

C. Graham Campbell, Ph.D.

ROCK AND ROLL: - FOUR GENERATIONS OF SOUP

There isn't one musically talented cell, molecule, muscle, or neurotransmitter in my entire body. I sing one note and it is always the wrong one. My sense of rhythm is utterly lacking. When I go to a Red Sox game at Fenway Park in Boston and the crowd begins clapping to some simple chant like "Let's Go Red Sox," I watch and do it visually, consequently I am usually off by a half beat. If I try to sing "Take Me Out To The Ballgame," people vacate seats around me for several rows.

But most of me is primed to appreciate music and for my formative years the only music I cared about was rock 'n roll. It was the music that defined my generation. Others referred to us as The Baby Boomer Generation recognizing the surge in births as service men and women returned home from WWII. I have always found the label a misnomer. Our parents were the baby boomers. We were the boomed babies. The label describes them not us. It is far more accurate to call us "The First Rock and Rollers," The FRRs.



Christmas in the fifth grade (circa 1958) my major gift from my parents was the present of my dreams, my first real record player. The outside was a gray and white suitcase-like box twenty-four inches deep and wide and fourteen inches high. I could carry it anywhere. I didn't even know what it was until I opened the clasp and saw the actual turn table, at which point I gasped in joy. To me, this new "Hi-fi" technology represented the ultimate in music of the time. Not only could it play the older style LP albums, but it could play the newer more popular 45's and it had a spindle which meant that smaller 45's could be stacked. Long before anyone had heard of Spotify, or YouTube or Apple music, we made our own playlist by stacking our records. I believed musical technology could not possibly evolve beyond this point in my lifetime.

In truth, I could not really tell the difference between the sound of hi-fi and whatever preceded it. But I would never have admitted to such an inexcusable lack of sophistication.

Then I realized that the gifts were not quite finished. My parents had also bought two 45s by Elvis. At last, I got something while it was in style and popular. Enhancing the possibility of my becoming popular. It is possible that I've never been that happy on any Christmas morning since that day.



Rock 'n Roll and my generation grew up together. We were there in the beginning with Bill Haley and the Comets, Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Buddy Holly. For a new teenager, the only music to care about was the equally new rock 'n roll. My interest in Baseball Cards and plastic model cars dissolved that Christmas morning. I never spent another nickel on either one. I did everything I could do to raise the ninety-nine cents to buy new records as often as possible. Fortunately, there was plenty of snow that winter, so the money from shoveling was plentiful. It

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

also helped that my mother had her own private stash of secret funds and was a soft touch when her only child needed some change. The stash was our secret.



Pride swelled when I realized that Worcester Radio Station WORC 1310 AM (FM was still unheard of) was one of the preeminent Rock 'n Roll stations in the country. Little ole Worcester, Massachusetts was leading the whole country. Once again, for the second time in my life, while absorbing every nuance from the radio, I was in style and with the popular kids. Record companies premiered records on our station. The format involved listeners calling in with requests and dedications for a specific song to be played for individuals or couples. The D.J. would drone on and on repeating dedications for every song. "Love me Tender" goes out to Susie, and Carol, and Bill and Janet who are now going steady." Dozens of names in between each song. More airtime was spent on dedications than music. We hung on to every word and often discussed the couple's dedications the next day. When my name was listed aloud on the radio, I felt associated with a song and its singers making me a star too. Score one more in style points for me.

Occasionally some public figure often a Southern Preacher, would garner extra publicity by attacking our music as evil and corrupting out youth. In this way Rock 'n Roll served as the same sort of target that social media does today. The attacks motivated us to close ranks. If a specific song or artist was mentioned in the rant, someone inevitably went out and bought the record the next day. Thus, garnering increased status for themselves. In those instances, it didn't matter if we liked the song. We were just determined to defend our territory. The Old Crew wasn't going to take over.

Three examples of this are cited on the internet on the OUBBLOG/ Oxford University Press in 2015. The New York Times quoted a Psychiatrist saying "Rock 'n Roll was a cannibalistic and tribalistic form of music." According to a minister, "ninety-eight percent of unwed mothers got that way under the influence of Rock 'n Roll." New Jersey Senator, Robert Hendrickson claimed "not even the Communist conspiracy could devise a more effective way to demoralize, confuse and destroy the United States." The FRRs, our crew, were embracing their music and would defend our territory from invasion.

