockers, and had no truck with the old stuff. There was very little middle ground.

Reasons for Rock 'n' Roll's Popularity

It is not enough to note the details of what happened; one has to delve further to understand *why* this revolution in taste occurred. There is no one final reason, of

* The expression comes from a line in a song: "I love my wife, but oh, you kid!"

course, for human history is seldom that simple. However, some important factors in the process can be described.

One important factor was that swing, as a popular, expressive idiom, had blown itself out. Like biological organisms, musical styles go through phases of birth, growth, maturity, and decay. Musicians strive to stay always fresh and innovative. The early big bands had evolved over a decade into the lean, tight, rhythmic groups of classic swing in the period 1936–42. The instrumentation was relatively fixed at three to four trumpets, three to four trombones, five saxes, and four rhythm pieces. This was the band size of Goodman, Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Duke Ellington—and probably of a few hundred other band leaders of varying degrees of fame.

After World War II, swing was searching for a new sound. The old band sound had become trite. Instruments were added—four or five trumpets or trombones, six saxophones, extra people in the rhythm section. Some bands added full string sections to the winds and percussion, making great, lush, unwieldy groups that usually lacked rhythmic punch. As even these experiments grew tiresome, some groups experimented with novel instrumentations with some short-term success. One group, for example, featured a vocalist, French horns, and a rhythm section. It was obvious that swing, as an expressive idiom, was in serious difficulty.

A second factor was the economic circumstances of rock's rise. The classic swing bands had kept a good size for touring, as well as making recordings and playing on radio. Much of the groups' appeal was generated at proms and dances, where young listeners could experience the music live and identify with the performers' personalities. The classic band of fifteen to sixteen performers was big enough to be distinctive but small enough to travel well. The small symphonies that emerged after the war were suited to recording and radio performances, but were too cumbersome and expensive to travel well. The much smaller (and increasingly electrically amplified) rock 'n' roll bands had an enormous economic advantage, and could achieve the personal touch now denied the older groups.

Still another reason for the change could be found in the young rock 'n' rollers themselves. Rock 'n' roll's greatest appeal was to the youngsters who had been born during or just before World War II. It is difficult today to realize the emotional stresses that afflicted people then—the unrelieved tension of the war, with its shortages and rationing, its headlines of disaster and triumph, and the constant nagging worry about the well-being of family members in the service. The end of the war brought joy and relief—but also the horrors of the extermination camps and the awesome image of a mushroom-shaped cloud. The old foes, Japan and Germany, were soon replaced by a new opponent, the Soviet Union. The newsreels were filled with stories of spy trials, nuclear bomb tests, and aircraft flying into Berlin to keep the city alive. In 1950, the Korean War started, and we were in a shooting war again. The times were tense, and the tension wore heavily on youngsters who could scarcely understand the world in which they lived.

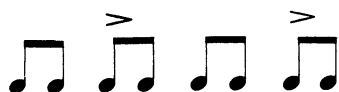
Rock 'n' roll offered diversion and relief from this world. First and foremost, it was body music, appealing directly to the dancing impulse. The relentless beat, the

simple harmonies, the rudimentary and often ungrammatical texts (“You Ain’t Nothin’ But a Hound Dog”), and the brash, irreverent high spirits of the music celebrated youth and good times. It helped block out the somber import of the news.

Characteristics of Rock ‘n’ Roll

Rock ‘n’ roll borrowed from bluegrass music, and even more heavily from rhythm-and-blues. The former contributed the guitar-based ensemble, the country accents of many of the singers, and the story lines of some of the songs. Black rhythm-and-blues provided the great majority of rock ‘n’ roll’s characteristics. To begin with, many rock ‘n’ roll songs, including “Hound Dog” and “Rock Around the Clock,” use the durable blues form—twelve-measure phrases, specific chords in specific measures, blue notes, and so on. Certain instruments, especially drums and saxophone, were borrowed from R & B. The way the saxophone was played (growly tone, riffing on one note) also came from black musical style.

