

The Flip Side

“Rock and roll will never die” is one of the many charming anthemlike lines that rock uses to describe itself. It is, of course, a lie: rock could well die—and the urge to die, to become a “classical” tradition, in other words, is as strong in rock as in any other tradition. One of the best ways to describe what constitutes death for a song tradition is when it acquires the notion of an irreproducible “original”: an authentic, perfect version that cannot be equaled, that cannot, in the parlance of music, be covered.¹ In this, as in so many other areas, the etymologically related concepts of “origins” and “originality” are crucially dependent on each other for any functional value: the very conceit of originality is strictly dependent on the existence of an original—that authentic form whose derivatives, whether they are perfect or imperfect copies, are necessarily secondary, derivative. (The word “copy” already carries within it the same disdain.) But before I talk about the death of a tradition, of an aesthetic form, let me talk first about the flip side, its life.

It is instinctive to react negatively to Benjamin’s meditations on the supreme cultural value of authenticity from a backward-looking perspective—that is, as the editors of this volume suggest, “in the digital age.” This would be, in essence, a narrative of how Benjamin precedes us and thus how he could not have known the many remarkable cultural phenomena that would flow from technological reproduction, the story of how we are now in a “radically changed technological, cultural, and social environment” to quote again the editors of this vol-

1. A cover in the rock tradition means a version of a song that is not merely an attempt to reproduce an earlier version (what might be an “original”) but rather is intended to interpret the song differently. While there are occasional purely imitative covers (usually as part of some special occasion—one thinks, for instance of George Michael’s extraordinary imitation of Freddie Mercury’s recording of *Somebody to Love* at the “memorial” concert for Mercury), but these are rare.

ume. There is an even more instructive story, I believe, to be found in first reacting negatively from the opposite temporal perspective. Benjamin's cultural prejudices and dicta revolving around the issue of originality—which means, let us repeat it, a bedrock belief in the existence of an inimitable authentic original—are part of the profoundly antimodernist aesthetics that has characterized the definition of European high culture at least since Petrarch. Ironically, full institutionalization of the Petrarchan disdain for the culture of variation—which is the opposite of a culture of the authentic original—is dependent for its full historical fulfillment on the most remarkable of tools of mechanical reproduction, the printing press.

The first point I want to argue, then, is that Benjamin's position is extraordinarily Petrarchan in its denial of high cultural value to literary phenomena that are rooted in cultures that do not prize "originality" and thus have little or no concept of an authentic "origins" but instead value variation, "covers," and "coverability." Part of the historical irony involved here is that for Benjamin and almost all other modernists the conscious articulation of the distinction between one type of cultural value and another is implicitly that of a decline from the cultural achievements of the modern West. This prevalence owes much to the success of that paradigm in obscuring the radically antioriginarian basis of the most "authentic" (in terms of the same paradigm) European cultural moment—namely, the rise of vernacular cultural forms in the tenth through twelfth centuries.

One could adopt a very different narrative perspective from which the dynamic issue within Western culture is always the struggle between an aesthetics (and ethics—for it is, indeed, a highly ethical question) that values variation—and thus has no conscious belief in the supreme value of "authenticity," no historiography of "origins"—and its opposite, an aesthetics that values fixed forms, worships authenticity, and cultivates the search for origins as the ultimate intellectual and philosophical quest. This conflict, moreover, is both internal and external: it is not merely one powerful, consistent set of beliefs and believers pitted against another (even if it often looks that way from the outside) although, in any given historical moment, one vision of cultural value may be largely triumphant. The conflict is always, at a minimum, latent within either vision, even within any given individual in either mode: in a culture of variation the attractions of classicization are never very far; conversely, in classicizing moments the seductive allure of variation is often just barely repressed. The role of mechanical re-

production—I will focus on the advent of printing and the development of its aural equivalent, sound recording—is equally "conflicted" and manipulable. Printing and recording can serve, with equal efficacy, as agents of classicization by fixing forms and providing the basis for an aesthetics of originality and "authenticity" or, conversely, as precisely the agents that allow a culture of variation to flourish. Because I cannot develop the full complexities of this dialectic in this brief essay, and because I mean for this to be a reading that reveals the ahistoricity of Benjamin's views, I will dwell on only two of the "ironic" aspects of the problem—how, in essence, the relationship between mechanical reproduction and authenticity can be viewed exactly opposite to Benjamin's conception of it. The flip side.

