

VOLUME!

Volume !

La revue des musiques populaires

9 : 2 | 2012

Contre-cultures n°2

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/3413>

DOI: 10.4000/volume.3413

ISSN: 1950-568X

Publisher

Association Mélanie Seteun

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2012

ISBN: 978-2-913169-33-3

ISSN: 1634-5495

Electronic reference

Jay Keister, « “The Long Freak Out”: Unfinished Music and Countercultural Madness in 1960s and 1970s Avant-Garde Rock », *Volume !* [Online], 9 : 2 | 2012, Online since 01 September 2016, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/3413> ; DOI : 10.4000/volume.3413

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

"The Long Freak Out": Unfinished Music and Countercultural Madness in 1960s and 1970s Avant-Garde Rock

« *The Long Freak Out* » : musique inachevée et folie contre-culturelle dans le rock d'avant-garde des années 1960 et 1970

Jay Keister

EDITOR'S NOTE

This text was published in *Countercultures & Popular Music* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2014), while its French translation appeared in this issue of *Volume!* in 2012.

1 THE AVANT-GARDE – UNDERSTOOD in its most provocative sense as an aesthetic attack on prevailing institutions and stylistic conventions of art – altered the course of art history in the twentieth century and continues to influence critical discourse in the twenty-first century, but to what degree has the avant-garde affected rock music? Writers on popular music have demonstrated various ways in which the avant-garde has contributed to the common historical narrative of rebellion in rock by examining subjects such as the development of art rock out of English art schools (Frith and Horne 1987), the Situationist strategies of the Sex Pistols (Marcus 1989), and the interaction between artists and musicians in the New York post-punk scene (Gendron 2002). One might presume that aggressive sonic features of musical attack, such as chaotic sounds, absurd lyrics and amateur musicianship, would be as widespread in rock as aggressive visual aesthetics are in painting and sculpture. But this is clearly not the case as many critics and fans typically dismiss recordings by rock musicians who overstep the boundaries of acceptability in rock music with extreme avant-garde recordings.



2 This chapter examines avant-garde approaches to rock music by focusing on what can best be described as the ‘freak out’ – recordings of chaotic sounds and free form improvisation that reject conventional notions of song structure, lyric meaning and technical competence. From the title of the first album by the Mothers of Invention, this term that has come to mean ‘madly panic’ in contemporary English aptly describes the atmosphere of madness and irrationality evoked by these extreme recordings that began to appear on record albums in the 1960s. Freak outs were usually cast as oppositional statements against mainstream culture by embodying the unstructured and unbridled freedom called for by the post-war counterculture, generating what Lochhead calls ‘liberatory chaos’ in music that ‘conveys a human condition of freedom by setting itself up directly against social and intellectual structures that are comprehended as constricting’ (2001: 217).

3 While it is tempting to view such experiments merely as attempts by pop musicians to gain cultural capital by appropriating the language of the avant-garde, a closer look at these recordings and their reception reveals no such gains on the part of musicians who have gone to such extremes. Given that ‘aural sculpting of sound without a beat or melody is not accepted as music’ by most rock fans (Gracyk 1996: 100), these risky, fractious works often alienate fans and even jeopardise careers in keeping with the avant-garde’s ‘built-in tendency ultimately to negate itself’ (Calinescu 1987: 124). Such self-destructive attacks on the emerging music business in the 1960s and 1970s echo the Dadaist and Surrealist impact on art institutions earlier in the century and invoke similar apocalyptic aesthetics of death and madness. Whether created by hippie-era musicians invoking countercultural ideals of social and aesthetic revolution or by post-punk musicians reacting to a decadent music industry, these recordings constitute a distinctive type of rock music that negates all manner of oppressive structure, even at the cost of

alienating listeners with unlistenable noise. As such, the freak out suggests a kind of madness, either invoked by musicians as a countercultural weapon against the sanity of mainstream culture or perceived by listeners who sometimes explain away such unlistenable records as temporary madness by their favourite musicians.

- 4 In addition to the overarching theme of madness conveyed by freak out recordings, I have identified three characteristics that most of these recordings have in common: anarchy, absurdity and amateurism. First and foremost, anarchy predominates in the way sounds seem to be erratic and uncoordinated, producing an overall sense of chaos or of being out of sync. There is no clear sense of song form and these tracks are often overly long, sometimes taking up an entire side of a vinyl record album. Secondly, absurdity is often pushed to the point of complete irrationality, either non-teleological in that these recordings seem to go nowhere or, if they have a goal, it is based on an irrational belief that the sounds can work some kind of magic. Defying meaning, rather than making meaning, freak out tracks feature vocals that seem to be utter nonsense, either fragments of recognisable language or unrecognisable gibberish chosen more for sound quality than semantic meaning. Thirdly, while performers of freak out recordings evoke amateurism, this is clearly by design. Whether musicians lack conventional technical skills or simply give the appearance of incompetence by making music that sounds disjointed, this valorising of amateur performance values is in line with hippie ideals of open participation and punk ideals of DIY musicality. The freak out affirms the notion that anyone can do it.

