

**The Real Cooking is Done in the Studio:
Toward a Context for Rock Criticism**

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Perhaps the most familiar refrain in the history of popular music in the second half of the twentieth century is the plaintive cry “Rock is dead,” immortalized in the Who’s song “Long Live Rock.” As Greil Marcus shows us, the demise of rock music has been anticipated almost as long as it has been around (see Marcus 1992). The prognostications of death—or at least a long illness due to terminal banality—continue to this day. The reasons for the decline of rock music differ depending on the agenda of the author. Mark Hunter, for example, takes the neo-Luddite point of view that synthesizers and techno-gadgetry are to blame, arguing that the advent of modern studio techniques, which enable the members of a rock band to make a record at different times and in different rooms, without the *esprit* that emerges from playing together, has squeezed all the feeling out of today’s recordings (Hunter 1987). To Martha Bayles, in an article published in the *Utne Reader* and in her recent book *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (Bayles 1993 and 1994), the problem with today’s rock is that it has drifted from its roots in the blues. Since white musicians originally appropriated the Afro-American idiom when they created rock, the farther their music travels from those roots the more desiccated it becomes. In other words, rock is dead.

Even older than the claim that rock is dead is the timeless despair of aging observers of any musical scene that the current style of music represents a decline from the music of their youth. Pointing to the masterpieces of the past—whether they be the so-called “classic rock” songs of the 1960s, or Mozart’s music in the time of Beethoven; or pick any era—music lovers declare that good music has simply stopped coming out, ignoring the fact that there has always been a small percentage of masterpieces surrounded by a sea of mediocrity, and that it takes some time to determine the best songs

¹ The author would like to thank Matthew Daines and Mark Brill for insightful comments on an early draft of this paper.

of a year, let alone a generation. Bayles reminisces about the high quality of the popular music not only of her youth, but also of the 1930s and 1940s, forgetting that the music of both eras was just as sharply criticized in almost exactly the same way she criticizes rock music.² Bayles is also wrong to see the death of rock music in its departure for the blues; the fact that many rock musicians cut their teeth on the blues does not make the blues synonymous with rock. Most medieval composers cut their teeth on plainchant, and chant quotations appear in much of their sacred and secular music. But to judge a medieval chanson or mass on the criteria of chant is ludicrous; the presence, or flavoring, of chant does not mean that a piece must follow the rules of plainsong. A medieval mass would make for a lousy chant, just as a chant would make for a lousy medieval mass; both may be beautiful, but they follow different rules and must be judged by different criteria. Using the blues as her point of reference, Bayles fails to judge rock on its own terms. Despite the subtitle of her book, she never provides us with the tools to assess what constitutes “beauty and meaning in American popular music,” unless by this she simply means *that music which sounds the most like the blues*—in which case she is not really talking about rock music at all.³

² During World War II, for example, Artur Rodzinski, then conductor of the New York Philharmonic, attacked the “pitiful” music of Frank Sinatra that was so popular at the time. “I believe that the style of boogie woogie which appeals to hep cats is the greatest cause of delinquency among American youths today,” he claimed. Then, in the same reactionary manner of today’s rock critics, he vainly urged listeners to turn back the clock on their musical taste: “There is no need for this type of jazz, with such beautiful compositions as the Strauss waltzes to provoke dance tempo” (New York Times 1944).

³ Allan Moore shows the underlying racism behind the notion that black music is somehow more authentic than white music, which assumes “that blacks in the southern USA lived in a state of mindless primitivism, in which they expressed themselves through music ‘naturally’, without the intervening of a musical ‘theory’.” (Moore 1993: 65). On a more theoretical level, Michael Jarrett convincingly refutes the “heat-death” model of conventionalization via degradation, in other words, “the process whereby ‘authentic’ music . . . is translated into ‘commercial’ music . . . for the purpose of selling music to a wide audience” (Jarrett 1991: 805). He continues:

The biggest failure of the heat-death model of conventionalization is this: it cannot account for innovation. By picturing the history of popular music as a downward spiral of “progress” by attrition, it fails to explain how so-called authentic music arises. More specifically, it continues to rely on the thinly disguised metaphysical assumption that genius visits select musicians, or (the more contemporary view) that the rock & roll muse does not strike so much as she resides within a “tradition” (p. 806).

