

# The Shock of the Global

THE 1970S IN PERSPECTIVE



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To  
Ernest R. May

1928–2009

*Teacher, mentor, friend*

## CHAPTER 18



## Liberation and Redemption in 1970s Rock Music

REBECCA J. SHEEHAN

IN THE 1970s ROCK MUSIC played a central role in transforming attitudes about sex and gender in the United States. Gender norms and ideas about sex were in a state of flux because of increasing sexual permissiveness, rising divorce rates, the spread of mass pornography, and the women's and gay liberation movements. A musical form with roots in black and working-class rebellion, ghosts of which lived on in its rhythms, rock music valorized the individual and promoted a message of personal liberation. Its sound and sexual spectacle transgressed taboos that relegated sex to the private domain and repressed its expression in the public sphere. Rock provided an arena for the open display of female sexual desire, modeled gender roles that were antithetical to middle-class "norms" of the nuclear family, and made androgyny and homosexuality visible.<sup>1</sup>

The perceived threat that the new sexual culture posed to morality and Christian values contributed to the culture wars of the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> In response to the state's failure to act as a moral arbiter in issues including censorship, sexual behavior, and abortion, conservatives both criticized and co-opted liberation rhetoric and popular culture. In 1966 John Lennon prefigured these clashes and scandalized Christians around the world with his claim that the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus."<sup>3</sup> In opposing rock to Christianity, even if facetiously, Lennon underestimated the adaptability of both. In the 1970s young Christians and older evangelicals deployed the musical form and cultural force of rock music to reinvigorate Jesus as a cultural icon and to appeal to new audiences. In so doing, they attempted to redeem their losses to an increasingly secular—and sexual—culture.

Young people, whether they sought sexual liberation or spiritual re-

demption, were thus connected through rock music. Rock music forged new communities of fans and listeners within the United States as well as across national borders. Although rock music originated in the United States and was launched onto the international scene through the phenomenal record sales of Elvis Presley in the 1950s, the "British Invasion" spearheaded by the Beatles in the mid-1960s established its transatlantic character. The rise of rock criticism in the United States in the late 1960s, signaled by the success of the new trade publication *Rolling Stone* magazine, helped to counter the British Invasion.<sup>4</sup> Rock spread American images of freedom and rebellion and contributed to a worldwide renewal of America's cultural influence. Yet this did not function purely as a new imperialism. In repressive and authoritarian regimes the very act of listening to censored or banned, sex-positive, pro-individual music was an act of rebellion, as was performing original rock music in regional styles and gathering for rock music festivals.

Young people's buying power propelled the rise of rock 'n' roll. Empowered by their new role as independent consumers, young people literally gained a voice through the music they purchased, and with it a means to subvert the older generation's authority. Music corporations expanded and grew, seeking to develop niche marketing strategies. Rock's individualism and liberated sexuality were packaged and sold by record companies and transnational corporations around the world. In fact rock's transatlantic nature, the ease with which it created a sense of shared community across national boundaries, multiplied the strategies through which it could be sold to new markets.

Thus while rock music encouraged individualism and rebellion, it also helped to build global markets. The contradiction between rock music's message and its industrial structure became increasingly apparent in the 1970s. Rock's romantic ideals of individualism and rebellion fused with the consumer culture that commodified and disseminated it. Rock music culture, then, was a realm in which a key tension of the decade played out: the extent to which an individual can be liberated when that very liberation relies on market forces.<sup>5</sup>

## Rock's Sexual Liberation

In the late 1960s Cynthia Plaster Caster, a Catholic teenager from Chicago, began making plaster casts of the erect penises of her favorite male musicians. Her adolescent sexual desire had been turned on by British

