

ROCK AND ROLL:
AN EXAMINATION OF HISTORY,
CULTURE, AND INFLUENCE

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What is the significance of rock and, furthermore, what is the history of rock and roll? What kind of culture does rock and roll represent and how has it changed society? What rock and roll songs are important, what do they mean, and how have they influenced me?

“Rock and roll” is a general term used to define a broad range of music. I chose a specific definition of rock for clarity. Rock is the music that was directly influenced by the blues, folk, and country music of black artists; it catered to the teenagers of the baby boomer generation. Rock had a sound dominantly produced from guitars, harmonica, drums, vocals, bass, and keyboard. Under this definition, rock and roll was influenced by and influenced the hippie movement and uncovered new ideas in the 60’s and 70’s.

I also focus on Led Zeppelin because I am passionate about their music and I feel that Led Zeppelin is a symbol of the appreciation I have for my parents. My artwork is experiential, a response to the sound within it. It can be described as “visual poetry” or, in more technical terms, a surreal-experimental time based media.

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What is the history of rock and roll? What kind of culture does rock and roll represent and how has it changed society? What rock and roll songs are important, what do they mean, and how have they influenced me? This paper includes the following: a brief history of rock and roll, an argument about whether or not rock and roll is dead, the cultural impact of rock and roll, and an analysis of a Led Zeppelin song, and the impact this music has had on me.

INTRODUCTION

My love for rock and roll music is hardly my own love, but a love given to me from my parents. I will never forget my mom blasting “Whole Lotta Love” by Led Zeppelin on the way to first grade and me commenting that Robert Plant sounded like Veruca Salt going down the garbage shoot in Willy Wonka [listen](#). As a young child, I rejected the music my parents seemed to be so fond of -- Johnny Cash, Led Zeppelin, The White Stripes, and the Rolling Stones. At the time, I was set on listening to the Jonas Brothers, The Black Eyed Peas, and Katy Perry. It was not until one of my mom’s boyfriend started playing The Black Keys in the car that I opened my mind to the music that I have now come to love [listen](#). As The Black Keys started to grow on me, I began to despise the pop music that all my 5th grade friends were listening to. After The Black Keys came my absolute obsession with The White Stripes. On my 14th birthday my dad took me to a Jack White (the former star of The White Stripes) concert and it was then that I started to really feel invested in music. I started to think that what I was listening to was shaping me, even though it had been shaping me all along [listen](#).

As I have further matured in high school I have started to perceive the music of Led Zeppelin as a symbol of my gratitude for how I have been raised. It’s not necessarily that Led Zeppelin preaches the values that my parents have raised me with, not even close, but rather that Led Zeppelin represents the things I love in life not just through their lyrics, but moreover through their sound. I see Robert Plant and Jimmy Page (Led Zeppelin’s front men) as the epitome of “cool” in the 70’s, a time that seems so foreign to me yet seems present through my parents and in myself. I have always been one of those kids who wished they were a teenager in the 70’s instead of the 21st century, which is ok; I like being the girl who loves Led Zeppelin. Led Zeppelin’s Tolkien-esque lyrics and their mystical sounds resonate with me in a way that I have a hard time even putting into words. It is almost as if the music of Led Zeppelin reaches something in me that is above reality or comprehension. Rock and roll reminds me of hot road trips and always moving forward...of letting go...of sunshine. To me, this music is more real than any other, which is something I really seek in life. The music that has been ever-present in my life is not generated in the sky by computers but rather seems to come from grit and the deepest humanness.

As much as I love the exposure to rock and roll I have had, I don’t know how this music came to be. I don’t know the history of my favorite music genre, which is almost shameful. I want to understand the inner workings of not just a music genre, but a culture rooted so deeply in my daydreams. Which leads me to wonder: What is the value of rock and roll? What is the history of rock and roll? What kind of culture does rock and roll represent and how has it changed society? What rock and roll songs are important to me, what do they mean, and how have they influenced me?

CULTURAL INFLUENCE

Rock and roll had a powerful and ultimately positive impact on society that has rarely been equaled and in relation to race it has proved to be beneficial. Because so much of rock and roll was derived from blues, many black performers were playing for a white audience and, as rock continues on, many white performers begin to appropriate music that was traditionally played by black musicians, therefore creating a desegregation (Fisher 53). “White teenagers listened to music not just inspired by, but often performed by African Americans. By doing this they embraced a part of culture that seemed or in many households actually was forbidden. They went to concerts where performers and parts of the audience were black. They watched movies

such as Blackboardjungle (1955) that showcased integration in schools and inspired youth to question authority. In the 1950s, rock 'n' roll was able to do what jazz couldn't when it created a common culture amongst white and black teenagers (Vaillancourt)." With the formation of white youths and black music, rock and roll created a breaking down of racial barriers, giving this music that was controversial at the time a very beneficial effect (Bertrand 95-6). Many have seen rock and roll as a step towards desegregation and it provoked racial cooperation and shared experience (Bertrand 95-6). While the joining of black and white proves to be a positive outcome of rock, there are other aspects to the music that are even more controversial.

