

How Does It Feel?:
Rationality and Affectivity in the
Birth and Early Development of Rock and Roll

by

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Abstract

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RATIONALITY AND AFFECTIVITY IN THE
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Through chapters on Elvis Presley, The Beatles, and Bob Dylan, this dissertation examines the hypothesis that the music and culture of rock and roll have mediated a return of intuitive, affective, and somatic epistemological modes discursively repressed in modernity. Employing a theoretical perspective derived from thinkers such as Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, William James, Henri Bergson, and Alfred North Whitehead, it shows how perhaps the preeminent musical genre of the mid-twentieth century enacted a dialectical return to archaic modes of experience as a complement to the privileging of rationalism and materialism since the Enlightenment. At the genre's inception in the mid-nineteen fifties, Elvis Presley participated in one prominent performative inflection of the intimate reintegration of the privileging polarity of rationality over affect that had come to pervade predominant cultural streams in the West over the preceding centuries, exemplified in the Cartesian *cogito*, the explicit equation of thought with human being in general. Subsequently, the Beatles and Bob Dylan brought this integration to a climax, the Beatles in the more external, social mode of the band, and Dylan in the more internal, introspective mode of the individual singer-songwriter. Along with many other artists,

Presley, the Beatles, and Dylan performed a fundamental transformation of culture whose implications still largely condition our aesthetic and psychological experience in the early twenty-first century.

Most texts about these three artists (and there are many) are either simple biographical narratives or analyses of music and lyrics, so a similar project would be largely redundant. By contrast, employing the methods of literary criticism, this dissertation primarily explicates the rhetorical nuances of the written and oral narratives about these figures, which obliquely trace a philosophy of rock and roll. That is, rock and roll appears to be both catalyst and expression of a deep and relatively sudden epistemological shift initiated on a mass scale in the mid-twentieth century. Although this shift was presaged by the confluence of many factors—musical, cultural, aesthetic, political, and economic—these elements seem never to have been fully synthesized until the emergence of rock and roll, never fully realized in a single lineage (among other lineages in other media) until Dylan, the Beatles, and others produced complementary syntheses of the mode Presley and his milieu had initiated with numerous other artistic and intellectual movements.

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Introduction: “Try to Find a Place to Start”¹

*Each of us has his own special gift, and you know this was meant to be true
And if you don't underestimate me, I won't underestimate you*

Bob Dylan, “Dear Landlord”²

Remember to let her into your heart, then you can start to make it better

The Beatles, “Hey Jude”³

*Oh, Baby, baby, baby, baby, baby
Baby, baby, baby, bu-bu-bu-bu-bu*

Elvis Presley, “Baby Let’s Play House”⁴

My entire adulthood has been a perpetual balancing act between two vocations: academic and musician. In fact, the impetus for this dissertation emerged from years of attempting to negotiate between the musical and intellectual modes in my daily life.⁵ I have often had the experience of singing for an audience at night with my rock and roll band and then lecturing in one of my classes the following day, a juxtaposition that has impressed upon me the radically different qualities of the two epistemologies implicit in these very different performative activities. As I developed my analytical and critical faculties on the one hand and my affective⁶ and intuitive faculties on the other, I consistently felt a jarring disjunction between these two ways of relating to experience. While engaged in one or the other of these endeavors, I often

¹ Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (New York: Abacus, 2003) 95. Listed in footnotes as “Guralnick,” except where noted.

² Bob Dylan, *John Wesley Harding* (Columbia Records, 1967).

³ The Beatles, *Past Masters, Vol. 2*. (Capitol Records, 1988).

⁴ Elvis Presley, *Elvis at Sun* (RCA, 2004).

⁵ My usage of the word “mode,” often employed in the following pages, is derived from Alfred North Whitehead’s usage of the term in his *Modes of Thought*.

⁶ “Affect” is described in the introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader* as “visceral forces beneath, alongside or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion.” Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) 1.

sensed that an essential phenomenological aspect was being left out or repressed. As I read thinkers like Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, William James, Henri Bergson, and Alfred North Whitehead, it became clear that my parallel immersion in these contrasting modes—the affective and the rational—was impelling me to enact an integration of these ways of knowing and relating to the world. In my experience, each has been informing the other: in consequence, my theorizing is permeated by insights I have gleaned from years of playing and listening to music, while the music I have written and played has been guided by, and expressive of, my theoretical interests. The tension inherent in this duality has, to a great extent, produced the narrative arc of my life. And, indeed, as is the case with most academics, my intellectual work is an ongoing attempt to come to terms with this primary concern in my personal experience. Thus, this dissertation will bring to bear insights of some of those theorists who have most influenced my intellectual life on the artistic and performative undertakings of some of those artists who have most informed my musical sensibility. Extrapolating from my experience and the cultural moment, I will suggest that these musicians are “forerunners”⁷ (to use James’ term) in the project of building a bridge between what Bergson characterizes as “intellect” and “intuition.”

However, before wading into concrete analyses of three primary exemplars of rock and roll in the chapters that follow—Elvis Presley, the Beatles, and Bob Dylan—I will first give a brief account of the sociological, psychological, and philosophical context in which my analysis is situated. In particular, I will introduce a number of concepts from Weber, Freud, James, Bergson, and Whitehead that will set the stage for the more particular biographical and musical analyses in the subsequent chapters, especially in regard to the complex and still developing relation between rational, intellectual, and scientific modes of thought on one hand, and intuitive,

⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 325.

affective, and somatic modes on the other. Although James, Bergson, and Whitehead will be the theorists most referred to in the following pages, as Jonathan Gould suggests in *Can't Buy Me Love: The Beatles, Britain, and America*, Weber and Freud offer an indispensable sociological and psychological foundation for the work of these other theorists in understanding the phenomenon of rock and roll.⁸

In his *Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism*, Weber traces the development of the rationalized quality characteristic of Western free market capitalism, which he presents as having come to dominate Western societies on all levels of organization over the course of modernity, down to those societies' "fundamental attitude" of "systematic regimentation." Weber describes this ascendancy of rationalism, which he defines as "a *conceptual* simplification and ordering," as concomitant with the repression and othering of instinctual animality, the secular, technological productivity that largely characterized twentieth century experience in the West effectively repressing awareness of the intuitive physicality of "natural man" as vulgar, sinful, and even inhuman.⁹

If Weber's analysis reveals the ways in which predominant sectors of Western culture moved away from affective modes of experience towards rationalized "disenchantment,"¹⁰ Freud's "return of the repressed," which Freud saw as active in the collective domain as well as in the individual, provides an indispensable conceptual tool for understanding the titanic upheavals of the twentieth century, which occurred just as the older modes of experience seemed to be nearing complete abeyance in service to the ascendancy of the rational. Freud understood

⁸ Jonathan Gould, *Can't Buy Me Love: The Beatles, Britain, and America* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007) 177.

⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002) 86, 26-27, 104, 316-17.

¹⁰ Max Weber, *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, Ed. John Dreijmanis (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008).

that the more fundamental domains of human affect could not be denied and ignored without profound compensatory symptoms emerging, one of which seems to have been the eruption of popular music in the twentieth century, the height of which is arguably rock and roll.¹¹

Although Freud demonstrated the return of repressed content in culture, he focused almost exclusively on delineating the neurotic symptoms that accompany such repression. By contrast, James, working during roughly the same period as Freud, more fully defined the intuitive epistemologies that had been repressed in their healthy, non-neurotic manifestations. James demonstrates that rational intellect is but one way of knowing the world applicable to certain domains of experience more than others, and that, for complex historical reasons, the materially and discursively dominant cultures in the West have systematically privileged “logical reason” over “feeling” and “intuition” for the last few centuries, particularly since the widespread acceptance in the seventeenth century of the Cartesian equation of thought with human being in general as codified in the *cogito*: “I think, therefore I am.” However, while these two epistemological domains, roughly definable as rationality and affectivity, have often been constructed in modernity as fundamentally discontinuous and incommensurable, James posits that, just as they were combined in premodernity in a naïve, unconscious way, it seems that the way to attain a more complete understanding of lived experience lies in the intentional integration of these experiential domains. And this integration appears to be constituted primarily in conscious awareness of where one’s attention is directed, and of which mode one emphasizes at any given moment, a synthesis that, I will contend, has been enacted to a great extent by rock and roll music.¹²

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) 120, 130, 172.

¹² *The Varieties of Religious Experience* 298, 301-92, 349-50, 443-44 and William James, *Pragmatism* (Toronto: Dover, 1995) 1, 86, 94-95, 111.

Bergson's vitalism corroborates James' pragmatism, suggesting that intellect is a mode of thought that can only analyze and reduce emergent qualities to their constituent parts. As he presents it, rational intellect alone, with science its ultimate expression, cannot truly comprehend the emergence of anything genuinely novel without recourse to affective modes. Bergson shows that the emergence of life itself, or of human consciousness, both radically emergent properties, appear to pure intellect as merely recombinations of existing elements. In contrast, the kind of emergence that Bergson traces is qualitative, not quantitative, though qualitative shifts do often have quantitative results. Furthermore, Bergson shows that this internal quality of process has to do with the conception of time: where science generally constructs time as a linear, static, quantitative medium, Bergson demonstrates that duration, the lived experience of temporality, can also be conceived as qualitative, each moment having a quality particular to it. And this "inner movement of life" is only accessible, Bergson suggests, to intuitive forms of engaging experience. Bergson asserts that intellect and intuition are both indispensable ways of knowing the world and that, although this may seem obvious in practice, particularly in an early twenty-first century context when affectivity has become a primary academic concern, the academic presuppositions of the last few centuries have explicitly and in many ways rendered intuitive modes as inferior to intellect, a privileging that has been concretized in class distinctions, and even perhaps in racism as discussed in the chapter on Presley. Ultimately, Bergson sees intellect and intuition as constellating an opposition that must be deconstructed and reintegrated if Western culture is truly to move beyond the deepest implicit prejudices of modernity.¹³

Whitehead developed this pragmatist, vitalist stream of thought in what is generally referred to as his "process" philosophy, though he referred to it as a "philosophy of organism."

¹³ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005) xxii, 24-25, 37-39, 124, 135, 145, 220.

Whatever one calls it, Whitehead's work further illuminates the domains that James and Bergson articulated as a way out of the conceptual dead-end that modernity appeared to have become by the time Whitehead began writing philosophy in the nineteen-twenties. Very briefly, Whitehead sees the fundamental problems articulated so profoundly by modern philosophy to be resolvable by attention to bodily experience. By leaving out this whole domain, Whitehead recognizes, rational intellect has come to focus primarily on the negative, for as he writes: "The negative judgment is the peak of mentality."¹⁴ As Whitehead suggests, the focus solely on intellect denies conscious access to the more fundamental kinds of meaning that rational thought can structure, analyze, and critique, but cannot engender. And Whitehead, like James and Bergson, explicitly calls for the reintegration of these two modes, going as far as to nominate this epistemological synthesis "Wisdom." While in our personal lives we may recognize the efficacy of intuitive modes, Whitehead seems to suggest that as long as these modes are "omitted" from open commerce with our explicit intellectual understanding, our culture will never attain "Wisdom" a collectivity, but only rational knowledge, an imbalanced situation that seems to have played a large part in producing the ecological, economic, social, and political crises in which we now find ourselves. According to Whitehead, the durational domain of "instantaneous reality" between "mind" and "material" is the organismic locus of lived experience in the animal body that has been repressed by the predominant scientific mentality, but which seems to have been slowly reemerging in the twentieth century, partially through the medium of popular music.¹⁵

¹⁴ Bruno Latour similarly refers to the overcoming of this exclusive modern need to denounce, unveil, unmask, negate, and critique as the realization that this mode of thought, "the critical spirit" is "one competence among others" (Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, 44).

¹⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968) 153-160; Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition*, Ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1985) 5; Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) 4, 43, 47, 99, 118, 148, 159; Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) vii, 2, 54, 57, 143-47, 87.

None of these three philosophers, James, Bergson, and Whitehead, wish to place intuition above intellect, but merely to redress the imbalanced emphasis of these two primary ways of knowing the world. As I will suggest, extrapolating from Whitehead, the quality of great art, including rock and roll, that “transforms the soul” of many individuals, and thus of the cultural development that this music has largely mediated in the last half-century, is deeply imbricated with the “immediate enjoyment” of the music, the quality of temporal immediacy, the “being in the moment” that is so characteristic of rock and roll culture, though forged through the profound discipline that Presley, the Beatles, and Dylan demonstrated in the hard-won creation of their art. And certainly this disciplined evocation of enjoyment, the conscious inducement of ecstasy, which literally means “out of stasis,” in the performer and in the audience, is one of the primary factors that has allowed millions of people around the world to participate in the “permanent realisation of values extending beyond” the initial form of this “living art.” For the value that rock and roll places in somatic modes of experience is in direct contradistinction to the predominance of rationality, to which the genre appears to have been a compensatory reaction.¹⁶

Ultimately, as Whitehead’s exposition particularly demonstrates, a transition between historical “epochs” is the work of generations, for as he writes: “Half a century is its unit of time.” Thus, from the vantage of more than half a century after the creation of rock and roll, I will trace in the following pages this “renewed exercise of the creative imagination”¹⁷ through the birth of the genre in the nineteen-fifties, largely in the figure of Elvis Presley, and the music’s first movements towards maturity in the first half of the nineteen-sixties embodied in the Beatles and Bob Dylan. Through textual analysis of biography, memoir, journalism, criticism, and sound and video recordings, I will examine the ways these genre-defining artists have enacted a

¹⁶ *Science and the Modern World* 202.

¹⁷ *Science and the Modern World* 198, 208.

“regression in the service of transcendence”¹⁸ and, subsequently, the various ways in which they have performed the reintegration of these modes with the predominant rational, intellectual, and technological preoccupations of modernity.

Most texts about these three artists (and there are many) are either simple biographical narrative or analyses of music and lyrics, so a similar project would be largely redundant. By contrast, employing the methods of literary criticism, this study primarily explicates the rhetorical nuances of the written and oral narratives about these figures, which obliquely trace a philosophy of rock and roll. That is, rock and roll appears to be both catalyst and expression of a deep and relatively sudden epistemological shift initiated on a mass scale in the mid-twentieth century. Although this shift was presaged by the confluence of many factors—musical, cultural, aesthetic, political, and economic—these elements seem never to have been fully synthesized until the emergence of rock and roll, never fully realized in a single lineage (among other lineages in other media) until Dylan, the Beatles, and others produced complementary syntheses of the mode Presley and his milieu had initiated with numerous other artistic and intellectual movements.

The first chapter, “‘Let’s Get Real, Real Gone For a Change:’ Elvis Presley and the Return of Repressed Affect,” examines the original emergence of rock and roll in the mid-fifties out of the encounter between the blues, country music, gospel, and jazz through the catalyst of Presley who ultimately became the paradigmatic symbol, the “king” as it were, of that original incarnation of the genre. This birth moment is characterized by the eruption of a visceral physicality into the realm of normative discourse, and this corrective reaction to the extreme rationalization of predominant cultures in the post-war era seems to have been constituted in a return to modes that

¹⁸ Michael Washburn, *The Ego and the Dynamic Ground: A Transpersonal Theory of Human Development* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994) 171.

had been largely repressed in modernity. My analysis will make it clear that rock and roll did not emerge *ex nihilo* but was the product of a confluence of genres, and that the originary dispensation of the larger movement with Presley its most visible exponent, was something like an emergent property from these component parts, combining certain characteristics of the commercially dominant jazz singers with many of the aspects of blues, country, and gospel.

As the nascent cultural and artistic phenomenon of rock and roll was successively mediated by layers of musical and lyrical complexity over the course of the ensuing decades, the genre became increasingly self-aware, correlating with the growing consciousness of the repressed modes that it embodied in the cultural psyche. Thus, in the second chapter, “‘A Creative Tension:’ Affectivity and Rationality in the Production of Beatlemania,” I trace the Beatles’ discovery of the genre, mediated by their love for Presley and other original rock and rollers; their initiation into the full range of instinctual animality during their residencies at clubs in Hamburg and Liverpool; their reengagement with the rational and technological modes characteristic of modernity through Brian Epstein, George Martin, and Abbey Road Studios; and their first concrete integration of the rational and intuitive modes in their early singles, which issued into the production of Beatlemania in 1963-64 and, though beyond the scope of this dissertation, the many inspired innovations of their middle and late periods.

Similarly, though in a rather different inflection, in “‘Looking for the Inner Heat:’ Bob Dylan’s Radical Empiricism of Identity,” I examine Dylan’s discovery of rock and roll, folk music, and poetry, which he synthesized over the course of his development ultimately to create a new, more expansive kind of rock and roll. This chapter traces Dylan’s trajectory from his childhood in Hibbing, Minnesota where he first heard the call of music, through his brief sojourn in Minneapolis where he discovered Woody Guthrie and received a critique that mediated his

previously more purely affective focus, and then his early years in New York when he was deeply engaged in the Greenwich Village folk scene as well as in a self-education in folk music and poetry. This trajectory ultimately produced a new kind of folk music that would find its fullest expression in synthesis with rock and roll at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, when Dylan ascended to his role as “Rock and Roll King,” a role that David Hajdu succinctly summarizes as the “Elvis of the mind.”¹⁹

¹⁹ David Hajdu, *Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Farina, and Richard Farina* (New York: North Point Press, 2001) 276-277.

Chapter 1: “Let’s Get Real, Real Gone for a Change”

Elvis Presley and the Return of Repressed Affect

Hold it, Fellas. That don’t move me. Let’s get real, real gone for a change.

Elvis Presley, “Milkcow Blues Boogie”²⁰

The story that I will tell about Elvis Presley is not a story that he would have told about himself, at least not in these words. However, I suspect that he would have been sympathetic to the general trajectory of my interpretation of him, though he would not have known much of the vocabulary used to contextualize the narrative arc of his life. Indeed, as the hermeneutic mode that I am employing here suggests, the methods characteristic of literary interpretation can be applied just as fruitfully to biography, to the narrative construction of “real life.” Presley and those who knew him felt that he was the catalyst for a profound transformation, not only in music, but in the American culture that the music both reflected and impelled. As Sam Phillips, Presley’s first producer and mentor, articulated it, “Elvis Presley may not have been able to verbalize all that—but he damn sure wasn’t dumb, and he damn sure was intuitive, and he damn sure had an appreciation for the total spirituality of the human existence, even if he would never have thought of the term. That was what he cared about.”²¹ Aside from situating this analysis within the proper scope of Presley’s vital significance for understanding the last half-century of

²⁰ *Elvis at Sun.*

²¹ “Sam Phillips: The *Rolling Stone* Interview,” *Rolling Stone* 467 (February 13, 1986) 56. Along with general histories of rock and roll by Glenn C. Altschuler and Robert Palmer, many of the quotes and biographical details about Elvis Presley referred to in the following pages are taken from what most consider the definitive Presley biography of Presley’s early years: Peter Guralnick’s *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*. To cite one enthusiastic endorsement among many, Bob Dylan is quoted as saying that Guralnick’s book is “unrivaled. . . . [Presley] steps from these pages, you can feel him breathe, this book cancels out all others” (Guralnick book cover). To my mind, there is no higher authority in rock and roll than Dylan, and I would agree that Guralnick’s book is a model of biographical restraint and insight, particularly in a field as cluttered with mediocrity as “Elvis studies,” offering a remarkably impartial and empathetic narrative of Presley’s life.

American culture, this quote from Phillips also leads to the clearing up of a common misconception, namely, the stereotype of Presley as a dumb country boy.

This clarification is particularly necessary because this dissertation is written in a style, and for an audience, that implicitly privileges the mode of intellectual analysis even while tracing a movement that implicitly pushes against the privileging of that mode, a precarious operation at best. As RCA promotion manager Chick Crumpacker noted, “he was so unassuming . . . but he had this quality—he was very, very smart behind it all.” Similarly, according to one acquaintance, Presley knew “what he was doing at all times. I really believe he was like a novelist—he studied and watched what was going on, it was really just second nature with him.”²² Presley may have cultivated a “country dumb” persona, as the Ray Charles character describes it in the movie *Ray*, but, in fact, he appears to have been something of a genius in understanding how to present himself physically and verbally in order to elicit a desired reaction from others.

Although Presley clearly stated “I don’t dig the intellectual bit,”²³ he is also quoted as saying:

I’ve made a study of Marlon Brando. . . . I’ve made a study of poor Jimmy Dean. I’ve made a study of myself, and I know why girls, at least the young ‘uns, go for us. We’re sullen, we’re broodin’, we’re something of a menace. I don’t understand it exactly, but that’s what the girls like in men. I don’t know anything about Hollywood, but I know that you can’t be sexy if you smile. You can’t be a rebel if you grin.²⁴

In a practical way rather than an intellectual way, Presley obsessively observed and emulated the physicality of his performative influences as much as he studied the vocal phrasing of his musical influences, which was a large contributing factor to the radically novel style that he did

²² Guralnick 192, 243.

²³ *New York Herald-Tribune*, August 18, 1956.

²⁴ Lloyd Shearer, *Parade*, July 1956.

so much to create.²⁵ As has often been suggested, sexuality was one important component of the affective, bodily modes repressed in modernity, which Presley embodied in a qualitatively more concentrated way than his precursors.

However, according to Peter Guralnick, Presley's early manager, Bob Neal, saw the first few years of Presley's career as "an almost exponential progression . . . not just in his stage manner . . . but in an appetite for change and self-improvement that seemed to know no experiential bounds." In Neal's opinion, Presley would never "be mistaken for an intellectual—and he was far too jittery to be called introspective. But he soaked up influences like litmus paper; he was open to new people and new ideas and new experiences in a way that defied social stereotypes. He was *serious* about his work."²⁶ Similarly, Walter Matthau, who worked with Presley in his fourth film, *King Creole*, told an interviewer:

I almost hesitate, I creep up to the sentence . . . he was an instinctive actor. Because that almost is a derogation of his talents. That's saying, 'Well, you know, he's just a dumb animal who does it well by instinct.' No, he was quite bright, too. He was very intelligent. Also, he was intelligent enough to understand what a character was and how to play the character simply by being himself *through* the means of the story.²⁷

For those who were close to Presley, particularly in his early days, he was a brilliant, intuitive, self-aware, hard-working, well-mannered, generous artist, "a beautiful human being"²⁸ who, in music and daily life as much as in his acting, intentionally projected a persona that was far less serious and complex than the young man underneath. For instance, Presley once described a kind of meditative technique to early girlfriend June Juanico that he had developed as a child in which he would "look up at the moon" and feel himself to be floating "in the space between the moon

²⁵ Tim Riley, *Tell Me Why: The Beatles: album by album, song by song, the sixties and after* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2002) 10.

²⁶ Guralnick 195.

²⁷ Gerry McLafferty, *Elvis Presley in Hollywood: Celluloid Sell Out* (London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1990).

²⁸ Robert Palmer, *Rock & Roll: an unruly history* (New York: Harmony Books, 1995) 28.

and the stars.” As he told her, “I learned a long time ago not to talk about it. People think you’re crazy when you talk about things they don’t understand,”²⁹ a scenario that suggests Presley was far more conscious than he is often given credit for because he learned to hide this serious, contemplative side of himself behind the persona that most people saw, and which ultimately produced the caricature of the “fat Elvis” in rhinestone jumpsuit and shades, dying on the toilet while eating a peanut-butter and banana sandwich. Although there were many significant historical factors that contributed to the creation of the material, political, and economic conditions under which rock and roll could emerge, the primary focus of this chapter will be on the direct experience of Presley and his contemporaries, attempting to think its way into the world view that Presley inhabited in order to understand how he did what he did. It is the project of this analysis to draw out the philosophical subtleties implicit in Presley’s radically novel mode of relating to experience, evident both in his life and in his music.³⁰

²⁹ Guralnick 313.

³⁰ Palmer 17. The beat poets, as well as the bebop movement in jazz, have much in common with the countercultural phenomenon of rock and roll, largely defining the American “hipster” aesthetic that Presley came to exemplify. In this indirect sense, the proto-beats and bebop musicians had a profound effect on the culture that produced Presley, though the beat movement is usually marked as beginning on October 7, 1955, the occasion of Allen Ginsberg’s first reading of “Howl,” more than a year after the release of Presley’s first single, “That’s All Right.” Regardless, neither the beats nor bebop, which had begun in the forties, were on Presley’s radar, so to speak. While the work of Kerouac or Miles Davis allowed high cultural access to the more intuitive and somatic modes that Presley embodied, there does not seem to be a direct link between the literary movement of the beats, the intellectual aesthetic performed musically by bebop, and the music of Elvis Presley. Thus, while acknowledging that the beats and bebop enacted a similar impulse to that of rock and roll, this analysis will primarily be concerned with the influences and cultural domains that Presley and his milieu themselves saw as their immediate precursors and contemporaries, namely, popular musicians and actors. Certainly all of these figures—poets, actors, and different kinds of musicians—were part of a larger movement in culture away from the exclusive privileging of intellect towards intuitive and somatic modes, and these various countercultural expressions were ultimately reintegrated with intellect in complex ways as will be seen in the following pages. However, whereas the beats essentially enacted the trajectory towards affect from the basis of a poetic genre that implicitly privileged intellect even while it pushed against it, and bebop carried jazz, which had been the previously dominant musical incarnation of the repressed epistemologies, towards intellect, Presley and his contemporaries embodied a more pure expression of affectivity without immediate reference to intellectual domains, though there is little doubt that they were ultimately reacting to this privileging, and that the further permutations of the genre, particularly those of the Beatles and Dylan, would engage with rationality much more intimately than Presley. Nevertheless, both the beats and bebop were explicitly in dialogue with the dominant intellectual mode whereas Presley and the majority of early rock and rollers were not in any significant way. Rather, the privileging of scientific rationality in modern discourse generally formed the background within which rock and roll was brought

Presley certainly inherited the crown of “American cool” in “the new youth market, which was crying for a successor to the late Jimmy Dean,”³¹ but this succession was far more than merely a vapid fad or a trivial pop culture phenomenon as it was often portrayed, particularly in the first few decades of rock and roll. Rather, I would contend, somewhat contrary to Simon Frith’s argument in *Performing Rites*,³² that the apparent whims of the marketplace can fruitfully be seen as a metric of the deepest desires and needs of the individuals who make up that economy at any given historical moment. Although this correlation between the profound yearnings of individuals and the commodities on which people spend their money is complicated by the often cynical realities of advertising, in some cases, as with the rise of Elvis Presley, the phenomenon defies the capability of corporate interests to create or control and, instead, reveals something authentic about the cultural psyche at that moment. I tend to agree with Anthony DeCurtis when he writes that, “as someone at play in the fields of popular culture, I care about everything that interests people. In a way that is antithetical to most rock criticism, I grow more curious about something the more popular it gets.”³³ I generally relate to this sentiment and would go further in saying that, while there is certainly value in unearthing what Robert Palmer calls the “more rarefied epiphanies”³⁴ that have been marginalized or ignored (a tendency exemplified by the series of *Nuggets* compilations and various strains of rock criticism), perhaps

into being. Although rock and roll did implicitly gain its significance by contrast to this dominant discursive mode, the genre’s relationship with the intellectually privileging culture is qualitatively different than the aesthetic modes employed by the beats and bebop.

³¹ Guralnick 260.

³² Frith writes: “The problem of populist cultural studies is less its politics than its sociology, its assumption that the ‘popular’ is defined by the market. The populist position is that whatever our (class-bound) personal tastes and values may be, we have to accept that sales figures, box office returns, and record charts tell us what ‘the people’ want. It’s only a residual academic elitism that leads us to celebrate the radical or avant-garde.” Simon Frith, *Performing Rites* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 15.

³³ Anthony DeCurtis, *Rocking My Life Away* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 1999) x.

³⁴ Palmer 11.

the best way to understand what the collective culture was going through at any particular moment is to look at the movements to which the most people were giving their attention.

Of course, the dichotomy that Frith, and to a lesser extent DeCurtis, set up between “popular” and “avant garde” becomes largely moot in the case of Presley, the Beatles, and Dylan, for these three artists seem to epitomize both descriptors in a way that very few artists in the history of popular music have been able to achieve, though Presley was only able to maintain this quality for the first few years of his career. Thus, while there have been many moments when the avant garde was intrinsically marginalized in American culture (the early fifties for instance), when Guralnick writes that Presley was “pure plasticity in an informational age that required a protean hero,”³⁵ he does not seem to be exaggerating or being facetious. Rather, Guralnick seems to be recognizing that mid-twentieth century America, like almost all cultures in all times, required such a transformative figure to enact, perform, catalyze, and manifest the deepest yearnings of that cultural moment.³⁶ Indeed, although it could be argued that a number of other early rock and rollers, including Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Buddy Holly, and others surpassed Presley in a variety of ways, the fact remains that Presley’s first single, “That’s All Right,” was released in July of 1954, a full year before Berry’s first single, “Maybelline,” a year and four months before Richard’s first hit, “Tutti Frutti,” and three years before Holly’s “That’ll Be the Day.” Put simply, among those men generally considered the “founding fathers” of the genre, Elvis Presley has by far the strongest claim to having invented rock and roll in its fully realized form (as distinct from rhythm and blues) because he got there first by a long shot.³⁷ As

³⁵ Guralnick 241.

³⁶ Altschuler 8.

³⁷ Riley 9. Conversely, Palmer argues that, “for many of these ‘first-generation rockers,’ the idea of a separate category of music called rock and roll is itself inherently suspect.” (7) Later, he writes: “Musically, rock and roll was not so much a departure from tradition as an evolutionary synthesis. For a hypothetical (and highly unlikely)

Chuck Berry summed it up: “Describe Elvis Presley? He was the greatest who ever was, is or ever will be.”³⁸

To be fair, Bill Haley & His Comets recorded “Rock Around the Clock” three months before Presley recorded “That’s All Right,” though the song did not attain widespread success until the following year, after Presley’s record had exploded into popular consciousness, at least in southeastern regional markets. Haley certainly did a great deal to popularize the genre, though to my ears, as well as to those of many critics, Haley’s music is not truly rock and roll, but a sort of bridge or compromise formation between jazzy, rhythm & blues-inflected country music and the rock and roll that would find its first complete expression in “That’s All Right.”³⁹ As Haley himself put it: “We take a lot of care with lyrics because we don’t want to offend anybody. The music is the main thing, and it’s just as easy to write acceptable words.”⁴⁰ However, aside from the transgressive suggestiveness of the songs Presley would sing, Presley’s first record possesses a manic energy and a dangerous intensity that Haley’s music lacks, qualities that ultimately defined the emerging genre. All of the structural elements were present to make Haley’s music technically identifiable as rock and roll—the more pronounced backbeat, the instrumental and vocal inflections derived simultaneously from country, blues, and jazz, and the simple inclusion of the verb “rock” in the lyrics—but the spark that would set the fire blazing was struck by Presley. Indeed, this is an exemplary instance of the radically different conclusions that can

listener well versed in the history of jazz, gospel, hillbilly, western swing, Latin music, blues, and r&b, fifties rock would have held few surprises” (141). In all fairness, Palmer does seem to draw back from this assertion in other passages, but this general attitude seems to be concomitant with the intellectual, scientific orientation described by Bergson: “Like ordinary knowledge, in dealing with things science is concerned only with the aspect of *repetition*. Though the whole be original, science will always manage to analyze it into elements or aspects which are approximately a reproduction of the past” (24-25). Although Palmer’s analysis is excellent in many ways, he tends to favor the mode which reduces novel emergent phenomena to their constituent parts rather than focusing on the integral synthesis that transcends the individual components.

³⁸ Ed. Anthony Thornton, *Uncut Legends: Elvis* (Issue no. 5, 2005) 143.

³⁹ Altschuler 33.

⁴⁰ Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, 25-26.

result from the modes of interpretation associated with rationality and affectivity: although Haley's song might be considered the first rock and roll record by a rational accounting, it is Presley's song that remains the epochal initiatory act as it expresses not only the confluence of genres that Haley's song synthesizes, but also the affective tone and attitude of the new genre that Haley did not possess, and which Presley epitomized.⁴¹

Bluntly stated, Bill Haley was not very cool, a quality which forms the heart of the genre, for American cool is definable as affective authenticity in contradistinction to the more affected performativity exhibited by Haley, which was characteristic of the pre-rock and roll era in which he had one foot firmly planted. Indeed, the juxtaposition of "affectivity" and "affectedness" is striking, for while "affect" implies the authentic bodily feelings that produce one's activity, the quality of being "affected" indicates a more passive and inauthentic submission to culturally preconditioned roles and modes of engagement. Thus, the transition marked by the subtle difference between Haley's and Presley's performativities can be seen as an emblematic enactment of the profound shift from the mandates of rationalized culture determining one's identity, to allowing one's persona to result from one's intrinsic felt experience. This difference is primarily constituted in attention to the conceptual mores of society being the dominant motivating factor for the rational mode, as opposed to attention focused on the dictates of one's bodily economy being the primary motive force in the affective mode. If Haley was standing in the doorway to the reemerging bodily mode, Presley leapt through with abandon into the new realm that he did so much to liberate. This subtle but crucial difference delineated the liminal cusp between "real" and "fake," between authenticity and its lack.

⁴¹ Cf. Lewis MacAdams, *Birth of the Cool: Beat, Bebop, and the American Avant Garde* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

Similarly, the Moondog Coronation Ball in Cleveland in 1952, produced by disc jockey Alan Freed who popularized the term “rock and roll,”⁴² was claimed by him to have been the “first rock and roll concert.” Although the term “rock and roll” had been in use since the forties, and Alan Freed had been using it on his radio show since 1951,⁴³ the performers who actually played at the Moondog event, like Paul “Huckleback” Williams and Tiny Grimes, both African Americans, were jazzy rhythm and blues musicians, both men having previous connections with Charlie Parker, for instance. Listening to their music, it sounds close to the rock and roll that would emerge a few years later, but not quite, an instance of Whitehead’s “slightest change of tone which yet makes all the difference.”⁴⁴ As Palmer expresses it, by the mid-fifties, “Rock and roll had become, *in practice*, a somewhat different musical proposition from rhythm and blues. The beat tended to become heavier and more emphatic; blues- and gospel-derived melodic usages expanded to embrace more elements of pop songcraft; jazz content was minimized.”⁴⁵ As with Haley, though to a lesser extent, many of the elements were present at the Moondog Coronation Ball that would define the emergent form. However, also as with Haley’s music, the music of Williams and Grimes presents as relatively affected, perhaps due in part to the structural elements delineated by Palmer, but also perhaps due to a relative lack of the willfully concentrated authenticity that Presley reintroduced into mainstream popular music, appropriating this crucial element for the creation of the new genre from James Dean and Marlon Brando as much as from the musicians by whom he was influenced. Listening to their music and witnessing their visual performativity, it is clear that Williams and Grimes were still essentially in the jazz age, while Presley, a few years later, emerged fully formed as the prime exemplar of what would

⁴² Altschuler 31 and Palmer 133.

⁴³ Gould 17-18.

⁴⁴ *Science and the Modern World 2*.

⁴⁵ Palmer 83.

become the rock era. While Presley's contribution is often summarized as synthesizing black and white musical modes, it seems that Presley's synthesis of the performativity characteristic of his musical precursors with that of the two actors mentioned above is nearly as significant a factor in Presley's production of rock and roll. Thus, rather than claiming the Moondog Coronation Ball as the "first rock and roll concert," it might be more accurate to say that the collective desire for the phenomenon of rock and roll was evinced in the Moondog Coronation Ball, but that it was a container waiting for something to fill it, as the new music did not truly emerge until Presley's moment of inspiration more than two years later in 1954.

Presley's era-defining first recordings, collected in *Elvis at Sun*, fall into two distinct categories. The first category is slow, sentimental ballads crooned largely in a "cloying and overdrawn"⁴⁶ imitation of the vocal jazz tradition exemplified by Dean Martin, Bing Crosby, and Perry Como,⁴⁷ though with a blues inflection, or, as Guralnick describes them, "soft, sweet songs, in a soft, slightly quavering voice."⁴⁸ However, the second kind of song was sung in the qualitatively new style created by Presley and his compatriots: not quite country, blues, jazz, or gospel, but a synthesis of all these styles, transubstantiated into something new by their rarefaction in the alembic of the new approach. Indeed, as Palmer observes, this new kind of song was fundamentally different from the more traditional fare, for "in a culture whose idea of musical entertainment was Perry Como, Doris Day, and 'Your Hit Parade,' the appearance of an Elvis Presley . . . was radical, unprecedented."⁴⁹ Although "That's All Right," explicated below, is considered by many to be the first true rock and roll record, correctly to my mind, "Milkcow

⁴⁶ Gould 18.

⁴⁷ Altschuler 24.

⁴⁸ Guralnick 43. "He sang quite a few of Kay Starr's songs, he was partial to Teresa Brewer, Joni James, Bing Crosby, Eddie Fisher, and Perry Como, as well as Hank Williams and Eddy Arnold" (Guralnick 48).

⁴⁹ Palmer 150.

Blues Boogie,” recorded a few months later, is the record on which Presley explicitly enacts the leap from one genre into another.⁵⁰

On this record, he starts out in the jazz age, which by now has grown into a safe orthodoxy, crooning in his quavering ballad-voice. Then, in what is clearly a staged, dramatic move, Presley “stops” the band (we know it is staged because the band stops playing before he tells them to) and, in a slightly harder, more commanding voice intones: “Hold it, fellas. That don’t move me. Let’s get real, real gone for a change,”⁵¹ an invocation which calls into being a new approach to making music, and perhaps a novel way of relating to experience. With this statement, Presley seems to be inciting his band, and himself, to make the potentially terrifying transrational leap, identifying for the length of the song with their bodies rather than their mental or critical faculties, which, for many in modernity exemplify the mode of consciousness that separates us from animals and justifies our very existence. While the phrase “for a change” seems explicitly to suggest trying something new, there also seems to be an implication of consciously moving their centers of attention from egoic consciousness to a more embodied form of consciousness for the purpose of producing collective transformation (“for a change”). And, when Presley tells his musicians to “hold it,” it may not be too much to suggest that Presley is half-consciously admonishing his band to hold themselves back from being drawn into the gravity of the old way of being. Thus, this break in the song seems to be an intentional enactment of the moment when rock and roll is born by performing a rupture with the previous mode.

Though all of the individual musical elements of rock and roll already existed in jazz, blues,

⁵⁰ It should also be recognized that a number of other earlier songs have been claimed, with some justification, to be the first rock and roll song, including Wynonie Harris’ version of “Good Rockin’ Tonight (1947), “The Fat Man” by Fats Domino (1949), and “Rocket 88” by Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats (1951). However, “That’s All Right,” along with its flip-side, “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” was the song that largely brought the genre into the main streams of public consciousness.

⁵¹ *Elvis at Sun*

country, and gospel, and those genres had cross-pollinated to a limited degree, it was not until Elvis Presley sang on these records, these Sun sessions that a metaphorical sun rose on a new day for American popular music.⁵²

In these records, Presley was enacting a mode that he knew to be transgressive within his cultural milieu, one that reversed the privileging opposition characteristic of modernity, focusing on affect and intuition over rational and intellectual concerns, though, as we will see with the Beatles and Dylan, intellect would be reengaged by rock and roll in profound ways in the sixties. However, the very fact that Presley was consciously entering into the modes largely repressed and rendered unconscious in modernity suggests that his initiatory reversal was always already gesturing towards an integration of these modes. As will be discussed in more depth below, Presley's constantly amused smirk seems to attest, in part, to the fact that he knew that emulating many of the mannerisms and stylistic tropes of African American rhythm and blues, as a white man, would be perceived as dangerous and subversive to the postwar order in which he lived.⁵³ Of course, the emulation of black culture was already a widespread phenomenon, from the white jazz musicians who followed the lead of their African American counterparts, to Jackie Robinson who initiated a revolution in the way baseball was played by white athletes during the same period. However, Presley's emulation of black culture seems to have differed qualitatively from these instances in that he not only emulated the way African Americans played, as did Benny Goodman or various white baseball players; he actually *acted* black to some extent, not in the condescending mode of minstrelsy, but in genuine homage. That is, rather than limiting his emulation to a specific area of endeavor, Presley partially modeled his persona on the subtle gestural and vocal inflections characteristic of postwar African American culture, while his

⁵² Altschuler 26.

⁵³ Gould 103.

values reflected the often more genuinely democratic and participatory ethics of that community. Although Presley was certainly not the only white person to take the cultural emulation to this extent, he was perhaps the most visible, coming to symbolize this act of racial integration within himself for many observers, both sympathetic and otherwise, an integration that will be traced in more detail below.⁵⁴

In these early recordings, we hear Presley developing a persona, creating a semi-fictional character by means of which he enacts the emerging genre in songs such as “Milkcow Blues Boogie,” “That’s All Right,” “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” “Good Rockin’ Tonight,” and “Mystery Train” through the suggestive inflections and distinctive phrasing that he employs in his singing, as well as in the manic intensity of his guitar strumming.⁵⁵ Indeed, in the two different versions of “I’m Left, You’re Right, She’s Gone,” one slow and one fast, Presley enacts this same transition between two stylistic eras, though “Milkcow Blues Boogie” remains the epitomical enactment aside from “That’s All Right” as, in this case, he dramatically dismisses the old style in favor of the new within the space of a single recorded track.

In November 1954, Presley summed up his reason for making music and performing in a succinct and direct way: “I like to do these things because they make me feel good,” which is a statement that comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with Presley’s music. However, while one might be inclined to interpret this statement as a trivial insight, it is, in fact, a precise evocation of the repressed affective orientation that was then reemerging into mass consciousness largely through the catalyst of rock and roll in a further iteration of the similar emergences that had occurred in the popular music of earlier decades. Similarly, as Guralnick describes a television appearance by Presley on the Dorsey brothers’ *Stage Show*, the most striking element of the

⁵⁴ Cf. Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

⁵⁵ Gould 19.

performance is “the sheer enjoyment of the moment.”⁵⁶ Although the ultimate trajectory of Presley’s life certainly was hedonistic, there is something more profound than mere hedonism being articulated here. Presley, watched by an entire generation, made the epochal discovery that one’s activities should be affectively enjoyable, not just rationally intelligible, and that perhaps the best pragmatic metric for the value and efficacy of an activity is the question asked by Bob Dylan a decade later: “How does it feel?”⁵⁷ Or, to put it in Presley’s terms from the spoken interregnum of “Milkcow Blues Boogie”: Does it move you? In fact, this question appears to have been the guiding principle by which Presley pursued his musical vision. According to producer Bones Howe, in the recording studio:

It was always about the music. He would keep working on a song, and he would listen to it played back, and his criterion was always: did it make him feel good? He didn’t care if there were little mistakes, he was interested in anything that would make magic out of the record. The sessions were always fun, there was great energy, he was always doing something that was innovative. It was always about whether you had a feeling for music or not, whether you felt what he felt.⁵⁸

Presley understood that precision and theoretical mastery are of secondary importance to the purpose of popular music, which can be expressed accurately as to “make magic,” a phrase that might sound naïve to our ears, but which nevertheless expresses the irreducibly numinous quality of a truly great song. It has often been suggested that music is the purest of the arts because it has the ability to produce nearly unmediated feeling in the listener, to open up vast imaginal vistas, and to evoke elevated states of consciousness and, at its best, rock and roll has epitomized this capacity.

Not only did Presley’s instinct for the pursuit of enjoyment make him a wildly successful performer, it also placed him directly at the center of what might be described as the deepest

⁵⁶ Guralnick 153, 245.

⁵⁷ The chorus from Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone.” Bob Dylan, *Highway 61 Revisited* (Columbia Records, 1965).

⁵⁸ Guralnick 335.

project of modernity, expressed by E.M. Forster as “only connect,” to find meaningful relationality in a world that had seemingly been voided of intrinsic meaning by cultural rationalization, constituted largely in the repression of attention to bodily feeling. This impulse enacted by Presley towards felt connection is also evident in the initiatory declarations of the beats, particularly Ginsberg’s “Howl”: “Moloch the heavy judger of men . . . the incomprehensible prison . . . whose mind is pure machinery . . . whose blood is running money . . . whose name is the Mind . . . in whom I am consciousness without a body . . . who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy.”⁵⁹ This is the extreme patriarchal, mechanistic, materialistic, rationalistic, and alienated state of affairs that Presley, Ginsberg, and many in their generation sought to overcome in different ways, through the pushing of language to transcend its inherently rational limitations in poetic and philosophical illumination as much as through the more purely visceral focus on modes other than intellect performed by rock and roll. Whereas Ginsberg articulated the reemergence of bodily knowledge in the more intellectual medium of poetry, Presley’s rock and roll was an almost completely intuitive expression of the return of modes repressed in modernity, though Presley would not have articulated the situation in quite this way.

Even if he had possessed the inclination to master the complex philosophical or poetic discourse required to describe the deeper meaning of his musical performativity, Presley would not have had the time both to do what he was doing and to explain it to the world—that is what philosophers are for. Ultimately, it seems that in order to produce genuine novelty, whether in music or in thought, one must focus one’s attention on one end of the dialectical polarity of affectivity and rationality, so that musicians must generally privilege intuition over intellect, while musically oriented thinkers must privilege rational thought in their daily work. However, it

⁵⁹ Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2001) 9-26.

seems that truly novel work in either domain must result from the engagement of this kind of extremity with its polar opposite, in Presley's ongoing conversation with his critics and his pushing against the rationalized expectations of his culture's predominant sectors as much as in the project of works like the present study, which is to analyze and explicate the deeper meaning of rock and roll without vitiating the visceral intensity and irreducible spirit of the genre.

For Presley, always in relation to his context, the transgressive focus on pure affect, and the concomitant awareness of temporality as qualitative duration, seems to have formed the crux of the method by which he made music. Guralnick explains: "Time meant nothing to him in the studio. If he felt like singing spirituals, he would sing spirituals to his heart's content. It was his way of finding his place; it was all part of the creative process as he had learned it in the Sun studio." However, he continues, "If the feeling wasn't there, you waited until it *got* there, you didn't try to define it too precisely before it showed up—and if something else happened to show up while you were waiting, well, then, you took advantage of that."⁶⁰ Presley seems to have understood that, where musical inspiration is concerned, one cannot force the constantly shifting quality of temporal experience to do one's bidding as one can to a limited extent in the relatively narrow domain accessible to science. Rather, he found that he could put himself in a state of meditative readiness so that, when inspiration struck, he would be prepared to perform the surge of novelty that he experienced. What a profoundly different approach this is from a science that sees time as a quantitative, linear medium for empirical testing and repeatability, often seeking to bring the world into compliance via technological instruments and mathematical models. Science is certainly a valid and noble enterprise, but apparently not the only valid way to approach understanding the world. Presley, only partially conscious of his role's significance, was one of

⁶⁰ Guralnick 335-6.

the primary figures who seems to have initiated the emergence of a novel approach to experience that integrates the individuated, modern, rational mind with the more intuitive mode of consciousness, which had been the predominant mode prior to the seventeenth century, and which is the appropriate mode for perceiving the qualitative nature of temporality. No wonder Presley and his group experienced apprehension as they created this audaciously new musical genre.

It seems to be the case that, in genuine cultural revolutions, a certain amount of uncertainty, even fear, is usually experienced by the would-be revolutionaries before the new mode finds footing in popular consciousness. The purpose of such revolutions appears to be to mediate the emergence of something that has never existed before, though all of the component parts are extant. Thus, there are often no institutions set up for the new mode's implementation, no ready-made audience or market, which is why it is so unusual for all of the necessary elements to come together to create a genuinely novel phenomenon like the one Presley and his friends enacted. As Sam Phillips said: "what I was thinking was, where you going to go with this, it's not black, it's not white, it's not pop, it's not country."⁶¹ The new music that Presley and his band created in these Sun sessions, despite the fact that they had planned and labored to bring it into being, did not fit into an easily accessible category precisely because it embodied the integration of the categories that Phillips mentions. There were no radio stations for music that sounded like a cross between blues and country, though, as discussed above, there was a relatively recently invented name for the genre.⁶²

⁶¹ Guralnick 99.

⁶² Altschuler 27.

