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'A magic science': rock music as a recording art

by PAUL CLARKE

Jimi Hendrix once claimed 'I'm working on music to be completely, utterly a magic science' (Henderson 1981, p. 337). It is a description that fits not just the best of Hendrix's own music, but the best of all that late twentieth-century music in which the ability to capture and control sounds (on tape or disc) has become a means of extending old musical forms and traditions, and establishing new possibilities for them. Throughout his career, Hendrix drew nourishment from his musical roots in black traditions, but it was not until the summer of 1967 that he plugged himself fully into the new possibilities opened up by the technology of sound recording. Hendrix had already proved himself something of a musical 'magician' in the ancient sense in that he attempted, through music, to mediate between order and disorder, using his guitar as an expressive extension of himself to flirt with the danger and power of musical disintegration (for the parallel with non-Western musical practice see Shepherd 1977, p. 72; Mellers 1973, pp. 24–6; Clarke 1982, pp. 227–9). From 1967 onwards, Hendrix was to prove himself an equally able musical 'scientist' through his mastery of studio technology. The studio became

> Jimi's workshop. The endless timeless space where he was most at home. Take after take. Seemingly for days and weeks. Getting the right sound, the right pitch and intensity . . . Most could not hear the sounds he was after, yet were greatly touched by the final product. Its close perfection surrendering to the final moments when it came together. (Henderson 1981, p. 237)

On stage, Hendrix's music had always been bound by time and place but in the studio – insofar as the costing of studio time allowed (and eventually Hendrix built his own studio) – the music could be lifted out of time, captured and contained on tape, made into an aural raw material which could then be added to or manipulated. Whereas on stage Hendrix had had to judge the experiential impact of sounds each moment as he brought them into being, in the studio this instant response could be supplanted or supplemented by a more considered response; each sound, as caught on tape, became repeatable, perfectible, subject to assessment, revision, manipulation – a process not possible or conceivable within the live performance tradition of

music making. The *magic* of Hendrix's post-1967 music (as cut in the grooves of *Are You Experienced?* and later albums) therefore derives not just from his own innate genius as a performer, and his grounding in the spirit and techniques of black music, but also from his command of the *science* of sound recording and control – his mastery of the aural/musical opportunities provided by the multi-tracking, the adjusting of frequencies, the mixing and re-mixing, and so on, that had become possible in the recording studio.

The move made by Hendrix from stage to studio reproduces on a small scale the way in which rock music as a whole has evolved in the last twenty-five years. Rock and its related musics (soul, reggae etc.) share roots in live performance traditions (from both Afro-American and Euro-American origins) but have emerged and developed with and through advances in the modern science of recording. To understand rock, then, we need to consider its musical origins and its technological base – and how the two connect. This is where Hendrix's term 'magic science' comes in useful, in that it insists we approach rock songs with an ear not only for the 'magic' of our experience of them, but also for the 'science' – the technological processes – through which the music is created. As V. F. Perkins has suggested, criticism, if it intends to 'contribute to a productive collaboration, rather than offer a merely rhetorical private response', should both 'present a positive statement of the achievements it claims to have located', and provide a 'clear definition' of what processes and combinations make these achievements possible (Perkins 1972, p. 191). In the following account I will firstly attempt to establish a clear definition of what is and what can be involved in the production of rock and related musics – locating rock's musical inheritance, describing its technological base and suggesting what links the two. I will then set out to make a positive analytical statement about the achievements of some particular songs.

The musicology of rock

As with the emergence of jazz three-and-a-half decades earlier, the rise of rock 'n' roll can be viewed as a cultural moment in which Afro-American musical characteristics penetrated and revitalised white popular music. And in both cases it was technological progress in sound recording and reproduction that allowed this to happen. Jazz had revolutionised popular dance music in the 1920s, bringing, through the media of gramophone and wireless, a greater concern for musical immediacy and emotional spontaneity. Rock 'n' roll saw the same process occurring within the tradition of popular song. The Afro-American concern with the expressive characteristics of the

human voice, long evident in blues and gospel music, caused a shift in emphasis from words to vocal sounds, from 'moon–June' lyrics to the jubilant emotional catharsis of 'awopbopaloobopalopbamboom'. Colour and expression and human 'feel' became valued in instrumental sounds as well, as a new rejection of (European) distinctions between 'music' and 'noise' made available *all* acoustic resources as potential elements of musical experience. Underlying everything else rock 'n' roll set the beat, a pounding regularity of percussion and bass instruments working directly on the physical responses of the body.

