

History 105
Rock and Roll & US History
Critical Primary Source Review

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For the purposes of this paper I will be examining the 1955 piece “A Warning to the Music Business” from *Variety*¹, and the late 60's Richard Goldstein article entitled “Pop Eye: Evaluating Media” that was published in *Village Voice*². The purpose of examining these two pieces will be to evaluate the changing contemporary views of rock music and it's place in pop culture. Through this examination, a variety of similarities and differences will become apparent, especially the remarkable the difference in tone with which rock is presented in both the pieces.

Before going too deep into content, it is important to consider the context of these pieces such as when they were written, who they were written for, and who they were written by. First the *Variety* piece. This piece was an editorial written by an author under the pseudonym Abel³. This editorial deals very specifically with the emergence of rhythm and blues in the early days of rock and roll and the perceived threat it presented to the mainstream consumer. It should be noted that by this time *Variety* was a well established publication that catered mostly to consumers of the days popular music, a section of society that was noted in the lectures to an older, more conservative crowd and not the energetic youth that would have been early consumers of rock and roll. This intended audience was highly sceptical of early rock and roll, it's message, and it's effect on the youth of the day. This is reflected early on in the editorial with lines such as “Our teenagers are already setting something of a record in delinquency without this raw musical idiom to smell up the environment still more.”⁴ It would also be a mistake to not make note of the racial tensions of the day. Although not explicitly mentioned in the editorial, the fears of the African-American community and their influence was an

1 David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates* (Third Edition) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98;

2 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 250;

3 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 96;

4 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 98;

ever present fact in mid-century America that was discussed heavily in early lectures. The introduction to the editorial acknowledges this fact in the line “...the concern about the inroads made by R&B is unimaginable without the widely held associations between race and certain categories of popular music and the way in which the structure of popular music mirrored the segregation of the US...”⁵

Goldstein's *Village Voice* column has a much more complex backstory. The late 60's was the heyday of the American counterculture, a movement that was increasingly accepting of the cultural and musical diversity that was present in America. Goldstein himself was a member of the counterculture and was notable as the first member of the counterculture to be hired by a reputable publication (in this case, *Village Voice*) as a rock critic⁶. Despite this shift in society many people in the mainstream, especially critics (whom Goldstein deals with in great detail) were still struggling to accept rock and roll as a legitimate form of art/music, a fact Goldstein acknowledges with his line “These parochial critics face a practically insurmountable obstacle in their unwillingness to accept the fact that a poet can work in a medium such as rock 'n' roll.”⁷ Goldstein attempts to deal with this fact extensively in his piece, drawing heavily from Marshall McLuhan's “Understanding Media” and his assertion that “the medium is the message.” Goldstein's main audience seems to be twofold, as an establish publication *Village Voice* would have had a mainstream audience, but as a member of the counterculture Goldstein would have been able to attract a much more diverse audience as well. The article seems to be affirming the counterculture, and rock fans in general, that their form of music is indeed aesthetically pleasing while reasoning with the mainstream that the diversity presenting itself in rock and roll is what offers itself to be artistically beautiful despite not fitting any of the traditional definitions of artistic beauty.

Bearing these backgrounds in mind, it is very easy to note that both pieces make quick mention that the mainstream audience does not hold rock in very high regard. Goldstein states that rock is not

⁵ Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 97;

⁶ Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 249;

⁷ Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 251;

considered artistic because “it is self-limiting in form, because it is not musically complex, because it has traditionally been commercial and therefore anti-artistic,”⁸ while the *Variety* piece takes a more moralistic approach stating, even implicitly looking down on the content of the songs with the intentional misspelling of lyrics as “leer-ics” and making statements such as “music 'leer-ics' are touching new lows...”⁹ in the opening. The next major similarity is the acknowledgement by both works that rock was typically a very commercial genre. We see Goldstein mention the previous quote of his in this paragraph (“...traditionally been commercial...”¹⁰) in addition to *Variety* making proclamations such as “...fast-buck songsmiths and music makers are incapable of social responsibility...”¹¹ and “...these business men are too concerned with the profit...”¹²

