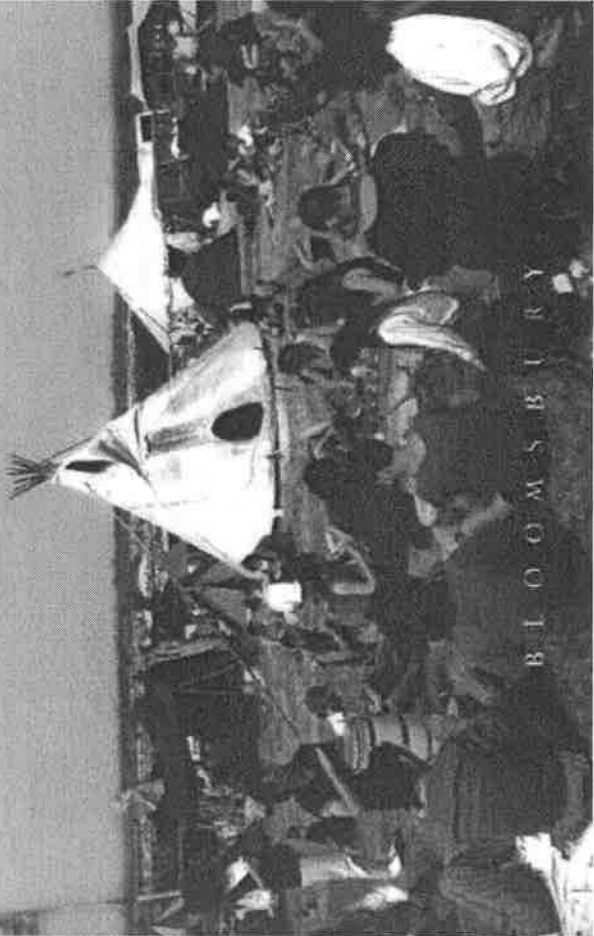


edited by  
**George McKay**

# the **RAV** festival

history, music, media, culture



BLOOMSBURY

## CHAPTER THREE

**‘Let there be rock!’ Myth and ideology in the rock festivals of the transatlantic counterculture**

Nicholas Gebhardt

*I want you all to know that right now, you are witnessing my dream! I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for having me and my band tonight. I always wanted to be a rock star, and tonight, we are all rock stars. I want you to forget about your worries, forget about your troubles, I want you to get lost in this music tonight. I want to make beautiful memories and be free tonight.*

BEYONCÉ KNOWLES (LIVE ON BBC GLASTONBURY, 2011)

From her riff on the Arabic mode in the opening bars of her 2003 hit song, ‘Crazy in love’, to her demand that the audience lose themselves in her music, Knowles’s performance on the famous Pyramid stage at the 2011 Glastonbury Festival refigured the meaning of rock ‘n’ roll for a contemporary global audience, while relying on its most powerful and enduring myths in order to legitimize her appearance as the first female headline act in over twenty-five years of the festival.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I want to explore the ideological significance of these myths in the context of the most influential and iconic rock festivals of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the United States, these

were the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967, the Woodstock Music and Art Fair in 1969 and the Altamont Free Concert in 1969; while in the United Kingdom, the key events were Isle of Wight Festival in 1968–70 (Figure 18) and Glastonbury Fair in 1971.<sup>2</sup> I want to focus primarily on the position that these festivals have within the broader narrative of rock history, and, in particular, on the countercultural claims that were (and continue to be) made about them (McKay 2000).

