

Rockin' the Right-Wing Blogosphere: John J. Miller's Conservative Song Lists and Popular Culture after 9/11

MICHAEL T. SPENCER

There is something increasingly “conservative” about the nation, and it is affecting every aspect of people’s daily lives.

(Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* 14)

What you’re reading aloud is my publication, cribbing Fidentinus, but when you read it badly, it begins to be yours.

(Marcus Valerius Martialis, *Epigrammata*
[qtd. in Mailloux 1981: 9])

ON MAY 26, 2006, RIGHT-WING POLITICAL REPORTER JOHN J. MILLER published an article for the *National Review* titled “Rockin’ the Right: The 50 Greatest Conservative Rock Songs” wherein he identified some of the more “liberal” rock songs according to popular memory from the 1960s to present day as actually “convey[ing] a conservative idea or sentiment.” The Beach Boys’ “Wouldn’t it Be Nice,” he says, stands as a “pro-abstinence and pro-marriage” tract, Paul Revere and the Raiders’ “Kicks” is an “anti-drug song that is also anti-utopian,” and Credence Clearwater Revival’s “Who’ll Stop the Rain?” is “pessimistic about activism and takes a dim view of both Communism and liberalism” (“Rockin’ the Right”).¹ Shortly after its publication, mainstream media outlets, conservative news websites and online message boards were inundated with reactions—postings of similar lists as well as left-wing responses—which either decried or reaffirmed the practice of claiming rock as a

The Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2010
© 2010, Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

conservative political mouthpiece. In my view, the curiousness of these events and the discourses arising in their wake warrants a renewed examination of the ways in which popular conservatism connects with popular culture and a consideration of the rhetorics of interpretation.

This recent “conservative song list” phenomenon stands as a parallel development to some of the “more mainstream” political maneuvering within the current US political climate of millennial “culture wars,” 9/11 policy, and Fox News punditry. I argue these lists attempt to reterritorialize rock as a means of shifting the terrain of political debate concerning the various cultural forms that can now be claimed for conservatism, and I position them in relation to a larger right-wing political trend: one which attempts to co-opt rather than suppress or regulate rock music. Rather than defend any particular interpretation, my analysis focuses on the practices of the discourses itself. In particular, I question the methods of analysis which online conservative ideologues use in their selection and interpretation of the lyrics of various rock songs (particularly New Criticism) in order to hash out the problem of assigning meanings to rock music. Finally, as an exemplary instance of this New Criticism—new conservative alliance, I focus my analysis on Miller’s reading of Metallica’s “Don’t Tread on Me.”

Where’s the Peace, Love, and Music?

In recent years, the activity of antiestablishment forces has lulled to such a degree that many of their previously held territories are left subject to reaffiliation by other groups. While rock has not jettisoned its historically liberal tendencies altogether, its current ties to grass-roots movements are scarce due to the lack of traditional organizing around liberal causes. Although recent musical/political megaevents such as Live Aid or Free Tibet propose a coalition between rock and liberalism, there is little comparison, for instance, between the Vietnam War protests of the 1960s and those of the Iraq War today in terms of scale or musical affiliation. Furthermore, what liberal politics these latest megaevents exhibit have been alleviated, derided, or corporatized by establishment interests.² These megaevents stand as sites of contestation and eventual loss for the American Left; liberal activities which have since yielded to conservative agendas. But there is a new visible link between liberal music and conservative politics that cannot be understood simply as the

result of the decline in the Left. Rather, it is best understood in terms of authority and control over popular culture.

Conservative song lists illustrate the convergence of modern conservatism and popular culture within the context of “culture wars,” a term which refers to the oppositional political clashes between progressive and orthodox political factions beginning in the 1960s and which enter the fore of public culture beginning around the 1980s.³ The phenomenon coincided with a period of increased activity in the 1980s from the “new conservatism,” a political movement which conglomerated various right-wing factions with intent to “constrain, police, and even regulate . . . the production and consumption of art and popular culture in the United States” (Grossberg *The Framing of Rock* 193). Since the 1980s, new conservatives have found ways in which to bring politics out of traditional sites and into daily life. In his 1993 book *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* Lawrence Grossberg argues “the new conservatism is being put into place through largely cultural rather than political strategies” . . . “through relations of commitment rather than belief” . . . constituting “the reorganization of the relations of culture and politics in the U.S.” (15). In entering the sphere of culture, Grossberg says, new conservatives are able to neutralize identity as a basis for Leftist political action. In depoliticizing identity politics, they have an effective weapon in reworking culture because focusing on cultural work often distracts people from the genuinely political.

However, new conservatism itself has been “reworked” in the last few years in order to situate itself among the current discourses of 9/11 politics, to enter new popular culture and mass media outlets, and to appeal not merely to people’s affect—“their attention, volition, mood, passion” (255)—but to build a political bloc in which cultural revolution is no longer noticeably primary, but appears equally important alongside political revolution.⁴ It is in locating the genuinely political in the post-9/11 era that I wish to reconsider Grossberg’s central concerns of almost two decades ago: “How can popular culture be a strategic weapon in, as well as the ground of, hegemonic struggles? How can the reconfiguration of cultural spaces, places, and tempos itself become a principle of the rearticulation of structures of power? How are dominant structures of power constituted and put into place?” (259–60). In doing so, I want to suggest that while Grossberg’s “affective epidemic” (255) is still applicable to studying the habits of new conservatism after 9/11, it must

be amended to consider the political shifts in the wake of the rupture and crisis that stem from that important historical event. In this light, recent new conservative activity can be seen with great clarity in the construction of conservative song lists on the Internet. Although the act of remapping rock music as a contested site or as part of the new conservative sphere is a significant cultural move, I would argue that since these song lists emphasize a song's political importance over its cultural references, "affect" must take a back seat.

