



Rocking Our Souls

Evangelical Christians in our society do not always do so well at relating and responding to popular culture. Some take the 'monastic' approach, cutting themselves off from it all. Many seek to engage with it, but are not sure what to make of it. We try to be discerning, but we can be so naive, often straining out the gnats and swallowing the camels. Let's take a look at the camels of youth music.

Beyond question, music is the most powerful force in teen culture. It is also the most powerful shaper of that culture. Much attention has been drawn to the lyrics of teen music, but an even more fundamental issue is often ignored: the music itself. This is because Christians tend to see music as a "neutral medium", neither good nor bad, which can be harnessed to carry any message. The message is in the words.

But musicians, and in particular rock musicians, know better. And if you think about it, you know better too. Music speaks. It is a language of its own, communicating powerful messages. The reason we forget this is because it usually happens subconsciously. Music doesn't speak primarily to the mind, but to the heart, to our emotions. It moves our souls.

Take the human voice as an example. Have you ever heard your next-door-neighbours having a yelling match? Maybe you couldn't hear the words, but you knew what was happening. Non-verbal information reached you. They were angry, furious. The volume and tone speak as powerfully as the words. And it's not only human voices that affect us. All sounds do.

Think of the sound of an electric drill, compared to the sound of the surf. One is irritating, stressful, while the other is peaceful or refreshing. Sound affects the way we feel.

Music is the language humans use for this sort of communication. It is a powerful force, all the more so because it is not rational. We cannot control its effects with reason. That is why it is the driving force in teen culture, even more than TV or magazines.

This power has been understood since ancient times. The Greek philosopher Plato taught that music could be used as a tool for shaping the moral character of youth. He assumed that music is a moral influence. He identified various kinds of music as being either soft or strong, ordered or wild, sober or licentious.

Plato argued that continued contact with one sort of music would guide the development of the character, for good or evil. In *The Republic*, he wrote:

"More than anything else, rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained, and otherwise the opposite ... And is it not for this reason ... that education in music is most sovereign?"

This makes good educational sense. John Calvin, the educator of the Reformation, agreed. *"There is scarcely anything in the world which is more capable of turning or moving this way and that the morals of men ... And in fact we experience that (music) has a secret and almost incredible power to arouse hearts in one way or another,"* he wrote in *Epistle to the Reader in the Genevan Psalter*.

This is true to our experience also. And if it is true, it leads inevitably to the question of what sort of musical environment our young people are growing in. What sort of music is shaping teen culture? The answer is plain: rock music.

Since the '50s, when Bill Haley and the Comets exploded onto the scene, rock 'n' roll has been teen music. Adults shuddered and shook their heads at the loud, brash, wild music. But the young people loved it. They were attracted to exactly those same qualities. Rock 'n' roll was exciting, liberating, and danceable, with its driving back-beat. In both music and words, it expressed their feelings: the exuberance of youth, sexual desire, rebelliousness, etc. Youth and rock began a relationship which has only deepened over the decades.

Rock is about doing what you feel, not what you should do. As such it has always been anti-authoritarian and subversive. Rock is the music of rebellion. The traditional enemies in the rock culture are parents, teachers, the establishment, anyone who imposes rules or discipline:

You bought a guitar to punish your ma, You didn't like school, you know you're nobody's fool.

Pink Floyd, *Welcome to the Machine*

Thus rock draws teens into a hyped-up youth "brotherhood" by alienating outsiders, especially adults. Over the decades this has solidified into a distinct sub-culture, which consciously sets itself apart from the society at large. As young people increasingly find their identity in their music, they join a great club across the Western world which shares the same cultural experiences. And that culture is supplied to them through the electronic media over vast distances.

Teens become more interested in the events and fashions of their electronic world than they are in the real world around them: their family, neighbourhood, ethnic group, etc. So it is a two-way relationship: rock belongs to teens, but it entices them to live a rock version of life: they belong to it also.

