

We Could Be So Good Together: Rock and Roll and American Fiction.

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One of Sherman Alexie's best short stories is titled "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star Spangled Banner' at Woodstock." In it, Alexie explores the contemporary Native American's search for cultural identity and the ways in which American popular culture impacts that search. Beyond Alexie's specific thematic concerns, the story also drives home at least two other important American truths: rock and roll saturates American popular culture and, thus, influences the making of American fiction, even Native American fiction, literature we would not normally associate with rock and roll. However, unlike jazz and the blues, critics have largely overlooked rock's influence on American fiction, even though, as Alexie shows, the rhythm of rock and roll pervades the American psyche to such a degree that it can't help but influence the production of its literary counterparts. Jim Morrison, poet, singer, and character in the increasingly fictionalized melodrama of his life and death, sings with the Doors, "We could be so good together / Ya, we could, I know we could," and he offers to "Tell you 'bout the world that we'll invent" ("We Could Be So Good Together"). Rock and fiction can be good together, too, because their enterprises are similar: Both invent lies in order to invite listeners and readers on an expedition to the truth of human experience.

Although the phrase "rock and roll" and its variants had for years carried sexual connotations in blues and rhythm-and-blues tunes, when Alan Freed applied the term to the new sound of the early 1950s, only he, the artists he played, and a few avid fans caught on. According to Irwin Stambler in the revised edition of *The Encyclopedia of Pop, Rock, and Soul*, Freed was the first disc jockey to use the term regularly (242). Though Freed had an avid following, neither the term nor the music was immediately embraced nationally. In fact, according to Songfacts, a huge database of rock trivia, when Sonny Dae and His Knights released "Rock Around the Clock" in 1954, the reference was so esoteric the record flopped. Even the record company did not know how to describe the song and on the label called it a "novelty foxtrot."

Bill Haley and the Comets released the song as a B-side that same year, but it made no waves until its re-release by the Comets in 1955. By 1957, though, Chuck Berry's hit "Rock and Roll Music" claimed it was the only music to dance to, and by 1958 Danny and the Juniors asserted that rock and roll was here to stay. They were right, and their proclamation has been repeated or echoed for nearly fifty years. "Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay" became an anthem for Sha-Na-Na, and its sentiment echoes in Neil Young's "My My, Hey Hey (Out of the Blue)." The likes of The Beatles and The Beach Boys covered "Rock and Roll Music." Peter, Paul, and Mary dug rock and roll music, Bob Seger liked old time rock and roll music, and the Arrows, Joan Jett, and Britney Spears all loved rock and roll and wanted another dime in the jukebox. Neil Young encouraged listeners to "keep on rockin' in the free world." Starship even went so far as claiming to have built a city on rock and roll. Exaggerated (and shallow) as that claim may be, it helps highlight an incontrovertible fact: since the days of Alan Freed, rock and roll has become a monolithic building block for American culture, not just in the cities but, as John Mellencamp clarifies in "R.O.C.K. in the U.S.A.," in the small towns, too.

Simply put: Rock and roll extends to all fields of American culture. We live in an age when every honky-tonk country band across the nation plays "Joy to the World," "Sweet Home Alabama," and "Old Time Rock and Roll"; Chet Atkins collaborates with Dire Straits' Mark Knopfler (*Neck and Neck*); country music—no, American music—icon Willie Nelson records tunes with Aerosmith, Kid Rock, Keith Richards, Joe Walsh, Eric Clapton, ZZ Top, and a host of others. Bob Seger, Led Zeppelin, Bob Dylan and other icons of the sixties rock explosion sell cars, clothes, lingerie, and movies. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young lead political protests and Bruce Springsteen and Bon Jovi have worked tirelessly to help heal the nation after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. MTV wants to "Rock the Vote" every four years. Queen's "We Will Rock You" accompanies athletes onto the field in small towns across America, and Presidential candidates cannot resist Fleetwood Mac's optimistic call to not stop thinking about tomorrow. Movie soundtracks have evolved from studio-generated background music to major label productions that are often far better than the movies they accompany. Somewhere right now, a poor soul is listening to "Stairway to Heaven" as Musak in an elevator or doctor's waiting room. As

Richard Lacayo points out in a 2001 *Time* article, nearly every American “under seventy has some emotional attachment to electrified music with a beat” (66).