This shift is explained by three features of contemporary new conservatism. First, the culture war debates of today are not limited to doctrinaire political debates among premier intellectuals as in its early years but are now a part of and making room for popular culture and public participation at large, distributed through mass-media outlets like the Internet. Secondly, today's new conservatism is just as concerned with political revolution as it is with cultural revolution. We can see this in the rhetoric with which new conservatives appraise (and praise) certain popular culture forms. Lastly, the latest emphasis of the new conservative agenda in the arena of rock is not on strategies that attempt to suppress or even regulate the consumption of the music, but rather to colonize and co-opt it. Thus, the conservative bans on rock in the 1950s and the Parents' Music Resource Center "warnings" of certain themes in rock in the 1980s have given way to Miller's "appropriation by praise" strategy today.

Hands Off My Rock Music, Neocon Scum!

It might seem ridiculous for conservative forces to indoctrinate rock music, a popular culture form which they have historically derided and which they recognized as a cause of a variety of social problems (juvenile delinquency, race mixing, Communist subversion, etc.). However it is clear that conservatives today are investing meaning in rock music through a dialectical process of negotiated use. Here I am referring to Stuart Hall's idea of the "double stake"; that popular culture is neither period nor class specific but rather a contested site invested in and identified with both "the people" and "the power bloc"—emanipatory and hegemonic structures—alike (1998: 443, 447, 452).⁵

The use of popular music in recent Republican Party electoral campaigns not only serves to illustrate Hall's notion of the terrain of

popular culture as a sort of “battlefield,” but the current trend in new conservative appropriations of popular culture as well. On more than one occasion during the Republican National Convention (RNC) of 2008 Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin presented herself before the caucus to the accompaniment of “Barracuda” by the rock band Heart. Two of Heart’s members, sisters Nancy and Ann Wilson, issued a statement of “cease and desist” to the RNC citing the Republican Party’s failure to receive permission for the use of the song as well as the band’s wishes not to be aligned with Palin’s politics.⁶

Similarly, the Republican Party has more recently directed its efforts to capitalize on music popular among an urban, black demographic. Partly formulated as a counterattack to Barak Obama’s presidential victory in November of 2008, the RNC selected Michael S. Steele, an African American, to chair their organization in early 2009. Moments after his election, Steele took to the podium and shouted to the assembly, “Are there any conservatives in the house?” (Mebler). Steele subsequently promised to extend Republican Party appeal to “urban, suburban hip-hop settings” through a new public relations campaign that would “come to the table with things that will surprise everyone—off the hook” (Hallow). Like Palin’s use of popular music, Steele’s hip hop references and use of the African-American vernacular has broader political implications. According to Ari Mebler, “It is Republicans who are frantically remixing their message for cultural appeal, targeting a new generation of voters who speak a different language.”

These instances cannot be said to be inauthentic nor necessarily underhanded as the long history of cultural studies has shown that appropriation, no matter how insipid or contemptible, may be part of legitimate cultural production. Lawrence Levine, for one, has asserted that “it is not necessary for a people to originate or invent all or even most of the elements of their culture. It is necessary only that these components become their own, embedded in their traditions, expressive of their world view and life style” (24).

Nevertheless, these three shifts are the result of various historical events, technological advances, and the further aging of popular culture since Grossberg’s writing. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent national concerns surrounding terrorism, national security, and the military objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq have fostered new “affective epidemics”: illegal immigration, a resurgence of racism, knee-jerk

nationalisms, rhetorics of heroism, politics of fear, conspiracy theory, and the "Axis of Evil." Similarly, the rise of conservative cable networks, a new popular political literature market, and the Internet have reoriented conservative initiatives since 9/11. Also, one needs to consider that entire generations of Americans (conservatives included) have grown up listening to rock and roll. The prevalence of rock in conservative culture today might explain why, as rock listeners age, the music loses its appeal and cultural capital to youth as an instrument of rebellion. This situation is all the more promising for new conservatism, which can deputize rock more frequently and with less difficulty.

The culture war debates have also migrated out of exclusive intellectual circles and situated themselves on a national stage. Its discourses are often delivered by political pundits serving as outposts for the dissemination of a particular side of the debates. Liberal "culture warriors" like Michael Moore and Al Franken are also satirists who have entered the fray through their best-selling books and movies, respectively. On television, Fox News network's political orientation is easily identified from its programming and iconic pundits. Bill O'Reilly, for instance, hosts what Fox News bills as "political debate" shows which provide him the venue with which to broadcast his (and, not coincidentally, the network's) conservative agenda and dissect liberal guests (read: victims) when they appear.

The Internet is perhaps the largest area of culture war activity. The rise of blogs—Internet journal sites which allow users to instantly publish and continuously update information to the web for public consumption—have altered the dynamics of political discussion and expression as today anyone with an opinion and a computer can enter these culture war debates. Using search engines like Google, web surfers can locate political blogs with great ease and anonymity. Once there, blogs allow visitors to post responses to published content, effectively allowing the user to engage in dialogue. Political blogs in particular are common and widespread. Today, a search for *Culture Wars* and *Blog* through Google's search engine could return upwards of 50 million "hits."⁷

Interestingly, while today's conservative ideologues like O'Reilly display an interest in resolutely conservative political topics (the Iraq war, the "nanny state," immigration, etc.), they are much more interested in popular culture than their predecessors (discussing their favorite books, movies, music, and "weird" news stories from across the

globe). O'Reilly's Fox News website features a section called "Bill's Favorite Music" in which he praises the Doors, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones (<http://www.billoreilly.com>). Likewise, conservative radio show hosts Mike Savage and Rush Limbaugh often discuss their familiarity with popular music on the air, and in print publication, pundits like Sean Hannity are known to acknowledge popular culture products. Even Limbaugh's show opens with the Pretender's "My City Was Gone" (a song which Miller insists is conservative). Parodies of culture war talk show hosts Bill O'Reilly, Lou Dobbs, and Chris Matthews, etc. are often present in popular culture, particularly on sketch comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live*.

