

# ROCK MUSIC AND THE SUBJECTIVITY OF TASTE

**Libertarian  
Alliance**

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Whilst in the literary and visual arts it may, to some extent, be possible to relate people's tastes to their overall philosophy or outlook on life this is not so in the case of music. In literature and the visual arts we are faced with the use of language and/or concrete images which we can relatively easily discuss. Nevertheless the relationships which we discern will necessarily be broad and rough. In films, plays and literature libertarians usually respond favourably to themes which affirm Man's prowess and in which the usually individualistic hero triumphs over his adversaries. But, for example, it does not follow that they will all like Clint Eastwood movies.

In music, however, things are much more problematic. Even when music is accompanied by singing we cannot necessarily discern a meaning. In pop music, at least, the lyrics often have no particular meaning and this is deliberate. The lyrics merely serve as a vehicle for the singing. It is primarily the singing *per se* that one is supposed to enjoy rather than the lyrical content. The lyrics are secondary. They do not make the music.

In this essay I survey certain features of rock music and I use this as a basis for discussing aspects of music in general. I also offer a general critique of attempts to evaluate tastes. I hold, as Ayn Rand did explicitly but not implicitly, that musical tastes and preferences are a subjective matter. However, Rand held that this was only temporary and due to our lack of knowledge. I hold that this subjectivity of tastes is permanent.

## HEAVY METAL AND THE AIRWAVES

Heavy metal and heavy Rock music are probably the most maligned musical forms within the popular music spectrum. All other types of pop music are regularly aired in general pop music settings but heavy metal and heavy rock is seldom heard outside its own special shows. For example if, say, Iron Maiden have a hit single it will be played on the radio while the single is *current*. But it will not be played again in, say, a year's time. This is not the case for other musical forms. Most other pop music is frequently heard well after it has been current. There are some exceptions. The introduction to an Iron Maiden song, *Phantom of the Opera*, forms the backdrop to the Daley Thompson lucozade advert, though only heavy metal fans would be aware of this. Led Zeppelin's *Whole Lotta Love* was, ironically, the theme tune to *Top of the Pops* for a number of years in the Seventies. Occasionally a rock song turns up in an unusual setting. In the early eighties the Rush song, *The Spirit of Radio*, was played on *Top of the Pops* to the accompaniment of Legs and Co! I am sure the Rush lyricist, Neil Peart, would have found this interesting. Within the softer rock category the music of Pink Floyd is frequently used for the theme turns of documentaries and can currently be heard in the TV advert for Nurofen tablets.

## CROSS-FERTILISATION

This bias against rock music is less prevalent in the USA where it shares equal status with the other forms

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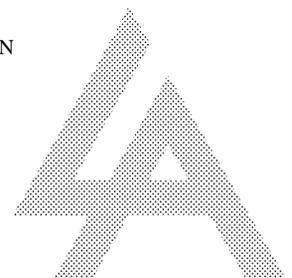
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of pop music. Def Leppard had several big hit singles there in 1989 and have had two very big-selling albums there in the eighties. In fact rock, in general, tends to be more successful over there than it is in the UK. It tends to cross-fertilise into other forms of music. So, for example, Tina Turner can be described as a “crossover” artist fusing as she does soul and rock. She did a duet with rock artist Bryan Adams on his *Reckless* album, for example. Michael Jackson also displays rock influences. Heavy metal guitarist, Eddie Van Halen, played on *Beat It* from Jackson’s *Thriller* album. Michael Jackson’s sister, Janet, cites Led Zeppelin’s *Black Dog* from *Led Zeppelin IV* as one of her favourite songs. Prince is another “crossover” artist. More recently, Belinda Carlisle can be said to fuse pop and rock. For want of a better description I would place her in the “pop rock” category.

### THE VAGUENESS OF CATEGORIES

Categories in pop music are fairly arbitrary and can be misleading. Many so-called heavy metal artists reject this label. Notable examples are AC/DC and Rush. There is a *sort* of distinction between heavy metal and heavy rock. But this is even vaguer than the distinction between heavy metal and mid-tempo or soft rock, sometimes called Adult-Oriented Rock (AOR for short) in the States, or just simply, rock. The labels heavy metal and heavy rock are often used interchangeably. And I do so in this essay. But, roughly, heavy rock represents a slightly less harsh and more harmonic form than heavy metal. So, for example, Led Zeppelin fall more into the heavy rock division than the heavy metal division. But they are referred to as heavy metal too.

