

The British Countercultural Movement and the Messages of Protest in “Rock Poetry”

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Abstract:

The cultural turn from the 60s followed by the countercultural movement and the anti-war campaigns led by important popular artists has been labelled by cultural theorists as mainly a set of reactions of the disillusioned middle-class youth against the consumerism-based adult society. The means of protest ranged from rebellion to experimentation of hallucinogenic drugs but it was popular music that best hosted young people's protests. The intellectualization of popular music lyrics expressed the educated youngsters' feelings of protest against the *status quo* of the 60s and the 70s. Most of these forms of protest are encapsulated in popular music, and particularly in the progressive music lyrics. Notorious progressive music bands, such as Pink Floyd, King Crimson, ELP and Jethro Tull composed a series of songs based around a particular theme known as concept album. These lyrics, called by Richard Goldstein “rock poetry,” draw on important literary works such as Wilfred Owen's anti-war poems, George Orwell's and Aldous Huxley's dystopian novels and contain profound messages of protest against militarism, totalitarianism, inhuman technocracy, etc. In this paper I intend to analyse some representative progressive music concept albums and songs in terms of their themes and `anti-status quo` messages.

Key words: Counterculture, progressive music, “rock poetry,” protest

Motto: “Not the torturer will scare me, nor the body's final fall, nor the barrels of death's rifles, nor the shadows on the wall, nor the night when to the ground the last dim star of pain, is hurled but the blind indifference of a merciless, unfeeling world.” (Roger Waters-Pink Floyd)

The *countercultural movement* of the late 60s and early 70s may be defined in various ways but, in its essence, it consisted in a range of reactions of the middle-class youngsters disillusioned by the status quo, the political systems and the direction the world was heading to. They reacted against war as well as against the consumer society and

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technocracy. The youth rejected the basic disregard of the politicians, tradesmen and technocrats for human emotion and creativity. According to Gary J. Clarke,

counter-culture spearheads a dissent from the youth's own, dominant parent culture. Their disaffiliation was principally ideological and cultural. They directed their attack mainly against those institutions which reproduce the dominant cultural ideological relations – the family, education, the media, marriage, the sexual division of labour. (Clarke et al., 1976:62)

This view is shared by another scholar, William Roszak, who noted that the counterculture was “opposed both to the hegemonic power of its parent culture but also to the technocracy which the parent culture had created.”(Roszak 1969:5) Greatly disillusioned with the consumer-oriented values of the Western world, many young people started to subvert the *status quo* by trying out alternative spiritual experiences. To this end, it was popular music that acted, as Theodor Adorno puts it in his seminal study *The Culture Industry*, as a “social cement” that “adjusted people to the reality of the lives they lead” (Adorno qtd. in Strinati 60) . Thus, popular music was associated with drugs (psychedelic music) and with a quest for truth in the religions of the Far East in an attempt to reach higher levels of consciousness. It is quite relevant, in this respect, Stuart Hall's view on the relationship between counter-cultural ideology and eastern religions:

The sacred books of Eastern religion and mysticism, the erotic code books, the figures of the Buddha and of Karma, fragments of eastern philosophy,(...) the music of Ravi Shankar – all of these are elements in the eclectic Orientalism of Hippie life, representing a return to contemplation and mystical experience. (Hall, 1968:8)

Upon this background, several socio-cultural movements which have been labelled by cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and Andy Bennett as *countercultural* emerged: the anti-Vietnam war movement, the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, the emphasis on a new perception of the world, based on the use of hallucinogenic drugs and the appropriation of beliefs from the Far East. In my view, these movements were to a great extent influenced by the counter-cultural ideology promoted by the young and nonconformist generation of the 60s. Moreover, a key role was played by the new genre of popular music that took the Western educated youth by storm: the progressive music.

Progressive music or progressive rock is defined by one of the most significant specialists in the field, Edward Macan, as “a classical/rock fusion with some folk and jazz elements included” (Macan, 1997:27), and by another expert, Bill Martin, as an English subgenre of rock music which “expresses romantic and prophetic aspects of that culture.” (Martin, 1998:121). Similarly, an extensive definition of progressive music is provided by Lucas Biela, who, in his article *Prog Rock Guides / What is Progressive Rock?*, writes: “Progressive rock (often shortened to prog or prog rock) is a form of rock music that evolved in the late 1960s and early 1970s as part of a mostly British attempt to elevate rock music to new levels of artistic credibility.” (Biela, “*Prog Rock Guides*”).