While rock and roll is heavily associated with drugs and sex, the exposure of rock stars' drug and sex related lives to the public had beneficial effects. Carlos Santana (20/100 greatest guitarists) gives partial credit for his exploration in style to his acid intake stating, "You cannot take LSD and not find your voice (Rolling Stone)." Pete Townshend when talking about Jimi Hendrix commented that "when he was onstage he changed...it wasn't just people taking LSD, though that was going on there's no question... he had a power that almost sobered you... he was bigger than LSD (Rolling Stone)." When the Beatles acknowledged using LSD, many fans followed, but after members of the "27 Club" died of drug overdose, being Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Jim Morrison, the drug scene in rock and roll declined (Altschuler 35). Many rock musicians, including John Lennon, Jimmy Page, Keith Richards, Eric Clapton, Pete Townshend, Elton John, David Bowie, and Bob Dylan, and many others, have admitted to having addictions to substances such as alcohol, heroin, or cocaine (Altschuler 30). Many of these artists have undergone rehabilitation, but others have died (Altschuler 30). While the drug aspect of rock and roll is not beneficial, it does shed a light on an issue experienced by many, especially as rock stars set examples in later years by going to rehab. Greil Marcus states that "Rock 'n' roll may be most of all a language that, it declares, can say anything: divine all truths, reveal all mysteries, and escape all restrictions" (Marcus 10) which argues that rock and roll was a step towards a greater understanding of what it is to be human. Rock and Roll is not the only music genre associated with this behavior, but may be one of the most notorious. A lot of rock and roll's lyrics usually linked to sex, but that may have been because sex is one of the most basic and universal actions of human life. Even as rock stars were having sex and doing drugs, which is and was viewed as bad or sinful, they were also influencing a time of sexual liberation, open mindedness, and an increase in empathy and understanding for the darker but realistic sides of life. Shedding a light on this behavior to such a widespread and young audience gave many people the feeling that they were not alone and that they did not have to hide themselves or problems they were having. Rock greatly contributed to the feminist movement as well and gave women a stronger voice in society. With sexual liberation came a greater respect for women as well and many women experienced a greater appreciation and acceptance of their bodies and themselves.

Furthermore, while rock and roll was incredibly influential in many ways, it was most influential for many teenagers who claimed that rock and roll is part of their self-identity. Greil Marcus states, "The ear of the new audience was fickle, teenagers knowing nothing of where the music came from and caring less.... It was new; it was different.... Out of a nascent sense that the world in which their parents had come of age had changed or in some deeper, inexpressible manner disappeared, a sound that made the notion of a new life a fact" (Marcus 17). Rock became one of the first genres of music to identify with an age group, that age group being the teenagers of the Baby Boomer generation (Padel). Rock and roll is credited for giving teenagers a sense of belonging even when they were alone (Coleman). The influence of rock and roll on

younger generations was a recurring cause for concern to older generations, especially because different racial and social groups shared rock and roll culture, which is now considered to be arguably invalid (Coleman). Rock and roll also had a tool in social activism with causes ranging from anti-war protests (especially related to the Vietnam War) and social justice and liberation (Padel). “Whether you identify as red or blue, we all bleed rock and roll. Voicing political beliefs mixes its way into conversation and lyrics all the same. Whether you're a fan of Jimi Hendrix's "Star Spangled Banner" reinvention or Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" insightful ballad, many musical artists have broached the subject of politics or have reacted to the current political and cultural climate through note and song. Inside of a song or performance, artists feel safe expressing their opinions and inviting fans to connect with their message regardless of party affiliation (Rock and Roll Hall of Fame).” As rock and roll created this massive cultural impact, the history of rock and roll is substantial in rock and roll’s effect.

