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# Constructed Nostalgia for Rock's Golden Age: "I Believe in Yesterday"

by

Deena Weinstein

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**Abstract:** The phenomenon of rock's past having occluded its present is examined through the intentionality that grounds it culturally and through the social-structural determinants of that intentionality. Specifically, neo-nostalgia (Jameson) and similar postmodern terms (simulation, construction) constitute the intentionality and the commercial interests of the music industry and the generational power of the Baby Boomers and Gen X are the structural determinants. Neo-nostalgia for rock's past is directed toward an aestheticized imaginary of rock's golden age — a mythical time that never was, rather than a supposed eternal transcendent (religion) or an individualized empirical past (homesickness). Nostalgia for a construction, fabricated for corporate profit and generational/parental power, is a depthless and riskless adventure for a generation that experiences severe constraints on its ability to actualize the modern(ist) ideals of authenticity-novelty.

**Keywords:** *nostalgia – classic rock – generation – the sixties – construction – youthfulness – neo-nostalgia.*

**Résumé :** Le passé du rock en est venu à étouffer son présent. Cet article examine l'intentionnalité qui, culturellement, fonde ce phénomène. Il montre que la néo-nostalgie étudiée par Jameson, avec d'autres éléments postmodernes (ceux de simulation et de construction), dirige cette intentionnalité, et que les facteurs structurels de celle-ci sont, d'une part, les intérêts mercantiles de l'industrie musicale et, d'autre part, le pouvoir de deux générations, celle des baby-boomers et de la « Génération X » – les facteurs structurels qui la déterminent. La néo-nostalgie pour le rock passé ne vise pas une transcendance supposément éternelle, comme dans la religion, ou un passé réellement vécu par les individus, comme dans le mal du pays. À la place, cette néo-nostalgie porte sur un imaginaire esthétisé, construit autour d'un âge d'or du rock qui n'est en fait qu'un mythe, une époque qui n'a jamais existé. Avoir la nostalgie d'une construction fabriquée en vue du profit, qui sert le pouvoir des parents, de la génération à laquelle ils appartiennent, n'offre actuellement aux jeunes, limités dans leur capacité à accomplir l'idéal moderne/moderniste d'authenticité et de nouveauté, qu'une aventure superficielle et sans danger.

**Mots-clés :** *nostalgie – rock classique – génération – les sixties – construction – jeunesse – neo-nostalgie.*

**Nostalgia** isn't what it used to be and neither is rock. In a sense, rock today is even more what it used to be while nostalgia, especially nostalgia about rock music, has changed so much that it deserves a new name. It once referred to direct experience; now it is mainly a cultural construction, so it would be more precise to refer to it as cultural nostalgia. Both nostalgia and rock have had their own histories, the first as old as the human past itself, and, the second inaugurated in the middle of the last century.

The relationship between nostalgia and rock has flipped—originally nostalgia was often influenced by rock, whereas today rock is impelled by nostalgia's new incarnation. The following discussion traces the conjunction of rock and nostalgia in terms of a general (post-modern) cultural analysis and its social-structural grounds.

### Rock Zombies Invade The Living

Rock emerged and flourished under the sign of romanticism, a cultural moment of modernity. In contrast to traditional or "classical" standards of appreciation, a new rock song or artist was supposed to be novel, different than what was extant. That standard was built into the definition of modern art. As Umberto Eco put it: "The modern criterion for recognizing the artistic value was NOVELTY, high information" (Eco, 1985: 161). "The concept of absolute originality is a contemporary one, born with Romanticism..." (Eco, 1985: 178).

Of course rock never was never as radically new as its aesthetic seemed to demand. No art form could be. Contemporary criticism has taught us that culture is inter-textual; no cultural object is pristine and *sui generis* (Kristeva, 1980). Even individual artists bring to any "new work" their sameness (name, face, signature sound, recurring themes, and a variety of expected tropes). More generally, genres are bundles of already known expectations. Nonetheless, what was privileged by creators, fans, critics, and media publicists in the rock world was what was different. If there wasn't enough that was different, the work was denounced as old, tired, generic, or mass produced.

