The Rhythm of Popular Music: Primitivist Slumming in a Machine Age?

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The most interesting response to my PRINCIPLES article, “A People without Melody,” was: “I get what you are saying about melody, but what about rhythm?” The person continued: “Certainly, there is a big emphasis on rhythm in popular music; wouldn’t you say that popular music today excels when it comes to rhythm?” I replied that rhythm is certainly a defining feature of much popular music today; however, the notion that these rhythms are always “excellent” would require a lengthier answer. This essay is my response.

I should say, by means of introduction, that I can only survey what I see as major...
trends in contemporary popular music and cannot even cover all of these. I very much regret, for example, that I will not be able to speak about that complicated, yet important, phenomenon of swing rhythm. There just isn’t enough space. But what follows will be an honest attempt to critique some of the major rhythmic trends in popular music.

It might be helpful, first, to look at St. Augustine’s definition of music: Musica est scientia bene modulandi. There is some question about the meaning of the last word (modulandi), but a good translation would be: “Music is the art of measuring well.” There is, however, another possible, and very complementary, translation. Taking the word motus (movement), which is very close to modulandi’s cognate word modus (measurement), I propose another translation: “Music is the art of moving well.”

These two connected ideas of the measurement of musical rhythm and the movement that it inspires in dance go back, most famously, to Plato. However, it is important to understand that it is the perceived movement in the music itself that, arguably, inspires the reciprocal movement in dancing. Keeping this in mind, I would like to proceed to what I think is a central, and poignant, question implicit in Roger Scruton’s fascinating book The Aesthetics of Music. The question is: How did we get from “the cheerful and life-enhancing sound of Louis Armstrong” to the “monsters of Heavy Metal”? Or, if I may add, to the modern-day Danse Apache of Gangsta Rap?

Even before Louis Armstrong, there is the equally cheerful and life-enhancing music of Ragtime. Ragtime seems to have been created by black pianists of the American Midwest who took the pre-existing musical form of the march, but “ragged” (i.e., syncopated) the rhythm of the melodies. Syncopation, which means emphasizing normally weak beats or weak parts of beats, was not a new phenomenon—you can find it in classical music. What makes Ragtime different, however, is that it uses syncopation regularly as a normal part of the music.

Is this more frequent use of syncopation something that comes out of Africa? Yes, but there is more to it than that. In Africa, as well as other places outside the West, one can find very complex percussion music of long tradition. It is typical in Africa to hear percussion ensembles playing layered rhythms that create fascinating textures, polyrhythms (e.g., groups of four played against groups of three), intellectually stimulating ambiguities (are these three groups of two or two groups of three?), and, at times, a deliberate obscuring of the beat.

Since such practices are beyond what one would hear even in Ragtime and in Louis Armstrong, where would one hear these influences in American popular music? The answer is that they can be heard in the Latin American music that comes out of South America and the Caribbean—
rumba, mambo, salsa—where black slaves were able to preserve more of their musical traditions than in North America. One can also hear this in some of the more sophisticated forms of jazz, particularly the solos of some of the better jazz drummers like “Papa” Joe Jones, Art Blakey, or Max Roach, to name just a few. Speaking about musicians in India, but applicable to African-influenced music, the critic Winthrop Sargeant notes that:

> It often happens among Indian musicians that a vina* player and a drummer will engage in a friendly contest to see which can confuse the other into losing track of the sam (the beat). . . . The vina player delights in apparently losing himself in the most abstruse counter-rhythms, leaving the listener with an utter sense of bewilderment, only to issue forth triumphantly at the sam again without a hair's breadth of inaccuracy, and with a sparkle of obvious satisfaction.³

If you want to get a sense of this technique in jazz drumming, look at the YouTube video “Max Roach -Solos.flv.”³ The second solo in that video is a particularly good example of this technique of obscuring the beat for a long time and then re-entering without missing a beat—a technique that is utterly foreign to most popular music today. In fact, the stronger and more obvious a beat is, the more likely are people to call the music “rhythmic,” which is a bit like saying, “2 + 2 = 4” and people responding, “He's a brilliant mathematician!” So, whence comes this idea that a throbbing, pounding, obvious beat is especially “rhythmic”—let alone “primitive”?