It had always been the case that, in contrast to the white tradition of notated music, in black music 'the act of expression took precedence over the artefact as the final goal'. Ian Hoare has observed that 'it was this oral emphasis that made the music's development so compatible with the declining importance of sheet music and the rise of the record medium where the essence of the appeal came to lie in the overall sound and mode of performance rather than in the *songs* as such' (Hoare 1975, p. 124). Sound recording, by bringing musical practices which had previously been confined to live performance to a much larger and more widespread audience, thus facilitated the cross-fertilisation of musical cultures which finds expression in both rock and jazz. But although Afro-American (and Afro-Caribbean) musics penetrated and revitalised white European-based music, they did not completely overwhelm this more formal tradition. Rock is neither a black nor a white music but rather a melting pot of the two, displaying what musicologist Richard Middleton considers an ambiguous cultural stance (Middleton 1972, p. 147). It is caught up in a continuous attempt to resolve the tension between European styles of music (classical, Tin Pan Alley, music hall/vaudeville, folk ballad, etc.) and Afro-American styles (blues, rhythm and blues, gospel, soul, reggae, etc.), a tension between the view of song as an aesthetic object and song as functional happening, between the idea of passive listening and the idea of participation, between notions of composition and complex structure and notions of improvisation and subtleties of texture. Hence the breadth of stylistic possibilities that characterise rock at any given moment.

In the view of Dave Rogers the rise of rock music has been characterised by two things: 'a process of cross-fertilisation and . . . an increasing eclecticism' (Rogers 1976, pp. 7–8). We have seen how the cross-fertilisation emerges out of the interpenetration of musical cultures which sound recording has facilitated. Rock's eclecticism also has its technological aspect, for radical advances in technology have transformed the recording studio – once no more than a location for the recording of performances – into what might be described as an audio

workshop, with sound (performed, synthesised, natural or of any other kind) being the raw material. As George Martin – producer of the Beatles – has noted, the studio allows access to 'any sound in the universe, from the sound of a whale mating to that of a Tibetan wood instrument, from the legitimate orchestra to synthesised sounds' (Martin and Hornsby 1979, p. 141). These sounds need not be produced or performed simultaneously, for with dubbing and multi-tracking techniques a song or musical piece can be constructed out of separate aural events laid down on tape at different times, and even from performances and other sound materials collected in other studios or recording locations. Paul Simon's 'The Boxer', for example, 'was recorded all over the place – the basic tracks in Nashville, the end voices in New York St Paul's Church, the strings in New York Columbia Studios and voices there too' (Simon, quoted in Leigh 1973, pp. 54–6). Furthermore, each performance or sound captured on a track of tape can then be subject to a variety of treatments, so that, as Charles Keil has observed of rock records, 'five instruments are sometimes made to sound like a full orchestra, or twenty instrumentalists and a choir can be given the texture of two ukelele players humming to each other in a phone booth' (Keil 1966, p. 90). Brian Eno, himself a musician much involved with the musical opportunities being opened up by new technology, has remarked that whereas 'in the early days of studio recording what went on to the tape was pretty much how the record ended up', since that period 'the degree of chaos in the actual making of the recording has been reduced, while the complications involved in processing have increased . . . What you have now is an incredible number of processing possibilities . . . and a very low degree of 'randomness' being generated by the recording situation itself' (Eno 1982, p. 94). Such sophistication has not been universally welcomed and many artists working in many genres, from the Dylan of *John Wesley Harding* to the Clash of their debut album, *The Clash,* still deliberately embrace the aesthetic of raw, undoctored performances, laid straight on to tape. But while technological advance has placed no *obligations* on rock musicians to juggle frequencies, assemble and mix diverse tracks and so on, it has opened up a whole range of *options*, and, from Phil Spector to Jimi Hendrix, from the Beatles to Brian Eno, it has encouraged an adventurous eclecticism of content.

Rock music as a recording art

Up until the last hundred years or so an artist or communicator wishing to address his public had two options. He could *make*

something – an object, a picture, a book, a musical score – or alternatively he could *do* something, perform something – speak, mime, dance, play an instrument – embodying in that action whatever he had to say. As drama theorist Richard Southern has observed, a creation – an artefact – 'you can perfect in solitude before the people see it; but an action is done before them once and is finished – the only chance of perfecting it lies in an opportunity of trying it all over again on another occasion' (Southern 1962, p. 23). So, there have always existed arts of making – creative arts – which involve 'work which however exacting can be perfected whenever one chooses', and arts of doing – performance arts – which depend 'on a concentrated effort on one particular occasion'. The problem with rock on record, however, is that it does not fall strictly into either category. It is a *made* thing, certainly – a round, black object stored in its sleeve on the record rack; but it is also, when introduced to the appropriate equipment, a matter of *performance*, of Beatle harmonies, of Chuck Berry guitar licks, of a ranting Johnny Rotten, or of Jerry Lee Lewis pummelling his piano. In fact, along with radio, cinema, television and video, rock on record is one of 'those strange new products of the modern age: the recorded and transmitted arts' (ibid., p. 23).

