

## CRITERIA FOR JUDGING ROCK MUSIC

by Kevin Twit

### Introduction

Almost everyone has an opinion about rock music. Some seem to think that it is God's gift to the 20th century, others that it has more diabolic origins. A lot of rhetoric but little firm argumentation characterize most of these debates. Many would consider foolish the attempt to enter into these often murky waters. However, it must be done. Part of the legacy of the Reformed worldview is the conviction that God's Word has implications for all of life. This means that it has something to say about culture. Christians are obligated to seek to understand and evaluate all cultural expression. This is one dimension of the cultural mandate of Genesis 1. Unfortunately, rock music, though an important cultural expression, has been largely neglected by Christian scholarship. Most of the few studies that have been done have shown very little understanding of the genre or appreciation for its positive aspects.

But recently there has been some fresh work in this area, notably by Quentin Schultze and his associates at Calvin College in a book entitled *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media*. They've done a fine job, but have only scratched the surface in some areas of this vast field. One of the areas that remain to be discussed more fully is that of how to evaluate rock music. Others have delineated some guidelines, but have not explored this field with much depth. In addition to this, there has been renewed interest in the serious study of pop music (of which rock is a type) among non-Christian scholars.

This paper is a humble attempt to add to the growing body of literature in this area. I write as a trained rock musician (some may wrongly consider that an oxymoron), a recording engineer, and a budding theologian who stands firmly within the Reformed tradition. It is this last aspect that has caused me to embark on this project. I am saddened by the lack of understanding and respect demonstrated by many of my (even Reformed) brethren with regard to rock music. Most of the critiques I have read are at best uninformed, and are often elitist. This trend toward elitism in Reformed writings on art disturbs me. It seems to owe more to people like Allan Bloom than to serious theological reflection. Thus, there is a great need for a thorough, Reformed, and musically informed evaluation of rock music. In addition to understanding rock as a cultural expression that must be evaluated, this study will also help to show how we can use rock as a bridge in communicating with a large segment of our culture.

My method will be first to discuss the nature of rock, how it communicates, and its meaning. Then I will propose some criteria by which we can better understand and judge rock music, hopefully helping us redeem rock music as an art form capable of glorifying God in uniquely emotional and powerful ways. Quentin Schultze has demonstrated how we can go about *Redeeming Television*. I would submit that even rock and roll is not an unredeemable medium.

## Presuppositions

Before we can engage in a serious study of rock, there are several widely held presuppositions that must be challenged. The first of these is the “high art” / “low art” dichotomy. This has become such a part of our vocabulary that it seems like a self-evident truth. Low art is said to be inherently inferior to high art. This is the crux of the arguments of people like Allan Bloom and Ken Myers. However, there are a number of serious problems with this simplistic reduction.

First of all, it is musically naive. As Lawrence Levine points out in an insightful study, most discussions regarding high and low art can’t *define* where the dividing line is. I would suggest that this is because the line is largely arbitrarily drawn. Ken Myers has this problem. He attempts to call pop music low art, but wants to claim that jazz (rock’s cousin by virtue of their common parent the blues) is high art. He can’t seem to comprehend how anyone could analyze a pop record and learn anything. I would contend that he has fallen into the elitist trap. He is attempting to force rock music to fit a certain set of criteria derived from Western Classical music. However, if one knows *how* to listen to rock (and, unfortunately for the critics who dislike rock, this requires quite a lot of listening to develop), it too can be appreciated. Myers has bought into the orthodox musicologist viewpoint that pop music is of “no great aesthetic importance.” Like many Christians, he has attempted to give theological reasons to account for what is largely a matter of taste. This is not to say that musical evaluation is *merely* a matter of personal taste (as this paper will show), but taste does play an important role in our judgments, and we must not naïvely think that our musical tastes are free from cultural influence.

Music is cultural activity, as William Edgar points out. He defines it as “human covenant response in the aspect of ordered sound.” The attempt to find a universal music that is a-cultural is misguided. Yet, this is often what traditional, elitist, classical musicologists attempt to do. Edgar points out the cultural relativity (in a sense) of music by citing the example of Eskimo throat-game music. He points out how only after years of study could a Westerner understand or enjoy this kind of music. He then contends that the music to which the Psalms were originally set would sound very strange to our Western ears, and probably would not convey the same emotional meaning to us that it did to an ancient Israelite. This is food for thought, and should lead to more caution in making sweeping generalizations about what constitutes “good” music.

