



'More Popular Than Jesus': The Beatles and the Religious Far Right

Mark Sullivan

Popular Music, Vol. 6, No. 3, Beatles Issue. (Oct., 1987), pp. 313-326.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0261-1430%28198710%296%3A3%3C313%3A%27PTJTB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-4>

Popular Music is currently published by Cambridge University Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/cup.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

'More popular than Jesus': the Beatles and the religious far right

MARK SULLIVAN

Probably the most famous photograph of the entire anti-rock movement features record burnings held in August 1966.¹ A crowd of elementary school-age children and a clean-cut disc jockey stand before a bonfire; one grinning boy presents a copy of *Meet the Beatles* to the camera prior to tossing it on the flames. This particular bonfire was organised by radio station WAYX in Waycross, Georgia, but it was only one of many in response to comments made by John Lennon.

In an interview printed in the London *Evening Standard* of 4 March 1966, John Lennon stated,

Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I will be proven right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first – rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was alright, but His disciples were thick and ordinary. It's them twisting it that ruins it for me

It was not until the quote was featured on the cover of the American teen magazine *Datebook*, however, that the statement received attention in the United States. A massive backlash against the Beatles ensued, just prior to their fourth, and ultimately last, United States tour. Immediately, dozens of radio stations, particularly those in the southern 'Bible Belt', banned Beatles music. (Similar bans were called as far away as Pamplona, Spain and Johannesburg, South Africa.) Many of these same stations sponsored record burnings like the one in the infamous photograph. The South Carolina Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan burned a Beatles record on a cross. The scandal even caused a dip in the stock of the Beatles' publishing company, Northern Songs, Ltd.

Numerous religious leaders offered opinions on the furore. Reverend Thurman H. Babbs, pastor of the New Heaven Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio pronounced, 'I will revoke the membership of any member of my church who agrees with John Lennon's remarks about Jesus or who goes to see the Beatles' (Friedman 1968, p. 35); the *New York Times* of 6 August 1966 reported that the Reverend Richard Pritchard of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Madison, Wisconsin, claimed the fault lay not with the Beatles, but with the outraged, advising they 'take a look at their own standards and values. There is much validity in what Lennon said. To many people today, the golf course is also more popular than Jesus Christ'; and, finally, the Right Reverend Kenneth Maguire, Anglican Bishop of Montreal, reminded, 'In the only popularity poll in Jesus' time, he came out second best to Barabbas' (Friedman 1968, p. 33).

Eventually, at Brian Epstein's urging, Lennon issued a semi-apology. According to the *New York Times* he said: 'I suppose if I had said television was more popular

than Jesus, I would have got away with it. I am sorry I opened my mouth. . . . I am not anti-God, anti-Christ, or anti-religion. I was not knocking it. I was not saying that we are greater or better.' Still, Lennon held to his claim that the Beatles *were* indeed more popular than Christ. The Vatican accepted Lennon's apology, but the religious far-right never has. The quote still appears in books like *The Legacy of Lennon: Charming or Harming a Generation?*, the most recent anti-rock treatise by the Reverend David A. Noebel.² Noebel is one of the pioneers of the anti-rock movement in general and the anti-Beatles movement in particular. In the 1960s he was an Associate Evangelist of Billy James Hargis' Christian Crusade, an evangelical anti-communist organisation. He was also Dean of the Christian Crusade Anti-Communist Youth University in Manitou Springs, Colorado. His activity pre-dates Lennon's irreverent remark by at least a year – in early 1965, he conducted a twenty-one day lecture tour of California, warning of the evils of the Beatles. *Newsweek* (15 February 1965) poked fun at Noebel, leading with

Fluoridation, mental-health programs, and the United Nations are, as every Right-thinking fundamentalist well knows, insidious Communist plots to soften up America for the Bolshevik takeover. But by dint of 'hard intelligence', a 28-year-old Wisconsin preacher, on tour for Billy Hargis's Christian Crusade says he has unearthed a more subtle Communist ploy – the Beatles.

The article, titled 'Beware the Red Beatles', closed with Noebel's most extravagant claim, 'In the excitatory state that the Beatles place these youngsters into, these young people will do anything they are told to do . . . One day when the revolution is ripe,' the minister warns in dark, apocalyptic tones, 'they [the communists] could put the Beatles on TV and [they] could mass hypnotize the American youth. This scares the wits out of me.'

Noebel quibbled with *Newsweek's* coverage, claiming, 'I have, on the authority of the Beatles themselves or their press officer, called the Beatles, rude, profane, vulgar, anti-Christ, atheistic, agnostic, anti-Pope, anti-Christian, etc., but I have yet to call the Beatles "Red" ' (Noebel 1965b). Noebel does not deny his final claim, that the Beatles are potential tools of a communist takeover of the United States. The disagreement seems to hinge on whether the Beatles are ignorant dupes or willing fellow travellers.

Noebel followed the lecture tour with the publication of his first anti-rock tract, *Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles*, subtitled, 'An Analysis of the Communist Use of Music – The Communist Master Music Plan'. The twenty-six page booklet includes eleven pages of footnotes – the far right extremists footnote religiously. While the most outlandish claims of such authors almost invariably draw on anti-rock authorities in fundamentalist Christian or anti-communist publications, Noebel 'proves' many extravagant claims with references to *American Opinion*, the house organ of the John Birch Society.³ Occasionally, a really outlandish claim goes suspiciously lacking in footnotes.

