

KEY TERMS IN POPULAR MUSIC AND CULTURE

EDITED BY

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3 Histories

Gilbert B. Rodman

People like to separate storytelling which is not fact from history which is fact. They do this so that they know what to believe and what not to believe. This is very curious. How is it that no one will believe that the whale swallowed Jonah, when every day Jonah is swallowing the whale? I can see them now, stuffing down the fishiest of fish tales, and why? Because it is history.

Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

On the first page of the syllabus for my undergraduate class on popular music, I warn my students that what they are enrolled in is not a history course. That is, my class doesn't look much like what my students expect a history course to be: a chronological survey of names and dates that they will need to memorize and regurgitate. While I do spend a week at the start of the semester mapping out a sketchy overview of some of the major shifts in US popular music since the turn of the century, the bulk of the course is devoted to more contemporary issues and questions – the ethics of sampling, the gender politics of the Spice Girls, the rise of multinational entertainment conglomerates, and so on – most of which are too current to strike my students as even vaguely historical in nature.

Nevertheless, throughout the semester, our discussions of even the most current of topics will hinge upon our understanding of popular music history. For example, explaining how the music industry works today requires us to have some knowledge of the sheet music business at the turn of the century, the heyday of Tin Pan Alley, the rise of radio and BMI, and so on. Our debates about contemporary moral panics over allegedly “dangerous” (e.g. Marilyn Manson) and/or “vacuous” (e.g. the Spice Girls) forms of popular music require us to compare them to previous moral panics around such popular music figures as Elvis and

Madonna. Making sense of the various arguments about the ethics of sampling will require us to situate those issues within the context of previous shifts in the technology of music-making and historical patterns of musical “borrowing”/“theft.” And so on. In short, every issue we address is one that we will wind up examining in light of historical contexts.

In this chapter, I want to make explicit the argument that is more of a hidden agenda in my classroom: namely, that studying popular music *always* requires us to take questions of history into account. Our efforts to study popular music (or virtually anything else, for that matter) ultimately boil down to a form of storytelling. We start with a set of unanswered questions. What does this song mean? Why did this genre develop the way it did? What effects does this shift in the industry have on musical creativity? From there, we go on to do research that hopefully allows us to tell a story that answers those questions in persuasive fashion. Yet the beginnings of the stories that we tell about popular music, whether they are about today’s hitmakers or turn-of-the-century minstrels, are always the endings of other stories that we have not told. And it is here – in the gap between the stories we are most interested in telling and the stories that precede them in time – that questions of history come into play in crucial ways.

I should emphasize up front that the impulse to tell stories – and the need to historicize that always goes along with it – plays an important role across the entire spectrum of popular music studies, regardless of discipline, methodology, or subject matter. A political economy approach, for instance, requires us to tell stories about the flow of money through a profit-driven industry; subcultural analysis produces stories about the relationship between particular styles of music, the communities of fans and artists that form around them, and the larger cultural formations in which those sounds and practices circulate; musicological analysis leads to stories about what the music in question means and how that meaning is produced; and so on.

To illustrate my argument in more concrete fashion, I draw on the example of my own research on Elvis Presley, although, in many respects, the phenomenon at the heart of my research is not historical at all. On the contrary, when I started working on Elvis in the early 1990s, the mystery I hoped to solve was centered on contemporary aspects of music and culture. Why, so many years after his death, was Elvis appearing across such an astonishingly broad swath of the US cultural terrain in so many strange and unpredictable ways? Why, to borrow a line from Mojo Nixon

and Skid Roper, was Elvis everywhere? Why wasn’t he behaving the way that dead stars are supposed to? It wasn’t surprising that Elvis could regularly be found on oldies radio stations or as the focal point of fan gatherings and newsletters. Nor was it particularly shocking that his estate, his former record label, and the various studios for whom he had made films were milking his continuing popularity for everything they could. But it was difficult to explain why Elvis was such a pervasive presence on less obviously relevant corners of the cultural terrain. For example, what was he doing in mainstream news reports on such “hard news” topics as the fall of communism in the Soviet Union, Operation Rescue’s blockades of women’s health clinics, or the 1992 presidential election? Why was he being invoked in advertisements for such far-flung enterprises as CD-ROM databases, copy shops, and luxury automobiles? Why was he suddenly a frequent figure in science fiction novels and short stories? What made him into a punchline for virtually every major syndicated comic strip in the USA? And – perhaps most curiously – why were so many people who openly despised Elvis and all that he stood for working so hard to keep him in the public eye?

