Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series

ROUTLEDGE

The Rock Canon

Canonical Values in the Reception of Rock Albums

Carys Wyn Jones

THE ROCK CANON

To my parents

The Rock Canon

Canonical Values in the Reception of Rock Albums

CARYS WYN JONES

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General Editor's Preface

The upheaval that occurred in musicology during the last two decades of the twentieth century has created a new urgency for the study of popular music alongside the development of new critical and theoretical models. A relativistic outlook has replaced the universal perspective of modernism (the international ambitions of the 12-note style); the grand narrative of the evolution and dissolution of tonality has been challenged, and emphasis has shifted to cultural context, reception and subject position. Together, these have conspired to eat away at the status of canonical composers and categories of high and low in music. A need has arisen, also, to recognize and address the emergence of crossovers, mixed and new genres, to engage in debates concerning the vexed problem of what constitutes authenticity in music and to offer a critique of musical practice as the product of free, individual expression.

Popular musicology is now a vital and exciting area of scholarship, and the *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* presents some of the best research in the field. Authors are concerned with locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context, and may draw upon methodologies and theories developed in cultural studies, semiotics, poststructuralism, psychology and sociology. The series focuses on popular musics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is designed to embrace the world's popular musics from Acid Jazz to Zydeco, whether high tech or low tech, commercial or non-commercial, contemporary or traditional.

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Introduction

In March 2003 the *NME* introduced their list of the *NME* writers' 'NME's 100 Best Albums of All Time!' by saying, 'This isn't a boring attempt to create some kind of canon of "classics" – just an honest account of what continues to rock our world.'[1] Yet the selection of albums in this poll (including albums by the Beatles, the Beach Boys and the Velvet Underground) suggests not only that a canon of 'great' artists and albums is emerging in rock music – but also that, for some reason, the writers of the *NME* are keen to deny it. This book asks the question of whether rock music is in fact in the process of creating a canon of classics, and in doing so, will investigate the extent to which canonical models from literature and classical music have informed the structures and values of the reception of rock music albums.

Simply put, the canon comprizes the works and artists that are generally considered to be the greatest in their field. Yet such an apparently simple construct embodies a complicated web of values and mechanisms. The oldest and most venerated canon comprizes the books of the Bible, and this canon has remained largely unquestioned over the centuries. The oldest and most established secular canon is that of literature, and canonical debate originated primarily within this field. However, the canon is also an increasingly important issue in the academic study of music, as it absorbs different styles and traditions of music into its orbit.

Indeed, the study of canons in general is a growing concern as our culture becomes increasingly multicultural. We struggle to find a way to reconcile the plurality of today's culture with the canon and yet the idea of the canon still holds authority over many areas of our lives. Traditionally canons have existed only in the rarefied spheres of high art; however, today the values embodied by these canons have filtered into the reception of popular culture. It is perhaps not surprising that popular culture inherits many of its structures of value from high culture, but that is not to say that such inheritance is not problematic. Canonical models from literature and classical music will therefore be used to explain patterns of reception in popular music, particularly the reception of rock music albums, which displays marked echoes of canons in its guiding logic.

Until now canons in popular music have not been explored in detail in academic literature, and the general position of the academic study of popular music towards canons has been ambivalent. Subjects related to canonicity in rock music (such as value judgement and marginalization of certain perspectives) have so far been discussed separately but not as part of a discussion of canons.[2] Some academics have privileged certain artists (especially the Beatles and Bob Dylan) in their research

1 Various Contributors, 'NME's 100 Best Albums of All Time!', *New Musical Express*, 8 March 2003, 35–42 (35).

2 For example, value judgement in the reception of popular music forms the central concern of Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Perspectives of women in rock are discussed in *Sexing*

and have thus started a tentative canon of works apparently considered worthy of academic study.[3] However, by contrast, Allan Moore states quite unequivocally in his book *Rock: The Primary Text* that he is trying to 'subvert the growth of an accepted "canon" of popular music (which already accepts the Beatles, "punk" and Bob Dylan, at the very least)'.[4] The publication of a special issue of the journal *Popular Music* on 'Canonisation in Popular Music' (January 2006) demonstrates the growing interest in the role of canons in popular music, but as the diverse articles in this edition make clear, there is little consensus as of yet over the field and values under discussion.[5] This book therefore aims to present an in-depth discussion of one particular aspect of canons in popular music and therefore to form part of the growing dialogue surrounding the issue.