The most important characteristic that rock ‘n’ roll borrowed from rhythm-and-blues, however, is the rhythm itself. The beat, the basic pulse, dominates everything else in the song. Rhythm was ruthlessly stripped of all subtlety. Three main rhythm patterns predominated, and may be found in song after song: 1. Even, duple eighth-note patterns with accents on the second and fourth beats



played absolutely evenly. The accented beats might be emphasized with a tambourine. 2. Liling triplets in slow tempo, usually accompanied by a stock bass figure that changed pitches to fit the chord changes



but remained fixed in rhythm. 3. A rapid quarter-eighth pattern that produced a loping boogie rhythm.



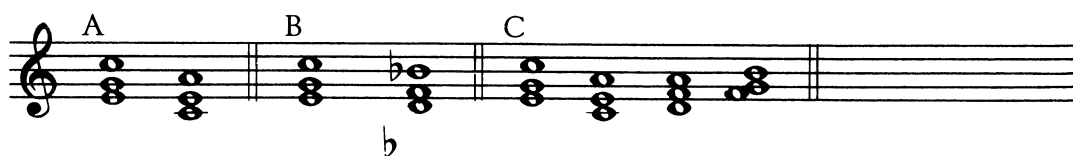
Rock ‘n’ roll also contains differences in text from previous popular songs. It is perhaps the first popular music to direct itself specifically at young adolescents. As with all popular music (of this century, at least), love (or its symptoms) is the most popular topic—specifically high-school-age love, as celebrated in such songs as “Puppy Love” or “This Time We’re Breaking Up For Good.” Other texts, however, deal with the trials of teens in relating to their parents, as in the witty “Yackety Yak,” by the Coasters. “Take out the trash, walk the dog, clean your room,” say the words, and each

chorus ends with, “Yackety yak, don’t talk back!” The theme of feeling misunderstood and persecuted is also reflected in “Charlie Brown,” in which a bass voice periodically asks, “Why is everybody always pickin’ on me?”

The texts often approach sex with a candor that adults found discomfiting, to their children’s delight. Black music had long accepted veiled references and double-entendres, and few people missed the suggestion in the line, “I found my thrill on Blueberry Hill.” Parents who squirmed when their twelve-year-old daughter sang the song should have remembered the Cole Porter hits of an earlier day. “Love For Sale” and the suggestive “Let’s Do It (Let’s Fall in Love)” once mortified their parents.

The focus of early rock ‘n’ roll, however, never shifted away from the impelling rhythmic drive. Texts were kept simple, sometimes inane; harmony was reduced to three or four chords, with the most direct and obvious relationships to one another. Certain harmonic conventions did emerge, such as the I–vi progression (Figure 1A) or I–^bVII (Figure 1B), or the longer progression I–vi–ii–V7 (Figure 1C), and of course, the blues changes mentioned earlier. No subtleties intruded, no blurring of the basic key, no ambiguities of tonality were tolerated. The beat was all.

FIGURE 1



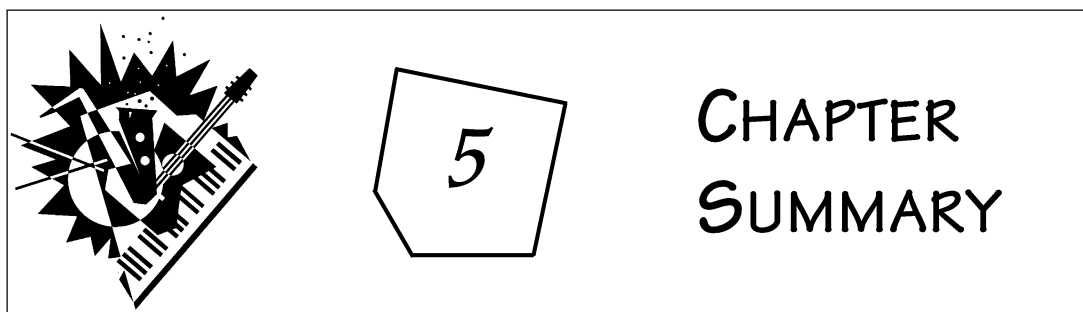
Rock ‘n’ Roll Singers and Groups

As the stream of rock ‘n’ roll turned into a flood, and then into a tidal wave, more and more personalities and groups surfaced, most of whom soon sank from sight. Some groups capitalized on a lead singer’s name—Ray Peterson, Freddie Cannon (many first names were in diminutive form), Jimmy Gilmer, Buddy Holly, Buddy Knox, Eddie Cochran. First and foremost, though, was Elvis Presley, whose talent and sulky, sexy good looks were hyped into a gigantic commercial phenomenon.