The Unfinished Music of John and Yoko

- 5 John Lennon is the most well known pop musician to be thoroughly condemned for extreme avant-garde recordings and his work with Yoko Ono during the late 1960s provides some insights about the use of avant-garde strategies and techniques in popular music. *Unfinished Music No. 1. Two Virgins* (1968), the first album collaboration by the couple commonly referred to as 'John and Yoko', is infamous for completely alienating a mass audience and attracting widespread condemnation from its initial release to the present day. Yoko Ono has offered her own explanation for the concept of 'unfinished' music:

If you listen to it, maybe you can add to it or change it or edit or add something in your mind. The unfinished part that's not in the record – what's in you, not what's in the record – is what's important. (Yoko Ono cited in Rockwell 1982: 275)

- 6 This pleasant, if naïve, invitation to participate in utopian idealism belies the harsh sound of a record that readily evokes harsh criticism and scatological insults from Beatles fans. For many rock fans and critics, *Two Virgins* was seen as a nadir in the career of John Lennon and evidence of the follies and failures of rock musicians whenever they stray too far from the accepted conventions of rock and into the realm of high art. But a brief consideration of the contents of the album and the context in which it was made reveal an expression of resistance to making a commercial product and a deliberate refusal to construct a cohesive work of art.
- 7 'Unfinished' accurately describes this album that presents the couple as literally raw, with its naked cover portrait and two extended tracks improvised and recorded in one night, consisting of fragments that never coalesce into anything more than discrete momentary sounds. While Yoko wails, sings and makes animal-like noises, John

occasionally shouts while maintaining a background of disconnected sounds using guitar, piano, organ, tape recorded sound effects and fragments of old records from a turntable. Snippets of conversation between the two of them give it a real-time feel and an air of domesticity, with what sounds like a tea break coming at the end of Side One that is almost inviting to the listener. But Side Two continues relentlessly as Lennon spins short bursts of old jazz records on a turntable, refusing to give the listener the satisfaction that normally comes from the passive listening experience so antithetical to their album's concept. In the final moments John engages Yoko in an intimate piano-vocal duet that ends with Lennon chanting 'Amen', but the record ultimately remains unfinished. Presenting music as a perpetually incomplete process, *Two Virgins* is the antithesis of the high-toned art rock that the Beatles had perfected the previous year with the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

- 8 Extreme recordings like *Two Virgins* and 'Revolution 9', John and Yoko's contribution to the Beatles' 'White Album' released just a week earlier in that November of 1968, are typically dismissed by critics as pretentious folly or bad taste (Spitz 2005: 795) and hated by fans as a kind of temporary insanity from their heroes. Following the avant-garde ethos of rejecting all convention and institutions, such recordings seem designed to deliberately confound all listeners, even critics who try to be open-minded and seriously consider such works. Critic John Rockwell, for example, grants John and Yoko much more leeway for their experimentation than the average Beatles fan, but miscasts the purpose of rock musicians who experiment:

For all their eagerness, however, rock experimenters lacked roots, in that they weren't always aware of the spiritually similar experiments that had taken place in earlier decades among the literary, and even musical, avant-gardes of Europe and America. And they often lacked the craft to shape their newly liberated imaginations. Too much art rock became clumsy imitation of the classics or shallow vulgarization of real avant-gardists or cynical exploitation of teenagers' seemingly endless capacity to be blown away by the obvious. John Lennon was too clever to be that crude. But it took Yoko to bring out his tendencies fully for both liberated expression and primal self-indulgence. (Rockwell 1982: 273)

- 9 This concern for a lack of 'roots' – certainly not true in the case of Yoko Ono or Frank Zappa – reveals Rockwell defending a hallowed tradition of 'classic' artists and 'real avant-gardists' who possessed talent as opposed to 'clumsy' and 'shallow' rock musicians who lack 'craft'. Not only does Rockwell take an aesthetic position that seems awkward for a rock critic, he also underestimates the power of rock music that is inspired by art. While more virtuosic rock musicians' 'clumsy imitation of the classics' may have had a more insidious agenda of criticising society than they are typically given credit for (Keister and Smith 2008), the more chaotic and raw 'vulgarization of real avant-gardists' as found in John and Yoko's work reveals an iconoclasm with which rock musicians are particularly well-equipped.
- 10 Rock music in the most extreme form of raw, chaotic experimentalism considered here shares similar goals with the most radical artists of the avant-garde who attacked art as an institution, something to be despised for valuing bourgeois notions of craft and beauty at the expense of spontaneity and truth. In John Lennon's case, his experimental works were more than just an ideological quest for spontaneity and truth. Beyond the utopian concept of the album, *Two Virgins* was a very direct attack on the Beatles in 1968, by that time a fully developed musical and financial institution built on craft and beauty, as well as an oppressive pressure-cooker of a business that damaged relationships between long-

time friends. As Lennon felt increasing hostility from his band mates toward Yoko, his collaborations with her became more than just new avenues for liberated expression – they became aesthetic weapons. *Two Virgins* met with resistance from many in the Beatles organisation who tried to delay the release of the album and, with even Ringo Starr voicing his concern that the album could damage all their reputations (Spitz 2005: 796–7), it is hardly surprising that Lennon persisted in further ‘primal self-indulgence’ with Yoko Ono during the final years of the band.

- 11 Considering Lennon’s awareness of his position in an organisation that many believed was leading the countercultural charge during the late 1960s, his avant-garde works with Yoko Ono at the time were as perfectly placed as Marcel Duchamp’s infamous urinal in an art gallery about 50 years earlier. Just as the early twentieth-century Dadaists attacked an art institution that had developed a business out of commoditising bohemian self-expression, John Lennon’s attack went to the heart of a music industry that was just then discovering the economic gains to be made from marketing rock music as high art. But unlike Duchamp’s urinal, which by the 1960s had fully transformed from prank to masterpiece and earned its reputation as high art, there was no such pay-off for John and Yoko as their avant-garde albums seem to resist such canonisation. During the 1960s when highbrow culture was bemoaning the death of the avant-garde because it had actually sustained the very system that it was supposedly trying to destroy (Mann 1991), the avant-garde was very much alive within popular music as rock musicians began employing similar strategies of resistance to – and exploitation of – the culture industry.