While these are all questions about what was then the present, and while the phenomenon of “Elvis sightings” was (and still is) very much a contemporary one, it became evident to me very early in my research that any convincing explanation for Elvis’s lingering cultural presence needed to address the question of how past events had helped to create a context in which that contemporary phenomenon could come about. For example, one of the more striking ways in which Elvis cropped up on the cultural terrain between 1989 and 1992 was as a powerful symbol of contemporary US racial politics. Probably the most notorious example of this was Public Enemy’s 1989 song “Fight the Power” (prominently featured in Spike Lee’s film *Do the Right Thing*), which pulled no punches in calling Elvis a “straight-up racist.” But Chuck D and company were hardly the only people invoking Elvis as part of a larger public conversation on racism in the USA. A year later, in Living Colour’s “Elvis Is Dead,” a song from the hard rock foursome’s second album, *Time’s Up*, the group continued the discussion by explicitly quoting – and then extending – Public Enemy’s jab at Elvis. In 1991, Joe Wood wrote an article for *The Village Voice* that was ostensibly about the Young Black Teenagers (a *white* rap act), though it actually devoted more space to Wood’s argument about Elvis and racial politics than it did to the YBTs. In 1992, the US Postal Service’s announcement that it would be issuing a series of stamps featuring Elvis and rock ‘n’ roll other legends was met

with public statements of concern in *The Washington Post* about the Postal Service's need to make sure that their final roster of rock 'n' roll legends was not all white (Nicholson, 1992). That same year, when Dave Marsh's 1982 Elvis biography was reprinted, these fresh charges of racism leveled at Elvis had become so numerous and widespread that Marsh took almost half of the book's new introduction to try and explain why it was wrong to see Elvis as a racist and what such a misconception meant for the future state of race relations in the USA.

Still, none of these texts were intended to be history lessons as much as they were attempts to engage with and intervene in one of the more pressing and divisive political questions of the moment. Which left me with a thorny question to answer: why on earth was Elvis, who had been dead for more than a decade, such a significant and oft-invoked figure in debates over racism in the 1990s? To answer that question, I had to do more than simply make sense of the contemporary moment in which these artists and writers were working; I also had to understand the specific histories that they were invoking, and I had to be able to make meaningful connections between those histories and the present. In this particular case, that meant I had to tell a story that encompassed both the state of contemporary race relations (on the one hand) and competing visions of the role that race and racism had played in the rise of rock 'n' roll from the 1950s onward (on the other). For what Elvis meant in these particular contemporary texts was inextricably bound up with arguments about what Elvis had represented in the past and whether the birth of rock 'n' roll was best envisioned as a progressive moment of racial integration or as yet another in a long line of racist appropriations of black music by white musicians, audiences, and businesses.

Historicizing, however, is about more than simply recognizing and understanding references to past events: it is also about providing a valuable sense of perspective on contemporary phenomena – even when those phenomena make no apparent allusions to the past. For example, one of the most common claims that my popular music students make early on in the semester is that “things” are far more extreme now than they have ever been. Most often, this line of argument revolves around the claim that the current breed of “scandalous” musicians (from Madonna to Marilyn Manson, from Prince to Snoop Doggy Dogg) has crossed lines of good taste and propriety that even the most outrageous artists of yesteryear would never even have considered crossing. Sure, my students will argue, Elvis was a rebel back in the fifties, but all he really did was sneer and shake his hips a bit. Today, on the other hand, it is common for musicians to release songs

filled with four-letter words and graphic descriptions of wild sexual acts, to make videos that are just barely this side of soft-core pornography, and to do things on stage even raunchier than that.

