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What Hath Rock Wrought?: Blues, Country Music, Rock'n'Roll and Istanbul

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If between 1925 and 1960 the most visible musical exports of the United States were the Broadway show tune and jazz, that distinction in the last quarter of the twentieth century has shifted to rock music. Since the 1960s, when British groups such as the Kinks, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones absorbed and transmuted Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley, then winged the new product back across the Atlantic to America in the so-called British Invasion, rock has become the *lingua franca* of the world's youth. In sheer popularity rock far surpasses its musical cousin jazz. The pervasiveness of the rock phenomenon prompts a couple of interesting questions:
1. What is the source of this music's appeal?
2. How adaptable is a fundamentally American musical discourse to expressive impulses of other cultures?

It may be helpful to trace the emergence of rock `n' roll in the United States as a confluence of two subcultures: one black, with its roots in an African past; the other white, with its roots in the British Isles. For rock `n' roll (and by extension its maturer form, which may be called rock) is a multicultural phenomenon. Neither a "black" nor a "white" music, it is a hybrid--a hybrid that has retained, with remarkable resiliency, the buoyancy of the vernacular cultures out of which it grew. But in a different kind of society, one for example that is predominantly Islamic and that possesses rich and vital vernacular musics of its own, can rock ever be more than an exotic but brief flower grafted on the gnarly stock of tradition? Before assenting too quickly, we might remember that the music and dance of the Turkish folk, however subjected on occasion to the manipulations of nationalist politics, are the expression of vital subcultures. These conditions are not totally dissimilar from those that gave rise in the United States to a new music.

Not so long ago Mr. Irving Caesar, Tin Pan Alley song publisher and lyricist of "Tea for Two," could make a statement such as the following: "The popular song of the last half-century had the largest impact on American culture of any so-called art form. Why, for God's sake, the popular song IS American culture" (qtd. in Furia 2).

What Mr. Caesar meant by "the popular song" is the music and lyrics which were marketed to the American public during the 1920s, `30s, and `40s, mainly through the music-publishing houses in New York that were known collectively as Tin Pan Alley. Lorenzo Hart, Ira and George Gershwin, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Cole Porter are a few great names of the era. Their music and lyrics were well-crafted, witty, tender, and steeped in the conventions of European verse. When Tin Pan Alley joined forces with the fledgling sound-recording and radio industries in the early 1920s, the result was a monolithic commercial music establishment whose hegemony remained virtually unbroken until the 1950s. Its audience consisted primarily of middle-class Americans: it was they who understood the music, the words, and the images of the art form and they who supported it by purchasing radios, record players, records, and the occasional ticket to a Broadway musical. What Irving Caesar meant by "American culture" was their culture.

Yet there were other cultures in the United States, which also had their musics (for we need not suppose that people who did not sing or listen to the popular song as conceived by New York publishers were condemned to sit at home in silence). I mean particularly the cultures--or subcultures, if you will--of black African-American; and white, predominantly Anglo-Irish-Scottish-American inhabitants of the rural South. These communities produced distinct musics, which, though they have expanded far beyond their original communities, never lost their identity. They are known respectively as the blues and as country music.

The form of music known as the blues is a cultural expression of the African-American people of the United States. The first Africans, of course, were brought to the colonies against their will as slaves. As we know from slave narratives and other historical accounts, every effort was made to strip them of their cultural heritage, even their identity as human beings, so that their owners could more comfortably regard them not as people with rights but as property, mere aids to production. They were forbidden to play drums--the most important musical instrument of tribal Africa--because plantation owners feared drums could be used to send messages (as indeed they could). They were denied access to education and to print culture, the conventional expressive medium of the dominant society. It was illegal to teach a slave how to read and write.

Nevertheless fragments of African tribal culture survived in oral expression--in the "hollers" of fieldworkers, in the lullabies and courtship songs of a constrained domestic life, and in the fervent preaching and singing of religious congregations. Here could be found the rhythms, harmonies, and imagery of African music. Modified by the changing sensibilities of African-Americans as they slowly moved from slavery to freedom, this music is what toward the end of the nineteenth century became the blues and, a little later, jazz. By 1910 such musicians as Charlie Patton had developed the Delta blues into the forms in which it would appear in recordings of the `20s and `30s. Among other characteristics the style was heavy in rhythmic syncopation and sexual innuendo.