An essay on psychological conditioning forms the core of *Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles*. In a discussion of the pioneering *Russian* researchers, Noebel states:

Pavlov experimented with animals in other areas as well, for example, in an area known as artificial neurosis. Here the scientist took healthy animals and using two conditioned reflexes, the excitatory reflex and the inhibitory reflex, caused these healthy animals to break down mentally with cases of artificial neurosis. As we shall see, this is exactly what the Beatles, in particular, and rock and roll, in general, are doing to our teenagers'. (Noebel 1965a, p. 3)

After 'proving' the Russians pioneered, and intimating they are still using, psychological warfare, Noebel cites 'evidence' from the House Committee on Un-American Activities connecting one children's record company and several folk musicians on its various labels to the Communist Party. Noebel believes these communists are ensnaring our young, adding,

But our younger children are not the only ones being tampered with by the communists. Our teenager is also being exploited. Exploited for at least three reasons: (a) his own demoralization; (b) to create in him mental illness through artificial neurosis and (c) to prepare him to riot and ultimately revolution in order to destroy our American form of government and the basic Christian principles governing our way of life. (Noebel 1965A, p. 10)

The study continues with a collection of quotes from psychologists and other social observers about Beatlemania, the cited symptoms of which are said to be identical to those of artificial neurosis. Noebel claims:

The Beatles or the Mindbenders or whatever group they might be need only mass hypnotize 10 or 15 million American youth; condition their emotions through their music and then give forth the word or words for riot and revolt. The consequences are imponderable'; (Noebel 1965A. Footnote 129, p. 25)

Hermina Eisele Brown, Director of Music Therapy Dept, New Jersey State Hospital, says that primitive rhythms are rarely good as they arouse basic instinct in the emotionally insecure person. Rock and roll has a direct bearing on delinquency since all delinquents are emotionally insecure; (Noebel, 1965A, footnote 139, p. 25)

and, finally:

But no matter what one might think about the Beatles or the Animals or the Mindbenders, the results are the same – a generation of young people with sick minds, loose morals and little desire or ability to defend themselves from those who would bury them.

In conclusion, it seems rather evident to this writer that the communists have a master music plan for all age brackets of American youth. We know from documented proof that such is the case for babies, one- and two-year-olds with their rhythmic music; we know such is the case for school children with their rhythmic music and for university students with their folk music.⁴ What but rock and roll fits the teenager? This isn't saying that the communists have invented rock and roll or any other type of music, but they do in fact know how to use each type for their own purpose.

... Throw your Beatle and rock and roll records in the city dump. We have been unashamed of being labeled a Christian nation; let's make sure four mop-headed anti-Christ beatniks don't destroy our children's emotional and mental stability and ultimately destroy our nation as Plato warned in his Republic ['The introduction of a new kind of music must be shunned as imperiling the whole State; since styles of music are never disturbed without affecting the most important political institutions']. (Noebel 1965A, pp. 14–15)

The pamphlet is a classic example of guilt by association. Noebel details the Russian ties to psychological warfare. By juxtaposing examples of textbook symptoms of artificial neurosis with those of Beatlemania, Nobel intends the reader to infer a causal relationship between the Beatles, rock'n'roll, and communist mind control. There is no reason to mention a minor group like the Mindbenders once, much less twice, other than to implant the connotation of the band's name. Noebel also brandishes his two examples of 'proven', – at least to the standards of the House Committee of Un-American Activities – communist involvement in cultural production. This reinforces the idea of a communist master music plan. Why wouldn't the communists use rock'n'roll? Still, Noebel scrupulously avoids naming the Beatles as communists.⁵

It is ironic that the Beatles and not the Rolling Stones became the Devils of the

Christian anti-rock movement. After all, Andrew Loog Oldham worked hard to shape the Stones as the 'anti-Beatles', the group from whom parents hid their daughters. In fact Noebel's principal target in 1965 was not the Beatles but rock'n'roll as a whole. Again and again, Noebel addresses himself to 'the Beatles, in particular, and rock and roll, in general'. The booklet has no references to individual Beatles, no comments on particular songs. The only remarks specific to the band are observations about fan behaviour presented as symptomatic of rock'n'roll as a whole. The Beatles are merely one manifestation of the disease.

However, the Beatles offered Noebel a perfect focus for his antipathy to rock'n'roll. The potential backlash in criticising Elvis Presley, the only previous rocker of the Beatles' stature, was just too dangerous. As James Morris suggests, Elvis was a hero to a large part of the Christian Crusade's constituency (Morris 1973, p. 277), effectively placing him off limits from attacks of this sort. Presley had always presented the image of a good, God-fearing young man, even at his most rebellious, but particularly after being drafted into the Army. (The revelations about his excessive lifestyle did not become public until just before his death.) The Beatles, however, were British and young. They were sufficiently different from American fundamentalist Christians to be a safe target. When Lennon's irreverent remarks were publicised, this difference was made particularly manifest, but it is the reality reflected in the 'more popular than Jesus' comment that reveals the basis for the fundamentalists' antipathy.

In the minds of the fundamentalists a popularity contest *was* being held. Noebel and his co-thinkers are conservatives in the full sense of the word, wary of any change. Joseph R. Gusfield's *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* provides insight into fundamentalist attitudes:

It is the decline in the general cultural standards which they bemoan . . . The central target of this hostility is the content of the mass society as contrasted with the local community. Sophistication, science, psychiatry, modern child rearing, contemporary educational methods are among the complex of patterns and institutions which are attacked as immoral and responsible for present-day ills. Cultural values that emanate from the national institutions of school, *entertainment media*, and even the major churches are depicted as sources for the decay in the status of the old middle class. (Gusfield 1963, p. 144, emphasis added)

Media which cater to the young are a prime target for all moral crusaders. Campaigns against comic books, television programming and rock music, even crusades against pornography and 'adult' movies, are housed in the language of saving the young from corruption. In turn, youth culture draws few supporters – the young consumers are not thought to have sufficient maturity to know what is really good for them.⁶ This opinion is held most strongly among the conservative faction.