The problem with such claims is that they are rooted in what are essentially ahistorical historical comparisons. That is, while my students are ostensibly working to explain the differences between two points in time, their assumption seems to be that those differences are superficial ones at best. In trying to judge Elvis's 1950s performances by contemporary standards and finding him decidedly tame, my students assume that the culture in which Elvis first wiggled his pelvis is similar enough to US culture today that identical standards of what counts as outrageous public behavior can be applied to both eras. The historical question that needs to be addressed here, however, is not whether Elvis would be seen as controversial today (or, conversely, how controversial Marilyn Manson would have been in 1956), but whether Elvis was more outrageous by the standards of his era than Marilyn Manson is by today's.

Viewed through *this* historical lens, it is not clear that even the most “extreme” contemporary musical acts are as transgressive as Elvis was forty years ago. While my students are certainly right to suggest that Elvis's hip thrusts would barely raise an eyebrow were they to be broadcast on national television today, we need to remember that the culture in which Elvis rose to stardom was far more strait-laced about “suggestive” public displays than “the same” culture is today. The mid-1950s, after all, were an era when even the most socially and morally acceptable form of sexual activity (i.e. procreative intercourse between a married couple) was too risqué for prime time television: for instance, even though their real-life marriage was public knowledge, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez still slept in separate beds on *I Love Lucy*, and even when Lucy's real-life pregnancy was too obvious to hide from the camera, the word “pregnant” was still too scandalous to actually utter on the air. In that tightly buttoned-up cultural environment, then, Elvis's hip-shaking was nothing less than revolutionary. By contrast, even the most radical of contemporary popular musicians are working in a cultural context where frank depictions and discussions of human sexuality are common features of *non*-controversial forms of popular culture (e.g. soap operas and PG-rated films) – which ultimately makes even the carefully calculated button-pushing of artists like Madonna or Prince less “over the top” than what Elvis did when he first came along.

Having argued that we always need to take questions of history into account in studying popular music, I want to anticipate four potential

misconceptions about what that actually entails. Specifically, I want to suggest that:

- doing history is about interpreting facts, not just reporting them;
- historical contexts are things that we have to construct in our storytelling;
- people make history, but never in conditions of their own making;
- historical events appear to be inevitable only after they have happened.

First, it is important to recognize that placing research on popular music in historical context is more than simply a matter of citing names and dates, or inserting the “proper” facts about past events into the stories that we are telling. For while it is certainly important not to get verifiable historical facts wrong (one cannot, for example, get away with claiming that Elvis was a Korean woman or that his first hit single was “Louie Louie”), we also have to remember that even the most widely agreed-upon historical facts are subject to competing – and potentially equally valid – interpretations. That there are demonstrably wrong answers to the historical questions we may ask *does not* always mean that there are clear-cut and indisputably right answers for us to use in telling our own stories.

Thus the ongoing debate over Elvis’s racial politics ultimately does not revolve around establishing the true facts of Elvis’s story as much as it hinges on competing claims about which facts matter most, how best to interpret those facts, and what is the proper story to be told using those facts. For example, Greil Marcus’s much-celebrated review of Albert Goldman’s much-reviled Elvis biography takes specific issue with Goldman’s misquote of Sam Phillips’s famous claim, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.” In particular, Marcus objects to Goldman’s substitution of “could sing like a nigger” for “had the Negro sound and the Negro feel,” and argues that Goldman brutally distorts the history of rock ’n’ roll by placing a racist slur at its heart. But while Marcus presents a devastatingly convincing argument as to why Goldman’s version of this historical moment is flawed, significantly enough, his case does not rest on establishing the verifiable truth about what Phillips really said (especially since Phillips denies ever making any version of the statement in question). Rather, it depends on using other verifiable facts (e.g. Phillips’s open willingness to go against the segregated norms of early 1950s Memphis by recording black musicians) to tell a different version of the story, one in which the

slur attributed to Phillips by Goldman is simply too implausible to let stand.

Closely related to this last point is the fact that, ultimately, there is more to doing historical work than simply fitting our discussion of contemporary issues into already established historical contexts. Instead, we actually need to *create* historical contexts to fit the questions that lie at the heart of our work. To put a slightly different spin on a point I made earlier, the beginnings of the stories we tell are actually the endpoints of *multiple* other stories that we don’t have time or space to tell in full. Thus, historicizing can be thought of as an act of stitching together new stories out of scraps taken from several earlier tales. The key questions here, then, are *which* historical facts to choose out of those available to us, and then *how* to interpret those facts and weave them together to form a persuasive narrative.

