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Los Angeles

Rock and Roll Fantasy:
Nostalgia in Early Seventies Rock

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Musicology

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Rock and Roll Fantasy:
Nostalgia in Early Seventies Rock

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This dissertation will explore the nostalgic fantasy worlds created by rock musicians at the start of the seventies. While popular culture of the entire decade saw a huge explosion of interest in the past, these early years of the decade are particularly interesting because they reveal a generation disillusioned with the sixties' utopian idealism and yet not ready to abandon all hope in the future ahead. Theorizing nostalgia, medievalism, cultural memory and fantasy, I will examine how the imaginary spaces created by rock musicians of this era function as complex nostalgic expressions, articulating present values and needs. Looking at uses of the past in this pivotal moment, we see not only a complex of events and objects, but also the networks through which creative people made meaning out of the past in their own present.

Chapter 1 will contextualize the beginnings of this nostalgic wave as a response to the experience of “future shock” as theorized by Alvin Toffler, and through a case study of Don

McLean's iconic 1971 track, "American Pie." Chapter 2 will explore the fantasy space of a British past in the music of Led Zeppelin and Jethro Tull, situating the ecocriticism and medievalism found in this era as a response to the specific conditions in England at the time. Chapter 3 will examine how American rock musicians turned towards romanticized visions of the Old West as an Edenic, pastoral playground, in the music of James Taylor, Three Dog Night and The Grateful Dead. Chapter 4 will conclude the dissertation by exploring the role of nostalgia in futuristic fantasies of this period, which, like much speculative fiction, explore past worlds recreated in the future. It will follow an extended case study of the many ways Pete Townshend re-engaged with his own past through his *Lifthouse* project. This dissertation will use interdisciplinary nostalgia theory to explore the ways in which rock music's fantasies of the past made new meaning for a generation of young adults at the start of the seventies.

The dissertation of Caitlin Claire Carlos has been approved.

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Dedication

To my husband, Anthony

The source of my inspiration, joy, love, and the best conversations...

And to my children

Every page of this dissertation was written with you in my arms and in my heart.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| List of Figures..... | vii |
| Acknowledgments..... | viii |
| Curriculum Vitae..... | x |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter 1..... | 21 |
| A Long, Long Time Ago...: The Aging of Youth Culture in the time of Future Shock | |
| Chapter 2..... | 74 |
| England's Green and Pleasant Land | |
| Chapter 3..... | 125 |
| "Out in the Country": Rural Romanticism, the Western, and Folk Ideology in American Rock Music at the Turn of the 1970s | |
| Chapter 4..... | 182 |
| "I Must Remember, Even If It Takes a Million Years": Nostalgic Futurism in Pete Townsend's Lifehouse Project | |
| Conclusion..... | 211 |

List of Figures

| | |
|---|-----|
| Figure 1.1 Stern, “Historical and Personal Nostalgia in Advertising Text” | 12 |
| Figure 2.1 <i>Led Zeppelin IV</i> – Front Cover | 83 |
| Figure 2.2. <i>Led Zeppelin IV</i> – Front and Back Album Cover..... | 84 |
| Figure 2.3 <i>This Was</i> – Front Cover..... | 86 |
| Figure 2.4 <i>Songs from the Woods</i> – Front Cover..... | 87 |
| Figure 2.5 <i>Aqualung</i> – Front Cover..... | 88 |
| Figure 2.6 <i>Aqualung</i> – Back Cover..... | 89 |
| Figure 2.7 <i>Led Zeppelin IV</i> – Inside Cover..... | 104 |
| Figure 2.8 <i>Led Zeppelin IV</i> – Inside liner sleeve..... | 107 |
| Figure 2.9 <i>Aqualung</i> – Back Cover..... | 110 |
| Figure 2.10 <i>Aqualung</i> – Back Cover..... | 111 |
| Figure 4.1 <i>Who’s Next</i> Front Cover..... | 188 |

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Introduction

The past is illusive and tempting. Both intangible and seemingly knowable, the past promises us a sense of stability not found in present and future. As David Lowenthal puts it:

Unlike the scant and scary contours of times ahead, the past is densely delineated. Countless vestiges in landscape and memory reflect what we and our precursors have done and felt. More familiar than the geographically remote, the richly elaborated past feels firmer than the present, for the here and now lacks the structured finality of what time has filtered and ordered. The past is less disconcerting than the present because its measure has already been taken.¹

Though forever inaccessible, the past attracts us precisely because it seems fixed: “we feel quite sure that the past really happened, that its traces and memories reflect irrefutable scenes and acts. The flimsy future may never arrive; man or nature may destroy all; time may terminate. But the securely tangible past is seemingly fixed, indelible, unalterable.”²

Looking at uses of the past in specific historical moments, we see not only a breadth of historical events and objects referenced, but also wide variations in the ways people made meaning of history in their contemporary moment through creative works. Nostalgia is one of the most common ways we find individuals and communities engaging with the past. Nostalgic reflection is not new to the 20th century, but it becomes increasingly more apparent as the decades progressed. In her landmark study, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym observes:

¹ Lowenthal, David. *The Past Is a Foreign Country – Revisited*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 25.

² Lowenthal, 25.

The ambivalent sentiment [nostalgia] permeates twentieth-century popular culture, where technological advances and special effects are frequently used to recreate visions of the past, from the sinking *Titanic* to dying gladiators and extinct dinosaurs. Somehow progress didn't cure nostalgia but exacerbated it. Similarly, globalization encouraged stronger local attachments. In counterpoint to our fascination with cyberspace the virtual global village, there is no less global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world. Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals.³

In the US and UK, the sixties were one of these moments of "historic upheavals," especially for the post-war generation who had grown-up over the course of the decade. In response to this period of unrelenting change, this generation turned to nostalgic imagining to make sense of their world. The popular culture, and especially the music, of the early seventies reveals the past as a utopian playground for a generation facing disillusionment with the present, but not yet ready to abandon all hope for the future.

Nostalgia in Rock Music

For the artistic generation rising in the wake of the sixties psychedelic counter-culture, life was messy – a surge of passionate and sometimes mixed emotions surrounding Vietnam, Kent State, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movements, and a rising emphasis on feminism,

³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), XIV.

environmentalism, and technological transformation. In the *Oxford History of Western Music*, Richard Taruskin connects “the sixties” - as a catchphrase - to retrospective thinking in the aftermath of the decade’s cultural change: “coined in nostalgia, in resentment, at any rate in retrospect, the phrase evokes disruption, a period of social division brought on by a confluence of social transformations.”⁴ Sometimes rock music addressed these issues directly, sometimes only in passing. But we often find a longing for a pre-sixties past, as the post-war generation looked to a future, in which they “won’t get fooled again.”

In many ways, rock of this era reflects the messiness and uncertainty of the political and cultural moment, by breaking into diverse and overlapping subgenres. One of the challenges of analyzing rock music of the late sixties and early seventies is its explosive diversification, completely different sounds and aesthetics crowded together uncomfortably under the cultural banner of “rock”: folk rock, country rock, singer-songwriters, glam rock, progressive rock, and heavy metal. But for all of their diverse aesthetic characteristics, their modes of composition, and their influences, all of these musics assumed the mantle of rock as a means of expressing artistic independence.

While the sonic expressions of these bands and musicians differ greatly, they also share an underlying ideology rooted in the “authenticity” of real-life experience, and a fervent interest in finding, accessing and exploring the past.⁵ Some new styles were already overtly nostalgic for earlier decades, like “greaser” (fifties) and garage (early sixties) rock. But a broader sense of

⁴ Richard Taruskin, “Chapter 7 The Sixties” *Music of the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 307.

⁵ The term authenticity has been passionately and controversially discussed in the field of musicology, but it is still an active part of how musicians and audiences conceptualize and discuss music. Simon Frith has argued that rock music largely draws its understanding of “authenticity” from folk music, and in opposition to the commercial artifice associated with “pop.” See Simon Frith. “‘The Magic That Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community.” *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 159-68.

nostalgic fantasy becomes a connecting thread in much rock music of the early seventies, offering a playground of semiotic meaning that allowed this generation to escape from as well as critique the contemporary present. As Boym reminds us, “outbreaks of nostalgia often follow revolutions.”⁶ For a generation of young adults, at the cusp of a new decade, a nostalgic disillusionment followed the counter-cultural revolution of only a few years prior. Faced with “unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete,” musicians of the early seventies turned to a romanticized past, and created fantasy playgrounds as a way of negotiating the present and re-envisioning the future.⁷

Navigating the changing musical and cultural landscape, up-and-coming rock bands formed in the late sixties (Led Zeppelin, Jethro Tull, Three Dog Night) began to emerge as mainstream idols, fusing a wide range of folk, rock, and pop influences into their sound. At the same time, folk-influenced singer-songwriters like Don McLean and James Taylor, participated in the same ideological formations as their harder rock contemporaries. Even The Grateful Dead and The Who (subcultural bands who had already developed distinctly “modern” fan followings by the end of the decade) shifted musical style to explore sonic playgrounds inspired by nostalgic imaginings. In this historical moment, rock embraced what one standard historical text dubs “the hippie aesthetic,” in which the musician is viewed as “an artist who has a responsibility to produce sophisticated music using whatever means are at his or her disposal. The music should stand up to repeated listening and the lyrics should deal with important issues or themes.”⁸ As rock turned towards introspection, the past became a powerful resource for artistic vision.

⁶ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 20.

⁷ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 20

⁸ John Rudolph Covach and Andrew Flory. *What's That Sound? : An Introduction to Rock and Its History*. Fifth ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018), 295

This dissertation will explore the nostalgic fantasy worlds created by rock musicians at the start of the seventies. While popular culture of the entire decade saw a huge explosion of interest in the past, these early years of the decade are particularly interesting because they reveal a generation disillusioned with the sixties' utopian idealism and yet not ready to abandon all hope in the future ahead. Longing for the simplicity of youth, the romanticism of a previous era, or the security of a former home is typically associated with old age, and yet the post-war generation's ventures into nostalgic yearning began at a time when the oldest of them were barely in their mid-twenties. They were still young, but they seemed to *feel* old: the world had changed rapidly over the previous two decades. As children, they dreamed of adventures in the Old West, by 1969 space cowboys had landed on the Moon. At a moment when the most progressive dreams for the future had collided with the present, the past became a new playground for imagination and creativity,

Theorizing nostalgia, medievalism, cultural memory and fantasy, I will examine how the imaginary spaces created by rock musicians of this era function as complex nostalgic expressions, articulating present values and needs. Boym defines nostalgia “as a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed [...] a sentiment of loss and displacement, but also a romance with one's own fantasy.”⁹ Looking at uses of the past in this pivotal moment, we see not only a complex of events and objects, but also the networks through which creative people made meaning out of the past in their own present. The diverse range of rock music practices in the late sixties and early seventies is one of the creative spaces where we can find nostalgic expressions and visions of the past. Even when the sounds differ greatly, they can betray a common interest in the past, forged in the chaos of the late-sixties cultural revolution.

⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 17.

Rock Scholarship

In this dissertation I will be focusing my attention on musicians that put out a wide range of sounds under the banner of “rock music” in the United States and England between 1970 and 1971. From the U.S., I will look at Don McLean, Three Dog Night, James Taylor and the Grateful Dead. From England, I will examine Led Zeppelin, Jethro Tull and The Who. While they have disparate sounds, they share many of the same audiences and released some of the most popular and commercially successful albums of the moment. This is important, as I am examining the role of nostalgic fantasy in this music as a broad generational phenomenon. I will argue that a coherent set of nostalgic tropes appear across a wide landscape of rock music, whether the artists were new or well-established, psychedelic, hard rock, progressive, “pop” bands or serious singer-songwriters. Interestingly, this nostalgic imaginary is also largely a phenomenon in the music of white, male musicians.¹⁰ Rock music as a genre was already white, and it seems that the music by Black artists who shared rock audiences during this period (Jimi Hendrix, Sly and the Family Stone, Stevie Wonder) did not (yet) display nostalgic tendencies, instead looking directly at the political present or to a more progressive future. Understanding why—perhaps by understanding the distinctively troubled relationship of African-Americans to the grand narratives of American history—will be an important future direction for my research.

Despite the importance of studying mainstream rock in its cultural context, much of the literature on mainstream rock music from the late sixties and early seventies comes from the popular press and rock journalism, where we find mostly biographical or gossip-based writing, such as Fred Davis’s sensationalist Led Zeppelin biography *Hammer of the Gods*.¹¹ The 33 1/3

¹⁰ Two exceptions I have found by women songwriters are Cynthia Weill’s “Good Time Livin’,” covered by Three Dog Night (see Chapter 3), and Carole King’s “Smackwater Jack,” on her landmark 1971 album *Tapestry*. In both of these cases, the women also had male coauthors on the song.

¹¹ Stephen Davis. *Hammer of the Gods: The Led Zeppelin Saga*. (New York: It Books, 2008).

series by Bloomsbury (originally began by Continuum) offers several accessible books which explore individual albums I will be discussing. Some of these books are authored by trained musicologists and music theorists (Allan Moore's study of *Aqualung*), others by rock journalists (Buzz Poole on *Workingman's Dead*, Erik Davis on *Led Zeppelin IV*) and can offer interesting hermeneutic insights.¹² Rock journalism also provides useful interviews with the musicians, many of whom are still living. A stand-out example is *Light and Shade: Conversations with Jimmy Page*, by former editor-in-chief of *Guitar World* magazine, Brad Tolinski. Ritchie Unterberg's monograph *Won't Get Fooled Again: The Who from Lifehouse to Quadrophenia*, provides a historical account of the creation of *Who's Next*, music originally intended for the film project called *Lifehouse* which is analyzed in my fourth chapter.

Tellingly, much of the music I explore in this dissertation, when it has been examined by scholars at all, is analyzed through the lens of disciplines other than musicology. For instance, the edited collection *Do You Believe in Rock and Roll: Essays on Don McLean's "American Pie,"* presents work from the fields of communication, history, philosophy, and English; there are no contributors from academic musicology.¹³ English scholar Mark Thomas Young usefully examines nostalgia for the spirit of revolution and progress in his 2015 dissertation, "Sonic Retro-Futures: Musical Nostalgia as Revolution in Post-1960s American Literature, Film and Technoculture."¹⁴

¹² Allan F. Moore, *Aqualung*. 33 1/3 (New York: Continuum, 2004)., Buzz Poole, *Workingman's Dead*. 33 1/3 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016)., Erik Davis, *Led Zeppelin IV*. 33 1/3 (New York: Continuum, 2005)

¹³ Schuck, Raymond I, and Ray Schuck. *Do You Believe in Rock and Roll? : Essays on Don Mclean's "American Pie"* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012).

¹⁴ Mark Thomas Young, "Sonic Retro-Futures: Musical Nostalgia as Revolution in Post-1960s American Literature, Film, and Technoculture." Ph.D. Diss., (University of California, Riverside, 2015).

The first wave of scholarship on this era of rock music entered musicology in the nineties and aughts. In much of this scholarship, the music is used as an avenue for addressing core methodological questions (often from a music-theoretical perspective) in analyzing rock music. For example, Allan Moore considers Jethro Tull in the chapter on “the case for modernism in mass music” in his edited volume, *Analyzing Popular Music*.¹⁵ Led Zeppelin’s music in particular seems to appeal to music theorists exploring new avenues for analyzing popular music forms. David Headlam used Led Zeppelin’s blues borrowings to ask about authorship and identification, and John Brackett examined the band’s rhythmic and metric practices. In most of this scholarship, cultural context takes a back seat to the musical characteristics which articulate larger concerns of style, or genre.¹⁶

Some of the bands I will examine in my dissertation enter scholarship as exemplars of styles like progressive rock (Jethro Tull), or psychedelia (The Grateful Dead). Of particular interest is Paul Hegarty and Martin Halliwell’s book *Beyond and Before: Progressive Rock since the 1960s*, which includes an insightful analysis of the role of nature and the outdoors in progressive rock music during the late sixties (much of which is also transferrable to what I see in other forms of rock at the time).¹⁷ Robert Walser’s *Runnin’ with the Devil: Power Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* discusses Led Zeppelin as an origin point for much of the sounds and mystical symbolism at the root of heavy metal music.¹⁸ In the American context, Sarah

¹⁵ Moore, Allan F. *Analyzing Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ David John Headlam. “Does the Song Remain the Same?: Question of Authorship and Identification in the Music of Led Zeppelin.” *Concert Music, Rock, and Jazz Since 1945* S. 313-363 (1995). Brackett, John. "Examining Rhythmic and Metric Practices in Led Zeppelin's Musical Style." *Popular Music* 27, no. 1 (2008): 53-76.

¹⁷ Paul Hegarty and Martin Halliwell. *Beyond and Before: Progressive Rock Since the 1960s*. New York: Continuum, 2011.

¹⁸ Robert Walser. *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Music/Culture. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

Hill's recent monograph, *San Francisco and the Long Sixties* uses the Grateful Dead to look at psychedelic music in San Francisco during this period. Hill interrogates the idea of a "long sixties," in which the ideals of sixties is carried long past the final years of the decade, and views The Dead's work at the start of the sixties as an important agent in this process.¹⁹ Nadya Zimmerman's *Counterculture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspectives on the Late Sixties in San Francisco* usefully explores the meaning of freedom in the San Francisco's late sixties counter-culture and how The Grateful Dead's embracing of "natural," anti-commercial values.²⁰ Olivia Mather's dissertation, "Cosmic American Music: Place and the Country Rock Movement, 1965-1974" also includes a chapter on The Grateful Dead, and addresses some theoretical issues of identity and the American West, which I will explore at in my third chapter.²¹

Perhaps the most relevant scholarship for this project can be found in works that focus on rock music's use of the past. Greil Marcus's *Old Weird America* explores Bob Dylan and the Band's *Basement Tapes*.²² Although I will not follow Marcus in insisting that these recordings programmatically avoid nostalgic imaginings of American history, his hermeneutic process will be useful for examining the myths and fantasies of the American countryside that I address in chapter three. Susan Fast's interpretive work on heavy metal is also relevant to understanding the play spaces created by bands and their fans, as well as the role of myth and meaning in these

¹⁹ Sarah Hill, *San Francisco and the Long 60s* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

²⁰ Nadya Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspectives on the Late Sixties San Francisco* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

²¹ Olivia Carter Mather. "'Cosmic American Music': Place and the Country Rock Movement, 1965–1974." Ph.D. Diss., (University of California, Los Angeles, 2006).

²² Greil Marcus. *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*. Updated ed., 2nd Picador ed. New York: Picador, 2011.

fantastic-pastoral worlds.²³ Her 2001 study *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* focuses on myth making and fantasy in Led Zeppelin, centering on the perceptions of fans.²⁴ The article “ ‘Days of Future Passed’: Rock, Pop and the Yearning for the Middle Ages” is a key methodological model in its attention to English medievalism in classic rock.²⁵ Elizabeth Randell Upton’s recent discussion of “Concepts of Authenticity in Early Music and Popular Music Communities” addresses some of the same issues, taking the long view of rock in relation to contemporaneous revivals in folk-rock and early music.²⁶ Finally, Simon Reynolds’s polemical *Retromania* takes a critical look at how popular music has continually used and reused the music of previous generations.²⁷ In particular, Reynolds’s discussion of the relationship between pop music and its own more recent past (the fifties) will be foundational for my discussions of the overlap of historical and personal nostalgia.

Playing with Nostalgia

Nostalgia theory has been explored in a wide range of disciplines, from the sciences to the humanities, with each area offering interesting and productive methodological developments. This dissertation aims to put these disciplines in conversation and to apply concepts collectively to rock music at the turn of the seventies. Key concepts from “nostalgia studies” and broader

²³ I draw on the theoretical concept of the play space from Brian Upton, *The Aesthetic of Play*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

²⁴ Susan Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁵ Susan Fast, “Days of Future Passed: Rock, Pop and the Yearning for the Middle Ages,” in *Mittelaltersehnsucht*, ed. Dororthea Redepenning and Annette Kreutziger-Herr (Kiel: Wissenschaftsverlag Vauk, 2000), 35-56.

²⁶ Elizabeth Randell Upton, “Concepts of Authenticity in Early Music and Popular Music Communities”, *Ethnomusicology Review*, vol. 17 (2012).

²⁷ Simon Reynolds. *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

work on cultural memory, collective identity, and cultural heritage will serve as important threads for this project.

One thread is the way *the past is used to make meaning in the present*. As Robert Hewison dialectically constructs the relation, “nostalgia is not simply a longing for the past, but a response to the conditions of the present.”²⁸ In this study, I examine how nostalgic fantasy – for the fifties and youth, for the rural countryside, for a romanticized era in the distant past – helped the American Baby Boomer generation and the British post-war generation (both still relatively young) make sense of the rapid changes they had already experienced in their lifetime. Further, we find many of these fantasies using eco-nostalgic imagery to offer a critique of technological modernization and progress.

I will also turn to nostalgia scholarship to theorize how different types of memory and nostalgia, linked to personal *versus* collective identities, intersect to create fantasy play spaces, *The typology of nostalgia as an act of memory* has been explored through very diverse methods across disciplines. One of the key contributions of sociology has been the definition and methodological study of two distinct types of nostalgia – *personal* and *historical*. Barbara Stern defines these types as nostalgia for a “personally remembered past” as opposed to nostalgia for a historical past never experienced.²⁹ Scholars from other fields often construe these “nostalgia types” in terms of collective *versus* individual memory. Boym defines collective memory as a pliable framing device, in which key moments of a collective past become “the common landmarks of everyday life. They constitute shared social frameworks of individual recollections. They are folds in the fan of memory, not prescriptions for a model tale.” She cites literary critic

²⁸ Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen London, 1987), 48. \

²⁹ Barbara B Stern, “Historical and Personal Nostalgia in Advertising Text: The Fin de siècle Effect,” *Journal of Advertising* 21, no. 4 (1992): 16.

and medical historians Jean Starobinski and Michael Roth for their work concluding that “in the twentieth century nostalgia was privatized and internalized,” turning Stern’s description of personal nostalgia into a political economy of nostalgia.³⁰ Further, although most nostalgia scholars would likely argue that the two types noted above are never truly separate, the distinction between them offers a useful analytical tool for looking at nostalgic practices in creative works. According to Stern, separate analytical examinations of historical and personal nostalgia types reveal different mental processes and emotional responses.

| | Historical Nostalgia | Personal Nostalgia |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Perceiver’s Mental Process | imagination | memory |
| Perceiver’s Response | Empathy Bonding with an “other” | Identification Development of self-image |

Figure 1.1 Stern, “Historical and Personal Nostalgia in Advertising Text,” 14.

To get a fuller grasp on how nostalgia works in artistic expression, we can acknowledge the different layers of meaning communicated through symbolic and creative practices that express both personal/individual or historical/collective memories. At the same time, the connection between these recollections is equally important for understanding how nostalgia works to create fantasy spaces. The intersection of these types of nostalgia provides a common language for communicating values and meaning in creative works.

In each chapter, I will look at the object of longing in these nostalgic practices and the ways in which that longing is recreated or reimagined through music. Janelle L. Wilson

³⁰ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. 53.

hypothesizes: "...does the 'nostalgic' truly long to go back in time? Instead, I think it is more a longing to recapture a mood or spirit of a previous time."³¹ Longing for a past whether it be our own or some historical fantasy, is one thing; accessing it quite another. Lowenthal explains:

Revisiting some actual past has long been a fond desire... that the past should be irrevocably lost seems unbearable. We crave its recovery. Is there no way to recapture, re-experience, relive it? Some agency, some mechanism, some faith must let us know, see, sense the past. We will feel afresh the daily life of our grandparents, the rural sounds of yesteryear, the deeds of the Founding Fathers, the creations of Michelangelo, the glory that was Greece.³²

Given our inability to access the material past itself, we look to other modes of time travel: creative fantasies, film, television, music, and games. These vehicles allow us access to the past we really want to see – a romanticized place or time, rather than the historical reality. As Umberto Eco notes, "the frantic desire for Almost Real arises only as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories, the Absolute Fake is offspring of the unhappy awareness of present without depth."³³ Through creative works, nostalgia is the gateway to see, feel or even hear something "past."

Creative nostalgic expressions, such as those found in music, film, literature and video games, can be viewed as sites for play and fantasy experiences. Taking video game designer Brian Upton's definition of play as "free movement within a system of constraints." we can

³¹ Janelle L. Wilson, "REMEMBER WHEN...": A Consideration of the Concept of Nostalgia." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 56, no. 3 (1999), 299.

³² Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*. 55.

³³ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality: Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986). 30-31.

examine creative nostalgic expressions as play.³⁴ Nostalgia offers a liminal movement away from the contemporary moment and into a space that is both free from reality, and yet framed by it. The fantasy spaces explored in this dissertation function as a playground of potentiality. The musicians and their audiences use them freely to make meaning on both individual and collective levels. Nostalgic fantasy can thus take a variety of forms, often centered on *recreation* or emotive *space*. Boym offers two types of nostalgia, which she delineates by their connection to the word's etymological roots: "Restorative nostalgia puts the emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance."³⁵ Restorative nostalgia focuses on recreation of the past, while reflective nostalgia rests in the emotive space that the past offers. Both restorative and reflective nostalgic expressions offer avenues for exploring the past through creative works, such as music. Through acts of recreation or spaces of emotional longing, nostalgia opens up fantasies of time and place for musicians and their listeners to respond to their contemporary environment and envision the type of world in which they would like to live.

An individual nostalgic expression need not be only one of these types, but Boym presents them as tendencies. When Led Zeppelin enters into a fantasy sonic space of myth and medievalism in "Stairway to Heaven" they are enacting, at some level, an object of recreation. Medievalism, as a term, is often used to describe an artifact associated with the Middle Ages that is viewed as historically inaccurate or a creative work of references associated vaguely with the distant past (not limited specifically to the Middle Ages, but usually from a post-antiquity / Pre-Enlightenment historical moment).³⁶ The use of recorders, and acoustic instrumentation all

³⁴ Upton. *The Aesthetics of Play*, 15.

³⁵ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. 41.

³⁶ Karl Fugelso, *Defining Medievalism(s)* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009).

contribute to the creation of a sonic playground in which the band and their fans can explore a past world – even if that past is historically inauthentic, or that world may have never existed. These instruments and effects are used to recreate what a past musical soundscape is imagined to have sounded like. Creativity in restorative nostalgia is the tool for filling in the “memory gaps” of the past. We can’t truly know what Middle Ages or other distant pasts were like, so why not recreate them with magic and mythological tropes? At the same time, the song is never intended to truly be a historical-musical recreation. It is not a recording of an old English folk song; it is a new creation. Instead, the song predominantly rests in the emotive space of the past, in the realm of reflective nostalgia. In “Stairway to Heaven,” elements of the past are evoked, sounds and instruments are imaginatively recreated, but the goal is never truly to leave the present. Ultimately, “Stairway to Heaven” and other nostalgic musical fantasies focus “not a recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the mediation of history and passage of time”, and “savor details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring the homecoming itself.”³⁷ As we will see in chapter two, “Stairway to Heaven” employs primarily reflective nostalgic tendencies to access the past through its emotive space, relying predominantly on the sense of longing for the past.

Other musical examples will showcase restorative nostalgia, in which the past is spatialized and accessed through modes of recreation. The folk-revival movement in both the United States and Britain placed an emphasis on the recreation aspect of nostalgia. Benjamin Filene points out that early folk music collectors worked passionately to capture the purest form of the music that they could find: “...collectors feared that pure native cultures were being corrupted as transportation improved and literacy spread... Fired by this sense of being on a last-

³⁷ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

ditch rescue mission, collectors felt authorized to take drastic steps to reclaim the “original” essences of the cultural products they sought.”³⁸ It wasn’t until later in the folk-revival movement and its transference of values to rock music in the late sixties and early seventies, that it became more permissible to openly modify folk songs in line with contemporary aesthetics (as long as the performer proceeded according to strict codes of perceived “authenticity”). From the standpoint of nostalgia, however, both the attempt at recreating “original essences” and, later, attempts to capture authentic folk experiences in the music share the restorative value that “the past is not supposed to reveal any signs of decay; it has to be freshly painted in its ‘original image’ and remain eternally young.”³⁹ Thus, when folk-rock musicians like Bob Dylan in the US or Fairport Convention in England repurpose folk songs for their contemporary purposes, they are relying heavily on restorative nostalgia efforts. Detailing criticisms levied at a contemporary band to Fairport Convention – Steeleye Span – Britta Sweers notes how appropriation and reconstruction is a key element of the electric-folk rock movement in England:

Steeleye Span indeed picked out recognizable elements in the tradition like pagan songs referring to wren-hunting traditions (“The King”) or mummers’ plays and ancient costumes for their stage shows. Yet retrospectively, this form of electric reinterpretation has had as much or as little influence on the original material as the acoustic interpretations. It is more likely that Steeleye Span have given their audiences a new access to the music, building a Bridge to present-day interpretations and interest in the tradition.⁴⁰

³⁸ Benjamine Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 11.

³⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

⁴⁰ Britta Sweers, *Electric Folk: The changing Face of English Traditional Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 59.

Fairport Convention, like Steeleye Span, provided access to a musical past through their restorative efforts. It matters not, that their instruments were electrified or that their interpretation of traditional folk-songs and tunes like “Matty Groves” or “The Lark in the Morning” are not historically-informed. Instead, restorative nostalgia in this music allows the musician and their listeners to access a “spatialized” past and not just dwell in a state of longing for that past.⁴¹

What does it mean to access a “spatialized past”? Any type of nostalgia can be imagined as both spatial and temporal. If we look back to the original context for the word “nostalgia” (coined by a 17th-century Swiss doctor, Johannes Hofer, to describe soldiers stationed overseas who longed for their homeland), we find that a sense of place was a defining element of what was deemed a curable, medical illness in which the displaced soldier yearned for an actual home that had been emotionally lost to distance, or to the damages of war.⁴² But the longing was not only for the place, but also the perceived time of peace before the war. So, too, do more recent representations of nostalgia navigate the ambiguity of time and space. Boym writes elegantly about the contradictions: “nostalgia tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence; it is about the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial...Nostalgia charts space on time and time on space and hinders the distinction between subject and object.”⁴³ Through restorative and reflective efforts, through recreation and emotional attachments, individual creative expressions and medievalisms explore the past as time and as space.

⁴¹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

⁴² See Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* 3-18.

⁴³ Boym, xvii-xviii.

Using these theoretical concepts as a frame for understanding an era that I see as being defined, in part, through nostalgia and its turn to the past, this dissertation will focus on key fantasy spaces embraced by rock musicians of the early seventies. Each chapter will look at these theoretical threads through the spaces and the people imagined to live in these environments.

Chapter 1 will contextualize the beginnings of this nostalgic wave as a response to the experience of “future shock” as theorized by Alvin Toffler. Young in years, but weighted down by change and uncertainty, the Baby Boomer generation turned to nostalgic visions and fantasy to make sense of the world that had changed dramatically within their lifetime. I will use Don McLean’s now-iconic “American Pie” to explore the ways in which this generation relied on nostalgic longing for the fifties, and in particular, the idealization of the early days of rock and roll, to ground their sense of identity and purpose.

Chapter 2 will explore the fantasy space of a British past. I examine the specific conditions of England at the end of sixties, and situate the ecocriticism and medievalism found in this era as a response to those conditions. The music of Led Zeppelin and Jethro Tull provide the focus of the musicological analysis, focusing on key albums released in 1971 – *Led Zeppelin IV*⁴⁴ and *Aqualung*.

Chapter 3 will examine how American rock musicians turned towards romanticized visions of the Old West as an Edenic, pastoral playground. These musicians used this fantasy space to negotiate the political and ideological tensions between Country (& Western) music of the sixties and the Counterculture. Charting this history through the California music scene at the

⁴⁴ As I will discuss, Led Zeppelin’s fourth album was released untitled and has acquired a wide range of names in the time since. Led Zeppelin IV is one of the most common of these makeshift titles.

end of the sixties, I will analyze three quite different albums from 1970: Three Dog Night's *It Ain't Easy*, James Taylor's *Sweet Baby James* and The Grateful Dead's *Workingman's Dead*. Despite the very different sounds they produced, all these musicians turn to the American West, as well as generalized perceptions of "oldness" in Americana music and imagery as retreat from the disappointments of the end of the previous decade.

Chapter 4 will conclude the dissertation by exploring the role of nostalgia in futuristic fantasies of this period, which, like much speculative fiction, explore past worlds recreated in the future. As Boym explains: "Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective, but also prospective. Fantasies of the past, determined by needs of the present, have a direct impact on realities of the future."⁴⁵ The Who's 1971 *Who's Next* offers an avenue for exploring many of the same eco-critical values and nostalgic visions of the outdoors deployed by Led Zeppelin or Three Dog Night. But these fantasies now arise within a post-apocalyptic future in which technology, though still a spectral presence, has ceded its hegemony. *Who's Next* is a powerful example whose origins lie in Pete Townshend's unrealized science fiction, live-concert film project titled *Lifehouse*. While the project was abandoned and the music was repurposed for *Who's Next*, Townshend revisited its post-technological fantasy world several times over the following decades. In 1999, he recorded and published the film narrative as a radio play, and in 2007, he returned to the project to recreate his previously imagined "futuristic" technology, now made possible through the millennial development of social media on the internet. The chapter will trace the *Lifehouse* project's significance across music-historical time, to explore the ways in which nostalgic longing created layers of meaning for Townshend and "his generation" as they aged (having conspicuously failed to, as the song had it, "die before they got old").

⁴⁵ Boym. XVI

The generation that had grown up believing in revolutions – from rock and roll to civil rights – now nostalgically searched for a time and place in which they could dream again. This dissertation will use interdisciplinary nostalgia theory to explore the ways in which rock music’s fantasies of the past made new meaning for a generation of young adults at the start of the seventies. Their fantasies of the past continued the sixties consciousness revolution in a new, more melancholy key, offering critiques of their contemporary world and questioning implications for the future. The nostalgic imaginings found in many songs and albums of this era, reveal a generation turning to a romanticized past and the fantasies of their youth as a way of reinterpreting the present and re-envisioning the future.

Chapter 1

A Long, Long Time Ago...: The Aging of Youth Culture in the time of Future Shock

“*Hope I die before I get old*” – cries Roger Daltry on the title track of The Who’s 1965 debut album *My Generation*. Prominently placed at the end of the song’s first stanza, the phrase came, in many ways, to define his generation. The post-war generation has long been associated with reimagined definitions of youth and aging.¹ Their relationship to growing up and growing old has been complicated—their distrust for adults in their youth (“never trust anyone over thirty”²) and their determination to believe themselves as young as they felt, clashed with reality as they grew into the life phases of traditional adulthood. They held tight to their youth, continually pushing back their definition of what it meant to be “old.” In fact, according to a 1996 survey, most of their generation at that time believed that old age began at age 79, in a time when the average life expectancy was slightly over 76 years.³ As J. Walker Smith and Ann Clurman cleverly observe, this generation literally thought they’d die before they got old.⁴

¹ See Peter Braunstein, “Forever Young: Insurgent Youth and the Sixties Culture of Rejuvenation.” in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s*, eds. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, (New York: Routledge), 243-274.

² This phrase is credited to UC Berkeley student and leader of the Free Speech Movement, Jackie Weinberg (who was 24 at the time), who was quote in the San Francisco Chronicle declaring “We have a saying in the movement that we don’t trust anybody over 30.” James Benet, “Growing Pains at UC” *San Francisco Chronicle* (November 15, 1964), 6.

³ J. Walker Smith and Ann Clurman, *Generation Ageless: How Baby Boomers Are Changing the Way We Live Today...And They’re Just Getting Started* (New York: Collins, 2007), 73.

⁴ Smith and Clurman, *Generation Ageless*, 73.

At the start of the seventies, the first wave of the post-war generation were in their mid-twenties and faced the prospect of adulthood and aging with uncertainty. For some iconic countercultural figures, The Who's death wish came tragically and literally true: between the years 1969 and 1971, Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison all died, all at the young age of twenty-seven. The post-war generation could find the deaths of youth in the news around them - in the thousands of young people killed in Vietnam, the students of Kent State, the victims of the Manson murders and even Altamonte. The death was also symbolic: the 1969 breakup of the Beatles felt something akin to a death of a loved one to their many fans.⁵ But for those very much alive and entering the new decade, the prospect of no longer being "the new generation" loomed menacingly ahead.

In this chapter, I examine the phenomenon of nostalgia as a response to future shock, and in particular, rock music's participation in a nostalgic fantasy for the feeling of youth.⁶ Nostalgia is commonly seen as a side affect of aging.⁷ However, particularly

⁵ For example, in an attempt to explain his position as a late Baby Boomer with a Generation-X musical consciousness, Kevin Dettmar recalls that he couldn't relate to his friends in the aftermath of the Beatles breakup: "When the Beatles broke up, I was in sixth grade; I remember my friend Hugh coming to school with the news, crying, and I had no idea why." Kevin Dettmar, *Is Rock Dead?* (New York: Routledge, 2006), XIII.

⁶ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970).

⁷ Lowenthal highlights how nostalgia, in response to aging, has come to be "promoted as a therapeutic, an aid to self esteem, a crutch for personal continuity, a deference against reminders of mortality." His description of a London Hospital's 1940s/50s Nostalgia Room for patients to reminisce together over a cup of tea is a useful example. Lowenthal, *The Past if a Foreign Country*, 33. See also Constantine Sedikides et al. 'Nostalgia as enabler of self-continuity', in Fabio Sani, ed., *Self-Continuity* (New York: Psychology Press, 2008), 227-39.; Clay Routledge et al., 'Finding meaning in the past: nostalgia as an existential resource', in Keith D. Markman et al., *The Psychology of Meaning* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), 297-316; John Tierney, 'A stroll down memory lane has benefits', *IHT*, 10 July 2013, 8; Jackie O'Sullivan, 'See, touch and enjoy Newham University Hospital's nostalgia room', in Helen Chatterjee, ed., *Touch in Museums* (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 224-30; Healing Heritage exhibition, University of College London, July 2011.

intriguing is the wave of nostalgia felt by early-seventies young adults, not only for the fantasy of a historical past, but more surprisingly, for their own recent past. As this dissertation will highlight, historical fantasies were already a part of their childhood in books, film/tv and play. This means that when they re-engage with these fantasies as adults, the nostalgia is operating on multiple levels of memory – historical and cultural memory for a shared past, as well as the individual memories of how they personally engaged with these fantasies in their childhoods. In *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past*, Simon Reynolds uses the term “retro” to describe cultural nostalgia for a recent past. He argues that this relatively new phenomenon characterizes every facet of our contemporary society:

Earlier eras had their own obsessions with antiquity, of course, from the Renaissance's veneration of Roman and Greek classicism to the Gothic movement's invocations of the medieval. But there has never been a society in human history so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of *its own immediate past*.⁸

I would argue that this “retro” wave of popular music can be traced back to the young adult population of the late sixties and early seventies. Further, while this interest in a recent past is inextricably tied with personal experience and memory, the common use of a small set of cultural referents makes it a hallmark of the postwar generational identity. In

⁸ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc. 2011), xiii.

chapters two and three of this dissertation, I will explore two specific seventies tropes (medievalism, Americana), their associated fantasy spaces, and the line between historical and personal nostalgia. I will examine the concept of identity and cultural memory in the specific context of England and the United States. However, there are also some markers of memory that seem to hold a similar meaning for this generation in both nations. Many of these markers refer back to the postwar generation's childhood days in the nineteen-fifties and early sixties.⁹

One of the most significant, recurring threads associated with fifties nostalgia is the centrality of rock 'n roll. For middle-class whites born after WWII, rock 'n roll was what imbued their generation with cultural meaning and identity. It articulated a divide that separated this generation from their parents. Joseph A. Kotarba contends "[t]he baby boomer generation was the first Western generation to grow up entirely in the world of rock 'n' roll music and culture, and many baby boomers experience rock 'n' roll as a master script for life."¹⁰ With this in mind, this chapter explores the meaning of fifties nostalgia and the rock 'n roll fantasy for the postwar generation at the start of the seventies through a case study of Don McLean's 1971 mega-hit, "American Pie." While rock 'n roll (*I dig those rhythm and blues*) provides the primary nostalgic thread in the song, it also interacts with other elements of fifties nostalgia. Medievalism (*the jester sang for the*

⁹ Like many fantasies of the past, the exact historical time of fifties nostalgia is vague and not necessarily consistent. While Buddy Holly's 1959 plane crash will become an important marker of memory for McLean in his generation, much of the other nostalgia takes a "long fifties" approach which sees the decade extending through the first half of the sixties.

¹⁰ Joseph A. Kotarba, *Baby Boomer Rock 'n' Roll Fans: The Music Never Ends* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), 13.

king and queen), which, as we will see in chapter two, can construct an entire fantasy space on its own, plays a subordinate role here, looking back to childhood play, Arthurian plays and films, and Disney cartoon fantasies. I will also situate the fifties fantasy of suburban car culture (*drove my Chevy*) alongside much more complex nostalgia for the pre-Civil Rights South (*to the levee*).

The nostalgic imaginings in “American Pie,” along with those found in many other songs and albums of this era, reflects a generation turning to a romanticized past and the fantasies of their youth as a way of reinterpreting the present and re-envisioning the future. In particular, “American Pie” constructs a specific fantasy space – the fifties, the innocent time before “the music died” – and fills it with the sounds, idols, fantasies and experiences of a generation’s childhood, the spirit towards which they longed to return.

Future Shock and the Aging of Rock 'n Roll

Rock music could not escape the anxiety of aging, as musicians, critics and fans alike pondered its future in a post-countercultural revolution landscape. In his 1974 article, “Growing Young with Rock and Roll,” Jon Landau famously claims to have found his past and what it felt like to be young and alive, again:

Last Thursday, at the Harvard Square theatre, I saw my rock’n’roll past flash before my eyes. And I saw something else: I saw rock and roll future

and its name is Bruce Springsteen. And on a night when I needed to feel young, he made me feel like I was hearing music for the very first time.¹¹

And while this landmark review is interesting for its association with jumpstarting Springsteen's career, it is also a remarkable timepiece, preserving this generation's nostalgic longing to hold on to, or perhaps more accurately, rediscover the *feeling* of youth. In fact, the entire essay is less about Springsteen and the future of rock music, and more a personal reflection on Landau's past and his own personal relationship with music over the previous decade. His "need to feel young," while still only 27 years old, may seem a bit ironic today (he's still going strong in the industry at age 73), but in 1974, Landau, like many of his generation, looked back at a past that *felt* so much longer than a mere ten years:

It's four in the morning and raining. I'm 27 today, feeling old, listening to my records, and remembering that things were different a decade ago. In 1964, I was a freshman at Brandeis University, playing guitar and banjo five hours a day, listening to records most of the rest of the time, jamming with friends during the late-night hours, working out the harmonies to Beach Boys' and Beatles' songs.¹²

¹¹ Jon Landau, "Growing Young with Rock and Roll" *The Real Paper* (May 22, 1974).

¹² Landau, "Growing Young with Rock and Roll"

To understand this odd juxtaposition of aging and youth, idealism and disillusionment, in such a short time span, it is important to remember how much had happened in a relatively short period of time. Science and technology had changed developed rapidly across the twentieth century, and especially within the lifetime of the post-war generation. By 1970, biochemist Philip Siekevitz had declared, “what has been learned in the last three decades about the nature of living beings dwarfs in extend of knowledge any comparable period of scientific discovery in the history of mankind.”¹³ The mainframe computer “allowed the computerization of many routine and tedious business operations [...] The first bank statements, telephone bills and insurance policies were produced by mainframes in the 1960s and airline reservation systems were gradually automated in the 1960s and 1970s.”¹⁴ Likewise the music industry had expanded artistically and economically. As Bill Graham lamented in *Cue* magazine in 1970:

It’s hard to believe that rock has been on this planet for two decades [...] It was a hundred-dollar business. Then it became a thousand-dollar business, and some young people had to get knowledgeable about what they had to do to run dances. But then rock became a million-dollar business and a multi-million-dollar business.¹⁵

Young people in the United States saw their world change dramatically before their eyes. In his chapter “From Camelot to Watergate: Ten Years That Changed the Politics of

¹³ Quoted in Toffler, *Future Shock*, 31.