A vulnerable target alone does not ensure a successful moral crusade, however. Somehow, public attention must be focused on the matter. In this case, John Lennon provided the fundamentalists with just the atrocity story they needed, that the young might actually prefer the Beatles to Christ. *Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles* may have been well-read among Christian anti-communists (it went through at least four editions of 10,000 each), but not with the general public. It took the crisis of the Beatles-Christ popularity poll to force the issue.

The controversy played itself out in less than two weeks; the greater public was happy to accept Lennon's apology. Noebel and others, notably Bob Larson, laboured on against rock, but it was not until later in the decade, when the release of *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* marked the beginning of a continuing debate on

drug lyrics in rock'n'roll, that the Beatles were implicated in another semi-public scandal.⁷ In response, Noebel released a new booklet, *The Beatles: A Study in Drugs, Sex and Revolution*. Unlike his earlier publication, this one featured very specific information about the band.

Noebel's introduction presents the Beatles as advance troops for the communist-socialist revolution:

Of course, the US radicals in particular also appreciate the Beatles for their subtle and not-so-subtle discs and albums promoting drugs and sexual promiscuity. They know all too well that such ingredients precipitate fuller, riper revolutions. (Noebel 1969, p. 17)

First, Noebel analyses the Beatles' relationship to the drug culture:

And, any record company or rock'n'roll group that lends respectability to such drugs is not only immoral but criminal. And yet, the single greatest offenders (because of their vast popularity) are the Beatles! (Noebel 1969, p. 17)

And:

Since the Beatles are gods to millions of teenagers today, if drugs are 'in' (or considered 'in') by the Beatles, they will be considered 'in' by the teenagers. For like it or not, whatever the teenagers' gods sanction – the teens have a tendency to sanction. No wonder America is experiencing a drug epidemic! And even if the Beatles were to swear off all drugs tomorrow, their drug records would still continue to circulate. In fact, when the Beatles did say they were temporarily through with drugs, the *Sgt Pepper* album still continued to circulate the drug message to our youth. If and when the Beatles seriously kick the drug habit, the only concrete evidence worth recording will be their desire to take their drug records off the stands.

Until such time, a word of warning should be sounded to our youth concerning the harmful effects of drugs both individually and nationally. No nation can long survive with her future citizens wallowing in the mire of sin and degradation because their moral inhibitions were destroyed by deconditioning drugs. (Noebel 1969, pp. 21–2)

Next, Noebel moves on to sex:

And, again, few have been more effective in bringing about this sexual revolution among our young people than the progenitors and performers of rock'n'roll. Indeed, present day rock is having a holiday ridiculing religion and morality while at the same time glorifying drugs, sexual promiscuity and revolution – and all the time claiming to do so under the guise or disguise of art! With identical reasoning, consistency would demand that Jack the Ripper be appointed dorm mother under the guise of fair and equal employment. (Noebel 1969, pp. 25–6)

Noebel exposes the real meaning of the term Alan Freed gave the music – rock'n'roll was a ghetto term for fornication. He reveals Jim Morrison's indecent exposure charges and catalogues a long list of rock songs with sexual connotations. Then the preacher offers:

Former rock player, Bob Larson, in conjunction with a physician, offers some light on the relationship between hard rock and promiscuous sex. He contends that the low frequency vibrations of the bass guitar, coupled with the driving beat of the drum, have a decided effect upon the cerebrospinal fluid. The fluid in turn affects the pituitary gland which directs the secretion of hormones, resulting in an abnormal balance of primarily the sex and adrenalin hormones. Instead of their normal regulatory function in the body, these hormones secreted under such conditions produce radical changes in the blood sugar and calcium of the body. Since the brain is nourished exclusively by blood sugar, it ceases to function properly, causing moral inhibitions to either drop to a dangerous low or be wiped out altogether. (Noebel 1969, pp. 29–30)⁸

Finally, Noebel explores the Beatles' links to revolution. As of 1969, there was still little to connect any of the Beatles, even Lennon, directly with radical causes. The

anti-rock authority still offers a number of opinions about the 'social revolution' the Beatles represent, however. It seems the rock band's influence in the areas of drugs and sex was laying the groundwork for the communists' ultimate triumph:

The Beatles' public pronouncements, in the main, could not please this socialist-communist coterie more and, therefore, although the Beatles might not fully understand all the ramifications of their usefulness, they have been considered more than acceptable by the Left.

Hence, rock'n'roll in general and the Beatles in particular have a special significance to the disrupters of society for their promotion of drugs, *avant-garde* sex and atheism. The revolution, though sometimes veiled, is fundamentally against Christianity and Christianity's moral concepts. Karl Marx sought to dethrone God before he set out to destroy capitalism.

