

Progress, Restoration, and the Life of Rock after Alternative

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Abstract

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Progress, Restoration, and the Life of Rock after Alternative

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This dissertation engages the state of rock music in Western popular culture over the past twenty years. Taking inspiration from the philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno, the project utilizes the concepts of progress and restoration to describe how musicians, scholars, and journalists have confronted challenges facing the continued practice of rock music into the twenty-first century. I argue that the tension between this progressive impulse in rock and a restorative response provides an explanation for aspects of rock's recent history and its creative challenges. Via interpretations of musical texts, references to artistic statements, and engagement with aesthetic theory, the chapters reveal how these concepts have been navigated in the evolving state of rock, including responding to anxieties such as the "death of rock." Emphasis includes advocacy for a renewed focus in academic scholarship on rock as a musical phenomenon. This approach asserts that stylistic and formal development are integral to thinking about the music's social history and cultural impact. As a critical study of the recent history of aesthetic ideas, I assert that progress and restoration influence rock culture, and that diagnosing their function within the genre is vital for understanding rock's history and trajectory.

Dedication

*To the memory of my father, Frank Moon, who taught me that you can assign Bob Dylan
in English 101 (and countless other things).*

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Introduction

What is the state of rock music and what ideas influence its practice and creativity? In this work, I look at contemporary rock music starting in the era of alternative rock in the 1990s, a *Zeitgeist* phenomenon that emerged out of the Pacific Northwest of the United States. I present this moment as part of an onset of a renewed dialogue over the past twenty years about the future of rock music, what it might sound like, and how it is to be created. My project is an analysis of the history of philosophical ideas about rock music looking largely at the self-reflexive perspectives of musicians, as well as reflections of scholars and critics. Specifically, I argue that the dynamic tension in current rock practice is generated by a debate between a progressive view of rock music as always evolving and changing, and a competing retrograde perspective that places primacy in the essential, unchanging aspects of rock's sound as its vehicle into continued authenticity. By highlighting the emergence of these concepts at various points in rock's recent history, I hope to outline how this tension has influenced the manner in which musicians and other invested parties think about the practice of rock music. In doing so, the terms of rock music's future also come into light.

It is widely accepted that the previous twenty-five years have been a period of dramatic change not only for rock music, but for popular music generally. Technology has been a major driving force of revolution in making music. Digital production has made it dramatically easier to record music independently and, furthermore, distribution systems are now in place to spread these compositions in seconds to countless listeners in all parts of the world. The days of audiences waiting for the arrival of unheard musics by

securing hardcopies are disappearing – as are many of the social patterns and structures this older technology sustained. The transformation has given rise to an intense pluralism fitting of the globalized, modern world. In the domain of “pop,” artists are more successful than ever at working around and in defiance of conventions of genre and style in order to reach mass audiences.

However, this has in turn left older, more “traditional” genres like rock music in a state of uncertainty. Though rock has long been prized for its synthetic qualities of adapting and incorporating new sounds, the genre has struggled to maintain its central place in musical culture to ensure that its new permutations still matter “as rock.” From academic scholars like Keith Negus and Lawrence Grossberg to critics and journalists, many voices are asking whether something about the situation of rock is changing indefinitely, without a cyclic return on the horizon. It is difficult to ignore that rock is no longer a central face of popular music and youth culture in the United States, but only one option among many in a cornucopia of expressive possibilities. Given the fact that cultural history in the United States, Great Britain, and elsewhere is so tightly linked to the memories of signature moments in the history of rock (*Sgt. Pepper*, Woodstock, punk, grunge, etc.), what does this shift mean? If the postures of style and sonic traces of form still remain from the music of Chuck Berry, the Sex Pistols, U2, and Nirvana, how do these vestiges fit into the contemporary rock scene with its codes of creativity and use? Rock is still there, it is recorded, listened to, enjoyed, and written about, but where is “there?”

Not attempting to encompass all aspects of this change as a rock “theory of everything,” I leave some aspects of contemporary rock phenomenon in softer focus. This study is not an extensive engagement with the explosion of new technology in contemporary music. Outstanding works like Paul Théberge’s *Any Sound You Can Imagine* (1997) and *Appetite For Self Destruction: The Spectacular Crash Of The Record Industry in the Digital Age* (2009) by Steve Knopper handle this task ably from two very different perspectives. Nor am I focused on the habits, consumption patterns, and identity formation among audiences. Since the first insights of British cultural studies, scholarship on rock and popular music has paid a great deal of attention to the role of identity, political gestures, and visual style in forming a musical audience. This work is extremely valuable and remains a vital part of rock scholarship. However, it is also well-attended, whereas my writing seeks to accent a different element of rock culture and to supplement the important work being done by scholars in the realm of audience studies. I would even acknowledge, anticipating my conclusions, that some of the most important consequences for my own discussion lie in further study of how audiences continue to navigate the changing terms of rock’s currency inside the complex and sprawling trails through which the contemporary audience accesses musical culture.

My work focuses on the philosophical ideas underlying discussions of rock form, style, and possibility. I trace a narrative articulated by artists and scholars as they interrogate the meaning of rock practice and sound. This also includes the analysis of specific musical texts where they intersect with the conceptual threads of this study. As concepts and specific aesthetic choices are advanced, they leave traces in the music and

visual styles – whether by the artists’ explicit intention or not. The artists’ philosophical pronouncements cannot be taken as the final word; one needs to explore how their ideas manifest themselves in their art. As the musicians reflect on their own creativity, composing their next musical expressions actively alter the relationship to that creativity.

The Life of Rock in Scholarship

The recent historical era which my project takes as its point of departure was a time when scholars of popular music actively considered the state of rock as a genre. John Fornäs’ important essay “The Future of Rock: Discourses that Struggle to Define a Genre” was published by *Popular Music* in 1995 at the peak of the era of Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and the Smashing Pumpkins. Fornäs’ essay is informed by the millennial impulse to consider the coming change and tumult that brought rock into “an ongoing struggle in discourses on musical aesthetics” (112). He rightly recognizes in rock music an identity conflict between an essentialism that laments the passing of rock’s previous mode and a wider, more expansive definition that accepts radical mutation. His argument is, in essence, that rock will evolve along a strong arch of decline if its definition remains limited and hegemonic, particularly as a mass culture white, male form. Regardless of what form it takes, Fornäs acknowledges that rock music has receded from its central place in youth culture. He writes, “I would for my part bet that come the millennium no single label will be able to claim to stand for youth music, the way rock once did. That way, rock will lose its hegemony – which is not the same as its life” (122). Thus Fornäs acknowledges how technological, economic, social, and aesthetic changes have altered

contemporary rock, but he remains optimistic and believes that these changes represent a new opportunity for rock to be transformed and for audiences to have their needs met in other ways with new music.

The ideas of popular music studies luminary Lawrence Grossberg provide a contrast to Fornäs' view. Grossberg recognizes much of the same means of transformation yet his appraisal of its results is more pessimistic. I examine Grossberg's arguments about the "death of rock" extensively in Chapter Two, and here I shall only outline how his scholarship bears upon the basis of my project. In 1994, Grossberg first published his essay "Is Anybody Listening? Does Anybody Care? On 'The State of Rock'" (reprinted in *Dancing in Spite of Myself*). Grossberg's theory of the "rock formation" views the genre as a social and historical phenomenon emerging out of certain constellations in youth leisure culture. Therefore, he is sensitive to shifts that may modify the terms of rock's continued possibility reaching an extreme situation where it is meaningful to talk about whether rock is "dead." For Grossberg, the political agency of rebellion associated with rock music and its effectiveness as a site for the expression of personal politics (such as the "politics of fun") have been drastically diminished both by changes in American and European political situations, as well as by the effects of technology on consumption and distribution. Rock can no longer function as the key site of culture, expression, and resistance as it once did. Though he doesn't frame it this way, Grossberg's argument implies that eruptions such as punk and the counterculture of the 1960s are no longer possible with rock playing a central role. Even if rock is not truly "dead," its place in culture has been dramatically diminished.

As these examples reveal, scholarly debates about the state of rock have drifted toward the polemic issue of the “death of rock.” After the millennial turn, Kevin J.H. Dettmar published his overview titled *Is Rock Dead?* In addition to weighing in with an answer, the goal of Dettmar’s book is to cover the subject of rock’s death from multiple perspectives – the history of the idea, songs about the death of rock, and both academic commentary and journalistic writing about rock’s demise. I will deal extensively with Dettmar’s rebuttal to Grossberg in Chapter Two but Dettmar, after all his historical analysis, comes to an enthusiastic conclusion about the state of rock based largely on his belief that rap music is a direct continuation of rock and is its lightly mediated heir. He finds rap to be both musically evolved and dynamic, as well as a fitting opportunity for the oppositional political expression that has often been viewed as rock’s domain. Therefore, for Dettmar, the work of rock music is still being done and there is little need to worry about rock’s condition. I find this connection highly problematic and outline my own response in that chapter.

Whether or not there are reasons to be sympathetic with the arguments of either camp, my own intervention is to twist the terms of the debate while giving an accent to an undertreated element. I am interested in how musicians understand their own musical practice, and in the resulting interpretations emanating from the music community. Though the volumes of insightful writing about rock music are persuasive concerning the extent to which rock music is a social, mediated, and cultural object, I would argue that a musical understanding of rock music has been neglected. I am not speaking solely about a technical musicology (though that certainly may be helpful), but about understanding

rock music as an aesthetic phenomenon in which choices about sound, style, instrumentation, and timbre are informed by philosophic ideas of what rock music could or should be.

If one is to engage in a debate about the “state of rock” or the “death of rock,” it is important to discuss what is occurring in the music itself and how aesthetic considerations manifest themselves in sound. That is why my method of examining the subject uses two complementary techniques. The first is to view artists themselves as a vehicle for both musical and aesthetic ideas. In some chapters I focus on a band, such as The White Stripes or The Mars Volta, to examine how their music relates to aesthetic questions in rock’s contemporary development. What sonic influences and philosophical ideas drive this work? What aesthetic questions help shape their musical choices? In each instance I supplement interpretations of their work with their own statements in order to reveal how their own view of themselves affects the aesthetic challenges they see facing them, and how this shapes the music.

In the remaining two chapters I rely on a second methodology which involves deeper engagements with theoretical and scholarly considerations. These engagements are spaced between the artist-driven chapters in order to explicate the concepts at work in the analysis of the music. To set aside the domain of musicians and compositions as the primary focus is also a guard to keep the terms of the debate from existing purely “inside” the enclosure of popular rock culture. Though I find engaging rock’s self-reflection invaluable, a debate conducted exclusively on these terms would not only be

limited in its theoretical scope, but it would also miss the opportunity to look at rock music as an object of critical, external reflection.

Defining “Rock” – Historical and Social Accounts

As I am attempting to navigate philosophical terrain where individuals contest and advocate for certain understandings of rock music, it is important to start with how rock has been conceptualized, labeled, and defined. To start with, even the terminology is problematic. Is “rock” different from “rock ‘n’ roll?” Why is it “rock ‘n’ roll” when it is also frequently written as “rock & roll” or “rock and roll?” I agree with Philip Auslander that the distinction between “rock” and “rock ‘n’ roll” appears to be based on the historical evolution of a style (66). We associate “rock ‘n’ roll” with the music of the 1950s and the early public awareness of the music as an identifiable genre. “Rock,” in contrast, is an expansive term that includes a range of musical expressions that emerged in the following decades. Though such diverse groups as Metallica, Radiohead, or Pink Floyd might all be accepted as “rock,” it seems unlikely that in the discourse generated by fans, journalists, and musicians they would be universally acknowledged as “rock ‘n’ roll” in the same way consensus would include Chuck Berry, the Rolling Stones, or Elvis Presley. Of course, these boundaries are porous both in terms of style and an artist’s catalog. However, I find the distinction meaningful and, with more definitional issues to resolve, I envision my project as an engagement with the genre of “rock” and import into this conversation the more eclectic and historically broad connotations that the term suggests.

Normative rock scholarship defines rock music in a few ways. One method is to ignore musical parameters and rely on a presumed historical arch of youth music using the artists as examples. William McKeen's anthology *Rock and Roll is Here to Stay* (2000) includes an opening section called "Definition of Terms" accompanied by the guiding quote "What we talk about when we talk about rock and roll" (5). However, the essays collected by authors ranging from Bob Dylan, Nick Hornby, to Salman Rushdie do little to define rock music except through impressionistic ideas generated by the essays' prose. McKeen states in his introduction that he defines rock as "all popular music aimed at a youth market," a dubious generalization requiring critique in this project (17). His book canopies diverse artists and commentators under the term "rock" and uses the presence of their ideas to form a discourse of rock culture. In a way, rock is for McKeen what the artists and aficionados throughout its history say about the work.

Katherine Charlton's *Rock Music Styles: A History* (1990) takes the forward step of attempting to trace rock's musical features in detail but again does not move far beyond a chronological history with itemized vocabulary and stand-alone song analysis. Though she pledges to "help students develop an understanding of the musical roots of rock and the ability to hear a direct relationship between these roots and the music currently popular," she presents no definition to identify parameters for rock nor makes extensive connections between each step in the development of rock music (1). Despite employing extensive formal and song analysis, each example is left to stand largely on its own as though the compendium of style must make linear connections in musical development clear by inference. Mostly, an extensive inventory of the artists themselves

is allowed to manufacture an identity for rock music. This enacts a certain circularity: we know what rock music is because it is the type of music we identify as being performed by rock artists.

Another, richer and more critical, means of defining rock is as a genre that performs authenticity in contrast to “pop.” The notion of “authenticity” is central to rock identity and fan investment. The ideological stance is that rock is true “art,” resistant to cooption by mass culture. According to this approach, the true rock artists follow their innate creative impulses to produce musical works that are unmediated by concerns over profitability and popular appeal. In contrast, “pop” is created overtly for profit and is designed to appeal to the largest audience possible. Instead of being a product of an individual artist or band, it is a chimera manufactured by countless songwriters, producers, engineers, executives, and focus groups. The artist is merely a figurehead bolstered by a massive promotional campaign. Even though theorists have extensively critiqued this constructed authenticity, few question its importance in rock culture.

“Authenticity” is the key feature Auslander uses in his work *Liveness* where he devotes a chapter to rock music. Auslander’s book is focused on live performance and his main debate is with Theodore Gracyk who argues that rock is primarily to be understood as a recorded, not live, media. Still, Auslander must confront the issue of authenticity and its role in articulating rock’s identity. Since the discourse of authenticity establishes a boundary between rock and pop, it is important for him to ask what constitutes the substance of the division. Here Auslander’s argument is in agreement with theorists such as Richard Meltzer and Lawrence Grossberg, and leads to the conclusion that “any

musical style can be assimilated into the category ‘rock’” (69). Authenticity is essential for establishing rock’s identity, but Auslander claims that authenticity is powered not by any stylistic or even historical notions, but by an ideological claim driven by “something to serve as an inauthentic Other” (70). In contrast to a nemesis such as pop, “rock music is imagined to be truly expressive of the artists’ souls and psyches, and as necessarily politically and culturally oppositional” (70). Auslander believes any style can convey this authenticity, therefore rock music is an open concept.

While definitions based on authenticity like Auslander’s are common, Keir Keightly readdresses authenticity in defining rock music. He begins by recognizing that rock “has been defined historically by its processes of exclusion,” by a rejection of light, commercial music, especially pop, which he labels “its opposite” (109). His understanding of authenticity in rock is largely normative; it is “those musics, musicians, and musical experiences seen to be direct and honest, uncorrupted by commerce, trendiness, derivativeness, lack of inspiration, and so on” (131). Keightly argues that these juxtapositions shift constantly in culture and provide no consistent musical or stylistic anchor. What may have been viewed as antithetical to rock in one moment could be treated as its salvation in the next. In thinking about stylistic unity, Keightly concedes that “there are, of course, particular sounds and styles that tend to be privileged in certain circumstances as the ‘core’ or essence of rock” (110). This admission will be important in musical definitions and conceptions of rock.

Keightly’s intervention to the understanding of rock authenticity is to posit that the real site where rock finds its true nature is not in a radical, oppositional stance to mass

culture but instead in audiences' perception of "seriousness" in the music. This differentiates the discourse of rock culture from pop music via a listening and attitudinal orientation where rock audiences treat their genre as a form to be taken seriously as valuable and full of content. This rejects the more traditional view of authenticity where economic and social systems construct rock as authentic.

Lawrence Grossberg is the preeminent scholar who argues against any understanding of rock music as defined by musical principles. His essay "Rock Cultures and Rock Formations" contains an oft-quoted section regarding rock as exclusively a historical and social phenomenon. Grossberg writes, "Although an account of rock cannot ignore its musical effectivity, it is also the case that rock cannot be defined in musical terms. There are, for all practical purposes, no musical limits on what can or cannot be rock" (*We Gotta Get Out of This Place* 131). Grossberg's declarative language argues that rock's musical consistency is a complete open concept. Though he notes that constraining, defining, and delimiting rock is a topic of conflict for rock culture, nothing is so far outside of rock's sonic palette that it cannot be rock in the proper context. Grossberg argues not only that anything can be rock but that there is no musical center in rock at all. While Grossberg in the same passage notes the place of music in understanding rock, he thinks only in terms of "musical effectivity." "Musical effectivity" refers to how the music relates to the experience of the audience, not compositional practices. As a cultural theorist of rock, Grossberg is interested in elements such as how music shapes affinities, plays a role in the everyday of the listener, and engages the body in dance and other practices.

The centerpiece of Grossberg's ideas is the "rock formation," an attempt to offer a conceptual map both of rock's history and also its social role. As the most fully realized and systematic account of what rock is and how it functions, the "rock formation" requires address in any discussion where rock is defined. Grossberg's concept of the formation is built upon a few fundamental pillars. The first element focuses on the "mainstream" of rock. Grossberg is interested in rock as a dominant, organizing principle in culture. This means focusing his study on "the most commonly shared ground and the most commonly invested sites." (133) Scholars of rock music investigate a sprawling array of topics concerning independent music, the politics of identity, and audience behaviors and scenes, but the rock formation sublimates these topics beneath macro-concepts, what Grossberg lists as the "economic, technological, sociological, cultural, political, ideological and experimental" (134). The goal of the rock formation is to theorize the function of rock on each of these levels.

The second pillar is the importance of youth as a category for study of rock culture. The rock formation links rock to the story of youth as it emerged in the United States in the twentieth century. However, the theory works to move beyond crude connections such as "rock is youth music and produced for a youth audience." Instead, youth is a primary yet fluid concept in the rock formation where specific articulations, generational tensions, and identity politics are integrated into rock's cultural function. Grossberg argues that in the articulation of rock as related to youth, rock layers itself "across the service of daily life and ultimately (at least for a while) across the social

formation itself” (134). Rock is as much constituted by its audience and social use than any inherent properties, especially musical characteristics.

Though it can account for change, the rock formation is governed by the origins of rock. Grossberg’s concerns about the state of rock (discussed extensively in Chapter Two) evaluate how far rock culture has strayed from founding principles altering the terms of its continued possibility. Grossberg maps out what he calls “four of the historical conditions of rock’s possibility” (*Dancing...* 110). The four conditions are the economic prosperity of the United States after World War II, the “baby boom” and the emergence of youth as a central element in popular culture, a “postmodern” structure of feeling (what we might think of as a disjuncture of meaning), and developments in the cultural domain. The last category is where Grossberg includes technological change, innovation in sound, and reorganization of media economics. These four conditions that provide the possibility of rock therefore are inextricable from Grossberg’s definition. This opening era is the formation itself of the “rock formation.” Grossberg, in offering the cultural definition of rock *par excellence*, describes rock as a historical event enabled by a set of parameters that continue to operate and evolve within the domain of youth and popular culture.

This is the dominant approach in the academy to define rock. Figures like Grossberg, Simon Frith, and Stuart Hall serve as the architects of popular music studies. Their work has codified the idea that rock is best understood as a cultural phenomenon. These contributions have been immensely valuable to understanding rock’s function, what influences it, how it relates to its audiences, and how subcultural scenes constitute

themselves using musical inspiration. This approach has gained assent from other scholars such as Auslander who, looking at rock music from the outside, are persuaded by arguments that musical properties and style are something infinitely malleable. However, other scholars have challenged a framework of studying rock music that neglects musical style as either secondary or the domain of enthusiasts and popular journalism. In arguing that rock music's aesthetic considerations influence its production by artists and its cultural function, my project aligns with these revisionist theorists, and it is to their ideas that I turn.

Defining "Rock" - Style and Musicological Study

Popular music studies is dense with rich theories about rock as a cultural phenomenon undefinable by its sound, but multiple writers have contributed recent works arguing for the viability of rock musicology. Allan F. Moore approaches rock from the field of musicology in his book *Rock: The Primary Text* (2000). He uses musicology to develop a framework allowing for analysis of songs and artists as texts in the same way that one would approach specimens of other genres. In contrast to those who would claim that rock is a musical open concept, Moore finds commonality in rock style and posits that what "does serve to separate rock from other sorts of music is a degree of consistency which can be found within its musical tendencies and practices" (1). Moore cautions that these common principles do not create a static definition, but instead possess musical sounds that carry across multiple examples. Moore's musicology itself is highly technical, resisting easy summary, but his presentations on vocal rhythm,

harmonic patterns, and less technical elements like instrumentation, texture, and vocal style form an impressive argument. His conclusion is that scholars can “evolve an understanding of what ‘rock’ is, in musical terms, by treating it as structured by a multiply-evolving but coherent set of rules and practices” (7).

Ken Stephenson’s writing in *What to Listen for in Rock* (2002) has much in common with Moore’s work. It is also a musicological analysis of rock focusing on features such as cadences, phrase rhythm, and keys and mode, all of which receive chapter length treatments. In the music, he finds distinct organizations of “melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic characteristics that are not found in any other musical style” (x). With an musicology even more complex than that of Moore, Stephenson’s work frequently arrives at conclusions such as “harmonic successions, which are normally {in rock} quite different from common-practice norms, must be understood as leading to resolution at a nontraditional moment, if they are to be seen as leading to anything at all” (28). The conversations about root movement, syncopation, and other topics are equally dense but build an argument that rock is musically distinct from other forms and identifiable by reoccurring musical devices. Towards the end of his introduction, Stephenson makes an equally important philosophical point in anticipation of objections to this analysis. He allows that “stylistic analysis simplifies complexities and ignores exceptions; it is the nature of generalizations to do so.” (xv). Stephenson is aware that one could always find examples that stray unrecognizably far from any normative understanding of a genre’s rules. However, to use this to profess that such rules have no weight or are arbitrarily imposed misses the way in which an established lexicon of

frequent practices forms a center encompassing a variety of styles. This is a center for compositions to travel out from in varying proximity. In Stephenson's view, his intensely detailed formal analysis does function as defining rock as a style of music even if, unfortunately, he is ultimately unable to compact this into a concise idea and is forced to simply state that his book itself is the definition in action.

From outside of musicology with an approach closer to my own comes the work of Keith Negus. In his chapter "Histories" from *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (1996), the implied goal is to interrogate how rock has been thought of in popular history. Negus looks principally at a critique of marking rock history with self-contained "eras." He seeks to advance a dialectical view of rock history in constant dialogue with its past instead of leaving that past behind in a moment of fissure. As part of this discussion, Negus argues for a musical component to understanding rock. Specifically taking on Grossberg's statement that there is "no sound that cannot become rock," Negus argues that this claim works "in stark contrast to the way in which fans, musicians, government administrators and industry personnel continually make distinctions about which sounds are and are not rock" (161). Negus' point is that academic understandings of genre must link up to the actual experience of participants in that genre. When this imperative is ignored and academics place all youth music under the umbrella of rock, Negus calls it "rock imperialism" (162). The methodology takes youth music to be "rock" and therefore interpolates such diverse genres as techno, soul, reggae, etc., as rock music. It ignores both their unique sonic traits and cultural

formations while not accounting for the consequences of glossing over differentiations in genres.

As an update on Grossberg, I find Negus to have the most effective framework for describing what rock is and how it moves in history. Though he is not driving specifically at a definition, Negus frames the emergence of the “new” in rock music and culture as developing “within the context of the possibilities provided by existing social relations (the industry organization, the political arrangements, the entire patterns of mediation and methods of social distribution), technological means (studio and instruments of music making, methods of storage and distribution) and aesthetic conventions (the complex of performance practices, bodily techniques and discriminations to select chords, sounds, notes, words and imagery, and then combine them in a specific way)” (138). Negus’ best contribution is to advocate for these “aesthetic conventions” as part of a trio of forces that shape rock music. The former duo, the social relations and technological means, have been covered at length by scholarship but as the writing of Auslander, Grossberg, and countless others suggest, the aesthetic musical concepts have been treated as benign issues of style that do not play a significant role in shaping rock music and its culture. Negus should be credited for offering these aesthetic conventions as a necessary aspect of understanding rock music in scholarship. What these authors do is give structure to the formal properties that are difficult for many musically untrained scholars to articulate but are none the less relevant when we talk about rock. Though it is true that rock music does not mean the same thing to all people in all places, it is likely that you could find some consensus amongst a diverse set of

listeners in age, nationality, gender, and other identifiers about what “rocks,” what sounds and styles convey the identity of a rock song. Elements of rock, its vocal style, relationship to guitars and other instruments, tempos, accents, and timbres can attempt to explain themselves without immediate context. It is a cliché now, often associated with jazz and blues, to say one knows a genre “when you hear it” without being able to articulate the rationale. Yet, this cliché has power. Arguments that there are no musical features forming perceptions and expressions of rock ignore the fact that listeners do process certain styles and sounds as “rock,” even if this processing is dynamic and flexible. This malleability is not infinite and conceding that rock cannot be understood with a static formal definition does not negate the accuracy of scholars like Moore, Negus, and Stephenson nor does it allow scholars to overlook the way people (audiences, critics, musicians, etc.) use the term “rock” to refer to discernible musical practices and sounds.

Utilizing a Musical Aesthetic of Rock

My project is not necessarily a complete execution of a musical approach for thinking about a definition of rock music or a rejection of the extensive cultural work on rock. A navigation through these competing yet complementary conceptualizations of rock is presented both to frame the identity of the critical object but also argue for a shift in emphasis in scholarly discourse about rock. My approach is based on accepting the argument that musical and stylistic phenomenon in rock music matter. They are not trivia and inventories of taste for the hobbyist fan nor capricious window dressing upon

the real content of rock culture. While scholars have consistently offered close readings of musical texts and offered advanced formal investigations into individual songs, I would also advocate for the study of style and form evolving across rock history as something that influences practice, alters the music's social role, and informs discourse about the genre.

I make two claims driven by discussion of how to define rock music. The first is that the work rock musicians compose and the aesthetic choices they present are equally important to understanding the music as a field of art as is analyzing rock through a social lens. The musical materials of rock music throughout its history are not merely coincidental to its reception, interpretation, and deployment by audiences. The musical form, along with its cultural affiliations and social contexts, is a vital part of connecting to the audience. Different music is received in different ways, drives different action, and helps shape new relationships. Negus suggests as much in a new direction for scholarship when he writes, "A focus on the stylistic practices of rock and how these change and intersect with other styles might provide a way of studying how different participants in the mediations of music making become involved in organizing musical boundaries - how musicians, industry workers, journalists, audiences and academics are involved in drawing boundaries around what is and is not rock" (162). The evolution of musical style is an integral part of rock's story of development and should play a significant role in scholarly understandings of rock culture.

Further, my project addresses cases where rock musicians make conscious aesthetic choices about the sound and style of their music. In my examples of groups like

The White Stripes, the Smashing Pumpkins, and The Mars Volta, musicians are thinking actively about the future of rock music, what it will sound like, and how it is to be understood and defined. This line of discussion should be irrelevant if rock's musical features are either undefinable or merely an ancillary element. Not only have the aforementioned scholars made a case that a musicology of rock is coherent, but it remains suspect to dismiss the aesthetic concerns of artists themselves and these concerns' influence on their music. If rock is to be viewed as a phenomenon in totality then it is appropriate to consider what ideas and dynamics influence the musical itself. With artists and scholars both debating and questioning the current state of rock, I take inspiration from the musicology of rock not to offer a further formal analysis but to discuss how musical choices and the aesthetic ideas that propel them are integrated into the unfolding motion of rock music as a genre.

Another influence upon my project is Steve Waksman and his work on the electric guitar. It is hard to overestimate the role of the electric guitar as a force in rock culture. In his 1999 book *Instruments of Desire*, Waksman casts a story of the electric guitar as a tool of expression, desire, and identity. Reaching back to its earliest electrifications, this interpretation is much more than an accounting of the history of rock guitar. *Instruments of Desire* traces the electrification of the guitar into the rock era where the instrument becomes the centerpiece of twentieth-century rock, particularly in artists like MC5, Led Zeppelin, and Jimi Hendrix. Waksman understands the guitar as “an agent of change, shaping the mode of musical production and the experience of difference in and through popular music” (13). Waksman's account is not only interested

in how the guitar functions as part of capital and musical production or what it signifies for race and gender (though he is strongly invested in all these things) but also, drawing on Jacques Attali, focused upon the guitar as a sound device for the production of noise. He wants to understand how the sonic characteristics of the instrument's performance shape and influence its social role. This focus allows him to effectively blend social analysis with descriptions of sonic practice in discussing events such as Bob Dylan's amplification at Newport.

Even as Grossberg critiques "the recent collapse of rock into guitar-based music," the creep of the electric guitar as a synecdoche for rock should not be dismissed as a marketing fluke or a musical obfuscation of rock (*Dancing...* 108). If defining rock and the manner in which audiences comprehend it are dynamic principles in play, then the increasing prominence of the guitar in rock culture and music is something worth interrogating at length. Though my own project is not focused solely on the guitar as the epitome of rock musical practice, debates about the state of rock are, in part, locations where guitar playing is contested. Both Chapter One and Chapter Three look at musicians who offer aesthetic ideas about how guitar is to be played in rock and what its contemporary style means. To anticipate my conclusions, even styles such as "post-rock" or other less traditional sounds can be viewed as responses to normative rock guitar practice.

Adorno's Theories of Progress and Restoration

The history of philosophic ideas I am navigating in rock is deeply indebted to the thought of the German philosopher and musicologist Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno's contribution to understanding popular music is most closely tied to his writing with Max Horkheimer concerning the nature of the "culture industry." In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer dismiss any capacity for mass culture (including music) to offer resistance to oppression or to facilitate agency for groups and individuals. Instead, the music, film, and art of mass culture are in collusion with capitalism to manipulate individuals to comprehend nearly identical products as containing meaningful differences. Adorno's further writing on popular music is completely dismissive of jazz, popular song, folk music, and presumably by extension rock 'n' roll. These genres are beneath serious consideration except in relentless critique, and Adorno casts any number of criticisms at the popular form – "baby talk," barbarism, pseudo-individualization, to name a few. For the majority of scholarship on popular music, this has been Adorno's legacy.¹

However, my project takes its point of departure from a different perspective on Adorno's thought. The tension between the impulses of progress and restoration² is

¹ In many ways, the project of cultural studies and the academic study of popular music can be read as a refutation of the central thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer's writing on the culture industry. With these approaches, scholars attempt to reveal the manner in which people enact identities and convey agency via their engagement with cultural products including music. In the reading and analysis of texts, these same scholars describe the meaning and consequences in specific artifacts as standing as their own valuable expression. Despite the seductive allure and moments of insight in the model of the "culture industry," it is for this reason that I do not rest here with this theory or describe it and its refutations in detail.

² Adorno's translators, including Robert Hullot-Kentor, use the term "restoration" to describe the treatment of Stravinsky's neo-classicism. With affinities to terms like "the return of rock" and the idea of rock cycling in vitality, this is not far from the tone of my project. However, the casual term "retro"

imported from the description of the “choice” between the compositional paths of Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg in *Philosophy of New Music*. In this work, Adorno is looking at European art music in a period of tumult with an uncertain future. Mirroring the dramatic changes in the visual arts of the early twentieth century, music has “lost the immediate certitude of itself” and therefore betrays a “consciousness of distress” (16). In confronting this crisis in art music, Adorno posits two competing impulses: the restorative approach of Stravinsky and the progressive advancements of Schoenberg. Adorno’s understanding of progress and historical motion is deeply tied to his philosophical immersion in Marxism and Hegel. The Marxist use of the term, according to Henry Pachter, is logical and dialectical. Advancement contains inversions where “evil must reach its logical climax, then it can reverse itself (*umschlagen*) into its opposite” (149). Adorno inherits this system of dialectical reversals where competing impulses are intertwined. Progress and restorations are not only antagonists but necessary mirrors of one another. In this contradiction, Schoenberg enters into the loss of traditional musical expression without hesitation, using dissonance and the highly developed system of his twelve-tone technique to embrace the new sounds demanded by musical history. Adorno prizes this as the unfolding of truth in the musical structures themselves but also for rejecting the social pressure for music to be familiar, marketable, and communitarian.

In contrast, he offers a lengthy criticism of Stravinsky. Instead of embracing the musical future and continued development, Adorno accuses Stravinsky of presenting a

(retroactive) or the regressive tendency are both perhaps more natural and familiar to rock’s own terminology so I will use them extensively as well.

false naturalism based on his incorporations of folk melodies, references to the “primordial past,” and failure to leave behind the established paradigm of tonal expression. His musical techniques harken back to an earlier primitive age and rhythm, melody, and accents collude to provide manipulative “shocks” that excite the listener. The argument of *Philosophy of New Music* is that Stravinsky relies on an infantile barbarism to reject the musical materials’ imperative of progress, and that his compositions advance a regressive form of music that embraces collective appreciation and, by extension, the ideology of mass culture.

Before continuing on to its affinities, there are important ways my framework differentiates from that of Adorno. Most importantly, my project is not an advocacy of one position over the other in the polemic manner of the German musicologist. I do argue, primarily in Chapter Three, that the ability for rock music to sustain itself through unashamed recapitulations of the past is a failure both as something that cannot be sustained indefinitely and as a technique with diminishing musical returns. This is a distinct stop short of Adorno’s argument about the consequences of the restorative path where a regressive tendency in music leads down a route of collectivist barbarism and an aesthetic of psychological distress. For Adorno, the success of retroactive aesthetics is a threat of significant consequence for modern civilization and freedom itself. This is an aggressive argument I am not prepared to make about rock.

I am also not interested in making essentialist arguments about the detailed mechanics of rock music. I understand progress and restoration in rock music as propulsive ideas that influence practice, reception, and discourse. These two concepts

describe some of the aesthetic choices that contemporary rock artists confront, respond to, and defy. What they are not are finite musical categories in which certain musical forms are fundamentally progressive while others are not. Unlike Adorno's argument about Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique, I will not argue that some specific musical practice is the solution to the puzzle of rock's next step. Instead, I address the music of The Mars Volta in Chapter Five and discuss how their music and identity function in response to the problems of rock music's state. While I would argue for the effectiveness and theoretical coherence of their art, I would not advance them as a singular genius of musical salvation. My discussion pertains to certain problems in rock creativity and to tracing a set of philosophical ideas into its musical history.

However, Adorno's conception of an antinomy between progressive and restorative impulses resonates with the historical situation of rock music at the end of the 1990s. As rock music evolves, it becomes more challenging for artists to devise new styles, sounds, and techniques that are not overly beholden to the music's past.³ When artists' new music strains against the boundaries of what is still recognizably "rock," the question arises whether something new has formed. In other words, like the situation Adorno identified in European art music, rock is at crossroads where it bears the weight of its own history. It always has carried this burden, but with each passing advancement, innovation, or moment of cultural *Zeitgeist*, that history grows denser and more intricate.

³ It is true that this designation – what is sufficiently "original" – is highly subjective and a subject of creative controversy in all of art but also acutely in popular music culture. Fans, critics, and other invested parties often evaluate music on its navigation of the past. Does it have a recognizable connection to prior forms without being too reminiscent of something heard before?

In discussing Schoenberg and Stravinsky, Adorno delineated a phenomenon that, though not likely universal, frequently presents itself in musical development. It is not merely a question historically constrained to how to move beyond Wagner or Mahler; this tension reveals itself in rock music as well. There lacks consensus on how to respond to creative challenges facing rock. On one hand, musicians like The Mars Volta and Billy Corgan of the Smashing Pumpkins express the attitude that rock must look for new avenues of expression, following a progressive path beyond the present musical materials. They express a rejection of repetition and relying on well-tested sounds, forms, and musical riffs. In contrast, Jack White of The White Stripes was the principal representative of the “return of rock,” a historical moment where artists, journalists, and critics argued that rock is most authentic and true at its level of simplicity. Rock’s roots in the aesthetic and style of the 1950s and 1960s are the best source for regeneration of a flagging genre. From this point of view, experimentation and large-scale conceptual work are deplorable excess. This tension has driven rock creativity and musical practice equally as it has in the realm of art music. Even looking beyond this dichotomy towards its unraveling, Adorno’s statement that “the only works that count are those that are no longer works” foreshadows of the rise of “post-rock” - the idea that the true inheritors of rock practice are those compositions and styles which are no longer actually rock but have rejected its codes of communication to become something else (*Philosophy of New Music* 30).