The second problem with the elitist view is that it constitutes a misuse of language. Levine argues (I believe rightly so) that we shouldn’t use “pop” as an aesthetic judgment. Rather, we should use it literally to mean that a piece of music has popular appeal. But who says that popular art is necessarily bad art? We must be very careful about automatically equating high art with tradition and intelligence, and low art with the poor, ignorant masses. Levine shows how in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century in America, Shakespeare was pop art!<sup>1</sup> The shift in America took place around the turn of the century, and is closely connected with racism and the attempt of one segment of the

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Shakespeare was pop art even in his own day! [Ed. note]

culture to gain control. William Edgar also picks up on this historical phenomena. The high/low dichotomy in art is not an eternal fact; it is a cultural development.

Thirdly, as Edgar points out, this elitist view actually lowers the standards of pop music because pop isn't taken seriously. Do we send the message that all fields are worthy of our best effort except pop music? I've gotten that distinct impression from some Reformed conferences! Surely we would be better off to take pop seriously, and to encourage talented men and women to invest their energy in this field, than simply to dismiss it as unredeemable.

Another presupposition that must be challenged is the view of many Christians that art is not important. Many see it as useful only if it serves the cause of evangelism. Thus, they "relegate art to the very fringe of life." To this, I respond first that the Reformed doctrine of calling needs to be recovered. Second, God is concerned with culture and all human endeavors, not just with witnessing. Our view of evangelism probably needs to be expanded. As Schultze points out, in a sense all we do as Christians either reflects positively or poorly on God and his grace. We can't radically separate our evangelism from our life as cultural beings. Hans Rookmaaker and Francis Schaeffer have both made good cases for why Christians should not neglect the importance of art, so I'll refer the reader to their writings for more on this point.

## **What is Rock?**

What is rock anyway? This is a much more difficult question than it may first appear. Many writers try to leave the question shrouded in vague generalities, and in a sense we'll have to do the same. But we can say a few things. First, bear in mind that trying to describe it is much more difficult than listening to a piece of music and categorizing it. Almost anyone in our culture can identify rock when they hear it. I believe that there are three aspects that must be included in our definition. It is a cultural phenomenon, a way of playing (an attitude if you will), and a particular form. None of these dimensions by itself is sufficient to explain what rock is.

I've already discussed how all music is a cultural activity. Rock music is closely connected with the youth culture and the quest for eternal adolescence. We could say it is an expression of our culture's idolatry of youthfulness. As such, Schultze and his associates say, rock is "a dramatic participatory anthem of teen life, freighted with the intense experience of what teens believe, feel, value, and do." They are getting at the sociological dimension of rock, but there is more to rock music than this. As they point out, it also can be defined as a musical genre. It is this aspect that is particularly hard to pin down.

First of all, the rock genre has a certain style to it. This is brought out by various elements like the beat, emotional intensity (drawing often on the blues), particular sounds (like the raspy human voice, electric guitar, and drums), and a certain feel. As a musician, I approach rock in a very different way from the way I play jazz, or country, or classical music. This includes rhythmic feel, the way I use micro-tonal embellishments,

vibrato, and the tones I use. The interesting thing is that a musician is usually instantly aware (and often so are the rock fans) when someone is trying to play rock with an inauthentic feel. This “feel” is not something that can be captured by traditional musical notation, and is similar to what Bill Edgar says about jazz; it’s a way of playing. That’s why “sheet music is not much help unless one is already a jazz musician.” The exact same thing could be said about rock music!