For reasons of clarity and convenience, the music under study will be consistently referred to as 'rock' music in this book. However, this is indubitably an unsatisfactory term to apply on the whole. Bob Dylan's music is often characterized as folk, and *Never Mind the Bollocks: Here's the Sex Pistols* is regarded as the epitome of punk, while the music of both the Beatles and the Beach Boys is more frequently referred to as 'pop' than 'rock'. Arguably the most jarring discrepancy in this use of the label 'rock' is in the discussion of Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, which is widely recognized as soul music. There is perhaps room here to argue that a new term is needed to describe music that is defined primarily by albums, one that transcends the different styles of soul, punk, pop and folk but that creates a more satisfying umbrella term than 'rock' (which has its own set of connotations).[6] I will come to argue, however, that while Gaye's music itself is not necessarily 'rock', the values by which it is judged in popular reception are rock values (albeit ones inherited from the high arts). Therefore, in the absence of a more suitable term, the word 'rock' will be employed throughout the book in its most general meaning in that it is defined primarily by the album (for the most part incorporating other terms such as rock 'n' roll, pop, folk-rock and so on). Where the term 'popular music' is employed later in the book, it indicates the field in its widest possible conception.

The majority of this study will deal with the possibility of an emerging canon of albums within the field of 'popular' rock music reception, and so a distinction is also drawn between 'popular' rock music reception and 'academic' rock music reception. Non-academic authors are defined as those who are not recognized primarily as academics (in any field) and whose works are published by non-academic publishers.

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the Groove: Popular Music and Gender, ed. by Sheila Whiteley (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

3 See for example Yrjö Heinonen and others, '(Being a Short Diversion to) Current Perspectives in Beatles Research', in *Beatlestudies 1: Songwriting, Recording, and Style Change*, ed. by Yrjö Heinonen and others (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä Press, 1998), pp. i–iv.

4 Allan F. Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text, Developing a Musicology of Rock*, 2nd edn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 7.

5 *Popular Music*, Special Issue on Canonisation, 25/1 (January 2006).

6 Perhaps the most obvious term for music defined primarily by albums is 'album music'; however, the immediate clumsiness and ambiguity of this term may explain why it has never come into use. Other terms, such as 'art rock' and 'classic rock', are also problematic in this respect, and this subject will be revisited later in the book.

However, some grey area inevitably arises, most notably in the case of Greil Marcus (a serious non-academic critic) and Simon Frith (an academic who also writes for non-academic publications).

Chapter 1 presents a general overview of the concept of the canon. It explores theories and definitions of the canons of literature and classical music in order to create a model of the canon that can then be applied to and compared with rock music reception in later chapters. Theorizations of the canon employed in this section include those of Harold Bloom, John Guillory and Charles Altieri in the field of literature and William Weber and Marcia Citron in the field of classical music.

Chapters 2 and 3 then demonstrate where these canonical ideas and ideals have filtered into the reception of rock music by focusing on ten albums: Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*, the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*, the Beatles' *Revolver*, the Velvet Underground's *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*, Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, the Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main St.*, Patti Smith's *Horses*, The Sex Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks: Here's the Sex Pistols*, and Nirvana's *Nevermind*. These albums and artists routinely appear in histories of rock music, feature highly in lists of 'greatest albums of all time' and have been the focus of books and articles describing their creation and influence. This part of the book therefore searches for canonical values, criteria and mechanisms in their reception. It also covers issues of secondary literature, aesthetic criteria, author/genius, and the album as a work of art. The focus is then redirected to common narrative strands of canons, the imagined structure of the canon and the perception of canonically excluded identities. Finally this section addresses canonical mechanisms present in rock reception, including the test of time, reissues and 'canonizers'.[7]

Chapter 4 explores the reception of the same ten albums for evidence of other canonical values and criteria specific to rock music that are generally absent from the canons of literature and classical music. Chapter 5 then turns to the problem of authority in rock music, and explores the position of academic study in relation to a canon of popular music. In conclusion, Chapter 6 puts forth a case for and against a canon in rock and then finally returns to the concept of the canon itself in order to question its future in an increasingly democratized and globalized culture.

7 The term 'canonizer', relating to those whose actions serve to create and perpetuate canons, is used by John Guillory in 'Canon', in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 233–49 and also Philip Bohlman in Philip V. Bohlman, 'Ethnomusicology's Challenge to the Canon; The Canon's Challenge to Ethnomusicology', in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons*, ed. by Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 116–36 (p. 203).

