

# FRANCIS SCHAEFFER AND AN ASSESSMENT OF LATE 60'S AND EARLY 70'S ROCK AND ROLL MUSIC

By Donald Ratcliff, Ph.D.

Schaeffer speaks of several prominent rock and roll musicians in his writings, notably The Beatles, Jimmy Hendrix, Janice Joplan, and others. Early Christian rock musicians, such as Larry Norman, also credit Schaeffer with encouraging and influencing their work. Schaeffer did not disparage the music of the 1960's and 70's, but rather used the lyrics and personal lives of the musicians to highlight faulty perspectives on life and Christian alternatives. Schaeffer was known for listening carefully to the messages of both the cultured elite and the popular culture, and discovering both positive and negative qualities therein. He was also one to affirm creative expressions by Christians that emphasized a more adequate world-view. In this manuscript, several musicians--and the broader trends in music they exemplify--are considered that were not specifically named by Schaeffer, yet who represent some of the ideas expressed by Schaeffer about modern Western culture in general.

## THE FORM

A distinction can be made between the form or structure of rock music, and its lyrics or content. Such a distinction is important since the verbal content of music can be subjected to literary and philosophic critique, whereas style is more likely to be evaluated subjectively. At the time of Schaeffer's early writing, many in the church condemned rock music as inherently decadent. Too often that critique was more of a reaction to unfamiliar and undesired music forms rather than serious study of the lyrics and world views they reflected.

Rock music comes in many varieties, thus making a comprehensive definition difficult. Common among most rock music is a heavy beat, often accentuated by drums and/or bass guitar. A second characteristic is the generally loud public performance of rock musicians, although there are exceptions to this tendency. Third, the guitar is basic to most rock music, again with exceptions. From the inception of rock music in the 1950's these traits have generally characterized this form of music.

Yet within that form, there is considerable freedom, to use Schaeffer's terminology. The form can make the music predictable, as well as providing a context for resolution, yet the freedom within that form gives variety and makes it interesting to those who appreciate the form. Similarly, Schaeffer sees freedom within form as essential to a Christian base for diverse areas of human life, including government, art, and other areas.

In rock, the freedom of variation often moves to the limits of the form by means of unusual resolutions within and at the conclusion of a song. Occasionally one finds rock music without resolution at the conclusion, or perhaps with only partial resolution. This can leave the person with a sense of incompleteness. However, full resolution is more commonly found, as it is the case in most Western music styles.

Generally rock accentuates notes just prior to the beat or "the off beat," characteristics also found in jazz and some classical music. Casual observation by some has provoked the comment that there is a violation of the form (the beat), but careful listening would suggest otherwise. The sequence is predictable, and the beat is not lost in the process. In reality, this characteristic is actually a form within a form, a music form adapted from earlier styles of music such as jazz and spirituals.

Occasionally the form may be described as replacing the content (lyrics) of rock music, illustrated by lengthy instrumentals or distorted lyrics. This practice may at times be an attempt at expressing "a universal" or "upper story" experience as described by Schaeffer. A "total experience," mystical in nature, is produced by the overwhelming beat and distortion. One feels as much as hears the music. Lengthy rock songs often have a thundering conclusion, suggestive of an absolute expression of truth, much as Schaeffer describes Jasper's "final experience."

One aspect of rock music performance, only peripherally related to the music form, is the costume of the performer. These may reflect the values of the performer, or at least the values the performer wishes to project as a part of his or her image. Expensive costumes reflect the value of prosperity, while casual clothing may express a reaction to formality or even materialism. Perhaps unusual clothing may reflect a rejection of the norms of society.