¹⁴ Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living since the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). 442.

¹⁵ Bill Graham, “The Americanization of Rock” *Cue* (1970). Rock’s Backpages. Accessed April 25, 2021. <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/library/article/the-americanization-of-rock>.

Boomer Culture”, William M. Knoblauch explains: “For the baby boom generation, 1963 to 1973 proved to be a transformative period in postwar politics. When the 1960s began, Americans had faith in their government. They were optimistic and hopeful about changing their country, and even the world.”¹⁶ By the end of the decade, the country had radically changed. The assassinations of President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy shook the political sphere, while the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. and urban, racial violence threatened to announce the failure of the Civil Rights Movement. The escalation of US military involvement in Vietnam War and the resulting protests, not only divided the nation, but did so largely along a generational line.

Young people in England experienced a similar shift towards disillusionment over the course of the sixties as well. The end of World War II had affected the childhood and upbringing of this generation on both sides of the Atlantic, as did Britain’s experiences of decolonization, which highlighted racial struggles that England faced as well. Youth in England also confronted different issues from those in the United States, namely economic stagnation and the failed Labor dreams of Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s “white heat” technological revolution. While both countries experienced population growth and rise in industrialization and urbanization, these concerns seemed especially pronounced in England, a much smaller country dealing with a reduced role on the world stage.

In both countries, the revolutions of the sixties were dramatic and inescapable. The postwar generation that spent their childhood playing “cowboys and Indians” could not have imagined seeing a man walk on the Moon before they reached full adulthood –

¹⁶ William M. Knoblauch, “From Camelot to Watergate: Ten Years That Changed the Politics of Boomer Culture.” *Baby Boomers and Popular Culture: An Inquiry into America’s Most Powerful Generation*, eds. Brian Cogan and Thom Gencarelli (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), 3.

never mind the shock of finding out by 1973 what really happened to Native Americans at places like Wounded Knee – but that is exactly what they experienced, a lifetime’s worth of technological and ideological change in only a few short years.

It should be unsurprising, then, that one of the bestselling books of a new decade was called *Future Shock* (1970). Alvin Toffler first coined the term “future shock” in 1965 to describe “the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time.”¹⁷ But it is his 1970 bestseller, with its psychedelic yellow spine and machine readable lettering, that most strikingly captures the feeling of having come of age in a time of rapid social and technological change. He writes:

But the final, qualitative difference between this and all previous lifetimes is the one most easily overlooked. For we have not merely extended the scope and scale of change, we have radically altered its pace. We have in our time released a totally new social force – a stream of change so accelerated that it influences our sense of time, revolutionized the tempo of daily life, and affects the very way we “feel” the world around us.¹⁸

I would argue that the historical response to future shock was nostalgic longing. Quantitative details are ultimately less important than the mere fact that for young adults in the early 1970s, the past had become another country.

¹⁷ Toffler, *Future Shock*, 2.

¹⁸ Toffler, 34

Nostalgia as a Response to Future Shock

The seventies brought nostalgia full force into popular culture. From fifties revivals to Tolkienesque medievalism, the past was very much alive in the present. And these nostalgic, retro tendencies were a relatively new phenomenon. As Reynolds observes:

For the greater part of the last century, modernism and modernization were the watchwords: the emphasis was on harking forward, an intent focus on everything in the present that seemed to represent ‘tomorrow’s world today’. That changed, gradually but with increasing momentum from the early seventies, towards a preoccupation with the residues of the past in the present, a massive cultural shift that encompassed the rise of the nostalgia industry with its retro fashions and revivals, postmodernism’s pastiche and renovation of historical styles and the spectacular growth of heritage.¹⁹

The first swells of nostalgia in the early seventies can be seen as a response to rapid progress in the previous decade. As Boym argues, “nostalgic manifestations are side effects of the teleology of progress.”²⁰

¹⁹ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 23.

²⁰ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 34

They are also a side effect of aging.²¹ What is particularly interesting is how nostalgia in popular music became a cultural strategy for the relatively young. As we age, we accumulate memories and develop a proclivity toward introspection and reflection on our personal past. But that past is inextricably linked to our sense of identity and how it relates to the world around us. Fred Davis observed this as early as 1979 in his monograph *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*:

[N]ostalgia, despite its private, sometimes intensely felt personal character, is a deeply social emotion as well. By this I mean that, like many other feelings and thoughts we experience, nostalgia derives from and has continuing implications for our lives as social actors. It leads us to search among remembrances of persons and places of our present (and to some degree) our future.²²

Nostalgic fantasies are connected to personal memories, our sense of identity, and relationships with people and places for which we long. These fantasies are an anchor to self-identity in an evolving world. Further, they are not only both individual and collective, they also traverse time and space. Janelle L. Wilson explains:

²¹ The relationship between nostalgia and aging largely falls into the domain of psychology, but several studies equate aging with increased propensity to look to the past. The Sentimentality and Nostalgia in Elderly People (SNEP) questionnaire was developed to measure this phenomenon in specific contexts. See Gergov T., Stoyanova S. (2013). Sentimentality and nostalgia in elderly people: Psychometric properties of a new questionnaire. *Psychological Thought*, 6(2), 358–375.

²² Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979), vii.

Our recollections are situated: If one says, “I long for my teenage years,” that longing is inevitably linked to where the person was, the space(s) he or she inhabited, and, most crucially, the meanings associated with this longing. Nostalgic experiences are anchored in space and, as we recollect or remember, the experience of nostalgia is embodied. That is to say, we recall both a place and a time and we also recall our lived experience associated with that memory.²³

Through individual recollections of one’s lived experience, one connects oneself with the time and places of those experiences – both of which are often shared with others. It is that nostalgic grounding of self, community, and purpose that anchors a changing sense of self as one ages. For instance, in their study on scrapbooking as “an American art of memory,” Tamar Katriel and Thomas Farrell conclude that the process of creating a scrapbook is “a ritualized, order-inducing gesture [that] is both an acknowledgement of and a response to the heightened sense of fragmentation which has attended the experience of modernity.”²⁴ Scrapbooking, like listening to “retro” music, is an individual act of remembrance, but one that connects the creator to their community and helps the individual make sense of their surrounding world. Likewise, listening to music can be a solitary activity, but one which links the individual to their world, through personal memories associated with the music, as well as social and cultural references found in the music.

²³ Wilson, Janelle Lynn. “Here and Now, There and Then: Nostalgia as a Time and Space Phenomenon.” *Symbolic Interaction* 38, no. 4 (2015): 479.

²⁴ Katriel, Tamar & Farrell, Thomas. (1991). *Scrapbooks as cultural texts: An American art of memory.* *Text and Performance Quarterly*. 11. 1-17.

Musical nostalgia was not a new concept in the seventies. Nineteenth century romanticism employed pastoral reflections on the past to make sense of the world, post-Industrial Revolution. In times of war, the nostalgia evoked by music could be both a source of comfort and a weapon.²⁵ Even in the sixties – an era largely looking towards the future – we find personally nostalgic songs, which link individual memories to one’s understanding of self. For example, the Kingston Trio’s 1961 “It Was a Very Good Year” reflects upon specific moments of romance in one’s life – at age seventeen, age twenty-one, and thirty-five. Each age is represented by a different verse, with descriptions of the girls, the settings, and the love-affairs of the age. The experience of savoring old memories is likened to drinking vintage wine (“a very good year”), bringing sweetness and clarity to one’s self-reflection. It is interesting, that in 1961, age thirty-five is depicted with the vitality of youth, whereas ten years later, the post-war generation struggled with a sense of accelerated aging before thirty.

What was new, however, was a strong association of generational identity and the plenteous amount of nostalgia found in creative works of the seventies. At the start of the decade, the then twenty-somethings began to reflect on their own self in a time of relentless change, and how that sense of self connected with those around them. Overtly narrative generational songs, like “American Pie,” offer insight into the negotiation between nostalgic longing for some element of the past, without fully abandoning the present.

“American Pie” romantically grounds itself in the past – in personal memories, as well as

²⁵ For example, Danielle Stein interrogates the use of nostalgia as a weapon in the US government’s Musac Project during World War 2. The Office of Strategic Services employed the popular German song “Lili Marleen” and the talents of Marlena Dietrich in an effort to lower morale of the German troops. Danielle Stein, “The Office of Strategic Services Musac Project: *Lili Marleen*, Marlene Dietrich, and the Weaponized Popular Music of World War II” presented at the National Meeting of the American Musicological Society, Boston, November 2019.

signs and symbols – while also articulating a revisionist remembrance. It writes a history, but a rock history; it offers spirituality, but grounded in a musical god. A longing for the fifties as a time of youthful dreaming is at the core of “American Pie” and the other retro-fifties works of popular culture and media that followed. As Reynolds observes: “Pop culture in the first half of the seventies was in large part *defined* by this yearning to return to the fifties.”²⁶ We find it in film (*American Graffiti* (1973), *Let the Good Times Roll* (1973), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Grease* (1978)), television (*Happy Days* (1974-1984)) and Broadway (*Grease* (1971)). Many of the decade’s biggest artists produced at least a one fifties throw-back like Elton John’s “Crocodile Rock” (1972) or Led Zeppelin’s “Rock and Roll” (1971). Linda Ronstadt quite successfully covered Buddy Holly’s primal rocker “That’ll be the Day” in 1974. Released in October 1971, “American Pie” was at the front edge of a fifties revival that would go mainstream by the end of the decade, and which arguably has never ended.

“American Pie”

Donald McLean III was born in October 1945, and grew up within the anxious tranquility of the first two postwar decades. Literary historian Sacvan Bercovitch describes the complex dialectic of this pivotal time:

In a strange way no quarter of the century has had to grapple with extremity, or its terrible aftermath, more than the seemingly tranquil decades after the Second World War, which some Americans still look back on as a Golden Age. Besides

²⁶ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 277.

coming to terms with general carnage on an unheard of scale, and moving rapidly towards the reconstruction of Europe and Asia, the post war world had to assimilate the most shocking news of the war, perhaps of the century as a whole: the details of the Holocaust and the effects of the nuclear bomb.²⁷

For those who had survived the war as adults, the 1950s response was glossy consumerism, authoritarianism, and escape. The suburbs became an idealized space of tranquility, free from urban racial tensions, as well the threat of annihilation in aerial warfare.²⁸ In their volume on popular culture and anxieties of the fifties, Darryl Jones, Elizabeth McCarthy and Bernice M. Murphy note that

Millions of returning GIs prompted the rapid growth of suburbia and one of the most astounding migrations in history. Consequently, between 1948 and 1958, 11 million new suburban homes were established. An astonishing 83% of all population growth during the 1950s took place in the suburbs. By 1970, they would house more people than either cities or farms. Behind the dry statistics of the situation: that the basic living patterns of American society were undergoing a revolution.²⁹

²⁷ While Bercovitch is primarily focused on the American experience in the post-war years, many of these anxieties were felt in Europe, and in some ways, even more so, because of the lasting physical remains and aftermath of the war. Sacvan Bercovitch *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁸ It was no secret the major cities of Europe experienced massive damages and high death tolls during Wartime bombing.

²⁹ Darryl Jones, Elizabeth McCarthy and Bernice M. Murphy, *It Came from the 1950s! Popular Culture, Popular Anxieties* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6.

McLean himself grew up in New Rochelle, New York, in a suburban neighborhood of single-family homes called Larchmont Woods. This is the space in which McLean opens “American Pie,” remembering his paper-route as a young teenager. For many, the suburban paper-route, a signifier accessible for a wide range of listeners through both personal experience and the media, would automatically bring up memories of the fifties. The romanticization of the route is a particularly middle-class imagery of the “American Dream” – one in which a child could safely ride through the neighborhood delivering papers to neighbors. While there is only one moment of pure innocence in the song (*“A long, long time ago / I can still remember how that music used to make me smile / and I knew if I had the chance that I could make those people dance / and maybe they’d be happy for a while”*), the associations a suburban setting sets up an idealistic site of memory in which innocence is lost. The imagery is darkened by the February cold and the news of Holly’s death:

But February made me shiver
With every paper I’d deliver
Bad news on the doorstep
I couldn’t take one more step
I can’t remember if I cried
When I read about his widowed bride
Something touched me deep inside
The day the music died

After this loss of innocence, all other moments in the song carry darker undertones (even the reflections of the rock ‘n roll dance is tainted by the disappointment of young love). Further, in siting nostalgia primarily in the way he felt, McLean further widens the accessibility of this fantasy. While he doesn’t specify who exactly has died, the sense of mourning produces an emotion to which many listeners can relate. The song’s producer, Ed Freeman once reflected that without the song, “many of us would have been unable to grieve, achieve closure, and move on. Don saw that, and wrote the song that set us free.”³⁰ McLean’s “American Pie” starts as a nostalgic reflection on the loss of innocence, a personal coming of age story that could be shared with his entire generation. In a 1971 interview with *Phonograph Record*, McLean reflected on the powerful changes he had observed in his own lifetime.

People have changed so drastically in the time I’ve been making music - audience and attitudes. [...] People know about dying now, they never did before, they weren’t permitted to find out about dying. Most kids today have been close enough to it to know what it’s like so that they’re aware of the fragility of their lives and also the impermanence of their routine things their parents weren’t aware of. To them their routine was their life, it reinforced their reason for being and if that face was in the mirror the

³⁰ Quoted in Alan Howard, *The Don McLean Story: Killing Us Softly With His Songs* (Starry Night Music, Inc., 2007), 125.

next morning when he shaved it, that was reassuring...Me, I don't see the same face twice now in the mirror.³¹

This statement is not entirely accurate – nostalgia romanticizes the past. Certainly, centuries of children have been aware of death, and experienced its effects more frequently than in McLean's contemporary environment. Lowenthal reminds us that: "old age today is more firmly linked with death because those who die of 'natural' causes are mainly the old. Death formerly struck with little warning at all ages, more frequently in infancy [...]. But in lands where medical care now saves all but a few of the young, only the elderly seem mortal."³² Protected within the shelter of post-war parenting, McLean and many of his generation may have experienced the awareness of death as a sudden or shocking realization. Only two years after Holly's death, McLean would lose his own father.³³ And in the aftermath of the sixties, after the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, after Vietnam and Kent State, death seemed omnipresent. Death had invaded the counterculture itself at Altamont, and brought with it the premature deaths of Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison. In this light, Buddy Holly's plane crash, "the day the music died," appears as the moment McLean

³¹ David G Walley. "Don McLean". *Phonograph Record* (1971). Don McLean. Rock's Backpages. Accessed April 26, 2021. <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/don-mclean>.

³² Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 218.

³³ The 50th anniversary of the song's release has inspired a resurgence of interest in the song and interviews with McLean. When asked if the death reference in the song could also refer the death of McLean's father, he told 2OceansVibe News "You've hit the nail on the head [...] I mean, that's exactly right. That's why I don't like talking about the lyrics because I wanted to capture and say something that was almost unspeakable. It's indescribable [...] American Pie is a biographical song." This further underscores the layers of meaning a single nostalgic reference can have and how it constantly negotiates the space between personal and cultural memory. <https://www.2oceansvibe.com/2020/10/23/american-pie-don-mclean-gives-rare-insight-into-lyrics-meaning/#ixzz6t6Yqfdcn> (accessed April 25, 2021)

first started to age, the first time he understood people and things he cared about – including he himself – could die.

McLean goes on from that suburban epiphany to tell a coming-of-age story of all that had been lost and won by his generation in the twelve short years since he first read that newspaper headline in February 1959. He may not have fully realized it at the time, but in the song, he looks back to that memory, the moment of rupture between the past and the present, and understands its significance. Perhaps more accurately, he *assigns* its significance, based on current feelings of loss and longing. Lowenthal explains: “Memories are selective reconstructions, remade by subsequent actions and perceptions, freshly envisioned by changing codes of knowledge [...] Recollections alien to present thinking are of no current consequence and apt to vanish beyond recall.”³⁴ Once assigned as the central marker of memory for the song, the death of Buddy Holly (“*the day the music died*”) fixes McLean’s innocent youth firmly in the past. Thus, when he opens “American Pie” with the phrase, “a long, long time ago”, one really feels that is the story of a long, distant past - one firmly planted in the realm of history.

“American Pie” as Rock and Roll History

In a 2017 radio interview, McLean reminisced about the writing of “American Pie” as a historical narrative: “I was trying to create my own kind of history – kind of a rock dream.”³⁵ In many ways, the eight-and-a-half minute ballad does lend itself to

³⁴ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 332.

³⁵ Steve Trelise, interview with Don McLean. “Don McLean opens up on ‘American Pie’, ‘Vincent.’” New Jersey 101.5 (September 21, 2017) https://nj1015.com/don-mclean-opens-up-on-american-pie-vincent/?utm_source=tsmclip&utm_medium=referral (accessed 4/25/21)

interpretation as a chronicle of rock history between the 1959 death of Buddy Holly and 1971, when the song was written. For almost a half a century since, fans and music professionals alike have attempted to interpret its meaning. But like many other works of popular nostalgia, it is precisely because the narrative is never fully revealed (McLean steadfastly refuses to provide a gloss) that “American Pie” can signify a different nostalgia to everyone. The song operates as a vehicle for collective memory, which, as Boym explains it, relies on shared social frameworks and symbols without any “prescriptive” narrative.³⁶ Nostalgia as collective memory is a practice that can be found in all of the works of fantasy discussed in this dissertation. Even in the context of a narrative ballad, McLean’s signifiers operate with relative freedom, relying on the shared emotive power of the symbols rather than the specific stories they tell.

As creative works, like “American Pie,” invoke the past for present purposes, they often move from the “meticulous objectivity” which is historiography’s “noble aim” and into a para-historical realm of fantasy, myth and play.³⁷ Creative uses of the past thus rely more heavily on shared heritage than actual history. Both heritage and history employ past visions and understandings for present day concerns, for shaping understandings of self and other, and for infusing contemporary values and meaning with a larger sense of purpose. Thus, as Lowenthal contends, “to vilify heritage as biased is thus futile: bias is the main point of heritage...Heritage thereby attests our identity and affirms our worth.”³⁸ Boym agrees, reminding us that the cultural myths of collective memory and

³⁶ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. 53.

³⁷ Boym, 106.

³⁸ Boym, 122.

nostalgia “are not lies but rather shared assumptions that help to naturalize history and make it livable, providing the daily glue of common intelligibility.”³⁹ Art which constructs nostalgic, heritage-based views of the past may make bad history, but it does provide key insights into its *own* historical moment – into the needs, desires, thoughts and emotions of people who created it: “History is not just what happened at the time but the thoughts and feelings, hunches and hypotheses about that time generated by later hindsight.”⁴⁰ The pseudo-history of rock and roll on offer in “American Pie” is not so great on the fifties and sixties, but it is *very* revealing of how those pivotal decades were remembered by early seventies culture and society. Attempting to understand how contemporaries of McLean interpreted fifties rock and roll, how it made meaning for them, we can better understand the anxieties and aspirations – the zeitgeist – toward which “the fifties” were being employed.

When “American Pie” offers an imagined history of rock and roll, it not only reveals the desires and anxieties of McLean’s generation, but also their understanding of time and their relationship to it. It is a vision of *heritage* disguised as *history*. Lowenthal usefully distinguishes these two conceptual modes in terms of distance: “History remains remote; personal immediacy is a heritage hallmark. Dealing with distant times and events beyond their own ken, many see history as inaccessibly alien: for them, “historical” events are those before living memory.”⁴¹ But rock and roll’s “history” was, in 1971, barely twenty years old: the actual historical events referenced in “American Pie” all

³⁹ Boym, 5.

⁴⁰ Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 115.

⁴¹ Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, 122

occurred within the immediate memory of McLean and his generation.⁴² The explosion of rock is a perfect example of a future shock which altered a generation's perception of time. Even though the history being relived all took place within their own young lifetimes, the first part, the fifties, feels like a story from "a long, long time ago."

In the song, McLean details a series of memories which mark specific moments in rock's evolution. It begins with the plane crash that killed Buddy Holly ("*I can't remember if I cried / When I read about his widowed bride*"), and cryptically seems to reference specific moments in the lives and careers of the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Elvis, and the Byrds. Important events like Woodstock ("*There we were all in one place*") and Altamont ("*No angel born in hell / could break that Satan's spell*") are glancingly referenced. Other cultural references of the sixties also seem to be interwoven into the text including increased drug use by the counter culture ("*the half-time air was sweet perfume*"), intersections of politics and music ("*'Lennin' read a book on Marx*")⁴³ and the space race ("*a generation lost in space*").⁴⁴

⁴² This is made more complicated by the fact that now, fifty years, later they truly are seen as history. But in 1971, they weren't that long ago.

⁴³ In McLean's autograph lyric sheet (up for auction in 2017), he spells the name "Lennin", seemingly a play on both "Lennon" and "Lenin". "Don McLean Handwritten Lyrics to His Iconic "American Pie" -- The Only Lyrics Ever Sold at Auction Apart From the Original Draft." Lot Detail - Don McLean Handwritten Lyrics to His Iconic "American Pie" -- The Only Lyrics Ever Sold at Auction Apart From the Original Draft, January 26, 2017. https://natedsanders.com/don_mclean_handwritten_lyrics_to_his_iconic___amer-lot45616.aspx

⁴⁴ The phrase "a generation lost in space" could also be a reference to the popular television show *Lost in Space* (1965-1968), which blended nostalgic fantasy with science fiction imagination. The show was inspired by, and marketed as, a futurist, space revival of Johann David Wyss's 1812 novel *Swiss Family Robinson*. Notably, in 1962 (prior to the *Lost in Space* television program), Gold Key comics released its comic book series *Space Family Robinson*, which employed the same premise.

The Day Rock and Roll Died

The rock and roll history that McLean's song traces actually *begins after the end*, with the untimely death of the musical style at its center. Although Don McLean's "American Pie" has come to hold an iconic place in popular music memory, one phrase in particular seems to have held special relevance for the Baby Boomer generation: "the day the music died." Recalling the untimely deaths of three rising rock and roll stars (Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and Richie Valens), it was actually McLean who named the accident, solidifying its importance as *the* moment of death for fifties rock and roll. This symbolic death is critical to understanding how "American Pie" works as history: despite detailing events relatively contemporaneous to the song's composition, it articulates an unbridgeable divide between past and present. The death of rock and roll and the loss of innocence that comes with an awareness of death, marks the end of childhood. Lowenthal observes: "In contrast to life's later stages it is finished, completed, summed up. Unlike our present incoherent mess, childhood is framed by a beginning and an end. Its saga has the shape of a fable: 'once upon a time' it begins and formulaically ends 'happily ever after'."⁴⁵ McLean is thus able to begin his song with an invocation typical of a child's fairy tale—"A long, long time ago"—because the death of rock and roll has already marked childhood's end.

In his appropriately titled monograph, *Is Rock Dead?*, Kevin Dettmar traces the earliest occurrence of the phrase "rock and roll is dead" to a 1956 country & western song called "The Death of Rock and Roll" by the California-based Maddox Brothers and Rose. As Dettmar points out, people have been announcing rock's death almost as soon

⁴⁵ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 128.

as it came into the public eye: “the fact that rock & roll’s death certificate was signed almost before the birth announcements were mailed – is no coincidence. For the birth of rock and the death of it are, I believe, two different metaphors for talking about the very same set of phenomena.”⁴⁶ Dettmar links rock’s death to the same anxiety in which it was born. Rock and Roll had adopted a hybrid style, crossed the color line, and challenged the adult generation of the fifties with its focus on topics favored by the youth that were simultaneously deemed inappropriate for them. As Linda Martin and Kerry Seegrave summarize in their study on rock’s detractors:

With its black roots, its earthy, sexual or rebellious lyrics, and its exuberant acceptance by youth, rock and roll has long been under attack by the establishment world of adults [...] The music has been damned as a corrupter of morals, as an instigator of juvenile delinquency and violence. Denounced as a communist plot, perceived as a symbol of Western decadence, it has been fulminated against by the left, the right, the center, the establishment, rock musicians themselves, doctors, clergy, journalists, politicians, and “good” musicians.⁴⁷

With a list of accusers this long, it is no wonder people have sought a reason to declare its demise at any opportunity. (This is also why partisans have always had to keep

⁴⁶ Kevin Dettmar, *Is Rock Dead?* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 29

⁴⁷ Linda Martin and Kerry Seegrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 3.

proclaiming that “Rock and roll is here to stay.”) But as fifties-style rock and roll faded into history, its sins became less pronounced in the eyes of adults, in part because the adult population itself had changed. No longer was rock and roll the music of the youth generation; it was the music of the now-adult generation’s youth.

Kotarba argues that rock and roll is a “primary source of everyday meanings for the first generation that was raised on it.”⁴⁸ The post-war generation did not invent rock and roll, but they were the first generation to grow up with it. They came of age in a time when popular music was re-writing cultural power dynamics. Many scholars have examined the links between youth culture and rock and roll at its birth, citing the war memories and Cold War anxiety of the parent generation, economic prosperity and its vision of the American dream, as well as a newly extended period of adolescence for the post-war generation.⁴⁹ Mitchell K. Hall explains:

Traditionally, teenage children rather quickly acquired adult responsibilities and largely adopted established cultural tastes. These expectations changed in the decade after the war. Middle-class adolescents with a degree of economic security enjoyed the luxury of avoiding adult responsibilities longer than ever before. Essentially freed from substantial work obligations, teens in the 1950s used their increased leisure time to develop

⁴⁸ Kotarba, *Baby Boomer Rock and Roll Fans*, 13.

⁴⁹ See Leerom Mondavi *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2005).

common interests that were unique to their peers, establishing a distinct generational identity.⁵⁰

The post-war generation's identity was forged in the idea of youth collectivity, and in opposition to the adult generations above them. In *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*, Leerom Medovoi argues that "identity" in the sense we understand it today, did not come into usage until the mid-fifties – the same time as the emergence of rock and roll.⁵¹

If nostalgia can emerge from the *feeling* of future shock, then so too can the object of longing be tied to a lost feeling. Boym explains that it's possible to be "nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic."⁵² Reynolds agrees, saying "it's true that when I think wistfully about golden periods of my life, they all share this quality of total immersion in the now: childhood, or falling in love, or phases of total involvement in current music."⁵³ The nostalgic fantasy of "American Pie" relies on static images of total immersion in the fifties present – delivering newspapers in the cold, heartbreak at the high school dance, drinking at the levee. The rock and roll history being told is made up of individual moments in the here and now.

Putting it together: the post-war generation's concept of youth was tied to teenage rebellion, which in turn was tied to the feeling of "living in the present." The

⁵⁰ Mitchell K Hall. *The Emergence of Rock and Roll: Music and the Rise of American Youth Culture (Critical Moments in American History)* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Kindle.

⁵¹ See Medovoi, *Rebels Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*.

⁵² Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 355

⁵³ Reynolds, *Retromania*, xxviii

mythical legacy of rock and roll is often understood as a story of youth rebellion. Medovoi argues that the story of rock and roll positions youth rebellion as the “thematic device” with which mainstream audience populations could be divided along the “axis of age.”⁵⁴ Mark Thomas Young argues that the sonic revolutions of rock and roll (among other genres such as electric blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, etc.) “caused a stir so profound as to ingrain itself into the cultural memory—indeed, into the affective cultural mythos. It set a new origin point in terms of what it means to be a modern American in an era of suburban ‘conformism’—rebellious, transgressive, innovative, and forward-thinking, even ‘futuristic.’”⁵⁵ This nostalgia for the rebellious edginess of youth – symbolically represented by the memory of rock and roll – would later manifest itself as punk at the end of the seventies. In the early seventies, however, we find it portrayed through memories of rock ‘n roll.

The “death of rock ‘n roll” was necessary for its revival. In order to be rediscovered, rock ‘n roll had to be lost, and the musical revolutions of the sixties provided the catalyst. Lowenthal explains: “nothing so quickens preservative action as foreboding of eminent extinction, whether of a bird, a building, or a folkway”—or, as we can discern in “American Pie,” rock ‘n roll.⁵⁶ It should come as no surprise then, that “American Pie,” a musical “thinkpiece” on rock ‘n roll history, parallels the rise of professional rock journalism in the late sixties and early seventies. As serious critical writing about rock emerged, it did so with a preternatural awareness of all the good music that had already

⁵⁴ Medovoi, *Rebels Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*, 92

⁵⁵ Mark Thomas Young, “Sonic Retro-Futures: Musical Nostalgia as Revolution in Post-1960s American Literature, Film and Technoculture.” PhD Diss., (University of California, Riverside, 2015), 5-6.

⁵⁶ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 28.

gone by. In her study of Lester Bangs' manipulations of temporality, Maud Berthomier notes that "the rock critics of his [Bangs'] time mostly lamented the fact that rock had become insipid and lacking originality [...] Richard Meltzer for instance was one of the first rock critics to see the end of the Sixties as the swan song of the first heyday of rock."⁵⁷ For the rock journalist examining a new album or an emerging musician, like McLean, trying to write new songs, everything was measured against what had come before. At the start of the seventies, we find rock musicians, audiences and critics alike, looking to the past – a *rock 'n roll* past – trying to capture something of what they felt had been lost. Henri Bergson argues that the past "is that which acts no longer but which might act and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation of which it borrows the vitality."⁵⁸ Rock 'n roll is believed to give life that vitality. Thus, in response to all that has happened since "the day the music died," McLean and his generation look to a rock 'n roll past to reinvigorate their identity and purpose.

Let us recall that it is not the mere nostalgia for rock 'n roll and youth by an aging generation that is so striking, but rather that this nostalgic turn occurred so early in their lives. Future shock, as a general phenomenon, can surely attribute to this feeling of "premature aging," but we can also appeal to the rate of change and stylistic progress within the music itself: a kind of *musical* future shock.

This shift away from live performance towards recorded sound over the course of the sixties marks a shift away from "rock 'n roll," which as Theodor Gracyk argues, is "a

⁵⁷ Maud Berthomier, "What if writing rock history was also writing with "ifs"? Or how Lester Bangs liked playing a trick on his reader's perception of time" *Transatlantica* 1 (2013), 2.

⁵⁸ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1919), 320.

performance style.”⁵⁹ Instead, rock music was music intended for listening. Gracyk further attests, “recordings are the primary link between the rock artist and the audience, and the primary object of critical attention.”⁶⁰

While slippage between “rock” and “rock ‘n roll” is still common in everyday language, a historical distinction between them is useful for our understanding of how “the music died.”⁶¹ To many who had lived through the decades, the music that was being created in the late sixties, moving into the early seventies, was no longer “rock and roll.” Van Morrison reflected in 1982: “When I started out, when I was a teenager, rock and roll to me was Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry and people like that.”⁶² Gracyk notes that “the distinction between rock and rock ‘n’ roll was firmly established among fans, musicians, and critics by 1967 and was taken for granted in early issues of *Rolling Stone*.” The identifiable separation between rock and “rock ‘n roll” (even if the ontology of each is open to debate) is essential for understanding the nostalgic longing for the latter. Although rock music was very much alive, it was very different – both in sound and in function – than the rock ‘n roll of the late fifties. Rock and roll, no longer active in the soundscape of mainstream music, was ripe for nostalgic longing.

⁵⁹ Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). 6 Gracyk makes even further distinctions between Rock and Roll, Rock ‘n’ Roll, etc. but for our purposes, a more limited distinction between rock as a recorded medium for listening, and rock and roll as a live music intended for dancing (and commonly associated with the fifties rock ‘n’ roll artists like Elvis, and Buddy Holly) is useful enough.

⁶⁰ Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 18.

⁶¹ One only needs to think of the figures memorialized in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to see the broad umbrella under which rock and roll has, on occasion, enfolded within its title (e.g. Abba, Beatles, Joan Baez, Chuck Berry, Genesis, The Grateful Dead, Michael Jackson and Metallica)

⁶² Quoted in Paul Vincent, “Van Morrison: The Mystic & His Music,” *BAM*, (February 12, 1982) 20.

The death of rock ‘n roll, then, comes to represent all the other losses of the previous decade. As we have already seen, fifties style rock ‘n roll represented rebelliousness and youthful energy, but it also embodied forward-thinking feelings of idealism and hope. This longing for past feelings, manifest in creative works of nostalgia like “American Pie,” offer a type of nostalgia, in which, “one is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been.”⁶³

“Can Music Save Your Mortal Soul”

Writing a rock ‘n roll history is one way that “American Pie” articulates a nostalgic impulse, but it is not the only way the song does so. The song also turns to Christian, specifically Catholic, imagery to make sense of its world. For the post-war generation, traditional structures – from government to religious institutions – were increasingly unappealing to this generation as they came of age. While the post-war generation turned away from traditional institutions, their ventures into the realm of creative arts reveal that they weren’t completely ready to abandon the emotional stability that these institutions offered—in particular, the feeling of spiritual faith and spirituality, extracted from or modeled on that of religion, that was mapped on to a new (quasi-)deity. The post-war generation may have stopped going to church on Sunday, but they still believed in rock ‘n roll.

In a December 1971 interview with *Phonograph Record*, McLean taps into this sentiment: “...music is a very sacred thing...to sell it, feint or abuse it isn’t just commercial, it’s sacrilege, Music touches the same universality that made Christ a saint to many

⁶³ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 351.

people and that's very important.”⁶⁴ In fact, McLean's “American Pie” explores the history of American popular culture through a lens of religious tropes and metaphors. The verse following the first chorus makes a drastic switch from personal reflection and memory to philosophical musings. McLean intermingles both traditional religious symbols (God, the Bible) with objects of a new spiritual source of rock ‘n roll. The “book of love”, viewed through a Christian lens could seem like a biblical reference to teachings in the New Testament, but it also very clearly points to the title of a rock ‘n roll / doo-wop hit by the Monotones (“The Book of Love,” 1958). It is also notable that the rock ‘n roll instrumentation enters at this particular stanza. Prior to this moment, McLean sings alongside a solo piano on the verse, and then piano and guitar on the first chorus. Certainly, this is a common texture-building technique in rock song recordings, but the delay of rock instrumentation past the first chorus and entering, instead, on this particular verse is significant. In a song with very few textural changes and virtually no word-painting (despite the obvious spaces where it could have been employed), the groove enters as McLean begins to sing a litany of questions entangling faith and rock ‘n roll:

Did you write the book of love
And do you have faith in God above
If the Bible tells you so?
Now, do you believe in rock 'n' roll

⁶⁴ David G. Walley, "Don McLean". *Phonograph Record* (1971). Don McLean. Rock's Backpages. Accessed April 26, 2021. <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/don-mclean>.

Can music save your mortal soul

And can you teach me how to dance real slow?

The new instrumentation, in combination with the lyrical back-and-forth between traditional religious markers and those of rock and roll, culminates in a question of music (implied as rock 'n roll music) as a new vision of spiritual salvation – “can music save your mortal soul?” The final question (“*And can you teach me how to dance real slow?*”) takes this series of spiritual questions and, using the musical structure, pivots back to the realm of personal memory in the experience of rock and roll as a teenager going to a dance. In doing so, McLean articulates an individualized notion of spirituality and faith.

Shortly after the fourth refrain, religious imagery returns, this time focusing on forces of destruction. While the previous sections of the song have focused on the rock “history”, narrating rock and roll’s shift to a later manifestation of the genre (what is now commonly called “rock”), McLean culminates this death knell with an apocalyptic metaphor of Satan as a dynamic rock musician taking over the stage:

So come on Jack be nimble, Jack be quick

Jack Flash sat on a candlestick

‘cause fire is the devils only friend

Oh and as I watched him on the stage

My hands were clenched in fists of rage

No angel born in Hell

Could break that Satan's spell

And as the flames climbed high into the night

To light the sacrificial rite

I saw Satan laughing with delight

The day the music died

Many fans and critics have speculated about the identity of the Satan figure, largely settling on Mick Jagger. There's a clear reference to "Jumping Jack Flash," and the Rolling Stone had long been viewed in the media as the "bad boy" British invasion group in contrast with the Beatles.⁶⁵ Even more direct in recent memory was the Rolling Stone's controversial foray into the world of psychedelia with their 1967 album *Their Satanic Majesties Request*. Finally, the murder of a young Black fan, Meredith Hunter, by the Hells Angels ("no angel born in hell") at the Rolling Stone's free Altamont festival had furthered darkened this generation's disillusionment for the present.

Closing out the song, McLean returns to his stripped down, acoustic instrumentation. The lyrics search for hope in a new voice ("*I met a girl who sang the blues*"), to find disappointment ("*...but she just smiled and turned away*"). This is often interpreted to be Janis Joplin, whose powerful, psychedelic blues-rock sound silenced by her tragic death in 1967. Regardless of her exact identity, the imagery of a girl (implying youth, as

⁶⁵ The Rolling Stone's business manager Andrew Loog Oldham is credited with planting this image in the press. See historical example: Larry Zolf, Mick Jagger, Brian Jones and Charlie Watts, "Would You Let Your Daughter Marry a Rolling Stone?" CBC, November 4, 1965. Online via CBC Archive: <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/would-you-let-your-daughter-marry-a-rolling-stone> (accessed April 25, 2021). Also see Valarie Alhart interview with John Covach, "Image is Everything: Was Marketing Key to Success of Rolling Stones?", March 12, 2015. Online via <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/image-is-everything-was-marketing-key-to-the-success-of-the-rolling-stones-93212/> (accessed April 25, 2021).

opposed to an older woman) singing the blues connects the present to a general sense of tradition and “oldness” that nostalgia relies on. This line is placed right before another depiction of rock and roll’s deification (“*I went down to the sacred store, where I’d heard the music years before*”) and more disappointment (“*But the man there said the music wouldn’t play*”). The sacred space of the music store expresses a nostalgic longing to rediscover the hope and inspiration that rock ‘n roll had given him in his youth.

McLean’s metaphorical use of rock and roll as religion continues as he sings about the silence of broken church bells alongside unnamed tragedies. He uses the language of the Christian Trinity to describe the final tragedy in the song:

And the three men I admire most
The Father, Son and the Holy Ghost,
They caught the last train for the coast
The day the music died

As with many of the other ambiguous figures referenced in the lyrics, there is a wide range of speculation to the identity of the Trinity figures including: John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy (although these three are not musicians and thus seem a bit of a stretch to call their death – “the day the music died”) or Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison and Brian Jones (all musicians, but all progressive figures in rock’s development during the period which McLean mourns in the song). Perhaps the most likely speculation would be a return to the three early figures of rock and roll whose death is referenced in the song’s beginning: Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and Richie Valens.

This reading creates a clear bookend to McLean's ballad, which began with the memory of 13-year old McLean learning about the plane crash on his mail route. Holly is also continually referenced in the song's refrain. The recurring line "This'll be the day that I die" is a fairly obvious reworking of the refrain from Holly's hit song "That'll Be the Day" (1957). The tragedy of the event is amplified by the changing tense of Holly's lyrics, which the early rock 'n roller had sang while living and looking towards a bright future ("*that'll be the day that I die*"). McLean's lyrics reside in the present ("*this'll be the day that I die*"), as sung by the "good 'ol boys" gathered at the dry levee. It is almost as if McLean and his generation are mourning through vocalizing Holly's reality. Where they had once looked to the future with excitement and anticipation, there is now only the bleak reality of mortality.

Whoever those three figures are, McLean is using them to symbolize the spiritual experience of what rock and roll felt like in his youth, and longing for a return to that meaning.^{66 1} Interestingly, in April 2015, McLean's original manuscript draft of the song was released and sold at auction. One of the major reveals of this event was the discovered of a previously unknown, never recorded, final verse, which perhaps alludes to the idea of the Beatles ("four") as a savior figure.

And there I stood alone and afraid
I dropped to my knees and there I prayed
And I promised him everything I could give
If only he would make the music live
And he promised it would live once more

But this time one would equal four
And in five years four had come to mourn
And the music was reborn.

Perhaps the lyrics were dropped due to the conflicting meanings implied through the lyrics. If the Beatles are the new saviors, how can their mourning (assumedly their break-up) equate to how the music is reborn? Ultimately, these lyrics have no bearing on the way the released track makes meaning for its audience, but they do provide insight into the sense of nostalgic longing that the song expressed. The spiritual signifiers are the primary focus of the unresolved conclusion and are paired with nostalgic language of restoration (“live once more,” “reborn”) revealing that the desire to find spiritual renewal through music is a key source of nostalgic longing in the song.

“When the Jester Sang for the King and Queen”

While nostalgic longing for the fifties and the spiritual and energizing gifts of rock and roll’s beginnings form the centerpiece of “American Pie’s” modes of meaning, it also turns to other symbolic markers and cultural referents. Fantasies situated in the past can sometimes operate in the world of Boym’s restorative nostalgia, recreating and rebuilding the past. Fantasy in this sense, must seem “true,” as Tolkien famously explained in his essay “On Fairy-Stories”:

He [the story-maker] makes a Secondary World, which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that

world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside.⁶⁷

Restorative nostalgia is a key element in the world of musical revivals and historically-informed performance.⁶⁸ But nostalgic fantasy can be much more fluid and inconsistent than the specific goals of historical accuracy. “American Pie” (as well as other works discussed in this dissertation) primarily operates through reflective nostalgia, relying on overtly unrelated fragments of memory and multilayered semiotic references.⁶⁹ While images in the song may seem unrelated, they work together to articulate a sense of longing for the past. In 2015, McLean explained: “It was an indescribable photography of America that I tried to capture in words and music [...] People ask me if I left the lyrics open to ambiguity. Of course, I did. I wanted to make a whole series of complex statements.”⁷⁰ Ambiguous lyrics that constantly shift between contemporary realism, spirituality, and medievalism interact with one another in a fantasy playground to create complex layers of meaning. There is a constant slippage between how these signifiers work in

⁶⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 132.

⁶⁸ As discussed in the introduction, Boym defines restorative nostalgia as focused on the act of recreation, in which the nostalgic aims to revive the past. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. 41.

⁶⁹ Boym’s reflective nostalgia dwells in the act of longing, in which images of the past are fragmentary and fluid. Boym, 41.

⁷⁰ Justin W. Moyer April 7, 2015 Washington Post “Gloomy Don McLean reveals meaning of ‘American Pie’ – and sells lyrics for \$1.2 million” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/04/08/gloomy-don-mclean-reveals-meaning-of-american-pie-and-sells-lyrics-for-1-2-million/>

the song, providing fifty years of imaginative play for audiences determined to understand the meaning of the lyrics. Play doesn't required winning (or finding the right answer), as a Elizabeth Randell Upton elucidates: "there's no way to win at make-believe, or playing house, for example. And there's no way to win listening to music." The nostalgic references in "American Pie" and other creative works are an act of play, not because they are consistent, clearly understood or able to be "solved," but because we constantly have to sort through them and struggle with their meaning.

