The New York Times Magazine | http://nyti.ms/1s4qGCb

Which Rock Star Will Historians of the Future Remember?

The most important musical form of the 20th century will be nearly forgotten one day. People will probably learn about the genre through one figure — but who might that be?

By CHUCK KLOSTERMAN MAY 23, 2016

Classifying anyone as the "most successful" at anything tends to reflect more on the source than the subject. So keep that in mind when I make the following statement: John Philip Sousa is the most successful American musician of all time.

Marching music is a maddeningly durable genre, recognizable to pretty much everyone who has lived in the United States for any period. It works as a sonic shorthand for any filmmaker hoping to evoke the late 19th century and serves as the auditory backdrop for national holidays, the circus and college football. It's not "popular" music, but it's entrenched within the popular experience. It will be no less fashionable tomorrow than it is today.

And this entire musical idiom is now encapsulated in one person: John Philip Sousa. Even the most cursory two-sentence description of marching music inevitably cites him by name. I have no data on this, but I would assert that if we were to ask the entire population of the United States to name every composer of marching music they could think of, 98 percent of the populace would name either one person (Sousa) or no one at all. There's just no separation between the awareness of this person and the awareness of this music, and it's hard to believe that will ever change.

Now, the reason this happened — or at least the explanation we've decided to accept — is that Sousa was simply the best at this art. He composed 136 marches

over a span of six decades and is regularly described as the most famous musician of his era. The story of his life and career has been shoehorned into the U.S. education curriculum at a fundamental level. (I first learned of Sousa in fourth grade, a year before we memorized the state capitals.) And this, it seems, is how mainstream musical memory works. As the timeline moves forward, tangential artists in any field fade from the collective radar, until only one person remains; the significance of that individual is then exaggerated, until the genre and the person become interchangeable. Sometimes this is easy to predict: I have zero doubt that the worldwide memory of Bob Marley will eventually have the same tenacity and familiarity as the worldwide memory of reggae itself.

But envisioning this process with rock music is harder. Almost anything can be labeled "rock": Metallica, ABBA, Mannheim Steamroller, a haircut, a muffler. If you're a successful tax lawyer who owns a hot tub, clients will refer to you as a "rock-star C.P.A." when describing your business to less-hip neighbors. The defining music of the first half of the 20th century was jazz; the defining music of the second half of the 20th century was rock, but with an ideology and saturation far more pervasive. Only television surpasses its influence.

And pretty much from the moment it came into being, people who liked rock insisted it was dying. The critic Richard Meltzer supposedly claimed that rock was already dead in 1968. And he was wrong to the same degree that he was right. Meltzer's wrongness is obvious and does not require explanation, unless you honestly think "Purple Rain" is awful. But his rightness is more complicated: Rock is dead, in the sense that its "aliveness" is a subjective assertion based on whatever criteria the listener happens to care about.

This is why the essential significance of rock remains a plausible thing to debate, as does the relative value of major figures within that system (the Doors, R.E.M., Radiohead). It still projects the illusion of a universe containing multitudes. But it won't seem that way in 300 years.

The symbolic value of rock is conflict-based: It emerged as a byproduct of the post-World War II invention of the teenager, soundtracking a 25-year period when the gap between generations was utterly real and uncommonly vast. That dissonance

gave rock music a distinctive, nonmusical importance for a long time. But that period is over. Rock — or at least the anthemic, metaphoric, Hard Rock Cafe version of big rock — has become more socially accessible but less socially essential, synchronously shackled by its own formal limitations. Its cultural recession is intertwined with its cultural absorption. As a result, what we're left with is a youth-oriented music genre that a) isn't symbolically important; b) lacks creative potential; and c) has no specific tie to young people. It has completed its historical trajectory. Which means, eventually, it will exist primarily as an academic pursuit. It will exist as something people have to be taught to feel and understand.

I imagine a college classroom in 300 years, in which a hip instructor is leading a tutorial filled with students. These students relate to rock music with no more fluency than they do the music of Mesopotamia: It's a style they've learned to recognize, but just barely (and only because they've taken this specific class). Nobody in the room can name more than two rock songs, except the professor. He explains the sonic structure of rock, its origins, the way it served as cultural currency and how it shaped and defined three generations of a global superpower. He shows the class a photo, or perhaps a hologram, of an artist who has been intentionally selected to epitomize the entire concept. For these future students, that singular image defines what rock was.

