Rock ’n’ Roll Experiences in Middle Age

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Although many observers still assume that rock ’n’ roll is essentially a feature of youth culture, the author argues that it is a key feature of adult culture and a primary source of everyday meanings for the first generation raised on it. The concept of the existential self, which focuses on the situational and evolving aspects of individuality in a rapidly changing social world, informs several qualitative studies to produce the following ways to characterize personal rock ’n’ roll experiences: the e-self, the self as lover, the self as parent, the self as believer, and the self as political actor.

Keywords: rock music; self; adults

The social science literature traditionally focuses on popular music experiences among young audiences. Specifically, the focus is on the rock ’n’ roll idiom as a feature of adolescent culture and, therefore, of teenagers’ everyday life experience. As Simon Frith (1981) noted in his famous sociological text, Sound Effects, rock ’n’ roll music has been fundamental to the experience of growing up ever since the end of World War II. Similarly, sociologists have demonstrated increasing interest in rock ’n’ roll music as an indicator of dramatic changes occurring in the social and cultural worlds of teenagers. We can trace this interest at least as far back as David Riesman’s (1950) classic examination of the emergence of the other-directed personality in post–World War II American society. The new middle class was marked by a weakening of parental control, a preoccupation with consumption, and a shift in the meaning of leisure resulting in the masses’—the lonely crowd—desperately trying to have fun. The time was ripe for the emergence of a youth culture defined by what has come to be known as rock ’n’ roll music.

The rock ’n’ roll industry continues to expand dramatically—beyond multibillion dollar annual sales, globalization, CDs, MP3 technology, and the Internet. Yet lay and scholarly observers have generally ignored or underplayed an important element of social and cultural change: rock ’n’ roll is no longer...

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limited to, nor solely the possession of, teenagers. The original generation of rock ’n’ rollers—the baby boomers—are now parents and in some cases, grandparents. The music and musical culture they grew up with has stayed with them, becoming the soundtrack of American culture.

I define rock ’n’ roll music very broadly as popular music that (a) is created for and marketed toward young people or people who consume music according to youthful tastes and values, (b) is primarily guitar driven and amplified, (c) has its musicological origins in African American musical styles, (d) is usually danceable, and (e) sounds best when played or performed loudly (Kotarba, 1994a). I define rock ’n’ roll broadly to include all varieties of pop music that have evolved from it (e.g., heavy metal, pop, New Age, Christian pop). All told, rock ’n’ roll music is arguably the preeminent form of popular music in our society.

The purpose of this article is to survey the many ways rock ’n’ roll pervades the everyday lives of adults in American society. In commonsense terms, I examine what happened to the first, complete generation of rock ’n’ roll fans—the baby boomer generation now in late middle age. I argue that rock ’n’ roll music continues to serve as a critical meaning resource for its adult fans as they continuously experience the becoming-of-self throughout life.

SOCILOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ROCK ’N’ ROLL

Four moments in the sociological analysis of rock ’n’ roll closely parallel the historical development of rock ’n’ roll itself during the past 50 years. I briefly trace these four moments to show their relevance to understanding adult experiences of this phenomenon.¹

The first moment of rock ’n’ roll occurred during the 1950s, when the idea of teenagers emerged within general American culture and scholarly observers forged the concept of youth culture to explain this strange yet wondrous new cohort. Whereas it is clear that cultural and musicological roots of rock ’n’ roll can be traced back at least several decades (Friedlander, 1996), these roots were post–World War II. The sociologist James Coleman (1961) conceptualized rock ’n’ roll music as a key feature of this youth culture. He argued that teenagers used popular music to stratify, organize, and manage each other and that rock ’n’ roll was a tool of working-class kids. When considering adult experiences, the concept of youth culture may be useful to the degree that its substantive contents and values are available to adults today as the making of youthful styles to apply to adult circumstances.

The second moment of rock ’n’ roll occurred during the late 1960s and 1970s. Rock ’n’ roll music grew to become a cultural entity much greater than merely the beat for sock hops or the drive-in. It took on broader political implications through its links to the civil rights and antiwar movements. In the second
moment, sociologists such as Frith (1981) and George Lewis (1983) conceptualized rock ’n’ roll as popular culture—the product of the popular culture industry in capitalistic society. They also acknowledged the fact that the rock ’n’ roll audience was much more diverse than the notion of youth implies. Experientially, there were White, Black, gay, men’s, and women’s rock ’n’ roll(s) and subsequently, markets. Viewing rock ’n’ roll music among adults as popular culture may be useful to the degree that the adult culture of rock ’n’ roll reflects similar diversity.