musicians who appeared on television in "tight tailored trousers."<sup>6</sup> Cynthia learned Cockney rhyming slang—a working-class vernacular that replaces words with rhyming counterparts—from a little-known British band. She then used it to write explicit messages to her music idols asking if she could cast them; the borrowed language enabled her to avoid the "sin" of swearing, and to distinguish herself from other American groupies.<sup>7</sup> Equipped with art supplies contained in a logo-bearing traveling case and business cards that read "Plaster Casters of Chicago: Lifelike Models of Hampton Wicks," Cynthia—and various assistants who provided oral sex to maintain the musicians' erections—quickly gained notoriety in the world of rock. In 1968 she cast the rock legend Jimi Hendrix. Throughout the 1970s high-profile musicians, from the Rolling Stones to Led Zeppelin, requested audiences with her. In her bold articulation of sexual desire, in her active pursuit of fulfilling it, and through exposing and literally objectifying a part of the male body—she assigned each cast a five-digit serial number—Cynthia crossed boundaries of public and private as well as norms of "decent" female behavior. Both sex and the rock 'n' roll moment were commodified and consumed in her transactions.

Although Cynthia was a unique character both within and outside rock music groupie culture, her behavior and her penis "art," as she called it, were nonetheless emblematic of the new sexual dynamics that influenced and were enabled by rock culture. In the 1950s, Cold War Americans idealized men as breadwinners and women as domestic, and sought to contain female sexuality within marriage and the home.<sup>8</sup> The rock 'n' roll lifestyle rejected traditional gender roles and family structure through public and promiscuous sexual behavior. Rock music helped to increase the visibility of sex: via television variety shows, rock musicians entered suburban homes. Their sexually charged performances reflected and fed relaxing censorship laws. In 1973 the Supreme Court issued a new obscenity ruling giving individual states the power to determine the meanings of obscenity and to control its dissemination. The ruling allowed representations of explicit sex and pornography to circulate more widely and publicly than ever before.<sup>9</sup> By the mid-1970s sex was such a booming business and had become so intrinsic to the popular vernacular that the informant for the *Washington Post's* Watergate investigation was named after the most infamous porn film of the decade, *Deep Throat*. Anti-rock conservative and religious groups coalesced with anti-porn feminists in their concern over rock music and pornography. Conservatives feared the moral threat posed

to the American family. Although pro-sex feminists argued that sexual liberation was fundamental to women's liberation, anti-porn feminists were concerned about the valorization of male sexuality and the commodification of women's bodies, which they argued came at the cost of women's liberation.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed for men in rock 'n' roll, the term "cock rock," popularized by rock critics in the 1970s, summarized what its culture promoted: promiscuous male sexuality focused on the satisfaction of male desire.<sup>11</sup> When Jimi Hendrix compared rock stars of the 1960s to generals and soldiers in wartime, he unwittingly described the transformation of the spheres in which masculine desire would circulate: "[It] used to be the soldiers who were the gallant ones, riding into town, drinking the wine and taking the girls. Now it's the musicians."<sup>12</sup> This was the liberating promise of rock masculinity: it existed outside convention. Middle-class expectations of gentlemanly behavior were smashed along with hotel rooms, television sets, and musical instruments. But the strength of these men, in contrast with warriors of the past and the men drafted to fight in Vietnam, was not in military service but in playful civic life—in the altered states produced by marijuana and hallucinogens, and in the multiple sexual partners encountered on concert tours that represented a life far removed from suburban confines.<sup>13</sup> Certainly the rock music business banked on the rejection of the traditional family and tailored rock stars' images in opposition to middle-class domesticity. During a publicity campaign to boost a musician's image, one executive ordered: "Get a paternity suit filed against him. . . . Get him some groupie status."<sup>14</sup>

Groupies, mostly female fans who sought sex with rock stars, were at the vanguard of fan culture. By the late 1960s the music industry recognized how crucial groupies were to the business: they acted as "word-of-mouth" publicists; they created success for the musicians they favored; and their presence was considered a marker of stardom.<sup>15</sup> Groupies lived the freedoms of an increasingly permissive sexual culture. With sex disconnected from reproduction owing to the availability of the birth control pill and the effective legalization of abortion in 1973, biology no longer necessarily determined destiny: a woman could experiment sexually without the threat of pregnancy and domestic confinement.<sup>16</sup>

