

The Apocalyptic Overtones in Rock Music

63

RAJMUND LADYSLAW DABROWSKI

I'm gonna listen to the cries
From the people
Who make this
Worlds End.

ANDWELLA, "Worlds End."

I

When the WHO, a British rock band, first came to America, its members could hardly play instruments. "They put on an apocalyptic stage show to cover up."¹ Today, six or seven years later, the WHO still puts on an apocalyptic stage show, but its function is not to make up for inadequacies of technique. It is the representative of the counterculture, announcing through its compositions that this world is about to die.

To many Christians, rock music is itself a sign of the world's end; it is a fulfillment of the prophetic revelation that strange things will occur at the "end of time." And to many, the WHO still represents the degenerate, sex-and-drug-ridden, young-and-angry men of the counterculture. But the WHO is more than just a product of reaction to the establishment. It offers the world not merely a symptom of a problem, but a solution.

To consider in detail rock music's apocalyptic preoccupation, one should have the background of certain general observations. Often both the films and the music of today are evaluated in Christian circles for their recreational and moral values rather than for the message that they try to communicate. This approach is a mistake, really, because many (if not most)

rock compositions are commentaries on the modern scene. A few rock songs succeed on sound alone, but the majority that are strong are so because of their lyrics. Whether the music is combined with words or not, however, most rock compositions are serious attempts at communicating.

A number of articles and books have been written on rock music's influence in the spreading cultural revolution. But relatively little has been written by Christians about the messages that effectively mirror American society. Some of these messages have a certain apocalyptic significance, but this aspect is generally ignored by both qualified and unqualified critics. For Seventh-day Adventists, the strong apocalyptic overtones in rock music ought to be more relevant than its various other themes.

The idea that apocalyptic concepts belong exclusively to ecclesiastical circles is no longer valid. Not only churchgoers sing about fire and brimstone. Nor are ministers in their pulpits alone in proclaiming the "end." Today's "secular man" often talks about doomsday as much as the nominal or dedicated Christian does; and rock songs contribute heavily to the universal (both geographic and ethnic) awareness of the approaching end of the present world.

II

The rock music scene, with its starry "age of Aquarius," its en masse events like Woodstock and Altamont, and its individual idols like Bob Dylan and John Lennon, is very much involved with the apocalyptic. The wide use of narcotics in the rock culture can be interpreted as an attempt to experience a different-than-present reality — a world without violence, greed, and hypocrisy. There is also among rock fans a revived interest in comic books in which the climax is the deliverance — often on a cosmic scale — of the oppressed from the tyrants. And, in the words of Leon Russell, a rock hero, a "master of space and time," "The only way to stay with it is to read science fiction, because if you study contemporary science, you're constantly in the past."²

Some talk about the destruction of the world, others talk about better days ahead, and still others simply warn the world that *the end is at hand*:

Just like the Seneca,
I have lost my place.
And where I've been planted now,
Soon will be shakin'
Too soon tomorrow will come.

BREWER AND SHIPLEY, "Too Soon Tomorrow."

Bob Dylan, probably the greatest minstrel of our times, and sometimes regarded as the John-the-Baptist of the rock apocalypse,³ predicted a few things about the future of this poor world, but was relatively vague about the particulars of the end.

Among those who talk of the end of the world in terms of destruction, there is a two-way development. On the one hand, there are some who strongly suggest that the end will be caused by the direct intervention of a supernatural force. On the other hand, a majority say that it is man who is destroying the world by his irresponsibility toward this earth and its inhabitants:

What have they done to the earth?
 What have they done to our fair sister?
 Ravaged and plundered and ripped her and bit her,
 Stuck her with knives in the side of the dawn,
 And died her with fences,
 And dragged her down.

THE DOORS, "When the Music Is Over."

Adventists are reminded here of John the Revelator, who linked both ideas: "Thy wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, . . . and for destroying the destroyers of the earth."⁴

In the rock compositions, however, the coming destruction can usually be avoided; mankind still has a possibility of survival, and even a better life on this earth. Some songs encourage us to believe that if we "give peace a chance" (Lennon), there will be brighter days ahead, while others warn us to "get on the right road" today, because tomorrow might be "too late to get started" (Gary Wright).

Since one of the causes of the approaching end is ecological negligence, some of the rock musicians urge mankind to get involved in an endeavor to "save the planet" (Edgar Winter) in order to avert "the end" (The Doors) on "doomsday afternoon" (Earth Island). For others, the crucial issue is man's lack of love — violence, crime, hate — that is "about to destroy the human race." So they sing:

Flame of love is about to die.
 We're gonna fan the fire,
 Come on along.

EARTH, WIND, AND FIRE, "Fan the Fire."

There is admonition, hope, and determination:

We can change this world. . . .
Please, let's make it happen.
For our children,
For our women,
Change the world.
Please make it happen.
Come on.

Can't stand it no more.
The people cheating,
Burning each other.
They know it ain't right.
How can it be right?
Better end soon, my friend.
It better end soon, my friend.

CHICAGO, "It Better End Soon."

66

But the apocalyptic outlook in rock music also includes despair and violence. Some rock compositions, for example, depict an individual struggle for survival in a world of boredom, pessimism, hate, and self-destruction — a struggle that is something like a "dance of the lemmings" (Amon Duul). From the nightmare of "fire and rain" (James Taylor), many seek a pathetic way out in drugs and suicide: "Isn't It a Pity?" (George Harrison). Other compositions portray the end in terms of revolution, in which the hero is the "street fighting man" (Rolling Stones).

In turning toward the East a few years ago, some participants in the counterculture found apocalyptic significance in the appearance of Meher Baba, an avatar from India, who proclaimed himself a messiah, and whose following is still strong both in the Western hemisphere and in India. Among other devotees, Peter Townshend of the WHO dedicated two privately produced albums to promoting the message of a returning Messiah.

And rock music has by no means isolated itself from the traditional Christian expectation of the Second Coming of Jesus. Besides the "Jesus rock" music produced by the "Jesus people" within the rock culture, a few other musicians have used the biblical theme of Jesus' return at the end of the world: "Oh, Happy Day" (Edwin Hawkins Singers), "The Lord Is Back" (Eugene McDaniels).

III

What do we Adventists have to say about this apocalyptic emphasis in the rock culture? What does it mean — in itself and for an Adventist?

An unusual article entitled "The Apocalypse of Our Time Is Over," notes that "properly used, apocalyptic always demands attention. Which is a major reason for its recent popularity. We are passing through terrible times, when everybody wants attention, but nobody quite knows how to command it." The article insists, however, that "the apocalypse of our time is over. And no veil was rent, no revelation deciphered. No antichrist led us astray. No messiah delivered us. Nor did we check into the New Jerusalem." Instead, the doomsday awareness developed into a "popular hysteria," and what we have left is a generalized paranoia about the future.⁵ According to this analysis, rock music doesn't look for the end of the world, or wait for a messiah, any more.

But Adventists still do. Their apocalyptic anticipation is based on their belief in the Word of God. And it is not merely the expectation of the end of the present world, or the hope of mankind learning to love, but the confidence of being "heaven bound" — destined for eternal life. If their message is better than that of recent rock music, one would suppose that Adventists would want to give it to the world all the more vigorously.

REFERENCES

- 1 Ellen Sander, Pensive pop for a more tempered time, *Saturday Review* (January 29, 1972).
- 2 Jerry Hopkins, Back where Leon once belonged, *The Rolling Stone* (November 11, 1971).
- 3 Howard Junker, The apocalypse of our time is over, *The Rolling Stone* (February 18, 1971).
- 4 Revelation 11:18.
- 5 Junker.