Since the rebellion or revolution not only sustains, but feeds on the sexual revolution, it is quite natural that the revolutionaries are against morality and Biblical Christianity which impedes the sexual revolution . . . There is good reason, therefore, why the Red revolutionists who are dedicated to attacking Christianity and the morals of Christianity look to the Beatles as their 'cultural heroes'. Of course, to the naive and uninitiated, the Beatles simply appear as four, fine, wholesome, uplifting musicians, but to those who peer at the clenched fist, radical revolutionists on our college campuses (and their useful idiots), the Beatles take on a vastly different hue and tone. (Noebel 1969, pp. 38-9)

While Noebel devoted himself to the Beatles, Bob Larson, the other prominent fundamentalist examining the music, focused on rock in general. His first book, *Rock & Roll: The Devil's Diversion* (1970), contains chapters on 'The History and Evolution of Rock and Roll', 'The Psychological', 'Physiological' and 'Sociological Effects of Rock'n'Roll'; the final chapter details 'Spiritual Consequences of Rock'n'Roll. The Beatles figure heavily in the presentations of the history and the sociology of the music, but Larson's is an assault on the entire rock culture. When discussing rock'n'roll's African heritage, Larson queries, 'What do these comments say about world conditions when men call "music" that which incited heathens to a frenzy and "art" that which goaded them into cannibalism?' (Larson 1970, p. 46). The inherent racism cannot be missed. Larson employs every cliché, including the story of the missionary in Africa who played both classical music and rock'n'roll for tribesmen; they liked the former, but picked up spears and stones to destroy the latter. Larson also claims that an epileptic in the audience of one of his anti-rock lectures told him that one of his examples of the terrible rock almost sent her into a seizure (Larson 1970, p. 66).

There is another crucial difference between the two pioneers of the movement in the relative emphasis they place on the political and religious threat posed by rock. Noebel emphasises the alleged pro-communist aspects of rock'n'roll, as might be expected from a life member of the John Birch Society (Noebel 1981). Only in the concluding chapter of *The Beatles: A Study of Drugs, Sex and Revolution* does Noebel take up the relationship of anti-communism to Christianity. Basically, they are synonymous.

Larson agrees that communism is the Devil's creation, but is more concerned with the specifically anti-Christian aspects of rock music. His definition of things anti-Christian is virtually all-inclusive. The ethnocentricity of *Hippies, Hindus, and Rock & Roll* – a chronicle of his trip to India to learn more about the Maharishi, meditation and their connection to the Beatles – is stunning. Not only are Hinduism and meditation anti-Christian, they are actually forms of Satanism:

I walked slowly away from the Ganges, more determined than ever that Satan had originated the phenomenon [sic] called the Beatles . . . the hippies . . . and the pounding beat of rock

and roll. It became clear to me that these were the media to accomplish his purpose of turning the attention of youthful America toward pagan religion. (Larson 1972, p. 62)

During his travels, Larson witnessed several religious ceremonies. According to him, 'the rhythm of the music [played during those rituals] was the same pulsating and syncopated tempo used in rock'n'roll'; Hindu youths danced until 'the spirit of our god enters into us', when they fell into convulsions. Larson claims they were possessed by demons (Larson 1972, p. 78). It would be interesting to know if Larson tenders a similar explanation for the behaviour of charismatic Christians who speak in tongues and believe in faith healing.

The 1970s saw little increase in anti-rock activity; Noebel and Larson continued their work, but few joined them. (Noebel was also involved in the internecine battles within the Christian Crusade, which had its tax-exempt status withdrawn and lost its leader, Billy James Hargis, after a sex scandal in 1974. Noebel subsequently formed his own Summit Ministries.)

They maintained some influence, however. Early in the 1970s, after a sermon based on Larson's *Rock & Roll: The Devil's Diversion*, a Reverend Riblett of the Community Baptist Church in Garden City, Michigan, built a seven-foot cross of rock'n'roll records, soaked it in gasoline and torched it. The anti-rock preachers laboured on, but they were preaching almost exclusively to the converted.

Beginning in 1980, however, there was a dramatic increase in anti-rock publications. The incoming Reagan administration signalled an atmosphere conducive to numerous conservative causes, including Christian fundamentalism. The notion that America actually experienced a swing to the right is highly debatable, but various right-wing organisations seized the opportunity, tapping what they, at least, saw as a large new market. This led, in turn, to a massive increase in Christian publishing in general (Flake 1984, especially pp. 149–68). The Beatles still figure in these books for reasons stated by Bob Larson in his latest anti-rock volume, *Rock*:

Why analyze a group that no longer exists? Because the Beatles endure through their music, and as Shakespeare put it, 'The evil that men do lives on after them'. What the Beatles said in the sixties set the tone for topics as diverse as drugs, war, parents, and respect for authority. Their melodies have melted into our consciousness (where would Muzak be without 'Yesterday' and 'Michelle?'), but their lyrics and lifestyles brought about a revolution. The Fabulous Four altered society's perception of public decency forever. The erotic escapades of John and Yoko, the glorification of drug experimentation via 'I Get High with a Little Help from My Friends', and the Beatles' espousal of TM affected the values of millions. Though 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' may pale by comparison to Rod Stewart's 'Do Ya Think I'm Sexy', John, Paul, George, and Ringo taught us to accept pop idols as arbiters of sex, politics, and religion. The Beatles may have been only temporarily 'more popular than Jesus', but it was long enough to alter the music and morals of the Western world. (Larson 1980, pp. 124–5)

John Lennon was not the only ex-Beatle embroiled in scandal. George Harrison's 'My Sweet Lord' was as controversial with the religious right as it was with the copyright courts. The various anti-rock tracts make quite a point of the 'Hare Krishna' chant in the background of 'My Sweet Lord'. (It seems that many born-againists mistakenly adopted the anthem as their own.) As Larson pointed out, Hinduism is a heathen religion, one of Satan's ruses to keep seekers away from the one true faith. Jimmy Swaggart⁹ put the problem into print:

In the mid-'60s, the Beatles journeyed to India to sit at the feet of Indian gurus. Sometime later, George Harrison wrote the song, 'My Sweet Lord'. This song glorified a demon-possessed spiritualist Indian guru with Satan as his master. From that moment, rock music took a turn

downward. What previously was bad became literally dominated by Satan. Modern rock started with the plunge into hell itself. (Swaggart 1987, p. 8)

Again, the Rolling Stones are robbed of their glory – *Their Satanic Majesties Request* predates Harrison's song by three years, and the Stones were far more blatant in their 'Sympathy for the Devil'.