Over the years, indeed, differences have proliferated, new genres have emerged. The term "rock" has become protean, covering diverse styles that project contrasting sensibilities and ideologies. The meaning of the term rock has always been a contested one which has varied over time, over place (including national discourses), and by the interests of those wielding it. Yet rock still demarcates a discursive field that connects to its origins. It bears the traces of its romantic DNA, but seems to have undergone a transvaluation of values, an inversion of its standards. Rather than the new, it is the old that is privileged today. The change has been palpably evident and radical. It can be documented by studies done by the author of her students in the undergraduate sociology of rock course that she has taught each year since the early 1980s. The students would be asked on the first day of class which bands they knew most about and which artists were their favorites.

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Up until the mid-1990s, students reported that they knew the most about contemporary bands with a youth following, among which were their favorites. Then there was a change that was at first surprising—the majority of students listening to radio tuned into “classic rock”-formatted stations, that is, those that played rock that was very popular more than 15 or 30 years earlier. Bands that the students knew the most about were now those bands whose music was played on classic rock radio, and among those artists were their favorites. As students began to listen to their own collections of mp3s on iPods and computers, I asked them to estimate what proportion of those songs were originally released within the past 15 years. For each class, more than three-quarters of the students reported that more than two-thirds and for some as high as 90% of their collections were from periods prior to fifteen years ago.

The micro-evidence from the author's on-going studies can be abundantly supplemented by macro-developments that clearly point to a transvaluation of present and past in rock.

Rock radio is now dominated by the classic rock format. As major markets see other rock formats erased, classic rock stations seem to be thriving. Live rock is also dominated by dinosaurs, particularly in the income they generate for themselves and their promoters. Prog-rock band Yes is touring profitably. Bassist Rick Squire, who co-founded the band in 1968, recognizes the linkage between radio and the concert business. “We still get radio play, so I think that keeps bringing in new, young fans, as well as the older diehards” (Blair, 2013). These older bands concentrate most or all of their

set list on their old hits, ignoring songs from (or even no longer having) recent releases. Those paying \$355.00 (the average ticket price) to see the Rolling Stones in 2013 find the band “playing certain old reliables again and again” (Caro, 2013). One meme of many recent concerts is playing the whole of the band's “classic” album. Yes, always known for its excesses, is true to form. “We don't have a new album,” Squire said, “so instead we're going to perform three of our classic albums—*The Yes Album*, *Close to the Edge* and *Going for the One*, all in their entirety, at each show. And the fans all seem to love the idea” (Blair, 2013).

Ticket prices for older bands are far higher than those for even well-known younger ones. The average concert ticket prices for artists well established by the 1980s “took off after the mid-1990s, ... prices grew much faster than overall price inflation after the mid-1990s” (Krueger, 2005). Much like the ratio of the rich to the rest of the population, “In 1981, the top 1% of artists took in 26% of concert revenue; in 2003, that figure more than doubled to 56%.” The top 5% of revenue generators took in 62% of concert revenue in 1982 and 84% in 2003. Surely, this is a superstar market if there ever was one.” “The number of shows performed by these superstar artists declined by 18%, while revenue per show increased by 60%. The increase in revenue was driven by both an increase in price and an increase in tickets per show” (Krueger, 2005).

Rock festivals that once were the gathering of the young to see newer artists now feature acts that have been well known for many decades. The 2013 Bonnaroo festival's headliners included Paul McCartney, ZZ Top and Billy Idol in addition to

Wilco, and My Morning Jacket. The audience for these festivals tends to be mainly late-teens and twenty-somethings, a demographic that hasn't changed since the late 1960s.

The major record companies are making their rock profits not from new releases but off their back catalogue. Sony has a whole division, Sony Legacy, that does very well. Sold as mp3s or as CDs that are in box sets, anniversary re-issues, newly remastered releases, never-heard recordings once deemed unfit for prior albums, and old live concerts (as CD or DVD); such recycled product comprises a significant portion of their new releases. To this considerable revenue stream is added the increasingly major source—licensing fees primarily from old releases received from sources like video games and advertisements, and streaming media like Pandora and Spotify.

