
Teaching Rock and Roll History: Bridging the Gap Between Reaction and Reality¹

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“(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction,” in many respects, is the theme song to courses on the history of rock and roll. Most American university music departments see rock history classes as simply a money maker to help fund other “real” projects – especially as rock classes, often with enrollments of up to 400 students in one class, “sell out.” Frequently, the reaction from colleagues that one teaches the history of rock ranges from scorn to comments on how easy it must be to teach the class. Many students show up for the first day of class assuming it will be fourteen weeks of listening to records and an easy fluff course to boost the GPA. Rock history studies seems to be taken far more seriously in Great Britain, and I assert in this article that we who teach it, write about it, study it, in the United States need to think of a way to change its theme song to “Respect.”

When I mention to people that I teach a course in the history of rock and roll music, I generally receive one of two responses. The first is, “Oh, wow, that is so cool! I’d like to take it! That must be so much fun!” The second is, less a sentence, and more a *look* – “Oh, you’re teaching what now? How quaint; that sure mustn’t take much work” – or words to that effect.

Yes, it *is* fun. And, yes, it *is* a legitimate field of study.

So why is rock history assumed to be dead easy to teach? Why does it sometimes merit such scorn? The notion of one teaching a rock history class is so frequently met with either humor or disdain, that all too often when I’m asked, “And you teach what

now?” I mutter some reply about popular music and culture, or I say “Latin grammar.” (And you can imagine the looks I get when it is learnt, that, yes, I *do* teach both. My CV is the stuff of legend.)

Such reactions, and others, got me wondering. Thus I made an inquiry into this reaction – based both on my own experiences and the experiences of a number of international colleagues from the IASPM (International Association for the Study of Popular Music) listserv who so graciously took the time to answer questions for a survey which I composed.

I wanted to know: who is out there teaching rock music, what sorts of reaction do they get from students and adults, and how can those of us who research, study, publish, and lecture on rock music promote this subject as something to be taken seriously by both the general community – which sometimes contains skeptical academic colleagues – and the parents paying their children’s tuition!

The respondents to my survey came mainly from the United States and Great Britain. I was quite pleased with this, as the origins of this paper came from perceiving a difference in attitude between the two countries towards studying rock music and a desire to see how accurate this perception was. Other respondents came from places as diverse as New Zealand, Spain, Brazil, and Finland. The respondents were divided just about equally across gender lines; they ranged in age from young adjuncts to a number of older, usually male, respondents. Some have always taught the popular music courses at their schools or academies; a couple were classically trained musicians roped in to round out their programs’ curricula.

I began with nuts and bolts questions; for example, what is the number of students per section, and what sort of textbooks are used. No surprises here – no matter where a course on the history of pop music/ rock and roll is taught, it is usually one of the most popular classes on the curriculum. Term enrollment figures ranged from twenty-five (out of a total Spanish classical conservatory population of 200) to 400+ with waiting lists. Many times the course is offered as an elective, but several of the respondents teach at schools where it is a required course on the curriculum. At my own university, during a regular semester, I generally have about

80 students while my main campus colleagues have about 250. In short sessions, here, there can be up to four or five sections offered at a time; it has also just been introduced (by me) as one of the class-options in the study-abroad to London program we have.

I asked about texts; for complicated reasons rivaling an explanation of the new English Premiership off-sides rule, I will say briefly that while textbooks are standard in American curricula, in Great Britain their use is uncommon; the students may read a series of articles, but there is no one general text assigned. The same difference in curricula holds true for assignments and examinations, and is more reflective simply of the differences between the two university systems than any attitude towards Mick Jagger's presence on the syllabus. So I will focus here briefly on American textbooks.

In the course of writing this essay, and while teaching my own course, I have looked at a selection of about a dozen rock history textbooks – the range of approach in theme of these books would give one pause for consideration. A couple of them were simple outline books, much in the style of Barron's study guides, timelines through the genres and groups that make up rock-and-roll history from about 1955 onwards. Most assume that the average rock history student is not a music major, nor a "trained musician" for want of a better phrase, and has very little theory or explanation by way of musical terms (and have something in the introduction which assures students that they will not be asked to perform feats of musical analysis best reserved for jazz and classical classes).

