

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Grant Maxwell. *How Does It Feel? Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the Philosophy of Rock and Roll*. n.p.: Persistent Press, 2014. 335 pp. File Size 2935 KB. \$4.99 (Kindle), ASIN B00IXRBW1I.

Reviewed by Thomas Conner (University of California–San Diego)

Published on H-1960s (November, 2014)

Commissioned by Zachary J. Lechner

## Come Together: Sex, Dualisms, and Rock and Roll

*I believe in Beatles*

*I believe my little soul has grown*

— David Bowie, “Afraid”

In an April blog post shortly after the publication of his first book, *How Does It Feel? Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the Philosophy of Rock and Roll*, author Grant Maxwell explains first that his book seeks to explore the thought processes of these iconic musicians and that “a number of related streams of philosophical, psychological, and sociological thought, from Hegel and Nietzsche to Max Weber and C. G. Jung, seemed to provide a vocabulary for articulating the significance of rock and roll in the context of what philosopher Richard Tarnas refers to as ‘the evolution of world views.’” He then apologizes, in case “this all sounds a little dry,” and describes his book instead as “a philosophically informed retelling of the familiar narratives” of the title characters.[1]

The first half of the book is just that: a “philosophically informed retelling” of rock’s three primary gospels—Elvis at Sun Studios, the Beatles in Hamburg, and Dylan in New York City—with particular attention to reasoned speculation about the thought processes directing performance and production decisions within each moment, with an ear toward the cultural upheaval to follow. Eventually, *How Does It Feel?* makes its philosophical stand in its final two chapters. Maxwell claims that “collective human experience was bodying forth, through the catalyst of the Beatles, what appears to have been the beginnings of an integration between intu-

itive belief and rational skepticism,” what Maxwell calls a “double irony” and one that “allowed the Beatles and their fans to walk the tightrope between belief and skepticism, a subtle layer of meaning that many in the old guard, having participated in the later stages of the necessary individuation of human intellect, were not equipped to comprehend. It was an inside joke for the young and the hip; a new kind of revelation” (locs. 4287, 4303).

Grant’s bridges between dualisms eventually detour into religious anthropology in a final claim “that Dylan, like Presley and Lennon, enacted and embodied the re-emergence of the epistemologies associated with animality ... spontaneously re-creating shamanic practice in a culture in which such activity had been almost completely repressed” (loc. 4879). It’s a smart restatement of a lot of old adages about rock music plugging people back into their bodies. To his credit, Maxwell accomplishes this without once employing the word “uptight” or ending a sentence like this, man. Still, he asserts, while citing music critic Ian MacDonald, that “the return of repressed bodily knowledge” and its integration with intellect, a reunion “enacted in large part by rock and roll,” was an absolutely “fundamental transformation of Western culture,” even though its discursive nodes occurred “below the threshold of conscious awareness”—“hidden in plain sight” on the pop charts (locs. 1239, 1075).

The “informed retelling” requires some initial patience, but the mild discomfort it invokes actually assists Maxwell’s argument. The first three chapters, about each title character and their particular artistic genesis, are

good cultural history and excellent pop music analysis (his explication of Dylan's rejection of modernity is one of the better summations available of this complicated figure); it's a valiant attempt to clarify "this disjunction between the way the situation actually transpired and the belief of the collective" (loc. 135). (Maxwell is a rocker himself, so the text is musically as well as philosophically informed.) The accounts provide fresh, rewarding perspectives on historical moments that have been theorized to death, if not outright mythologized, and Maxwell's historical blow-by-blow does great service as a patient, careful examination of each watershed. His technique, however, of exploring these histories while name-dropping the occasional and allegedly relevant bread crumb of Hegel, Weber, James, and others often comes off as dilettantish, as if he is just another erudite hipster at the dimmest table in the club rambling about *the significance* of the music while grasping at any threads that might bind high culture with low, in order to validate the latter. When he inserts wink-winks, like "as William James particularly understood" amid a discussion of George Martin's band-management practices—or especially when he makes a couple of seemingly ludicrous comparisons of the Beatles' songwriting to Copernican cosmology—you are forgiven the impulse to flee (loc. 2198).

However, this very polar tension generates the ultimately subtle magnetism of Maxwell's book. If even I, a pop music critic who has argued for far more than his share of low-culture validation, leap to describe Maxwell's alignment of hits and heliocentrism as "seemingly ludicrous," then the intellectual denigration of rock music is indeed deeply ingrained not only in the overall culture but also in its very producers. This is precisely what Maxwell's book seeks to temper and mediate. Suggesting within many philosophy and social science (even musicology) departments that rock music be discussed seriously alongside any other culture remains, to my dismay and surely Maxwell's, a surprising difficulty. Many others have blazed trails using elevated critical engagement (e.g., Greil Marcus, Simon Frith, Simon Reynolds to a degree, and Richard Goldstein when he described Dylan's songs as "brief, visceral debates with existence"[2]), but the goal is roughly the same: to claim rock music's formative moments as "the primary temporal locus for the re-embrace of affectivity" within contemporary culture (loc. 1868).

