The Death of Rock?

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Is rock dead? Not according to the NME. In November 2002 the paper included a free CD, 'The New Rock Revolution', which heralded a new dawn for 'rock'. NME editor Conor McNicholas wrote 'Once in a generation something so revolutionary happens in music that afterwards nothing is ever the same again. Right now, that's exactly what's happening'.

Is it? Anybody noticed? Take the compilation included some half-decent US and UK bands (The Von Bondies, Radio 4, Black Rebel Motorcycle Club, The Coral, The Music) as well as New Zealanders The Datsuns. The music was neither new (being variously 'sourced' from PIL, The Jesus and Mary Chain, NY post-punk 'no-wave' and 'mutant disco') nor revolutionary. Despite the NMEs attempts to sell this idea (literally, through t-shirts) the 'rock' public remained unmoved. Everything was still the same, the marketing hype failed, and NME sales fell inexorably while Kerrang!'s rose.

But what constitutes a 'rock revolution'? The history of rock music since the 1950s has been littered with revolutionary rhetoric around key historical moments. Whenever rock (and roll) seemed to be limping to an early and deserved grave, upstart musicians forged a new sound that reinvigorated rock music.

When revolutionary Elvis joined up and turned out to be an all-American-God-fearing-boy after all (the first 'death of rock'), a bunch of scouse lads took black rhythm and blues and the cool of Gene Vincent to Hamburg, and returned with a sound that was to shake up the USA and inspired the 60s British invasion. This 'Britishification' of US culture by a mutant Anglo-American music seemed revolutionary in itself, but the greatest rock revolution is said (by rock journalists and academics then and since) to be when the Anglo-American axis transformed rock and roll into 'Rock'.

This transformation occurred when the cultural weight placed on the shoulders of showbiz rock and roll became too great and required an intellectual anti-mainstream ordination. By the late 1960s, rock music, through The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan et al was said to have caused a 'revolution in the head'. That is, youth culture had the false consciousness of consumer society, parent culture and mainstream politics lifted from it - by opening the doors of perception a new society could not only be imagined, but also built. Rock, it has been argued, was central to this revelatory cultural moment, but others suggest that it merely soundtracked social transitions and changes that were happening anyway. Whatever, Psychedelia and protest music became associated with revolutionary counter-culture. With the increasing amplification of rock, the growth of festivals, increasing numbers of music magazines and papers, and the introduction of rock radio, rock became increasingly audible and visible throughout the 1960s. It did so on the back of frenzied commercial exploitation that did not sit easily with rock artists (who had greatly benefited from it). The anti-music industry and anti-mainstream rhetoric of rock (borrowed from the 1960s political folk movement) has been a feature of rock ever since, but one that each generation feels it has discovered for itself.

Pop and rock music has also been viewed by cultural critics as a mere product of a mind-numbing corporate music industry. Despite some suggesting 1960s rock
marked a revolution of perception, others argued the music industry had figured out how to sell revolution to consumers who had grown out of the rock and roll of their youth, and who were hungry for more weighty music that they could call their own. So the revolution of 60s rock was also marked by a revolution in the music industry. The 7" single was no longer the primary format - album orientated rock became the vehicle for music that maybe took itself far too seriously.

Early rock and roll had a certain 'authenticity by association' for the rock audience - it had a heritage in black rhythm and blues and country, and this heritage was reaffirmed in the late 1960s when The Band, Neil Young, The Beatles, The Byrds and others turned away from Psychedelia to a simpler blues and country based rock. In some respects, 'gutter punk' rock was felt to have been sullied by the LSD fuelled manic drive towards innovation and the celebration of individual genius. Rock was supposed to be about 'the street' - or at least about music created from 'three chords and the truth'.