First irony: the printing press and the development of a print culture is the form of mechanical reproduction that allows the ascendance of a concept of authentic original. In historical, developmental terms, it is simple enough to see the destruction of a medieval culture of variation—a culture whose two principal literary forms were the song (later called, in the age of mechanically reproduced written form, lyric and poem) and the story, principally the stories of what is called the framed-tale tradition. Framing, the specification of a person telling a story (usually a twice-told tale) is the narrative device that thematizes and makes central the oral nature of storytelling that would be largely replaced with the advent of a print culture. In both cases and in different ways—ways that have all too often been occluded by a literary historiography that participates in the value systems of print culture—the highest values are those of variation and participation, of reproducibility and covers. Speaking generally, authenticity and excellence in such traditions are necessarily keyed not to "uniqueness" but to something resembling the opposite, which I might state as how many versions—variants, of course—are produced.² Originality is not a function of uniqueness (a phenomenon that within this framework is actually a marker of sterility) but of performance of a known text (story, song).

2. Many of the easiest examples of this can be taken from the vernacular framed-tale tradition, to judge from manuscript evidence the most popular and influential of vernacular literary genres. In such a context, Boccaccio's *Griselda* story, itself a "cover" of the Job story (as Chaucer, in his cover, will point out) is immediately rewritten by Petrarch (who has the most difficulty with the issue of versions and covers, but who deals with it by doing his version in Latin, a complex gesture in the attempt to move into a classicized and fixed mode) and then by Chaucer, who further articulates the virtues of covers by giving, at the end, the possibility of a different way of telling the story.

Performance is, by definition, an interpretive act that involves the participation of both the performer and the audience.

At least two things need to be said about the fate of the vernacular song movement that can be called "troubadour" in a very inadequate shorthand. By most accounts (including my own) the movement is at the heart of a redefinition of culture at a crucial historical crossroads, with profound reverberations well into our own time and certainly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, it was a song tradition, powerfully attached to the introduction of a range of musical instruments (notably fiddles and percussion) and a mode of performance of those instruments, the whole ensemble called "secular monody." Second, of greatest importance, is that we have understood precious little about this song movement. Indeed, we have construed it in radically distorted ways because of its anteriority to any means of mechanical reproduction, and because we have seen it through a prism of the concepts of authenticity and originality for works of art in "high" culture that became virtually universal in the wake of the development of the printing press.

Let me reduce this complex point to a handful of basics. First, the lack of mechanical reproduction (in this case, recording) has meant a virtually complete loss of the vital musical aspect. Although some musical notation exists in manuscripts, what is ultimately undecipherable in this tradition—that is, secular monody as opposed, for example, to sacred polyphony—is its rhythmic component. This, in turn, has powerful implications for how we might reconstruct or reconceive the kind of music that was so transforming, so much the object of opprobrium by ecclesiastical authorities, and so central a part of the cultural revolution of the time. But the principal point is that we do not attempt to deal with this as a song tradition at all but have, instead, redefined it as "the lyric." The medieval lyric will come to have, in the vast majority of work done on it in the modern philological period, two crucial ontological features that are, in fact, diametrically opposed to the ethics of the "original" song tradition: it will be conceptualized as a fixed-text tradition and, following that, it will have and be an authentic original. The establishment of each of these—the fixed texts that can be deduced from extraordinary variations in manuscript traditions, and origins that are transparently elusive—become the two principal philological projects in Romance studies from the mid-nineteenth century forward. In other words, the secular medieval song tradition has not been understood in terms of its own musical ethics of variation and

performance, but rather in terms of an ethics of fixed texts that, although masterfully prefigured and in part established by Petrarch in the *Canzoniere*,³ would certainly not have become so universal without the mechanical written reproduction of the printing press. Even more significant for the argument at hand, this clearly anachronistic presentation of a foundational European lyric as a player in the culture of authenticity is exactly what allows Benjamin to articulate a kind of flip-side historical vision, one in which "originals" and "fixed forms" and "authenticity" (all dependent on each other for legitimacy) are features and values of the cultural landscape *until* the age of mechanical reproduction. The history I am suggesting reads the other way around.

