HOW THE BEATLES DESTROYED ROCK 'N' ROLL

AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC

"Wald's book is suave, soulful, ebullient and will blow out your speakers."
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ELIJAH WALD

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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF JEFF McLAUGHLIN,
WHOSE SUPPORT AND CRITICISM HELPED ME SO OFTEN OVER THE YEARS,
AND WHOSE PRESENCE IN THIS BOOK AND IN MY LIFE IS SORELY MISSED.

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HOW THE BEATLES DESTROYED ROCK 'N' ROLL

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INTRODUCTION

> You do not have to love a work of art or a style in order to criticize it, but you need to understand its attraction for someone who does. . . . Criticism has no significance and no importance if it is not accompanied by understanding—and that implies the comprehension of at least the possibility of love.
>
> CHARLES ROSEN

The first record I ever owned was side two of *Meet the Beatles*. It was a birthday present from a Danish au pair, who had given side one to my younger sister. My sister's birthday is three days before mine, and in between the au pair neatly rewrapped the album, then gave me side two. It was 1965, and I was turning six.

I suppose I should have been aware of the Beatles before that, as my family had spent the previous year in England, but all I remember of that year was finding a bomb shelter and a hibernating hedgehog, and my enduring perplexity about a word I heard as "lava tree." And once, on a drive to London, noticing a person with long hair and a beard and being confused about whether it was a man or a woman.

In any case, I loved *Meet the Beatles,* and my sister and I would dance around the living room, singing along—I tended to skip over "This Boy" and "Till There Was You," which were sappy, but all the other songs were great. Within the next year or so, another au pair took us to see *Help!* and it instantly became my favorite movie. I saw *Help!* every year for the rest of my childhood. I also got the soundtrack album, along with *Beatles '65*, *Beatles VI,* and the first two Monkees albums.

Sometime in 1967, or maybe it was 1968, my much older half-brother gave my parents *Sgt. Pepper*. He didn't just hand them the album; he sat the whole family down and we listened to it from beginning to end. I could tell it was a masterpiece—my father, who was an amateur cellist, loved it—but it was not really my music. It was adult music, like Louis Armstrong or Pablo Casals. I played it occasionally, but nowhere near as often as the band's early records. It simply wasn't as much fun. Same with *Abbey Road* and *Magical Mystery Tour*, both of which I vaguely remember hearing when my parents bought them for us, but neither of which I can ever recall playing again. When *Yellow Submarine* came out, my mother took a group of

my friends to it for my birthday party. I enjoyed the movie but had no interest in the soundtrack album.

The years passed, and between my sister and me, we gradually filled most of the holes in our Beatles collection. My tastes never changed, though. I can't remember playing *Revolver*, and although I definitely played *Rubber Soul*, it was mostly for the moments when it sounded like the earlier discs.

I heard all the songs, of course, on all the records, and was aware of how the Beatles' hairstyles were changing from year to year and listened for the clues that proved that Paul was dead and grew my own hair down over my ears. There was no way to avoid the Beatles' influence. Even if you hated them, you couldn't have missed being bombarded with the music, the pictures, and the news about their drugs and marriages and, eventually, their breakup. Twenty years later, a recently divorced friend defined his test for maturity as, "I'm not dating anyone who can't name all four Beatles." I was shocked to realize that there were young people who couldn't do that. I could understand not liking the Beatles—my own enthusiasm had dimmed a good deal as I discovered folk and blues—but not being able to *name* them?

Fast forward to 2004 or thereabouts. I had written a book about Robert Johnson and the history of blues, trying to place the early blues singers in the broader context of black popular music rather than treating them as folk artists. Over and over again, in interviews and conversations, I found myself saying that knowing about Johnson and Muddy Waters but not about Leroy Carr or Dinah Washington was like knowing about, say, the Sir Douglas Quintet but not knowing about the Beatles. My point was that in order to understand the music of any period, you have to be aware of the major artists of the time. If you are not aware of the Beatles, you cannot hope to understand any music of the 1960s, because they were ubiquitous and affected all the other music. Even if some musicians remained free of their influence, those musicians were still heard by an audience that was acutely conscious of the Beatles. They were the dominant, inescapable sound of the era.

It took a while, but eventually that thought began to nag me, because I was guilty of exactly the sort of mistake I was criticizing: I had been writing about the music of the 1920s for years but had never listened to a Paul Whiteman record. Admittedly, I had quite a bit of company. Virtually all the books I had read about the music of the '20s ignored Whiteman or mentioned him only in the negative—jazz historians remain angry that he was dubbed the "King of Jazz" and tend to mention him only in passing, as a barrier that the true jazz artists had to surmount. Nobody writing about blues or country music seems to feel any need to listen to him, nor do most jazz historians feel obliged to analyze his influence on the music they care about.

But, like the Beatles, Whiteman's orchestra was not only the most popular band of the 1920s, but was also enormously influential in every field of music. When that period is referred to as the "Jazz Age," conjuring up pictures of flappers, bearskin

coats, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, the band that made that jazz was Whiteman's. In purely musical terms, his innovations were huge: He defined the arranging style that would be used by virtually every later bandleader. His band was the first to add a vocal group, the Rhythm Boys (which included Bing Crosby, the most popular singer in America for the next twenty years), and to hire a female vocalist, Mildred Bailey. If he didn't swing, he appreciated musicians who could and hired many of the most important white jazz artists of that era. And he was the first person to force a broad public to treat jazz as serious, important music rather than just a noisy fad. As the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* was for rock, Whiteman's *Rhapsody in Blue* was the breakthrough work in the struggle to have jazz recognized as art music, bringing it out of the saloons and dance halls and forcing "serious" music fans to take notice of it as the sound of their time. Duke Ellington always stressed his respect for Whiteman's innovations, and it would be hard to argue that the Beatles' music crossed racial lines as much as Whiteman's did.

