

ROCK STAR

The Making of Musical Icons from Elvis to Springsteen

DAVID R. SHUMWAY

Foreword by Anthony DeCurtis

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For Travis, future rock star—in whatever field he chooses

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Bill Clinton may have been the first person I ever heard referred to as a rock star in the metaphorical sense. That was partly due to his charisma and partly to do with the fact that his political rise corresponded to the period in the late eighties and early nineties when it became not merely acceptable but advantageous for politicians to consort with rock musicians. Jerry Brown had done that in California in the seventies, of course, even to the point of dating Linda Ronstadt. But those associations didn't seem to help him beyond his home state or, more exactly, beyond Los Angeles. They just reinforced whatever perceptions might have already existed of him in the general population as a marginal figure, certainly not someone to take seriously as a presidential candidate. (Using *Rolling Stone's* offices as his New York campaign headquarters during his 1992 presidential run probably didn't help in that regard either.)

But by the time Clinton was making his successful run for the presidency, the boomer generation that had grown up with rock & roll now wielded real power in the country and, for better and worse, Clinton reflected their ideals, ambitions, tastes, and appetites. His choice of Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop Thinking about Tomorrow" as his campaign song and his willingness to meet with the members of U2 while then president George H.W. Bush was clumsily dodging the phone calls that Bono was making to him from the stages of packed stadiums across the United States during U2's Zoo TV tour both indicated that a generational shift had taken place. (Clinton also fit the rock-star suit. His own sexual proclivities conformed exactly to the long-standing rule of the road among musicians in supposedly monogamous relationships: Blow jobs don't count.) Suddenly politicians didn't need to distance themselves from rock stars. Quite the opposite: They actively courted them. We'd come a long way from the days when Jimmy Carter quoting Bob Dylan in his 1977 inaugural address seemed daring.

Of course the success of this new relationship depended entirely on the specific politician and rock star. As David Shumway points out, when Ronald Reagan spoke about Bruce Springsteen and attempted to use "Born in the U.S.A." during his 1984 reelection campaign, the gesture blew up in his face. Similar efforts by conservative politicians to use rock songs in their campaigns have met with similar results since then. And the knife cuts both ways. Bono has spoken about how his meetings with the likes of George W. Bush and Jesse Helms about debt relief and AIDS policy in Africa have not only displeased some fans but disturbed his own band members.

Along those lines, it's quite possible that the level of respectability that has allowed rock stars to move comfortably with mainstream politicians has also dimmed the luster of their stardom. Sure, it was fun to watch President Barack Obama tease the members of Led Zeppelin about not trashing the White House when they came by for their Kennedy Center Honors ("So, guys, just settle down—these paintings are valuable!"), but what's the point of being a rock star if it requires responsible behavior?

And right around the time "rock star" became a ubiquitous metaphor, the meaning of stardom in popular music began to change. In 2000 I was hired to do some editing for *Vibe* magazine, and one piece I worked on was about the rapper Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest. One of the secondary interviews for the story was with a prominent black music executive who wearily described Q-Tip as "rock star." It wasn't a compliment. Hip-hop had fully established itself as a cultural force by then, so the reference carried none of the hurt and bitterness that, say, accompanied the Public Enemy line in "Bring Tha Noize" less than a decade earlier: "Roll with the rock stars, still never get accepted as."

No, the executive was making a different point about Q-Tip. By that point Sean “Puffy” Combs had redefined the image of the successful rapper from a street thug to a mogul, the line entirely blurred, or perhaps just rendered meaningless, between the artist and the businessman. Jay-Z has traveled that same trajectory and beyond, to the point of declaring, only half-jokingly, that when (not if) he’s voted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, he wants Barack Obama to induct him. (“It’d be all right,” he told Bill Maher. “He owes me a couple.”) That Q-Tip was not aspiring to the role of businessman / power broker was precisely the point the executive was making about him. In his view the term “rock star” meant something like “aesthete brat.” That is, not commercially minded; too undisciplined and self-involved to increase his potential sales; too pretentious and self-conscious about his role as an “artist” to realize that, as one industry powerhouse once pointedly explained to me, “They don’t call it ‘the music art.’ They call it ‘the music business.’ ”

From that vantage, rock stars’ insistence on acting as if money was never a consideration for them, on still dressing from the thrift store after earning tens of millions of dollars, just seemed ridiculous, or maybe even a little nuts. To deliver a warning that you’re “crazy like Kurt Cobain” became something of a trope in rap after the Nirvana lead singer killed himself at the height of his band’s popularity. Now wait a minute, the reasoning behind those references seemed to run: You killed yourself *because* you were successful and made a ton of money? That is some really scary shit. To be “crazy like Kurt Cobain” meant that you could not be relied upon in any way to behave rationally—such as, in Q-Tip’s case, refusing to maximize your earning power. It was the true, and perhaps final, blow to the stature of being a rock star.

Cobain, indeed, marked something like the end point of rock stardom, the point when even actual rock stars rejected the role. We’d had alternative rock stars like Lou Reed and Iggy Pop, who looked and sounded the part but missed the memo about selling millions of records. In the early days of R.E.M., Michael Stipe defined the role of reluctant rock star, acting as if, through no recollected actions of his own, he suddenly discovered himself onstage, in front of a camera or doing an interview, and consequently had no choice but to play along. But after Cobain’s shocking, definitive refusal, it became highly undesirable to be perceived as chasing rock stardom.

