

# Rock.

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“Rock” is sometimes used as an umbrella term to refer to post–World War II Popular music in general. This article focuses on its more restricted and, arguably, more appropriate usage, as a generically specific category of post–World War II popular music, produced primarily in the United States and Britain but eventually taken up in other countries, with particular musical characteristics and sociocultural underpinnings. The term is almost always coupled with a subgeneric designation, such as Blues rock, Glam rock, Psychedelic rock, Alternative rock, and so on, and genres such as Punk and Heavy metal are also sometimes referred to as subgenres of rock, although these have been aesthetically and politically opposed to rock at certain historical moments (the mid-1970s, for example), when rock was seen to have become conservative, “mainstream,” and tied to corporate interests. Indeed, there are both musical and social characteristics that make it possible to consider all of these and other subgenres of rock together.

The term *rock* began to be used in the mid-1960s, coinciding with the development of rock criticism, to distinguish this music from the Rock and roll [rock 'n' roll] of the 1950s and the pop and soul of the early 1960s. Like [rock 'n' roll] before it, rock was grounded in the idea of youthful rebellion, particularly by white men, who have always dominated its production and who make up a significant (although certainly not exclusive) part of its audience. Although there are now older generations of rockers, youthful rebellion still lies at the heart of the music. The idea of rebellion in 1950s rock 'n' roll was situated in what Lawrence Grossberg has called “youth’s experiences of alienation, powerlessness, and boredom,” which arose “in a particular temporal context, variously characterized as late capitalism [or] postmodernity.” For many white youth, rock music has functioned as a kind of salvation, one might even say as a theology. It has been a means through which to challenge the status quo, to create community, and to feel empowered.

## 1. Rock ideology.

Rock 'n' roll was grounded in the white consumption and appropriation of black rhythm and blues, a style of music not consumed by older generations and which was considered dangerous and inappropriate for whites, especially for the middle class. It was produced using electric instruments; it was loud and unruly music, with strong grooves, intended for a kind of dancing associated with bodily pleasure and sexual transgression deemed inappropriate in “respectable” (and racist) white culture. Breaking out of the confinements of white bodily and other social restraints was of paramount significance to the first generation of rock 'n' rollers and this has remained an important characteristic of rock music. Perhaps ironically, as rock developed in the late 1960s and beyond, musicians have displayed a relatively restrained physicality, reproducing white, straight, male anxieties about overt expressions of emotion that might link them to homosexuality; if they move, the movement has often been athletic, about strength and endurance, rather than dancing, especially choreographed dancing, which is associated with the perceived artificiality of pop music. The way rock musicians move suggests power and control—over bodies and instrument technology.

In rock music of the mid to late 1960s there were two ways in which ideas of “rebelliousness,” and hence empowerment, widened. One was through sonic expansion of blues-based music, making it louder and heavier, and sometimes also introducing influences from musics outside of rhythm and blues or country—this began with psychedelic rock of the later 1960s, where the inclusion of Indian or other “exotic” music (such as the Doors’ unlikely cover of Kurt Weill’s “Alabama Song” [1966], drawn from 1930s expressionist cabaret) came to be viewed as part of the mind-expanding experience of the counterculture. The other was to introduce lyrics that were socially conscious or politically charged, dealing with subject matter outside the traditional rock ’n’ roll focus on romantic love and sex. Beginning in the 1970s, the term Hard rock generally designated the former, Soft rock the latter, but there are plenty of examples of both that mix these characteristics (Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” [1971] is a classic example from hard rock, as is Bruce Springsteen’s “Born to Run [1975]”; a soft rock example is Elton John’s “Levon,” [1971]). A particularly significant moment for the development of rock was Bob Dylan’s 1965 album *Highway 61 Revisited*, which combined a blues-based electric sound and elements of contemporary folk with Dylan’s characteristically weighty lyrics. This introduced an element of introspection and seriousness into rock that has been important to varying degrees ever since; it is also the element most criticized by those who believe that with the development of rock, popular music became too professionalized, pompous, and serious, and that it violated the spirit of rebelliousness and simplicity (“anyone should be able to play this music”) at the heart of the rock ’n’ roll revolution.

