

A Case Study in Cultural Decline: Rock Music

by Bradford Tuckfield (May 2015)



Many people, especially cultural conservatives, are concerned about what they perceive as the decline of Western or American culture. However, since it is very hard to define or measure either “culture” or “decline,” discussions on the topic are always difficult and are frequently non-starters. In order to avoid an abstract discussion of ill-defined topics, I suggest that it is worthwhile to do a case study of one particular instance of cultural decline. I am inspired in this undertaking by Edmund Burke, who avoided discussions of the abstract notion of liberty, saying “abstract liberty, like other mere abstractions, is not to be found. Liberty inheres in some sensible object.” I echo him and say that abstract decline is not to be found except when it inheres in some sensible object.

I propose a case study of the decline of rock music – an investigation into whether it has declined and what can be done about it. This may seem like a surprising or strange topic. When conservatives bemoan the decline of culture, they usually mean the decline of high culture: classical music, fine art, and the most sophisticated of the literary arts. Many devotees of these “higher” arts probably consider rock music and pop culture contemptible. To them I say that we should take pop culture seriously because in many ways it is the only culture we have (an idea I have heard expressed by Emily Esfahani Smith and others). Millions of dollars of record sales indicate that rock is an important cultural force to examine, lowbrow though it may be. Though I am an aspiring curmudgeon and I think that rock music is inferior to classical music, I think that there is some good in it. I also think that most of the world’s great rock music was made decades ago, and that rock music (and popular music more generally) has gone only downhill since then. If we can understand whether, why and how rock music has faded from its former glory, then maybe we can do something about the other instances of cultural decline that surround us.

I do not pretend that this case study is scientifically rigorous. Rather, it is an informal collection of thoughts and observations about the decline of rock, put together with the hope that they will shed light on the phenomenon of Western cultural decline more generally.

I will examine the following questions: first, whether rock music has really declined; second,

whether this is necessarily undesirable; third, whether this decline can or should be stopped; and fourth, what the right steps are for the future. In order to augment my amateurish understanding of the topic, I have interviewed two experts who gave me valuable insights into many of these topics.

The interviewees. The experts I interviewed are both accomplished musicians and professors whose research deals with the nature and history of rock music and its place in American culture.

Steve Waksman (henceforth SW) is a well-known scholar of rock music. From his faculty bio at Smith College:

Steve Waksman has turned a lifelong involvement with music as a player and listener into a career as a scholar of rock and pop. Professor of music and American studies at Smith College, he joined the Smith faculty in 2001 after receiving his doctorate in American studies at the University of Minnesota. His research and teaching interests range widely across the subjects of U.S. popular music and popular culture, with particular specialty in the study of live music, music genres, music technology and musical instruments (especially the guitar).

John Covach (henceforth JC) is both a successful popular guitarist and distinguished professor of music. From his faculty bio at the prestigious Eastman School of Music:

John Covach received his B.Mus., M.Mus. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Michigan. He was a Fulbright scholar in Vienna, Austria during 1987-88, and has done post-doctoral work in philosophy under Charles Bambach at the University of Texas-Dallas. Professor Covach has taught at the Interlochen Arts Academy, The University of North Texas College of Music, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His students have won a wide variety of awards, and hold faculty positions at CUNY, the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, the University of Surrey, the University of Utah, among others.

As a guitarist, Professor Covach has performed throughout the United States and Europe. He remains active as a member of the progressive-rock band, Land of Chocolate, as well as with various other projects.

Has rock music declined?

It may reasonably be asked what I could mean by the decline of rock music. It is relatively

easy to judge whether (for example) an economy or an animal population is in decline, because they can be measured one-dimensionally: via GDP and population size, respectively. Judging whether a culture or an art form is in decline, by contrast, is necessarily fraught with difficulty, first because they vary on so many dimensions, and second because some of these dimensions cannot ever be perfectly measured. When I say that rock music has declined, I do not merely mean that sales or market share have gone down. I mean it as an aesthetic judgment of the quality of what is currently being produced.



The contrast between commercial success and artistic poverty in rock music is striking. Concert venues are full, tabloid magazines feature rock stars prominently on their covers, teenagers are making noise in their garages, and record labels still rake in profits despite the challenges represented by digital piracy. In purely quantitative terms, rock music thrives about as much as it ever did. However, I believe that there is a qualitative decline in rock music, a decline in the brilliance of the art form and the richness of its current productions. In its better days, rock music was something remarkable. Even people who don't like it will admit that the greatest of "classic rock" played by Led Zeppelin, The Who, and their ilk has a raw power to it, a visceral element that strikes somewhere deep in the heart. I'm referring to songs like "Kashmir," which memorably conjures the dusty, stark landscapes of the Silk Road, or "Bohemian Rhapsody," an imaginative tour de force on par with Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" or Mozart's "Fantasia No. 3 in D Minor." Even the best popular music produced today falls far short of the glory of these creations – it is cheap music created to earn a quick dollar and it is forgotten as soon as it is heard.