Which may be fortunate, since it seems to be disappearing anyway, as Shumway argues in this smart, provocative, and emotionally charged book. I’d hate for that to be true, but in the worlds of media and culture we’re in the grips of changes as profound as any since the invention of the printing press. In that enormous context, the loss of rock stardom may seem trivial. But, as the old prerock era Gershwin song says, not for me.

Anthony DeCurtis

PREFACE

At a time when the music scene is fragmented and many of the records that top the charts seem to have reverted to prerock pop, it may be hard to remember how much rock stars once mattered. This book will investigate what some of the more prominent stars meant—and continue to mean—not merely to their fans but in the context of the culture at large. Popular culture in general had long been treated as either ephemeral entertainment or a dangerous influence. Popular music in particular, epitomized by Tin Pan Alley love songs, hardly seemed capable of serious content, and only aficionados understood jazz as an exception. But rock changed all of that. By the end of the 1960s, the news media accepted rock stars as representatives of their generation and its role in what was perceived to be the remaking of America. Rock stars were not mere entertainers but politically charged cultural icons.¹ Music mattered in a way it never had before, as Matthew Weiner illustrates in a 2012 episode of *Mad Men* set around the time of the Beatles' *Revolver* release in 1966. Don Draper, a Depression era baby and successful advertising executive, wonders at the quickly changing cultural landscape: "When," he asks his colleagues, "did music become so important?"²

Music was newly important, I am arguing, not mainly because of how it changed, but because of how its leading performers presented themselves and were perceived. I am also arguing that stardom as a particular social phenomenon, distinct from fame or celebrity, also matters in ways that have eluded most scholars. Star personas are complex and meaningful texts that require the kind of interpretive exploration we devote to other works of art. Moreover, given stars' widespread popularity, they may more accurately reflect and more strongly impact the larger culture than most other works.

The goal of this book is to explain what the personas of seven rock icons meant to the culture, by examining those stars through their many representations: live performance, films, television, videos, cover art and photography, interviews and journalism, in addition to recorded music and lyrics. These star personas might be the most important of rock & roll's many products. My argument is that these stars represented a new kind of star, one defined by the embodiment of cultural controversies, which replaced the movie star in the popular imagination and helped popular music attain a new cultural centrality. While they inherited the power and prominence of their Hollywood forebearers, rock stars came to stand for many of the changes that caused conflict in post-World War II America.

Each of the major figures I consider illustrates a different aspect of the cultural impact of rock & roll and of the new form of stardom. My book is a narrative told in a series of tableaux, the discussion of each star not only advancing a general story about the development of rock stardom but also illustrating from a different perspective the means by which stars' personas were presented and were received by audiences. Each of the stars I discuss depended differently on media other than sound recording. Each chapter deals with a different social conflict that the star persona in question comes to embody, for example, civil rights and black power for James Brown, high versus low culture for Bob Dylan.

Please note that my argument is not that the rock stars I discuss are, in the main, intending to be political actors but that their personas were understood as having distinct political valences. According to Peter Wicke, by 1967 "rock music was now placed in a context in which it no longer defined itself merely in musical terms, but also in political terms."³ Wicke is cognizant of the contradiction between rock's revolutionary ideology and its actual existence as an industrial commodity, and he associates stardom entirely with the latter. The argument I'm making is that rock stardom also has to be understood as political, differing not only from Wicke's position but also from

arguments about rock politics made by Dick Hebdige and Lawrence Grossberg. These scholars persuasively argue that rock has been a form of resistance in particular subcultures (Hebdige) or for the youth of postwar American society (Grossberg).⁴ Grossberg treats rock & roll as “strategic empowerment,” emphasizing what the formation does in the everyday lives of its participants.⁵ My claim here has to do with the broader cultural meaning and impact of rock stars, which requires that we understand them not as defined against the larger culture as a whole but as an element of that culture, its internal opposition. Hebdige and Grossberg are concerned mainly with rock’s role in contemporary cultural struggles, and it is important to acknowledge that these struggles continue. My focus, however, is on rock stars’ connection to historical struggles and the changes they produced. While I accept the idea that rock was a force for change, it was also an instance of it. In discussing stardom, I must necessarily deemphasize what Grossberg calls the “boundaries” constructed by the rock formation, the idea of rock as “a differentiating machine ... [that] continually separated Us ... from Them” and emphasize rock’s inclusion in the dominant culture.⁶

That culture should be understood not as unitary and unchanging but as diverse, characterized by struggle and change. Arthur Marwick has argued persuasively that a cultural revolution took place between 1958 and 1974 not only in the United States but also in Britain, France, and Italy. Marwick lists sixteen distinct categories of significant change during this period, including the formation of new subcultures and movements, an upsurge of entrepreneurialism resulting in the founding of theaters, clubs, boutiques, and so on, and the rise of young people to unprecedented influence. For our purposes, however, the following is most important: “A participatory and uninhibited popular culture whose central component was rock music, which in effect became a kind of universal language.”⁷ While one might find this last claim questionable, we have evidence such as Tom Stoppard’s play “Rock ‘n’ Roll,” about events in late-1960s Czechoslovakia, to support the notion that rock had a very broad reach and was widely understood to be disruptive of the status quo. It is not my claim that rock & roll is a self-sufficient cause of all of the cultural change with which it should be associated. Rather, in most instances rock contributed to and reflected changes that were being fueled by other sources.