Black music at first received little respect from the nation's cultural establishment. The music of blacks was considered "primitive," "barbaric," "tuneless," "cacophonous," or at best, "folk." Indeed, when the first recordings of blues and jazz were offered for sale by Columbia Records in 1920, record-company executives could think of no more descriptive category than "race music."(Note 1)

The second music mentioned--"country music"--was, like black music, an import to America, although most of its practitioners came to the country willingly, or at least not as slaves. Its origins are European, with immediate roots in the ballads, jigs, and reels of the British Isles, particularly the Scottish and Irish highlands. Many folk ballads (such as "Lord Randall," "Barbara Allan," or "House Carpenter") have kept their form essentially unchanged to the present day. Though ballads were frequently sung without accompaniment, dancing was another matter, and European string instruments such as the guitar, violin, and mandolin were often used singly or in combination to accompany the lively dances favored by these mountain folk.

As it happened, large concentrations of immigrants from rural Britain settled in the Appalachian Mountains of the American South--the same geographical area where, in the lowlands, the plantation system had imported large numbers of Africans as slaves. There was little social mixing between the two ethnic groups, but there was a good deal of musical cross-pollination. To mention only two examples, African-Americans adapted the ballad form to their own purposes in the blues lyric; and white country musicians incorporated the banjo, an African instrument, into the traditional string band.

Like black music, Americanized "mountain music" was held in low esteem by urban tastemakers. When the rural music of white Appalachia began to be issued on recordings in 1923, company executives again could think of no more descriptive classification than "hillbilly music" after the derogatory epithet that, like "nigger" to the American Negro, was often applied to these frequently poor and illiterate mountaineers. One of the pioneering groups in the recording of "hillbilly music" was Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers. Their 1926 recording of "Whitehouse Blues," commemorating the assassination of President McKinley in 1901, is a good example of topical commentary in country music, as well as of the lively rhythms that made mountain music so infectious.

We may call blues and country music vernacular music after the Latin *vernaculus*, meaning a slave born in his master's house--a native, in short. Vernacular musics exist everywhere in the United States, but their heaviest concentration has always been in the South--across the Southeast from the Atlantic coast of the Carolinas and Georgia to the Appalachians, thence down to the Mississippi Delta and across the Southwest from the Louisiana swamps into Texas, thence west to the High Plains and south to the Rio Grande Valley.

The vernacular musics made modest gains in popularity in the 1920s and `30s, as record companies found it profitable to go "on location," recording performers in their own communities and then selling the product back to the community. (This was the impetus behind RCA's 1920s recordings of such notable <stanbul musicians as Tamburi Cemil Bey.) But what was more important in the long run was the recording industry's discovery of radio. In 1921 there were fewer than 20 radio stations in the United States; in 1922 there were 600. By 1933, 60% of American households owned a radio (by 1950 the number would be 96%), and by 1940 there would be radio stations in every nine out of ten cities with a population over 100,000 (Ennis 58-59). These radio stations had to play something, and that most often was music.

As a rule, stations which belonged to the big network systems--NBC, CBS, and the Mutual Broadcasting Network--played musical fare that originated in the Tin Pan Alley establishment. On most of this music copyrights were protected and performance rights licensed by the American Society of Artists, Composers, and Performers (ASCAP), founded in 1914 for this purpose. However, in the 1930s, when ASCAP attempted to charge fees to radio broadcasters for the use of its music, a long power struggle ensued. In the course of the dispute many independent stations chose to bypass ASCAP and to play music that was in the public domain (not copyrighted by anybody), or to air live performances. Such music tended to be regional and vernacular rather than reflecting the taste of New York or Hollywood. Eventually radio broadcasters formed their own licensing company in 1940 as an alternative to ASCAP. It was called Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI). The BMI catalogue contained a much broader selection of regional and ethnic music than the ASCAP catalogue. It was a difference that would have a notable effect on radio broadcasting of the 1940s and `50s, and consequently on the emergence of rock `n' roll. (Note 2)

One music that was never heard on the radio in the 1920s and `30s was non-sacred rural black music--that is, the blues. This was an exclusion owing primarily to racist policies entrenched in the Southern power structure. The self-appointed guardians of Southern morality thought such music entirely too "suggestive" . . . too "savage" . . . too "primitive" for the general public--precisely the charges that would be leveled against rock `n' roll in the 1950s by preachers and pundits who declared that it was corrupting the nation's teenagers. Still, even though very little vernacular Black music, except for gospel music, was heard on the radio, mutual influences continued to be traded between the blues and "hillbilly" music. Jimmie Rodgers, for example, a white "hillbilly" singer whose "blue yodels" brought him national popularity in the 1930s, readily acknowledged his debt to black performers such as Blind Lemon Jefferson. On the other hand, bluesman Mississippi John Hurt reported that his primary influence was none other than Jimmie Rodgers.