Interviewee JC told me "I do think there's a very marked decline" in rock music. SW at least partially agreed: "rock just isn't the defining thing in it the way that it was several years ago." Other evidence exists too: one supporting anecdote comes from a list recently compiled by Rolling Stone of the greatest guitarists of all time. Of the top five guitarists on the list, three have been dead for decades and the other two (B.B. King and Eric Clapton) were born in 1925 and 1945, respectively – they are representatives the music of several generations ago. Going further up the list, No. 6 was born in 1926 and No. 7 has been dead for decades. The deceased and the geriatric dominate the list as one continues upward. That the great rock guitarists are nearly all deceased or very old is one strong indication that the art form is long past its prime.

Interviews and anecdotes can never fully settle the question of whether rock music has declined. My assertion that rock music has declined is holistic and qualitative, based on my

observation and judgment. Reasonable people may disagree, and I welcome their perspectives. Because judgment is difficult and perceptions are sometimes faulty, I will present a few possible counterarguments to my assertion of decline, and consider whether they invalidate my thesis.

Nostalgic misperception of decline. The first question that SW asked me after I told him about my thesis was how old I am (I'm in my twenties). He told me that he had developed his love of rock music when he was growing up in the 70's and 80's. It is easy to imagine that for rock music, as for anything else, the things that we are exposed to in our formative years seem natural, while anything else seems to be unnatural, wrong, or evidence for cultural decline. People use this idea to explain why conservatism is correlated with age, saying that the bemoaning decline is merely the way that judgmental older people use to complain about new developments in the world while feeling smugly superior. So it could be that rock music is just as good as ever, but it has experienced small neutral or even positive innovations which have led the old and the nostalgic to mistakenly condemn it as a declining art form.

Superficial changes in terminology. Another way to explain away cultural decline is to say that perception of it is merely a result of superficial changes in terminology. It could be that rock music has declined only because people don't use the word "rock" anymore to discuss what is nevertheless rock music. SW thought that this could be occurring. He told me that when he talks to young people and students, "when they talk about the music they're into a lot of it is music I think of as rock but they don't think of it as rock. Metal is an example. A lot of people don't think metal is rock, but in my mind that's patently absurd." So it could be that the music categorized as rock is worse than it used to be not because the music has gotten worse, but because the term itself now refers to a smaller or different set of things. This would be linguistic change masquerading as artistic decline.

Decline and change. Another possibility is that what looks like decline is merely change. This would be the conservative reflection of the common liberal error that change always represents progress. It seems obvious that tastes have changed, and SW agreed: "I think tastes also have changed." If our collective tastes have changed, then even if rock music has stayed the same, and is just as good as ever, we might still think it has declined because of our changed preferences. Conversely, if our tastes are the same, but rock has changed, we could mistake neutral change for qualitative decline.

These counterarguments are reasonable and may be valid explanations for other perceived instances of cultural decline. However, I do not think they are sufficient to explain what I see as the decline of rock. Even a young person with a broad conception of what rock

encompasses and a positive attitude towards change, I think, would agree that rock has declined. Once again, I fall back on my holistic and qualitative judgment, and I judge that rock music is not as good as it used to be.

Is the decline of rock music necessarily a bad thing?

At first glance, this question seems easy: decline means that things are getting worse, and tautologically it is bad if things get worse. However, there are a few reasons why it may be acceptable or even good that rock music has declined over the years.

Decline amidst expansion and growth. If rock has declined, but the rest of the music ecosystem has sprung up and thrived around it, would this be a bad thing? Economists talk about “creative destruction,” in which the death of a firm frees up capital and laborers to work for more productive enterprises, and the economy as a whole benefits. If rock dies but its death allows other fruitful genres to emerge and capture the public imagination, then we need not mourn the decline of rock too much. There is some evidence that this is what is happening with rock music. SW said: “I think there’s a lot of interesting rock music being made but I don’t think it captures people’s attention the way it used to because rock is just one thing among many that’s going on right now.” JC echoed this sentiment: “the world of music has fragmented into so many different pieces then with the rise of the internet, it’s just so possible to hear music. There’s more music available to people now than there ever has been in the history of humankind of which we’re aware.” Rock may have suffered, but there has been a simultaneous boom in other genres, and attention previously paid to rock can now be paid to music that is new, different, and maybe better. Our mourning for one decline can be tempered by our enthusiasm for many other ascents.

