

# Rock Music

Culture, aesthetics and sociology

Z 2.2.0

302975

5

T E R W I C K E

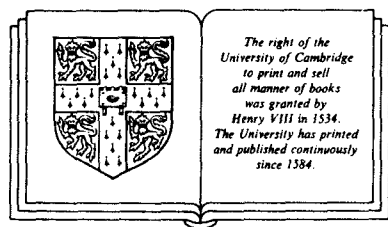
# ROCK MUSIC

---

*Culture, aesthetics and sociology*

PETER WICKE

*Translated by Rachel Fogg*



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Cambridge*

*New York Port Chester Melbourne Sydney*

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

Originally published in German as *Rockmusik: zur Ästhetik und  
Soziologie eines Massenmediums*  
by Verlag Philipp Reclam jun. Leipzig 1987  
and © 1987

First published in English by Cambridge University Press 1990 as  
*Rock music: Culture, aesthetics and sociology*  
English translation © Cambridge University Press 1990

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

*British Library cataloguing in publication data*

Wicke, Peter

Rock music : culture, aesthetics, and sociology

1. Rock music – Sociological perspectives

I. Rockmusik. *English* II. Title

306'.484

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data applied for*

ISBN 0 521 36555 4 hardback

ISBN 0 521 39914 9 paperback

WG

## *Rock music*

## About the author

---

Peter Wicke was born in Zwickau in 1951 and is currently head of the centre for popular music research at the Music Faculty of Berlin's Humboldt University. He completed his music studies in Berlin in 1974. Since then he has been a member of the teaching staff at the Music Faculty at Humboldt University, lecturing on the history, aesthetics and theory of popular music. He received his PhD in 1980 for a thesis on the aesthetics of popular music, and in 1986 he received his Dr. sc. phil. He has published many articles in his native country and abroad on theoretical, historical and cultural-political problems of popular music, and his work has been translated into English, French, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, Finnish, Czech, Bulgarian and Russian. He is the co-author, with Wieland Ziegenrucker, of *Rock Pop Jazz Folk. Handbuch der populären Musik*. He has visited many foreign universities on lecture tours, including, as part of the preparation for this book, London, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham. He is a member of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music and has held the post of General Secretary of the Association since 1987.

## *Preface*

---

Batteries of spotlights pick out the band in multi-coloured light against the darkness of the stage. The hall trembles under the thunderous noise of the fans. The singer steps up to the front of the stage. The music begins to the stamping rhythm of the drums ... Scene change: the shadows of young people dance frenetically in the flickering lights of a discotheque. The noise level is deafening. Nothing disturbs their abandonment to the music. The energy which keeps their bodies moving seems inexhaustible ... Scene change: a fourteen-year-old boy, eyes closed, wears the booming headphones of a stereo system. The walls around him are papered from top to bottom with posters and stickers. A record revolves on the turntable. Only a light rhythmical rocking of his upper body gives away his absorbed involvement in what is reaching him via connector and cable ...

Rock music – who can fail to recognise these descriptions of young fans which are so inextricably bound up with it? But what is it that actually lies behind these descriptions? What does the fascination with this music, reflected in such scenes, consist of? What experience of reality is to be found in the music? What significance and what cultural values are locked up in the hammering, motoric rhythms and the often shrill sounds that are transmitted to a mass audience through the songs?

This book attempts to provide an answer to these questions. It seeks to investigate the social and cultural origins of rock music in order to reconstruct the contexts in which its very diverse musical styles have arisen, and which, at each point in its development, have become the carriers of very specific meanings, embodying values which reach deep into the lives of its fans. The book seeks to penetrate to the social roots of rock music, demystifying its history and making clear the social movements

which it reflects. The central concern of the book is to expose and to make comprehensible and meaningful those levels of rock music which lie hidden beneath its musical surface, behind its styles and ways of playing. Records and songs are not isolated objects; they are the symptoms of an extensive overall cultural context which owes its existence in equal measure to social and political relations as well as to the particular environment of its listeners.