In addition to the style, there is also a certain form or structure to rock music. In a very insightful article, Andrew Chester makes a helpful distinction between the “*extensional* form of musical construction” (which most western classical music follows), and “*intensional* development.” He points out that while rock has some forms that follow extensional development, usually (“like many other non-European musics”) it follows “the path of intensional development.” Extensional development he explains as that in which “theme and variations, counterpoint, tonality, are all devices that build diachronically and synchronically outward from basic musical atoms. The complex is created by combinations of the simple, which remains discrete and unchanged in the complex unity.” In other words, the music generates interest by taking small elements and combining them creatively in interesting forms. Rock does have an element of this, but primarily it works in a different way. Chester explains that in intensional musical development, “the basic musical units (played/sung notes) are not combined through space and time as simple elements into complex structures. The simple entity is that constituted by the parameters of melody, harmony, and beat, while the complex is built up by modulation of the basic notes, and by inflection of the basic beat... All existing genres and subtypes of the Afro-American tradition [of which rock is but one] show various forms of combined intensional and extensional development.” Thus, though the form may be considered very limiting in rock, actually it is a challenge to work creatively within it and to try variations on the structure itself. The artistry comes in maintaining the balance between freshness and breaking the form by going too far. Chester shows the implications of ignoring the extensional/intensional distinction: “The 12-bar structure of the blues, which for the critic reared on extensional forms seems so confining, is viewed quite differently by the bluesman, for he builds ‘inward’ from the 12-bar structure, and not ‘outward.’” So we see that it’s important to reckon with rock as it is rather than how as western classical musicologists wish it could be. This formal aspect is fundamental to any definition of what rock is.

## **How Rock Communicates**

Now that we’ve discussed what rock is, we need to look at how it actually communicates. This is an area where a lot of confusion exists, especially among Christians (though certainly this problem is not confined to them). We must be aware that communication extends beyond mere words. Actually, we communicate by symbols that include both “words and images, which convey meaning.” Included in the idea of image are both visual images and also aural ones. However, bear in mind that there is a certain amount of cultural relativity to what message a sound communicates. In other words, a distorted rock guitar may communicate rebellion to one person, yet, to a rock fan, it may communicate a sense of joy or power. In rock, “the primary mode of meaning

and expression is not 'rational discourse'... rock in particular is a non-rational mode of communication, dealing with the sensory and the emotional, employing figurative lyrics, musical mood, and symbolic gestures." As Schultze points out, because of this, "Perhaps all attempts at determining the specific meaning or the expressive content of particular rock songs will meet with limited success because rock music is the ultimate existential art form. While neat dichotomies are dangerous, it is safe to say that for the most part rock and roll features feeling and experience more than thought and analysis."

But this doesn't mean that rock doesn't communicate. In fact, it is quite a powerful medium of communication, as many of its critics are well aware. But attempts like the PMRC's (and many Christian's crusades) to deal with rock solely in terms of lyrical content are naive and misguided. Eddie Van Halen (a popular and influential rock guitarist) once quipped when asked if he was worried whether his mother would be offended by the lyrics to his band's songs (written by the singer David Lee Roth), "I don't know what the lyrics are." "It is certain that much rock is not received primarily in terms of text: indeed, the texts of some genres of popular music are not clearly discernible by its fans – those who are most devoted to the music – and the obscurity of the verbal dimension seems even to be part of the attraction."

In addition, rock communicates on several levels at once. As McClary and Wasler point out, unlike verbal language, "music relies on events and inflections occurring on many interdependent levels (melody, harmony, timbre, texture, etc.) simultaneously." And each of these has its own "grammar of expectations." Actually, most human communication does this at some level (for instance body language and voice inflection in human verbal communication), but it is good to emphasize it as an aspect of the way music works. To understand the message of rock, we must seek to understand how it is working together at a number of levels.

Rock also communicates because of its social context. We mustn't try to interpret it in a cultural vacuum. Several writers point out how we must look at the social conditions of rock's origins and use to fully understand it. However we mustn't evaluate it merely as a sociological entity. Rather, there must be an interdisciplinary approach combining sociology and musicology. Allow me just to mention some of the ways rock works sociologically. Schultze and his colleagues cover this ground very well, so I'll just summarize some of their insights: they speak of rock as new romanticism, as celebration, as protest, and as healer. Let us explore briefly what each of these entails.

Calling rock the new Romanticism, they say, "The outrageous punk band ... is not merely 'bad' or nihilistic: it is the latest embodiment of the romantic urge to live life free of limits and disentangled from responsibility to society and nature. This urge is sometimes expressed in extreme ways." This attitude is certainly open to moral judgment, but right now we are concerned with understanding. We'll cover value judgments later. Rock is also an expression of, and symbol for, celebration. Rock is just fun. It can be an expression of "a kind of innocent and exultant hedonism, a delight in the simple pleasures of the body and of consciousness, of the goodness of being alive." Though this can be abused and made into an idol, fundamentally there is nothing

inherently wrong with expressing the joy of life through making and listening to music. In fact, to deny that at times we *do* enjoy life would be to deny our humanness.

