

## ***ROCK MUSIC:***

### ***For the Christian or Not?<sup>1</sup>***

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#### ***Introduction***

Virtually every home with growing teenagers will hear from time to time the heavy thump-thump-thump of rock music coming through the stereo. That reality raises the question: ought the child of the Lord to appreciate rock music? Ought parents (though they themselves might not like the music) to consider rock music to be the music of today's youth, and so permit their youngsters to listen to it?

The topic opens a Pandora's box. The older generation in our midst tends not to like this style of music, while young people invariably appreciate it. For parents then to speak disparagingly about this music is to ask for a confrontation with their children. Furthermore, amongst the (younger?) parents are some who do appreciate rock music.<sup>2</sup> That division amongst the parents weakens their stand against young people who on this point are very much united.

In discussions on rock music, debates zero in on two points: the lyrics and the tune. As to what to think about the lyrics of rock music, I suspect that parents and youth alike are quite agreed that songs which blatantly transgress God's commands re blasphemy, murder, sex, etc (I think, for example, of the lyrics of "Guns and Roses") simply cannot be enjoyed by the Christian. Other songs, though, are considered to be "neutral"; Gangajang, for example sings of Australia's rural districts ("Sounds of Then"), and that's more difficult to condemn. So the conclusion is reached that some songs are allowable, others are not.

In this paper I choose to pass the lyrics by, and focus specifically on the music itself. Though I'm far from being an expert on rock (let alone music as such), I'm given to understand that a music genre is never neutral; the music itself conveys a message. As lyrics communicate, so too does the music accompanying the lyric *communicate*. Rock music is rock music because it wants to say something. The message which rock music as a genre wants to communicate is, I am convinced, incompatible and hence may not be appreciated by any child of God. To demonstrate how I have come to this conclusion, I propose to do two things. In the first place, I want to investigate the origins of rock music – what concept of life, what view of reality, lies behind the tapes our youth play in their cars? In the second place, I want to apply the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:20: "by their fruits you will know them."

#### ***A Misconception***

Before we start our discussion of the origin of rock music, I think it imperative that our minds be cleared of a misconception. It's a fact that today's young people, whether of the church or not, have a distinct liking for rock music. A question asked of 17 and 18 year olds in Catechism class and in Armadale John Calvin Highschool received a uniform response: all like rock music. Why do youth like it? Rock music is today's music, it's contemporary, and by the very definition of things young people like what is contemporary. Rock music is also music of youth, young people's music –why?– because it has a beat that appeals to the energy and vibrancy of youth. In itself, no one should be surprised that today's young people –covenant youth included– listen to rock music. And no one should be surprised either that these youth –covenant youth too– will insist that they really *like* rock, enjoy it.

Here, though, is where we need to clear our minds of a misconception. That misconception is this: the fact

that (young) people like a certain genre of music does not mean that that genre is therefore acceptable. In His care for us the Lord has told of the depravity of every human heart. In the words of Gen 6:5:

*"Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the wickedness of his heart was only evil continually."*

That not only the Gentiles have a heart filled with wickedness is pointed up by what the prophet Jeremiah had to say about God's covenant people of the Old Testament:

*"The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked: Who can know it?" (17:9).*

As we confess of ourselves in the Heidelberg Catechism:

*"I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour" (LD 2.5),*

and

*"...we (are) so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil" (LD 3.8).*

The reality of our depravity points up that no human being –ourselves included– is in a position to judge accurately what is right and what is wrong. The result of our fall into sin is that our tastes have a natural bent toward the wrong, the wicked.

It is true that God in the Holy Spirit has graciously regenerated the hearts of many. Yet even this regeneration does not undo this inherent depravity so that the tastes and judgment of the Christian are now only God pleasing. The church has learned from Scripture that "in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning" of the obedience God demands (LD 44.114). There is a reason why the writers of the Bible must repeatedly enjoin the people of God to stay away from sin, to repent of evil. Even the new heart which the Christian has received is so far from being perfect, so far from being a reliable judge of what is good and what is not. Applied to music: one's likes and dislikes, one's tastes and preferences can never be an accurate gauge of whether one *may* like any given music. When it comes to (rock) music too, it is God's Word that is to lighten our path, and dictate the tastes we are to enjoy.

