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Kant Get No Satisfaction

A review of **Philosophy at 33½ rpm—Themes of Classic Rock Music** by Stuart Hanscomb

I find it surprising that it has taken so long for someone to dedicate a book to intellectual themes in rock music. That thought-provoking issues have often found expression in and formed the substratum of rock lyrics since the mid-sixties is certainly not news to most rock fans, and yet it has taken nearly thirty years for this to be formally acknowledged in an academic format. I can only assume that Harris' very rock‘n’roll opening line: “Rock music has received very little attention and practically no respect from the self-appointed guardians of American Culture” bears some truth.

The seven chapters covering themes of alienation, freedom, rights, sexual and racial politics, religion, mysticism and hedonism among others are composed of numerous headed subsections that give the book the (possibly accidental) feel of the inner sleeve or lyrics sheet of an L.P. Bob Dylan’s first electric concert in 1965 is seen as the watershed between rock‘n’roll music that was merely fun (if ‘shocking’ against its 1950’s backdrop) and a time when rock became the serious voice of the revolutionary counterculture.

‘Serious’ rock is of course still poured out in abundance, but the music of the ‘sixties’ (roughly the mid 1960’s to the early 1970’s) is seen by Harris as of overriding importance.

Although it is necessary for an indepth study to limit its scope in some way, perhaps the true motivation behind Harris’ choice of direction is revealed by the development of its two separate and not always compatible aims. The first of these can be taken by the author’s professional motive for the book’s inception—”to provide material and impetus [for] serious intellectual themes, preoccupations, and even arguments, to be found in the lyrics.” Actual arguments are thin on the ground, but it is possible for philosophical influences to be successfully extracted just as they can be from literature and poetry.

The work is playing to its strengths when dealing with the more existential themes—in particular the three ’A’s; angst, alienation and absurdity. This is unsurprising in light of existentialism’s substantial cross-over into the arts, and especially into art-forms that surface at times of political and social alienation.

Of the many illuminating exegeses, that of Pink Floyd’s The Dark Side of the Moon stands out. Harris sees this L.P as a direct reference to R.D. Laing’s theories on the schizoid personality and its relation to insanity.

The ‘dark side’ is the ‘unembodied self’ which, because of the fragile nature of the schizoid’s selfidentity, retreats from the public self and takes on a complex spectatorial role with respect to this ‘false’ embodiment. The true unembodied self, like the dark side of the moon, is always unseen, living in a private fanatasy world detached from the embodied self: but as the self is existentially reliant upon external reality, the schizoid’s defences are eventually self-

defeating and result in the ‘mental disintegration’ of schizophrenia: “everything under the sun is in tune, but the sun is.”

The disturbing lyrics and the multi-layered soundeffects brilliantly evoke this predicament and its wider, ‘sane’ manifestations. Elsewhere the influences of Sartre, Kafka, Hesse among others are divined in songs of alienation such as Paul Simon’s A Poem on the Underground Wall and Dylan’s Ballad of Hollis Brown.

The more positive side of existentialism, reinforcing individual integrity and responsibility is expounded in later chapters. The lone man or ‘hero’ seeking authentic identity and escaping false values is as much a classic rock theme as it is an existential one.

Harris argues that an optimistic ‘neo-romantic’ picture of human nature developed among the counter-culture and found a voice in music: the prevailing Willy Loman (*Death of a Salesman*) type ‘organization man,’ rooted in Hobbesian cynicism was decried in favour of a model that saw man at his best when unrestrained by society. Joni Mitchell’s Woodstock for example is seen as a portrayal of Rousseau’s innately good ‘noble savage.’ Relatedly, the rights of the individual became a major issue in the 1960’s America and Harris makes the most of the link between rock music, civil disobedience and the issue of state versus the individual.

The book’s second string is the only implicitly stated and yet highly conspicuous thesis that politically and culturally the sixties was an era of profound importance that greatly contrasted with the decades that preceded it and all that has happened since.

Seven factors responsible for the ‘mood’ of the sixties are outlined including the sense of mission and empowerment felt by a younger generation who saw themselves and their icons (Kennedy, Martin Luther King etc) as victimized by an oppressive social order. A sense of release from the shackles of their parent’s generation and a conviction that they could do something about all that was wrong in the world made the sixties a unique ‘moment’ in history.

Harris clearly feels this very strongly, but to his credit mostly avoids the ‘Big Chill’ - esque nostalgia so common among the ‘Woodstock Generation.’

That an optimistic picture of human nature replaced a mood of cynicism may well be true, although assuming that the rock musicians who sang about this at the time were responding to a set of pressing social tensions and not directly to the romanticism of Rousseau or Thoreau, the correspondence with actual intellectual themes is weakened.

An example of this type of problem is found in Harris’ treatment of Meatloaf’s Paradise by the Dashboard light. This is indeed a song, possibly written from experience, definitely full of wit and perspicacity, about sexual mores in the 1950’s and the situations they led to. It is not however, any kind of treatise on sexual sublimation or an advocacy of the theories of Norman O. Brown. Both popular films and novels are full of this kind of thing, but I don’t think it is accurate to say that they contain a subtext of serious intellectual comment.

The suggested incompatibility of the work's parallel aims is most apparent in the final chapter. Harris writes: "Never before in any period of human history have the ...beliefs and causes and emotions... of the times been so dramatically encapsulated in music...And never before...has a medium been in such a mutually interactive role with its message with each... influencing the other on such a grand scale. This is why understanding classic rock is essential to any serious understanding of the sixties."

Fair point perhaps, but should he not be saying that understanding the sixties is essential for an understanding of classic rock? Otherwise he would seem to be losing sight of the stated primary aim of the book—to look at "intellectual themes..to be found ..in rock music." By over-emphasizing what should at most be an ancillary thesis he seems to have compromised the book's whole *raison d'être*, with the result that at times it reads like one of those 'Rock and Roll Years' programmes that use music merely to illustrate newsworthy events of the time. Is the reason for this maybe that there is not enough to say purely about intellectual themes? Or is it that they do not hold together well enough and need to be bonded by a socio-political context? The latter is the more likely answer as Harris is clearly aware, there are many other examples of solid intellectual reference in rock music beyond what is mentioned in the book.

This toe-treading of the joint theses reaches a climax when he mourns the passing of the sixties mood and bemoans the fragmented state of rock music today (into rap, house, grunge, indie etc.) and its loss of any cohesive meaning. This is undeniably the case, but just as the music of the sixties was entwined with its times, is today's music not representative of our current philosophical, political and sociological mood? Why should rock music survive as a central, influential voice or 'religion' (to which he likens it) in an age when it seems impossible for any single medium or idea to claim the mantle? An overwhelming sense of simplicity, of good versus evil, made impactful, coherent movements and beliefs in the sixties possible, but the Western World, if it were that way, certainly does not seem that way now.

On balance, *Philosophy at 33 1/3 rpm* is bigger than this flaw that I've outlined: it makes plenty of interesting comment on individual songs, admirably highlights the poetic qualities of many of them and induces the reader to think, or think again about the contents of their music collection. It should be of interest to serious rock fans, cultural historians and philosophers alike, and serve as a useful antidote to those who believe that all rock musicians have relaxed brains and think from below the waistline.

Anyone who does think this would certainly do well to read this book, or better still listen to some of the music it recommends.