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# ROCK AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

SIMON FRITH

In Britain as well as the USA, the 60s have a bad reputation. They're the leading target of Tory demonology; for Margaret Thatcher and her colleagues the 60s were when Britain went bad. And this is not just a party-political point. The Labour governments of 1964–70 were, it's claimed, as much an effect as a cause of the general malaise. Britain's 60s sickness was cultural; it was most clearly articulated by the cult of permissiveness—public license, private indulgence, pleasure without consequence. From the Tory perspective the consequences were, in fact, appalling: the *cement* of society (the authority of age and family, church and class, culture and nation) was corroded. British social democracy turned out to mean a soft, do-gooding, “welfare” state used (like the pill) as a way of avoiding any moral accounting system, blurring the disciplinary role of the marketplace.

There's an oddly Gramscian ring to such assaults on the 60s. Tory thinkers are as aware as socialist thinkers of the political importance of ideas, culture, common sense, and they're equally concerned with the class role of intellectuals. They thus explain the effects of permissiveness by reference to a systematic *trahison des clercs*: at the heart of the rot were all those teachers, lawyers, clerics, artists, critics, politicians, academics leaping on board the pop culture bandwagon, gorging themselves on immediate sensation, fawning upon youth. And it was the reversal of proper age relations that marked Britain's long-term loss of discipline and enterprise. For all their export earnings, the Beatles became national heroes because of their frivolity, because their sound of chirpy optimism concealed a loss of national will.

To read these arguments now is to be overcome with nostalgia—the Tory claims as to what happened so exactly echo what I thought would and should happen at the time—and the irony is that this (backhanded) celebration of the 60s should come from the right—from my current left perspective, the theory of counterculture seems like dippy idealism (the greening of America!) and the theory of the Revolutionary Youth Movement simply a romantic gesture at politics. But nostalgia works on feelings, not arguments,

and what I suddenly remember is the feeling that music matters, that records, sounds, songs, rhythms *can* have all these consequences.

Take one of the 60s' key symbols, the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper*. All we've got now is a collection of well-mannered pop songs in a fading pop art sleeve, but at the time the record was an event, the most orchestrated event, indeed, that pop had ever known. It was, according to its producer George Martin, "the watershed which changed the recording art from something that merely made amusing sounds into something which will stand the test of time as a valid art form: sculpture in music, if you like." This was, wrote Ken Tynan, "a decisive moment in the history of Western Civilization." The Lonely Hearts Club Band represented a new movement of youth—classless and ageless too. Pop had a new purpose: to make out of pleasure a politics of optimism, to turn passive consumption into an active culture. Such ambition derived from the Beatles' authority as superstars—not just skilled pop musicians but skilled pop artists, self-conscious, calculating their entertaining effects. *Sgt. Pepper* was more than just another LP. In making their own style out of the street sounds of 1967, the Beatles gave these sounds a shape, an aesthetic form; they made the optimism concrete and so gave pop fans something to judge the moment by. The Beatles were not the leaders of a cultural movement but its symbols—they were as keen as everyone else to be followers of fashion. Their importance was to use their public position to *legitimate* Britain's nascent hippie ideology.

*Sgt. Pepper* wasn't the first rock LP (Bob Dylan had made that in 1965) but it marked most clearly the pop to rock move, the shift in the terms in which mass music was explained. The key word was "progress." The Beatles' own career—from homespun rock'n'rollers and hit ditty makers to subtle melodists, acute lyricists—was the model of such progress. It was obvious that "A Day in the Life" *mattered* more than "She Loves You," addressed issues other than teenage fun. Rock, in other words, described a more ambitious music than pop, in terms of form, content and impact. Rock ideologues (in *Rolling Stone*, for example) wrote about records' political and poetic significance; rock musicians both represented a subversive community (making the public sounds of the youth counterculture) and realized complex private dreams and feeling. Rock was presented to its audience as something to work on and commit oneself to as well as a sensation to be immediately consumed.

This ideology turned out to be a wonderful source of sales rhetoric—rock commitment meant buying lots of records, rock belief in progress sent people out to buy new releases even more reliably than the pop concern for trends and fashion. But that didn't come clear to me till later. What was most obvious at the time (1967, 1968) was that rock was "progressive" politically too. The rock sensibility—the combination of aesthetic and social assumptions people took to their musical choices, used to account for their tastes—had at its cutting edge a critique of mass culture which drew impli-

citly (and, via Marcuse, sometimes explicitly) on Frankfurt School positions. Rock arguments focused on the problem of commercial cooptation, on the transformation of culture into commodity (“selling out”), the music’s relationship to organized political struggles, to protest. Rock’s artistic claims were inextricable from its political claims (hence its central role in the counterculture)—there was a moment when even the most mindless groups (the Bee Gees, say) had to present themselves as something other than “entertainers.”