This leads to a final point where my project takes inspiration from Adorno. Despite the limitations of his musicology, Adorno should be commended for recognizing

that music and its form itself are in play with dynamic ideas and forces - those in philosophy, the social realm, politics, and economics. Though this insight is not only Adorno's, his commitment to arguing that musical practices are in dialogue with a host of other influences broadened the scope of how music could be considered as a piece of culture. While cultural studies and scholarship of popular music have done insightful work in portraying musical culture as inextricably alive inside the social realm, there has been less investment in the presence of musical ideas such as progress, restoration, or even the consequences of dynamics, timbre, or other sonic features. Pushed to an extreme, *Philosophy of New Music* protests for a serious consideration of the "politics" or consequences of musical choices in a way that isn't reducible to the social. Even though my project is only a small portion of this work, it is an avenue for the study of rock and other popular genres in need of continued development.

Chapter Outline

My first chapter uses the work of the Smashing Pumpkins as an entry point to begin discussing the "state of rock" at the end of the 1990s. One of the decade's most successful groups, the Smashing Pumpkins' work in *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* presented some of the era's most ambitious rock music in terms of its scope and versatility. Following this album, their guitarist, vocalist, and songwriter Billy Corgan became vocal about his reservations concerning the state of rock music, particularly its role in youth culture but also the viability of continued innovation via the electric guitar. The goal of this chapter is to identify the problems Corgan recognized in rock practice

building to his claim that “rock is dead.” I use the Smashing Pumpkins to discuss the onset of a debate about how rock music could progress and what creativity in the genre means for the twenty-first century.

Leaving the self-reflexive claims concerning the death of rock from a musical artist, the next chapter is an in-depth engagement with the topic of the death of rock as framed by academic discourse. Here, I enter into a debate between three scholars: Lawrence Grossberg, Kevin J.H Dettmar, and Robert Miklitsch. I wish to revise Grossberg’s arguments about the “residual” state of rock music to support the anxieties expressed by Smashing Pumpkin’s Billy Corgan in the previous chapter. In doing so, I must respond to Dettmar’s more optimistic appraisals of the situation of rock music as well as outline Grossberg’s limitations in thinking about rock as a *musical* subject. Miklitsch is highly critical of Grossberg as well, but contributes an important intervention to the discussion. He concedes that some aspect of rock music in Western culture may be experiencing precipitous decline. However, Miklitsch continues that rock may be vibrant and reconstituted as it moves across the globe. This prefigures elements of my argument in the final chapter where I discuss progress and transnationalism in The Mars Volta.

The next move is an inversion of the momentum of the project by looking at the “return of rock” from the millennial turn. The regressive music of groups like The Whites Stripes, The Strokes, Yeah Yeah Yeahs, The Hives, and countless negligible groups was offered by the music media as evidence that rock was not in crisis and, in fact, entering a state of renewed creativity. I read this moment as extremely significant in the recent history of rock. First, it gave truth to Corgan’s and Grossberg’s claims that

rock possessed a problem to be solved in the 1990s. Secondly, it attempted to address this problem by, for the first time in rock music, offering a culturally central rock style not only inspired by but unabashedly imitative of the past. I argue that this perpetuated the crisis of rock's advancing motion and functioned as a measure to forestall dealing with challenges of how to continue to develop the genre. To construct this argument, I follow closely the portrayal of rock history in the guitarist documentary *This Might Get Loud*.

The phenomenon of popular culture becoming increasingly regressive has been studied recently by critic Simon Reynolds in his work *Retromania*. In the fourth chapter, I wish to outline the extensive affinities between Reynolds' specific critiques of retro musical culture and the anti-regressive argument of Theodor Adorno in *Philosophy of New Music*. Reynolds' work is a bridge to Adorno where this tension between progressive and restorative impulses in rock music can be framed not simply as preferences about taste but as forces driving rock culture's understanding of itself and the ideology of its practice. In general, it assists in framing rock music within the context of both Reynolds' more popular contemporary work and Adorno's philosophical aesthetics.

The final chapter presents the music of The Mars Volta as one attempt to reconcile creative challenges to contemporary rock music. Having offered a critique of the regressive tendency as a solution for rock practice, The Mars Volta represents one interpretation of the legacy of progressive and experimental rock music. What is interesting about this group is that they import the Eurocentric notion of progress in the arts and mediate this aesthetic through a boldly transnational style. Though the music

may not be a universal answer to philosophical problems in rock aesthetics, this group articulates elements in their music that remain deeply tied to the rock tradition without submitting to a nakedly regressive tendency or accepting the narrative of progress without a critical approach. This allows them to construct rock music that is both recognizable as rock yet also embracing of the globalized, de-centered role of rock in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

This work is a reading of philosophical ideas in recent rock history. It is not meant to stand as a total “theory of rock” nor an embodiment of every drive that may influence the state of rock for there are undoubtedly too many to be synthesized at once. The goal is to map and highlight forces that are playing a role in how musicians, critics, and scholars have thought about rock music for the last twenty years by considering a selection of crucial moments and issues in this history. By interpreting rock’s recent past, one can analyze rock’s current state as well as probe into its future. At a moment in which musical popular culture has pushed rock into a period of transition, this is important work for understanding its culture. The goal is to enter this subject on the rigorous and theoretical terms of the academy. However, the best writing on rock, such as Greil Marcus’ minutely accurate diagnosis of the music of The Band or Steve Waksman’s aforementioned work on the electric guitar, exists in an interdisciplinary space that uses the pursuit of theoretical insight and descriptive accuracy as the measure

of its success against the material. *Progress, Restoration, and the Life of Rock after Alternative* strives to be such a project.

Chapter One: The Smashing Pumpkins and the Possibilities of Alternative Rock

The genre of alternative rock was a magnet for airplay, music discourse, and sales for the majority of the 1990s in the United States. In this chapter, I look at the genre and one of its most successful groups, Chicago's the Smashing Pumpkins,⁴ and contextualize their album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*⁵ as part of the realization and exhausting of alternative rock. As the primary mode of mainstream rock creativity in the 1990s, I argue that the Smashing Pumpkins' attempts to search for the creative boundaries of their genre were a dialogue acknowledging the limits of the electric guitar in the alternative rock context and the threats to the vitality of rock music itself. The rise of electronica, coupled with a creative and cultural fatigue in alternative rock, ultimately pushed the band's leader Billy Corgan into pronouncements about the "death of rock." Corgan took a philosophical position against the inertia of repetition as a musical value and advanced an agenda that rock music must continue to progress in form and style if it wishes to claim to be "alive." This debate took place with the rise of the mp3, challenges to the stability of genre, and immediately before the revivalist "return of rock," making this mid-90s work of the band a valuable location to begin historicizing recent rock history.

⁴ Like many bands, the group's name is often accompanied by a "the" or "The" indicating that it is a formal part of the name. This is often inconsistent and ambiguous when referring to rock bands, and the history of the Smashing Pumpkins is especially erratic. I retain "the" here. Unlike "The Beatles," it is usually written in the lower case.

⁵ From here on frequently abbreviated as *Mellon Collie*.

Alternative Rock as Musical Culture

The work of the Smashing Pumpkins at this time can only be properly understood as part of the alternative rock context in which they made music in the 1990s. Such an understanding is unfortunately impeded by the lack of scholarly literature on the subject. Published academic scholarship is limited in both articles and books though work on alternative rock is active at the conference level. When one does uncover writing (often non-academic books), research is challenged in two significant ways. The first is a focus at the exclusion of all other styles upon the specific subgenre of “grunge.” This term was popularized to describe the first wave of artists emerging from Seattle and the Pacific Northwest at the onset of the 1990s. Biographical books about these artists are numerous in addition to texts describing the musical and cultural setting. A quick scan of the literature reveals Mark Yarm’s *Everybody Loves Our Town: An Oral History of Grunge* (2012), *Grunge is Dead: the Oral History of Seattle Rock Music* (2009) by Greg Prato, Stephen Tow’s *The Strangest Tribe: How a Group of Seattle Rock Bands Invented Grunge* (2011), and others. While these are useful for their own purposes as popular accounts, grunge can only tell a partial story of the rock music from this period. Though this initial development was genre defining and indispensable, alternative rock grew to be a diverse form with a wide set of musical practices and social positions, ranging from neo-punk music, Riot Grrrl, industrial rock, to the epic, progressive rock influenced songs of the Smashing Pumpkins. New bands continued to reshape and organize the genre and were just as important in the social, musical, and economic development in later years.

The second major challenge in looking at secondary texts is the tendency to reduce the music of the 1990s to a continuation of music stretching back to the beginnings of rock history or at least to commercially marginal groups like Velvet Underground in the 1960s. While this is an important story in the long history of rock ‘n’ roll, to overemphasize this continuity is to do a disservice to the time-specific musical and cultural phenomenon of the 1990s. It also ignores that listeners of Generation X and younger fans could refer to “alternative rock” or even “alternative” as a listening preference with an active body of defined contemporary artists. When someone in high school or college in the 1990s said, “I listen to alternative,” it did not imply a necessary allegiance to the numerous rock underground artists of previous decades. Thought it was possible to be a listener of any of those performers, it was more likely that the person was referring to current artists who did much of their most notable work during the years preceding the millennial turn.

I view alternative rock in the 1990s as the mainstream commercial emergence of a sonic and social trend in music that had been developing within underground music and the area of college radio throughout the prior decade.⁶ The loss of this embryonic

⁶ Looking at primary documents, this moment can be caught from sources like Karen Schoemer’s article “College Radio Crosses Over” in *Rolling Stone* from October 1990. In it, the author struggles to capture an embryonic definition of what’s happening by saying, “Five years ago a group wasn’t thought of as alternative or ‘college radio’ unless it had a weird name, inaccessible sound and a low-budget independent label distributing records out of somebody’s basement. Today, ‘alternative music’ is considered a genre – meaning, in general, white, slightly quirky rock – just like rap, country or adult contemporary.” The article as a whole focuses on the increasing involvement of major labels with what was once a mostly non-commercial niche environment in college radio.

Schoemer, Karen. “College Radio Crosses Over.” *Rolling Stone*. 4 Oct. 1990. CD-ROM. Rolling Stone Cover to Cover. Bondi Digital Publishing, 2007.

moment is something frequently mourned by those who lived through this time in a manner reminiscent of anxieties about the end of punk's first blossoming. The regret over such a loss of the authentic phase of a musical event has been repeated throughout rock history. In *Noise From the Underground* (1996), Pat Blashill laments that "never before has a word as colorless as 'alternative' been bandied about to describe such a crazy panoply of best-selling musical artists" (15). For Blashill, the term itself is an embarrassing remnant of mainstream music culture's usurpation of the birth of the musical moment, a designation that youth would quickly abandon

The resistance to the term "alterative" or "alternative rock" also appeared in the statements of artists as well. In 1994, a journalist asked experimental-pop icon Bjork "what makes music 'alternative?'" Bjork dismisses the term as the province of journalists, not self-critical artists. She also suggests the struggles to label her music might have a gendered component when she says, "Maybe they say it's dance music because that's the kind of music male critics traditionally don't understand...But I mean, give me one more guy wearing a black leather jacket, jeans and sneakers, and I'll shoot him" (Ukovitch 69). Cracker, a band whose rock sound on a hit like "Low" was placed in the alternative camp, once apologized to its expanding audience "I should have told you we're not really alternative...We're much weirder than alternative" (Quoted in Puterbaugh 67). A later 1996 article about Cornershop and Cibo Matto, two bands caught in the American alternative moment despite international roots in India and Japan respectively, expressed their frustration at being embedded into a generalizing culture that didn't represent them. Cibo Matto frontwoman Yuko Honda said, "All these white

guitar-rock bands who want to talk about how hurt they are and how mad they are about the world, I really want to slap them” (quoted in Aaron 66). There is no doubt that many artists resisted seeing their art glossed over by such an ambiguous term they often viewed as imposed by journalists and mass culture.

My personal recollection of the decade is a supplement to Blashill and the artists mentioned above, and it appeared that some audiences were comfortable with the term “alternative,” as it worked to describe a music that listeners liked and the associated culture they connected with. Disagreement over the viability of the term “alternative” itself may be a generational problem between Generation X (and its musicians) and their slightly younger counterparts who grew up with a different relationship to the music. While the older cultural group felt that “alternative” betrayed a marketing and organizing imposition, younger listeners accepted it inherently as a convenient way to communicate their tastes or position themselves culturally. As a scholar, I choose to work with the term not necessarily because the word choice of “alternative” speaks to some fundamental truth of the genre but because the term has reached a point of cultural currency where even those who resist its use generally understand the music it denotes. “Alternative rock” is an effective way to refer to a body of rock music that reached a cultural centrality in the 1990s and maintained this position for many years.

What is most important for scholarly engagement with alternative rock, however, is to avoid the misstep that the music becomes less relevant the moment it is born in mainstream consciousness. The evolutionary arc of a musical impulse continues beyond its popular advent following a continued path full of confrontations with its new

ascendant status. While cultural formations around fandom and audiences may be deeply invested in anxieties over a music's relationship to mass culture, it is not something that must be imported in popular music scholarship. For my discussion about the Smashing Pumpkins at the height and waning of alternative, the opportune window to analyze how the genre changed and reacted to the forces around it is the period of its life in popular awareness. My argument is more focused upon the developments in late style than it is concerned with this style's bond to an authentic point of origin.

By the middle of the 1990s, alternative rock⁷ had been prevalent in mainstream discourse on rock music and saturated rock publications, television, and sales for years. One signature moment was the holiday record sales of 1991 when *Nevermind*, the major-label debut of Nirvana, became Billboard's number one album and displaced Michael Jackson. In a sea-change transition, the album also leapfrogged the biggest artists of the past years – Garth Brooks, U2, and Guns n' Roses among them (Neely 15). In addition, MTV focused on the music consistently and gave a place of primary importance to their “Buzz Bin,” a special designation for videos the network wished to give heavy airplay. Often, the Buzz Bin featured almost exclusively alternative rock acts (including the Smashing Pumpkins) and its influence in media was significant. *Entertainment Weekly* called MTV programming chief Andy Schuon “the most powerful man in the music business” and noted that “roughly 75 percent of songs in the Bin will push their

⁷ In addition to “alternative rock,” the term “alt rock,” “alternative,” and even “alt.rock” (presumably a reference to internet newsgroups) were also used. There isn't a great deal at stake in parsing these terms, but it could be relevant to suggest that “alternative” eventually replaced “alternative rock” in many circles to acknowledge both the music's wide inclusion of the sounds not easily linked to the classic guitar-oriented, aggressive posture of “rock” and also the connection of the genre to a cultural movement that was not limited to a form of music.

respective albums to gold or platinum” (“Taking Care of Buzz-iness”). At its peak, alternative rock was inseparable from the dominant culture industry of popular music.

Like most breakthrough musical genres, alternative rock was not an isolated formal music practice but also tied to a larger cultural movement. The most commonly discussed affiliate is the United States youth body Generation X. One dominant historical narrative of Generation X is dissatisfaction with normative American culture and consumerism (and tacitly, its mainstream music), which Tara Brabazon evokes when she says bluntly “early 1990s culture captured a dark, deep despair” (16). Leslie Haynesworth concurs in *GenXegesis* and writes, “Claiming alienation and anomie as its defining characteristics, Generation X culture explicitly locates itself outside the mainstream of American culture. Gen Xers define themselves largely through their rejection of American values, and typically fashion their identities through the practices and iconographies of various ‘oppositional’ subcultures” (41). This emotive force in Generation X spawned the heroin-drenched misanthropy of Kurt Cobain’s lyrics in Nirvana as well as Billy Corgan’s own brand of quasi-surrealistic nihilism.

As part of this pessimism, musical culture in the 90s also attempted to construct itself in organized forms. The most obvious manifestation was the music and arts festival Lollapalooza. The concert was conceived by musician Perry Farrell and debuted as a twenty-one city tour and played for nearly half a million people in 1991 featuring not only music but experimental artists and body manipulation, as well as representations of various activist causes (Fricke, “Lollapalooza,” 11). Reebee Garaofolo’s take on the festival ties directly into other analysis of youth culture in the 90s in its conception of the

audience. According to Garaofolo, “fans that listened to rap, metal, and alternative had a fair amount in common, including, certainly, their age and alienation from the establishment. These styles were themselves united in their commitment to transgression - transgression of musical conventions, transgression of societal values, transgression of behavioral norms.” (418) Simon Reynolds noted how the festival called to the idealistic utopia sentiment of the 1960s, writing that “Lollapalooza seemed to be a conscious attempt to re-invoke the 60s’ sense of rock as counterculture, in defiance of today's perception of rock as a leisure industry” (“Pop Music”). Lollapalooza represented one public face of alternative rock culture and provided its own expression of the subcultural trope of resistance and denial of mainstream values.

Gender Alternatives

This denial of mainstream values was also represented by new attitudes about gender and identity in mass culture but especially inside the rock community. In attempting to understand the synthesis that produced the politics of alternative rock, Mimi Schippers writes, “Alternative hard rock took the cultural criticism of punk, the gender criticism of feminism, and tried to create a world that was different. Within this world, a story about not fitting in with the jocks and cheerleaders became very important. It was rockers’ form of authenticity, and contributed to their status as cultural outsiders” (54). Using her own participation in the musical scene, Schippers frames alternative rock in the 1990s as including a conversation about the renegotiation of the stereotypical “musician/groupie” relationship. Her work finds fans and musicians rejecting the status

quo of sexual exploitation and inequality. Jennifer Finch of L7 tells her, “Groupies are mostly a mainstream rock phenomenon. It’s a sexist world and groupies are just part of that world. Not any different from any other sexist aspect of society” (quoted in Schippers 62). Because Schippers has anecdotal evidence of both male and female musicians challenging this aspect of normative rock culture, she cautions against an understanding that suggests that the exploitation of male fans by women might be a progressively transgressive practice. Schippers says, “if women musicians enact the role of musician in the ways men have, they are reproducing and supporting the gender structure of the relationship between musicians and fans” (63). This negotiation, how female rock artists function both as part of existing rock culture yet as revolutionizing women, would be a frequent topic of debate in alternative rock circles.

Gayle Wald and Joanne Gottlieb attempted to capture this phenomenon at an early stage writing for *Critical Matrix* in 1993. They argue that many factors coalesced in this moment producing something unique in terms of rock history and gender, including “increases in the number of women bands, the introduction of self-conscious feminism into rock discourse and activity...and the (in part, media-driven) visibility of women rockers in defiant and often outrageous performance and musical styles which both defy and recast conventionally feminine erotic performance” (“Smell Like Teen Spirit”). The authors attempt to balance optimism for the role of women in alternative rock with anxieties about resilient masculinist trappings. On one hand, “the signing of the three most recognizable ‘angry women bands’ to major labels may signal mainstream commercial acceptance of a new role for women in rock and, most optimistically, the

beginnings of a new role for women” (“Smells Like Teen Spirit”). Yet, the article begins with the story of how the title for Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” perhaps alternative rock’s most important song, was actually the invention of a friend and neighbor Kathleen Hanna (of her own band, Bikini Kill). This produces “multiple ironies, dizzying, in their cumulative effect” about appropriation, marketability, and the obfuscation of symbols of girl culture with Teen Spirit being a deodorant targeted at girls (“Smells Like Teen Spirit”). For these authors, the role of patriarchy in rock still presents an obstacle in alternative rock culture inhibiting authentic expression for women. This is aided by the function of normative rock journalism that captures women in rock with labels and structures that reproduce male-dominated narratives. Wald and Gottlieb’s writing captures the early stages of the alternative rock phenomenon as a moment where debates about gender were both active and fraught.

Alternative rock’s concern about sex and gender was not limited to women’s voices. The generation’s signature icon, Kurt Cobain, positioned himself as an oppositional figure to gender norms. Cobain appeared in music videos and on stage wearing a dress, he wrote songs that evoked sexual abuse of women as critique (“Rape Me,” “Polly”), and he allied with strong female peers like Courtney Love and Kathleen Hanna. In speaking with *Spin* in 1993, Cobain expressed his exhaustion with “male rock ‘n’ roll” and hoped to play a role in fighting misogyny in rock and facilitate the concurrent rise of female-oriented bands (Steinke 48). Cobain’s relationship to his own sexual identity was complex (the same *Spin* article notes that he told *The Advocate* “I’m definitely gay in spirit”) (quoted in Steinke 48). One of the most in-depth presentations

of Cobain in this light comes from Jan Muto's analysis in "He Was the Woman of His Dreams: Identity, Gender, and Kurt Cobain." Looking at various representations of Cobain's "self," Muto argues that his gender performance was both one that defied a masculine presentation yet also betrayed Cobain's difficulty in navigating stigmas and limitations associated with a "feminine" social stereotype. Expectations of gender performance, both masculine and anti-masculine, played a role in the psychological strain Cobain clearly felt as a generational icon. While many male alternative rock artists like Kim Thayil, Eddie Vedder, and others spoke of the need to change troublesome gender dynamics in rock, Cobain came the closest of his commercially successful peers to presenting a public persona that was actively involved in a critique of and wrestle with concepts of rock masculinity.

Even LGBTQ identities saw an increase in visibility and recognition during the alternative rock era. The "queercore" movement that existed in accepting punk rock communities going back to the 1980s pushed for standing by releasing a 1994 compilation of all-queer punk rock. That same year, queercore band Pansy Division opened for one of punk's most successful mainstream crossover bands, Green Day. According to D. Robert DeChaine, "this exposed them to a massively expanded audience of both straights and queers and heightened queercore's media exposure" (18).

Ani DiFranco began releasing albums in the mid-1990s to be greeted with probing questions about her then-novel public bisexuality only to transcend constrictions and quickly become a complex voice of resistance and musical independence. Her role as a representative of queer identity in music was coupled with respect at her success with her

own music label, Righteous Babe. Increased media comfort with DiFranco's sexuality coincided with artists like k.d. lang and Melissa Etheridge opening up about their lesbian identification. By 1997, *The Advocate* noted that these expressions had become "mainstream" (Walters 24). These examples are just small ways in which alternative rock culture sought to open new spaces for sexual expression from the LGBT community.

There existed at least one more important component of alternative rock's relationship to gender. Emerging out the same Pacific Northwest localities⁸ that produced grunge was alternative rock's most focused expression of gender politics, the music and associated activism of Riot Grrrl. This organized group of bands and community members was not only part of the music scene but also arose from a specific historical context around women's rights. In *Girls to the Front* (2010), Sara Marcus opens by framing Riot Grrrl in the context of the April 1992 We Won't Go Back March for Women's Lives. This march was a response to a cultural climate that had made issues around gender volatile and helped to encourage Riot Grrrl's formation. The era included attention to the problem of workplace harassment sparked by the confirmation hearing of Clarence Thomas, the publication of Susan Faludi's defense of feminism in *Backlash*, and the case of *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which was viewed by Pro-Choice advocates as a threat to abortion rights. Already organizing itself as these events unfolded, Riot Grrrl participated in a rejuvenated focus on the political fate of women.

⁸ Its politics would soon expand nationally and build an especially strong presence in Washington, D.C. when important members of the Washington state Riot Grrrl community shifted operations to the nation's capital.

Riot Grrrl's solidity was drawn from the fact that it was not merely a musical style nor something imposed externally as a media label for cultural phenomenon. The artists, activists, and musicians who gathered together generated the term themselves and operated under its banner. They organized work groups, committees, and other bodies that addressed both political and musical agendas. Riot Grrrl received its inertia from these meetings where women expressed personal experiences as political by sharing stories that "ranged from extremes of rape, incest, and child sexual abuse to those widespread indignities of female adolescence" (Marcus 117). They planned events, wrote statements, and engaged in creative projects.

None of these extra-musical endeavors were more important to the Riot Grrrl community than the publication of zines, independently self-produced magazines popular in punk rock. According to Kristen Schilt, "zines became a medium for discussing taboo subjects, such as rape, incest, and eating disorders. Zine making offered girls a way of forming connections with other girls who shared their experiences. The formation of these connections allowed girls to see their own personal experiences with rape and assault as part of a larger political problem" (6). The movement itself was born, organized, and expanded largely through this zine culture. Members of the musical community published *Riot Grrrl* #1 in July of 1991, providing the movement with its name from inside.

Riot Grrrl music worked largely out of the punk rock tradition, emphasizing a Do-It-Yourself philosophy where inexperience and amateurism were not viewed as barriers to participation and performance. The goal was not to achieve a certain sound but to get

women active and expressing themselves. By de-emphasizing technical ability, “musical skill wasn’t the point, it leveled the playing field, encouraging young women to join bands, get onstage, and learn to play as they went” (Meltzer 6). For some, amateurism itself was political, challenging norms of quality and critical authority. Allison Wolfe of Bratmobile sought to “show people that these structures onstage can be totally broken down...I’m not trying to play bad music, but who’s saying it’s bad?” (quoted in Marcus 87).⁹ Above all, giving women a voice was the priority, and to do so, female musicians needed to find each other and form bands. For Tobi Vail, this included a critique of the way in which most rock was not neutral but already gendered. Forming a band with women was a way to fight the neglect of gender difference. She said, “I’ve always been interested in playing music with other women...and it seems like I’ve always been misunderstood and gotten called sexist for it. I don’t know, maybe I’m crazy, but to me it seems natural to notice the differences between men and women and I don’t understand WHY I’m constantly told to ignore that in the context of rock and roll” (quoted in Marcus 43-44).

Because of its resistance to mainstream press coverage, its frequent rejection of profit motives and the music industry, and lack of interest in aesthetic norms, the musical politics of Riot Grrrl often placed itself in opposition to alternative rock and even some of the male-fronted bands who were once community peers. In addition to its sizeable contribution to new ways of conceptualizing gender and rock in 1990s music, the story of

⁹ As I will return to in Chapter 3, the issue of virtuosity, who represents musicianship authority, and how this contributes to rock ‘n’ roll narratives has a gendered component that functions in the “return of rock” moment.

Riot Grrrl is also a story about disjuncture between subculture and mass culture in music. As Nirvana left the Olympia/Seattle scene for mega-stardom and others followed, the punk rock political ethos of Riot Grrrl and some male bands became a site of strain as individual groups reached a mass audience. In many ways, artists like Nirvana, the Smashing Pumpkins, and Pearl Jam would (with varying levels of comfort) find themselves playing a different game both in business and musical creativity. Meanwhile, the Riot Grrrl movement helped pave the way for a strong female voice during the music of the 1990s. Its rise in the early years of the decade prefigured the viability of the all-female Lilith Fair, the vocal assertiveness of Courtney Love as a voice in rock, and an innumerable number of female artists who found new space and outlets for their work. All these aspects of alternative rock culture, challenges about gender norms, the role of sexual politics in rock, and voices like Difranco, Cobain, and the women of Riot Grrrl firmly established the alternative nature of its gender politics.

Alternative Rock and Musical Style

Within this cultural diversity, alternative rock cannot be relegated to one essential sound or style, yet many of the artists have similar musical configurations, styles, and compositional devices. It is not accurate to treat “alternative rock” as an open concept to which there are virtually no parameters. One could categorize multiple subgenres including the classic rock inspired “Seattle Sound,” what Jonathan Gold of the *LA Times* characterized as “a glorious noise unto the bored: throbbing, confrontational, guitar-based rock, bottom-heavy, fuzzed-out and greasy, as grounded in Blue Cheer, the Sonics and

the Stooges as it is in the Zep” (“The Seattle Sound”). The alternative culture wave also shone a spotlight on new female singer/songwriters such as Alanis Morissette, Liz Phair, and Joan Osborne, culminating in Sarah McLachlan’s Lilith Fair tour where she sought to provide “a forum for women in music to get together and create some sort of community” (quoted in Chang). Additionally, one finds what Karen Schoemer calls “white, slightly quirky rock” (“College Radio Crosses Over”). Though an awkward and uncomfortable racial generalization, it betrays a certain truth about the music that would be responsible for the shift from alternative rock to simply “alternative.” While maintaining an emphasis on guitar driven composition, alternative music often abandoned both the hetero-normative posturing of rock music and presented its own unique take on musical hooks to produce something with the logic of a pop song, a song that functioned like the commercial tendencies of Top 40 radio.

Out of this diverse set of musical styles, alternative rock included what I would posit as the neo-progressives. Instead of presenting a unified sound, what these groups shared was a commitment to experimental and extended song form as well as gestures of scope and complexity, all values held over from the much-maligned progressive rock era of the 1970s. The band *par excellence* would be Radiohead, and both academic and popular discourse have argued for this group as constantly pushing musical boundaries, defying the conventions of guitar rock, and continuing to carry the mantle of progressive, experimental art rock.¹⁰ The literature on the band is exhaustive, but they are not the only

¹⁰ For a concise yet revealing description of Radiohead’s relationship to the troubled history of “progressive rock,” see Marianne Tatom Letts’ *Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album*. Not only does her introduction mention the distinction between “art rock” and “prog rock” in understanding the band, but it notes how stigmas against progressive rock’s 1970s legacy were used against the band in reviews. This

representatives of this group from alternative rock. Another prominent group would be Tool, who blended metal guitar sounds with an extended song form and post-humanism imagery. My own project takes up the work of a third member of this group, Chicago's the Smashing Pumpkins.

Beginnings of the Smashing Pumpkins

The Smashing Pumpkins formed in Chicago in the late 1980s. Billy Corgan, who would serve as the band's leader, principal songwriter, and general architect, added D'arcy Wretzky on bass and James Iha on guitar to his own lead vocal and guitar role. A young teenage Corgan can be seen shredding in the style of speed metal in early home movies, and this element of his musical sensibilities would never be abandoned. However, the early days of the Smashing Pumpkins brought the members together via interest in new wave and artists like Joy Division, the Cure, and older influences. They played the same diverse brand of college-radio friendly music as many bands who would form the body of alternative rock at the beginning of the 90s.

The band added drummer Jimmy Chamberlain and dismissed the drum machine that had been serving as their percussion. Though Chamberlain learned many of the songs Corgan had already written and been performing, Chamberlain's aggressive yet precise style of live drumming and his signature snare rolls enabled the band to shift their

construction continues to have negative connotations that are more valuable for competitive debates about musical taste than academic understandings of the genre.

Letts, Marianne Tatom. *Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album: How to Disappear Completely*. Profiles in Popular Music. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010. Print.

aesthetic towards the even heavier sound that would be featured on their first full length album for Caroline Records *Gish*. *Gish* repeatedly features one of alternative rock's formal calling cards - the soft-loud-soft-loud dynamic shift represented by Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and countless other songs of the genre.¹¹ *Gish* was a substantial independent hit and facilitated the Smashing Pumpkins' transfer to Caroline's major label affiliate, Virgin Records.

In 1993, the band achieved a commercial and creative breakthrough with their second album *Siamese Dream*, a record Simon Reynolds called derisively yet accurately an "inferno of acid-rock and art-metal" (Reynolds, "Record Brief" 86). With the support of a major label and the groundwork laid by the success of Nirvana and first-wave grunge artists, the album debuted at number ten in the Billboard charts and eventually sold millions of records. It produced multiple singles, probably none better known than "Today" with its simplistic chime-like guitar introduction giving way to a crash of backing tracks after a few measures. The band became a fixture on MTV and widely discussed and interviewed by the music press. In addition, they were given a headlining position for the Lollapalooza tour in 1994, cementing them as both established commercial artists and representatives of "Alternative Nation" culture.

Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness and Alternative Progressive Rock

In 1995, the Smashing Pumpkins released their album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*. *Mellon Collie* took the progressive-minded aspect of alternative rock in

¹¹ For more on the soft-loud dynamic in alternative rock, see Theo Cateforis' work and others.

the 1990s and pushed many of its normative boundaries, including winding prog-rock epics with multiple sections, naunceless metal of saturated guitars, quiet dreamlike ballads, and the incorporation of electronic and sampled elements. This album was a search for the borders of alternative rock to press beyond them with twenty-eight tracks touching on different sounds and forms. More than just a critical credit for its diversity and ambition, *Mellon Collie* has a central place in understanding alternative rock because of its orientation towards experimentation and genre's potential. It also holds a place in the social history of rock music at a tipping point a year after the death of Kurt Cobain when alternative had reached a creative apex with the release of many of its key albums.¹² In writing and working on the album, Billy Corgan searched to find just how far alternative rock could go. Having felt satisfied, the band took a stance that *Mellon Collie* placed rock at a creative impasse where it could not keep repeating itself if it wished to stake a claim as being meaningful. Troubled by the residual pall of Cobain's death and uncertain about the potential of heavy rock guitar, it was after the release of *Mellon Collie* that Billy Corgan would join the long list of individuals who had once proclaimed rock music "dead."

Upon its release, critical voices noted the ambition and scope that the album attempted to express. Rock writer Jim DeRogatis referenced Corgan's own comparison to Pink Floyd's conceptual double album *The Wall* as a frame for understanding *Mellon*

¹² I don't find this to be a terribly controversial point. In the middle of the decade (1994-1996) alternative rock bands were producing some of the genres most well-known and critically acclaimed (not to mention best-selling) albums. In addition to *Mellon Collie*, this span of time featured Nine Inch Nails' *The Downward Spiral*, Beck's *Odelay*, Soundgarden's *Superunknown*, and Bjork's *Post* to name only a few. This Smashing Pumpkins album arrived at a moment when alt-rock was peaking in the post-Nirvana moment.

Collie. The goal was to make *The Wall* for Generation X using the concept album tools of thematic unity, wide scope, and arc of presentation that transcended a shuffled collection of individual songs.¹³ Noting that the songs aren't actually linked by a narrative, DeRogatis suggests, "Maybe Corgan meant that he wanted Mellon Collie to be a lush, diverse soundscape that would be as state of the art for 1995 as Pink Floyd's album was for 1979" (DeRogatis 65). DeRogatis captures both the overall lyrical theme, a focus on the scattered and sprawling emotions and rhythms of teen life, and the thrust of Corgan's creative ambition to make something "state of the art." Though this crude phrase might delight the band's detractors by making the album sound like a new television, the album does attempt to not only harness the resources of the studio to make a large statement but also represents the band's desire to produce an album with a forward-pointing, non-regressive musical palette. Unlike alternative peers who remained grounded in the raw materials of 70s classic rock and the legacy of punk, the comparison to Pink Floyd is apt in evoking their brand of sweepingly broad yet accessible conceptual rock.

Musically, the album hits on many different styles beyond the Pumpkin's prior songwriting and arrangements. Though their first full-length albums had a number of

¹³ Alternative rock's own unique take on the "concept album" is not singular to the Smashing Pumpkins. As Marianne Tatom Letts notes in *Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album*, standard definitions of the concept album rely on protagonist subjects, a strong central theme, or a lyrical or musical cohesions. Her project focuses on how the traditional understanding of a "concept album" does not fully cover her topic, the alternative rock group Radiohead, yet their work can be understood in this way because "a concept album need not be strictly narrative to present a cohesive "concept" to the listen, nor should she be necessarily looking for one" (26). An album like Radiohead's *Kid A* becomes resistant as it strains against cohesion, reflecting something like a fractured subject instead of a unified one. Though perhaps not as challenging in its musical aesthetics or themes, *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* might be understood the same way.

longer compositions, tracks such as “Thru the Eyes of Ruby” and “Porcelina of the Vast Oceans” earned the Pumpkins the “prog” label in many reviews. Both songs feature some of what John Sheinbaum identifies as progressive rock proper’s stylistic characteristics: electronics/expanded “soundscape,” extended compositional length, a focus on the mind (not the body/dance) as a site of listening consumption, and rejection of traditional rock structural forms (26). The album attempted to re-imagine the trappings and clichés of the progressive rock tradition in order to harness it to serve the purpose of pushing alternative rock into new directions with an emphasis on elaborate arrangements and multi-part compositions.

Another example of the album’s scope and breadth is the contrast between its peaks of saturated rock guitar aggressive and atmospheric light balladry. The most extreme of the former presents an almost incoherently aggressive posture. By the middle of “X.Y.U.,” Corgan rasps and snarls at an inconsistent recording level that betrays something like a rehearsal take. The vocal maintains more control on “An Ode To No One” but it provides another example of an almost brutal nihilistic approach to the guitar that represents the Smashing Pumpkins’ own brand of heavy metal. Existing somewhere between the precision of 80s speed metal¹⁴ and the rough thrash of punk with an added element of the New Wave processed guitars of the post-punk era, *Mellon Collie* relies heavily in moments on these guitar-centric riff-oriented songs and teeth-gritting angst.

The effect of the album would be weaker if this note was played relentlessly upon listeners, but in its ambition, the album attempts to include multiple styles of alternative

¹⁴ The music upon which Corgan learned and began playing the guitar.

rock. Far from post-Sabbath rock guitar figures, other tracks hunt for the margins of sonic possibilities by accepting strange timbres and unfamiliar arrangements. “Love” distorts the guitar and processes it heavily while adding layers of crackling distortion to both overdubbed guitars and vocals. “Cupid de Locke” is a dreamy, singsong ballad with harps plucking electronic notes. “33” uses phased pedal-steel to deliver a country lament and “1979” relies on guitar, samples, and keyboards to play an alternative rock brand of guitar pop.

This gesture of indulgence and scope was not typical of alternative rock at the time. In reviewing the album for *The New York Times*, Jon Pareles cast the distinction by saying, “While alternative-rock is obsessed with fragmentation, ‘Mellon Collie’ thinks big” (“Alternative Rockers Thing Big, Uneasily”). Though he doesn’t expound this point, this contrast with “fragmentation” can be teased out in more than one direction as it is a concept that now asserts itself in debates about the state of rock. As a genre, alternative rock had become sonically fragmented into the myriad of styles that I mentioned earlier. No unified sound covered all of alt-rock, definitely not the grunge of the Northwest with which Chicago’s Smashing Pumpkins were always a poor fit. There were many types of music labeled alternative despite a scattering of their sonic markers in various subgenres of rock style.