Reflective nostalgia in "American Pie" thus turns to medievalism to create a fantasy play space in which McLean can sort through his own philosophical musings on the moment, while his listeners do the same. The song is an "American" folk-style ballad that relies on a cryptic narrative of courtly characters: a jester, a queen and a king. In part, this connects the song back through Appalachian folk music to the European roots of the ballad as a narrative song form. McLean thus becomes a modern day bard or troubadour, defined by John Haines as "one who travels and gives a message of which music is only one part."⁷¹ McLean's troubadour song is an epic tale of good versus evil. Umberto Eco refers to an imaginative view of the Middle Ages as a "barbaric age" – a time of constant conflict and war. Conflict in the song thus operates on two scales: the larger history of the destruction of rock and roll and the narrative of the characters within the text. Both of these conflicts lack any true resolution. Within the character narrative, there is no

⁷¹ Haines draws this definition from his interview with a self-proclaimed Eco-Troubadour, Stan Slaughter, who has dedicated his life and music to educating communities on environmental concerns. Slaughter connects his work to the 1960s folk music tradition, of which McLean was a part. He had spent a summer as the New York State Council for the Art's Hudson River Troubadour, traveling the valley to play music and educate the community about environmental issues, before continuing those efforts on tour with Pete Seeger.

conclusion: the conflict between the jester and king ends without solution (“the court-room was adjourned / no verdict was returned”) and Satan ends the song “laughing with delight, the day the music died.” In the larger music history timeline, too, rock and roll is never truly found again (“I went down to the sacred store / Where I’d heard the music years before / But the man there said the music wouldn’t play”). In the cultural landscape of the early seventies, moral clarity was difficult to find. Beginning with the bomb, and culminating in the psychedelic revolution of the late sixties, the rapid changes and moral debates of the era did not leave clear answers. What the medieval fantasy offers the seventies nostalgic in this narrative is a connection to a morally simpler time. Of course, moral issues in the past were not actually clearer or more easily resolved. Lowenthal writes that one of nostalgia’s biggest critiques is its “foolish faith that issues were faced, action was taken, crises were averted, and problems were solved better and faster in the past.”⁷² Beginning with the development and use of the atomic bomb, and culminating in the psychedelic revolution of the late sixties, the rapid changes and moral debates of the era did not leave clear answers. The fantasy of the Middle Ages takes the nostalgic back to a time of perceived moral clarity – not unlike the medieval storybook’s of one’s childhood.

The medievalism in “American Pie” also helps articulate another characteristic of nostalgic fantasy, a turn to magic and myth. In their study of nostalgic practices in historic building preservation, Jennifer Kitson and Kevin McHugh argue that a sense of enchantment is a definitive element of nostalgia. They write: “The experience of nostalgia,

⁷² Lowenthal, 52

we propose, is enchantment with distance, an unbridgeable yet distinctly felt spatio-temporal chasm between *now* and *then*.”⁷³

The medieval fantasy is especially magical, then, because of its distance in time from the present. We know the medieval past existed, we have physical remains of castles, portraits and manuscripts, but it is distant enough that we are less concerned about its historical accuracy. Fantasies of courtly life are continually recreated in books, film/television, theme parks, and even childhood play. The Baby Boomer generation’s childhood was filled with eclectic fantasy spaces and imagination. For instance, the Western “cowboy” fantasy could be found everywhere from film and television to games and toys (this fantasy space will be discussed more in chapter three) and was popular on both sides of the Atlantic. The medieval fantasy, as well, could be found in both English and American popular culture. This is true in books (E.B. White’s *The Once and Future King*, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* cycle), films (especially those made by Disney, including *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *The Sword and The Stone* (1963) and even in political life (immediately following President Kennedy’s assassination, his time in the White House was referred to as “Camelot”).⁷⁴ The opening of Disneyland in 1955, a literal fantasy space which centered its themed playgrounds around

⁷³ Jennifer Kitson and Kevin McHugh, “Historic Enchantments - Materializing Nostalgia.” *Cultural Geographies* 22, no. 3 (2015): 488.

⁷⁴ In a *Life* magazine interview shortly after her husband’s assassination, Jacqueline Kennedy famously called JFK’s time in the White House “Camelot”: “At night, before we’d got to sleep, Jack like to play some records; and the song he loved most came at the very end of this record. The lines he loved to hear were: *Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.* [...] There’ll be great presidents again [...] but there’ll never be another Camelot again.” Theodore H. White “For President Kennedy: An Epilogue” *Life* (December 6, 1963).

a central, medieval-inspired castle, was a major (and televised) event of their childhood (even if they never actually visited it, themselves).⁷⁵

All of these medieval imaginings work together, so that they have taken on a cultural significance in a word alone. When McLean refers to a “jester,” “king,” and “queen,” he invokes all of these meanings at once. Listeners are, at the same time, both sure they know his exact meaning and completely enthralled by the puzzle of interpreting the lyric’s exact reference. As Brian Upton reminds us, sometimes the goal of language is not for the recipient to understand its meaning immediately, but instead to enjoy the experience of discovery:

The result is a semiotic playground. An aesthetic work is a work that intersects with out pre-existing internal constraints in such a way that easy convergence on a single fixed interpretation is difficult. Instead engagement with such a work is an active and continually unfolding process where expectations (both small and large) are thwarted in order to trigger new cascades of anticipatory play.⁷⁶

Nostalgic signifiers, in particular, are ripe for semiotic play, because while their collective meaning is accessible, one can continually re-engage with them in new and dynamic ways.

Most popular analyses of the song agree that the jester represents Bob Dylan. The line “when the jester sang for the king and queen, in a coat he borrowed from James Dean” seems to point to the coat Dylan wore on the cover of his 1963 album, *The*

⁷⁵ Aronstein and Coiner describes Disney’s use of the Middle Ages as a pretext for historical fantasy, one which tells the tale of “the American dream of the local boy who, through his gumption, imagination, and hard work, achieves financial and familial success.” Susan Aronstein and Nancy Coiner. “Twice Knightly: Democratizing the Middle Ages for Middle Class America.” *Studies in Medievalism* VI (1994): 213.

⁷⁶ Brian Upton. *The Aesthetics of Play* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 179.

Freewheelin' Bob Dylan, which looks strikingly similar to the one worn by James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause*. Later, McLean pictures the jester “on the sidelines, in a cast,” a reference to Dylan’s 1967 motorcycle accident and subsequent retreat from the public eye just as the Beatles (the “sergeants,” playing a “marching tune”) were leading the way to a progressive rock modernism. Additionally, there is a precedent in Dylan’s work for a medieval fantasy space – “All Along the Watchtower” – which is situated in what could be perceived as a medieval location (the “watchtower”), and tells a narrative, fantasy tale of a “joker” and “thief.” Dylan’s 1967 song is similarly cryptic in the meaning of its lyrics.

The identity of the other court figures (the king and queen) are less clear, although Elvis Presley’s moniker as “the King” is well-enough established by the early seventies that many listener’s interpreted it to reference him. This interpretation is perhaps best supported by the King’s fall (“*and while the king was looking down, the jester stole his thorny crown*”), in which Dylan (the jester) becomes crowned as the new King of Rock ‘n Roll. The queen (of rock ‘n roll) in this reading harder is difficult to pin down; she is never mentioned again (unsurprisingly) relegating any early heroines of rock and roll’s story to a mere passing reference. A direct interpretation of the lyrics is further challenged because Dylan never performed for Elvis (“*when the jester sang for the king and queen...*”). Others listeners interpret the King and Queen to be the Kennedys – a reference supported by their “Camelot” White House and the idea that they would have seen him perform on television. Additionally, in the fifty years since the song’s release, McLean has stated the impact of JFK’s death on his inspiration in writing the song.⁷⁷ The Kennedy reading is challenged by the lyrics of the jester stealing the crown and doesn’t

⁷⁷ Don McLean. Interview with Dan Rather. *The Big Interview with Dan Rather*. AXS TV. May 20, 2020.

fully stand on its own. Dylan did perform for another (this time literal) King and Queen - Martin Luther King Jr. and the Queen Elizabeth II of England (on separate occasions). King's assassination in 1968 perhaps lines up with the sacrificial, Christ-like metaphor of a "thorny crown". The metaphor is still slippery, however, since McLean uses the term "stole" with reference to the crown (implying some level of effort in taking the King's place) and while he is certainly a voice of support in the Civil Rights effort, he is not exactly the most direct heir to its leadership. In all of these readings, there is never a truly satisfactory interpretation.

And so, perhaps what is most meaningful about these lyrics is not the identity of the figures, but the democratization of their court. In McLean's hands, the Dylanesque jester transforms from a lackey to a representative of the people ("*the jester sang for the king and queen...in a voice that came from you and me*"). In a 1965 issue of *Ramparts Magazine*, journalists Helen Nestor and Michael Alexander highlight the devotion of young Boomer fans to Dylan as mouthpiece for their generation:

This postbeatnik group of Atom Bomb babies has produced some wildly devoted Bob Dylan fans who have even, maintaining that he is, above all, a poet, insisted on bringing Dylan lyrics to English classes in high school and junior high school... "Bob Dylan says all the things I feel but can't say myself" a fourteen-year-old girl wrote... They have rejected so thoroughly all the language and attitudes and concepts of their elders that a fragment of Dylan's verses seems like a summary of it all.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Helen Nestor and Michael Alexander, "We Shall Overcome" *Ramparts Magazine* (April 1965), 48.

Dylan's voice as speaker of truth for the people is a form of medievalism, for in the court, the jester is the only individual with the ability to speak truth to the King. This is because he does so through the guise of entertainment.⁷⁹ Dylan is both one of the most popular entertainers/musicians of the era, but also the voice of his generation. McLean's evocation of a jester is not to imply his influence as a "joke" but that through entertainment, he can speak truth.

Further, the medievalism in "American Pie" fits into what Aronstein and Coiner define as "a particularly American Middle Ages: the Middle Ages of Democratic Possibility."⁸⁰ Building on Umberto Eco's theory of "Ten Little Middle Ages", in which the Middle Ages are used as a "pretext" to explore contemporary characters and storytelling, they posit:

"In these versions of the Middle Ages, the heroic fantasy is enacted in a time; figured as American pre-history, and it follows the narrative outline provided by the American dream of the local boy, who through his gumption, imagination, and hard work, achieves financial and familial success."⁸¹

⁷⁹ We find this analysis of the jester in contemporary scholarship to the creation of "American Pie." Shakespeare's plays (while not medieval in academic history are still a pre-modern resource for medievalism and fantasy) are prime examples of the role of the fool or jester who can speak truth through satire. See Roger Ellis, "The Fool in Shakespeare: A Study in Alienation," in *The Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 3, (Autumn, 1968), 245-268; Glenys McMullen, "The Fool as Entertainer and Satirist, On Stage and in the World," in *The Dalhousie Review*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring, 1970), 10-22.

⁸⁰ Aronstein and Coiner, "Twice Knightly," 213.

⁸¹ Aronstein and Coiner, 213; Umberto Eco, "Dreaming of the Middle Ages," in *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1986), 68.

This is “American dream” but it is also a trope of the aspiring rock ‘n roll musician – that he would come from the people. As Landau wrote in 1972, “there existed a strong bond between performer and audience, a natural kinship, a sense that the stars weren’t being imposed from above but had sprung up from out of our own ranks. We could identify with them without hesitation.”⁸² The medieval fantasy in “American Pie” is not only used to delineate clearly between the axis of good and evil, but also as a pretext in which its heroes are “everyday people,” with a voice anyone could aspire to have.⁸³

A democratized, medieval storytelling of rock ‘n roll in the sixties also fits nicely into the common narrative of rock history through its celebration of folk ideals. As the generation that grew up on rock and roll entered adulthood, many of them turned to folk music as an alternative to the manufactured pop of the early sixties. Folk music, with its populist leanings and social awareness, carried forward some of the “rebelliousness” that rock and roll had offered, the subliminal integrationist agenda of rhythm and blues cross-over turned into an explicit civil rights agenda. Simon Frith goes on to argue that rock music has, for much of its history, operated as a folk music.⁸⁴ This folk-conception of rock and its roots in fantasies of the rural West, will be central to the discussion in Chapter 3, but the imbrication of a populist, folk notion of rock *within* the medievalist framework of a song like “American Pie” defines a nostalgic fantasy space the rock generation would inhabit deeply by the early seventies.

⁸² Jon Landau *It's Too Late to Stop Now: A Rock and Roll Journal* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972), 21.

⁸³ Aronstein and Coiner, “Twice Knightly,” 213.

⁸⁴ Frith, Simon. “‘The Magic That Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community.” *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 159-68.

“The levee was dry”

The medieval framework of “American Pie” invokes another powerful fantasy space for the baby boom generation: nature, and the rural countryside. Thus far we have primarily understood nostalgia as a longing for another time. But nostalgia has a spatial element as well, traceable to its roots as a disease afflicting the homesick émigré: “Nostalgia charts space on time and time on space and hinders the distinction between subject and object; it is Janus-faced, like a double-edged sword. To unearth the fragments of nostalgia one needs dual archeology of memory and of place, and a dual history of illusions and of actual practices”.⁸⁵ The nostalgic fantasies in “American Pie” are no exception; McLean’s refrain takes the form of a nostalgic road trip back to a powerful site of memory.

So bye, bye, Miss American Pie
Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry
And them good old boys were drinking whiskey ‘n rye
Singing, “This’ll be the day that I die”
“This’ll be the day that I die.”

McLean uses a Chevy – an American-made car – as the vehicle for this imaginative trip. The imagery is meaningful on multiple levels, all of which connect back to the fifties nostalgia that permeates the song. Firstly, the car represents a middle-class American

⁸⁵ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 22.

dream of the 1950s – a dream that became an increasingly real prospect as the decade progressed. Jonathan Veitch writes:

In 1946, Americans bought 3 million cars; in 1949 they doubled that figure and in 1950 Detroit sold a record total of 8 million more. At long last, the hallowed promise of ‘a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage’ was on the verge of actuality for much of the middle class. By the mid-fifties, thanks to the installment plan, everyone who wanted a car (and could obtain credit) had one.⁸⁶

As middle-class adults bought new cars, used ones were starting to make their way into hands of fifties teenagers, bringing with them the possibility of independence and mobility. What the car offered, however, was not just physical independence, the power to move and gather, but also sonic independence. Coinciding with the rise of Black American musical sounds (rhythm & blues) on new “Top 40” radio stations, was the ability of teenagers to consume those sounds without adult supervision on their car radios. As David Morris points out:

The home consumption by white youth of difference at a distance would have, by itself, only indirectly or symbolically connected groups across established racial barriers. But by the late 1950s, affluence, industrial

⁸⁶ Jonathan Veitch. “Angels of the Assembly Line: The Dream Machines of the Fifties.” *Southwest Review* 79, no. 4 (1994): 650-58.

policies, and technological advances put large numbers of used cars into the hands of teenagers, and these cars would make it possible for sonic identification to turn into a more public practice. A survey showed that nearly half of all male high school seniors had a car by the end of the spring of 1961, and it can be estimated that about half of those had radios.⁸⁷

Susan J. Douglas agrees that rock and roll radio allowed this newly mobile generation to take over spaces not intended for youth expressions:

The powerful fusion of cars, young people, rock ‘n’ roll, and the radio meant that teenagers could – and did – use broadcast music to become squatters; they claimed territory that wasn’t really theirs by blanketing that space with rock ‘n’ roll. They did this while driving around small towns, cursing up and down certain strips, blasting their radios in Laundromats and candy stores, or staking out portions of beaches and parks. At nights and on weekends especially they occupied public spaces reserved for grownups, for business, for the orderly conduct of all kinds of commerce, and use the sounds of radios and cars to defy that orderliness. They

⁸⁷ David Z. Morris, “Cars with the Boom: Identity and Territory in American Postwar Automobile Sound.” *Technology and Culture* 55, no. 2 (2014): 326-53.

reclaimed districts where they were supposed to be seen but not heard as loud, unruly kid space, where their sensibilities took precedence.⁸⁸

Douglas highlights a cultural shift of power away from the adults to the youth of the fifties. The physical gesture of not simply entering adult spaces, but rather, *invading* them with rock and roll as a display of sonic power, allowed this large and growing population of young people to assert cultural dominance over an unprepared adult generation. I believe that this cultural power shift, a shift that was necessarily intertwined with their teenage listening practices and spatial posturing, was keenly felt by the post-war generation, and contributed to their early onset of nostalgic longing in the early seventies. Previous generations had assimilated into adulthood, gaining cultural power with age. In contrast, the boomer generation was the first generation to feel a threat to their cultural power as they approached adulthood, precisely because they had not only found that power at a younger age, but also entangled it with notions of youth and mobility.

When McLean centers his nostalgic fantasy of rock and roll around the sonic and physical space of a parked car gathering, he taps into these emotions of cultural power. The community aspect of swaths of teenagers taking over adult spaces is depicted as “good ‘ol boys” singing together in a rock and roll refrain, and specifically invoking Holly’s “That’ll be the Day” in a pessimistic turn towards a bleak present (“this’ll be the day that I die”). It is not exactly clear whether this setting is supposed to be a memory of past events (perhaps those dark days following the deaths of Holly and the other rockers),

⁸⁸ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening in: Radio and the American Imagination*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 253.

or a restorative effort in the present to return to a spatialized memory of rock and roll listening practices.

The final piece of the chorus' nostalgic roadtrip is the actual location of gathering – the levee. Some scholars (notably Joseph E. Burns) have attempted to connect this location to a personal site of memory for McLean.⁸⁹ While these readings are possible (McLean has indicated that the song is very autobiographical), this level of meaning and personal memory would have been lost on audiences. For audiences, and likely McLean as well, the levee has much richer meaning and signification on a cultural level, with its associations of the American South and the roots of the blues tradition.

The many levees along the many tributaries of the Mississippi Delta are fundamental to the imagery of the country blues, and as the blues became rhythm & blues and then rock 'n roll, most of the blues signifiers came along. It should be noted that rock music's appropriation of blues symbolism largely ignores the deep meaning and cultural epistemology for Black Americans in the South. This is particularly complicated element of musical nostalgia, which often centers on the feeling of *longing* for a mystical past, regardless of historical accuracy or to whom that past truly belongs. Indeed, by 1971, "the levee" would be deeply entangled in the nostalgic imagination of white rock musicians who had never seen one, let alone driven their Chevy out to drink there. "American Pie" is not the only nostalgic song by a rock musician to look to the levee blues to re-establish a more "authentic" musical and personal experience. Led Zeppelin covered "When the

⁸⁹ Joseph E. Burns argues that, for McLean, the Levee (with a capital L) refers to the nickname for the Beechmont Tavern, a bar in New Rochelle New York (where McLean had grown up) and that the phrase drinking whiskey and rye is actually "drinking whiskey in Rye" – a city ten miles north of McLean's hometown. See Joseph E. Burns, "A Long, Long Time Ago: A Lyrical Interpretation" *Do You Believe in Rock and Roll? : Essays on Don Mclean's "American Pie"* eds. Schuck, Raymond I, and Ray Schuck (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012), Kindle.

Levee Breaks,” a 1929 blues by Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie, on their 1971 album (discussed in chapter 2), alongside their own raved-up 12-bar blues, “Rock and Roll.” Finding both of these songs on the same nostalgically rich album reflects a pervasive symbolism.

McLean makes an interesting choice by describing the levee as having run dry (“drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry”). Much of the reason the levee exists as a recurring theme in the classic Blues repertoire is because of the recurring of floods and levee breaks faced by African Americans in the early 20th century, most notably the epic flooding of the Mississippi River Delta in 1927. Blues historian David Evans provides an impressively complete list of blues lyrics inspired by that disaster:

One of the many consequences of the 1927 flood was an outpouring of topical songs and other expressions...the most varied and intense artistic reaction to the flood came from blues singers and composers. It included Lonnie Johnson’s ‘South Bound Water’, Blue Belle’s ‘High Water Blues’. Blind Lemon Jefferson’s ‘Rising High Water Blues’, Sippie Wallace’s ‘The Flood Blues’, Laura Smith’s ‘Lonesome Refugee’ and ‘The Mississippi Blues’, Barbeque Bob’s ‘Mississippi Heavy Water Blues’, Alice Pearsons’s ‘Greenville Levee Blues’ and ‘Water Bound Blues’, Bessie Smith’s ‘Homeless Blues’, Luella Miller’s ‘Muddy Stream Blues’, Lonnie Johnson’s ‘Broken Levee Blues’, Barbeque Bob’s ‘Mississippi Low-Levee Blues’, James Crawford’s ‘Flood and Thunder Blues’, Lonnie Johnson’s ‘The New Fallin’ Rain Blues’, Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie’s ‘When the Levee Breaks’, Charley Patton’s ‘High Water Everywhere’, Tommy

John's 'Slidin' Delta', and several other songs that have remained unissued. The last of these blues tunes was recorded in March 1930, nearly three years after the major levee breaks along the Mississippi River, indicating the profound and enduring significance of this event in the blues community.⁹⁰

The Levee thus represents something much more dangerous and challenging in the Blues tradition. These sites were fraught with tension and risk for the African American communities who live around them. A full levee had the potential to bring harm to its surrounding community, because it was always at the risk of breaking. However, the way it is used in the song doesn't seem to engage with that tension. Instead the dry levee is lamented, offered almost as a metaphor for dried up musical inspiration. In McLean, the levee seems to stand as a site of back-to-roots rock and roll, but it no longer functions as a wellspring of inspiration – a bleak image of music's future.

Rock and Roll Fantasies

Fred Davis finds that "Nostalgic experiences help the individual to maintain the sense of continuity in identity always threatened by life cycle changes."⁹¹ For the post-War generation, rock and roll became an important marker of past and self, and an anchor of cultural memory around which they could reflect as a community; as they moved into a more functionally adult phase, they turned to nostalgic imaginings to maintain a sense of community with their past. This generation is not the first, nor will it be the last to

⁹⁰ David Evans. "Bessie Smith's 'Back-Water Blues': The Story behind the Song." *Popular Music* 26, no. 1 (2007): 97-98.

⁹¹ Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday* (London: The Free Press, 1979).

glorify the music of their youth. The history of music is full of generational conflict between older musicians holding on to the music of their past, and a new generation looking to push against those aesthetics. Neuroscientists and psychologists have recognized and attempted to study a phenomenon commonly referred to as the “reminiscence bump,” in which memories from between the ages of twelve and twenty-two seem to have the most durability as we age. (Theories differ on whether the reminiscence bump has its roots in neurological factors or whether it is culturally constructed.) The cultural and musical ramifications of a turn toward the “retro” while an entire large generation was still inside the “reminiscence bump” has created a layer cake of music nostalgia, in which nostalgic tropes from the late sixties and early seventies have since become nostalgic objects themselves. The nostalgic fantasies and tropes in rock music of this era reveal not only the longings of the post-war generation, but also their anxieties and concerns. As the first “youth” generation faced the reality of aging, they looked to their past – a past imagined to a soundtrack of teenage rock and roll – to imagine the uncertain future ahead.

Chapter 2

England's Green and Pleasant Land¹

After a series of exhausting European and American tours in 1969, Jimmy Page and Robert Plant of the British hard rock group Led Zeppelin, escaped to the remote cottage Bron-yr-Aur in Wales for a few weeks of relaxation and songwriting. Upon their return to London, they recorded music for what would become *Led Zeppelin III*. The album, released by Atlantic Records on October 5, 1970, is dramatically different from the band's previous hard rock style, especially in its reliance on acoustic instrumentation. In an interview with Chris Welch of *Melody Maker*, Page confirms the new course: "We'll never stop doing the heavy things, because that comes out of us naturally when we play. But – there is another side to us. The new album is totally different from the others and I see that it's obviously a new direction."² In that interview Page also looks ahead to the next album, promising an even greater change in the band's musical direction. The fourth album, released without a title but commonly referred to as *Led Zeppelin IV*, hit the market a year later, on November 8, 1971.³ It is generally viewed as

¹ This chapter is adapted from Caitlin Vaughn Carlos, "Historical Nostalgia, Nature, and the Future in Three Iconic Albums from 1971: *Aqualung*, *Who's Next*, and *Led Zeppelin IV*." In *Postmodernity's Musical Pasts*, edited by Tina Frühauf, (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 225-48. And Caitlin Vaughn Carlos, "'Ramble On': Medievalism as a Nostalgic Practice in Led Zeppelin's Use of J.R.R. Tolkien" in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Medievalism*, edited by Stephen C. Meyer and Kristen Yri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 530-546.

² Welch, Chris. "Led Zeppelin: Page on *Zeppelin III*". *Melody Maker* (1970). Led Zeppelin. Rock's Backpages. Accessed April 28, 2021. <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/led-zeppelin-page-on-zeppelin-iii>.

³ The album's wordless cover does not indicate a specific title for the album. Four symbols are listed on the top of the inside sleeve (the first text found in the album artwork), offering one possible title. However, the album has been variously referred to in the literature as Led Zeppelin IV, Untitled, IV, Four Symbols, ZOSO, and Runes. This chapter will refer to the album as *Led Zeppelin IV*

their most iconic work. Looking back at these creative years, Page exclaims during an interview with Brad Tolinski of *Guitar World*: ‘Our attitude was, “Fuck the sixties. We’re going to chart the new decade!”’⁴

At the start of the seventies, Great Britain stood at a crossroads of economic crisis and social anxiety. The rebuilding of London and other British cities after World War II had produced a functional, modernist landscape of housing projects and urbanization, a process that carried into the following decades. Between 1945 and 1970, over 6.2 million homes were built, with peak periods right after the war under Labour and again under a Conservative government, starting in 1951. By the early seventies, the cracks were showing in these once-futuristic visions of concrete. In what was being called for the first time a “postindustrial” age, the post-war generation of young people began to question the earlier attitude towards urban and technological development.⁵ Combined with the disappointing attempt at a technological revolution under Prime Minister Harold Wilson (1964–1970), the greying landscape of urban “renewal” shadowed the dimming of their future prospects.⁶ Heirs to Romantic protests in the face of the Industrial Revolution, and

³ Brad Tolinski’s ‘oral autobiography’, *Light and Shade: Conversations with Jimmy Page*, pulls from several decades of interviews with Jimmy Page, beginning in 1993 when Tolinski was editor-and-chief for *Guitar World*. Much of this material is previously unpublished. Although Tolinski does not cite exact dates for each interview segment in the book, this particular quote appears to come from an interview conducted after 2007. In the same interview, Page references ‘a little while ago, before the Led Zeppelin reunion show’, most likely referring to the band’s first full-length reunion concert in 2007. Brad Tolinski, *Light and Shade: Conversations with Jimmy Page* (New York, 2012), p. 117.

⁵ See Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945–1980* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). An early and influential Anglophone take on the post-industrial society (a term first coined by French sociologist Alain Touraine in 1969) came in 1973 from Daniel Bell. See *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

⁶ Francis Sandbach argues that concern for environmental pollution and disillusionment with high financial costs of technology “toys” like the Concorde airliner were essential elements in the decline in support for Wilson’s policies of economic and technological growth; see Francis Sandbach, *Environment, Ideology and Policy* (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun, 1980), 36, 138.

the critique of the machine encoded in the Arts & Crafts movement, many neo-romantics of the late sixties and early seventies saw encroachment by the urban environment as a threat to the satisfaction of one's physical, mental and spiritual needs - needs that could only be satisfied by the experience of an unspoiled nature. However, the new critique expanded beyond those of its nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predecessors. Not only did these post-industrial romantics retreat to the actual countryside, they also sought refuge in an idealized temporal space. Historian Meredith Veldman asserts that many neo-romantics of this generation were "appalled by the present and fearful of the future," challenging postwar Britain with a "protest rooted in romanticism" in which "they looked to nature and the past for guidance in their effort to build in Britain a society that would suit not only the demands of the ecology but also the spiritual and communal needs of humanity."⁷ The escape to nature and the outdoors is deeply intertwined with nostalgia and neo-romantic visions of the past, as well as with the resurgence of interest in medievalism and myth.⁸

The longing of this generation for more "genuine" times and spaces had a profound effect on British popular culture. A sense of decline triggered by the economic crisis and unstable job market coincided with the collapse of the utopian dreams of the hippies, especially those who had become popular and rock musicians. In his 1979 book on nostalgia, sociologist Fred Davis relates "[t]he nostalgia wave of the seventies" to the

⁷ Veldman, *Fantasy*, 246.

⁸ In the introduction, I draw on the work of Karl Fugelso to offer a general definition of medievalism as a term often used "to describe an artifact associated with the Middle Ages that is viewed as historically inaccurate or a creative work of references associated vaguely with the distant past (not limited specifically to the Middle Ages, but usually from a post-antiquity / Pre-Enlightenment historical moment)." See Karl Fugelso, *Defining Medievalism(s)* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009).

“massive identity dislocations of the sixties.”⁹ Likewise, the folk revival, rooted in British heritage and reviving songs from several centuries that were deemed “traditional,” had been affected by the musical trends of the 1960s: folk had “gone electric,” led by pioneering British folk-rock bands such as Fairport Convention, and Steeleye Span.¹⁰ Indeed, 1971 appears as a turning moment in British history, marking the end of the cultural idealism of the late 1960s, culminating politically in the fall of the Labour government that had been promising social and economic restoration through “white heat” of technological and industrial advancement.

This chapter will examine songs and albums by two of the dominant rock bands at the start of the 1970s, Led Zeppelin and Jethro Tull, focusing primarily on work from 1971, in the context of these historical and cultural transformations. Two albums in particular, *Led Zeppelin IV* and *Aqualung*, capture the emergence of a new nostalgic impulse in early seventies British rock, manifested through medievalism and fantasy in England during this time. Viewing medievalism as an inherently nostalgic practice, I explore the way these bands embrace a fictionalized, medieval-inspired past, which is both spatial and temporal. Led Zeppelin’s venture into a medieval-like space is notable for its use of fantasy literature (especially the works of J.R.R. Tolkien), fantasy and myth to evoke a sense of magic and mystery in the past. Jethro Tull often relied on religion and the Gothic as a gateway to the past, and the sonic/lyrical medievalism employed in 1971 is a precursor to the type of medieval, pastoral fantasies that the band would explore

⁹ Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 105.

¹⁰ See Britta Sweers, *Electric Folk: The Changing Face of English Traditional Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). In the US, see Elijah Wald, *Dylan Goes Electric! Newport, Seeger, Dylan, and the Night that Split the Sixties* (New York: Dey Street Books, 2015).

later in the decade on albums like *Songs from the Wood* (1977) and *Heavy Horses* (1978). Both of these bands used medievalism to explore topics of Britishness, identity and meaning, pilfering the collective cultural memory for signifiers which could evoke culturally specific antiquarian meanings for their early seventies audiences. An examination of the music offers an avenue for understanding how individuals and communities construct meaning and identity in such periods of fragmentation and upheaval. Furthermore, by considering previous incarnations of medievalism and romanticism in British history, this chapter suggests that Led Zeppelin and Jethro Tull relied on deeply-rooted cultural memories to participate in a dialogue between urban criticism and a romanticized vision of rural Britain.

Medievalism as a Nostalgic Practice

In order to understand how creative uses of medieval tropes and fantasies, such as those of Led Zeppelin and Jethro Tull, make meaning in their contemporary environments, we need to view medievalism as an essentially nostalgic practice.¹¹ Like other nostalgic expressions, medievalism has almost always employed the past to critique the present (few works of medievalism evoke the era to rejoice over our advances in sanitation and medicine since the death of King Arthur). Annette Kreutziger-Herr observes that expressions of medievalism “have nothing to do with the Middle Ages and

¹¹ Susan Fast equates medievalism in rock, especially progressive rock, as an evocation of the Other. In her reading of this music, the sense of longing is not for a homeland or a past, so much as it is for the Other “as a source of power alternative to that possessed by the dominant culture.” See Susan Fast, “Days of Future Past: rock, pop, and the yearning for the Middle Ages” *Mittelaltersehnsuch* ed. Dorothea Redepenning and Annette Kreutiger-Herr, Kiel: Wissenschaftsverlag Vauk, (2000): 35-56.

everything to do with *our* era.”¹² Often, these expressions are entwined with heritage and cultural memory, which, as David Lowenthal argues, “align us with forebears whose virtues we share and whose vices we shun.”¹³ The past becomes most useable when it is seen to clearly articulate some value(s), which relate to the present. Medievalism, especially in creative and artistic works, relies on cultural memory - defined loosely as “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts.”¹⁴ It also often relies on the idea of a distant past rooted in contemporary notions of authenticity and purity, and viewed as a foil to the contemporary world—an imaginary past to which the nostalgic longs to return or from which he/she longs to learn.¹⁵ Nostalgic practices and medievalism, then, *use* the past to imagine a future.

Finding a way to access the past presents a challenge in articulating the past’s relevance to a present world. As I noted in my introduction, the nostalgic power of the past can take a variety of forms, often centered around either its *recreation* or its *emotive space*. Boym’s two types of nostalgia (*restorative* and *reflective*) are thus distinguished by the needs of the individual or group looking to the past. Restorative nostalgia focuses recreation, while reflective nostalgia rests in the emotive space that the past offers. Medievalism, also, can be understood as an attempt to recreate some element of the

¹² Annette Kreutziger-Herr. “Postmodern Middle Ages: Medieval Music at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century,” *Florilegium*, 15 (1998). 188.

¹³ David Lowenthal. *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), XV.

¹⁴ Astrid Eril and Ansgar Noonning, *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 2.

¹⁵ Ann M. Martinez explores this ecomedieval fantasy of purity in her analysis of the Elven realms in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Ann M. Martinez, “Elvencentricism: The Green Medievalism of Tolkien’s Elven Realms” *Studies in Medievalism XXVI: Ecomedievalism* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 31-41.

medieval past, or to reflect on the emotional space, the feeling of longing, that contemplation of the medieval world could open up. Creative medievalisms such as Tolkien's Middle Earth, then, can be seen operating both as a restorative practice of recreating a past world as a physical space, and as a reflection on what the past world would *feel* like, especially if that world feels maximally different than the creator's contemporary environment.

Medievalism remains a basic tool for many progressive and metal bands and their fans, especially those, following Led Zeppelin, engaged in building elaborate mythic fantasy worlds around their music. As Susan Fast explains in her groundbreaking monograph, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music*:

[the] idea that myth unites us is particularly important, for it is one reason that the mythology of Led Zeppelin is so powerful to many fans. When fans say that Led Zeppelin's music is 'timeless' or that it 'epitomizes humanity,' this is, I think, what they mean. The feeling of connectedness to other people, to history, and to a supernatural world is profound, especially for those who feel alienated in their daily lives."¹⁶

The expression of medievalism in the music of Zeppelin and Tull navigate the space of longing, between the object as both time and as space. In examining the medievalism in

¹⁶ Susan Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 53.

these songs as a nostalgic practice, we can begin to understand the values which both groups attribute to the past and use to make meaning in the present.

Nostalgia, Nature, and the Urban Landscape

The Edenic fantasy of rural Britain is intimately tied with medieval imaginings. This vision has been prominent in British culture since at least the early 19th century, when, as Meredith Feldman asserts, “the impulse to conserve flora, fauna, and habitat” began around the same time that many scholars discern the first wave of Romantic medievalism.¹⁷ Both conservation and medievalism rely on a nostalgic impulse to retain a sense of British heritage, viewed as innate to the British countryside. Lowenthal confidently argues that “landscape is Britain’s archetypal legacy; two centuries of city celebrants made country life a metaphor for the national soul.”¹⁸ Lowenthal paints the landscape as an accessible piece of Britain’s past – seemingly recoverable, both through an eco-conservative urge, as well as a fantasy space characterized by pastoral imagery. This is the paradox of nostalgic imagination: the physical landscape exists, but the imagined, space - the archaic British countryside - is ultimately a fantasy. Raymond Williams explores the problem of perspective in this peculiarly British nostalgia, concluding that “when we move back in time, consistently directed to an earlier and happier rural England, we could find no place, no period, in which we could seriously rest.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 208. For 19th century roots of British Medievalism, see Clare A Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁸ Lowenthal. *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, 7.

¹⁹Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) 35.

The early seventies generation's rediscovery of the pastoral, however imagined, can be seen historically linked to a recurring neo-romantic view of nature as an essential human need, especially in opposition to industrialization, urban development, and modernization. Historian Frank Trentmann sees the early–twentieth-century English culture's affinity for outdoor “rambles” in the countryside as the “psychic balance wheel” to the merciless advance of smoking chimneys and urban life'.²⁰ In the early seventies, the post-war generation turned to nostalgic, pastoral impulses in response to their own growing awareness of environment destruction and the price of progress and urban development. In a 1970 interview with Penny Valentine of *Sounds* magazine, The Who's Roger Daltry expressed his concerns about urban pollution and his desire to retreat away from the city:

I want to really be in the wilds. I just can't stand it to be honest. I read this thing the other week in the *Observer* about a biologist who was experimenting on over-population with animals, rats and deer, that kind of think. I get the feeling already that the big crunch is nearer than we think. I'll probably go to Ireland and really live in the wilds. I just want a little old cottage, mate. I don't want a big house. I want the bare necessities of life.

Daltry's references to the “wilds” of Ireland in a little old cottage, relies on associations of Celtic mythology as a magical, ancient world in the larger British imagination.²¹

²⁰ See Frank Trentmann, 'Civilization and its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth Century Western Culture', *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 4 (October 1994), pp. 583–625.

²¹ See Marion Gibson, Shelley Trower and Garry Tregidga, *Mysticism, Myth and Celtic Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Medievalism thus acts as a nostalgic impulse that employs a mythical sense of “pastness” to imagine an idealized space.

Eco-Critical Album Art

Both bands, to different degrees, use album artwork to delineate the tension between urban life and pastoral traditions, a critique further developed in music and lyrics. *Led Zeppelin IV* balances nostalgic imaginings and progressive developments; it is an album rich in overt dichotomies such as past/present, pastoral/urban, brightness/darkness, and weightlessness/weight (epitomized in the band’s own name), and the textless cover introduces the listener to exactly these themes.²²



Figure 2.1 *Led Zeppelin IV* – Front Cover

²² Although the album does not credit a photographer or designer for the outside cover artwork, George Case attributes the front cover photograph to rock photographer Keith Morris. Case quotes Page giving credit to Plant for the discovery of and idea to use the painting of the old man; see *Led Zeppelin FAQ* (Milwaukee, 2011), p. 213.

On the front cover, a picture in a worn frame hangs on a dilapidated wall covered with peeling wallpaper. The image functions as a window to a distant past. It shows an old man carrying a bundle of sticks on his back. His haggard appearance and hunched posture under a heavy load indexes a sense of pastness by reminding the viewer of the challenges of labor and advanced age in a pre-industrial world. Further, his solitude in a green countryside where he gathers woodland materials references nature and the outdoors. Around the image, faded, peeling wallpaper implies decline and the waning of rural life. Turning the album over, one sees that the front cover offers an inside view into one of the crumbling postwar buildings around it, a house in the process, we realize, of being demolished:



Figure 2.2. *Led Zeppelin IV* – Front and Back Album Cover

Unfolded, the bifold album cover seamlessly incorporates the edges of the wallpaper, the dilapidated 19th-century row houses, and a modern housing block towering in the background. These contrasting images take the viewer on a journey through these

temporal spaces.²³ As the perspective opens, the viewer travels away from the old framed painting through two more layers of time: aging worker housing in the foreground, and the contemporary Salisbury Tower apartment complex in the distance. Different timescales are overlaid onto a single location, one which we understand is changing irrevocably from green countryside (the framed image of a man in nature) to a grey, oppressive cityscape (the concrete tower rising up with no sign of human habitation). This contrast—modernity as cold and inhuman, and the past as pastoral and nurturing—is a major theme of this album.

In an October 2014 BBC interview, Jimmy Page explained that the album art was based on a sense of “resonance to the idea of the ‘old style’... the old ways of life, and the encroaching modernity.”²⁴ Before the first note is even heard, the album cover has already introduced the listener to the tension between an earlier rural mode of existence and destructive urban development. But, however polarized time and space appear, there remains a space in between. The social critique of the album exists in this in-betweenness, in the tension between the dichotomies found on the cover (and also heard in the music). Homi K. Bhabha refers to this place of critique as the ‘Third Space’, claiming that it is ‘unconscious’ and yet ‘introduces...an ambivalence in the act of interpretation’.²⁵ The juxtaposition of past and present on the album cover, depicted

²³ See Elizabeth Upton, ‘Concepts of Authenticity in Early Music and Popular Music Communities’, *Ethnomusicology Review* 17 (2014), <http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/journal/volume/17/piece/591> (accessed July 31, 2016).

²⁴ ‘Jimmy Pages Talks to Shaun Keaveny’, 2014. *BBC Radio6 Music*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p029myrc> (accessed November 20, 2014).

²⁵ Homi K Babha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, 1994), p. 53.

through a spatial timeline of pastoral to urban, projects a nostalgia for the past, but tempered by the reality of forward development.

Several Jethro Tull album covers also use art to complement a musical critique of the postwar decades, while simultaneously offering Luddite lenses through which to view and build a future. The band's first album, *This Was* (1968), features the band in the forest surrounding by dogs.



Figure 2.3 *This Was* – Front Cover

The (faux) woodland setting, surrounded by animals, coupled with the band's choice of name – a sly reference to a gentleman-agriculturist from the dawn of modernity – introduced the band to audiences with semiotic associations of nature and the pastoral world. The album title, according to Anderson, references the type of American-influenced, blues based rock that they had been playing, but no longer felt any authentic connection to:

It's all in the title, isn't it? This was Jethro Tull. That's no accident because when we were recording it, the one thing I felt sure about is that if we were lucky enough to make another album, I knew it wouldn't be like this one: based on blues elements and black American folk culture. That's not part of my life and I couldn't keep doing that – I'd look like a complete twit.²⁶

Toward the end of the decade, the album *Songs from the Wood* (1977) would build even more on themes of escape to the outdoors and more overtly make the connections to the pastoral landscape as indicative of British identity. That album's cover would solidify these associations with an image of Anderson, making camp, alone in the woods.



Figure 2.4 *Songs from the Woods* – Front Cover

²⁶ Philip Wilding, "Every Jethro Tull album in Ian Anderson's own words" *Prog*. March 12, 2018 <https://www.loudersound.com/features/every-jethro-tull-album-in-ian-andersons-own-words> (accessed April 26, 2021).

Between these albums, the band's 1971 release, *Aqualung*, depicts a physical locale that stands in stark contrast to the forestry we have just seen. Instead *Aqualung* depicts the tension of its moment by highlighting the reality of contemporary urban life in juxtaposition to the Gothic medievalism implied by the font and the Biblical references on the back cover. The front cover, a watercolor painting commissioned from New York artist Burton Silverman, depicts a scruffy, suspicious-looking man.

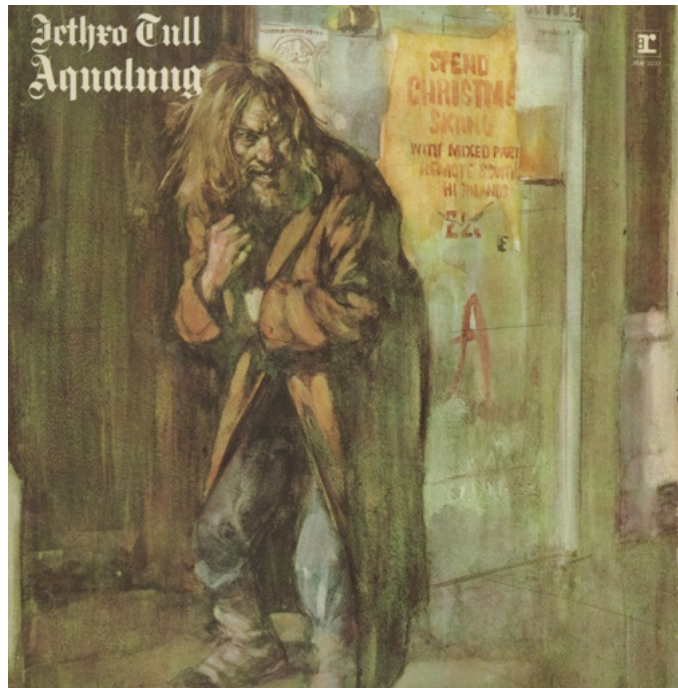


Figure 2.5 *Aqualung* – Front Cover

His sinister expression and the apprehensive concealment of his left hand suggest an immediate, albeit underlying, danger of urban life—a fear of dark alleys due to the presence of such shady figures. In a 2014 interview, Silverman reveals that after attending some of the band's rehearsals and hearing some of the songs, he had attempted

to create an image of what a “homeless man with a malevolent stare might look like.”²⁷ More specifically, he had envisioned the figure ‘pictured against a doorway almost cornered but still menacing ... a fringe person who would usually be ignored in the street (this seemed to be much of the content in a couple of the songs in the album....’²⁸ He was likely referring to the title track, “Aqualung,” in which a homeless man is described as both dangerous, a dark, menacing pedophile, as well as pathetic, a marginalized and defeated old man. The art on the cover’s back side reflects the latter description.