Listening to the studio banter after an early take of “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” Phillips can be heard saying “Hell, that’s different. . . . That’s a pop song now, nearly about,”⁶³ Presley, Black, and Moore laughing uneasily. They were not sure exactly what it was they had created, though they knew that they had never heard anything quite like it before. Indeed, it is easy to forget, more than a half-century later in the culture that these men did so much to create, the profoundly novel quality of this music, with all the difficulties and resistances that inevitably accompany novelty’s ingress into historical process. Rock and roll was not just a revolution in musical style; it was a primary embodiment and articulation of a revolution in the way many people, in America and elsewhere, lived, felt about, and thought about their lives and their relation to immediate experience. At its deepest octave, rock and roll appears to have been the symbolic, narrative act of the paradigmatic European white man breaking out of exclusive identification with his rational intellect and the domains of experience to which this mode allows access, and into a centauric, dual identification of consciousness with both mind and body, a rupture whose shock waves are still rippling through our culture more than half a century later.⁶⁴

A central aspect of this integration effected by Presley and the other rock and rollers was the synthesis of black and white music to create a genre, which, though it was not raceless, constituted a profound complication of the cultures of these two groups. By now, it is cliché to note that the original rock and roll, exemplified by Presley, was produced by the synthesis of music made by both black people and white people: blues and country, vocal jazz and gospel.⁶⁵ However, it seems that this synthesis implicitly gestured towards the integration of a profound bifurcation in American culture between intellect and intuition. First, it is important to be

⁶³ Elvis Presley, *The Complete Sun Sessions*, United States of Distribution LTD., 2005.

⁶⁴ Altschuler 191.

⁶⁵ Palmer 49-50.

absolutely clear that the pernicious supposition that African Americans are biologically more intuitive or somatically gifted and that white Americans are biologically more intellectual is an unsupportable assertion. However, there does seem to be a genuine cultural difference in these areas, though one that is always already deconstructed by the many visible exceptions to this general cultural tendency.

As Frantz Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions.” Here, Fanon seems to be employing Europe as the symbolic origin of Western modernity in which slavery, segregation, racism, sexism, classism, and imperialism have formed the long shadow of the Enlightenment myth of unlimited progress and the rational “ascent of man.” Indeed, as Fanon implies, this “sickness” and “inhumanity” seem to be products of the exclusive privileging of intellect divorced from affect for, as he continues: “Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth.”⁶⁶ Instead of continuing the primarily Western hegemony of the rational, Fanon seems to suggest that the way forward is to integrate body and mind, “muscles” and “brains” for the elicitation of novelty, which will produce the birth of “the whole man” who will maintain balance between all of the different epistemological modes necessary for healthy sustainability. These repressed modes seem to be symbolized for Fanon by what he describes as “the Third World,” though this term is apparently just as applicable to marginalized groups within Europe and the United States. Indeed, Fanon’s project seems essentially complicit with the work of

⁶⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2005) 236-37.

James, Bergson, and Whitehead traced in the introduction, though in a rather different cultural domain than the ones explicated by these old, white, Eurocentric men.⁶⁷

Thus, based on Fanon's work, it seems plausible that the institution of slavery and, later, of segregation, produced a situation in which African American culture was literally forced to privilege and exemplify the epistemologies that had been repressed and identified as "other" by the dominant white culture for, according to Brian Ward, whites "had long reified black culture as the perpetually fascinating but feral, alluring but alarming, sensual but sordid antithesis to the dominant white one."⁶⁸ Since African Americans generally did not have access to education (with some notable exceptions) and they were often forced to do physically demanding work and to live in extremely modest circumstances, many black Americans essentially had no choice but to privilege the affective efficacy that was necessary for both physical and psychological survival under such conditions. Through the instrumentality of racial oppression, American culture seems to have literalized the larger process of the individuation of intellect by means of the repression of other epistemologies. Through an institutionalized system of cultural domination and violence, African Americans were generally forced to embody somatic modes while many white Americans were coerced by somewhat more subtle cultural pressures to embody a mode that privileged science, intellect, and rationality.

Enter the Presleys who lived in a primarily black part of Memphis, and who were just about as immersed in African American culture as it was possible for white people to be in the mid-twentieth century South. The preachers and the congregations who worshiped in the

⁶⁷ Lucien Price reports Alfred North Whitehead as saying: "Let Americans study Europe and see what has been done. But when it comes to creation, God bless my soul ! then forget everything that has ever been done before and create!" Lucien Price, *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* (Boston: Nonpareil, 2001) 60.

⁶⁸ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998) 39.

churches in Presley's neighborhood expressed their religious devotion in an extremely physical way, singing, dancing, shouting, and testifying in a cathartic, rhythmic rejoicing. Although Presley was a liminal figure between the black and white worlds, living in the neighborhood where this ecstatic physicality predominated, but not actually venturing into these African American churches, "you didn't have to go inside to get the feeling." Living in the midst of this cultural milieu, Guralnick explains, "you breathed it in, as natural as air—after a while you got used to it, it became yours, too, *it was almost like being in church.*"⁶⁹ This was the culture in which Elvis Presley spent a significant portion of his formative years. A white boy in a primarily black community with all of the complex social dynamics that this immersion in otherness entailed, Presley was consistently embedded in the somatic modes that were generally privileged in the black community. It is clear from listening to Presley's music and reading his biography that he internalized those modes, integrating them to a high degree with the rationalized, post-Enlightenment mode that had been inculcated into him as a nearly inescapable part of being white in postwar American culture, in his white schools and churches as much as through the increasingly pervasive media of radio and television. In a way that very few people were able to do at that time, Presley, partially by dint of his developmental environment, exemplified the integration of the opposed modes at the heart of a schizophrenic modernity. He may not have been particularly interested in articulating this integration verbally, but he enacted it in his singing, his physical movements when performing, and in his general mode of relating to his embodied experience. Although ultimately, as Palmer suggests, "white musicians have long since made the rock and roll idiom their own," to a great extent because of Presley's appropriation and synthesis of the genre's tropes, "the fact remains that the music's wellsprings,

⁶⁹ Guralnick 27-28.

its governing aesthetic precepts, its ‘deep structures,’ are fundamentally African and African-American.”⁷⁰

Although Presley’s immediate, white social circles in Memphis were, in fact, largely oriented towards music, Presley necessarily participated to some degree in the mentality of the predominant streams of white, national culture, which privileged intellect, first in school, but particularly once he expanded beyond his immediate circles to become a perpetual presence in the national press. Ultimately, this privileging of intellect produced a situation of profound unintelligibility. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the epistemological alienation that permeated much of mid-twentieth century American culture with the rhythmic, somatic, intuitive approach taken by the African Americans in Presley’s neighborhood is striking in its dissonance. Although there were certainly many black people who willingly participated in the predominantly white modes of rationalized industry, and many whites who participated in the modes exemplified by black culture, this bifurcation was still a primary factor in the structural organization of American culture at that time.

However, having emphasized the radical bifurcation between the races at this historical moment in the mid-fifties, it should also be noted that radio was at the forefront of enacting a reintegration of these artificially conditioned cultural modes in the United States.⁷¹ As a salesman for the station that would first play Presley’s songs, WDIA, quipped, the letters stood for “We Done Integrated Already,”⁷² and Presley was deeply immersed in this musical and racial integration. In an interview in 1956, Presley explained:

The colored folks been singing it and playing it just like I’m doin’ now, man, for more years than I know. They played it like that in the shanties and in their juke

⁷⁰ Palmer 77.

⁷¹ Guralnick 39-40.

⁷² Altschuler 19.

joints, and nobody paid it no mind 'til I goosed it up. I got it from them. Down in Tupelo, Mississippi, I used to hear old Arthur Crudup bang his box the way I do now, and I said if I ever got to the place where I could feel all old Arthur felt, I'd be a music man like nobody ever saw.⁷³

With characteristic modesty, Presley was aware that he was the propagator of a musical mode that had existed before him and that this mode had come to prominence through him, to some degree, because of his race. However, the truth is somewhat more complex than Presley constructs it in the interest of self-effacement, for the very act of being a white man singing something that resembled what had previously been considered black music was profoundly courageous in the cultural climate of the mid-fifties. Although others were performing a similar act of racial integration, very few people took this integration to the level of overwhelming cultural visibility that Presley did, making him a lightning rod for this deeply divisive issue at the heart of American culture. And Presley certainly added a great deal to the primarily African American musical modes by synthesizing them with other, predominantly white genres, particularly country music, and adding his own distinctive inflections. Nevertheless, it is clear that the core of Presley's music was derived in large part from African American music, and specifically, from the focus on "feel" that Presley emphasizes in relation to Crudup and that is, in fact, the essence of the blues genre. To borrow a memorable paraphrase of Eldridge Cleaver, "black music gave whites their bodies back,"⁷⁴ and Presley was one of the primary mediators of this profound gift.

In a similar way to Presley, though in the opposite direction, black rock and rollers like Chuck Berry and Little Richard did a great deal to move African American music towards white musical and cultural tropes. Indeed, Chuck Berry's first hit, "Maybellene," was a rewrite of Roy

⁷³ Gary Kays, "Elvis Defends Low-Down Style," *Charlotte Observer*, June 27, 1956.

⁷⁴ Dirk Dunbar, "The Evolution of Rock and Roll: Its Religious and Ecological Themes," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Volume 2: Fall 2002.

Acuff's "Ida Red." Where Presley was a white man playing essentially black rhythm and blues with an inevitable white inflection, Chuck Berry was an African American playing essentially white country music, though inflected by the blues. Strategically orchestrated by Leonard Chess of Chess Records to appeal to a white audience, the song was a huge hit among the "millions" of predominantly white teenagers, which "proved that they were ready to idolize an African American."⁷⁵ Although white jazz fans had long revered black musicians like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Nat King Cole, Berry carried this reverence to a new level of intensity partially by appropriating the most distinctively "white" musical form, country music.

Thus, it would be misleading to suggest that Presley produced the integration of black and white musical modes single-handedly. For another instance, Sam Phillips, Presley's first producer and mentor, was a curator of novelty who understood that African American music represented a profound mode of engagement largely unencumbered by the limiting assumptions produced by the privileging of intellect in the predominant, Eurocentric cultures of modernity. As Phillips articulated it with characteristically poetic bluntness, he was drawn to "genuine, untutored negro" music, to "negroes with field mud on their boots and patches in their overalls . . . battered instruments and unfettered techniques" for, according to Phillips, he "was shooting for that damn row that hadn't been plowed." Leaving aside the vestiges of the "noble savage" mythos in which Phillips seems to be engaging, his integration of epistemologies, associated in this particular context with the integration of racially overdetermined cultural tropes embodied in music, was the path towards the novelty for which Presley and Phillips were explicitly searching, following what amounts to an "almost subversive attraction not just to black music but to black

⁷⁵ Altschuler 57, 63, 66.

culture, to an inchoate striving, a belief in the equality of man.”⁷⁶ In the American culture of the mid-fifties, this fascination with African American culture was indeed subversive because, to many white people, black culture seemed to possess an intrinsically deeper understanding of, and a more profound relationship with, the body than did white culture, a difference that could be both frightening and enthralling for a white culture that had systematically repressed and othered bodily knowledge for centuries.

Indeed, the courage it required for Presley and his compatriots to delve into the modes that were primarily associated at this time with African American culture is evident in the great resistance, ridicule, and anger that were directed towards Presley, which will be explicated more fully below, though of course this resistance pales in comparison to that experienced by many African Americans enacting a similar project of integration. Nevertheless, as Phillips suggests, Presley did apparently experience what might be described as an echo of the black experience in the fifties, for when the young singer first entered Sun studio in 1953, “He tried not to show it . . . but he felt *inferior*. He reminded me of a black man in a way; his insecurity was so *markedly* like that of a black person.”⁷⁷ Thus, it seems that it was not only the profound gifts of the African American experience, but also the deep burden of that experience that Presley carried more than most white men. However, despite the fact that he lived in an African American neighborhood, emulated black cultural and musical tropes, and even felt something like an echo of the African American experience, Presley enjoyed a largely unconscious cultural privilege shared by those with lighter skin tones and European features in American culture at that time. Although his racial identity was genuinely ambiguous, he lived in a culture that reified radical difference based almost exclusively on physical appearance.

⁷⁶ Guralnick 5-6, 60, 134.

⁷⁷ Palmer 25.

However, aside from the reactionary voices that condemned Presley based on racism, classism, conservatism, or simple misunderstanding, the most common descriptions of Presley were primarily focused on his intuitive brilliance and on the profoundly novel quality of his music. As Phillips describes it, Presley

had the most intuitive ability to hear songs without ever having to classify them, or *himself*, of anyone I've ever known outside of Jerry Lee Lewis and myself. It seemed like he had a photographic memory for every damn song he ever heard—and he was one of the most introspective human beings that I've ever met. You see, Elvis Presley knew what it was like to be poor, but that damn sure didn't make him prejudiced. *He didn't draw any lines*. And like [*Billboard* editor] Paul Ackerman said, you have to be an awful smart person or dumb as hell (and you *know* he wasn't dumb) to put out that kind of thinking.⁷⁸

Thus, Presley seems to have acted as something like an agent of boundary dissolution between the opposed modes of thought that had been artificially associated with black and white for centuries in American culture. Partially because he grew up, for a significant portion of his youth, in a primarily African American neighborhood, and partially because he had a profound sense of the radical equality of all humanity, derived largely from his devotion to the “do unto others” ethos of Christianity, Presley genuinely did not seem interested in drawing racial distinctions, a radical position at that moment in history. At the time when Presley emerged, racial integration was already beginning, particularly in music, and Presley himself was a prime focus and catalyst for this multi-leveled integration of races and of the epistemological modes that these racial identities had temporarily embodied.⁷⁹

However, Presley's novelty was not confined to the integration of this pervasive dichotomy in American culture. When speaking of Presley, observers consistently remarked

⁷⁸ Guralnick 135.

⁷⁹ Guralnick 176.

upon the quality of radical difference that he seemed to possess intrinsically.⁸⁰ Various commentators were quoted as saying that “he changed it all around,” he “opened up new territory,” and “there were rumblings throughout the entire industry” in the wake of his emergence. Country singer Hank Snow’s son, Jimmie Rogers Snow, declared that “he was the change that was coming to America,”⁸¹ that he was not only the agent of transformation, but that he actually embodied that transformation. Watch the full episodes of the *Ed Sullivan Show* that Presley appears in and one will comprehend, in a visceral way, what the beatniks and hippies meant when they called the main streams of mid-twentieth century American culture “straight” and “square.” In fact, these spatial tropes seem to be precise descriptions of both the mental and physical qualities of most of the other performers besides Presley.

Physically, almost all of the various singers, in particular, seem stiff, constrained, and uncomfortable in their own skin, as if literally boxed in by their culture assumptions, a situation gestured to above in relation to Bill Haley. Similarly, on a psychological level, these performers present as willfully naïve, trapped within elaborate, delusional cultural constructions of race, gender, class, and sexuality. It is abundantly clear from watching this footage that Presley broke out of many of those rational bonds, smashing through barriers with a pelvic thrust of erotic force and an amused smirk. Where most of the other performers seem inauthentic to an early twenty-first century sensibility, playing culturally defined roles in which they do not seem to believe just below the surface, Presley comes off as authentic: conscious that he is playing a role and attempting to make that role coincide with how he feels in each moment.

It is a pleasure to watch Presley wrestle, or perhaps dance, with his fear and insecurity, striving to lose himself in the music and dialogically feeding off of the audience’s reactions. He

⁸⁰ Altschuler 30.

⁸¹ Guralnick 142, 195, 203, 172.

is such a magnetic performer, in part, because he periodically lets the audience know, through small physical gestures and facial expressions that he knows that they know down deep that they are all participating in a play, a slightly ridiculous make-believe, but that this is precisely what makes it enjoyable. This telegraphing of self-awareness is something that few of the other performers do in these broadcasts, but which has become a standard mode of performance in the irony-drenched postmodern culture of the last few decades. The other performers play their roles like actors in a classic Broadway musical, melodramatically projecting caricatures of emotion, while Elvis has thrown aside the mask or, in the words of Bob Dylan, brought his audience “through the mirror.”⁸² It is clear from watching Presley in this footage that a qualitatively new kind of person had been born and that Presley was one of the first people, based largely on the models of James Dean and Marlon Brando, to bring this new style of being to primetime television.⁸³ In a sense, Presley was the paradigmatic postmodern man in that he was constantly aware of the constructed quality of culture as well as the performative nature of physicality, the presentation of body.⁸⁴

At the moment when Presley recorded his first songs at Sun Recording Studio in 1954-55, the world was ripe for change. As Presley recognized, “I happened to come along at a time in the music business when there was no trend. The people were looking for something different, and I was lucky. I came along just in time.”⁸⁵ Presley is here articulating the proverbial night that is darkest just before the dawn when the old order no longer contains the charged affect of

⁸² “Go on back to see the gypsy / He can move you from the rear / Drive you from your fear / Bring you through the mirror / He did it in Las Vegas and he can do it here.” Bob Dylan, *New Morning* (Columbia Records, 1970) “Went to See the Gypsy.”

⁸³ For one instance, fully two thirds of people watching television in America were watching Presley’s appearance on *The Frank Sinatra Show* during its broadcast: “The subsequent ratings . . . representing 67.7-percent audience share.” Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2000) 63.

⁸⁴ Cf. John Leland, *Hip: The History* (New York: Ecco, 2004).

⁸⁵ Ren Grevatt, “On the Beat,” *Billboard* (September 29, 1958).

profound, revolutionary significance that it once carried. Thus, popular music at that moment in the mid-fifties was experienced by many of those in the cultural vanguard as a stale orthodoxy providing increasingly diminishing returns. However, as Presley's statement suggests, the absence of a vital "trend" provided the space within which the new genre could emerge.

Although rhythm and blues and country music were being played in clubs in Memphis, and around the country, Presley had performed very little at the time of his early Sun sessions, so his musical style was created first in the recording studio, and only then was it brought onto the stage. In the studio, Presley was attempting to break through into a new musical realm, to birth a new mode, though these attempts were met with what seemed like resistance from reality itself. Presley was persistently following his felt sense to overcome the current musical modes, though the "numbing familiarity" of the music he was singing made it difficult to find the novelty for which he and Phillips were explicitly searching, Guralnick's phrase "trying to make it live" evocative of birth, or perhaps of creation itself. Presley was endeavoring to produce something new and vital, but the inertia of habit kept pulling his efforts into a mechanical, entropic monotony.⁸⁶ Indeed, Presley seems here to be enacting the vital impulse that Whitehead describes as "an offensive, directed against the repetitious mechanism of the Universe,"⁸⁷ for as Whitehead, Bergson, and James have all attested in different inflections, the emergence of novelty does not happen gradually, though the preparation for revolution is gradual. Rather, as Whitehead observes: "new epochs emerge with comparative suddenness."⁸⁸ Thus, the creation of rock and roll by Presley and his friends was not a process of slow, steady development, but a sudden, revelatory moment of rupture and discontinuity with the past.

⁸⁶ Guralnick 94.

⁸⁷ *Adventures* 80.

⁸⁸ *Science and the Modern World* 1.

As Presley articulates his creation of “That’s All Right,” “this song popped into my mind that I had heard years ago, and I started kidding around with [it].” Presley had been almost physically hurling himself at a seemingly insurmountable internal obstacle until suddenly, for no discernible material reason, but bound up with “kidding around,” there was a lightning strike of felicitous inspiration that catalyzed the transformation of what had seemed a fixed and immovable system. As Scotty Moore narrates the momentous discovery:

All of a sudden . . . Elvis just started singing this song, jumping around and acting the fool, and then Bill picked up his bass, and he started acting the fool, too, and I started playing with them. Sam, I think, had the door to the control booth open—I don’t know, he was either editing some tapes or doing something—and he stuck his head out and said, “What are you doing?” And we said, “We don’t know.” “Well, back up,” he said, “try to find a place to start, and do it again.”

Moore is describing a process of intuitive creation that has more to do with playful experimentation than it does with theorizing. Although these four men knew intellectually that they wanted to create something new by fusing what had been considered black and white musical tropes, they did not know precisely how this integration would take place. In fact, the integration seems to have required years of conscious, theoretical preparation, and then putting critical thought aside and simply being in the moment without observing that moment, allowing something to emerge that they did not consciously create, though they consciously laid the groundwork for its emergence. Sam Phillips’ great genius was not in creating the new genre; it was in allowing Presley, Moore, and Black the space to create novelty through “acting the fool,” momentarily putting aside their rational considerations in favor of the abandon of absurdist physical humor, allowing something to emerge that seemed to them to exceed their conscious

volition. However, what is perhaps even more unusual is that Phillips immediately saw the value of this novelty when it emerged.⁸⁹

Indeed, all of the parties involved in this creative process agreed that there was something profoundly new about the music they had just created through an unintentional moment of imaginative play, for Phillips described the new sound as “different” and as “itself,” a collision of terms that suggests authentic novelty. The sound that Presley and his band discovered seems always to have existed *in potentia*, implicit in all of the elements that they had brought to the table: their deep knowledge of different kinds of music, their theoretical preparation for the integration of these various musical modes and, perhaps most importantly, their inchoate desire for, or vision of, something as yet unrealized. They were able to create this music because they could feel the form of it pulling them magnetically into its event horizon, and Presley’s ability to lose himself in ecstatic affect, to impel himself out of stasis, moved his band to a similar state of pure enjoyment, a process through which the vital creative impulse could find a form for its expression. Whether one conceives this inspiration as coming from the unconscious or from something excessive of individuality, as Presley saw it, this creative impulse does not appear to have been primarily the product of rational, egoic consciousness.

Of course, it is imperative that those who receive such apparently transpersonal inspiration put in the work necessary not only to enact the moment of revelation, but to see it through to fruition, to uncover that which seems obvious in retrospect, but which is obscure until its annunciatory achievement. Thus, after Presley and the others received their initial epiphany, they played the song repeatedly, “refining” the strikingly new sound that had spontaneously emerged, though the central component of the music was always Presley’s energetic strumming

⁸⁹ Guralnick 94-95.

on his acoustic guitar, “up till this moment almost a handicap to be gotten over.”⁹⁰ In fact, it is often the case that working within constraints, “tarrying with the negative”⁹¹ as Hegel puts it, is the very thing that impels the emergence of novelty. Similarly to Presley’s rather rudimentary guitar playing, all of the voices of the primary artists who are the subject of this dissertation—Presley, Lennon, McCartney, and Dylan—were not initially considered great instruments by the conventional standards of their day. Their voices were all limited and constrained in ways that forced their owners to create a distinctive singing style in order to make their vocal cords convey the feeling that they wanted to express. As Presley put it: “I never sang like [that] in my whole life until I made that record.”⁹² Because Presley’s voice was limited in certain ways, particularly in his younger days, he was instinctively impelled to invent inflections and phrasings, his distinctive low swoops and high hiccups, that transmuted his liabilities into strengths.

In turn, the thrilling novelty of Presley’s phrasing impelled Moore and Black to play in a new way, producing a “swinging gait that was the very epitome of what Sam had dreamt of but never fully imagined.” When Phillips first played the take for the band, Bill Black asserts, “we couldn’t believe it was us,”⁹³ Moore adding: “It just sounded sort of raw and ragged. . . . We thought it was exciting, but what was it? It was just so completely different. But it just really flipped Sam—he felt it really had something. We just sort of shook our heads and said, ‘Well, that’s fine, but good God, they’ll run us out of town!’”⁹⁴ This collective narrative is a portrait of the process of transformation into novelty at its purest. Presley mediated this transformation, and he was a “different singer” because of what ultimately amounts to a moment of transduction

⁹⁰ Guralnick 95.

⁹¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, Ed. J.N. Findlay (Oxford University Press, 1977) 18-19.

⁹² Gould 20.

⁹³ Guralnick 96.

⁹⁴ Trevor Cajiao interview with Scotty Moore, “We Were the Only Band Directed by an Ass,” *Elvis: The Man and His Music 10* (March 1991) 19.

between musical eras. As in all such cases of rupture, “all the rules were out the window,” for such moments of “phase transition” seem generally to be constituted in the supersession of the rules of a system, the fundamental premises on which the system is based. Although “everything had changed,”⁹⁵ it was not necessary for the change to be articulated because it was a transformation that surpassed the scope of rational, analytic discourse. Indeed, the novelty *can* be articulated, which is the project of retroactive analysis like that found in the present work, a mode that exhibits its own kind of novelty, though the purest kind of novelty is often prior to verbal formulation. Nevertheless, as Palmer points out, “Plato warned in his *Republic* that changes in the modes and rhythms of popular music inevitably lead to changes in society at large,”⁹⁶ and this originary moment of rock and roll seems to be one of the clearest cases in musical history of a fundamentally new rhythmic mode catalyzing an equally fundamental cultural transformation.

Referring to “That’s All Right” and its flipside, “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” Moore noted that “it’s funny how they both come about by accident. There was nothing like a direction, there was just a certain . . . feel.” Although Moore and Phillips had talked many times in the coffee shop next to the studio about creating something new that somehow combined black and white musical tropes, this ambition did not seem to be at the front of their minds during the session. Certainly, there was a feeling that they were trying to create a novel style out of known elements, but these men did not seem to know precisely what form that synthesis would take—they simply knew that they must keep experimenting, following their intuition until it “felt” right. This process of creation was prepared intellectually by analyzing the various elements that they suspected would combine to create a new style, but the new style itself could only be discovered

⁹⁵ Guralnick 96, 112.

⁹⁶ Palmer 17.

by leaving aside analysis and entering into a largely nonverbal engagement with experience. Presley and the others carried the vision of what they wanted to create—they could somatically sense its contours somewhere just over the temporal horizon—but the only way to bring their vision to fruition was to act in a primarily intuitive mode. Indeed, as Phillips’ assistant Marion Keisker describes the creative process in the studio: “Sam would say, ‘Well, let’s go back, and you hold on to what you did there. I want that.’ And Elvis would say, ‘What did I do? What did I do?’ Because it was all so instinctive that he simply didn’t know.”⁹⁷ The primary criterion for judging their work was that it had to feel right, not knowing why it felt right, or even being conscious of what they had just done a moment before. All of the material elements of composition, arrangement, and performance had to be organized in such a way that these elements produced a bodily recognition in the participants of the achievement of the thing that they sensed clearly, but, until now, had not had the specific structural tropes to bring into concrete manifestation.

Positive affect constituted an indication that they were heading in the right direction, moving towards the new mode that they were attempting to body forth, for as Phillips puts it, “Every time we did a number I wanted to make sure to the best of my ability that everybody *enjoyed it*.” As discussed above, to an intellectually privileging mode, this “organizing principle,” as Guralnick puts it, may sound rather trivial, even hedonistic, but, in fact, it is coextensive with the recognition that attention to affect is an indispensable mode for the production of genuine novelty. Indeed, acting on this principle, according to Marion Keisker, “everyone was trying very hard to hang very loose through the whole thing,”⁹⁸ which suggests the participants’ implicit knowledge that, in order to make good music, they had to stay in a kind

⁹⁷ Guralnick 103, 133.

⁹⁸ Guralnick 133.

of meditative state similar to Buddhist “no mind” so that, in each moment, they would adjust not only their playing, but their posture, breathing, facial expression, and conscious attention in a continuous dance incorporating their different modes of engagement to follow what Whitehead calls the “lure of feeling”⁹⁹ leading them inexorably toward the production of novel musical forms.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes this state of mind as “optimal experience” when we “feel in control of our actions, masters of our own fate. On the rare occasions that it happens, we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like.” This “flow” state produces “a sense of *participation* in determining the content of life,”¹⁰⁰ which is to say that, in this kind of confluent creativity, one must apparently relinquish control enough to allow something usually described as excessive of conscious volition to manifest through one’s individuality, suggesting a process that temporarily seems to bring the affective states of participants in the kind of phenomenon enacted by Presley and his compatriots into a kind of energetic resonance. In “Good Rockin’ Tonight,” for instance, analysis and doubt, indeed, conscious thought, in a paradoxical operation, appear consciously to have been put aside, allowing something to emerge out of the band that resembles nothing so much as group consciousness so that all three of the musicians seem willingly to have temporarily released their egoic minds to give themselves to the new form they are creating. The recognition that this intuitive enjoyment and fusion is “almost in defiance of societal norms”¹⁰¹ perfectly illustrates the transgressive quality of ecstatic experience at that moment in American culture. By

⁹⁹ *Process and Reality* 25.

¹⁰⁰ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Rider and Co, 2002) 3-4.

¹⁰¹ Guralnick 133-34.

definition, only that which is taboo or repressed by a society can be transgressive and, in this moment of musical creation, American history witnessed one of the primary moments of the reemergence of repressed ecstatic affect. As with “That’s All Right” and “Milkcow Blues Boogie,” though in this case in the lyrics as well as the musical aspects of the song, Presley announces that “good rockin,” a term associated with physicality, and particularly sexuality, is the “news” that the culture had been waiting for.

However, it was not just in those initial sessions that these men effected a transformation in the music. It was over the sustained period of all the Sun sessions that Presley, Moore, Black, and Phillips worked out the form of the new genre they had initially stumbled upon the day they recorded “That’s All Right.” For instance, they produced a radical reimagining of “I Don’t Care If the Sun Don’t Shine,” which had been an outtake from Disney’s *Cinderella*, and was later popularized by Patti Page and Dean Martin. As Phillips notes: “That’s what he heard in Dean . . . that little bit of mischievousness that he had in his soul when he cut up a little bit—[that’s why] he loved Dean Martin’s singing.”¹⁰² Presley took his admiration for Martin, certainly a prime exemplar of the musical orthodoxy at that moment, and recontextualized his vocal inflections, which carried the “mischievousness” that Phillips describes, within the rhythmic realm of what amounts to a close cousin of the “jump blues” exemplified by Louis Jordan.¹⁰³ Presley and his band were not creating a new style out of thin air. Rather, they were intuitively synthesizing disparate genres in novel ways to create, in Moore’s words, “almost a total rhythm thing.”¹⁰⁴ They appropriated the tropes of the country and vocal jazz styles that were popular in their predominantly white social milieu and placed these tropes in the context of predominantly

¹⁰² Guralnick 133.

¹⁰³ Altschuler 12.

¹⁰⁴ Guralnick 132.

African American rhythmic modes, particularly in Presley's vocalization, even *Time* magazine reluctantly admitting: "There is no denying that rock and roll evokes a physical response from even its most reluctant listeners, for that giant pulse matches the rhythmical operations of the human body."¹⁰⁵ As we have seen, one of Presley's primary contributions to culture was to bring the rhythmic sophistication and intensity of black music into white cultural domains, thereby complicating the overly simplistic distinctions between "black" and "white" music and, ultimately, between "black" and "white" cultures. Indeed, this musical integration in some sense seems habitually to have entrained a visceral empathy between the two groups, comprising a necessary precondition for the socio-political integration of desegregation and Civil Rights in the sixties.¹⁰⁶ As Ray Charles put it, the new style of music "meant that White America was getting hipper."¹⁰⁷

After the new music had been created in the studio, there was still the essential task of propagating this music to the public. As in almost all such revolutionary instances, one can see here the necessity of transmitting the revolution through established channels of communication. Indeed, another thing that made Sam Phillips the perfect mentor for Presley was that he was close friends with disc jockey Dewey Phillips (no relation), who had a popular radio show in Memphis. Once Sam persuaded Dewey to play "That's All Right" and "Blue Moon of Kentucky" on his show on July 7, 1954, dozens of calls and telegrams came pouring in, prompting Dewey to play the songs "seven times in a row, eleven times over the course of the rest of the program. . . . it seemed as if all of Memphis was listening." Here we see the mythologizing already beginning with Dewey Phillips as champion and myth-purveyor, which

¹⁰⁵ "Yeh-Heh-Heh-Hes, Baby," *Time* (June 18, 1956).

¹⁰⁶ Palmer 21 and Altschuler 35, 48.

¹⁰⁷ Altschuler 51.

illustrates that not only is it necessary for the new style to be created and concretized on tape, but in order for a new form of music to take root in popular consciousness, there must be someone with power and influence promoting the new genre through existing avenues of transmission with the authority that this position implies. It just so happens that this is one of those felicitous cases in which the distance between the artist and the people who could help present his art as a viable cultural commodity was very slight. It took Presley about a year to convince Sam Phillips to let him record at the Sun studio. But when he did, achieving his artistic vision after some hard work and frustration, it seemed to be only a matter of time before the world recognized this music for the dramatic transformation that it represented, largely because Sam Phillips and Dewey Phillips were buddies. Once Dewey played the songs on his show, “the news traveled like wildfire,”¹⁰⁸ a strikingly appropriate image for the propagation of a promethean discovery through culture.

The fact that Elvis and his band during the Sun sessions recorded multiple versions of songs in the two different styles—bluesy jazz balladry and the new, more upbeat rock and roll style—illustrates the tentativeness with which they approached this new genre. Although it is clear to most people listening more than a half century later that the rock and roll numbers are the truly exciting, ground-breaking performances from these sessions, while the slower songs are largely mediocre retreads of an existing genre, in 1954, the new style that these musicians had just created seemed frantic, transgressive, even dangerous. As mentioned above, according to Moore, after they played back a take of “That’s All Right,” they declared, “Well, that’s fine, but good God, they’ll run us out of town!”¹⁰⁹ It may seem ridiculous to us now, in an era when gangsta rap and death metal are the conventional orthodoxy, that this largely acoustic music

¹⁰⁸ Guralnick 100, 102.

¹⁰⁹ Cajiao 19.

derived primarily from country and blues should be so controversial. However, as anyone knows who follows the way revolutions in music occur, it is nearly impossible to underestimate the inertia of culture, but it is similarly impossible to halt the revolution once it is underway.

In retrospect, although rock and roll's success seems to have been inevitable, Presley and the genre that he largely initiated and represented in popular consciousness received a great deal of resistance from the existing powers in the press, the government, and even from musicians of a previous generation.¹¹⁰ Once the new style had been created in the studio, Presley, Black, and Moore quickly began playing live shows, with Presley's effusive physicality an apparently natural outgrowth of his singing. Nevertheless, a review in the *New York Times* judged Presley as having "no discernible singing ability."¹¹¹ Similarly another review in the *New York Journal-American* asserted that "the sight of young (21) Mr. Presley caterwauling his unintelligible lyrics in an inadequate voice, during a display of primitive physical movement difficult to describe in terms suitable to a family newspaper, has caused the most heated reaction."¹¹² And the *Daily News* declared that popular music "has reached its lowest depths in the 'grunt and groin' antics of one Elvis Presley," asserting that "Elvis, who rotates his pelvis, was appalling musically. Also, he gave an exhibition that was suggestive and vulgar, tinged with a kind of animalism that should be confined to dives and bordellos." Yet another critic wrote that Presley's music was "a terrible popular twist on darkest Africa's fertility tom-tom displays," and another that "if any further proof were needed that what Elvis offers is not basically music but a sex show, it was proved last night," claiming that his show recalled "one of those screeching, uninhibited party

¹¹⁰ Altschuler 5-6.

¹¹¹ *New York Times* (June 6, 1956).

¹¹² *New York Journal-American* (June 9, 1956).

rallies which the Nazis used to hold for Hitler.”¹¹³ The press, in a panicked frenzy of incomprehension, many seeming personally threatened by Presley, could not decide if he was a “primitive” African, a Nazi, or a stripper, all similarly odious to the dominant cultural milieu of little more than half a century ago.¹¹⁴ Similarly, as New York Congressman Emanuel Celler stated, Presley’s “animal gyrations . . . are violative of all that I know to be in good taste.”¹¹⁵

Even, or perhaps especially Frank Sinatra, who was the primary precursor to the role that Presley now inhabited, declared (“in a ghost-written magazine article”¹¹⁶):

Rock ‘n’ roll smells phony and false. . . . It is sung, played, and written for the most part by cretinous goons and by means of its almost imbecilic reiteration, and sly, lewd, in plain fact, dirty lyrics . . . it manages to be the martial music of every sideburned delinquent on the face of the earth. . . . [It] is the most brutal, ugly, desperate, vicious form of expression it has been my misfortune to hear.¹¹⁷

Reading this bile-filled utterance, one immediately suspects that there is an element of jealousy involved in Sinatra’s condemnation of the new musical genre, particularly since he later dedicated an entire season finale of his television show to welcoming Presley back from the army in 1960, implicitly acknowledging the younger singer as his legitimate successor.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, in the passage above, Sinatra articulates a sentiment about rock and roll that was ironically prevalent among the generation which had previously rebelled in a similar, though more constrained way through the catalyst of Sinatra’s music.

In a very real sense, rock and roll was in fact partially responsible for “race mixing,”¹¹⁹ as one critic opined, though the guardians of the normative discourse at that moment generally took

¹¹³ Guralnick 285, 438.

¹¹⁴ Altschuler 6.

¹¹⁵ Guralnick 384.

¹¹⁶ Gould 75.

¹¹⁷ Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1993) 46-47.

¹¹⁸ Palmer 144.

¹¹⁹ Guralnick 286.

this as a negative development, whereas most of us now see this integration as entirely positive. However, even such African American luminaries as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Langston Hughes decried rock and roll, apparently worried that the unsophisticated physicality of the genre would undermine their efforts towards racial equality, King going so far as to say that rock and roll “often plunges men’s minds into degrading and immoral depths.”¹²⁰ Clearly, Presley had become a symbolic focus for the major issues that divided the younger generation from the older, generally constellated around attitudes towards race, sexuality, and affect.¹²¹

The vituperative litany from the old guard against the young upstarts proves that even such august cultural authorities as the *New York Times* and the United States Congress are not infallible. Although it may seem obvious to us now that these institutions were often the platform for reactionary oppression, corruption, and cynical self-interest, this view does not seem to have been the predominant one in the nineteen-fifties, though certain sectors of society, particularly the beats, expressed these kinds of sentiments openly. Thus, it is only right to condemn what can accurately be described as warfare by the reactionary right against emancipatory ideals. However, once one has acknowledged the moral turpitude of some within the prevailing institutions, it becomes apparent that these conservative agents were enacting an entrenched resistance and oppression that ultimately served the function of the Hegelian negative mentioned above, the obstacle that *Geist* or “Spirit,” the vital impulse towards self overcoming intrinsic to temporality, must confront to be transformed.

According to Hegel, “Spirit” “wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. . . . Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This

¹²⁰ Altschuler 46.

¹²¹ Guralnick 384 and Altschuler 8 and Cf. Ward’s *Just My Soul Responding*.

tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being.”¹²² From an Hegelian perspective, Presley’s critics were not merely short-sighted and mean-spirited, though they were certainly these things. Although the condemnation of such repressive attitudes is certainly justified, it must also be recognized that these conservative voices were performing a necessary function in what appears to be an essentially dialectical process of transformation. Understood in this way, the old order’s repressive behavior becomes intelligible, not only because this *ancien regime* characteristically sought to conserve and protect its mode of thought embodied in established power structures, but because, as Whitehead understood, novel modes often seem a bit ridiculous, half-formed, overly idealistic, and naïve to the conservative mode of consciousness. As Whitehead writes: “If you have had your attention directed to the novelties in thought in your own lifetime, you will have observed that almost all really new ideas have a certain aspect of foolishness when they are first produced.”¹²³ Indeed, the moment of confluent inspiration when Presley “acted the fool” to create the new genre seems to confirm Whitehead’s dictum beyond all reasonable expectation, proving foolishness and novelty to be intimately imbricated. This connection is often evoked by Bob Dylan in his consistent use of “jester” imagery, his song “Jokerman” being the most obvious example. Ultimately, Sam Phillips’ expression of the meaning of rock and roll in the face of great resistance remains fairly definitive:

We were all beginners, just beginners, and we were *making history*. Oh, there was all sorts of resentment. First it was ‘sinful,’ and second it was affecting our children. *Yes, it was*. But it was giving them some individuality, giving them some say-so about their emotions and not having them just be a product of their parents right up until they were twenty-five years old. All this had an awful lot to do with the total psychological change that took place in this country because of

¹²² Hegel 18-19.

¹²³ *Science and the Modern World* 47.

rock and roll and r&b—which was for the better, I don't give a damn what anybody says.¹²⁴

It is to be expected that a fundamental transformation in world view, a “total psychological change,” would be met with a great deal of fear and resistance. Thus, that the rock and roll revolution was ultimately successful, as Phillips insists, in mediating the affective liberation of American culture is a testament not only to the originality and brilliance of Presley and his cohort, but to the courage and persistence of these world-transforming outsiders.

However, it is also clear that Presley was the recipient of a gift that very few individuals are given for, according to Presley's early girlfriend Dixie Locke, “right from the start it was as if he had a power over people, it was like they were transformed.”¹²⁵ By many accounts, Presley seems to have had the ability to mediate what was experienced as a transformation in others, a potency that appears directly related to Presley's ability to put aside rational thought to become like an animal on stage, acting almost purely by instinct, though he made a conscious choice to enact this role, which is how Bergson describes intuition: the conscious, temporary relinquishment of intellect to engage with other domains of process. It is Presley's undeniable animality relative to the cultures in which he was embedded that elicited both erotic desire from his fans and accusations of bestial primitivity from his detractors. However, as mentioned above, I do not mean to suggest that Presley's primary effect on his audience was merely to serve as a catalyst for the release of repressed sexuality, though he certainly did this.¹²⁶ In fact, the mass erotic release that he produced in his audience is but one manifestation of the affective force that many of his associates describe in him. For instance, Marion Keisker describes Presley as having “an almost magical quality that both protected him and in turn brought out the best in others.”

¹²⁴ Palmer 147.

¹²⁵ Guralnick 79.

¹²⁶ Altschuler 67.

Similarly, according to Jimmie Rodgers Snow, “I’d never seen anyone quite like him—even as a kid he had that something about him, he just *had* it.” Presley had the talent, the drive and, just as important, the *courage* necessary to transgress social mores intentionally to think like an animal. By consciously enacting certain aspects of instinctual animality, Presley seems to have been able to tap into an intuitive mode through his music that allowed him to see and express the “higher kind of—mystery, for want of a better word,” that others could not, often constrained as they were by rationalized cultural assumptions by which Presley was relatively unencumbered.¹²⁷

As June Juanico recalls Presley’s description of his performative experience: “I don’t know, it’s hard to explain. It’s like your whole body gets goose bumps, but it’s not goose bumps. It’s not a chill either. It’s like a surge of electricity going through you. It’s almost like making love, but it’s even stronger than that.” Juanico asked him if this was a common feeling among performers: “I don’t know,” he replied “The few I’ve talked to experience excitement and nerves, but they must not feel the way I do. If they did, they would say more about it, don’t you think? They say they get nervous, but after they sing a few lines, they calm down. Hell, I don’t calm down till two or three hours after I leave the stage. Sometimes I think my heart is going to explode.” Presley possessed an exceptional ability to mediate this “surge of electricity,” and to communicate this energetic quality to his audience. He is only able to describe this experience through analogy to having “goose bumps” or a “chill” or “making love,” though the phenomenon seems to elude the reach of Presley’s vocabulary. However, it is not merely because Presley was not an intellectual that he did not have the words to describe his experience; it is also because the culture in which he was embedded did not have the language of this experience ready at hand outside of a few theorists like those referred to in the present work. Perhaps the closest analogy

¹²⁷ Guralnick 120, 171, 205.

for what Presley experienced was the feeling that can come over one in church, though he was at great pains to assert that his music was not religious, probably because he knew that such a claim would produce an immediate backlash. As he asserted in a 1956 interview: “There was some article came out where I got the jumping around from my religion. Well, my religion has nothing to do with what I do now. Because the type of stuff I do now is not religious music, and my religious background has nothing to do with the way I sing.” However, one suspects that this is a case of Presley protesting too much, for he would also claim that his music was a gift from God, and he would go on to record numerous gospel songs over the course of his career.¹²⁸

Nevertheless, though Presley did not fully understand what it was that he was doing, he got better and better at doing it, at least until his induction into the army. In an interview in early 1956, Presley was asked, “have you any idea just what it was that started the girls going crazy over you?” to which he replies, “No, I don’t. I guess it’s just something God gave me. I believe that, you know.”¹²⁹ Similarly, in a 1957 interview, Presley stated that “I lose myself in my singing,” indicating an overcoming of egoic consciousness, which seems to be a precondition for the ingression of musical inspiration. Indeed, contrary to the stereotype of Presley as an unconscious, uncouth animal, to which many people still uncritically subscribe, Presley was a profoundly moral, conscientious, and empathetic young man who consciously enacted a certain role in his performance. According to Jimmie Rogers Snow, “this nice, polite, well-mannered boy became transformed onstage in a manner that seemed to contradict everything that you might discern about his private personality.”¹³⁰ Essentially, Presley was, in most respects, a “well-mannered boy” who developed the ability to transform himself into a catalyst for the

¹²⁸ Guralnick 319-320.

¹²⁹ “Elvis Gives Out with Crazy Cool Interview,” *Waco News-Tribune* (April 18, 1956).

¹³⁰ Guralnick 430, 172.

deepest yearnings of his cultural moment by consciously regressing to a prerational state, thereby embodying the expression of modes that had been repressed and systematically denied.

Once Presley, Phillips, and the others created the first incarnation of rock and roll, the music quickly became a model for a new mode of being that the audience could explore. Like the German “swing kids” in the thirties who greeted and identified one another by whistling a non-verbal melodic phrase from Duke Ellington’s “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing),” according to an article in the magazine *Cowboy Songs* in 1955, “the current greeting among [Memphis] teenagers is still a rhythmical line from the song [“That’s All Right”]: ‘Ta dee da dee da.’”¹³¹ In both cases, there was a felt potency for young people in these rhythmic, melodic phrases, a power that the old guard could not seem to comprehend and that soon spread outside Memphis to the country and the world. Like a ritual incantation, the latter phrase signified that the direction of novelty at that moment was not in the words that Presley was singing—those were almost beside the point—but in the affect that his rhythmic physicality mediated in his audience. Thus, it could even be said that something essential to the trajectory of Western culture in the twentieth century is encapsulated in these rhythmic phrases, as there has been a growing nostalgia in modernity for the archaic, primarily nonverbal, intuitive modes of experience as a corrective reaction to the exclusive privileging of verbal, logical, and rational modes, culminating in the twentieth century.

As suggested above, not only was Presley’s music an enactment of this transformative trajectory, but Presley himself appears to have been something like a symbolic incarnation of this process. For Phillips and for the worldwide audience that gave Presley their attention, he was an agent of radical novelty not only in music, but in attitude and physical performativity. Phillips

¹³¹ Guralnick 114.

was not concerned with Presley as a “physical specimen,” he asserts: “I wasn’t thinking, ‘Is he going to look good onstage, is he going to be a great performer?’ I was just looking for something that nobody could categorize.” Even to the visionary Phillips, the visual aspect of Presley’s performative style came as a “revelation,” an unexpected uncovering of something profoundly new. Presley himself was not entirely certain that the way he was performing had value for, as Moore describes it, “during the instrumental parts he would back off from the mike and be playing and shaking, and the crowd would just go wild, but he thought they were actually making fun of him.”¹³² Presley had spontaneously created a phenomenon that was not entirely of his volition, but that seems to have embodied an historical process searching for appropriate expression. Without understanding why, Presley discovered that he could make certain movements that would provoke a nearly unprecedented response.¹³³ According to Moore, Presley’s “movement was a natural thing . . . but he was also very conscious of what got a reaction. He’d do something one time and then he would expand on it real quick.”¹³⁴ Presley found that he had an intrinsic gift for producing ecstasy in the primarily young people who comprised his audience. However, although this ability was instinctive, he consciously cultivated it through a process that might be described as radical empiricism, for he kept what worked and discarded what did not.¹³⁵

In a sense, Presley was developing a gestural language to convey what could not be communicated through words for, as Bob Neal explained:

¹³² Guralnick 106, 110.

¹³³ I say “nearly” because there are some precursors in the reaction to Frank Sinatra or even Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring,” accompanied at its premier by Vaslav Nijinsky’s controversial choreography, though certainly not on this scale or level of intensity.

¹³⁴ Guralnick 119.

¹³⁵ Cf. William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003).

His show developed in that sometimes if he was onstage and just through some accidental movement there would be a big scream or reaction, he would automatically remember. On the other hand, if he devised something and got a dead reaction, he would never worry about it, he would drop it and go on to something else. It was just as automatic as breathing to him.

With the participation of his audience, Presley created a somatic code that perfectly expressed the needs of the moment. As a performer with the gift of being able to read his audience's reactions and adjust his performance accordingly, Presley seems to have been chosen by that audience to mediate an impulse that was ripe for expression. Thus, the audience seems to have created Presley just as much as he created them—a co-creation in the truest sense. As Presley expressed it: "If I do something good, they let me know it. If I don't, they let me know that, too. It's a give-and-take proposition in that they give me back the inspiration. I work absolutely to them. . . . They bring it out of me: the inspiration. The ham."¹³⁶

A fruitful analogy can be made between Presley's performance style and a surfer riding a wave, recalling William James' "single drops which sparkle in the sun as they are flung far ahead of the advancing edge of a wave-crest"¹³⁷ of novelty's ingress into historical process. As Guralnick describes Presley's performavity, the defining characteristic is that "over and over again he stops in the midst of a practiced gesture and shrugs his shoulders, audibly exhales, rolls his eyes, *freezes*—just waiting for the wave that has been momentarily stilled to roll back over him."¹³⁸ As with surfing, Presley did not seem to be in control of the unconscious, elemental forces that were flowing through him. Rather, his mode of eliciting reaction from his audience via his physical movements seems to have been a process of developing and rehearsing his gestural language, and then positioning himself correctly, both physically and in terms of the

¹³⁶ Guralnick 154, 174.