There are other bases for comparison. In both the 1920s and the 1960s—the Jazz Age and the rock age—music served as a marker for deeper changes. "The older generation . . . pretty well ruined this world before passing it on to us," a young writer explained. "They gave us this thing, knocked to pieces, leaky, red-hot, threatening to blow up; and then they are surprised that we don't accept it with the same attitude of pretty, decorous enthusiasm with which they received it."[1] That was in 1920, but it could as easily have been written in the 1960s. And the fact that the eras' music symbolized the dreams and hopes of new generations gave the words "jazz" and "rock" a special weight. For many people, they were—and are—far more than musical styles. They were new languages, capable of expressing attitudes and emotions that other types of music could barely suggest. Because of that, they have inspired particular devotion and tend to be seen as not only separate from but also inimical to the pop music that preceded them and surrounded them in their youth.

I was a kid in the 1960s, and to me and my peers even the music of the 1950s seemed unimaginably old. I was taken by a grown-up friend to see a Chuck Berry concert around 1970, and I thought he was great, but it would have been incomprehensible for anyone my age to have played a record by Berry or Elvis Presley at a party. Those were already called "oldies"—a word that is still associated with the same records forty years later. The Beatles had changed everything—not by themselves, of course, but they were the standard-bearers—and although we could appreciate the rock 'n' roll pioneers as the roots of our music, we were living in a different era.

If early rock was already the sound of the past, then what interest could we possibly have in the popular styles that preceded it? The idea that we might have tossed a Glenn Miller record on the turntable was ridiculous: That music was already thirty years old! So it feels very odd to me when I ask my twelve-year-old nephew what he

and his friends dance to at parties and the first band he names is the Beatles. He also listens to the Black-Eyed Peas and other present-day groups, of course. But kids, at parties, are putting on forty-year-old records! Much as I love a lot of older music, I find that incomprehensibly strange. After all, if kids in the 1960s had been dancing to the music of the most popular band of forty years earlier, they would have been dancing to . . . Paul Whiteman.

So I got interested, first in hearing Whiteman and his peers, and then in trying to make sense of how American popular music evolved over the course of the twentieth century. It was a way of forcing myself to listen to a lot of artists whom I knew by name but had never really heard, and of coming to terms with all the mainstream pop music that people like me have tended to disparage as "commercial." Instead of groaning over the fact that Whiteman was a bigger star than Louis Armstrong, that Dinah Shore outsold Dinah Washington, and that Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians were the most popular dance band of the century, I wanted to try to understand their music and the ways in which it affected the music I knew better.

One thing I concluded very early in this exploration was that the words "jazz" and "rock" were getting in my way. Both genres have inspired such devotion and spawned such vast critical and historical literatures that it is difficult to put them in perspective. In the creation of their canons, certain artists and styles have been examined in exhaustive detail while others have been ignored, often with little regard for which were more popular or more respected in their time. I understand the value of those canons—like all canons, they define an aesthetic and are both useful and illuminating—but because they account for such an immense proportion of the writing on American popular music, it has become hard to see beyond, around, under, and through them and to make sense of the broader picture into which they fit.

So I started trying to think of other ways to look at the evolution of popular music. One is to explore the effects of evolving technologies, as bandstands and parlor pianos gave way to Victrolas, transistor radios, and iPods and what was once a social lubricant became a way of creating a personal soundtrack. Another is to see the sweep of American music through the twentieth century as a story of African rhythm triumphing over European melody—an oversimplification, not least because Africa has produced plenty of melodies and Europe plenty of rhythms, but a cohesive way of tying together many of the century's key genres, from ragtime to jazz, swing, rock 'n' roll, funk, disco, and hip-hop.

The idea of a steady progression from ragtime to rap is tempting to a historian because it shows a clear line of development over an extended period of time. And if one accepts that continuum, then the Whiteman orchestra and the Beatles played very similar roles: not as innovators but as rearguard holding actions, attempting to maintain older, European standards as the streamlining force of rhythm rolled over them. Within the small world of music nuts, there have always

been some who regard the Beatles in just this way. In their view, rock is rooted in African-American music, and its evolution was from blues and R&B through Little Richard, Ruth Brown, and Ray Charles toward James Brown and Aretha Franklin, and on to Parliament/Funkadelic and Grandmaster Flash. By the time the Beatles hit, still playing the rhythms of Chuck Berry and Carl Perkins, that style was already archaic and their contributions were to resegregate the pop charts by distracting white kids from the innovations of the soul masters, to diffuse rock's energy with effetely sentimental ballads like "Yesterday"—paving the way for Simon and Garfunkel, Crosby, Stills and Nash, Elton John, and Billy Joel—and then to drape it in a robe of arty mystification, opening the way for the Velvet Underground, Pink Floyd, Yes, and Emerson, Lake and Palmer. In other words, rather than being a high point of rock, the Beatles destroyed rock 'n' roll, turning it from a vibrant black (or integrated) dance music into a vehicle for white pap and pretension.

