

Analysis of the Rock and Roll Phenomenon in USA*

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Abstract

There appeared a youth counterculture movement marked by Rock and Roll in USA in the 1960s¹, which, due to its rebelliousness, made a great impact on the American society and changed the ideas of a whole generation. But, with the development and infiltration of the American commercial culture, Rock and Roll came to lose the kernel of the rebellious spirit and finally became something on good terms with the mainstream culture.

Keywords:USA, Rock and Roll,Rebelliousness,Commercialization

1. Introduction

The term "Rock and Roll" now has at least two different meanings, both in common usage. The American Heritage Dictionary and the Merriam-Webster Dictionary both define Rock and Roll as synonymous with Rock music. Encyclopedia Britannica, on the other hand, regards it as the music that originated in the mid-1950s and later developed "into the more encompassing international style known as Rock music".In the 1950s and 1960s,Rock and Roll became the carrier and an important weapon for the rebellious youth to criticize the American society.Rock and Roll spread a new philosophy, attitude and lifestyle,and made a significant impact on the social life of the United States at that time.With the cultural change manifested in Rock and Roll,the immersion of commercial factors in music gradually deepened, and eventually changed the connotation of Rock and Roll.

2. The Emergence of Rock and Roll

Rock and Roll arose in the 1950s. The phrase rocking and rolling originally described the movement of a ship on the ocean, but was used by the early twentieth century, both to describe a spiritual fervor and as a sexual analogy. Various gospel, blues and swing recordings used the phrase before it became used more frequently – but still intermittently – in the late 1930s and 1940s, principally on recordings and in reviews of what became known as rhythm and blues music aimed at a blackaudience. In 1951, Cleveland-based disc jockey Alan Freed began playing this music style while popularizing the term Rock and Roll to describe it. In the mid-1950s, the song "Rock Around the Clock" from the movie "Blackboard Jungle" widely circulated and ushered in the era of the American Rock and Roll. The birth of Rock and Roll was closely related with the political and economic environment of the American society.

On the one hand, with the advent of the Cold War Iron Curtain after World War II, there appeared a provocative political force-McCarthyism in the United States, which aimed to eradicate the radical ideas and dissents in the American cultural and academic life. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, the anti-Communist ideologyinfiltrated into the United States educational, cultural and political spheres at all levels, and the left-wing forces in the United States got an unprecedented blow. McCarthyism stifled the free discussion in the American ideological circles,creating a modern politics of terror. In this political atmosphere,most Americans lost the courage to maintain their individualities.

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¹The 1960s term refers to an era more often called the Sixties,denoting the complex of inter-related cultural and political trends across the globe.This "cultural decade" is more loosely defined than the actual decade,lasted from late 1950stillearly 1970s.

The youth were cautious and taciturn and vividly called the "Silent Generation". The campus which should have been vibrant was also repressive in the 1950s. A survey (Altbach, 1997) showed that an oath of allegiance and the repression on the radical and liberal speakers on campus were very common.

On the other hand, The US economy produced abundantly after the war, and military, automotive, construction, transportation, finance and other industries developed rapidly. A large number of middle class with strong spending power arose in the American society. However, in the society with material prosperity, the wealth gap, racial discrimination and gender discrimination still existed, which revealed the inequality of the American society. Meanwhile, in the United States—a developed industrial society, technology was increasingly becoming a decisive factor in the social life. Faced with a machinery world and automation programs, people felt powerless and bewildered. Large commercial organizations with a strong influence in the power structure developed all the natural and human resources available but ignored the environmental pollution and destruction, as well as the repression on human nature their behaviors caused. This was a society using material items to fill the emptiness while forgetting the value of human beings. Although a modern factory in this society could probably produce shoes enough for people around the world to wear, people felt depressed. In their opinion, feelings are more important than senses and reasons, beliefs more important than knowledge, entertainment more important than production, spiritual life more important than material life, human instinct more important than science and technology. For personal liberation, "they would rather not wear shoes." (Rand, 1971) The social repression resulted in the youth's distrust of the traditional economic thinking which says "production first, efficiency first", or even loss of confidence in the entire science and technology itself and the capitalist industrial society.

In this social atmosphere, young people were in an urgent need of a certain carrier to give out their thoughts and feelings, while the traditional elite culture and the general pop music obviously couldn't meet their needs, because they didn't agree with their parents' appreciation standards. Therefore, they wanted to express their thoughts and feelings in some new way. In this case, Rock and Roll, a new style of youth counter-culture, provided the most suitable and popular way for the young generation to express their emotions. We might come to a conclusion that Rock and Roll is not just a type of music but more a product of social culture; Rock and Roll includes not only music itself, but also the associated social environment. What it reflects is the state of various aspects of the social environment in which it exists.

3. The Rebelliousness of Rock and Roll

Rebelliousness was the soul of Rock and Roll in the 1950s and 1960s and the characteristic by which Rock and Roll was regarded more notable than any other traditional music. Such rebelliousness is mainly manifested in the following aspects.