A dominant strand in women's liberation discourse focused on women experiencing and experimenting with their long-repressed sexuality. Groupies brought rock music together with this discourse of sexual free-

dom. They overturned stereotypes of the passive and passionless woman in their public and active displays of sexual desire. At the same time, given the relative absence of women as stars in their own right within the rock realm, and in light of the media representations of groupies as beautiful helpmeets at best and hangers-on at worst, groupies refashioned but also fed into a traditional gender hierarchy.<sup>17</sup>

The sexual and gender dynamic between heterosexual men and women in rock culture reflected broader debates about women's roles. In 1973 the feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether posed a question central to the debates: "Does the encounter culture and its cult of freer sexuality offer any genuine liberation to women, or is it not a retooling of their roles as sexual pacifiers?"<sup>18</sup> For Cynthia Plaster Caster, the groupie experience was liberating: "The sensation of being in control or being used does not occur to me. . . . [H]opefully the two of you," groupie and rock star, "are mutually attracted to each other, each getting their rocks off. . . . Except that the groupie has the added bonus of having scored a night in the sack with the Face on the cover of her favorite album."<sup>19</sup> She recognized implicitly that the commodification of bodies did not apply just to women in mainstream culture and especially in pornography: male bodies were also commodified in the rock realm.

The commodification of sex and pop culture was central to the advancing consumer culture and to the globalizing music industry, but rock musicians self-consciously critiqued this commodification even while capitalizing on it. In the late 1960s "glam" or "glitter" rock emerged, captivating and horrifying audiences with its norm-confronting spectacle: male rockers in women's makeup and clothing. As the *New York Times* described it, glam rock took "standard hard rock music as a framework for kinky lyrics, bizarre costumes, garish make-up, and, most of all, flamboyant stage shows that blend homo-eroticism and sado-masochism into a goulash of degeneracy."<sup>20</sup> With his 1972 rock music concept album and concert tour *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, the British musician David Bowie captured the zeitgeist of glam rock. As the title character, Ziggy, Bowie played an androgynous alien rock star who comes to an environmentally degraded Earth. Ziggy Stardust, through his "otherness," communicated escape from existing gender and sex roles while at the same time commenting on rock culture's nihilism. Aware that youth was ephemeral, he offered a momentary connection

through sex, drugs, and rock when he sang, "Turn on with me and you're not alone." Ultimately, though, as the lyrics described, Ziggy was a "leper messiah," destroyed by the excesses of rock's hedonism, egotism, and fan worship. Taking his cue from the news-making gay liberation movement, Bowie gave press interviews claiming to be bisexual and wore makeup and women's clothes offstage; his outré persona won him the notoriety that contributed to his rise as an international media phenomenon.<sup>21</sup>

Glam rock masculinities were constructed transnationally but displayed national differences. Early glam rockers in the United States performed "glamour" as violent: they conjured demonic images through monstrous makeup and bloody stage theatrics. The earliest and most visible glam rock group in the United States was Alice Cooper. The band became infamous for "shock rock" antics, which included mock executions, chopping up baby dolls, and chasing live chickens around the stage.<sup>22</sup> They opened up possibilities for different masculine performance styles through on-stage cross-dressing but made clear to the press that they were heterosexual offstage. Early British glam rockers like Bowie and the band T Rex, by contrast, were androgynous and sexually ambiguous both on- and off-stage. They used makeup to accentuate their beauty, and suggested a "third" gender identity through the cosmic imagery of stars, glitter, and alien life forms. Using tambourines to strum electric guitars and performing rock's traditional singer and guitarist solos in an explicitly homoerotic manner, they challenged neat categorizations of gender and sexual preference.<sup>23</sup>

Given its mostly male stars, within the music industry glam rock conserved male power even while parodying it. But glam rock's spectacle also created a permissive arena for—and made fashionable—gender ambiguity, homosexuality, and bisexuality.<sup>24</sup> Fashion was, of course, another realm of consumption, but it was also a symbolic marker of rebellion and style politics that empowered identities outside the mainstream and made them recognizable to one another.<sup>25</sup> Through shared taste in music and fashion, individuals who had been closeted by social norms were able to form connections and communities. Gay liberation groups did not necessarily recognize or embrace glam rock as a cultural formation of their politics, in part because any implication that sexual orientation was merely a fashion could work against their cause. Nonetheless, glam rock made sex and gender play visible and audible at a time when heterosexuality was considered the universal norm and religious groups decried homosexuality as an abomination.<sup>26</sup>