This was a brief moment (from Woodstock to Altamont?). By the end of the 60s I recall the British left taking for granted the failure of rock to realize its countercultural claims (though, ironically, the most straightforwardly political rock records were still to come). In Britain, at any rate, there was an obvious migration from the Underground to Trotskyism, from age to class politics. Sex and drugs and rock’n’roll were dismissed as middle-class, male indulgences, while the few commentators who paused to wonder what had gone wrong pointed to the incorporation of rock into the leisure business on the one hand, to the fragmentation of the rock audience on the other. In short, rock’s claims to be different from pop, to evade the logic of mass culture, turned out to be baseless. Rock was tied inevitably into the process of commodity production: the rock community was simply an easily manipulated consumer group.

This conclusion—a kind of traditional left told-you-so—has had a debilitating effect on subsequent Marxist analyses of rock (of 60s rock, in particular). For example, it has reinforced the sour Frankfurt view. The music which at the time was experienced as a challenge to notions of passive consumption is now cited as confirmation of them, and concepts of traditional left analysis (authenticity, realism) discredited in debates about other cultural forms, remain central to discussions of pop and rock. Thus in 1976–77 the British left had its interest in music revived by punk, which was interpreted as an attempt to seize the means of record production, as a rank-and-file expression of class interest, and lost that interest the moment punk was “coopted,” the moment its audience “fragmented.” And so pop is still defined as “escapism”—as if such a description precludes the need for further attention—just as it was in the 60s. What happened to music then appears to account for nothing at all in contemporary critiques of mass culture.

One reason for this is that rock ideologists’ own claims (which, as I’ve suggested, anyway drew on the Marxist account of mass culture) are taken at their face value (the idea of progress, for example) so that their failure is easily shown. What is not considered is whether such claims made sense of the politics of pop in the first place, and this means a peculiar denial of people’s 60s memories. The exhilaration, the sense of change and purpose, the emotional underpinnings of the *experience* of liberation are dismissed as fraudulent because of what happened next—just as the genuinely disruptive, ideological effects of our drug use in the 60s are concealed by blanket

references to drugs' "inevitable" evil consequences. The "failure" of rock thus becomes equally inevitable — which makes it impossible to explain why we were all deluded in the first place. This is particularly a problem now because of the current ideological role of history and myth and memory. The Thatcherist attack on the 60s feeds into an attempt to reconstruct British common sense, and the left's muted response is therefore damaging. There may be good reasons why socialists and feminists are wary of permissiveness, reluctant to *celebrate* the 60s, but not to present some positive account of them is to cede an argument unnecessarily, to deny the 60s' continuing effects. Hippie ideology, hippie music, may be discredited but it survives in important interstices of youth and leisure culture and, if anything, increases in importance as we move from struggles in the workplace to struggles on the unemployment line. Put it this way: Rastafarian gigs in the 1980s are the closest thing to Grateful Dead concerts in the 1960s.

My own critique of the 60s is that they left us a legacy of good music but bad theory—I don't doubt rock's achievements but its claims. The problem is not that rock failed to break out of the pop form but that its ideologists misunderstood the significance of that form in the first place. By rock ideologists I don't mean rock critics but the people who articulate rock's common sense, the musicians, journalists, promo departments, disc jockeys, A-and-R men and record producers, who turn a sales process into a cultural process, who provide the terms in which producers and consumers alike explain their choices. Rock criticism, as such, developed as a critique of this ideology as much as of the music itself. And indeed, by the end of the 1960s the most acute critics in both the USA and the UK seemed marginal to rock culture, their position cutting across the usual rock discourse in its refusal to accept the pop-rock distinction.

This became clearer in the 1976–77 debates on punk I've already mentioned. Critics welcomed punk precisely because of its contempt for rock sensibility. "Rock," indeed, was much more clearly the punk enemy than capitalism—the "old farts" under attack worked in record companies and radio stations and music papers—and by the end of the 1970s "rockist" was a regular term of abuse, a shorthand way of dismissing records and performers. "Rockist" referred not just to a sound (the guitar-based "progressive" blues of the late 60s supergroups was the basic reference point) but also to an attitude, to the use of pop music as a sign of sincerity, a mark of community, a form of cultural opposition. Though from the post-punk perspective *any* musical claims to expressiveness, collectivity or anti-commercialism were obviously false, the response was not to dismiss the music but rather to reject its claims. Musicians who present their performances as "authentic" are evading the interesting issues of pop politics—the ways in which musics and meanings, performers and listeners are constructed *artificially*. It is precisely pop's artifice that allows it be a site of conflict.