One of the ways rock is most often perceived is as protest. But this protest can take different forms. If it is advocating anarchy and the destruction of all legitimate, God-given institutions, rock must be criticized. But not all protest is bad. It depends on the morality of what is being protested, and also the motive behind the protest (is it a true concern for justice?). Then we must ask if the protest is proportional to the evil protested against. Some music is so violent that we may legitimately ask, "Is life really that bad?" For the most part though, with regard to protest, rock's bark is worse than its bite. "As a vehicle for rebellion and protest ... rock has been far more ambiguous and contradictory than dangerous and violent. More influence has been attributed to it than it has ever been capable of wielding." We must reckon with rock as protest, but not all protest is bad. In a fallen world, with institutional injustice, there is always a place for prophetic critique and protest.

One of the often overlooked ways that rock works in our culture is as a healer. Schultze says, "It contains enormous cathartic power to help youth deal with life's problem's and contradictions. For whatever else it might do, rock does at times provide solace and define community." Again, this is not an unqualified good or evil, it depends on how it is used. Music can be a healer, but it can also be abused and used merely as escapism (this is also true of Classical music!). But using music for leisure and relaxation is not wrong in itself. Perhaps we need to gain a better perspective on the value of leisure to appreciate this aspect of rock music.

## **Evaluation of Rock Music**

Evaluation of music, and rock music in particular, is very tricky. As McClary and Walser put it, "Music is an especially resistant medium to write or speak about." It would be much easier to play examples of rock music to illustrate the points being made, but that is not possible in a paper. There are a number of reasons why it is difficult to write about and evaluate. One of the foundational problems is that there really isn't a developed language to speak about music, as there is for visual art or literary art. There is a high level of abstraction involved in trying to capture the essence of sounds in ordinary language. What language does exist to describe and critique other music is often inappropriate in discussing rock music. This is because the categories are derived from western classical music which, as we saw, has some fundamental structural differences. As Lawrence Levine rightly complains, we often "employ *frozen* categories ripped out of the contexts in which they were created." In fact, what we see happening today is that because of the particular challenges of popular music, musicologists have had to rethink the way music is understood and judged.

Another complicating factor is that often criticism ends up sucking the life out of the music. When we try to dissect music to explain it, we usually find we have killed it and mutilated it to the point where it is unrecognizable to the average rock fan. There may be another subtle element at work here as well: because of rock's threat to neat,

orderly, rational categories of explanation, the temptation is strong for the rock critic to “keep at arms distance the dimensions of music that are most compelling and yet most threatening to rationality.” Music moves the passions, and this must not be feared or we will be tempted to explain rock’s impact without this vital aspect. Incidentally, moving the passions (a term used by the Baroque theorists) is not necessarily a bad thing. There seems to be an unspoken assumption among many Christians that music which affects us emotionally is somehow less spiritual and more dangerous than more cerebral music. Of course, this is baseless and fails to see the connection between music and emotions throughout the Scriptures.

With regard to how music affects us, another problem we have in evaluating it is that it seems to affect us directly. But in reality, it is mediated through culture, and we interpret it at an almost subconscious level. Furthermore, people often find it very difficult to express why they like a particular piece of music. A little reflection could go a long way towards improving most people’s aesthetic taste. As it is, there is almost “no consensus as to what aesthetic merit really is.” But just because there is so little agreement does not mean that we can’t attempt to make some sort of judgments regarding aesthetic merit (as well as moral goodness).

To evaluate rock music, we must also take it seriously. The fans and the creators certainly do. Anyone who has sat in a recording studio for twelve hours while a musician works on one guitar part trying to get it just right will never be able to say that this is just mindless entertainment. Donald Fagen’s 1982 album *The Nightfly* required 365 eight-hour days to complete!

So, how do we evaluate rock music? First of all, we must avoid the trap of “trying to control the music by means of a single totalizing method.” We need to have a three-fold dimension to our evaluation that deals with form, content, and function. If we fail to do this, we can fall into moralism, or produce propaganda art (by judging content alone), or we can fall into formalism (by judging only the structure). We must also keep in our minds the fact that music works on all of these levels at once. Therefore, we must evaluate each of these areas individually, and also look at how they work together. Do they work together, or do they contradict? Some music even sets up a tension between these three aspects in order to communicate a message beyond the surface meaning. A good example of this is the song *Missing You* by John Waite. He sings, “Since you’ve been gone, I ain’t been missing you at all.” Yet, clearly from the way he sings and the mood of the music, he really is missing his girl (this is confirmed by a closer examination of the lyrics of the verses and bridge.)