Freaking Out in the 1960s: From Countercultural Events to Rock Albums

- 12 In what may have been the first freak out of the post-war counterculture – Allen Ginsberg’s legendary reading of the poem *Howl* in 1955 at the Six Gallery in San Francisco – Ginsberg showed that the madness that he claimed was so destructive of the post-war generation was both the symptom of a disease and its cure. In the poem Ginsberg urged Carl Solomon, whom he had befriended during his brief stay in a psychiatric ward, to ‘accuse your doctors of insanity’, evoking madness as a weapon to be used against Moloch, his metaphor for the Western society that he felt was sacrificing the minds and bodies of the young (Ginsberg 1956: III). Ginsberg’s method of embodying madness and projecting it back at society was rooted in nineteenth-century French writers Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Lautréamont and early twentieth-century artists associated with Dada and Surrealism such as Schwitters, Dalí and Artaud, who practised an art of insanity that could be seen as the only sane way of dealing with an already insane society. ‘Openly declaring one’s insanity’, as Donald Kuspit describes it, is a quest for authenticity necessary for artistic growth and ‘the only genuine authenticity in an insanely inauthentic world’ (Kuspit 2000: 153).
- 13 Many in the counterculture eagerly embraced the utopian promise of creative madness as a way of overcoming personal alienation, as well as instigate radical political change. In his 1968 countercultural diatribe, *Bomb Culture*, Jeff Nuttall quotes an anonymous poster hung on the doors of the Sorbonne: ‘The society of alienation must disappear from history. We are inventing a new and original world. Imagination has seized power’ (Nuttall 1968: viii). Adding that ‘the root of political development is creative and

irrational' (ibid.: ix), Nuttall outlines in his book a number of tactics that call for a hallucinatory insanity that could spread 'an ego-dissolving delirium' and 'release forces into the prevailing culture that would dislocate society' (ibid.: 264). In *The Making of the Counterculture*, Theodore Roszak attacked what he called the technocracy and how it curtailed human creativity, citing the mad visions of William Blake, whose work had been reduced by civilisation to the sober respectability of art, passively consumed and completely divorced from the ecstasy of experience that had generated the poet's original visions (Roszak 1969).

- 14 In the early 1960s, those in search of profound, Blake-like mystical experiences that could cleanse the doors of perception sought their inspiration in a combination of psychedelic drugs, Eastern spirituality and radical psychology, and portrayed society's version of sanity as a public health problem. 'No one is more dangerously insane than one who is sane all the time', proclaimed popular philosopher Alan Watts who advocated an environment of complete spontaneity 'for dancing, singing, howling, babbling, jumping, groaning, wailing' in which 'nonsense may have its way' (Watts 1962: 88). Watts created just such an environment in a freak out session that was recorded and released as an album called *This Is It!* (1962) in which Watts and collaborators chanted and babbled nonsense words in faux tribal rituals accompanied by acoustic instruments. Although similar to the audio anarchy explored by John Cage during this time period, *This Is It!* was presented not as art music, but as a kind of audio prescription for mental health. As this idea of invoking experiential madness as therapy and resistance began to motivate similar underground gatherings in the 1960s, rock music began to play an important role in countercultural events.
- 15 Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters pursued freaking out with an evangelical fervour in California in the mid-1960s. Armed with a plentiful supply of LSD and bolstered by the idea that collectively freaking out could therapeutically bring about Buddha-like enlightenment in any participant, Kesey created the Acid Tests, a series of about a dozen multi-media events designed to get young people to take acid and dissolve their egos in hopes of transforming society. Like Alan Watts' freak out session, these events documented in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) were conceived more as rituals than performances with the only goal being to 'mess up the minds' of those in attendance and ensure they 'go nowhere' (Sculatti 2005). The temporary insanity instigated by Kesey was meant to be a kind of rite of passage in which the individual, provided with free LSD, would become immersed in an alternative environment of free expression, interaction and experience without boundaries, and could eventually return to everyday life a newly enlightened person.
- 16 Audio fragments of Kesey and his Pranksters freaking out in a recording studio in early 1966 appeared on an album called *The Acid Test* in which Kesey described the events as 'open circles' of participatory possibilities as opposed to the 'closed circles' of everyday reality:
- Everything is closed circles between people. When you get an open circle it's dangerous, it's like children or animals. It means they demand you doing weird things like playing a harmonica that is going nowhere, that at any moment you can add to it your own kind of noise and it's part of it. This is different from Beethoven's Fifth which is finished and there's no place for me in it except as an audience. (*The Acid Test* LP, 1966)
- 17 Music in this environment was not intended to be a performance for an audience, but a spontaneous interaction between all participants, like John and Yoko's unfinished music

in a communal setting. Although the house band for the Acid Tests was an early incarnation of the Grateful Dead, the sound of these events was a chaotic blend of Grateful Dead music, the amateur Prankster band and anyone else who felt like making noise. 'None of us are musicians', said Kesey proudly, 'we are all completely bumbling amateurs' (*The Acid Test*, 1966). Although some of the later acid tests took on the atmosphere of concert performances by the Grateful Dead and other nascent psychedelic groups, until the last such event in 1966 Kesey worked to keep the events as disorganised as possible, describing them as 'deliberately self-defeating' and trying 'to achieve nothing at all times' (*ibid.*). Kesey's disorganisation by design rejected the idea of finished work in favour of a participatory experience of failure and crisis somewhat akin to Artaud's theatre of cruelty.

