

# YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION?: POPULAR MUSIC AND REVOLT IN FRANCE, THE UNITED STATES, AND BRITAIN DURING THE LATE 1960S

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**Abstract:** It is almost impossible to understand the youth protest movements of the 1960s without some appreciation of the importance of that decade's popular music. This music and ideas of personal and political liberation and self-expression were closely linked. This article analyses the role of popular music (rock music) in the 1960s' counterculture.

It is not an exercise in musicology or sociology, though it may inadvertently tread on the toes of those disciplines. It adopts an explicitly comparative historical approach to the phenomenon, utilising case studies of three contrasting societies – two in Western Europe, plus the United States. The argument here is that despite that this music challenged many social convention and helped to 'emancipate' its consumers, its uses and role in the USA, Britain, and France were frequently dissimilar. Often, these were determined by differing national circumstances and traditions. The piece disputes also the notion of a united and radical counterculture and attempts to illuminate the nature of youth rebellion in each of the countries that it examines. This paper seeks to suggest that the 1960s' youth-based movements for social change were frequently responding to local or parochial problems in their protests. 1968 is taken as the main focus here, partly because it permits an examination of the intense Parisian revolt that broke out in that year, but also because it is frequently conceptualised as the decade's hinge. 1968 is the year when the optimistic mind-set of the preceding five or so years started to give way to frustration and disillusionment.

**Keywords:** 1960s, counterculture, rock music, popular music, France, Britain, USA, revolution.

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This article is a piece of comparative history that endeavours to highlight, in short compass, the different roles of popular music in the various types of social rebellion that arose in the 1960s. It is not an exercise in musicology or sociology, though it may inadvertently tread on the toes of those disciplines – for which apologies in advance. For simplicity's sake, it uses the term 'rock music' to denote those types of popular music that are not immediately identifiable as commercial 'pop' designed for a pre and early teenage market.

Recent work by Nick Thomas has demonstrated that, whilst young people in Western Europe and the USA certainly underwent a common experience that encompassed, for instance, rising prosperity, greater disposable income, and major mass technological changes, the idea of an international countercultural movement with shared political aims is easily overdrawn<sup>1</sup>. Instead, despite some obviously mutual origins, the 1960s' youth-based movements for social change were frequently responding to local or parochial problems in their protests. In part, this paper seeks to support that idea by contrasting the experience of movements, through their relationship to rock music, in three different countries. 1968 is taken as the main focus here, partly because it permits an examination of the intense Parisian revolt that broke out in that year, but also because it is frequently conceptualised as the decade's hinge. A loose consensus has emerged amongst historians: that to understand the Sixties 'revolution', 1963-73 makes a more fruitful periodisation than the strict chronology of 1960-69. Within that interval, as Kenneth Gloag has commented, a further "micro-periodisation" has started to emerge; this

1. Thomas, Nick, "Challenging Myths of the 1960s: The Case of Student Protest in Britain". *Twentieth Century British History*, XIII-3 (2002), 277-297.

sees 1968 as the year when the optimistic mindset of the preceding five or so years started to give way to frustration and disillusionment<sup>2</sup>. Some of the practical consequences of that adjustment are illustrated in what follows.

Why choose rock music as the central point here, though? Its symbolic value to so many participants in the various 1960s protest movements makes it an ideal candidate for international comparison; indeed, we may agree with Jerry Rodnitzky that “if there was a political or social counterculture in the 1960s, surely it lived between the microgrooves of rock and topical records. Music is still the best guide to understanding a decade that some historians will continue to label ‘the Age of Protest’”<sup>3</sup>. Rock music resulted from the post-war development of mass communications, plus the economic and technological improvements in Western capitalist countries alluded to earlier<sup>4</sup>. Its audience was, at least potentially, enormous. Still more, Morris Dickstein suggested that rock was not just a mirror of the decade (as other arts were) but was, partly because of its simplicity and its direct appeal to the average person, the religion of self-expression<sup>5</sup>. In it, ideas of personal and political liberation and self-expression were closely linked. For example, the sexual ‘emancipation’ of youth which took off from the gentle nudgings of rock ‘n’ roll innuendo through to the full-blown consummation of the Rolling Stones’ “Let’s Spend the Night Together” demonstrated the mutually beneficial relationship between the two concepts. Rock music thus became the means of articulating demands for liberty in many spheres. It provided a coherence of feeling for its consumers and gave a unity of impression to the outside world<sup>6</sup>.

Most specifically, rock music became the mouthpiece of the counterculture - deliberately parading anti-‘establishment’ values on the airwaves and in concert halls. It encouraged people to think independently and to adopt values that were contrary to those with which they had been imbued in chil-

dhood. Much of this proselytising was extraordinarily naïve, of course, but its impact should not be consequently underestimated. Rock’s reaction to the Vietnam war was a case in point. It was seen by many musicians as the ideal way to articulate protest against the war because it combined easily identifiable images with generational rebellion. The songs ranged from the cynicism and bitterness of Phil Ochs’ “Talking Vietnam Blues” (Burned the jungle far and wide/ Made sure the red apes had nowhere to hide/ Put all the people in relocation camps/ Under lock and key, made damn sure they’re free...<sup>7</sup>) to the anarchic madness of the Fugs’ “Kill for Peace”, which took mere sarcasm over the brink:

Kill, Kill, Kill for peace  
Kill, it will give you mental ease  
Kill, it will give you a big release...<sup>8</sup>.

