

Rock as Religion

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“CAN MUSIC SAVE YOUR MORTAL SOUL?”:
A BIBLIOGRAPHIC SURVEY OF ROCK AS
RELIGION

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s, serious critical engagement with rock music was rare. Though the Beatles and the Rolling Stones had already taken America by storm, many sophisticates wrote off rock as merely a facet of the counterculture's mushrooming drug practices. Three authors, however, recognized that rock was not merely an ancillary music for the consumption of illicit substances, but produced effects which were in fact analogous to those of drugs themselves. Paul Williams, the founder of rock criticism and *Crawdaddy!* magazine, compared two songs from the Doors' 1967 debut album. “‘The End’ is great to listen to when you're high,” explained Paul, “but ‘Soul Kitchen’ will get you high, which is obviously much cruder and more important ... [the song] is a catalyst with

... potential for generating truth.”¹ A few months later, Albert Goldman, professor of English at Columbia University, wrote for the *New American Review* that, “like the effects of LSD, that of rocking things is to spotlight them in a field of high concentration and merge them with the spectator in a union that is almost mystical.”² Another English professor, Benjamin DeMott of Amherst College, utilized the same metaphor in a 1968 *New York Times Magazine* piece entitled “Rock as Salvation.” DeMott claimed: “Rock can possess quasireligious force. It leads me past my self [sic], beyond my separateness and difference into a world of continuous blinding sameness—and, for a bit, it stoneth me out of my mind.”³ Williams, Goldman, and DeMott understood that rock presented a vehicle for transcendence, an opportunity for contact with the sacred through sound.

These early rock commentators were among the first to recognize that rock was not merely another kind of music, but akin to religion for offering transcendental experiences. This essay explores what scholars, critics, and other authors since the early 1970s have written concerning

¹ Paul Williams, “Rock is Rock: A Discussion of a Doors Song,” *Crawdaddy!: The Magazine of Rock*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (May 1967), 45.

² Albert Goldman, “The Emergence of Rock,” *New American Review*, No. 3 (April 1968), 131.

³ Benjamin Demott, “Rock as Salvation,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 25, 1968, 46.

what I call the “rock-religion phenomenon,” i.e. the religious constructions of rock music and the experiences of spirituality and contact with the numinous through rock music. I do not seek, as some of the works examined below have, to compare rock with a traditional religion. Rather, through introducing scholarship on the intersection of rock and religion, I hope to take the rock-religion phenomenon on its own terms, examining the aspects of the music and its reception that indicate that rock is different from other musical genres, that it represents and offers its listeners communion with the sacred.⁴

This essay begins by exploring the select works which have recognized rock as comparable to religion. Though these books and essays remain more focused on analogizing rock and religion than

⁴ Defining mainstream “rock” music is a difficult task. This essay uses “rock” and “rock and roll” interchangeably, though the latter is usually used exclusively to refer to the brand of rock produced from the mid-1950s until the early 1960s. My definition of rock is fairly narrow musically but broad culturally. Musically, I sought guitar-based music featuring drums and, most likely, a bass (or bass guitar), wherein music competed with the lyrics for central sound (unlike folk, where the lyrics frequently dominate). Culturally, many works include Rhythm and Blues artists (the most frequent [though largely outdated] genre classification for rock performed by an African American) as rock; I see no reason why any of the qualities I attribute to rock should not apply to R&B as well (or, indeed, to country music), especially considering these genres utilize similar performance styles and instrumentation. I have excluded rock genres that, by design, are outside the musical mainstream (punk rock, heavy metal), as well as genres which vary too far musically (rap/hip-hop). On race, rock, and questions of musical classification, see: Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998) and Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).

contextualizing the rock-religion phenomenon historically, they nonetheless provide a useful introduction to the phenomenon as well as possible means of examining it. Thereafter, this essay takes up studies that have examined the connections between rock and religion without directly analogizing the two. While the presence of such works may seem unsurprising, I illustrate that the nature of the study of the intersection of rock and religion is, in fact, unique when compared to the study of religion and popular culture more generally. I present a hypothesis regarding why rock has been treated differently by both scholars and fans and conclude with recommendations for further courses of study which would facilitate an understanding of the rock-religion phenomenon and its place in the history of twentieth-century American religion.