- 18 Even closer to Artaud's concept of an overwhelming style of theatre was Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* [hereafter *EPI*], a series of performances that occurred at about the same time as the Acid Tests. A multi-media freak out with connections to the New York neo-avant-garde art scene and the happenings that had become fashionable at the time, *EPI* was a series of multi-media events delivering sensory overload and, like the Acid Tests, featured a legendary house band, the Velvet Underground, to guide the trip. But unlike the Acid Tests, there were few traces of optimism and critics viewed the trip as a bad one. Lacking any promising concepts such as Kesey's 'open circles' of free expression or possibilities for accidental discovery, *EPI* was essentially an audio-visual attack in what seemed at the time to be a more dangerous environment. Reviewers described being 'brutalized, helpless' and 'ducking in the midst of shrapnel' in an event that 'vibrates with menace, cynicism and perversion' (Joseph 2005: 250–51). Although in retrospect, these shows were perhaps no more assaultive than typical rock concerts or dance raves today, they sharply contrasted with the peace and love philosophy then promoted by the counterculture.
- 19 The intensity of freak out events like *EPI* or the Acid Tests was difficult to capture on record, but going mad in the recording studio eventually became a method for bands that emerged out of these underground scenes, each exhibiting varying levels of skill in creating the raw atmosphere of freaking out. With impeccable musical skill, the Grateful Dead, on their album *Anthem of the Sun* (1968), blended excerpts from live shows with studio recordings to create sound collages on songs like 'Caution (Do Not Stop on Tracks)' and 'That's It for the Other One', the latter song paying tribute to Kesey's Merry Prankster activities. Much more raw by comparison, the Velvet Underground brought their high volume noise into the recording studio for their first album, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (1967), with the feedback-drenched final track, 'European Son' being the closest audio approximation of Warhol's *EPI* at the time.
- 20 The album that most successfully captured freaking out in the recording studio in the 1960s was the appropriately titled *Freak Out!* (1966) by the Mothers of Invention led by Frank Zappa. The album package itself was an image of sensory overload, blasting a message of radical social critique that resembled a Dadaist manifesto. The liner notes included relevant quotes, names of influential artists, as well as everyone who played a part in the Los Angeles freak scene documented by Zappa, and even included a map to 'freak out hot spots'. Most importantly, in the liner notes Zappa defined freaking out as
- a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking, dress and social etiquette in order to express CREATIVELY his relationship to his immediate environment and the social structure as a whole ...

when any number of 'Freaks' gather and express themselves creatively through music or dance, for example, it is generally referred to as a FREAK OUT. The participants, already emancipated from our national social slavery, dressed in their most inspired apparel, realize as a group whatever potential they possess for free expression. (Zappa 1966, caps in original)

With gratuitous use of capital letters and italics, Zappa invited his listeners to freak out and become members of what he called 'The United Mutations' (ibid.).

- 21 On the extended tracks that made up Sides 3 and 4 of this double LP, Zappa displayed his 'united mutations' – the freaks of the Los Angeles scene – who he invited into the Hollywood recording studio to 'freak out on \$500 worth of rented percussion' on a Friday night in March, 1966 (ibid.). 'Return of the Son of Monster Magnet' [hereafter RSMM], the 12-minute track that concludes the album, captures the raw sounds of that late night collective freak out, but ironically – and there is always irony with Zappa – the entire track is meticulously structured. In the liner notes it is listed as an 'Unfinished Ballet in Two Tableaux' in a nod to Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* with the first part subtitled 'Ritual Dance of the Child-Killer' and the second part subtitled 'Nullis Pretti (No commercial potential)'. As Watson interprets the track, the reference to ritual is more than just a parody of Stravinsky, but a symbolic sacrifice of the character Suzy Creamcheese who represents innocence deflowered and corrupted (Watson 1997: 157). But deflowered and corrupted by what? The conventional society attacked in Zappa's manifesto? Or the hedonistic, drug taking, free love counterculture that he seemed to be celebrating?
- 22 The 'Ritual Dance' begins with a brief dialogue between Zappa and the character Suzy Creamcheese, in which he asks her, 'what's got into you', implying anything from a drug to a penis to self-realisation, all potentially corrupting influences common at the time. This is followed by a slow build-up of orgasmic panting by the voice of Suzy Creamcheese, accompanied by Zappa's freaks vocalising non-melodic sounds, faux jungle calls and occasional screams over repeating drum patterns and a siren sound. As Suzy's orgasmic panting builds, the drums speed up and the accompanying voices increase in density with a chorus of males mimicking excited animals. The first section concludes with the instruments in rapid tempi fading behind several voices saying hippie expressions such as 'flashing', 'oh wow' and 'happening, man', suggesting that the conflation of music, drugs and sex has killed the innocent child. The shorter second part, 'Nullis Pretti (No commercial potential)', is more playful as the voices, including Suzy's, continue to chant and the phrase 'cream cheese' is subjected to multiple vocal variations. As the tape speed of the voices increases, the final vocal sounds evoke the laughter of children, perhaps suggesting that the sacrificed child has been reborn.
- 23 Although such an interpretation may be reading too much into this audio celebration of anarchy, the freak out of RSMM is clearly a highly structured work that is much more finished than either Kesey's Acid Tests or John and Yoko's first album, resulting in several ironies. While his invited guests freaked out in the studio, Zappa was the control freak, carefully organising these sessions in advance (Walley 1972: 61) and manipulating them in the editing process. The collective free expression that Zappa championed in his manifesto was perhaps less about emancipation from social slavery than a way to add tone colours to his individual compositional palette, enabling him to better critique society and even the counterculture itself. Perhaps the greatest irony was that while RSMM and the entire album seemed to celebrate psychedelic drugs, Zappa was fiercely opposed to all drugs and even published a public statement that year denouncing all

forms of drugs (ibid.: 64–5). Zappa soon expanded his critique beyond mainstream culture to attack the counterculture's gleeful indulgence in dangerous drugs and simplistic rock and roll with naïve messages of peace and love as heard on the Mothers' 1968 album, *We're Only in It for the Money*. While it is open to question whether or not Zappa was representing the counterculture or simply exploiting it, Zappa was clearly employing avant-garde technique not for the kind of experience advocated by Kesey, but for the purpose of making art.