The problem is not culture *versus* commodity but the contradictions of the culture of the commodity.

From this perspective, 60s rock people seem remarkably naive. I cringe at my own remembered belief in “the natural” (whether applied to music or sex or desire generally), which stands in pathetic contrast to the knowing postpunk assumption that *everything* is constructed (can be deconstructed), desires too, that there is nothing to be found *in* music, only the pleasure of being defined *by* it. Pop, it now seems, must be momentary (can’t be progressive), represents nothing but itself (not youth, not class, not subculture) and this must be the starting point of any discussion of how it has effects. This certainly casts new light on the 60s. *Sgt. Pepper*, for example, gives me pleasure not because it was the first hippie art work but because it was the final triumph of mod. It is Swinging London music, a shopping style, the sound of consumption (male boutiques, sitar echoes and incense blurring in the traffic noises of Carnaby Street, the Kings Road, Saturday afternoons in the shopping center).

I realize now that *all* my favorite 60s songs were mod songs—play as hard work, work as just a chore—smart, restless songs from the Kinks, the Small Faces, the Stones. The roots of the postpunk pop sensibility lie in these ironic, distanced records, in their use of form as content. The game was to apply pop rules to any subject—mining disasters as well as love disorders. Pop songs about pop songs—the theorists had arrived (David Bowie was beginning his career as a would-be mod pop star, Bryan Ferry was studying pop art with Richard Hamilton).

The best of Britain’s 60s pop bands was the Who because Pete Townshend was the smartest theorist. *The Who Sell Out* (note the title) was a buoyant, funny record with a much sharper concept than *Sgt. Pepper* and a much clearer sense of how pop worked—Townshend’s songs were about music *as commodity*. The group took their links and jingles from a real station, the pirate Radio London, and wrote their own linking ads—Odorono! Medac!—but the point was that the “real” songs could just as well have been ads too—“Welcome to my life, tattoo!” *The Who Sell Out* was a pop art LP, a mocking presentation of the group as product which by drawing attention to this truth (the group *was* a product) seemed to deny it; by providing their own commercial setting the Who distanced themselves from it. But Townshend’s argument was that teenage solidarity and excitement derived precisely from pop’s commercial presence, and the real irony of *The Who Sell Out*, from his point of view, was that the teenage rebellion had been won. The mod generation hadn’t gotten old but had taken pop over (hence Radio London) and as mod pop was routinized so disputes over definitions of pleasure shifted ground: mods went mainstream, stylists went hippie, and pop went psychedelic.

Psychedelic pop had the mod concern for looking smart, but the shift of drugs, from speed to grass and acid, meant a shift of aesthetic. Pleasure

became more laid back, sensual space mattered more than emotional immediacy, and dance floor action no longer involved the mods' intense absorption in their own bodies but a more abstract absorption into a sound. Psychedelia was essentially elitist, but the joy of psychedelic pop was that it invited everyone to join the elite—the music was friendly, its mysteries still framed by hooks and an easy beat.

There was a tension involved, though, as there is in all pop movements—on the one hand the push to democracy, the attempt to please everyone; on the other hand the push to exclusivity, to make consumption a matter of individual difference. And psychedelic pop (partly because of its drug base) developed much more formally than previous movements its own musical language, its own coded sets of references and attitudes, its own journals. Such articulateness, the sheer weight of hippie words, turned a pop cult into an explicit counterculture, and counterculture meant artistic self-consciousness, not in terms of money-making but in terms of creativity. Hippie musicians began to identify with romantic artists generally—writers, painters, poets; they began to assume a culturally well educated audience even while proclaiming their own superiority to it. As musicians like Jimi Hendrix and Cream (named to stress their elite status) displayed their technical skills in lengthy improvisations, complex harmonies, opened-up rhythms that had never been dreamt of in three-minute pop songs, pop stars began to move from show-biz to bohemia, and bohemians seized on pop music as one more means of self-expression.

