

CHAPTER EIGHT: TAKING ROCK TO THE LIMIT

Although the varieties of rock are legion, certain musical characteristics remain more or less constant. Among these are: song forms deriving largely from blues and the American popular song tradition, a melodic technique most often based on short phrases of text whose musical embodiment is intimately matched with the natural cadences of speech, a harmonic idiom based on the traditional major/minor tonal system in terms of chord content (but not necessarily in terms of chord progressions), and a complex of rhythmic archetypes in which 4/4 meter with displaced accents (on beats two and four instead of one and three) predominates. Rock is also based on a set of textural norms involving a prominent vocal line with an accompaniment in which electric bass and drum kit are indispensable, electric and/or acoustic guitars are nearly indispensable, and other instruments such as keyboards (acoustic and electric piano, organ, synthesizer, and other electronic keyboards such as the mellotron), brass, woodwinds, and assorted percussion, are prevalent but not indispensable. In musical terms, the most important style characteristic in determining whether or not a piece is or is not “rock” is the instrumental format in conjunction with a set of musical patterns set up by the rhythm section of drums, bass, and guitar. To “rock” a piece of classical music, it usually suffices simply to add a rock rhythm section to the tune. Conversely, a rock piece can be “classicized” or “derocked” by re-orchestrating it and subtracting the rhythm section, as is frequently done in canned music.

If rock music is thus seen not as a genre determined by the demographics of record consumption, the verbal content of the songs, or the political stance of the musicians, but rather as a complex of musical style characteristics, how far can those characteristics be diluted or extended before the music ceases to be rock? Many answers to this question have been proposed, not in abstract musicological terms of course, but in actual pieces of music.

A number of rock’s leading musicians have taken rock to the limit, only to pull back to more traditional positions. During their most innovative period, from *Rubber Soul* to *Magical Mystery Tour* (or roughly 1965-1967), the Beatles extended the musical definition of rock through their textural experimentation, drawing freely on the instrumental resources not only of the rock and jazz traditions, but of Western classical music, Indian music, and electronic music, in later efforts such as the 1968 “white album” *The Beatles*, they largely abandoned such non-rock trappings in favor of a back-to-basics approach. The Rolling Stones’ development followed a similar path, their pinnacle of experimentation being reached in *Their Satanic Majesties’ Request* of 1967 and in *Beggar’s Banquet* of the following year. Throughout their entire subsequent career, the Stones drew back into the rock mainstream and reaffirmed its attendant stylistic norms. The progressive rock group Yes, adding synthesizers and expanding rock’s harmonic palette beyond most previous limits, broke out of rock’s formal conventions with compositions like the nineteen-minute “Close to the Edge” of 1972, when Yes regrouped in the 1980s, however, it was with a more frankly commercial sound operating within considerably streamlined formal dimensions.

Many groups have extended the language of rock by attempting a fusion of genres, notably jazz and rock. Blood, Sweat & Tears and Chicago approached such a fusion from the direction