- 24 Zappa's transformation of that late night freak out is what Peter Bürger would call a 'non-organic work' of avant-garde art in that it is built on principles of chance and montage as opposed to the structural integrity of 'organic' modernist works:

Artists who produce an organic work ... treat their material as something living. They respect its significance as something that has grown from concrete life situations. For avant-gardistes, on the other hand, material is just that, material. Their activity initially consists in nothing other than in killing the 'life' of the material, that is, in tearing it out of its functional context that gives it meaning. Whereas the classicist recognizes and respects in the material the carrier of a meaning, the avant-gardistes see only the empty sign, to which only they can impart significance. The classicist correspondingly treats the material as a whole, whereas the avant-gardiste tears it out of the life totality, isolates it, and turns it into a fragment. (Bürger 1984: 70)

- 25 This transformation of material in order to make art explains a great deal of Zappa's montage style of which his first album was just the beginning. Throughout his career Zappa was always a realist, not a madman, and constantly responding to current affairs that provided the impetus for his work. Yet Zappa's transformations of popular culture, whether the disco satires of the late 1970s or the PMRC hearings of the 1980s, were always directed at subduing the forces he opposed and make them serve his purpose as an artist.

Psychedelic Party Tracks and Freak Out Failures

- 26 The freak out may have appeared to support countercultural revolution, but its self-destructive death instinct – as suggested by Zappa's cynical RSMM – worked against any hopes the counterculture may have had for building an alternative community through rock music. Activist John Sinclair declared rock music to be 'one of the most vital revolutionary forces in the West' precisely because it made people feel 'alive again in the middle of this monstrous funeral parlour of western civilisation' (Sinclair 1995: 301). But freaking out, like avant-garde actions that die 'consciously and voluntarily' (Calinescu 1987: 124), had a built-in tendency to negate itself, and was perhaps more about death than life. Strategies of instigating a delirium of the senses through media overload, dissolving egos, and messing up minds with chemicals to circumvent any goal are linked to a death obsession in rock that is hardly limited to the psychedelic era, but seemed to be everywhere in the late 1960s. Themes of death permeated psychedelic rock from the Mothers and the Velvet Underground to the Beatles, the Stones and the Doors, and for a brief moment freaking out was a fashionable expression undertaken by many musicians in mainstream pop music that seemed to be leading nowhere.
- 27 One manifestation of rock and roll's capacity for celebrating life was the 'party track', a type of recording that includes sounds of people shouting and making noises as if at a party. As explored by the Beach Boys on the album *Beach Boys Party*, the party track created the illusion of people seemingly enjoying a party with the band in which anyone

could participate by clapping, banging on bottles or playing bongos. Party tracks went psychedelic in 1966 with songs such as the Beatles' 'Yellow Submarine' and Bob Dylan's 'Rainy Day Women #12 and 35' in which the parties became wilder under the apparent influence of drugs and began to carry a distinctive countercultural message: not only was everyone invited to the party, but everyone listening was implicated in the counterculture – 'we all live in a yellow submarine' and 'everybody must get stoned'. Conceived this way, the party track seemed to offer the promise, or at least the illusion, of a unified counterculture.

- 28 But as party tracks became a type of freak out this approach led to creative dead ends for some bands. The competitive Brian Wilson continued with the party track technique to salvage the Beach Boys' aborted Smile project that ended up as the album *Smiley Smile* in 1967. Featuring several stoned party tracks with giggling voices spouting nonsense that are sometimes sped up, *Smiley Smile* has since become a cult favourite and even praised for pushing the boundaries of conventional song form, but this disturbing version of the ordinarily squeaky clean Beach Boys alienated their fans and was a commercial failure at the time (Harrison 1997). The Beatles' other competitors, the Rolling Stones, with their more decadent, Dionysian image, were perhaps more convincing at freaking out, but they also failed. The album *Their Satanic Majesties Request* (1967), widely considered a failed imitation of the Beatles' successful psychedelic pop, was an erratic, stoned-sounding record in which the band explored unusual and eclectic instruments such as recorders and Indian percussion. The eight-minute 'Sing This All Together (and See What Happens)' featured meandering jamming complete with snippets of conversation intended to recreate a drug party and is critically viewed today as a blemish on their recorded output.
- 29 If freaking out on record albums was unwelcomed by listeners, it also met with animosity from audiences of the more adventurous live acts that attempted them onstage. The Syd Barrett-led Pink Floyd, the darlings of the London psychedelic scene, favoured free form, pan-tonal jams such as 'Interstellar Overdrive' and, when playing at venues outside the underground London scene, were often met with openly hostile audiences expecting their current hit songs (Mason 2005: 67–9). The band did record a shorter, nine-minute version of 'Interstellar Overdrive' for their 1967 album, *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, which became the raw blueprint for the more controlled, extended progressive rock pieces by the reformed group following Syd Barrett's legendary collapse from what appeared to be drug-induced madness. Also on the London scene was Soft Machine, a band that explicitly cited the Dadaist pataphysics of Alfred Jarry in their music. Soft Machine's most notorious song in concert, 'We Did It Again', was a single 4-beat-measure-long riff played over and over again along to a repeated vocal chant of 'we did it again'. While extended versions of this minimalist joke were embraced as hip Dadaism in France, it generated hostility among audiences in the UK (G. Bennett 2005: 110). Like their colleagues Pink Floyd, Soft Machine soon underwent personnel changes and began developing multi-movement progressive rock suites in a more listener-friendly and professional style that dispensed with Dadaist pranks.
- 30 With the lack of audience and critical support, it seemed that freaking out was not particularly revolutionary nor was it entertaining. More of a party spoiler, freaking out helped bring an end to the party of psychedelic pop just as it was getting started, making the genre one of the shortest historical periods in rock (Borthwick and Moy 2004: 42). The demand for immediate and total transcendence in psychedelic rock – what Russell Reising calls 'psychedelic carpe diem' and 'psychedelic apocalypse' (Reising 2009: 528) – could not