How did these festivals contribute to the widespread belief in rock music as a genre that was based on a permanent cycle of youth rebellion? In what ways did these events involve participants in new ideas about collective consciousness and cultural practice? And to what extent was the music – its forms, lyrical contents and sonic properties – essential to the claims that were made about these events? These questions highlight the problem of explaining the historical significance of rock festivals and especially their relevance to issues of cultural continuity and change in popular culture (Ethen 2014; Grossberg 1983–84; Schowalter 2000). If we treat the great countercultural rock festivals of the late 1960s and early 1970s as responses to a more general collective crisis in modern, Western bourgeois societies, especially the United States, Canada, Australia and many European nations, then one surprising fact about them is that they appear to be as relevant to as many people today as they were for an earlier generation of hippies, dropouts, protestors, cultural radicals, anti-war protestors and student activists (Bindas and Houston 1989). This invariably raises a further critical question: Has the meaning of rock festivals changed since the 1960s?

One of the first attempts to explore these issues was a 1973 essay by sociologist Richard Peterson, in which he tracks the 'unnatural' (early) history of rock festivals in the United States and compares them to other

large-scale collective movements such as the race riots and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, the labour strikes in the 1940s and the ghetto riots and student uprisings of the 1960s. He argues that the central premise in each of these events was that they promised or threatened to alter society in some fundamental way, and as such, their 'energy' was derived from, and was responding to, much larger and more complex changes taking place in American culture (Peterson 1973, 97). Moreover, in Peterson's view, the period in which rock festivals made a significant cultural impact was relatively brief, lasting only from 1967 to 1971. He claims that subsequent festivals lacked the potential to challenge society, to speak to and for the social demands of a universal audience of young people. Instead, as their organizers came up against a worldwide coalition of city officials, moral leaders, legal experts, corporate executives, community groups and politicians, the movement fragmented around particular musical genres and became focused primarily on celebrating the values and practices of specific sub-cultures or returning to older values and practices (Peterson 1973, 117).<sup>3</sup>

Why does Peterson make such a claim? Arguing for a broadly structural approach to understanding the emergence of rock festivals, he suggests that the social conditions that made it possible to successfully organize a 'high-energy cultural revolution celebration' were quickly closed off by those individuals and social groups opposed to countercultural events (1973, 117). As with race riots or union strikes, Peterson claims that the festival movement raised some fundamental questions about the basic tenets of liberal-capitalist societies such as the United States or Germany or Great Britain, particularly around issues of reason and passion, art and life, individualism and social hierarchy, and ownership and property. Festivals were thus identified with much larger, and increasingly complicated, social conflicts in these societies, in which people's core beliefs about the forms of human social and political organization were undergoing intensive, and in many instances collective, revision. My interest in such contemporary accounts as Peterson's is meant to highlight the extent to which our understanding of rock festivals is inseparable from what we take those conflicts to be about.

At the beginning of Chris Hegadus and D. A. Pennebaker's film, *Monterey Pop*, the film-makers interview a young woman waiting to enter the stadium. When they ask her what she thinks it's going to be like, she replies, 'I think it's gonna be like Easter and Christmas and New Year's and your birthday all together, you know, hearing all the different bands, you know. Like I've heard a lot of them. ... All at the same time, it's just going to be too much. I mean the vibrations are just going to be flowing everywhere' (Hegadus and Pennebaker 2002). This idea of 'vibrations ... flowing everywhere' is a central theme in what Peter Wicke describes as the ideology of rock. 'One of the myths about rock music', he writes, 'is that it arises spontaneously out of the common experience of musicians and fans' (Wicke 1990, 91). For Wicke, the ideology of rock depends above all on a set



FIGURE 18 Isle of Wight Festival, 1970.

of claims about the individuality of the artist's sound, the immediacy of the musical experience and the highly personalized relationship between artist and audience (1990, 94–5). Although it was created within an organized system of musical production, and so dependent on the collective enterprise of promoters, producers, agents, bankers, lawyers, accountants, technicians, designers, suppliers, sales persons and others, in order to reach a global audience, rock was consistently defined as an authentic and, perhaps even more paradoxically, an unmediated expression of the individuality and personality of the performer (Wieke 1990, 99). This is evident in the following comment by the critic and producer, Jon Landau: '[w]ithin the confines of the media, these musicians articulated attitudes, styles and feelings that were genuine reflections of their own experience and of the social situation which had helped to produce that situation' (Landau 1972, 130).