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Chapter 1

Defining the Canon

In the last thirty years there has been much interest, conflict and uncertainty created by the word 'canon'. The concept of the canon is unfamiliar to many, especially those outside of academia; however, the idea of the canon is embodied in every reference to 'a classic', in lists of 'all-time greats' and in the habitual reverence of hallowed and ancient wisdom.

Put simply, a canon is the collection of works and artists that are widely accepted as the greatest in their field. These are the works and artists that are studied in schools and universities, performed in concert halls and displayed in galleries. These works are passed down from one generation to the next, and the artists are celebrated in histories and honoured with centennials. In Western literature the canon includes the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Tolstoy; in art, Botticelli, Rembrandt and Picasso; and in classical music, Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. However, such a reductive account of history and culture masks a complex and contradictory set of values and mechanisms that have been passed down over the years in the form of the canon.

The word 'canon' has meant many things over the years (including 'reed' or 'rod' or 'rule'), but as John Guillory recounts, it first came to signify a 'list of texts or authors, specifically the books of the Bible and of the early theologians of Christianity', in the fourth century AD. This early canon determined what was worthy of attention; in effect 'early Christianity had to decide what its "truths" were, what it was going to teach its followers.'[1] Once these 'truths' were established, the biblical canon became highly resistant to change; and much of the weight, authority and power of the word 'canon' can be traced back to these roots in religion. Therefore canons retain a residual aura of morality and unquestionable greatness.[2]

However, today's canons are no longer primarily those of religion. Since the twentieth century, use of the word canon has become more generally secular, but also more loosely defined. Rather than one (religious) canon, today we have many. As Charles Altieri comments:

> There are personal canons and official canons, canons for what one needs to know and canons for undermining all one is told one needs to know – and each of these classes has

1 John Guillory, 'Canon', in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 233–49 (p. 233).

2 See Richard Tristman, 'Canon: Historical and Conceptual Overview', in *The Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, ed. by Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), I, pp. 331–4 (pp. 332–4).

> several subdivisions. There are probably even canons for bathroom reading. Canons, then, reveal the same diversity and flexibility we find in the self's affairs.[3]

Yet this multitude of modern canons cannot hope to serve a similar social role, nor engender the same unquestioning respect, as the early canon of Christianity. Any comparison made between today's canons and the now closed biblical canon therefore requires a degree of caution.

Some of the uncertainty surrounding the concept of the canon is attributable to the term itself. Although the concept of the 'great' artist and the 'classic' work (or 'masterwork') has been around for centuries, the term 'canon' is a relatively recent addition to the vocabulary of literary criticism, and so its varied and often confused usage (especially outside of academia) is understandable. General use of the word 'canon' as a collection of prized works has only become common in the last 30 years, and even now this is only one possible understanding of the word.[4]

Adding to the confusion is the fact that the canon in any one discipline is not a fixed set of works (like the Bible), but is instead a forever shifting collocation of works that represents its greatest achievements; what Guillory has referred to as 'an *imaginary* totality of works'.[5] Given the vagueness associated with the idea of the canon, it is a concept that always requires (re)definition or qualification. The rest of this chapter will therefore seek to define the canon by focusing on the canons of two disciplines, those of Western literature and Western classical music, in order to crystallize the shared characteristics of these canons into a model that will then be employed throughout the rest of the book.

Of the various secular canons now in existence, the canon of Western literature is the oldest and most venerated. It is also the canon that has attracted the most criticism in the last 20 years, since the publication of *Canons* (1984), a collection of essays edited by Robert von Hallberg that was highly influential in raising the issue of canons in literary and music criticism.[6] Most of the issues pertaining to the canon as a concept have been raised with regard to the specific canon of Western literature.

The canon of Western classical music has been influenced by that of literature and yet remains wholly separate, and is therefore an invaluable model for the study of more recent canon formation, especially in the field of music. The musical canon is in its infancy compared to that of literature, and it was only properly established with the rise of musicology and the cult of Beethoven in the nineteenth century.[7] However, criticism

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3 Charles Altieri, 'An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon', in *Canons*, ed. by Robert von Hallberg (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1984), pp. 41–64 (p. 63 n. 6).

4 Even within the discipline of musicology, the word 'canon' is more usually recognized as a form of contrapuntal composition rather than a collocation of great works; alternatively, 'canon' is employed to denote the collected works of a single composer (for example, 'Symphony no. 9 is one of the greatest in the Beethoven canon').

5 John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 30. [Emphasis in the original.]

6 *Canons*, ed. by Robert von Hallberg (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

7 William Weber has explored the rise of the musical canon in various articles and books, most notably William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century*