possibly be sustained. In a music industry that began marketing rock as an art form, rock musicians in the late 1960s either looked backward, as in the return to roots for the Rolling Stones, or looked forward, as in the development of progressive rock by Pink Floyd and Soft Machine. Rock music of the new era would not be based on audience participation in a wild freak out, but on audience consumption of music made by professionals who carefully controlled their craft. As for the San Francisco bands associated with Kesey's Acid Tests, several of these groups were signed to CBS Records and marketed using countercultural rhetoric. The resulting advertising slogan, 'The Revolution is on CBS' (Harron 1988: 184), ironically proclaimed the advent of the real revolution of the psychedelic era: a newly revitalised music industry.

- 31 The most destructive avant-garde attack on the burgeoning rock music industry of the late 1960s was the self-destruction of the Monkees, a prefabricated teen idol band that was one of the entertainment industry's most successful appropriations of late 1960s counterculture. After nearly two years of a successful weekly television series, their feature film *Head* (1968) was essentially an extended freak out that can be seen as an attempt either to gain countercultural acceptance or to terminate the band's career. Although this Hollywood-created band had fought for artistic control over their product and eventually obtained it by playing their own instruments and writing their own songs, the irony of this foray into art filmmaking was that the group once again became, in the words of singer Davy Jones, 'pawns in something we helped create but had no control over' (Lynskey 2011). Created by the Monkees' producers with a script by Jack Nicholson, *Head* satirised war, the entertainment business, and the Monkees' own commercial enterprise. Like the satirical works of Zappa – who has a cameo appearance in the film – *Head* is another example of a 'non-organic' work that uses montage to kill the life of the material and expose the façade of the band. The death of the Monkees as an entertainment commodity is made explicit in the film's opening sequence of drummer Micky Dolenz leaping off a bridge in an apparent suicide and the final scene in which Dolenz and the rest of the band make the same leap only to become trapped in a giant aquarium that thwarts their ultimate act of freedom. The commercial failure of the Monkees' final freak out may have been its only success in that it helped to euthanise this band that was viewed as inauthentic, not only by rock fans, but by some members of the band themselves.

Freaking Out in the 1970s: For Some the Revolution Never Ended

- 32 At the end of his 1968 book on countercultural revolution, Jeff Nuttall declared that the 'freak out is over' and, retreating from the sensory delirium he advocated throughout the book, called for artists to 'turn away from the Nothingness' and give 'power and body to the true music of the gods by cultivating the craftsman in us' (Nuttall 1968: 268–9). While many rock musicians of the 1970s proceeded to develop their craft in a thriving music industry, some rock musicians continued dabbling in absurdist anarchy despite critical and public antagonism toward avant-garde gestures. John Lennon, the most high-profile rock musician of the time, continued his extreme collaborations with Yoko Ono, leading some critics to question his sanity, but what many saw as Lennon's folly was part of a larger, more calculated Dadaist protest against war (Wiener 1998: 8). Much less calculated and far from the media spotlight, Detroit-based band the Stooges experimented with

psychedelic drugs during recording sessions, concluding their album *Fun House* (1970) with a song titled 'L.A. Blues', a formless noise jam originally titled 'Freak' (Matheu 2009: 61) that cast freaking out as a raw, punk gesture stripped of the customary countercultural statements.

- 33 For many German underground rock musicians in the early 1970s, in a genre known today as 'krautrock', freaking out was an essential part of a radical approach by bands that operated as musical collectives dedicated to avant-garde approaches to music making. Long freak out tracks were the norm for commune bands such as Amon Düül, its spin-off band Amon Düül II and Ash Ra Tempel, a band that recorded an actual 1960's style 'acid test' with countercultural guru Timothy Leary leading a large group of amateurs in an LSD ritual documented on the album *Seven Up* (1972). Even the more sober-minded, Cologne-based group Can experimented with extended jamming in the studio to capture spontaneous freak outs with eccentric and unstable lead singers such as Damo Suzuki and Malcolm Mooney babbling nonsense lyrics. The German commune band most dedicated to Dadaist anarchy was Faust, a band formed by impresario and journalist Uwe Nettlebeck with a manifesto proclaiming the therapeutic properties of the absurd (Koch and Harris 2009: 586). Faust's disorienting, non-organic collages of sound attacked all conventions of popular music with mad laughter the most frequent recurring motif on their records.
- 34 In contrast to the outsider approach of commune bands from Germany, former Velvet Underground guitarist Lou Reed used his insider position as an established artist with RCA Records to directly attack the music industry with his album *Metal Machine Music* (1975). This double disc of continuous guitar distortion and feedback has become one of the most infamous albums in rock history and an avant-garde prank that mocked the music industry's marketing strategies by creating an ambiguity as to whether the work is highbrow art music, lowbrow rock or an elaborate joke. Lester Bangs portrays Reed as delighting in a sadistic relationship with his fans, his critics and his record label, as he reports Reed trying to convince RCA to release it on their classical Red Seal label, insisting that references to Beethoven were hidden within the impenetrable walls of feedback on the record (Bangs 1987: 189). While many record buyers demanded refunds shortly after it was released, Bangs celebrated the album as one of the greatest of all time, thus canonising it as a landmark punk album, but undoubtedly one with as few listeners as *Two Virgins*.
- 35 Extreme recordings by Lou Reed, Faust, Can and the Stooges reveal continuities between the countercultural anarchy of the 1960s and the punk rebellion of the mid-1970s that encompassed music more diverse than three-chord rock songs. The punk revolt against a music industry dressed in countercultural disguise spawned numerous post-punk bands who created freak outs that refute the punk cliché of 1976 as a 'year zero' for rock and supports the notion that 'the punk and hippy eras were much closer to each other than to what came before or after' (Harron 1988: 205). Like the 1940s bebop movement that can be seen as both an evolutionary and a revolutionary force in jazz history (DeVeaux 1997), 1970s punk reveals just as many continuities as disruptions if one looks at bands involved in avant-garde experimentation (see Reynolds 2005 and Hegarty 2007). Public Image Limited (aka PiL), Throbbing Gristle, Psychic TV, Nurse With Wound, Coil and Current 93, are a few of the UK post-punk, industrial and post-industrial groups that celebrated destruction of song form, amateurish values of musicianship and conceptual absurdity, demonstrating that the freak out was not over.

