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Rock Music Scholarship

Monica Berger

CUNY New York City College of Technology

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**”Rock Music Scholarship,” ACA/PCA 2007, Rock in the Academy panel, 4/7/07
Monica Berger, New York City College of Technology, CUNY mberger@citytech.cuny.edu**

My challenge is to take my master’s thesis, a lengthy annotated bibliography of academic monographs on rock in American culture, and make it come alive and, in the process, provide a sense of how the academic rock discourse has evolved.

A question to consider is why is rock music such fertile ground for so many methods and so much interdisciplinary work? No one individual or discipline owns the scholarly discourse on rock.

How useful is it to consider only monographs? Periodical literature may be more current but it is more specialized as well. The indexing of academic journal literature on rock is problematic. Music indexes are poorly designed and limited by discipline. General and humanities indexes are overly broad. By limiting my study to monographs, I am looking at the “tip of the iceberg” but that tip is significant. I can easily identify academic luminaries as well as the broadest range of disciplines and methods, and, get a sense of the history of “rock in the academy.”

1969 represents the birth of pop culture studies under Ray Browne and the creation of the PCA. Writing on rock from this period, e.g. Gillett and Belz, appears to be more factual socio-history than theoretical. Fifteen years later sees little evolution in London’s Closing the Circle. Bowden’s 1982 monograph on Dylan is indicative of another early strain of rock scholarship: the hermeneutic literary study. In contrast, in England, the Birmingham School method of cultural studies was breaking new ground as indicative of the work of Simon Frith.

Cultural studies gradually infiltrated American academia in the 1980s, *see* Radway’s Reading the Romance and the writings of George Lipsitz. With the acceptance of cultural studies, new interdisciplinary academic discourses arose including ethnic studies and women’s studies. The advent of the New Musicology in the early 1990s further complicates our history.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: THE NEW MUSICOLOGY

Is there a turf war between musicologists and non-musicologists on the rock discourse? I would consider this an issue of “chops”: some musicologists presume that formal analysis of music is prerequisite to *any* discussion of rock. However, other musicologists play an important role in the overall rock discourse, so this issue is complex. All of the works discussed below speak to both audiences.

Middleton’s 1990 Studying Popular Music considers the social aspects of popular music as well as how musicology has approached popular music. The husband and wife team of McClary and Walser were also groundbreakers. Particularly influential is Walser’s 1993 Running with the Devil. Another noteworthy early work is Shepherd’s Music as Social Text. Schwarz’s 1997 Listening Subjects employs Lacanian psychoanalysis to discuss music and the body. Fast’s fascinating In the Houses of the Holy (2001) examines how women Led Zeppelin fans negotiate gender and sexuality. A non-musicologist, John Mowitt, employed musicological methods to great success in Percussion (2002). By the late 1990s, many musicologists incorporated humanities and social sciences theory. Ethnomusicologists also used a mix of close reading and other methods.

INTIMACIES: ETHNOMUSICOLOGY AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES

The first work on rock to use ethnography is Bennett’s 1980 insider study, On Becoming a Rock Musician. Mahon, an anthropologist, became part of the Black Rock Coalition in order to write her 1997 book. Berger’s 1999 Metal, Rock, and Jazz Perception close reads musicians and listeners in northeastern Ohio. Schippers’ 2002 Rockin’ Out of the Box considers post-punk gender maneuvering. Echard in Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy (2005) examines Young’s critical reception and fan discourse.

SPACES AND PLACES: GEOGRAPHIES

Kruse's A Cultural Geography of the Beatles (2005) uses a form of cultural geography to challenge his own disciplinary tradition. Austin, Texas is the subject of Americanist Shank's highly readable Dissonant Identities (1994). Laird's Louisiana Hayride (2005) looks at the influential radio program that set the stage for the birth of rock and roll. White's social history, The Nearest Faraway Place (1994) uses the Beach Boys to explore California in the 1960s.

A substantial body of academic writing on rock focuses on the hugely popular figures of Elvis, Dylan, and Springsteen, as well as Madonna. Are these popular figures blank screens that provide a space for scholars to ponder big issues? Is academic writing viral? Why are there no academic books on Nirvana and dozens on Dylan?

ELVIS IS EVERYWHERE

Plasketes has written a couple of non-theoretical books about Elvis as icon. Doll explores Elvis' Southern, hillbilly heritage. Elvis fans and places feature in Americanist Doss's Elvis Culture (1998). Focusing on Elvis places, Marling's Graceland (1996) has a visual focus. For a good summation of the academic discourse on "why Elvis?" see Rodman's Elvis after Elvis (1996). Americanist Bertrand's Race, Rock and Elvis (2000) examines rock and roll as an expression and cause of social change in Southern history. Before we move on to Dylan, let us look at a few outstanding American studies works.

