NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF MEDIA STUDIES

"Fuck You, I Won't Do What You Tell Me": A Critical Analysis of Rebellion, Revolution and the Dionysian in Popular Music

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Rock music has traditionally been characterised in the popular imagination by what Theodor Gracyk refers to as a "Dionysian" sensibility (Gracyk 1996:178-9) – a wild, rebellious temperament that seeks to actively subvert, resist, and transgress societal norms. It is difficult to deny that there is a strong sense of rebellion associated with rock musicians and present in many rock recordings. Closely related to this popular rebellion has been a sense of implicit dissatisfaction with the political or cultural milieus that rock music inhabits, that has, with increasing frequency, given rise to bitterly sardonic commentaries on modern existence and explicit calls for social change or revolution; ranging from the American folk revival of the 1960s, to the punk movement of the 1970s, to a host of bands arising from the post-punk rock scene of the late 1980s and 90s. Yet those appeals for revolution have failed to engender the sort of dramatic social change that they often call for. Rage Against the Machine (RATM) listeners continue to do what you tell them, to paraphrase the lyric from which this essay draws its title; the consumers of rock would not appear to be bringing about a revolution anytime soon.

Despite the success and cultural impact of Dionysian rock music its calls for rebellion and revolution has found little material resonance in the listening population. How then should we account for rock's seeming inability to ferment political unrest? We must first identify those rock musicians and texts which make the most strident and transparent calls social change, and then we must clarify exactly what political action this music is advocating; calls for participation in parliamentary democracy are not the same, after all, as calls to challenge the established capitalist-democratic system. Given the ostensibly earnest nature of the musicians and assuming an understanding of the message by the audience it is then imperative to account for the failure of this music to topple, or even substantially threaten, the hegemony of the capitalist-democratic system. A Frankfurt School interpretation would attribute this lack of revolutionary effect to the mass-produced nature of the rock text and its implication within the capitalist relations of production. However this explanation reduces popular music's existence to that of a commodity form, and fails to address its existence as a group of polysemous texts that generate meanings and emotional resonance for audiences. In order to address this (intentional) oversight, rock will be considered in light of notions of performance and authenticity and its place within the broader political scheme of late capitalist-democracy. Performance is to be understood, not in the lay sense of a live rock concert being a "performance" of showmanship and musical ability, but rather as a "presentation of self", whereby individuals adopt certain behaviours, manners and attitudes in order to project a specific identity (Goffman 1990: 14-21). In particular, it is of interest that there can be a conflict between expression (of rebellion) and action (of rebellion) (Goffman 1990: 43). If rock music is, to some extent, a performance this would seem to present the possibility that its calls for rebellion and revolution could be implicated within this performance. This could, in turn, result in a situation where rebellion comes to be perceived only in the context of performance, rather than as a potential reality. Thus the integration of rock music within the democratic-capitalist system and the symbolic order of the everyday means that its calls for rebellion and revolution are interpreted as performance, rather than real criticisms of structures of power, and therefore these calls to resist and subvert authority are shorn of any material or historical consequences.

A relatively specific aspect of rock will be focussed upon in this essay; the term, "rock", will be employed to describe Dionysian popular music that is composed of those popular music texts that exhort the listener to subvert or resist socio-political norms, either tacitly (leading by example) or explicitly. Accordingly, many popular musicians normally understood to be rock musicians will inhabit that category only intermittently under this regime, while others may inhabit a Dionysian identity in a more permanent sense. Rebellion in this instant will be characterised as a refusal to accept the authority of prevailing socio-political systems; revolution as an attempt to overthrow these systems, be it slowly or quickly, violently or pacifistically. In the context of Rock music, rebellion and revolution can be seen in any expressions of dissatisfaction with the socio-political status quo, often rooted in the discourses of gender, ethnicity, race and class, and appeals to resist or change the existing political order.