I conclude: our personal tastes for music are not decisive for our evaluation of (rock) music. On the assumption that this point is granted, we can now proceed to look at the world of thinking behind the music our depraved youth like so much.

## **ORIGINS OF ROCK MUSIC**

I quite agree with one writer's observation that the answer to the question of what rock music is "is about as straightforward as the answer to the question, 'How long is a piece of string.'"<sup>3</sup> Within the realm of music known as "Rock" there is quite a range of classifications. One can speak of rock 'n roll, of reggae, of heavy metal, of metalica, etc. In their history of the Rolling Stones (tellingly entitled *Rock of Ages*), Ed Ward and his team<sup>4</sup> give an account including (amongst others) such persons and events as Presley, the Beatles, Boogie, Woodstock, Hard Rock, Disco, Funk, Black Rock, etc. It seems to me justified, then, for our purposes today, to use the term "rock" *to denote that style of music of the last four decades that accents beat and repetition in order to convey a message*. I realise that this "definition" is very loose and hardly complete, but I trust that with this denotation I've made clear what sort of music I'm talking about. It's the music of Elvis Presley, the Beatles, John Lennon, Alice Cooper, Jim Morrison, Peter Garrett, etc, etc.<sup>5</sup>

Rock music came into its own as an accepted genre with the music of Elvis Presley in the late 1950's. Presley, however, had not found a new sound; his music was essentially the "rhythm and blues" of

America's southern negroes. The fact that he was *white* made his *black* music socially acceptable.<sup>6</sup>

Via various stages and generations the "rhythm and blues" of America's black people originates from the African jungle. The negroes captured from Africa for slavery in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took with them nothing but their religion. A central element in their religion was their music.<sup>7</sup>

In our western society today we are accustomed to music being distinguished into religious music (ie, church music) and amusement music (eg, "Mary had a little lamb"). The music of the African bush did not know this distinction. To the natives of Africa (and it's true of the natives of Australia, of America, of India, etc), all music was religious; their music was part of their religion. In fact, it was the medicine man (priest, sorcerer, call him what you will) who was the chief musician. The purpose of the music was to get the tribesmen into contact with the gods, be it to drive the evil spirits away or to attract the favour of the good gods. How the medicine man used music to get his tribesmen into contact with the gods? He did so *through the beat*. The incessant repetition of sound, without a break, combined with volume, has an effect on the human being. Think of the role of the drummer in times past in marching a contingent of soldiers from Point A to Point B. The ongoing, uninterrupted beat produced by the drummer had a hypnotic effect on the soldiers, numbing the mind so that the soldiers did not think of tiredness; they just marched on, and on....

In our culture today we describe the effect of such music with words as ecstasy, frenzy, high, out of this world. The cultures of Africa described the effect with the concept of 'getting in touch with the gods'. By means of the music, the tribesmen were worked into a craze, a frenzy, so that they heard voices of the spirits, saw what they otherwise did not see, did what they otherwise could not (would not) do.

The purpose of the music was to get into contact with the gods. From what the only God has revealed in His Word we know that these "primitives" did not come into contact with their gods as such (for those gods did not exist). Scripture tells us instead of the principalities of the air, the "host of wickedness in the heavenly places" (cf Eph 6:12) This the tragedy of their music: the numbing of the mind resulting from the uninterrupted, overbearing beat exposed their minds to influences from the prince of darkness, together with his demons.

"Primitives" we politely call these bushmen of Africa (and Australia and America etc). The Bible gives us a more apt description of these people (and their culture); they are *degenerate*, unregenerated. That is: here is fallen mankind still lost in sin and misery living in spiritual darkness, untouched by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Instead of worshipping the only true God, they are (maybe unknowingly) devoted to the evil one, the "ruler of this present age".

