

Preface

T*his is the hardest piece I've ever written.* I've been avoiding it for several years. When I confided the difficulty I was having with it to my friend Frank Lentricchia, who teaches at Duke and whose advice on all matters concerned with writing is invaluable, he said, "Why don't you start by writing about the problems you're having with it?" That was more than a year ago. I remember thinking at the time that it was great advice. I also thought it would motivate me to begin writing. That didn't happen.

Maybe this project means too much to me. Ever since I started writing about music in 1978, when I was a graduate student in English at Indiana University—I wrote reviews and profiles for the town newspaper, then amusingly titled the Bloomington Herald-Telephone—I thought that one day I would love to publish a collection of my work. Years later when I discussed it with Ken Wissoker, my editor at Duke University Press, he expressed enthusiasm, and I became excited. I thought it would be revealing, and fun to put together. That was before I began the strangely complicated process of assembling my work, deciding what would be best to include and arranging it in some sensible order.

Essentially, the process broke down for me at that point. A notoriously generous reader of my own work, I liked—or at least felt a certain affection for—almost everything I read. Still, looking back disturbed me. I resented the implied suggestion that the glory days were behind me. The cliché about projects like this is that you feel as if you're writing your own epitaph. There's some truth to that.

Also, arbitrarily declaring a stopping point in my work seemed unnatural, counterintuitive. Through chance and the passage of time, a couple of natural breaking points occurred. First, in May 1995, I left my job as a writer and editor at *Rolling Stone* after nine years to take a job as on-air correspondent and editorial director at VH1. At that point Ken and I talked about using the move from print to television as a peg for this introduction. When I left VH1 a year later, Ken and I spoke again. I had gotten a deal to write a book about R.E.M. for another publisher, but, of course, I assured him, I would shortly be completing this introduction. Then I did nothing.

As all this was going on, I eventually dumped an enormous pile of

stuff on Ken's desk. He read it, made some comments, and suggested an organizational plan. We then met in North Carolina and weeded through the pieces to give the book a more determined shape and bring it in at a manageable length. We refined that scheme a few times subsequently, incorporating suggestions from the press's readers, and finally came up with the work you see before you.

I introduce Ken's role here both to emphasize the deep sense of gratitude I feel and because, for whatever reasons, I doubt I would have been able to organize this collection myself. From an intellectual standpoint, I suppose my problem looking back on my work is that I don't come to music or any other subject from a specific ideological stance, and no such position emerges in this collection. That's partly because most of this work was written on journalism deadlines and partly because I prefer to *discover* a story—whether that story is a critical response to an album, an encounter with an artist, or an engagement with a social issue—rather than allow my preconceptions to “explain” it in advance.

What I like about these pieces is their sense of a drama unfolding, the palpable feel of a person rendering perspective on a series of experiences in a complex culture. I always liked writers and teachers who seemed to be thinking in front of me, and, to as great a degree as possible, my writing is done in that spirit. One of the titles I originally considered for this collection is “flashpoints,” and that's how I see this work—as the sparks that flew when I rubbed up against the subject of the moment.

While social and political ideas inform my thinking at every second—I grew up in a working-class family, and that is the filter through which I view all my experiences—my writing tends to be governed more by aesthetic concerns. I'm far more interested in whether a subject excites me—and whether or not I can write well about it, whether I can make the reader feel or understand something—than whether it is “worthy” or “progressive,” by whatever means such designations could be measured. As someone at play in the fields of popular culture, I care about everything that interests people. In a way that is antithetical to most rock criticism, I grow more curious about something the more popular it gets. Despite that, some of the subjects discussed here have faded from cultural view. Others have accrued greater significance. Prominence of subject was, of course, one factor Ken and I considered in assembling this book, but I think we both felt that if the writing in a piece really came across, then that piece would be included.

Given current academic fashions, my concerns and approach might be considered by some to be conservative. I don't see it that way—and the positions I take in the “Culture Watch, Culture Wars” section of this book bear me out, I think. But, if that's so, so be it. I've always enjoyed treating nontraditional subjects in traditional ways. As a graduate student, I wrote my dissertation about American fiction that, in almost every instance, had been written within the previous two decades. By the standard of the time—this was the late Seventies—writing about such “unproven” material was daring. Writing about it without hauling in an obvious theoretical frame was even riskier.

My approach was a kind of socially conscious new criticism—a concentrated focus on a text in the effort to coax out its cultural, political, psychological, and aesthetic meanings. That's still my favorite method. It implies that analysis is always a work in progress. If you keep thinking and paying attention, if you remain alert, meanings emerge and alter as times and cultural circumstances change. Sorting out the resonances of contemporaneous work is my greatest intellectual pleasure. It's a bit like walking on the wire. I love being free of the weight of previous readings, the precarious feeling that both my ideas and the subject in question must accept that there can be no firm footing on shifting sands.