Historically, rock has been linked with "antiestablishment activity" and considered to be "expressive of a broadly based and broadly felt sense of cultural and political opposition and renewal" (Shepard 2003: 70). While RATM's lyric, for which this essay is named, provides a succinct summary of rock music's antiauthoritarian attitude, by no stretch could they be considered the only popular music group who directly advocate for political action or criticise the powers-that-be. NOFX from the USA, Radiohead, Manic Street Preach-

ers and, more classically, the Sex Pistols from the UK, to some extent, Living End from Australia and Shihad from New Zealand could all be considered examples of rock bands who incorporate political, predominantly Marxist or Anarchist-inflected, critiques into their music, often drawing on leftish punk influences. Nor does this short list begin to account for the multitude of groups, many operating within the "pop punk" and "nu metal" (sic) genres, who have railed against "the system", "the establishment", or one of many other synonymous terms, in recent years.

This rebellion can take may forms; from extra-musical publicity stunts and appearances; to lyrical statements of dissent or unrest, and calls for uprising or revolution; to more formal musicological features such as beat and noise which can, and have, been used to subvert and attack social norms (Gracyk 1996: 99-148). This particular discussion will focus primarily on lyrical content, though it is acknowledged that an analytic strategy that separates lyrics and sonics is regarded by many as problematic (Kahn-Harris 2003: 83). However, due to the abstract and complex nature of socio-political criticism, it is almost mandatory that commentary on the topic be delivered via the precision of a linguistic, rather than musical, sign system, which is much better suited to the communication of complex meanings. That is to say, lyrics can be held forth as an (unambiguous) indicator of a song or a musician's explicit politics, where as guitar solos or bass lines cannot, because, though clearly Dionysian, they cannot bear the weight of the sophisticated meanings necessary for socio-political critique. While it is possible for a listener to avoid the extra-musical posturing of RATM, and to interpret the chaotic use of noise and distortion in a non-political context, it is almost impossible for them to misconstrue the howled repeated refrain of "Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me", with which the song ends as anything other than a direct challenge to authority. Different listeners will, of course, interpret this lyric in different ways, dependant on their listening context and habitus (Hall 1997: 29-32), but it is likely that all non-aberrant readings will at least recognise the implied rebelliousness, though it may be inflected with personal, social or political meanings. It can also be assumed that the more familiar a listener is with RATM and associated texts, the more likely they are to construe the lyric as a direct call for political disobedience, which acts as a recurring motif within the group's work. Nor is this explicit political engagement limited to RATM. As another example, in 1998, a Welsh Rock group, Manic Street Preachers (Manics) reached number one in the UK charts with their single, "If You Tolerate This Then Your Children Will Be Next" ("Manic Street Preachers" Wikipedia), the chorus of which was a repetition of the song's title. While the song technically refers to the Spanish Civil War, a more abstract reading is also possible where "This" refers to contemporary, rather than historical, political circumstances. This particular reading is reinforced by the accompanying music video, which presents an warped anomic vision of a family picnic, the symbol of banal social norms par excellence, with the family replaced by eerie faceless ciphers.

The "politics" advocated for by these musicians should not be considered simply congruent with customary party politics, but rather more representative of what Grossberg labels "critical/oppositional" rock (Grossberg 1997: 48). Although many musicians do enter the political arena to advocate for particular political parties or policies, for example Tony Blair and the Britpop groups (Harris 2003: xiii-xxii), musicians such as RATM and the Manics operate at a considerable distance from mainstream politics and are more prone to sweeping criticisms than directed attacks on specific political figures or parties (the notable exception is, of course, George W. Bush, who has been openly denounced by many musicians). In this instance, "politics" refers not to participation in the electoral process, but rather to denouncements of the entire capitalist-democratic political system and process; often in the form of calls to resist, denounce or overthrow a hierarchal system which oppresses and controls the masses - a position that draws heavily on Marxist or Anarchic rhetoric. The "system" in this instance is taken to be alternatingly: alienating, capitalist, materialistic, militaristic, unjust, consumerist and oppressive. Therefore, political rock can be defined as popular music which encourages listeners to regard the current economic-political system as possessing any or all of those features listed above; and, either explicitly or by implication, encourages its listeners to subvert, or resist the capitalist-democratic system through actions above and beyond those normally permitted under the Western democratic process. Given that the production, distribution and consumption of popular music is almost entirely reliant upon contemporary capitalist relations of production and consumption (Gracyk 1996: 178-9), this would appear to be a problematically self-defeating stance. Without the capitalist system that is denounced by many of these politicised rock groups, popular music, as it is currently understood, could simply not exist.

