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Reflections on a Revolutionary and Music

Réflexions sur un révolutionnaire et la musique

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Reflections on a Revolutionary and Music

Réflexions sur un révolutionnaire et la musique

Jeremy Varon

EDITOR'S NOTE

The following is a commentary on: VELASCO-PUFLEAU Luis, "From Music to Armed Struggle, from 1968 to *Action Directe*: An Interview with Jean-Marc Rouillan", *Transposition*, no. Hors-série 2, 2020, <https://journals.openedition.org/transposition/3780>. DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.3780>

The age of miracles.

The age of sound.

Well there's a Golden Age.

Comin' round, comin' round, comin' round!

- Phish, "Golden Age"

- 1 At the height of the radical Sixties, the White Panther's John Sinclair called for the creation of a "guitar army".¹ "Rock'n'roll", he extolled, was "a weapon of cultural revolution" — indeed, the "*model* of a revolutionary future".² Combined with acid, activism, and guns, it had the power to birth beautiful, free, high-energy people in a new, beautiful world.
- 2 Sinclair's vision spoke to rock'n'roll's insurgent roots. From its start, rock music has been the bearer of rebellion, borne of adolescent rage, illicit sexuality, and great dollops of Black cool so coveted within white Western culture. Building on the musical legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, folk and then rock musicians brought the protest song to thriving social movements. Some artists embraced the revolutionary "freak" culture reaching its zenith at the Woodstock festival of August 1969.

- 3 The music-saturated event served, in turn, as a master-metaphor for a comprehensive liberation. On the witness stand for his involvement in the Chicago 1968 protests at the Democratic National Convention, Yippee leader Abbie Hoffman declared himself a resident not of the United States but of a Woodstock Nation. That nation, currently “held captive” by a “decaying system”, valued “cooperation” over “competition” and profit.³
- 4 A decade later — and with hope of revolution now in decay — Hoffman changed his tune. (He had spent much of the 1970s underground fleeing cocaine charges, while remaining active in small environmental campaigns.) “The idea that rock was revolutionary”, he told an interviewer in 1979, “was probably the greatest put-on of the Sixties”.⁴ Only Phil Ochs, the MC5, and the Fugs had dared play at the Yippie’s Festival of Life during the Chicago convention, teeming with riot police. Most musicians, Hoffman lamented, “just wanted to make a lot of money and smoke a lot of dope”.
- 5 Here Hoffman speaks to that other side of rock music, squarely planted in the culture industry. From its start, rock’n’roll was a mass commercial enterprise, growing more lucrative as youth culture exploded. Its leading artists appeared to relish growing fabulously wealthy — even as they maintained the persona of the incorrigible bad-ass, or earnest rocker, or pop spiritualist, or patron of noble causes. Reckless profligacy in the form of gluttonous addictions and smashed instruments, hotel rooms, and sports cars became part of the renegade profile.
- 6 All the while, little golden ages of pushback to commercialism — such as once captivated Sinclair and Hoffman — bubbled up and quickly vanished. The fledgling “guitar army” of the Sixties gave way to arena rock, disco, and the inward-looking singer-songwriter. Thereafter, the whole genre periodically re-energized itself in purported return to a plebian, break-even authenticity, like the early days of punk or grunge. This cycle of decline and rebirth continues on, with DIY-diehards ever posing as rock’s conscience.
- 7 But eventually, most everyone wants to get paid. When they don’t, they file lawsuits. Bitter disputes over royalty payments and estates have themselves become the unseemly stuff of rock legend, consuming the likes of George Clinton, John Fogerty, Johnny Rotten/Lydon, the Dead Kennedys, Prince, and the Clash’s Paul Simonon. Involvement in good causes still exists, but mostly as philanthropy and celebrity advocacy safely within the progressive mainstream.
- 8 And still the singers howl, in whatever the latest rebel fashion, “Long live rock, be it dead or alive!”