Figure 2.6 *Aqualung* – Back Cover

In Silverman’s own words, it depicts the ‘other side of this creature’s rant at the world, the hopeless side as he sat alone in the dark and with only a stray dog, as a companion’.²⁹

²⁷ Juan Marcos Velardo, ‘Burton Silverman – An Exclusive Interview, *Aqualung/My God*’ *Jethro Tull Tribute Blog*, February 14, 2014, <http://aqualung-mygod.blogspot.dk/2014/02/burton-silverman-exclusive-interview.html> (accessed January 03, 2017).

²⁸ Verlaro, “Burton Silverman”

²⁹ Verlaro, “Burton Silverman”

The threatening man who dominates the front cover is also a victim of societal inequality, clearly visible in an urban environment such as London. There is an irony in the advertisement flier behind him in the front cover, which entices a luxurious holiday: “Spend Christmas skiing.” The back cover further develops this inequality. In presenting these contrasting images of the same man, the artwork contributes to the album’s critique of urban life.

Evoking the pastoral through song

Building upon the frameworks laid out by their cover artwork, these albums often sonically portray the tension between natural and urban landscapes by a basic contrast of acoustic and electric instrumentation. This contrast carries both temporal and spatial connotations, with the acoustic sounds presented as older, natural, and free from corruption, and the electric sounds perceivable as contemporary, powerful, and dominating.³⁰ The lyrics further deepen these contrasting modes, expressing nostalgia for an imagined, deeper life experience associated with the older, pastoral setting. *Led Zeppelin IV* explores these sonic and lyrical playgrounds overtly through softer, folk-influenced songs such as “Goin’ to California” and “The Battle of Evermore,” which contrast to the heavier rock of “Black Dog,” “Rock and Roll,” and “When the Levee Breaks.” The divergence mirrors the album cover; the heavier songs and their lyrics

³⁰ In his work on heavy metal music, Robert Walser argues that distortion (the furthest end of the electrification spectrum) ‘functions as a sign of extreme power and intense expression by overflowing its channels and materializing the exceptional effort that produces it.’ *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, CT, 1993), 42.

emphasize dominance and power (encroaching urban modernization), while the acoustic songs tend to focus introspectively on humanity.

“Going to California,” for instance, looks to a brighter future in the West, one of freedom and open air: “The mountains and the canyons started to tremble and shake, as the children of the sun began to awake.” California, with its natural wonders of “mountains and canyons” and its powerful earthquakes appears here as a majestic space, one in which the speaker can “make a new start.” The mythology of the West in this song negotiates ancient and modern meanings. In the ancient World, the West was often mythologized as the land of the future and afterlife – in the direction of the setting sun and in opposition to the East as origin, the land of Eden.³¹ In the more modern world, the mythology of the American West brought associations of manifest destiny; the West was the land of opportunity. “Going to California” relies on both of these fantasies, with the merging together of timeless nature imagery with the ultra-modern (“*a big jet plane*”). It is, on one hand, the autobiographical storytelling of a touring rock band making their way to the land of fame. The “canyons” in the lyrics could be a literal reference to Laurel Canyon in the Hollywood Hills where the folk-rock musicians like Joni Mitchell, Carole King, and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young lived. In particular Mitchell is often viewed to be the “girl out there with love in her eyes and flowers, in her hair [...] who plays guitar, cries and sings...” – a reference strengthened by her 1970 hit “California” (which also romanticizes the state). While the song primarily resides in the acoustic mode, plant’s

³¹ The 14th century English map, Hereford Mappa Mund, for instance, depicts Eden as the furthest point East. Housed at the Hereford Cathedral, the church has created an impressive interactive website for exploring annotated images of the map. “Mappa Mundi Exploration” *Mappa Mundi Hereford Cathedral* online <https://www.themappamundi.co.uk/mappa-mundi/> (accessed April 25, 2021).

vocal wails offer the sonic equivalent of modernity. Robert makes a similar claim in his analysis of Axl Rose's voice in "Welcome to the Jungle" citing Marshall Berman's description of the "voice" of modernity in philosophers:

What is distinct and remarkable about the voice that Marx and Nietzsche share is not only its breathless pace, its vibrant energy, its imaginative richness, but also its fast and drastic shifts in tone and inflection, its readiness to turn on itself, to question and negate all it has said, to transform itself into a great range of harmonic and dissonant voices, and to stretch itself beyond its capacities into an endlessly wider range to express and grasp a world where everything is pregnant with its contrary and all that is solid melts into air. This voice resounds at once with self-discovery and self-mocking, with self-delight and self-doubt. It is a voice that knows pain and dread but believes in its power to come through. Grave danger is everywhere, and may strike at any moment, but not even the deepest wounds can stop the flow and overflow of its energy. It is ironic and contradictory, polyphonic and dialectical, denouncing modern life in the name of values that modernity itself has created, hoping – often against hope – that the modernities of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow will heal the wounds that wreck the modern men and women of today.³²

³² Walser cites Marshall Berman *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 118. Robert Walser. *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Music/Culture. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1993),170.

Simultaneously, the reverb on Plant's voice (*seems that the wrath of the gods...*) as he stretches into his upper register evokes the echoes of Gothic churches and adds to this contradictory mythology.

The tension built through the juxtaposition of contrasting song styles is manifest in "Stairway to Heaven", the album's central track and the only song to have its lyrics printed on the album sleeve. The song weaves together two modes sonically, moving between acoustic and electric instrumentation, once again blurring the line between the extremes of past/present and nature/urban. In doing so, the song portrays the growing dominance of urban influence and the desire to return to a past envisioned as closer to nature and thus more 'authentic'. The playful act of musically recreating the past reveals the influence of postmodernist ideas on rock. While there is no single claim to 'truth,' the fantasy of a medieval past is offered as a critique of the present more than a prescription for the future. Nostalgic imaginings allow the musicians to express a sincere longing for more genuine life experiences by looking back to a time or times when life was perceived to have more meaning.

In the course of the song, the opening acoustic instrumentation gives way to electrified timbres; however, the song ultimately resolves by reverting to the natural connotations of the acoustic sound. In the repeat of the opening phrase, the song's famous acoustic guitar introduction is expanded through the addition of haunting recorders, setting the scene of a misty English countryside. The overdubbed layers of John Paul Jones playing several recorder lines create the atmosphere of an early-music recorder consort. In the highly publicized 2016 trial over the song's authorship (specifically regarding this short thirteen-second introduction), Robert Plant testified that he 'was

really trying to bring the beauty and remoteness of the pastoral Britain', looking to a nostalgic view of a pre-urban, untainted England.³³

“The Battle of Evermore” is, perhaps, Led Zeppelin’s clearest example of a nostalgic soundscape which attempts to situate the listener in a spatialized fantasy world. In this case, the fantasy world is specifically linked to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* legendarium. Lyrical references to the outdoors and lighting (“*dark of night*,” “*morning light*,” “*eastern glow*,” “*sunlight*,” “*clouds*”) not only depict a visual setting for the imagined space, but also find their sonic equivalent in timbral effects. Led Zeppelin’s signature mixing of acoustic and electrified instruments, bright and dark timbres, and sparse and dense textures set the scene. These sonic effects also carry semiotic connotations. The mandolins and acoustic instrumentation, for instance, signify the pastoral through their associations with folk music settings. While the mandolin is not itself a medieval instrument, the drone chords that it performs evoke a more specific reference to a medieval folk past. The drone offers a sense of the archaic and blur the sense of tonality in the piece. There is a slippage of meaning between the ambiguous “oldness” of the sonic timbres and the more specific medievalism implied by the harmony. The song then negotiates this complicated sense of past with a more electrified, modern soundscape – a sound world employed by other musicians at this time. In this same contemporary moment, Britain’s folk rock movement was appealing to many of the same audiences, exploring folk songs and traditions through a similar mix of electrified

³³ Plant’s testimony also ties this remote vision of Britain to mythology and medieval imaginings, which will be further discussed in the following section; see ‘Read Robert Plant’s Testimony at Led Zeppelin ‘Stairway to Heaven’ Trial’, *The Rolling Stone*, August 16, 2016, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/read-robert-plants-testimony-at-led-zeppelin-stairway-to-heaven-trial-w434372> (accessed January 3, 2017).

and acoustic instrumentation.³⁴ Bands such as Fairport Convention, and Steeleye Span drew on many of the same fantasy tropes of a romanticized, pastoral, medieval British world.

The lyrics in “The Battle of Evermore” are rich with seasonal references to a time of harvest, adding more specificity to the setting the song constructs. When Plant sings: “The apples of the valley hold, the seas of happiness, the ground is rich from tender care...,” the pastoral setting is articulated by reference to both in a season of bounty, as well as a location where humans are living in harmony with nature. The song takes place in an Edenic space which has been tenderly cultivated and is ripe with food. As the war begins, the symbol of this fertility (the apples): “turn to brown and black,” a process that deepens the nostalgic tone implied by the rich, pastoral imagery described previously in the song. The images of decay and loss relate directly to the battle-scarred world of Tolkien’s Middle Earth. Tolkien relates environmental degradation to actions of Sauron’s armies:

Upon its outer marches under the westward mountains Mordor was a dying land, but it was not yet dead. And here things still grew harsh, twisted, bitter, struggling for life. In the glens of the Morgai on the other side of the valley low scrubby trees lurked and clung, coarse grey grass-tussocks fought with the stones, and withered mosses crawled on them; and everywhere great writhing, tangled brambles sprawled.³⁵

³⁴ These bands include Fairport Convention, Steeleye Span, and Pentangle. See Britta Sweers, *Electric-folk: The Changing Face of English Traditional Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965). 243.

Further, readers of *The Lord of the Rings* know the effects of war are not limited to the realm of Mordor. As becomes clear in the “The Scouring of the Shire” at the end of the novels, even the idyllic Shire has suffered degradation during Frodo’s quest to return the Ring. Upon seeing their industrialized and corrupted homeland, Sam exclaims “This is worse than Mordor! . . . It comes home to you, they say; because it is home, and you remember it before it was ruined.”³⁶ Here, Sam captures the heart of the nostalgic impulse in his longing for the home that he remembers, rather than the one that currently exists. As Salman Rushdie strikingly reveals in his discussion of homecomings in *The Wizard of Oz*, “. . .the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that there is no place like home, but rather that there is no longer such a place as home; except of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz: which is anywhere and everywhere, except the place from which we began.”³⁷

The song’s depiction of a war-torn state is made even more concrete through its lyric references to a battle scene inspired by *The Lord of the Rings*, which specific allude to the “Queen of Light” (possibly Galadriel – the queen of the elves) as well as the “dark Lord” and the “ring wraiths”. The battle, which has often been identified by fans as the Battle of the Pelennor Fields from *The Return of the King*, provides a rich setting for nostalgic urges by contrasting times of war and conflict to the time of perceived peace that existed before.³⁸ This contrast looks both to nostalgia’s history as a medical term for

³⁶ Tolkien, 367.

³⁷ Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (New York: Vintage International, 1996).57.

³⁸ The song, itself does not specify a battle from the books, but that hasn’t stopped fans for creating their own readings. For an example of fan interpretations see “Led Zeppelin and Lord of the Rings – Rockers

homesick soldiers but also the original roots of “nostos”, which harkens to Odysseus’s homecoming, inextricably bound with ideas of war and homesickness. Led Zeppelin’s sonic recreation of a battle in Middle Earth captures a nostalgic tone of longing. Plant’s vocal cries throughout the song articulate strain and desperation, lying clearly above his comfortable tessitura. The continual downward motion of the wails further evokes a sense of yearning. The haunting, pastoral soundscape layers a melancholy longing on top of a rural, outdoor environment depicted through the lyrics and the acoustic instrumentation. In the song, Led Zeppelin sets up the destructive world of war in opposition to an idealized and arcadian peaceful home – an idea that is emphasized by the dilapidated, post-war, urban housing depicted on the album’s front cover.

While “The Battle of Evermore” operates in specifically articulated settings, the situation of “Ramble On,” from Led Zeppelin’s second album (1969) is less clear. The opening lyrics paint an unspecified, misty outdoor locale:

Leaves are falling all around, it's time I was on my way.

Thanks to you, I'm much obliged for such a pleasant stay.

But now it's time for me to go. The autumn moon lights my way.

For now I smell the rain, and with it pain, and it's headed my way.

Sometimes I grow so tired, but I know I've got one thing I got to do...

and Tolkien Fans,” The One Ring, accessed February 22, 2018. <http://www.theonering.com/reading-room/critical-viewpoints/led-zeppelin-and-lord-of-the-rings-rockers-and-tolkien-fans>

There is some indication of a connection to nature with “leaves...falling all around”, and the autumn moon lighting the way. The premise of the song’s lyric is found in the chorus and the title – “Ramble On.” In writing this song, Led Zeppelin draws on the tradition of the itinerant blues traveler. Josh-Wade Ferguson cites Angela Davis to remind us that “rambling” in the blues tradition is a clear double entendre:

Rambling...is an illicit movement where numerous sexual partners can be found from house to house, town to town. The combination of sex and travel marks an “important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation,” because, for the first time in the US, black men and women were free to choose their own sexual partners and go where they pleased.³⁹

This is certainly the *musical* tradition from which Led Zeppelin was drawing. However, it is not a cultural tradition to which they could relate. In 1963 Amiri Baraka (publishing under the name LeRoi Jones) further expressed this historical movement of Southern Blacks as an economic necessity: “...the thousands of black blues shouters and ballit singers who wandered throughout the South around the turn of the century moved from place to place not only because Negroes were allowed to travel after the Civil War, but because for a great many Negroes, emancipation meant a constant search for employment.”⁴⁰ While the employment of the touring musician was tied to movement, it was not equitable to the precarious necessity of travel by Black blues musicians in the

³⁹ Josh-Wade Ferguson, “Rambling Blues: Mapping Contemporary North American Blues Literature” PhD Diss., (The University of Mississippi, 2019), 5-6. Angela Y. Davis, *Black Legacies and Blues Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 4.

⁴⁰ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka). *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 78.

American South after the Civil War. Instead, Zeppelin draws their understanding of the blues tradition through the influence of what Andrew Kellet refers to as the “British blues network.”⁴¹ Kellet builds on Elijah Wald’s assertion that “for most modern listeners, the history, aesthetic and sound of the blues as a whole was formed by the Stones and a handful of their white, mostly English contemporaries...[I]t is through their eyes that the rest of the world has come to see the blues.”⁴² Led Zeppelin continues this act of reimagining the Blues, merging it with their contemporary understanding of Britishness and identity.⁴³

Thus the nostalgic fantasy of the rambler is both one rooted in a Blues tradition, but reinvented through the band’s understanding of collective understanding of British another common English medievalism of the pastoral mode - nature walks or “rambles”. These rambles are central to the song’s nostalgic impulses, relying on cultural memory for outdoor walks as a popular English pastime. Trentmann has shown in his writing on “ramble” culture in early twentieth century England, that by this time “the countryside was already invested with the Arcadian aura of a ‘Golden Age’.”⁴⁴ The Victorian

⁴¹ See Andrew Kellet, *The British Blues Network: Adoption, Emulation and Creativity*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

⁴² Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad, 2004), 220-21.

⁴³ Kellet traces this act to roots in previous British musical history: “...Britain gained a reputation for borrowing forms and styles from the Continent and adapting them in interesting ways. In the 1960s, British blues enthusiasts drew on this long-standing tradition by producing a varied musical *mélange*. [...] Centuries’ worth of British cultural borrowing was not necessarily a conscious influence on British rock musicians, but I argue that it helped prepare the ground for what would come.” Kellet, *The British Blues Network*, 4.; Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 249.

⁴⁴ Frank Trentmann, “Civilization and Its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth-Century Western Culture,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 4 (October 1, 1994): 584.

romanticism rooted in pastoral imagery and medievalism carried into the later 20th century. The sense of longing expressed in the song looks to rambles as a mode of accessing a spiritual connection to the outdoors. As Trentmann explains: “Ramblers approached nature as a teacher of the principles of simplicity, peace and a life of harmony with the natural elements.”⁴⁵

To a slightly lesser degree, Jethro Tull’s *Aqualung* also embraces the tension between acoustic and electric modes of sound in its critique of urbanization and corruption. In the album’s 25th Anniversary box set, novelist Craig Thomas describes the contrasting sounds heard in the title song as “blues-hard rock declamation” and “lyrical-folk introspection.” He interprets this opposition as “the clash between the individual and society, between the rural and urban worlds, between happiness (however qualified) and disillusion,” and views it as “the archetypal tension of so many songs by the band.”⁴⁶ The song, “Locomotive Breath,” also captures this dichotomy by beginning with John Evan’s improvisatory solo piano introduction. The piano is soon joined by a counter-melody in the electric guitar. As the introduction comes to its close, the piano is completely overpowered by the growing distortion from the guitar. The romantic virtuosity of the pianist (which could be interpreted as the embodiment of the “human spirit”) gives way to the power and force of the “locomotive” pulse of the entire rock band. The great machine of the industrial revolution, once again, reigns supreme. In a 2018 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Anderson reflected: “It was my first song that was perhaps on a topic that would be a little more appropriate to today’s world. It was about

⁴⁵ Trentmann, “Civilization and It’s Discontents,” 588.

⁴⁶ Jethro Tull, *Jethro Tull: 25th Anniversary Box Set*. Chrysalis CDCHR 6004, 1993, compact disc.

the runaway train of population growth and capitalism. It was based on those sorts of unstoppable ideas. We're on this crazy train. We can't get off it. Where is it going?"⁴⁷

The overwhelming pressure of modernity relies on the collective understanding runaway train's imagery. In "Locomotive Breath" the acoustic mode is, once again, used as representative of "natural" elements and places, while the electrified, distorted rock sections can be seen as representative of an overly industrialized, modernized urban space.

Aqualung also issues its critique of urban, contemporary life through the use of recurring characters in many of the album's songs. The dark characterization of Aqualung—a creepy, homeless pedophile—highlights the dangers and sexual profligacy of the city. Aqualung, the character, never speaks a word, but his pedophilic intentions ('eyeing little girls with bad intent') and poor hygiene ('snot dripping down his nose, greasy fingers smearing shabby clothes') are explicit. Further, his name alludes to an underwater breathing device, derived from the sound of his labored breaths ('and you snatch your rattling last breaths with deep sea diver sounds'). His asthmatic symptoms can be reasonably inferred to stem from a number of urban pollutants such as smog or cigarettes. Both Aqualung and Cross-Eyed Mary (the main character and the title character of the album's second track) are found in this same, polluted space—far away from nature. As English writer Alan Moore puts it:

⁴⁷ Kory Grow, "Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson: My Life in 10 Songs" *Rolling Stone* (June 27, 2018) <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/jethro-tulls-ian-anderson-my-life-in-10-songs-666164/> (accessed April 29, 2021).

Anderson places us firmly in North London, a London beneath a cold sun, by an urban playground...this situates us firmly in contemporary England—no exoticism, no fantasy, but a rather dirty reality.... Dirty, because there is a strong under-current of child molestation here—not only in the description of Aqualung, but Mary seems to have spent her lunch-hour undergoing a back-street abortion, hence her lift back with the ‘jack-knife barber’.⁴⁸

By setting both songs in the same location, Jethro Tull emphasizes the contemporary urban environment as a place of danger and disgust. Mary’s cross-eyedness (whether literal or not) implies an inability to see things as they really are, because the realities are too horrifying. *Aqualung*’s lyrics critique the present day. This critique is supported through the pastoral allusions introduced by the acoustic guitars, recorders, and other instruments more commonly associated with the folk rock movement than hard rock. Further, the nostalgic desire for a simpler time is implied through the tone of songs like “Mother Goose” or “Wond’ring Aloud”. Even “Aqualung” uses imagery of nature (“*sun streaking cold*”; “*do you remember December’s icy freeze?*”) to reveal an alternative side of Aqualung’s world. The flowers (“*and the flowers bloom like madness in the spring*”) contrast the bitter cold of winter, felt as especially harsh by the homeless people wandering the empty city streets, while the bog (“*he goes down to the bog and warms his feet*”) becomes a place of refuge for the man’s aching feet. Although these references to nature may seem subtle in comparison to those found on *Led Zeppelin IV*, they are indicative of a growing trend in the band’s repertoire to turn towards an idealized image

⁴⁸ Allan F. Moore, *Aqualung* (New York, 2004), p. 26.

of pastoral England and the past. In 1971, however, the band was only beginning their pastoral turn, implying nostalgia primarily through a powerful critique of the contemporary urban world.

Mythology, Medievalism, and British Heritage

If the nostalgia of the early 1970s was grounded in an image of the unspoiled English countryside, it was a setting derived from several generations of fantasy and pseudo-historical imaginings.⁴⁹ Nostalgic visions of rural England had long looked to a temporal past seen as mythological, magical, and medieval. The Celtic world, especially, is often depicted as a “world before time, inhabited by supernatural creatures, power and heroes, fabulous myths and legends....”⁵⁰ Twentieth-century imaginings of the medieval encompass a wide spectrum of creative works, from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* to *Camelot* to Disney’s Fantasyland.⁵¹ Just as the term “medievalism” encompasses a broad range of creative practices, so too does its use in 1970s British rock music draw upon an eclectic array of source material. Embracing the Middle Ages as a pretext, according to Umberto Eco, allows musicians to use that time period ‘as a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters’.⁵²

⁴⁹ Each chapter in Norman Cantor’s monograph, *Inventing the Middle Ages*, provides a history of a different vision of the Middle Ages that was developed in the twentieth century, and explores the reverberating effects of each of those visions on later fantasies of the Medieval period. See Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York, 1991).

⁵⁰ Veronica Ortenberg West-Harling, ‘Medievalism as Fun and Games’, *Studies in Medievalism: Defining Medievalism(s) II*. XVIII (2009), p. 1.

⁵¹ See Upton, ‘Concepts of Authenticity in Early Music and Popular Music Communities’.

⁵² Eco, ‘Dreaming of the Middle Ages’, 68. This is also clearly visible in Led Zeppelin’s stage shows, where one could find Jimmy Page waving a violin bow in the air as a metaphorical wand, casting a spell on his audience through both the physical gesture of the raised bow and the unearthly sound it creates when shredding across the strings of an electric guitar.

To varying degrees, the albums and songs discussed in this chapter, both in their visual and sonic art, imagine the medieval world and create a metaphorical stage through which each band can play out their fantasies.⁵³ By submitting to spatial and temporal mobility provided by practices of nostalgia, specifically to medievalism and fantasy, these musicians were able to find a creative play space in which they could contemplate real-life cultural and societal issues.

Medieval-inspired Album Art

In *Led Zeppelin IV*, mysterious symbolic figures from several sources intertwine to create an aura of fantasy and mysticism. The inside cover is filled with a single pencil illustration, titled *The Hermit*, by Page's friend Barrington Colby, printed vertically across the fold.⁵⁴



Figure 2.7 *Led Zeppelin IV* – Inside Cover

⁵³ Video-game designer Brian Upton defines play as ‘free movement within a system of constraints.’ For rock musicians, the technological limitations of the physical album, as well as stylistic and genre expectations for the music provide some of these constraints. Brian Upton, *The Aesthetics of Play* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 15.

⁵⁴ Both Barney Hoskyns and Erik Davis recognize ‘View in Half or Varying Light’ as an alternative title. The hermit figure also connects back to the old man on the front cover. Both images depict an elderly man holding a walking stick and through the context of their placement, revere these men as sources of wisdom which have been lost to modernization; see Hoskyns, *Led Zeppelin* (New York, 2006), p. 129; Erik Davis, [*Led Zeppelin IV*] (New York, 2005), p. 36.

Page explains it as follows: ‘It actually comes from the idea from the tarot card of the Hermit, and so the ascension to the beacon and the light of truth.’⁵⁵ Page’s interpretation of the hermit as a transcendental figure likely came from his familiarity with Aleister Crowley’s writings on the Tarot. In his *Book of Thoth*, Crowley describes the Hermit (IX) as follows:

Wander alone; bearing the light and thy staff. And be the light so bright that no man seeth thee. Be not moved by aught without or within: Keep silence in all ways. Illumination from within, secret impulse from within; practical plans derived accordingly. Retirement from participation in current events.⁵⁶

Crowley’s writings on tarot and the occult aligned with a surge of medievalism in England in the Victorian era, and the revival of medievalism by musicians of the late 1960s and the 1970s draws on the writings of their 19th-century predecessors. Colby’s image is clearly modelled on the hermit card from the popular Rider-Waite tarot deck designed by Pamela Colman Smith in 1910.⁵⁷

With this image, Zeppelin looks back through several layers of pastness (early twentieth century, Victorian, and medieval) to an understanding of the world behind (or

⁵⁵ Hoskyns, *Led Zeppelin*, p. 129; Helen Farley traces the Hermit’s symbolic origins to Renaissance tarot packs under the alternative titles of *il Vecchio* (Old Man), *il Gobbo* (The Hunchback), or *il Tempo* (Time), and argues that the personification of time as an old man is likely one of the card’s earliest origins; see *Cultural History of the Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism* (London, 2009), p. 68.

⁵⁶ Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Thoth: A Short Essay on the Tarot of the Egyptians*, Equinox 3.5 (Boston, 1944), p. 257.

⁵⁷ George Case writes that in 2007, Page also connected the image to an 1845 painting of Christ holding a lamp-light, *The Light of the World*, by William Holman Hunt; see *Led Zeppelin FAQ*, p. 215.

beyond) the instrumental rationality of twentieth-century thought. The band embraces the card's significance to illustrate a quest for a pure and enlightened existence. There is, of course, a strong dissonance between the ideals of this card and the life of a massively famous, touring rock band. In many ways the mythical imagery and introspective, philosophical musings articulated by the album art and song's lyrics was a response to the criticism of the press. Several decades later, Page confirmed this goal. Referring to the wordless, album cover, he recalled: "They told us we were committing professional suicide and threatened war, but the cover wasn't meant to antagonize the record company – it was designed as a response to the music critics who maintained that the success of our first three albums was driven by hype and not talent."⁵⁸

The inside sleeve maintains the mysticism projected by *The Hermit* image through the juxtaposition of symbols from several different origins. The front of the sleeve displays the lyrics of "Stairway to Heaven." At the request of Page, Colby designed the font for the inside sleeve in a style similar to one Page had found in 'an old back issue of the Victorian arts and crafts magazine *Studio*.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Tolinski, *Light and Shade*, 141.

⁵⁹ Martin Power, *No Quarter: The Three Lives of Jimmy Page* (London, 2016).

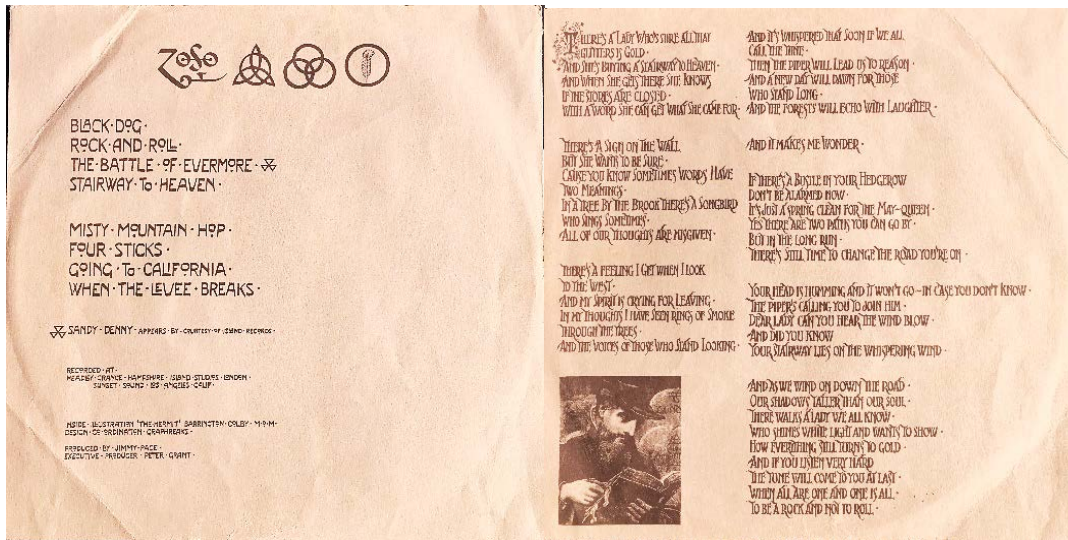



Figure 2.8 *Led Zeppelin IV* – Inside liner sleeve

The symbols  on the top of the page each represent a different band member. A fifth symbol can be found further down on the sleeve next to the name and appearance information of Sandy Denny, lead singer for the folk-rock band Fairport Convention.

It was Page who had the idea of a symbolic representation of each band member. He designed the first symbol himself and suggested Rudolph Koch's *The Book of Signs* to John Paul Jones and John Bonham for finding their signs, which are placed consecutively after Page's.⁶⁰ Jones' sign is described as one of 'two signs used to exorcise evil spirits.'⁶¹ This reference to the occult relies on nontraditional modes of understanding reality and harkens back in imagination to a time, in which the occult could explain the world as easily (or subjectively better) than science. Bonham's symbol also looks

⁶⁰Rudolf Koch, *The Book of Signs: 493 Symbols Used from Earliest Times to the Middle Ages by Primitive Peoples and Early Christians* (1930; repr., New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1955). Although it is tempting to place significant meaning on these choices, it is also likely that these were rather superficial decisions. For instance, Bonham's symbol appears on the page opposite of Jones' symbol in Koch's book, indicating that they may not have carefully searched through the book, rather choosing their individual symbols quickly from the same pages as their bandmate.

⁶¹ Koch, 33.

towards prescientific thought and, according to Koch's book, is an 'early sign' for the Trinity:

Each circle has its own center and is therefore complete in itself; at the same time it has a large section in common with each of the other circles, though only the small central shield is covered by all three circles. In this shield they possess a new central point, the real heart of the whole figure.⁶²



A Christian understanding of the Trinity requires believers to accept that God is simultaneously both tripartite and one. Such a concept defies rationality, exemplifying a belief system that scientific and technological progress cannot explain. While this symbol has religious origins, in Page's view it represents a man, woman, and child and relates to 'the mainstay of all people's belief'.⁶³ Similarly, Robert Plant saw a range of meaning in his, the fourth, symbol, stating: 'My choice involved the feather – a symbol on which all philosophies have been based. For instance, it represents courage to many Indian tribes.'⁶⁴ In addition to referring to the natural world, the feather and its symbolic connotations rely on ideas outside of Western culture, fixating on a perceived 'purity' of Native Americans. In doing so, Plant searches for wisdom in the ideas of people whom he thought potentially had a greater connection with the natural and spiritual realms of being.

⁶² Koch, 32.

⁶³ Hoskyns seems to draw from his personal archive of interview materials (likely from his previous work as a writer for *NME* and *Melody Maker*) for this particular quote, see Hoskyns, *Led Zeppelin*, p. 127.

⁶⁴ David Lewis. *Led Zeppelin: The Tight But Loose Files, Celebration II* (London, 2003), p. 25. The earliest documentation of this quote can be found in this anthology of resources on the band and its history. As editor and chief of *Tight But Loose Magazine*, Lewis draws on resources from previous editions of the magazine as well as his own files of exclusive interviews. Unfortunately, his 2003 book does not provide any additional information on the origins of this specific quote.

As a group, the symbols project both mystery and mysticism, directing their audience toward more ancient forms of understanding the world. Even without the personal associations, the four symbols engage with the rest of the cover art, to contribute to the mysterious tone of the album and to generate a creative space for nostalgic imaginings. This diversity of symbolic meaning ultimately creates a sense of timelessness, which Boym describes as an escape for the feeling of being “stifled within the conventional confines of time and space”.⁶⁵ This kind of nostalgia suggests dissatisfaction with present modes of creating meaning while offering the individual a variety of means to reconceptualize one’s identity and its relationship to the past.

In contrast to ’s eclectic array of mythological symbols and gestures, *Aqualung*’s critique of contemporary society uses specific appropriations of Christian references. The album extends its critique to the perceived hypocrisy of organized religion, thus adding to a complex vision of pastness in the present. The font used on the cover of *Aqualung* (see figure 10.4), like that found on the inside sleeve of , suggests several layers of pastness by resembling the Gothic lettering of a medieval manuscript or early printed Bible; the font looks to a specific historical moment, while the written form of the Bible itself dates as far back as the fifth century C.E. Another layer of pastness resides in the historical time depicted in Biblical stories, which themselves chronicle a vast temporal span - the “origins” of the world to first century after Christ.

⁶⁵ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. xiv.

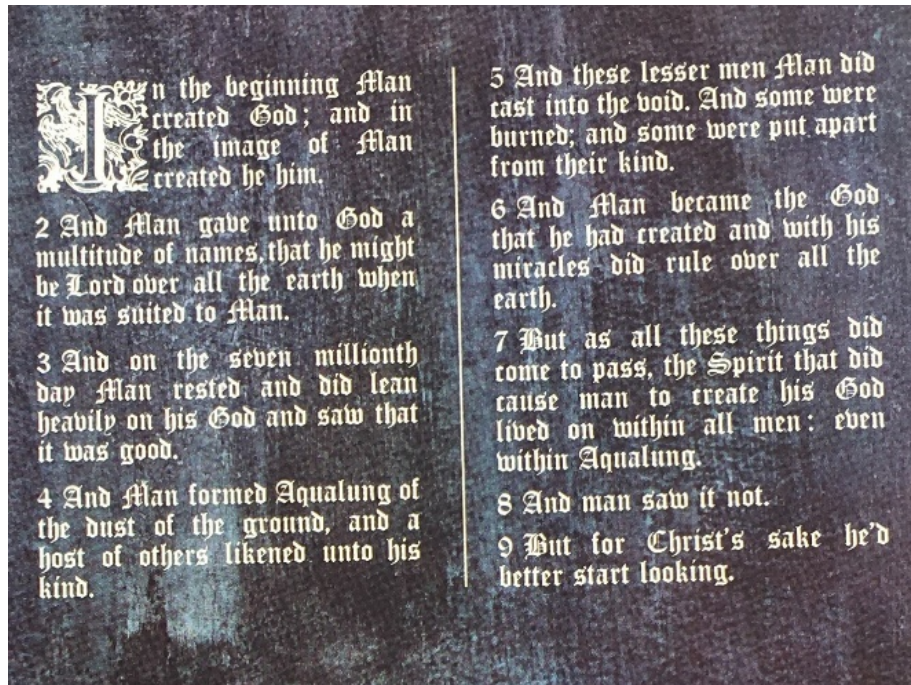


Figure 2.9 *Aqualung* – Back Cover

The evocation of the Bible is deepened through a parody of Genesis 1 printed on the back cover. This parody is the listener's first introduction to the cutting critique of organized religion manifest on the tracks of the albums' second half. The irony of the role reversal in Genesis—of man creating God and using his God to suppress other, 'lesser men'—is further developed in the two-part structure of the album's musical material. The first half of the album introduces a litany of strange characters, like Aqualung and Cross-Eyed Mary, who are reviled and pitied by society. Only after considering these characters' humanity, does the album dive into its powerful religious critique, driving home the message proclaimed on the album's back cover. The medieval church serves as the playground for the creative manifestation of this critique. The cover ultimately invites us to recognize the album's deep connections to a medieval past and its desire to irreverently appropriate this past for a new conception of the present and future, a present

and future that both indict humanity for its injustices while empowering them to use their ‘rule over all the earth’ to do something better.

The artwork on the inside fold depicts the band in a scene of wild revelry inside a Gothic church.



Figure 2.10 *Aqualung* – Back Cover

Anderson appears dressed in a white peasant top and boots, a popular medievalism of the late 1960s and 1970s; he irreverently swings a thurible above his head. Keyboardist John Evan is depicted playing the organ in his signature white suit. The band members are contextualized in an imagined Gothic framework—in a church whose architecture points to late 12th century onwards, while also serving as the contemporary recording space for the album. As it happens, the album was recorded in Island Studios, newly converted from an actual Gothic church on London’s Basing Street.

Medieval-inspired Songs

Medievalism, mythology, and references to English heritage are also present in the lyrics and music of these albums. The “Battle of Evermore,” as we have seen, situates

itself in the imaginative space of Middle Earth. This setting is not only a place, but equally importantly, a time. This is the medievalism of Umberto Eco's third "little Middle Ages"—a vision which sees the Middle Ages as a "barbaric age." *The Lord of the Rings* is not just a tale of Frodo's quest, but also a series of epic battles. While the battles are barbaric, there is a constant return to goodness. Norman Cantor writes: "Here is the medieval world at its most bellicose, destructive and terrible moments: the Age of the Barbarian Invasions in the fifth and sixth centuries; the Hundred Years' War in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries....What is surprising and original in *The Lord of the Rings* is not the power of darkness but the force of good led by Frodo".⁶⁶ A key element of medieval fantasy, recreated musically by Led Zeppelin, is a popular vision of the Middle Ages as a time of noble actions amid barbaric wars. These actions are rooted in the common man – represented by Frodo and Sam – and their bravery in standing up against the forces of darkness. The counterculture largely rejected war, and yet they found something heroic in the Tolkien's hobbits. For example, in 1966, Mary Merryfield explored the growing campus phenomenon of college students sporting buttons declaring "Frodo Lives". She wrote in *The Chicago Tribune*: "'Frodo Lives!' That's the password and rallying cry of a growing number of college students who have made a 'hobbit' named Frodo their new literary hero." Merryfield interviews Illinois Teachers College-South English Professor Robert Meredith who offers: "The turning to the epic hero, to fantasy, wonder, myth, fable, is all part of [young people's] response to the disillusionment the modern world foists upon them. They ache for values; they're feeling forces stirring within themselves that are most refreshing and wonderful. This is a world-

⁶⁶ Norman F. Cantor. *Inventing the Middle Ages*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991). 228

wide phenomenon – this questioning searching.”⁶⁷ It Tolkien’s Hobbits are not participants in the battles but actors in bringing and end to the war. The counter-culture generation, standing up in opposition to the darkness and war of their own time, perhaps saw in themselves something of this bravery.

The battle scene in the “Battle of Evermore” is simultaneously historical (albeit fabricated) and unrealistically fantastic. The song offers a nostalgic vision of the past in which war was made with swords and crossbows, instead of fighter jets and bombs. At the same time, while these wars of the past seem more noble and romantic than those of the present, they were still destructive and chaotic events—events which may offer insight into the contemporary world. In both its original form as well as in its future appropriations (such as those of Led Zeppelin), Tolkien’s fantasy exemplifies Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s view that literature creates “‘Secondary Worlds,’ which illumine, rather than simply reflect reality.”⁶⁸ Middle Earth becomes a fantasy play-space in which the contemporary world can be seen through the lens of a past one.⁶⁹ Sonically, the creation of a fantastical world, set in the past, is achieved through several methods, prominently the lead-role of the mandolin, and the inclusion of a female voice (Sandy Denny, lead vocalist of the folk-rock band Fairport Convention). Denny’s folk-styled

⁶⁷ Mary Merryfield, "A Hobbit? He's a Campus Hero Now!" *Chicago Tribune* (Aug 21, 1966), G5.

⁶⁸ Veldman 46; Tolkien, himself, expresses a similar idea to Coleridge’s “secondary Worlds” when he write about the concept of “Sub-creation”. See J.R.R. Tolkien. “On Fairy Stories” *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983).

⁶⁹ Middle Earth, even if it is an imaginary world, operates as an imaginary history – one that is applicable to the present. In the preface to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien himself would explain: “I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.” J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965) xi.

singing contributes to the ethereal aesthetic created for the song. Page explains: “[The song] sounded like an old English instrumental first off. Then it became a vocal and Robert did his bit. Finally, we figured we’d bring Sandy by and do a question-and-answer-type thing.” For some listeners, the call and response may evoke older conceptions of singing, especially as found in liturgical church traditions including antiphonal psalm singing. Edward Macan draws specific connections between the Anglican Church and the English progressive rock “sound” in “modal harmony, the emphasis on ‘pipe organish’ sonorities and quasi-choral vocal arrangements, the fondness for pure head tones and tempered singing⁷⁰.” The religious and archaic associations with these sounds offer a sense of timelessness. Further, Denny’s voice also brings several layers of meaning to the exoticism of the soundscape. She is female and clearly not a member of the core band. Her outsider presence (whether or not listeners recognize her identity) works to transport the listener to someplace new. If listeners were aware of her place in the British folk-rock scene then her mere presence would connote folk, heritage and Britishness. Even the gender of her voice alone might have had folk connotations. As Macan points out, while female singers were co-equal participants in the folk-rock revivals of the sixties, they are much less common in sixties rock.⁷¹ Thus Denny’s voice would have sounded “folky” to contemporary listeners, whether or not they recognized her. The song still sounds like Led Zeppelin (Plant’s lead vocal is distinctive, and acoustic/folk soundscapes had been explored by the band before), but the prominent

⁷⁰ Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 150

⁷¹ Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 135.

addition of an ethereal female vocalist differentiates this song's sound world from typical "hard" rock. The historical-fantasy setting allows the band to create a world which operates in a completely different sense of time than the contemporary reality in which they lived.

The album's most iconic song, 'Stairway to Heaven', also uses instrumentation to create an ethereal, fantasy-world sound. Page admits this freely: 'It's ... incredibly English. It sounds almost medieval. At times it sounds like, you know, you want to have swirling mists.'⁷² While Page's description of the music as 'medieval' is certainly visual ("swirling mists") it's also, perhaps more importantly, a sound, tied to the use of recorders in the opening measures.⁷³ However, rather than indicating some specific historical period, their flutey tone indexes a 'general sense of a premodern "before now", a nostalgic tone that offers space for personal reflection and interpretation.'⁷⁴ The acoustic guitar introduction layers an ascending melodic line arching over the midpoint of the phrase, creating a musical "stairway" against the descending chromatic (lament) bass line. This Dorian melody, implied through emphasis on the lowered seventh at the end of key phrases ("*and she's buying a stairway to heaven*") hints at older, pre-tonal

⁷² Hoskyns seems to draw from his personal archive of interview materials (likely from his previous work as a writer for *NME* and *Melody Maker*) for this particular quote, see Hoskyns, *Led Zeppelin*, p. 97.

⁷³ Page's likely uses 'medieval' as a vague description of music from a more distant past. Susan Fast, on the other hand, attempts to tie the band's efforts to a specific historical moment, noting that as 'a trained musicologist with a fairly good grasp of historical styles of Western music, I hear traces of sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century Tudor music in the opening of 'Stairway to Heaven', and this situates it not in mythological time but in a particular historical moment.' She cites the timbre of the recorder as one of these specific elements; see *In the Houses of the Holy* (New York, 2001), p. 67. However, neither the members of Led Zeppelin nor their audiences would have been concerned with historical specificity. Instead, the recorders offer a sense of timelessness. The non-specificity of the past implied by these musicians, is a common and important characteristic of popular medievalism.

⁷⁴ Upton, 'Concepts of Authenticity in Early Music and Popular Music Communities'.

conventions. Simultaneously, the harmonic structure of the song employs more functional tonal harmony in the key of A minor, striking a balance between older and contemporary musical practices.⁷⁵ Additionally, the reverb effect in the recording gives an atmospheric suggestion of space, which brings to mind the large resonant space of a church.