There is some basic introduction to theory, however, at least the general form of song structure – understanding 12 bar blues construction is imperative, and a few of the books have an introductory chapter on rhythm and rhythmic styles. One of the books I favor for musical analysis is Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman's *American Popular Music*, as for each genre and milestone in pop music they have not only examples of key songs, but an accessible analysis both of musical structure and lyrical content.²

I do not mean to single out any one text; I draw on a number of texts for my own lectures, and I have used scores of books and

articles to create my lectures. What I would say, in sum, however, is how all together these myriad rock-and-roll history texts reveal that this is not an “easy” subject. Aside from the few books which are just the outlines as mentioned (here are the important groups from the Brill Building; here is a list of what characterizes Art Rock), many are very much cultural and social histories – this is the perspective from which I teach; most of my students come into class knowing the “oldies” from classic rock stations or Quentin Tarantino films, and it is usually quite a revelation for them to have the music (and attitudes) put into an historical context. For this reason I like Starr and Waterman, as well as *What’s That Sound*. The cultural and social context can be, too, what makes for a challenge in teaching a history of rock course – not just putting the songs into a context for the students born at a time when disco is a Halloween theme, not a dire threat to rock and roll, but also dealing with political and social issues of race, civil rights, and class consciousness objectively – especially in the cases of such issues where emotions still run strong, and about which sometimes political correctness practically gags us from speaking openly and candidly.

Another basic question asked of my querents concerned the sort of media used in the classroom. I myself feel as if I am staging a new West End musical twenty-four times in fourteen weeks, as I use PowerPoint slides, music, video, and online digital clips to illustrate my class – bearing in mind that my program borrows its classroom space from a community college which has not upgraded all of its classrooms to support multimedia, so I have to set up portable projectors, a CD player, and connect the entire thing together, then knock it down after every class. As for types of multimedia, the respondents’ answers were very much the same; media ranged simply from CDs to multimedia. Most agreed that it is simply impossible to teach such a course without any media support – certainly recordings are a given, but also images and film clips are necessary. I cannot just describe Little Richard with mere words; anyone who says he can is lying.

Media support itself brings up an entirely new issue – one of the topics I cover in class is copyright, and I go all the way back to case studies involving people such as Stephen Foster and then

the Berne Convention of 1888. Copyrights and licensing can make a rock history course a living hell, and this was an issue pointed out by several respondents as well – unlike classical history and music appreciation classes, a good number of the “important” songs needed to illustrate key points and trends in rock are simply not available on legal sources such as iTunes or ruckus.com; some texts come with CDs with odd collections of songs on them because licensing of the “good stuff” would drive the cost of the textbook through the roof. Fortunately, a number of textbook publishers now have, more and more, special online read-only access for students who use a particular book. But I and some of my correspondents noted that there can be difficulties accessing particular crucial pieces of music – we certainly cannot tell students to download from shady sites after weeks of discussing copyright and illegal file sharing! So access to resources is another challenge for teachers of popular music. I have solved some of my musical resource issues by using Ruckus, and I am one of the first teachers in the United States to use the site for academic purposes.

As for their department in which they and their classes are based – many of the teachers are also ethnomusicians and are in either music or anthropology departments. I also had instructors based in English departments, and several in sociology; two were librarians. I have taught my section as a music department class, and I have taught a version of it under the auspices of the history department.

The last of the basic questions was, “How long does your class last, and how long would you say you prepare for each lecture?” Most classes were standard stuff, between one and two hours. The replies about prep were interesting – more than one – many more than one, replied, with some amusement, that they had taken about twenty to thirty years to prepare – since they (it was almost exclusively the men who made the joke) had been living rock and roll their entire lives! The shortest amount of prep time was two hours per lecture; this answer was unique. Most respondents averaged around six to eight hours of preparation for the initial lectures; several noted it was not so much having enough to lecture on, but how on earth to manage the enormous amount of

information, and how to focus the lecture/ class (musical analysis, historical context, technological aspects) that took up the most time. And, of course, many added that even after the initial semester, they constantly updated and added to the course.