The third moment of rock ’n’ roll occurred in the 1970s and 1980s when rock ’n’ roll lost some of its critical appeal and became increasingly entrenched in and controlled by the entertainment industry. The ensuing revolt against corporate rock ’n’ roll, especially in terms of the new wave and punk movements in England, led British scholars such as Dick Hebdige (1979) and others from the Birmingham school to conceptualize rock ’n’ roll as subculture. Subcultural theory denotes marginality and resistance to an authority, hegemonic or otherwise. The image of Bill Clinton jamming on a saxophone at an inauguration party makes the existence of meaningful resistance among adult rock ’n’ rollers problematic.

The fourth moment of rock ’n’ roll began in the 1980s and 1990s, when sociologists joined other scholarly observers to conceptualize rock ’n’ roll simply as culture (e.g., Kaplan, 1987). They saw rock ’n’ roll as one feature of a postindustrial or postmodern culture undergoing radical transformation. The generational boundaries that so obviously delineated youth from their parents were cracking. Lawrence Grossberg (1992), for example, proclaimed the death of rock ’n’ roll insofar as it no longer functions to empower teenagers by differentiating them from their parents and other adults. By the 1990s, cross-generational pop music (e.g., Billy Joel, Madonna) that could be enjoyed by everyone had started to supplant rock ’n’ roll as the dominant soundtrack in American culture, whereas rap music has taken over much of rock ’n’ roll’s political role. Yet rock ’n’ roll has not simply died. Rock ’n’ roll acts of an earlier era continue to draw loyal audiences, whereas contemporary rock ’n’ roll has dissolved into the pastiche of popular music that results in White rappers such as Eminem, rock and rapper groups such as Limp Bizkit, and pop acts such as Britney Spears and her myriad of clones. Why, then, have so many adults not outgrown rock ’n’ roll?

**THE BECOMING-OF-SELF**

The existential sociological concept of the becoming-of-self is a useful guide in seeking the sociological answers to this question. Existential social thought views the self “as a unique experience of being within the context of contemporary social conditions, an experience most notably marked by an incessant sense of becoming and an active participation in social change” (Kotarba, 1984, p. 3).
The incessant sense of becoming is a reflection of the contemporary need for the individual to be prepared to reshape meanings of self in response to the dictates of a rapidly changing social world. The well-integrated self accepts the reality of change and welcomes new ideas, new experiences, and reformulations of old ideas and experiences that help one adapt to change (Kotarba, 1987).

The idea of becoming is one of the most important ideas in existentialist thought across disciplines because it places responsibility for fashioning a self on the individual. Whereas Jean-Paul Sartre (1945) argued dramatically that we are condemned to be free and to choose who we are to become, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) insisted more moderately and sociologically that we must ground our becoming-of-self in the real world to cope effectively with it. Thus, an effective strategy for becoming begins with a foundation of personal experience and the constraints of social structure, while evolving in terms of the resources presented by culture. I argue that middle-aged Americans work with a self built to some degree on the meanings provided by the rock ’n’ roll idiom, and they continue to nurture the self within the ever-present cultural context of rock ’n’ roll.

Douglas (1984) noted that there are, in fact, two analytically distinct stages of becoming-of-self with which the modern actor contends. The first is the need to eliminate or control threats to the basic security of self (e.g., meaninglessness, isolation from others, shame, death). Although existential psychotherapists such as Yalom (1980) have argued that chronic insecurity—or neurosis—is pervasive in our society, Douglas argued sociologically that it is more common for the sense of security to vary biographically, situationally, and developmentally. In general, adults try to shape everyday life experiences to avoid basic threats to the self. Basic threats to the adult self in our society would include divorce, the loss of a job, the loss of children (e.g., the empty-nest syndrome), illness, disability, and poverty. The second stage of becoming-of-self involves growth of the sense of self. Growth occurs when the individual seeks new experiences as media for innovative and potentially rewarding meanings for self (Kotarba, 1987). It is through growth, or self-actualization as it is often referred to today, that life becomes rich, rewarding, full, and manageable.