Two ideas central to rock were born in the later 1960s and early 1970s. Tempos often slowed down (Pink Floyd’s music is an extreme example of this trend) and this, combined with the new direction of lyrics, signaled a kind of music that was intended for contemplation rather than dancing; the increasing virtuosity of rock musicians also contributed to this aesthetic. Even in rock that was relatively up-tempo and that included lyrics primarily about love and sex, such as that of the band AC/DC, the primary objective was not dancing, but listening, and this has remained the case (who really “dances” at a U2 or Coldplay concert?). Second, ideas about what constitutes “authenticity” in popular music, already evident in earlier rock ’n’ roll and bolstered with the folk revival of the early 1960s, began to creep into the discourse more forcefully. The notion of rock authenticity claims that music should express an unmediated interiority; artists should perform their own songs, have artistic control over their output, and shun the commercial side of the music industry (if commercial success comes, it should be a by-product, not an aim). These ideas have shaped not only rock music but popular music in general, since they have become pervasively—and problematically—accepted as criteria through which to judge the merit of any popular music. In recent years, this idea of authenticity has been challenged by both fans and scholars of other types of popular music, and the perspective coming from rock musicians and fans has been termed, negatively, “rockist.”

## **2. Rock instrumentation.**

The typical rock ensemble consists of guitar, bass guitar, drum kit, and singer: these are considered to be the core elements, the ur-ensemble of rock; it is difficult to conceive of a rock band that does not include these components (although the Doors did not have a bass player; in live performance bass lines were created on a keyboard). The most stripped-down version of this kind of ensemble is the “power trio,” in which the singer also plays one of the instruments. The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Cream, and Rush are seminal examples. The word “power” here is meant to signify the heavy sound of the music. Keyboards and horns are also

routinely used in rock; however, keyboards can sometimes be viewed as a feminizing, or at least inauthenticating, element, so they do not feature in the garage rock of a band such as the Ramones; and, interestingly, the keyboard player, while a significant presence, has never been considered an official member of the Rolling Stones, although this may have more to do with economics than aesthetics or ideology. The function of the drum kit and bass is primarily to articulate a repeated pattern called the groove, and in rock the groove is almost always four or eight bars long. Guitar duties are often split between two players, one of whom may play primarily “lead” (solos) the other “rhythm”; or the singer might also play rhythm guitar (John Lennon in the Beatles, Bono in U2, Ric Ocasek in the Cars).

The lead guitar player is of central importance: the electric guitar has been the defining instrument in rock music. It became the instrument of choice because of the possibility of creating loud, distorted, sustained sound, as well as a wide range of different timbres, and fast, virtuosic solos. However, the swagger of early rock 'n' roll guitarists such as Chuck Berry also helped solidify the instrument's position as a symbol of masculine freedom and power. Berry's seemingly effortless command of the instrument—his ability to play it while “duckwalking,” for example—suggested a powerful mastery of the technology, and because the vast majority of rock guitar players who followed have been men, this has been associated with a particular construction of largely white masculinity. Virtuoso rock guitar players—Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Eddie Van Halen, to name only a few—are known as “guitar heroes” and the guitar has often been viewed as a phallic symbol, not only in the ivory tower but by guitar players themselves: in the 1995 Time-Warner documentary *The History of Rock and Roll*, Kiss's Paul Stanley declared, “I've always viewed the guitar as an extension of what I have between my legs.” The association of hard rock, in particular, with the construction of a sexually powerful (hetero)masculinity led to the moniker “cock rock” in the 1970s. In an influential early scholarly article titled “Rock and Sexuality,” Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie mapped out the characteristics of this kind of rock and contrasted it with softer styles of Pop.

There are two prominent styles of rock singing, both derived from the blues. One of these, developed by singers such as the Who's Roger Daltrey and Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant, is indebted to blues shouters such as Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters. These powerful singers exploit the upper range of the voice and lace the sound with distortion, often singing full out, using the chest voice, not falsetto. Some metal singers, such as Iron Maiden's Bruce Dickinson, developed this style of singing to include techniques from opera (less distortion and more vibrato), the genre of classical music associated with the most powerful kind of vocal production. This singing style is generally associated with hard rock and metal, and signifies power and control. The second kind of rock singing, also derived from blues shouters, utilizes a lower and narrower melodic range that stays close to the blues scale; Jim Morrison and Mick Jagger are good examples of this style of rock singing.