Besides this three-fold evaluation of form, content, and function, we must add the overall dimension of purpose. Art is purposeful. In fact, everything that man does has purpose in some sense; there is no neutral cultural activity. This is not to deny the reality of adiaphora (morally indifferent things), but simply to contend that creating music can never be adiaphora. As William Edgar explains, it is either an expression of rebellion or obedience to God. But what is the legitimate purpose of art? Here Quentin Schultze has some important insights. He contends that *the* purpose of art (as in all cultural activity) is to glorify God, but under this are many valid sub-purposes. As sub-

purposes he includes things like telling truth, entertainment, beauty, expressing realistic emotions, etc. Each of these is a valid purpose for art, but if we try to elevate any of them to *the* purpose we have a serious problem. I believe this is a very helpful perspective. Not all art has to be beautiful, though beautiful art is certainly valid. Not all art must be realistic; abstract art is certainly valid.

Purpose is important, but what constitutes a valid purpose is not as narrow as many would try to argue. We also need to remember that because of common grace, and the continuing reality of sin in the world, nothing human can be totally good or totally evil. Thus, in seeking to evaluate art, we will need to think of a continuum from bad to good rather than making absolute, total judgments.

Before I propose some useful criteria for judging rock music, I need to say a quick word about some invalid criteria. First, we need to heed Edgar's caution that music is neither neutral nor inherently evil. Thus, we must reject a purely alarmist view of rock which sees it primarily as manipulation. Even if rock music did affect us physiologically, which is far from clear, this would not provide a basis for evaluating it because this is not an inherently bad thing.

Another invalid criteria commonly advanced is complexity. In itself, this is not a preferable thing. The question is, does the complexity serve the purpose? For example, no one would argue that Bach's 2-part inventions are somehow inferior because they are not as complex as a Mozart Symphony. Yet, rock is often criticized for not being complex. This is a false criterion that doesn't help us evaluate what is truly excellent in the rock genre (or in the classical genre for that matter!).

The final false criteria I wish to look at is a false distinction made by C.S. Lewis, Ken Myers and others. They talk of *using* art rather than *receiving* it. They contend that pop art is only capable of being used and not received. First of all, there is much rock that is worthy of serious study and that brings new insight every time it is enjoyed (e.g. the music of Steely Dan or of Sting). But the real problem with this elitist view lies elsewhere: it is far too simplistic. Much "high" art is merely escapist and doesn't lead to reflection either. As Edgar asks, "Why should not art be used as well as received?" Do we really want to say that the purpose of art is to reflect on "higher" or "more spiritual" aspects of life? This is a very Platonic view of art which sees it as valid only as a catalyst for thinking of the spiritual realm. We must reject this view of Myers and Lewis because they illogically assume that art's greatness is to be found primarily in its ability to cause us to reflect on universal themes. Nevertheless, I do believe that art which does this is good. This is a valid purpose for art, but it is not *the* purpose.

### **Criteria for Judging Rock Music**

A distinction between moral good and aesthetic good must be made. However, if we are to do everything to God's glory, aesthetically bad art does have moral implications. Always listening to consistently poor art is a failure to be a good steward of our time and God-given gifts to make judgments about art. We must maintain the

delicate balance between Christian liberty, on the one hand, and seeking to improve our aesthetic standards as an implication of the cultural mandate, on the other hand. If part of sanctification is cultivating the enjoyment of what God enjoys, then there are more serious implications for what, and how, we listen to music than many of us would care to think about. But we must combine this insight with the fact that often the judgments we make about art are judgment calls. Thus, we must not seek simplistically to legislate what is “good” art, but discuss it with others and seek to learn together.

The following proposals are intended to stimulate discussion and give some guidelines rather than mandating absolutes. Music in the real world is very complex and may excel in some of these areas and fail in others, thus there is no way to talk about absolutely good or bad art. How a piece of rock music excels or fails in these areas is a matter of judgment. God wants us to exercise thoughtful discernment, and so he doesn't give us a rigid set of criteria for how to judge art. Rather, he gives us principles. Because some Christians are bothered by this, hard and fast rules tend to seep into this discussion. I have taken the broad outline of these criteria from *Dancing in the Dark* by Quentin Schultze, et al., have added to them, and sought to expand on their discussion.