### Rock's Spiritual Redemption

For American cultural and religious conservatives, the newly permissive sexual culture threatened the existence of the normative reproductive family unit. Although many evangelical Christians believed in equal opportunity for women, evangelical women and men were concerned that female and homosexual liberation would enslave the nation to human laws instead of divine laws. They crusaded for salvation based on the Bible's sexual morality and gender order. In the 1960s, leftist social movements inspired activism among conservatives and among Christian youth across the political spectrum. Ministers proffered Christ as redemptive in a chaotic world, encouraging individualism in order to counter the impersonal and pernicious secular and materialist forces. In the 1970s, when youth culture flourished, sexual promiscuity increased, and rock music boomed, evangelical Christianity also enjoyed a resurgence.<sup>27</sup>

Ironically it was rock music that brought new trends in evangelical Christianity to the attention of the national media and helped the evangelical movement to reach critical mass. In 1971, just five years after one of its cover stories asked "Is God Dead?" *Time* magazine reported on the "Jesus Revolution."<sup>28</sup> The article connected the successful rock operas *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* to the "God Rock" movement and the rise of the Jesus People in the United States. Also known as Jesus Freaks and Street Christians, this evangelical movement comprised young people disillusioned with the 1960s counterculture and with the New Left.<sup>29</sup> The movement emerged most prominently in California, where young people began turning to Jesus Christ after the various attractions of the 1960s—including Eastern religions, political groups, drug-induced psychedelic visions, and witchcraft—left them spiritually wanting. For them, Jesus, with his long hair and hippie style, offered personally identifiable redemption in the maelstrom of choice. A contemporary book commented that "the basic symbol for the Jesus movement seems to be *multiplicity*. The unconverted life is described as confused by countless options, symbols, and alluring paths."<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, the catchphrase of this Christian youth movement was "One Way: the Jesus Way!"

By incorporating Christian themes and inspiring a new genre of—and market for—Christian rock music, the evangelical movement harnessed rock's rhetorical forms against the notion that a body can be redeemed sexually. The movement appropriated language and style from rock cul-

ture and sexual liberation. For example, the interdenominational college group Campus Crusade for Christ organized Explo '72, an evangelical conference held in Dallas that ended with a concert that was dubbed the "Christian Woodstock." "Operation Penetration" was the code name given for the follow-up strategy in which each Explo participant was expected to recruit five others with the broader goal of converting young people around the United States and the world by 1980.<sup>31</sup> *Christianity Today* claimed that as the result of young people connecting with Christ through rock, record numbers of youth were entering ministries at home and overseas.<sup>32</sup>

Christian crusaders who used countercultural forms attracted and mobilized followers across North America and internationally whom the traditional church could not reach. As one convert said, "Straight people never could have talked to me." For them, Jesus' true message had been compromised by the Christian establishment. Although the same Christians who fought against rock as the devil's music saw Christian rock as an inherently problematic and contradictory form, other evangelicals wanted to save souls and counter moral decay more than they wanted orthodox routes to salvation. One pastor's wife reflected their viewpoint when she said that she would rather see young people "excited about God than drugs. I'm conservative but I'm for whatever reaches them for Christ."<sup>33</sup>

The Reverend Billy Graham exemplified the possibilities of expanding the religious flock through intergenerational connection. Graham allied himself with the Jesus Movement, became involved in Christian rock concerts, and took on an increasingly permissive tone in his public speaking. Graham spun his involvement as emblematic of his ministry in the 1960s and 1970s: it was a time when the counterculture represented generational questioning and searching, and Graham was prepared to try new avenues to appeal to young people. In 1969, as a special guest at the Miami Rock Festival, he got a feel for the crowd by circulating in disguise. He sensed in them a righteous rejection of materialism and a desire for "something of the soul." Onstage Graham promoted Jesus as the ultimate individual rebel. "Jesus was a nonconformist," he told the audience, encouraging them to avoid the ephemeral high of drugs and instead "tune in to God. . . . Turn on to His power."<sup>34</sup>