These statements point to a less explicit similarity, the simplicity of early rock and roll. This simplicity was discussed in many of the early lectures, mostly in context of the fact that part of the appeal of rock and roll was the notion that anyone could pick up an instrument and play it. This simplicity often extended to the lyrical content. *Variety* laments this simplicity among the lyrics, and even more-so some of the messages implied by the lyrics, and frequently makes mention of the fact they feel the record companies are exploiting the simplicity to make a fast buck in this passing trend, saying of those selling the records “The major diskeries...are guilty. Guiltier, perhaps, considering the greater obligation – their maturer backgrounds – their time-honored relations with the record-buying public.”¹³ This is not the only time *Variety* attempts to take up moral high ground on the basis of greater good for the public as there are many calls for the industry to police themselves. The author even goes as far to point out the involvement *Variety* had in spotlighting payola¹⁴ as if to justify the place of *Variety* as a moral beacon for the music industry. Goldstein on the other hand, while

8 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 252;

9 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 98;

10 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 252;

11 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 98;

12 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 98;

13 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 98;

14 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 99;

acknowledging that there are indeed “hacks working in pop music,”¹⁵ attempts to paint a more vivid picture of rock. A picture that had evolved greatly in the 10 plus years since the *Variety* article, spotlighting the diversity of the Beatles playing styles, the rhythm-and-blues of Chuck Berry, the music of Motown, the surf-sound of California, psychedelic music, jazz-rock, folk-rock, and the artists of the British Invasion. Goldstein plays heavily of the theme that “the medium is the message” and implicitly states that you can not place all rock music into a specific mold to evaluate it, it must be considered as it's own unique work, separate from others, to fully appreciate it. Perhaps his best summations of this are when he says of Motown “the lyrics are repetitive and rarely present any poetic ideas; the beauty is in the 'sound'”¹⁶ and his contrasting of surf and California folk which he describes as “materialistic and happy” and “spiritual and often 'psychedelic'”¹⁷ respectively. These pictures that *Variety* and Goldstein paint of rock starting out as simple and becoming more complex and diverse with time are in direct contrast to each other and can be seen as a microcosm of rock's evolution, an evolution that would continue for decades to come.

As to how these documents have enhanced my knowledge of rock history, overall these documents serve as a great reflection on the time periods they were produced and how rock was viewed in those times. *Variety* does an excellent job of showcasing the fears of early rock and roll and the impact it may have on society while Goldstein serves as a window into the optimism of the 60's counterculture by enthusiastically portraying rock as constantly growing. It is also interesting to see Goldstein attempt to bridge the gap with many who probably would have identified with the feelings presented in the *Variety* article, highlighting the fact that newer ways to evaluate media were needed as the medium was constantly changing and the medium could not be understood if new methods were not found. Indeed these pieces also spotlight the working relationship rock and roll has had with the consumer market and the evolution of styles in superficial manners, but on a much larger scale these

15 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 253;

16 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 252;

17 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 252;

pieces highlight the struggle that rock faced in its early years to gain acceptance in society and among critics. It is almost symbolic of the rough upbringing many early rock stars had and the trials they faced in entering the music business.

My personal feelings on these documents is much more simplistic. As a fan of rock and roll I am much more inclined to relate to the Goldstein piece, celebrating the diversity of rock and acknowledging that the differences among the genres are what make each beautiful and worthy of being called art. The Goldstein piece has a much more timeless feel, perhaps best summed in its last paragraph with the line “understanding media is hardly enough; we must learn to evaluate as well,”¹⁸ with “evaluate” seemingly being equated with “take an objective look,” a lesson that can be applied in life to so much more than rock music.

On the other hand I can't help but share the sentiment of the *Variety* article that rock is nothing short of a cash grab on occasion, especially when considering contemporary rock bands. I also agree that occasionally the music we ingest may affect our moral tendencies, although I would not agree on a level that creates the panic *Variety* conveys in its writing as I do feel there are many other factors in this regard. In addition, I do feel the *Variety* article is much more complex than it may first appear. I simply can not help but feel the article was written with the belief rock would replace the contemporary pop of the day that *Variety* catered to, thus possibly putting *Variety* out of business, a paranoia that would have resonated with anyone in pursuit of the American dream. The more I read this document the more this sense stuck with me and affected how seriously I was able to take it.

18 Brackett, *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 253;

Works Cited

Brackett, David. *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates* (Third Edition) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)