AMERICAN STUDIES AND AMERICAN SOCIAL HISTORY

What does popular music say about the myth of "America"? Scheurer's Born in the U.S.A (1991) explores whether popular music is hegemonic or counterhegemonic or both. Garman's excellent A Race of Singers connects Whitman to Guthrie who in turn influenced Seeger as well as Dylan and Springsteen. Now, let us tackle the literature on Bob Dylan.

THAT WEIRD OLD AMERICA: DYLANOLOGY

Herdman's Voice Without Restraint (1982), like Bowden, is literary-oriented. A recent book by poet and academic Ricks also uses classical literary tropes. An outstanding early book on Dylan is musicologist Mellers' A Darker Shade of Pale (1985) which utilizes an orthodox American studies methodology. Greil Marcus' Mystery Train was published in 1990 and Marcus continues to explore Dylan in subsequent works including his 1997 Invisible Republic and his 2005 Like a Rolling Stone. Dylan's historical precedents are explored in Filene's Romancing the Folk (2000) and issues of social class and authenticity are considered. This is the perfect segue to our next "star": Bruce Springsteen.

BORN TO WRITE: SCHOLARS ON SPRINGSTEEN

Major themes include Springsteen as emblematic of American culture and Springsteen fan culture. Springsteen also functions as a ground to consider authenticity, class, sexuality, and gender. Pratt in his Rhythm and Resistance (1990) provides a sophisticated argument that the Springsteen phenomenon is symbolic of all the "power and contradictions of contemporary popular culture" (176), or, rock authenticity as a masculine false consciousness. Using an orthodox American studies approach, Cullen's 1997 book posits Springsteen as a champion of the common man and traces him to Emerson, Twain and Whitman. Cavicchi's Tramps Like Us (1998) considers Springsteen fan culture and uses a blend of methods, primarily ethnography.

MADONNARAMA

Madonna scholarship is an industry onto itself. Guilbert's Madonna as Postmodern Myth (2002) draws from postmodernism, gender theory on performativity, camp, and colonialism. Faith's Madonna, Bawdy & Soul (1997) focuses on Madonna's reception and her fan culture. A challenging and highly theoretical overview of the academic discourse on Madonna can be found in Miklitsch's From Hegel to Madonna (1998).

FEMINIST AND GENDER THEORY

Before there was theory, there was history. Wilfrid Mellers' 1986 Angels of the Night: Popular Female Singers of Our Time represents the factual method. During the heyday of MTV, there was a plethora of

feminist writing on music videos. Lewis's 1990 Gender Politics And MTV is typical: music videos as misogynistic as well as liberatory.

Responding to Frith's work, journalists Reynolds and Press wrote The Sex Revolts in 1995. Informed by psychoanalytic theory, it addresses gender and sexuality. Other important works include Rhodes' Electric Ladyland (2005) which explores women rock journalists and groupies. Lehman's 2003 Roy Orbison considers gender. Burns and LaFrance's 2002 Disruptive Divas examines how female musicians negotiate identity. Carson, Lewis, and Shaw cover the history of women in rock but also address the personal experiences of female rock musicians. Lastly, the leading scholar on gender and popular music is Sheila Whiteley, a free-ranging musicologist.

IT'S ALL IN HOW YOU USE IT: CULTURAL STUDIES, FAN CULTURES, SUBCULTURES

The logical place to begin is with Simon Frith. His 1988 Music for Pleasure questions rock authenticity. His 1996 Performing Rites revisits popular music taste and aesthetics, long banished from the academy. Cagle's Reconstructing Pop/Subculture (1995) probes how authenticity was turned on its head by the Stooges, the New York Dolls and others. More recently, Shuker's second edition of Understanding Popular Music (2001) provides an excellent overview and notes a recent maturing of the discourse. Auslander's Performing Glam Rock (2006) follows in Cagle's footsteps but places more emphasis on visual representation.

FROM JESUS TO THE DEVIL: TWO SUBCULTURES, CHRISTIAN ROCK AND METAL

There is a small but substantial body of academic writing on Christian rock and the definitive academic monograph is Apostles of Rock (1999) by communications scholars Howard and Streck. A fascinating book on the connection between religion and popular music that addresses a variety of subcultures including Deadheads and metal culture is Robin Sylvan's Traces of the Spirit (2002). During its heyday, heavy metal was a common topic for theses and articles in the social sciences, particularly metal as social pathology. Sociologist Deena Weinstein is the major scholar on metal. Her sympathetic Heavy Metal, revised in 2000, is the first full-length scholarly study of the social aspects of heavy metal.