Fragmentation in rock resists a strong single genre narrative. If genre solidity falls apart, the ability for an artist to make a grand gesture becomes problematic. Little shared ground exists upon which to build something like a genre-encompassing, conceptual work. However, that can also arrive as a challenge – an opportunity for an

artist to move against the current and defy the fragmentation in order to collect a functioning unity to serve as a code of communication.¹⁵ Reading Pareles' statement in that way, he recognizes the hubris in Corgan's *Mellon Collie* project as well as identifies its alternative-alternative impulse of defiance by offering something larger than the genre could or would claim for its own. The album is anti-alternative alternative rock with a stance that pushes the boundaries of the genre internally.¹⁶ It collects the fragmentation of alternative rock in order to find ground upon which to work beyond it. Latent here are the musical politics that would drive Corgan in his more polemic anti-rock statements. With claims about the genre "post-rock" also emerging out of rock at the end of the millennium, he sought to make a genre defining album before rock itself appeared to cease any forward motion and give way to other styles.

"Electronica" as the End of Alternative Rock

A new direction of popular music arrived in the form of a challenge and threat to rock, at least as described by the music press. The electronic elements, samples, keyboards, and accents of isolated digital sounds featured throughout *Mellon Collie and*

¹⁵ Zachery J. Starkie offers an analysis of two songs from the *Mellon Collie* album in relation to youth culture in the 1990s in his M.A. thesis "Cool Kids Never Have the Time: The Music of the Smashing Pumpkins and Youth of the 1990s." He notes (in conjunction with other critics) that despite not being a traditional concept album with an almost theatrical narrative, the twenty-eight songs do hang together by a kind of structure that may relate to a roller coaster of emotions during youth.

Starkie, Zachary J. "Kids Never Have the Time: The Music of the Smashing Pumpkins and Youth of the 1990s." MA Thesis. University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2008. Web. 12 May 2012.

¹⁶ In support of *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, Billy Corgan adopted his "Zero" t-shirt, a simple long-sleeved black shirt with the title of their song "Zero" above a small silver star. Corgan wore the song in the video for the album's first (and highly successful) single "Bullet With Butterfly Wings" as well as during nearly every show of the album's tour. Considering that many artists of alternative rock had adopted the casual flannel/t-shirt iconic aesthetic, Corgan's black and silver "costume" was an odd, pretentious sour-note typical of the band's difficult relationship to their peers.

the Infinite Sadness were the mark of the rise of “electronica,” a form of electronic dance music that threatened to supplant rock (and to some extent pop) as a major commercial and creative force. By the end of *Mellon Collie*’s highly profitable 1996 run, music journalism had turned to electronica as the ground for conversations about the “new” and the latest sign that the era of rock may be over in some amorphous sense.

Neil Strauss joined the voices at the beginning of 1997 and wrote about electronica as a possible “next big thing” for *The New York Times*. He gave credit for its success not to its own merits but to fatigue from both music listeners and the industry with other sounds such as guitar rock. Electronica had gained prominence with audiences “not because the music has grown and matured to produce scores of innovative artists who make music as suitable for the home as for the clubs (which it has), but because fans and executives alike are bored with most everything else. The great alternative-rock gold rush is over” (“The Next Big Thing or The Next Big Bust?”). Strauss notes the end of the “great alternative-rock gold rush” and in doing so makes a statement about the decline of the genre’s commercial viability and dynamism as a genre for listeners. He earlier suggests in the article that electronica sounded “new” and makes a contrast between this form and what had happened to alternative rock. Like the classic rock of the 1970s attacked implicitly and explicitly by punk rock, the music of bands like the Smashing Pumpkins was facing obsolescence as electronic music broke into the mainstream with different sonic textures and forms.

Only months later, *Entertainment Weekly* made the same popular prognosis with an article by Chris Willman. He expresses the same impressions as Strauss and appeared

to couple the waning of alternative as a money-making, record-selling enterprise to its end as a listener-engaging, viable creative outlet, as though those two forces were tightly wound in this case.¹⁷ In his words, “Executives humbled by 1996’s flat sales and youthful yawns are eager to spot any popular uprising that might replace the increasingly outré strains of guitar grunge and jangle angst” (“Rock Is Dead...Long Live Electronica?!”). If listeners had gotten the attention of record executives by not buying records, the cause according to Willman and Strauss was a lack of interesting music to compete with a new, more exhilarating genre of electronic music.

Willman’s articles continues to discuss the rock musicians attempting to incorporate elements of electronica in order to stay viable. He references the most obvious example, U2, whose album *Pop* and lead single “Discothèque” did nothing to mask their fondness to set aside rock and move towards electronic dance music. In addition to U2 and David Bowie, who took inspiration from electronica and heavier “industrial” music, the article offers the Smashing Pumpkins as one of those groups “already busy co-opting the stylistic tenets of electronic pop and beating their Stratocaster swords into digital plowshares” (“Rock Is Dead...Long Live Electronica?!”). The

¹⁷ The relationship between a musical genre/its “moment,” and its presence in mass awareness/consumption is a fascinating and still fruitful area of debate. Much of popular music scholarship has focused either on music in the margins or music in its marginal moment. Viewing alternative rock during the peak of its creative and commercial bell curve gives a differing perspective. Of course, there is a strong investment in the idea that these two moments must never coincide – the rule that any musical movement is already dying by the time it becomes “commercial.” In Willman’s own *Entertainment Weekly* article, the musician Moby makes the claim that “‘All the journalists who are getting excited about this ‘electronica’ revolution, I feel they missed the boat,’ sniffs Moby, who’s done his small part to buck the tide by going back to guitars on his latest album, *Animal Rights*. ‘The stuff that’s going on now is a real pale imitation of what was happening five years ago. It would be like people declaring a punk-rock revolution in 1985.’” Whether this describes a real phenomenon of creativity or reflects mostly a stance of social credibility for a genre is still a topic for debate.

Smashing Pumpkins had revealed elements of this intent on *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* and continued as they moved beyond the album into new territory.

In addressing whether rock and electronica could co-exist, whether there was room for both to be major forces, the prevailing answer in the music press of the mid-1990s appeared to be “no.” In the prominent music publication *SPIN*, writer Eric Weisbard was charged with reviewing what was called a “confounding” year of 1996. Leading with the sub-heading “The Road to Somewhere,” the article identifies the rock versus electronica antagonism as central to questions of rock’s future, describing their relationship as a “tug-of-war.” Weisbard strikes concern over rock music at large. Not only was rock threatened by electronica but the decline of alternative rock was seen as potentially a crisis moment for rock itself, a crisis that centered on the possibility of rock’s progress, teleology, and creative potential as a musical form. Many elements of this *SPIN* piece are embedded into discourse about the future of rock. The subheading, “The Road to Somewhere,” is far from neutral. It links the development of music to something with an established past then points forward to “somewhere” with an air of perplexed uncertainty. Weisbard’s phrasing asks what future is possible based on rock’s current state.

The orientation towards progress as a musical value continues in the article. One polemic victim was the southern pop-rock band Hootie and the Blowfish who Weisbard charged with “spitting in the face to any claims of progress” at a moment when, for Weisbard, music had ceased to matter in an era of genre disintegration and creative dissipation for movements such as grunge (“moldy”), hip-hop, and underground music

(35). The “grunge movement” was dying and its ability to push rock into new creative territory was over. He notes the lack of success for many new albums by alternative and rock artists and offers the observation that “sounds only break through once – after that, it’s necessary to take them somewhere” (37). Weisbard here participates in a life cycle argument about musical genres suggesting that the breakthrough, the single moment of explosion in which consciousness about a musical moment increases exponentially, had faded for alternative rock leaving it in need of a new avenue of possibility.

The reason these articles demand attention is because they document the downward slide of the alternative rock moment and the manner in which this was viewed at the time as a potentially larger problem for rock music with its reliance on guitars, drums, bass, and vocalist as a musical form. Weisbard, for one, linked the waning of vitality in these rock music signatures to a potential breakdown in the evolutionary development of the music. Continued progress without rock was becoming increasingly difficult to conceptualize under its current terms of style and possibility. These concerns were the same as those that struck Billy Corgan after searching for the forward boundaries of alternative rock composition in *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*. Having created a *magnum opus* of alt-rock, Corgan agreed about the genre’s demise.

The Problem of Guitar Rock

Even as *Mellon Collie* was in the final stages of completion, Corgan had already begun to view the problem of rock music not only as a creative problem for his band (though it surely was) but also as a challenge for the future of rock and its signature sonic

icon, the electric guitar. When *BigO magazine* visited the band in the studio in 1995 as they worked on the last segments of the album, he made no attempt to hide their guitar fatigue, "I think we've given up on guitar, to be honest with you....It still plays an integral role in the band, but it's not the lead role. It's obviously what I know, but I really think that we hit a finite wall" ("No More Guitars"). At first, the claim rings as something confined to the particular career arch of the band. Corgan speaks of the integral aspect of the electric guitar to the Smashing Pumpkins and frames its limitation as related to "the way we play it." Left in this spot, the critique of electric guitar composition at the highpoint of alternative rock presents itself as perhaps only a problem for a single band at a creative crossroads.

However, later in the same article, Corgan expounds and makes it clear that the ability of a certain type of guitar style dominant in rock to create new possibilities was a problem for more than his own act. His argument is that, as an instrument of speed and aggression, the guitar had been mastered by the technical proficiency of some of its heavy metal groups. In general, he expresses the increasing difficulty of finding new avenues for rock guitar by saying, "I play now and almost everything I do sounds like a Jimmy Page cliché or it sounds like I've done it a hundred times before. It's almost impossible to find something new that's your own" ("No More Guitars"). What becomes clearer is that the frontman is talking about a guitar problem focused not only on the Smashing Pumpkins but on any group attempting to play in one of rock's more common styles – fast, aggressive, heavy music in the long tradition of increasingly more intense, loud guitar moving from the 1960s and the noise competition between The Beatles'

“Helter Skelter” and The Who’s “I Can See For Miles” through the various metal genres of the 1980s and into the idiomatic distorted riffs of Nirvana. This quote reaches a certain historical framing, placing Led Zeppelin as early, formative hard rock and marking at the end the thrash, speed punk/metal of Slayer as the modern extreme. Between those poles, Corgan found little space for new creativity at least as outlined by the acceptably recognizable “rock” style in which alternative rock participated.

Another aspect of Corgan’s claim is the importance of moving music in new, previously unheard-of directions. In this, Corgan aligns himself with a progressive, avant-gardist impulse in popular music that puts greater emphasis on transcending and breaking from the past than in drawing on rock’s extensive prior musical materials. Corgan frames the desire to make vanguard music and innovate as requiring the departure from “the classic guitars-bass-drum rock format” (“Band Shuns Tragic Label”). What he calls the “rock ‘n’ roll thing” is separate and irreconcilable from being innovators at the vanguard. The traditional combo of a rock line-up centered on guitars was a creative dead-end for staying ahead of the currents of music at the end of the 1990s. To escape this trap, Corgan offered an analysis reminiscent of F.T. Marinetti and other avant-garde artists who take as a sign of aesthetic affirmation the displeasure of the masses. The potential to once again surprise, shock, and even offend was the signal forward. The thought process of the Smashing Pumpkins was aligned with much of the music press who found the vibrancy of alternative rock dull in comparisons to music’s many new (often electronic) possibilities.¹⁸

¹⁸ Responding to the shifts in rock music at the time as noted in the press, Billy Corgan wasn’t the only artist to express this lack of possibility for alternative rock guitar. Probably more has been written about

Further discontent with the state of rock guitar in the mid-1990s was reflected in the press by the article “Is Rock Guitar Dead...Or Does It Just Smell Funny?” by James Rotondi of *Guitar Player*. Rotondi wrote his article with, like Corgan, an eye not just to the short-term fate of alternative rock but thinking of the longer story of the electric guitar’s ability to communicate and create meaning in the rock context. He notes the problems caused by electronica, the lack of commercial success by reliable alternative artists, overexposure and cheapening by record labels, and other common causes for the genre’s decline. His strongest point is to identify rock guitarists themselves as centrally responsible for rock’s state. Thinking of the mainstream rock music of the 1980s that alternative rock spurned, Rotondi turns to say that his contemporary musicians were no better: “While few particularly miss the excesses, clichés and macho pretense of ’80s shred guitar, alternative rock guitar values have become every bit as narrow-minded. You know the drill: “I play for the song, man. I’m not a technical player” (75). After a decade of technique bashing, it’s fair to ask if all those well-meaning, retro-leaning ideologies

Radiohead than any other band from this era. Without overviewing that wealth of material, a brief look at their statements at the time and sonic choices reveal that they shared Corgan’s fatigue about what guitar-oriented alternative rock was capable of. Band guitarist Johnny Greenwood spoke to *Guitar Player* magazine when promoting their 1997 album *OK Computer*, widely noted for its challenge to rock conventions while still (possibly for the last time for the band) bearing enough sonic markers that few challenged whether it was itself still a “rock” album. During the making of the album, Greenwood asked fans to assist him in submitting unconventional chord patterns. The guitarist framed this casually with the comment, “It was kind of a joke on the limitations we were working in... ‘There are only 12 major and minor chords, and you put them in different orders, right? Sadly, we’d already used them all’” (quoted in Vaziri 27). The simple point of this diversion is to reinforce the claim that, even outside of music journalism, Billy Corgan was far from the only one concerned about the state of rock and guitar composition.

Vaziri, Aidin. “Radiohead: British Pop Aesthetes.” *Guitar Player* 1997: 27, 27, 29. International Index to Music Periodicals Full Text. Web. 11 Oct. 2012.

had become a creative dead end. In contrast to the Smashing Pumpkin's agenda of exploring the fringes of their guitar elements, Rotondi identifies the element of alternative rock guitar that kept its roots firmly planted in the "retro-leaning" of previous history. The problem in this case was the multiple failures of backward reflecting rock style – failure to maintain the interest of a widespread audience and failure to open the doors to new styles of composition and expanded creativity. Rotondi offers the road not taken by citing the "forward-leaning rock guitar" of My Bloody Valentine and ambient UK group Main as forms of rock composition that "pushed the envelope" while foreshadowing ascendant electronic music (75). Despite asking "Is electric guitar tapped out? Is there anything left to say?" the article ultimately argues talk of rock's demise as hyperbole. Relying heavily on the quotes of active guitarists, Rotondi's piece parts with the conclusion that progress in the realm of sonics and content may not be easily accessible but that the future of the guitar lay in eclectic collaborations and the shifting of the definition of rock itself.

The "Pistachio Medley"

A final note about the Smashing Pumpkins and the relationship to the electric guitar comes in the marginalia to the already sprawling *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* album project. After releasing the twenty-eight track album in 1995, the band added to their catalog in November 1996 by contributing a singles collection *The Aeroplane Flies High*. In addition to the original singles plus their B-sides, the five-disc boxed set supplemented each disc with more tracks selected from the album's sessions.

The compilation's longest track, "Pistachio Medley," gathers dozens of snippets of abandoned songs and riffs culled from the rehearsal tracks for the album.

While the intended purpose may be to tantalize fans with "what might have been" and provide a hearing for the band's discarded ideas, the subtext runs deeper and provides another perspective on the band's tiring of standard rock music. The track is a meditation on the electric guitar in the rock context. All segments appear to be live band rehearsals with only the twin guitars of Billy Corgan and James Iha, the bass guitar of D'arcy Wretzky, and the percussion of Jimmy Chamberlain present in the recordings. There is little augmentation with synthesizers, loops, or any of the sounds that would appear on the final album. The electric guitar is presented in the fore. Because the tracks have minimal mastering or post-production, a lack of compression and re-enforcement moves the rhythm section into the background for the majority of the minutes. Often the guitars are recorded with a high level of presence that gives them a near-the-ear sensation in the mix. As much as possible songs, the "Pistachio Medley" unfolds as a series of riffs and guitar experiments.

The illusion of the "Pistachio Medley" is the possibility of song beyond the riffs. A prolonged listening begins to devolve not into a series of near-misses but instead into a string of isolated, unmoored guitar utterances. After a dozen attempts, it matters not whether each was a possible fragment for a song. They are all tokens in a jam that exists in the rehearsals of any number of bands armed with guitars. Without the context of composition, each passage carries less meaning than the sum of its parts. Despite any affectionate fan attachments to an abandoned snippet of might-have-been-song, whether

any individual riff is memorable misses the significance that the track presents as a whole. Lost in the series of turns and twists to melody, tempo, and timbre, each cut becomes meaningless as another sonic trinket. Over twenty minutes in length, the fatigue in the electric guitar manifests as an audible experience, and one engagement with the track is to hear the emerging limits of alternative rock composition. The riffs roll out like widgets made by the cogs of a factory where nothing is created that isn't instantly disposable. In a raw way, if the Smashing Pumpkins have this many throwaways rehearsing one album, what does it all mean? How much does this repetition and exploration leave a taint on the compositions that survive?

This subtext of repetition and meaninglessness becomes more manifest near the end of the exercise. Roughly the final six minutes of the track are consumed by a section referred to as "Die." Not wholly an orphan, "Die" is closely reminiscent in pattern, timbre, and tempo to the breakdown section of the *Mellon Collie* album track "X.Y.U.". However, where "X.Y.U." has a distinct pattern of an interworking lead and rhythm guitar along with Corgan's vocal, "Die" couples its backing riff with lead guitar bends and punctuations that are still hunting for a way through the song and searching (or possibly not?) for what works. The lead guitar comes to settle on a squealing, unfinished-sounding pattern that closely reflects the backing chords but in a higher register. The rhythm guitar quickly is locked into a three note (and sometimes chord) chromatic figure descending F-E-Eb.¹⁹ The only noticeable break is the intermittent sounds of feedback

¹⁹ For the majority of the sessions and album tracks for *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, the band used guitars de-tuned ½ step to Eb-Ab-Db-Gb-Bb-Eb (low to high). The riff for "Die" is an absurdly simple chromatic walk down the lowest strings of the guitar one half-step at a time until the open note is played (Eb).

that spike whenever a guitar is left idle for too long or its ring is muted. In total, the rhythm figure is played approximately 133 times before the “Pistachio Medley” ends on one more build-up into another idea. It is subjective in the ears of the listener at exactly what point the repetition becomes mindless and numbing (Six times? Thirty-three? Eighty-five?), but it is difficult to conceive of the exercise as still “interesting” for very long. The group is still performing alternative rock here, and it is difficult to read this as a kind of LaMonte Young study on stasis and lack of melodic development. The profusion of repetitions are defiantly boring.

In wrapping the marginalia of *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, the “Pistachio Medley” works as a seduction with the promise of a behind-the-scenes look into the rehearsal and live composition process of the Smashing Pumpkins in action. The first three quarters are quick edits and snippets with varying timbres, tempos, and moods of alternative rock style. They work to open up the compositional frame of what might have been. However, the final quarter shuts that down and reflexively mocks the riff-after-riff excitement of “rocking out” by bludgeoning the listener with deadening guitar repetition. Whether wholly intentional by the artist or not, it concludes with a strong statement of Billy Corgan’s pessimism about loud, heavy guitar-rock composition. The fact that “Die” sticks out so conspicuously at six minutes (many segments last six seconds) suggests that this is more than a coincidence. Three descending chromatic notes are not presented over 130 times to be compelling on their musical merits. Instead, they form a testament to the death in repetition of alternative rock guitar.

Billy Corgan and the “Death of Rock”

The challenge to finding progressive ways to compose guitar-based rock music and the growing repetition in alternative rock led Billy Corgan to ultimately make an infamous claim that rock was “dead.” This pronouncement was without a doubt tied in part to the Smashing Pumpkins’ biography. Their touring keyboardist Jonathan Melvoin had fatally overdosed while using heroin with drummer Jimmy Chamberlain. Chamberlain’s subsequent dismissal from the band altered Corgan’s plan’s to follow-up *Mellon Collie* and produced the piano-heavy, atmospheric *Adore* album. *Adore* served neither as another rock smash nor a major step forward into new territory, and sales suffered as Corgan entrenched to defend the album by playing it in near entirety while on tour.

However, to dismiss conversations in the late 1990s about the “death of rock” as merely the disappointed submission of an artist with struggling professional dynamics is to miss how the trajectory of alternative rock prior to these events had set the stage to make such a claim a viable site of contention. It neglects how the challenges seeping into the traditional rock sound and culture, at least as it had been practiced in alternative rock for half of a decade, had built up enough pressure to create a crisis moment in rock. Electronica had started to press the fissures in 1990s rock, but eventually it would be blown open when pop reclaimed its dominance in the form of mega acts like N*SYNC and Britney Spears. What Billy Corgan responded to was not delusions of his own existential strains but a real phenomenon detectable inside what Lawrence Grossberg would call the “rock formation.”

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when “Billy Corgan says rock is dead” entered into the music media consciousness. *Circus Magazine* was already asking Corgan about this by mid-1997 in asking him to elaborate statements about the predicament of the rock sound and composing on the electric guitar. Nina Gordon of fellow alternative band Veruca Salt told a documentary on the Smashing Pumpkins an anecdote about attending a Metallica concert with Corgan, presumably a show in early February of 1997. She recalled Corgan insisting to everyone backstage that “rock is dead” and even repeating it to Metallica leader James Hetfield who had just finished playing to an enthusiastic crowd of twenty thousand. (“Nina Gordon...”)

Corgan made public statements in an August 1998 appearance on the Howard Stern radio show to express his dissatisfaction with the state of rock. When asked by Stern’s co-host Robin about his disappointment in his fans’ lack of support for their non-rock experimentations, Corgan voiced the opinion that it might be possible to continue to produce standard rock music, but “it’s not where music is going to be headed, so should we be the Smashing Pumpkins who have been ahead of their time or should we just kind of do what other bands do, which is to keep rehashing the same thing” (“Billy Corgan 1998-08-03 Interview”). Corgan makes a point that connects back to the irony of discussing “rock is dead” at a concert where twenty thousand fans are engaged with the performance. It is not merely an argument about rock’s persistence, its continued creation being a justification. The production of rock music has never ceased since its inception, and there is always enough diversity in group tastes to make claims that some

artists are “good” based on criteria of appreciation. In addition, the commercial production of rock music may still be profitable.

What Corgan argues in this radio appearance is that a music may continue to be made and prosper even once its capacity to evolve creatively has diminished. The presence of rock music at the level of mass culture is not sufficient to ridicule his “rock is dead” claims. In fact, the production of music could itself be read as indicative of a crisis moment in rock if it does not transcend repetition of the past, what French writer Jacques Attali would call “the murder of creativity” as a mark of decay in repetitive society. Attali’s critique of “repeating” as a sonic paradigm ties closely to Corgan’s criticism of rock music in that both link the presence of repetition to the drive towards death. For Attali, this is a death drive into violence and oppression caused by a state in which society is defined by its capacity to produce repetitious cultural products and control sound.²⁰ In turn for Corgan, repetition is the gnawing force that pulls at rock music, diminishes its value, and results in the death of rock. Though Attali’s concerns about repetition being an organizational force that represses new orders and ways of living may seem at first distant and more expansive than an artist’s concerns over a musical genre, anxieties over and rejections of repeating oneself can be a driving force in musical politics such as when an artist like the Smashing Pumpkins reaches the conclusion that a certain way of organizing a genre’s sound is exhausted. The idea that this is a problem, that new patterns and frameworks for the music are required, is not that far from

²⁰ Attali’s argument about repetitive society is heavily indebted both to Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of the culture industry, and also Walter Benjamin’s famous work on reproduction in the arts.

theoretical social concerns like Attali's where a repetitive music is meaningless in its "universalizing, despecifying degradation" as one vehicle for a regressive society (109).

Attali's theory of noise, sound, and music is also instructive because it assists in framing Corgan's criticism of rock as a genre to a theoretical analysis of repetition in music as a problem of creativity. Though conceptualizing Corgan's critique of rock is difficult under one umbrella with its formal, commercial, and conceptual overtones, thinking of the problem as one of "creativity" may be most appropriate. His concern is about the proper course of action for the creative act and the possibility to manufacture newness out of the musical materials in the style of rock. The philosophy of the idea of creativity is complex, particularly as the union of what is preexisting and what is introduced new by human operation, but Attali's "murder of creativity" criticizes repetition under any interpretation. This construction recalls Corgan's idea that to achieve creativity in rock is make music with traits and structure that is largely unfamiliar. This is intended as music that, in a meaningful (as defined to the satisfaction of the artist) capacity, escapes the impulse of repetition. If rock cannot do this and faces its own death, than the result in excess is something like Corgan's death dirge in the "Pistachio Medley."

In same appearance on the radio, Corgan made it clear that his philosophy is also about an understanding of the motion of rock history. Corgan claimed, "the survival of rock n' roll, the future of rock n' roll, has to always be an exploration. It's like when you hear Chuck Berry complaining in the 60s about rock 'n' roll, while The Beatles took it another step" ("Billy Corgan 1998-08-03 Interview"). There are no absolute static

understandings of a musical sound in history, and no music is timelessly right or “wrong.” They instead function as part of a logical musical continuum. Chuck Berry had his role in breaking down barriers and presenting something that hadn’t been heard in that medium and in that style, just as did The Beatles which Corgan points out. The story continues with punk in the 1970s and with Nirvana fifteen years later. What Corgan calls for is a continued understanding of rock as exploration, of searching for the edge and beyond. Through this, he complicates the notion that rock is understood only as a cultural force marked by style and stances of rebellion. In conjunction with his critique of traditional rock composition and instrumental format, there is a partially formalist argument at work here placing the movement of the musical materials of rock ‘n’ roll as a dynamic part of its evolution, something easily missed when one conflates that any angry teenager at any time with loud guitar in hand makes rock music that generates social meaning beyond a personal utility. In the tradition of “thinking big” in composing his *Mellon Collie* album, Corgan looked at the long historical narrative of rock music not limited to personal practice to insist that music is not vital in culture if it doesn’t, at some core, maintain a forward motion of exploration.

The consequences of addressing the “rock is dead” claim from one of the decade’s most successful artists is not to offer a final judgment in the form of a “yes or no” answer. Instead, it is better to locate what actual factors made this a workable claim whether it was correct or not. As I’ve argued, Corgan included a philosophical view of the evolution of an artistic genre asserting that artists should always be striving to break out of old patterns of creativity and explore the boundaries to push their work into new

territory. This is a reoccurring avant-gardist theme in art but perhaps one that had not been so forcefully expressed inside rock except for some rare occurrences. If it gained any traction at this moment, it may be because it was measured against the accumulating history of rock practice and the ever-diminishing returns in pursuit of new sounds. It is hard to argue that rock in 1999 had equal access to innovation as rock in 1959 just as new avenues for the symphony were not equally accessible to Schoenberg as they were to Beethoven. If one accepts that rock as a musical genre has some semblance of coherence, it is only logical that each innovation pushes artists deeper and deeper into the borders of what they can compose while still producing music that gains consensus in culture as “rock.” Corgan’s protest at the end of the 1990s can be read as a recoil against the limitations of these boundaries; one of the first expressions from the musical community that rock may be approaching a new creative impasse. Coupled with the challenges rock music faced in the transition to a largely digital setting²¹ and the expansive shifts in culture brought on by the continued developments of the digital communication age, the lack of a clear path forward for the electric guitar in rock presented musicians with an incredible challenge with rock’s meaning, development, and identity so closely knit to this instrument.

In responding to the waning of the alternative rock moment of the 1990s, Billy Corgan and the Smashing Pumpkins argued in the press and through their music that the

²¹ This is a speculative topic all of its own but it is intriguing to ask whether the digital aesthetics of pop, dance, and electronic music had made the traditional appeal of rock with its analog-inspired sound of “guitar-to-tape” passé to a large section of new audiences. To put it crudely, perhaps rock is not twenty-first-century music. If rock was creatively expiring on a musical level in the 1990s, it was almost certainly both internally-generated as well as compromised by changing tastes, aesthetics, and other external factors.

key to rock's future was the search for new ideas, forward motion, and an expanding understanding of what rock music could be. This places them in an aesthetic tradition in art that rejects repetition as a musical value and instead privileges the new, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable. What is interesting is not some absolute formalist criticism positing their composition itself as a kind of creative apex. What is more important is chronicling the band's engagement with issues about the state of rock, and the claim that rock 'n' roll cannot merely recycle itself if it wishes to remain creatively vibrant. Though this point might strike some as obvious, I will argue in further chapters that rock artists and media figures would ultimately reject Corgan's claim and offer in turn a revitalization of rock music based on a close affinity and sometimes even imitation of sounds from the past centered on a resurrection of classic hard rock guitar. This antagonism between a progressive aesthetic and a regressive one can be viewed as one pivot point around which debates about the state of rock and its life can swing. Instead of academic debates focusing solely on who is listening, which artists are selling, and who is creating rock, we can think about rock musicianship as having its own internal inertia based on debates concerning advancement of its musical form. In *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, the band pushed alternative rock towards its recognizable boundaries and made an important critique about the consequences of what happens to a genre when creative stasis and repetition take hold.

Chapter Two: Debating the Death of Rock

The “death of rock” has been a reoccurring trope in rock music culture since its inception, and in the previous chapter I discussed more recent statements made by Billy Corgan in the context of his work in the Smashing Pumpkins. Though the phrase itself can function as distracting hyperbole, engaging academic questions about the state of rock creates a bridge between issues in practice and artist statements to theoretical analysis incorporating the contributions of scholars and theorists. In this chapter, I engage the debate inside the academy using the competing views of Lawrence Grossberg, Kevin J.H. Dettmar, and Robert Miklitsch. Grossberg is the central advocate of the idea of the “death of rock” while Dettmar and Miklitsch have taken opportunities to argue against Grossberg’s claims. Dettmar focuses on the successful continuation of rock music in rap and hip hop culture while Miklitsch offers extensive analysis of genre and youth culture to rebuff Grossberg’s pessimism about the state of rock. My own engagement discusses the limitations of these approaches. Miklitsch in particular has strong elements of his argument that are valuable for pointing towards directions not suggested by Grossberg. However, my concluding remarks are built out of sympathy to the position that rock, as an organized, unitary genre affecting culture, is in decline. Though Grossberg underserves the sonic aspects of rock and the role they play in its state, he is correct to argue that the position of rock music is moving to a new, residual place in American musical culture that, while it may not constitute absolute “death,” is important to acknowledge and theorize.

Grossberg and the Rock Formation

Grossberg has functioned as the central voice, sweeping and pessimistic, in academic debates about the death of rock. In discussing this scholarly issue, his writing provides the starting point upon which scholars like Miklitsch, Dettmar, and others have built their rebuttals. Grossberg uses a cultural approach of defining rock music, and his frame of the “rock formation” is one of the most extensive theoretical treatments of how rock is to be understood. Though I will argue that there is reason to be far more sympathetic to his analysis and pessimism than other writers have allowed, I maintain that the model of the rock formation commits the shortcoming of neglecting the sonic realm of music and therefore misses key elements of how we might discuss the state of rock. With Grossberg’s complete rejection of rock music as having any musical parameters, his theory is not only limited in how it accounts for style, musical features, paths of music evolution, etc., but it leaves the theory incapable of looking comprehensively at rock’s growing obsolescence.

As outlined in the introduction, the rock formation device says that rock is most accurately understood as a temporal phenomenon emerging from a specific historical context - the development of youth culture after the Second World War in the United States. Grossberg’s understanding of rock music is rooted in an analysis of its social and historical origins (*Dancing...* 31). Rock ‘n’ roll is read not as some mix of blues, R&B, country, and folk practices but as growing out of the forces at work in the late 1940s and 50s in the United States, such as postwar alienation, boredom with the “American Dream,” and the respective roles of repetition and technology in the everyday. This

alienation and anxiety about the postwar/postmodern established rock as political and oppositional, two necessary characteristics that will become key when Grossberg discusses the death of rock.

Beyond mere temporality, the rock formation has insightful features pertaining to debates about rock music and its future. The influence of Marx is clear in Grossberg's understanding of historical development and analysis of the superstructure of rock culture instead of the local and particular.²² Even "materiality" in an abstract sense is important when Grossberg attempts to capture the identity of what is at stake in the terminology "rock formation."

To describe rock culture as a formation is to constitute it as a material – discursive and nondiscursive – context, a complex and always specific organization of cultural and noncultural practices that produce particular effects: specific forms and organizations of boredom and fun, of pleasure and pain, of meaning and nonsense. (*Dancing...* 16)

This material is organized in a spatial model of relationships that cuts across media, style, and academic disciplines and occasions the practice of individuals in a dispersive plane influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic conceptualizations. Effects are important to Grossberg but only in how they function across culture in relation to the social. The rock formation is principally a set of historical factors and a social schema

²² Grossberg's analysis of rock is conspicuous for its adherence to abstracts and broad frameworks within the context of cultural studies, avoiding the popular practice of understanding musical culture via engagement with issues of identity, i.e., race, class, gender, queerness, and other issues. In the theoretical organization of the rock formation, Grossberg argues that identity and personal politics work on lower organizational tiers of "apparatuses, scenes, alliances" (*Dancing...* 17).

that produced the emergence of rock 'n' roll and continues to provide a framework from which to discuss its situation.

Beyond its scope, Grossberg's theory is useful as a means to engage the "terms of possibility" for rock music. The rock formation establishes conditions for the modality of rock. In this modality, rock culture has an organization of practices that produce effects. If this construction undergoes massive reorganization or failure, the terms of rock's possibility will have drastically changed. In the rock formation, the music is not governed by a set of assumptions about its stable identity or contemporary context. Instead, everything is potentially in play, including the life and death of rock. Rock music can be analyzed as a phenomenon that arose due to a particular set of conditions and therefore potentially transformed, eradicated, or redeveloped based on alterations in those conditions. This insight leaves much for debate about the terms of rock but the framework of viewing rock music as potentially transitory and a site of "possibility" is a critical advantage over Grossberg's interlocutors.

Grossberg's Case for the "Death of Rock"

Grossberg reaches pessimistic conclusions about rock music by arguing that the "operating logics" of rock's possibility have become so altered that it makes sense to think of rock as "dead" (or transformed unrecognizably) in the face of these alterations. The operating logics are vital to defining rock music for Grossberg since how rock functions in culture establishes its identity. He cites four operating logics. The first is that "rock is an effective machine" (*Dancing...* 113). This means that rock exerts

influence at the level of the individual and their emotional investments (what he refers to as “mattering maps”). It functions beneath the level of the normative ideology of its national context. Second, “rock is a differentiating machine” (113). This is where the “authenticity” aspect of rock music culture resides. Rock creates spaces of difference between investments in groups of listeners, taste categories, and musical values. Third, “rock defines a politics of fun” (114). This politics of fun delineates the position of youth as not a matter of age but a state of mind marked by the celebration of dance, the body, joy, and the escape of boredom.

Grossberg tells the reader that rock’s fourth operating logic is its most important: “rock is a deterritorializing machine that defines a politics of everyday life” (114). The “deterritorialization” occurs when rock’s political power functions by moving outside the boredom of the routinized everyday. However, freedom in the everyday is not adequate on its own for liberation, and Grossberg claims that rock’s real political power is weak and seldom able to challenge or make a true break with dominant social structures. Instead, if rock “cannot offer transcendence, it can at least promise a kind of salvation” (115). This salvation is found in the momentary release from the drudgery of the everyday, a moment of empowerment to “make it through the day,” the same fleeting flash of escape that Adorno and Horkheimer found false and destructive as the lure of the music of the culture industry. However, Grossberg finds these functions, the way in which rock can reorganize both everyday activity and influence extraordinary expression of political agency, to be fundamental to what rock is and what it does.

When Grossberg published the essay “Is Anybody Listening? Does Anybody Care? On ‘The State of Rock’” in the 1990s, he was only beginning to describe how these operating logics might be changing. This first incarnation of the argument is ultimately close to what Grossberg discusses as the problem of “fragmentation” in rock.

Fragmentation is caused by the inability of rock culture to maintain a stable core. In describing the situation at the time, Grossberg says that “apparatuses, scenes, and alliances are proliferating and, more importantly, the relations between them are becoming more fluid and temporary and less exclusionary” (119). The differentiating power of the rock formation still works but works so extensively that these differences cease to matter as all genres are spread into the sprawl of musical culture. Rock is not able to centrally organize itself as a meaningful and relevant musical genre because audience investments in rock are “no longer capable of totalizing themselves across the entire field” (120). He further explains that the diminished position of rock music in culture is due to its tie to other activities and practices. Instead of being the driving force around which other social practices are organized, rock music is only background in character. Once the site of a strong politicization of fun and rebellious joy, rock is left declawed and complacent in culture, particularly at it relates to youth. The logics that once allowed rock to establish itself as politically oppositional have changed so extensively that moments such as punk, 1960s counterculture, alternative rock, and others are no longer part of the terms of rock’s possibility. Comparing his understanding of rock’s previous forceful influence, Grossberg concludes that one can begin to think about rock as “dead.”