Black performers became major rock ‘n’ roll personalities as well, even with white audiences—which was something of a novelty in the 1950s. The most influential of these was Chuck Berry, whose songs (“Maybelline,” “Roll Over, Beethoven,” “Johnny B. Goode”) defined the idiom. Fats Domino also achieved a national reputation, as did Bobby Blue Bland, James Brown, Little Richard, Bo Diddley, and many others.

Along with the solo performers or “headliners,” some groups also achieved prominence. The groups were sometimes named after animals—the Flamingoes or the Falcons, echoed later by the Beatles and their feeble American copies, the Monkees. Others took names suggesting a mood or feeling, such as the Coasters, the Drifters,

the Shadows, or the Impressions. Many of the black rock groups had their origins in church gospel singing groups. Still other groups borrowed someone's name, such as the Everly Brothers or Booker T and the MG's. Aside from the gospel origins, these groups continued a tradition fixed in the swing era by groups such as the Andrews Sisters, the Ink Spots, the Modernaires, and the Lamplighters.



By 1962, rock 'n' roll had established itself as *the* American pop-music idiom. From its first appearance in the early 1950s, this raucous celebration of adolescent high spirits had come to dominate the airwaves both here and abroad. The energetic, blues-based music with its compulsive beat and its cocky lyrics drove more sophisticated, jaded swing into oblivion.

Rock 'n' roll triumphed by being everything that swing was not. Swing was subtle; rock was sledgehammer obvious. Swing used large sections of wind instruments; rock was based on the guitar-bass-drum ensemble. Swing employed sophisticated harmonic effects; rock stuck to folk-tune harmonies. Swing's beat was soft and understated; rock's beat was thunderous. Swing texts were veiled and poetic; rock's verses were crude, sometimes mindless ("doo wopaloo wopalop bop bop"), often juvenile. No one could doubt that a revolution—in sound, in function, in aesthetic—had taken place.

Revolutions have their troubles, though, and these troubles are often the same ones faced by the older regime: How do you keep moving? Once you have done all this, overturned everything, what do you do next? Not surprisingly, revolutions often adopt the same solutions as the institutions they overthrew. It's the same in music; once a new sound is established, it begins to be trite. The old urge to become more subtle and harmonically adventurous, to add new instruments and more interesting arrangements, shows up once again. By 1963, it was apparent that rock 'n' roll had said about all it had to say, and that change was in the wind.

Suggested Projects

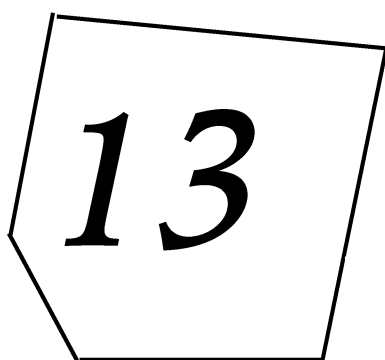
1. Listen to Elvis Presley's recording of "Hound Dog," which uses blues changes. Do the changes occur in the expected places? Is the text in typical blues form? Does the song use a twelve-measure phrase? Now listen to Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock," and answer the same questions.
2. Find examples of the three rhythm patterns mentioned in this chapter. Are there other typical rock 'n' roll characteristics you can discover? List them.
3. What sort of dances did the young rock 'n' rollers do? See if you can learn to do the twist. Were these dances mostly couple dances or solo dances?

Suggested Records

Berry, Chuck. *Chuck Berry: Golden Decade*. Chess.

Presley, Elvis. *The Elvis Presley Sun Collection*. RCA.

20 Rock Revival Greats. K-Tel NI 4750. A good survey of minor groups and styles of early rock 'n' roll.



DISCO, REGGAE, PUNK, NEW WAVE, AND WHATEVER

The eruption of rock styles that took place in the 1960s led to even more, and more extreme, kinds of rock in the 1970s. Some of these new styles were spin-offs of some of the 1960s innovations. Others were attempts to get back to the original social function of rock—to shock, to outrage, to bug the squares. At root, however, the fact was that rock, as a popular idiom, was running out of steam, groping ever more desperately for the means to keep going. Whenever you see a musical style recycling its original material in revivals, you know that the style is having trouble staying creative.