¹³⁷ *Varieties* 325.

¹³⁸ Guralnick 352-3.

affect that he was manifesting, to catch the “wave” of inspiration or connection that was the ultimate source of his appeal. His attitude towards his performance generally seems to have been one of slyly amused looseness and receptivity, opening himself to the desire of the audience to connect with the force that Presley seemed to be expressing.

As seen above, Presley had made a careful study of how physicality produces affect by watching Dean and Brando, as well as by watching and listening to many of his favorite singers, and by testing, through trial and error, what produced the desired effect on the crowd. However, when he walked on stage in front of an audience, this preparation only got him part of the way to the felt connection for which he was the catalyst. It seems to have been his radical receptivity to the qualitative nature of temporality, Bergsonian duration, which allowed him to induce the kind of collective feeling that he did. As one eyewitness noted, “when Elvis was performing, everyone had the same basic reaction. It was spontaneous. It reminded me of the early days, of where I was raised in East Texas and going to these ‘Holy Roller’ Brush Arbor meetings: seeing people get religion.”¹³⁹ As this quotation suggests, the similarity between Presley’s performances and religious revivals does not appear to be merely a surface resemblance, but rather a manifestation of the same largely unconscious impulse towards ecstasy that had long existed on the margins of a rationalized American culture, from the Great Awakenings and religious revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the performative physicality of swing music and dancing in the nineteen thirties. Indeed, as Palmer notes, the rhythmic tropes that form the palette of rock and roll “are capable of transforming an audience into participants in communal ecstasy . . . forged and tempered in hundreds of years of religious ritual, from Africa

¹³⁹ Guralnick 151.

to the Caribbean to the American South.”¹⁴⁰ Clearly, the impulse towards the return of repressed affect did not suddenly appear in 1954 *ex nihilo*, for all the precursors mentioned above presaged the heights which the impulse embodied in rock and roll would attain, first through Presley and his contemporaries, and then through the Beatles, Dylan, and others on an even larger scale in the sixties.

The reaction that Presley produced in his audience was “mass hysteria,” resembling those earlier periods, but on an unprecedented scale and with a novel intensity. Eliciting “screams of anguish” and “shrieks of ecstasy,” Presley appears to have been driving his audience to a frenzied state, not only through his ritualized performance, but by his very presence.¹⁴¹ For Phillips and promoter Bob Neal as they watched the show, “this was something beyond either of their wildest expectations.”¹⁴² Even the men who participated in the creation of this phenomenon could not have predicted the sheer force with which audiences would respond. With Presley as catalyst, the teenagers of America let out a collective scream, initiating the liberation of felt experience that would find its culmination in the following decade. This eruption transformed the way a whole generation thought about their most intimate selves: their bodies, their sexuality, their race, and their basic mode of relating to the world. In fact, to a large degree, we still live in the space that Presley and his contemporaries cleaved into the darkness, to employ a Jamesian trope.¹⁴³

By all accounts, Presley seems to have possessed a quality that allowed his audience to see themselves in a new light. As Marion Keisker describes, “he was like a mirror in a way: whatever you were looking for, you were going to find in him.” Presley appears to have been a

¹⁴⁰ Palmer 66.

¹⁴¹ Guralnick 223, 344.

¹⁴² Guralnick 110.

¹⁴³ Palmer 8.

focal point for the playing out of the deepest desires, fears, and aspirations of his culture. He embodied the American dream for a time, the dream of profound transformation via fame and wealth, certainly, but also via the more intangible quality of “cool” explicated above. As one admirer said, “we all wanted to be like Elvis”¹⁴⁴ because he seemed simultaneously godlike and all-too-human. He projected the appearance of effortless confidence and equanimity, but he was also authentic and accessible, even vulnerable in his public persona, though seemingly indifferent to the expectations of rational culture, at least until his induction into the army.

Presley was the great American hope at that moment, and his fans poured countless amounts of money and attention into allowing him to become a shining beacon of human aspiration. Indeed, it is striking that, in a 2009 interview for *Rolling Stone*, Bob Dylan says that “Elvis was truly some sort of American king. His face is even on the Statue of Liberty.”¹⁴⁵ In fact, Presley’s features do bear a striking resemblance to those of “Lady Liberty,” and in those brief years between the release of “That’s All Right” in 1954 and Presley’s induction into the army in 1958, the singer was something like the embodiment of liberty in the collective imagination, an agent of liberation from the tyranny of the past.

But most of all, it was his singing, tellingly inseparable from his physical movements, that captured the attention of a generation, and the way his vocal and gestural performativity made that generation feel. Presley simply had a charisma that is impossible to manufacture, and this “animal magnetism” expressed itself through his vocal motivity. There was an elemental potency produced by the relationship between Presley and his audience that Presley himself did not fully intend and that he had little control over, and which had the precise effect of driving the audience “out of their minds,” one definition of ecstasy, allowing for the ritualistic surrender of

¹⁴⁴ Guralnick 120, 264.

¹⁴⁵ Douglas Brinkley, “Bob Dylan’s America,” *Rolling Stone* (May 14, 2009) 48.

rational thought to focus on the felt quality of immediate experience. According to a review of a Memphis show in 1956, young audience members “broke from their seats, swept like a wave up to the stage. . . . Elvis pleaded with them as pleasantly as he could to sit down, but it was like Canute telling the tide to stop.”¹⁴⁶ Although Presley certainly had some agency in his performativity, there seems to have been an historical impulse manifesting as a titanic surge of psycho-sexual affect beyond the ability of any individual to predict, create, or control. Presley appears to have been just as caught in the current of historical necessity as his audience, and together they acted out the transgressive narrative that would constitute the core of the counterculture’s identity over the ensuing decades.¹⁴⁷

The transition between rational and affective modes of constructing experience implicit in Presley’s admonition to “get real, real gone for a change” seems to suggest that rock and roll was an artistic and cultural mediation of a profound epistemological shift in the history of Western culture. However, I would suggest that, while it was necessary for the intellect-privileging modern mind to explore, for the next half-century, the deconstructive moment of rupture between “epochs” that the main forms of postmodernism represent, Presley enacted this

¹⁴⁶ Robert Johnson, “Elvis Sings and Thousands Scream,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar* (July 5, 1956).

¹⁴⁷ In his *The Making of a Counter Culture*, Theodore Roszak defines “counter culture” as “a culture so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of our society that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all, but it takes on the alarming appearance of a barbaric intrusion” (42). However, although this definition emphasizes the radical difference from the predominant cultural streams and the predominant culture’s inevitable resistance to the counterculture, in practice, the counterculture often participates in the main streams of culture by dissenting from within the established pathways of commerce, generally seeking to transform those avenues of transmission rather than abandon them altogether. Presley, the Beatles, Dylan, and their contemporaries did not start new societies completely divorced from their cultures, but transgressed their culture’s normative assumptions enough to transform them in fundamental ways while still being able to participate in collective discourse. It is only through this dialectical process, creating a counterculture *within* the field of the dominant discursive streams that cultures are inexorably transformed. But cultures can only transform so quickly, and those who seek to remake their culture too radically can dissolve into incoherence or lose the very things that make us human, an extreme example of which is Charles Manson and his cult, who forced the sixties counterculture to complicate some of its more radically simplistic ideas about sex, drugs, and social organization. Ultimately, Roszak asserts, the counterculture “strikes beyond ideology to the level of consciousness, seeking to transform our deepest sense of self, the other, the environment” (49).

moment only briefly before forging on.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, the moment of pause that Presley performs after he cuts short the first version of “Milkcow Blues Boogie,” but before he starts the second version can be seen as the dramatization of an interregnum between eras before he leaps into an early, prototypical model of what would become a novel mode of constructing experience. Based on the testimonies of those who witnessed Presley’s early career, as well as on the subsequent permutations of the genre that Presley initiated, this mode appears to be constituted in the primacy of a way of thinking that privileges neither the intuitive mode of consciousness that largely defined premodernity nor the analytical mode that generally defined modernity, but rather integrates these two modes, recognizing that each is an indispensable heuristic tool for understanding seemingly incommensurable domains of process.

¹⁴⁸ The term “postmodern” has meant different things to different people. It was originally coined by Charles Olson, one of the Black Mountain poets, as a way of articulating the radical break from the limiting assumptions of modernity. However, I am employing the term here in the way it has come to be most commonly used: as “an incredulity towards metanarratives,” to quote Lyotard.

Chapter 2: “A Creative Tension”¹⁴⁹

Affectivity and Rationality in the Production of Beatlemania

It's so hard to reason with you, whoa yeah, why do you make me blue?

The Beatles, “Please Please Me”¹⁵⁰

Where Elvis Presley bore the personas of both edgy rebel and popular performer in his character, John Lennon and Paul McCartney polarized themselves into these roles respectively, McCartney displaying an “appetite for kitsch” similar to Presley, while Lennon shared Presley’s rebellious attitude.¹⁵¹ Of course, both Lennon and McCartney contained this polarity between what are roughly definable as radical and conservative impulses within themselves as well (though they were both politically progressive), but their sustained alliance over the course of the Beatles’ existence appears to have anchored them, allowing each one to pull in his direction, thereby producing an emergent entity that transcended their individuality as well as their influences. Lennon and McCartney grew up together largely through their rock and roll apprenticeship, bound together by their mutual devotion to the genre, and for the first time in rock and roll, though in some ways prefigured by the Everly Brothers, Lennon and McCartney demonstrated that strong solo personalities could work together in a group as equals. Although the unit that they formed was ultimately unsustainable, McCartney allowed Lennon to become a beacon for “truth” (exemplified in Lennon’s song from the *Imagine* album, “Gimme Some Truth”) while Lennon allowed McCartney to be a brilliant performer, composer, and promoter of both their music and the countercultural ethos that they represented, transmitting previously

¹⁴⁹ Bob Spitz, *The Beatles: The Biography* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2005) 555.

¹⁵⁰ The Beatles, *Please Please Me* (Capitol Records, 1987).

¹⁵¹ Riley 20-21.

marginal modes of thought into popular consciousness.¹⁵² Together, Lennon and McCartney were able to achieve the highest level of fame by combining sublimely beautiful music with the deepest level of authenticity.¹⁵³

As long as they could stand to stay together, the partners formed an unassailable axis of transformative force. As Ian MacDonald puts it, “the two represented a classic clash between truth and beauty”¹⁵⁴ and, although this radical difference in Lennon’s and McCartney’s approaches certainly created friction that ultimately led to the “divorce,”¹⁵⁵ as Lennon would once call it, this friction between the two men also seems to have produced the creative energy that drove the band to ever greater heights over the course of their relatively short career. Indeed, it seems clear that the two young musicians made the conscious choice when they first met to combine their considerable, and considerably different talents to create something that exceeded their individual capacities. As Lennon once said: “The records are the point. Not the Beatles as individuals,”¹⁵⁶ emphasizing the collective nature of their endeavor, for their immense creativity was impelled by the tension between the two young men.

¹⁵² As Gould sums up the impact of the phenomenon surrounding the early Beatles: “From its frenzied, inchoate beginnings in Britain and the United States, the great upsurge of adolescent fervor that the press called Beatlemania would coalesce into one of the main tributaries of a broad confluence of pop enthusiasm, student activism, and mass bohemianism that would flood the political, social, and cultural landscape of much of the industrialized world during the second half of the 1960s” (Gould 8).

¹⁵³ The literature on the Beatles is of a rather different character than most of the writing about Presley. Although many of the same themes pertain to both artists, the biographies and myriad other treatises about the Beatles tend to be somewhat more sophisticated than the writing about the “king,” excepting Guralnick’s biography and a few others. This state of affairs most likely results from the fact that the Beatles themselves were intellectually inclined where Presley was explicitly not (MacDonald xv and Gould 29, 33). Thus, perhaps more than Presley, the Beatles themselves, as well as their work, seem to invite a critical analysis of the kind performed here. Although “more than five hundred books” (Gould 11) have been written about the Beatles, there are relatively few full biographies. Thus, the texts I will primarily be drawing from in the following pages include the biography by Bob Spitz, called simply *The Beatles*, Jonathan Gould’s *Can’t Buy Me Love*, Ian MacDonald’s *Revolution in the Head*, Tim Riley’s *Tell Me Why*, interviews from the *Beatles Anthology*, and the general histories of rock and roll mentioned in the previous chapter.

¹⁵⁴ MacDonald 13.

¹⁵⁵ Ray Connelly, *Times of London*, September 6, 2008.

¹⁵⁶ David Sheff and G. Barry Golson, eds., *The Playboy Interviews with John Lennon and Yoko Ono* (New York: Playboy Press, 1981).

Beginning in the mid-fifties, rock and roll not only created a soundtrack to the lives of a generation, but, more than any other factor, it provided a general cultural attitude for young people, expressed in dress, speech, a wide array of thematic concerns, and, perhaps most importantly, in the focus on bodily knowledge as a counterbalance to the rationalization of predominant sectors of postwar British and American culture. As Lennon, the founder of the band that would become the Beatles declared, “rock and roll . . . was real. Everything else was unreal. To me it was the only thing to get through to me out of all the things that were happening when I was fifteen.”¹⁵⁷ Thus, it was not religion or business or politics or any of the other areas of human endeavor that gave Lennon’s life meaning, that had the quality of reality, which is to say that, for the young musician, rock and roll addressed the way he felt what William James describes as “the total push and pressure of the cosmos”¹⁵⁸ better than any other form of cultural process.

Indeed, Lennon and his bandmates’ devotion to rock and roll appears to have exemplified and mediated what MacDonald describes as “the true revolution of the sixties,” which, “more powerful and decisive for Western society than any of its external by-products—was an inner one of feeling and assumption: a revolution in the head” which is “readable nowhere more vividly than in The Beatles’ records. In effect,” he continues, “the ‘generation gap’ which opened in the Fifties turned out not to be a quarrel between a particular set of parents and children but an historical chasm between one way of life and another. . . . A new way of life so persuasively and pervasively replaced an earlier one that the majority made the mental crossing between them without really noticing.”¹⁵⁹ The project of this chapter is to trace the process by

¹⁵⁷ John Lennon, *The Beatles Anthology*, Dir. Geoff Wonfor and Bob Smeaton (Apple Corps, 2003).

¹⁵⁸ *Pragmatism* 1.

¹⁵⁹ MacDonald 27.

which the Beatles initially came to discover and embody this “new way of life,” mediated by a focus on “feeling” that would come to characterize the sixties counterculture and its antecedents, liberating realms of intuitive experience that had been rendered obscure to the modern mind through Weberian rationalization, though always in negotiation with the “spirit of capitalism.” As MacDonald aptly notes, this fundamental transformation of Western culture, enacted in large part by rock and roll, was so subtle and pervasive that the reemergence of affect into central discursive networks seems to have occurred for many people below the threshold of conscious awareness, allowing what is perhaps the deepest shift in our culture in the last century to remain hidden in plain sight, as it were. Tim Riley concurs: “The boundaries that Presley seemed to break in his singing became metaphors for ways of thinking about life. The most aggressive rock ‘n’ roll is a testing of limits, a combusive enactment of the frontier spirit.”¹⁶⁰ However, despite the depth of purpose that the genre enacted, the explicit focus of the music has always been enjoyment, for rather than being tangential to the genre’s meaning, it is *because* rock and roll is enjoyable that it has been such a profound force for liberation from cultural constraint and the development of novel experiential forms.

Thus, John Lennon was certainly not alone in feeling rock and roll to be the most significant mediator of his experience when the genre first hit Britain on a mass scale. As Bob Spitz describes the situation, the release of “Heartbreak Hotel” in England in 1956 caused “an explosion . . . felt by teenage listeners unlike anything that had ever hit them before,” impelling “an emotional groundswell” in the culture.¹⁶¹ As Lennon put it: “When I heard it . . . it was the end for me.”¹⁶² These phrases directly articulate the return of affectivity repressed in modernity,

¹⁶⁰ Riley 12.

¹⁶¹ Spitz 41.

¹⁶² The Beatles, *The Beatles Anthology* (San Francisco: Chronicles, 2000) 11.

for the “emotional groundswell” that Lennon experienced along with his peers on hearing “Heartbreak Hotel” seemed to him the most important thing—that is, the most valuable or significant—in his experience at that time. As Lennon put it, “Nothing really affected me until Elvis”¹⁶³ and, as Lennon told Marshall McLuhan, “I heard Elvis Presley. . . . There were a lot of other things going on, but that was the conversion. I kind of dropped everything,”¹⁶⁴ exchanging the predominant rationalized mode of thought for the more affectively oriented mode exemplified by rock and roll.

Similarly, Lennon’s childhood best friend Pete Shotton has said that “Heartbreak Hotel” “was the most exciting thing [we’d] ever heard. . . . It was the spark, and then the whole world opened up for us.”¹⁶⁵ Lennon’s discovery of the genre through the figure of Presley, the individual who, more than any other, “embodied the rock ‘n’ roll myth,”¹⁶⁶ was a definitive rupture in Lennon’s experience. The music produced a kind of meaning in Lennon’s life that had been conspicuously lacking, perhaps due to his early abandonment by his parents, a primal wound that continued to haunt him for much of his life. For Lennon, rock and roll was the obvious vehicle for this meaning-making and, although it is the rhythm that kept Lennon “mesmerized”¹⁶⁷ as several commentators describe it, that is, in something like a state of ecstasy, Presley was the primary symbolic focus for that rhythmically induced affect. As discussed above, Presley was one primary embodiment of the deepest yearnings of a generation, reflecting what his audience was feeling and thereby providing a catalyst for the expression of repressed experiential modes. And Lennon is perhaps Presley’s most noted devotee, the single musician

¹⁶³ Hunter Davies, *The Beatles* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010) 19.

¹⁶⁴ *Rolling Stone* (June 28, 1970).

¹⁶⁵ Spitz 41.

¹⁶⁶ Riley 13.

¹⁶⁷ Spitz 41 and Riley 14.

with the greatest claim to being Presley's direct successor, though Lennon's embeddedness in the Beatles complicates this lineage somewhat.¹⁶⁸

Even at this early stage in Lennon's development in the mid-fifties, before he met the other boys who would become the Beatles, performing seems to have come to him as naturally as breathing. As school friend Eric Griffiths remarked, "John was a born performer. . . . You could sense that when he sang. It lifted him, he was energized." According to Griffiths, Lennon possessed "a sense that you could control a crowd's emotions with your voice." He seemed "to loosen up" when performing "like a captive animal released into its natural habitat." Where Lennon felt constrained in daily life, Shotton calling Lennon "the world's worst dancer, like a stiff cardboard box," he seemed physically liberated onstage, taking on the character of a wild beast in a strikingly similar way to Presley's conscious embrace of instinctive physicality. This ability to inhabit animality, closely connected with the quality of being "energized," seems to be the factor that allowed Lennon to mediate an audience's affective experience. Although somewhat constrained by the myriad limiting assumptions and conventions of somatically repressed and rationalized mid-century modern British life, Lennon's ability to enter into what appears to be a prerational, or perhaps transrational state of consciousness granted him the ability to "control a crowd's emotions" by inducing ecstasy in himself, and increasingly in his audience. Lennon seemed to possess the intrinsic charisma that drew others' attention to him and that served as a catalyst for their inner processes. Although this kind of charisma can be cultivated to an extent, it seems to be a quality that is intrinsic in some characters and not others.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ However, as Palmer notes: "rock and roll genealogy . . . is never as linear and clear-cut as the beleaguered student might wish" (Palmer 72).

¹⁶⁹ Spitz 49, 38, 56.

Initially, Lennon had lifted Presley to an exalted position, identifying with him, or rather his image of him, so completely that Lennon in a sense became Presley, integrating the older singer's performative mode into his own character until it was an indelible part of him. As Shotton describes Lennon's early emulation, "by this time, John thought he was Elvis Presley," which seems to indicate that Lennon held an image of Presley in his mind and tried to act, think, and be exactly how he imagined his idol, from the way he dressed and moved to the way he spoke and sang. Lennon and his compatriots reenacted Presley's archetypal narrative, that of the young, liminal outsider who incites a revolutionary upheaval, though on an emergent level of process for, from the beginning, Lennon had a certain critical faculty that Presley apparently lacked. However, this lack was probably the precondition for Presley's exceptional somatic and performative genius constituted in a loose sexuality that Lennon could never hope truly to emulate. Thus, although Lennon idolized Presley, he began to assert his independence at an early age, going as far as to mock Presley's performance in *Love Me Tender* in a 1957 scene described by Shotton: "We sat in the cinema in Lime Street and killed ourselves laughing" at Presley, as "John thought he was ridiculous."¹⁷⁰ An integral part of Lennon's initiation into the mysteries of rock and roll was apparently to become critical of his idol, problematizing his exclusive identification of Presley with the genre to which he was devoted. Instinctively, he knew that, while Presley had essentially created the genre and thereby brought the intuitive mode that rock and roll embodied into popular consciousness, and he could never be surpassed in this relatively pure domain, Lennon could, on a conceptual level, take the genre farther than Presley could have imagined, largely because the Beatles wrote their own songs, but also because they were simply of a more intellectually experimental temperament.

¹⁷⁰ Spitz 63.

Subsequently, Lennon discovered another embodiment for his aspirations in the form of Little Richard, who allowed Lennon to step outside of his exclusive identification with Presley to critique the elements of his idol's character with which he did not resonate. As in the Oedipal relationship between father and son, Lennon symbolically slayed Presley with his ridicule, but only to become him. And if Jonathan Gould is correct that, "in a genre of popular music that was destined to be almost entirely dominated by male stars, it fell to Little Richard to play the Queen to Presley's King,"¹⁷¹ then Little Richard's flamboyant homosexuality offered the potential for a kind of Oedipal consummation of Lennon's love for the genre transcending Presley alone, a supposition perhaps given added weight by Lennon's rumored bisexuality.¹⁷² In order to imagine himself into Presley's persona, a template through which Lennon could ultimately cultivate his own unique persona, Lennon had finally to empty that persona of mystery through his critique while simultaneously shifting his temporary allegiance to a more "feminine" figure (if we take Richard's wearing of makeup, his fluttering physical performativity, and his falsetto vocal interjections as a transgressive performance of femininity), thus rendering Presley's role accessible to himself.

In a similar, though perhaps less Oedipal operation, Lennon later claimed that Chuck Berry was "in a different class from the other performers" because "he really wrote his own stuff,"¹⁷³ which, along with Holly and Richard, provided one of the primary models for Lennon's songwriting persona. Indeed, by the seventies, Berry seems to have replaced Presley and Richard as Lennon's primary musical allegiance. Nevertheless, through a series of such identifications with idols and the subsequent disenchantment and psychic reconciliation with them, Lennon was

¹⁷¹ Gould 62.

¹⁷² Little Richard referred to himself as the "King and Queen of Rock and Roll" (Palmer 140), which would seem to complicate the Oedipal dynamic somewhat.

¹⁷³ Jann Wenner, *Lennon Remembers* (New York: Popular Library, 1971) 168.

able to forge his own identity, appropriating elements of many different figures and combining them within the crucible of his experience into a more encompassing synthesis exemplified in the broader aesthetic range of the Beatles' music, like most great artists acting as a cultural omnivore, mediating the integration of previously disparate tropes and genres within his persona, from American rock and roll and "girl group" rhythm and blues to skiffle, music hall, and British comedic wit. However, Lennon's breadth of musical and conceptual scope was purchased at the expense of the narrower depth of nearly pure affective brilliance in which Presley has never been eclipsed. Ultimately, Lennon was able to return to his love for Presley, seeing him in a more balanced way, like the adult child who, after a period of rebellion, forges a mature relationship with his father.¹⁷⁴

Despite his critique of Presley, and probably because of it, Lennon was able to embody the transgressivity of rock and roll with a profound belief in its righteousness in large part because he found it affectively satisfying. Indeed, though the Cavern club in Liverpool was initially a "trad" (traditional) jazz club that allowed for some skiffle, a genre based largely on American folk, jazz, and country music popular in Britain during the same years as rock and roll's first efflorescence, Lennon flagrantly flouted the prohibition against the novel genre in a joyfully primal act of defiance. At an early show at the Cavern in 1961, the Quarry Men¹⁷⁵ began their set with an acceptable skiffle song by Lonnie Donegan. However, for the second song, Lennon announced "Don't Be Cruel," prompting Rod Davis, one of the early members of the Quarry Men, to protest: "You can't *do* that. They'll eat you alive if you start playing rock 'n roll in the Cavern." However, oblivious to Davis' admonition, Lennon began the song anyway and, according to Davis, "you could tell the audience was uneasy about it, but that didn't stop John.

¹⁷⁴ Guralnick 212.

¹⁷⁵ The Quarry Men would eventually become the Beatles.

He was just going to continue and expected us to follow.”¹⁷⁶ Lennon had a missionary zeal for rock and roll that impelled him to play it in the face of intense opposition, a penchant for loutish transgressivity aligned with the “Teddy Boys,” the pseudo-Edwardian rebels who emerged in the wake of rock and roll in Britain, a distinctive hybrid of American rocker and Edwardian styles of dress that Lennon temporarily adopted. Like the Teds, who had a reputation for violence and destruction, he seems to have enjoyed the somewhat more subtle musical conflict at the Cavern, carrying the new genre into what was a center of the Liverpool music scene’s old order, eventually transforming the club into the primary locus of a new dispensation. Lennon implicitly understood that the trad jazz establishment in Britain had become a safe orthodoxy (as opposed to the more avant garde bebop prominent in the United States), a music industry, which seemed to him a betrayal of the spirit of novelty that rock and roll represented at that moment. Thus, he seems to have felt it to be his duty to cast those who had inexorably turned popular music into mere entertainment out of the symbolic locus of cultural authority.

Paul McCartney’s smooth diplomacy, his “considerable tact and social awareness,”¹⁷⁷ is often described as a counterbalance to Lennon’s rough authenticity.¹⁷⁸ When Lennon and McCartney met in July 1957, “there was an instant recognition,” a kind of “love at first sight”¹⁷⁹ based upon their mutual devotion to rock and roll. Indeed, while Lennon possessed undeniable charisma, energy, and talent, McCartney impelled Lennon to work consistently at his craft, practicing guitar and transcribing lyrics from the radio.¹⁸⁰ As Shotton explains, “Paul had made a

¹⁷⁶ Spitz 65.

¹⁷⁷ Gould 47.

¹⁷⁸ Some have seen Lennon’s willful authenticity as a kind of dilettantish pose, and not without some justification, for although Lennon would proclaim himself a “working-class hero,” he was actually the most solidly middle-class member of the Beatles. Thus, as with Bob Dylan, there was a kind of paradoxical artifice in Lennon’s performance of authenticity, though, to my mind, this conceit did not detract appreciably from Lennon’s art.

¹⁷⁹ Spitz 97.

¹⁸⁰ Riley 20.

huge impression on John,” for, “in a way, his ability underscored all John’s [musical] shortcomings.”¹⁸¹ McCartney, strong where Lennon was weak and weak where Lennon was strong, impelled Lennon really to become a musician or, as Lennon expressed it in his bluntly humorous way, “Paul taught me how to play properly.”¹⁸² Moreover, whereas Lennon was direct and tactless, which is a large part of what made him so fascinating, McCartney had an innate feel for the subtleties of performance, for engaging the audience and holding their attention through the nuances of facial expression, movement, and pacing. Where Lennon demanded the audience’s attention by force of will, McCartney solicited that attention, seducing the crowd with his puppy-dog eyes and his infectious enthusiasm. Although I would argue that Lennon was ultimately more visionary than McCartney, it also seems clear that McCartney had a greater facility for implementing that vision as a successfully propagating system, as well as simply for playing instruments.¹⁸³

Subsequent to Lennon’s and McCartney’s fateful meeting, as Lennon recounts: “We spent hours just listening to the stars we admired. . . . We’d sit around and look all intent and intense and then, when the record had ended, we [sic] try and reproduce the same sort of sounds for ourselves.”¹⁸⁴ Lennon’s and McCartney’s methodology for creating their sound involved close listening and attempting to reproduce what they heard, but the constraints imposed by their limited technical abilities, like Presley’s rudimentary strumming, are part of what allowed them to produce novel musical forms.¹⁸⁵ In learning primarily by ear, it was necessary for the boys to

¹⁸¹ Spitz 98.

¹⁸² *Anthology* (book) 12 and Riley 23.

¹⁸³ Gould 34, Spitz 437, and Riley 23.

¹⁸⁴ Billy Shepherd, *The True Story of the Beatles* (New York: Bantam, 1964) 16.

¹⁸⁵ Gould 59.

invent their own technique and their own style, perhaps not “correct” as far as their sources, or the British musical establishment, were concerned, but highly effective nonetheless.

However, the deeper purpose of this “bashing away” seems to have been to fuse themselves into a unit so that they could act at certain moments as if they were a single mind. Their mutual immersion in an “intuitive” “rhythm”¹⁸⁶ suggests the mode that focuses on perceiving the qualitative nature of duration elucidated by Bergson, the felt quality of the moment. Similarly, the phenomenon of “instantaneity”¹⁸⁷ that MacDonald describes in relation to the Beatles seems to lead inexorably back to the Bergsonian durational felt quality of experience, which MacDonald portrays as one of the defining factors in the cultural transformation that the Beatles did so much to mediate. Riley also evokes this intuitive approach to temporality for making music for, as he suggests, the tempos of the songs were determined by “feel,” or even by something that exceeded the individuality of the musicians rather than by the technological precision of the metronome or the “click track.”¹⁸⁸ And in a broader sense, Gould observes that rock and roll “had a temporal as well as a visceral immediacy for them” that “seemed to be in tune with the world to come,”¹⁸⁹ a prophetic intimation of the emergence of a new approach to experience constituted in the dialectical reembrace of a premodern relation to temporality by the rationalized conception of time privileged in modernity. This focus on the constantly shifting quality of immediate bodily experience, a dominant concern in the sixties counterculture (mediated in large part by the Beatles’ countercultural infiltration of the predominant cultural streams), not only resides at the heart of great musicianship, but strongly informs the various Eastern contemplative and yogic traditions that found such favor in the West

¹⁸⁶ Spitz 110-11.

¹⁸⁷ MacDonald 20-21.

¹⁸⁸ Riley 29 and Palmer 65.

¹⁸⁹ Gould 68.

beginning during that period, in large part through the Beatles themselves, particularly George Harrison.

Adding Harrison into the group soon after Lennon and McCartney met in 1957 only increased the energetic complexity of the band. Having three guitarists in the mix impelled them to refine and “clarify” their “increasingly shapeless” arrangements, bringing an intellectual quality to the visceral physicality that was the baseline of the genre, “like cracking a code.” In this kind of analytic exercise, the three young men were able to channel their intense energy through the focusing structure of simplified musical arrangements, one of many moments in their trajectory when the Beatles employed the rational mode, Weber’s “*conceptual* simplification and ordering,” to temper the somatic drive that had been the defining characteristic of rock and roll music. Like the discipline that goes into tuning a guitar, as Spitz describes, filtering their “exuberance” through rigorous “focus” allowed their combined sonic “vibration” to attain heightened “resonance.”¹⁹⁰

In early 1958, McCartney mentioned to Lennon that he had been writing songs, playing one for him called “I Lost My Little Girl” and, according to Pete Shotton, Lennon was “floored.” Through the obsessive repetition that practicing entails, an activity characteristic of rationality, the two boys worked themselves into a focused state, which seems to have formed the precondition for the emergence of inspiration, for the “momentous discovery” of songwriting. The Beatles elicited a felt epiphany that could only have been attained through rigorous commitment, Spitz hardly exaggerating when he writes that McCartney’s “disclosure” of his songwriting activity “is arguably a pivotal event in modern musical history,” for this discovery did in fact “set the current flowing” that would ultimately provide the impetus to mediate an

¹⁹⁰ Spitz 128.

integration between polarized, and seemingly incommensurable epistemologies.¹⁹¹ The Beatles' role in relation to the rationalized cultural milieu in which they found themselves was, like Presley, to embody the repressed intuitive mode even as they did a great deal to integrate this mode with the predominant rationality of their culture. Indeed, the integration of the roles of musician and composer within the group largely mediated the integration of the more somatic musical mode with the more rational compositional mode exemplified by Tin Pan Alley, often driven more by craftsmanship than inspiration.

The Beatles transgressed the conventions of both songwriting and playing, radically expanding both in the process. Their experience as performers eventually allowed them a creative freedom that can only come from spending many hours learning to connect with an audience, not primarily on an intellectual level, but on an intuitive level where the rules of songwriting seem conventions begging to be broken in order to make the songs more effective vehicles for the elicitation of affect. Similarly, their experience as songwriters, however intuitive, trained them in the more conceptual art of fitting words to the mathematical relations of chords, melodies, and harmonies in a pleasing and novel way, a quality that they then applied to their formal and technological musical experiments, not to mention their visual and verbal aesthetics. The Beatles formed the paradigmatic case for the rock group, in which realm they have yet to be surpassed in many ways, but particularly in the sheer number of formal and conceptual innovations that they introduced into the musical and cultural lexicons, from incorporating “modal, pentatonic, and Indian scales” and unusual instruments into rock and roll's vocabulary, to the use of tape-loops and the very idea of the “concept album.” Thus, in their humorous, often

¹⁹¹ Spitz 130-31.

lighthearted way, the Beatles catalyzed the transformation of their genre, their medium, and their culture beyond all reasonable expectation.¹⁹²

However, before they could become avatars for the return of repressed bodily knowledge and then integrate that older mode with intellect, it was necessary for the nascent Beatles first to integrate the specific vocal and musical inflections of their influences. At the early stage of their development in 1958, the arrangements of most of the songs they played were copied directly from the records. The Beatles, as creators of a new style, found it necessary initially to emulate the styles of their predecessors, internalizing their way of approaching the world through music. By engaging in this kind of rigorous apprenticeship, they acquired the tools, the vocabulary of the genre in which they were working. Of course, original rock and roll was already an integration of disparate elements, though the Beatles took this initial synthesis and radically expanded its encompassing reach over the course of their career, for processual revolutions seem generally to consist of just this sort of consolidation of seemingly incommensurable elements. Thus, after the Beatles' apprenticeship, there was a moment when, in order to create something genuinely new, they found it necessary to further integrate all of the previous tropes into an emergent synthesis or, as Lennon would later put it: "Don't copy the swimming teacher, learn how to swim."¹⁹³ One might almost suspect that Lennon had read the passage from Bergson's *Creative Evolution* concerning how the act of swimming precedes intellectual understanding of what swimming entails: "Come enter the water," Bergson writes, "and when you know how to swim, you will understand how the mechanism of swimming is connected with that of walking. Swimming is an extension of walking, but walking would never have pushed you on to

¹⁹² MacDonald 10-11 and Gould 8, 178.

¹⁹³ Riley 17.

swimming”¹⁹⁴ However, what is more likely is that Lennon instinctively knew that one must thrust oneself in a leap of faith outside of what Bergson terms “the circle of the given” in order to produce genuine novelty.

Often, the discoverers of emergent paradigms refer back to some older precedent in order to justify the audacity of their enterprise. The Beatles, revolting not only against the jazz orthodoxy of that moment in the late fifties, but against the main stream of British rock and roll exemplified by Cliff Richard and the Shadows, employed certain influences as justification for various aspects of the new and unprecedented style they were creating, one of which was their composition of their own songs. According to McCartney, “people these days take it for granted that you do” write songs, “but nobody used to then. . . . John started to write because of Buddy Holly.”¹⁹⁵ As McCartney points out, the Beatles were the first major British group to write most of their songs and to break out of the lock-step dance moves exemplified by the Shadows. What seems commonplace now was then revolutionary, which demonstrates how quickly the revolution becomes a new orthodoxy. Like the Copernican revolutionaries who justified their Sun-centered cosmology by reference to ancient philosophers like Aristarchus, the Pythagoreans, and Heraclides, not only Holly, but Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Carl Perkins, Smokey Robinson, Roy Orbison, and Arthur Alexander all set a “precedent”¹⁹⁶ for, and gave “sanction”¹⁹⁷ to, the novelty promulgated by the Beatles.

However, Holly was extremely influential on the nascent Beatles in one particular respect, for although Holly may not have been as brilliantly visceral as Presley, Berry, or Little Richard, his collaborations with the Crickets and their producer, Norman Petty, in the writing,

¹⁹⁴ Bergson 159.

¹⁹⁵ *Anthology* (book) 22.

¹⁹⁶ Riley 46.

¹⁹⁷ Spitz 132.

arranging, and recording of their songs formed the early paradigm of the self-contained band that the Beatles would come to exemplify to a much greater degree. Although Holly and his band employed much the same instrumentation as Berry or Presley in his early incarnation, the Crickets, whose name would improbably inspire the greatest band of all time to identify themselves with a lowly insect, also served as the primary model for this deeply collaborative quality that would characterize the Beatles' approach to making music. In addition, Holly's relatively stiff "whiteness," in contrast to Presley's looser approach (though Cliff Richard made Holly seem positively loose-limbed), rendered him more accessible to English teenagers than perhaps any other American rock and roller for, of the Beatles' four primary influences (Holly, Berry, Presley, and Little Richard), Holly and the Crickets were the only act significantly more successful in England than they were in America. Thus, the contours of the Beatles' early style were traced by their range of influences, a spectrum stretching from the wild, unhinged physicality of Little Richard to the more polite and studiously bespectacled exuberance of Holly, whose persona created a bridge between American rock and roll and the Quarry Men's native performative influences like Lonnie Donegan and the Goons.¹⁹⁸

By all accounts, the Beatles' songwriting process is extremely reminiscent of Presley's and his band's methodless method of "acting the fool" in the Sun studio until they stumbled upon a pragmatically viable novelty. Lennon and McCartney were drawn by a vague vision, "a general notion of where something was headed"¹⁹⁹ reminiscent of Whitehead's "lure for feeling," a "subjective aim" that "is not primarily intellectual."²⁰⁰ All of the preexisting melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and lyrical tropes that Lennon and McCartney were absorbing by studying the songs of

¹⁹⁸ Gould 65-66.

¹⁹⁹ Spitz 133.

²⁰⁰ *Process and Reality* 25, 85.

others became a palette from which they could draw without analysis or premeditation, so immersed were they in the musical “tradition,” to produce songs that often sounded as if they had been received fully formed, “like driftwood that had washed up onshore.”²⁰¹ And this creative act was only possible because they possessed an affectively luring sense which defied the necessity, and even the possibility, of rational proof in advance, allowing them to write their names at the top of a blank page on which they would jot the lyrics to a new song. Thus, the felt “aim” of the songwriting process is not a “lure” for intellectual analysis, though it is susceptible to such analysis in retrospect, but for the motive force of bodily experience. Through this process, Lennon and McCartney “created a sound,” a mode of arranging sonic elements to form an irreducibly novel gestalt.

As Lennon declared, “lyrics didn’t really count,”²⁰² because, at least until their encounter with Bob Dylan, the Beatles’ primary focus was on creating a “hook” that would excite their listeners, inducing the kind of self-transcendence that only a truly great refrain can. Although the Beatles were lyrically inventive, and often witty and evocative, words, as the primary medium of activity for a culturally logocentric rationality, were not the main focus of their art. Rather, it is the nonverbal musical elements that make the experience of this music so affectively profound. However, contrary to Lennon’s provocative statement, the words do in fact matter, but only insofar as they are sung in the overall musical context of the songs. Indeed, I would argue that the “comparative vagueness”²⁰³ of the lyrics, the fact that they cannot be read as poetry on a page, is not a fault but a virtue, for the lyrics do exactly what they need to do in context, which is

²⁰¹ Spitz 133.

²⁰² *The Playboy Interviews with John Lennon and Yoko Ono* 119.

²⁰³ MacDonald x.

to evoke images that grant the music a conscious focus and meaning, but are not so specific or overwrought as to detract from the vital musical experience.²⁰⁴

As addressed above, a large part of what allowed Lennon and McCartney to create such universally acclaimed music was their partnership, tossing the “beach ball”²⁰⁵ back and forth between them. According to McCartney, “It was great . . . because instead of looking into my own mind for a song, I could see John playing—as if he was holding a mirror to what I was doing.”²⁰⁶ Developing their musical aesthetic face to face seems to have thrust their attention out of their own heads, allowing the two young men to feel as if they were temporarily dissolving the boundaries between their individual, egoic selves. By focusing on one another, rather than on themselves, they were apparently able to elicit from one another a polarization of their intrinsic characters, a mutual tension which allowed each of them to embody their endemic natures in a relatively pure way. It seems that they focused not primarily on their internal processes as Dylan did, but on performing their role in the band, which allowed them to “get out of their heads” to inhabit the collective unity of group consciousness, not dissimilar to the “group mind” experienced by athletic teams or by military units, though with quite a different general orientation.

While they were able to sustain their partnership, Lennon and McCartney formed a whole that seemed to surpass them individually, though the mutual partiality of their characters ultimately proved to be limiting once they split at the end of the sixties. For the duration of their immensely productive partnership, however, the two men were able to sustain the intensity of their experience together by passing the reins back and forth between them, so to speak, rarely

²⁰⁴ Riley 33.

²⁰⁵ Spitz 133.

²⁰⁶ *Anthology* (book) 23.

having to pause or hold back because one of them could always be counted on to take the lead if the other's will or inspiration began to flag. According to early bandmate Colin Hanton, "Something special was growing between them . . . something that went past friendship as we knew it. It was as if they drew power from each other." In a very real sense, their "strangely connected" mode granted them the motive "power," which allowed them to "create an alternative reality" that ultimately became a lived reality for millions of fans, profoundly transforming popular music in the process.²⁰⁷

Furthermore, although verbal language was a vital aspect of their creative activity, the two young men generally "let their guitars do the talking," as Spitz puts it: "No matter how anyone interpreted it, it was the way John Lennon and Paul McCartney best communicated."²⁰⁸ Although words played an integral role in their partnership, their primary mode of engagement with one another and with their art was one that bypassed verbal formulation and interpretation for, as Riley writes, "the Beatles deserve to be addressed on their own terms. What's missing from most Beatles criticism is a sense of how they best expressed themselves: through instrumental and vocal interplay,"²⁰⁹ through ongoing sonic conversations consisting of harmonic and instrumental punctuation, call-and-response, and other forms of musical imbrication that produced a communal, even organismic quality in their songs. As noted in relation to Presley, this primarily nonrational mode of engagement with experience is sufficient in itself, though it certainly invites the kind of analysis being performed in the present text.

However, it seems to be the case that theoretical analysis, though vitally necessary in preparing the way for conscious creation or in understanding novelty after the fact, is almost

²⁰⁷ Spitz 135.

²⁰⁸ Spitz 135.

²⁰⁹ Riley 8-9.

always detrimental to the kind of co-creative intuitive process in which Lennon and McCartney were engaged while it is occurring. With their attention focused on the felt quality of immediate experience, on the rhythmic and tonal resonances of their guitars and singing voices, trying to articulate what they were doing in words as they were doing it would have broken the spell, so to speak, drawing their attention away from primarily nonverbal modes and into the more rational and intellectual modes characteristic of verbal articulation. Thus, when the Beatles were playing, they were not talking. However, as can be witnessed so clearly in much of the recorded footage of the Beatles' banter, even their speech was often less about making rational sense than about the sound and cadence of the words, the "scouse" accent characteristic of Liverpool strikingly similar in this regard to various inflections of Southern drawl in the United States, which also often seem to privilege sound over sense. Indeed, according to Gould, this playful approach to language is characteristic of the general "Lancastrian tradition of puns and deliberate malapropisms,"²¹⁰ which, aside from the focus on the sound of the words, also subverts literal meanings in favor of associative humor. "A Hard Day's Night" and "Tomorrow Never Knows" are two primary examples of this tendency, a sort of compromise formation between Presley's inarticulate somatic brilliance and the verbal obsession characteristic of the predominant British cultures at that time.

Perhaps more than their verbal relationship, Lennon's and McCartney's songwriting partnership was the most tangible evidence of their rare quality. Whereas before meeting McCartney, Lennon had been something of a "rebel without a cause," his relationship with McCartney provided the context for Lennon's felt potential to manifest itself. Their mutual discovery of songwriting could be described as something like an emergent phenomenon that

²¹⁰ Gould 42.

may not have taken form out of potentiality but for the tension of opposites that the two musicians together embodied. That is, while the qualities possessed by each of these young men alone may not have been enough to produce the kind of radical novelty that Presley created, Lennon's and McCartney's constant negotiation of their difference produced a qualitatively new style that ultimately surpassed their mentor in many ways. Where Presley's primary role was to synthesize black and white musical and cultural tropes within himself, Lennon's and McCartney's role was to take the initial synthesis exemplified by Presley as their starting point, their thesis, and then polarize themselves along a different axis within the space that Presley had liberated, which ultimately allowed the Beatles to perform an expansive and sustained synthesis of many more novel elements than Presley had been able to absorb and recontextualize on his own. Where Presley's novelty was almost purely performative, the Beatles combined this performativity with compositional, conceptual, technological, and philosophical experimentation to produce a new whole. As is usually the case in the development of cultural process, Presley was the giant on whose shoulders the Beatles stood. Rock and roll appears to have been the platform for a pervasive transformation of world views that is still occurring more than a half century later and whose implications are far greater than the genre itself.²¹¹

However, even in the Quarry Men's first recording in 1958, a version of Buddy Holly's "That'll Be the Day," there is an undeniable potency that exceeds Holly's influence. In the nascent Beatles' initial foray into the studio, they took Holly's song and made it their own, investing it with "an intensity unexplored in the original." Lennon certainly knew "intuitively how to grab a listener's attention from the start," but this quality was amplified by his competitive relationship with McCartney. Although it is impossible to know how Lennon's and

²¹¹ Riley 35-36.

McCartney's music would have developed had they never met, one can get a glimpse of this alternate reality by comparing their post-Beatles solo work to the music they made together. Although they both produced a number of great songs on their own, there is a balance and driving force granted by their partnership that is undeniably lacking in even their best solo efforts, exemplified in the harmonic blend of their voices as a sonic, physical performance of their combined characters. In this first recording of a cover song by the band that would eventually become the Beatles, the "creative tension" between Lennon and McCartney rendered the song "a minor miracle," a locus for novelty's ingression into cultural process. In making this first recording, the group enacted a mode that bypassed intellect through ecstatic affect, and while they had not yet been able to evoke this kind of motivity consistently in their audience, the first step towards inducing such affect in others seems to be to induce ecstasy in oneself.²¹²

Besides their mutual devotion to rock and roll, it is probably the death of both of their mothers when they were teenagers (McCartney at fourteen and Lennon at seventeen²¹³), that cemented the bond between them. McCartney's mother had died of cancer in 1956 and, when Lennon's mother was hit by a car and instantly killed in 1958, the two boys suddenly shared a trauma that few others could understand. As McCartney would put it: "Now we were both in this, both losing our mothers. . . . This was a bond for us, something of ours, a special thing."²¹⁴ Their trajectory as musicians already determined, their mutual loss seems to have driven them into the depths of despair, which subsequently seems to have propelled them with an explosive force to emerge from those depths to bring what they had learned into the light of day. As with all of the great milestones in life, from marriage and having children to receiving a degree or

²¹² Spitz 142-43, 555.

²¹³ Riley 15.

²¹⁴ Barry Miles, *Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997) 49.

losing one's parents, it is impossible to know what these things really mean until one has lived with them day after day. The effect that these experiences would have can certainly be understood on an intellectual level, but the profound changes that such events impel in one's physical and emotional being must be lived through in order to be comprehended adequately. Thus, it seems that Lennon's and McCartney's primal wounds were a primary factor in their experience that propelled them to the heights of musical achievement. After his mother's death, Lennon descended into a period of drunken rage and self-destructive behavior, while in a balancing operation that would characterize the Beatles dynamic for the length of their career, McCartney took over temporarily as the motivating force in the group. The death of Lennon's mother seems to have given him license to explore the emotional extremes that were his inclination, but that he had until then restrained himself from fully inhabiting, which in turn brought out McCartney's intrinsic need to succeed, and to create a musical context within which Lennon could express his anger and sadness, not only at his mother's death, but at his early abandonment by both of his parents. As Lennon would scream repeatedly in the first song on his first solo album: "Mama, don't go. Daddy, come home."²¹⁵

Emerging from his angry bender in 1959, Lennon was pulled inexorably back into the rising tide of the musical genre he would come to define, and when Lennon and McCartney went to see Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent play in Liverpool in early 1960, they witnessed up-close a "confirmation of their calling."²¹⁶ Seeing the American musicians in action impelled them to enact the same role. In an earlier stage of their development, the distance of Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Buddy Holly, and the rest was a spur to the imaginative, exploratory discovery of rock

²¹⁵ John Lennon, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band* (Apple/EMI, 1970).

