**WOODSTOCK: A DIALOGUE OF ENERGY**

My subtitle, “A Dialogue of Energy,” is the phrase Mick Jagger of The Rolling Stones offered when asked what he thought was the essence of rock music. Here’s a few seconds of old Mick, who should have been at Woodstock, but was not.

**Woodstock** as a performance event was the culmination of collective yearnings, especially among young people, for a different culture, simmering for years, in 1969 boiling over. Philosopher Susanne Langer said that every epoch is characterized more by the questions it asks than by the answers it finds for those questions. The Woodstock period posed many fundamental questions about ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, sexual and political values. How do we use our energy, mental and physical. Who should have power? What energies are latent within us and within the structure of our culture? How does change happen? A widely embraced hypothesis was that cultural change depends on prior change in the consciousness or sensibility of individuals. Psychology before politics. And, art is the harbinger. The best artists are diagnostic of society's ills and prophetic of its future.

**PART ONE – a new sensibility**

Rock music, in the late 60s, significantly increased the emphasis on extreme, intense sensory responses. The rock show with its high volume, changing rainbow of lights and constant movement illustrates this bias. It’s not that subtlety was unappreciated (there can be a subtlety of frenzy as in Janis Joplin’s singing) but that intensity and extremity are desirable for their cathartic effects.

**PART TWO – A shift in cultural values**

The new sensibility implied a significant shift in aesthetic taste. More sensuality, less rationality, a more democratic ethos, more intercultural borrowing, especially among blacks and whites. Aesthetic values would then drive ethical values which, in due course, might prefigure a change in political values. All this constitutes a tectonic shift in the way people perceive and interpret the world: A paradigm shift in consciousness.

Two of the illuminating interpretations of how such a change in consciousness may have been coming about in the mid- to late 20th century are those of Norman O. Brown – in his books *Life Against Death* (1959) and *Love’s Body (1966)*; and in the work of Herbert Marcuse, such as *Eros and Civilization (*1955)*,* and in his *An Essay on Liberation* (1969)*.* Also important was Paul Goodman’s book *Growing Up Absurd* (1960). Some of the best rock songs in the Woodstock period illustrate how contemporary popular music intuitively grappled with ideas – as did Brown, Marcuse and Goodman -- about a major change in consciousness. Pop music had come a long way from the banalities of the 1950’s.

Let’s look first at a rock vision of apocalyptic cultural change. Some rock songs in this vein foresee political revolution. Others propose a radical change in consciousness while envisioning a “new” man. Still others forecast a better society. However, Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” is not committed to any specific point of view, and it deliberately plays with the mysterious feeling of an approaching but unidentified threat to the status quo. In the fearsomeness of this mystery lies its power to suggest that something dramatic is about to happen.

There are two characters and a narrator. The main speaker in V1 is the joker who istense, paranoid, disoriented, claustrophobic and alienated. He seeks relief from the confusion of a situation where no one knows what life is worth. The *urban* *businessman* doesn’t recognize the value of his wine and the *rural ploughman* fails to see the value of his earth.

Here is Jimi Hendrix singing “Watchtower.”

**SONG EXCERPT**

In V2 we meet the thief. Both he and his joker counterpart are outsiders who have only a peripheral connection with the community of man. The thief, however, is self-assured and relaxed. He rejects the joker’s confusion, reminding him that although many others consider life to be a pointless, absurd joke, they (the joker and the thief) already have gone beyond this. They strive to make something better of it all, at least for themselves. Yet he insists their time is short and they must speak honestly. They cannot afford the illusions of the businessman and ploughman.