Most of the recent books do not go into such detail about the Beatles, though. They mention Lennon's 'more popular than Jesus' comment, but only as one moment in a brief history of rock leading to what the critic invariably stresses are new lows. These writers pride themselves on keeping up with contemporary trends.

On 8 December 1980, John Lennon was shot in New York City. Following his death, both Lennon, and his then-new album *Double Fantasy*, received massive attention. Lennon was the focus of numerous media eulogies, while many periodicals devoted covers and often whole issues to the ex-Beatle. His death became a focus for rose-tinted memories of the ideals of the 1960s as candlelight vigils were held in numerous cities.¹⁰ Noebel seized the opportunity to recycle his information on the Beatles, publishing *The Legacy of John Lennon: Charming or Harming a Generation?*

Like *Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles*, the new book grew out of lectures given by Noebel. One such lecture before the John Birch Society Council was taped for wider distribution. Noebel is very aware of his audience – before the Birch Society, he is relaxed, at ease. He calls the council members by first name, and jokes that he loves animals too much to play this music for them; besides, he says, it would get him in trouble with the ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). Noebel also waves the red flag of the communist revolution before the right-wing extremists, summing up the current situation thus,

The legacy of John Lennon is rock and roll today. Rock and roll is doing four things: number one, it is pushing the sex revolution like you just can't believe; number two, we're still pushing the drug revolution; number three, we're pushing the social revolution. *And I know you can take it, but when you walk outside that door they can't take it. The social revolution is another fancy word for the Marxist-Leninist revolution.* And we're also pushing perversion, perversion. (Noebel 1981)

The Legacy of Lennon, the book, is Noebel's most reasonable work to date, however. It is also the only one of his anti-rock books published by an outside publisher and available in Christian bookstores. The preacher tones down his previous outlandish claims about the communist threat, sticking to the Beatles' and rock'n'roll's assault on Christian values. Noebel rehearses the Beatle facts from his earlier books, adding the excesses of later rock stars to demonstrate that today's behaviour is far worse than the terrible extremes of Lennon's early days. The overall thrust becomes very close to Larson's.

Ironically, the more a critic hates rock, the more honest his critique. (These anti-rock preachers are invariably male.) For instance, Noebel and Larson are more comprehensive, and truer to rock as a medium, than many later crusaders, particularly the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC).¹¹ Whereas rock apologists, like the PMRC, believe the music can be cleansed by surgically removing certain anti-social lyrical trends, Noebel and his fellows feel the entire form to be inherently corrupt.

Noebel has no qualms about condemning all of rock, seeing the music as inextricably linked to the modernity he hates. When he attacks the world's most popular group, the Beatles, Noebel has a far better claim to be speaking to what is

typical in rock than the PMRC which presents obscure heavy metal acts as the contemporary norm. Noebel does catalogue excesses of the various bands, often employing the same atrocity stories as the PMRC, but simply as window dressing meant to reinforce his audiences' preconceived notions about rock. (It should be remembered that until his latest book, Noebel's writings were available almost exclusively to like-minded thinkers.) He hates rock and everything it stands for.

The apologists, however, posit an idyllic past for rock. Tipper Gore and the rest of the PMRC protest they really like rock, citing songs they danced to in their teens and aerobicise to today.¹² But now, they claim, things are different, they are far worse. PMRC member Susan Baker has said, on numerous occasions:

What we are trying to do is let parents know that the rock'n'roll that they danced to and that I danced to growing up, has changed from the swinging of Elvis' hips and saying, 'I want you, I need you, I love you', to people like Blackie Lawless going around in his codpiece with a chainsaw between his legs singing, 'I F-U-C-K like a beast'. (Berry 1985).

Similar statements have been made by other members of the PMRC, including Jeff Ling, youth minister at the New Covenant Church and advisor to the group. They either don't realise or, more likely, choose to ignore the fact that they are comparing yesterday's mainstream acts with today's cult groups. These critics also ignore the changing moral context. Presley was as fully shocking in his day as Blackie Lawless' band, WASP, is today, and Presley's shocking antics were reaching a broader public. Amusingly enough, it is the same Beatles whom Noebel finds so offensive that Tipper Gore cites as rock's idyllic past: 'It is a quantum leap from the Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand" to Prince singing: "If you get tired of masturbating . . . /If you like, I'll jack you off"' and 'In the days of Elvis Presley and the Beatles' concerts', Dr Taylor points out, there was 'controlled frenzy [Noebel called this controlled frenzy artificial neurosis], but there was no socking someone in the mouth'¹³ (Gore 1987, pp. 83, 149). Gore even quotes the Beatles' 'All You Need is Love' as a positive model for parenting (Gore 1987, p. 157).

In affirming some rock, the apologists must make their stand solely on the evidence of lyrics, finding themselves in the dubious position of claiming a direct causal influence of those lyrics on teenage behaviour.

Jimmy Swaggart, for one, sees the difficulties caused by isolating one portion of rock from the whole:

Then he [James Chute in the *Milwaukee Journal*] said:

'They all make the same fatal mistake: that somehow the lyrics change the music's context, its subliminal message. More likely, the very opposite happens. The Las Vegas/Wayne Newton lounge act style is sanctified through its Christian associations.

James Chute is right. It is a *fatal* mistake. The lyrics do not change the music's content nor its subliminal message. Actually, it is the music that converts the Christian message into a nightclub format. And when this happens, we come very close to blaspheming the Holy Spirit. (Swaggart 1987, p. 8, Swaggart's emphasis).