That is how a lot of jazz fans over the years have categorized the Whiteman band: as a temporary impediment to the music's evolution, substituting lilting strings and pretentious arrangements for swinging rhythms and group improvisation. It is incontrovertibly true that the Whiteman outfit lacked the rhythmic power and complexity of the King Oliver, Fletcher Henderson, or Count Basie bands, just as the Beatles lacked the rhythmic power and complexity of Motown, Stax, and James Brown. On the other hand, both the Whiteman orchestra and the Beatles pioneered a melodic and harmonic richness that was considered revolutionary for their genres, most dramatically in works arranged by Ferde Grofé, Whiteman's main arranger, and by the Beatles' producer, George Martin, who considered Grofé one of his musical heroes.

I don't want to overstate that analogy—the Beatles, unlike Whiteman, composed their own songs, were a loose, rowdy rock 'n' roll band before they got arty and, though they shared his commercial aspirations, would have mocked Whiteman's aspirations to respectability. But the differences in how they tend to be viewed by historians say more about the way jazz and rock history have been written than about the realities of their music and careers. Both were the dominant bands of their times, for better or worse—and, if we want to understand those times, for better *and* worse. That is, if one accepts that the Beatles and their peers transformed teenage dance music into a mature art form, then it isn't fair to deny Whiteman credit for doing much the same thing to jazz. And, conversely, if Whiteman is to be damned for attempting to turn jazz into white art music, why are the Beatles to be applauded for doing the same thing to rock?

Before I began writing about music, I was a working musician. Due to the limitations of my talent and the tastes of my audiences, I had few illusions about being an artist, but I was doing something I enjoyed and making a decent living at it. I was a reasonably skilled craftsman and took pride in the fact that I could play a wide enough range of styles to suit a lot of different kinds of people. And that is a key

difference between the general run of musicians and most of the people who write music criticism and history. The writers are trying to define aesthetic positions, whereas the players, by and large, see aesthetic categories as limitations, cutting them off from jobs they are capable of filling. This attitude has inescapably shaped my understanding of music history: Any stylistic break, exciting as it may be, also seems to me to be a barrier. So as I survey the course of American music, I am always looking for connections, ways of linking styles and artists that usually are placed in separate boxes.

This does not mean that I favor continuity over change, but rather that I am fascinated by the continuities that show up even in the midst of the most dramatic changes. For example, there is no more perfect evocation of the thrill that came with early rock 'n' roll than the moment in Elvis Presley's 1954 recording of "Milkcow Blues" when, after singing a couple of slow, classic country blues lines, he stops the band, saying "Hold it, fellas. That don't *move* me. Let's get real, real gone," then breaks into a wild, whooping boogie. So I was charmed, listening to a record by Bennie Moten and his Kansas City Orchestra from 1928, to hear the trumpet player, Ed Lewis, interrupt Moten's perky piano introduction, saying "Hey, Bennie. Stop that ragtime. Let's get real lowdown," and go into a jazzy scat vocal.[2] The differences between Presley's music and Moten's are obvious, but so is their similar effort to signal a break with old rhythms—as well as, in both cases, to first signal their mastery of the older style.

So one of the main things I try to do in this book is to avoid the assumptions of genre histories, the divisions of eighty years of evolving popular styles into discrete categories like ragtime, jazz, swing, R&B, and rock. Not because those categories are necessarily inaccurate or objectionable, but because when I step outside them I hear the music differently and understand things about it that I previously missed.

This process inevitably has made me conscious of the ways in which my own experiences have affected my musical tastes. To stay with Presley for a minute, the fact that I was born in 1959 made it difficult for me to hear him as a musical revolutionary. I first recall seeing him in the 1973 television special *Aloha from Hawaii*, and his rhinestone jumpsuit, Vegas mannerisms, and orchestral bombast epitomized everything that was archaic, overblown, and ridiculous about mainstream show biz. I have since come to understand his importance and to appreciate the youthful excitement of his early Sun sides and his moody charisma in *King Creole*, but that was as much by reading about him as by listening to him or watching him—which is to say I like a lot of his work, but he has never been an important part of my life.

By contrast, Peter Guralnick, whose writings forced me to reconsider Presley's work, first saw him leaping off the television screen in 1956, when Guralnick was twelve. So, while he is always measured and incisive about Presley's abilities and does not shy away from the contradictions of both the life and the music, Guralnick

is intensely aware of Elvis's initial impact: "The world was not prepared for Elvis Presley," he wrote in a groundbreaking essay for *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock 'n' Roll*. "Other rock 'n' rollers had a clearer focus to their music. An egocentric genius like Jerry Lee Lewis may even have had a greater talent. Certainly Chuck Berry or Carl Perkins had a keener wit. But Elvis had the moment. He hit like a Pan American flash, and the reverberations still linger from the shock of his arrival."[3]

That is the image of Elvis that dominates virtually all rock histories: the young revolutionary of "That's All Right" and "Hound Dog," signaling the arrival of a new era with his untamed vocals, swiveling hips, and rebellious sneer. And I have no argument with it, either aesthetically or historically. My favorite Elvis records are the rootsy, rocking sides, and when I read newspapers and magazines from the mid-1950s, he is universally hailed or damned for leading a blues-powered assault on the sedate and respectable bastions of Tin Pan Alley.