So what's the image?

Certainly, there's one response to this hypothetical that feels immediate and sensible: the Beatles. All logic points to their dominance. They were the most popular band in the world during the period they were active and are only slightly less popular now, five decades later. The Beatles defined the concept of what a "rock group" was supposed to be, and all subsequent rock groups are (consciously or unconsciously) modeled upon the template they naturally embodied. Their 1964 appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show" is so regularly cited as the genesis for other bands that they arguably invented the culture of the 1970s, a decade when they were no longer together. The Beatles arguably invented everything, including the very notion of a band's breaking up. There are still things about the Beatles that can't be explained, almost to the point of the supernatural: the way their music resonates with toddlers, for example, or the way it resonated with Charles Manson. It's

impossible to imagine another rock group where half its members faced unrelated assassination attempts. In any reasonable world, the Beatles are the answer to the question “Who will be the Sousa of rock?”

But our world is not reasonable. And the way this question will be asked tomorrow is (probably) not the same way we would ask it today.

In Western culture, virtually everything is understood through the process of storytelling, often to the detriment of reality. When we recount history, we tend to use the life experience of one person — the “journey” of a particular “hero,” in the lingo of the mythologist Joseph Campbell — as a prism for understanding everything else. That inclination works to the Beatles’ communal detriment. But it buoys two other figures: Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan. The Beatles are the most meaningful group, but Elvis and Dylan are the towering individuals, so eminent that I wouldn’t necessarily need to use Elvis’s last name or Dylan’s first.

Still, neither is an ideal manifestation of rock as a concept.

It has been said that Presley invented rock and roll, but he actually staged a form of primordial “prerock” that barely resembles the post-“Rubber Soul” aesthetics that came to define what this music is. He also exited rock culture relatively early; he was pretty much out of the game by 1973. Conversely, Dylan’s career spans the entirety of rock. Yet he never made an album that “rocked” in any conventional way (the live album “Hard Rain” probably comes closest). Still, these people are rock people. Both are integral to the core of the enterprise and influenced everything we have come to understand about the form (including the Beatles themselves, a group that would not have existed without Elvis and would not have pursued introspection without Dylan).

In 300 years, the idea of “rock music” being represented by a two-pronged combination of Elvis and Dylan would be equitable and oddly accurate. But the passage of time makes this progressively more difficult. It’s always easier for a culture to retain one story instead of two, and the stories of Presley and Dylan barely intersect (they supposedly met only once, in a Las Vegas hotel room). As I write this sentence, the social stature of Elvis and Dylan feels similar, perhaps even identical. But it’s entirely possible one of them will be dropped as time plods forward. And if

that happens, the consequence will be huge. If we concede that the "hero's journey" is the de facto story through which we understand history, the differences between these two heroes would profoundly alter the description of what rock music supposedly was.

If Elvis (minus Dylan) is the definition of rock, then rock is remembered as showbiz. Like Frank Sinatra, Elvis did not write songs; he interpreted songs that were written by other people (and like Sinatra, he did this brilliantly). But removing the centrality of songwriting from the rock equation radically alters it. Rock becomes a performative art form, where the meaning of a song matters less than the person singing it. It becomes personality music, and the dominant qualities of Presley's persona — his sexuality, his masculinity, his larger-than-life charisma — become the dominant signifiers of what rock was. His physical decline and reclusive death become an allegory for the entire culture. The reminiscence of the rock genre adopts a tragic hue, punctuated by gluttony, drugs and the conscious theft of black culture by white opportunists.

But if Dylan (minus Elvis) becomes the definition of rock, everything reverses. In this contingency, lyrical authenticity becomes everything; rock is somehow calcified as an intellectual craft, interlocked with the folk tradition. It would be remembered as far more political than it actually was, and significantly more political than Dylan himself. The fact that Dylan does not have a conventionally "good" singing voice becomes retrospective proof that rock audiences prioritized substance over style, and the portrait of his seven-decade voyage would align with the most romantic version of how an eclectic collection of autonomous states eventually became a place called "America."

These are the two best versions of this potential process. And both are flawed.

