

Rock as Art

by Camille Paglia

- 1 Rock is eating its young. Rock musicians are America's most wasted natural resource.
- 2 Popular music and film are the two great art forms of the twentieth century. In the past twenty-five years, cinema has gained academic prestige. Film courses are now a standard part of the college curriculum and grants are routinely available to noncommercial directors.
- 3 But rock music has yet to win the respect it deserves as the authentic voice of our time. Where rock goes, democracy follows. The dark poetry and surging Dionysian rhythms of rock have transformed the consciousness and permanently altered the sensoriums of two generations of Americans born after World War Two.
- 4 Rock music should not be left to the Darwinian laws of the marketplace. This natively American art form deserves national support. Foundations, corporations and Federal and state agencies that award grants in the arts should take rock musicians as seriously as composers and sculptors. Colleges and universities should designate special scholarships for talented rock musicians. Performers who have made fortunes out of rock are ethically obligated to finance such scholarships or to underwrite independent agencies to support needy musicians.
- 5 In rock, Romanticism still flourishes. All the Romantic archetypes of energy, passion, rebellion and demonism are still evident in the brawling, boozing bad boys of rock, storming from city to city on their lusty, groupie-dogged trail.
- 6 But the Romantic outlaw must have something to rebel against. The pioneers of rock were freaks, dreamers and malcontents who drew their lyricism and emotional power from the gritty rural traditions of white folk music and African-American blues.
- 7 Rock is a victim of its own success. What once signified rebellion is now only a high-school affectation. White suburban youth, rock's main audience, is trapped in creature comforts. Everything comes to them secondhand, through TV. And they no longer have direct contact with folk music and blues, the oral repository of centuries of love, hate, suffering and redemption.
- 8 In the Sixties, rock became the dominant musical form in America. And with the shift from singles to albums, which allowed for the marketing of personalities, it also became big business. The gilded formula froze into place. Today, scouts beat the bushes for young talent, squeeze a quick album out of the band, and put them on the road. "New" material is stressed. Albums featuring cover tunes of classics, as in the early Rolling Stones records, are discouraged.
- 9 From the moment the Beatles could not hear themselves sing over the shrieking at Shea Stadium in the mid-Sixties, the rock concert format has become progressively less conducive to music-making. The enormous expense of huge sound systems and grandiose special effects has left no room for individualism and improvisation, no opportunity for the performers to respond to a particular audience or to their own moods. The show, with its army of technicians, is as fixed and rehearsed as the Ziegfeld Follies. Furthermore, the concert experience has degenerated. The focus has switched from the performance to raucous partying in the audience.
- 10 These days, rock musicians are set upon by vulture managers, who sanitize and repackage them and strip them of their unruly free will. Like sports stars, musicians are milked to the max, then dropped and cast aside when their first album doesn't sell.
- 11 Managers offer all the temptations of Mammon to young rock bands: wealth, fame, and easy sex. There is not a single public voice in the culture to say to the musician: You are an artist, not a money machine. Don't sign the contract. Don't tour. Record only when you are ready. Go off on your own, like Jimi Hendrix, and live with your guitar until it becomes part of your body.
- 12 How should an artist be trained? Many English rock musicians in the Sixties and early Seventies, including John Lennon and Keith Richards, emerged from art schools. We must tell the young musician: Your peers are other artists, past and future. Don't become a slave to the audience, with its smug hedonism, short attention span and hunger for hits.
- 13 Artists should immerse themselves in art. Two decades ago, rock musicians read poetry, studied Hinduism, and drew psychedelic visions in watercolors. For rock to move forward as an art form, our musicians must be given the opportunity for spiritual development. They should be encouraged to read, to look at paintings and foreign films, to listen to jazz and classical music.
- 14 Artists with a strong sense of vocation can survive life's disasters and triumphs with their inner lives intact. Our musicians need to be rescued from the carpetbaggers and gold-diggers who attack them when they are young and naive. Long, productive careers don't happen by chance.