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Can the French do Rock and Roll ?

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Are the French less capable than European-Americans or Britons of recreating music of African-American origins ? Does the peculiarity of French culture impede the reproduction of a music founded in the alienation of first a racial minority and then a rootless, alienated American population ? The explanation frequently offered by French musicians and fans of rock and roll is that there is indeed a cultural limitation in France : the language. In their opinion, the phonetic structure and monotone stress patterns of the French language render virtually impossible the articulation of the emotions, the feeling at the heart of African-American music.

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However, as early as 1956, the writer Boris Vian, in his capacity as producer for the Phillips-Marconi record company, wrote rock and roll lyrics (under the name of Vernon Sinclair) that were convincingly performed by the singer Henri Salvador (under the name Henry Cording). These efforts were, it is true, parodies. But they were accomplished with such a degree of competence that they raise questions about the far more technically inferior "products" offered to the public several years later.

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Boris Vian occupies a pivotal place in the evolution of popular music in France because he embodied the transition between the immediate postwar renewal of the literary realist song and the less textually serious rock and roll that followed.

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Vian was a young darling of the Left-Bank existentialist set who embodied the critically madcap spirit of the surrealists and the zazous. Musician, composer, writer, he was the creator of a number of songs, such as "Le Déserteur" (The Deserter), "La Java des bombes atomiques," (Atomic Bomb Party) "Les joyeux bouchers," (The Happy Butchers) "J'suis snob," (I'm a Snob) "Complainte du progrès," (Progress Blues) "Le petit commerce," (Small Business) and "La Java martienne," (Martian Jump) which combined an existentialist seriousness with a gallic mockery.

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Excellent jazz trumpeter and prolific writer about jazz, Vian successfully fused an artist's sensibility with the analytical acuity of the best literary critics. In "Le Déserteur " (1955), for example, he addresses himself directly to the President of the Republic, pronouncing himself against militarism and war in the wake of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in Indo-China and at the beginning of the War in Algeria. The song was banned from the radio and television. In "La Valse jaune" (The yellow waltz), (sung by Mouloudji) he offered a challenge to the productivist ethos propagandized in postwar France by affirming that "there is too much work in our lives. I don't like work, but I love life." In "Les joyeux bouchers " [1956], he called into question the eating of meat along with militarism. The refrain in this song used a common expression meaning the fight must be waged without compromise, "Faut qu' ça saigne," which literally means "let it bleed."

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In 1956, Vian and Henri Salvador collaborated in spoofing the new music, rock and roll, that had emerged in the

United States. Issued under the name Henry Cording (which means "recording" – enregistrement – said with French pronunciation) the songs "Dis-moi qu'tu m'aimes, Rock" (Tell me you love me rock), "Rock-hoquet," (Hiccup rock), and "Va t'faire cuire un œuf, man !" (Bug off, man !) effectively capture the spirit of the more accessible currents of rock and roll. "Dis-moi qu'tu m'aimes, Rock," for example, is done in the instrumental style of Bill Haley and the Comets, and Henri Salvador's voice resembles that of Louis Armstrong. These recordings are evidence that French musicians possessed the technical ability of producing rock and roll music and singing it in French with original compositions. But the fact remains that rock and roll never emerged in France with the originality or authenticity that it did in Great Britain. The question is, why ?

<https://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L124xH107/images-25-eaad0.jpg>

The man who introduced Boris Vian to rock and roll, record producer Jacques Canetti, has suggested that Vian may have retarded the reception of the new music in France. When, in 1956, Canetti and Michel Legrand returned from a trip to the United States with some rock and roll records in their suitcases, they immediately turned to Vian in the hopes that a market for the latest rage could be created in France.

<https://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L93xH144/images-8-4-2e601.jpg>

Initially, Vian had trouble finding musicians who could play rock and roll. It was for this reason that he penned, undoubtedly in 1956, the following "technical note" for the benefit of these uncomprehending studio musicians. Like everything he wrote, these instructions were expressed with humor and irony. His premises could be challenged easily today, but the freshness of his perceptions and reasoning has the virtue of a kind of anthropological objectivity that most who write about popular music seriously lack.

Boris Vian died in June 1959 at the age of forty, as he sat watching the first showing of a film based on his famous novel about racism in the American south, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* (I will spit on your graves).

"Rock and Roll" by Boris Vian

The expression "rock and roll" has replaced "rhythm and blues" because the latter has been used in record catalogues to refer what used to be called "race records", records made for sale to a black public and consisting especially of blues vocals.

As we all know (with the exception of the majority of people who "inform" their readers), the blues is a harmonic formula consisting of twelve bars in which hundreds of themes and improvisations have been constructed.

The particular character and sound of rock and roll comes from a standardization of its orchestration :

1° The percussion maintains a steady two-beat tempo with the stress on the second and fourth beats. In passing, it is interesting to observe that French people always clap their hands against the beat of this music, on the first and third beats in the tradition of military marches.

2° The acoustic bass plays a double-time, "boogie-woogie" beat by "slapping" the strings, in other words by hitting the strings against the neck of the instrument.

3° A honking tenor sax is generally featured which repeats the chorus on a limited number of notes and which

contributes to the production of the worst possible sonority.

4° The instrumental "melody" is generally reduced to a repetitive series of notes (called a "riff") which is contained within two or four bars interminably repeated and modulated according to the harmonies of the blues. Frequent use is made of a choir's "responses" to the soloist.

5° As far as the lyrics are concerned, in principle they always, in English, revolve around double meanings involving eroticism. "Rock" is a word very close in meaning to another word that refers without ambiguity to what is meant by "Good rocking tonight". The equivalent might suggest : "we are going to sleep well together tonight". The phonic similarity of "to rock" ("bercer" – "to rock"), with another, quite precise French word ["baiser" – "to fuck", translator's note] gives a very accurate notion of the real meaning. To exactly translate "rock and roll" in French we would have to say something like "braise et brande" ["roast and burn"] if only that had any meaning.

The erotic lyrics of black blues, often very amusing and almost always perfectly healthy and full of good feeling, have been systematically deformed and exploited by small white bands composed of bad musicians (such as Bill Haley) in order to produce a sort of ridiculous tribal chant for the benefit of an idiotic public. The obsessional quality of the riff is used to put listeners in a "trance".

This formula quickly achieved great popularity in the United States because of sexual taboos that are much stronger there than in Europe. Rock and roll either channels or releases libidinous energies pent-up by a repressive moral code. In France, on the contrary, the public is not "paralyzed" by puritanism and therefore has no need of rock and roll. This is why representations of "rock and roll" in France appear to be successful only to the degree that they are burlesque. Indeed, it seems difficult to put listeners into a trance who are physically reacting against the beat of the music in question.

The potential success of rock in France could very well be that of any type of comic song. It is clear that we could produce an erotic French rock, which would not really be different, except rhythmically, from [Charles] Aznavour's slow songs. For example, an adaptation of his famous "Biaiseuse" [Coyly seductive girl] (with the refrain "biaise, biaise, pretty baby") [which, in French, would sound like "baise, baise", or "fuck, fuck, pretty baby". Translator's note] to rock would correspond well enough to American rock. But this seems quite limited....

(Translation by Larry Portis)