But if the stripped-down energy of the Sun recordings makes it easy to place Elvis in the company of rockers like Lewis, Berry, and Perkins, his success—the way he grasped his moment—very quickly put him in the company of Pat Boone and Perry Como, who rank just behind him as the top hitmakers of the 1950s. Guralnick tells me that Presley always expressed appreciation for Boone's ballad singing, and has written that it was Sun's owner, Sam Phillips, who pushed the young singer toward what we now call rockabilly. As Elvis told an interviewer in 1955, "I had never sung anything but slow music and ballads in my life at that time."[4] And when he left Sun for RCA, he quickly began to alternate the rock numbers with dreamy concoctions like "Love Me Tender" and "That's When Your Heartaches Begin"—an old Ink Spots hit he had recorded as a present for his mother during his first visit to Sun. The major label's choruses and studio musicians helped him sound like the movie stars he had idolized back in Memphis, and he would pick "It's Now or Never," based on Mario Lanza's version of "O Sole Mio," as his own favorite among his recordings.[5]

So with the advantage of hindsight one could think of Elvis as a 1950s equivalent of Bing Crosby, who established himself in Whiteman's band as the most jazz-oriented of white singers, then proved his mastery of older and more sedate styles, branching out into Tin Pan Alley ballads, Hawaiian exotica, cowboy songs, and Irish-American nostalgia. By 1956 Whiteman was a radio and television executive celebrating his fiftieth anniversary in show business, and his assessment of RCA's new star was "I think Presley's got the inner talent if it's handled well, but he'll have to develop his style in order to stay on top, like Crosby and Sinatra have."[6] And, with adjustments to fit the different eras, that is precisely what happened.

Or, more accurately, that is an alternate way of telling the story. Any history is a reflection of at least two periods—when the events happened and when one is writing—and also of the writer's personal experience. So when I write about

Elvis's arrival, I am writing about the 1950s, looking back from the thirtieth year of hip-hop, and hearing him with the ears of someone who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. I can do my best to understand how he sounded when he burst out of car radios in 1955, but I inevitably remain aware of the power ballads that link him to Celine Dion, which I hear with tastes formed by the folk-blues revival. Some of my contemporaries deal with this by thinking of the Sun sessions as the real Elvis and the RCA ballad sides as irrelevant commercial confections, and that is a reasonable aesthetic judgment. But it doesn't explain why both "Hound Dog" and "Love Me Tender" spent over a month at number one in 1956. To say that something is timely—that it expresses its time—is a compliment, just as it is a compliment to say that something is timeless. But what made something timely is usually very different from what makes it timeless.

That is the essential divide between history and criticism. The critic's job is to assign value and importance on an artistic level, which necessarily is a judgment about how the work stands up in the present. The historian's is to sort out and explain what happened in the past, which means attempting to understand the tastes and environment of an earlier time. And the latter task also involves sorting out and understanding how earlier critics and historians were affected by their own times.

Anyone researching rock's beginnings is necessarily thrown back on the work of the early rock historians, who began writing in the late 1960s. Those writers were still living in the midst of the rock revolution, and they created a picture of the 1950s in which Elvis, Berry, Lewis, Big Joe Turner, Little Richard, Ruth Brown, Buddy Holly, the Drifters, and dozens of other artists pioneered a new style and forever transformed popular music. They drew strict boundaries between these artists and mainstream imitators like Boone and Georgia Gibbs, and completely ignored older, unrocking singers such as Como and the McGuire Sisters. One result is that today it is hard to come up with much in-depth, reliable information about the scene that produced Boone, Gibbs, Como, and the McGuires. Another is that the artists who have been celebrated and hailed as pioneers have been separated from their broader context. When Presley and Boone were the two most popular singers among American teens, were they really the idols of opposing camps? Or does that way of seeing them just reflect the fact that the few teenage music fanatics who went on to become rock critics had different tastes from the millions of teenagers who swooned over both? And did even the critics all draw that distinction when they were teenagers in the 1950s, or did some only learn to despise Boone as they matured through Motown, the Beatles, and Jimi Hendrix?

Ellen Willis, one of the few women writing about rock in the 1960s, was also the only prominent critic to answer that last question in the affirmative. In 1968, she wrote:

> If we who grew up with rock and have always loved it feel smug these days, the smugness is tainted—at least for some of us. We all knew Elvis was great . . . but who among us has soul so pure that he never liked Pat Boone? My own taste was not only less discriminating than it could have been but often discriminating in the wrong way. I tended, for instance, to prefer the tamer, white versions of rhythm-and-blues records to the black originals. Partly this was because the imitators were pushed on the radio, but partly it was because Georgia Gibbs *sounded better* to me than LaVern Baker; I was one of the white teen-aged reasons the music was being watered down.[7]

Most of Willis's male peers claimed precisely the purity of soul that she admitted lacking, which is probably one reason she phrased her memory as an admission. And I do not think it is coincidental that a female critic was the lone admitted Boonian—or at least recovering Boonian—in the 1960s rock fold. Reading through the histories of both jazz and rock, I am struck again and again by the fact that although women and girls were the primary consumers of popular styles, the critics were consistently male—and, more specifically, that they tended to be the sort of men who collected and discussed music rather than dancing to it. Again, that is not necessarily a bad thing (some of my best friends . . .), but it is relevant when one is trying to understand why they loved the music they loved and hated the music they hated.