²¹⁶ Spitz 176.

and roll, this “ironic detachment”²¹⁷ from their primary influences granting a novel twist to the distinctively American musical form. After this initial stage of romantic distance, however, their direct engagement with these second-tier American rock and roll stars (Vincent and Cochran) seems to have done much to initiate a more focused stage in which the Beatles actually learned the specific performative techniques that allowed their heroes to induce a self-forgetting rapture in their audiences. In particular, the liberated physicality of these artists, legs splayed at precipitous angles, bodies bopping with manic abandon, seems to have provided a model for the Beatles’ performative breakthrough in Hamburg later that same year.²¹⁸

After years of honing their craft and playing in the same clubs around Liverpool, the Beatles finally embarked on their first tour in May of 1960, a nine-day jaunt through Scotland with manufactured pop idol Johnny Gentle. Having dreamt for so long of being real rock and roll musicians, which generally meant going on tour, this first taste of the road seemed to them a qualitative leap forward. This was the moment when they began to be able to put into practice the role they had been imagining themselves into for years. And this role was partially constituted in producing the relentless rhythms of their music—though mediated by their sublime harmonies and clever arrangements—literally to pound the audience out of their heads and into their bodies, the crowd’s rationalized cultural assumptions temporarily cast aside as the audience members were “undone by the music.”

According to Gentle, Lennon and McCartney “operated on a different frequency than those around them,” perhaps because their innate talent had been forged in the polarized tension between them, bonded together by their mutual pain so that they achieved a level of energetic intensity that was qualitatively different than their contemporaries. They were inhabiting what

²¹⁷ Riley 12.

²¹⁸ Cf. Whitehead’s *The Aims of Education* for his discussion of these “stages” of “romance” and “precision.”

appeared to observers as a more expansive mode of engagement in which their bodies and minds were relatively unified, striving desperately, gleefully to pull their audiences up with them, out of what their milieu perceived as the static orthodoxy of rationalized postwar conformity and into the wild, creative, exploratory attitude that would come to define the sixties counterculture, many of whose innovations were ultimately absorbed into the main streams of culture, thereby transforming those streams. Indeed, Gentle's comment that he had "never seen anything like it"²¹⁹ closely echoes Roy Orbison's statement about Presley that "there was just no reference point in the culture to compare it,"²²⁰ both acknowledgements of the ingression of radical novelty that the two men were witnessing. Furthermore, Gentle's emphasis of their composite quality as "*Lennon and McCartney*"²²¹ reinforces the sense of their mutual participation in a process exceeding their individuality.

However, by all accounts it is the Beatles' stint in Hamburg, beginning a few months after their tour with Gentle, which truly forged them into the force for cultural transformation that they would soon become.²²² Harrison has called Hamburg "the naughtiest city in the world"²²³ and indeed, for historical reasons, the city appears to have been the perfect place for the Beatles to lose their minds, so to speak, and work their way into a more embodied mode. As Spitz observes: "There existed an ethos of hedonism that stretched back to the Middle Ages, when Hamburg was a member of the Hanseatic League, a free port, and therefore an essentially lawless haven." Fellow Liverpool musician, Adrian Barber called Hamburg "kind of a Dodge City of the open seas" and, as Spitz notes, up until the early sixties when the Beatles had their

²¹⁹ Spitz 190.

²²⁰ Jody Cook and Patty Henry, *Graceland National Historic Landmark Nomination Form*, 13. <http://www.nps.gov/nhl/designations/samples/tn/Graceland.pdf>, accessed 2/8/10.

²²¹ Spitz 190.

²²² Gould 104.

²²³ *Beatles Anthology*.

first residency in the city, “the tradition was preserved as a foil to the rigid German culture, which was built around regimentation and power.”²²⁴ This rigidity of German culture had much in common with the “stiff upper-lip” of British culture (starkly contrasting with Presley’s volatile upper lip, one corner twitching in his characteristic snarl), for the two great Northern European industrial powers had been primary leading forces in the rationalization of Western culture over the previous centuries, producing many of the scientific, philosophical, and technological breakthroughs that led to the world in which the Beatles found themselves. Although one might suspect that there would be some animosity between the two nations that had fought one another in the Second World War less than two decades previously, Hamburg was apparently home to a vigorous anglophilia, perhaps as a compensatory reaction by the generally progressive city to Germany’s fascist past. Thus, the Beatles discovered a foil to their own culture in what has sometimes been described as the German equivalent of San Francisco, the permissive port town where radical ways of being come to incubate as a reaction to the predominant culture of the respective nations.²²⁵ Indeed, it is striking that the primary side street of the Reeperbahn where the Beatles were playing was called “Grosse Freiheit,” which translates as “Great Freedom,” for this was the ideal place for the Beatles to “find their freedom,” so to speak. Aside from the permissive quality of Hamburg, the Beatles were liberated by the mere fact that they were strangers in an unknown city, far away from their friends and families, all of whom participated in the “reflexive debunkery of Liverpool, which blunted ambition as surely as it punctured pretension.”²²⁶

²²⁴ Spitz 207.

²²⁵ Artist Christian Ebert, personal communication.

²²⁶ Gould 79-82

When they first arrived in Hamburg in August 1960, the young musicians possessed a large repertoire of songs, not only rock and roll, but skiffle and pop standards as well, though they initially failed to connect with their new audiences. Until their foray to Hamburg, the Beatles were essentially scholars of rock and roll who also played—deeply devoted to the genre and extremely knowledgeable about it, but lacking the visceral intensity in their performance that the music required in order truly to move a crowd. However, the Beatles’ encounter with audiences in the Reeperbahn, Hamburg’s red-light district, drawn there by the district’s ambiance of unmediated instinctual activities, particularly those related to sex, drugs, and rock and roll, soon forced the Beatles to break out of their scholarly dedication to their music and into a more physical and emotive performativity largely derived from their American mentors. Simply stated, Hamburg is where the Beatles became a real rock and roll band. Gould aptly points out that the Beatles, by going to Hamburg, were enacting what Joseph Campbell termed the “monomyth,” constituted in “a journey to a strange and distant land, in the course of which a young hero is tested by his encounters . . . and from which the hero returns . . . transformed by the experience, and possessed of some new form of strength or knowledge that has the power to change the world.”²²⁷ This archetypal myth-form perfectly describes the Beatles’ encounter with Hamburg for, just as ancient heroes such as Hercules and Odysseus found it necessary to enter Hades in order to emerge transformed, so too were the Beatles compelled to engage with the underworld quality of the Reeperbahn, which was a haven for all manner of instinctual activity associated with sinful animality and unconscious drives.

However, the encounter with Hamburg’s underworld tone was only the initial spur towards their transformation, for it required the concerted efforts of two geographically closer,

²²⁷ Gould 78.

though significantly less exalted mentors than Presley and Little Richard, or even Lonnie Donegan and Gene Vincent, to incite the Beatles to produce their collective performative style. As early promoter Alan Williams notes, when the Beatles first arrived at the Indra club in Hamburg, their act was “far too deadpan,” adding that the band merely “stood still and strummed.” While this “motionless” performativity may have worked in some genres like folk or country music, or even skiffle to some extent, rock and roll is a type of music that generally requires movement. The essence of the genre is its rhythm, which tends to impel musicians and audiences towards the physical and intuitive modes of experience, as well as towards a more effusive performativity and, Williams, intent on receiving his commission, admonished the boys to “make a show.”²²⁸

Having grown up in Liverpool, however, the Beatles were deeply conditioned to take a skeptical, ironically humorous view of life for, as Gould observes, in Liverpool “the standard line, proudly repeated by natives to non-natives with the air of an original thought, was that life in the city was so hard that you had to be a comedian to survive there.”²²⁹ The Beatles, somewhat uncomfortable with physicality, filtered the somatic quality of the music through humor in order to mediate the absurdity of being a group of relatively inhibited young British men trying to emulate the easy instinctual physicality of musicians like Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Elvis Presley. Indeed, as MacDonald notes, the rationalized quality of predominant sectors of English culture in the early sixties produced “an embarrassed unco-ordination of mind and body,” and “even a basic sense of rhythm was rare.”²³⁰ Although the Beatles were certainly those rare British lads who had more than a basic sense of rhythm, it appears that the somatically inhibited

²²⁸ Spitz 209.

²²⁹ Gould 38.

²³⁰ MacDonald 9.

quality of their culture at that moment still constrained their performativity to a great extent. With Williams exhorting the band to throw aside their inhibitions, Lennon particularly found the whole thing absurdly hilarious, flinging himself around the stage and parodying Chuck Berry's "duck-walk" while Williams shouted: "That's it! Make a show! Make a show!"²³¹

Although Lennon may have initially been mocking Williams' suggestion, the band ultimately incorporated the liberated physicality that resulted from the hilarity into their repertoire, but always maintaining the ironic humor, which ultimately allowed an equally inhibited audience, particularly in Britain and America, access to their own repressed physicality. Club owner Bruno Koschmider followed Williams' lead, urging the Beatles in German to "*Mach Schau! Mach Schau!*" The Beatles apparently found this whole scenario uproariously funny, "like the Goons doing a hilarious take on the Nazis,"²³² though humor can often constitute a profound energetic release, as what began as a parody seems to have emancipated the physically inhibited young men. The wildness of their new environment in Hamburg combined with Williams and Koschmider barking orders at them seems to have jolted the band's center of attention out of their heads, out of their analytical minds, and into their bodies. As Freud suggests in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, laughter is a process which can have a cathartic effect by liberating psychosomatic content that has been repressed, and which he describes in very similar terms to the dreams that initially formed the primary textual object for the psychoanalytic mode of interpretation. Similarly, as Lucien Price reports Whitehead having said: "Laughter is our reminder that our theories are an attempt to make existence intelligible, but necessarily only an attempt, and does not the irrational, the instinctive burst in to keep the

²³¹ Spitz 209.

²³² Spitz 209.

balance true by laughter?”²³³ Put simply, laughter can be a recognition of limit, the coming to consciousness of that which had been unconscious or unacknowledged, of that which exceeds our rational, theoretical formulations, a recognition often accompanied by physical disinhibition.

Thus, the effect of laughter induced by absurdist humor on the Beatles’ performative mode was profound, recalling the moment of eruption when Presley and his band created “That’s All Right,” and therefore rock and roll, by “acting the fool” a half-decade earlier. Whereas before, the Beatles had been earnestly strumming their songs, focusing on their singing and playing in a rather staid and studious way that perhaps reflected their disciplined training as relatively proper English school boys, their lack of connection with the rowdier Reeperbahn audiences impelled them to try a new approach. Although the Beatles had been studying American rock and roll from afar, they had previously been embedded in the polite propriety of English rock and roll exemplified by Cliff Richard. Where Presley had grown up in the more somatically oriented African American neighborhood of Memphis, the Reeperbahn was the Beatles’ first direct encounter with relatively unmediated affect on a large scale, though of a rather different kind than that encountered by Presley. Nevertheless, their tenure in Germany seems to have liberated the Beatles’ emulation of African American musical tropes. Through their African American heroes, the Beatles introduced many of the stylistic and performative elements often characteristic of black culture in America at that moment not only to England, but to an American public that had largely forgotten the pull of that musical mode in the succession of saccharine teen idols that flooded the airwaves in the early sixties. As McCartney succinctly sums up their initial orientation in the *Anthology*: “We thought we were a little R&B combo.”²³⁴

²³³ Price 59-60. Price attributes this quote to section XIII of *Science and the Modern World*, though this section does not contain such a quote, at least in the 1967 Free Press edition.

²³⁴ *Beatles Anthology*.

In Hamburg, once the band realized that the approach they had taken thus far was not working in this new context, they became receptive to the admonitions of Williams and Koschmider, whose primary function, like mentors or coaches in many different areas of endeavor, was to provoke a self-overcoming in the Beatles. In this case, the band was undergoing the precise kind of transformation that they would soon mediate in larger cultural realms outside of their immediate social circles, breaking the bonds of rational propriety to act in ways that they never had onstage, though they had seen their American influences perform enough to be able to emulate their physicality with some encouragement. Thus, the knowledge of their immanent failure if they did not adapt, combined with the two men shouting at them to “make a show” seems to have elicited a release of creative vitality from the Beatles, beginning as a mockery of their mentors, but issuing into an unsuspected bodily liberation. And this liberation immediately appeared in their performances as the young men dynamically threw themselves around the stage, though always with their ironic humor, transmuting their act into an exhilaratingly primal spectacle. Within a very short time, this new performative style began to attract large crowds to the Indra, as this moment of transformation for the Beatles, though one of many such moments in their career, is certainly one of the most significant “changes of state” for the group that would have such a profound effect on their culture. That the transformation occurred not in an institution of higher learning or a place of religious worship, but in a seedy bar in the red-light district of Hamburg involving absurdist physical humor only adds to the remarkable quality of this metamorphosis. Although the Beatles could not have known it, the process of learning how to act with physical abandon on a small stage in an unremarkable nightclub was one of the most significant performances of their culture’s vanguard, the things they learned here going on to influence millions of others profoundly.

Over time, the overt physicality of the Beatles' performative style would diminish somewhat as they internalized the liberated abandon that they began enacting in Hamburg. However, this wilder physicality sometimes emerged in full force onstage, as can be seen in their 1965 concert at Shea Stadium when Lennon "went mad,"²³⁵ as Starr describes it, lunging about the stage and playing the keyboard with his elbows, or in the nearly slapstick humor of their first two films, like the scene in *A Hard Day's Night* when they are running and tumbling through a field, shot from above as they whirl about in chaotic geometrical patterns, resembling nothing as much as a group of stylishly deranged hobbits. Indeed, the quality of "madness" appears, in many cases, to be coextensive with behavior that does not conform to the rationalized dictates of modern culture.

As a fellow Liverpool musician describes their 1960 residency in Hamburg, "after a few weeks, you could barely move in the place, it was so jammed. . . . The heat was terrific, everyone smoked, drank. Everyone was having a blast. There was a real sense that something incredible was going down."²³⁶ The Beatles, through hard work and openness to phenomenological experimentation, had discovered what the audience needed and desired at that moment: a wild physicality that induced crowd ecstasy, a collective "going down" into the unconscious. The ingestion of alcohol, tobacco, amphetamines, and other psychoactives only enhanced the feeling of somatic emancipation from the tyranny of the rational brought on by the intense rhythms and the sight of the Beatles hilariously flinging themselves around the stage. Indeed, the phrase "having a blast" recalls nothing so much as the social and psychological analogue of orgasmic sexuality. This was the Beatles' initiation into the intuitive mode that the original rock and roll had privileged, but which early British rock and roll had shied away from.

²³⁵ *Beatles Anthology*

²³⁶ Spitz 210.

By experimenting with performative variables, they hit upon a method that created excitement in their audience. Although the Beatles would go on to “promote artistry” and “expand the musical genre” like few other groups in the history of popular music, they understood that it is necessary to engage with the world as it is, not as one wishes it to be. That is, they hit upon a “formula” that worked in their present context, eliciting the desired response, and so this method was pragmatically validated by the end that it produced.²³⁷ Volume was an important part of their performance, simple loudness having the effect of repressing intellect and inducing more somatic modes of experience; hence the common expression, “I can’t hear myself think.” Rational thought seems, in large part, to be a silent speaking to oneself in words, an activity which becomes significantly more difficult when waves of immense sound are coursing through one’s body.²³⁸ However, mere volume is not enough to induce ecstasy as anyone knows who has ever witnessed a performance by one of the many mediocre and appallingly loud bands that continue to play in rock clubs around the world. Rather, there is a subtle artistry in keeping a bar audience engaged for hours on end that involves maintaining a high level of intensity perhaps best described through metaphors having to do with heat or fire, for this kind of performance radiates an “energy” that seems only adequately to be describable through such tropes. However, it seems that the Beatles were not primarily focused on musical subtleties during this period, to some extent because of the limitations of their bass player and drummer, Stuart Sutcliffe and Pete Best, who played the same driving rhythm on nearly every song.²³⁹

As a result of the affect that the Beatles generated in their audiences, the group gained a reputation around Hamburg for being “crazy,” with John as the inevitable ring-leader, wearing a

²³⁷ Spitz 212.

²³⁸ According to Alain Danielou, quoted in Palmer, “a very high level of sound is useful in inducing states of trance” (Palmer 149).

²³⁹ Gould 81.

“scabby” bathing suit on stage, for instance, and “mooning” the crowd.²⁴⁰ In a twenty-first century context, this behavior sounds like typical, even relatively tame adolescent escapades. However, in the context of Britain or Germany in 1960, long before the era of *Jackass* and *Punk’d*, their behavior seems to have been considered somewhat more transgressive or “crazy,” that is, contrary to the rational normalization of behavior. As MacDonald observes, at this moment in the early sixties, “Britain was stiff with psychic tension which was bound, sooner or later, to explode,”²⁴¹ and the Beatles in Hamburg were a paradigmatic instance of that combustive release of pressure. In fact, the Beatles and the subsequent waves of English groups that they inspired and made possible, from the Rolling Stones, the Who, and the Kinks to Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, and David Bowie, were perhaps the one factor that, more than any other, liberated Britain from its often inflexible militaristic conformity and class hierarchy via the somatic quality characteristic of both the music and the performativity of these groups.

Furthermore, as suggested above, it is clear that the Beatles were not being driven to these extreme states solely by inspiration in Hamburg, for the chemicals flowed in great abundance, particularly alcohol and amphetamines called Preludin, which allowed the Beatles to sustain their manic energy through their nightly marathon performances. Harrison wrote in a letter to a friend that they were “eating Prellie sandwiches” not only to stay awake, but to fuel the general phenomenological tone of this period in the Beatles’ narrative, which revolved around pushing pure instinct to its extreme. According to Lennon’s first wife, Cynthia, when she and McCartney’s girlfriend Dot arrived in Hamburg, “the pills and booze they had been stuffing into themselves had heightened their senses beyond our reason, and they overwhelmed us with their nonstop chat and frenzied excitement.” The substances that the Beatles were ingesting thrust

²⁴⁰ Spitz 217.

²⁴¹ MacDonald 9.

their attention “beyond” “reason” and rationality, and into their “senses,” their somatic selves. Indeed, this furious activity seems to have been the expression of a half-conscious impulse in the Beatles to break through into a qualitatively different mode of relating to experience, for according to Spitz, “the band was on the verge of something important; everyone could feel it.”²⁴² This felt knowledge of imminent transformation intuited by the primary actors and the community in which they were embedded remains an example of the kind of collective process that is susceptible to analysis, but that precedes rational formulation.

For the German art school bohemians or “exis”²⁴³ who befriended the Beatles in Hamburg, the young men were perceived as exemplars of a new way of relating to experience that incorporated ecstatic practice with the intellectual mode in which the Beatles, as former art school bohemians themselves (in the case of Lennon and Sutcliffe), were immersed, and which they made increasingly explicit in their recorded work, peaking perhaps most obviously in their mid-period “conceptual” albums: *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *Magical Mystery Tour*. Indeed, that the Beatles essentially created the “concept” album is a testament to how much they did to integrate the mode of intuitive affectivity with the more rational, intellectual mode suggested by the word “concept.”

The Beatles’ visual style also apparently benefitted from the physicality in which they were immersed in Hamburg. As Spitz describes the photographs taken by Astrid Kirchherr, one of the German exis who later married Stuart Sutcliffe, “they projected a cool, postured identity, and in the process established the classic iconography for rock ‘n roll bands for the next forty

²⁴² Spitz 245.

²⁴³ McCartney describes them in the *Anthology*: “They weren’t really rockers or mods like we’d seen. They were something in the middle. They called themselves “exis:” existentialists. They were art students, really (laughing).” *Beatles Anthology*.

years.”²⁴⁴ As had been the case for Presley, it was not only the Beatles’ music that transformed culture, but their visual aesthetic and their attitude, visible evidence for the fundamental epistemological premises through which they approached their experience.²⁴⁵ Indeed, as Gould writes, “these photographs struck the Beatles with the force of self-revelation,”²⁴⁶ and the effortlessness with which the band “took to their new identity” testifies to the sense that the Beatles were the right people in the right place at the right time, positioned at the perfect point in their trajectory to mediate and mirror the development of their culture. Although they drew visual elements from idols like Presley and Holly, they also appropriated English and German stylistic tropes, from the flamboyant sneer of the Teds to the brooding seriousness of the exis, synthesizing them into a novel whole for which there was “no precedent,”²⁴⁷ and which “came as a complete revelation”²⁴⁸ to their audience when they first exploded into popular consciousness a few years later.

Similarly, the Beatles synthesized their vocal influences with their own accents and particular vocal qualities to create their distinct singing styles, which were somatic performances of their respective identities, while their harmonies enacted the merging of those identities within the group. The Beatles’ voices, both in their intrinsic physicality—the shapes and structures of mouths, lungs, noses, and throats—and in the way they sang—the various stylistic idiosyncrasies borrowed from their favorite singers or developed through experimentation—voiced their personalities, the intrinsic qualities that formed the characters of the singers. In enacting their complementarity, Lennon and McCartney were able to integrate their voices into a novel

²⁴⁴ Spitz 223-24.

²⁴⁵ Riley 26.

²⁴⁶ Gould 87.

²⁴⁷ Spitz 223-24.

²⁴⁸ Gould 4.

synthesis so that something profound emerged in their vocal relationality that neither man was able to conjure alone. However, although the direct opposition between Lennon and McCartney, while incredibly productive, could have become monotonous, Harrison added a slightly skewed perspective from outside the polarity that Lennon and McCartney had created between them, manifesting in the stylishly quirky musicality of his guitar playing, as well as in his droll voice and persona. What Harrison added complemented the others, creating the precise balance of factors from which the “Beatles’ magic”²⁴⁹ could manifest, the intangible combination of elements that led to an irreducible quality of affective potency.

When the Beatles returned from Germany at the end of 1960 after Harrison, McCartney, and Best were deported, Mo Best, Pete’s mother and owner of the Casbah club where the Beatles often played in Liverpool, described the band’s unexpected transformation as “a revelation to behold,”²⁵⁰ embodied in the dramatic coalescence of their group identity.²⁵¹ However, the revelatory transformation produced by their time in Hamburg requires no mystification to be mysterious, for it is not a combination of factors that can be reproduced through rational formulation. Rather, it is a process that more resembles the growth of an organism, so that all of the component parts are materially explicable, but the whole that arises out of the confluence of those parts seems to refuse purely material explanation in a similar way to the emergence of life from non-life or human sentience from episodic, mammalian consciousness.

After their time in Hamburg, whereas the Beatles had until very recently seemed unexceptional to their peers, all of the factors described above had wrought in them a metamorphosis, perhaps partially ascribable to the death of Lennon’s mother, and certainly

²⁴⁹ Riley 41 and Spitz 225.

²⁵⁰ Spitz 234.

²⁵¹ Gould 82.

mediated by their German initiation, but not reducible to these factors, producing the unprecedented phenomenon that the Beatles were in the process of enacting. At this moment in late 1960, the Beatles underwent a kind of “change of state,” for although they were still primarily playing cover songs, for reasons that elude purely rational explanation, “suddenly everything had changed” as “they burst through an entirely new dimension.”²⁵² The poverty and horrendous living conditions of the Reeperbahn, the ingestion of vast amounts of amphetamine, tobacco, and alcohol, and the sustained exposure to sex and violence that pervaded the district all contributed to forming these relatively innocent English boys into something harder, fiercer, wilder, and more willing to take risks. However, this transformation is ultimately not ascribable to these factors alone, for other talented, hardworking bands from a similar background and with similar influences underwent a similar initiation in Hamburg around the same time, though none of these others became the force for cultural change that the Beatles did.

Thus, for ultimately unknowable reasons, but seemingly driven by what Bergson describes as a “vital impulsion”²⁵³ towards the world’s self-overcoming, this felt shift constituted an initiatory moment that elevated the Beatles, and ultimately the entire musical and cultural landscape, from what they considered a conventional “feeble drone” into a visceral “excitement that bordered on anarchy,” which “gave their dreams an unpredictable new lift,” carrying their vision of radical transformation into the realm of the possible. However, the Beatles’ time in Hamburg only “opened a small window”²⁵⁴ into an experiential mode that they would enter into

²⁵² Spitz 4-5.

²⁵³ Bergson 41.

²⁵⁴ Spitz 6. It should be noted that, although original rock and roll had subsided, great music was still being made in the late fifties and early sixties, particularly in the Brill Building output exemplified in Phil Spector, by which the Beatles were strongly influenced. However, the Beatles seem to have felt that the music of the late-fifties and early sixties lacked something of the visceral intensity and epochal novelty of mid-fifties rock and roll. In particular, they experienced the British rock and roll scene as particularly anemic, with Cliff Richard and the Shadows as its primary exemplar in that moment.

more and more completely over the course of their career, though their tenure in Hamburg and the subsequent period in Liverpool were perhaps the peak of their descent into the more purely visceral mode that Presley had exemplified. The Beatles, later known as the relatively polite and loveable “moptops” in comparison with the bands who would immediately follow them like the Rolling Stones and the Who, seem at this moment in the narrative to have been at the cutting edge of the descent into the underground of repressed modes performed by rock and roll, though, as will become apparent, in order to reach the heights of fame that they ultimately attained, it was necessary to mediate this pure affective frenzy somewhat.

“I’d never seen any band look like this before,” declared promoter Dave Foreshaw. “Normally,” he concludes, popular Liverpool bands such as “the Remo Four or the Dominoes would come on and . . . perform in a polite, orderly way. This band’s performance attacked the crowd. They [played] aggressively and with a lot less respect. They just *attacked* them!” Similarly, according to fellow Liverpool musician Billy Kramer: “It was just so different. . . . To act that way onstage and make that kind of sound—I was absolutely staggered.” At one point, Lennon apparently admonished the crowd to “get your knickers down!” at which the crowd “screamed and raised their arms in delight.” In contrast with the other Liverpool bands, the Beatles were literally wild, “a beast of a different nature” who had learned to move back into a more primal mode to produce “a state of unconscious, indiscriminate euphoria”²⁵⁵ in their audience, stopping “at nothing to get a rise from the crowd.”²⁵⁶ For the predominant streams of British culture that so strongly privileged intellectual wit and rational propriety, the admonition

²⁵⁵ Spitz 11-12.

²⁵⁶ Gould 82.

towards the repressed modes that the Beatles' music and attitude embodied was profoundly transgressive, producing "a seismic shift in the landscape"²⁵⁷ of the local music scene.

After years of struggling to find their voice and their audience, the Beatles, as a result of their time in Hamburg, suddenly became the top band in Liverpool. As Johnny Byrne, guitarist for the Hurricanes, recalls:

We couldn't believe our eyes—or our ears. The sound that was coming from these guys was fantastic, it was raw and exciting, just plain rocking out, and as tight as I'd heard a band play. There was something about the way they looked, too—rough, and intense, and a little bit rebellious. Not anything like we remembered them from Liverpool. Once we realized who it was, Rory and I turned to each other with this shocked look on our faces and we both kind of blurted out: "It's the *Beatles!*"²⁵⁸

The radical change that the Beatles had undergone produced this quality of shock and disbelief in their contemporaries. Like Robert Johnson, who became himself in his mythic transaction with the Devil at "the crossroads" (in which he is said to have sold his soul to become a great blues man) the Beatles were likewise transformed by their immersion in the underworld ambiance of the Reeperbahn, by the encounter with "sinful," instinctual behavior. As Gould suggests, the Beatles' return to Liverpool at the Litherland ballroom on December 27, 1960 constituted a similar archetypal moment to Benny Goodman's 1935 performance at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles, which produced a similarly dionysian eruption, marking the initiation of swing music as a dominant cultural force. Thus, the Beatles' return from the Reeperbahn underworld resembled not only the trajectories of ancient mythological heroes like Hercules and Odysseus, but also those of more recent musical luminaries like Johnson and Goodman.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ Spitz 12.

²⁵⁸ Spitz 202.

²⁵⁹ Gould 89.

Furthermore, as with any new permutation of a genre felt to be genuinely novel by a community, the Beatles required a place with which that new dispensation could be associated. The Cavern Club in Liverpool, previously a center of the jazz orthodoxy, became the Beatles' "Mecca" for, as Adrian Barber put it, "the Cavern was a shithole—but with soul. No place was more conducive to the spirit of rock 'n roll."²⁶⁰ As with the locus of many such revolutionary ruptures, the Cavern, a subterranean temple to the Id much like the clubs they had played in Hamburg, symbolized the Beatles' psychological descent into the realm of unconscious instinct. And the Beatles' following grew exponentially once they had undergone their transformation, for in bringing back what they had learned to Liverpool, the Beatles had reached a point of "phase transition," embodying the production of a qualitatively new genre, which seemed to them and their audience to enact a novel way of constructing the phenomenology of the animal body. Subsequently, this transformation attracted an audience who poured their energy and attention into the Beatles which, in turn, allowed them to carry their metamorphosis even further. This was a moment when all of the necessary factors converged so that the newly emergent demographic of "teenagers" possessed the time, money, and will to support something as intangible and ephemeral as the mass cultural phenomenon of rock and roll. The narrative trajectory of the Beatles from this point around the beginning of the sixties through the end of the sixties is one of almost continual transformation and self-overcoming, and one which explicitly led the way in the larger cultural revolution, as every novelty produced by the Beatles, whether in music, style, or attitude, produced immediate—and ever-expanding—ripples of emulation and outrage in the culture at large.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Spitz 237, 300. Similarly, Gould refers to the Top Ten Club in Hamburg, where Beatles found the peak of their early success in that city, as having been promoted "as a mecca for rock 'n' roll" (Gould 94).

²⁶¹ Riley 6.

Although they had a long way to go before they would become the most famous band of all time, the Beatles had finally discovered a way reliably to induce ecstasy in their audience for, according to manager Brian Epstein's personal assistant Alistair Taylor, in their early appearances at the Cavern club in 1961 after their return from Germany, "they could barely play . . . and they were deafening and *so* unprofessional—laughing with the girls, smoking onstage, and sipping from cokes during their act. But *absolutely magic!* The vibe they generated was just unbelievable."²⁶² Indeed, the seemingly "willful"²⁶³ unprofessionalism that the Beatles displayed probably even contributed to their allure at that moment, for in the context of polished groups doing coordinated dance steps on the model of the Shadows, the Beatles' lack of conventional polish was thrillingly transgressive. Although they ultimately added a more professional veneer to their stage act, their irreverence elicited a sense of authenticity in their audience. It was clear that they were not actors pretending to be rock and roll rebels; they were the real thing, living their lives within the collective persona that they carried onto the stage. However, regardless of whether their lack of professionalism was an asset or a liability, and it was probably some of both, the Beatles simply had *something*, a charismatic energy difficult to define verbally in a way that does not sound trivial to sophisticated ears (e.g. "magic" and "vibe"), but that is over and over again deemed affectively profound by those who witnessed the group in action.

The music industry of Liverpool, such as it was, comprised largely of Brian Epstein's NEMS record stores, began to be drawn to the energetic activity radiating from the Cavern in late 1961. According to Alistair Taylor, who went to see the Beatles with fellow classical music aficionado Epstein at the Cavern for the first time in November, explains that "we laughed at

²⁶² Spitz 268.

²⁶³ Gould 109.

how both of us had been converted—like *that*—to the pop world.”²⁶⁴ Witnessing the Beatles inducing self-overcoming in their audience, and participating in that ecstatic activity, produced a “conversion” in the two slightly older connoisseurs of classical music, schooled as they had been until then in the more intellectually mediated pleasures of the much older musical genre. They could not “understand it” because intellectual understanding was not the domain of experience in which this new music communicated, at least not initially. Although rock and roll ultimately became such a pervasive and culturally significant phenomenon that a whole vocabulary has been developed to convey what it means and what it does, the music is first and foremost affective—Dylan’s “How does it feel?” and Presley’s “That don’t move me” as the primary criteria for judging the genre. Indeed, we might add to this list any number of Beatles lyrics, from “my heart went boom,” an almost aggressively simplistic evocation of attraction taken from “I Saw Her Standing There” on their first album; through Lennon’s initiatory statement of intent in *Rubber Soul*’s “The Word”: “Now that I know what I feel must be right, I’m here to show everybody the light”; to “I’ve Got a Feeling,” the title of a song from *Let It Be*, the last album they released, though not the last they recorded.

After seeing the Beatles a few times at the Cavern, Epstein offered to manage them, which required “a gigantic leap of faith”²⁶⁵ on the part of the young businessman. The Beatles were playing a species of rock and roll that had not been heard before, so throwing his lot in with the band was not a particularly rational business decision on Epstein’s part. Of course, the phenomenon of the Beatles is an exemplary instance of one of this study’s primary insights: that pure rationality is not always the most efficacious mode for making decisions, in business or otherwise. Although Epstein seems to have been sexually attracted to the Beatles, particularly

²⁶⁴ Spitz 269.

²⁶⁵ Spitz 274.

Lennon, it is also clear that this was not the only motivating factor in his determination to manage the group. As with the phenomenon of Beatlemania in general, it was not merely sexual desire, but a combination of many factors that produced Epstein's conversion, not least of which is the profound affective tug of genuine novelty embodied by the Beatles.²⁶⁶

While Epstein belied his stereotype as a hard-nosed mogul to follow his intuition about, and desire for the Beatles, the group also demonstrated a business acumen that belied their instinctive orientation, for they knew that they needed someone with the resources and influence to usher them into the higher echelons of the music business. Although they were certainly idealistic, the Beatles were also clear-eyed about what was required to bring their ideals to concrete fulfillment. Unlike Tony Sheridan, their friend and mentor in Hamburg, who by all accounts was an immensely talented musician, but who had a habit of sabotaging his career through "obnoxiousness and undependability,"²⁶⁷ the Beatles walked the fine line between wild, intuitive brilliance and the rational focus and consistency necessary to bring that brilliance to fruition. Once the Beatles had found their mojo, so to speak, it became necessary to ally themselves with someone like Brian Epstein to negotiate a compromise between their wilder tendencies and the realities of the music business. Epstein, who had previously dabbled in fashion design, window styling, and theater, wanted "to smarten them up,"²⁶⁸ as Alistair Taylor put it, to appeal to a wider audience, the phrase acquiring an added resonance in the context of the Beatles' trajectory away from the privileging of intellect into a more embodied mode. Their descent into the Reeperbahn, primarily immersed in nonrational modes defined by the focus on sex, drugs, and affect, was followed by a reentry into the dominant field of discourse, which

²⁶⁶ Gould 116-117.

²⁶⁷ Gould 81.

²⁶⁸ Spitz 279.

implicitly perceived these modes as hierarchically inferior to the privileged intellectual mode. In order to bring the more somatically oriented mode of experience into the main streams of culture—that is, onto radio and television, and into venues and record stores—it was necessary essentially to smuggle it in behind the veneer of polished suits and what *The New York Times* later described as the “contagious . . . Beatle wit,”²⁶⁹ consisting largely of clever insults and puns, like a postmodern Trojan Horse come to tear down the hegemony of the rational.

Furthermore, as Gould suggests, the Beatles’ implicit project of integrating the instinctiveness of American rock and roll with the more rationalized quality of modernity was deeply complicit with the “sleek, subtle, obsessively neat, and self-consciously modern” “mod” movement (short for “modernist”) brought to public attention by London bands like the Who and the Small Faces a few years later, a movement which “sought not a retreat into the past, but a symbolic alliance with the future.” Although the Beatles were never truly mod, but more a hybrid of mod and rocker, Starr’s scripted statement in *A Hard Day’s Night* (“I’m a mocker”) being a droll accurate enactment of the synthesis performed by the Beatles, they influenced the mods a great deal. Not only in the Beatles’ alliance with the mod subculture, but in their initiation into the music business via Epstein, and later George Martin, the group catalyzed the self-transcending impulse of their culture not by dropping out, but by navigating from the margins of the discursive network towards the central nodes of cultural authority and participating in the commercial marketplace of that network, transforming it from the edge of the inside, as it were. By donning suits, the Beatles were declaring their participation in the predominant cultural streams, but that those suits were of an unusual, fashion-forward cut subtly, aesthetically pushed against the rationalized dictates of modernity, allowing the Beatles to ride

²⁶⁹ *New York Times* (February 8, 1964) 49.

the crest of novelty's wave rather than floundering in the past as they had been in their sartorial allegiance to the leather-clad style of the previous decade.²⁷⁰

Ultimately, the quality that made the Beatles great was precisely what distinguished them from the tame pop-stars like Cliff Richard or the post-army Presley that Epstein apparently wanted to model their careers after: the "authenticity" discussed above, of which the mods were a new inflection. Thus, as with the tension between Lennon and McCartney within the group, there was also a similar sort of productive tension between the rebellious authenticity of the Beatles and the slick professionalism of their manager, and it is the negotiation between these two poles that allowed the Beatles to become the world historic phenomenon they ultimately became. Of course, holding this tension between art and commerce is like walking a tightrope and, in contrast to the Beatles, Presley fell rather firmly onto the side of commerce for the duration of the sixties, though he still made some great records during that time. Thus, the truly remarkable thing about the Beatles is not that they were able to capture the zeitgeist in its nascence, but that they were able to sustain the "creative tension"²⁷¹ throughout the seven or so years of fame before their break-up. Any student of popular music will immediately recognize how rare it is to find an artist who almost never falls off the tightrope, so to speak, but manages consistently to create great art while keeping a mass audience engaged and invested, both monetarily and emotionally.

The historical, material precondition for the sustained brilliance of the Beatles appears to have been a confluence of economic and political factors, particularly the economic prosperity of the sixties. This prosperity allowed young people the purchasing power to support such a sustained phenomenon as a symbolic enactment of cultural revolution, mediated by the much

²⁷⁰ Gould 129-134.

²⁷¹ Spitz 555.

discussed “generation gap” characteristic of that moment. Nevertheless, it seems that the polarity of Lennon and McCartney within the larger polarity between the Beatles and Brian Epstein created a kind of buffer through multiple levels of reiteration, so that Lennon could embody authenticity while McCartney held the pole of compromise, though in the larger polarity, McCartney was firmly on the side of art in relation to Epstein, who represented commerce. As Harrison comments in the *Anthology*: “That was the good thing about being four together, not like Elvis, you know. I always felt sorry later for Elvis ‘cause he was on his own. He had his guys with him but there was only one Elvis. Nobody else knew what he felt like. But for us, we all shared the experience.”²⁷² There was psychological strength in numbers, for although Lennon was initially the driving force behind the band, McCartney carried the weight of responsibility for a significant portion of their career while Lennon was distracted by immoderate drug intake, depression, and Yoko Ono. And, as can be seen in their solo work, particularly after their first few efforts, which were still riding on the momentum of the group, the Beatles were not able to sustain their epochal brilliance individually.

In Liverpool in late 1961, Epstein was busy producing a transformation in his protégés very different than the one they had undergone in Hamburg, for aside from their dress, Epstein took issue with their unprofessionalism, their smoking, drinking, and cursing onstage, and their lack of a coherent setlist. Instead of tracing a dramatic arc in their performances, they simply played whatever they felt like playing in the moment, sometimes even stopping in the middle of a song if an audience member called out for another song. To put it colloquially, the Beatles were not yet “ready for primetime.” Their stint in Hamburg had not so subtly pressed them in the direction of nonrational modes, privileging feeling over thought, which had been an absolutely

²⁷² *Beatles Anthology*.

necessary and profound course for them to follow in their developmental trajectory. However, it had also instilled some bad habits into them, including a lack of discipline and professionalism, which were Epstein's forte. On one hand, Andy Williams and Bruno Koschmider, urging the Beatles to "*Mach Schau!*" had helped them to enter into a fuller engagement with intuitive efficacy. On the other hand, Epstein led the Beatles out of their "underground" scene centered on the Cavern, and into the rational daylight world of the marketplace dominated by the "spirit of capitalism." Indeed, the Beatles' management contract with Epstein completed their "deal with the devil," so to speak, for this is the moment when they symbolically agreed to bring the modes that they had rediscovered in Hamburg into the rationalized world of modern commerce by negotiating with the established music business hierarchy, Epstein their adroit messenger. In Hamburg and Liverpool before Epstein's "makeover," their shows resembled bacchanalian revels, but they lacked the rational apollonian structure necessary for genuine communication: the "rhyme" and "reason," the "logical pacing." Where the Beatles were previously undisciplined, Epstein taught them how to "control the ebb and flow" of affective energy, to "work the crowd" with awareness and the hard won rigor of the rational mind to produce an orgasmic "climax" in their audience.²⁷³

Furthermore, Epstein convinced the Beatles to add a dramatic bow to their stage show and, though it was controversial within the group, particularly with Lennon, their manager ultimately prevailed. According to McCartney, "Brian believed that would be very good for us . . . and I was also a great believer in that."²⁷⁴ Both literally and metaphorically, the Beatles were bowing to convention, to the ever-shifting dictates of an industry built on the ineffable fascination of pop music. McCartney, generally the reasonable half of the Lennon-McCartney

²⁷³ Spitz 279-80.

²⁷⁴ Paul McCartney 96.

polarity, saw that they must make concessions to the rational mode, predominant even in commercial art and entertainment. McCartney's professionalism, his "Mr. Show Business" persona, allowed Lennon to carry the flame of authenticity, of primal affect, though always in a compromise formation with his more intellectual tendencies. Whereas McCartney engaged with rationality in a more practical way, Lennon was of a philosophical temperament, appearing implicitly to justify his focus on feeling as a kind of experiment in identity. On his own, this consciously adopted primitive attitude may well have prevented Lennon from achieving real commercial success, which is often the case with immensely talented and uncompromising artists. However, in the context of the group, Lennon's rebelliousness is part of what initially fueled the Beatles' intense creativity, McCartney's facile politesse mediating Lennon's often brutal candor.

In a very real sense, the relationship between Lennon and McCartney represented the meeting of two worlds, two distinct ways of participating in experience. Although the pair shared a passionate devotion to rock and roll, their inclinations often emphasized different aspects of the music, Lennon generally preferring a dissonant, horizontally melodic mode "moving up and down as little as possible," while McCartney generally wrote in a consonant, melodically vertical mode "ranging freely across the stave in scalar steps and wide intervals." Similarly, their lyrical tendencies can be described as ironic realism in Lennon's case, and extroverted optimism in McCartney's, though there are certainly some exceptions, such as the "no one was saved" pessimism of McCartney's "Eleanor Rigby" and the "it's easy" optimism of Lennon's "All You Need Is Love."²⁷⁵ These general differences are exemplified, for one striking instance of many, in "We Can Work It Out," McCartney writing the hopeful and melodically acrobatic verses and

²⁷⁵ MacDonald 12-13.

chorus, while the sardonic and melodically sedentary bridge, which begins with the phrase “life is very short,” was added by Lennon. Thus, the “friction” caused by these fundamental differences, and impelled by their mutual ambition, “drove them to fertile middle ground.” They both implicitly seemed to know that, as long as they maintained their partnership and managed to subsume their difference in the group, they possessed a combined force that rendered them unstoppable. However, the very “creative tension” that drove the band was also the factor that ultimately made their partnership unsustainable.²⁷⁶

Although the fans in Liverpool and Hamburg knew the Beatles possessed qualities that set them apart from the crowd, the only demonstration record the band had to play for A&R men—the only material evidence of their music aside from their live performances—was a cacophonous recording of one of their shows, which did not even remotely do justice to the excitement that they generated in person. As the poor sound quality of their demo attests, although the Beatles had forged themselves into great performers who could generate ecstatic excitement in their audience, they had as yet had very little opportunity to develop their skills as recording artists, which is a rather different activity than playing live in front of a crowd. Thus, their audition for Decca Records on New Year’s Day 1962 was a mediocre showing that did not live up to their incredible potential, McCartney later referring to the songs that they recorded, including standards like “Three Cool Cats,” “Besame Mucho,” and “The Sheik of Araby,” as a “fairly silly repertoire.”²⁷⁷ Having tied themselves to Epstein, the Beatles were attempting to bring the mode that they had developed in live performance into a music industry dominated by the dictates of the market. Thus, their song selection for the audition was based primarily on rational considerations rather than the more intuitive mode that they had been enacting. In trying

²⁷⁶ Spitz 280-81, 555.

²⁷⁷ *Paul McCartney* 89.

to woo the musical establishment, they had compromised some of their wilder tendencies, trading leather for suits, bowing, and writing setlists that traced a dramatic arc rather than doing whatever they felt in the moment. However, at the Decca audition, they compromised too much, making too many concessions to music business conventions, an overcompensation that essentially vitiated the spirit of their music. By suppressing their intuition in favor of the considered opinions of “experts” like Epstein and producer Mike Smith, they nearly killed their career as purveyors of radical novelty.

Listening to the audition, one is struck by the polite lack of visceral intensity characteristic of the band’s earlier music. This moment in the narrative development of the Beatles shows the pendulum swinging too far in the direction of basing their musical decisions on the hope of cultivating commercial appeal to the point that there is very little of the raucous, rebellious edge universally ascribed to the band’s Hamburg period evident in these recordings. Although many of the sonic elements are present that would soon allow them to conquer the world—their voices and playing style—there is a quality of inspiration and energetic vitality that is undeniably absent in these lackluster performances. Being justly rejected by Decca is the event that seems to have broken the momentum of their trajectory back towards the rational end of the polarity represented by Epstein, and that confirmed the impulse towards the wild physicality which had drawn them to rock and roll in the first place, and which had initially attracted Epstein to them. Through this series of pendulum swings, the Beatles progressively integrated the two poles of art and commerce, generally coextensive with the polarity of novelty and habit, increasingly moving towards a type of music that was authentic to their intrinsic sense of things, always shifting and nearly impossible to define or pin down, but that was accessible to the various gatekeepers who determined whether the songs would ever be heard, as well as to the

audience that must ultimately judge the music's value. The songs and performances of the Decca audition appealed to what the Beatles thought the record label would want. They had over-analyzed their song selections, choosing covers based on what had worked for others in the past, though Lennon immediately recognized that they had betrayed the more intuitive criteria that are the *sine qua non* of good music, for as he later said of the audition: "We should have rocked like mad in there and shown what we're like when we're roused."²⁷⁸

Nevertheless, it seems almost inevitable that the Beatles would have momentarily succumbed to the gravitational force of convention, for rather than being merely marginal "madmen" who had completely rejected rational thought, it seems the band had devoted their lives to what I would suggest is the primary implicit project of rock and roll music: to demonstrate that modes of experience the predominant sectors of culture often considered "mad," exemplified by the genre's reembrace of "primitive" affect, had value for the further development of that culture. Intuition, constituted primarily in attention to bodily feeling, appears to have functioned as something like a dialectical complement or antithesis to the original thesis posited, which is that humanity is defined purely by the rational mind as Descartes so starkly exhibited in his equation of thought with human being. As James, Bergson, and Whitehead all argue in the various valences traced in the introduction to this dissertation, the twentieth century has been the primary temporal locus for the reembrace of affectivity, a mode of engagement with process that these theorists perceive to be as valid and necessary for a sustainable and integrated culture as critical intellect. I hope I am some way towards convincingly showing that the Beatles were one of the primary cruxes on which this discursive reunion of mind and body has turned, what MacDonald calls "the quiet inner revolution of

²⁷⁸ *The Beatles Book Monthly* (January 1983) 7.

attitude and assumption within whose consequences . . . we live today.”²⁷⁹ Thus, it is because the Beatles cared so deeply about being recognized by their culture that they were momentarily seduced by the “repetition” of already existent modes, perhaps the defining quality of institutions and cultural hierarchies, which are rational by definition, based on abstract conceptual rankings, mores, and power relations as opposed to the immediate relationality characteristic of affectivity. It seems to have been necessary for the Beatles to go through this humbling experience in order to be reminded that music is not primarily about rational concerns, but about the irreducible felt quality of the moment.

Although by this time the Beatles were widely recognized as the top band in Liverpool, almost every British label had declined to sign them, due in large part to the Decca tapes, which became the demo that Epstein played for the other labels. Finally, in May of 1962, after being rejected by the majority of labels in England, Epstein, at his wit’s end, called upon Sidney Coleman, an acquaintance who hesitantly suggested Parlophone Records. Coleman was hesitant because, according to George Martin, the head of A&R and a producer at the label, Parlophone was the “‘poor relation’ in the corporate family of EMI.”²⁸⁰ Colin Manley of the Remo Four, putting it even more bluntly, called the label “the bastard child of the recording industry . . . kept locked away in the clock tower and treated with disdain.”²⁸¹ More specifically, Parlophone was primarily known for recordings by comedy and classical acts, not pop groups. However, it just so happened that Martin had come to the conclusion that, in order to keep the label vital, he would have “to do something” with acts that had fallen “between the cracks” at the other English

²⁷⁹ MacDonald 34.

