



The Secret History of Rock 'n' Roll

By Christopher Knowles
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They partied through the day and into the night, and the booze flowed as freely as the drugs in their veins. Trancelike, their sexually charged bodies danced to the unending throb of the music—music that resembled more a wall of noise rather than a thing of delicate beauty. Above all, it was loud: vocals were shouted as much as they were sung, instruments played at the edge or beyond their acoustic limits, and the drums—an endless crashing thunder. No wonder neighbors were annoyed, and parents worried as this scene played out not at some nightclub rave or the stage at Woodstock, but thousands of years ago in the ancient civilizations of Rome, Greece, and Egypt.

In *The Secret History of Rock 'n' Roll*, Christopher Knowles puts forth an incredible premise: rock and roll music did not just spring out of existing American popular music in the 1950s. It is rather a long-repressed, direct descendant of the mystery cults of ancient Mediterranean civilizations. Of course, Knowles is not the first to compare the “rock and roll lifestyle” to Bacchanalian rituals, but he carefully and entertainingly outlines many of the ancient mystery religions and draws parallels to modern rock music and musicians.

Nearly the entire first half of the book gives essential background on these religious societies and their practices. Covering the Egyptian cults of Isis and Osiris, the Greek Korybantes and worshipers of Apollo, Mithraism that descended from Persian Zoroastrianism, and of course Bacchanalia, the author chronicles the histories of many sects, and highlights the elements that give them such primal power in psyche of both ancient and modern man. Their rituals and beliefs varied widely—some sects practiced excessive indulgence,

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while others demanded an ascetic lifestyle. Many used alcohol and sex to attain heightened states of spirituality, and there is even evidence that hallucinogenic drugs played a role in a number of mystery cult rituals. However, the most striking commonality among them was the use of music to transcend the everyday world and to connect with the divine.

Largely, this music was not sedate and serene. Accounts of ancient historians describe it as loud, raucous and driving—what we would now call rock and roll. Knowles takes it a step further and superimposes the various ancient belief systems on modern rock music and equates them with specific styles such as hard rock, heavy metal, grunge, punk, folk, and progressive rock. The second half of the book traces the histories, stylistic elements, and influences of specific bands and musicians, highlighting their commonalities with the ancient mystery religions into which they are categorized.

The parallels are indeed striking. (Consider the Korybantes whose warrior priests “performed their insane racket in full hoplite armor, clanging their swords and shields in time to the beat of drums and lyres, literally screaming their songs until their throats were raw.”) While

this sounds nearly identical to the sound and theatrics of a heavy metal concert, it would seemingly take a leap of mythic proportion to say that modern rock music is directly descended from these ancient practices. Knowles, however, constructs a credible case for it. By highlighting early Christianity’s practice of co-opting the festivals and rituals of these various religious sects, and tracing its spread through Northern Europe, the author posits that much of the raw material for the rock and roll music and lifestyle was supplanted in the New World by the means of European folkways. Further, the author proposes that rock and roll did not emerge primarily from the blues, but more directly from gospel music, which can trace its roots to the religious practices of West Africa, specifically to the rituals of the Yoruba. Anthropologists and historians now believe that Youruban culture was greatly influenced by migrants that settled in the region (from none other than ancient Egypt).

Whether these remarkable parallels are truly directly connected—or whether their genesis is from something primal in the human psyche and historically unrelated—is up to the reader. However, Knowles makes a good argument for the former. From a historical context, the author gives a refreshing look at both the histories of ancient mystery cults and rock music. Though much of the material is not appropriate for young audiences, the assertions and arguments are thought provoking, especially for Orff scholars and practitioners who find fascinating the relationship of elemental music and the deepest elements of our humanity. ■

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