Obviously, as I survey the history of popular music, I am just as affected by my own time, gender, race, and class as the writers of the 1930s or the 1960s were by theirs, with my own prejudices and experiences. I am sure I would have written this book very differently before hip-hop, or if I were not a guitarist or the son of two middle-class, Jewish college professors with strong left-wing politics, one of them born in 1906 and the other an Austrian refugee, classical pianist and prominent feminist, or if I hadn't spent years playing bar gigs or writing for a newspaper, or so on and so forth . . .

So I am not claiming any clearer vision than previous writers; I am just trying to be conscious of who they were and how that affected their tastes and judgments. In the late 1930s and 1940s a lot of critics made rulings about what was and was not jazz, and in the late 1960s and 1970s other critics defined a canon of what was and was not rock, and we can respect those rulings without accepting them as definitive or even accepting those categories as useful ways for us to sort the music of those times. The critical choices have affected the way I hear the music, and continue to affect it, but, like the surviving magazines, playbills, interviews, and the music itself, those choices are now historical artifacts. There are no definitive histories because the past keeps looking different as the present changes.

This book is an attempt to go back and look at some familiar ground with fresh eyes and to strip away some layers of past opinion. Like any history, it omits far more

than it includes, and if I have left out a lot of familiar stories and revered figures that is in general because they are covered at length and in depth in other books or because they do not happen to intersect the particular trails I am following.

One thing I want to stress is that I am trying to write history, not criticism—that is, to look at some of the most influential movements and stars of the twentieth century and explore what links and divides them without worrying about whether they were marvelous or pernicious, geniuses or frauds, or whether I personally enjoy their work. Even allowing for strong tastes, one can still attempt to separate artistic judgments from historical ones. I prefer Vincent van Gogh's paintings to Paul Cezanne's, but although that is my heartfelt aesthetic judgment, my historical judgment is that one could trace a solid, cohesive chronology of modern art without including Van Gogh—though it would lack some wonderful paintings and interesting connections—whereas without Cezanne one cannot understand how Picasso and Braque came to create cubism and thence explain all the other abstractions, geometric and otherwise, of twentieth-century academic art. Similarly, I prefer Picasso to the average painter of sunsets, and yet am aware that outside the academies and museums most people looking for pictures to hang on their walls still tend to prefer competent representations of pretty girls and landscapes to the innovative explorations of the twentieth century. So I can imagine a broad and accurate history of modern art that would treat museums and academies as serving an elite and largely irrelevant taste and recognize Van Gogh for having designed a fabulously popular and influential poster of sunflowers.

As it happens, that is how most histories of popular music are written: We tend to leave classical and symphonic styles out of the story, as if they existed in a separate world, just as historians of classical styles tend to give at best a glancing nod to pop trends. In a choice that seems odd to an outsider, the classical music historians also tend to regard most of the new, classically based orchestral compositions of the twentieth century—radio, film and television scores, easy listening and mood music, the orchestral sections of *Sgt. Pepper*—as falling outside their field. And, equally oddly, the jazz and rock canons tend to mimic the classical canon in this respect. Jazz historians, by and large, have no more interest in Paul Weston, Nelson Riddle, and Henry Mancini than classical historians have, and only minimally more interest in Glenn Miller. And while there are dozens of scholarly discussions of the Velvet Underground, there are virtually none of KC and the Sunshine Band.

To a great extent, that is because music criticism demands studious, analytic listening, and the people who listen that way tend to value music that rewards careful attention and analysis over styles that are just fun, relaxing, or danceable—which, again, is perfectly reasonable but automatically separates them from most

of the people buying and dancing to popular music. And in the same way, historians tend to focus on unique, original musicians rather than typical, generic ones, even when they are supposedly studying trends and movements rather than exceptional achievements.

This is particularly true for historians of music from the past hundred years, because we can hear so much of it. Historians of earlier styles necessarily devote a lot of attention to generic performance practices because, unless the styles involved written notation, that is pretty much all we have to study, and even where notation exists, we need to understand how it was translated into sound. For the twentieth century, we have millions of recordings available, so we not only can read the sheet music for "Stardust" and study the composers and musicians who were active in its heyday, but can also listen to the ways different artists of that period played it. This is obviously an advantage, but it tempts us to think of those recordings as representative even when they are not and—because we have our own tastes and must listen to the records we are studying over and over—to pay more attention to records that excite us than to records that we find boring. For example, when we study the music of the 1920s we are tempted to focus on Louis Armstrong's Hot Five, even though we know that it never performed outside the recording studio, and to avoid Guy Lombardo, because he made hundreds of records. We can't write about them intelligently without listening to a representative sample of them, and they bore us.

Which brings me to my final point, at least for now: The most difficult thing about understanding the past is appreciating choices and tastes that seem strange or disagreeable and trying to confront them on their own terms. I began this introduction with a quotation from the classical pianist and historian Charles Rosen, and I want to end with another. Rosen notes that one of the things that makes it hard for us to appreciate new and unfamiliar styles is that they demand that we accept not only sounds that are strange to us but also the absence of qualities that we consider necessary. One reason that the music of Whiteman and the Beatles was so phenomenally popular was that it blended styles that older listeners found abrasive and unmusical with familiar elements, so those listeners could enjoy it without abandoning their previous standards and feel broad-minded and modern without essentially changing their tastes. But as Rosen writes, "The appreciation of a new style is as much an effort of renunciation as of acceptance."[8] And the same holds true for any idea, old or new, that is drastically different from our own.