What is the character of the music itself? The genre has developed and expanded. It now comes in many forms: heavy metal, grunge, pop, rap, etc. All of these, however, share some basic characteristics. The back-beat is the one essential element in all rock. It establishes the physicality of the music. It pulsates in a way that affects the listeners at a bodily level. When it is loud (and rock is loud) you feel it in your body. This insistent pulse determines many of rock's other qualities: its repetitive nature, lack of movement (it doesn't go anywhere), its simplicity.

Being essentially physical music, rock doesn't aim at the mind but at the emotions. It's about the senses, feelings, desires ... hormones. Rock can be passionate, but rarely intelligent or thoughtful. It can occasionally be clever verbally, but the music itself is about instinct, not intellect. In any case the words are definitely of secondary importance: the music is its own message. Often the words cannot be clearly heard, but this makes no difference to the effect.

As physical music, rock focuses on two of the most basic instincts: aggression and sex. It is no accident that it has always generated licentious, angry lyrics and "heroes": the music itself is explicit enough. Rock dancing, of course, combines both these instincts. The music's vocal quality is often harsh, with plenty of shouting. The classic sound is of distorted guitars, especially in the harder varieties. In rap, the 'singers' spit out their angry words as aggressively as possible: that's the rap sound. Rock musicians are under no illusions that their music is morally neutral. Mick Jagger says: *"The best rock and roll ... encapsulates a certain high energy — an angriness ... (it) is always brash ... Violence and energy ... that's really what rock and roll's all about."*

At the pop end of the spectrum, love (which means sex) rules. The tone is sweeter, more hypnotic and seductive. Rock finds it difficult to convincingly venture beyond this very instinctive emotional territory. It is unrestrained music, and doesn't cope well with the rigours of maturer emotions.

This is the music teens live and breathe day by day. It is generally the only music they will tolerate. Now let's be realistic. There's nothing wrong with a bit of teen hormone and aggression. Nor with chocolate ice cream. But would you bring your kids up exclusively on chocolate ice cream?

If the main moral input our youth receive comes from music that glorifies emotion, lack of restraint, sex and anger, it doesn't take a prophetic gift to see how they'll turn out. Don't expect them to become emotionally mature, intelligent, reliable or happy people. Look around you. The results are everywhere.

Though this article has not presented an extreme view of rock, its implications call for radical action from parents.

If you want an ongoing say in the moral development of your kids, exercise control over the music they listen to. From an early age, expose them to all sorts of music. Get them making music themselves and with you, playing instruments and in choirs.

Music can be a powerful positive force in education and in relationship building. When I was a kid I started learning guitar, and my Dad started learning it with me. That's a Dad! Of course young people need some freedom of choice, but within your guidelines. And don't give up in the crucial teen years, when they start to resent control.

Music is where the war for your teens is on. If you don't parent them, there's a multi-billion dollar media industry ready to take your place.

Rock music is far from being a neutral medium. Christians wanting to 'redeem' it for Christ and for evangelism have a lot of problems to work through. You can change the words, but the music still speaks its same old message. Its character is far removed from the character of the gospel. You can't do a rap version of the Beatitudes without radically altering their spirit: rap is not meek.

If you can make rock music that encourages reverence for authority, trust, putting to death the desires of the flesh, discipline and joy, you've come some way to resolving the problem.

If you can make rock that doesn't rely on worldly wisdom, (eg seeming hip or cool) it's looking hopeful. Because Christianity is not 'cool', and doesn't try to be. If you can make rock that speaks to the mind, not so much the body, great. These are only a few of the issues to be resolved.

But I just don't see how it can be done. Music like that will simply not be rock. It may, however, be good music which young people can relate to.

Using rock music to attract young people into the Church or to an evangelistic event, seems to me a bit like starting off a peace rally with a boxing match. You undermine your own message. It's time we stopped it.

And if you want to know where I'm coming from, I'm a twenty-something musician: guitarist and song-writer.

Jonathan Hoves

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