3.1 Rock and Roll Had Different Ways of Expression

Rock and Roll rhythms are extremely strong and loud compared with the music played by "big band". Rock and Roll is exciting, fully demonstrating vitality and self-existence. It is this alternative way of expression that made Rock music create a huge shock in the 1960s. In the 1950s and 1960s, Rock and Roll not only existed as a musical element, but also made the youth find a medium for expression and exchange of ideas and emotions. Rock and Roll was echoing in the anti-Vietnam War movement, the black civil rights movement, the woman's movement and other movements. With a strong sense of rhythm, Rock youth showcased youth rebelliousness and created a rebellious era.

3.2 Rock Singers Made Changes in Attire

Influenced by the Protestant ethic and the spirit of Puritanism, the dresses the American traditional culture is proud of are beautiful, clean and conservative, but the Rock singers of the 1960s, who were born in the middle and upper classes of society, began to imitate the urban underclass in primping—long beard, wearing bell-bottoms and long ornaments, which raised the concern of the American society. The U.S. media had noticed the difference of the Beatles-style band before it reached the United States. The magazine "Look" once published a photo showing the impact the British Beatles had on hair length of the British. (1964) In November 1963, Time Magazine's report focused on the alternative look and stage presence of Beatles: they looked like dirty Peter Pan (naive adult), keeping mushroom heads and wearing white turtleneck shirts. (1963) With the popularity of Rock music, Rock singers' costumes were widely emulated by young students. Many students began to grow long hair, challenging the school rules for clothing.

To work with hair styles, young people also wore a variety of fancy dresses and challenged the traditional Western aesthetics. This fully embodied the strong desire of the youth who wanted to abandon the traditional conformist life and move towards a freer living space.

3.3 Rock and Roll Showed Obvious Political Tendency

From the very early stage, Rock and Roll encompassed social, human and other issues. For example, the song "gunman" was directed at the political and social darkness. Its lyrics are to the effect that: I come to ask you a question: what has your money brought you? No matter how much you earn, it can't make atonement for you! The spiritual leader of the American "folk Rock" Bob Dylan's song "Blowin' in the Wind" was the holy song of the civil rights movement. Bob Dylan himself played the role of a rebel. He sang for President Kennedy's assassination and cried for a variety of social injustice and repression of freedom. A negative relationship was formed between Rock and Roll and the society. Rock and Roll became the pioneer culture of the era with its anti-government, anti-war, anti-authoritarian and anti-traditional theme.

In short, Rock and Roll of the 1950s and 1960s pushed the youth into the social center from the margin of the society and caused a strong impact on the mainstream culture, directly contributing to the rise of popular art and civilian art. The popularity and sensationality of Rock and Roll not only made it the carrier of the rebellious youth culture, but also become a symbol of social rebellion. Rock and Roll in the United States, like a bloodless revolution, influenced the process of the society and changed a whole generation.

4. The Commercialization of Rock and Roll

Though carrying information not consistent with the mainstream society from the very beginning, Rock and Roll continued to develop. One of the reasons is that Rock and Roll not only catered to the younger generation's values and recreational orientation, but also met the needs of the American Society to tap its enormous commercial value. For commercial interests, the U.S. commercial civilization abandoned its original shrewd-looking appearance and plunged headlong into Rock and Roll and youth parties, because all the rebels were closely related to the huge youth consumer market. In order to open young people's wallets, the youth culture must be given legitimacy. Thus, the youth culture with Rock and Roll as its main symbol was developing rapidly under the coercion of business culture.

In April 4, 1964, the Beatles sold millions of albums, and earned huge profits for the record company. Moreover, their success further expanded the Rock music market. In 1963, 5 million people bought Rock albums, while in 1968, 10-15 million, and in 1972, 25-30 million. (Glatt, 1993) In 1968, among the 60 gold records the Recording Industry Association of America certified, more than half (31) were Rock albums, which had never happened before historically. (1968) In 1971, the Rock music created 65% profit for Warner Bros. In CBS, music contributed 20% of the total sales revenues and 26% of the total profits in 1973. In 1972, Rock and Roll records accounted for about 80% of the American music recordings, and the total returns of phonorecords and tape recordings of the year were more than \$2 billion. Thus, the wealth Rock music created surpassed that produced by movies and sports projects, not including incomes from concerts, radio advertising or sales of radios, taperecorders and musical instruments. (Chapple, 1977) Many record companies began trying to eliminate the cultural rift between the conservative corporate culture and the bands through the so-called "institutional hippies" or the "company Frankenstein", who were working for the company and acted as contact members for the company, the band and the underground radios. Some people (Chapple, 1977) described the state of the music industry: on the commercial side, managers and technical staff turned into hippies: long hair, taking drugs, accepting "indulgent" lifestyle, and changing clothes..... producers began to live as those artists in the programs which they recorded; they looked just like those artists..... promotion staff began taking drugs they sold..... even retail sales staff and the managers of record stores like Tower also accepted the customers' cultural lifestyle. Rock and Roll became the most eye-catching element in the commercial tide.