ORIGINS OF ROCK AND ROLL AND THE 50’S

The origins of rock and roll are unclear, however I have discovered that rock and roll is most commonly considered to have directly originated from the blues. As sung by Muddy Waters: “The blues had a baby and they named it rock and roll (Waters)” [listen](#). Rock and roll first began to emerge in the United States in the mid 1950’s but is a direct link to the rhythm and blues music of the 1940’s (Tosches 32). Looking at the line of influence in the creation of rock and roll further back shows that it also comes from jazz, swing, boogie woogie, gospel, country, western, folk, and earlier blues, making rock and roll a melting pot of genres, much like the country it has been popularized in (Gilliand, track 1). By the 20th century, the words “rock and roll” were more popularly used together as black slang with a double meaning, one referring to dancing and partying, but the other with a subtextual meaning of sex (Unterberger). The terms "Rocking" and "rolling" were used, both separately and together, in a sexual context; writers for hundreds of years had used the phrases "They had a roll in the hay" or "I rolled her in the clover (Unterberger)." Even from early origins I can see that the term rock and roll was derived from the most basic objective of life, being sex, but from whom rock originated from seems unclear. Rock and roll was birthed by a range of artists and songs and with the emergence of rock and roll comes a new mingling of whites and blacks in American culture. Rock emerged from the southern United States and depicts a joining of African musical tradition with European instrumentation (Farley). During the Great Migration the migration of former slaves and their families to major urban cities meant that more than ever before black and white residents were living in close proximity to each other and, therefore, a mingling of each other’s music came about (Farley). This rise of urbanization that followed WW2 was characterized by affluence in much of American society, giving rise to high levels of consumption and a boom in population, in short the 50’s were a time of prosperity (Farley). With this newfound opportunity the arts found new freedom in their creativity. In 1951, Alan Freed began broadcasting rhythm, blues, and country music for a multi-racial audience, which Freed described as being rock and roll music (Bordowitz 63). Some of the most commonly known characters at the roots of rock and roll are Robert Johnson, Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Muddy Waters, Johnny Cash, Little Richard, Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, Buddy Holly, and Fats Domino (Marcus, 3 and Cadillac Records) [listen](#). Many of these rock icons are members of the rockabilly subgenre of rock and roll. Then moving away from the 50’s and the birth of rock and roll the 60’s emerged with an expansion of boundaries in rock and roll.

THE 60'S

After the basis of rock and roll in the 50's was established, rock and roll in the 60's was a time of pushing the boundaries and was also a time of its peak. "By the 1960s — as the sapless Eisenhower years were ending and the brief, lusty Kennedy era was forming — a new generation was coming of age. The parents of this generation had worked and fought for ideals of peace, security and affluence, and they expected their children not only to appreciate and benefit from this bequest but also to affirm and extend their prosperous new world (Gilmore)." This striving towards a new world in turn translated into music as well as the ideas behind rock and roll become "new" too. Many of the lyrics at this time begin to shift from songs of love to songs with social consciousness and political statements (Rock Music Timeline). "Under the influence of Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary, folk was turning more politically explicit, becoming increasingly identified with civil rights and pacifism, among other causes. But it was in the nasal-toned, rail-thin young Bob Dylan — who had moved from Minnesota to New York to assume the legacy of Woody Guthrie — that folk found its greatest hope: a remarkably prolific songwriter who was giving a forceful and articulate voice to the apprehensions and ideals of the emerging restless generation (Gilmore)". Because Britain and the U.S. share a common language, much of the music that was wildly popular in America also became popular in Britain (Allmusic, British Invasion). Furthermore, American troops were stationed in Britain at the time, thusly Britain was exposed to American culture and artists such as Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry and Carl Perkins (Allmusic, British Invasion). Some time after this in 1964 the British invasion known as the Beatles arrived and many other substantial groups came out of Britain as well, such as The Kinks, The Who, The Yardbirds, and The Rolling Stones (Allmusic, British Invasion). Many of these artists, especially The Beatles, added to rock and roll's cultural activism. "Elvis Presley had shown us how rebellion could be fashioned into eye-opening style; the Beatles were showing us how style could have the impact of cultural revelation — or at least how a pop vision might be forged into an unimpeachable consensus (Gilmore)." Television also becomes a big factor in the industry as networks try to attract younger audiences (Rock Music Timeline). Early on we begin to see that rock is rooting itself culturally and is mindful of society's constructs.