After Goldman and DeMott, sociologists in the 1970s became the first members of the academy to take up studying the connection between rock and religion. In a 1972 essay for *Sociological Inquiry*, William Shepherd analogized the function of religion and music in the age of the counterculture. Religion makes dogmatic truth claims, Shepherd illustrates, which were of primary importance for Catholics, Fundamentalists, and Liberal Protestants alike. Yet, for Western youth, religious experience had gained primary importance over dogmas. Thus,

music, which provided quasi-religious experiences without doctrinal truths, provides an apt metaphor for religion as practiced by youth. Shepherd utilizes the work of Emile Durkheim to strengthen his comparison, claiming that music, as religion per Durkheim, provides a “set of symbols, certain ritual practices, and production of social cohesion.”⁵ In a 1979 essay, sociologist Bernice Martin took a similar approach to Shepherd, also invoking Durkheim’s terminology of the “sacred.” She argues that rock provided access to the sacred but also, more importantly, a means of thinking about society via a “sacralization of the symbolism of disorder.”⁶ Though, surprisingly, Martin does not cite Shepherd’s essay, Shepherd’s work was clearly novel and contentious in the sociological community, with the following edition of *Sociological Inquiry* featuring responses to Shepherd by three noted sociologists, Robert Bellah, Rainer Baum, and Victor Lidz, as well as Shepherd’s reply to their comments.⁷

While Martin and Shepherd rely on the work of Durkheim, music

⁵ William C. Shepherd, “Religion and the Counter Culture—A New Religiosity,” *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1972), 3.

⁶ Bernice Martin, “The Sacralization of Disorder: Symbolism in Rock Music,” *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Summer 1979), 88-89.

⁷ Robert N. Bellah, Rainer C. Baum, Victor Lidz, and William C. Shepherd. “Symposium on Shepherd, ‘Religion and the Counter Culture—A New Religiosity,’” *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (1972): 155-172.

critic Robert Pielke utilizes another religious thinker to present the rock-religion phenomenon. Borrowing the six components of religion as developed by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), Pielke reduces religiousness to these six categories and demonstrates how each applies to rock music, specifically a rock concert.⁸

In an oft-cited essay published in 1996 in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, David Chidester uses rock as a means of exploring the connections between religion and popular culture. Chidester compares rock with the Native American potlatch, claiming that “the potlatch ... displays the complex symbolic and material interests that are inevitably interwoven in religion. Similar interests ... can be located in rock ‘n’ roll.”⁹ Chidester’s work is primarily concerned with an expansive understanding of what constitutes religion and he employs the example of the Kingsmen’s “Louie, Louie” and its central line of “Let’s give it to ‘em, right now” to explore rock and religion as “practices of expenditure” for

⁸ Robert G. Pielke, *You Say You Want a Revolution: Rock Music in American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 133-138.

⁹ David Chidester, “The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock ‘n’ Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Winter 1996), 756; see also: David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005), 43-48.

both believer and listener.¹⁰

Instead of relying on a single philosopher of religion or associating a religious ritual with rock, Robin Sylvan employs a variety of scholarly voices in *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*. Sylvan's work provides a new answer to the theory of the gradual secularization in the United States: "Religion and God are not dead, but very much alive and well and dancing to beat of popular music."¹¹ Sylvan seeks to understand "what kind of religion" popular music presents for American youth: "How does one characterize its experiences, practices, rituals, symbols, myths, beliefs, values, and social organization?"¹² He addresses this question in four ethnographic chapters, each of which explores a music subculture in San Francisco, including "Deadheads," fans of the Grateful Dead rock band.

Sylvan begins his study with an explanation of the connection between religion and music. In his first chapter, Sylvan demonstrates the inherent religious nature of music and therefore its "universal" application as a vehicle of spirituality.¹³ Sylvan explores the seven cognitive planes

¹⁰ Chidester, "The Church of Baseball," 757.

¹¹ Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 3.

¹² Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, 9.

¹³ Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, 45.

where he claims religion is manifest: physiological, psychological, sociocultural, semiological, virtual, ritual, and spiritual, and claims that music also functions for the listener on each level. Sylvan invokes the work of scholars of religion writing on music (Gerardus van der Leeuw, Rudolf Otto), musical scholars writing on religion (John Blacking, David McAllester), or multiples of each in his introduction of each of these categories. Thus, he compares the religious experience with that of listening to music, staking his comparison on a universal human phenomenon.

In his second chapter, Sylvan further explores music's inherent spirituality, explicating the historical connection between the two. Sylvan claims that American popular music has its origins in West African drum-based possession practices wherein music and religion are inseparable. This music was brought to North America via the slave trade where it gradually evolved into rock and roll. According to Sylvan, despite the evolution of African-originated music away from its original expression, it nonetheless retained its intrinsic religious qualities. Thus, music has become the center of youth-dominated subcultures which "provide almost

everything for its adherents that a traditional religion would.”¹⁴

Sylvan, however, does not fully attempt to compare traditional religion and musical subculture. This task is taken up by Rupert Till in *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music*.¹⁵ Till, like Shepherd, emphasizes that he does not claim popular music as a religion. Rather, *Pop Cult* remains focused on the communal aspect of music, examining “whether functions formerly served within society by religions are now being addressed by cults of popular music.”¹⁶ Till’s work, while focused on what pop cults offer their adherents, also handles how individuals have sought from pop cults what was previously offered in traditional religions.¹⁷

Though scholarship focusing singularly on rock music is scant, each of these works by Shepherd, Martin, Chidester, and Pielke provides useful material in analyzing the rock-religion phenomenon. They offer insight into potential methodologies: comparing traditional religion—either as an institution or a process of symbol creation—and rock (Shepherd, Martin, and Till) or taking popular music in a broad sense as a

¹⁴ Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, 4.