The *transmitted* arts translate images and sounds (including performances) into electronic signals capable of being broadcast – literally 'broadly cast' – and thus free them from having to be heard and/or seen by an audience in a particular *place*. Our concern, the technology of audio or visual *recording*, takes things further than this; it both frees images and sounds (and therefore performances) from the limitations of place, *and*, by giving transient events a solid embodiment (on cassette, disc etc.), liberates them from the limitations of *time*. The initial effect of this capability was to revolutionise the possibilities of performance art in ways that today we take for granted. Recording firstly ensured that performances (of a Charlie Chaplin, a Nureyev, a Jimi Hendrix) last beyond the moment of doing (even beyond the life-span of the doer) as lengths of eventful time removed from the time-flow to be re-inserted as and when desired. It secondly allowed the performer the opportunity to repeat and refine his musical, theatrical, choreographic action over and over in a series of 'takes' until satisfied with it. But along with its marked influence on performance traditions, recording has also been instrumental in the development of what can best be described as new forms of *creative* art – forms in which the capturing of performances (on disc or tape or in digital coding) becomes not an end in itself but a gathering of raw material which can then be treated in various ways: speeded up, slowed down, chopped about, mixed, distorted and so on, as part of a process of considered

composition. As early as the late fifties, in rock music, double-tracking in combination with dubbing techniques was being used to create musical experiences which had been previously inconceivable. In Neil Sedaka's 'Breaking Up Is Hard To Do', for example:

> Sedaka sings in definite harmonies with himself in some sections, and in others the 'front' voice sings the lyric while from behind comes the rhythmic 'dum-a-dum-a-dum-dooby-do-dum-dum' phrase with which the record opens. In a sense all that happens is that one man is doing what it took three- or four-voiced groups to do before, but the effect is entirely different. It is the aural equivalent to the splendour of a hall of mirrors – each distorting in a different way the same image, the man singing. (Laing 1970, p. 112)

Dave Laing goes on to argue that it was around this time that the disc became a truly autonomous medium, offering unique musical possibilities which finally set it apart from music on the stage or in the score. As with parallel developments in the other recording arts of film and television, these unique possibilities came about as a result of the blurring of distinctions between performance arts and creative arts, between the act of 'doing' and the act of 'making', and the consequent complicating of the relationship between the creator and his materials and the performer and his audience.

Thus in the recording arts our experience of an 'act of doing' is no longer bound to a particular occasion; instead the action, aural or visual, can be lifted out of the time continuum and given a solid embodiment in a made 'thing', to be released back into time when desired. The performer, although he looses direct contact with his public, has the chance to reach a much wider audience, and the opportunity to perfect his performance in solitude before they experience it. The 'act of making', on the other hand, has aural and/or visual events as material to work with, events which may include, or entirely consist of, performances. Not surprisingly, therefore, recording arts frequently involve a variety of skills: technical, performing, organisational and so forth, and as a result tend to be collaborative rather than individual ventures. Further, the artistic process becomes entwined with a production process which requires a concentration of capital (studios, pressing plants, etc.). In each society the question of who owns and has access to (under what conditions) these technological resources will have great bearing on what it is possible for recording arts to achieve.

The recording art of *rock* is one of a number of modern musics founded on the technology of sound recording – many avant garde and electronic musics, for example, are created in the studio rather than in performance or in a score – but it is musically distinct from these other forms in that it has clear origins in certain (Afro- and

Euro-American) performance traditions, aspects of which it has extended and adapted in exploring the musical possibilities of the new technology. Rock marks, then, a convergence of musical traditions and technological advances – the technology constantly extends the possibilities of what can be done with sounds, while the musical traditions provide means and motivations, forms and functions for exploiting these possibilities. Looked at in the context of the general history of song making, rock, through the development of sound recording, has added to the performance (aural) traditions characteristic of 'folk' and 'primitive' musics and the creative (notational) traditions typified by the 'art' song of the European composer a third option: the artistic–technological capability to *create* songs directly out of *performances*. The songmaker, in the workshop of the studio with any conceivable sound as his raw material, can lift his own or other performances out of time to be repeated and revised, speeded up or slowed down, enhanced or distorted, weaved in with any number of separate recorded performances and sounds, using the tape recorder and its more sophisticated extensions as an aid to composition whereby 'the inspiration of the moment may be fixed, considered, worked over at leisure' (Cole 1974, p. 153). In a sense this is the best of all worlds, combining the aural opportunities of performance with the eventual permanence of creation, combining features of both 'folk' and 'art'. Like folk and primitive musics (in which it has its roots), rock music has as its basis the art of performance, and therefore improvises and experiments with all kinds of vocal and instrumental sound. Like notated art musics, rock song on record is ultimately a lasting creation, a made 'thing'.