Many critics have addressed this apparent contradiction by attempting to locate it within a temporal context; arguing something along the lines of, "Whether or not it has become 'establishment culture,' it does seem that rock is losing its power to encapsulate and articulate resistance and opposition" (Grossberg 1992: 9). Many histories of rock music echo this idea, that rock was once capable of voicing a legitimate call for rebellion, but has now surrendered any real ability to offer political or social criticism as a consequence of commercialisation and cooption (Eyerman and Jamison 1995 451-2, Garafalo 2002: 365-77). This narrative is repeated on a micro-scale every time a group or musician is accused of 'selling out', where by musicians are thought to lose their ability to offer oppositional

political comment, as well as their artistic authenticity, once they attain a popular following or financial success. Gracyk, however, gives us grounds to reject this narrative, pointing out that "Dionysian authenticity" functions, sometimes consciously, as a selling point as well as a "standard for artistic success" (Gracyk 1996: 183). Groups such as Manics and RATM have attained popularity because of their anti-authoritarian stances, not in spite of them. Therefore, as their success has arisen, in part, as a result of their politicised music it would seem illogical for the groups to discontinue their criticisms of existing power structures and relations after achieving popular success. Indeed it is difficult to determine any discernible softening in the political stance, either lyrically or extra-musically, of either band's output following their mainstream successes; in 2001 the Manics became the first Western rock band to play in Cuba ("Manic Street Preachers" Wikipedia), just a year after their latest single had topped the UK charts. Yet the chart-topping success of these avowedly political artists did not translate, in these instances, into any perceivable change in their politics of their mass, mainstream audiences – "The political activism of many rock performers [has] had little impact on people's willingness or desire to actively participate in political struggle or even to voice controversial oppositional opinions" (Grossberg 1992: 168). While it may be a little premature, not to say narrow-minded, to adopt this view as an absolute - after all who is to say that Amnesty-sponsored concerts or Band Aid-style events do not raise general awareness of particular issues - it clearly applies in this situation; when a hit single calls for wanton acts of civil disobedience, the fans do not man the barricades. This poses a seeming paradox; the widespread acceptance of rock's rebellion seems to have robbed it of any widespread influence.

One potential explanation, drawing on the work of the Frankfurt school, is that as a musician's work becomes more popular it ceases to be consumed as a work of creativity and meaning, and instead becomes implicated in the dominant systems as a commodity, stripping it of its radical political potential. Gracyk attributes arguments, such as these, which seek to "separate artistry and commercial entertainment in order to deny the aesthetic merits of the later" (1996: 151), to the continued influence of the early cultural critic, Theodor Adorno and his ilk. Adorno argued that popular music could be distinguished from serious music through its extensive use of standardisation, which conditioned the audience into "a system of response mechanisms wholly antagonistic to the idea of individuality in a free liberal society" (2000: 200-1). Any sense of authentic response, be it tears or the expression of political unrest, was simply a moment of catharsis: "Music that permits its listeners the confession of their unhappiness reconciles them, by means of this 'release', to their social dependence" (Adorno 2000: 208). Thus popular music, political rock included, becomes nothing more than a "substitute for confrontation with our social reality" (Gracyk 1996: 157). However, while this argument does provides a possible explanation for the failure of rock's call for revolution - the repetitive standardisation of popular music engenders only passive consumption, which stifles any potentially rebellious or subversive content - it fails to account for the real listening practices of rock audiences: what Finnegan calls "the complex ways fans experience the music: their shared enthusiasms, experiential conventions in 'becoming-a-fan' narratives, [and] sense of personal connection" (Finnegan 2003: 185). Adorno's monolithic construction of the music industry contradicts the reality that the meanings of songs and lyrics are interpreted differently by different audiences in different contexts (Gracyk 1996: 167). Although the commodity form of popular music is still important, it is only part of a wider framework of production, consumption and interpretation, as Gracyk argues, "Social context, including both the means of production and access to music, is the major factor determining both the music's significance and the audience's response" (1996: 155).