Although it is unlikely that rock music alone caused anyone to burn their draft-cards or protest against Vietnam, it is nevertheless a rock song that dominates the historical image of anti-war protests in the 1960s. That song was John Lennon’s “Give Peace A Chance”, a simple enough chant, but one which so permeated public awareness that it was sung by over half a million people in the Vietnam Moratorium Day protests in Washington D.C. on November 15th 1969.

Rock was not only the vehicle for political protest and physical liberation, though. In fact, it was probably more influential when it advocated mental liberation. The concept of freeing one’s mind through music was at first scorned by political activists of the counterculture, but gradually even this aspect of its potential was accepted by the New Left intellectuals. In the wake of the turbulence of 1968, the Freudian Marxist Herbert Marcuse, who had been initially contemptuous of popular music, could enthuse about the power of song in the political struggle: “[T]he soul,” he wrote, “is no longer in Beethoven, Schubert, but in the blues, in jazz,

2. Gloag, Kenneth, “Situating the 1960s: Popular Music – Postmodernism - History”. *Rethinking History*, V-3 (2001), 397-410.  
3. Rodnitzky, Jerome L., “The Sixties between the Microgrooves: Using Folk and Protest Music to Understand American History, 1963-73”. *Popular Music and Society*, XXIII-4 (1999), 105-122.  
4. Gans, H.J., *Popular Culture and High Culture*. New York, Basic Books, 1974, 94-95.  
5. Dickstein, Morris, *Gates of Eden - Culture In the Sixties*. New York, Basic Books, 1977, 184.  
6. Mitchell, Stuart, “The Glories of the Vernacular: Popular Musics Within Oral Traditions”. *Diatribes*, I-5 (1995), 63-70.  
7. Ochs, Phil, *Talking Vietnam Blues*. Elektra Records, 1964.  
8. The Fugs, *Kill for Peace*. ESP-Disk, 1966.

in rock ‘n’ roll”<sup>9</sup>. Marcuse’s essay was a fanfare for the New Left against the so-called establishment, which, he decided, included the old left. In it, he urged all those in the protest movement not to abuse their potential allies - anyone who was a ‘non-conformist’:

...the reversal of meaning, driven to the point of open contradiction – giving flowers to the police, ‘flower power’ - the redefinition and very negation of the sense of ‘power’; the erotic belligerency in the songs of protest; the sensuousness of long hair, of the body unsoiled by plastic cleanliness<sup>10</sup>.

This almost poetic call-to-arms railed against the alleged sterility of repressive (corporate-capitalist) society. Marcuse’s audience was necessarily small in comparison to that of popular music as a whole, but his argument remained nonetheless a rallying call which was – though usually couched in more simplistic terms – echoed throughout the new culture of the Sixties, and most importantly in American rock music.

Popular music ended the decade advocating what amounted to a new moral code, one that threatened not just conservatives who had reacted against rock and roll, but also those liberal members of the establishment who had believed themselves to be so enlightened in giving MBEs to the Beatles. It was not merely that some young people were experimenting with drugs, communal living, new spiritualism and the suchlike that concerned ‘normal’ society, it was because, in the USA at least, youth seemed to advocate such modes of behaviour as foundations for societal transformation<sup>11</sup>. The identification of rock music as the defining culture of the epoch in this case would appear to have some accuracy. The values of rock were, or at least on the surface, the values of new youth. These values were best articulated through music, if only because in this manner they would reach a far wider audience than the small cells of students to which radical intellectuals had access:

This articulate disaffiliation, symbolically announced in psychedelic rock, long hair, drugs, the ornamental clothing and spiritual withdrawal of the hippies, and then dramatically driven home by international youth protest against the war in Vietnam and university structures at home, was doubly shocking. For this crisis... of the predictable estrangement and officialised boredom of middle-class adult life and its deferential culture, was led by the very sons and daughters of those habitually used to participating in the definition, control and curtailing of such social unrest<sup>12</sup>.

Thus the liberal establishment came under attack not merely from an inchoate rebellion of working class youth, as had happened in the early Sixties, but from within its own (largely middle class) ranks<sup>13</sup>. Sixties rock reflected the changing nature of protest from directionless delinquency in the 1950s into something “altogether more serious, cerebral and introspective”<sup>14</sup>. But although this role for popular music as defining culture was fairly unambiguous in the USA and in Britain, this was not universally true. In France, the nation in which, arguably, the most obviously radical and youth-driven events of the decade occurred, popular music was not seen as an adjunct to revolt. In contrast, for most of the Sixties, it was identified as a manifest impediment. It is to this conundrum that the paper now turns.

## 1. THE USES OF POPULAR MUSIC: FRANCE, THE UNITED STATES, AND BRITAIN

In May 1968, France almost underwent a revolution. In Paris, students rioted and throughout the country workers came out on strike. But unlike the USA, where popular music and popular culture had increasingly become components of the revolutionary underground, there was no adoption of popular music forms as vehicles for protest. Indeed, popular music was ridiculed because it created the passive consumer, fed on a diet of bourgeois images presented as ‘truth’. Why did the youth

9. Marcuse, Herbert, *An Essay on Liberation*, London (Allen Lane), 1969, p.36.

10. Ibid.

11. Marwick, Arthur, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, 481-484.

12. Chambers, Ian, *Urban Rhythms - Pop Music and Popular Culture*. London, Macmillan, 1985, 101.

13. Mitchell, Stuart, “Douglas-Home, the Conservative Party and the Threat of Rebellious Youth: 1963-64”. *University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History*, 1-4 (2002).

14. Street, John, *Rebel Rock - The Politics of Popular Music*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, 170.

of France, then, have such an enormously different perception of the power of popular culture from young people in Britain and America?