Rock & roll was not a purely musical language. As Grossberg explains, “Most writing about rock and roll has failed to define the production of the apparatus, which includes not only the production of recorded music but also of concerts, of music that is never recorded ... of art and dance, of writing and fashion styles, and so on.”⁸ My project is to show how the star personas of rock & roll’s leading performers are one of the most significant elements of this “apparatus.” The force of stardom helps explain rock’s cultural reach, while it also is a major aspect of the recording industry’s commercial success. I argue that while music and lyrics are elements that help define a star’s persona, that persona is also indispensable to understanding the songs and other works the star produces.

This volume is a historical study. It aims to understand the personas of different stars through the cultural forces at work in specific historical moments, mainly from 1956 through the 1970s. While the stars I’m concerned with here remain iconic today, in each case their cultural meaning emerged at an earlier moment and persisted despite changes in form and popularity. But my historical frame is longer than the history of rock & roll. Stardom itself is a distinct historical phenomenon, and [chapter 1](#) situates rock stardom within that larger history. It deals with the concept of stardom and its relation to fame and celebrity. It then continues with a focus on Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s and explores how their different media make popular music stardom different from film stardom. I next examine how stardom changes after World War II, when certain leading film stars develop politicized personas, setting the stage for the emergence of the rock star. In the final section I introduce the chapters on individual rock stars that make up the body of this book.

This book would not exist if I had not met Anthony DeCurtis in graduate school at Indiana University in the 1970s. Anthony was the first person I knew who taught rock records and lyrics in a college course, and talking with Anthony about music turned my dim inkling that serious rock criticism might be possible into an ambition for me; it has been, of course, a reality for him, and I have continued to learn from him and his writing. The book itself can be traced back to 1980, to what was my second academic conference paper, written for a panel that included Anthony and film scholar and rock musician Robert B. Ray at the Popular Culture Association Convention in Detroit. A few pages of the paper are present here in [chapter 5](#), but more important, the idea of reading performers rather than music or lyrics was its basis.

My book comes out of rock criticism and popular music studies on the one hand and film history and criticism on the other, and I am appreciative of many who came before me in both areas. I am especially indebted to the late Robert Palmer, from whom I learned a great deal when he served as a visiting professor at Carnegie Mellon University in the late 1980s. Other scholars and critics who have influenced me include Greil Marcus, Richard Dyer, Simon Frith, Robert Christgau, Lawrence Grossberg, and Dick Hebdige.

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I have presented many bits of this book at meetings of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music and its U.S. chapter, and I have benefited greatly from comments and discussion at those sessions. Many people have invited me to give portions of this book at their institutions, and for this I am grateful to Celia Ferreira Alves, Tony Badger, Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, Craig Dionne, Anne Fillaudeau, Winfried Fluck, Loren Glass, Dick Hebdige, Jonathan Hope, Gerd Hurm, Anahid Kassabian, Robert Kerr, Henry Krips, Sonia Di Loreto, René Lysloff, Robert Myers, Andrew Preston, Andreas Rude, Andrew Weintraub, Kathleen Woodward, and Josh Zeitz.

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I am most grateful to Heather Scarlett Arnet, who has lived with this project longer than anyone but me, for her love, insight, and support. I have been inspired by our son Travis and his love of music. This book is dedicated to him.

The usual disclaimers apply.

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A shorter version of [chapter 4](#) was published as “Bob Dylan as Cultural Icon,” *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 110–21.

The conclusion is developed from a much shorter essay, “Where Have All the Rock Stars Gone?,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 22, 2007, The Chronicle Review, 6.

With the golden days of Hollywood long gone, and the movies having given way to pop music and pro sports as America's prime fantasy obsessions, a new kind of star had come along. The rock star.

Robert Greenfield

By the time Robert Greenfield observed that “a new kind of star had come along,” rock stars had replaced movie stars at the head of the pantheon of American popular culture.¹ Where Greta Garbo, Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, and Humphrey Bogart had once reigned supreme, now Mick Jagger, Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, and numerous others held court. “Rock star” replaced “movie star” as the standard designation for someone possessed of great charisma, glamour, and sex appeal. Thus, Bill Clinton was a rock star, where a generation earlier President John F. Kennedy was likened to a movie star. This change may seem to be a trivial shift in fashion, explicable in terms of the buying power of adolescent baby boomers and the decline of the studio system but not of any importance in itself. The rock star, however, really was a new kind of star, not merely the successor to the movie star as the biggest celebrity, but having a new cultural role. One reason we have failed to understand this is that we have consistently confused stardom with celebrity, and, as a result, we have not treated stars and stardom with the seriousness they deserve.