It was this self-definition of pop musicians as artists which really marked the ideological shift from pop to rock. At issue was the purpose of musicmaking—to please and put together a mass audience or to please and put together a coterie, and, ironically, it was therefore precisely at the moment when musicians presented themselves as political (because autonomous, serious) that they ceased to address the only political issues on which popular music has any bite—issues of pleasure, escape, banality.

The same sort of shift of attitude lies at the core of the history of pop in the USA. There mod pop was based in Los Angeles, which in the mid-60s functioned as London's twin town—in its boutiques and clubs, on its radio shows and records, the latest Anglo-styles were posed and sold. LA's great 60s hit, Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth," seemed less to protest the youth-police battles along Sunset Strip than to celebrate them as style wars.

Buffalo Springfield's songwriters and singers, Steve Stills and Neil Young, began their musical lives as folk singers, and their move into pop was an example of the Beatles' most important effect on American music: thousands of disillusioned rock'n'roll fans (from Bob Dylan on down) who'd abandoned teenage music at the end of the 1950s for the "adult" concerns of folk, were convinced by the British sound that rock and roll was still an exciting form, and American Beatlemania further suggested that

it was precisely its vast popular appeal that made rock and roll (compared to folk) an urgent, relevant, political medium. As Bob Dylan soon discovered, there's no greater musical power than a number one AM radio hit, and by 1967 American towns were filled once more with would-be pop stars, teenage garage bands, punks, making their own version of post-Beatle, post-Byrd, post-Yarbird psychedelic pop — fuzz tones, electric twelve strings, screamed vocals.

The problem was that at the same time (on campuses, in clubs) protest singers and poets were using the new rock sounds without wanting to be associated with pop at all. The folk use of rock increasingly meant taking over the pop form while denying the pop context, and the pop-to-rock move in the USA meant a triumph of bohemia—the American rock arguments came most clearly from San Francisco, a self-consciously anti-pop, anticommercial community. I remember being sold San Francisco in songs (Scott McKenzie's "San Francisco," the Flowerpot Men's "Let's Go To San Francisco," Eric Burdon's "San Francisco Nights") as if it were a natural product, like sunshine and flowers, but available, like all pop, only to the young at heart. I duly set off and was deeply shocked by my first concert, the Grateful Dead in Berkeley—to my mod pop tastes they looked and sounded so scruffy. The basis of the San Francisco community, it turned out, was not pop but art. San Francisco music was made out of nonpop forms, blues and folk and jazz, and addressed nonpop issues; the San Francisco sound was the sound of Beatniks.

The Beats' post-Beatles discovery was that they could read poetry to a rock and roll beat much more easily than they could to the more intellectual sounds of contemporary jazz. If Britain's hippie movement sometimes felt like a rerun of the 1950s self-discovery of teenagers by more affluent, more pretentious youth, the USA hippie movement felt to me like a rerun of the 1950s beat fantasy by more affluent, less guilty youth. In the resulting countercultural terms, what mattered most about the San Francisco sound was not its content (loosely meaningful lyrics went with loosely meaningful music) but its form. The music the bands made met the needs of acid-dropping audiences. It was rambling, loud, multitextured and raw; it used simple melodies and beat, but electronically distorted, to sound more difficult. The SF bands always seemed to have a relentless determination to exhaust their listeners; our aim on the floor was to follow one theme, one sound, through the haze.

This was a new sort of popular music which defined a new sort of popular audience, reflected a new organization of popular leisure. Hippie ideology itself stressed the music's bohemianism, its independence of the usual commercial practices of American pop, but what emerged from San Francisco most obviously was a new style of commercialism itself. The most significant people in the Bay Area turned out to be not musicians but entrepreneurs—Tom Donahue, the disc jockey who pioneered FM rock ra-

dio; promoter Bill Graham, who laid down the rules of the stadium rock show; Jann Wenner, who started *Rolling Stone*. The most important rock'n'roll impresarios previously had been outsiders, seizing on stars opportunistically (like Colonel Parker on Elvis Presley). The San Francisco operators, in contrast, emerged from within the new audience itself, and so disguised the exploitation involved in the rock marketplace in the name of "the rock community." The political significance of this was not that rock was coopted, but that the terms of its cooptation were concealed. Pop commercialism was so blatant that pop fans could never forget their consumer status; rock fans, by contrast, could treat record-buying as an act of solidarity.