This brings us to our central problem: how do we talk about rock music on its own terms? That there is a particular aesthetic of rock is doubtlessly true, although what exactly it constitutes has eluded our grasp for some twenty-five years.⁴ Most critical discussion of rock in the popular press dispenses with any formal theory of how rock works as music, primarily attending to superficial genre classifications and the artistry of the lyrics, as Bayles points out (Bayles 1994: 217).⁵ In scholarly circles, rock theorizing has mostly fallen to sociologists and those studying popular culture in general (see for example Shepherd 1982 and Wicke 1982).⁶ Whether music scholars have avoided rock due to disinterest or inability is not clear, but the result is a general lack of informed discussion of rock as music, Bayles' works being only the most recent examples.

Calling yet again for a more musical approach to the discussion of rock music brings up the question of whether rock needs—or deserves—such treatment. Rock has if anything benefited from the multidisciplinary approach taken by its scholars; as Susan McClary and Robert Walser point out, being forced to create from scratch the theoretical framework for an intelligent discussion of the music has made rock scholars flex critical muscles long laying dormant in traditional musicology (McClary & Walser 1990: 280–

⁴ One of the earliest calls for a special vocabulary for writing about rock music is Andrew Chester's "Second Thoughts on a Rock Aesthetic: The Band," published in 1970. A famous early attempt to write seriously about rock is Wilfred Mellers' *Twilight of the Gods*, written in the early 1970s. Efforts since then have been numerous and of uneven quality. One of the most interesting and successful is Allan Moore's *Rock: The Primary Text* (1993), discussed below.

⁵ This problem has long existed. Chester warned that "disarticulation of a lyric from the complex musical totality runs the risk of involuntarily subsuming this lyric under the category of 'literature', and applying pre-existing canons foreign to the genre" (Chester 1970: 75). Steve Perry provides a good review of some of the better rock criticism (Perry 1993).

⁶ Some of the most important recent work in the sociology of popular music has been written by Simon Frith (see Frith 1982 and 1987). Frith co-edited with Andrew Goodwin the excellent anthology *On Record*, the contents of which primarily concern extramusical matters. The same can be said of the recent issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly* devoted to "Rock & Roll and Culture," edited by Anthony DeCurtis (Fall 1991) and of this journal.

87).⁷ The appropriation of rock by classically-trained musicologists also runs certain risks. As Chester notes, rock music can seem simple when judged on the basis of the specific mode of complexity of classical music (Chester 1970: 78). We can see an example of this in the attempt by Nors Josephson to show how some progressive rock shares formal elements with classical music, implying that rock music is more valuable when it emulates classical music (Josephson 1992). Allan Moore makes an excellent start at creating a musicology of rock (Moore 1993), but makes the mistake of relying too much on functional harmonic analysis rather than on guitar-based chord structures, which is how most rock harmony is conceived by its composers. This is odd, since he elsewhere skillfully demonstrates the function of guitar box positions in the creation of rock melodic lines (Moore 1993: 74–75). Perhaps most telling is Mellers' discussion of the Beatles (Mellers 1973); reading his book I was confused why the harmonic analysis of some songs was given in a different key from the harmony on the record, until it became clear that Mellers was contemplating the sheet music version of the songs rather than the records themselves.⁸ Scholars like Mellers, it seems, would rather address a secondary realization of the music—the transcription, rather than the record—since it bears the comforting similarity to the score in classical music.

The uneven quality of rock criticism, however, does not mean that the effort should be abandoned. What seems to be an intellectual liability of musicology can also be an advantage. Free of the labor of justifying a work's place in the canon, a musicologist can focus on its musical details and bring to light interesting matters, while rock scholars have to reinvent the wheel each time, so to speak. An analytical article or a book by a musicologist often focuses on a single movement, or a portion of a movement of a

⁷ Musicology, of course, has become increasingly less isolated in recent years. See for example McClary and Leppert's anthology *Music and Society* (1987).

⁸ See for example his discussion of the album *A Hard Day's Night* (pp. 43–66), in which every harmonic example he gives is in transposition from the key on the record.

classical work, but rarely do we read scholarly rock criticism focusing on individual songs, or even on single albums. While the absolute truth of a musical work certainly cannot be seen in musical terms alone, much of its meaning is in fact purely musical—the graceful melodic descent; the addictive quality of certain guitar riffs, etc. To search for extramusical answers for the meaning of every song is to miss some of the most important qualities of the music. Of course, not all the elements of any music are completely analyzable; McClary and Walser are right to defend the irrational elements of rock (see McClary and Walser). And in analysis of classical music, we often make the mistake of assuming we can break down and fully understand the magic of any work. On the other hand, rock criticism rarely even tries to create an understanding of how the musical elements go together to make something beautiful. It is precisely this failure that has led to the malaise that Bayles and others describe. Weak music exists because consumers are willing to support it. The solution to the problem, however, has nothing to do with the blues; rather, if we want to nurture the meaningful and beautiful in rock, we must enable consumers to recognize it.⁹