- 36 John Lydon of the Sex Pistols and PiL is the central conduit through which hippie avant-gardism passed through punk into post-punk avant-gardism (see Albiez 2003). The sloppy performance of conventional song forms by the Sex Pistols may have been homologous to the social anarchy behind the UK punk movement, but Lydon – a record collector with a taste for rock avant-gardism – explored sonic anarchy further with his group PiL that developed a distinctive style of ineptitude. Unlike many punk musicians for whom ineptitude is a virtue that connotes authenticity (Hegarty 2007: 94–5), the more skilled musicians of PiL, such as guitarist Keith Levene, exaggerated amateurishness by intentionally playing ‘wrong’ notes (Reynolds 2005: 20). Like Zappa’s counterattack on hippie culture, the early PiL albums were counterattacks on punk orthodoxy, each LP veering further away from punk and toward krautrock eclecticism that alienated many fans (Hegarty 2007: 97). John Lydon’s self-destructive tendencies were, like John Lennon’s, partly a reaction to his position as the most prominent figure of a powerful youth movement within a revitalised popular music industry.
- 37 With the late 1970s punk DIY philosophy encouraging young amateurs to create their own musical enterprises, freaking out could prove just as useful as three-chord simplicity, as was the case for Steve Stapleton, founder of the band Nurse With Wound. An obsessive record collector and devotee of krautrock, Stapleton and his friends set out to collect as many freak out records as possible and followed three basic guidelines: long tracks, no songs and drug-related album covers (Stapleton 2001). When a friend of Stapleton’s who worked at a recording studio offered him free studio time if he had a band, Stapleton lied, telling him that he was in a band and immediately bought some instruments and invited his record collector friends to the recording studio. Having never touched musical instruments before, the three novices went into the studio with no rehearsal and recorded the album *Chance Meeting on a Dissecting Table of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella* (1979) as a spontaneous freak out, becoming the band Nurse With Wound. In punk DIY fashion, Stapleton packaged the album himself and created a lifelong career for himself independently selling his surrealist-inspired music.
- 38 For groups like Nurse With Wound and related post-punk bands, as well as bands such as Faust that continued into the twenty-first century, it seems as if the revolution never ended and psychedelic apocalypse is perpetually looming. Since the 1980s, the band Coil have treated their recordings more as magic rituals than as musical works – as in their extended track ‘How to Destroy Angels’ – and the group’s use of psychedelic drugs to achieve altered states in the recording studio was a common method for the group up until their dissolution in 2004. Genesis P-Orridge of Psychic TV and David Tibet of Current 93 have both expressed fondness for the consciousness-altering spirit of 1960s psychedelic rock and have expanded on its darker side in their own music. This ongoing obsession with the ‘Six Six Sixties’ – a song title by Throbbing Gristle – suggests the dark side of the long sixties. Whereas mainstream absorption of countercultural values, as argued by Tom Hayden in his book *The Long Sixties* (2009), have helped drive cultural change, evidenced socially by President Obama’s election and musically by the political activism of rock groups such as U2, among some underground musicians there is a more apocalyptic spirit that continues as well. No longer part of any countercultural movement, the ‘long freak out’ continues a discourse of anarchy in which musicians flail at instruments and shout against meaning in pursuit of chaos, irrationality and notions of revolution that may not be collective, but are individualised and desperately solipsistic.

Conclusion: Unfinished Music as Resistance

- 39 Yoko Ono's notion of unfinished music offers a useful way to understand how freak out recordings function as a strategy of resistance by rock musicians. The recordings included here range from the unfinished rawness of *Two Virgins*, to the more intentional chaos of drug party tracks, punk noise jams and krautrock tape collages, to more finished, cohesive works such as Frank Zappa's freak out ballet. But all of these recordings are unfinished in the sense that they deny completion. Freak out tracks resist becoming rock songs by rejecting beat, melody and song form, and in their fragmentation they also resist becoming organic musical objects for aesthetic contemplation. Deeper readings of *Two Virgins* or *Metal Machine Music* might reveal further insights – perhaps identify specific avant-garde source works or an aesthetics of audio madness – but such detailed analysis, like analysing the elegant contours of Duchamp's urinal, risks misrepresenting as art objects what are essentially raw and noisy acts of resistance. Such sonic attacks should not be misinterpreted as poor imitations of avant-garde tradition or efforts to gain highbrow cultural accreditation (see Gendron 2002), but as attacks that are immediate and of the moment in their lack of any clearly defined goals.
- 40 The idea of madness that runs through all of these recordings is problematic as it is feigned in almost every case and for this reason needs to be understood as a conscious act of provocation. Whether it is a broad, utopian attack against what Kesey called the 'closed circles' of society or a focused attack on record executives or demanding fans, the avant-garde strategy of pushing an art form to its deepest point of crisis in a self-destructive manner can only be seen as madness in the competitive business of popular music. One explanation for this madness might be that musicians use it as a pose of authenticity, still regarded by some scholars as an essential part of the aesthetics of rock (see Moore 2002 and Gracyk 1996). Allen Ginsberg declaring his authentic insanity against a sane world certainly helped make him a countercultural hero, but the Monkees declaring their authentic selves trapped within an inauthentic music industry left them as sacrificial victims of the marketplace. Whether a rock musician's experiment in avant-gardism destroys an existing career or, if they're lucky, creates a new one, the consumer plays a participatory role, ultimately completing these works either by buying into utopian ideals, expanding their own listening habits or demanding refunds for albums of unlistenable noise. Such are the perils of Kesey's dangerous, open circles designed to go nowhere.
- 41 Ironically, the marketing of countercultural revolution by the music industry during the late 1960s allowed musicians this freedom to go 'beyond music' and engage in precisely the same participatory aesthetics practised by neo-avant-garde artists at that time. Just as avant-garde aesthetics in the art world had empowered artists with the ability to transform anything they touched into art (Rosenberg 1972: 11), the music industry endowed charismatic rock stars with a similar artistic license and at the height of the counterculture some rock musicians and artists seemed to share similar goals. The marriage of pop star John Lennon and Fluxus artist Yoko Ono symbolised the mutual efforts by rock musicians and avant-garde artists to integrate art and daily life through collective creation and reception of music unhindered by any boundaries between performer and audience. But whereas the avant-garde had obliterated the old hierarchy of values in art, generating new styles of conceptualism incomprehensible to the mass