Daniel Herwitz, in his insightful book *The Star as Icon*, takes Princess Diana as his central instance. Herwitz says much that is persuasive about stardom, but I want to argue that, regardless of what one thinks of the late wife of the heir to the British throne, she cannot be called a star. She was certainly a celebrity and, by Herwitz's definition, an icon, but she does not meet the criteria that distinguish stardom as a specific historical and cultural phenomenon.² In making this claim, I mean to make no comment on Diana's importance to history, contribution to human welfare, or degree of attraction and fascination. To say that she is not a star is not a criticism of her but a simple act of taxonomy necessary so that we can understand the different forms that fame and visibility have had in our culture. Diana was not a star, because she had not *achieved success in a skilled field or profession*, one of five defining characteristics of stardom. The other four attributes that distinguish stardom, which I will discuss in more detail below, are (2) the star is the object of imagined personal relationships by fans; (3) the star has a persona that represents more than an individual personality but works as a widely understood culturally specific sign or icon; (4) the persona is consistent and well developed; and, finally and most subjectively, (5) a star has the degree of personal attractiveness that we call “star quality.”

It would be impossible in popular discourse to expect any distinction between *celebrity* and *stardom* to be regularly observed. Scholarly discourse, however, should be able to support such a distinction, but it has routinely failed to do so. In recent scholarship, film studies partially excepted, celebrity has been far more often the focus. This fact seems to me to stem from the power of Daniel Boorstin's notion that “the Celebrity is a person who is well known for his well-knownness.”³ By “power,” I don't mean “influence,” although Boorstin's treatment of celebrity has doubtless been influential. Rather, I mean that Boorstin's critique of celebrity captured something that many people feel to be a fundamental condition of contemporary life. We believe that many, if not most, celebrities do not deserve the interest they receive.

All stars are celebrities, but not all celebrities are stars. Boorstin fails to recognize this distinction treating stars as pseudo-events and as creatures of the machinery of publicity and advertising: “The qualities which now commonly make a man or woman into a ‘nationally advertised’ brand are in fact a new category of human emptiness.”⁴ Boorstin’s conflation of star and celebrity has become the norm, and even some otherwise careful theorists such as David Marshall and Chris Rojek fail to escape it. While not everyone who conflates stardom and celebrity is as dismissive of it as Boorstin was, they continue to accept his basic assumption that, as Marshall puts it, “the interchangeability of celebrities means that no celebrity possesses any meaning of consequence.” Marshall observes that this thesis “identifies in outline the postmodern condition,” and he connects Boorstin to Jean Baudrillard. Marshall doesn’t give this position his unqualified endorsement, but neither does he repudiate it.⁵

We need to distinguish celebrity both from fame and from stardom. I want to use the word *fame* as a category for those who have gained the public eye through public action.⁶ By this definition the famous—generals, politicians, and authors—were traditionally not celebrities. The phenomenon of celebrity emerges when the private lives of the famous become of major public interest, which as Freya Inglis shows, happened within the past 250 years.⁷ Those people we identify as stars are, like the traditionally famous, distinguished from other celebrities because of valued achievements. They are thus the opposite of people who are well known merely for being well known. Most people we call stars have achieved success in a skilled field or profession. This is perhaps most clear of sports stars, whose performance is readily quantified, making stardom seem like a simple matter of statistics. Although it is true that even sports stardom involves more than statistics—Babe Ruth and Michael Jordan had recognizable public personas—we don’t typically denigrate athletic stars in the same way we do many others. Of course, stars in entertainment are also partly defined in terms of box office or record sales, and thus to some extent stardom here is also quantifiable.

While in sports the almost unquestioned assumption is that the star’s abilities are the source of their success, the economic success of entertainment personalities does not always lead to the same belief in their worthiness. Still, even bad actors or mediocre musicians must have performed relatively skilled labor. Conversely, the fact that those we feel to be the most talented sometimes do not become stars does not mean that those who do are uniformly lacking in talent. Clearly, the unreliability of stardom as a measure of talent or worth is one of the conditions that lead critics to view stars as mere celebrities in Boorstin’s sense. Stars, however, are no different in this regard than authors, painters, politicians, or, indeed, people in any field of endeavor. Ever since Ecclesiastes, we have known that the fastest runner does not always win a race. While “the celebrity,” as Boorstin observes, “is always contemporary,” great stars, like authors, painters, and some U.S. presidents, are distinguished by the longevity of their cultural presence.⁸ John Wayne, for example, was America’s favorite movie star in 1995, more than fifteen years after his death. Greta Garbo, Humphrey Bogart, and Cary Grant continue to be widely recognized and revered today, long after their careers and lives have ended.