The lyrics for ‘Stairway to Heaven’ further contribute to the medievalism and mythology of the piece. Here is how musicologist Robert Walser parsed them in 1993:

We encounter a number of mysterious figures: a lady, the piper, the May Queen. Images of nature abound: a brook, a songbird, rings of smoke, trees, forests, a hedgerow, wind. We find a set of concepts (pretty much summing up the central concerns of philosophy): signs, words, meanings, thoughts, feelings, spirit, reason, wonder, soul, the idea that ‘all are one and one is all’. We find a set of vaguely but powerfully evocative symbols: gold, the west, the tune, white light, shadows, paths, a road, and the stairway to heaven itself. At the very end, we find some paradoxical self-referentiality: ‘to be a rock and not to roll’.⁷⁶

Walser’s listing of categories help us understand the wide range of symbols, both spatial and temporal, that are found in the song. During the 2016 copyright trial over “Stairway to Heaven,” Plant reflected that he attempted to place “old, almost unspoken Celtic

⁷⁵ I am grateful to Elizabeth Upton for her insight on the effect of the modal melody in this song.

⁷⁶ Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, 1993), p. 159.

references into the piece'.⁷⁷ Similarly to many other creative works of medievalism, the song does not rely on the historical accuracy of its references or their individual symbolic weight. Instead, they derive their overall meaning from their interaction with one another. Instead, they derive meaning from their interaction. Together they create a mystical, imaginative space that is both past and pastoral.

Led Zeppelin's second album had already looked to a medieval past in "Ramble On." Like both "The Battle of Evermore" and "Stairway to Heaven," the dichotomy between acoustic and electric instrumentations grounds the time travel between past and present. Also, like the "Battle of Evermore," the song deals in Tolkien references. But it is unclear whether these references point to an *imaginary past* (in the narrative diagesis of Middle Earth) or whether they refer to *the reality of a contemporary environment* (with metaphorical references to figures from Tolkien). The lyrics intertwine personal experience with literary allusions:

Mine's a tale that can't be told, my freedom I hold dear.

How years ago in days of old, when magic filled the air.

T_u was in the darkest depths of Mordor, I met a girl so fair.

But Gollum, and the evil one crept up and slipped away with her.

The allusions to Gollum and Mordor are taken from Tolkien's works, and yet the rest of the lyric—meeting and losing a "girl so fair"—does not recount any particular scene from

⁷⁷ 'Read Robert Plant's Testimony at Led Zeppelin 'Stairway to Heaven' Trial', *Rolling Stone*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/read-robert-plants-testimony-at-led-zeppelin-stairway-to-heaven-trial-w434372> (accessed February 1, 2017).

the novels and further, does not actually make sense in the context of *The Lord of the Rings*.⁷⁸ Ultimately, like a medieval troubadour, or the Delta bluesmen from whom Zeppelin learned the “rambling man” trope, the singer is constantly returning to a life of travel, in which he is journeying towards, even searching for, true love, but never able to settle down (“*got no time for spreading roots*”).

In the late sixties when Zeppelin released “Ramble On,” the song’s title appealed to a common set of anti-modern values shared by ramblers, both the Mississippi and the British varieties, and the contemporary hippie counterculture. Ramblers rejected the techno-progressive attitudes of the modern world, so that “rambling became an antidote to the quickening speed of the modern machine age, providing the psyche with silence and peace from the urban chaos.”⁷⁹ Plant’s lyrics build on these associations; motion is offered as a response to the feeling of being tired and trapped (“*ah, sometimes I grow so tired, but I know I’ve got one thing I got to do...Ramble on*”). The lyrics constantly reference modernity’s quickly passing time (“*now’s the time, the time is now*”) and the need to keep moving. Rejecting the driven bustle of the city, “Ramble On,” instead, recovers a nostalgic view of motion through the countryside as timeless and freeing.⁸⁰ Further, the interweaving of Tolkien-esque characters into the song provides additional

⁷⁸ Although fair maidens would not be found in the dark world of Mordor, there is some precedent for songs which describe female characters as “fair” in Tolkien’s novels, especially when the imagery of unspoiled nature is strong. Notably, the forest dweller, Tom Bombadil, sings of a lost “fair river-daughter” in his “Hey dol! Merry Dol!” from *The Fellowship of the Rings*.

⁷⁹ Trentmann, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” 588.

⁸⁰ A trope of unending motion can be found across art forms. For instance, Alison Murray connects the ideas of “circular narrative motion,” and “unspecified time frame” to a sense of timelessness which one finds in nostalgic films. See Alison Murray, “Women, Nostalgia, Memory: Chocolat, Outremer, and Indochine.” *Research in African Literatures* 33, no. 2 (2002): 240.

layers of meaning. The need for constant motion (“*ain’t no time for growing roots*”) is depicted as a timeless tradition, going back to the medieval world: “years ago in days of old when magic filled the air.”

Though they don’t make narrative sense, the references to Mordor and Gollum connect the song’s epic journey to that of *The Lord of the Rings*. The legendarium of Tolkien’s quadrology centers around movement: from Bilbo’s adventures in *The Hobbit*, to the quest to return the Ring to Mordor, the novels rely on a constant state of motion. In the novels, Tolkien offers up several “walking songs” which accompany these journeys. Bilbo’s “The Road Goes Ever, Ever On” songs first appear in *The Hobbit*, and continue as “The Road Goes Ever On and On” in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The versions in the first novel of the trilogy, both as sung by Bilbo in the opening chapter and later, as recounted by Frodo, parallel the necessary movement captured in Plant’s “Ramble On”:

“The Road goes ever on and on / Down from the door where it began. / Now far ahead the Road has gone, / And I must follow, if I can.”⁸¹ The repetition of “on and on” is sonically reimagined as “ramble on”, which appears seven times within the song.

“Ramble On” is not the only song from Led Zeppelin’s repertoire to explore motion and walking songs as a critique of the contemporary world. “Out On The Tiles,” from the band’s third album (released in 1970, a year after “Ramble On”), begins with the line “As I walk down the highway, all I do is sing my song” and later characterizes the fast pace of his surroundings, as Plant sings, “People go and people come, see my rider right by my side / It’s a total disgrace, they set the pace, it must be a race / And the best thing I can do

⁸¹ The song appears in several forms in *The Lord of the Rings* including chapter 1 of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. J.R.R. Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Led Zeppelin “Ramble On,” recorded 1969, track 7 on *Led Zeppelin II*, Atlantic, 1969

is run.”⁸² Both songs imagine motion as a constant pull, an unyielding force which compels the singer onward, like the endless road down which the heroic hobbits of Tolkien’s legendarium must wander.

In many ways, the past embraced by Jethro Tull in their early albums is much more eclectic. Ian Anderson’s flute, while certainly carrying folk and pastoral associations, is also usefully ambiguous in its evocations of the past. From Gothic medievalism, through Baroque and Classical music, to 19th-century theater, the flute can transport the listener to a multitude of temporal spaces. This fungible use of the sonic past is linked to a larger impulse towards nostalgia, evidenced by, for example, the surge in popularity of Baroque and specifically Bach references during the late sixties. The instrumental “Bouree” on Jethro Tull’s 1969 album, *Stand Up*, is an overt example of the band’s participation in this Baroque fad. The track is based on Johann Sebastian Bach’s famous “Bourrée,” which Anderson attributes to learning through the floorboards of his London apartment:

...there was a media student in the room below who kept playing over and over again this refrain of the Bach tune “Bourrée.” He played it on classical guitar, but he only ever got the one bit, he never progressed beyond that basic thing. So I kept hearing that over and over and over and over again, and decided that I would try to use that little tune some way as a starting point for an instrumental piece.⁸³

⁸² Led Zeppelin, “Out On the Tiles,” recorded 1970 on *Led Zeppelin III*, Atlantic, 1970.

⁸³ Carl Wiser. “Ian Anderson: ‘The delight in making music is that you don’t have a formula’ SongFacts (April 11, 2013) <https://www.songfacts.com/blog/interviews/ian-anderson-the-delight-in-making-music-is-that-you-dont-have-a-formula> (accessed April 29, 2021).

Although this chapter is primarily concerned with medieval-inspired fantasies and their relation to the temporal moment of the early seventies, it is worth considering the influence of late sixties neoclassicism in setting the stage for seventies medievalism. If a medieval, pastoral fantasy is indeed afoot in early seventies Britain, it developed out of a previous, more general fascination with the orderly world of the past. Elizabeth Randell Upton traces this nostalgic lineage in popular music to the Beatles' late sixties work. She explains that, for non-specialists, historical accuracy is not as important as the semiotic associations they carry. Thus, we often find "slippage in meaning, especially for non-historians" which allow for "one element of the past to stand in for other historical times, through the common element of "oldness". She usefully theorizes that:

This kind of slippage explains how Baroque musical sounds in 1960s pop, originally by the Beatles, but also reinforced by other artists like the use of harpsichord in Simon and Garfunkel's otherworldly "Scarborough Fair/Canticle" (1966), comes to represent the past in general in 1970s medievalist folk-rock. The recorders in Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" (1971) call up associations not with J. S. Bach, or colonial America, or Marie Antoinette, but with memory, magic, and nostalgia.⁸⁴

So, too, do Jethro Tull's sonic associations with the past easily "slip" between historical period, and yet they still operate in the same nostalgic vein as works of creative medievalism more historically linked to the Middle Ages. By the time Tull recorded *Aqualung*, eclectic allusions to an ambiguously historical past were part of their musical

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Randell Upton. "Early Music and Popular Music: Medievalism, Nostalgia, and the Beatles," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Medievalism*, ed. Stephen C. Meyer and Kirsten Yri. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 509- 529

style. But the increased reliance on more medieval-inspired nostalgia, both in the album artwork (as we have already seen) and in the music, does characterize this album.

The piecing together of various medieval and mystical imaginings is manifest on the acoustic tracks of *Aqualung*, although they are used more sparingly than in Zeppelin's work. 'Mother Goose' is the most overt example. Ian Anderson intended it to be a 'surrealist pastiche with summery motives' of fairy tale (and faux-fairy tale) characters.⁸⁵ The song title brings to mind Robert Samber's popular eighteenth-century translations of the Mother Goose fairy tales, and, by association, the tradition of fables and nursery rhymes of Britain's literary history. The nostalgic backdrop of fairytale characters and childhood innocence are juxtaposed against a darker reality of concealed identities and sexual innuendo, dark thanks to the undertones of child molestation earlier in the album. Anderson identifies these characters as caricatures of real people he saw and met around Hampstead Heath (Mother Goose, Bearded Lady, Long John Silver, Johnny Scarecrow, etc.).⁸⁶ The imagery satirizes the diverse individuals who make up contemporary society, at the same time highlighting their inability to see one another's true identity.

Like Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven," "Mother Goose" also uses the recorder. In an interview included as the final track on the twenty-fifth anniversary release of *Aqualung*, Anderson describes the instruments as "weird, genuine, Yamaha, plastic, school recorders." Although he does not remember exactly what model they used for the recording, he acknowledges that they were "things we bought in the local school

⁸⁵ Moore, *Aqualung*, p. 42.

⁸⁶ See Moore, 40–41.

supply shop ... little plastic-y things.”⁸⁷ Anderson was clearly less concerned with the historical accuracy of the instrument or its sound than with the acoustic “bit of color” the recorders added.⁸⁸ Anderson also notes the personal nostalgic associations of the school recorder for musicians (and listeners) at the time, reflecting that the recorder was “for many people, their first shot at playing a musical instrument ... picking up the ‘school recorder’ and having a go.”⁸⁹ In this way, personal nostalgia acts as a catalyst for the social critique of the piece. The music and lyrics take the listener back to the simplicity of childhood, and, in this way, personal nostalgia acts as a catalyst for social critique in the song, complementing the more historical nostalgia found in the larger culture of the time.

Just as memories of childhood favor an idealized recollection of the innocence and simplicity of one’s own past, the historical nostalgia of British society in the 1970s romanticized the pastoral simplicity of a pre-Enlightenment past. Cultural historian Robert Hewison makes a similar observation on the commodification of nostalgia and British heritage, explaining that, paradoxically, “[n]ostalgia is felt most strongly at a time of discontent, anxiety, or disappointment, yet the times for which we feel nostalgia most keenly were often themselves periods of disturbance.”⁹⁰ In 1971 British society was searching for answers to the economic, political, and cultural chaos of the times. Through a historical nostalgia rooted in familiar images of British mythology and symbolism,

⁸⁷ John Bungey and Ian Anderson, ‘Ian Anderson Interview’, in *Aqualung (Bonus Track Version)*. Parlophone Records Ltd, 1996, <http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/aqualung-bonus-track-version/id726371044> (accessed June 14, 2016).

⁸⁸ Bungey and Anderson.

⁸⁹ Bungey and Anderson.

⁹⁰ Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987), 45.

these two albums brought forward a hope for the future made believable through idealized memories of different pasts.

Conclusion

Faced with the collapse of utopian visions imagined in the 1960s, young adults in England stood perched at the top of a new decade with new politics, economic instabilities, and societal concerns creating uncertainty for their future. The music of Led Zeppelin, Jethro Tull and other early seventies rock groups participate in this pivotal moment, and they show a generation of British youth attempting to navigate their uncertain present and future, by looking to romanticized visions of the past for inspiration. Made cautious by the overly zealous idealism of the previous decade, this new generation embraced a more tempered vision of the future—one that could move beyond the limitations of archaic ideas of religion and traditional lifestyles, and yet still retain the values of spiritual and communal unity which they found in romanticized past imaginings.

Chapter 3

“Out in the Country”:

Rural Romanticism, the Western, and Folk Ideology in American Rock Music at the Turn of the 1970s

For a generation of young musicians at the start of the 1970s, the American countryside emerged as a place of nostalgic fantasy. The open-air inclinations of the hippie generation took on a “country,” often Country & Western flair, as artists looked to the past to find American identity. In many ways, the past they found was the same as that embraced by the folk revival of the 1950s, itself colored through the lens of postwar nostalgia. Thomas Gruning explains:

Nostalgia for an imagined past has long held a central role in folk music discourses. The sense of longing for the imagined rural homestead, the simplicity of a preindustrial lifestyle, and the freedom to wander the open prairies of America unfettered by the constraints of twentieth century modernity had particular resonance for folk musicians during earlier periods in the development of American industrialization.¹

When rock musicians picked up this banner of nostalgic longing for an unspoiled American countryside, they also embraced a romanticized vision of the individuals who had inhabited these spaces. Like their British counterparts, American rock musicians looking to

¹ Tom Gruning, *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music since the Sixties* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2006). 28.

the rural American countryside at the turn of the decade senses this nostalgia as growing disillusionment with the utopianism of an earlier psychedelic moment.

This chapter will consider American fantasies of the West in rock music at the turn of the 1970s. It will examine how rock music first discovered a past in the mid-sixties, through the gateway of the American folk revival. As sixties then drew to a close, Country & Western sounds and imagery, which once seemed antithetical to the cultural and political revolutions of the counterculture, became legible through the nostalgic playground of the American West and its mythical past. In some of these fantasies, the countryside operates as an Edenic paradise. In a long-standing American trope, the wide, open spaces of the wilderness are seen as offering spiritual renewal for individuals and communion with a brotherhood of mankind. In other fantasies, the American West is explored through the people who lived there and through their lives, which are imagined to have operated at a different pace and with a different perception of time. I will trace the fantasy of the American West in rock music through the vibrant California music scene(s) that emerged at the end of the sixties. To conclude, I will adduce three case studies of albums from 1970 which traverse the California music scene – Three Dog Night’s *It Ain’t Easy*, James Taylor’s *Sweet Baby James*, and The Grateful Dead’s *Workingman’s Dead*. Despite having their own unique sounds and musical associations, these musicians all embraced a similar Western fantasy in their output from this period. As Olivia Carter Mather argues in her study of The Eagles and Country Rock regionalism:

Regardless of the sounds these musicians produced, the West allowed bands to project countercultural values along with tradition. The Old West

easily morphed into imagery of Southern California as a locus of the American dream, myths of Western expansion, and individualism, lending a contemporary cultural significance to the music.²

Through these musical examples, we can understand engagement with the Western fantasy as a larger cultural trend that is not limited by the individual styles of the musicians. Ultimately, these musical creations offer an avenue for exploring how wilderness romanticism and pastoral fantasies operate as complex nostalgic expressions, navigating spaces between individual and collective memory: the nostalgic imaginings working in these albums are as rooted in personal recollections of childhood play as they are in the historical imagination.

The West in the American Imagination

As American historian Richard Aquila explains, “the West is seen as a place where one could achieve happiness, spiritual rejuvenation, universal brotherhood, and social, religious, and individual freedom, while living in a climate so healthy and vibrant as to dispel all doubts that the West must truly be ‘God’s Country’.”³ The West, as fantasy, need not be one place. The entire region from the Mississippi to the Pacific was an open playground. As Frank Bergon and Zeese Papanikolas write: “More than other American region, the West eludes definition because it is as much dream as a fact, and its locale

² Olivia Carter Mather. ““Cosmic American Music”: Place and the Country Rock Movement, 1965–1974.” Ph.D. Diss., (University of California, Los Angeles, 2006).

³ Richard Aquila, “Images of the American West in Rock Music” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 11, No. 4 (Oct. 1980), 415.

was never geographical. Before it was a place, it was a conception.”⁴ Nostalgic imaginings, of both time and place, luxuriate in the fantasy of wilderness; the physical reality of these visions are far less important than a romanticized landscape created by several layers of creative nostalgia. The West as frontier, as a “wide open” land of spiritual and physical renewal, is one of the most powerful American fantasies, created through generations of historical and political arguments, fine art, and popular visions of what the western frontier could mean to those who embraced it.

The West also encapsulated a fantasy about the folks who lived there. One of the core tenets of Folk, later appropriated by the definers of the rock aesthetic, centers around the fantasy that it is the music “of the people.” Certainly the conception of folk is a complicated one, as many scholars have discussed. Glossing the tradition of *volkisch* fantasies handed down from Herder and other Romantic nationalists, Robert Cantwell argues that ideas of the “folk” are inextricably connected to nobility and class distinction: “...the folk are simply what humanity appears to be from the prospect of social preeminence, as it gazes down on its dependents.”⁵ The American image of the “folk” locates it in the rural wilderness, but, of course, as Dave van Ronk notes in his memoir of the “great Folk scare” of the 1950s, those creating and listening to LP records of folk music were “the bourgeoisie,” members, like the Lomaxes, the Seegers, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, of an urban (or at least small-town) (upper) middle class: “One of the first things that must be understood about these revivals is that the ‘folk’ have very little to do with them. Always,

⁴ Frank Bergon and Zeese Papnikolas, eds. *Looking Far West: The Search for the American West in History, Myth and Literature* (New York, 1978), 59.

⁵ Robert Cantwell. *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 38

there is a middle-class constituency, and its idea of the folk – whoever that might be – is the operative thing.”⁶ As Simon Frith reminds us, “The radical tradition of American folk music was primarily the creation of a group of metropolitan, left-wing bohemians: their account of ‘the people’ was as rooted in myth and their own circumstances as was that of their more respectable, bourgeois, folk predecessors.”⁷ This remains true for Rock musicians and audiences who adopt folk practices in their own sphere.

Rather than historical authenticity, many rock musicians instead seemed to seek a revisionist imagining of the American folk in their songwriting.⁸ This conception aligns with what Greil Marcus influentially imagined as “the old, weird America” in his celebration of Dylan’s 1967-1968 electric re-working of folk and traditional repertoire with the members of his backing group, the Band.⁹ Marcus sets his image in opposition to an earlier vision of American folk music based on the romanticized image of the past that motivated the folk music collecting of a Carl Sandburg or Robert Gordon.¹⁰ Poet Kenneth

⁶ Dave Van Ronk and Elijah Wald, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street: A Memoir* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2005), 28.

⁷ Simon Frith. “‘The Magic That Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community.” *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 162.

⁸ The revisionism of the Western fantasy in rock music seems to less overtly critical of the past than what we find in Revisionist Western films of the same time.

⁹ The Basement Tapes refers to a series of recordings Bob Dylan made in 1966 with musicians who would later become the Band. Bootleg recordings circulated among music fans but the tracks were not released officially until 1975.

¹⁰ Although Sandburg and Gordon expanded the canon of American folk music beyond the Anglo-Saxon folk songs collected by earlier collectors such as Cecil Sharp and Francis Child, both collectors ultimately stuck primarily to a romanticized notion of American heritage in the collection and promotion of their works.

Rexroth called this idealized image of an American past the “old, free America.”¹¹ This straight white man’s fantasy imagined a national past unencumbered by (or at least unconcerned with) issues of race, gender or politics. Marcus counterpoises an alternative, more subversive national vision, first explored in Harry Smith’s hipster *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952).¹² In Dylan’s “Basement Tapes,” he hears folk-inspired musicians drawing on the essential strangeness of the past, filled with the weird sounds and stories of eccentric people; instead of a nostalgic, conservative settler nation, they voiced an “old, weird America.”

This much is undoubtedly true. But the folk-inspired past imagined by musicians of the seventies was also tied to the deeply conservative popular depictions of the West which filled their childhoods. This was the generation that grew up with Roy Rogers films and “Westerns” on network television. The mid-fifties saw an explosion of interest in settler colonialism, with the “Davy Crockett craze” inspired by a three-episode Disney television series in 1954 and 1955; NBC’s *Bonanza* carried the Western fantasy across this generation’s entire youth, running from 1959 all the way till 1973.¹³ As children, the Baby Boomer generation grew up thumbing Sears catalogues full of Western outfits,

¹¹ Greil Marcus. *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*. Updated ed., 2nd Picador ed. (New York: Picador, 2011), 86.

¹² Smith’s *Anthology* has been hailed as one of the most important influences on the folk revivals of the fifties and sixties. Kevin M. Moist explains: “The set, and the music and world view it contained, would spread like a subterranean virus during the decade serving as a bible for the late-1950s ‘folk revival,’ and later as a spur for the countercultural musical developments of the 1960s.” Moist, Kevin M. “Collecting, Collage, and Alchemy: The Harry Smith Anthology of American Folk Music as Art and Cultural Intervention.” *American Studies* 48, no. 4 (2007): 111-27

¹³ See Rollins, Peter C., O’Connor, John E., Rollins, Peter C. C., and O’Connor, John E. E., eds. *Hollywood’s West : The American Frontier in Film, Television, & History*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005. Accessed April 22, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

repeater rifles and hobby-horses. As young adults, the musicians among them looked to the 19th-century pastorals of Fennimore Cooper, Twain, and Zane Grey—and back to their own childhood play with Western fantasies—to make sense of their own contemporary environment. As Boym observes of post-Soviet nostalgia and memory, the anxieties and struggles of the postwar generation’s revolutionary adolescence had given way to “a new longing for the imaginary, ahistorical past, the age of stability and normalcy.”¹⁴ This collective nostalgia can reveal “a kind of nationwide midlife crisis; many are longing for the time of their childhood and youth, projecting personal affective memories on the larger historical picture and partaking collectively in a selective forgetting.”¹⁵ Signifiers of the American West became a playground of fantasy and collective longing, markers of memory for a time when the manifold political complexities of American identity could be boiled down to cowboy *vs.* Indian.

At a moment of headlong cultural change, the first wave of rock musicians created a Western playground for their own musical creations. This Western fantasy was not entirely new to rock musicians.¹⁶ Hippie attire clearly drew on cowboy *vs* Indian tropes from Baby Boomer childhoods through its appropriation of leather, buckskin fringe and eagle feathers.¹⁷ Alice Echols traces this connection to one of the foundational locations

¹⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). 58

¹⁵ Boym, 58

¹⁶ For an analysis of the intersection of hippie and cowboy culture see Michael Allen. ““I Just Want to Be a Cosmic Cowboy”: Hippies, Cowboy Code, and the Culture of a Counterculture.” *Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2005): 275-99.

¹⁷ While there is a growing awareness of Indigenous rights during the late sixties and early seventies, the music of these bands seems to avoid engaging with the Native American side of the “cowboys *vs* Indians” trope, beyond the stereotyping of native attire and some romanticization of their connection to environmental protection. This is an important area for future research.

of the hippie movement, The Red Dog Saloon, in Virginia City, Nevada: “for Baby Boomers raised on a steady diet of Westerns, the Red Dog, which was modeled on the saloon in *Gunsmoke*, was a dream come true. The men outfitted themselves with guns and quick-draw outfits.”¹⁸ For the most part, however, psychedelic music itself avoided country music influences, seen, not without reason, as conservative and square. While the Byrds, influenced by Gram Parsons’ desire to make a “cosmic American music,” released a country-themed album, *Sweethearts of the Rodeo*, at the height of the psychedelic movement (1968), it was not until the early seventies that their lead was taken up by erstwhile blues and “acid” rock musicians. Olivia Carter Mather discerns a shift in focus from “country” to “Western,” allowing the American past to become more fully accessible: “The mythical West, rich with metaphors of personal freedom, allowed country rock to present itself as the counterculture’s version of country while simultaneously non-southern and therefore less conservative.”¹⁹

By the early seventies, we find a diverse and surprising range of both new and established bands beginning to turn to a Western-inspired setting. Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young premiered the appropriately titled *Déjà vu* in 1970, with its sepia-tone, “old-timey” cover. In 1971, we find Kenny Loggins and Jim Messina (lately of Poco and Buffalo Springfield) decked out as cowboys around a poker table on their cover of *Sittin’ In*. Three Dog Night’s 1970 *It Ain’t Easy* takes an eco-critical look at urbanism and the merciless wheel

¹⁸ Alice Echols. *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 35.

¹⁹ Olivia Carter Mather. “Takin’ it Easy in the Sunbelt: The Eagle’s and Country Rock’s Regionalism” *American Music* 31, No. 1 (Spring 2013), 27.

of progress with tracks like “Cowboy” or “Out in the Country.” James Taylor, who had cut his first album in England, working with the Beatles’ Apple records, had found his way to California and used Western imagery in his *Sweet Baby James*. (British rocker Elton John had released his own Western themed album, *Tumbleweed Connection*, the year before.), In these early moments of the decade, even the Grateful Dead moved away from their psychedelic blues in search of a mythological America with *Workingman’s Dead*. Whether the Western themes inspired an entire oeuvre, an album or just a few songs, images of Americana became a playground for many nostalgic, fantastic imaginings.

Rock Finds the Past through Folk Music

To understand the phenomenon of Western themes in rock music, it helps to take a step back, historically, to look at how American rock music first began to access the past in its music. The mid-sixties saw the convergence of folk and rock music traditions in the United States. Whether Dylan plugging in his Fender Stratocaster at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, or the Byrd’s cover of “Mr. Tambourine Man” while sporting Beatles haircuts and a Rickenbacker 12-string, by the end of the sixties, the intertwining of rock and folk—both sound and ideology—was in full force.²⁰ As rock and roll assimilated the folk *topos*, it began also to encounter and process ideas connected with “the folk,” especially those forged in the political struggles of the postwar folk revival. Frith posits what he calls the “folk-rock argument,” which “is not about how music is made, but how it works”; in this view, rock music operates as a folk music according to the way

²⁰ See Elijah Wald. *Dylan Goes Electric: Newport, Seeger, Dylan, and the Night That Split the Sixties* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015).

it is “used” by its listeners, articulating “communal values.”²¹ Ideological rock critics like John Landau “claimed their music as folk in order to distinguish it from the rest of pop; rock was ‘popular music that was not imposed from above,’ that did not fake emotion.”²² In short - folk music gave rock music its own definition of “authenticity.”

While the term has been widely contested in musicology, the concept of “authenticity” remains an active presence in the ideology and discourse of rock by musicians, critics and audiences. Much of the challenge of using the term in scholarship comes from the many varied definitions assigned to it. For some, authenticity is tied to the relationship between the musician and the music they perform. Allen Moore uses the example of Ewan McCowell who, as a member of the second English revival of the fifties, “insisted that one should sing only in one’s own native tongue, and sing songs only from one’s own social or cultural setting.”²³ This is certainly not the type of authenticity with which many white folk and rock musicians were concerned. In fact, by accessing the past through the folk tradition, rock musicians of the seventies could actually bypass the Black roots of the traditions from which their music was derived. Instead of looking to Chuck Berry, Little Richard, or even early Blues musicians like Robert Johnson, they could turn to Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger and the lineage of white folk revivalists to find their past.

Thus, folk and rock musicians often look to another definition of authenticity, one that derives its meaning by association with a primal source.²⁴ Although many folk

²¹ Frith, “The Magic That Can Set You Free,” 159.

²² Frith, 160.

²³ Alan Moore. “Authenticity as Authentication” *Popular Music*, 21. No.2 (May 2002), 211.

²⁴ See Timothy Taylor. *Global Pop: World Musics, World Markets* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

revivalists were concerned with how closely the new material relates to that source (in sound, instrumentation, style), rock musicians seem to focus primarily on the origin source.²⁵ When rock music accesses the past through folk's lead, it does not often concern itself with authenticity of tradition - of how close it can remain to the original - but instead focuses on the lineage. The music is deemed authentic by musicians and listeners because it *has* a recognizable past, even if it has evolved stylistically from it. As Moore reminds us: "Authenticity is a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicized position. It is ascribed, not inscribed."²⁶ Rock music uses the past as a device of authentication.

Frith rightly argues that what rock took from the folk 'revival' was "bound up with rural romanticism, with a search for values and ways which could be opposed to urban commerce and corruption."²⁷ Certainly rural imagery becomes an integral part of the rock's romantic inclinations of the late sixties and early seventies, but it wasn't just the images of pastoral space and community of the folk that appealed to the rock world: Folk music helped rock music find a useful past. Rock music, in its early-to-mid-sixties guise as "rock 'n roll," was still firmly planted in the world of commercial pop, and thus the currency of its authenticity was *hipness*, being "with it," the realm of newness, youth and independence: "the essence of pop is the exhortation to 'be here now', meaning both 'live like there's no tomorrow' and 'shed the shackles of yesterday'."²⁸ Rock 'n roll's

²⁵ See Philip Bohlman. *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988),

²⁶ Moore. "Authenticity as Authentication," 210.

²⁷ Frith, "The Magic that Can Set You Free," 161.

²⁸ Reynolds, *Retromania*, xvii-xix.

emergence into white mainstream consciousness in the mid-fifties meant that it did not yet have a widely acknowledged white history or lineage.²⁹ In the minds of the baby boomers, many of whom had lived through it personally, its past only seemed to go back as far as they did, back to Elvis and Buddy Holly. But when folk music merged rock ‘n roll to create “rock” at mid-decade, it gave musicians and listeners a way of accessing a more catholic and distant past. Folk music, as a practice, engages with the past—really, with many pasts at once—and is a participant in the process by which that past is constructed. As Benjamin Filene notes, early attempts to create a commercial “folk music” in which music wasn’t simply being preserved, but sold to audiences, centered around music that, even if it was written that week, sounded as if it *could be* old. Filene highlights Ralph Peer’s work gathering “hillbilly” music, aimed at Southeastern, working class, white listeners: “Peer recognized [...] that old-timey music need not actually be old, and certainly not as old as a fourteenth-century ballad. Primarily he wanted to record artists who were comfortable enough with traditional music to sing songs in the older *styles* that attracted hillbilly music’s audiences.”³⁰ Nolan Porterfield observes a similar effort in the music of Jimmy Rogers and the Carter Family (who Filene notes were both “discovered” and frequently recorded by Peers), who looked to “old half-forgotten relics of the past”

²⁹ As historians today, of course, we chart the roots of rock and roll through decades of blues, rhythm and blues, country and western, and popular music, but for musicians, critics and audiences of the sixties, rock and roll history extended only as far back as the mid-fifties. Indeed the first rock and roll histories were not written until the late-sixties. Elijah Wald observes: “Those writers were still living in the midst of the rock revolution, and these created a pictures of the 1950s in which Elvis, [Chuck] Berry, [Jerry Lee] Lewis, Big Joe turner, Littler Richard, Ruth Brown, Buddy Holly, the Drifter, and dozens of other artists pioneered a new style and forever transformed popular music. Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock and Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8.

³⁰ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 37.

and “original songs that sounded like the old ones.”³¹ The “folk” in folk-rock was one of the first points where mainstream rock could authentically incorporate a sound world associated with the past. It’s hard to imagine Chuck Berry’s or Bo Diddley’s listeners being nostalgic for the past, and, outside of a few blues purists, rock music of the sixties was basically progressive and modern-sounding. Folk-rock could be both new *and* old; it drew on older traditions, but added contemporary sounds while addressing contemporary issues.

By the dawn of the seventies, American rock music’s relationship to the past was thus at a crossroads. Folk music allowed access to “older” sounds and folk storytelling, a combination which could assimilate and trump the conservative political associations of country & western music in the Nixon era. Country music, like folk, was rooted in past traditions, using acoustic instrumentation and narrative songwriting, but it was also ever more tightly linked with conservative backlash politics. In 1972, the Country Music Association went as far as to create a custom-pressed LP called *Thank You Mr. President*, narrated by the CMA’s president (and Republican Senate candidate from Tennessee), Tex Ritter. In a dissertation on country music, race and politics, J. Lester Feder counts this record as one of the bluntest pronouncements of partisan political alignment ever associated with a commercial genre of popular music:

When Tex Ritter proudly told Richard Nixon on *Thank You Mr. President* that “our country music...in reality is the voice of your ‘Silent Majority,’” he was not only asserting country music’s ideological sympathy with the

³¹ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 37.

President's politics. He was claiming the President's political base – the conservative working people whom Nixon had first labeled the “forgotten Americans” and rechristened the “Silent Majority” after his election – for country music.³²

While rock music wasn't always this overtly political, if it was going to look backwards, it needed to avoid being entangled with conservative backlash. Populist folk references enabled rock musicians to explore a congenial and authentic musical past without slipping into backlash politics. Of course, if one goes far enough back, country music and folk music demonstrably share many of the same impulses. Once the door to the past was opened, country-influenced rock soon followed. It should be no surprise then, that the first figures to attempt to transition from a rock paradigm to a country and western one are the same musicians who were exploring the folk-rock divide mid-decade. Although largely considered unsuccessful, the Byrd's experiment *Sweethearts of the Rodeo* (1968) kicked off the movement. Dylan followed in 1969, recording *Nashville Skyline* in Nashville itself, and collaborating with Johnny Cash in the process. As Peter Doggett observes about this pivotal moment, “The most daredevil spirit of the rock era was now content to perform gentle country music. Such was Dylan's iconic power, that far from alienating his audiences by this volte-face, he was able to drag them along in his wake.”³³

³² J. Lester Feder "'Song of the South': Country music, race, region, and the politics of culture, 1920--1974 (Jimmie Rodgers, Merle Haggard, Charley Pride, Ray Charles, Carter Family)." PhD Diss (University of California, Los Angeles, 2007), 195.

³³ Peter Doggett, *Are You Ready for the Country: Elvis, Dylan, Parsons and the Roots of Country Rock*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 10.

For folk-rock pioneers like the Byrds and Dylan, country music became a natural extension of folk; by the start of the seventies, even more musicians were exploring that space. Further fueled by the disappointments of the sixties counter-cultural revolutions, country musical sounds and Western fantasies became a new playground for nostalgic, back-to-roots longing.

California Country

The transition to country-rock music was not as simple as Greil Marcus would have had us believe in his 1968 analysis of the new phenomenon: “People were just imitating *John Wesley Harding*, that’s all. They suddenly thought, ‘Bob Dylan says we shouldn’t be doing *Pepper*-style sound effects, we should be doing simple roots music about the soil.” In truth, however, rock musicians had been dabbling in the sound world of country for some time. As Doggett rightly argues, for many of the leading American rock bands of the sixties, “country music wasn’t foreign territory, but the core of their own heritage.” Bands such as the Grateful Dead and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young had their roots in folk and country-based music, especially bluegrass, before taking up rock and roll.³⁴ It is also important to note that the seeds of country rock emerged in the West - most specifically through the interactions of intersecting musical communities of California in the mid-to-late sixties. The decade see-sawed between North and South, San

³⁴ Prior to forming the Grateful Dead, Jerry Garcia had played in several folk and Bluegrass bands (often as a dedicated banjo player) from 1960 onward. He also worked with Dead lyricist Robert in several folk/bluegrass groups during this time. Some of these bands include the Thunder Mountain Tub Thumpers (Spring 1962), Sleepy Hollow Hog Stompers (May 1962-September 1962), Wildwood Boys (Fall 1962), Hart Valley Drifters (November 1962, and again at the Monterey Folk Festival in 1964), Godawful Palo Alto Bluegrass Ensemble (Summer 1963), Black Mountain Boys (Winter 1963-Spring 1964), Mother McCree’s Upton Jug Champions (Spring 1964-Fall 1964) and the Asphalt Mountain Jungle Boys (Summer 1964).

Francisco and Los Angeles, with the Bakersfield-Hollywood axis also playing an influential role.

The California music scene in the late sixties and early seventies was an amalgamation of influences, some homegrown, some transplanted. In addition to the city's native labels (Capitol, Warner Bros., A&M), Los Angeles became the West Coast hub for several major East Coast labels which set up shop in the city by the end of the decade (Elektra, Motown, Aldon Music). The city also found itself in the midst of a massive influx of artists, many of whom flocked to the (at that time) rural hippie enclaves of Laurel Canyon, Silverlake, and Topanga.³⁵ In 2012, Joni Mitchell explained the atmosphere of Los Angeles in the late sixties, saying: "Like Paris was to the Impressionists and the post-Impressionists, L.A. was the hotbed of all musical activity. The greatest musicians in the world either live here or pass through here regularly. I think that a lot of beautiful music came from it, and a lot of beautiful times came through that mutual understanding."³⁶ In addition to the burgeoning singer-songwriter community (Joni Mitchell, Carole King, James Taylor), the artistic communities surrounding Hollywood gave root to other musical developments and fusions, including freaks like Frank Zappa, the Doors, and Alice Cooper, as well as folk-rock pioneers like the Mamas and the Papas, the Byrds, and

³⁵ Laurel Canyon is a small area of Los Angeles in which many of the musicians of this area live (in particular, many all lived on the same street - Lookout Mountain Ave). However, the scene was much bigger than that: "many songwriters resided in Laurel Canyon, Silverlake, and Topanga Canyon—eclectic enclaves in the hills immediately north of the city that were, in the 1970s, more affordable places to live. Through my interviews, I observed practitioners from this scene using the term "Laurel Canyon" in reference to any of these hippie neighborhoods on the fringe of Hollywood." Christa Anne Bentley. "Los Angeles Troubadours: The Politics of the Singer-Songwriter Movement, 1968-1975." PhD diss, (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016), 94.

³⁶ Malka Maron. *Joni Mitchell: In her Own Words* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2014), 51.

Buffalo Springfield (members of whom would go on to form the eponymous supergroup Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young).

On the other hand, although the Sunset Strip had its drugs and Kesey's Pranksters regularly passed through town, the late sixties left San Francisco positioned as the unrivaled nucleus of the psychedelic counterculture. The Haight-Ashbury district served as the Northern California equivalent of Laurel Canyon—an artistic refuge for young hippies looking to find like-minded companions.³⁷ In a 2007 interview with *The Guardian*, The Grateful Dead's Bob Weir described the scene: "Haight Ashbury was a ghetto of bohemians who wanted to do anything—and we did but I don't think it has happened since. Yes, there was LSD. But Haight Ashbury was not about drugs. It was about exploration, finding new ways of expression, being aware of one's existence."³⁸ The folk music scene was especially pronounced in the region, with many of the fifties Beat Generation sharing a deep interest in music and American culture of the past.³⁹ Notably, West Coast record-collector Harry Smith had made San Francisco his home base while compiling what would become the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Released in 1952, this collection became a fascinating trove of America's past for people like Jerry Garcia and his writing partner, lyricist Robert Hunter.

The San Francisco counter-culture scene was eclectic, but some prominent influences stand out. Significantly for this chapter, one that stood out was the Western,

³⁷ See Tom Wolf. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Picador, 1968).

³⁸ Ed Vulliamy. "Love and Haight" *The Observer* (May 20, 2007) <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/may/20/popandrock.features8> (Accessed May 1, 2021)

³⁹ See Joel Selvin. *The Summer of Love: The Inside Story of LSD, Rock & Roll, Free Love and High Times in the Wild West* (New York: Plume, 1995).

“cowboys and Indians”-influenced aesthetic that infused fashion, music and the other arts. This can be clearly seen in the music and dress of The Charlatans, one of the core bands of the late sixties counter-culture movement in San Francisco. In 1965, San Francisco native band The Charlatans got their start in the previously mentioned Red Dog Saloon in Virginia City, Nevada. The recently restored Red Dog was the perfect fit for a band that “had perfected their old-time look through countless hours of rummaging in San Francisco’s well-stocked thrift stores.”⁴⁰ The Red Dog prided itself on its character, as one of its owners, Chandler Laughlin, reflected in 2005: “...the theory of the Red Dog was, when your feet hit the floor in the morning, you were in a B-Western movie.”⁴¹ The Charlatans participated in this fantasy and brought it with them when they returned to San Francisco.

Finally, situated between these two musical and cultural powerhouses was Bakersfield, which maintained its own active and heavily country-influenced musical scene. In his journeys to the unknown and forgotten “crossroads of rock ‘n’ roll,” Randy McNutt described the Bakersfield phenomenon:

“The Bakersfield Sound is both fast and slow, thoughtful and playful, electric and acoustic, but mostly it’s music with a true hillbilly heart. From the 1950s to the 1970s, when it occupied a prominent place in Los Angeles recording studios

⁴⁰ Selvin, *The Summer of Love*, 5.

⁴¹ Karen Woodmansee. “‘Proto-hippie’ Still Burning Up the Airwaves” *Northern Nevada Business Weekly* (August 21, 2005) <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.nnbw.com/news/2005/aug/21/proto-hippie-still-burning-up-the-airwaves/&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1615354509119000&usg=AOv-Vaw1ixQLI6ITMaixoHg0PyE3j> (April 28, 2021)

and on the national charts, Bakersfield supplied an army of session musicians for Capital Records. [Buck] Owens, Red Simpson, Bill Woods, Jelly Sanders, and their friends piled into cars and drove one hundred miles south to Los Angeles to play on singles and albums for producer Ken Nelson. Because they were accomplished but not full-time session players, Bakersfield's musicians brought a fresh approach that sounded uncluttered. After a session, they'd head north to the potato fields and factories and honky-tonks -- to home."⁴²

Located just over a hundred miles north of Los Angeles, Bakersfield musicians like Buck Owens and Merle Haggard had access to the Los Angeles recording studios and venues but were far enough away to establish their own sonic identities separate from both Los Angeles and Nashville. Peter La Chapelle describes the emergence of Bakersfield, in 1967, as the "Country Music Capitol [*sic*] of the West," replacing Los Angeles as "Nashville West." Its edgier, rock-influenced sounds, like the "outlaw" scene based in Austin, Texas, separated the Bakersfield Sound from the Southern associations of country during the sixties.