Of course, not all songs or artists were equal. I remember the first time I heard Pat Boone's cover of Little Richard's "Tutti-Frutti." All I could think of is that the adults had stolen our music. No matter what he sang after that, he would never be forgiven for such syrupy, bland, dull music.

What we did not know at that time was that we were at the heart of a very real controversy. Living in the small city of Worcester, Massachusetts which was overwhelmingly white and segregated, race was never spoken of in white society. The only slurs toward minorities I ever heard were voiced by white adults. Throughout my schooling from kindergarten through ninth grade the only minority kids were Jewish. There were no other minorities in our classes. As I write this it is hard to believe but it is absolutely true. Students, parents, schools all looked the other way until

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

1954 Warren Court's school desegregation order forced a response which was slow arriving in Worcester. We were oblivious. Those in charge were quietly resistant.

It was a time not of innocence but of avoidance, denial, and separation. It was a time of a totally unacknowledged, at least by white people, of a sort of Pseudo-apartheid.

The only seepage through the wall of the separation for us was music. There was a long and inglorious history of white musicians 'covering' the songs of African Americans. Producers would take the rhythmic edge off and soften the lyrics to make the song more acceptable to the 'general,' as in white, audience. Elvis was paraded around for dozens of interviews on southern radio stations which were sometimes rebroadcast on Northern outlets. A big deal was made of what high school he graduated from. What we did not know was that the answer was code to southern listeners for the 'White School.'

We knew little about racial music or for that matter racial issues. We just knew sappy, dumb music when we heard it. What we knew was Elvis, "the Pelvis," as he was then known for the extreme gyrations he engaged in when he performed, could sing. He was on The Ed Sullivan Show several times and after the first, he was filmed from the waist up. Long before Miley Cyrus, Elvis had his own version of twerking.

Elvis videos are available on YouTube. The early ones show him happy, smiling, humble, looking like he is having fun and oozing sensuality. It wasn't long before he was 'covered' by himself in a costume, which looked like a zoot suit, in Las Vegas.



For many of us this evolved into Friday night dances at the local YMCA. From seventh through the end of ninth grade they were the only place to be. To say that the dances were the highlight of the week is to underestimate their importance. Music, dancing, girls, and very few adults: what more could a kid ask for?

Eighty or ninety kids clustered in groups around the gym floor. Dancing, flirting, doing anything to impress the girls with your style or the guys with how cool you could be. Nothing felt better than to walk across the floor and have someone from another group call out, "Hey Soup, come here."

With the last name of Campbell, "Soup" became the inevitable moniker that followed me in those years. I liked it. I found out years later that my father hated it. If he answered the phone and someone asked to speak to Soup, he would respond, "No one by that name lives here," and hang up. My mother challenged him once and he said, "The boy has a name. He should use it." Ah, the teenage loves of my life thwarted by a stodgy father.

Sometimes in the dance we would gather in the safety of small, boys-only groups, which could always be found in the corners. For some, this was precipitated by 'girl trouble' of one sort or another. Or on really dark nights, we sat alone taking on the role of wounded 'loner' in the crowd hoping to impress someone, preferably the girl who had dumped us, with

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

the depth of our angst so she would return to our side. If you were lucky just as you were assuming this pose, Dion singing "Teenager in Love" would get played. The alternative scenario involved another girl being sent as an emissary sounding you out about the possibility of talking to the one who had wronged you. The protocol required initial resistance which relented only after the emissary pleaded, "Oh, Soup, Just talk to her, she is sorry and knows it was a stupid thing to do." Some girls specialized in the role of ambassador of teenage love shuttling between repentant offender and wounded loner. The fate of one's entire existence rested on the diplomatic skills of the messenger. If this failed there was one more possibility. The next week the loner and the emissary developed a relationship in school. For some girls the pose of wounded loner was a neon homing beacon beckoning them to your side. Before long, your entire future rested on the success of the new 'one true love.' Then the cycle would repeat.