Although sports stars are the most easily recognized and agreed upon, sports stardom is also quite thin. There is a limited range of characteristics revealed in the performance of a sport, though that range may be greater in an individual sport like tennis than in a team sport such as football. Those people who are the most multidimensional stars are to be found in the performing arts. Performance in that special sense in which it happens in film, theater, or concert—rather than the everyday performance that Judith Butler and others have discussed—is important to stardom because it is through performance that the star’s persona can be most richly developed.⁹

The phenomenon of celebrity has been traced by Inglis as far back as London of the 1760s, when, he asserts, it “stood to fame as marketing to production” and where “the intimate life of actors is

greedily pursued.”¹⁰ This desire for intimacy is also a defining characteristic of stardom, and Inglis’s example suggests that theatrical stardom may have been the prototype for celebrity in general. There was a star system in British theater of the eighteenth century, making it probably the first. Marcel Proust’s account of his response to stars suggests that the phenomenon of stardom was already well established in late nineteenth-century Paris: “But if the thought of actors preoccupied me so ... how much more did the name of a ‘star’ blazing outside the doors of a theater, how much more, seen through the window of a brougham passing by in the street, its horses’ headbands decked with roses, did the face of a woman whom I took to be an actress, leave me in a state of troubled excitement, impotently and painfully trying to form a picture of her private life.”¹¹ Proust describes here precisely the relationship of fan to star that defines the phenomenon. The young Proust wants to know the private person behind the star image, a person whose life he can and must imagine.

Movie Stars

There were theatrical stars in the United States in the nineteenth century, but it is the motion picture industry that provides the basic model of stardom for the twentieth-century United States. For this reason, we can best approach the change with which rock & roll was associated by looking first at stardom in film. It is largely by analogy with the movies that *star* was applied to other areas of entertainment, including sports, radio, music, and television. More recently, it has been used of politicians, architects, and even English professors.¹² Unlike most other fields, in theater and film stars portray characters. This enables the development of stars’ personas, since each character played can potentially add new qualities or attributes. Richard Dyer asserts that the duality of persona and person is the basic condition for film stardom, which depends upon the existence of a consistent persona.¹³ While it is true that film actors do not necessarily have such consistent personas—and we can distinguish those who practice “impersonation” acting, wherein an actor transforms him- or herself into different characters, from “personification,” where his or her persona is constant from film to film—even impersonation actors who are stars develop personas. The star’s persona then becomes associated with the private individual, but the two are never identical, and only the most naïve fans experience them as such. As Marshall puts it, “the relationship that the audience builds with the film celebrity is configured through a tension between the possibility and impossibility of knowing the authentic individual.”¹⁴

The movies had distinct advantages over theater in creating widely recognized stars. The most obvious is the vast increase in the size of the audience, but perhaps just as important was the increase in the size of the actor, and especially her or his face, on the screen. Roland Barthes in “The Face of Garbo,” associated this star with “that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunges audiences into the deepest ecstasy.”¹⁵ This visual intimacy with the face enabled the illusion of an emotional intimacy with the performer greater than one produced by being in the same room with her or him. The studios also had much greater resources, allowing them to exploit other media in their effort to encourage belief in this intimacy.

Unlike the famous, or mere celebrities, stars are defined by attractiveness, usually experienced as sexual, but that may be a more general personal magnetism. Movie stars are often said to be different from the rest of us because of their “star quality,” which screenwriter Budd Schulberg defines as a “mysterious amalgam of self-love, vivacity, style, and sexual promise.”¹⁶ The components of star quality correspond to two components of audience response: desire and identification. The star’s attractiveness works both directly and vicariously in the minds of the fans, who want either to have the star or to be the star. Sexual promise, conveyed through the portrayal of romantic relationships, is at

the heart of what the dream factory made and sold, yet it would be a mistake to treat stars merely as sex objects. As sociologist Joshua Gamson notes, fans took the Hollywood star as a model, someone identify with and to imitate.¹⁷ Film scholar Jackie Stacey has shown that identification is central to how women responded to stars of the 1940s and 1950s, both while watching movies and at other times. Self-love is important because an individual lacking self-love tends not to be regarded as worthy of imitation or identification.¹⁸

According to architect Denise Scott Brown, “stardom is something done to a star by others. Stars cannot create themselves.”¹⁹ It is the audience’s identification and desire that “create” the star. Stardom is an effect of a relation between the celebrity and the fans. This points to the second distinguishing attribute of stars: they are the objects of imagined personal relationships by fans. For Richard Schickel, modern celebrity, the model for which is film stardom, is “based on an imagined intimacy fostered by the media.”²⁰ But while stars share this condition with some other celebrities, not all celebrities engender such fantasies. How do we know that fans typically imagine such relationships? The evidence lies in fan mail, in public reactions to stars’ marriages and divorces, and especially in the mourning—sometimes on a vast scale—of them when they die. Adoring fans make the star adorable; thus studios staged premieres and other events for the display of public worship, made sure that fan mail received responses so that fans would send more mail, and helped build quasireligious shrines such as the Walk of Fame.