Such views relied on mobilizing some long-standing myths about the music as both a return to a more authentic mode of cultural expression and a radical break with existing traditions and values. According to Bernard Gendron, these myths involve two major founding claims: first, rock introduced real sexuality and the authentic blackness of rhythm and blues into mainstream popular music in the 1950s; secondly, it revealed to its young audience the superficiality of the songs produced on Tin Pan Alley, and more importantly, the inherent conservatism of the culture that had produced them (2004, 298). To demonstrate the effect these myths have on our understanding of the music, Gendron focuses on the recordings and performances of Jerry Lee Lewis, whose demonic stage persona and evocation of uncontrollable sexual desire remain prime examples for rock critics and historians of the music's transformative powers and its profound radicalism. He cites a passage from Robert Palmer's biography of the singer as an example of what he means by this: 'Jerry Lee Lewis and his allies are the real revolutionaries', writes Palmer. 'Rocking out, really rocking out the way Jerry Lee Lewis did in "Whole lotta shakin' goin' on" ... is the most profoundly revolutionary statement an artist can make in the rock and roll idiom' (Palmer, quoted in Gendron 2004, 298). For Gendron, the widespread tendency to conceive of rock solely in terms of its revolutionary potential for social change obscures, rather than clarifies, the important continuities it had with the songs produced by composers such as George Gershwin or Cole Porter, as well as other equally significant popular music genres and the cultural practices and values associated with them. Moreover, the tendency in many accounts of rock is to reduce a complex story of musical change to a simple narrative of revolt.

The point of summarizing Gendron's discussion here is to highlight the extent to which these myths have formed the basis for most historical and theoretical studies of rock, as well as the presuppositions of popular music journalism and critical commentary about rock culture (see Durant 1985, 97–8). From Bill Haley's cover of 'Rock around the clock' to the mobilizing of the Woodstock Nation, to the current resurgence of new, and

the revitalization of existing, rock festivals around the world, attempts to explain the music's meaning focus, for the most part, on its authentic modes of expression and appeal, above all, to a specific kind of collective identity derived from a shared passion for the music. As Greil Marcus suggests: 'We fight our way through the massed and levelled collective taste of the Top forty, just looking for a little something we can call our own. But when we find it and jam the radio to hear it again it isn't ours – it is a link to thousands of others who are sharing it with us. As a matter of a single song this might mean very little; as culture, as a way of life, you can't beat it' (Marcus 1977, 115).

There are two important points to make here about Marcus's claims. First, when understood against the background of wider cultural conflicts of the 1960s, his identification of rock with 'a way of life' connects the emergence of the music with the development among its audience of something like a collective consciousness. There is no clear consensus about what this consciousness consisted of, but in most accounts it involves a radical break with the past, producing a (kind of) coherent and politically meaningful vision of the world that appeared in dramatic contrast to the dominant values of the 1950s. Some saw this new collective consciousness negatively; for Daniel Bell, in his influential study of post-industrial societies, '[b]y the end of the 1960s, the new sensibility had been given a name (the counter-culture) and an ideology to go with it. The main tendency of this ideology – though it appeared in the guise of an attack on the "technocratic society" – was an attack on reason itself' (1976, 143). Members of the counterculture thus turned to rock as their primary means of expression precisely because it appeared to speak directly to (and through) them and to give an aesthetic form to this broader, in Bell's view, 'anti-rational' vision of the world. An alternative account of this new consciousness forms the basis for Theodore Roszak's 1968 path-breaking study of the counterculture. 'We have no serviceable language in our culture', he claims, 'to talk about the level of the personality at which this underlying vision of reality resides. But it seems indisputable that it exerts its influence at a point that lies deeper than our intellectual consciousness. ... When I say that the counter culture delves into the non-intellectual aspects of the personality, it is with respect to its interest at this level – at the level of vision – that I believe its project is significant' (Roszak 1968, 80–1). In both cases, rock music appears to relate in some fundamental ways to deeper issues of personal commitment and the structures of belief in modern societies.