Categories give a rough guide to the kind of music one can expect to hear but they give no hint as to the diversity which might be found. In heavy metal a few conspicuous examples are usually taken as being representative of the whole field. A recent *Arena* programme on the BBC did just this. Heavy metal conjures up images of loud, crashing guitars, apparently to produce as much noise as possible. It is often greeted with that widespread but inane comment that “it’s all the same”. When people make this criticism of a piece of music they merely mean that they do not like it but that they cannot verbalise why. There is nothing wrong with this. We usually cannot make sensible musical criticisms regarding *taste*. Though many people foolishly feel they can. It is amazing how stupid some of the comments levelled against rock music have been. It would be far more sensible for critics to just say they do not like it and then shut up.

### THE SUBJECTIVITY OF TASTES AND THE FUTILITY OF CRITICISM

Taste is purely subjective. We can appraise music from the point of view of its technical proficiency and according to how well it attains its objectives. Though

even here there is an element of subjectivity. Experts can disagree with each other. Objective *comparisons*, as opposed to objective assessments, will only be possible if each artist is trying to do precisely the same thing. It is easier, for example, to say that Stevie Wonder is a *good* musician than it is to say that Stevie Wonder is *better* musician than Elton John. To make a proper comparison we would have to have them both playing the same songs. It is similar with, say, actors. It is easy to say that Robert De Niro and Dustin Hoffman are better actors than Arnold Schwarzenegger but between De Niro and Hoffman it is rather more difficult to distinguish. Of course, in ranking these two above Schwarzenegger we say nothing about the content of their respective films. We might still prefer Schwarzenegger’s films. In fact, on the whole, I do.

But let us agree that we can recognise good musicianship and so on. This does not mean we will like the music. In fact we often like music which may be technically deficient. There are no objective criteria for saying what musical piece is preferable to another nor even why we like a piece of music. This is not surprising because our responses to music are largely a “right brain” and, therefore, non-verbal affair. So when we do try to verbalise our responses we often end up talking nonsense. The reasons we give for liking a piece of music can often equally be applied to music which we dislike and *vice versa*. Certainly, describing a form of music as being “all the same” cannot be regarded as a sensible criticism. We often find that music with which we are unfamiliar does sound all the same to us. But clearly it is not. If heavy rock music were all the same then *all* heavy rock fans would like *all* heavy rock music which quite clearly they do not. The same applies to, say, reggae and classical music. Yet it is true that all these musical forms have something in common which demarcates them from each other and from other musical forms, for that is why we categorise them as such. But these categorisations are merely rough guides. They enable us to effect a preliminary mental sorting prior to actually listening to the music so that we can more easily search out similarities and dissimilarities. This helps us to find further music which we think we may like and to avoid that which we think we may dislike. Thus categorisations perform the economic function of reducing information costs.

When we talk about our tastes we can often say at least something about *what* it is we like about a particular musical piece, if not always *why*. So, for example, we can say that we like the lead guitar break, or the fusion of bass guitar and drums, and so on. However, in order to provide a criterion of demarcation between music which we like and music which we dislike we need to be able to provide descriptions which quite clearly *only* apply to that which we do like and do not apply to that which we dislike. But this we normally cannot do. We often cannot say anything more than that we like the melody. And this is clearly too broad

a criterion to demarcate between what we like and what we do not like. Virtually *everything* has some sort of melody. And we will generally be at a loss to explain what it is about a particular melody which appeals to us and what it is about another melody which does not.