Sometimes indeed the color of the performers was not apparent in the music. For example, because of a clerical mistake, a record by white performers Austin and

Lee Allen, known as the Chattanooga Boys, was issued in 1927 on Columbia's 14000 "race music" series rather than its 15000 "hillbilly" series. No one seemed to mind except the Allen brothers, who threatened a $250,000 lawsuit. (The recording was called "Chattanooga Blues" and was recently reissued by Columbia on its "Roots `n' Blues Retrospective 1925-1950.")

Each in its fashion, then, the blues and country music were at heart rebellious: both constituted a rejection of the commercialized popular song as conceived by Tin Pan Alley. The blues, moreover, encoded the dissimulated rebellious attitudes of a people effectively "colonialized" for 300 years. In a "deliberately obscure language of concealment" (Oliver 11; see also Gates Jr. Chapter I) that Paul Garon associates with such time-honored practices as "signifying" and "playing the dozens," the blues singer celebrated prowess in both sexual and criminal matters; in outwitting the preacher, the devil, the police and other authority figures; and in performing other socially disparaged but effective acts of acquiring personal autonomy and identity (Garon 62ff; see also Cooke Chapter I). Furthermore, blues lyrics, besides being filled with references to dreams, love, madness, the devil, drugs, alcohol, and sexual passion, are not without a rich sense of humor--the range extends from the subtle to the vaudevillian and certainly does not overlook the satirical. In short, the blues is a music that, in its anarchic and erotic impulses, is subversive, at least symbolically, of the dominant culture's investment in order, respectability, and stability. (Note 3) This subversive element would carry forward to rhythm and blues, and thence to rock `n' roll.

In the late 1930s electricity came to the guitar. It is not clear who was the first to amplify the instrument electronically; the names of Ted Daffan and Bob Dunn are often mentioned. (Both were prominent guitarists in the "Western Swing" milieu of Fort Worth, Texas, whose best-known bands were those of Bob Wills and Milton Brown.) Regardless of the inventor, however, the impact was far-reaching. Now that the guitar could be heard clearly above the band, it quickly became a lead as well as a rhythm instrument. Not only did electronic amplification make the guitar a key instrument in Western Swing--that hybrid of traditional country music and the swing jazz pouring out of Chicago and Kansas City--it deeply affected jazz, country music, and the blues.

The great social changes that swept the country in the war years of 1940-45 would also leave their mark on country music and the blues. Black culture as a whole was unalterably changed by the migration of large numbers of African-Americans from the rural South to the northern cities. A population transfer had in fact been underway since the 1920s, but the impetus received from employment provided by the burgeoning defense industry now accelerated the process dramatically. Black music began to reflect its audience's urbanization. One musician, for instance, who moved from Mississippi to Chicago was McKinley Morganfield, better known as Muddy Waters. The transformation of Muddy's music in the 1940s from the acoustic rural blues to the electrified form known as rhythm and blues is

paradigmatic. It was loud and aggressive music, driven by a strong, danceable beat. Howlin' Wolf, Jimmy Reed, Big Mama Thornton, Big Walter Horton, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Willie Dixon are a few other outstanding names associated with early rhythm and blues.

Significantly, this music could now be heard to some extent on the radio. Thanks in part to legal proceedings between BMI and ASCAP, strictures on the broadcast of black music had been eased. The national networks, sticking to the "genteel" ASCAP catalogue, remained reluctant to play anything so earthy as rhythm and blues. However, it became a prominent staple on many independent stations in the South, where the BMI catalogue was favored and where the advance guard of that demographic bulge known as the "baby boomers" was eagerly tuning in music that made them want to dance.

As for country music, it too was undergoing change. Much of its audience, displaced from the farm in the 1930s by the mechanization of agriculture and a declining economy, had, like black people, moved to the cities. The migration accelerated in the `40s; and now this new white urban proletariat was suffering a loss of "roots" and undertaking a quest for "identity." Exiled in the city, these refugees looked back nostalgically to the good old days. Country-music lyrics invoked a lost pastoral innocence that contrasted sharply with the alienation of factory life. To help remove the stigma of rusticity, record-company executives changed the music's "hillbilly" designation to "country and western." A decade later the "western" would fall away, and by the 1970s country music would be produced virtually as pop music. (Note 4) (The last development would prove to be a mistake both artistically and commercially.)