There are a number of answers to this question. One is to say that the French had their own long-standing popular methods of cultural protest, such as street theatre, which simply appealed more to them than American imports such as rock music. Another argument is that rock music was appropriated as a radicalising force, but mostly after the May events. Progressive rock groups such as Lard Free and Magma formed in the aftermath of Les Événements, seeking to capitalise on the spirit of the revolt. Gilbert Altman, one of the musicians in the former group, explained: "The year 1968 certainly served as an eye-opener to the French music scene. Everything in music seemed possible... Rock music at that time seemed much more dynamic [than European jazz music], moving beyond the boundaries of its history. Politics certainly played a part in the emergence of a parallel rock scene - music expressed itself in the universities, the factories, and the alternative festivals... It was in this context that Lard Free was born"<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, the insurrection prompted a number of reactions which did make the French pop charts, albeit somewhat later. Most notable amongst these were Aphrodite's Child's rather oblique "Rain and Tears" and Jacques Dutronc's openly cynical "L'Opportuniste" (I am of all parties/ I am of all nations/ I am of all factions/ I'm king of the converted)<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, at the time of the uprising the use of rock music as a vehicle of expression and protest was extremely limited in France. More vitally for many of the énrages, "to be interested in the hit parade was a sure sign that one had been duped into the culture marketed by the mass media, and that one was not concerning oneself with more important political questions"<sup>17</sup>. At the time of the rebellion, the French pop chart was topped successively by Claude François and Johnny Hallyday: both native singers, but whose output could hardly have been classified as radical.

This attitude might appear strange to a latter day observer of the material produced in the aftermath of '68. Rock music vividly exemplified the freedom of expression that the revolutionaries so avidly sought: not only political protest but also the advocacy of mind expanding drugs, 'free love', ethnic awareness, spiritualism. All these ideas were intended to facilitate the unfettering of ostensibly conditioned minds, which is what the revolutionaries claimed, at least in part, to be searching for. The failure to make this connection can, however, perhaps be explained in the role of intellectuals in French thinking, Sartre's and Marcuse's ideas were extremely important to the student youth, and their type of leftist thought demanded the denunciation of mass cultural forms since they concentrated primarily on quantity not quality of consumption<sup>18</sup>. Conversely, the figures who had most impact upon American counter-cultural protest movements were largely in favour of popular culture as a means of protest, indeed some of them were peddlers of it: Timothy Leary, Norman Mailer, Bob Dylan, Ken Kesey, and the suchlike<sup>19</sup>. Yet here was a further reason for French youth to be dismissive of popular music as a medium for protest or rebellion: pop music was seen as American in origin. Shared by left and right was a deep distrust of American influence in world affairs. US pop culture, no matter if it broadly supported a leftist point of view, had been rejected by the majority of French youth. Even the Vietnam War, which had provided the spur for student dissent in other European countries, could not be co-opted into the French students' protests in 1968, largely because de Gaulle's government too opposed American intervention in Vietnam. The situation was made still more problematic by the ideological divisions within the French student movement. Since Ho Chi Minh's relations with China had quickly deteriorated once the Cultural Revolution started "it was... difficult for French Maoists to support the North Vietnamese unreservedly. As for the French Trotskyists, their expressions of solidarity with Ho Chi Minh may have been inhibited by the fact that there was good

15. Interview with Gilbert Altman. Available from Internet at: <<http://www.rhino.com/Albums/724511in.html>>.

16. Dutronc, Jacques, "L'Opportuniste". *Vogue*, 1968. Translated (perhaps poorly!) by the author. (The original lyrics are: Je suis de tous les partis/ Je suis de toutes les patries/ Je suis de toutes les coteries/ Je suis le roi des convertis.) The members of Aphrodite's Child, Greek 'art rock' band, the most famous of whom was Vangelis, had been in Paris at the time of Les Événements. "Rain and Tears" was ostensibly about the revolt, though it is rather difficult to tell this just from reading the lyrics.

17. Rigby, B., *Popular Culture in Modern France*. London, Routledge, 1991, 165.

18. Wollener, A., *The Action-Image of Society*. London, Tavistock, 1970, 147.

19. Marwick, A., *The Sixties...*, op.cit., 482.

reason to suppose he had been responsible in some way for the murder of all the leading Trotskyists in Vietnam in 1945<sup>20</sup>. Thus the major topic of criticism articulated by rock music was shut off from at least some of the participants in May '68.

Paul Yonnet suggested also that on both wings of French politics there had been an ideology of high culture. This had prevented vulgar forms of culture from making a significant mark upon the vast majority of people. He even contended that this ideology became more widespread after 1945, to which the actions of the students in 1968 give some credence<sup>21</sup>. After all, the students looked primarily to high or avant-garde culture (particularly Surrealism; Post-1917 Russian art; Free jazz; Dada) as their symbols of cultural empowerment. Yonnet criticised this backward looking attitude:

The French ideology of high culture is without doubt largely responsible for the impasse in which the whole area of French creativity has found itself. The French ideology of high culture also explains the rejection of American rock 'n' roll...<sup>22</sup>.