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- 9 The enduring genius of rock’n’roll has been to mask its social position with its subjective spirit: to signify rebellion in a deep, visceral way, while remaining tethered to common aspirations for fame and fortune, or at least a decent living. How else to explain the reflections on music and revolution of the French urban guerrilla Jean-Marc Rouillan than in terms of this cunning?
- 10 Rouillan repeatedly describes rock music — the *real* rock music of the 1960s and later of the punk era — as the people’s music. He praises the bands of his own little golden age

tearing up British clubs in the early and mid-1960s. He credits music for helping to push him into the streets of Paris in May 68 and a life of radical activism. And he readily separates the damned from the saved: those who betrayed and those who stayed faithful to rock's rebel roots, defined for him by the rejection of profit.

- 11 Rouillan holds the “big companies” promoting rock concerts in special contempt, claiming the right to crash any show too wedded to money. Posing as a “peace and love” festival, Woodstock itself was a giant rip-off. Few artists escape his purist wrath, which verges on self-parody. Rouillan brands Eric Clapton a sell-out from the start; his remarkable achievements on the guitar were evidently driven by his single-minded goal “to make money”. David Bowie, no matter what he meant to queer and other misfit kids, suffers the similar taint of greed. Even the ultra-hip Velvet Underground “smelled too much like the fake underground”. Rouillan found redemption in the European punk/DIY scene of the 1970s and early 80s, aligned with the autonomist movement and, in his mind, the militancy of *Action directe*. The Clash, a favorite among his comrades, became for him the gods of a resurrected rock.
- 12 By parts idealistic, censorious, and naïve, Rouillan somehow escaped Hoffman's disillusionment. Above all, he seems guilty of taking rock's insurgent spirit for its essence, imposing expectations on it not widely shared by rockers themselves. The extraordinary times he lived in make this error, at the very least, understandable. His generation was propelled into a higher consciousness and mission of social change under the influence of music. Countless youths appealed to rock — the lyrics but also just the energy — as inspiration, oracle and omen.
- 13 Rouillan recalls being seized with the sense that “something will happen in our lives” after hearing a rousing section in the garage band classic “Gloria”. That something became for him a new life as a radical trying to create a new world. Rock could capture also the heaviness of the times. Jonathan Lerner, an American radical, recalls of 1967:
my soundtrack mostly came from folk rockers, like Jesse Colin Young. His iconic “Get Together”⁵, with its admonition to “love one another right now”, came out that year. So did his “Dreamer's Dream”⁶. Its chorus goes, “Now the dream has ended, the world that I intended crashing down into bitter reality”. It was actually a song of broken romance. I misheard it as political commentary, because crashing into bitter reality felt like what was happening.⁷
- 14 Two years later, Lerner helped found the urban guerrilla group Weatherman. Suggesting inexorable change, its name was famously drawn from the Bob Dylan line “you don't need a Weatherman to know which way the wind blows”. At the time and in reflection, rock was used both to make sense of and to reshape one's individual and social world.
- 15 Insofar as the subjecting feelings associated with rock music inspired activism and other change energy, music became an objective, social force. In this limited sense, Rouillan is not wrong to equate rock music with social transformation and even political radicalism, no matter his dubious claim of rock's elemental purity.
- 16 More troublesome, however, is Rouillan's conceit that art somehow owes the revolution — even when revolution is just a pipe dream of a handful of ultra-radicals at the far margins of their national politics. The Grateful Dead's early manager, Rock Scully, took as his creed that “there's no such thing as a free show”, even when the audience paid nothing.⁸ (Scully had helped set-up numerous free Dead concerts in San Francisco's Panhandle and other locales).⁹ *Someone* is always doing the hard work, whether

compensated or not. Setting aside the issue of money, Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia addressed the late-Sixties demand of “free music for free people” from a musician’s perspective:

the musician’s first responsibility is to play music as well as he can. . . . [A]ny responsibility to anyone else is just journalistic fiction. . . or political fiction. Because that bullshit about the people’s music, man . . . what’s that supposed to mean? It wasn’t any people that sat with me while I learned to play guitar. . . . [And] when somebody says *the people* . . . that has to mean everybody. It means the cops, the guys who drive the limousines, the fucker who runs the elevators, everybody”.¹⁰

