

Rock lives!



Peter Frampton. Homogenized rock for a mainstream audience.

By John Rockwell

The other evening I was sitting in Max's Kansas City—the upstairs, rock-club part of that two-story establishment on Park Avenue South. Like everything else about rock, Max's has changed—and not just its ownership. A few years ago, the bar and restaurant downstairs was the center for hip scene-making in New York, a Warholian Elaine's. Now Andy goes to Elaine's and Max's downstairs is nowhere.

But again like rock, Max's survives, and upstairs, with their new décor, and committed to the cause of underground rock, they play records between sets. On a good night, the on-the-scene disk jockey

is Wayne County, an underground rocker himself, who until recently did his act in Mae West drag. As a disk jockey, Wayne knows few peers, and as I sat there, listening to song after song, each more full of vitality than the last, I was impressed once again by what a wonderfully alive and energetic art form rock is.

Its importance is another matter. If you look a little more closely, there are signs of age and decline. A lot of people of my generation—people whose tastes were formed in the 1960's on such pop-music giants as the Beatles, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix—used to base their record collections on rock; now it's jazz or classical or nothing.

Unregenerate jazz and Tin Pan Alley buffs and publications always suspicious of youth-oriented popular cul-

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ture seize upon such disaffection to "prove" the ephemerality of the phenomenon. After 1971, writes Mark Crispin Miller in a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books*, "more and more records came out, and concerts went on, much amplified, but rock had lost the keen joy of something fresh and illicit. Its body went on dancing but it had lost its soul."

More disturbing than such assaults from opaque outsiders are the signs of doubt within the ranks. Critics attack one another in print, questioning their colleagues' adherence to the cause—as did Dave Marsh of *Rolling Stone* when he blasted Robert

*So you're a little bit older and
a lot less holder
Than you used to be.
So you used to shake 'em
down
But now you stop and think
about your dignity.
So now sweet 16's turned 31,
You get to feelin' weary when
the work day's done.
Well, all you got to do is get
up and into your kicks
If you're in a fix.
Come back, baby,
Rock and roll never forgets.**

Without wishing to be a smile-button Pollyanna, I can't say I sympathize with those who claim that rock has lost its spontaneity or rele-



Joni Mitchell. "Most original of the ex-folkie songwriters."

Christgau of *The Village Voice* recently for being "arrogant and humorless, [lacking] compassion, not to mention empathy, with current rock." Even performers have defensively taken to writing songs about rock's perseverance, songs that are full of nostalgia and defiance. David Essex's detached, eerie "Rock On" a couple of years ago was one of the first, but there are many examples. The first song on Bob Seger's warmly received "Night Moves" album of last year is called "Rock and Roll Never Forgets," and begins like this:

vance. Pessimists tell us more about themselves than about the state of the art. It's next to impossible to convince doubters of rock's present-day riches using words alone. All one can do is point the way.

The 1975 Rolling Stones concerts seem a good place to start, if only because they attracted a number of people who had liked the Stones in the 60's but had drifted away. The youth of the crowds and the noise and the huge size of Madison Square Garden

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were disconcerting to a lot of these people. And the Stones seemed distant, mechanical and fatally safe.

Yet if you stopped worrying about your memories—real or imagined—and just listened, there were powerful things to hear. Mick Jagger may not have the most dulcet baritone around—he never did—but he phrases and prances with a cocky authority that remains both unmistakable and compelling. Even more impressive is the guitar sound of this most primal of all rock-and-roll bands. With his rhythmic exactitude, Keith Richard of the wasted appearance has always defined the Stones' sound. Now that Ron Wood has joined the band as second

the Who can turn an arena into a Dionysian celebration; Peter Townshend of that band has a knack for introducing fresh twists into rock traditions without betraying those traditions. And Bob Dylan seems to have moved into a fertile second period, too. His lyrics may not be as striking as they were in the 60's, but the music on his last studio album, "Desire," was, in its hoarse and haunting way, better than anything he's done for nearly a decade.

But what really makes 1970's rock and pop so appealing is its breadth and variety—although those very attributes make any survey like this one maddeningly selective. In the 60's—or at



Survivors. Stevie Wonder, left, and Mick Jagger.

guitarist, the Stones have a technical and temperamental parity at that key position unmatched since Brian Jones was still healthy and alive. In songs like "Tumbling Dice" (a 70's song as fine as any Jagger and Richard have composed) or the perennial "Jumping Jack Flash," the slamming precision of Richard's and Wood's guitar attacks was in itself enough to convince me that rock lives.