There is, of course, another way to consider how these things might unspool, and it might be closer to the way histories are actually built. I'm creating a binary reality where Elvis and Dylan start the race to posterity as equals, only to have one runner fall and disappear. The one who remains "wins" by default (and maybe that happens). But it might work in reverse. A more plausible situation is that future people will haphazardly decide how they want to remember rock, and whatever they

decide will dictate who is declared its architect. If the constructed memory is a caricature of big-hair arena rock, the answer is probably Elvis; if it's a buoyant, unrealistic apparition of punk hagiography, the answer is probably Dylan. But both conclusions direct us back to the same recalcitrant question: What makes us remember the things we remember?

In 2014, the jazz historian Ted Gioia published a short essay about music criticism that outraged a class of perpetually outraged music critics. Gioia's assertion was that 21st-century music writing has devolved into a form of lifestyle journalism that willfully ignores the technical details of the music itself. Many critics took this attack personally and accused Gioia of devaluing their vocation. Which is odd, considering the colossal degree of power Gioia ascribes to record reviewers: He believes specialists are the people who galvanize history. Critics have almost no impact on what music is popular at any given time, but they're extraordinarily well positioned to dictate what music is reintroduced after its popularity has waned.

"Over time, critics and historians will play a larger role in deciding whose fame endures," Gioia wrote me in an email. "Commercial factors will have less impact. I don't see why rock and pop will follow any different trajectory from jazz and blues." He rattled off several illustrative examples: Ben Selvin outsold Louis Armstrong in the 1920s. In 1956, Nelson Riddle and Les Baxter outsold "almost every rock 'n' roll star not named Elvis," but they've been virtually erased from the public record. A year after that, the closeted gay crooner Tab Hunter was bigger than Jerry Lee Lewis and Fats Domino, "but critics and music historians hate sentimental love songs. They've constructed a perspective that emphasizes the rise of rock and pushes everything else into the background. Transgressive rockers, in contrast, enjoy lasting fame." He points to a contemporary version of that phenomenon: "Right now, electronic dance music probably outsells hip-hop. This is identical to the punk-versus-disco trade-off of the 1970s. My prediction: edgy hip-hop music will win the fame game in the long run, while E.D.M. will be seen as another mindless dance craze."

Gioia is touching on a variety of volatile ideas here, particularly the outsize memory of transgressive art. His example is the adversarial divide between punk and disco: In 1977, the disco soundtrack to "Saturday Night Fever" and the Sex Pistols' "Never

Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols" were both released. The soundtrack to "Saturday Night Fever" has sold more than 15 million copies; it took "Never Mind the Bollocks" 15 years to go platinum. Yet virtually all pop historiographers elevate the importance of the Pistols above that of the Bee Gees. The same year the Sex Pistols finally sold the millionth copy of their debut, SPIN magazine placed them on a list of the seven greatest bands of all time. "Never Mind the Bollocks" is part of the White House record library, supposedly inserted by Amy Carter just before her dad lost to Ronald Reagan. The album's reputation improves by simply existing: In 1985, the British publication NME classified it as the 13th-greatest album of all time; in 1993, NME made a new list and decided it now deserved to be ranked third. This has as much to do with its transgressive identity as its musical integrity. The album is overtly transgressive (and therefore memorable), while "Saturday Night Fever" has been framed as a prefab totem of a facile culture (and thus forgettable). For more than three decades, that has been the overwhelming consensus.

But I've noticed — just in the last four or five years — that this consensus is shifting. Why? Because the definition of "transgressive" is shifting. It's no longer appropriate to dismiss disco as superficial. More and more, we recognize how disco latently pushed gay, urban culture into white suburbia, which is a more meaningful transgression than going on a British TV talk show and swearing at the host. So is it possible that the punk-disco polarity will eventually flip? Yes. It's possible everyone could decide to reverse how we remember 1977. But there's still another stage here, beyond that hypothetical inversion: the stage in which everybody who was around for punk and disco is dead and buried, and no one is left to contradict how that moment felt. When that happens, the debate over transgressions freezes and all that is left is the music. Which means the Sex Pistols could win again or maybe they lose bigger, depending on the judge.

"There is a justice-driven part of my brain that believes — or needs to believe — that the cream rises to the top, and the best work endures by virtue of its goodness," argues the music writer Amanda Petrusich, author of "Do Not Sell at Any Price," a dive into the obsessive world of 78 r.p.m. record collectors. "That music becomes emblematic because it's the most effective. When I think of rock and who might survive, I immediately think of the Rolling Stones. They're a band that sounds like

what we've all decided rock 'n' roll should sound like: loose and wild. Their story reflects that ethos and sound: loose and wild. And also, they're good."