Greta Garbo, a star “when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy,” c. 1930. (publicity photo, MGM)

In the United States, film stardom begins around 1910 with the emergence of the first “picture personalities,” performers whose identities were “constructed through the films [they] had appeared

and the publicity for those films.”²¹ It was at this point that studios discovered the economic advantages of stars and began to promote them. One kind of publicity was particularly important in making film stars distinctive from other celebrities. Producer Carl Laemmle seems to have been the first in the industry to actively manipulate public perceptions of film actors outside of the films by trying to convince the public that an actor—King Baggot in 1912—was the sort of person he played on the screen.²² As this example shows, stardom is best created out of the interrelation of different media. The invention of stars’ public images needs to be understood as a collaborative project of the star and industry, but the success of that invention clearly depends on audience response. The studios built a publicity apparatus to ensure that the personality portrayed in the movies would be further developed in other media and that images of the star’s offscreen life would continue the fans’ relationship with the star between film releases. The star system became a successful marketing strategy rooted in part on the system of contract labor that tied actors to a single studio, typically for seven years. Even without the same labor contracts, the music industry adopted this strategy, partly because its biggest stars of the prerock era, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, were also movie stars. By the time rock & roll came along, this “star-maker machinery” was familiar and available. Stardom increased record sales because it created a desire for new products that preexisted the actual products themselves.

The mention of the machinery of stardom raises the issue of authenticity, which is a problem for stardom, because stars are in several important senses artificial. The most obvious of these is the importance of publicity and the conscious manipulation of the media in which the movie studios, agents, managers, and record companies regularly engage. How can we trust that the star we perceive isn’t the mere invention of advertising and public relations? The authenticity of stars is also made problematic by the way in which their primary media, that is, film and sound recording, are typically understood. These media seem particularly artificial. Walter Benjamin, who lamented the loss of the storyteller’s authenticity in the literature of his own time, famously argued that the mechanical reproduction of art would render the question of authenticity moot. Benjamin welcomed this destruction of art’s aura, and modern art of all kinds has often reveled in the wholesale disappearance of the old, as Chuck Berry suggested with “Roll Over Beethoven.” According to Benjamin, the “aura” of a venerated work of art derives from its authenticity and “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.” But once mechanical reproduction becomes the norm, the need for an original, authentic object is lost. “To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense.” This leads Benjamin to conclude that the criterion of authenticity has ceased to be applicable to artistic production, and, as a result, “the total function of art is reversed.” Thus, “that which withers away in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.”²³

If Benjamin’s idea that mechanically reproduced art lacks a significant element of the authenticity of a great painting is irrefutable, Herwitz shows how film nonetheless produced its own aura, which surrounded its stars. He suggests that there *is* an original—the real Cary Grant or Greta Garbo—a point that restates Marshall’s insight about the inherent tension between persona and person.²⁴ Of course, Herwitz’s point holds for rock as well, but perhaps even more strongly, since we are more likely to accept a rock star’s persona as an authentic expression of his or her self. This throws the problem of authenticity back to the question of the star’s agency in his or her own stardom. The fact that the star functions within an industrial system seems to render him or her a mere object of manipulation, but that doubt is rooted in the ideology of individualism. What this book will show is that rock stars are best understood as collaborators in the creation of their personas. They could not

have done it alone, but it could not have been done without them either.

Doubtless the star system in rock has tended to undermine the authenticity of the music. At least part of the inevitable rejection by younger musicians and fans of the dominant stars of the previous generation—or moment—is a result of the conviction that anyone so popular and so frequently represented in the media could not possibly be “real.” But this is only part of the story. The greatest stars continue to personify authenticity—at least to their fans—in the face of almost any changes or revelations that might call it into question. Elvis Presley remained authentically the King to numerous fans even after his personal appearance had become self-parody. Indeed, even the most radical of all changes—death—for many did not diminish their belief in Elvis’s real presence.²⁵ The Rolling Stones continue to fill stadiums by playing the rebellious adolescents they have not been for more than thirty years.



“Everybody wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant,” c. 1940. (publicity photo)

This suggests a qualification of Marshall’s point that the very condition of stardom creates a division between the star and an imagined private individual: not every fan experiences this division. Consider movie stars John Wayne and Arnold Schwarzenegger, both of whom are perceived by their fans to be the person they typically played onscreen. Steven Ross shows how candidate Schwarzenegger often used the lines of his movie characters in his campaign for governor of California.²⁶ Authenticity, then, is also an effect of the star system. This effect enables the star to have a persona that represents more than an individual personality but works as a widely understood culturally specific sign or icon. To be a star is to be perceived as standing apart from the movies or music and to exist in the cultural imaginary at the same level as historical figures like George

Washington, fictional characters like Sherlock Holmes, or well-known symbols such as the Statue of Liberty.

The movie stars of the studio era were icons of personality, but, as I will show below, after World War II, stars in both film and music often represent a politics or an ideology. To prepare for that discussion, it is necessary to discuss how rock stardom is formally distinct from film stardom. The rock star differs from the movie star by virtue of differences in their primary media. Because the rock star's performance is, with a few exceptions, as him- or herself, rather than as a fictional character, performance and persona are very closely associated. If the movie industry tried to convince us that stars were like the characters they portrayed, the music industry's task was simpler: it needed to convince the audience that the performing self was a genuine reflection of the real self. That this effort was largely persuasive is shown by the fact that we do not normally take, say, John Lennon or Bob Dylan to be playing a role. We may perceive a movie star's personality in all of the roles he or she plays, but a rock star like Mick Jagger only plays Mick Jagger. One can't imagine him saying, like Cary Grant, that even he *wants* to be Mick Jagger.