Where the answers and thoughts became more interesting was when I asked about attitude towards the respondent's course and curriculum: "What is the general reaction when you tell someone you teach the history of rock and roll? What expectations do the students seem to have when they sign up?"

Here was the biggest difference between American and British replies – and, for the most part, came some evidence to support my own initial perceptions. American students, for the most part, come into the class expecting something fun – fair enough, as one could have that expectation for any number of courses – and something easy. "The History of Rock and Roll" seems to scream "Take me! Easy A!" probably because the students seem to think the course will be fourteen weeks (in my case) of listening to current music, no brains required. Indeed, quite recently a *Sports Illustrated* article mocked one of its profiled college athletes for taking a history of rock class for being a "baby easy" class. My own students are usually quite surprised as I kick off with the invention of recorded sound, and walk into a classroom on the first day with a drawing of Thomas Young, captioned 1806, on the PowerPoint screen. (Young was the first to experiment with recorded sound.) Many students draw up short, say "Oops," and walk out, thinking they have stumbled into some class on zoology by mistake.

For the most part, the surprise seems to be that they are expected to write essays and a paper, among other things, and to take exams that are for grades and not for movie tickets as from a radio call-in gimmick. I have had students who were actually surprised to discover that there are real assignments, and yes, it is 20% off the final grade if one is not submitted. My American respondents made similar remarks: that initially students expect the class to be fluffy and fun, and are surprised about "real" tests and assignments. My colleagues and I have also heard students remark that they expected only trivia, not cultural context and analysis – and for the most part the students' response on discovering this, however, has been

extremely positive; they come to enjoy the class for a completely different reason. Suddenly, the boring oldies' station music and movie soundtrack shortcuts make sense. In my own case, I assign my students an interview – they must interview someone at least twenty years older than themselves, and ask questions I supply: the results galvanize my classroom. I deliberately have the paper due mere weeks into the term, and usually from that point the students are very lively and interested, because in interviewing their parents (the usual victim of choice) they discover a common bond, and suddenly have more of an interest in the topic than before.

I suspect that the expectation that it is a fluffy course comes simply from the title: "The History of Rock and Roll" does sound rather like something from *Bill and Ted's University*. And, of course, the expectation comes from rock and roll's own self-image of the party animal, the wild man, or the giddy pop star. And how much of *that* image is actually manufactured by the music business, slyly having created an image reaching back nearly 130 years, when the only people available – or willing – to record for the new music industry were the "pop idols" of their day; the "real" musicians and opera singers, the classical musicians, would not touch the phonograph and gramophone for being too shoddy or vulgar in those days. So, from the earliest days, pop music and rock and roll have had a stigma, for want of a better word, of being popular, common, and trivial.

And this brings me to the reaction of colleagues when they learn I teach "The History of Rock and Roll." Sometimes, especially in the United States, such courses are looked down upon as strictly money makers for the school or department, not as a serious field of study. A number of the respondents who have experienced this stated independently that they wonder if the course might not have a better image if it were called "Popular Music History"; several respondents remarked that they were met with a more positive or thoughtful reaction than when they called the course "The History of Rock."

A number of the respondents remarked that colleagues sometimes laugh about the course; it is assumed there is no work involved. If the course is not taken seriously, we are not taken

seriously. One respondent told me that he was once dismissed by a colleague (not in the same department) for not being a “real professor” because he teaches “that crap music class, whatever it is.” With luck this is an extreme example, and must be balanced out by those respondents who remarked that, fortunately, they are gaining more positive responses and support at their schools, *especially* once they explain to their colleagues the course content, the actual amount of work, and its usually multi-discipline and thought-provoking content.