Criticism and criteria

A conception of rock music as a recording art, and of rock records as aural artefacts, can help guide us away from those blinkered critical perspectives which view rock songs solely in terms of criteria borrowed from either the performance or the creative arts. Critics preoccupied with the energy and spontaneity of *performance* will often overlook the extent to which even those recorded songs which exhibit a marked reliance on improvisation and expressive elaboration need to be evaluated ultimately as considered compositions. Thus the American rock critic, Greil Marcus, argues that Elvis Presley's earliest Sun recordings were not 'the natural (and the implicit assumption is, likely unthinking) expression of a folk culture' but on the contrary were:

> carefully and laboriously constructed out of hits and misses, riffs and bits of phrasing held through dozens of bad takes. The songs grew slowly, over hours

> and hours, into a music that paradoxically sounded much fresher than all the poor tries that had come before; until Presley, Bill Black and Scotty Moore had the attack in their blood and . . . didn't have to think about it. (Marcus 1977, p. 173)

Even in its comparatively primitive state in the mid-1950s, the technology of the tape-recorder allowed Presley and Sam Phillips to 'delay, recheck and refine the direct musical dialectic of an aural-tradition, performance-bound art' (Wishart 1977, pp. 147–8).

The evaluation of rock music based on inappropriate criteria drawn from the *creative* arts generally takes two forms: the literary critical assessment of words, or the musicological-notational assessment of music. In both cases the aural artefact of rock song on record is valued only to the extent that it can be reduced to the form of a visual artefact – a page poem or a musical score. In the classical tradition in which music is worked out as a written blueprint, or in literature in which language is set upon the page as prose or poetry, this may be an acceptable mode of analysis. Songs made in the studio, however, should be understood as considered aural compositions in which sounds are performed, recorded, treated and combined together often with no necessity for any kind of visual mediation whatsoever. It should also be understood that these are *songs*, each a synthesis of music and language so that even when one aspect is prominent, the musico-linguistic balance tilted a particular way – towards words in a Joni Mitchell song, towards formal music in an orchestrated Beatles ballad – our evaluation must still be based (as our experience of the song is) not on any one aural strand – lyrical, musical or vocal – but on the complex of created relationships between sounds as they act on us through time.

Given these *criteria*, we can then afford a degree of critical pragmatism, borrowing or adapting musical, linguistic, literary and drama critical *terms and techniques* where necessary. This is legitimate to the extent that we borrow only terms and techniques, and do not invoke wholesale the inappropriate criteria of the foreign discipline; it is, after all, possible to follow through Joni Mitchell's use of metaphor in 'A Case of You' without having to claim that the song is a poem, or the Beatles' use of strings in 'Eleanor Rigby' without having to claim it as an 'art' song. In the rest of this article I will offer some suggestions as to how appropriate criteria and terms and techniques for the analysis and evaluation of rock songs might be developed within the theoretical framework that has been outlined. I will firstly suggest a few ways in which our approach to the language of rock lyrics might be re-thought. To balance this, I will then offer an analysis of a song in which language

is the least prominent element, but in which the moment-by-moment interaction of *all* the aural ingredients – sounds which communicate linguistically, along with sounds which express paralinguistically and sounds which affect us musically – work to draw us into the powerful experience of a situation and a state of mind.

Rock language

In the mid-sixties, around the time of Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*, the notion of rock lyrics as poetry came into fashion; it became 'a truism among Dylan's admirers that he is a poet using rock-and-roll to spread his art' (Willis 1975, p. 100). As Dylan's use of language came to influence other rock artists, so the literary comparisons were extended to their songs as well: Van Morrison, being both Irish and mystic was heard as an echo of Yeats (see Mark 1979); the Beatles' 'A Day in the Life', being fragmented and kaleidoscopic, was regarded by some as an updating of T. S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland' (see Poirier 1969, p. 178). Rock-as-poetry became a marketable concept: Robert Christgau has observed of Procul Harem's 'A Whiter Shade of Pale' that 'from the ads . . . placed in the trades you might assume it was Shakespeare newly unearthed' (Christgau 1969, p. 235). Since the sixties, the vogue for placing rock heroes alongside literary luminaries has faded, as rock's own heritage has become an acknowledged source of its meanings, its language and its music. There still remains, however, the persuasive argument that the best way of talking about a rock lyric – an organised, intensified use of language – is with the aid of terms and techniques that have been tested on organised and intensified language for centuries: the terms and techniques of literary criticism. It is not an argument that can be accepted or rejected outright. On the one hand, if we dismiss literary criticism, we cut off a principal source of our vocabulary for talking about lyrics. On the other hand, we need to be wary not so much of the terms and techniques of literary criticism but of the *criteria* we may be tempted to assimilate along with them, especially the notion that the worth of a lyric can be gauged from how well it works when given visual representation (as a poem) on a page.