Accordingly, adult fans nurture their interest in and experience with rock ’n’ roll music for two reasons. On one hand, keeping up with the music and the culture that were so important to them when growing up helps them maintain continuity with the past and, thus, solidify the sense of self security. On the other hand, working hard to keep rock ’n’ roll current and relevant to their lives helps adults grow as parents, as spiritual beings, and as friends.

The concept of the existential self tells us that the experience of individuality is never complete; the answer to the question Who am I? is always tentative. In the postmodern world, the mass media—including popular music—serve as increasingly important audiences to the self. The self is situational and mutable (Zurcher, 1977). One can be various selves as the fast-paced, ever-changing, uncertain postmodern society requires. In the remainder of this article, I provide
a working inventory of the various adult experiences of self—common in everyday life—predicated by or embedded in the rock ‘n’ roll idiom.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on several studies of popular music conducted during the course of 15 years. These studies have used a range of symbolic interactionist-inspired, qualitative methods—including conversational interviews with artists, fans, and others—participant observation of rock ‘n’ roll concerts and events, the analysis of popular music materials and documents, and the active production of rock ‘n’ roll events.

I refer to my style of research on this topic as ethnographic tourism (Kotarba, 1994b). It is ethnographic to the degree that it attempts to describe rock ‘n’ roll phenomena in terms of the natural situations in which they occur and in terms of the language, feelings, and perceptions of the individuals who experience them. This research can be viewed metaphorically as tourism because it is an attempt to approach rock ‘n’ roll phenomena with wonder and discovery. This analytical distancing of researcher from phenomena is important because the author is a member of the population in question and as a typical rock ‘n’ roller, could be too easily tempted to claim experience with and expertise in rock ‘n’ roll.

THE E-SELF

As the rock ‘n’ roll fan ages, many of the attractive aspects of the earlier self are more difficult to maintain. There is a tendency for youthfulness, energy, risk taking, appearance, sensuality, and other aspects of the adolescent or young-adult self to become either less available or less desirable. Our culture does, however, provide a self-identity that resonates with the affluence of middle age, as well as with the continuing need to establish status/self-esteem. The e-self refers to an experience of individuality in which the affective and philosophical self-resources of rock ‘n’ roll media are displaced or at least supplemented by the increasingly technological and commodified aspects of the media. For the middle-aged fan, what you play your music on can be at least as, if not more, important than what you play.

Middle age results in less concert attendance and more music experience in the comfort of home, automobile, and for the energetic, on the jogging trail. A content analysis of an issue of Wired (2004), a magazine that is geared toward the affluent and technologically interested middle-aged person, discloses the strategy of marketing rock ‘n’ roll to its audience. There are ads for sophisticated cell phones that allow the consumer to “keep rockin’ with your favorite MP3s.” The promotion for “THEWIREDAUCTION” on eBay, which benefits a children’s foundation, includes a “limited edition series precision bass guitar signed
by Sting,” among other high-end music items. The ad for the Bose Music intelligent playback system highlights “its unique ability to listen to the music you play and learn your preferences based on your likes, dislikes, or even your mood at the moment.” There are numerous ads for satellite radio systems and the luxury sport-utility vehicles that include them as standard equipment.

Such marketing sometimes resonates with the adults it targets. George is a 51-year-old Anglo electrical engineer who just installed a satellite radio system in his Lexus sedan. He sees two benefits of his musical purchase: “I don’t have to mess with CDs or radio anymore. I get to play only the music I like to hear.... There are stations dedicated just to ’80s heavy metal. Cool.” George has effectively eliminated the hassles of concert crowds and debates about musical tastes with peers. High technology puts his e-self in control of his musical environment. George can experience his music with the aura of cultural independence that affluent adults seek.

**THE SELF AS LOVER**

A significant aspect of the continuous popularity of rock ’n’ roll music is its use in helping make sense of others, especially in intimate relationships. Numerous observers have correctly identified the sexist messages present in rock ’n’ roll (e.g., McRobbie, 1978). A postmodern existentialist view, however, highlights the fact that rock ’n’ roll music displays an open-ended horizon of meaning for its audiences. What a rock ’n’ roll music performance means is largely a function of the situation in which it is experienced and the particular self-needs of the audience member (Kotarba, 1994a). As time passes, the rock ’n’ roll audience matures, biographies evolve, men’s and women’s relationships change, popular music commodities come and go, cultural themes available through the media advance, and we would expect the actual lived experience of popular music to change.