Grossberg's 2002 essay "Reflections of a Disappointed Popular Music Scholar"²³ adds additional clarity and refinement to his ideas about the state of rock. Here, he finds new terminology and more detail to analyze the state of rock one decade later. This argument foregrounds a new phrase, "becoming residual," to describe the apparatus of rock and the way it functions in culture. Without needing to rely on rock's relationship to grand political gestures, the framing of rock as culturally "residual" allows Grossberg to have his most successful insights. This issue, as discussed before, is not that rock is disappearing, no longer listened to, or has ceased to be performed. The key concept is that rock has moved from a position in which it functions as a central force of popular music to a space where it is moved out of primacy by other ways of listening; in Grossberg's terms, other operational logics and apparatuses. Specifically, Grossberg suggests that eclecticism and hybridity have brought to the fore the logic of Top 40 listening. Whereas Top 40 listening was once an organization of "catchy" hits plucked from any number of styles, its "anything goes" scattered eclecticism now defines the main mode of listening in the contemporary digital age for youth culture. The democratizing influence of the internet splay multiple styles of popular music (dance, pop, rock, rap, techno, hip hop) onto the same plane of experience. With fragmentation, investments are not able to coalesce around any particular genre, short-circuiting Grossberg's aspiration for rock as an instrument of political and personal agency.

²³ Printed and cited from Grossberg, Lawrence. "Reflections of a Disappointed Popular Music Scholar." *Rock Over the Edge*. Eds. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook, & Ben Saunders. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. 25-59. Print.

Without a strong position from which to operate as its own centrally organized force, the rock era comes to an end.

Despite its intriguing account of rock in the contemporary, this claim appears to be dependent on a clear understanding of rock as a musical genre that Grossberg fails to value. If this is lacking, then eclecticism might merely be the new modality of rock ‘n’ roll. In other words, if rock can be any music, then how is Grossberg to know “rock” is no longer present in another form? In fact, this is the argument that Kevin J.H. Dettmar will offer as a rebuttal to Grossberg, that rock music is “alive” via its transmission into another musical form, namely rap. Because Grossberg rejects musical parameters for rock music, he is more interested in how eclectic musical culture might regain the agency once possessed by rock in its era of dominance. If rock is no longer present in this situation as a space to organize oppositional politics in the everyday, the new cultural organization of popular music will not serve to reassert rock’s agency and will leave it in a state of decline. Without boundaries, this problem for rock music becomes a challenge for music generally.

As suggested by earlier engagement with musicological scholars like Negus, Moore, and Stephenson, I would argue that the limitation of Grossberg’s rock formation and “death of rock” claim to account for the *musical* operation of rock is its greatest weakness. Rock may have moved into this “residual” formation not only because of material changes in how it is consumed by listeners and the emergence of a wildly diverse musical landscape, but because rock music itself has exhausted much of its own potential to present new sonic configurations and continue its evolution while residing in

the normative confines of its musical genre. Form, style, and creativity are essential aspects of rock materiality, not peripheral factors to the rock formation. There are consequences for the consumption of rock if it is unable to find innovative sounds and style without becoming too distant from its core musical markers. Rock reinserts itself into a central place in culture in part because of the interest generated by the presentation of new musical ideas. The emergence of “moments” in rock music history is not merely configurations of concrete cultural factors seizing upon a pre-existing indifferent musical body of work but driven in part by the excitement generated by previously unheard stylistic variation. Rock continuing to fight for a primary position in the social realm is dependent on its ability to move forward and couple its sonic evolution to the realm of culture. If it cannot do this, then it does run the risk of being declared “dead” in meaningful ways pertaining to the “death of rock” discourse.

The idea that continued stylistic development is vital to rock may not seem to be an immeasurably controversial claim though it finds little sympathy in how rock music is discussed in the academy. The history of Western Music is filled with examples of music that captured the energy and *Zeitgeist* of its time in part because of new innovation in its presentation of sonic material only to be eventually moved into a residual position when it exhausted its creative avenues and was replaced by other forms. These examples could include everything from the *Ars Nova*, the Romantic symphony, to American jazz. None of these forms are “dead” in the absolute sense but all have seen their moment of centrality come to an end. In contrast to their apex, their current condition lacks the same opportunity for formal innovation and the ability to be the site for transformation in

culture. Though I have argued that Grossberg's theory of the "rock formation" and death of rock would be buttressed by an attentive musicology, we reach a common conclusion the genre problems for rock music could imperil it as a central force in musical culture.

Kevin J.H. Dettmar and the Life of Rock

In his 2006 book *Is Rock Dead?*, Kevin J.H. Dettmar looks at the issue of the "death of rock" extensively, discussing the history of the idea in rock journalism, songs about the death of rock, and scholarly disagreement on the issue. In addition to the accomplished historical scholarship, Dettmar wants to argue that the notion "rock is dead" has been around as a trope since rock's outset and that nothing has occurred in the subsequent decades to unseat the idea that rock is still alive in a meaningful sense. The author devotes a whole chapter in response to Lawrence Grossberg, and Dettmar's rebuttal to Grossberg is important because it is a sustained attempt to reject the theories of one of contemporary popular music studies' architects. However, Dettmar often avoids taking many of Grossberg's arguments "head-on" (he leaves this to Miklitsch, who I will discuss momentarily). One central criticism is based upon how Grossberg has presented his viewpoint over twenty-five years of scholarship. Dettmar accuses Grossberg of being disingenuous in his writings about the death of rock. He finds a move away from Grossberg's direct accountability about the theory towards the presentation of the death of rock as an external rumor. He criticizes Grossberg for offering the death of rock as a word of mouth phantom that he is engaging not propagating, an attempt to distance himself from his own agenda.

His broader critique of Grossberg's ideas dovetails closely on a critique by Miklitsch – that Grossberg's generational investments make it difficult for him to understand transformation in rock as anything other than its death. This valuable thread out of Dettmar's critique highlights the way in which Grossberg's anxieties about the state of rock can itself be viewed as part of his subject position. Beyond my own hesitations about the lack of a musicology in Grossberg's grand conception, Dettmar is correct that a particular generational investment limits Grossberg's frame, what Dettmar identifies as a "baby-boomer vision of the rock formation" (120). Grossberg's rock formation is not only something embedded in a scholarly agenda in describing rock music, but also a product of its author's connection to the generation that spawned and developed rock music. Dettmar ties Grossberg's academic scholarship to the same sentiment in rock journalism and popular writing that focuses on fatigue in rock culture, specifically where the music appears to lack the same power to motivate change and excite the listener. Offering a list of writers with similar laments, Dettmar suggests that "Boomer Triumphalism" in rock culture displaces the loss of their own youth onto a "eulogy for rock & roll" (90).

What this argument neglects is that generational investments are integral to understandings of rock music, not something imposed externally. They are an effective place to address the limits of a scholar's approach, but they are not invalid in and of themselves. What Grossberg and all writers Dettmar critiques are attempting to capture is the shifting position of rock in culture. Though the bias nostalgia in losing something of 60s and 70s rock culture is clearly detectable in an idealization of these eras, it does

not follow that one can assume that rock has not undergone significant qualitative changes. Despite the extensive inventory of the “death of rock” narrative, Dettmar’s work is not rigorous enough to reject that rock has traversed through significant change.

Jazz, Rock, and Rap (Dettmar’s Genre Trouble)

Dettmar’s own engagement with the state of rock is dependent on bold claims that do not endure hard scrutiny. Dettmar’s misunderstanding of what is at stake for the death of rock is exemplified by his rejection of the argument of Gary Giddins' essay “How Come Jazz Isn’t Dead?” Recognizing one of the many affinities between rock and jazz as two American popular forms, Dettmar seeks to dissect the problems of Giddins’ argument about the decline of jazz because this critique establishes a blueprint for Dettmar to expose limitations in the “rock is dead” claim. As Dettmar explains, Giddins’ argument is based on four “stations” to jazz’s history that clarify the genre’s rise and fall. The fourth and final period is the most relevant for this debate, what Giddins calls “the classical.” This is where “even the most adventurous young musicians are weighed down by the massive accomplishments of the past.” In addition to presenting a creative challenge for musicians, the orientation of the audience changes in the classical period: “a large percentage of the renewable jazz audience finds history more compelling than the present” (quoted in Dettmar 7). Giddins’ argument about jazz focuses on the problems presented by an accumulating musical history that burdens and obscures the work of the present.

Dettmar does not find this is to be a parallel depiction of the current state of rock. For him, the term “classic rock” is an “oxymoron” of naturalized “oddness.” Dettmar’s dismissal of terminology (“classic rock”) possessing extensive currency and meaning in rock culture is difficult to explain. It is an apt descriptor of a large body of rock music of the last fifty years and is used extensively by fans, journalists, and segments of the music industry. The work of the 1960s and 1970s established a rock canon which is tightly wound with the musical and cultural values of a certain generation of listeners. Dettmar acknowledges this as the “canonizing impulse within the rock & roll audience, who want rock & roll to stop changing and to become instead, like classical music, a standard repertory” (7). However, acknowledging this is not adequate to dismiss the term. This canon is real in how it functions as a concept inside rock discourse and as a body of work that sets parameters for performance. Artists still cover some of the most identifiable and signature songs of rock’s first decades. In addition, as Giddins points out about jazz, many contemporary musicians feel the weight of rock’s canonical legacy. I will argue that this gave rise to the retroactive “return of rock” and a form of rock purism in the early twenty-first century.²⁴ Far from having no relation, the connection between Giddins’ claim about jazz and the state of rock seems apt especially as it pertains to the idea of the “classical.”

Dettmar’s dismissal of accepted genre conventions like “classic rock,” allow him to make bold turns in his argument. Dettmar’s own appraisal of rock music as enduring in a strong state is dependent upon the claim that the rap genre is the continuation of the

²⁴ This topic will form the basis of my arguments in Chapter Three.

legacy of rock, and in fact, the thriving incarnation of rock itself. The importance of this pillar to his argument is expressed in his own words: “if one is willing acknowledge that rap is a forward advance of the rock formation, is in fact a part of rock & roll, then it seems to me there’s no logically coherent way to argue that rock is dead. If, on the other hand, one insists that rap is no part of rock & roll – well then, rock is in a bit more trouble” (155).²⁵ This formulation attempts to benefit from the inclusion of an absolute construction – “no part of rock & roll.” Dettmar points out that rap deals with the rock canon via sampling recordings as a musical element in a rap composition. He claims “it is arguably rap that has most successfully dealt with the burden of tradition: through sampling” (7). The problem here is that rap is dealing with *rock*’s tradition successfully. This does not solve the problem of how rock itself deals with its own tradition just as how Run-DMC interpreting “Walk This Way” will not solve for future generations of rappers how to deal with the legacy of the rap and hip hop canon. There is no value argument at work here about rap and rock music. Whether either is good, bad, or one likes or dislikes sampling (for musical or political reasons) is irrelevant to my reply to Dettmar which is that rock and rap, through intertwined and related (one need not claim “no part”), are two distinct and identifiable genres complete with their own musical histories, social origins, and sonic markers. To write as though rap is rock and therefore the proper avenue for any concerns about the state of the rock genre is to obscure more than is revealed via a failure to acknowledge meaningful distinctions.

²⁵ Arguing that rap is rock and that we need not retain the classic markers of rock music in order to still see it strikes me as similar to telling someone not to mourn the dinosaurs because of the birds.

What is at stake in this debate with Dettmar is what it means to have stability and definition in rock as a genre. I would argue that rap's musical style, including its use of sampling as a vital element, its trademark vocal delivery, its emphasis and stylized use of beats, and its specific and documented social history make it a genre of its own. Dettmar even quotes American rapper Snoop Dogg who appears to make a clear distinction in how rap has begun to outperform rock 'n' roll. Snoop states that he finds rock and rap to be separate and commercially in opposition. The rapper does not see himself embedded in the rock genre nor a direct continuation of its sound. In another way, the fact that rap uses and is related to the rock canon does not make it rock 'n' roll any more than Chuck Berry is bebop jazz. A distinction between genres seems to reflect more accurately common usage and nomenclature. Though I would concede that the boundaries of genre are more scattered and porous than they once were, particularly among younger listeners, it is difficult to posit that someone would request "rock" or "rock 'n' roll" and be satisfied by a mix of rap artists. Rap and rock have extensive historical and stylistic affinities, and many rap artists have performed songs that clearly bare the staples of rock music. However, this genre blending and mixing does not constitute a full collapse of the two genres into each other.²⁶

²⁶ There is an extensive element of this debate that is about the politics of race, though Dettmar himself only references it briefly. The central debate concerns whether the omission of rap from the rock lineage entails racial exclusion of a largely black musical form from what is deemed (problematically) to be a white one. The concern is that a racist element will not accept black artists as "rock." Both Dettmar and I agree that this can only be dealt with at length and should not be taken up in passing. What I should say here is that, despite debates about ownership and origins, contemporary rock and rap have been become (unevenly) integrated and my principle motivations for rejecting Dettmar's conflation are along musical and historical lines. The contemporary white rappers Macklemore and Eminem are not rock artists and Living Colour and Lenny Kravitz are not rap, despite their racial identities.

If my debate with Dettmar is ultimately about how and to what degree one views rap music as merely an extension or “next step” for rock music and not an intertwined yet distinct popular music genre, then Dettmar’s deep skepticism about the “death of rock” and insistence on its well-being appears to be on unstable ground by his own admission. Accepting the limitations of my own analysis, there are spaces left open where Dettmar’s direct line between rock and rap is under-theorized to reject the “rock is dead” argument. Dettmar requires an extensive and specific analysis of the musical and cultural continuity between the two genres in order to secure his basic claim that rock continues to be an enduring and dynamic form and is most clearly exemplified as such by the success of rap music.²⁷ If Dettmar’s argument is generously reframed to state that rap, especially for American youth in the 1990s, fulfills the function that rock once did, then I would claim that this actually reinforces arguments (such as Grossberg’s) about rock’s obsolescence. Far from delegitimizing rap as unworthy to be rock’s new expression, this construction valorizes rap and hip hop as the active site of dynamic influence once occupied by rock. This transition creates a new avenue for scholars to view such a shift with multidisciplinary analysis. This limitation of Dettmar is also why I find more sympathy with Grossberg. Grossberg’s argument about the state of rock contains a theory of the function of rock music in culture, even if it too is musically underdeveloped. Grossberg’s

²⁷ Analysis of rap is outside of this project, but Dettmar’s enthusiasm for that genre should also not be taken at face value. Dettmar appears to take the “state of rap” as self-evident in the positive. This strikes me as a gesture of enthusiasm for rap music as the new sight of the authentic and “real” which Grossberg alludes to. The concern is that this view of rap, emboldened by well-meaning rejections of the “racist and homophobic” critiques which concern Dettmar, gives rap an unexamined endorsement in the context of his argument.

sustained engagement of why, how, and in what ways it makes sense to discuss the “death of rock” is richer in insight and analysis.

Robert Miklitsch, Genre, and Internationalism

The last scholar in academic debates around the “death of rock” I wish to engage is Robert Miklitsch. His essay “Rock ‘N’ Theory: Autobiography, Cultural Studies, and the ‘Death of Rock’” is aggressively critical of claims about the “death of rock” and his argument is useful in two ways. First, he offers a much richer analysis of social, economic, and musical factors in rebuffing Grossberg and like-minded scholars than does Dettmar. Secondly, Miklitsch grants a significant concession in his conclusions where he admits that “death of rock” claims may have validity if constructed as a problem of creativity in a Western or North American lens. This is where I find his argument most useful for my own interventions. Such a revelation is valuable to prefigure elements of my argument going forward, both as I discuss regressive musical tendencies in Chapters Three and Four and look at transnationalism in rock music in Chapter Five.

Miklitsch identifies a “death drive at work in cultural/popular music studies” (#21).²⁸ This is not limited to the writing of Grossberg, and Miklitsch finds the impulse elsewhere in the work of scholars such as Simon Frith and Charlie Gillet. His summaries of their objections are not far from the essence of Grossberg’s own views. In Miklitsch’s characterization, “rock is now all but dead as a mass-cultural force because for all its revolutionary ‘energy and excitement,’ anger and anarchism, it has finally succumbed to

²⁸ This version of Miklitsch’s essay is not paginated, but it is organized in a numeric listing of paragraphs. My citations refer to the number of these paragraphs.

those twin demons: capital and technology” (#26). He shares this view with Dettmar, reading the death of rock not as an opportune diagnosis of any particular state of rock but an embedded part of its discourse. As rock culture is often concerned about authenticity and commercialism, there is always select evidence available to make a case that rock has succumbed to what Miklitsch calls “the Mephistophelian commercial temptations of late capitalism” (#27). Rock is not dead but anxieties over its state are nearly as old as rock itself and the product of consumerist anxieties.

In turning to focus on Grossberg’s argument specifically, he recognizes that Grossberg diagnoses a set of shifting circumstances for the rock formation, including the rise of neoconservative politics as the political context, the dominance of inauthenticity in postmodernism, the increased commodity identity of rock in the digital age, and other factors. Where he departs from Grossberg is in viewing these changes as necessarily deleterious for rock. Whereas Grossberg might find certain expressions of rock culture devoid of the authenticity, rebellion, and agency, Miklitsch argues that they are functioning contemporary modalities of the genre. He makes the powerful criticism that, despite Grossberg’s preoccupation with affect as part of “mattering maps” and “structured planes of effects,” his writing suffers from a problem of abstraction which limits his ability to deal with issues such as race and sex-gender. His work’s “theoreticism” (as Miklitsch calls it) leaves Grossberg’s conception of the rock formation unable to acknowledge the important ways rock music may continue to be an effective agent for contemporary identity politics. Grossberg may come to the conclusion that “rock is dead” because his generationally-influenced frame for viewing rock as a

historical phenomenon cannot actually account for its social function in the contemporary.

Miklitsch disagrees with Grossberg and also Dettmar on another important point. He does not accept the prerogative that rock can be discussed as having no musical parameters. Pursuing this argument, his work includes a call for a more thoughtful analysis of the relationship between rock and rap music. Though he emphasizes that the “relationship between rap and rock is not one of simple exteriority,” Miklitsch disagrees with Dettmar’s unmediated connection between the two (#40). Instead, he posits in restraint that “rock has been part and parcel of that eclectic mix that is rap,” far from the argument that one can cast aside anxieties about the state of rock by investing in rap as the new site of authenticity (#38). This point is at once critical of both Grossberg and Dettmar - Grossberg insofar as his neglect of genre boundaries fails to deal with rap’s influence on musical culture, and Dettmar, who jumps to argue by conflating rap music with rock without more clearly theorizing their complex relationship.

This practice of claiming that rock can be anything or that anything may be rock is a methodological pitfall. Drawing heavily on Keith Negus’ valuable work on rock musicology and genre, Miklitsch argues that “rock imperialism” frequently diminishes other musics’ distinctiveness as part of the rock genre. Taking this construction beyond concerns about Western popular music, Miklitsch is bothered by the geopolitical aspects of this terminological gloss where the term “rock” “is applied to popular music in the global context, so-called ‘world beat’ or ‘world music’” (#44). This results in numerous theoretical and practical problems. First, it neglects the recognizable formal musical

markers that are part of rock music. Miklitsch and Negus both rightly point out that ignoring any musical understandings of rock neglects how audiences, critics, and other participants in musical discourse use the term. As Miklitsch writes referencing Roland Barthes, “if a little formalism turns one away from history, a lot brings one back to it” (#40). More importantly to concerns of power and authority, rock imperialism, when applied internationally, reproduces an exoticism where rock manifesting in non-Western culture is somehow “authentic” and “vital,” perhaps closer to the physical and libidinal roots of real rock ‘n’ roll (#45).

Miklitsch attempts a reconciliation of these antagonisms in terms of internationalism and the “death of rock.” In doing so, his emphasis on a spatiality/mobility of rock leads to a rather remarkable confession, one that Miklitsch probably under-acknowledges to the extent that his essay is an extensive critique of Grossberg. In following the path of rock across continents, Miklitsch concludes, “a certain form of rock may well be dead, or at least embalmed, in the U.S. or North American but it is alive and kickin’ elsewhere – say, in Cuba or China, Argentina or South America, Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union” (#52). Miklitsch does not explain exactly what this might mean in detail for Western rock, but instead turns to a discussion of youth culture, from which one can decipher elements of why he might consider a locational “death of rock.” In the culture of the U.S. and North America, Miklitsch argues that youth as a category has become detached as a referent to age. The twentieth century dispersed disposable income and consumption participation into increasingly younger demographics. Coupling this with older groups continuing to

express behaviors and interests once focused inside “youth,” and one has a situation where the social boundaries are porous. In turn, people ages sixteen to twenty-four have responded at times by “distancing themselves from ‘adulterated’ discourses such as, precisely, rock” (#58). Miklitsch concludes by arguing that if we are to reexamine the issues of the “death of rock,” we would be wise to “reconsider the generational axes” (#63). While this approach does not fully account for a possibility of a localized expiration of the genre, Miklitsch’s focus on shifts inside youth culture, genre fragmentation, and other issues brings the terms of his debate remarkably close to the theories of his opponent, Grossberg.

Prefiguring the analysis in Chapter Five, Miklitsch’s introduction of transnational concerns into a conversation about the state of rock is indispensable. Instead of arguing about rock’s demise in terms of a single subject, it is worth asking to whom rock might be dead and where it might be so. I have argued that rock’s continued vitality, its “life” as a musical genre, is connected to its ability to produce new and innovative sounds in the context of its genre. However, this formulation suggests a story about progress, a narrative that is thoroughly value-laden in discussions of music. Not only is the concept of musical progress far from a self-evident “good,” the ability of rock (or any genre) to access it infinitely is suspect. This is why it is important to investigate how we can think about the state of rock outside of unitary narratives of progress, particularly a Western ascendant vision of progress. Rock’s future development may not be coming to an end but may be radically transforming via transnational contexts. Miklitsch’s brief

engagement with an internationalized account of the state/death of rock is a tantalizing lead into future theorizing that I will resume in Chapter Five.

Conclusions

In discussing these three writers, I have attempted to present my own interpretations of the “death of rock” in terms of their arguments. This secondary analysis not only reinforces the concerned statements of musicians like Corgan, but it also serves to delineate ways in which critical study of rock music has identified challenges to the genre. As Dettmar diagnosis, the concept of the “death of rock” has been a reoccurring trope in rock culture for decades and is an embedded part of its discourse. However, arguing in concert with Grossberg, I maintain that its reoccurring nature is not antithetical to dynamic change as well. As listening practices, musical style, and technology change, scholars should continue to re-interrogate the “death of rock.”

I wish to conclude by mapping out a method for thinking about the “death of rock” and the continued terms of rock’s possibility. There appears to be consensus among all parties that some form of what we call rock ‘n’ roll or simply rock will continue for the foreseeable future. There is no doubt that bands whose sound is best represented by the term “rock” are still active and successful. In conjunction with claims for a musicology of rock as coherent and organized around musical principles, I would reaffirm that when talking about the state of rock music one cannot leave behind the musical elements that constitute it. Though there is no doubt that it has evolved in its first six decades or that many of its musical boundaries are malleable, contemporary

discussion of rock focuses its stylistic organization on a mix of its use of backbeat, prominence of the electric guitar, vocal style, and musical principles such as its competing influence of the blues, art music, and other genres.

One of the central questions becomes how rock is to be understood as those borders (both formal and national) do become more suspect. Kevin J.H. Dettmar has argued that rap is the continuation of rock's legacy to the point of claiming that it can be identified as part of contemporary rock. Though I have argued against this, if true, it would amount to a radical reorganization of the sonic principles of rock music unlike any other in the development of its short musical history. Even allowing the extremes of heavy metal and art rock, there is no leap in stylistic alteration that would compare to this wholesale shift in style. I would instead argue that the stretching of practices such as rap and hip hop into the category of rock practice is evidence of the imperiled state of the genre, not its well-being. If rock needs these forms in order to sustain itself that may instead reveal that rock is not capable of continuing to be an actively creative and evolving genre on its own terms. Claiming another genre's vitality for rock's own is far from acknowledging the quality of rap and hip hop but the epitome of rock imperialism.

If rock is considered musically coherent and that idea that "anything can be rock" rejected, this appears to make more sense. Quoting journalist Michael Cable in the negative, Dettmar finds the notion that there could be melodic limits to the variation a popular music genre like rock can offer "preposterous as to defy refutation" yet his refutation relies on his standard reply – "Even if one were to grant that Western's music 'limited number of notes' means that all is repetition, the (postmodern) hip-hop practice

of sampling does suggest a way out of this impasse” (26). I would suggest that one of the principal reasons that rock has moved to a residual role in musical culture is precisely because its musical resources of evolution are not infinite. What Dettmar finds “preposterous” – a critique of infinite variation – is wholly rational. Rock’s prominent role in culture, its ability to influence generations, historical events, and patterns of thought, is tied to its sonic practice including the ability to offer the new, unfamiliar, and exciting. Far from Dettmar’s skepticism, there is little reason to believe that rock’s ability to do this is an inexhaustible resource. It is possible that rock can only survive as dynamic via its incorporation into a related yet separate genre instead of as its own self-perpetuating body of work.

As will be explored in the next chapter, I argue that rock’s turn in the beginning of the millennium to a retroactive version of rock ‘n’ roll based on the limited sounds of the 1960s and 1970s British and American “garage rock” was a self-aware acknowledgement of this situation. After the previous high watermark of alternative rock and the unique blend of the melodic and heavy by Nirvana and eclectic experimentation with both long form compositions and electronics by the Smashing Pumpkins in *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, rock had limited avenues through which to innovate and excite. In turn, it chose a vision of rock ‘n’ roll that attempted to move forward by moving backwards and invited an essentialist argument that rock was not about its ability to change and evolve but its capacity to evoke the guitar-centric energy of its classic period.

Whether this ultimately constitutes the “death of rock” is still doubtful if “death” is to be taken in the polemic. However, if by “death” the more careful scholar is arguing that rock is taking a receding role in musical culture that is unlikely (or at best, unassured) to reverse itself as it has in the past, then there is reason to claim that the station of rock has changed, possibly permanently. Rock relies on its ability to evolve into new territory, incorporating new sounds and styles. If that cannot be done through what is recognizable as rock, then rock music as it has existed in its first decades may be in decline.

Chapter Three: The Musical Ideology of the Return of Rock

Following Billy Corgan's outspoken stance favoring a progressive path pushing rock forward into new territory, the music industry and press responded at the turn of the millennium by offering a highly retroactive version of rock music to resurrect it from a commercial and creative malaise. This musical moment was commonly referred to as the "return of rock" or "garage revival," the latter phrase connecting the music to the garage bands of the 1960s. Counter to people like Corgan, this vision of rock 'n' roll contended that its continued vitality was tied to the pervasive use of the sounds of its prior decades. I argue that this was an opportunistic attempt by rock journalists, artists, and the music industry to circumvent a creative crisis of how to develop rock by explicitly rejecting forward motion or experimentation as unnecessary. Instead, the music of "return of rock" artists offered rock guitar styles of the past as a renewable source of creative energy able to draw on rock's essential power of volume, attitude, and other stylistic hallmarks. While the press spent a great deal of time covering a myriad of bands who fit with the agenda of the return of rock, the flagship group for this movement was the Detroit duo The White Stripes. The White Stripes served this musical philosophy by producing rock 'n' roll that actively imposed limits on its formal potential, presented itself as authentic in its simplicity, and rejected the modern aesthetic of recording production. In this chapter, I will describe the historical situation that drove the need for an essentialist "return of rock" and offer analysis of The White Stripes as an outlet for its aesthetic agenda, particularly as guitarist Jack White is represented in the film *It Might Get Loud*.

The Rise of Pop and Rock's "Disappearance"

In the period of years between the final fading of alternative rock at the end of 1990s and what the press would organize as the “return of rock” around 2002, it is worth asking where rock music was residing if it was somehow absent. Where did it return *from* and why did it require salvation? One of the reasons musical culture, particularly mainstream journalists, perceived rock as playing a diminished role was the commercial dominance of other forms of popular music. The turn of the millennium was a high point of attention to “pop” artists and their recordings. In the extensive academic writing on “rock” versus “pop” music, one of the best summaries comes from Philip Auslander in his study of performance. Rock and pop do have important stylistic differences that can distinguish them: rock’s strong reliance on the electric guitar, pop’s approach to vocal chorus “hooks,” pop’s preference for digital/processed percussion vs. live drums, and many other subtle details in presentation. However, Auslander prefers to focus on the distinction outside the music itself by working through the central notion of authenticity. “The ideological distinction between rock and pop,” he points out, for example, “is precisely the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic, the sincere and the cynical, the genuinely popular and the slickly commercial, the potentially resistant and the necessarily coopted, art and entertainment” (69). He links this to the romantic notion that rock music truly expresses the inner feelings and emotions of its producers and their often oppositional stance, whereas pop artists merely place the final veneer on a pre-fabricated song architecture that is crafted and test-marketed in a business environment committed to maintaining the profit margins and social status quo. Like all authors

dealing with this subject, Auslander acknowledges the difficulty in believing in this simplistic binary as a reality, but the key is how it functions as real in discourses around rock music generated both by the press and enthusiasts.

The pop music of the millennium embraced a spectacle that openly accepted heavily manufactured presentation without concern about narratives of unmediated creativity or modest expressions of artistic essence. Operating in the final peak of the music video era, the artists presented themselves in larger-than-life, complex digital productions, using the developing digital video technology and hyper-busy editing styles to push visual extremes. Featuring “boy bands” and “pop princess” solo artists, the music industry made little effort to obscure the impression that these performers were corporate constructions in contrast to the vaguely anti-capitalist postures of some alternative rock artists of the previous decade. The notion of authenticity, prized in some alternative rock bands driven by the anti-corporate mentality of punk rock, was not overtly renounced as much as it was of little concern against the backdrop of a massive business infrastructure prepared to globally market a bombastic and boldly elaborate pop music culture.

If Nirvana pushing aside Michael Jackson was the commercial watershed moment of alternative rock, its own dénouement was signaled by the ascension of Britney Spears’ debut single “...Baby One More Time” in January of 1999. Spears helped open the market to other similar acts while also accompanying a return of boy band culture. In the year 2000 alone, N*SYNC, Britney Spears, and the Backstreet Boys sold 31 million albums and the data from that year reflects the overall sagging of rock music by comparison. Country music was selling effectively and rap and hip-hop represented itself

in the form of successful solo artists. The strongest rock sales were from the group Creed who charted two albums totaling thirteen million (Pesselnick 39). Yet, Creed had few companions and were seldom referred to as evidence of rock's strength.²⁹

The shift away from rock and towards an aesthetic and social climate of pop music has been linked to the emergence of the Generation Y/Millennial generation (commonly thought of as those born between 1982 and the early 1990s) and their energetic consumption of media promoting a positive and celebratory message about fame and music. When Linda Lee investigated the burgeoning cultural phenomenon in 1997, she found that "what is notable about the newest wave is that idoldom itself has moved front and center in the culture, in a way not seen since the youthquake triggered by the baby boom in the 50's and 60's" ("Attack of the 90-Foot Teenagers"). This type of fandom was not centered on "bands" or "solo artists" as in rock but instead looked at individual icons or "groups" reminiscent to many critics of the teen heartthrobs of the 1950s and the numerous vocal groups that were the alternative to the rougher, more crude guitar sounds of rock 'n' roll.

In the modern context, the music itself was presented as a sharp contrast to the angst-filled songs of the 1990's popular alternative bands. Those interviewed in the industry contributing to Lee's piece hit on a repeated note regarding what the new generation of youth was interested in. Carmen Cacciatore of MCA records talked about the radio emphasis on "upbeat, quirky, fun music" and John McDaniel of Seattle public

²⁹ The conspicuous manner in which Creed became (and often still is) a target of ridicule and disdain as somehow embodying all that is wrong with rock is a historiographic topic in itself. This burden has also been shared by their approximate contemporaries Nickelback.

school radio station KNHC said “a lot of music now doesn’t have a negative energy. It’s fluffy. It seems more a lighter note” (“Attack of the 90-Foot Teenagers”). Lee employed Roger Rosenblatt of *Time* to frame the sociological analysis of a generation free from anxieties pointing out that “This generation doesn’t have a war. The economy is good. They have drugs a bit, but it’s not attached to anything important. They have no political agenda. They have created pop culture lite”³⁰ (“Attack of the 90-Foot Teenagers”). The culture of the 1990s that had spawned alternative rock was over, and the Generation X group that had been central to driving the aesthetic of its music had reached an age where a new group of youth with disposable income had supplemented them. With their ascendancy, new priorities about carefree joy were reflected in the music they supported. This was a heavily-processed, synthesizer-focused musical aesthetic, a sound driven not by rock musical auteurs but by the elaborate interworkings of producers, songwriters, publishing houses. All of this was moved by the booming economic climate of the dot-com bubble and the growing prosperity.

Nowhere was the shift in cultural *Zeitgeist* more evident than in the changes at MTV and its signature show of the millennial turn *Total Request Live*. “TRL” (as it was commonly abbreviated) was ushered in with the same sweep that produced pop’s dominance when it debuted in September of 1998. The show functioned in response to criticism that MTV had moved away from airing music videos, the format for sharing music that had once been its near sole reason for broadcasting. Throughout the 1990s, the network had accelerated its airing of entertainment programs, contest shows, and even

³⁰ Less than five years later, this vision of culture in the USA would clearly change with the events of September 11, 2001.

played an instrumental role in birthing the reality genre when it debuted *The Real World* in 1992. Less and less space remained for the airing of traditional music videos, and the end of the alternative moment had seen the disappearance of the video-centric “Buzz Bin” as well as other methods of drawing attention to new offerings.

TRL brought to MTV a renewed force for the logic of Top 40 pop listening and used as its primary format a system in which viewers could vote for their favorite videos and then discover where each video was ranked that afternoon. While this approach to fandom and marketing was an easy fit for new teen idols like Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys, rockstars of the previous decade had a difficult time assimilating. Writing for *Rolling Stone*, Gavin Edwards picked up such resentment when talking to one rock musician who felt like the music of the alternative era was a poor fit for the this approach to publicity. In contextualizing Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails refusal to “kiss {TRL host} Carson Daly’s ass,” Edwards found that “some artists resent how much power now resides in what they see as a teeny-bop program that caters to the most trivial side of popular music” (16). For Reznor (and he was probably not alone), it was uncomfortable and insulting to have play the game of pandering for airplay. Artists like Nine Inch Nails, the Smashing Pumpkins, Pearl Jam, and other alternative groups had reached commercial success during a time when MTV presented itself with a journalistic and self-conscious approach fitting of its demographic at the time, the twenty-somethings of Generation X. With MTV shifting its focus to young teen and even “tween” viewers, many older artists struggled in how to connect with the new music and video dispersion format and maintain what they felt was their own artistic integrity.

TRL became a venue for old conflicts between rock ‘n’ roll and pop music beyond the artists themselves. In the same *Rolling Stone* article, Edwards revealed this in the statements of on-air callers who MTV would allow to introduce videos and offer commentary. In his words, “the show has successfully pitted pop fans against rock fans so that both camps have a stake in the results; the (usually male) voters for Korn often mention in their on-air testimonials how important it is to get more rock in the countdown” (13). Because artists like Korn (a rap-tinged nü-metal group) appeared to be in the minority, their presence was a reminder of music largely absent and incongruous from the pop artists that dominated the Top 10 countdown forming the show’s structure.³¹

In commentary on the online *AVClub.com*, Nathan Rabin directly connected the *TRL* pop explosion to the demographic and culture shifts occurring between the Generation X and Generation Y transition. His language is loaded with a polemical tone driven from being inside the debate itself. He contrasts “the jaded, no-future Gen-Xer” with the “web-savvy, mindlessly optimistic member of Generation Y, a consumption-happy bunch with an insatiable appetite for the next fad” (“MTV – Inside TRL”). For Rabin, the self-conscious culture of alternative rock which held personal authenticity vital

³¹ Instead of running from this tension, MTV made light of it and offered a nod to the new direction the channel had taken. Eric Weisbard wrote about the birth of *TRL* for *The Village Voice* and linked the new face of MTV to promo bumpers played during their signature yearly event *The MTV Music Awards* that same September 1998. One promo featured a sad, “stupefied” 7-Eleven clerk, the image of the twenty-something, 90s “slacker” archetype as he comforted himself with a boombox playing college radio favorites The Replacements. Weisbard reads this as an emerging nod to MTV’s rejection of musical history in favor of an obsessive attention to the current, a loss of what he calls “all the classic tunes MTV can’t acknowledge.”

Weisbard, Eric. "A Golden Age: MTV Names the Only 10 Songs that Matter." *The Village Voice*. Oct 26 1999: 145-. International Index to Music Periodicals Full Text. Web. 24 Oct. 2012.

was being swept away by a much more eager and embracing new youth culture. *TRL* functioned as a popularity contest of the best, brightest, and prettiest, recapitulating a high school-style opposition to the identity of “slacker” and “loser,” common terms to describe American youth subculture in the 1990s and their often less-than-photogenic stars.

In offering this comparison, Rabin strikes themes familiar to many scholars of rock history, including recalling the dubious distinctions in popular music between disco – solo artist driven, light, dance/pleasure centered – and rock ‘n’ roll, the site of “real” musicians playing instruments, singing with serious content, and maintaining a place for artistic authenticity. Rabin’s critique hits this note even more clearly near his conclusion where he points out that, among the artists on one day’s *TRL* countdown, “only Stone Temple Pilots performs accompanied by anything as antiquated as musical instruments, a telling detail for a video that celebrates the triumph of marketing over art and style over substance” (“MTV – Inside *TRL*”). The important point is not the true presence of “substance,” but the way in which the signifiers of musical instruments, including the electric guitar so important to rock, had receded from a prominent place in the visual culture of mainstream popular music. No matter what one believes about these musical politics, the dominance of pop music and its familiar modes were an effective antidote after the alternative rock era and its own musical politics. A move away from bands, instruments, and other rock signifiers set the stage for the “return of rock,” which would import the notion of authenticity driven by instrument-centered rock ‘n’ roll bands once more.