Making a List, Checking it Twice

New conservative ideology and culture war rhetoric are laden within the processes of construction of these song lists. The list which perhaps best exemplifies the new conservative agenda is that of *National Review* reporter John J. Miller. Miller's list is ostensibly an attempt to reveal the hidden history of conservative politics in rock and roll. He argues that even though rock has traditionally had liberal ties, "some rock songs really are conservative—and there are more of them than you might think." Miller compiled his list with the help of *National Review Online* readers who made song recommendations to him through the web. Then, according to Miller, he "sifted through them all, downloaded scores of mp3s, and puzzled over a lot of lyrics" ("Rockin' the Right"). After the songs are listed loosely by ranking of importance, he offers a short explanation as to how the lyrics of each song express a particular conservative idea.

Though the motivation for Miller's list is undeniably cultural—at least given its attention to popular music—his project is evidently more political. The only cultural concern in Miller's list is that the song in question be catalogued as "rock and roll"; a classification which he assigns loosely, as Tammy Wynette and the Georgia Satellites make an appearance. Moreover, his list is overwhelmingly void of musicological inquiry. What is exhibited is purely a textural analysis. Outside of identifying the music as "rock," it is literally the text of a song, which must express some tenet of conservatism. Given this, the political stigma assigned to (or embedded in, as Miller would have it) the

text in question renders the songs mouthpieces of new conservative ideology. This constitutes a clear political maneuver. Thus, it is evident that politics sits in the driver's seat while culture simply navigates.

Since Miller believes politics to be a quality intrinsic to the music, the apolitical stigma of this project appears heavily mediated. New conservatives often engage in the rhetoric of "anti-ideology" to outwardly having no political ties or by attacking "political correctness." Exemplar of this, Miller's list is made to appear as though it has been formulated for the purposes of record via the collection of data and without any inherent political rationale behind it; as if the only politics involved are those which the included songs evidently express and, through a simple gesture of assemblage, have come to occupy a position among the ranks. But the apolitical and ostensibly "common sense" approach is thinly veiled. The motivation in constructing such a list is fervently political. This becomes obvious when one considers Miller's political resume, his cultural leanings, and the critical approach with which he and other right-wing bloggers use to construct these lists.

Miller is the author of a plethora of popular culture-minded articles for the *National Review* such as a critique of the movie *Rocky Balboa* ("The Sixth Coming of Rocky") and an endorsement of Icelandic rockers Sigur Ros ("World's Coolest Band"). He has even published a glorifying review of Iron Maiden's *Powerslave* album upon its twentieth anniversary (Powerslave!). His article, "The General Grubbiness of Alan Ginsberg," by contrast, illustrates Miller's distaste for "dirty hippies." Ginsberg's "Howl," he says, is "vulgar and verseless," "utter rubbish," an "abomination" consisting of "wretched lines." According to Miller, he considered his college literature professor a "sensible guy" who "exposed [him] to the classics and seemed to appreciate them" yet he could not understand why "Howl" made it onto the course syllabus ("General Grubbiness"). Miller's favorite works are the "classics," of course. Only those which extend from the European (read: white, male) tradition; Shakespeare, British romantics, the modernists, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, he says, and one author of particular relevance here: Matthew Arnold.

For the uninitiated, Arnold might be the first culture warrior who, in the early nineteenth century, believed "culture" was a civilizing force which could chisel away at the "raw and unkindled masses" leaving a sculpted egalitarian society wherein class distinctions would simply

melt away. In his article “Culture and Anarchy” in 1869, Arnold argued that culture could lift humanity out of darkness and disorder and toward “sweetness and light” (8). He also wrote that culture was a natural form of power; that culture is “a principle of authority, to counteract the tendency to anarchy” (qtd. in Kammen xviii). Arnold’s secondary concern—and Miller’s as well—is to make a distinction between “low” and “high” cultural values. Miller’s taste for Arnold might not be coincidental when one considers that Miller is a regular reader of and contributor to *The New Criterion*, a periodical featuring conservative art criticism which postures itself as “a staunch defender of the values of high culture” (New Criterion home page).

The question arises then, how does Miller propose to do the new conservative work of defending “high culture” when he is attempting to valorize a music usually associated with popular or “low culture”? One’s first inclination might be that Miller has simply misappropriated his efforts. In reality, he is precisely in accordance with the new conservative strategy. New conservatives are constantly inventing ways of maneuvering into popular culture. Given the power that authorship and criticism holds in that arena, new conservatives are now producing “scholarly” work that attempts to blur the boundaries between “high” and “low.” In other words, to construe popular culture forms as high culture.⁸ The “popular” then becomes part of the dominant culture satisfying the doctrinaire conservative requirements of those like Arnold.