A particular self-need of the mature rock ’n’ roll fan is to interpret romantic phenomena. This can happen two ways. First, fans can (re)interpret music to fit romantic needs. In my autobiographical writing as a rock ’n’ roll fan (Kotarba, 1997), I described the way I used Dion’s “Runaround Sue” to account for the way a girl back in eighth grade rejected my very timid show of affection in favor of those of an older boy. Like the Sue in the song, my Sue was a “bad” girl and I was merely a victim of her wiles. Twenty-five years later, at a class reunion, I used the same song as the basis for a conversation with the same Sue. We laughed about the silliness of those grammar school days, but my heartbeat jumped a bit when she admitted that she really did like me back then but was too shy to tell me!

Second, fans can gravitate toward music that can be perceived as romantic. Autobiographically, “Smokey” Robinson and the Miracles’ “Tracks of My Tears” was a constant play on my 45 record player in 1965 when it put
comforting words to yet another heartbreak in my life. My guess is that I would not have been drawn as much to this new record if I did not have a personal need for its plaintive prose. In general, fans gravitate toward music that fits their everyday life concerns.

Baby boomers use rock ‘n’ roll materials for a range of romantic purposes. They use music (e.g., CDs) as birthday and Christmas gifts. They use music to help them appreciate other media such as films and television. One of the more interesting romantic uses of rock ‘n’ roll music is the our-song phenomenon, where a musical performance serves to define a relationship. Our-songs are clearly not limited to baby boomers. Preadolescents, for example, commonly choose songs that remind them of a boy or a girl but are often too shy to disclose this fact to the other!

For mature rock ‘n’ roll fans, the our-song can function at least two ways. First, it provides meaning for benchmark events in the relationship. Shirley is a 52-year-old, Latina sales person who is a big Los Lobos fan. She builds anniversary activities around one particular song she and her husband both enjoy:

We fell in love with “Nadie Quiere Sufrir” at a Los Lobos concert when we were still just dating. It is a very pretty waltz that actually comes from an Edith Piaf song. . . . I make sure the CD [with the song] is in the car when we drive to [our anniversary] dinner. He bought me the CD for our anniversary a few years ago. . . . Oh, I guess it just makes us feel young again.

Second, the our-song can help the person feel like a lover. As couples age and perhaps find themselves feeling and acting less romantic with time, the our-song can function as a quick fix. Rob is a 58-year-old, Anglo executive who has maintained a serious relationship with Tommy, a 47-year-old artist, for about 15 years. Their song is Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody”:

There will never be another Freddie Mercury. It was really special to have our own gay rock icon. . . . I surprise Tommy by playing “Bohemian Rhapsody” now and again. Tommy is still thrilled that I remember it. . . . Why? Well, it’s one of those songs that make you feel good, to feel that you can be gay and a rocker at the same time. . . . I like doing things for Tommy. We are just so busy with our careers, ’makes us feel like an old married couple!

Needless to say, the rock ‘n’ roll industry is aware of the market here for its goods and services. One of the more recent examples is the advent and growing popularity of rock ‘n’ roll cruises. Carnival Cruise Lines offered the following “Rock ‘n’ Roll Cruise Vacation” in an online ad:

What could be cooler than a seven-day Caribbean cruise with legendary big-hair 1970s/80s rockers Journey, Styx and REO Speedwagon? Well . . . we’ll reserve comment. But, if your idea of a totally awesome vacation is a seven-day cruise with legendary big-hair 1970s/80s rockers Journey, Styx and REO Speedwagon, you’re in luck. (Rock ‘n’ Roll Holiday Escape, 2004)
THE SELF AS PARENT

The impact of rock 'n' roll on one's self as parent is possibly the most pervasive aspect of the personal rock 'n' roll experience. Baby boomers grew up experiencing music as a major medium for communicating with parents. Managing music illustrates one's skill at parenting, as well as one's style of parenting.

Standard scholarly and journalistic wisdom on rock 'n' roll argues that it has functioned largely to help establish adolescence as a distinct stage in the life cycle while serving as a weapon in conflicts between adults and adolescents. The mass media have long contributed to this overstated, overromanticized view of rock 'n' roll and adolescence. The rebellious imagery of Elvis Presley, for example, portrays a prevailing cultural myth that links rock 'n' roll with youthful rebellion, unbridled sexuality, cross-ethnic intimacy, and a wide range of delinquent activities (Garafo, 2002). The film Footloose (Ross, 1984) portrays the plausible scenario in which fundamentally conservative, small-town adults view rock 'n' roll as an evil influence on their teenagers. Rock 'n' roll is portrayed in the film as the gauntlet that forces teenagers to choose between good and evil by choosing their parents or dancing.