Rock has always been raiding the past, but today they proudly fly their pirate flags. Some of the best known newer groups such as the White Stripes and the Black Keys have well-publicized their older aesthetics. New releases by older artists often point to their past in no uncertain terms. Remark- ing about David Bowie's 2013 *The Next Day*, the *New Yorker* critic Sasha Frere-Jones (2013: 84) writes: "*The Next Day* uses sounds that are several decades old, particularly reverb settings and syn- thesizers that even a musical illiterate will identify as sounding "1980s." Regardless of whether these markers are intentional, it's clear that Bowie *does* want you to think about time: specifically, the time that David Jones (his birth name) has spent being David Bowie." John Fogerty's 2013 release, *Wrote a Song for Everyone*, pairs Fogerty as song-

writer and on some tracks as performer too, with a variety of musicians including Dave Grohl and the Foo Fighters, Rage Against the Machine's Tom Morello, and Bob Seger, on various of Fogerty's late-1960s hits.

The dead, the soon-to-be-dead, those risen from the dead as re-united bands, and a hologram or two on the live stage—these are the zombies that haunt the earth, airwaves, and rock and celebrity mass media on paper and via the internet. In sum, rock today is awash in the rock of yesterday.

Returning to the author's students, they were recently asked to respond anonymously to the questions: "Would you have preferred to live in the 1960s or now? Why?" Two thirds *preferred to live in the sixties*. Some of their reasons for that preference were:

"To live in a time where music was so influential would be awesome. Living in the height of optimism and living off music sounds like fun;"

"I like a lot of the music made in the 1960s and it seems like a very free and laid back period;"

"...because the 1960s youth had the opportunity to see the most influential rock bands of all time";

"It was a time of change political, in thought, in fashion, music and society. I could be a part of the change or at least witness it";

"It was a time of revolution where the youth actually gave a damn about what is going on and actually had hope for the future. I want to be best friends with Bob Dylan";

"Youth movement, optimism, the Beatles, art, LSD;"

"The 1960s aesthetic culturally, musically, politically seems to have the most people genuinely involved/ learning and is most appealing;"

"I am a helpless romantic with a severe case of 'Golden Age Thinking'".

## Constructed Nostalgia

Rock hasn't changed to become exactly what it used to be. It carries a severely edited version of its past with many artists and recordings redacted, and others, especially those from the late 1960s and early 1970s, bolded and underlined. On the other hand, nostalgia is something more than it has been with a history far older than the word itself.

The oldest form of nostalgia, first documented in those who lived and died in the same community in which they were born, was for some mythic past. It was a past when the gods interacted with humans. In the Abrahamic religions, that past was described as the Garden of Eden. It was the home of human beings, the home of us all, a wonderful place-time to which we could never "return," providing that dual sweet and bitter feeling that characterizes nostalgia.

Nostalgia's second incarnation, adding to but not erasing that originary type, began once there were armies stationed or fighting for years in foreign lands, sailors, traders, or explorers discovering "new worlds," and whole communities forced from their ancestral lands. This new type was a longing to return to a real, not ideal, site, in which people once lived. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, such nostalgia was understood, at least by the Swiss whose mercenary armies experienced it, as a medical problem. Many soldiers pining for home physically deteriorated and some died. The condition was at first called *Heimweh* by a Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, who coined his neologism in 1688 from two Greek words, *nost* (return or home) and *algia* (pain) (Hofer, 1688). This pre-industrial denotation of nostalgia as a desire to return

to one's native land, or the bittersweet memories of it, persisted and is still in use. For example, the Irish escaping famine and populating the northeastern United States in the mid-nineteenth century would gather in shebeens and then saloons and sing Irish songs (Rosenzweig, 1983).

Perhaps for some, the object of nostalgia is a place, but, less than a century later, one of Hofer's countrymen, Jean Jacques Rousseau, would interpret the term in a broader way. In his *Dictionary of Music*, Rousseau said that songs, such as those sung by the Irish immigrants, are a "memorative sign." Music, he argued, not only recalls a geographical location, but also peoples' "former pleasures, their youth, and all the joys of life," and thus "excite[s] in them a bitter sorrow for the loss of them" (Rousseau, 1768: 267).

Immanuel Kant went beyond Rousseau, contending that "what a person wishes to recover is not so much the actual *place* where he passed his childhood as his youth itself. He is not straining toward something which he can repossess, but toward an age which is forever beyond his reach" (Kant, 1798: 95). Rousseau and Kant comprehend nostalgia as it has mainly been understood in the modern world. Lunching with a friend, a professor of art about 50 years old, I asked him about the music he really liked in his late teens. He immediately responded that he was embarrassed that he still likes and listens to that music today, particularly Joy Division. Listening to that music today reminded him of what it did for him decades ago; it "created a sense of alternative possibility"—a sense that "life sucks and we like it, we're still having fun." Did that feeling, when first

recognized in his youth, give him a strong sense of his self? “Yes, definitely.”