Disco

Disco music is a case in point. Disco is body music, just as the music of Fats Domino and Chubby Checker is body music. It was to be danced to, not seriously listened to, and it had no more purpose than that. Name all the great disco bands you can think of. Chances are, you can't think of any. There is no Simon and Garfunkel, no Joni Mitchell, in disco. You're supposed to dance, not think about the song.

Disco's style is homogeneous, even homogenized. Performers aren't important. The music itself typically has a relentless beat, impelled by the whop, whop of a pile-driving bass drum. The tempo stays the same from song to song. There may be intricate layers of rhythm, borrowing from African and Jamaican reggae music. The melody is usually a slick and soulless arrangement of a tune you already know—pop songs, other rock tunes, even (sacrilege!) classics by Beethoven, Mozart, or someone else. Lots of violins, some bluesy wailing by a vocal group, and there you have it— instant disco.

This disco craze began in New York in the early 1970s, and spread across the country, mostly in nightclubs in large cities. The term “disco” is a contraction of “discotheque,” meaning a French dance hall where the music is provided from recordings, rather than by a live band. Disco exploded on the American consciousness after the

release of the film *Saturday Night Fever*, starring John Travolta. For a year or so, it seemed that disco music bubbled from every radio, every “boom box,” every automobile in the nation. The fever passed almost as quickly as it came on, however. While some people still visit discotheques, the fad has run its course, and you seldom hear disco on a popular-music station today.

Reggae

The sun-soaked Caribbean island of Jamaica is a long way from the sound studios of Philadelphia or London. It may seem strange that the music of this tropical land should influence popular music in this country. Still, the music of the Caribbean has had a strong impact on American pop music in the past—most recently in the Cuban *mambo* craze of the 1950s and Harry Belafonte’s calypso songs—so the new sound of reggae had a rather familiar ring when it began showing up in current pop records.

No one knows just where the word “reggae” (pronounced RAY-gay) came from. Whatever its origin, it has a distinctive sound. Most of the effects are rhythmic. Accents are placed on beats two and four in a four-beat measure. The acoustic guitar plays a steady “chinga-chinga” pattern. Sometimes horns are used in reggae; some of the pieces of Earth, Wind, and Fire show a lot of reggae influence. The sound of reggae came to Britain through the large communities of Jamaicans living there. Probably the best-known Jamaican reggae band was Bob Marley and the Wailers. The words to their songs are often full of the symbolism of their Rastafarian religion, and are meaningless to others. Marley died of brain and lung cancer on May 11, 1981. You can hear reggae influences in the music of many new-wave groups, such as The Police.

Punk Rock

Girls with bright orange mohawk haircuts and scarlet lipstick. Boys with black-dyed hair in cocklebur spikes and large safety pins inserted through their cheeks. Leather jackets over T-shirts, leather-look thigh-high boots and miniskirts. Central Casting characters for *A Clockwork Orange*? No, punk rockers.

Punk rock is not just aggressive, not just antisocial. Punk rock is nihilistic. Punks are against everything. Punk emerged from the pubs of London as an expression of the frustration and anger of the long-unemployed workers and of kids raised in hopeless slums. In their crude language and cruder behavior, punks gave expression to the feelings of fed-up blue-collar Britishers.

The model for punk bands was established by the Sex Pistols. The group was created in 1975 by Malcolm McLaren, owner of an exclusive London clothes shop called, incongruously, Sex. In his off-duty time, Malcolm acted as manager for various rock bands. He picked up three out-of-work instrumentalists and added a strutting, sneering lead singer (who had never sung) named John Lydon, alias Johnny Rotten.

As a musical unit, the Sex Pistols were raw and amateurish. To their fans, musical deficiencies were more than made up for by their undisguised hostility. A recording contract with Britain's EMI led to their first single, "Anarchy in the U.K.," but the arrangement with the band immediately soured. EMI was acutely embarrassed by the band's obscene language on a TV interview. The recording executives squirmed, but the publicity sent the Sex Pistols' fame soaring. Other similar incidents finally led EMI to cancel their contract. Their next contract, with A & M Records, lasted exactly a week, and was canceled for unacceptable conduct. No club in Britain would book them, no record company would market them—so they fired their bass player and added Johnny Rotten's friend, Sid Vicious, in his place.