On the other hand, British colleagues and the British response are almost entirely positive and very serious. Of course, there is some tongue-in-cheek joshing, but one can find that in any field! Several of my British respondents were actually puzzled by the nature of my survey, and one took me to task for asking such strange questions. I think he quite honestly believed I was being a facetious nutter, because the history of popular music has been on the British curriculum since the 1980s and is treated as seriously as any other academic subject and musical genre. Not only is it quite accepted as a genre, but students also attend particular schools and conservatories explicitly to focus on rock music and to earn a degree on the subject. Most of the books I have purchased – not textbooks, but specialized studies on rock music – have come from the UK; the rock music section at Foyles in London, for example, is rich in this regard. And much of that is because one of the clerks in the music section graduated with a degree in rock music studies from Liverpool.

The *only* instances of any sort of negative response to rock music in the UK (and elsewhere in the English-speaking world outside of the US, New Zealand in this case) were from female respondents, which I find very interesting – whereas I had been expecting different responses across the ocean, I had not considered a gender divide. But from having played guitar for over twenty-five years, from my experiences as the lone female in a guitar shop, and from often being the lone female pawing through used vinyl in rarities shops, I realized I ought to have expected this result!

Whereas most of the male respondents in both the US and UK had positive responses on how they are treated by their

colleagues, the female ones were almost always met with a bit of cheek and with less seriousness about their integrity as academics. I found this extremely interesting – most of the male respondents, in the case of the question, “How long do you prepare for your lectures?” almost always had a cheeky response, “All my life!” because rock music is a boys’ thing. Or so we are told. Girls just swoon over the pretty boy idols, and get dragged off by the cavemen rockers; rock and roll is a man’s world. Nevertheless, a number of my female colleagues have worked just as long to prepare, noting that the creation of original lectures frequently took many hours.

The general gender bias has some basis in the overall perception of the image of women in rock music; I recently reviewed Sheila Whiteley’s book *Too Much Too Young*, a study of how record companies manufacture image, and the stereotypical good-girl image, and good boy/ bad boy image of rock musicians. Through a series of illustrative case studies, Whiteley examines the relationship of age, gender, and the image projected by – or created for – young music stars. She covers many aspects of exploitation, depending on the sex of the performer and whether the image is one of the “little girl,” the “bad boy,” or the “nice boy,” and demonstrates in a general survey that the marketing of young performers relies on an overall loss of identity of the individual to the expectation of that image. It is a fascinating study on image and expectation – how the business has taught us to perceive the sexes through the lens of rock and roll.

But I think from my own experience and from reading these surveys, that image has extended to rock’s target audience as well. Has rock music shaped us? Or has the industry shaped our perception of ourselves – judging the academic on his subject, at the same time the subject itself is being judged. Perhaps we cannot be separated from the product. Think about image and perception. How many of us, as youths, chose friends on the basis of what he or she listened to? You could have divided my school in cliques along rock groups. And how many of you surreptitiously check out your host’s record or CD collections even now, either thinking enviously, “Gosh! Neat stuff,” or, conversely, congratulating yourself for having far superior tastes.

It is in this section where Whiteley's arguments about the power and lasting ability of image rang truest for me: simply seeing David Cassidy's name, at once I smiled remembering my *Partridge Family* lunchbox (and made a mental note to reclaim it from my parent's attic) and felt the same warm fuzzies instilled in me 35 years ago by Screen Gems and ABC television. While David Cassidy has gone on to a fairly respectful adult career, he's forever Keith Partridge to a portion of the population.

So does that mean, in the States – or for women anywhere – that image and expectation have a long reach? Despite the number of female stars, the rock music industry seems to be a male domain – female performers are either the little girls Whiteley describes, or oversexed fantasy figures. When she became Chair of Popular Music at the University of Salford, Whiteley notes that the press seemed more interested that she was a woman advancing in the study of rock and pop music, and less in her publications and lectures.