The words of a rock song work aurally, strung along a voice in real time. Whereas the 'sound' of a written poem is a synaesthetic experience, its aurality derived in the imagination from visual evidence, the sound of a song is actual – words realised in a particular way by a particular voice. 'The difference between the words on paper and the song', Bob Dylan once observed, is that 'the song disappears into the air, the paper stays. They have little in common' (quoted in Saal 1975, p. 106). Of course, Dylan's own songs very rarely disappear

completely into the air. They are caught (by studio engineers or bootleggers, depending on circumstances) on magnetic tape to be sent out again and again into the air as desired by the listener. In this sense (as part of an aural-*recorded* process) Dylan's songs have a permanence akin to that of the page poem. Nonetheless, the actual listening experience of a recorded song, each time we play it, is a matter of sounds coming at us through time, and this is the first aspect of the aural language of rock song we should consider.

When we read a poem, there is no 'time' consideration in our assimilation of it. We can pause and dwell on a word or line, an image or an idea for as long as we wish before moving on. Song, however, being time-bound, has a dramatic immediacy which allows us no intermediate stage between the moment's verbal/musical statement and our reaction. Listening to a rock song we can dwell on a word, an image, an idea only for as long as the performer/creator – the songmaker – allows us to; we cannot refer back, or skip forward, or pause and ponder, our only options are to listen to the song right through, or to switch the record player off. This is part of the point Simon Frith is making when he suggests that 'songs are more like plays than poems' (Frith 1980, p. 882). Like drama, in fact like all performance and recording arts, rock song 'corresponds directly with the continuum of our experiencing' (Wishart 1977, p. 130).

Whenever we begin to listen to a rock song on record, then, we effectively submit ourselves to the songmaker's manipulation of the time continuum. So far as language is concerned, this allows the vocalist, like an actor, to time each word or phrase for maximum impact, to pace his words, or rush through them, or dwell on them, leave them hanging on a silence – all devices whereby the rhythm of language can be used to dramatise the content of what is being said or sung. Take, for example, the way in which 'reggae poet' Linton Kwesi Johnson makes vivid and startling use of dramatic narrative to convey the menace and violence of racial conflict in 'Five Nights of Bleeding':

Night number five at the Telegraph:
vengeance walked through the doors
so slow
so smooth
so tight an ripe an smash
                                        broke glass;
a bottle finds a head
an the shell of the fire-hurt cracks;
the victim feels fear
                finds hands
                holds knife
                finds throat;

o the stabbings an the bleeding an the blood.
it's war amongst the rebels:
madness . . . madness . . . war.

The dramatic action has two stages, one leading to the 'smash', the other to the horrific silence which follows 'finds throat'. In each stage Johnson uses gaps in the lyric to expose the dark, insidious reggae beat and to set up a tension between language rhythm and musical measure. Thus the sonorities of 'slow' and 'smooth' are each followed by a wordless, edgy half-a-bar, nervous anticipation, before the catharsis of: 'so *tight* an *ripe* an *smash*'. The second stage of the song has no such release. The 'victim feels fear' (silence) 'finds hands' (silence) 'holds knife' (silence) 'finds throat' (silence) and then we are left with just a throbbing bass, a clutter of percussion and, as the silence sinks in, a deep sense of dread. The lyric as page poem (I have laid it out here as it is set out in Johnson's anthology *Dread, Beat and Blood*: 1975, p. 17) fails to convey this horror at the unspoken fate of the 'knife' and the 'throat'. A mere semi-colon cannot capture the dread of that moment on record; 'in a poem you can *see* all the time what the end is going to be', whereas in a song 'the end is not in front of your eyes' and you have no way of anticipating what will happen next (Ricks 1980, p. 49). This does not affect just the ends and climaxes of songs, but works moment to moment at every level, from our anticipation of each successive romantic simile in Smokey Robinson's 'It's Growing', to our concern for the 'fit' of musical and verbal syntax in Van Morrison's 'Astral Weeks', from the hammering out of a poetic conceit in Joni Mitchell's 'A Case of You', to the outlandish rhyming and chiming of words in Dylan's 'Subterranean Homesick Blues'. One consequence of this is that rock lyrics tend to favour stark, sharp imagery or expression rather than sustained, involved argument or reflection. They come at us through time – working directly on our response state, so that Wallace Steven's remark that 'one reads poetry with one's nerves' (Stevens 1966, p. 155), comes to seem even more appropriate for our listening to the language of rock song.