In an ending note, to overstate this point of rock's "disappearance," however, can be misleading. Though pop's usurpation of rock at the turn of the millennium and the generational shift left rock with a reduced impact on music culture, rock music still had a foothold in the market and the attention of some listeners. With artists like Korn, Limp Bizkit, Kid Rock, and others, rock was present even on *TRL* in the years preceding the "return of rock." What was noteworthy is that this brand of rock, hybridized with fusions of rap and metal, was at times not deemed worthy to truly "count" towards a strong rock presence. This type of "impure" rock music set the stage for a style that would enact the sound and image of a more essentialized, retro-looking brand of rock 'n' roll that drew much of its inspiration from forty years prior.

Rock's Re-emergence and the "Return of Rock"

There is no clear demarcation to begin looking at the origin of the "return of rock" or the "garage-revival" as it is also called. If there was any catalyst in the early history, it was the 1998 release of the *Nuggets* boxed-set that dispersed this music to new musicians by presenting dozens of songs from the 1960s' lesser known rock 'n' roll groups into one extensive, multi-CD package complete with annotations.³² Many of those songs would be noticed and offered as covers by the bands that followed and used as templates when writing their own compositions. Writing for *PopMatters*, Robert Jamieson described the

³² The term "garage" was not new to describe a type of modern rock music, but it became popular at this time to draw attention to both the artists' general lack of previous recognition ("playing in a garage") as well as to signify their amateurism of playing simple rock 'n' roll with inexpensive instruments in any available rehearsal space. It also linked the return of rock bands to the longer history of archival "garage band" music that *Nuggets* would promote.

slow build for recognition of the music and gap between its existence and mainstream profile, “‘Rock is back’ declared magazine articles and websites around the world in 2002. The response that it never really left is only partially correct. The airwaves...have been dominated by teen-pop and bling-bling hip-hop over the past five years or so. In that time, it wasn’t that rock music wasn’t being written, performed and lived during this time, it’s just that it wasn’t what mainstream corporate media chose to talk about” (“Gore Gore Girls: Up All Night”). The music that formed the return of rock germinated like most popular music forms in the practice of multiple independent groups making music in relative obscurity. Yet, these groups were particularly late in finding recognition, and Jamieson also notes that numerous albums that formed the list of 2002’s best offerings were actually released as far back as two years prior. In the pace and life cycle of popular music, those would be considered dated albums. The records languished until a moment when they were harnessed to present a specific narrative about not only the state of rock but the nature of the genre and its hopes for the future in the past.

A key figure in giving voice to the “return of rock” was Steven Van Zandt, guitarist for Bruce Springsteen’s E Street Band and host of *Little Steven’s Underground Garage*, a national radio program devoted to garage music of the past. This show also seized upon the rise of new garage acts to enhance its repertory. As numerous journalists sat with Van Zandt for interviews, he became a sort of spokesman for the musical politics of this moment. Quoting him for an article, Nichols Jennings communicated the religious hyperbole of the music’s power and importance:

On the eighth day, God took a look at Rock and Roll and found it was becoming pretentious and self-important and boring and so He created Garage. It was not always particularly original and the musicians not always particularly accomplished. But God gave the singers a permanent snotty adolescence and infused the entire genre with the essence of what Rock and Roll is all about: attitude, anger, angst, anxiety, frustration, bravado, guitars, fuzztones and Farfisa organs. And it was cool. (12)

Despite the tongue-in-cheek whimsy of this account of garage coming from the hand of God, many themes that would become tropes in talking about rock in the early twenty-first century take shape in this passage. “Garage rock,” in its chordal simplicity, lack of instrumental ornamentation, simple yet aggressive beats, and prominent use of guitars in the style of 50s and 60s rock, was a corrective to the bombast and complexity of another form of rock music. The stand-in opponent could be any number of styles from eras of rock music – the orchestral grand design of The Beatles’ *St. Pepper*, the long, evolving ode of “Stairway to Heaven,” or in a more contemporary sense, the neo-prog alternative of the Smashing Pumpkins or busy, hybrid rap-rock like Limp Bizkit. Like punk or 60s underground music, the recent music of Van Zandt’s radio show was able to tap into rock music’s ever present wealth-spring of “permanent snotty adolescence” in order to exert its power, even while he admits that the music seldom succeeds in offering something new. This position can hold if one asserts that rock ‘n’ roll only appears at times to be an evolving, revitalizing genre of new styles and forms. Van Zandt and others offer the

claim that rock n' roll is an essential thing in character – attitude, anger, angst, etc. As much as anything, it is a music of style and attitude.

Yet, when asked to define the garage rock genre, Van Zandt provides a formalist analysis by saying, “I can tell you what it's not. It's not synthesizers. It's not drum loops. It's not keyboards in general, unless it's a Vox Continental or Farfisa organ. Its guitars and bass and drums and harmonicas and maracas. It's real people playing real music. It's primitive” (“Garage Rocks! It's Loud, it's Fast and it's Cool Again”). Despite common pronouncements about an attitude-centric analysis of rock,³³ this statement reflects that “rock” does function with a formal component of musically identifiable signifiers. Van Zandt offers here an instrumentation account of what garage is – the simple format of guitar, bass, and drums with the augmentation of a select number of acceptable keyboard instruments. Because this is also deeply connected to an understanding of an essential character of rock music, this particular arrangement, the garage band, is presented as rock at its most real, pure, and authentic.³⁴

Reacting to the power of pop music and the lack of “pure” rock ‘n’ roll, this “return of rock” was offered as a salvation for rock music, the resurrection from the death of rock that Billy Corgan argued for at the end of the 1990s. This narrative of rock in need of a resurrection was prevalent around 2002. Ian Youngs of the BBC called the

³³ This conversation shouldn't be confused with the much larger use of the term “rock” to denote types of behavior and even musical stances. I would argue that when “rock” is exported out of the music in the context of pop or dance music (the recent popularity of LMFAO's “party rock” fad is one example) it is functioning to evoke the attitude/stance aspect of rock ‘n’ roll performance. However, the delineation of rock music itself cannot be reduced to this non-musical quality.

³⁴ The “primitivism” and “real people” claims about the music of rock's return should not be read only as an internal conversation about styles of rock but also an assault on the previously ascendant trend of pop vocal groups and teen idols.

latest wave of bands rock's "saviors" and this label and its variations was applied to The White Stripes, The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, and others. Stephen Van Zandt seconded this analysis as well by declaring to *EW.com*, "Rock & roll has never been more dead than now. The rock era, as I clock it, went from '65 to '94, from "Like a Rolling Stone" to Kurt Cobain's death. We are back in the pop era, and I don't find that particularly spiritually nourishing" ("Rock Godfather"). Generational politics are at work in this statement, the same politics that Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Robert Miklitsch note in their critique of Lawrence Grossberg's writing on the death of rock. However, Van Zandt doesn't fit seamlessly into the generational frame, working as an artist from the 70s and 80s attempting to bridge a continuum between the music of the 1960s and the early millennium. He draws conclusions like Corgan's that rock suffered a crisis with the death of Kurt Cobain which catalyzed the waning of alternative rock in the second half of the 1990s. Once pop and hybrid-friendly "new/nü metal" took hold, rock 'n' roll died, not as a permanent condition but as potentially part of a life cycle. Van Zandt claims that this most recent moment of rock's death is somehow an extreme situation unparalleled in its history ("never been more dead than now").

However, not every critical observer was as reassured by the ascendancy of simple, retro-minded rock music as the inheritors of the true mantle of rock 'n' roll and the hope for its future. Writer David Browne's commentary is valuable in part because of its attempt to stem the tide of positive press at the time. More importantly, his wariness about the garage revival's dismissal of musical progress and originality has affinities with two other larger critiques I will take up later in Chapter Four – Theodore Adorno's

analysis of restoration in art music and Simon Reynolds' much more contemporary claim about the crisis of "retromania" in popular culture. Browne's criticism is centrally about originality, the potential for new and forward thinking avenues for rock music to travel into. He argues that what separates the "rock is back" movement of the millennium from other such occurrences in rock history is that it was the first to fail to reach towards a "fresh direction, either sonically or philosophically." Every important event in the previous development of rock has "proclaimed that not only was the genre not ready for its funeral but there were new roads to explore and new paths to wander" ("Retro Active"). Browne writes in opposition of Van Zandt's essentialism about rock. While Van Zandt sees garage as a supreme reduction of rock 'n' roll to its primal, formally simple essence, Brown has something different in mind when describing rock's "vital element." He has his own rock essentialism but it is one of constant motion and development, looking for new sounds, augmentations, and experimentations. This is a richer conception of rock history that attempts to understand rock not through static characteristics but as continually developing. For Browne, the revival of rock has taken place each time in history due to rock's ability to need, like the shark, to keep swimming and moving forward in order to survive.

Browne's second point is an insightful one that outstrips its setting in an *EW* commentary piece. The problem of rock 'n' roll being reborn in a style brazenly restorative of the music of distant decades is not only that "it essentially announces that the genre has nothing new left to say and leaves innovation to other styles," but that it threatens to reduce rock music, once thought of as a vivacious social force in culture, to

something like a secondary niche form that can only be enacted as a genre confined by an accessible set of musical parameters. Thinking of specific examples, Browne warns “unless the music decides to head down new avenues, it could end up with as many defined boundaries as bluegrass or Dixieland jazz” (“Retro Active”). While there is nothing wrong with bluegrass or Dixieland, their social agency is limited by the fact that they would struggle to present themselves as musically dynamic and innovative. While he is working against the idea of neglecting the role of sound in rock culture, Browne’s point is deep in the underbelly of Grossberg’s concerns about fundamental shifts in the “rock formation.” Rock music conceding the ground of progress and innovation is not a promising course for its musical vitality or long-term social relevance. If rock music has exhausted itself with nothing new to be said because it is, fundamentally, a genre with tight boundaries, it could become like the symphonies of the Classical and Romantic eras – peak achievements of their times still enjoyed in reflection and performed as an homage alongside contemporary retread imitations but far from importance in the everyday listening experience and musical life of the populace who once held it central.

The questions Browne raises are not ones of pleasure in listening or the availability of the music. Rock can continue in many forms with an active audience just as jazz, Dixieland, or symphonic composition have retained footholds in listening behaviors and musical culture. What is at stake for Browne’s concept of rock music is a revision of its identity. Brown, like Corgan and other like-minded parties, wants to argue that rock history reveals it to be equally defined by change as tradition. Even if audiences begin to consume this tradition indefinitely, they are consuming a different

musical force than generations of fans had previously. Conversely, rock's ability to avoid becoming merely another listening choice amongst many is predicated on its formal ability to engage large audiences and wed its style and presentation to a level of consciousness and excitement making it a central actor in not just musical culture but culture at large. Browne's provocative insight holds that the "return of rock" may actually function to relinquish this aspect of rock altering its position significantly. He is diagnosing, like Lawrence Grossberg, an aspect of rock's move from twentieth century primacy to twenty-first century recession.

Gender, Musicianship, and Saving Rock

Another critique of the "return of rock" era and its musical politics was suggested by Carrie Brownstein of the Riot Grrrl group, Sleater Kinney. Speaking to *Rolling Stone* at the height of the "return of rock" in 2002, Brownstein responded to a question about the contemporary role of women in musical politics. Contrasting the place of women in rock to their acceptance in hip hop, Brownstein said, "In rock... women are still ghettoized...I think that women will never be allowed to save rock music, because the hero - the rebel who rises from the ashes to save rock - is always a male" (quoted in Cross 57). The critique of how women are excluded or compartmentalized in rock culture has been articulated in many ways by artists, journalists, and critics, but Brownstein presents here a timely and specific critique about not just the role of women generally but about their suppression in rock narratives. As the "return of rock" veered at times into a discourse about meta-considerations such as saving rock, this insight is an

effective entrance to consider the ways in which such constructions presented a gendered position as a neutral, inclusive one.

Brownstein herself, as a member of the Pacific Northwest Riot Grrrl scene, is responding to a consistent erasure of women from rock narratives. Catherine Strong published an essay only a few years after Brownstein's remarks suggesting that women were already being written out of the media's account of the music of the 1990s. Looking at the ten-year anniversary of the death of Kurt Cobain, Strong argues that "grunge has been reclaimed as a masculine space along the lines of other rock movements" (398). Historical distance amplifies this effect and "female participants in the scene become reduced in stature and importance in the media" (412). As Strong presents her evidence of media myopia, it increases the scope of Brownstein's observation about the state of women in rock in 2002. Not only does the guitarist recognize that women are excluded from a vanguard role in the immediate rock cultural setting, but this relegation is part of a process that had been actively developing over the previous decade.

Part of the explanation for why salvation narratives in rock often privilege a certain type of male performer is based upon constructions of intellectualized technical ability. For Marisa Meltzer, this has been endemic since rock's earliest attempts at elaboration and development in the 1960s. She argues that "rock was about virtuosity and, unless you're a diva, virtuosity has always been associated with being male" (6). As later movements such as punk and Riot Grrrl embraced the ideas that anyone could play or even learn while onstage, this placed the work of women in these movements in a

secondary position to selected male peers. Helen Davies has studied constructions of female rock performers in the British press and reaches the conclusion that rock discourse frames the output of male artists as “intelligent and serious.” This replicates a divide between the “association of masculinity with the cerebral and femininity with the physical” that could function to sustain “women's exclusion from credibility” (306). Music that is the proper site of contemplation, serious and technical, is the province of male artists and masculinity. This dovetails on the claims of Neil Nehring in *Popular Music, Gender and Postmodernism: Anger Is an Energy* (1997) who sees in rock commentary an elevation of intellect over emotion that extends back into the philosophical biases of the modern and romantic paradigms. This preference delegitimizes the voices of women and removes them from the conversation about serious music, and instead includes them in emotionally-fetishizing categories like “angry women.”

With rock narratives and identity so entwined with the electric guitar and its (almost exclusively male) hero, gendered orientation towards this instrument also manifests itself as a problem. It is easy to note the lack of female guitar icons in mainstream (or even alternative/subcultural) rock culture. In contrast, women, when they are represented as instrumentalists, are disproportionately present as bass players. Ellen Koskoff studied this phenomenon extensively in local Boston bands during the 1990s.³⁵ She submitted questions to musicians both male and female to gain insight into social views about musicianship and bass playing. She found assumptions that “women, more

³⁵ Koskoff choose local Boston bands entering a talent competition to avoid a methodological problem of scholars over-representing commercially established acts as reflective of rock culture at large.

than men, would be drawn to an instrument with lower skill requirements and/or a faster learning curve” (199). She frames the high incidence of female bassists as part of Barbara F. Reskin and Patricia Roos’ queuing theory of occupational sex segregation where women fill needs where men can’t or won’t perform. The rejection of this musical position by men is important. Koskoff theorizes that “lower skill requirements produce opportunities for women only when coupled with low prestige and consequent masculine disinterest” (201). Male musicians sometimes view the role of bass as a spot for mediocre or failed guitarists and were seen in some of the responses as using power inequalities in the musical scene to deny access to “the most valued instruments, leaving the lower-status bass more available to those marginalized by either gender or skill level (or both)” (202).

This is what makes a band such as Brownstein’s Sleater Kinney subtly even more radical in the rock context and explains her indignation at how the saviors of rock are always male. Not only do two members of her group (Brownstein and Corin Tucker) play six-string electric guitars, but the band does not include a bass player at all. With one default formation of a rock band being the power trio of guitar, drummer, and bass, this decision to exclude the role of a bassist and have both women play guitars is notably transgressive of rock norms. With Sleater Kinney being seven years removed from their first album at the time of her statement to *Rolling Stone*, Brownstein could be read as protesting the lack of recognition for work like her own and wondering why rock needed to call upon a man to spark its return at all.

As I will turn to next, the role of guitar playing and Jack White as its modern embodiment become key narratives to the “return of rock.” This is expressed in extensively in the film *It Might Get Loud*. The ideology of the “return of rock” tells a particular story about the electric guitar and the essence of rock music. This ties to a backwards-looking view of rock’s teleology and also opens itself to a critique of masculinity as suggested by Brownstein where men and a masculinized view of rock practice continue to define the canon.

The White Stripe’s Minimalist Rock on Record

As part of this narrative of the hero who saves rock, the music press focused on the group The White Stripes as the era’s paradigmatic representatives, particularly the persona of their singer/guitarist Jack White. Their choice of a restricted minimalist rock palette and musical philosophy manifested many of the important points of the ideology of the return of rock. The band consisted of a duo, Jack and Meg White, who began the group while a married couple yet continued after their divorce and responded by reinventing their press narrative as a brother-sister combo. They created an elaborate backstory about their family origins and stood out for their signature red, white, and black visual aesthetic inspired by peppermint candy. Musically, the band was commonly described as a fusion of punk, blues, and American garage music making them sonic torchbearers for the return of rock. They released two albums in 1999 and 2000 before gaining international acclaim for their 2002 release *White Blood Cells*. Because of their critical prominence, Jack White moved to the fore of musical culture as a contemporary

rock spokesman, and his group presents an access point to discuss the return of rock in terms of a specific artistic practice.

On the strength of *White Blood Cells*, The White Stripes were presented in the press as both saviors of rock ‘n’ roll³⁶ and a perfect response to the failings of popular music at the turn of the millennium. Ben Greenman in *The New Yorker* recognized the antagonisms between the broader working definition of “rock” (and more specifically “rock ‘n’ roll”) and looked at the shortcomings of other successful “rock” bands at the time. Some of these groups failed because they played rock-hip hop fusion while others were unable to claim the mantle of vibrant, consequential rock ‘n’ roll by lacking “an extra ingredient: an upjut of energy, a defiant attitude, a backbeat” (204). This conveys the attitude theory of rock ‘n’ roll accompanied by the formal reference to the “backbeat.” In this case, the backbeat is a popular synecdoche, standing not only for the literal emphasis on the second and fourth beat but for a whole set of musical properties that sonically signify “rock ‘n’ roll.” Not just the beat that helps associate the form with movement and dance, the backbeat in this short quote is everything that makes rock swing and move the audience, such as the loud guitars, boogie rhythms, and emphatic vocals. The White Stripes were able to meet both the attitude and aural requirements in the form of short, simple songs featuring uncomplicated electric guitar and embryonic drums packaged with a mischievous and uncomfortable press persona that established

³⁶ David Fricke’s feature for them in an August 2002 issue of *Rolling Stone* employed the headline “Reluctant Rock and Roll Saviors The White Stripes Would Like the Spotlight Turned Off: Too Much Too Soon.”

them as Detroit garage upstarts in opposition to the glamour and mechanizations of the international music machine.³⁷

Their musical aesthetic was based on sonic simplicity involving an adherence to basic rock ‘n’ roll forms and chords, limited instrumentation, conservative analog production techniques, and a strong debt to American rural blues. The band achieved their intended sound through the technique of imposing their own musical limitations grounded first in the minimalist style of drummer Meg White. Meg White performed unapologetically without pretension to virtuosity. For her, this refusal to be lured into flashy technique was a source of pride. She told David Fricke, “That is my strength. A lot of drummers would feel weird about being that simplistic” (quoted in “White on White”). Instead of supplying an array of varying rhythms to give the songs a unique character or using drum fills to plug musical breaks, her drumming consisted of concise rhythms where the goal was to either provide a steady backbeat or to directly punctuate the accents on Jack White’s guitar chords and vocal phrases. In a motif he would restate in many ways, Jack White viewed her style as an opportunity for creativity, “I never thought, ‘God, I wish Neil Peart was in this band’ ...Meg is the best part of this band. It never would have worked with anybody else, because it would have been too complicated. When she started to play drums with me, just on a lark, it felt liberating and refreshing” (“Jack White defends...”).

³⁷ Jack White played up this “Detroit outsider” aspect of the band’s appeal and described the situation to *Spin* as “so far away from the music industry and press industry that bands are allowed to become really great performers or great songwriters.” This contributed the narrative that The White Stripes resisted the culture industry of the mass commercial music and therefore arrived from an authentic place.

In this way, The White Stripes touch upon a broader musical tradition of establishing a set of parameters to constrain the musical work, including the most disciplined application of serialism and the procedures of composers like John Cage. Like Berg pulling harmonies out of the tone rows in “Lulu,” the imposition of limits is not an absolute barrier but a challenge from which creativity and the desired sound must be extracted. In discussing the twelve-tone work of Schoenberg, Theodor Adorno wrote that “music becomes a result of the process to which the material is subjected and which the music itself keeps from being unveiled” (*Philosophy of New Music* 50). In the same way, The White Stripes emphasize storytelling through song and rhythm as the band’s key component, but they process this through the restrained style of one of their two instrumentalists. As White alludes above, the same chords and vocal melodies forming a song could be arranged with a percussionist of advanced skill (like Rush’s Neil Peart) but it would not produce the desired effect. The simple drumming maintains the unity of the musical production that blends into the work as part of The White Stripes’s musical aesthetic. Because rock ‘n’ roll at its most raw and simple was one of the pillars of return of rock, this approach helped The White Stripes fit tightly with the movement.

In addition to Meg White’s signature drumming, the band made little attempt to ornament their musical instrumentation beyond what they were capable of as a duo. Unlike some bands who played live with few musicians yet supplemented their music in the recording studio (such as the three instrumentalists in The Doors), The White Stripes chose not to supply their songs with a bass guitar track, allowing only the guitar and

drums to carry the songs with occasional supplements of piano or organ.³⁸ To fill this sonic void, The White Strips relied heavily on a standard mixing scheme of placing Jack White's primary guitar channel a bit off-center (normally to the left) opposite Meg White's snare drum and supplementary guitar track added to reinforce the choruses. Most tracks on the *White Blood Cells* album feature a very dry (unprocessed) single vocal track by Jack without the reverb,³⁹ stabilizing, and heavy compression used to bolster standard pop and rock vocal performances. The overall recording aesthetic of the band was one that embraced an unmanipulated and simple musical sound highlighting instead of compensating for the limits of a two person group.

The effect here was to create a direct bridge between the band as a live performance group and recording artists. Theodore Gracyk, in his philosophical work that blends rock analysis with the legacy of analytic aesthetics, has argued that rock music is primarily a recorded medium and that we should reject a realist understanding of the recording as a transparent lens to capture performance. This is driven by the philosophical position that the musical work does not assume a fixed identity until its editing is regarded as complete.⁴⁰ In his words, "the music performed to generate the

³⁸ This omission of a bass guitar on *White Blood Cells* inspired some musician fans to experiment with adding their own bass guitar playing to the tracks. The effect was generally unremarkable with the bass featured in conspicuous mixes or providing too many flourishes with fills. The effect results in the performers somewhat understandably overindulging the idea of "Look! There's a bass here." One example is the numerous glissandos, hanging notes, and fills provided by the "Redd Blood Cells" project.

³⁹ There are some notable exceptions to this where vocal layering is used on background and harmony vocals such as "Fell In Love With a Girl" and "Aluminum."

⁴⁰ Gracyk's understanding of "complete" is based on the social practice for producing and disseminating a musical commodity and strongly informed by institutional theories of art in the tradition of Arthur Danto. Further, Gracyk argues convincingly and intuitively in his book *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* that rock music should be understood first as a recorded medium in which recordings have no ontological inferiority when juxtaposed to live performances.

basic tracks had an ambiguous identity at the times of its recording” (46). When a band records a complex production with multiple tracks, edits, and often digital processing, this situation is even more pronounced. The act of a sole instrumental part being recorded is distant from the identity of the finished product. The White Stripes’ techniques of keeping their studio recordings close to what the two members could produce live in real-time attempted to cover this schism. Though they did require some overdubbing, The White Stripes presented their studio recordings not as heavily mediated products but as the capture of “real,” authentic performance.

The opening track on *White Blood Cells*, “Dead Leaves and the Dirty Ground,” speaks directly to this point. The album begins with an introductory sound uncommon in mainstream rock music: pronounced tape hiss.⁴¹ Normally, the natural interference and tape noise that accompanies recording (especially analog) is carefully filtered out to give a clear sound. Gracyk understands tape hiss and static to be unwanted because of rock listening’s commitment to “the ideology of recording transparency,” in other words, the fact that the listener doesn’t want to be reminded that they are listening to a recording with its own limitations in the same way most moviegoers do not wish to be confronted with conspicuous edits (103). Because of The White Stripes’ intentional use of the noise, it functions differently here as a sign. As instruments are handled, gently feedback, and drumsticks are clicked through the hissing noise, the intent is make sure the listener knows that a live band is preparing to begin the song. The process of these sounds and

⁴¹ It should be noted that independent music includes a “lo-fi” movement in which the phenomenon I’m about to note is quite common and actually a sonic marker of the niche genre. The White Stripes, despite their Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach, are not generally thought of as a “lo-fi” group.

tape hiss signify that we are hearing a performance, specifically a performance during which the two musicians are present together recording the track. Other small sounds reinforce this image including the instances during the song's signature musical introduction during which the notes in Jack White's guitar arpeggios are clearly clipped and flubbed. In a refined studio process, a musician may have found these unacceptable and re-recorded only the guitar multiple times to reach "perfection." The White Stripes bypass this option and include the warts and all spontaneity of this recording. Though a studio recording, "Dead Leaves and the Dirty Ground," carries with it some of artistic capital of the liveness of performance in real-time instead of a post-production assembly of disparate individual takes of instruments.

The White Stripes, the Blues, and Authenticity

The notion of authenticity is a powerful one in discourse over rock music and The White Stripes' sound made them new representatives of the authentic in rock. Part of The White Stripes' image as authentic was based upon their reliance on the blues. In their book *Faking It* about rock and authenticity, Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor describe how Alan Lomax's pursuit of the roots of black Southern music untouched by white influence was part of his condescendingly racialized pursuit to record artists like Leadbelly. Lomax based his interest on "the Darwinian assumption that those roots were less complicated, less corrupted, more 'pure,' than the songs of his day...He was looking for cultural authenticity, a relatively unadulterated version of a particular musical culture" (22). Barker and Taylor, like many others before, find Lomax's attitudes towards the

musicians he recorded racially problematic for more reasons than purely economic appropriation. Lomax's interest in this music was based upon the distinction of the black song as "primitive" and free from the "civilizing" influence of white culture. Not only did this set up a clear, if multi-faceted, hierarchy (black = primitive = desirable) but it ignored the musical elements of the blues that were more than simple devices but the product of a rich and long established musical culture influenced by and extending to the rhythms of the African continent.

Leadbelly's song "In the Pines" was performed as "Where Did You Sleep Last Night?" to close Nirvana's famous MTV Unplugged performance and their discussion has direct affinities to the role of the blues in The White Stripes. Barker and Taylor are more sympathetic to Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain than they are to Lomax but their read brings us closer to the spirit that would influence the return of rock ten years later. Leaving behind a fetishism for black rural expression, the song appealed to Cobain because "real rock 'n' roll must be shackled to the kind of primitivism that accompanied Leadbelly's career, an idealization of 'savage' simplicity" (23). Barker and Taylor wish to argue that the song, not the African-American culture, is what is primitive and authentic, therefore serving as a fitting vehicle for the rock artist's expression. With its stark chords and direct interrogation of the song's antagonist, the song could give voice to Cobain's own personal pain and provide for authenticity in performance.

This hard divide between Lomax and Cobain is more complicated and blurry than the authors' treatment as evidenced by the fact that they must rely on the same words (primitive, savage) that scholars find so troubling when making their redirected claims

about the power of authenticity in the song. However, my main interest here is how this same blues authenticity functioned in the return of rock and The White Stripes. The appeal of a song like this is based upon “something elemental, resonant, and mysterious,” sentiments about blues music that sound close to what is being sought in its cover performances sung by Jack White (22). Working in the setting of indie rock in particular, there is still an impression that a simple two-person combo playing Son House’s “Death Letter”⁴² is offering the “real thing” via the older, more simple form even if Jack White is singing as an interpreter and has not in fact been informed of the loss of the woman he loves or attended her funeral. There’s little reason to doubt White’s personal sincerity in his fondness for the blues and intentions in performing it but that does not negate that the band gets an increase in their cultural capital by using the blues as a vehicle for expression, especially playing for an American and British indie rock audience where many members not only feel the overtones of the notion of the rural blues of Son House and Robert Johnson as elemental but also view the music as exotic in its importation to the indie rock context.

With the blues as one of rock ‘n’ roll’s origin forms, bands performing during the return of rock were able to harness it as a nod to something closer to the source of the rock genre. Stripping away the augmentation, hybridization, instrumental additions, and development of form, the sound of the return of rock advanced an essentialized vision of rock drawing upon what was perceived as its core, fundamental principles; principles that

⁴² The band recorded “Death Letter” for their second album *De Stijl* and continued to perform it live after the release of *White Blood Cells* and beyond. It was a popular insertion into the middle of their own songs and the band treated it as a calling card to the extent they still played two verses during their live performance of the original hit “Seven Nation Army” at the 2004 Grammy Awards.

were always accessible and renewable much like music in a folk tradition. On record and in live performance, The White Stripes enacted the version of rock authenticity offered by the garage revival, one in which rock could always draw on its origins and most basic of forms in order to spark creativity anew.

Musical Politics in It Might Get Loud

It Might Get Loud, a 2009 film by Douglas Guggenheim, attempts to canonize the place of Jack White and The White Stripes in the mythology of rock 'n' roll and gives White a platform to expose his musical politics in his own words, many of the themes running concurrently with the sentiments of the "return of rock." The premise of the film is to bring into conversation three legends of rock guitar, Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page, U2's The Edge, and White. They are chosen to represent three different rock epochs. Page is the representation of the birth of hard rock and 60s/70s "classic rock," the elder statesman. The Edge is the 80s/90s technological experimentalist and musical leader of one of the decade's most successful groups. He functions as the bridge and foil to Jack White, the most contemporary and recent addition to the canon of great rock guitarists.⁴³

⁴³ An April 2005 issue of *Guitar Player* is evidence of how music discourse uses the electric guitar as a means to describe the continued development of rock history and how central White is to this narrative. It is a popular practice in such magazines to fill pages with rankings – The Top 25 Guitar Solos of All-Time, the 100 Greatest Guitarists, etc. – and in this issue, the magazine attempted to account for the "The 101 Greatest Moments In Guitar History." Fitting its title, the article chose to organize them not by a hierarchal ranking but chronologically tracing the steps of guitar history. The White Stripes represent the last entry into the list but before getting there, a look at the list suggests the exponential loss of "things to say" about the state of guitar innovation. Thirteen entries comes from the 1980s on the strength of both New Wave bands and the explosion of the subgenre that would define Heavy Metal. The 1990s accounts for five entries and represents the scope of *Guitar Player's* interest. Nirvana is predictably represented but so are technical projects like digital-modeling and the emergence of seven-string guitars. After 1998, "The White Stripes Storm the Airwaves" is the only event in the last seven years prior to the article's publication.

Though the film itself does not necessarily accept White's views about music, authenticity, and the guitar, its suturing of White into this group poses a claim for his voice as central concerning the state of contemporary rock music. It selects White and the music of The White Stripes⁴⁴ as important and representative, able to stand on the same ground with established canonical artists like U2 and Led Zeppelin. By making him the symbol of the "now," White achieves the strongest footing upon which to speak to the current rock culture, define what rock music is, and suggest authentic paths for rock going forward. *It Might Get Loud* is a capstone to the first phase of White's career and an attempt to secure his place as a spokesman for the music.

White and the filmmakers work together to present him as the face of a minimalist, anti-progress aesthetic of rock music based on a rejection of technology and innovation. White gets to open the film and is immediately put into a context that is nakedly ideological. The very first image of the film, which rises from black moments after sounds of rustling, shows White laboring with his hands, working string or cord, building to create something. The hands roll in the foreground in a soft focus. The viewer can see in sharper focus the background image of a chewing cow accompanied by the sounds of other cows at pasture. The next shots are presented as a montage: We get a look at more materials, a hammer, some nails, a bottle, all upon a broken section of dirty shards of pavement followed by a close-up look at the end of a ¼ inch electrical input cable, the kind often used to connect an electric guitar.

⁴⁴ The film was recorded between The White Stripes final album *Icky Thump* in 2007 and their dissolution in early 2011. In addition to The White Stripes, the film shows White playing with his most recent group The Raconteurs. This is not dealt with extensively by the film as it centers on White as a guitarist and mostly focuses on his role in The White Stripes.

The film then moves to a wider establishing shot so that the viewer gets to see what White is up to more clearly. He is making his own instrument, in this case a diddley bow, an instrument “based on the remembrance and development of central and west-central African monochord zithers” popular in the South of the United States (Kubik 16). An important feature of the diddley bow here is that it is a simple, homemade instrument, consisting of a single string with nut and bottle in order to maintain tension. White’s electric element is to add a guitar pick-up, distortion stomp box, and input jack to enable a sound very similar to a standard electric guitar. As White works, the film provides more visual cues establishing a rural, rustic setting. We can still see a cow in the left of the frame and deep in the background a line of hay bales sits stacked against naked autumn trees. White works while standing next a porch complete with cracking paint and suspect pillars. Before the title screens intrude, White gets the film’s first human line once satisfied with the sound of his device, “Who says you need to buy a guitar?” (*It Might Get Loud*).⁴⁵

The setting for the film’s opening with White places him in the tradition of “romantic agrarianism,” which David Danbom describes as “a vehicle for criticizing a capitalistic, technologically-oriented, urban-industrial society” (2). This tradition is antimodernist and seeks authentic life and human happiness in freedom from industrialization by returning to the land. This is what Danbom talks about “as restoration or recapture of a free and natural existence that had been lost” (3). Like an idealized small farmer, White is working with his hands to make his own instrument

⁴⁵ Direct quotations from the film are hereby cited with the abbreviation “*IMGL*.”

instead of relying on industrialized production of carbon-copy musical instruments to supply him with something to play. White's willingness to find satisfaction in an unassuming, homemade instrument sets him in a contrast to the urban, technological offerings that could give him more options. The themes of romantic agrarianism offer many parallels to White's thoughts about music shared during the film's interviews. The extensive use of technology and innovation in rock music is seen by White as a dodge away from authenticity, a veneer cast over honest expression. White's own playing is "free and natural," unadorned by improvements, wrestling with basic raw materials, much like his setting at the beginning of *It Might Get Loud*. From its first images, the film makes a statement about White's reliance upon the historical past, authentic life, and sonic minimalism.⁴⁶

The other allusion in this scene is to the Southern blues tradition that gives White much of his musical and philosophical inspiration. According to the DVD commentary, he is being filmed in Franklin, Tennessee just south of Nashville (*IMGL*). White creating his diddley bow at a rural farm in Tennessee is a gesture to suggest his connection to anonymous players in the twentieth century living in the South and creating their own instruments. It also links him to the well-known "professional" country blues players of the canon. Though originally a Detroit native, White (who now lives in Tennessee) is re-

⁴⁶ *It Might Get Loud*'s use of the imagery of agrarianism to frame White has a strange call to Bob Dylan's statements about the song "Stack A Lee" in the liner notes to his 1993 album of traditional folk/blues covers *World Gone Wrong*. Dylan, writing in the midst of the Alternative Nation explosion of Nirvana, comments "give me a thousand acres of tractable land & all the gang members that exist and you'll see the Authentic alternative lifestyle, the Agrarian one." As for the film, the sight of authenticity and the true externality is the escape from modernity. Dylan would twist these themes more in his quasi-apocalyptic film *Masked and Anonymous*.

imagined as a Southern, rural bluesman working in the same setting as his idols Son House, Robert Johnson, and Blind Willie McTell. While much of rock is deeply indebted to the blues as a musical background, Jack White, in both presentation and performance, cuts back to the presumably authentic source reflecting his understanding of rock as based primarily on its most elemental musical origins.

As it unfolds, the film gives White many opportunities to express his philosophy about music, creativity, and technology. In one of the earliest provided edits, he describes technology specifically as a “big destroyer of emotion and truth” (*IMGL*). Paul Théberge recognizes this sentiment as part of the “unexamined assumptions” about expression and musical technology that goes back to the 1980s and writers such as Simon Frith trying to deal with the extensive use of synthesizers in pop music (2).⁴⁷ Crudely put, the synthesizer, with its keys that bear little relationship to the sound produced other than activating a digital signal, is the realm of the inauthentic while in turn the embodied guitar is a direct expression of the physical playing of its master directly translated (and perhaps enhanced) by electricity. In discussing musical style, Théberge writes, “style is something that is primarily felt; it is an awareness that is as much physical as it is cognitive” (167). For White, technology doesn’t provide him with opportunities to innovate or enhance creativity but instead functions as a barrier for the authentic performance that resides in his intimate relationship to a physical instrument.

⁴⁷ White later makes this same connection, “by the time I’m getting into teenage years like late 80’s...I don’t remember that many rock ‘n’ roll bands being around that were that popular. Things were changing so much in music; technology was taking over so much. Technology was heavily distracting everybody. People spent weeks trying to get the perfect snare drum with gated reverb sound. So processed it wasn’t real anymore” (*IMGL*).