To be able to recognize the exceptionally beautiful, we first must know what is musically *normative* in rock. As listeners we bring expectations, conscious or not, to all music concerning the formal structure, harmony, rhythm, meter, instrumentation, etc. We can make some broad characterizations about the nature of rock in general—the tendency to emphasize beats two and four, for example—but each artist also constructs his own palette, giving listeners expectations over the course of a career and by certain signs within the work itself. If we hear a dobro on the first track of an album, for example, whether or not we know what a dobro is or what it looks like, it serves as a marker of country music. Unconsciously, we then make certain assumptions about the rest of the song and album—the form of the tunes, the subject matter of the lyric, the vocal style,

⁹ Philip Tagg (Tagg 1982: 37–39) provides the most cogent reasons why we should analyze popular music.

and so on. These expectations can be thwarted for artistic effect, or fulfilled in a way that is superior to other attempts in the genre: this is where artistry comes in.

Simon Frith claims that the logic of the music is simply beyond the understanding of most rock fans, that its meaning for them lies elsewhere (Frith 1987: 139). I have found, however, that average university undergraduates possess a surprisingly sophisticated grasp of how rock is put together. This is borne out by unscientific experiments I have run as a teaching exercise for general education students. Playing isolated phrases of an unfamiliar song on CD for my students, I ask them what they expect to happen next. They almost always know when something different is about to happen, or whether material from earlier in the song will return—demonstrating that they know what the standard form of a rock song is.¹⁰ When I play songs with unusual aspects, such as Sting’s “Straight To My Heart” (. . . *Nothing Like the Sun*, A&M Records: 1987), in $\frac{7}{8}$ time, students generally hear that something is “different,” and often can arrive at the unusual characteristics even if they have no formal music training. I believe informed discussion about rock as music is within the grasp of all its listeners.

As I shall argue below, the rock style is simply too heterogeneous to facilitate simple generalizations. Still, we can make some tentative observations concerning how the rock style treats certain traditional elements of music:¹¹

1) Melody: Perhaps because of its fundamental vocalism, rock is among the most tuneful of western musical styles. Rock songs that are not hummable may find success in alternative circles, but almost certainly not in a broader context. I am convinced that the

¹⁰ Which is: (Introduction)-Verse-Chorus-Verse-Chorus-Bridge-Verse-Chorus (repeat Chorus and fade). A guitar solo may be substituted for the Bridge or final Verse. The standard form is always changing, of course, and always subject to manipulation by sophisticated songwriters.

¹¹ I find Philip Tagg’s model for analyzing popular music too cumbersome for practical application (Tagg 1982); the aim here is to discuss musical parameters in a language that most listeners can understand.

phenomenal popularity of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" (*Nevermind*, Geffen: 1991) was as much due to the striking melody—including an upward leap of a ninth in the chorus—as to the powerful distortion, driving rhythm and biting, cynical lyrics.

2) Harmony: Mellers spends much of his energy in *Twilight of the Gods* analyzing the harmonic language of the Beatles, rightly so, for this is one of the most striking and interesting elements of their songcraft. But for rock in general, this is the exception rather than the rule. For the most part, harmony is one of the least interesting elements of rock, and songwriters have been paying less and less attention to harmonic complexity for the last twenty years—quite the opposite of classical and jazz music, both of which grew more harmonically rich as they matured—bringing rock back to the harmonic simplicity of the 1950s. We can even see this trend within the careers of certain rock artists: as Moore points out, both Kate Bush and Peter Gabriel composed harmonically complex songs in the 1970s, then moved their compositional focus to timbre and rhythm as they became acquainted with synthesizers and African drumming (Moore 1993: 195, fn. 36).