Traversing the interconnected music scenes of 1960s California, West Coast rock musicians found a wide range of influences and sounds. As the Baby Boomer generation began to doubt the idealism of the psychedelic moment, it sought out roots to make sense of its place in the world. When the Western nostalgic fantasy centers California, it creates a common home for a wide-range of people. One need not be from California to feel its

⁴² Randy McNutt. *Guitar Towns: A Journey to the Crossroads of Rock 'n' Roll* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002)

influence. For one, it was already familiar through film and television. It was also a land of migrants, from the Gold Rush in the 19th century to the Okie Migration in the early 20th century. In the late sixties, a wave of young people who aimed to find a counter-culture utopia of like-minded individuals, as well as large influx of young musicians who hoped to achieve their dreams in this perceived land of opportunity, moved to California. It's notable that even expatriate musicians portray California as the mythical West during this time, including Joni Mitchell, a Canadian living in Laurel Canyon. In her song "California" (1971), Mitchell details her travels around the world, only to declare repeatedly, "California, I'm coming home." In a similar vein, Led Zeppelin's "Goin' to California" uses mythical imagery to imagine it as a space of idealized dreaming. In "Nostalgia and the Shapes of History," Nadia Atia and Jeremy Davies find "nostalgia's pleasures are ... especially treasured by travelers, immigrants, exiles, and refugees: by displaced people of all kinds".⁴³ The California vision of the West thus becomes the imagined homeland for the displaced - whether (like James Taylor) one comes to California to find that home, or (like the Grateful Dead) that native California homeland has been spoiled, and it must be found again.

Three Dog Night's *It Ain't Easy*

Formed in Los Angeles in 1967, Three Dog Night was one of the most successful recording groups of the sixties and seventies. Originally established as a vocal group made up of Danny Hutton, Chuck Negron, and Cory Wells, the trio began their career

⁴³ Atia, Nadia and Jeremy Davies, 2010 "Nostalgia and the Shapes of History," *Memory Studies* 3(3): 181-6

recording under the name of a famed giant tree known for growing in California – Redwood. In 1968, the group recruited a backup band and changed their name to Three Dog Night, another “outdoorsy” reference. The term has been attributed to Aboriginal life in Australia, as a way of describing the temperature by the number of dogs (dingoes) one would need to sleep with to keep warm at night.⁴⁴ While not American, Australia outback imagery in the name stirs up similar associations to those of the Wild West (both evoke Cowboys taming an open wilderness) – a perfect example of slippery signifiers that need not be precise to have their affect understood. The band holds an interesting place in the history of rock because of its association as a “pop” group – centered around vocals and famous for recording many songs that they did not write themselves.⁴⁵ For our purposes here, however, they are an excellent example of how the Western fantasy united the rock world, even as it was fracturing into a wide range of different sounds, from the introspective, folk-rock-inspired, singer-songwriter James Taylor, to The Grateful Dead, operating on the furthest edge of the psychedelic counter-culture.

Several songs from Three Dog Night’s album *It Ain’t Easy*, such as “Cowboy”, “Out in the Country”, the title song “It Ain’t Easy”, and “Good Time Livin’” embrace a rural, Western fantasy space to articulate both an eco-critical view of the contemporary

⁴⁴ The phrase pops up in various corners of the internet but most coherently in this NY Times history of the dingoes in Australia. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/science/australias-view-of-the-dingo-evolves.html?auth=login-google>

⁴⁵ While song-writing was not a precedent for rock and roll stardom in its earliest years (Elvis is certainly a fantastic example), the expectation that rock musicians write their own songs was significantly established by the end of the sixties due to the example of the Beatles. The Monkees, while extremely popular, are an example of a group that struggled to find rock authenticity despite being modeled after the biggest rock group of the age – the Beatles. An artist like Carole King was considered a pop-songwriter when she was writing songs to be performed by other people, yet she was embraced by rock audiences for her 1971 album *Tapestry*, in which she performed songs that she had written or co-written herself (despite the fact that several of them had lived a previous existence as a pop song recorded first by someone else).

world, as well as a nostalgic vision longing for a more natural, pastoral past. The album features a wide range of songwriters. “Cowboy” was written by Randy Newman, classically trained, and just becoming recognized for his dark, acid-etched take on the “old, weird America.”⁴⁶ Rock auteurs Roger Nichols and Paul Williams wrote “Out in the Country”, while country writer Ron Davies produced “It Ain’t Easy.”⁴⁷ On the other hand, “Good Time Livin’” was by the well-known Brill Building songwriting team of Barry Mann and Cynthia Weill. The participating of all these songwriters speaks to the growing popularity of rural Western imagery during this specific moment, as well as a dawning awareness of the environmental issues which each of the songs addresses. Further, regardless of authorship, these are the songs that the band chose to put together on this album and in doing so, they interact with one another and make meaning for the band and their audience.

“Cowboy” opens with an image of stifling, confined urban life; a melodic lament carries overtly alienated lyrics which depict a cold, city landscape.

Verse 1:

Cold gray buildings where a hill should be.

Steel and concrete closing in on me.

City faces haunt the places I roam alone.

⁴⁶ Newman also wrote the album’s biggest hit, “Mama Told Me (Not to Come).” While it does not use Western imagery, its critical depiction of the psychedelic lifestyle harmonizes with the nostalgic tone of what surrounds it.

⁴⁷ “It Ain’t Easy” is also notable for being covered by David Bowie., who includes it on his futuristic 1971 album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* and would be an interesting case study in how nostalgia works in the changing context of each of the song’s recordings.

Chorus:

Cowboy, cowboy, can't run, can't hide, too late.

To fight now, to die to try.

The sparse, grooveless texture of the accompaniment evokes longing for open spaces, imagined to have existed in a pre-industrial American countryside. The contemporary sounds of an electric keyboard and electric guitar dominate the accompaniment. The band's vocal harmonies are not put on display, except the occasional lush, echoing harmonies on single words (i.e. "hide"). There is no sonic dichotomy between past (acoustic) and present (electrification). The sound is firmly planted in the modern, offering a bleak image of the world as it stands.

Where a dichotomy does come into play is as the song transitions into the next track. In direct opposition to the grim modernism of "Cowboy", "It Ain't Easy" relaxes into a roots-y, country vibe. Over a thudding bass drum, an acoustic guitar presents a bright, twanging backbeat, blues licks abound, and tambourine enters halfway through the song. A folksy harmonica solo before the third verse and in the song's outro transports the listener even further into "older" music traditions.

The next track, "Out in the Country," mediates between these sound worlds, employing chorused acoustic guitar amid electric keyboard, bass, and lush pop vocals. The verses are characterized by relatively sparse instrumentation, and soft, breathy double-tracked singing. They stand in contrast to the chorus which adds in significant percussive elements and creates a festive, up-beat atmosphere.

Verse 1:

Whenever I need to leave it all behind

Or feel the need to get away

I find a quiet place, far from the human race

Out in the country

Chorus:

Before the breathin' air is gone

Before the sun is just a bright spot in the nighttime

Out where the rivers like to run

I stand alone and take back somethin' worth rememberin'

Verse 2:

Whenever I feel them closing in on me

Or need a bit of room to move

When life becomes too fast, I find relief at last

Out in the country

“Out in the Country” builds on “Cowboy”—it is elegant that both songs depict the city “closing in on” the protagonist—but provides it with an optimistic twist. Instead of tragic, nostalgic longing, the song cheerfully looks to the American countryside as an escape from the stifling environment of urban life and a land of spiritual renewal.

The choruses are also significant for the juxtaposition of future and past imaginings in the lyrics. The first half of the chorus expresses a concern for a future where “the breathin’ air is gone” and the world has been lost even more completely to the constant forces of progress. However, this future is juxtaposed against a nostalgic look backwards, as the chorus ends: “Out where the rivers like to run, I stand alone and take back somethin’ worth rememberin’”. Recall Boym: “Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective, but also prospective. Fantasies of the past, determined by needs of the present, have a direct impact on realities of the future.”^[1] Nostalgia can be used as a critique of the present, to offer a vision of what the future could be. In “Out in the Country”, Three Dog Night quite explicitly addresses what they view as “something worth rememberin’,” rooted in the wide open spaces of the American countryside.

The album ends with an upbeat paean to “Good Time Livin’,” in which the lyrics again look to the past as a prescription for the present. The contemporary critique of environmental degradation and technology is explicit in the verses:

Verse 1:

Air pollution, revolution, you know I’ve had my fill.

Advertisin’, computerizin’, don’t understand it and I never will.

Verse 2:

Isolation, segregation, government controls

Call it a cop out gotta drop out.

You and me we gotta save out souls.

Countering these images of destruction, sweet harmonies, and upbeat tempo surround the optimistic lyrics of the chorus:

Got to get back to some good time livin'

Got to get out where the air is sweet.

Got to, got to get back livin'

Each chorus also ends by pulling back the texture, taking on a more sentimental, reflecting tone as they sing: “Work with our hands, live off the land / Feel good clean earth under your feet.”

Implicit in the music of Three Dog Night’s eco-conservative fantasy for the American countryside, is a nostalgic longing for the slower pace of life in that world. The bridge (“*You’re gonna take to planting flowers everywhere / We’ll find a world of simple pleasures we can share*”) presents a romantic melody on the lyrics which offer flowers and the natural world as a cure for a world spinning out of control: “Nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams... The nostalgic desires to turn history into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition”⁴⁸ The historical past of rural life is imagined to operate in a world of slower rhythms, not unlike the experience of temporality in childhood. In *It Ain’t Easy*, this fantasy is tied both to a general longing for a slower

⁴⁸ Boym, xvi.

pace of life as well as a more specific vision of pre-industrial wanderers like the cowboy and the itinerant musician. From Ken Kesey's 1964 cross-country bus tour (in a psychedelic painted bus labeled "Further"), to the migration of young people from all over the country to central hub of San Francisco at the height of the hippie movement, travel became synonymous with "freedom" – both spiritual and physical. For rock musicians spending much of their lives on tour, this "rambling" lifestyle may be one of the most relatable elements uniting both cowboy culture and the hippie movement. It is certainly one of the connections that was most ardently embraced moving into the early years of the 1970s. In that decade, we find American bands turning again and again to images of the open road as a symbol of freedom and escape. At the same time, these songs also embrace some of the clearest examples of nostalgia – of longing for home – when the road becomes long and tiresome.

While the lyrics and expression in the song relies on a nostalgic impulse, its sonic quality is much more contemporary. The song seems to be clearly drawing on the influence of the sound of psychedelic soul, like the songs Norman Whitfield was writing for the Temptations at the end of the sixties. Moving away from the softer, vocal numbers which had characterized their Motown career earlier in the decade, Whitfield's songwriting turned to social issues set amid a more psychedelic, funk-infused instrumental sound. As extremely successful and prolific songwriters across the sixties, Cynthia Weil and Barry Mann would certainly been aware of this new development in Motown's sound at the decade end while they were writing the music for "Good Time Livin'". Although it was recorded after *It Aint' Easy*, Whitfield and Barrett Strong's "Ball of Confusion" (recorded by the Temptations in 1970) is a clear example of the style which Weil and Mann

would have been emulating. Looking at them together, we find two songs articulating anxiety for the present, in a very similar way (both sonically and lyrically): “*air pollution, revolution, you know I’ve had my fill*” (Weil/Mann) versus “*evolution, revolution, gun control, sound of soul...*” (Whitfield/Strong). The lyrics in “Ball of Confusion,” are primarily concerned with the social issues of the contemporary moment (racism, war, unemployment and economic anxieties). However, while “Good Time Livin’” articulates both environmental and social concerns, it leans towards the environmental (the first words of the song decry “*air-pollution*” and the chorus emphasizes getting back to “*where the air is sweet*”). The environmental emphasis relies on a nostalgic impulse, while social justice issues necessarily look to the future for resolution (a prescription for ending racism could not be found in the past). It is telling then, that one of most sonically present (even progressive) songs in this dissertation is one that is so heavily influenced by Black popular music. And yet, while the post-war generation on both sides of the color line express concerns about their contemporary moment, we find two very different modes of response. While Black musicians leaned into the present and looked to the future with rhythmically progressive styles like funk, white musicians and their audiences often looked to the past, a luxury of having a past worth looking to.⁴⁹

James Taylor’s *Sweet Baby James*

The end of the sixties brought many trials for James Taylor. While the young Boston-born musician had the good fortune and talent to be picked up by the Beatles for

⁴⁹ For analysis of the rhythmic innovations of Whitfield during the late sixties and seventies see Robert Fink. “Goal Directed Soul? Analyzing Rhythmic Teleology in African American Popular Music” *Journal of the American Musicological*. 64, No. 1 (Spring 2011), 179-238.

their new record label, Apple, he was trying to break a heroin habit he had developed while gigging and looking for his big break in New York in 1966. As Taylor told *The New York Times* in 1981, “I learned a lot about music and too much about drugs.”⁵⁰ Although the release of his eponymous first album (1968 UK; 1969 US) brought him favorable critical reviews – notably, Jon Landau called it “the coolest breath of fresh air I’ve inhaled in a good long while” – Taylor’s struggles with addiction rendered him unable to promote the album. Instead, he spent its release recovering in an addiction center in Massachusetts.⁵¹ Later in 1969, Taylor broke both hands and both feet in a motorcycle accident, forcing him to take even more time away from performing. Despite all of this turmoil, Taylor was able to sign a record deal with Warner Bros in October of 1969.

Like many of his generation, Taylor moved to California to restart his career. His second album, *Sweet Baby James*, was recorded at Sunset Sound in December of 1969, and makes consistent use of pastoral (especially Western) nostalgic fantasy to imagine a more grounded space and time. Several songs from *Sweet Baby James* embrace the trope of the American countryside as a place of rejuvenation, moving at a much slower pace. This is especially true of “Sweet Baby James,” “Country Road,” and (a very unusual choice for a rock singer-songwriter in the early 1970s), a reimagining of Stephen Foster’s minstrel classic “Oh! Susanna.”

In this song the cowboy becomes a foil for the contemporary rock lifestyle. The song begins by drawing a Western picture:

⁵⁰ Robert Palmer. “THE POP LIFE; TAYLOR: AFTER THE TURMOIL AND WANDERLUST.” *New York Times*, Apr 08, 1981.

⁵¹ Jon Landau. “James Taylor” *Rolling Stone* (April 19, 1969) <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/james-taylor-188231/> (accessed May 3, 2021).

There is a young cowboy, he lives on the range.
His horse and his cattle are his only companions
He works in the saddle and he sleeps in the canyons,
waiting for summer, his pastures to change
And as the moon rises he sits by his fire,
thinking about women and glasses of beer
And closing his eyes as the doggies retire,
he sings out a song which is soft but it's clear
as if maybe someone could hear...

This stanza epitomizes Barbara Stern's historical nostalgia – a longing to go back to a time and place never actually experienced by the nostalgic subject.⁵² Whether this cowboy is supposed to be a contemporary figure, though the song is written in the present tense, the mode of existence harkens to something out of a Western novel rather than the suburban, Chapel Hill childhood of Taylor's own past. The historical nostalgia in this verse is analogous to the contemporary lifestyle depicted in the second verse, one likely drawn from Taylor's own experiences moving and traveling for his music:

Now the first of December was covered with snow
and so was the turnpike from Stockbridge to Boston
Though the Berkshires seemed dreamlike on account of that frosting

⁵² Barbara B. Stern. "Historical and Personal Nostalgia in Advertising Text: The Fin de siècle Effect." *Journal of Advertising* 21, no. 4 (1992), 13.

with ten miles behind me and ten thousand more to go
There's a song that they sing when they take to the highway
a song that they sing when they take to the sea
a song that they sing of their home in the sky,
maybe you can believe it if it helps you to sleep
but singing works just fine for me

The modern experience of a traveling lifestyle is set against that of the lonely cowboy. Both figures turn to the same lullaby to comfort themselves in their lonely, nomadic lives:

So, goodnight you moonlight ladies,
Rock-a-bye sweet baby James
Deep greens and blues are the colors I choose,
Won't you let me go down in my dreams?
And rock-a-bye sweet baby James

The use of the same musical material – the lullaby – strengthens the association between the two seemingly contrasted lifestyles. The song's triple meter is unusual for a rock song, but not for a cowboy song. The image of a cowboy singing a triple meter lullaby to his cattle is a common trope of the Western imagination. In this particular song, it not only plays with this history but also relies on a larger cultural understanding of the “timelessness” of lullabies. The cowboy lullaby emphasizes what is portrayed as essential needs: companionship, comfort, and simplicity. The historical associations of the signifiers of

cowboys and lullabies work together to create a template for escape from the modern world: “historical nostalgia expresses the desire to retreat from contemporary life by returning to a time in the distant past viewed as superior to the present. No matter whether the long-gone era is represented as richer and more complex than today...or as simpler and less corrupted...it is positioned as an escape from the here and now.”⁵³ As Boym reminds us, “shared everyday frameworks of collective or cultural memory offer us mere signposts for individual reminiscences that could suggest multiple narratives. These narratives have a certain syntax (as well as a common intonation), but no single plot.”⁵⁴

The image of the cowboy at his campfire operates as a playground, rather than a narrative. It is an imaginative space for the listener to travel in the song. Its significance rests on Boym’s ideas of signposts – very little context and storytelling is need for the listener to understand the emotive meaning of the verse. Instead, the collective memory, the space created through historical nostalgia, offers “a zone of stability and normativity in the current change that characterizes modern life.”⁵⁵ It is this zone, established in the first verse, which is carried into the contemporary space of the second. The rock musician finds comfort in the stability, purity, and integrity of comparing his own lifestyle to that of the cowboy.

While the historical associations of the cowboy helps articulate a contemporary need, this is not the only method by which nostalgia is employed to access comfort and

⁵³ Stern, “Historical and Personal Nostalgia in Advertising Text.” 13.

⁵⁴ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 53.

⁵⁵ Boym, 53.

stability in *Sweet Baby James*. It is no accident that the cowboy in the title song has the same first name as the songwriter. The image of the lonely cowboy can also operate as personal nostalgia, in which the “locus of memory is the sentimentalized ‘home’ of one’s childhood...recollected in adult life as the font of warmth, security, and love.”⁵⁶ Taylor grew up in the 1950s, an era, as I noted above, filled with Western-themed films, toys, music, and stories. The nostalgia in the song, thus, operates on both historical and personal levels, where collective memory and individual experiences overlap. Distinguishing between these two “types” can allow us to analyze nostalgic expressions and creative works more precisely. But the emotive results of these nostalgias always overlap.

“Country Road,” the penultimate song on Side A of *Sweet Baby James*, explores the same fantasy of the road as its opening track. While “Sweet Baby James” creates a dialogical relationship between a fantasy past and the present, “Country Road” relies on temporally-vague signifiers of an open road. It’s significant that the opening line mentions a “highway,” signaling long-distance travel (the title alone could index local movement around a small town). Taylor never indicates any other clue to a location, only that his mother “wants to know where I’ve been,” and it appears that, like many in his generation, he is hitch-hiking across the American countryside. The song opens with a chance meeting on the American highway:

Take to the highway

Won’t you lend me your name?

Your way and my way

⁵⁶ Stern, “Historical and Personal Nostalgia in Advertising Text.” 16.

They seem to be one and the same

Later in the song, we learn that the wanderer has been traveling on foot:

I guess my feet know

Where they want me to go

Walkin' on a country road

Like the ramble culture invoked in the music of Led Zeppelin, the American countryside and highway becomes marker of meaning for this generation of neo-romantics. As discussed in chapter two, the American Blues tradition (with which Taylor was most certainly familiar) has a long history of songs about movement, looking back to both the new-found freedom and economic insecurity of post-Civil War South.⁵⁷ This was magnified by the Great Migration in the early decades of the twentieth-century in which great numbers of African Americans moved to the North in search of employment, as well as to escape the overt racism and dangers they faced in the South. Migration thus becomes an important topic Blues songs, integrally tied to the concept of escape. As James Cone articulated in 1972: “The blues express a belief that one day things will not be like what they are today. This is why buses, railways, and trains are important images in the blues. Each symbolizes motions and the possibility of leaving the harsh realities of an oppressive environment.”⁵⁸ However, several decades after the first Great Migration, the

⁵⁷ See Josh-Wade Ferguson, “Rambling Blues: Mapping Contemporary North American Blues Literature” PhD Diss., (The University of Mississippi, 2019); Angela Y. Davis, *Black Legacies and Blues Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998)

⁵⁸ James Cone. *The Spirituals and the Blues*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), 139.

forward-looking hope the Cone finds in Blues songs, becomes a source of nostalgic longing for a generation of white rock musicians who romanticized its history.

Although in no way a “hit” (it was not released as a single for obvious reasons) “O, Susannah” is perhaps the most interesting track on *Sweet Baby James*, because of the way in which it transforms the original (1848) Stephen Foster minstrel song, an American classic with a huge range of nostalgic associations, into a contemporary folk-rock arrangement. While “O, Susannah” would probably have been classed as a “folk song,” rather than “country and western,” it still connects to deeply nostalgic American fantasies of Westward expansion. Taylor relies on collective memory and cultural referents to permeate this old, old fantasy space with the contemporary and confessional content we usually associate with early 1970s songwriting.

During the recording process, songs usually go through a transformation of some type from the original (whatever that original may be: rough concept, recorded demo, version from live performance, etc.), through various stages of development, to the final release. However, as Alban Zak notes, while the creator is aware of these changes over time, the listener is not. When dealing with a cover song, however, the newly recorded track now has at least one version against which it will almost always be heard:

With a song’s original recording, the path from initial sketch to finished work is often unrecoverable. Even if there are demo versions, these may be lost, destroyed, or unreleased to the public. But for cover versions—remakes of songs already in public circulation—there is at least one referent

from which to trace the transformative process.”⁵⁹

While Zak is concerned with the transformative process as a (re)creative force, it can also be understood as a process of memory. Each new recording becomes a site of memory creating layers of associations and semiotic meaning. The example of Taylor’s “Oh, Susannah” is slightly unusual in the realm of songs covered by rock musicians, because the song was originally published in 1848, not as a recording, but as sheet music. In addition to the many renditions that have been made since the advent of recording technology, there are many more personal associations that each of Taylor’s listeners were likely to have held in their own memory – memories of piano lessons, summer camp sing-alongs, family evenings at home while a parent plays an instrument, or school music classes—not to mention the myriad appearances of this American evergreen in movies, television, and animated cartoons. Taylor’s version acts, then, in dialogue with a general collective memory created through encounters with several different renditions of the song.

Notions of folk song performance vary from person to person and era to era, but for audiences at the start of the seventies, the horizon of expectation was likely influenced by two conflicting modes of performance: a process-based approach to folk song, centered on participatory practices (in the tradition of Pete Seeger) versus the individual stylings of the professional performer (such as Bob Dylan or Peter, Paul and Mary). Foster’s “Oh! Susanna” is an appealing choice for nostalgic expression because it can operate in both modes. On the one hand, Foster is one of the few American composers with

⁵⁹ Albin J Zak III, “Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix: Juxtaposition and Transformation ‘All along the Watchtower,’” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, no. 3 (2005): 602.

whom a large portion of the American population would have been familiar; audiences would have known the tune and words and could easily have song along. However, instead of Seeger's communal mode of performance, Taylor transforms the song into a fixed performance. His style is highly idiosyncratic – performed in a way that not only resists imitation, but also places the emphasis on the performer's talent and stylings. It is not one performance in a series of renditions – it is *the* James Taylor version, captured in permanent recording to be fixed and associated with him in his audience's memory. It is a new layer of memory building on top of the familiarity his listeners would have already had with the song. Thus the folk association of the song, then acts as a fantasy playspace. Taylor moves into this familiar space of a well-known song to access the past - to explore its sonic qualities and lyrical imageries – and yet always returns to what Theodore Gracyk identifies as the “ontology of rock,” the fixed recorded object created in a studio, like a painting.

There are several ways in which Taylor reimagines the folk space of “Oh! Susanna.” First, Taylor takes increasing freedom with the lyrics of the verse which further affect the vocal rhythm. The song's guitar introduction employs a steady, complex finger-picking technique, derived from Piedmont blues, and characteristic of the folk revival. This banjo-inspired sound reflects not only the lyrics of the song (“with a banjo on my knee”), but also Pete Seeger's recorded and performed renditions of the song.⁶⁰ Shortly thereafter, the song breaks into the verse. A consistent sense of meter is lost, with

⁶⁰ See Pete Seeger, *American Favorite Ballads*, vol. 1, 5 vols. (Smithsonian/Folkways, 2009).; For Seeger's performance of the song at Carnegie Music Hall (February 20, 1965), see Pete Seeger, *Live in '65*, CD (Applesseed Records, 2009).

long pauses between each stanza. Taylor takes an ad lib approach to tempo and meter, even within stanzas, rejecting any sense of parallel length or structure.

The chorus slows into a flowing lament before picking up tempo again in the second verse. Swinging into a steadier pulse and accented with breaks in both the vocals and the guitar, Taylor plays with the traditional lyrics, subtly adding and subtracting words which bring both the sonic and lyrical content into a more contemporary environment. Significantly, most of these lyrical changes are additions of words like “own” or “myself,” which emphasize personal experience. Even more striking is the shortening of Susannah in both verses to Suzanne, a change which further emphasizes the casual intimacy of the song. The name also connects the song to an even more direct personal expression on the album – the hit song “Fire and Rain,” where Taylor works through the suicide of a close friend with that name (“Suzanne, the plans they made put an end to you”). James Taylor’s transformation of “Oh! Susannah” thus operates in a dialogical relationship with the song’s lineage, with folk music in general, and with audience’s expectations for folk and rock music. Further, it turns to a shared understanding of personal loss and longing. Taylor creates his own, individualized sonic playground, but through medium of a well-known folk song. Thus, his listeners are brought into the emotive space of nostalgic longing, while still retaining the contemporary spirit of Taylor’s sound world.

The nostalgic practice of individualizing and re-imagining a collective memory can also have an additional effect – erasure and forgetting. A Foster classic like “Oh! Susanna” has its roots in the minstrel show, a tradition now-notorious for its offensive and harmful stereotyping of African Americans. Even more so, Foster’s original second verse of “Oh! Susanna” (which Taylor does not perform) is, as Foster scholar Ken Emerson

describes, “the most racially offensive lines Foster ever wrote.”⁶¹ While nostalgia offers many positives (such as rejuvenation, comfort, or a sense of belonging), one of its dangers is the way it allows individuals and communities to avoid problematic histories. Taylor’s rendition side-steps this history, in part, by making it sound like a contemporary song – one he could have written himself.

James Taylor’s 1970 album *Sweet Baby James* marked his major label debut, and his first major commercial success. Taylor draws on eclectic musical influences, taking on characteristics of country, folk, blues, rock, and even old minstrel tropes, which together trace out “a long history in the collective memory of the audience.”⁶² George Lipsitz argues that rock music always “embodies a dialogic process of active remembering.”⁶³ Taylor calls on this collective process in his audience and invites them into a memory playground which they can all share. This process ultimately resulted in a softer musical option for rock, captured by *Time* magazine’s March 1, 1971 cover which displayed an artistic rendition of James Taylor with the caption: “The New Rock – Bittersweet and Low.”⁶⁴ David Brown contends that with *Sweet Baby James*, Taylor “became the left-field poster boy for a new gentler sound with a new, post-sixties sensibility. Taylor’s tales of inner turmoil – and his desire to retreat onto that country road – spoke to a generation that, by 1970, felt battered by the tumult and unfulfilled promises of the

⁶¹ Ken Emerson, “Stephen Foster and American Popular Culture” *American Music* 30, No. 3 (Fall 2012), 401.

⁶² George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). 113.

⁶³ Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 116.

⁶⁴ “The New Rock: Bittersweet and Low,” *Time Magazine*, March 1, 1971.

decade before.”⁶⁵

Thus Taylor’s retreat, while personally nostalgic, relied on collective memories, which he shared with his audiences. Frith explains the theoretical reasoning behind this relationship, based on two aspects of rock ideology taken directly from the ideology of the folk revival: “firstly, the music was an authentic ‘reflection of experience’; secondly the music reflected the experience of a community – there was no distinction of social experience between performers and audiences.”⁶⁶ Taylor and his audiences are ultimately speaking the same language, even if their individual experiences and recollections differ.

The Grateful Dead – *Workingman’s Dead*

In 1969, The Grateful Dead were at the top of their game. Late in the year, Lenny Kaye declared in *Fusion* that

The Grateful Dead are on the way up. But whether it be from a growing musical acumen on the part of their audience, a starring role in Tom Wolfe’s *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, or simply that they are one of the only living reminders of the Summer of Love, nobody can really say for sure. The only thing that does seem sure is that suddenly great gobs of people have turned on to the group, giving them a series of packed houses,

⁶⁵ David Browne, “How James Taylor Made ‘Sweet Baby James,’” *Rolling Stone*, April 16, 2013, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/how-james-taylor-made-sweet-baby-james-20130416>.

⁶⁶ Simon Frith, “‘The Magic That Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community,” *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 159.

screaming audiences and fans whose devotion borders on the mystical.

And yet, in 1970, the Grateful Dead suddenly and drastically changed musical direction, abandoning the extended improvisation and psychedelic sound that had built their reputation as one of the founding groups of San Francisco's musical counterculture. *Workingman's Dead* was, for all intents and purposes, a country album. At a time when country music was seen as the antithesis of the hippie counterculture, the Grateful Dead latched on to the West Coast version of it, the Bakersfield sound of Buck Owens and Merle Haggard.

The Dead had spent the final years of the sixties in a constant haze of touring and recording. After 1966, the band averaged 120 concerts a year, peaking at over 140 by the turn of the decade. When they hired the Rolling Stones' tour manager Sam Cutler in the aftermath of Altamont, they were at a crossroads in their career. They were astonished by how a band like the Rolling Stones could do long tours while also maintaining the joy of music making. The commercial side of music seemed incompatible with the atmosphere of discovery that they so cherished. When Warner signed them in 1966, the band went deep into debt exploring the recording studio and trying to learn how to use it, rather than focusing on creating commercially viable tracks. As the decade came to a close, the pressure to create a hit album (or at least a financially fruitful one) increased, along with the changing economic landscape of their San Francisco home. In the 2017 documentary *Long Strange Trip*, Cutler explained: "This was a period when business was looking at the hippie scene and working out different forms of how to commercialize it. The perfect, idyllic childhood of the Grateful Dead as a group of musicians was over. The Haight-

Ashbury was destroyed by becoming popular. So the hippies left.”⁶⁷

The departure was both philosophical and physical. The Haight-Ashbury district was now packed with crowds of fans and tourists, all trying to get a glimpse of the much-hyped psychedelic scene. Almost fifty years later, drummer Mickey Hart reflected that the Dead were overwhelmed by the massive influx of people that descended on the city: “We were living in the Haight and it was getting hot for us. There were buses coming by the house -- you know, tourist buses. ‘This is the home of the Grateful Dead. The feared.’ And, so we felt like, you know, it’s time to get out of town.” So they headed out to the country.

Hart was the first to move, settling on a ranch in northern Marin County where his bandmates would visit him to escape the pressures of city and music industry life. Hart associates the physical relocation as an important influence on the musical changes that can be heard in the band at the turn of the decade:

Everyone started coming out one by one. And, you know, within a short amount of time, everybody started becoming psychedelic cowboys. And we loved it in the country. Loved the trees, loved the woods, loved nature. We were learning about everything that is wild. “Oh! These are wild sounds.” And so, it started to affect the music. We were discovering what Grateful Dead music could be.

And after hearing Dylan’s *Nashville Skyline*, The Dead began looking not only to the

⁶⁷ Long, *Strange Trip*. Directed by Amir Bar-Lev (2017, Santa Monica, Amazon Studios), Accessed March 20, 2021 on Amazon Prime Video.

open spaces of the country side, but also to the mythic space of the past, adding country standards such as “Silver Threads and Golden Needles” to their live shows. Peter Doggett reports that this chestnut, “played without a hint of irony, inaugurated a new era of Dead music.”⁶⁸ The following year, the band recorded and released their own exploration of country-and folk-inspired rock, *Workingman’s Dead*. Recorded in February of 1970, it was a complete repudiation of the psychedelic, electric jam sessions of the band’s previous decade, and a return to the old-time and bluegrass roots of the band, which had been overshadowed by the white heat of the counterculture revolution.⁶⁹

Planning their next album, Jerry Garcia told his band mates: “Why don’t we approach this one as though it were, like, a country and western record, or like California country and western, you know like, Bakersfield.”⁷⁰ While it comes off as a humorous quip, the Bakersfield reference is actually quite useful for understanding of the Grateful Dead’s country explorations. In fact, the band’s first forays into country music – before *Workingman’s Dead* – came as interludes in their live shows. For example the Dead performed Merle Haggard’s “Mama Tried” as part of their live show all through 1969, up to and including Woodstock in August. (It was arguably the only hardcore country song performed at the Festival.)

On the surface, it seems unlikely that a San Francisco band like the Dead, so

⁶⁸ Peter Doggett, *Are You Ready for the Country* (London: Viking, 2000). 114.

⁶⁹ Indeed, prior to forming the Grateful Dead, Jerry Garcia had played in Bluegrass bands from 1960 onward. He had even played with the Heart Valley Drifters at the Monterey Folk Festival in 1964. Primary lyricist for *Workingman’s Dead*, Robert Hunter, had also joined Garcia in these folk groups prior to the formation of The Dead

⁷⁰ Long, *Strange Trip* (2017).

deeply rooted in the psychedelic counterculture would ever want to associate themselves with country music, especially at the turn of the decade, when Haggard's infamous "Okie from Muskogee," was the genre's biggest hit. The song became a classic in conservative circles immediately following its release in 1969, with lyrics that criticize Vietnam War protests and the psychedelic movement (of which the Dead could be considered founding members). The irony of the song's opening line "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee," written and sung by Bakersfield's own pot-smoking, rebel musician (Haggard was arrested several times as a youth, spending time in San Quentin, before turning to music) captures some of the juxtapositions of sound and meaning that it is found in the fusion of rock and roll and country in Bakersfield.

"Okie From Muskogee" - despite its adoption by many listeners up to an including the Republican President as a pro-war, conservative anthem - has constantly negotiated the spaces between literal and ironic. Haggard once told a Michigan reporter, "Son, the only place I *don't* smoke is in Muskogee."⁷¹ In performance, he has often smiled wryly at his bandmates and guests like Johnny Paycheck or Willie Nelson, when singing the line "We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy." At the same time, the main premise of the song does resonate with Haggard's personal history, through the inspiration of his father - an Oklahoman who came to California during the Dust Bowl. As he explained: "My father worked hard on his farm, was proud of it, and got called white trash once he took to the road as an Okie. ... there were a lot of other Okies from around there, proud people whose farms and homes were foreclosed...and who then got treated like

⁷¹ The Country Music Hall of Fame artist biography page for Merle Haggard traces this quote to a 1974 interview with a Michigan newspaper reporter. "Merle Haggard" Country Music Hall of Fame <https://countrymusichalloffame.org/artist/merle-haggard/> (accessed April 29, 2021).

dirt. Listen to that line: ‘I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee.’ Nobody has ever said that before in a song.”⁷² In this way, Haggard’s music, like much of the Bakersfield sound, seems to operate in a middle space between the conservative establishment sound of Nashville and the more progressive, counter-cultural side of the California rock scene – a space the Dead would move right into with their early seventies output.

The Bakersfield sound worked for the Dead in multiple ways. On the one hand, there is certainly a way that Haggard’s lyrics in “Mama Tried”, autobiographical for him, also emphasized the generational disappointment that the psychedelic boomers might have projected onto their own parents. (Remember that Three Dog Night’s cover of “Mama Told Me (Not to Come),” which uses the same “I should have listened to Mama” trope, would climb to the top of the pop charts the next year.) The irony of “Okie from Muskogee” would not have been lost on this particular group of musicians. On the other hand, there was the musical authenticity that the Bakersfield sound stood for in the world of country music. As Peter Le Chapelle writes:

Rather than favoring the more polished adult-oriented country pop of their middle-Tennessee contemporaries, Bakersfield artists adhered to a grittier anti-Nashville aesthetic, presenting themselves as rougher-edged blue collar traditionalists who sang wistfully of hardscrabble lives and a simpler, rural past. In reality, Bakersfield country drew extensively from urban Angeleno rockabilly, honky-tonk and western swing traditions, heavily

⁷² Quoted in Barbara Ching. “The Possum, the Hag, and the Rhinestone Cowboy: Hard Country Music and the Burlesque Abjection of the White Man,” *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 125.

influenced by vocalists and guitarists who had lived or set up shop in the region, such as Lefty Frizzell, Jean Shepard, Merle Travis, and Speedy West. Despite nostalgic imagery and efforts to preserve older stylistic elements, the Bakersfield “sound” also flaunted tradition, especially in its use of the electric guitar.⁷³

A line can be drawn from this rougher-edge celebration of hardened, rural living in the music of Haggard to the harder, folk-country-rock fusion of the Grateful Dead at the turn of the century. When the Dead moved away from predominantly improvisational blues performance and into songwriting and storytelling, they did not, like Bob Dylan, decamp to Nashville. They stayed to work an edgier California vein.

Garcia also describes a more relaxed, nostalgic feeling around the album, one less interested in idealistic progressivism and countercultural values: “We weren’t feeling so much like an experimental music group but more like a good old band.” This shift was facilitated by the increased salience of lyricist Robert Hunter in the Dead’s work at the time. Hunter and Garcia had met as teens in Palo Alto. They even formed a duo (“Bob and Jerry”) for a short period of time in the early sixties. While Hunter had contributed lyrics to the Dead’s work before 1970, he was the primary lyricist for all the songs on *Workingman’s Dead*, crafting stories of myth and fantasy through the characters and stories found within the songs.

The album’s first track, “Uncle John’s Band,” provides an avenue for exploring

⁷³ Peter La Chapelle. *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 184.

Marcus's "old, weird America." The expected common man (or men) folk music trope in the song is Uncle John and his band, analogized to a Pied Piper who has "come to take his children home." In the song, the listener is invited to come listen to Uncle John's band as way of moving away from every day struggles ("Well the first days are the hardest days, don't you worry anymore / Cause when life looks like easy street, there is danger at your door"), as well as political worries of home and abroad ("Their wall are built of cannonballs, their motto is "don't tread on me"). The song uses many cultural referents that connect to both historical and personal pasts— especially relating to the experiences of Garcia and Hunter.

Perhaps the most overt of these is the question of Uncle John's identity. I argue that the name works both as a common cultural referent, as well as a specific individual. The name itself is mythic in its commonality – "Uncle John." At the most basic level, the name John has been used as a stand-in for anonymous, unknown or generic, figures ("John Doe", "Dear John", "Johnny Get Your Gun," etc.) for centuries.⁷⁴ According to the United States Social Security Administration, John was one of the top five birth names for at least a hundred years, going back to when records begin in 1880. Its commonness makes it an protean cultural referent, open to a wide range of interpretations. Further, the lyrics situate the figure "playing to the tide" and "by the riverside" – both of which stand for sites of cultural memory. Like the levee in McLean's "American Pie", the river in "Uncle John's Band" seems to be about more than irrigation. Certainly, levees

⁷⁴ Paul Dickson lists the name John as "...the closest thing we have to a generic male name in the English-speaking world" and traces the term "John Do" to British law during Edward III's reign. Paul Dickson. *What's in a Name? Reflections of an Irrepressible Name Collector* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1996),132.

and riversides existed in American life during the sixties and seventies, but the ways in which they are being evoked look to the past. The waterside has long been a place of spiritual renewal, the paradigmatic site for Christian baptism. “Uncle John” could theoretically be the biblical figure of John the Baptist, and many gospel songs refer to the totality of the saved church as a “band,” as in “I Belong to the Band, Hallelujah!”⁷⁵ This band of god’s children is called back to a familiar place, “come with me or go alone, he’s come to take his children home.” Nostalgia is intricately tied homecoming, both etymologically, but also in the way it is used today:

When we are home, we don’t need to talk about it. “To be at home” – *byt’ doma* – is a slightly ungrammatical expression in many languages. We just know how to say it in our native tongue. To feel at home is to know that things are in their places and so are you; it is a state of mind that doesn’t depend on an actual location. The object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world; it is not the past in general, but that imaginary moment when we had time and didn’t know the temptation of nostalgia.⁷⁶

This longing for home marks an important shift in tone for rock music at the start of the seventies. On a generational level, it can be seen across all pop culture media, in the albums and songs of the decade, as well as film, books and television. However, we can also see it in the Dead’s own personal nostalgia – as individual members and as a group.

⁷⁵ The Reverend Gary Davis, “I Belong to the Band,” *Goodbye Babylon!*, Dust to Digital, 2003.

⁷⁶ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 251.

Returning home after endless touring, and *to* a home in the Haight that had changed dramatically in terms of population and attention, triggered a sense of displacement. The band that had once celebrated “The Golden Road (to Endless Devotion),” was searching for a new home, at one level, Mickey Hart’s ranch as a site of grounding and community, but also a musical return to the roots of the band, especially those of Hunter and Garcia.

This brings us to a more specific reading of the “Uncle John” figure. Indeed, the term “uncle” implies a sense of home with family, but despite its commonness, there are a few real individuals to whom the name John could refer. First, there’s Garcia himself. Through his role as primary songwriter, leader guitarist and singer for the Dead, he also became a leader of the counter-cultural movement in San Francisco. In fact, after Garcia’s death in 1995, several individuals chose a particularly relevant title for him: the “pied piper” of his generation.⁷⁷ At a surface level, Garcia seems the obvious choice for a personal referent in Hunter’s lyrics, but there are other elements in the song which seem to point to another musical leader – John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers (NLCR).

NLCR was a New York based folk revival group founded by Mike Seeger, Tom

⁷⁷⁷⁷⁷⁷ The term gets used as both a critique and a complement by writers after Garcia’s death, putting up for debate whether he was leading his children “home” or to “psychedelic hedonism” For a critical voice see: Byron D. Harvey. “Freedom or Free-for-all” *Pittsburg Post-Gazette* (August 18, 1995), 23. Available from: <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/august-18-1995-page-70-74/docview/1869806105/se-2?accountid=14512> (accessed April 29, 2021)

For the pied-piper moniker as a compliment see: Antony Violanti. “The Dead’s Pied Piper Where Jerry Led, Generations Followed” *The Buffalo News* (August 10, 1995) https://buffalonews.com/news/the-deads-pied-piper-where-jerry-garcia-led-generations-followed/article_ad25d9de-9a9d-56fd-9775-3187fe5ab93a.html (Accessed April 29, 2021)

William R. Buckley, “Jerry Garcia, the Pied Piper” *Cincinnati Enquire* (August 22, 1995), 8. Available from: <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/august-22-1995-page-8-38/docview/1896675963/se-2?accountid=14512>. (Accessed April 29, 2021)
, 81. Available from: <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/august-13-1995-page-81-613/docview/1885292092/se-2?accountid=14512>. (Accessed April 29, 2021)

Paley and Cohen in 1958. Tracy Schwartz replaced Paley in 1962. Both Hunter and Garcia were familiar with the band through their folk music days in the early sixties. In an email correspondence with David Dodds (published in Dodds' book, *The Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics*) Hunter wrote:

Tom Paley [a member of NRLB] was a math teacher at the University of Connecticut the year I was there. (I was president of the folk music club.) His replacement in the Ramblers, Tracy Schwartz, came to a party at Ellen Cavanaugh's house, along with Garcia, Nelson, and me, after one of the NLCR shows in 1964, and we played until way early in the morning.⁷⁸

In the email, Hunter validates Dodds' musing on Cohen's identity as "Uncle John". He also connects the lyrics to a tradition of "Come All Ye" songs, specifically highlighting the relationship between the lyrics in "Uncle John's Band" ("like the morning sun you come and like the wind you go") with the lyrics of "Come All Ye Fair and Tender Ladies" ("They're like the stars on a summer's morning / First appear and then they're gone").⁷⁹ Interestingly, however, "Uncle John's Band" uses a melodic reference, not from the song mentioned by Hunter, but to a version of "Let No Man Steal Your Thyme" as recorded by British folk-rock group Pentangle in 1968. The opening minor melodic figure of the Pentangle recording shares a striking resemblance the melodic gesture first

⁷⁸ David Dodds. *The Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 106-107.