The need of the guitarist to extract sound through physical labor comes to White from an understanding of the Judeo-Christian Genesis story. He tells the filmmakers: “In the Bible, God cursed the ground so that the man will always have to work hard...whether you’re a farmer, or a carpenter, or a guitar player, or whatever it is, you have to fight these manmade materials” (*IMGL*).⁴⁸ Not only is guitar playing related to the physical engagement with the instrument, but White reminds the viewer that the guitarist functions in a tradition of manual labor, the first exemplar of which is the agrarian farmer. As the guitarist must fight the instrument in order to obtain “fruits,” the people in the field battle the unyielding ground to sustain themselves. This ties back to the opening of the film where the ideas of authentic timeless rural existence are represented as White’s proper setting. Rock practice may evolve and change with new sounds and styles but its primary mode remains intact as an unadorned struggle with a basic set of physical parameters from which to start. These physical parameters are informed by original sin itself and the need for the worker to wrestle with resistant materials. The anti-modernist stance against complex, innovative, and technologically informed composition comes to White from an understanding of a timeless struggle going back to humanity’s origins in religious mythos.

⁴⁸ White is alluding specifically to God’s declaration to Adam and Eve after their fall in Genesis 3:17-19: “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (*NIV* 3-4)

The film uses a following scene to make clear the notion that guitar playing can be expressed by one-to-one physical brutality with the instrument. White instructs a young actor standing in for himself at age nine in how to play the actual guitar White used in The White Stripes, his signature red and white Airline. The guitar instruction involves laying the amplified instrument upon the ground and stomping on it in order to produce sounds. White encourages his student to run his shoe along the strings to make a sliding noise (not dissimilar to the diddley bow) and to press his foot down onto the guitar's body. Consistent with this ethos, the verbal instruction is to "Pick a fight with it...pick a fight and win the fight" (*IMGL*). This scene unfolds like the *reductio ad absurdum* of primitive guitar with the guitar not so much played as forced into submission in the same way one would tame an animal or till a field.

Beyond crude technique, White's understanding of rock guitar is based upon the imposition of limits, even beyond the two-person, no-digital parameters of The White Stripes. He advances here again that those limits are set by the need for the artist to create obstacles in order to enhance creativity. Instead of seeking as many avenues as possible towards the creation of new sounds and sonic combinations, White looks at how a limitation of the possible can influence the final result. This drives one of White's most oft-quoted lines from the film, a line that inspired discussion in not only music circles but also in other fields like architecture and design. White critiques the convenience of "opportunity" and is edited by the filmmakers to conclude by saying "that's the disease you have to fight in any creative field – ease of use" (*IMGL*). This harkens to his band's rejection of digital recording. Not only had digital recording made it easier for rock

artists to record a near infinite number of tracks of an infinite number of takes but White also appears to be speaking to the proliferation of mass market audio recording technology in the form of GarageBand, Audacity, and other such programs. With the proliferation of home recording and increased access to recording technology rivaling studios, his assertion that music has welcomed opportunity and ease of use through technology is difficult to reject.

White describes a very specific, if not eccentric, program to ensure that his own musical production does not fall into the trap of ease of use. Calling on the basic physical relationship of the body to performance, he considers obstacles such as positioning his organ further away in order to tax his body to reach it. He also mentions reducing the number of strings on his guitar from six to three but it is difficult to find White actually employing that device with frequency during live performance. The instruments he desires are ones with flaws – bent necks, plastic, out of tune – so that they provide the necessary fight in order to produce the desired sound. It is too easy to visit a store and purchase a factory perfected Les Paul, Rickenbacker, or Stratocaster with precise intonation and vibrant tone. Instead, a flawed, refusing instrument allows White the romantic notion of having to extract art from adversity, in this case an adversity embedded in the materials of sonic production.

A Man and His Voice vs. a Man and His Effects

Understanding the ideal White is reaching for creatively is most clear when he reveals his “favorite song,” Son House’s “Grinnin In Your Face.” Though Son House

was an accomplished blues guitar player including his employment of a slide, this track captures the minimalist side of House's music with only his own voice accompanied by a steady hand clap. This reflects first the preference for sonic minimalism, a rejection of the need for complex, elaborate, or progressive music as the paradigm for making a strong musical statement. Like many of White's influences, this song represents a testament to how little is needed in order to make an authentic musical gesture conveying a social truth. For White, "this meant everything about rock 'n' roll, for expression, creativity, for art" because it is driven by "attitude" (*IMGL*). This is the "rock 'n' roll attitude" theory of rock music, that anything can be rock 'n' roll based on a type of oppositional stance. If not rock itself exactly, "Grinnin' In Your Face" connects directly to The White Stripes' interpretation of the blues because it presents an authentic, oppositional performance without any artificial adornments. Like White taking four steps to his organ instead three, Son House is reaching for communication only through his own voice and clapping rhythms.

By describing Son House's 1965 blues recording as the epitome of rock 'n' roll, White makes an implicit claim that is often latent in analysis of rock music – that the best way of understanding rock music is as a type of folk tradition. Rock music is in fact not understood first as an evolving genre with a musical-historical trajectory, but instead is an established tradition that can be tapped into from anywhere at any time in order to harness a timeless power and agency. In a more casual way, what was good enough for the garage bands of 1966 is good enough for you. The trajectory from Chuck Berry to The Beatles to Nirvana appears to call a fetishizing of rock timelessness into question but

this reimagined, if not entirely new, orientation is central to the return of rock's claim for rock music's continued life and vibrancy. For White, all contemporary trappings are unnecessary, and White's ideal is a form of raw, minimally mediated expression. Nothing is as expressive, even in rock, as a performer and the voice.

The film presents The Edge of U2 as a foil for White's musical code. U2 itself was one of the artists who embraced the challenge to rock music presented by the sounds and techniques of electronic and digital technology at the end of the 1990s, releasing an album in 1997 called *Pop* and leading with a heavily processed dance single called "Discotheque." Since then, The Edge has become known as one of the foremost users of digital and analog effects to process his guitar. As the film documents, The Edge's standard guitar "rig" (set of cables, amplifiers, and signal processing devices) is complex and multifaceted (*IMGL*). During some tours, The Edge actually employs an off-stage technician to switch and manage a portion of the effects in real time, almost making this person a collaborator.

Midway through the film, The Edge is revealed in a rehearsal space where (presumably) much of his equipment is installed to practice. Far from White's minimalism, the excess abounds.⁴⁹ A dozen guitars are accessible around him paired with nearly as many amplifiers, Vox, Marshall, and others. On the floor in front the guitarist has a board of effects which he can operate with his feet. In addition, a vertical rack of yet more patches and modifications to the guitar's signal is mounted behind.

⁴⁹ White is shown at another point in the film in a makeshift practice/recording space of his own. In contrast to The Edge, White plays blues-influenced guitar while seated with a dirty, overdriven amplifier tone and records on an analog, reel-to-reel device.

When the scene opens, he is playing a simple riff on the guitar, but it is heavily altered by a wah-wah pedal, distortion, and equalization to give a phasing, sharp sound. The Edge then demonstrates what the “clean” guitar sound reveals when the processing is stripped away. The effect is comically unimpressive, and the musician acknowledges this by breaking into a grin and mocking the idea that he could present such a thing to his bandmates for consideration in that form. In direct contrast to White, he credits the “footpedal, the effects, the whole thing,” for providing the meaning and identity to the sound (*IMGL*). The simple, direct relationship of the guitarist’s hands and fingers upon the strings so prized by White is only a small part of the equation for The Edge. In some ways, the bare materials of the guitar are almost passé for his approach. It is no wonder that The Edge’s signature sound, featuring a delay on the guitar, is based on response notes the guitarist doesn’t actually play in real-time. The physical musician is the trigger but then notes appear that aren’t generated by performance in real-time but by digital signal processing.

At work in these juxtapositions is a debate over both the nature of rock music and its future. The restorative impulse to strip rock back to its roots works simultaneously with the drive to keep the music current and evolving by expanding the sonic options, finding new timbres, and pushing the boundaries of standard rock form. *It Might Get Loud* brings The Edge and Jack White into this conversation, with the former expressing skepticism at the creative potential of the most minimalist of rock guitar style and the latter insisting on it as vital to maintaining creativity in the genre. Neither is ultimately right or wrong about this vision, and my argument is that this tension is in itself integral

into how rock has developed stylistically, especially in the contemporary era when rock, like all forms of modern art, is far from self-evident in terms of its future direction.

Backwards as a Forward Direction for Rock

The “return of rock” and the ideas Jack White expresses during *It Might Get Loud* build to a statement about rock music trajectory and identity – where it is headed, what its purpose is, and what defines the genre. They coalesce around Jack White’s discussion of a band called The Flat Duo Jets. Though they predate the garage revival proper, The Flat Duo Jets were a direct influence on The White Stripes and the type of band that many revivalists listened to in the 1990s for inspiration. Like The White Stripes, they were a two-piece band consisting of a drummer and a vocalist/guitarist. Presented as part of Jack White’s inspiration and presented to Jimmy Page and The Edge for appreciation, the film highlights their boosted, rockabilly version of the 400-year-old folk song “Frog Went a Courtin’” before transitioning into the Jet’s own “Crazy Hazy Kisses.” It is not necessary to belabor the significance of White selecting the folk song to share via a record player for the legendary guitarists. The idea of repurposing this song in the garage style not only reflects White’s musical aesthetic but taps into the ambiguous old weirdness (to paraphrase Greil Marcus) of Western musical culture weaving from a English/Scottish folk tune through the minor key blues of the twentieth-century American South. The implicit claim is about rock’s roots, even these deep roots, and those origins’ centrality to contemporary rock music. The understanding of rock music and its identity,

for White and ideology of the return of rock, is embedded in the past not the possibilities for the future.

In describing them, White acknowledges that accepting or rejecting the music of The Flat Duo Jets is a statement about the philosophy of musical teleology. He describes seeing them for the first time and viewing them as “headed in what I would have thought of at the time a backwards direction” (*IMGL*). The Flat Duo Jets are headed backwards by playing rock music in a bare, stripped down fashion. With only two instruments, they reject the multitude of options available for them in composition and performance. Before even considering complex chord structures, multi-instrumental arrangements, and experimental form, the bands bypasses, as The White Stripes would, the need for even a bass player. The brief live clip of “Crazy Hazy Kisses” features the Chuck Berry/Rolling Stones/ZZ Top cliché of the recognizable rock/blues boogie moving the fifth of the chord on and off to a sixth. Their music touches on all the necessary elements of the return of rock aesthetic – aggressive, garbled or gravelly vocals, blues rock guitar, lack of refinement in tuning, and limited instrumentation.

White acknowledges but complicates the notion of progress in rock music. Reflecting on how his opinion of the band changed, he states, “I had to reassess what ‘backwards’ meant in my mind” (*IMGL*). Collapsing the intuitive “backwards” of a two-piece rock group with modest equipment playing a rockabilly interpretation of “Frog Went a Courtin’” into a claim about it being a “new” avenue for the guitar and creativity expresses the central ideological claim of the return of rock – that backwards is forwards; rock music must get back to its roots to renew itself. This inversion gave the movement

its power to attempt to point a way forward for rock music creativity. There was no need for innovation or a struggle to surpass or re-imagine influences, but instead the goal became the interminable mining of source material, be it the godparents of rock 'n' roll or the European folk tradition. Because "backwards" is nearly infinite and the future uncertain, it was safer to present this avenue as the path forward than acknowledge the lack of possibility by continuing to look for previously unheard ways of expressing rock creativity.

The substitution of backwards for forwards in the ideology of the return of rock can be viewed as an attempt to solve a problem in contemporary rock music. The problem is the diminishing returns of opportunities for development and new sounds within the confines of the rock music genre. The idea of stagnation would be unappealing to invested parties like artists and music industry professionals who would want to avoid presenting their recordings as having no new directions or ideas. If a simplistic, minimalist style of rock was to be offered as the "new thing" or promising path of renewed quality, it required an explanation and framing to explain it. This explanation was that rock's early history provided an essential established set of musical practices and presentational performance stances that could be accessed in any moment to rejuvenate rock. In a sense, the return of rock as presented by the media and joined by artists like The White Stripes attempted to define rock as an essential core of musical and social authenticity. Rock's livelihood was infinite due to the ever present materials of distorted electric guitars, direct functional rhythm, and an attitude of energy, defiance,

passion, and lack of restraint. At a moment of crisis, the return of rock attempted to solve creative (and, by extension, economic) challenges to rock perhaps indefinitely.

If the “return of rock” offered a solution to aspects of rock’s crisis in creativity, what are the limitations of this solution? The first question to ask is what is the relationship of this moment in rock to audiences. For a period, the music of The White Stripes and their peers were a focal point for a large segment of music listeners. As with most such moments, this interest transcended a “rock audience” and moved its way into a large public awareness and crossover into pop and other audiences.⁵⁰ I would argue that these dispersions into broader culture are the manner in which the next set of musical parameters is re-filtered into numerous musical practices but also tastes formations on the level of audiences. However, it is not clear how backwards looking music pertains to sustained youth interest in rock, hence concerns about the “death” or at least radical alteration of the terms of rock music. Contemporary incarnations of youth music that might be housed broadly under the domain of rock include everything from extreme, emotionally effusive heavy music to an opposite, what commentary about Mark Spitz work on twee music and culture has called “the gentle revolution” of “calculated precocity” (“Twee – About the Book”). What remains unclear is how and if any of this matters to audiences *as rock*. By accepting a retrograde view, the return of rock presented to audiences a canon of sounds and imagery that did not move rock forward or,

⁵⁰ It should be noted that I’m not using the language of a manipulative, dominant mass culture which simply feeds a larger listening public with their ascendant music of choice. Though the role that business plays in music is undeniable, it is unsatisfying to believe that breakthrough moments for musical styles enter mainstream consciousness merely by force without a strong relationship to social frameworks and established sounds and listening patterns in existing audiences.

more importantly for audiences, connect with a sustained engagement to their musical culture.

The limitation of the backwards look in the early millennium for rock is not simply a lack of enduring connection to audiences and musical culture but a broader issue of the consequences for the extended future of the genre. Relying heavily on a look backwards for inspiration is not by itself suspect. Nearly any genre of music exists in a dialogue with its past so the “return of rock” cannot be dismissed on these terms. Yet, as David Browne points out, the extent to which the “return of rock” as an organizational label for rock practice sought to not just build upon but imitate and evoke the past surpasses the rock tradition. This is a new relationship for rock to its own history and could signal a new modality as it continues in the twentieth-first century. To what extent is the mining of its musical antecedents sustainable and repeatable for the current state of rock? The first sixty years of rock history are a finite resource so attempts to recapitulate the impact of styles already produced is restricted as repetition becomes increasingly overwhelming and new sources are exhausted.⁵¹ If the look backwards was a solution to uncertainty about rock’s next step, it may only be a solution fit for a limited, perhaps single, deployment. Can rock return again looking and sounding as it did in 2002 and 1967?

⁵¹ Ever present investigations into forgotten or underappreciated artists are, in part, a sign that this body of work must be constantly mined for new products to buttress the offerings of contemporary rock. This argument is accepted by Simon Reynolds in *Retromania*, discussed at length in the following chapter.

Contextualizing the Return of Rock in the Motion of Rock History

The history of rock is a constant unfolding of musical culture's self-reflexive understanding of its place in culture, role in society, orientation towards identity, and stylistic development. At its most important historical moments, rock music functions as both a catalyst and reactant to its context. In some places, this has been clearly and primarily social such as the role of punk rock at the end of the 1970s or the intimate relationship between largely American counterculture and the sounds of the 1960s. The "return of rock" is the last unmistakable "moment" in rock's recent history. Though other understandings of current rock culture may emerge in reflection, the garage revival after the turn of the millennium was the last time discourse about rock organized itself in the form of an identifiable style.⁵² Large segments of the musical public who spoke about rock music actively knew what was meant by the "return of rock," what groups were included and what style, attitude, and sound this would encompass. With The White Stripes at the fore, a group of both highly successful bands and a multitude of flashes formed a cadre of artists giving shape to that musical moment.

The "return of rock" is important not necessarily because of some critical role in a larger social moment or youth culture. In fact, its absence from a broader social movement is one of the elements that most distinguishes it from some of its ancestors in rock history, including and noteworthily the deep affinities between alternative rock and Generation X culture in the United States. The return of rock is a pivotal moment for

⁵² Some journalists have written about the even more recent phenomenon of "blog rock" in the 2000s. However, it is difficult to argue that blog rock transcended anything but the discourse of a small segment of insiders. Without offering referendum on the music itself, comparing it to other larger organized moments in rock history feels false.

how people invested in rock music, particularly critics and artists, reflect upon the state of the genre. The return of rock attempted through its promotion in the music industry to establish a claim for what rock is and by extension always can be. The claim was the one articulated by Steven Van Zandt and others: rock music is an enduring, renewable form tied to a simple set of musical instruments performed in a recognizable way emphasizing distorted guitars, back beats, and expressive if unrefined vocals. Aside from any detailed stylistic analysis, it was something the listener would detect while clued in by the rock ‘n’ roll attitude.

Making this claim had and will continue to resonate with important consequence for how rock is understood. First, this claim is of obvious utility in the self-preservation of the culture industry of musical production. One of the music industry’s principal tools for attracting listeners is the excitement generated by the “new.” The notion of originality still functions strongly even as countless repetitions of familiar chord progressions, melodies, and touches of timbres are presented to audiences over and over. Rock, on the level of commercial consumption, is little different in this regard. Except as irony or kitsch, the marketing approach for rock music cannot simply be “you’ve heard this before but you’ll enjoy it again!” Instead, the illusion of the new, driven by innovation and a development of form and timbre, must be maintained to avoid the idea that musical progress in this form of art has come to a halt. The message of the “return of rock,” that backwards is now forwards, is vital for the culture industry to draw on previously existing material in order to offer new bands for appreciation. If the verbal rejection of “Haven’t I heard this before?” can be answered with “Yes. Doesn’t it rock!?”

than the music industry's narrative of rock's motion can continue. Though this isn't a wholly new phenomenon in rock or popular culture at all, it is acute in this era due to the ever increasing need to deal with the diminishing returns of enlivening the genre.

Also, by claiming that rock is an essentialist genre using a narrow set of musical elements, there is also a rejection of other things not rock. This includes the hybrid forms influenced by rap, metal, and hip hop mentioned earlier, but offering the garage revival as a defining essence also rejects the long-standing tradition of innovation and increasing sophistication in rock style. At its earliest, this was a debate about whether The Beatles were authentically rock in the face of the blues and R&B purism of The Rolling Stones, but it is still a relevant argument for continued creativity. If rock music should not move forward into new musical territory or is no longer able to do so based on fundamental limits of the genre, the meaning of the genre may have to shift drastically. The issue of whether rock music is ultimately a folk genre or an evolving, dynamic art form is reaching a moment of culmination in which it cannot be easily set aside. Our understanding of rock as being continually innovative or at least presenting new configurations has been important for linking it to social paradigms and youth culture. If rock music is simply a preexisting set of musical frames onto which a new message can be laid, it can still function successfully and the fact that people are not ceasing to form rock bands is obvious evidence that this is true. However, if it is accepted (as the "return of rock" did), that the pursuit of new avenues is unnecessary or a violation of real rock 'n' roll, then rock may see itself slowly transition into the same social space that folk music now occupies. While this space may be valuable, enjoyable, and enriching for the

individual artist and community of fans, it has ceased to be a place that can drive or dynamically react to the social realm.

The consequences for rock are yet to be fully felt but this could be a sign that the constant self-reassurance of rock culture that something new is always possible is now ringing hollow. The answer of those invested in rock's future during the "return of rock," be it record companies, musicians, or journalists, became that rock's future wasn't a future at all but a past. Here, rock faces either the loss of genre in the twenty-first century where it encounters near endless fusions leaving it unrecognizable or a constant cycle of repetition where tired forms are trotted out anew.

Chapter Four: Retromania and Restoration as Musical Critiques

This chapter brings into dialogue two critiques of a backward-looking musical culture: the extensive engagement with “retromania” in contemporary popular music by critic Simon Reynolds and the critique of “restorative” musical impulses by Theodor Adorno. Juxtaposing these two analyses reveals the affinities between the creative crises in contemporary music discussed by Reynolds and Adorno’s condemnations of early twentieth-century music of the European art tradition. While Adorno’s examination is a critique with implications for the most high-stakes areas of the modern world (freedom, war, totalitarianism), Reynolds is thinking primarily (though not exclusively) about consequences for popular culture. Reynolds’ concern is not politically philosophical in the manner of Adorno, but both succeed in revealing the current of ideas behind restorative musical cultures and aspects of its significance for composition and musical creativity. The historical and methodological juxtaposition of their frameworks generates creative tensions that convey how the current state of rock music is not unique in the history of stylistic development. Yet, concerns about restorative aesthetics manifest themselves in a distinctive way in contemporary popular music. Drawing on their work, I argue that Reynolds’ frame of “retromania” is not only a persuasive description of the current state of popular culture but that its consequences for music become even clearer when developed in a larger philosophical framework of a critique of regressive musical tendencies such as Adorno’s. This argument serves to add further context to the “return of rock” discussed in Chapter Three which rejected forward trajectory in rock music in favor of something that continually looked to the past for inspiration.

The Description of “Retromania”

“Retromania” is Simon Reynolds’ description of the contemporary state of popular culture speaking broadly to the predilection in the arts and entertainment industry for styles and practices directly imitative and evocative of the recent past. As an established writer on popular music from books to supplementary material for albums, Reynolds’ investment in the subject is from the perspective of someone enmeshed in both the broad development of musical culture but also its minute distinctions. In approaching this phenomenon as a listener, he is both repelled by and drawn into engagement with tokens of the cultural past. Aficionados of music are well-served by modern media where YouTube videos, deluxe reissues of musical works (especially rock), and television programs feed off the nostalgia for the past and supply the consumer with seemingly endless glimpses into recent history. The appeal and easy use of this technology has created a generation with more opportunities to indulge in archival material than ever before. Simultaneously, an astute, familiar commentator like Reynolds is troubled that he is complicit with a situation that has internalized this history and used it as opportunity to slow the progress of artistic development and the creation of new styles and forms. Reynolds observes, “Sometimes it can feel like progress itself has actually slowed down, with the sixties as the climax of a twentieth-century surge of innovation and the decades that followed a bewildering muddle of stagnation and roll back” (*Retromania* 364).

Reynolds’ argument is essentially a specific historical one about how today’s popular culture utilizes and understands its immediate past. Reynolds establishes a contrast between the flagging of the millennium and the forceful momentum of the earlier

twentieth-century when “pop’s metabolism buzzed with dynamic energy, creating the surging-into-the-future feel of periods like the psychedelic sixties, the post-punk seventies, the hip-hop eighties and the rave nineties” (x). His metaphor for music in the 2000s is one of a plateau where style builds to a fast peak but then flattens with no continued development. He looks at the numerous “micro-genres” in rock and pop and finds them in a “steady-state condition, evolving at an incremental rate that is unspectacular at best and often barely perceptible” (405). Instead of pursuing a signature expression in the popular arts of its own, the previous decade brought not only the reintroduction of earlier artists and their music as central figures, but was also a decade of “rampant *recycling*: bygone genres *revived* and *renovated*, vintage sonic material *reprocessed* and *recombined*” (xi). His text is a litany of examples from the reformation of old groups, the cooption of existing musical material into “new” songs, and performers whose reintroduction of a timeworn style approaches the level of pastiche. As an inventory of diverse examples, Reynolds’ argument is compelling that we are living in a popular culture era that is more than ever enamored with its own barely faded memories.

Reynolds correctly acknowledges that a close communion with the past is a common trend throughout artistic history and not exclusive to contemporary culture. As he states, the Renaissance drew heavily on the influence of Roman and Greek classicism and the Gothic movement appropriated considerable inspiration from the medieval era (xiii). In addition, historical thought about the arts has not necessarily viewed extensive borrowing as problematic throughout time and across culture. Though Reynolds is ill at ease with this contemporary state of affairs, he notes that a premium on “originality” is a

modern concern. For example, he uses the statements of artist Sherrie Levine and journalist W. Davis Marx to contrast a focus on originality to the enduring tendency in Japanese culture to establish one's artistic practice by first completely mastering traditional forms accompanied by a discouragement of new compositions (164). The tendency to draw even severely on the past is neither a modern invention nor the province of a particular philosophy or location.

Reynolds argues that what is singular about this moment in popular music is not only the pervasive borrowing from the past but the extent to which the immediate past (ten to fifteen years) is already fodder for reintroduction. In contrast to the Renaissance reusing Greek and Roman forms from hundreds of years before, the modern approach of "retromania" is to revive the culture that already exists in the living memory of a "conscious, pop aware person" (xiv). The current age has pushed this to the extreme by expressing nostalgia for, in one of Reynolds' examples, decades that have not yet expired. One suggestion offered as to the cause is technological, i.e., that the ability to disperse and spread an innovation into countless countries, scenes, and localities results in styles being exhausted quickly. To phrase this another way, while progress into the future appears to be slowing down, the past is accumulating ever more rapidly. Whereas something may once have required decades of passage out of popular culture to provide the grounds for nostalgic reintroduction, the rhythms of cultural consumption now devour something to the point of warranting a reprisal in the span of a decade or less.

Ultimately, Reynolds concludes by contextualizing retromania as part of both postmodern hybrid musical practices and the technology of the Internet for the dispersion

of sound. Its arrival had been established by the practice of recording technology, and then accelerated in the digital age. Drawing on the work of curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud, Reynolds accepts his term “postproduction” as encompassing what retromania entails in artistic practice. Using the DJ as the paradigmatic example, Bourriaud is optimistic that musical culture can leave behind the postmodern mindset of quotation and citation to engage similar practices in a way that is more casual and flattens the relationship between the producer and source. With less reliance on the status of the source (as kitsch or parody), postproduction would be a next step linked with but moving out of the mentality of postmodernism in the arts (416). The fundamental difference between Reynolds’ own ideas and those of someone like Bourriaud is their attitude towards this phenomenon. In Reynolds’ case, he is far less confident that the artistic mechanism of postproduction is creating music that contains the vitality of its sources or that these works are themselves providing the groundwork for future expansion and creativity in the arts.

Reynolds’ Critique of “Retromania”

This leads to the question of the nature of Reynolds’ critique of retromania. The diagnosis is clear but the author’s ambivalence as a consumer of popular culture makes his real objections to the phenomenon less obvious. However, various passages outline how one might think of retromania as a problematic practice.⁵³ I would summarize the

⁵³ In his chapter “The Shock of the Old,” the author immediately confesses to adopting a strong sense of modernism in relation to popular music, “the belief that art has some kind of evolutionary destiny, a teleology that manifests itself through genius artists and masterpieces that are monuments to the future”

first idea as the inadequacy of backwards-looking music to history. On one hand, Reynolds suggests that retro music fails the possibilities of the future and meditates on the notion of “nostalgia for the future.” Using the concepts and promises of twentieth-century futurism (Disney’s Tomorrowland, Le Corbusier, etc.) and the aspirations of the space program in the United States, Reynolds mourns the unfulfilled potentials that seemed accessible in previous decades (368). Though the hope for ideas like colonies on Mars or levitating cars may now appear naïve, the end of forward motion in music is tied here to a “settling for less,” the sense that not only will technological aspirations for human freedom and prosperity have to be restrained but so will what listeners can expect out of music’s continued development. As I will describe later, Reynolds’ suggestion that progress in music has intersections with human social development itself is one of his strongest affinities to Theodor Adorno, who also expressed alarm at retroactive music’s consequences for humanity.

Perhaps more interesting than the way in which Reynolds talks about contemporary music betraying the promise of the future is the observation that popular music may actually be failing the present as well. Though Reynolds doesn’t explicitly dwell on this argument, his understanding of the history of culture in the United States and Great Britain is one in which the music (and other arts) of an era are vital for both influencing society as actors in the present and also for organizing cultural memory as we frame and construct the past. By extension, the popular music of a period should in some way connect or signify that era, being unique to it as one method of delineating what we

(403). Despite this idea’s strong hold in certain domains of twentieth-century art, he recognizes its limitation as a self-justifying principle and does not use it as the basis of his critique.

think of as organized expressions of culture. For him, the previous fifteen years have failed in this regard. Instead of defining itself in its own terms, “the 2000s have been about every other previous decade happening all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present’s own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel” (xi). Reynolds argues we are in a moment without musical *Zeitgeist*, on the verge of entering an era that is defined not by its music but via the means to create and disseminate that music. Beyond the sonic realm, the defining images of the twenty-first century will not be representations of artists, concerts, or albums but of devices, software, and logos.

Reynolds may not want to articulate things in this manner but one could follow his approach to suggest that the music of a historical moment may even possess, on the level of structure and stylistic development, a form that directly relates to the listening practice and social situation of its audience. Which elements of music such as punk or the British invasion actually possessed sonic markers in their style that facilitated new ways of living and thinking thereby embedding them not merely as a “soundtrack to our history” but as a constituent actor creating the very patterns and behaviors of everyday practice? Though he is not writing social theory or philosophy, this is what I believe Reynolds attempts to capture in the phrase “distinct identity and feel.” Not only is music related to subjects constructing themselves via the consumption of cultural products and allied taste groups, but it is also about something more difficult to capture – the “feel” of a moment. If Lawrence Grossberg is right that some popular music can “change the rhythms of everyday life” and restructure the everyday “by articulating its lines of flight

into new mattering maps,” then part of the device that marks these changes, that allows people to embody the influence of the music they consume, is the form of the music itself (115). What Reynolds may be mourning is that music, as it aligns with the rhythms and functions of the contemporary everyday, continues to advance culture and thought in new directions as it progressively transforms itself.

Reynolds also has a quasi-Marxist-inspired criticism of music whose function is the re-interpolating of old sounds or even old recordings themselves. He asks whether much of retroactive music is a means to extract “surplus-value” from musical artifacts. The reference here is both to monetary value in creating additional marketable products and finding creative recesses where a style surpassed can be mined for something that artists did not fully exploit in its first iteration. In multiple passages, Reynolds describes this technique as being a result of “creativity enmeshed with the market” where lulls in creativity are buttressed by the pursuit of places inside existing styles where value has not been fully extracted (197). Though his theoretical approach does not necessarily dismiss musical works in terms of their commerciality, he suggests a pattern in popular music of ebb and flow where weak moments are supplemented by mining the graves of songs, styles, and movements that no longer possess the same immediacy.

This concern about the exploitation of musical “resources” results in a connection between contemporary musical culture and the modern financial operation of global capitalism. Reynolds offers a provocative comparison that links the highly self-referential culture of retro-bands, sampling DJs, and micro-genres to the complex instruments that enable financial speculation in late capitalism. Both are alienated from

the tangible “real” while requiring detailed, highly specialized information to comprehend. Just as the mechanisms and tools of modern financial capitalism are coherent exclusively to the initiated elite, only the “hipsterati and bloggerati” possess the intimate knowledge to comprehend music that functions as much based upon what it references as it obtains value in its being and end result (420). Both organizational structures are perversely “meta-,” without a basis underneath to provide stability. They are built upon music-about-music and money-about-money. Echoing many commentators who have voiced criticisms directed at financial capitalism’s lack of connection to real products and commodities carrying resolute, enduring value, Reynolds is suggesting that modern popular music is built upon the same fragile and illusionary architecture.

As I have suggested specifically about rock, Reynolds also asks questions about the ultimate sustainability of this scheme.⁵⁴ Looking at the social and aesthetic situation of popular music, the question remains: “What in today’s musical landscape is rich enough, nourishing enough – which is to say, sufficiently non-derivative – to sustain future forms of revivalism and retro? Surely, at some point, recycling will just degrade the material beyond the point that future use-value can be extracted” (424). Recent years have seen a crisis in this speculative capitalism when stress revealed the lack of firm assets at the bottom of monetary practice. As retromania needs material from the recent past in order to generate itself, we could be looking at something akin to an economic

⁵⁴ Reynolds does not use the term “sustainability,” and I am grafting into the discussion another “buzzword” concerning threats and solution to the modern world but this reads as apt considering the many such connections Reynolds is making.

bubble bursting in popular music when the present fails to produce enough viable material to be recapitulated. In this description, the bottom of the practice falls out, creating a crisis moment in the creativity of popular music. Without clear alternatives for future compositional approaches, the exhaustion of the musical bedrock resources forces musicians and industry professionals into an impasse where repetition and stasis (a traditional antagonist of popular forms) will dominate as the only available aesthetic positions.

Retromania and Rock

I agree with Reynolds about this concern for sustainability and would offer it also as a central problem for rock music. As I described in the previous chapter, one way to contextualize the “return of rock” of the post-millennium is as a means to avoid confronting the lack of progress possible within rock. Return of rock style sounds much like what Reynolds is describing – the pursuit of old sounds for the extraction of more material and homages to music of prior eras verging on parody. This practice, though executed once with great creative and commercial success, is not infinitely repeatable. Its current state is one piece of evidence reflecting the limitation of restorative impulses in the genre. Rock has once again receded from the mainstream of popular music and resigned itself into niche audiences and nostalgia because reintroducing an essentialized vision of rock constituted out of the sounds and aesthetic of the 1950s and 60s was itself quickly exhausted. It is unlikely that another attempt to claim “rock is back” with

distorted guitars, simple rhythms, minimalist production, and strained vocals would have the same impact upon audiences in any near future.

Though the “return of rock” is situated into the broader context of this backwards-looking historical moment, rock is particularly underserved to sustain itself by regenerations of the past because its restorative impulses are ultimately poor fits for retromania’s aesthetic of hybridity, mash-ups, and overtly coy acknowledgments of the past. What is unique in much of the music of the “return of rock,” particularly the work of The White Stripes, is that it only in flashes embodies the kitsch of postmodern pastiche. In many instances, rock gravitates back towards of its central tropes and presents itself as the sight of the real, of the authentic expression of musical ideas, not a winking allusion. By contrast, the many styles and forms described in *Retromania* are seldom, if ever, presented by fans or practitioners as a location for the establishment of authenticity. Instead, the intrusions of the past into the present as filtered and processed through modern technology often ignore and dismiss any notion of the authentic. Despite numerous social, musical, and technological alterations, rock culture still relies on a construction of authenticity, making its participation in a widespread contemporary aesthetic of retromania problematic and fleeting.

In this way, much of the “return of rock” attempts to be pre-modern rather than postmodern. Looking at the digital postproduction complexity of modern pop, Reynolds describes it as dependent upon “a different skill set (information processing, editing, framing, packaging) that breaks the ‘work aesthetic’ of earlier black and black inspired forms” (418). Once again, *It Might Get Loud* and the shots of Jack White creating his

own musical instrument by hand make more sense. The music of The White Stripes and the accompanying aesthetic posture push back against contemporary musical progress (especially in the realm of technology) in order to deify their conception of a musical philosophy rooted in the creativity of a rural, Southern black musical culture. This explains White's veneration of Son House's unaccompanied vocal recording and The White Stripes' establishment of House's "Death Letter" as a reoccurring facet of their live performance.⁵⁵ As Reynolds rightly adds, "What reactionary and radical nostalgia share is dissatisfaction with the present, which generally means the world created by the industrial Revolution, urbanization and capitalism" (xxvii). The nostalgia of the "return of rock" is not only an attempt to reclaim a moment when rock was closer to its musical core, but also a reach into the past for an idealized era when creativity was unmediated by the technical products and the social structures of the twenty-first century.

Adorno and Restoration

While Reynolds focuses on the recent past of popular music, his concerns over the musical and social consequences of an artistic style that is deeply beholden to the past have broad resonance with the critique of a "restorative" musical culture offered in the mid-twentieth century by Theodor Adorno, especially but not exclusively in his

⁵⁵ In discussing the shift from artists being innovators to becoming "curators and archivists," Reynolds' description of the circumstance sounds a great deal like Jack White: "At a certain point the sheer mass of past accumulating behind the music began to exert a kind of gravitational pull. The sensation of movement, of going somewhere, could be satisfied as easily (in fact, more easily) by going backwards to the vast past than by going forwards. It was still an exploratory impulse, but now it took the form of archaeology" (xx).

comments on the work of Igor Stravinsky in *Philosophy of New Music*. The philosophy is unfolded through a critique of Stravinsky's composition in works like *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*. Adorno argues that Stravinsky frequently reaches into the archetypal past to evoke a pre-modern naturalism, and in doing so steps out of time to create a world of atemporal barbarism. For Adorno, a rejection of forward motion is a submission to compositional anarchy, a renunciation of the organizing principles for musical form and culture. Thinking specifically of retroactive music, he states that "the quest for an age past not only fails to indicate the way home but forfeits all consistency" (*Philosophy of New Music* 10). Decades before modern technology and musical behaviors established Reynolds' diagnosis of "everything at once," Adorno critiques Stravinsky for bypassing the musical imperatives found in the formal development of art music and submitting to a state of chaos and unpredictability. Sequences like the "Danse des Adolescentes" from *The Rite* contain rhythms that have a jarring lack of consistency, and their arbitrary nature reflects the omission of an organizing temporal principle. One can sense here the connections between Stravinsky's musical decisions and a larger rejection of purposeful motion through time. In *Quasi una Fantasia*, Adorno chides Stravinsky's music for its indifference to temporal form. Repetition inside compositions parallels his restoration of musical artifacts as they negate forward motion. For Adorno, Stravinsky's chief failure is his mythologizing of a pre-modern past and reliance on restoring old music as the marker of authenticity in his work.