Another important result is that 'song words are always spoken out – we always hear them in somebody's voice' (Frith 1980, p. 882). The words of a song matter not only as meaningful signs but as human noise – as sounds which convey paralinguistically something of the personality, emotion, attitude at their source. This is especially so for songs and genres in which the voice comes to matter more than the words it carries, the words being merely the means by which emotion is channelled, directed, explained. The art of Otis Redding, for example, is less a matter of words than of the emotional intensity with

which they are delivered, and this is true of many soul, blues, and rhythm and blues singers (and their white imitators). In Redding's 'I've Been Loving You Too Long', the lyric is little more than a sequence of disjointed, fragmented utterances with key lines: 'I've been loving you for too long', 'I can't stop now', 'you were tired', and 'my love is growing stronger', repeated over and over to the point of seeming obsession. The words set the situation, they have us eavesdrop on the tragic disintegration of a relationship in which the lover/singer's 'love is growing stronger' while his beloved's 'love is growing cold', but the power of the song lies in the way Redding's voice charges each verbal moment with vocal passion and desperation. Simon Frith has observed that 'what makes these words convincing are the sounds around them. The exaggerated ooos and eees, the repetitions, the pauses and the hiccups, the slurs and interjections. What Redding suggests is the power of spontaneous feeling barely controlled by words or music' (Frith 1980, p. 882). Most of this description is of a surface structure of paralinguistic events, events in the flow of voice – gasping and gulping, jabbering and stuttering – which convey feelings instantly and empathetically from speaker to listener. By the climactic begging exhortation of the song, in which words and phrases are crushed or dismembered into gasping, pleading sounds, we can almost feel the muscular spasms which generate each imploring 'please'.

Earlier in his article Simon Frith notes that such non-verbal vocal effects have their corollary 'in our own daily lives where the most directly intense statements of our feelings involve not words but noises. We sigh and we gasp, we moan, we guffaw, cry, cheer, and so on' (Frith 1980, p. 882). What happens in an aural song tradition (performed or recorded) is that these sounds become part of an artist's dramatic resources. When Redding sings 'Oh baby I'm down on my knees', we know that he is not, and that his traumatised voice is in response to no one at all, there is no woman on the receiving end of his dramatic pleas – but this does not mean that the voice is not *meant* for anybody. It is meant for us, the listeners, not as direct address of course, rather as an invitation for us to enter into the singer's dramatic fiction, to suspend our disbelief and infer a situation from the words and voice we hear. We do much the same whenever we read a poem and flesh out an imagined world around it on the basis of the verbal implications it provides, only in a rock or soul song it is not only words but paralinguistic sounds (intonation, rhythm, vocal texture, dynamics) involved in the delivery of words that carry implications of character and circumstance.

In evaluating rock lyrics, then, we need to keep in mind both their

aural and their *vocal* nature: we hear a song as a continuous happening, and we hear it too in somebody's voice. The language of rock, it follows, falls somewhere between poetry and drama, another instance of the 'ambiguous situation' of rock as a recording art. Like poetry, it has a lasting embodiment and involves the creative organisation of language. Like drama, it works through performance, in real time, and can draw upon the expressive resources of the human voice. There is, of course, a further point to be made. We must remember that rock words are just the linguistic dimension of a musico-linguistic synthesis – that, in Frith's words, 'rock meaning cannot be detached from musical form' (Frith 1979, p. 17). As Redding cries 'please . . . please . . . please' at the climax of 'I've Been Loving You Too Long', he does so as part of a cacophony, his words battering hopelessly against a ruthless, rising wall of horns, just as they batter against the indifference of his lover. When, in 'Sail Away', Randy Newman sings 'climb aboard little wog and sail away with me', what has promised to be (in terms of musical convention) a gloriously orchestrated hymn to America is warped into a hymn to the American Original Sin of slavery, leaving us as listeners to cope with the contradictions and ironies. Even in a song as wordy as Joni Mitchell's 'Furry Sings the Blues', we cannot divorce the powerful, poetic narrative from the haunting, cyclical movement of the music which frames it, or the emotional texture of its unresolved chords, or Neil Young's lonesome, vulnerable harmonica which, though wordless, perhaps best articulates the bleak world of the dying blues singer. Each song and song convention will have a different balance and interrelationship between words, voice and music, and, as Michael Parsons has observed, 'to speak as if the words are the primary element and the music subsidiary to them is to reduce the impact and oversimplify the complexity of feeling of which words and music together are capable' (Parsons 1969, pp. 118–19). To conclude, then, I will consider the synthesis of music and language in a particular rock recording.