When we consider the social context of political rock it would not be amiss to consider the political aspects of the social context as particularly relevant. After all, it is often percieved political injustices perpetrated within society by the capitalist system that provide the apparent inspiration for politicised rock groups. If we were to take the lyrics from Radiohead's "No Surprises", "Bring down the government, they don't, they don't speak for us", as a representative example, it would appear that the current political system is entirely at odds with politicised music. Those in a position of authority and control would therefore be expected to be extremely intolerant and oppositional towards musicians and fans of politicised music. A quick examination shows that this is hardly the case though, with many politicised bands, including Radiohead, finding mainstream success and their music being used in advertisements, movies and video games. Thomas Frank proposes a solution to this seeming contradiction, arguing that "corporate America is not an oppressor but a … facilitator of carnival, our slang-speaking partner in the quest for that ever-more apocalyptic orgasm." (1997b: 319). And while Frank focuses on the United States in particular, there is no reason to suppose that his argument cannot be extrapolated to include the commercial cultures of the entire Anglophone world. The basic thrust of his argument is that the capitalist system, rather than opposing calls for revolution, actively encourages critique and comment because:

> *[With] 'rebellion,' two of late capitalism's great problems could easily be met: obsolescence found a new and convincing language, and citizens could symbolically resolve the contradiction between their role as consumers and*

> *their role as producers… a cultural perpetual motion machine in which disgust with the falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppressions of consumer society could be enlisted to drive the ever-accelerating wheels of consumption. (Frank 1997a: 31)*

Working within the model implied above, it would therefore appear to be in the capitalist systems' best interest to foster, rather than oppose, demands for revolution, because constant calls to overturn the old help reinforce the planned obsolescence of consumer goods that drives the late capitalist economy. This presents a possible explanation for the why the mass media would disseminate apparently revolutionary and subversive messages, such as the 1996 Coca-Cola advertisement that declared, "The CYBERNAUT [computer] generation is intrinsically anarchistic, endlessly antiauthoritarian and hates corporate America" (qtd. in Frank 1997a: 133). These messages are disseminated because the revolution stimulates consumer demand.

This process has direct parallels within political rock, which must, like commodity goods, constantly update itself in order to retain its appeal. The difference is that where as in the case of consumer goods this need to update arises as a result of the cycling of fashions, in rock this arises from the contradiction between its need for authenticity and its inescapable implication within the capitalist economy. The discourse of Rock ensures that Rock music must constantly appeal to notions of authenticity as markers of quality; an authenticity that in the case of politicised rock takes the form of political stands and revolutionary rhetoric. Grossberg characterises this drive for authenticity as rock's requirement to construct itself as outside of everyday existence, "Rock … attacked, or at least attempted to transcend, its own everyday life … by appropriating the images and sounds of an authenticity constituted outside of, and in part by the very absence of, everyday life" (1992: 150-1). However, by virtue of its implication within the contemporary economic and political milieu, rock is always tied back to commodity capitalism and therefore cannot transcend its everyday economic realities. Thus politicised rock acts to inadvertently transfer the ideas of revolution and rebellion - concepts that give rise to images and sounds that are quite clearly outside of the everyday life of rock music consumers in the Western world, and therefore potential sites of authenticity - into the symbolic order of the everyday. This process depoliticises ideas of rebellion, rendering them effectively inauthentic, and therefore leaving rock with further need to demonstrate its authenticity through the incorporation of more extreme expressions of antiauthoritarian sentiment and revolution:

> *Rock must constantly change to survive; it must seek to reproduce its authenticity in new forms, in new places, in new alliances. It must constantly move from one centre to another, transforming what had been authentic into the inauthentic, in order to constantly projects its claim to authenticity. (Grossberg 1992: 209)*

According to this formulation, politicised rock debases the revolutionary political views it believes it is propagating by appropriating them into the sphere of the everyday and thus rendering them inauthentic. When criticisms of worker alienation and military build-up appear alongside invocations of love and dancing on the Top 40, or simply within the wider field of popular music, there is a potential that the revolutionary claims will becomes just another aspect of the performance.

