

How I Taught My Father to Rock



BY SUSAN SAITER ANDERSON

FEATRICK

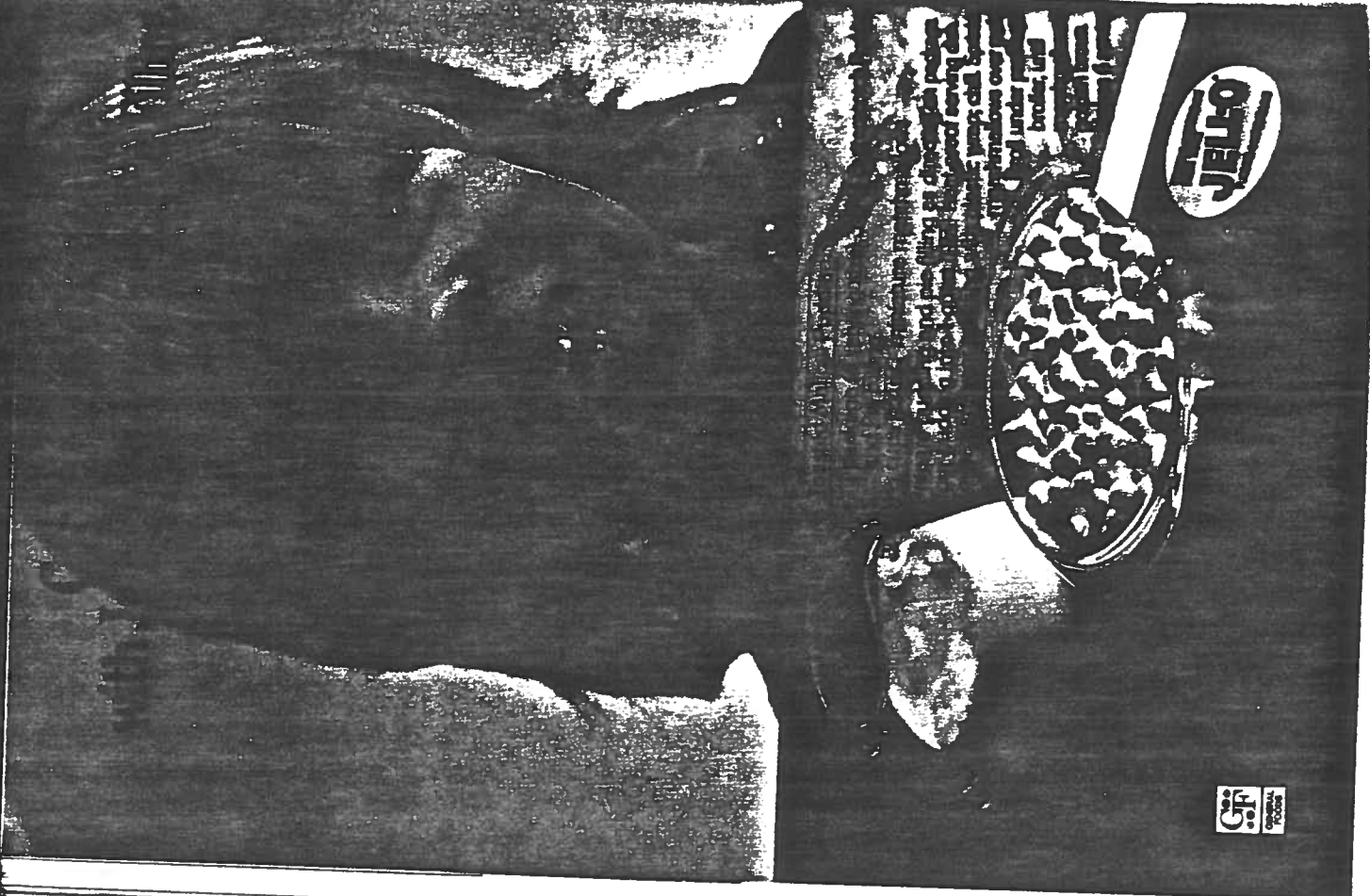
A beleaguered parent takes a short course in modern music appreciation

ROCK music is like modern art — most older people hate it, including my father. On my 13th birthday, a friend gave me an Elvis Presley album. Dad took one look at the gold shoes and catting sneer on the cover and snorted, "You're not playing that in this house."

Not that Dad lacked a sense of

humor. He once picked me up at a record hop in May, wearing earmuffs. Or tenderness. When I was in tears because Frankie Avalon failed to answer my fan letter, he wrote himself, demanding that "that nutty music singer" answer his daughter's letter. But whenever my brothers and I saw him leave in the morning, then stomp back into the house in a

ILLUSTRATION: MICHEL FORTIER



JIF
CREAM
POUNCE

JELLO

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rage, we knew that one of us had left the car radio on at high volume.

