The Forbidding Entrance of Rock

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An Essay (no further chapters).

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Chapter 1

It seems incredible that a force of such seismic power and influence as Led Zeppelin should emerge from the relative innocence of the London Blues and session music scenes of the sixties, but then a similar thing could be said of British Rock as a whole. What was it that transformed an interest among young men of largely middle class origins in the bleak brooding music of the Blues into a musical movement which took America and the world at large by storm in the late '60s and early '70s? That's not an easy question to answer, but I'm going to give it some sort of a go.

The Blues themselves may provide something of a solution to the puzzle. Widely believed to have begun life as a secularised version of the black Gospel music of the American south, with lyrics reflecting the sensuality, isolation and anguish of lost souls victimised by life and alienated from God, they found fertile soil in the still repressed United Kingdom of the late 1950s and early sixties. They did so especially inthe affluent south among men such as Brian Jones from the genteel spa town of Cheltenham, Eric Clapton from Surbiton - via Ripley - in Surrey, and Jimmy Page from nearby Epsom, also in Surrey.

However, it'snot any of these superstars, but aParis-born guitarist and pianist of Greek and Austrian ancestrywho has been called the Founding Father of British Blues. Justifiably so, too, because possibly more than anyone, Alexis Korner was the incubator of the '60s Blues Boom which was one of the great cornerstones of the entire Rock movement. He began his musical career in 1949 as a member of Chris Barber's Jazz Band, but his love of the kindred but then lesser known music of the Blues led ultimately to his forming the band Blues Incorporated in 1961, with singer Long John Baldry, harmonica player Cyril Davies, guitarist Jack Bruce, saxophonist Dick Heckstall-Smith and drummer Charlie Watts.

In addition to those already mentioned, the list offuture Rock starswho were drawn to Korner's regular Rythym and Blues night at the Ealing Jazz Club in the early '60s includedMick Jagger, Keith Richards, Brian Jones, Ginger Baker, Jimmy Page, Rod Stewart,and Paul Pond.

Pond, a tall, elegant Oxford undergraduate with the chiselled good looks of a Greek god,had been Brian Jones' first choice as vocalist for his band the Rollin' Stones, but he turned him down in the belief that the Blues had no future. He later resurfaced as Paul Jones,front man for Manfred Mann, one of the first wave of British Blues bands to achieve mainstream Pop success, along with the Rolling Stones, the Animals, the Spencer Davis Group, the Yardbirds etc.He became a born again Christian in the mid 1980s, after having been invited to an event featuring Brazilian evangelist Luis Palau by fellow former teen idol, Cliff Richard.

However, the British Rock explosion was not just fuelled by the Blues, because by the early '60s, an effervescent fusion of Rock and Roll, Skiffle, R&B, Doo-Wop, Soul and even traditional Classic Pop had emerged from several British cities most notably the tough industrial towns of Liverpool and Birmingham, before going on to take the UK charts by storm. It was the sound of Beat, and no bandincarnatedit to quitethe samedegree asthe Beatles.

That said, to further confuse matters, the term Beat - or rather Big Beat - had been used to describe a music genre as early as 1961 by the writer Royston Ellis, a close friend of John Lennon's due to their shared appreciation of the Beat poets. In Ellis's book "The Big Beat Scene", the term Beat is used to describe the music of the first British Pop stars to emerge in the wake of the Rock revolution, such as Billy Fury, Joe Brown, Marty Wilde et al, as well as a host of lesser known ones. But then Rock is also used as an abbreviation for Rock and Roll in the selfsame book.

The Beatles are seen by some as the inventors of modern guitar Pop. While this is debatable, they are without doubt the best known and most successful Pop group in history. Yet, they themselves resisted being typecast as mere Pop, and could be said to have ultimately promoted a type of Rock with Pop elements which was yet no less removed from pure Pop than the Blues-based Rock of their chief rivals the Rolling Stones. The overwhelming melodiousness of their classic period of 1964-'69 was founded on a vast variety of genres including Classical music, Folk, Classic Pop, Country and Western, Rock and Roll, Soul and Motown, and even the Blues, leading one to conclude that largely through the Beatles, Rock became the ultimate musical smorgasbord, a veritable Babel of musical styles.