Accordingly, Miller’s list attempts to stretch the new conservative sphere of influence to encompass rock music. Historicizing rock under a newfound conservatism effectively reorients rock as an establishment product and thus a form of high culture. However, this does not suggest that new conservatism is recentering itself. New conservatism always strives to maintain its center (Grossberg *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* 291). Rather, this is what Grossberg contends is the result of new conservatives restructuring, redistributing, or redefining sites of identification and belonging known as “mattering maps.”⁹ According to Grossberg, “New conservatives mobilize ideology to restructure the mattering maps of everyday life, redistributing the places that matter and redefining their political inflections. On this view, the new conservatism is an ideological struggle over the specific content or meaning which surrounds people once they are called to the appropriate places” (283). New conservatives enter the “site” of rock and roll to

engage in “a struggle over the politics of place” insofar as they “see themselves engaged in a series of ideological battles” with the Left (281, 283). Any movement into these mattering sites will “inevitably implicate people with the new conservatism which claims ownership, not only of the particular site, but of the field in which it is identified.” Thus, even the most leftist rock listeners “find themselves almost uncontrollably situated on or at least pulled toward ‘the right,’ regardless of their ideological relations (or lack of relations) with the Right” (283).

This remapping constitutes an act of hostile territorialization resulting in a type of cultural colonization. The site that truly “matters” here is the 1960s. A decade whose liberal social movements, which combined with rock music, stunted conservative agendas; a decade in need of restructuring, redistributing, or redefining in the manner of a Gingrichian return to the so-called stability of the previous era: the 1950s. Clearly, insofar as these song lists encroach on sites that matter, they effectively attempt to colonize the past. The Age of Aquarius is now a targeted site. Thus, in the new conservative struggle, “mattering places are transformed into vectors so that the concerns and investments of real social history become the ruins of a displaced, perhaps even misplaced, paranoia” (284).

Everyone's a Critic

Aside from his political leanings, it is Miller's critical approach which is responsible for this remapping of rock. According to Miller, “Claiming that a song is conservative certainly does not mean to suggest that the artist who wrote it or performed it is a conservative. For the most part, I interpreted the lyrics the way a New Critic would interpret a poem—i.e., by examining a text without reference to biography or historical context” (“Encore!”). Here we can see the project in finer detail: an attempt to forge a link between New Criticism and new conservatism.

As explained by Ross Murfin and Supriya M. Ray, New Criticism is

a type of formalist literary criticism that reached its height during the 1940s and 1950s and that received its name from John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*. New Critics treat a work of literature as if it were a self-contained, self-referential object. Rather than basing their interpretations of a text on the reader's response,

the author's stated intentions, or parallels between the text and historical contexts (such as author's life), New Critics perform a close reading, concentrating on the relationships within the text that give it its own distinctive character or form . . . New Critics especially appreciate the use of literary devices, such as irony, to achieve a balance or reconciliation between dissimilar, even conflicting, elements in a text.

(“Definition of New Criticism”)

As per the New Critical approach, Miller reminds the reader that biographical information is not considered in selecting certain artists for his list. “In several cases,” he says, “the musicians are outspoken liberals. Others are notorious libertines. For the purposes of this list, however, we don't hold any of this against them” (“Rockin' the Right”). However, the invocation of New Criticism receives no follow-through from Miller. Although he portends to do New Critical work, what results is nothing of the sort. From his short analyses following the song titles in the list, there is no evidence of “deep reading” or even mere observations of such mechanisms as “tension” or “release.” Likewise, there is no inspection of important literary devices like structure, irony, metaphor, syntax, allegory, paradox, ambiguity, etc. In some areas Miller's list stands as the very antithesis of New Criticism. While New Criticism engages in tastes and canons (every school of criticism requires the two), it also insists that the literature realm is beyond politics. Yet Miller offers a list which he claims evidences New Criticism and whose songs are inherently political as well. Likewise, Miller fails to uphold the autonomy of the literary object (in this case, the lyrics of the music). Although he sees the lyrics as independent from their authors, he nonetheless argues they are deeply connected to a conservative ideology. This is a clear fallacy. Thus, both his motivations and conclusions contradict a New Critical project.

Furthermore, the application of New Criticism when dealing with musical pieces is, from the outset, a perilous venture. New Criticism requires that one consider a work in total, but this becomes difficult when dealing with anything outside the lyrics of a song. No one from the school of New Criticism, from Eliot to Warren, had ever attempted to apply their method to music and neither did they have any musical training. But of course, music's function as a mode language or text cannot be avoided in a New Critical approach. Miller does not account for ways in which the music functions as another textural element in

the songs he lists. Unfortunately, this oversight forces Miller to fall short of arriving at any “total meaning” and thus from carrying out a New Critical project to its exhaustive conclusion. Ultimately, Miller is forced to read musical pieces as either “liberal” or “conservative,” but such an approach hardly rises to the standards of any critical school, let alone New Criticism.

Consider Miller’s reading of Metallica’s “Don’t Tread on Me” which appears on the band’s self-titled album in 1991. According to Miller, this song is “A head-banging tribute to the doctrine of peace through strength, written in response to the first Gulf War,” citing the lyrics “So be it/Threaten no more/To secure peace is to prepare for war.” In the first place, the song cannot respond to the Gulf War as it was written well before the conflict. Although the song was released in the same month as the Gulf War began (August 1991), it is well known that Metallica spent almost a year and a half recording the album and, considering the length of time the album commanded in postproduction, the song can hardly be construed as a “response” given its lateness onto the market.