Secular musicians were the first to see the possibilities of marrying rock with Christian themes to draw audiences and sell records. Conceived by British composers Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice as a concept al-

bum in 1970, the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* placed the biblical Jesus in the milieu of rock music stardom. It made explicit themes of idolatry, celebrity, and gender roles implicit in both narratives. *Jesus Christ Superstar* told the story of Jesus' last seven days. Its three main characters—Jesus, Judas, and Mary Magdalene—were, consciously or not, invested as the central sites of sociopolitical meaning. The rock opera portrays Jesus as a man struggling with his identity and his destiny. Once he becomes sure of his purpose, his last days are filled with doubt about the meaning of his life. Judas questions whether or not Jesus is the Messiah. Concerned that Jesus' followers will revolt against him when they realize that he is a man and not a god, Judas betrays Jesus in order, he explains, to save them all. Mary Magdalene is styled as Jesus' closest ally and as an adoring groupie—albeit one who has renounced her sexually promiscuous ways. Unlike the male characters, Magdalene does not have a rock voice: her songs are ballads. Interestingly, rock music culture and Christianity found common ground in their positioning of woman as helpmeet.

Sparking controversy among religious groups even before it was released, by 1973 *Jesus Christ Superstar* had become the biggest-selling two-disc album in recording history.<sup>35</sup> An example of the multiple formats and cross-marketing that came to define the entertainment industries in the 1970s, the album was turned into a Broadway stage production in 1971, and *Jesus Christ Superstar* was released as a Hollywood film in 1973. The album was an international hit, including in the Soviet Union, where young people grew their hair so as to look like Jesus, and Russian-language recordings entered the black market.<sup>36</sup> The rock opera's success demonstrated that global markets were open to Christian-themed music. By the end of the decade Jesus Rock had become its own industry. Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), though separate from the mainstream rock industry, paralleled it culturally and commercially by commodifying Jesus and using media networks to spread the gospel.<sup>37</sup> In Sri Lanka, for example, the radio program *Parables in Melody* played the recordings of Christian musicians such as Larry Norman, who came out of the Jesus Movement, and Cliff Richards, who was a Christian-identified mainstream musician. The music galvanized Christians there.<sup>38</sup>

### Globalizing Music and Rebellion

Rock 'n' roll revolutionized the music industry. In 1970 the *Wall Street Journal* reported that rock's profits were becoming so significant that vari-

ous conglomerates, including the life insurance and financial services company Transamerica Corp. and Kinney National Services (which later became Warner Communications), were rushing to buy into the music business. Rock paved the way for other popular music forms to be marketed and distributed internationally. The increasing affluence of young people drove the growth of the industry and influenced the increasing diversity of market offerings: subgenres of rock, reggae, country, R&B, folk, punk, disco, funk, soul, hip hop, and CCM. By 1973 music had become the most popular form of entertainment in the United States and indeed internationally, with \$3.3 billion worldwide sales in records and tapes. By 1978 the head of Warner Communications' International Record Division claimed that "music is the most important cultural export. . . . Music's impact is tremendous. It's in every home."<sup>39</sup>

Disseminated through television, film, and new technologies such as the long-playing (stereophonic) record and compact audiocassette tapes, rock music and its embedded sexuality appeared at a mass level, internationally, with a global reach that film and television did not yet share.<sup>40</sup> FM stereo radio, newly available in the late 1960s, was static free and, because of its lower commercial airtime rates, offered airplay to songs not on the Top 40 list, including those considered too risqué for AM radio. Music's material mediums—vinyl records and cassette tapes—were widely available, and cassettes especially enabled popular music to spread through home taping, as well as bootlegging, and piracy.<sup>41</sup> DJs playing records in clubs and discothèques were far cheaper to hire than live bands, and the nightclub scene grew. By the end of the decade, disco was the most internationally accessible form of popular music.