Second, the distinction Marcus makes between music 'we can call our own' and 'the massed and levelled collective taste of the Top 40' is a recurrent theme in rock criticism and forms the basis for one of the central claims of rock ideology. As Gendron explains in another essay exploring the critical reception of rock, the music's 'appearance at a particular juncture of class, generational, and cultural struggle has given it a preeminent role among mass cultural artifacts as an instrument of opposition and liberation'

(Gendron 1986, 19). According to Gendron, most critics adhere to the *auteur* theory of rock, which places a great premium on the agency of the artists who produce it and the youth audiences who consume it, in order to make a series of claims about the rock's authenticity (1986, 34). What is missing from such accounts is any reference to the complex series of mediations that make it possible for rock musicians to reach their vast global audiences. As long as we think of rock as primarily about the music and its fans, it is difficult to conceptualize the convoluted system that contributes to the creation of meaning in rock (Gendron 1986, 34). What all this suggests is that the countercultural festivals were critical to the process by which the ideology of rock became an essential element to the wider social conflicts of the 1960s and thus were integral to consolidating the primacy of rock (and its various sub-genres, such as metal, punk, grunge, 'indie' and so on) as the dominant form of countercultural (and so oppositional) music for a worldwide audience of young people (Crossberg 1983–84).

As noted above, rock's ideological appeal was based on the claim that the music had emerged spontaneously from the everyday experiences of performers and audiences, and that it was primarily a medium of expression for disaffected young people (Bennett 2001, 7–23; Wicke 1990). Moreover, the particular social space opened up by these countercultural festivals both intensified, and then fundamentally reconfigured, the music's meaning within a broader set of themes relating to freedom, escape, passion, revitalization and renewal (Curtis 1987, 221–34). If we are to understand how this happened, then we have to recognize the extent to which these events were also connected to, and in many ways, continuous with, other post-Second World War social and artistic movements that celebrated spontaneous happenings, sit-ins, improvisation and performance art, as a means to achieving new and more holistic forms of individual and collective consciousness. The way in which the series of countercultural festivals unfolded across the United States, Britain and Europe was thus connected to a more general questioning of the consequences of modernity and modernization that was evident in the art, poetry, literature, art music and theatre of the period, from Pop Art to Minimalism (Pippin 1999, 160–79).

What I want to focus on for the remainder of this chapter is the process by which rock and its festivals became identified as the primary expressive medium of countercultural expression, and highlight some of ways in which critics made sense of that process. As Peterson makes clear, the first event to explicitly incorporate rock into a broader statement of countercultural consciousness was held in June 1967, on Mt. Tamalpais, outside of San Francisco. The Fantasy Fair and Magic Mountain Music Festival (Figure 19) was organized by local music fans; it featured arts and crafts, and most of the people involved donated their services. The bands appearing were Jefferson Airplane, The Doors, The Byrds, Country Joe, Dionne Warwick and Smokey Robinson, all of whom performed for nominal fees and became key figures in the bigger festival movement. Tickets were \$2, and any profits

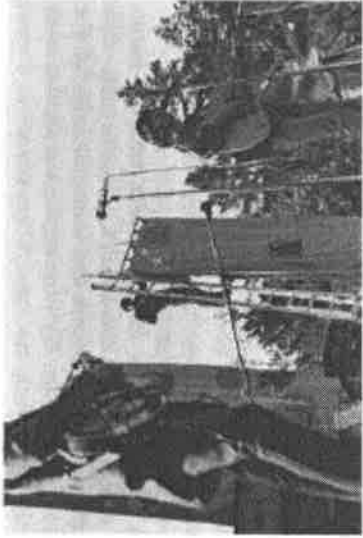


FIGURE 19 Last-minute stage construction at the Fantasy Fair and Magic Mountain Festival, California, June 1967.

were donated to an African American ghetto charity. More importantly, however, the audience for this event was primarily made up of hippies, beats and other countercultural groups from the San Francisco Bay area. As Peterson also notes, however, the event was promoted in the San Francisco *Oracle*, an underground magazine, as an extension of the 1967 Human Be-In festival in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco (Peterson 1973: 120 n. 20), which aimed to unite the counterculture with the anti-war, civil rights and student movements through broad principles of 'love and activism' (Perry 1970, 55–60).