In the second place, the text of the song appears long before the Gulf War as well; about two hundred years before. Much of the lyrics are literally lifted from Benjamin Franklin’s satirical essay featured in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1775. Published under the pseudonym “An American Guesser,” Franklin argued for the rattlesnake as an iconic symbol of Americana. The rattlesnake was eventually taken as a symbol of defiance to British military rule by Philadelphians who emblazoned the animal on the Gadsden flag along with the words “Don’t Tread on Me” underneath. The rattlesnake, coincidentally, is featured on the cover of the album, coiled in the lower right-hand corner in a defensive stance. Ironically, however, the Gadsden flag is used today as a symbol of libertarians and not conservatives. Most damaging to Miller’s analysis is the fact that though Metallica’s song appears ostensibly as a prowar, conservative tract, this is not as clear-cut as Miller would argue. Both the lyrics and music reveal an ambiguity or tentativeness to the “peace through strength” doctrine. The lyrics “To secure peace is to prepare for war” could not be more ambiguous as it reaches the height of ambiguity: a paradox. Other lyrics such as “liberty or death” and “love it or leave it” only buttress the song’s ambiguity.

The most important aspect of the song is out of Miller’s reach: the music. If one listens closely, they will notice that the song opens by

referencing the melody to Leonard Bernstein's "I Want to Live in America" (Pillsbury 87), a song which itself expresses ambiguity about Puerto Rican alliances to their mainland American surroundings. The song is featured in the film *West Side Story* (1961), a film which confronts white racism vis-à-vis the topics of interracial love and "juvenile delinquency." What then does Metallica's song perform when it simultaneously presents a superficial support of American imperialism and yet ironically undermines that attempt by including a reference to a theater piece which, according to Nadine Hubbs, "was the fruit of collaboration among the gay artists Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, Jerome Robbins and Steven Sondheim?" (4). This aspect of the song seems to destabilize the "consensus" national identity that Miller interprets.

Why then would Miller even invoke New Criticism if he wishes to suggest that the music in question is "conservative" or even politically conscious? Primarily, it is meant as a "tie-straightening" gesture; a move that Miller assumes will establish him as a serious academic rather than lay music listener. While Miller's credentials are less the issue, the use of New Criticism is, and it has deeper relevance. By invoking New Criticism, Miller need not consider factors that would upend his conclusions. He can disavow charges that he has misleadingly inserted conservative politics into music that could very well be not at all political while at the same time reorienting the music around a conservative ethos. However, this does not go without creating the problem of both affirming and denying politics. Essentially, Miller wants it both ways: he wants to both depoliticize and repoliticize music for use in new conservative initiatives. The use of New Criticism in this list—as with the new conservative approach—ostensibly attempts to depoliticize the art in question by removing the subject from context or political orientation. It is then "remapped," to use Grossberg's language, and "repoliticized" in order to serve as a conservative device.

The reasons for choosing New Criticism are made more obvious when one considers that Miller is attempting to align with a critical school which had complex right-wing tendencies; a school whose sphere of influence reached its nadir during the period which Miller seeks to revisit: the 1950s. New Criticism stemmed from those Southern literary "fugitives" of the 1920s who later aligned with the right-leaning agrarian politics of the 1930s. Ransom himself was involved with both movements extensively. New Criticism, as has been shown in recent

scholarship, harbored Cold War anxieties about “emotional chaos, mob psychology, soul cultivation, mass hallucination, and charismatic leadership” (Siebers 38) and encouraged “political inertia” with respect to Civil Rights and McCarthyism (Eagleton 50). Hence, New Criticism seems the perfect device to establish new conservative legitimacy.

Isn't it Ironic?

Interestingly, the faux-New Critical approach is seen in numerous other conservative song lists in the right-wing blogosphere. Some are keenly intent on replicating Miller's list. In the summer of 2006, conservative blogger Jon Swift published “50 More Conservative Rock Songs” at blogspot.com, a list which takes obvious cues from Miller. According to his short biography, Swift states, “I am a reasonable conservative who likes to write about politics and culture. Since the media is biased I get all my news from Fox News, Rush Limbaugh and Jay Leno monologues” (“50 More”). Swift lists The Byrds' “Turn! Turn! Turn!” as a song that conveys a conservative idea because “All the lyrics come from the Bible, which is, of course, conservative.” The line “We don't need no education” from Pink Floyd's “Another Brick in the Wall, Part II,” gets a mention. “Clearly,” Swift says, “this is an argument for home schooling.” The song “Bengali in Platforms” by Morrissey, features the line “Life is hard enough when you belong here,” whose meaning Swift says is: “you'll be a lot happier if you just stay in your own country.” The song “Ohio” by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, he says, is “a cautionary song about what could happen when you protest against the government” (“50 More”). Likewise, Don Surber, in a list at blogspot.com titled “Top Conservative Songs Lack Soul,” asks “Am I alone in noticing there were no black artists on the list?” To Surber, The Temptations' “Papa Was a Rolling Stone” and “Cloud 9” are exemplars of Black conservatism. “You want conservative, that is the Tempts,” he says. “Sitting on the Dock of the Bay” by Otis Redding, Surber writes, “was intended to be an anti-hippie song,” as Redding disdains their liberal “laziness” (“Top Conservative Songs Lack Soul”).