³ A vina, or veena, (pictured above) is a plucked string instrument of India.
Now Stravinsky had no agenda, but those famous stabbing, pulsing chords in the Danse des Adolescentes section of The Rite of Spring, which the audience heard that night, were to become forever seared into our modern Western cultural consciousness as exemplars of “primitive rhythm.” To be fair to Stravinsky, this is one section in a very long work, and even these repeated pulse-like chords are accented at irregular intervals that give the rhythm a real subtlety. However, as great a work of art as The Rite is, in my opinion, its faux primitivism unwittingly inspired lesser talents to create everything from cheap slasher movie sound tracks to the mindless thumping of disco music (including, but not limited to, the Village People) to the hand-clapping in Queen’s tribal anthem, “We Will Rock You” (short-short, LONG, short-short, LONG), and a whole lot more.

It is almost as if our culture collectively said, “You see, this is what primitive people do, and we all know that they ‘have rhythm’!” But as I already established, many non-Western cultures have a much more sophisticated sense of rhythm than that. What developed was a musical caricature of the primitive. For example, take Stravinsky’s pulsating rhythm; speed it up a bit; amplify it; put it into the most predictable, symmetrical patterns; spike your hair; wear a torn T-shirt; and maybe vomit on stage for good measure and—voilà!—you have punk rock.

In her book Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music, Martha Bayles points out how punk rock was largely created by the impresario Malcolm McLaren. An English fashionista and art-school dropout, McLaren was in thrall to what Bayles terms “Perverse Modernism.” This can be summed up in the French phrase, Épater la bourgeoisie! (Shock the bourgeoisie!), which was a rallying cry among the Decadent poets of the 1880s. It continued through the perverse plays of Frank Wedekind, Dadaism, and into the Fluxus Movement of the 1950s. It was the notion that art had to shock, offend, and unsettle in order to be effective. In this case, popular music was commandeered as a platform on which to pursue this art-school philosophy. Interestingly, the black jazz trumpeter and music educator Wynton Marsalis has a somewhat similar take on Rap, calling it “ghetto minstrelsy.” He speaks of white “safari seekers” saying, “Let’s go into the ghetto and see what the natives are doing.” His point is that in the nineteenth-century minstrel show, the “safari seekers” would have seen what they thought of as rather buffoonish, but lovable primitives. What such safari seekers are tempted to see in Rap today, according to Marsalis, are savage (but lovable, because they secretly want to be like them?) primitives who murder and fornicate without scruple. This is a harsh indictment, and, to be sure, his criticism tends to provoke strong reactions. Nevertheless, it may do this because it hits close to the target. I shall investigate the musical reasons why this may be the case later.

However, before we do this, we need to move on from the faux primitive to what I call the mechanical approach to rhythm. To this end, I will quote Roger Scruton again:

Rhythm plays with regularity, but is not reducible to
it: the pulse is both counted and discounted. . . . even the most exact performer will imbue a piece with a minute rubato, and this rubato is the mark of a living organism—the unnoticed vacillation of the pulse. When this rubato is absent—as when someone plays in time to a drum machine or a metronome—it is precisely rhythm that is the primary victim.7

Here we return to the notion that musical rhythm is both measurement and movement. If its measurement is too exact, then it won’t actually move us in a human way. As Scruton says in another venue, “one note invites the next into the space that it has vacated.”8 A note might coyly linger, creating anticipation for the next note, or more quickly cede, stressing the next note’s importance. There is a subtle give and take, just as in human relationships. Music is not strict geometry. When it is treated that way, it has a very different effect. Scruton observes, for example, that “the rhythm in Heavy Metal . . . is shot at you; the rhythm of the [eightsome] reel [on the other hand] invites you to move with it.”9 He then goes on to discuss the difference between “at” and “with” and how profound this is in human relationships. For example, we all know the difference between a conversation with a close friend and the pushy salesman who talks at us.

One example of this phenomenon in music is the song “Bleed,” by the Swedish Heavy Metal band Meshuggah. It’s not only the song’s unrelenting fortissimo volume and the shouted vocals, but also the absolute rigidity of the accompanimental rhythm. Though there is measurement, there is no true relationship among the individual notes; they are isolated points, pulsations spaced along a timeline. They are like bullets, shot out at us from their evenly spaced places within an ammunition clip. This is why such music is often associated with violent, dehumanizing ideas and images. (I strongly warn against watching the very disturbing video associated with this song.) Or listen to the more anodyne Eurodance hit from the 1990s “What Is Love?” Again, it’s not just the computer-produced sounds; it’s the exactly measured computer-produced rhythms that create the feel of the hip yet impersonal world against which the singer makes his plaintive cry, “What is Love?” The presence of a humanizing, plaintive cry cannot be counted on in all such music.