The narrator enters in V3, offering an omniscient perspective. The watchtower seems like a bastion of civilization, of society. All along its breadth and range, powerful authorities (princes) keep watch for encroaching danger. Meanwhile, their women and servants keep busy with their daily labor. Out on the horizon, “a wildcat did growl,” reminding us of WB Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming” in which we see the “dumb beast/ its hour come round at last” slouching “toward Bethlehem to be born.” Two unidentified riders approach, and the dense ambiguity of their identity feels threatening. Are they the joker and the thief, bringing their message of confusion, of new values, of the need for disruptive honesty? Or, are they someone else? There is no certain answer, but the wind howls and the song ends with this ominous threat as yet unrealized and getting closer all the time.

**PART THREE – the psychological dimension**

Any major change in cultural values would involve a comparable change in psychological habits: the way people think and feel. In assessing the possibility for broad, cultural change, both Marcuse and Brown look closely at the workings of the individual mind. It is Freud’s id-ego-superego model that forms the basis of Brown’s and Marcuse’s arguments about a kind of psychic battle among these constituent “parts” of the mind. So, here comes Psych 101…

The **id** is the seat of man’s instinctual energies. These energies take two forms: first, the *life instincts* which seek pleasure either through sex (which Brown contends must be defined broadly as any sensory stimulation, not just genital excitement) or through the satisfaction of needs such as hunger and thirst. There are also the *death instincts*, a desire for nonbeing, a return to the void. In contrast to this instinctual basis of the psyche, there is the **super-ego** which is the conscience with its aesthetic, ethical, political values. These values are embodied in the life of institutions – family, church, corporation, state -- and are mediated to the individual by parents, priests, bosses, and politicians. The third element of the psyche, the **ego**, acts as an entrepreneur in the exchange – or dialogue, if you will -- of energy between *unconscious id* and *conscious superego*. The ego strives to release as much as possible of the id’s energy without being checked by the restraints of the superego.

The importance of controlling the id’s instinctual energy cannot be overemphasized. If the desire for pleasure had gone completely unchecked, man would never have done the onerous work required to find food, shelter and protection. If the death instinct were unleashed, man would act suicidally. Self-control therefore involves denying or repressing some degree of instinctual energy. “Sublimation” is the term Freud used to describe the process of diverting such energy into other activity. Brown and Marcuse contend that sublimated instinctual energy became the “work” we recognize as essential to the creation of culture: artifacts, services, and institutions. The key to the problem of making man do this work (rather than pursuing pleasure or death) was the creation of a sense of need. The need for food and shelter was obvious. However, the need for elaborate institutions like religion or government had to be created by giving man a sense of moral obligation, and this is where the role of superego is vital. Marcuse and Brown reassess ways in which man might alter his control of instinctual energy. The possibility of a change in this individual psychological sense is the seed of their vision of a radically different culture.

**PART FOUR – the change in consciousness**

Now, what about rock music? Three related issues arise: the use of reason, the experience of work, and the character of childhood.

Brown and Marcuse contend that in western civilization one mode of conscious thought has been elevated to a level of prominence greater than all other forms, in a drastic imbalance. Reason has been revered and, conversely, intuition, mysticism and other forms of non-rational insight have been scorned. Brown contends this bias is deadening to the life of the mind and debilitating for culture. He underscores the need to balance our respect for different modalities of understanding and insight. This is an argument about *epistemology*, how we know what we know. A mystic, for example, eschewing rational speculation, might be in more direct contact with his instinctual desires, and, as such, he gives a greater degree of free play to them. An important by-product of this freedom, the argument goes, could be better mental health.

There are many rock songs celebrating a reduced emphasis on reason and/or an increased reliance on intuitive, mystical insight as a way toward understanding. These songs fall into two categories. The first is a satirical critique of people who spend their time thinking in a vacuum about problems no one else pays attention to: The solipsistic, ivory tower problem. Songs of this type implicitly demand that the thinker reconfigure himself, in deeper communion with others. The Beatles’ song “Nowhere Man,” animated in the film *Yellow Submarine*, illustrates this idea.