No one doubts the relevance of rock and roll to American history. Even a cursory review of Eric Nuzum’s “Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America,” a web site summarizing his book of the same title, reveals the powerful impact of rock in America’s municipal, state, and national political and religious arenas since the 1950s.¹ In addition to the political impact of censorship, there are matters such as Buddy Holly’s death, Elvis’ appearances on Ed Sullivan, the British invasion of America led by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones in the 1960s, John Lennon’s assassination in 1980 outside the Dakota, and Curt Cobain’s suicide. These are pivotal moments in rock and roll history whose influence extends well beyond music studies.

Rock and roll might have begun as a counter cultural movement with rebels in leather jackets throwing off the shackles of country music, but that rebellion seemed tame by the late 1960s.² Certainly, as Lawrence Grossberg argues in his essay “Is There Rock After Punk?”, “rock and roll might be seen as an invasion of the house . . . [that] radically reshapes the real, not merely symbolically, [but] by placing the rock and roll apparatus in a (limited) struggle within and against the structures of everyday life” (116). Rock and roll and its long haired listeners might have scared the pants off parents, legislators, and television executives, but “[h]owever rebellious and provocative rock n roll appeared and however much it conflicted with conservative and conformist pressure in the high schools at the time, it was nothing more than a cultural form in which the teenagers in fifties America accepted their conditions of life” (Wicke 47). The very cultural contexts and entities that produced rock and roll eventually begin to co-opt and dominate the sound. In essence, real life issues of life and death begin to dominate the movement.³

The U.S. presence in Vietnam, the fight for civil rights and equality, and the burgeoning sexual revolution transformed rock fashion from the poodle skirts and bobby-socks of the teeny-boppers to the hip huggers and feather boas of Janice Joplin. Music moved from what Robert Miklitsch calls the “‘teen morality plays’ like the Shangri Las’ ‘Leader of the Pack’” to the hip swaying, sex-filled longing of Janice’s voice and her bands’ raw, physical guitar. Joplin’s hard living bluesy rock blends perfectly with Mick Jagger’s exaggerated and openly phallic tongue. Clearly, the “Leader of the Pack” and all

other early rock gang members would have gotten their asses kicked by the late 60s. Let's face it: by the late 1960s Fonzie would have been more welcome at the family dinner table than the Lizard King or Mick Jagger. Woodstock taught America that rock truly was here to stay and it provided a clear preview that American culture needed to re-evaluate the meaning of rebellion.

In essence, rock and roll defines the American narrative of the last forty years or more. Any film, television movie, or history of America now must include references to the musical stars of its era. Rock and roll and American culture have formed a symbiotic relationship in which one informs the other. Or as Joyce Carol Oates' narrator writes about teen culture in the short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" music "made everything so good: the music was always in the background, like music at a church service; it was something to depend upon" (36). Oates dedicates her story to Bob Dylan, and rock plays an integral role in the story's conflict and characterization. Arnold Friend, thirty-something antagonist who attempts to disguise himself as a teenager in order to stalk young girls such as fifteen-year-old Connie, refers to Connie as his "sweet little blue-eyed girl" (54). The phrase calls to mind Dylan's "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," and knowing the song helps unlock both Connie's and Arnold's characters and motivations. Connie's dangerously naive visions of life, love, and sex are epitomized by the sweet, sugary pop music she listens to day after day (think Ohio Express, the Archies, Edison Lighthouse). In her hazy view, sexually charged interaction with boys is "sweet, gentle, the way it was in movies and promised in songs" (39). With no parental guidance (her mother nags at her and her father ignores her), Connie "learns" only from other teens, popular movies, and bubble-gum rock.⁴ Thus, she is helpless against Arnold Friend, whose disguise creates an uncanny resemblance to Dylan and whose actions are like those of the vagabond knocking on Baby Blue's door, luring her into an ominously surrealistic vision of the world. Dylan sings in "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," "You must leave now, take what you need, you think will last, / But whatever you wish to keep, you better grab it fast." In Oates' story, Arnold says he has come to take Connie "for a ride" (43) and commands her to "come outside" (52) in a hurry so that they can "get away before her people come back" (53). According to Dylan's song persona, the familiar world is crumbling: "This sky, too," he says, "is

folding under you,” and later, “The carpet, too, is moving under you.” As a result, “it’s all over now, Baby Blue.”⁵