The movie star entails three distinct levels—the character portrayed, the public persona, and the private or “real” person—but the rock star, only the latter two. Yet rock stars do come to portray characters that exist with more or less consistency throughout the media in which they perform. “Lennon,” “Dylan,” and “Jagger” are roles that, unlike those in film, exist in no script. Rock stars do not transform or animate the creation of another; they make themselves up as they go along. But if rock stars are characters, one is entitled to ask in what dramatic or narrative form do they exist. One answer is that they inhabit preexisting social roles, each of which implies at least the outline of a narrative. Dylan has assumed a series of these social roles. He is perhaps most well known as the prophet of such diverse messages as “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “You Gotta Serve Somebody,” but he has also played the aesthete (*Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*), the down home balladeer (*John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*), and the poet wounded in love (*Blood on the Tracks*). Another answer is the story of rock itself. This story has been told often in print and occasionally in televised documentaries, but I want to argue that rock's story was invented prior to any of these more or less professional versions. Indeed, the importance of this narrative context to the experience of rock is one of the things that distinguishes it from other popular musical practices: only classical music foregrounds its own history more than rock has. Film stars also inhabit a historical narrative, of course, but it is less salient in the public's experience of them, probably because movie stars are not so readily conceived as authors of self-expression.

Celestial Revolution

Probably the single word most associated with pre–World War II movie stars was *glamour*. Today the word is associated especially with still photographs, which portray actors as more than just beautiful or attractive, a mystical embodiment of the good life. They seem often in such photos to glow, like the heavenly bodies for which they are named, from the inside rather than from mere reflected light. The word *glamour* originally meant a magic spell or charm, and these portraits cast spells over charmed viewers. But if the lighting of the photos implies some kind of otherworldly quality, the clothes worn reveal that the good life suggested here is a life full of goods. Glamour was associated not just with a look but with, as Joshua Gamson puts it, “extravagant consumption,” which is also something that fans doubtless dreamed of enjoying.²⁷ That's why product tie-ins used movies and stars in advertising offering consumers the chance to purchase a little bit of a star's glamour.

Dyer observes, “Stardom is an image of the way stars live. For the most part, this generalized lifestyle is the assumed backdrop for the specific personality of the star and the details and events of

her / his life.”²⁸ Other photographs make this explicit, putting the stars at home in the midst of luxury goods. If the level of consumption makes the stars different from you or me, their personalities and private lives make them look more like the rest of us, and some photographs depict the stars living “ordinary” family life. The studios worked hard to keep a balance between these two poles. Stars were meant to be like us, but more so. They were to be our ideal images of ourselves, and therefore the “mask” of glamour was not enough. It is hard to have an imaginary personal relationship with someone who is perfect, so a few private difficulties or eccentricities helped. This duality largely remained intact in the era of the rock star, though glamour became less significant than excess and transgression in distinguishing stars from the rest of us.



A glamour photo of Carole Lombard, c. 1930. (publicity photo, Paramount Pictures)

A second concept central to the cultural meaning of stardom in the studio era is personality, which was an innovation of the early twentieth century. According to Samantha Barbas, “Personality entered American culture during the first two decades of the century as part of an ongoing dialogue on the nature of self in a rapidly modernizing culture.”²⁹ Where nineteenth-century self-help writers urged the virtues of “character,” which was understood to be at least partly inherent and featured morality and sincerity, twentieth-century advisers touted “personality,” defined as “charm, friendliness, and flawless self-presentation.” Studio era stars illustrate the triumph of personality over character: “by the 1920s, stars were more than just actors. To many Americans, they had become models of modern selfhood.”³⁰ But stars were also models for a range of different personalities, distinct packages of attractive traits that might inspire imitation in some and desire in others but perhaps just as often provide a kind of illustrated taxonomy of human personalities. On this reading, the differences among

movie stars, especially those who represented the same social types, were what made them interesting. Through World War II, movie stars' cultural meanings tended to remain, at least overtly, at the level of personality, and exceptions such as Charlie Chaplin and Orson Welles merely prove the rule.³¹ Early stars such as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks had explicitly political aspects of their identities, but these were not very elaborately developed.³² This explicit politics would become less common after the studios began to manage the stars' images more closely in the wake of the scandals of the early 1920s. The enforcement of the production code in 1934 meant that films themselves would be political only in the sense that they were covertly ideological and that the studios would avoid political controversy. Popular entertainment during the Depression and World War II certainly served ideological ends, but it did so precisely by seeming not to be political. World War II era films that supported the war effort were not understood as political but patriotic.

After the war, the cultural function and perception of popular entertainment changed despite efforts to preserve the apolitical consensus of wartime, which as historian Lary May has shown, the studios tried to enforce by keeping class conflict out of their films.³³ The new head of the Motion Picture Association of America, Eric Johnston, sought to allow only movies that depicted America in a positive light: "We'll have no more *Grapes of Wrath*, we'll have no more *Tobacco Roads*, we'll have no more films that deal with the seamy side of American life. We'll have no more films that treat the banker as the villain."³⁴ Yet the consensus Johnston and the government hoped for failed to take hold. Instead, the very attempt to enforce consensus produced the opposite, and there emerged a more politicized cinema. The Cold War and the repression of the Left in the United States made people aware of the potential politics of the movies and other entertainment. Humphrey Bogart, who would not have been perceived as a political figure previously, suddenly found himself one when he stood up to and then backed down from the blacklists. The personas of the greatest movie stars of the 1950s—John Wayne, James Dean, and Marilyn Monroe—are all overtly more political than those of the studio era stars.