A wealth of new ideas, technologies, and musical styles were born over the course of the twentieth century, and the ones that achieved popularity required both acceptance and renunciations. Electricity, automation, ragtime, movies, jazz, radio, air travel, amplification, and rock 'n' roll were all wonderful in some ways and

destructive in others. And to trace their evolutions we need to remain conscious of the losses as well as the gains, and to accept that some of the changes that most excite us were difficult for plenty of decent, intelligent, and talented people. For example, without recording we could not hear any of the music I write about in this book, and yet in some ways there has been no more musically destructive force than the phonograph. So I will begin this story with a look at what musical life was like before recording.

1

AMATEURS AND EXECUTANTS

Of all the ways in which music changed over the course of the twentieth century, the most fundamental was the shift from being something people played to something they consumed and from being part of a larger experience to being a thing that is often heard alone and out of any set context. Audio recording, simply by existing, separated sound from performance. Until recording, music did not exist without someone playing it, and as a result music listening was necessarily social. There was no way to hear a musical group without other people being present—to play even a duet, there had to be two people in the room. It is hard to think about how different that must have been, as everyone reading this book has listened to music alone. Indeed, with Walkmans and MP3 players, it has become common to use music to shut out the rest of the world.

Strange as it may seem, my own earliest musical memories reflect that era before recorded sound. My mother grew up in Vienna, the daughter of a concert-quality pianist and herself a child prodigy on the instrument. My father was an amateur cellist, and I recall them playing duets sometimes on the weekends. We would also gather around the piano and sing together, reading the lyrics from the *Fireside Book of Folk Songs* as my mother played the accompaniment. And my father would sing the popular hits of his youth, usually at the dinner table. I still know many of his favorite songs: "Sheik of Araby," "Lena Was the Queen of Palesteena," "Mammy," "Oh, by Jingo," and odd scraps like "Your Wife and Your Boarder, They're All Right." We owned a record player and my parents had dozens of classical albums, so I'm sure I heard those at times, and we even had some children's records which I must have listened to, since I still recognize songs from them. But I have no memories of listening to recorded music before that Beatles album on my sixth birthday.

Even in the early 1960s that was fairly unusual, and today it is extremely rare. But, with some variations, it is typical of how pretty much everyone first heard music, pretty much everywhere in the world, until well into the twentieth century. And that is something any modern reader needs to understand in order to follow the evolution of popular music from the ragtime era into the jazz years and beyond: For much of that time, records remained relatively unimportant. We tend to give them a lot of historical weight because we still have them, but for their first half century they were considered brief, fuzzy snapshots of popular music, not the thing itself. Live performances, most of them by players and singers who would never be recorded, remained the norm—indeed, the whole idea of "live music" did not arrive until well after the dawn of recording, as until then there had been no dead music.

When they first appeared, audio recordings were faint and scratchy novelties, and no one could have imagined a time when amateur performers would be complimented by being told that they sound "just like a record." Only the most pessimistic were more prescient, and the most famous of these was John Philip Sousa, who coined the term "canned music" and summed up his feelings in a 1906 diatribe, "The Menace of Mechanical Music."[1] By that time the phonograph had become a fairly common object in homes and entertainment arcades, with Sousa's popularity accounting for some of its greatest successes. The first Columbia Records catalog, published in 1890, included fifty cylinders by the U.S. Marine Band, then under his direction, and over the next decade his marches were among the most frequently recorded and best-selling tunes.

From the beginning, though, Sousa was ambivalent about the new technology. The Marine Band that recorded for Columbia was just an eight-man subgroup, as the acoustic recording process could not accommodate a full brass ensemble, and Sousa himself never set foot in the Columbia studio. After he broke off to form his own group in 1892, Sousa's Band would be credited with some 1,770 recordings, but only eight of those were made under his personal supervision.[2] He preferred to leave recording to his assistants while concentrating his own efforts on composing and, more important, bringing "good music" to a mass public.

Sousa considered himself first of all a classical musician, and his concerts, which routinely drew crowds numbering in the thousands, mixed his famous marches with a broad selection of European concert works. He would also include a small sample of light, hummable pop tunes, but to his way of thinking these were there as sweetener for the more serious material. A ragtime march like Kerry Mills's "At a Georgia Camp Meeting" or a sentimental parlor ballad like Charles K. Harris's "After the Ball" would act as a bridge to Wagner and Beethoven. That said, Sousa was acutely conscious and respectful of popular tastes. He noted with pride that the snootier classical orchestras could not match his concert receipts and ascribed this not only to the expertise of his musicians but also to the democratic spirit of his repertory.

From a modern perspective, it can be hard to understand the breadth of music Sousa popularized. Now that brass bands are heard only in parades and at sporting events, we tend to think of them as rousing, blaring calls to action. But brass band concerts included waltzes and ballads as well as marches. "After the Ball," for example, was a sentimental waltz:

> After the ball is over, after the break of morn;
> After the dancers' leaving, after the stars are gone;
> Many a heart is aching, if you could read them all;
> Many the hopes that have vanished after the ball.[3]

This song was the biggest sheet music seller of the 1890s, and it remained phenomenally popular well into the twentieth century. In a large part this was due to how easily it could be sung around the parlor piano or used as a tearjerker by professional balladeers, but when Harris looked back on the song's early life, he credited its overwhelming success to Sousa. The 1893 Chicago World's Fair was the first such event to draw visitors from all over the country, and Sousa was its musical superstar: "There were thousands of visitors to the World's Fair who heard Sousa's band play the song as only he could render it," Harris later wrote. "They would then invariably buy copies in Chicago's music stores to take back home with them, to show the home folks the reigning song success of the World's Fair. That was one of the reasons why the song spread throughout the world as no ballad of its kind had ever done before."[4]