However it does not follow that a performed rebellion is necessarily an inauthentic rebellion. As argued earlier, the distinction between authentic and inauthentic in the context of rock is false and serves only to "imprison and perplex" discussions regarding rock (Gracyk 1996: 183). "Authentic" rebellion is a selling point in rock, and there is no reason to suppose that success leads necessarily to artistic or political compromise or renders this rebellion any less authentic. Rather it is the authenticity of these rebellions that, ironically, makes them so counter-revolutionary. As Warren Susman points out, American history is replete with examples of revolutionary intentions leading to conservative consequences as a result of the radical tradition's grounding in myth, rather than history (2003: 64-9). In many instances, the reasons given for political rock's rebellion are in line with corporate marketing strategies, or in support of causes, which already have the (superficial) backing of the system. Grossberg's examples of rock festivals supporting fashionable causes illustrates this point – "While such events may serve a valuable education and public relations function, the causes often guarantee the audience's sympathy and agreement: it is hard to be for torture, starvation or apartheid" (1992: 168). By invoking rebellion and political criticism in the name of already popularly supported causes, those musicians ensure that rebellion becomes seen as an authorised action, one that can be carried out within the parameters of a democratic late capitalist society. This should not be taken to say that the call for revolution is in anyway inauthentic, and this not mean to second-guess the intentions of the musicians or their listeners. However, what this does mean is that potentially revolutionary energies become channelled towards socially constructed strawmen, as Herbert Marcuse writes, "what had been part of the permanence of life, now becomes a concert, a festival, a disc in the making… And as this music loses its radical impact, it tends to massification: the listeners and co-performers in the audience are masses streaming to a spectacle, a performance" (1972: 115) Rebellion takes on, in his words, an "aesthetic form" (Marcuse 1972: 114), and becomes something to be performed and consumed

as part of the symbolic order, rather than being carried out in a material or historical sense.

This formulation runs counter to the argument advanced by Eyerman and Jamison, who assert that popular music within the context of the USA in the 1960s "provided a sense of identification as well as rallying strength to resist authority" (1995: 457) and thus did matter in a historical sense. In their account, the folk revival was central to, and essential for, the success of the various social movements that were active at the time. Thus the performance of rebellion is argued to have supported a legitimate political movement with material political goals, and thus existed as more than simply an empty performance. Two points must be noted in respect to this: firstly that this relies upon a somewhat naïve and under-theorised notion of popular music, as pointed out by Frith (1999: 579) and Street (2000: 258); and secondly, that the movements referred to, for the most part, failed to enact any major long-term change in the capitalist-democratic system; their impact was limited, primarily, to the symbolic order. Eyerman and Jamison admit as much, noting that the "[oppositional consciousness] turned out, however, to be a consciousness that was extremely difficult to transform into effective political practice; its larger impact … was instead to be on the mores and values of popular culture." Despite their insistence that popular culture can influence social movements, even Eyerman and Jamison concede that the actual political outcomes are limited at best. This would then appear to reinforce, rather than refute, the current argument; that politicised-rock, despite its calls for rebellion, could not, and can not, help but fail to have any real impact beyond that of performance and the symbolic. In these circumstances criticism of authority becomes an end in itself, an end that is implicated within the system it criticizes, and that sees the promulgation of revolutionary messages as a performance necessary for retaining a particular brand of rock authenticity. Consequently, rock's call to rebel against authority leads only to a performed revolution; and while this still may be authentic and well intentioned, it is effectively powerless, because it lacks any progressive or transgressive purpose outside the symbolic. Performed revolution becomes concerned with the accumulation and consumption of texts that operate within the discourse of revolution, rather than with the enactment of political change. Thus it can be argued that while political rock does authentically engage with a critical view of the social and economic system, it does so only within the barriers set by that system. No real boundaries are crossed; and by constructing what they say as revolutionary, politicised rock lyrics potentially distract from unauthorised, more transgressive or subversive, political critique. The impetus placed on rock to produce a Dionysian persona has the side effect that any political or revolutionary stance produced almost immediately becomes rock-as-usual, safely ensconced within the realm of the everyday. Gracyk's summary of the overall effect is thus not very confident of the revolutionary potential of rock music:

> *Rock, infused with the mythology of rebellion, would seem to attract an audience who cannot actually rebel and overthrow the system. We are to conclude that middle-class white teens are attracted to counterculture music … because it openly speaks of an oppressive system that they dare not confront; the temporary release comes from its frank admission that contemporary life sucks. (1996: 158)*

This would seem to be an awfully negative prognosis for anyone who regards rock as a potential vehicle for the revolutionary, or even politically critical, ideas with which it has been historically associated. Is there, then, any foreseeable way in which rock could produce a meaningful political critique? Fortunately, yes. The limitations previously discussed have all arisen as a result of rock music's inability to critique its own existence as a commodity form that circulates within a dynamic socio-political context. However, it is conceivable that if political rock musicians were to offer a deconstruction of the rules and systems of the rock industry that made explicit the role those systems played in disempowering and normalising calls for rebellion, this would serve to reposition further political claims beyond mere performance. If a rock song were to able to offer a critique of both its own Dionysian conventions and its commodity form, this could create the conditions for political comment that acknowledged, and in doing so moved beyond, the limits enforced by the field of popular music. It does not follow that simply by making evident the conditions of its own production, a rock text automatically becomes a political text capable of bringing about rebellion and revolution, far from it. But such deconstruction is a necessary prior condition to the success of a politicised text, without it the revolution becomes simply revolution-as-performance. In order to demonstrate how such a text might function, I would propose that the Electric Six's song "Rock and Roll Evacuation" meets these criteria of political engagement and self-reflexive awareness. Treading the thin postmodern line between parody and celebration the lyrics of "Rock and Roll Evacuation" simultaneously subvert the Dionysian rock paradigm and offer a political comment on militaristic society in the lines – "We are disposable creations, they're throwing us away/ Ignoring everything that we do and everything that we say/ Mr President, make a lot of money sending people you don't know to Iraq/ Mr President, I don't like you. You don't know how to rock!" The political utility of this strategy was noted by at least one reviewer; Mike Barthel of the Village Voice referred to these lines as "Those 12 seconds [are] the best political music ever made, because they acknowledge the genre's limitations: In rock, we condemn people for not rocking, and indeed,

the president does not rock" (2006).

Historically, the Dionysian sensibility has been central to the philosophy of rock music; more recently, it has taken the form of explicit political critiques and calls to subvert and rebel against the political and economic system of late capitalist-democracy. It is possible, to some extent, to gauge the political engagement of a band through recourse to their lyrics, the musical space most conducive to unambiguous communication of abstract ideas. However, the calls to revolution prevalent in the lyrics of several charting groups do not appears to have had any real effect upon the political engagement and activity of their listeners. Paradoxically, the more popular that a political band becomes, the less clout their politics appears to have. A Frankfurt School interpretation would attribute this to overdetermining commodity form through which rock music circulates, but this fails to account for the polysemous nature of the rock text and the active nature of the audience. An alternate explanation, drawing on the work of Thomas Frank, is that rock fails to secure its rebellion, because its seemingly subversive comments simply reflect the prevailing social and political climate. This reduces rock's political critique to the level of performance that serves to disempower rather than propagate more relevant political messages. Political comment becomes simply an extension of swaggering rock attitude. That is, except in those the rare occasions where political rock music critiques its own limitations as well as those of contemporary political milieu, which acts to simultaneously denaturalise the prevailing ideologies of both rock music and late capitalist society. Thus rock music still retains its potential to tear down society, though it just might have to tear itself down along the way.

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