Britain and America dominated popular music during the 1970s, owing to the power of rock as an Anglo-American youth-cultural formation, their resistance to foreign-language music, and the size and reach of their music corporations. Five companies (CBS, EMI, PolyGram, Warner, and RCA), each owned by larger transnational conglomerates, essentially ran the international music industry. These corporations used foreign bases around the world—from Denmark to Kenya to Chile—to manufacture and market hit records. Although countries such as Australia, France, and Canada put airtime limits on imported records, markets continued to open up: by the late 1970s Spain had lifted its censorship, and Sri Lanka had liberalized import restrictions. Following the example of the American Armed Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS), Radio Luxembourg spread American-style radio programming and music throughout Europe.<sup>42</sup> West

German television broadcast Western rock to East Germany. Bootleg recordings of Western popular music were exchanged at street fairs in Prague, and rock sold over the counter in Budapest. In 1975 Lyudmila Zhivkova, the thirty-four-year-old daughter of Bulgaria's ruler, was appointed minister of culture and opened the country to Western popular entertainment. By the end of the decade the Soviet Union was hosting international rock concerts, and even China's youth were experiencing rock and disco, once considered "the forbidden fruit of socialism."<sup>43</sup>

Despite the dominance of Anglo-American multinationals and the commodification of rock music's freedoms, individual listeners, music groups, and fan communities enacted rock's rebellion against oppression and authoritarianism in local contexts.<sup>44</sup> When students attended the 1971 Festival at Avándaro, Mexico's version of Woodstock, only months after the government massacre of protesting students in Mexico City, they marked the beginning of a new political consciousness among Mexican youth linked with rock music.<sup>45</sup> A 1976 *New York Times* article distinguished Eastern Europe from the Soviet Union by discussing the prevalence of rock music and discothèques there, arguing that "for the youth of Eastern Europe, it may represent a link with Western peers or a subtle protest against the constraints of Moscow-style Communism." That year the members of Plastic People of the Universe, a Czech rock group, were arrested for "hooliganism" simply for performing a live show: the arrest spurred the Charter 77 movement, which criticized the government for contravening the Helsinki Accords and UN human rights agreements.<sup>46</sup>

Rock music developed local inflections around the world during the 1970s. Original rock groups emerged throughout the Eastern bloc. Because Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, banned the Beatles in the early 1960s, rock music became there—and throughout Southeast Asia—a symbol of rebellion and populist politics. Disco and funk influenced a thriving music scene in Pakistan, and before the 1979 revolution Iranian rock and popular music flourished.<sup>47</sup> Bob Marley, the Jamaican son of a black woman and a white man, mixed together Caribbean and Afro-American rhythm and blues to become the Third World's first international music star. Marley sang about Rastafarianism, a religion that conceptualized God as black, acknowledged Jesus Christ as a messiah but focused on his Second Coming in the incarnation of the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, advocated spiritual marijuana use, and promoted Africa as the birthplace of humankind.<sup>48</sup> Through reggae music and style, Marley brought black

liberation politics to new audiences, including those who might not have been turned on to social issues in any other way.

In the 1970s rock as a commodity form was manipulated by the very forces that it challenged: authority, the market, and conservative sexual morality. A 1974 strategic directions report from the Pentagon discussed the crucial role that culture markets and multinational companies would play in securing and maintaining America's position in a globalizing world. The report argued that "those who will fashion tomorrow's world are those who are able to project their image (to exercise the predominant influence and long range influence)."<sup>49</sup> Certainly the Anglo-American popular music industry played a significant role in the competition for cultural dominance. Music conglomerates spread worldwide rock music's messages of permissive sexuality, individualism, and rebellion, and triggered cultural backlashes. The Religious Right in the United States rallied against and was invigorated by its opposition to rock music, while radical Islam surged up against Western secularization and cultural decadence.<sup>50</sup>

Yet rock's freedoms were undeniable. Rock music gave a measure of cultural and economic legitimacy to female sexuality and marginal gender identities. The music market facilitated individual and social rebellion and connected youth around the globe. American attitudes toward sexual permissiveness became increasingly liberal during the 1970s. In the decades that followed, more women became music stars in their own right. Androgynous styles and explicit sexuality continued to flourish in popular music, taking new forms with new generations.



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#### 18. Liberation and Redemption in 1970s Rock Music

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