The idea that people would hear his band play music and be inspired to go home and perform it themselves was integral to Sousa's mission. It is a bit of a stretch to compare him to Pete Seeger, but like Seeger a half century later he dreamed of a country full of amateurs making music for one another. It was part of the democratic American dream: The aristocratic arts of Europe would be made common property, rubbing shoulders with the rough songs of the pioneers and the latest dances of the vibrant new cities. Sousa differed from Seeger in that he not only wanted everyone to play, but also hoped they would play the works of the great European composers, but for both men, the most important thing was getting instruments into everyone's hands and encouraging them to make music. (And, although Seeger is best known for championing the songs of nonprofessional folk artists, he also recorded banjo transcriptions of Bach, Beethoven, and Stravinsky and wrote a book on sight-reading.[5])

Sousa's objections to "canned music" were not purely aesthetic. He was a businessman as well as an artist, and until 1913 recordings were not subject to copyright and paid no composer's royalties, so his marches were selling millions of cylinders and discs for which he received not a penny. But he also had more altruistic reasons to dislike the new technology, and although he granted that his polemic might be read as both alarmist and partisan, to a modern reader it

seems prophetic—as well as being a reminder of a lost world of popular music making.

Sousa started by celebrating America's success in democratizing musical performance: "There are more pianos, violins, guitars, mandolins, and banjos among the working classes of America than in all the rest of the world," he wrote, "and the presence of these instruments in the homes has given employment to enormous numbers of teachers who have patiently taught the children and inculcated a love for music throughout the various communities."

> Right here is the menace in machine-made music! The first rift in the lute has appeared. The cheaper of these instruments of the home are no longer being purchased as formerly, and all because the automatic music devices are usurping their places.
>
> And what is the result? The child becomes indifferent to practice, for when music can be heard in the homes without the labor of study and close application, and without the slow process of acquiring a technic, . . . the tide of amateurism cannot but recede, until there will be left only the mechanical device and the professional executant. . . .
>
> When a mother can turn on the phonograph with the same ease that she applies to the electric light, will she croon her baby to slumber with sweet lullabys, or will the infant be put to sleep by machinery?
>
> Children are naturally imitative, and if, in their infancy, they hear only phonographs, will they not sing, if they sing at all, in imitation and finally become simply human phonographs—without soul or expression? Congregational singing will suffer also, which, though crude at times, at least improves the respiration of many a weary sinner and softens the voices of those who live amid tumult and noise. . . .
>
> The country band with its energetic renditions, its loyal support by local merchants, its benefit concerts, band wagon, gay uniforms, state tournaments, and the attendant pride and gayety, is apparently doomed to vanish in the general assault on personality in music. . . .
>
> The country dance orchestra of violin, guitar and melodeon had to rest at times, and the resultant interruption afforded the opportunity for general sociability and rest among the entire company. Now a tireless mechanism can keep everlastingly at it, and much of what made the dance a wholesome recreation is eliminated. . . .[6]

We have long lived in the world Sousa dreaded. Only a small minority of Americans still bother to master a musical instrument, and many readers will be puzzled by his reference to the country band with its bandwagon and gay uniforms, never having seen such an amateur group leading a local parade or giving a concert in a park. Virtually all dancing is now commonly done to recordings, played without pause, whether at clubs or at private parties. And although some mothers (and fathers) still hum lullabies and most religious congregations still sing together,

it is becoming increasingly common for recorded music to be used even in these situations.

On the flip side, the fact that the "tide of amateurism" has been widely replaced by "the mechanical device and the professional executant" means that we can hear music performed not only by our family members and neighbors but also by the finest artists, alive or dead, who have ever been recorded anywhere in the world, and we can hear it whenever we want, wherever we go, in whatever order and at whatever volume we please. The musicians of the last hundred years have been able to study not only with local music teachers but also by listening to a range of performers and styles that were never previously available to anyone, no matter how rich or well traveled, and it has given them a breadth of experience and created a wealth of fusions that would have been unimaginable in Sousa's day.

So there have been plenty of gains to offset the losses. But some of the changes have been so fundamental that present-day music listeners do not even think about them, and it is worth taking a moment to consider how different music was before recording arrived and became a popular medium.

First of all, we need to remember that in the century or so before Sousa's diatribe, music had already undergone a huge change because of the wide dissemination of printed scores. The nineteenth century was the dawn of "popular music," as separate from "folk music," though few if any critics or historians were yet drawing that distinction. At root both terms are identical, and both originally referred to the music of the common people as opposed to styles composed for the pleasure and edification of a social or educational elite. But over the years they came to be understood quite differently, with folk music being what people made in their communities and popular music being the commercial styles they got from professionals.