To speak of Rock commercialization, we'll have to mention the landmark event of this period-Rock music festival. The first major Rock festival was held in Monterey, California in June 16-18, 1967. This festival, as a prelude to San Francisco hippie movement, brought together about 50,000 Rock fans, showing the power of music which shocked the world. Monterey Music Festival was both a cultural success and a commercial success. The festival was planned in seven weeks by promoter Lou Adler, John Phillips of The Mamas & the Papas, producer Alan Pariser and publicist Derek Taylor.

They invited many musicians such as McCartney and Paul Simon as consultants, and brought in a lot of famous bands with a small amount of money as baits. The fact has proved that almost all of the bands presented there sprang into fame. Jimi Hendrix ended his Monterey performance with an unpredictable version of "Wild Thing", which contributed to his rising popularity in the United States. Monterey Festival also brought considerable benefits for the organizers.

A profit of \$250,000 was made by company participation only, while ABC paid \$400,000 for television fee. This Festival is a creative turning point, which reflects the power and size of the new culture, as well as the important influence of music on the youth. (Echols, 1999) After the Monterey Festival, holding outdoor concerts became a fashion. In 1969 only, dozens of concerts were planned, among which, "Woodstock Festival" was the most successfully organized and became a sign of the times, which was also the climax of the youth counter-culture movement in the 1960s.

This festival was held at Max Yasgur's 600-acre dairy farm in the Catskills near the hamlet of White Lake in the town of Bethel, New York, from August 15 to August 18, 1969. During the sometimes rainy weekend, 32 acts performed outdoors before an audience of 400,000 young people. Rolling Stone once listed it as one of the 50 moments that changed the history of Rock and Roll. During the festival, the young people rocked and roared in the torrential rain on the muddy grass. They took drugs, made love, played in the mud or meditated, as an expression of disgust for Vietnam War and contempt for the political hypocrisy and cultural mediocrity. Woodstock immediately became a counter-culture model. But, even this counter-culture event couldn't get rid of the influence of business. Michael Wadleigh directed the documentary film Woodstock soon after the event. By 1979, the film had got a worldwide profit of \$50 million, and won the Oscar award for the best documentary. Most people who participated in 1969 Woodstock performances were paid and some of them benefited greatly from the Festival afterwards—for example, as major figures in the Festival, Crosby, Stills and Nash won the Grammy Award for Best New Artist, and May of 1970 saw the release of *Déjà Vu*, recorded with Young as a full member. *Déjà Vu* was certified gold in America only one week after its release. The film and LP all gained an unprecedented success. (Liu, 1991)

Woodstock Music Festival once again showed people a huge market of live Rock show. In 1973, Bill Graham, an American impresario and Rock concert promoter, promoted the largest outdoor concert at Watkins Glen, New York with the Grateful Dead, the Allman Brothers Band and the Band. Over 600,000 paying ticket-holders were in attendance. However, this music festival has little cultural symbolism, and few people remember the place Watkins Glen. This festival was sponsored by the Midland Bank. The Woodstock Music Festival still had some contact with the entrepreneurs who sympathized with the counter-culture, while Watkins Glen Festival completely fell into the hands of the institutions which cared about business but neglected or even were hostile to the counter-culture. It, we can say, was only a tool for the commercial culture to make large fortunes with the aid of youth culture. This change made it more difficult for the music festival to play the role in the cultural transmission and group spirit shaping. With the commercial development of Rock and Roll, its rebellious factors gradually dissolved, leaving only some market-oriented characteristics. Since 1980s, the most exciting about Rock and Roll has been its commercial success. Even though rockers sometimes "burn" hypocrisy and spread dissatisfaction and rebelliousness, their repeated actions have lost signs of fearless determination of the 1950s and 1960s. Today's Rock music is no longer outrageous; it has become a commercial television program, with little countercultural implication.

5. Conclusion

Rock and Roll in the 1960s projected itself as a way of protest in the United States, and quickly combined itself with a variety of social movements and was subsequently fully integrated into the commercialized regime. It could be said that the youth counter-culture itself is a natural platform for the business, and its novelty is precisely a good tool for the business to open up the new market and promote changes in people's consumer attitudes and behaviors. Conversely, the business is an important channel to make the youth counter-culture integrated into the mainstream society. The U.S. commercial interests not only made Rock and Roll of the 1960s commercialized, but also had its rebellious spirit damaged. Rock and Roll thus became a neutral culture in harmony with the mainstream culture. In this process, the business culture dissolved the opposing forces of the counter-culture by stealing the youth counter-culture symbols, removing their "revolutionary" contents, and then selling them to the public as commodities.

Objectively speaking, the American counter-culture with Rock and Roll as its hallmark did not cause any damage to the American social system, but made the existing system withstand a test, thus enhancing its ability to survive. Fundamentally, the commercialization of the youth counter-culture is advantageous for the American ruling class to absorb opposition forces and perpetuate the spirit of capitalism.

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