²⁸⁰ Gould 121.

²⁸¹ Spitz 296.

labels.²⁸² Parlophone would ultimately retain its association with comedy and classical music, though primarily in the dramatically recontextualized locus of the Beatles' records, which often incorporated comedic elements and classical instrumentation, particularly in their middle, "psychedelic" period.

Epstein, in an initial meeting with Martin, attempted to sell his band to the producer with the zealousness and overinflated rhetoric of a true believer. However, Martin was not particularly impressed with the Decca recording, later admitting that he felt the Beatles were "a rather unpromising group." Based on that evidence alone, Martin justifiably felt that their selection of covers was pedestrian, and that their original songs were "very mediocre," though he heard "a certain roughness," probably in Lennon's voice, which stopped him from dismissing the group outright. Here we see the Decca audition still haunting the Beatles, nearly destroying their last chance to record for a label. Although the Beatles had temporarily compromised the visceral intensity that made them exceptional in their Decca audition, it seems likely that Martin sensed something of this vitality simmering below the surface. Thus, it is only Martin's vision, or perhaps his desperation, that allowed the Beatles, generally acclaimed as the greatest band in the history of popular music, to pass through the humblest side-gate of the music industry. Through this felicitous concatenation of circumstances, the Beatles, as exemplary outsiders, received one more chance to prove themselves to the guardians of the music business hierarchy.²⁸³

However, before Epstein secured their audition for Parlophone, the Beatles returned, in April of 1962, for one last stint in Hamburg. When they arrived, they learned that Stuart Sutcliffe, Lennon's best friend and their former bass player, had died of what appeared to be a brain-hemorrhage. Perhaps this tragedy created the pathos necessary to push them over the hump

²⁸² George Martin, *All You Need Is Ears* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin Press, 1994) 84.

²⁸³ Martin 122.

from being a popular local band in Hamburg and Liverpool, to being genuine recording artists, though one could also imagine a scenario in which such a tragedy could have dampened their momentum. Thus, regardless of whether this event was causally related to their continued upward trajectory, the Beatles were determined to press on, playing in their residency at the Star-Club, which Adrian Barber described as “an immense, cavernous rock ‘n roll cathedral,” a tabernacle to the Id, to that which had been rendered unconscious in predominant discursive streams. Their residency at the club was a huge success, which certainly boosted their confidence in the musical mode they had developed as they prepared to face what amounted to their last chance at stardom in their upcoming audition for Parlophone. Their final tenure in Hamburg seems to have cemented their status as the preeminent Liverpoolian band for, with six other bands from their hometown joining them, the shows were a definitive demonstration that a distinctive Liverpool sound—Merseybeat—had arrived.²⁸⁴ A genuinely novel and distinctive style had been created by the Beatles and their contemporaries, but it still required a catalyst, one group to have a hit, which would then create a demand for the whole scene. By all accounts, the Beatles had emerged as the Liverpool band most likely to take their local milieu to the national stage. Indeed, the primary factor that set the Liverpool music scene apart from the many other English cities filled with aspiring rock and roll bands appears to have been the Beatles themselves.²⁸⁵

More than simply yet another narrative of the Beatles’ rise to fame, the aim of the present analysis is to explicate, through the concrete specificity of the Beatles, the processes by which novelty is promulgated through culture, transforming the systemic networks of relation that

²⁸⁴ Spitz writes: “A distinctive sound was developing: chord patterns that repeated their repertoires, a penchant for exquisitely modulated phrasing and sudden downshifting into minor chords, deliberate Everly Brothers references in their harmonies, ways of punctuating lyrics with dynamics.” Spitz 306, 308.

²⁸⁵ Gould 112.

radically new forms of process encounter in their development, radiating through the media that mediate the discursive trajectories of historical transformation. Indeed, this is a pattern of processual activity played out in many inflections again and again in many domains to the extent that such moments of revolution in the cultural system may seem obvious in retrospect. However, such moments of rupture are almost always surprising in both the form and timing of their occurrence. The Beatles are so close to our cultural self-conception that it can be difficult to see them objectively for the profound novelty that they embodied.²⁸⁶

Thus, it is an intrinsically problematic task in the world that the Beatles so fundamentally inform to see that, when the Beatles entered Abbey Road Studios for their audition with George Martin, the situation resembled nothing so much as an instance of wild, provincial primitives stepping into engagement with the cultivated technological sophistication of modernity.²⁸⁷ This narrative is familiar to Beatles enthusiasts, but its occluded import, the sense that this moment was the locus for a cultural bifurcation, a split that could have gone either way, is difficult to see without the rosy knowledge of what eventually occurred coloring one's perception of the event. Things are one way, and then, with relative suddenness, they are another, and no one can know where and when these moments of transformation, the fundamental reorganization of the system's rules, will take place. However, after the fact, it generally appears that it could not have gone any other way. The situation in question, stripped of its mythical import, could be described

²⁸⁶ Riley 9.

²⁸⁷ Despite the Beatles' recent immersion in the more somatic mode characteristic of both rock and roll and the Reeperbahn, the rational mode had been inculcated into them from a young age as an intrinsic part of English education. Although the Beatles' experiences in English schools had prepared them for their encounter with Abbey Road to a far greater extent than the analogy to the meeting of primitive tribe and advanced technological civilization suggests, there does seem to have been something of this quality endemic to the situation, for apparent in descriptions of the Beatles first encounter with Abbey Road is an evocation of class distinctions between the basically working class attitude of the Beatles (belied somewhat by particularly Lennon's middle-class background) and the high cultural environment of Abbey Road. The encounter between the Beatles and Abbey Road seems to have exemplified the friction, and eventual integration, of working-class and middle-class modes of thought. (Gould 46 and MacDonald 25).

as nothing more than a little dance band entering into a recording studio for an audition, but this encounter is one of those rare moments on which the direction of history depends, allowing the Beatles to become a symbolic focus for the larger transformations of their decade.

Indeed, the radical quality of the continual “revolution in the head”²⁸⁸ that the Beatles underwent from the beginning of the sixties until their break-up at the end of the sixties is perfectly encapsulated in Lennon’s joke at the close of their last concert on the roof of Abbey Road Studios in 1969: “I’d like to say ‘thank you’ on behalf of the group and ourselves, and I hope we passed the audition.” The actual audition inside that same building less than a decade before the rooftop concert is a defining motif of the Beatles’ career: from this moment on, tested again and again, they always managed to pass into wider and higher realms of culture until they had reached “the toppermost of the poppermost,” and there were no more auditions left to pass, a situation that provided the context for the perfect summation of Lennon’s ironic statement. On one hand, it appears the height of absurdity for the most famous and successful band of all time to express the sentiment that Lennon voiced. However, in the context of the actual lived experience of the Beatles, they were still essentially the same young men who had optimistically set out for their audition less than seven years before in the summer of 1962. Indeed, one of the most appealing things about the Beatles is that they never seem to have lost their sense of humble aspiration, even when Lennon was claiming that the group was “bigger than Jesus.”²⁸⁹

The Abbey Road building into which the Beatles entered on what can only be referred to as that fateful day, June 6, 1962, while “boxy,” “low-ceilinged,” and “unpretentious,” had been the site for the development of some of the most important technological innovations in recording, including “the fundamentals of stereo,” “moving-coil microphones,” and “large-valve

²⁸⁸ The title of Ian MacDonald’s book.

²⁸⁹ *Beatles Anthology*.

tape recorders.”²⁹⁰ As seen previously, the Beatles were, thus far, almost exclusively a live band, focusing on generating frenzied excitement in audiences. Abbey Road, however, represented a rather different venue of transmission. The Beatles stepping into the studio were a virtual embodiment of intuitive modes literally entering into commerce with the rational, scientific epistemology productive of recording technology. In addition to the recording innovations mentioned above, EMI, the parent company of Parlophone, had been one of the primary developers of television and radar, though this period of radical innovation was over by the 1950s, and the company had retreated into a relatively static orthodoxy, with Abbey Road studios as one of the primary exemplars of this technological complacency. Like the cliché primitives entering into a center of cultural power, the Beatles were initially intimidated by the sheer magnitude of the facilities. Abbey Road, generally described as something between a scientific laboratory and a library, was starkly different from the dank, underground clubs that the Beatles had become accustomed to, the architectural and aesthetic qualities of a building profoundly informing the affective tone of the activities that occur inside.²⁹¹

The ambiance of Abbey Road was reflective of a rational approach to making records based on fixed schedules and technical procedures. According to engineer Alan Brown, the studio practiced a “very strong engineering discipline,” explaining that “we all wore white lab coats when we worked.”²⁹² This description sounds more like a scientific laboratory than a place for recording rock and roll. The clean, rather utilitarian rooms of Abbey Road, filled with the latest in recording technology, would have, like a film set, created a certain tone, visible in the activity of technicians carefully turning knobs and flipping switches under white ceilings. This

²⁹⁰ Spitz 316.

²⁹¹ Gould 121.

²⁹² Spitz 350.

setting speaks volumes about the mentality that went into its construction, which prizes efficiency and rational structure over aesthetic concerns, and which profoundly affects the felt experience of activity, and thus the concrete products that result from that activity. The interior of the building was blank, an orderly and brightly lit container for precise technological accomplishment. In contrast, the Cavern Club in Liverpool, the venue most associated with the Beatles' early career, has more the quality of a decrepit Victorian cellar, having previously served as a produce warehouse, with narrow stairs leading down to a dimly lit room with rounded ceilings of rough-hewn stone curving steadily into walls of the same coarse material, dripping with condensation from the bodies packed within. Where Abbey Road was a neat, spacious building conducive to technical problem solving, the Cavern was a place more conducive to losing oneself in the hot, fecund press of bodies and the pounding rhythms echoing through the tight, womblike hall.²⁹³

This difference was only amplified by the respective environs of the buildings, the affluent St. Johns Wood area of London in which Abbey Road was situated contrasting sharply with the Matthew Street location of the Cavern Club in Liverpool, which had been the site of a produce market dotted with pubs, a decidedly more working-class locale. Thus, the distinction between these two primary loci of the Beatles' public identity could not be more stark: the site for the distribution of the produce of provincial physical labor and its accompanying after-hours ambiance of alcohol consumption juxtaposed against the posh centrality of a studio generally dedicated to technological development and the recording of high cultural classical music and verbal comedic wit. The Beatles' seven-year inhabitation of Abbey Road produced a deconstruction of this opposition, both in concrete practical ways, and more broadly in the public

²⁹³ Gould 109 and Spitz 59.

imagination, culminating in the iconic photo of the long-haired, bearded, and barefoot (in McCartney's case) Beatles crossing the road on the cover of their last recorded album, named for the studio in which they produced the bulk of their music. Where there was tension in their first encounter, Abbey Road ultimately became synonymous with its provincial invaders through a sustained engagement of polarized relational modes. Although the Beatles would come to represent the return of repressed epistemologies into the predominant technological culture of commercial media, they were only able to perform this return by deeply integrating the rapidly advancing technologies into their music, from double-tracked vocals and sped-up piano solos to backwards guitars and tape-loops.²⁹⁴

The Beatles were rebellious agents of change producing transformation through their prolonged involvement with this place that so strongly epitomized the rationalization of culture, down to the music that the culture produced, which is perhaps the most accurate metric that one can hope to find for the state of a culture's soul. The Beatles, who had spent most of the last few years riling up drunken crowds of sailors, strippers, art students, and wage-workers, inhabited a different way of relating to experience than the clean, precise quality of the studio. Again, as with the tension between Lennon and McCartney, this broader tension of opposites produced the friction necessary to generate profound novelty. Although the band's unorthodox attitude certainly ruffled some feathers, so to speak, the friction between the Beatles and Abbey Road, fractally echoing the friction between Lennon and McCartney, generated an electrically charged atmosphere as the group arrived for their audition.²⁹⁵

The encounter with Martin and Abbey Road Studios produced a shift equally significant to the Beatles' initiation in Hamburg, but of a radically different character. As with their

²⁹⁴ Riley 26 and Gould 14.

²⁹⁵ Spitz 316, 350.

epiphany at the hands of Williams and Koschmider, the Beatles willingly submitted themselves to the more professional mode exemplified by Martin and Abbey Road, particularly after the failed Decca audition.²⁹⁶ The Beatles seem implicitly to have understood that the Abbey Road audition was an initiation not into primal modes of experience, but rather into the equally profound critical and analytical faculties developed primarily in modernity. Because the Beatles had, thus far, largely focused their attention on embodying the somatic modes characteristic of rock and roll, this encounter became one of the primary narrative enactments of the engagement between intellect and intuition that took place so dramatically in the sixties. This initiation, rather than the “baptism by fire”²⁹⁷ of Hamburg, exhibited more the quality of a music school examination and, after the Beatles played their songs, Martin and his team were initially unsure whether the band measured up.

The Beatles had developed their musicianship, and particularly their singing voices, to a relatively high degree, but their selection of material was not connecting in the studio the way it did live, and Martin justly thought the songs they had written were not of the highest quality, probably because the band’s primary focus had been on performance. As Martin recalls: “They were rotten composers,”²⁹⁸ asserting that “their own stuff wasn’t any good.”²⁹⁹ Of course, this assessment is particularly striking given that the Beatles would very soon become known as among the greatest songwriters in the history of popular music. Indeed, what seems to have produced this dramatic change resembles nothing so much as an academic critique. As Martin describes the situation, he and engineer Norman Smith “laid into them for about an hour and . . . were pretty forthright” with their criticism, admonishing the young musicians for not having

²⁹⁶ Gould 122.

²⁹⁷ Spitz 210.

²⁹⁸ Martin 123.

²⁹⁹ Gould 122-123 and Spitz 318.

“suitable material,”³⁰⁰ while Smith felt that they should “embellish the sound”³⁰¹ of the band.

This is a kind of critical initiation that Presley never seems to have experienced, and it appears to be these successive initiations into both the intuitive and the intellectual modes that allowed the Beatles to produce an integration of these two epistemologies, which was a step beyond the synthesis that Presley produced. By “laying into them,” Martin and Smith apparently incited the Beatles’ analytical faculties, which impelled the band more critically to examine all aspects of their art, Martin’s professional experience giving structure and focus to the Beatles’ creativity, thereby bringing the rational mode into dialogue with the more instinctive mode in which the band had been immersed.³⁰²

However, Martin and his assistants did not share one criticism, which, as Ron Richards said to Martin, was that “the drummer was no good and needed to be changed.”³⁰³ Pete Best simply did not possess the innate subtlety of feel required to lift the Beatles’ music from being merely good, to being great.³⁰⁴ The Abbey Road professionals, having worked with the best session musicians, could immediately tell that Best was holding the Beatles back, so it was necessary to let him go, difficult though it would be to kick him out of the group. However, even aside from the as yet unspoken issue of the drummer, the withering critique was painful, but it seems to have been necessary in order to break down all of the band’s immature and amateurish presuppositions, a process that ultimately had the desired effect of impelling the Beatles to rebuild themselves to think like professional recording artists. A lesser group might have given

³⁰⁰ Martin 123.

³⁰¹ Brian Southall, *Abbey Road: The Story of the World’s Most Famous Recording Studio* (Cambridge, UK: Stevens, 1982) 81.

³⁰² Riley 27.

³⁰³ Spitz 318.

³⁰⁴ Gould 123.

up in anger and despair right then and there, for thorough critiques like the one Martin and Smith gave the Beatles are never easy to hear. As Spitz narrates:

The producer's overall response had been brutal. He'd given them a real raking-over. When the final blow had been delivered, there was a long, anxious silence. Almost apologetically, Martin asked the Beatles if there was anything *they* didn't like. After a well-timed beat, George Harrison sneered: 'I don't like your tie.' The room went silent. For a split second, nobody breathed. A line had been crossed. Martin fixed George with a stern look, not certain what tack to take with this boy, when he noticed the flicker of a smile at the corner of George's mouth. A joke! He'd been making a joke! What a perfect ice-breaker. Martin's grin flashed approval ear to ear.

According to Norman Smith: "That was the turning point,"³⁰⁵ the Beatles falling into the humorous banter they had developed in their many hours together. "I really think the Beatles got their recording contract because of that conversation," Smith concludes. "Let's be honest: they got that recording contract because of their enthusiasm, their presence, not because of their music. During that one conversation, we realized they were something special."³⁰⁶

Nervous about their audition, wanting desperately to succeed, the Beatles had been trying to conform to how they imagined "serious musicians" comported themselves, though this impulse towards compromise was surely tempered by memories of the Decca audition. Nevertheless, in this most antithetical of environments to their usual rock and roll clubs, the Beatles' brilliant wit had temporarily been cut off from their musical personas. Harrison's joke was the moment when the two were first truly integrated within the purview of the predominant music business hierarchy, for they had encountered an authoritative mentor who saw the potential, not only, or even primarily, in their music, but in their humor. Through their "wordplay" and "double-talk," the Beatles proved that they were "something special," though this "something" had as much to do with their personalities as it did with their playing.

³⁰⁵ Spitz 318-319.

³⁰⁶ William J. Dowling, *Beatlesongs* (New York: Fireside, 1989) 35.

Harrison's "crossing the line" was a moment of transgression that took belief in the rightness of their cause, but also required a sympathetic interlocutor, which it found in Martin, producing an ecstatic hilarity reminiscent of their breakthrough moment in Hamburg mediated by absurdist humor, though in an almost precisely opposite context. This was a "turning point," not only in the conversation, but in the Beatles' career, and in the trajectory of popular music itself. Had Harrison not cracked his joke, there is every possibility that Martin would have rejected the band, which would most likely have killed their last chance of recording for a label.³⁰⁷

Although the Beatles had thus far been focusing on developing their intuitive capacities, they had also been developing the verbal wit that was ultimately as important to their appeal as their music. Thus, though the Beatles spent the rest of their career effecting an integration of their two primary modes—the witty humor and the intuitive musicality—this moment, significantly orchestrated by Harrison, not Lennon or McCartney, was a primary transductive instance that turned the tide, so to speak. Though Harrison's joke might at first glance seem trivial, it is just such moments on which the bifurcations of history depend, though it seems almost inevitable that the Beatles would produce this sudden reversal in this situation. As it is said, "character is destiny," and the Beatles had been developing their characters their whole lives in preparation for this moment. Harrison's joke appropriated the critical mode to which Martin and Richards had been subjecting the Beatles and placed it in the context of the Beatles' embodied, absurdist mode, simultaneously acknowledging and parodying the critique they had just received by reciprocally critiquing the small, seemingly trivial detail of Martin's tie, which probably did in fact offend the aesthetic sensibility of Harrison, who is generally considered the most stylish Beatle. By criticizing Martin's tie, Harrison implicitly expressed recognition of the

³⁰⁷ Spitz 318-319.

critical mode's utility but, at the same time, put that mode in its place, so to speak. This quip demonstrated the absurdity that results from the exclusive focus on "negative judgment"³⁰⁸ characteristic of the critical mentality, particularly in the context of rock and roll, whose primary mode of significance eludes the critical mode, appealing directly to the more fundamental somatic domain of experience.

This episode is another instance of Whitehead's "slightest change of tone which yet makes all the difference," for nothing material changed in the encounter—the Beatles' music was the same, they were still the same people with the same characters and capacities—but the fact that Harrison's joke radically transformed Martin's attitude towards the group from negative judgment to positive affirmation is a subtle shift in affective tone that ultimately allowed the Beatles to be recording artists at all, which in turn did make a huge difference in the culture's experience. Furthermore, it is highly significant that Harrison produced this reversal because it proves just how much the Beatles really were a group entity. Although most of the focus, particularly in the early years, was on the polarity formed by Lennon and McCartney, Harrison's wry wit, as well as his eccentrically engaging musicianship, produced an excellent foil to diffuse and redirect the tension between the two gigantic egos of the Lennon-McCartney partnership. The only thing that was missing now was the simple affability and superb feel of the drummer who would complete the Beatles' circle of nearly universal accessibility.

In addition to all of Epstein's previous work, one of the manager's most important contributions to the group was convincing them, on George Martin's advice, to replace Pete Best with a more suitable drummer. Persuading the other Beatles does not appear to have been difficult, for they do not seem to have felt a particularly strong bond with their old drummer, a

³⁰⁸ *Process and Reality* 5.

laconic loner lacking the sense of humor shared by Lennon, McCartney, and Harrison. Even before Martin's suggestion, Tony Sheridan had been urging them to replace Best, so the three core Beatles had already been considering a replacement, and they knew exactly who they wanted to complete the band: their old friend Ringo Starr.³⁰⁹

According to Adrian Barber, Starr “was an excellent drummer and had a good feel,” his personality and drumming perfectly suited to support the Beatles’ songs.³¹⁰ Of the four final Beatles, Starr, perhaps because of his frequent illness as a child, was probably the most naturally able to put aside egoic consciousness, which allowed him to create “grooves” that very simply felt good, that produced positive affect, which seems to be the essence of quality musicianship.³¹¹ Where Lennon and McCartney embodied, in different ways, the fraught trajectory from the privileging of the rational mind to the integration of that mode with repressed epistemologies, Starr, the oldest member of the group, in his quietly good-natured way appears already to have found an easy center between mind and body by the time he became a Beatle. Though never an intellectual, Starr had an instinctual feel for the witty repartee that characterized the Beatles’ collective persona, while grounding their brilliance with his solid, distinctive drumming and loveable charm. As Lennon expressed it: “To be so aware with so little education is rather unnerving to someone who’s been to school since he was fucking two onwards.”³¹² Where Best had been vain and heavy-handed—“mean, moody, and magnificent”³¹³ as DJ Bob Wooler described him—Starr added a warm humor and steady maturity that completed the group’s constellation of qualities.

³⁰⁹ Gould 83, 126.

³¹⁰ Spitz 325.

³¹¹ Riley 25, 44.

³¹² Michael Braun, *Love Me Do: The Beatles’ Progress* (London: Penguin, 1964) 37.

³¹³ *Beatles Anthology*.

Displaying an instinctual feel for rhythm that exceeded verbal articulation, Starr's drumming exemplifies the dictum from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Energy is eternal delight." Indeed, the "natural feel" that Starr exhibited seems to be a kind of somatic, bodily knowledge that comes, paradoxically, from learning consciously to let go of mind to enter into a state similar to the one performed by Presley and his compatriots in the invention of the genre that Starr's group would come to exemplify. Thus, it should be made clear that the drummer's playing was not the product of pure instinct, but of hard work, many hours of practice, and experimentation—the rational discipline of rehearsal producing pure affective potency. The verbal formulations used to describe what Starr was doing—cadence, syncopation, and so on—come after the doing, and are incidental to his mastery. This seems to be the case with all analysis: it is useful, even vital for understanding a creative act after the fact, for impelling one to change or refine one's approach, but in the flow of the inspired moment, intellect is generally an impediment, the unwanted intrusion of doubt into the direct engagement with experience. Put simply, intellect is appropriate for some activities and not others, for writing about music but not for playing music, at least in the moment of playing. As with the "true love"³¹⁴ that Starr felt for the drums, good musicianship is something that cannot be achieved primarily through analysis of the potential beloved's attributes and accomplishments, but rather something that one must feel.³¹⁵

And it is precisely this subtle quality of "feel" that was the missing ingredient in the Beatles with Best on drums. The Beatles had matured and integrated their parts until they achieved mastery over themselves, at least in a collective, musical context. They possessed an intuitive musicality, which had a "cleverness" and "ingenuity" that can only be an indication of

³¹⁴ Spitz 338-9.

³¹⁵ Riley 29.

the more intellectual mode that analyzes and critiques, finding novel and interesting ways to frame and direct the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic qualities that are central to playing music, giving them a “sharp, inventive twist,” though “a lot of it happened without a great deal of forethought,” a paradoxical operation whereby intellect and intuition seem to have been integrated in an emergent synthesis. With Starr in the group, the Beatles possessed the perfect balance of qualities among them to make music that satisfied in every domain of experience, from the most visceral, somatic domain of “feel,” through the domain of emotional potency, to the domain of intellectual interest, to perhaps even more intangible domains.³¹⁶

Although they had become a popular and effective group with Best, the “magic,” the irreducibly numinous quality of experience, did not fully manifest until the fourth member of the quaternity entered the picture. Their playing is ultimately a reflection of their relationships with one another, and Best’s status as outsider in the group, both musically and socially, had caused the band to sound and feel ultimately incoherent, with Lennon, McCartney, and Harrison inhabiting a simultaneously cleverer and more somatically nuanced sensibility than Best. It is clear that the three original Beatles did not particularly enjoy their early drummer’s company, so it would have been extremely difficult to play music with him that was fully enjoyable for both themselves and their audience. Whereas Best’s “unobtrusive, undistinctive” lack of subtlety flattened the sound of the band, bringing all the players down to his lowest common denominator, Starr fit perfectly into the group, in both personality and musicianship, eliciting the extraordinarily distinctive feel of the band that is one of their greatest strengths.³¹⁷

³¹⁶ Spitz 325.

³¹⁷ Riley 41-43.

However, although according to Abbey Road engineer Ron Richards, “they had their own *sound*,” which “set them immediately apart”³¹⁸ from the majority of other groups, how they would be received in the national music market was still an open question. Richards describes a conversation he had with Martin to determine how to market the band: “He knew how important it was to establish their identity,” Richards asserts, “so we kept walking and talked about what to call them—Paul McCartney and the Beatles, or John Lennon and the Beatles,” initially attempting to fit the group into the template of that musical moment in which there was almost always an individual leading the group, a choice between McCartney, “the pretty boy,” or Lennon, “the down-to-earth type.” As Richards describes the conversation: “It went on like that, back and forth, as we continued along Oxford Street,” though, “when we got to the end, we knew it was perfect the way it was.”³¹⁹

As with most rational decision making, Martin and Richards were attempting to model their newly signed group on immediately previous precedent rather than on an awareness of the rare but inevitable emergence of processual ruptures. This is a well-known fallacy in the music industry (and many other industries, for that matter) as A&R representatives are notorious for trying to sign acts that look and sound like bands that have had recent success, or to mold the bands already on their label’s roster on the model of previous successes, rather than working with the artists to help them develop the qualities that make them unique and novel, which seems to be the highest aim of most music, at least as far as audiences and musicians are concerned.³²⁰ Making music subservient to a rational mentality, which tends to repeat what has worked in the past, seems to have a dampening or repressive effect on the ineffable quality of musical

³¹⁸ Southall 78.

³¹⁹ Spitz 352-53.

³²⁰ Palmer 9.

inspiration, which is after all the factor that draws most listeners to music in the first place. Indeed, the commercialization of music, though necessary for the wide dissemination of that music, is so often decried for precisely this reason: the devouring of the primarily intuitive mode of music by the rationality of the marketplace tends to make for mediocre music. It is only at certain intervals in the history of this art form in the twentieth century that revolutions driven by novel inspiration have broken through the mediocrity of a static recording industry visible in the emergence of bebop in the early forties as much as in the punk rock revolution of the late seventies. The emergence of the Beatles is a primary moment of this kind of rupture, for the Beatles were the antidote to the “white bread” teen idols playing a tame and sanitized version of rock and roll that had risen to prominence by the early sixties.

Thus, Martin’s and Richards’ ambulatory discourse concerning how to market their new signing was a moment when the cultural guardians could have pulled the Beatles back into the gravity of the old way of being, for who knows what would have transpired if the group had been billed as “Paul McCartney and the Beatles”? However, it is a testament both to the vision of Martin and to the genuinely novel musical collective that the Beatles had forged that the producer ultimately decided to maintain “the beautiful balance they seemed to have found.”³²¹ The Beatles were young and new to the music business, but Martin and his engineers, committed members of the institutional hierarchy, found it necessary to analyze their new act, critiquing the Beatles’ music before they bought into it, both in terms of monetary and emotional investment. However, it is not primarily for rational reasons that Martin decided to keep the band a group; as William James particularly understood, rationality often merely finds justifications for our intuitive sense of things. Thus, it seems that Martin engaged in the analytical dialogue to satisfy

³²¹ Spitz 352.

himself that his decision was based on sound logic, though ultimately it is his intuitive faculty that convinced him it was “perfect the way it was.” This analytic discourse by Martin and Richards presaged the public reaction to the Beatles and to the sixties counterculture in general: both ultimately succeeded in redirecting the flow of cultural process, but it was necessary for a great deal of dialogue, of “back and forth,” to occur before the rebels could be elevated to an exalted cultural status.

The Beatles were elated when their first single, “Love Me Do,” made it to number seventeen in the British pop charts in late 1962, though this chart position fell short of where the Beatles needed to be in order to have the kind of career that they envisioned. Thus, it was vitally important that their next offering make a larger impact. As their second single, the Beatles released “Please Please Me” in early 1963, into which they managed to condense all the novel excitement of their live shows in a way that they had not quite been able to achieve with “Love Me Do.”³²² They compressed everything they had learned into the space of one song, the long process of integrating visceral intensity with the musical inventiveness and wit that transformed rock and roll, making it exponentially more complex.³²³ In this way, the Beatles rendered the ecstatic affect that they induced in their performances available on a massively wider scale so that anyone with a radio or record player could participate. Although Martin initially found the song “dreary,”³²⁴ once the band, at Martin’s urging, produced the more up-tempo arrangement heard on the record, the producer’s sentiment about the song underwent a radical shift. It is again a testament to Martin’s exceptional intuitive capacity that, after listening to the first playback of

³²² Gould 137, 142.

³²³ Riley 45. It should be noted, however, that the Brill Building/Girl Group era in the early sixties pushed towards complexity in ways that presaged “Please Please Me,” though the Beatles brought the visceral intensity of early rock and roll together with the instrumental and harmonic sophistication of what Phil Spector referred to as “little symphonies for the kids” in unprecedented ways (Palmer 37-39).

³²⁴ Gould 139.

the recording, he was able to tell the Beatles: “Gentlemen, you’ve just made your first number-one record.”³²⁵ Thus, the skeptical holdout and representative of the established order was now completely won over to what the Beatles were creating, perhaps because he had a hand in its creation, but also because Martin’s input was the final ingredient that produced the record’s encapsulation of profound novelty. And Martin’s reversal is prophetic of the success that the song would achieve, quickly rising to number one in the British pop charts, for the record itself seems to have demanded such recognition. “Please Please Me” is one of those classic, nearly perfect records that is undeniable, capturing a certain energetic gestalt that can reliably induce positive feeling in the listener time after time, but that cannot be manufactured or reproduced through a rationalized formula.

Listening to “Please Please Me,” from the very first bass and drum hit issuing immediately into the simultaneously breezy and exhilarating swoop of the harmonica and guitar line, a discerning listener in 1963 would have immediately recognized the sound as novel, viscerally driven by the eighth-note insistence of McCartney’s bass part. Then the vocals come in, sounding like the Everly Brothers on amphetamines, not far from the truth, with Lennon singing the simple, nursery rhyme melody and McCartney holding a pedal-tone on the high first note. This bifurcating harmony, combined with the deliberate cadence of the words and the driving rhythm, has the effect of producing a dramatic tension that, reflecting the gist of the lyrics, evokes the primal yearning of adolescent sexuality.³²⁶ And the hacked out, rising bar chords over the stop in the middle of the verse only serve to punctuate this tension, as do the five individual notes, played in unison on guitar and bass at the end of the verse, though it could also be argued that these clever moments of punctuation detract slightly from the momentum of the

³²⁵ Martin 130.

³²⁶ Riley 47.

song. However, the most thrilling moment of the record is when Lennon rasps “come on,” as if imploring the world to satisfy his visceral desire for connection, continually ratcheted up by the harmonized echoes from McCartney and Harrison, emphasized by Starr’s adeptly modulated drum fills, moving from the optimistically ascendant major fourth to the querulously searching minor second to the darkly menacing minor sixth and back to the hopeful major fourth, a sequence that, in concert with the words, creates a sense of intense yearning for the warmth of sexual satisfaction.

The movement from the minor second to the minor sixth creates a displaced affect of doubt and difficulty in which a weaker group could have become mired in maudlin sentimentality, but it is carried through by the rhythmic animal potency of the three voices in the “come on” bridge. And then the band drops back to the big open E chord, the lowest and most fully resonant chord on the guitar, for the tagline, “please *please* me,” which feels like a return to an original state of unity, but immensely complicated and recontextualized by having passed through the harmonic odyssey of the bridge. Thus, in the space of almost exactly one minute, the song has carried the listener from the homey docks of Liverpool evoked by the harmonica line, which reiterates and dramatically reframes the harmonica part on the simpler “Love Me Do” (which itself appropriates the harmonica introduction on the previous year’s top-selling British hit, Frank Ifield’s “I Remember You”³²⁷), into the coaxing, cajoling, and demanding “come ons” that guide the listener through the anxiously libidinal labyrinth of the bridge, and back into the wide-open, orgasmic release of the chorus, which seems musically to enact the fulfillment of the sexual reciprocity that Lennon and his bandmates are explicitly seeking in the lyrics: “please

³²⁷ Gould 138-141.

please me like I please you.”³²⁸ All of these tortuous twists and turns amount to a multilayered narrative complexity packed into a span of time so short as to have been previously unimaginable, a moment qualitatively similar to Presley’s recording of ‘That’s All Right,’³²⁹ though on a higher level of conceptual order, a hallmark of rationality. Although the lyrics of “Please Please Me” may appear a bit trite or facile to a twenty-first century sensibility, it seems that this record is one of the primary initiatory moments of the rupture the Beatles would enact for their culture over the ensuing decade.

“Please Please Me” certainly sparked the manic conflagration that would catalyze the emerging counterculture, for as press agent Tony Barrow describes the reaction to the first show the Beatles played in London following the record’s success: “Immediately . . . the kids started screaming,” he says, “I’d never experienced anything like it before. The Beatles, at this time, were basically unknown. But if this bunch of kids in London had gotten as far as finding out the individual band members’ names, then it was a phenomenon of some kind, which, to me, was extremely significant.”³³⁰ The Beatles, through all of their various transformations, impelled to a great extent by the need to reconcile polarized experiential domains, had discovered a relational mode which, at that moment, seems to have had the intrinsic quality of producing ecstasy in their audience. This ecstatic enthusiasm was often referred to as “hysteria”³³¹ in the press, and while it did sometimes devolve into hysterical behavior, this word is loaded with pejorative significance against women, who had for centuries been diagnosed with this supposed pathology if they exhibited inclinations counter to the prescribed feminine roles. According to Barrow, the audience was “genuinely excited. . . . They knew the song; they knew about the band. It had to

³²⁸ Riley 47.

³²⁹ Gould 142.

³³⁰ Spitz 363.

³³¹ Gould 180.

be spontaneous, to some extent. But if you ask me, that special Beatles mystique was already at work.”³³² All of the experiential terrain that they had traversed, from the original forging of the partnership between Lennon and McCartney, through the years of hard work and obscurity, the Hamburg initiation, the failed Decca audition, the successful audition for Parlophone, and, finally, the recording and release of their second single, had forged a “mystique” around the band that communicated itself to their audience by their very presence.

Even at this early stage in their career, the Beatles were a profoundly novel “phenomenon,” something “unknown” and unexpected, though this moment was the culmination of a cultural storm that had apparently been brewing for a long time. To the sophisticated London culture, they seem to have symbolized the primal mode of rock and roll, though largely stripped of the racial overtones connected to Presley and his contemporaries in the previous decade. Nevertheless, lacking the overtones exemplified by American rock and roll, the Beatles produced a similar kind of reversal and integration of polarized opposites in terms of class and region, mediating what Gould calls “the birth of Northern chic.”³³³ It is usually the case that processual transformations originate from agents outside the systemic centers, and the cultural revolution catalyzed by the Beatles is no exception, Liverpool perfectly fulfilling this criterion in relation to the cultural dominance of London.

Impelled by their unassailable combination of accessibility and novelty, not just in their music, but in their visual style and physicality, English rock and roll was suddenly a viable proposition. As one observer put it: “To those of us in England who lived for the next great American single . . . it seemed like the Beatles were the promise we’d been waiting for all our

³³² Spitz 363.

³³³ Gould 92.

lives.”³³⁴ If it appears as if accounts of the Beatles’ rise keep ratcheting up the superlatives until it seems there is nowhere else to go, and then, again and again, transcend the limitations of what seems possible, this is precisely the affective quality that accompanied the Beatles over the course of their relatively brief existence. More than any other group, their career was a long, nearly uninterrupted series of climaxes, one after another, taking their audience higher and higher, lifting them out of the static, rationalized conformity that largely characterized the predominant cultural streams of the fifties and into a radically new and expanded world. The Beatles were the right people at the right time, perfectly poised to catch the wave of desire and expectation that propelled the culture through a decade-long convulsion of titanic change.

Although many of the songs that the Beatles played in the early performances of their fame in 1963 were not as thrilling as their first number one single, the overall effect of their sound and their appearance catalyzed the audience. Through the many musical elements and performative techniques that they had developed over the years, they were increasingly able to induce a feeling of self-overcoming in the crowds through their physical performativity, the audience jolted out of their rational minds and into their primal bodies. Though not individually as physically gifted as Presley, the Beatles had developed similarly effective collective techniques, though of a less sexual quality, to induce mind-displacing euphoria in their largely female devotees during live performances, particularly the head-shaking falsetto “oohs,” adapted from Little Richard, which became the band’s early trademark. The effect that this presentation had on the audience is undeniable, and still thrilling to hear, for according to Colin Manley of the Remo Four, describing the show: “Just a few weeks before they’d been nothing more than mates, one of us,” he recalls, “but it was clear that night they’d become stars.” The “ecstatic response”

³³⁴ Spitz 367.

from the audience created an “aura”³³⁵ around the band, a felt quality that starkly distinguished them from their old friends, as well as from their old selves. And indeed, what came to be known as “Beatlemania” does not seem to have been merely the trivial histrionics of hysterical teenage girls (“phony Beatlemania”³³⁶ as the Clash would call it in “London Calling” during the following decade), for according to entertainer Kenny Lynch, who witnessed the mania up-close, “the Beatles shook those crowds up, even scared them a little.” The audience members were genuinely frightened by the relative extremity of the spectacle, which is a primary way of overcoming inhibition, but only “a little,” just enough to allow the crowd to express their repressed libido in a comparatively safe context, a moment that numerous observers have described as something like a “tipping point” in the cultural process.³³⁷

In all honesty, it may seem a bit ridiculous that every time the Beatles went through a significant experience it is described as the turning point in their career and in history, the moment when they became the avatars of cultural revolution. However, as mentioned above, this quality seems to have followed the Beatles wherever they went as they enacted what amounts to a revolution in consciousness for their culture.³³⁸ Each moment of change may not have been unique in the overall trajectory of the Beatles’ career, which consisted of many such moments, though in the history of culture, and even in relation to most of their peers, each of these moments was a rare and highly significant event that elicited qualities of human experience on a mass scale that had never before emerged in quite that way. In this sense, each of these epiphanic instances constituted a genuine turning point in the historical process. As Lennon later commented, rather than immediately trying to act as the cultural icons that they ultimately

³³⁵ Spitz 377.

³³⁶ The Clash, *London Calling* (Epic Records, 1979).

³³⁷ Spitz 371.

³³⁸ MacDonald xi-xii.

became, “your goal is, you know, always a few yards ahead rather than right up there” in the unimaginable heights that they eventually attained. Their primary ambition was “making it big in Liverpool, then being the best in the county, you know, then being the best group in England, and then we’d go for Scotland and break them in, and things like that,”³³⁹ which seems to be Lennon’s way of saying that the Beatles were always trying to overcome their present state, but one step at a time.

The writing of “I Saw Her Standing There” can be considered another such transformative moment in the history of popular music. McCartney wrote the first few lines on the van-ride home from a gig in 1962: “she was just seventeen, and she’d never been a beauty queen.” However, when he played the first draft of the song for Lennon, the two boys came to the mutual conclusion that the second line was “useless,”³⁴⁰ replacing it with the more off-the-cuff and evocative “you know what I mean.” As with so many of the Beatles’ artistic decisions, this choice for the second line of what became one of their most famous songs was precisely “a prophetic gesture,”³⁴¹ as Spitz describes it, to young people who were literally dis-affected from their somatic selves, for this phrase tacitly acknowledges that the visceral, sexual, affective qualities of experience that tend to be particularly intense in teenagers defy the necessity of verbal formulation. While the relatively conservative main streams of culture in the nineteen-fifties had served to repress this kind of knowledge in the West’s technologically mediated self-conception, producing an artificial innocence that continually threatened to burst at the seams, the Beatles recognized that the juxtaposition of the girl’s age with the pulsating bass line communicated more information about the tumultuous urges of youth than a descriptive couplet

³³⁹ *Beatles Anthology*.

³⁴⁰ *Beatles Book Monthly* (August 1983) 6.

³⁴¹ Spitz 373.

ever could. By starting out the song in this way, McCartney and Lennon were essentially winking at their audience, conveying in the secret code of the young a tacit understanding that their moment had come, and that this moment was sexy and visceral.

Similarly, as Epstein described the band in the studio during the recording of their first album, accomplished almost entirely on February 11, 1963: “They just put their heads down and played,”³⁴² which seems implicitly to suggest that, rather than analyzing and critiquing, the Beatles, when playing music, would temporarily relegate their minds to a subordinate position in relation to more embodied modes, feeling their way through the songs as they had learned to do in the many nights spent playing in Liverpool and Hamburg. They had developed a kind of mutual resonance by playing together so often that they were apparently able to enter into heightened states of awareness through their collective intention and their ecstasy-inducing rhythms.

Even before the release of their first album however, the success of their second single produced yet another qualitative “leap” in the Beatles’ narrative trajectory, for they were now having real, transformative effects on individuals and on the culture that these individuals comprised throughout the United Kingdom, one observer at the time declaring that “their physical appearance inspires frenzy.”³⁴³ However, it was no longer necessary for the group physically to be present to induce this activity—even their music and image were unnecessary in some cases—for their very name became a powerful word, loaded with significance, which could invoke intense feelings in their fans merely by its utterance. As mediators of the return of repressed epistemologies, the Beatles fed off this increasing flood of energy and attention, for this is precisely the kind of fame that they had been envisioning through those hard years in

³⁴² Spitz 375.

³⁴³ Maureen Cleave, *Evening Standard* (February 2, 1963) 145.

Liverpool and Hamburg. Although they would later tire of the mania, at this early stage in the phenomenon, the Beatles embraced the rising tide of intense affect directed towards them. Chosen by their culture to perform the most profound yearnings of the moment, the Beatles were propelled forward by historical forces that they could not control, though they willingly accepted their election as avatars of a new dispensation.³⁴⁴

Although slightly greater numbers of musicians have reached this initial phenomenal status, one quality that made the Beatles such an exceptional phenomenon was the consistency with which they practiced their art, regardless of the many distractions of fame. They were certainly inspired by their success, writing cascades of songs in this initial rush of notoriety.³⁴⁵ However, it is the Beatles' commitment to steady productivity that set them apart, for according to Kenny Lynch who was part of the Beatles' package tour: "They wrote every day on the coach, like clockwork" amidst the "highs and lows" of life on the road, a phrase evocative of the affective mode.³⁴⁶ This "roller-coaster" quality is characteristic of feeling, which is an indispensable mode of engagement with reality, but which requires the mediating critical distance and organizing structure of rationality, "like clockwork," to achieve its greatest effectiveness. Intellect without affect lacks meaning, but affect without intellect lacks consciousness. While the Beatles had previously been carrying the intuitive mode in relation to a culture that often privileged rationality, they increasingly represented the integration of these two modes. The intuitive mode in which they had been immersed issued into the focused expression of their songs, for as they discovered in their critique at the hands of George Martin, simple, unmediated feeling is not sufficient to produce genuine novelty.

³⁴⁴ Spitz 383-84.

³⁴⁵ Gould 157.

³⁴⁶ Spitz 384.

As agents of novelty's ingression into cultural process, the Beatles had been called into the limelight by popular demand and the assent of the gatekeepers of institutional hierarchies. Indeed, the audiences for a tour in the fall of 1963 were almost entirely composed of teenage girls, screaming and weeping in ecstatic release, acting "as if they all knew one another." According to press agent Tony Barrow, speaking of a show at the prestigious Royal Albert Hall in London: "they acted that way because they had one thing in common . . . They were Beatles fans."³⁴⁷ Their mutual enthusiasm for the group produced a collective quality—they were all profoundly moved by the same phenomenon. The Beatles were producing, in the most revered and public of British venues, an ecstatic reaction, which is as appropriate a moment as any to mark the inception of Beatlemania. The collective self-transcendence contained in this neologism had come from the Cavern and the provincial halls to the center of institutional sanction in England, and the country—soon the world—would ultimately be transformed by this cultural infiltration. The developmental process of the genre had reached a point at which the whole industry, indeed the whole country, began to reconfigure itself around a band that had until recently been a group of liminal outsiders with few prospects. The underdogs, with relative suddenness, had been ushered into the center of technologically mediated discourse to participate in a profound revision of the narrative at the heart of their culture.

In this moment, the impulses towards cultural revolution and sexual liberation were deeply intertwined, and this multivalent return of repressed modes found one of its greatest catalysts in the Beatles, as can be witnessed in video footage of concerts from these years. "You don't have to be a genius," one psychiatrist at the time commented, "to see parallels between sexual excitement and the mounting crescendo of delighted screams through a stimulating

³⁴⁷ Spitz 398.

number like ‘Twist and Shout.’³⁴⁸ However, Beatlemania cannot be reduced to sexuality, Brian Epstein referring to the phenomenon as “simply a kind of mass pathology,” which is often the case with the return of repressed psychic contents of many kinds, contending that the Beatles “have an extraordinary ability to satisfy a certain hunger in the country,”³⁴⁹ apparently a hunger for somatic release from rational propriety. Similarly, Barbara Ehrenreich has suggested that “the attraction of the Beatles bypassed sex and went straight to the issue of power,”³⁵⁰ the power to express repressed affect, including “female assertiveness, female aggression, female sexuality, and female solidarity”³⁵¹ in public. Thus, when one police officer participating in the mayhem claimed that “these people have lost the ability to think,”³⁵² he seems to have been correct in the sense that the sheer physicality of the experience impelled the audiences’ center of attention literally out of their minds and into their bodies. However, where the officer saw this impulsion as a lack, to many of those who participated, it was experienced as a plenitude: not the absence of thought, but the intentional overcoming of the hegemony of the rational.

One attendee at a concert in 1964 described the experience in elemental terms: the “screaming, weeping ecstasy . . . felt like an earthquake. . . . It would start at one end [of the arena] and continue to the other. It was incredible to do nothing but stand there, letting it wash right over you.”³⁵³ Based on the descriptions of those who experienced these concerts, as well as on the video footage, the sheer force of the collective emotion catalyzed by the Beatles is strikingly clear. As the *Daily Mail* wrote of one fan: “Screaming like an animal, and wearing

³⁴⁸ *Sunday Times* (November 3, 1963).

³⁴⁹ David Bailey and Peter Evans, *Goodbye Baby and Amen* (New York: Coward McCann, 1969) 73.

³⁵⁰ Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, *Re-Making Love* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986) 35.

³⁵¹ Gould 184.

³⁵² *Vancouver Sun* (August 24, 1964).

³⁵³ “Beatle Bat It Out for Seattle,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (August 22, 1964).

almost as much leather as one, the young girl writhed and shook in some private ecstasy.”³⁵⁴ However, although this description evokes the visceral animality produced by Beatlemania, it is precisely public, not “private ecstasy” that characterized the phenomenon. It seems clear that this public ecstasy was an intentional performance, for though no individual could control the elemental force of Beatlemania, it appears that the young, screaming girls consciously participated in the phenomenon, allowing the music and presence of the Beatles to catalyze their internal process. Although the historical imperative that produced the screaming ecstasy of Beatlemania had not been manufactured and could not be stopped, the participants willingly took part in this pandemonium, the spectacle providing a socially acceptable outlet for the urge towards wild physical abandon that had so long been repressed.

The tide of change that lifted the Beatles continued to rise throughout 1963 as, in the English charts, their “dominance was unprecedented.”³⁵⁵ Similarly, witnessing the Beatles’ arrival for the first time in America in February 1964, one observer exclaimed that “no one, I mean *no one*, has ever seen or even remotely suspected anything like this before!”³⁵⁶ The phenomenon of Beatlemania was something that had never occurred on that scale. Although there were many precursors to the phenomenon, from religious awakenings and revivals over the centuries to the furors over Valentino, Sinatra, and Presley, this incarnation of mass ecstasy was happening on a higher order of magnitude than those other manifestations, permeating the cultural psyche via concurrently emerging technologies in a way that nothing of this kind had ever done, particularly in Britain.

³⁵⁴ *Daily Mail* (October 1, 1963).