This is true. The Rolling Stones are good, even when they release records like "Bridges to Babylon." They've outlived every band that ever competed against them, with career album sales exceeding the present population of Brazil. From a credibility standpoint, the Rolling Stones are beyond reproach, regardless of how they choose to promote themselves: They've performed at the Super Bowl, in a Kellogg's commercial and on an episode of "Beverly Hills, 90210." The name of the biggest magazine covering rock music was partly inspired by their sheer existence. The group members have faced arrest on multiple continents, headlined the most disastrous concert in California history and classified themselves (with surprisingly little argument) as "the greatest rock and roll band in the world" since 1969. Working from the premise that the collective memory of rock should dovetail with the artist who most accurately represents what rock music actually was, the Rolling Stones are a strong answer.

But not the final answer.

NASA sent the unmanned craft Voyager I into deep space in 1977. It's still out there, forever fleeing Earth's pull. No man-made object has ever traveled farther; it crossed the orbit of Pluto in 1989 and currently tumbles through the interstellar wasteland. The hope was that this vessel would eventually be discovered by intelligent extraterrestrials, so NASA included a compilation album made of gold, along with a rudimentary sketch of how to play it with a stylus. A team led by Carl Sagan curated the album's contents. The record, if played by the aliens, is supposed to reflect the diversity and brilliance of earthling life. This, obviously, presupposes a lot of insane hopes: that the craft will somehow be found, that the craft will somehow be intact, that the aliens who find it will be vaguely human, that these vaguely human aliens will absorb stimuli both visually and sonically and that these aliens will not still be listening to eight-tracks.

But it did guarantee that one rock song will exist even if the earth is spontaneously swallowed by the sun: "Johnny B. Goode," by Chuck Berry. The song was championed by Ann Druyan (who later become Sagan's wife) and Timothy

Ferris, a science writer and friend of Sagan's who contributed to Rolling Stone magazine. According to Ferris, who was the album's de facto producer, the folklorist Alan Lomax was against the selection of Berry, based on the argument that rock music was too childish to represent the highest achievements of the planet. (I'm assuming Lomax wasn't too heavily engaged with the debate over the Sex Pistols and "Saturday Night Fever" either.) "Johnny B. Goode" is the only rock song on the Voyager disc, although a few other tunes were considered. "Here Comes the Sun" was a candidate, and all four Beatles wanted it to be included, but none of them owned the song's copyright, so it was killed for legal reasons.

The fact that this happened in 1977 was also relevant to the song's selection. "Johnny B. Goode" was 19 years old that year, which made it seem distinguished, almost prehistoric, at the time. I suspect the main reason "Johnny B. Goode" was chosen is that it just seemed like a reasonable track to select. But it was more than reasonable. It was, either deliberately or accidentally, the best possible artist for NASA to select. Chuck Berry may very well become the artist society selects when rock music is retroactively reconsidered by the grandchildren of your grandchildren.

Let's assume all the individual components of rock shatter and dissolve, leaving behind a hazy residue that categorizes rock 'n' roll as a collection of memorable tropes. If this transpires, historians will reconstitute the genre like a puzzle. They will look at those tropes as a suit and try to decide who fits that suit best. And that theoretical suit was tailored for Chuck Berry's body.

Rock music is simple, direct, rhythm-based music. Berry made simple, direct, rhythm-based music.

Rock music is black music mainstreamed by white musicians, particularly white musicians from England. Berry is a black man who directly influenced Keith Richards and Jimmy Page.

Rock music is preoccupied with sex. Berry was a sex addict whose only American No. 1 single was about playing with his penis.

Rock music is lawless. Berry went to prison twice before he turned 40.

Rock music is tied to myth and legend (so much so that the decline of rock's prominence coincides with the rise of the Internet and the destruction of anecdotal storytelling). Berry is the subject of multiple urban legends, several of which might actually be true and which often seem to involve cheapness, violence and sexual defecation.

"If you tried to give rock and roll another name," John Lennon famously said, "you might call it Chuck Berry." That quote is as close as we come to a full-on Sousa scenario, where the person and the thing are ideologically interchangeable. Chuck Berry's persona is the purest distillation of what we understand rock music to be. The songs he made are essential, but secondary to who he was and why he made them. He is the idea itself.

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A version of this article appears in print on May 29, 2016, on page MM40 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Rock of Ages.