⁷⁹ Hunter claims that NLCR recorded "Come All Ye Fair and Tender Ladies" but I have yet to find that recording. Mike Seeger of NLCR did record it in 1964, plus NLCR recorded several other "come all ye" songs, which may have caused Hunter to associate the song with the band even if they didn't actually record it themselves.

played by the Dead near the end of “Uncle John’s Band” and then again at the end. It is curious that the song which Hunter quotes as a source for his lyrics, has the same basic opening lyrics (“Come all ye fair and tender ladies/girls”) as the Pentangle track which musically aligns with the Dead’s recording.⁸⁰ It speaks to the messiness of nostalgic operations; there is a slippage between history and actuality and how meaning is created in that space. Elizabeth Randell Upton writes that “slippage in meaning, especially for non-historians, allows one element of the past to stand in for other historical times, through the common element of ‘oldness’”.⁸¹ Here we see two “old”, “Come All Ye”-style songs – one recorded by a contemporary, popular music group (Pentangle) and the other by a more traditional, folk-revivalist (Mike Seeger of NLCR). The latter connects the Dead with popular notions of authenticity, and to a more distant past.

There are several other lyrical references in “Uncle John’s Band” that seem to refer to songs recorded by NLCR, including “Buck Dancer’s Choice” and “The Story The Crow Told Me”. Both of these tunes have a similar lightness and aesthetic, as well as sharing some melodic contours. It seems notable that in this particular instance, the music seems to have pre-dated the lyrics. Whereas Hunter has spoken about giving stacks of lyrics to Garcia to decide which pieces he wanted to use to compose, for this song, in an interview with Blair Jackson, Hunter explained that he wrote the lyrics as a response to hearing a

⁸⁰ Pentangle’s recording uses the term “girls” whereas the “Come All Ye” song Hunter references uses the term “ladies.” Thank you to Bob Fink for alerting me to the connection between the Pentangle introduction and the Dead’s ending.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Randell Upton “Early Music and Popular Music: Medievalism, Nostalgia and the Beatles” *Oxford Handbook of Music and Medievalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 524.

track that the band had recorded instrumentally: “I played it over and over and tried writing to it [...] I kept hearing the words ‘God damn, Uncle John’s mad,’ and it took a while for that to turn into ‘Come hear Uncle John’s Band.’ and that’s one of those little things where the sparkles start coming out of your eyes.”⁸²

It seems highly likely that Hunter was referring to John Cohen in his writing of the song’s lyrics, especially given his penchant for allusive, autobiographical writing, and his later recollection.⁸³ The connection is meaningful because it is a link to the past that sidesteps the country-backlash politics of the era (epitomized by Haggard’s “Okie From Muskogee”) by going to more a more distant space. It authenticates the Dead by using an American past that’s even older than the sounds of country music heard in the sixties.

“Uncle John’s Band” is a far cry from the psychedelic, electric-blues of the bands previous work. First of all, it is completely acoustic, relying on vocal harmonies inspired by the singing of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, and aligned, both sonically and lyrically with an extremely broad use of the past. In addition to the references already discussed, the song lyrics allude to Civil War era “cannonballs,” the Revolutionary War’s Gadsden Flag (“don’t tread on me”), and the work of 19th century American poet Emily Dickinson (“ain’t no time to hate/barely time to wait”) and early 20th century American poet Robert Frost (“fire from the ice”). In this way it operates as a pastiche of American historical and cultural referents. While some theorists, namely Fredric Jameson, have lamented a breakdown of what they call “genuine historicity” through the proliferation of pastiche and the

⁸² Blaire Jackson. *Garcia: An American Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 178. The original lyric impulse survives in the third verse, which begins “Goddam, well I declare, have you seen the like?”

⁸³ Dodds, *The Complete Annotated Grateful Dead Lyrics*, xi-xxvi.

resulting nostalgic mode, historical accuracy is not the focus (or even a necessity) in a work of popular art.⁸⁴ Postmodern pastiches in the popular culture context create their meaning precisely through a multiplicity of readings, and in the case of “Uncle John’s Band”, the resulting non-partisan fantasy of “pastness” that results from a medley of historical and cultural signifiers from both right and left is the meaningful “object.” History can be exclusive (*whose history? which stories are worth telling?*), but fantasy has a much more inclusive potential.

By opening *Workingman’s Dead* with a nostalgic work that ranges from the present to the distant past, and everything in between, the song becomes a fantasy portal into a completely different world than the progressive psychedelia than much of the band’s sixties work. The choice to “come with me or go alone” mirrors the act of reflective nostalgia, in which “voluntary and involuntary recollections of an individual intertwine with collective memories.”⁸⁵ In the material space of the album, “Uncle John’s Band” calls the listeners into the American countryside fantasy which characterizes the entire album.

Like Taylor, the Dead constantly negotiate past and present in the same space. Henri Bergson’s metaphor of the cone, as explained by Gilles Deleuze, is useful for mapping this dynamic space of memory:

⁸⁴ See Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁸⁵ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 74.

[t]he idea of contemporaneity of the present and the past has one final consequence: Not only does the past co-exist with the present that has been, but, as it preserves itself in itself (while the present passes), it is the whole, integral past; it is all our past, which coexists with present. The famous metaphor of the cone represents this complete state of coexistence. But such a state implies finally, that in the past itself there appear all kinds of levels of profundity, marking all the possible intervals in this coexistence.⁸⁶

A song like “Dire Wolf” showcases this possibility very clearly. Sonically, it inhabits the past space, especially given Garcia’s pedal steel guitar playing (he also plays the instrument on “High Time”). The pedal steel helps audiences access the past through its associations with country music (the instrument had entered the country and western sound in the fifties). The instrument also holds some personal association with musical roots for Garcia who had become interested in it during his bluegrass days: “it was just doing something that I had wanted to do for years, really. Because I wanted to get into pedal steel back when I was playing the banjo. I was attracted to the sound of it on records. ‘Now there is a snappy sounding instrument. That fucker really sings.’”⁸⁷ The lyrics, too, rely on signs of pastness. Written as a ballad, it sets its story in a rural, location:

In the timbers of Fennario

The wolves are running’ round

The winter was so hard and cold

⁸⁶ Gilles Deleuze. *Bergonism*. Trans. H. Tomlison & B. Habberiam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 59.

⁸⁷ Ed, Dennis McNall. *Jerry on Jerry* (New York: Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers, 2015), 205.

Frozen ten feet 'neath the ground.

Fennario is the name of a town in the Scottish folk song “The Bonnie Lass o’Fyvie”. The song is also known by the title “Peggy-O”, under which title it was performed by the Dead throughout the seventies. Further still, Hunter associates the lyrics to a dream he had after watching a film adaptation of a Sherlock Holmes story. In 1996, Hunter wrote:

The song “Dire Wolf” was inspired, at least in name, by watching the *Hound of the Baskervilles* on TV with Garcia. We were speculating on what the ghostly hound might turn out to be, and somehow the idea that maybe it was a Dire Wolf came up. Maybe it was even suggested in the story, I don’t remember. We thought Dire Wolves were great big beasts. Extinct now, it turns out they were quite small and ran in packs. But the idea of a great big wolf named Dire was enough to trigger a lyric. As I remember, I wrote the words quickly the next morning upon waking, in that hypnogogic state where deep rooted associations meld together with no effort. Garcia set it later that afternoon.

Hunter’s imaginative story takes a Western turn when the dire wolf is invited in for a game of cards. The Western fantasy is one of the most common playgrounds of the album. We can find it in the album cover, which offers a sepia-tone portrait of the band standing on a street-corner, with Hunter included. Hart and Ron “Pigpen” McKernan are wearing cowboy hats, as is Bill Kreutzmann who is lounging in the doorway of the band. The photo’s coloring and the posture and dress of the band are yet another gateway into the fantasy space of the past in the album. On closer look, however, the band is not

actually visualized in the past. Kreutzmann sits in front of a 7-Up sign and there seem to be the shadows of three smokestacks falling on the building in the background. While industrialization and smokestacks don't necessarily indicate modernity, combined with rural, B-Western imagery, the shadow of the industrial present seems also to outline Bergson's cone of a multiplicity of temporalities.

The final track of *Workingman's Dead* takes on the myth of Casey Jones – a railroader who died in 1906 while trying to stop his passenger train from hitting a stalled freight on the track ahead. The history of the event is contested – the Illinois Central Railroad blamed him for the accident, while two ballads written in his honor turned him into a heroic legend.⁸⁸ Before writing and recording “Casey Jones”, the Dead had often played one of these folksong versions, “The Ballad of Casey Jones”, in their live concerts. As with James Taylor's cover of Stephen Foster, we find the Dead engaging a folk song with a rich and varied performance history. The Dead version of “The Ballad of Casey Jones” seems to be based on the version recorded by Mississippi John Hurt in 1963. However, when the band rewrites a new song based on the legend, it not only works in dialogue with the folk ballad from their live performances and its history, but also the entire mythology of the Casey Jones story. It is yet another example of historical and personal nostalgias engaging with one another. The song relies on collective memory for the legend and its memorialization in folk song, but also the individual memories of the many ways in which the members of the band and their audience would have come in contact with it. For instance, in 1950, Walt Disney released an animated film short, *The*

⁸⁸ For a 1972 study on the two ballads, see Norm Cohen. ““Casey Jones”: At the Crossroads of Two Ballad Traditions.” *Western Folklore* 32, no. 2 (1973): 77-103.

Brave Engineer, based on the Casey Jones story. Not only were the members of the Dead the right age to have seen the short at its release, it was also played several times on television in the following years. This particular dramatization of the story features a frenetic energy parallel with the psychedelic trip imagined by the Dead in Hunter and Garcia's new composition, where the ill-fated engineer heads toward disaster while under the influence of cocaine: "Driving that train / high on cocaine / Casey Jones you better watch that speed." Casey Jones is thus molded and reconstructed as "a hippie adventurer". Having played with the myth for several years, with Hunter's help they transformed it into a new creation for this album: an American legend with a psychedelic twist.

Conclusion

At the turn of the 1970s we find a generation of rock musicians turning towards nostalgic visions of the American West, as a source of both individual and collective memory. The ambiguity of the Western fantasy allows it to function as a complex playground of these nostalgias, operating in the zone between historical time and the personal experience of time, as well as a mythical space of rejuvenation and renewal. The image of California as a locus of Western imaging further sidesteps the anxieties of political conservatism associated with the Country and Western music as a genre. California thus acts a mythical homeland for the "old, weird America" come to life in a nostalgic, yet contemporary Western fantasy.

Chapter 4

“I Must Remember, Even If It Takes a Million Years”: Nostalgic Futurism in Pete Townshend’s Lifehouse Project¹

Standing at the edge of a new decade, the post-war generation turned to nostalgic fantasies as a response to the merciless pace of change around them. They became disillusioned with utopian dreams that had, in many ways, taken a dark turn. Lowenthal contends: “Present malaise and future mistrust fuelled nostalgia from the 1970s, when threats of resource exhaustions, of ecological collapse, of nuclear Armageddon made the past a haven from millennial angst.”² However, the nostalgia wave of the early seventies, in particular, still largely held onto a tempered vision of hope for the future. The anxieties of the moment were told through imagination and fantasy, and in doing so, revealed a new vision for the world ahead. Svetlana Boym argues that “creative nostalgia reveals the fantasies of the age, and it is in those fantasies and potentialities that the future is born.”

One avenue for exploring nostalgia’s hold on the future goes through the creation of science fiction. In seventies popular art and music we find many creative works that bridge this divide between past and future. Sometimes the historical past is used as a metaphor in futuristic settings. This was especially common in Kennedy-era fantasies where the American West merged with the space race, where the cosmos becomes the “final frontier.”³ It should be no

¹ This chapter is adapted from Caitlin Vaughn Carlos. ““I must Remember, Even if it Takes a Million Years”: Nostalgic Futurism in Pete Townshend’s Lifehouse Project.” *Lied Und Populäre Kultur* 64, (2019): 155-169., and Caitlin Vaughn Carlos. “Historical Nostalgia, Nature, and the Future in Three Iconic Albums from 1971: Aqualung, Who’s Next, and Led Zeppelin IV.” In *Postmodernity’s Musical Pasts*, edited by Tina Frühauf, 225-48. Boydell & Brewer, 2020.

² David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 36.

³ This idea was popularized by the opening credits for the television show *Star Trek*, which began with the narrator intoning “Space – the final frontier.” The original series ran from 1966-1969.

surprise, then, that by decade's end, *Star Wars* (1977) started its path to becoming the most popular film of all time. The story is framed to be set in the past, albeit that of another galaxy, beginning with the futuristic fairytale invocation "a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Similarly, in 1975's *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (based on the 1973 stage musical), science-fiction, extra-terrestrial fantasy-horror collided with Sha-na-na style campy fifties nostalgia. David Bowie played with the unlikely "time warp" between futurism and nostalgia in his early seventies albums *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* and *Diamond Dogs*. The collision of nostalgic fantasy and science fiction, of merging the past (in values or aesthetics) with a vision of the future in the early seventies would not only carry throughout the decade, but would become a powerful presence in popular culture for the next fifty years. In this chapter, I will explore the powerful role of nostalgia in rock's science-fiction fantasies through a case study of Pete Townshend's *Lifehouse* project, a vision that began with the seventies and continued for almost four decades. Through it, we can see how layers of meaning are built upon one another, as Townshend and his generation continually reflect back on the visions of their youth.

On the heels of his groundbreaking rock opera *Tommy*, Pete Townshend, the creative motor of The Who, spent the better part of 1970 teasing the band's next project, an even larger venture which he had dubbed *Lifehouse*. It would be a massive undertaking, in which the band would create a science-fiction film about a post-apocalyptic future Earth. Townshend, in his autobiography, calls it "a modern retelling of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*."⁴ The film would use live concert footage of The Who, and would end with concert attendees at the imaginary *Lifehouse* rejecting the corrupt, technology-centered existence of the future and

⁴ Pete Townshend, *Who I am: A Memoir*. (New York: Harper, 2012), 203.

disappearing in a musical rapture as they all found “the sound of the universe as a single note.”⁵ However, by 1971, the film had been scrapped and the songs intended for it re-purposed into a conventional studio album with the deliberately matter-of-fact title *Who’s Next*.

Although never fully realized, the Lifehouse project haunted Pete Townshend for decades. In a 1999 interview, Townshend emphasized the time warping aspect of his futuristic fantasy: “It’s a very far-reaching idea. It was ambitious. And in some respects, it was ahead of its time, and so it’s travelled *with* time. I have let it go a number of times, but it’s always come back.”⁶ He returned repeatedly to his vision for the story, attempting to bring some new piece of it to fruition. In 1999, Townshend worked with playwright Jeff Young to complete the Lifehouse script, tailored for performance as a radio play. In addition to its first broadcast on BBC3, Townshend also released the radio play as part of his 6-CD box set *The Lifehouse Chronicles* (2000), a compilation that included musical selections, as well as unreleased demos and tracks. Futuristic technological visions from the project remained unfilled until 2007, when Townshend teamed up with composer and mathematician Lawrence Ball and software engineer Dave Snowden to launch an online software system (The Lifehouse Method), intended to generate “authentic musical ‘portraits’ of the ‘sitters’ who took part in the Method experiment.”⁷

For almost 40 years, the Lifehouse project manifested as a personally nostalgic act in which Townshend continually attempted to revisit this creative vision of his rock star youth. Throughout a personal journey of creation and recreation, Townshend relied on collective

⁵ Townshend, 207.

⁶ Charles Shaar Murray, “Pete Townshend: *The Lifehouse Chronicles*”. *MOJO* (1999) Rock’s Backpages. Accessed April 23, 2021. <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/pete-townshend-the-lifehouse-chronicles>.

⁷ Lifehouse Method. Online Available via [<https://petetownshend.net/musicals/lifehouse-method>] (accessed on October 1, 2018).

memory in the Lifehouse project to evoke an imagined past more in tune with nature and humanity than the present. Despite thematizing a fear of technology, in the various incarnations of Lifehouse it is, ironically, computer technology that mediates the nostalgic vision. The Lifehouse project was intended for film and the plot and themes found in the actual products that Townshend creates originated with that medium. However, the expression of specific concepts has been facilitated through the different technological media that Townshend employs in his three main Lifehouse projects. The album *Who's Next* centers around the synthesized sounds of technology and fragmentary lyrical images of nature and pollution, while the radio play allows the *Lifehouse Chronicles* to focus on a plot in which technology threatens humanity. Finally, the interactive software of the Lifehouse Method attempts, through the saving power of live rock music, to bring humans back into harmony with nature and one another. In each reincarnation of the project, Townshend's technological resources move closer to the futuristic fantasy he had first imagined in the seventies. Likewise, as we inch closer to the actual date of Townshend's imagined future, the act of creation turns from futuristic prophecy to nostalgia for the futurism of the past. In this chapter, I will analyze this vision of what I will call *nostalgic futurism* in three key artifacts: The Who's 1971 album *Who's Next*; the 1999 radio play (released in the 6-volume box set, *The Lifehouse Chronicles*); and the 2007 musical software system known as The Lifehouse Method. Mapping the intertextual relationships between these works, we can see how nostalgic futurism navigates cultural memory for the past alongside several generations of futuristic imaginings. An act of increasingly personally nostalgic creativity for Townshend which simultaneously relies on collective memory, the Lifehouse project allows its audience to explore the fears, hopes and reflections of an aging generation at the edge of a new millennium.

Lifthouse Envisioned: Film script and *Who's Next* (1971)

In the early seventies, hints and rumors of a post-*Tommy* Who film project began to appear in the press, in with reviews of concert performances held at the Young Vic theatre. Anticipation was high, as Who publicist and friend Keith Altham wrote in 1971: “the Who march on into their experiment with theatre at the Young Vic from which Mr. T. promises a new dimension in visual-rock and the first truly representational film of pop music in a decade. He is probably one of the few people capable of living up to that promise.”⁸ But for all of Altham’s faith, even he couldn’t quite understand what it was they were waiting for, later admitting: “I didn’t understand a bloody word...It was very hard to grasp the concept.”⁹ Eventually, the film was abandoned. Some involved say that the project had expanded to a level of complexity that seemed impossible realize.¹⁰ In a 2010 interview with Ritchie Unterberger, Altham reflected: “It was a kind of really abstract idea. I mean, there were elements in it which had been talked about before. In some ways, he was foretelling the use of the Internet, [the experience suits] that went into everybody’s homes, and people wouldn’t have to move. But in those days of course there was no Facebook, no Twitter, no blogs, no computers. And to good old practical Roger [Daltry], it meant wiring up everybody’s house. That was Roger’s famous quote – ‘there’s not enough wire.’”¹¹ Townshend himself tends to blame Kit Lambert, the Who’s co-manager, who was more interested in capitalizing on the success of *Tommy* with a film based on the rock-opera,

⁸ Altham, Keith. “Pete Townshend”. *Record Mirror* (1971). Rock’s Backpages. Accessed April 23, 2021. <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/pete-townshend-2>.

⁹ Sutcliffe, Phil. “The Who: *Lifthouse*.” *Q* (2004). Rock’s Backpages. Accessed April 23, 2021. <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-who-lifthouse>.

¹⁰ Richie Unterberger, *Won’t Get Fooled Again. The Who from Lifthouse to Quadrophenia*. (London: Jawbone Press, 2011), 87-111.

¹¹ Unterberger, *Won’t Get Fooled Again*, 101.

rather than venturing into a new project.¹² For whatever reason, the project was scrapped and the songs intended for *Lifeshouse* were dumped on *Who's Next*, a nine-track studio album released late in 1971.

Like much dystopian science fiction, the plot for Townshend's *Lifeshouse* project relies on fears about technology. The story takes place in a post-apocalyptic world in which the Earth's surface has been ravaged by pollution and un-regulated industrial expansion. The protagonists of the narrative are a "self-sufficient drop out family group" of farmers from Scotland, who brave the polluted wasteland and travel across the English countryside in search of their teenage daughter, who has left home to attend the rumored "Lifeshouse" concert festival.¹³ Except for a few essential farm workers on the surface, society has been relegated to a virtual existence underground, with forced curfews and special suits to protect humans from the pollution reported by the government. The suits aren't just physical barriers protecting their wearers from the hostile world outside, but are also "interconnected in a universal grid, a little like the modern Internet, but combined with gas-company pipelines and cable-television company wiring."¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, this grid becomes corrupted, and falls under the control of "an imperious media conglomerate headed by a dictatorial figure called Jumbo." The so-called "Lifeshouse" concert is, thus, offered as a physical and spiritual escape for those people inside the grid, as well as those living on the surface. Townshend writes: "A young composer called Bobby hacks in to the grid and offers a festival-like music concert – called *The Lifeshouse* – which he hopes will impel the audience to throw off their suits (which are in fact no longer necessary for physical survival) and

¹² Pete Townshend and Jeff Young: *Lifeshouse* (London: Simon & Schuster 1999), 6–7. ^[1]_[SEP]

¹³ Pete Townshend, Jeff Young, *Lifeshouse*. (London: Simon & Schuster 1999), 2-3.

¹⁴ Townshend and Young, 3.

attend in person: ‘Come to the Lifehouse, your song is here’.¹⁵ As the concert progresses and the audience members begin dancing to the music, both the live audience and those tuning into the concert through the grid at home disappear in an unexplainable rapture-like moment.

Although *Who’s Next* does not lay out a specific narrative, much of the music it contains was originally intended for the Lifehouse film, and the album artwork nods to the project’s dystopian anti-technological vision. Similarly to the *Led Zeppelin IV* album cover (which juxtaposes nature imagery against a crumbling urban landscape), the album cover for *Who’s Next* introduces the tension between nature and environmental degradation, which are later developed through the musical tracks. The cover shows the band standing around a large concrete object, protruding out of a vast spoil tip or “slag heap.”¹⁶



Figure 4.1 *Who’s Next* Front Cover

¹⁵ Townshend and Young, 4.

¹⁶ Slag, originally a word for the waste products of burning coal, has become a generalized term synonymous with “trash.” Any waste pile is referred to in Britain as a “slag heap.”

A slag heap is a large pile of waste rock leftover from coal mining. It was, by the 1960s, a familiar image in Britain, a toxic remnant of a dying industry receding into the past. The landscape on the album cover evokes a rubbished, post-apocalyptic world, not unlike the one envisioned by Townshend in his *Lifeshouse* script. It is – to quote one of the most famous songs originally written for *Lifeshouse* – a (Teenage) Wasteland.¹⁷ In this context, the slagheap represents the failed dreams of the industrial revolution.¹⁸ Of course, the concrete monolith, towering amid the rubble, overtly and ironically references an icon of contemporary science fiction – the mysterious black monolith in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Band photographer Keith Russell explains that the first shots he captured for the cover at this site were of the band members explicitly reenacting the scene in Kubrick’s film where the apes explore the object in awe.¹⁹ However, the semiotic meanings tied to this object in *2001* extend beyond that first scene. Appearing in key moments of evolution during the film, the monolith is symbolically linked to progress and the development of mankind. Film scholar Garry Leonard posits that “the monolith is always proximate to discovery and development, but it always precedes it, exceeds it and is never surpassed by it.”²⁰ In spite of this grandiose signaling, the photograph ultimately chosen

¹⁷ The chorus of the song “Baba O’Riley” (often mistakenly referred to by it) sings of a “teenage wasteland.” In 1971, Townshend attributed the concept to the *Lifeshouse* plot, in which the protagonist (a man in his fifties) looks around at the wasted potential of youth and idealism. Richie Unterberger cites November 1971 Townshend interview in *Circus Magazine*. Unterberger, *Won’t Get Fooled Again*, 67.

¹⁸The fifties had brought the closure of many mines, and, subsequently, the decline of the mining communities surrounding them. See Peter Leese, *Britain since 1945. Aspects of Identity*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁹ Ethan Russell explains this in an ad for him as a speaker. Ethan Russel THE BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE Corporate. Online available via <https://vimeo.com/187270265> (accessed 1 October 2018).

²⁰ Leonard, Garry. “Technically Human: Kubrick’s Monolith and Heidegger’s Propriative Event.” *Film Criticism* 36, no. 1 (2011): 45.

for the album cover represents neither awe nor curiosity. Instead, we see the boyish lark of urinating on the pillar – the band “taking a piss” on a symbol of progress and development.

The urban ruins depicted on the cover indicate a longing for the idealism of a previous era, as well as the world destroyed in attempting to bring that ideal to fruition. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss theorizes that “the out-of-date ruins of the recent past appear as residues of a dream world.”²¹ It is this sort of dream world that is recreated through the visual medium of the studio album *Who’s Next*. The cover art draws on collective memory for other science fiction sites of apocalyptic imagery, such as the work of H.G. Wells, Arthur C. Clarke, and more directly contemporaneous, eco-dystopias by Philip K. Dick and J.G. Ballard.²² In addition to these dark fictions, Townshend’s contemporary environment was filled with a real world fear, which builds on these images. Born in 1945, Townshend and his generation grew up the wake of the atomic bomb. Keenly aware of the failed efforts of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, they were the first generation for whom fear of nuclear destruction was always a real and constant possibility.²³ In addition, a countervailing fear of overpopulation and societal collapse gripped the developed world, fueling speculation about the cost of unchecked growth on the environment and humanity. We find contemporary evidence of these fears through *The Yorkshire Post’s* 1971 award winner for non-fiction – *The Doomsday Book* by Gordon Rattray

²¹ Buck-Morss, Susan. “The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe.” *October* 73 (1995): 4.

²² Although it is centered on alien invasion, instead of human-inflicted environmental decline, the popularity of H.G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds* (1897) is often credited with inspiring a wave of post-apocalyptic science fiction, which depicted a world after Earth’s destruction. The *Time Machine* (1895) pre-dates Townshend’s envisioning of a future world where humanity has split into two distinct classes. Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) also envisions a post-apocalyptic world in which humanity struggles to live off of a destroyed earth.

²³ See “Part II - The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: romantic protest on the march” in Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945-1980* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). 115-201.

Taylor. Written during the same cultural moment as Townshend's development of the Lifehouse project, this book issues many of the same concerns for the future of Earth and humanity as a result of unchecked progress.²⁴ (How quickly the liberal dream of technology's "white heat" had faded!) Simultaneously, as unimaginably beautiful images of the Earth taken by NASA from outer space were shared the world over, this moment was also heavily invested in preserving the Arcadian beauty under threat.²⁵ While, as we've seen, pastoral romanticism had long been intertwined with the British imagination, sparking preservation efforts since shortly after the Industrial Revolution, the mid-to-late sixties saw a resurgence of interest in the environment. Dominick Sandbrook's influential cultural history of postwar Britain outlines this outburst of "momentum and enthusiasm" in his chapter on "The Green Death," highlighting a period when:

the high-minded middle classes turned their attention to the spread of factory farming, the growth of suburbia and the blight of pollution, that the conservationists began to acquire a genuinely significant following. Membership of the Ramblers' Association (obviously a form of leisure, though a green-tinged one) doubled between 1962 and 1972; meanwhile, coverage of environmental issues in *The Times* increased by 280 per cent between 1965 and 1973.²⁶

²⁴ Gordon Rattray Taylor, *The Doomsday Book*, (London: Thames & Hudson Limited, 1970). See also Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*.

²⁵ Barbara Ward's *Spaceship Earth* (1966) is notable for the way it uses recent images of Earth sent back from space to encourage worldwide collaboration to prevent Earth's destruction. Barbara Ward, *Spaceship Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

²⁶ Dominick Sandbrook, *State of Emergency* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 182. Meredith Veldman also details the historical roots of the green movement and its resurgence in the UK during this period. See Veldman: *Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of Britain*.

The younger generation, especially, found countercultural and ecological values in alignment. For sensitive artists like Townshend, the eco-dystopian future became a space for imaginative thinking: what would happen after Earth's seemingly inevitable destruction through overdevelopment?

Of the nine songs on *Who's Next*, eight relate directly to the abandoned film project, with several of them using language that idealizes nature and the outdoors amid the devastation of a post-apocalyptic world.²⁷ The disastrous affects of pollution on the earth are found in "Goin' Mobile" ("*I don't care about pollution, I'm an air-conditioned gypsy!*"). "Love Ain't for Keeping" equates love with unspoiled nature ("*Black ash from the foundry hangs like a hood / But the air is perfumed by the burning firewood / The seeds are bursting, The spring is a-seeping / Lay down my darling. Love ain't for keeping.*") In fact, this equation of love and an idealized vision of the natural world culminates in the album's fifth track (the final track of the first side), intended as the concert finale of the *Lifhouse* film. In "The Song is Over," Roger Daltrey sings his song of lost love to the surrounding world: "I'll sing my song to the wide open spaces / I'll sing my heart out to the infinite sea / I'll sing my visions to the sky high mountains / I'll sing my song to the free, to the free."

The open-air space of the future, like that of the idealized past, provides a view of the outdoors as a place of freedom and escape—a major theme in these songs, connecting back to the *Lifhouse* premise of humans living in constricting experience suits controlled by a

²⁷ Written by bassist John Entwistle, the song 'My Wife' was not intended for the *Lifhouse* project. Of the others, 'Baba O'Riley', 'Love Ain't For Keeping', and 'The Song is Over' idealize nature and the outdoors, while 'Won't Get Fooled Again', 'Pure and Easy', and 'Going Mobile' offer a sense of rebellion against modernization's claustrophobic dominance.

dictatorial figure. And yet, in the Lifehouse plot, much of the natural world has been destroyed. Thus Lifehouse script brings two different apocalyptic fears into conflict – environmental destruction and authoritarian control. The ecological collapse of the planet will result in alienation from human contact and forced retreat from the natural world, even as it recovered. Further, this necessary response is a likely vehicle for human corruption and governmental control. In Lifehouse, freedom of life on the Earth’s surface is thus presented as an unlikely antidote to the government control of a post-apocalyptic world. This freedom is present from the opening lines of the album’s first song, ‘Baba O’Riley’: “*Out here in the fields, I fight for my meals!*” While the speaker has to fight for his livelihood, this fight seems preferable to the alternative—an inauthentic, artificial existence, living out one’s life in the bubble of a futuristic experience suit (which has essentially become the new city).

The protagonist of the film script is a farmer living in Scotland named Ray (one of the few humans living “unplugged” on the Earth’s surface). Ray and his wife, Sally, travel to London to in search of the open-air music festival Lifehouse, where they hope to find their teenaged daughter. The lyrics ‘Sally, take my hand, travel south cross land’ and ‘the exodus is here’, from ‘Baba O’Riley’ and the entire premise of ‘Goin’ Mobile’ express the freedom sought in this pilgrimage. The need for mobility expressed in these lyrics contrasts an imagined freedom of movement with the limited personal space of an experience suit. This mobility is both spatial (the protagonist physically travels across England) and temporal (the journey represents a turn towards past values of human interaction and simplicity). It is significant that ‘authenticity’ is found in this (relatively) natural environment. It is a world in ruins, but still preferable to the sanitized, but simulated existence found in the technologically advanced experience suits. Furthermore, the

journey across this wasteland is a pilgrimage to find an ‘authentic’ life in another setting—the live music experience of the outdoor festival.

To be sure, violence and commercial corruption had tainted the utopian ideals of the outdoor festival in both the US and the UK by 1970. The open-air music festival (first embraced by jazz and folk revivalists, and later by psychedelic pop and rock musicians) aimed to fill a therapeutic role in the late 1960s, allowing audiences to escape from the soulless modernism of suburban life.²⁸ As the decade went on, however, a darker undertone tainted the utopian view of the natural world commonly expressed by musicians of the time. Certainly the murder of Meredith Hunter by Hells Angels security at Altamont epitomizes this shift. However, even the Woodstock Festival of 1969, depicted in Michael Wadleigh’s film *Woodstock: 3 Days of Peace & Music* (1970) as a “contemporary version of *The Canterbury Tales*: a pilgrimage for hippies seeking the communal expression of music and love,” witnessed 5000 medical cases and three deaths.²¹ Even as early as 1971, we can sense nostalgia for the 1960s open-air music festival, a nostalgia for the idealism and utopianism that this generation had so recently felt. Using a representation of the future as a means of exploiting historical nostalgia, Townshend expresses optimism amid fears about Britain’s future; while technological progress hinders the human expression of many people in post-apocalyptic Lifehouse, those characters who challenge the status quo find ecstatic freedom and creativity in reconnecting with nature.

While *Who’s Next* maintains references to the storyline of the film-script, it is not a concept album with an overt narrative. Shorn of specifics, the album generally expresses the themes of the Lifehouse project, especially fears about the price of progress and concern for Earth and

²⁸ See Chapter 3 “Out in the Garden” in Paul Hegarty and Martin Halliwell. *Beyond and Before: Progressive Rock since the 1960s* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 47-64.

humanity's future. These fears are drawn from the historical moment of the early seventies, as Townshend recalls in his autobiography:

In my draft, I touched on some of the major anxieties of the times. When the Earth's ecosystem collapsed, its inhabitants would have to drastically reduce their demands on the resources of the world. Only through submission to a police state would we survive. The allied governments of the world would join forces to demand that ordinary folk accept a long enough period of hibernation in the care of computers, in order to allow the planet to recover.²⁹

In Townshend's synoptic scenario, all the late 1960s science fiction dystopias collide: industrial pollution would destroy the Earth, and the technological advances offered as the solution to eco-suicide, would, in their turn, threaten to destroy humanity. Even those who survived the coming holocaust would be atomized by political repression and a computerized virtual life, losing the spirituality and sense of self that comes from interacting with others. While the 1970s manifestation of this storyline – *Who's Next* – seems to center on the effects of environment degradation, this loss of humanity becomes the focus of Townsend's later projects. Tapping into collective memories of a pre-Industrial Britain, a time and a place envisioned as more meaningful than either the present or the recent past, the nostalgic practice embodied in Townsend's seventies works is a particularly florid strand of cultural nostalgia³⁰ Science fiction fantasies such as Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), episodes of the hit BBC series *Dr. Who* (1963-pres.), and perhaps most closely related to the *Lifeshouse* narrative, the BBC Television

²⁹ Townshend. *Who I Am*, 203.

³⁰ Boym describes collective memory as "collective landmarks of everyday life." Svetlana Boym: *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 53.

adaptation of E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1966) are landmarks here, grounding individual conceptions of a dystopian future in a shared semiotic. Because collective memory relies on these individual signs, the lack of narrative in *Who's Next* does not negate the cultural significance that its listeners can draw from the album. Instead, listeners could construct their own narratives (and their own meanings) using the visual and musical signposts offered by the album. Through a futuristic setting, the album sends its listeners to the past to find meaning for a contemporary moment.

Sonically, *Who's Next* closely adheres to The Who's standard electrified instrumentation and sophisticated recording methods. And yet, Townshend verbally rejects overly complicated musical technologies, speaking in a contemporaneous interview with Stever Turner of *Beat Instrumental* in December of 1971: "The technology is beginning to overtake the musician ... The infinite possibilities presented by technologies makes me want to capture the present in a far more simple way."³¹ Closer examination of Townshend's songs written during this period, as well as his spiritual and musical influences, reveals the type of simplicity to which he is referring. The opening track for *Who's Next* relies heavily upon the synthesizer; in fact, Townshend indicates in a 1971 *Melody Maker* interview that the instrument would have provided the backbone for the *Lifeforce* project, had it been completed. Referring to "Baba O'Riley," Townshend shares that "This is the way we expected most of the music in the film to sound ... because we have a pre-recorded tape of the synthesizer in the background."³² However complicated and futuristic the technology needed for the film project would have been, the musical composition

³¹ Steve Turner. "Pete Townshend: Genius of the Simple," *Beat Instrumental* (December, 1971).

³² Quoted after Unterberger, *Won't Get Fooled Again*, 64–65. Unterberg indicates that the quote comes from 'Pete's track-by-track description of *Who's Next*' in the July 17, 1971 issue of *Melody Maker*.

relies upon the avant-garde movement of minimalism. The song title combines the names of two of Townshend's influences of the time: California minimalist composer Terry Riley and Indian spiritual leader Meher Baba. Both Riley's music and Baba's teachings focus on concepts of simplicity and reduction. Riley's 1969 minimalist album, *A Rainbow in Curved Air*, as well as his 1964 composition *In C* were favorites of Townshend and bare a remarkable resemblance to the underlying keyboard motive in 'Baba O'Riley'. Meher Babba's philosophies were a major part of Townshend's work in the interim period between *Tommy* and *Who's Next*.³³ Baba's concepts of simplicity and the illusion of reality are quite similar to the rejection of artificial living expressed in the *Lifehouse* plot. Similarly to Townshend's eclectic range of science fiction source material for *Lifehouse*, the mysticism found in the plot and consequently in the songs on *Who's Next* written for the film project draw from a range of Eastern philosophical ideas and mysticism. For example, at a press conference at the Young Vic Theatre in Waterloo, on January 13, 1971, Townshend announced:

We shall not be giving the usual kind of Who rock show. The audience will be completely involved in the music, which is designed to reflect people's personalities. Each participant is both blueprint and inspiration for a unique piece of music or song. We shall try to induce mental and spiritual harmony through the medium of rock music.³⁴

The concept of a unifying spiritual, musical pitch forms the basis for the climax of the film—a moment of transcendence experienced during the live open-air concert. In a 1970 essay for

³³ Interestingly, Townshend's major project between *Tommy* and *Lifehouse/Who's Next* was an LP entitled *Happy Birthday* in honor of what would have been Meher Baba's seventy-sixth birthday (however, it ended up marking the first anniversary of his death); see Unterberger, 56–57.

³⁴ Andrew Neill and Matthew Kent, *Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere: The Complete Chronicle of the WHO 1958–1978* (New York: Sterling, 2009), 196.

Melody Maker, Townshend explains his burgeoning personal philosophy of musical spirituality, which seems to stem from the teachings of Inayat Khan: “There’s a note, a musical note, that builds the basis of existence somehow. Mystics would agree, saying that of course it is OM, but I am talking about a MUSICAL note.”³⁵ Songs such as ‘Getting in Tune’ reference Townshend’s ideas regarding spiritual harmony as the lyrics describe ‘getting in tune’ with emotional and physical states, as well as an eternal note – ‘the simple secret of the note in us all’.

Although *Who’s Next* takes a futuristic approach to its critique of unchecked progress, environmental degradation, and the decline of human interaction, the science-fiction fantasy relies on philosophical values of simplicity, gleaned from a more distant past. The future depicted in Townshend’s seventies vision is, in many ways, more a reflection of his contemporary experience than a radical envisioning of the future. Describing the quasi-spiritual experience of re-enacting *Tommy* live in concert, night after night, Townshend explained: “I moved on to Lifehouse with a fear that what the future promised was that we’d lose all this. I wasn’t frightened of what I could see as what would one day become the internet, [it] just challenged my belief that it was really important to show up, to be there.”³⁶ The virtualized, hyper-mediated dystopia of “experience suits” imagined by Townshend was visible in his own, not-so-distant future. The Beatles had already abandoned public performance in favor of the “virtual” world of musical creation in the recording studio; would his increasingly complex and ambitious musical ideas force him to do the same?³⁷ With a “society of the spectacle” centered around artificial experiences already

³⁵ Pete Townshend. ‘Another Fight in the Playground’. *Melody Maker*. September 19, 1970; see also Unterberger, *Won’t Get Fooled Again*, 44–45.

³⁶ Pete Townshend, *Lifehouse Chronicles*. Eel Pie, EPR 002, 2000 (CD, UK).

³⁷The Beatles famously stopped touring in 1966, retreating into the world of the record studio where their musical contact with the outside world came through the releasing of complexly produced studio albums instead of live

visible on the horizon, the technologies Townshend envisioned build on those of his contemporary world.³⁸ This is not uncommon in science fiction, which often extrapolates on current technologies in creating a world of the future. Thus the “grid” feeding entertainment and life-experiences to the masses was, simply and extrapolation of television, which had reached full penetration of British society during Townshend’s own youth.³⁹ In a 1975 critique of science fiction literature, John Huntington argued that “one may reasonably ask whether it is possible to imagine or describe any future that is not in some way based on the past; the wildest fantasy, after all, if it is to be comprehensible, must at some point anchor itself in the known.”⁴⁰ While he offers this insight as a criticism of popular science fiction as unimaginative and conservative, it touches on the powerful semiotics at play in the Lifehouse project. A familiar technology (television) turned into an instrument of oppression parallels the rise of media theory during this same time. When Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1968, that the “medium was the message,” he was expressing a similar anxiety that the rise of technology, itself, was the primary concern (more than the work it does or the messages it transfers).⁴¹ The nostalgic futurism of Lifehouse relies on cultural memory and the longing for a pre-industrial world, and perhaps more importantly, for live music

concerts. In this same spirit of nostalgia, however, they too would attempt to reconnect through live performance in their famous rooftop concert in January of 1969, the conclusion of their deliberately named “Get Back” project.

³⁸ Guy Debord. *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970).

³⁹ In the introduction to his book release of the radio play script, Townshend describes his 1971 vision of the grid as “a little like the modern Internet, but combined with gas-company pipelines and cable-television-company wiring.” Townshend and Young, *Lifehouse*, 3.

⁴⁰ Huntington’s critique of Science Fiction comes from a place of education and curriculum content: [he wrote](#) his essay for a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English. See John Huntington, “Science Fiction and the Future.” *College English* 37 (1975) No. 4, p. 352. Also, Huntington highlights this tendency in science fiction in the late seventies, but it is an argument that is continually revisited, even today. See Tom Vanderbilt, “Why Futurism Has a Cultural Blindspot,” *Nautilus* on 18.11.2018. Online available via <http://nautil.us/issue/65/in-plain-sight/why-futurism-has-a-cultural-blindspot-rp> (accessed 13 October 2018).

⁴¹ See Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

as a privileged medium for creating spiritual, human experiences. It is the latter of these two objects of longing which is ultimately revisited in Townshend's Lifehouse ventures in the first years of the 21st century.

Lifehouse Revisited: *Lifehouse Chronicles* (2000) & *Lifehouse Method* (2007)

The original Lifehouse fantasy was of a not-so-distant future; by 1999, when Townshend returned to the scenario, that future was now contemporary reality. In his introduction to the radio play of *Lifehouse* (December, 1999), Townshend admits: "Today, what Lifehouse is – is a *landing* in my current reality. I suddenly find myself at the end of 1999, looking at the future, and thinking, well, you know, these aren't ideas...these aren't abstract ideas anymore...they are realities."⁴² Returning to the Lifehouse project in a narrative form, Townshend engages in an act of personal nostalgia. His own experiences with the project – the unrealized aspirations of a live, interactive concert interwoven into a science fiction film narrative – shape his creative process and goals at the outset of the new millennium. This idea can most clearly be seen through the two primary aspects of the original project realized at this time – a narrative (the *Lifehouse* radio play) and an interactive experience with the audience (the *Lifehouse Method*). The personal side of this nostalgic act is one centered on an unfinished masterpiece, and the vision of what that masterpiece might have brought about, if only it had been created.

In "The Right to Nostalgia," Xiao Yen declares that "Nostalgia is not only a kind of remembrance, but a kind of right. We all have a longing for the past – lingering over some mundane objects because these mundane objects have become the memorial to the trajectory of one's

⁴² Pete Townshend: *Lifehouse Chronicles*. Eel Pie, EPR 002, 2000 (CD, UK).

own life, allowing us, without a doubt, to construct a human archive.”⁴³ More of a superseded artistic vision rather than a “mundane object,” the Lifehouse Project still became a memorial to the trajectory of Townshend’s life. In returning to it, Townshend could wander the nostalgic roads of his own memory and explore the “might-have-been.” For his audience, this act of revisiting can evoke individual longings to do the same, living vicariously through Townshend’s ability to return to a past that the rest of us never will. Thus, while it is useful to examine personally nostalgic acts, separate from the cultural or collective meanings they may hold, it is also important to remember that these acts are never created in isolation, nor are their effects limited to the creator.