³⁵⁵ Spitz 450.

³⁵⁶ Geoffrey Giuliano, *Dark Horse: The Secret Life of George Harrison* (London: Pan, 1991) 47.

Of course, as with Presley, once the Beatles started to gain notoriety, the backlash from the press was harsh and swift. In response to their epochal appearance on the Ed Sullivan show, Jack Gould, the same *New York Times* critic who had panned Presley a decade before, relegated the Beatles to the status of “a fad,” though he acknowledged their “bemused awareness.” As Gould writes: “Televised Beatlemania . . . appeared to be a fine mass placebo,” a “sedate anticlimax” to the expectation that had been built up in the press for the Beatles first trip to America.³⁵⁷ Similarly, the critic for the *Washington Post* wrote that the Beatles “seemed downright conservative . . . asexual and homely,”³⁵⁸ while the *Herald Tribune* inexplicably declared in its front-page headline: “BEATLES BOMB ON TV,” the critic claiming that the Beatles were “a magic act that owed less to Britain than to Barnum.” Continuing the tirade, he writes that the Beatles “apparently could not carry a tune across the Atlantic” and that they were “75 percent publicity, 20 percent haircut, and 5 percent lilting lament.”³⁵⁹ These are severe appraisals, certainly, but compared to the vitriol aimed at Presley and his contemporaries, the critical response to the Beatles was somewhat restrained, portraying them not as a threat but rather as a trivial fad, which is almost a worse indictment for would-be rebels. Whereas Presley had been derided as a vulgar, dangerous animal, the Beatles were dismissed as merely insubstantial.

It is certainly a sign of progress that the press at least recognized the Beatles’ “bemused awareness,” visibly expressing their integration of intellectual and intuitive modes, which rendered them more palatable to the established media than their rock and roll precursors had been. However, to rephrase McCartney’s lyric in “I Saw Her Standing There,” the youth knew

³⁵⁷ Jack Gould, “The Beatles and Their Audience,” *New York Times* (February 10, 1964).

³⁵⁸ *Washington Post* (February 10, 1964).

³⁵⁹ *Herald Tribune* (February 10, 1964).

what the Beatles meant; they were in on the joke, and cranky journalistic incomprehension did absolutely nothing to abate the feverish momentum that was carrying the Beatles, and primary streams of culture along with them, into a new and distinct historical period. However, as the decade progressed, even most journalists were won over by a revolution in consciousness that left many aspects of culture transmogrified in its wake. Ultimately, what the Beatles performed for their culture, for young and old alike, was the conscious awareness characteristic of rationality brought to bear on the intuitive physicality endemic to rock and roll, an initiatory reembrace of affect by intellect.

The Beatles, faithful in the righteousness of their mission, were not discouraged by the initial negative response from the press, but took it as a challenge. As Lennon put it: “If everybody really liked us, it would be a bore. . . . It doesn’t give any edge to it if everybody just falls flat on their face saying, ‘You’re great.’”³⁶⁰ This attitude recalls the Beatles’ first shows at the Cavern when Lennon took perverse pleasure in playing rock and roll in spite of the prohibitions of the jazz establishment. There was something in Lennon’s character that impelled him towards such gleeful rebellion. Similarly, at an early American press conference, the Beatles used their charming wit to full effect, converting an initially hostile group of journalists through their irresistibly absurd mode of relation. It was a combination of all the elements that made them exceptional—their music, their style, and their charisma—that seduced the audience. But it was primarily the Beatles’ quick humor, their ability to engage in witty repartee—the stock-in-trade of much mid-twentieth century journalism—that won over the American press.³⁶¹ Thus, the Beatles continued to demonstrate that they were an ideal vessel for the return of repressed modes of experience. By integrating these modes with the privileged rational mode in their artistic and

³⁶⁰ *Anthology* (book) 120.

³⁶¹ Gould 167.

public personas, the Beatles ultimately provided a focus for the integration of these epistemologies in the predominant discursive domains.

Chapter 3: “Looking For the Inner Heat”³⁶²

Bob Dylan’s Radical Empiricism of Identity

I try my best to be just like I am, but everybody wants you to be just like them

Bob Dylan, “Maggie’s Farm”³⁶³

Writing about Dylan is in some ways more daunting than writing about Presley or the Beatles because of the sheer mass of excellent literature on him, but also less problematic in some ways because Dylan himself wrote with depth and insight about a significant portion of the period in his career that is the main focus of this chapter: his childhood through the moment in 1965 when he “went electric,” the platform from which he would subsequently transform the genre of rock and roll. The Beatles seem to invite from their biographers a journalistic eloquence that never delves too deeply into any one character, which is an entirely appropriate approach for a band whose defining characteristic is that they are four equals in constant dialogue, accounts generally focusing on the relationships between the individual Beatles and between the Beatles and their audience. Conversely, Dylan invites a kind of interior depth that the Beatles generally do not, for Dylan’s is the story of the lone genius poet who is primarily concerned with his own interior process and the way that process is mirrored in the external world. Although Dylan tells much of his narrative in relation to his friends and influences, he less often recounts stories about his relationships with these people, rather giving what amount to character sketches of the individuals that he admires and has learned from.³⁶⁴

³⁶² Bob Dylan, *Chronicles* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005) 47.

³⁶³ Bob Dylan, *Bringing It All Back Home* (Columbia Records, 1965).

³⁶⁴ Writing about Bob Dylan is a rather different task than writing about either Presley or the Beatles because there is a proliferation of high quality books about Dylan. There are at least four or five worthy biographies and a plethora of other texts, ranging from accounts of specific albums or periods in Dylan’s career to analyses of Dylan’s lyrics from a variety of philosophical and religious perspectives, and even an entire book solely devoted to the song “Like a

As with the two previous artists, I will endeavor to make explicit things that Dylan implies, or that are implicated in the subtext of his narrative. However, this task is a bit more complicated with Dylan for two reasons. First, Dylan is still alive while the primary subjects of the first two chapters, Presley and the Beatles, have both left the building, so to speak, the band having been dissolved in 1970 and Lennon and Harrison having departed this corporeal life. Second, Dylan is explicitly philosophical. Although he does not seem particularly interested in academic philosophy of the kind I am employing, he is deeply interested in the philosophical strains of music, literature, poetry, painting, film, history, and any number of other subjects. For instance, Dylan writes in *Chronicles*: “Balzac was pretty funny. His philosophy is plain and simple, says basically that pure materialism is a recipe for madness.”³⁶⁵ Although Dylan seems merely to be summarizing Balzac’s philosophy, Dylan hardly ever says anything innocently, rarely expressing ideas in an impartial, objective manner, but rather speaking in ways that demonstrate that he understands concepts because he has lived through them, and that those concepts are always already embodied. Thus, Dylan implicitly acknowledges here one of the main points traced thus far in the present text: that the almost exclusive privileging of reductionist “materialism” and its accompanying rationality in modernity has produced a kind of

Rolling Stone” from which this dissertation takes its title. However, perhaps the biggest difference in writing about Dylan is that he has published the first volume of his memoir: *Chronicles*. Although Paul McCartney and George Harrison have both written autobiographies, John Lennon, the slightly predominant focus of the previous chapter, never had a chance to, and Presley was not literarily inclined.

On his website in 2011, Dylan wrote: “Everybody knows by now that there's a gazillion books on me either out or coming out in the near future. So I'm encouraging anybody who's ever met me, heard me or even seen me, to get in on the action and scribble their own book. You never know, somebody might have a great book in them.”³⁶⁴ I take this passage as both a provocation and a challenge. I agree with the implication that not many great books have been written about Dylan, though some exceptions are the relatively recent biography *The Ballad of Bob Dylan: A Portrait* by Daniel Mark Epstein, David Hajdu’s *Positively Fourth Street*, several books by Greil Marcus, and Dylan’s own *Chronicles: Volume One*, which offers an unparalleled view into the inner workings of the man’s mind. Thus, though I am not producing a whole book on Dylan, this chapter is my bid to write about him in a way in which he can recognize himself, though in doing so I will often take recourse to philosophers with whom Dylan may not be familiar.

³⁶⁵ *Chronicles* 45-46.

collective “madness,” describable as a mass psychosis resulting from the repression of affectivity. Furthermore, as with this reference to Balzac, in *Chronicles*, Dylan speaks about almost everything obliquely. Most of the narrative is concerned with the large cast of characters that he admired and respected. He writes directly about himself less often, rather giving an impression, as in a photographic negative, of what he was thinking and feeling in relation to these other people. It seems likely, based on this evidence, that he thinks about himself and defines his character largely in this way, becoming himself by constantly projecting himself into the subjectivity of others.

Thus, writing about Dylan is a rather more daunting task than writing about Presley or the Beatles precisely because one gets the impression that, while Presley and, to a lesser extent, the Beatles were not particularly adept at articulating the subtleties of their internal processes, Dylan seems to be the one who understands his thinking best. Whereas the Beatles maintained a conceit of critical distance from the intellectually privileging epistemology of modernity by means of their ironic humor, Dylan has maintained a similar distance through an obfuscating, mysterious, riddle-like way of speaking that often relies less on humor, though he can certainly be hilarious when he feels the urge. In fact, Dylan’s attitude has much of the same absurdity that the Beatles evinced in their humor and lyrics, but Dylan’s mode of verbal expression is more like a Zen koan or the modern poetry by which he was explicitly influenced. The Beatles as well as their commentators expressed self-awareness more in their attitude and in their witty, cutting banter, by saying things without saying them, whereas it is rarely quite clear what Dylan is actually saying, for many of his statements are metaphorical, aphorisms that can be taken on different levels of discursive signification, evoking profound depths and dizzying heights with Dylan as opaque medium. As Greil Marcus describes Dylan at an early show opening for Joan Baez in

1963: “Something in his demeanor dared you to pin him down, to sum him up and write him off, and you couldn’t do it.”³⁶⁶

Perhaps even more than Presley or the Beatles, Dylan was a true scholar of musical history. Like the Beatles, he grew up on rock and roll, though he was closer to the source. As he writes in *Chronicles*,

I was into the rural blues . . . it was a counterpart to myself. It was connected to early rock and roll and I liked it because it was older than Muddy and Wolf. Highway 61, the main thoroughfare of the country blues, begins about where I come from . . . Duluth to be exact. I always felt like I’d started on it, always had been on it and could go anywhere from it, even down into the deep Delta country. It was the same road, full of the same contradictions, the same one-horse towns, the same spiritual ancestors. The Mississippi River, the bloodstream of the blues, also starts up from my neck of the woods. I was never too far away from any of it. It was my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood.³⁶⁷

If rivers are the arteries of a country, then highways are the nerve fibers, and Dylan felt that growing up at the North end of Highway 61, the same road that had been “the main thoroughfare of the country blues,” formed an abiding connection between him and that deep well of African American experience. Indeed, though Dylan explored many styles in his long career, he would always return to the blues.³⁶⁸ Whereas Presley and Little Richard and Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers embodied the quintessence of musical achievement for the Beatles, particularly in their early years, Dylan quickly passed through these more contemporary influences to immerse himself in the archaic, mysterious tradition of folk music, of which the blues were an integral part.

³⁶⁶ Greil Marcus, *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005) 18.

³⁶⁷ *Chronicles* 240-1.

³⁶⁸ Daniel Mark Epstein, *The Ballad of Bob Dylan* (New York: Harper, 2011) 431.

When asked at a 1966 press conference, “Why do you sing?” Dylan answers, “Why? Just because I feel like singing.”³⁶⁹ Although this statement seems rather transparent, it bears unpacking. Dylan did not answer that he sang for any high minded reasons, to change the world or to create great art, though he certainly did both of these things, but simply because he felt like it. There is no more direct evocation of the supposition that Dylan has been driven primarily by affect, though counter to the trivial connotations that this supposition might evoke in the context of a rationality privileging modernity, Dylan in many ways proves affect to be a window into the most profound mysteries of human experience in the animal body.

Bearing a strong similarity to descriptions of both Presley and Lennon, the boy who would become Bob Dylan is consistently portrayed as having possessed a quality common to artists alternately described as “awareness” or “sensitivity”; he simply seemed to see and feel more of the world than other children.³⁷⁰ However, while this heightened awareness renders many artists intensely sensitive to criticism, Dylan seems not to have suffered much from this usual downside to the artistic temperament, or perhaps a compensatory toughness was ingrained into him from a young age by the harsh climate of the coal-mining town of Hibbing, Minnesota, as well as by the recurrent admonitions of his grandmother (whom Dylan calls “my one and only confidante”) to “just let it go—let it wear itself out,”³⁷¹ and by his father’s conventionally austere parenting style. As Robert Shelton speculates in his biography about Dylan’s childhood home: “The living room was so clean and orderly. Everything was in its place. Maybe that is what they expected of him, to be just another home appliance, to turn on and off.”³⁷² Although

³⁶⁹ *No Direction Home*, Dir. Martin Scorsese (Paramount Pictures, 2005).

³⁷⁰ Epstein 49.

³⁷¹ *Chronicles* 42-43.

³⁷² Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987) 12.

by all accounts Dylan's parents were attentive and generous,³⁷³ it seems that they were also steadfastly committed to the rationalized ethos characteristic of 1950's Midwestern modernity, for as Dylan described his childhood to Nat Hentoff in 1964: "I wasn't free. . . . I was constantly on guard. Somehow, way back then, I already knew that parents do what they do because they're up tight. They're concerned with their kids in relation to themselves. . . . They want you to be what *they* want you to be."³⁷⁴ This statement suggests the imposition of restrictive conceptual mores on many in Dylan's generation by their parents' generation, which perhaps took the privileging of rationality more for granted than the generation born around the time of the Second World War when the world was at its most flagrantly irrational, the residual Enlightenment and Victorian presuppositions about the proper conduct of life coming starkly into contrast with the bestial horrors of war. Nevertheless, for no materially discernible reason given his conventionally comfortable upbringing, and as opposed to most other humans, close friend Victor Maymudes asserts that Dylan "knew he was on fire when he was eleven."³⁷⁵ Or, as folksinger Pete Seeger expressed it in 1964: "Dylan may well become the country's most creative troubadour—if he doesn't explode."³⁷⁶ Dylan clearly possessed an extreme intensity beyond the explanatory scope of his family background

One of Dylan's primary influences, whom he heard on both radio and record from an early age, was Hank Williams.³⁷⁷ As Dylan writes in *Chronicles*: "The sound of his voice went through me like an electric rod. . . . Even at a young age, I identified fully with him. I didn't have to experience anything that Hank did to know what he was singing about." Through recordings

³⁷³ David Hajdu, *Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Farina, and Richard Farina* (New York: North Point Press, 2001) 66.

³⁷⁴ Benjamin Hedin, ed. *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader* (New York: Norton, 2004) 35.

³⁷⁵ Hajdu 198.

³⁷⁶ Hedin 24.

³⁷⁷ Hajdu 67.

or transmissions of Williams' voice, the older singer's identity seemed to resonate with Dylan's, causing the young boy to feel intuitively drawn into identification with the man generally considered to be the father of country music. Dylan sensed something of Williams in himself, imaginatively becoming him just as Lennon had with Presley (though Dylan also seems to have identified with Presley in a similar way), to the point that Williams' death in 1953, when Dylan was only eleven years old, affected him profoundly: "Hearing about Hank's death caught me squarely on the shoulder. The silence of outer space never seemed so loud." Even at such a young age, Dylan was apparently discerning enough to know truly great music when he heard it, the metaphor of "outer space" as a psychologically transcendent realm a recurrent image in his narrative. Dylan recognizes that transformative artists like Williams were somehow able to go "beyond the circle,"³⁷⁸ a phrase that seems to echo, whether consciously or unconsciously, Bergson's "circle of the given," to produce something radically novel, something that had never existed before though all of the material elements were extant.

Furthermore, Dylan acknowledges his debt, and by proxy, the debt of many songwriters, to Williams, for the country singer's songs are indeed some of the most sublimely constructed compositions in popular music, from "Your Cheatin' Heart" and "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" to "Lost Highway" and "Ramblin' Man," so that they are often described as seeming received rather than composed, a quality that is often ascribed to Dylan's songs as well. As Dylan writes later in *Chronicles*: "A song is like a dream, and you try to make it come true. They're like strange countries that you have to enter."³⁷⁹ By spending many hours listening to Williams' records, immersed in the affective tone of these "strange countries," Dylan seems to have "internalized" the mode that Williams enacted. Imaginatively inhabiting the internal,

³⁷⁸ *Chronicles* 95-97.

³⁷⁹ *Chronicles* 165.

subjective terrain that Williams had explored and expressed through his songs apparently allowed Dylan to access that space within himself, the time spent there allowing the particular mental and physical qualities of that “high lonesome” psychosomatic experiential domain to subtly affect the development of the young boy’s bodily economy, incorporating the felt identity embodied in Williams’ songs into the young Bobby Zimmerman. As Dylan describes it, he seems to have literally absorbed something of Williams’ affectivity into his own affectivity through the medium of recorded song, perhaps through the emulation of William’s posture, breathing, tone of voice, facial expression, and so forth. Indeed, this seems to be just one instance, albeit an especially significant and intense one, of the kind of process that occurs whenever one listens to music. In a similar operation to the truism that “you are what you eat,” it also seems to be the case that “you are what you listen to,” though Dylan apparently possessed an exceptionally profound receptivity to musical transmissions of affect.

However, like many in his generation, “when rock and roll emerged,” David Hajdu writes, “Bob became obsessed with the music,”³⁸⁰ becoming a fan of Presley, Holly, Little Richard, and the rest.³⁸¹ Although, as Hajdu writes, Presley “had helped introduce young people to aspects of the folk sensibility,”³⁸² according to Dylan, by the early sixties after Presley had returned from the army:

Nobody listened to him. . . . It had been years since he had done his hip thing and taken songs to other planets. I still kept turning the radio on, probably more out of mindless habit than anything else. Sadly, whatever it played reflected nothing but milk and sugar and not the real Jekyll and Hyde themes of the times. The *On the Road*, *Howl* and *Gasoline* street ideologies weren’t there, but how could you have expected it to be? 45 records were incapable of it.³⁸³

³⁸⁰ Hajdu 67.

³⁸¹ Shelton 32.

³⁸² Hajdu 11.

³⁸³ *Chronicles* 34.

It had only been three years since Presley had been drafted into the army in 1958, but to a twenty year old Dylan whose high school years had almost exactly coincided with the peak of original rock and roll, 1955-58, this relatively brief period must have felt like an eternity of mediocrity. In fact, it seems likely that this sense that popular music was lacking excitement and vitality, the quality of taking “songs to other planets,” is probably a large part of what impelled Dylan ultimately to produce a new revolution in the music that he cared about so deeply, partially through a synthesis of that music with the more sophisticated and experimental beat “ideologies” that he saw lacking in popular culture at the beginning of the sixties.

The moment when Presley was inducted into the military marked the end of the era of original rock and roll. The waking beast was temporarily tamed, or at least mollified in the late fifties and early sixties. However, the impulse towards radical transformation through the embrace of repressed epistemologies reemerged with renewed vigor in the form of what would come to be called the sixties counterculture. As Dylan acknowledges in Scorsese’s documentary, *No Direction Home*, in Hibbing in the fifties, “the music that was popular *was* ‘How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?’”³⁸⁴ though the original rock and roll was still fresh in the young man’s memory. As Dylan writes: “It wasn’t that I was anti-popular culture or anything and I had no ambitions to stir things up. I just thought of mainstream culture as lame and a big trick.”³⁸⁵ This was the brief moment of pause between the initial revolution of the fifties and the even more transformative decade of the sixties, an interregnum when the countercultural impulse was pushed back underground into the more sophisticated and intellectual manifestations of beat poetry, folk music, and bebop (as opposed to the British “trad” jazz that the Beatles abhorred), which all carried a radical impulse similar to that of rock and roll, but which simply did not

³⁸⁴ Scorsese

³⁸⁵ *Chronicles* 35.

possess the same visceral drive and intensity coupled with wide accessibility as the musical genre initiated by Presley and his contemporaries.³⁸⁶ Indeed, though the folk and beat movements were certainly allies in their rejection of the dominant culture, Sean Wilentz observing that “the folk revival and the Beat scene shared certain ancestral connections in the Depression-era Left,”³⁸⁷ many folkies and beats did not quite see eye to eye at this historical moment. As Dylan writes: “The Beats tolerated folk music, but they really didn’t like it. They listened exclusively to modern jazz, bebop.”³⁸⁸ However, though these three countercultural streams—folk music, beat poetry, and bebop—were relatively distinct and not yet integrated, Dylan seems to have sensed that they were bound to come together down the road, the separate streams flowing into the countercultural flood that occurred in the mid-to-late sixties, “a new form of human existence”³⁸⁹ which Dylan did much to mediate, and which transformed the main streams of culture even as it was absorbed by those predominant discursive networks.

Despite the beats’ “exclusive” allegiance to jazz, to which he could not entirely relate (and which he may be exaggerating somewhat for rhetorical effect), Dylan is probably the single figure who did more than anyone else to bring the two countercultural streams of beat poetics and folk music together. Although he still cared deeply about the main streams of American culture in which he was embedded, Dylan’s allegiance was explicitly with the poets and the folksingers and implicitly with rock and roll, though this profound commitment would only come to light a few years later. In this moment between revolutions, rock and roll had been

³⁸⁶ Gould 100. However, as Robert Palmer suggests: “Often dismissed as a dull interregnum between the original fifties rock explosion and the arrival of the ‘modern pop band’ in the person of the Beach Boys and the Beatles, the late fifties/early sixties was in many ways a uniquely rich time for rock and roll, and one that found the music growing in fresh and unexpected directions” (Palmer 35). However, Dylan seems to have been significantly less interested in the sophistication and musical complexity of the Brill Building, Phil Spector, and the “girl groups” than were the Beatles.

³⁸⁷ Sean Wilentz, *Bob Dylan In America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011) 51.

³⁸⁸ *Chronicles* 48.

³⁸⁹ Wilentz 66.

temporarily coopted by the dominant commercial culture: Pat Boone had bigger hits than Little Richard with bland, sanitized versions of his songs and, most significantly, Presley had been coerced into cutting his hair and submitting to the military-industrial power structure, which would be the primary locus of dissent for the sixties protest movements, the rationalized “machine” that Mario Savio would fiercely exhort the students of Berkeley to throw their bodies upon half a decade later in 1964.

However, the greatest influence on Dylan’s music and persona during his initial rise to fame, more than Presley, Williams, or Jonny Cash, is Woody Guthrie for, as Dylan asserts in *Chronicles*, “the songs of Woody Guthrie ruled my universe,”³⁹⁰ once even extolling Guthrie as “the greatest holiest godliest one in the world,”³⁹¹ and elsewhere proclaiming Guthrie a “genius genius genius.”³⁹² Describing his first major encounter with Guthrie’s music, most likely in 1960 during a year spent in Minneapolis, Dylan recalls listening to “about twelve double sided 78 records” by Guthrie. Although Dylan had appreciated Guthrie’s music before, he “hadn’t actually heard” the singer from Oklahoma in “this earth shattering kind of way.” Now, the experience of hearing “all these songs together, one after another” made his “head spin” with the euphoria of discovery.³⁹³

Dylan goes to great lengths to describe precisely what it was about Guthrie that struck such a resonant chord in him and, much like the other character sketches and artistic analyses that Dylan provides, this description of perhaps his greatest influence seems to reveal much about how Dylan sees himself. Like Dylan, “Guthrie had such a grip on things,” a phrase that seems to indicate an acute awareness or sense of perspective evident in his compositions and

³⁹⁰ *Chronicles* 49.

³⁹¹ Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971) 56.

³⁹² “Let Us Now Praise Little Men,” *Time* (May 31, 1963).

³⁹³ *Chronicles* 243-44.

performances. Both singers were able to see and express the vast complexity of experience in both simple and deeply insightful ways without reducing that complexity. Similarly, the three adjectives that Dylan uses to describe Guthrie, “poetic and tough and rhythmic,” evident in songs like “Hard Travelin’,” “Cumberland Gap,” and “I Ain’t Got No Home,” also accurately describe the combination of factors that made Dylan exceptional: a verbal or intellectual fluency colored with the romantic quality usually implied by the word “poetic,” integrated with the physical and intuitive “rhythmic” musicality that made the singing affectively effective, and the “toughness” that indicates a determination, drive, and potent intensity impelling and supporting the integration of the intellectual and somatic modes suggested by the other two qualities.³⁹⁴

Guthrie’s “mannerisms” and “diction,” both rather subtle qualities in singing, had a titanic physical effect on the young Dylan: they “just about knocked me down,” “picked me up and flung me across the room,” felt “like a punch,” and “tore everything . . . to pieces.” This violent force of feeling that Guthrie had developed into “a perfected style of singing that it seemed like no one else had ever thought about,” coupled with “the infinite sweep of humanity” in his lyrics, proved to be perhaps the single most profound influence on Dylan’s own style.³⁹⁵ Like Guthrie, there is a force to Dylan’s singing, coupled with exceptional subtlety and creativity in phrasing that produces a visceral reaction in the listener.³⁹⁶ Indeed, this is why it is often said of Dylan that one either loves him or hates him, for his voice is confrontational, making one feel the affect that it is conveying in a particularly intense way (“Intensity, that’s what he’s got,”³⁹⁷ proclaimed producer Tom Wilson in 1964). And this intensity, combined with the brilliance and elevated perspective of both Guthrie’s and Dylan’s words, produces a sense that both singers are

³⁹⁴ *Chronicles* 243-44.

³⁹⁵ *Chronicles* 243-44.

³⁹⁶ Epstein 80 and Hedin 33.

³⁹⁷ Hedin 28.

communicating something urgent and profound for, as Robert Ray has observed: “The *sound* of Bob Dylan’s voice . . . changed more people’s ideas about the world than his political message did.”³⁹⁸ Indeed, one of the ways that Dylan integrated intellect and intuition is simply by singing complex, evocative words with multiple layers of meaning in an earthy, forceful style. Although, ultimately, Dylan’s singing was deeply original, it was necessary for him to emulate Guthrie’s singing in order eventually to surpass his mentor.

However, in 1960, Dylan had not yet become the epochal artist that he soon would, and it is precisely through his compulsive aping of Guthrie that Dylan found a platform from which he could develop his own performative identity.³⁹⁹ Dylan, in a “trance,” felt that, in discovering Guthrie, he had somehow discovered himself, “feeling more like myself than ever before.” Indeed, Dylan sensed that Guthrie was expressing qualities of experience that Dylan had perceived, but did not have the specific tropes to articulate. In Guthrie, he saw “some essence of self-command,”⁴⁰⁰ a phrase that seems to indicate, in this context, the ability to master one’s own physical and mental processes by means of heightened awareness to focus one’s energy in order to produce ecstasy in oneself and in one’s audience, though certainly of a more introspective kind than Presley induced with his swiveling hips and baritone “uh-uh-huhs,” or than the Beatles produced with their head-shaking “oohs” and searing harmonies.

Dylan found in folk music, with Guthrie its prime exemplar, a novel way of seeing the world that had precedent in an archaic mode generally repressed in modernity, for many of the rural places that Guthrie traveled through, the sources of folk music, often still saw the world through predominantly premodern modes of consciousness. As Dylan told Scorsese: “I thought

³⁹⁸ Marcus 53.

³⁹⁹ Hajdu 71.

⁴⁰⁰ *Chronicles* 245.

folk music was delivering me something, you know, which is the way I always felt about life, you know, and institutions, and ideology, and it was just, you know, uncovering it all.”⁴⁰¹ Dylan understood that folk music articulated, both in its lyrics and in its somatic performativity, a way of relating to the world that he had always sensed intuitively but had not had the verbal or musical tools to express, something intrinsic to human experience that had been rendered difficult to even perceive by systematic cultural rationalization. Appropriately, for reasons that appear to defy rational explanation, Dylan was one of the few artists able to inhabit primarily the intuitive mode, but also able still to find huge and consistent success in a largely rationalized culture, thereby mediating the intuitive mode’s ingression into historical process.

Believing that he was Guthrie’s successor before there was any material evidence to support this supposition, Dylan found it necessary to emulate not only Guthrie’s music and attitude, but all of the elements that made up his mentor’s identity, even down to sometimes claiming to be from Oklahoma. Guthrie offered an alternative to the primary mode of rebellion exemplified for Dylan in that moment by the late James Dean, Elvis Presley, and the beats. As will become clear below, although they were extremely influential in his early development, Dylan felt that the beats, particularly Jack Kerouac, were ultimately reactionary, defining themselves by what they were against rather than what they were for. However, some of the beats certainly evolved with the emergence of the sixties counterculture, Allen Ginsberg being the most obvious example, Dylan saying that “I know only two saintly people. I know just two holy people. Allen Ginsberg is one.”⁴⁰² Like many great artists, Ginsberg seems ultimately to

⁴⁰¹ Scorsese

⁴⁰² The other was Dylan’s wife at the time, Sarah. Epstein 174.

have defined the beat movement by transcending it, much as Dylan did with various musical genres, the two domains intertwined largely through the relationship of these two men.⁴⁰³

Nevertheless, in saying in relation to the beats that “even a lost cause . . . would be better than no cause,” an implicit reference to James Dean’s *Rebel Without a Cause*, Dylan seems to be articulating an inflection of what has often been characterized as an overcoming of the postmodern “incredulity towards metanarratives” (to employ Lyotard’s phrase) in favor of a more constructive kind of multivalence, a mode of engagement arguably closer to what Charles Olson intended in his coinage of the term “post-modern.”⁴⁰⁴ Dylan would soon write some of the most powerfully scathing indictments ever recorded of the “bourgeois conventionality” against which the beats railed. In particular, “Ballad of a Thin Man,” whose “Mr. Jones” seems to be the epitome of the “man in the gray flannel suit”⁴⁰⁵ that Dylan sees the beats reacting against, embodies such a critique of the normalized rationality of predominant postwar cultural streams. However, the subtle but essential difference between Dylan’s vision and that of the beats as he presents them is that Dylan seems to have meant this song, and others, not as a simple reaction to the predominant mode, but as a provocation to the adherents of that mode to find out exactly what is “happening” that Mr. Jones does not understand. Indeed, that Dylan, in the same mid-sixties period admonishes his audience to ask themselves “how does it feel?”⁴⁰⁶ suggests that Dylan had discovered the affective mode as an effective countermeasure to the exclusive privileging of rationality. Instead of merely rejecting “bourgeois conventionality,” which is how he perceives the primary activity of the beats, he seems to be telling the Mr. Joneses of the world

⁴⁰³ Wilentz 51.

⁴⁰⁴ It seems to have been primarily through poststructuralism, particularly of the French variety, that the term took on its more exclusively deconstructive tone. In particular, Olson’s statement that “the job now, is to be at once archaic and culture-wise” seems to suggest something of the integration between premodern and modern epistemologies. (Charles Olson, *Selected Letters*, Ed. Ralph Maud, University of California, 2000, 58.)

⁴⁰⁵ *Chronicles*, 247.

⁴⁰⁶ *Highway 61 Revisited*

to understand what is happening with the emerging counterculture by participating in that counterculture, which generally seems to have entailed paying conscious attention to one's bodily feelings through various practices, both musical and otherwise.⁴⁰⁷

However, as Dylan admits, although his discovery of Guthrie allowed him to perceive the world with new eyes, his ascension to the role of Guthrie's successor was not all confluent discovery:

Singing Woody's songs, I could keep everything else at a safe distance. This fantasy was short-lived, however. Thinking that I was wearing the sharpest looking uniform and the shiniest boots around, all of a sudden I felt a jolt and was stopped short in my tracks. It felt like someone had taken a chunk out of me. Jon Pankake, a folk music purist enthusiast and sometime literary teacher and film wiseman, who'd been watching me for a while on the scene, made it his business to tell me that what I was doing hadn't escaped him. "What do you think you're doing? You're singing nothing but Guthrie songs," he said, jabbing his finger into my chest like he was talking to a proper fool. Pankake was authoritative and a hard guy to get past. It was known around that Pankake had a vast collection of the real folk records and could go on and on about them. He was part of the folk police, if not the chief commissioner, wasn't impressed with any of the new talent. To him nobody possessed any great mastery—no one could succeed in laying a hand on any of the traditional stuff with any authority. Of course he was right, but Pankake didn't play or sing. It's not like he put himself in any position to be judged.⁴⁰⁸

As with George Martin's devastating critique of the Beatles, Pankake was an older, well-educated, and "authoritative" guardian of culture, a kind of gatekeeper, though of a more subtle kind than Martin, an English professor who played a vital role in Dylan's development by bursting his bubble of "fantasy" that he could actually become Guthrie. Indeed, the image of Pankake "jabbing his finger" into Dylan's chest is a physical enactment of the critical mode puncturing the purely intuitive mode which, without the mediating influence of intellectual analysis, appears prone to inflated delusion and self-deception of the kind Dylan initially

⁴⁰⁷ Some of these other practices include meditation, yoga, the ingestion of psychoactive compounds, breathwork, and various therapeutic modalities. Marcus 118.

⁴⁰⁸ *Chronicles* 248.

experienced in relation to Guthrie, for belief without some moderate degree of doubt seems to preclude self-awareness.

Like the Beatles' critique by Martin, though earlier in his trajectory, this was one of Dylan's main points of initiation into the intellectual mode that he had temporarily turned away from in favor of the intuitive modes characteristic of folk music. As with the "police" or other authority figures, Pankake played a conservative but necessary role in Dylan's developmental process. Though youth often rails against such cultural authorities, these authorities exist to do exactly what Pankake did for Dylan. That is, if Pankake or someone like him had not rained on Dylan's parade, so to speak, it is unlikely that Dylan would have ever outgrown his emulation of Guthrie, and our culture would be a much poorer place with an obscure Woody Guthrie clone named Bob Dylan instead of an artist of world-historic significance going by that name. Of course, just because the role that Pankake played was a necessary one does not mean that he does not also deserve some criticism as a critic who "didn't play or sing," who did not even endeavor to take artistic risks and, thus, "did not put himself in any position to be judged." As the saying goes: no risk, no glory. Pankake risked little and achieved a concomitant amount of notoriety, mostly as a footnote in Dylan's memoir. Conversely, Dylan risked a great deal, which allowed him to act as one of the primary performers of the compensatory ingression of affectivity into a generally rationalized culture.⁴⁰⁹

However, it should also be emphasized that not only did Pankake's critique puncture Dylan's fantasy, but it actually liberated Dylan from a different kind of repetition characteristic of a more naïve relation to the rational mode. Dylan had been endeavoring to produce novelty by exactly reproducing Guthrie's musical persona, though in retrospect it is obvious that lightning

⁴⁰⁹ It is instructive that, in a review of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Pankake states an unequivocal preference for Dylan's first, self-titled album. (Hedin 17).

never strikes in the same place twice; that is, novelty can only take a particular form once, for when the new form of process has passed from potentiality into actuality, it is no longer novel, and novelty must subsequently find a different manifestation for its expression. Indeed, this is a paradox at the heart of novelty's ingression into process, as well as at the core of Dylan, who is a primary avatar of that ingression. As Bergson writes in *Creative Evolution*: "*There are things that intelligence alone is able to seek, but which, by itself, it will never find. These things instinct alone could find; but it will never seek them.*"⁴¹⁰ Thus Dylan, in his instinctual emulation of Guthrie, a relatively unconscious relation to immediate experience, was temporarily content to dwell in the preexistent modes until an encounter with a higher kind of intellect, in the form of Pankake's critique, provided the spur to self-awareness that impelled Dylan to surpass the already existent style. In a paradoxical operation, Dylan, without the benefit of rational training, was temporarily thwarted in his search for novelty by falling prey to the simplest kind of rational fallacy, the attempt to create something new by simply repeating what has come before. Pankake's critique apparently incited a higher kind of rationality in Dylan that, in turn, further liberated Dylan into the intuitive realms that he explicitly favored. Indeed, a progression can be seen through the three artists examined in this dissertation, for while Presley primarily enacted a rejection of rationality, and the Beatles enacted a relatively simple rejection and dialectical reintegration of rationality, Dylan, true to form, enacted a subtly complex imbrication of this polarity through various compromise formations such as this encounter with Pankake's intuition-liberating critique.

However, although Pankake allowed Dylan to transcend habit through the performance of analysis acting upon naive intuition, Pankake himself was not a primary agent of novelty

⁴¹⁰ Bergson 124.

because, at least in this context, he only embodied the critical side of the polarity, while Dylan increasingly embodied an integral synthesis of that polarity. As Whitehead observes, pure intellect requires “recurrence to the utmost depths of intuition for the refreshment of imagination,”⁴¹¹ but intuition also requires critical analysis in order not to become trapped in blind, repetitive organismic compulsion. The two modes are vitally complementary, for the eras in history when one mode has been predominantly suppressed in favor of the other seem equally to be repressive of novelty, whether through the barbaric violence of unmitigated instinct, still widely practiced in some of the least developed corners of the world (including the poorest neighborhoods within the United States), or through the neurotic nihilism and static conformity characteristic of intellect run amok (visible in the more extreme forms of postmodernism), which for most of this text’s potential readers is somewhat closer to home.

Much as Dylan paradoxically sought novel ways of relating to experience in the archaic past, he was liberated into a more expansive mode, having been unconstrained in the habitual emulation of his mentor, by the critical mode more often associated with “negative judgment” (by Whitehead) and repetition compulsion (by Bergson) in late modern culture. In some contexts, particularly in more conservative or religiously fundamentalist communities, or in underprivileged communities without access to quality education, critical thought is the mode that should perhaps be emphasized as a counterbalance to the tyranny of feeling, usually justified by simplistic conceptual structures. However, the most influential streams of our culture since the seventeenth century, taking many forms, appear to have engaged in an opposite sort of privileging operation.⁴¹² In this way, the cultural spectrum traces something like a waveform

⁴¹¹ *Adventures of Ideas* 159.

⁴¹² Cf. William James, *The Will To Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, and Human Immortality*, (Digireads.com, 2010) 6.

surging through historical process: even though there are many countervailing vectors mediated by fundamentally different approaches to experience in many different compromise formations, it appears that at the moment of John Pankake's critique of Bob Dylan in 1960, the young singer was a primary embodiment of the vanguard of postmodernity in its more constructive guise. Dylan apparently brought to popular consciousness those epistemologies that had been reintroduced into discourse in the more purely academic domain earlier in the twentieth century by theorists like Bergson and Whitehead.

However, Dylan did not undergo an instantaneous transformation in Pankake's hands. Rather, it was a series of encounters between the two men that mediated this period of Dylan's self-becoming. Continuing his description of their exchange, Dylan writes:

"You're trying hard, but you'll never turn into Woody Guthrie," Pankake says to me as if he's looking down from some high hill, like something has violated his instincts. It was no fun being around Pankake. He made me nervous. He breathed fire through his nose. "You'd better think of something else. You're doing it for nothing. Jack Elliott's already been where you are and gone. Ever heard of him?" No, I'd never heard of Jack Elliott. When Pankake said his name, it was the first time I'd heard it. "Never heard of him, no. What does he sound like?" John said that he'd play me his records and that I was in for a surprise. . . . The record started to spin and Jack's voice blasted into the room. . . . Damn, I'm thinking, this guy is really great. He sounds just like Woody Guthrie, only a leaner, meaner one, not singing the same Guthrie songs, though. I felt like I'd been cast into sudden hell. . . . Elliott, who'd been born ten years before me, had actually traveled with Guthrie, learned his songs and style firsthand and had mastered it completely. . . . Pankake was right. Elliott was far beyond me."⁴¹³

The external acknowledgement that Dylan was trying to become Guthrie cast this attempt in a new light. Whereas before, Dylan's emulation of his idol had been a pure and pleasurable activity, now it was shown to be a limitation, a step in a process of becoming himself. Indeed, Dylan's statement that "it was no fun being around Pankake" attests to the older man's loyalty to the conventional, critical mode of consciousness whose "peak," as Whitehead observes, is

⁴¹³ *Chronicles* 250-1.

“negative judgment,” for rationality alone can only analyze phenomena into their constituent elements, a myopically reductive partiality intrinsically blind to the possibility of genuine novelty’s emergence. Dylan saw the necessity of integrating this critical mode with the novel archaic mode he was exploring, but he recognized that the critical mode alone tended to be repressive of novelty, a quality often accompanied by the affect of “fun.” As Dylan came implicitly to understand, while pure intellect finds its culmination in “negative judgment,” pure affective novelty unmediated by intellect is ultimately hedonistic and mute. Thus, though he did not enjoy Pankake’s critique, Dylan was self-aware enough to realize that he must undergo it to become what he felt he was on the path to becoming.

However, before he could create something genuinely new, it seems to have been necessary for Dylan to “become” Elliott as well, integrating the further permutation of the role that Guthrie had previously played. Dylan continues:

Elliott had indeed already gone beyond Guthrie, and I was still getting there. I had nothing near the compelling poise of self that I heard on the record. . . . I sheepishly left the apartment and went back out into the cold street, aimlessly walked around. I felt like I had nowhere to go, felt like one of the dead men walking through catacombs. It would be hard not to be influenced by the guy I just heard. I’d have to block it out of my mind, though, forget this thing, tell myself I hadn’t heard him and he didn’t exist. He was overseas, anyway, in a self-imposed exile. The U.S. hadn’t been ready for him. Good. I was hoping he’d stay gone, and I kept hunting for Guthrie songs.⁴¹⁴

Dylan was momentarily at a loss in the trajectory of his self-becoming. Discovering Guthrie, he had found an already explored corner of the world that his affectivity resonated with profoundly. However, Dylan felt that it was not his fate to remain a Guthrie clone. Thus, Pankake had, in a sense, killed the identity of “Woody Guthrie” that Dylan had briefly inhabited so that, for a brief

⁴¹⁴ *Chronicles* 252.

period, perhaps just that one evening, Dylan “felt like the dead men walking through catacombs,” a ghost of his former identity who had not yet found a new role to inhabit.

At first he tried to deny Elliott’s influence, “to block it out of my mind,” indicating an initial resistance to the critical mode embodied in this instance by Pankake. However, Dylan does not seem generally prone to prolonged self-deception, and the death of Dylan’s Guthrie persona quickly issued into his rebirth as none other than Ramblin’ Jack Elliott:

A few weeks later, Pankake heard me playing again and was quick to point out that I didn’t fool him, that I used to be imitating Guthrie and now I was imitating Elliott and did I think in some way that I was equivalent to him? Pankake said that maybe I should go back to playing rock and roll, that he knew I used to do that. I don’t know how he knew—maybe he was a spy, too, but in any case, I wasn’t trying to fool anybody. I was just doing what I could with what I had where I was. Pankake was right, though. You can’t take only a few dance lessons and think you’re Fred Astaire.⁴¹⁵

Again, Pankake was the critical agent that punctured Dylan’s emulation of the man who had emulated Guthrie and then possibly even eclipsed him. Perhaps Pankake could somehow sense from Dylan’s style and attitude that he used to play rock and roll, but his suggestion to Dylan that he go back to that genre proved prophetic, for this is exactly what Dylan would do a few years later once he had established himself as the primary heir to Guthrie, effectively supplanting Elliott in that role. But as Dylan claims, he was not trying to be deceptive, not “trying to fool anybody.” Rather, he knew that in order to move towards his felt destination, this period of emulation was necessary, in retrospect, a stage that he must pass through, “doing what I could with what I had where I was.” Essentially, Dylan seems to have been absorbing preexisting elements within himself, devouring Guthrie and Elliott so that he could employ their tropes to produce a novel synthesis of their styles. As all good artists know, one must pass through an apprenticeship in which one emulates and integrates one’s precursors before one can surpass

⁴¹⁵ *Chronicles* 253.

them. However, at the stage in his development initiated by Pankake's critique, it was necessary for Dylan to understand that although becoming Guthrie and Elliott felt like he was becoming more himself, these identities were not resting places, but stepping stones on a path that ultimately produced the artist who would play such a large role in the transformation of his culture.⁴¹⁶

This section of Dylan's narrative vividly illustrates his exceptional persistence, his intrinsic will towards transformation, so that the egoic death produced by Pankake's criticism did not halt Dylan's trajectory as it might have done for many other aspiring singers, but impelled him to new heights, much as the Beatles' Decca audition impelled them radically to shift their approach. Although Dylan did not "get caught up in"⁴¹⁷ what people thought of him because he seems usually to have taken an essentially objective, experimental approach to his own identity, he does not appear to have been closed off to others until he was forced by extraordinary fame to keep most people at bay.⁴¹⁸ As photographer Barry Feinstein has observed, "Bob really only liked to have friends like us around him. He had an image to maintain, and he protected it."⁴¹⁹ Although Dylan kept to his close friends, and he was guarded even with them, he seems to have been extremely open to new ideas, particularly anything that he could use to move forward. As he tells Scorsese: "I have a habit I picked up someplace along the way: whatever works for me, not to give that away so easily."⁴²⁰ Dylan incorporated many elements into his identity, drawing from many different sources (musical, poetic, intellectual, and performative), but always fiercely protecting his freedom to do and to be exactly who and what he felt like doing and being, and to

⁴¹⁶ Wilentz 53.

⁴¹⁷ *Chronicles* 253-4.

⁴¹⁸ Hedin 33-34.

⁴¹⁹ Hajdu 191.

⁴²⁰ Scorsese

form habitual ways of thinking that may have seemed strange or perverse to others, but that allowed him to become himself relatively unencumbered by societal constraints.

As Dylan would sing in “Maggie’s Farm” a few years later: “I try my best to be just like I am, but everybody wants you to be just like them,”⁴²¹ a line that encapsulates Dylan’s search for authentic selfhood based on his affective sense rather than on preconditioned, rationalized roles and mores. Similarly, Dylan told journalist Nat Hentoff at the session for *Another Side* in 1964: “I want to write from inside me. . . . The way I like to write is for it to come out the way I walk or talk. . . . Not that I even walk or talk yet like I’d like to. I don’t carry myself the way Woody, Big Joe Williams, and Lightnin’ Hopkins have carried themselves. I hope to someday, but they’re older.”⁴²² Dylan’s primary drive seems always to have been this search for mature authenticity, for both his music and his physical and verbal personas to be expressions of his core self.⁴²³ As Dylan told Hentoff, “What’s wrong is how few people are free. Most people walking around are tied down to something that doesn’t let them really *speak*. . . . All I can do is be me.”⁴²⁴ In his process of becoming through the liberation of authentic selfhood, and thereby the intensification and complexification of immediate experience, Dylan felt impelled to “keep straight ahead,” engaging with and dispatching the “shadowy forms that had to be dealt with in one way or another,” like an “honorable knight”⁴²⁵ who must confront many trials in his pursuit of the grail. For Dylan, Jack Elliott, the “King of the Folksingers,” was just such a “shadowy form,” the expression of a mode that Dylan was compelled to become and then to overcome.

⁴²¹ *Bringing It All Back Home*

⁴²² Hedin 25-26.

⁴²³ Marcus 29.

⁴²⁴ Hedin 34-35.

⁴²⁵ *Chronicles* 253-4, 247.

However, it would still be some time after his shedding of the Ramblin' Jack persona that Dylan would create the more novel persona which would carry him towards his initial fame.⁴²⁶

At that moment in the early sixties in Minneapolis, Dylan apparently felt that a new order was in the process of arising out of the old, and he sensed that, by passing through the successive trials of identity which he describes, he could participate significantly in the coming revolutionary upheaval through the medium of folk music. As he writes:

Practically speaking, the '50s culture was like a judge in his last days on the bench. It was about to go. Within ten years' time, it would struggle to rise and then come crashing to the floor. With folk songs embedded in my mind like a religion, it wouldn't matter. Folk songs transcended the immediate culture.⁴²⁷

As Dylan recognizes, the old guard was constituted in the privileging of that mode of thought which intrinsically seeks to repress the eruption of novelty, "like a judge in his last days on the bench," and Dylan's devotion to folk songs was explicitly geared towards the overcoming of those present constraints. It is these very songs that became the vehicle through which Dylan embodied and catalyzed the cultural revolution that was about to take place perhaps as much as any other individual.

And it is clear that Dylan saw this cultural revolution as the pivot-point between two eras: "I was born in the spring of 1941. The Second World War was already raging in Europe. . . . If you were born around this time or were living and alive, you could feel the old world go and the new one beginning. It was like putting back the clock to when B.C. became A.D. Everybody born around my time was part of both." It seems that Dylan sees the years stretching from the end of World War II to the beginning of the sixties as a moment of pause and relative stasis between two distinct historical periods. Dylan continues:

⁴²⁶ Hajdu 73.

⁴²⁷ *Chronicles* 27.