The ultimate expression of this idea was the rock festival. Unlike the traditional pop package show, put together *for* the fans out there, the rock festival—in its length, its size, its setting, its reference to a folk tradition—was an attempt to provide materially the experience of community that the music expressed symbolically. This put a new sort of burden on the stars: they had to make themselves "known" to their audiences directly. Thus Janis Joplin was probably the most remarkable festival performer I saw because of her ability to use her emotions (which touched on self-loathing) to bind her listeners together. What came across from the stage (on record Joplin's technical and imaginative weaknesses are more obvious) was the feeling that she so trusted us that she was holding nothing back. Rock performance, in short, came to mean not pleasing an audience (pop style) nor representing it (folk style) but, rather, displaying desires and feelings rawly, as if to a lover or friend. The appeal of the other great festival performer, Jimi Hendrix, rested on the sense that his apparently uninhibited pursuit of pleasures was on show, for all of us to see and share.

Joplin and Hendrix set the intensive norm for rock shows, fed the rock audience's need for the emotional charge that confirmed they'd been at a "real" event. The questions they posed were central to rock: how to guarantee the emotional impact of their performances night after night after night (the answer lay in technology, volume, a gradually evolved repertoire of rock signs of emotion); how to relate public and private life when rock audiences expected no distinction (the answer was to ignore the audience, to deny that there was such a thing as a separate public persona—musicians soon found that they could make lots of money by apparently playing only to please themselves).

This sense of self-importance was most obvious in the singer-songwriters inspired by Bob Dylan. There had always been performers who wrote their own songs but they had not previously been regarded as distinctive popmakers. Paul Anka's "Diana," for example, had never been thought to express his own experience except in terms of clichés so general that they could be used by everyone (the point of pop). What Dylan and his successors brought into pop, then, was the concept of authenticity. Folk

singers had always been contrasted to pop singers because they wrote and sang about the “real” world—the real world of politics, the real world of personal feeling—and it was this convention of reality that singer-songwriters brought to rock. The ramifications were immediate. Singer-songwriters’ confessional mode, the appeal of their supposed “transparency,” introduced a kind of moralism into rock—faking an emotion (which in postpunk ideology is the whole point and joy of pop performance) became an aesthetic crime; musicians were judged for their openness, their honesty, their sensitivity, were judged, that is, as real, knowable people (think of that pompous rock fixture, the *Rolling Stone* interview). Once again, the problem was not that performers sold out the rock community by becoming stars but that they presented themselves as if they weren’t. And so avoided a central pop issue.

There was a similar evasion of pop responsibility in attitudes to fans, in the arguments about what it meant to be popular. The most obvious example of this was the Doors, the most militant exponents of the counter-culture’s romantic individualism. Jim Morrison’s self-image as a poet referred not just to his lyrics but also to his personality, to his obsession with his own perceptions. He seized on the romantic ideal of decadence—it was *Morrison’s* experience of rock performance that mattered, not his audience’s. Given the right musical form Morrison’s narcissism could indeed be compelling, but the rock audience became increasingly unimportant to him as a source of sensation. In the end, his legacy to rock was a style of contempt, the Californian version of the old bohemian argument that the pain of one “artist” is worth the boredom of any number of “ordinary” people.

Jim Morrison is a representative 60s figure (and remains one of the key models for young British rock performers) precisely because of his self-importance. He stood for the claim that rock became an art form through its pursuit of the extraordinary and the extreme, through the very process of self-indulgence. The Doors’ music was actually pretty banal (which is why it sometimes worked) and my point is that the banality of groups like the Doors remains a more interesting aspect of the 60s than their pretensions (though as Jim Morrison continues to be mythologized this distinction gets harder to make—his pretensions have been fed into the pop parade as a sort of bohemian kitsch).

The 60s still stand ideologically as a moment of great musical significance, but it worked at the time as a series of moments of more or less triviality. Rock was certainly centrally important to my life then, but to my private life not my public one. Rock didn’t cause me to be political but rather confirmed my politics as background music, as a permanent sound track of anger and hope and joy—the rock “community” was a community of feeling. Music mattered to 60s politics for its openness, its ambiguity. It was possible, for example, for some performers (the Doors, Jimi Hendrix, the

Stones, the Dead) to be a source of solidarity and enthusiasm for both the antiwar movement and the American soldiers in Vietnam. The politics of pop lie in what people do with it, how they use it to seize a moment, define a time, cull meaning around official knowledge. If pop offers private grief for public use, it also offers public words for private use. Its effects depend on its ability to resonate through different circumstances. Rock theorists got the public-private interplay all wrong, claiming the music as a publicly important phenomenon early on, giving musicians (John Lennon is the obvious example) a misleading sense of their own significance. Rock became a sort of official culture, lost its furtiveness; songs which should have worked as a fleeting subversion of moods became too didactic to be used by anyone. The political issues that popular music can explore—the ways in which people’s “private” lives are public constructions—were dropped for the delusions of a rock “movement.”