So far various scholars have exposed their findings on the development of progressive music. Thus, Macan, in his book *Rocking the Classics*, traces back the sources of progressive rock drawing together cultural theory and music criticism. According to him, the whole progressive rock musical style is founded on systematic juxtaposition of masculine and feminine elements which contain many of the cultural opposites that the counterculture wished to see reconciled: nature and technology, matriarchal and patriarchal and so on. (Macan,1997:45)

Another significant study in the field is *Progressive Rock Reconsidered* by Kevin Holm-Hudson – a collection of essays highlighting the melding of elements of classical style into the progressive rock repertoire. The following studies also weigh heavily in defining the impact progressive music had on young intellectuals in the early and mid-60s: Richard Goldstein’s *The Poetry of rock (1969)*; Paul Stump’s *The Music’s All That Matters: A History of Progressive Rock (1997)*; Carol Selby Price and Robert M. Price’s *Mystic Rhythms: The Philosophical Vision of Rush (1998)*; Bill Martin’s *Listening to the Future: The Time of Progressive Rock, 1968-1978 (1998)*. From these studies we may conclude the following ideas: on the one hand, some progressive songs illustrate exotic landscapes, medieval or Eastern scenes inspired from mythology, fantastic tales and sacred texts; on the other hand, there were many songs which depicted the modern society through apocalyptic images of war, technocracy, consumerism and soulless bureaucracy. Taking these studies as a background I will focus on some representative songs and depict the most striking countercultural or protest messages some of the most outstanding progressive music lyricists attempted to convey.

In the early 60s, there was a trend of intellectualization of popular music lyrics, an action which initially took place in Britain and then in the US and Europe. Animated by the countercultural movements mentioned earlier, popular musicians began to gradually replace the simplistic pop lyrics with the so called "rock poetry." The term "rock poetry" was coined by Richard Goldstein in his study on progressive music entitled *The Poetry of Rock* (1969). As a result, the experimental music of progressive rock groups appeared, such as Pink Floyd, King Crimson and Van der Graff Generator. Pink Floyd were among the earliest innovators and were later followed by Yes, Genesis (later with Phil Collins), and Emerson Lake and Palmer. They were met with enthusiasm by a large middle-class youth audience in secondary-schools, art schools and universities. Some groups began writing a series of songs whose lyrics could be polarized by a single theme known as *concept albums*.

Although their initial intentions were commercial, progressive musicians now wanted to achieve success by using different methods from those working elsewhere in popular music. In the mid-60s and later on, progressive bands went on to become highly successful in Britain and the US, with their characteristic long solos, sophisticated, metaphoric lyrics, grand orchestration and flamboyant clothes, influencing many other bands in Europe and America who copied their style.

An important feature of the counter-cultural movement was the anti-Vietnam war campaign. This feeling was shared by many popular musicians, who attempted to make their views known by playing anti-war songs such as Joe MacDonald with his "Fixing to Die Rag" and its well-known lyrics: "the next stop is Vietnam... You can be the first ones on the block to have your boy come home in a box" (MacDonald) or Joni Mitchell with the popular song "Woodstock." Also, John Lennon's famous songs "Imagine" and "Give Peace a Chance" are quite telling about the anti-war campaign carried out by popular rock stars. This anti-war campaign was also present in progressive music lyrics whose composers tend to view war from a more philosophical point of view than pop music lyricists, seeing it as the inevitable result of society's materialism and lust for power. There are many songs whose words condemn war in general and "slam" the industrial-military complex in particular. Thus, two progressive music groups released concept albums whose songs portray the disasters war causes on human beings and on the natural environment. The songs "Battlefield" by ELP (Emerson, Lake and Palmer) and "21st Century Schizoid Man" by King Crimson are the two outstanding examples I will focus on in the following lines.

The first song, "Battlefield," appeared in the concept album released by ELP in 1971, ambiguously entitled "Tarkus." The composer, William Neil, disambiguates the title of the album explaining on a comment published on the album cover that "the name is an amalgamation between 'Tartarus' – a place of punishment mentioned in the Bible in 2 Peter 2:4 and 'carcass'" (William "Tarkus"). "Battlefield" resembles, in its theme and motifs, Wilfred Owen's poem *Dulce et Decorum Est pro Patria Mori*. The horrors of the war are exposed in an ironic manner: "the profit of our victory "is materialized by "starving children poor", "scorched earth" and "spectral torch." (ELP, 1971) Then we see/hear of a doomsday snapshot: "the leaves of sorrow turned their face, /Scattered on the ashes of disgrace."(ELP, 1971).

Another song highlighting the futility of war is the tune entitled "21st Century Schizoid Man" from the album *In the Court of the Crimson King*, composed by Robert Fripp, a poet and leader of the progressive group King Crimson. In the first stanza, we are once again bombarded with a rhythmic cascade of wartime snapshots depicting a nightmarish scene: "Blood rack barbed wire / Politicians funeral pyre / Innocents raped with napalm fire" (King Crimson, 1969) The second stanza emphasizes the idea that war is deeply rooted in materialism, which is, in turn, the source of greed and violence: "Death seed blind mans greed / Poets starving children bleed / Nothing he's got he really needs / Twenty first century schizoid man." (King Crimson, 1969) The fast tempo beaten by the drums and the muffled bass guitar riffs add up to the grim atmosphere of this song.