Surber might be inadvertently offering an insightful point here: it is what is left off Miller's list that is of the utmost importance. Where, for instance, is Toby Keith's “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)?” Surely a tune which features lyrics like “You'll be

sorry you messed with the U.S. of A., cause we'll put a boot in your ass, it's the American Way" would resonate among conservatives. Why, for instance, is Barry Sadler's "Ballad of the Green Berets" or Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." not on Miller's list? If these are not considered to be "rock" songs, then why not include a song by the Right Brothers, a Nashville rock duo whose music could not be more openly conservative. Their latest album titled *No Apologies* features tunes like "Bush Was Right" (a tribute to the "Bush Doctrine"), "Stop Global Whining" (an anti-Al Gore and antienvironmentalism tract), and the love song "I'm in Love with Ann Coulter." Unfortunately, these songs are too explicitly conservative for Miller, whose purpose is to reorient "liberal" or ambiguously political rock around a conservative ethos. Songs such as "Bush Was Right" need no reorientation. Likewise, one might wonder why Miller does not praise Springsteen's "Born in the USA" as new conservatives had in the 1980s. The bind for Miller here seems to be quite clear: new conservatives tried to appropriate the song and ultimately failed. Reagan's use of the song during his reelection campaign had angered Springsteen, who was successful in his demand that the song be detached from Republican Party events.¹⁰ Thus, reappropriating "Born in the USA" by adding it to his list might put Miller in double jeopardy.

Perhaps the more interesting reactions to Miller's list are those which spring from left-wing bloggers who seem to pinpoint an element which passes unnoticed by their conservative counterparts. I speak here of irony. Liberal bloggers note these lists manifest a "tongue-in-cheek" irony or humorousness which it appears Miller and other new conservatives fail to realize, perhaps since conservatism's terrain acts as a bastion of anti-ironic earnestness and virtue.¹¹

Blogger John Holbo calls for liberal reaction to what he calls "lyrical activism": "The Who, 'Won't Get Fooled Again.' Conservative rock song. File Under: complex irony, I guess" ("Republican Party Dance-Mix"). Blogger Chris Molla of musicforamerica.org writes:

Mr. Miller also seems to completely miss the idea that many of these lyrics with which he finds such tidy agreement are intended *ironically* (hel-lo!). Either he's completely out of touch with the aesthetics of popular culture, or he's ignoring them in order to be able to interpret things his way. In either case he's really reaching.

(Molla)

And Keith Mataya of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA's daily student newspaper, sarcastically thanks Miller "for throwing out any understanding of irony" ("Top Conservative Songs Absurd").

Certainly, irony would be a basic element of interest in a New Critical approach, yet it receives no attention from conservative critics. This is a fallacy not lost on liberal bloggers who respond by using parody in constructing their own lists to further ironicize this conservative project. In doing so, they note the weak interpretive methods conservatives like Miller apply to the lyrics of songs. Superficiality and contextual manipulation are the charges issued by liberal bloggers who cleverly mimic their methods in ways that expose these lists' failure to support an argument.

Liberal blogger "Snarkattack" reacts to Miller's list: "Oh, and I guess 'Fuck the Police' . . . is a conservative song because it advocates having sex with law enforcement officers" ("Bad Choices"). Mataya proposes an "equally absurd label": "50 Greatest Songs That, When Played Backward, Provide Instructions for Performing Heart Surgery" ("Top Conservative Songs Absurd"). Brad Luen, of the East Bay View blog proposes twelve more songs for Miller's list. Among them are Grandmaster Flash's "The Message," which he says is "a cautionary tale about what could happen to you if you don't get a job sweeping streets," and of John Lennon's "Imagine," he writes: "By asking us to imagine a world without fundamentalism, nationalism, and profiteering, Lennon shocks us into realizing how terrible an unconservative world would be" ("Twelve More Conservative Songs").

Sarcastically riffing on Miller's method, blogger "DonnieB78" at blogcritics.org created what he called "The *National Review's* Top 25 Conservative Movies." *Scarface*, he says, features "a legal immigrant [who] pulls himself up by the bootstraps, succeeds in business and chases the American capitalist dream." *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* features a "rugged individualist . . . trapped in health-care bureaucracy, [and] menaced by [a] domineering, ambiguous female pushing [a] single-payer system." *Bambi*, a movie where "responsible hunters exercise [their] Second Amendment, [and] help [the] environment by thinning [the] deer herd." And, of course, *Titanic* "debunks [the] myth of global warming" ("Right Wing Mag Names Top 50 Conservative Songs").

Clearly, liberal bloggers note that these lists read more like iPod playlists than serious canons of art, as haphazard attempts to shut out

liberal participation in rock music, and they rebuke Miller's effort at reterritorialization. Through the lens of parody, Miller appears less like Cleanth Brooks and more like Casey Casem.

Epistemology and Epigrammata

The act of assigning meaning in reference to cultural appropriation in the post-9/11/post-New Critical world complicates the pairing of epistemology and politics. But can popular music studies utilize New Critical methodology with any effectiveness? While Miller's case reveals an important cultural-political move on the part of new conservatives, it also points to an important paradox latent in the New Critical method: while one may consider texts to be autonomous, it is only through a reading that a text performs the work one says it does. We can liken this to the old epigram: "If a tree falls in the woods and no one is around, does it make a sound?" that is, "Do texts have meaning if no one reads them?" Thus, it is in the illusion of a work's self-containment—autonomous, cut off from the historical realm, exiled into "political inertia"—where the New Critical method truly fails.