My departure from home did not spell relief for his "headaches" from the poundings of Jerry Lee Lewis, the Beach Boys or the Animals. On the night of my high-school senior prom, my mother gave birth to their "surprise baby," a bouncing girl who eventually inherited my room and my stereo. But last year I took my ten-year-old daughter home for a visit. That's when I made my belated breakthrough.

It started badly. I caught Dad looking at my kid sister's Grateful Dead album. Hoping to push him into the now generation, I asked, "Did you know that their followers are called Dead Heads?" He tossed the cover back into the record pile as if it were radioactive.

Dinner went better. Dad boasted about how well his girls had turned out, even our "crazy music," as he put it, hadn't addled our brains to any noticeable degree. Later, when I turned on the radio, he nodded approval at my choice. An orchestra was playing a Beatles song.

It was then that I decided to lay it on the line. "Look, Dad," I said, "when a station plays 'oldies' these days, they're playing old rock songs. You were mystified about the sor-row over John Lennon's death, and the hoopla over the Rolling Stones tour. All the younger salesmen where you work talk about rock stars, and you and Mom don't even know who they are. You don't have to like them, but you should know a change. Space flights, television,

little' about the music that's all around you."

My outburst stunned even me. So did my father's response. He smiled and said: "Begin." I did. I had four evenings left. I got together a pile of records to illustrate my points. Together, Dad and I would explore why rock appealed to the young.

Right off, Dad admitted that he was confused. "What is rock 'n' roll, anyway?"

"Good question," I said. "Like any other popular art, rock has different audiences and styles. But there are four basic themes: rebellion, love, alienation and celebration. Rock puts these across through repetition, loudness and a certain sensuality or aggressiveness."

"I'll say," said Dad, dryly.

In the '50s, I went on, rock was new — it didn't sound like anything else. It dealt with growing up. There was much moaning about being a teenager in love.

Then in the '60s the Beatles broke rock music wide open. Singers and groups began to work out their own sounds. Folk rock came from protest singers like Bob Dylan, mellow rock from West Coast groups like the Beach Boys, psychedelic rock from Jefferson Airplane. But all were within the framework of rock.

That first night we tackled rebellion. Rock, I explained, emerged in the last half of the '50s. By the '60s no generation in history had been so well educated or affluent as mine. But none had to deal with such swift change. Space flights, television,



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civil rights marches, followed by assassinations and the war in Vietnam. Rock music told how we felt about all this — loud, confused and emotional. But honest.

Harmony became less important than rhythm, beat and lyrics. Messages changed with the social climate. Musicians shed flashy costumes for blue jeans. Lyrics filled with irony. "I suppose you thought you were the discoverers of hypoco-risy," Dad said. "No," I replied. "We just talked about it more." We searched for our own rules, our own point of view. At Woodstock, N.Y., the strength of this generation and its music was seen in the half a million people who gathered together in a field to celebrate peace and music. Authority figures took their lumps as Dad and I listened to Bob Dylan sing:

*Come mothers and fathers
throughout the land*

*And don't criticize what you can't
understand*

*Your sons and your daughters are
beyond your command*

*Your old road is rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one if you
can't lend your hand*

For the times they are a-changin'

I followed this with a protest song from the Rolling Stones.

"Ugh," Dad exclaimed. "Why does he have to shout and whine?"

"It's cathartic," I answered. "Rockers make it okay to shout out our aches."

"But why so loud, and why do rockers put all the emphasis on sex?"

"Loudness catches the raw emotions," I explained. And the sexual revolution hit music just as it did television, movies and newspapers. I suspect there was less here than met the eye, or ear, though. Most people I knew frowned on promiscuity, even though Elvis pleaded, "Don't say don't," the Shirelles boasted, "Tonight's the night," and bleached-blond Rod Stewart ordered his "virgin child" to "get upstairs before the night's too old."

Similarly, drugs may well have helped fuel "psychedelic music" of the '60s — the frenzied outpourings of Jefferson Airplane and The Grateful Dead — but most high-school and college students did not turn to hard drugs when Sly and the Family Stone said: "I wanna take you higher, higher." At least, not the ones I knew.

Much in rock, I admitted, was for shock effect. The group "Kiss" wore wild makeup, and its pre-teen fans cheered more for the crazy show than for the music.

On night two, Dad and I talked about love and heartache. Romantic love has always been a pop music theme, I said. Rock is no different. Listen to the Jefferson Airplane:

*Don't you want somebody to love
Don't you need somebody to love
Wouldn't you love somebody to
love*

You better find somebody to love.

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Dad shook his head at Grace Slick's voice. "That sounds like an angry woman, banging through a drawer full of pots and pans." But young love is frightening, I said. As the Beatles put it, "Love has a nasty habit of disappearing overnight." Emotions soar, then plummet. Jilted lovers lick their wounds to the music, but once you've found your true love, you've got music to capture the emotion.