In contrast with the culture and music of those whom God in His righteous judgment had (so far) passed by is the culture and music of the lands where the gospel had been embraced. The heathens of Europe (the fallen and unregenerated ancestors of so many in today's western society!) received the gospel centuries ago, and by the grace of the Lord many came to faith. These people, by nature living in darkness and blind to sin, were renewed by the Holy Spirit. These Christians of the Europe of centuries ago were – again by the grace of God – a positive influence on the culture of their lands. These Christians understood life to have positive meaning and purpose, for the Lord God had sent His Son to pay for sin and so reconcile sinners to God. So the ups and downs of this life were not evidence of the whims of capricious gods, selfishly playing cat-and-mouse with human pawns; the ups and downs of this life were rather the result of the wise guidance of an almighty Father in heaven who dearly loved the covenant people for whom His Son had died. There could be then a contentedness with life and peace in one's heart as one received whatever this Father in His wisdom gave. Life made sense.

This approach of faith to life resulted in a form of music that communicated peace and contentment with life, that communicated the conviction that life made sense. The music of the heathen fathers of Europe was transformed into a genre of music that gave expression to the perspective resulting from faith in Jesus Christ. As an example of how music of a culture not touched by the gospel can be changed when the gospel is received, one may think of the negro spirituals. Though this music is historically descended from the music imported from Africa to America, it has undergone a transformation as a result of the

world view coming with the gospel; the mind-numbing effect of the strong beat is removed.

The result was a style of music in which rhythm was balanced with melody to make a harmonious whole, reflecting something of the harmony God restored to life in Jesus Christ. Whereas in the music of heathen Africa the beat had dominated the melody (with as effect that minds were hypnotised and so contact with the gods/demons was made possible), in Christianised Europe the rhythm *complimented* the melody – and so drew attention to the life saving work of the only true God. It's because of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of many Europeans that the music of a Bach could be produced and appreciated. No other culture in the world<sup>8</sup> produced this genre of music. The world-view resulting from the saving work of God in Jesus Christ permeated the culture of Europe so as to produce a style of music that communicated the harmony and peace obtained by the Saviour on Calvary.

Ever since the days of the Enlightenment (think of the French Revolution of 1789) the Christian flavour of western culture has been eroding. The nineteenth century saw the rise of various "isms", philosophies of life that discounted the existence of God, rejected the Christian faith. Various artists (be it in painting, poetry or music) gave expression to these God-less views of life in their works of art, but their styles were still affected by the parameters inherited from the past, parameters determined by the Christian faith once generally embraced in western society. So an unbeliever as Beethoven could still produce music that communicates the values of the Christian world-view.

It's our current century that has seen a departure from styles-determined-by-the-Christian-past.<sup>9</sup> Life-views as promoted by philosophies as Nihilism and Existentialism received expression in paintings of which one cannot tell up from down, can make precious little sense of what's on the canvas.<sup>10</sup> The point of the art is that life makes no sense, there is no up or down, no right or wrong, no beginning and no end.

The new style of music popularised in the last forty years conveys the same message as the paintings.<sup>11</sup> The sounds of Rock are mind-numbing, mesmerising, vulgar, raw, undisciplined, chaotic, and that is because the message of Rock 'n Roll as a music genre is the message that God is dead, that life makes no sense, is chaotic, undisciplined, meaningless. Rock music is not neutral, is not just a plastic medium that can be bent into any direction. The genre itself is communication. This is the music of the unregenerate heart that screams out the senselessness it sees in the wars and the bombs of our century, the hunger and the plague, the tensions and the hates that characterise the life of humans on this earth. Particularly since the Second World War western society has thrown away the Christian faith, has tossed overboard the standards and values that came into our culture through the Christian faith. The result is emptiness, hopelessness, an abandonment of all the mores and habits that made up western (Christian) society. In the realm of art known as music, it is rock as a music genre that gives expression to the anguish and the hopelessness that lives in the hearts of so many modern young people (and not so young) who have embraced this world-view-without-God so common in the second half of the twentieth century. The Christian faith which moulded western values is now rejected and so "each line and each beat [is] full of the angry insult to all western values."<sup>12</sup> Rock music as an art promotes and expresses "a neo-paganistic primitivism",<sup>13</sup> a new culture that leaves far behind the standards of the old. The overbearing beat of the music itself so benumbs the hearer that in the right environment he has no more resistance to the evil influences of the devil and his demons than did his unregenerated spiritual fathers in the jungles of heathen Africa. (For a discussion of how rock music affects the brain, see the Appendix to Blanchard's *Pop Goes the Gospel*, entitled: "The Neurophysiology of Rock," pg 187ff).