Making way for an anointed successor. Just like monarchs die and are succeeded by new generations without undue harm to the kingdom, so might rock’s decline simply be part of a natural order, including an anointed successor to come after, and keep popular music strong and thriving. SW described a few possible successors to rock in the popular imagination: “dance music, hip hop, R&B, even country on some level have become more central or at least just as central to mainstream taste as rock.” He went on to describe that migrating to a new genre is a natural part of the order of things in pop culture: “there’s always going to be that next thing that comes along and presents itself as the newer more cool kind of alternative.”

These ideas make the decline of rock a little less tragic. But there is always something to be mourned in a decline or a death, even when it is accompanied by something positive. The

instinct of someone who loves Western culture will always be to mourn the passing of every art form that has given the culture something good, and I think that rock music is worth mourning.

Stopping or reversing decline

Though decline is real and can have negative effects, there is not an obvious prescription for what to do about it. Indeed, it may be that change, including decline, is inevitable and can be observed but not reversed or influenced more than a little.

The inevitability of change. Development in technology is certainly inevitable. JC described how technology drives innovation and change in music: “so much of what has happened in popular music has been to a certain degree bound up with advances in technology.” He mentioned many technologies that had each brought certain changes in popular music with it: recording technology, performance-enhancing technology (like better lights and microphones), radio, marketing technology (like today’s personally targeted internet ads), television, MTV, cable TV, and of course the internet. Each of these technologies was impossible to predict or control, and each brought changes to the landscape of popular music. JC: “[Technology can] place music in a different place in culture.” Technological forces like TV, radio, and the internet are so powerful that it is hard to imagine stopping or altering their effects on music and culture, and for this reason it could be that change is simply inevitable.


Rigidity and the paradox of preservation. If a cultural conservative who loved rock music wanted to preserve and cherish it, what would he or she do? A natural response would be to create institutions that enshrine and preserve it, like the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. SW described a paradox in such an institution:

when rock was new, it was presented as youth music, youth culture. It signified the energy of young people and their passions and their drives and their desires... [But] the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is not for 20 year olds. You can’t get in if you’re 20 because you have to have had a career for 25 years before you can get in. That automatically sets up that this is about artists that have a pedigree, years of experience.

In other words, a young person’s art form cannot be perfectly preserved by an old person’s institution. A museum is for dead and old things, but the essence of rock is something young and alive. When we strive to preserve an art form or an institution, we risk losing some of its vitality, as SW affirmed: “when you start holding up culture like that and you’re turning it into something more like a museum piece, it starts lose a certain amount of its contemporary relevance.” In order for rock to grow and thrive, it must be a living part of the

culture, present in people's hearts and minds. Enshrining it in a museum can preserve its memory but not its essence.

Cycles of history. It is possible that even without outside intervention, rock music will return to the way it was and the glory it once had. History rhymes, after all, and quite often what looks like linear and irreversible change is really part of an endless and repeating cycle.

JC described an example of this to me in the context of the design and marketing of rock  songs. He said that in the 50's and 60's, "rock music was about selling singles." However, the Beatles' album "Sergeant Pepper" changed that, and the focus from then until the launch of Napster was on selling albums rather than singles. But there is a "return now to selling singles. File sharing transformed all popular music and made it about hit singles, not about concepts, ambition, and vision." This is a return to an earlier part of the cycle of history, but there is no reason to believe that the cycle will stop here. JC expressed hope for another shift in the cycle: "I would welcome a return to a longer format of music making, which I think would give musicians a larger opportunity to innovate than the single does."

SW describes a cycle in popular music that goes even deeper than the single/album cycle. He said that there is a constant shift between music focused on dancing, and music focused purely on listening. He described this shift as follows:

Rock started as dance music, with Elvis and Chuck Berry and Little Richard in the 50's. It started as sort of dance music, but by the time you get to Bob Dylan and the Beatles, it's not really dance music anymore. It's being defined more in terms of artistry and virtuosity and self-expression, and the audience has a different relation to that kind of music than it than they have to music where you're primarily listening to it to enjoy yourself, get a kind of physical release, and to dance.

In the last few years, there has been a huge increase in newer forms of dance music. House music, dubstep, and electropop are just a few of the burgeoning dance genres that are displacing the more familiar forms of "listening music" represented by rock bands like the Beatles. SW described this trend as follows:

Dance music has never gone away, it's never lost its push. The fact that we're seeing now a resurgence of interest in dance oriented music is a sign that audiences want to have a relationship to music that is more primarily physical than intellectual. You can listen to music and dance to it and think about it at the same time, but which of those things becomes more primary? The dance orientation is becoming primary now in a way it

hasn't been for a while.