In similar fashion, Friend tells Connie she must leave now because the place where she came from “ain’t there any more” and the place where she “had in mind to go is cancelled out” (Oates 52). “It’s all over for you here,” he says, “so come on out” (51). The place Connie came from is a place where love is like sugar and honey and yummy in the tummy, growing wherever she goes. The place where she is going, Friend promises her, is a place where “I’ll have my arms tight around you so you won’t need to try to get away and I’ll show you what love is like, what it does” (Oates 53). We can be good together, he’s telling Connie, not in the bubble-gum rock world but, rather, in a world like the Doors portray, a “wanton world without lament” (“We Could Be So Good Together”). Oates’ story conveys both the power and the danger ever-present in the rock and roll that emerged in the 1960s and the 1970s, both in its smoother and its edgier manifestations.

This dependence of the American myth on rock and roll becomes increasingly relevant to American fiction after the rock and roll revolution of the 1960s, and Oates’ story is by no means the only one in which rock plays an integral role. The narrator of T. Coraghessan Boyle’s short story “Greasy Lake” considers rock and roll a part of nature: he and his contemporaries went to Greasy Lake, he says, to “drink beer, smoke pot, howl at the stars, savor the incongruous full-throated roar of rock and roll against the primeval susurrus of frogs and crickets. This,” they thought, “was nature” (2). Boyle’s story takes its title and epigraph from Bruce Springsteen’s “Spirit in the Night,” and like Connie the characters in it develop a worldview grounded in rock and roll. Theirs, however, is a rawer music than Connie’s (in addition to Springsteen, Dylan, and The Doors, think the Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix).⁶ They want to be “bad,” to cultivate “decadence like a taste,” to strike “elaborate poses to show that [they don’t] give a shit about anything” (10). Wild young Billy in Springsteen’s song offers up a “bottle of rose” and “some dust” about which he says to his friends, “Trust some of this it’ll show you where you’re at, or at least it’ll help you really feel it.” They revel in drugs, sex, and rock-and-roll out at Greasy Lake. The narrator and his friends in the story “Greasy Lake” drink “gin and grape juice, Tango, Thunderbird, and Bali Hai,” and sniff “glue and ether” and what

someone claims is cocaine (1). They stay out until dawn, and one night after carousing around town for hours they “take a bottle of lemon-flavored gin up to Greasy Lake” (3). As they pursue this “bad” life on this particular night, they nearly kill a man, nearly rape a girl, discover a corpse, and watch as the narrator’s parents’ car is brutally vandalized. By the end of the story, when two stoned girls with a handful of pills ask them to party, the narrator simply wants to cry and responds, “No thanks” (11). The “bad” life they have dreamed of, similar to the lifestyle depicted in Springsteen’s song, is too much for them. As powerfully as they are drawn to the world depicted in rock-and-roll, they cannot handle the harsh realities of that world any more than Connie can when she is forced to confront it via Arnold Friend.

This interplay between music and literature becomes increasingly relevant after the rock and roll revolution of the 1960s, and Oates’ and Boyle’s stories are by no means the only cases in which rock and American fiction interact. *Carved in Rock: Short Stories by Musicians* (Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003) is a collection of twenty-seven short stories by rock and rollers such as Eric Burdon, Ray Davies, Joan Jett, and Graham Parker; *It’s Only Rock and Roll: An Anthology of Rock and Roll Short Stories* (Godine, 1998) is a collection of twenty-two fictions about rock and roll, written by fiction writers such as Lee K. Abbott, Madison Smartt Bell, and T. Coraghessan Boyle. The Bomp Bookshelf, an online archive “dedicated to listing all music books ever published (in rock and related genres),” lists well over one hundred novels and short story collections to which rock and roll is central. The influence of rock and roll on American fiction can be as simple as Bobbi Ann Mason’s epigraph to Bruce Springsteen in her novel *In Country* or Thomas Pynchon’s grunge rock band in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Rock’s presence extends beyond simple references in the text, though. The so-called “MTV novels” from Jay McInerney and Brett Easton Ellis mirror the influence of fragmented video on musical production and interpretation.⁷ Punk rock and the gothic novel go hand in hand, and America’s endless fascination with biography lends itself to novels and short stories that create fictional accounts of musicians like Mark Childress’ *Tender*, Don DeLillo’s *Great Jones Street*, Carl Hiaasen’s *Basket Case* (with at least a little input from Warren Zevon), or even Jimmy Buffet’s *Joe Merchant*.⁸ Novelists T.C. Boyle, Stephen King, and Barbara Kingsolver utilize rock and roll in some guise or another in their fiction. Their contact

with rock even extends beyond the typewriter and into the Rock Bottom Reminders, a band that “plays music as well as Metallica writes novels,” band member Dave Barry quips on their website. But Metallica does not have to write novels to be important to novelists. In “Intersections: T.C. Boyle’s Rock n Roll Muse,” a March 8, 2004, interview with NPR, Boyle says, “every writer of my generation and down is only writing because we can’t have our own rock bands.”⁹