Secular authors recognise too the break which rock music has made with the styles of music which have long characterised western culture. The book which has "long been the most widely read music-appreciation text in the English language" [Joseph Machlis, *The Enjoyment of Music*, 4th edition (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1977), pg 388] claims that "the blues was not sung according to European ideas of 'correct' pitch, but with a free use of 'bent', 'quavered', 'glided', and otherwise emotionally infected vocal sounds of various kinds." Bear in mind that culturally "European" is equivalent to "Christian". As a child of the music produced by the unregenerated of dark Africa, rock music rings a cord in the unregenerated (and depraved) hearts of countless of the secularised western world. It rings such a chord because rock music itself is born of the unbelieving, unregenerate heart, is

born of the philosophy that says that God is not God.

On the basis of the mindset, the world view, behind Rock music, the conclusion warranted so far is this: in the great battle of the ages, rock music is to be connected more with Satan than with God. Here is a form of art that gives expression to what Paul writes in Romans 1 about the fallen human race:

*"[They] suppress the truth in unrighteousness..., [and] became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (vss 18, 21).*

## **EFFECTS OF ROCK MUSIC**

It is no light statement to conclude that rock music is to be connected more to Satan than to God. To judge whether this conclusion will stand in the light of Scripture, I want to apply to rock music the words of Jesus about the tree and its fruit. Said Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

*"...every good tree bears good fruit but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree can not bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit... Therefore by their fruits you will know them" (Mt 7:17ff).*

The effects of rock music are well documented. On my desk are various books on rock, some condemning of all that's in any way rock, some condemning of certain rock styles, some delighted by the genre. All agree that rock has an effect on the person. The effects may range from the violence that characterises rock concerts (have you ever wondered why rock concerts are not held in traditional concert halls??) to the anti-authoritarian attitude that lays hold of the teenager listening to rock in his bedroom. The effects range from encouraging communal rebellion, blasphemy, and aggression to dulling the conscience of the thief as he tours the country. Anti-authority, free sex (bisexual and homosexual), blasphemy, revolution, alcohol, drugs, hatred: the list goes on and is disputed by none. Consider the following tables of contents: David W Scheer, *PG: A Parental Guide to Rock*:

4. Rock and Sex
5. Rock and Drug Abuse
6. Rock and the Occult
7. Rock and Violence
8. Rock and Blasphemy

and John Blanchard's *Pop Goes the Gospel*:

3. Body Language (re sex)
4. Strange Fire (re occult)
5. Danger Signals (re drugs, violence, rebellion, blasphemy.)

Various passages of Scripture describe for us the fruits of the flesh as opposed to the fruits of the Spirit. The "fruits of the Spirit" describe those works invariably done by those whose hearts have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. The "fruits of the flesh" list the works done by those not touched by the Spirit's renewing work, those still lost in their fallen state. In Galatians 5 we read the following:

*"Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like.... But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control" (vss 19ff).*

Any comparison of this list with the conduct displayed by those attending rock concerts demonstrates that rock music is to be connected more to Satan than to the Lord God. In fact, this music produces in artists and audience alike nothing of the fruits of the Spirit mentioned here; this music produces only the works of the flesh. (It is true that the 1969 rock festival at Woodstock, New Jersey, has been applauded as a

display of love and peace. But the love and peace of this festival was not the love of Galatians 5, a love directed first to the Lord and then the neighbour; it was rather a purely human-centred love. Witness the public nudity and the sexuality of that concert....) To judge the tree by its fruits is to conclude that rock music is connected only to Satan, and not to the Lord God. Not only is this music flowing from *fallen* mankind, music of the unregenerate heart; this is music rooted in the Great Enemy.