But even in religious circles, this argument is losing its effectiveness. Currently, there is a major debate among fundamentalists about the appropriateness of Christian rock – rock of all sorts, including punk and heavy metal, but with religious lyrics. After years of condemning it, even Larson has come to endorse Christian rock.¹⁴

The two groups of crusaders can be distinguished by the nature of their complaints – cultural or lyrical. There is, however, a heavy overlap between the two factions. In 1965, Noebel was ridiculed by *Newsweek*; today his latest book is

recommended by the PMRC (PMRC 1986, p. 29). PMRC advisor Jeff Ling's ties are to the fundamentalist anti-rock school. His slide show, presented at the PMRC's initial press conference, as well as before the Senate hearing on record labelling, is identical to those given by anti-rock evangelists like the Peters Brothers. Today, the National PTA distributes Ling's slide show. Once laughed at, anti-rock activity is now quite respectable.

Both groups are cultural vigilantes, forming a subset of Murray Edelman's concept of vigilantism in *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1985):

Notice that the vigilante type of mass action is fundamentally pessimistic. Viewing the situation from the perspective of the vigilantes themselves, even a victory would not produce a better world; at best it will remove a potential foe or threat. Victory, moreover, never occurs.

In other words, the vigilantes have 'a desperate fear that a good order will be destroyed' (Edelman 1985, pp. 166, 169).

The key difference between the PMRC and the Noebels and Swaggarts lies in each group's placement of that better time to which they wish the world would return. The era identified as the golden age becomes a measure of one's conservatism. The Noebels look back to a time before rock'n'roll; to them, rock is just one more clue to a world gone bad. The Gores and PMRC harken back to the late 1950s and early 1960s, thereby embracing the 'more innocent' rock'n'roll of that time. So the severity of rock's corruption seems to be, at least partially, an aspect of one's age and one's initial reaction to rock. David Wilkerson, a contributor to Swaggart's magazine *The Evangelist*, as much as admitted this in a tract titled, 'Confessions of a Rock'n'Roll Hater':

I have always hated rock and roll music. My first book was entitled, *Rock and Roll – The Devil's Heartbeat*. In it, I listed what I believe were 16 sins caused by rock music. Looking back now, I don't remember what they were.

My hatred for rock was cultural, having grown up with Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and Chubby Checker, and hearing them and their music condemned from the pulpits everywhere. . . .

Recently, I heard an early Elvis recording, and it was amusing. It sounded harmless and rather innocent – and it makes me wonder what all the controversy was about. . . . (Wilkerson 1982)

What follows is a reconsideration of Christian rock by one of its major detractors. Wilkerson closes the tract with:

No, I am not backslidden. I am not compromising. I am growing up in the Lord. Some will think I have become too soft in my middle age – but we so desperately need to love one another and quit judging. I probably will never like 'Christian' rock and roll – but now it is not an issue with me. (Wilkerson 1982)

As the average age of those who like rock and, more importantly, the average age of those who actively dislike it rises,¹⁵ rock as a form becomes less open to attack and lyrical criticism becomes the standard. Now, even the critics admit liking some rock. Increasingly, even those who dislike everything about rock must base their complaints on the lyrics and lifestyles of the rock stars. Even Bob Larson is forced to adopt this strategy as evidenced by the subtitle of his latest book, already in its seventh printing: *Rock: Practical Help for Those Who Listen to the Words and Don't Like What They Hear*. As the difference between the two *The Legacy of Lennons* reveal, Noebel too felt a need to tone down his extremism when targeting a larger audience. The potential tune-out factor for a total critique of the medium has become too high.

As more and more parents have grown up with the music, the rock form seems less threatening. Noebel's worst fears, and John Sinclair's most fervent dreams, of a total cultural revolution based on rock'n'roll never came true. It now seems naïve to have granted rock the power the evangelists once attributed to it. With a lyrical analysis, however, the claim that the music is much worse today – 'not like it was when we were young' – is easily promoted. The PMRC, in particular, has proved just how persuasive this line of reasoning can be. To provide the ultimate irony, ex-Beatle Paul McCartney has voiced his sympathy for the PMRC:

I kind of see their point, you know? I think there is a point, like with newspapers, where you start to want to censor stuff. I don't *really* think you ought to, but . . . Let's say a really great group emerged – and you tend to think they'd be heavy metal, although that's probably 'heavy metalist' to say – and say they were advocating, I don't know, killing, Satanism. And they came out with a really great album and turned a lot of people onto Satanism. There's got to be a point where you're gonna say, 'Look, guys, we're all for artistic freedom, but maybe we just don't want *de debbil* trampling across America at the moment'.

I mean, what would you do? I don't know. I think censorship's very dangerous . . .

But things are getting farther and farther out . . . but how far ought they to let that go? I think, in a way, that it doesn't really hurt to have someone keepin' an eye on that stuff. It's not a bad thing to have watchdog groups; you just mustn't let them get too much power. (Loder 1986, p. 48)

This statement is from a member of the band Noebel and many others claim 'put a generation of our people into the drug culture' (Noebel 1981). If McCartney is held to his reasoning about one band's turning a lot of people onto Satanism, should he agree with Noebel about the detrimental effect of the Beatles?