¹⁵ Till seeks to reclaim the term “cult” from its negative associations, supporting Douglas Cowan and David Bromley’s conclusion that the word “cult” is “a four letter word for any religion someone doesn’t like.”

¹⁶ Rupert Till, *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music* (London, New York: Continuum, 2010), ix.

¹⁷ Douglas E. Cowan and David G. Bromley, *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 14; Till, *Pop Cults*, 8, 182.

new religion (Sylvan and Pielke). So too, though they rely perhaps too heavily on an arbitrarily selected philosopher of religion, the authors' theoretical explanations of the meaning of religion provide some guidelines to understand how rock suits these categories and helps facilitate understanding of religion outside the confines of traditional theologies. This broadened understanding allows for the study of the connection of music and religion.

Yet, these works ultimately fail to illustrate the kind of religion rock presents. If rock indeed has replaced traditional theologies as either a locus of community formation or a source of the sacred, why has it done so? Till implies that the ascendance of pop cults has as much to do with the decline of the church as with the rise of rock music. Yet, this claim rests on the teleological assumption that music would serve as the natural successor to traditional theologies despite the unprecedented nature of the rock-religion phenomenon until the postwar period. Why did *rock* become the chosen religion of youth? It is insufficient to claim, as Sylvan does, that the music possesses inherent religious qualities. The field of ethnomusicology rests on the premise that music is both created and heard in specific contexts; Sylvan, however, ignores any context of music

formation or reception.¹⁸

Furthermore, studies of rock as compared with traditional religions deny the study of the rock-religion phenomenon on its own terms. Interest in how rock resembles established religions is of little value to increasing our understanding of rock or the religion of rock. Certainly, there are aspects of rock music which resemble practices of traditional religions. However, simplistic comparisons may exclude important aspects of the rock-religion phenomenon because it bears no similarity to any part of other religions.

The rock-religion phenomenon has not only been studied at the macro level, as other works have examined the blurred line between fandom and religion, comparing fan communities to religious groups. Studies of “Tramps” (Bruce Springsteen fans), “Parrotheads” (Jimmy Buffet enthusiasts), “Deadheads” (The Grateful Dead fans), and Led Zeppelin devotees have relied largely on ethnography to explore fan communities forged around specific musicians.¹⁹ These studies have

¹⁸ Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, 16, 54.

¹⁹ Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Likes Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Linda K. Randall, *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall: Community and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2011); Julie J. Ingersoll, “The Thin Line between Saturday Night and Sunday Morning: Meaning and Community among Jimmy Buffett’s Parrotheads” in Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy (eds.), *God in the Details: American Religion in*

affirmed that these communities are not merely conglomerates of like-minded music lovers. Rather, many rock fans have, like Tramps in Linda Randall's study, "created a community and a spiritual home for themselves."²⁰ Fan communities are comparable to religious groups for their close-knit societies organized around a shared sense of the source of the sacred.

However, while these studies elucidate an important aspect of the rock-religion phenomenon, they improperly assume that the communal aspect of fandom is central to the religion of rock. Susan Fast, in her ethnographic study of the Led Zeppelin fans, concludes that there is "no sense that [the experience of spiritual 'contact' with the band's music] is contingent upon being a part of the fan community."²¹ Similarly, two works on the religion of Elvis fandom, both subtitled "The Cult of the King," demonstrate the personal, rather than communal, spiritual

Popular Culture (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 253-266; Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit*, 83-116; Christopher Williams, "The Song Remains the Same" (PhD Diss., New York University, Department of Sociology, 1995); Similarly, see: David Shenk and Steve Silberman, *Skeleton Key: A Dictionary for Deadheads* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); Garry Berman, *We're Going to See The Beatles!: An Oral History of Beatlemania As Told by the Fans Who Were There* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2008).

²⁰ Randall, *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall*, 109.

²¹ Susan Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 56.

connections many fans have with Elvis.²² The existence of fan communities points to an important feature of the rock-religion phenomenon and these works may help lay the groundwork for future analysis. However, a broader study should not rely singularly on the conglomeration of case studies such as these, as they exclude potentially significant instances of the connection between fandom, music, and the sacred.