Yonnet's case is important, but it underplays the political antipathy of the *énrages* toward Stateside culture. Also, of course, France still had a persistent bond with its folk music and chanson traditions. The myths of national culture were conjured by French singers such as Chevalier and Piaf, and also upon the musical folk tradition, which in the 1960s was strengthened by those who wished to counter the infiltration of Americanised rock. Because television was largely controlled by the state it meant that one outlet for popular music that had been used since the 1950s (e.g., 6-5 Special) in Britain and America was sternly scrutinised. In part, this resulted to the growth of a teeny-bopper market in popular music in France, characterised by artists such as Johnny Hallyday, but no parallel growth in a (radical) rock music market. The understandable attitude of many students towards television was that it was primarily the peddler of

state propaganda. This points to the completely different concept of popular culture in France when compared to Britain, where television had not only been satirical and but also had been frequently criticised for encouraging rebellious behaviour in the young<sup>23</sup>. There was something strangely hermetic about the revolt in Paris; it was a peculiarly French affair. An intriguing piece of evidence has been quoted by Arthur Marwick in his book *The Sixties*. It is the oral testimony of a Parisian resident who (like much of Parisian opinion) supported the students and indeed actively helped them in constructing barricades and so forth:

[T]he first barricade was bristling with tricolor flags. Because of that, we said 'it's like 1848'. A plainclothes officer issued a warning but no one heard him because we were all singing, not the Internationale, but the Marseillaise...<sup>24</sup>.

Marwick goes on to say that of course the Internationale was sung as well during the uprising, but it is clear that the revolt was by no means in the pocket of those who inclined to international revolution. In fact, it was national emblems and national exceptionalism that helped to sustain the unrest; they also help to explain the rejection of American culture.

The final reason why the participants of May found pop music unpalatable was because of its technocratic aspects. Its production owed much to technological advances, whilst its marketing was a triumph for corporate capitalism. In other words, the *énrages* followed, perhaps unwittingly, Marxist doctrine in believing pop music was just another commodity to be purchased, consumed and subsequently discarded<sup>25</sup>. As one of the revolt's participants commented in his journal written during the events:

As for the consumer society, I was amazed at the vehemence both of the posters and slogans plastered all over the building [the Odéon Theatre, which was occupied by the students on May 16th], and of

20. Briton, Celia, "The Representation of Vietnam in French Films Before and After 1968", cited in Torato, D., "May 1968 and After: Cinema in France and Beyond" [document on-line] Available from Internet at: <[http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/9805/offscreen\\_essays/may68.html](http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/9805/offscreen_essays/may68.html)>.

21. Paul Yonnet, cited in Rigby, B., *Popular Culture...*, op. cit., 196.

22. Ibid, 197.

23. Tracey, Michael; Morrison, David, *Whitehouse*. London, Macmillan, 1979, ch. 4 passim.

24. Cited in Marwick, A., *The Sixties...*, op. cit., 609.

25. Mitchell, S., "Glories of the Vernacular...", op.cit., 65-6.

the people who spoke of it. Everywhere, it seemed, the idea of prosperity and progress seen in terms of consumer goods, money, affluence, television and the motor car was denounced and attacked. Sometimes the arguments against it were based on the concept of affluence as the weapon of a capitalist society; but quite as often, no such analysis was made, the speaker or writer seeming to express himself from the point of view not of left-wing politics but of deep personal awareness that money and material things did not bring happiness<sup>26</sup>.

“Commodities are the opium of the people”, “Burn commodities”, “Are you a consumer or a participant?”: these were a small handful of the graffiti that may have been observed by the journal’s author – mass culture had no place in the revolution<sup>27</sup>. As for technocracy and its grasp on popular music: “We want a wild and ephemeral music. We propose a fundamental regeneration: concert strikes, sound gatherings with collective investigation. Abolish copyrights: sound structures belong to everyone!” and “Long live communication, down with telecommunication”<sup>28</sup>. The presumption that pop music was embedded in capitalist structures seems clear in the exhortation to abolish copyrights. Technology not only bolstered archaic bureaucracy, but also served up the banal commodities that supported hated consumer society. Small wonder, then, that popular musics were almost absent from Les Événements.

One area that has been overlooked in the foregoing is the spontaneity of the revolt of May 1968, in contrast to the ongoing nature of the student and general unrest in the USA. France had one large explosion of violence, leftist thought, and ‘emancipation’, and experienced the fallout for many years following; America had several small explosions over a much longer time period. It is not perhaps surprising, then, that the énrages of Paris looked backward for cultural sound-track (to jazz; to Dadaism). American youth developed instead musical and cultural hallmarks as the Sixties progressed:

thus the rise of rock music; the radicalisation of cinema; the electrification of folk and country music; the further development of Pop Art; the fusion of jazz and rock.

The *Woodstock Census*, a survey of 1,005 people who were between the ages of 25 and 37 at the time it was taken in 1978, provides interesting figures as to the influence of rock music on American youth in the 1960s. For instance, 57% of respondents believed in the 1960s that rock and roll was a revolutionary political force, but by the 1970s this figure had dropped to 31%<sup>29</sup>. In comparison to the situation in France, and perhaps even in Britain, this revelation is enormous - it shows the impact that rock music had on its followers at this time. Although later the belief in rock as revolutionary was shown to be naïve, at the time the fiction was scarfed up whole. But why did this myth so grab public consciousness in America and not, ostensibly, elsewhere?

Part of the answer must lie in the pluralising of popular music that occurred in the late 1960s. Although the *Woodstock Census* produced figures of 87% who liked ‘rock music’ it would be extremely tenuous to suggest that all of that 87% liked the Beatles, for instance<sup>30</sup>. Rock began to offer a number of different styles in the 1960s, thus widening its audience, although its radical message remained largely homogeneous throughout<sup>31</sup>.