This conclusion leads to a corollary. If rock music as a genre is rooted in hell, rock music cannot be used to communicate the gospel. Numerous are the bands who accompany their Scripture-based songs with music indistinguishable from, say, AC/DC. Tim Stafford writes,

"Stylistically, CCM ["Contemporary Christian Music", CB] is derivative: whether it's rap or heavy metal or pop, the music is indistinguishable from its secular counterpart, except for the uplifting lyrics. CCM is part of a parallel Christian culture, enabling kids to be normal, blue-jean-wearing, music-loving American teenagers without abandoning their faith. In fact, it enables them to celebrate both their faith and their culture..."<sup>14</sup>

On the Australian scene, Steve Grace comes to mind. But the very message of the music itself, the nihilistic, un-Godly view on life that receives expression in this music, makes it contradictory to attach to this music genre any message of hope from the Scriptures. As Calvin Johansson puts it: "Christian rock of whatever category is still rock since the message remains the same."<sup>15</sup> "Christian rock" is as much a contradiction in terms as "Christian occult".

In the final analysis, this connection between this music and the devil need not surprise us. Not for nothing is Satan termed in Scripture "the god of this age" (II Cor 4:4). He goes about, writes Peter, as "a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (I Pet 5:8). To Satan's diabolic mind, any means will suffice to tear God's own from His hand. He may "transform himself into an angel of light" (II Cor 11:14), present himself in sheep's clothing. He may also come "with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish" (II Thes 2:9). But "by their fruits you will know them" (Mt 7:17ff). In the culture of rock, one sees something of what the Spirit recorded through Paul:

*"But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal despisers of good, traitors, head strong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God..." (II Tim 3:1ff).*

Our young people "like" rock music virtually to a man. This taste of the youth is not surprising, since rock is very much the music of the young, is the music of today. That in itself speaks to our youth. Add on top of that the biblical doctrine of depravity –our inclination to appreciate what is bad– and no one should be surprised that our young people are hooked on rock. Here the young people (and we all) need to work with the doctrine of our depravity, need to consider too how the Scriptures would have us evaluate this music genre, need also to develop in ourselves tastes for music that flow from a regenerated heart. Sinners as we are, we need to learn to like music (and poetry and painting etc) that gives expression to God's work of redemption in Jesus Christ. By the grace of the Holy Spirit promised to God's covenant children, we can learn to appreciate music shunned by countless of our unregenerated compatriots.

In this regard, it is also most relevant to realise –with gratitude– that we in our western culture are heirs to a very rich history of music written from the perspective that life makes sense in Jesus Christ, that the Father is worthy of our praise day by day. This is music we not only may enjoy; this is music upon which we can *build*, and upon whose shoulders we can make our own (twentieth century) music. In Jesus Christ there's plenty of reason for us and our youth to make music. Let it be done as an expression of faith in the risen Saviour.

## **Appendix**

### ***Rock Music – Not for the Christian***

A year or so ago, I contributed an article to *Reformed Perspective* on "Rock Music". My thesis was that the Christian cannot appreciate this art form because of the message of the music itself (as distinct from the lyrics). I argued that Rock Music –as a *music*– communicates a world view far removed from the peace and hope acquired by Jesus Christ in His sacrifice on the cross. Instead, rock music conveys the restlessness and hopelessness of nihilistic philosophy. Subsequent issues of *Reformed Perspective* printed contributions interacting with my writing, some bolstering the argument, others criticising it.