3) Form: rock has been growing more standardized in regards to formal structure since the 1960s; it is hard to imagine an album with the formlessness of Iron Butterfly's *In-a-Gadda-da-Vida* being produced in the 1990s—or at least, it is hard to imagine hearing about it. Rock usually contains sixteen-bar phrases alternating between verses (with changing lyrics) and choruses (with the lyrics repeated), with a guitar solo or eight-bar bridge, containing new musical material, about halfway through. An interesting example of how form has become more regimented can be found in the cover version of Simon and Garfunkel's "Hazy Shade of Winter" (*Bookends*, Columbia: 1968) performed by the Bangles (available on *Greatest Hits*: Columbia: 1990), where Paul Simon's sixteen-bar bridge was edited to a more normative eight bars. The manipulation of form was of great compositional interest to progressive rock bands of the 1970s, and lingers in

groups spawned in that era such as Rush and Yes. In mainstream rock of the 1990s, however, we can expect only subtle variations.¹²

4) Rhythm and Meter: in contrast to harmony and form, the sophistication of rhythm and meter have increased in rock since the 1960s. With the advent of African and Latin American borrowings into rock in the 1970s and especially the 1980s, surface rhythmic complexity has measurably increased. And with the emancipation of rock from dance in the 1960s, and the birth of punk rock and subsequent styles such as speedmetal in the 1970s and 1980s, the palette of tempi has expanded vastly. The locus of compositional interest in meter has changed since the 1970s from the disorienting shifting of meters—for example, the addition of a half bar in Led Zeppelin’s “The Crunge” (*Houses of the Holy*, Atlantic: 1973)—to the use of different meters throughout a whole song. We are more likely to hear a rock song in waltz time in the 1990s than in the 1960s, and songwriters such as Sting have shown a fondness for complex meters (“Seven Days” and “Love Is Stronger Than Justice” on his recent album *Ten Summoners’ Tales*, A&M: 1993, for example). The primary difference is that today’s songwriters use varying meters not to jolt the listener but as a kind of color or flavoring.

5) Texture: since rock is primarily a melodic style, we rarely find true polyphony.¹³ Sometimes songs are built up around piano or guitar riffs to which the vocal line creates a kind of counterpoint, but for the most part the instruments serve to support the melody. With the addition of more tracks in the multitrack recording studio and of digital samplers, the possibility of extremely dense textures has emerged.

¹² An example of subtle formal manipulation can be heard in Suzanne Vega’s charming song “Book of Dreams” (*Days of Open Hand*, A&M: 1990), where the verse lengths are extended by one bar and we hear a new verse after the bridge when we expect a chorus.

As we reach the middle of the 1990s a revival of some of the art rock aesthetic of the 1970s seems to be underway with new bands such as Dream Theater and Jellyfish.

¹³ One example is the round at the end of the Indigo Girls’ “Secure Yourself” (*Indigo Girls*, Epic: 1989).

6) Lyrics: the importance of the words varies about as much as any element in rock music, from banal nonsense vowels designed to carry the melody to a profound kind of poetry that transcends all other elements. Lyrics are often analyzed in their own right, but rarely in their relation to the music. Neil Peart's lyrics for Rush, for example, are often praised—and they certainly are more sophisticated in content than average rock lyrics—but they also seem to sit awkwardly in Geddy Lee's mouth. This is because the lines, although rhyming, contain no consistent poetic meter, thus when the words are set to music the melody naturally emphasizes normally unaccented syllables from verse to verse. The best songwriters have always had the jingle-writer's skill at natural word declamation combined with meaningful content and the occasionally delightful turn of phrase.

7) Timbre: due in part to rapid improvements in synthesizer technology, sound color is an important element in rock, especially in what can roughly be called progressive rock—in some cases, the dominant element. Timbre is unfortunately also one of the most difficult musical elements to write about intelligently, especially as improving synthesizers enable artists to create sounds that are neither novelty noises nor directly derivative of acoustic instruments. In addition, a great variety of foreign and domestic folk instruments have found their way onto rock albums of late, giving rock composers a virtually unlimited variety of timbres to use for their art.

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But before we can apply intelligent comment about some or all of these elements to a critical discourse about rock music, we must answer one more vital question: what is the “art” that rock artists create? Or to put it another way, where is the “text” of rock music located? To Mellers, the text is the song, whether incarnated as sheet music or a track on an album or a soundtrack to a movie. To others more concerned with the role of rock in contemporary society, such as David Shumway, the text of rock lies in the performer, the construction of which the song, the video, the performance, and the press

release all serve as contributing elements (Shumway 1991: 765). Rock stars are the true creators, Shumway argues, and the art they create is themselves, or their persona. While it certainly is instructive to investigate how rock stars manipulate the machinery of fame—which is as much a part of the totality of rock as the electric guitar—if we consider rock music a legitimate art it deserves primary consideration as such. As in classical music, the composer is the composer, but the music is the text; they are both worthy subjects of study, but require different tools and techniques.