## ROMANTICISM AND EROTICISM

Several trends are found in rock music which have been repeated a number of times in its history. Perhaps the most common is romanticism, which is still a strong influence in today's rock. Most of the early rock musicians, including Elvis and the Beatles, expressed romanticism in their lyrics, portraying an extremely idealistic and often self-centered love. Such romanticism reminds us of Michelangelo's "David" which Schaeffer says represents a person that has never existed nor could ever exist because of its perfection. As a result, youth seek an idealistic love which is far from what can be reasonably expected in normal human relationships. Attempts to apply such idealism to relationships inevitably results in failure, as all human love is delimited by the sin nature. Of course failure of love also constitutes a key theme in modern music.

Romanticism developed into a bold eroticism. Elvis may have been a major contributor to this trend, as he combined wholesome lyrics with actions considered suggestive at the time. Because of his sensuality, he was often filmed only from the waist up. In a sense, this can be seen as an expression of hedonism, with sexual pleasure – implied by the performer's actions or lyrics – being the ultimate value. Hitchcock (1982)

sees the contradiction between Elvis' suggestive actions and relatively innocent lyrics as indications of a deeply divided man. This inconsistency becomes even more apparent when one considers the regular use of drugs during Elvis' later life, while simultaneously releasing records with religious content.

Later, rock lyrics implied that sex provided meaning. Yet such a conclusion has little to support it; sex in itself can be only physical activity without meaning or purpose, an activity humans hold in common with animal life. Sexuality becomes beautiful and meaningful only with a sufficient Biblical basis (love) and within a Biblically mandated context (marriage).

### ACTIVISM AND REVOLUTION

Another trend of the early 1960's was that of social activism. Peter, Paul, and Mary, as well as Bob Dylan, exemplified the movement toward "relevance" in music. Yet many of the concepts used were borrowed from political left wing ideology and sometimes from Rousseau's humanist Enlightenment philosophy. The quest for the "noble savage" surfaced in the accompanying hippy movement and in the Woodstock festival.

A great deal of positive value can be seen in the social activism of the 1960's. Racism was exposed and deplored, a problem long ignored by the Christian church. Indeed there was and still is a significant problem of racism in many churches. However, as Schaeffer states, when the church has failed to confront this problem, it not only went against Biblical values but also against the historical record of Christians fighting injustice.

An outgrowth of the activist trend in music was the anti-war statements found in much of the music in the late 1960's and early 1970's. This movement underscored the value of human life, a value too often ignored today by the pro-choice movement. The inconsistencies of the older generation and their bankrupt values of personal peace and affluence needed to be pointed out, as Schaeffer states. Unfortunately, the assessment was accurate but the solution they offered was insufficient, concludes Schaeffer.

From social activism came a darker revolutionary stream of thought in the music of the late 1960's. Yet, according to Lawhead, this reactionary framework had been linked to rock from the beginning because of its youth orientation. In each generation the music of youth reflects the expression of a distinctive youth culture identity quite different from the previous older generation.

The leftist stance implicit in many of the lyrics of this time – such as John Lennon's "Imagine" – is itself without an adequate philosophical base, says Schaeffer. He calls Marxism a Christian heresy – the humanitarian words were stolen from the Bible, which apart from a Christian framework can only produce totalitarianism.

### EXISTENTIALISM AND MYSTICISM

The lyrics of some rock music may be understood as a correlate of philosophical existentialism. In the face of an irrational universe without meaning, the individual may make a "leap of faith" which can create a sense of meaning for a particular person, although ultimately meaninglessness remains. Songs such as "Dust in the Wind" by Kansas express the meaninglessness of the universe, while "Bridge Over Troubled Water" by Simon and Garfunkle suggests that another person can become one's source of meaning.

Both Judy Collins and Simon and Garfunkle illustrate attempts at deep sharing of feelings, and the result can be seen as very beautiful lyrically, yet vague notions of existential meaninglessness come through now and then (see "Patterns" by Simon and Garfunkle).