What I think is happening here, interestingly enough, is that in general rock history teachers are being met with the same reaction that rock music has – it's not "serious art" as dismissed by the adult "Turn that noise down!" contingent; and it's a money-maker, as the image projected by the (again, adult) businessmen somewhat cynically in charge of the product. We have become completely associated with the popular perception of our field of study.

My original impetus in giving this survey was to find an answer to this next question, how to change this image? But as I worked out the results and wrote up the paper, however, that question gradually changed to, *should* we change this image?

I followed up with, how ought a history of rock class be promoted so that there is a more constructively positive image – or at least a "neutral" one. In the UK, image does not seem to be an issue; again, rock and roll and popular music have been accepted on the curricula in many schools for over twenty years now. This comes as no surprise – jazz was acceptable in Europe and the UK as "proper" music among academics more quickly than it was in the United States, so it would follow that rock music both as a musicological subject and a sociological/ cultural phenomenon

would be an acceptable course of study.

From my American respondents, a common response was that perhaps American universities ought to rethink the actual title of the class. Yes, “The History of Rock and Roll” and “Rock History” gets the enrollment figures up. But it brings along with it the baggage as described above – and while rock history as a suitable research topic is gaining respect in the States among academics, the general population still seems to regard it as a silly filler class. Several of my colleagues and I independently have wondered if “The History of Popular Music” might not lend a better image to the genre. At the very least, it opens the subject up to a far wider range of topics within the lectures. Rock-and-roll music itself survived beyond 1959 because of its versatility – and really, what is rock? Over the course of the semester, I cover a wide variety of rock-and-roll genres, but I also look at related music which lent an influence to what became American rock – without watering down the topic too much or relegating “rock and roll” to three lectures at the end of a three-month term; “popular” music sounds as if it not only encompasses more, but also describes more accurately what rock and roll/ rock is: popular music, music of the people.

In this respect, for me, at least, now the course would have the versatility to fit into music, history, sociology, English, or whatever department. Call it popular music and suddenly we have a sociological context, rather than a load of noise that will get complaints from the administration offices that back up to my classroom to TURN THAT RUBBISH DOWN!! (All too common from my experience!) And, come on now, the Beatles really were more “pop” than “rock”? Changing the title might be one way to change the perception of these classes. But would something then be lost? It’s really very difficult.

One last observation from my experience and the responses I received to my survey has led me to discover the one thing that will be invaluable: as Mick Jagger put it, “Time is on my side.” Perhaps as the generation that “created” rock and roll pass on, and “the time when rock was not” passes out of living memory, rock music, and the history of rock-and-roll music will become that much more acceptable as an art form, as part of the cultural

landscape, and will become both a historical subject as well as a subject for musical analysis without the baggage. Certainly any current popular music course will always be met with a bit of “I’m spending my tuitions dollars on what now?” In that respect, life goes on as normal – Gilbert and Sullivan were irked that their “pop pieces” on wax cylinder were craved by the public more than their serious music, for example. Every day rock-and-roll history becomes just that much more a part of history and a part of understanding American/ British sociology. In fact, I believe actually that it’s really rap music that’s currently getting the brunt of the older generations “ugh” factor – how many people of the original rock-and-roll generation, now parents and grandparents, hope desperately that the noise and vulgarity of rap goes away, much as their own parents and grandparents did – and rap has been around for twenty-five years now.

By way of thoughtful conclusion, then, right now, especially in the US, there is a percentage of the general population, which regards rock and roll and its history as profitable but fluffy, and not at all a serious pursuit for an academic. The most positive responses came from abroad; the strongest positive response in the States came from a respondent whose school is primarily business-oriented and whose students plan to enter the music industry straight from graduation. Otherwise, unfortunately, the mainstream image of history of rock class is that it is just a time-filler and an easy A. But if we change its image, are we not losing sight of rock and roll as rebellious, free, and shocking the norms? It becomes an interesting question. Rock-and-roll music has a particular image, and we are inextricably linked to that image. As I worked on this problem, how to improve the image of rock-and-roll classes, I really did come to see this connection between how rock music itself was and is perceived, and how we teachers of it are perceived. Obviously it is not in our best interests to adopt the rock-and-roll lifestyle – although a colleague once told me that it’s but a lateral move from rock and roll to academics – but do we really want to neuter the class to satisfy the grownups?