Nothing has changed this context, or the music culture of the twentieth century, more fundamentally than the meteoric rise to fame of the Beatles. Around eighty per cent of the music currently available on sound media represents one or other branch of rock music, using the term rock music in its widest sense. In Britain and the USA alone, rock's classic countries of origin, a total of around ten thousand singles and eight thousand LPs are released in this field each year; if we assume ten tracks per LP, this gives a total of one hundred thousand songs every year. The rock'n'roll programme 'Aloha from Elvis in Hawaii', featuring Elvis Presley, was beamed across the world in January 1973 from the International Center in Honolulu; demographers estimate it reached about one third of the world's population. The satellite broadcast of the sixteen-hour 'Live Aid' double concert from Wembley Stadium in London and the John F. Kennedy Stadium in Philadelphia (with contributions from Sydney, Moscow, Tokyo, Peking, Cologne and Vienna), is said to have united nearly two thousand million viewers from 150 countries in front of the television screen. Therefore to see rock music simply as an exclusively 'teenage music', just linked to the phase of adolescence, misses the point altogether, even though young people – the age group with the most intensive contact with music – do form the central social group related to rock. In fact, the upper age limit of this group is continually rising and it has, for a long time, included young adults up to the now forty-five-year-old Beatles generation.

Merely by virtue of its numerical significance in current music production, rock music imposes conditions and has cultural consequences which allow it to become a symptom of much more far-reaching and fundamental changes. These changes cannot be reduced to the problem of 'youth', but rather amount to the formation of a new everyday culture, influenced by the

media. Thus it is valid to see in rock music the prospect of a development which may be ignored or resisted, but which will definitely not be halted. By linking music, showmanship, lighting, poetry, politics and image a new art praxis has been created. On the basis of the technology of modern mass communication this praxis also validates a new kind of artistic self-awareness, which cannot be dismissed merely by alluding to the putative musical and content nonsense of commercial business-mindedness. It is more the case that it is part of the peculiar nature of rock music to involve itself uncompromisingly with the technical and economic conditions of the cultural mass processes organised by the media, and in doing this it becomes a communications medium itself. Rock music is not an object of a contemplative enjoyment of 'art' separate from everyday life; rock songs are not subjects for contemplation, their meaning is not given to the 'form' by a hidden 'content'. Rock music is a mass medium through which cultural values and meanings circulate, through which social experiences are passed on which reach far beyond the material nature of the music.

The 'content' of rock songs cannot be reduced to what is directly played or even what appears to be expressed in the lyrics. For its listeners these aspects only form the medium of which they themselves make *active* use. They integrate them into their lives and use them as symbols to make public their own experiences, just as, seen from another angle, these aspects give the experience of social reality a cultural form conveyed by the senses and thereby influence that reality. However, this does not mean that lyrics and music are now to be entrusted to the whim of an arbitrary use or that they are in the end to be interchangeable in their concrete form. Just as in a jigsaw puzzle each individual piece is only partly defined by its shape and form, while the context of the whole picture and the place of the piece in it is equally important, the 'content' of rock music is not merely grounded in the musical form of the songs. On the one hand this 'content' is determined by the contexts which its fans give it, and on the other hand it is also preconditioned by the social relations of its production and distribution together with the institutional contexts in which these stand. In other words, these contexts become a component of the lyrics, a component of a cultural text formed from cultural symbols of the most varied kind (images,



technology, fashion, leisure objects, the everyday materials of the consumer society], and the music is the medium for the formulation of this cultural text. Because of this, rock music is a very complex cultural form in which dance forms, the mass media, media pictures, images and styles of dress are included as well as music. This cultural form is a social environment produced by means of music for cultural activities of the most diverse nature. Its musical and stylistic homogeneity corresponds at any given time to different social contexts, in which rock music appears with changing meanings, always defined through different characteristics, functions and methods of use. This makes it impossible to bind rock music to a rigidly delineated musical definition.

In what follows therefore, rock music itself will be allowed to speak, unburdened by the systematisation of concepts and categories. The purpose of this is to achieve a portrait of rock, of its significant characteristics as revealed in the diversity of its stylistic forms and the breathtaking dynamics of its development. The most suitable form of presentation for this is the essay, which is able to concern itself with detail while keeping the whole in view, piecing together an overall picture from the individual aspects rather like a mosaic. Of course, this does not mean that instead of offering verifiable statements I have taken flight into the twilight of metaphorical vagueness and inaccuracy, or escaped into the journalistic superficiality so common in rock literature. What I am offering are a variety of attempts at a theoretical, reflective approach to the subject, each encapsulated in a self-contained study which considers the subject from a different viewpoint, studies which can only produce a valid model of this music when combined. A form of music that is still changing so much and which, because of the dynamic nature of its own development, escapes any systematic approach, can hardly be dealt with in any other way. Because of this and because of the plethora of individual releases, dates, facts, names, styles and trends (which are in any case no longer entirely clear), I have not attempted to include everything, nor do I believe such an attempt to be necessary. What is far more important is the uncovering of those questions to which the development of rock provides an answer, the reconstruction of the cultural factors, social circumstances and contradictions to which it owes its existence.