**Technical Excellence:** This is a large area. Schultze includes both freshness and fitness within this category. Basically, good art will exhibit some trait of excellence rather than mere mediocrity. In rock (as with all art) there should be an aspect of creativity (or freshness) and also a dimension of appropriateness (or fit). With regard to creativity, trite art is bad art. However, before we can judge triteness we must bear in mind that only an informed judge can accurately judge if a piece is truly trite within its genre. We must have a wide knowledge of both the genre itself and also the history of it. The historical context of a piece is vital to evaluating its freshness properly. Does the piece exhibit freshness for its era? Does it represent a particularly important piece because of its subsequent influence?

A piece must also exhibit appropriateness. This means that it must be tasteful. Seeking to introduce elements that don't fit, or even that destroy the form (if there is no artistic purpose in doing so) will produce poor art. This is a very tricky area because in reality there is always a tension between originality and appropriateness. Going too far in one direction will produce poor art. “Faddishness” comes from trying to introduce freshness without purpose. Thus, the freshness is used as a gimmick which quickly grows old and boring. There is also an appropriateness within the various sub-groupings of rock. What fits in a metal song may be totally wrong in a southern rock song. The question is, “Does this piece exhibit creativity while retaining appropriateness?” And even this tension can be used creatively. Sometimes there is a deliberate stretching of the form for a particular effect. As always the question of purpose looms in the background.

There are many areas where judgments of technical excellence can be made. For instance, does it exhibit exceptional skill in the performance of the song, or even in a particular part of the song (like a great guitar solo)? Is the vocal performance exceptional? This doesn't just mean in tune (which in a blues-influenced genre may

sound stiff); it covers such questions as, “Is it passionate?” and, “Does the vocalist groove with the track?”

Since I’ve mentioned groove, I had better explain what it is. “Groove” refers to the overall rhythmic pulse of a song. All the various instruments working together create a beat, which has a certain feel to it. To the makers of rock, groove is essential. The groove may be different in different sub-types of rock. For example the rock of Bryan Adams often is played on top of the beat. This means that within the continuum of where the pulse is, the musicians are attacking beats 2 and 4 (in 4/4 time) a little early. But with a band like AC/DC, or especially Little Feat, the groove is more laid back. In this case the musicians play beats 2 and 4 a little bit late, and the music has a heavier feel to it. Yet, all of these groups have a tremendous groove. The point is that a skilled rock musician can fit in with the rest of the musicians rhythmically in a way that his part adds to the groove of the whole. Often a great groove makes an otherwise ordinary song something exceptional.

Closely related to the groove is the improvisational element. Though many seem unaware of it, there is a tremendous amount of improvisational interplay between musicians on most rock records. Often this takes the form of subtle variations in the phrasing of a passage or in varying a rhythmic figure. At times the drummer may play a drum fill that breaks his normal pattern, thus creating tension (that will soon be resolved). We should ask, “Does this piece demonstrate excellence in its improvisational elements?”

Then we can examine the writing of the song, which must be distinguished from the performance of it (even though the writer is often among the performers). With regard to the song itself, we can ask, “Do the lyrics, melody, harmony, and form demonstrate excellent craft? Do they exhibit excellence in their creativity?”

We can also look for technical excellence in the area of the sound of a record. Technical excellence in this area does not merely mean realism (though depending on the purpose, realism may be desirable). Often sounds are created that are deliberately unreal for a desired effect. This area covers the arrangement (how the instruments are combined, what parts they play, and which instruments will be used), and the engineering (done by the technician who artfully manipulates or realistically captures the various sounds and mixes them together for a unified effect). Over both of these stands the producer. He is the one with the overall vision of what the final product will be and guides the various people to bring it about. All of these areas can exhibit technical excellence (freshness and fit), which is why we give Grammy Awards for these categories.

So we see, technical excellence is a wide-ranging and vital criteria. And we mustn’t forget to judge technical excellence within its historical context. We shouldn’t anachronistically critique earlier rock songs for failing to achieve the level of technical skill exhibited by many newer records (not to imply that all newer records exhibit greater technical skill!).

***Moral and Religious Integrity:*** Because rock music (like all art) is human cultural activity, it can and must be judged for truth value and its moral goodness. T.S. Eliot has argued that literary criticism from a Christian perspective “should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint.” All cultural activity is (as Quentin Schultze explains) what people do before God to decide what they are. As such, culture can never be neutral. Cultural activity has a moral dimension which must be judged by God’s standard of good and evil, right or wrong. When we apply this to evaluating rock music, there are a number of areas to consider.