Simon and Garfunkle included many themes commonly found in the literature of existentialism, such as death and suicide, and residing in the background is the lack of ultimate meaning in life. The beauty of their expressions belies the despair of their conclusions. Paul Simon continued to produce reflective music as a soloist in the 1970's, then fell into acute depression in the early 1980's. It was not until his widely popular "Graceland" album (recorded with a South African Christian group, with a title that he emphasizes speaks more of a state of grace rather than Elvis Presley's famous residence) that he once again gained the spotlight. Unfortunately, the last two albums in the 1990's have not done as well, which emphasized occultic mysticism and inner city decadence (the latter including many of the worst possible explitives).

The value of mystical experience became prominent in rock lyrics as early as the 1960's in some of the lyrics of the Beatles, when they were visiting Eastern gurus. The non-rational thought forms of Eastern thought, both that of a religious and a philosophical nature, made many question the value of Western logic and philosophy. A well-known group of this era, the Moody Blues, spoke often of the mystical "OM" the impersonal god found in Eastern literature.

Mysticism could also be artificially induced with the use of drugs. In the early 1970's radio stations were forbidden to play songs glorifying drug usage, a theme very prevalent in the rock music of that era. I recall a drug user of the time telling me that music by groups such as Pink Floyd intensified the influence of drugs.

Occultic music joined the stream of mystical rock in the 1970's. Groups such as Black Sabbath sang of the "Master of the Universe," in which the master was Satan. In the quest for meaning, Schaeffer observes in *How Should We Then Live*, even the horrendous can be preferable to meaninglessness.

## NIHILISM

The rock music of the 1970's included most of the trends mentioned thus far, but a new disturbing direction surfaced in the development of "punk rock" and its variations. This trend reflected a much more pessimistic outlook than the earlier music, a nihilism lacking any trace of optimism.

The roots of punk rock go back, I believe, to an often overlooked genius of the 1960's and 1970's, Frank Zappa. In his music, Zappa seemed to perceive the irrationality and inconsistency of any optimism in music. He indicated this by mocking the 1950's and 1960's styles of rock because of its empty romanticism. He deplored the "flower power" of the hippies. In 1967 he produced an album, a "Sergeant Pepper" look-alike which he titled "We're Only in it for the Money," implying his perception of the motivation for the Beatles' work. Zappa satirized the Rousseau-like optimism of the day by placing vegetables on the cover picture where flowers had been on the Beatles album, and replacing the picture of the Beatles in band uniforms with his own male musicians dressed in drag.

Early in the 1970's Zappa began exploring what Schaeffer calls "electronic music," essentially random sounds of instruments and other sources of noise, often lacking resolution. Zappa called his music "dada rock" after the fragmented art form by that name, and eventually made a movie – 200 Motels – in which he attempted to visually portray the meaninglessness and fragmentation of being on the road. "Electronic music" also was used experimentally by the Beatles: "Revolution Number Nine" on their white album.

Zappa's quest later deteriorated to sheer absurdity and finally to pornography – he has the dubious distinction of being among the first to record the worst possible obscenities in the late 1960's. The use of obscenity was an expression of opposition to society's values and thus similar to the "dirty speech movement" which derived from the earlier "free speech movement" that Schaeffer describes. This philosophy of negation rather than affirmation of some alternative is fundamental to modern punk rock. Today with the proliferation of permissiveness, Zappa's music has lost much of its shock value; he is now just another musician not much different from the others. In the years before his death in the mid 1990's, Zappa addressed congress in his attempt to keep restrictive labels off of obscene and profane albums.

Zappa's early experiments and insights caused him to look widely for rock groups which departed from the mainstream. He founded his own record label, "Bizarre," and signed on such unusual groups as Wild Man Fisher, who could spend several minutes mouthing unusual noises into a microphone and pass it off as music. In Zappa's effort to offend he also introduced an all lesbian group, an innovation unheard of in the early 1970's.