The third incarnation of nostalgia is the meaning that characterizes the current period and that applies to the domination of rock’s past over its present. Whereas originary nostalgia was directed toward a mythical “golden age” that was deemed to have existed and was lost, and modern nostalgia refers to an individualized experienced past that can no longer be recovered, contemporary nostalgia is a construct of the communications media that is directed to a simulation of a de-individualized empirical past that never existed as such and is not directly part of the lives of the individuals who experience the nostalgia.

Contemporary nostalgia is neither for everyone’s personal past nor for a concrete individual’s life history, but for a social construction. It is constructed nostalgia that the students who would prefer to have lived in the 1960s or in some later decades of the twentieth century, feel (e.g. “I would have rather been a teenager in the late 1970s in NYC, so I could hang out with Talking Heads”). Past rock functions here as a “memorative sign” for a representation, a sign for a sign. As Pickering and Keightley (2006: 929) grasp it, contemporary nostalgia is self-referential: the individual who feels it is engaged in a process of “mediated nostalgic remembering.”

In his commentary on Frederic Jameson’s discussion of nostalgia in postmodernity, Brown defines Jameson’s notion of “neo-nostalgia” as “the pseudo-historical appeal of a bygone aesthetic.” That appeal “is achieved by stylistic evocations and

temporal stereotypes, which convey various forms of past-ness”(Brown, 2001: 310).

Nostalgia for rock’s past is a form of “mediated nostalgic remembering.” There was, indeed, an empirical past of rock, but it has been taken up in the present as mediated and then re-mediated to create, for example, the 1960s as a set of selective representations in which some artists, music, and events are highlighted and others eliminated. In that process of selection and simplification, nostalgia is aestheticized—it becomes a pose that can be felt intensely, but that does not connect the individual to an “eternal tradition” or to a personal history, but to an image lacking insistency.

Aestheticized nostalgia for past rock lacks seriousness in the sense that it does not instigate any attempt by those who feel it to try to recreate the past, except sporadically and episodically. To dwell in the constructed golden age is to experience its culture as an imaginary (similar to originary nostalgia), but also as the survival of an empirical past in which there is interest but no commitment.

That aestheticized nostalgia should have come to be the dominant intentionality towards rock might be an irony, since rock’s ideology privileges authenticity and novelty as the requisites for having one’s own music that expresses oneself and one’s generation. How could this reversal have happened?

### **Commodification of Nostalgia**

Why has rock’s past swamped its present? Why is rock today mired in neo-nostalgia? There are two

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major structural determinants of this constructed nostalgia. The major one is economic, essentially, commercial capitalism doing what it is supposed to do. Each of the companies that comprise the complex of the rock industry is focused on maximizing its own corporate profits. Various and interrelated changes beginning in the 1990s—legal, demographic, and technological—created a situation in which the most rational strategy for rock's major mediators was to concentrate attention on a subset of rock bands from prior decades (“legacy bands”) while giving short-shrift to newer rock artists.

Of rock's two primary mediators—corporations that bridge the gap between musicians and their potential audiences—one is involved in recording music and the other in presenting it live. Before music can be heard on the radio or bought in one format or another such as CDs, record labels have enabled rock bands to record their songs. Record companies, highly concentrated into fewer and fewer conglomerates, have divisions for all types of music, not merely rock. During the late 1990s they saw the proportion of sales of rock records decrease. There were several reasons for declining rock sales, and the labels reaction to that trend insured that rock sales would decrease even more.

There had been a sharp increase in sales of rock recordings from the mid-'80s through the mid-'90s, in part due to new styles developed in local scenes and/or by indie record labels. By 1991 the majors stepped in and bought the contracts of those bands and also purchased some of the labels. The influence of SoundScan's precise measurement of what is currently “hot” and the dismantling of

“artist-oriented labels” in favor of huge conglomerates like Time-Warner (which then had to jump to Wall Street's dictates), made for a “Hollywood blockbuster-type mentality, with an emphasis on who opened big and what records quickly ‘fail’” (Moerer, 1998: 76). Rather than developing innovative new artists, the companies signed newer bands that fashioned themselves after existing popular bands (Pearl Jam clones were especially numerous).