With this short contribution, I want to move the discussion one step further. Reproduced elsewhere on this page is a reproduction of Francis Bacon's *Head VI*. My question is this: is there room for Bacon's painting on the wall of a Christian home? The question is important because, as I tried to demonstrate in my earlier article, the arts (be it the canvas or music) communicate a world-view. As it turns out, the genre Bacon represents communicates the same world-view as does rock music. (The person wishing to challenge this thesis is referred to HR Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1970.)



The painting speaks for itself. Here is a man trapped in a box, screaming out his frustrated anger. His eyes are vague, expressionless, unseeing, but the outrage is loud, agonising, despairing. Here is hopelessness, misery, alienation, a man caught in the futility of his being. Here is surely no view of life agreeing with the meaning of Christ's victory on Calvary.

It does not require demonstration, I think, to maintain that no Christian –delighted as he is by the redemption Christ obtained– can appreciate the message communicated by Bacon in his painting. Again, no Christian –convinced as he is that he is no longer enslaved to sin and Satan– can adopt for himself a world-view as Bacon communicates in his painting. To *enjoy* such a painting is to deny the gospel of Calvary. As no Christian can *appreciate* Bacon (and hence given him a place on the wall of the home's living room), so no Christian can rightly *appreciate* the music genre that conveys the same message.

Equally, just as much as we would not give a moment's thought to using Bacon's work as a means to communicate the gospel, so we cannot rightly use the medium of rock music to communicate the gospel. For the Christian faith on the one hand, and the world-view expressed by Bacon and rock music on the other, are inherently antithetical.

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## Footnotes

1. This paper was originally published in the February issue of Reformed Perspective (Vol 14, No. 4). (It appeared also in the March, 1995 issues of *Una Sancta*). Its publication in Reformed Perspective resulted in an extensive discussion in that magazine on this topic, with writers both applauding and criticising the position taken in this paper. In response to that discussion, I wrote a second article on the topic of Rock Music. It was published in the September 1996 issue (Vol 15, No. 11), and is attached to this paper as an Appendix. [\(Return\)](#)
  2. cf J vanDyke, "In Search of...Christian Art", *Newsletter*, August 1994, pg 9ff. Br vanDyke quotes with favour the comments of (teacher) Brad Davis in Reformed Perspective, April 1994, pg 17: "It's all God's music." [\(Return\)](#)
  3. J Blanchard, *Pop goes the Gospel* (Durham: evangel Press, 1983), pg 19. [\(Return\)](#)
  4. Ed Ward, ea, *Rock of Ages, the Rolling Stone History of Rock & Roll*, New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1986. [\(Return\)](#)
  5. J vanDyke writes, "By rock we mean all types of pop music, including hard rock, rap, funk, and disco", pg 9. [\(Return\)](#)
  6. cf Ward, *Rock of Ages*, pg 77. Also HR Rookmaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), pg 189: "'Rock and roll' rolled in – rhythm and blues was ... borrowed by the white men." [\(Return\)](#)
  7. For the details concerning the "primitive" origins of rock, I am indebted to a tape of a speech by GJ Nijhof, entitled "De Wereld Achter de Grammafoonplaat." No details to place or date of the speech is mentioned on the tape I have. [\(Return\)](#)
  8. I refer to cultures unaffected by western thinking/music. [\(Return\)](#)
  9. See, eg, GI Williamson, *Understanding the Times* (Phillipsburg: Prebyterian & Reformed Publishing Co, 1979). [\(Return\)](#)
  10. cf Rookmaker, 160ff. [\(Return\)](#)
  11. Rookmaker, 184. [\(Return\)](#)
  12. Rookmaker, 189. [\(Return\)](#)
  13. Rookmaker, 190. [\(Return\)](#)
  14. Tim Stafford, "Has Christian Rock Lost its Soul?" in *Christianity Today*, Nov 22, 1993, pg 17. [\(Return\)](#)
  15. Johansson, Calvin M, *Discipling Music Ministry: Twenty-first Century Directions* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), pg 25. [\(Return\)](#)
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