At a recent libertarian seminar Chris Tame pointed out that in rock and roll music some people prefer the saxophone sound while others prefer the guitar sound and that there is no objective way of saying that one is superior to the other, for it is like comparing apples with oranges. In fact this subjectivity goes much further than the merits of the saxophone versus the guitar. Criticism of musical tastes is generally futile. It cannot cause us to like something which we do not like nor *vice versa*. Musical response is some combination of environmental influences and brain physiology. This must be so because different people in the same environment do not all end up liking the same stuff. The environment exposes us to diverse forms of musical stimuli which we then filter through the physiological structures of our brains. But our responses are not static. For our musical tastes can change. We can become bored with music which we initially like while music which we initially dislike can “grow” on us. But we cannot be “persuaded” by others to like a piece of music. Others can only present us with new material. Our brains do the rest. Sometimes repeated exposure to a piece of music results in us growing to like it. Sometimes it does not.

Trying to predict the musical responses of others can be difficult also. Someone who is not a rock fan would be at a loss to explain why I like one rock band but not another. To him it “all sounds the same”. A rock fan may fare better but even he might be surprised by my preferences. A friend of mine who was primarily a soul and disco fan happened to like Meatloaf who are a comparatively heavy rock band. He was surprised to find that I did not and do not like them.

### THE MIRAGE OF RATIONALITY

Many libertarians tend to feel that they can rationalise about musical tastes. They are habitually rationalistic types of people and this leads them to think that reason can cover everything. Many of them are classical music connoisseurs. I often feel that classical music fans display a certain snobbishness concerning pop music. Pop music is for the uncultured masses. Ayn Rand dismissed rock music (and most pop music it seems) as being equivalent to the music and the primitive drumbeat of the jungle. It seems that she just observed the behaviour of a few hippies at the Woodstock rock festival in the late sixties and come to the conclusion that all people who like rock music must be hippies and drug addicts. One might draw a similar conclusion today by observing that since many of today’s heavy metal groups attract a multitude of

long-haired denim-clad fans then all heavy metal fans must be like this.

Rand seemed to regard the musically more complex as being superior to the musically less complex. Now while this may be true in comparing, say, a song which consists of just two notes repeated for ten minutes with Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*, it is not true if we compare the latter with, say, *Yesterday* by The Beatles. The Beatles may be simpler than Beethoven but we cannot say that Beethoven is objectively superior. In any case, Rand used to like what she called her “tid-dlywink” music which, though somewhat simpler, I am sure she would regard as superior to Beethoven, whom she detested for his “malevolence”. In truth Rand liked the music she did because she liked it and disliked the music she did because she disliked it.

### THE NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS

The popular music press often condemn artists who produce what they consider to be the same old stuff over and over again or who seem to be “behind the times”. These artists are dismissed as “boring old farts” or “dinosaurs”. On the other hand, artists are also condemned for changing direction! Heavy metal and rock music in general do not fare too well in certain of the popular music papers. The *New Musical Express* tends to be particularly hostile. In the late seventies they dismissed Rush as a bunch of fascists because they were individualists. This was quite interesting given that the lead singer’s parents happened to be Nazi concentration camp survivors. The *NME*’s main grumble was the fact that they did not like Rush’s political views. The question of whether they liked the music or not was marginal. The last thing I read by the *NME* about Rush was something to the effect that trying to get rid of them was like trying to get rid of terminal cancer. The critic was obviously disappointed that Rush were still churning out records.

### THE DIVERSITY WITHIN ROCK

Within the broad field of rock music there is in fact considerable diversity, ranging from heavy metal and heavy rock through to rock, soft rock and what used to be called pomp rock. The latter term was often used to categorise artists such as Genesis, Yes and Pink Floyd. It is a somewhat derogatory description and is usually supposed to designate music which takes itself “too seriously” or which is “pretentious”. Sting’s last solo album was criticised by some people for this reason. But what is wrong with trying to be serious about what one does? Musicians should be free to experiment, to be light-hearted, to be serious or whatever. With music critics, however, one cannot win, so in the end many artists just do what they want and hope that enough people will like it.