THE 70'S

The 1970's are when rock and roll was truly becoming big business as many of the great groups from the 60's continued to impact rock and roll while new substantial groups were forming as well. Many of the most popular artists started playing in arenas in front of thousands of fans and at this time rock and roll was a wealthy industry. The 70's was most widely associated with The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, The Who, Grand Funk, Led Zeppelin, David Bowie, Saturday Night Fever, Bruce Springsteen and The Sex Pistols (Rock Music Timeline) [listen](#). Many of these bands contained artists with incredibly controversial and wacky characters. Mick Jagger changed his aesthetic routinely and aspired to be the antithesis of The Beatles and create havoc, not to mention the girls went absolutely crazy for him (Crossfire Hurricane). Jimmy Page, for example, also had an infamous reputation for possibly being a satanist and practicing the dark arts (The Song Remains The Same). Rock began to turn away from the psychedelic rock of the 60's with the deaths of Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Jim Morrison but started to turn into hard rock (Rock Music Timeline). After retaining information from many sources, I see the 70's and late 60's as the height of rock and roll music as a genre and a cultural tool. After the 70's, rock continued on into the rest of history but took a different turn. With the

birth of MTV came a whole new wave of pop-like rock and roll associated with Michael Jackson, U2, Madonna, and Prince (Rock Music Timeline) [listen](#). Rock and roll after this time has been widely debated as to whether or not it is valid. I personally believe that there is little music after this time that can be considered rock in its cultural influence and simultaneously in its sound. As the Baby Boomer generation began to turn into adults rather than teenagers, the new rock and roll was catering to a totally new culture and group of people. Punk and pop-rock became the new rock and roll in all their popularity, however rock and roll after the early 80's or even late 70's catered to such a different audience of teenagers and had a wildly different sound that I do not consider it to be rock and roll in the definition that I am talking about. My definition of rock and roll is the music that was directly influenced by the blues, folk and country music of black artists and catered to the teenagers of the baby boomer generation that had a sound dominantly produced from guitars, harmonica, drums, vocals, bass, and keyboard. Under this definition rock and roll was influenced by and influenced the hippie movement specifically and uncovered new ideas in the 60's and 70's.

THE DEATH OF ROCK AND ROLL

While some believe that rock and roll lives on today, I, and many others, believe that rock and roll is dead in its truest sense. However, this death of rock and roll is a great loss because much of the culture that was influenced by and influential towards rock and roll is much needed in today's society. Gene Simmons, the bassist for Kiss claims that "Rock and roll is finally dead" and "the death of rock was not a natural death. Rock did not die of old age. It was murdered" (Kreps). Simmon's goes on to explain that the growing lack of respect for music murdered rock and roll and that 1958 to 1983 was music's pinnacle as he could name 100s of iconic musicians (Kreps). While Gene Simmons's opinion is not above all other, many would agree with him. In 2012 Rolling Stone Magazine issued the *100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time*, which is a fundamental argument for why rock and roll in its essence is dead (Rolling Stone). The guitar is inarguably the most important piece in the creation of rock and roll and as the top ten best guitarists are considered to be Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Keith Richards, Jeff Beck, B.B. King, Chuck Berry, Eddie Van Halen, Duane Allman, and Pete Townshend, who were all popular in the early 60's to late 70's, supports that rock and roll is not only dead but was also at its prime in the 60's and 70's (Rolling Stone). Regardless of talent, the anti war, communal, nature-loving, rebellious culture behind rock and roll is gone. At this point in time, there is just too much music out there, making it more difficult for anyone to create anything, let alone become really immersed in one band. Maybe artists have achieved originality in recent years, but there is nothing like the newness of rock and roll in the 50's, 60's and 70's that coincide with a powerful counter culture like the hippie movement. With a massive rise in streaming and illegal downloading of music, there has been a loss of respect for music and artists, and many artists therefore have a harder time making a living from being professional musicians (gogulf.com). Even if rock and roll was not dead, it would not be profitable enough for artists as it was in the 60's and 70's because music is so much cheaper for everyone. With advancements in technology, like social media, there is a prevalent sense of a lack of real community; at any given concert, there are always people video taping with their phones and, therefore in a sense, transporting them away from the present moment. Ultimately, there is no way for music artists to make a living producing their music, as music has become a commodity. Rock and roll is dead in its truest sense. Even while people go to concerts to experience the music they love, they still feel the need to take abundant pictures and videos to show off on

social media instead of living in that moment. Real rock and roll would promote a laid back attitude instead of worrying about social status. Yes there are bands like The White Stripes, Cage The Elephant or The Black Keys that in terms of sound would prove that rock and roll is not dead, but the influence these bands have on culture would argue that these bands are not rock and roll [listen](#). Rap music could be considered rock and roll more than The White Stripes in the sense that it spurs new ideas, especially in the young adult crowd, and challenges society's standards, however rap clearly does not sound the same and is generally produced from computers rather than guitars. The rock and roll that I am referring to is clearly based in the late 50's to late 70's, and is the rock that most likely many 50 to 60 year olds experienced.