Ian Dury's 'Waiting For Your Taxi': language and music as sounds in synthesis

Along a jazz-rock riff Ian Dury (or rather *two* Durys double-tracked an octave apart) sings:

Waiting for your taxi
Which taxi never come
Waiting for your taxi.

The lyric sets the scene, and the voice(s) in which it is sung – muted,

resigned – sets the mood. We are stood, with Dury's persona, in a taxi queue for an indefinite duration. The words end, and so, for a moment, does the music, leaving only a whispering synthesiser pulse to mark time for a few bars. Over this pulse we hear the sounds of the street, the rumble of cars passing by, the aural world of the taxi queue. Then Dury and his bass-voiced *doppelgänger* return with the same riff and the same lyric:

Waiting for your taxi
Which taxi never come
Waiting for your taxi.

And once more we find ourselves outside on the street, listening to the traffic with only that thread of a synthesiser pulse to give us musical bearings. The street sounds give way once more to that steady riff, but this time the repeated lyric (by now established as a refrain) is prefaced by gratingly off-key horns (musical horns, that is), straining upwards for resolution. The refrain which follows is in turn followed by more traffic (with a slight lull) which then gives way to a fourth refrain. By now the pattern is set: Dury has us caught in the time-suspending alternation, our ears screening the intervals of street noise for signs of release, of an impending cab, while our nerves are worked on by that nagging riff, that repetitive lyric, and the occasional punctuation of frustrated horns. After the fourth refrain, in the street once more, we hear a hubbub – people jostling, voices debating destinations, the thud of a car door and the revving of an engine. Someone, it seems, has caught a taxi, and all of a sudden where we expect the riff and refrain, the music changes key and blows its top in a shrieking tantrum of a saxophone solo. It is a cathartic moment – a frightening release of pent-up tension and impotent rage. But quickly we are back with the riff and the – this time peculiarly subdued – refrain:

Waiting for your taxi
Which taxi never come
Waiting for your taxi.

Just as disturbing as the shrieking saxophone solo is the near silence that now ensues in the wake of this refrain. All we can hear is a faint murmur of faraway traffic, and most unsettling of all is the sudden absence of that whispering synthesiser, and therefore of any musical bearings. We are, for a moment, fully involved in the aural alienation of the taxi queue. Rescue takes the form of another refrain, the sixth, which is both welcome in its breaking of the street silence, and, by this stage, irritatingly repetitive. We are eager, by now, for an end to the song, and our hopes are raised when the next sound we hear is of a car

pulling to a halt. Could this be our taxi? Two lines into the seventh refrain, just as we are beginning to doubt that it is, the song is suddenly cut short. It is a welcome, albeit startling conclusion – a relief after our comic-chilling forced empathy with Dury's taxi-watcher. We relax and wait for the needle to lift, instead of which, as suddenly as it ended, the song, in a flood of moaning horns, returns with a final refrain:

Waiting for your taxi
Which taxi never come
Waiting for your . . . TAX-I!

The final full-throated cry at last provides a release, musically, emotionally and dramatically.

'Waiting For Your Taxi' puts a situation and a state of mind into sound, and involves us, through our moment by moment immediacy of response, in both of them. The taped 'actuality' of street sounds (skilfully selected and edited so as to maximise our frustration) introduces us to the *situation*, the aural world of the taxi queue, while the juxtaposition of the deadpan passivity of the lead vocal(s) with the manic terror of the saxophone solo musically dramatises the *state of mind*, the mental world of Dury's taxi-seeker, his outward calm concealing an inner turmoil. How we hear the song will depend to a great extent on our willingness to give way fully to the aural-musical experience it offers. We may delve no further than the comic surface of the song, appreciating particularly the deft and audacious manipulation of the listener's responses. The street sounds, for example, continually mislead and irritate us: a car pulls up, our hopes are raised, back come the riff and refrain, our hopes are dashed. It is especially laughable that this sustained aggravation eventually makes the arrival of the taxi as absurdly crucial, and the wait for it as profoundly unendurable for us as it is for Dury's persona. The song has its darker aspect, however, and our ordeal in the taxi queue can, if we allow it to, provide an experience which is as unnerving as it is farcical. Much depends on the openness of our response to the sounds as they reach us, on our willingness, for example, to submit to being stretched on the emotional rack of those intermittent struggling horns, or jabbed and pestered by the frantic saxophone, or chilled by the sudden snapping of the synthesiser thread which leaves us exposed to the ominous quiet of the street. Once we involve ourselves to this extent we become aware of the point at which humour shades into horror, novelty into nightmare, comedy into Absurdity.