Equally important for the progressive musicians were the anti-totalitarian messages. Thus, Pink Floyd, ELP, and Jethro Tull are some of the many progressive bands which protested against totalitarian regimes and presented dystopian societies as nightmares for mankind. The pioneers of these lyrics were the British band Pink Floyd whose Orwellian concept albums "Animals" and "The Wall" depict the dangers of a totalitarian society. Thus, the song "Animals" is grounded in Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* and it depicts a totalitarian society consisting of three categories of "animals": the "sheep" which symbolise the obedient followers in a dystopian society, the "pigs" standing for the party police and the ferocious "dogs" which represent the manipulators in a dictatorship. The first part portrays the tyrannical power-hungry manipulators represented by the pigs in *Animal Farm*. Then we hear the meek sheep which are nothing more than a symbol of obedience and fellowship but whose fate is doomed from the very outset: "Meek and obedient you follow the leader /

Down well trodden corridors into the valley of steel.”(Pink Floyd, 1977). The lyrics of the second part called “Dogs” warn the inhabitants of a totalitarian state to stay away from the thought police who manipulate, misinform and strike unexpectedly: “And then moving in silently, down wind and out of sight, / You gotta strike when the moment is right without thinking”(Pink Floyd ,1977). The climax of the album is the revolt of the "sheep" that embark on fighting against the "dogs." The ending is a twisted one as the sheep return to their initial state of obedience and meekness: “The dogs are dead! You'd better stay home and do as you're told, / Get out of the road if you want to grow old “(Pink Floyd, 1977)

Another outstanding concept album is ELP’s 1973 release, *Brain Salad Surgery*, whose first song called “Karn Evil 9 -1st Impression” sketches an Orwellian manipulative totalitarian society in which natural phenomena, spirituality and human emotion have been destroyed: “Cold and misty morning, I heard a warning borne in the air / About an age of power where no one had an hour to spare” (ELP, 1973). The next song, “Karn evil 9 -3rd impression,” echoes Aldous Huxley’s dystopian society from *Brave New World* and it is technocracy that comes under attack this time. The protagonist of the scene is a technocratic overlord, a computer which relentlessly oppresses people overwhelming them with redundant tasks. The lyrics contain a powerful critique at the technology-dominated world where creativity and human emotion have vanished. The last human beings revolt against the overlord and finally defeat it but, even though the computer has been locked, technology wins as the computer asks the “ex-opressed”: “I am perfect – are you?” (ELP, 1973). The two songs reflect the conception of the members of the countercultural movements according to which both models of society – totalitarianism and capitalism – are equally materialistic.

Last but not least, it is religion as well as the school system that become the target of some popular progressive songs. The emphasis put by the clerics of the Church of England on ritual acts rather than on real religious experience is frowned upon in some lyrics from Jethro Tull’s songs, published in the concept album *Aqualung*, in King Crimson’s album *Starless and Bible Black* and in ELP’s song “The Only Way.” Thus, in “My God” the regular call to church is satirized in the lines: “The bloody Church of England (...) requests your earthly presence / at the vicarage for tea” (*Jethro Tull*) while church rituals are mocked at in ELP’s “The Only Way”: “People (...) kneel at the shrine, deceived by the wine” (ELP, 1971). So is the trade made with religious objects such as “the plastic crucifix” (*Jethro Tull*), “the figurines of Virgin Mary” (*King Crimson*, 1974). Moreover, the limited school system based

on conformism and focused on levelling students is not spared by the progressive rock poetry either. An eloquent example is Pink Floyd's famous song from the 80s "Another Brick in the Wall" with its notorious sung-along chorus part: "We don't need no education / we don't need no thought control / No dark sarcasm in the classroom" – an obvious denial of conformity and a plea for freedom of thought. (Pink Floyd, 1979)

All in all, one of the most outstanding achievements of the countercultural movements is the attempt of its promoters – the progressive musicians – to convey antimilitaristic, antitotalitarian, antitechnocratic and nonconformist messages which succeeded in influencing the mindsets of many young intellectuals. The outright plea for peace and freedom in times of war and terror and the quest for a return to creativity and emotion in a period when consumerism and technology began to dominate the western world expressed through the lyrics of the "rock poetry" of the 60s and 70s have had long-term echoes in the cultural choices of many young generations. The lyrics of these songs, equated by their unique harmonious orchestrations, remain significant landmarks in the socio-cultural struggle of the representatives of the countercultural movements.

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