There are other honored 60's veterans who have survived the trauma of turning 30 and who have gone on to make superb music. On a good night,

least so it seems in retrospect—a hit would immediately sweep all else aside, as everybody scrambled to emulate what was currently popular. After the Beatles arrived in 1964, that meant a million mop-topped quartets and a full five years of loud, insistent rock. Now no one kind of music commands that kind of exclusivity. People generally like loud music and soft music, weepy ballads and lively dance tunes, urban energy and rural nostalgia, tortured personal statements and bland, bouncy pop, and there are 70's variants of all of

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these. Just to enumerate some of my own favorites:

In black music, which in some basic yet subtle sense still underlies most of what America and Britain have produced in pop music, there is Stevie Wonder. Wonder has come a long way from the piping, prepubescent excitement of his "Fingertips, Part 2" 1963 single. Today he is a mature artist with about the most influential, inventive musical imagination in all of popular music. His use of the synthesizer alone has elevated that formerly gimmicky piece of hardware into almost as central a spot as the guitar, and his confidence in creating heretofore unheard-of sounds in the studio makes almost every one of his songs sound fresh.

In softer rock, there is the new Fleetwood Mac, a 10-year-old, originally British blues band which recently added two Americans—a bewitching woman singer and songwriter named Stevie Nicks, and a lanky male singer, composer and guitarist named Lindsey Buckingham—and as a result had one of the monster-selling albums of 1976. Fleetwood Mac captures that great secret of rock (as opposed to so much pre-rock "adult" pop)—they know how to be accessible and ingratiating and, at the same time, speak directly and uncloyingly to the emotions.

Everybody considered so far falls within the mainstream. But there are extreme wings to the pop-rock music field, too. David Bowie and Brian Eno, for instance, produce a strange, hypnotic sound not far removed from what certain "serious" avant-garde composers like György Ligeti, Karlheinz Stockhausen or Philip Glass are turning out. At the other extreme are a whole raft of musicians who are reverting quite deliberately to a more primitive kind of rhythm and blues. Graham Parker from London, for instance, makes a horse-voiced driving music not far removed from the early Rolling Stones. Yet he retains a 70's sensibility through the sophistication of his poetic ideas and the relative complexity of his musical forms.

The 60's were full of fine singers, but the 70's may have even finer ones. After years of erratic solo albums and even more erratic group efforts with the Faces, Rod Stewart seems to have finally emerged triumphantly on his own. Stewart has one of the most compelling voices in all of rock—high, raspy and

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vulnerable—and he reminds one once again of the validity of Henry Pleasants' thesis that the microphone, having freed singers from the necessity to sacrifice all subtlety in the pursuit of volume, has triggered a rebirth of bel canto vocalism.

Linda Ronstadt is another kind of great pop vocalist, one whose techni-

cal qualities are closer to the classical ideal normally associated with opera. Ronstadt has had trouble finding a focus—she does nearly everything well—but in the past three years she has put out four albums that cap her status as the leading woman pop singer of the day. Not that she is alone: The 70's are a decade in which women have emerged with ever-

greater confidence into the creative center of the music. Dolly Parton, for example, who as both singer and composer is probably the leading light of present-day country. Or Joni Mitchell, arguably the most personal and original of all the ex-folkie singer-songwriters. Or a lesser-known act, the McGarrigle Sisters, Kate and Anna, who seem about to confirm

their status as the 70's most affecting folk musicians.

And the above assortment doesn't even take into account heavy-metal rock or teeny-bopper rock or conventional progressive rock or punk rock or country rock or middle-of-the-road schlock-rock or cabaret stylists or disco or reggae or any of the rest. The dizzying range of present-day styles and sounds might make one wonder why people are worrying in the first place.

Rock clearly isn't in trouble in an overt, tangible sense. The Recording Industry Association of America puts American record and tape sales for 1975 (the most recent year for which figures are available) at \$2.36 billion, which represents a steady escalation from the mid-50's (when the figure was \$277 million). Of course, those numbers need a little explanation: They refer to retail prices when records are routinely discounted, and they reflect price rises as well as increased unit sales. Still, although the figures for the actual number of records sold are even vaguer than the dollar totals, there seems to be a consensus among record-industry spokesmen that the number of LP's, singles and tapes sold, has increased steadily over the years, too, if at not quite so dramatic a rate as the dollar gross. The R.I.A.A. keeps album unit sales figures only back to 1974, but even over the one-year span from 1974 to 1975 album sales in this country increased from 276 million to 282 million. And record sales are only part of a story that also includes concerts, television shows and increased coverage in the specialist and general press.