**SONG EXCERPT**

The second type of song about reducing our emphasis on reason and increasing our reliance on intuition calls for more mystical, non-rational insights, but also tries to evoke the experience of such perception through the music itself. The Beatles’ tune “Tomorrow Never Knows” is an example.

The song has a strong rhythmic foundation of drums (including tabla) and sitar (the drone-like instrument), contributing a mesmerizing sound behind the lyric. Before the lyric begins, we hear the cries of gulls, sounds which make us feel a sense of spaciousness, of floating freely, of disconnection from measured space or recorded time.

**SONG EXCERPT**

The lyric itself is not coherent. In this sense, its randomness parallels the strange sounds drifting unpredictably throughout the musical texture. There are commands and enigmatic statements: Turn off all rational approaches, and let the mind play freely with non-rational feelings, visions, and sensations.

**PART FIVE -- man’s attitude toward work**

Marcuse and Brown see man’s attitude toward work as a central issue in the broad question of cultural change. Man learned to repress his instinctual desires, to sublimate his instinctual energy, because the things he needed to stay alive were in scarce supply. If resources are scarce, then hard work is necessary to obtain, utilize and protect them. High repression of instinctual desires is necessary. The converse also applies: If resources are plentiful and easily obtained, then less onerous work is needed as is less repression, and a greater exercise of instinctual freedom becomes possible.

Brown and Marcuse argue that technology in recent centuries has reduced significantly the need for burdensome work. Abundance rather than scarcity is the general rule. For many people and groups, leisure greatly increases. This does not mean that resources are distributed equally; poverty and its debilitating consequences continue to exist. Moreover, there is also the insidious problem of the creation of false needs: the seduction of the worker into believing he needs more goods and services than he really does. The result of such insatiable desire is a dispiriting sense of obligation to work harder still. Despite these problems, Brown and Marcuse hold out the promise of a potentially better time of it for everyone.

They note also that man finds himself seriously confused by these developments. Simultaneously people feel bored with their work, disillusioned with their leisure and suspicious that there is something fundamentally wrong with the economic system. Furthermore, in societies where the Protestant work ethic has had a stronghold on the moral definition of labor, there is widespread guilt about these feelings of alienation from work. Brown claims that “the most realistic observers are emphasizing man’s increasing alienation from his work…; and the utter incapacity of human nature as it is today to make genuinely free use of leisure – to play.” Paul Goodman, in his *Growing Up Absurd*, prophesies that the absence of meaningful, useful, stimulating work becomes a primary cause for social revolt in industrialized societies.

Rock and roll – up to the late 1960s -- had always been a music for an audience composed largely of adolescents. It is no wonder then that the authority figures it often attacked for being too stern, harsh and repressive were parents and their surrogates in the schools. But there are also good rock songs focusing specifically on the way we define an individual’s responsibility to commit himself to unpleasant work, to stifle his imagination and repress his instinctual desire for play and freedom. One of these songs is John Lennon’s “Working Class Hero.”

**SONG EXCERPT**

This autobiographical ballad alludes to Lennon’s adolescence and the various attempts by family, school and society to squelch his imagination and make him subservient. At the same time, he was forced into a procrustean mold of predefined success and respectability. However, except for the last two lines, which refer directly to the persona, the song is written in the second person and can be taken as addressed to a wide audience. Lennon sings it in a drained, tired voice with an exhausted, scornful attitude. The song’s somber dynamics are appropriately narrow in their range of pitch and volume. There is no crescendo or climax. The guitar accompaniment is repetitious and basically dull. The villains are labeled simply “they” and can therefore be any or all repressive authorities. Lennon catalogues what have been for him the worst of them: parents, educators, employers, religious leaders, proferrers of addictive entertainment. The result of all this repressive torture is a battle-scarred psyche: paranoid, masochistic, deeply unhappy.

Bob Dylan’s “Subterranean Homesick Blues” is another good example of rock’s concern with the emptiness of work.