But with classical music, we have a score—preferably an autograph manuscript—which we can identify as the primary text. The music exists outside this text, but it is to the score that we turn when contemplating the music. What makes Mellers’ analysis ring false is that he considers the music in abstract rather than the recording, which is the primary text of rock music.¹⁴ Consider what he missed in his analysis of the sheet music, rather than the record: the careful consideration of instrumentation by Paul McCartney and George Martin; the peculiar catch in the voice of John Lennon; the intimacy created by the distinct miking of all the instruments, making it feel like the Beatles are in your living room; or, later in their careers, the special tape manipulation that provided a fundamental element to their songwriting craft—these are of passing or no interest to a scholar not listening to the record. The Beatles are a good example here, for it was their decision in 1966 to abandon touring that began the transformation of the art of rock from a live to a recorded form. Jonathan Tankel says it succinctly: “The recording itself *is* . . . rock music” (Tankel 1991: 41).

Some observers have trouble with the notion of rock as a recorded art. “The essence of rock,” writes Frith, “remains live not recorded performance” (Frith 1982: 149). But this leads to errors in aesthetic judgment. We admire certain things in a performance, such as instrumental technique and interpretive flexibility that are harder to admire in a

¹⁴ John Mowitt and others have previously acknowledged the replacement of scores with records in contemporary popular music (Mowitt 1987: 175).

recording. For Bayles and many others, recordings represent live music and are best when spontaneous and unadorned, like the 1940 Duke Ellington recording she praises (Bayles 1994: 370). To Bayles, studio techniques amount to a kind of trickery that obfuscates a performer's talent, or lack thereof. What is lost here is an understanding of the talent it takes to make a record—a talent, granted, which is different from standard gauges of musical virtuosity, but one not necessarily less musical. We fail to see that the art of making records is a separate-but-equal musical art. Glenn Gould shocked the classical world by not only admitting but also defending the use of the tape splice when recording, claiming the musical benefits of editing from several takes outweighed the benefits of the supposedly “unified conception” of a single run-through of a particular piece (Gould 1984: 337–39; see also Ray 1991: 776). Evan Eisenberg takes Gould's remarks one step further:

It is too bad that Gould's morbid interest in the death of live music should have drawn attention from his tidings that a new art, the art of recorded music—what I call phonography—had been born. Gould was right to believe that the center of musical gravity was now the spindle hole. He was right to insist that recorded music be viewed not as a reproduction of the concert but as an independent art, as distinct from live music as film is distinct from theater (Eisenberg 1987: 105).

By the time Gould wrote his essay, Eisenberg continues, popular music had already been transformed into a phonographic art, “where a concert is often a promotional appearance in which one attempts to mimic one's records” (Eisenberg 1987: 105). As Robert B. Ray points out, with performers such as Madonna, Janet Jackson, New Order and most rap groups, it goes beyond mimicking to the actual replacement of the live by the recorded in concert (Ray 1991: 777). This paradigm shift to recordings affects both construction and consumption of the musical art. As for consumption, the record (or CD) has become the musical object, now consumed in the car, at work or at home rather than in the concert hall. And in the construction of the music, this marks nothing less than the advent of a third form of musical composition—the first two being music written for oral

transmission and music composed on paper. As Brian Eno notes, the change occurred sometime in the 1970s, when multi-track tape recorders expanded from eight to sixteen tracks:

After you get to a 16-track, you have far more tracks than you need to record a conventional rock band. Even if you spread the drums across six tracks, have the bass on two, have the vocals, have the guitars, you've still got six tracks left. People started to think, "What shall we do with those six tracks?" (Eno 1983: 57)

This leads to a new kind of music artist, one who writes composes in the studio.

Eno continues:

You no longer come to the studio with a conception of the finished piece. Instead, you come with actually rather a bare skeleton of the piece, or perhaps with nothing at all. . . . You begin to think in terms of putting something on, putting something else on, trying this on top of it, and so on, then taking some of the original things off, or taking a mixture of things off, and seeing what you're left with—actually constructing a piece in the studio (Eno 1983: 57).¹⁵

"In the popular field, written notes or chords are about as important as written recipes in your *bubbe's* kitchen," writes Eisenberg. "The real cooking is done in the studio" (Eisenberg 1987: 124).