The terms 'aesthetics' and 'sociology' in the subtitle of this book represent approaches which define the nature of the way of looking at the problem. Anyone who is led by this to expect a theory-intensive construction of categories, normative value criteria or a richness of empirical-statistical data will be disappointed. A 'theory of rock music' must be developed from the reality of the music, and this reality comprises the musical, cultural and social contexts out of which [and together with the diversity of its performance styles] it arose and out of which it has always evolved new forms. This approach admittedly demands a correspondingly complex viewpoint, for which, as scientific disciplines, aesthetics and sociology provide suitable theoretical apparatus. However, it is not the use of these disciplines that is under discussion here, but rather what I have discovered with their aid. The consideration of rock from a sociological standpoint makes it possible to regard its development as part of its fans' everyday lives and leisure and to understand it as such. The theoretical apparatus of aesthetics, on the other hand, helps to decipher the noisy sounds, the colourful facial expressions and the often obscure disguises, tracking down the code by which personal and collective experiences are recast into songs. But even if the reader's attention is directed in this way to more complex connections than would be the case from the mere description of the musical events and their chronology, even this cannot and will not deliver a really comprehensive explanation. This too is nothing more than an *attempt* to understand and to make understandable what has really been created with this music.

Just as the music itself is constantly changing, so is its terminology. The term 'rock music' means many different things and its meaning has changed at practically every stage in its development. The boundaries between it and other classes of popular music and other fields of music culture are fluid and are constantly changing. A few years ago the description 'beat music' was understood and widespread in German-speaking countries, but has since become a technical term which can now only be applied to the British rock development of the early sixties and to those groups directly influenced by it. The shortform 'rock', derived from the American term 'rock'n'roll', only came into general use in the mid-sixties, losing in the process the specific meaning that it had previously had as a description of those musical styles

directly derived from rock'n'roll. Meanwhile rock music is nurtured from very diverse musical sources – even sources from quite different traditions, like the music of Philip Glass or Steve Reich, Edgar Varese or John Cage, or the music of non-European cultures or European 'classical' music. Amongst these different sources rock'n'roll plays, as before, a dominant, but no longer an exclusive, role. The term itself goes back to the language of the blues and to the slang of North American blacks, in which *to rock* is both a harmless metaphor for dancing as well as a quite obscene euphemism for the sexual act. Incidentally, this background ambiguity has remained in many lyrics right up to the present day, even if the obvious sexual meaning has in the meantime been neutralised.

In any case many different terms also exist – pop, pop music, rock & roll (in contrast to rock'n'roll) etc. – which provide a rich source of confusion, since they are partly synonyms but partly used with more or less independent meanings. This is only of relevance to the following presentation in so far as all these terms appear in perfect harmony in the works of the quoted authors and musicians. In the context of quotations their use is always synonymous with the term rock music.

The conversations and discussions which I had the opportunity to take part in stimulated many important ideas; I am also grateful to all those who have supported me with material, information and contacts in my, often very time-consuming, research. I owe my thanks equally to musicians and representatives of the music industry and also to fans, who listened patiently to me and answered my 'strange' questions, thereby often opening up broad vistas into their thoughts and everyday lives.

I would like to thank the following here for their help and support: Moe Armstrong, Clarence Baker, Chris Bohn, Iain Chambers, Chris Cutler, Geoff Davies, Monika Doering, Simon Frith, Reebee Garofalo, Larry Grossberg, Charles Hamm, Nick Hobbs, Peter Hooten, David Horn, Mike Howes, Robert Lloyd, Paul McDonald, Greil Marcus, Richard Middleton, Charles Shaar-Murray, Paul Rutten, Mark E. Smith, Philip Tagg, Geoff Travis, John Walters, Paul Willis, Tony Wilson – as well as all those whom it is not possible to mention here.