These cultural images support an ideological vision of youth culture that overemphasizes the independence and rebellion of teenagers. A postmodernist existentialist reading of this history finds much more diversity within youth culture (Kotarba, 2002a). The kids on the American Bandstand television show in the 1950s and early 1960s were all-American kids. They dressed modestly and neatly. They all chewed Beechnut gum, provided by the sponsor of the program. And above all, they were extremely well behaved. The boys and girls, especially the “regulars,” tended to match up as boyfriends and girlfriends, not as potentially promiscuous dates and mates. American Bandstand probably represented many teenagers in American society at that time. And teenagers could not participate in activities like American Bandstand without the approval, if not support, of their parents. After all, someone had to drive the kids to the studio or at least give them permission and money to take the bus there, just as someone had to provide the television and permit watching American Bandstand at home.

Baby boomers appear more likely to be cautious supporters of their children’s rock ‘n’ roll activities than outright critics. This somewhat passive if not permissive style of parenting is not new to baby boomers; in fact, they learned it from their parents. For every Elvis Presley fan in the 1950s and 1960s whose parents threatened disowning, there was an American Bandstand fan whose parent (mom?) was likely to sit next to her in front of the TV and watch Fabian and Frankie Avalon make all the girls sigh (Stuessy & Lipscomb, 1999).

There is a greater tendency among parents—apparently across ethnic groups and social classes—to manage rock ‘n’ roll as though their teenagers are children who need to be nurtured and protected rather than as adolescents who must be controlled, sanctioned, and feared. At a recent Metallica concert in Houston,
for example, numerous teenagers indicated that their parents did not approve of heavy metal music for various reasons (e.g., volume, distortion, immorality, potential affiliation with evils such as satanism). Yet these same parents carpooled their teenagers and friends to the Astrodome on a school day and in most cases, bought or provided the money for tickets. A similar situation exists among African American and Hispanic parents in terms of the popularity of rap music among their teenagers (Kotarba, 1994b). Mass media–generated images of obstinate if not rebellious youth generally ignore the reflexive relationship between teenagers and their parents. As long as teenagers live at home as legal, financial, and moral dependents—that is, as children—their parents provide the resources for creating rock 'n' roll identities (e.g., allowances, free time, and fashionable hip-hop clothing). Parents then respond to the identities they helped create by controlling, criticizing, sanctioning, and punishing their teenagers for living out their rock 'n' roll–inspired identities—responding to them as if they were autonomous, responsible adults.

Baby boomer parents often share their music with their children. Sociologically, much of this sharing is functional and positive: Rock 'n' roll helps integrate families. Rock 'n' roll has always served as a special commonality between mothers and daughters. They shared Elvis Presley in the 1950s, the Beatles in the 1960s, and Neil Diamond in the 1970s. In the feminist era of the 1980s and 1990s, however, the object of sharing shifted to other women. Madonna is the case in point.

Madonna represents a rock 'n' roll phenomenon that is attractive to both mothers and daughters. Madonna is a multifaceted star whose appeal rests on lifestyle, clothing style, and attitude as well as musical performance. During the Houston stop on the “Like a Virgin” tour, I interviewed a number of mother-daughter pairs who attended. The pairs typically were dressed alike, in outfits such as black bustier and short black skirts, with matching jewelry. During the interviews, they talked about Madonna in similar ways and appeared more like friends than family. In virtually all cases, they noted a distinct lack of true appreciation of Madonna by the men in their lives (e.g., fathers, husbands, brothers, and boyfriends who may look at Madonna and see only a sex object). And in most cases, the mothers indicated that Madonna served to bring them closer to their daughters. A currently fashionable style of music shared by mothers and daughters is the boy group: 'N Sync, Backstreet Boys, O Town, and so forth. Fathers and sons also use rock 'n' roll music to bond, but in different ways than one might expect. Fathers who learned to play guitar in the 1960s or 1970s teach their sons how to play. Sharing music is difficult, as the younger generation today continues the traditional ideological belief that their music is better than that of their parents. Fathers and sons are considerably more vehement than women in their allegiance to their generation’s music. During our study of the rave phenomenon in Houston (Kotarba, 1993, 2003), we heard one 16-year-old boy exclaim, “I hate my dad’s music. He listens to that old shit, like Led Zeppelin.” On the other hand, recent trends such as rave (i.e., dance parties held in
clandestine locations to the beat of loud synthesized music) display a renaissance of the 1960s counterculture. Psychedelia is “in,” for example, with LSD as the drug of choice and lighting provided by mood lamps. Teenagers see rave as a way of retrieving the romance and simplicity of the 1960s. In a way, these kids accept their parents’ claim that growing up in the 1960s was special. Another example is Deadhead fathers and their sons sharing the Grateful Dead experience.