The producer is now the primary *auteur* of rock music (Moore 1993: 161; see also Gilett 1980). The most successful producers, such as Quincy Jones and Daniel Lanois, can put a personal stamp on the music of any album they work on without obscuring the craft of the artist. And rock musicians themselves can raise their artistic status by producing their own albums, as Kate Bush and Laurie Anderson have done, or becoming independent producers in their own right, such as David Gilmour of Pink Floyd and Phil Spector. There is even a kind of virtuosity of phonography; rock artists seeking to impress critics have been known to release an album that was self-produced and either

¹⁵ It should be noted that rock musicians are not the only ones who compose this way; New Age musicians such as Suzanne Ciani and Vangelis use this technique, as do many film and television composers and even some composers of art music.

entirely or primarily self-performed—Stevie Wonder (*Innervisions*, Motown: 1973), Prince (*Prince*, Warner Brothers: 1979), Karl Wallinger (recording as World Party; see his album *Goodbye Jumbo*, Ensign: 1990) and George Michael (*Listen Without Prejudice*, Columbia: 1990) have all done this. That the art of phonography has become a central part of the rock compositional experience is made clear by a detail on the inside cover of Queen’s seminal 1970s album *A Night At the Opera* (Electra: 1975): perhaps to show off their artistry, or perhaps just to avoid confusion, the band proudly advertised that the album had been made entirely without synthesizers.¹⁶ That the album is a masterpiece of overdubbing and employs reverb units and other gadgetry must not have struck the musicians as a sign of “studio trickery”, to return to Bayles’ phrase. Multitracking was, and is, within the realm of authenticity in rock.

Technology in itself is aesthetically neutral (Hamilton 1988: H32), and today’s critics are right to claim that much of today’s popular music is overproduced. But some rock artists have also created masterpieces in the studio, for example Kate Bush’s song cycle *The Ninth Wave* on her 1985 release *Hounds of Love* (EMI-Manhattan). In addition to a strong narrative, melodically rich songs that flow into one another seamlessly, and an intriguing use of Celtic folk music, Bush uses phonography to paint a picture in sound. In this regard, she makes a masterful use of what Allan Moore calls the “sound-box”, a way to describe musical texture by imagining the aural space created by stereo recordings as a three-dimensional box, the first dimension being the stereo imaging from left to right; the second being the registral location (up and down) of different textual strands; and the third being the sense of musical depth, “the illusory sense that some sounds originate at a greater distance than others” (Moore 1993: 106). With Kate Bush, as with the Beatles, Pink Floyd, the current group Jellyfish, and other great phonographic artists, one has a sense of musical events happening in the foreground, middleground and background—as

¹⁶ By 1980, Queen had adopted synthesizers, apparently without embarrassment.

well as in various points left and right and up and down—simultaneously. Like the best of any art music, the music of these artists is both immediately attractive on a first hearing and rewards more careful listening as the different textural strands and other details emerge (for an interesting discussion of Kate Bush’s song cycle, see Kruse 1990).

Some rock artists, of course, have very little concern for phonography. The Grateful Dead are among the last groups for whom the text is still in the live performance rather than the records (bootleg tapes notwithstanding). And for many other bands, regardless of the artistry of the studio, records really do just present a facsimile of the live sound; in other words, it is at the concert that you will find the essence of the band’s music. And for still others, as Shumway points out, the recording stands behind the persona as the center of a band’s “meaning”. How can we account for these exceptions when analyzing rock?

The answer is to not just accept but celebrate the diversity of styles imbedded within rock music. Each sub-style must be analyzed on the basis of its own criteria. If you value a perceived political content to your music, you might think punk is the most interesting of all rock music; if you are fascinated by harmonic sophistication, however, you will find more to contemplate in the Beatles than in punk rock; if you are intrigued by instrumental virtuosity, you will be more interested in heavy metal than the Beatles; if you are most concerned about the music’s dancability, you will listen to Madonna over heavy metal; if you desire music with a kind of authenticity in the instrumentation, you will value the Indigo Girls over Madonna, and so on. Only by understanding what the artists are trying to achieve can we adequately judge them.

Bayles worries that compartmentalization is a “logjam” in the river of our culture (Bayles 1994: 384)—and she’s right to call for more cross-fertilization. But I suspect she sees the “river” as the blues, with several cross-currents and eddies within; I prefer to see our culture as a watershed with several rivers which can blend together or split, all serving the same overall function, but all wonderfully different. Extending this analogy,

we must recognize that rock music is not a tributary to the blues but rather a separate stream. If popular music is truly as banal as Bayles seems to think it is, it is not because we have drifted down the wrong river; rather, it is because we are using the map of the blues to guide our travels—or no map at all. Until we learn to judge rock music using the elements specific to the rock style we will never truly understand the music.