Berlin-Pankow, April 1986

# Contents

---

Preface	<i>page vii</i>
1 'Roll Over Beethoven': new experiences in art	1
2 'Rock Around the Clock': emergence	28
3 'Love Me Do': the aesthetics of sensuousness	48
4 'My Generation': rock music and sub-cultures	73
5 'Revolution': the ideology of rock	91
6 'We're Only in It for the Money': the rock business	114
7 'Anarchy in the UK': the punk rebellion	135
8 'Wild Boys': the aesthetic of the synthetic	154
9 Postscript: 'The Times They Are A-Changing'	174
Notes	184
Bibliography	196
Discography	217
Index of people and groups	219
General index	223

---

## *'Roll Over Beethoven': new experiences in art*

When rock music made its first appearance with American rock'n'roll in the early fifties, using the word 'art' in this context would doubtless have seemed sacrilegious. Even today the claim that rock music is an art form still provokes heated discussion and intense resistance, although in the meantime rock has aspired to academic honours and the Beatles count as its 'classics'. If to some people rock music signals a new musical creativity in the age of the mass media, to others it equally represents the mere substitution of commerce for art. Now we could just leave it at that without further observation. It is irrelevant to the actual effect of rock whether it is honoured with the description of 'art' or not. Since its real status in contemporary music culture hardly needs this sort of justification, such arguments are futile and unproductive.

However, if we want to understand what it is that rock evokes in its listeners and why this music has become in quantitative terms such a phenomenon in present-day music culture, we must start from the assumption that it should be regarded not only as the expression of general social relationships and economic mechanisms, but primarily as what it is to its young fans above all else – music. The significance that it holds, the values that it embodies and the pleasure that it provides are linked to its role as aesthetically relevant sound material. Even if it cannot be reduced to this level, but represents instead a very complex form of cultural activity (including, perhaps, dress and hair fashions, dance styles and poster collecting), the basis on which everything else rests is the music. As Michael Lydon quite correctly states: 'There's a million theories about rock'n'roll, what it is and what it means, but what is most obvious is most overlooked: it's music.'<sup>1</sup> However trite such a conclusion may appear, it is

anything but self-evident. If rock music is really to be understood in its cultural dimension it must be taken seriously as music and be accepted as a legitimate art form.

This only becomes a problem if it leads to the conclusion that those criteria of musical appreciation should apply for which Beethoven serves as a symbol, a conclusion which argues that the true meaning of music is encapsulated in Beethoven and his tradition. Although not always stated in quite such categorical terms, the majority of the countless misunderstandings that have accompanied the development of rock music are rooted in the transformation of this concept of music into an absolute standard. Measured against this, rock music would indeed be nothing but a meaningless noise, invented by a gigantic commercial enterprise to satisfy its profit requirements and made attractive to susceptible teenagers by an appealing exterior. However, this view can be countered by the fact that music is not defined by its means of expression – loud or soft, simple or extremely complex – but primarily by the effects which these achieve. The assumption that relevant and differentiated content, value and meaning can only be expressed by those musical means developed in the tradition of Beethoven and his successors not only contradicts the facts, but presents an equally ahistorical and mechanistic view of art. Artistic means of expression can never be considered separately from their cultural and functional context. There are a number of factors which affect this significantly – the question of whether music is more genuinely realised in the concert hall or in the mass media, the particular everyday activities, lifestyles and needs which music affects, the particular conditions of its production and distribution – and these factors have led not only to historical changes in the conception of music, but also to quite different perceptions of music. This has always been the case, but previously these differing perceptions did not clash as directly as they do today, when this process even intrudes into family life, creating discord between parents and children.

Thus, in order to take rock seriously as music, we need to investigate the conception of music which underlies it rather than apply aesthetic criteria and musical models that are completely alien to its cultural origins.

It is, however, rock's champions themselves, musicians,

journalists and publicists, who have contributed significantly to this confusion. They have applied socially established views of music to rock in order to create a respect for it corresponding to its cultural status. In 1963, for example, Richard Buckle in *The Sunday Times* described the Beatles as: 'the greatest composers since Beethoven'.<sup>2</sup> A greater misunderstanding is scarcely imaginable, for such deep-seated differences exist between these two musical worlds that the one simply cannot be measured by the standards of the other. No less misleading is the opposing theory that would have rock music understood as a form of folk music, as expressed by the American rock historian Carl Belz, who starts from the premise 'that rock is a part of the long tradition of folk art in the United States and throughout the world'.<sup>3</sup> Rock music is organised according to principles that are neither those of folk music nor those of bourgeois art music. In trying to measure rock against either of these we fail to recognise its musical individuality and significantly distort the perspective from which we view it. Paradoxically, it was precisely the same originality which made rock stand out from the conventions of the traditional pop song and which led falsely to the attempt to subsume it in the genre of folk music or to declare it to be 'art' according to the standards of Beethoven.