Another group Zappa associated with was Alice Cooper, which used violence on stage, such as killing live chickens, portraying the nihilistic philosophy of Marquis de Sade. While there is evidence that such actions were probably just a publicity stunt, the Christian would see the fact that such actions increased the group's popularity as significant: violence replaced a Biblical world-view. The general public responded by attending the wild performances of Alice Cooper and making his songs, such as "School's Out," best sellers. This was the beginning of Punk Rock.

One wonders what Schaeffer would have thought of Frank Zappa (they were contemporaries, but Zappa was relatively unknown except to his few devoted fans in the 1960's and 70's. Zappa was reacting to the meaninglessness of his parents' nominal Catholic faith, and extended that anti-religious zealotry to religion in general. Yet the alternative he offered was not always clear. How one wishes Zappa had made the journey to L'Abri!

## A FEW AGAINST THE FLOW

Not all of the rock musicians of this era were content with emptiness and decadence. In the early 1970's Noel Paul Stookey broke with his group – Peter, Paul, and Mary – after a conversion experience. In his public testimony of that era, he spoke of his quest for truth and meaning, which eventually led him to talk with Bob Dylan. At that time not a Christian, Dylan pointed Noel to the Bible. Stookey withdrew from the music scene for several years before returning to release only Christian music. Others, too, reportedly turned to the Christian faith, but chose to stay in popular music, such as Bob Dylan and reportedly even Alice Cooper. At the time of this writing (2000) Stookey has rejoined Peter and Mary again for concerts of folk music, with an occasional folk gospel song, while there is some indication that Dylan is again speaking of his personal faith. And, of course, the 1970's, 80's, and 90's saw the emergence of Christian rock and roll as an alternative industry, with a few artists crossing over to the pop charts as well. In general, the Christian rock groups tend to be heard only on the Christian radio stations operated, supported, and listened to by Christians. Meanwhile popular music has tended to highlight hedonism, eroticism, and perversity, as social activism and optimistic messages are more likely to be heard on the Christian stations.

## THE CHURCH AND THE ROCK

How has the church responded to influences of rock music? In the 1960's and early 1970's many in the liberal churches accepted rock music without much question, particularly that which confirmed its own left wing orientation. Most evangelicals, on the other hand, held back from involvement or dialogue because of fear. Few understood the content of the music, and the thought forms were quite alien because the church had so alienated itself from what the world was saying.

Since there was no true dialogue with the musical philosophy of its time – with a few exceptions such as Francis Schaeffer – the church must share some of the blame for the decadent direction modern music has taken. In contrast, we should look to the Biblical example of Paul on Mars Hill. Paul knew the Greek philosophy of the time, and even spoke their language referring to the "unknown God." Yet he did so without

compromise. What a vivid example for the church today as we speak to the thought forms of our day, so often reflected in the language of rock music.

*Christianity Today* published the following review of an album titled "The Wall" by Pink Floyd:

*The church's response to rock's godless effusion has itself often been godless, showing God's hatred for sin but not his love for sinners... Absent is the approach of the apostle Paul, who reasoned with skeptics... Absent is the desire expressed by Peter, that his readers should always be prepared to explain their hope. Absent is the attitude Francis Schaeffer displayed in his booklet "Art and the Bible." Looking at Giacometti's sculpture portraying man's alienation, Schaeffer said, "I can understand what he is saying and I cry." Some walls are so thick that only God's love can break them down.*

### CONCLUSION

Many of the themes Schaeffer develops in his books are reflected to a greater or lesser extent in the popular music of the 1960's and 1970's. Others, too, have noted that the music of that era reflects many philosophically-relevant themes (see *Philosophy at 33 1/3 RPM* by James Harris, for example). The music and other creations produced by an era tends to reflect the major concerns of that era, as Schaeffer brilliantly stated in the first paragraph of *How Should We Then Live?*:

*There is a flow to history and culture. This flow is rooted and has its wellspring in the thoughts of people. People are unique in the inner life of the mind--what they are in their thought-world determines how they act. This is true of their value systems and it is true of their creativity.*

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