Rock ’n’ roll fits well with the burgeoning family leisure and vacation industry. Family theme parks typically have some attraction related to rock ’n’ roll, such as the complete mock-up of a 1950s small-town main street in the Fiesta Texas amusement park in San Antonio. The artists performing at the amphitheaters in the Six Flags parks have included, during the course of several years, REO Speedwagon, an Eagles reunion band, and a KISS reunion band. The concept “family entertainment” in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s referred to phenomena such as wholesome television programming, Walt Disney films, and home games, whereas today it increasingly refers to rock ’n’ roll. The rock ’n’ roll presented usually addresses a common denominator acceptable to both parents and children, such as rockabilly or 1980s power pop (e.g., Lynyrd Skynyrd, Van Halen, Cheap Trick, Aerosmith).

THE SELF AS BELIEVER

As we have seen, baby boomers’ early experiences of rock ’n’ roll music were complex. They learned to love, play, dissent, and belong through the idiom. They also experienced spirituality (Seay & Neely, 1986). In adulthood, the spiritual dimension of rock ’n’ roll continues to affect the self as believer. The lyrics and mood created by such performers as Van Morrison (Astral Weeks) and U2 (The Joshua Tree) provide baby boomers with nonsectarian yet religion-friendly soundtracks. New Age Music, such as that produced by Windham Hill, functions the same way.

Rock ’n’ roll music has also had a direct influence on spirituality by helping shape organized religious ceremonies and rituals to fit the tastes of the adult member. For example, Catholic baby boomers grew up at a time when the Church, largely as a result of the Vatican II Council, encouraged parishes to make use of local musical styles and talent. Witness the emergence of the rock ’n’ roll mass in the 1970s. Today, the very popular style of praise and worship music, with its electronic keyboard and modern melodies, is infiltrating Catholic liturgy.

An integral segment of the self as parent is moral if not religious or spiritual socialization. Rock ’n’ roll functions as a mechanism for teaching religious beliefs and values in many families, whether or not rock ’n’ roll is compatible with the particular family’s religious orientation. For mainstream Protestant denominations, rock ’n’ roll increasingly fits with the faith. For example, when
Amy Grant played Houston several years back, her music was loud and fast (e.g., seven piece band with double drummers and double lead guitars). Parents accompanying their children to the concert peppered the audience. One father, in his 30s, brought his wife and 10-year-old daughter to the concert (which he learned about at his Lutheran church). When I asked him about the compatibility of Christian rock music with Christianity, he stated,

We love Amy Grant. She is married and tours with her husband, which is not the case with regular rock stars. Her songs are full of Christian messages. Any way you can get the message of Christ to your kids is OK with us.

The variety of Christian rock ’n’ role styles is growing. A particularly intriguing version is Christian heavy metal (Kotarba, 1991). One rock club in Houston routinely books Christian heavy metal bands on Sunday evenings. One evening, they booked a Christian speed metal band, which played extremely loud and fast music about Christ. I talked to several parents who accompanied their children to the concert. The parents were very polite, clean-cut, middle-class, Southern Baptists surrounded by a sea of punk rockers and headbangers. They struck me as being much like the parents of the American Bandstand generation discussed above. They created the opportunity for their teenagers to attend the concert by carpooling them and their friends in from the suburbs. They hoped that the message emanating from the longhaired rockers was indeed Christian, but they wanted to see for themselves that Satan was not infiltrating the event.