It was said that World War II spelled the end of the Age of Enlightenment, but I wouldn't have known it. I was still in it. Somehow I could still remember and feel the light of something about it. I'd read that stuff. Voltaire, Rousseau, John Locke, Montesquieu, Martin Luther—visionaries, revolutionaries . . . it was like I knew those guys, like they'd been living in my back yard.⁴²⁸

Dylan seems to be speaking almost literally when he says that he “was still in” the “Age of Enlightenment” at the moment when he was finding his artistic voice in the early sixties, for the mode of consciousness that the young man inhabited appears to have exhibited all the characteristic optimism, revolutionary fervor, and naiveté visible in the dominant philosophy of the eighteenth century. This era seems to have been something like the adolescence of Western culture, a stage of consciousness that Dylan felt himself to be enacting in what might be described as a fractal reiteration.

Instinctively, Dylan knew, like most young people, that he must pass through the state of mind so eloquently and completely articulated by the “visionaries” and “revolutionaries” of earlier times before he could catch up with the vanguard of consciousness in his own time and place. Dylan immersed himself in the early, more expansively inspired stage of modernity in which a whole new world was opening up to the minds of the philosophical revolutionaries that he mentions, a stage at which this new mode of thought had not yet become an orthodoxy repressive of the subsequent mode, though it did often rail against the limitations and destructive irrationality of affect unmediated by intellect. As with Dylan's immersion in the premodern modes of archaic folk music, he also immersed himself during his first few years in New York in the intellectual efflorescence of the Enlightenment, which had become nearly as archaic as the folk traditions by that moment in the mid-twentieth century.

⁴²⁸ *Chronicles* 28, 30.

Dylan writes about an apartment that he stayed in with friends in New York before recording his first album that seems to symbolize for him the high culture descended from the Enlightenment in which he was so interested at that moment:

The place had an overpowering presence of literature and you couldn't help but lose your passion for dumbness. Up until this time I'd been raised in a cultural spectrum that had left my mind black with soot. Brando. James Dean. Milton Berle. Marilyn Monroe. Lucy. Earl Warren and Khrushchev, Castro. Little Rock and Peyton Place. Tennessee Williams and Joe DiMaggio. J. Edgar Hoover and Westinghouse. The Nelsons. Holiday Inns and hot-rod Chevys. Mickey Spillane and Joe McCarthy. Levittown. . . . Standing in this room you could take it all for a joke. . . . There were all types of things in here, books on typography, epigraphy, philosophy, political ideologies.

Dylan reels off a list of names: Tacitus, Pericles, Thucydides, Gogol, Balzac, Maupassant, Hugo, Dickens, Machiavelli, Dante, Rousseau, Ovid, and on and on. As he writes: "I was looking for the part of my education that I never got" after dropping out of his first year of college, having rarely attended classes. Raised in the Midwest, Dylan had been immersed in a certain stream of American popular culture, in what he aptly describes as a "passion for dumbness." In all fairness, despite being the locus of some excellent universities and pockets of thriving artistic and intellectual communities, the predominant culture of the Midwest has tended towards anti-intellectualism in favor of more practical and intuitive knowledge constituted in attention to the rhythms of nature and the body. This focus of attention was apparently born of necessity in the central practice of rural agriculture for that area of the country, which has been described as America's "bread basket." Indeed, it seems plausible that Dylan means the term "dumb" not in the more common contemporary sense of "stupid," but in its more literal meaning, which is the inability to speak. Thus, Dylan may be suggesting that it is not that the culture of the Midwest

breeds stupidity, but rather that it often fosters an interest in nonverbal, and therefore non-intellectual modes of knowing.⁴²⁹

Dylan was raised in an area of the country that seems generally to have favored certain limited forms of the repressed epistemologies, though the full range of these modes, particularly the more ecstatic and exploratory ones, were often even more repressed here than on the coasts, perhaps to compensate for the rejection of intellect by paying homage to the rationalized quality of much of America's self-conception in the fifties, conditioned by radio and television, and exemplified in the repetitive architectural conformity of suburban developments like Levittown (though there were many subcultures that complicated this facile image of the unitary, "Leave it to Beaver" postwar plastic utopia). Though deeply grounded in the repressed modes, Dylan possessed a restless intellectual mind, perhaps partially a product of his Jewish cultural heritage,⁴³⁰ embedded within the very different mode privileged in the Midwest. This dissonance between context and inclination pulled him on a pilgrimage to New York City, which for him

⁴²⁹ *Chronicles* 35-36. If only to bring balance to Dylan's rather negative assessment of his place of origin in the above passage, it is worthwhile to reproduce a passage from *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* as reported by Lucien Price:

"It often seems to me," Whitehead resumed, "that European man was at his best between 1400 and 1600. Since then our appreciation of beauty has become too overlaid with intellectualizing. We educated people have our aesthetic sense too highly cultivated and do not come to beauty simply enough. It is possible that the feeling for beauty is much more true and strong in unschooled people than in ourselves. The early cathedral builders—even the Norman and Romanesque—did not theorize: they *built*; and the poets went to work much more directly. We of today over-elaborate. The only place I see where another great flowering of European culture might come is in the American Middle West, where the start could be fresh and from the ground up" (Price 60).

It might be suggested that Whitehead's Midwestern "flowering of European culture," predicted in 1935, is evident in rock and roll, particularly in Dylan and Presley, for Whitehead assents to the broad definition of the Midwest suggested by Price as "Between the Appalachians and the Rockies. . . . Roughly, the Mississippi Basin" (Price 68). As if designed to fulfill Whitehead's prophecy, both Memphis and Minneapolis lie along the Mississippi river, the central axis of the geographical area delineated by Whitehead and Price.

⁴³⁰ As Owen Barfield explains in *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, the ancient Hebrews were the forerunners of modernity's crusade against a premodern world view founded primarily on formal and final causation, which Barfield terms "original participation," and which was almost completely dominant prior to the initiation of the individuation of the autonomous rational intellect by the ancient Hebrews, and subsequently by the ancient Greeks, that found its culmination in the last three centuries (Barfield 124.)

was the cultural capital of America, not to mention the Jewish capital,⁴³¹ where he found the high cultural works mentioned above to be a revelation. However, Dylan soon recognized that he could never master it all, both “high” and “low” culture, as folk music was considered by some, that he had to choose a path: “I wanted to read all these books, but I would have to have been in a rest home or something in order to do that. . . . I read the poetry books, mostly. Byron and Shelley and Longfellow and Poe.”⁴³² Dylan had instinctively chosen the high cultural stream that perhaps most carried the impulse countervailing to the privileging of rationality and materialism: poetry, which had kept the flame of the repressed epistemologies burning through the literally heady years of the Enlightenment and the ascendance of science and rationalist philosophy in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

However, I do not wish to suggest that these centuries exhibited a simple trajectory from affect to rationality any more than Dylan’s trajectory possessed simple directionality, for this fundamental transformation of culture traversed through many regressions, reactions, side roads, and compromise formations. Indeed, as Weber shows, the larger movement towards rationalism took place within the crucible of the Protestant denominations of Christianity, which is the epitome of a compromise formation, mediating the transition from premodern religious forms to the secular rationalism that would become a predominant cultural mode by late modernity.

Furthermore, the religious revivals and awakenings of the nineteenth century, as well as literary Romanticism and idealist philosophy, all presaged the further ingression of premodern

⁴³¹ In the 1950s, there were more Jews in New York City, peaking at 2.1 million (roughly a quarter of the city’s population), than any other city in the United States. Thus, it seems likely that part of the reason why Dylan was so drawn to New York is that he had grown up an outsider, part of a tiny Midwestern Jewish enclave among primarily Christians, and he was instinctively drawn to the place where he could feel the least an outsider in his own country. When he arrived in New York, it seems that he finally discovered a culture that valued his particular brand of intellectual intensity, a quality often ascribed to Jewish people, perhaps a product of that culture’s millennia-long commitment to language as “the people of the book.” (UJA Federation of New York, *The Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*, www.ujafedny.org, 39)

⁴³² *Chronicles* 37.

epistemological modes into the post-Enlightenment West, perhaps culminating, at least so far, in the massive cultural upheaval of the nineteen sixties.⁴³³ Thus, Dylan was at the very crest of a wave that had swept through many cultural permutations as a countervailing impulse to the Enlightenment. And one of the primary permutations of this impulse was poetry, which is often as interested in the rhythmic sonority of words as in their literal meaning. As Dylan writes: “I read a lot of the pages aloud and liked the sound of the words, the language,” which indicates that he was drawn perhaps even more to the poetic verbal cadences than to the ideas that the words expressed. Indeed, that Dylan read these poems aloud speaks volumes about how he would use these texts as models for his expansion of song forms. As he continues: “In the past, I’d never been that keen on books and writers but I liked stories . . . The folksingers could sing songs like an entire book, but only in a few verses.”⁴³⁴ Dylan’s inclinations did not lead him towards a conventional literary calling (if such a calling can be called conventional), but rather towards songwriting deeply informed by literature, philosophy, and, most especially, poetry.

However, Dylan was drawn to New York not only because of its association with intellect and high culture, but because many of the folksingers whom he admired resided there. Dylan’s relocation to New York was a pilgrimage to what he perceived as “the capital of the world,” a journey to find the people who embodied his yearning for meaningful connection in a culture where such connection seemed increasingly difficult to locate. As seen above, Guthrie, whom Dylan describes as “the true voice of the American spirit,”⁴³⁵ had been a particular mentor for Dylan through his records and biography, and Dylan was following a deeply sensed summons to explore the place that Guthrie inhabited, and eventually even to form a close

⁴³³ Cf. Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁴³⁴ *Chronicles* 39.

⁴³⁵ *Chronicles* 99.

relationship with his idol, telling Nat Hentoff in 1964: “seeing Woody Guthrie was one of the main reasons I came East.”⁴³⁶ Coming from the small town of Hibbing, Dylan must have felt liberated in New York, for the complexity of that city, “a web too intricate to understand,” reflects the complex mystery generally attributed to Dylan himself. Indeed, that Dylan “wasn’t going to try”⁴³⁷ to understand the city seems implicitly to suggest that he was interested in analyzing neither himself nor the place in which he found himself, both literally and metaphorically. Rather, he seems to have been more interested in exploring the intricacies of both the city and his own mind, bringing the things he found there to light, sharing his thoughts and ideas rather than trying to explain where they came from or what their deeper meaning was. Indeed, as he says in *No Direction Home*, “I can’t self-analyze my own work,”⁴³⁸ for as we have seen with both Presley and the Beatles, though in rather different inflections, the analytical mode is generally incompatible with inspired artistic creativity, at least in the moment of creation.

As noted above, in reading Dylan’s memoir, one is struck by how little he talks about himself, and how much he talks about other people, the cast of characters that he admired and engaged with. In fact, it seems clear from his writing that this is how Dylan thinks: he projects himself into others so that he almost becomes them, empathizing with them so deeply that he elicits the potential part of himself that is like them in the process. Perhaps even more extreme than Lennon’s emulation of Presley, Dylan actually seems almost to have become the characters that he inhabited, both real and invented. Indeed, as Dylan himself recognizes, particularly in these early days in New York, but to varying degrees throughout his career, he “didn’t have too much of a concrete identity. . . . ‘I’m a rambler—I’m a gambler. I’m a long way from home.’

⁴³⁶ Hedin 36.

⁴³⁷ *Chronicles* 9.

⁴³⁸ Scorsese

That pretty much summed it up.”⁴³⁹ Dylan was an explorer, both geographically and mentally, as well as a “musical expeditionary.”⁴⁴⁰ He went wherever he felt like going, wherever his exceptionally attuned affective sense directed him.

The Beatles were ultimately political, one of the primary exemplars of the impulse towards putting differences aside and working as a group to create great art, integrating disparate modes in an emergent entity (for, in Carol Hanisch’s phrase, “the personal is political”). In contrast, Dylan had many companions, but he was always ultimately a man alone, a “true loner”⁴⁴¹ experimenting with his identity, trying on radically different modes one after another at a dizzying pace, integrating these modes within himself. As he sings in “Jokerman” from the 1983 album *Infidels*, he was constantly “shedding off one more layer of skin,”⁴⁴² just as he shed fellow-travelers, driven by what he describes in the very next line as “the persecutor within,” though this inner drive that he felt so strongly seems to have manifested in a somewhat less oppressive, more expansive form in his sixties experience. And one can see this radical experimental quality in Dylan’s facial expressions: like a great method actor, he is committed completely to whatever part he is playing at that moment. He does not seem to countenance much doubt, giving himself wholly and unselfishly to his successive roles.

Thus, although Dylan was a rambler, he rambled with great ambition. As he writes, “Picasso had fractured the art world and cracked it wide open. He was revolutionary. I wanted to be like that.”⁴⁴³ Indeed, as Leonard Cohen⁴⁴⁴ and others⁴⁴⁵ have recognized, Picasso is perhaps the closest analogue in twentieth century visual art for the way Dylan’s musical career has

⁴³⁹ *Chronicles* 55.

⁴⁴⁰ Scorsese

⁴⁴¹ *Chronicles* 255.

⁴⁴² Bob Dylan, *Infidels* (Columbia Records, 1983).

⁴⁴³ *Chronicles* 55.

⁴⁴⁴ Jim Slotek, “Cohen’s Future is Now,” *The Toronto Sun* (Nov. 19 1992).

⁴⁴⁵ Hedin 49.

evolved: prolific and passing through many phases, both artists transformed their medium as well as their culture. And like Picasso, Dylan was a man who let his intuition guide him, forging bravely into each new realm that opened before him on his path. Indeed, Dylan seems to have exuded an exceptional charisma similar to that of Picasso. According to friend Happy Traum: “I’ve never seen anything like it in my life. From the day he arrived in the city it was like nobody could talk about anything else. It was Bobby this and Bobby that, where was Bobby, what was he going to do next. Have you seen Bobby? No matter what he did or what he didn’t do,” Traum asserts, “people were just obsessed with the guy. It wasn’t just about the music, although that got more interesting as time went on.”⁴⁴⁶ Like Picasso or the few individuals at the pinnacle of any area of human endeavor, Dylan seems to have possessed a kind of “animal magnetism,” drawing multiple genres into his field of influence, leaving anything he touched transformed.

Dylan describes the Café Wha?, where he got his start in the New York scene, as “a subterranean cavern,” which immediately recalls the underground quality of the Beatles’ major venue in Liverpool. When the master of ceremonies at Café Wha?, folksinger Fred Neil, told Dylan he “could play harmonica with him during his sets,” Dylan “was ecstatic,”⁴⁴⁷ which obviously indicates that Dylan was happy to have a gig. However, in light of all that is known about Dylan, this phrase also seems to refer to Dylan’s relatively rare capacity to induce ecstatic affect in himself and, eventually, in others. Indeed, one gets the sense from listening to, watching, and reading about Dylan that one of his defining characteristics was that he naturally entered and inhabited this state of ecstasy with more ease than almost anyone else, though this somatic state should not be mistaken for mere happiness. As Dylan recalls his childhood in a 2004 *60 Minutes* interview, “I really didn’t consider myself happy or unhappy. I always knew

⁴⁴⁶ Epstein 90.

⁴⁴⁷ *Chronicles* 9-10.

that there was something out there that I needed to get to. And it wasn't where I was at that particular moment.”⁴⁴⁸ Thus, Dylan’s whole orientation did not revolve around the polarity of happiness and unhappiness, but rather around his sense of destination, and his need to be “out of stasis,” always moving and transforming. However, though he was initially elated at the novelty of having a steady gig in New York City, after having spent many hours in Café Wha?, Dylan heard “nothing that would change your view of the world,” which obliquely demonstrates that the young singer was not looking for mere entertainment, but for something transformative, revelatory, something that went beyond the “madness” that results from “pure materialism,” which he perceived as dominant in modernity.⁴⁴⁹ And as is so often the case, Dylan began looking for this “world view” changing revelation in the distant past.

When Dylan first arrived in New York, he “began hanging out at the Folklore Center, the citadel of Americana folk music. . . . The small store was up a flight of stairs and the place had an antique grace. It was like an ancient chapel. . . . The place was a crossroads junction for all the folk activity you could name and you might at any time see real hard-line folksingers in there.”⁴⁵⁰ Sean Wilentz describes the places Dylan spent most of his early days in New York, including the Folklore Center and the Café Wha?, among others, as “Dylan’s Yale College and his Harvard,”⁴⁵¹ and as musician John Herald observed: “It was like Dylan was in all the places all the time.” The Folklore Center, which Hajdu calls “the nerve center of the Village folk community,”⁴⁵² was a treasure trove of archaic knowledge and modes of experience. As Dylan describes:

⁴⁴⁸ “Dylan Looks Back,” *60 Minutes* (CBS News, November 13 2006).

⁴⁴⁹ *Chronicles* 45-46.

⁴⁵⁰ *Chronicles* 18-19.

⁴⁵¹ Wilentz 2.

⁴⁵² Hajdu 71, 35.

There were a lot of esoteric folk records, too, all records I wanted to listen to. Extinct song folios of every type—sea shanties, Civil War songs, cowboy songs, songs of lament, church house songs, anti-Jim Crow songs, union songs—archaic books of folk tales, Wobbly journals, propaganda pamphlets about everything from women’s rights to the dangers of boozing, one by Daniel De Foe, the English author of *Moll Flanders*. A few instruments for sale, dulcimers, five-string banjos, kazoos, pennywhistles, acoustic guitars, mandolins. If you were wondering what folk music was all about, this was the place where you could get more than a vague glimmer.⁴⁵³

Differing from a normal library filled with novels, historical treatises, and scientific tomes, the Folklore Center was a genuine repository of folk knowledge, of the repressed mode that railed against the evils wrought by the unbalanced dominance of rationality—racism, classism, imperialism—and that sought refuge and escape in mysterious liminal places—the sea, the wild west, old churches, children’s stories, and bohemian enclaves. Indeed, the “conceptual simplification” of rationality divorced from affective knowledge can justify the most barbaric behavior, from slavery to genocide, if the appropriate premises are adopted and acted upon. Although Dylan claims to have absorbed a great deal of what passed as knowledge in the main streams of culture, this archaic folk knowledge was the sort of education in which he was primarily immersed, half-consciously searching for a way out of the constraining cage that modernity had inevitably become over the centuries of its development. And this archaic orientation deeply influenced the songs that Dylan would soon write.

As Dylan notes: “The madly complicated modern world was something I took little interest in. It had no relevancy, no weight. I wasn’t seduced by it.” Dylan appears not to have been particularly interested in the modes of thought that predominated in late modernity, in the concerns of his day. Rather, “what was swinging, topical and up to date for me was stuff like the *Titanic* sinking, the Galveston flood, John Henry driving steel, John Hardy shooting a man on the

⁴⁵³ *Chronicles* 19.

West Virginia line. All this was current, played out and in the open. This was the news that I considered, followed and kept tabs on.”⁴⁵⁴ Dylan imaginatively inhabited the dim American past, dreaming himself into long gone times because that is where his inclination led him, but ultimately because this immersion in a temporally distant world is what allowed him to see his own time for the transient dream that it was, which in turn made the present appear malleable, susceptible to transformation. What Dylan seems to have been searching for through this polarity of old and new, more than anything else, was an identity, a way to perform himself in such a manner that he could convey the vast complexity of what he felt but had not yet found the form and mode to express, and he did this by delving into the deep past to find a way beyond the tyranny of the present.⁴⁵⁵

In early 1961, Dylan was playing at various smaller folk venues like the entry-level Café Wha?, but he had his sights set on what might be described as the next rung up the ladder: the Gaslight. As with the Beatles, Dylan’s immediate ambitions were always pragmatically oriented towards the next step forward rather than the heights that he ultimately attained. And like Dylan, the Gaslight was “cryptic” and “had mystique,” which is perhaps why he wanted to play there. He apparently felt drawn to the venue, not only because it was a more prestigious place to play, but because he sensed that its affective tone coincided with his own, a quality that he conveys through poetic, philosophical parables. Instead of stating things directly, Dylan seems compelled to express himself in words that demand interpretation, that intimate multiple levels of meaning, which bears a strong similarity to the way he describes the quality of cryptic mystique that surrounded the Gaslight, “a closed drawn circle that an unknown couldn’t break into.”⁴⁵⁶ Indeed,

⁴⁵⁴ *Chronicles* 20.

⁴⁵⁵ Wilentz 9.

⁴⁵⁶ *Chronicles* 15.

this metaphor is more apt for the way Dylan saw his career than the ladder metaphor: while the Beatles saw their trajectory as rungs to be climbed successively, Dylan saw his trajectory as delving into successive layers of mystery and depth, a labyrinth to be penetrated and mastered. And that Dylan saw himself in this way also draws the listener into these mysterious depths.⁴⁵⁷

At the Gaslight, Dylan “played the folk songs that I possessed and paid attention to what was going on in the moment.”⁴⁵⁸ He “possessed” the songs that he sang, not only owning them, but imbuing them with vitality and significance, and he seems to have been able to do this because he was immersed in the moment, not primarily thinking about past or future, where he had come from or where he was going, but being present to each durational instance. As Dylan would later sing in “Mr. Tambourine Man,” he was learning to “forget about today until tomorrow,”⁴⁵⁹ a paradoxical operation whereby Dylan more fully inhabited the present by not thinking about the present as an object for past or future contemplation, but as the immediate locus of his bodily experience. And as Marcus observes: “His sense of time, or timelessness, only rarely failed him,”⁴⁶⁰ a timelessness that Wilentz articulates as “his ability to crisscross through time and space. It could be 1927 or 1840 or biblical time in a Bob Dylan song, and it is always right now too.”⁴⁶¹

Spending time at the Gaslight, Dylan was surrounded by “all kinds of characters looking for the inner heat. I felt like I was seeing it all sitting on the crest of a cliff.” As with the language used to describe the Beatles’ music, Dylan recognizes that the inspiration the performers were seeking was an energetic “inner heat” that could be made to burn more brightly through attention

⁴⁵⁷ Marcus 23.

⁴⁵⁸ *Chronicles* 46.

⁴⁵⁹ *Bringing It All Back Home*.

⁴⁶⁰ Marcus 113.

⁴⁶¹ Wilentz 12.

and practice. Dylan, without inflation, recognizes that he seems to have had an exceptional capacity to produce this promethean flame, and he felt like he was witnessing this scene from an elevated perspective, again the product of his exceptionally keen awareness, his intrinsic ability to see to the heart of things. Dylan knew himself to be subtly but profoundly different from his contemporaries, and it is this difference that allowed him eventually to emerge as perhaps the greatest songwriter of all time. As he describes it, Dylan recognized that he was different from most other performers because he instinctively knew that great performance was not about getting people to like him as a person, but “about putting the song across,” which was his vehicle for exploring “the universe” from inside, “the inner substance of the thing,” Bergson’s “inner movement of life”⁴⁶² as opposed to the external quality of reality accessible to reductive materialism. Dylan was so fully committed to this exploration of subjectivity that his singing and guitar playing were extremely intense, less focused on virtuosity than piercing through veils of illusion to get to the core of the songs, which Dylan describes as “my preceptor and guide into some altered consciousness of reality, some different republic, some liberated republic.”⁴⁶³

Just as Dylan’s move to New York was largely a pilgrimage to find Woody Guthrie, his first real song, “Song to Woody,” was a tribute to his idol who had become a friend and a mentor. As Dylan explains in *Chronicles*, “the first song I’d wind up writing of any substantial importance was written for Woody Guthrie.”⁴⁶⁴ It is completely characteristic of Dylan that his first “substantial” song was written as an acknowledgement of his most important influence, his debt to the past, for Dylan was able to be so consistently and profoundly revolutionary and transformative in part because he was so deeply grounded in the history and tradition of folk

⁴⁶² Bergson 38.

⁴⁶³ *Chronicles* 47, 17-18, 34-35.

⁴⁶⁴ *Chronicles* 54.

music. This rootedness gave the startlingly new compositions that would flow from his typewriter over the ensuing years a gravitas and authority often lacking in popular music.

However, as discussed above, Dylan was not only deeply rooted in the folk tradition; he had also been immersing himself in poetry. As he writes in *Chronicles*:

I had broken myself of the habit of thinking in short song cycles and began reading longer and longer poems to see if I could remember anything I read about in the beginning. I trained my mind to do this, had cast off gloomy habits and learned to settle myself down. I read all of Lord Byron's *Don Juan*, and concentrated fully from start to finish. Also, Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. I began cramming my brain with all kinds of deep poems. It seemed like I'd been pulling an empty wagon for a long time and now I was beginning to fill it up and would have to pull harder. I felt like I was coming out of the back pasture.⁴⁶⁵

Dylan, with the gifts of a prodigious memory and an ability to focus intensely for long periods, was drawn to these poets and their verbal experimentalism. He knew instinctively that he wanted to combine their way of approaching language with the folk songs in which he was also immersed. As he describes it, he literally “trained” his mind to think like these poets just as he was training his mind by his constant immersion in song. It seems almost inevitable that Dylan would soon feel the impulse to combine these two lyrical forms, a synthesis that came to him naturally, but that had never really been accomplished before then.

Dylan had been influenced profoundly by the beat poets as a teenager. As Dylan said in a 1985 interview: “I came out of the wilderness and just naturally fell in with the Beat scene, the bohemian, Be Bop crowd, it was all pretty much connected. . . . It was Jack Kerouac, Ginsberg, Corso, Ferlinghetti . . . I got in at the tail end of that and it was magic . . . it had just as big an impact on me as Elvis Presley.”⁴⁶⁶ However, Dylan's relationship with the beats was not one of

⁴⁶⁵ *Chronicles* 56.

⁴⁶⁶ Wilentz 50.

simple admiration and influence for, as he writes in *Chronicles*, when he first arrived in Minneapolis, just having graduated from High School:

I suppose what I was looking for was what I read about in *On the Road*—looking for the great city, looking for the speed, the sound of it, looking for what Allen Ginsberg had called the “hydrogen jukebox world.” Maybe I’d lived in it all my life, I didn’t know, but nobody ever called it that. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, one of the other Beat poets, had called it “The kiss proof worlds of plastic toilet seats, Tampax and taxis.” That was okay, too, but the Gregory Corso poem “Bomb” was more to the point and touched the spirit of the times better—a wasted world and totally mechanized—a lot of hustle and bustle—a lot of shelves to clean, boxes to stack. I wasn’t going to pin my hopes on that. Creatively you couldn’t do much with it.⁴⁶⁷

For Dylan, the beats were primarily reacting to the materiality and commerciality of postwar America, protesting the dominance of “mechanized” industry that Dylan felt to be a waste of the world’s creative potential, but which he intuitively saw a way out of that many of the beats perhaps did not. Whereas he perceived the beats as still decrying the old order, Dylan was ready to move on to a new way of approaching the world. Although the beats’ impulse was in this direction, Dylan saw their creativity as circumscribed by the mode they were reacting against, whereas Dylan did not feel much need to define himself in relation to the predominant mode after a brief adolescent rebellion, though the beats clearly created the precondition upon which Dylan could viably surpass them. Many years later in Scorsese’s documentary, Allen Ginsberg, choking up with emotion as he describes hearing Dylan for the first time, specifically “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” says that he wept “‘cause it seemed that the torch had been passed to another generation from earlier bohemian or beat illumination and self-empowerment.”⁴⁶⁸ As early as 1961 when Dylan first arrived in New York, he sensed that the countercultural flame of novelty was about to be handed from the beats to a new movement. Thus, though Dylan had

⁴⁶⁷ *Chronicles* 235.

⁴⁶⁸ Scorsese

been deeply influenced by the beats, he began to see that movement's limitations at an early age as he immersed himself in folk music.

In 1961, Dylan began to delve deeply into the other forms of poetry that seemed to him more vital than the beats:

Within the first few months that I was in New York I'd lost my interest in the 'hungry for kicks' hipster vision that Kerouac illustrates so well in his book *On the Road*. That book had been like a bible for me. Not anymore, though. I still loved the breathless, dynamic bop poetry phrases that flowed from Jack's pen, but now, that character Moriarty seemed out of place, purposeless—seemed like a character who inspired idiocy. He goes through life bumping and grinding with a bull on top of him.⁴⁶⁹

Having carried Kerouac's "hipster vision" "like a bible," Dylan seems completely to have integrated the aesthetic that Kerouac exemplified, the "breathless, dynamic bop poetry phrases," but he now saw that, although the form was profound, the content was to a large extent "purposeless," an attitude largely derived from an existentialism that would often define reality as an essentially random and meaningless collection of atoms in which we must bravely make our own meaning despite all evidence to the contrary. Dylan seems to have felt a kinship with this mode of thought up to a point, having read "everything from Sartre to the beats"⁴⁷⁰ during his year in Minneapolis after high school, but it is the focus on the intrinsic meaninglessness of existence, or more precisely the mere rejection of the kinds of meaning posited in modernity that seems to have turned Dylan in other directions. Yes, he seems to imply through his creative activity, recognize that meaning is constructed, but rather than believing that this recognition connotes that there is no intrinsic meaning or purpose in the world, perhaps it makes more sense to believe that the human mind participates in the creation of the meaning of the world, that because the human mind is evolved from and embedded in the world, then sentience can be seen

⁴⁶⁹ *Chronicles* 58.

⁴⁷⁰ Clinton Heylin, *Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 43.

as the world coming to know itself. In this view, none of the material facts have changed, but this subtle shift in affective tone “yet makes all the difference” for the possibility of genuine meaning in human experience.

It seems clear that Dylan was able to create his many titanic imaginative works because he understood what Kerouac and Sartre were saying about the constructed quality of reality, but whereas they seem to have taken this recognition as a negative indication that we are merely putting window-dressings on a vast and fathomless void, Dylan, in shifting his allegiance away from Kerouac in particular, seems to have realized that the fact that experience is constructed can mean that we literally co-create the world by the products of our imaginative labors.

Furthermore, the bull that Dylan sees on top of Moriarty is strongly reminiscent of the Wall Street bull statue in New York, which is as good a symbol as any for one of the primary aspects of modernity, the “spirit of capitalism” and the single-minded, “bull-headed” drive towards unlimited progress and growth at any cost, leveling all in its path. Kerouac, as described by Dylan, was ultimately reactionary because he remained in the shadow of modernity, rebelling against its oppressive consistency, like Queen Jane who is “tired of all this repetition.”⁴⁷¹ On the other hand, Dylan did not seem to feel particularly oppressed by anything, except perhaps by the weight of his own visions.

Whereas the beats seemed to Dylan to be obsessed with liberating themselves from the constraints of the prevailing order, Dylan apparently found this liberation to be a necessary, but ultimately incomplete endeavor, a mere rejection of what modernity had become without offering a viable alternative. Rather, Dylan was drawn to old songs, stories, and ways of thinking that preceded his immediate context, for Dylan saw the way out of the current stalemate that the

⁴⁷¹ *Highway 61 Revisited*

beats decried not in a rejection of the past, but in a more complete embrace of tradition, an “archaic revival”⁴⁷² of a history so deep and mysterious that it seemed radically novel in the current historical context. Dylan writes:

I had already landed in a parallel universe, anyway, with more archaic principles and values; one where actions and virtues were old style and judgmental things came falling out on their heads. A culture with outlaw women, super thugs, demon lovers and gospel truths . . . streets and valleys, rich peaty swamps, with landowners and oilmen, Stagger Lees, Pretty Pollys and John Henrys—an invisible world that towered overhead with walls of gleaming corridors. It was all there and it was clear—ideal and God-fearing—but you had to go find it. It didn’t come served on a paper plate. Folk music was a reality of a more brilliant dimension. It exceeded all human understanding, and if it called out to you, you could disappear and be sucked into it. I felt right at home in this mythical realm made up not with individuals so much as archetypes, vividly drawn archetypes of humanity, metaphysical in shape, each rugged soul filled with natural knowing and inner wisdom. Each demanding a degree of respect. I could believe in the full spectrum of it and sing about it. It was so real, so more true to life than life itself. It was life magnified. Folk music was all I needed to exist. Trouble was, there wasn’t enough of it. It was out of date, had no proper connection to the actualities, the trends of the time. It was a huge story but hard to come across. Once I’d slipped in beyond the fringes it was like my six-string guitar became a crystal magic wand and I could move things like never before. I had no other cares or interests besides folk music. I scheduled my life around it. I had little in common with anyone not like-minded.⁴⁷³

For Dylan, having immersed himself in the profoundly different ways of seeing the world characteristic of earlier times, generally constellated around mythic “enchantment” (as opposed to the “disenchantment” characteristic of modernity posited by Weber), the folk songs that encapsulated these modes of experience really did seem to evoke a “parallel universe,” “a reality of a more brilliant dimension.” Indeed, the “principles and values” that folk music portrayed were literally “archaic” because, in folk’s general focus on liminal figures from American frontiers, the “outlaw women, super thugs, demon lovers and gospel truths,” and the “Stagger Lees, Pretty Pollys and John Henrys,” Dylan found a window into predominantly premodern

⁴⁷² Cf. Terence McKenna’s *The Archaic Revival*.

⁴⁷³ *Chronicles* 235-6.

epistemologies, persisting well into modernity in the forgotten borderlands and rural routes of America.

It was a mythologically oriented “invisible world” whose “archetypes” seemed more real to Dylan than the scientific knowledge of distant cities and universities. Whereas for Dylan, the late modern subject was alienated from his (for it was always “he” that was referred to) labor, his culture, and even his body, the archetypal denizens of folk songs were “filled with natural knowing and inner wisdom,” precisely evocative of the epistemologies so effectively repressed by the dominance of rationality in postwar America. Indeed, while the individual in late modernity seemed small and peripheral, merely a commodified and insured sack of flesh and bone with a list of marketable skills and a net worth, the figures in folk songs seemed to Dylan to defy this reductive view of human nature by their participation in the “full spectrum” of “life magnified” through these other modes of being in the world, “each demanding a degree of respect.” Whereas in the late modern visions of the existentialists and the beats, the world seemed vacated of meaning, the folk tradition was the repository of a mode of thought in which the world was an epic place of profound significance inhabited by larger-than-life characters. Dylan, not just academically interested in this mode, seems to have lived his life in the light of the mysterious world view that he describes, though mitigated somewhat by the intellectual self-consciousness forged in modernity that had not yet been fully individuated in premodernity. As Dylan puts it: “I was beginning to feel like a character from within these songs, even beginning to think like one,” though always with the self-awareness of one who seeks out this premodern mode as a reaction to his culture rather than being born into it without access to mediating rationality.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷⁴ *Chronicles* 240.

But certainly, as Dylan notes, at that moment in the early sixties, “there wasn’t enough” of this archaic way of thinking available in the main streams of culture. The mode of consciousness exemplified in folk music had been buried so effectively, expunged from collective awareness by the dominance of pure reason, that it was a titanic labor archaeologically to unearth the evidence of this repressed way of relating to experience. To be sure, the older mode was there to be found, but “it was out of date, had no proper connection to the actualities, the trends of the time,” for the American ideal had long been reconstellated around an entirely different center of gravity focused on rationalized conformity, with scientific repeatability and the efficiency of the machine as the governing metaphors. The repressed modes were “a huge story” because, as William James notes, they had been the primary mediators of human experience prior to the seventeenth century, as the modes of thought characteristic of science (generally Aristotelian material and efficient causation) had not yet been systematically differentiated from archetypal and teleological modes of thought (generally Aristotelian formal and final causation). However, it is a testament to the adaptability of the human mind that, only a few hundred years after the Enlightenment, the mode of constructing experience that had defined human culture for so long “was hard to come across.” Dylan discovered that these were modes of explanation that could account for the vital, animate, meaning-infused quality of human experience in the animal body. If these forms of consciousness had no connection to the “trends of the time,” at least those predominant in the main streams of culture, then Dylan would just have to start new trends and, in order to perform this epochal role, he found it necessary to cut himself off from the predominant discursive milieu so that he “had little in common with anyone not like-minded.” As mentioned above, Dylan’s intuitive revulsion at explaining himself to journalists and other gatekeepers of the predominant cultural hierarchies seems to stem directly

from this need to maintain consciously the new mode that was constituted in the integration of an archaic mode with the critical awareness more characteristic of his time. Ultimately, Dylan was an artist, not a philosopher, and he did not have the time or energy both to create his world-transforming visions and explain them to skeptics, which is probably one of the reasons why so many books have been written about him: The musical and mythological narrative he created is profound and can bear the weight of such explanation.

In pursuit of the novel archaic mode, Dylan devoured everything that crossed his path, consuming ideas, songs, and characters, both in life and in fiction, as fuel to impel his continued trajectory upward and inward. As he writes in *Chronicles*: “I wanted to understand things and then be free of them. I needed to learn how to telescope things, ideas. Things were too big to see all at once, like all the books in the library—everything lying around on all the tables. You might be able to put it all into one paragraph or into one verse of a song if you could get it right.”⁴⁷⁵ It is this intense drive to “understand things and then be free of them,” to see things “all at once,” that impelled Dylan towards what he felt to be higher and higher planes of awareness where he could gain a wider and wider perspective on the world. His impulse was somehow to “telescope” all the things he had been devouring into “one paragraph” or “one verse” to create a synthesis of the vast knowledge of culture, a Borgesian ambition that Dylan achieved beyond all reasonable expectation. Like most exceptional artists, Dylan had a vision of bringing together various strands that had never before been synthesized: literary and musical genres, ideas and ways of thinking from ancient Greece to Civil War-era America to nineteenth century France, and he combined these elements in such a way that they seem to have been meant to come together all along. As musician John Koerner expressed it: “He was just taking everything in—he listened to

⁴⁷⁵ *Chronicles* 61.

everybody, and he had an incredible ability to take things in and absorb them and turn around and put them right back out there like they had always been a part of him.”⁴⁷⁶

As Dylan continues his narrative of self-overcoming, “sometimes it takes a certain somebody to make you realize it” and, for Dylan personally, “Mike Seeger had that effect on me.” For Dylan, Mike Seeger, half-brother to Pete Seeger, was the prime exemplar of that to which Dylan had been aspiring: the ultimate mastery of all folk forms. According to Dylan, Mike Seeger had attained the highest aim of performance, which is to make the audience forget themselves in the music, evoking one meaning of “ecstasy,” drawing the listener out of egoic consciousness into complete identification with the song and the singer. However, as with many such turning points, both personal and collective, Dylan’s recognition of the futility of continuing on his current path was essentially an identity crisis that impelled him to reorganize his “inner thought patterns.” Dylan had been “closing [his] creativity down to a very narrow, controllable scale” in order to master the mechanics of musical performance, but seeing Seeger acted for Dylan like a Kuhnian scientific anomaly which sparks the revolutionary rupture, the persistently incommensurable piece of evidence that impels the whole system to reorganize itself, producing the realization that Dylan “would have to start believing in possibilities that [he] wouldn’t have allowed before.” This encounter with performative perfection was the shock that forced Dylan to expand his identity consciously so that he could create something that went beyond the limited realm that Seeger had already mastered.⁴⁷⁷

Dylan realized that, when one has become fixed in one’s way of seeing the world, it is necessary to “disorientate” oneself, as Rimbaud suggested, to create something genuinely new. Dylan instinctively recognized that, in order to go beyond the merely performative and

⁴⁷⁶ Hajdu 69.

⁴⁷⁷ *Chronicles* 62, 70-71.

interpretive mastery exemplified by Seeger, it would be necessary for him to undergo a period of turmoil during which he would have to redefine the system of his identity from a performer to a songwriter who performs. Dylan had possessed the felt sense that his apprenticeship as a folksinger was leading him towards something qualitatively different, but it is not until this encounter with Seeger that he seems to have realized that his performative focus was merely a prelude to his most important work: that of a songwriter. Indeed, Dylan suggests here that seeing Seeger was a revelation which impelled him “to claim a larger part of myself,”⁴⁷⁸ to expand his conscious identity to encompass parts of his being that had previously been unconscious, dormant potential. Dylan knew that he must, to employ Bergson’s metaphor, throw himself into the water, the new medium, and learn how to swim. However, Dylan intuitively sensed that, in order to expand himself to the necessary level of awareness, he would lose the comfort of the smaller world that he had previously inhabited. “There’s only one way to change things,” Dylan told Nat Hentoff in 1964,” and that’s to cut yourself off from all the chains. That’s hard for most people to do.”⁴⁷⁹

However, Dylan writes in *Chronicles*, “that was all right.” As he explains:

America was changing. I had a feeling of destiny and I was riding the changes. New York was as good a place to be as any. My consciousness was beginning to change, too, change and stretch. One thing for sure, if I wanted to compose folk songs I would need some kind of new template, some philosophical identity that wouldn’t burn out. It would have to come on its own from the outside. Without knowing it in so many words, it was beginning to happen.⁴⁸⁰

Picking up the thread of a previously employed metaphor, Dylan recognized that a wave of revolutionary artistic, political, philosophical, and social transformation was sweeping through America and he sensed that he was bound not only to swim in the new medium, but to ride the

⁴⁷⁸ *Chronicles* 71-72.

⁴⁷⁹ Hedin 35.

⁴⁸⁰ *Chronicles* 71-73.

crest of that wave, like William James' "single drops which sparkle in the sun as they are flung far ahead of the advancing edge of a wave-crest."⁴⁸¹ Indeed, Dylan seems to believe that he possessed the capacity to feel and align himself with the ever-shifting impulses in the historical process. And, as he notes, this ability was intimately connected to a transformation and expansion of his "consciousness" that would manifest in "some kind of new template" for folk songs. In turn, he seems to suggest that this "template" is homologous with a new "philosophical identity" consciously based on this novel way of approaching experience, predicated less on normative constructs than on one's affective sense. Indeed, this approach was geared towards sustainability, towards not "burning out," but finding a way to keep the promethean flame alive by conceiving his identity as something like an actor who takes on different roles, inhabits them completely, and then discards them when their shelf-life has expired, so to speak.

The singer's name change from Robert Zimmerman to Bob Dylan constitutes an early and definitive declaration of the malleability of his identity. Dylan writes:

One time [my cousin Reenie] asked me why I was using a different name when I played, especially in the neighboring towns. Like, didn't I want people to know who I was? "Who's Elston Gunn?" she asked. "That's not you, is it?" "Ah," I said, "you'll see." The Elston Gunn name thing was only temporary. What I was going to do as soon as I left home was call myself Robert Allen. As far as I was concerned, that was who I was—that's what my parents named me. It sounded like the name of a Scottish king and I liked it. There was little of my identity that wasn't in it.⁴⁸²

Dylan's simple, mysterious, and evocative answer to his cousin's question, "You'll see," is characteristic of Dylan's relationship to his name and, by extension, to his sense of identity. In fact, Dylan's ability to inhabit his successive roles almost completely is one of his most clearly defining qualities, a fact that he seemed to intimate to his cousin, at least in retrospect. However,

⁴⁸¹ *Varieties* 325.

⁴⁸² *Chronicles* 78.

as Dylan notes, “the Elston Gunn name thing was only temporary,” the first of many identities that Dylan would assume. His second choice, Robert Allen, using his middle name as his last, was perhaps too close to his real identity to suit the young man who would become Dylan. It seems likely that it is precisely because “there was little of my identity that wasn’t in it” that Dylan felt the impulse to push his stage name one degree further from his original, core identity, the one his parents had given him. As Dylan says in Scorsese’s documentary, when he listened to the country song “Drifting Too Far From the Shore,”⁴⁸³ “the sound of the record made me feel like I was somebody else, you know, that I was maybe not even born to the right parents or something”⁴⁸⁴ Clearly something intrinsic in Dylan was driving him far from anything that he could call home.

Continuing the narrative of his self-naming, Dylan writes:

What kind of confused me later was seeing an article in *Downbeat* magazine with a story about a West Coast saxophone player named David Allyn. I had suspected that the musician had changed the spelling of Allen to Allyn. I could see why. It looked more exotic, more inscrutable. I was going to do this, too. Instead of Robert Allen it would be Robert Allyn.

Young Bobby Zimmerman, driven to experiment with his identity in a kind of science of selfhood, and always drawn to “exotic” and “inscrutable” things, the distant and mysterious, added another subtle permutation to his nominative transformation. He seems to have had an innate need to know the mystery of being by himself becoming an embodiment of that mystery, a transformation that first had to be exemplified in his name. Finally, as Dylan writes:

Sometime later, unexpectedly, I’d seen some poems by Dylan Thomas. Dylan and Allyn sounded similar. Robert Dylan. Robert Allyn. I couldn’t decide—the letter *D* came on stronger. But Robert Dylan didn’t look or sound as good as Robert Allyn. People had always called me either Robert or Bobby, but Bobby Dylan sounded too skittish to me and besides, there already was a Bobby Darin, a Bobby

⁴⁸³ The version that Dylan heard was probably by Bill Monroe, Hanks Williams, or Roy Acuff.

⁴⁸⁴ Scorsese

Vee, a Bobby Rydell, a Bobby Neely and a lot of other Bobbys. Bob Dylan looked and sounded better than Bob Allyn. The first time I was asked my name in the Twin Cities, I instinctively and automatically without thinking simply said, “Bob Dylan.”⁴⁸⁵

Thus, it is primarily intuitive and aesthetic criteria, carefully considered and deliberated over, that led Bobby Zimmerman to become Bob Dylan. He describes a meticulous process, much like his songwriting, in which he considers every permutation, from the precedents for various names to the sound of the names to the visual impact of various spellings on the page. By the time he arrived in Minneapolis, he had put so much thought into his new name that it came out “instinctively and automatically without thinking.”⁴⁸⁶ Although it is true, as Hajdu writes, that “the irony of Robert Zimmerman’s metamorphosis into Bob Dylan lies in the application of so much elusion and artifice in the name of truth and authenticity,” this paradoxical quality seems to evidence a deeper kind of authenticity in the case of Dylan, who appears to have an intrinsic drive to reveal different aspects of himself through the performance of many different personas. As singer Harry Jackson observed, “He’s so goddamned real, it’s unbelievable,”⁴⁸⁷ a clear articulation of the paradox at the heart of Dylan, for the quality of being “real” is synonymous with the quality of being “believable.” Thus, as seems to be the potential with paradoxes generally, Dylan pushes the oppositional duality of authenticity and artifice to such a point that they are shown to be two sides of the same coin, genuine authenticity defined as the refusal of fixed identity, as the performance of how one feels in the moment rather than how one is expected to behave based on past precedent. As Dylan asks in “Like a Rolling Stone”: “How

⁴⁸⁵ *Chronicles* 78-9.

⁴⁸⁶ It is interesting to note that, as late as 1961, Dylan’s name was not yet fixed for, as Robert Shelton writes of an interview of Dylan for his *New York Times* piece: “Did he want me to call him Bobby Dylan or Bob Dylan? He thought that one out, as if he were about to sign a contract. Half aloud, he repeated the two names to himself: ‘Bob Dylan, Bobby Dylan, Bob Dylan, Bobby Dylan . . . Make it Bob Dylan! That’s what I’m really known as,’ he declared confidently” (Hedin 12).

⁴⁸⁷ Hajdu 73-74.

does it feel to be on your own?”, a stark reminder that the freedom to live based on the mercurial impulses of one’s affectivity comes at the expense of the fixed certainty provided by culturally predetermined roles and mores.⁴⁸⁸

The self-naming described above is as good an exhibition of Dylan’s creative process as any, for it is clear that in his songwriting, Dylan labors over each word, constantly writing and rewriting verses, changing phrases to add new layers of depth and meaning, so that by the time he sings a song on stage or on record, it seems like it has always been that way. And indeed, even after he records his songs, he keeps experimenting with them so that the versions of songs on *Hard Rain*, for instance, which are so different than their earlier incarnations, often seem as perfect and timeless as the originals that they drastically rewrite. And more than just lyrics, Dylan also constantly experiments with melodies, chord changes, phrasing, rhythm, tempo, and instrumentation. Although his songs are ultimately simple folk tunes, in a very real sense he is as experimental as John Cage or Cecil Taylor, though whereas these experimenters in avant garde composition and free jazz, respectively, were mostly formal explorers, Dylan is primarily an explorer of content, though he has also pushed the form in significant ways, particularly in terms of song length and in melding various genres that had never been synthesized in quite that way before. As has often been noted, form and content are ultimately inseparable.

Another instance that compounds the evidence for Dylan’s consciousness of passing through different identities comes from *Eat the Document*, a fragmented documentary of Dylan’s 1966 tour of England filmed by D.A. Pennebaker (who shot and edited *Don’t Look Back*), but edited by Dylan. In the footage, which appears to be near the end of the tour, Dylan, extremely thin, androgynous, and weary looking, quips in a jittery voice: “I think I’m gonna get me a new

⁴⁸⁸ Hedin 48.