Although there is plenty of variation, a “standard” drum kit groove in rock is described by Allan Moore as follows: the snare articulates the backbeat, cymbal or high hat sounds straight eighth notes (two on every beat), and the bass drum plays on beats one and three, with fills occurring at the beginning and end of major sections, such as the verse or chorus. As can be noted from this description, rock grooves tend toward less complex versions of urban blues and R&B grooves. Like R&B and blues, rock is generally riff based, and in hard rock, especially, riffs are often doubled by bass and guitar.

### 3. Form and structure.

Rock employs musical forms that are ubiquitous in popular music: modified 12-bar blues, verse chorus or verse refrain, 32-bar song form, among others. Some styles, especially progressive rock, have experimented with form, drawing on models from classical music (Yes) and Indian music (the Beatles' "Within you without you"). While hard rock, especially, is often defined by the up-tempo songs, rock ballads are also important. The "power ballad" is closely associated with 1970s and 1980s rock and usually combines slow, broad grooves, saturated with reverb, with highly emotional singing and lyrics that are sometimes intended to convey "deep" sentiments (they are just as often, however, about the conventional elements of love). Classic songs in this genre include Aerosmith's "Dream on," Bon Jovi's "Wanted Dead or Alive," and Foreigner's "I want to know what love is." It has been argued that power ballads drew more women fans to rock music, given the softer and more emotional tenor of these songs, but this is anecdotal and risks playing into conventional ideas about femininity. There is evidence to suggest that women consume hard rock and metal in equal numbers to that of men. Robert Walser reported in his study of heavy metal that women constituted about half the audience for this music in the late 1980s, and Susan Fast's ethnography of Led Zeppelin fans at the turn of the 21st century indicated that about a third of committed fans of that band were women. Although rock is primarily made by men, the core ideas of rebellion, liberation, and empowerment found in this music are also attractive to women.

### 4. Challenges and developments.

The role of studio technology in the production of rock since the late 1960s cannot be underestimated (see Zak, 2001). Music produced under the rubric of "rock" is where a great deal of experimentation with recording technology has taken place, and sophisticated studio production became a hallmark of the style early on. The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) is one of the first rock records that utilized studio technology to create music that, at the time, could not be reproduced live. Some have argued that rock music is first and primarily a recorded music, that studio recordings are rock's primary texts, and that live performance is secondary, but live performance remains crucially important to most kinds of rock music. As Walser argued with respect to metal, fans want to see and hear the musicians reproduce the music on records live and this obtains to other styles of rock music as well; the live demonstration of technical facility and the experience of being in the presence of the musicians are significant elements of the style.

Because rock has been overwhelmingly produced by white, straight men, and because it has at its core a form of rebellion and empowerment associated with a particular construction of masculinity, women, and other minorities have not had much presence. It is interesting that two of the founding figures of rock—Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, a woman and an African American man—remain among the very few minorities who have achieved critical and commercial success in rock. The 1970s mainstream produced Heart, a rock band fronted by sisters Ann and Nancy Wilson, as well as Stevie Nicks and Christine McVie of Fleetwood Mac. Notably, none of these women are virtuoso electric guitar players (Nancy Wilson played mostly rhythm and acoustic guitars, although she is sometimes credited with playing lead). As Mavis Bayton has argued, lack of access to technology and general discouragement from engagement with it, as well as a culture unfriendly to women, made it difficult for women to pursue rock. Two virtuoso electric guitar players emerged in the 1980s, Jennifer Batten and Lita Ford; although both have achieved considerable success, neither name is well known. The emergence of punk in the 1970s, with its do-it-yourself aesthetic and less emphasis on

virtuosity, opened a door for women to participate in the production of a certain kind of rock music. Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders emerged out of this culture, as did the Riot grrrl movement of the 1990s. Still, women rock musicians are relatively rare. The same can be said for racial and ethnic minorities, who, unsurprisingly, gravitate toward forms of music making that perhaps better reflect—and through which they can better articulate—different social concerns and subjectivities. Despite this, there certainly are African American musicians who choose to play rock: Slash, most well known as the guitarist for Guns N’ Roses, Tom Morello of Rage against the Machine, and Lenny Kravitz are three who have achieved name recognition, and the rock band Living Colour, comprising African American musicians, was important in the 1980s. The Black rock coalition, formed in 1985, is an advocacy group for black artists challenging the idea that black musicians do not, or cannot, play rock.

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