MTV was no longer around to introduce new styles and artists, as that station had done in the 1980s. The station found that it would earn more money if its programming units were thirty minutes long rather than a three-minute video, and so it scheduled “Beavis and Butthead,” “The Real World,” and other non-music content. Not only was the time devoted to videos reduced, but by 1997 rock music videos were all but eliminated in favor of pop, hip-hop, and R&B. Rather than leading, MTV was now risk-averse. Rolling Stone reported in 1996 that MTV would not be airing videos unless the record was in heavy rotation on rock radio and selling well (Boehlert, 1996: 20).

At the same time as MTV was eliminating rock, rock radio formats other than “classic rock” were in sharp decline. Talk/Sports/News and Spanish-language programming have been the fastest growing formats (Farhi, 2005). Here too there were several reasons for the change. Firstly, demographics were shifting; the cohort of white youth, the traditional audience for new rock, was declining. In 1990 non-Hispanic whites made up 75.15% of the population 15-19 year olds; a decade later, they comprised only 63.11%. Similarly, 20-24 year



olds went from 76.36% to 61.14% non-Hispanic whites over the course of that decade (U.S. Bureau of the Census).

Rock radio was also impacted by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, allowing companies to own unlimited numbers of stations (Clear Channel acquired more than 1,200), and as many as eight stations in a major market. The bottom line was the preoccupation of corporate suits, and not even long term profits, but quarterly results. As a consequence, formats were changed to maximize advertising revenue, including highly tightened playlists (Moerer, 1998). Such “corporate consolidation has made radio more bland, with endless commercials and shrinking playlists” (Farhi, 2005). It was no wonder that rock radio’s overall share of the audience tumbled (about 13 percent from 1999 to 2004).

Given the lack of appeal of current rock radio to its traditional audience and the shrinking demographics of that audience, radio corporations switched to other formats, especially talk/news/sports. Today there are major markets with only one rock radio station, and its format is classic rock.

The changes in demographics and in rock radio prompted major labels put more money behind pop acts that promised fast and lucrative and returns—signing and supporting fewer newer rock acts. Profits continued to be made with rock recordings that had been new some decades ago. The labels’ back catalog could be resold as CDs that had been remastered, or collected in “best of’s and box-sets. Yet feeding on the past by record companies was limited by changes in record retail-

ing in the late 1990s. Traditional record stores that sold back catalog, were being put out of business, first by large chains, and then by mass merchandisers (especially Wal-mart and BestBuy). These stores didn’t stock much back catalog, and cut back on their CD-space to make room for more lucrative movie DVDs.

The net earnings for major record labels reached their peak in 1999 (14,585,000). Cutting back on developing new rock bands, the impact of changes in retail, and the internet led to a steep decline. The companies’ net income decreased by about 50% from its 1999 peak to 2010’s \$6,995,000 (R.I.A.A.). The record industry blamed internet file sharing, which they called “piracy.” Of course their back catalog started to pick up and do rather well when Amazon entered the picture, with its nearly infinite shelf space. Then, in 2003, iTunes allowed purchase of mp3s with immediate downloading.

Despite the lack of rock radio other than classic rock, some rock fans took to listening to the numerous rock formats on satellite radio networks (Sirius and XM, now merged). The internet allowed rock fans to listen to radio stations that had put their programming onto the net from anywhere in the world. And, of course, they could download songs in mp3 format on very small portable players and more recently via their smart phones. Streaming music services like Pandora and Spotify have also become popular.

Sales of mp3s did bring revenue to labels, but of a very different sort than in rock’s heyday. Rather than having to buy a whole album, at 10\$-16\$,

digital downloads allowed purchase of individual songs. Historically, many fans had bought physical albums (vinyl LPs, prerecorded cassettes, and CDs) because that was the only way to get a desired song. Now with the chance to buy just the one song for 99 cents, they did so. Labels and artists lost 90% of what they might have earned before digital downloads. Much of their physical sales, and those make far greater profits, are of box sets, re-releases, and live concerts from legacy acts.

The internet changed rock in many ways. New bands could record and distribute without having a label to underwrite them, yet lacking the label's clout, they could not become big stars. Fans could indulge their taste in any rock genre from any era. The impact on major labels was that rock still sold, but did not create blockbuster sales for any one recording. And it is from blockbusters that labels make their profits.<sup>1</sup>

The number of albums, in all styles of music, selling one million or more units in a year has continued to decline in the current century (Peoples, 2010). Despite having no albums in the top ten best sellers of the year, rock still managed to comprise 47.6% of album sales in 2011 and 49.6% in 2012 (Nielsen, 2013).