Endnotes

- 1 The United Press International photo appears in numerous books, including: Herman 1982, p. 155; and Wiener 1984, facing p. 204. Todd Rundgren's *Utopia* used a slightly altered version of the picture for the cover for their album *Swing to the Right* (Bearsville 1982).
- 2 Noebel's is only one of many Christian anti-rock tracts to revive Lennon's declaration – the quote is surprisingly popular, even in those anti-rock books published in the 1980s: Allen 1982, p. 35; Aranza 1985, p. 67; Bill 1984, p. 35; Blanchard 1983, p. 12; Godwin 1985, p. 263; Hart and Kirban 1981, p. 88; Haynes 1982, p. 73; Landis 1981, p. 1; Larson, 1980, p. 125; Peck 1985, p. 25; Peters *et al.* 1984, p. 23; Peters and Peters 1980, p. 2; and Scheer 1986, p. 28.
- 3 The John Birch Society is a particularly reactionary splinter group of the radical right, viewing all aspects of modernity as aspects of a communist conspiracy. The degree of their extremism became apparent when Birch Society founder Robert Welch declared then-President Eisenhower 'a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy'. For more information on the group see Westin 1964. For an amusing satire of the organisation listen to Bob Dylan's 'Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues' (sometimes called 'Talking Communism') on various bootlegs; the text is available in Dylan 1973, pp. 17–18.
- 4 Noebel was to pursue this particular theme the following year, 1966, in *Rhythm, Riots and Revolution: An Analysis of the Communist Use of Music – The Communist Master Music Plan*. This book extends the line of argument in *Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles* about Russian mind-control and Communist infiltration of the music industry, particularly in the genre of folk music. In 1974, Noebel issued an expanded update, *The Marxist Minstrels: A Handbook on Communist Subversion of Music*, which integrated *Rhythm, Riots and Revolution* with his second Beatle book *The Beatles: A Study in Drugs, Sex and Revolution*.
- 5 When asked, 'What do you think about the pamphlet calling you four Communists?' (almost definitely a reference to Noebel's booklet), Paul McCartney replied, 'Us, Communists? Why we can't be Communists. We're the world's number one Capitalists. Imagine us Communists!' The official Communist Party paper, *Komsomolskava Pravda*, had this to say about the band, 'The Beatles are a plot by the British ruling classes to distract British young-

sters from politics and bitter pondering over disgraced and shattered hopes' (both quotes, Friedman 1968, p. 23).

- 6 The mid-1960s, however, were distinct in at least one aspect. For once, there were a large number of adults who, if not jumping to defend, were very willing to consume youth culture – even Jackie Kennedy was rumoured to dance the twist. The adult dollars became votes in youth culture's favour. Today, those same baby boom teenagers who set the cultural trends in 1965 are campaigning against their contemporary equivalents.
- 7 For an analysis of the drug-rock connection see Taqi (1969), who claims, 'After *Sgt Pepper* drug-usage themes in rock'n'roll visibly increased, and there was progressively less outcry against them, presumably because there were scores of such songs now' (p. 33). Taqi's article became the basis for many later complaints, such as Agnew (1972) and the opening salvo in the 1973 'drugola' scandal, see Buckley (1973).
- 8 'Former rock player' Bob Larson is now, and was at the time, a fundamentalist preacher and anti-rock crusader. His much vaunted career in rock was as a contract songwriter in the days before, even he admits, the Beatles revolutionised the record industry. ('In just five years [the Beatles] completely altered the structure of popular music on an international scale . . . Rock'n'roll has revolutionised the record industry' (Larson 1970, p. 51). The 'medical' information comes from Larson's first anti-rock screed, *Rock & Roll: The Devil's Diversion*, pp. 73–84.
- 9 TV evangelist Jimmy Swaggart has recently received a large amount of attention for his own campaign against rock music. Walmart, a large discount store chain in the southern and mid-western United States discontinued selling many rock magazines, as well as numerous rock albums, in direct response to a televised sermon of Swaggart's, who, ironically, learned to play piano on the same piano stool as his cousins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Mickey Gilley.
- 10 Richard Aquilla may have the essential facts correct about the outpouring of love for Lennon, but his analysis is hopelessly naïve, given to calling Lennon and the Beatles 'revitalisation figures' and making generalisations like:

For sixteen years the JFK wound was closed. But like the unstoppable [sic] killer in the movie *Halloween*, the assassin nightmare had returned. The pain a generation left behind in 1964 overtook them in 1980. They grieved not

just Lennon, but John Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and American society. (Aquilla 1985, p. 40)

- 11 Set up in 1985 by a group of Congressmen's wives, this pressure group's first success came when record companies agreed to the voluntary labelling of certain albums which might 'cause offence'.
- 12 PMRC member Pam Howar first recognised the explicitness of rock lyrics in an unusual setting: Howar recalls her own rock awakening. 'I started picking up a word here and a word there [of the rock songs played] during aerobics classes,' she says. 'I'd heard Prince over the radio. One day at the breakfast table my daughter was listening to the music, and I noticed this punk look about her. I started thinking, "We'd better get a peer group together."' (Wolmuth 1985, p. 49)

I will leave it to later studies to explore the possibility that anti-rock crusaders are attempting to reinforce their maturity by distancing themselves from a music they associate with their youth.

- 13 The quote is from Dr Carl Taylor's *Rock Concert: A Parent's Guide*; the reference is to WASP's admittedly disgusting stage act of miming the beating of a scantily clad female.
- 14 Another debate within the religious anti-rock movement centres on backmasking. Supposedly, certain rockers are promoting Satan by placing reverse-recorded subliminal messages in their songs. The backward strategy is allegedly based on arcane instructions from noted Satanist Aleister Crowley. Several states, as well as the US Senate have considered statutes against backmasking.

Like many other rock trends, this one is also traced to the Beatles, rooted in the 'Paul Is Dead' rumours – many of the clues were said to be hidden backwards. See Aranza 1985; Peters *et al.* 1985; and Walker 1982. The last is a sceptical account of the controversy which traces the often exaggerated credentials of the experts who testify about it and a phonetic analysis of the specific claims.