Another reason for rock’s importance in America was its value as a means of communication, in the parochial revolt of Paris there was no need for the sort of communication that rock music could provide. Within a city, particularly one in the throes of revolt, news could travel quickly, however in a country the size of America rock music was one method of disseminating information. For example, within twenty-four hours of the killings of four students at Kent State University during May 1970, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young had released *Ohio*, a rock and roll attempt to rally a movement supposedly reeling under the coercive power of

26. “A Paris Journal”, extract from *Anarchy 1968*. Available from Internet at: <<http://www.tao.ca/1968/>>.

27. These graffiti were translated by K. Knabb. Available from Internet at: <<http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/index.htm>>.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Weiner, R.; Stillman, D. (eds.), *Woodstock Census: The Nationwide Survey of the Sixties Generation*. New York, Viking, 1979, 235.

30. *Ibid.*, 234.

31. One could chose, perhaps, from American folk-rock, psychedelic acid rock, the country-influenced sound, or the blues revival amongst others.

the state<sup>32</sup>. (Tin Soldiers and Nixon comin’/ We’re finally on our own/ This summer I hear the drummin’/ Four dead in Ohio<sup>33</sup>). Rock music was the glue of counter-culture, it bound the Underground movement together far more effectively than drugs (only 27% felt ‘totally involved’ in the 1960s drug scene); political concerns (only 43% considered themselves ‘radical’); or sexuality (58% disagreed with the statement ‘Sex was better in the Sixties than in the Seventies’)<sup>34</sup>. George Melly has pointed out that the Underground was nurtured by ‘flower power’ and came to fruition after its death. The hippies had introduced a generation to drugs, sexuality, and left-inclined political thought gently, and these elements of the counterculture came to appear somehow not as dangerous as they once had been. So, by 1968, the Underground in the US “was no longer the property of a tiny minority. It had thousands of adherents and sympathisers, its own slang, its own meeting places, its own heroes, and more relevant.... its own groups”<sup>35</sup>. But by far the most important cause of in the radicalisation of American popular music, and its following, as intimated earlier, was the threat of the Vietnam war. This “directly affected the pop audience. They may have had to go. As a result the acid rock groups were active at all the great marches”<sup>36</sup>. Such radicalism also made good commercial sense. It is hardly astonishing that record companies, far from deserting the radical rock market like good capitalists and patriots, had few qualms about promoting bands with an seemingly radical posture.

In one sense, the participants in the French revolt were correct: protest needed capitalism to spread its message. One of the Underground’s heroes, Bob Dylan, confirmed this:

Sure, you can make all sorts of protest songs and put them on Folkways record. But who hears them? The people that do hear them are going to be agreeing with you anyway. You aren’t going to get somebody to hear it who doesn’t dig. If you can find

a cat who can actually say, ‘Okay! I’m a changed man because I heard this one thing - or I just saw this one thing...’<sup>37</sup>.

But simply because much of the new cultural output was distributed and promoted through the market mechanism, this did not make it any less radical. By being commercial, it reached a wider audience, drawing together the threads of the counterculture far more successfully than if protest had been ghettoised in the folk movement.

The practical consequence of this was a series of protests, marches, and often violent confrontations between students and the supposed enemies of liberty, which were centred upon opposition to Vietnam and black civil rights (though after Martin Luther King’s assassination and the subsequent increased importance of black power movements this became less of a factor in the protests). A majority of campuses in America experienced disturbances, most notably the Berkeley campus of the University of California where the President, Professor Clark Kerr, was dismissed in 1967 after two years of agitation from students, who alleged (with the benefit of hindsight, rather unconvincingly) that he was authoritarian. Festivals and marches were the other major arenas of dissent, the former demonstrating how closely rock music was bound up with the protest movement: “It would not be uncommon at festivals to see booths with information on local movements and organisations which followed suit the message of the music being played, as well as artists selling their wares. The use of music and the music festival as a way of spreading a message was by far the most successful conduit for the ideals of the hippie youth culture”<sup>38</sup>. So serious was the rising torrent of protest and disorder at pop festivals that it led Congress to pass the Anti-Riot Act in early 1968. In August, events at the Chicago ‘Festival of Life’ proved the utility of the legislation. At the event, counterculture celebrities such as MC5 and Phil Ochs played (though others refused because

32. Klein, M., *The Vietnam Era - Media and Culture in the US and Vietnam*. London, Pluto, 1990, 94.

33. Crosby, Stills, *Nash and Young*, Ohio. Atlantic Records, 1970.

34. Weiner and Stillman, *Woodstock Census. Figures respectively on 255, 247, 252*.

35. Melly, George, *Revolt into Style: The Pop Arts in Britain*. London, Allen Lane, 1972, 116.

36. *Ibid.*, 119.

37. Interview with Bob Dylan, *In-Beat Magazine*, May 1965. Available from Internet at: <<http://ilovemuggsy.tripod.com/Bob-Dylan/id12.html>>.

38. Ferre, H.M., “Television & Rock: The Dynamic Duo of Social Change in the Sixties” [document on-line]. Available from Internet at: <<http://www.gate.net/~doctor/Postingpole/Essays/tv&rock.htm>>.

of the event's association with the Youth International Party or 'Yippies'). The festival led to direct counter-action against the 1968 Democratic Party Convention, held simultaneously in the same city, and the riots had to be suppressed (quite brutally) by almost 20,000 police officers. Subsequently, seven of the organisers were indicted on the accusation of conspiring to organise a riot at the Party's Convention<sup>39</sup>. All of which served only to harden the counterculture's attitude towards the forces of authority.