Second irony: mechanical sound reproduction has been a *primum mobile* in the development of the ethics of "authenticity" and "originals" in music. Recording has played the most conspicuous role in transforming what we normatively call "classical" music from an art form rooted in the virtues of variation—performance—to one in which performance, as Edward Said has so felicitously put it, has become an "extreme occasion" in which achieving the reproduction of a perfect "original," rather than a variant personal interpretation, is the regnant ethic.⁴ In rock, where the internal struggle between fixed forms and variant forms is still very much in progress (but which already has a period and style unironically called "classic rock"), recording still serves both purposes—thus revealing the complexity of the relationship between mechanical reproduction and the values of authenticity.

3. Petrarch is an extraordinary example of the inherent nature of the conflict between the vitality of vernacular variation, on the one hand, and, on the other, the urge to classicize and make fixed (grammatical, to use Dante's term in the *De vulgari eloquentia*). Petrarch's rejection of the variation and performance ethics of the song tradition is explicitly a rejection of the legitimacy of covers (see the extended discussion in Menocal, *Shards of Love*, esp. pp. 176–81).

4. See Said, *Musical Elaborations*, for an extended and highly nuanced discussion of the problem. His theoretical touchstone is not Benjamin—although he might have been—but rather Adorno. Of particular interest, in the key first chapter "Performance as an Extreme Occasion," is Said's discussion of the irony of Glenn Gould's now infamous abandonment of performance—described by Gould as "the last blood sport" because of the unattainable perfection of "authenticity" the audience had come to hear—rather than an interpretation with necessary variation. Gould's striking individuality of interpretation and performance, his attempt to recultivate and re-elevate interpretation and variation, was, in a further ironic twist, only achieved through turning to recording at the expense of live performance. In other words, the extreme classicization of the classical tradition in music has, among other things, fixed the notion of text so absolutely that live performance can no longer provide the space for interpretation and variation—only recording.

A few gross generalizations about the importance of performance and the ethics of variation in music—a crucial cultural practice that suffers from one of the most problematic dichotomies of “high” culture/“low” culture—are in order. First of all, there is a very general and powerful correlation in cultural evaluation between what I will call inaccessibility or “high” value, on the one hand, and accessibility or “low” value, on the other. In purely musical terms the correlation can be fruitfully seen by the way a Platonic or Neoplatonic prism views Dionysian music and its performance. Interestingly enough, this is the perspective of Allan Bloom’s scathing denunciation of rock—a denunciation that logically (and correctly) taken to its ends would have included an equal abhorrence of (among others) Wagnerian performances in the nineteenth century and many performances of opera today. At the heart of Dionysian music is the ability to provoke profound (and widespread) emotional involvement that, in turn, depends in subtle but telling ways not only on the purely technical aspects of the music—does the rhythm, for example, make listeners get up and dance (or at least long to get up and dance)—but also on the listener’s involvement in the performance or on the possibility (however openly illusory) that the individual and communal audience is able to *be* a performer—a participant intimately tied to the performer and to the very aura of the work of art.⁵

This, clearly, is a value system in which “authentic” and “original” are anathema—and in which performance must not be an extreme occasion but rather, as rock concerts largely continue to be, a fully participative occasion. Rock audiences do not just dance to the music but also sing the songs: no rock concert worth its name in the last two decades occurs without one or more audience “sing-alongs” orchestrated by the band. Most remarkable from the perspective of the utter unachievability of classical performance except by virtuosos—even the most unmusical member of the audience can pretend to be playing along with the band: a common sight at any rock concert is members of the audience playing imaginary guitars. Said rather forlornly describes the utter remoteness and formality of the classical-concert-going experience. He could have gone further and pointed out the remarkable

5. Incidentally, one can deduce from much secondary evidence as well as from the provenance of musical instruments in the tenth through twelfth centuries that the key features of the troubadour song tradition—immensely appealing to many but appalling to the clergies—was its highly moving rhythmic nature, and its ability to provoke emotional and physical movement in the audience.