First, mankind was given the task of keeping and tilling the world. As Edgar explains, “The musician is also called to ‘till and keep’ his environment. As ruler over God’s world, he must find his place in the world of music and attend to its becoming a lovely environment for his dwelling and a glory to God.” While I would want to expand the purpose of art beyond just creating beauty, Edgar touches on an important point here. As Charlie Peacock expresses it, God has made us in his image to be “little creators.” So we must ask, “Does this art use, in a responsible manner, the gifts God has given the creators of it?” Admittedly, this is a judgment call, but some rock is obviously sloppy and lazily done. This is poor art.

We must also ask, “Does this art *further* the cultural mandate?” Keep in mind there are many ways that a piece of rock can do this. Schultze speaks of “illumination,” which means, “Does this art shed light on the human condition?” Edgar points out how rock is often an honest look and commentary on life as it is “under the sun” in “very much the same way as the Book of Ecclesiastes.” We must evaluate not just whether or not a piece of music is beautiful or makes us feel good, but whether or not it’s true. In a fallen world, the truth is often painful and ugly, and a valid purpose of art (and a common purpose of rock) is to cut through the niceties and portray life as it is. Bruce Springsteen brings this out well, “You do your best work and hope that it pulls out the best in your audience – that some piece of it spills over into the real world and into people’s everyday lives. And it takes the edge off the fear and allows us to recognize each other through our veil of differences. I always thought that was one of the things popular art was supposed to be about.” I am not saying that all rock must do this, but if it does, then it is worthy of praise. We must ask, “Is it true?” recognizing that no human activity will be either totally true or totally devoid of truth. By examining the message (admittedly often a very difficult thing to do since the message is more than just the lyric content), we can judge it by God’s word with regard to its truth.

But truth doesn’t just refer to its message. It also applies to the spirit in which the rock is done. Is it true to its intent, or does it prostitute itself simply to make money? There is nothing wrong with rock for the purpose of entertainment and making money, but we must ask, “Does it attempt to pass itself off as something more than that?” We must try to judge whether a piece is true to its intent.

Morally, we must ask such questions as: Is it good? Does it promote racism? Is it derogatory or pornographic? Does it attempt to do away with all structure? Edgar contends (rightly so) that trying to do away with all structure is evil in music because it rebels against God’s order. However, we must be careful to distinguish between doing

away with structure as rebellion against God (which is evil), and destroying structure as a powerful way to comment on the institutional evil in our society. Deliberately breaking the structure may be a technique to challenge the status quo. Again we must look at the intent and also judge whether or not there is a correspondence between the evil protested against and the depth of rage in the protest. Some anger in rock music does go too far because it is unjustified by the circumstances, but we can't say that all anger in music is wrong.

***Aesthetic Expressiveness:*** This is a difficult thing to pin down, yet it is a vital criterion nonetheless. "Although philosophers disagree about what gives one art product more aesthetic value than another, nearly everyone involved with popular art expects it to express something and voices disappointment when it fails. Almost everyone wants art to capture something about the world and to present it in an effective way. The best art in this regard engages and sometimes deeply moves." Basically we should ask, "Does it move you in some way?" In the Renaissance era, musicians explored how music moves the passions and wrote about this at length. However, many today are suspicious of popular music precisely because it engages the passions. This is unwarranted and is a failure to come to terms with how music works.

Some would say that music which unlocks deep passions and longings in us is not "safe." But who decided that art should be safe? By its very nature, art is risky. It seeks to communicate in less obvious ways than normal language, and if it succeeds the effect is very powerful. Sometimes however, it fails and is misunderstood. The artist considers it worth the risk, those who nervously sit on the sidelines usually view all artists with suspicion. The body of Christ needs artists, and it needs those who would hold artists responsible. Moving the passions is not all there is to music, but as Duke Ellington once said, "It don't mean a thing, if it ain't got that swing."

Good rock should have energy and passion, both in the way it's played and in how it's perceived. There is a certain intangible quality in good rock. It moves you. However, passion and energy by themselves aren't sufficient. There must also be some substance to the music or it will soon grow boring and trite. We can also ask, "Does the music express a certain mood?" Is it creatively done? Does it express itself well, and does it achieve its purpose? If we know that a song is intended to communicate anger, but instead it communicates despair, we can say it didn't fulfill its purpose.