The relationship between music and twentieth century fiction has some critical history. Werner Wolf, in “Towards a Functional Analysis of Intermediality: The Case of Twentieth Century Musicalized Fiction,” reminds us that “a further cultural function which the musicalization of fiction served in the twentieth century is related to the specific feature of much of Western music since the late middle ages: polyphony” (25). The polyphonic, a plurality of voices of equal importance, is multi-faceted in any discussion of music and literature. Most important, perhaps, is the voice of the music that echoes in the background as any author produces a work of fiction. Notably, though, that echo, or an equivalent one, bounces between the ears of the reader. The polyphonic production of fiction, though, “allows writers to abandon traditional referential storytelling and its implications, while still guaranteeing aesthetic coherence and control for a text which otherwise might be in danger of disintegration” (Wolf 28). Rock and roll might have a guitar solo, but eventually every instrument on stage has to jell to create a song. The same thing begins to happen in Oates’ story. Connie and Arnold Friend are but two voices in the story who meld with Bob Dylan to create meaning. Concomitantly, the reader’s experience, both directly and indirectly with Dylan, creates a separate voice that influences meaning.¹⁰

This relationship, or this polyphonic exchange, is not one sided. John R. Duxbury, in “Shakespeare Meets the Backbeat: Literary Allusion in Rock Music,” catalogues “the practice of incorporating literary allusions and quotes in the world of rock music” (19). Rush gives us the new “Tom Sawyer,” Jefferson Airplane sings about Lewis Carroll’s “white rabbit,” and even Ratt’s “Round and Round” has a reference to Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet” (Duxbury 20, 21). The connection extends beyond allusions, though. Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, in “The Devil Sings the *Blues*: Heavy Metal, Gothic *Fiction* and ‘Postmodern’ Discourse,” argues that “the appearance of Gothic fiction in the late

eighteenth century and that of Heavy Metal in the late twentieth follows the same historical path as their two parent-forms, namely the novel and Rock music” (151). P. Jane Helen, in “Rock and Roll, Redskins, and Blues in Sherman Alexie’s Work,” argues that Alexie uses references to rock and roll and he has “reinscribed them for his own purposes of presenting an American Indian cultural and political view of subversion and resistance” (71). These kinds of articles, though, are few and far between, and considering the centrality of rock and roll to American culture, this absence seems surprising. As an indelible part of our consciousness, rock has moved from the alternative to the mainstream and slowly infiltrates virtually any venue.

It is precisely this attachment to popular culture, perhaps, that has kept rock and roll from serious study among academics.¹¹ Yet, the experimentation in both theme and process, the self-referentiality of rock in its rhythm and words, shows us that “music shares with fiction and literature some essential features” (Wolf 20). The two can be good together. Since Washington Irving adapted European folklore to American settings, fiction writers have led the way to creating a distinctly American literary tradition and identity, just as rock and roll, with some help from across the Atlantic, has created a distinctly American musical identity. In *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O’Connor asserts that the short story as a genre remains “romantic, individualistic, and intransigent” (21) and that it always conveys a sense of “outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society” and, thus, “an intense awareness of human loneliness” (19). Although O’Connor was Irish, was distinguishing between the novel and the short story as he perceived them, and died roughly fifteen years after the advent of rock and roll, he might as well have been describing most modern and contemporary American fiction, novels included, and the best and most influential rock and roll. Consider fiction’s and rock’s most critically acclaimed artists and works; images of wanderers, scorned lovers, Byronic heroes, and marginalized characters giving the finger to the status quo in America abound.¹²

Both genres offer their readers and listeners the artistic exploration of the human condition. An intermedia approach sees music as a work of art which has “a special affinity with, and impact on, the human consciousness and the unconscious” (Wolf 24). More important, though, the combination of these two distinct artistic fields offers a way

for American fiction to expand the conventional narrative and explore the contemporary condition. Simply put, both genres are always tuned in and turned on.