Garry Wills asserts, "The year John Wayne became a superstar, 1948, was also the year he became a political activist."³⁵ Wayne had sat out the war and had not become interested in anticommunism until it was over. It was in 1948 that Howard Hawks released *Red River*, the film that, Wills argues, defined John Wayne for the rest of his career.³⁶ That year Wayne also made the first two of the three Seventh Cavalry films for John Ford, which associated the actor with the U.S. military. His appearance as Sergeant Stryker in *Sands of Iwo Jima* the following year "brought Wayne his first Oscar nomination and Stryker entered the mythology of right-wing America."³⁷ Wayne would spend the 1950s struggling to make *The Alamo* (1960), which he directed, and he began to plan that film in 1948, at the same time as he became an active anticommunist. According to Wills, Wayne became enduringly popular because he represented what his fans wanted an American to be. In other words, he became an icon for an ideology.

The case for Marilyn Monroe as a political figure is much less obvious, of course, but Richard Dyer's well-known essay on her can be read as making the case. Dyer argues that Monroe represented the condensation of 1950s discourses around sex, in particular, those of *Playboy* and of the problem of female sexuality. It is important to emphasize here that the 1950s were a period in which sex became much more visible in American culture and a much debated social problem. Monroe did more than merely reflect this change. Dyer notes that she was a "taboo breaker, from riding the scandal of the nude *Golden Dreams* calendar to showing her nipples in her last photo session with Bert Stern and doing a nude scene in the unfinished *Something's Got to Give*, unheard of for a major motion picture star."³⁸ Ever since the 1920s, Hollywood had guarded stars against such scandals, but Monroe's career

was about pushing boundaries. In Dyer's view, she comes to represent the idea of the innocence of "natural sex." He quotes Diana Trilling saying, "None but Marilyn Monroe could suggest such a purity in sexual delight," and Monroe herself asserting, "I think that sexuality is only attractive when it is natural and spontaneous."³⁹ While actresses had long been sex objects, they had not previously been symbols of a particular ideology of sex.

For purposes of understanding rock stardom, however, the most important politicized movie star of the 1950s was James Dean. As cultural studies scholar Leerom Medovoi has shown, youth emerged in the 1950s as a new cultural identity. "Even as anticommunist ideology authorized the suppression of an Old Left rooted in radical class politics, the rise of the New Left, animated by identity politics, was actually abetted by a different face of the Cold War imaginary that envisioned the young American rebel as guarantor of the nation's antiauthoritarian democratic character."⁴⁰ James Dean was the purest instance of that young American rebel, in part because he only made three movies and died at the height of his popularity. In the most popular of those films, *Rebel without a Cause*, he played the most iconic instance of the young American rebel, Jim Stark. Stark's blue jeans may have been borrowed from the working class, but Stark was middle class, and his rebellion was not motivated by economic or social oppression. Medovoi notes the sources of Jim Stark's delinquency in the failure of his father to live up to an older image of masculinity, and he correctly connects this to larger American anxieties around the Cold War and conformity.⁴¹ Before youth-identity politics began to develop, James Dean became a leading image of resistance to the adults youth saw as their opponents.



John Wayne in his standard costume in *The Searchers*, 1956. (publicity photo, Warner Brothers)



James Dean, middle-class youth in working-class garb, in *Rebel without a Cause*, 1955. (publicity photo, Warner Brothers)

These three stars are precursors of the rock star, because they embody explicit and controversial ideologies, and in Dean's case, one that rock stars will also embody. But it must be kept in mind that Wayne, Monroe, and Dean were exceptions, even in the 1950s. It is with the rock star that stardom became widely politicized. Rock stars were more political than any other previous genre of star. Let me be very clear, since this claim can be easily misunderstood. I am not asserting that rock stars as a group think of themselves as having an explicit politics—though it is true that rock stars have more often done this than have film stars. Still less am I claiming that rock stars' politics are necessarily, or even on the whole, progressive. Rather, my point is that rock stars from Elvis to Eminem have consistently figured politically in the cultural imagination, while movie stars, especially those of the studio era, generally have not.

The political edge that many rock stars had is an aspect of a broader characteristic of their personas, their adversarial stance. Previously, popular musicians were sometimes perceived as outsiders because of race or class, but they presented themselves as insiders, dressing like the bourgeoisie and keeping their drug use under wraps. But the rock star flaunted his or her differences from social norms. From Elvis on, rock stars' dress and hairstyles stood out from those of the entertainment world and ordinary, middle-class life. Also starting with Elvis, their performances deviated from the conventions that had governed popular musicians. By the mid-1960s, drug use had become associated with rock stardom, as had an image of virtually unlimited sexual behavior. Where movie stars' conduct was carefully monitored and publicity about it sanitized, rock stars became defined by their rejection of social propriety.

When rock & roll burst on the scene in the mid-1950s, it was doubtless not widely viewed as a

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