In contrast, the conception of music which is genuinely at the centre of the development of rock music – even though rock has developed in many often opposing directions in the wake of stylistic differences – was formulated at a very early stage and quite unmistakably in the music itself. It was in 'Roll Over Beethoven',<sup>4</sup> the Chuck Berry song that appeared in 1956, that the musical self-awareness of the rock'n'roll craze, then at its height in the USA, found a provocative and challenging expression, one which has remained something of a leitmotif. In the song the fascination of this music is compared with fever and illness, whose inevitability is taken as a metaphor for the overwhelming effect rock had at that time. Not without irony, while claiming the same status and cultural relevance, rock music appears self-consciously juxtaposed to an artistic appreciation, represented by the names of Beethoven and Tschaiowsky, for which we cannot imagine greater contrasts than a jukebox and a self-sufficient sensuousness. There is, no doubt, more to this than the simple provocation of adults by a pointed lack of respect

for their musical gods. What the black singer and guitarist Chuck Berry was screaming to his fans in this song, in his breathless 'Roll Over Beethoven', heralded a conception of music which had become aware of its own novelty and which challengingly contrasted this with all other musical traditions.

What was really new about rock was its relationship with the means of mass communication – record, radio, television and film. American rock'n'roll found its basic conditions of existence in these media and accepted this fact without compromise as a prerequisite for artistic creativity. Its commercial effectiveness, which no other form of music before it had possessed, was not attributable, as is usually claimed, to the supposed exotic nature of its Afro-American roots. Even in the swing era more than two decades earlier black musicians and bands had been acclaimed by a white audience, just as there had been exchanges between 'black' and 'white' music even before this, in spite of assertions to the contrary. The assumption of a completely separate development of Afro-American and European-American music is more a racist argument that (still) legitimises the established barriers between the races by accepting a real cultural contrast between 'black' and 'white' based on skin colour, a contrast first overcome by rock'n'roll. The relationship between the Afro-American minority in the USA and white Americans, against the background of arbitrarily established barriers between the races, is far more complex than such simplistic 'black/white' thinking makes clear.

The reason for the swift and spectacular spread of rock'n'roll lay, instead, in the fact that it was so much a part of the mass media, which developed explosively after 1945. Rock'n'roll was the first form of music to be distributed in mass quantities on record, the first form of music whose development was linked to radio, film and television. It is true that in the thirties records had already been so successful that an independent industry was established on the basis of this success. But its products still went mostly to jukebox installers or were reserved for the rather more exclusive body of classical music purchasers. In the early fifties this situation changed in the wake of a number of innovations in media technology which led to a rapid reduction in the price of records.

In 1948 CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) introduced the



high fidelity long-playing record (LP), which was made possible by reducing the playing speed from 78 to 33½ revolutions per minute using vinyl plastic (with its twin advantages of low noise characteristics and great strength) instead of shellac. Not long after this RCA (Radio Corporation of America) brought out the 45 r.p.m. single, based on the same technology, as their answer to the competition's LP. The single was aimed at the new teenage market and was priced within reach of teenagers' pocket money. But probably the most far-reaching development in the realm of media technology was the introduction, directly after the Second World War, of magnetic tape for recording music. This replaced the costly electrical recording method in record production and created the necessary technical conditions to allow recordings to be corrected afterwards. In 1947 the swing guitarist Les Paul was already using the so-called sound-on-sound method for producing backing tracks, copying a finished recording together with an additional section onto a second tape. In multi-track recording – first used in 1954 with two separate recording tracks (the two-track method) and then developed step by step to the current standard of 24, 32 or 64 tracks – this principle became the basis of studio music production, with far-reaching consequences for musical performance. Up to this point, developments in media technology had never interfered directly with the structure of music. They had remained external, merely allowing the performance to be stored or reproduced, although even this did not leave music completely unaffected. Harvey Fuqua, lead singer in the fifties with the Moonglows – one of the hundreds of vocal rhythm & blues ensembles around at that time – and now a producer and manager, recalled those times in 1978 and offered a vivid description of how things were done in the studios before the introduction of multi-track recording:

It wasn't like they've got 32 and 64 tracks to play with like today. They'd put the microphone right in the middle of the room and everybody stood round it, the band, the singers, everybody. If you wanted more of an instrument or a singer you'd have to move either back or forward. And you didn't necessarily use drums then; you could use a telephone book and slap it. It was wild.<sup>5</sup>