For example, we can tell very different versions of “the same” story – say, the tale of Elvis’s rise to national prominence in 1956 – depending on which historical facts we decide to use in framing and supporting our narrative. To be sure, not all the facts we could draw on are going to be equally relevant to our story, and the facts that are available to us place unavoidable limits on what stories we can plausibly tell. But there is also no single right answer to the question of which facts are the most important here. If we are especially concerned with the racial politics of the rise of rock ’n’ roll, as in chapter 6 in this book, then it might be especially important for us to pay attention to who originally wrote and recorded the various songs on which Elvis built his career, how faithful his versions of those songs were to the spirit of the originals, what the racial demographics of the audiences who bought those records were, who did and did not receive royalty payments on sales of those records, whether Elvis’s success helped boost the popularity of the black artists whose music he performed, and so on. On the other hand, if we are more interested in the rise of youth culture that rock ’n’ roll helped to bring about (see, for example, chapter 8 in this book), then we are more likely to ask questions about the age of Elvis’s audiences, how links were forged between rock ’n’ roll and other youth-friendly aspects of the leisure and entertainment industries (soda shops, drive-ins, etc.), the rise in disposable income among post-war teens, and so on. Each of these sets of historical questions will put a very different spin on the story that results.

One can find this same principle at work in broader “histories” as well. Looking at three different volumes dedicated primarily to the history of post-Second World War Anglo-American popular music, one can see “the

same" story being told in strikingly different ways. DeCurtis and White's *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, for example, consists of nearly 100 essays, most of which focus exclusively on a specific artist (Elvis, the Beatles, Madonna), scene (Chicago, Memphis, San Francisco), or musical style (doo-wop, folk rock, funk, rap). The story resulting from these essays is one that emphasizes musicians over moguls, albums over audiences, and songs over social forces: in this version of rock 'n' roll history, the major theme is that of rock 'n' roll as a creative, artistic endeavor, and the story's major figures are the Great Artists responsible for making such Great Music. Charlie Gillett's *The Sound of the City*, on the other hand, maps roughly the same period of musical history, but concentrates far more intently on the recording industry and the role played by specific labels in the music's rise to prominence. Here, rock 'n' roll becomes more of a terrain created and fought over by shrewd entrepreneurs and media empires than a revolutionary artistic oeuvre, and industry figures such as Motown's Berry Gordy and Atlantic's Ahmet Ertegun become central to the tale. Meanwhile, Reebee Garofalo's *Rockin' Out* takes yet a third approach to the story at hand. While Garofalo writes a great deal about both artists and the industry, his main focus is on rock 'n' roll as a powerful social, cultural, and political force. As a result, non-musical events (for example, the civil rights movement) play a larger role in the story, and Garofalo makes a deliberate effort to explain how popular music both shaped and was shaped by the culture around it.

Another common misconception about questions of history stems from the tendency to oversimplify the way history actually unfolds. This oversimplification typically takes one of two forms: either it dramatically over-emphasizes the role played by broad, impersonal forces in the making of history, or it grants too much credit for historical change to "great" individuals. An example of the former tendency can be found in the relatively common claim that the rise of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s was simply the inevitable result of social, economic, and cultural forces that had been at work for years beforehand. One version of this argument would have us believe that it was a combination of the economic prosperity of post-war life, the entertainment industry's drive to create a new and highly profitable market centered on youth culture, and the growing desire for black music by white audiences (among other factors) that ultimately made rock 'n' roll happen. According to this vision of rock 'n' roll history, no particular individual was somehow essential to the way the story unfolded: if there had been no Elvis Presley, someone else would have played the role he did just as well. Albert Goldman's aforementioned

Elvis biography is a textbook example here – Goldman bends over backwards to portray Elvis's success as a consequence of anything (luck, timing, slick packaging, other people's talent, etc.) besides Elvis himself – but he is far from alone in this regard. As Simon Frith points out in "The academic Elvis," academic work on popular music – including, Frith admits, his own early writings (e.g. *Sound Effects*) – has all too often echoed the more facile versions of non-scholarly histories and biographies.