Furthermore, the ethnographic-based studies of fan communities do not examine the context in which these fan communities were formed and thereby miss an important opportunity to explore the origins of the rock-religion phenomenon. While Sylvan provides a brief history of Deadheads, we know very little about how, why, or even when fan communities developed; the authors fail to place fandom in socio-cultural, historical context. Certainly, this is attributable in part to the lack of acknowledgement of the rock-religion phenomenon by studies of twentieth-century American religion. Of works dealing with spirituality in America in the postwar period, for example, only Robert Wuthnow and Charles H. Lippy have recognized, and only briefly, that rock provided a

²² Ted Harrison, *Elvis People: The Cult of the King* (London: Fount, 1992); Gregory L. Reece, *Elvis Religion: The Cult of the King* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

vehicle for accessing the sacred.²³ Nonetheless, studies of fandom which claim music communities as comparable to traditional religion or as new religions should ensure they consider the state of traditional religious communities at the time of the fan-community formation. As fandoms and adherence to traditional theologies are not mutually exclusive, an assessment of the juncture when “Springsteen fans” became Tramps would provide crucial insight into the quest for spirituality among American youths in the postwar period. Likewise, given that individuals are not merely fans, an interrogation of the process of the adoption of fandom as an aspect of identity would help explain both the status of traditional religious adherence in the mid-twentieth century as well as the religious nature of music fandom itself.

The lack of contextualization may be attributable to the fact that, with the exception of Sylvan, the authors of the works referenced above are themselves self-identified members of the fan communities they study.

²³ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998), 57; Charles H. Lippy, *Being Religious, American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 225; for work on spirituality outside traditional religious institutions in the postwar period which do not discuss rock music, see, for example: Timothy Miller (ed.), *America's Alternative Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Michael F. Brown, *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997); Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Future work, conducted either on previously studied communities or unstudied fan subcultures such as KISS's "KISS Army" or Aerosmith's "Blue Army," should be conducted either by outsiders to these communities or insiders willing to contextualize their fandom in a broader socio-cultural, religious context.

Nonetheless, these studies of fans prove valuable for their focus on rock's audience. Most work that connects religion and rock focuses either on the lyrical content of the music or the biography of rock artists. One popular strategy has been an exegetical analysis of rock lyrics, elucidating religious themes or references in the work of one or multiple artists.²⁴ This

²⁴ For example: George Y. Yamin Jr., "The Theology of Bruce Springsteen," *Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1-2 (1990), 1-21; Kate McCarthy, "Deliver me From Nowhere: Bruce Springsteen and the Myth of the American Promised Land" in Mazur and McCarthy (eds.), *God in the Details*, 23-46; Michael Gilmour, *Tangled Up in the Bible: Bob Dylan and Scripture* (New York: Continuum, 2004); Bill Friskics-Warren's *I'll Take You There: Pop Music and the Urge for Transcendence* (New York and London: Continuum, 2005); Michael Gilmour (ed.), *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Robert G. Vagacs, *Religious Nuts, Political Fanatics: U2 in Theological Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock: 2005); Michael Gilmour, *Gods and Guitars: Seeking the Sacred in Post-1960s Popular Music* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009); Carl Olson, *An Introduction to Religion and Religious Themes in Rock Music* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011); Deane Galbraith, "Fallen Angels in the Hands of U2" in Scott Calhoun (ed.), *Exploring U2: Is this Rock 'n' Roll?: Essays on the Music, Work, and Influence of U2* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 179-194; Matthew Orel, "From Adam to Jesus: Springsteen's Use of Scripture" in Kenneth Womack, Jerry Zolten, and Mark Bernhard (eds.), *Bruce Springsteen: Cultural Studies and the Runaway American Dream* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 145-162; Azzan Yadin-Israel, *The Grace of God and the Grace of Man: The Theologies of Bruce Springsteen* (Highland Park, NJ: Lingua Press, 2016); Andrew Gardner, "The Theological Virtues According to Bruce Springsteen," *BOSS: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2016), 64-90.

attention to rock music represents one part of the burgeoning scholarly interest since the late 1990s in the intersection of religion and popular culture, and specifically the study of religious images in popular culture.²⁵ These works of lyrical analysis reveal a connection between rock and religion, though they ultimately offer little more than lessons on the meaning of the lyrics themselves as well as the theology of individual rock musicians. The rock-religion phenomenon is not contingent on religious references in rock lyrics. In fact, rock critics have argued that rock deemphasizes lyrics to the point that their content may be immaterial to the rock experience. Noted music critic Greil Marcus has claimed that rock is at its best “when the guitar is fighting for space in the clatter while voices yelp and wail ... the lyrics are blind baggage, and they emerge only