Bob Dylan next week, get me a new Bob Dylan and *use* him. Use the new Bob Dylan; see how long he lasts.”⁴⁸⁹ Beyond expressing his exhaustion after months of heavy drug use and playing to partially hostile crowds, this statement seems to show an awareness in Dylan that each successive incarnation he inhabits is a role that he plays intensely until there is nothing left for that transient being to give, then it passes away and a new Dylan emerges to take its place.⁴⁹⁰ By creating roles that he can inhabit almost completely, but which are not perfectly coextensive with his internal sense of self, Dylan built into his “philosophical identity” an escape hatch so that he would not “burn out,” that is, literally die with the death of each persona as did Hank Williams, Elvis Presley, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Jimmie Hendrix, Gram Parsons, and any number of other young stars.⁴⁹¹ Or, as Benjamin Hedin aptly puts it: “Dylan was the rarest of pop culture survivors—he had managed to both burn out *and* fade away.”⁴⁹²

When Dylan first heard Mike Seeger and decided to start composing songs, he writes: “I was beginning to think I might want to change over. . . . I’d have to find some cuneiform tablets—some archaic grail to lighten the way. I had grasped the idea of what kind of songs I wanted to write, I just didn’t know how to do it yet.” Dylan was searching specifically for an “archaic” text that might provide him with a direction; an archaeological unearthing of some secret, ancient “cuneiform” writings close to the origin of civilization to illuminate his path, though Dylan was looking for the origin a little closer to home in the New World. He wanted to create something profoundly new and so he went looking for something old and forgotten to inspire him and show him a way out of the tyranny of the contemporary: “I couldn’t exactly put in words what I was looking for, but I began searching in principle for it, over at the New York

⁴⁸⁹ Scorsese

⁴⁹⁰ Hajdu 281.

⁴⁹¹ Wilentz 13.

⁴⁹² Hedin xiv.

Public Library.” This activity sounds more like a scholar doing research than a songwriter looking for inspiration. Nevertheless, as Dylan continues: “I started reading articles in newspapers on microfilm from 1855 to about 1865 to see what daily life was like. I wasn’t so much interested in the issues as intrigued by the language and rhetoric of the times.”⁴⁹³ Dylan was not looking primarily for insight into the social and political questions that folk songs so often addressed, but rather for a forgotten way to use language, along with its concomitant mode of thought, that he could revive in a new context. As he would sing nearly two decades later on *Slow Train Coming*, “gonna change my way of thinking,”⁴⁹⁴ which is one of the clearest and most direct expressions of the instinctual imperative that has driven Dylan’s successive transformations. He was searching in the distant past for a way out of the predominant modes of thought that seemed to hold everything, including music, in their iron grip at that moment in the early sixties.

As Dylan writes, “Semantics and labels could drive you crazy. . . . The songs I’d write . . . wouldn’t conform to modern ideas. I hadn’t begun yet writing streams of songs as I would, but . . . everything around us looked absurd—there was a certain consciousness of madness at work.” Dylan was consciously rebelling against what he perceived as “modern ideas,” by which he seems to mean the descent of late-modernity, embodied in the rationalized “semantics and labels” that produced a collective “madness” driven by the imbalanced focus on rendering experience measurable and categorizable. Again, this seems to be the very quality that Dylan would so often react to in his interviews a few years later, the impulse to label him as “protest singer” or “voice of his generation.” These labels constituted the rational mode attempting to

⁴⁹³ *Chronicles* 84.

⁴⁹⁴ Bob Dylan, *Slow Train Coming* (Columbia Records, 1979).

devour and master the intuitive and affective modes in which Dylan was primarily immersed, a lens through which these kinds of labels often seemed absurd and pointless.⁴⁹⁵

In September 1961, Dylan met John Hammond, a producer for Columbia Records, who offered him a recording contract. Although Dylan had a vaguely defined sense of the road ahead, he had until then assumed that he would rise through the usual channels of folk music. As he writes: “I envisioned myself recording for Folkways Records. That was the label I wanted to be on. That was the label that put out all the great records.” However, Folkways had already rejected Dylan, so his signing to Columbia was completely unexpected, pulling him into a large corporation that specialized in smooth jazz singers like Johnny Mathis and Tony Bennett, not spiritual sons of Woody Guthrie. However, as Dylan attests, Hammond was a visionary and Dylan could not refuse:

John had first seen and heard me at Carolyn Hester’s apartment. Carolyn was a Texan guitar-playing singer who I knew and played with around town. . . . That she had known and worked with Buddy Holly left no small impression on me and I liked being around her. Buddy was royalty, and I felt like she was my connection to it, to the rock-and-roll music that I’d played earlier, to that spirit.⁴⁹⁶

Perhaps like Pankake, Hammond could sense that Dylan’s interests transcended folk music, that his attitude and intensity had some residue of his years spent devoted to “his first love,”⁴⁹⁷ rock and roll. Indeed, that Dylan was drawn to the woman through whom he would meet Hammond because of her connection to Buddy Holly and the “spirit” of rock and roll suggests that the genre was a hidden and implicit, but vital element in Dylan’s origin story, his narrative of being “signed” to a record label. Thus, it seems clear that Dylan not only aspired to attain the level of

⁴⁹⁵ *Chronicles* 89.

⁴⁹⁶ *Chronicles* 15, 277.

⁴⁹⁷ Wilentz 6.

“King of the Folksingers”⁴⁹⁸ like Ramblin’ Jack Elliot, but that he also felt a kinship with rock and roll “royalty,” which he would also become a few years later, though to great initial resistance from the folk community. Even at this point when he was almost completely absorbed in the folk world, he still carried a secret flame for rock and roll.

Hammond’s aristocratic background combined with his “edgy” taste in music produced the ideal gatekeeper to usher Dylan into the musical mainstream curated almost exclusively by “major” labels like Columbia. Like Sam Phillips for Presley or George Martin for the Beatles, though with Pankake playing the critical role that Martin had played, but combined with Hammond’s magisterial quality, Hammond, as a representative of one of the predominant musical institutions, initiated Dylan into the fold. If the Gaslight club had been one step further into the mystery, then Columbia Records was “the center of the labyrinth,” at least as far as worldly mysteries were concerned. In a similar situation to the Beatles’ signing by Parlophone, Dylan was a young, untried outsider from a liminal genre generally associated with small, specialized “independent” labels. Dylan himself did not even remotely fit the mold of the popular artists of that moment in the early sixties, which he characterizes as the “sanitized and pasteurized” lull between the first rock and roll explosion in the mid-fifties and the British Invasion that began in 1964. However, despite Dylan’s unpolished presentation, Hammond was able to sense the transformative quality in the young singer, to “feel” Dylan’s “thoughts,” which obliquely indicates the degree to which Dylan’s intuitive capacity and rational mind were already integrated at this early stage in his career.⁴⁹⁹

As Dylan narrates, after he signed with Columbia, Hammond

⁴⁹⁸ *Chronicles* 253-4.

⁴⁹⁹ *Chronicles* 279-80, 5-6.

called in Billy James, the head of publicity at the label, told Billy to write some promo stuff on me, personal stuff for a press release. . . . Billy dressed Ivy League like he could have come out of Yale—medium height, crisp black hair. He looked like he'd never been stoned a day in his life, never been in any kind of trouble. I strolled into his office, sat down opposite his desk, and he tried to get me to cough up some facts, like I was supposed to give them to him straight and square.

To Dylan, James seems to have represented the privileging of rationality in the predominant commercial and academic culture of mid-twentieth century modernity. Yale particularly seems to signify for Dylan this clean-cut mode divorced from intuitive and somatic knowledge. And, as noted in the chapter on Presley, the description “straight and square” is not merely metaphorical, but actually seems to describe the affect performed by those firmly embedded in the predominant ethos of the fifties and early sixties: rigid, both physically and mentally, “by the book,” following well-trodden paths through marriage, career, family, sexuality, and many other aspects of experience, at least on the surface. By contrast, the emerging counterculture distinctly grooved and slouched, moving in more circular or labyrinthine ways, both physically and mentally. Indeed, this more organismic performativity can be seen in Dylan’s constant experimentation with his physicality as much as in his words and music. Whereas Billy James was straight-backed, crisp, stiff, and short-haired, like a taut vertical line between heaven and hell looking straight ahead towards the myth of unbounded American progress, Dylan was constantly leaning like James Dean, head slyly cocked, leg shaking, bouncing on the balls of his feet, hands flittering and gesticulating in fractured motion, like a kind of Dadaist dance. It is clear that Dylan was a profoundly interesting thinker, but a fact that is not often explicitly mentioned is that this interest was constantly being performed in his body.⁵⁰⁰

Whereas Billy James wanted Dylan to give him straight answers to straight questions, Dylan instinctively rebelled against participating in this linear, factual, demystifying mode of

⁵⁰⁰ *Chronicles* 7 and Hajdu 75.

discourse. Rather, the whole thrust of the young singer's inclination impelled him to misdirect and obfuscate, to conjure mystery and uncertainty within which he could abide in the archaic, mythical mode of consciousness "behind the shades,"⁵⁰¹ as it were. Dylan seems to imply that James, like most of the journalists with whom Dylan developed an increasingly contentious relationship, was attempting to pull Dylan into the gravity of the prevalent way of being, the literalist, materialist mode characteristic of science and technology. As Dylan writes, "I didn't feel like answering his questions, didn't feel the need to explain anything to anybody."⁵⁰² His intrinsic sense implicitly rejected the ethos that Billy James represented, which privileged rational explanation over attunement to the felt quality of immediate experience in which Dylan was primarily interested.

Dylan's encounter with Billy James is one of the first examples of the resistance that Dylan, as revolutionary artist, would inevitably face. Like both Presley and the Beatles, Dylan received some scathing and dismissive reviews, a phenomenon that seems to come with the territory. According to Dylan,

Irwin Silber, the editor of the folk magazine *Sing Out!* . . . [castigated] me publicly in his magazine for turning my back on the folk community. It was an angry letter. I like Irwin, but I couldn't relate to it. Miles Davis would be accused of something similar when he made the album *Bitches Brew*, a piece of music that didn't follow the rules of modern jazz, which had been on the verge of breaking into the popular marketplace, until Miles's record came along and killed its chances. . . . As for me, what I did to break away was to take simple folk changes and put new imagery and attitude to them, use catchphrases and metaphor combined with a new set of ordinances that evolved into something different that had not been heard before. Silber scolded me in his letter for doing this, as if he alone and a few others had the keys to the real world. I knew what I was doing, though, and wasn't going to take a step back or retreat for anybody.⁵⁰³

⁵⁰¹ From the subtitle of Heylin's *Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited*

⁵⁰² *Chronicles* 8.

⁵⁰³ *Chronicles* 67.

Even before Dylan “went electric,” the folk establishment, exemplified by Silber, felt betrayed by Dylan, whom they thought had responsibility to the movement that wedded traditional folk music and political activism. However, Dylan knew intuitively that as soon as an artist capitulates to what his or her audience or critics want, the art is dead in the water, vitiated. Silber, the epitomical critic, does not seem to have possessed the capacity to understand Dylan’s artistic nature, which impelled him towards ever greater and more encompassing visions of “the real world” to create “something different that had not been heard before.”

Dylan describes an evening after he had been signed to Columbia by Hammond but before recording his first album that provides a window into the creative process of which Silber was ignorant. Dylan was in the office of music publisher Lou Levy, who was producing demos of Dylan singing his compositions:

I didn’t have many songs, but I was making up some compositions on the spot, rearranging verses to old blues ballads, adding an original line here or there, anything that came into my mind—slapping a title on it. I was doing my best, had to thoroughly feel I was earning my fee. Nothing would have convinced me that I was actually a songwriter and I wasn’t, not in the conventional songwriter sense of the word. Definitely not like the workhorses over in the Brill Building, the song chemistry factory that was only a few blocks away but might as well have been on the other side of the cosmos. Over there, they cranked out the home-run hits for radio playlists.⁵⁰⁴

Even though the industry, embodied in Hammond and Levy, had acknowledged Dylan as a songwriter, he still resisted the label because he did not want to be confined to a certain idea of what that label meant. His ability to produce songs “on the spot” by synthesizing other songs is an extremely rare gift that allowed him to forego craft almost entirely. Dylan did not have to think about writing songs, for this activity appears to have come to him intuitively. Indeed, part of the reason why Dylan was able to create such profoundly novel compositions is that he

⁵⁰⁴ *Chronicles* 227.

refused to be labeled, an intrinsic drive towards freedom from constraint that would characterize all aspects of his life and career.⁵⁰⁵

What Dylan emphasizes in this snapshot of his songwriting process is that he consciously eschewed rational thought in favor of intuitive creativity for, as he writes: “There was little head work involved. What I usually did was start out with something, some kind of line written in stone and then turn it with another line—make it add up to something else than it originally did. It’s not like I ever practiced it and it wasn’t too thought consuming. Not that I would sing any of it onstage.”⁵⁰⁶ What Dylan is describing here is the time-honored process of learning a craft by emulating and appropriating the work of others, taking elements from the vast catalogue of songs that he had at his disposal and recombining them into something new. In fact, though Dylan did not perceive what he was doing as practicing, it seems clear that his constant playing and thinking about songs, half-consciously shuffling and reordering them in his head, constitutes a kind of practice, though it must have felt so natural and so pleasurable that it did not seem like work to Dylan.

As Malcolm Gladwell suggests in *Outliers*, true “geniuses,” not so much in IQ, but in creative accomplishment, are forged by thousands of hours of practice, whether they consider it practice or not, and Dylan fits this description, saying in a 1968 interview, “I certainly spent a lot of hours just trying to do what other people had been doing.”⁵⁰⁷ Similarly, Dylan writes in *Chronicles*: “I played morning, noon and night. That’s all I did, usually fell asleep with the guitar in my hands.”⁵⁰⁸ It is clear that Dylan was consumed by songs from a very young age, so that by the time he made these demos for Levy in 1961, creating new compositions out of existing

⁵⁰⁵ Wilentz 44.

⁵⁰⁶ *Chronicles* 228.

⁵⁰⁷ Heylin 47.

⁵⁰⁸ *Chronicles* 241.

elements seemed like the easiest thing in the world, though it is something that very few songwriters can do well, particularly “on the spot” as Dylan claims. And he was able to accomplish this feat, in part, because he had immersed himself so completely in the songs of others that they formed a large proportion of the texture of his immediate experience. Perhaps even more than spoken language, verbal and musical song tropes were the vocabulary through which Dylan most related to the world around him. Thus, whereas writing a song seems like a difficult task for most people, Dylan seems to have instinctively constructed his experience in such a way that writing a song was as easy as expounding on some esoteric subject might be for a scholar.

Dylan continues to describe the initiation of his songwriting career, noting that

The one song that had hooked me up with Leeds Music, the one that convinced John Hammond to bring me over there in the first place, wasn't an outreaching song at all but more of an homage in lyric and melody to the man who'd pointed out the starting place for my identity and destiny—the great Woody Guthrie. I wrote the song with him in mind, and I used the melody from one of his old songs, having no idea that it would be the first of maybe a thousand songs that I would write.

It seems that Dylan judged his own songs to some extent by how meaningful they were to him personally, which indicates that Dylan's focus was not so much on the craft and mechanics of songwriting, on the borrowing of concrete lyrics, melodies, and structural elements from existing songs, in this case taking the melody from Guthrie's “1913 Massacre” for his “Song to Woody.” Rather, Dylan's focus was on the layers of meaning that lay behind and within the songs. He knew that if he could summon the appropriate affect, the materiality of the composition would flow from him without effort or analysis. He understood that if the song was not meaningful to him, if it did not seem to part the “misty curtain” to the “invisible world” that he describes, it would probably not connect very deeply with his audience. Judging by his profound reverence

for his influences, there is no more meaningful subject for Dylan than Guthrie, whom Dylan repeatedly insists “pointed out the starting place for my identity and destiny.”⁵⁰⁹ And the fact that Dylan wrote what he considers his first substantial song as “homage” to Guthrie rather than in a conscious attempt to establish himself as a songwriter only reinforces this hypothesis. Dylan does not seem to have thought of himself as a professional songwriter, but merely as someone with a deep and abiding passion for songs and those who create them; a subtle difference, but an important one in allowing Dylan to do what he did. Instead of choosing to become a songwriter for rational reasons, Dylan simply felt impelled by his own nature in relation to the world to create, an approach that he seems to have cultivated carefully and protected assiduously.

Dylan’s first, self-titled album, *Bob Dylan*, released in March of 1962, and composed of primarily traditional songs, was initially deemed a commercial failure, selling less than 5,000 copies in its first pressing.⁵¹⁰ Hammond, undaunted, retained his faith in what his colleagues at Columbia were starting to call “Hammond’s Folly.” Indeed, as Clinton Heylin observes of Dylan, “the failure of *Bob Dylan* would convince him that he should have more faith in his own instincts and less in others.”⁵¹¹ Thus, rather like the Beatles at their Decca audition, which had taken place less than three months before, though at a somewhat different point in his career, the lukewarm reception of Dylan’s first album impelled in him the realization that he should trust his own intuition rather than rationally trying to satisfy the expectations of other people. And as Dylan told Scorsese: “Part of me was just sayin’ that I didn’t wanna record that record anyway, that I just did it. I didn’t want to give away anything that was really, you know, dear to me or

⁵⁰⁹ *Chronicles* 229, 52, 236.

⁵¹⁰ Hajdu 105.

⁵¹¹ Heylin 85.

something.”⁵¹² It seems to have been necessary for Dylan, relatively new to recording, to make an uncertain album, an album on which he held himself back from revealing too much. Indeed, this impulse seems to be coextensive with his need to create a persona shrouded in mystery and depth. However, whereas this tactic of holding his best cards close to his chest seems to have been effective in his prolonged relationship with the other members of the folk scene, Dylan seems to have immediately realized upon hearing his first record that making an album is quite a different mode of communication than performing in the folk clubs every night, for an album is a brief chance to convey the very best of oneself to a much larger audience. Dylan did not make the same mistake twice, the unsatisfactory quality of his first record impelling him to begin writing songs in earnest, which would be the key to unlocking Dylan’s immense felt potential.⁵¹³

At the Newport Folk Festival in 1959, Dylan’s future manager, Albert Grossman, had declared that “the American public is like Sleeping Beauty waiting to be kissed awake by the prince of folk music.” This proclamation proved prophetic, as four years later in 1963, Dylan was the undisputed “prince of folk music,” smooching the movement, and the wider culture, from its slumber. As Epstein writes: “1962 was Dylan’s pivotal year artistically, just as 1963 was his annus mirabilis in career terms.”⁵¹⁴ He recorded *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, the album that would catapult him to fame, in a series of sessions from July to December 1962, and these songs are simply a huge artistic leap forward from the primarily cover songs he had played on his first record. In particular, “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Girl From the North Country,” “Masters of War,” “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” and “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” catalyzed the folk movement in a way that nothing else could have.

⁵¹² Scorsese

⁵¹³ Hajdu 108.

⁵¹⁴ Epstein 104-6.

These new songs by Dylan are indisputably as great, or greater, than any of the traditional songs Dylan had been singing, but they were also radically new. As Hajdu writes of the traditional folk songs: “Something about the songs was old-fashioned—not simply old, as all folk music is supposed to sound, but out of fashion—for a generation that grew up on rock and roll. . . . One by one, Dylan’s songs of protest and social commentary veered further from tuneful imitations of Seeger and Guthrie toward a bolder style with the bite of rock and roll.”⁵¹⁵ Even before Dylan went electric, these new songs integrated the folk idiom that was their immediate precursor with an attitude and sensibility characteristic of rock and roll. And it certainly did not hurt that the songs were sung by a fascinating looking young man with an ancient-sounding voice. Indeed, in 1963, Dylan shed his baby fat, from which emerged the gaunt, angular visage that would become iconic in the ensuing years, suddenly appearing less like a pudgy ragamuffin and more like a Jewish Woody Guthrie or James Dean. And certainly, Dylan’s intuition a few years earlier that he was bound to sing with Joan Baez was borne out by the actual course of events as he began his storied relationship with the “Queen of Folk Music,” which elevated Dylan to the status of “King.”⁵¹⁶

Furthermore, the success that Peter, Paul, and Mary achieved with Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” was the kind of success that folk musicians had rarely experienced, and only “folk pop” artists like the Kingston Trio and Harry Belafonte. Thus, it was somewhat unprecedented for a hard-core folk purist like Dylan to have a song at the top of the national charts, even performed by a more commercial sounding group. This success primed the folk community for an equally unprecedented phenomenon at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival, “the ultimate bastion

⁵¹⁵ Hajdu 117-118.

⁵¹⁶ Hajdu 119 and Epstein 110.

of folk purity,”⁵¹⁷ which, as Epstein writes, was “a virtual coronation of Bob Dylan as the prince of folksingers, heir apparent to the legendary Pete Seeger.”⁵¹⁸ Seeger, who had played with Woody Guthrie, had arguably neither attained the level of artistry achieved by his predecessor nor the level of fame and artistry that would be achieved by his successor. Thus, Seeger acted as something like a bridge between the old dispensation and the new, a modest patriarch devoted primarily to the folk tradition and its political causes. Although Seeger wrote or co-wrote a number of classic songs, including “If I Had a Hammer,” “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” and “Turn, Turn, Turn,” Dylan, still a very young man, had already produced the kinds of songs that Seeger never would, songs that catalyzed the folk movement, mirroring the affectivity of a new generation of believers. And that Dylan and Baez were a couple was the icing on the cake, so to speak. Dylan seemed to be the leader that the folk movement had been waiting for, and he reveled in the adoration in the way only a twenty-two-year-old can (in part, by carrying a bullwhip with him for the three days of the festival). In singer Theodore Bikel’s assessment, the 1963 Newport Folk Festival was “the apogee of the folk movement.” Indeed, although folk had long been perceived as outsider music, in that moment, folk had actually emerged as one of the most commercially successful genres, with Dylan its prime exemplar.⁵¹⁹

However, it is well known that Dylan’s ascendancy as the “King of Folk” was merely a step towards his far more profound transformation synthesizing folk music with rock and roll a few years later, a transformation presaged in Dylan’s early love for the rock and roll genre, in the role his admiration for Buddy Holly played in his signing to Columbia, and in the sensibility that increasingly permeated his acoustically performed songs. However, there is one little-known

⁵¹⁷ Hedin 41.

⁵¹⁸ Epstein 111.

⁵¹⁹ Hajdu 166-67. Bikel is referring specifically to an encore of “We Shall Overcome” sung by Dylan, Baez, Seeger, and others.

circumstance that prefigures Dylan's most famous transformation, his "going electric," in a particularly striking way: On October 26 and November 1, 1962, during the recording sessions for *Freewheelin'*, Dylan and five studio musicians (including Bruce Langhorne, who would play guitar on *Bringing It All Back Home* three years later) had cut six takes of Elvis Presley's version of "That's All Right."⁵²⁰ Listening to the second take, if one did not know when the song was recorded, one might guess that the recording had taken place during the sessions for *Bringing It All Back Home*, not *Freewheelin'*. Although some of Dylan's subtle vocal inflections are clearly more characteristic of his early folk period, the style and feel of the song is much closer to Dylan's music after he went electric in 1965. In fact, aside from the obvious connection that Langhorne's distinctive guitar provides to songs like "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and "Maggie's Farm" on *Bringing It All Back Home*, and the slightly less mature tenor of Dylan's voice, the song sounds most of all like one of the numerous covers that Dylan played with the Band collected on *The Genuine Basement Tapes*, recorded in Woodstock in 1967. Other than these subtle clues, this recording (along with "Mixed-Up Confusion") makes the years of Dylan's first six great albums (after the relatively mediocre *Bob Dylan*), 1962-1966, seem like a long, strange dream, which is not far from the truth.

That Dylan recorded for his first album of mostly original material what is generally considered the first true rock and roll song even though he had been working as a solo folksinger for the previous few years attests to Dylan's abiding commitment to rock and roll. As Benjamin Hedin puts it in a somewhat fanciful speculation: "It is likely that had he waited a few years before coming to New York, during the reign of British rock and R&B, Dylan would have turned immediately to rock—skipping, in effect, his folkie debut and beginning with the likes of

⁵²⁰ Marcus 60-61.

‘Mixed-Up Confusion’ or ‘She Belongs to Me.’”⁵²¹ Although when Dylan went electric in 1965 it seemed to be a radical break from his style and identity, which was intimately bound up with the folk movement at that time, this moment can be viewed more accurately as a return to the rock and roll that had always been implicitly at the core of Dylan’s music. In fact, this seems to be precisely the point he sought to convey by naming his first electric album “*Bringing It All Back Home*”: that electric blues, country, and rock and roll were Dylan’s starting point, the music of his youth, and the implicit basis for everything he had done and would do. Dylan was always a rock and roller who had taken a detour into the folk idiom for, as Dylan told an audience at the Royal Albert Hall in London at the end of his 1966 British tour with the Hawks (later the Band): “Folk music was just an interruption and very useful.”⁵²² His tenure as a folk musician appears always to have been inevitably leading to his rock and roll rebirth.

Based on Dylan’s statement above, it might be construed that he cynically donned the trappings of folk music in order to use the genre’s popularity in the early sixties as a launching pad for his own career. Indeed, as Dylan asserted soon after going electric:

I have not arrived at where I am now. . . . I have just returned to where I am now. I never considered myself a folksinger. They called me that if they wanted to. I don’t care. I latched on, when I got to New York City, because I saw [what] a huge audience there was. I knew I wasn’t going to stay there. I knew it wasn’t my thing. I knew that Woody did this kind of thing and Woody was famous, and I used it.

While this explanation does seem to express a partial truth, as Dylan has always been adept at finding the pragmatic way forward, it is also clear, as demonstrated amply above, that he was genuinely devoted to folk music. Indeed, this diatribe seems to be a kind of historical revisionism characteristic of an artist who had recently rejected his previous identity and milieu, and who

⁵²¹ Hedin xii.

⁵²² Palmer 107.

wanted to justify this rejection in absolute terms. Summing up his complete denial of his former self, Dylan provocatively ranted that “folk music . . . is a bunch of fat people.”⁵²³ However, it should be apparent by now that Dylan was in fact profoundly committed to the folk tradition, embodied most of all in his love for Woody Guthrie.

Thus, rather than being an either/or proposition, it appears Dylan fundamentally understood that folk and rock and roll were really just two different forms of a larger definition of “folk music” in the sense that the two genres sprang from the same deep wells of American musical experience. Their temporary polarization into “head music” and “body music” was a fantasy, a conceit acted out half-consciously in the culture to perform the reintegration of intellect, exemplified at that moment in the mid-sixties by the “highbrow” folk movement, and affect, embodied at that moment in “lowbrow” rock and roll. Like Cain and Abel, rock and folk were sibling genres that, in Bob Dylan’s mythical performativity, were ultimately reconciled through the act of Dylan infiltrating the folk movement, becoming its primary exponent, and then symbolically slaying it at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival by playing ugly, visceral rock and roll. In this sense, Dylan really was a kind of “Judas,” as one audience member shouted at a concert Dylan played with the Band in 1966, though if one follows this archetypal analogy to its logical conclusion, Dylan was also a Christ figure for, like Judas, he performed the betrayal of the true folk believers, but only to become a martyr enacting the death and rebirth of folk as part of something far greater in the ensuing decades.⁵²⁴

Watching footage of Dylan’s performance at Newport in 1965 when he “went electric,” the thing that immediately strikes one as Dylan and his band begin their first song, “Maggie’s

⁵²³ Barry Miles and Pearce Marchbank, eds., *Bob Dylan: In His Own Words* (New York: Quick Fox, 1978) 46, 61, 74.

⁵²⁴ Hajdu 10 and Hedin xvi, xiii.

Farm,” is the insistence, intensity, and sheer volume of the repetitive four-note bass line. This repetitive quality, combined with the primal, cutting snarl of Mike Bloomfield’s lead guitar, must have been jolting for an audience expecting an acoustic folksinger. The sound is piercing and anxiety-producing, urgent and fierce. Although Peter Yarrow claims that “the volume of the blues band was kind of wild, you couldn’t get the words too clearly,”⁵²⁵ judging from the recording, while “wild” is an accurate description of the volume, the words were perfectly audible, an observation reinforced by the fact that Paul Rothchild, who would go on to produce the Doors masterfully, was engineering the sound. However, although the folk audience might have been startled by the sheer magnitude of the volume coming from their beloved folk troubadour, it could not have been the mere loudness that produced such a negative reaction, for both the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and the Chambers Brothers had played loud electric sets earlier in the day, which had both been well-received. Although many in the audience were probably surprised by Dylan’s thwarting of their expectations (despite the fact that Dylan had released *Bringing It All Back Home* about four months previously and “Like a Rolling Stone” a week before), contrary to popular belief, it does not seem to be the bare fact of Dylan playing loud rock and roll that caused the audience to start booing.⁵²⁶

Paying careful attention to the footage, as the band starts playing “Maggie’s Farm,” there is excited talking in the audience, neither ecstatic nor critical, a clamor of expectant voices attempting to determine the music’s value, shouting to be heard over the loud rhythm section and guitar. Dylan is visibly a bit nervous, but the first verse sounds fine, if slightly uncertain, his

⁵²⁵ Scorsese

⁵²⁶ Hajdu 259-260. Several other theories have been put forward to explain why the crowd was booing, including that the sound quality was poor (which does not appear to be the case based on the footage), that the set was too short (which is temporally impossible as the booing started near the beginning of the first song), and that the crowd was angry at Peter Yarrow for trying to cut Dylan’s set short (again temporally impossible). Some have even claimed that there was no booing, which is simply not true (Marcus 155-156).

powerful voice cutting through the intense rhythmic potency of the band.⁵²⁷ This initial success appears to give Dylan courage, and he starts to smile as the song goes to the “five” at the end of the first verse on the word “bored,” the chord that universally releases tension in the blues, allowing the song to resolve back to the “one,” the root chord. But the bass, which has been thunderously dominating the feel of the band, and rather effectively up to this point, does not go to the five, and thus the tension is not released. This deviation from the recorded version of the song on *Bringing It All Back Home* does not seem premeditated as the musicians appear confused for a brief moment, Dylan finishing the phrase, and then looking uncomfortably over at Bloomfield as two unseen men in the audience start to boo about a second after the singer steps back from the microphone. Another second later, Dylan looks down, apparently towards the booing men, with a half-wounded, half-disdainful expression as others join in the booing, the singer seeming to realize that he has lost his audience for this first live performance with a band (at least since high school).⁵²⁸ Although Dylan’s guitar is barely audible, and his left hand is not visible during this critical moment of the first verse, the bass refuses to move to the five again at the end of the second verse, while Dylan’s hand moves to what appears to be the A chord, the five for the key of D in which the song is played, which indicates that Dylan was performing the song as it was originally conceived, but that the sheer volume of the bass overruled his guitar.

While most commentators appear to have implicitly assumed that Dylan meant the band to stay on the root chord as a premeditated assault on the audience, it seems far more likely, based on the subtle fluctuations in the band’s playing, as well as on the physical and facial cues from Dylan and Bloomfield, that the bass player simply did not know the changes of the song

⁵²⁷ Hedin 42.

⁵²⁸ Marcus 156.

very well, which merely demonstrates how little rehearsal had gone into the performance.⁵²⁹ As organ player Al Kooper charitably, though somewhat inaccurately, put it: “We didn’t especially play that good; the beat got turned around.”⁵³⁰ Similarly, musician Geoff Muldaur has said that “I don’t believe people were booing because the music was revolutionary. . . . It was just that Dylan wasn’t very good at it. He had no idea how to play the electric guitar, and he had very second-rate musicians with him, and they hadn’t rehearsed enough. It just didn’t work. The musicians didn’t play good. There’s no doubt in my mind, people were booing because it stank.”⁵³¹ While most commentators disagree with this assessment, based on the footage, it seems undeniable, though it also seems remarkable that, to my knowledge, no one has ever mentioned in print that the specific musical problem was neither primarily the beat getting turned around nor Dylan’s electric guitar-playing, but the bass player missing a change. One suspects that the fact that the bass player, Jerome Arnold, was one of two African Americans playing with Dylan may have had something to do with the collective amnesia, the product of a proto-political correctness that was probably justified at the time, but that is perhaps unnecessary in the post-Obama era, particularly when so many of our greatest musicians are black. However, the fact remains that although the booing seems to have begun as a reaction to the music’s execution, it soon took on an entirely different significance, perhaps even by the end of that first song, but certainly by the time other audiences followed suit culminating in the “Judas” concert at the Manchester Free Trade Hall in 1966. As Marcus articulates the cultural significance of Dylan “going electric”: “Newport forced people to take sides—or allowed them the thrill of taking

⁵²⁹ Marcus 154.

⁵³⁰ Palmer 105.

⁵³¹ Hajdu 260.

sides.”⁵³² This was high drama played out on the stage of popular culture, requiring nearly as much conceit and suspension of disbelief as the theater for its effectiveness.

The unvarnished truth is that Dylan was accustomed to versatile session players and the ability to do multiple takes of songs in the studio, while this rhythm section, borrowed along with Bloomfield from the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, was only equipped to play straight blues. Having worked with very few bands at that point, Dylan chose his musicians naively, thinking that they would be able to do his music justice with very little rehearsal when this was simply not the case. Playing alone, Dylan’s confidence in his performance was unbreakable because he had the exceptional ability to rise to any occasion. But playing with a band suddenly made it necessary for him to consider the thoughts and feelings of the other musicians, even just enough to elicit a good performance from them. Thus, it seems that the simple fact, generally overlooked, is that members of the audience started booing not primarily because they felt betrayed by Dylan’s embrace of rock and roll, but because the bass player missed a change, which broke the momentum and made the performance feel wrong in a way that would have been difficult to define in the moment.

The myth that has grown up around this performance is that it was the symbolic enactment of an ideological schism between the folk purists and those favorably inclined to both folk and rock and roll,⁵³³ and it ultimately did come to symbolize this very thing. According to folksinger Oscar Brand, “to the old left, Dylan was the second coming. . . . He was a kind of link to their own lost youth that validated them and gave them hope for their own resurgence.” However, if the betrayal of Dylan’s hopeful validation of traditional folk music was the source of Pete Seeger’s and the rest of the old guard’s disapproval, it does not seem to have been the

⁵³² Marcus 159.

⁵³³ Hedin 40.

primary concern for most audience members. As singer, writer, and close Dylan friend Richard Farina insisted,

We all grew up with . . . radio music—it was not traditional music. . . . Only when popular music was in its very worst period, when nothing was happening there, did we turn to folk music. [Rock and roll] was part of everybody’s music when they were growing up in America. It was part of high school in America. The first person that Dylan and I ever talked about when we hung out together was Buddy Holly.⁵³⁴

Given their generation’s deep affection for rock and roll, with the benefit of recording technology and a musician’s ear, one gets the distinct impression that the myth might have been rather different had Dylan and his band sounded as tight as they did on his latest record.

However, as was almost always the case, Dylan managed to transform this near disaster into a triumph, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat when he was called back out to perform two acoustic songs. After singing “Mr. Tambourine Man,” he performed a weary, frustrated “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” that somehow perfectly encapsulated the transitional quality of that moment, the performance of the death and rebirth of American popular music from one genre into another, from one way of being into another. Dylan had not quite mastered live rock and roll, but this was the moment when the reigning “King of Folk Music”⁵³⁵ declared unequivocally that he was no longer exclusively, or even primarily, a folk musician.

Speaking about the electric performance, Dylan claims in Scorsese’s film:

I was thinkin’ that someone was shouting, ‘Are you with us? Are you with us?’ And, uh, you know, I don’t know, what’s that supposed to mean? I had no idea why they were booing. I don’t think anybody was there having a negative response to those songs, though. Whatever it was about wasn’t about anything that they were hearing.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁴ Hajdu 210, 227.

⁵³⁵ Epstein 110.

⁵³⁶ Scorsese

However, knowing Dylan's propensity for fabrication,⁵³⁷ and seeing the subtle signs in the performance footage, it seems likely that Dylan convinced himself in retrospect that the booning "wasn't about anything that they were hearing," perhaps choosing to believe, or making it seem that he believed, the myth that his milieu had created in a sense to cover up the fact that the man they had elected their prophet was all too human. His audience and his generation needed him to succeed, so rather than believe that Dylan could make a mistake as basic as not having sufficiently rehearsed, most of those involved seem to concur that Dylan made intentionally alienating music to declare his independence from the folk movement. While this supposition is true to a limited extent, Dylan almost certainly did not intend for the bass player to miss the chord change, which sparked the booning that, in turn, stalled the momentum of the performance.

However, as Dylan's friend Paul Nelson observed a decade later: "In the mid-Sixties Dylan's talent evoked such an intense degree of personal participation from both his admirers and detractors that he could not be permitted so much as a random action. Hungry for a sign, the world used to follow him around, just waiting for him to drop a cigarette butt. When he did they'd sift through the remains, looking for significance. The scary part is they'd find it."⁵³⁸ Although one might interpret this "hunger for a sign" in a less sinister light than Nelson does, it seems clear that the audience wanted Dylan to succeed so badly that, by collectively creating a narrative near the factual truth, but not quite identical with it, they allowed Dylan to carry on with his trajectory towards greatness. And this disjunction between the way the situation actually transpired and the belief of the collective could conceivably be taken as proof that everyone was participating in a mass delusion, for from a reductionist perspective, it was just a bunch of people

⁵³⁷ Epstein notes that Dylan's memoir "never allows truth to get in the way of a good story, or history to interfere with the revelation of the most significant truths" (Epstein 81).

⁵³⁸ Marcus 154.

making a bunch of noise and getting all worked up about it. However, from a mythically and naratologically informed perspective, the very fact that the audience collectively and unconsciously saved Dylan from embarrassment, transmuting what was simply a bad performance into an epochal rupture, is evidence that Dylan was, in some sense, destined for great things. The myth of this moment is far more significant than the way the music actually sounded whereas, by contrast, both the music and the event were equally epochal at the “Judas” concert the following year, Dylan by then having perfected his approach to rock and roll, not least by hiring one of his generation’s greatest bands.

Legend has it that Pete Seeger, as embodiment of the old guard of folk music, was threatening to cut the cables with an axe while Dylan was playing with the band at Newport. However, as Seeger told Scorsese decades later: “I remember seeing Bob later on that evening looking kind of blue, as though he hadn’t made the point that he wanted to make properly. He didn’t want to feel that he was limited here or limited there. He wanted to do something with the Butterfield Blues Band. And it was great.” In retrospect, the old guard acquiesced to Dylan’s revolution, though not without a great deal of resistance, a great deal of wailing and gnashing of teeth. However, if Pete Seeger initially played the role of the disapproving father, singer Maria Muldaur played the role of the supportive, accepting sister. As she describes an interaction with Dylan later that same evening:

Every night after the concerts, the festival people would have a party, and Bob was sitting in the corner, I guess thinking about what had happened, and I said, ‘Hey, Bob, do you wanna dance?’ And he looked up at me and said, ‘I’d dance with you, Maria, but my hands are on fire.’ And, it’s sort of like, that was a cryptic remark, but I kinda knew exactly what he meant.

Dylan’s hands were burning with a metaphorical fire (perhaps the same promethean fire that had possessed him when he was eleven, the same “inner heat” the performers were searching for at

the Gaslight), burning with the magnitude of what he had just done, performing the necessary murder of the old order in an ugly, flawed, but ultimately effective—and epochal—fifteen minutes of visceral intensity and sheer volume.⁵³⁹

As Al Kooper, in his drolly humorous way, describes Dylan's next show a month after the Newport performance:

When we played Forest Hills, "Like A Rolling Stone" was number one. And so when we played "Like A Rolling Stone," they stopped booing and sang along. And then when we finished they started booing again. I thought that was great. I enjoyed that. But at the party after the show, Bob came runnin' up to us and gave us big hugs. He said, "that was fabulous! It was great, it was like a carnival, it was fantastic." He really enjoyed the show.

Based on Kooper's observations, it seems clear that Dylan understood on a deep level that the booing was not really about him, that he was a catalyst for something profound occurring in his culture. In fact, although John Lennon enjoyed flouting the rules of conventional show-business by playing rock and roll at the jazz-oriented Cavern or by telling the screaming crowds to "shut up," Dylan seems to have at least temporarily attained a state approaching egoless consciousness such that he viscerally enjoyed the crowd booing at him, at least for a time, not because he had a pathological need to be hated, but because he knew that he was playing a central role in the cultural drama. As Dylan himself notes, "I had a perspective on the booing because you gotta realize you can kill somebody with kindness, too,"⁵⁴⁰ which seems to indicate that Dylan did in fact see himself as a Christ-like figure, not primarily for the glory, but because he knew that he could play that vital cultural role. Dylan, in his "perspective" on the resistance leveled against him, is putting into action the French proverb, "to understand all is to forgive all," for seemingly more than anyone else, he understood that the audiences were not booing because of who he was

⁵³⁹ Scorsese

⁵⁴⁰ Scorsese

as a private individual, but because he was playing a necessary transformative role in the development of historical process.⁵⁴¹ And having rejected folk music, he was not about to settle into his role as “Rock and Roll King” for Dylan, always refusing to be pinned down, rejected the labels “folk rock” and “rock and roll” for his new style, preferring to call it “vision music,”⁵⁴² which seems as accurate a description as any. As always, Dylan’s impulse was to transcend genre, identity, and even temporality to perform the “unceasing creation”⁵⁴³ of which Bergson writes.

⁵⁴¹ Or, in the slightly more prosaic phrasing of a friend from his days in Minneapolis: “He didn’t give a shit.” (Heylin 46).

⁵⁴² Hajdu 276, 281.

⁵⁴³ Bergson 19.

Conclusion: “The Way You Feel That You Live”

*When that steamboat whistle blows, I'm gonna give you all I got to give
And I do hope you receive it well, dependin' on the way you feel that you live*

Bob Dylan, “Dear Landlord”⁵⁴⁴

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to begin to come to grips with the significance of rock and roll in the context of the trajectory of Western culture towards rational modes of thought since the Enlightenment. Although this is a project that could be expanded in many directions, taking in earlier and later permutations of popular music, as well as many other cultural, socioeconomic, political, technological, and philosophical factors, I have tried to trace the historical process described in different inflections by Weber, Freud, James, Bergson, and Whitehead through the concrete experiences of some of the primary exemplars of rock and roll. Of course, a similar project could be undertaken in relation to the other early initiators of the genre, and the biographical narratives of Presley, the Beatles, and Dylan could be followed further chronologically as well as in terms of other relevant domains not explored in these pages. However, it is my hope that the focus on the embodied development of the polarity describable as that between rational intellect and intuitive affect through the “very dirt of private fact”⁵⁴⁵ experienced by these artists and their milieus has done justice to the profound complexity of the historical development of rock and roll, and has made some small contribution to the still developing scholarship on that genre.

As I suggested in the first chapter, Elvis Presley seems to have been a primary focus for the integration of a deep divide in the main streams of American culture, a privileging of rationality over intuition that pervaded many areas of life, deeply intertwined with hierarchical

⁵⁴⁴ Bob Dylan, *John Wesley Harding* (Columbia Records, 1967).

⁵⁴⁵ *Pragmatism* 31.

oppressions based on race and class. Music, along with love and religion, is one of the most personal, intimate areas of experience that determine one's felt identity and relation to the world, and Presley seems to have been a catalyst for the integration of primarily black and white experiential modes expressed through music. It seems that without the musical integration produced by Presley and his slightly later contemporaries, the desegregation achieved by the civil rights movement of the sixties may not have been possible. Thus, Presley brought African American modes of relation into the homes of white Americans in a dramatic way through his largely white, teenage audience. Although there have been many notable exceptions, whereas whites often treated African Americans as a lower class of humanity at that historical moment, Presley's reverential emulation of his black neighbors in Tupelo and Memphis reversed this privileging so that a generation of rock and roll devotees willingly placed themselves at the feet of a figure who was implicitly preaching the mode of engagement characteristic of African American culture. Indeed, much like the Romanticism and idealism that had carried certain elements of the repressed epistemologies during the heady heights of modernity, I hope that I have convincingly demonstrated, particularly through Frantz Fanon's work, that African American culture has preserved and developed a vitally important inflection of those same repressed epistemologies, and that rock and roll was one of the primary avenues of those modes' ingress into broader American cultural streams. Similarly, I hope I have also convincingly explicated the anatomy of the circumstances in which the new genre was born out of a felicitous moment of play, describable as an eruption of affective immediacy into the dominant field of rational discourse.

Subsequently, the Beatles, emulating Presley along with so many in their generation, brought the primarily African American and rural modes that Presley had embodied into

commerce with the Old World, with England and Germany, two of the primary loci of imperial and colonial domination during the preceding centuries. Largely by dint of their geographical and cultural distance from Presley's American South, the Beatles appropriated the synthesis that Presley had produced as antithesis to their British identities, integrating the witty verbal and rational gifts characteristic of English culture, even in its Northern working class permutations, with Presley's instinctual, humorous physicality. Following their initiation into the repressed epistemologies in Hamburg, the Beatles brought this somatic mode literally into commerce with more prevalent cultural domains largely through the figures of Brian Epstein and George Martin: Epstein in terms of business and the presentation of their image, and Martin in terms of the technological quality of recording and the professionalism of the music industry in London. Indeed, it sounds so simple to say that the Beatles were a Trojan Horse for the reentry of the repressed modes into Western culture but, as they say, the devil is in the details, for there were a great many factors that needed to be arranged in precisely the right combinations to produce the once in a lifetime phenomenon of the Beatles and Beatlemania. As with most peaks of cultural achievement, it seems obvious in retrospect that those numerous factors had to be brought together in precisely the way that they were to produce the novel mode that would define subsequent developments. Nevertheless, it is a testament to the nearly universal accessibility of the Beatles that we can now almost take them for granted when they were once so radically new and yet somehow immediately familiar.

Finally, Bob Dylan, the somewhat more internal counterpart to the relatively external efflorescence enacted by the Beatles, took a more circuitous and obscure path, initially incorporating the mode that Presley had synthesized in rock and roll, and also the country music embodied by Hank Williams, then performing his own series of further syntheses of Woody

Guthrie, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Robert Johnson, and many others. Although Dylan's deep allegiance to rock and roll is an implicit undercurrent in the narrative traced in these pages, the analysis in the last chapter primarily examined the synthesis of "archaic" folk songs and various strains of poetry, from the Romantics to the beats, that formed the precondition for the transformation of rock and roll that Dylan would engender beginning in 1965. By drawing on the more intellectual strains of the countercultural reaction to the dominance of rationality, poetry and folk music, Dylan would mediate the integration of these forms with the more purely visceral mode characteristic of early rock and roll. Indeed, aside from the section on the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, the period analyzed above is essentially a brief hiatus in Dylan's abiding commitment to rock and roll music, for he was only able to remake rock and roll into a radically expanded art form because he temporarily put that genre aside to immerse himself in the streams he would utilize for its transformation.

If I were to attempt to summarize succinctly the trajectory traced in the preceding pages, I would say that Elvis Presley participated in the creation of a genre that initiated one prominent performative inflection of the intimate reintegration of the privileging polarity of affect and rationality that had come to pervade Western culture over the preceding centuries. Subsequently, the Beatles and Bob Dylan brought this integration to a climax, the Beatles in the more external, social mode of the band, and Dylan in the more internal, introspective mode of the individual singer-songwriter. Along with many other artists, Presley, the Beatles, and Dylan embodied and led the way in a fundamental transformation of culture whose implications still largely condition our experience in the early twenty-first century. Although there have been many great artists in the multivalent subgenres of rock music over the subsequent decades, it seems clear that the sixties and the early seventies were the peak of the musical stream initiated by Presley, just as the

thirties had been the peak of the jazz genre initiated at the turn of the twentieth century if we judge the two genres on the merits of both artistic achievement and mass influence. Certainly, a great deal of exceptional jazz music was made after the thirties, and a lot of great rock and roll was made after the sixties, but these were the moments when the two genres perfectly expressed the spirit of the times on a mass scale.

It also seems clear that the torch of cultural novelty has now been definitively passed to a new set of genres, roughly describable as hip hop, electronic-based pop music, and indie rock, though of course many of the elements of rock and roll have lived on in these genres. Much like bebop and subsequent iterations of jazz beginning around the time of the rock and roll revolution in popular music starting in the fifties, rock and roll now continues to play a vital role in our culture, but one that appears to have been eclipsed in magnitude by its progeny. And similarly to the joyful affect I feel at the bare fact that I am writing this conclusion during the moment when America's first black president has been reelected to his second term, it is also immensely gratifying that it is women who are now dominating popular music in the way that men did for most of the twentieth century. Indeed, both of these developments seem to be culminations of the emancipatory movements of civil rights and feminism that so dramatically transformed our culture, particularly in the sixties and thereafter. Only time will tell, but perhaps historians in half a century will look back on the era of Beyoncé, Amy Winehouse, Taylor Swift, Rihanna, Lady Gaga, and Adele in the same way that we look back with awe and delight on Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the many other artists who formed the peak of the rock and roll era.

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