The American case, in blunt contrast to the French revolt, showed that rock music and radicalism could intrinsically bind together. The French writer Edgar Morin even suggested that, in fact, the American movement was more radical than the French: "I am one of those people who see the activism of the party militant as reactionary. What is revolutionary is being militant in everyday life – it is the new network of human, social and, indeed, economic relationships; it is the rock festival and the love-in"<sup>40</sup>. Whilst the France's New Left remained frighteningly highbrow, the American protest movement appeared to have thrown off all inhibitions and had fastened its standard firmly to the mast of personal liberation. Indeed, because the 'revolution' in America was a gradual process many of the people who participated in it retained their radicalism into the 1970s<sup>41</sup>.

Meanwhile, developments in Britain demonstrated that rock music could be a significant cultural force without necessarily being a revolutionary one. Melly castigated the British 'underground' thus: "At all events the political upheaval of 1968 proved that pop music, in the revolutionary sense, was a non-starter, a fake revolt with no programme much beyond the legislation of pot..."<sup>42</sup>. The major figures in the British counter-culture were largely apathetic towards political revolt, with luminaries such as Lennon and Townsend only becoming interested at the fag-end of the decade. Not that British pop oeuvre was devoid of protest songs, of a sort. Songs that depicted domestic misery, such as the Who's "A Legal Matter" or the Kinks' "Dead

End Street", thronged alongside those that assaulted the apparent suffocating atmosphere of 'little England' – "Good Morning, Good Morning" by the Beatles and Manfred Mann's "Semi-Detached Suburban Mr. James", for instance – or those that expressed the alleged wretchedness of the working class like the Stones' "Factory Girl", or "Situation Vacant", again by the Kinks. The absence of a direct focal point for discontent in British rock music is however, perhaps comprehensible. In America, the threat of the draft loomed over youth; in France the Fifth Republic had been deliberately constituted to avoid the systemic weakness that had destroyed its predecessor and consequently had failed to make adjustments to accommodate social reformist demands. For these reasons, radicalism found easy focus in these countries; nothing analogous can be shown in Britain. In short: no Vietnam, no de Gaulle. On the other hand, the music was every bit as culture-shaping and emancipating as American rock (perhaps more so) both in terms of pushing and loosening the boundaries of the art-form and in terms of tackling socially subversive subjects in new ways, for example "Pictures of Lily" by the Who (masturbation) or Pink Floyd's "Arnold Layne" (transvestism). It was not, however, radical in the sense that it challenged the state. Or, at least, it did not do so directly.

Oddly, the British Labour government, unlike its French counterpart, made finding a focus for youth revolt more difficult. Roy Jenkins, the reformist Home Secretary, had legislated (or had made clear his intention to) on a number of issues, each of which might have otherwise provided a point around which to rally for the disaffected. In 1968, it was announced that the age of majority would be reduced to 18, and in the same year the Race Relations Act was passed. The previous year had seen the decriminalisation of consensual homosexual sex for adults over the age of 21, the abolition of the death penalty, and the enactment of liberal reforms on divorce and abortion. In addition, though rather a minor point in comparison to the foregoing, BBC radio had started to operate Radio One in September 1967; which provided finally a major daily out-

39. A detailed case study of the trial is "The Chicago Seven Trial: 1969-1970" [document on-line] Available from Internet at: <<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/Chicago7/chicago7.html>>.

40. Edgar Morin, cited in Rigby, B., *Popular Culture...*, op. cit., 172.

41. Weiner and Stillman, *Woodstock Census...*, op. cit., 248.

42. Melly, G., *Revolt...*, op.cit., 121.

let for rock and pop music other than pirate radio. The combined effect of these reforms cut a lot of ground from underneath the feet of potential revolutionaries.

In addition, the attitude of many of rock's major figures towards open revolt was ambivalent to say the least. Composed (probably) in late April/early May of 1968 and recorded by The Beatles at the end of May, and therefore roughly contemporaneous with (and influenced by) *Les Événements*, John Lennon's "Revolution No.1" was symptomatic of this. Broadly expressing sympathy with the aims of the radical activists (You say you want a revolution/ Well, you know we all want to change the world), it offered nonetheless grave reservations about the form and destructiveness of revolt<sup>43</sup>. Lennon made one concession to the radical left – ambiguously adding, *sotto voce*, the word 'in' to the end of the line, "When you talk about destruction/ Don't you know that you can count me out" – but the tone of the song was heavily critical of the potential revolutionaries. (In fact when the band re-recorded the song as "Revolution" a few months later, at faster tempo, even the 'in' had been deleted)<sup>44</sup>. Naturally, the song brought down the ire of the New Left press upon Lennon, but he was not alone in his sentiments amongst English rock stars. Eric Burdon of the Animals penned a caustic rejoinder to the leftists along the lines of Jacques Dutronc's earlier mentioned "L'Opportuniste", called "Year of the Guru", whilst artists like the Kinks had always abjured the counterculture, claiming that the so-called 'freedom' of the Sixties was a myth<sup>45</sup>. There were some voices of genuine radicalism, in particular the ageing folk singer Ewan MacColl, but folk music was marginalised until the arrival of folk-rock bands like Pentangle and Fairport Convention in the late Sixties. Neither of which, despite their greatly innovative styles, produced any politically radical output of significance. In fact, by refusing to accept rock music as a force for disseminating radical attitudes, MacColl played a part in the marginalisation of folk as protest medium. He summed

up his attitude thus: "I became concerned that we had a whole generation who were becoming quasi-Americans, and I felt this was absolutely monstrous! I was convinced that we had a music that was just as vigorous as anything that America had produced, and we should be pursuing some kind of national identity, not just becoming an arm of American cultural imperialism"<sup>46</sup>. MacColl's sentiments prefigured those of the French situationists in 1968, but most British artists were happy to ape American musical styles, though shorn of their political content.