²⁵ See various works referenced throughout this study as well as: *The Journal of Religion and Film* (first issue: April, 1997); Marjorie Garber and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (eds.), *One Nation Under God?: Religion and American Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999); Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (eds.), *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005 [2000]); *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* (first issue: Fall 2002); Conrad Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003); Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Terry Mattingly, *Pop Goes Religion: Faith in Popular Culture* (Nashville: W. Publishing, 2005); B.J. Oropeza (ed.), *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008 [2005]); Richard W. Santana and Gregory Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2008).

in snatches.”²⁶

The other primary lens for investigating the rock-religion connection has been through biographies focused on the faith of rock musicians. This course of study remains related to celebrity culture, the “religion of our consumer society” according to Judy and Fred Vermorel, which has produced popular interest in the personal lives of movie stars, professional athletes, musicians, and others.²⁷ Yet scholars and critics have taken up the study of the role of faith for rock musicians comparably more than they have for other celebrities. This fascination has spawned specific works on individual rockers as well as broad assessments of various rock stars’ intersection of faith and music, many of which have been published by evangelical presses.²⁸

One work that combines lyrical analysis with spiritual biography is Steve Turner’s *The Gospel According to the Beatles*. Turner narrates the

²⁶ Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n Roll Music* (New York: Dutton, 1975), 55.

²⁷ Fred and Judy Vermorel, *Starlust: The Secret Fantasies of Fans* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1985), 247.

²⁸ For example: Davin Seay with Mary Neely, *Stairway to Heaven: The Spiritual Roots of Rock ‘N’ Roll* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986); Steve Turner, *Hungry for Heaven: Rock ‘n’ Roll and the Search for Redemption* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995 [1988]); Scott M. Marshall with Marcia Ford, *Restless Pilgrim: The Spiritual Journey of Bob Dylan* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2002); David Rosen, *The Tao of Elvis* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 2002); Steve Stockman, *Walk On: The Spiritual Journey Of U2* (Orlando: Relevant Books, 2005); Ray Comfort, *The Beatles, God and The Bible* (Washington D.C.: WND Books, 2012); Gary Tillery, *The Seeker King: A Spiritual Biography of Elvis Presley* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2013).

role of religion in the life of each Beatle and illustrates how the band's spirituality affected all of their music, not merely explicitly religious tracks such as "Let it Be."²⁹ Turner's work, published in 2006, was in fact the first of four books published by Westminster John Knox Press (JKP)—the academic and trade title of the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation—to illustrate the spirituality of the music of a specific rock performer. Turner's work proves unique among the JKP titles, however, for its objective approach. *The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen* (2008), *The Gospel According to U2* (2009), and *The Gospel According to Bob Dylan* (2011) illuminate the latent divinity of each artist's body of work, exploring how their music brings forth the 'good news' for strengthening and affirming spiritual—mostly Christian—beliefs.³⁰ The divergence in orientation of the first to the latter three books is unsurprising when we examine the biographies of the authors. Whereas Turner is an accomplished music critic, each of the other three authors is either an ordained religious leader (Jeffrey Symynkywicz, author of the Springsteen

²⁹ Steve Turner, *The Gospel According to the Beatles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), esp. viii.

³⁰ Jeffrey Symynkywicz, *The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen: Rock and Redemption, from Asbury Park to Magic* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Greg Garrett, *We Get to Carry Each Other: The Gospel According to U2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Michael Gilmour, *The Gospel According to Bob Dylan: The Old, Old Story of Modern Times* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

volume), a professor at a Christian university (Michael Gilmour, Dylan), or both (Greg Garrett, U2). These three works represent a host of examples of Christian authors illustrating the way popular culture and, specifically, rock music—even songs that make no reference to religion—can affirm Christian beliefs. Similar works have proliferated since the early-2000s, among them *The Gospel According to Rock* by a former Presbyterian pastor.³¹

Motivation for this scholarship is easy to divine. While Christian leaders were among rock's chief opponents in the 1950s and 1960s, opposition to rock on religious grounds has largely disappeared since the early 1990s.³² These works, then, seek to claim mainstream rock music not as the Anti-Christ, but as decidedly Christian. Under the exegetical eye of these authors, nearly all rock music, when examined closely enough, can reveal something to us about faith. Rock music, like cinema, sports, or

³¹ For example: Andrew Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1988); Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003); Steve Stockman, *The Rock Cries Out: Discovering Eternal Truth in Unlikely Music* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2004); Doug Van Pelt, *Rock Stars on God: 20 Artists Speak Their Minds About Faith* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Books, 2004); Toby Jones, *The Gospel According to Rock*, (Harbor Springs, MI: Books and Bridges, 2007); William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007); Don H. Compier, *Listening to Popular Music: Christian Explorations of Daily Living* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2013).

³² Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock 'n' Roll* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1988), 48-50, 177-184.

literary classics for other authors, presents a site for locating Christian values, evangelizing to youth, and strengthening Christian faith.³³

Yet, the singular focus of the study of the intersection of rock and religion remains striking. Why have no Christian authors attempted to write the “Gospel According to Miles Davis”? Alternatively, why have no music scholars examined the faith of jazz musicians?³⁴ Granted, the presence of lyrics in rock facilitates the spiritual analysis of music in print form, which would prove difficult for instrumental jazz music. But why not study the spiritual applicability of folk music or the faith of a folk artist other than Bob Dylan (whose genre-bending allows him to also be categorized as a rock musician)? Perhaps rock produced around mid-century has an appeal for its enduring popularity and relative accessibility given many of the authors’ long tenure of fandom. Yet, why not a gospel according to “pop” music? While a 2013 musical at Columbia University

³³ On film, sports, and literary classics as relating to Christian faith, see: Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006 [2000]); Shirl J. Hoffman, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010); Leland Ryken, *Realms of Gold: The Classics in Christian Perspective*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003).

³⁴ Robert Gelinas, a pastor and self-proclaimed “jazz theologian,” has written a text on the connection of Christian faith and jazz: *Finding the Groove: Composing a Jazz-Shaped Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009). However, unlike the rock texts cited above, Gelinas’ book utilizes jazz largely as a metaphor for how Christians can approach their faith; while he sees jazz as a means of strengthening his faith and connecting to the divine, his work contains no analysis of jazz or explanation of how the *content* of jazz music affirms or offers spiritual messages.

entitled *SPEARS: The Gospel According to Britney* told the story of Jesus through the music of Britney Spears, there has been no serious engagement of the spirituality of pop music.³⁵ What accounts for the singular focus on rock?

The extensive studies of the faith of rock musicians and the phenomenon of Christian authors elucidating the religious applicability of rock music bear the same underlying assumption. Namely, that rock artists' musical ability and the nature of the music they create provides them with a higher level of spirituality, that their talent facilitates contact with the divine. As Steve Turner writes, "There is something in the essence of rock 'n' roll that mirrors the religious search ... rock 'n' roll stars appear ... more open to religion [than other artists] ... Is there something within music that makes musicians more attracted to the numinous?"³⁶ The interest of the authors cited above demonstrate the belief that rock stars experience a phenomenon analogous to the Overview Effect. First proposed by Frank White in 1987, the Overview Effect hypothesis states that astronauts, following the experience of viewing the earth from outside of the atmosphere, undergo a psychological shift which

³⁵ Melissa Locker, "The Gospel According to Brit Brit: Musical Tells the Story of Christ Through Britney Spears Songs," *Time* online, November 4, 2013 (full link in bibliography).

³⁶ Turner, *Hungry for Heaven*, 14, 15.

can often result in drastic changes in religious beliefs following their return to Earth.³⁷ As the experience of seeing the Earth as a pale blue dot in the context of the vast, dark sky endows astronauts with increased perspective—many of them return with grandiose notions of the “brotherhood of humanity”—the underlying implication of the works cited above is that the making of rock music provides musicians with a similar growth in perspective on the divine or human spirituality.

Fan behavior has also indicated an understanding of rock stars’ experience of the Overview Effect. As the Beatles’ press officer complained to the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1964, “It’s as if [the band] founded a new religion ... Cripples threw away their sticks, sick people rushed up to the car as if a touch from one of the boys would make them well again.”³⁸ Similarly, popular graffiti in London in the mid-1960s claimed, “[Eric] Clapton is God,” and some Elvis fans, like many Beatlemaniacs, believed the artist had a healing touch. Roy Shuker further illustrates that David Bowie, Marc Bolan, and Bon Jovi have served as

³⁷ Frank White, *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution* (Reston, VA: American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 1998 [1987]).

³⁸ Alfred G. Aronowitz, “The Return of The Beatles,” *Saturday Evening Post*, Vol. 237, No. 28 (1964), 28.

“religious touchstones” for their fans.³⁹

Fan responses to rock music are different than those to other cultural productions, illustrating the implicitly understood singularity of the spirituality of rock music. Certainly, fans have celebrated certain movie stars and athletes, as they have for rock artists. However, there is not a comparable phenomenon of fans hoping for healing at the hands of their favorite movie star. So too, while both sports and cultural productions such as *Star Trek* have been studied as religions, these descriptions often focus on the construction and engagement with ritual. A rock and roll concert is certainly a ritual, but it also provides, as we shall see, a vehicle for transcendence. While the nature of music itself—compared to the cinema or sports—may facilitate this distinctive spirituality, folk music also featured a core group of celebrity performers and large concerts in the 1960s, though it engendered no comparable hysteria among its fans.