- 15 According to data gathered for the National Endowment for the Arts by John P. Robinson in 1982, the average age for people who liked rock was 30.1 years; for those who disliked rock, the average was 49.3 (Robinson 1982, table 7). I would hazard a guess that both those ages will rise steadily as growing up listening to rock becomes increasingly the norm.

References

- Agnew, S. 1972. 'Talking brainwashing blues', in *The Sounds of Social Change: Studies in Popular Culture*, ed. R. S. Denisoff and R. A. Peterson (Chicago), pp. 307–10
- Allen, T. 1982. *Rock'n'Roll, the Bible and the Mind* (Beaverlodge, Alberta)
- Aquilla, R. 1985. 'Why we cried: John Lennon and American culture', *Popular Music and Society*, 10(1), pp. 33–42
- Aranza, J. 1985. *More Rock, Country and Backward Masking Unmasked* (Shreveport)
- Berry, J. 1985. 'Inside Greater Washington' *WJLA News*, 6 September
- Bill, J. B. 1984. *Rock and Roll: Proceed with Caution* (Old Tappan)
- Blanchard, J. 1983. *Pop Goes the Gospel* (Hertfordshire)
- Buckley, J. L. 1973. 'The record industry and the drug epidemic', *Congressional Record – Senate*, pp. 37849–53
- Dylan, B. 1973. *Writings and Drawings* (New York)
- Edelman, M. 1985. *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana, Ill.)
- Flake, C. 1984. *Redemptoriana: Culture, Politics, and the New Evangelicalism* (New York)
- Friedman, R. 1968. *The Beatles: Words Without Music* (New York)
- Godwin, J. 1985. *The Devil's Disciples: The Truth About Rock* (Chino, CA)
- Gore, T. 1987. *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society* (Nashville)
- Gusfield, J. R. 1963. *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana, Ill.)
- Hargis, B. J. 1974. *Why I Fight for a Christian America* (Nashville)
- Hargis, B. J. 1965. 'Distortion by Design' – *The Story of America's Liberal Press* (Tulsa)
- Hart, L. and Kirban, S. 1981. *Satan's Music Exposed* (Huntingdon Valley, PA)
- Haynes, M. K. 1982. *The god [sic] of Rock: A Christian Perspective of Rock Music* (Lindale, TX)
- Herman, G. 1982. *Rock and Roll Babylon* (New York)
- Landis, J. 1981. *Rock'n'Roll & the Occult* (Harrisburg, PA)
- Larson, B. 1980. *Rock: Practical Help for Those Who Listen to the Words and Don't Like What They Hear* (Wheaton, Ill.)
- Larson, B. 1972. *Hippies, Hindus and Rock & Roll* (Carol Stream, Ill.)
- Larson, B. 1970. *Rock & Roll: The Devil's Diversion*, revised edition (McCook, NE); originally published in 1967
- Loder, K. 1986. 'The Rolling Stone Interview: Paul McCartney', *Rolling Stone*, 11 September, pp. 46–8, 100–3
- Morris, J. 1973. *The Preachers* (New York)
- Newsweek*. 1966. 'Blues for the Beatles', 22 August, p. 94
- Noebel, D. 1965A. *Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles* (Tulsa)
- 1965B. 'Letter to the editor', *Newsweek*, 8 March, p. 6.
1966. *Rhythm, Riots and Revolution* (Tulsa)
1969. *The Beatles: A Study in Drugs, Sex and Revolution* (Tulsa)
1974. *The Marxists Minstrels: A Handbook on Communist Subversion of Music* (Tulsa)
1980. *Rock'n'Roll: A Prerevolutionary Form of Cultural Subversion* (Manitou Springs, CO)
1981. 'The legacy of John Lennon'. Lecture before the John Birch Society Council Dinner, 14 March 1981 (Belmont, Mass.)
1982. *The Legacy of Lennon: Charming or Harming a Generation?* (Nashville)
- Parents' Music Resource Center. 1986. *Let's Talk Rock: A Primer for Parents* (Arlington, VA)
- Peters, D. and Peters, S. 1980. *Documentation Part I: 'What the Devil's Wrong with Rock Music?'* (Minneapolis)
1985. *Rock's Hidden Persuader: The Truth About Backmasking* (Minneapolis)
- Peck, R. 1985. *Rock: Making Musical Choices* (Greenville)
- Peters, D., Peters, S., with Merrill, C. 1984. *Why Knock Rock?* (Minneapolis)
- Robinson, J. P. 1982. 'Survey of public participation in the arts: preliminary data', unpublished
- Scheer, D. W. 1986. *PG: A Parental Guide to Rock* (Camp Hill, PA)
- 'Stock in Beatles songs is cheaper in London', *New York Times*, 11 August 1966, p. 35
- Swaggart, J. 1987. 'Rock'n'roll: music in the Church', *The Evangelist*, January
- Taqi, S. 1969. 'Approbation of drug usage in rock and roll music', *Bulletin on Narcotics*, 21(4) pp. 29–35
- Walker, M. W. 1982. 'Backward messages in commercially available recordings', *Popular Music and Society*, 10(1) pp. 2–13
- Westin, A. F. 1964. 'The John Birch Society: "radical right" and "extreme left" in the political context of post World War II', in *The Radical Right*, ed. D. Bell (Garden City, NY), pp. 239–68

Wiener, J. 1984. *Come Together: John Lennon in His Times* (New York)

Wilkerson, D. 1982. 'Confessions of a rock'n'roll hater.' *The Evangelist* (Lindale, TX)

Wolmuth, R. 1985. 'Parents vs rock', *People*, 16 September, pp. 46-55