Closely related to aesthetic expressiveness (and it could even be considered an aspect of it) is amusement value. Entertainment is a valid purpose for art. There is nothing inherently unspiritual about it. Though we live in a culture where entertainment is often made an object of idolatry, abuse does not negate the proper use (though much criticism of rock proceeds on this fallacy). So we can ask of a piece of rock, "Does it entertain?" However, rock (like television) is not *merely* entertainment. And in fact, as Schultze and his colleagues point out, "Although the purpose of 'entertaining' is usually seen as mere amusement or just moneymaking, its real purpose is education." Entertainment is thus both friend and teacher.

**Political Significance:** So far we have considered evaluations of form (technical excellence) and of content (moral integrity and aesthetic expressiveness). But rock also has function, and so our evaluation must include this. Political significance is one aspect of function. Schultze says that this includes how rock “serves to encourage or discourage motivations, attitudes, and behaviors that might liberate disadvantaged groups and work toward justice for everyone.” Of course, not all rock does this, but where it does it must be praised. Many of the detractors of rock have completely missed this important (and often very powerful) function of rock. In a fallen world, challenging injustice is a commendable activity. Music has a sociological aspect. Does it contribute to human flourishing? Does the music heal? Musicians can be ministers of God’s common grace to mitigate the effects of the Fall. It is in this way that we can ask, “Is it beautiful?” Beauty is one way in which the effects of the fall are mitigated, but it is not the only way. Also worthy of consideration is the question, “Does the piece of art encourage reflection?” As I argued before, not all art has to do this, but it is to be praised when it does.

This is the place for us to discuss the sexuality of rock. As McClary and Walser argue, “Unless the sensual power of the music is dealt with seriously, the rest of the argument becomes irrelevant. It lacks credibility.” Sexuality is a common theme in rock, and a part of its social function in culture. However, not all rock is about sex! Even if it were, we would still have to ask, “Is sexuality treated in a true and healthy manner or is it used in an illegitimate way and depraved from what God intended?” For example, Charlie Peacock’s record *Love Life* deals with the issue of sexuality from a thoroughly biblical perspective. In doing this he challenges the Victorian prudishness of much of the church saying, “I don’t want my children to learn about sex from the world. I want them to know that sex is delightful in God’s eyes, and it’s a part of being human and that God is not ashamed of it... Somehow, we get the idea that God is a shy God, easily embarrassed, and that when a man and woman who are married lie naked together in bed, God somehow turns his head. That’s utter foolishness. We’re talking about the Creator of the Universe.” We must judge what a song teaches about sexuality (remembering of course that this goes beyond lyrical content.)

**Social Scope:** This is not mere popularity, but is more properly conceived of as a piece of art’s “reach in the society or audience for which it’s intended.” Schultze says this includes both its breadth (the fact that it speaks to many segments of the intended audience), and its depth (the fact that it goes beneath the surface of people’s lives). Both of these are commendable in a piece of rock music, but as Schultze points out, these two elements are often in tension. Still, if art is to communicate (and it must), then we must ask, “Does it communicate broadly (encompassing universal themes) and does it communicate deeply?”

Schultze and his associates include economic worth as a separate criteria, but I conceive of this as a practical measurement of whether or not the music has communicated broadly and deeply. Along with this we could consider a piece of rock’s longevity. Classic rock stations abound because many rock songs have achieved a “classic” status to rock fans. I think it would be a serious mistake to conceive of this as mere nostalgia (though this is probably part of it). Rather, I think this demonstrates that

a certain piece of music has connected with people. Rock's staying power testifies to the fact that it touches people, often long after it has dropped off the "Hit Parade."

## **Conclusion**

These criteria are by no means exhaustive, but they should provide a well-rounded point of entry into the task of evaluating rock music. We *can* judge cultural activity; it is not all equally valid. But we need to exercise great caution. We must be careful not to impose false criteria, or to elevate "personal taste" to the level of moral absolute. Hopefully, as we grow in our sanctification, there will be a greater correspondence between personal taste and God's standard, but we must always be humble about it. In seeking to evaluate rock music, we are engaging in a worthwhile and necessary cultural activity. May God be glorified by our attitude in this venture, and by our skill and hard work as we undertake this task.