**SONG EXCERPT**

In the end, the kid jumps down a manhole and goes underground, symbolically in the direction of the subconscious. The song’s title suggests that he is homesick for a freedom he can't find above ground – in the excessively regulated world -- but which he knows intuitively is available below the surface of things.

The David Crosby song “Déjà Vu,” is less subtle but still evocative of an underground source of mysterious energies, paralleling the theoretical model of the mind’s deeper instinctual functions, a la Freud, as translated by Brown and Marcuse.

**SONG EXCERPT**

**PART SIX – the instinctual wisdom of childhood**

Working as if in the tradition of the Romantic poets, Brown and Marcuse opine that the repression imposed on us by adult social norms is dangerously intense. They turn to certain aspects of childhood, speculating that -- given the possibility of abundance -- extreme repression becomes incrementally obsolete, and a greater amount of release of the instinctual desire for pleasure becomes not only possible but desirable. They believe children have yet to learn society’s harsh lesson about the alleged need to repress intuitive, non-rational, fantasy-like thought. Children take delight in a full range of sensory experience and express their reactions largely without inhibition. Brown and Marcuse emphasize that children do not make moral distinctions as adults do, about pleasure received through various parts of the body. A child’s sexuality, in other words, is not restricted to the genitals but is dispersed throughout the whole body. The applicable phrase – too much to unpack at the moment – is that children are *ploymorphously perverse*. Finally, Brown and Marcuse observe that the primary activity of children is guiltless play, rather than work.

It would be simplistic to say that man’s salvation lies in acting like a baby or that all children behave in these ways. This is not the argument. The point is that Brown and Marcuse see several characteristics of childhood thought and physical behavior which they think should be combined with other mature, adult characteristics. The result would be a different kind of adult with a different consciousness, a different perception of the world. Neither Brown nor Marcuse denies the need for some repression, some work and some controls on sexual behavior. Nor do they degrade the fruits of reason. They would put play and work on equal terms; mystical visions and rational logic on the same plane; and they argue for an open, uninhibited, guiltless sexuality of the whole body rather than a guilt-ridden attitude restricted to genital pleasure and monogamous heterosexuality. Brown contends that “man is that species of animal which has the historical project of recovering his own childhood ....”

Rock music of the 60s was often about just these philosophical themes. The refrain in one of Dylan’s songs goes “Ah, but I was so much older then / I'm younger than that now.” There is a Beatles lyric which reads “Can you take me back where I came from? Can you take me back?” Another Beatles song, called “Get Back,” about retreating from repressive social norms, contains the lines “Get back, get back / Get back to where you once belonged.” A Beatles song (part of a medley on *Abbey Road*), seems to remind us about the burdens of civilization: “Boy, you're gonna carry that weight/ Carry that weight a long time.” Still another Beatles burst of nostalgia for a lost childhood – the tune “Golden Slumbers” -- goes: “Once there was a way to get back homeward/ Once there was a way to get back home/ Sleep little darling, do not cry/ And I will sing a lullaby.”

**SONG EXCERPT**

**and finally, PART SEVEN – the terror and the transformation**

Some of the best rock songs express visions and dreams. Joni Mitchell’s “Woodstock” is one. It is the signature song for this conference.

The lyric tells of the narrator’s need to purge herself of unnecessary restrictions, to clean out her soul, to break free from stifling norms and find a more loving, ecstatic relationship with other people and nature. The lyric suggests she is by no means alone in these feelings. She sees herself as a cog in a great turning wheel; she wonders if now may be a propitious time when mankind will realize its capacity for a better life. Although the song’s immediate setting is the August 1969 rock festival at Woodstock, its visionary perspective is surely universal. In the end, Mitchell delivers the most striking image in all of rock’s poetry: the ominous hovering, encroaching Police and Army bombers turning magically into harmless butterflies. The ugly is transformed into the beautiful, the deadly into the living, the agent of repression into the embodiment of weightless freedom.

**SONG EXCERPT**