On the other hand Yes, Genesis, Emerson Lake & Palmer and other rock bands of the 1970s felt that rock should be about conceptualism, complexity and have an art aesthetic - it should aspire to be a new revolutionary 'classical' music that replaced the old. Progressive rock therefore had competing and contradictory drives - both to 'smash the system' of old cultural values while employing the tools and attitudes of elitist culture (such as the symphony orchestra). Progressive rock intended to have a revolution project, and some bands more than others (Van Der Graaf Generator, King Crimson) did make music that assaulted the audience and mainstream culture. However, it was felt by rock critic Lester Bangs that progressive rock betrayed everything that rock was supposed to be about. In the film 'Almost Famous', 'Bangs' suggests that the early 1970s marked the death of rock.

John Rockwell in the Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll elaborates on this suggesting 'There is a morphology to artistic movements. They begin with a rude and innocent vigour, pass into a healthy adulthood and finally decline into an overwrought, feeble old age. Something of this process can be observed in the passage of Rock & Roll from the 3-chord primitivism of the 50s through the burgeoning vitality and experimentation of the 60s to the hollow emptiness of much of the so-called progressive or art rock of the 70s'. However, progressive rock itself contained the seeds of the next revolution that for some resulted in the undisputed death of rock music, and for others marked its rebirth.

Punk Rock, it has been suggested, looked at the walking corpse of rock music as represented in progressive rock, and decided to emphasise the Dionysian rather than cerebral pleasures of rock. And yet, some areas of progressive rock contained such desires. Van Der Graaf Generator's Peter Hammill released the solo album 'Nadir's Big Chance' in 1975. It was a call to arms that not only questioned the excesses of progressive rock, but also did so with a proto-punk noise that seems now astoundingly prescient. King Crimson, through Robert Fripp, influenced many artists (including much later Kurt Cobain) who produced awkward and incendiary music that was as far removed from Yes as can be imagined, and yet is still called 'prog'.

Arguably punk didn't aim to destroy 'prog' as such, but wanted to destroy the complacency of the 'Old Grey Whistle Test' school of rock (Nils Lofgren, Peter Frampton) and the pomposity of stadium rock - with Led Zeppelin (non-Prog) as guilty as ELP (uber-prog).

Punk reinvigorated rock music by simplifying it and speaking to the audience in a prosaic and direct way. The poetic romanticism of prog was implicitly ridiculed by punk, and the music bore little relation to symphonic rock. However, it was far from a working-class rebellion against the middle-class occupation of rock by proggers. The Sex Pistols may have been working class Londoners, but the organising forces behind punk and its spread were middle-class. Art school and higher educated entrepreneurs (whether Malcolm McLaren, Vivienne
Westwood or, outside the capital Tony Wilson and the Buzzcocks). Their predecessors were equally a mixed bunch of college kids slumming in the rock dives of New York - whether Patti Smith, Television or the Talking Heads. And Johnny Rotten/Lydon was a prog rock (Peter Hammill, dub reggae and Neil Young fan whose musical tastes were not dictated by his working class background.

Punk, through the Pistols, momentarily shocked some of the UK public in 1977, and later the USA - but by 1978 punk had been fully co-opted by the music industry with novelty punk hits such as Jilted John's 'Gordon is a Moron' (a precursor of Linkin Park) outselling punk bands who were 'keeping it real'. And sadly for those who believe that punk changed the world, it has to be noted that despite Morat's claims in the 2000 Kerrang! special that 'way back when dinosaurs (Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Genesis et al) ruled the earth, it was the Pistols who drove them to extinction', the only thing dead in 1978 was punk.

Far from the whole world going punk in 1976-77, punk was a minority taste. Punk could not commercially compete with Pink Floyd, Genesis or Yes, pop/rock artists ELO, Abba and David Soul, and disco in the late 70s and early 80s. The Pistols were extinct well before Pink Floyd. The progressive dinosaurs remained on the whole, undefeated and arguably reinvigorated by punk. Yes, Genesis and Phil Collins (regrettably or otherwise) in one way or another found their greatest commercial success in the 1980s. Therefore, the long-term impact of punk in Britain is arguably over-amplified and ironically, in the post-punk era, Johnny Rotten/Lydon and his new band PIL pursued a distinctly 'progressive' path in an attempt to bury punk. So in what sense was punk a revolution? Like the 1960s counter-culture, maybe punk propagated for some a new revolution in the head which only played itself out in the 1980s through the growth of indie and alternative rock - and many bands inspired by punk (The Smiths, New Order and the Cocteau Twins) did not actually play punk rock.

