

Rock Me

By Wes Brooks

Forgive me, I'm brand new at this. I don't know if it's gauche to begin with a disclaimer, but here's one anyway. I play guitar and sing in a band. I don't think that gives me the upper hand determining what's cool or not in the world of music. However, it's given me first-hand appreciation for what it takes to make the "music" you hear on popular radio today. You might also be wondering how old I am. I'm the same age as the kids in the Netflix series *Stranger Things* would be today. That's as much as you're getting out of me.

Merle Haggard wrote "Are We Rollin' Downhill" to voice his overall disdain for how he saw the state of our nation back in 1981. One might use the same metaphor for what the pop radio gives us today. I'll give it a shot.

*I wish a coke was still cola and a joint was a bad place to be
Back before Nixon lied to us all on TV*

Perhaps its age, but I just can't wrap my head around the stuff on pop radio today. To me, most songs seem to be formulaic, computer-generated melodies which are completely bankrupt of substance. I don't ask much, only that it's honest. What I mean by that is, when you hear a song do you believe the person singing it?

C'mon Taylor, sing me another song about breaking up with your boyfriend.

Sit with this for a while: the songs that are going to be popular have already been determined. Don't believe me? Do you remember the last time you called a radio station to request your favorite song? Give it a try. Spoiler alert: unless you're calling a college radio station, you can't. In most cases, the songs you are hearing on your radio are fed to the radio stations via the Internet. Who tells the radio stations what's popular? Record companies. Who tells them? It's supposed to be us. What this has done is create an environment where you won't ever see another Van Halen... or Guns 'n Roses... The environment for new band like that is almost impossible to survive. A band basically has to become their own cottage industry before a record label recognizes them, but that's a topic for another day.

I could wax nostalgic for three more paragraphs about how I miss the good ol' days, but I'm already flirting with sounding like a cynic and that's not the message I want to give the reader. Sure, there's still great new music being made, it just seems to be hidden behind a widening morass of cookie-cutter pop. You know you miss it..."Comin' up next is a hot new band that's makin' a lotta waves in (insert city here) with their single that climbing the charts..."

*Before the Beatles and Yesterday
When a man could still work and still would.*

I'd give myself a solid "C+" when grading my ability to play the guitar, *but I earned it*. It is not easy. You see, everything I learned was by ear. That means endless hours of listen—repeat—listen—repeat—listen—repeat. But I loved it, and I still do. When guitar was brand new to me guitarists like Eddie Van Halen, Billy Duffy (The Cult), Billy Gibbons (ZZ Top), Stevie Ray Vaughan, and The Edge (U2) were all over the radio.

What I've noticed is that the young guys learning their craft are all studying these guys too. Why? Two thoughts immediately come to mind: first and most obvious, the guys I just named are insanely good at

their craft; second, maybe there aren't any contemporary guitar players who inspire a young person to pick the instrument up. Why would you take the time learning the guitar, bass, or drums when there are computer programs that'll have you recreating all three in an afternoon?

Side note: God bless my parents for enduring the years of noise that emanated from my room when I was learning. I mention all that to point out that when I was learning, almost all players I tried to emulate were at the height of their fame at that moment.

Wait a second! Are me and my fellow Generation-X'ers to blame? Did we kill being a guitar hero when we gave the world the anti-hero grunge movement in the 1990's? Yikes, I hope not.

*Is the best of the free life behind us now
Are the good times really over for good?*

No, Mr. Haggard, they are not. There's plenty of good stuff out there if you look for it. Are you losing faith? I suggest you give a listen to Jason Isbell or Sturgill Simpson, or The Jompson Brothers. The good times are alive and kickin.

If you have a child who's expressed any interest in playing an instrument I hope you will encourage him or her with every resource at your disposal. It'll make them smarter. It's a scientific fact. Remind your burgeoning musician that there is no instant gratification in taking on their instrument until they've put in the work. However, if they love it half as much as I do they'll never stop wanting to learn. Besides, they just might give us the next Stairway to Heaven. I hope they do. Until then, I'm waiting to be rocked.