The belief that rock somehow embodied the essence of the counterculture, and that it was primarily a medium for imagining and expressing the alternative realities, began to take shape in the critical commentaries that surrounded these festivals, especially among journalists (Jones 2002, 19–40). As several key studies have noted, however, it was at the Monterey festival in the same year that the relationship between countercultural consciousness and rock music was most firmly established for a global audience, and largely as a result of the media coverage of the event (Bennett 2009, 474–89; Bennett 2004; Hill 2006, 28–40; Miller 1999). Lou Adler, who founded the event, understood how important this element was to the event's historic significance as a cultural happening. 'The media coverage was worldwide', Adler says, 'and that had never happened before. You can send out all the press releases you want, and if it's not in the media's psyche, then forget it. We had Derek Taylor, the Beatles' publicist, doing press, and we knew we had a lot of requests for media credentials, but it was still a shock, on the morning of the festival, to wake up and see all these TV crews from all over the world' (quoted in Arnold 2001, 14–20). The iconic images of major rock performers in Pennebaker's film of the event shifts our frame of reference dramatically, as well as redefining our understanding of what the festival



was a bout. Although rock was not the sole genre featured, it was through the sounds and gestures of performers such as The Who, Janis Joplin, Jefferson Airplane, the Jimi Hendrix Experience and so on that the music became identified as the foremost medium for registering social dissent, expressing individual and social liberation and forging a new collective consciousness. Moreover, the media coverage of the festival ensured that rock achieved this new cultural significance on a global scale; and this, in turn, set a precedent for subsequent films and television coverage of countercultural festivals (Bennett 2004; Kits 2009).

Once set in motion, however, rock's anti-establishment and liberationist ideology became the basis for its worldwide commercial success, and by 1970 the major rock festivals across the United States and throughout Britain and Europe had come to embody in many ways the most overt, and most collective, of those representations of the counterculture (Peterson 1973, 113). This extended from the sonic properties of the music to the assertion that rock was a music uniquely grounded in the individuality and independence of artists and audiences alike (Frith 1981). As Bill Graham, the promoter and owner of the Fillmore East and West rock venues, suggested in an interview in 1971, '[t]he young people used rock 'n' roll to say to the world, "We can be independent. This is our way of life. We're revolutionaries"' (quoted in Jones 1980, 135). A pamphlet produced by the Eagles Liberation Front, a group of high school students in Seattle, Washington, confirms just how prevalent this understanding of the music was during this period:

Rock music began as an alternative community, our community. Rock expresses the ethos of our community, its force is filled by our struggle. But over the years the established entertainment industry – promoters, agents, record companies, media, and every name group – has gradually transformed our music into an increasingly expensive commodity. (quoted in Denisoff 1975, 354)

What stands out in this statement is the distinction the students draw between rock as an alternative community, produced by and for its participants, and rock as a commodity, owned and controlled by the industry, and therefore separated from its listeners by its increasingly unaffordable price tag. In Simon Frith's view, the major countercultural festivals had come to exemplify by the end of the 1960s this image of the rock community. They revealed the music's inherent contradictions, precisely because of the way in which festivals seemed to mediate the claims and values of the counterculture within the popular imagination (and the shared memories that structured that social imaginary), as well as appearing to resolve those same contradictions. 'Unlike the traditional pop package show', he argues, 'put together for the fans out there, the rock festival – in its length, its size, its setting, its reference to a folk tradition – was an attempt to provide materially

the experience of community that the music expressed symbolically' (Frith 1984, 66). And it was out of this particular experience of directness, in which artist and audience were identified with each other, one acting as the mirror of the other through the unmediated medium of the music (exemplified most powerfully in Michael Wadleigh's film *Woodstock: Wadleigh 1999*), that this claim for the rock festival as an alternative social space took shape (Bennett 2004; Kits 2009).