The writing in this collection, too, is relatively traditional—perhaps even belletristic, as they say these days. I've never subscribed to the idea that writing about rock & roll somehow had to “capture the spirit” of the music. All writing should capture the spirit of its subject, obviously. In rock criticism, though, that goal typically provides the rationale for ridiculous adolescent excesses, creating a genre characterized by what Stephen Holden has described as “smart teen talk.” Readers—and writers—who want to engage the spirit of the music really should go listen to it.

Nor am I, with relatively few exceptions, overtly present as a character in much of my writing. That's another absurdly self-indulgent tendency that has made rock criticism a laughingstock to virtually everyone who doesn't do it for a living. Writing about rock & roll, to the disappointment of most of its practitioners, is ultimately no different from writing about anything else. The same virtues apply—intelligence, clarity, grace, humor, and a concern for the reader.

As for the title, “Rocking My Life Away”—borrowed, of course, from the great Jerry Lee Lewis song (which was written by Mack Vickery and drops the “g”)—that's another story. Six years ago, when I turned forty,

that song—along with “Thirty-nine and Holding,” another Jerry Lee Lewis signature—were my private, if somewhat ironic, anthems. They fiercely celebrate, with just the right undertones of arrogance and desperation, the contradictions of aging in a profession that worships youth. My favorite moment in “Rockin’ My Life Away” comes midway in the first verse. Over a punishing piano rhythm, Lewis delivers the song’s opening lines—first-rate examples of brilliant rock & roll nonsense—with who-gives-a-fuck off-handedness. “Fourteen, twenty-five, and forty, ninety-eight / I threw a rock & roll party on my last birthday,” he sings, “But it’s good / I’m rockin’ my life away.”

From the fever of the performance, Lewis is clearly having a blast. So, why the “but”? What is the implied criticism to which he’s responding? Should he have not thrown that “rock & roll party”? Why not? Is it morally wrong to be behaving at twenty-five or forty, let alone ninety-eight, the same as you did at fourteen? More likely, is rock & roll damning him to hell, as he once feared? For myself, I understood that “but” all too well. Among many other things, it meant, “even though I have a Ph.D.,” or “even though I should have a grown-up job,” or “even though I should be acting my age.” I agree, though: It’s good.

I never set out to be a “rock critic,” a profession that did not exist when I was young. Sometimes it seems like a strange job to have as an adult. I’ve often told people that essentially I live the same way now as I did when I was seventeen (if not, fourteen)—I read, I write, and I listen to music.

That an entire intellectual culture would grow up around the music I love is something no one ever could have foreseen—certainly I didn’t foresee it. Even when I was teaching literature and simultaneously writing rock criticism, I’d rarely introduce music into the classroom. I didn’t want to be a “rock & roll professor,” and, to tell the truth, that aspect of things still feels a bit funny to me. (Not that I’m snobbish about it, mind you. Not only have I written for virtually every mass market publication in existence, but, as I mentioned, I also worked in cable television.)

When I was younger, I believed that rock & roll, like sex, was something best learned on the street. I enjoyed the fact that my friends and I could have intense discussions about the music in ways that seemed far removed from any institutional structure. What’s more, it always felt strange trying to contain the power of rock & roll in a classroom or lecture situation. I remember once playing Little Richard’s “I Hear You

Knocking” during a talk I was giving to a group of arts journalists. It seemed surreal to be sitting still in a room in the middle of the afternoon earnestly listening to two of the most anarchic minutes in all of rock & roll.

These days, contradictions like that intrigue me more than put me off. Popular culture is a booming academic business—and it should be. I certainly do my share of lecturing and writing about it in serious contexts—like this one, for example. And I may eventually end up teaching it myself, quite happily.

Around the time of my fortieth birthday—the point of my realization that, for better or worse, I was rocking my life away—I made my peace with the notion that my professional life was largely devoted to a music that, to this day, many people associate exclusively with kids. While it embarrasses me to see some of my contemporaries—and even people in their thirties, for that matter—chasing every new trend, I still find myself moved and motivated by plenty of new music. And I ardently believe there are still plenty of interesting and important things to be said about the music that’s been around for a while.

The nonmusic pieces in this collection demonstrate that my interests range far wider than rock & roll. But—that word again—sometimes your “career” chooses you, and I feel fortunate to have found a specialty that continues to provide gripping subjects and to renew itself for me. Some of the best results of that lucky fit are gathered here, for your pleasure.