On the flip side of the coin – and often offered as a deliberate response to the vision of history where people are interchangeable parts bound up in the works of some larger machine – we find an approach to history that celebrates Great Men (and it is almost always men who are lauded this way) as the principal agents of historical change. Here, for example, Elvis might readily be touted as a profound visionary who recognized what was wrong with US culture in ways that no one else had before him, and who singlehandedly set out to change that culture. Instead of broader forces leading inexorably to the triumph of rock 'n' roll, this vision of history is likely to see Elvis as a lone hero fighting *against* an overwhelming array of broader forces – busting down the barriers between black and white, shattering the stifling sexual morality of the era, teaching youth to think for themselves and question authority, and so on – in order to bring into existence his personal vision of a better life for us all. Some of the sharpest and most insightful commentators on Elvis's life and music have made such overstated claims (see Guralnick, 1979; Marsh, 1982; Marcus, 1991, pp. 26–39). To be fair, they have undoubtedly done so out of a passionately felt need to rebut the widespread vision of musical history as nothing more than impersonal social forces. Nevertheless, such claims *are* overstated. One doesn't have to portray Elvis as having some sort of master plan to transform US culture in order to make a strong case that he played a unique role in bringing dramatic changes about in that culture.

In the end, the main problem with each of these competing visions of rock 'n' roll history is not that they make untenable claims as much as that each manages to ignore the important insights of the other. There really were a host of structural and institutional forces that combined to make rock 'n' roll possible – and, without these, rock 'n' roll might never have come into existence at all. But it is also true that without the unique talents of figures like Elvis and Chuck Berry, the ultimate shape and impact of rock 'n' roll would have been very different: take Presley and Berry out of the picture, and rock 'n' roll might very easily have become a primarily piano-based music after the example of figures like Fats Domino,

Jerry Lee Lewis, and Little Richard. The difficult balance that we need to strike in our historical work lies in the recognition that historical change is the byproduct of unique individual achievements in the context of social, cultural, economic, and political circumstances that are beyond the ability of those individuals to create or control on their own.

Finally, it is vital for us to recognize that history never looks as neat or predictable while it is unfolding as it does after the fact. One of the most difficult tricks in doing historical work is recapturing the sense of uncertainty that existed at some prior moment about what would happen next. In hindsight, for instance, it is quite easy (and common) to view July 6, 1954 as “that fateful day” when Elvis cut his first single for Sun Records and started off on the road to international stardom – and even easier for us to frame the stories we tell in such a way that Elvis’s subsequent fame and fortune are seen as the natural and inevitable consequence of wheels set in motion that summer afternoon in a little studio on Union Street. At the time, however, there was nothing at all inevitable about the future of Elvis’s career. Even two years later, after he had signed a contract with RCA-Victor and had two singles go to the top of *Billboard’s* pop charts, Elvis could still be heard to speculate about what he was going to do *when* – not “if” – the rock ‘n’ roll fad faded away. Today, of course, we know precisely how Elvis’s story turned out. Back then, however, no such knowledge was possible – just as today we cannot speak with absolute certainty about what next year’s (or even next week’s) headlines will be. In telling our own stories, then, and in doing the historical work that we need to in order to have our stories make sense, we have to be careful about seeing predictable cause-and-effect relationships between events where no such certainty actually existed.

Perhaps the best example to use to illustrate this point is *Last Train to Memphis*, the first volume of Peter Guralnick’s biographical opus on Elvis. What is remarkable about Guralnick’s book is that he tells a story that most of his readers already know in intimate detail (or think they do), yet he manages to present it in such a way that the reader is still surprised time and time again by what happens next. Guralnick pulls off this seemingly impossible task, not by uncovering a vast storehouse of previously unknown facts that fundamentally alter the story we have heard countless times before, but by the way in which he tells his tale: specifically, how he allows it to unfold before us in much the way it unfolded at the time for those who lived it. Which means that Elvis’s own surprise at his rise to stardom becomes a surprise for us as well.

And this, in the end, may be the most important reason why “doing

history” matters for the study of popular music: not because it will allow us to answer all our questions, but precisely because it won’t. If done well, history will surprise us, challenge us, and lead us to new – and hopefully better – questions. Which, in turn, will lead us to tell better stories.

Resources

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