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The Eclipse of Rock 'n' Roll :

The Last Music of the

"Mechanical Age" (2)

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How rock 'n' roll represents one cultural form produced at a crucial moment in the transition between the mechanical and the electronic ages is revealed by its connection in the popular imagination with automobiles. At the time of its inception, and during its early years, rock 'n' roll was linked to a deep-running fascination with automobiles and especially to the youth-oriented "hot rod" subculture existing in the United States in the 1950s.

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"Hotrodding" — the amateur modification of automobiles intended to improve their appearance and mechanical performance — emerged in the 1930s, but developed rapidly throughout the country after the Second World War.

By the late 1940s, hot rodding was a subculture with its own canon and specialized publications (*Hot Rod* magazine was created in southern California in 1947). In the 1950s, it became a mass phenomenon entailing a specialty market and the expression of youth revolt against authorities of all kinds. It was, at this point in history, a subculture peculiar to the United States and clearly central in the "youth revolt" said to have existed during the early years of the post-war period.

Generally overlooked, the fascination with cars was prominent theme in rock 'n' roll lyrics and music and is evidence of how individual and collective rebellion was part of social evolution and technological change. It is often said, for example, that the first rock 'n' roll recording was Jackie Brenston's "Rocket 88," referring to a popular model of Oldsmobile in 1950. But it is not so much the thematic content of song lyrics that is important, as how the theme is combined with other cultural elements. References to automobiles in songs can be found since the advent of cars. "My Merry Oldsmobile" was a hit in 1910. What happened in the 1950s was that automobiles became a "vehicle" for the expression of far more importance impulses and preoccupations — speed and death. It is here, in the tension of rock 'n' roll music, and in the evocation of danger and anxieties, that a real cultural nexus can be found.

Two major hits in 1955 better indicate these connections. Firstly, "Black Denim Trousers" by The Cheers, celebrated the story of a reckless motorcyclist and rebel who rampaged the highways and womanized with macho abandon.

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He wore black denim trousers and motorcycle boots

And a black leather jacket with an eagle on the back

He had a hopped-up 'cycle that took off like a gun

That fool was the terror of Highway 101

Well, he never washed his face and he never combed his hair

He had axle grease imbedded underneath his fingernails

On the muscle of his arm was a red tattoo

A picture of a heart saying "Mother, I love you"

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He had a pretty girlfriend by the name of Mary Lou

But he treated her just like he treated all the rest

And everybody pitied her and everybody knew

He loved that doggone motorcycle best

refrain

Mary Lou, poor girl, she pleaded and she begged him not to leave

She said "I've got a feeling if you ride tonight I'll grieve"

But her tears were shed in vain and her every word was lost

In the rumble of an engine and the smoke from his exhaust

Then he took off like the Devil and there was fire in his eyes !

He said "I'll go a thousand miles before the sun can rise."

But he hit a screamin' diesel that was California-bound

And when they cleared the wreckage, all they found

Was his black denim trousers and motorcycle boots

And a black leather jacket with an eagle on the back

But they couldn't find the 'cycle that took off like a gun

And they never found the terror of Highway 101

Much is encapsulated in this somewhat cretinous song. Coming after the success of Marlon Brando's sultry performance in Laszlo Benedick's film "The Wild One", the erstwhile morality tales of speed and violence concocted to respond to a national concern over "juvenile delinquency" spin out of control ; both film and song tend to celebrate anti-social instincts. Instead of bringing young people to reason and sobriety through a demonstration of what can happen if violent impulses are given full rein, the wild behavior of "crazy mixed up kids" promoted rebellion against authority.

Authorities had no real control over the car and the motorcycle and they became fetichized object for young people. This was especially the case for legions of lower-middle class youth in the western spaces where cheap used cars,

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the need to create an identity brooking no compromise with elders and authority in general, and the desire to shock resulted in the widespread avocation called "hotrodding."

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Another successful song of this momentous year (1955), when Elvis Presley went a national star, was Gene Vincent's "*Race with the Devil*."

Well I've led an evil life, so they say

But I'll outrun the devil on judgment day, I said

Move, hot-rod, move man !

Move, hot-rod, move man !

Move hot-rod, move me on down the the line, oh yeah !

Well me and the devil, at a stop light

He started rollin', I was out of sight, I said

Move, hot-rod, move man !

Move, hot-rod, move man !

Move hot-rod, move me on down the the line, oh yeah !

Well, goin' pretty fast, looked behind

A here come the the devil doin' ninety-nine, I said

Move, hot-rod, move man !

Move, hot-rod, move man !

Move hot-rod, move me on down the line, oh yeah ! (Let's drag now)

Well thought I was smart, the race was won

A-here come the devil doin' a-hundred and one

Move, hot-rod, move man !

Move, hot-rod, move man !

Excellent rockabilly number, the lyrics of this song capture the bravado of young adolescent males whose vaunted wildness was driven by the automobile industry's marketing stratagems. The fusion of speed, power and sexual energy expressed as a devil-may-care attitude in the face of danger and possible death was celebrated throughout the whole culture, on every social level and by virtually every social class and sub-class. It was also during these early years of the 1950s that jet test pilots were showing they had "the right stuff" and that Jack Kerouac was writing *On the Road*. The latter had Dean Moriarty say in response to the question of 'where are we going' ? : "I don't know, we just have to go."