'Waiting For Your Taxi' should be understood as less a song about taxis than a song about waiting – the act of waiting which Martin Esslin (writing about Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1955)) considers 'an essential

and characteristic aspect of the human condition' (Esslin 1968, p. 49). In fact it is more than about waiting, it actually (like the theatrical experience of Beckett's play) *makes us wait*. Esslin has observed that 'it is in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of *time* in its purest, most evident form. If we are active we tend to forget the passage of time, but if we are merely passively waiting, we are confronted with the action of time itself.' (1961, p. 49) Such a confrontation can be precisely engineered in the recording art of rock which, like the performance art of drama (Beckett's medium), and unlike the static creative arts of poetry and painting, works through, and can alter our experience of, real, experiential time. Dury, working with the song convention of brief rather than (theatrical) lengthy time-scales, has the monotony of long-term waiting condensed into the short-term monotony of repetition – a cyclical, time-suspending alternation of refrains and sound effects. It is within this framework that he sets up the duality of aural experience that we noted above: the street sounds, the murmur of traffic, the snatches of conversation, the slamming of car doors and revving of engines which *affect* us, irritate us, worry us almost as if *we* are the ones waiting for the taxi, and the reactive music of horns, saxophone and voice which collaborate to *express* to us the emotional state (outer passivity, inner mutilation) of Dury's taxi-seeker. Through these musical and aural devices we are caught in a complex and unnerving response state: our experiences of the aural isolation of the taxi queue leads us to empathise with the plight of Dury's persona, but such empathy involves an acknowledgement of a darker, more dangerous sense of isolation, a more fundamental anxiety than it is safe to acknowledge (which is why laughter may be a preferred response, a 'precaution against panic' (Esslin 1973, p. 51)).

It is interesting to speculate what criticism based on borrowed criteria might make of 'Waiting For Your Taxi'. A literary critical approach, isolating the lyric on the page, would find little of interest in Dury's three-line refrain, and would overlook the crucial contribution of the paralanguage – the tone of voice and of voice-imitating instruments – to the song. A musicological approach, if not too hamstrung by notational preconceptions, might investigate the elements of jazz and rock in the music, note the jazz influences on Davey Payne's saxophone technique, for example, but would not explain the role of music in conveying situation and persona. The attentive and involved listener permits no such fragmentation – he experiences the song first and foremost as a continuous and coherent aural event. From such a perspective, aspects of sound and meaning, of music and language, are not examined for their own sake but for

how they act upon each other and on us, moment by moment, to establish the total musico-linguistic significance of the song.

'Waiting For Your Taxi' demonstrates the practical application of the criteria established earlier – criteria which are appropriate to the medium (aural-recorded), the form (musico-linguistic) and the musicology (ambiguously set between Afro-American and Euro-American) which characterise rock song. Thus the emotional potency of those moaning horns and the alarmingly 'vocal' saxophone are clearly grounded in two essential features of Afro-American music: the use of aural order and disorder as a metaphor for ordered and disordered reality (community, environment, psyche), and the close connection of much black instrumental music with the expressive characteristics of the human voice. Similarly, a conception of rock song as a *recording art* helps us understand the way the song is made; how Dury contrives such a strange (multi-tracked) duet with his own voice, how street sounds are captured, selected and edited (on magnetic tape), how the startling saxophone playing of Davey Payne (perfected in a series of takes) comes to act as a musical reaction to those street sounds. Overall we can see how the studio is used by Ian Dury and his band, the Blockheads (as by Hendrix, the Beatles and many others before them) as a workshop within which a diversity of aural materials, including performances, can be subjected to a variety of treatments and then combined, mixed and re-mixed, pared down or augmented until judged aurally and experientially to be exactly the sound(s) desired.

So, as with Jimi Hendrix with whom we began, the 'magic' of 'Waiting For Your Taxi' as a musico-linguistic experience owes as much to the 'science' of recording and manipulating sounds as it does to the skill and spontaneity of performances. In fact we have seen how in all rock songs, even those in which post-production mixing and editing matter little (the songs of Linton Kwesi Johnson or Otis Redding, for example), the ability to record sounds and seal them in the lasting form of an object has opened up a whole new dimension of musico-linguistic possibility. To understand and evaluate such songs (even as a prelude to placing them in a wider sociological or cultural context), we need critical theories and methods which do justice to *all* aspects of sound which count in our listening experience.

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