- 17 Insisting that artists conform to “the militant commitment” of radicals like Rouillan — self-appointed as the arbiters of worthy art — is to ask the wrong thing from the wrong people. Of the many reasons that *Action directe* and similar Western armed struggle groups failed to instigate mass insurrections, that kind of arrogance may be one.
- 18 In closing, Rouillan asserts that, “we have to fight to reclaim the collective memory of our music”, much as we must reclaim the memory of radical political struggles. Part of both histories is the passion of true belief and the optimism, joy, and dedication it brings. In his idealism, unbroken by years in prison, Rouillan is himself worthy of appreciation and study as part of this memory project. But it is also vital to learn from — and not merely reclaim — illusions, no matter how seductive. Otherwise, the next great reign of freedom risks being just another golden age.

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NOTES

1. SINCLAIR John, *Guitar Army: Street Writings/Prison Writings*, New York, Douglas Book Corporation, 1972.
2. SINCLAIR, p. 113.
3. From “The Testimony of Abbie Hoffman in the Chicago 7 Conspiracy Trial”, <https://www.famous-trials.com/chicago8/1326-hoffman>.

4. From “Abbie Hoffman — Interview Outtakes, August 20, 1979”, posted by *Paste Magazine*, 31 October 2008, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2008/10/abbie-hoffman-interview-outtakes.html?part=12>.
 5. <https://youtu.be/mgo7jZzW7Jw>
 6. https://youtu.be/0C_4fzrLzDE
 7. JONATHAN Lerner, “What I Saw on the Way to Revolution”, *The New York Times*, 12 September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/opinion/what-i-saw-on-the-way-to-the-revolution.html>.
 8. Scully expounded his views in interviews for the “40th Anniversary Summer of Love Oral Archive by Rock Scully”, Compact Disc issued by BeanBag1 Entertainment, 2007.
 9. A list of the Grateful Dead’s free shows and benefit concerts is available at: “Grateful Dead Guide”, 15 June 2015, <https://deadessays.blogspot.com/2015/06/free-shows-benefits-1965-1975.html>.
 10. Quoted in RICHARDSON Peter, *No Simple Highway: A Cultural History of the Grateful Dead*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 2014, pp. 169-70.
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ABSTRACTS

After spending years in prison for armed actions with the French urban guerrilla group *Action directe*, Jean-Marc Rouillan shared in an interview his reflections on the role of music in his political development and on the broader politics of rock’n’roll. This essay responds to Rouillan’s reflections. Noting rock’n’roll’s dual identity as rebel music and a mass commercial enterprise, the essay sees hopefulness, naïveté, and arrogance in Rouillan’s insistence that to stay true to its roots rock music must shun profit. The essay argues the value of recovering radical moments in popular culture while cautioning against idealizing cultural forms.

Après des années d’emprisonnement suite à son action armée au sein de l’organisation française de guérilla urbaine *Action directe*, Jean-Marc Rouillan a donné un entretien au gré duquel il partage ses réflexions sur le rôle de la musique dans son propre engagement politique, et plus largement sur les politiques du rock’n’roll. Cet essai répond aux réflexions de Rouillan. Relevant l’identité duale du rock’n’roll – à la fois musique rebelle et entreprise commerciale de masse –, nous notons l’optimisme, la naïveté et l’arrogance avec lesquelles Rouillan insiste sur la nécessité qu’a le rock à fuir le profit afin de rester fidèle à ses racines. Soulignant l’intérêt d’un tel retour sur des moments radicaux de la culture populaire, cet essai met en garde contre l’idéalisation de formes culturelles.

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Mots-clés: Action directe, Bowie (David), Clapton (Eric), Clash, Garcia (Jerry), Grateful Dead, Hofmann (Abbie), Lerner (Jonathan), Rouillan (Jean-Marc), rock’n’roll, Sinclair (John), White Panthers, Yippies.

Keywords: Action directe, Bowie (David), Clapton (Eric), Clash, Garcia (Jerry), Grateful Dead, Hofmann (Abbie), Lerner (Jonathan), Rouillan (Jean-Marc), rock’n’roll, Sinclair (John), White Panthers, Yippies.

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Jeremy Varon is a Professor of History at the New School in New York City. He is author of *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* and co-founder and editor of *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*.