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The social alienation symbolized by the hotrod cult found popular expression in one of the most popular films of the era, Nicolas Ray's "*Rebel without a Cause*," released in 1955. James Dean's studied cool cannot be dissociated from his customized 1949 Mercury. The sleek car represented an inaccessible world, a whole culture, incomprehensible to adults. The new generation had its social codes and aesthetic canon revolving around notions of beauty and honor. One of the key turns in the plot occurs when, in order to prove his courage, Dean's character engages in a "chicken race" with another young man (they are highschool students). Each of them racing towards a cliff in an old car, the "chicken" (coward) will be he who leaps first from his vehicle, before it hurtles into space to its destruction.

In song lyrics, the theme of racing for the thrill of braving accident and death began to meet with commercial success at the beginning of the 1950s, following the emergence of hotrodding as a recognizable cultural phenomenon. In late 1950, versions of a song titled "*Hot Rod Race*," written by George Wilson, were released in rapid succession (seven of them in the early fifties). In all versions, stress was placed on the risk incurred by driving at such speed in dangerous conditions. The objective was to romantically valorize behavior that, from another perspective, could be considered irresponsible and mindless. As in many songs, considerable technical detail about the motors, the models, and the modifications made to the cars was incorporated into the lyrics. In spite of this rather arcane information, these songs were hits, made for a mass market. They were not produced only for a few enthusiasts.

"Hot Rod Race" was about a race between cars that ended with both being passed by yet a third car, a "hopped-up" modified in order to increase its power and performance Model A Ford. Throughout the 1950s the song was modified or used as a model for others (such as "*Hot Rod Boogie*" by Dorsey Lewis).

In 1959, Charlie Ryan wrote and recorded a new version called "*Hot Rod Lincoln*," which was covered the following year by Johnny Bond, meeting with enormous success. An interesting element of this success was a reference in the lyrics of Ryan's version to the original song of 1950. Ryan wrote of his race while recalling the original race, which most of the listeners had not heard of on record or radio. In Ryans' version, he begins by explaining that he was the "kid who was driving that Model A" that had stolen the original race. It was an allusion to what, for many of the young people who had entered the subculture, was the almost pre-history of hotrodding. In this way, a mythology was created linking one generation of hotrodders to another.

The "hotrod cult," expression used by Science Illustrated in 1960 in a cover story on the subject, was so solidly rooted in the perceptions and values of youth in the 1950s that the need to combat it created another, lucrative market.

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Already in 1955, an enterprising disk jockey named Jimmy Drake made a record, "*Transfusion*," under the name of Nervous Norvus and had a nation-wide hit. Drake made direct reference to hotrods and used the sort of hep-cat jive slang borrowed from jazz musicians that young people affected at the time. His point was to criticize the irresponsible behavior hotrodders often indulged in, speeding and racing on public roads. Perversely, however, as in the case of films like "*The Wild One*" and "*Rebel Without A Cause*," his evocation of speed, injury and death simply participated

in the general fascination surrounding them.

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ZZZZZZOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMMMMMMM

Tooling down the hightway doing 79

I'm a twin pipe papa and I'm feelin fine

Hey man dig that was that a red stop sign-

(scrreeech-BANG !!tinkle)

Transfusion transfusion

I'm just a solid mess of contusions

Never never never gonna speed again

Slip the blood to me Bud

I jump in my rod about a quarter to nine

I gotta make a date with that chick of mine

I cross the center line man you gotta make time-

(scrreeech-BANG !!tinkle)

Transfusion transfusion

Oh man I got the cotton pickin convolutions

Never never never gonna speed again

Shoot the juice to me Bruce

My foot's on the throttle and it's made of lead

But I'm a fast ridding daddy with a real cool head

I'ma gonna pass a truck on the hill ahead-

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(screeech-BANG !!tinkle)

Transfusion transfusion

My red corpsuckles (sic) are in mass confusion

Never never never gonna speed again

Pass the crimson to me Jimson

I took a little drink and I'm feelin right

I can fly right over everything everything in sight

There's a slow poking cat I'm gonna pass him on the right-

(screeech-BANG !!tinkle)

Transfusion transfusion

I'm a real gone paleface and that's no illusion

I'm a never never never gonna speed again

Pass the claret to me Barrett

A-rollin down the mountain on a rainy day

Oh when you see me coming better start to pray

I'm a cuttin' up the road and I'm the boss all the way-

(screeech-BANG !!tinkle)

Transfusion transfusion

Oh Doc, pardon me for this crazy intrusion

I'm never never never gonna speed again

Pump the fluid in me Louie

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I'm burning up the highway early this morn

I'm passing everybody oh nothing but corn

Man outa my way I don't drive with my horn-

(screeech-BANG !!tinkle)

Transfusion transfusion

Oh nurse I'm gonna make a new resolution

I'm never never never gonna speed again

Put a gallon in me Alan

Oh barnyard drivers are found in two classes

Line crowding hogs and speeding jackasses

So remember to slow down today

Hey daddy-o

Make that type O huh

Atta-boy

(screeech-BANG !!tinkle)