In comparison to the movements in America and France, the student revolts that did take place in England were trifling affairs. Insurrections at Hornsey College of Art, the Universities of Leeds and Hull, and the London School of Economics (LSE), amongst others, used much the same language as those at the Sorbonne and Berkeley:

At Hornsey a microcosm of society changed totally, the people who took over had to challenge the inner organisation, to change its relationships with the outside world, and to change themselves. Revolution of thought and feeling is the only permanent revolution. A structure can only work so long as it grows out of feeling. The only magic wand was our imagination<sup>47</sup>.

They were, however, small-scale concerns. They responded to parochial injustices at the institutions concerned, but they hardly challenged the goals of the nation-state, as had happened in the US. Nor did they bring the country to a position of near-paralysis and threaten the overthrow of the government, as had *Les Événements*. In part, this may have been due to their popular support, which was meagre in comparison with that of the other two countries. 61% of Parisian opinion had believed the French students' position justifiable; in Britain, when asked whether they were more sympathetic to the students or to the university authorities, only 15% of the public were more supportive of the stu-

43. The Beatles, *Revolution No.1*. Apple Records, 1968.

44. Macdonald, Ian, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the '60s*. London, Pimlico, 1994, 227.

45. Herbert, Trevor; Richards, Fiona, *The Sixties: Mainstream Culture and Counter-Culture*. Milton Keynes, Open University, 1998, 172.

46. Interview with Ewan MacColl, in Denselow, Robin, *When the Music's Over: The Story of Political Pop*. London, Faber & Faber, 1989, 25-26.

47. "Hornsey - The Flower Breaks the Concrete". IT, 34 (1968) [article on-line] Available from Internet at: <<http://pers-www.wlv.ac.uk/~fa1871/>>.

dents<sup>48</sup>. Significantly, this sample was also asked whether they were better disposed to the French students or to General de Gaulle: they split 27% to 40% in favour of the President<sup>49</sup>. Of course, limited popular support may well suggest that Britain was a far more conservative nation than either France or the United States; it might just as well reflect the success of the Labour regime in carrying out reforms which effectively robbed the protests of any substantial rationale beyond particular abuses at individual colleges.

By the concluding months of 1968 evidence was abundant that the revolts of continental Europe were not to be repeated on anything like the same scale in the UK. In this context the sentiments of the Stones' "Street Fighting Man" (one of the few songs to openly advocate revolt) were an apt summation:

Think the time is right for a palace revolution  
 But where I live the game to play is compromise  
 solution  
 Well what can a poor boy do  
 Except to sing for a rock and roll band  
 'Cause in sleepy London town  
 There's just no place for a street fighting man<sup>50</sup>.

Jagger's unusually vitriolic stance – other than the LP from which this song came, *Beggars' Banquet* (1968), his songs were more typical of the ambivalent or openly hostile view of revolution already discussed – betrays the essence of the times. "Sleepy London town" and the Labour Government's "compromise solutions" were precisely the problems for the activists of the New Left. For some, the lack of success of rock in Britain to kindle revolution or to unleash some sort of wave of liberation was "because it was corrupted. It was incorporated in the capitalist system which has power to absorb and exploit all tendencies, including the tendencies towards its own overthrow"<sup>51</sup>. Three decades later, a less ideological and more accurate judgement can be made: rock music failed to provide the adhesive for revolution in Britain not because it was consumed by capitalism, but because - in a political sen-

se - it was never revolutionary in the first place.

## 2. THE 1960S INTO THE 1970S

Ultimately, whilst the revolution in Britain never came, the rebellions in France and America were unsustainable. In France the free-form anarchism of the revolt and its deliberate lack of leaders meant that restoring order, particularly after de Gaulle had promised reform, and thus weaned the support of moderates away from the cause, was relatively easy. Paradoxically, though, just as America was beginning to reject popular music as a potentially radical force, the French began to take up rock music in just this fashion, though its impact on the wider political scene remained limited. As for the USA, Allan Bloom cynically (but accurately) pinpointed the collapse of the student part of the movement in Richard Nixon's ending of the draft, despite that the war continued for some three years after its termination<sup>52</sup>. The removal of this focus for dissent coincided approximately with the crumbling of other pillars of the counterculture: the feminist assault upon the pseudo-sexual revolution; the disillusionment with hard drugs; the rejection of left wing thought by many counterculture heroes, and finally the disenchantment with rock music as a genuine revolutionary messenger.

For those who had hoped that the rock revolution would be realised, the beginning of the 1970s heralded a depressing episode in the development of popular music, there was a widespread sense of disappointment at the lack of (political) achievement in the 1960s. Kenneth Gloag has used the example of the Pink Floyd album *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), which dominated the album charts for some weeks in both Britain and the USA, as archetypal of this shift in the mind-set of the age from hope to pessimism<sup>53</sup>. In the sphere of popular music there was a definite shift in emphasis from a radical to an entertainment-based genre, rock musicians were sick of revolution (in Britain, as this piece has argued, they were always somewhat doubtful). There were many illustrations of this re-

48. IFOP poll in *L'Express*, 13-19 May 1968.

49. Gallup *Political Index*, no.98 (June 1968).

50. The Rolling Stones, *Street Fighting Man*. London Records, 1968.

51. Greer, Germaine, "Mozic and the Revolution". *Oz*, 24 (October 1969).

52. Bloom, Allan, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987, 329.

53. Gloag, K., "Situating...", op. cit., 401.

coil, but amongst the most famous was the Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again":

I tip my hat to the new constitution  
Take a bow for the new revolution  
Smile and grin at the change all around  
Pick up my guitar and play  
Just like yesterday  
Then I get on my knees and pray  
We won't get fooled again...  
Meet the new boss: Same as the old boss<sup>54</sup>.