We see the same point being made repeatedly about each of the main countercultural festivals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, from Woodstock to the Isle of Wight. In his study of the popular recording industry, for example, Serge Denisoff argues that the 'importance of Woodstock in any examination of popular music cannot be overestimated since, as *Time* [magazine] correctly observed, "The spontaneous community of youth that was created at Bethel was the stuff of which legends are made; the substance of the event contains both revelation and a sobering lesson." Woodstock generated an ethos, a mythology, which lent support to the most ardent proponents of the dawning of a new community' (Denisoff 1975, 343). Likewise, Christopher Small describes the process by which, at the Isle of Wight Festival, there 'came into a least partial existence the potential society which lies otherwise beyond our grasp; young people released from the stresses and restrictions of their everyday life were engaging in the celebration of a common myth, a common life-style. ... [M]usic became the centre of a communal ritual' (Small 1977, 171). More recently, for Arthur Marwick, '[r]ock music (and the idolatry it inspired), nature, love, drugs, and mass togetherness – where they all joined hands was in the open-air music festival, the greatest of all the types of spectacle invented in the sixties' (1998, 497). According to such claims, rock festivals refigured the social spaces of social activism, collective consciousness and individual subjectivity, by calling on and reproducing within the structures and sound of the music itself – from new techniques of amplification to practices of distortion and overlay – the countercultural demand for a new transnational community of free individuals (Moore 2004, 80–3).

Such interpretations raise immediately the basic problems we encountered in Gendron's analysis of rock ideology in that they share in the notion that the most influential countercultural rock festivals – and especially those that have come to be seen as definitive – Monterey, Woodstock, Altamont, Isle of Wight, Glastonbury – reveal in one way or another something essential about the nature of rock music as counterculture, and that because of this history, those pivotal events have come to exemplify the emergence of a transatlantic (and in many respects, global) movement of young people defined by their anti-hierarchical, anti-establishment, dissatisfaction with an 'old consciousness' (as Charles Reich referred to it). Moreover, as mythic countercultural spaces, rock festivals continue to hold out the possibility of the emergence of a 'new consciousness' (Reich 1972, 241–48). Hence the frequent references to, and the widespread belief in, the potential for

rock festivals to alter our experience of the world, however much we are aware of the commercial imperatives that make them possible in the first place and which invariably seem to compromise or distort their utopian claims. It is precisely this history of the rock festival as *the* expression of the counterculture which continues to open up a social space for a pop star like Beyoncé to speak of dreaming of becoming a rock star, but also for her to conceive of inviting her audience to do the same.

### Notes

- 1 According to the BBC press office, the television audience for Knowles's performance peaked at 2.6 million viewers: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2011/06\\_june/30/lastdodbury.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2011/06_june/30/lastdodbury.shtml). Accessed 10 July 2014.
- 2 It is also critical to recognize the influence of less iconic (but no less important) events, such as Die Internationale Essener Songtage, which was held in 1968 in Essen, Germany, so as to further highlight the historic conjuncture in the late 1960s of rock music and the formation of a transnational counterculture that was identified with new forms of collective consciousness.
- 3 For example, in 1971, when the major countercultural rock festivals were in decline, there were seventy-nine Muegrass festivals held in the United States alone (Peterson, 117).

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### Reading Considerations

- How is this article constructed
- What is Gebhardt's argument
- What are the arguments Gebhardt presents, and what are his counter arguments
- According to Gebhardt what is the impact of the rock festival
- Do we, as music enthusiasts, hold music festivals to be too important