Most country musicians made the popular switch to the electric guitar in the 1940s. Nevertheless some performers, the Stanley Brothers or Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys for example, sought to recapture the authenticity of traditional music--and of rural life--by returning to the acoustic instrumentation of the early string bands. Record companies labelled this as "old-time music." In an "old-time" song like Bill Monroe's "I'm Going Back to Old Kentucky" (1947), the nostalgia and the wish to return to the past are palpable.

However, the figure who dominated the country music of the late 1940s and early `50s was singer-songwriter Hank Williams. Williams had learned to play guitar from a black musician, and he injected into the country stream the raw emotion and personal lyricism of the blues tradition. Behind an electric version of the country string band, he used blues moans and a touch of jazz phrasing to evoke both the misery of the urban exile--his loneliness, sexual frustration, and rootlessness--and the traditional sorrow of the folks back home on their hard-scrabble farms. His "Honky-Tonk Blues," recorded in 1949, is a classic of the genre. It became so popular that it crossed over from the country-music audience to the much larger

pop audience. The "cross-over" phenomenon, with its desirable effect on record sales, was something that producers soon would begin consciously to pursue.

Although Tin Pan Alley's songs continued to dominate the national radio networks during the Eisenhower '50s, rhythm and blues and country music were gaining an audience that included more and more of America's middle-class teenagers. The adolescent young were growing increasingly disaffected from the cultural mainstream and its emphasis on middle-class conformity at the expense of passion and spontaneity. They liked the beat of rhythm and blues, and the unvarnished emotion of country music; their parents' and teachers' disapproval only added to the music's appeal. Record producers for their part felt that if they could somehow marry the erotic drive of rhythm and blues to the tender sentimentality of country music, they could create a new pop music which would capture this large young audience. It was accepted as a matter of course that the vehicle of the music would have to be white.

In Memphis, Tennessee, a young white kid was trying hard to become a country-music singer. One day in 1954 he went into a studio and bought time to record two songs as a birthday present for his mother. The producer, Sam Phillips, mused on the contradictions he heard between the kid's sweet sincerity and the sexual urgency in his voice. He rehearsed the lad and his band for six months, then brought them back into the studio. After a few days they emerged with what would be Elvis Presley's first hit. The "A" side, "That's All Right Mama," had been recorded by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, a black rhythm and blues musician, in 1946. The "B" side was bluegrass musician Bill Monroe's 1947 hit, "Blue Moon of Kentucky." Elvis and Phillips had fused white and black vernaculars into a musical hybrid that would radiate out from the South to win the loyalty of teenagers in every corner of the country. They had in fact tapped into a mass culture that was in the act of transforming itself.

The early history of rock is much more than Elvis Presley, of course. One could mention The Dominoes, Chuck Berry, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Fats Domino, the Everley Brothers, Carl Perkins, The Coasters, a dozen more--everyone's list will vary. Still, it was Elvis who would become "King of Rock `n' Roll" and remain an icon in the national consciousness. Far from being a passing fad, as Tin Pan Alley spokesmen had predicted, the music would become the anthem of the nation's young for a decade while they negotiated the perilous journey to adulthood. It would be embraced by black and white performers and speak to audiences of both colors. As music, rock `n' roll was neither white nor black but was, as the London *Daily Mail* put it (commenting on Bill Haley and the Comets), "wild, untamed, and . . . American." It was also, not least, a thorn in the side of bourgeois respectability. When Elvis appeared on nationwide TV, for example, the cameras were permitted to shoot him only from the waist up. Like the blues, rock `n' roll celebrated eros and passion and the defiance of authority. Yet, like country music, it was also innocent and sentimental, promising romance and fidelity and life-long

happiness. No wonder young people, whose emotions are notoriously as fluid as the sea, claimed it for their own.

The teenagers of the `50s grew into the "youth" of the `60s--the first "youth culture" in the nation's history--and took their music with them. As it matured into "rock," this music would absorb influences from jazz and folk and in the process become a medium for political as well as lyrical expression. Bob Dylan, the most significant folk poet of the `60s, as Woody Guthrie was of the `30s and Hank Williams of the `40s, would embrace rock when he saw the audience it had won for the Beatles. As for the Beatles, it was their example that drew the attention of serious musicians to rock. And so the era of the big band and the Tin Pan Alley tunesmith finally came to an end. It was rock music that now would supply the sound track for participants in important rites of passage such as the civil rights struggle, the protests against the Vietnam War and, for that matter, the war itself.