The songs that shaped my 60s worked not because of their “authenticity” but because of their playfulness—it was the sheer silliness of Scott McKenzie’s “San Francisco” that made the hippie life seem so appealing. Songs that took it for granted that they didn’t matter registered much more precisely than progressive rock the essential mood of the 60s, the sense of change and possibility. The 60s music that affected me made me laugh, implied a certain carelessness—Phil Spector’s and the Beach Boys’ soap operas, Bob Dylan’s move into rock which made available a new tone of voice, the Stones’ *Beggars’ Banquet*, ironic commentary from the political sidelines. And above all, Motown music, soul, which lay at the heart of British musical experience in the 60s even if it doesn’t fit the category “60s music.” Soul music mattered to me more than anything else because I understood my desires and fantasies by reference to it—falling in love wasn’t accompanied by Otis Redding’s “My Girl” but defined by it.

What I’m describing here is the use and meaning of pop music now just as much as in the 60s (or in the 30s, come to that). What made the 60s different was not that this use of music changed, but that such pop meanings were in competition with the lightning raids of the self-styled artists, bohemians, folkies and hippies who claimed to do something with rock altogether different. I didn’t really believe them but there’s no doubt their activities heightened music’s importance. What was misleading was the suggestion that this involved “progress”—pop isn’t a form that progresses anyway and the suggestion that rock somehow went beyond pop, did things it couldn’t do, concealed the way in which rock too was really a music of transitory private pleasures.

This is not to say that music has fixed meanings or values. Like all mass media it depends for its effects on its context, the response of active audiences, and more obviously than the other media, it also depends on memory. Music is such a powerful trigger of remembered emotion that it is probably more widely used for nostalgic reasons than for anything else. The politics of musical memory—the struggle to determine what the music

meant then, why that matters now—is complicated by its double setting: to play *Sgt. Pepper* is to hear it as music now (in the context of corporate rock and postpunk pop) and as music then (memories, good in my case, of the summer of '67). Then *Sgt. Pepper* seemed to express most joyously the sense that we were on the move. Now (after the 1970s, the Sex Pistols, the new aggression of the right) I can't help thinking the move hit a dead end, and the 60s record I listen to all the time is *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, a record I don't even remember hearing at the time.

San Francisco ideologist Ralph Gleason once wrote after a Velvet Underground performance in the city that "Andy Warhol's Plastic Inevitable, upon examination turns out to be nothing more than a bad condensation of all the bum trips of the Trips Festivals." Warhol's offense was that he wasn't concerned to inspire or represent a community but simply wanted to stir people up and see what happened—he'd been drawn to the Velvets because they made such an unbearable din. For him they were not a rock group but a commentary on a rock group and the miracle (not Warhol's doing) was that their music was remarkable anyway. Lou Reed's songs picked at the underside of bohemia—drugs as sickness and money, sex as jealousy and pain. John Cale had an avant-garde obsession with textural repetition, with the impact on monotony of the slightest dissonance. The Velvets' sound was harsh, loud, unpleasant in its use of feedback and screeching; the Velvets' music was made not out of melodies, hooks and choruses but out of riffs, repeated phrases that built up their effects in layers, made their rhythmic and harmonic impact simultaneously. Each Velvet Underground song used a small cluster of notes that battered and battered against each other until feedback, a screech, was the only logical place to go.

The Velvet Underground's music, unlike most other 60s sounds, offered no escape. It was indubitably present, unavoidable, which is why it became such a profound influence on the 1970s development of a critical pop sensibility, a sensibility concerned with the politics of *form*—the Velvets still stand for the idea that the politics of music involves the struggle to make meanings in the first place, to define something stable in the ever-shifting play of pop signifiers. The Velvet Underground's first LP, then, like *Sgt. Pepper*, offered new arguments about what popular music could do, but where the Beatles' message was that everything was possible, the Velvets' was that everything was in doubt.

It's paradoxical to rethink the 60s with such pessimism (though I'd guess that the Velvet Underground's music is played these days as much as anything else from then) but in retrospect the point is that the Rock Revolution was far too easy. It proclaimed a utopia without struggle; it invoked disorder when the politics of pop really involves (did then too, which is what we must recall) the day-to-day, commonplace attempt to grasp reassurance from the realization that everything—love, sex, pleasure, power—is in doubt.