However, Adorno's assessment of restorative, backwards-looking culture stems from a deeper philosophical position that is not merely about the shortcomings of one

composer or his oeuvre. In affinity to an idea that is only an undercurrent sentiment in Reynolds' writing, Adorno clearly advances the idea that musical works are obligated to pursue an accurate reflection of their own historical moment, to use their formal constructions to engage the social situation around them. He offers that authentic works can be identified as "those that surrender themselves to the historical substance of their age without reservation," and for him, true works of art function as a "historiography of their epoch." (*Aesthetic Theory* 182). The marks of a composition's context are embedded into the form and aesthetic choices that constitute it. Adorno notes the fondness in audiences of his time for canonical works and their related rejection of contemporary new music lacking a pre-existing schema for comprehension; discarding work that, in its newness and unfamiliarity, necessarily challenges the listener.⁵⁶ The performance of the "pantheon of classics" is a "false and nonsensical" attempt to reject the most progressive forms of art in favor of the comfort and complacency of the familiar (*Aesthetic Theory* 183).

Works of art (like the music of the garage revival or Igor Stravinsky) that attempt to harness some authentic character by employing the past without critical reflection or as a self-evident marker of the real fail to meet the standard of what Adorno would call the work's truth content. A work's engagement with the present is integral to connecting it to knowledge. It is what enables an artwork to become more than purely a sensuous object for immediate intuition and to perform as an object of philosophical reflection in cognition. The manufacture of truth and knowledge in the work of art requires constant

⁵⁶ Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory* that "Aesthetic experience is not genuine experience unless it becomes philosophy" (131).

motion. Adorno is aware of and suspicious of works that offer this newness yet in fact reproduce what already exists. This falsity is rampant and Adorno says that “innumerable artworks suffer from the fact that they lay claim to being a process of constant self-transformation and development and yet subsist as an atemporal sequence of what is ever-the-same” (*Aesthetic Theory* 129). This self-transformation is a necessary part of how an artwork comes to establish itself and answer the questions posed by its own constitution thereby generating aesthetic truth content. This requires the work to participate in the “temporal sequence” and move out of reproducing the “ever-the-same.”

What Adorno finds instead of this creation of knowledge and truth in restorative works of art is a false representation of style. Richard Leppert’s commentary is particularly revealing for describing the widespread negative connotation in which Adorno uses the term “style” to reference backwards-looking music, in this case again Stravinsky. Instead of a true reckoning with the musical materials of the past, Leppert describes Adorno’s conception of style as a mask with “decorative resonance.” This means that the elements of preceding musics are incorporated as thin veneers and attractive tokens to mask the falseness of the whole. Leppert uses the metaphor of Disney’s Tomorrowland and the activity of a tourist to express the encounter with music that offers a series of trivial diversions. Though he is still thinking of the critique of Stravinsky, this criticism could be grafted onto a discussion of the music of Reynolds’ retromania with its repeated need to sample and reference the past. As Leppert states it, “To the extent that history and the past revert to mere quotation...history is in fact

forgotten, and the presentness of the present is all the more inscribed and naturalized” (“Commentary” 555). Speaking to Adorno’s anxieties about such music, Leppert suggests that the criticism stems from a deep concern over what this quotational music does to history. Because it continually presents history anew as melded into the face of the present, it obscures an accurate and authentic relationship to the past and instead offers a repeated fragmentary idealization. The true violence is, however, committed upon the present. The state of affairs that exists in the present, especially those of oppression and subjugation, is naturalized by the abuse of history, cementing the ills of the present instead of remedying them. For Adorno, one of the great failings of restorative music is the manner in which the past impinges upon a clear conception of the present.

Thinking Outside an Administrated Humanity

A rejection of music that entrenches the status quo and fails to facilitate the creation of new ideas, possibilities, and freedoms is the central theoretical concern that both Reynolds and Adorno share. Adorno draws attention to the relationship between restorative music and oppressive psychology and political order while Reynolds’s music-inspired futurism worries over society’s aspirations of prosperity and development. This forms the most important substance of their critiques of restorative and retro impulses in musical culture. In *Philosophy of New Music*, Adorno refers to the “schema of a totally regimented humanity” (144). This phrase encapsulates Adorno’s worldview where the array of social structures coalesces to establish boundaries for acceptable action and

thought. At each step in the life of the subject, forces surround a person constraining them by continually presenting a narrow set of “choices” as meaningful possibilities and options. Deviation from the preconceived configurations results in anything ranging from a limit on one’s economic survival or social status to more familiar and drastic consequence such as imprisonment and execution by the state. However, an emphasis of this theory is to highlight the way in which these structures continue to function and exert pressure even outside what observers might view as nakedly fascist regimes, ones possessing totalitarian governments. Adorno wishes to argue that elements such as capitalist economic systems, organized religion, and especially the entertainment industries all play roles in setting limits for human experience even in ostensibly free or democratic regimes like those in the United States.

This concept is elaborated expansively in the famous essay on the culture industry written with Max Horkheimer. Here, the authors take this account of the social realm and describe its direct relationship to art objects and entertainment. They describe a system where cultural products (songs, radio, film) all operate as part a prefabricated set of assumptions, ways of thinking, and normalization. These works lock into a reciprocal relationship by functioning as a preset system of possibility while reinforcing the consistency of the system itself. They are both the products and ingredients of the status quo. The reciprocity is part of the culture industry’s ability to exclude or marginalize anything that does not fit. Their ever-the-sameness functions to prevent the legitimization of anything that would challenge the organizing principles they have locked into place. The system domesticates works of art and “subdues their unruliness

and subordinates them to the formula which supplants the work” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 99). What Adorno and Horkheimer are looking at here, at the core of the argument, is a system that claims to be presenting new, innovative forms but succeeds in actually masking the repetition of art and entertainment thereby uniting with a system that prevents people from recognizing the lack of freedom in their everyday life.

Music plays a key role in the authors’ description of the culture industry. Though Adorno and Horkheimer are not exclusively thinking of the backwards-looking music so thoroughly criticized in *Philosophy of New Music*, certain aspects of the argument suggest that retroactive music might be one of the guiltiest parties in the authors’ critical roster. A reoccurring theme is that part of the allure, that which captures the listener into a regressive consciousness, is the presentation in music of that which the listener has already heard. A first manifestation of this appears in the works of art themselves. Despite the limitations of Adorno’s sweeping dismissal of all popular forms, even one of their brief observations bears a great deal of resonance with the functioning of music in a culture such as retromania. Thinking of what these philosophers would call “light music,” they consider the relationship of the listener to an individual song and observe that “the prepared ear can always guess the continuation after the first bars of a hit song and is gratified when it actually occurs” (99). The examples in mind are likely the familiar melodic and chordal patterns that form the substance of popular and pleasant listening styles. Based on the notion of a musical system that feeds back upon itself, the culture industry bathes musical culture with only a small number of musical possibilities.

The immersed listener is prepared by that available musical palette and therefore gains gratification when they are provided with the familiar sound they expect.⁵⁷

If one extrapolates forward to the contemporary condition considered by Simon Reynolds, the potential for popular music to function just this way is striking. Reynolds' argument is that contemporary popular music is based upon quotation and an amalgamation of existing recordings and styles. Whether it is a mashup song that brings together two separate songs in a "remix" or a "new" song that uses an instantly recognizable sample,⁵⁸ the appeal of much of the music of retromania is the precise recognition of the assembled elements or references. The resulting song, Reynolds argues, is something that is unimpressive merely on its own terms as a sonic object. In writing about mashup songs which blend multiple records together, he writes, "there is no creation of surplus value, musically: even at their very best they only add up to the sum of their parts. The bonus element is conceptual" (359). Beyond just being satisfied with the comfort of the conventions of Western harmony, the listener in retromania is reassured by the actual presence of a recording (include timbre, sound quality, and other hyper-specific details besides melody/harmony/rhythm) they have heard before. In fact, their satisfaction is dependent upon it.

⁵⁷ The affinities to a description of Pavlovian behavioral psychology are difficult to miss. The idea of humans conditioned by mass culture to respond without thought or resistance is very much in step with Horkheimer and Adorno's theory.

⁵⁸ It is distracting to offer a list of examples but one recent example is the single "Anaconda" by Nikki Minaj. The song works most effectively if the listener is aware of the ubiquitous 1992 hit "Baby Got Back" by Sir Mixalot which it samples extensively and plainly. On its own merits without this connection, the song is thin and lacks the same impact. Of course, "Baby Got Back" itself includes a sample of the 1986 proto-techno song "Technicolor" by Channel One. I would argue that one of the features that makes a condition of retromania more clear is that Mixalot's song is not dependent on this knowledge while Minaj's, with its overt use of the sample, is fundamentally dependent on it.

The other aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument about music is inter-compositional, and this is perhaps more directly relevant to thinking about a phenomenon like the return of rock. Another way in which works of art function according to the theory of the culture industry is via their similarity to each other. Inferior works of art rely on their resemblance to other works in order to establish identity since they themselves are hollow and aesthetically thin. For Adorno and Horkheimer, these imitative works of art are reduced to little but style. As stated before, this is a negative conception of style in which it promises reconciliation with social truth yet ultimately masks the reality it professes to reveal. Reduced to diversions and ornaments, the authors argue, style is brought into a state of "obedience to social hierarchy" (103-104). Making a strong claim about the relationship to musical form and social structure, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that songs confirm their status and identity by being substantially indistinguishable from one another except by the addition of tokens of style. In doing so, the creation of a system of uniformity in art helps maintain the status quo that dominates human lives.

Setting aside a relationship to systematic oppression, the music of the return of rock does align with this function as it is described in the "culture industry. Many rock artists attempted to establish their own creative position by drawing connections to the work of the past, connections that, in many cases, reduced them to versions of one another. This included the style and sound of music itself. It is no coincidence that magazines and radio programs already championing the music of rock's past decades were able to assimilate and embrace contemporary restorationist artists. Even beyond the

music, representations of style found themselves reintroduced whether it was leather or denim jackets, bands in suit and tie uniforms, or other markers of quintessential rock imagery. Though all of these elements are present to varying degrees in rock's extensive history, the return of rock movement drove the furthest in organizing itself by its direct and acknowledged participation with the style of rock's antiquity. In doing so, musical artists and recording companies gained legitimacy by both the familiarity of their music in terms of history and their stylistic similarity to one another. Though a handful of artists may be offered as aesthetically superior from the perspective of fan investment, their creative practice was reinforced by the larger organizing principles of unremarkable "return of rock" acts.

The model of the culture industry and the argument that virtually all music (but especially popular music) reinforces human subjugation is so sweeping that it is hard to accept. In the realm of rock music, numerous writers in cultural studies and other fields have offered analyses of how audiences and other groups utilize music and style for their own purposes that defy the Horkheimer/Adorno model. With that acknowledged, Simon Reynolds' description of contemporary musical culture presents an opportunity to once again interrogate the consequences of reproducing the same musical forms. This is most relevant because, in his own way, Reynolds is not as distant from the imperative concerns of the cultural industry theory. At the very end of his book, Reynolds discusses the consequences of "hyper-stasis," a term he comes to rest on as describing the musical situation under retromania. It is a term that captures a frantic bouncing between source materials where artists are "striving frenetically to locate exit routes to the beyond" (427).

Reynolds acknowledges that technical innovation and digital development might appear to be altering our intellectual landscapes at revolutionary rates, but he argues that this does not extend into the macro-sphere of culture. It is what he calls “a paradox of speed and standstill” (427). Instead of the creation of new sounds and possibilities by technology, we have a “rapid movement within a network of knowledge, as opposed to the outward-bound drive that propelled an entire system into the unknown” (428).

Reynolds is writing a 2011 version of the same concern Adorno and Horkheimer were discussing at the time of the publication of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1944. Both pursue the project of continued human development, Reynolds out of creative stasis and Adorno and Horkheimer out of a musical condition they find complicit with a state of human unfreedom. Both extend from critiques of musical systems that are reliant on the past to the extent that they mar the present. The central idea they share is a participation in the modern project: that it is a social good for humans to develop new thoughts, constantly revise limited or outmoded ways of thinking, and introduce the new and previously unimagined into the realm of the arts. For Adorno, at stake is the ability of humanity to see outside of its own oppression, to use the arts not as a mask of social reality but as something that reveals the violence, inequality, and subjugation contained in modern life. Though one need not fully agree with the extremes of the culture industry model, the resonance with the situation Reynolds discusses encourages us to view the restorative impulses of retromania as something less than wholly benign in culture. Reynolds argues that contemporary popular music is stuck in a moment of hyper-stasis, which is both an acute artistic problem for creativity and a threat to humanity’s ability to

conceptualize dynamic futures of continued possibility. Together, these critiques are useful tools to question the underpinnings of a musical ideology like the “return of rock.”

Tag note – a “Non-Western” Solution

As an addendum and glance into the following chapter, it is worth noting that Reynolds parallels some of the ideas of Robert Miklitsch concerning the “death of rock.” Reynolds suggests in his discussion that retromania may be uniquely confined to Western culture. Reading it as a manifestation of the decadence of a culture enthralled with celebrity, extreme cuisine, and all sorts of excess, Reynolds asks if retromania might “be just another facet of the decline and fall of the West” (395). The popular forms of music that have accompanied the advancement of contemporary culture in the United States and Europe are now running out of agency inside their original contexts. They have become fatigued and are incapable of the sort of cultural and stylistic dynamic motion they embodied in the twentieth century. Instead, Reynolds wonders whether “the ball is now in the court of the rest of the globe” (396). Considering the rapid modernization and industrial expansion in other parts of the world, Reynolds wishes to speculate that they might become the cultural innovators and dominants of the meta-narratives of musical style. While popular styles as they have been conceived according to the Western context recede, their place might be taken by innovations from other geographic points that succeed in thinking outside of the limitations of the status quo.

As discussed previously, Miklitsch makes a similar claim when thinking about the “death of rock.” Despite his extensive critique of Lawrence Grossberg, he at one point in

his argument concedes Grossberg's central thesis that rock might be "dead." However, for Miklitsch, this is properly understood as a drastic change to rock's spatiality and temporality. Acknowledging the decline of a rock music as understood in the twentieth-century United States, "baby boomer" context, Miklitsch suggests that elements of rock culture might remain vital and relevant for social and musical transformation as they move deeper into fusion and transnational contexts. Instead of thinking of a unitary "rock" as possessing a state, scholars may want to consider how other parts of the globe are reconfiguring meta-narratives about rock, including musical progress and development. This is the same conceptual and geopolitical territory where Reynolds is looking for an escape out of retromania.

In this chapter, I have brought into dialogue two critiques of backward-looking musical culture. The goal has been to build bridges between thinking of Reynolds' critiques and their setting in contemporary popular music and the more expansive yet aged writing of Theodor Adorno on the regressive tendency in the art music of the past century. Reflexively, they both buttress and help explain the critique of the return of rock which I offered in the previous chapter. Whether the concerns of any party to this debate can be assuaged by the invention of non-Western influences is unclear, but in the next chapter, I will look the music of The Mars Volta as a way to interrogate the intersections of progressive rock culture and transnationalism. The argument will turn from a critique of regressive musical culture that has been discussed in concert with Adorno and Reynolds and towards thinking, in one example, of how an artist's work manifests these tensions and attempts at a resolution of their antinomies.

Chapter Five: Progressive Rock, Transnationalism, and The Mars Volta

This chapter engages the tensions between the rock subgenre progressive rock and critiques of Eurocentrism offered by theories of transnationalism and globalization. Even as progressive rock reached its peak in the 1970s in Great Britain and the United States, the style and concept of progressive rock has continued into contemporary rock music as a drive towards experimentation and innovation. However, the musical ideas of progressive rock are built upon the foundation of European art music and the philosophical narratives offered by writers like Theodor Adorno. For this reason, to be of continuing use in thinking about rock's future, progressive rock's Anglophile bias must confront both the critiques of Western Enlightenment thought as well as the contemporary globalization of sound. This confrontation produces the second portion of this chapter where I offer the music of The Mars Volta as a synthesis of both progressive rock and transnationalism, employing them here as a way to think about the future of rock and its potential for continued development. I will argue that the music of The Mars Volta presents a response to the contemporary condition of rock music by insisting upon the narrative of progress while rendering the Eurocentric aspects of this tradition problematic via the group's transnational elements referencing the El Paso-Juarez border, North Africa, and beyond. This places the group in the midst of a complex set of interrelations in which rock culture inherits the tradition of progressive rock that seeks to find new sonic expressions, while dealing with the various critiques of the Enlightenment legacy of teleological motion.

Progressive Rock as Subgenre

Progressive rock is a style that was prominent in the 1970s as a diversion out of what most listeners and radio stations would commonly think of as “classic rock,” the canonical body of work played in the United States on rock stations promoting Led Zeppelin, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Pink Floyd, and others. While its area of prominence was the United States and Great Britain of the 1970s, the creative impulses and aesthetic principles of progressive rock have continued to play a role in rock music in terms of the impetus to create experimental, avant-garde, or “progressive” music, as well as in bands like The Mars Volta, whom critics and the artists themselves recognize as actively accepting the “prog rock” legacy.⁵⁹ Progressive rock is important because it still informs practice with its musical value of navigating a forward path for the genre. It provides rock music’s most direct connection to the canon of classical music (what I am calling here the “European art music tradition”) and works in direct tension with the impulse in rock to remain stagnant and basic. It enacts this stylistically in terms of musical form but also through philosophical ideas guiding the music.

The best, most thorough analysis of progressive rock in academic scholarship comes from Bill Martin, professor of Philosophy at DePaul University in Chicago. In *Listening to the Future: the Time of Progressive Rock, 1968-1978* (1998), Martin attempts to provide a theory of the music as it functions as a segment of the larger rock genre. This book in particular is an expansive update of his work concerning the band Yes, but is also a precursor to his important text *Avant Rock* (2002), which looks at the

⁵⁹ Throughout this chapter, I will use “progressive rock” and its frequent stand-in “prog rock” to refer to the same musical phenomenon.

issue of experimental rock music as a whole. Martin's writing includes many recapitulations of the key features of progressive rock. In *Listening to the Future*, he offers a definition of progressive rock as "visionary and experimental," played by musicians of "consummate instrumental and compositional skills," and relating to "romantic and expressive aspects" of English culture (121). Martin makes one more claim that may initially sound like a mere tautology, namely that progressive rock "is played, at least in significant part, on instruments typically associated with rock music, by musicians who have a background in rock music, and with the history of rock music itself as background" (121). The insight here is that music which may not clearly strike a particular listener as true rock on an auditory or structural level is interpolated into the rock genre by way of both signifiers of rock practice (particular instruments, for example) and also the cultural/market position of the performers. Though this connection is not unbreakable, a rock artist drifting into sounds and styles outside of normative rock music is more likely to still have the music heard and interpreted as rock than someone from the classical, jazz, or world musical spheres.

In addition, this definition contains useful elements for not only determining intrinsic qualities of the genre but also for distinguishing which artists may or may not fit the definition. By including instrumental virtuosity, Martin reveals why a group like the Velvet Underground, though arguably "experimental and visionary," is not progressive rock. Though the individual musicians in the Velvet Underground may certainly possess extensive musical skill (multi-instrumentalist John Cale was classically trained on the viola), their compositions and improvisations did not stress tight, arranged virtuosity with

the instruments. I am amending Martin's definition slightly here in that his claim should not be focused so much on the abilities of the musicians as on how those musicians choose to play their instruments. Outside of their level of training or technical skill, a given musician can choose to communicate in any number of ways, and it is the music itself that may be heard as virtuosic.

Kevin Holm-Hudson acknowledges this in his introduction to the essay collection *Progressive Rock Reconsidered* (1999). Holm-Hudson calls the music "a style of self-consciously complex rock often associated with prominent keyboards, complex metric shifts, fantastic (often mythological or metaphysical) lyrics, and an emphasis on flashy virtuosity" (2). Holm-Hudson's definition has the benefit of intensifying musical qualities that do appear to link many artists together. It is not merely the talent of the musicians but their performance style of "self-consciously" complex music that marks progressive rock. The "flashy virtuosity" is not solely about creativity and a raw vision but enacts a certain performance style that draws attention to the abilities of the performers as a key piece of communication and appeal. This is demonstrated with typical technical attributes: speed, precision, inflection, dynamic control, etc. In this way, the progressive rock musician performs not only out of the tradition of the "guitar hero," but also from the idea of the featured soloist in an orchestral piece, the virtuoso violinist or pianist.

In addition to an emphasis on virtuosity, progressive rock has other key features beyond these definitions. Many artists employ extended form, vastly exceeding the pop music single length of three minutes or even a common rock song duration of four to six

minutes. Progressive rock showpiece works can extend into the ten to twenty-minute range and beyond. Examples include “The Fall of the House of Usher” (15:04) by the Allan Parsons Project and “Lizard” by King Crimson (23:22). This style of composition can be read as a statement of artistic breadth, the notion that these groups are able to compose a song and maintain thematic material at length. The gesture seeks to demonstrate that these groups exceed the vision and conceptual procedures of standard rock music, or even popular music generally. These songs can, at times, be broken into sections with multiple parts either separated on the track listing of an LP or, more commonly now, broken into isolated tracks on a CD.

Progressive rock is, however, not simply about style or musical form but contains ideas and a conception of musical history. By its nature and nomenclature, progressive rock suggests that rock history can be organized with some sense of linearity. This has led Bill Martin and others to articulate the “blame it on The Beatles” theory of progressive rock (*Avant Rock* 39). Though this is an informal construction, the understanding of rock history that it projects places the ambition and scope of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* at the origin of progressive rock and other experimental forms. This album presented the building block upon which artists could, with earnestness and artistic credibility, begin rock projects of ever-increasing grandeur in terms of the richness of musical ideas. As Martin says of this music, the progressive impulse is “in a sense trying to take rock music to new places, and to do experimental and creative things with it, and to create something that would ‘stand up’ musically, that would endure as good and significant music” (*Avant Rock* 70). The program of

progressive rock is to move beyond the common creative center of rock music not simply in quality but in terms of pushing what that quality could become and where it may lead.

In many elements of the music, progressive rock has a strong connection to the tradition of European art music or what we refer to in the vernacular as “classical music.” This connection is stronger when one looks at the Eurocentric narrative of the development of the normative Western classical canon; in other words, the forward march of history that tracks through Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Mahler, and Schoenberg into the beginning of the twentieth century. Progressive rock has been the rock subgenre that has most consistently executed a teleological mission. Bill Martin alludes to this mission when he notes: “[T]here is a developmental logic to progressive rock works. This logic has played out against the background of, and, to a large extent, recapitulated, the developmental trajectories of Western classical music and jazz” (*Listening to the Future* 91). The orchestral and chamber traditions inform progressive rock’s sound, its approach to performance, its musical identity, and audience. Though much of it is recognizable as rock by its beat, instrumentation, and chord structures, the music often imports harmonic ideas and timbres from the classical world.

As mentioned, some of the elements connecting progressive rock to classical music are structural and formal. I would argue that perhaps no connection is clearer than the tendency for numerous progressive rock bands to break their extended pieces into movements. This is a direct importation of the form of the standard romantic/classical symphony and the chamber suite. For progressive rock, this serves multiple functions. First, it presents music with disparate relations in key, timbre, tempo, etc., as part of a

single, coherent whole. Where the compact three-to-five minute rock song must maintain a strong sense of internal consistency in order to be comprehended by a rock audience (down to the level of timbre, production qualities, and other subtleties), the break of a work into multiple sections on record provides another means to establish thematic cohesion between disparate parts even when their individual musical elements are varied. In rock, it is a guide for appreciation, pointing towards incongruent rock passages as one extended piece. Secondly, a composition with multiple sections is an indication of the music's seriousness as art. Having multiple sections suggests that this music is not adequately contained by the simple format of the popular song but is better served by the organizational forms of "high art." A progressive rock composition presented this way seeks to attract the respect and seriousness of art music and chooses a segmented format to gain artistic credibility.

Not every author is prepared to accept the extent to which progressive rock is indebted to the tradition of European art music. Holm-Hudson complains, for example, that progressive rock "has suffered from the misconception that it was a (failed) attempt to merge 'classical' music with rock, thereby enabling rock to 'progress' beyond its blues-based roots by emphasizing sophistication of structure and virtuosity" (3). Yet, these features, both incorporation of classical elements and its estrangement from blues-based rock practices, are aspects noted by many commentators on the genre, and Holm-Hudson's own objection sounds dubious when he almost immediately confesses, "Admittedly, that stereotype does apply fairly well to progressive rock's most commercially successful groups such as Yes, Genesis, and Emerson Lake and Palmer

(ELP). All of these bands shared an emphasis on virtuosity and a tendency to explore extended suite-like song structures” (4). Both in musical style and in the realm of musical ideas, the connections between progressive rock and European art music are strong.

The final important point about progressive rock is the claim that it is fundamentally an English phenomenon. Both Edward Macan and Bill Martin have theorized this feature of the music. Macan’s book, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (1997), deals exclusively with artists originating from England. Though he acknowledges the contribution of American artists to the development of prog rock, he bases his focus on English bands not only for methodological concision, but also because England was the location for progressive rock’s birth and rise of its “classic form” (10). Martin carries this argument much further and integrates a whole body of “English” ideas into creating the base of progressive rock philosophy, including “English romanticism,” “pastoralism,” and “religious hermeticism” (*Listening to the Future* 105).

If Macan and Martin are correct, then progressive rock and the impulses of musical sophistication and experimentation that follow are not universal at all but highly particular. They represent a defined vision of musical progress, one set culturally and philosophically in the British Isles that travels into the Anglophile elements of American rock culture. Progressive rock has been praised as a proto-World Music for its integration of other global musical styles. Yet under a dominant orientation of Western music and though, each such gesture is simply filtered back (or co-opted, to be less kind)

by the resources and ideology of the West. As I will argue later in the chapter, this sets progressive rock up as a problematic solution to the continued motion of rock music into the future.

Adorno and the Idea of Progress in Music

Theodor Adorno was an important figure in advocating for progress as a musical concept in twentieth-century art music. His early writing about Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School was particularly prominent in presenting progress as a value in opposition to a regressive tendency. Even beyond this period, his influence on avant-garde musical practice endured into the 1950s and 1960s when he participated in summer study courses at the militantly progressive Darmstadt School where Richard Leppert writes that Adorno's "position as an advocate of avant-garde music was at once reflected and secured" ("Introduction" 15). Progressive rock imports a philosophy of musical progress as part of its debt to the twentieth-century classical tradition, and therefore Adorno's thinking opens a useful perspective if one is to confront progress as a musical concept, even in popular music. My task in this section is not to outline Adorno's voluminous musicology as that would lead too far afield. Instead, I wish to more clearly sketch the affinities between Adorno's idea of musical progress in art music and progressive rock music, much in the same way that the previous chapter established continuities between the popular culture "retromania" of Simon Reynolds and Adorno's critique of the restorative tendency in music.

Adorno's account of progress in the musical arts is driven by what he refers to as the "musical materials," the practices in melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, etc., that move through each musical epoch and accumulate as the palette available to the composer. In his Philosophy of New Music, Adorno has a very specific argument for the progress of Arnold Schoenberg and his followers' musical works. His point is, in summary, that Schoenberg's use of twelve-tone technique was the only logical and truthful continuation of the growing introduction of dissonance and chromaticism in orchestral art music. To maintain the viability of traditional harmony was a false persistence of compositional techniques that had been surpassed. For Adorno, the pursuit of continued development demanded by tendencies in the musical material was the imperative of the responsible composer. The state of music appears to composers as an enigma where they must "do it justice and give the one right answer that technique in that moment permits" (33). Compositions themselves are the answer to these "technical puzzles" (33). A progressive composer, like Schoenberg, cannot rest on outmoded means of musical expression but must instead look for ways in which compositional practices can be pushed for new solutions and developments.

It is here that some of the affinities between the progressive impulse in rock music and Adorno's philosophy can be noticed. Adorno was, as a musicologist, nothing if not a theorist of the avant-garde, who focused much of his analysis on the "advance guard" of a musical age where practices and styles were most fully developed, taking the largest risks, and reaching most deeply into new territories. Progressive rock has been called a "popular avant-garde," and Bill Martin has argued that this "oxymoron" can be extended

into rock and also jazz (*Listening to the Future 2*). This term, “popular avant-garde,” functions well outside of an absolute where there can only be one avant-garde represented at a time in a lone genre of artistic creativity of high art. Thinking of a contextual avant-garde, one that allows certain practices to be understood within genres as progressive, opens the path to analyzing that body of work on its own terms without having to depend upon an externally imposed hierarchy of musical values. Even as it moves out of the classic “progressive rock” from the 1970s, rock music has retained this component of progress and experimentation at its margins, indeed a “rock avant-garde.” Most notably this includes the continued use of extended form but also structural complexity, formal experimentation, and uncommon rock harmonic structures.⁶⁰

This musical organization brings progressive rock into dialogue with Adorno’s conception of musical progress as it relates to the experience of the audience and expression. Whereas mainstream rock has a rich history relating to dance, the sensual enjoyment of the body occasioned by sound, and an integration of its rhythms into bodily movement, progressive rock often rejects dance as a key musical value.⁶¹ This music is offered as progressive in part because it shifts the experience from the body chiefly to the

⁶⁰ In the rock music context of concise songs (6 minutes or less), extended form and length is an avant-garde practice, particularly when the piece is not improvised but mostly through-composed in sections of planned movement and transition.

⁶¹ Volumes have been written on this subject, but I support the position that most distinctions between “rock” and “pop” music are driven by cultural style, subject position, and other non-musical elements. I would argue that, in terms of the listener, the appeal and relationship of music to the audience is very similar between the two, hence the ease with which a “catchy” song from a genre can “crossover” into popular music. Much of rock, even oppositional music like punk, connects with the listener on a level of enjoyment often driven by appealing and immediate sensuous features of the music. Acknowledging the extensive and valuable insights of the field of cultural studies, what audiences *do* with the music is where the greatest distinction arises. However, for this discussion, the importance is in the manner of musical consumption. Dance, bodily experience, and sensuous immediacy are prime features of normative rock extending from its dawn to the contemporary situation.

intellect; it is not to be intuited bodily, but thought through in comprehension. In rejecting jazz, rock, and virtually any form of music that was accompanied by dance as belonging to the realm of serious art, Adorno spoke directly of a necessity to advance music into the realm of contemplative reason as opposed to mere sensuous enjoyment. What Adorno prized was the musical work that functioned as an “object of thought” and therefore “itself participates in thinking” (*Philosophy of New Music* 96). In its ideal, this applies to a progressive rock piece of music, one performed not merely for “entertainment,” but for aesthetic consideration as a work of art that bears the mark of organized and extensive cogitation, thus “participating in thinking” and stimulating thought in the listener. In this sense, progressive rock as a subgenre has as much affinity with the intellectual constructs of Arnold Schoenberg as it does with stage persona of Chuck Berry.

Because it is avant-garde music, not easily danced to, comprehended, or consumed in quick fragments, progressive rock confronts a challenge of expression when it privileges cognitive elements. In his valuable essay about progressive rock’s subversion of normative rock values, John Sheinbaum notes the reaction of rock music journalists to the prog rock canon by summarizing their objections. From their criticism, these intellectualized forms “don’t communicate deep feelings and important messages; the strange and excessive tone colors stand in the way of natural expression; and the difficult-to-understand lyrics and visuals are not aimed at the common listener” (22). If rock music travels on a current of authenticity of artistic expression based on energy, lyrical connection, and a musical style that strikes the listener on a visceral level, then the

journalists Sheinbaum synopsizes view progressive rock as a betrayal of true rock spirit. Progressive rock defies rock convention as a progressive avant-garde by rejecting the expression and transmission of emotional content and the excitement of emotion in the listener as the highest good of rock.

The complaints against the musical practices of progressive rock closely mirror the criticism of Schoenberg and other forms of new music earlier in the twentieth century. Possessing extreme timbres and atonal harmonic organization, Schoenberg's music was criticized at times for lacking the human element that expresses feeling to listeners, for being too remote and distant from the audience. Adorno was withering in his disdain for this criticism and felt, in the classic avant-gardist manner, that success in mass culture was a sign of artistic failure. Striving for this connection was to present a false face of accessibility, and Adorno claimed that in reaching out to an audience, "the collusion with the listener, disguised as humanity, begins to disintegrate the technical standards that progressive composition achieved" (*Philosophy of New Music* 9). In other words, as in progressive rock music, the demand for new, daring, and innovative ways of composing was antithetical to easy audience appreciation. Progressive music could only tear down its own achievements in order to obtain broader appeal. For Adorno, progressive art music represented a "transformation of the function of expression" where ersatz feeling wooing listeners was replaced by complex, elusive emotional content (*Philosophy...* 35). Progressive rock is similar in maintaining its musical value outside of traditional rock emotional content by attempting to connect with its audience in a manner beyond traditional expression.

Progressive rock not only draws organizational features and musical elements from the tradition of European art music, but it moves in step with the philosophy of progress and the avant-garde offered by philosophers like Adorno whose thinking shaped narratives about progressive musical practice in the twentieth century. In many ways, the musical development that continued in rock music in the second half of the twentieth century followed the same trajectory as the avant-garde music of the century's onset. Following from the late work of The Beatles and other artists, progressive rock was a key force for entrenching a vision of artistic development in rock music, a vision reliant on technical mastery of the musical materials, extended form, and a particular "English" aesthetic that grounded its musical posture in the culture and style of Western and Central Europe.

The Global and Transnational Critique of Eurocentrism

Despite the affinities between progressive rock music and the avant-garde traditions of European art music, the philosophical narrative offered by the Adornoian school⁶² of musical progress cannot stand on its own as a program for modern rock especially in the contemporary world of globalized music. An unmistakable failing of Adorno's musicology is the near-complete omission of music of non-European lineage,

⁶² I write "Adornoian School" here because it is unfair to lay the entire Eurocentric notion of progress at the feet of Adorno. He and Max Horkheimer composed one of the richest critiques of Enlightenment reason in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This complicates a simplistic notion of linear progress out of Adorno's thought. However, I have highlighted the affinities between the notion of progress in the music of Schoenberg and progress in rock music because those connections do hold in the philosophical tradition of Adorno's understanding of European art music even if his philosophy does not bear this easy connection in its full richness. A "progressive" understanding of rock music must assume the weight of these philosophical values.

as though other musics of the world exist outside history or lag behind in some pre-modern era. This bias is not simply an orientation towards music but also a philosophical worldview rooted in the Enlightenment with its frequent Eurocentrism. In order to retain what is valuable in this perspective and utilize the notion of progress for understanding contemporary rock music, one must take into account a rich body of scholarship, particularly theories of transnationalism, which I hope to do in conclusion with the music of The Mars Volta.

The notion of progress in the course of modernity is tied to the European Enlightenment and an emphasis on the development of the natural and social sciences. Peter Hamilton describes Enlightenment thinking as “the idea that through the application of reasoned and empirically based knowledge, social institutions could be created that would make men happier and free them from cruelty, injustice, and despotism,” in other words, the continuing capacity for humanity to improve itself as time moves forward (37). The connection between this centuries-old philosophy to the impetus of progressive rock will seem less strange when one considers how progressive rock is based on a particular form of rock rationalism, the emphasis on moving past visceral, intuitive playing and towards building advanced rock compositions through careful planning and detailed musical architecture, all presented in a performance that suggests intellectual contemplation as much as bodily enjoyment.

Golan Gur has offered a critique of Western teleology in appraisals of the work of Schoenberg. Writing about the development of dissonance in Schoenberg’s compositions, Gur argues that this idea of progress “is informed by controversial theories

of determinism and teleological ends in history. Such notions do not only impose historical facts onto preconceived schemes but also imply a patterned continuity that expands into the future” (2). These ideas are not culturally or philosophically neutral, but a direct product of a Western conception of time linked to “Hegel's philosophy of history, Karl Marx's historical materialism, social Darwinism, and the undeniable and visible progress of science and technology” (5). This theoretical underpinning is not problematic on its own as composers and musical paradigms are entitled to a hearing in their own contexts. However, Gur makes an additional point about the notion of progress in the music of Schoenberg as understood by Adorno and others. He reads Schoenberg’s attempt to solve compositional problems as a rejection of a sort of pluralism. By relying on only one historical trajectory for music, the progress discussed here is the development of one line of musical tradition that functions as oblivious to a variety of styles. In focusing on one paradigm as the proper subject of development, it dismisses the authority of musics outside of the Western tradition. Pluralism is, if nothing else, a contemporary cultural reality and any notion of progress in music, rock or otherwise, must deal with this reality in order to remain relevant.

This historical narrative of progress has been widely critiqued in contemporary scholarship as a totalizing ideology that excludes spaces outside of the European and United States worldview while advancing its own vision based on the notion of a superior European culture. It validates a particular vision of development as universal and beneficial. Progress functions in support of what Edward Said has called “*positional* superiority.” Here, the Eurocentric perspective is free to move around the foreign subject

(in Said's case the "Orient") and in doing so maintains a controlling distance where it is never in danger of relinquishing "the relative upper hand" (7). Said ties this orientation of dominance directly to the rise of European art and culture and the "extraordinary ascendancy from the late Renaissance to the present" (7). Therefore, the critical position of Western musicology lapses into this superiority in which the great accomplishments of Western art⁶³ are venerated as the greatest expressions of artistic development. This orientation selects the true subjects of history and defines the proper sites for the most valuable critique.