The lists of Miller and others are not simply petty bickering among loyal rock music fans. Rather, they constitute an important tributary in culture-building processes. As political battles rage in the post-9/11 era, we might heed Steven Mailloux's call to "move from explaining interpretation in terms of isolated readers and isolated texts to discussing rhetorical exchanges among interpreters embedded in discursive and other social practices at specific historical moments" (1989: 134). Thus, I want to steer away from assigning any of my own interpretations to the songs of these lists or positioning myself in the crossfire of rhetorical exchange. The site of interpretation is an elusive one. It not only rests strewn across the webbing of specific social, political, and economic contexts, but is embedded in certain hegemonic practices as well. The act of reading structures a complicated power play that attempts to direct or re-direct authority through either coercion or convincing argument (Mailloux 1998: 50–51). In understanding the act of interpretation one must, *à la Mailloux*, "describe this tradition of discursive practices in which acts of interpretive persuasion are embedded" (1989: 17).

Placing rhetoric at the center of analysis in this way elucidates the cultural conversations of the culture war era. But scholars of popular culture have their work cut out for them. If texts truly cannot read themselves, then in the words of Gregory Jay, “when the text ends, our own work begins” (209).

Notes

1. Miller published “Encore!: 50 More Conservative Rock Songs” four days after “Rockin' the Right.” This article recognizes both articles as part of the same project and includes the criticisms to both from conservative and liberal bloggers alike. Although both are published in print form, I am interested in their posting online as well as electronic responses, critiques, etc., elicited.
2. See Garofalo's discussion of Woodstock and Live Aid as examples.
3. Williams provides an overview of more doctrinaire progressive/orthodox debates. For an anthology of culture war discussions with respect to the arts, see Bolton.
4. Here, as explained further on, I want to revisit Grossberg's claim that in the battle for ideology “culture leads politics” (*We Gotta Get Out of This Place* 255).
5. According to Hall, the “double stake” is a “double movement of containment and resistance” in which “complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation. . . make the field of culture a sort of constant battlefield.” Moreover, Hall warns us that “to write a history of the culture of the popular classes exclusively from inside those classes, without understanding the ways in which they are constantly held in relation with the institutions of dominant cultural production, is not to live in the twentieth century” (1998: 443, 447, 446).
6. In a subsequent email to *Entertainment Weekly*, the Wilsons wrote, “Sarah Palin's views and values in NO WAY represent us as American women. We ask that our song ‘Barracuda’ no longer be used to promote her image. The song ‘Barracuda’ was written in the late 70s as a scathing rant against the soulless, corporate nature of the music business, particularly for women (The ‘barracuda’ represented the business)” (qtd. in Pastorek).
7. Search performed by the author, February 24, 2007. (<http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=%22+culture+war%22+blogs&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>).
8. See Paul Cantor's *Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization* (2001), which attempts to elevate various popular television shows from the 1960s to present day (*Gilligan's Island*, *Star Trek*, *X-Files*, *The Simpsons*, etc.) to the level of high culture by likening them to Shakespeare and Dickens. Cantor's politics are deliberate and unconcealed. In the book's “Notes on Method” section, he bemoans Lefty scholars who “come at popular culture with an elaborate theoretical framework already in place, and television shows often become little more than grist for their Marxist mills” (xxx). Cantor conveniently and problematically asserts that “popular culture is a form of marketplace and, over time, the cream comes to the top and that becomes the source of our great art” (Carson), describing popular culture solely in terms of fame or popularity; privileging the market over the culture. In a subsequent interview, Cantor further discloses his political intent: “It's just a major mistake to abandon popular culture to the Left. It's what makes the Left appear cool to students. It makes it appear ‘with it,’ hip. It's amazing how much currency you can get with students if you can show familiarity with the culture that means something to them” (Carson).
9. Stuart Hall has engaged ideology and cultural classification in similar fashion to Grossberg in his “Encoding/Decoding,” employing the terms *maps of meaning* and *maps of social reality* (56–57).

10. See Cullen for an extensive analysis of Reagan's use of Springsteen's song; perhaps the most well known example of right-wing appropriations of rock.
11. Heart is one rock group who, like liberal bloggers, realize this irony. In their email to *Entertainment Weekly* the band writes, "While Heart did not and would not authorize the use of ["Barracuda"] at the RNC, there's irony in Republican strategists' choice to make use of it there" (qtd. in Pastorek).

Works Cited

- Arnold, Matthew. "Culture and Anarchy." *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. 2nd ed. Ed. John Storey. New York: Pearson, 1998. 7–12.
- Bill O'Reilly's Official Homepage. 2007. 1 Apr. 2007 <<http://www.billoreilly.com>>.
- Bolton, Richard ed. *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*. New York: New Press, 1992.
- Carson, Stephen W. "Cartoon Anarchy: An Interview with Paul Cantor." 6 Feb. 2003. 18 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.lewrockwell.com/carson/carson12.html>>.
- Cantor, Paul. *Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.
- Cullen, Jim. *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition*. New York: Harper Collins, 1997.
- DonnieB78. "Right Wing Mag Names Top 50 Conservative Songs." Pete Blackwell. 26 May 2006. 25 Mar. 2007 <<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2006/05/26/101648.php>>.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983.
- Franklin, Benjamin. "An American Guesser." *Pennsylvania Journal*. 27 Dec. 1775. 31 Mar. 2007 <http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1988/2/1988_2_74.shtml>.
- Garofalo, Reebee. "Understanding Mega-Events: If We Are the World, Then How Do We Change It?" *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements*. Ed. Reebee Garofalo. Boston: South End, 1992. 15–35.
- Grossberg, Lawrence. *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . "The Framing of Rock: Rock and the New Conservatives." *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, and Institutions*. Eds. Tony Bennett et al. New York: Routledge, 1993. 193–209.
- Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." *Media Studies: A Reader*. Eds. Paul Marris and Sue Thornham. Edinburgh: U of Edinburgh P, 1996. 51–61.