Within heavy metal and heavy rock there are many variations in style which may not be apparent to those not conversant with this form of music. Led Zeppelin,

Deep Purple and Black Sabbath, who spanned the same era, produced very different music from each other. Moreover, if we consider, say, Led Zeppelin, there are significant changes in style as one progresses through their various albums. Not all of their material is in fact heavy. The same applies to a greater extent to Rush. Virtually every album is noticeably different from its predecessor. This can be seen in the fact that they have many fans who only like the one or two albums. Those who feel that all rock music is superficial should try to reproduce some of the musical complexities of Rush and Led Zeppelin. Rush have been criticised in recent years for making music which is too complex. It is true that most of their albums are not easily accessible even to the hardcore Rush fan. The lead singer, Geddy Lee, remarked after their *Moving Pictures* album that “some may feel betrayed”. Their albums require an effort. It is hardly surprising that they so often get a bad press. Though they seldom get criticised for their musical competence. A music critic might only give them a couple of listens, whereas I find that it usually takes me at least half a dozen listens to feel comfortable with whatever is their current album. It then takes me about a year before I can compare it with their other albums.

Yet it is a mistake to argue that music *has* to be complex to be good. It can often be more difficult to create something that is simple and good. I suspect that most people like at least some simple, catchy stuff as well as things which are more demanding, depending on their mood. I like the relatively simple, melodic pop songs of The Carpenters but I would not compare listening to The Carpenters with listening to Rush. It is like comparing chalk with cheese. Moreover the comparative simplicity of The Carpenters does not imply that such simplicity is easy to achieve. If it were then any fool could do the same and have the same success. Within rock I like Status Quo even though it does “all sound the same”, although I do not listen to them regularly.

It is probably the case that, given two pieces of music which we like, the musically more complex will generally have greater staying power than the musically less complex. That is, we will listen to the more complex piece more often than we listen to the less complex piece. This is because the more complex contains more things to discover than the less complex. But there is no hard and fast rule. Some simple things have a long-lasting appeal to us despite being simple. And we may listen to them frequently. Musical complexity can show “diminishing marginal utility”. That is, beyond a certain point, music can become too complex. Bearing in mind that what characterises music is the concatenation of periodic sound sequences, increasing complexity can make it more and more difficult to discern this periodicity until at some point it will just seem like noise. The point at which this happens will vary from individual to individual.

Coming forward in time, contemporary heavy metal is very different from that of the late sixties and early seventies. Among current artists there are again significant differences. AC/DC are noticeably different from Iron Maiden and Judas Priest. The latter two are closer to each other than they are to AC/DC. AC/DC fall into the “boogie” style of heavy metal. But all three bands are different from, say, Bon Jovi. In general, I have a preference for the older rock forms and I like the medium-paced rock produced by many of the rock artists of the seventies such as Pink Floyd, Bad Company, Supertramp, The Eagles, etc.

Heavy metal and heavy rock also display a range of singing styles. Detractors would say “screaming” styles. Well, it is not all screaming, but even screaming can show skill. Two of the best vocalists in rock are Robert Plant and Ian Gillan, formerly of Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple respectively. They are good screamers as well as good singers. Plant, in particular, perhaps more than anyone else, perfected the art of using his voice as a musical instrument. A survey through the works of these two singers reveals a rich tapestry of vocal dynamics. On the other hand, singers like Joe Elliott of Def Leppard have a more limited vocal range, but his voice is nevertheless well suited to the particular type of music which his singing accompanies.

### **SOME MAY BE SURPRISED**

I am not arguing that everyone should like heavy rock. I *dislike* most of it myself for the general reason that what is good is usually a minority of what is available. But I feel people should be aware that there is more to it than meets the eye. Anyone who checks out what Led Zeppelin’s Robert Plant and Jimmy Page did on the *Honeydrippers* album, for example, may be surprised. One friend of mine who was not a rock fan used to comment that he was often impressed with acoustic guitar songs which heavy rock groups came up with from time to time. He may have been referring to the acoustic-oriented *Led Zeppelin III* album.

Many people like at least something from most forms of music, so many non-rock fans like the occasional rock band or rock song. I know of a soul/disco fan who likes Whitesnake, for example. This is probably due to David Coverdale’s vocal style which is in fact quite “soul-like”. His is a similar singing style to that of Paul Rodgers of Free and Bad Company. And, indeed, I know another soul/disco fan who likes Bad Company.

I have often found among friends who do not share my musical tastes that, after having repeatedly slagged off some rock group, they have accidentally stumbled across something which sounds pleasant to them and different. They have then found that what they were listening to was a song by the very same group they had hitherto been slagging off.