One can characterize the history of record labels' relations to rock with that old scouting song: "Make new friends and keep the old, one is silver and the other gold." The rock industry began creating new artists, but by the mid-1970s it was following that song, keeping the old while making the new. The silver and gold made their profits soar in the 1970s, and, with the help of MTV and CDs,

in the 1980s the industry's profits headed for the stars. But by the latter part of the 1990s, the majors abandoned making the new rock stars, in favor of Britney, Beyonce, Miley, Jay-Z, and Beiber. Their rock business since the late 1990s is refining and recycling gold.

The second main mediator of rock is the live concert promoter. Like radio stations and recording companies, concert promoters have merged to form oligopolies. Major rock bands were sought after by the promoters who controlled increasingly larger stadiums that these bands were sure to sell-out. And the top artists among these mainly decades-old bands could name their price—the promoter would merely raise the price of tickets. Given that recordings were not selling well, bands were anxious to make money from their live shows. (Previously, concerts were seen as advertisements for the latest album, so ticket prices were low since the money would be made with the recordings. Today, the reverse is true; insofar as bands, rather than record labels, control the price of their recordings. (Leaking the recording onto the pirate sites was sometimes done by those working for the band.)

Just because there are strictly commercial reasons for major record labels, radio stations, and concert promoters to favor old (classic) rock over new, does not mean that they would be successful in getting rock's past to swamp its present. Pursuing their interests has merely kept classic rock available to be heard and/or seen by potential audiences. To make audiences desire the "back catalog," they have also had to promote rock's past and construct a simulation of the past that would instigate neo-nostalgia.

That is exactly what the big players have done, aided and abetted by a host of secondary mediators. They have contrived an “aura,” to use Walter Benjamin’s (1969) term in a way he would not have anticipated, to surround the rock of a “golden age.”

Rock writers (a.k.a. rock critics, rock journalists, rock publicists) collectively create that aura. In interviews, and in reviews of albums and especially concerts, they construct an imaginary of their subjects. Sharing their collectively constructed celebrity texts of these “rock greats,” they conjure up an aura around a past that they have aestheticized.

Writers and documentarians, accompanying the major record labels, concert promoters and classic rock djs, create an auratic imaginary of rock’s past that breeds neo-nostalgia. These hypesters of the canon create some Golden Age that never was, but can be heard in this \$100 box set, or seen for a few hours and \$355 in person. These writers and their imaginaries are found in the documentaries on particular bands, rock history itself, or a rock festival like Woodstock that are shown on TV and sold as DVDs. They are the writers of rock biographies and box-set liner notes.

The efforts of these mediators create not only a mythic rock past, but mythic bands. Branding is more than words, including iconic pictures of the musicians in their prime, and band iconography. Fans pay to display the band’s logos (such as AC/DC’s), icons (like the Rolling Stones’ lips), or album cover images on merchandise, especially T-shirts.

Rock writers are also contributors to those ubiquitous “Best of,” “Greatest” lists that are the staple of rock and general entertainment magazines, in print and online. Examining 38 lists of the “100 greatest albums of all time,” Appen and Doehring (2006: 34) found that the majority of the recordings were released between 1965-1969.

These imaginaries also make their way into the general news and entertainment media, when a mega-tour is launched or one of the musicians is seriously ill or dies.

Death is the great career move in rock, as the posthumous careers of Elvis, Morrison, Hendrix, and Lennon, for example, have shown. They were exceedingly lucrative and enhanced their fame of the deceased. They are also free of all connection to an actual living human being, so the subject appears only as a mediated construction, open to endless manipulation and refinement.

Mass media reports on the death further reinforce that nostalgia-inducing imaginary. The innumerable TV, radio, magazine, and newspaper accounts of Lennon’s death referenced not the man and the four decades in which he lived, or even the nearly two decades in which he was a famous performer. Instead, he was entombed in the mythical 1960s. His fans and media reporters repeated the refrain that with his death, “the sixties are over” (Mäkelä, 2004). This construction of the “1960s” is what the students reference in their desire to return to that Golden Age.