audience, yet recuperated by museums (see Calinescu 1987: 144-8), the rock experimentalists can claim no such triumph within popular culture. The raw, anarchistic nonsense of the freak out seems designed to resist coming to fruition as either a successful work of art or slice of entertainment that could serve any function in the marketplace of popular music.

- 42 In the twenty-first century countercultural madness is no longer the preferred method of resistance to the culture industry. While the romanticised battle between creative freedom and corporate domination continues in the narrative of rock, the very notion of resistance has become a cliché in which just about anyone can declare their independence as an artist and gain points for authenticity. Alongside this still-thriving romantic model of the 1960s and 1970s – what Frith and Horne call ‘rock bohemianism’ – is the more self-conscious ‘pop situationism’ that emerged in the late 1970s when musicians began to apply cool-headed, neo-avant-garde theories of pop art to their work and its marketing (Frith and Horne 1987). From this perspective, marketing what Bloomfield calls ‘resisting songs’ – pop songs that subtly disrupt the conventions of pop song form – is seen as a way of resisting commodification while avoiding the avant-garde ‘cultural ghetto’ (Bloomfield 1993: 28) where rock extremists like Steve Stapleton reside, even though his music seems more effective at resisting commodification by resisting conventional song form itself. Compared to the soft sell pop resistance of today – if such pop is indeed resistant – the extreme freak out records of the past still scream and spark more controversy than the Dadaist readymade objects that quietly reside in art museums. While the Beatles remain the most iconic symbol of the romantic ideal of the rock band, creating authentic art and selling it – still today – within a commercial music industry, albums like *Two Virgins* are still actively engaged in resistance. As long as there are Beatles fans outraged over albums like *Two Virgins*, John and Yoko’s music will remain unfinished.

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- Bob Rafelson, 1968. *Head*.

ABSTRACTS

Cette contribution examine les enregistrements « freak out » dans le rock, à savoir de longs titres d'album qui, par leur anarchie sonore, leur absurdité conceptuelle et leur technique amateur, connotent la folie. Ces enregistrements datent des années 1960 et 1970 et sont de purs produits de la contre-culture, tout en étant enracinés dans la tradition des avant-gardes artistiques. Dans leurs attaques lancées contre l'industrie du disque, ils rejetaient les conventions musicales à l'œuvre à l'époque : structures des chansons, signification et compétence technique. Là où des disques aussi extrêmes mettent en évidence les relations difficiles entre art et rock, que des musiciens pop s'essayaient à l'avant-gardisme n'est pas antithétique au rock ; au contraire, elle fait partie de son discours de révolte. Cet article démontre comment cette production, qui va de l'époque hippie des années 1960 au post-punk de la fin des années 1970, fonctionna plus comme une série d'actes de résistance agressifs contre les conventions sociales et musicales que comme des tentatives d'élever les musiques populaires au rang d'art légitime.

This article examines avant-garde 'freak out' recordings in rock music: extended album tracks that suggest madness in their sonic anarchy, conceptual absurdity and amateur technique. Products of the counterculture rooted in the historical avant-garde, these recordings by musicians in the 1960s and 1970s rejected musical conventions of song structure, meaning and competence in their attacks on an emerging music industry. While such extreme recordings bring to the fore the uneasy relationship between art and rock, avant-garde recordings by pop musicians are not antithetical to rock, but part of its discourse of rebellion. This article demonstrates how recordings of this kind ranging from the hippie era of the 1960s to the postpunk era of the late 1970s functioned more as aggressive acts of resistance to social and musical convention than attempts to elevate popular music to a higher level of art.

INDEX

Geographical index: États-Unis / USA, Grande-Bretagne / Great Britain

artiste Grateful Dead (the), Ono (Yoko), Lennon (John), Plastic Ono Band, Captain Beefheart, Beatles (the), Mothers of Invention (the), Zappa (Frank), Nurse with Wound, Reed (Lou), Rolling Stones (the), Velvet Underground (the), Stooges (the), Watts (Alan)

Chronological index: 1960-1969, 1970-1979

Mots-clés: contre-culture / résistance, hippies / freaks, avant-garde, légitimation, underground / alternative, expérimentation

Keywords: counterculture / resistance, hippies / freaks, avant-garde, legitimization, underground / alternative, experimentation

genremusical expérimentale / experimental music, psychedelic / acid rock, rock music

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