Certain Christian denominations, such as the Assemblies of God Church, tend to view rock ’n’ roll of any kind as evil, whether under the guise of Christian rock or not. Parents in this faith focus their attention on rock ’n’ roll as a way of establishing moral boundaries for their children. For example, a very popular video among Assemblies of God youth ministers is called Rock and Roll: A Search for God. The producer, Eric Holmberg (n.d.), displayed numerous rock album covers to illustrate his argument that rockers, especially heavy metal rockers, advertently or inadvertently proclaim satanic messages. For fundamentalist parents, rock ’n’ roll functions as a convenient and accessible way of teaching their children clearly and directly that Satan and evil are present in today’s world and can take various attractive forms. Ironically, Christian rock and satanic rock dramatically illustrate the ongoing battle between good and evil for many Christians.

THE SELF AS POLITICAL ACTOR

Rock ’n’ roll music serves as a soundtrack for the situations in which baby boomers perceive themselves as political actors. Rock ’n’ roll can add both atmosphere and meaning to political events. For example, New York punk poet and singer Patti Smith performed a concert in Houston on March 28, 2003—
right at the beginning of the war in Iraq. The concert was originally scheduled simply to support an exhibit of her art displayed at the Museum of Contemporary Arts. The audience was overwhelmingly middle-aged people, dressed up in their jeans and long (hippie) skirts. Through conversations with numerous fans after the concert, it was clear that they enjoyed the concert. Patti Smith’s poetry and songs (e.g., “People Have the Power”) gave them a relevant and identifiable venue for sharing their overwhelmingly negative feelings about the war.

Families also use rock ’n’ roll to relay a sense of political history to their children. For example, every year on Memorial Day in Houston, various veterans organizations sponsor a concert and rally at the Miller Outdoor Theater. Most of the veterans present fought in the Vietnam and Gulf Wars, wars for which rock ’n’ roll served as the musical soundtrack. Most of the veterans bring their children to the event. Among all the messages and information available to the kids is the type of music popular during the wars. A popular band regularly invited to perform is the Guess Who, whose “American Woman” was a major anthem among soldiers. I have observed fathers explaining the song to their teenaged and preteen children, who would otherwise view it as just another of dad’s old songs. The fathers explain that the song had different meanings for different men. For some, it reminded them of girlfriends back home who broke up with them during the war. For others, the title was enough to remind them of their faithful girlfriends back home. For still others, the song reminded them of the occasions when they were sitting around camp, smoking pot and listening to any American rock ’n’ roll songs available as a way of bridging the many miles between them and home. In Houston, Juneteenth and Cinco de Mayo activities function much the same way for African American and Hispanic families, respectively. In summary, rock ’n’ roll music is vital to maintaining a sense of the political self because many baby boomers learned their politics—and how to be and feel political—from Country Joe McDonald (and the Fish), Jimi Hendrix, and the Grateful Dead.

CONCLUSION

I have described several contemporary experiences of self to illustrate the ways the rock ’n’ roll idiom has remained a major cultural force in the everyday lives of mature fans. There are obviously other experiences. Furthermore, these experiences are not limited to fans. Rock ’n’ roll music is also a preeminent aspect of the musician’s self who performed rock ’n’ roll music many years ago and who continues to perform. These musicians redirect their careers in directions more comfortable if not more profitable. Kinky Friedman comes to mind. He was a Texas-based bandleader in the 1970s (the infamous Texas Jew Boys). He now performs acoustically in small clubs while managing a very successful line of men’s clothing and authoring popular mystery novels. As time passes, rock ’n’ roll provides resources for the aging self (Kotarba, 2002b). In my
interviews, I routinely hear respondents note how the recent deaths of middle-aged rock ’n’ roll artists, such as Robert Palmer and George Harrison, are disturbing because these afflictions may be more the result of aging than the excessive lifestyles associated with the premature deaths of artists such as Janice Joplin, Jimmy Hendrix, and Jim Morrison. It will be interesting, then, to see the various ways in which baby boomers draw on the rock ’n’ roll idiom as they move beyond middle age. For example, what new meanings will aging boomers attach to the rock ’n’ roll idiom? What place will rock ’n’ roll have in the grandparent-grandchild relationship? Attending to such questions will highlight the role that music plays in the ongoing becoming-of-self.

NOTES

1. A detailed discussion of the four moments in rock ’n’ roll and the sociological analysis of rock ’n’ roll is found in Kotarba (2002a).

2. Scene theory appears to be a promising refinement of subculture theory (Bennett & Peterson, 2004), as its core concept of “scene” suggests the possibility that contemporary adults may be able to maintain lifelong interests in rock ’n’ roll while assimilating these interests into their otherwise complex and multifaceted lifestyles and self-identities.

REFERENCES


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