In essence, Maxwell is claiming for these teen idols the very kind of subtle philosophical subversions for which cultural theorists like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer never saw the potential within the pop mu-

sic they so loathed. This brings up the one name curiously *not* dropped in this book: Karl Marx. He is present but not present; Maxwell's approach to history is utterly dependent on a Marxist belief in linear progress and ultimate revolution. The "transformation of consciousness" that Maxwell describes in one breath is in the next a "rupture in the historical process" (loc. 2285). Each artist is shown to draw on '50s-rock influences for the raw material of their paradigm-shifting revolution (the inevitable Thomas Kuhn citation occurs in the Dylan chapter) because "the discoverers of emergent modes of thought [often] refer back to some older precedent in order to justify the audacity of their enterprise" (loc. 1261). This all "fulfilled a central role in the evolution of rock and roll as well as of historical process in general" (loc. 2525). Maxwell's entire thesis is a dialectical synthesis.

The only real disappointment is that he stops there. One Marxist's synthesis is another Marxist's additional negation to be negated, and the element keeping *How Does It Feel?* from rising above the flotsam of typical '60s-glorification tomes is its lack of even an offhand consideration of the paths traveled within pop culture since the philosophical rupture he is describing. Unfortunately, leaving it all at the doorstep of the '70s plays right into the hands of the baby boomers' indefatigable cultural imperialists, and Maxwell, alas, is not immune to the effects of the affect he is describing, to the point of repeating the occasional fawning cliché, such as how Lennon and McCartney "operated on a different frequency than those around them" (Johnny Gentle quoted at loc. 1410). In his existing epilogue, Maxwell presents another philosophically informed rereading, this time discussing the minimal impacts of actual meetings between the title figures. A more useful epilogue, however, might have been a look forward along the culture's linear progression.

His existing argument contains numerous seeds that could germinate easily into further fruitful analysis of this cultural transformation's impact. A particular undercurrent to these historical accounts is the transition from a live musical experience to a technologically mediated one—especially how the records were affecting the concerts, and vice versa. Maxwell claims that Elvis created his biggest youthquake not on stage but in the studio, that the Beatles struggled to translate the "ecstatic affect" from performances to recordings, and, significantly, that the electric myth of the 1965 Newport Folk Festival "might have been rather different had Dylan and his band sounded as tight as they did on record" (locs. 2185, 100). This also possessed a significant capitalist dimension: records made more money than concert tickets in

the late '60s. Today, though, that's reversed, and critics for years now have been debating reasons for the ebb of this tide, including the correlating iTunes-era diminishment of the album as both a complete artistic statement and a primary commercial product. There exist today numerous creative artists who, as Maxwell says of the Beatles, are "deeply integrating the rapidly advancing technologies into their music" with a variety of purposes (loc. 1983). In addition, beyond the "Beatlemania"-level hysteria that became a rote marker of success for later acts from the Police to Hanson, Maxwell's claim that an act like the Beatles had "the power to express repressed affect" resounds with even greater force and precision when applied to more contemporary deified figures such as, say, Morrissey (loc. 2363).

In the end, Maxwell walks a delicate line discussing these artists as semireligious figures, a claim based on the idea that, for this generation, the source of meaning was not traditional institutions, "not school or work or science or institutional religion, but rock and roll" (loc. 4010). The Beatles operated within a "religious practice"; records were "religious texts" (locs. 4150, 4166). Whether future generations are likely to view the Bea-

ties' artistry as "something potent and numinous" remains in their hands (loc. 4406). Maxwell, as quoted earlier, states that these artists' achievements were only "beginnings," but succeeding generations already have used these religious-ish inspirations to shift the culture in various ways. The task remaining, perhaps for Maxwell's next venture, is to chart and examine those shifts. His book demonstrates how these shamans made their particular magic, and in his conclusion Maxwell writes that Dylan's "shift in perspective has been a primary factor in allowing him to do what he has done" (loc. 4983). Fine, but what exactly has it allowed *us* to do?

#### Notes

[1]. Grant Maxwell, "The Rock and Roll Philosopher of Lockeland Springs," *Lockeland Springsteen* (blog), April 17, 2014, <http://lockelandspringsteen.com/2014/04/17/features-the-rock-and-roll-philosopher-of-lockeland-springs/>.

[2]. Richard Goldstein, "Nothing Is Revealed," in *Goldstein's Greatest Hits: A Book Mostly About Rock 'n' Roll* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 162.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-1960s>

**Citation:** Thomas Conner. Review of Grant Maxwell, *How Does It Feel? Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the Philosophy of Rock and Roll*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. November, 2014.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42133>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.