Rock critics also are the ones who are consulted in deciding upon the contents of rock museums such as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland or the Experience Music Project in Seattle. Simulat-

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ing and selecting out a set of cultural artifacts construct a golden age imaginary that is also found in Hard Rock Hotels and Cafes.

The imaginary is also alive and well in video games like the Guitar Hero and Rock Band franchises. These simulations foster neo-nostalgia for an aestheticized golden age, a simulation itself. Hodson's analysis of the Beatles Rock Band Game is illustrative. "The game produces a false sense of community and history which encourages a hyperreal relationship to commodity over community" he writes (Hodson, 2012: 72). "Rather than just a commodification of play, *Beatles Rock Band* is a game that also commodifies nostalgia" (Hodson, 2012: 81).

For Jameson, neo-nostalgia is a matter of substituting an imaginary/construction/simulation/myth for what actually presumably happened at some time in the past. Neo-nostalgia takes that construction as its object and then judges the present to be inferior to the construction—it would have been better to live then, but at least I can be entertained by the (aestheticized) myth. The music industry is more than happy to have initiated and to perpetuate that myth.

### Youth without Youth

Even all the hype generated by the rock industry and its associated cultural mediators would not guarantee the current hegemony of rock's past. Aside from the operation of commercial interests, a major social factor—the power of the Boomer generation especially in the US—insured that hegemony. The

cultural power of the baby-boomers is a second structural foundation for constructed nostalgia.

The most obvious factor in boomer-power is the fact that Boomers along with the slighter cohort born during WWII, were the youth that created, sold, mediated, and were fans of the music now called classic rock. They were the generation that began rock criticism and some of those initiators are still involved in that occupation. More significantly, they hired, trained and edited younger rock scribes. With their reviews, "best-of/'greatest" lists, and institutions like the Grammy Awards and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, they have created and disseminated the "canon" and made the myth of rock's golden age.

Beyond those involved in the rock industry, Boomers were more generally crucial to a variety of socio-cultural changes. This cohort of those born after WWII was unusual in several ways. One was its overwhelmingly large size. Growing up in an expanding economy, the Boomers became targets for a large swathe of commercial interests purveying pro-youth ideology along with their products and services. Unlike prior youth cohorts, they did not look forward to becoming adults in the extant society. They came of age with the civil rights movement, learning that the American creed was hypocritical when it came to the treatment of non-whites. The civil rights movement provided a model (tactics and ideology) for the various movements focused on the interests of and led by youth, such as the free speech movements at universities and the anti-war movement. Adults were held to be responsible for an unjust world that activist youth proposed to reform.

Adolescent and college age youth in the 1960s had, like prior generations, their own culture—clothing and hair fashions, slang, and music. Yet theirs wasn't merely a youth subculture with different values than the general culture, including parental culture. They can be said to have taken the 1950s teenage rebellion against their parents out of the home and into the streets. They were a counterculture, intent on having their values replace the older ones for everyone.

The Boomers were more successful in changing elements of the general culture than in challenging economic or politic power structures. And their fight against adults / strong attachment to their youth continued as they themselves aged. "Don't trust anyone over thirty," was a war cry of the student movement in the mid-1960s. At the same time, "I hope I die before I get old" was a key line to "My Generation," a hit song by the Who. Although they had no choice but to age out of chronological youth, they maintained the anti-adult stance by grasping onto the most attainable substitute, "youthfulness."

Rock was a marker of youth culture, and many Boomers did not give up their rock, listening to it, or to the newer music made by the bands of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their music was, in Rousseau's (1768: 267) term, a "memorative sign", creating a sense of nostalgia, in Kant's sense, "toward an age which is forever beyond his reach" (Kant, 1798). As these bands began to be seen as "great" aesthetically, they and their music became by the late 1970s an integral component of modern culture itself. Those who were too young to have lived in the "golden age" could become fans of

"classic rock" as many of the canonical bands put out new records and toured in support of them.

Starting in the late 1970s, Gen-X began a new youth culture, but until the late 1980s it was mainly underground and under the radar of mainstream media. Its music was seen and heard in college towns and released on independent labels, hence the terms indie and college rock. Gen-Xers also saw through the hypocrisy of the older generation, and fought for justice and equality. They were ignored by the mainstream media until a few of their new bands made their music sound more commercial and were picked up by major labels. Re-branded as Alternative rock, R.E.M., Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Smashing Pumpkins were among the commercially most successful. It has turned out that Gen-X was the last generation before neo-nostalgia buried new musical initiatives by young people.