Thus the music that was born on the periphery of American culture moved to the center, becoming as it did so the expressive medium for a large segment--perhaps eventually the majority--of the country's population. No longer merely "youth music," it is now, in the 1990s, an idiom familiar to fifty-year-olds no less than to thirteen-year-olds. Even the President, Bill Clinton, has been heard to blow a rock riff on his personal saxophone. And of course rock has spread far beyond American borders. By 1970 it was the new music of Europe; by 1980 the catalyst for musical innovation in West Africa; and by 1990 the subject of experimentation by musicians in the Middle East. In Africa and Europe rock entered into a dialectic with pop and vernacular musics of various indigenous cultures on its way to becoming something distinctive from American rock. What its fortunes will be in the Middle East, it is too soon to know.

In this as in other matters, Turkey is an interesting case. As a performance music, rock is so far quite marginal here: it is played very little and then almost exclusively in amateur conditions by the youth of the elite classes. This class identification, for a music whose roots are deeply embedded in the American working class, is perhaps ironic. The performers' lack of formal musical training, on the other hand, may be seen as positive, in keeping with rock's folk and egalitarian traditions. Professional Turkish musicians have virtually shunned rock music; one reason, of course, is that there was no money to be made from it. Until recently the electronic media were controlled by a state-owned monopoly, Turkish Radio and Television. As the single largest and most significant employer of musicians, TRT vigorously pursued a nationalistic program of support for Turkish *halk* and *sanat* music (see Stokes for a fuller discussion).

Within the last five years, however, the cultural picture has been altered by the emergence of a myriad of privately held radio frequencies and television channels. Not only in the major cities but throughout the country, radio listeners and television viewers are receiving a steady diet of American and European rock as

well as other forms of Western pop music and culture--MTV, for instance. In addition, new "rock clubs" are springing up seemingly every day. In addition to supplying a constant sound track of recorded music to their patrons, these clubs offer a venue where fledgling rock bands can gain experience. Not surprisingly, the number of such clubs is largest in Istanbul; again, not surprisingly, their patrons consist almost exclusively of middle- and upper-class young people under twenty-five. There is also a small but growing network of rock fans who subscribe to foreign publications of rock journalism and who publish their own fugitive broadsides in Turkish; but as yet one sees nothing comparable to the "rock culture" of the United States or western Europe.

The evolution of rock in Turkey promises to be an interesting study. Turkish rock at present is overwhelmingly characterized by close imitation of American rock, even in the form of "copy bands." The idiom is still perhaps too foreign for Turkish musicians to express themselves adequately in it, but the critical presence of radio will, as in the United States, have the predictable effect of familiarizing a vastly larger audience with its musical conventions. Indeed, already there are signs of an attempt at fusing rock with indigenous vernacular music, for example in so-called *yeni türkü*. Again, the pop music known as*arabesk* has shown itself capable of absorbing features of both Western and "oriental" commercial music. Although any experiments are highly tentative at this point, they reveal an attempt to realize a musical discourse that is more than merely imitative.

American rock grew out of folk-music forms to speak to a mass communal audience and thence to commercial autonomy. If that experience is a model--and developments in Europe and Africa suggest that it is--we can presumably expect Turkish rock also to change as it responds to cultural needs and as market demand. Perhaps it will tap into traditional Anatolian sources for strength and vigor, much as Okay Temiz has done for jazz. It is, after all, these sources that are the equivalent of American blues and country music, the roots of rock `n' roll.

Stay tuned and see.

Notes

1

It is remotely possible that the term "race record" or "race music" was adopted out of deference to those black leaders of the postwar period who saw themselves and their people as "the Race"-- an early manifestation of racial pride also reflected by the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance movement. If so, the connection was soon lost to the record-buying public (See Sanjek and Sanjek 15).

2

The competition between ASCAP and BMI for control of radio product continued into the 1950s, when ASCAP attempted to persuade Congress that the "vulgar" music purveyed by BMI-- namely rock'n'roll-- was undermining the musical taste of the country and likely to lead to moral detriment as well (For a brief discussion, see Ennis).

3

The dominant culture was not one to notice that many characteristics of the blues can also be found in nineteenth-century French poetry--a current that would issue in the Surrealism movement, which was quite unambiguous about wanting to sabotage bourgeois "normality" (Garon 168).

4

There are thematic parallels between certain aspects of American country music and of the *arabesk* music popular in Turkey's urban gecekondus (See, for example, Stokes).

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