Returning to his own personal past, Townshend taps into referents for a generation of audience members whose past is tied to his own. At the edge of a new millennium, at a moment filled with its own fears of technological progress, Townshend looked to a previous era in his own lifetime in which civilization faced fears of destruction because of the unintended consequences of technology. Speaking with *MOJO* about the release of *The Lifehouse Chronicles*, Townshend explained that he discovered this personal and generational meaning only during his *return* to the story in the late 1990s:

What we [Young and Townshend] found out was that the story was about me, my childhood, and kids like me. It’s an immediate postwar story, about a kid who is born after the war and has a vision of the future, which is disturbing but exciting. He realizes as he grows up that he is not going to realize his vision. He has had a wonderful, almost utopian, vision: he sees that there is danger of pollution, of nuclear proliferation, but also of

⁴³ Dai Jinhau, Translated by Judy T.H. Chen: *Imagined Nostalgia Postmodernism and China* 24 (1997) No. 3. p. 144.

the watering-down of art. He hears this fantastic music in his head, as I did, and what I used to fear was that I would never hear that music when I became an adult, and I haven't. The hero grows up and wants to have that back, and realizes that he's in a time when the generation after him, his daughter and her boyfriend, are going to do something about it: they're gonna stop the rot. And he desperately would love to be a part of it, but it's too late.⁴⁴

Townshend draws on his own experiences while working through the *Lifehouse* project but acknowledges that these experiences are connected to that of his own generation. The fears and ultimately the failure of his generation to save the world from the heavy hand of "progress" are nostalgically revisited through the radio play. Further, this conception of and longing for an interconnected human experience (within generations, nations, or cultures) while reflexively interesting to our understanding of nostalgic acts on a theoretical level, is also central to the narrative of *Lifehouse*. The interplay between what is imagined and how it is created thus provides another avenue for understanding how creative nostalgic acts mediate futuristic visions.

At the release of *The Lifehouse Chronicles* in the late nineties, several writers acknowledged that the "grid" of Townshend's plot seemed very similar to the contemporary experience of the internet.⁴⁵ A *New York Times* headline exclaimed: "Pete Townshend was able to foresee the Internet nearly 30 years ago"⁴⁶ Similarly, *The Independent* credited Townshend with prophetic visions: "Begun in 1971, it [*Lifehouse*] would have foretold the coming of the internet and

⁴⁴ Murray. "Pete Townshend: The Lifehouse Chronicles".

⁴⁵ Interestingly, these writers all fail to link Townshend's narrative to early science fiction accounts of an interconnected virtual experience, which we find even as early as E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909).

⁴⁶ Steve Hochman: Townshend's 'Lifehouse' Will See the Light of Day. *Los Angeles Times* on 31.10.99 Online available via <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/oct/31/entertainment/ca-28097> (accessed 1 October 2018).

worldwide web.”⁴⁷ But while *The Lifehouse Chronicles* explored the narrative of a world interconnected through an internet-like “grid,” ultimately its medium of existence was somewhat “retro”—the radio play. Although technological advancements in film, television, and even the internet offered a plethora of publishing possibilities for Townshend to return to the Lifehouse vision, the ultimate product of his creative work in the late nineties was a nostalgic one, both in content and in medium. However, radio-performed science fiction narratives had experienced several resurgences of interest in the UK through the Radiophonic Workshop.⁴⁸ Further, the imaginative space of an auditory-only medium had proven to be exceptionally effective in conjuring up apocalyptic fears, as was experienced in Orson Welles’s 1938 production *The War of the Worlds*.⁴⁹

The interruptions of the “Hacker” in the *Lifehouse Chronicles* signals a type of uncomfortable anxiety for the audience as it brings out for the characters in the play. His first entrance, in the third scene, hauntingly interrupts the conversation between protagonist Ray and his wife Sally.

Hacker: ...*Breathe...breathe...breathe...*who is this voice breathing a breath of fresh air into couch potato land. What’s *he* doing in our living room, crashing our favorite show?

People, I’m *collecting*...Collecting the music of your heart and soul...I want to hear your

⁴⁷ David Lister: Townshend’s New Epic Saw the Future 30 Years Ago. *Independent* 26.7.99 Online available via <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/townshends-new-epic-saw-the-future-30-years-ago-1108741.html> (accessed 1 October 2018)

⁴⁸ Townshend’s website says he met with members of the workshop in 1971. See Louis Niebur: *Special Sound. The Creation and Legacy of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2010).

⁴⁹ Although the public’s response is largely believed to have been exaggerated by the press, the association of science fiction and apocalyptic fears remain. See A. Brad Schwartz: *Broadcast Hysteria. Orson Welles’s War of the Worlds and the Art of Fake News*. New York: Hill and Wang (2015). Further, podcasts and audiobooks remain popular to this day, despite the many visual mediums available to audiences.

pulse beats and the blood pumping through your veins... Because the night is *coming*... all back to *my* place... *one* place... *one* music ... When's it happening? You'll *know* about it 'cos you'll *be* there. And what's the big night *called*? It's called the Lifehouse... *Lifehouse*... *Lifehouse*... Hear me breathing... Here comes *the Lifehouse* ... breathe... breathe ... breathe...

The broadcast ends and breaks down into static, then background music.

[...]

Sally: I don't understand him. He gives me the creeps.⁵⁰

The diegetic static that proceeds and ends the Hacker's entrance is unsettling for both the characters and Townshend's audience. Similarly, the moments of silence in the play, as Ray and Sally point out, is a tension-filled, haunting effect:

Sally: Listen

Ray: To what

Sally: The silence. *That's* what we came her for. No traffic. No sirens. No helicopters hanging in the sky.

Ray: There is no silence here. You can *hear* the darkness.

Sally: Don't. You'll make me scared.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Townshend, Young. 28-29.

⁵¹ Townshend, Young. 31-32.

Relying on science fiction radio tropes, Townshend's radio play aligns his own science fiction venture with their legacy. Further, in returning to the plot of the Lifehouse project, through a radio play, Townshend indulges in a type of retrofuturism. Although less ambivalent than works commonly described as examples of retrofuturism, the powerful semiotic associations of the radio play recenter the plot of *The Lifehouse Chronicles* less on the near future and more on what the recent past's vision of that future (a future time which had, in the meantime, come and gone) had been.⁵² Sharon Sharp usefully offers examples of how retrofuturism might operate: "retrofuturism uses iconic imagery of previous visions of the future, such as jet packs, homes of tomorrow, ray guns and other space age manifestations of technological progress, because our sense of the future is often inflected with a sense of nostalgia for the imaginings of the future that never materialized."⁵³ In using a past technology – radio – Townshend taps into that nostalgic yearning – yearning for his own past, for the past of previous generations, and for the vision of the future that is now the present.

It wasn't until the early 2000s that internet-like technology finally entered Townshend's toolbox. In 2007, Townshend's team launched the website lifehouse-method.com. Through this technological space, fans could input personal data into the website interface, which would be used to create an "authentic musical 'portrait' of the 'sitters'". In many ways, this was the

⁵² Retrofuturism often carries associations of kitsch or ambivalent irony. While there is certainly irony in the use of a past technology to create a futuristic science fiction narrative, this does not necessarily equate with a detached, creative process. On the contrary, as Townshend explains to MOJO, "The decision to do a radio play was because radio would force me to get the story sorted out, without any falling back on animation, images, trickery, special effects, esoteric sci-fi computerized bollocks." The more powerful effect of the irony in this case, seems to be the centering of the focus on the narrative – a nostalgic, but likely highly meaningful, act. See Murray, "Pete Townshend: The Lifehouse Chronicles".

⁵³ Sharon Sharp, "Nostalgia for the future: Retrofuturism in Enterprise," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4, no. 2 (2011):25.

realization of Townshend's seventies futuristic vision. Speaking to *NME* in 1971, he explains that "Baba O'Riley" was his first venture into this "portrait"-making setting:

"Baba O'Riley" was a number I wrote while I was doing these experiments with tapes on the synthesizer. Among my plans for the concert and film of the concert at the Young Vic was to take a person out of the audience and feed information – height, weight, astrological details, beliefs, and behavior etc. – about that person into the synthesizer. The synthesizer would then select notes from the pattern of that person. I would be like translating a person into music. On this particular track, I programmed details about the life of Meher Baba and that provides the backing for the number.⁵⁴

In 2006, Pete Townshend became the next portrait "sitter," and the first to test out the Lifehouse Method system.⁵⁵ His own musical portrait, like the others released on *Method Music* (2012), evokes the sounds of minimalism.⁵⁶ Terry Riley, a pioneer of American minimal music, is also referenced by the assignment of his surname to "Baba O'Riley," matching the repetitive minimal sound of the track.⁵⁷ The repetitive aesthetic in these musical portraits operates through several layers of pastness. Firstly, the process links back to the seventies, when Townshend was writing his portrait of Meher Baba as the basis for "Baba O'Riley," intended to be the opening track for the planned Lifehouse film. In that historical moment, British composers and art school students

⁵⁴ "Pete Townshend at 26. Just an Old Fashioned Guy," *NME* 21 August 1971

⁵⁵ His portrait can be heard on his website. Online Available via <https://petetownshend.net/musicals/lifehouse-method> (accessed 21 April 2021)

⁵⁶ Lawrence Ball: *Method Music*. Navona Records, NV5860, 2012 (CD, USA).

⁵⁷ Townshend explains this inspiration and connection clearly at the 2007 launch of *Method Music*. Online Available via <https://petetownshend.net/musicals/lifehouse-method> (accessed 1 Oct 2018).

(something Townshend himself had once been) were discovering American minimalism.⁵⁸ In doing so, they were engaging in a nostalgic link back to a kind of less goal-driven, a-teleological music. In 1966, La Monte Young attributed this minimalist thinking to both Eastern musical systems, as well as Western music through the 14th century, explaining: “climax and directionality have been among the most important guiding factors, whereas music before that time, from the chants, through organum and Machaut, used stasis as a point of structure a little bit more the way Eastern musical systems have.”⁵⁹ Through this “stasis”, minimalism, in sound and theory, directs attention to a sense of timelessness. Taking Boym’s theory that “nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress,” the minimalist sounds of the Lifehouse Method capture this idea of a “time out of time.”⁶⁰ There is no longer any past or future. Wim Mertens encourages this reading of experimental musics, like minimalism or aleatoric music, which reject dialectical time: “Instead of the existential identification with dialectical time that one finds in traditional music, or the neutralization of time that occurs in autonomous music, Cage identifies with macro-time, which transcends history and can therefore be called mythic. The nature of macro-time is essentially static, and duration is an automatized conglomerate of moments, without relation to past or future.”⁶¹ This is the ultimate vision of the Lifehouse plot, and

⁵⁸ Reflecting on his time at Ealing Art School in the early sixties, Townshend highlights minimalism as one of the musical experiences of that time: “There would be lessons where you sort of *listened* to jazz [...] Or listened to classical music. Or explored minimalism. [...] It was a clearinghouse, and music was something that was very much considered to be ok. And not something that you only did after-hours. It was part of life.” See Mark Wilkerson: *Who Are You. The Life of Pete Townshend*, (London: Omnibus, 2008).

⁵⁹ Richard Kostelanetz. *The Theatre of Mixed Means: An introduction to happenings, kinetic enrolments, and other mixed-means performances*. (New York: Dial Press, 1968), 188. Likewise, Steve Reich, told Michael Nyman in 1971 that he viewed Perotin and the Notre Dame School as “a kind of high point” in music’s history, Michael Nyman. “Steve Reich: Interview with Michael Nyman,” *Musical Times* CXII (March 1971), 229-231.

⁶⁰ Boym. Xv.

⁶¹ Wim Mertens: *American Minimal Music*. London: Kahn & Averill (1983), 107. Mertens also quotes Christian Wolff, who negates any sense of nostalgia or anticipation in this music. I would argue, however, (at least in how

the lofty ideal to which the Lifehouse Method aspires – to find purity in the absence of time itself (remember, the Lifehouse concert was to end with a rapture-like moment as all the audience joined together in one single note). Building on this, the Method did not intend to stop with musical portraits. Townshend intended to recreate his mythical last scene of the *Lifehouse* film project. As the liner notes for *The Lifehouse Chronicles* foreshadow:

Thirty years on, as the Millennium dawns, Threshold Computers, in association with Pete Townshend, are going to make this fictional scene happen [...] On a date (yet to be set) in the future, an event will be held at which many of the pieces will be heard in public for the first time. Impudently, there will also be an attempt to realize Pete's 1971 vision for The Who's lost movie project, and every single piece produced in the exercise will be combined and broadcast worldwide. We could hear the Music of the Spheres, or a busy night on Broadway. Pete believes we will hear the ocean."⁶²

Townshend has continued to promise a concert to interweave the musical portraits in a live concert setting at the launch of the Lifehouse Method in 2007.⁶³ Unsurprisingly, this promise to realize the original, futuristic fantasy of an apocalyptic concert has, to date, not been realized. The open-ended state of the Lifehouse vision also continues, then, to tease audience expectations

this philosophical concept applies to popular culture, including rock music) the sense of timelessness is, in fact, a nostalgic practice, precisely because it does, as Mertens claims, seem “mythic.”

⁶² “Threshold Computers” is used as a stand-in name for an undisclosed computer company with whom Townshend claims to be in negotiations for the concerts. cite Townshend liner notes. Further, Townshend isn't the first to associate the minimalism aesthetic with the ocean, as can be seen in Steve Reich's [1968 manifesto](#) “Music as a Gradual Process” and John Luther Adams “Become Ocean...” Reich writes “Performing and listening to a gradual musical process resembles: [...] placing your feet in the sand by the ocean's edge and watching, feeling, and listening to the waves gradually bury them.”

⁶³ Available Online via <https://petetownshend.net/musicals/lifehouse-method>. (accessed 1 October 2018).

while simultaneously reminding them of the past. In his over thirty years of revisiting Lifehouse themes and concepts, Townshend's creative forays into his own past now *themselves* evoke a sense of nostalgia that reflects the experiences of his own generation.

Nostalgia for Future Past

For Townshend, the Lifehouse project became a deeply nostalgic one. There was a sense of urgency in returning to the project at the edge of a new millennium, a marker which he had once envisioned as the near future of his seventies vision. By 2007, the clock had essentially run out. Historical time collided with imagined time and Townshend's own era of cultural dominance was disappearing. In its various reincarnations, Lifehouse taps into deep cultural memory and longing for meaning, for spirituality and for human connectedness, imprinting these longings onto a fervent faith in the "magic" of rock music. Townshend lays out his creed in his 2012 autobiography: only live rock music could save the dystopian world of his imagination.

What would make forced hibernation, plugged into a mainframe called the Grid, bearable? Only virtual experience, piped in through digital technology. What would free people from this forced hibernation? Live music and the Lifehouse. Rock music would quickly identified by the controllers of the Grid as problematic. Because of its potential to awaken the dormant masses, rock music would be strictly banned.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Townshend, *Who I Am*, 203.

Townshend's faith in the live experience of rock 'n roll is touching; it is also a nostalgic relic from the idealism of his youth. As the world's understanding of rock moved further away from the communal experience of live performance to become centered instead on listening to recordings as "the primary text," and as rock itself then faded from cultural view, Townshend's seventies fears seem to have been realized.⁶⁵ The entire Lifehouse project, then, as a remnant of an era when Townshend led one of the most famous rock bands in the world, is an anchor of memory and meaning for him (and his aging audience), almost transcending fear of progress and hope for the future. Mediated through a series of "new" technologies for almost forty years, the Lifehouse project progressively approaches a singularity, turning inward so that its dated futurism becomes the nostalgic object itself. As the Lifehouse project evolved over time, it shifted from being a work centered around futuristic nostalgia, to becoming the object of nostalgia in its own future. As Lynn Spigel has argued, "much of the current corporate wisdom on technological progress is steeped in a sense of nostalgia, not for yesterday *per se* but, more specifically, for yesterday's future."⁶⁶ In the shifting reincarnations of Lifehouse, Townshend keeps looking back at a seventies future through the lens of the contemporary moment. In doing so, he reveals the layers of meaning that such nostalgic reflections hold, he and "his generation" facing their own future as reality as a new millennium advances.

⁶⁵ Theodore Gracyk argues that rock music is dependent on recording technology. See Theodore Gracyk: *Rhythm and Noise. An Aesthetic of Rock*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

⁶⁶ Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 382.

Conclusion

Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run

There's still time to change the road you're on...

The nostalgia wave at the start of the seventies kicked off a persistent cultural phenomenon. In the fifty years since, it has become clear how the postwar generation's romanticization of the past has become a cultural dominant within the popular arts. In many ways, the practice of looking back – of finding things in the past worth preserving for the future – has helped this large generation make sense of the ever-more-rapidly changing world around them. And if the turn to nostalgia of the early seventies was an early symptom of “future shock,” the Tofflers, who coined the term, would not be surprised to find that the condition has only worsened in the time since. In 2002, Boym posited:

As for time, it is forever shrinking. Oppressed by multitasking and managerial efficiency, we live under a perpetual time pressure. The disease of this millennium will be called chronophobia or speedomania, and its treatment will be embarrassingly old-fashioned. Contemporary nostalgia is not so much about the past as about vanishing the present.¹

Armed with imaginative nostalgia as the antidote to present and future anxieties, the postwar generation has infused the past into every facet of the present. Thus, in their turn, works of creative nostalgia from the early seventies (including many of those discussed in this dissertation)

¹ Svetlana Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 391.

have since become objects of nostalgic longing themselves. That specific moment of transition, notable for the way it navigated the space between past, present and future, has become a template for more retrospective reflection.

The past fifty years have seen a flood of revivals, anniversary celebrations and the canonization of the rock and roll past. Popular culture of the eighties built on the nostalgic longing of the preceding decade as evidenced by songs like Billy Joel's "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me" (1980), and Joan Jett's "I Love Rock and Roll" (1981), as well as films like *Back to the Future* (1985). The establishment of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation in 1986 triggered a series of reflective annual celebrations of rock's past. The first inductees were, in fact, many of the fifties rock 'n rollers hailed by musicians like Don McLean and Led Zeppelin in the early seventies: Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly (among others). The iconic rock DJ Alan Freed, who has been credited with coining the term "rock 'n roll" was also included, and the physical museum even took it one step further, interring Freed's ashes within the exhibit dedicated to his legacy from 2002-2014.²

The nineties and early oughts were pockmarked with lucrative rock anniversaries in which the music industry regularly indulged. Anniversary reissues, boxed sets and new greatest hits collections introduced younger generations to the emerging rock canon while the Baby Boomers filled the industry's pockets, purchasing all of their favorite albums again as CDs. (Just like their memories, the compact disc promised "perfect sound forever.") Cable television channels like MTV and VH1 also capitalized on the postwar generation's obsession with their musical past by creating nostalgic shows like VH1's *Behind the Music* (original release 1997-2014),

² James F. McCarty. "Alan Freed's ashes, evicted from Rock Hall, have a final resting place of prominence in Cleveland." February 29, 2016. https://www.cleveland.com/entertainment/2016/02/alan_freeds_ashes_evicted_from.html.

or MTV's *Pop-Up Videos* (original release 1996-2002) – both of which allowed middle-aged rock fans to recount their own memories alongside accounts of and clever factoids about rock history. As further evidence of the recurring (and recursive) power of nostalgia, both these shows have now experienced their *own* revivals. (*Behind the Music* will debut again in 2021.)³

While The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation was a product of the eighties, the physical opening of a Rock and Roll Museum a decade later offered even more opportunities for nostalgic indulgence. A ceremony at the breaking of ground featured Pete Townshend, Chuck Berry, Billy Joel, Sam Phillips and Ruth Brown, and the placing of the building's last steel beam was honored with a performance by Jerry Lee Lewis. The museum itself opened its doors in September 1995 to a grand celebration featuring performances by, among others, James Brown, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bob Dylan and Aretha Franklin, and welcomed high profile guests like Little Richard and Yoko Ono.⁴ Other rock and popular music museums have followed suit, expanding the memorialization of popular music history including Seattle's Museum of Popular Culture (formerly the Experience Music Project) and the Memphis Rock 'n Soul Museum (both in 2000), the Stax Museum of American Soul (2003), Nashville's Musicians Hall of Fame (2006) and the revitalized Country Music Hall of Fame (new location opened in 2001), and Los Angeles's Grammy Museum (2008). England too, experienced a surge of museumification of

³ Jordana Ossad. "First Look: Behind the Music is Coming to Paramount+" March 15, 2021. <http://www.mtv.com/news/3175148/first-look-behind-the-music/>.

⁴ The "About" page on the Rock Hall's website details the main events that lead up to the building's grand opening in 1995. <https://www.rock-hall.com/about#:~:text=The%20Rock%20%26%20Roll%20Hall%20of%20Fame%20threw%20open%20its%20doors,at%20nearby%20Cleveland%20Municipal%20Stadium.>

popular and rock music history (on top of all the Beatles memorial sites found throughout Liverpool) including the British Music Experience (2009).⁵

As the general public and the music industry reveled in nostalgic indulgence, music critics and academics valorized the music as essential art and history. The first popular music history courses were largely framed as rock history courses, added to the curriculum in the eighties, and especially the nineties.⁶ While the academic study of a subject does not necessarily have to rely on nostalgic emotions, this particular trend aligns with a larger cultural one. These courses evolved alongside the aging of the post-war generation, and were largely championed by Boomer college professors who grew up with the music.

So too did rock critics promote the ideals of their generation's musical taste, elevating them onto a platform against which all later music would be compared. As Robert Christgau reflected in 1991: "we [early rock critics] did play the game of vaunting our 'generation's 'artistic achievement.' We celebrated pop flux, insisting – despite our distaste for if-it-feels-good-do-it, love-the-one-you're-with, hope-I-die-before-I-get-old banality – that music, like life itself, was best experienced in the present. But we couldn't resist valorizing it in the historicist terminology of the academy."⁷ Popular music magazines – most infamously the designated keeper of rock's flame, *Rolling Stone* – began offering lists of "Greatest Hits," a way to keep focusing nostalgically on the music of the past. Carys Wyn Jones has argued that that music criticism plays a

⁵ The Liverpool Echo compiled a list of Beatle's museums and pilgrimage sites. See Amy Brown. "Beatles attractions in Liverpool: Tick these 30 landmarks off your bucket list." August 13, 2018. <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/whats-on/music-nightlife-news/beatles-landmarks-bucketlist-liverpool-11708380>. For British Music Experience, see <https://www.britishmusicexperience.com/>.

⁶ See David Blake, "Between a Rock and a Popular Music Survey Course: Technological Frames and Historical Narratives in Rock Music," *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 5, no. 1 (2014) 103-15.

⁷ Robert Christgau. *Is It Still Good to Ya?: Fifty Years of Rock Criticism, 1967-2017*, 76-80 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 77.

significant role in canonic creations, as those artists and albums most likely to be revered are ones that “appear to be less associated with pop chart success compared to albums that receive some other form of recognition.”⁸ Catherine Strong agrees, noting that “certain groups, such as music journalists, exert a greater influence over the canons than audiences.”⁹ Strong further finds “the classic rock canon, as constructed by music critics and also public polls (for example, *Rolling Stone*’s lists of the greatest albums of all time or Australian radio station Triple J’s very popular poll ‘The Hottest 100 Songs of All Time’), tends to be quite homogeneous.”¹⁰

This claim is sociologically and statistically supported by the work of Ralph Von Appen and André Doehring, who found that lists of the “top 100 records of all time” “reduce the unimaginable versatility of popular music from all over the world to a small collection of albums within very narrow stylistic bound, and defines pop and rock music by the standards of late 1960s rock.”¹¹ Looking at over thirty years of rock lists, they found the “golden age” of rock defined as 1965-1969, from which over forty percent of the lists were taken. It would seem that this golden age has expanded since Von Appen and Doehring’s 2006 study, for it now includes the first years of the seventies as well. A cursory search of more contemporary lists reveals several early seventies albums making the cut (although there is some difference between what is included on the lists from major music publications such as *Rolling Stone* or *NME*, and those created by audience-driven radio stations and more independent bloggers). The major journals often

⁸ Carys Wyn Jones, *The Rock Canon: Canonical Values in the Reception of Rock Albums* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 1520.

⁹ Catherine Strong. “Shaping the Past of Popular Music: Memory, Forgetting and Documenting” in *The Sage Handbook of Popular Music* editors Andy Bennet and Steve Waksman (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2018), 423.

¹⁰ Strong. “Shaping the Past of Popular Music: Memory, Forgetting and Documenting”, 423.

¹¹ Ralph Von Appen and André Doehring. "Nevermind the Beatles, Here's Exile 61 and Nico: 'The Top 100 Records of All Time': A Canon of Pop and Rock Albums from a Sociological and an Aesthetic Perspective." *Popular Music* 25, no. 1 (2006): 34.

include albums like David Bowie's *Hunky Dory* (1971) and *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), Carole King's *Tapestry* (1971) and Joni Mitchell's *Blue* (1971), as well as Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions* (1973) – all works which have experienced considerable critical acclaim.¹² Radio station lists and those with more populist focus tend to valorize commercially successful early seventies giants like Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd.¹³ Ironically, the music that was created in response to the musical and cultural revolutions of the sixties is now retrospectively generalized into the same innovative movement.

Musicians and fans have held on tightly to the romanticization of the late sixties and early seventies rock, and they have faced considerable criticism for doing so (even as legacy artists' pocketbooks swelled). In a particularly harsh, ageist tirade against Townshend's *Lifeshouse* reincarnations, John Strausbaugh wrote in 2001:

When Pete Townshend decides in his mid-fifties that he wants to record a six-CD rock opera (*Lifeshouse*) [...]...*someone* should say, “No, Pete, that’s a bad idea,” and lead him by the elbow back to the old folks’ home -- where Steve, Eddie, Mick and the rest of the geezers might have a good laugh and remind him of the lyrics to a certain song he wrote decades earlier, famously addressing precisely this topic of aging. But no. Instead Pete “reunites” one more time with what’s left of The Who, sans Keith Moon -- and really, what’s The Who without Keith

¹² Some examples include *Rolling Stone*'s “Best Albums of All Time” September 22, 2020. www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/best-albums-of-all-time-1062063/kanye-west-my-beautiful-dark-twisted-fantasy-3-1063216/; Emily Barker. “The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time: 100-1” *NME* October 25, 2013. <https://www.nme.com/photos/the-500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-100-1-1426116>.

¹³ For example *Louder*'s “50 Best Rock Albums of All Time.” <https://www.loudersound.com/features/the-50-best-rock-albums-ever>.

Moon? -- and they go creaking off on another graybeards' summer concert tour of the States. Here comes the new one, not *quite* the same as the old one.¹⁴

Of course, Townshend was only in his mid-fifties when Strausbaugh issued this complaint – an age that seems hardly “old” in today’s environment (with Paul McCartney still touring at almost 80 and the artists from the early oughts now approaching middle-age themselves and showing no sign of stopping). But it does articulate the continued tension of aging in rock music for the post-war generation; Jethro Tull even titled their 1975 album (released only a few years after *Aqualung*) *Too Old to Rock and Roll, Too Young To Die*. The generation that cried “I hope I die before I get old” continually reimagined what “getting old” would actually mean. In 2006, Pete Townshend explained what he thinks about when the band performs that iconic line:

“I hope I die before I get old.” This time I am not being ironic. I am 61. I hope I die before I get old. I hope I die while I still feel this alive, this young, this healthy, this happy, and this fulfilled. But that may not happen. I may get creaky, cranky, and get cancer, and die in some hospice with a massive resentment against everyone I leave behind. That’s being old, for some people, and probably none of us who don’t die accidentally can escape being exposed to it. But I am not old yet. If getting older means I continue to cherish the lessons every passing day brings, more and more, then whatever happens, I think I’ll be happy to die before I get old, or after I get old, or any time in between. I sound like a fucking greetings card¹⁵

¹⁴ John Strausbaugh. *Rock ‘Til You Drop: The Decline from Rebellion to Nostalgia* (London: Verso, 2001), 4.

¹⁵ Quoted in Mark Willerson. *Who Are You: The Life of Pete Townshend* (London: Omnibus, 2009), Kindle.

Thus, while some critiqued the practice of aging rock stars continuing to perform the classics of their youth well past middle age, others have found such youthful spirits endearing. More recently, the nostalgic, 2016 rock festival Desert Trip, hosted on the same grounds as California's popular Coachella music festival was popularly deemed "Oldchella" for the performers and audiences it was expected to bring in, including Bob Dylan, The Rolling Stones, Neil Young, Paul McCartney, The Who and Roger Waters. And while the audience was indeed filled with Baby Boomer rock fans, it also attracted a considerable number of Millennial listeners, many of whom attended the concerts with their parents.

While this may surprise some, I found it quite reasonable. I'd argue that since the seventies, nostalgia itself has become a cultural practice that is now passed on from generation to generation. Sixties and seventies music and pop-culture is often embraced by the Millennial generation, raised in the nostalgic culture of the nineties. In her review of Desert Trip, Jillian Mapes makes this same observation about the cross-generational make-up of the festival attendees: "For the millennial children of boomer parents who raised them on classic rock in the 1990s (a time when '60s and '70s revivalism loomed large over pop culture), this [Desert Trip] was an occasion to return the favor, or at least just bond."¹⁶ The Desert Trip festival became a multi-generation nostalgic experience in which the Baby Boomers could ground themselves in their continued sense of identity with their surrounding generation, while simultaneously celebrating collective memories of parenting their Millennial children to the soundtracks of their youth.

While the legacy artist performances received better reviews than Straughnsbaugh would have predicted fifteen years earlier, the event was undoubtedly a nostalgic indulgence for the

¹⁶Jillian Mapes. "Surviving Oldchella: Scenes from the Ultimate Classic Rock Rager," *Pitchfork*, October 11, 2016. <https://pitchfork.com/features/festival-report/9960-surviving-oldchella-scenes-from-the-ultimate-classic-rock-rager/>.

generationally privileged, with attendees spending on average upwards of \$1000 per person on the weekend. The event fared better than the eclectic “Woodstock 50,” set up to celebrate the iconic festival’s 50th anniversary in 2019, ultimately cancelled. Of the two, it seems that the line-up of purely legacy artists, teamed with the millennial penchant for Coachella as a music festival destination, was the better business proposition. And that itself is what much of the post-war generation’s nostalgia has evolved to be – commercial endeavors grounded in the security of knowing that the prosperous Baby Boomers will happily indulge in nostalgic retrospectives any chance they get.

That said, capitalist critiques of these practices can also overlook a darker, *cultural* side to their nostalgic imaginings. Certainly, we have seen how individuals and communities can find a healthy grounding of identity (of self and in relation to others) by looking to the past, even if it is largely an imagined one. But the practice of preserving some memories can also force the forgetting of others. The dangers of romantic nostalgia have become a major issue in, for instance, the wedding industry, with many of the major wedding websites pledging to stop promoting plantation weddings because the continued romanticization of these sites avoids acknowledging the horrors of slavery which occurred there.¹⁷ Rock music has participated in this racialized practice of forgetting. Blues-based rock and southern rock often promulgate a white man’s history of popular music which ignores the continual presence of Black musicians, audiences, and the conditions in which their musical roots were made. Boym cautions: “the danger of nostalgia is that

¹⁷ See Heather Murphy, “Pinterest and the Knot Pledge to Stop Promoting Plantation Weddings” *New York Times*, December 5, 2019. And Olivia Hoskin, “It Was Never Ok to Get Married at a Plantation. Here’s Why.” *Town and Country*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/the-scene/weddings/a33446093/plantation-wedding-controversy-ryan-reynolds-blake-lively/#:~:text=Last%20year%2C%20The%20Knot%2C%20Zola,their%20objections%20to%20the%20practice.>

it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary home.” Nostalgic fantasies of the blues, or for a pre-Civil War Southern past, become problematic when the music acts as a space for larger American cultural memories which forget the traumas of time and space. A historical-regional understanding of culture is a fundamental pillar of what Clyde Wood calls the “Blues Epistemology,” “a long standing African American tradition of explaining reality and change,” that transmits shared cultural knowledge, and resists systematic oppression.¹⁸ Uncritical reproduction of nostalgic fantasies ignores this tradition and its ways of making meaning.

For example, when Creedence Clearwater Revival (CCR) rearranged Lead Belly’s “Cotton Fields” in 1969 with sweet folk harmonies, evoking generalized nostalgia for an imaginary South, the poignancy of the Blues Epistemology – the generational transmission of historical and cultural knowledge through song – is lost. The lyrics, unchanged from Lead Belly’s 1940 recording, lose their edge of political and cultural critique:

When I was a little bitty baby
My mama would rock me in the cradle,
In them old cotton fields back home;

It was down in Louisiana,
Just about a mile from Texarkana,
In them old cotton fields back home.

Oh, when them cotton bolls get rotten

¹⁸ Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: Race, Power and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta*. (New York: Verso, 1998), 25.

You can't pick very much cotton,
In them old cotton fields back home.

In this new arrangement, as in the sentimental portrayals that infested its post-bellum minstrel iconography, the trauma of plantation life is missing; the powerful imagery of what it meant, tangibly and financially, not to be able to pick the cotton is masked under a generically “old-timey” folk aesthetic. Instead of hearing the struggles of African Americans from plantation slavery to the plight of sharecroppers fighting crop failure, emphasis is placed on the nostalgic evocation of home and childhood. Blues songs like “Cotton Fields” have historically articulated black consciousness – a consciousness lost when subsumed under the penumbra of generalized American-folk nostalgia. When Blues revivalists or Blues-rock bands like CCR record or perform songs that draw on this tradition, they are also invoking its history and the history of the people who originally created the Blues. In August Wilson’s play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Ma Rainey tries to elucidate the true meaning of the Blues, as an African American tradition of transmitting meaning and knowledge: “White folks don’t understand about the Blues. They hear it come out, but they don’t know how it got there. They don’t understand that’s life’s way of talking. You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ‘cause that’s a way of understanding life.”¹⁹ In CCR’s recording, we hear the same lyrics which Lead Belly originally recorded, but do not actually hear the transmission of African American consciousness. Instead, we are left with the myth of American roots music as a false unity, providing a too-easily unified source of stolen identity and heritage.

¹⁹ August Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (New York: Plume, 1985), 3.

This type of forgetting, sometimes defended as unintentional, is perhaps most common in the sixties and early seventies, but as time progressed, white-backlash politics infused blues-based rock music, often quite overtly. While Southern Rock icons Lynyrd Skynyrd did eventually retire the Confederate battle flag in 2012, the flag and other symbols of the Civil War and antebellum South were celebrated in their music, supported by country and rock fans who embraced white-backlash politics. Often hailed as the “National Anthem of the South,” the band’s 1974 hit “Sweet Home Alabama” operates in the present tense, but roots itself (as much of folk-, country- and Southern-rock do) in a nostalgic sense of home and longing. There is a temporal element to the longing, but also spatial. The temporal nostalgia comes from celebration of history and heritage – the way the song centers itself in an emotional connection to Southern identity. For instance, the Confederate flag is displayed prominently across the cover of the single which articulates a very specific past that is, politically, no longer in existence, but an active symbol of heritage. The spatialized nostalgia in the song looks back to the word’s earliest roots as the disease of home-sick soldiers. The lyrics for the first verse are very much about this feeling of displacement and the longing to return home again:

Big wheels keep on turnin’
Carry me home to see my kin
Singin’ songs about the southland
I miss Alabamy once again
And I think it’s a sin

Boym calls the longing for home (whatever that home may be) a definitive characteristic of nostalgia, and this is the central thrust of the nostalgic impulse in “Sweet Home Alabama.”²⁰

The song was written as response to Neil Young’s 1970 “Southern Man” which was critical of the South’s history of racism and slavery, and continued resistance to Civil Rights efforts. Lynryrd Skynrd even calls out Young by name in the song’s lyrics (*Well I heard Mister Young sing about her / Well, I heard ol’ Neil put her down / Well, I hope Neil Young will remember / A Southern man don’t need him around, anyhow*). In the 2018 Showtime documentary on the band, *If I Leave Here Tomorrow*, footage of the late Ronnie Van Zant includes the songwriter explaining: “We knew that by doing that song, just writing those lyrics, we knew from the beginning that we’d get a lot of heat for it. And I did attack Neil Young in that song.”²¹ The song lyrics even reference segregationist governor George Wallace (*“In Birmingham they love the governor”*) - a connection from which the band has since tried to separate themselves. In the 2018 documentary, guitarist Gary Rossington claims that the background “ooo’s” which follow the line are actually “boo’s”: “A lot of people believed in segregation and all that. We didn’t. We put the ‘boo, boo, boo’ there saying, ‘We don’t like Wallace’.”²² However, the song’s final chorus also references Wallace, as the band sings: *“Sweet Home Alabama / where the skies are so blue and the governor’s true.”* Additionally the song’s co-writer Ed King contradicted Rossington, writing on his website in 2009:

²⁰ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 13.

²¹ This quote from the documentary is cited in Felix Contreras. “Unfurling ‘Sweet Home Alabama,’ A Tapestry Of Southern Discomfort” *NPR*, December 17, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/17/676863591/sweet-home-alabama-lynyrd-skynyrd-southern-discomfort-american-anthem>.

²² This statement from the documentary is also quoted in Contreras, “Unfurling ‘Sweet Home Alabama’”.

I can understand where the ‘boo boo boo’ would be misunderstood. It’s not US going ‘boo’ ... it's what the Southern man hears the Northern man say every time the Southern man’d say “In Birmingham we love the gov’nor.” Get it? “We all did what WE could do!” to get Wallace elected. It’s not a popular opinion but Wallace stood for the average white guy in the South.”²³

Once again, (a disputed) authorial intention is not the main concern here – instead, it is how the song makes its meaning in the world. “Sweet Home Alabama,” like “Okie from Muskogee” before it, became an anthem of Southern conservative pride. It carried its pride in a nostalgia which romanticized the South, free from any moral reservations (“*Now Watergate does not bother me / Does your conscience bother you? / Tell the truth*”).

The racialized politics of nostalgia did not end with Southern Rock. In fact, this particularly harmful manifestation has proven to be a continually reappearing phenomenon in American and English politics. Donald Trump's 2016 campaign slogan “Make American Great Again” (MAGA) is clearly a nostalgic idea, but it is not a new one; the phrase finds its roots in Reagan’s political career, as evidenced by his speeches, image, and campaign merchandise.²⁴ MAGA political rhetoric in the 2016 election, in particular, relied heavily on invoking images of a romanticized American past (temporally ambiguous though it may have been) that appealed especially to White, Christian Baby Boomers.²⁵ Musically too, the Trump campaign for the 2016 election

²³ Ed King’s website contains a question/answer forum where King wrote this quote on a thread dated December 3, 2009. <https://edking.proboards.com/thread/87/secong-helping>.

²⁴ The full acceptance speech is published on the Reagan Library website: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/republican-national-convention-acceptance-speech-1980>.

²⁵ See Pew Research Survey: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters/>. White is capitalized here to signify a racialized “national” white supremacist identity formation.

turned to classic rock icons, even while the musicians themselves often rejected the use of their music. Donald Trump announced his candidacy to Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World", began blasting Aerosmith's "Dream On" at campaign rallies, and celebrated his victories to Queen's "We Are the Champions" and The Rolling Stone's "You Can't Always Get What You Want." While his opponent Hillary Clinton embraced a diverse array of musical associations (genres, generations, artists) and often had the individual support of the musicians whose music Trump would play during his events, Trump's musical selections effectively triggered nostalgic emotions and collective identity for a large population of white Americans of a certain age – emotions which fed directly into his MAGA campaign rhetoric – and British political life over the past fifty years has also seen a rise in nostalgic rhetoric as a response to the changing demographics of the nation.

In his popular but extremely controversial book, *Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities*, political scientist Eric Kaufmann examines (and defends) white-identity politics and populism as a response to the perceived threat of immigration and racial diversity. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Kaufmann directly links this defense mechanism and right-wing populism to nostalgic emotions, explaining: "that what's ultimately behind the rise of right-wing populism are these ethnic-majority grievances, particularly around their decline, and that ultimately this is about nostalgia and attachment to a way of life or to a particular traditional ethnic composition of a nation."²⁶ Thus, the emotive space of nostalgic longing that Trump and Boris Johnson's generations had embraced in their youth evolved to become a key component of right wing political rhetoric and theatrics across the decades. As the post-war

²⁶Issac Chotiner. "A Political Scientist Defends White Identity Politics." *The New Yorker*. April 30, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/a-political-scientist-defends-white-identity-politics-eric-kaufmann-whiteshift-book>.

generation continued to find the world of their youth pulling away from them, they reimagined a past that seemed to meld together the comforts of their memory, in resistance to the discomfort of a changing world.

And yet, not every nostalgic trip which grounds an individual or community in a sense of identity is destined to be weaponized. The environmental nostalgia that is so prevalent in the early seventies, has, perhaps, offered opportunities for acknowledging the darkness of the past and humanity's role, by looking to an even further past - one in which humans found themselves working in communion with nature, instead of against it. This concept was ironically marketed in 1971 by the famous "Crying Indian" anti-littering campaign, which featured Italian-American actor Espera de Corti (nicknamed "Iron Eyes Cody") crying a single tear while a narrator declared: "Some people have a deep, abiding respect for the natural beauty that was once this country. And some people don't."²⁷ While the lack of authenticity in this ad campaign would eventually evoke criticism, and even ridicule, environmental efforts (like those by the National Park System) have largely managed to use nostalgia in a way that avoids romanticizing human history, by, instead, evoking a kind of "pre-historic" nostalgia for an untouched Earth. This is the romanticized environmental purity on display in the popular wilderness films, documentaries and TV shows that have become incredibly popular over the decades, such as PBS's *Nature* documentary series (begun in 1982), and the BBC's *Planet Earth* and *Blue Earth* franchises (both begun in 2001).

In the past fifty years the post-war generation built layers upon layers of nostalgia into their creative, political and cultural endeavors. As works of nostalgia proliferated, they faced

²⁷ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-indian-crying-environment-ads-pollution-1123-20171113-story.html>. While stereotyping of Indigenous people and their connection to the earth certainly persist, environmental nostalgia has increasingly turned its focus to the physical features of the earth, which are deemed worthy of protection.

criticism as lazy or kitsch. In rock music especially, this trope forms the centerpiece of the “pop-timism” vs “rockism” opposition. As rock music was valorized across the decades, it experienced pushback by the “poptimists” who referred to this canon building pejoratively as “rockism”. In the 2004 *New York Times* article “The Rap Against Rockism,” Kelefa Sanneh called rockism “imperial” in that it demands all musical values must stand up against those embraced by rock – values which are largely created by white men playing guitar-driven, “authentic” music rooted in “righteous struggle.” Sanneh further observed:

Rockism isn’t unrelated to older, more familiar prejudices – that’s part of why its so powerful, and so worth arguing about. The pop star, the disco diva, the lip-syncher, the “awesomely bad” hit maker: could it really be a coincidence that rockist complaints often pit straight white men against the rest of the world? Like the anti-disco backlash of 25 years ago, the current rockist consensus seems to reflect not just an idea of how music should be made but also an idea about who should be making it.

For what is “rockism” but a nostalgic attachment to the seventies, when rock was white and unchallenged in its hegemony? And yet, such dismissal ignores some the finer nuance that we find when we critically examine the nostalgia wave of the early seventies. For one, the nostalgia is such a core element of this historical moment, that rockism is not a betrayal of the counterculture but a logical extension of some of its most poignant tendencies. Secondly, some of this nostalgia can be deeply felt and culturally radically, especially when these works hold the past and future in tension with one another. In the early seventies, the past became a tool, used by the musicians and audiences as a potential anecdote to the sense of displacement and future shock in the wake

of the sixties. The past also became a source of renewal, of finding inspiration for the future - one in which the post-war generation could find their spirit to dream again.