material contrasts between the sheer physical and verbal involvement of audiences at rock concerts—in “live” recordings the many sounds, musical and otherwise, of the audience are a crucial part of the experience—versus the quietude and stillness of “classical” performances, in which the ideal audience is invisible and nonexistent. Ideally, there would be no way to tell the difference between a recording of a classical performance in front of a live audience and a studio recording. I am not suggesting that normative “classical” music is not profoundly moving; rather, the correct presumption is that listeners are moved “silently” and internally. I am as moved, in many ways more so, by Beethoven’s Ninth as by any rock song, but public performance of the Ninth completely forbids my own participation—the aura of Beethoven’s perfection depends on the utter banishment of my own performance (the singing along, conducting along, and dancing along that I do at home) and radically changes the nature of the artwork’s aura, substantially depersonalizing it.

Rock, the culturally dominant vernacular song form of the last half of the twentieth century—and probably beyond—is at a historic crossroads. The role of recording and the mechanical reproduction of sound, which have undergone a remarkable revolution and progress hand in hand with the development of the genre (largely as a direct consequence of the vast economic power of the rock tradition) affects both sides of the conflict. On the one hand, recording and the cheap and universal dissemination of recorded songs have played crucial roles in the formation and preservation of a culture of variants. This is true in many complex ways, but I will single out two of the most conspicuous. First, recordings have been historically essential to exposing key early rockers to the otherwise inaccessible music of black American blues, which are a key formative strain. Without the recordings of Robert Johnson heard and subsequently interpreted by a whole generation of white British boys—Eric Clapton and Keith Richards, to name two of the most canonical—rock could not have developed as a culturally miscegenated variant form. Recordings in the formative period offered exposure to other sounds that were perceived as prestigious and became the basis for an interpretive and variant performance. Second, in a later period of cultural dominance and ascendancy, recording plays the seemingly paradoxical role of enabling the vitality of performance that in the rock concert, as I have suggested, is profoundly tied to both the possibility of a performer’s necessarily variant performance and to the audience’s active participation in the performance. One of the most dis-

tinctive phenomenological features of the rock concert is this extreme degree of audience involvement, which is, in the end, dependent on the audience's remarkable knowledge of the music performed—a knowledge acquired primarily or exclusively through recordings.

Anyone attending a rock concert for the first time—and used to the diametrically opposed aesthetics and ethics of a classical performance—will be astonished by the many overt markers of the audience's intimate role. There is no program, but audible reaction will indicate unambiguously the moment of recognition of an upcoming song, usually as the first few chords are sounded, sometimes (astonishingly) from the way the guitars are tuned.⁶ Even more dramatically, as I have mentioned, not only does everyone sing along individually, but most concerts also include at least one or two songs in which the audience is specifically invited to sing with or even in lieu of the singers—everyone understands this is a vital part of the aura and value of the song.⁷ Both of these vital features that make up the highly individual aura of the work of art that is a song—unique individual interpretation and intimate and necessary involvement of a live audience—are (the paradox should be self-evident) fully dependent on the existence and mass availability of the recording (first the single, then the album, now the CD). Moreover, the recording is not only a fixed form but also a form able to reproduce with increasing technical perfection.

The flip side (vinyl records, by the way, had flip sides, hence the expression; but CDs have only one playing side and this is beginning to affect how songwriters are structuring what we used to call “albums”—the linguistic effects of this is still an open question) is that recording—logically enough, inevitably perhaps—can and does serve the

6. Fredric Lieberman, an ethnomusicologist who has worked extensively with the Grateful Dead—arguably the most variation-and-performance oriented among the major classic rock bands—does a marvelous demonstration of the phenomenon of how quickly the Dead's audience can recognize any one of the over four hundred songs in their active repertoire. In an inaugural lecture delivered at UC Santa Cruz (“Fieldwork among the Dead,” 1991, available as UCSC Media Center tape VT1659), Lieberman makes the point by having the band on stage (not the Grateful Dead, but a band there to play some of their music as demonstration) merely tune their guitars and play one or two opening chords—and then having the audience identify (quickly, invariably correctly) the song—a feat one would more likely expect from very experienced performers.