By the 1980s, any claim that rock was the primary experience and vehicle for youth cultural expression became unsustainable. As suggested previously, disco, as well as ska, reggae, Motown, northern soul and funk, had been central to club and dance culture that was all but ignored by rock critics (unless, that is, a rock artist (Bowie and Young Americans) showed an interest in these forms). From the 1950s onwards pop and dance music had been sidelined as inauthentic music industry ephemera, and yet was the experience of the majority of the record buying public. Rock, by placing itself at the pinnacle of popular music, had reduced large swathes of music culture to footnotes in the histories of rock.

When NY Electro, Detroit Techno and Chicago House hit the clubs and streets of Britain in the 1980s, British youth was continuing its long term obsession with music from these contexts (New York Disco, Chicago electro blues, Detroit Motown and soul) - this was not a 'dance revolution'. What was revolutionary was that there were magazines such as The Face and ID who were documenting the fleeting club scenes, and bringing them to a national audience. In the 1970s, sociological studies suggested that dance...
musics, since the 1960s, had appealed to British working class youth. whereas rock was the primary experience of middle-class youth and students. By the 1980s, this social stratification of tastes was unclear (if it was ever really true). Bands such as New Order enacted the shift from guitar-based rock into music that could encompass aspects of Hi NRG and Electro. It could be argued that Manchester club the Hacienda educated its audience into an acceptance that rock and dance boundaries were meaningless, resulting in the cross-over music of the Happy Monday’s ‘Madchester’. Dance culture, through house, techno, acid and rave became a mass movement by the early 1990s (that is, mass because of the scale of its organisation - 10,000 people dancing in a field), and it seemed apparent that youth culture had diversified into a range of lifestyle choices. Rock no longer could claim to be the central experience of youth - as Lawrence Grossberg suggests “people no longer danced to the music they liked, they liked the music they danced to.”

In the 1990s rock seemed to gain a new lease of life in the US and UK through Nirvana and ‘grunge’ but it became difficult for these artists to come to terms with the fact that the challenging music they were making was given the corporate tag ‘alternative rock’, and by 1992 was the mainstream rock format of the US music industry and MTV. The British response to grunge was the guitar orientated Britpop ‘movement’ which was deeply nostalgic, retrogressively nationalist and a throwback to 1960s British rock. In the USA, after the breakthrough success of Korn and the Deftones a new form of hard rock that embraced elements of Hip Hop culture became the primary format of American rock as Nu-Metal. Through carefully honed marketing and presentation, these bands seemed to represent a new anger, an alternative to mainstream thought and lifestyles, but in the final analysis are corporate rock for the noughties, Nu-Metal is sanctioned rebellion - in the case of bands such as System of a Down, anti-capitalist anger marketed through a capitalist corporation - capitalism will sell anything as long as it can be packaged with a free sticker and fold-out poster for the teen-angster.

Kerrang may now be the biggest selling weekly magazine, guitars may be flying out of music shops (and DJ decks and groove boxes left languishing on the shelves) but this does not necessarily mean this recent revival of ‘rock’ is a vital authentic expression of an oppositional culture, as opposed to dance or any other culture. It is a lifestyle choice. Rock may have kicked itself that it was once the voice of a generation, but in the present it is the inarticulate voice of a generation without a script. Punk (at least punk not represented by Blink 182 and Sum 41) may remain as an oppositional space with its own independent network, and there may well be evidence that in the field of electronic music there are ‘dance’ artists creating independently minded work (Alec Empire) that ask difficult political questions. But we first need to work out what it means for rock to be alive before we can suggest it is dead. Maybe rock was never about politics anyway, but was always really about the pleasures of noise, dance and youthful insolence. In this sense, it still fulfills the same pleasures enjoyed by the kids who trashed cinemas in the 1950s while watching ‘Rock Around the Clock’, and isn’t quite yet on its way to the emergency resuscitation unit.

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