While it has been common enough over the past century for moralists to decry the “sensuality” in some music, a fair amount of popular music of the past thirty or forty years lacks the rhythmic fluidity to be truly sensual. Often enough, its rhythm is machine-like and rigid. Though there will be the obligatory syncopations—all but required in contemporary pop music—they are the processed, reified product of the digital studio. They do not seduce or tempt. That would be an improvement. Rather, such rhythmic stiffness creates
a more impersonal, “objective” effect. And this is also why such music inspires neither the ordered movement that the Waltz would, nor the more sensual, but still relational, movement that the Tango would. Such uncompromising rhythms do not encourage the subtle male-female negotiations, the give and take typical of couple dancing. In fact, as Roger Scruton has observed, it should not surprise us that what Punk, Heavy Metal, and Techno do inspire are “head-banging, slam-dancing, . . . [and] ‘moshing’.”

This brings us to Rap. Where does it come from?

The only thing that we can say for sure is that Rap emerged in New York City in the 1970s, specifically in black neighborhoods in the Bronx. Rap’s musical origin seems to have been the joining of three distinct elements: 1) the beat-heavy faux primitivism of 1970s popular music, 2) the nascent mechanical approach to rhythm that would come to prominence in the 1980s, and 3) certain rhyming games and speech patterns common in African-American neighborhoods (think of “jive talk” and the poetry of Mohammed Ali).

As you can see, of these three elements, only the last is truly African-American. At its most effective, in Gangsta Rap in particular, Rap takes place against a pounding faux primitive beat, often employing that technological cookie cutter that is digital sampling, and couched in an unrelenting ostinato pattern. The effect can be that of Chinese water torture. You do not move with such rhythmic structures so much as submit to them, as one does to a good thrashing. It bowls you over—or you fight manfully against it. The only thing of any musical sophistication is that sometimes the rapper will chant the words in unusual rhythms against the beat, as in the quintuplet rapping of Eminem, in which the man vs. machine nature of the genre becomes most explicit.

How far we have come from the days of West Side Story (1957) when the kids were, or at least aspired to be, “cool.” Tough teenage delinquents though they were, the Jets and the Sharks strove for a certain cool unflappability, which had a concomitant flexibility as well as a natural grace to it. Gangsta Rap is not cool, it is rough, graceless and merciless—masculinity at its most unyielding. I realize that there are other types of Rap, but the tamer the subgenre of Rap is, the more it has the quality of a gimmick, like Fred Astaire dancing to the rhythms of the steam ship engine in Shall We Dance? (1937). While this certainly is entertaining, it is hardly something that would normally endure as a popular music genre for decades. No, it is the rougher, more authentic variety of Rap that holds most people’s attention because it speaks to them. We are dealing with a very significant cultural phenomenon.

Rap, simply put, often draws on the same sort of primitivist and, at times, perverse modernism that Punk and Heavy Metal do. In the final analysis, and despite most of
its performers, it is only partially African-American in its musical makeup and hardly African at all.
In my opinion, Rap does not even come close to that truly great product of African-American culture: jazz. Thus, the cultural significance of Rap’s deep and widespread popularity needs to be examined more carefully from the starting point of its actual musical structure, rather than from any politically correct (or even well-intentioned) views of ethnicity.

Finally, Rap seems to be a part of the general trend toward verbalism in the popular music of our day. Beginning at least with Bob Dylan, and continuing through Bruce Springsteen to U2, popular music has often been a venue for earnest poets and social critics of modest musical abilities. Dylan at least had the ability to craft a decent enough, tuneful melody; by the time we get to U2 all we have is eminently forgettable musical recitative. Rap drops even this pretense.

In conclusion, I want to stress that I have tried to delineate rhythmic trends in American popular music: the faux primitive, the mechanical, and the African. These are not the only trends, nor do they explain every single piece of popular music. However, these are major, significant trends. So my response to the question at the beginning of the article is that, because of the decline of African influences over the last half-century or so, only a small percentage of rhythm in popular music today could be considered musically “excellent.” On the other hand, the rhythm of much popular music today speaks volumes about where we are as a culture.

ENDNOTES
1. The Latin verb modulari does not itself mean “to move,” though it can mean “to dance” or “represent by dancing.” And the noun mutus, as in the phrase dare mutus, can refer to “dancing.”
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
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