The sonic makeup of rock music provides the most probable explanation for the unique scholarly and critical interest in the faith of

³⁹ Jann Wenner, “John Lennon,” *Rolling Stone*, January 21, 1971, 36-43; Seay with Neely, *Stairway to Heaven*, 56; Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 214; Christopher Sandford, *Clapton, Edge of Darkness* (London, De Capo Press, 1999 [1994]), 58; see also: Harrison *Elvis People*; Reece *Elvis Religion*.

rock stars as well as fans' unprecedented approach to rock musicians as messianic figures. As critic Paul Williams wrote in 1967, "the direct appeal to the mind made by 'folk' [music] ... cannot compare ... with the abilities of rock to move people's muscles, bodies, caught up swaying and moving ... [it sinks] into your soul on a more-than cognitive level."⁴⁰ The unique effects of rock music have also been observed by sociomusicologist Simon Firth, who wrote in 1981 of rock as "primitive. It uses a primitive understanding of how sound and rhythms—prelinguistic devices—have their emotional and physical effects."⁴¹ However, the musical qualities of rock are invariably lost in the writing about the music. As the famous dictum states: "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture."

Thus, authors' lack of reflexivity can be explained in part by the lack of scholarly attention to rock music from the perspective of music studies. Neither *The Journal of the American Musicological Society* (founded in 1948) nor *Ethnomusicology Review* (1984) has ever published an article pertaining exclusively to rock music, and the *Journal of Musicology* has published only two since its inception in 1982.

⁴⁰ Williams, "Rock is Rock," 45.

⁴¹ Simon Firth, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 14.

Furthermore, musicologist Joseph Kerman writes that Cambridge University Press' 1987 musicological anthology, *Music and Society*, broke the norm for its inclusion of rock music alongside classical composers.⁴²

Similarly, Allan Moore notes in his introduction to *Rock Music: The Primary Text* (1993) that his work remained largely unique for its musicological study of rock.⁴³ Future work should utilize Charles Keil and Stephen Feld's notion of listening as a "feelingful activity" when taking up rock music, which would allow for an examination of the music itself as well as the listening experience and its offering of spirituality.⁴⁴

Ethnomusicologists have examined the spirituality of the musical experience for various non-Western peoples. Such a study should be extended to rock fans, though it should not ignore the works of scholars who have illustrated the importance of consumer culture and technology in creating and proliferating rock and its sound.⁴⁵ Scholarship on rock from a musicological perspective would allow for an understanding of rock's

⁴² Joseph Kerman, "American Musicology in the 1990s," *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring 1991), 135.

⁴³ Allan F. Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text: Developing a Musicology of Rock* (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993), 1.

⁴⁴ Charles Keil and Stephen Feld, *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴⁵ Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999); André Millard, *Beatlemania: Technology, Business, and Teen Culture in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

unique cultural role as well as comprehension of the impetus for the rock-religion phenomenon.

A better understanding of the nature of rock music would also contribute to another under-studied aspect of the rock-religion phenomenon. Live performance has in many ways defined the rock experience in the United States. However, as Tim Quirk and Jason Toynbee note, surprisingly little has been written about it.⁴⁶ Scholars and critics prove eager to analyze rock lyrics with a fine-tooth comb, but reticent to discuss the balance between staging and spontaneity which both Quirk and Steve Feffer see at the heart of live rock music.⁴⁷ Various authors have, if only in passing, observed the transcendental nature of rock performance for the audience. Since the 1960s and 1970s scholars and critics have compared rock concerts with evangelical tent meetings or similar religious revivals, describing mass gatherings of like-minded believers traveling to witness a shared group of prophets.⁴⁸ However, there

⁴⁶ Tim Quirk and Jason Toynbee, "Going through the Motions: Popular Music Performance in Journalism and in Academic Discourse," *Popular Music*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (October 2005), 404-405.

⁴⁷ Quirk, "Going through the Motions," 401; Steve H. Feffer, "'An Opera Out on the Turnpike': Rehearsing Spontaneity/Staging Authenticity in the Rock/Theatre of Bruce Springsteen" (paper presented at Glory Days: A Bruce Springsteen Symposium, September 9-11, 2005), copy provided by author via e-mail, September, 2013.

⁴⁸ For example: Barry Farrell, "Gloria! Donald! Countermiracle at the great stoned rock show," *Life*, August 1969; Ed Ochs, "Tomorrow: Woodstock's [sic] A Critic's Conscience," *Billboard*, September 6, 1969, 6; William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals*,

has been little scholarly analysis of rock concerts beyond the echoing of this metaphor. No scholars have attempted to explain at length *why* live performance facilitates transcendence or the ways concerts resemble old-time revivals beyond the presence of masses of people around a stage in an outdoor facility. Recent work has sought to move performances closer to the center of analysis of rock, but has not yet taken to a fuller examination of the connection of spiritual transcendence and performance.⁴⁹ So too, no scholar has yet attempted to write the history of the rock concert, a study which could provide crucial insight into the nature of live rock performance.⁵⁰

The lack of critical study of live rock is particularly noteworthy given that live performance is a sphere wherein rock musicians have acknowledged that their musical skills endow them with spiritual

Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 208; Dan Graham (director), *Rock My Religion*, 1984; Michael Broyles, *Beethoven In America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2011), 132.