A new generation that faced a different situation than Gen-X was coming into adolescence in the mid-1990s. They were a smaller cohort, particularly if we subtract non-Hispanic whites. They were omnivores, claiming to "like everything" when asked about their favorite music, and seeming to identify themselves more with new digital technologies (the internet, iPods, video games, "social media," and smart phones) than with any specific content. Called Gen-Y or Millennials, these middle-class youth were close to their parents, who both indulged them with new technology and protected ("helicopter parents") them more than any other youth group had been.

In my classes, I learned that parents were admired and seen as cool. It was in early 1997 that one stu-

dent remarked that their taste in music was shaped by and was the same as their parents. Classic rock radio was this cohort's favorite format. Industry insider and rock writer Hank Bordowitz (2006: xiv) polled several college classes at a New Jersey state college and found that more than half of them listened to a classic rock station. By the new century, it was no longer unusual to hear that students' favorite bands were those in the "canon," and that they went to legacy rock shows—whose ticket prices could feed a family of four for a week—with their parents.

The major financial "crisis" in 2008, from which the U.S., and other post-industrial countries had not recovered when this article was written in 2013, gave the Millennials even less power. They had no assurance that they could maintain, much less exceed, the same standard of living provided by their parents. They encountered fierce competition for the few good jobs available, and they had been over-protected by adults. Many of them have moved back home with their parents after college or else live on their own with parental support. Millennials and the society in general are not optimistic about the future.

The commercial, economic, and cultural power of the Boomers/Gen-Xs over their children has created a reversal of the pattern in which young people reject the music of their parents and affiliate with "their own music"—the rock current during their adolescence. Behind that reversal is the stealing of "youth" from the young by the parental generation, which has substituted the effect of "youthfulness" for actual youth itself—another aestheticization and simulation that accompanies and is bound up with neo-nostalgia.

## Conclusion

The preceding sociological essay has examined the phenomenon of rock's past occluding its present from the viewpoint of the intentionality that is integral to it and how that intentionality has been fostered by social-structural commercial and generational determinants. The phenomenon is noteworthy because it marks a reversal of the modern(ist) interpretation of rock—and to a certain extent its actual cultural history—as a continual displacement of rock's past by a new wave of genre transformation coinciding with the rise of a new generational cohort of youth.

It would be unthinkable before the present century that rock's past would overtake its present and capture the sensibilities and musical preferences of young people. Rock's intentionality at its inception was the youth social (not political) rebellion against the tastes of the parental generation. Rock is now at a polar opposite position: youth now embraces the older generation's tastes.

There are persuasive reasons for the reversal—the "back catalog" seems endlessly susceptible to profitable commercial exploitation, and the Boomer and then Gen-X parents were bound and determined to preserve their youth if only as the aesthetic of youthfulness. The corporate and parental co-construction of an imaginary of rock's golden age, in the context of commercial and generational power, seduced, in Baudrillard's sense, youth.

Neo-nostalgia—Frederic Jameson's precise contribution to postmodern discourse—is the framing intentionality of the event of rock's past occluding its present. (New rock has not disappeared:

it even flourishes on the periphery and under the radar of major media.) Jameson's theoretical move is to have epitomized the line of discourse on the counter-tendency of the accumulating past to undermine the modern cultural drive to novelty. Initiated in Nietzsche's *Use and Abuse of History* (1957) and extended beyond the mere stifling effect of an overhanging past in Baudrillard's *Simulations* (1983), the critique of the modern culminates with its subjective component in (neo)nostalgia.

The myth of rock's "golden age" is an aestheticization of rock's past, existing purely on the surface

as a fashion. It is a depthless adventure; for the intentionality of neo-nostalgia, one might wish that one had lived in some fabled era of rock's past, but that wish incurs no consequences. One does not descend into homesickness because no home as been lost, and one does not try to recreate the life of the "golden age," or even more to the point, seriously worship it. One is, perhaps a bit wistfully, entertained by the packaged-in-imaginary recycled artifact.

Neo-nostalgia for rock's past is a riskless adventure.

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## Note

1. About 80-90 percent of most releases, do not cover their costs of production. It is the few that do so, and sell in

the millions, that cover the costs of all of the others, and provide the labels profits.