During their brief few years of existence, they informed the development of Rock to a greater degree than any

other group or solo singer, and that includes the Rolling Stones, whose early style was far more rooted in the Delta and Chicago Blues than that of the Beatles, which was lighter, or Poppier. The Stones' uncompromisingly primal rhythmic proto-Rock went on to form the basis of Hard Rock and Heavy Metal, and yet even these have to a greater or lesser extent benefited from the unrelenting melodic inventiveness of the Beatles. That's not to say, however, that the Beatles introduced melody into Rock and Roll, because it already existed by the time they had their first hit single in 1962.

One of its chief sources was the Brill Building Sound, which thrived in that briefperiodbetweenElvis's inductioninto the US Army and the onset of Beatlemania. During this interregnum, the music's initial threat was neutralised by its co-option by teenage idols on both sides of the Atlantic, who while heavily influenced by Elvis visually, had nowhere near the same devastating effect on the moral establishment. It was named after the very building in New York City where many of its songwriters were housed and which since the '30s had been a centre for Pop music, a term allegedly coined as early as 1926.

Brill Building could be described as traditional Pop informed by the Rock and Roll revolution, and so partaking of Rock rhythms as much as the sophisticated songwriting techniques of the Classic, which is to say pre-Rock, Pop of the Great American Songbook. It exerted a colossal if largely unsung influence on the evolution of Pop in the sixties. As if to confirm this fact, the Beatles, the greatest of the sixties groups, covered songs by Brill Building composers Goffin and King, and Bacharach and David, in the early, more wholesome phase of their career.

While the Beatles remain indelibly associated with modern Pop, bythe totemic year of1966, they were as much a Rock as a Pop group,thanks less totheir music than to their lyrics, which had started to acquire a markedintellectual dimension. This was in no small part attributable to the influence of Bob Dylan, a consciously intellectual figure who in the fallow years that immediately preceded the British Invasion had mined the ancient American art of Folk Music for inspiration, thereby gaining an international reputation as a poet-minstrel in the Protest tradition. Pop as a whole had acquired a gravitas by the mid 1960s which wasjarringly at odds with the innocent and sentimental music of the early Beatles and other bands within the outdated Beat genre.

This was as a result not just of Dylan's influence as the first great poet of Rock, but both an increasing melodic complexity on one hand, and an increasing spiritual darkness on the other. While the Beatles led the field in terms of the former, the latter arose as I see it from the growing pre-eminence of harder, more forbidding acts such as the Stones, the Kinks, the Who, the Yardbirds and the Troggs. The term Rock was somehow perfect in describing the way out music they made, although when this moved in to supplant Pop as thefavoured termfor hard-rocking guitar music it's impossible to say.

One thing is certain...as soon as it did, Rock became far more than a mere music form. I'd go so far as to say that it was a way of life almost from the outset, a philosophy, even a religion...one of whose primetenets was rebellion against the traditional Judaeo-Christian moral values of the West. Could this be the reason - or at least one of the reasons - why the US and Britain came to be its spiritual homelands, given that these are the nations most associated historically with the rise of Evangelical Christianity?

Who can say for sure; but whatever the truth, Rock is clearly more than just another form of Pop, despite having been inextricably linked topop culture since its birth, in much the same way as Jazz once was; and while it has very little ability left to shock, its impact has been so immense, that in the last half century or more, Western society has been altered beyond all recognition by the rebel spirit of Rock; and the sexual and social upheavals it led for so long.

Based on an article called "The Riddle of the British English", which has been revised, leaving much left-over material, also included here. Published on the 21st of July 2010.

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