The message of this track was explicit: that the 'revolution' had become as corrupt as the society that it had endeavoured to replace. John Swenson, one of the Who's biographers, has also recalled a poignant anecdote about Pete Townsend's announcement of this song on stage: " 'We've seen you do this,' he said, holding up a clenched fist, 'we've seen you do this,' holding up a peace sign, 'so we just do what's in between – this!' At this point Townsend raised his arm in a Nazi salute: 'It's just a natural development, you know'"<sup>55</sup>. More nauseated still were the Strawbs in their song "Round and Round": "After all, it's just the revolution I despise/ The dawn of revelations and the flower power lies/ I pity those poor children with no sunshine in their eyes"<sup>56</sup>. The backlash against the Sixties 'revolution' became widespread in the US and Britain, until at least the mid-1970s<sup>57</sup>. Everyone from Bob Dylan, in his two rurally elegiac albums *Nashville Skyline* (1969) and *New Morning* (1970), to John Lennon, in "God" – his astonishing processional attack on the follies of the counterculture (amongst other things) – seemed to be peeling away from the notion of rock as revolutionary.

The new emphasis on entertainment that this desertion from the vanguard caused, led to the development of musical forms such as heavy metal, glam or glitter rock, and country rock. These forms were not, in the main, explicitly political, and neither was the other development in rock music: 'progressive' or art rock. However, there is an argument that this functional shift in the main body of popular music can neither be interpreted simply

in terms of the breakdown of the counterculture, nor boredom on the part of rock stars. The centralisation of the music industry and its creation of barriers to entry to new artists that occurred in the early 1970s have been seen by some as the most important factor in the anti-political shift. Because of the oligopoly fashioned by the industry at this time, particularly in the US and Britain, there was a dearth of new talent in the musical marketplace. Most records were being made by already established acts and thus reflected not a new generation of ideas, but the ideas and ideals of the increasingly domestic Sixties' generation: the sounds of Woodstock's contemporaries growing up.

Another school of thought suggests that music simply ceased to empower people in the 1970s, at least until punk rock emerged, and so it became tame and apathetic towards politics. Much of this has to do with the economic situation of the 1970s – Dickstein's formula being that "it takes a firm structure to support a large superstructure; culture and sensibility belong to that superstructure, and their importance diminished in the climate of mere survival that developed in the 1970s"<sup>58</sup>.

Both these points of view, though, concentrate too heavily upon a market / economic view of rock music and pay insufficient attention to the nature of rock music itself and the considerable different (national) uses to which it was put. Rock music is essentially a liberal individualistic medium, which nevertheless has the occasional ability to create unity in diversity, as in the USA in the 1960s. The 'me' generation of the Seventies was the flowering of the Sixties dream of liberation; to assume that music ceased to empower or liberate its 'consumers' because it was no longer 'revolutionary' or because it had become 'commercial' is an intellectual conceit. Rock music – as opposed to, say, folk – had always been commercial, and it had only really been 'revolutionary' in America because of the specific threat of the Vietnam draft in that country. Similarly, popular music in terms of record sales (at least LP sales) was at least as popular in the 1970s as in the preceding decade. By the

54. The Who, *Won't Fooled Again*. Polydor, 1971.

55. Swenson, John, *The Who*. London, Star Books, 1981, 89.

56. The Strawbs, *Round and Round*. A&M Records, 1974.

57. Rodnitzky, J., "The Sixties...", op.cit., 105.

58. Dickstein, M., *Gates...*, op.cit., 272.

same token, the number of new acts entering the market was not inconsiderable – though, until the punk explosion, they were considerably less likely to be propagating a radical message. Finally, such arguments are centred upon the experience of the USA in the main, and ignore the rather different developments elsewhere. In fact, the period from 1969 until the mid-1970s was actually the biggest flowering of radical rock music in France (albeit in a somewhat high-brow vein). ‘Progressive’ rock bands like Ange and Lard Free, for instance, were considerably more political in intent than British or American creations like Genesis or Yes.

The collapse of the counterculture, or at least rock music’s part in it, must then be seen in these terms. Different national trajectories go a long way to explaining why there was ostensibly a backlash of sorts, against music as a radical messenger, against

drugs as a form of liberation, and most importantly against the idea that a political revolution was necessary in the first place<sup>59</sup>. Events since the 1970s replicate much of the pattern that has been sketched here. Rock music remains a potential conduit of protest, and indeed in a very few cases it can help to provoke and sustain mass movements for social change; the recent role of Greenjolly’s “Razom Nas Bahato” in providing a radio anthem for the Ukrainian ‘Orange Revolution’ speaks testament to that. But where it has been most effective as a force for social reform is in discrete areas where it has responded to and disseminated particular national or regional abuses. To say that there seems little chance of rock music breaking out of this ghetto is not to deny its vitality as a cultural phenomenon, but the idea that it might help to underpin international social and political change is, for the moment, obsolete.

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59. See, for instance, *Gallup Opinion Polls, France: Volume Two 1968-1975*. New York, Random House, 1976, 849 and 921-922.