(Nervous Norvous, "Transfusion," 1955)

<https://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L291xH400/securedownload-694be.jpg>

Another expression of this cultural syndrome is the tremendous popularity of the writer Henry Gregor Felson and his novels about adolescent males and their hot rods. Felson wrote a variety of popular novels on topical themes, but he really hit a rich vein after publishing *Hot Rod* in 1950. The wild success of the book led to similar publications in 1953 (*Street Rod*), 1954 (*Ragtop*) and 1958 (*Crash Club*). They were novels aimed to impress junior highschool students about the dangers of automobiles. Felson carefully drew-in his young readers by describing in meticulous detail how his protagonists "always teenaged hotrodders" designed, constructed and cared for their cars before the inevitable. A terrible accident due to youthful exuberance and hubris tragically destroyed the beloved hot rod, along with the hotrodders. Here is an example of the climatic scene from Felson's most celebrated novel "Hot Rod :

"The crushed pile of twisted metal that had once been My-Son-Ralph's Chevy was on its back in the ditch, its wheels up like paws of a dead dog. Two of the wheels were smashed, and two were turning slowly. Something that looked

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like a limp, ripped-open bag of laundry hung halfway out of a rear window. That was Marge.

The motor of Ralph's car had been driven back through the frame of the car, and its weight had made a fatal spear of the steering column. Somewhere in the mashed tangle of metal, wood and torn upholstery was Ralph. And deeper yet in the pile of mangled steel, wedged in between jagged sheet steel on one side, and red hot metal on the other, was what had been the shapely black head and dainty face of LaVerne.

Walt's car had spun around after being hit, and had rolled over and along the highway. It had left a trail of shattered glass, metal, and dark, motionless shapes that had been broken open like paper bags before they rolled to a stop. These were what had been Walt's laughing passengers. Pinned inside his wrecked car, beyond knowing that battery acid ran in his eyes, lay Walt Thomas. Somehow the lower half of his body had been twisted completely around, and hung by a shred of skin."

Impressing thirteen-year-olds about the danger of death and injury from driving or riding in glamorous and exciting motor vehicles was surely an ambitious and idealist undertaking. Fortunately for him, Felson's project was financially successful, for the effect of his books was undoubtedly quite the opposite of what he intended. Rather than cooling the ardor of young people, Felson's readers focused upon the modifications mentioned in the text, and resolved to emulate or go beyond them. Fifteen years later, some of these same readers followed the lead of a different novelist. In 1965, Ken Kesey and his "Merry Pranksters," traveled in a customized 1939 International Harvester school bus, destination : "Further."

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The themes of sex, speed and death can be seen in innumerable songs of the period. From Del Shannon's "Runaway" and Dion Demucci's "The Wanderer" to The Shangrilas' "Leader of the Pack" to the Beach Boys, the motor vehicle remained a symbol of freedom and transcendence.

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Music "rock 'n' roll" was the essential glue holding together the cultural nexus. Nothing could have been better adapted to driving, "cruising," racing and "dragging" than this music expressing the hormonal rhythms of the most materially privileged generation in modern history. The boogie beat powered rock 'n' roll ; it was a "driving beat" which complemented the actual driving of a car. It has often been said that this music was best heard from automobile radios. It created, or rather extended, a culture of being on the road, of romanticizing travel and mobility. It was emblematic of a time of unconscious revolt and a kind of alienation that only greater maturity could inform.

The hotrod subculture, while remaining strong in some sectors of US society, receded in the 1960s. The search for authenticity took other forms. Events contributed largely to the emergence of new trends. The civil rights movement, especially, and the then the war in Vietnam, stimulated political protest and the growth of a "counterculture" that, at least superficially, rejected the materialistic values that automobiles best symbolized. In the midst of these changes, however, death remained an omnipresent theme. The civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, periodic political assassinations, violent and mortal demonstrations and riots "the events of the period insured that death remained a cultural preoccupation.

The automobile is still a fetichized object in our culture for social reasons that are inseparable from geo-political interests and strategies. But what about rock 'n' roll ? Is this music "eclipsed" more than motor vehicles ? The answer must be affirmative, in that, as the aesthetic-emotional expression of a specific generation, rock 'n' roll will, and has already, lost its urgency, spontaneity and creativity. Rock 'n' roll will continue to exist, but only as a preserved musical form, like ragtime, blues and Dixieland. Rock 'n' roll is essentially a relatively recent development in the fusion of African, African-American and European musical sensibilities. Its mummification is inevitable.

What is unique about rock 'n' roll is its simultaneous existence as the last music of the mechanical age and the first

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music of the electronic age. How rock 'n' roll and rock represent the cultural expression of a major social and technological transformation will become more clear with the passing of the generation emotionally attached to it. When subjective identification yields to historicist "objectivity," rock 'n' roll will be seen as cultural expression of capitalist society during a privileged moment, a moment of unprecedented material prosperity and economic power, a moment immediately preceding a generalized implosion of conventional values and established institutions.