As for the elite styles, commonly called "art," "serious," or "classical" music, they are usually discussed as if they formed a separate world, but as both Sousa's repertoire and the work of scholars such as Lawrence Levine have shown, in the nineteenth century highbrow and popular styles overlapped far more than they do today. To a great extent the reason was that both were mostly played at home. Composers and songwriters made their income not from the performance of their works but from sales of printed songs and instrumental arrangements, and most consumers bought and played everything from theater songs, "peasant melodies," and patriotic anthems to Strauss and Beethoven, often grouped in the same folios. Concert artists would likewise mix popular hits and operatic arias on the same program and in both cases tended to embrace the latest works. Today, we expect most classical concerts to be devoted to old music played in an old-fashioned manner, but until the latter half of the nineteenth century, concert programs were overwhelmingly devoted to contemporary compositions and settings. Even when one played the works of older composers, these were routinely adapted to suit current tastes—expanded orchestral settings of Haydn matched the opulent stage settings

of nineteenth-century Shakespeare productions—and when both high and low culture were expected to keep up with the times, it was much easier for popular and art styles to overlap.

Concerts, in any case, made up only a small part of musical life, even in the classical field. The vast majority of compositions were written and marketed for people to play at home, which meant that the vast majority of musical performances were by people who, if they bothered to think of themselves seriously as players, thought of themselves as amateurs—literally, lovers of music—rather than as musicians. It was analogous to dancing, the only art that people still practice themselves more often than they pay to have it done by professionals. We dance at home, go out to social events built around dancing, and when we get into a new style like salsa or tango, we take some lessons, then practice with our friends or use our skills as a way to meet people. Far more of us dance than go to watch professional dancers, especially when we're young, and very few of us, even when we are taking lessons, give any thought to becoming professionals ourselves.

Playing music used to be like that. People sang as children and often learned to play an instrument, and many continued to play at least occasionally throughout their lives. What made a song popular was not that a concert artist was using it to wow sedentary crowds, but that hundreds of thousands of people were playing and singing it. Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home" was the runaway hit of 1851, and a columnist for the *Albany State Register* described its impact in a wry paragraph:

> Pianos and guitars groan with it, night and day; sentimental young ladies sing it; sentimental young men warble it in midnight serenades; volatile young "bucks" hum it in the midst of their business and their pleasures; boatmen roar it out stentorially at all times; all the bands play it; amateur flute players agonize over it at every spare moment; the street organs grind it out at every hour; the "singing stars" carol it on the theatrical boards, and at concerts. . . .[7]

Note that the "singing stars" don't appear in that list until item nine, and no particular star is associated with the song. Today, we associate hits first of all with particular stars. It remains true that virtually none of us hear them for the first time at concerts, but a ubiquitous song tends to be heard in a recording by someone like Christina Aguilera, and though it still may permeate our lives, being heard at dance clubs and shopping malls and blaring from the windows of passing cars, it is always the same arrangement backing the same voice. At the turn of the twentieth century, hits were still heard and played in multifarious arrangements and sung by anyone who thought she could carry a tune.

That is one reason so many of the favorite art music composers of the nineteenth century have fallen from favor today. In competition with Beethoven, they now suffer from their comparative ordinariness and simplicity, but those were not drawbacks when amateurs had to play the music on their own instruments or with

a few friends from the neighborhood. Beethoven was considered the highest of high art and scared a lot of amateurs, but even his work was by no means written exclusively for the concert hall. Although he was the most celebrated composer in Vienna, only two of his thirty-two piano sonatas were given public performances there during his lifetime. All of his string quartets were performed in concert, but the piano sonatas were considered "house music" for people to play at home or for professionals to play at small gatherings of amateurs.[8] Few composers could count on wealthy patrons or large commissions—the only sources of income aside from sheet music sales—so they carefully tailored their work to amateur performance. A reminder of this is all the pieces that were written for "piano, four hands." In concert, piano duets were played on two pianos, but few homes had more than one, so composers wrote duets to be played on the single keyboard. A piece that could be played only by concert artists might bring fame, but if you wrote a piece that people wanted to play at home, everyone needed to buy copies of the music.

Most of the famous composers and concert virtuosos were men, but it is worth noting that, in middle- and upper-class homes of the nineteenth century, the majority of musicians were female. Boys could sometimes escape the torture of music lessons, devoting themselves instead to sports or conjugating Latin verbs, but any properly brought up young lady was expected to be able to perform on the keyboard, guitar, violin, or some other common parlor instrument. A modern girl would keep up with the latest compositions, both serious and light, and a typical evening's playing might range from Beethoven to "The Old Folks at Home."

I keep emphasizing that overlap because it formed the foundation of popular music well into the twentieth century. Ragtime and jazz were both dependent on generations of performers and listeners whose musical world ranged from the latest popular songs to the most elevated concert works. Of course, part of what made people think of some works as elevated was that they were associated with a smaller, more educated audience, but that made them all the more attractive, especially when mixed with lighter fare. Today, orchestras that want to educate their audiences tend to perform a "difficult" piece by someone like Lutoslawski sandwiched between more accessible works by Beethoven or Schubert. In the nineteenth century, high and low arts were not so rigorously defined, so performers might "gild . . . the prodigious pill of Beethoven by the most irresistible polkas and Grand-Exhibition-of-all-Nations waltzes, mazurkas and redowas." That quotation is from an 1853 magazine review of the violinist Paul Julien, anticipating an American tour on which he promised a program of "Beethoven, Haydn and Mozart, with a colossal orchestra and no clap-trap performance but a genuine matter. He will interweave a lighter music so daintily, that our feet will insensibly glide from the solemn marches of the great masters to the airy pulsations of Strauss, and Lanner, and Julien himself."[9] Meanwhile Julien's singing star, the German soprano Anna Zerr, would perform not only selections from Mozart's *Magic Flute* but also