Notes

¹ See Eric Nuzum's website <http://ericnuzum.com/banned/>. For a more complete listing of music censorship, see his book mentioned in the text (*Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America*, Harper, 2001). There are a myriad of other sources related to rock and roll censorship and multiple on-line and hard copy bibliographies. See About R.O.C. (Rock Out Censorship) at <http://www.theroc.org/aboutroc/roc10.htm> for a more complete listing.

² Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds notes that "Partly due to its youthful energy and partly due to its position in history, the 1960s Rock band found itself speaking the language of rebellion: instrumentally, it found the sound of the Big Bands and Bing Crosby too easy on the ear, too mushy; its lyrics found the crooning of euphemistic love songs and the nonsense verse of 1950s 'bubblegum' pop too arid and politically unaware" (152). See also Peter Wicke's *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology* for a more complete discussion of rock and roll's emergence from country music and rhythm and blues.

³ See Wicke and Grossberg for a more detailed discussion of the cultural impact of rock and roll. Additionally, Robert Miklitsch, in his essay "Rock 'N' Theory: Autobiography, Cultural Studies, and the 'Death of Rock'", provides an excellent "anecdotal and autobiographical take on the origin or 'birth' of rock" (par. 1). While Miklitsch claims his essay begins anecdotally, he provides a well-researched look at the early stages of rock.

⁴ According to the *St. James Encyclopedia of Pop Culture* (bubblegum rock enjoyed its heyday in the late 1960s. Bubblegum rock was mass-marketed and created to target the pre-teen market left behind by rock and roll's edgy sex driven music. Think of "Yummy Yummy Yummy" by Ohio Express, "Sugar, Sugar" by the Archies, or "Love Grows (Where My Rosemary Goes)" by Edison Lighthouse; for a more contemporary example, imagine Hillary Duff or the 80s duo Hanson. While bubblegum rock is, like other genres within rock and roll, a cultural product, it is important to note that the music is fluffy and sappy. Like bubblegum, it's fun at first, but the flavor quickly goes away. See A. Mateski's web site dedicated to bubblegum rock for a more complete definition (http://home.xnet.com/~reja/life/bubblegum/bubblegum_music.html).

⁵ Paul Cioe argues in his essay "'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' and the Fantasies of the Unconscious" that "Dylan's mid-60s lyrics are full of 'Arnold Friendian' sentiments and postures" (93). While Cioe doesn't call Dylan a seducer, he does note that Dylan was a key troubadour in the musicalization of America. Connie's attachment to music isn't that different from the average Americans. Cioe quotes Marie Urbanski who notes that music replaces the apple in leading Connie down the path of ruin.

⁶ The Stones' "Street Fighting Man" and "Satisfaction" would be relevant to Boyle's story, as would Hendrix's "Are You Experienced" and "Purple Haze."

⁷ Brett Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero* is considered by many the first MTV novel. These works are characterized by short chapters and quick scene shifts and they reflect the growing influence of MTV on a generation that came of age in the 1980s. Additionally,

the characters in these novels reference songs and videos as a means of explaining their own lives.

⁸ Certainly, rock and roll is a complex musical genre. We define rock in general earlier in the essay. Punk rock, as Hinds points out, emerges as the rock rebellion of the 1960s becomes established and dominated by the record labels. Hinds argues “By the late 1960s, however, a hegemonic force had taken hold of Rock music” (153). Rock and roll became mass marketed, and, as such, lost its edge. Punk and heavy metal emerged as a response. In much the same way, the gothic novel of the 18th century develops in response to the safe, artistic works of the age.

⁹ Likewise, Bobbi Ann Mason has remarked that she “became a writer because she couldn’t sing and was too shy to become a rock singer” (qtd. Brinkmeyer 8).

¹⁰ Consider, for instance, the different “readings” of Dylan possible. A person who heard Dylan live and “came of age” during the 1960s might imagine him differently than a 15 year old who first heard Dylan singing with Victoria Secrets models in the background.

¹¹ See Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin’s *On Record: Rock, Pop, and The Written Word* for a more complete discussion of the academy’s response to rock and roll. Frith and Goodwin argue that the academy has treated rock as a “low grade gimmick” (2).

¹² For a more complete discussion of this idea, see Perry Meisel’s *The Cowboy and the Dandy: Crossing Over from Romanticism to Rock and Rollz* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) and Robert Pattison’s *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987).

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