PUNK AND RIOT GRRRL

British scholar Laing's 1985 One Chord Wonders, is probably the first major scholarly text on punk. The first American scholar to write a book on punk is Tricia Henry, Break All Rules! (1989). Recent monographs on punk include Malott and Pena's Punk Rocker's Revolution (2003), Thompson's Punk Productions (2004), and sociologist Haenfler's study of straight edge (2006). Our contemporary authors write as "insiders" of their subject subcultures. The body of scholarship on Riot Grrrl and girl culture is largely book chapters and articles.

OTHER METHODOLOGIES: FREUDIAN THEORY, POSTMODERNITY, ETHNICITY

"Pure" Freudian, as well as Marxist theory, is employed in Watson's quirky book on Zappa, The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play (1995). Music video spawned works incorporating postmodern theory by Kaplan and later Goodwin. Issues of race are touched upon in many of the books discussed in this paper.

COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA STUDIES

Not surprisingly, there is a substantial body of work from the field of communications and media studies. Influenced by McLuhan, early works include Pielke's You Say You Want a Revolution (1986) and Curtis' Rock Eras (1987). In 1991, Denisoff, and Romanowski wrote a survey of the history of rock music in motion pictures and in 1997 Keith published his history of counterculture underground radio. Jones considers how studio production influences the perception of authenticity and technology in his 1992 Rock Formation. Noteworthy is the recent overview on the evolution of rock criticism by Lindberg et al., Rock Criticism from the Beginning (2005).

POLITICAL SCIENCE

Denisoff's 1983 Sing a Song of Social Significance and Orman's The Politics of Rock Music (1984) are early American considerations of the political aspects of popular music. British scholar Street's Rebel

Rock and his 1997 Politics and Popular Culture complicate the discourse and consider the politics of popular music. Lastly, Wiener has written two books on the Nixon administration's harassment of John Lennon.

LITERARY APPROACHES

Two early literary works on rock by Pattison and Wallace Fowlie, are influenced by Nietzschean Romanticism. More recently, Larry David Smith has written several books that utilize auteur theory. Hamelman's 2004 But Is it Garbage? brings a traditional literary approach to his analysis of rock and the "trash trope."

ART HISTORY, AESTHETICS AND PHILOSOPHY.

Philosopher Gracyk's 1996 Rhythm and Noise is highly ambitious and explores rock aesthetics through the tensions between authenticity and insincerity. Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club by Gendron (2002) connects art history to rock history. Also published in 2002 is Martin's interesting study of avant-rock. Friskics-Warren's 2005 I'll Take You There explores the transcendent and popular music.

SOCIOLOGY

A substantial number of academic authors on rock are sociologists. Wicke's 1990 Rock Music connects countercultural ideas about aesthetic and social change to rock-as-revolutionary. Negus, a sociologist and former musician, looks at the impact of the music industry as well as the role of genre in his second book, the 1999 Music Genres and Corporate Cultures.

BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

The primary academic author on the business aspects of popular music is Sanjek. The first full-length monograph by an economist by Dolfmsa (2004) examines why rock became so popular in the 1950s and 1960s.

CONCLUSION

If one is interested in a *Gesamtwerk* or an overview of all rock theories, I would suggest Negus' 1996 Popular Music in Theory. Kolloger's 1999 The Times They Are A-Changin' is another good overview. I will conclude by touching on five books that are excellent representations of rock scholarship at its best. Nehring's Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism (1997) examines how feelings, particularly anger, are considered feminine and irrational and are culturally dangerous. Influenced by feminist theory, the author seeks to reclaim anger in music and repositions the complex debate on rock and gender. Americanist Waksman's Instruments of Desire (1999) pulls out all of the theory guns: gender, ethnicity, whiteness, and racial studies. The body and desire is a theme throughout the book. Subjects include Jimi Hendrix, the MC5, and the gender and sexual contradictions of heavy metal. Gracyk's 2001 I Wanna Be Me challenges the identity politics of cultural studies scholars who view rock music as sexist, homophobic, and racist. In this difficult book, the author probes authenticity and appropriation. Kevin Dettmar's 2006 exciting Is Rock Dead? goes deeply into the authenticity debate and examines the rock discourse from both the academic and mainstream media as well as within rock music itself. The fetishization of authenticity is at the root of rock's supposed demise. The discourse on authenticity is implicit or explicit in many of the works discussed today.

I hope you have enjoyed my talk. I am always amazed at how rock music is so intrinsically interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary: it is the perfect contemporary academic object of study. Who represents "rock in the academy"? No one and everyone, for rock is the intellectual everyman of the humanities and social sciences. That is why the discourse on rock is so rich and varied and reflects the overall evolution of the humanities and social sciences. Thank you for listening.

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