PERSONAL REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS

While rock and roll had a massive influence on culture, rock and roll has also impacted my life and, similar to the teenagers in the 60's and 70's, rock is part of my identity. Led Zeppelin in particular is very meaningful to me and out of their songs it is hard for me to pick the most substantial one to me. I have chosen "Over the Hills and Far Away" because it most vividly reminds me of a time when I was really happy. The following is the lyrics to "Over the Hills and Far Away" which is from the album entitled *Houses of the Holy*. [listen](#)

1 "Hey lady--you got the love I need
Maybe more than enough.
Oh Darling... walk a while with me
You've got so much...

2 Many have I loved - Many times been bitten
Many times I've gazed along the open road.

3 Many times I've lied - Many times I've listened
Many times I've wondered how much there is to know.

4 Many dreams come true and some have silver linings
I live for my dream and a pocketful of gold.

5 Mellow is the man who knows what he's been missing
Many many men can't see the open road.

6 Many is a word that only leaves you guessing
Guessing 'bout a thing you really ought to know, ooh!
You really ought to know..."

"Over the Hills and Far Away" failed to get on the top 50 when it was released in May of 1973 and seems to be impartially regarded by the members of Led Zeppelin (Welch 79). "According to Plant... He found it difficult to sing to some of the increasingly complex melody lines, however it gave him a chance to indulge in his passion for Celtic mythology (Welch 79)." Plant's lyrics were inspired by Tolkien and his poem by the same name which describes Hobbit adventures (Welch 79). The opening verse (1) of this song is very desperate to me, but I think also shows a lot of respect for women. Verse 2 portrays 3 distinct states of being with "loved"

being positive, “bitten” being negative, and “along the open road” being neutral. These lyrics seem to be about companionship, and are simple ideas, but also offer up an understanding of relativity as it shows different states in one’s own experiences. The first verses immediately offer up narrative about relationships or most likely sex, just as much of rock and roll does. Verse 3 could be in a relationship context but also could have to do with one’s own self and an understanding of the world. Already there is a presence of mysticism in the lyrics and the ideas are portrayed very romantically. Verse 4 begins to divert away from a context of companionship and into the context of the self. Like many of Led Zeppelin’s songs, this song is rooted in dreaming and utopia. “I live for my dreams and a pocketful of gold” I think most relates to the struggle of being successful at something you are also passionate about, which in the case for Jimmy Page or Robert Plant would be that they can be rich and successful from playing their music. These particular lyrics have been debated over because in concert Robert Plant would sing “Acapulco gold” instead of “A pocketful of gold” which was a type of very potent marijuana in the 60’s and 70’s (Welch 79). Verse 5 seems to be about awareness and I think refers to the present moment and the bigger picture in life. “The open road” is also referred to in verse 2, showing that the writer of this is much more aware than oblivious. “Many is a word that only leaves you guessing” similar to verse 4 gives a feeling of striving towards goals or idealism or even utopia. The idea of “many” refers to riches or abundance. I think the real meaning behind this song is a striving for success or bliss. The title itself, “Over the Hills and Far Away,” is similar to the expression “the grass is always greener on the other side” which relates to the entire song itself. Essentially it is talking about how what we can’t have is what we need, but in reality we must be satisfied with what we have. At the same time the song values a striving quality and glorifies yearning and desperation. The yearning of rock and roll is not just portrayed in this particular song but was the basis of rock and roll as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the history of rock and roll and its components has been important for me. Just listening to the music has given me a greater understanding for something that I feel very passionate, yet oblivious about. I think I identify with rock and roll because of the truth in it, and its acceptance for what it is to be human. Rock and roll is gritty and sad and sometimes intensely happy, but it always has a rolling forward quality to it that is important to me, like the everlasting motion of a train. From the blues to its early icons, rock and roll has proven to have a massive impact on the world just as much as on individuals. Rock and roll was merely a product of change and growth in culture. As rock and roll had challenged society, it arguably brought it to a better place. I think most of all rock and roll promoted freedom and liberation and fostered open-mindedness. Rock and roll proved to be a vital influence on society in its peak and without a cultural force like rock and roll in present day, society is in need of a challenger to push us forward. Rap music almost qualifies as the rock and roll of today, yet falls short especially as music is such a commodity now. For society to push forward we need a completely new type of challenger, something that will speak to the masses... something to create a sense of community, which leaves me wondering; what will the rock and roll of tomorrow be and who will be our rockstars?

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