Admittedly, for all of the difficulties in image, one thing did hold true with almost everyone who was kind enough to respond

– almost all felt completely at home with the subject and would not trade the class for the world. One respondent mentioned a colleague, a trained classical musician and teacher of a traditional music appreciation class, who told the respondent that she would run screaming into the street if she were asked to teach rock and roll; another respondent remarked that one of his colleagues thought he was somehow being punished with some sort of booby prize when he was assigned to teach the rock class. But not a single one of my respondents said he or she wanted to stop teaching the class. Perhaps inside, and I admit feeling this way, we like the fact that it is us against the Man: rock-and-roll rebels, inside our ivory towers.

I will conclude with this anecdote: I used to have three CVs – my work on popular music (in my case, the British Invasion, and, specifically, the Kinks); my history, Latin, and museum studies work; and a combined CV that was a sort of “master” list. Usually, I kept the three safely separated. The day I sent a book proposal to a very austere, highly regarded publisher of medieval Latin translations, I goofed up, and sent the master copy. My proposal made it through the first acceptance round; the second was a telephone interview. The editor, a well-know professor in medieval philosophy, is a very no-nonsense Austrian. I was thoroughly grilled, but felt I was managing to hold up pretty well under his questions about my academic background and my proposal. Then, as things were winding down, I was thinking, “Yay! I think I’ve scored with my first book proposal!”

He paused, and said, “Now...your CV. It has some... interesting things on it.” Indeed – mixed in with my “real research” are reviews of Kinks’ concerts, a short biography of Dave Davies, and work editing liner notes on reissues of Swiss punk bands with names like “The Bastards.” Oh dear.

“These rock music things, this pop stuff you include. What is this all about?” And, yet again, I found myself stammering a bit, defending that popular music is a legitimate scholarly field.

“Hmm, yes, yes, I see. Well, I do not generally mention this to my colleagues,” and here his voice dropped to a tiny whisper, “but I am liking the hiphop myself.”

If rock-and-roll music can break through the barriers of economic differences, class barriers, regional differences, and the myriad colors of human skin, eventually it will sort itself out among the academics, too.

I have not segregated my research on my CVs since.

Notes

¹This paper began life as a talk given for the Boston meeting of the PCA/ ACA on 5 April 2007. I would like to thank Thomas Kitts for giving me the opportunity to present this paper, and for his help and encouragement with the project. I would also like to acknowledge those members of the IASPM who helped by contributing their time to answering my survey, including Hector Fouce, CSMA, Zaragoza, Spain; Susan Hill, University of Southampton; Antti-Ville Kärjä, Musiikkiteide, Finland; Andy Lineham, Popular Music Curator, The British Library; Allan Moore, University of Surrey; Nick Rubin, McIntire Dept of Music, University of Virginia; Simon Warner, Senior Teaching Fellow, School of Music, University of Leeds; Elizabeth Wollman, Fine and Performing Arts, CUNY; Kirsten Zemke-White, Ethnomusicology, Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland, NZ, and many others. Additional thanks goes to Ms. Ellen Newman (State College, PA) and Mr. Darren Holdstock (Fareham, United Kingdom).

²A selection of the texts used by the respondents includes John Covach, *What's That Sound: An Introduction to Rock and Its History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006); Thomas Larson, *History of Rock and Roll* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 2004); Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3* (London: Oxford UP, 2007); Joe Stuessy and Scott Lipscomb, *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River [NJ]: Prentice Hall, 2006); David P. Szatmary, *Rockin' in Time: A Social History of Rock and Roll*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River [NJ]: Pearson, 2007).