In Samir's *Eurocentrism* (2009), the phenomenon of Eurocentric culture is articulated as the rise of a "particularly European, rationalist, and secular ideology" that functions in its own cultural space "while claiming worldwide scope" (89). These two elements form the essential poles of the critique. Eurocentrism advances a worldview including its own particular set of philosophical frames, yet it offers this worldview as global and universal. This false universality reinforces the current state of affairs (the "as it is") or delineates the end result of all progress. For Amin, the Marxism that influenced Adorno and many revisionist thinkers in the twentieth century can be understood as both a continuation and corrective to Eurocentric Enlightenment philosophy. While Amin agrees that the Marxist critique of political economy is indispensable, this criticism falls short especially as it continues to advocate for a notion of social progress. It retains "a

⁶³ Though it is well beyond the scope of my argument, excellent work has been conducted problematizing the unified notion of "Western" art, including the adoption by Europeans of the Greeks as natural and native grounds for their culture. See in particular Martin Bernal's "Race, Class, and Gender in the Formation of the Aryan Model of Greek Origins" in *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Readings*, Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi Eds., Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2001.

certain evolutionist perspective that prevents it from tearing down the Eurocentric veil of the bourgeois evolutionism against which it revolts” (77). It is this “evolutionist perspective” that is pervasive in progress narratives around the arts.

A body of scholarship on globalization and, specifically for my argument, transnationalism has worked to function as one corrective to a Eurocentric vision of culture. If the narrative of progress in the genre of rock music inherits a mostly linear teleology of development from decade to decade, akin to the manner in which one can conceptualize modernism in European art music, then a global worldview has attempted to present a dispersive, non-vertical picture of the world. Michael Kearney speaks to the paradigm-shaking intervention of globalization as a critique of the “bipolar imagery of space and time of [the] modern world view.” Instead, he offers a “multidimensional global space with unbounded, often discontinuous and interpenetrating sub-spaces” (549). Globalization is understood in this context as a theory of network conceptualization where spaces in the periphery and metropolitan centers are “stitched” together by technology, travel, communication, and culture. Kearney expresses this as a more accurate anthropological picture of the current world and sees in such revisionist frames an opportunity to break from patterns of dominance and unidirectionality. A search for “nonteleological thinking” attempts to remove globalization thought from the “master narrative of progress” (550).

Many other scholars have worked to enhance simple descriptions of “globalization” and one area where there has been success is in the field of transnational studies. Khagram and Levitt present transnationalism as a tool to gain a finer level of

detail into how actors function across borders. It is also a technique for avoiding integrationist models of global homogenization. They argue that globalization theory “is often not fine-tuned enough to capture cross-border agents, structures, and interactions that are not worldwide in scope. It often assumes a level of convergence and homogenization that does not occur” (3-4). By thinking about the presence of borders but attempting to move beyond them, transnationalism endeavors to deal with the system of nation-states as they function, including their ability to maintain internal integrity but also highlighting their porous features. It is a program for an “optic or gaze that begins with a world without borders, empirically examines the boundaries and borders that emerge at particular historical moments, and explores their relationship to unbounded areas and processes” (5).

Thinking more in the realm of spatial reformation, Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih have compared this alternative global picture to the idea of the rhizome as popularized by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, an “uncontainable, invisible symbolic geography of relations that become creative terrain on which minority subjects act and interact in fruitful lateral ways” (2). The rhizomatic conception is a popular image in many fields of scholarship that attempt to move past “metanarratives” dominated by Western thoughts and conceptions of history and value. They are chosen by scholars like Lionnet and Shih for their potential to liberate minority subjects and reduce the influence of hierarchy. In the fields of globalization and transnationalism, this might address acute problems of inequality and subjugation.

Progressive rock and its legacy are deeply in need of this corrective. Its premier scholars have agreed that progressive rock is a fundamentally English style and thus it falls into the trap of harnessing musical progress and expanded vision into a relatively narrow ideological path. If rock music is to retain a teleological element that is not regressive, it must embrace an expanded view of musical progress beyond the model of European art music or it will replicate the musical ideologies the aforementioned authors are concerned about. In refusing to accept a defiant stasis, rock music can continue to change in a way that is recognizable on the evolving terms of the genre. Musical culture can accept the manner in which the musical terrain has changed sonically, acknowledge the fusions and expanded sounds of the twenty-first century, and confront itself with the limitations of fatigued styles from its first decades.

To return, one way in which to view my own project here is as the creation of a historical narrative about rock music. I have attempted to talk about how rock music has moved in recent history, the issues it has confronted, and how it has explicitly in the past twenty years been self-reflexive about the idea of what its future will look like. Based on my reading of recent rock history, the first extreme upon which it has tilted is the continuing notion of progressive development - taking the forms, musical materials, and sounds of rock and continuing to expand and push them into new territory. The competing impulse is the regressive one, which looks not simply to the past as contemporary inspiration but attempts to actively “wind back the clock” to a perpetual state of rock’s youth, reproducing some of its most basic elements over and over again.

At this stage in the argument, the easiest paths, i.e., those of binary choice, are unacceptable. The temptation is great to simply advocate for one position or the other. As my own preferences and argument make clear, I find the regressive path deeply problematic both for its artistic implications and for its utility as a means of continuing rock music's prominent role in culture, a role it has reasserted and performed principally in the United States and Great Britain for decades. Becoming an unreflective advocate for progress is likewise inadequate because the criticisms of this concept from fields like global studies, transnationalism, and Said's "Orientalism" are too persuasive to be wholly dismissed. Progress, as it has been expressed in rock music, is not isolated but participates fully in the history of the term, a history that is filled with the values of Eurocentrism that cannot stand as a program for the contemporary global age. However, I am not ready to abandon the notion of musical progress and relegate it to a realm of obsolete concepts that no longer have any value. Some mediated notion of continuing rock music's forward trajectory of experimentation, large conceptual forms, and technical development appear to be the music's best hope for continuing to prosper. If the only choice is to acquiesce to a fully "rhizomatic" view in which all sounds are possible on a horizontal plain, then rock music will only have the option of continuing as a static, memorialized form altering the nature of the genre's history entirely.

Progress and Transnationalism in The Mars Volta

I would like to conclude by integrating these schools of thought and moving beyond this impasse via the music of the modern rock group, The Mars Volta. My goal

is to examine their unabashed allegiance to the narrative of musical progress in conjunction with their overt participation in the sounds and imagery of transnationalism. This results in their music working as a meeting point where the progressive impulse of rock endures while complicating its Eurocentric origins. More than hearing the music of The Mars Volta as programmatic for future composition, I understand them as a site where contemporary issues in rock music became manifest in their musical output from 2001 to 2012. They represent a contemporary rock practice that retains the important elements of what has preceded it in the past, yet progressively moves through and beyond critiques of the past, all while maintaining a style that is recognizably “rock music.”

Before discussing the elements of the band’s art and music that is transnational in style, I’d like to offer evidence that firmly places The Mars Volta’s identity as a participant in prog-rock. Much of the official biography of The Mars Volta from their website inscribes them in the world of rock music as a progressive art form. One of the most powerful statements reflects the scope of the key members’ artistic activity: “The eighteen or so years that Omar Rodriguez-López and Cedric Bixler Zavala have spent making music together have been a prime example of the theory of musical evolution, a journey of exploration that’s seen the duo refuse to stand still, maturing and growing ever bolder in their art” (“Biography”). This short passage contains a “theory” of their musical perspective, an evolutionary path of development.

Drawing on this source, it is an obvious question to ask whether one can read the official website biography at face-value as a statement of The Mars Volta’s self-image or whether this is mostly an imposition concocted by their record company Warner Bros. to

market the group and develop a narrative for the band's challenging and non-radio friendly music. In answering this question, other statements by the band members support the idea that the group embraces the idea of musical progress. In interviews and comments, the group's two person brain trust of vocalist Cedric Bixler-Zavala and guitarist Omar Rodriguez-Lopez have offered additional comments that shed light on their aesthetic intentions. The band's primary composer and guitarist Rodriguez-Lopez has talked about The Mars Volta's frequent rejection of traditional song form, saying "Writing a song is the easiest part; you can do that in your sleep. But challenging yourself to go further and further and further, that's what takes will and exercise" (Diver). I read the repetition and emphasis on the word "further" as evidence that the progressive, evolutionary perspective offered in the group's biography is not a record company ploy but organically reflective of the band's musical ethos. The term "further" is a stand-in for the idea of a waiting future organized logically around the groundwork of the past and the potential to continue to develop the musical materials of rock music.

In fact, the desire to move further and further is apparently part of what led to the dissolution of the duo's former group, the popular post-punk, hard rock band, At the Drive-In. Other members of At the Drive-In were willing to continue in a standard hard rock vein while Bixler-Zavala and Rodriguez-Lopez had grown restless, motivated by a wish to keep experimenting. It was their goal to spearhead a new musical outfit where they could execute their ambitious agenda. When Ryan Wasoba asked Rodriguez-Lopez if The Mars Volta was a rebellion against their former group, he replied, "Not rebelling against it, but dramatic changes are just part of making progress" ("Interview: The Mars

Volta's Omar Rodriguez-Lopez"). With this emphasis on progress, The Mars Volta decided to embrace the label "prog-rock," despite some negative associations of pomposity and kitsch-laden music. Rodriguez-Lopez told Steve Chick, "We choose to take the 'prog' label literally...For us, 'progressive' means moving forwards, not sounding like our previous bands or our old records. When you think of it in those terms, it's a *positive* association" ("The Mars Volta").

Critical discourse around the group has taken a similar tone in placing their musical style inside the progressive context. *Rolling Stone* validated the band by declaring The Mars Volta 2008's best "prog-rock" band.⁶⁴ Additionally, an unusual online review of the band's album *Frances the Mute* described the release in a series of equivalencies. The article's conclusion was conveyed by the construction "Art = progress. Art = *Frances the Mute*. *Frances the Mute* = progress" (Pollack).

Musically, the group uses many of the signs of progressive rock music. Though they did not frequently apply this practice, on the group's second album *Frances the Mute* they employ the technique of breaking an extended composition into multiple parts. Three different pieces are split into four to five separate sections delineated by an alphabetic outline (A., B., etc.). The album has five compositions (including the shorter standalone single "The Widow") yet twelve tracks.⁶⁵ Even in places where the band uses distinct song titles and CD tracks, their compositions can blur together using two

⁶⁴ Excepting a group of niche bands who regressively continue to make "prog rock" completely imitative of the music of the 1970s, it is worth wondering how much competition *Rolling Stone* felt The Mars Volta had.

⁶⁵ Despite being divided into four parts on the back of the album, the opening piece "Cygnus....Vismund Cygnus" is presented as one thirteen minute CD track.

different techniques. Either they offer no clear space of silence or natural beginning or close,⁶⁶ or in other cases, The Mars Volta allow a song form to break down into electronic, free-time, and atonal sounds to move slowly from one section to another.⁶⁷ When added together, many pieces by The Mars Volta range from twelve to seventeen minutes as examples of progressive rock's extended form. The songs themselves use the musical tropes of progressive and experimental rock music. This includes non-standard (for rock) metric ideas, moments of atonality, fast and intricate instrumental playing, vocal effect processing, and the balance of complex composed sections with moments that appear to be at least partially improvised. All of these elements place them in the tradition of American and British progressive rock from the 1970s and beyond.

The band also continues what Edward Macan has described as progressive rock's deep engagement with surrealism in both its lyrical expressions and visual style. The approach of The Mars Volta often relies on the band's own take on lyrical surrealism ("I've been sewing the wounds but the seeds sprout a lachrymal cloud" is typical) and the many song titles are taken from a mix of linguistic sources including English, Spanish, and Latin, all supplemented by the group's own modification and combination of these words. Their cover art is also directly reflective of what Macan calls "the surrealistic element of fantasy landscapes" in progressive rock art (*Rocking the Classics* 60).

Multiple albums, *Frances the Mute*, *Octahedron*, *Amputechure*, display photographs,

⁶⁶ One clear example would be the transition from Track 1 "Aberinkula" to Track 2 "Metatron" on 2008's *Bedlam in Goliath*. Not only are the songs close in key but "Aberinkula" ends with a musical passage that resolves directly into the vocal pick-up of "Metatron." Most listeners not watching the CD display would hear this as the move to a new section of the same song.

⁶⁷ The 2009 work *Octahedron* album has multiple such movements on its own including Teflon->Halo of Nembutals and Cotopaxi->Desperate Graves.

paintings, and digital productions that depict fantasy or stylized scenes including strong cubist influences in artist Jeff Jordan's work for *Octahedron*. Not only does The Mars Volta follow the legacy of progressive rock in the philosophical aesthetic, but they do so in the music and imagery as well.

However, The Mars Volta does not import the Anglocentric tradition of progressive rock without transformation, and this is perhaps the most important aspect of their music's role in continuing this tradition. Based on the idea of transnationalism and global theory as a critique of Eurocentrism, it is important to outline transnational elements of The Mars Volta's art. The group's two consistent members, Rodriguez-Lopez and Bixler-Zavala, both grew up in the city of El Paso, Texas in families of Latin American origin. El Paso is a city in which identity is constructed in, around, and in defiance of the border – a truly contested terrain of nationality. In his study of identity in the context of transnationalism, Pablo Vila describes the border area of Juarez-El Paso as a place where concerns over and knowledge of border identity are particularly powerful for defining the subjectivity of Mexican-Americans and Mexicans on either side of the border:

Living on the border thus offers a multitude of mirrors generating images which can be used to categorize and compile narratives about others and themselves.

The self-definition of a Mexican-American living in Chicago is thus very different from the self-definition of one who lives in El Paso. The essential difference is that Mexico...is still *there*, actually visible from El Paso. For the

Mexican-Americans living on the American side of the border, the *origin* of their difference is always present, serving as a constant reminder. (79)

The immediate presence of the border engages those living near Juarez-El Paso with the reality of its consequences on a daily basis, placing individuals in a space of liminality around the border. The lack of a stable, fixed national identity experienced there is spoken to by Rodriguez-Lopez in an interview promoting a film he had set in his hometown. In describing the film's setting as in El Paso, Rodriguez-Lopez says, "if you go there, anyone will tell you that El Paso is not Texas. And that Juarez is not Mexico. And it's a no man's land that has a whole surreal feeling to it. It has no identity because it has some other identity, that doesn't pertain to either country" (Ellis). Even in the early days of At the Drive-in, the two men demonstrated explicit references to this divided, transnational space by placing flags (Mexico for Bixler-Zavala and Puerto Rico for Rodriguez-Lopez) next to their names in the album's credits. The group was not merely from El Paso or the US but from many places and also, in a sense, from no definitive location.

The culture of living on the border and Latin American identity are manifested sonically in the group's music. Rodriguez-Lopez has talked about his aspirations as a salsa musician while a young boy under the influence of his father. "My culture revolved around salsa music," says Rodriguez-Lopez. "As a kid, I was always going to practices with my dad, who played in a salsa band. I wanted to learn to play salsa, and then skateboarding hit me, and I started finding out about bands like Slayer and Minor Threat and Black Flag." (as quoted in Jenkins 86) Salsa makes an appearance in the breaks of

the band's song "L'Via L'Viaquez" from 2005's *Frances the Mute*. As a twelve-minute prog rock epic typical of the genre, the band performs multiple transitions in tempo, style, and feel. An early section includes fast, "shred" style guitar which gives way to a clear sonic space for driving bass and atmospheric keyboards. This sounds like relatively unassuming hard rock with the exception of the distinctly non-heavy metal lead guitar melodies. However, at two and a half minutes into the song, a strong crescendo gives way to a slow salsa beat with unmistakably Latin electric piano. The different portions of the songs juxtaposed to one another create a transnational sonic space that is at once US punk rock, British/Pink Floyd psychedelia, and the diasporic musical culture of Latin America and Latino Americans. The use of salsa here is not merely a global postmodern pastiche but a mixing of two aesthetics that are both elements of the band's repertoire and abilities. Salsa is itself a fundamentally transnational form of music, but in this context it is also transformed into a progressive, experimental musical element that stands out in the hard rock context.

Something else curious happens in this moment. As a body of work, the songs of The Mars Volta alternate between lyrics delivered in Spanish, lyrics in English, and songs that employ both. "L'Via L'Viaquez" is this latter type of song. However, the lines performed in English occur not in the heavy neo-psychedelia of the beginning but at the moment when the momentum shifts to the first of the numerous salsa interludes. Coupling English with the salsa segment of the song and operatic, aggressive Spanish vocals with the heavier rock sound is a simple inversion of the stereotypical associations of this type of prog rock as English and salsa as Latin. It is a method of defying and

complicating expectations of what subject speaks through language in this music. Again, it is using the linguistic tools at the band's disposal and exercising them like colors in a palette to think beyond clichéd gestures. In this moment, The Mars Volta is part of what Josh Kun discusses as a "*reconquista*, or reconquest of English-language 'U.S. rock' – a racially and culturally hybrid formation that has itself been the subject of repeated cross-racial conquests and appropriations" (256). What this music opens to the listener and artist both is "an audio-geographical organization, a musical-spatial terrain of becoming, belonging, and identification" (Kun, 260). Though Kun is thinking of other musical practices, this is an apt way of hearing "L'Via L'Viaquez." He relates this to spatial notions that are compelling for thinking of this type of music in a transnational context.

Thinking transnationally often leads a scholar into questions of territoriality and the idea of personal and artistic practices creating a conceptual space. This is reminiscent of Gustav Mahler famously stating that the "symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything" ("Gustav Mahler"). The musical work, like "L'Via L'Viaquez," is a world conjuring force, producing notions of space, place, and geography. However, this composition cannot and does not naively presume to "embrace everything." What it does present is an interweaving of various cultural markers and musical styles, conceptually creating the sort of space which Jackson, Crang, and Dwyer call part of the "*symbolic and imaginary geographies* through which we attempt to make sense of our increasingly transnational world" (3). By pushing sonic boundaries between Europe-Latin America/US-Texas, "L'Via L'Viaquez" is an attempt to make some sense of that

world, even if no total reconciliation is possible or even desirable. It is progressivism made pluralism and vice versa.

Despite the undeniable connections between The Mars Volta and the Texas-Mexico border, their artistic expression of transnationality cannot be simplified to merely referencing this relationship, and at least one of their album covers defies a simplistic reading of transnationality over a single border. The artwork for their 2008 album *Bedlam in Goliath* is one of their least surreal covers. There is no spatial ambiguity and all figures and objects exist in clear Cartesian space. Also, unlike the strange figure/statue on the cover of *Amputechure* or the disembodied head of *Deloused in the Comatorium*, all human figures represented are part of a plausible real-life scene. The image that adorns the cover appears to depict a public space somewhere in North Africa where numerous individuals, some in Islamic dress, walk about. Conspicuous satellite dishes and what look like solar panels sit atop the brick buildings. The cover is a painting created again by Jeff Jordan and identified by its title *Agadez* which suggests that it's a portrayal of or inspired by the largest city in Northern Niger. Released in 2008 when reception in the United States of America of Muslim imagery could be potentially controversial by its very presence, this visual idea cannot be casually dismissed. I read it as part of the band's attempts to challenge Eurocentric readings of the art as a whole and present many of their listeners with visual tropes that reference something far outside of their own borders and the Juarez-El Paso space.

Inside, the booklet of *Bedlam in Goliath* contains one of the most complex references in The Mars Volta visual library, the Seven African Powers. The Seven

Powers are themselves a diasporic, transnational religious image coming to the Caribbean and taking on importance in Santeria practices as a syncretism of Roman Catholic and Yoruba religious figures (Perez y Mena 22). They are particularly central to some religious practices in Puerto Rico, the homeland of Rodriguez-Lopez's mother. Andres Perez y Mena traces the adoption of these seven particular deities from the Yoruba to an Afro-Cuban song "A Las Siete Potencias." The assumed reason for their inclusion in the album is the extensive use of an Ouija board called "The Soothsayer" by the band which served as the inspiration for the album. However, the Seven Powers also present a complicated image for fans in comprehending the message of the album. For those with knowledge of Santeria in Latin America, they may be a familiar set of cultural icons. To other listeners, they may be wholly unfamiliar. As a middle path, many fans of the band who purchased the album could probably comprehend the images and style as sparking some kind of unclarified recollection but not completely place them. Consider a juxtaposition to the classic iconography of seventies prog rock – the UFO, surreal fantasy, and science fiction of Rush, ELO, and Hawkwind. By pushing the boundaries of their audience's visual comfort with this set of transnational iconography, The Mars Volta present an image that doesn't integrate into a progressive rock genre without qualification as transnational.

What is most compelling about The Mars Volta's music is the way in which they pull together multiple threads of music and culture at once. In their moments of artistic self-reflection, they insist on maintaining a progressive orientation towards rock music. Yet, they accomplish this with a subjectivity that does not inherit the legacy and

aesthetics of 1970s progressive rock without extensive mediation through a transnational lens. The realm of politics and critiques of identity, as well as the analysis of Eurocentrism discussed early, have left in poor standing an unreflective status towards the position of the subject in all forms of popular music, and rock cannot be exempted from this. The technique of The Mars Volta suggests how composing rock music can include critical reflections about subjectivity itself by fully displaying tensions and dynamics the subject position of the music represents. For this band, this is tied principally to their transnational identity, and a certain type of twenty-first-century globalism is probably inevitable to establish a new modality of rock with a broader scope.

The history of rock's infusion with musical forms outside of its own canon is extensive including British rocker's colonially problematic fascination with the sounds of India in the 1960s. However, The Mars Volta creates music that is not simply a cooptation of the music of "the other" or even "Non-Western" in the way it is normally described. After all, it would be accurate to call the band's core members "Latin American" and therefore integrated into "the West." The art of the band is a dialogue with the liminal status of Western identity, how a transnational world establishes its subjects across borders.

The Mars Volta allows this integration without a full submission to a rhizomatic picture of complete pluralism in which all is possible at all times without the boundaries of genre or artistic value. If that situation were enacted, rock music may only be able to continue to constitute itself by its own past via an enslavement to a canon that presents rock music as a museum artifact. However, the work of The Mars Volta is worth

analyzing in that it retains the strong notion that, even today, rock music can function in a progressive sense to expand into new compositional possibilities, alleviate the boredom of familiar sonics, and regard itself as an art form that is constantly growing in some (even if unknown) direction. What is instructive about this band is how they do this while embracing the reality that the globe is now a complex, transnational place in which music and culture are always intersecting in, around, and in defiance of the borders of nation states. Transnationalism and prog rock come together to create something that is more theoretically complex than its parts and more compelling to listen to as a result. In the music of The Mars Volta, one need not choose between inclusive pluralism of sound and teleological musical progress but instead listen for what their synthesis might sound like.

Conclusions and Futures in Post-Rock

In this project, I have identified how certain concepts within rock music culture have both framed debates about the genre's condition and influenced artistic practice into the twenty-first century. I have described a tension in contemporary rock orbiting around two conceptions of rock's fundamental nature. The first presents sustained evolution and change as central to the music's identity. This position rejects the incessant re-introduction of familiar and classic sounds in favor of styles that continually present something new or innovate significantly upon the past. The musical politics of artists like the Smashing Pumpkins in the 1990s or The Mars Volta two decades later argue for an avant-garde understanding of rock music where artists are constantly searching for unexplored formal possibilities and confronting their audiences with complex works of expansive scope. The issue of what measure of new or innovative counts for an interested party is incredibly subjective and layered with the politics of any number of musical investments. That is why it is worth emphasizing that my primary focus has been to discuss these concepts as *ideas* that influence thought about rock. While some chapters have discussed artistic style, particularly in terms of the "return of rock" or The Mars Volta, I have intentionally avoided arguing about "progressive" practice in terms of formal principles or absolutes.

In turn, this impulse has met resistance in the form of musical arguments and compositions that take a different interpretation of rock's essential character. These counter-examples have relied heavily on the presentation of the familiar. Music such as the 2000s' "return of rock," (as well as the extensive hard rock, metal, and retro culture

that still persists in its wake) attempted to link rock proper with raw, minimalist practices from its previous decades. The music and imagery of the artists was intended to evoke the idealized memories of rock's "golden eras" whether it be the origin music of the 1950s, the explosion of styles and innovation of the 1960s, or the classic rock period of the 1970s. Instead of insisting that rock continually move forward, the philosophical position expressed in these works suggested that the real path to rock's vitality and authenticity was to seek inspiration by looking backwards.

I view this conflict as one method of understanding the history of philosophical ideas in rock music, part of the force that propels it ahead creatively and frames conversation among groups invested in rock culture. Key to the structure of my argument is to convey a particular historical narrative around the state of rock. The exhaustion of continued paths for innovation in alternative rock, coupled with the weight of fifty years of existing rock guitar practice, lead Billy Corgan of the Smashing Pumpkins to claim that "rock is dead" in the late 1990s. While rock did momentarily concede the focus of mainstream music journalism, youth investment, sales, and other barometers of well-being, rock culture was reorganized again in an attempt to answer Corgan's charge. In doing so, the "return of rock" offered a strategically self-serving vision of rock music. By claiming that *real* rock was recognizable by a confined set of musical styles directly related to rock's formative, most basic forms, rock musical culture could present the promise of indefinite renewal, claiming that all the resources required to keep rock vital were already available in the sound and postures of rock's past. This vision was an alternative to the more foreboding approach of how to continue to push

rock music into new directions, especially as genre fragmentation and musical hybridity made the position of established, older genres such as rock seem suspect and antiquated.

These contemporary challenges to rock (and popular music generally) are well-documented in both journalism and academic scholarship. The adversities faced by a genre like rock are numerous. Digital technology has created such extensive means to both produce and distribute musical works that their connection to an object, any last hints of their scarcity, have seemed to disappear. Now, consumers can legally and illegally access music with mouse clicks, and in the case of free music, this has led to questions about whether current listeners value the music in the same way as previous generations. The album, once the paradigm of listening to rock music, has given way to a culture even more fixated on individual songs, now easily available to download one by one. Furthermore, style has also posed a challenge to rock. The social situation has occasioned increasing hybridity and eclecticism, reducing genres like rock to yet another niche fragment within larger listening practices. It is becoming increasingly difficult for any body of music organized around stylistic affinity to hold the attention of youth (the quintessential rock audience and purveyors of the “new”).

What plagues the condition of rock music are not only social, economic, and technological factors but also questions of form and composition. To claim that rock faces no formal creative obstacles is to accept one of two things. First, one may believe that rock musicians will always find avenues to rejuvenate the music creatively, and that inside the parameters of the genre are present enough components to be infinitely recombined. This is what has led writers like Kevin J.H. Dettmar to scoff at the

suggestion that rock could ever run out of melodies, structures, and variations. I have been clear that I find this faith suspect. Rock has been the home to a malleable yet comprehensible set of musical practices, sounds, and instrumentations. While artists or songs connected to the rock milieu may stray far outside these parameters, they are tied to rock by their links to its core principles and sonic markers. These limited musical means are exhaustible and not perpetually renewable despite variations in timbre, vocal style, recording techniques, etc. In addition, as rock music branches further and further to seek new paths of creativity, it loses its connection to that central musical identity. If rock could merely uproot itself, transfer its definition and social function to a largely new musical space, then perhaps there is no threat. However, as I argue here, treating rock as an open concept that can be grafted onto a discrete musical form such as rap is not a satisfying solution. Too much of rock's accumulating history, culture, and musical style is left behind to perform this move.

An alternative objection could be offered that this imperative to grow and evolve is a false requirement, and this is precisely the position represented by the "return of rock." Again, it is a maneuver to avoid the challenges to contemporary rock composition, and it was successful for one moment in the previous decade. This is the point where issues of investment and stakes become key. It may be wholly plausible for rock to recycle its own material into foreseeable decades, just as many musical styles have continued long after mining the past became easier and more preferable to innovation. There is little doubt that an audience for this music will remain, even a diverse one across generational lines. Extreme forms of rock, most notably punk and

metal, have thrived as niche listening groups, and the current proliferation of very aggressive contemporary heavy metal in youth culture is a sign that rock is far from disappearing in any meaningful way. However, to disconnect new sounds and styles in rock from a central place in youth culture is to radically mutate the role it played in British and United States culture in the twentieth century.

This dynamic has led to conversations about the “death of rock,” both from musicians such as Billy Corgan and from respected popular music scholars like Lawrence Grossberg. Ultimately this phrasing, the “death of rock,” can be a hyperbolic distraction from the important issues it in fact seeks to address. As acknowledged in Chapter Three, this conversation is more accurately thought of as the “state of rock” (as Grossberg says in one essay), or even better, the terms of rock’s continued possibility. I argue in this project that the current shifting state of popular music makes it valuable to highlight and investigate the ways in which these conditions are changing. One way to think about the apparent waning of rock music in culture is as a fatigue of its formal possibilities. The extremes taken to push rock (from ultra-heavy/fast metal, deconstructed noise music, or the late work of Radiohead) can be read as attempts to obtain distance from the fading core to the margins of possibility. The most important issue here is to advocate for a scholarly emphasis on this shifting situation.

The need to focus on change in rock at a time of such upheaval in the consumption of popular culture may seem obvious, but some scholarship has taken refuge in the idea that rock will continue as it has or that the consequences of its alterations have minimal relevance. Claims that rock has always been self-reflexive

about its own demise do not mean that its material conditions will always be the same. Even if the history of rock is littered with anxieties about its well-being, these anxieties should be confronted anew in terms of its actual circumstances. I am also not wholly persuaded by Robert Miklitsch's suggestion that negative critiques such as Grossberg's are reducible to aged generational investments in twentieth-century rock values. However, as I have acknowledged elsewhere, a worthwhile path for future study is precisely the type of scholarly work where popular music studies excels – analyses of fan groups, “scenes,” and systems of investment. What is the investment in the “status of rock” or just “rock” at the level of fans from various demographics? It may very well be that rock, as a unitary, organized genre with a set of musical approaches and political values, is as dilapidated as some critics claim. Concerns over the status of rock may be driven by these critics as they themselves are the principal remaining site of continued investment.⁶⁸ Again, that would not affirm rock's life or death but speak to the importance of change in its circumstances.

Perhaps the most important idea in conclusion here is to acknowledge that both of these stances are entwined as attempts to find solutions for compositional challenges in rock. More is understood by conceiving of progress and restoration as two inseparably connected forces than viewing them as diametric paths for rock practice. It is their dynamic interaction that has provided a propulsive force within rock at least since The Beatles' work of the mid-1960s introduced a strong avant-garde sensibility into the genre.

⁶⁸ In fairness, this suggestion is not antithetical to Miklitsch's argument in “Rock ‘N’ Theory,” but I would maintain that his personal, aggressive approach to critiquing “death of rock” claims make it difficult to point towards an analysis that suggests a weakened state for rock.

Both the idea that rock must evolve and the claim that rock contains an unchanging, core sound to be restored are “real” in that they describe phenomenon of musical culture. Either description contains theoretical limits and neither is, on its own, fully able to account for the other. Though my own partisan lens sees more clearly the falseness of the perpetual re-introduction of the past, even the imperative to progress infinitely contains irrationality at its extreme. Instead of an uninterrupted ascension by one outcome, the tension persists. The ability to debate rock and grapple over its contemporary nature may long outlast the music’s own capacity for evolution and cultural centrality.

Futures in Post-Rock

I began this project on the state of rock music with the recordings and statements of the Smashing Pumpkins at the end of the 1990s. At the same time, critics, fans, and musicians began to discuss the emergence of a post-rock phenomenon. I wish to end my conversation by contextualizing post-rock in my discussion as not only a musical genre in dialogue with strains around progressive directions in rock but also as an allegory for rock’s social and creative position.

A useful place to establish the basic parameters of the subgenre is Simon Reynolds’ writing at the beginning of critical awareness of the music. He defines post-rock as “using rock instrumentation for non-rock purposes, using guitars as facilitators of timbres and textures rather than riffs and powerchords. Increasingly, post-rock groups are augmenting the traditional guitar/bass/drums line up with computer technology: the

sampler, the sequencer and MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface)” (“Shaking the Rock Narcotic”). The use of typical rock instruments is a main element of continuity with rock, though Reynolds emphasizes that one of post-rock’s creative preoccupations is a reimagining of the guitar within the rock context. It is sometimes played using alternate striking techniques from traditional picking or even held in a unique manner.⁶⁹ Instead of focusing on easily intelligible patterns of rhythms and riffs, post-rock guitar can become fragmentary, broken sounding, or add elements of rhythmic complexity associated with the subgenre of “math rock.”

Reynolds contrasts post-rock to the aesthetics of rock writer Joe Carducci, whose *Rock and The Pop Narcotic* (1991) argues for “a precise, materialist definition of [rock] as music, rather than 'attitude', 'spirit', 'rebellion', or any other metaphysical notions” and says it is fundamentally “the real time interaction of drums, bass and rhythm guitar” (quoted in Reynolds “Shaking the Rock Narcotic”). With Carducci playing the now familiar role of the essentialist who looks at rock music as exemplified by musicians playing energetically in real-time under the inspiration of hard rock and punk music, post-rock breaks with this understanding of rock by technically experimenting and also by substituting a “hot” or present sound for one that is processed, “cold,” and in many cases, clearly assembled and fragmented using production technology. Even though post-rock is performed largely by ensembles recognizable as bands, their performances can lack the energy and aggression associated with live rock instrumentalists. The charge

⁶⁹ An example would be the minimalist song “The Ongoing Horrible” by Dave Davison of Maps & Atlases. In this performance, he lays an acoustic guitar down in his lap and strikes the fretboard with his finger to generate harmonics. In one section of the song, he adjusts the tuning pegs of strings to create a pitch slide.

of playing “cold” is reminiscent of previous critiques of groups perceived to be over-intellectualized or processed rock music.⁷⁰

I would draw on this to argue that what post-rock really entails, and makes as its central statement, is the rejection of the *logic* of rock music. By logic, I mean the way in which something is composed and operates to establish its being. As Reynolds notes in the writing of Carducci, rock can be understood as a formal set of musical parameters, but it is also the manner in which these basic musical elements function and their modality in culture. A music’s logic is the way in which it makes sense in an internally coherent manner and then communicates this coherence to an audience. So, not only is rock music composed of certain interactions between bass, drums, and guitars and the general style in which they are played, it is also the way in which these sounds are coded between performers and audiences to signify “rock.” Post-rock presents an uncanny version of the music. Its most recognizable elements are present in terms of instrumentation, sketches of rhythm, and other markers. However, the music continually breaks the codes of style and performance established by the normative understanding of mainstream rock.⁷¹ Not only does its own style of fragmentary rhythms, collage-like recordings, and other elements make it incongruous to most rock, it requires a different sensibility of listening in order to be deciphered and appreciated.

⁷⁰ I’m thinking here in the first case of Talking Heads as the paradigmatic example. The latter critique of overly-processed rock might be applied to a 90s band like Garbage, who without coincidence was composed largely of rock producers and sound engineers.

⁷¹ As Reynolds also notes, this behavior has a history going back into rock, one that Reynolds correctly identifies with Brian Eno as a central figure.

Conceptually, post-rock contains an idea reminiscent of what Jean-François Lyotard sees in postmodernism. Among its many characteristics, Lyotard observes in postmodernism a distrust of “the principle of a general progress in humanity” (48). Just as postmodernism purports in moments to be a rejection of the modern developmental project, post-rock does not simply perform as a “progressive” gesture in rock. In contrast to the progressive rock tradition which took seriously the possibility of intellectualizing rock into new formal complexities by inheriting the sounds and ideas of Western art music, post-rock represents a break with normative rock and the tools necessary to hear and compose it. This is not a hard or complete break, but its insistence on otherness to traditional rock is part of why it is not, and is unlikely to ever be, the ascendant style in rock music. Post-rock is not an inheritor of the historical narrative of successive movements or breakthroughs. It functions not as a reclaiming of the vitality of rock music in composition and culture but instead as an alternative that takes the fatigued materials of rock (down to the instruments themselves) and reworks them into a sonic space with its own organization and logic.

The existence and persistence of post-rock is not evidence that rock has been abandoned. As with all “post-“ interactions, something of the original endures through whatever transformation has occurred. As is often the case, the paradigm expressed in the origin term continues to operate while the “post-“ revision stands as a critique that seeks to diagnose or surpass the previous iteration’s shortcomings. Post-rock exists as a distinct and isolated practice inside the current state of rock. What most listeners would recognize musically as “traditional rock,” loud guitars, minimalist rhythms sections,

power chords, and all the rest - is still the standard-bearer of rock culture. It continues to play this role even as its own logic fails to operate as successfully as it did during the first fifty years of rock 'n' roll. Post-rock exists somewhere beneath as the bothersome reminder that rock musical development has moved to a point where its construction and cultural history contain the materials for its own obsolescence, that rock has established the conditions to move beyond itself.

Elements exist that do make it seem as though we may be entering a broader "post-rock" musical landscape. In addition to its uncertain status as the representative of youth culture in the United States and Great Britain, the accumulating weight of its stylistic history appears to be enfolding rock inside a rote set of musical practices that are difficult to escape. As Miklitsch and Reynolds have suggested, this may be the end of a certain Western narrative and condition of rock that was crystalized in the twentieth-century. Not only does the question remain of how audiences in the West will view and consume rock, but the logic and sound of rock has long taken hold in other geographies as well. It will be a longer endeavor to contextualize how those practices continue to shape the state of rock. As audiences and artists utilize the tools of rock to make statements about identity, politics, and other personal investments, the shift in rock as an agent requires continued attention. If this ceases to matter "as rock" or if these gestures function outside of musical movements, rock will proceed to shift into a new modality in the twenty-first century. Even where it is present, its reduced social role and continued tensions about its musical identity may result in an approaching post-rock future.

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