"That's innocent enough. And nice music," Dad said. "But I'll bet some is more suggestive than that."

On the third night we talked of "alienation." I assured Dad I'd had a happy home, but even I had felt that my friends knew me better than my parents. We played a Beatles song: "She's leaving home after living alone for so many years," and then the Beach Boys who asked: "Will my kids be prouder if their old man's really a square?... when I grow up to be a man?" Dad chuckled knowingly.

Poetry sums up what we feel, but can't express. So, for me, does rock music. When all else fails, you dream of escape. Joni Mitchell echoes the yearnings of many who are desk-bound:

*I was a free man in Paris
I felt unfettered and alive
Nobody was calling me up for favors*

*No one's future to decide
You know I'd go back there tomorrow
But for the work I've taken on.*

"But there's more to alienation than that," Dad said.

"Sure," I replied. "Listen to Bruce Springsteen. He's switched with the rest of us, to a more personal loneliness."

At night sometimes it seemed

You could hear the whole damned city crying

Blame it on the lies that killed us

Blame it on the truth that ran us down.

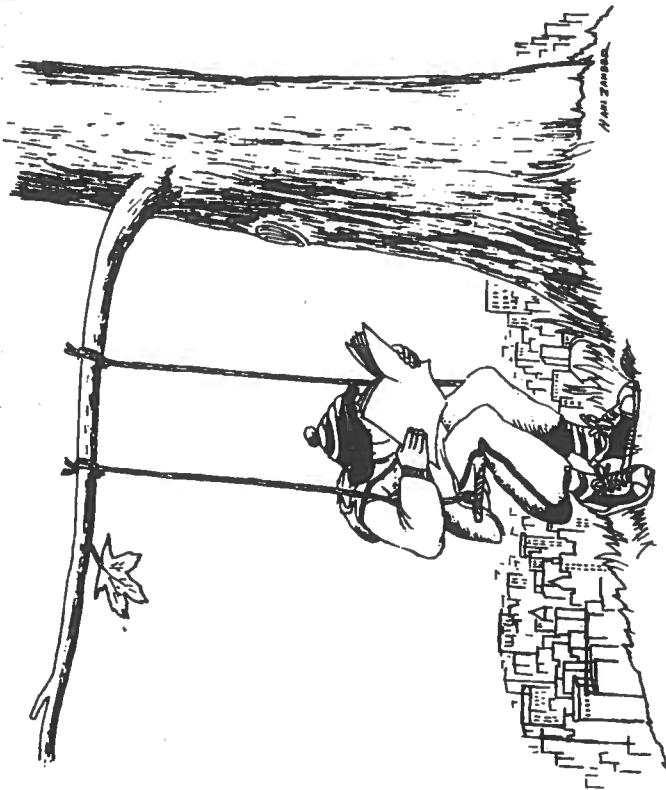
The fourth and last night was cheerier. "Celebration! That's what all the noise is about, Dad," I said. Life can be gloomy, but not always. "Clap your hands," says Stevie Wonder. "We're dancing in the streets," shout Martha Reeves and the Vandellas. "Let's get right down to the real nitty gritty," sing Gladys Knight and the Pips. "I've gotta dance, dance, dance," say the Beach Boys.

Rock, most of all, is fun. And to finish up, I put on a Beatles song about a gunslinger resting up after a bad draw:

*Now Rocky Raccoon
He fell back in his room
Only to find Gideon's Bible
Gideon checked out
And he left it, no doubt
To help with good Rocky's revival.*

In the end, Dad still seemed to be a bit bewildered. I didn't have the heart to introduce him to the

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mysteries of punk, heavy metal or new wave. He was rocking enough already.

"How do I know what's good and what's not?" he asked.

"Look to your feelings," I said. "Even you, from time to time, have been 'Feel'n' Groovy.'"

"And don't take this music too seriously. Look to the words to evoke

feelings and images, not tell a story. Forget the neighbors. Turn up the sound and let it pulse through your bones."

Before I left, I scribbled down a list of what I thought he might like. Sometime later, I got a letter. "I like some of it," he wrote. "But I'm not joining any fan clubs." That was all I'd hoped for.

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Loss Cause

A WOMAN who loves candy was given a big box wrapped in the paper of a famous chocolate firm. She said to her husband, "You've got to save me from myself. Put it in the freezer." Six months later, she had a desperate urge for chocolate.

"Please," she said to her husband, "get the chocolate out of the freezer. I've got to have some."

Her husband went to the freezer, got the gift-wrapped package and handed it to her. When she opened it, she found a book, frozen stiff.

— Alex Thien in *Milwaukee Sentinel*

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