Ten years later, in 1969, Henry Kissinger became Secretary of State in the Nixon Administration. He was praised for inventing "shuttle Diplomacy," moving between countries brokering settlements to their often-volatile disputes on the international stage. It was clear to me he has studied the young female emissaries in our dances.



Whatever mood we were in, or role we were playing on any given night, this was our world. In this world, just before drugs became popular and complicated things, we freely experimented with music, girls, groups. All the important things to us.

At the core of this world was rock 'n roll which had two overlapping functions separating the generations and camouflaging our interest/obsession with sex.

First, separating the generations involved that adults claimed to hate our music. School and just about everything else was controlled by them. They decided what was good for us in every other way. But we decided on rock 'n roll. If by some strange, horrid miracle they decided they liked it we would have shifted to jazz. Thankfully, they didn't.

Second, which we convinced ourselves was a secret, was that rock was about sex. But the sex was in code. When Fats Domino sang about "The Thrill on Blueberry Hill," we knew there was more going on than a picnic. When Little Richard sang "The Girl Can't Help It" we knew what the girl couldn't help doing. And when the Sherrills sang "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" we knew what last night's activities probably included.

In that era there was no balance in the lyrics or the critique of the girls. Boys were supposed to want to, and girls were supposed to refuse. But, of course, if the girl really loved you, she would provide proof by doing IT. And then the next day, the question would be do you still love her since she was now 'cheep.' The whole thing was harmful, making girls sexual objects and guys often toxic.

We thought it was in code. We knew something the adults hadn't figured out. Or at least, something we convinced ourselves that adults didn't know. We needed this belief to further separate us from them.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

Overtly things were more innocent. Covertly, things were not very different from how they have always been. The sexuality of the music was latent, hidden, secret, under the covers. It was a time when the most provocative magazine in any house was the thirty-five pages of women's underwear in the five-hundred-page Sears Catalogue.



Inevitably, with great reluctance, the FRRs aged with great resistance and had our own children. Having been there from the beginning we knew the music strategies and could easily counter them. We thought we had invented them. So, we thought there would be no fooling us. They wouldn't be able to sneak any adventure on blueberry hill past us. We were ready to call them out on the secret.

What I was utterly unprepared for was music and its younger adherents developing a new strategy to both separate generations and relate to the sexuality of their age. They reversed directions on their parents. This was established not with a secret code only they could translate but with oversexualized lyrics which I thought were often mind-bogglingly blatant. We dared adults to break the code. The next generation dared us to listen. I much preferred the subtlety of the secret and the clandestine. But rock, no longer rock 'n roll, your parents like does not really fulfill its roll of marking out your crew's territory.

In the mid-1980s my oldest son loved Heavy Metal from the likes of David Lee Roth and even Ozzie Osborn. And Eddie Van Halen with his "Too Hot For Teacher" in 1984. His younger brother, two years his junior, liked the androgenous David Bowie whose looks made his music impossible for me. The next youngest ten years their junior, was a dedicated fan of Rap Music. I tried to convince him that the first rap song was Dylan's World War III Blues. He just rolled his eyes like I did when my father tried to get me to listen to Perry Como. Finally, my fourth son, two years younger, liked something called industrial music at which point I gave up interest in anything after the Rolling Stones or Creedence Clearwater.

Part of what is interesting for me in this is that I had joined those who were now disparaging Rock. I joined the newest versions of Preachers, senators, and psychiatrists in their cultural panic about 'Drugs, and sex and rock and roll' which replaced "Wine, women and song." I had actually listened to almost none of it for longer than it took to walk the hallway across their opened bedroom doors. To quote the old saying, "Sometimes the more things change, the more they stay the same."

And testifying to the decline in the Campbell Soup brand none of them got that nick name.



Almost ten years ago I was traveling with my grandson who was about thirteen and he asked me if I had ever heard the music of Bob Dylan or Neil Young. I sighed deeply, expressed my deep appreciation for both and thought there was hope for the future. We now have a relationship based in large part on music. Unfortunately, he now likes something called EDM. As with the other variants of rock. I don't get it, but I guess rock,

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

and its variants, whatever one wishes to call them, is doing what it has always done.

And I think my father may be looking down at us chuckling with a Perry Como album in his hand.