A new recording contract, with the ironically named Virgin Records, led to a series of singles and an album before the band fell apart in 1978. Sid Vicious lived up to his name, murdering his girlfriend a year later. Johnny Rotten ducked into a telephone booth, and came out mild-mannered John Lydon, proclaiming the futility of punk and the death of rock 'n' roll.

The Sex Pistols were through, but they left behind a legacy of raunchy music and a veritable army of imitators. The most successful of the imitators was The Clash, a shrewder and less self-destructive group than their forerunners. Beginning as a punk band, The Clash has gradually moved in the direction of new wave, one ear tuned to outrage, the other to the ring of the cash register. The Clash hoped to be the focus of punk's anti-culture; but instead of leading the punk revolution, they have ended up in the role of followers of punk fashion. Revolutions have always had a way of swallowing their own children.

Heavy Metal and Glitz Rock

The textbook definition of a heavy metal is one of the metallic elements, like uranium or plutonium, which appear near the end of the Periodic Table of Elements. In music, the term describes wall-shaking, ear-numbing, distorted, hyper-amplified aggression. The logical extension of the acid-rock and Jimi Hendrix developments, heavy metal bands carry both guitar technique and feedback distortion to new extremes.

The prototype heavy-metal band is Led Zeppelin (1968–80), a British band that was founded, led, and produced by guitarist Jimmy Page. The Zep, as its fans have nicknamed the group, evolved a thunderous, screaming sound expanded and diffused by reverb and leaning heavily on bass and drums for its power. These qualities became the stock-in-trade of heavy metal bands everywhere.

With this for a beginning (1968), other heavy metal bands sprang up from the gentle soil of England like amanita mushrooms. Groups formed, fell apart, then reformed with dizzying frequency, often with virtually the same members. Thus Deep Purple first appeared in 1968 changing personnel every few years, and in 1978 color-shifted into a succession of Whitesnakes. Similarly, Black Sabbath (1969) hived off

Ozzie Osbourne and later shared vocalists with Rainbow, which in turn contributed some members to a new Deep Purple incarnation. Other British groups in the genre include Judas Priest (formed 1973), Motörhead (1975), Iron Maiden (1977), and Def Leppard (1978).

Foreign imitators emerged in the 1970s. The durable group AC/DC formed in Australia in 1974 and found success in Britain and the United States. America produced a spate of groups, including Aerosmith, Motley Crüe, and Blue Öyster Cult (umlauted letters seem to be an American penchant), and wiz guitarist Eddie van Halen. Petite, red-haired Pat Benatar trained to sing opera, but opted for the glamour and money of rock instead. And Metallica sprang from Los Angeles in 1983 and found a niche with passionate speed-metal freaks.

Musically, heavy metal employs mind-numbing volume, repeating riffs, and power chords from the guitars. One variant, speed metal, includes guitar solos played as fast as possible over a jackhammer beat from the drums. The music inspires devotees to engage in head-banging (against a wall or with each other) and “moshing,” or launching oneself as a projectile at other dancers, heedless of possible damage.

Other bands adopted the heavy-metal sound and image. Among noteworthy British groups, we should mention Deep Purple, Bad Company, and Ozzie Osbourne’s group Black Sabbath, with its reputation for having satanic-cult connections.

The bizarre and grotesque aspects of rock reached new extremes in a number of groups that traded musical prowess for theatricality. Ultimate honors in the class of glitz rock, perhaps, should be shared by the weirdly painted ensemble called Kiss (who for several years never had their pictures taken *without* makeup), and the gross antics of Alice Cooper (born Vincent Furnier, a preacher’s son), who depended on boa constrictors, gallows, and beheaded chickens to validate his act. Add to the glitz list Ted Nugent, who has appeared onstage clad only in a loincloth, and the New York Dolls, renowned mainly for the fact that lead singer David Johansson is a ringer for Rolling Stone Mick Jagger.