⁴⁹ For example, David Pattie, *Rock Music in Performance* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Wade Hollingshaus, *Philosophizing Rock Performance: Dylan, Hendrix, Bowie*, (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2013).

⁵⁰ The only history of rock concerts this author has been able to locate is a single chapter of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 207-224; an edited volume by Ian Inglis does progress through time via select case studies of important moments of popular music performance, but the aim of his volume is to examine the nature of public performance rather than its change over time, see: Ian Inglis (ed.), *Performance and Popular Music: History, Place and Time*, (Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

perspective or divine authority. Rock guitarist Jeff Beck has stated:

“Recording puts a barrier between the artist and the audience. I only get the feeling I’m putting my true self across when performing live. If it’s a good night on the road ... and if the audience is dynamite, there’s a real chance of my ‘going off’ into a state of altered consciousness.”⁵¹ Jimi Hendrix, too, spoke of the spirituality of live rock performance: “I can’t express myself in easy conversation—the words don’t come out right. But when I get up on stage—well that’s my whole life. That’s my religion. My music is electric church music ... I am electric religion.”⁵² In order to more fully understand the rock-religion phenomenon, studies which deal primarily with rock artists should not focus on artists’ faith but on ways in which they are able to utilize music as a conduit for spirituality, be it for themselves or their fans. Similarly, as Beck acknowledges, the audience plays an integral role in the artists’ experience during a live performance. More attention should be paid from cultural, religious, and musicological perspectives on how listeners access rock music. Many fans have reported experiences of transcendence while listening to rock, and future studies

⁵¹ George Martin (ed.), *Making Music* (London: Pan, 1983), 143, quoted in: Ian Inglis, “History, place and time: the possibility of the unexpected,” in Inglis (ed.), *Performance and Popular Music*, xiv.

⁵² Harry Shaprio and Caesar Glebbeek, *Jimi Hendrix: Electric Gypsy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 342.

should examine the transcendental qualities of both live and recorded music and how audience reception shapes religious experiences based on music.

In summation, there is much regarding the rock-religion phenomenon which has not been fully illuminated. The works cited above do not paint a sufficiently rich picture of rock as a lived religion. Martin, Sylvan, Chidester, Pielke, and others remain too grounded in theoretical and overly rigid comparisons to traditional religion and thereby ignore the actual nature of rock-religion for those who experience it. Even studies which take fans as their centerpiece fail to pin down the true character of rock-religion as they focus too heavily on community structure rather than the personal aspect of fandom. Similarly, the lack of scholarly attention on live rock performance and its history is indicative of our dearth of knowledge of the lived experience of the rock-religion phenomenon.

Explication of the socio-historical, cultural context in which the rock-religion phenomenon emerged would allow for an understanding of the true character of the religion of rock and the way its offerings of transcendence filled a void for its adherents. Historians of rock have amply noted that rock did not emerge in a vacuum, that the new musical form brought distinct changes to American society and culture in the

postwar period.⁵³ This essay proposes two future courses of study in order to fully explain the rock-religion phenomenon and its lessons on religion in twentieth-century America. First, future work should explore why rock remains unique from other musical genres and other products of the cultural sphere, a distinction indicated by the actions of fans as well as the attention of scholars. A musicological discussion would provide an important step in this course of study. While rock music bore clear offerings of transcendence that had not been offered on the same scale in previous genres of popular music such as folk or jazz, rock music was nonetheless composed, performed, and listened to within a specific ethnomusicological context. Youth listening practices before the emergence of rock, for example, would provide crucial insight into how audience reception facilitated the transformation of rock into a genre with religious power.

Second, in order to understand the rock-religion phenomenon, future studies should illuminate not only the musical but also the religious climate into which rock emerged. Historians of religion should seek to explain the widespread emergence of the new religion of rock and its

⁵³ See, for example, Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

attraction of youthful devotees in the postwar period. What were rock fans finding in musical subcultures and in rock concerts that replaced or supplemented religious experiences in more traditional settings? Scholars of American religion debate whether America entered a period of 'secularization' in the twentieth century, but the exploration of rock as a religion and as offering religious experiences provides insight into the state of religious belief in the postwar period, the nature of contemporary quests for religious experience, and the relationship between culture and religion.

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