SW described a multi-generational cycle that began in the era of Elvis, Chuck Berry, and Jerry Lee Lewis. These were physical performers, whose music was mostly danceable and focused on live performance and visceral power. They gave way to the generation of Bob Dylan, focused on artistry, poetry, and virtuosity. In our own day, we see the decline of the style of rock of Bob Dylan and his contemporaries, and the rise of new dance movements such as house music. We have gone from dancing with Elvis to listening to Dylan, and now back to dancing again. If SW is to be believed, this is not a catastrophic loss, but rather a natural or even an inevitable return to a previous and recurring state of affairs.

If we look back even further, we can see that the cycle of dance music vs. listening music is perennial. One era has Gershwin writing musicals and Stravinsky writing ballets, but just before that, Rachmaninoff and Mahler were writing pure listening music. Before that, Chopin and Liszt were highly physical performers, by some accounts as dramatic as the likes of James Brown (both Liszt and Brown fainted on stage as a possibly feigned result of being overcome by musical passion). Before them, Haydn and Mozart were more reserved writers of listening music. We could trace this cycle all the way back to the earliest days of history, when David played a harp meant only for listening, or before that when Miriam the prophetess struck a tambourine and danced. Finally, anthropologists have described examples of dance music in primitive cultures around the world, who have probably been making dance music for thousands of years. So today's decline of rock and ascent of dance music is only the latest recurrence of an apparently eternal cycle that connects us, James Brown, Liszt, Miriam the prophetess, remote tribes in deep jungles, and many others besides.

Understanding one apparent decline as a part of a recurring cycle of change should make us more sanguine about the prospects for our civilization. The past will never return exactly as it was, but the human nature that shaped our past is still shaping our future and will probably bring new developments that not only rhyme with old ones but also carry something good of their own. The proper position for an admirer of Western culture is not a slavish devotion to the past, but rather a healthy appreciation of the past and a hope that its best elements will carry on into the future.

Pushing toward a renaissance – thoughts on the future

In this essay, I have not yet mentioned the causes for the decline of rock music. I cannot claim to know all of them, but I can point towards some of them. One identifiable cause is the shift of focus by artists towards the short-term rather than the long-term. As each new song

is viewed as a chance to rake in dollars during a few days of popularity rather than contribute something enduring to a culture, we will surely produce less of value. Record labels conduct expensive market research that determines exactly what the lowest common denominator desires, then take action to deliver exactly that because it is the most profitable. A dash of elitism would be beneficial here: great art is invariably the product of the singular vision of an exceptional mind, not an amalgamation of tricks to satiate the lustful masses.

More generally, I believe that the decline of rock is a symptom of the more widespread artistic poverty of our age. Art can rise no higher than the ideals, character, and aspirations of the culture that produces it. The ideals that are expressed in the lyrics of popular music produced today are poor indeed – the songs are mostly unimaginative and mostly about sex. The librettos of great operas in previous centuries grappled with timeless issues: conflicts between desire and duty, tests of friendship and faithfulness, and the power of love to lift and ennoble us. If there is one root cause of the decline of our arts today, it is that we no longer approach these timeless subjects in our art.

The quick decline of rock music shows us that the best and most beautiful parts of a culture are painfully fragile. Like any art form, rock music is of mysterious provenance and developed as if of its own volition. It crescendoed and reached a peak sometime in the 60's and 70's, and has never been quite as good since, even though it is just as popular. No one could have intentionally designed its rapid rise and unfortunate decline; these things happened with the unstoppable tides of culture. Cultural conservatives are concerned with the preservation and renewal of whatever is good in our culture. If only we had preserved good rock music! We have so little that is worthwhile today. We cannot unilaterally start or stop the tides that bring new art forms and take away old ones. All we can do is welcome the good that comes with open arms, cherish it for as long as it is with us, and delay its demise and departure – even if just for a moment.

Those who love Western culture cannot hope that the future will be a rote repetition of the past and its art. The best we can hope for is a renaissance – a revival of culture ignited by resurgent interest in a classical past. I see this hope in the films of Whit Stillman, a cultural conservative who nevertheless extols the virtues of disco music, and hopes for a new ballroom dance craze to capture our nation and save its drifting youth. There is no royal road to cultural renewal, but if it comes it will depend on the efforts of individuals and families to understand and cherish our best artistic traditions. I think that it is not absurd to include rock music among these traditions.

Rock music is certainly inferior to the Western classical music tradition. Nevertheless, there is some good in it; at its best it has a unique brilliance all its own. Conservatives need not be dogmatic about which art forms are worthy of admiration and which are contemptible. That the classical tradition deserves more admiration than rock music need not mean that rock deserves no admiration at all. Indeed, an appreciation for rock and a healthy nostalgia about its suffering quality could lead to fruitful discussions about the state of culture, the reasons for admiring the West's cultural tradition, and decline in the West more generally. It may even lead to the persuasion of otherwise implacable ideological foes. If so, rock will not have declined in vain.

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