- . “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’.” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. 2nd ed. Ed. John Storey. New York: Pearson, 1998. 442–53.
- Hallow, Ralph Z. “Steele: GOP Needs ‘Hip Hop’ Makeover.” *The Washington Times*. 19 Feb. 2009. 20 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/feb/19/steele-gop-needs-hip-hop-makeover/>>.
- Holbo, John. “Republican Party Dance-Mix.” 21 May 2006. 25 Mar. 2007 <<http://crookedtimber.org/2006/05/21/republican-party-dance-mix/>>.
- Hubbs, Nadine. *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2004.
- Jay, Gregory S. *American Literature & the Culture Wars*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997.
- Kammen, Michael. *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- Keith, Toby. “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American).” *Unleashed*. Dreamworks Nashville, 2002.
- Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Luen, Brad. “Twelve More Conservative Songs.” 25 May 2006. 25 Mar. 2007 <<http://eastbayview.blogspot.com/2006/05/twelve-more-conservative-songs.html>>.
- Mailloux, Steven. *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998.
- . *Rhetorical Power*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989.
- . “Introduction.” *Theories of Reading, Looking, and Listening*. Ed. Harry R. Garvin. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1981. 9–12.
- Mataya, Keith. “List of Top Conservative Songs Absurd.” *Daily Bruin*. 7 June 2006. 25 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.dailybruin.ucla.edu/news/2006/jun/07/list-of-top-conservative-songs/>>.
- Mebler, Ari. “The GOPs Hip-Hop Makeover.” *The Nation*. 3 Mar. 2009. 20 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090316/melber>>.
- Metallica. “Don’t Tread On Me.” *Metallica*. Elektra, 1991.
- Miller, John J. “Encore!: 50 More Conservative Rock Songs.” *National Review Online*. 30 May 2006. 18 Mar. 2007 <<http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=ZWEzNmQwM2NmZWlwYTFhMGJlZDNIINGE1NWY3NGM4NDg=>>.
- . “The General Grubbiness of Alan Ginsberg.” *National Review Online*. 14 Sept. 2006. 6 Feb. 2007 <<http://article.national>>

- review.com/?q=ZmNIMjKxNGI1NGFlZjVhODk4NzEzMTJiZjVmNzgwNmM=).
- . “Powerslave!” *National Review Online*. 15 Sept. 2004. 1 Apr. 2007 <<http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=OGNmODJjMDgzZTFkOWU1YTFiNjkzNTBhOTFhMGnkYjU=>>.
- . “Rockin’ the Right: The 50 Greatest Conservative Rock Songs.” *National Review Online*. 26 May 2006. 6 Feb. 2007 <<http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NzZkNDU5MmViNzVjNzkzMD E3NzNIN2MyZjRjYTk4YjE=>>.
- . “The Sixth Coming of Rocky.” *National Review Online*. 20 Dec. 2006. 1 Apr. 2007 <<http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=MWQ1ZTI0ZmU5ODk3NjQ5MTVhYmE3Y2Q0NjA0ZGNjZjY=>>.
- . “World’s Greatest Band.” *National Review Online*. 13 Sept. 2005. 1 Apr. 2007 <<http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=OGE5M2E1N2E5Yjc2NTlkZTE3ODk1NzA3NDM3NjYxNjM=>>.
- Molla, Chris. 2006. 25 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.musicforamerica.org/node/105564>>.
- Morrissey. “Bengali in Platforms.” *Viva Hate*. Sire, 1987.
- Murfin, Ross, and Supryia M. Ray. “Definition of New Criticism.” 2007. 18 Mar. 2007 <http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/poetry/critical_define/crit_newcrit.html>.
- New Criterion* home page. 2007. 6 Feb. 2007 <<http://newcriterion.com/>>.
- Pastorek, Whitney. “Heart’s Nancy Wilson Responds to McCain’s use of ‘Barracuda’ at Republican Convention.” *Entertainment Weekly*. 5 Sept. 2008. 20 Mar. 2009 <<http://hollywoodinsider.ew.com/2008/09/heart-responds.html>>.
- Pillsbury, Glenn. *Damage Incorporated: Metallica and the Production of Musical Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Pink Floyd. “Another Brick in the Wall (Part 2).” *The Wall*. Columbia, 1979.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Snarkattack. “Why the Conservative Songs Were Bad Choices.” Scott Butki. 6 June 2006. 25 Mar. 2007 <<http://blogcritics.org/archives/2006/06/05/173145.php>>.
- Surber, Don. “Top Conservative Songs Lack Soul.” 26 May 2006. 24 Mar. 2007 <<http://donsurber.blogspot.com/2006/05/top-conservative-songs-lack-soul.html>>.
- Swift, Jon. “50 More Conservative Rock Songs.” 26 Feb. 2006. 24 Mar. 2007 <<http://jonswift.blogspot.com/2006/05/50-more-conservative-rock-songs.html>>.
- The Right Brothers. *No Apologies*. Right Coast Records, 2006.

Williams, Mary E. *Culture Wars: Opposing Viewpoints*. Chicago: Greenhaven, 2003.

Michael T. Spencer is a PhD candidate in American Studies at Michigan State University. Originally from San Jose, CA, Mike received his BA in History from UCLA and MA in American Studies from University of Massachusetts, Boston. His major fields of interests are in Ethnomusicology, African American Studies, Art History, and Popular Culture. He is currently completing his dissertation, *Pacific Standard Time: Modernism and the Making of West Coast Jazz*, while teaching in MSU's Center for Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities.

Copyright of Journal of Popular Culture is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.