Not that the future is necessarily roseate. Americans are getting older, and after 25 they don't seem to buy as many records as they do when they're younger. Though the record industry has been able to grow steadily without worrying unduly about how to attract the adult buyer, one of these years the moguls are going to have to sit down and retool their promotional effort. But given the stakes and the fact that a good deal of present-day popular music is a lot more mature than teen-pop used to be, one doesn't feel too concerned.

The problem with rock today doesn't so much reflect tangible business factors as intangible tremors of creative self-doubt. In its early years rock was a music by young people and for young people. It was a rude, brutally simple, powerhouse sound, untroubled by reflection.

Now rock is well over 21, and aging means self-consciousness. When you start thinking about what you're doing in an introverted, historically aware way, you produce a different kind of music from what the early Elvis produced. There has been a spate of songs about what a geriatric rocker's to do (the Beatles' typically light-hearted "When I'm 64" was only a premonition). Critics who have achieved journalistic prominence through their rock writing begin to wonder nervously if their tastes still correspond to the music.

The best solution for them is simply to relax. Rockers and critics in their 30's worry unduly about their own relevance. Naturally an older person won't have the same simple, even simplistic, tastes as a teen-ager, but so what? Teen-agers can take care of themselves, with their own bands and fanzines. The population is growing steadily older, anyhow—as the rockers age, so do their audiences, right along with them. Nor should critics worry about failing to “appreciate” the well-meaning but bland likes of a Peter Frampton. Aside from his sexy cuteness, Frampton attained his sales success in 1976 (his two-disk live album threatens to supplant Carole King's “Tapestry,” which, as the biggest selling album of all time, has sold nearly 14 million copies worldwide) by simplifying and homogenizing rock's familiar gestures for a mainstream audience. He is bland in large part because of rock's very success.

In the 60's, even with mass festivals like Woodstock, rock was still a countercultural secret, and could be prized as such by 60's radicals who clothed their inverted snob-bishness in populist rhetoric. Now rock really is a mass phenomenon; jocks look like hippies today. The result is the inevitable broadening of rock's vocabulary to reach an audience that might previously have resisted the harshness of the Rolling Stones.

But rock hasn't just spread down to a wider and wider stratum of society, it has also spread up to include older people, too. Within the whole body of “rock” there is music of extraordinary sophistication and originality today, and just because you can't take Kiss doesn't mean you have to shut your ears to Patti Smith or Peter Allen. Eclecticism and stylistic diversity have been key words to describe all the arts in the 70's, and they apply to rock as well.

What is most difficult for old 60's radicals to accept is that the revolution didn't work, at least not totally and immediately. Just as society itself wasn't transformed in the 70's, so, too, the music has veered away from its role as anthem of the revolution and become entertainment instead. For some politicians, the kind who listened to the Beatles more as harbingers of the new age than for their

songs, that loss of extramusical aura has crippled their interest in popular music altogether. They see the “music business” full of sleazy souls interposing themselves between the artists and “the people.” They hear the AM top 40 (or top 15, more likely) recycling the same bouncy pap hour after hour. And they proceed to dismiss all of pop music, refusing to recognize that some mechanism has to distribute the music to the masses if there's to be a mass music at all, and that FM radio, the specialist journals and the record stores provide viable alternatives to AM programming.

It seems to me that people disaffected from popular music today should do two things. First, open their ears to the best of what is being produced. Simply listen without bias. Of course there is a lot of silly garbage around; there always was. Of course the popular can't be equated with the good; it never could. But there's still something gratifying about music that is both popular and worthy, and that was why it was so satisfying when Stevie Wonder's “Songs in the Key of Life” album achieved No. 1 status at the same time that Rod Stewart had the No. 1 single with “Tonight's the Night.”

The second thing to do is to recognize that 70's rock is part of a process. Ever since 1954, popular music has been solidifying its claims on our serious attention. As classical avant-garde music becomes ever more marginal, pop artists are increasingly recognized as the principal musical spokesmen of the day. That's hardly to say that there won't be a place for sober, noncommercial experimentation, but such work can proceed just as seriously in the popular field (blues archivists, avant-garde jazz) as in the classical.

In the end, the lines between what is popular and what is classical are going to blur completely—as they already have to a large extent in the visual arts. There will always be a recognizable range between good and bad, lasting and trivial. But the best won't necessarily be the most obscure or the most complex or the most indebted to European or academic models. The greatest and the truest American arts have characteristically been those most closely rooted in the American people. In music today, that means rock. ■