7. My own favorite example is from the early years of the development of this tradition: the performance by Country Joe and the Fish at Woodstock, of one of the most scathing antiwar songs, *I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixing-To-Die Rag*, with an obscene spell-along “cheer” and the band's struggle, after each of the first two verses, to get the audience to sing the refrain; finally, the lead singer bursts out with: “Listen, people, I don't know how you expect to ever stop the war if you can't sing any better than that.”

many profound urges to classicize, to fix an authentic version with an inimitable aura, to devalue the cover in favor of the “original.” I explicitly use “original” in quotes because the canonized form may, in fact, not be an original in strictly chronological or “authentic” terms, but merely in terms of what is assumed to be the perfect version—the perfect studio recording. Jimi Hendrix's version of Bob Dylan's *All Along the Watchtower*, for example, would be taken by most classic rock purists to be the perfect performance of that song, and thus the authentic, which cannot be covered without loss of aura. I recently discovered that in a large group of twenty- to twenty-two-year-olds, most assumed it *was* Hendrix's song, had no knowledge of Dylan's authorship, or of his “original” version—the one Hendrix heard, on a recording, and rather radically adapted.

Although one can argue all one wants—as I have just done briefly—that the very heart and soul of rock (or of any song tradition of the Dionysian variety) lies in its cultivation of the cover and interpretation, the inherently conflicting urge to establish a classic—and uncoverable—form is evident everywhere. It is not simply that a well-defined classic period exists (roughly speaking the decade from 1963 to 1973) in comparison to which all later material is necessarily belated (no matter how canonical in its own right), it is also that the freedom of performers to work outside the bounds of the classical norms is, at times, far more constrained by a concept of the aura of an original than it used to be. The complaints along these lines from all sorts of rock musicians are by now well known: the new guys don't get air-time or recognition unless they sound like they are a part of the classic tradition; the old guys can't do live performances with much new material because the audience has come to hear the classics, and to hear them as close as possible to their original sound. Almost invariably, the “original” is the precise and clean version, the “pure” perfection of the song recorded in a studio, the sort of sound—now we hear echoes of the sad fate of classical music—that cannot be matched in a live performance.

What is fascinating about rock is precisely that it has not yet cast its lot. It is driven by both the impulse to classicize and the urge to retain the aesthetics of variation. Recording, as I have tried to suggest, could and can serve either side. In a hundred years, recordings of rock will have either allowed the covers to continue (and will have provided a record of the many historical variants possible) or it will have set and fixed a perfect and immutable original version, with an aura of purity, which no one—by definition—will ever sing again. In the end, it is

more than possible that the effects of the superb sound reproduction techniques being developed today as part of the rock tradition will result in a complete flip-side effect both from what has until now defined rock as a vital song tradition and from what Benjamin had envisioned. The rock performance could become another blood sport through the use of technology to reaffirm the Petrarchan and Benjaminian notion of a pure and authentic aura. We can thus begin to imagine walking into a concert hall and sitting stiffly and in utter, reverential silence to a virtuoso guitarist attempting to reproduce that perfect version of Jimi Hendrix's *Purple Haze*.⁸ One can only hope that will be followed by a Glenn Gould defiantly—but hopelessly—coming on stage to do his version of Neil Young's *My My, Hey Hey*, of which the final verse is:

Hey hey, my my
 Rock and roll can never die
 There's more to the picture
 Than meets the eye

8. There is a stunning string quartet version of *Purple Haze* recorded by the Kronos Quartet in 1986, which I take to be a participant in the tradition of interpretive covers, but also a partially classicizing removal of the song from the audience-participative tradition into the silent concert-hall world (you listen quietly to it—you don't dance to it—and you can't sing along because it has been redone as an instrumental). An equally suggestive note: in playing various covers of *Purple Haze* to a group of undergraduates—none of whom were born while Hendrix was alive, by the way, and all of whom have known Hendrix only through recordings—there was not only rejection of all of the *rock* covers but indignation from many that anyone would try and do any cover (i.e., real interpretation) of that most classic of rock songs. The Kronos Quartet cover, it emerged, was the only one that met with any approval.