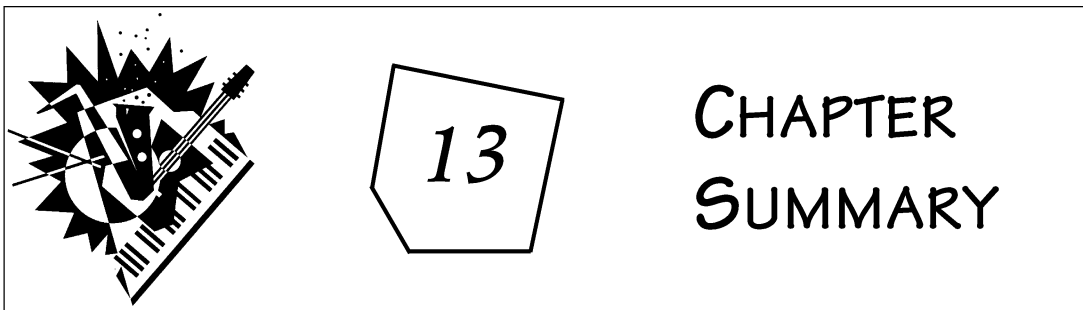
New Wave

In a field of study which, like rock, is full of imprecise terms (what is rock ‘n’ roll? jazz-rock? soul?), one of the most imprecise is the term “new wave.” As much as anything else, the term refers to style of dress and even of haircut. Musically, there are many bands with different styles that might be called new wave.

Consider the following list: the B-52’s; the Cars; Devo; the Knack; Men at Work; The Police. What do they all have in common? A heavy debt to their forebears, undoubtedly, to heavy-metal guitar growls, disco’s relentless dance beat, reggae, and even primitive rock ‘n’ roll instrumentals. Often, they also achieve their sound by using new items of equipment and new technology—tuned electronic drums, reverb units, special studio techniques.

Like disco, new wave is intended for dancing. The beat chugs along in a steady eighth-note trot, frequently marked by a stick-tap on closed high-hat cymbals. Vocal phrases are usually short, with instrumentals filling the gaps. New wave has a visual side as well, as can be seen from Devo's upside-down-flowerpot headgear, or the garage band dress of groups like the Cars.

Two foreign groups, The Police (from England) and Men at Work (from Australia) are notable for their musical quality. Both bands are capable of creating bad music when they make the effort, but are fundamentally solid units with strong rhythmic drive and a flair for creating expressive songs. The Police show more reggae influence than most, and some of their song lyrics have a haunting, alienated poetry unusual in Top-Forty bands.



There are hints that, as John Lydon claims, rock is beginning to run out of steam. It's much too early to hold a funeral, but there are signs of decay in the House of Rock 'n' Roll. In some ways, rock has returned to its own first principles: dance, have fun, shock your parents, forget your problems. That, at least, was the message of disco—but then, disco didn't last that long. Reggae was big in Jamaica, but never really caught on in the States. Punk rock also did poorly on this side of the Atlantic, though it had a vogue in Great Britain. There has been a steady market for heavy metal bands for some time, both here and abroad. From time to time, a heavy metal group will turn out a song that does well on the pop charts, too. But the glitz and flash groups burn out quickly. After all, when you buy a record, you can't see the funny or freaky costumes; and many of those bands just can't make it on music alone. Off to MTV, guys.

That leaves the ambiguous new wave bands. Some are quite good, and will probably become established in pop music much as Yes, Led Zeppelin, or the Rolling Stones have. We can't tell what sorts of groups will be the pop music leaders of the future. We can say for sure that the pop music of the year 2020 will be quite different from what is popular today. However, one thing seems certain—it ought to be interesting.

Suggested Projects

1. One of the modern buzzwords, in popular psychology and in rock, is “alienation,” meaning “withdrawn, indifferent, estranged.” Do you think that modern rock describes alienation in its words or music? If so, how does it do this? Can you think of groups whose music sounds more alienated than most? What does this indicate about the groups or their fans? Write an essay on your thoughts about alienation in rock.
2. “Be Good, Johnny” is a song by Men at Work that has to do with parents nagging their teenage son. In the 1950s, a group called the Drifters recorded a song called “Yackety Yak (Don’t Talk Back),” which addressed the same eternal theme. Can you think of other songs that deal with the stresses of teenage life? List and describe the themes of as many as you can find. Be sure to name performers, and include information on record labels and numbers.